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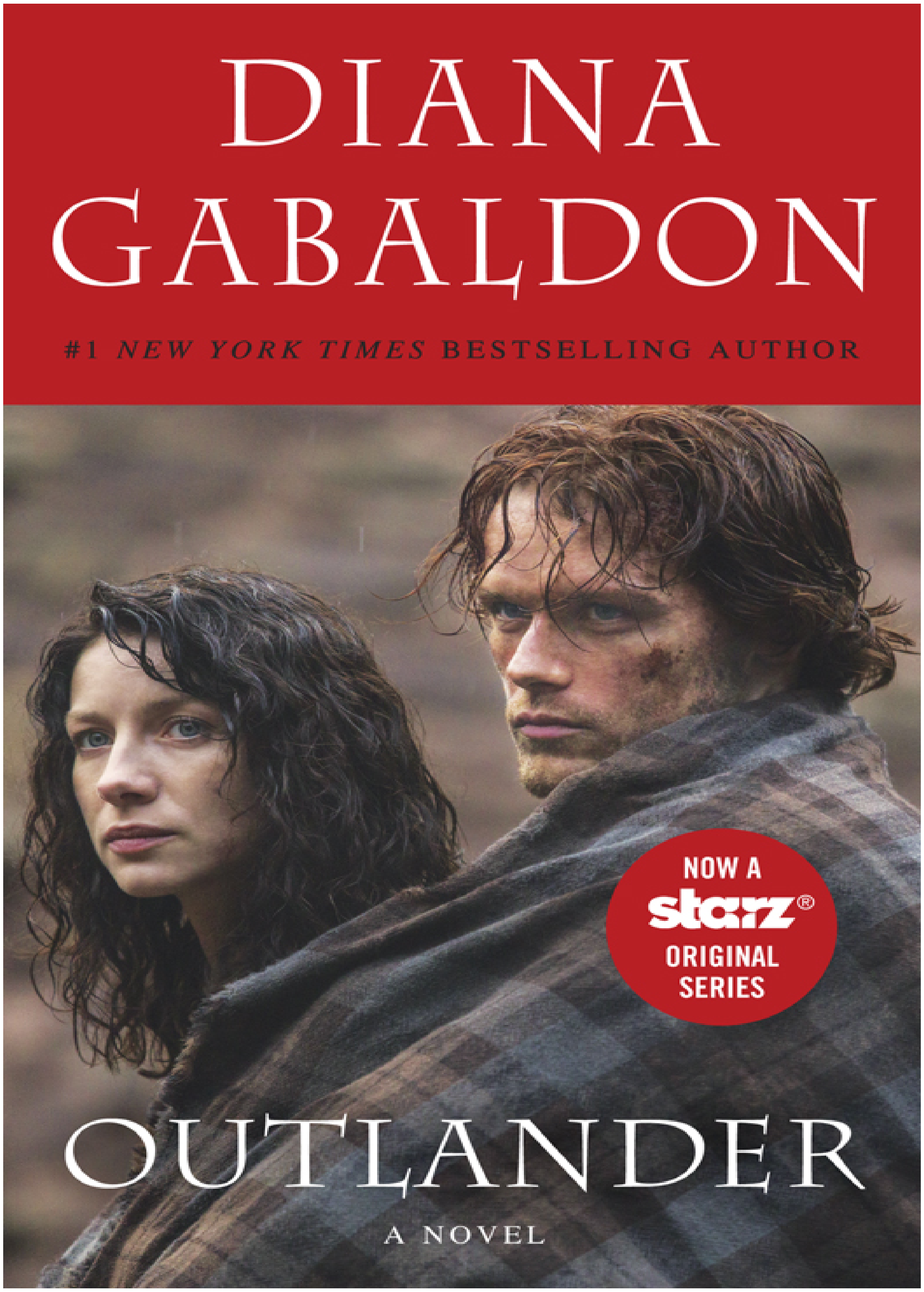
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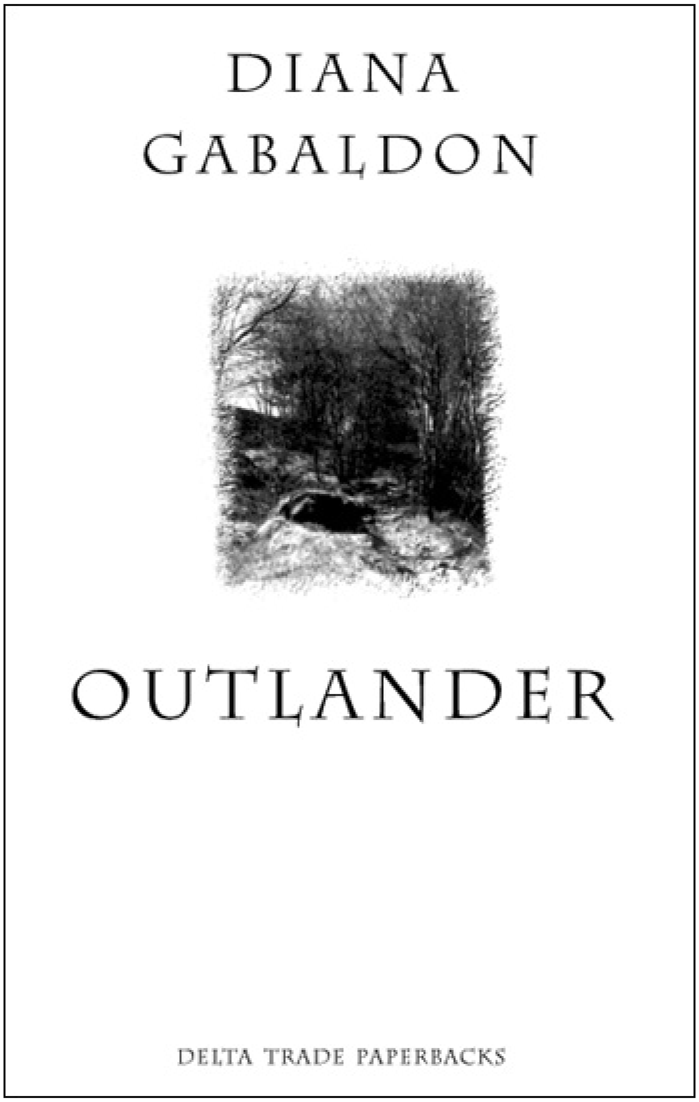

DIANA
GABALDON

OUTLANDER

DELTA TRADE PAPERBACKS

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OUTLANDER

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Dedication
Acknowledgments
An Intervew with Diana Gabaldon
Reader's Guide

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People disappear all the time. Ask any policeman. Better yet, ask a journalist. Disappearances are bread-and-butter to journalists.

Young girls run away from home. Young children stray from their parents and are never seen again. Housewives reach the end of their tether and take the grocery money and a taxi to the station. International financiers change their names and vanish into the smoke of imported cigars.

Many of the lost will be found, eventually, dead or alive. Disappearances, after all, have explanations.

Usually.

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PART ONE

Inverness, 1945

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1

A NEW BEGINNING

It wasn't a very likely place for disappearances, at least at first glance. Mrs. Baird's was like a thousand other Highland bed-and-breakfast establishments in 1945; clean and quiet, with fading floral wallpaper, gleaming floors, and a coin-operated hot-water geyser in the lavatory. Mrs. Baird herself was squat and easygoing, and made no objection to Frank lining her tiny rose-sprigged parlor with the dozens of books and papers with which he always traveled.

I met Mrs. Baird in the front hall on my way out. She stopped me with a pudgy hand on my arm and patted at my hair.

"Dear me, Mrs. Randall, ye canna go out like that! Here, just let me tuck that bit in for ye. There! That's better. Ye know, my cousin was tellin' me about a new perm she tried, comes out beautiful and holds like a dream; perhaps ye should try that kind next time."

I hadn't the heart to tell her that the waywardness of my light brown curls was strictly the fault of nature, and not due to any dereliction on the part of the permanent-wave manufacturers. Her own tightly marceled waves suffered from no such perversity.

"Yes, I'll do that, Mrs. Baird," I lied. "I'm just going down to the village to meet Frank. We'll be back for tea." I ducked out the door and down the path before she could detect any further defects in my undisciplined appearance. After four years as a Royal Army nurse, I was enjoying the escape from uniforms and rationing by indulging in brightly printed light cotton dresses, totally unsuited for rough walking through the heather.

Not that I had originally planned to do a lot of that; my thoughts ran more on the lines of sleeping late in the mornings, and long, lazy afternoons in bed with Frank, not sleeping. However, it was difficult to maintain the proper mood of languorous romance with Mrs. Baird industriously Hoovering away outside our door.

"That must be the dirtiest bit of carpet in the entire Scottish Highlands," Frank had observed that morning as we lay in bed listening to the ferocious roar of the vacuum in the hallway.

"Nearly as dirty as our landlady's mind," I agreed. "Perhaps we should have gone to Brighton after all." We had chosen the Highlands as a place to holiday before Frank took up his appointment as a history professor at Oxford, on the grounds that Scotland had been somewhat less touched by the physical horrors of war than the rest of Britain, and was less susceptible to the frenetic postwar gaiety that infected more popular vacation spots.

And without discussing it, I think we both felt that it was a symbolic place to reestablish our marriage; we had been married and spent a two-day honeymoon in the Highlands, shortly before the outbreak of war seven years before. A peaceful refuge in which to rediscover each other, we thought, not realizing that, while golf and fishing are Scotland's most popular outdoor sports, gossip is the most popular indoor sport. And when it rains as much as it does in Scotland, people spend a lot of time indoors.

"Where are you going?" I asked, as Frank swung his feet out of bed.

"I'd hate the dear old thing to be disappointed in us," he answered. Sitting up on the side of the ancient bed, he bounced gently up and down, creating a piercing rhythmic squeak. The Hoovering in the hall stopped abruptly. After a minute or two of bouncing, he gave a loud, theatrical groan and collapsed backward with a twang of protesting springs. I giggled helplessly into a pillow, so as not to disturb the breathless silence outside.

Frank waggled his eyebrows at me. "You're supposed to moan ecstatically, not giggle," he admonished in a whisper. "She'll think I'm not a good lover."

"You'll have to keep it up for longer than that, if you expect ecstatic moans," I answered. "Two minutes doesn't deserve any more than a giggle."

"Inconsiderate little wench. I came here for a rest, remember?"

"Lazybones. You'll never manage the next branch on your family tree unless you show a bit more industry than that."

Frank's passion for genealogy was yet another reason for choosing the Highlands. According to one of the filthy scraps of paper he lugged to and fro, some tiresome ancestor of his had had something to do with something or other in this region back in the middle of the eighteenth—or was it seventeenth?—century.

"If I end as a childless stub on my family tree, it will undoubtedly be the fault of our untiring hostess out there. After all, we've been married almost eight years. Little Frank Jr. will be quite legitimate without being conceived in the presence of a witness."

"If he's conceived at all," I said pessimistically. We had been disappointed yet again the week before leaving for our Highland retreat.

"With all this bracing fresh air and healthy diet? How could we help but manage here?" Dinner the night before had been herring, fried. Lunch had been herring, pickled. And the pungent scent now wafting up the stairwell strongly intimated that breakfast was to be herring, kippered.

"Unless you're contemplating an encore performance for the edification of Mrs. Baird," I suggested, "you'd better get dressed. Aren't you meeting that parson at ten?" The Rev. Dr. Reginald Wakefield, vicar of the local parish, was to provide some rivetingly fascinating baptismal registers for Frank's inspection, not to mention the glittering prospect that he might have unearthed some moldering army despatches or somesuch that mentioned the notorious ancestor.

"What's the name of that great-great-great-great-grandfather of yours again?" I asked. "The one that mucked about here during one of the Risings? I can't remember if it was Willy or Walter."

"Actually, it was Jonathan." Frank took my complete disinterest in family history placidly, but remained always on guard, ready to seize the slightest expression of inquisitiveness as an excuse for telling me all facts known to date about the early Randalls and their connections. His eyes assumed the fervid gleam of the fanatic lecturer as he buttoned his shirt.

"Jonathan Wolverton Randall—Wolverton for his mother's uncle, a minor knight from Sussex. He was, however, known by the rather dashing nickname of 'Black Jack,' something he acquired in the army, probably during the time he was stationed here." I flopped facedown on the bed and affected to snore. Ignoring me, Frank went on with his scholarly exegesis.

"He bought his commission in the mid-thirties—1730s, that is—and served as a captain of dragoons. According to those old letters Cousin May sent me, he did quite well in the army. Good choice for a second son, you know; his younger brother followed tradition as well by becoming a curate, but I haven't found out much about him yet. Anyway, Jack Randall was highly commended by the Duke of Sandringham for his activities before and during the '45—the second—Jacobite Rising, you know," he amplified for the benefit of the ignorant amongst his audience, namely me. "You know, Bonnie Prince Charlie and that lot?"

"I'm not entirely sure the Scots realize they lost that one," I interrupted, sitting up and trying to subdue my hair. "I distinctly heard the barman at that pub last night refer to us as Sassenachs."

"Well, why not?" said Frank equably. "It only means 'Englishman,' after all, or at worst, 'outlander,' and we're all of that."

"I know what it means. It was the tone I objected to."

Frank searched through the bureau drawer for a belt. "He was just annoyed because I told him the ale was weak. I told him the true Highland brew requires an old boot to be added to the vat, and the final product to be strained through a well-worn undergarment."

"Ah, that accounts for the amount of the bill."

"Well, I phrased it a little more tactfully than that, but only because the Gaelic language hasn't got a specific word for drawers."

I reached for a pair of my own, intrigued. "Why not? Did the ancient Gaels not wear undergarments?"

Frank leered. “You’ve never heard that old song about what a Scotsman wears beneath his kilts?”

“Presumably not gents’ knee-length step-ins,” I said dryly. “Perhaps I’ll go out in search of a local kilt-wearer whilst you’re cavorting with vicars and ask him.”

“Well, do try not to get arrested, Claire. The dean of St. Giles College wouldn’t like it at all.”

* * *

In the event, there were no kilt-wearers loitering about the town square or patronizing the shops that surrounded it. There were a number of other people there, though, mostly housewives of the Mrs. Baird type, doing their daily shopping. They were garrulous and gossipy, and their solid, print-clad presences filled the shops with a cozy warmth; a buttress against the cold mist of the morning outdoors.

With as yet no house of my own to keep, I had little that needed buying, but enjoyed myself in browsing among the newly replenished shelves, for the pure joy of seeing lots of things for sale again. It had been a long time of rationing, of doing without the simple things like soap and eggs, and even longer without the minor luxuries of life, like L’Heure Bleu cologne.

My gaze lingered on a shop window filled with household goods—embroidered tea cloths and cozies, pitchers and glasses, a stack of quite homely pie tins, and a set of three vases.

I had never owned a vase in my life. During the war years, I had, of course, lived in the nurses’ quarters, first at Pembroke Hospital, later at the field station in France. But even before that, we had lived nowhere long enough to justify the purchase of such an item. Had I had such a thing, I reflected, Uncle Lamb would have filled it with potsherds long before I could have got near it with a bunch of daisies.

Quentin Lambert Beauchamp. “Q” to his archaeological students and his friends. “Dr. Beauchamp” to the scholarly circles in which he moved and lectured and had his being. But always Uncle Lamb to me.

My father's only brother, and my only living relative at the time, he had been landed with me, aged five, when my parents were killed in a car crash. Poised for a trip to the Middle East at the time, he had paused in his preparations long enough to make the funeral arrangements, dispose of my parents' estates, and enroll me in a proper girls' boarding school. Which I had flatly refused to attend.

Faced with the necessity of prying my chubby fingers off the car's door handle and dragging me by the heels up the steps of the school, Uncle Lamb, who hated personal conflict of any kind, had sighed in exasperation, then finally shrugged and tossed his better judgment out the window along with my newly purchased round straw boater.

"Ruddy thing," he muttered, seeing it rolling merrily away in the rearview mirror as we roared down the drive in high gear. "Always loathed hats on women, anyway." He had glanced down at me, fixing me with a fierce glare.

"One thing," he said, in awful tones. "You are *not* to play dolls with my Persian grave figurines. Anything else, but not that. Got it?"

I had nodded, content. And had gone with him to the Middle East, to South America, to dozens of study sites throughout the world. Had learned to read and write from the drafts of journal articles, to dig latrines and boil water, and to do a number of other things not suitable for a young lady of gentle birth—until I had met the handsome, dark-haired historian who came to consult Uncle Lamb on a point of French philosophy as it related to Egyptian religious practice.

Even after our marriage, Frank and I led the nomadic life of junior faculty, divided between continental conferences and temporary flats, until the outbreak of war had sent him to Officers Training and the Intelligence Unit at M16, and me to nurses training. Though we had been married nearly eight years, the new house in Oxford would be our first real home.

Tucking my handbag firmly under my arm, I marched into the shop and bought the vases.

I met Frank at the crossing of the High Street and the Gereside Road and we turned up it together. He raised his eyebrows at my purchases.

"Vases?" He smiled. "Wonderful. Perhaps now you'll stop putting flowers in my books."

"They aren't flowers, they're specimens. And it was you who suggested I take up botany. To occupy my mind, now that I've not got nursing to do," I reminded him.

"True." He nodded good-humoredly. "But I didn't realize I'd have bits of greenery dropping out into my lap every time I opened a reference. What was that horrible crumbly brown stuff you put in Tuscum and Banks?"

"Groutweed. Good for hemorrhoids."

"Preparing for my imminent old age, are you? Well, how very thoughtful of you, Claire."

We pushed through the gate, laughing, and Frank stood back to let me go first up the narrow front steps.

Suddenly he caught my arm. "Look out! You don't want to step in it."

I lifted my foot gingerly over a large brownish-red stain on the top step.

"How odd," I said. "Mrs. Baird scrubs the steps down every morning; I've seen her. What do you suppose that can be?"

Frank leaned over the step, sniffing delicately.

"Offhand, I should say that it's blood."

"Blood!" I took a step back into the entryway. "Whose?" I glanced nervously into the house. "Do you suppose Mrs. Baird's had an accident of some kind?" I couldn't imagine our immaculate landlady leaving bloodstains to dry on her doorstep unless some major catastrophe had occurred, and wondered just for a moment whether the parlor might be harboring a crazed ax-murderer, even now preparing to spring out on us with a spine-chilling shriek.

Frank shook his head. He stood on tiptoe to peer over the hedge into the next garden.

"I shouldn't think so. There's a stain like it on the Collinses' doorstep as well."

“Really?” I drew closer to Frank, both to see over the hedge and for moral support. The Highlands hardly seemed a likely spot for a mass murderer, but then I doubted such persons used any sort of logical criteria when picking their sites. “That’s rather … disagreeable,” I observed. There was no sign of life from the next residence. “What do you suppose has happened?”

Frank frowned, thinking, then slapped his hand briefly against his trouser leg in inspiration.

“I think I know! Wait here a moment.” He darted out to the gate and set off down the road at a trot, leaving me stranded on the edge of the doorstep.

He was back shortly, beaming with confirmation.

“Yes, that’s it, it must be. Every house in the row has had it.”

“Had what? A visit from a homicidal maniac?” I spoke a bit sharply, still nervous at having been abruptly abandoned with nothing but a large bloodstain for company.

Frank laughed. “No, a ritual sacrifice. Fascinating!” He was down on his hands and knees in the grass, peering interestedly at the stain.

This hardly sounded better than a homicidal maniac. I squatted beside him, wrinkling my nose at the smell. It was early for flies, but a couple of the big, slow-moving Highland midges circled the stain.

“What do you mean, ‘ritual sacrifice’?” I demanded. “Mrs. Baird’s a good church-goer, and so are all the neighbors. This isn’t Druid’s Hill or anything, you know.”

He stood, brushing grass-ends from his trousers. “That’s all you know, my girl,” he said. “There’s no place on earth with more of the old superstitions and magic mixed into its daily life than the Scottish Highlands. Church or no church, Mrs. Baird believes in the Old Folk, and so do all the neighbors.” He pointed at the stain with one neatly polished toe. “The blood of a black cock,” he explained, looking pleased. “The houses are new, you see. Pre-fabs.”

I looked at him coldly. “If you are under the impression that that explains everything, think again. What difference does it make how old the houses are? And where on earth is everybody?”

"Down the pub, I should expect. Let's go along and see, shall we?" Taking my arm, he steered me out the gate and we set off down the Gereside Road.

"In the old days," he explained as we went, "and not so long ago, either, when a house was built, it was customary to kill something and bury it under the foundation, as a propitiation to the local earth spirits. You know, 'He shall lay the foundations thereof in his firstborn and in his youngest son shall he set up the gates of it.' Old as the hills."

I shuddered at the quotation. "In that case, I suppose it's quite modern and enlightened of them to be using chickens instead. You mean, since the houses are fairly new, nothing was buried under them, and the inhabitants are now remedying the omission."

"Yes, exactly." Frank seemed pleased with my progress, and patted me on the back. "According to the vicar, many of the local folk thought the War was due in part to people turning away from their roots and omitting to take proper precautions, such as burying a sacrifice under the foundation, that is, or burning fishes' bones on the hearth—except haddocks, of course," he added, happily distracted. "You never burn a haddock's bones—did you know?—or you'll never catch another. Always bury the bones of a haddock instead."

"I'll bear it in mind," I said. "Tell me what you do in order never to see another herring, and I'll do it forthwith."

He shook his head, absorbed in one of his feats of memory, those brief periods of scholastic rapture where he lost touch with the world around him, absorbed completely in conjuring up knowledge from all its sources.

"I don't know about herring," he said absently. "For mice, though, you hang bunches of Trembling Jock about—'Trembling Jock i' the hoose, and ye'll ne'er see a moose,' you know. Bodies under the foundation, though—that's where a lot of the local ghosts come from. You know Mountgerald, the big house at the end of the High Street? There's a ghost there, a workman on the house who was killed as a sacrifice for the foundation. In the eighteenth century sometime; that's really fairly recent," he added thoughtfully.

"The story goes that by order of the house's owner, one wall was built up first, then a stone block was dropped from the top of it onto one of the workmen—presumably a dislikable fellow was chosen for the sacrifice—and he was buried then in the cellar and the rest of the house built up over him. He haunts the cellar where he was killed, except on the anniversary of his death and the four Old Days."

"Old Days?"

"The ancient feasts," he explained, still lost in his mental notes. "Hogmanay, that's New Year's, Midsummer Day, Beltane and All Hallows'. Druids, Beaker Folk, early Picts, everybody kept the sun feasts and the fire feasts, so far as we know. Anyway, ghosts are freed on the holy days, and can wander about at will, to do harm or good as they please." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "It's getting on for Beltane—close to the spring equinox. Best keep an eye out, next time you pass the kirkyard." His eyes twinkled, and I realized the trance had ended.

I laughed. "Are there a number of famous local ghosts, then?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. We'll ask the Vicar, shall we, next time we see him?"

We saw the Vicar quite shortly, in fact. He, along with most of the other inhabitants of the village, was down in the pub, having a lager-and-light in celebration of the houses' new sanctification.

He seemed rather embarrassed at being caught in the act of condoning acts of paganism, as it were, but brushed it off as merely a local observance with historical color, like the Wearing of the Green.

"Really rather fascinating, you know," he confided, and I recognized, with an internal sigh, the song of the scholar, as identifying a sound as the *terr-whit!* of a thrush. Harking to the call of a kindred spirit, Frank at once settled down to the mating dance of academe, and they were soon neck-deep in archetypes and the parallels between ancient superstitions and modern religions. I shrugged and made my own way through the crowd to the bar and back, a large brandy-and-splash in each hand.

Knowing from experience how difficult it was to distract Frank's attention from this sort of discussion, I simply picked up his hand, wrapped his fingers about the stem of the glass and left him to his own devices.

I found Mrs. Baird on a deep bench near the window, sharing a companionable pint of bitter with an elderly man whom she introduced to me as Mr. Crook.

"This is the man I tell't ye about, Mrs. Randall," she said, eyes bright with the stimulation of alcohol and company. "The one as knows about plants of all sorts.

"Mrs. Randall's verra much interested in the wee plants," she confided to her companion, who inclined his head in a combination of politeness and deafness. "Presses them in books and such."

"Do ye, indeed?" Mr. Crook asked, one tufted white brow raised in interest. "I've some presses—the real ones, mind—for plants and such. Had them from my nephew, when he come up from university over his holiday. He brought them for me, and I'd not the heart to tell him I never uses such things. Hangin's what's wanted for herbs, ye ken, or maybe to be dried on a frame and put in a bit o' gauze bag or a jar, but whyever you'd be after squashing the wee things flat, I've no idea."

"Well, to look at, maybe," Mrs. Baird interjected kindly. "Mrs. Randall's made some lovely bits out of mallow blossoms, and violets, same as you could put in a frame and hang on the wall, like."

"Mmmphm." Mr. Crook's seamed face seemed to be admitting a dubious possibility to this suggestion. "Weel, if they're of any use to ye, Missus, you can have the presses, and welcome. I didna wish to be throwing them awa', but I must say I've no use for them."

I assured Mr. Crook that I would be delighted to make use of the plant presses, and still more delighted if he would show me where some of the rarer plants in the area could be found. He eyed me sharply for a moment, head to one side like an elderly kestrel, but appeared finally to decide that my interest was genuine, and we fixed it up that I should meet him in the morning for a tour of the local shrubbery. Frank, I knew, meant to go into Inverness for the day to consult some records in the town hall there, and I was pleased to have an excuse not to accompany him. One record was much like another, so far as I was concerned.

Soon after this, Frank pried himself away from the Vicar, and we walked home in company with Mrs. Baird. I was reluctant to mention the cock's blood on the doorstep, myself, but Frank suffered from no such reticence, and questioned her eagerly as to the background of the custom.

"I suppose it's quite old, then?" he asked, swishing a stick along through the roadside weeds. Lamb's-quarters and cinquefoil were already blooming, and I could see the buds of sweet broom swelling; another week and they'd be in flower.

"Och, aye." Mrs. Baird waddled along at a brisk pace, asking no quarter from our younger limbs. "Older than anyone knows, Mr. Randall. Even back before the days of the giants."

"Giants?" I asked.

"Aye. Fionn and the Feinn, ye ken."

"Gaelic folktales," Frank remarked with interest. "Heroes, you know. Probably from Norse roots. There's a lot of the Norse influence round here, and all the way up the coast to the West. Some of the place names are Norse, you know, not Gaelic at all."

I rolled my eyes, sensing another outburst, but Mrs. Baird smiled kindly and encouraged him, saying that was true, then, she'd been up to the north, and seen the Two Brothers stone, and that was Norse, wasn't it?

"The Norsemen came down on that coast hundreds of times between A.D. 500 and 1300 or so," Frank said, looking dreamily at the horizon, seeing dragon-ships in the wind-swept cloud. "Vikings, you know. And they brought a lot of their own myths along. It's a good country for myths. Things seem to take root here."

This I could believe. Twilight was coming on, and so was a storm. In the eerie light beneath the clouds, even the thoroughly modern houses along the road looked as ancient and as sinister as the weathered Pictish stone that stood a hundred feet away, guarding the crossroads it had marked for a thousand years. It seemed a good night to be inside with the shutters fastened.

Rather than staying cozily in Mrs. Baird's parlor to be entertained by stere-opticon views of Perth Harbor, though, Frank chose to keep his appointment for sherry with Mr. Bainbridge, a solicitor with an interest in local historical records. Bearing in mind my earlier encounter with Mr. Bainbridge, I elected to stay at home with Perth Harbor.

"Try to come back before the storm breaks," I said, kissing Frank goodbye. "And give my regards to Mr. Bainbridge."

"Umm, yes. Yes, of course." Carefully not meeting my eye, Frank shrugged into his overcoat and left, collecting an umbrella from the stand by the door.

I closed the door after him, but left it on the latch so he could get back in. I wandered back toward the parlor, reflecting that Frank would doubtless pretend that he didn't have a wife—a pretense in which Mr. Bainbridge would cheerfully join. Not that I could blame him, particularly.

At first, everything had gone quite well on our visit to Mr. Bainbridge's home the afternoon before. I had been demure, genteel, intelligent but self-effacing, well groomed, and quietly dressed—everything the Perfect Don's Wife should be. Until the tea was served.

I now turned my right hand over, ruefully examining the large blister that ran across the bases of all four fingers. After all, it was not my fault that Mr. Bainbridge, a widower, made do with a cheap tin teapot instead of a proper crockery one. Nor that the solicitor, seeking to be polite, had asked me to pour out. Nor that the potholder he provided had a worn patch that allowed the red-hot handle of the teapot to come into direct contact with my hand when I picked it up.

No, I decided. Dropping the teapot was a perfectly normal reaction. Dropping it into Mr. Bainbridge's lap was merely an accident of placement; I had to drop it somewhere. It was my exclaiming "Bloody fucking hell!" in a voice that topped Mr. Bainbridge's heartcry that had made Frank glare at me across the scones.

Once he recovered from the shock, Mr. Bainbridge had been quite gallant, fussing about my hand and ignoring Frank's attempts to excuse my language on grounds that I had been stationed in a field hospital for the better part of two years. "I'm afraid my wife picked up a number of, er, colorful expressions from the Yanks and such," Frank offered, with a nervous smile.

"True," I said, gritting my teeth as I wrapped a water-soaked napkin about my hand. "Men tend to be very 'colorful' when you're picking shrapnel out of them."

Mr. Bainbridge had tactfully tried to distract the conversation onto neutral historical ground by saying that he had always been interested in the variations of what was considered profane speech through the ages. There was "Gorblimey," for example, a recent corruption of the oath "God blind me."

"Yes, of course," said Frank, gratefully accepting the diversion. "No sugar, thank you, Claire. What about 'Gadzooks'? The 'Gad' part is quite clear, of course, but the 'zook'…."

"Well, you know," the solicitor interjected, "I've sometimes thought it might be a corruption of an old Scots word, in fact—'yeuk.' Means 'itch.' That would make sense, wouldn't it?"

Frank nodded, letting his unscholarly forelock fall across his forehead. He pushed it back automatically. "Interesting," he said, "the whole evolution of profanity."

"Yes, and it's still going on," I said, carefully picking up a lump of sugar with the tongs.

"Oh?" said Mr. Bainbridge politely. "Did you encounter some interesting variations during your, er, war experience?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "My favorite was one I picked up from a Yank. Man named Williamson, from New York, I believe. He said it every time I changed his dressing."

"What was it?"

" 'Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,' " I said, and dropped the sugar lump neatly into Frank's coffee.

* * *

After a peaceful and not unpleasant sit with Mrs. Baird, I made my way upstairs, to ready myself before Frank came home. I knew his limit with sherry was two glasses, so I expected him back soon.

The wind was rising, and the very air of the bedroom was prickly with electricity. I drew the brush through my hair, making the curls snap with static and spring into knots and furious tangles. My hair would have to do without its hundred strokes tonight, I decided. I would settle for brushing my teeth, in this sort of weather. Strands of hair adhered stickily to my cheeks, clinging stubbornly as I tried to smooth them back.

No water in the ewer; Frank had used it, tidying himself before setting out for his meeting with Mr. Bainbridge, and I had not bothered to refill it from the lavatory tap. I picked up the bottle of L'Heure Bleu and poured a generous puddle into the palm of my hand. Rubbing my hands briskly together before the scent could evaporate, I smoothed them rapidly through my hair. I poured another dollop onto my hairbrush and swept the curls back behind my ears with it.

Well. That was rather better, I thought, turning my head from side to side to examine the results in the speckled looking glass. The moisture had dissipated the static electricity in my hair, so that it floated in heavy, shining waves about my face. And the evaporating alcohol had left behind a very pleasant scent. Frank would like that, I thought. L'Heure Bleu was his favorite.

There was a sudden flash close at hand, with the crash of thunder following close on its heels, and all the lights went out. Cursing under my breath, I groped in the drawers.

Somewhere I had seen candles and matches; power failure was so frequent an occurrence in the Highlands that candles were a necessary furnishing for all inn and hotel rooms. I had seen them even in the most elegant hotels, where they were scented with honeysuckle, and presented in frosted glass holders with shimmering pendants.

Mrs. Baird's candles were far more utilitarian—plain white plumber's candles—but there were a lot of them, and three folders of matches as well. I was not inclined to be picky over style at a time like this.

I fitted a candle to the blue ceramic holder on the dressing table by the light of the next flash, then moved about the room, lighting others, ’til the whole room was filled with a soft, wavering radiance. Very romantic, I thought, and with some presence of mind, I pressed down the light switch, so that a sudden return of power shouldn’t ruin the mood at some inopportune moment.

The candles had burned no more than a half-inch when the door opened and Frank blew in. Literally, for the draft that followed him up the stairs extinguished three of the candles.

The door closed behind him with a bang that blew out two more, and he peered into the sudden gloom, pushing a hand through his disheveled hair. I got up and relit the candles, making mild remarks about his abrupt methods of entering rooms. It was only when I had finished and turned to ask him whether he’d like a drink, that I saw he was looking rather white and unsettled.

“What’s the matter?” I said. “Seen a ghost?”

“Well, you know,” he said slowly, “I’m not at all sure that I haven’t.” Absentmindedly, he picked up my hairbrush and raised it to tidy his hair. When a sudden whiff of L’Heure Bleu reached his nostrils, he wrinkled his nose and set it down again, settling for the attentions of his pocket comb instead.

I glanced through the window, where the elm trees were lashing to and fro like flails. A loose shutter was banging somewhere on the other side of the house, and it occurred to me that we ought perhaps to close our own, though the carry-on outside was rather exciting to watch.

“Bit blustery for a ghost, I’d think,” I said. “Don’t they like quiet, misty evenings in graveyards?”

Frank laughed a bit sheepishly. “Well, I daresay it’s only Bainbridge’s stories, plus a bit more of his sherry than I really meant to have. Nothing at all, likely.”

Now I was curious. “What exactly did you see?” I asked, settling myself on the dressing-table seat. I motioned to the whisky bottle with a half-lifted brow, and Frank went at once to pour a couple of drinks.

"Well, only a man, really," he began, measuring out a jigger for himself and two for me. "Standing down in the road outside."

"What, outside this house?" I laughed. "Must have been a ghost, then; I can't feature any living person standing about on a night like this."

Frank tilted the ewer over his glass, then looked accusingly at me when no water came out.

"Don't look at me," I said. "You used up all the water. I don't mind it neat, though." I took a sip in illustration.

Frank looked as though he were tempted to nip down to the lavatory for water, but abandoned the idea and went on with his story, sipping cautiously as though his glass contained vitriol, rather than the best Glenfiddich single malt whisky.

"Yes, he was down at the edge of the garden on this side, standing by the fence. I thought"—he hesitated, looking down into his glass—"I rather thought he was looking up at your window."

"My window? How extraordinary!" I couldn't repress a mild shiver, and went across to fasten the shutters, though it seemed a bit late for that. Frank followed me across the room, still talking.

"Yes, I could see you myself from below. You were brushing your hair and cursing a bit because it was standing on end."

"In that case, the fellow was probably enjoying a good laugh," I said tartly. Frank shook his head, though he smiled and smoothed his hands over my hair.

"No, he wasn't laughing. In fact, he seemed terribly unhappy about something. Not that I could see his face well; just something about the way he stood. I came up behind him, and when he didn't move, I asked politely if I could help him with something. He acted at first as though he didn't hear me, and I thought perhaps he didn't, over the noise of the wind, so I repeated myself, and I reached out to tap his shoulder, to get his attention, you know. But before I could touch him, he whirled suddenly round and pushed past me and walked off down the road."

"Sounds a bit rude, but not very ghostly," I observed, draining my glass. "What did he look like?"

"Big chap," said Frank, frowning in recollection. "And a Scot, in complete Highland rig-out, complete to sporran and the most beautiful running-stag brooch on his plaid. I wanted to ask where he'd got it from, but he was off before I could."

I went to the bureau and poured another drink. "Well, not so unusual an appearance for these parts, surely? I've seen men dressed like that in the village now and then."

"Nooo …" Frank sounded doubtful. "No, it wasn't his dress that was odd. But when he pushed past me, I could swear he was close enough that I should have felt him brush my sleeve—but I didn't. And I was intrigued enough to turn round and watch him as he walked away. He walked down the Gereside Road, but when he'd almost reached the corner, he … disappeared. That's when I began to feel a bit cold down the backbone."

"Perhaps your attention was distracted for a second, and he just stepped aside into the shadows," I suggested. "There are a lot of trees down near that corner."

"I could swear I didn't take my eyes off him for a moment," muttered Frank. He looked up suddenly. "I know! I remember now why I thought he was so odd, though I didn't realize it at the time."

"What?" I was getting a bit tired of the ghost, and wanted to go on to more interesting matters, such as bed.

"The wind was cutting up like billy-o, but his drapes—his kilts and his plaid, you know—they didn't move at all, except to the stir of his walking."

We stared at each other. "Well," I said finally, "that is a bit spooky."

Frank shrugged and smiled suddenly, dismissing it. "At least I'll have something to tell the Vicar next time I see him. Perhaps it's a well-known local ghost, and he can give me its gory history." He glanced at his watch. "But now I'd say it's bedtime."

"So it is," I murmured.

I watched him in the mirror as he removed his shirt and reached for a hanger. Suddenly he paused in mid-button.

"Did you have many Scots in your charge, Claire?" he asked abruptly. "At the field hospital, or at Pembroke?"

"Of course," I replied, somewhat puzzled. "There were quite a few of the Seaforths and Camerons through the field hospital at Amiens, and then a bit later, after Caen, we had a lot of the Gordons. Nice chaps, most of them. Very stoic about things generally, but terrible cowards about injections." I smiled, remembering one in particular.

"We had one—rather a crusty old thing really, a piper from the Third Seaforths—who couldn't stand being stuck, especially not in the hip. He'd go for hours in the most awful discomfort before he'd let anyone near him with a needle, and even then he'd try to get us to give him the injection in the arm, though it's meant to be intramuscular." I laughed at the memory of Corporal Chisholm. "He told me, 'If I'm goin' to lie on my face wi' my buttocks bared, I want the lass *under* me, not behind me wi' a hatpin!' "

Frank smiled, but looked a trifle uneasy, as he often did about my less delicate war stories. "Don't worry," I assured him, seeing the look, "I won't tell that one at tea in the Senior Common Room."

The smile lightened and he came forward to stand behind me as I sat at the dressing table. He pressed a kiss on the top of my head.

"Don't worry," he said. "The Senior Common Room will love you, no matter what stories you tell. Mmmm. Your hair smells wonderful."

"Do you like it then?" His hands slid forward over my shoulders in answer, cupping my breasts in the thin nightdress. I could see his head above mine in the mirror, his chin resting on top of my head.

"I like everything about you," he said huskily. "You look wonderful by candlelight, you know. Your eyes are like sherry in crystal, and your skin glows like ivory. A candlelight witch, you are. Perhaps I should disconnect the lamps permanently."

"Make it hard to read in bed," I said, my heart beginning to speed up.

"I could think of better things to do in bed," he murmured.

"Could you, indeed?" I said, rising and turning to put my arms about his neck. "Like what?"

* * *

Sometime later, cuddled close behind bolted shutters, I lifted my head from his shoulder and said, "Why did you ask me that earlier?

About whether I'd had to do with any Scots, I mean—you must know I had, there are all sorts of men through those hospitals."

He stirred and ran a hand softly down my back.

"Mmm. Oh, nothing, really. Just, when I saw that chap outside, it occurred to me he might be"—he hesitated, tightening his hold a bit—"er, you know, that he might have been someone you'd nursed, perhaps … maybe heard you were staying here, and came along to see … something like that."

"In that case," I said practically, "why wouldn't he come in and ask to see me?"

"Well," Frank's voice was very casual, "maybe he didn't want particularly to run into me."

I pushed up onto one elbow, staring at him. We had left one candle burning, and I could see him well enough. He had turned his head, and was looking oh-so-casually off toward the chromolithograph of Bonnie Prince Charlie with which Mrs. Baird had seen fit to decorate our wall.

I grabbed his chin and turned his head to face me. He widened his eyes in simulated surprise.

"Are you implying," I demanded, "that the man you saw outside was some sort of, of …" I hesitated, looking for the proper word.

"Liaison?" he suggested helpfully.

"Romantic interest of mine?" I finished.

"No, no, certainly not," he said unconvincingly. He took my hands away from his face, and tried to kiss me, but now it was my turn for head-turning. He settled for pressing me back down to lie beside him.

"It's only…." he began. "Well, you know, Claire, it *was* six years. And we saw each other only three times, and only just for the day that last time. It wouldn't be unusual if … I mean, everyone knows doctors and nurses are under tremendous stress during emergencies, and … well, I … it's just that … well, I'd understand, you know, if anything, er, of a spontaneous nature …"

I interrupted this rambling by jerking free and exploding out of bed.

"Do you think I've been unfaithful to you?" I demanded. "Do you? Because if so, you can leave this room this instant. Leave the house altogether! How dare you imply such a thing?" I was seething, and Frank, sitting up, reached out to try to soothe me.

"Don't you touch me!" I snapped. "Just tell me—*do* you think, on the evidence of a strange man happening to glance up at my window, that I've had some flaming affair with one of my patients?"

Frank got out of bed and wrapped his arms around me. I stayed stiff as Lot's wife, but he persisted, caressing my hair and rubbing my shoulders in the way he knew I liked.

"No, I don't think any such thing," he said firmly. He pulled me closer, and I relaxed slightly, though not enough to put my arms around him.

After a long time, he murmured into my hair, "No, I know you'd never do such a thing. I only meant to say that even if you ever did … Claire, it would make no difference to me. I love you so. Nothing you ever did could stop my loving you." He took my face between his hands—only four inches taller than I, he could look directly into my eyes without trouble—and said softly, "Forgive me?" His breath, barely scented with the tang of Glenfiddich, was warm on my face, and his lips, full and inviting, were disturbingly close.

Another flash from outside heralded the sudden breaking of the storm, and a thundering rain smashed down on the slates of the roof.

I slowly put my arms around his waist.

" 'The quality of mercy is not strained,' " I quoted. " 'It droppeth as the gentle dew from heaven …' "

Frank laughed and looked upward; the overlapping stains on the ceiling boded ill for the prospects of our sleeping dry all night.

"If that's a sample of your mercy," he said, "I'd hate to see your vengeance." The thunder went off like a mortar attack, as though in answer to his words, and we both laughed, at ease again.

It was only later, listening to his regular deep breathing beside me, that I began to wonder. As I had said, there was no evidence whatsoever to imply unfaithfulness on my part. *My* part. But six years, as he’d said, was a long time.

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2

STANDING STONES

Mr. Crook called for me, as arranged, promptly at seven the next morning.

"So as we'll catch the dew on the buttercups, eh, lass?" he said, twinkling with elderly gallantry. He had brought a motorcycle of his own approximate vintage, on which to transport us into the countryside. The plant presses were tidily strapped to the sides of this enormous machine, like bumpers on a tugboat. It was a leisurely ramble through the quiet countryside, made all the more quiet by contrast with the thunderous roar of Mr. Crook's cycle, suddenly throttled into silence. The old man did indeed know a lot about the local plants, I discovered. Not only where they were to be found but their medicinal uses, and how to prepare them. I wished I had brought a notebook to get it all down, but listened intently to the cracked old voice, and did my best to commit the information to memory as I stowed our specimens in the heavy plant presses.

We stopped for a packed luncheon near the base of a curious flat-topped hill. Green as most of its neighbors, with the same rocky juts and crags, it had something different: a well-worn path leading up one side and disappearing abruptly behind a granite outcrop.

"What's up there?" I asked, gesturing with a ham sandwich. "It seems a difficult place for picnicking."

"Ah." Mr. Crook glanced at the hill. "That's Craigh na Dun, lass. I'd meant to show ye after our meal."

"Really? Is there something special about it?"

“Oh, aye,” he answered, but refused to elaborate further, merely saying that I’d see when I saw.

I had some fears about his ability to climb such a steep path, but these evaporated as I found myself panting in his wake. At last, Mr. Crook extended a gnarled hand and pulled me up over the rim of the hill.

“There ’tis.” He waved a hand with a sort of proprietorial gesture.

“Why, it’s a henge!” I said, delighted. “A miniature henge!”

Because of the war, it had been several years since I had last visited Salisbury Plain, but Frank and I had seen Stonehenge soon after we were married. Like the other tourists wandering awed among the huge standing stones, we had gaped at the Altar Stone (‘w’ere ancient Druid priests performed their dreadful ’uman sacrifices,’ announced the sonorous Cockney tour guide accompanying a busload of Italian tourists, who all dutifully took photographs of the rather ordinary-looking stone block).

Out of the same passion for exactness that made Frank adjust his ties on the hanger so that the ends hung precisely even, we had even trekked around the circumference of the circle, pacing off the distance between the Z holes and the Y holes, and counting the lintels in the Sarsen Circle, the outermost ring of monstrous uprights.

Three hours later, we knew how many Y and Z holes there were (fifty-nine, if you care; I didn’t), but had no more clue to the purpose of the structure than had the dozens of amateur and professional archaeologists who had crawled over the site for the last five hundred years.

No lack of opinions, of course. Life among academics had taught me that a well-expressed opinion is usually better than a badly expressed fact, so far as professional advancement goes.

A temple. A burial ground. An astronomical observatory. A place of execution (hence the inaptly named “Slaughter Stone” that lies to one side, half sunk in its own pit). An open-air market. I liked this last suggestion, visualizing Megalithic housewives strolling between the lintels, baskets on their arms, critically judging the glaze on the latest shipment of red-clay beakers and listening skeptically to the claims of stone-age bakers and vendors of deer-bone shovels and amber beads.

The only thing I could see against that hypothesis was the presence of bodies under the Altar Stone and cremated remains in the Z holes. Unless these were the hapless remains of merchants accused of short-weighting the customers, it seemed a bit unsanitary to be burying people in the marketplace.

There were no signs of burial in the miniature henge atop the hill. By "miniature," I mean only that the circle of standing stones was smaller than Stonehenge; each stone was still twice my own height, and massive in proportion.

I had heard from another tour-guide at Stonehenge that these stone circles occur all over Britain and Europe—some in better repair than others, some differing slightly in orientation or form, all of purpose and origin unknown.

Mr. Crook stood smiling benignly as I prowled among the stones, pausing now and then to touch one gently, as though my touch could make an impression on the monumental boulders.

Some of the standing stones were brindled, striped with dim colors. Others were speckled with flakes of mica that caught the morning sun with a cheerful shimmer. All of them were remarkably different from the clumps of native stone that thrust out of the bracken all around. Whoever built the stone circles, and for whatever purpose, thought it important enough to have quarried, shaped, and transported special stone blocks for the erection of their testimonial. Shaped—how? Transported—how, and from what unimaginable distance?

"My husband would be fascinated," I told Mr. Crook, stopping to thank him for showing me the place and the plants. "I'll bring him up to see it later." The gnarled old man gallantly offered me an arm at the top of the trail. I took it, deciding after one look down the precipitous decline that in spite of his age, he was likely steadier on his pins than I was.

* * *

I swung down the road that afternoon toward the village, to fetch Frank from the vicarage. I happily breathed in that heady Highland mix of heather, sage, and broom, spiced here and there with chimney smoke and the tang of fried herring, as I passed the scattered cottages. The village lay nestled in a small declivity at the foot of one of those soaring crags that rise so steeply from the Highland moors. Those cottages near the road were nice. The bloom of postwar prosperity had spread as far as a new coat of paint, and even the manse, which must be at least a hundred years old, sported bright yellow trim around its sagging windowframes.

The vicar's housekeeper answered the door, a tall, stringy woman with three strands of artificial pearls round her neck. Hearing who I was, she welcomed me in and towed me down a long, narrow, dark hallway, lined with sepia engravings of people who may have been famous personages of their time, or cherished relatives of the present vicar, but might as well have been the Royal Family, for all I could see of their features in the gloom.

By contrast, the vicar's study was blinding with light from the enormous windows that ran nearly from ceiling to floor in one wall. An easel near the fireplace, bearing a half-finished oil of black cliffs against the evening sky, showed the reason for the windows, which must have been added long after the house was built.

Frank and a short, tubby man with a clerical dog-collar were cozily poring over a mass of tattered paper on the desk by the far wall. Frank barely looked up in greeting, but the vicar politely left off his explanations and hurried over to clasp my hand, his round face beaming with sociable delight.

"Mrs. Randall!" he said, pumping my hand heartily. "How nice to see you again. And you've come just in time to hear the news!"

"News?" Casting an eye on the grubbiness and typeface of the papers on the desk, I calculated the date of the news in question as being likely around 1750. Not precisely stop-the-presses, then.

"Yes, indeed. We've been tracing your husband's ancestor, Jack Randall, through the army dispatches of the period." The vicar leaned close, speaking out of the side of his mouth like a gangster in an American film. "I've, er, 'borrowed' the original dispatches from the local Historical Society files. You'll be careful not to tell anyone?"

Amused, I agreed that I would not reveal his deadly secret, and looked about for a comfortable chair in which to receive the latest revelations from the eighteenth century. The wing chair nearest the windows looked suitable, but as I reached to turn it toward the desk, I discovered that it was already occupied. The inhabitant, a small boy with a shock of glossy black hair, was curled up in the depths of the chair, sound asleep.

"Roger!" The vicar, coming to assist me, was as surprised as I. The boy, startled out of sleep, shot bolt upright, wide eyes the color of moss.

"Now what are you up to in here, you young scamp?" The vicar was scolding affectionately. "Oh, fell asleep reading the comic papers again?" He scooped up the brightly colored pages and handed them to the lad. "Run along now, Roger, I have business with the Randalls. Oh, wait, I've forgotten to introduce you—Mrs. Randall, this is my son, Roger."

I was a bit surprised. If ever I'd seen a confirmed bachelor, I would have thought the Reverend Wakefield was it. Still, I took the politely proffered paw and shook it warmly, resisting the urge to wipe a certain residual stickiness on my skirt.

The Reverend Wakefield looked fondly after the boy as he trooped off toward the kitchen.

"My niece's son, really," he confided. "Father shot down over the Channel, and mother killed in the Blitz, though, so I've taken him."

"How kind of you," I murmured, thinking of Uncle Lamb. He, too, had died in the Blitz, killed by a hit to the auditorium of the British Museum, where he had been lecturing. Knowing him, I thought his main feeling would have been gratification that the wing of Persian antiquities next door had escaped.

"Not at all, not at all." The vicar flapped a hand in embarrassment. "Nice to have a bit of young life about the house. Now, do have a seat."

Frank began talking even before I had set my handbag down. "The most amazing luck, Claire," he enthused, thumbing through the dog-eared pile. "The vicar's located a whole series of military dispatches that mention Jonathan Randall."

“Well, a good deal of the prominence seems to have been Captain Randall’s own doing,” the vicar observed, taking some of the papers from Frank. “He was in command of the garrison at Fort William for four years or so, but he seems to have spent quite a bit of his time harassing the Scottish countryside above the Border on behalf of the Crown. This lot”—he gingerly separated a stack of papers and laid them on the desk—“is reports of complaints lodged against the Captain by various families and estate holders, claiming everything from interference with their maidservants by the soldiers of the garrison to outright theft of horses, not to mention assorted instances of ‘insult,’ unspecified.”

I was amused. “So you have the proverbial horse thief in your family tree?” I said to Frank.

He shrugged, unperturbed. “He was what he was, and nothing I can do about it. I only want to find out. The complaints aren’t all that odd, for that particular time period; the English in general, and the army in particular, were rather notably unpopular throughout the Highlands. No, what’s odd is that nothing ever seems to have come of the complaints, even the serious ones.”

The vicar, unable to keep still for long, broke in. “That’s right. Not that officers then were held to anything like modern standards; they could do very much as they liked in minor matters. But this is odd. It’s not that the complaints are investigated and dismissed; they’re just never mentioned again. You know what I suspect, Randall? Your ancestor must have had a patron. Someone who could protect him from the censure of his superiors.”

Frank scratched his head, squinting at the dispatches. “You could be right. Had to have been someone quite powerful, though. High up in the army hierarchy, perhaps, or maybe a member of the nobility.”

“Yes, or possibly—” The vicar was interrupted in his theories by the entrance of the housekeeper, Mrs. Graham.

“I’ve brought ye a wee bit of refreshment, gentlemen,” she announced, setting the tea tray firmly in the center of the desk, from which the vicar rescued his precious dispatches in the nick of time.

She looked me over with a shrewd eye, assessing the twitching limbs and faint glaze over the eyeballs.

"I've brought but the two cups, for I thought perhaps Mrs. Randall would care to join me in the kitchen. I've a bit of—" I didn't wait for the conclusion of her invitation, but leapt to my feet with alacrity. I could hear the theories breaking out again behind me as we pushed through the swinging door that led to the manse's kitchen.

The tea was green, hot and fragrant, with bits of leaf swirling through the liquid.

"Mmm," I said, setting the cup down. "It's been a long time since I tasted Oolong."

Mrs. Graham nodded, beaming at my pleasure in her refreshments. She had clearly gone to some trouble, laying out handmade lace mats beneath the eggshell cups and providing thick clotted cream with the scones.

"Aye, I couldna get it during the War, ye know. It's the best for the readings, though. Had a terrible time with that Earl Grey. The leaves fall apart so fast, it's hard to tell anything at all."

"Oh, you read tea leaves?" I asked, mildly amused. Nothing could be farther from the popular conception of the gypsy fortune-teller than Mrs. Graham, with her short, iron-grey perm and triple-stranded pearl choker. A swallow of tea ran visibly down the long, stringy neck and disappeared beneath the gleaming beads.

"Why, certainly I do, my dear. Just as my grandmother taught me, and her grandmother before her. Drink up your cup, and I'll see what you have there."

She was silent for a long time, once in a while tilting the cup to catch the light, or rolling it slowly between lean palms to get a different angle.

She set the cup down carefully, as though afraid it might blow up in her face. The grooves on either side of her mouth had deepened, and her brows pressed together in what looked like puzzlement.

"Well," she said finally. "That's one of the stranger ones I've seen."

"Oh?" I was still amused, but beginning to be curious. "Am I going to meet a tall dark stranger, or journey across the sea?"

"Could be." Mrs. Graham had caught my ironic tone, and echoed it, smiling slightly. "And could not. That's what's odd about your cup, my dear. Everything in it's contradictory. There's the curved leaf for a journey, but it's crossed by the broken one that means staying put. And strangers there are, to be sure, several of them. And one of them's your husband, if I read the leaves aright."

My amusement dissipated somewhat. After six years apart, and six months together, my husband *was* still something of a stranger. Though I failed to see how a tea leaf could know it.

Mrs. Graham's brow was still furrowed. "Let me see your hand, child," she said.

The hand holding mine was bony, but surprisingly warm. A scent of lavender water emanated from the neat part of the grizzled head bent over my palm. She stared into my hand for quite a long time, now and then tracing one of the lines with a finger, as though following a map whose roads all petered out in sandy washes and deserted wastes.

"Well, what is it?" I asked, trying to maintain a light air. "Or is my fate too horrible to be revealed?"

Mrs. Graham raised quizzical eyes and looked thoughtfully at my face, but retained her hold on my hand. She shook her head, pursing her lips.

"Oh, no, my dear. It's not your fate is in your hand. Only the seed of it." The birdlike head cocked to one side, considering. "The lines in your hand change, ye know. At another point in your life, they may be quite different than they are now."

"I didn't know that. I thought you were born with them, and that was that." I was repressing an urge to jerk my hand away. "What's the point of palm reading, then?" I didn't wish to sound rude, but I found this scrutiny a bit unsettling, especially following on the heels of that tea-leaf reading. Mrs. Graham smiled unexpectedly, and folded my fingers closed over my palm.

"Why, the lines of your palm show what ye are, dear. That's why they change—or should. They don't, in some people; those unlucky enough never to change in themselves, but there are few like that." She gave my folded hand a squeeze and patted it. "I doubt that you're one of those. Your hand shows quite a lot of change already, for one so young. That would likely be the War, of course," she said, as though to herself.

I was curious again, and opened my palm voluntarily.

"What am I, then, according to my hand?"

Mrs. Graham frowned, but did not pick up my hand again.

"I canna just say. It's odd, for most hands have a likeness to them. Mind, I'd no just say that it's 'see one, you've seen them all,' but it's often like that—there are patterns, you know." She smiled suddenly, an oddly engaging grin, displaying very white and patently false teeth.

"That's how a fortune-teller works, you know. I do it for the church fete every year—or did, before the War; suppose I'll do it again now. But a girl comes into the tent—and there am I, done up in a turban with a peacock feather borrowed from Mr. Donaldson, and 'robes of oriental splendor'—that's the vicar's dressing gown, all over peacocks it is and yellow as the sun—anyway, I look her over while I pretend to be watching her hand, and I see she's got her blouse cut down to her breakfast, cheap scent, and earrings down to her shoulders. I needn't have a crystal ball to be tellin' her she'll have a child before the next year's fete." Mrs. Graham, paused, grey eyes alight with mischief. "Though if the hand you're holding is bare, it's tactful to predict first that she'll marry soon."

I laughed, and so did she. "So you don't look at their hands at all, then?" I asked. "Except to check for rings?"

She looked surprised. "Oh, of course you do. It's just that you know ahead of time what you'll see. Generally." She nodded at my open hand. "But that is not a pattern I've seen before. The large thumb, now"—she did lean forward then and touch it lightly—"that wouldn't change much. Means you're strong-minded, and have a will not easily crossed." She twinkled at me. "Reckon your husband could have told ye that. Likewise about that one." She pointed to the fleshy mound at the base of the thumb.

"What is it?"

"The Mount of Venus, it's called." She pursed her thin lips primly together, though the corners turned irrepressibly up. "In a man, ye'd say it means he likes the lasses. For a woman, ’tis a bit different. To be polite about it, I’ll make a bit of a prediction for you, and say your husband isna like to stray far from your bed.” She gave a surprisingly deep and bawdy chuckle, and I blushed slightly.

The elderly housekeeper pored over my hand again, stabbing a pointed forefinger here and there to mark her words.

“Now, there, a well-marked lifeline; you’re in good health, and likely to stay so. The lifeline’s interrupted, meaning your life’s changed markedly—well, that’s true of us all, is it not? But yours is more chopped-up, like, than I usually see; all bits and pieces. And your marriage-line, now”—she shook her head again—“it’s divided; that’s not unusual, means two marriages …”

My reaction was slight, and immediately suppressed, but she caught the flicker and looked up at once. I thought she probably was quite a shrewd fortune-teller, at that. The grey head shook reassuringly at me.

“No, no, lass. It doesna mean anything’s like to happen to your good man. It’s only that if it did,” she emphasized the “if” with a slight squeeze of my hand, “you’d not be one to pine away and waste the rest of your life in mourning. What it means is, you’re one of those can love again if your first love’s lost.”

She squinted nearsightedly at my palm, running a short, ridged nail gently down the deep marriage line. “But most divided lines are broken—yours is forked.” She looked up with a roguish smile. “Sure you’re not a bigamist, on the quiet, like?”

I shook my head, laughing. “No. When would I have the time?” Then I turned my hand, showing the outer edge.

“I’ve heard that small marks on the side of the hand indicate how many children you’ll have?” My tone was casual, I hoped. The edge of my palm was disappointingly smooth.

Mrs. Graham flicked a scornful hand at this idea.

“Pah! After ye’ve had a bairn or two, ye might show lines there. More like you’d have them on your face. Proves nothing at all beforehand.”

“Oh, it doesn’t?” I was foolishly relieved to hear this. I was going to ask whether the deep lines across the base of my wrist meant anything (a potential for suicide?), but we were interrupted at that point by the Reverend Wakefield coming into the kitchen bearing the empty tea cups. He set them on the drainboard and began a loud and clumsy fumbling through the cupboard, obviously in hopes of provoking help.

Mrs. Graham sprang to her feet to defend the sanctity of her kitchen, and pushing the Reverend adroitly to one side, set about assembling tea things on a tray for the study. He drew me to one side, safely out of the way.

“Why don’t you come to the study and have another cup of tea with me and your husband, Mrs. Randall? We’ve made really a most gratifying discovery.”

I could see that in spite of outward composure, he was bursting with the glee of whatever they had found, like a small boy with a toad in his pocket. Plainly I was going to have to go and read Captain Jonathan Randall’s laundry bill, his receipt for boot repairs, or some document of similar fascination.

Frank was so absorbed in the tattered documents that he scarcely looked up when I entered the study. He reluctantly surrendered them to the vicar’s podgy hands, and came round to stand behind the Reverend Wakefield and peer over his shoulder, as though he could not bear to let the papers out of his sight for a moment.

“Yes?” I said politely, fingering the dirty bits of paper. “Ummm, yes, very interesting.” In fact, the spidery handwriting was so faded and so ornate that it hardly seemed worth the trouble of deciphering it. One sheet, better preserved than the rest, had some sort of crest at the top.

“The Duke of … Sandringham, is it?” I asked, peering at the crest, with its faded leopard couchant, and the printing below, more legible than the handwriting.

“Yes, indeed,” the vicar said, beaming even more. “An extinct title, now, you know.”

I didn’t, but nodded intelligently, being no stranger to historians in the manic grip of discovery. It was seldom necessary to do more than nod periodically, saying “Oh, really?” or “How perfectly fascinating!” at appropriate intervals.

After a certain amount of deferring back and forth between Frank and the vicar, the latter won the honor of telling me about their discovery. Evidently, all this rubbish made it appear that Frank's ancestor, the notorious Black Jack Randall, had not been merely a gallant soldier for the Crown, but a trusted—and secret—agent of the Duke of Sandringham.

"Almost an agent provocateur, wouldn't you say, Dr. Randall?" The vicar graciously handed the ball back to Frank, who seized it and ran.

"Yes, indeed. The language is very guarded, of course…." He turned the pages gently with a scrubbed forefinger.

"Oh, really?" I said.

"But it seems from this that Jonathan Randall was entrusted with the job of stirring up Jacobite sentiments, if any existed, among the prominent Scottish families in his area. The point being to smoke out any baronets and clan chieftains who might be harboring secret sympathies in that direction. But that's odd. Wasn't Sandringham a suspected Jacobite himself?" Frank turned to the vicar, a frown of inquiry on his face. The vicar's smooth, bald head creased in an identical frown.

"Why, yes, I believe you're right. But wait, let's check in Cameron"—he made a dive for the bookshelf, crammed with calf-bound volumes—"he's sure to mention Sandringham."

"How perfectly fascinating," I murmured, allowing my attention to wander to the huge corkboard that covered one wall of the study from floor to ceiling.

It was covered with an amazing assortment of things; mostly papers of one sort or another, gas bills, correspondence, notices from the Diocesan Council, loose pages of novels, notes in the vicar's own hand, but also small items like keys, bottle caps, and what appeared to be small car parts, attached with tacks and string.

I browsed idly through the miscellanea, keeping half an ear tuned to the argument going on behind me. (The Duke of Sandringham probably *was* a Jacobite, they decided.) My attention was caught by a genealogical chart, tacked up with special care in a spot by itself, using four tacks, one to a corner. The top of the chart included names dated in the early seventeenth century. But it was the name at the bottom of the chart that had caught my eye: "Roger W. (MacKenzie) Wakefield," it read.

"Excuse me," I said, interrupting a final sputter of dispute as to whether the leopard in the Duke's crest had a lily in its paw, or was it meant to be a crocus? "Is this your son's chart?"

"Eh? Oh, why, yes, yes it is." Distracted, the vicar hurried over, beaming once more. He detached the chart tenderly from the wall and laid it on the table in front of me.

"I didn't want him to forget his own family, you see," he explained. "It's quite an old lineage, back to the sixteen hundreds." His stubby forefinger traced the line of descent almost reverently.

"I gave him my own name because it seemed more suitable, as he lives here, but I didn't want him to forget where he came from." He made an apologetic grimace. "I'm afraid my own family is nothing to boast of, genealogically. Vicars and curates, with the occasional bookseller thrown in for variety, and only traceable back to 1762 or so. Rather poor record-keeping, you know," he said, wagging his head remorsefully over the lethargy of his ancestors.

It was growing late by the time we finally left the vicarage, with the vicar promising to take the letters to town for copying first thing in the morning. Frank babbled happily of spies and Jacobites most of the way back to Mrs. Baird's. Finally, though, he noticed my quietness.

"What is it, love?" he asked, taking my arm solicitously. "Not feeling well?" This was asked with a mingled tone of concern and hope.

"No, I'm quite well. I was only thinking …" I hesitated, because we had discussed this matter before. "I was thinking about Roger."

"Roger?"

I gave a sigh of impatience. "Really, Frank! You can be so … oblivious! Roger, the Reverend Wakefield's son."

"Oh. Yes, of course," he said vaguely. "Charming child. What about him?"

"Well … only that there are a lot of children like that. Orphaned, you know."

He gave me a sharp look, and shook his head.

"No, Claire. Really, I'd like to, but I've told you how I feel about adoption. It's just … I couldn't feel properly toward a child that's not … well, not of my blood. No doubt that's ridiculous and selfish of me, but there it is. Maybe I'll change my mind in time, but now.…" We walked a few steps in a barbed silence. Suddenly he stopped and turned to me, gripping my hands.

"Claire," he said huskily, "I want *our* child. You're the most important thing in the world to me. I want you to be happy, above all else, but I want … well, I want to keep you to myself. I'm afraid a child from outside, one we had no real relationship with, would seem an intruder, and I'd resent it. But to be able to give you a child, see it grow in you, see it born … then I'd feel as though it were more an … extension of you, perhaps. And me. A real part of the family." His eyes were wide, pleading.

"Yes, all right. I understand." I was willing to abandon the topic—for now. I turned to go on walking, but he reached out and took me in his arms.

"Claire. I love you." The tenderness in his voice was overwhelming, and I leaned my head against his jacket, feeling his warmth and the strength of his arms around me.

"I love you too." We stood locked together for a moment, swaying slightly in the wind that swept down the road. Suddenly Frank drew back a bit, smiling down at me.

"Besides," he said softly, smoothing the wind-blown hair back from my face, "we haven't given up yet, have we?"

I smiled back. "No."

He took my hand, tucking it snugly beneath his elbow, and we turned toward our lodgings.

"Game for another try?"

"Yes. Why not?" We strolled, hand in hand, back toward the Gereside Road. It was the sight of the Baragh Mhor, the Pictish stone that stands at the corner of the road there, that made me remember things ancient.

"I forgot!" I exclaimed. "I have something exciting to show you." Frank looked down at me and pulled me closer. He squeezed my hand.

"So have I," he said, grinning. "You can show me yours tomorrow."

* * *

When tomorrow came, though, we had other things to do. I had forgotten that we had planned a day trip to the Great Glen of Loch Ness.

It was a long drive through the Glen, and we left early in the morning, before sunup. After the hurry to the waiting car through the freezing dawn, it was cozy to relax under the rug and feel the warmth stealing back into my hands and feet. Along with it came a most delicious drowsiness, and I fell blissfully asleep against Frank's shoulder, my last conscious sight the driver's head in red-rimmed silhouette against the dawning sky.

It was after nine when we arrived, and the guide Frank had called for was awaiting us on the edge of the loch with a small sailing skiff.

"An' it suits ye, sir, I thought we'd take a wee sail down the loch-side to Urquhart Castle. Perhaps we'll sup a bit there, before goin' on." The guide, a dour-looking little man in weather-beaten cotton shirt and twill trousers, stowed the picnic hamper tidily beneath the seat, and offered me a callused hand down into the well of the boat.

It was a beautiful day, with the burgeoning greenery of the steep banks blurring in the ruffled surface of the loch. Our guide, despite his dour appearance, was knowledgeable and talkative, pointing out the islands, castles, and ruins that rimmed the long, narrow loch.

"Yonder, that's Urquhart Castle." He pointed to a smooth-faced wall of stone, barely visible through the trees. "Or what's left of it. 'Twas cursed by the witches of the Glen, and saw one unhappiness after another."

He told us the story of Mary Grant, daughter of the laird of Urquhart Castle, and her lover, Donald Donn, poet son of MacDonald of Bohuntin. Forbidden to meet because of her father's objection to the latter's habits of "lifting" any cattle he came across (an old and honorable Highland profession, the guide assured us), they met anyway. The father got wind of it, Donald was lured to a false rendezvous and thus taken. Condemned to die, he begged to be beheaded like a gentleman, rather than hanged as a felon. This request was granted, and the young man led to the block, repeating "The Devil will take the Laird of Grant out of his shoes, and Donald Donn shall not be hanged." He wasn't, and legend reports that as his severed head rolled from the block, it spoke, saying, "Mary, lift ye my head."

I shuddered, and Frank put an arm around me. "There's a bit of one of his poems left," he said quietly. "Donald Donn's. It goes:

"Tomorrow I shall be on a hill, without a head.
Have you no compassion for my sorrowful maiden,
My Mary, the fair and tender-eyed?"

I took his hand and squeezed it lightly.

As story after story of treachery, murder, and violence were recounted, it seemed as though the loch had earned its sinister reputation.

"What about the monster?" I asked, peering over the side into the murky depths. It seemed entirely appropriate to such a setting.

Our guide shrugged and spat into the water.

"Weel, the loch's queer, and no mistake. There's stories, to be sure, of something old and evil that once lived in the depths. Sacrifices were made to it—kine, and sometimes even wee bairns, flung into the water in withy baskets." He spat again. "And some say the loch's bottomless—got a hole in the center deeper than anything else in Scotland. On the other hand"—the guide's crinkled eyes crinkled a bit more—" 'twas a family here from Lancashire a few years ago, cam' rushin' to the police station in Invermoriston, screamin' as they'd seen the monster come out o' the water and hide in the bracken. Said 'twas a terrible creature, covered wi' red hair and fearsome horns, and chewin' something, wi' the blood all dripping from its mouth." He held up a hand, stemming my horrified exclamation.

"The constable they sent to see cam' back and said, weel, bar the drippin' blood, 'twas a verra accurate description"—he paused for effect—"of a nice Highland cow, chewin' her cud in the bracken!"

We sailed down half the length of the loch before disembarking for a late lunch. We met the car there and motored back through the Glen, observing nothing more sinister than a red fox in the road, who looked up startled, a small animal of some sort hanging limp in its jaws, as we zoomed around a curve. He leaped for the side of the road and swarmed up the bank, swift as a shadow.

It was very late indeed when we finally staggered up the path to Mrs. Baird's, but we clung together on the doorstep as Frank groped for the key, still laughing over the events of the day.

It wasn't until we were undressing for bed that I remembered to mention the miniature henge on Craigh na Dun to Frank. His fatigue vanished at once.

"Really? And you know where it is? How marvelous, Claire!" He beamed and began rattling through his suitcase.

"What are you looking for?"

"The alarm clock," he replied, hauling it out.

"Whatever for?" I asked in astonishment.

"I want to be up in time to see them."

"Who?"

"The witches."

"Witches? Who told you there are witches?"

"The vicar," Frank answered, clearly enjoying the joke. "His housekeeper's one of them."

I thought of the dignified Mrs. Graham and snorted derisively. "Don't be ridiculous!"

"Well, not witches, actually. There have been witches all over Scotland for hundreds of years—they burnt them 'til well into the eighteenth century—but this lot is really meant to be Druids, or something of the sort. I don't suppose it's actually a coven—not devil-worship, I don't mean. But the vicar said there was a local group that still observes rituals on the old sun-feast days. He can't afford to take too much interest in such goings-on, you see, because of his position, but he's much too curious a man to ignore it altogether, either. He didn't know where the ceremonies took place, but if there's a stone circle nearby, that must be it." He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. "What luck!"

Getting up once in the dark to go adventuring is a lark. Twice in two days smacks of masochism.

No nice warm car with rugs and thermoses this time, either. I stumbled sleepily up the hill behind Frank, tripping over roots and stubbing my toes on stones. It was cold and misty, and I dug my hands deeper into the pockets of my cardigan.

One final push up over the crest of the hill, and the henge was before us, the stones barely visible in the somber light of predawn. Frank stood stock-still, admiring them, while I subsided onto a convenient rock, panting.

"Beautiful," he murmured. He crept silently to the outer edge of the ring, his shadowy figure disappearing among the larger shadows of the stones. Beautiful they were, and bloody eerie too. I shivered, and not entirely from the cold. If whoever had made them had meant them to impress, they'd known what they were doing.

Frank was back in a moment. "No one here yet," he whispered suddenly from behind me, making me jump. "Come on, I've found a place we can watch from."

The light was coming up from the east now, just a tinge of paler grey on the horizon, but enough to keep me from stumbling as Frank led me through a gap he had found in some alder bushes near the top of the path. There was a tiny clearing inside the clump of bushes, barely enough for the two of us to stand shoulder to shoulder. The path was clearly visible, though, and so was the interior of the stone circle, no more than twenty feet away. Not for the first time, I wondered just what kind of work Frank had done during the War. He certainly seemed to know a lot about maneuvering soundlessly in the dark.

Drowsy as I was, I wanted nothing more than to curl up under a cozy bush and go back to sleep. There wasn't room for that, though, so I continued to stand, peering down the steep path in search of oncoming Druids. I was getting a crick in my back, and my feet ached, but it couldn't take long; the streak of light in the east had turned a pale pink, and I supposed it was less than half an hour 'til dawn.

The first one moved almost as silently as Frank. There was only the faintest of rattles as her feet dislodged a pebble near the crest of the hill, and then the neat grey head rose silently into sight. Mrs. Graham. So it was true, then. The vicar's housekeeper was sensibly dressed in tweed skirt and woolly coat, with a white bundle under one arm. She disappeared behind one of the standing stones, quiet as a ghost.

They came quite quickly after that, in ones and twos and threes, with subdued giggles and whispers on the path that were quickly shushed as they came into sight of the circle.

I recognized a few. Here came Mrs. Buchanan, the village postmistress, blond hair freshly permed and the scent of Evening in Paris wafting strongly from its waves. I suppressed a laugh. So this was a modern-day Druid!

There were fifteen in all, and all women, ranging in age from Mrs. Graham's sixty-odd years to a young woman in her early twenties, whom I had seen pushing a pram round the shops two days before. All of them were dressed for rough walking, with bundles beneath their arms. With a minimum of chat, they disappeared behind stones or bushes, emerging empty-handed and bare-armed, completely clad in white. I caught the scent of laundry soap as one brushed by our clump of bushes, and recognized the garments as bedsheets, wrapped about the body and knotted at the shoulder.

They assembled outside the ring of stones, in a line from eldest to youngest, and stood in silence, waiting. The light in the east grew stronger.

As the sun edged its way above the horizon, the line of women began to move, walking slowly between two of the stones. The leader took them directly to the center of the circle, and led them round and round, still moving slowly, stately as swans in a circular procession.

The leader suddenly stopped, raised her arms, and stepped into the center of the circle. Raising her face toward the pair of easternmost stones, she called out in a high voice. Not loud, but clear enough to be heard throughout the circle. The still mist caught the words and made them echo, as though they came from all around, from the stones themselves.

Whatever the call was, it was echoed again by the dancers. For dancers they now became. Not touching, but with arms outstretched toward each other, they bobbed and weaved, still moving in a circle. Suddenly the circle split in half. Seven of the dancers moved clockwise, still in a circular motion. The others moved in the opposite direction. The two semicircles passed each other at increasing speeds, sometimes forming a complete circle, sometimes a double line. And in the center, the leader stood stock-still, giving again and again that mournful high-pitched call, in a language long since dead.

They should have been ridiculous, and perhaps they were. A collection of women in bedsheets, many of them stout and far from agile, parading in circles on top of a hill. But the hair prickled on the back of my neck at the sound of their call.

They stopped as one, and turned to face the rising sun, standing in the form of two semicircles, with a path lying clear between the halves of the circle thus formed. As the sun rose above the horizon, its light flooded between the eastern stones, knifed between the halves of the circle, and struck the great split stone on the opposite side of the henge.

The dancers stood for a moment, frozen in the shadows to either side of the beam of light. Then Mrs. Graham said something, in the same strange language, but this time in a speaking voice. She pivoted and walked, back straight, iron-grey waves glinting in the sun, along the path of light. Without a word, the dancers fell in step behind her. They passed one by one through the cleft in the main stone and disappeared in silence.

We crouched in the alders until the women, now laughing and chatting normally, had retrieved their clothes and set off in a group down the hill, headed for coffee at the vicarage.

“Goodness!” I stretched, trying to get the kinks out of my legs and back. “That was quite a sight, wasn’t it?”

“Wonderful!” enthused Frank. “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.” He slipped out of the bush like a snake, leaving me to disentangle myself while he cast about the interior of the circle, nose to the ground like a bloodhound.

“Whatever are you looking for?” I asked. I entered the circle with some hesitation, but day was fully come, and the stones, while still impressive, had lost a good deal of the brooding menace of dawn light.

“Marks,” he replied, crawling about on hands and knees, eyes intent on the short turf. “How did they know where to start and stop?”

“Good question. I don’t see anything.” Casting an eye over the ground, though, I did see an interesting plant growing near the base of one of the tall stones. Myosotis? No, probably not; this had orange centers to the deep blue flowers. Intrigued, I started toward it. Frank, with keener hearing than I, leaped to his feet and seized my arm, hurrying me out of the circle a moment before one of the morning’s dancers entered from the other side.

It was Miss Grant, the tubby little woman who, suitably enough in view of her figure, ran the sweets and pastries shop in the town’s High Street. She peered nearsightedly around, then fumbled in her pocket for her spectacles. Jamming these on her nose, she strolled about the circle, at last pouncing on the lost hair-clip for which she had returned. Having restored it to its place in her thick, glossy locks, she seemed in no hurry to return to business. Instead, she seated herself on a boulder, leaned back against one of the stone giants in comradely fashion and lighted a leisurely cigarette.

Frank gave a muted sigh of exasperation beside me. “Well,” he said, resigned, “we’d best go. She could sit there all morning, by the looks of her. And I didn’t see any obvious markings in any case.”

“Perhaps we could come back later,” I suggested, still curious about the blue-flowered vine.

“Yes, all right.” But he had plainly lost interest in the circle itself, being now absorbed in the details of the ceremony. He quizzed me relentlessly on the way down the path, urging me to remember as closely as I could the exact wording of the calls, and the timing of the dance.

"Norse," he said at last, with satisfaction. "The root words are Ancient Norse, I'm almost sure of it. But the dance," he shook his head, pondering. "No, the dance is very much older. Not that there aren't Viking circle dances," he said, raising his brows censoriously, as though I had suggested there weren't. "But that shifting pattern with the double-line business, that's … hmm, it's like … well, some of the patterns on the Beaker Folk glazeware show a pattern rather like that, but then again … hmm."

He dropped into one of his scholarly trances, muttering to himself from time to time. The trance was broken only when he stumbled unexpectedly over an obstacle near the bottom of the hill. He flung his arms out with a startled cry as his feet went out from under him and he rolled untidily down the last few feet of the path, fetching up in a clump of cow parsley.

I dashed down the hill after him, but found him already sitting up among the quivering stems by the time I reached the bottom.

"Are you all right?" I asked, though I could see that he was.

"I think so." He passed a hand dazedly over his brow, smoothing back the dark hair. "What did I trip over?"

"This." I held up a sardine tin, discarded by some earlier visitor. "One of the menaces of civilization."

"Ah." He took it from me, peered inside, then tossed it over one shoulder. "Pity it's empty. I'm feeling rather hungry after that excursion. Shall we see what Mrs. Baird can provide in the way of a late breakfast?"

"We might," I said, smoothing the last strands of hair for him. "And then again, we might make it an early lunch instead." My eyes met his.

"Ah," he said again, with a completely different tone. He ran a hand slowly up my arm and up the side of my neck, his thumb gently tickling the lobe of my ear. "So we might."

"If you aren't too hungry," I said. The other hand found its way behind my back. Palm spread, it pressed me gently toward him, fingers stroking lower and lower. His mouth opened slightly and he breathed, ever so lightly, down the neck of my dress, his warm breath tickling the tops of my breasts.

He laid me carefully back in the grass, the feathery blossoms of the cow parsley seeming to float in the air around his head. He bent forward and kissed me, softly, and kept on kissing me as he unbuttoned my dress, one button at a time, teasing, pausing to reach a hand inside and play with the swelling tips of my breasts. At last he had the dress laid open from neck to waist.

"Ah," he said again, in yet another tone. "Like white velvet." He spoke hoarsely, and his hair had fallen forward again, but he made no attempt to brush it back.

He sprang the clasp of my brassiere with one accomplished flick of the thumb, and bent to pay a skilled homage to my breasts. Then he drew back, and cupping my breasts with both hands, drew his palms slowly down to meet between the rising mounds, and without stopping, drew them softly outward again, tracing the line of my rib cage clear to the back. Up and again, down and around, until I moaned and turned toward him. He sank his lips onto mine, and pressed me toward him until our hips fitted tightly together. He bent his head to mine, nibbling softly around the rim of my ear.

The hand stroking my back slipped lower and lower, stopping suddenly in surprise. It felt again, then Frank raised his head and looked down at me, grinning.

"What's all this, then?" he asked, in imitation of a village bobby. "Or rather, what's *not* all this?"

"Just being prepared," I said primly. "Nurses are taught to anticipate contingencies."

"Really, Claire," he murmured, sliding his hand under my skirt and up my thigh to the soft, unprotected warmth between my legs, "you are the most terrifyingly practical person I have ever known."

Frank came up behind me as I sat in the parlor chair that evening, a large book spread out on my lap.

"What are you doing?" he asked. His hands rested gently on my shoulders.

"Looking for that plant," I answered, sticking a finger between the pages to mind my place. "The one I saw in the stone circle. See …" I flipped the book open. "It could be in the Campanulaceae, or the

Gentianaceae, the Polemoniaceae, the Boraginaceae—that's most likely, I think, forget-me-nots—but it could even be a variant of this one, the *Anemone patens*." I pointed out a full color illustration of a pasqueflower. "I don't think it was a gentian of any kind; the petals weren't really rounded, but—"

"Well, why not go back and get it?" he suggested. "Mr. Crook would lend you his old banger, perhaps, or—no, I've a better idea. Borrow Mrs. Baird's car, it's safer. It's a short walk from the road to the foot of the hill."

"And then about a thousand yards, straight up," I said. "Why are you so interested in that plant?" I swiveled around to look up at him. The parlor lamp outlined his head with a thin gold line, like a medieval engraving of a saint.

"It's not the plant I care about. But if you're going up there anyway, I wish you'd have a quick look around the outside of the stone circle."

"All right," I said obligingly. "What for?"

"Traces of fire," he said. "In all the things I've been able to read about Beltane, fire is always mentioned in the rituals, yet the women we saw this morning weren't using any. I wondered if perhaps they'd set the Beltane fire the night before, then come back in the morning for the dance. Though historically it's the cow herds who were supposed to set the fire. There wasn't any trace of fire inside the circle," he added. "But we left before I thought of checking the outside."

"All right," I said again, and yawned. Two early risings in two days were taking their toll. I shut the book and stood up. "Provided I don't have to get up before nine."

It was in fact nearly eleven before I reached the stone circle. It was drizzling, and I was soaked through, not having thought to bring a mac. I made a cursory examination of the outside of the circle, but if there had ever been a fire there, someone had taken pains to remove its traces.

The plant was easier to find. It was where I remembered it, near the foot of the tallest stone. I took several clippings of the vine and stowed them temporarily in my handkerchief, meaning to deal with them properly when I got back to Mrs. Baird’s tiny car, where I had left the heavy plant presses.

The tallest stone of the circle was cleft, with a vertical split dividing the two massive pieces. Oddly, the pieces had been drawn apart by some means. Though you could see that the facing surfaces matched, they were separated by a gap of two or three feet.

There was a deep humming noise coming from somewhere near at hand. I thought there might be a beehive lodged in some crevice of the rock, and placed a hand on the stone in order to lean into the cleft.

The stone screamed.

I backed away as fast as I could, moving so quickly that I tripped on the short turf and sat down hard. I stared at the stone, sweating.

I had never heard such a sound from anything living. There is no way to describe it, except to say that it was the sort of scream you might expect from a stone. It was horrible.

The other stones began to shout. There was a noise of battle, and the cries of dying men and shattered horses.

I shook my head violently to clear it, but the noise went on. I stumbled to my feet and staggered toward the edge of the circle. The sounds were all around me, making my teeth ache and my head spin. My vision began to blur.

I do not know now whether I went toward the cleft in the main stone, or whether it was accidental, a blind drifting through the fog of noise.

Once, traveling at night, I fell asleep in the passenger seat of a moving car, lulled by the noise and motion into an illusion of serene weightlessness. The driver of the car took a bridge too fast and lost control, and I woke from my floating dream straight into the glare of headlights and the sickening sensation of falling at high speed. That abrupt transition is as close as I can come to describing the feeling I experienced, but it falls woefully short.

I could say that my field of vision contracted to a single dark spot, then disappeared altogether, leaving not darkness, but a bright void. I could say that I felt as though I were spinning, or as though I were being pulled inside out. All these things are true, yet none of them conveys the sense I had of complete disruption, of being slammed very hard against something that wasn't there.

The truth is that nothing moved, nothing changed, nothing whatever appeared to *happen* and yet I experienced a feeling of elemental terror so great that I lost all sense of who, or what, or where I was. I was in the heart of chaos, and no power of mind or body was of use against it.

I cannot really say I lost consciousness, but I was certainly not aware of myself for some time. I "woke," if that's the word, when I stumbled on a rock near the bottom of the hill. I half slid the remaining few feet and fetched up on the thick tufted grass at the foot.

I felt sick and dizzy. I crawled toward a stand of oak saplings and leaned against one to steady myself. There was a confused noise of shouting nearby, which reminded me of the sounds I had heard, and felt, in the stone circle. The ring of inhuman violence was lacking, though; this was the normal sound of human conflict, and I turned toward it.

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3

THE MAN IN THE WOOD

The men were some distance away when I saw them. Two or three, dressed in kilts, running like the dickens across a small clearing. There was a far-off banging noise that I rather dazedly identified as gunshots.

I was quite sure I was still hallucinating when the sound of shots was followed by the appearance of five or six men dressed in red coats and knee breeches, waving muskets. I blinked and stared. I moved my hand before my face and held up two fingers. I saw two fingers, all present and correct. No blurring of vision. I sniffed the air cautiously. The pungent odor of trees in spring and a faint whiff of clover from a clump near my feet. No olfactory delusions.

I felt my head. No soreness anywhere. Concussion unlikely then. Pulse a little fast, but steady.

The sound of distant yelling changed abruptly. There was a thunder of hooves, and several horses came charging in my direction, kilted Scots atop them, yodeling in Gaelic. I dodged out of the way with an agility that seemed to prove I had not been physically damaged, whatever my mental state.

And then it came to me, as one of the redcoats, knocked flat by a fleeing Scot, rose and shook his fist theatrically after the horses. Of course. A film! I shook my head at my own slowness. They were shooting a costume drama of some sort, that was all. One of those Bonnie-Prince-in-the-heather sorts of things, no doubt.

Well. Regardless of artistic merit, the film crew wouldn't thank me for introducing a note of historic inauthenticity into their shots. I doubled back into the wood, meaning to make a wide circle around the clearing and come out on the road where I had left the car. The going was more difficult than I had expected, though. The wood was a young one, and dense with underbrush that snagged my clothes. I had to go carefully through the spindly saplings, disentangling my skirts from the brambles as I went.

Had he been a snake, I would have stepped on him. He stood so quietly among the saplings as almost to have been one of them, and I did not see him until a hand shot out and gripped me by the arm.

Its companion clapped over my mouth as I was dragged backward into the oak grove, thrashing wildly in panic. My captor, whoever he was, seemed not much taller than I, but rather noticeably strong in the forearms. I smelled a faint flowery scent, as of lavender water, and something more spicy, mingled with the sharper reek of male perspiration. As the leaves whipped back into place in the path of our passage, though, I noticed something familiar about the hand and forearm clasped about my waist.

I shook my head free of the restraint over my mouth.

“Frank!” I burst out. “What in heaven’s name are you playing at?” I was torn between relief at finding him here and irritation at the horseplay. Unsettled as I was by my experience among the stones, I was in no mood for rough games.

The hands released me, but even as I turned to him, I sensed something wrong. It was not only the unfamiliar cologne, but something more subtle. I stood stock-still, feeling the hair prickle on my neck.

“You aren’t Frank,” I whispered.

“I am not,” he agreed, surveying me with considerable interest. “Though I’ve a cousin of that name. I doubt, though, that it’s he you have confused me with, madam. We do not resemble one another greatly.”

Whatever this man’s cousin looked like, the man himself might have been Frank’s brother. There was the same lithe, spare build and fine-drawn bones; the same chiseled lines of the face; the level brows and wide hazel eyes; and the same dark hair, curved smooth across the brow.

But this man's hair was long, tied back from his face with a leather thong. And the gypsy skin showed the deep-baked tan of months, no, years, of exposure to the weather, not the light golden color Frank's had attained during our Scottish holiday.

"Just who are you?" I demanded, feeling most uneasy. While Frank had numerous relatives and connections, I thought I knew all the British branch of the family. Certainly, there was no one who looked like this man among them. And surely Frank would have mentioned any near relative living in the Highlands? Not only mentioned him but insisted upon visiting him as well, armed with the usual collection of genealogical charts and notebooks, eager for any tidbits of family history about the famous Black Jack Randall.

The stranger raised his brows at my question.

"Who am I? I might ask the same question, madam, and with considerably more justification." His eyes raked me slowly from head to toe, traveling with a sort of insolent appreciation over the thin peony-sprigged cotton dress I wore, and lingering with an odd look of amusement on my legs. I did not at all understand the look, but it made me extremely nervous, and I backed up a step or two, until I was brought up sharp by bumping into a tree.

The man finally removed his gaze and turned aside. It was as though he had taken a constraining hand off me, and I let out my breath in relief, not realizing until then that I had been holding it.

He had turned to pick up his coat, thrown across the lowest branch of an oak sapling. He brushed some scattered leaves from it and began to put it on.

I must have gasped, because he looked up again. The coat was a deep scarlet, long-tailed and without lapels, frogged down the front. The buff linings of the turned-back cuffs extended a good six inches up the sleeve, and a small coil of gold braid gleamed from one epaulet. It was a dragoon's coat, an officer's coat. Then it occurred to me—of course, he was an actor, from the company I had seen on the other side of the wood. Though the short sword he proceeded to strap on seemed remarkably more realistic than any prop I had ever seen.

I pressed myself against the bark of the tree behind me, and found it reassuringly solid. I crossed my arms protectively in front of me.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" I demanded again. The question this time came out in a croak that sounded frightened even to my ears.

As though not hearing me, he ignored the question, taking his time in the fastening of the frogs down the front of his coat. Only when he finished did he turn his attention to me once more. He bowed sardonically, hand over his heart.

"I am, madam, Jonathan Randall, Esquire, Captain of His Majesty's Eighth Dragoons. At your service, madam."

I broke and ran. My breath rasped in my chest as I tore through the screen of oak and alder, ignoring brambles, nettles, stones, fallen logs, everything in my path. I heard a shout behind me, but was much too panicked to determine its direction.

I fled blindly, branches scratching my face and arms, ankles turning as I stepped in holes and stumbled on rocks. I had no room in my mind for any form of rational thought; I wanted only to get away from him.

A heavy weight struck me hard in the lower back and I pitched forward at full length, landing with a thud that knocked the wind out of me. Rough hands flipped me onto my back, and Captain Jonathan Randall rose to his knees above me. He was breathing heavily and had lost his sword in the chase. He looked disheveled, dirty, and thoroughly annoyed.

"What the devil do you mean by running away like that?" he demanded. A thick lock of dark-brown hair had come loose and curved across his brow, making him look even more disconcertingly like Frank.

He leaned down and grasped me by the arms. Still gasping for breath, I struggled to get free, but succeeded only in dragging him down on top of me.

He lost his balance and collapsed at full length on me, flattening me once more. Surprisingly enough, this seemed to make his annoyance vanish.

"Oh, like that, is it?" he said, with a chuckle. "Well, I'd be most willing to oblige you, Chuckie, but it happens you've chosen a rather inopportune moment." His weight pressed my hips to the ground, and a small rock was digging painfully into the small of my back. I squirmed to dislodge it. He ground his hips hard against mine, and his hands pinned my shoulders to the earth. My mouth fell open in outrage.

"What do you …" I began, but he ducked his head and kissed me, cutting short my expostulations. His tongue thrust into my mouth and explored me with a bold familiarity, roving and plunging, retreating and lunging again. Then, just as suddenly as he had begun, he pulled back.

He patted my cheek. "Quite nice, Chuck. Perhaps later, when I've the leisure to attend to you properly."

I had by this time recovered my breath, and I used it. I screamed directly into his earhole, and he jerked as though I had run a hot wire into it. I took advantage of the movement to get my knee up, and jabbed it into his exposed side, sending him sprawling into the leaf mold.

I scrambled awkwardly to my feet. He rolled expertly, and came up alongside me. I glanced wildly around, looking for a way out, but we were flush up against the foot of one of those towering granite cliffs that jut so abruptly from the soil of the Scottish Highlands. He had caught me at a point where the rock face broke inward, forming a shallow stony box. He blocked the entrance to the declivity, arms spread and braced between the rock walls, an expression of mingled anger and curiosity on his handsome dark face.

"Who were you with?" he demanded. "Frank, whoever he is? I've no man by that name among my company. Or is it some man who lives nearby?" He smiled derisively. "You haven't the smell of dung on your skin, so you haven't been with a cottar. For that matter, you look a bit more expensive than the local farmers could afford."

I clenched my fists and set my chin. Whatever this joker had in mind, I was having none of it.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you are talking about, and I'll thank you to let me pass at once!" I said, adopting my very best ward-sister's tone. This generally had a good effect on recalcitrant orderlies and young interns, but appeared merely to amuse Captain Randall. I was resolutely repressing the feelings of fear and disorientation that were flapping under my ribs like a panicked flock of hens.

He shook his head slowly, examining me once more in detail.

"Not just at present, Chuckie. I'm asking myself," he said, conversationally, "just why a whore abroad in her shift would be wearing her shoes? And quite fine ones, at that," he added, glancing at my plain brown loafers.

"A what!" I exclaimed.

He ignored me completely. His gaze had returned to my face, and he suddenly stepped forward and gripped my chin in his hand. I grabbed his wrist and yanked.

"Let go of me!" He had fingers like steel. Disregarding my efforts to free myself, he turned my face from one side to the other, so the fading afternoon light shone on it.

"The skin of a lady, I'll swear," he murmured to himself. He leaned forward and sniffed. "And a French scent in your hair." He let go then, and I rubbed my jaw indignantly, as though to erase the touch I still felt on my skin.

"The rest might be managed with money from your patron," he mused, "but you've the speech of a lady too."

"Thanks so much!" I snapped. "Get out of my way. My husband is expecting me; if I'm not back in ten minutes, he'll come looking for me."

"Oh, your husband?" The derisively admiring expression retreated somewhat, but did not disappear completely. "And what is your husband's name, pray? Where is he? And why does he allow his wife to wander alone through deserted woods in a state of undress?"

I had been throttling that part of my brain that was beating itself to pieces trying to make sense of the whole afternoon. It now managed to break through long enough to tell me that however absurd I thought its conjectures, giving this man Frank's name, the same as his own, was only likely to lead to further trouble. Disdaining therefore to answer him, I made to push past him. He blocked my passage with a muscular arm, and reached for me with his other hand.

There was a sudden whoosh from above, followed immediately by a blur before my eyes and a dull thud. Captain Randall was on the ground at my feet, under a heaving mass that looked like a bundle of old plaid rags. A brown, rocklike fist rose out of the mass and descended with considerable force, meeting decisively with some bony protuberance, by the sound of the resultant crack. The Captain's struggling legs, shiny in tall brown boots, relaxed quite suddenly.

I found myself staring into a pair of sharp black eyes. The sinewy hand that had temporarily distracted the Captain's unwelcome attentions was attached like a limpet to my forearm.

"And who the hell are you?" I said in astonishment. My rescuer, if I cared to call him that, was some inches shorter than I and sparely built, but the bare arms protruding from the ragged shirt were knotted with muscle and his whole frame gave the impression of being made of some resilient material such as bedsprings. No beauty, either, with a pockmarked skin, low brow, and narrow jaw.

"This way." He jerked on my arm, and I, stupefied by the rush of recent events, obediently followed.

My new companion pushed his way rapidly through a scrim of alder, made an abrupt turn around a large rock, and suddenly we were on a path. Overgrown with gorse and heather, and zigzagging so that it was never visible for more than six feet ahead, it was still unmistakably a path, leading steeply up toward the crest of a hill.

Not until we were picking our way cautiously down the far side of the hill did I gather breath and wit enough to ask where we were going. Receiving no answer from my companion, I repeated "Where on earth are we going?" in a louder tone.

To my considerable surprise, he rounded on me, face contorted, and pushed me off the path. As I opened my mouth to protest, he clapped a hand over it and dragged me to the ground, rolling on top of me.

Not again! I thought, and was heaving desperately to and fro to free myself when I heard what he had heard, and suddenly lay still.

Voices called back and forth, accompanied by trampling and splashing sounds. They were unmistakably English voices. I struggled violently to get my mouth free. I sank my teeth into his hand, and had time only to register the fact that he had been eating pickled herring with his fingers, before something crashed against the back of my skull, and everything went dark.

* * *

The stone cottage loomed up suddenly through a haze of night mist. The shutters were bolted tight, showing no more than a thread of light. Having no idea how long I had been unconscious, I couldn't tell how far this place was from the hill of Craigh na Dun or the town of Inverness. We were on horseback, myself mounted before my captor, with hands tied to the pommel, but there was no road, so progress was still rather slow.

I thought I had not been out for long; I showed no symptoms of concussion or other ill effects from the blow, save a sore patch on the base of my skull. My captor, a man of few words, had responded to my questions, demands and acerbic remarks alike with the all-purpose Scottish noise which can best be rendered phonetically as "Mmmmphm." Had I been in any doubt as to his nationality, that sound alone would have been sufficient to remove it.

My eyes had gradually adapted to the dwindling light outside as the horse stumbled through the stones and gorse, so it was a shock to step from near-dark into what seemed a blaze of light inside. As the dazzle receded, I could see that in fact the single room was lit only by a fire, several candlesticks, and a dangerously old-fashioned-looking oil lamp.

"What is it ye have there, Murtagh?"

The weasel-faced man grabbed me by the arm and urged me blinking into the firelight.

"A Sassenach wench, Dougal, by her speech." There were several men in the room, all apparently staring at me, some in curiosity, some with unmistakable leers. My dress had been torn in various spots during the afternoon's activities, and I hastily took stock of the damage. Looking down, I could see the curve of one breast clearly through a rip, and I was sure the assembled men could too. I decided that making an attempt to pull the torn edges together would only draw further attention to the prospect; instead I chose a face at random and stared boldly at him, in hopes of distracting either the man or myself.

"Eh, a bonny one, Sassenach or no," said the man, a fat, greasy-looking sort, seated by the fire. He was holding a chunk of bread and didn't bother to set it down as he rose and came over to me. He pushed my chin up with the back of his hand, shoving the hair out of my face. A few breadcrumbs fell down the neck of my dress. The other men clustered close around, a mass of plaid and whiskers, smelling strongly of sweat and alcohol. It was only then that I saw they were all kilted—odd, even for this part of the Highlands. Had I stumbled into the meeting of a clan society, or perhaps a regimental reunion?

"C'mere, lass." A large, dark-bearded man remained seated at the table by the window as he beckoned me. By his air of command, he seemed to be the leader of this pack. The men parted reluctantly as Murtagh pulled me forward, apparently respecting his rights as captor.

The dark man looked me over carefully, no expression on his face. He was good-looking, I thought, and not unfriendly. There were lines of strain between his brows, though, and it wasn't a face one would willingly cross.

"What's your name, lass?" His voice was light for a man of his size, not the deep bass I would have expected from the barrel chest.

"Claire … Claire Beauchamp," I said, deciding on the spur of the moment to use my maiden name. If it were ransom they had in mind, I didn't want to help them by giving a name that could lead to Frank. And I wasn't sure I wanted these rough-looking men to know who I was, before I found out who they were. "And just what do you think you're—" The dark man ignored me, establishing a pattern that I was to grow tired of very quickly.

"Beauchamp?" The heavy brows lifted and the general company stirred in surprise. "A French name, it is, surely?" He had in fact pronounced the name in correct French, though I had given it the common English pronunciation of "Beecham."

"Yes, that's right," I answered, in some surprise.

"Where did ye find this lass?" Dougal demanded, swinging round on Murtagh, who was refreshing himself from a leather flask.

The swarthy little man shrugged. "At the foot o' Craigh na Dun. She was havin' words with a certain captain of dragoons wi' whom I chanced to be acquent'," he added, with a significant lift of his eyebrows. "There seemed to be some question as to whether the lady was or was not a whore."

Dougal looked me over carefully once more, taking in every detail of cotton print dress and walking shoes.

"I see. And what was the lady's position in this discussion?" he inquired, with a sarcastic emphasis on the word "lady" that I didn't particularly care for. I noticed that while his Scots was less pronounced than that of the man called Murtagh, his accent was still broad enough that the word was almost, though not quite, "leddy."

Murtagh seemed grimly amused; at least one corner of the thin mouth turned up. "She said she wasna. The captain himself appeared to be of two minds on the matter, but inclined to put the question to the test."

"We could do the same, come to that." The fat, black-bearded man stepped toward me grinning, hands tugging at his belt. I backed up hastily as far as I could, which was not nearly far enough, given the dimensions of the cottage.

"That will do, Rupert." Dougal was still scowling at me, but his voice held the ring of authority, and Rupert stopped his advances, making a comical face of disappointment.

"I don't hold wi' rape, and we've not the time for it, anyway." I was pleased to hear this statement of policy, dubious as its moral underpinning might be, but remained a bit nervous in the face of the openly lascivious looks on some of the other faces. I felt absurdly as though I had appeared in public in my undergarments. And while I had no idea who or what these Highland bandits were up to, they seemed bloody dangerous. I bit my tongue, repressing a number of more or less injudicious remarks that were bubbling toward the surface.

"What d'ye say, Murtagh?" Dougal demanded of my captor. "She doesna appear to care for Rupert, at least."

"That's no proof," objected a short, balding man. "He didna offer her any siller. Ye canna expect any woman to take on something like Rupert without substantial payment—in advance," he added, to the considerable hilarity of his companions. Dougal stilled the racket with an abrupt gesture, though, and jerked his head toward the door. The balding man, still grinning, obediently slid out into the darkness.

Murtagh, who had not joined in the laughter, was frowning as he looked me over. He shook his head, making the lank fringe across his forehead sway.

"Nay," he said definitely. "I've no idea what she might be—or who—but I'll stake my best shirt she's no a whore." I hoped in that case that his best was not the one he was wearing, which scarcely looked worth the wagering.

"Weel, ye'd know, Murtagh, ye've seen enough o' them," gibed Rupert, but was gruffly hushed by Dougal.

"We'll puzzle it out later," said Dougal brusquely. "We've a good distance to go tonight, and we mun' do something for Jamie first; he canna ride like that."

I shrank back into the shadows near the fireplace, hoping to avoid notice. The man called Murtagh had untied my hands before leading me in here. Perhaps I could slip away while they were busy elsewhere. The men's attention had shifted to a young man crouched on a stool in the corner. He had barely looked up through my appearance and interrogation, but kept his head bent, hand clutching the opposite shoulder, rocking slightly back and forth in pain.

Dougal gently pushed the clutching hand away. One of the men pulled back the young man's plaid, revealing a dirt-smeared linen shirt blotched with blood. A small man with a thick mustache came up behind the lad with a single-bladed knife, and holding the shirt at the collar, slit it across the breast and down the sleeve, so that it fell away from the shoulder.

I gasped, as did several of the men. The shoulder had been wounded; there was a deep ragged furrow across the top, and blood was running freely down the young man's breast. But more shocking was the shoulder joint itself. A dreadful hump rose on that side, and the arm hung at an impossible angle.

Dougal grunted. "Mmph. Out o' joint, poor bugger." The young man looked up for the first time. Though drawn with pain and stubbled with red beard, it was a strong, good-humored face.

"Fell wi' my hand out, when the musket ball knocked me off my saddle. I landed with all my weight on the hand, and *crunch!,* there it went."

"Crunch is right." The mustached man, a Scot, and educated, to judge by his accent, was probing the shoulder, making the lad grimace in pain. "The wound's no trouble. The ball went right through, and it's clean—the blood's runnin' free enough." The man picked up a wad of grimy cloth from the table and used it to blot the blood. "I don't know quite what to do about the disjointure, though. We'd need a chirurgeon to put it back in place properly. You canna ride with it that way, can you, Jamie lad?"

Musket ball? I thought blankly. *Chirurgeon?*

The young man shook his head, white-faced. "Hurts bad enough sitting still. I couldna manage a horse." He squeezed his eyes shut and set his teeth hard in his lower lip.

Murtagh spoke impatiently. "Well, we canna leave him behind noo, can we? The lobsterbacks are no great shakes trackin' in the dark, but they'll find this place sooner or later, shutters or no. And Jamie can hardly pass for an innocent cottar, wi' yon great hole in 'im."

"Dinna worrit yourself," Dougal said shortly. "I don't mean to be leaving him behind."

The mustached man sighed. "No help for it, then. We'll have to try and force the joint back. Murtagh, you and Rupert hold him; I'll give it a try."

I watched in sympathy as he picked up the young man's arm by wrist and elbow and began forcing it upward. The angle was quite wrong; it must be causing agonizing pain. Sweat poured down the young man’s face, but he made no sound beyond a soft groan. Suddenly he slumped forward, kept from falling on the floor only by the grip of the men holding him.

One unstoppered a leather flask and pressed it to his lips. The reek of the raw spirit reached me where I stood. The young man coughed and gagged, but swallowed nonetheless, dribbling the amber liquid onto the remains of his shirt.

“All right for another go, lad?” the bald man asked. “Or maybe Rupert should have a try,” he suggested, turning to the squat, black-bearded ruffian.

Rupert, so invited, flexed his hands as though about to toss a caber, and picked up the young man’s wrist, plainly intending to put the joint back by main force; an operation, it was clear, which was likely to snap the arm like a broomstick.

“Don’t you dare to do that!” All thought of escape submerged in professional outrage, I started forward, oblivious to the startled looks of the men around me.

“What do you mean?” snapped the bald man, clearly irritated by my intrusion.

“I mean that you’ll break his arm if you do it like that,” I snapped back. “Stand out of the way, please.” I elbowed Rupert back and took hold of the patient’s wrist myself. The patient looked as surprised as the rest, but didn’t resist. His skin was very warm, but not feverish, I judged.

“You have to get the bone of the upper arm at the proper angle before it will slip back into its joint,” I said, grunting as I pulled the wrist up and the elbow in. The young man was sizable; his arm was heavy as lead.

“This is the worst part,” I warned the patient. I cupped the elbow, ready to whip it upward and in.

His mouth twitched, not quite a smile. “It canna hurt much worse than it does. Get on wi’ it.” Sweat was popping out on my own face by now. Resetting a shoulder joint is hard work at the best of times. Done on a large man who had gone hours since the dislocation, his muscles now swollen and pulling on the joint, the job was taking all the strength I had. The fire was dangerously close; I hoped we wouldn't both topple in, if the joint went back with a jerk.

Suddenly the shoulder gave a soft crunching *pop!* and the joint was back in place. The patient looked amazed. He put an unbelieving hand up to explore.

"It doesna hurt anymore!" A broad grin of delighted relief spread across his face, and the men broke out in exclamations and applause.

"It will." I was sweating from the exertion, but smugly pleased with the results. "It will be tender for several days. You mustn't extend the joint at all for two or three days; when you do use it again, go very slowly at first. Stop at once if it begins to hurt, and use warm compresses on it daily."

I became aware, in the midst of this advice, that while the patient was listening respectfully, the other men were eyeing me with looks ranging from wonder to outright suspicion.

"I'm a nurse, you see," I explained, feeling somehow defensive.

Dougal's eyes, and Rupert's as well, dropped to my bosom and fastened there with a sort of horrified fascination. They exchanged glances, then Dougal looked back at my face.

"Be that as it may," he said, raising his brows at me. "For a wetnurse, you'd seem to have some skill at healing. Can ye stanch the lad's wound, well enough for him to sit a horse?"

"I can dress the wound, yes," I said with considerable asperity. "Provided you've anything to dress it with. But just what do you mean 'wetnurse'? And why do you suppose I'd want to help you, anyway?"

I was ignored as Dougal turned and spoke in a tongue I dimly recognized as Gaelic to a woman who cowered in the corner. Surrounded by the mass of men, I had not noticed her before. She was dressed oddly, I thought, in a long, ragged skirt and a long-sleeved blouse half-covered by a sort of bodice or jerkin. Everything was rather on the grubby side, including her face. Glancing around, though, I could see that the cottage lacked not only electrification but also indoor plumbing; perhaps there was some excuse for the dirt.

The woman bobbed a quick curtsy, and scuttling past Rupert and Murtagh, she began digging in a painted wooden chest by the hearth, emerging finally with a pile of ratty cloths.

“No, that won’t do,” I said, fingering them gingerly. “The wound needs to be disinfected first, then bandaged with a clean cloth, if there are no sterile bandages.”

Eyebrows rose all around. “Disinfected?” said the small man, carefully.

“Yes, indeed,” I said firmly, thinking him a bit simpleminded, in spite of his educated accent. “All dirt must be removed from the wound and it must be treated with a compound to discourage germs and promote healing.”

“Such as?”

“Such as iodine,” I said. Seeing no comprehension on the faces before me, I tried again. “Merthiolate? Dilute carbolic?” I suggested. “Or perhaps even just alcohol?” Looks of relief. At last I had found a word they appeared to recognize. Murtagh thrust the leather flask into my hands. I sighed with impatience. I knew the Highlands were primitive, but this was nearly unbelievable.

“Look,” I said, as patiently as I could. “Why don’t you just take him down into the town? It can’t be far, and I’m sure there’s a doctor there who could see to him.”

The woman gawped at me. “What town?”

The big man called Dougal was ignoring this discussion, peering cautiously into the darkness around the curtain’s edge. He let it fall back into place and stepped quietly to the door. The men fell quiet as he vanished into the night.

In a moment he was back, bringing the bald man and the cold sharp scent of dark pines with him. He shook his head in answer to the men’s questioning looks.

“Nay, nothing close. We’ll go at once, while it’s safe.”

Catching sight of me, he stopped for a moment, thinking. Suddenly he nodded at me, decision made.

“She’ll come with us,” he said. He rummaged in the pile of cloths on the table and came up with a tattered rag; it looked like a neckcloth that had seen better days.

The mustached man seemed disinclined to have me along, wherever they were going.

"Why do ye no just leave her here?"

Dougal cast him an impatient glance, but left it to Murtagh to explain. "Wherever the redcoats are now, they'll be here by dawn, which is no so far off, considering. If this woman's an English spy, we canna risk leaving her here to tell them which way we've gone. And if she should not be on good terms wi' them"—he looked dubiously at me—"we certainly canna leave a lone woman here in her shift." He brightened a bit, fingering the fabric of my skirt. "She might be worth a bit in the way of ransom, at that; little as she has on, it's fine stuff."

"Besides," Dougal added, interrupting, "she may be useful on the way; she seems to know a bit about doctoring. But we've no time for that now. I'm afraid ye'll have to go without bein' 'disinfected,' Jamie," he said, clapping the younger man on the back. "Can ye ride one-handed?"

"Aye."

"Good lad. Here," he said, tossing the greasy rag at me. "Bind up his wound, quickly. We'll be leaving directly. Do you two get the horses," he said, turning to weasel-face and the fat one called Rupert.

I turned the rag around distastefully.

"I can't use this," I complained. "It's filthy."

Without seeing him move, I found the big man gripping my shoulder, his dark eyes an inch from mine. "Do it," he said.

Freeing me with a push, he strode to the door and disappeared after his two henchmen. Feeling more than a little shaken, I turned to the task of bandaging the bullet wound as best I could. The thought of using the grimy neckrag was something my medical training wouldn't let me contemplate. I tried to bury my confusion and terror in the task of trying to find something more suitable, and, after a quick and futile search through the pile of rags, finally settled on strips of rayon torn from the hem of my slip. While hardly sterile, it was by far the cleanest material at hand.

The linen of my patient's shirt was old and worn, but still surprisingly tough. With a bit of a struggle, I ripped the rest of the sleeve open and used it to improvise a sling. I stepped back to survey the results of my impromptu field dressing, and backed straight into the big man, who had come in quietly to watch.

He looked approvingly at my handiwork. "Good job, lass. Come on, we're ready."

Dougal handed a coin to the woman and hustled me out of the cottage, followed more slowly by Jamie, still a bit white-faced. Unfolded from the low stool, my patient proved to be quite tall; he stood several inches over Dougal, himself a tall man.

The black-bearded Rupert and Murtagh were holding six horses outside, muttering soft Gaelic endearments to them in the dark. It was a moonless night, but the starlight caught the metal bits of the harness in flashes of quicksilver. I looked up and almost gasped in wonder; the night sky was thick with a glory of stars such as I had never seen. Glancing round at the surrounding forest, I understood. With no nearby city to veil the sky with light, the stars here held undisputed dominion over the night.

And then I stopped dead, feeling much colder than the night chill justified. No city lights. "What town?" the woman inside had asked. Accustomed as I was to blackouts and air raids from the war years, the lack of light had not at first disturbed me. But this was peacetime, and the lights of Inverness should have been visible for miles.

The men were shapeless masses in the dark. I thought of trying to slip away into the trees, but Dougal, apparently divining my thought, grabbed my elbow and pulled me toward the horses.

"Jamie, get yourself up," he called. "The lass will ride wi' you." He squeezed my elbow. "You can hold the reins, if Jamie canna manage one-handed, but do ye take care to keep close wi' the rest of us. Should ye try anythin' else, I shall cut your throat. D'ye understand me?"

I nodded, throat too dry to answer. His voice was not particularly threatening, but I believed every word. I was the less tempted to "try anythin'," in that I had no idea what to try. I didn't know where

I was, who my companions were, why we were leaving with such urgency, or where we were going, but I lacked any reasonable alternatives to going with them. I was worried about Frank, who must long since have started looking for me, but this didn't seem the time to mention him.

Dougal must have sensed my nod, for he let go of my arm and stooped suddenly beside me. I stood stupidly staring down at him until he hissed, "Your foot, lass! Give me your foot! Your *left* foot," he added disgustedly. I hastily took my misplaced right foot out of his hand and stepped up with my left. With a slight grunt, he boosted me into the saddle in front of Jamie, who gathered me in closely with his good arm.

In spite of the general awkwardness of my situation, I was grateful for the young Scot's warmth. He smelt strongly of woodsmoke, blood, and unwashed male, but the night chill bit through my thin dress and I was happy enough to lean back against him.

With no more than a faint chinking of bridles, we moved off into the starlit night. There was no conversation among the men, only a general wary watchfulness. The horses broke into a trot as soon as we reached the road, and I was jostled too uncomfortably to want to talk myself, even assuming that anyone was willing to listen.

My companion seemed to be having little trouble, in spite of being unable to use his right hand. I could feel his thighs behind mine, shifting and pressing occasionally to guide the horse. I clutched the edge of the short saddle in order to stay seated; I had been on horses before, but was by no means the horseman this Jamie was.

After a time, we reached a crossroads, where we stopped a moment while the bald man and the leader conferred in low tones. Jamie dropped the reins over the horse's neck and let it wander to the verge to crop grass, while he began twisting and turning behind me.

"Careful!" I said. "Don't twist like that, or your dressing will come off! What are you trying to do?"

"Get my plaid loose to cover you," he replied. "You're shivering. But I canna do it one-handed. Can ye reach the clasp of my brooch for me?"

With a good deal of tugging and awkward shifting, we got the plaid loosened. With a surprisingly dexterous swirl, he twirled the cloth out and let it settle, shawllike, around his shoulders. He then put the ends over my shoulders and tucked them neatly under the saddle edge, so that we were both warmly wrapped.

"There!" he said. "We dinna want ye to freeze before we get there."

"Thank you," I said, grateful for the shelter. "But where are we going?"

I couldn't see his face, behind and above me, but he paused a moment before answering.

At last he laughed shortly. "Tell ye the truth, lassie, I don't know. Reckon we'll both find out when we get there, eh?"

* * *

Something seemed faintly familiar about the section of countryside through which we were passing. Surely I knew that large rock formation ahead, the one shaped like a rooster's tail?

"Cocknammon Rock!" I exclaimed.

"Aye, reckon," said my escort, unexcited by this revelation.

"Didn't the English use it for ambushes?" I asked, trying to remember the dreary details of local history Frank had spent hours regaling me with over the last week. "If there is an English patrol in the neighborhood …" I hesitated. If there was an English patrol in the neighborhood, perhaps I was wrong to draw attention to it. And yet, in case of an ambush, I would be quite indistinguishable from my companion, shrouded as we were in one plaid. And I thought again of Captain Jonathan Randall, and shuddered involuntarily. Everything I had seen since I had stepped through the cleft stone pointed toward the completely irrational conclusion that the man I had met in the wood was in fact Frank's six-times-great-grandfather. I fought stubbornly against this conclusion, but was unable to formulate another that met the facts.

I had at first imagined that I was merely dreaming more vividly than usual, but Randall's kiss, rudely familiar and immediately physical, had dispelled that impression. Neither did I imagine that I had dreamed being knocked on the head by Murtagh; the soreness on my scalp was being matched by a chafing of my inner thighs against the saddle, which seemed most undreamlike. And the blood; yes, I was familiar enough with blood to have dreamed of it before. But never had I dreamed the scent of blood; that warm, coppery tang that I could still smell on the man behind me.

"Tck." He clucked to our horse and urged it up alongside the leader's, engaging the burly shadow in quiet Gaelic conversation. The horses slowed to a walk.

At a signal from the leader, Jamie, Murtagh, and the small bald man dropped back, while the other two spurred up and galloped toward the rock, a quartermile ahead to the right. A half-moon had come up, and the light was bright enough to pick out the leaves of the mallow plants growing on the roadside, but the shadows in the clefts of the rock could hide anything.

Just as the galloping shapes passed the rock, a flash of musket fire sparked from a hollow. There was a bloodcurdling shriek from directly behind me, and the horse leaped forward as though jabbed with a sharp stick. We were suddenly racing toward the rock across the heather, Murtagh and the other man alongside, hair-raising screams and bellows splitting the night air.

I hung onto the pommel for dear life. Suddenly reining up next to a large gorse bush, Jamie grabbed me round the waist and unceremoniously dumped me into it. The horse whirled sharply and sprinted off again, circling the rock to come along the south side. I could see the rider crouching low in the saddle as the horse vanished into the rock's shadow. When it emerged, still galloping, the saddle was empty.

The rock surfaces were cratered with shadow; I could hear shouts and occasional musket shots, but couldn't tell if the movements I saw were those of men, or only the shades of the stunted oaks that sprouted from cracks in the rock.

I extricated myself from the bush with some difficulty, picking bits of prickly gorse from my skirt and hair. I licked a scratch on my hand, wondering what on earth I was to do now. I could wait for the battle at the rock to be decided. If the Scots won, or at least survived, I supposed they would come back looking for me. If they did not, I could approach the English, who might well assume that if I were traveling with the Scots I was in league with them. In league to do what, I had no idea, but it was quite plain from the men's behavior at the cottage that they were up to something which they expected the English strongly to disapprove of.

Perhaps it would be better to avoid both sides in this conflict. After all, now that I knew where I was, I stood some chance of getting back to a town or village that I knew, even if I had to walk all the way. I set off with decision toward the road, tripping over innumerable lumps of granite, the bastard offspring of Cocknammon Rock.

The moonlight made walking deceptive; though I could see every detail of the ground, I had no depth perception; flat plants and jagged stones looked the same height, causing me to lift my feet absurdly high over nonexistent obstacles and stub my toes on protruding rocks. I walked as fast as I could, listening for sounds of pursuit behind me.

The noises of battle had faded by the time I reached the road. I realized that I was too visible on the road itself, but I needed to follow it, if I were to find my way to a town. I had no sense of direction in the dark, and had never learned from Frank his trick of navigation by the stars. Thinking of Frank made me want to cry, so I tried to distract myself by trying to make sense of the afternoon's events.

It seemed inconceivable, but all appearances pointed to my being someplace where the customs and politics of the late eighteenth century still held sway. I would have thought the whole thing a fancy-dress show of some type, had it not been for the injuries of the young man they called Jamie. That wound had indeed been made by something very like a musket ball, judging from the evidence it left behind. The behavior of the men in the cottage was not consistent with any sort of play-acting, either. They were serious men, and the dirks and swords were real.

Could it be some secluded enclave, perhaps, where the villagers reenacted part of their history periodically? I had heard of such things in Germany, though never in Scotland. *You've never heard of the actors shooting each other with muskets, either, have you?* jeered the uncomfortably rational part of my mind.

I looked back at the rock to check my position, then ahead to the skyline, and my blood ran cold. There was nothing there but the feathered needles of pine trees, impenetrably black against the spread of stars. Where were the lights of Inverness? If that was Cocknammon Rock behind me, as I knew it was, then Inverness must be less than three miles to the southwest. At this distance, I should be able to see the glow of the town against the sky. If it was there.

I shook myself irritably, hugging my elbows against the chill. Even admitting for a moment the completely implausible idea that I was in another time than my own, Inverness had stood in its present location for some six hundred years. It was there. But, apparently, it had no lights. Under the circumstances, this strongly suggested that there were no electric lights to be had. Yet another piece of evidence, if I needed it. But evidence of what, exactly?

A shape stepped out of the dark so close in front of me that I nearly bumped into it. Stifling a scream, I turned to run, but a large hand gripped my arm, preventing escape.

"Dinna worry, lass. 'Tis me."

"That's what I was afraid of," I said crossly, though in fact I was relieved that it was Jamie. I was not so afraid of him as of the other men, though he looked just as dangerous. Still, he was young, even younger than I, I judged. And it was difficult for me to be afraid of someone I had so recently treated as a patient.

"I hope you haven't been misusing that shoulder," I said in the rebuking voice of a hospital Matron. If I could establish a sufficient tone of authority, perhaps I could persuade him into letting me go.

"Yon wee stramash didna do it any good," he admitted, massaging the shoulder with his free hand.

Just then, he moved into a patch of moonlight, and I saw the huge spread of blood on his shirt front. Arterial bleeding, I thought at once; but then, why is he still standing?

"You're hurt!" I exclaimed. "Have you broken open your shoulder wound, or is it fresh? Sit down and let me see!" I pushed him toward a pile of boulders, rapidly reviewing procedures for emergency field treatment. No supplies to hand, save what I was wearing. I was reaching for the remains of my slip, intending to use it to stanch the flow, when he laughed.

"Nay, pay it no mind, lass. This lot isna *my* blood. Not much of it, anyway," he added, plucking the soaked fabric gingerly away from his body.

I swallowed, feeling a bit queasy. "Oh," I said weakly.

"Dougal and the others will be waiting by the road. Let's go." He took me by the arm, less as a gallant gesture than a means of forcing me to accompany him. I decided to take a chance and dug in my heels.

"No! I'm not going with you!"

He stopped, surprised at my resistance. "Yes, you are." He didn't seem upset by my refusal; in fact, he seemed slightly amused that I had any objection to being kidnapped again.

"And what if I won't? Are you going to cut my throat?" I demanded, forcing the issue. He considered the alternatives and answered calmly.

"Why, no. You don't look heavy. If ye won't walk, I shall pick you up and sling ye over my shoulder. Do ye want me to do that?" He took a step toward me, and I hastily retreated. I hadn't the slightest doubt he would do it, injury or no.

"No! You can't do that; you'll damage your shoulder again."

His features were indistinct, but the moonlight caught the gleam of teeth as he grinned.

"Well then, since ye don't want me to hurt myself, I suppose that means as you're comin' with me?" I struggled for an answer, but failed to find one in time. He took my arm again, firmly, and we set off toward the road.

Jamie kept a tight hold on my arm, hauling me upright when I stumbled over rocks and plants. He himself walked as though the stubbled heath were a paved road in broad daylight. He has cat blood, I reflected sourly, no doubt that was how he managed to sneak up on me in the darkness.

The other men were, as advertised, waiting with the horses at no great distance; apparently there had been no losses or injuries, for they were all present. Scrambling up in an undignified scuffle, I plopped down in the saddle again. My head gave Jamie's bad shoulder an unintentional thump, and he drew in his breath with a hiss.

I tried to cover my resentment at being recaptured and my remorse at having hurt him with an air of bullying officiousness.

"Serves you right, brawling round the countryside and chasing through bushes and rocks. I told you not to move that joint; now you've probably got torn muscles as well as bruises."

He seemed amused by my scolding. "Well, it wasna much of a choice. If I'd not moved my shoulder, I wouldna have ever moved anything else again. I can handle a single redcoat wi' one hand—maybe even two of them," he said, a bit boastfully, "but not three."

"Besides," he said, drawing me against his blood-encrusted shirt, "ye can fix it for me again when we get where we're going."

"That's what you think," I said coldly, squirming away from the sticky fabric. He clucked to the horse, and we set off again. The men were in ferocious good spirits after the fight, and there was a good deal of laughter and joking. My minor part in thwarting the ambush was much praised, and toasts were drunk in my honor from the flasks that several of the men carried.

I was offered some of the contents, but declined at first on grounds that I found it hard enough to stay in the saddle sober. From the men's discussion, I gathered it had been a small patrol of some ten English soldiers, armed with muskets and sabers.

Someone passed a flask to Jamie, and I could smell the hot, burnt-smelling liquor as he drank. I wasn't at all thirsty, but the faint scent of honey reminded me that I was starving, and had been for some time. My stomach gave an embarrassingly loud growl, protesting my neglect.

"Hey, then, Jamie-lad! Hungry, are ye? Or have ye a set of bagpipes with ye?" shouted Rupert, mistaking the source of the noise.

"Hungry enough to eat a set of pipes, I reckon," called Jamie, gallantly assuming the blame. A moment later, a hand with a flask came around in front of me again.

"Better have a wee nip," he whispered to me. "It willna fill your belly, but it will make ye forget you're hungry."

And a number of other things as well, I hoped. I tilted the flask and swallowed.

* * *

My escort had been correct; the whisky built a small warm fire that burned comfortably in my stomach, obscuring the hunger pangs. We managed without incident for several miles, taking turns with both reins and whisky flask. Near a ruined cottage, though, the breathing of my escort gradually changed to a ragged gasping. Our precarious balance, heretofore contained in a staid wobble, suddenly became much more erratic. I was confused; if *I* wasn't drunk, it seemed rather unlikely that *he* was.

"Stop! Help!" I yelled. "He's going over!" I remembered my last unrehearsed descent and had no inclination to repeat it.

Dark shapes swirled and crowded around us, with a confused muttering of voices. Jamie slid off headfirst like a sack of stones, luckily landing in someone's arms. The rest of the men were off their horses and had him laid in a field by the time I had scrambled down.

"He's breathin'," said one.

"Well, how very helpful," I snapped, groping frantically for a pulse in the blackness. I found one at last, rapid but fairly strong. Putting a hand on his chest and an ear to his mouth, I could feel a regular rise and fall, with less of that gasping note. I straightened up.

"I think he's just fainted," I said. "Put a saddle-bag under his feet and if there's water, bring me some." I was surprised to find that my orders were instantly obeyed. Apparently the young man was important to them. He groaned and opened his eyes, black holes in the starlight. In the faint, light his face looked like a skull, white skin stretched tight over the angled bones around the orbits.

"I'm all right," he said, trying to sit up. "Just a bit dizzy is all." I put a hand on his chest and pushed him flat.

"Lie still," I ordered. I carried out a rapid inspection by touch, then rose on my knees and turned to a looming shape that I deduced from its size to be the leader, Dougal.

"The gunshot wound has been bleeding again, and the idiot's been knifed as well. I think it's not serious, but he's lost quite a lot of blood. His shirt is soaked through, but I don't know how much of it is his. He needs rest and quiet; we should camp here at least until morning." The shape made a negative motion.

"Nay. We're farther than the garrison will venture, but there's still the Watch to be mindful of. We've a good fifteen miles yet to go." The featureless head tilted back, gauging the movement of the stars.

"Five hours, at the least, and more likely seven. We can stay long enough for ye to stop the bleeding and dress the wound again; no much more than that."

I set to work, muttering to myself, while Dougal, with a soft word, dispatched one of the other shadows to stand guard with the horses by the road. The other men relaxed for the moment, drinking from flasks and chatting in low voices. The ferret-faced Murtagh helped me, tearing strips of linen, fetching more water, and lifting the patient up to have the dressing tied on, Jamie being strictly forbidden to move himself, despite his grumbling that he was perfectly all right.

"You are not all right, and it's no wonder," I snapped, venting my fear and irritation. "What sort of idiot gets himself knifed and doesn't even stop to take care of it? Couldn't you tell how badly you were bleeding? You're lucky you're not dead, tearing around the countryside all night, brawling and fighting and throwing yourself off horses … hold still, you bloody fool." The rayon and linen strips I was working with were irritatingly elusive in the dark. They slipped away, eluding my grasp, like fish darting away into the depths with a mocking flash of white bellies. Despite the chill, sweat sprang out on my neck. I finally finished tying one end and reached for another, which persisted in slithering away behind the patient's back. "Come back here, you … oh, you goddamned bloody bastard!" Jamie had moved and the original end had come untied.

There was a moment of shocked silence. "Christ," said the fat man named Rupert. "I've ne'er heard a woman use such language in me life."

"Then ye've ne'er met my auntie Grisel," said another voice, to laughter.

"Your husband should tan ye, woman," said an austere voice from the blackness under a tree. "St. Paul says 'Let a woman be silent, and—' "

"You can mind your own bloody business," I snarled, sweat dripping behind my ears, "and so can St. Paul." I wiped my forehead with my sleeve. "Turn him to the left. And if you," addressing my patient, "move so much as one single muscle while I'm tying this bandage, I'll throttle you."

"Och, aye," he answered meekly.

I pulled too hard on the last bandage, and the entire dressing scooted off.

"Goddamn it all to hell!" I bellowed, striking my hand on the ground in frustration. There was a moment of shocked silence, then, as I fumbled in the dark for the loose ends of the bandages, further comment on my unwomanly language.

"Perhaps we should send her to Ste. Anne, Dougal," offered one of the blank-faced figures squatting by the road. "I've not heard Jamie swear once since we left the coast, and he used to have a mouth on him would put a sailor to shame. Four months in a monastery must have had some effect. You do not even take the name of the Lord in vain anymore, do ye, lad?"

"You wouldna do so either, if you'd been made to do penance for it by lying for three hours at midnight on the stone floor of a chapel in February, wearing nothin' but your shirt," answered my patient.

The men all laughed, as he continued. "The penance was only for two hours, but it took another to get myself up off the floor afterward; I thought my … er, I thought I'd frozen to the flags, but it turned out just to be stiffness."

Apparently he was feeling better. I smiled, despite myself, but spoke firmly nonetheless. "You be quiet," I said, "or I'll hurt you." He gingerly touched the dressing, and I slapped his hand away.

"Oh, threats, is it?" he asked impudently. "And after I shared my drink with ye too!"

The flask completed the circle of men. Kneeling down next to me, Dougal tilted it carefully for the patient to drink. The pungent, burnt smell of very raw whisky floated up, and I put a restraining hand on the flask.

"No more spirits," I said. "He needs tea, or at worst, water. Not alcohol."

Dougal pulled the flask from my hand, completely disregarding me, and poured a sizable slug of the hot-smelling liquid down the throat of my patient, making him cough. Waiting only long enough for the man on the ground to catch his breath, he reapplied the flask.

"Stop that!" I reached for the whisky again. "Do you want him so drunk he can't stand up?"

I was rudely elbowed aside.

"Feisty wee bitch, is she no?" said my patient, sounding amused.

"Tend to your business, woman," Dougal ordered. "We've a good way to go yet tonight, and he'll need whatever strength the drink can give him."

The instant the bandages were tied, the patient tried to sit up. I pushed him flat and put a knee on his chest to keep him there. "You are *not* to move," I said fiercely. I grabbed the hem of Dougal's kilt and jerked it roughly, urging him back down on his knees next to me.

"Look at that," I ordered, in my best ward-sister voice. I plopped the sopping mass of the discarded shirt into his hand. He dropped it with an exclamation of disgust.

I took his hand and put it on the patient's shoulder. "And look there. He's had a blade of some kind right through the trapezius muscle."

"A bayonet," put in the patient helpfully.

"A bayonet!" I exclaimed. "And why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged, and stopped short with a mild grunt of pain. "I felt it go in, but I couldna tell how bad it was; it didna hurt that much."

"Is it hurting now?"

"It is," he said, shortly.

"Good," I said, completely provoked. "You deserve it. Maybe that will teach you to go haring round the countryside kidnapping young women and k-killing people, and…." I felt myself ridiculously close to tears and stopped, fighting for control.

Dougal was growing impatient with this conversation. "Well, can ye keep one foot on each side of the horse, man?"

"He can't go anywhere!" I protested indignantly. "He ought to be in hospital! Certainly he can't—"

My protests, as usual, went completely ignored.

"Can ye ride?" Dougal repeated.

"Aye, if ye'll take the lassie off my chest and fetch me a clean shirt."

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4

I COME TO THE CASTLE

The rest of the journey passed uneventfully, if you consider it uneventful to ride fifteen miles on horseback through rough country at night, frequently without benefit of roads, in company with kilted men armed to the teeth, and sharing a horse with a wounded man. At least we were not set upon by highwaymen, we encountered no wild beasts, and it didn't rain. By the standards I was becoming used to, it was quite dull.

Dawn was coming up in streaks and slashes over the foggy moor. Our destination loomed ahead, a huge bulk of dark stone outlined by the grey light.

The surroundings were no longer quiet and deserted. There was a trickle of rudely dressed people, heading toward the castle. They moved to the side of the narrow road to let the horses trot past, gawking at what they plainly thought my outlandish garb.

Not surprisingly, it was misting heavily, but there was enough light to show a stone bridge, arching over a small stream that ran past the front of the castle, down to a dully gleaming loch a quarter mile away.

The castle itself was blunt and solid. No fanciful turrets or toothed battlements. This was more like an enormous fortified house, with thick stone walls and high, slitted windows. A number of chimney pots smoked over the slick tiles of the roof, adding to the general impression of greyness.

The gated entrance of the castle was wide enough to accommodate two wagons side by side. I say this without fear of contradiction, because it was doing exactly that as we crossed the bridge. One ox-drawn wagon was loaded with barrels, the other with hay. Our little cavalcade huddled on the bridge, waiting impatiently for the wagons to complete their laborious entry.

I risked a question as the horses picked their way over the slippery stones of the wet courtyard. I hadn't spoken to my escort since hastily re-dressing his shoulder by the roadside. He had been silent, too, aside from an occasional grunt of discomfort when a misstep by the horse jolted him.

"Where are we?" I croaked, my voice hoarse from cold and disuse.

"The keep of Leoch," he answered shortly.

Castle Leoch. Well, at least now I knew where I was. When I had known it, Castle Leoch was a picturesque ruin, some thirty miles north of Bargrennan. It was considerably more picturesque now, what with the pigs rooting under the walls of the keep and the pervasive smell of raw sewage. I was beginning to accept the impossible idea that I was, most likely, somewhere in the eighteenth century.

I was sure that such filth and chaos existed nowhere in the Scotland of 1945, bomb craters or no. And we were definitely in Scotland; the accents of the people in the courtyard left no doubt of that.

"Ay, Dougal!" shouted a tattered hostler, running up to grab the halter of the lead horse. "You're early, man; we hadna thought to see ye before the Gathering!"

The leader of our little group swung down from the saddle, leaving the reins to the grubby youth.

"Aye, well, we've had some luck, both good and bad. I'm off to see my brother. Will ye summon Mrs. Fitz to feed the lads? They'll need their breakfasts and their beds."

He beckoned Murtagh and Rupert down to accompany him, and together they disappeared under a pointed archway.

The rest of us dismounted and stood steaming in the wet courtyard for another ten minutes before Mrs. Fitz, whoever she might be, consented to show herself. A cluster of curious children gathered around us, speculating on my possible origins and function. The bolder ones had just begun to get up enough courage to pluck at my skirt when a large, stout lady in dark brown linen and homespun bustled out and shooed them away.

“Willy, my dear!” she cried. “How good to see ye! And Neddie!” She gave the small balding man a hearty buss of welcome that nearly knocked him over. “Ye’ll be needin’ breakfast, I reckon. Plenty in the kitchen; do ye go and feed yerselves.” Turning to me and Jamie, she started back as though bitten by a snake. She looked openmouthed at me, then turned to Jamie for an explanation of this apparition.

“Claire,” he said, with a brief tilt of his head toward me. “And Mistress FitzGibbons,” he added, with a tilt the other way. “Murtagh found her yesterday, and Dougal said we must bring her along wi’ us,” he added, making it clear it was no good blaming *him*.

Mistress FitzGibbons closed her mouth and looked me up and down with an air of shrewd evaluation. Apparently she decided that I looked harmless enough, despite my odd and scandalous appearance, for she smiled—kindly, despite several missing teeth—and took me by the arm.

“Well then, Claire. Welcome to ye. Come wi’ me and we shall find ye somethin’ a bit more … mmm.” She looked over my short skirt and inadequate shoes, shaking her head.

She was leading me firmly away when I remembered my patient.

“Oh, wait, please! I forgot Jamie!”

Mistress FitzGibbons was surprised. “Why, Jamie can fend for himself. He knows where to get food and someone will find him a bed.”

“But he’s hurt. He was shot yesterday and stabbed last night. I bandaged the wound for riding, but I didn’t have time to clean or dress it properly. I must care for it now, before it gets infected.”

“Infected?”

“Yes, that is, I mean, inflamed, you know, with pus and swelling and fever.”

“Oh, aye, I know what ye mean. But do ye mean to say as ye know what to do for that? Are ye a charmer then? A Beaton?”

“Something like that.” I had no notion what a Beaton might be, nor any wish to go into my medical qualifications, standing out in the chilly drizzle that had set in. Mistress FitzGibbons seemed of a like mind, for she called back Jamie, who was making off in the opposite direction, and taking him also by an arm, towed us both into the castle.

After a long trip through cold narrow corridors, dimly lit by slitted windows, we came to a fairly large room furnished with a bed, a couple of stools, and most importantly, a fire.

I ignored my patient temporarily in favor of thawing my hands. Mistress FitzGibbons, presumably immune to cold, sat Jamie on a stool by the fire and gently got the remains of his tattered shirt off, replacing it with a warm quilt from the bed. She clucked at the shoulder, which was bruised and swollen, and poked at my clumsy dressing.

I turned from the fire. “I think it will need to be soaked off, and then the wound cleansed with a solution for … for preventing fevers.”

Mistress FitzGibbons would have made an admirable nurse. “What will ye be needin’?” she asked simply.

I thought hard. What in the name of God had people used for preventing infection before the advent of antibiotics? And of those limited compounds, which might be available to me in a primitive Scottish castle just after dawn?

“Garlic!” I said in triumph. “Garlic, and if you have it, witch hazel. Also I’ll need several clean rags and a kettle of water for boiling.”

“Aye, well, I think we can manage that; perhaps a bit of comfrey as well. What about a bit o’ boneset tea, or chamomile? T’lad looks as though it’s been a long night.”

The young man was in fact swaying with weariness, too tired to protest our discussing him as though he were an inanimate object.

Mrs. FitzGibbons was soon back, with an apron full of garlic bulbs, gauze bags of dried herbs, and torn strips of old linen. A small black iron kettle hung from one meaty arm, and she held a large demijohn of water as though it were so much goosedown.

“Now then, m’ dear, what would ye have me do?” she said cheerfully. I set her to boiling water and peeling the cloves of garlic while I inspected the contents of the herb packets. There was the witch hazel I had asked for, boneset and comfrey for tea, and something I tentatively identified as cherry bark.

“Painkiller,” I muttered happily, recollecting Mr. Crook explaining the uses of the barks and herbs we found. Good, we’d need that.

I threw several cloves of peeled garlic into the boiling water with some of the witch hazel, then added the cloth strips to the mixture. The boneset, comfrey, and cherry bark were steeping in a small pan of hot water set by the fire. The preparations had steadied me a bit. If I didn’t know for certain where I was, or why I was there, at least I knew what to do for the next quarter of an hour.

“Thank you … ah, Mrs. FitzGibbons,” I said respectfully. “I can manage now, if you have things to do.” The giant dame laughed, breasts heaving.

“Ah, lass! There aye be things for me to do! I’ll send a bit o’ broth up for ye. Do ye call oot if ye need anything else.” She waddled to the door with surprising speed and disappeared on her rounds.

I pulled the bandages off as carefully as I could. Still, the rayon pad stuck to the flesh, coming away with a soft crackling of dried blood. Droplets of fresh blood oozed around the edges of the wound, and I apologized for hurting him, though he hadn’t moved or made a sound.

He smiled slightly, with a hint perhaps of flirtation. “No worry, lass. I’ve been hurt much worse, and by people much less pretty.” He bent forward for me to wash the wound with the boiled garlic decoction, and the quilt slipped from his shoulder.

I saw at once that, whether meant as a compliment or not, his remark was a statement of plain fact; he had been hurt much worse. His upper back was covered with a criss-cross of faded white lines. He had been savagely flogged, and more than once. There were small lines of silvery scar tissue in some spots, where the welts had crossed, and irregular patches where several blows had struck the same spot, flaying off skin and gouging the muscle beneath.

I had, of course, seen a great variety of wounds and injuries, doing combat nursing, but there was something about these scars that seemed shockingly brutal. I must have drawn in my breath at the sight, for he turned his head and caught me staring. He shrugged his good shoulder.

"Lobsterbacks. Flogged me twice, in the space of a week. They'd ha' done it twice the same day, I expect, were they not afraid of killing me. No joy in flogging a dead man."

I tried to keep my voice steady while I sponged. "I shouldn't think anyone would do such a thing for joy."

"No? You should ha' seen him."

"Who?"

"The redcoat captain that skinned my back for me. If he was not precisely joyous, he was at least verra pleased with himself. More nor I was," he added wryly. "Randall was the name."

"Randall!" I couldn't keep the shock from my voice. Cold blue eyes fixed on mine.

"You're familiar with the man?" The voice was suddenly suspicious.

"No, no! I used to know a family of that name, a long time, uh, a long time ago." In my nervousness, I dropped the sponge cloth.

"Drat, now that will have to be boiled again." I scooped it off the floor and bustled to the fireplace, trying to hide my confusion in busyness. Could this Captain Randall possibly be Frank's ancestor, the soldier with the sterling record, gallant on the field of battle, recipient of commendations from dukes? And if so, could someone related to my sweet gentle Frank possibly be capable of inflicting the horrifying marks on this lad's back?

I busied myself at the fire, dropping in a few more handfuls of witch hazel and garlic, setting more cloths to soak. When I thought I could control my voice and face, I came back to Jamie, sponge in hand.

"Why were you flogged?" I asked abruptly.

It was hardly tactful, but I badly wanted to know, and was too tired to phrase it more gently.

He sighed, moving his shoulder uneasily under my ministrations. He was tired, too, and I was undoubtedly hurting him, gentle as I tried to be.

“The first time was escape, and the second was theft—or at least that’s what the charge-sheet read.”

“What were you escaping from?”

“The English,” he said, with an ironic lift of his brow. “If ye mean where, Fort William.”

“I gathered it was the English,” I said, matching the dryness of his tone. “What were you doing in Fort William in the first place?”

He rubbed his brow with his free hand. “Oh, that. I think that was obstruction.”

“Obstruction, escape, and theft. You sound a right dangerous character,” I said lightly, hoping to distract him from what I was doing.

It worked at least slightly; one corner of the wide mouth turned up, and one dark blue eye glinted back over his shoulder at me.

“Oh, I am that,” he said. “A wonder you think yourself safe in the same room wi’ me, and you an English lassie.”

“Well, you look harmless enough at the moment.” This was entirely untrue; shirtless, scarred and blood-smeared, with stubbled cheeks and reddened eyelids from the long night ride, he looked thoroughly disreputable. And tired or not, he looked entirely capable of further mayhem, should the need arise.

He laughed, a surprisingly deep, infectious sound.

“Harmless as a setting dove,” he agreed. “I’m too hungry to be a threat to anything but breakfast. Let a stray bannock come within reach, though, and I’ll no answer for the consequences. Ooh!”

“Sorry,” I muttered. “The stab wound’s deep, and it’s dirty.”

“It’s all right.” But he had gone pale beneath the coppery stubble of his beard. I tried to lead him back into conversation.

“What exactly is obstruction?” I asked casually. “I must say it doesn’t sound a major crime.”

He took a deep breath, fixing his eyes resolutely on the carved bedpost as I swabbed deeper.

"Ah. Well, I suppose it's whatever the English say it is. In my case, it meant defending my family and my property, and getting myself half killed in the process." He pressed his lips together, as if to say no more, but after a moment went on, as though seeking to focus his attention on anything other than his shoulder.

"It was near to four years ago. There was a levy put on the manors near Fort William—food for the garrison, horses for transport, and suchlike. I wouldna say many liked it, but most would yield what they had to. Small parties of soldiers would go round with an officer and a wagon or two, collecting the bits of food and things. And one day in October, yon Captain Randall came along to L—" he caught himself quickly, with a glance at me, "to our place."

I nodded encouragingly, eyes on my work.

"We'd thought they'd not come so far; the place is a good distance from the fort, and not easy to get to. But they did."

He closed his eyes briefly. "My father was away—gone to a funeral at the next farm. And I was up in the fields wi' most of the men, for it was close to harvest, and a lot to be done. So my sister was alone in the house, except for two or three of the women servants, and they all rushed upstairs to hide their heads under the bedclothes when they saw the red coats. Thought the soldiers were sent by the devil—and I'll no just say they were wrong."

I laid down my cloth. The nasty part was done; now all we needed was a poultice of some kind—lacking iodine or penicillin, it was the best I could do for infection—and a good tight dressing. Eyes still closed, the young man did not appear to notice.

"I came down toward the house from behind, meaning to fetch a piece of harness from the barn, and heard the shouting and my sister screaming inside the house."

"Oh?" I tried to make my voice as quiet and unintrusive as I could. I wanted very much to know about this Captain Randall; so far, this story had done little to dispel my original impression of him.

"I went in through the kitchen and found two of 'em riflin' the pantry, stuffin' their sacks wi' flour and bacon. I punched one of them in the head, and threw the other out the window, sack and all. Then I burst into the parlor, where I found two of the redcoats with my sister, Jenny. Her dress was torn a bit, and one of them had a scratched face."

He opened his eyes and smiled, a bit grimly. "I didna stop to ask questions. We were going round and about, and I wasna doing too poorly, for all there were two of them, when Randall came in."

Randall had stopped the fight by the simple expedient of holding a pistol to Jenny's head. Forced to surrender, Jamie had quickly been seized and bound by the two soldiers. Randall had smiled charmingly at his captive and said, "Well, well. Two spitfire scratchcats here, have we? A taste of hard labor'll cure your temper, I trow, and if it doesn't, well, there's another cat you'll meet, name of nine-tails. But there's other cures for other cats, aren't there, my sweet pussy?"

Jamie stopped for a moment, jaw working. "He was holdin' Jenny's arm behind her back, but he let go then, to bring his hand round and put it down her dress, round her breast, like." Remembering the scene, he smiled unexpectedly. "So," he resumed, "Jenny stamped down on his foot and gave him her elbow deep in the belly. And as he was bent over choking, she whirled round and gave him a good root in the stones wi' her knee." He snorted briefly with amusement.

"Weel, at that he dropped the pistol, and she went for it, but one of the dragoons holding me got to it first."

I had finished the bandaging and stood quiet behind him, a hand resting on his good shoulder. It seemed important he should tell me everything, but I was afraid he would stop if he were reminded of my presence.

"When he'd got back enough breath to talk with, Randall had his men haul us both outside. They stripped off my shirt, bound me to the wagon tongue, and Randall beat me across the back with the flat of his saber. He was in a black fury, but a wee bit the worse for wear, ye might say. It stung me a bit, but he couldna keep it up for long."

The brief spurt of amusement had vanished now, and the shoulder under my hand was hard with tension. “When he stopped, he turned to Jenny—one of the dragoons had hold of her—and asked her did she want to see more, or would she rather go into the house with him, and offer him better entertainment?” The shoulder twitched uneasily.

“I couldna move much, but I shouted to her that I wasna hurt—and I wasn’t, too much—and that she was not to go with him, not if they cut my throat before her eyes.”

“They were holding her behind me, so I couldna see, but from the sound of it, she spat in his face. She must have done, because next thing I knew, he’d grabbed a handful of my hair, pulled my head back, and set his knife against my throat.”

“I’ve a mind to take you at your suggestion,” Randall had said through his teeth, and dug the point just beneath the skin, far enough to draw blood.

“I could see the dagger close to my face,” Jamie said, “and the pattern of spots my blood was making in the dust under the wagon.” His tone was almost dreamy, and I realized that, from fatigue and pain, he had lapsed into something like a hypnotic state. He might not even remember that I was there.

“I made to call out to my sister, to tell her that I’d much prefer to die than have her dishonor herself wi’ such scum. Randall took the dagger from my throat, though, and thrust the blade betwixt my teeth, so I couldna call out.” He rubbed at his mouth, as though still tasting bitter steel. He stopped talking, staring straight ahead.

“But what happened then?” I shouldn’t have spoken, but I had to know.

He shook himself, like a man rousing from sleep, and rubbed a large hand tiredly across the back of his neck.

“She went with him,” he said abruptly. “She thought he would kill me, and perhaps she was right. After that, I dinna ken what happened. One of the dragoons hit me in the head wi’ the stock of his musket. When I woke, I was trussed up in the wagon wi’ the chickens, jolting down the road toward Fort William.”

“I see,” I said quietly. “I’m sorry. It must have been terrible for you.”

He smiled suddenly, the haze of fatigue gone. “Oh, aye. Chickens are verra poor company, especially on a long journey.” Realizing that the dressing was completed, he hunched the shoulder experimentally, wincing as he did so.

“Don’t do that!” I said in alarm. “You really mustn’t move it. In fact,” I glanced at the table, to be sure there were some strips of dry fabric left. “I’m going to strap that arm to your side. Hold still.”

He didn’t speak further, but relaxed a bit under my hands when he realized that it wasn’t going to hurt. I felt an odd sense of intimacy with this young Scottish stranger, due in part, I thought, to the dreadful story he had just told me, and in part to our long ride through the dark, pressed together in drowsy silence. I had not slept with many men other than my husband, but I had noticed before that to sleep, actually *sleep* with someone did give this sense of intimacy, as though your dreams had flowed out of you to mingle with his and fold you both in a blanket of unconscious knowing. A throwback of some kind, I thought. In older, more primitive times (*like these?* asked another part of my mind), it was an act of trust to sleep in the presence of another person. If the trust was mutual, simple sleep could bring you closer together than the joining of bodies.

The strapping finished, I helped him on with the rough linen shirt, easing it over the bad shoulder. He stood up to tuck it one-handed into his kilt, and smiled down at me.

“I thank ye, Claire. You’ve a good touch.” His hand reached out as though to touch my face, but he seemed to think better of it; the hand wavered and dropped to his side. Apparently he had felt that odd surge of intimacy too. I looked hastily away, flipping a hand in a think-nothing-of-it gesture.

My gaze traveled around the room, taking in the smoke-blacked fireplace, the narrow, unglazed windows, and the solid oak furnishings. No electrical fittings. No carpeting. No shiny brass knobs on the bedstead.

It looked, in fact, like an eighteenth-century castle. But what about Frank? The man I had met in the wood looked disturbingly like him, but Jamie's description of Captain Randall was completely foreign to everything I knew about my gentle, peace-loving husband. But then, if it were true—and I was beginning to admit, even to myself, that it might be—then he could in fact be almost anything. A man I knew only from a genealogical chart was not necessarily bound to resemble his descendants in conduct.

But it was Frank himself I was concerned with at the moment. If I was, in fact, in the eighteenth century, where was he? What would he do when I failed to return to Mrs. Baird's? Would I ever see him again? Thinking about Frank was the last straw. Since the moment I stepped into the rock and ordinary life ceased to exist, I had been assaulted, threatened, kidnapped and jostled. I had not eaten or slept properly for more than twenty-four hours. I tried to control myself, but my lip wobbled and my eyes filled in spite of myself.

I turned to the fire to hide my face, but too late. Jamie took my hand, asking in a gentle voice what was wrong. The firelight glinted on my gold wedding band, and I began to sniffle in earnest.

"Oh, I'll … I'll be all right, it's all right, really, it's … just my … my husband … I don't—"

"Ah lass, are ye widowed, then?" His voice was so full of sympathetic concern that I lost control entirely.

"No … yes … I mean, I don't … yes, I suppose I am!" Overcome with emotion and tiredness, I collapsed against him, sobbing hysterically.

The lad had nice feelings. Instead of calling for help or retreating in confusion, he sat down, gathered me firmly onto his lap with his good arm and sat rocking me gently, muttering soft Gaelic in my ear and smoothing my hair with one hand. I wept bitterly, surrendering momentarily to my fear and heartbroken confusion, but slowly I began to quiet a bit, as Jamie stroked my neck and back, offering me the comfort of his broad, warm chest. My sobs lessened and I began to calm myself, leaning tiredly into the curve of his shoulder. No wonder he was so good with horses, I thought blearily, feeling his fingers rubbing gently behind my ears, listening to the soothing, incomprehensible speech. If I were a horse, I'd let him ride me anywhere.

This absurd thought coincided unfortunately with my dawning realization that the young man was not completely exhausted after all. In fact, it was becoming embarrassingly obvious to both of us. I coughed and cleared my throat, wiping my eyes with my sleeve as I slid off his lap.

"I'm so sorry … that is, I mean, thank you for … but I …" I was babbling, backing away from him with my face flaming. He was a bit flushed, too, but not disconcerted. He reached for my hand and pulled me back. Careful not to touch me otherwise, he put a hand under my chin and forced my head up to face him.

"Ye need not be scairt of me," he said softly. "Nor of anyone here, so long as I'm with ye." He let go and turned to the fire.

"You need somethin' hot, lass," he said matter-of-factly, "and a bit to eat as well. Something in your belly will help more than anything." I laughed shakily at his attempts to pour broth one-handed, and went to help. He was right; food did help. We sipped broth and ate bread in a companionable silence, sharing the growing comfort of warmth and fullness.

Finally, he stood up, picking up the fallen quilt from the floor. He dropped it back on the bed, and motioned me toward it. "Do ye sleep a bit, Claire. You're worn out, and likely someone will want to talk wi' ye before too long."

This was a sinister reminder of my precarious position, but I was too exhausted to care much. I uttered no more than a pro forma protest at taking the bed; I had never seen anything so enticing. Jamie assured me that he could find a bed elsewhere. I fell headfirst into the pile of quilts and was asleep before he reached the door.

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5

THE MACKENZIE

I woke in a state of complete confusion. I vaguely remembered that something was very wrong, but couldn't remember what. In fact, I had been sleeping so soundly that I couldn't remember for a moment who I was, much less where. I was warm, and the surrounding room was piercingly cold. I tried to burrow back into my cocoon of quilts, but the voice that had wakened me was still nagging.

"Come then, lass! Come now, ye must get up!" The voice was deep and genially hectoring, like the barking of a sheepdog. I pried one reluctant eye open far enough to see the mountain of brown homespun.

Mistress FitzGibbons! The sight of her shocked me back to full consciousness, and memory returned. It was still true, then.

Wrapping a blanket about me against the chill, I staggered out of bed and headed for the fire as fast as possible. Mistress FitzGibbons had a cup of hot broth waiting; I sipped it, feeling like the survivor of some major bombing raid, as she laid out a pile of garments on the bed. There was a long yellowish linen chemise, with a thin edging of lace, a petticoat of fine cotton, two overskirts in shades of brown, and a pale lemon-yellow bodice. Brown-striped stockings of wool and a pair of yellow slippers completed the ensemble.

Brooking no protests, the dame bustled me out of my inadequate garments and oversaw my dressing from the skin out. She stood back, surveying her handiwork with satisfaction.

"The yellow suits ye, lass; I thought it would. Goes well wi' that brown hair, and it brings out the gold in your eyes. Stay, though, ye'll need a wee bit o' ribbon." Turning out a pocket like a gunnysack, she produced a handful of ribbons and bits of jewelry.

Too stunned to resist, I allowed her to dress my hair, tying back the sidelocks with primrose ribbon, clucking over the unfeminine unbecomingness of my shoulder-length bob.

"Goodness, me dear, whatever were ye thinkin', to cut your hair so short? Were ye in disguise, like? I've heard o' some lasses doin' so, to hide their sex when travelin', same as to be safe from they dratted redcoats. 'Tis a fine day, says I, when leddies canna travel the roads in safety." She ran on, patting me here and there, tucking in a curl or arranging a fold. Finally I was arrayed to her satisfaction.

"Weel now, that's verra gude. Now, ye've just time for a wee bite, then I must take you to himself."

"Himself?" I said. I didn't care for the sound of this. Whoever Himself was, he was likely to ask difficult questions.

"Why, the MacKenzie to be sure. Whoever else?"

Who else indeed? Castle Leoch, I dimly recalled, was in the middle of the clan MacKenzie lands. Plainly the clan chieftain was still the MacKenzie. I began to understand why our little band of horsemen had ridden through the night to reach the castle; this would be a place of impregnable safety to men pursued by the Crown's men. No English officer with a grain of sense would lead his men so deeply into the clan lands. To do so was to risk death by ambush at the first clump of trees. And only a good-sized army would come as far as the castle gates. I was trying to remember whether in fact the English army ever had come so far, when I suddenly realized that the eventual fate of the castle was much less relevant than my immediate future.

I had no appetite for the bannocks and parritch that Mrs. FitzGibbons had brought for my breakfast, but crumbled a bit and pretended to eat, in order to gain some time for thought. By the time Mrs. Fitz came back to conduct me to the MacKenzie, I had cobbled together a rough plan.

The laird received me in a room at the top of a flight of stone steps. It was a tower room, round, and rich with paintings and tapestries hung against the sloping walls. While the rest of the castle seemed comfortable enough, if somewhat bare, this room was luxuriously crowded, crammed with furniture, bristling with ornaments, and warmly lit by fire and candle against the drizzle of the day outside. While the outer walls of the castle had only the high slit windows suited to resisting attack, this inner wall had been more recently furnished with long casement windows that let in what daylight there was.

As I entered, my attention was drawn at once by an enormous metal cage, cleverly engineered to fit the curve of the wall from floor to ceiling, filled with dozens of tiny birds: finches, buntings, tits, and several kinds of warblers. Drawing near, my eye was filled with plump smooth bodies and bead-bright eyes, set like jewels in a background of velvet green, darting among the leaves of oak, elm, and chestnut, carefully tended trees rooted in mulched pots set on the floor of the cage. The cheerful racket of conversing birds was punctuated by the whir of wings and rustle of leaves as the inhabitants flitted and hopped about their business.

"Busy wee things, are they no?" A deep, pleasant voice spoke from behind me, and I turned with a smile that froze on my face.

Colum MacKenzie shared the broad planes and high forehead of his brother Dougal, though the vital force that gave Dougal an air of intimidation was here mellowed into something more welcoming, though no less vibrant. Darker, with dove-grey rather than hazel eyes, Colum gave that same impression of intensity, of standing just slightly closer to you than was quite comfortable. At the moment, though, my discomfort arose from the fact that the beautifully modeled head and long torso ended in shockingly bowed and stumpy legs. The man who should have topped six feet came barely to my shoulder.

He kept his eyes on the birds, tactfully allowing me a much-needed moment to gain control of my features. Of course, he must be used to the reactions of people meeting him for the first time. It occurred to me, glancing around the room, to wonder how often he did meet new people. This was clearly a sanctuary; the self-constructed world of a man to whom the outer world was unwelcome—or unavailable.

"I welcome ye, mistress," he said, with a slight bow. "My name is Colum ban Campbell MacKenzie, laird of this castle. I understand from my brother that he, er, encountered you some distance from here."

"He kidnapped me, if you want to know," I said. I would have liked to keep the conversation cordial, but I wanted even more to get away from this castle and back to the hill with the standing stone circle. Whatever had happened to me, the answer lay there—if anywhere.

The laird's thick brows rose slightly, and a smile curved the fine-cut lips.

"Well, perhaps," he agreed. "Dougal is sometimes a wee bit … impetuous."

"Well." I waved a hand, indicating gracious dismissal of the matter. "I'm prepared to admit that a misunderstanding might have arisen. But I would greatly appreciate being returned to … the place he took me from."

"Mm." Brows still raised, Colum gestured toward a chair. I sat, reluctantly, and he nodded toward one of the attendants, who vanished through the door.

"I've sent for some refreshment, Mistress … Beauchamp, was it? I understand that my brother and his men found ye in … er, some apparent distress." He seemed to be hiding a smile, and I wondered just how my supposed state of undress had been described to him.

I took a deep breath. Now it was time for the explanation I had devised. Thinking this out, I had recalled Frank's telling me, during his officer's training, about a course he had taken in withstanding interrogation. The basic principle, insofar as I remembered it, was to stick to the truth as much as humanly possible, altering only those details that must be kept secret. Less chance, the instructor explained, of slipping up in the minor aspects of one's cover story. Well, we'd have to see how effective that was.

"Well, yes. I had been attacked, you see."

He nodded, face alight with interest. "Aye? Attacked by whom?"

Tell the truth. "By English soldiers. In particular, by a man named Randall."

The patrician face changed suddenly at the name. Though Colum continued to look interested, there was an increased intensity in the line of the mouth, and a deepening of the creases that bracketed it. Clearly that name was familiar. The MacKenzie chief sat back a bit, and steepled his fingers, regarding me carefully over them.

"Ah?" he said. "Tell me more."

So, God help me, I told him more. I gave him in great detail the story of the confrontation between the Scots and Randall's men, since he would be able to check that with Dougal. I told him the basic facts of my conversation with Randall, since I didn't know how much the man Murtagh had overheard.

He nodded absorbedly, paying close attention.

"Aye," he said. "But how did you come to be there in that spot? It's far off the road to Inverness—you meant to take ship from there, I suppose?" I nodded and took a deep breath.

Now we entered perforce the realm of invention. I wished I had paid closer attention to Frank's remarks on the subject of highwaymen, but I would have to do my best. I was a widowed lady of Oxfordshire, I replied (true, so far as it went), traveling with a manservant en route to distant relatives in France (that seemed safely remote). We had been set upon by highwaymen, and my servant had either been killed or run off. I had myself dashed into the wood on my horse, but been caught some distance from the road. While I had succeeded in escaping from the bandits, I had perforce to abandon my horse and all property thereon. And while wandering in the woods, I had run afoul of Captain Randall and his men.

I sat back a little, pleased with the story. Simple, neat, true in all checkable details. Colum's face expressed no more than a polite attention. He was opening his mouth to ask me a question, when there was a faint rustle at the doorway. A man, one of those I had noticed in the courtyard when we arrived, stood there, holding a small leather box in one hand.

The chief of Clan MacKenzie excused himself gracefully and left me studying the birds, with the assurance that he would shortly return to continue our most interesting conversation.

No sooner had the door swung shut behind him than I was at the bookshelf, running my hand along the leather bindings. There were perhaps two dozen books on this shelf; more on the opposite wall. Hurriedly I flipped the opening pages of each volume. Several had no publication dates; those that did were all dated from 1720 to 1742. Colum MacKenzie obviously liked luxury, but the rest of his room gave no particular indication that he was an antiquarian. The bindings were new, with no sign of cracking or foxed pages within.

Quite beyond ordinary scruples by this time, I shamelessly rifled the olivewood desk, keeping an ear out for returning footsteps.

I found what I supposed I had been looking for in the central drawer. A half-finished letter, written in a flowing hand rendered no more legible by the eccentric spelling and total lack of punctuation. The paper was fresh and clean, and the ink crisply black. Legible or not, the date at the top of the page sprang out at me as though written in letters of fire: 20 April, 1743.

When he returned a few moments later, Colum found his guest seated by the casement windows, hands clasped decorously in her lap. Seated, because my legs would no longer hold me up. Hands clasped, to hide the trembling that had made it difficult for me to stuff the letter back into its resting place.

He had brought with him the tray of refreshments; mugs of ale and fresh oatcakes spread with honey. I nibbled sparingly at these; my stomach was churning too vigorously to allow for any appetite.

After a brief apology for his absence, he commiserated with me on my sad misfortune. Then he leaned back, eyed me speculatively, and asked, “But how is it, Mistress Beauchamp, that my brother’s men found ye wandering about in your shift? Highwaymen would be reluctant to molest your person, as they’d likely mean to hold ye for ransom. And even with such things as I’ve heard of Captain Randall, I’d be surprised to hear that an officer in the English army was in the habit of raping stray travelers.”

“Oh?” I snapped. “Well, whatever you’ve heard about him, I assure you he’s entirely capable of it.” I had overlooked the detail of my clothing when planning my story, and wondered at what point in our encounter the man Murtagh had spotted the Captain and myself.

“Ah, well,” said Colum. “Possible, I daresay. The man’s a bad reputation, to be sure.”

“Possible?” I said. “Why? Don’t you believe what I’ve told you?” For the MacKenzie chieftain’s face was showing a faint but definite skepticism.

“I did not say I didn’t believe ye, Mistress,” he answered evenly. “But I’ve not held the leadership of a large clan for twenty-odd years without learning not to swallow whole every tale I’m told.”

“Well, if you don’t believe I am who I say, who in bloody hell do you think I am?” I demanded.

He blinked, taken aback by my language. Then the sharp-cut features firmed again.

“That,” he said, “remains to be seen. In the meantime, mistress, you’re a welcome guest at Leoch.” He raised a hand in gracious dismissal, and the ever-present attendant near the door came forward, obviously to escort me back to my quarters.

Colum didn’t say the next words, but he might as well have. They hung in the air behind me as clearly as though spoken, as I walked away:

“Until I find out who you really are.”

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PART TWO

Castle Leoch

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6

COLUM’S HALL

The small boy Mrs. FitzGibbons had referred to as “young Alec” came to fetch me to dinner. This was held in a long, narrow room outfitted with tables down the length of each wall, supplied by a constant stream of servants issuing from archways at either end of the room, laden with trays, trenchers, and jugs. The rays of early summer’s late sunlight came through the high, narrow windows; sconces along the walls below held torches to be lighted as the daylight failed.

Banners and tartans hung on the walls between the windows, plaids and heraldry of all descriptions splotching the stones with color. By contrast, most of the people gathered below for dinner were dressed in serviceable shades of grey and brown, or in the soft brown and green plaid of hunting kilts, muted tones suited for hiding in the heather.

I could feel curious glances boring into my back as young Alec led me toward the top of the room, but most of the diners kept their eyes politely upon their plates. There seemed little ceremony here; people ate as they pleased, helping themselves from the serving platters, or taking their wooden plates to the far end of the room, where two young boys turned a sheep’s carcass on a spit in the enormous fireplace. There were some forty people sat to eat, and perhaps another ten to serve. The air was loud with conversation, most of it in Gaelic.

Colum was already seated at a table at the head of the room, stunted legs tucked out of sight beneath the scarred oak. He nodded graciously at my appearance and waved me to a seat on his left, next to a plump and pretty red-haired woman he introduced as his wife, Letitia.

"And this is my son, Hamish," he said, dropping a hand on the shoulder of a handsome red-haired lad of seven or eight, who took his eyes off the waiting platter just long enough to acknowledge my presence with a quick nod.

I looked at the boy with interest. He looked like all the other MacKenzie males I had seen, with the same broad, flat cheekbones and deep-set eyes. In fact, allowing for the difference in coloring, he might be a smaller version of his uncle Dougal, who sat next to him. The two teenage girls next to Dougal, who giggled and poked each other when introduced to me, were his daughters, Margaret and Eleanor.

Dougal gave me a brief but friendly smile before snatching the platter out from under the reaching spoon of one of his daughters and shoving it toward me.

"Ha' ye no manners, lass?" he scolded. "Guests first!"

I rather hesitantly picked up the large horn spoon offered me. I had not been sure what sort of food was likely to be offered, and was somewhat relieved to find that this platter held a row of homely and completely familiar smoked herrings.

I'd never tried to eat a herring with a spoon, but I saw nothing resembling a fork, and dimly recalled that runcible spoons would not be in general use for quite a few years yet.

Judging from the behavior of eaters at other tables, when a spoon proved impracticable, the ever-handy dirk was employed, for the slicing of meat and removal of bones. Lacking a dirk, I resolved to chew cautiously, and leaned forward to scoop up a herring, only to find the deep blue eyes of young Hamish fixed accusingly on me.

"Ye've not said grace yet," he said severely, small face screwed into a frown. Obviously he considered me a conscienceless heathen, if not downright depraved.

"Er, perhaps you would be so kind as to say it for me?" I ventured.

The cornflower eyes popped open in surprise, but after a moment's consideration, he nodded and folded his hands in a businesslike fashion. He glared round the table to insure that everyone was in a properly reverential attitude before bowing his own head. Satisfied, he intoned,

"Some hae meat that canna eat,
And some could eat that want it.
We hae meat, and we can eat,
And so may God be thankit. Amen."

Looking up from my respectfully folded hands, I caught Colum's eye, and gave him a smile that acknowledged the sangfroid of his offspring. He suppressed his own smile and nodded gravely at his son.

"Nicely said, lad. Will ye hand round the bread?"

Conversation at table was limited to occasional requests for further food, as everyone settled down to serious eating. I found my own appetite rather lacking, partly owing to the shock of my circumstances, and partly to the fact that I really didn't care for herring, when all was said and done. The mutton was quite good, though, and the bread was delicious, fresh and crusty, with large dollops of fresh unsalted butter.

"I hope Mr. MacTavish is feeling better," I offered, during a momentary pause for breath. "I didn't see him when I came in."

"MacTavish?" Letitia's delicate brows tilted over round blue eyes. I felt, rather than saw Dougal look up beside me.

"Young Jamie," he said briefly, before returning his attention to the mutton bone in his hands.

"Jamie? Why, whatever is the matter wi' the lad?" Her full-cheeked countenance creased with concern.

"Naught but a scratch, my dear," Colum soothed. He glanced across at his brother. "Where is he, though, Dougal?" I imagined perhaps, that the dark eyes held a hint of suspicion.

His brother shrugged, eyes still on his plate. "I sent him down to the stables to help auld Alec wi' the horses. Seemed the best place for him, all things considered." He raised his eyes to meet his brother's gaze. "Or did ye have some other idea?"

Colum seemed dubious. "The stables? Aye, well … ye trust him so far?"

Dougal wiped a hand carelessly across his mouth and reached for a loaf of bread. "It's yours to say, Colum, if ye dinna agree wi' my orders."

Colum's lips tightened briefly, but he only said, "Nay, I reckon he'll do well enough there," before returning to his meal.

I had some doubts myself, as to a stable being the proper place for a patient with a gunshot wound, but was reluctant to offer an opinion in this company. I resolved to seek out the young man in question in the morning, just to assure myself that he was as suitably cared for as could be managed.

I refused the pudding and excused myself, pleading tiredness, which was in no way prevarication. I was so exhausted that I scarcely paid attention when Colum said "Goodnight to ye, then, Mistress Beauchamp. I'll send someone to bring ye to Hall in the morning."

One of the servants, seeing me groping my way along the corridor, kindly lighted me to my chamber. She touched her candle to the one on my table, and a mellow light flickered over the massive stones of the wall, giving me a moment's feeling of entombment. Once she had left, though, I pulled the embroidered hanging away from the window, and the feeling blew away with the inrush of cool air. I tried to think about everything that had happened, but my mind refused to consider anything but sleep. I slid under the quilts, blew out the candle, and fell asleep watching the slow rise of the moon.

It was the massive Mrs. FitzGibbons who arrived again to wake me in the morning, bearing what appeared to be the full array of toiletries available to a well-born Scottish lady. Lead combs to darken the eyebrows and lashes, pots of powdered orrisroot and rice powder, even a stick of what I assumed was kohl, though I had never seen any, and a delicate lidded porcelain cup of French rouge, incised with a row of gilded swans.

Mrs. FitzGibbons also had a striped green overskirt and bodice of silk, with yellow lisle stockings, as a change from the homespun I had been provided with the day before. Whatever "Hall" involved, it seemed to be an occasion of some consequence. I was tempted to insist on attending in my own clothes, just to be contrary, but the memory of fat Rupert's response to my shift was sufficient to deter me.

Besides, I rather liked Colum, despite the fact that he apparently intended to keep me here for the foreseeable future. Well, we'd just see about that, I thought, as I did my best with the rouge. Dougal had said the young man I had doctored was in the stables, hadn't he? And stables presumably had horses, upon which one could ride away. I resolved to go looking for Jamie MacTavish, as soon as Hall was over with.

Hall turned out to be just that; the dining hall where I had eaten the night before. Now it was transformed, though; tables, benches, and stools pushed back against the walls, the head table removed and replaced by a substantial carved chair of dark wood, covered with what I assumed must be the MacKenzie tartan, a plaid of dark green and black, with a faint red and white over-check. Sprigs of holly decorated the walls, and there were fresh rushes strewn on the stone flags.

A young piper was blowing up a set of small pipes behind the empty chair, with numerous sighs and wheezes. Near him were what I assumed must be the intimate members of Colum's staff: a thin-faced man in trews and smocked shirt, who lounged against the wall; a balding little man in a coat of fine brocade, clearly a scribe of some sort, as he was seated at a small table equipped with inkhorn, quills, and paper; two brawny kilted men with the attitude of guards; and to one side, one of the largest men I have ever seen.

I stared at this giant with some awe. Coarse black hair grew far down on his forehead, nearly meeting the beetling eyebrows. Similar mats covered the immense forearms, exposed by the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt. Unlike most of the men I had seen, the giant did not seem to be armed, save for a tiny knife he carried in his stocking-top; I could barely make out the stubby hilt in the thickets of black curls that covered his legs above the gaily checked hose. A broad leather belt circled what must be a forty-inch waist, but carried neither dirk nor sword. In spite of his size, the man had an amiable expression, and seemed to be joking with the thin-faced man, who looked like a marionette in comparison with his huge conversant.

The piper suddenly began to play, with a preliminary belch, followed at once by an ear-splitting screech that eventually settled down into something resembling a tune.

There were some thirty or forty people present, all seeming somewhat better-dressed and groomed than the diners of the night before. All heads turned to the lower end of the hall, where, after a pause for the music to build up steam, Colum entered, followed at a few paces by his brother Dougal.

Both MacKenzies were clearly dressed for ceremony, in dark green kilts and well-cut coats, Colum's of pale green and Dougal's of russet, both with the plaid slung across their chests and secured at one shoulder by a large jeweled brooch. Colum's black hair was loose today, carefully oiled and curled upon his shoulders. Dougal's was still clubbed back in a queue that nearly matched the russet satin of his coat.

Colum walked slowly up the length of the hall, nodding and smiling to faces on either side. Looking across the hall, I could see another archway, near where his chair was placed. Clearly he could have entered the hall by that doorway, instead of the one at the far end of the room. So it was deliberate, this flaunting of his twisted legs and ungainly waddle on the long progress to his seat. Deliberate, too, the contrast with his tall, straight-bodied younger brother, who looked neither to left nor right, but walked straight behind Colum to the wooden chair and took up his station standing close behind.

Colum sat and waited for a moment, then raised one hand. The pipes' wailing died away in a pitiful whine, and "Hall" began.

It quickly became apparent that this was the regular occasion on which the laird of Castle Leoch dispensed justice to his tacksmen and tenants, hearing cases and settling disputes. There was an agenda; the balding scribe read out the names and the various parties came forward in their turn.

While some cases were presented in English, most of the proceedings were held in Gaelic. I had already noticed that the language involved considerable eye-rolling and foot-stamping for emphasis, making it difficult to judge the seriousness of a case by the demeanor of the participants.

Just as I had decided that one man, a rather moth-eaten specimen with an enormous sporran made of an entire badger, was accusing his neighbor of nothing less than murder, arson, and wife-stealing, Colum raised his eyebrows and said something quick in Gaelic that had both complainant and defendant clutching their sides with laughter. Wiping his eyes, the complainant nodded at last, and offered a hand to his opponent, as the scribe scribbled busily, quill scratching like a mouse's feet.

I was fifth on the agenda. A placement, I thought, carefully calculated to indicate to the assembled crowd the importance of my presence in the Castle.

For my benefit, English was spoken during my presentation.

"Mistress Beauchamp, will ye stand forth?" called the scribe.

Urged forward by an unnecessary shove from Mrs. FitzGibbons's meaty hand, I stumbled out into the clear space before Colum, and rather awkwardly curtsied, as I had seen other females do. The shoes I had been given did not distinguish between right foot and left, being in either case only an oblong of formed leather, which made graceful maneuvering difficult. There was a stir of interest through the crowd as Colum paid me the honor of getting up from his chair. He offered me his hand, which I took in order not to fall flat on my face.

Rising from the curtsy, mentally cursing the slippers, I found myself staring at Dougal's chest. As my captor, it was apparently up to him to make formal application for my reception—or captivity, depending how you wanted to look at it. I waited with some interest to see just how the brothers had decided to explain me.

"Sir," began Dougal, bowing formally to Colum, "we pray your indulgence and mercy with regard to a lady in need of succor and safe refuge. Mistress Claire Beauchamp, an English lady of Oxford, finding herself set upon by highwaymen and her servant most traitorously killed, fled into the forests of your lands, where she was discovered and rescued by myself and my men. We beg that Castle Leoch might offer this lady refuge until"—he paused, and a cynical smile twisted his mouth—"her *English* connections may be apprised of her whereabouts and due provision made for her safe transport."

I didn't miss the emphasis laid on "English," and neither did anyone else in the hall, I was sure. So, I was to be tolerated, but held under suspicion. Had he said French, I would have been considered a friendly, or at worst, neutral intrusion. It might be more difficult than I had expected to get away from the castle.

Colum bowed graciously to me and offered me the unlimited hospitality of his humble hearth, or words to that effect. I curtsied again, with somewhat more success, and retired to the ranks, followed by curious but more or less friendly stares.

Until this point, the cases seemed to have been of interest chiefly to the parties involved. The spectators had chatted quietly among themselves, waiting their turns. My own appearance had been met with an interested murmur of speculation and, I thought, approval.

But now there was an excited stir through the hall. A burly man stepped forward into the clear space, dragging a young girl by the hand. She looked about sixteen, with a pretty, pouting face and long yellow hair tied back with blue ribbon. She stumbled into the space and stood alone, while the man behind her expostulated in Gaelic, waving his arms and occasionally pointing at her in illustration or accusation. Small murmurs ran through the crowd as he talked.

Mrs. FitzGibbons, her bulk resting on a sturdy stool, was craning forward with interest. I leaned forward and whispered in her ear. "What's she done?"

The huge dame replied without moving her lips or taking her eyes from the action. "Her father accuses her of loose behavior;

consortin' improperly wi' young men against his orders," muttered Mistress FitzGibbons, leaning her bulk backward on the stool. "Her father wishes the MacKenzie to have her punished for disobedience."

"Punished? How?" I hissed, as quietly as I could.

"Shhh."

In the center, attention now focused on Colum, who was considering the girl and her father. Looking from one to the other, he began to speak. Frowning, he rapped his knuckles sharply on the arm of his chair, and a shiver ran through the crowd.

"He's decided," whispered Mrs. FitzGibbons, unnecessarily. What he had decided was also clear; the giant stirred for the first time, unbuckling his leather belt in a leisurely manner. The two guards took the terrified girl by the arms and turned her so that her back was to Colum and her father. She began to cry, but made no appeal. The crowd was watching with the sort of intent excitement that attends public executions and road accidents. Suddenly a Gaelic voice from the back of the crowd rose, audible over the shuffle and murmur.

Heads turned to locate the speaker. Mrs. FitzGibbons craned, even rising on tiptoe to see. I had no idea what had been said, but I thought I recognized that voice, deep but soft, with a spiky way of clipping the final consonants.

The crowd parted, and Jamie MacTavish came out into the clear space. He inclined his head respectfully to the MacKenzie, then spoke some more. Whatever he said seemed to cause some controversy. Colum, Dougal, the little scribe, and the girl's father all seemed to be getting into the act.

"What is it?" I muttered to Mrs. Fitz. My patient was looking much better than when last seen, though still a bit white-faced, I thought. He'd found a clean shirt somewhere; the empty right sleeve had been folded and tucked into the waist of his kilt.

Mrs. Fitz was watching the proceedings with great interest.

"The lad's offering to take the girl's punishment for her," she said absently, peeking around a spectator in front of us.

"What? But he's injured! Surely they won't let him do something like that!" I spoke as quietly as I could under the hum of the crowd.

Mrs. Fitz shook her head. "I dunno, lass. They're arguin' it now. See, 'tis allowable for a man o' her own clan to offer for her, but the lad is no a MacKenzie."

"He's not?" I was surprised, having naively assumed that all the men in the group that had captured me came from Castle Leoch.

"O' course not," said Mrs. Fitz impatiently. "Do ye no see his tartan?"

Of course I did, once she had pointed it out. While Jamie also wore a hunting tartan in shades of green and brown, the colors were different than that of the other men present. It was a deeper brown, almost a bark color, with a faint blue stripe.

Apparently Dougal's contribution was the deciding argument. The knot of advisers dispersed and the crowd hushed, falling back to wait. The two guards released the girl, who ran back into the crowd, and Jamie stepped forward to take her place between them. I watched in horror as they moved to take his arms, but he spoke in Gaelic to the man with the strap, and the two guards fell back. Amazingly, a wide, impudent grin lighted his face briefly. Stranger still, there was a quick answering smile on the face of the giant.

"What did he say?" I demanded of my interpreter.

"He chooses fists rather than the strap. A man may choose so, though a woman may not."

"Fists?" I had no time to question further. The executioner drew back a fist like a ham and drove it into Jamie's abdomen, doubling him up and driving his breath out with a gasp. The man waited for him to straighten up before moving in and administering a series of sharp jabs to the ribs and arms. Jamie made no effort to defend himself, merely shifting his balance to remain upright in the face of the assault.

The next blow was to the face. I winced and shut my eyes involuntarily as Jamie's head rocked back. The executioner took his time between blows, careful not to knock his victim down or strike too many times in one spot. It was a scientific beating, skillfully engineered to inflict bruising pain, but not to disable or maim. One of Jamie's eyes was swelling shut and he was breathing heavily, but otherwise he didn't appear too badly off.

I was in an agony of apprehension, lest one of the blows redamage the wounded shoulder. My strapping job was still in place, but it wouldn't hold for long against this sort of treatment. How long was this going to go on? The room was silent, except for the smacking thud of flesh on flesh and an occasional soft grunt.

"Wee Angus'll stop when blood's drawn," whispered Mrs. Fitz, apparently divining my unasked question. "Usually when the nose is broken."

"That's barbarous," I hissed fiercely. Several people around us looked at me censoriously.

The executioner apparently now decided that the punishment had gone on for the prescribed length of time. He drew back and let fly a massive blow; Jamie staggered and fell to his knees. The two guards hurried forward to pull him to his feet, and as he raised his head, I could see blood welling from his battered mouth. The crowd burst into a hum of relief, and the executioner stepped back, satisfied with the performance of his duty.

One guard held Jamie's arm, supporting him as he shook his head to clear it. The girl had disappeared. Jamie raised his head and looked directly at the towering executioner. Amazingly, he smiled again, as best he could. The bleeding lips moved.

"Thank you," he said, with some difficulty, and bowed formally to the bigger man before turning to go. The attention of the crowd shifted back to the MacKenzie and the next case before him.

I saw Jamie leave the hall by the door in the opposite wall. Having more interest in him now than in the proceedings, I took my leave of Mrs. FitzGibbons with a quick word and pushed my way across the hall to follow him.

I found him in a small side courtyard, leaning against a wellhead and dabbing at his mouth with his shirttail.

"Here, use this," I said, offering him a kerchief from my pocket.

"Unh." He accepted it with a noise that I took for thanks. A pale, watery sun had come out by now, and I looked the young man over carefully by its light. A split lip and badly swollen eye seemed to be the chief injuries, though there were marks along the jaw and neck that would be black bruises soon.

"Is your mouth cut inside too?"

"Unh-huh." He bent down and I pulled down his lower jaw, gently turning down the lip to examine the inside. There was a deep gash in the glistening cheek lining, and a couple of small punctures in the pinkness of the inner lip. Blood mixed with saliva welled up and overflowed.

"Water," he said with some difficulty, blotting the bloody trickle that ran down his chin.

"Right." Luckily there was a bucket and horn cup on the rim of the well. He rinsed his mouth and spat several times, then splashed water over the rest of his face.

"What did you do that for?" I asked curiously.

"What?" he said, straightening up and wiping his face on his sleeve. He felt the split lip gingerly, wincing slightly.

"Offer to take that girl's punishment for her. Do you know her?" I felt a certain diffidence about asking, but I really wanted to know what lay behind that quixotic gesture.

"I ken who she is. Havena spoken to her, though."

"Then why did you do it?"

He shrugged, a movement that also made him wince.

"It would have shamed the lass, to be beaten in Hall. Easier for me."

"Easier?" I echoed incredulously, looking at his smashed face. He was probing his bruised ribs experimentally with his free hand, but looked up and gave me a one-sided grin.

"Aye. She's verra young. She would ha' been shamed before everyone as knows her, and it would take a long time to get over it. I'm sore, but no really damaged; I'll get over it in a day or two."

"But why you?" I asked. He looked as though he thought this an odd question.

"Why not me?" he said.

Why *not*? I wanted to say. Because you didn't know her, she was nothing to you. Because you were already hurt. Because it takes something rather special in the way of guts to stand up in front of a crowd and let someone hit you in the face, no matter what your motive.

"Well, a musket ball through the trapezius might be considered a good reason," I said dryly.

He looked amused, fingering the area in question.

"Trapezius, is it? I didna know that."

"Och, here ye are, lad! I see ye've found your healer already; perhaps I won't be needed." Mrs. FitzGibbons waddled through the narrow entrance to the courtyard, squeezing a bit. She held a tray with a few jars, a large bowl, and a clean linen towel.

"I haven't done anything but fetch some water," I said. "I think he's not badly hurt, but I'm not sure what we can do besides wash his face for him."

"Och, now, there's always somethin', always somethin' that can be done," she said comfortably. "That eye, now, lad, let's have a look at that." Jamie sat obligingly on the edge of the well, turning his face toward her. Pudgy fingers pressed gently on the purple swelling, leaving white depressions that faded quickly.

"Still bleedin' under the skin. Leeches will help, then." She lifted the cover from the bowl, revealing several small dark sluglike objects, an inch or two long, covered with a disagreeable-looking liquid. Scooping out two of them, she pressed one to the flesh just under the brow bone and the other just below the eye.

"See," she explained to me, "once a bruise is set, like, leeches do ye no good. But where ye ha' a swellin' like this, as is still comin' up, that means the blood is flowin' under the skin, and leeches can pull it out."

I watched, fascinated and disgusted. "Doesn't that hurt?" I asked Jamie. He shook his head, making the leeches bounce obscenely.

"No. Feels a bit cold, is all." Mrs. Fitz was busy with her jars and bottles.

"Too many folk misuses leeches," she instructed me. "They're verra helpful sometimes, but ye must understand how. When ye use 'em on an old bruise, they just take healthy blood, and it does the bruise no good. Also ye must be careful not to use too many at a time; they'll weaken someone as is verra ill or has lost blood already."

I listened respectfully, absorbing all this information, though I sincerely hoped I would never be asked to make use of it.

"Now, lad, rinse your mouth wi' this; 'twill cleanse the cuts and ease the pain. Willow-bark tea," she explained in an aside to me, "wi' a bit of ground orrisroot." I nodded; I recalled vaguely from a long-ago botany lecture hearing that willow bark in fact contained salicylic acid, the active ingredient in aspirin.

"Won't the willow bark increase the chance of bleeding?" I asked. Mrs. Fitz nodded approvingly.

"Aye. It do sometimes. That's why ye follow it wi' a good handful of St. John's wort soaked in vinegar; that stops bleedin', if it's gathered under a full moon and ground up well." Jamie obediently swilled his mouth with the astringent solution, eyes watering at the sting of the aromatic vinegar.

The leeches were fully engorged by now, swollen to four times their original size. The dark wrinkled skins were now stretched and shiny; they looked like rounded, polished stones. One leech dropped suddenly off, bouncing to the ground at my feet. Mrs. Fitz scooped it up deftly, bending easily despite her bulk, and dropped it back in the bowl. Grasping the other leech delicately just behind the jaws, she pulled gently, making the head stretch.

"Ye don't want to pull too hard, lass," she said. "Sometimes they burst." I shuddered involuntarily at the idea. "But if they're nearly full, sometimes they'll come off easy. If they don't, just leave 'em be and they'll fall off by themselves." The leech did, in fact, let go easily, leaving a trickle of blood where it had been attached. I blotted the tiny wound with the corner of a towel dipped in the vinegar solution. To my surprise, the leeches had worked; the swelling was substantially reduced, and the eye was at least partially open, though the lid was still puffy. Mrs. Fitz examined it critically and decided against the use of another leech.

"Ye'll be a sight tomorrow, lad, and no mistake," she said, shaking her head, "but at least ye'll be able to see oot o' that eye. What ye want now is a wee bit o' raw meat on it, and a drop o' broth wi' ale in it, for strengthenin' purposes. Come along to the kitchen in a bit, and I'll find some for ye." She scooped up her tray, pausing for a moment.

"What ye did was kindly meant, lad. Laoghaire is my granddaughter, ye ken; I'll thank ye for her. Though she had better thank ye herself, if she's any manners at all." She patted Jamie's cheek, and padded heavily off.

I examined him carefully; the archaic medical treatment had been surprisingly effective. The eye was still somewhat swollen, but only slightly discolored, and the cut through the lip was now a clean, bloodless line, only slightly darker than the surrounding tissue.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Fine." I must have looked askance at this, because he smiled, still careful of his mouth. "It's only bruises, ye know. I'll have to thank ye again, it seems; this makes three times in three days you've doctored me. Ye'll be thinking I'm fair clumsy."

I touched a purple mark on his jaw. "Not clumsy. A little reckless, perhaps." A flutter of movement at the courtyard entrance caught my eye; a flash of yellow and blue. The girl named Laoghaire hung back shyly, seeing me.

"I think someone wants to speak with you alone," I said. "I'll leave you. The bandages on your shoulder can come off tomorrow, though. I'll find you then."

"Aye. Thank ye again." He squeezed my hand lightly in farewell. I went out, looking curiously at the girl as I passed. She was even prettier close up, with soft blue eyes and rose-petal skin. She glowed as she looked at Jamie. I left the courtyard, wondering whether in fact his gallant gesture had been quite so altruistic as I supposed.

* * *

Next morning, roused at daylight by the twittering of birds outside and people inside, I dressed and found my way through the drafty corridors to the hall. Restored to its normal identity as a refectory, enormous cauldrons of porridge were being dispensed, together with bannocks baked on the hearth and spread with molasses. The smell of steaming food was almost strong enough to lean against. I felt still off-balance and confused, but a hot breakfast heartened me enough to explore a bit.

Finding Mrs. FitzGibbons up to her dimpled elbows in floured dough, I announced that I wanted to find Jamie, in order to remove his bandages and inspect the healing of the gunshot wound. She summoned one of her tiny minions with the wave of a massive white-smeared hand.

"Young Alec, do ye run and find Jamie, the new horse-breaker. Tell 'im to come back wi' ye to ha' his shoulder seen to. We shall, be in the herb garden." A sharp fingersnap sent the lad scampering out to locate my patient.

Turning the kneading over to a maid, Mrs. Fitz rinsed her hands and turned to me.

"It will take a while yet before they're back. Would ye care for a look at the herb gardens? It would seem ye've some knowledge of plants, and if you've a mind to, ye might lend a hand there in your spare moments."

The herb garden, valuable repository of healing and flavors that it was, was cradled in an inner courtyard, large enough to allow for sun, but sheltered from spring winds, with its own wellhead. Rosemary bushes bordered the garden to the west, chamomile to the south, and a row of amaranth marked the north border, with the castle wall itself forming the eastern edge, an additional shelter from the prevailing winds. I correctly identified the green spikes of late crocus and soft-leaved French sorrel springing out of the rich dark earth. Mrs. Fitz pointed out foxglove, purslane, and betony, along with a few I did not recognize.

Late spring was planting time. The basket on Mrs. Fitz's arm carried a profusion of garlic cloves, the source of the summer's crop. The plump dame handed me the basket, along with a digging stick for planting. Apparently I had lazed about the castle long enough; until Colum found some use for me, Mrs. Fitz could always find work for an idle hand.

"Here, m'dear. Do ye set 'em here along the south side, between the thyme and foxglove." She showed me how to divide the heads into individual buds without disturbing the tough casing, then how to plant them. It was simple enough, just poke each clove into the ground, blunt end down, buried about an inch and a half below the surface. She got up, dusting her voluminous skirts.

"Keep back a few heads," she advised me. "Divide 'em and plant the buds single, one here and one there, all round the garden. Garlic keeps the wee bugs awa' from the other plants. Onions and yarrow will do the same. And pinch the dead marigold heads, but keep them, they're useful."

Numerous marigolds were scattered throughout the garden, bursting into golden flower. Just then the small lad she had sent in search of Jamie came up, out of breath from the run. He reported that the patient refused to leave his work.

"He says," panted the boy, "as 'e doesna hurt bad enough to need doctorin', but thank ye for yer consairn." Mrs. Fitz shrugged at this not altogether reassuring message.

"Weel, if he won't come, he won't. Ye might go out to the paddock near noontide, though, lass, if ye've a mind to. He may not stop to be doctored, but he'll stop for food, if I ken young men. Young Alec here will come back for ye at noontide and guide ye to the paddock." Leaving me to plant the rest of the garlic, Mrs. Fitz sailed away like a galleon, young Alec bobbing in her wake.

I worked contentedly through the morning, planting garlic, pinching back dead flower heads, digging out weeds and carrying on the gardener's never-ending battle against snails, slugs, and similar pests. Here, though, the battle was waged bare-handed, with no assistance from chemical antipest compounds. I was so absorbed in my work that I didn't notice the reappearance of young Alec until he coughed politely to attract my attention. Not one to waste words, he waited barely long enough for me to rise and dust my skirt before vanishing through the courtyard gate.

The paddock to which he led me was some way from the stables, in a grassy meadow. Three young horses frolicked gaily in the meadow nearby. Another, a clean-looking young bay mare, was tethered to the paddock fence, with a light blanket thrown across her back.

Jamie was sidling cautiously up along one side of the mare, who was watching his approach with considerable suspicion. He placed his one free arm lightly on her back, talking softly, ready to pull back if the mare objected. She rolled her eyes and snorted, but didn't move. Moving slowly, he leaned across the blanket, still muttering to the mare, and very gradually rested his weight on her back. She reared slightly and shuffled, but he persisted, raising his voice just a trifle.

Just then the mare turned her head and saw me and the boy approaching. Scenting some threat, she reared, whinnying, and swung to face us, crushing Jamie against the paddock fence. Snorting and bucking, she leapt and kicked against the restraining tether. Jamie rolled under the fence, out of the way of the flailing hooves. He rose painfully to his feet, swearing in Gaelic, and turned to see what had caused this setback to his work.

When he saw who it was, his thunderous expression changed at once to one of courteous welcome, though I gathered our appearance was still not as opportune as might have been wished. The basket of lunch, thoughtfully provided by Mrs. Fitz, who did in fact know young men, did a good deal to restore his temper.

"Ahh, settle then, ye blasted beastie," he remarked to the mare, still snorting and dancing on her tether. Dismissing young Alec with a friendly cuff, he retrieved the mare's fallen blanket, and shaking off the dust of the paddock, he gallantly spread it for me to sit on.

I tactfully avoided any reference to the recent contretemps with the mare, instead pouring ale and offering chunks of bread and cheese.

He ate with a single-minded concentration that reminded me of his absence from the dining hall the two nights before.

"Slept through it," he said, when I asked him where he had been. "I went to sleep directly I left ye at the castle, and didna wake 'til dawn yesterday. I worked a bit yesterday after Hall, then sat down on a bale of hay to rest a bit before dinner." He laughed. "Woke up this morning still sitting there, wi' a horse nibbling at my ear."

I thought the rest had done him good; the bruises from yesterday's beating were dark, but the skin around them had a good healthy color, and certainly he had a good appetite.

I watched him polish off the last of the meal, tidily dabbing stray crumbs from his shirt with a moistened fingertip and popping them into his mouth.

“You’ve a healthy appetite,” I said, laughing. “I think you’d eat grass if there was nothing else.”

“I have,” he said in all seriousness. “It doesna taste bad, but it’s no verra filling.”

I was startled, then thought he must be teasing me. “When?” I asked.

“Winter, year before last. I was livin’ rough—ye know, in the woods—with the … with a group of lads, raidin’ over the Border. We’d had poor luck for a week and more, and no food amongst us left to speak of. We’d get a bit of parritch now and then from a crofter’s cottage, but those folk are so poor themselves there’s seldom anything to spare. They’ll always find something to give a stranger, mind, but twenty strangers is a bit much, even for a Highlander’s hospitality.”

He grinned suddenly. “Have ye heard—well, no, ye wouldna. I was goin’ to say had ye heard the grace they say in the crofts.”

“No. How does it go?”

He shook his hair out of his eyes and recited,

“Hurley, hurley, round the table,
Eat as muckle as ye’re able.
Eat muckle, pooch nane,
Hurley, hurley, Amen.”

“Pooch nane?” I said, diverted. He patted the sporran on his belt.

“Put it in your belly, not your bag,” he explained.

He reached out for one of the long-bladed grasses and pulled it smoothly from its sheath. He rolled it slowly between his palms, making the floppy grainheads fly out from the stem.

“It was a late winter then, and mild, which was lucky, or we’d not have lasted. We could usually snare a few rabbits—ate them raw, sometimes, if we couldna risk a fire—and once in a while some venison, but there'd been no game for days, this time I'm talkin' of."

Square white teeth crunched down on the grass stem. I plucked a stem myself and nibbled the end. It was sweet and faintly acid, but there was only an inch or so of stem tender enough to eat; hardly much nourishment there.

Tossing the half-eaten stalk away, Jamie plucked another, and went on with his story.

"There was a light snow a few days before; just a crust under the trees, and mud everywhere else. I was looking for *fungas,* ye know, the big orange things that grow on the trees low down, sometimes—and put my foot through a rind of snow into a patch of grass, growing in an open spot between the trees; reckon a little sun got in there sometimes. Usually the deer find those patches. They paw away the snow and eat the grass down to the roots. They hadn't found this one yet, and I thought if they managed the winter that way, why not me? I was hungry enough I'd ha' boiled my boots and eaten them, did I not need them to walk in, so I ate the grass, down to the roots, like the deer do."

"How long had you been without food?" I asked, fascinated and appalled.

"Three days wi' nothing; a week with naught more than drammach—a handful of oats and a little milk. Aye," he said, reminiscently viewing the grass stalk in his hand, "winter grass is tough, and it's sour—not like this—but I didna pay it much mind." He grinned at me suddenly.

"I didna pay much mind to the thought that a deer's got four stomachs, either, while I had but one. Gave me terrible cramps, and I had wind for days. One of the older men told me later that if you're going to eat grass, ye boil it first, but I didna know that at the time. Wouldn't ha' mattered; I was too hungry to wait." He scrambled to his feet, leaning down to give me a hand up.

"Best get back to work. Thank ye for the food, lass." He handed me the basket, and headed for the horse-sheds, sun glinting on his hair as though on a trove of gold and copper coins.

I made my way slowly back to the castle, thinking about men who lived in cold mud and ate grass. It didn't occur to me until I had reached the courtyard that I had forgotten all about his shoulder.

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7

DAVIE BEATON'S CLOSET

To my surprise, one of Colum's kilted men-at-arms was waiting for me near the gate when I returned to the castle. Himself would be obliged, I was told, if I would wait upon him in his chambers.

The long casements were open in the laird's private sanctum, and the wind swept through the branches of the captive trees with a rush and a murmur that gave the illusion of being outdoors.

The laird himself was writing at his desk when I entered, but stopped at once and rose to greet me. After a few words of inquiry as to my health and well-being, he led me over to the cages against the wall, where we admired the tiny inhabitants as they chirped and hopped through the foliage, excited by the wind.

"Dougal and Mrs. Fitz both say as you've quite some skill as a healer," Colum remarked conversationally, extending a finger through the mesh of the cage. Well accustomed to this, apparently, a small grey bunting swooped down and made a neat landing, tiny claws gripping the finger and wings slightly spread to keep its balance. He stroked its head gently with the callused forefinger of the other hand. I saw the thickened skin around the nail and wondered at it; it hardly seemed likely that he did much manual labor.

I shrugged. "It doesn't take that much skill to dress a superficial wound."

He smiled. "Maybe not, but it takes a bit of skill to do it in the pitch-black dark by the side of a road, eh? And Mrs. Fitz says you've mended one of her wee lads' fingers as was broken, and bound up a kitchen-maid's scalded arm this morning as well."

"That's nothing very difficult, either," I replied, wondering what he was getting at. He gestured to one of the attendants, who quickly fetched a small bowl from one of the drawers of the secretary. Removing the lid, Colum began scattering seed from it through the mesh of the cage. The tiny birds popped down from the branches like so many cricket balls bouncing on a pitch, and the bunting flew down to join its fellows on the ground.

"No connections to clan Beaton, have ye?" he asked. I remembered Mrs. FitzGibbons asking at our first meeting, *Are ye a charmer, then? A Beaton?*

"None. What have the clan Beaton to do with medical treatment?"

Colum eyed me in surprise. "You've not heard of them? The healers of clan Beaton are famous through the Highlands. Traveling healers, many of them. We had one here for a time, in fact."

"Had one? What happened to him?" I asked.

"He died," Colum responded matter-of-factly. "Caught a fever and it carried him off within a week. We've not had a healer since, save Mrs. Fitz."

"She seems very competent," I said, thinking of her efficient treatment of the young man Jamie's injuries. Thinking of that made me think of what had caused them, and I felt a wave of resentment toward Colum. Resentment, and caution as well. This man, I reminded myself, was law, jury, and judge to the people in his domain—and clearly accustomed to having things his own way.

He nodded, still intent on the birds. He scattered the rest of the seed, favoring a late-coming grey-blue warbler with the last handful.

"Oh, aye. She's quite a hand with such matters, but she's more than enough to take care of already, running the whole castle and everyone in it—including me," he said, with a sudden charming grin.

"I was wondering," he said, taking swift advantage of my answering smile, "seeing as how you've not a great deal to occupy your time at present, you might think of having a look at the things

Davie Beaton left behind him. You might know the uses of a few of his medicines and such.”

“Well … I suppose so. Why not?” In fact, I was becoming slightly bored with the round between garden, stillroom, and kitchen. I was curious to see what the late Mr. Beaton had considered useful in the way of paraphernalia.

“Angus or I could show the lady down, sir,” the attendant suggested respectfully.

“Don’t trouble yourself, John,” Colum said, gesturing the man politely away. “I’ll show Mistress Beauchamp myself.”

His progress down the stair was slow and obviously painful. Just as obviously, he didn’t wish for help, and I offered none.

The surgery of the late Beaton proved to be in a remote corner of the castle, tucked out of sight behind the kitchens. It was in close proximity to nothing save the graveyard, in which its late proprietor now rested. In the outer wall of the castle, the narrow, dark room boasted only one of the tiny slit windows, set high in the wall so that a flat plane of sunlight knifed through the air, separating the darkness of the high vaulted ceiling from the deeper gloom of the floor below.

Peering past Colum into the dim recesses of the room, I made out a tall cabinet, equipped with dozens of tiny drawers, each with a label in curlicue script. Jars, boxes, and vials of all shapes and sizes were neatly stacked on the shelves above a counter where the late Beaton evidently had been in the habit of mixing medicines, judging from the residue of stains and a crusted mortar that rested there.

Colum went ahead of me into the room. Shimmering motes disturbed by his entry swirled upward into the bar of sunlight like dust raised from the breaking of a tomb. He stood for a moment, letting his eyes grow used to the dimness, then walked forward slowly, looking from side to side. I thought perhaps it was the first time he had ever been in this room.

Watching his halting progress, as he traversed the narrow room, I said, “You know, massage can help a bit. With the pain, I mean.” I caught a flash from the grey eyes, and wished for a moment that I hadn't spoken, but the spark disappeared almost at once, replaced by his usual expression of courteous attention.

"It needs to be done forcefully," I said, "at the base of the spine, especially."

"I know," he said. "Angus Mhor does it for me, at night." He paused, fingering one of the vials. "It would seem you do know a bit about healing, then."

"A bit." I was cautious, hoping he didn't mean to test me by asking what the assorted medicaments were used for. The label on the vial he was holding said PURLES OVIS. Anyone's guess what *that* was. Luckily, he put the vial back, and drew a finger gingerly through the dust on a large chest near the wall.

"Been some time since anyone's been here," he said. "I'll have Mrs. Fitz send some of her wee lassies along to clean up a bit, shall I?"

I opened a cupboard door and coughed at the resulting cloud of dust. "Perhaps you'd better," I agreed. There was a book on the lower shelf of the cupboard, a fat volume bound in blue leather. Lifting it, I discovered a smaller book beneath, this one bound cheaply in black cloth, much worn along the edges.

This second book proved to be Beaton's daily log book, in which he had tidily recorded the names of his patients, details of their ailments, and the course of treatment prescribed. A methodical man, I thought with approval. One entry read: "2nd February, A.D. 1741. Sarah Graham MacKenzie, injury to thumb by reason of catching the appendage on edge of spinning reel. Application of boiled pennyroyal, followed by poultice of: one part each yarrow, St. John's-wort, ground slaters, and mouse-ear, mixed in a base of fine clay." Slaters? Mouse-ear? Some of the herbs on the shelves, no doubt.

"Did Sarah MacKenzie's thumb heal well?" I asked Colum, shutting the book.

"Sarah? Ah," he said thoughtfully. "No, I believe not."

"Really? I wonder what happened," I said. "Perhaps I could take a look at it later."

He shook his head, and I thought I caught a glimpse of grim amusement showing in the lines of his full, curved lips.

“Why not?” I asked. “Has she left the castle, then?”

“Ye might say so,” he answered. The amusement was now apparent. “She’s dead.”

I stared at him as he picked his way across the dusty stone floor toward the doorway.

“It’s to be hoped you’ll do somewhat better as a healer than the late Davie Beaton, Mrs. Beauchamp,” he said. He turned and paused at the door, regarding me sardonically. The sunbeam held him as though in a spotlight.

“Ye could hardly do worse,” he said, and vanished into the dark.

I wandered up and down the narrow little room, looking at everything. Likely most of it was rubbish, but there might be a few useful things to be salvaged. I pulled out one of the tiny drawers in the apothecary’s chest, letting loose a gust of camphor. Well, *that* was useful, right enough. I pushed the drawer in again, and rubbed my dusty fingers on my skirt. Perhaps I should wait until Mrs. Fitz’s merry maids had had a chance to clean the place before I continued my investigations.

I peered out into the corridor. Deserted. No noises, either. But I was not naive enough to assume that no one was nearby. Whether by order or by tact, they were fairly subtle about it, but I knew that I was being watched. When I went to the garden, someone went with me. When I climbed the stair to my room, I would see someone casually glance up from the foot to see which way I turned. And as we had ridden in, I hadn’t failed to note the armed guards sheltering under the overhang from the rain. No, I definitely wasn’t going to be allowed simply to walk out of here, let alone be provided with transport and means to leave.

I sighed. At least I was alone for the moment. And solitude was something I very much wanted, at least for a little.

I had tried repeatedly to think about everything that had happened to me since I stepped through the standing stone. But things moved so rapidly around this place that I had hardly had a moment to myself when I wasn't asleep.

Apparently I had one now, though. I pulled the dusty chest away from the wall and sat down, leaning back against the stones. They were very solid. I reached back and rested my palms against them, thinking about the stone circle, trying to recall every tiny detail of what had happened.

The screaming stones were the last thing I could truly say I remembered. And even that I had doubts about. The screaming had kept up, all the time. It was possible, I thought, that the noise came not from the stones themselves, but from … whatever … I had stepped into. Were the stones a door of some kind? And into what did they open? There simply were no words for whatever it was. A crack through time, I supposed, because clearly I had been *then,* and I was *now,* and the stones were the only connection.

And the sounds. They had been overwhelming, but looking back from a short distance, I thought they were very similar to the sounds of battle. The field hospital at which I was stationed had been shelled three times. Even knowing that the flimsy walls of our temporary structures would not protect us, still doctors, nurses and orderlies had all dashed inside at the first alarm, huddling together for courage. Courage is in very short supply when there are mortar shells screaming overhead and bombs going off next door. And the kind of terror I had felt then was the closest thing to what I had felt in the stone.

I now realized that I did recall some things about the actual trip through the stone. Very minor things. I remembered a sensation of physical struggle, as though I were caught in a current of some kind. Yes, I had deliberately fought against it, whatever it was. There were images in the current, too, I thought. Not pictures, exactly, more like incomplete thoughts. Some were terrifying and I had fought away from them as I … well, as I "passed." Had I fought toward others? I had some consciousness of fighting toward a surface of some kind. Had I actually *chosen* to come to this particular time because it offered some sort of haven from that whirling maelstrom?

I shook my head. I could find no answers by thinking about it. Nothing was clear, except the fact that I would have go back to the standing stones.

"Mistress?" A soft Scottish voice from the doorway made me look up. Two girls, perhaps sixteen or seventeen, hung back shyly in the corridor. They were roughly dressed, with clogs on their feet and homespun scarves covering their hair. The one who had spoken carried a brush and several folded cloths, while her companion held a steaming pail. Mrs. Fitz's lasses, here to clean the surgery.

"We'll no be disturbin' ye, mistress?" one asked anxiously.

"No, no," I assured them. "I was about to leave anyway."

"You've missed the noon meal," the other informed me. "But Mrs. Fitz said to tell ye as there's food for ye in the kitchens whenever ye like to go there."

I glanced out the window at the end of the corridor. The sun was, in fact, a little past the zenith, and I became conscious of increasing hunger pangs. I smiled at the girls.

"I might just do that. Thank you."

* * *

I brought lunch to the fields again, fearing that Jamie might get nothing to eat until dinner otherwise. Seated on the grass, watching him eat, I asked him why he had been living in the rough, raiding cattle and thieving over the Border. I had seen enough by now both of the folk that came and went from the nearby village and of the castle dwellers, to be able to tell that Jamie was both higher born and much better educated than most. It seemed likely that he came from a fairly wealthy family, judging from the brief description he had given me of their farm estate. Why was he so far from home?

"I'm an outlaw," he said, as though surprised that I didn't know. "The English have a price of ten pounds sterling on my head. Not quite so much as a highwayman," he said, deprecatingly, "but a bit more than a pickpocket."

"Just for obstruction?" I said, unbelievingly. Ten pounds sterling here was half the yearly income of a small farm; I couldn't imagine a single escaped prisoner was worth that much to the English government.

"Och, no. Murder." I choked on a mouthful of bread-and-pickle. Jamie pounded me helpfully on the back until I could speak again.

Eyes watering, I asked, "Wh-who did you k-kill?"

He shrugged. "Well, it's a bit odd. I didna actually kill the man whose murder I'm outlawed for. Mind ye, I've done for a few other redcoats along the way, so I suppose it's not unjust."

He paused and shifted his shoulders, as though rubbing against some invisible wall. I had noticed him do it before, on my first morning in the castle, when I had doctored him and seen the marks on his back.

"It was at Fort William. I could hardly move for a day or two, after I'd been flogged the second time, and then I had fever from the wounds. Once I could stand again, though, some … friends made shift to get me out of the camp, by means I'd best not go into. Anyhow, there was some ruckus as we left, and an English sergeant-major was shot—by coincidence, it was the man that gave me the first flogging. I'd not ha' shot him, though; I had nothing personal against him, and I was too weak to do more than hang onto the horse, in any case." The wide mouth tightened and thinned. "Though had it been Captain Randall, I expect I'd ha' made the effort." He eased his shoulders again, stretching the rough linen shirt taut across his back, and shrugged.

"There it is, though. That's one reason I do not go far from the castle alone. This far into the Highlands, there's little chance of running into an English patrol, but they do come over the Border quite often. And then there's the Watch, though they'll not come near the castle, either. Colum's not much need of their services, having his own men to hand." He smiled, running a hand through his bright cropped hair 'til it stood on end like porcupine quills.

"I'm no precisely inconspicuous, ye ken. I doubt there's informers in the castle itself, but there might be a few here and there about the countryside as would be glad enough to earn a few pence by letting the English know where I was, did they know I was a wanted man." He smiled at me. "Ye'll have gathered the name's not MacTavish?"

"Does the laird know?"

"That I'm an outlaw? Oh, aye, Colum knows. Most people through this part of the Highlands likely know that; what happened at Fort William caused quite a bit of stir at the time, and news travels fast here. What they won't know is that Jamie MacTavish is the man that's wanted; provided nobody that knows me by my own name sees me." His hair was still sticking up absurdly. I had a sudden impulse to smooth it for him, but resisted.

"Why do you wear your hair cropped?" I asked suddenly, then blushed. "I'm sorry, it's none of my business. I only wondered, since most of the other men I've seen here wear it long…."

He flattened the spiky licks, looking a bit self-conscious.

"I used to wear mine long as well. It's short now because the monks had to shave the back of my head and it's had but a few months to grow again." He bent forward at the waist, inviting me to inspect the back of his head.

"See there, across the back?" I could certainly feel it, and see it as well when I spread the thick hair aside; a six-inch weal of freshly healed scar tissue, still pink and slightly raised. I pressed gently along its length. Cleanly healed, and a nice neat job by whoever had stitched it; a wound like that must have gaped and bled considerably.

"Do you have headaches?" I asked professionally. He sat up, smoothing the hair down over the wound. He nodded.

"Sometimes, though none so bad as it was. I was blind for a month or so after it happened, and my head ached like fury all the time. The headache started to go away when my sight came back." He blinked several times, as though testing his vision.

"Fades a bit sometimes," he explained, "if I'm verra tired. Things get blurry round the edges."

"It's a wonder it didn't kill you," I said. "You must have a good thick skull on you."

"That I have. Solid bone, according to my sister." We both laughed.

"How did it happen?" I asked. He frowned, and a look of uncertainty came over his face.

“Weel, there’s just the question,” he answered slowly. “I dinna remember anything about it. I was down near Carryarick Pass with a few lads from Loch Laggan. Last I knew, I was pushing my way uphill through a wee thicket; I remember pricking my hand on a hollybush and thinking the blood drops looked just like the berries. And the next thing I remember is waking in France, in the Abbey of Sainte Anne de Beaupré, with my head throbbing like a drum and someone I couldn’t see giving me something cool to drink.”

He rubbed the back of his head as though it ached yet.

“Sometimes I think I remember little bits of things—a lamp over my head, swinging back and forth, a sort of sweet oily taste on my lips, people saying things to me—but I do not know if any of it’s real. I know the monks gave me opium, and I dreamed nearly all the time.” He pressed his fingers flat over closed eyelids.

“There was one dream I had over and over. Tree roots growing inside my head, big gnarled things, growing and swelling, pushing out through my eyes, thrusting down my throat to choke me. It went on and on, with the roots twisting and curling and getting bigger all the time. Finally they’d get big enough to burst my skull and I’d wake hearing the sound of the bones popping apart.” He grimaced. “Sort of a juicy, cracking noise, like gunshots under water.”

“Ugh!”

A shadow fell suddenly over us and a stout boot shot out and nudged Jamie in the ribs.

“Idle young bastard,” the newcomer said without heat, “stuffin’ yerself while the horses run wild. And when’s that filly goin’ to be broke, hey, lad?”

“None the sooner for my starving myself, Alec,” Jamie replied. “Meanwhile, have a bit; there’s plenty.” He reached a chunk of cheese up to a hand knotted with arthritis. The fingers, permanently curled in a half-grip, slowly closed on the cheese as their owner sank down on the grass.

With unexpectedly courtly manners, Jamie introduced the visitor; Alec McMahon MacKenzie, Master of Horse of Castle Leoch.

A squat figure in leather breeks and rough shirt, the Master of Horse had an air of authority sufficient, I thought, to quell the most recalcitrant stallion. An "eye like Mars, to threaten or command," the quotation sprang at once to mind. A single eye it was, the other being covered with a black cloth patch. As if to make up for the loss, his eyebrows sprouted profusely from a central point, sporting long grey hairs like insects' antennae that waved threateningly from the basic brown tufts.

After an initial nod of acknowledgment, Old Alec (for so Jamie referred to him, no doubt to distinguish him from the Young Alec who had been my guide) ignored me, dividing his attention instead between the food and the three young horses switching their tails in the meadow below. I rather lost interest during a long discussion involving the parentage of several no doubt distinguished horses not among those present, details of breeding records of the entire stable for several years, and a number of incomprehensible points of equine conformation, dealing with hocks, withers, shoulders, and other items of anatomy. Since the only points I noticed on a horse were nose, tail, and ears, the subtleties were lost on me.

I leaned back on my elbows and basked in the warming spring sun. There was a curious peace in this day, a sense of things working quietly in their proper courses, nothing minding the upsets and turmoils of human concerns. Perhaps it was the peace that one always finds outdoors, far enough away from buildings and clatter. Maybe it was the result of gardening, that quiet sense of pleasure in touching growing things, the satisfaction of helping them thrive. Perhaps just the relief of finally having found work to do, rather than rattling around the castle feeling out of place, conspicuous as an inkblot on parchment.

In spite of the fact that I took no part in the horsey conversation, I didn't feel out of place here at all. Old Alec acted as though I were merely a part of the landscape, and while Jamie cast an occasional glance my way, he, too, gradually ignored me as their conversation segued into the sliding rhythms of Gaelic, sure sign of a Scot's emotional involvement in his subject matter. Since I gathered no sense from the talk, it was as soothing as listening to bees humming in the heather blossoms. Oddly contented and drowsy, I pushed away all thoughts of Colum's suspicions, my own predicament, and other disturbing ideas. "Sufficient unto the day," I thought sleepily, picking up the biblical quotation from some recess of memory.

It may have been the chill from a passing cloud, or the changed tone of the men's conversation that woke me sometime later. The talk had switched back to English, and the tone was serious, no longer the meandering chat of the horse-obsessed.

"It's no but a week 'til the Gathering, laddie," Alec was saying. "Have ye made up your mind what you'll do then?"

There was a long sigh from Jamie. "No, Alec, that I havena. Sometimes I think one way, sometimes the other. Granted that it's good here, working wi' the beasts and with you." There was a smile somewhere in the young man's voice, which disappeared as he went on. "And Colum's promised me to … well, you'll not know about that. But kiss the iron and change my name to MacKenzie, and forswear all I'm born to? Nay, I canna make up my mind to it."

"Stubborn as your Da, ye are," remarked Alec, though the words held a tone of grudging approval. "You've the look of him about ye sometimes, for all you're tall and fair as your mother's folk."

"Knew him, did ye?" Jamie sounded interested.

"Oh, a bit. And heard more. I've been here at Leoch since before your parents wed, ye ken. And to hear Dougal and Colum speak of Black Brian, ye'd think he was the de'il himself, if not worse. And your ma the Virgin Mary, swept awa' to the Bad Place by him."

Jamie laughed. "And I'm like him, am I?"

"Ye are and all that, laddie. Aye, I see why it'd stick in your craw to be Colum's man, weel enough. But there's considerations the other way, no? If it comes to fighting for the Stuarts, say, and Dougal has his way. Come out on the right side in *that* fight, laddie, and you'll ha' your land back and more besides, whatever Colum does."

Jamie replied with what I had come to think of as a "Scottish noise," that indeterminate sound made low in the throat that can be interpreted to mean almost anything. This particular noise seemed to indicate some doubt as to the likelihood of such a desirable outcome.

"Aye," he said, "and if Dougal doesna get his way, then what? Or if the fight goes against the house of Stuart?"

Alec made a guttural sound of his own. "Then you stay here, laddie. Be master of horse in my place; I'll not last so much longer, and there's no better hand I've seen wi' a horse."

Jamie's modest grunt indicated appreciation of the compliment.

The older man went on, disregarding such interruptions. "The MacKenzies are kin to ye, too; it's not a matter of forswearing your blood. And there's other considerations, too"—his voice took on a teasing note—"like Mistress Laoghaire, perhaps?"

He got another noise in response, this one indicating embarrassment and dismissal.

"Hey now, lad, a young feller doesna let himself be beaten for the sake of a lass he cares nothin' for. And ye know her father will no let her wed outside the clan."

"She was verra young, Alec, and I felt sorry for her," said Jamie defensively. "There's nothin' more to it than that." This time it was Alec who made the Scottish noise, a guttural snort full of derisory disbelief.

"Tell that one to the barn door, laddie; it's no more brains than to believe ye. Weel, even if it's no Laoghaire—and ye could do a deal worse, mark me—ye'd be a better prospect for marriage did ye ha' a bit of money and a future; as ye would if ye're next Master. Ye could take yer choice of the lasses—if one doesna choose *you* first!" Alec snorted with the half-choked mirth of a man who seldom laughs. "Flies round a honeypot would be nothin' to it, lad! Penniless and nameless as ye are now, the lasses still sigh after ye—I've seen 'em!" More snorting. "Even this Sassenach wench can no keep away from ye, and her a new widow!"

Wishing to prevent what promised to be a series of increasingly distasteful personal remarks, I decided it was time to be officially awake. Stretching and yawning, I sat up, ostentatiously rubbing my eyes to avoid looking at either of the speakers.

“Mmmm. I seem to have fallen asleep,” I said, blinking prettily at them. Jamie, rather red around the ears, was taking an exaggerated interest in packing up the remains of the picnic. Old Alec stared down at me, apparently taking notice of me for the first time.

“Interested in horses, are ye, lass?” he demanded. I could hardly say no, under the circumstances. Agreeing that horses were most interesting, I was treated to a detailed exegesis on the filly in the paddock, now standing drowsily at rest, tail twitching for the occasional fly.

“Ye’re welcome to come and watch any time, lass,” Alec concluded, “so long as ye dinna get so close ye distract the horses. They need to work, ye ken.” This was plainly intended as a dismissal, but I stood my ground; remembering my original purpose in coming here.

“Yes, I’ll be careful next time,” I promised. “But before I go back to the castle, I wanted to check Jamie’s shoulder and take the dressings off.”

Alec nodded slowly, but to my surprise, it was Jamie who refused my attentions, turning away to go back to the paddock.

“Ah, it’ll wait awhile, lass,” he said, looking away. “There’s much to be done yet today; perhaps later, after supper, hey?” This seemed very odd; he hadn’t been in any hurry to return to work earlier. But I could hardly force him to submit to my ministrations if he didn’t want to. Shrugging, I agreed to meet him after supper, and turned uphill to go back to the castle.

As I made my way back up the hill, I considered the shape of the scar on Jamie’s head. It wasn’t a straight line, as might be made by an English broad-sword. The wound was curved, as though made by a blade with a definite bend. A blade like a Lochaber ax? But so far as I knew, the murderous axes had been—no, were, I corrected myself—carried only by clansmen.

It was only as I walked away that it occurred to me. For a young man on the run, with unknown enemies, Jamie had been remarkably confiding to a stranger.

Leaving the picnic basket in the kitchens, I returned to the late Beaton's surgery, now dustless and pristine after a visitation by Mrs. Fitz's energetic assistants. Even the dozens of glass vials in the cupboard gleamed in the dim light from the window.

The cupboard seemed a good place to start, with an inventory of the herbs and medicaments already on hand. I had spent a few moments the night before, before sleep overcame me, thumbing through the blue leather-bound book I had taken from the surgery. This proved to be *The Physician's Guide and Handbook,* a listing of recipes for the treatment of assorted symptoms and diseases, the ingredients for which were apparently displayed before me.

The book was divided into several sections: "Centauries, Vomitories, and Electuaries," "Troches and Lodochs," "Assorted Plasters and Their Virtus," "Decoctions and Theriacs," and a quite extensive section ominously headed with the single word "Purges."

Reading through a few of the recipes, the reason for the late Davie Beaton's lack of success with his patients became apparent. "For headache," read one entry, "take ye one ball of horse dunge, this to be carefully dried, pounded to powder, and the whole drunk, stirred into hot ale." "For convulsions in children, five leeches to be applied behind the ear." And a few pages later, "decoctions made of the roots of celandine, turmeric, and juice of 200 slaters cannot but be of great service in a case of jaundice." I closed the book, marveling at the large number of the late doctor's patients who, according to his meticulous log, had not only survived the treatment meted out to them but actually recovered from their original ailments.

There was a large brown glass jar in the front containing several suspicious-looking balls, and in view of Beaton's recipes, I had a good idea what it might be. Turning it around, I triumphantly read the hand-lettered label: DUNGE OF HORSES. Reflecting that such a substance likely didn't improve much with keeping, I gingerly set the jar aside without opening it.

Subsequent investigation proved PURLES OVIS to be a latinate version of a similar substance, this time from sheep. MOUSE-EAR also proved to be animal in nature, rather than herbal; I pushed aside the vial of tiny pinkish dried ears with a small shudder.

I had been wondering about the "slaters," spelt variously as "slatters," "sclaters," and "slatears," which seemed to be an important ingredient in a number of medicines, so I was pleased to see a clear cork-stoppered vial with this name on the label. The vial was about half-full of what appeared to be small grey pills. These were no more than a quarter-inch in diameter, and so perfectly round that I marveled at Beaton's dispensing skill. I brought the vial up close to my face, wondering at its lightness. Then I saw the fine striations across each "pill" and the microscopic legs, folded into the central crease. I hastily set the vial down, wiping my hand on my apron, and made another entry in the mental list I had been compiling. For "slaters," read "woodlice."

There were a number of more or less harmless substances in Beaton's jars, as well as several containing dried herbs or extractions that might actually be helpful. I found some of the orrisroot powder and aromatic vinegar that Mrs. Fitz had used to treat Jamie MacTavish's injuries. Also angelica, wormwood, rosemary, and something labeled STINKING ARAG. I opened this one cautiously, but it proved to be nothing more than the tender tips of fir branches, and a pleasant balsamic fragrance floated out of the unsealed bottle. I left the bottle open and set it on the table to perfume the air in the dark little room as I went on with my inventory.

I discarded jars of dried snails; OIL OF EARTHWORMS—which appeared to be exactly that; VINUM MILLEPEDATUM—millipedes, these crushed to pieces and soaked in wine; POWDER OF EYGYPTIANE MUMMIE—an indeterminate-looking dust, whose origin I thought more likely a silty streambank than a pharaoh's tomb; PIGEONS BLOOD, ant eggs, a number of dried toads painstakingly packed in moss, and HUMAN SKULL, POWDERED. Whose? I wondered.

It took most of the afternoon to finish my inspections of the cupboard and multidrawered cabinet. When I had finished, there was a great heap of discarded bottles, boxes, and flasks set outside the door of the surgery for disposal, and a much smaller collection of possibly useful items stowed back into the cupboard.

I had considered a large packet of cobwebs for some time, hesitating between the piles. Both Beaton's *Guide* and my own dim memories of folk medicine held that spider's web was efficacious in dressing wounds. While my own inclination was to consider such usage unhygienic in the extreme, my experience with linen bandages by the roadside had shown me the desirability of having something with adhesive as well as absorbent properties for dressings. At last, I set the cobwebs back in the cupboard, resolving to see whether there might be a way of sterilizing them. Not boiling, I thought. Maybe steam would cleanse them without destroying the stickiness?

I rubbed my hands against my apron, considering. I had inventoried almost everything now—except the wooden chest against the wall. I flung back the lid, and recoiled at once from the stench that gusted out.

The chest was the repository of the surgical side of Beaton's practice. Within were a number of sinister-looking saws, knives, chisels, and other tools looking more suited to building construction than to use on delicate human tissues. The stench apparently derived from the fact that Davie Beaton had seen no particular benefit to cleaning his instruments between uses. I grimaced in distaste at the sight of the dark stains on some of the blades, and slammed shut the lid.

I dragged the chest toward the door, intending to tell Mrs. Fitz that the instruments, once safely boiled, should be distributed to the castle carpenter, if there were such a personage.

A stir behind alerted me, in time to avoid crashing into the person who had just come in. I turned to see two young men, one supporting the other, who was hopping on one foot. The lame foot was bound up in an untidy bundle of rags, stained with fresh blood.

I glanced around, then gestured at the chest, for lack of anything else. "Sit down," I said. Apparently the new physician of Castle Leoch was now in practice.

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8

AN EVENING'S ENTERTAINMENT

I lay on my bed feeling altogether exhausted. Oddly enough, I had quite enjoyed the rummage through the memorabilia of the late Beaton, and treating those few patients, with however meager a resource, had made me feel truly solid and useful once more. Feeling flesh and bone beneath my fingers, taking pulses, inspecting tongues and eyeballs, all the familiar routine, had done much to settle the feeling of hollow panic that had been with me since my fall through the rock. However strange my circumstances, and however out of place I might be, it was somehow very comforting to realize that these were truly other people. Warm-fleshed and hairy, with hearts that could be felt beating and lungs that breathed audibly. Bad-smelling, louse-ridden, and filthy, some of them, but that was nothing new to me. Certainly no worse than conditions in a field hospital, and the injuries were so far reassuringly minor. It was immensely satisfying to be able once again to relieve a pain, reset a joint, repair damage. To take responsibility for the welfare of others made me feel less victimized by the whims of whatever impossible fate had brought me here, and I was grateful to Colum for suggesting it.

Colum MacKenzie. Now there was a strange man. A cultured man, courteous to a fault, and thoughtful as well, with a reserve that all but hid the steely core within. The steel was much more evident in his brother Dougal. A warrior born, that one. And yet, to see them together, it was clear which was the stronger. Colum was a chieftain, twisted legs and all.

Toulouse-Lautrec syndrome. I had never seen a case before, but I had heard it described. Named for its most famous sufferer (who did not yet exist, I reminded myself), it was a degenerative disease of bone and connective tissue. Victims often appeared normal, if sickly, until their early teens, when the long bones of the legs, under the stress of bearing a body upright, began to crumble and collapse upon themselves.

The pasty skin, with its premature wrinkling, was another outward effect of the poor circulation that characterized the disease. Likewise the dryness and pronounced callusing of fingers and toes that I had already noticed. As the legs twisted and bowed, the spine was put under stress, and often twisted as well, causing immense discomfort to the victim. I mentally read back the textbook description to myself, idly smoothing out the tangles of my hair with my fingers. Low white-cell count, increased susceptibility to infection, liable to early arthritis. Because of the poor circulation and the degeneration of connective tissue, victims were invariably sterile, and often impotent as well.

I stopped suddenly, thinking of Hamish. *My son,* Colum had said, proudly introducing the boy. Mmm, I thought to myself. Perhaps not impotent then. Or perhaps so. But rather fortunate for Letitia that so many of the MacKenzie males resembled each other to such a marked degree.

I was disturbed in these interesting ruminations by a sudden knock on the door. One of the ubiquitous small boys stood without, bearing an invitation from Colum himself. There was to be singing in the Hall, he said, and the MacKenzie would be honored by my presence, if I cared to come down.

I was curious to see Colum again, in light of my recent speculations. So, with a quick glance in the looking glass, and a futile smoothing of my hair, I shut the door behind me and followed my escort through the cold and winding corridors.

The Hall looked different at night, quite festive with pine torches crackling all along the walls, popping with an occasional blue flare of turpentine. The huge fireplace, with its multiple spits and cauldrons, had diminished its activity since the frenzy of supper;

now only the one large fire burned on the hearth, sustained by two huge, slow-burning logs, and the spits were folded back into the cavernous chimney.

The tables and benches were still there, but pushed back slightly to allow for a clear space near the hearth; apparently that was to be the center of entertainment, for Colum's large carved chair was placed to one side. Colum himself was seated in it, a warm rug laid across his legs and a small table with decanter and goblets within easy reach.

Seeing me hesitating in the archway, he beckoned me to his side with a friendly gesture, waving me onto a nearby bench.

"I'm pleased you've come down, Mistress Claire," he said, pleasantly informal. "Gwyllyn will be glad of a new ear for his songs, though we're always willing to listen." The MacKenzie chieftain looked rather tired, I thought; the wide shoulders slumped a bit and the premature lines on his face were deeply cut.

I murmured something inconsequential and looked around the hall. People were beginning to drift in, and sometimes out, standing in small groups to chat, gradually taking seats on the benches ranged against the walls.

"I beg your pardon?" I turned, having missed Colum's words in the growing noise, to find him offering me the decanter, a lovely bell-shaped thing of pale green crystal. The liquid within, seen through the glass, seemed green as the sea-depths, but once poured out it proved to be a beautiful pale-rose color, with the most delicious bouquet. The taste was fully up to the promise, and I closed my eyes in bliss, letting the wine fumes tickle the back of my palate before reluctantly allowing each sip of nectar to trickle down my throat.

"Good, isn't it?" The deep voice held a note of amusement, and I opened my eyes to find Colum smiling at me in approval.

I opened my mouth to reply, and found that the smooth delicacy of the taste was deceptive; the wine was strong enough to cause a mild paralysis of the vocal cords.

"Won—wonderful," I managed to get out.

Colum nodded. “Aye, that it is. Rhenish, ye know. You’re not familiar with it?” I shook my head as he tipped the decanter over my goblet, filling the bowl with a pool of glowing rose. He held his own goblet by the stem, turning it before his face so that the firelight lit the contents with dashes of vermilion.

“You know good wine, though,” Colum said, tilting the glass to enjoy the rich fruity scent himself. “But that’s natural, I suppose, with your family French. Or half French, I should say,” he corrected himself with a quick smile. “What part of France do your folk come from?”

I hesitated a moment, then thought, stick to the truth, so far as you can, and answered, “It’s an old connection, and not a close one, but such relatives as I may have there come from the north, near Compiègne.” I was mildly startled to realize that at this point, my relatives *were* in fact near Compiègne. Stick to the truth, indeed.

“Ah. Never been there yourself, though?”

I tilted the glass, shaking my head as I did so. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, inhaling the wine’s perfume.

“No,” I said, eyes still closed. “I haven’t met any of my relatives there, either.” I opened my eyes to find him watching me closely. “I told you that.”

He nodded, not at all perturbed. “So ye did.” His eyes were a beautiful soft grey, thickly lashed with black. A very attractive man, Colum MacKenzie, at least down to the waist. My gaze flickered past him to the group nearest the fire, where I could see his wife, Letitia, part of a group of several ladies, all engaged in animated conversation with Dougal MacKenzie. Also a most attractive man, and a whole one.

I pulled my attention back to Colum and found him gazing abstractedly at one of the wall hangings.

“And as I also told you before,” I said abruptly, bringing him out of his momentary inattention, “I’d like to be on my way to France as soon as possible.”

“So ye did,” he said again, pleasantly, and picked up the decanter with a questioning lift of the brow. I held my goblet steady, gesturing at the halfway point to indicate that I wanted only a little, but he filled the delicate hollow nearly to the rim once more.

"Well, as *I* told *you,* Mistress Beauchamp," he said, eyes fixed on the rising wine, "I think ye must be content to bide here a bit, until suitable arrangements can be made for your transport. No need for haste, after all. It's only the spring of the year, and months before the autumn storms make the Channel crossing chancy." He raised eyes and decanter together, and fixed me with a shrewd look.

"But if ye'd care to give me the names of your kin in France, I might manage to send word ahead—so they'll be fettled against your coming, eh?"

Bluff called, I had little choice but to mutter something of the yes-well-perhaps-later variety, and excuse myself hastily on the pretext of visiting the necessary facilities before the singing should start. Game and set to Colum, but not yet match.

My pretext had not been entirely fictitious, and it took me some time, wandering about the darkened halls of the Castle, to find the place I was seeking. Groping my way back, wineglass still in hand, I found the lighted archway to the Hall, but realized on entering that I had reached the lower entrance, and was now at the opposite end of the Hall from Colum. Under the circumstances, this suited me quite well, and I strolled unobtrusively into the long room, taking pains to merge with small groups of people as I worked my way along the wall toward one of the benches.

Casting a look at the upper end of the Hall, I saw a slender man who must be Gwyllyn the bard, judging from the small harp he carried. At Colum's gesture, a servant hastened up to bring the bard a stool, on which he seated himself and proceeded to tune the harp, plucking lightly at the strings, ear close to the instrument. Colum poured another glass of wine from his own decanter, and with another wave, dispatched it via the servant in the bard's direction.

"Oh, he called for his pipe, and he called for his bowl, and he called for his fiddlers threeee," I sang irreverently under my breath, eliciting an odd look from the girl Laoghaire. She was seated under a tapestry showing a hunter with six elongated and cross-eyed dogs, in erratic pursuit of a single hare.

“Bit of overkill, don’t you think?” I said breezily, waving a hand at it and plumping myself down beside her on the bench.

“Oh! er, aye,” she answered cautiously, edging away slightly. I tried to engage her in friendly conversation, but she answered mostly in monosyllables, blushing and starting when I spoke to her, and I soon gave it up, my attention drawn by the scene at the end of the room.

Harp tuned to his satisfaction, Gwyllyn had brought out from his coat three wooden flutes of varying sizes, which he laid on a small table, ready to hand.

Suddenly I noticed that Laoghaire was not sharing my interest in the bard and his instruments. She had stiffened slightly and was peering over my shoulder toward the lower archway, simultaneously leaning back into the shadows under the tapestry to avoid detection.

Following the direction of her gaze, I spotted the tall, red-haired figure of Jamie MacTavish, just entering the Hall.

“Ah! The gallant hero! Fancy him, do you?” I asked the girl at my side. She shook her head frantically, but the brilliant blush staining her cheeks was answer enough.

“Well, we’ll see what we can do, shall we?” I said, feeling expansive and magnanimous. I stood up and waved cheerily to attract his attention.

Catching my signal, the young man made his way through the crowd, smiling. I didn’t know what might have passed between them in the courtyard, but I thought his manner in greeting the girl was warm, if still formal. His bow to me was slightly more relaxed; after the forced intimacy of our relations to date, he could hardly treat me as a stranger.

A few tentative notes from the upper end of the hall signaled an imminent beginning to the entertainment, and we hastily took our places, Jamie seating himself between Laoghaire and myself.

Gwyllyn was an insignificant-looking man, light-boned and mousy-haired, but you didn’t see him once he began to sing. He only served as a focus, a place for the eyes to rest while the ears enjoyed themselves. He began with a simple song, something in

Gaelic with a strong rhyming chime to the lines, accompanied by the merest touch of his harp strings, so that each plucked string seemed by its vibration to carry the echo of the words from one line to the next. The voice was also deceptively simple. You thought at first there was nothing much to it—pleasant, but without much strength. And then you found that the sound went straight through you, and each syllable was crystal clear, whether you understood it or not, echoing poignantly inside your head.

The song was received with a warm surge of applause, and the singer launched at once into another, this time in Welsh, I thought. It sounded like a very tuneful sort of gargling to me, but those around me seemed to follow well enough; doubtless they had heard it before.

During a brief pause for retuning, I asked Jamie in a low voice, "Has Gwyllyn been at the Castle long?" Then, remembering, I said, "Oh, but you wouldn't know, would you? I'd forgotten you were so new here yourself."

"I've been here before," he answered, turning his attention to me. "Spent a year at Leoch when I was sixteen or so, and Gwyllyn was here then. Colum's fond of his music, ye see. He pays Gwyllyn well to stay. Has to; the Welshman would be welcome at any laird's hearth where he chose to roost."

"I remember when you were here, before." It was Laoghaire, still blushing pinkly, but determined to join the conversation. Jamie turned his head to include her, smiling slightly.

"Do ye, then? You canna have been more than seven or eight yourself. I'd not think I was much to see then, so as to be remembered." Turning politely to me, he said, "Do ye have the Welsh, then?"

"Well, I do remember, though," Laoghaire said, pursuing it. "You were, er, ah … I mean … do ye not remember me, from then?" Her hands fiddled nervously with the folds of her skirt. She bit her nails, I saw.

Jamie's attention seemed distracted by a group of people across the room, arguing in Gaelic about something.

"Ah?" he said, vaguely. "No, I dinna think so. Still," he said with a smile, pulling his attention suddenly back to her, "I wouldna be likely to. A young burke of sixteen's too taken up wi' his own grand self to pay much heed to what he thinks are naught but a rabble of snot-nosed bairns."

I gathered he had meant this remark to be deprecatory to himself, rather than his listener, but the effect was not what he might have hoped. I thought perhaps a brief pause to let Laoghaire recover her self-possession was in order, and broke in hastily with, "No, I don't know any Welsh at all. Do you have any idea what it is he was saying?"

"Oh, aye." And Jamie launched into what appeared to be a verbatim recitation of the song, translated into English. It was an old ballad, apparently, about a young man who loved a young woman (what else?), but feeling unworthy of her because he was poor, went off to make his fortune at sea. The young man was shipwrecked, met sea serpents who menaced him and mermaids who entranced him, had adventures, found treasure, and came home at last only to find his young woman wed to his best friend, who, if somewhat poorer, also apparently had better sense.

"And which would you do?" I asked, teasing a bit. "Would you be the young man who wouldn't marry without money, or would you take the girl and let the money go hang?" This question seemed to interest Laoghaire as well, who cocked her head to hear the answer, meanwhile pretending great attention to an air on the flute that Gwyllyn had begun.

"Me?" Jamie seemed entertained by the question. "Well, as I've no money to start with, and precious little chance of ever getting any, I suppose I'd count myself lucky to find a lass would wed me without." He shook his head, grinning. "I've no stomach for sea serpents."

He opened his mouth to say something further, but was silenced by Laoghaire, who laid a hand timidly on his arm, then blushing, snatched it back as though he were red-hot.

"Sshh," she said. "I mean … he's going to tell stories. Do ye not want to hear?"

“Oh, aye.” Jamie sat forward a bit in anticipation, then realizing that he blocked my view, insisted that I sit on the other side of him, displacing Laoghaire down the bench. I could see the girl was not best pleased at this arrangement, and I tried to protest that I was all right as I was, but he was firm about it.

“No, you’ll see and hear better there. And then, if he speaks in the Gaelic, I can whisper in your ear what he says.”

Each part of the bard’s performance had been greeted with warm applause, though people chatted quietly while he played, making a deep hum below the high, sweet strains of the harp. But now a sort of expectant hush descended on the hall. Gwyllyn’s speaking voice was as clear as his singing, each word pitched to reach the end of the high, drafty hall without strain.

“It was a time, two hundred years ago …” He spoke in English, and I felt a sudden sense of déj? vu. It was exactly the way our guide on Loch Ness had spoken, telling legends of the Great Glen.

It was not a story of ghosts or heroes, though, but a tale of the Wee Folk he told.

“There was a clan of the Wee Folk as lived near Dundreggan,” he began. “And the hill there is named for the dragon that dwelt there, that Fionn slew and buried where he fell, so the dun is named as it is. And after the passing of Fionn and the Feinn, the Wee Folk that came to dwell in the dun came to want mothers of men to be wet nurses to their own fairy bairns, for a man has something that a fairy has not, and the Wee Folk thought that it might pass through the mother’s milk to their own small ones.

“Now, Ewan MacDonald of Dundreggan was out in the dark, tending his beasts, on the night when his wife bore her firstborn son. A gust of the night wind passed by him, and in the breath of the wind he heard his wife’s sighing. She sighed as she sighed before the child was born, and hearing her there, Ewan MacDonald turned and flung his knife into the wind in the name of the Trinity. And his wife dropped safe to the ground beside him.”

The story was received with a sort of collective “ah” at the conclusion, and was quickly followed by tales of the cleverness and ingenuity of the Wee Folk, and others about their interactions with the world of men. Some were in Gaelic and some in English, used apparently according to which language best fitted the rhythm of the words, for all of them had a beauty to the speaking, beyond the content of the tale itself. True to his promise, Jamie translated the Gaelic for me in an undertone, so quickly and easily that I thought he must have heard these stories many times before.

There was one I noticed particularly, about the man out late at night upon a fairy hill, who heard the sound of a woman singing "sad and plaintive" from the very rocks of the hill. He listened more closely and heard the words:

"I am the wife of the Laird of Balnain
The Folk have stolen me over again."

So the listener hurried to the house of Balnain and found there the owner gone and his wife and baby son missing. The man hastily sought out a priest and brought him back to the fairy knoll. The priest blessed the rocks of the dun and sprinkled them with holy water. Suddenly the night grew darker and there was a loud noise as of thunder. Then the moon came out from behind a cloud and shone upon the woman, the wife of Balnain, who lay exhausted on the grass with her child in her arms. The woman was tired, as though she had traveled far, but could not tell where she had been, nor how she had come there.

Others in the hall had stories to tell, and Gwyllyn rested on his stool to sip wine as one gave place to another by the fireside, telling stories that held the hall rapt.

Some of these I hardly heard. I was rapt myself, but by my own thoughts, which were tumbling about, forming patterns under the influence of wine, music, and fairy legends.

"It was a time, two hundred years ago …"

It's always two hundred years in Highland stories, said the Reverend Wakefield's voice in memory. *The same thing as "Once upon a time," you know*.

And women trapped in the rocks of fairy duns, traveling far and arriving exhausted, who knew not where they had been, nor how they had come there.

I could feel the hair rising on my forearms, as though with cold, and rubbed them uneasily. Two hundred years. From 1945 to 1743; yes, near enough. And women who traveled through the rocks. Was it always women? I wondered suddenly.

Something else occurred to me. The women came back. Holy water, spell, or knife, *they came back*. So perhaps, just perhaps, it was possible. I must get back to the standing stones on Craigh na Dun. I felt a rising excitement that made me feel a trifle sick, and I reached for the wine goblet to calm myself.

"Be careful!" My groping fingers fumbled the edge of the nearly full crystal goblet which I had carelessly set on the bench beside me. Jamie's long arm shot across my lap, narrowly saving the goblet from disaster. He lifted the glass, holding the stem delicately between two large fingers, and passed it gently back and forth under his nose. He handed it back to me, eyebrows lifted.

"Rhenish," I explained helpfully.

"Aye, I know," he said, still looking quizzical. "Colum's, is it?"

"Why, yes. Would you like to try some? It's very good." I held out the glass, a trifle unsteadily. After a moment's hesitation, he accepted the glass and tried a small sip.

"Aye, it's good," he said, handing the goblet back. "It's also double strength. Colum takes it at night because his legs pain him. How much of it have you had?" he asked, eyeing me narrowly.

"Two, no, three glasses," I said, with some dignity. "Are you implying that I'm intoxicated?"

"No," he said, brows still raised, "I'm impressed that you're not. Most folk that drink wi' Colum are under the table after the second glass." He reached out and took the goblet from me again.

"Still," he added firmly, "I think you'd best drink no more of it, or ye won't get back up the stairs." He tilted the glass and deliberately drained it himself, then handed the empty goblet to Laoghaire without looking at her.

"Take that back, will ye, lass," he said casually. "It's grown late; I believe I'll see Mistress Beauchamp to her chamber." And putting a hand under my elbow, he steered me toward the archway, leaving the girl staring after us with an expression that made me relieved that looks in fact cannot kill.

Jamie followed me up to my chamber, and somewhat to my surprise, came in after me. The surprise vanished when he shut the door and immediately shed his shirt. I had forgotten the dressing, which I had been meaning to remove for the last two days.

"I'll be glad to get this off," he said, rubbing at the rayon and linen harness arrangement under his arm. "It's been chafing me for days."

"I'm surprised you didn't take it off yourself, then," I said, reaching up to untie the knots.

"I was afraid to, after the scolding ye gave me when you put the first one on," he said, grinning impudently down at me. "Thought I'd get my bum smacked if I touched it."

"You'll get it smacked now, if you don't sit down and keep still," I answered, mock-stern. I put both hands on his good shoulder and, a little unsteadily, pulled him down onto the bedroom stool.

I slipped the harness off and carefully probed the shoulder joint. It was still slightly swollen, with some bruising, but thankfully I could find no evidence of torn muscles.

"If you were so anxious to get rid of it, why didn't you let me take it off for you yesterday afternoon?" His behavior at the paddock had puzzled me then, and did so still more, now that I could see the patches of reddened skin where the rough edges of the linen bandages had rubbed him nearly raw. I lifted the dressing cautiously, but all was well beneath.

He glanced sidelong at me, then looked down a bit sheepishly. "Well, it's—ah, it's only that I didna want to take my shirt off before Alec."

"Modest, are you?" I asked dryly, making him raise his arm to test the extension of the joint. He winced slightly at the movement, but smiled at the remark.

"If I were, I should hardly be sittin' half-naked in your chamber, should I? No, it's the marks on my back." Seeing my raised eyebrows, he went on to explain. "Alec knows who I am—I mean, he's heard I was flogged, but he's not seen it. And to know something like that is no the same as seein' it wi' your own eyes." He felt the sore shoulder tentatively, eyes turned away. He frowned at the floor. "It's—maybe you'll not know what I mean. But when you know a man's suffered some harm, it's only one of the things you know about him, and it doesna make much difference to how ye see him. Alec knows I've been flogged, like he knows I've red hair, and it doesna matter to how he treats me." He looked up then, searching for some sign of understanding from me.

"But when you see it yourself, it's like"—he hesitated, looking for words—"it's a bit … personal, maybe, is what I mean. I think … if he were to see the scars, he couldna see *me* anymore without thinking of my back. And I'd be able to see him thinking of it, and that would make me remember it, and—" He broke off, shrugging.

"Well. That's a poor job of explaining, no? I daresay I'm too tender-minded about it, in any case. After all, I canna see it for myself; perhaps it's not as bad as I think." I had seen wounded men making their way on crutches down the street, and the people passing them with averted eyes, and I thought it was not at all a bad job of explanation.

"You don't mind my seeing your back?"

"No, I don't." He sounded mildly surprised, and paused a moment to think about it. "I suppose … it's that ye seem to have a knack for letting me know you're sorry for it, without makin' me feel pitiful about it."

He sat patiently, not moving as I circled behind him and inspected his back. I didn't know how bad he thought it was, but it was bad enough. Even by candlelight and having seen it once before, I was appalled. Before, I had seen only the one shoulder. The scars covered his entire back from shoulders to waist. While many had faded to little more than thin white lines, the worst formed thick silver wedges, cutting across the smooth muscles. I thought with some regret that it must have been quite a beautiful back at one time. His skin was fair and fresh, and the lines of bone and muscle were still solid and graceful, the shoulders flat and square-set and the backbone a smooth, straight groove cut deep between the rounded columns of muscle that rose on either side of it.

Jamie was right too. Looking at this wanton damage, I could not avoid a mental picture of the process that had caused it. I tried not to imagine the muscular arms raised, spread-eagled and tied, ropes cutting into wrists, the coppery head pressed hard against the post in agony, but the marks brought such images all too readily to mind. Had he screamed when it was done? I pushed the thought hastily away. I had heard the stories that trickled out of postwar Germany, of course, of atrocities much worse than this, but he *was* right; hearing is not at all the same as seeing.

Involuntarily, I reached out, as though I might heal him with a touch and erase the marks with my fingers. He sighed deeply, but didn't move as I traced the deep scars, one by one, as though to show him the extent of the damage he couldn't see. I rested my hands at last lightly on his shoulders in silence, groping for words.

He placed his own hand over mine, and squeezed lightly in acknowledgment of the things I couldn't find to say.

"There's worse has happened to others, lass," he said quietly. Then he let go and the spell was broken.

"It feels as though it's healing well," he said, trying to look sideways at the wound in his shoulder. "It doesna pain me much."

"That's good," I said, clearing my throat of some obstruction that seemed to have lodged there. "It *is* healing well; it's scabbed over nicely, and there's no drainage at all. Just keep it clean, and don't use the arm more than you must for another two or three days." I patted the undamaged shoulder, signifying dismissal. He put his shirt back on without assistance, tucking the long tails down into the kilt.

There was an awkward moment as he paused by the door, seeking something to say in farewell. Finally, he invited me to come to the stable next day and see a newborn foal. I promised that I would, and we said good night, both speaking together. We laughed and nodded absurdly to each other as I shut the door. I went at once to bed and fell asleep in a winey haze, to dream unsettling dreams that I would not recall come morning.

Next day, after a long morning of treating new patients, rummaging the stillroom for useful herbs to replenish the medical supplies cupboard, and—with some ceremony—recording the details in Davie Beaton's black ledger, I left my narrow closet in search of air and exercise.

There was no one about for the moment, and I took the opportunity to explore the upper floors of the castle, poking into empty chambers and winding staircases, mapping the castle in my mind. It was a most irregular floor plan, to say the least. Bits and pieces had been added here and there over the years, until it was difficult to say whether there ever *had* been a plan originally. In this hall, for example, there was an alcove built into the wall by the stairs, apparently serving no purpose but to fill in a blank space too small for a complete room.

The alcove was partly shielded from view by a hanging curtain of striped linen; I would have passed by without stopping, had a sudden flash of white from within not attracted my attention. I stopped just short of the opening and peered inside to see what it was. It was the sleeve of Jamie's shirt, passing around a girl's back, drawing her close for a kiss. She sat on his lap, and her yellow hair caught the sunlight coming through a slit, reflecting light like the surface of a trout stream on a bright morning.

I paused, uncertain what to do. I had no desire to spy on them, but was afraid the sound of my footsteps on the corridor stones would draw their attention. While I hesitated, Jamie broke from the embrace and looked up. His eyes met mine, and his face twitched from alarm to recognition. With a raised eyebrow and a faintly ironic shrug, he settled the girl more firmly on his knee and bent to his work. I shrugged back, and tiptoed away. Not my business. I had little doubt, however, that both Colum and the girl's father would consider this "consorting" highly improper. The next beating might well be on his own account, if they weren't more careful in choosing a meeting place.

Finding him at supper that night with Alec, I sat down opposite them at the long table. Jamie greeted me pleasantly enough, but with a watchful expression in his eyes. Old Alec gave me his usual

"Mmphm." Women, as he had explained to me at the paddock, have no natural appreciation for horses, and are therefore difficult to talk to.

"How's the horse-breaking coming along?" I asked, to interrupt the industrious chewing on the other side of the table.

"Well enough," answered Jamie cautiously.

I peered at him across a platter of boiled turnips. "Your mouth looks a bit swollen, Jamie. Get thumped by a horse, did you?" I asked wickedly.

"Aye," he answered, narrowing his eyes. "Swung its head when I wasna looking." He spoke placidly, but I felt a large foot come down on top of mine under the table. It rested lightly at the moment, but the threat was explicit.

"Too bad; those fillies can be dangerous," I said innocently.

The foot pressed down hard as Alec said, "Filly? Ye're no workin' fillies now, are ye, lad?" I used my other foot as a lever; that failing, I used it to kick his ankle sharply. Jamie jerked suddenly.

"What's wrong wi' ye?" Alec demanded.

"Bit my tongue," muttered Jamie, glaring at me over the hand he had clapped to his mouth.

"Clumsy young dolt. No more than I'd expect, though, from an idjit as canna even keep clear of a horse when…." Alec went on for several minutes, accusing his assistant at length of clumsiness, idleness, stupidity, and general ineptitude. Jamie, possibly the least clumsy person I had ever seen in my life, kept his head down and ate stolidly through the diatribe, though his cheeks flushed hotly. I kept my eyes demurely on my plate for the rest of the meal.

Refusing a second helping of stew, Jamie left the table abruptly, putting an end to Alec's tirade. The old horsemaster and I munched silently for a few minutes. Wiping his plate with the last bite of bread, the old man pushed it into his mouth and leaned back, surveying me sardonically with his one blue eye.

"Ye shouldna devil the lad, ye ken," he said conversationally. "If her father or Colum comes to know about it, young Jamie could get summat more than a blackened eye."

"Like a wife?" I said, looking him squarely in the eye. He nodded slowly.

"Could be. And that's not the wife he should have."

"No?" I was a bit surprised at this, after overhearing Alec's remarks in the paddock.

"Nay, he needs a woman, not a girl. And Laoghaire will be a girl when she's fifty." The grim old mouth twisted in something like a smile. "Ye may think I've lived in a stable all my life, but I had a wife as was a woman, and I ken the difference verra weel." The blue eye flashed as he made to get up. "So do you, lass."

I reached out a hand impulsively to stop him. "How did you know—" I began. Old Alec snorted derisively.

"I may ha' but one eye, lass; it doesna mean I'm blind." He creaked off, snorting as he went. I found the stairs and went up to my room, contemplating what, if anything, the old horsemaster had meant by his final remark.

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9

THE GATHERING

My life seemed to be assuming some shape, if not yet a formal routine. Rising at dawn with the rest of the castle inhabitants, I breakfasted in the great hall, then, if Mrs. Fitz had no patients for me to see, I went to work in the huge castle gardens. Several other women worked there regularly, with an attending phalanx of lads in varying sizes, who came and went, hauling rubbish, tools, and loads of manure. I generally worked through the day there, sometimes going to the kitchens to help prepare a newly picked crop for eating or preserving, unless some medical emergency called me back to the Skulkery, as I called the late Beaton's closet of horrors.

Once in a while, I would take up Alec's invitation and visit the stables or paddock, enjoying the sight of the horses shedding their shaggy winter coats in clumps, growing strong and glossy with spring grass.

Some evenings I would go to bed immediately after supper, exhausted by the day's work. Other times, when I could keep my eyes open, I would join the gathering in the Great Hall to listen to the evening's entertainment of stories, song, or the music of harp or pipes. I could listen to Gwyllyn the Welsh bard for hours, enthralled in spite of my total ignorance of what he was saying, most times.

As the castle inhabitants grew accustomed to my presence, and I to them, some of the women began to make shy overtures of friendship, and to include me in their conversations. They were plainly very curious about me, but I replied to all their tentative questions with variations of the story I had told Colum, and after a bit, they accepted that as all they were likely to know. Having found out that I knew something of medicine and healing, though, they grew still more interested in me, and began to ask questions about the ailments of their children, husbands, and beasts, in most cases making little distinction between the latter two in level of importance.

Besides the normal questions and gossip, there was considerable talk of the coming Gathering that I had heard Old Alec mention at the paddock. I concluded that this was an occasion of some importance, and grew more convinced by the extent of the preparations for it. A constant stream of foodstuffs poured into the great kitchens, and more than twenty skinned carcasses hung in the slaughter shed, behind a screen of fragrant smoke that kept the flies away. Hogsheads of ale were delivered by wagon and carted down to the castle cellars, bags of fine flour were brought up from the village mill for baking, and baskets of cherries and apricots were fetched daily from the orchards outside the castle wall.

I was invited to go on one of these fruit-picking expeditions with several of the young women of the castle, and accepted with alacrity, eager to get out from under the forbidding shadow of the stone walls.

It was beautiful in the orchard, and I greatly enjoyed wandering through the cool mist of the Scottish morning, fingering through the damp leaves of the fruit trees for the bright cherries and smooth, plump apricots, squeezing gently to judge the ripeness. We plucked only the best, dropping them into our baskets in juicy heaps, eating as much as we could hold, and carrying back the remainder to be made into tarts and pies. The enormous pantry shelves were nearly filled now with pastries, cordials, hams, and assorted delicacies.

“How many people customarily come to a Gathering?” I asked Magdalen, one of the girls with whom I had become friendly.

She wrinkled a snub freckled nose in thought. “I dinna ken for sure. The last great Gathering at Leoch was over twenty year past, and then there were oh, maybe ten score of men come then—when old Jacob died, ye ken, and Colum was made laird. Might be more this year; been a good year for the crops and folk will ha’ a bit more money put by, so a good many will bring their wives and bairns along."

Visitors were already beginning to arrive at the castle, though I had heard that the official parts of the Gathering, the oath-taking, the tynchal, and the games, would not take place for several days. The more illustrious of Colum's tacksmen and tenants were housed in the castle proper, while the poorer men-at-arms and cottars set up camp on a fallow field below the stream that fed the castle's loch. Roving tinkers, gypsies, and sellers of small goods had set up a sort of impromptu fair near the bridge. The inhabitants of both castle and nearby village had begun to visit the spot in the evenings, when the day's work was done, to buy tools and bits of finery, watch the jugglers and catch up on the latest gossip.

I kept a close eye on the comings and goings, and made a point of paying frequent visits to stable and paddock. There were horses in plenty now, those of the visitors being accommodated in the castle stables. Among the confusion and disturbance of the Gathering, I thought, I should have no difficulty in finding my chance to escape.

* * *

It was on one of the fruit-picking expeditions to the orchard that I first met Geillis Duncan. Finding a small patch of *Ascaria* beneath the roots of an alder, I was hunting for more. The scarlet caps grew in tiny clumps, only four or five mushrooms in a group, but there were several clumps scattered through the long grass in this part of the orchard. The voices of the women picking fruit grew fainter as I worked my way toward the edge of the orchard, stooping or dropping on hands and knees to gather the fragile stalks.

"Those kind are poison," said a voice from behind me. I straightened up from the patch of *Ascaria* I had been bending over, thumping my head smartly on a branch of the pine they were growing under.

As my vision cleared, I could see that the peals of laughter were coming from a tall young woman, perhaps a few years older than myself, fair of hair and skin, with the loveliest green eyes I had ever seen.

"I am sorry to be laughing at you," she said, dimpling as she stepped down into the hollow where I stood. "I could not help it."

"I imagine I looked funny," I said rather ungraciously, rubbing the sore spot on top of my head. "And thank you for the warning, but I know those mushrooms are poisonous."

"Och, you know? And who is it you're planning to do away with, then? Your husband, perhaps? Tell me if it works, and I'll try it on mine." Her smile was infectious, and I found myself smiling back.

I explained that though the raw mushroom caps were indeed poisonous, you could prepare a powdered preparation from the dried fungi that was very efficacious in stopping bleeding when applied topically. Or so Mrs. Fitz said; I was more inclined to trust her than Davie Beaton's *Physician's Guide*.

"Fancy that!" she said, still smiling. "And did you know that these"—she stooped and came up with a handful of tiny blue flowers with heart-shaped leaves—"will *start* bleeding?"

"No," I said, startled. "Why would anyone want to start bleeding?"

She looked at me with an expression of exasperated patience. "To get rid of a child ye don't want, I mean. It brings on your flux, but only if ye use it early. Too late, and it can kill you as well as the child."

"You seem to know a lot about it," I remarked, still stung by having appeared stupid.

"A bit. The girls in the village come to me now and again for such things, and sometimes the married women too. They say I'm a witch," she said, widening her brilliant eyes in feigned astonishment. She grinned. "But my husband's the procurator fiscal for the district, so they don't say it too loud."

"Now the young lad ye brought with ye," she went on, nodding in approval, "there's one that's had a few love-philtres bought on his behalf. Is he yours?"

"Mine? Who? You mean, er, Jamie?" I was startled.

The young woman looked amused. She sat down on a log, twirling a lock of fair hair idly around her index finger.

"Och, aye. There's quite a few would settle for a fellow wi' eyes and hair like that, no matter the price on his head or whether he's any money. Their fathers may think differently, o' course.

"Now, me," she went on, looking off into the distance, "I'm a practical sort. I married a man with a fair house, a bit o' money put away, and a good position. As for hair, he hasn't any, and as for eyes, I never noticed, but he doesna trouble me much." She held out the basket she carried for my inspection. Four bulbous roots lay in the bottom.

"Mallow root," she explained. "My husband suffers from a chill on the stomach now and again. Farts like an ox."

I thought it best to stop this line of conversation before things got out of hand. "I haven't introduced myself," I said, extending a hand to help her up from the log. "My name is Claire. Claire Beauchamp."

The hand that took mine was slender, with long, tapering white fingers, though I noticed the tips were stained, probably with the juices of the plants and berries resting alongside the mallow roots in her basket.

"I know who ye are," she said. "The village has been humming with talk of ye, since ye came to the castle. My name is Geillis, Geillis Duncan." She peered into my basket. "If it's *balgan-buachrach* you're looking for, I can show you where they grow best."

I accepted her offer, and we wandered for some time through the small glens near the orchard, poking under rotted logs and crawling around the rim of the sparkling tarns, where the tiny toadstools grew in profusion. Geillis was very knowledgeable about the local plants and their medicinal uses, though she suggested a few usages I thought questionable, to say the least. I thought it very unlikely, for instance, that bloodwort would be effective in making warts grow on a rival's nose, and I strongly doubted whether wood betony was useful in transforming toads into pigeons. She made these explanations with a mischievous glance that suggested she was testing my own knowledge, or perhaps the local suspicion of witchcraft.

Despite the occasional teasing, I found her a pleasant companion, with a ready wit and a cheerful, if cynical, outlook on life. She appeared to know everything there was to know about everyone in village, countryside, and castle, and our explorations were punctuated by rests during which she entertained me with complaints about her husband's stomach trouble, and amusing if somewhat malicious gossip.

"They say young Hamish is not his father's son," she said at one point, referring to Colum's only child, the red-haired lad of eight or so whom I had seen at dinner in the Hall.

I was not particularly startled by this bit of gossip, having formed my own conclusions on the matter. I was only surprised that there was but one child of questionable parentage, surmising that Letitia had been either lucky, or smart enough to seek out someone like Geilie in time. Unwisely, I said as much to Geilie.

She flung back her long fair hair and laughed. "No, not me. The fair Letitia does not need any help in such matters, believe me. If people are seeking a witch in this neighborhood, they'd do better to look in the castle than the village."

Anxious to change the subject to something safer, I seized on the first thing that came to mind.

"If young Hamish isn't Colum's son, whose is he supposed to be?" I asked, scrambling over a heap of boulders.

"Why, the lad's, of course." She turned to face me, small mouth mocking and green eyes bright with mischief. "Young Jamie."

* * *

Returning to the orchard alone, I met Magdalen, hair coming loose under her kerchief and wide-eyed with worry.

"Oh, there ye are," she said, heaving a sigh of relief. "We were going back to the castle, when I missed ye."

"It was kind of you to come back for me," I said, picking up the basket of cherries I'd left in the grass. "I know the way, though."

She shook her head. "You should take care, my dearie, walking alone in the woods, wi' all the tinkers and folk coming for the Gathering. Colum's given orders—" She stopped abruptly, hand over her mouth.

"That I'm to be watched?" I suggested gently. She nodded reluctantly, clearly afraid I would be offended. I shrugged and tried to smile reassuringly at her.

"Well, that's natural, I suppose," I said. "After all, he's no one's word but my own for who I am or how I came here." Curiosity overcame my better judgment. "Who does he think I am?" I asked. But the girl could only shake her head.

"You're English," was all she said.

I didn't return to the orchard next day. Not because I was ordered to remain in the castle, but because there was a sudden outbreak of food poisoning among the castle inhabitants that demanded my attention as physician. Having done what I could for the sufferers, I set out to track the trouble to its source.

This proved to be a tainted beef carcass from the slaughter shed. I was in the shed next day, giving the chief smoker a piece of my mind regarding proper methods of meat preserving, when the door swung open behind me, sending a thick wave of choking smoke over me.

I turned, eyes watering, to see Dougal MacKenzie looming through the clouds of oakwood smoke.

"Supervising the butchering as well as the physicking, are ye now, mistress?" he asked mockingly. "Soon ye'll have the whole castle under your thumb, and Mrs. Fitz will be seeking employment elsewhere."

"I have no desire to have anything to do with your filthy castle," I snapped, wiping my streaming eyes and coming away with charcoal streaks on my handkerchief. "All I want is to get out of here, as fast as possible."

He inclined his head courteously, still grinning. "Well, I might be in a position to gratify that wish, mistress," he said. "At least temporarily."

I dropped the handkerchief and stared at him. "What do you mean?"

He coughed and waved a hand at the smoke, now drifting in his direction. He drew me outside the shed and turned in the direction of the stables.

"You were saying yesterday to Colum that ye needed betony and some odd bits of herbs?"

“Yes, to make up some medicines for the people with food poisoning. What of it?” I demanded, still suspicious.

He shrugged good-naturedly. “Only that I’m going down to the smith’s in the village, taking three horses to be shod. The fiscal’s wife is something of an herb-woman, and has stocks to hand. Doubtless she has the simples that you’re needing. And if it please ye, lady, you’re welcome to ride one of the horses down wi’ me to the village.”

“The fiscal’s wife? Mrs. Duncan?” I immediately felt happier. The prospect of escaping the castle altogether, even if only for a short time, was irresistible.

I mopped my face hurriedly and tucked the soiled kerchief in my belt.

“Let’s go,” I said.

* * *

I enjoyed the short ride downhill to the village of Cranesmuir, even though the day was dark and overcast. Dougal himself was in high spirits, and chatted and joked pleasantly as we went along.

We stopped first at the smith’s, where he left the three extra horses, taking me up behind him on his saddle for the trip up the High Street to the Duncans’ house. This was an imposing half-timbered manor of four stories, the lower two equipped with elegant leaded-glass windows; diamond-shaped panes in watery tones of purple and green.

Geilie greeted us with delight, pleased to have company on such a dreary day.

“How splendid!” she exclaimed. “I’ve been wanting an excuse to go through the stillroom and sort out some things. Anne!”

A short, middle-aged serving woman with a face like a winter apple popped out of a door I hadn’t noticed, concealed as it was in the bend of the chimney.

“Take Mistress Claire up to the stillroom,” Geilie ordered, “and then go and fetch us a bucket of spring water. From the spring, mind, not the well in the square!” She turned to Dougal. “I’ve the tonic put by that I promised your brother. If you’ll come out to the kitchen with me for a moment?”

I followed the serving woman's pumpkin-shaped rear up a set of narrow wooden stairs, emerging unexpectedly into a long, airy loft. Unlike the rest of the house, this room was furnished with casement windows, shut now against the damp, but still providing a great deal more light than had been available in the fashionably gloomy parlor downstairs.

It was clear that Geilie knew her business as an herbalist. The room was equipped with long drying frames netted with gauze, hooks above the small fireplace for heat-drying, and open shelves along the walls, drilled with holes to allow for air circulation. The air was thick with the delicious, spicy scent of drying basil, rosemary, and lavender. A surprisingly modern long counter ran along one side of the room, displaying a remarkable assortment of mortars, pestles, mixing bowls, and spoons, all immaculately clean.

It was some time before Geilie appeared, flushed from climbing the stairs, but smiling in anticipation of a long afternoon of herb-pounding and gossip.

It began to rain lightly, drops spattering the long casements, but a small fire was burning on the stillroom hearth, and it was very cozy. I enjoyed Geilie's company immensely; she had a wry-tongued, cynical viewpoint that was a refreshing contrast to the sweet, shy clanswomen at the castle, and clearly she had been well educated, for a woman in a small village.

She also knew every scandal that had occurred either in village or castle in the last ten years, and she told me endless amusing stories. Oddly enough, she asked me few questions about myself. I thought perhaps that was not her way; she would find out what she wanted to know about me from other people.

For some time, I had been conscious of noises coming from the street outside, but had attributed them to the traffic of villagers coming from Sunday Mass; the kirk was located at the end of the street by the well, and the High Street ran from kirk to square, spreading from there into a fan of tiny lanes and walks.

In fact, I had amused myself on the ride to the smithy by imagining an aerial view of the village as a representation of a skeletal forearm and hand; the High Street was the radius, along which lay the shops and businesses and the residences of the more well-to-do. St. Margaret's Lane was the ulna, a narrower street running parallel with the High, tenanted by smithy, tannery, and the less genteel artisans and businesses. The village square (which, like all village squares I had ever seen, was not square at all, but roughly oblong) formed the carpals and metacarpals of the hand, while the several lanes of cottages made up the phalangeal joints of the fingers.

The Duncans' house stood on the square, as behooved the residence of the procurator fiscal. This was a matter of convenience as well as status; the square could be used for those judicial matters which, by reason of public interest or legal necessity, overflowed the narrow confines of Arthur Duncan's study. And it was, as Dougal explained, convenient to the pillory, a homely wooden contraption that stood on a small stone plinth in the center of the square, adjacent to the wooden stake used—with thrifty economy of purpose—as whipping post, maypole, flagstaff and horse tether, depending upon requirements.

The noise outside was now much louder, and altogether more disorderly than seemed appropriate to people coming soberly home from church to their dinners. Geilie put aside the jars with an exclamation of impatience and threw open the window to see what caused the uproar.

Joining her at the window, I could see a crowd of folk dressed in church-going garb of gown, kirtle, coat, and bonnet, led by the stocky figure of Father Bain, the priest who served both village and castle. He had in his custody a youth, perhaps twelve years old, whose ragged trews and smelly shirt proclaimed him a tanner's lad. The priest had the boy gripped by the nape of the neck, a hold made somewhat difficult to maintain by the fact that the lad was slightly taller than his minatory captor. The crowd followed the pair at a small distance, rumbling with disapproving comment like a passing thunder cloud in the wake of a lightning bolt.

As we watched from the upper window, Father Bain and the boy disappeared beneath us, into the house. The crowd remained outside, muttering and jostling. A few of the bolder souls chinned themselves on the window ledges, attempting to peer within.

Geilie shut the window with a slam, making a break in the anticipatory rumble below.

"Stealing, most like," she said laconically, returning to the herb table. "Usually is, wi' the tanners' lads."

"What will happen to him?" I asked curiously. She shrugged, crumbling dried rosemary between her fingers into the mortar.

"Depends on whether Arthur's dyspeptic this morning, I should reckon. If he's made a good breakfast, the lad might get off with a whipping. But happen he's costive or flatulent"—she made a moue of distaste—"the boy'll lose an ear or a hand, most like."

I was horrified, but hesitant to interfere directly in the matter. I was an outlander, and an Englishwoman to boot, and while I thought I would be treated with some respect as an inhabitant of the castle, I had seen many of the villagers surreptitiously make the sign against evil as I passed. My intercession might easily make things worse for the boy.

"Can't *you* do anything?" I asked Geilie. "Speak to your husband, I mean; ask him to be, er, lenient?"

Geilie looked up from her work, surprised. Clearly the thought of interfering in her husband's affairs had never crossed her mind.

"Why should you care what happens to him?" she asked, but curiously, not with any hostile meaning.

"Of course I care!" I said. "He's only a lad; whatever he did, he doesn't deserve to be mutilated for life!"

She raised pale brows; plainly this argument was unconvincing. Still, she shrugged and handed me the mortar and pestle.

"Anything to oblige a friend," she said, rolling her eyes. She scanned her shelves and selected a bottle of greenish stuff, labeled, in fine cursive script, EXTRACT OF PEPPERMINT.

"I'll go and dose Arthur, and whilst I'm about it, I'll see if aught can be done for the lad. It may be too late, mind," she warned. "And if that poxy priest's got a hand in, he'll want the stiffest sentence he can get. Still, I'll try. You keep after the pounding; rosemary takes forever."

I took up the pestle as she left, and pounded and ground automatically, paying little heed to the results. The shut window blocked the sound both of the rain and the crowd below; the two blended in a soft, pattering susurrus of menace. Like any schoolchild, I had read Dickens. And earlier authors, as well, with their descriptions of the pitiless justice of these times, meted out to all illdoers, regardless of age or circumstance. But to read, from a cozy distance of one or two hundred years, accounts of child hangings and judicial mutilation, was a far different thing than to sit quietly pounding herbs a few feet above such an occurrence.

Could I bring myself to interfere directly, if the sentence went against the boy? I moved to the window, carrying the mortar with me, and peered out. The crowd had increased, as merchants and housewives, attracted by the gathering, wandered down the High Street to investigate. Newcomers leaned close as the standees excitedly relayed the details, then merged into the body of the crowd, more faces turned expectantly to the door of the house.

Looking down on the assembly, standing patiently in the drizzle awaiting a verdict, I suddenly had a vivid understanding of something. Like so many, I had heard, appalled, the reports that trickled out of postwar Germany; the stories of deportations and mass murder, of concentration camps and burnings. And like so many others had done, and would do, for years to come, I had asked myself, “How could the people have let it happen? They must have known, must have seen the trucks, the coming and going, the fences and smoke. How could they stand by and do nothing?” Well, now I knew.

The stakes were not even life or death in this case. And Colum’s patronage would likely prevent any physical attack on me. But my hands grew clammy around the porcelain bowl as I thought of myself stepping out, alone and powerless, to confront that mob of solid and virtuous citizens, avid for the excitement of punishment and blood to alleviate the tedium of existence.

People are gregarious by necessity. Since the days of the first cave dwellers, humans—hairless, weak, and helpless save for cunning—have survived by joining together in groups; knowing, as so many other edible creatures have found, that there is protection in numbers. And that knowledge, bred in the bone, is what lies behind mob rule. Because to step outside the group, let alone to stand against it, was for uncounted thousands of years death to the creature who dared it. To stand against a crowd would take something more than ordinary courage; something that went beyond human instinct. And I feared I did not have it, and fearing, was ashamed.

It seemed forever before the door opened and Geilie stepped in, looking cool and unperturbed as usual, a small stick of charcoal in her hand.

"We'll need to filter it after it's boiled," she remarked, as though going on with our previous conversation. "I think we'll run it through charcoal in muslin; that's best."

"Geilie," I said impatiently. "Don't try me. What about the tanner's boy?"

"Oh, that." She lifted a shoulder dismissively, but a mischievous smile lurked about the corners of her lips. She dropped the facade then, and laughed.

"You should have seen me," she said, giggling. "I was awfully good, an' I say it myself. All wifely solicitude and womanly kindness, with a small dab o' maternal pity mixed in. 'Oh, Arthur,' " she dramatized, " 'had our own union been blessed'—not much chance, if I've aught to say about it," she said, dropping the soulful mask for a moment with a tilt of her head toward the herb shelves—" 'why, how would ye feel, my darling, should your own son be taken so? Nae doubt it was but hunger made the lad take to thievery. Oh, Arthur, can ye no find it in your heart to be merciful—and you the soul of justice?' " She dropped onto a stool, laughing and pounding her fist lightly against her leg. "What a pity there's no place for acting here!"

The sound of the crowd outside had changed, and I moved to the window to see what was happening, ignoring Geilie's self-congratulations.

The throng parted, and the tanner's lad came out, walking slowly between priest and judge. Arthur Duncan was swollen with benevolence, bowing and nodding to the more eminent members of the assembly. Father Bain, on the other hand, resembled a sullen potato more than anything else, brown face lumpy with resentment.

The little procession proceeded to the center of the square, where the village locksman, one John MacRae, stepped out of the crowd to meet them. This personage was dressed as befitted his office in the sober elegance of dark breeches and coat and grey velvet hat (removed for the nonce and tenderly sheltered from the rain beneath the tail of his coat). He was not, as I had at first assumed, the village jailer, though in a pinch he did perform such office. His duties were primarily those of constable, customs inspector, and when needed, executioner; his title came from the wooden "lock" or scoop that hung from his belt, with which he was entitled to take a percentage of each bag of grain sold in the Thursday market: the remuneration of his office.

I had found all this out from the locksman himself. He had been to the Castle only a few days before to see whether I could treat a persistent felon on his thumb. I had lanced it with a sterile needle and dressed it with poplar-bud salve, finding MacRae a shy and soft-spoken man with a pleasant smile.

There was no trace of a smile now, though; MacRae's face was suitably stern. Reasonable, I thought; no one wants to see a grinning executioner.

The miscreant was brought to stand on the plinth in the center of the square. The lad looked pale and frightened, but did not move as Arthur Duncan, procurator fiscal for the parish of Cranesmuir, drew his plumpness up into an approximation of dignity and prepared to pronounce sentence.

"The ninny had already confessed by the time I came in," said a voice by my ear. Geilie peered interestedly over my shoulder. "I couldna get him freed entirely. I got him off as light as could be, though; only an hour in the pillory and one ear nailed."

"One ear nailed! Nailed to *what?*"

"Why, the pillory, o' course." She shot me a curious look, but turned back to the window to watch the execution of this light sentence obtained by her merciful intercession.

The crush of bodies around the pillory was so great that little of the miscreant could be seen, but the crowd drew back a bit to allow the locksman free movement for the ear-nailing. The lad, white-faced and small in the jaws of the pillory, had both eyes tight shut and kept them that way, shuddering with fear. He uttered a high, thin scream when the nail was driven in, audible through the closed windows, and I shuddered a bit myself.

We returned to our work, as did most of the spectators in the square, but I could not help rising to glance out from time to time. A few idlers passing by paused to jeer at the victim and throw balls of mud, and now and then a more sober citizen was to be seen, seizing a moment from the round of daily duties to attend to the moral improvement of the delinquent by means of a few well-chosen words of reproval and advice.

It was still an hour to the late spring sunset, and we were drinking tea below in the parlor, when a pounding at the door announced the arrival of a visitor. The day was so dark from the rain that one could hardly tell the level of the sun. The Duncans' house, however, boasted a clock, a magnificent contrivance of walnut panels, brass pendulums, and a face decorated with quiring cherubim, and this instrument pointed to half-past six.

The scullery maid opened the door to the parlor and unceremoniously announced, "In here." Jamie MacTavish ducked automatically as he came through the door, bright hair darkened by the rain to the color of ancient bronze. He wore an elderly and disreputable coat against the wet, and carried a riding cloak of heavy green velvet folded under one arm.

He nodded in acknowledgment as I rose and introduced him to Geilie.

"Mistress Duncan, Mrs. Beauchamp." He waved a hand toward the window. "I see ye've had a wee bit doing this afternoon."

"Is he still there?" I asked, peering out. The boy was only a dark shape, seen through the distortion of the wavering drawing-room panes. "He must be soaked through."

"He is." Jamie spread the cloak and held it for me. "So you'd be as well, Colum thought. I'd business in the village, so he sent along the cloak with me for ye. You're to ride back wi' me."

"That was kind of him." I spoke absently, for my mind was still on the tanner's lad.

"How long must he stay there?" I asked Geilie. "The lad in the pillory," I added impatiently, seeing her blank look.

"Oh, him," she said, frowning slightly at the introduction of such an unimportant topic. "An hour, I told you. The locksman should ha' freed him from the pillory by now."

"He has," Jamie assured her. "I saw him as I was crossing the green. It's only the lad's not got up courage to tear the griss from his lug yet."

My mouth dropped open. "You mean the nail won't be taken out of his ear? He's to *tear* himself loose?"

"Oh, aye." Jamie was cheerfully offhand. "He's still a bit nervous, but I imagine he'll set his mind to it soon. It's wet out, and growing dark as well. We must leave ourselves, or we'll get naught but scraps to our dinner." He bowed to Geilie and turned to go.

"Wait a bit," she said to me. "Since you've a big, strong lad like yon to see ye home, I've a chest of dried marsh cabbage and other simples as I've promised to Mrs. FitzGibbons up at the Castle. Perhaps Mr. MacTavish would be so kind?"

Jamie assenting, she had a manservant fetch down the chest from her workroom, handing over the enormous wrought-iron key for the purpose. While the servant was gone, she busied herself for a moment at a small writing desk in the corner. By the time the chest, a sizable wooden box with brass bands, was brought in, she had finished her note. She hastily sanded it, folded and sealed it with a blob of wax from the candle, and pressed it into my hand.

"There," she said. "That's the bill for it. Will ye give it to Dougal for me? It's him that handles the payments and such. Dinna give it to anyone else, or I'll not be paid for weeks."

"Yes, of course."

She embraced me warmly, and with admonitions about avoiding the chill, saw us to the door.

I stood sheltering beneath the eave of the house, as Jamie tied the box to his horse's saddle. The rain was coming down harder now, and the eaves ran with a ragged sheet of water.

I eyed the broad back and muscular forearms as he lifted the heavy box with little apparent effort. Then I glanced at the plinth, where the tanner's boy, in spite of encouragement from the regathered crowd, was still firmly pinioned. Granted this was not a lovely young girl with moonbeam hair, but Jamie's earlier actions in Colum's hall of justice made me think that he might not be unsympathetic to the youngster's plight.

"Er, Mr. MacTavish?" I began, hesitantly. There was no response. The comely face did not change expression; the wide mouth stayed relaxed, the blue eyes focused on the strap he was fastening.

"Ah, Jamie?" I tried again, a little louder, and he looked up at once. So it really wasn't MacTavish. I wondered what it was.

"Aye?" he said.

"You're, er, quite sizable, aren't you?" I said. A half-smile curved his lips and he nodded, clearly wondering what I was up to.

"Big enough for most things," he answered.

I was encouraged, and moved casually closer, so as not to be overheard by any stragglers from the square.

"And tolerably strong in the fingers?" I asked.

He flexed one hand and the smile widened. "Aye, that's so. Happen you've a few chestnuts you want cracked?" He looked down at me with a shrewd and merry glint.

I glanced briefly past him to the knot of onlookers in the square.

"More like one to be pulled from the fire, I think." I looked up to meet that questioning blue gaze. "Could you do it?"

He stood looking down at me for a moment, still smiling, then shrugged. "Aye, if the shank's long enough to grip. Can ye draw the crowd away, though? Interference wouldna be looked on kindly, and me a stranger."

I had not anticipated the possibility that my request might put him in any danger, and I hesitated, but he seemed game to try, danger notwithstanding.

"Well, if we both went over for a closer look, and then I were to faint at the sight, do you think—?"

"You being so unused to blood and all?" One brow lifted sardonically and he grinned. "Aye, that'll do. If ye can make shift to fall off the plinth, still better."

I had in fact felt a bit squeamish about looking, but it was not so daunting a sight as I had feared. The ear was pinned firmly through the upper flange, close to the edge, and a full two inches of the nail's square, headless shank was free above the pinioned appendage. There was almost no blood, and it was clear from the boy's face that while he was both frightened and uncomfortable, he was in no great pain. I began to think that Geilie perhaps had been right in considering this a fairly lenient sentence, given the overall state of current Scottish jurisprudence, though this didn't alter by one whit my opinion as to the barbarity of it.

Jamie edged casually through the fringe of lookers-on. He shook his head reprovingly at the boy.

"Na then, lad," he said, clicking his tongue. "Got yourself in a rare swivet, have ye no?" He rested one large, firm hand on the wooden edge of the pillory, under pretext of looking more closely at the ear. "Och, laddie," he said, disparaging, "yon's no job to be making heavy weather of. A wee snatch o' the head and it's over. Here, shall I help ye?" He reached out as though to grasp the lad by the hair and wrench his head free. The boy yelped in fear.

Recognizing my cue, I stepped back, taking care to tread heavily on the toes of the woman behind me, who yipped in anguish as my boot heel crushed her metatarsals.

"I beg your pardon," I gasped. "I'm … so dizzy! Please …" I turned away from the pillory and took two or three steps, staggering artfully and clutching at the sleeves of those nearby. The edge of the plinth was only six inches away; I took a firm hold on a slightly built girl I had marked out for the purpose and pitched headfirst over the edge, taking her with me.

We rolled on the wet grass in a tangle of skirts and squeals. Letting go of her blouse at last, I relaxed into a dramatically spread-eagled heap, rain pattering down on my upturned face.

I was in truth a trifle winded by the impact—the girl had fallen on top of me—and I fought for breath, listening to the babble of concerned voices gathered around me. Speculations, suggestions, and shocked interjections rained on me, thicker than the drops of water from the sky, but it was a pair of familiar arms that raised me to a sitting position, and a pair of gravely concerned blue eyes that I saw when I opened my own. A faint flicker of the eyelids told me that the mission had been accomplished, and in fact, I could see the tanner's lad, napkin clutched to his ear, making off at speed in the direction of his loft, unnoticed by the crowd that had turned to attend to this new sensation.

The villagers, so lately calling for the lad's blood, were kindness itself to me. I was tenderly gathered up and carried back to the Duncans' house, where I was plied with brandy, tea, warm blankets, and sympathy. I was only allowed to depart at last by Jamie's stating bluntly that we must go, then lifting me bodily off the couch and heading for the door, disregarding the expostulations of my hosts.

Mounted once more in front of him, my own horse led by the rein, I tried to thank him for his help.

"No trouble, lass," he said, dismissing my thanks.

"But it was a risk to you," I said, persisting. "I didn't realize you'd be in danger when I asked you."

"Ah," he said, noncommittally. And a moment later, with a hint of amusement, "Ye wouldna expect me to be less bold than a wee Sassenach lassie, now would ye?"

He urged the horses into a trot as the shadows of dusk gathered by the roadside. We did not speak much on the rest of the journey home. And when we reached the castle, he left me at the gate with no more than a softly mocking, "Good' e'en, Mistress Sassenach." But I felt as though a friendship had been begun that ran a bit deeper than shared gossip under the apple trees.

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10

THE OATH-TAKING

There was a terrific stir over the next two days, with comings and goings and preparations of every sort. My medical practice dropped off sharply; the food-poisoning victims were well again, and everyone else seemed to be much too busy to fall sick. Aside from a slight rash of splinters-in-fingers among the boys hauling in wood for the fires, and a similar outbreak of scalds and burns among the busy kitchen maids, there were no accidents either.

I was excited myself. Tonight was the night. Mrs. Fitz had told me that all the fighting men of the MacKenzie clan would be in the hall tonight, to make their oaths of allegiance to Colum. With a ceremony of this importance going on inside, no one would be watching the stables.

During my hours helping in the kitchens and orchards, I had managed to stow away sufficient food to see me provided for several days, I thought. I had no water flask, but had contrived a substitute using one of the heavier glass jugs from the surgery. I had stout boots and a warm cloak, courtesy of Colum. I would have a decent horse; on my afternoon visit to the stables, I had marked out the one I meant to take. I had no money, but my patients had given me a handful of small trinkets, ribbons, and bits of carving or jewelry. If necessary, I might be able to use these to trade for anything else I needed.

I felt badly about abusing Colum's hospitality and the friendship of the castle inhabitants by leaving without a word or a note of farewell, but after all, what could I possibly say? I had pondered the problem for some time, but finally decided just to leave. For one thing, I had no writing paper, and was not willing to take the risk of visiting Colum's quarters in search of any.

An hour past first dark, I approached the stable cautiously, ears alert for any signs of human presence, but it seemed that everyone was up in the Hall, readying themselves for the ceremony. The door stuck, but gave with a slight push, its leather hinges letting it swing silently inward.

The air inside was warm and alive with the faint stirrings of resting horses. It was also black as the inside of an undertaker's hat, as Uncle Lamb used to say. Such few windows as there were for ventilation were narrow slits, too small to admit the faint starlight outside. Hands outstretched, I walked slowly into the main part of the stable, feet shuffling in the straw.

I groped carefully in front of me, looking for the edge of a stall to guide me. My hands found only empty air, but my shins met a solid obstruction resting on the floor, and I pitched headlong with a startled cry that rang in the rafters of the old stone building.

The obstruction rolled over with a startled oath and grasped me hard by the arms. I found myself held against the length of a sizable male body, with someone's breath tickling my ear.

"Who are you?" I gasped, jerking backward. "And what are you doing here?" Hearing my voice, the unseen assailant relaxed his grip.

"I might ask the same of you, Sassenach," said the deep soft voice of Jamie MacTavish, and I relaxed a little in relief. There was a stirring in the straw, and he sat up.

"Though I suppose I could guess," he added dryly. "How far d'ye think you'd get, lassie, on a dark night and a strange horse, wi' half the MacKenzie clan after ye by morning?"

I was ruffled, in more ways than one.

"They wouldn't be after me. They're all up at the Hall, and if one in five of them is sober enough to stand by morning, let alone ride a horse, I'll be *most* surprised."

He laughed, and standing up, reached down a hand to help me to my feet. He brushed the straw from the back of my skirt, with somewhat more force than I thought strictly necessary.

"Well, that's verra sound reasoning on your part, Sassenach," he said, sounding mildly surprised that I was capable of reason. "Or would be," he added, "did Colum not have guards posted all round the castle and scattered through the woods. He'd hardly leave the castle unprotected, and the fighting men of the whole clan inside it. Granted that stone doesna burn so well as wood …"

I gathered he was referring to the infamous Glencoe Massacre, when one John Campbell, on government orders, had put thirty-eight members of the MacDonald clan to the sword and burned the house above them. I calculated rapidly. That would have been only fifty-some years before; recent enough to justify any defensive precautions on Colum's part.

"In any case, ye could scarcely have chosen a worse night to try to escape," MacTavish went on. He seemed entirely unconcerned with the fact that I *had* meant to escape, only with the reasons why it wouldn't work, which struck me as a little odd. "Besides the guards, and the fact that every good horseman for miles around is here, the way to the castle will be filled wi' folk coming from the countryside for the tynchal and the games."

"Tynchal?"

"A hunt. Usually stags, maybe a boar this time; one of the stable lads told Old Alec there's a large one in the east wood." He put a large hand in the center of my back and turned me toward the faint oblong of the open door.

"Come along," he said. "I'll take ye back up to the castle."

I pulled away from him. "Don't bother," I said ungraciously. "I can find my own way."

He took my elbow with considerable firmness. "I daresay ye can. But you'll not want to meet any of Colum's guards alone."

"And why not?" I snapped. "I'm not doing anything wrong; there's no law against walking outside the castle, is there?"

"No. I doubt they'd mean to do ye harm," he said, peering thoughtfully into the shadows. "But it's far from unusual for a man to take a flask along to keep him company when he stands guard. And the drink may be a boon companion, but it's no a verra good adviser as to suitable behavior, when a small sweet lass comes on ye alone in the dark."

"I came on *you* in the dark, alone," I reminded him, with some boldness. "And I'm neither particularly small, nor very sweet, at least at present."

"Aye, well, I was asleep, not drunk," he responded briefly. "And questions of your temper aside, you're a good bit smaller than most of Colum's guards."

I put that aside as an unproductive line of argument, and tried another tack. "And why *were* you asleep in the stable?" I asked. "Haven't you a bed somewhere?" We were in the outer reaches of the kitchen gardens by now, and I could see his face in the faint light. He was intent, checking the stone arches carefully as we went, but he glanced sharply aside at this.

"Aye," he said. He continued to stride forward, still gripping me by the elbow, but went on after a moment, "I thought I'd be better out of the way."

"Because you don't mean to swear allegiance to Colum MacKenzie?" I guessed. "And you don't want to stand any racket about it?"

He glanced at me, amused at my words. "Something like that," he admitted.

One of the side gates had been left welcomingly ajar, and a lantern perched atop the stone ledge next to it shed a yellow glow on the path. We had almost reached this beacon when a hand suddenly descended on my mouth from behind and I was jerked abruptly off my feet.

I struggled and bit, but my captor was heavily gloved, and, as Jamie had said, a good deal larger than I.

Jamie himself seemed to be having minor difficulties, judging from the sound of it. The grunting and muffled cursing ceased abruptly with a thud and a rich Gaelic expletive.

The struggle in the dark stopped, and there was an unfamiliar laugh.

"God's eyes, if it's no the young lad; Colum's nephew. Come late to the oath-taking, are ye not, lad? And who's that wi' ye?"

“It’s a lassie,” replied the man holding me. “And a sweet juicy one, too, by the heft of her.” The hand left my mouth and administered a hearty squeeze elsewhere. I squeaked in indignation, reached over my shoulder, got hold of his nose and yanked. The man set me down with a quick oath of his own, less formal than those about to be taken within the hall. I stepped back from the blast of whisky fumes, feeling a sudden surge of appreciation for Jamie’s presence. Perhaps his accompanying me had been prudent, after all.

He appeared to be thinking otherwise, as he made a vain attempt to remove the clinging grip of the two men-at-arms who had attached themselves to him. There was nothing hostile about their actions, but there was a considerable amount of firmness. They began to move purposefully toward the open gate, their captive in tow.

“Nay, let me go and change first, man,” he protested. “I’m no decent to be going into the oath-taking like this.”

His attempt at graceful escape was foiled by the sudden appearance of Rupert, fatly resplendent in ruffled shirt and gold-laced coat, who popped out of the narrow gate like a cork from a bottle.

“Dinna worrit yourself about that, laddie,” he said, surveying Jamie with a gleaming eye. “We’ll outfit ye proper—inside.” He jerked his head toward the gate, and Jamie disappeared within, under compulsion. A meaty hand gripped my own elbow, and I followed, willy-nilly.

Rupert appeared to be in very high spirits, as did the other men I saw inside the castle. There were perhaps sixty or seventy men, all dressed in their best, festooned with dirks, swords, pistols, and sporrans, milling about in the courtyard nearest the entrance to the great Hall. Rupert gestured to a door set in the wall, and the men hustled Jamie into a small lighted room. It was one apparently used for storage; odds and ends of all kinds littered the tables and shelves with which it was furnished.

Rupert surveyed Jamie critically, with an eye to the oatstraws in his hair and the stains on his shirt. I saw his glance flicker to the oatstraws in my own hair, and a cynical grin split his face.

"No wonder ye're late, laddie," he said, digging Jamie in the ribs. "Dinna blame ye a bit."

"Willie!" he called to one of the men outside. "We need some clothes, here. Something suitable for the laird's nephew. See to it, man, and hurry!"

Jamie looked around, thin-lipped, at the men surrounding him. Six clansmen, all in tearing high spirits at the prospect of the oath-taking and brimming over with a fierce MacKenzie pride. The spirits had plainly been assisted by an ample intake from the tub of ale I had seen in the yard. Jamie's eye lighted on me, his expression still grim. This was *my* doing, his face seemed to say.

He could, of course, announce that he did not mean to swear his oath to Colum, and head back to his warm bed in the stables. If he wanted a serious beating or his throat cut, that is. He raised an eyebrow at me, shrugged, and submitted with a fair show of grace to Willie, who rushed up with a pile of snowy linen in his arms and a hairbrush in one hand. The pile was topped by a flat blue bonnet of velvet, adorned with a metal badge that held a sprig of holly. I picked up the bonnet to examine it, as Jamie fought his way into the clean shirt and brushed his hair with suppressed savagery.

The badge was round and the engraving surprisingly fine. It showed five volcanos in the center, spouting most realistic flames. And on the border was a motto, *Luceo non Uro*.

"I shine, not burn," I translated aloud.

"Aye, lassie; the MacKenzie motto," said Willie, nodding approvingly at me. He snatched the bonnet from my hands and pushed it into Jamie's, before dashing off in search of further clothing.

"Er … I'm sorry," I said in a low voice, taking advantage of Willie's absence to move closer. "I didn't mean—"

Jamie, who had been viewing the badge on the bonnet with disfavor, glanced down at me, and the grim line of his mouth relaxed.

"Ah, dinna worrit yourself on my account, Sassenach. It would ha' come to it sooner or later." He twisted the badge loose from the bonnet and smiled sourly at it, weighing it speculatively in his hand.

"D'ye ken my own motto, lass?" he asked. "My clan's, I mean?"

"No," I answered, startled. "What is it?"

He flipped the badge once in the air, caught it, and dropped it neatly into his sporran. He looked rather bleakly toward the open archway, where the MacKenzie clansmen were massing in untidy lines.

"Je suis prest," he replied, in surprisingly good French. He glanced back, to see Rupert and another large MacKenzie I didn't know, faces flushed with high spirits and spirits of another kind, advancing with solid purpose. Rupert held a huge length of MacKenzie tartan cloth.

Without preliminaries, the other man reached for the buckle of Jamie's kilt.

"Best leave, Sassenach," Jamie advised briefly. "It's no place for women."

"So I see," I responded dryly, and was rewarded with a wry smile as his hips were swathed in the new kilt, and the old one yanked deftly away beneath it, modesty preserved. Rupert and friend took him firmly by the arms and hustled him toward the archway.

I turned without delay and made my way back toward the stair to the minstrels' gallery, carefully avoiding the eye of any clansman I passed. Once around the corner, I paused, shrinking back against the wall to avoid notice. I waited for a moment, until the corridor was temporarily deserted, then nipped inside the gallery door and pulled it quickly to behind me, before anyone else could come around the corner and see where I had gone. The stairs were dimly lit by the glow from above, and I had no trouble keeping my footing on the worn flags. I climbed toward the noise and light, thinking of that last brief exchange.

"Je suis prest." *I am ready*. I hoped he was.

* * *

The gallery was lit by pine torches, brilliant flares that rose straight up in their sockets, outlined in black by the soot their predecessors had left on the walls. Several faces turned, blinking, to look at me as I came out of the hangings at the back of the gallery; from the looks of it, all the women of the castle were up here. I recognized the girl Laoghaire, Magdalen and some of the other women I had met in the kitchens, and, of course, the stout form of Mrs. FitzGibbons, in a position of honor near the balustrade.

Seeing me, she beckoned in a friendly manner, and the women squeezed against each other to let me pass. When I reached the front, I could see the whole Hall spread out beneath.

The walls were decked with myrtle branches, yew and holly, and the fragrance of the evergreens rose up into the gallery, mingled with the smoke of fires and the harsh reek of men. There were dozens of them, coming, going, standing talking in small groups scattered throughout the hall, and all clad in some version of the clan tartan, be it only a plaid or a tartan bonnet worn above ordinary working shirt and tattered breeches. The actual patterns varied wildly, but the colors were mostly the same—dark greens and white.

Most of them were completely dressed as Jamie now was, kilt, plaid, bonnet, and—in most cases—badges. I caught a glimpse of him standing near the wall, still looking grim. Rupert had disappeared into the throng, but two more burly MacKenzies flanked Jamie, obviously guards.

The confusion in the hall was gradually becoming organized, as the castle residents pushed and led the newcomers into place at the lower end.

Tonight was plainly special; the young lad who played the pipes at Hall had been augmented by two other pipers, one a man whose bearing and ivory-mounted pipes proclaimed him a master piper. This man nodded to the other two, and soon the hall was filled with the fierce drone of pipe music. Much smaller than the great Northern pipes used in battle, these versions made a most effective racket.

The chanters laid a trill above the drones that made the blood itch. The women stirred around me, and I thought of a line from “Maggie Lauder”:

“Oh, they call me Rab the Ranter,

and the lassies all go daft,
When I blow up my chanter."

If not daft, the women around me were fully appreciative, and there were many murmurs of admiration as they hung over the rail, pointing out one man or another, striding about the Hall decked in his finery. One girl spotted Jamie, and with a muffled exclamation, beckoned her friends to see. There was considerable whispering and murmuring over his appearance.

Some of it was admiration for his fine looks, but more was speculation about his presence at the oath-taking. I noticed that Laoghaire, in particular, glowed like a candle as she watched him, and I remembered what Alec had said in the paddock—*Ye know her father will no' let her wed outside the clan*. And Colum's nephew, was he? The lad might be quite a catch, at that. Bar the minor matter of outlawry, of course.

The pipe music rose to a fervent pitch, and then abruptly ceased. In the dead silence of the Hall, Colum MacKenzie stepped out from the upper archway, and strode purposefully to a small platform that had been erected at the head of the room. If he made no effort to hide his disability, he did not flaunt it now either. He was splendid in an azure-blue coat, heavily laced with gold, buttoned with silver, and with rose silk cuffs that turned back almost to the elbow. A tartan kilt in fine wool hung past his knees, covering most of his legs and the checked stockings on them. His bonnet was blue, but the silver badge held plumes, not holly. The entire Hall held its breath as he took center stage. Whatever else he was, Colum MacKenzie was a showman.

He turned to face the assembled clansmen, raised his arms and greeted them with a ringing shout.

"Tulach Ard!"

"Tulach Ard!" the clansmen gave back in a roar. The woman next to me shivered.

There was a short speech next, given in Gaelic. This was greeted with periodic roars of approval, and then the oath-taking proper commenced.

Dougal MacKenzie was the first man to advance to Colum's platform. The small rostrum gave Colum enough height that the brothers met face to face. Dougal was richly dressed, but in plain chestnut velvet with no gold lace, so as not to distract attention from Colum's magnificence.

Dougal drew his dirk with a flourish and sank to one knee, holding the dirk upright by the blade. His voice was less powerful than Colum's, but loud enough so that every word rang through the hall.

"I swear by the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, and by the holy iron that I hold, to give ye my fealty and pledge ye my loyalty to the name of the clan MacKenzie. If ever my hand shall be raised against ye in rebellion, I ask that this holy iron shall pierce my heart."

He lowered the dirk, kissed it at the juncture of haft and tang, and thrust it home in its sheath. Still kneeling, he offered both hands clasped to Colum, who took them between his own and lifted them to his lips in acceptance of the oath so offered. Then he raised Dougal to his feet.

Turning, Colum picked up a silver quaich from its place on the tartancovered table behind him. He lifted the heavy eared cup with both hands, drank from it, and offered it to Dougal. Dougal took a healthy swallow and handed back the cup. Then, with a final bow to the laird of the clan MacKenzie, he stepped to one side, to make room for the next man in line.

This same process was repeated over and over, from vow to ceremonial drink. Viewing the number of men in the line, I was impressed anew at Colum's capacity. I was trying to work out how many pints of spirit he would have consumed by the end of the evening, given one swallow per oath-taker, when I saw Jamie approach the head of the line.

Dougal, his own oath completed, had taken up a station to Colum's rear. He saw Jamie before Colum, who was occupied with another man, and I saw his sudden start of surprise. He stepped close to his brother and muttered something. Colum kept his eyes fixed on the man before him, but I saw him stiffen slightly. He was surprised, too, and, I thought, not altogether pleased.

The level of feeling in the hall, high to start with, had risen through the ceremony. If Jamie were to refuse his oath at this point, I thought he could easily be torn to shreds by the overwrought clansmen around him. I wiped my palms surreptitiously against my skirt, feeling guilty at having brought him into such a precarious situation.

He seemed composed. Hot as the hall was, he wasn't sweating. He waited patiently in line, showing no signs of realizing that he was surrounded by a hundred men, armed to the teeth, who would be quick to resent any insult offered to The MacKenzie and the clan. *Je suis prest,* indeed. Or perhaps he had decided after all to take Alec's advice?

My nails were digging into my palms by the time it came his turn.

He went gracefully to one knee and bowed deeply before Colum. But instead of drawing his knife for the oath, he rose to his feet and looked Colum in the face. Fully erect, he stood head and shoulders over most of the men in the hall, and he topped Colum on his rostrum by several inches. I glanced at the girl Laoghaire. She had gone pale when he rose to his feet, and I saw that she also had her fists clenched tight.

Every eye in the hall was on him, but he spoke as though to Colum alone. His voice was as deep as Colum's, and every word was clearly audible.

"Colum MacKenzie, I come to you as kinsman and as ally. I give ye no vow, for my oath is pledged to the name that I bear." There was a low, ominous growl from the crowd, but he ignored it and went on. "But I give ye freely the things that I have; my help and my goodwill, wherever ye should find need of them. I give ye my obedience, as kinsman and as laird, and I hold myself bound by your word, so long as my feet rest on the lands of clan MacKenzie."

He stopped speaking and stood, tall and erect, hands relaxed at his sides. Ball now in Colum's court, I thought. One word from him, one sign, and they'd be scrubbing the young man's blood off the flags come morning.

Colum stood unmoving for a moment, then smiled and held out his hands. After an instant's hesitation, Jamie placed his own hands lightly on Colum's palms.

"We are honored by your offer of friendship and goodwill," said Colum clearly. "We accept your obedience and hold you in good faith as an ally of the clan MacKenzie."

There was a lessening of the tension over the hall, and almost an audible sigh of relief in the gallery as Colum drank from the quaich and offered it to Jamie. The young man accepted it with a smile. Instead of the customary ceremonial sip, however, he carefully raised the nearly full vessel, tilted it and drank. And kept on drinking. There was a gasp of mingled respect and amusement from the spectators, as the powerful throat muscles kept moving. Surely he'd have to breathe soon, I thought, but no. He drained the heavy cup to the last drop, lowered it with an explosive gasp for air, and handed it back to Colum.

"The honor is mine," he said, a little hoarsely, "to be allied with a clan whose taste in whisky is so fine."

There was an uproar at this, and he made his way toward the archway, much impeded by congratulatory handshakes and thumps on the back as he passed. Apparently Colum MacKenzie was not the only member of the family with a knack for good theater.

The heat in the gallery was stifling, and the rising smoke was making my head ache before the oath-taking finally came to an end, with what I assumed were a few stirring words by Colum. Unaffected by six shared quaichs of spirit, the strong voice still reverberated off the stones of the hall. At least his legs wouldn't pain him tonight, I thought, in spite of all the standing.

There was a massive shout from the floor below, an outbreak of skirling pipes, and the solemn scene dissolved into a heaving surge of riotous yelling. An even louder shout greeted the tubs of ale and whisky that now appeared on trestles, accompanied by platters of steaming oatcakes, haggis, and meat. Mrs. Fitz, who must have organized this part of the proceedings, leaned precariously across the balustrade, keeping a sharp eye on the behavior of the stewards, mostly lads too young to swear a formal oath.

"And where's the pheasants got to, then?" she muttered under her breath, surveying the incoming platters. "Or the stuffed eels, either?

Drat that Mungo Grant, I'll skin him if he's burnt the eels!" Making up her mind, she turned and began to squeeze toward the back of the gallery, plainly unwilling to leave administration of something so critical as the feasting in the untried hands of Mungo Grant.

Seizing the opportunity, I pushed along behind her, taking advantage of the sizable wake she left through the crowd. Others, clearly thankful for a reason to leave, joined me in the exodus.

Mrs. Fitz, turning at the bottom, saw the flock of women above and scowled ferociously.

"You wee lassies clear off to your rooms right sharp," she commanded. "If you'll not stay up there safe out o' sight, ye'd best scamper awa' to your own places. But no lingering in the corridors, nor peeping round the corners. There's not a man in the place who's not half in his cups already, and they'll be far gone in an hour. 'Tis no place for lasses tonight."

Pushing the door ajar, she peered cautiously into the corridor. The coast apparently clear, she shooed the women out the door, one at a time, sending them hurriedly on their way to their sleeping quarters on the upper floors.

"Do you need any help?" I asked as I came even with her. "In the kitchens, I mean?"

She shook her head, but smiled at the offer. "Nay, there's no need, lass. Get along wi' ye now, you're no safer than the rest." And a kindly shove in the small of the back sent me hurtling out into the dim passage.

I was inclined to take her advice, after the encounter with the guard outside. The men in the Hall were rioting, dancing, and drinking, with no thought of restraint or control. No place for a woman, I agreed.

Finding my way back to my room was another matter altogether. I was in an unfamiliar part of the castle, and while I knew the next floor had a breezeway that connected it to the corridor leading to my room, I couldn't find anything resembling stairs.

I came around a corner, and smack into a group of clansmen. These were men I didn't know, come from the outlying clan lands, and unused to the genteel manners of a castle. Or so I deduced from the fact that one man, apparently in search of the latrines, gave it up and chose to relieve himself in a corner of the hallway as I came upon them.

I whirled at once, intending to go back the way I had come, stairs or no stairs. Several hands reached to stop me, though, and I found myself pressed against the wall of the corridor, surrounded by bearded Highlanders with whisky on their breath and rape on their minds.

Seeing no point in preliminaries, the man in front of me grabbed me by the waist and plunged his other hand into my bodice. He leaned close, rubbing his bearded cheek against my ear. “And how about a sweet kiss, now, for the brave lads of the clan MacKenzie? Tulach Ard!”

“Erin go bragh,” I said rudely, and pushed with all my strength. Unsteady with drink, he staggered backward into one of his companions. I dodged to the side and fled, kicking off my clumsy shoes as I ran.

Another shape loomed in front of me, and I hesitated. There seemed to be only one in front of me, though, and at least ten behind me, catching up fast despite their cargo of drink. I raced forward, intending to dodge around him. He stepped sharply in front of me, though, and I came to a halt, so fast that I had to put my hands on his chest to avoid crashing into him. It was Dougal MacKenzie.

“What in hell—?” he began, then saw the men after me. He pulled me behind him and barked something at my pursuers in Gaelic. They protested in the same language, but after a short exchange like the snarling of wolves, they gave it up and went off in search of better entertainment.

“Thank you,” I said, a little dazed. “Thank you. I’ll … I’ll go. I shouldn’t be down here.” Dougal glanced down at me, and took my arm, pulling me around to face him. He was disheveled and clearly had been joining in the roistering in the Hall.

“True enough, lass,” he said. “Ye shouldna be here. Since ye are, weel, you’ll have to pay the penalty for that,” he murmured, eyes gleaming in the half-dark. And without warning, he pulled me hard against him and kissed me. Kissed me hard enough to bruise my lips and force them apart. His tongue flicked against mine, the taste of whisky sharp in my mouth. His hands gripped me firmly by the bottom and pressed me against him, making me feel the rigid hardness under his kilt through my layers of skirts and petticoats.

He released me as suddenly as he had seized me. He nodded and gestured down the hall, breathing a little unsteadily. A lock of russet hair hung loose over his forehead and he brushed it back with one hand.

“Get ye gone, lassie,” he said. “Before ye pay a greater price.”

I went, barefoot.

Given the carryings-on of the night before, I had expected most inhabitants of the castle to lie late the next morning, possibly staggering down for a restorative mug of ale when the sun was high—assuming that it chose to come out at all, of course. But the Highland Scots of Clan MacKenzie were a tougher bunch than I had reckoned with, for the castle was a buzzing hive long before dawn, with rowdy voices calling up and down the corridors, and a great clanking of armory and thudding of boots as men prepared for the tynchal.

It was cold and foggy, but Rupert, whom I met in the courtyard on my way to the hall, assured me that this was the best sort of weather in which to hunt boar.

“The beasts ha’ such a thick coat, the cold’s no hindrance to them,” he explained, sharpening a spearpoint with enthusiasm against a foot-driven grindstone, “and they feel safe wi’ the mist so heavy all round them—canna see the men coming toward them, ye ken.”

I forbore to point out that this meant the hunting men would not be able to see the boar they were approaching, either, until they were upon it.

As the sun began to streak the mist with blood and gold, the hunting party assembled in the forecourt, spangled with damp and bright-eyed with anticipation. I was glad to see that the women were not expected to participate, but contented themselves with offering bannocks and drafts of ale to the departing heroes. Seeing the large number of men who set out for the east wood, armed to the teeth with boar spears, axes, bows, quivers, and daggers, I felt a bit sorry for the boar.

This attitude was revised to one of awed respect an hour later, when I was hastily summoned to the forest's edge to dress the wounds of a man who had, as I surmised, stumbled over the beast unawares in the fog.

"Bloody Christ!" I said, examining a gaping, jagged wound that ran from knee to ankle. "An *animal* did this? What's it got, stainless steel teeth?"

"Eh?" The victim was white with shock, and too shaken to answer me, but one of the fellows who had assisted him from the wood gave me a curious look.

"Never mind," I said, and yanked tight the compression bandage I had wound about the injured calf. "Take him up to the castle and we'll have Mrs. Fitz give him hot broth and blankets. That'll have to be stitched, and I've no tools for it here."

The rhythmic shouts of the same beaters still echoed in the mists of the hillside. Suddenly there was a piercing scream that rose high above fog and tree, and a startled pheasant broke from its hiding place nearby with a frightening rattle of wings.

"Dear God in heaven, what now?" Seizing an armful of bandages, I abandoned my patient to his caretakers and headed into the forest at a dead run.

The fog was thicker under the branches, and I could see no more than a few feet ahead, but the sound of excited shouting and thrashing underbrush guided me in the right direction.

It brushed past me from behind. Intent on the shouting, I didn't hear it, and I didn't see it until it had passed, a dark mass moving at incredible speed, the absurdly tiny cloven hooves almost silent on the sodden leaves.

I was so stunned by the suddenness of the apparition that it didn't occur to me at first to be frightened. I simply stared into the mist where the bristling black thing had vanished. Then, raising my hand to brush back the ringlets that were curling damply around my face, I saw the blotched red streak across it. Looking down, I found a matching streak on my skirt. The beast was wounded. Had the scream come from the boar, perhaps?

I thought not; I knew the sound of mortal wounding. And the pig was moving well under its own power when it had passed me. I took a deep breath and went on into the wall of mist, in search of a wounded man.

I found him at the bottom of a small slope, surrounded by kilted men. They had spread their plaids over him to keep him warm, but the cloth covering his legs was ominously dark with wetness. A wide scrape of black mud showed where he had tumbled down the length of the slope, and a scrabble of muddied leaves and churned earth, where he had met the boar. I sank to my knees beside the man, pulled back the cloth and set to work.

I had scarcely begun when the shouts of the men around us made me turn, to see the nightmare shape appear, once more soundless, out of the trees.

This time I had time to see the dagger hilt protruding from the beast's side, perhaps the work of the man on the ground before me. And the wicked yellow ivory, stained red as the mad little eyes.

The men around me, as stunned as I was, began to stir and reach for weapons. Faster than the rest, a tall man seized a boar-spear from the hands of a companion who stood frozen, and stepped out into the clearing.

It was Dougal MacKenzie. He walked almost casually, carrying the spear low, braced in both hands, as though about to lift a spadeful of dirt. He was intent on the beast, speaking to it in an undertone, murmuring in Gaelic as though to coax the beast from the shelter of the tree it stood beside.

The first charge was sudden as an explosion. The beast shot past, so closely that the brown hunting tartan flapped in the breeze of its passing. It spun at once and came back, a blur of muscular rage. Dougal leapt aside like a bullfighter, jabbing at it with his spear. Back, forth, and again. It was less a rampage than a dance, both adversaries rooted in strength, but so nimble they seemed to float above the ground.

The whole thing lasted only a minute or so, though it seemed much longer. It ended when Dougal, whirling aside from the slashing tusks, raised the point of the short, stout spear and drove it straight down between the beast's sloping shoulders. There was the thunk of the spear and a shrill squealing noise that made the hairs stand up along my forearms. The small, piggy eyes cast to and fro, veering wildly in search of nemesis, and the dainty hooves sank deep in mud as the boar staggered and lurched. The squealing went on, rising to an inhuman pitch as the heavy body toppled to one side, driving the protruding dagger hilt-deep in the hairy flesh. The delicate hooves spurned the ground, churning up thick clods of damp earth.

The squeal stopped abruptly. There was silence for a moment, and then a thoroughly piggish grunt, and the bulk was still.

Dougal had not waited to make sure of the kill, but had circled the twitching animal and made his way back to the injured man. He sank to his knees and put an arm behind the victim's shoulders, taking the place of the man who had been supporting him. A fine spray of blood had spattered the high cheekbones, and drying droplets matted his hair on one side.

"Now then, Geordie," he said, rough voice suddenly gentle. "Now then. I've got him, man. It's all right."

"Dougal? Is't you, man?" The wounded man turned his head in Dougal's direction, struggling to open his eyes.

I was surprised, listening as I rapidly checked the man's pulse and vital signs. Dougal the fierce, Dougal the ruthless, was speaking to the man in a low voice, repeating words of comfort, hugging the man hard against him, stroking the tumbled hair.

I sat back on my heels, and reached again toward the pile of cloths on the ground beside me. There was a deep wound, running at least eight inches from the groin down the length of the thigh, from which the blood was gushing in a steady flow. It wasn't spurting, though; the femoral artery wasn't cut, which meant there was a good chance of stopping it.

What couldn't be stopped was the ooze from the man's belly, where the ripping tushes had laid open skin, muscles, mesentery, and gut alike. There were no large vessels severed there, but the intestine was punctured; I could see it plainly, through the jagged rent in the man's skin. This sort of abdominal wound was frequently fatal, even with a modern operating room, sutures, and antibiotics readily to hand. The contents of the ruptured gut, spilling out into the body cavity, simply contaminated the whole area and made infection a deadly certainty. And here, with nothing but cloves of garlic and yarrow flowers to treat it with.…

My gaze met Dougal's as he also looked down at the hideous wound. His lips moved, mouthing soundlessly over the man's head the words, "Can he live?"

I shook my head mutely. He paused for a moment, holding Geordie, then reached forward and deliberately untied the emergency tourniquet I had placed around the man's thigh. He looked at me, challenging me to protest, but I made no move save a small nod. I could staunch the bleeding, and allow the man to be transported by litter back to the castle. Back to the castle, there to linger in increasing agony as the belly wound festered, until the corruption spread far enough finally to kill him, wallowing perhaps for days in long-drawn-out pain. A better death, perhaps, was what Dougal was giving him—to die cleanly under the sky, his heart's blood staining the same leaves, dyed by the blood of the beast that killed him. I crawled over the damp leaves to Geordie's head, and took half his weight on my own arm.

"It will be better soon," I said, and my voice was steady, as it always was, as it had been trained to be. "The pain will be better soon."

"Aye. It's better … now. I canna feel my leg anymore … nor my hands … Dougal … are ye there? Are ye there, man?" The numb hands were blindly flailing before the man's face. Dougal grasped them firmly between his own and leaned close, murmuring in the man's ear.

Geordie's back arched suddenly, and his heels dug deeply into the muddy ground, his body in violent protest at what his mind had begun already to accept. He gasped deeply from time to time, as a man who is bleeding to death gulps for air, hungry for the oxygen that his body is starving for.

The forest was very quiet. No birds sang in the mist, and the men who waited patiently hunkered in the shadow of the trees, were silent as the trees themselves. Dougal and I leaned close together over the struggling body, murmuring and comforting, sharing the messy, heartrending, and necessary task of helping a man to die.

The trip up the hill to the castle was silent. I walked beside the dead man, borne on a makeshift litter of pine boughs. Behind us, borne in precisely similar fashion, came the body of his foe. Dougal walked ahead, alone.

As we entered the gate to the main courtyard, I caught sight of the tubby little figure of Father Bain, the village priest, hurrying belatedly to the aid of his fallen parishioner.

Dougal paused, reaching out to stay me as I turned toward the stair leading to the surgery. The bearers with Geordie's plaid-shrouded body on its litter passed on, heading toward the chapel, leaving us together in the deserted corridor. Dougal held me by the wrist, looking me over intently.

"You've seen men die before," he said flatly. "By violence." Not a question, almost an accusation.

"Many of them," I said, just as flatly. And pulling myself free, I left him standing there and went to tend my living patient.

* * *

The death of Geordie, hideous as it was, put only a momentary damper on the celebrations. A lavish funeral Mass was said over him that afternoon in the castle chapel, and the games began the next morning.

I saw little of them, being occupied in patching up the participants. All I could say for sure of authentic Highland games is that they were played for keeps. I bound up some fumble-foot who had managed to slash himself trying to dance between swords, I set the broken leg of a hapless victim who'd got in the way of a carelessly thrown hammer, and I doled out castor oil and nasturtium syrup to countless children who had overindulged in sweeties. By late afternoon, I was near exhaustion.

I climbed up on the surgery table in order to poke my head out of the tiny window for some air. The shouts and laughter and music from the field where the games were held had ceased. Good. No more new patients, then, at least not until tomorrow. What had Rupert said they were going to do next? Archery? Hmm. I checked the supply of bandages, and wearily closed the surgery door behind me.

Leaving the castle, I trailed downhill toward the stables. I could do with some good nonhuman, nonspeaking, nonbleeding company. I also had in mind that I might find Jamie, whatever his last name was, and try again to apologize for involving him in the oath-taking. True, he had brought it off well, but clearly he would not have been there at all, left to his own devices. As to the gossip Rupert might now be spreading about our supposed amorous dalliance, I preferred not to think.

As to my own predicament, I preferred not to think about that, either, but I would have to, sooner or later. Having so spectacularly failed to escape at the beginning of the Gathering, I wondered whether the chances might be better at the end. True, most of the horses would be leaving, along with the visitors. But there would be a number of castle horses still available. And with luck, the disappearance of one would be put down to random thievery; there were plenty of villainous-looking scoundrels hanging about the fairground and the games. And in the confusion of leaving, it might be some time before anyone discovered that I was gone.

I scuffed along the paddock fence, pondering escape routes. The difficulty was that I had only the vaguest idea where I was, with reference to where I wanted to go. And since I was now known to virtually every MacKenzie between Leoch and the Border, thanks to my doctoring at the games, I would not be able to ask directions.

I wondered suddenly whether Jamie had told Colum or Dougal of my abortive attempt to escape on the night of the oath-taking. Neither of them had mentioned it to me, so perhaps not.

There were no horses out in the paddock. I pushed open the stable door, and my heart skipped a beat to see both Jamie and Dougal seated side by side on a bale of hay. They looked almost as startled at my appearance as I was at theirs, but gallantly rose and invited me to sit down.

"That's all right," I said, backing toward the door. "I didn't mean to intrude on your conversation."

"Nay, lass," said Dougal, "what I've just been saying to young Jamie here concerns you too."

I cast a quick look at Jamie, who responded with a trace of a headshake. So he hadn't told Dougal about my attempted escape.

I sat down, a bit wary of Dougal. I remembered that little scene in the corridor on the night of the oath-taking, though he had not referred to it since by word or gesture.

"I'm leaving in two days' time," he said abruptly. "And I'm taking the two of you with me."

"Taking us where?" I asked, startled. My heart began to beat faster.

"Through the MacKenzie lands. Colum doesna travel, so visiting the tenants and tacksmen that canna come to the Gathering—that's left to me. And to take care of the bits of business here and there…." He waved a hand, dismissing these as trivial.

"But why me? Why us, I mean?" I demanded.

He considered for a moment before answering. "Why, Jamie's a handy lad wi' the horses. And as to you, lass, Colum thought it wise I should take ye along as far as Fort William. The commander there might be able to … assist ye in finding your family in France." Or to assist *you,* I thought, in determining who I really am. And how much else are you not telling me? Dougal stared down at me, obviously wondering how I would take this news.

"All right," I said tranquilly. "That sounds a good idea." Outwardly tranquil, inwardly I was rejoicing. What luck! Now I wouldn't have to try to escape from the castle. Dougal would take me most of the way himself. And from Fort William, I thought I could find my own way without much difficulty. To Craigh na Dun. To the circle of standing stones. And with luck, back home.

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PART THREE

On the Road

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11

CONVERSATIONS WITH A LAWYER

We rode out of the gates of Castle Leoch two days later, just before dawn. In twos and threes and fours, to the sound of shouted farewells and the calls of wild geese on the loch, the horses stepped their way carefully over the stone bridge. I glanced behind from time to time, until the bulk of the castle disappeared at last behind a curtain of shimmering mist. The thought that I would never again see that grim pile of stone or its inhabitants gave me an odd feeling of regret.

The noise of the horses' hooves seemed muffled in the fog. Voices carried strangely through the damp air, so that calls from one end of the long string were sometimes heard easily at the other, while the sounds of nearby conversations were lost in broken murmurs. It was like riding through a vapor peopled by ghosts. Disembodied voices floated in the air, speaking far away, then remarkably near at hand.

My place fell in the middle of the party, flanked on the one side by a man-at-arms whose name I did not know, and on the other by Ned Gowan, the little scribe I had seen at work in Colum's hall. He was something more than a scribe, I found, as we fell into conversation on the road.

Ned Gowan was a solicitor. Born, bred, and educated in Edinburgh, he looked the part thoroughly. A small, elderly man of neat, precise habits, he wore a coat of fine broadcloth, fine woolen hose, a linen shirt whose stock bore the merest suggestion of lace, and breeches of a fabric that was a nicely judged compromise between the rigors of travel and the status of his calling. A small pair of gold-rimmed half-spectacles, a neat hair-ribbon and a bicorne of blue felt completed the picture. He was so perfectly the quintessential man of law that I couldn't look at him without smiling.

He rode alongside me on a quiet mare whose saddle was burdened with two enormous bags of worn leather. He explained that one held the tools of his trade; inkhorn, quills, and papers.

"And what's the other for?" I asked, eyeing it. While the first bag was plump with its contents, the second seemed nearly empty.

"Oh, that's for his lairdship's rents," the lawyer replied, patting the limp bag.

"He must be expecting rather a lot, then," I suggested. Mr. Gowan shrugged good-naturedly.

"Not so much as all that, m'dear. But the most of it will be in doits and pence and other small coins. And such, unfortunately, take up more room than the larger denominations of currency." He smiled, a quick curve of thin, dry lips. "At that, a weighty mass of copper and silver is still easier of transport than the bulk of his lairdship's income."

He turned to direct a piercing look over his shoulder at the two large mule-drawn wagons that accompanied the party.

"Bags of grain and bunches of turnips have at least the benefit of lack of motion. Fowl, if suitably trussed and caged, I have nae argument with. Nor with goats, though they prove some inconvenience in terms of their omnivorous habits; one ate a handkerchief of mine last year, though I admit the fault was mine in allowin' the fabric to protrude injudiciously from my coat-pocket." The thin lips set in a determined line. "I have given explicit directions this year, though. We shall *not* accept live pigs."

The necessity of protecting Mr. Gowan's saddlebags and the two wagons explained the presence of the twenty or so men who made up the rest of the rent-collecting party, I supposed. All were armed and mounted, and there were a number of pack animals, bearing what I assumed were supplies for the sustenance of the party. Mrs. Fitz, among her farewells and exhortations, had told me that accommodations would be primitive or nonexistent, with many nights spent encamped along the road.

I was quite curious to know what had led a man of Mr. Gowan's obvious qualifications to take up a post in the remote Scottish Highlands, far from the amenities of civilized life to which he must be accustomed.

"Well, as to that," he said, in answer to my questions, "as a young man, I had a small practice in Edinburgh. With lace curtains in the window, and a shiny brass plate by the door, with my name inscribed upon it. But I grew rather tired of making wills and drawing up conveyances, and seeing the same faces in the street, day after day. So I left," he said simply.

He had purchased a horse and some supplies and set off, with no idea where he was going, or what to do once he got there.

"Ye see, I must confess," he said, dabbing his nose primly with a monogrammed handkerchief, "to something of a taste for … adventure. However, neither my stature nor my family background had fitted me for the life of highwayman or seafarer, which were the most adventurous occupations I could envision at the time. As an alternative, I determined that my best path lay upward, into the Highlands. I thought that in time I might perhaps induce some clan chieftain to, well, to allow me to serve him in some way."

And in the course of his travels, he had in fact encountered such a chieftain.

"Jacob MacKenzie," he said, with a fond, reminiscent smile. "And a wicked, red auld rascal he was." Mr. Gowan nodded toward the front of the line, where Jamie MacTavish's bright hair blazed in the mist. "His grandson's verra like him, ye ken. We met first at the point of a pistol, Jacob and I, as he was robbing me. I yielded my horse and my bags with good grace, having little other choice. But I believe he was a bit taken aback when I insisted upon accompanying him, on foot if necessary."

"Jacob MacKenzie. That would be Colum and Dougal's father?" I asked.

The elderly lawyer nodded. “Aye. Of course, he was not laird then. That happened a few years later … with a very small bit of assistance from me,” he added modestly. “Things were less … civilized then,” he said nostalgically.

“Oh, were they?” I said politely. “And Colum, er, inherited you, so to speak?”

“Something of the kind,” Mr. Gowan said. “There was a wee bit o’ confusion when Jacob died, d’ye see. Colum was heir to Leoch, to be sure, but he …” The lawyer paused, looking ahead and behind to see that no one was close enough to listen. The man-at-arms had ridden forward, though, to catch up with some of his mates, and a good four lengths separated us from the wagon-driver behind.

“Colum was a whole man to the age of eighteen or so,” he resumed his story, “and gave promise to be a fine leader. He took Letitia to wife as part of an alliance with the Camerons—I drew up the marriage contract,” he added, as a footnote, “but soon after the marriage he had a bad fall, during a raid. Broke the long bone of his thigh, and it mended poorly.”

I nodded. It would have, of course.

“And then,” Mr. Gowan went on with a sigh, “he rose from his bed too soon, and took a tumble down the stairs that broke the other leg. He lay in his bed close on a year, but it soon became clear that the damage was permanent. And that was when Jacob died, unfortunately.”

The little man paused to marshal his thoughts. He glanced ahead again, as though looking for someone. Failing to find them, he settled back into the saddle.

“That was about the time there was all the fuss about his sister’s marriage too,” he said. “And Dougal … well, I’m afraid Dougal did not acquit himself so verra weel over that affair. Otherwise, d’ye see, Dougal might have been made chief at the time, but ’twas felt he’d not the judgment for it yet.” He shook his head. “Oh, there was a great stramash about it all. There were cousins and uncles and tacksmen, and a great Gathering to decide the matter.”

“But they did choose Colum, after all?” I said. I marveled once again at the force of personality of Colum MacKenzie. And, casting an eye at the withered little man who rode at my side, I rather thought Colum had also had some luck in choosing his allies.

"They did, but only because the brothers stood firm together. There was nae doubt, ye see, of Colum's courage, nor yet of his mind, but only of his body. 'Twas clear he'd never be able to lead his men into battle again. But there was Dougal, sound and whole, if a bit reckless and hot-headed. And he stood behind his brother's chair and vowed to follow Colum's word and be his legs and his sword-arm in the field. So a suggestion was made that Colum be allowed to become laird, as he should in the ordinary way, and Dougal be made war chieftain, to lead the clan in time of battle. It was a situation not without precedent," he added primly.

The modesty with which he had said "A suggestion was made …" made it clear just whose suggestion it had been.

"And whose man are you?" I asked. "Colum's or Dougal's?"

"My interests must lie with the MacKenzie clan as a whole," Mr. Gowan said circumspectly. "But as a matter of form, I have sworn my oath to Colum."

A matter of form, my foot, I thought. I had seen that oath-taking, though I did not recall the small form of the lawyer specifically among so many men. No man could have been present at that ceremony and remained unmoved, not even a born solicitor. And the little man on the bay mare, dry as his bones might be, and steeped to the marrow in the law, had by his own testimony the soul of a romantic.

"He must find you a great help," I said diplomatically.

"Oh, I do a bit from time to time," he said, "in a small way. As I do for others. Should ye find yourself in need of advice, m'dear," he said, beaming genially, "do feel free to call upon me. My discretion may be relied upon, I do assure you." He bowed quaintly from his saddle.

"To the same extent as your loyalty to Colum MacKenzie?" I said, arching my brows. The small brown eyes met mine full on, and I saw both the cleverness and the humor that lurked in their faded depths.

"Ah, weel," he said, without apology. "Worth a try."

"I suppose so," I said, more amused than angered. "But I assure *you,* Mr. Gowan, that I have no need of your discretion, at least at present." It's catching, I thought, hearing myself. I sound just like him.

"I am an English lady," I added firmly, "and nothing more. Colum is wasting his time—and yours—in trying to extract secrets from me that don't exist." Or that do exist, but are untellable, I thought. Mr. Gowan's discretion might be limitless, but not his belief.

"He didn't send you along just to coerce me into damaging revelations, did he?" I demanded, suddenly struck by the thought.

"Oh, no." Mr. Gowan gave a short laugh at the idea. "No, indeed, m'dear. I fulfill an essential function, in managing the records and receipts for Dougal, and performing such small legal requirements that the clansmen in the more distant areas may have. And I am afraid that even at my advanced age, I have not entirely outgrown the urge to seek adventure. Things are much more settled now than they used to be"—he heaved a sigh that might have been one of regret—"but there is always the possibility of robbery along the road, or attack near the borders."

He patted the second bag on his saddle. "This bag is not entirely empty, ye ken." He turned back the flap long enough for me to see the gleaming grips of a pair of scroll-handled pistols, snugly set in twin loops that kept them within easy reach.

He surveyed me with a glance that took in every detail of my costume and appearance.

"Ye should really be armed yourself, m'dear," he said in a tone of mild reproof. "Though I suppose Dougal thought it would not be suitable … still. I'll speak to him about it," he promised.

We passed the rest of the day in pleasant conversation, wandering among his reminiscences of the dear departed days when men were men, and the pernicious weed of civilization was less rampant upon the bonny wild face of the Highlands.

At nightfall, we made camp in a clearing beside the road. I had a blanket, rolled and tied behind my saddle, and with this I prepared to spend my first night of freedom from the castle. As I left the fire and made my way to a spot behind the trees, though, I was conscious of the glances that followed me. Even in the open air, it seemed, freedom had definite limits.

* * *

We reached the first stopping-place near noon of the second day. It was no more than a cluster of three or four huts, set off the road at the foot of a small glen. A stool was brought out from one of the cottages for Dougal's use, and a plank—thoughtfully brought along in one of the wagons—laid across two others to serve as a writing surface for Mr. Gowan.

He withdrew an enormous square of starched linen from the tailpocket of his coat and laid it neatly over a stump, temporarily withdrawn from its usual function as chopping block. He seated himself upon this and began to lay out inkhorn, ledgers, and receipt-book, as composed in his manner as though he were still behind his lace curtains in Edinburgh.

One by one, the men from the nearby crofts appeared, to conduct their annual business with the laird's representative. This was a leisurely affair, and conducted with a good deal less formality than the goings-on in the Hall of Castle Leoch. Each man came, fresh from field or shed, and drawing up a vacant stool, sat alongside Dougal in apparent equality, explaining, complaining, or merely chatting.

Some were accompanied by a sturdy son or two, bearing bags of grain or wool. At the conclusion of each conversation, the indefatigable Ned Gowan would write out a receipt for the payment of the year's rent, record the transaction neatly in his ledger, and flick a finger to one of the drovers, who would obligingly heave the payment onto a wagon. Less frequently, a small heap of coins would disappear into the depths of his leather bag with a faint chinking sound. Meanwhile, the men-at-arms lounged beneath the trees or disappeared up the wooded bank—to hunt, I supposed.

Variations of this scene were repeated over the next few days. Now and then I would be invited into a cottage for cider or milk, and all of the women would crowd into the small single room to talk with me. Sometimes a cluster of rude huts would be large enough to support a tavern or even an inn, which became Dougal's headquarters for the day.

Once in a while, the rents would include a horse, a sheep, or other livestock. These were generally traded to someone in the neighborhood for something more portable, or, if Jamie declared a horse fit for inclusion in the castle stables, it would be added to our string.

I wondered about Jamie's presence in the party. While the young man clearly knew horses well, so did most of the men in the party, including Dougal himself. Considering also that horses were both a rare sort of payment, and usually nothing special in the way of breeding, I wondered why it had been thought necessary to bring an expert along. It was a week after we had set out, in a village with an unpronounceable name, that I found out the real reason why Dougal had wanted Jamie.

The village, though small, was large enough to boast a tavern with two or three tables and several rickety stools. Here Dougal held his hearings and collected his rents. And after a rather indigestible luncheon of salt beef and turnips, he held court, buying ale for the tenants and cottars who had lingered after their transactions, and a few villagers who drifted in when their daily work was completed, to gawk at the strangers and hear such news as we carried.

I sat quietly on a settle in the corner, sipping sour ale and enjoying the respite from horseback. I was paying little attention to Dougal's talk, which shifted back and forth between Gaelic and English, ranging from bits of gossip and farming talk to what sounded like vulgar jokes and meandering stories.

I was wondering idly how long, at this rate, it might take to reach Fort William. And once there, exactly how I might best part company with the Scots of Castle Leoch without becoming equally entangled with the English army garrison. Lost in my own thoughts, I had not noticed that Dougal had been speaking for some time alone, as though making a speech of some kind. His hearers were following him intently, with occasional brief interjections and exclamations. Coming gradually back to an awareness of my surroundings, I realized that he was skillfully rousing his audience to a high pitch of excitement about *something*.

I glanced around. Fat Rupert and the little lawyer, Ned Gowan, sat against the wall behind Dougal, tankards of ale forgotten on the bench beside them as they listened intently. Jamie, frowning into his own tankard, leaned forward with his elbows on the table. Whatever Dougal was saying, he didn't seem to care for it.

With no warning, Dougal stood, seized Jamie's collar and pulled. Old, and shabbily made to begin with, the shirt tore cleanly down the seams. Taken completely by surprise, Jamie froze. His eyes narrowed, and I saw his jaw set tightly, but he didn't move as Dougal spread aside the ripped flaps of cloth to display his back to the onlookers.

There was a general gasp at sight of the scarred back, then a buzz of excited indignation. I opened my mouth, then caught the word "Sassenach," spoken with no kindly intonation, and shut it again.

Jamie, with a face like stone, stood and stepped back from the small crowd clustering around him. He carefully peeled off the remnants of his shirt, wadding the cloth into a ball. An elderly little woman, who reached the level of his elbow, was shaking her head and patting his back gingerly, making what I assumed were comforting remarks in Gaelic. If so, they were clearly not having the hoped-for effect.

He replied tersely to a few questions from the men present. The two or three young girls who had come in to fetch their families' dinner ale were clustered together against the far wall, whispering intently to each other, with frequent big-eyed glances across the room.

With a look at Dougal that should by rights have turned the older man to stone, Jamie tossed the ruins of his shirt into a corner of the hearth and left the room in three long strides, shaking off the sympathetic murmurs of the crowd.

Deprived of spectacle, their attentions turned back to Dougal. I didn't understand most of the comment, though the bits I caught seemed to be highly anti-English in nature. I was torn between wanting to follow Jamie outside, and staying inconspicuously where

I was. I doubted that he wanted any company, though, so I shrank back into my corner and kept my head down, studying my blurry, pale reflection in the surface of my tankard.

The clink of metal made me look up. One of the men, a sturdy-looking crofter in leather trews, had tossed a few coins on the table in front of Dougal, and seemed to be making a short speech of his own. He stood back, thumbs braced in his belt, as though daring the rest to something. After an uncertain pause, one or two bold souls followed suit, and then a few more, digging copper doits and pence out of purse and sporran. Dougal thanked them heartily, waving a hand at the landlord for another round of ale. I noticed that the lawyer Ned Gowan was tidily stowing the new contributions in a separate pouch from that used for the MacKenzie rents bound for Colum's coffers, and I realized what the purpose of Dougal's little performance must be.

Rebellions, like most other business propositions, require capital. The raising and provisioning of an army takes gold, as does the maintenance of its leaders. And from the little I remembered of Bonnie Prince Charlie, the Young Pretender to the throne, part of his support had come from France, but part of the finances behind his unsuccessful rising had come from the shallow, thread-bare pockets of the people he proposed to rule. So Colum, or Dougal, or both, were Jacobites; supporters of the Young Pretender against the lawful occupant of the throne of England, George II.

Finally, the last of the cottars and tenants drifted away to their dinners, and Dougal stood up and stretched, looking moderately satisfied, like a cat that has dined at least on milk, if not cream. He weighed the smaller pouch, and tossed it back to Ned Gowan for safekeeping.

"Aye, well enough," he remarked. "Canna expect a great deal from such a small place. But manage enough of the same, and it will be a respectable sum."

" 'Respectable' is not quite the word I'd use," I said, rising stiffly from my lurking place.

Dougal turned, as though noticing me for the first time.

"No?" he said, mouth curling in amusement. "Why not? Have ye an objection to loyal subjects contributing their mite in support of their sovereign?"

"None," I said, meeting his stare. "No matter which sovereign it is. It's your collection methods I don't care for."

Dougal studied me carefully, as though my features might tell him something. "No matter which sovereign it is?" he repeated softly. "I thought ye had no Gaelic."

"I haven't," I said shortly. "But I've the sense I was born with, and two ears in good working order. And whatever 'King George's health' may be in Gaelic, I doubt very much that it sounds like 'Bragh Stuart.' "

He tossed back his head and laughed. "That it doesna," he agreed. "I'd tell ye the proper Gaelic for your liege lord and ruler, but it isna a word suitable for the lips of a lady, Sassenach or no."

Stooping, he plucked the balled-up shirt out of the ashes of the hearth and shook the worst of the soot off it.

"Since ye dinna care for my methods, perhaps ye'd wish to remedy them," he suggested, thrusting the ruined shirt into my hands. "Get a needle from the lady of the house and mend it."

"Mend it yourself!" I shoved it back into his arms and turned to leave.

"Suit yourself," Dougal said pleasantly from behind me. "Jamie can mend his own shirt, then, if you're not disposed to help."

I stopped, then turned reluctantly, hand out.

"All right," I began, but was interrupted by a large hand that snaked over my shoulder and snatched the shirt from Dougal's grasp. Dividing an opaque glance evenly between us, Jamie tucked the shirt under his arm and left the room as silently as he had entered it.

* * *

We found accommodation for the night at a crofter's cottage. Or I should say I did. The men slept outside, disposed in various haystacks, wagon-beds and patches of bracken. In deference to my sex or my status as semicaptive, I was provided with a pallet on the floor inside, near the hearth.

While my pallet seemed vastly preferable to the single bedstead in which the entire family of six was sleeping, I rather envied the men their open-air sleeping arrangements. The fire was not put out, only damped for the night, and the air in the cottage was stifling with warmth and the scents and sounds of the tossing, turning, groaning, snoring, sweating, farting inhabitants.

After some time, I gave up any thought of sleeping in that smothered atmosphere. I rose and stole quietly outside, taking a blanket with me. The air outside was so fresh by contrast with the congestion in the cottage that I leaned against the stone wall, gulping in enormous lungfuls of the delicious cool stuff.

There was a guard, sitting in quiet watchfulness under a tree by the path, but he merely glanced at me. Apparently deciding that I was not going far in my shift, he went back to whittling at a small object in his hands. The moon was bright, and the blade of the tiny *sgian dhu* flickered in the leafy shadows.

I walked around the cottage, and a little way up the hill behind it, careful to watch for slumbering forms in the grass. I found a pleasant private spot between two large boulders and made a comfortable nest for myself from heaped grass and the blanket. Stretched at length on the ground, I watched the full moon on its slow voyage across the sky.

Just so had I watched the moon rise from the window of Castle Leoch, on my first night as Colum’s unwilling guest. A month, then, since my calamitous passage through the circle of standing stones. At least I now thought I knew why the stones had been placed there.

Likely of no particular importance in themselves, they were markers. Just as a signpost warns of rockfalls near a cliff-edge, the standing stones were meant to mark a spot of danger. A spot where … what? Where the crust of time was thin? Where a gate of some sort stood ajar? Not that the makers of the circles would have known what it was they were marking. To them, the spot would have been one of terrible mystery and powerful magic; a spot where people disappeared without warning. Or appeared, perhaps, out of thin air.

That was a thought. What would have happened, I wondered, had anyone been present on the hill of Craigh na Dun when I made my abrupt appearance? I supposed it might depend on the time one entered. Here, had a cottar encountered me under such circumstances, I would doubtless have been thought a witch or a fairy. More likely a fairy, popping into existence on that particular hill, with its reputation.

And that might well be where its reputation came from, I thought. If people through the years had suddenly disappeared, or just as suddenly appeared from nowhere at a certain spot, it might with good reason acquire a name for enchantment.

I poked a foot out from under the blanket and waggled my long toes in the moonlight. Most unfairylike, I decided critically. At five foot six, I was quite a tall woman for these times; as tall as many men. Since I could hardly pass as one of the Wee Folk, then, I would likely have been thought a witch or an evil spirit of some kind. From the little I knew of current methods for dealing with such manifestations, I could only be grateful that no one, in fact, had seen me appear.

I wondered idly what would happen if it worked the other way. What if someone disappeared from this time, and popped up in my own? That, after all, was precisely what I was intending to do, if there were any possible way of managing it. How would a modern-day Scot, like Mrs. Buchanan, the postmistress, react if someone like Murtagh, for instance, were suddenly to spring from the earth beneath her feet?

The most likely reaction, I thought, would be to run, to summon the police, or perhaps to do nothing at all, beyond telling one's friends and neighbors about the most extraordinary thing that happened the other day….

As for the visitor? Well, he might manage to fit into the new time without arousing excessive attention, if he was cautious and lucky. After all, I was managing to pass with some success as a normal resident of this time and place, though my appearance and language had certainly aroused plenty of suspicion.

What if a displaced person were *too* different, though, or went about loudly proclaiming what had happened to him? If the exit were in primitive times, likely a conspicuous stranger would simply have been killed on the spot without further inquiry. And in more enlightened times, they would most likely be considered mad and tidied away into an institution somewhere, if they didn't quiet down.

This sort of thing could have been going on as long the earth itself, I reflected. Even when it happened in front of witnesses, there would be no clues at all; nothing to tell what had happened, because the only person who knew would be gone. And as for the disappeared, they'd likely keep their mouths shut at the other end.

Deep in my thoughts, I hadn't noticed the faint murmur of voices or the stirrings of footsteps through the grass, and I was quite startled to hear a voice speak only a few yards away.

"Devil take ye, Dougal MacKenzie," it said. "Kinsman or no, I dinna owe ye that." The voice was pitched low, but tight with anger.

"Do ye no?" said another voice, faintly amused. "I seem to recall a certain oath, giving your obedience. 'So long as my feet rest on the lands of clan MacKenzie,' I believe was the way of it." There was a soft thud, as of a foot stamping packed earth. "And MacKenzie land it is, laddie."

"I gave my word to Colum, not to you." So it was young Jamie MacTavish, and precisely three guesses as to what he was upset about.

"One and the same, man, and ye ken it well." There was the sound of a light slap, as of a hand against a cheek. "Your obedience is to the chieftain of the clan, and outside of Leoch, I am Colum's head and arms and hands as well as his legs."

"And never saw I a better case of the right hand not knowin' what the left is up to," came the quick rejoinder. Despite the bitterness of the tone, there was a lurking wit that enjoyed this clash of wills. "What d'ye think the right is going to say about the left collecting gold for the Stuarts?"

There was a brief pause before Dougal replied, “MacKenzies and MacBeolains and MacVinichs; they’re free men all. None can force them to give against their will, and none can stop them, either. And who knows? It may happen that Colum will give more for Prince Charles Edward than all o’ them put together, in the end.”

“It may,” the deeper voice agreed. “It may rain straight up tomorrow instead of down, as well. That doesna mean I’ll stand waiting at the stairhead wi’ my wee bucket turned upside down.”

“No? You’ve more to gain from a Stuart throne than I have, laddie. And naught from the English, save a noose. If ye dinna care for your own silly neck—”

“My neck is my own concern,” Jamie interrupted savagely. “And so is my back.”

“Not while ye travel with me, sweet lad,” said his uncle’s mocking voice. “If ye wish to hear what Horrocks may tell ye, you’ll do as you’re told, yourself. And wise to do it, at that; a fine hand ye may be wi’ a needle, but you’ve no but the one clean shirt.”

There was a shifting, as of someone rising from his seat on a rock, and the soft passage of footsteps through the grass. Only one set of footsteps, though, I thought. I sat up as quietly as I could, and peered cautiously around the edge of one of the boulders that hid me.

Jamie was still there, sitting hunched on a rock a few feet away, elbows braced on his knees, chin sunk on his locked hands. His back was mostly to me. I started to ease backward, not wishing to intrude on his solitude, when he suddenly spoke.

“I know you’re there,” he said. “Come out, if ye like.” From his tone, it was a matter of complete indifference to him. I rose and started to come out, when I realized I had been lying in my shift. Reflecting that he had enough to worry about without needing to blush for me as well, I tactfully wrapped myself in the blanket before emerging.

I sat down near him and leaned back against a rock, watching him a little diffidently. Beyond a brief nod of acknowledgment, he ignored me, completely occupied with inward thoughts of no very pleasant form, to judge from the dark frown on his face. One foot tapped restlessly against the rock he sat on, and he twisted his fingers together, clenching, then spreading them with a force that made several knuckles pop with soft crackling sounds.

It was the popping knuckles that reminded me of Captain Manson. The supply officer for the field hospital where I had worked, Captain Manson suffered shortages, missed deliveries, and the endless idiocies of the army bureaucracy as his own personal slings and arrows. Normally a mild and pleasant-spoken man, when the frustrations became too great, he would retire briefly into his private office and punch the wall behind the door with all the force he could muster. Visitors in the outer reception area would watch in fascination as the flimsy wallboard quivered under the force of the blows. A few moments later, Captain Manson would reemerge, bruised of knuckle but once more calm of spirit, to deal with the current crisis. By the time he was transferred to another unit, the wall behind his door was pocked with dozens of fist-sized holes.

Watching the young man on the rock trying to disjoint his own fingers, I was forcibly reminded of the captain, facing some insoluble problem of supply.

"You need to hit something," I said.

"Eh?" He looked up in surprise, apparently having forgotten I was there.

"Hit something," I advised. "You'll feel better for it."

His mouth quirked as though about to say something, but instead he rose from his rock, headed decisively for a sturdy-looking cherry tree, and dealt it a solid blow. Apparently finding this some palliative to his feelings, he smashed the quivering trunk several times more, causing a delirious shower of pale-pink petals to rain down upon his head.

Sucking a grazed knuckle, he came back a moment later.

"Thank ye," he said, with a wry smile. "Perhaps I'll sleep tonight after all."

"Did you hurt your hand?" I rose to examine it, but he shook his head, rubbing the knuckles gently with the palm of the other hand.

"Nay, it's nothing."

We stood a moment in awkward silence. I didn't want to refer to the scene I had overheard, or to the earlier events of the evening. I broke the silence finally by saying, "I didn't know you were a lefty."

"A lefty? Oh, cack-handed, ye mean. Aye, always have been. The schoolmaster used to tie that one to my belt behind my back, to make me write wi' the other."

"Can you? Write with the other, I mean?"

He nodded, reapplying the injured hand to his mouth. "Aye. Makes my head ache to do it, though."

"Do you fight left-handed too?" I asked, wanting to distract him. "With a sword, I mean?" He was wearing no arms at the moment except his dirk and *sgian dhu,* but during the day he customarily wore both sword and pistols, as did most of the men in the party.

"No, I use a sword well enough in either hand. A left-handed swordsman's at a disadvantage, ye ken, wi' a small-sword, for ye fight wi' your left side turned to the enemy, and your heart's on that side, d'ye see?"

Too filled with nervous energy to keep still, he had begun to stride about the grassy clearing, making illustrative gestures with an imaginary sword. "It makes little difference wi' a broadsword," he said. He extended both arms straight out, hands together and swept them in a flat, graceful arc through the air. "Ye use both hands, usually," he explained.

"Or if you're close enough to use only one, it doesna matter much which, for you come down from above and cleave the man through the shoulder. Not the head," he added instructively, "for the blade may slip off easy. Catch him clean in the notch, though"—he chopped the edge of his hand at the juncture of neck and shoulder—"and he's dead. And if it's not a clean cut, still the man will no fight again that day—or ever, likely," he added.

His left hand dropped to his belt and he drew the dirk in a motion like water pouring from a glass.

"Now, to fight wi' sword and dirk together," he said, "if ye have no targe to shelter your dirk hand, then you favor the right side, wi' the small-sword in that hand, and come up from underneath wi' the dirk if ye fight in close. But if the dirk hand is well shielded, ye can come from either side, and twist your body about"—he ducked and weaved, illustrating—"to keep the enemy's blade away, and use the dirk only if ye lose the sword or the use of the sword arm."

He dropped low and brought the blade up in a swift, murderous jab that stopped an inch short of my breast. I stepped back involuntarily, and at once he stood upright, sheathing the dirk with an apologetic smile.

"I'm sorry. I'm showin' off. I didna mean to startle ye."

"You're awfully good," I said, with sincerity. "Who taught you to fight?" I asked. "I'd think you'd need another left-handed fighter to show you."

"Aye, it was a left-handed fighter. The best I've ever seen." He smiled briefly, without humor. "Dougal MacKenzie."

Most of the cherry blossoms had fallen from his head by now; only a few pink petals clung to his shoulders, and I reached out to brush them away. The seam of his shirt had been mended neatly, I saw, if without artistry. Even a rip through the fabric had been catch-stitched together.

"He'll do it again?" I said abruptly, unable to stop myself.

He paused before answering, but there was no pretense of not understanding what I meant.

"Oh, aye," he said at last, nodding. "It gets him what he wants, ye see."

"And you'll let him do it? Let him use you that way?"

He looked past me, down the hill toward the tavern, where a single light still showed through chinks in the timbers. His face was smooth and blank as a wall.

"For now."

* * *

We continued on our rounds, moving no more than a few miles a day, often stopping for Dougal to conduct business at a crossroads or a cottage, where several tenants would gather with their bags of grain and bits of carefully hoarded money. All was recorded in ledgers by the quick-moving pen of Ned Gowan, and such receipts as were needed dispensed from his scrap-bag of parchment and papers.

And when we reached a hamlet or village large enough to boast an inn or tavern, Dougal would once more do his turn, standing drinks, telling stories, making speeches, and finally, if he judged the prospects good enough, he would force Jamie to his feet to show his scars. And a few more coins would be added to the second bag, the purse bound for France and the court of the Pretender.

I tried to judge such scenes as they developed, and step outside before the climax, public crucifixion never having been much to my taste. While the initial reaction to the sight of Jamie's back was horrified pity, followed by bursts of invective against the English army and King George, often there was a slight flavor of contempt that even I could pick up. On one occasion I heard one man remark softly to a friend in English, "An awfu' sight, man, is it no? Christ, I'd die in my blood before I let a whey-faced Sassenach to use me so."

Angry and miserable to start with, Jamie grew more wretched each day. He would shrug back into his shirt as soon as possible, avoiding questions and commiseration, and seek an excuse to leave the gathering, avoiding everyone until we took horse the following morning.

The breaking point came a few days later, in a small village called Tunnaig. This time, Dougal was still exhorting the crowd, a hand on Jamie's bare shoulder, when one of the onlookers, a young lout with long, dirty brown hair, made some personal remark to Jamie. I couldn't tell what was said, but the effect was instantaneous. Jamie wrenched out of Dougal's grasp and hit the lad in the stomach, knocking him flat.

I was slowly learning to put a few words of Gaelic together, though I could in no way be said to understand the language yet. However, I had noticed that I often could tell what was being said from the attitude of the speaker, whether I understood the words or not.

"Get up and say that again," *looks* the same said in any schoolyard, pub, or alley in the world.

So does "Right you are, mate," and "Get him, lads!"

Jamie disappeared under an avalanche of grimy work clothes as the rents-table went over with a crash beneath the weight of brown-hair and two of his friends. Innocent bystanders pressed back against the walls of the tavern and prepared to enjoy the spectacle. I sidled closer to Ned and Murtagh, eyeing the heaving mass of limbs uneasily. A lonely flash of red hair showed occasionally in the twisting sea of arms and legs.

"Shouldn't you help him?" I murmured to Murtagh, out of the corner of my mouth. He looked surprised at the idea.

"No, why?"

"He'll call for help if he needs it," said Ned Gowan, tranquilly watching from my other side.

"Whatever you say." I subsided doubtfully.

I wasn't at all sure Jamie would be able to call for help if he needed it; at the moment he was being throttled by a stout lad in green. My personal opinion was that Dougal would soon be short one prime exhibit, but he didn't seem concerned. In fact, none of the watchers seemed at all bothered by the mayhem taking place on the floor at our feet. A few bets were being taken, but the overall air was one of quiet enjoyment of the entertainment.

I was glad to notice that Rupert drifted casually across the path of a couple of men who seemed to be contemplating joining the action. As they took a step toward the fray, he bumbled absentmindedly into their way, hand lightly resting on his dirk. They fell back, deciding to leave well enough alone.

The general feeling appeared to be that three to one was reasonable odds. Given that the one was quite large, an accomplished fighter, and obviously in the grip of a berserk fury, that might be true.

The contest seemed to be evening out with the abrupt retirement of the stout party in green, dripping blood as the result of a well-placed elbow to the nose.

It went on for several minutes more, but the conclusion became more and more obvious, as a second fighter fell by the wayside and rolled under a table, moaning and clutching his groin. Jamie and his original antagonist were still hammering each other earnestly in the middle of the floor, but the Jamie-backers amongst the spectators were already collecting their winnings. A forearm across the windpipe, accompanied by a vicious kidney punch, decided brown-hair that discretion was the better part of valor.

I added a mental translation of "That's enough, I give up," to my growing Gaelic/English word list.

Jamie rose slowly off the body of his last opponent to the cheers of the crowd. Nodding breathlessly in acknowledgment, he staggered to one of the few benches still standing, and flopped down, streaming sweat and blood, to accept a tankard of ale from the publican. Gulping it down, he set the empty tankard on the bench and leaned forward, gasping for breath, elbows on his knees and the scars on his back defiantly displayed.

For once he was in no hurry to resume his shirt; in spite of the chill in the pub, he remained half-naked, only putting on his shirt to go outside when it was time to seek our lodging for the night. He left to a chorus of respectful good nights, looking more relaxed than he had in days, in spite of the pain from scrapes, cuts, and assorted contusions.

* * *

"One scraped shin, one cut eyebrow, one split lip, one bloody nose, six smashed knuckles, one sprained thumb, and two loosened teeth. Plus more contusions than I care to count." I completed my inventory with a sigh. "How do you feel?" We were alone, in the small shed behind the inn where I had taken him to administer first aid.

"Fine," he said, grinning. He started to stand up, but froze halfway, grimacing. "Aye, well. Perhaps the ribs hurt a bit."

"Of course they hurt. You're black and blue—again. Why do you do such things? What in God's name do you think you're made of? Iron?" I demanded irritably.

He grinned ruefully and touched his swollen nose.

"No. I wish I were."

I sighed again and prodded him gently around the middle.

"I don't think they're cracked; it's only bruises. I'll strap them, though, in case. Stand up straight, roll up your shirt, and hold your arms out from your sides.” I began to tear strips from an old shawl I’d got from the innkeeper’s wife. Muttering under my breath about sticking plaster and other amenities of civilized life, I improvised a strap dressing, pulling it tight and fastening it with the ring-brooch off his plaid.

“I can’t breathe,” he complained.

“If you breathe, it will hurt. Don’t move. Where did you learn to fight like that? Dougal, again?”

“No.” he winced away from the vinegar I was applying to the cut eyebrow. “My father taught me.”

“Really? What was your father, the local boxing champion?”

“What’s boxing? No, he was a farmer. Bred horses too.” Jamie sucked in his breath as I continued the vinegar application on his barked shin.

“When I was nine or ten, he said he thought I was going to be big as my mother’s folk, so I’d have to learn to fight.” He was breathing more easily now, and held out a hand to let me rub marigold ointment into the knuckles.

“He said, ‘If you’re sizable, half the men ye meet will fear ye, and the other half will want to try ye. Knock one down,’ he said, ‘and the rest will let ye be. But learn to do it fast and clean, or you’ll be fightin’ all your life.’ So he’d take me to the barn and knock me into the straw until I learned to hit back. Ow! That stings.”

“Fingernail gouges are nasty wounds,” I said, swabbing busily at his neck. “Especially if the gouger doesn’t wash regularly. And I doubt that greasy-haired lad bathes once a year. ‘Fast and clean’ isn’t quite how I’d describe what you did tonight, but it *was* impressive. Your father would be proud of you.”

I spoke with some sarcasm, and was surprised to see a shadow pass across his face.

“My father’s dead,” he said flatly.

“I’m sorry.” I finished the swabbing, then said softly, “But I meant it. He *would* be proud of you.”

He didn’t answer, but gave me a half-smile in reply. He suddenly seemed very young, and I wondered just how old he was. I was about to ask when a raspy cough from behind announced a visitor to the shed.

It was the stringy little man named Murtagh. He eyed Jamie's strapped-up ribs with some amusement, and lobbed a small wash leather bag through the air. Jamie put up a large hand and caught it easily, with a small clinking sound.

"And what's this?" he asked.

Murtagh raised one sketchy brow. "Your share o' the wagers, what else?"

Jamie shook his head and made to toss the bag back.

"I didna wager anything."

Murtagh raised a hand to stop him. "You did the work. You're a verra popular fellow at the moment, at least wi' those that backed ye."

"But not with Dougal, I don't suppose," I interjected.

Murtagh was one of those men who always looked a bit startled to find that women had voices, but he nodded politely enough.

"Aye, that's true. Still, I dinna see as that should trouble ye," he said to Jamie.

"No?" A glance passed between the two men, with a message I didn't understand. Jamie blew his breath out softly through his teeth, nodding slowly to himself.

"When?" he asked.

"A week. Ten days, perhaps. Near a place called Lag Cruime. You'll know it?"

Jamie nodded again, looking more content than I had seen him in some time. "I know it."

I looked from one face to the other, both closed and secretive. So Murtagh had found out something. Something to do with the mysterious "Horrocks" perhaps? I shrugged. Whatever the cause, it appeared that Jamie's days as an exhibition were over.

"I suppose Dougal can always tap-dance instead," I said.

"Eh?" The secretive looks changed to looks of startlement.

"Never mind. Sleep well." I picked up my box of medical supplies and went to find my own rest.

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12

THE GARRISON COMMANDER

We were drawing nearer to Fort William, and I began to ponder seriously what my plan of action should be, once we had arrived there.

It depended, I thought, upon what the garrison commander was likely to do. If he believed that I was a gentlewoman in distress, he might provide me with temporary escort toward the coast and my putative embarkation for France.

But he might be suspicious of me, turning up in the company of the MacKenzies. Still, I was patently not a Scot myself; surely he would not be inclined to think me a spy of some sort? That was evidently what Colum and Dougal thought—that I was an English spy.

Which made me wonder what I was meant to be spying on? Well, unpatriotic activities, I supposed; of which, collecting money for the support of Prince Charles Edward Stuart, pretender to the throne, was definitely one.

But in that case, why had Dougal allowed me to see him do it? He could easily enough have sent me outside before that part of the proceedings. Of course, the proceedings had all been held in Gaelic, I argued with myself.

Perhaps that was the point, though. I remembered the odd gleam in his eyes and his question, "I thought ye had no Gaelic?" Perhaps it was a test, to see whether I really was ignorant of the language. For an English spy scarcely would have been sent into the Highlands, unable to speak with more than half the people there.

But no, the conversation I had overheard between Jamie and Dougal would seem to indicate that Dougal was indeed a Jacobite, though Colum apparently was not—yet.

My head was beginning to buzz with all these suppositions, and I was glad to see that we were approaching a fairly large village. Likely that meant a good inn, as well, and a decent supper.

The inn was in fact commodious, by the standards I had grown accustomed to. If the bed was apparently designed for midgets—and flea-bitten ones, at that—at least it was in a chamber to itself. In several of the smaller inns, I had slept on a settle in the common room, surrounded by snoring male forms and the humped shadows of plaid-wrapped shapes.

Customarily I fell asleep immediately, whatever the sleeping conditions, worn out by a day in the saddle and an evening of Dougal's politicizing. The first evening in an inn, though, I had remained awake for a good half-hour, fascinated by the remarkable variety of noises the male respiratory apparatus could produce. An entire dormitory full of student nurses couldn't come close.

It occurred to me, listening to the chorus, that men in a hospital ward seldom really snore. Breathe heavily, yes. They gasp, groan occasionally, and sometimes sob or cry out in sleep. But there was no comparison to this healthy racket. Perhaps it was that sick or injured men could not sleep deeply enough to relax into that sort of din.

If my observations were sound, then my companions were plainly in the most robust health. They certainly looked it, limbs casually asprawl, faces slack and glowing in the firelight. The complete abandon of their sleep on hard boards was the satisfying of an appetite as hearty as the one they had brought to dinner. Obscurely comforted by the cacophony, I had pulled my traveling cloak around my shoulders and went to sleep myself.

By comparison, I found myself now rather lonely here in the solitary splendor of my tiny, smelly attic. Despite having removed the bedclothes and beaten the mattress to discourage unwelcome co-habitants, I had some difficulty in sleeping, so silent and dark did the chamber seem after I had blown out the candle.

There were a few faint echoes from the common room two floors below, and a brief flurry of noise and movement, but this served only to emphasize my own isolation. It was the first time I had been left so completely alone since my arrival at the castle, and I was not at all sure I liked it.

I was hovering uneasily on the verge of sleep, when my ears picked up an ominous creaking of floorboards in the hall outside. The step was slow and halting, as though the intruder hesitated in his path, picking the soundest-appearing of the boards for each next step. I sat bolt upright, groping for the candle and flint box by the bed.

My hand, blindly searching, struck the flint box and knocked it to the floor with a soft thump. I froze, and the steps outside did likewise.

There was a soft scratching at the door, as of someone groping for the latch. I knew the door was unbolted; though it was fitted with brackets for a bolt, I had searched unavailingly for the bolt itself before retiring. I grabbed the candlestick, yanked the stub of the candle out, and slid out of bed as quietly as I could, clutching the heavy pottery.

The door squeaked slightly on its hinges as it gave. The room's only window was tightly shuttered against both elements and light; nonetheless I could just make out the dim outline of the door as it opened. The outline grew, then to my surprise, it shrank and disappeared as the door shut again. Everything was quiet once more.

I stayed pressed against the wall for what seemed like ages, holding my breath and trying to hear through the noise of my pounding heart. At last I inched toward the door, edging carefully around the room next to the wall, thinking the floorboards must surely be more solid here. I eased my foot down at each step, gradually trusting my weight to it, then pausing and groping with bare toes for the seam between two boards, before setting the other foot as solidly as I could judge.

Once the door was reached, I paused, ear pressed to the thin panels, hands braced on the frame, on guard against a sudden bursting inward. I thought perhaps I heard slight sounds, but wasn't sure. Was it only the sounds of the activity down below, or was it the stifled breathing of someone on the other side of the panel?

The constant flow of adrenaline was making me slightly sick. Tiring at last of this nonsense, I took a firm grip of my candlestick, yanked open the door, and rushed into the hallway.

I say "rushed"; in actuality, I took two steps, trod heavily on something soft, and fell headlong into the passageway, skinning my knuckles and banging my head quite painfully on something solid.

I sat up, clutching my brow with both hands, completely uncaring that I might be assassinated at any moment.

The person I had stepped on was swearing in a rather breathless manner. Through the haze of pain, I was dimly aware that he (I assumed from the size and the smell of sweat that my visitor was male) had risen and was groping for the fastening of the shutters in the wall above us.

A sudden inrush of fresh air made me wince and shut my eyes. When I opened them, there was enough light from the night sky for me to see the intruder.

"What are *you* doing here?" I asked accusingly.

At the same time Jamie asked, in a similarly accusatory tone, "How much do ye weigh, Sassenach?"

Still a bit addled, I actually replied "Nine stone," before thinking to ask "Why?"

"Ye nearly crushed my liver," he answered, gingerly prodding the affected area. "Not to mention scaring living hell out of me." He reached a hand down and hauled me to my feet. "Are ye all right?"

"No, I bumped my head." Rubbing the spot, I looked dazedly around the bare hallway. "What did I bang it on?" I demanded ungrammatically.

"*My* head," he said, rather grumpily, I thought.

"Serves you right," I said nastily. "What were you doing, sneaking about outside my door?"

He gave me a testy look.

"I wasna 'sneaking about,' for God's sake. I was sleeping—or trying to." He rubbed what appeared to be a knot forming on his temple.

"Sleeping? *Here?*" I looked up and down the cold, bare, filthy hallway with exaggerated amazement. "You do pick the oddest places; first stables, now this."

"It may interest ye to know that there's a small party of English dragoons stopped in to the taproom below," he informed me coldly. "They're a bit gone in drink, and disporting themselves a bit reckless with two women from the town. Since there's but the two lasses, and five men, some of the soldiers seemed a bit inclined to venture upward in search of … ah, partners. I didna think you'd care overmuch for such attentions." He flipped his plaid back over his shoulder and turned in the direction of the stairway. "If I was mistaken in that impression, then I apologize. I'd no intention of disturbin' your rest. Good e'en to ye."

"Wait a minute." He stopped, but did not turn back, forcing me to walk around him. He looked down at me, polite but distant.

"Thank you," I said. "It was very kind of you. I'm sorry I stepped on you."

He smiled then, his face changing from a forbidding mask to its usual expression of good humor.

"No harm done, Sassenach," he said. "As soon as the headache goes away and the cracked rib heals, I'll be good as new."

He turned back and pushed open the door of my room, which had swung shut in the wake of my hasty exit, owing to the fact that the builder had apparently constructed the inn without benefit of a plumb line. There wasn't a right angle in the place.

"Go back to bed, then," he suggested. "I'll be here."

I looked at the floor. Besides its essential hardness and coldness, the oaken boards were blotched with expectorations, spills, and forms of filth I didn't wish even to contemplate. The builder's mark in the door lintel had said 1732, and that was plainly the last time the boards had been cleaned.

"You can't sleep out here," I said. "Come in; at least the floor in the room isn't quite this bad."

Jamie froze, hand on the doorframe.

"Sleep in your room with ye?" He sounded truly shocked. "I couldna do that! Your reputation would be ruined!"

He really meant it. I started to laugh, but converted it into a tactful coughing fit. Given the exigencies of road travel, the crowded state of the inns, and the crudity or complete lack of sanitary facilities, I was on terms of such physical intimacy with these men, Jamie included, that I found the idea of such prudery hilarious.

"You've slept in the same room with me before," I pointed out, when I had recovered a bit. "You and twenty other men."

He sputtered a bit. "That isna at all the same thing! I mean, it was a quite public room, and …" He paused as an awful thought struck him. "You didna think I meant that you were suggesting anything improper?" he asked anxiously. "I assure ye, I—"

"No, no. Not at all." I made haste to reassure him that I had taken no offense.

Seeing that he could not be persuaded, I insisted that at the least he must take the blankets from my bed to lie upon. He agreed to this reluctantly, and only upon my repeated assurances that I would not use them myself in any case, but intended to sleep as usual in the cover of my thick traveling cloak.

I tried to thank him again, as I paused by the makeshift pallet before returning to my fetid sanctuary, but he waved away my appreciation with a gracious hand.

"It isna entirely disintested kindness on my part, ye ken," he observed. "I'd as soon avoid notice myself."

I had forgotten that he had his own reasons for keeping away from English soldiery. It did not escape me, however, that this could have been much better accomplished, not to say more comfortably, by his sleeping in the warm and airy stables, rather than on the floor before my door.

"But if anyone *does* come up here," I protested, "they'll find you then."

He reached a long arm out to grasp the swinging shutter and pulled it to. The hall was plunged in blackness, and Jamie appeared as no more than a shapeless bulk.

"They canna see my face," he pointed out. "And in the condition they're in, my name would be of no interest to them, either, even were I to give them the right one, which I dinna mean to do."

"That's true," I said, doubtfully. "Won't they wonder, though, what you're doing up here in the dark?" I could see nothing of his face, but the tone of his voice told me he was smiling.

"Not at all, Sassenach. They'll just think I'm waiting my turn."

I laughed and went in then. I curled myself on the bed and went to sleep, marveling at the mind that could make such ribald jokes even as it recoiled at the thought of sleeping in the same room with me.

* * *

When I awoke, Jamie was gone. Going down to breakfast, I met Dougal at the foot of the stairs, waiting for me.

"Eat up quickly, lass," he said. "You and I are riding to Brockton."

He declined to tell me anything further, but he seemed a bit uneasy, I thought. I ate quickly, and we soon found ourselves trotting through the misty early morning. Birds were busy in the shrubbery, and the air gave promise of a warm summer day to come.

"Who are we going to see?" I asked. "You may as well tell me, since if I don't know, I'll be surprised, and if I do, I'm intelligent enough to act surprised, anyway."

Dougal cocked an eye at me, considering, but decided that my argument was sound.

"The garrison commander from Fort William," he said.

I felt a minor shock. I wasn't quite ready for this. I had thought we had three days yet until we reached the Fort.

"But we're nowhere near Fort William!" I exclaimed.

"Mmphm."

Apparently this garrison commander was an energetic sort. Not content to stay at home minding his garrison, he was out inspecting the countryside with a party of dragoons. The soldiers who had come to our inn the night before were part of this group, and had told Dougal that the commander was presently in residence at the inn at Brockton.

This presented a problem, and I was silent for the rest of the ride, contemplating it. I had counted on being able to extract myself from Dougal's company at Fort William, which I thought to be within a day's travel of the hill of Craigh na Dun. Even unprepared for camping, and lacking food or other resources, I thought I could cover that much ground alone, and find my way to the stone circle. As to what would happen then—well, there was no way to tell except by going there.

But this development threw an unexpected spanner into my plans. If I parted company with Dougal here, as I well might, I would be four days' ride from the hill, not one. And I did not have sufficient faith in my sense of direction, let alone my endurance, to risk it alone on foot among the wild crags and moors. The last weeks of rugged travel had given me a wary respect for the jagged rocks and crashing burns of the Highlands, let alone the occasional wild beast. I had no particular desire to meet a boar, for example, face-to-face in some deserted glen.

We reached Brockton at mid-morning. The mist had burned away, and the day was sunny enough to give me a sense of optimism. Perhaps it would be a simple matter, after all, to persuade the garrison commander to provide me with a small escort who could see me to the hill.

I could see why the commander had chosen Brockton as his temporary headquarters. The village was large enough to boast two taverns, one of them an imposing three-story edifice with attached stable. Here we stopped, turning our horses over to the attention of a hostler, who moved so slowly as to seem ossified. He had barely succeeded in reaching the stable door by the time we were inside and Dougal was ordering refreshment from the innkeeper.

I was left below, contemplating a plate of rather stale-looking oatcakes, while Dougal mounted the stair to the commander's sanctum. It felt a bit strange to see him go. There were three or four English soldiers in the taproom, who eyed me speculatively, chatting to each other in low voices. After a month among the Scots of clan MacKenzie, the presence of English dragoons made me unaccountably nervous. I told myself I was being silly. After all, they were my own countrymen, out of time or not.

Still, I found myself missing the congenial company of Mr. Gowan and the pleasant familiarity of Jamie whatever-his-name-was. I was feeling rather sorry that I had had no chance to bid farewell to anyone before leaving that morning, when I heard Dougal's voice calling from the stair behind me. He was standing at the top, beckoning me upward.

He looked somewhat more grim than usual, I thought, as he stood aside without speaking and gestured me into the room. The garrison commander stood by the open window, his slim, straight figure silhouetted by the light. He gave a short laugh when he saw me.

"Yes, I thought so. It had to be you, from MacKenzie's description." The door closed behind me, and I was alone with Captain Jonathan Randall of His Majesty's Eighth Dragoons.

He was dressed this time in a clean red-and-fawn uniform, with a lace-trimmed stock and a neatly curled and powdered wig. But the face was the same—Frank's face. My breath caught in my throat. This time, though, I noticed the small lines of ruthlessness around his mouth, and the touch of arrogance in the set of his shoulders. Still, he smiled affably enough, and invited me to sit down.

The room was plainly furnished, with no more than a desk and chair, a long deal table, and a few stools. Captain Randall motioned to a young corporal who stood to attention near the door, and a mug of ale was clumsily poured and set before me.

The Captain waved the corporal back and poured his own ale, then sank gracefully onto a stool across the table from me.

"All right," he said pleasantly. "Why don't you tell me who you are, and how you come to find yourself here?"

Having little choice at this point, I told him the same story I had given Colum, omitting only the less tactful references to his own behavior, which he knew about in any case. I had no idea how much Dougal had told him, and didn't wish to risk being tripped up.

The captain appeared polite but skeptical throughout my recital. He took less trouble to hide it than Colum had, I reflected. He rocked back on his stool, considering.

"Oxfordshire, you say? There are no Beauchamps in Oxfordshire that I know of."

"How would you know?" I snapped. "You're from Sussex yourself."

His eyes popped open in surprise. I could have bitten my tongue.

"And may I ask just how you know *that*?" he asked.

"Er, your voice. Yes, it's your accent," I said hastily. "Clearly Sussex."

The graceful dark brows nearly touched the curls of his wig.

"Neither my tutors nor my parents would be much obliged to hear that my speech so clearly reflects my birthplace, Madam," he said dryly. "They having gone to considerable trouble and expense to remedy it. But, being the expert at local speech patterns that you are"—he turned to the man standing against the wall—"no doubt you can also identify my corporal's place of origin. Corporal Hawkins, would you oblige me by reciting something? Anything at all will do," he added, seeing the confusion on the man's face. "Some popular verse, perhaps?"

The corporal, a young man with a stupid, beefy face and broad shoulders, glanced wildly about the room seeking inspiration, then drew himself up to attention and intoned,

Buxom Meg, she washed my clothes,
And took them all away.
I waited thus in sore distress,
And then I made her pay.

"Er, that will do, Corporal, thank you." Randall made a dismissive motion, and the corporal subsided against the wall, sweating freely.

"Well?" Randall turned to me, questioning.

"Er, Cheshire," I guessed.

"Close. Lancashire." He eyed me narrowly. Putting his hands together behind his back, he strolled over to the window and peered out. Checking to see whether Dougal had brought any men with him? I wondered.

Suddenly he whirled back to me with an abrupt *"Parlez-vous français?"*

"Très bien," I promptly replied. "What of it?"

Head to one side, he looked me over carefully.

"Damme if I think you're French," he said, as though to himself. "Could be, I suppose, but I've yet to meet a Frenchie could tell a Cockney from a Cornishman."

His neatly manicured fingers tapped the wood of the tabletop. "What was your maiden name, Mrs. Beauchamp?"

"Look, Captain," I said, smiling as charmingly as I could, "entertaining as it is to play Twenty Questions with you, I should really like to conclude these preliminaries and arrange for the continuation of my journey. I've already been delayed for some time, and—"

"You do not help your case by adopting this frivolous attitude, Madam," he interrupted, narrowing his eyes. I had seen Frank do that when displeased about something, and I felt a little weak in the knees. I put my hands on my thighs to brace myself.

"I have no case to help," I said, as boldly as I could. "I'm making no claims on you, the garrison, or for that matter, on the MacKenzies. All I want is to be allowed to resume my journey in peace. And I see no reason why you ought to have any objection to that."

He glared at me, lips pressed tight together in irritation.

"Oh, you don't? Well, consider my position for a moment, Madam, and perhaps my objections will become clearer. A month ago I was, with my men, in hot pursuit of a band of unidentified Scottish bandits who had absconded with a small herd of cattle from an estate near the border, when—"

"Oh, so that's what they were doing!" I exclaimed. "I wondered," I added lamely.

Captain Randall breathed heavily, then decided against whatever he had been going to say, in favor of continuing his story.

"In the midst of this lawful pursuit," he went on, in measured tones, "I encounter a half-dressed Englishwoman—in a place where no Englishwoman should be, even with a proper escort—who resists my inquiries, assaults my person—"

"You assaulted mine first!" I said hotly.

"Whose accomplice renders me unconscious by a cowardly attack, and who then flees the area, plainly with some assistance. My men and I searched that area most thoroughly, and I assure you, Madam, there was no trace of your murdered servant, your plundered baggage, your discarded gown, nor the merest sign that there is the slightest truth to your story!"

"Oh?" I said, a little weakly.

"Yes. Furthermore, there have been no reports of bandits in that area within the last four months. And *now,* Madam, you turn up in company with the war chieftain of clan MacKenzie, who tells me that his brother Colum is convinced you are a spy, presumably working for *me*!"

"Well, I'm not, am I?" I said, reasonably. "You know that, at least."

"Yes, I know that," he said with exaggerated patience. "What I don't know is who the devil you are! But I mean to find out, Madam, have no doubts as to that. I am the commander of this garrison. As such, I am empowered to take certain steps in order to secure the safety of this area against traitors, spies, and any other persons whose behavior I consider suspicious. And those steps, Madam, I am fully prepared to take."

"And just what might those steps be?" I inquired. I honestly wanted to know, though I suppose the tone of my question must have sounded rather baiting.

He stood up, looked down at me consideringly for a moment, then walked around the table, extended his hand, and drew me to my feet.

"Corporal Hawkins," he said, still staring at me, "I shall require your assistance for a moment."

The youth by the wall looked profoundly uneasy, but sidled over to us.

"Stand behind the lady, please, Corporal," Randall said, sounding bored. "And take her firmly by both elbows."

He drew back his arm and hit me in the pit of the stomach.

I made no noise, because I had no breath. I sat on the floor, doubled over, struggling to draw air into my lungs. I was shocked far beyond the actual pain of the blow, which was beginning to make itself felt, along with a wave of giddy sickness. In a fairly eventful life, no one had ever purposely struck me before.

The Captain squatted down in front of me. His wig was slightly awry, but aside from that and a certain brightness to his eyes, he showed no change from his normal controlled elegance.

"I trust you are not with child, Madam," he said in a conversational tone, "because if you are, you won't be for long."

I was beginning to make a rather odd wheezing noise, as the first wisps of oxygen found their way painfully into my throat. I rolled onto my hands and knees and groped feebly for the edge of the table. The corporal, after a nervous glance at the captain, reached down to help me up.

Waves of blackness seemed to ripple over the room. I sank onto the stool and closed my eyes.

"Look at me." The voice was as light and calm as though he were about to offer me tea. I opened my eyes and looked up at him through a slight fog. His hands were braced on his exquisitely tailored hips.

"Have you anything to say to me now, Madam?" he demanded.

"Your wig is crooked," I said, and closed my eyes again.

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13

A MARRIAGE IS ANNOUNCED

I sat at a table in the taproom below, gazing into a cup of milk and fighting off waves of nausea.

Dougal had taken one look at my face as I came downstairs, supported by the beefy young corporal, and strode purposefully past me, up the stairs to Randall’s room. The floors and doors of the inn were stout and well constructed, but I could still hear the sound of raised voices upstairs.

I raised the cup of milk, but my hands were still shaking too badly to drink it.

I was gradually recovering from the physical effects of the blow, but not from the shock of it. I *knew* the man was not my husband, but the resemblance was so strong and my habits so ingrained, that I had been half-inclined to trust him, and had spoken to him as I would have to Frank, expecting civility, if not active sympathy. To have those feelings abruptly turned inside out by his vicious attack was what was making me ill now.

Ill, and frightened as well. I had seen his eyes as he crouched next to me on the floor. Something had moved in their depths, just for a moment. It was gone in a flash, but I did not want ever to see it again.

The sound of a door opening above brought me out of my reverie. The thud of heavy footsteps was succeeded by the rapid appearance of Dougal, followed closely by Captain Randall. So closely indeed, that the Captain appeared to be in pursuit of the Scot, and was brought up short when Dougal, catching sight of me, halted suddenly at the foot of the stairs.

With a glare over his shoulder at Captain Randall, Dougal came swiftly over to where I was seated, tossed a small coin on the table in payment, and jerked me to my feet without a word. He was hustling me out the door before I had time to do more than register the extraordinary look of speculative acquisitiveness on the face of the redcoat officer.

We were mounted and moving before I had even tucked the voluminous skirts around my legs, and the material billowed around me like a settling parachute. Dougal was silent, but the horses seemed to pick up his sense of urgency; we were all but galloping by the time we hit the main road.

Near a crossroads marked with a Pictish cross, Dougal abruptly reined to a halt. Dismounting, he seized the bridles of both horses and tied them loosely to a sapling. He helped me down, then abruptly disappeared into the bushes, beckoning me to follow.

I followed the swing of his kilt up the hillside, ducking as the branches he pushed out of the way snapped back across the path over my head. The hillside was overgrown with oak and scrubby pine. I could hear titmice in the copse to the left, and a flock of jays calling out to each other as they fed, further on. The grass was the fresh green of early summer, clumps of sturdy growth shooting out of the rocks and furring the ground under the oaks. Nothing grew under the pines, of course; the needles lay inches thick, affording protection for the small crawling things that hid there from sunlight and predators.

The sharp scents made my throat ache. I had been up such hillsides before, and smelled these same spring scents. But then the pine and grass scent had been diluted with the smell of petrol fumes from the road below and the voices of day trippers replaced those of the jays. Last time I walked such a path, the ground was littered with sandwich wrappers and cigarette butts instead of mallow blossoms and violets. Sandwich wrappers seemed a reasonable enough price to pay, I supposed, for such blessings of civilization as antibiotics and telephones, but just for the moment, I was willing to settle for the violets. I badly needed a little peace, and I felt it here.

Dougal turned suddenly aside just below the crest of the hill and disappeared into a thick growth of broom. Shoving my way in after him with some difficulty, I found him seated on the flat stone edging of a small pool. A weathered block of stone stood askew behind him, with a dim and vaguely human figure etched in the stained surface. It must be a saint's pool, I realized. These small shrines to one saint or another dotted the Highlands, and were often to be found in such secluded spots, though even up here, tattered remnants of fabric flapped from the branches of a rowan tree that overhung the water; pledges from visitors who petitioned the saint, for health or a safe journey, perhaps.

Dougal greeted my appearance with a nod. He crossed himself, bent his head, and scooped up a double handful of water. The water had an odd dark color, and a worse smell—likely a sulfur spring, I thought. The day was hot and I was thirsty, though, so I followed Dougal's example. The water was faintly bitter, but cold, and not unpalatable. I drank some, then splashed my face. The road had been dusty.

I looked up, face dripping, to find him watching me with a very odd expression. Something between curiosity and calculation, I thought.

"Bit of a climb for a drink, isn't it?" I asked lightly. There were water bottles on the horses. And I doubted that Dougal meant to petition the patron of the spring for our safe journey back to the inn. He struck me as a believer in more worldly methods.

"How well d'ye know the Captain?" he asked abruptly.

"Less well than you," I snapped back. "I've met him once before today, and that by accident. We didn't get on."

Surprisingly, the stern face lightened a bit.

"Well," he admitted, "I canna say as I care for the man much myself." He drummed his fingers on the well coping, considering something. "He's well-thought of by some, though," he said, eyeing me. "A brave soldier and a bonny fighter, by what I hear."

I raised my eyebrows. “Not being an English general, I am not impressed.” He laughed, showing startlingly white teeth. The sound disturbed three rooks in the tree overhead, who flapped off, full of hoarse complaint.

“Are ye a spy for the English or the French?” he asked, with another bewildering change of subject. At least he was being direct, for a change.

“Certainly not,” I said crossly. “I’m plain Claire Beauchamp, and nothing more.” I soaked my handkerchief in the water and used it to wipe my neck. Small refreshing trickles ran down my back under the grey serge of my traveling gown. I pressed the wet cloth to my bosom and squeezed, producing a similar effect.

Dougal was silent for several minutes, watching me intently as I conducted my haphazard ablutions.

“You’ve seen Jamie’s back,” he said suddenly.

“I could hardly help doing so,” I said a little coldly. I had given up wondering what he was up to with these disconnected questions. Presumably he would tell me when he was ready.

“You mean did I know Randall did it, then? Or did you know that yourself?”

“Aye, *I* kent it well enough,” he answered, calmly appraising me, “but I wasna aware that *you* did.”

I shrugged, implying that what I knew and what I didn’t were hardly his concern.

“I was there, ye ken,” he said, casually.

“Where?”

“At Fort William. I had a bit of business there, with the garrison. The clerk there knew Jamie was some kin to me, and sent me word when they arrested him. So I went along to see could aught be done for him.”

“Apparently you weren’t very successful,” I said, with an edge.

Dougal shrugged. “Unfortunately not. Had it been the regular sergeant-major in charge, I might ha’ saved Jamie at least the second go-round, but as it was, Randall was new in command. He didna know me, and was indisposed to listen much to what I said. I thought at the time, it was only he meant to make an example of

Jamie, to show everyone at the start that there'd be no softness from him." He tapped the short sword he wore at his belt. "It's a sound enough principle, when you're in command of men. Earn their respect before ye do aught else. And if you canna do that, earn their fear."

I remembered the expression on the face of Randall's corporal, and thought I knew which route the captain had taken.

Dougal's deepset eyes were on my face, interested.

"You knew it was Randall. Did Jamie tell ye about it?"

"A bit," I said cautiously.

"He must think well of ye," he said musingly. "He doesna generally speak of it to anyone."

"I can't imagine why not," I said, provoked. I still held my breath each time we came to a new tavern or inn, until it was clear that the company had settled for an evening of drinking and gossip by the fire. Dougal smiled sardonically, clearly knowing what was in my mind.

"Well, it wasna necessary to tell me, was it? Since I kent it already." He swished a hand idly through the strange dark water, stirring up brimstone fumes.

"I'd not know how it goes in Oxfordshire," he said, with a sarcastic emphasis that made me squirm slightly, "but hereabouts, ladies are generally not exposed to such sights as floggings. Have ye ever seen one?"

"No, nor do I much want to," I responded sharply. "I can imagine what it would take to make marks like the ones on Jamie's back, though."

Dougal shook his head, flipping water out of the pool at a curious jay that ventured close.

"Now, there you're wrong, lass, and you'll pardon my saying so. Imagination is all verra well, but it isna equal to the sight of a man having his back laid open. A verra nasty thing—it's meant to break a man, and most often it succeeds."

"Not with Jamie." I spoke rather more sharply than I had intended. Jamie was my patient, and to some extent, my friend as well. I had no wish to discuss his personal history with Dougal, though I would, if pressed, admit to a certain morbid curiosity. I had never met anyone more open and at the same time more mysterious than the tall young MacTavish.

Dougal laughed shortly and wiped his wet hand through his hair, pasting back the strands that had escaped during our flight—for so I thought of it—from the tavern.

"Weel, Jamie's as stubborn as the rest of his family—like rocks, the lot of them, and he's the worst." But there was a definite tone of respect in his voice, grudging though it was.

"Jamie told ye he was flogged for escape?"

"Yes."

"Aye, he went over the wall of the camp just after dark, same day as the dragoons brought him in. That was a fairly frequent occurrence there, the prisoners' accommodations not bein' as secure as might be wished, so the English ran patrols near the walls every night. The garrison clerk told me Jamie put up a good fight, from the look of him when he came back, but it was six against one, and the six all wi' muskets, so it didna last long. Jamie spent the night in chains, and went to the whipping post first thing in the morning." He paused, checking me for signs of faintness or nausea, I supposed.

"Floggings were done right after assembly, so as to start everyone off in the proper frame of mind for the day. There were three to be flogged that day, and Jamie was the last of them."

"You actually *saw* it?"

"Oh, aye. And I'll tell ye, lass, watchin' men bein' flogged is not pleasant. I've had the good fortune never to experience it, but I expect bein' flogged is not verra pleasant, either. Watching it happen to someone else while waitin' for it yourself is probably least pleasant of all."

"I don't doubt it," I murmured.

Dougal nodded. "Jamie looked grim enough, but he didna turn a hair, even listening to the screams and the other noises—did ye know ye can *hear* the flesh being torn?"

"Ugh!"

"So I thought myself, lass," he said, grimacing in memory of it. "To say nothing of the blood and bruises. Ech!" He spat, carefully avoiding the pool and its coping. “Turned my stomach to see, and I’m no a squeamish man by any means.”

Dougal went on with his ghastly story.

“Come Jamie’s turn, he walks up to the post—some men have to be dragged, but not him—and holds out his hands so the corporal can unlock the manacles he’s wearing. The corporal goes to pull his arm, like, to haul him into place, but Jamie shakes him off and steps back a pace. I was half expectin’ him to make a dash for it, but instead he just pulls off his shirt. It’s torn here and there and filthy as a clout, but he folds it up careful like it was his Sunday best, and lays it on the ground. Then he walks over to the post steady as a soldier and puts his hands up to be bound.”

Dougal shook his head, marveling. The sunlight filtering through the rowan leaves dappled him with lacy shadows, so he looked like a man seen through a doily. I smiled at the thought, and he nodded approvingly at me, thinking my response due to his story.

“Aye, lass, courage like that is uncommon rare. It wasna ignorance, mind; he’d just seen two men flogged and he knew the same was coming to him. It’s just he had made up his mind there was no help for it. Boldness in battle is nothing out of the way for a Scotsman, ye ken, but to face down fear in cold blood is rare in any man. He was but nineteen at the time,” Dougal added as an afterthought.

“Must have been rather gruesome to watch,” I said ironically. “I wonder you weren’t sick.”

Dougal saw the irony, and let it lie. “I nearly was, lass,” he said, lifting his dark brows. “The first lash drew blood, and the lad’s back was half red and half blue within a minute. He didna scream, though, or beg for mercy, or twist round to try and save himself. He just set his forehead hard against the post and stood there. He flinched when the lash hit, of course, but nothin’ more. I doubt I could do that,” he admitted, “nor are there many that could. He fainted half through it, and they roused him wi’ water from a jug and finished it.”

“Very nasty indeed,” I observed. “Why are you telling me about it?”

"I havena finished telling ye about it." Dougal pulled the dirk from his belt and began to clean his fingernails with the point. He was a fastidious man, in spite of the difficulties of keeping clean on the road.

"Jamie was slumped in the ropes, with the blood running down and staining his kilt. I dinna think he'd fainted, he was just too wambly to stand for the moment. But just then Captain Randall came down into the yard. I don't know why he'd not been there to begin with; had business that delayed him, perhaps. Anyway, Jamie saw him coming, and had the presence o' mind left to close his eyes and let his head flop, like as if he were unconscious."

Dougal knitted his brows, concentrating fiercely on a recalcitrant hangnail.

"The Captain was fair put out that they'd flogged Jamie already; seems that was a pleasure he'd meant to have for himself. Still, not much to be done about it at the moment. But then he thought to make inquiries about how Jamie came to escape in the first place."

He held up the dirk, examining it for nicks, then began to sharpen the edge against the stone he sat on. "Had several soldiers shaking in their boots before he was done—the man's a way wi' words, I'll say that for him."

"That he has," I said dryly.

The dirk scraped rhythmically against the stone. Every so often, a faint spark leapt from the metal as it struck a rough patch in the rock.

"Weel, in the course of this inquiry, it came out that Jamie'd had the heel of a loaf and a bit of cheese with him when they caught him—taken it along when he went over the wall. Whereupon the Captain thinks for a moment, then smiles a smile I should hate to see on my grandmother's face. He declares that theft bein' a serious offense, the penalty should be commensurate, and sentences Jamie on the spot to another hundred lashes."

I flinched in spite of myself. "That would kill him!"

Dougal nodded. "Aye, that's what the garrison doctor said. He said as he'd permit no such thing; in good conscience, the prisoner must be allowed a week to heal before receiving the second flogging."

"Well, how humanitarian of him," I said. "Good conscience, my aunt Fanny! And what did Captain Randall think of this?"

"He was none too pleased at first, but he reconciled himself. Once he did, the sergeant-major, who knew a real faint when he saw one, had Jamie untied. The lad staggered a bit, but he kept to his feet, and a few of the men there cheered, which didna go ower a treat wi' the Captain. He wasna best pleased when the sergeant picked up Jamie's shirt and handed it back to the lad, either, though it was quite a popular move with the men."

Dougal twisted the blade back and forth, examining it critically. Then he laid it across his knee and gave me a direct look.

"Ye know, lass, it's fairly easy to be brave, sittin' in a warm tavern ower a glass of ale. 'Tis not so easy, squatting in a cold field, wi' musket balls going past your head and heather ticklin' your arse. And it's still less easy when you're standing face to face wi' your enemy, wi' your own blood running down your legs."

"I wouldn't suppose so," I said. I did feel a little faint, in spite of everything. I plunged both hands into the water, letting the dark liquid chill my wrists.

"I did go back to see Randall, later in the week," Dougal said defensively, as though he felt some need to justify the action. "We talked a good bit, and I even offered him compensation—"

"Oh, I *am* impressed," I murmured, but desisted in the face of his glare. "No, I mean it. It was kind of you. I gather Randall declined your offer, though?"

"Aye, he did. And I still dinna ken why, for I've not found English officers on the whole to be ower-scrupulous when it comes to their purses, and clothes such as the Captain's come a bit dear."

"Perhaps he has-other sources of income," I suggested.

"He does, for a fact," Dougal confirmed, but with a sharp glance at me. "Still …" he hesitated, then proceeded, more slowly.

"I went back, then, to be there for Jamie when he came up again, though there wasna much I could do for him at that point, poor lad."

The second time, Jamie had been the only prisoner up for flogging. The guards had removed his shirt before bringing him out, just after sunup on a cold October morning.

"I could see the lad was dead scairt," said Dougal, "though he was walking by himself and wouldna let the guard touch him. I could see him shaking, as much wi' the cold as wi' nerves, and the gooseflesh thick on his arms and chest, but the sweat was standing on his face as well."

A few minutes later, Randall came out, the whip tucked under his arm, and the lead plummets at the tips of the lashes clicking softly together as he walked. He had surveyed Jamie coolly, then motioned to the sergeant-major to turn the prisoner around to show his back.

Dougal grimaced. "A pitiful sight, it was, too—still raw, no more than half-healed, wi' the weals turned black and the rest yellow wi' bruises. The thought of a whip comin' down on that soreness was enough to make me blench, along wi' most of those watching."

Randall then turned to the sergeant-major and said, "A pretty job, Sergeant Wilkes. I must see if I can do as well." With considerable punctilio, he then called for the garrison doctor, and had him certify officially that Jamie was fit enough to be flogged.

"You've seen a cat play wi' a wee mousie?" Dougal asked. " 'Twas like that. Randall strolled round the lad, making one kind of remark and another, none of them what ye'd call pleasant. And Jamie stood there like an oak tree, sayin' nothing and keeping his eyes fixed on the post, not lookin' at Randall at all. I could see the lad was hugging his elbows to try to stop the shivering, and ye could tell Randall saw it too.

"His mouth tightened up and he says, 'I thought this was the young man who only a week past was shouting that he wasn't afraid to die. Surely a man who's not afraid to die isn't afraid of a few lashes?' and he gives Jamie a poke in the belly wi' the handle of the whip.

"Jamie met Randall's eye straight on then, and said, 'No, but I'm afraid I'll freeze stiff before ye're done talking.' "

Dougal sighed. “Well. It was a braw speech, but damn reckless, for a’ that. Now, scourging a man is never a pretty business, but there’s ways to make it worse than it might be; strikin’ sideways to cut deep, or steppin’ in wi’ a hard blow ower the kidneys, for instance.” He shook his head. “Verra ugly.”

He frowned, choosing his words slowly.

“Randall’s face was—intent, I suppose ye’d say—and sort o’ lighted up, like when a man is lookin’ at a lass he’s soft on, if ye know what I mean. ’Twas as though he were doin’ somethin’ much worse to Jamie than just skinning him alive. The blood was running down the lad’s legs by the fifteenth stroke, and the tears running down his face wi’ the sweat.”

I swayed a little, and put out a hand to the stone of the coping.

Well,” he said abruptly, catching sight of my expression, “I’ll say no more except that he lived through it. When the corporal untied his hands, he nearly fell, but the corporal and sergeant-major each caught him by an arm and kind o’ steadied him ’til he could keep his feet. He was shakin’ worse than ever from shock and cold, but his head was up and his eyes blazin’—I could see it from twenty feet away. He keeps his eyes fixed on Randall while they help him off the platform, leavin’ bloody footprints—it’s like watchin’ Randall is the only thing keeping him on his feet. Randall’s face was almost as white as Jamie’s, and his eyes were locked wi’ the lad’s—as though either of them would fall if he took his eyes away.” Dougal’s own eyes were fixed, still seeing the eerie scene.

Everything was quiet in the small glade except for the faint rush of wind through the leaves of the rowan tree. I closed my eyes and listened to it for some time.

“Why?” I asked finally, eyes still closed. “Why did you tell me?”

Dougal was watching me intently when I opened my eyes. I dipped a hand in the spring again, and applied the cool water to my temples.

“I thought it might serve as what ye may call a character illustration,” he said.

“Of Randall?” I uttered a short, mirthless laugh. “I don’t need any further evidence as to his character, thank you.”

"Of Randall," he agreed, "and Jamie too."

I looked at him, suddenly ill at ease.

"Ye see, I have *orders,*" he emphasized the word sarcastically, "from the good captain."

"Orders to do what?" I asked, the agitated feeling increasing.

"To produce the person of an English subject, one Claire Beauchamp by name, at Fort William on Monday, the 18th of June. For questioning."

I must have looked truly alarming, for he jumped to his feet and came over to me.

"Put your head between your knees, lass," he instructed, pushing on the back of my neck, " 'til the faintness passes off."

"I know what to do," I said irritably, doing it nonetheless. I closed my eyes, feeling the ebbing blood begin to throb in my temples again. The clammy sensation around my face and ears began to disappear, though my hands were still icy. I concentrated on breathing properly, counting *in*-one-two-three-four, *out*-one-two, *in*-one-two-three-four.…

At length I sat up, feeling more or less in possession of all my faculties. Dougal had resumed his seat on the stone coping, and was waiting patiently, watching to be sure that I didn't fall backward into the spring.

"There's a way out of it," he said abruptly. "The only one I can see."

"Lead me to it," I said, with an unconvincing attempt at a smile.

"Verra well, then." He sat forward, leaning toward me to explain. "Randall's the right to take ye for questioning because you're a subject of the English crown. Well, then, we must change that."

I stared at him, uncomprehending. "What do you mean? You're a subject of the crown as well, aren't you? How would you change such a thing?"

"Scots law and English law are verra similar," he said, frowning, "but no the same. And an English officer canna compel the person of a Scot, unless he's firm evidence of a crime committed, or grounds for serious suspicions. Even with suspicion, he could no remove a

Scottish subject from clan lands without the permission of the laird concerned."

"You've been talking to Ned Gowan," I said, beginning to feel a little dizzy again.

He nodded. "Aye, I have. I thought it might come to this, ye ken. And what he told me is what I thought myself; the only way I can legally refuse to give ye to Randall is to change ye from an Englishwoman into a Scot."

"Into a Scot?" I said, the dazed feeling quickly being replaced by a horrible suspicion.

This was confirmed by his next words.

"Aye," he said, nodding at my expression. "Ye must marry a Scot. Young Jamie."

"I couldn't do that!"

"Weel," he frowned, considering. "I suppose ye could take Rupert, instead. He's a widower, and he's the lease of a small farm. Still, he's a good bit older, and—"

"I don't want to marry Rupert, either! That's the … the most absurd …" Words failed me. Springing to my feet in agitation, I paced around the small clearing, fallen rowan berries crunching under my feet.

"Jamie's a goodly lad," Dougal argued, still sitting on the coping. "He's not much in the way of property just now, true, but he's a kind-hearted lad. He'd not be cruel to ye. And he's a bonny fighter, with verra good reason to hate Randall. Nay, marry him, and he'll fight to his last breath to protect ye."

"But … but I *can't* marry anyone!" I burst out.

Dougal's eyes were suddenly sharp. "Why not, lass? Do ye have a husband living still?"

"No. It's just … it's ridiculous! Such things don't happen!"

Dougal had relaxed when I said "No." Now he glanced up at the sun and rose to go.

"Best get moving, lass. There are things we'll have to attend to. There'll have to be a special dispensation," he murmured, as though to himself. "But Ned can manage that."

He took my arm, still muttering to himself. I wrenched it away.

"I will not marry anyone," I said firmly.

He seemed undisturbed by this, merely raising his brows.

"You *want* me to take you to Randall?"

"No!" Something occurred to me. "So at least you believe me when I say I'm not an English spy?"

"I do *now*." He spoke with some emphasis.

"Why now and not before?"

He nodded at the spring, and at the worn figure etched in the rock. It must be hundreds of years old, much older even than the giant rowan tree that shaded the spring and cast its white flowers into the black water.

"St. Ninian's spring. Ye drank the water before I asked ye."

I was thoroughly bewildered by this time.

"What does that have to do with it?"

He looked surprised, then his mouth twisted in a smile. "Ye didna know? They call it the liar's spring, as well. The water smells o' the fumes of hell. Anyone who drinks the water and then tells untruth will ha' the gizzard burnt out of him."

"I see." I spoke between my teeth. "Well, my gizzard is quite intact. So you can believe me when I say I'm not a spy, English *or* French. And you can believe something else, Dougal MacKenzie. I'm not marrying anyone!"

He wasn't listening. In fact, he had already pushed his way through the bushes that screened the spring. Only a quivering oak branch marked his passage. Seething, I followed him.

* * *

I remonstrated at some length further on the ride back to the inn. Dougal advised me finally to save my breath to cool my parritch with, and after that we rode in silence.

Reaching the inn, I flung my reins to the ground and stamped upstairs to the refuge of my room.

The whole idea was not only outrageous, but unthinkable. I paced around and around the narrow room, feeling increasingly like a rat in a trap. Why in hell hadn't I had the nerve to steal away from the Scots earlier, whatever the risk?

I sat down on the bed and tried to think calmly. Considered strictly from Dougal's point of view, no doubt the idea had merit. If he refused point-blank to hand me over to Randall, with no excuse, the Captain might easily try to take me by force. And whether he believed me or not, Dougal might understandably not want to engage in a skirmish with a lot of English dragoons for my sake.

And, viewed in cold blood, the idea had some merit from my side as well. If I were married to a Scot, I would presumably no longer be watched and guarded. It would be that much easier to get away when the time came. And if it were Jamie—well, he liked me, clearly. And he knew the Highlands like the backs of his hands. He would perhaps take me to Craigh na Dun, or at least in the general direction. Yes, possibly marriage was the best way to gain my goal.

That was the cold-blooded way to look at it. My blood, however, was anything but cold. I was hot with fury and agitation, and could not keep still, pacing and fuming, looking for a way out. Any way. After an hour of this, my face was flushed and my head throbbing. I got up and threw open the shutters, sticking my head out into the cooling breeze.

There was a peremptory rap on the door behind me. Dougal entered as I pulled my head in. He bore a sheaf of stiff paper like a salver and was followed by Rupert and the immaculate Ned Gowan, bringing up the rear like royal equerries.

"Please do come in," I said courteously.

Ignoring me as usual, Dougal removed a chamber pot from its resting place on the table and fanned the sheets of paper out ceremoniously on the rough oak surface.

"All done," he said, with the pride of one who has shepherded a difficult project to a successful conclusion. "Ned's drawn up the papers; nothing like a lawyer—so long as he's on your side, eh, Ned?"

The men all laughed, evidently in good humor.

"Not really difficult, ye ken," Ned said modestly. "It's but a simple contract." He riffled the pages with a proprietary forefinger, then paused, wrinkling his brow at a sudden thought.

"You've no property in France, have ye?" he asked, peering worriedly at me over the half-spectacles he wore for close work. I shook my head, and he relaxed, shuffling the papers back into a pile and tapping the edges neatly together.

"That's that, then. You'll only need to sign here at the foot, and Dougal and Rupert to witness."

The lawyer set down the inkpot he had brought in, and whipping a clean quill from his pocket, presented it ceremoniously to me.

"And just what is this?" I asked. This was in the nature of a rhetorical question, for the top page of the bundle said CONTRACT OF MARRIAGE in a clear calligraphic hand, the letters two inches high and starkly black across the page.

Dougal suppressed a sigh of impatience at my recalcitrance.

"Ye ken quite weel what it is," he said shortly. "And unless you've had another bright thought for keeping yourself out of Randall's hands, you'll sign it and have done with it. Time's short."

Bright thoughts were in particularly short supply at the moment, despite the hour I had spent hammering away at the problem. It really began to seem that this incredible alternative was the best I could do, struggle as I might.

"But I don't *want* to marry!" I said stubbornly. It occurred to me as well that mine was not the only point of view involved. I remembered the girl with blond hair I had seen kissing Jamie in the alcove at the castle.

"And maybe Jamie doesn't want to marry me!" I said. "What about that?" Dougal dismissed this as unimportant.

"Jamie's a soldier; he'll do as he's told. So will you," he said pointedly, "unless, of course, ye'd prefer an English prison."

I glared at him, breathing heavily. I had been in a stir ever since our abrupt removal from Randall's office, and my level of agitation had now increased substantially, confronted with the choice in black and white, as it were.

"I want to talk to him," I said abruptly. Dougal's eyebrows shot up.

"Jamie? Why?"

“*Why?* Because you’re forcing me to marry him, and so far as I can see, you haven’t even told him!”

Plainly this was an irrelevancy, as far as Dougal was concerned, but he eventually gave in and, accompanied by his minions, went to fetch Jamie from the taproom below.

Jamie appeared shortly, looking understandably bewildered.

“Did you know that Dougal wants us to marry?” I demanded bluntly.

His expression cleared. “Oh, aye. I knew that.”

“But surely,” I said, “a young man like yourself; I mean, isn’t there anyone else you’re, ah, interested in?” He looked blank for a moment, then understanding dawned.

“Oh, am I promised? Nay, I’m no much of a prospect for a girl.” He hurried on, as though feeling this might sound insulting. “I mean, I’ve no property to speak of, and nothing more than a soldier’s pay to live on.”

He rubbed his chin, eyeing me dubiously. “Then there’s the minor difficulty that I’ve a price on my head. No father much wants his daughter married to a man as may be arrested and hanged any time. Did ye think of that?”

I flapped my hand, dismissing the matter of outlawry as a minor consideration, compared to the whole monstrous idea. I had one last try.

“Does it bother you that I’m not a virgin?” He hesitated a moment before answering.

“Well, no,” he said slowly, “so long as it doesna bother you that I am.” He grinned at my drop-jawed expression, and backed toward the door.

“Reckon one of us should know what they’re doing,” he said. The door closed softly behind him; clearly the courtship was over.

* * *

The papers duly signed, I made my way cautiously down the inn’s steep stairs and over to the bar table in the taproom.

“Whisky,” I said to the rumpled old creature behind it. He glared rheumily, but a nod from Dougal made him oblige with a bottle and glass. The latter was thick and greenish, a bit smeared, with a chip out of the rim, but it had a hole in the top, and that was all that mattered at the moment.

Once the searing effect of swallowing the stuff had passed, it did induce a certain spurious calmness. I felt detached, noticing details of my surroundings with a peculiar intensity: the small stained-glass inset over the bar, casting colored shadows over the ruffianly proprietor and his wares, the curve of the handle on a copper-bottomed dipper that hung on the wall next to me, a greenbellied fly struggling on the edges of a sticky puddle on the table. With a certain amount of fellow-feeling, I nudged it out of danger with the edge of my glass.

I gradually became aware of raised voices behind the closed door on the far side of the room. Dougal had disappeared there after the conclusion of his business with me, presumably to firm up arrangements with the other contracting party. I was pleased to hear that, judging from the sound of it, my intended bridegroom was cutting up rough, despite his apparent lack of objection earlier. Perhaps he hadn't wanted to offend me.

"Stick to it, lad," I murmured, and took another gulp.

Sometime later, I was dimly conscious of a hand prying my fingers open in order to remove the greenish glass. Another hand was steadyingly under my elbow.

"Christ, she's drunk as an auld besom in a bothy," said a voice in my ear. The voice rasped unpleasantly, I thought, as though its owner had been eating sandpaper. I giggled softly at the thought.

"Quiet yerself, woman!" said the unpleasant rasping voice. It grew fainter as the owner turned to talk to someone else. "Drunk as a laird and screechin' like a parrot—what do ye expect—"

Another voice interrupted the first, but I couldn't tell what it said; the words were blurred and indistinguishable. It was a pleasanter sound, though, deep and somehow reassuring. It came nearer, and I could make out a few words. I made an effort to focus, but my attention had begun to wander again.

The fly had found its way back to the puddle, and was floundering in the middle, hopelessly mired. The light from the stained-glass window fell on it, glittering like sparks on the straining green belly. My gaze fixed on the tiny green spot, which seemed to pulsate as the fly twitched and struggled.

“Brother … you haven’t a shance,” I said, and the spark went out.

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14

A MARRIAGE TAKES PLACE

There was a low, beamed ceiling over me when I woke, and a thick quilt tucked tidily under my chin. I seemed to be clad only in my shift. I started to sit up to look for my clothes, but thought better of it halfway up. I eased myself very carefully back down, closed my eyes and held onto my head to prevent it from rolling off the pillow and bouncing on the floor.

I woke again, sometime later, when the door of the room opened. I cracked one eye cautiously. A wavering outline resolved itself into the dour figure of Murtagh, staring disapprovingly down at me from the foot of the bed. I closed the eye. I heard a muffled Scottish noise, presumably indicating appalled disgust, but when I looked again he was gone.

I was just sinking thankfully back into unconsciousness when the door opened again, this time to reveal a middle-aged woman I took to be the publican's wife, carrying a ewer and basin. She bustled cheerily into the room and banged the shutters open with a crash that reverberated through my head like a tank collision. Advancing on the bed like a Panzer division, she ripped the quilt from my feeble grasp and tossed it aside, leaving me quaking and exposed.

"Come along then, me love," she said. "We mun get ye ready now." She put a hefty forearm behind my shoulders and levered me into a sitting position. I clutched my head with one hand, my stomach with the other.

"Ready?" I said, through a mouth filled with decayed moss.

The woman began briskly washing my face. “Och, aye,” she said. “Ye dinna want to miss yer own wedding, now, do ye?”

“Yes,” I said, but was ignored as she unceremoniously stripped off my shift and stood me in the middle of the floor for further intimate attentions.

A bit later I sat on the bed, fully dressed, feeling dazed and belligerent, but thanks to a glass of port supplied by the goodwife, at least functional. I sipped carefully at a second glass, as the woman tugged a comb through the thickets of my hair.

I jumped and shuddered, spilling the port, as the door crashed open once more. One damn thing after another, I thought balefully. This time it was a double visitation, Murtagh and Ned Gowan, wearing similar looks of disapprobation. I exchanged glares with Ned while Murtagh came into the room and walked slowly around the bed, surveying me from every angle. He returned to Ned and muttered something in a tone too low for me to hear. With a final glance of despair in my direction, he pulled the door shut behind them.

At last my hair was dressed to the woman’s satisfaction, swept back and pulled high in a knot at the crown, curls picked loose to tumble to the back, and ringlets in front of my ears. It felt as though my scalp were going to pop off from the tension of the strained-back hair, but the effect in the looking glass the woman provided was undeniably becoming. I began to feel slightly more human, and even brought myself to thank her for her efforts. She left me the looking glass, and departed, remarking that it was so lucky to be married in summer, wasn’t it, as I’d have plenty of flowers for my hair.

“We who are about to die,” I said to my reflection, sketching a salute in the glass. I collapsed on the bed, plastered a wet cloth over my face, and went back to sleep.

I was having a rather nice dream, something to do with grassy fields and wildflowers, when I became aware that what I had thought a playful breeze tugging at my sleeves was a pair of none-too-gentle hands. I sat up with a jerk, blindly flailing.

When I got my eyes open, I saw that my small chamber now resembled a Tube station, with faces wall-to-wall: Ned Gowan, Murtagh, the innkeeper, the innkeeper's wife, and a lanky young man, who turned out to be the innkeeper's son, with his arms full of assorted flowers, which accounted for the scents in my dream. There was also a young woman, armed with a round wicker basket, who smiled amiably at me, displaying the lack of several rather important teeth.

This person, it developed, was the village sempstress, recruited to repair the deficiencies of my wardrobe by adjusting the fit of a dress, obtained on short notice from some local connection of the innkeeper's. Ned was carrying the dress in question, hanging from one hand like a dead animal. Smoothed out on the bed, it proved to be a low-necked gown of heavy cream-colored satin, with a separate bodice that buttoned with dozens of tiny cloth-covered buttons, each embroidered with a gold fleur-de-lis. The neckline and the belled sleeves were heavily ruched with lace, as was the embroidered overskirt of chocolate-brown velvet. The innkeeper was half-buried in the petticoats he carried, his bristling whiskers barely visible over the foamy layers.

I looked at the port-wine stain on my grey serge skirt and vanity won out. If I were in fact to be married, I didn't want to do it looking like the village drudge.

After a short spell of frenetic activity, with me standing like a dressmaker's dummy and everyone else racing about fetching, carrying, criticizing, and tripping over each other, the final product was ready, complete to white asters and yellow roses pinned in my hair and a heart pounding madly away beneath the lacy bodice. The fit was not quite perfect, and the gown smelled rather strongly of its previous owner, but the satin was weighty and swished rather fascinatingly about my feet, over the layers of petticoats. I felt quite regal, and not a little lovely.

"You can't make me do this, you know," I hissed threateningly at Murtagh's back as I followed him downstairs, but he and I both knew my words were empty bravado. If I had ever had the strength of character to defy Dougal and take my chances with the English, it had drained away with the whisky.

Dougal, Ned, and the rest were in the main taproom at the foot of the stair, drinking and exchanging pleasantries with a few villagers who seemed to have nothing better to do with their afternoon than hang about getting sloshed.

Dougal caught sight of me slowly descending, and abruptly stopped talking. The others fell silent as well, and I floated down in a most gratifying cloud of reverent admiration. Dougal's deepset eyes covered me slowly from head to foot and returned to my face with a completely ungrudging nod of acknowledgment.

What with one thing and another, it was some time since a man had looked at me that way, and I nodded quite graciously back.

After the first silence, the rest of those in the taproom became vocal in their admiration, and even Murtagh allowed himself a small smile, nodding in satisfaction at the results of his efforts. *And who appointed* you *fashion editor?* I thought disagreeably. Still, I had to admit that he was responsible for my not marrying in grey serge.

Marrying. Oh, God. Buoyed temporarily by port wine and cream lace, I had momentarily managed to ignore the significance of the occasion. I gripped the banister as fresh realization hit like a blow in the stomach.

Looking over the throng, though, I noticed one glaring omission. My groom was nowhere in sight. Heartened by the thought that he might have succeeded in escaping out of a window, and be miles away by now, I accepted a parting cup of wine from the innkeeper before following Dougal outside.

Ned and Rupert went to fetch the horses. Murtagh had disappeared somewhere, perhaps to search for traces of Jamie.

Dougal held me by one arm; ostensibly to support me lest I stumble in my satin slippers, in reality to prevent any last-minute breaks for freedom.

It was a "warm" Scottish day, meaning that the mist wasn't quite heavy enough to qualify as a drizzle, but not far off, either. Suddenly the inn door opened, and the sun came out, in the person of James. If I was a radiant bride, the groom was positively resplendent. My mouth fell open and stayed that way.

A Highlander in full regalia is an impressive sight—any Highlander, no matter how old, ill-favored, or crabbed in appearance. A tall, straight-bodied, and by no means ill-favored young Highlander at close range is breath-taking.

The thick red-gold hair had been brushed to a smooth gleam that swept the collar of a fine lawn shirt with tucked front, belled sleeves, and lace-trimmed wrist frills that matched the cascade of the starched jabot at the throat, decorated with a ruby stickpin.

His tartan was a brilliant crimson and black that blazed among the more sedate MacKenzies in their green and white. The flaming wool, fastened by a circular silver brooch, fell from his right shoulder in a graceful drape, caught by a silver-studded sword belt before continuing its sweep past neat calves clothed in woolen hose and stopping just short of the silver-buckled black leather boots. Sword, dirk, and badger-skin sporran completed the ensemble.

Well over six feet tall, broad in proportion, and striking of feature, he was a far cry from the grubby horse-handler I was accustomed to —and he knew it. Making a leg in courtly fashion, he swept me a bow of impeccable grace, murmuring "Your servant, Ma'am," eyes glinting with mischief.

"Oh," I said faintly.

I had seldom seen the taciturn Dougal at a loss for words before. Thick brows knotted over a suffused face, he seemed in his way as taken aback by this apparition as I was.

"Are ye mad, man?" he said at last. "What if someone's to see ye!"

Jamie cocked a sardonic eyebrow at the older man. "Why, uncle," he said. "Insults? And on my wedding day too. You wouldna have me shame my wife, now, would ye? Besides," he added, with a malicious gleam, "I hardly think it would be legal, did I not marry in my own name. And you do want it legal, now, don't you?"

With an apparent effort, Dougal recovered his self-possession. "If ye're quite finished, Jamie, we'll get on wi' it," he said.

But Jamie was not quite finished, it seemed. Ignoring Dougal's fuming, he drew a short string of white beads from his sporran. He stepped forward and fastened the necklace around my neck. Looking down, I could see it was a string of small baroque pearls, those irregularly shaped productions of freshwater mussels, interspersed with tiny pierced-work gold roundels. Smaller pearls dangled from the gold beads.

“They’re only Scotch pearls,” he said, apologetically, “but they look bonny on you.” His fingers lingered a moment on my neck.

“Those were your mother’s pearls!” said Dougal, glowering at the necklace.

“Aye,” said Jamie calmly, “and now they’re my wife’s. Shall we go?”

* * *

Wherever we were going, it was some distance from the village. We made a rather morose wedding party, the bridal pair encircled by the others like convicts being escorted toward some distant prison. The only conversation was a muted apology from Jamie for being late, explaining that there had been some difficulty in finding a clean shirt and coat large enough to fit him.

“I think this one belongs to the local squire’s son,” he said, flipping the lacy jabot. “Bit of a dandy, it looks like.”

We dismounted and left the horses at the foot of a small hill. A footpath led upward through the heather.

“Ye’ve made the arrangements?” I heard Dougal say in an undertone to Rupert, as they tethered the beasts.

“Och, aye.” There was a flash of teeth in the black beard. “Was a bit o’ trouble to, persuade the padre, but we showed him the special license.” He patted his sporran, which clinked musically, giving me some idea of the nature of the special license.

Through the drizzle and mist, I saw the chapel jutting out of the heather. With a sense of complete disbelief, I saw the round-shouldered roof and the odd little many-paned windows, which I had last seen on the bright sunny morning of my marriage to Frank Randall.

“No!” I exclaimed. “Not here! I can’t!”

“Hst, now, hst. Dinna worry, lass, dinna worry. It will be all right.” Dougal put a large paw on my shoulder, making soothing Scottish noises, as if I were a skittish horse. “ ’Tis natural to be a bit nervous,” he said, to all of us. A firm hand in the small of my back urged me on up the path. My shoes sank moistly in the damp layer of fallen leaves.

Jamie and Dougal walked close on either side of me, preventing escape. Their looming plaid presences were unnerving, and I felt a mounting sense of hysteria. Two hundred years ahead, more or less, I had been married in this chapel, charmed then by its ancient picturesqueness. The chapel now was creaking with newness, its boards not yet settled into charm, and I was about to marry a twenty-three-year-old Scottish Catholic virgin with a price on his head, whose—

I turned to Jamie in sudden panic. "I can't marry you! I don't even know your last name!"

He looked down at me and cocked a ruddy eyebrow. "Oh. It's Fraser. James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser." He pronounced it formally, each name slow and distinct.

Completely flustered, I said "Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp," and stuck out my hand idiotically. Apparently taking this as a plea for support, he took the hand and tucked it firmly into the crook of his elbow. Thus inescapably pinioned, I squelched up the path to my wedding.

Rupert and Murtagh were waiting for us in the chapel, keeping guard over a captive cleric, a spindly young priest with a red nose and a justifiably terrified expression. Rupert was idly slicing a willow twig with a large knife, and while he had laid aside his horn-handled pistols on entering the church, they remained in easy reach on the rim of the baptismal font.

The other men also disarmed, as was suitable in the house of God, leaving an impressively bristling pile of lethality in the back pew. Only Jamie kept his dagger and sword, presumably as a ceremonial part of his dress.

We knelt before the wooden altar, Murtagh and Dougal took their places as witnesses, and the ceremony began.

The form of the Catholic marriage service has not changed appreciably in several hundred years, and the words linking me with the red-headed young stranger at my side were much the same as those that had consecrated my wedding to Frank. I felt like a cold, hollow shell. The young priest's stammering words echoed somewhere in the empty pit of my stomach.

I stood automatically when it came time for the vows, watching in a sort of numbed fascination as my chilly fingers disappeared into my bridegroom's substantial grasp. His fingers were as cold as my own, and it occurred to me for the first time that despite his outwardly cool demeanor, he might be as nervous as I was.

I had so far avoided looking at him, but now glanced up to find him staring down at me. His face was white and carefully expressionless; he looked as he had when I dressed the wound in his shoulder. I tried to smile at him, but the corners of my mouth wobbled precariously. The pressure of his fingers on mine increased. I had the impression that we were holding each other up; if either of us let go or looked away, we would both fall down. Oddly, the feeling was mildly reassuring. Whatever we were in for, at least there were two of us.

"I take thee, Claire, to be my wife …" His voice didn't shake, but his hand did. I tightened my grip. Our stiff fingers clenched together like boards in a vise. "… to love, honor and protect … for better and for worse …" The words came from far away. The blood was draining from my head. The boned bodice was infernally tight, and though I felt cold, sweat ran down my sides beneath the satin. I hoped I wouldn't faint.

There was a small stained-glass window set high in the wall at the side of the sanctuary, a crude rendering of John the Baptist in his bearskin. Green and blue shadows flowed over my sleeve, reminding me of the tavern's public room, and I wished fervently for a drink.

My turn. I stuttered slightly, to my fury. "I t-take thee, James …" I stiffened my spine. Jamie had got through his half creditably enough; I could try to do as well. "… to have and to hold, from this day forth …" My voice came stronger now.

" 'Til death us do part." The words rang out in the quiet chapel with a startling finality. Everything was still, as though in suspended animation. Then the minister asked for the ring.

There was a sudden stir of agitation and I caught a glimpse of Murtagh's stricken face. I barely registered the fact that someone had forgotten to provide for the ring, when Jamie released my hand long enough to twist a ring from his own finger.

I still wore Frank's ring on my left hand. The fingers of my right looked frozen, pallid and stiff in a pool of blue light, as the large metal circlet passed over the fourth finger. It hung loose on the digit and would have slid off, had Jamie not folded my fingers around it and enclosed my fist once more in his own.

More mumbling from the priest, and Jamie bent to kiss me. It was clear that he intended only a brief and ceremonial touching of lips, but his mouth was soft and warm and I moved instinctively toward him. I was vaguely conscious of noises, Scottish whoops of enthusiasm and encouragement from the spectators, but really noticed nothing beyond the enfolding warm solidness. Sanctuary.

We drew apart, both a little steadier, and smiled nervously. I saw Dougal draw Jamie's dirk from its sheath and wondered why. Still looking at me, Jamie held out his right hand, palm up. I gasped as the point of the dirk scored deeply across his wrist, leaving a dark line of welling blood. There was not time to jerk away before my own hand was seized and I felt the burning slice of the blade. Swiftly, Dougal pressed my wrist to Jamie's and bound the two together with a strip of white linen.

I must have swayed a bit, because Jamie gripped my elbow with his free left hand.

"Bear up, lass," he urged softly. "It's not long now. Say the words after me." It was a short bit of Gaelic, two or three sentences. The words meant nothing to me, but I obediently repeated them after Jamie, stumbling on the slippery vowels. The linen was untied, the wounds blotted clean, and we were married.

There was a general air of relief and exhilaration on the way back down the footpath. It might have been any merry wedding party, albeit a small one, and one composed entirely of men, save the bride.

We were nearly at the bottom when lack of food, the remnants of a hangover, and the general stresses of the day caught up with me. I came to lying on damp leaves, my head in my new husband's lap. He put down the wet cloth with which he had been wiping my face.

"That bad, was it?" He grinned down at me, but his eyes held an uncertain expression that rather touched me, in spite of everything. I smiled shakily back.

"It's not you," I assured him. "It's just … I don't think I've had anything at all to eat since breakfast yesterday—and rather a lot to drink, I'm afraid."

His mouth twitched. "So I heard. Well, that I can remedy. I've not a lot to offer a wife, as I said, but I do promise I'll keep ye fed." He smiled and shyly pushed a stray curl off my face with a forefinger.

I started to sit up and grimaced at a slight burning in one wrist. I had forgotten that last bit of the ceremony. The cut had come open, no doubt as a result of the fall I had taken. I took the cloth from Jamie and wrapped it awkwardly around the wrist.

"I thought it might have been that that made ye faint," he said, watching. "I should have thought to warn ye about it; I didna realize you weren't expecting it until I saw your face."

"What was it, exactly?" I asked, trying to tuck in the ends of the cloth.

"It's a bit pagan, but it's customary hereabouts to have a blood vow, along with the regular marriage service. Some priests won't have it, but I don't suppose this one was likely to object to anything. He looked almost as scared as I felt," he said, smiling.

"A blood vow? What do the words mean?"

Jamie took my right hand and gently tucked in the last end of the makeshift bandage.

"It rhymes, more or less, when ye say it in English. It says:

> *'Ye are Blood of my Blood, and Bone of my Bone.*
> *I give ye my Body, that we Two might be One.*
> *I give ye my Spirit, 'til our Life shall be Done.'* "

He shrugged. "About the same as the regular vows, just a bit more … ah, primitive."

I gazed down at my bound wrist. "Yes, you could say that."

I glanced about; we were alone on the path, under an aspen tree. The round dead leaves lay on the ground, gleaming in the wet like rusted coins. It was very quiet, save for the occasional splat of water droplets falling from the trees.

“Where are the others? Did they go back to the inn?”

Jamie grimaced. “No. I made them go away so I could tend ye, but they’ll be waitin’ for us just over there.” He gestured with his chin, in the countryman’s manner. “They’re no going to trust us alone ’til everything’s official.”

“Isn’t it?” I said blankly. “We’re married, aren’t we?”

He seemed embarrassed, turning away and elaborately brushing dead leaves from his kilts.

“Mmmphm. Aye, we’re married, right enough. But it’s no legally binding, ye know, until it’s been consummated.” A slow, fierce blush burned its way up from the lacy jabot.

“Mmmphm,” I said. “Let’s go and find something to eat.”

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15

REVELATIONS OF THE BRIDAL CHAMBER

At the inn, food was readily available, in the form of a modest wedding feast, including wine, fresh bread, and roast beef.

Dougal took me by the arm as I started for the stairs to freshen myself before eating.

"I want this marriage consummated, wi' no uncertainty whatsoever," Dougal instructed me firmly in an undertone. "There's to be no question of it bein' a legal union, and no way open for annulment, or we're all riskin' our necks."

"Seems to me you're doing that anyway," I remarked crossly. "Mine, especially."

Dougal patted me firmly on the rump.

"Dinna ye worry about that; ye just do your part." He looked me over critically, as though judging my capacity to perform my role adequately.

"I kent Jamie's father. If the lad's much like him, ye'll have no trouble at all. Ah, Jamie lad!" He hurried across the room, to where Jamie had come in from stabling the horses. From the look on Jamie's face, he was getting his orders as well.

* * *

How in the name of God did this happen? I asked myself some time later. Six weeks ago, I had been innocently collecting wildflowers on a Scottish hill to take home to my husband. I was now shut in the room of a rural inn, awaiting a completely different husband, whom I scarcely knew, with firm orders to consummate a forced marriage, at risk of my life and liberty.

I sat on the bed, stiff and terrified in my borrowed finery. There was a faint noise as the heavy door of the room swung open, then shut.

Jamie leaned against the door, watching me. The air of embarrassment between us deepened. It was Jamie who broke the silence finally.

“You dinna need to be afraid of me,” he said softly. “I wasna going to jump on ye.” I laughed in spite of myself.

“Well, I didn’t think you would.” In fact, I didn’t think he would touch me, until and unless I invited him to; the fact remained that I was going to have to invite him to do considerably more than that, and soon.

I eyed him dubiously. I supposed it would be harder if I found him unattractive; in fact, the opposite was true. Still, I had not slept with any man but Frank in over eight years. Not only that, this young man, by his own acknowledgment, was completely inexperienced. I had never deflowered anyone before. Even dismissing my objections to the whole arrangement, and considering matters from a completely practical standpoint, how on earth were we to start? At this rate, we would still be standing here, staring at each other, three or four days hence.

I cleared my throat and patted the bed beside me.

“Ah, would you like to sit down?”

“Aye.” He came across the room, moving like a big cat. Instead of sitting beside me, though, he pulled up a stool and sat down facing me. Somewhat tentatively, he reached out and took my hands between his own. They were large, blunt-fingered, and very warm, the backs lightly furred with reddish hairs. I felt a slight shock at the touch, and thought of an Old Testament passage—“For Jacob’s skin was smooth, while his brother Esau was a hairy man.” Frank’s hands were long and slender, nearly hairless and aristocratic-looking. I had always loved watching them as he lectured.

“Tell me about your husband,” said Jamie, as though he had been reading my mind. I almost jerked my hands away in shock.

“What?”

"Look ye, lass. We have three or four days together here. While I dinna pretend to know all there is to know, I've lived a good bit of my life on a farm, and unless people are verra different from other animals, it isna going to take that long to do what we have to. We have a bit of time to talk, and get over being scairt of each other." This blunt appraisal of our situation relaxed me a little bit.

"Are you scared of me?" He didn't look it. Perhaps he was nervous, though. Even though he was no timid sixteen-year-old lad, this *was* the first time. He looked into my eyes and smiled.

"Aye. More scairt than you, I expect. That's why I'm holdin' your hands; to keep my own from shaking." I didn't believe this, but squeezed his hands tightly in appreciation.

"It's a good idea. It feels a little easier to talk while we're touching. Why did you ask about my husband, though?" I wondered a bit wildly if he wanted me to tell him about my sex life with Frank, so as to know what I expected of him.

"Well, I knew ye must be thinking of him. Ye could hardly not, under the circumstances. I do not want ye ever to feel as though ye canna talk of him to me. Even though I'm your husband now—that feels verra strange to say—it isna right that ye should forget him, or even try to. If ye loved him, he must ha' been a good man."

"Yes, he … was." My voice trembled, and Jamie stroked the backs of my hands with his thumbs.

"Then I shall do my best to honor his spirit by serving his wife." He raised my hands and kissed each one formally.

I cleared my throat. "That was a very gallant speech, Jamie."

He grinned suddenly. "Aye. I made it up while Dougal was making toasts downstairs."

I took a deep breath. "I have questions," I said.

He looked down, hiding a smile. "I'd suppose ye do," he agreed. "I imagine you're entitled to a bit of curiosity, under the circumstances. What is it ye want to know?" He looked up suddenly, blue eyes bright with mischief in the lamplight. "Why I'm a virgin yet?"

"Er, I should say that that was more or less your own business," I murmured. It seemed to be getting rather warm suddenly, and I pulled one hand free to grope for my handkerchief. As I did so, I felt something hard in the pocket of the gown.

"Oh, I forgot! I still have your ring." I drew it out and gave it back to him. It was a heavy gold circlet, set with a cabochon ruby. Instead of replacing it on his finger, he opened his sporran to put it inside.

"It was my father's wedding ring," he explained. "I dinna wear it customarily, but I … well, I wished to do ye honor today by looking as well as I might." He flushed slightly at this admission, and busied himself with refastening the sporran.

"You did do me great honor," I said, smiling in spite of myself. Adding a ruby ring to the blazing splendor of his costume was coals to Newcastle, but I was touched by the anxious thought behind it.

"I'll get one that fits ye, so soon as I may," he promised.

"It's not important," I said, feeling slightly uncomfortable. I meant, after all, to be gone soon.

"Er, I have one main question," I said, calling the meeting to order. "If you don't mind telling me. Why did you agree to marry me?"

"Ah." He let go of my hands and sat back a bit. He paused for a moment before answering, smoothing the woolen cloth over his thighs. I could see the long line of muscle taut under the drape of the heavy fabric.

"Well, I would ha' missed talking to ye, for one thing," he said, smiling.

"No, I mean it," I insisted. "Why?"

He sobered then. "Before I tell ye, Claire, there's the one thing I'd ask of you," he said slowly.

"What's that?"

"Honesty."

I must have flinched uncomfortably, for he leaned forward earnestly, hands on his knees.

"I know there are things ye'd not wish to tell me, Claire. Perhaps things that ye *can't* tell me."

You don't know just how right you are, I thought.

"I'll not press you, ever, or insist on knowin' things that are your own concern," he said seriously. He looked down at his hands, now pressed together, palm to palm.

"There are things that I canna tell *you,* at least not yet. And I'll ask nothing of ye that ye canna give me. But what I would ask of ye—when you do tell me something, let it be the truth. And I'll promise ye the same. We have nothing now between us, save—respect, perhaps. And I think that respect has maybe room for secrets, but not for lies. Do ye agree?" He spread his hands out, palms up, inviting me. I could see the dark line of the blood vow across his wrist. I placed my own hands lightly on his palms.

"Yes, I agree. I'll give you honesty." His fingers closed lightly about mine.

"And I shall give ye the same. Now," he drew a deep breath, "you asked why I wed ye."

"I *am* just the slightest bit curious," I said.

He smiled, the wide mouth taking up the humor that lurked in his eyes. "Well, I canna say I blame ye. I had several reasons. And in fact, there's one—maybe two—that I canna tell ye yet, though I will in time. The main reason, though, is the same reason you wed me, I imagine; to keep ye safe from the hands of Jack Randall."

I shuddered a bit, at the memory of the Captain, and Jamie's hands tightened on mine.

"You *are* safe," he said firmly. "You have my name and my family, my clan, and if necessary, the protection of my body as well. The man willna lay hands on ye again, while I live."

"Thank you," I said. Looking at that strong, young, determined face, with its broad cheekbones and solid jaw, I felt for the first time that this preposterous scheme of Dougal's might actually have been a reasonable suggestion.

The protection of my body. The phrase struck with particular impact, looking at him—the resolute set of the wide shoulders and the memory of his graceful ferocity, "showing off" at swordplay in the moonlight. He meant it; and young as he was, he knew what he meant, and bore the scars to prove it. He was no older than many of the pilots and the infantrymen I had nursed, and he knew as well as they the price of commitment. It was no romantic pledge he had made me, but the blunt promise to guard my safety at the cost of his own. I hoped only that I could offer him something in return.

"That's *most* gallant of you," I said, with absolute sincerity. "But was it worth, well, worth marriage?"

"It was," he said, nodding. He smiled again, a little grimly this time. "I've good reason to know the man, ye ken. I wouldna see a dog given into his keeping if I could prevent it, let alone a helpless woman."

"How flattering," I remarked wryly, and he laughed. He stood up and went to the table near the window. Someone—perhaps the landlady—had supplied a bouquet of wildflowers, set in water in a whisky tumbler. Behind this stood two wineglasses and a bottle.

Jamie poured out two glasses and came back, handing me one as he resumed his seat.

"Not quite so good as Colum's private stock," he said with a smile, "but none so bad, either." He raised his glass briefly. "To Mrs. Fraser," he said softly, and I felt a thump of panic again. I quelled it firmly and raised my own glass.

"To honesty," I said, and we both drank.

"Well, that's one reason," I said, lowering my glass. "Are there others you can tell me?"

He studied his wineglass with some care. "Perhaps it's just that I want to bed you." He looked up abruptly. "Did ye think of that?"

If he meant to disconcert me, he was succeeding nicely, but I resolved not to show it.

"Well, do you?" I asked boldly.

"If I'm bein' honest, yes, I do." The blue eyes were steady over the rim of the glass.

"You wouldn't necessarily have had to marry me for that," I objected.

He appeared honestly scandalized. "You do not think I would take ye without offering you marriage!"

"Many men would," I said, amused at his innocence.

He sputtered a bit, at a momentary loss. Then regaining his composure, said with formal dignity, "Perhaps I am pretentious in saying so, but I would like to think that I am not ‘many men,’ and that I dinna necessarily place my behavior at the lowest common denominator.”

Rather touched by this speech, I assured him that I had so far found his behavior both gallant and gentlemanly, and apologized for any doubt I might inadvertently have cast on his motives.

On this precariously diplomatic note, we paused while he refilled our empty glasses.

* * *

We sipped in silence for a time, both feeling a bit shy after the frankness of that last exchange. So, apparently there *was* something I could offer him. I couldn’t, in fairness, say the thought had not entered my mind, even before the absurd situation in which we found ourselves arose. He was a very engaging young man. And there had been that moment, right after my arrival at the castle, when he had held me on his lap, and—

I tilted my wineglass back and drained the contents. I patted the bed beside me again.

“Sit down here with me,” I said. “And”—I cast about for some neutral topic of conversation to ease us over the awkwardness of close proximity—“and tell me about your family. Where did you grow up?”

The bed sank noticeably under his weight, and I braced myself not to roll against him. He sat closely enough that the sleeve of his shirt brushed my arm. I let my hand lie open on my thigh, relaxed. He took it naturally as he sat, and we leaned against the wall, neither of us looking down, but as conscious of the link as though we had been welded together.

“Well, now, where shall I start?” He put his rather large feet up on the stool and crossed them at the ankles. With some amusement, I recognized the Highlander settling back for a leisurely dissection of that tangle of family and clan relationships which forms the background of almost any event of significance in the Scottish Highlands. Frank and I had spent one evening in the village pub, enthralled by a conversation between two old codgers, in which the responsibility for the recent destruction of an ancient barn was traced back through the intricacies of a local feud dating, so far as I could tell, from about 1790. With the sort of minor shock to which I was becoming accustomed, I realized that that particular feud, whose origins I had thought shrouded in the mists of time, had not yet begun. Suppressing the mental turmoil this realization caused, I forced my attention to what Jamie was saying.

"My father was a Fraser, of course; a younger half-brother to the present Master of Lovat. My mother was a MacKenzie, though. Ye'll know that Dougal and Colum are my uncles?" I nodded. The resemblance was clear enough, despite the difference in coloring. The broad cheekbones and long, straight, knife edged nose were plainly a MacKenzie inheritance.

"Aye, well, my mother was their sister, and there were two more sisters, besides. My auntie Janet is dead, like my mother, but my auntie Jocasta married a cousin of Rupert's, and lives up near the edge of Loch Eilean. Auntie Janet had six children, four boys and two girls, Auntie Jocasta has three, all girls, Dougal's got the four girls, Colum has little Hamish only, and my parents had me and my sister, who's named for my Auntie Janet, but we called her Jenny always."

"Rupert's a MacKenzie, too?" I asked, already struggling to keep everyone straight.

"Aye. He's—" Jamie paused a moment considering, "he's Dougal, Colum, and Jocasta's first cousin, which makes him my second cousin. Rupert's father and my grandfather Jacob were brothers, along with—"

"Wait a minute. Don't let's go back any farther than we have to, or I shall be getting hopelessly muddled. We haven't even got to the Frasers yet, and I've already lost track of your cousins."

He rubbed his chin, calculating. "Hmm. Well, on the Fraser side it's a bit more complicated, because my grandfather Simon married three times, so my father had two sets of half-brothers and half-sisters. Let's leave it for now that I've six Fraser uncles and three aunts still living, and we'll leave out all the cousins from that lot."

"Yes, let's." I leaned forward and poured another glass of wine for each of us.

The clan territories of MacKenzie and Fraser, it turned out, adjoined each other for some distance along their inner borders, running side by side from the seacoast past the lower end of Loch Ness. This shared border, as borders tend to be, was an unmapped and most uncertain line, shifting to and fro in accordance with time, custom and alliance. Along this border, at the southern end of the Fraser clan lands, lay the small estate of Broch Tuarach, the property of Brian Fraser, Jamie's father.

"It's a fairly rich bit of ground, and there's decent fishing and a good patch of forest for hunting. It maybe supports sixty crofts, and the small village—Broch Mordha, it's called. Then there's the manor house, of course—that's modern," he said, with some pride, "and the old broch that we use now for the beasts and the grain.

"Dougal and Colum were not at all pleased to have their sister marrying a Fraser, and they insisted that she not be a tenant on Fraser land, but live on a freehold. So, Lallybroch—that's what the folk that live there call it—was deeded to my father, but there was a clause in the deed stating that the land was to pass to my mother, Ellen's, issue only. If she died without children, the land would go back to Lord Lovat after my father's death, whether Father had children by another wife or no. But he didn't remarry, and I am my mother's son. So Lallybroch's mine, for what that's worth."

"I thought you were telling me yesterday that you didn't have any property." I sipped the wine, finding it rather good; it seemed to be getting better, the more I drank of it. I thought perhaps I had better stop soon.

Jamie wagged his head from side to side. "Well, it belongs to me, right enough. The thing is, though, it doesna do me much good at present, as I can't go there." He looked apologetic. "There's the minor matter of the price on my head, ye see."

After his escape from Fort William, he had been taken to Dougal's house, Beannachd (means "Blessed," he explained), to recover from his wounds and the consequent fever. From there, he had gone to France, where he had spent two years fighting with the French army, around the Spanish border.

"You spent two years in the French army and stayed a virgin?" I blurted out incredulously. I had had a number of Frenchmen in my care, and I doubted very much that the Gallic attitude toward women had changed appreciably in two hundred years.

One corner of Jamie's mouth twitched, and he looked down at me sideways.

"If ye had seen the harlots that service the French army, Sassenach, ye'd wonder I've the nerve even to touch a woman, let alone bed one."

I choked, spluttering wine and coughing until he was obliged to pound me on the back. I subsided, breathless and red-faced, and urged him to go on with his story.

He had returned to Scotland a year or so ago, and spent six months alone or with a gang of "broken men"—men without clans—living hand to mouth in the forest, or raiding cattle from the borderlands.

"And then, someone hit me in the head wi' an ax or something o' the sort," he said, shrugging. "And I've to take Dougal's word for what happened during the next two months, as I wasna taking much notice of things myself."

Dougal had been on a nearby estate at the time of the attack. Summoned by Jamie's friends, he had somehow managed to transport his nephew to France.

"Why France?" I asked. "Surely it was taking a frightful risk to move you so far."

"More of a risk to leave me where I was. There were English patrols all over the district—we'd been fairly active thereabouts, ye see, me and the lads—and I suppose Dougal didna want them to find me lying senseless in some cottar's hut."

"Or in his own house?" I said, a little cynically.

"I imagine he'd ha' taken me there, but for two things," Jamie replied. "For one, he'd an English visitor at the time. For the second, he thought from the look of me I was going to die in any case, so he sent me to the abbey."

The Abbey of Ste. Anne de Beaupré, on the French coast, was the domain, it seemed, of the erstwhile Alexander Fraser, now abbot of that sanctuary of learning and worship. One of Jamie's six Fraser uncles.

"He and Dougal do not get on, particularly," Jamie explained, "but Dougal could see there was little to be done for me here, while if there was aught to help me, it might be found there."

And it was. Assisted by the monks' medical knowledge and his own strong constitution, Jamie had survived and gradually mended, under the care of the holy brothers of St. Dominic.

"Once I was well again, I came back," he explained. "Dougal and his men met me at the coast, and we were headed for the MacKenzie lands when we, er, met with you."

"Captain Randall said you were stealing cattle," I said.

He smiled, undisturbed by the accusation. "Well, Dougal isna the man to overlook an opportunity of turning a bit of a profit," he observed. "We came on a nice bunch of beasts, grazing in a field, and no one about. So …" He shrugged, with a fatalistic acceptance of the inevitabilities of life.

Apparently I had come upon the end of the confrontation between Dougal's men and Randall's dragoons. Spotting the English bearing down on them, Dougal had sent half his men around a thicket, driving the cattle before them, while the rest of the Scots had hidden among the saplings, ready to ambush the English as they came by.

"Worked verra well too," Jamie said in approval. "We popped out at them and rode straight through them, yelling. They took after us, of course, and we led them a canty chase uphill and through burns and over rocks and such; and all the while the rest of Dougal's men were making off over the border wi' the kine. We lost the lobsterbacks, then, and denned up at the cottage where I first saw ye, waiting for darkness to slip out."

"I see," I said. "Why did you come back to Scotland in the first place, though? I should have thought you'd be much safer in France."

He opened his mouth to reply, then reconsidered, sipping wine. Apparently I was getting near the edge of his own area of secrecy.

"Well, that's a long story, Sassenach," he said, avoiding the issue. "I'll tell it ye later, but for now, what about you? Will ye tell me about your own family? If ye feel ye can, of course," he added hastily.

I thought for a moment, but there really seemed little risk in telling him about my parents and Uncle Lamb. There was, after all, some advantage to Uncle Lamb's choice of profession. A scholar of antiquities made as much—or as little—sense in the eighteenth century as in the twentieth.

So I told him, omitting only such minor details as automobiles and airplanes, and of course, the war. As I talked, he listened intently, asking questions now and then, expressing sympathy at my parents' death, and interest in Uncle Lamb and his discoveries.

"And then I met Frank," I finished up. I paused, not sure how much more I could say, without getting into dangerous territory. Luckily Jamie saved me.

"And ye'd as soon not talk about him right now," he said understandingly. I nodded, wordless, my vision blurring a little. Jamie let go of the hand he had been holding, and putting an arm around me, pulled my head gently down on his shoulder.

"It's all right," he said, softly stroking my hair. "Are ye tired, lass? Shall I leave ye to your sleep?"

I was tempted for a moment to say yes, but I felt that that would be both unfair and cowardly. I cleared my throat and sat up, shaking my head.

"No," I said, taking a deep breath. He smelled faintly of soap and wine. "I'm all right. Tell me—tell me what games you used to play, when you were a boy.

The room was furnished with a thick twelve-hour candle, rings of dark wax marking the hours. We talked through three of the rings, only letting go of each other's hands to pour wine or get up to visit the privy stool behind the curtain in the corner. Returning from one of these trips, Jamie yawned and stretched.

"It is awfully late," I said, getting up too. "Maybe we should go to bed."

“All right,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “To bed? Or to sleep?” He cocked a quizzical eyebrow and the corner of his mouth twitched.

In truth, I had been feeling so comfortable with him that I had almost forgotten why we were there. At his words, I suddenly felt a hollow panic. “Well—” I said, faintly.

“Either way, you’re no intending to sleep in your gown, are ye?” he asked, in his usual practical manner.

“Well, no, I suppose not.” In fact, during the rush of events, I had not even thought about a sleeping garment—which I did not possess, in any case. I had been sleeping in my chemise or nothing, depending on the weather.

Jamie had nothing but the clothes he wore; he was plainly going to sleep in his shirt or naked, a state of affairs which was likely to bring matters rapidly to a head.

“Well, then, come here and I’ll help ye wi’ the laces and such.”

His hands did in fact tremble briefly as he began to undress me. He lost some of his self-consciousness, though, in the struggle with the dozens of tiny hooks that attached the bodice.

“Ha!” he said in triumph as the last one came loose, and we laughed together.

“Now let me do you,” I said, deciding that there was no point in further delay. I reached up and unfastened his shirt, sliding my hands inside and across his shoulders. I brought my palms slowly down across his chest, feeling the springy hair and the soft indentations around his nipples. He stood still, hardly breathing, as I knelt down to unbuckle the studded belt around his hips.

If it must be sometime, it may as well be now, I thought, and deliberately ran my hands up the length of his thighs, hard and lean under his kilt. Though by this time I knew perfectly well what most Scotsmen wore beneath their kilts—nothing—it was still something of a shock to find only Jamie.

He lifted me to my feet then, and bent his head to kiss me. It went on a long while, and his hands roamed downward, finding the fastening of my petticoat. It fell to the floor in a billow of starched flounces, leaving me in my chemise.

"Where did you learn to kiss like that?" I said, a little breathless. He grinned and pulled me close again.

"I said I was a virgin, not a monk," he said, kissing me again. "If I find I need guidance, I'll ask."

He pressed me firmly to him, and I could feel that he was more than ready to get on with the business at hand. With some surprise, I realized that I was ready too. In fact, whether it was the result of the late hour, the wine, his own attractiveness, or simple deprivation, I wanted him quite badly.

I pulled his shirt loose at the waist and ran my hands up over his chest, circling his nipples with my thumbs. They grew hard in a second, and he crushed me suddenly against his chest.

"Oof!" I said, struggling for breath. He let go, apologizing.

"No, don't worry; kiss me again." He did, this time slipping the straps of the chemise down over my shoulders. He drew back slightly, cupping my breasts and rubbing my nipples as I had done his. I fumbled with the buckle that held his kilt; his fingers guided mine and the clasp sprang free.

Suddenly he lifted me in his arms and sat down on the bed, holding me on his lap. He spoke a little hoarsely.

"Tell me if I'm too rough, or tell me to stop altogether, if ye wish. Anytime until we are joined; I dinna think I can stop after that."

In answer, I put my hands behind his neck and pulled him down on top of me. I guided him to the slippery cleft between my legs.

"Holy God," said James Fraser, who never took the name of his Lord in vain.

"Don't stop now," I said.

* * *

Lying together afterward, it seemed natural for him to cradle my head on his chest. We fitted well together, and most of our original constraint was gone, lost in shared excitement and the novelty of exploring each other. "Was it like you thought it would be?" I asked curiously. He chuckled, making a deep rumble under my ear.

"Almost; I had thought—nay, never mind."

"No, tell me. What did you think?"

"I'm no goin' to tell ye; ye'll laugh at me."

"I promise not to laugh. Tell me." He caressed my hair, smoothing the curls back from my ear.

"Oh, all right. I didna realize that ye did it face to face. I thought ye must do it the back way, like; like horses, ye know."

It was a struggle to keep my promise, but I didn't laugh.

"I know that sounds silly," he said defensively. "It's just … well, ye know how you get ideas in your head when you're young, and then somehow they just stick there?"

"You've never seen *people* make love?" I was surprised at this, having seen the crofters' cottages, where the whole family shared a single room. Granted that Jamie's family were not crofters, still it must be the rare Scottish child who had never waked to find his elders coupling nearby.

"Of course I have, but generally under the bedclothes, ye know. I couldna tell anything except the man was on top. *That* much I knew."

"Mm. I noticed."

"Did I squash you?" he asked, a little anxiously.

"Not much. Really, though, is that what you thought?" I didn't laugh, but couldn't help grinning broadly. He turned slightly pink around the ears.

"Aye. I saw a man take a woman plain, once, out in the open. But that … well, it was a rape, was what it was, and he took her from the back. It made some impression on me, and as I say, it's just the idea stuck."

He continued to hold me, using his horse-gentling techniques again. These gradually changed, though, to a more determined exploration.

"I want to ask ye something," he said, running a hand down the length of my back.

"What's that?"

"Did ye like it?" he said, a little shyly.

"Yes, I did," I said, quite honestly.

"Oh. I thought ye did, though Murtagh told me that women generally do not care for it, so I should finish as soon as I could."

"What would Murtagh know about it?" I said indignantly. "The slower the better, as far as most women are concerned." Jamie chuckled again.

"Well, you'd know better than Murtagh. I had considerable good advice offered me on the subject last night, from Murtagh and Rupert and Ned. A good bit of it sounded verra unlikely to me, though, so I thought I'd best use my own judgment."

"It hasn't led you wrong yet," I said, curling one of his chest hairs around my finger. "What other sage bits of advice did they give you?" His skin was a ruddy gold in the candlelight; to my amusement, it grew still redder in embarrassment.

"I could no repeat most of it. As I said, I think it's likely wrong, anyway. I've seen a good many kinds of animals mate with each other, and most seem to manage it without any advice at all. I would suppose people could do the same."

I was privately entertained by the notion of someone picking up pointers on sexual technique from barnyard and forest, rather than locker rooms and dirty magazines.

"What kinds of animals have you seen mating?"

"Oh, all kinds. Our farm was near the forest, ye see, and I spent a good deal of time there, hunting, or seeking cows as had got out and suchlike. I've seen horses and cows, of course, pigs, chickens, doves, dogs, cats, red deer, squirrels, rabbits, wild boar, oh, and once even a pair of snakes."

"Snakes!?"

"Aye. Did ye know that snakes have two cocks?—male snakes, I mean."

"No, I didn't. Are you sure about that?"

"Aye, and both of 'em forked, like this." He spread his second and third fingers apart in illustration.

"That sounds terribly uncomfortable for the female snake," I said, giggling.

"Well, she appeared to be enjoying herself," said Jamie. "Near as I could tell; snakes havena got much expression on their faces."

I buried my face in his chest, snorting with mirth. His pleasant musky smell mingled with the harsh scent of linen.

“Take off your shirt,” I said, sitting up and pulling at the hem of the garment.

“Why?” he asked, but sat up and obliged. I knelt in front of him, admiring his naked body.

“Because I want to look at you,” I said. He was beautifully made, with long graceful bones and flat muscles that flowed smoothly from the curves of chest and shoulder to the slight concavities of belly and thigh. He raised his eyebrows.

“Well then, fair’s fair. Take off yours, then.” He reached out and helped me squirm out of the wrinkled chemise, pushing it down over my hips. Once it was off, he held me by the waist, studying me with intense interest. I grew almost embarrassed as he looked me over.

“Haven’t you ever seen a naked woman before?” I asked.

“Aye, but not one so close.” His face broke into a broad grin. “And not one that’s mine.” He stroked my hips with both hands. “You have good wide hips; ye’d be a good breeder, I expect.”

“What!?” I drew away indignantly, but he pulled me back and collapsed on the bed with me on top of him. He held me until I stopped struggling, then raised me enough to meet his lips again.

“I know once is enough to make it legal, but …” He paused shyly.

“You want to do it again?”

“Would ye mind verra much?”

I didn’t laugh this time either, but I felt my ribs creak under the strain.

“No,” I said gravely. “I wouldn’t mind.”

* * *

“Are you hungry?” I asked softly, sometime later.

“Famished.” He bent his head to bite my breast softly, then looked up with a grin. “But I need food too.” He rolled to the edge of the bed. “There’s cold beef and bread in the kitchen, I expect, and likely wine as well. I’ll go and bring us some supper.”

“No, don’t you get up. I’ll fetch it.” I jumped off the bed and headed for the door, pulling a shawl over my shift against the chill of the corridor.

"Wait, Claire!" Jamie called. "Ye'd better let me—" but I had already opened the door.

My appearance at the door was greeted by a raucous cheer from some fifteen men, lounging around the fireplace of the main room below, drinking, eating and tossing dice. I stood nonplussed on the balcony for a moment, fifteen leering faces flickering out of the firelit shadows at me.

"Hey, lass!" shouted Rupert, one of the loungers. "Ye're still able t' walk! Isn't Jamie doin' his duty by ye, then?"

This sally was greeted with gales of laughter and a number of even cruder remarks regarding Jamie's prowess.

"If ye've worn Jamie out a'ready, I'll be happy t' take 'is place!" offered a short dark-haired youth.

"Nay, nay, 'e's no good, lass, take me!" shouted another.

"She'll ha' none o' ye, lads!" yelled Murtagh, uproariously drunk. "After Jamie, she'll need somethin' like this to satisfy 'er!" He waved a huge mutton bone overhead, causing the room to rock with laughter.

I whirled back into the room, slammed the door and stood with my back to it, glaring at Jamie, who lay naked on the bed, shaking with laughter.

"I tried to warn ye," he said, gasping. "You should see your face!"

"Just what," I hissed, "are all those men doing out there?"

Jamie slid gracefully off our wedding couch and began rummaging on his knees through the pile of discarded clothing on the floor. "Witnesses," he said briefly. "Dougal is no takin' any chances of this marriage bein' annulled." He straightened with his kilt in his hands, grinning at me as he wrapped it around his loins. "I'm afraid your reputation's compromised beyond repair, Sassenach."

He started shirtless for the door. "Don't go out there!" I said, in sudden panic. He turned to smile reassuringly, hand on the latch. "Dinna worry, lass. If they're witnesses, they may as well have somethin' to see. Besides, I'm no intendin' to starve for the next three days for fear of a wee bit o' chaff."

He stepped out of the room to a chorus of bawdy applause, leaving the door slightly ajar. I could hear his progress toward the kitchen, marked by shouted congratulations and ribald questions and advice.

"How was yer first time, Jamie? Did ye bleed?" shouted Rupert's easily recognized gravel-pit voice.

"Nay, but ye will, ye auld bugger, if ye dinna clapper yer face," came Jamie's spiked tones in broad Scots reply. Howls of delight greeted this sally, and the raillery continued, following Jamie down the hall to the kitchen and back up the stairs.

I pushed open the door a crack to admit Jamie, face red as the fire below and hands piled high with food and drink. He sidled in, followed by a final burst of hilarity from below. I choked it off with a decisive slam of the door, and shot the bolt to.

"I brought enough we'll no need to go out again for a bit," Jamie said, laying out dishes on the table, carefully not looking at me. "Will ye have a bite?"

I reached past him for the bottle of wine. "Not just yet. What I need is a drink."

* * *

There was a powerful urgency in him that roused me to response despite his awkwardness. Not wanting to lecture nor yet to highlight my own experience, I let him do what he would, only offering an occasional suggestion, such as that he might carry his weight on his elbows and not my chest.

As yet too hungry and too clumsy for tenderness, still he made love with a sort of unflagging joy that made me think that male virginity might be a highly underrated commodity. He exhibited a concern for my safety, though, that I found at once endearing and irritating.

Sometime in our third encounter, I arched tightly against him and cried out. He drew back at once, startled and apologetic.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didna mean to hurt ye."

"You didn't." I stretched languorously, feeling dreamily wonderful.

"Are you sure?" he said, inspecting me for damage. Suddenly it dawned on me that a few of the finer points had likely been left out of his hasty education at the hands of Murtagh and Rupert.

"Does it happen every time?" he asked, fascinated, once I had enlightened him. I felt rather like the Wife of Bath, or a Japanese geisha. I had never envisioned myself as an instructress in the arts of love, but I had to admit to myself that the role held certain attractions.

"No, not every time," I said, amused. "Only if the man is a good lover."

"Oh." His ears turned faintly pink. I was slightly alarmed to see the look of frank interest being replaced with one of growing determination.

"Will you tell me what I should do next time?" he asked.

"You don't need to do anything special," I assured him. "Just go slowly and pay attention. Why wait, though? You're still ready."

He was surprised. "You don't need to wait? I canna do it again right away after—"

"Well, women are different."

"Aye, I noticed," he muttered.

He circled my wrist with thumb and index finger. "It's just … you're so small; I'm afraid I'm going to hurt you."

"You are not going to hurt me," I said impatiently. "And if you did, I wouldn't mind." Seeing puzzled incomprehension on his face, I decided to show him what I meant.

"What are you doing?" he asked, shocked.

"Just what it looks like. Hold still." After a few moments, I began to use my teeth, pressing progressively harder until he drew in his breath with a sharp hiss. I stopped.

"Did I hurt you?" I asked.

"Yes. A little." He sounded half-strangled.

"Do you want me to stop?"

"No!"

I went on, being deliberately rough, until he suddenly convulsed, with a groan that sounded as though I had torn his heart out by the roots. He lay back, quivering and breathing heavily. He muttered something in Gaelic, eyes closed.

“What did you say?”

“I said,” he answered, opening his eyes, “I thought my heart was going to burst.”

I grinned, pleased with myself. “Oh, Murtagh and company didn’t tell you about that, either?”

“Aye, they did. That was one of the things I didn’t believe.”

I laughed. “In that case, maybe you’d better not tell me what else they told you. Do you see what I meant, though, about not minding if you’re rough?”

“Aye.” He drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “If I did that to you, would it feel the same?”

“Well, you know,” I said, slowly, “I don’t really know.” I had been doing my best to keep my thoughts of Frank at bay, feeling that there should really be no more than two people in a marriage bed, regardless of how they got there. Jamie was very different from Frank, both in body and mind, but there are in fact only a limited number of ways in which two bodies can meet, and we had not yet established that territory of intimacy in which the act of love takes on infinite variety. The echoes of the flesh were unavoidable, but there were a few territories still unexplored.

Jamie’s brows were tilted in an expression of mocking threat. “Oh, so there’s something you don’t know? Well, we’ll find out then, won’t we? As soon as I’ve the strength for it.” He closed his eyes again. “Next week, sometime.”

* * *

I woke in the hours before dawn, shivering and rigid with terror. I could not recall the dream that woke me, but the abrupt plunge into reality was equally frightening. It had been possible to forget my situation for a time the night before, lost in the pleasures of newfound intimacy. Now I was alone, next to a sleeping stranger with whom my life was inextricably linked, adrift in a place filled with unseen threat.

I must have made some sound of distress, for there was a sudden upheaval of bedclothes as the stranger in my bed vaulted to the floor with the heartstopping suddenness of a pheasant rising underfoot. He came to rest in a crouch near the door of the chamber, barely visible in the pre-dawn light.

Pausing to listen carefully at the door, he made a rapid inspection of the room, gliding soundlessly from door to window to bed. The angle of his arm told me that he held a weapon of some sort, though I could not see what it was in the darkness. Sitting down next to me, satisfied that all was secure, he slid the knife or whatever it was back into its hiding place above the headboard.

"Are you all right?" he whispered. His fingers brushed my wet cheek.

"Yes. I'm sorry to wake you. I had a nightmare. What on earth—" I started to ask what it was that had made him spring so abruptly to the alert.

A large warm hand ran down my bare arm, interrupting my question. "No wonder; you're frozen." The hand urged me under the pile of quilts and into the warm space recently vacated. "My fault," he murmured. "I've taken all the quilts. I'm afraid I'm no accustomed yet to share a bed." He wrapped the quilts comfortably around us and lay back beside me. A moment later, he reached again to touch my face.

"Is it me?" he asked quietly. "Can ye not bear me?"

I gave a short hiccupping laugh, not quite a sob. "No, it isn't you." I reached out in the dark, groping for a hand to press reassuringly. My fingers met a tangle of quilts and warm flesh, but at last I found the hand I had been seeking. We lay side by side, looking up at the low beamed ceiling.

"What if I said I couldn't bear you?" I asked suddenly. "What on earth could you do?" The bed creaked as he shrugged.

"Tell Dougal you wanted an annulment on grounds of nonconsummation, I suppose."

This time I laughed outright. "Nonconsummation! With all those witnesses?"

The room was growing light enough to see the smile on the face turned toward me. "Aye well, witnesses or no, it's only you and me that can say for sure, isn't it? And I'd rather be embarrassed than wed to someone that hated me."

I turned toward him. "I don't hate you."

"I don't hate you, either. And there's many good marriages have started wi' less than that." Gently, he turned me away from him and fitted himself to my back so we lay nested together. His hand cupped my breast, not in invitation or demand, but because it seemed to belong there.

"Don't be afraid," he whispered into my hair. "There's the two of us now." I felt warm, soothed, and safe for the first time in many days. It was only as I drifted into sleep under the first rays of daylight that I remembered the knife above my head, and wondered again, what threat would make a man sleep armed and watchful in his bridal chamber?

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16

ONE FINE DAY

The hard-won intimacy of the night seemed to have evaporated with the dew, and there was considerable constraint between us in the morning. After a mostly silent breakfast taken in our room, we climbed the small hillock behind the inn, exchanging rather strained politenesses from time to time.

At the crest, I settled on a log to rest, while Jamie sat on the ground, back against a pine sapling, a few feet away. Some bird was active in the bush behind me, a siskin, I supposed, or possibly a thrush. I listened to its dilatory rustlings, watched the small fluffy clouds float by, and pondered the etiquette of the situation.

The silence was becoming really too heavy to bear, when Jamie suddenly said, “I hope—” then stopped and blushed. Though I rather felt it should be me blushing, I was glad that at least one of us was able to do it.

“What?” I said as encouragingly as possible.

He shook his head, still pink. “It doesna matter.”

“Go ahead.” I reached out a foot and nudged his leg with a tentative toe. “Honesty, remember?” It was unfair, but I really couldn’t stand any more nervous throat-clearing and eye-twitching.

His clasped hands tightened around his knees, and he rocked back a bit, but fixed his gaze directly on me.

“I was going to say,” he said softly, “that I hoped the man who had the honor to lie first wi’ you was as generous as you were with me.” He smiled, a little shyly. “But on second thought, that didna sound quite right. What I meant … well, all I wanted was to say thank you.”

“Generosity had nothing to do with it!” I snapped, looking down and brushing energetically at a nonexistent spot on my dress. A large boot pushed into my downcast field of vision and nudged my ankle.

“Honesty, is it?” he echoed, and I looked up to meet a derisively raised pair of eyebrows above a wide grin.

“Well,” I said defensively, “not after the first time, anyway.” He laughed, and I discovered to my horror that I was not beyond blushing after all.

A cool shadow fell over my heated face and a large pair of hands took firm hold of mine and pulled me to my feet. Jamie took my place on the log, and patted his knee invitingly.

“Sit,” he said.

I reluctantly obliged, keeping my face turned away. He settled me comfortably against his chest and wrapped his arms about my waist. I felt the steady thump of his heart against my back.

“Now then,” he said. “If we canna talk easy yet without touching, we’ll touch for a bit. Tell me when you’re accustomed to me again.” He leaned back so that we were in the shade of an oak, and held me close without speaking, just breathing slowly, so that I felt the rise and fall of his chest and the stir of his breath in my hair.

“All right,” I said after a moment.

“Good.” He loosened his grip and turned me to face him. At close range, I could see the bristle of auburn stubble on cheek and chin. I brushed my fingers across it; it was like the plush on an old-fashioned sofa, stiff and soft at the same time.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I couldna shave this morning. Dougal gave me a razor before the wedding yesterday, but he took it back—in case I cut my throat after the wedding night, I expect.” He grinned down at me and I smiled back.

The reference to Dougal reminded me of our conversation of the night before.

“I wondered …” I said. “Last night, you said Dougal and his men met you at the coast when you came back from France. Why did you come back with him, instead of going to your own home, or the Fraser lands? I mean, the way Dougal's treated you …" I trailed off, hesitant.

"Oh," he said, shifting his legs to bear my weight more evenly. I could almost hear him thinking to himself. He made up his mind quite quickly.

"Well, it's something ye should know, I suppose." He frowned to himself. "I told ye why I'm outlawed. Well, for a time after—after I left the Fort, I didna care much … about anything. My father died about that time, and my sister …" He paused again, and I sensed some kind of struggle going on inside him. I twisted around to look at him. The normally cheerful face was shadowed with some strong emotion.

"Dougal told me," he said slowly, "Dougal told me that-that my sister was wi' child. By Randall."

"Oh, dear."

He glanced sideways at me, then away. His eyes were bright as sapphires and he blinked hastily once or twice.

"I … I couldna bring myself to go back," he said, low-voiced. "To see her again, after what happened. And too"—he sighed, then set his lips firmly—"Dougal told me that she … that after the child was born, she … well, of course, she couldna help it; she was alone—damn it, I *left* her alone! He said she had taken up wi' another English soldier, someone from the garrison, he didna know which one."

He swallowed heavily, then went on more firmly. "I sent back what money I could, of course, but I could not … well, I couldna bring myself to write to her. What could I say?" He shrugged helplessly.

"Anyway, after a time I grew tired of soldiering in France. And I heard through my Uncle Alex that he'd had word of an English deserter, named Horrocks. The man had left the army and taken service wi' Francis MacLean o' Dunweary. He was in his cups one day and let out that he'd been stationed wi' the garrison at Fort William when I escaped. And he'd seen the man who shot the sergeant-major that day."

"So he could prove that it wasn't you!" This sounded good news, and I said so. Jamie nodded.

"Well, yes. Though the word of a deserter would likely not count for much. Still, it's a start. At least I'd know myself who it was. And while I … well, I dinna see how I can go back to Lallybroch; still it would be as well if I could walk the soil of Scotland without the risk of being hanged."

"Yes, that seems a good idea," I said dryly. "But where do the MacKenzies come into it?"

There followed a certain amount of complicated analysis of family relationships and clan alliances, but when the smoke cleared away, it appeared that Francis MacLean was some connection with the MacKenzie side, and had sent word of Horrocks to Colum, who had sent Dougal to make contact with Jamie.

"Which is how he came to be nearby when I was wounded," Jamie finished up. He paused, squinting into the sun. "I wondered, afterward, ye know, whether perhaps he'd done it."

"Hit you with an ax? Your own uncle? Why on earth!?"

He frowned as though weighing how much to tell me, then shrugged.

"I dinna ken how much ye know about the clan MacKenzie," he said, "though I imagine ye canna have ridden wi' old Ned Gowan for days without hearin' something of it. He canna keep off the subject for long."

He nodded at my answering smile. "Well, you've seen Colum for yourself. Anyone can see that he'll not make old bones. And wee Hamish is barely eight; he'll no be able to lead a clan for ten years yet. So what happens if Colum dies before Hamish is ready?" He looked at me, prompting.

"Well, Dougal would be laird, I suppose," I said slowly, "at least until Hamish is old enough."

"Aye, that's true." Jamie nodded. "But Dougal's not the man Colum is, and there are those in the clan that wouldna follow him so gladly—if there were an alternative."

"I see," I said slowly, "and you are the alternative."

I looked him over carefully, and had to admit that there was a certain amount of possibility there. He was old Jacob's grandson; a MacKenzie by blood, if only on his mother's side. A big, comely, well-made lad, plainly intelligent, and with the family knack for managing people. He had fought in France and proved his ability to lead men in battle; an important consideration. Even the price on his head might not be an insurmountable obstacle—if he were laird.

The English had enough trouble in the Highlands, between the constant small rebellions, the border raids and the warring clans, not to risk a major uprising by accusing the chieftain of a major clan of murder—which would seem no murder at all to the clansmen.

To hang an unimportant Fraser clansman was one thing; to storm Castle Leoch and drag out the laird of the clan MacKenzie to face English justice was something else again.

"Do you mean to be laird, if Colum dies?" It was one way out of his difficulties, after all, though I suspected it was a way hedged with its own considerable obstacles.

He smiled briefly at the thought. "No. Even if I felt myself entitled to it—which I don't—it would split the clan, Dougal's men against those that might follow me. I havena the taste for power at the cost of other men's blood. But Dougal and Colum couldna be sure of that, could they? So they might think it safer just to kill me than to take the risk."

My brow was furrowed, thinking it all out. "But surely you could tell Dougal and Colum that you don't intend … oh." I looked up at him with considerable respect. "But you did. At the oath-taking."

I had thought already how well he had handled a dangerous situation there; now I saw just *how* dangerous it had been. The clansmen had certainly wanted him to take his oath; just as certainly Colum had not. To swear such an oath was to declare himself a member of the clan MacKenzie, and as such, a potential candidate for chieftain of the clan. He risked open violence or death for refusal; he risked the same—more privately—for compliance.

Seeing the danger, he had taken the prudent course of staying away from the ceremony. And when I, by my botched escape attempt, had led him straight back to the edge of the abyss, he had set a sure and certain foot on a very narrow tightrope, and walked it to the other side. *Je suis prest,* indeed.

He nodded, seeing the thoughts cross my face.

"Aye. If I had sworn my oath that night, chances are I wouldna have seen the dawn."

I felt a little shaky at the thought, as well as at the knowledge that I had unwittingly exposed him to such danger. The knife over his bed suddenly seemed nothing more than a sensible precaution. I wondered how many nights he had slept armed at Leoch, expecting death to come visiting.

"I always sleep armed, Sassenach," he said, though I had not spoken. "Except for the monastery, last night is the first time in months I've not slept wi' my dirk in my fist." He grinned, plainly remembering what *had* been in his fist, instead.

"How the bloody hell did you know what I was thinking?" I demanded, ignoring the grin. He shook his head good-naturedly.

"You'd make a verra poor spy, Sassenach. Everything ye think shows on your face, plain as day. You looked at my dirk and then ye blushed." He studied me appraisingly, bright head on one side. "I asked ye for honesty last night, but it wasna really necessary; it isna in you to lie."

"Just as well, since I'm apparently so bad at it," I observed with some asperity. "Am I to take it that at least *you* don't think I'm a spy, then?"

He didn't answer. He was looking over my shoulder toward the inn, body suddenly tense as a bowstring. I was startled for a moment, but then heard the sounds that had attracted his attention. The thud of hooves and jangle of harness; a large group of mounted men was coming down the road toward the inn.

Moving cautiously, Jamie crouched behind the screen of bushes, at a spot commanding a view of the road. I tucked my skirts up and crawled after him as silently as I could.

The road hooked sharply past a rocky outcrop, then curved more gently down to the hollow where the inn lay. The morning breeze carried the sounds of the approaching group in our direction, but it was a minute or two before the first horse poked its nose into sight.

It was a group of some twenty or thirty men, mostly wearing leather trews and tartan-clad, but in a variety of colors and patterns. All, without exception, were well armed. Each horse bore at least one musket strapped to the saddle, and there was an abundance of pistols, dirks, and swords on view, plus whatever further armament might be concealed in the capacious saddlebags of the four packhorses. Six of the men also led extra mounts, unburdened and saddleless.

Despite their warlike accoutrements, the men seemed relaxed; they were chatting and laughing in small groups as they rode, though here and there a head raised, watchful of the surroundings. I fought back the urge to duck as one man's gaze passed over the spot where we lay hidden; it seemed as though that searching look must surely discover some random movement or the gleam of the sun off Jamie's hair.

Glancing up at this thought, I discovered that it had occurred to him as well; he had pulled a fold of his plaid up over his head and shoulders, so that the dull hunting pattern made him effectively part of the shrubbery. As the last of the men wound down into the innyard, Jamie dropped the plaid and motioned back toward the path up the hill.

"Do you know who they are?" I panted, as I followed him up into the heather.

"Oh, aye." Jamie took the steep path like a mountain goat, with no loss of breath or composure. Glancing back, he noticed my labored progress and stopped, reaching down a hand to help me.

"It's the Watch," he said, nodding back in the direction of the inn. "We're safe enough, but I thought we'd as soon be a bit further away."

I had heard of the famous Black Watch, that informal police force that kept order in the Highlands, and heard also that there were other Watches, each patrolling its own area, collecting "subscriptions" from clients for the safeguarding of cattle and property. Clients in arrears might well wake one morning to find their livestock vanished in the night, and none to tell where they had gone—certainly not the men of the Watch. I was seized by a sudden irrational terror.

"They're not looking for you, are they?"

Startled, he looked back as though expecting to see men scrambling up the hill in pursuit, but there was no one, and he looked back at me with a relieved smile and put an arm about my waist to help me along.

"Nay, I doubt it. Ten pound sterling is not enough to make me worth the hunting by a pack like that. And if they kent I was at the inn, they wouldna have come as they did, traipsing up to the door all of a piece." He shook his head decisively. "No, were they hunting anyone, they'd send men to guard the back and the windows before coming in the front door. They've but stopped there for refreshment, likely."

We continued to climb, past the spot where the, rude path petered out in clumps of gorse and heather. We were among foothills here, and the granite rocks rose higher than Jamie's head, reminding me uncomfortably of the standing stones of Craigh na Dun.

We emerged then, onto the top of a small dun, and the hills sloped away in a breathtaking fall of rocks and green on all sides. Most places in the Highlands gave me a feeling of being surrounded by trees or rocks or mountains, but here we were exposed to the fresh drafts of the wind and the rays of the sun, which had come out as though in celebration of our unorthodox marriage.

I experienced a heady sense of freedom at being out from under Dougal's influence and the claustrophobic company of so many men. I was tempted to urge Jamie to run away, and to take me with him, but common sense prevailed. We had neither of us any money nor any food beyond the bit of lunch that he carried in his sporran. We would certainly be pursued if we did not return to the inn by sundown. And while Jamie could plainly climb rocks all day without breaking a sweat or getting out of breath, I was in no such training. Noticing my red face, he led me to a rock and sat beside me, contentedly gazing out over the hills while he waited for me to regain my breath. We were certainly safe here.

Thinking of the Watch, I laid a hand impulsively on Jamie's arm.

“I’m awfully glad you’re not worth very much,” I said.

He regarded me for a moment, rubbing his nose, which was beginning to redden.

“Well, I might take that several ways, Sassenach, but under the circumstances,” he said, “thank you.”

“I should thank *you,*” I said, “for marrying me. I must say that I’d rather be here than in Fort William.”

“I thank ye for the compliment, lady,” he said, with a slight bow. “So would I. And while we’re busy thanking each other,” he added, “I should thank you for marrying *me,* as well.”

“Er, well …” I blushed once more.

“Not only for that, Sassenach,” he said, his grin widening. “Though certainly for that as well. But I imagine you’ve also saved my life for me, at least so far as the MacKenzies are concerned.”

“Whatever do you mean?”

“Being half MacKenzie is one thing,” he explained. “Being half MacKenzie wi’ an English wife is quite another. There isna much chance of a Sassenach wench ever becoming lady of Leoch, whatever the clansmen might think of me alone. That’s why Dougal picked me to wed ye to, ye ken.”

He lifted one brow, reddish-gold in the morning sun. “I hope ye wouldna have preferred Rupert, after all?”

“No, I wouldn’t,” I said with emphasis.

He laughed and got up, brushing pine needles from his kilts.

“Well, my mother told me I’d be some lassie’s choice one fine day.” He reached down a hand and helped me up.

“I told her,” he continued, “that I thought it was the man’s part to choose.”

“And what did she say to that?” I asked.

“She rolled her eyes and said ‘You’ll find out, my fine wee cockerel, you’ll find out.’ ” He laughed. “And so I have.”

He looked upward, to where the sun was now seeping through the pine needles in lemon threads.

“And it is a fine day, at that. Come along, Sassenach. I’ll take ye fishin’.”

We went further up into the hills. This time Jamie turned to the north, and over a jumble of stone and through a crevice, into the head of a tiny glen, rock-walled and leafy, filled with the gurgling of water from the burn that spilled from a dozen wee falls among the rocks and plunged roistering down the length of the canyon into a series of rills and pools below.

We dangled our feet in the water, moving from shade to sun and back to shade as we grew too warm, talking of this and that and not much of anything, both aware of each other's smallest movement, both content to wait until chance should bring us to that moment when a glance should linger, and a touch should signal more.

Above one dark speckled pool, Jamie showed me how to tickle trout. Crouched to avoid the low-growing branches overhead, he duck-walked along an overhanging ledge, arms outstretched for balance. Halfway along, he turned carefully on the rock and stretched out his hand, urging me to follow.

I had my skirts tucked up already, for walking through rough country, and managed well enough. We stretched full-length on the cool rock, head to head, peering down into the water, willow branches brushing our backs.

"All it is," he said, "is to pick a good spot, and then wait." He dipped one hand below the surface, smoothly, no splashing, and let it lie on the sandy bottom, just outside the line of shadow made by the rocky overhang. The long fingers curled delicately toward the palm, distorted by the water so that they seemed to wave gently to and fro in unison, like the leaves of a water plant, though I saw from the still muscling of his forearm that he was not moving his hand at all. The column of his arm bent abruptly at the surface, seeming as disjointed as it had been when I had met him, little more than a month—my God, only a month?—before.

Met one month, married one day. Bound by vows and by blood. And by friendship as well. When the time came to leave, I hoped that I would not hurt him too badly. I found myself glad that for the moment, I need not think about it; we were far from Craigh na Dun, and not a chance in the world of escape from Dougal for the present.

“There he is.” Jamie’s voice was low, hardly more than a breath; he had told me that trout have sensitive ears.

From my angle of view, the trout was little more than a stirring of the speckled sand. Deep in the rock shadow, there was no telltale gleam of scales. Speckles moved on speckles, shifted by the fanning of transparent fins, invisible but for their motion. The minnows that had gathered to pluck curiously at the hairs on Jamie’s wrist fled away into the brightness of the pool.

One finger bent slowly, so slowly it was hard to see the movement. I could tell it moved only by its changing position, relative to the other fingers. Another finger, slowly bent. And after a long, long moment, another.

I scarcely dared breathe, and my heart beat against the cold rock with a rhythm faster than the breathing of the fish. Sluggishly the fingers bent back, lying open, one by one, and the slow hypnotic wave began again, one finger, one finger, one finger more, the movement a smooth ripple like the edge of a fish’s fin.

As though drawn by the slow-motion beckoning, the trout’s nose pressed outward, a delicate gasping of mouth and gills, busy in the rhythm of breathing, pink lining showing, not showing, showing, not showing, as the opercula beat like a heart.

The chewing mouth groped and bit water. Most of the body was clear of the rock now, hanging weightless in the water, still in the shadow. I could see one eye, twitching to and fro in a blank, directionless stare.

An inch more would bring the flapping gill-covers right over the treacherous beckoning fingers. I found that I was gripping the rock with both hands, pressing my cheek hard against the granite, as though I could make myself still more inconspicuous.

There was a sudden explosion of motion. Everything happened so fast I couldn’t see what actually *did* take place. There was a heavy splatter of water that sluiced across the rock an inch from my face, and a flurry of plaid as Jamie rolled across the rock above me, and a heavy splat as the fish’s body sailed through the air and struck the leaf-strewn bank.

Jamie surged off the ledge and into the shallows of the side pool, splashing across to retrieve his prize before the stunned fish could succeed in flapping its way back to the sanctuary of the water. Seizing it by the tail, he slapped it expertly against a rock, killing it at once, then waded back to show it to me.

"A good size," he said proudly, holding out a solid fourteen-incher. "Do nicely for breakfast." He grinned up at me, wet to the thighs, hair hanging in his face, shirt splotched with water and dead leaves. "I told you I'd not let ye go hungry."

He wrapped the trout in layers of burdock leaves and cool mud. Then he rinsed his fingers in the cold water of the burn, and clambering up onto the rock, handed me the neatly wrapped parcel.

"An odd wedding present, may be," he nodded at the trout, "but not without precedent, as Ned Gowan might say."

"There are precedents for giving a new wife a fish?" I asked, entertained.

He stripped off his stockings to dry and laid them on the rock to lie in the sun. His long bare toes wiggled in enjoyment of the warmth.

"It's an old love song, from the Isles. D'ye want to hear it?"

"Yes, of course. Er, in English, if you can," I added.

"Oh, aye. I've no voice for music, but I'll give you the words." And fingering the hair back out of his eyes, he recited,

"Thou daughter of the King of bright-lit mansions
On the night that our wedding is on us,
If living man I be in Duntulm,
I will go bounding to thee with gifts.
Thou wilt get a hundred badgers, dwellers in banks,
A hundred brown otters, natives of streams,
A hundred silver trout, rising from their pools …"

And on through a remarkable list of the flora and fauna of the Isles. I had time, watching him declaim, to reflect on the oddity of sitting on a rock in a Scottish pool, listening to Gaelic love songs, with a large dead fish in my lap. And the greater oddity that I was enjoying myself very much indeed.

When he finished, I applauded, keeping hold of the trout by gripping it between my knees.

"Oh, I like that one! Especially the 'I will go bounding to thee with gifts.' He sounds a most enthusiastic lover."

Eyes closed against the sun, Jamie laughed. "I suppose I could add a line for myself—'I will leap into pools for thy sake.' "

We both laughed, and then were quiet for a time, basking in the warm sun of the early summer. It was very peaceful there, with no sound but the rushing of water beyond our still pool. Jamie's breathing had calmed. I was very conscious of the slow rise and fall of his breast, and the slow beat of the pulse in his neck. He had a small triangular scar, just there at the base of his throat.

I could feel the shyness and constraint beginning to creep back. I reached out a hand and grasped his tightly, hoping that the touch would reestablish the ease between us as it had before. He slid an arm about my shoulders, but it only made me aware of the hard lines of his body beneath the thin shirt. I pulled away, under the pretext of plucking a bunch of pink-flowered storksbill that grew from a crack in the rock.

"Good for headache," I explained, tucking them into my belt.

"It troubles you," he said, tilting his head to look at me intently. "Not headache, I don't mean. Frank. You're thinking of him, and so it troubles you when I touch you, because ye canna hold us both in your mind. Is that it?"

"You're very perceptive," I said, surprised. He smiled, but made no move to touch me again.

"No great task to puzzle that out, lass. I knew when we married that you couldna help but have him often in your mind, did ye want to or no."

I didn't, at the moment, but he was right; I couldn't help it.

"Am I much like him?" he asked suddenly.

"No."

In fact, it would be difficult to imagine a greater contrast. Frank was slender, lithe and dark, where Jamie was large, powerful and fair as a ruddy sunbeam. While both men had the compact grace of athletes, Frank's was the build of a tennis player, Jamie's the body of a warrior, shaped—and battered—by the abrasion of sheer physical adversity. Frank stood a scant four inches above my own five foot six. Face-to-face with Jamie, my nose fitted comfortably into the small hollow in the center of his chest, and his chin could rest easily on top of my head.

Nor was the physical the only dimension where the two men varied. There was nearly fifteen years' difference in their ages, for one thing, which likely accounted for some of the difference between Frank's urbane reserve and Jamie's frank openness. As a lover, Frank was polished, sophisticated, considerate, and skilled. Lacking experience or the pretense of it, Jamie simply gave me all of himself, without reservation. And the depth of my response to that unsettled me completely.

Jamie was watching my struggle, not without sympathy.

"Well, then, it would seem I have two choices in the matter," he said. "I can let you brood about it, or …"

He leaned down and gently fitted his mouth over mine. I had kissed my share of men, particularly during the war years, when flirtation and instant romance were the light-minded companions of death and uncertainty. Jamie, though, was something different. His extreme gentleness was in no way tentative; rather it was a promise of power known and held in leash; a challenge and a provocation the more remarkable for its lack of demand. I am yours, it said. And if you will have me, then …

I would, and my mouth opened beneath his, wholeheartedly accepting both promise and challenge without consulting me. After a long moment, he lifted his head and smiled down at me.

"Or, I can try to distract ye from your thoughts," he finished.

He pressed my head against his shoulder, stroking my hair and smoothing the leaping curls around my ears.

"I do not know if it will help," he said, quietly, "but I will tell you this: it is a gift and a wonder to me, to know that I can please you—that your body can rouse to mine. I hadna thought of such a thing—beforehand."

I drew a long breath before replying. "Yes," I said. "It helps. I think."

We were silent again for what seemed a long time. At last Jamie drew away and looked down at me, smiling.

"I told ye I've neither money nor property, Sassenach?"

I nodded, wondering what he intended.

"I should have warned ye before that we'd likely end up sleeping in haystacks, wi' naught but heather ale and drammach for food."

"I don't mind," I said.

He nodded toward an opening in the trees, not taking his eyes off me.

"I havena got a haystack about me, but there's a fair patch of fresh bracken yonder. If ye'd care to practice, just to get the way of it …?"

* * *

A little later, I stroked his back, damp with exertion and the juice of crushed ferns.

"If you say 'thank you' once more, I will slap you," I said.

Instead, I was answered with a gentle snore. An overhanging fern brushed his cheek, and an inquisitive ant crawled across his hand, making the long fingers twitch in his sleep.

I brushed it away and leaned back on one elbow, watching him. His lashes were long, seen thus with his eyes closed, and thick. Oddly colored, though; dark auburn at the tips, they were very light, almost blond at the roots.

The firm line of his mouth had relaxed in sleep. While it kept a faintly humorous curl at the corner, his lower lip now eased into a fuller curve that seemed both sensual and innocent.

"Damn," I said softly to myself.

I had been fighting it for some time. Even before this ridiculous marriage, I had been more than conscious of his attraction. It had happened before, as it doubtless happens to almost everyone. A sudden sensitivity to the presence, the appearance, of a particular man—or woman, I suppose. The urge to follow him with my eyes, to arrange for small "inadvertent" meetings, to watch him unawares as he went about his work, an exquisite sensitivity to the small details of his body—the shoulder-blades beneath the cloth of his shirt, the lumpy bones of his wrists, the soft place underneath his jaw, where the first prickles of his beard begin to show.

Infatuation. It was common, among the nurses and the doctors, the nurses and the patients, among any gathering of people thrown for long periods into one another's company.

Some acted on it, and brief, intense affairs were frequent. If they were lucky, the affair flamed out within a few months and nothing resulted from it. If they were not … well. Pregnancy, divorce, here and there the odd case of venereal disease. Dangerous thing, infatuation.

I had felt it, several times, but had had the good sense not to act on it. And as it always does, after a time the attraction had lessened, and the man lost his golden aura and resumed his usual place in my life, with no harm done to him, to me, or to Frank.

And now. Now I had been forced to act on it. And God only knew what harm might be done by that action. But there was no turning back from this point.

He lay at ease, sprawled on his stomach. The sun glinted off his red mane and lit the tiny soft hairs that crested his spine, running down to the reddish-gold fuzz that dusted his buttocks and thighs, and deepened into the thicket of soft auburn curls that showed briefly between his spread legs.

I sat up, admiring the long legs, with the smooth line of muscling that indented the thigh from hip to knee, and another that ran from knee to long, elegant foot. The bottoms of his feet were smooth and pink, slightly callused from going barefoot.

My fingers ached, wanting to trace the line of his small, neat ear and the blunt angle of his jaw. Well, I thought, the action *had* been taken, and it was far past the time for restraint. Nothing I did now could make matters worse, for either of us. I reached out and gently touched him.

He slept very lightly. With a suddenness that made me jump, he flipped over, bracing himself on his elbows as though to leap to his feet. Seeing me, he relaxed, smiling.

"Madam, you have me at a disadvantage."

He made a very creditable courtly bow, for a man stretched at full length in a patch of ferns, wearing nothing but a few dappled splotches of sunlight, and I laughed. The smile stayed on his face, but it altered as he looked at me, naked in the ferns. His voice was suddenly husky.

"In fact, Madam, you have me at your mercy."

"Have I, then?" I said softly.

He didn't move, as I reached out once more and drew my hand slowly down his cheek and neck, over the gleaming slope of his shoulder, and down. He didn't move, but he closed his eyes.

"Dear Holy Lord," he said.

He drew his breath in sharply.

"Don't worry," I said. "It doesn't *have* to be rough."

"Thank God for small mercies."

"Keep still."

His fingers dug deeply into the crumbling earth, but he obeyed.

"Please," he said after a time. Glancing up, I could see that his eyes were open now.

"No," I said, enjoying myself. He closed his eyes again.

"You'll pay for this," he said a short time later. A fine dew of sweat shone on the straight bridge of his nose.

"Really?" I said. "What are you going to do?"

The tendons stood out in his forearms as he pressed his palms against the earth, and he spoke with an effort, as though his teeth were clenched.

"I don't know, but … by Christ and St. Agnes … I will … th-think of s-something! God! Please!"

"All right," I said, releasing him.

And I uttered a small shriek as he rolled onto me, pinning me against the ferns.

"Your turn," he said, with considerable satisfaction.

We returned to the inn at sunset, pausing at the top of the hill to be sure that the horses of the Watch were no longer hobbled outside.

The inn looked welcoming, light already shining through the small windows, and through the chinks in the walls. The last of the sun glowed behind us as well, so that everything on the hillside threw a double shadow. The breeze rose with the cooling of the day, and the fluttering leaves of the trees made the multiple shadows dance on the grass. I could easily imagine that there were fairies on the hill, dancing with those shadows, threading their way through the slender trunks to blend into the depths of the wood.

"Dougal's not back yet, either," I observed as we came down the hill. The large black gelding he customarily rode was not in the inn's small paddock. Several other beasts were missing as well; Ned Gowan's for one.

"No, he shouldna come back for another day at least—maybe two." Jamie offered me his arm and we descended the hill slowly, careful of the many rocks that poked through the short grass.

"Where on earth has he gone?" Caught in the rush of recent events, I had not thought to question his absence—or even to notice it.

Jamie handed me over the stile at the back of the inn.

"To do his business wi' the cottars nearby. He's got but a day or two before he's supposed to produce you at the Fort, ye ken." He squeezed my arm reassuringly. "Captain Randall willna be best pleased when Dougal tells him he's not to have ye, and Dougal would as soon not linger in the area afterward."

"Sensible of him," I observed. "Also kind of him to leave us here to, er … get acquainted with each other."

Jamie snorted. "Not kindness. That was one of the conditions I set for takin' ye. I said I'd wed if I must, but damned if I'd consummate my marriage under a bush, wi' twenty clansmen lookin' on and offering advice."

I stopped, staring at him. So that was what the shouting had been about.

"*One* of the conditions?" I said, slowly. "And what were the others?"

It was growing too dark to see his face clearly, but I thought he seemed embarrassed.

"Only two others," he said finally.

"Which were?"

"Well," he said, kicking a pebble diffidently out of the way, "I said ye must wed me proper, in kirk, before a priest. Not just by contract. As for the other—he must find ye a suitable gown to be wed in." He looked away, avoiding my gaze, and his voice was so soft I could scarcely hear him.

"I—I knew ye didna wish to wed. I wanted to make it … as pleasant as might be for you. I thought ye might feel a bit less … well, I wanted ye to have a decent dress, is all."

I opened my mouth to say something, but he turned away, toward the inn.

"Come along, Sassenach," he said gruffly. "I'm hungry."

* * *

The price of food was company, as was obvious from the moment of our appearance at the door of the inn's main room. We were greeted by raucous cheers, and hurriedly pushed into seats at the table, where a hearty supper was already in progress.

Having been somewhat prepared this time, I didn't mind the rough jests and crude remarks at our expense. For once, I was pleased to be modestly self-effacing, scrunching back into the corner and leaving Jamie to deal with the rough teasing and bawdy speculations about what we had been doing all day.

"Sleeping," said Jamie, in answer to one question of this sort. "Didna catch a wink last night." The roars of laughter that greeted this were topped by louder ones as he added in confidential tones, "She snores, ye ken."

I obligingly cuffed his ear, and he gathered me to him and kissed me soundly, to general applause.

After supper there was dancing, to the accompaniment of the landlord's fiddle. I had never been much of a dancer, being rather prone to trip over my own feet in times of stress. I scarcely expected that I would do better, attired in long skirts and clumsy footgear. Once I had shed the clogs, though, I was surprised to find that I danced with no difficulty and great enjoyment.

Women being in short supply, the innkeeper's wife and I tucked up our skirts and danced jigs and reels and strathspeys without ceasing, until I had to stop and lean against the settle, red-faced and gasping for breath.

The men were absolutely indefatigable, whirling about like plaid tops, by themselves or with each other. Finally, they stood back against the wall, watching, cheering and clapping, as Jamie took both my hands and led me through something fast and frantic called "The Cock o' the North."

Ending up by forethought near the stair, we swirled to a close with his arm about my waist. Here we paused, and he made a short speech, mixed in Gaelic and English, which was received with further applause, particularly when he reached into his sporran and tossed a small wash-leather bag to the landlord, instructing that worthy to serve whisky so long as it lasted. I recognized it as his share of the wagers from his fight at Tunnaig. Likely all the money he had in the world; I thought it could not have been better spent.

We had made it up to the balcony, followed by a hail of indelicate good wishes, when a voice louder than the others called Jamie's name.

Turning, I saw Rupert's broad face, redder than usual above its bush of black beard, grinning up from below.

"No good, Rupert," called Jamie. "She's mine."

"Wasted on ye, lad," said Rupert, mopping his face with his sleeve. "She'll ha'ye on the floor in an hour. No stayin' power, these young lads," he called to me. "Ye want a man who doesna waste his time sleepin', lass, let me know. In the meantime …" He flung something upward.

A fat little bag clanked on the floor at my feet.

"A wedding present," he called. "Courtesy of the men of the Shimi Bogil Watch."

"Eh?" Jamie stooped to pick it up.

"*Some* of us dinna spend our day idlin' about the grassy banks, lad," he said reprovingly, rolling his eyes lewdly at me. "That money was hard earned."

"Oh, aye," said Jamie, grinning. "Dice or cards?"

"Both." A raffish grin split the black beard. "Skint 'em to the bone, lad. To the bone!"

Jamie opened his mouth, but Rupert held up a broad, callused palm.

"Nay, lad, nay need o' thanks. Just give her a good one for me, eh?"

I pressed my fingers to my lips and blew him a kiss. Slapping a hand to his face as though struck, he staggered back with an exclamation and reeled off into the taproom, weaving as though drunk, which he wasn't.

After all the hilarity below, the room seemed a haven of peace and quiet. Jamie, still laughing quietly to himself, sprawled out on the bed to recover his breath.

I loosened my bodice, which was uncomfortably tight, and sat down to comb the tangles out of my dance-disordered hair.

"You've the loveliest hair," said Jamie, watching me.

"What? *This?*" I raised a hand self-consciously to my locks, which as usual, could be politely described as higgledy-piggledy.

He laughed. "Well, I like the other too," he said, deliberately straightfaced, "but yes, I meant that."

"But it's so … curly," I said, blushing a little.

"Aye, of course." He looked surprised. "I heard one of Dougal's girls say to a friend at the Castle that it would take three hours with the hot tongs to make hers look like that. She said she'd like to scratch your eyes out for looking like that and not lifting a hand to do so." He sat up and tugged gently on one curl, stretching it down so that, uncurled, it reached nearly to my breast. "My sister Jenny's hair is curly, too, but not so much as yours."

"Is your sister's hair red, like yours?" I asked, trying to envision what the mysterious Jenny might look like. She seemed to be often in Jamie's mind.

He shook his head, still twisting curls in and out between his fingers. "No. Jenny's hair is black. Black as night. I'm red like my mother, and Jenny takes after Father. Brian Dhu, they called him, 'Black Brian,' for his hair and his beard."

"I've heard that Captain Randall is called 'Black Jack,' " I ventured. Jamie laughed humorlessly.

"Oh, aye. But that's with reference to the color of his soul, not his hair." His gaze sharpened as he looked down at me.

"You're not worrying about him, are ye, lass? Ye shouldna do so." His hands left my hair and tightened possessively on my shoulders.

"I meant it, ye know," he said softly. "I will protect you. From him, or anyone else. To the last drop of my blood, *mo duinne*."

"Mo duinne?" I asked, a little disturbed by the intensity of this speech. I didn't want to be responsible for *any* of his blood being spilt, last drop or first.

"It means 'my brown one.' " He raised a lock of hair to his lips and smiled, with a look in his eyes that started all the drops of my own blood chasing each other through my veins. *"Mo duinne,"* he repeated, softly. "I have been longing to say that to you."

"Rather a dull color, brown, I've always thought," I said practically, trying to delay things a bit. I kept having the feeling of being whirled along much faster than I intended.

Jamie shook his head, still smiling.

"No, I'd not say that, Sassenach. Not dull at all." He lifted the mass of my hair with both hands and fanned it out. "It's like the water in a burn, where it ruffles over the stones. Dark in the wavy spots, with bits of silver on the surface where the sun catches it."

Nervous and a little breathless, I pulled away in order to pick up the comb I had dropped on the floor. I came up to find Jamie eyeing me steadily.

"I said I wouldna ask for anything you did not wish to tell me," he said, "and I won't, but I draw my own conclusions. Colum thought perhaps you were an English spy, though he couldna imagine in that case why you'd no Gaelic. Dougal thinks you're likely a French spy, maybe looking for support for King James. But in that case, *he* canna imagine why you were alone."

"And what about you?" I asked, pulling hard at a stubborn tangle. "What do you think I am?"

He tilted his head appraisingly, looking me over carefully.

"To look at, you could be French. You've that fine-boned look through the face that some of the Angevin ladies have. Frenchwomen are usually sallow-faced, though, and you have skin like an opal." He traced a finger slowly across the curve of my collarbone, and I felt the skin glow beneath his touch.

The finger moved to my face, drawing from temple to cheek, smoothing the hair back behind my ear. I remained immobile under his scrutiny, trying not to move as his hand passed behind my neck, thumb gently stroking my earlobe.

"Golden eyes; I've seen a pair like that once before—on a leopard." He shook his head. "Nay, lass. Ye could be French, but you're not."

"How do you know?"

"I've talked with you a good deal; and listened to you besides. Dougal thinks you're French because you speak French well—verra well."

"Thank you," I said sarcastically. "And the fact that I speak French well proves I'm not French?"

He smiled and tightened his grip on my neck. "*Vous parlez très bien*—but not quite as well as I do," he added, dropping back into English. He released me suddenly. "I spent a year in France, after I left the castle, and two more later on with the army. I know a native speaker of French when I hear one. And French is not your mother tongue." He shook his head slowly.

"Spanish? Perhaps, but why? Spain's no interests in the Highlands. German? Surely not." He shrugged. "Whoever you are, the English would want to find out. They canna afford to have unknown quantities at large, with the clans restless and Prince Charlie waiting to set sail from France. And their methods of finding out are not very gentle. I've reason to know."

"And how do you know I'm not an *English* spy, then? Dougal thought I was, you said so."

"It's possible, though your spoken English is more than a little odd too. If you were, though, why would you choose to wed me, rather than go back to your own folk? That was another reason for Dougal's makin' ye wed me—to see would ye bolt last night, when it came to the point."

"And I didn't bolt. So what does that prove?"

He laughed and lay back down on the bed, an arm over his eyes to shield them from the lamp.

“Damned if I know, Sassenach. *Damned* if I know. There isna any reason able explanation I can think of for you. You might be one of the Wee Folk, for all I know”—he peeked sideways from under his arm—“no, I suppose not. You’re too big.”

“Aren’t you afraid. I might kill you in your sleep some night, if you don’t know who I am?”

He didn’t answer, but took his arm away from his eyes, and his smile widened. His eyes must be from the Fraser side, I thought. Not deepset like the MacKenzies’, they were set at an odd angle, so that the high cheekbones made them look almost slanted.

Without troubling to lift his head, he opened the front of his shirt and spread the cloth aside, laying his chest bare to the waist. He drew the dirk from its sheath and tossed it toward me. It thunked on the boards at my feet.

He put his arm back over his eyes and stretched his head back, showing the place where the dark stubble of his sprouting beard stopped abruptly, just below the jaw.

“Straight up, just under the breastbone,” he advised. “Quick and neat, though it takes a bit of strength. The throat-cutting’s easier, but it’s verra messy.”

I bent to pick up the dirk.

“Serve you right if I did,” I remarked. “Cocky bastard.”

The grin visible beneath the crook of his arm widened still further.

“Sassenach?”

I stopped, dirk still in my hand.

“What?”

“I’ll die a happy man.”

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17

WE MEET A BEGGAR

We slept fairly late the next morning, and the sun was high as we left the inn, heading south this time. Most of the horses were gone from the paddock, and none of the men from our party seemed to be about. I wondered aloud where they had gone.

Jamie grinned. "I canna say for sure, but I could guess. The Watch went *that* way yesterday"—he pointed west—"so I should say Rupert and the others have gone *that* way." Pointing east.

"Cattle," he explained, seeing that I still didn't understand. "The estate-holders and tacksmen pay the Watch to keep an eye out, and get back their cattle, if they're stolen in a raid. But if the Watch is riding west toward Lag Cruime, any herds to the east are helpless—for a bit, anyway. It's the Grants' lands down that way, and Rupert's one of the best cattle-lifters I've ever seen. Beasts will follow him anywhere, wi' scarcely a bleat amongst them. And since there's no more entertainment to be had here, most likely he's got restless."

Jamie himself seemed rather restless, and set a good pace. There was a deer trail through the heather, and the going was fairly easy, so I kept up with no difficulty. After a bit, we came out onto a stretch of moorland, where we could walk side by side.

"What about Horrocks?" I asked suddenly. Hearing him mention the town of Lag Cruime, I had remembered the English deserter and his possible news. "You were supposed to meet him in Lag Cruime, weren't you?"

He nodded. "Aye. But I canna go there now, wi' both Randall and the Watch headed that way. Too dangerous."

"Could someone go for you? Or do you trust anyone enough?"

He glanced down at me and smiled. "Well, there's you. Since ye didna kill me last night after all, I suppose I may trust you. But I'm afraid you couldna go to Lag Cruime alone. No, if necessary, Murtagh will go for me. But I may be able to arrange something else—we'll see."

"You trust Murtagh?" I asked curiously. I had no very friendly feelings toward the scruffy little man, since he was more or less responsible for my present predicament, having kidnapped me in the first place. Still, there was clearly a friendship of some kind between him and Jamie.

"Oh, aye." He glanced at me, surprised. "Murtagh's known me all my life—a second cousin of my father's, I think. His father was my—"

"He's a Fraser, you mean," I interrupted hastily. "I thought he was one of the MacKenzies. He was with Dougal when I met you."

Jamie nodded. "Aye. When I decided to come over from France I sent word to him, asking him to meet me at the coast." He smiled wryly. "I didna ken, ye see, whether it was Dougal had tried to kill me earlier. And I did not quite like the idea of meeting several MacKenzies alone, just in case. Didna want to end up washing about in the surf off Skye, if that's what they had in mind."

"I see. So Dougal isn't the only one who believes in witnesses."

He nodded. "Very handy things, witnesses."

On the other side of the moorland was a stretch of twisted rocks, pitted and gouged by the advance and retreat of glaciers long gone. Rainwater filled the deeper pits, and thistle and tansy and meadowsweet surrounded these tarns with thick growth, the flowers reflected in the still water.

Sterile and fishless, these pools dotted the landscape and formed traps for unwary travelers, who might easily stumble into one in darkness and be forced to spend a wet and uncomfortable night on the moor. We sat down beside one pool to eat our morning meal of bread and cheese.

This tarn at least had birds; swallows dipped low over the water to drink, and plovers and curlews poked long bills into the muddy earth at its edges, digging for insects.

I tossed crumbs of bread onto the mud for the birds. A curlew eyed one suspiciously, but while it was still making up its mind, a quick swallow zoomed in under its bill and made off with the treat. The curlew ruffled its feathers and went back to its industrious digging.

Jamie called my attention to a plover, calling and dragging a seemingly broken wing near us.

“She’s a nest somewhere near,” I said.

“Over there.” He had to point it out several times before I finally spotted it; a shallow depression, quite out in the open, but with its four spotted eggs so close in appearance to the leaf-speckled bank that when I blinked I lost sight of the nest again.

Picking up a stick, Jamie gently poked the nest, pushing one egg out of place. The mother plover, excited, ran up almost in front of him. He sat on his heels, quite motionless, letting the bird dart back and forth, squalling. There was a flash of movement and he held the bird in his hand, suddenly still.

He spoke to the bird in Gaelic, a quiet, hissing sort of speech, as he stroked the soft mottled plumage with one finger. The bird crouched in his hand, completely motionless, even the reflections frozen in its round black eyes.

He set it gently on the ground, but the bird did not move away until he said a few more words, and waved his hand slowly back and forth behind it. It gave a short jerk and darted away into the weeds. He watched it go, and, quite unconscious, crossed himself.

“Why did you do that?” I asked, curious.

“What?” He was momentarily startled; I think he had forgotten I was there.

“You crossed yourself when the bird flew off; I wondered why.”

He shrugged, mildly embarrassed.

“Ah, well. It’s an old tale, is all. Why plovers cry as they do, and run keening about their nests like that.” He motioned to the far side of the tarn, where another plover was doing exactly that. He watched the bird for a few moments, abstracted.

"Plovers have the souls of young mothers dead in childbirth," he said. He glanced aside at me, shyly. "The story goes that they cry and run about their nests because they canna believe the young are safe hatched; they're mourning always for the lost one—or looking for a child left behind." He squatted by the nest and nudged the oblong egg with his stick, turning it bit by bit until the pointed end faced in, like the others. He stayed squatting, even after the egg had been replaced, balancing the stick across his thighs, staring out over the still waters of the tarn.

"It's only habit, I suppose," he said. "I did it first when I was much younger, when I first heard that story. I didna really believe they have souls, of course, even then, but, ye ken, just as a bit of respect …" He looked up at me and smiled suddenly. "Done it so often now, I'd not even notice. There's quite a few plovers in Scotland, ye ken." He rose and tossed the stick aside. "Let's go on, now; there's a place I want to show you, near the top of the hill yon." He took my elbow to help me out of the declivity, and we set off up the slope.

I had heard what he said to the plover he released. Though I had only a few words of Gaelic, I had heard the old salutation often enough to be familiar with it. 'God go with ye, Mother,' he had said.

A young mother, dead in childbirth. And a child left behind. I touched his arm and he looked down at me.

"How old were you?" I asked.

He gave me a half-smile. "Eight," he answered. "Weaned, at least."

He spoke no more, but led me uphill. We were in sloping foothills, now, thick with heather. Just beyond, the countryside changed abruptly, with huge heaps of granite rearing up from the earth, surrounded by clusters of sycamore and larch. We came over the crest of the hill, and left the plovers crying by the tarns behind us.

* * *

The sun was growing hot, and after an hour of shoving through thick foliage—even with Jamie doing most of the shoving—I was ready for a rest.

We found a shady spot at the foot of one of the granite outcrops. The spot reminded me a bit of the place where I had first met Murtagh—and parted company with Captain Randall. Still, it was pleasant here. Jamie told me that we were alone, because of the constant birdsong all around. If anyone came near, most birds would stop singing, though the jays and the jackdaws would screech and call in alarm.

"Always hide in a forest, Sassenach," he advised me. "If ye dinna move too much yourself, the birds will tell you in plenty of time if anyone's near."

Looking back from pointing out a squawking jay in the tree overhead, his eyes caught mine. And we sat as though frozen, within hand's reach but not touching, barely breathing. After a time, the jay grew bored with us and left. It was Jamie who looked away first, with an almost imperceptible shiver, as though he were cold.

The heads of shaggy-cap mushrooms poked whitely through the mold beneath the ferns. Jamie's blunt forefinger flipped one off its stem, and traced the spokes of the basidium as he marshaled his next words. When he spoke carefully, as now, he all but lost the slight Scots accent that usually marked his speech.

"I do not wish to … that is.… I do not mean to imply.…" He looked up suddenly and smiled, with a helpless gesture. "I dinna want to insult you by sounding as though I think you've a vast experience of men, is all. But it would be foolish to pretend that ye don't know more than I do about such matters. What I meant to ask is, is this … usual? What it is between us, when I touch you, when you … lie with me? Is it always so between a man and a woman?"

In spite of his difficulties, I knew exactly what he meant. His gaze was direct, holding my eyes as he waited my answer. I wanted to look away, but couldn't.

"There's often something like it," I said, and had to stop and clear my throat. "But no. No, it isn't—usual. I have no idea why, but no. This is … different."

He relaxed a bit, as though I had confirmed something about which he had been anxious.

"I thought perhaps not. I've not lain with a woman before, but I've … ah, had my hands on a few." He smiled shyly, and shook his head. "It wasna the same. I mean, I've held women in my arms before, and kissed them, and … well." He waved a hand, dismissing the *and*. "It was verra pleasant indeed. Made my heart pound and my breath come short, and all that. But it wasna at all as it is when I take you in my arms and kiss you." His eyes, I thought, were the color of lakes and skies, and as fathomless as either.

He reached out and touched my lower lip, barely brushing the edge. "It starts out the same, but then, after a moment," he said, speaking softly, "suddenly it's as though I've a living flame in my arms." His touch grew firmer, outlining my lips and caressing the line of my jaw. "And I want only to throw myself into it and be consumed."

I thought of telling him that his own touch seared my skin and filled my veins with fire. But I was already alight and glowing like a brand. I closed my eyes and felt the kindling touch move to cheek and temple, ear and neck, and shuddered as his hands dropped to my waist and drew me close.

* * *

Jamie seemed to have a definite idea where we were going. At length he stopped at the foot of a huge rock, some twenty feet high, warty with lumps and jagged cracks. Tansy and eglantine had taken root in the cracks, and waved in precarious yellow flags against the stone. He took my hand and nodded at the rock face before us.

"D'ye see the steps, there, Sassenach? Think ye can manage it?" There were, in fact, faintly marked protuberances in the stone, rising at an angle across the face of the rock. Some were bona fide ledges, and others merely a foothold for lichens. I couldn't tell whether they were natural, or perhaps had known some assistance in their forming, but I thought it might just be possible to climb them, even in a full-length skirt and tight bodice.

With some slippages and scares, and with Jamie pushing helpfully from the rear on occasion, I made it to the top of the rock, and paused to look around. The view was spectacular. The dark bulk of a mountain rose to the east, while far below to the south the foothills ran out into a vast, barren moorland. The top of the rock sloped inward from all sides, forming a shallow dish. In the center of the dish was a blackened circle, with the sooty remnants of charred sticks. We were not the first visitors, then.

“You knew this place?” Jamie stood to one side a little, observing me and taking pleasure in my raptness. He shrugged, deprecating.

“Oh, aye. I know most places through this part of the Highlands. Come here, there’s a spot ye can sit, and see down to where the road comes past the hill.” The inn also was visible from here, reduced from doll-house to child’s building-block by the distance. A few tethered horses were clustered under the trees by the road, small blobs of brown and black from here.

No trees grew on the top of the rock, and the sun was hot on my back. We sat side by side, legs dangling over the edge, and companionably shared one of the bottles of ale that Jamie had thoughtfully lifted from the well in the inn yard as we left.

There were no trees atop the rock, but the smaller plants, the ones that could gain a foothold in the precarious cracks and root themselves in meager soil, sprouted here and there, raising their faces bravely to the hot spring sun. There was a small clump of daisies sheltering in the lee of an outcrop near my hand, and I reached to pluck one.

There was a faint whir, and the daisy leaped off its stem and landed on my knee. I stared stupidly, my mind unable to make sense of this bizarre behavior. Jamie, a good deal faster than I in his apprehensions, had flung himself flat on the rock.

“Get *down*!” he said. A large hand fastened on my elbow and jerked me flat beside him. As I hit the spongy moss, I saw the shaft of the arrow, still quivering above my face, where it had struck home in a cleft of the outcrop.

I froze, afraid even to look around, and tried to press myself still flatter against the ground. Jamie was motionless at my side, so still that he might have been a stone himself. Even the birds and insects seemed to have paused in their song, and the air hung breathless and waiting. Suddenly Jamie began to laugh.

He sat up, and grasping the arrow by the shaft, twisted it carefully out of the rock. It was fletched with the split tail-feathers of a woodpecker, I saw, and banded with blue thread, wrapped in a line half an inch wide below the quills.

Laying the arrow aside, Jamie cupped his hands around his mouth and gave a remarkably good imitation of the call of a green woodpecker. He lowered his hands and waited. In a moment, the call was answered from the grove below, and a broad smile spread across his face.

“A friend of yours?” I guessed. He nodded, eyes intent on the narrow path up the rock-face.

“Hugh Munro, unless someone else has taken to making arrows in his style.”

We waited a moment longer, but no one appeared on the path below.

“Ah,” said Jamie softly, and whirled around, just in time to confront a head, rising slowly above the edge of the rock behind us.

The head burst into a jack-o’-lantern grin, snaggle-toothed and jolly, beaming with pleasure at surprising us. The head itself was roughly pumpkin-shaped, the impression enhanced by the orange-brown, leathery skin that covered not only the face but the round, bald crown of the head as well. Few pumpkins, however, could boast such a luxuriant growth of beard, nor such a pair of bright blue eyes. Stubby hands with filthy nails planted themselves beneath the beard and swiftly hoisted the remainder of the jack-o’-lantern up into view.

The body rather matched the head, having a distinct look of the Halloween goblin about it. The shoulders were very broad, but hunched and slanted, one being considerably higher than the other. One leg, too, seemed somewhat shorter than its fellow, giving the man a rather hopping, hitching sort of gait.

Munro, if this was indeed Jamie’s friend, was clad in what appeared to be multiple layers of rags, the faded colors of berry-dyed fabric peeking out through rents in a shapeless garment that might once have been a woman’s smock.

He carried no sporran at his belt—which was in any case no more than a frayed length of rope, from which two furry carcasses swung, head-down. Instead, he had a fat leather wallet slung across his chest, of surprisingly good quality, considering the rest of his outfit. A collection of small metal oddments dangled from the strap of the wallet: religious medals, military decorations, what looked to be old uniform buttons, worn coins, pierced and sewn on, and three or four small rectangular bits of metal, dull grey and with cryptic marks incised in their surfaces.

Jamie rose as the creature hopped nimbly over the intervening protrusions of rock, and the two men embraced warmly, thumping each other hard on the back in the odd fashion of manly greeting.

"And how goes it then, with the house of Munro?" inquired Jamie, standing back at length and surveying his old companion.

Munro ducked his head and made an odd gobbling noise, grinning. Then, raising his eyebrows, he nodded in my direction and waved his stubby hands in a strangely graceful interrogatory gesture.

"My wife," said Jamie, reddening slightly with a mixture of shyness and pride at the new introduction. "Married but the two days."

Munro smiled more broadly still at this information, and executed a remarkably complex and graceful bow, involving the rapid touching of head, heart, and lips and ending up in a near-horizontal position on the ground at my feet. Having executed this striking maneuver, he sprang to his feet with the grace of an acrobat and thumped Jamie again, this time in apparent congratulation.

Munro then began an extraordinary ballet of the hands, motioning to himself, away down toward the forest, at me, and back to himself, with such an array of gestures and wavings that I could hardly follow his flying hands. I had seen deaf-mute talk before, but never executed so swiftly and gracefully.

"Is that so, then?" Jamie exclaimed. It was his turn to buffet the other man in congratulation. No wonder men got impervious to superficial pain, I thought. It came from this habit of hammering each other incessantly.

"He's married as well," Jamie explained, turning to me. "Six months since, to a widow—oh, all right, to a *fat* widow," he amended, in response to an emphatic gesture from Munro, "with six children, down in the village of Dubhlairn."

"How nice," I said politely. "It looks as though they'll eat well, at least." I motioned to the rabbits hanging from his belt.

Munro at once unfastened one of the corpses and handed it to me, with such an expression of beaming goodwill that I felt obliged to accept it, smiling back and hoping privately that it didn't harbor fleas.

"A wedding gift," said Jamie. "And most welcome, Munro. Ye must allow us to return the favor." With which, he extracted one of the bottles of ale from its mossy bed and handed it across.

The courtesies attended to in this manner, we all sat down again to a companionable sharing of the third bottle. Jamie and Munro carried on an exchange of news, gossip, and conversation which seemed no less free for the fact that only one of them spoke.

I took little part in the conversation, being unable to read Munro's hand-signs, though Jamie did his best to include me by translation and reference.

At one point, Jamie jabbed a thumb at the rectangular bits of lead that adorned Munro's strap.

"Gone official, have ye?" he asked. "Or is that just for when the game is scarce?" Munro bobbed his head and nodded like a jack-in-the-box.

"What are they?" I asked curiously.

"Gaberlunzies."

"Oh, to be sure," I said. "Pardon my asking."

"A gaberlunzie is a license to beg, Sassenach," Jamie explained. "It's good within the borders of the parish, and only on the one day a week when begging's allowed. Each parish has its own, so the beggars from one parish canna take overmuch advantage of the charity of the next."

"A system with a certain amount of elasticity, I see," I said, eyeing Munro's stock of four lead seals.

“Ah, well, Munro’s a special case, d’ye see. He was captured by the Turks at sea. Spent a good many years rowing up and down in a galley, and a few more as a slave in Algiers. That’s where he lost his tongue.”

“They … cut it out?” I felt a bit faint.

Jamie seemed undisturbed by the thought, but then he had apparently known Munro for some time.

“Oh, aye. And broke his leg for him, as well. The back, too, Munro? No,” he amended, at a series of signs from Munro, “the back was an accident, something that happened jumping off a wall in Alexandria. The feet, though; that was the Turks’ doing.”

I didn’t really want to know, but both Munro and Jamie seemed dying to tell me. “All right,” I said, resigned. “What happened to his feet?”

With something approaching pride, Munro stripped off his battered clogs and hose, exposing broad, splayed feet on which the skin was thickened and roughened, white shiny patches alternating with angry red areas.

“Boiling oil,” said Jamie. “It’s how they force captive Christians to convert to the Mussulman religion.”

“It looks a very effective means of persuasion,” I said. “So that’s why several parishes will give him leave to beg? To make up for his trials on behalf of Christendom?”

“Aye, exactly.” Jamie was evidently pleased with my swift appreciation of the situation. Munro also expressed his admiration with another deep salaam, followed by a very expressive if indelicate sequence of hand movements which I gathered were meant to be praising my physical appearance as well.

“Thank ye, man. Aye, she’ll do me proud, I reckon.” Jamie, seeing my uplifted brows, tactfully turned Munro so that his back was to me and the flying fingers hidden. “Now, tell me what’s doing in the villages?”

The two men drew closer together, continuing their lopsided conversation with an increased intensity. Since Jamie’s part seemed to be limited mainly to grunts and exclamations of interest, I could glean little of the content, and busied myself instead with a survey of the strange little rock plants sprouting from the surfaces of our perch.

I had collected a pocketful of eyebright and dittany by the time they finished talking and Hugh Munro rose to go. With a final bow to me and a thump on the back for Jamie, he shuffled to the edge of the rock and disappeared as quickly as one of the rabbits he poached might vanish into its hole.

"What fascinating friends you have," I said.

"Oh, aye. Nice fellow, Hugh. I hunted wi' him and some others, last year. He's on his own, now that he's an official beggar, but his work keeps him moving about the parishes; he'll know everything that goes on within the borders of Ardagh and Chesthill."

"Including the whereabouts of Horrocks?" I guessed.

Jamie nodded. "Aye. And he'll carry a message for me, to change the meeting place."

"Which foxes Dougal rather neatly," I observed. "If he had any ideas about holding you to ransom over Horrocks."

He nodded, and a smile creased one corner of his mouth.

"Aye, there's that about it."

* * *

It was near supper-time again as we reached the inn. This time, though, Dougal's big black and its five companions were standing in the inn yard, contentedly munching hay.

Dougal himself was inside, washing the road dust from his throat with sour ale. He nodded to me and swung round to greet his nephew. Instead of speaking, though, he just stood there, head on one side, eyeing Jamie quizzically.

"Ah, that's it," he said finally, in the satisfied tones of a man who has solved a difficult puzzle. "Now I know what ye mind me of, lad." He turned to me.

"Ever seen a red stag near the end of the rutting season, lass?" he said confidentially. "The poor beasts dinna sleep nor eat for several weeks, because they canna spare the time, between fightin' off the other stags and serving the does. By the end o' the season, they're naught but skin and bones. Their eyes are deep-sunk in their heads, and the only part o' them that doesna shake wi' palsy is their—"

The last of this was lost in a chorus of laughter as Jamie pulled me up the stairs. We did not come down to supper.

* * *

Much later, on the edge of sleep, I felt Jamie's arm around my waist, and felt his breath warm against my neck.

"Does it ever stop? The wanting you?" His hand came around to caress my breast. "Even when I've just left ye, I want you so much my chest feels tight and my fingers ache with wanting to touch ye again."

He cupped my face in the dark, thumbs stroking the arcs of my eyebrows. "When I hold ye between my two hands and feel you quiver like that, waitin' for me to take you … Lord, I want to pleasure you 'til ye cry out under me and open yourself to me. And when I take my own pleasure from you, I feel as though I've given ye my soul along with my cock."

He rolled above me and I opened my legs, wincing slightly as he entered me. He laughed softly. "Aye, I'm a bit sore, too. Do ye want me to stop?" I wrapped my legs around his hips in answer and pulled him closer.

"*Would* you stop?" I asked.

"No. I can't."

We laughed together, and rocked slowly, lips and fingers exploring in the dark.

"I see why the Church says it is a sacrament," Jamie said dreamily.

"This?" I said, startled. "Why?"

"Or at least holy," he said. "I feel like God himself when I'm in you."

I laughed so hard he nearly came out. He stopped and gripped my shoulders to steady me.

"What's so funny?"

"It's hard to imagine God doing this."

Jamie resumed his movements. "Well, if God made man in His own image, I should imagine He's got a cock." He started to laugh as well, losing his rhythm again. "Though ye dinna remind me much of the Blessed Virgin, Sassenach."

We shook in each other's arms, laughing until we came uncoupled and rolled apart.

Recovering, Jamie slapped my hip. "Get on your knees, Sassenach."

"Why?"

"If you'll not let me be spiritual about it, you'll have to put up wi' my baser nature. I'm going to be a beast." He bit my neck. "Do ye want me to be a horse, a bear, or a dog?"

"A hedgehog."

"A hedgehog? And just how does a hedgehog make love?" he demanded.

No, I thought. I won't. I will *not.* But I did. "*Very* carefully," I replied, giggling helplessly. So now we know just how old *that* one is, I thought.

Jamie collapsed in a ball, wheezing with laughter. At last he rolled over and got to his knees, groping for the flint box on the table. He glowed like red amber against the room's darkness as the wick caught and the light swelled behind him.

He flopped back on the foot of the bed, grinning down at me, where I still shook on the pillow with spasms of giggles. He rubbed the back of his hand across his face and assumed a mock-stern expression.

"All right, woman. I see the time has come when I shall have to exert my authority as your husband."

"Oh, you will?"

"Aye." He dived forward, grabbing my thighs and spreading them. I squeaked and tried to wriggle upward.

"No, don't do that!"

"Why not?" He lay full-length between my legs, squinting up at me. He kept a firm hold on my thighs, preventing my struggles to close them.

"Tell me, Sassenach. Why don't ye want me to do that?" He rubbed his cheek against the inside of one thigh, ferocious young beard rasping the tender skin. "Be honest. Why not?" He rasped the other side, making me kick and squirm wildly to get away, to no avail.

I turned my face into the pillow, which felt cool against my flushed cheek. "Well, if you must know," I muttered, "I don't think—well, I'm afraid that it doesn't—I mean, the smell …" My voice faded off into an embarrassed silence. There was a sudden movement between my legs, as Jamie heaved himself up. He put his arms around my hips, laid his cheek on my thigh, and laughed until the tears ran down his cheeks.

"Jesus God, Sassenach," he said at last, snorting with mirth, "don't ye know what's the first thing you do when you're getting acquainted with a new horse?"

"No," I said, completely baffled.

He raised one arm, displaying a soft tuft of cinnamon-colored hair. "You rub your oxter over the beast's nose a few times, to give him your scent and get him accustomed to you, so he won't be nervous of ye." He raised himself on his elbows, peering up over the slope of belly and breast.

"That's what you should have done wi' me, Sassenach. You should ha' rubbed my face between your legs first thing. Then I wouldn't have been skittish."

"Skittish!"

He lowered his face and rubbed it deliberately back and forth, snorting and blowing in imitation of a nuzzling horse. I writhed and kicked him in the ribs, with exactly as much effect as kicking a brick wall. Finally he pressed my thighs flat again and looked up.

"Now," he said, in a tone that brooked no opposition, "lie still."

I felt exposed, invaded, helpless—and as though I were about to disintegrate. Jamie's breath was alternately warm and cool on my skin.

"Please," I said, not knowing whether I meant "please stop" or "please go on." It didn't matter; he didn't mean to stop.

Consciousness fragmented into a number of small separate sensations: the roughness of the linen pillow, nubbled with embroidered flowers; the oily reek of the lamp, mingled with the fainter scent of roast beef and ale and the still fainter wisps of freshness from the wilting flowers in the glass; the cool timber of the wall against my left foot, the firm hands on my hips. The sensations swirled and coalesced behind my closed eyelids into a glowing sun that swelled and shrank and finally exploded with a soundless *pop* that left me in a warm and pulsing darkness.

Dimly, from a long way away, I heard Jamie sit up.

“Well, that’s a bit better,” said a voice, gasping between words. “Takes a bit of effort to *make* you properly submissive, doesn’t it?” The bed creaked with a shifting of weight and I felt my knees being nudged further apart.

“Not as dead as you look, I hope?” said the voice, coming nearer. I arched upward with an inarticulate sound as exquisitely sensitive tissues were firmly parted in a fresh assault.

“Jesus Christ,” I said. There was a faint chuckle near my ear.

“I only said I *felt* like God, Sassenach,” he murmured, “I never said I *was*.”

And later, as the rising sun began to dim the glow of the lamp, I roused from a drifting sleep to hear Jamie murmur once more, “Does it ever stop, Claire? The wanting?”

My head fell back onto his shoulder. “I don’t know, Jamie. I really don’t.”

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18

RAIDERS IN THE ROCKS

“What did Captain Randall say?” I asked.

With Dougal on one side and Jamie on the other, there was barely room for the three horses to ride abreast down the narrow road. Here and there, one or both of my companions would have to drop back or spur up, in order to avoid becoming entangled in the overgrowth that threatened to reclaim the crude track.

Dougal glanced at me, then back at the road, in order to guide his horse around a large rock. A wicked grin spread slowly across his features.

“He wasna best pleased about it,” he said circumspectly. “Though I am not sure I should tell ye what he actually *said*; there’s likely limits even to *your* tolerance for bad language, Mistress Fraser.”

I overlooked his sardonic use of my new title, as well as the implied insult, though I saw Jamie stiffen in his saddle.

“I, er, don’t suppose he means to take any steps about it?” I asked. Despite Jamie’s assurances, I had visions of scarlet-coated dragoons bursting out of the bushes, slaughtering the Scots and dragging me away to Randall’s lair for questioning. I had an uneasy feeling that Randall’s ideas of interrogation might be creative, to say the least.

“Shouldn’t think so,” Dougal answered casually. “He’s more to worry about than one stray Sassenach wench, no matter how pretty.” He raised an eyebrow and half-bowed toward me, as though the compliment were meant in apology. “He’s also better sense than to rile Colum by kidnapping his niece,” he said, more matter-of-factly.

Niece. I felt a small shiver run down my spine, in spite of the warm weather. Niece to the MacKenzie chieftain. Not to mention to the war chieftain of clan MacKenzie, riding so nonchalantly by my side. And on the other side, I was now presumably linked with Lord Lovat, chief of clan Fraser, with the abbot of a powerful French abbey, and with who knew how many other assorted Frasers. No, perhaps John Randall *wouldn't* think it worthwhile to pursue me. And that, after all, had been the point of this ridiculous arrangement.

I stole a glance at Jamie, riding ahead now. His back was straight as an alder sapling and his hair shone under the sun like a helmet of burnished metal.

Dougal followed my glance.

"Could have been worse, no?" he said, with an ironic lift of his brow.

* * *

Two nights later, we were encamped on a stretch of moorland, near one of those strange outcroppings of glacier-pocked granite. It had been a long day's travel, with only a hasty meal eaten in the saddle, and everyone was pleased to stop for a cooked dinner. I had tried early on to assist with the cooking, but my help had been more or less politely rejected by the taciturn clansman whose job it apparently was.

One of the men had killed a deer that morning, and a portion of the fresh meat, cooked with turnips, onions, and whatever else he could find, had made a delicious dinner. Bursting with food and contentment, we all sprawled around the fire, listening to stories and songs. Surprisingly enough, little Murtagh, who seldom opened his mouth to speak, had a beautiful, clear tenor voice. While it was difficult to persuade him to sing, the results were worth it.

I nestled closer to Jamie, trying to find a comfortable spot to sit on the hard granite. We had camped at the edge of the rocky outcrop, where a broad shelf of reddish granite gave us a natural hearth, and the towering jumble of rocks behind made a place to hide the horses. When I asked why we did not sleep more comfortably on the springy grass of the moor, Ned Gowan had informed me that we were now near the southern border of the MacKenzie lands. And thus near the territory of both Grants and Chisholms.

"Dougal's scouts say there's no sign of anyone nearabouts," he had said, standing on a large boulder to peer into the sunset himself, "but ye can never tell. Better safe than sorry, ye ken."

When Murtagh called it quits, Rupert began to tell stories. While he lacked Gwyllyn's elegant way with words, he had an inexhaustible fund of stories, about fairies, ghosts, the *tannasg* or evil spirits, and other inhabitants of the Highlands, such as the waterhorses. These beings, I was given to understand, inhabited almost all bodies of water, being especially common at fords and crossings, though many lived in the depths of the lochs.

"There's a spot at the eastern end of Loch Garve, ye ken," he said, rolling his eyes around the gathering to be sure everyone was listening, "that never freezes. It's always black water there, even when the rest o' the loch is frozen solid, for that's the waterhorse's chimney."

The waterhorse of Loch Garve, like so many of his kind, had stolen a young girl who came to the loch to draw water, and carried her away to live in the depths of the loch and be his wife. Woe betide any maiden, or any man, for that matter, who met a fine horse by the water's side and thought to ride upon him, for a rider once mounted could not dismount, and the horse would step into the water, turn into a fish, and swim to his home with the hapless rider still stuck fast to his back.

"Now, a waterhorse beneath the waves has but fish's teeth," said Rupert, wiggling his palm like an undulating fish, "and feeds on snails and waterweeds and cold, wet things. His blood runs cold as the water, and he's no need of fire, d'ye ken, but a human woman's a wee bit warmer than that." Here he winked at me and leered outrageously, to the enjoyment of the listeners.

"So the waterhorse's wife was sad and cold and hungry in her new home beneath the waves, not caring owermuch for snails and waterweed for her supper. So, the waterhorse being a kindly sort, takes himself to the bank of the loch near the house of a man with the reputation of a builder. And when the man came down to the river, and saw the fine golden horse with his silver bridle, shining in the sun, he couldna resist seizing the bridle and mounting.

"Sure enough, the waterhorse carries him straight into the water, and down through the depths to his own cold, fishy home. And there he tells the builder if he would be free, he must build a fine hearth, and a chimney as well, that the waterhorse's wife might have a fire to warm her hands and fry her fish."

I had been resting my head on Jamie's shoulder, feeling pleasantly drowsy and looking forward to bed, even if that was only a blanket spread over granite. Suddenly I felt his body tense. He put a hand on my neck, warning me to keep still. I looked around the campsite, and could see nothing amiss, but I caught the air of tension, running from man to man as though transmitted by wireless.

Looking in Rupert's direction, I saw him nod fractionally as he caught Dougal's eye, though he went on with the story imperturbably.

"So the builder, havin' little choice, did as he was bid. And so the waterhorse kept his word, and returned the man to the bank near his home. And the waterhorse's wife was warm, then, and happy, and full of the fish she fried for her supper. And the water never freezes over the east end of Loch Garve because the heat from the waterhorse's chimney melts the ice."

Rupert was seated on a rock, his right side toward me. As he spoke, he bent down as though casually to scratch his leg. Without the slightest hitch in his movements, he grasped the knife that lay on the ground near his foot and transferred it smoothly to his lap, where it lay hidden in the folds of his kilt.

I wriggled closer and pulled Jamie's head down as though overcome by amorousness. "What is it?" I whispered in his ear.

He seized my earlobe between his teeth and whispered back. "The horses are restless. Someone's near."

One man got up and strolled to the edge of the rock to relieve himself. When he returned, he sat down in a new spot, next to one of the drovers. Another man rose and peered into the cook-pot, helping himself to a morsel of venison. All around the campsite, there was a subtle shifting and moving, while Rupert kept on talking.

Watching carefully, with Jamie's arm tight around me, I finally realized that the men were moving closer to wherever their weapons had been placed. All of them slept with their dirks, but generally left swords, pistols, and the round leather shields called targes in small, neat heaps near the edge of the campsite. Jamie's own pair of pistols lay on the ground with his sword, just a few feet away.

I could see the firelight dancing on the damascened blade. While his pistols were no more than the customary horn-handled "dags" worn by most of the men, both broadsword and claymore were something special. He had showed them to me with pride at one of our stops, turning the gleaming blades over lovingly in his hands.

The claymore was wrapped inside his blanket roll; I could see the enormous T-shaped hilt, the grip roughened for battle by careful sanding. I had lifted it, and nearly dropped it. It weighed close to fifteen pounds, Jamie told me.

If the claymore was somber and lethal-looking, the broadsword was beautiful. Two-thirds the weight of the larger weapon, it was a deadly, gleaming thing with Islamic tracery snaking its way up the blue steel blade to the spiraled basket hilt, enameled in reds and blues. I had seen Jamie use it in playful practice, first right-handed with one of the men-at-arms, later left-handed with Dougal. He was a glory to watch under those conditions, swift and sure, with a grace made the more impressive by his size. But my mouth grew dry at the thought of seeing that skill used in earnest.

He bent toward me, planting a tender kiss under the edge of my jaw, and taking the opportunity to turn me slightly, so that I faced one of the jumbled piles of rocks.

"Soon, I think," he murmured, kissing me industriously. "D'ye see the small opening in the rock?" I did; a space less than three feet high, formed by two large slabs fallen together.

He clasped my face and nuzzled me lovingly. "When I say go, get into it and stay there. Have ye the dirk?"

He had insisted I keep the dirk he had tossed to me that night at the inn, despite my own insistence that I had neither the skill nor the inclination to use it. And when it came to insisting, Dougal had been right; Jamie *was* stubborn.

Consequently, the dirk was in one of the deep pockets of my gown. After a day of uncomfortable awareness of its weight against my thigh, I had grown almost oblivious to it. He ran a hand playfully down my leg, checking to make certain of its presence.

He lifted his head then, like a cat scenting the breeze. Looking up, I could see him glance at Murtagh, then down at me. The little man gave no outward sign, but rose and stretched himself thoroughly. When he sat down again, he was several feet nearer to me.

A horse whickered nervously behind us. As though it had been a signal, they came screaming over the rocks. Not English, as I had feared, nor bandits. Highlanders, shrieking like banshees. Grants, I supposed. Or Campbells.

On hands and knees, I made for the rocks. I banged my head and scraped my knees, but managed to wedge myself into the small crevice. Heart hammering, I fumbled for the dirk in my pocket, almost jabbing myself in the process. I had no idea what to do with the long, wicked knife, but felt slightly better for having it. There was a moonstone set in the hilt and it was comforting to feel the small bulge against my palm; at least I knew I had hold of the right end in the darkness.

The fighting was so confused that at first I had no idea what was going on. The small clearing was filled with yelling bodies, heaving to and fro, rolling on the ground, and running back and forth. My sanctuary was luckily to one side of the main combat, so I was in no danger for the moment. Glancing around, I saw a small, crouching figure close by, pressed against my rock in the shadow. I took a firmer grip on my dirk, but realized almost at once that it was Murtagh.

So that was the purpose of Jamie's glance. Murtagh had been told off to guard me. I couldn't see Jamie himself anywhere. Most of the fighting was taking place in the rocks and shadows near the wagons.

Of course, that must be the object of the raid; the wagons and the horses. The attackers were an organized band, well armed and decently fed, from the little I could see of them in the light of the dying fire. If these were Grants, then, perhaps they were seeking either booty or revenge for the cattle Rupert and friends had pilfered a few days before. Confronted with the results of that impromptu raid, Dougal had been mildly annoyed—not with the fact of the raid, but only concerned that the cattle would slow our progress. He had managed to dispose of them almost at once, though, at a small market in one of the villages.

It was soon clear that the attackers were not much concerned with inflicting harm on our party; only with getting to the horses and wagons. One or two succeeded. I crouched low as a barebacked horse leaped the fire and disappeared into the darkness of the moor, a caterwauling man clinging to its mane.

Two or three more raced away on foot, clutching bags of Colum's grain, pursued by furious MacKenzies shouting Gaelic imprecations. From the sound of it, the raid was dying down. Then a large group of men staggered out into the firelight and the action picked up again.

This seemed to be serious fighting, an impression borne out by the flashing of blades and the fact that the participants were grunting a good deal, but not yelling. At length I got it sorted out. Jamie and Dougal were at the center of it, fighting back to back. Each of them held his broadsword in the left hand, dirk in the right, and both of them were putting the arms to good use, so far as I could see.

They were surrounded by four men—or five; I lost count in the shadows—armed with short swords, though one man had a broadsword hung on his belt and at least two more carried undrawn pistols.

It must be Dougal, or Jamie, or both, that they wanted. Alive, for preference. For ransom, I supposed. Thus the deliberate use of smallswords, which might merely wound, rather than the more lethal broadsword or pistols.

Dougal and Jamie suffered from no such scruples, and were attending to business with considerable grim efficiency. Back to back, they formed a complete circle of threat, each man covering the other's weaker side. When Dougal drove his dirk hand upward with considerable force, I thought that "weaker" might not be precisely the term.

The whole roiling, grunting, cursing mess was staggering toward me. I pressed myself back as far as I could, but the crevice was barely two feet deep. I caught a stir of movement from the corner of my eye. Murtagh had decided to take a more active part in affairs.

I could scarcely pull my horrified gaze away from Jamie, but saw the little clansman draw his pistol, so far unfired, in a leisurely manner. He checked the firing mechanism carefully, rubbed the weapon on his sleeve, braced it on his forearm and waited.

And waited. I was shivering with fear for Jamie, who had given up finesse and was slashing savagely from side to side, beating back the two men who now faced him with sheer bloody-mindedness. Why in hell didn't the man fire? I thought furiously. And then I realized why not. Both Jamie and Dougal were in the line of fire. I seemed to recall that flintlock pistols sometimes lacked a bit in the way of accuracy.

This supposition was borne out in the next minute, as an unexpected lunge by one of Dougal's opponents caught him at the wrist. The blade ripped up the length of his forearm and he sank to one knee. Feeling his uncle fall, Jamie pulled back his own blade and took two quick steps backward. This put his back near a rock face, Dougal crouched to one side, within reach of the protection of his single blade. It also brought the attackers side-on to my hiding-place and Murtagh's pistol.

Close at hand, the report of the pistol was startlingly loud. It took the attackers by surprise, particularly the one who was hit. The man stood still for a moment, shook his head in a confused way, then very slowly sat down, fell limply backward, and rolled down a slight decline into the dying embers of the fire.

Taking advantage of the surprise, Jamie knocked the sword from the hand of one attacker. Dougal was on his feet again, and Jamie moved to the side to give him room for swordplay. One of the fighters had abandoned the fray and run down the hill to drag his wounded companion out of the hot ashes. Still, that left three of the raiders, and Dougal wounded. I could see dark drops splashing against the rock face as he wielded the sword.

They were close enough now that I could see Jamie's face, calm and intent, absorbed with the exultancy of battle. Suddenly Dougal shouted something to him. Jamie tore his eyes from his opponent's face for a split second and glanced down. Glancing back just in time to avoid being skewered, he ducked to one side and *threw* his sword.

His opponent gazed in considerable surprise at the sword sticking in his leg. He touched the blade in some bemusement, then grasped it and pulled.

From the ease with which it came out, I assumed the wound was not deep. The man still seemed slightly bewildered, and glanced up as though to ask the purpose of this unorthodox behavior.

He uttered a scream, dropped the sword, and ran, limping heavily. Startled by the noise, the other two attackers looked over, turned, and likewise fled, pursued by Jamie, moving like an avalanche. He had succeeded in yanking the huge claymore out of the blanket roll, and was swinging it in a murderous, two handed arc. Backing him up came Murtagh, shouting something highly uncomplimentary in Gaelic and brandishing both sword and reloaded pistol.

Things mopped up quite quickly after that, and it was only a quarter of an hour or so before the MacKenzie party had reassembled and assessed its damages.

These had been slight; two horses had been taken, and three bags of grain, but the drovers, who slept with their loads, had prevented further depredations on the wagons, while the men-at-arms had succeeded in driving off the would-be horse thieves. The major loss seemed to be one of the men.

I thought when he was missed at first that he must have been wounded or killed in the scrimmage, but a thorough search of the area failed to turn him up.

"Kidnapped," said Dougal grimly. "Blast, he'll cost me a month's income in ransom."

"Could ha' been worse, Dougal," said Jamie, mopping his face on his sleeve. "Think what Colum would say if they'd taken *you*!"

"If they'd taken *you,* lad, I'd ha' let them keep ye, and ye could change your name to Grant," Dougal retorted, but the mood of the party lightened substantially.

I unearthed the small box of medical supplies I had packed, and lined up the injured in order of severity. Nothing really bad, I was pleased to see. The wound on Dougal's arm was likely the worst.

Ned Gowan was bright-eyed and fizzing with vitality, apparently so intoxicated with the thrill of the fight as hardly to notice the tooth that had been knocked out by an ill-aimed dagger hilt. He had, however, retained sufficient presence of mind to keep it carefully held under his tongue.

"Just on the off-chance, d'ye see," he explained, spitting it into the palm of his hand. The root was not broken, and the socket still bled slightly, so I took the chance and pressed the tooth firmly back into place. The little man went quite white, but didn't utter a sound. He gratefully swished his mouth with whisky for disinfectant purposes, though, and thriftily swallowed it.

I had bound Dougal's wound at once with a pressure bandage, and was glad to see that the bleeding had all but stopped by the time I unwrapped it. It was a clean slash, but a deep one. A tiny rim of yellow fat showed at the edge of the gaping cut, which went at least an inch deep into the muscle. No major vessels severed, thank goodness, but it would have to be stitched.

The only needle available turned out to be a sturdy thing like a slender awl, used by the drovers to mend harness. I eyed it dubiously, but Dougal merely held out his arm and looked away.

"I dinna mind blood in general," he explained, "but I've some objection to seein' my own." He sat on a rock as I worked, teeth clenched hard enough to make his jaw muscles quiver. The night was turning cold, but sweat stood out on the high forehead in beads. At one point, he asked me politely to stop for a moment, turned aside and was neatly sick behind a rock, then turned back and braced his arm on his knee again.

By good luck, one tavern owner had chosen to remit his rent this quarter in the form of a small keg of whisky, and it came in quite handily. I used it to disinfect some of the open wounds, and then let my patients self-medicate as they liked. I even accepted a cupful myself, at the conclusion of the doctoring. I drained it with pleasure and sank thankfully onto my blanket. The moon was sinking, and I was shivering, half with reaction and half with cold. It was a wonderful feeling to have Jamie lie down and firmly gather me in, next to his large, warm body.

"Will they come back, do you think?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"Nay, it was Malcolm Grant and his two boys—it was the oldest I stuck in the leg. They'll be home in their own beds by now," he replied. He stroked my hair and said, in softer tones, "Ye did a braw bit o' work tonight, lass. I was proud of ye."

I rolled over and put my arms about his neck.

"Not as proud as I was. You were wonderful, Jamie. I've never seen anything like that."

He snorted deprecatingly, but I thought he was pleased, nonetheless.

"Only a raid, Sassenach. I've been doin' that since I was fourteen. It's only in fun, ye see; it's different when you're up against someone who really means to kill ye."

"Fun," I said, a little faintly. "Yes, quite."

His arms tightened around me, and one of the stroking hands dipped lower, beginning to inch my skirt upward. Clearly the thrill of the fight was being transmuted into a different kind of excitement.

"Jamie! Not here!" I said, squirming away and pushing my skirt down again.

"Are ye tired, Sassenach?" he asked with concern. "Dinna worry, I won't take long." Now both hands were at it, rucking the heavy fabric up in front.

"No!" I replied, all too mindful of the twenty men lying a few feet away. "I'm not tired, it's just—" I gasped as his groping hand found its way between my legs.

"Lord," he said softly. "It's slippery as waterweed."

"Jamie! There are twenty men sleeping right next to us!" I shouted in a whisper.

"They wilna be sleeping long, if you keep talking." He rolled on top of me, pinning me to the rock. His knee wedged between my thighs and began to work gently back and forth. Despite myself, my legs were beginning to loosen. Twenty-seven years of propriety were no match for several hundred thousand years of instinct. While my mind might object to being taken on a bare rock next to several sleeping soldiers, my body plainly considered itself the spoils of war and was eager to complete the formalities of surrender. He kissed me, long and deep, his tongue sweet and restless in my mouth.

"Jamie," I panted. He pushed his kilt out of the way and pressed my hand against him.

"Bloody Christ," I said, impressed despite myself. My sense of propriety slipped another notch.

"Fighting gives ye a terrible cockstand, after. Ye want me, do ye no?" he said, pulling back a little to look at me. It seemed pointless to deny it, what with all the evidence to hand. He was hard as a brass rod against my bared thigh.

"Er … yes … but …"

He took a firm grip on my shoulders with both hands.

"Be quiet, Sassenach," he said with authority. "It isna going to take verra long."

It didn't. I began to climax with the first powerful thrust, in long, racking spasms. I dug my fingers hard into his back and held on, biting the fabric of his shirt to muffle any sounds. In less than a dozen strokes, I felt his testicles contract, tight against his body, and the warm flood of his own release. He lowered himself slowly to the side and lay trembling.

The blood was still beating heavily in my ears, echoing the fading pulse between my legs. Jamie's hand lay on my breast, limp and heavy. Turning my head, I could see the dim figure of the sentry, leaning against a rock on the far side of the fire. He had his back tactfully turned. I was mildly shocked to realize that I was not even embarrassed. I wondered rather dimly whether I would be in the morning, and then wondered no more.

* * *

In the morning, everyone behaved as usual, if moving a little more stiffly from the effects of fighting and sleeping on rocks. Everyone was in a cheerful humor, even those with minor wounds.

The general humor was improved still further when Dougal announced that we would travel only as far as the clump of woods we could see from the edge of our rocky platform. There we could water and graze the horses, and rest a bit ourselves. I wondered whether this change of plan would affect Jamie's rendezvous with the mysterious Horrocks, but he seemed undisturbed at the announcement.

The day was overcast but not drizzling, and the air was warm. Once the new camp was made, the horses taken care of, and the wounded all rechecked everyone was left to his own devices, to sleep in the grass, to hunt or fish, or merely to stretch legs after several days in the saddle.

I was sitting under a tree talking to Jamie and Ned Gowan, when one of the men-at-arms came up and flipped something into Jamie's lap. It was the dirk with the moonstone hilt.

"Yours, lad?" he asked. "Found it in the rocks this morning."

"I must have dropped it, in all the excitement," I said. "Just as well; I've no idea what to do with it. I'd likely have stabbed myself if I'd tried to use it."

Ned eyed Jamie censoriously over his half-spectacles.

"Ye gave her a knife and didn't teach her to use it?"

"There wasna time, under the circumstances," Jamie defended himself. "But Ned's right, Sassenach. Ye should learn how to handle arms. There's no tellin' what may happen on the road, as ye saw last night."

So I was marched out into the center of a clearing and the lessons began. Seeing the activity, several of the MacKenzie men came by to investigate, and stayed to offer advice. In no time, I had half a dozen instructors, all arguing the fine points of technique. After a good deal of amiable discussion, they agreed that Rupert was likely the best among them at dirks, and he took over the lesson.

He found a reasonably flat spot, free of rocks and pine cones, in which to demonstrate the art of dagger-wielding.

“Look, lass,” he said. He held the dagger balanced on his middle finger, resting an inch or so below the haft. “The balance point, that’s where ye want to hold it, so it fits comfortable in yer hand.” I tried it with my dagger. When I had it comfortably fitted, he showed me the difference between an overhand strike and an underhanded stab.

“Generally, ye want to use the underhand; overhand is only good when ye’re comin’ down on someone wi’ a considerable force from above.” He eyed me speculatively, then shook his head.

“Nay, you’re tall for a woman, but even if ye could reach as high as the neck, ye wouldna have the force to penetrate, unless he’s sittin’. Best stick to underhand.” He pulled up his shirt, revealing a substantial furry paunch, already glistening with sweat.

“Now, here,” he said, pointing to the center, just under the breastbone, “is the spot to aim for, if ye’re killin’ face to face. Aim straight up and in, as hard as ye can. That’ll go into the heart, and it kills wi’in a minute or two. The only problem is to avoid the breastbone; it goes down lower than ye think, and if ye get yer knife stuck in that soft bit on the tip, it will hardly harm yer victim at all, but ye’ll be wi’out a knife, and he’ll ha’ you. Murtagh! Ye ha’ a skinny back; come ’ere and we’ll show the lass how to stick from the back.” Spinning a reluctant Murtagh around, he yanked up the grubby shirt to show a knobbly spine and prominent ribs. He poked a blunt forefinger under the lower rib on the right, making Murtagh squeak in surprise.

“This is the spot in back—either side. See, wi’ all the ribs and such, ’tis verra difficult to hit anythin’ vital when ye stab in the back. *If* ye can slip the knife between the ribs, that’s one thing, but that’s harder to do than ye might think. But here, under the last rib, ye stab upward into the kidney. Get him straight up, and hell drop like a stone.”

Rupert then set me to try stabbing in various positions and postures. As he grew winded, all the men took it in turns to act as victim, obviously finding my efforts hilarious. They obligingly lay on the grass or turned their backs so I could ambush them, or leaped at me from behind, or pretended to choke me so I could try to stab them in the belly.

The spectators urged me on with cries of encouragement, and Rupert instructed me firmly not to pull back at the last moment.

"Thrust as though ye meant it, lass," he said. "Ye canna pull back if it's in earnest. And if any o' these laggards canna get themselves out of the way in time, they deserve what they get."

I was timid and extremely clumsy at first, but Rupert was a good teacher, very patient and good about demonstrating moves, over and over. He rolled his eyes in mock lewdness when he moved behind me and put his arm about my waist, but he was quite businesslike about taking hold of my wrist to show me the way of ripping an enemy across the eyes.

Dougal sat under a tree, minding his wounded arm and making sardonic comments on the training as it progressed. It was he, though, who suggested the dummy.

"Give her something she can sink her dirk into," he said, when I had begun to show some facility at lunging and jabbing. "It's a shock, the first time."

"So it is," Jamie agreed. "Rest a bit, Sassenach, while I manage something."

He went off to the wagons with two of the men-at-arms, and I could see them standing heads together, gesticulating and pulling bits of things from the wagon bed. Thoroughly winded, I collapsed under the tree next to Dougal.

He nodded, a slight smile on his face. Like most of the men, he had not bothered to shave while traveling, and a heavy growth of dark brown beard framed his mouth, accentuating the full lower lip.

"How is it, then?" he asked, not meaning my skill with small arms.

"Well enough," I answered warily, not meaning knives either. Dougal's gaze flicked toward Jamie, busy with something by the wagons.

“Marriage seems to suit the lad,” he observed.

“Rather healthy for him—under the circumstances,” I agreed, somewhat coldly. His lips curved at my tone.

“And you, lass, as well. A good arrangement for everyone, it seems.”

“Particularly for you and your brother. And speaking of him, just what do you think Colum’s going to say when he hears about it?”

The smile widened. “Colum? Ah, well. I should think he’d be only too pleased to welcome such a niece to the family.”

The dummy was ready, and I went back into training. It proved to be a large bag of wool, about the size of a man’s torso, with a piece of tanned bull’s hide wrapped around it, secured with rope. This I was to practice stabbing, first as it was tied to a tree at man-height, later as it was thrown or rolled past me.

What Jamie hadn’t mentioned was that they had inserted several flat pieces of wood between the wool sack and the hide; to simulate bones, as he later explained.

The first few stabs were uneventful, though it took several tries to get through the bull-hide. It was tougher than it looked. So is the skin on a man’s belly, I was informed. On the next try, I tried a direct overhand strike, and hit one of the wood pieces.

I thought for a moment that my arm had suddenly fallen off. The shock of impact reverberated all the way to my shoulder, and the dirk dropped from my nerveless fingers. Everything below the elbow was numb, but an ominous tingling warned me that it wouldn’t be for long.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” I said. I stood gripping my elbow and listening to the general hilarity. Finally Jamie took me by the shoulder and massaged some feeling back into the arm, pressing the tendon at the back of the elbow, and digging his thumb into the hollow at the base of my wrist.

“All right,” I said through my teeth, gingerly flexing my tingling right hand. “What do you do when you hit a bone and lose your knife? Is there a standard operating procedure for that?”

"Oh, aye," said Rupert, grinning. "Draw your pistol wi' the left hand and shoot the bastard dead." This resulted in more howls of laughter, which I ignored.

"All right," I said, more or less calmly. I gestured at the long claw-handled pistol Jamie wore on his left hip. "Are you going to show me how to load and shoot that, then?"

"I am not." He was firm.

I bristled a bit at this. "Why not?"

"Because you're a woman, Sassenach."

I felt my face flush at this. "Oh?" I said sarcastically. "You think women aren't bright enough to understand the workings of a gun?"

He looked levelly at me, mouth twisting a bit as he thought over various replies.

"I've a mind to let ye try it," he said at last. "It would serve ye right."

Rupert clicked his tongue in annoyance at us both. "Dinna be daft, Jamie. As for you, lass," turning to me, "it's not that women are stupid, though sure enough some o' 'em are; it's that they're small."

"Eh?" I gaped stupidly at him for a moment. Jamie snorted and drew the pistol from its loop. Seen up close, it was enormous; a full eighteen inches of silvered weapon measured from stock to muzzle.

"Look," he said, holding it in front of me. "Ye hold it here, ye brace it on your forearm, and ye sight along here. And when ye pull the trigger, it kicks like a mule. I'm near a foot taller than you, four stone heavier, and I know what I'm doin'. It gives *me* a wicked bruise when I fire it; it might knock *you* flat on your back, if it didna catch ye in the face." He twirled the pistol and slid it back into its loop.

"I'd let ye see for yourself," he said, raising one eyebrow, "but I like ye better wi' all of your teeth. You've a nice smile, Sassenach, even if ye *are* a bit feisty."

Slightly chastened by this episode, I accepted without argument the men's judgment that even the lighter smallsword was too heavy for me to wield efficiently. The tiny *sgian dhu,* the sock dagger, was deemed acceptable, and I was provided with one of those, a wicked-looking, needle-sharp piece of black iron about three inches long, with a short hilt. I practiced drawing it from its place of concealment over and over while the men watched critically, until I could sweep up my skirt, grab the knife from its place and come up in the proper crouch all in one smooth move, ending up with the knife held underhand, ready to slash across an adversary's throat.

Finally I was passed as a novice knife-wielder, and allowed to sit down to dinner, amid general congratulations—with one exception. Murtagh shook his head dubiously.

"I still say the only good weapon for a woman is poison."

"Perhaps," replied Dougal, "but it has its deficiencies in face-to-face combat."

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THE WATERHORSE

We camped the next night on the banks above Loch Ness. It gave me an odd feeling to see the place again; so little had changed. Or would change, I should say. The larches and alders were a deeper green, because it was now midsummer, not late spring. The flowers had changed from the fragile pinks and whites of May blossom and violets to the warmer golds and yellows of gorse and broom. The sky above was a deeper blue, but the surface of the loch was the same; a flat blue-black that caught the reflections from the bank above and held them trapped, colors muted under smoked glass.

There were even a few sailboats visible, far up the loch. Though when one drew near, I saw it was a coracle, a rough half-shell of tanned leather on a frame, not the sleek wooden shape I was used to.

The same pungent scent that pervades all watercourses was there; a sharp mix of tangy greenness and rotted leaf, fresh water, dead fish, and warm mud. Above all, there was that same feeling of lurking strangeness about the place. The men as well as the horses seemed to feel it, and the air of the camp was subdued.

Having found a comfortable place for my own bedroll and Jamie's, I wandered down to the edge of the loch to wash my face and hands before supper.

The bank sloped sharply down until it broke in a jumble of large rock slabs that formed a sort of irregular jetty. It was very peaceful under the bank, out of sight and sound of the camp, and I sat down beneath a tree to enjoy a moment's privacy. Since my hasty marriage to Jamie, I was no longer followed every moment; that much had been accomplished.

I was idly plucking the clusters of winged seeds from a low-hanging branch and tossing them out into the loch when I noticed the tiny waves against the rocks growing stronger, as though pushed by an oncoming wind.

A great flat head broke the surface not ten feet away. I could see the water purling away from keeled scales that ran in a crest down the sinuous neck. The water was agitated for some considerable distance, and I caught a glimpse here and there of dark and massive movement beneath the surface of the loch, though the head itself stayed relatively still.

I stood quite still myself. Oddly enough, I was not really afraid. I felt some faint kinship with it, a creature further from its own time than I, the flat eyes old as its ancient Eocene seas, eyes grown dim in the murky depths of its shrunken refuge. And there was a sense of familiarity mingled with its unreality. The sleek skin was a smooth, deep blue, with a vivid slash of green shining with brilliant iridescence beneath the jaw. And the strange, pupilless eyes were a deep and glowing amber. So very beautiful.

And so very different from the smaller, mud-colored replica I remembered, adorning the fifth-floor diorama in the British Museum. But the shape was unmistakable. The colors of living things begin to fade with the last breath, and the soft, springy skin and supple muscle rot within weeks. But the bones sometimes remain, faithful echoes of the shape, to bear some last faint witness to the glory of what was.

Valved nostrils opened suddenly with a startling hiss of breath; a moment of suspended motion, and the creature sank again, a churning roil of waters the only testimony to its passage.

I had risen to my feet when it appeared. And unconsciously I must have moved closer in order to watch it, for I found myself standing on one of the rock slabs that jutted out into the water, watching the dying waves fall back into the smoothness of the loch.

I stood there for a moment, looking out across the fathomless loch. “Goodbye,” I said at last to the empty water. I shook myself and turned back to the bank.

A man was standing at the top of the slope. I was startled at first, then recognized him as one of the drovers from our party. His name was Peter, I recalled, and the bucket in his hand gave the reason for his presence. I was about to ask him whether he had seen the beast, but the expression on his face as I drew near was more than sufficient answer. His face was paler than the daisies at his feet, and tiny droplets of sweat trickled down into his beard. His eyes showed white all around like those of a terrified horse, and his hand shook so that the bucket bumped against his leg.

"It's all right," I said, as I came up to him. "It's gone."

Instead of finding this statement reassuring, it seemed occasion for fresh alarm. He dropped the bucket, fell to his knees before me and crossed himself.

"Ha-have mercy, lady," he stammered. To my extreme embarrassment, he then flung himself flat on his face and clutched at the hem of my dress.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said with some asperity. "Get up." I prodded him gently with my toe, but he only quivered and stayed pressed to the ground like a flattened fungus. "Get up," I repeated. "Stupid man, it's only a …" I paused, trying to think. Telling him its Latin name was unlikely to help.

"It's only a wee monster," I said at last, and grabbing his hand, tugged him to his feet. I had to fill the bucket, as he would (not unreasonably) not go near the water's edge again. He followed me back to the camp, keeping a careful distance, and scuttled off at once to tend to his mules, casting apprehensive glances over his shoulder at me as he went.

As he seemed undisposed to mention the creature to anyone else, I thought perhaps I should keep quiet as well. While Dougal, Jamie, and Ned were educated men, the rest were largely illiterate Highlanders from the remote crags and glens of the MacKenzie lands. They were courageous fighters and dauntless warriors, but they were also as superstitious as any primitive tribesmen from Africa or the Middle East.

So I ate my supper quietly and went to bed, conscious all the time of the wary gaze of the drover Peter.

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DESERTED GLADES

Two days after the raid, we turned again to the north. We were drawing closer to the rendezvous with Horrocks, and Jamie seemed abstracted from time to time, perhaps considering what importance the English deserter's news might have.

I had not seen Hugh Munro again, but I had wakened in darkness the night before to find Jamie gone from the blanket beside me. I tried to stay awake, waiting for him to return, but fell asleep as the moon began to sink. In the morning, he was sound asleep beside me, and on my blanket rested a small parcel, done up in a sheet of thin paper, fastened with the tail-feather of a woodpecker thrust through the sheet. Unfolding it carefully, I found a large chunk of rough amber. One face of the chunk had been smoothed off and polished, and in this window could be seen the delicate dark form of a tiny dragonfly, suspended in eternal flight.

I smoothed out the wrapping. A message was incised on the grimy white surface, written in small and surprisingly elegant lettering.

"What does it say?" I asked Jamie, squinting at the odd letters and marks. "I think it's in Gaelic."

He raised up on one elbow squinting at the paper.

"Not Gaelic. Latin. Munro was a schoolmaster once, before the Turks took him. It's a bit from Catullus," he said.

> *… da mi basia mille, diende centum,*
> *dein mille altera, dein secunda centum …*

A faint blush pinkened his earlobes as he translated:

Then let amorous kisses dwell
On our lips, begin and tell
A Thousand and a Hundred score
A Hundred, and a Thousand more.

"Well, that's a bit more high-class than your usual fortune cookie," I observed, amused.

"What?" Jamie looked startled.

"Never mind," I said hastily. "Did Munro find Horrocks for you?"

"Oh, aye. It's arranged. I'll meet him in a small place I know in the hills, a mile or two above Lag Cruime. In four days' time, if nothing goes wrong meanwhile."

The mention of things going wrong made me a bit nervous.

"Do you think it's safe? I mean, do you trust Horrocks?"

He sat up, rubbing the remnants of sleep from his eyes and blinking.

"An English deserter? God, no. I imagine he'd sell me to Randall as soon as he'd spit, except that he canna very well go to the English himself. They hang deserters. No, I dinna trust him. That's why I came wi' Dougal on this journey, instead of seeking out Horrocks alone. If the man's up to anything, at least I'll have company."

"Oh." I wasn't sure that Dougal's presence was all that reassuring, given the apparent state of affairs between Jamie and his two scheming uncles.

"Well, if you think so," I said doubtfully. "I don't suppose Dougal would take the opportunity to shoot you, at least."

"He did shoot me," Jamie said cheerfully, buttoning his shirt. "You should know, ye dressed the wound."

I dropped the comb I had been using.

"Dougal! I thought the English shot you!"

"Well, the English shot *at* me," he corrected. "And I shouldna say it was Dougal shot me; in fact, it was probably Rupert—he's the best marksman among Dougal's men. No, when we were running from the English, I realized we were near the edge of the Fraser lands, and I thought I'd take my chances there. So I spurred up and cut to the left, around Dougal and the rest. There was a good deal of shooting goin' on, mind ye, but the ball that hit me came from behind. Dougal, Rupert, and Murtagh were back of me then. And the English were all in front—in fact, when I fell off the horse, I rolled down the hill and ended almost in their laps." He bent over the bucket of water I had brought, splashing cold handfuls over his face. He shook his head to clear his eyes, then blinked at me, grinning, glistening drops clinging to his thick lashes and brows.

"Come to that, Dougal had a sore fight to get me back. I was lyin' on the ground, not fit for much, and he was standing over me, pulling on my belt with one hand to get me up and his sword in the other, going hand-to-hand with a dragoon who thought he had a certain cure for my ills. Dougal killed the man and got me on his own horse." He shook his head. "Everything was a bit dim to me then; all I could think of was how hard it must be on the horse, tryin' to make it up a hill like that with four hundred pounds on his back."

I sat back, a little stunned.

"But … if he'd wanted to, Dougal could have killed you then."

Jamie shook his head, taking out the straight razor he had borrowed from Dougal. He moved the bucket slightly, so the surface formed a reflecting pool, and pulling his face into the tortuous grimace men use when they shave, began to scrape his cheeks.

"No, not in front of the men. Besides, Dougal and Colum didna necessarily want me dead—especially not Dougal."

"But—" My head was beginning to whirl again, as it seemed to do whenever I encountered the complexities of Scottish family life.

Jamie's words were a little muffled, as he stuck out his chin, tilting his head to reach the bit of stubble beneath his jaw.

"It's Lallybroch," he explained, feeling with his free hand for stray whiskers. "Besides being a rich bit of ground, the estate sits at the head of a mountain pass, d'ye see. The only good pass into the Highlands for ten miles in either direction. Come to another Rising, it would be a valuable bit of land to control. And if I were to die before wedding, chances are the land would go back to the Frasers."

He grinned, stroking his neck. “No, I’m a pretty problem to the brothers MacKenzie. On the one hand, if I’m a threat to young Hamish’s chieftainship, they want me safely dead. On the other, if I’m not, they want me—and my property—securely on their side if it comes to war—not wi’ the Frasers. That’s why they’re willing to help me wi’ Horrocks, ye see. I canna do that much wi’ Lallybroch while I’m outlawed, even though the land’s still mine.”

I rolled up the blankets, shaking my head in bewilderment over the intricate—and dangerous—circumstances through which Jamie seemed to move so nonchalantly. And it struck me suddenly that not only Jamie was involved now. I looked up.

“You said that if you died before wedding, the land would go back to the Frasers,” I said. “But you’re married now. So who—”

“That’s right,” he said, nodding at me with a lopsided grin. The morning sun lit his hair with flames of gold and copper. “If I’m killed now, Sassenach, Lallybroch is yours.”

* * *

It was a beautiful sunny morning, once the mist had risen. Birds were busy in the heather, and the road was wide here, for a change, and softly dusty under the horses’ hooves.

Jamie rode up close beside me as we crested a small hill. He nodded to the right.

“See that wee glade down below there?”

“Yes.” It was a small green patchwork of pines, oaks, and aspens, set back some distance from the road.

“There’s a spring with a pool there, under the trees, and smooth grass. A very bonny place.”

I looked over at him quizzically.

“A little early for lunch, isn’t it?”

“That’s not precisely what I had in mind.” Jamie, I had found out by accident a few days previously, had never mastered the art of winking one eye. Instead, he blinked solemnly, like a large red owl.

“And just what *did* you have in mind?” I inquired. My suspicious look met an innocent, childlike gaze of blue.

“I was just wondering what you’d look like … on the grass … under the trees … by the water … with your skirts up around your ears."

"Er—" I said.

"I'll tell Dougal we're going to fetch water." He spurred up ahead, returning in a moment with the water bottles from the other horses. I heard Rupert shout something after us in Gaelic as we rode down the hill, but couldn't make out the words.

I reached the glade first. Sliding down, I relaxed on the grass and shut my eyes against the glare of the sun. Jamie reined up beside me a moment later, and swung down from the saddle. He slapped the horse and sent it away, reins dangling, to graze with mine, before dropping to his knees on the grass. I reached up and pulled him down to me.

It was a warm day, redolent with grass and flower scents. Jamie himself smelled like a fresh-plucked grass blade, sharp and sweet.

"We'll have to be quick," I said. "They'll be wondering why it's taking so long to get water."

"They won't wonder," he said, undoing my laces with a practiced ease. "They know."

"What do you mean?"

"Did ye no hear what Rupert said as we left?"

"I heard him, but I couldn't tell what he said." My Gaelic was improving to the point that I could understand the more common words, but conversation was still far beyond me.

"Good. It wasna fit for your ears." Having freed my breasts, he buried his face in them, sucking and biting gently until I could stand it no more and slid down beneath him, tucking my skirts up out of the way. Feeling absurdly self-conscious after that fierce and primitive encounter on the rock, I had been shy about letting him make love to me near the camp, and the woods were too thick to safely move very far from the campsite. Both of us were feeling the mild and pleasant strain of abstinence, and now, safely removed from curious eyes and ears, we came together with an impact that made my lips and fingers tingle with a rush of blood.

We were both nearing the end when Jamie froze abruptly. Opening my eyes, I saw his face dark against the sun, wearing a perfectly indescribable expression. There was something black pressed against his head. My eyes at last adjusting to the glare, I saw it was a musket barrel.

"Get up, you rutting bastard." The barrel moved sharply, jarring against Jamie's temple. Very slowly, he rose to his feet. A drop of blood began to well from the graze, dark against his white face.

There were two of them; Redcoat deserters from the look of their ragtag remnants of uniform. Both were armed with muskets and pistols, and looked very much amused by what chance had delivered into their hands. Jamie stood with his hands raised, the barrel of a musket pressed against his chest, face carefully expressionless.

"You might ha' let 'im finish, 'Arry," said one of the men. He grinned broadly, with a fine display of rotting teeth. "Stoppin' in the middle like that's bad for a man's 'ealth."

His fellow prodded Jamie in the chest with the musket.

" 'Is 'ealth's no concern o' mine. An' it won't be any concern to 'im for much longer. I've a mind to take a piece o' that," he nodded briefly in my direction, "an' I don't care to come second to any man, let alone a Scottish whoreson like this."

Rotten-teeth laughed. "I bain't so bloody particular. Kill 'im, then, and get on wi' it."

Harry, a short, stout man with a squint, considered a moment, eyeing me speculatively. I still sat on the ground, knees drawn up and skirts pressed firmly around my ankles. I had made some effort to close my bodice, but a good deal was still exposed. Finally the short man laughed and beckoned to his companion.

"No, let 'im watch. Come ower 'ere, Arnold, and 'old your musket on 'im." Arnold obeyed, still grinning widely. Harry set his musket down on the ground and dropped his pistol belt beside it in preparation.

Pressing my skirts down, I became aware of a hard object in the right-hand pocket. The dagger Jamie had given me. Could I bring myself to use it? Yes, I decided, looking at Harry's pimpled, leering face, I definitely could.

I would have to wait 'til the last possible second, though, and I had my doubts as to whether Jamie could control himself that long.

I could see the urge to kill marked strong on his features; soon consideration of the consequences would no longer be enough to hold him back.

I didn't dare let too much show on my face, but narrowed my eyes and glared at him as hard as I could, willing him not to move. The cords stood out in his neck, and his face was suffused with dark blood, but I saw an infinitesimal nod in acknowledgment of my message.

I struggled as Harry pressed me to the ground and tried to pull up my skirts, more in order to get my hand on the dagger hilt than in actual resistance. He slapped me hard across the face, ordering me to be still. My cheek burned and my eyes watered, but the dagger was now in my hand, concealed under the folds of my skirt.

I lay back, breathing heavily. I concentrated on my objective, trying to erase everything else from my mind. It would have to be in the back; the quarters were too close to try for the throat.

The filthy fingers were digging into my thighs now, wrenching them apart. In my mind, I could see Rupert's blunt finger stabbing at Murtagh's ribs, and hear his voice, "Here, lass, up under the lowest ribs, close to the backbone. Stab hard, upward into the kidney, and he'll drop like a stone."

It was almost time; Harry's foul breath was disgustingly warm on my face, and he was fumbling between my bared legs, intent on his goal.

"Take a good look, laddie-buck, and see how it's done," he panted, "I'll 'ave your slut moaning for more before—"

I whipped my left arm around his neck to hold him close; holding the knife hand high, I plunged it in as hard as I could. The shock of impact reverberated up my arm, and I nearly lost my hold on the dagger. Harry yelped and squirmed, twisting to get away. Unable to see, I had aimed too high, and the knife had skittered off a rib.

I couldn't let go now. Luckily, my legs were free of the entangling skirts. I wrapped them tightly around Harry's sweating hips, holding him down for the precious seconds I needed for another try. I stabbed again, with a desperate strength, and this time found the spot.

Rupert had been right. Harry bucked in a hideous parody of the act of love, then collapsed without a sound in a limp heap on top of me, blood jetting in diminishing spurts from the wound in his back.

Arnold's attention had been distracted for an instant by the spectacle on the ground, and an instant was more than long enough for the maddened Scotsman he held at bay. By the time I had gathered my wits sufficiently to wriggle out from under the defunct Harry, Arnold had joined his companion in death, throat neatly cut from ear to ear by the *sgian dhu* that Jamie carried in his stocking.

Jamie knelt beside me, pulling me out from under the corpse. We were both shaking with nerves and shock, and we clung together without speaking for minutes. Still without speaking, he picked me up and carried me away from the two bodies, to a grassy space behind a screen of aspen.

He lowered me to the ground and sat down awkwardly beside me, collapsing as though his knees had suddenly given way. I felt a chilly isolation, as though the winter wind blew through my bones, and reached for him. He raised his head from his knees, face haggard, and stared at me as though he had never seen me before. When I put my hands on his shoulders, he pulled me hard against his chest with a sound midway between a groan and a sob.

We took each other then, in a savage, urgent silence, thrusting fiercely and finishing within moments, driven by a compulsion I didn't understand, but knew we must obey, or be lost to each other forever. It was not an act of love, but one of necessity, as though we knew that left alone, neither of us could stand. Our only strength lay in fusion, drowning the memories of death and near-rape in the flooding of the senses.

We clung together on the grass then, disheveled, blood-stained, and shivering in the sunshine. Jamie muttered something, his voice so low that I caught only the word "sorry."

"Not your fault," I muttered, stroking his hair. "It's all right, we're both all right." I felt dreamlike, as though nothing whatever was real around me, and I dimly recognized the symptoms of delayed shock.

“Not that,” he said. “Not that. It *was* my fault.… So foolish to come here without taking proper heed. And to let you be … I didna mean that, though. I meant … I’m sorry for using ye as I did just now. To take you like that, so soon after … like some sort of animal. I’m sorry, Claire … I don’t know what … I couldna help it, but … Lord, you’re so cold, *mo duinne,* your hands are ice, Come then, let me warm ye.”

Shock, too, I thought fuzzily. Funny how it takes some people in talk. Others just shake quietly. Like me. I pressed his mouth against my shoulder to quiet him.

“It’s all right,” I said, over and over. “It’s all right.”

Suddenly a shadow fell across us, making us both jump. Dougal stood glowering down at us, arms folded. He courteously averted his eyes while I hastily did up my laces, frowning instead at Jamie.

“Now look ye, lad, takin’ your pleasure wi’ your wife is all verra weel, but when it comes to leavin’ us all waiting for more than an hour, and being so taen up wi’ each other that ye dinna even hear me comin’—that kind o’ behavior will get ye in trouble one day, laddie. Why, someone could come up behind ye and clap a pistol to your head before ye knew—”

He stopped in his tirade to stare incredulously at me, rolling on the grass in hysterics. Jamie, red as a beetroot, led Dougal to the other side of the aspen screen, explaining in a subdued voice. I continued to whoop and giggle uncontrollably, finally stuffing a handkerchief in my mouth to muffle the noise. The sudden release of emotions, coupled with Dougal’s words, had evoked a picture of Jamie’s face, caught in the act as it were, that I found totally hilarious in my unhinged state. I laughed and moaned until my sides ached. Finally, I sat up, wiping my eyes on my kerchief, to see Dougal and Jamie standing over me, wearing identical expressions of disapproval. Jamie hoisted me to my feet and led me, still hiccuping and snorting occasionally, to where the rest of the men were waiting with the horses.

* * *

Except for a lingering tendency to laugh hysterically over nothing, I seemed to suffer no ill effects from our encounter with the deserters, though I became very cautious about leaving the campsite. Dougal assured me that bandits were not, in fact, that common on the Highland roads, only because there were not many travelers worth robbing, but I found myself starting nervously at sounds in the wood, and hastening back from routine chores like fetching wood and water, eager for the sight and sound of the MacKenzie men. I also found new reassurance in the sound of their snoring around me at night, and lost whatever self-consciousness I might have had about the discreet writhings that took place under our blankets.

I was still somewhat fearful of being alone when, a few days later, the time for the meeting with Horrocks arrived.

"Stay here?" I said in disbelief. "No! I'm going with you."

"You can't," said Jamie patiently, once more. "The bulk of the men will go on to Lag Cruime wi' Ned, to collect the rents as expected. Dougal and a few of the others are coming wi' me to the meeting, in case of any treachery by Horrocks. You can't be seen in the open near Lag Cruime, though; Randall's men may be about, and I wouldna put it past him to take ye by force. And as for the meeting wi' Horrocks, I've no idea what may happen. No, there's a small copse near the bend of the road—it's thick and grassy, and there's water nearby. You'll be comfortable there, until I come back for ye."

"No," I said stubbornly. "I'm coming with you." Some sense of pride made me unwilling to tell him that I was frightened of being away from him. But I was willing to tell him that I was frightened *for* him.

"You said yourself you don't know what will happen with Horrocks," I argued. "I don't want to wait here, wondering all day what's happening to you. Let me come with you," I coaxed. "I promise I'll stay out of sight during the meeting. But I don't want to stay here alone, worrying all day."

He sighed impatiently, but didn't argue further. When we reached the copse, though, he leaned over and seized my horse's bridle, forcing me off the road into the grass. He slid off his horse, tying both sets of reins to a bush. Ignoring my vociferous objections, he disappeared into the trees. Stubbornly, I refused to dismount. He couldn't *make* me stay, I thought.

He came down at last to the road. The others had gone on before, but Jamie, mindful of our last experience with deserted glades, wouldn't leave until he had thoroughly searched the copse, quartering methodically through the trees and swishing the tall grass with a stick. Coming back, he untied the horses, and swung up into his saddle.

"It's safe," he said. "Ride up well into the thicket, Claire, and hide yourself and the horse. I'll be back for ye, as soon as our business is done. I canna tell how long, but surely by sunset."

"No! I'm coming with you." I couldn't stand the thought of stewing in a forest, not knowing what was happening. I would far rather be in active danger than be left for anxious hours, waiting and wondering. And alone.

Jamie curbed his impatience to be gone. He reached over and grasped my shoulder.

"Did ye no promise to obey me?" he asked, shaking me gently.

"Yes, but—" But only because I had to, I was going to say, but he was already urging my horse's head around toward the thicket.

"It's verra dangerous, and I'll not have ye there, Claire. I shall be busy, and if it comes to it, I can't fight and protect you at the same time." Seeing my mutinous look, he dropped his hand to the saddlebag and began rummaging.

"What are you looking for?"

"Rope. If ye wilna do as I say, I shall tie ye to a tree until I come back."

"You wouldn't!"

"Aye, I would!" Plainly he meant it. I gave in with bad grace, and reluctantly reined in my horse. Jamie leaned to kiss me glancingly on the cheek, already turning to go.

"Take care, Sassenach. You've your dirk? Good. I shall come back as soon as I can. Oh, one more thing."

"What's that?" I said sullenly.

"If you leave that copse before I come for ye, I'll tan your bare arse wi' my sword belt. Ye wouldna enjoy walking all the way to

Bargrennan. Remember," he said, pinching my cheek gently, "I dinna make idle threats." He didn't, either. I rode slowly toward the grove, looking back to watch him racing away, bent low over the saddle, one with the horse, the ends of his plaid flying behind.

It was cool under the trees; the horse and I both exhaled with relief as we entered the shade. It was one of those rare hot days in Scotland, when the sun blazes out of a bleached muslin sky and the early haze is burnt away by eight o'clock. The copse was loud with birds; a gang of titmice was foraging in the oak clump to the left, and I could hear what I thought was a thrasher in the near distance.

I had always been an enthusiastic amateur birder. If I were marooned here 'til it suited my overbearing, domineering, pig-headed jackass of a husband to finish risking his stupid neck, I'd use the time to see what I could spot.

I hobbled the gelding and turned him loose to graze in the lush grass at the edge of the copse, knowing he wouldn't go far. The grass ceased abruptly a few feet from the trees, smothered by the encroaching heather.

It was a glade of mixed conifers and oak saplings, perfect for bird-watching. I wandered through it, still mentally fuming at Jamie, but growing gradually calmer as I listened for the distinctive *tsee* of a flycatcher and the harsh chatter of the mistle thrush.

The glade ended quite suddenly on the far side, on the edge of a small precipice. I thrust my way through the saplings and the sound of bird song was drowned in rushing water. I stood on the lip of a small burn, a steep rocky canyon with waterfalls bounding down the jagged walls to splash in the brown and silver pools below. I sat down on the edge of the bank and let my feet dangle over the water, enjoying the sun on my face.

A crow shot past overhead, closely pursued by a pair of redstarts. The bulky black body zigzagged through the air, trying to avoid the tiny dive-bombers. I smiled, watching the furious small parents chivying the crow to and fro, and wondered whether crows, left to their own devices, really did fly in a straight line. That one, if it kept to a straight path, would head straight for …

I stopped dead.

I had been so intent on arguing with Jamie that it had not until this minute dawned on me that the situation I had been vainly trying to bring about for two months had finally occurred. I was alone. And I knew where I was.

Looking across the burn, my eyes were dazzled by the morning sun blazing through the red ash trees on the far bank. So that was east. My heart began to beat faster. East was over there, Lag Cruime was directly behind me. Lag Cruime was four miles to the north of Fort William. And Fort William was no more than three miles due west of the hill of Craigh na Dun.

So, for the first time since my meeting with Murtagh, I knew approximately where I was—no more than seven miles from that bloody hill and its accursed stone circle. Seven miles—perhaps—from home. From Frank.

I started back into the copse, but changed my mind. I dared not take the road. This close to Fort William and the several small villages that surrounded it, there was too much risk of meeting someone. And I could not take a horse down the precipitous course of the burn. In fact, I had some doubt that it could be managed on foot; the rock walls were sheer in some spots, plunging directly into the foaming water of the stream, with no real footing save the tops of scattered rocks sticking out of the rushing water.

But it was by far the most direct path in the direction I wanted. And I did not dare to take too circuitous a route; I might easily lose my way in the wild growth or be overtaken by Jamie and Dougal, returning.

My stomach gave a sudden lurch as I thought of Jamie. God, how could I do it? Leave him without a word of explanation or apology? Disappear without a trace, after what he had done for me?

With that thought I finally decided to leave the horse. At least he would think I had not left him willingly; he might believe I had been killed by wild beasts—I touched the dagger in my pocket—or possibly kidnapped by outlaws. And finding no trace of me, eventually he would forget me, and wed again. Perhaps the lovely young Laoghaire, back at Leoch.

Absurdly enough, I found that the thought of Jamie sharing Laoghaire's bed upset me as much as the thought of leaving him. I cursed myself for idiocy, but I couldn't help imagining her sweet round face, flushed with ardent longing, and his big hands burying themselves in that moonbeam hair …

I unclenched my teeth and resolutely wiped the tears off my cheeks. I hadn't time nor energy for senseless reflections. I must go, and now, while I could. It might be the best chance I would get. I hoped that Jamie would forget me. I knew that I would never be able to forget him. But for now, I must put him out of my mind, or I wouldn't be able to concentrate on the job at hand, which was tricky enough.

Cautiously, I picked my way down the steep bank to the edge of the water. The noise of the rushing stream drowned out the birds in the copse above. The going was rough, but there was at least room to walk by the water's edge here. The bank was muddy, and strewn with rocks, but passable. Further down, I saw that I would have to step out actually into the water, and make my way precariously from rock to rock, balancing above the flood, until the bank widened enough to go ashore again.

I picked my way painfully along, estimating how much time I might have. Jamie had said only that they would return before sundown. Three or four miles to Lag Cruime, but I had no way of knowing what the roads were like, nor how long the business with Horrocks might take. If he was there. But he would be, I argued with myself. Hugh Munro had said so, and outlandish as that grotesque figure had been, Jamie plainly considered him a reliable source of information.

My foot slipped off the first rock in the stream, plunging me into icy water to the knee and soaking my skirt. I withdrew to the bank, tucked my skirts as high as I could and removed both shoes and stockings. I slipped these into the pocket made by my tucked-up skirt and set my foot again on the rock.

I found that by gripping with my toes, I could manage to step from rock to rock without slipping. The bunches of my skirt made it difficult to see where I was going to step next, though, and more than once I found myself sliding into the water. My legs were chilled, and as my feet grew numb, it got harder to maintain my grip.

Luckily the bank widened again, and I stepped gratefully ashore into warm, sticky mud. Short periods of more or less comfortable squelching alternated with much longer periods of precarious rock-hopping through the freezing rapids, and I found to my relief that I was much too busy to think very much about Jamie.

After a time, I had the routine worked out. Step, grip, pause, look around, locate next step. Step, grip, pause, and so on. I must have become over-confident, or perhaps only tired, because I got careless, and undershot my goal. My foot skidded helplessly down the near side of the slime-coated rock. I waved my arms wildly, trying to move back to the rock I had been on, but my balance had shifted too far. Skirts, petticoats, dagger and all, I plunged into the water.

And kept on plunging. While the stream overall was only a foot or two deep, there were intermittent deep pools, where the scouring water had scooped out deep depressions in the rock. The one on which I'd lost my footing was perched on the edge of one such pool, and when I hit the water, I sank like a rock myself.

I was so stunned by the shock of the icy water rushing into my nose and mouth that I didn't cry out. Silvery bubbles shot out of the bodice of my dress and rushed past my face toward the surface above. The cotton fabric soaked through almost at once, and the freezing grip of the water paralyzed my breathing.

I began almost at once to fight my way up to the surface, but the weight of my garments pulled me down. I yanked frantically at the laces of my bodice, but there was no hope of getting everything off before I drowned. I made a number of savage and uncharitable silent observations about dressmakers, women's fashions, and the stupidity of long skirts, while kicking frenziedly to keep the entangling folds away from my legs.

The water was crystal clear. My fingers brushed the rock wall, sliding through the dark slick streamers of duckweed and algae. Slippery as waterweed, that's what Jamie said about my …

The thought jarred me out of my panic. Suddenly I realized that I shouldn't be exhausting myself trying to kick to the surface. The pool couldn't be more than eight or nine feet deep; what I needed to do was relax, float down to the bottom, brace my feet and spring upward. With luck, that would get my head clear for a breath, and even if I went down again, I could continue bouncing off the bottom until I worked my way close enough to the edge to get a decent grip on a rock.

The descent was agonizingly slow. As I was no longer fighting upward, my skirts rose round me in billows, floating in front of my face. I batted them away; I must keep my face clear. My lungs were bursting and there were dark spots behind my eyes by the time my feet touched the smooth bottom of the pool. I let my knees bend slightly, pressing my skirts down around me, then shoved upward with all my might.

It worked, just barely. My face broke the surface at the top of my leap, and I had just time for the briefest of life-saving gulps before the water closed over me again. But it was enough. I knew I could do it again. I pressed my arms down to my sides to streamline myself and make the descent more rapid. Once more, Beauchamp, I thought. Bend your knees, brace yourself, jump!

I shot upward, arms extended overhead. I had seen a flash of red overhead when I broke water last; there must be a rowan tree overhanging the water. Perhaps I could get hold of a branch.

As my face broke water, something seized my outstretched hand. Something hard, warm, and reassuringly solid. Another hand.

Coughing and spluttering, I groped blindly with my free hand, too glad of rescue to regret the interruption of my escape attempt. Glad, at least until, wiping the hair out of my eyes, I looked up into the beefy, anxious Lancashire face of young Corporal Hawkins.

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UNE MAUVAIS QUART D’HEURE AFTER ANOTHER

I delicately removed a strand of still-damp waterweed from my sleeve and placed it squarely in the center of the blotter. Then, seeing the inkstand handy, I picked up the weed and dipped it in, using the result to paint interesting patterns on the thick blotting paper. Getting fully into the spirit of the thing, I finished off my masterpiece with a rude word, carefully sprinkled it with sand and blotted it before propping it up against the bank of pigeon-holes.

I stepped back to admire the effect, then looked around for any other diversions that might take my mind off the impending advent of Captain Randall.

Not bad for the private office of a captain, I thought, eyeing the paintings on the wall, the silver desk fittings, and the thick carpet on the floor. I moved back onto the carpet, in order to drip more effectively. The ride to Fort William had dried my outer garments fairly well, but the underlying layers of petticoat were still wringing wet.

I opened a small cupboard behind the desk and discovered the Captain’s spare wig, neatly bestowed on one of a pair of wrought-iron stands, with a matched silverbacked set of looking glass, military brushes, and tortoiseshell comb laid out in orderly ranks before it. Carrying the wig stand over to the desk, I gently sifted the remaining contents of the sander over it before replacing it in the cupboard.

I was seated behind the desk, comb in hand, studying my reflection in the looking glass, when the Captain came in. He gave me a glance that took in my disheveled appearance, the rifled cupboard, and the disfigured blotter.

Without blinking, he drew up a chair and sat down across from me, lounging casually with one booted foot resting on the opposite knee. A riding crop dangled from one fine, aristocratic hand. I watched the braided tip, black and scarlet, as it swung slowly back and forth over the carpet.

"The idea has its attractions," he said, watching my eyes follow the sweep of the whip. "But I could probably think of something better, given a few moments to collect myself."

"I daresay you could," I said, fingering a thick sheaf of hair out of my eyes. "But you aren't allowed to flog women, are you?"

"Only under certain circumstances," he said politely. "Which your situation doesn't meet—yet. That's rather public, though. I had thought we might get better acquainted in private, first." He reached to the sideboard behind him for a decanter.

We sipped the claret in silence, eyeing each other over the wine.

"I had forgotten to offer you felicitations on your marriage," he said suddenly. "Forgive my lack of manners."

"Think nothing of it," I said graciously. "I'm sure my husband's family will be most obliged to you for offering me hospitality."

"Oh, I rather doubt it," he said, with an engaging smile. "But then, I didn't think I'd tell them you were here."

"What makes you think they don't know?" I asked, beginning to feel rather hollow, despite my earlier resolve to brazen it out. I cast a quick glance at the window, but it was on the wrong side of the building. The sun wasn't visible, but the light looked yellow; perhaps mid-afternoon? How long before Jamie found my abandoned horse? And how long after that before he followed my trail into the stream—and promptly lost it? Disappearing without a trace had its drawbacks. In fact, unless Randall decided to send word of my whereabouts to Dougal, there was no way on earth the Scots could know where I had gone.

"If they knew," the Captain said, arching one elegantly shaped brow, "they would presumably be calling on me already. Considering the sorts of names Dougal MacKenzie applied to me on the occasion of our last meeting, I scarcely think he feels me a suitable chaperon for a kinswoman. And the clan MacKenzie seems to think you're of such value that they'd rather adopt you as one of their own than see you fall into my hands. I can hardly imagine they would allow you to languish in durance vile here."

He looked me over disapprovingly, taking in every detail of my waterlogged costume, unkempt hair, and generally disheveled appearance.

"Damned if I know what they want you for," he observed. "Or, if you're so valuable to them, why the devil they let you wander about the countryside by yourself. I thought even barbarians took better care of their womenfolk than that." A sudden gleam came into his eyes. "Or have you perhaps decided to part company with them?" He sat back, intrigued by this new speculation.

"The wedding night was more of a trial than you anticipated?" he inquired. "I must confess, I was somewhat put out to hear that you preferred the alternative of bedding one of those hairy, half-naked savages to further discussions with me. That argues a high devotion to duty, Madam, and I must congratulate whomever employs you on their ability to inspire it. But," he leaned still further back in his chair, balancing the claret cup on his knee, "I am afraid I still must insist on the name of your employer. If you have indeed parted company with the MacKenzies, the most likely supposition is that you're a French agent. But whose?"

He stared at me intently, like a snake hoping to fascinate a bird. By now I had had enough claret to fill part of the hollow space inside me, though, and I stared back.

"Oh," I said, elaborately polite, "I'm included in this conversation, am I? I thought you were doing quite well by yourself. Pray continue."

The graceful line of his mouth tightened a bit, and the deep crease at the corner grew deeper, but he didn't say anything. Setting his glass aside, he rose, and taking off his wig, went to the cupboard, where he placed it on an empty stand. I saw him pause for a moment, as he saw the dark grains of sand adorning his other wig, but his expression didn't change noticeably.

Unwigged, his hair was dark, thick, fine-textured, and shiny. It was also disturbingly familiar-looking, though it was shoulder-length and tied back with a blue silk ribbon. He removed this, plucked the comb from the desk and tidied the hair flattened by the wig, then retied the ribbon with some care. I helpfully held up the looking glass, so that he could judge the final effect. He took it from me in a marked manner and restored it to its place, shutting the cupboard door with what was almost a slam.

I couldn't tell whether this delay was in hopes of unnerving me—in which case; it was working—or merely because he couldn't decide what to do next.

The tension was slightly relieved by the entrance of an orderly, bearing a tray of tea things. Still silent, Randall poured out and offered me a cup. We sipped some more.

"Don't tell me," I said finally. "Let me guess. It's a new form of persuasion you've invented—torture by bladder. You ply me with drinkables until I promise to tell you anything in exchange for five minutes with a chamber pot."

He was so taken by surprise that he actually laughed. It quite transformed his face, and I had no difficulty seeing why there were so many scented envelopes with feminine handwriting in the bottom left-hand drawer of his desk. Having let the facade crack, he didn't stifle the laugh, but let it go. Finished, he stared at me again, a half-smile lingering on his mouth.

"Whatever else you may be, Madam, at least you're a diversion," he remarked. He yanked at a bellpull hanging by the door, and when the orderly reappeared, instructed him to convey me to the necessary facilities.

"But take care not to lose her on the way, Thompson," he added, opening the door for me with a sardonic bow.

I leaned weakly against the door of the privy to which I was shown. Being out of his presence was a relief, but a short-lived one. I had had ample opportunity to judge Randall's true character, both from the stories I had heard and from personal experience. But there were those damnable flashes of Frank that kept showing through the gleaming, ruthless exterior. It had been a mistake to make him laugh, I thought.

I sat down, ignoring the stench in my concentration on the problem at hand. Escape seemed unlikely. The vigilant Thompson aside, Randall's office was in a building located near the center of the compound. And while the fort itself was no more than a stone stockade, the walls were ten feet high and the double gates well guarded.

I thought of feigning illness and remaining in my refuge, but dismissed it—and not only because of the unpleasantness of the surroundings. The unpalatable truth was that there was little point in delaying tactics, unless I had something to delay for, and I didn't. No one knew where I was, and Randall didn't mean to tell anyone. I was his, for as long as he cared to amuse himself with me. Once again, I regretted making him laugh. A sadist with a sense of humor was particularly dangerous.

Thinking frantically in search of something useful I might know about the Captain, I latched onto a name. Half-heard and carelessly remembered, I hoped I had it right. It was a pitifully small card to play, but the only one I had. I drew a deep breath, hastily let it out again, and stepped out of my sanctuary.

Back in the office, I added sugar to my tea and stirred it carefully. Then cream. Having drawn out the ceremony as long as I could, I was forced to look at Randall. He was sitting back in his favorite pose, cup elegantly suspended in midair, the better to look at me over.

"Well?" I said. "You needn't worry about spoiling my appetite, since I haven't got one. What do you mean to do about me?"

He smiled and took a careful sip of the scalding tea before replying.

"Nothing."

"Really?" I lifted my brows in surprise. "Invention failed you, has it?"

“I shouldn’t care to think so,” he said, polite as usual. His eyes traveled over me once more, far from polite.

“No,” he said, his gaze lingering on the edge of my bodice, where the tucked kerchief left the upper swell of my breasts visible, “much as I would like to give you a badly needed lesson in manners, I am afraid the pleasure must be postponed indefinitely. I’m sending you to Edinburgh with the next posting of dispatches. And I shouldn’t care to have you arrive damaged in any visible way; my superiors might consider it careless of me.”

“Edinburgh?” I couldn’t hide my surprise.

“Yes. You’ve heard of the Tolbooth, I imagine?”

I had. One of the most noisome and notorious prisons of the period, it was famous for filth, crime, disease, and darkness. A good many of the prisoners held there died before they could be brought to trial. I swallowed hard, forcing down the bitter bile that had risen at the back of my throat, mingling with the swallow of sweet tea.

Randall sipped his own tea, pleased with himself.

“You should feel quite cozy there. After all, you seem to prefer a certain dank squalor in your surroundings.” He cast a condemning glance at the soggy hem of my petticoat, sagging below my gown. “Should be quite homelike, after Castle Leoch.”

I rather doubted that the cuisine at the Tolbooth was as good as that to be had at Colum’s board. And general questions of amenities aside, I couldn’t—*could not*—allow him to send me to Edinburgh. Once immured in the Tolbooth, I would never get back to the stone circle.

The time to play my card had arrived. Now or never. I raised my own cup.

“Just as you like,” I said calmly. “What do you suppose the Duke of Sandringham will have to say about it?”

He upset the hot tea on his doeskin lap and made several very gratifying noises.

“Tsk,” I said, reprovingly.

He subsided, glaring. The teacup lay on its side, its brown contents soaking into the pale green carpet, but he made no move toward the bellpull. A small muscle jumped in the side of his neck.

I had already found the pile of starched handkerchiefs in the upper lefthand drawer of the desk, alongside an enameled snuffbox. I pulled one out and handed it to him.

"I do hope it doesn't stain," I said sweetly.

"No," he said, ignoring the handkerchief. He eyed me closely. "No, it isn't possible."

"Why not?" I asked, affecting nonchalance, wondering *what* wasn't possible.

"I would have been told. And if *you* were working for Sandringham, why the devil would you act in such a damned ridiculous manner?"

"Perhaps the Duke is testing your loyalty," I suggested at random, preparing to leap to my feet if necessary. His fists were bunched at his side, and the discarded riding crop was within much too easy a reach on the desk nearby.

He snorted in response to this suggestion.

"*You* may be testing my gullibility. Or my tolerance to irritation. Both, Madam, are extremely low." His eyes narrowed speculatively, and I braced myself for a quick dash.

He lunged, and I flung myself to one side. Getting hold of the teapot, I threw it at him. He dodged, and it hit the door with a satisfying crash. The orderly, who must have been lingering just outside, poked a startled head in.

Breathing heavily, the Captain motioned him impatiently into the room.

"Hold her," he ordered brusquely, crossing toward the desk. I began to breathe deeply, both in hopes of calming myself and in anticipation of not being able to do it in a moment.

Instead of hitting me, though, he merely pulled out the lower right-hand drawer, which I had not had time to investigate, and pulled out a long strand of thin rope.

"What kind of gentleman keeps rope in his desk drawers?" I inquired indignantly.

"A prepared one, Madam," he murmured, tying my wrists securely behind me.

“Go,” he said impatiently to the orderly, jerking his head toward the door. “And don’t come back, no matter what you hear.”

This sounded distinctly ominous, and my forebodings were abundantly justified as he reached into the drawer once more.

There is something unnerving about a knife. Men who are fearless in personal combat will shrink from a naked blade. I shrank myself, until my bound hands collided with the whitewashed wall. The wicked gleaming point lowered and pressed between my breasts.

“Now,” he said pleasantly, “you are going to tell me everything you know about the Duke of Sandringham.” The blade pressed a little harder, making a dent in the fabric of my gown. “Take as long as you like about it, my dear. I am in no hurry whatsoever.” There was a small *pop!* as the point punctured the fabric. I felt it, cold as fear, a tiny spot directly over my heart.

Randall slowly drew the knife in a semicircle under one breast. The homespun came free and fell away with a flutter of white chemise, and my breast sprang out. Randall seemed to have been holding his breath; he exhaled slowly now, his eyes fixed on mine.

I sidled away from him, but there was very little room to maneuver. I ended up pressed against the desk, bound hands gripping the edge. If he came close enough, I thought, I might be able to rock backward on my hands and kick the knife out of his hand. I doubted that he meant to kill me; certainly not until he had found out just what I knew about his relations with the Duke. Somehow that conclusion was of relatively little comfort.

He smiled, with that unnerving resemblance to Frank’s smile; that lovely smile which I had seen charm students and melt the stoniest college administrator. Possibly under other circumstances, I would have found this man charming, but just at present … no.

He moved in fast, thrusting a knee between my thighs and pushing my shoulders back. Unable to keep my balance, I fell heavily backward on the desk, crying out as I landed painfully on my bound wrists. He pressed himself between my legs, scrabbling with one hand to raise my skirts while the other fastened on my bared breast, rolling and pinching. I kicked frantically, but my skirts got in the way. He grasped my foot and ran a hand up my leg, pushing damp petticoats, skirt, and chemise out of the way, tossing them up above my waist. His hand dropped to his breeches.

Shades of Harry the deserter, I thought furiously. What in God's name is the British army coming to? Glorious traditions, my aunt Fanny.

In the midst of an English garrison, screaming was unlikely to attract any helpful attention, but I filled my lungs and had a try, more as a pro forma protest than anything else. I had expected a slap or shake in return, to shut me up. Instead, unexpectedly, he appeared to like it.

"Go ahead and scream, sweeting," he murmured, busy with his flies. "I'll enjoy it much more if you scream."

I looked him straight in the eye and snapped "Get stuffed!" with perfect clarity and terrible inaptness.

A lock of dark hair came loose and fell across his forehead in rakish disarray. He looked so like his six-times-great grandson that I was seized by a horrible impulse to open my legs and respond to him. He twisted my breast savagely and the impulse disappeared at once.

I was furiously angry, disgusted, humiliated, and revolted, but curiously not very frightened. I felt a heavy, flopping movement against my leg and suddenly realized why. He wasn't going to enjoy it *unless* I screamed—and possibly not then.

"Oh, like that, is it?" I said, and was rewarded at once with a sharp slap across the face. I shut my mouth grimly and turned my head away lest I be tempted into any more injudicious remarks. I realized that rape or not, I was in considerable danger from his unstable temper. Looking away from the sight of Randall, I caught a sudden flicker of movement at the window.

"I'll thank ye," said a cool, level voice, "to take your hands off my wife." Randall froze with a hand still on my breast. Jamie was crouched in the window frame, a large, brass-handled pistol braced across one forearm.

Randall stood frozen for a second, as though unable to believe his ears. As his head turned slowly toward the window, his right hand, shielded from Jamie's view, left my breast, sliding stealthily toward the knife, which he had laid on the desk next to my head.

"*What* did you say?" he said, incredulously. As his hand fastened on the knife, he turned far enough to see who had spoken. He stopped again for a moment, staring, then began to laugh.

"Lord help us, it's the young Scottish wildcat! I thought I'd dealt with you once and for all! Back healed after all, did it? And this is *your* wife, you say? Quite a tasty little wench, she is, quite like your sister."

Still shielded by his partly turned body, Randall's knife-hand swiveled; the blade was now pointed at my throat. I could see Jamie over his shoulder, braced in the window like a cat about to spring. The pistol barrel didn't waver, nor did he change expression. The only clue to his emotions was the dusky red creeping up his throat; his collar was unbuttoned and the small scar on his neck flamed crimson.

Almost casually, Randall slowly raised the knife into view, point almost touching my throat. He half turned toward Jamie.

"Perhaps you'd better toss that pistol over here—unless you're weary of married life. If you'd prefer to be a widower, of course …" Their eyes locked tight as a lover's embrace, neither man moved for a long minute. Finally, Jamie's body relaxed its springlike tension. He let out his breath in a long sigh of resignation and tossed the pistol into the room. It hit the floor with a clunk and slid almost to Randall's feet.

Randall bent and scooped up the gun in a quicksilver motion. As soon as the knife left my throat, I tried to sit up, but he placed a hand on my chest and shoved me flat again. He held me down with one hand, using the other to aim the pistol at Jamie. The discarded knife lay somewhere on the floor near my feet, I thought. Now, if only I had prehensile toes.… The dirk in my pocket was as unreachable as if it were on Mars.

The smile had not left Randall's features since Jamie's appearance. Now it broadened, enough to show the pointed dog teeth.

"Well, that's a bit better." The pressing hand left my chest to return to the swelling flies of his breeches. "I was engaged when you arrived, my dear fellow. You'll forgive me if I get on with what I was doing before I attend to you."

The red color had spread completely over Jamie's face, but he stood motionless, the gun pointed at his middle. As Randall finished his maneuvers, Jamie launched himself at the open mouth of the pistol. I tried to scream, to stop him, but my mouth was dry with terror. Randall's knuckles whitened as he squeezed the trigger.

The hammer clicked on an empty chamber, and Jamie's fist drove into Randall's stomach. There was a dull crunching sound as his other fist splintered the officer's nose, and a fine spray of blood spattered my skirt. Randall's eyes rolled up in his head, and he dropped to the floor like a stone.

Jamie was behind me, pulling me up, sawing at the rope around my wrists.

"You bluffed your way in here with an *empty* gun?" I croaked hysterically.

"If it were loaded, I would ha' just shot him in the first place, wouldn't I?!" Jamie hissed.

Feet were coming down the corridor toward the office. The rope came free and Jamie yanked me to the window. It was an eight-foot drop to the ground, but the footsteps were almost to the door. We jumped together.

I landed with a bone-shaking jar and rolled in a tumble of skirts and petticoats. Jamie jerked me to my feet and pressed me against the wall of the building. Feet were passing the corner of the building; six soldiers came into view, but didn't look in our direction.

As soon as they were safely past, Jamie took my hand and motioned toward the other corner. We sidled along the building, stopping short of the corner. I could see where we were now. About twenty feet away, a ladder led up to a sort of catwalk that ran along the inside of the fort's outer wall. He nodded toward it; this was our objective.

He brought his head close to mine and whispered, “When ye hear an explosion, run like hell and get up that ladder. I’ll be behind ye.”

I nodded understanding. My heart was going like a trip-hammer; glancing down, I saw that one breast was still exposed. Not much to be done about it just at present. I rucked up my skirts, ready to run.

There was an almighty roar from the other side of the building, like a mortar explosion. Jamie gave me a shove and I was off, running as fast as I could go. I jumped for the ladder, caught it and scrambled up; I felt the wood jerk and tremble as Jamie’s weight hit the ladder below me.

Turning at the top of the ladder, I had a bird’s-eye view of the fort. Black smoke was billowing up from a small building near the back wall, and men were running toward it from every direction.

Jamie popped up beside me. “This way.” He ran crouching along the catwalk, and I followed. We stopped near the flag staff set in the wall. The ensign flapped heavily above us, halyard beating a rhythmic tattoo against the pole. Jamie was peering over the wall, looking for something.

I looked back over the camp. The men were clustering at the small building, milling and shouting. Off to one side, I spotted a small wooden platform, set three or four feet high, with steps leading up. A heavy wooden post rose out of the center, cross-beamed, with rope manacles dangling from the arms of the cross.

Suddenly Jamie gave a whistle; looking over the wall, I saw Rupert, mounted and leading Jamie’s horse. He looked up at the sound of the whistle and maneuvered the horses close to the wall below us.

Jamie was cutting the halyard from the flagpole. The heavy red and blue folds of the flag drooped and slid down, landing with a swishing thud next to me. Twisting a rope end rapidly around one of the struts, Jamie tossed the rest down the outside of the wall.

“Come on!” he said. “Hold tight with both hands, brace your feet against the wall! Go!” I went, bracing my feet and paying out rope; the thin cordage slipped and burned in my hands. I dropped next to the horses and hurried to mount. Jamie vaulted into the saddle behind me a moment later, and we took off at a gallop.

We slowed our pace a mile or two from the camp, when it became apparent that we had lost any pursuers. After a short conference, Dougal decided that we had better make for the border of the Mackintosh lands, as being the closest safe clan territory.

"Doonesbury's within riding distance by tonight, and likely to be safe enough. There'll be word out on us tomorrow, but we'll be across the border before it reaches there." It was mid-afternoon by then; we set off at a steady pace, our horse with its double load lagging slightly behind the others. My horse, I supposed, was still happily eating grass in the copse, waiting to be led home by whoever was lucky enough to find it.

* * *

"How did you find me?" I asked. I was beginning to shake in reaction, and folded my arms around myself to still the quivering. My clothes had dried completely by this time, but I felt a chill that went bone-deep.

"I thought better of leaving ye alone, and sent a man back to stay wi' ye. He didna see ye leave, but he saw the English soldiers cross the ford, and you wi' them." Jamie's voice was cold. I couldn't blame him, I supposed. My teeth were beginning to chatter.

"I'm s-surprised that you didn't just think I was an English spy and l-leave me there."

"Dougal wanted to. But the man who saw ye with the soldiers said you were struggling. I had to go and see, at least." He glanced down at me, not changing expression.

"You're lucky, Sassenach, that I saw what I did in that room. At least Dougal must admit that you're not in league wi' the English."

"D-Dougal, eh? And what about you? Wh-what do *you* think?" I demanded.

He did not reply, but only snorted briefly. He did at last take pity on me to the extent of jerking off his plaid and flinging it over my shoulders, but he would not put his arm around me nor touch me more than strictly necessary. He rode in grim silence, handling the reins with an angry jerkiness quite unlike his usual smooth grace.

Upset and unsettled myself, I was in no frame of mind to put up with moods.

"Well, what is it, then? What's the matter?" I asked impatiently. "Don't sulk, for heaven's sake!" I spoke more sharply than I intended, and I felt him stiffen still further. Suddenly he turned the horse's head aside and reined up at the side of the road. Before I knew what was happening, he had dismounted and jerked me from the saddle as well. I landed awkwardly, staggering to keep my balance as my feet hit the ground.

Dougal and the others paused, seeing us stop. Jamie made a short, sharp gesture, sending them on, and Dougal waved in acknowledgment. "Don't take too long," he called, and they set off again.

Jamie waited until they were out of earshot. Then he yanked me around to face him. He was clearly furious, on the verge of explosion. I felt my own wrath rising; what right did he have to treat me like this?

"Sulking!" he said. "Sulking, is it? I'm using all the self-control I've got, to keep from shakin' ye 'til your teeth rattle, and you tell me not to sulk!"

"What in the name of God is the matter with you?" I asked angrily. I tried to shake off his grip, but his fingers dug into my upper arms like the teeth of a trap.

"What's the matter wi' me? I'll tell ye what the matter is, since ye want to know!" he said through clenched teeth. "I'm tired of having to prove over and over that you're no an English spy. I'm tired of having to watch ye very minute, for fear of what foolishness you'll try next. And I'm *verra* tired of people trying to make me watch while they rape you! I dinna enjoy it a bit!"

"And you think *I* enjoy it?" I yelled. "Are you trying to make out it's *my* fault?!" At this, he did shake me slightly.

"It *is* your fault! Did ye stay put where I ordered ye to stay this mornin', this would never have happened! But no, ye won't listen to me, I'm no but your husband, why mind *me*? You take it into your mind to do as ye damn please, and next I ken, I find ye flat on your back wi' your skirts up, an' the worst scum in the land between your legs, on the point of takin' ye before my eyes!" His Scots accent, usually slight, was growing broader by the second, sure sign that he was upset, had I needed any further indication.

We were almost nose to nose by this time, shouting into each other's face. Jamie was flushed with fury, and I felt the blood rising in my own face.

"It's your own fault, for ignoring me and suspecting me all the time! I told you the truth about who I am! And I told you there was no danger in my going with you, but would you listen to *me*? No! I'm only a woman, why should you pay any attention to what I say? Women are only fit to do as they're told, and follow orders, and sit meekly around with their hands folded, waiting for the men to come back and tell them what to do!"

He shook me again, unable to control himself.

"And if ye'd done that, we wouldna be on the run, with a hundred Redcoats on our tail! God, woman, I dinna know whether to strangle ye or throw ye on the ground and hammer ye senseless, but by Jesus, I want to do *something* to you."

At this, I made a determined effort to kick him in the balls. He dodged, and jammed his own knee between my legs, effectively preventing any further attempts.

"Try that again and I'll slap you 'til your ears ring," he growled.

"You're a brute and a fool," I panted, struggling to escape his grip on my shoulders. "Do you think I went out and got captured by the English on purpose?"

"I do think ye did it on purpose, to get back at me for what happened in the glade!"

My mouth fell open.

"In the glade? With the English deserters?"

"Aye! Ye think I should ha' been able to protect ye there, an' you're right. But I couldna do it; you had to do it yourself, and now you're tryin' to make me pay for it by deliberately putting yourself, *my* wife, in the hands of a man that's shed my blood!"

"*Your* wife! *Your* wife! You don't care a thing about me! I'm just your property; it only matters to you because you think I belong to you, and you can't stand to have someone take something that belongs to you!"

“Ye *do* belong to me,” he roared, digging his fingers into my shoulders like spikes. “And you *are* my wife, whether ye like it or no!”

“I don’t like it! I don’t like it a bit! But that doesn’t matter either, does it? As long as I’m there to warm your bed, you don’t care what I think or how I feel! That’s all a wife is to you—something to stick your cock into when you feel the urge!”

At this, his face went dead white and he began to shake me in earnest. My head jerked violently and my teeth clacked together, making me bite my tongue painfully.

“Let go of me!” I shouted. “Let go, you”—I deliberately used the words of Harry the deserter, trying to hurt him—“you rutting bastard!” He did let go, and fell back a pace, eyes blazing.

“Ye foul-tongued bitch! Ye’ll no speak to me that way!”

“I’ll speak any way I want to! You can’t tell me what to do!”

“Seems I can’t! Ye’ll do as ye wish, no matter who ye hurt by it, won’t ye? Ye selfish, willful—”

“It’s your bloody pride that’s hurt!” I shouted. “I saved us both from those deserters in the glade, and you can’t stand it, can you? You just stood there! If I hadn’t had a knife, we’d both be dead now!”

Until I spoke the words, I had had no idea that I had been angry with him for failing to protect me from the English deserters. In a more rational mood, the thought would never have entered my mind. It wasn’t his fault, I would have said. It was just luck that I had the knife, I would have said. But now I realized that fair or not, rational or not, I *did* somehow feel that it was his responsibility to protect me, and that he had failed me. Perhaps because *he* so clearly felt that way.

He stood glaring at me, panting with emotion. When he spoke again, his voice was low and ragged with passion.

“You saw that post in the yard of the fort?” I nodded shortly.

“Well, I was tied to that post, tied like an animal, and whipped ’til my blood ran! I’ll carry the scars from it ’til I die. If I’d not been lucky as the devil this afternoon, that’s the least as would have happened to me. Likely they'd have flogged me, then hanged me." He swallowed hard, and went on.

"I knew that, and I didna hesitate for one second to go into that place after you, even thinking that Dougal might be right! Do ye know where I got the gun I used?" I shook my head numbly, my own anger beginning to fade. "I killed a guard near the wall. He fired at me; that's why it was empty. He missed and I killed him wi' my dirk; left it sticking in his wishbone when I heard you cry out. I would have killed a dozen men to get to you, Claire." His voice cracked.

"And when ye screamed, I went to you, armed wi' nothing but an empty gun and my two hands." Jamie was speaking a little more calmly now, but his eyes were still wild with pain and rage. I was silent. Unsettled by the horror of my encounter with Randall, I had not at all appreciated the desperate courage it had taken for him to come into the fort after me.

He turned away suddenly, shoulders slumping.

"You're right," he said quietly. "Aye, you're quite right." Suddenly the rage was gone from his voice, replaced by a tone I had never heard in him before, even in the extremities of physical pain.

"My pride is hurt. And my pride is about all I've got left to me." He leaned his forearms against a rough-barked pine and let his head drop onto them, exhausted. His voice was so low I could barely hear him.

"You're tearin' my guts out, Claire."

Something very similar was happening to my own. Tentatively, I came up behind him. He didn't move, even when I slipped my arms around his waist. I rested my cheek on his bowed back. His shirt was damp, sweated through with the intensity of his passion, and he was trembling.

"I'm sorry," I said, simply. "Please forgive me." He turned then, to hold me tightly. I felt his trembling ease bit by bit.

"Forgiven, lass," he murmured at last into my hair. Releasing me, he looked down at me, sober and formal.

"I'm sorry too," he said. "I'll ask your pardon for what I said; I was sore, and I said more nor I meant. Will ye forgive me too?"

After his last speech, I hardly felt that there was anything for me to forgive, but I nodded and pressed his hands.

"Forgiven."

In an easier silence, we mounted again. The road was straight for a long way here, and far ahead I could see a small cloud of dust that must be Dougal and the other men.

Jamie was back with me again; he held me with one arm as we rode, and I felt safer. But there was still a vague sense of injury and constraint; things were not yet healed between us. We had forgiven each other, but our words still hung in memory, not to be forgotten.

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22

RECKONINGS

We reached Doonesbury well after dark. It was a fair-sized coach-stop with an inn, fortunately. Dougal closed his eyes briefly in pain as he paid the innkeeper; it would take quite a bit of extra silver to insure his silence as to our presence.

The silver, however, also insured a hearty supper, with plenty of ale. Despite the food, supper was a grim affair, eaten mostly in silence. Sitting there in my ruined gown, modestly covered by Jamie's extra shirt, I was plainly in disgrace. Except for Jamie, the men behaved as though I were completely invisible, and even Jamie did no more than shove bread and meat in my direction from time to time. It was a relief at last to go up to our chamber, small and cramped though it was.

I sank on the bed with a sigh, disregarding the state of the bedclothes.

"I'm done in. It's been a long day."

"Aye, it has that." Jamie unfastened his collar and cuffs and unbuckled his sword belt, but made no move to undress further. He pulled the strap from the scabbard and doubled it, flexing the leather meditatively.

"Come to bed, Jamie. What are you waiting for?"

He came to stand by the bed, swinging the belt gently back and forth.

"Well, lass, I'm afraid we've a matter still to settle between us before we sleep tonight." I felt a sudden stab of apprehension.

"What is it?"

He didn’t answer at once. Deliberately not sitting down on the bed by me, he pulled up a stool and sat facing me instead.

“Do ye realize, Claire,” he said quietly, “that all of us came close to bein’ killed this afternoon?”

I looked down at the quilt, shamefaced. “Yes, I know. My fault. I’m sorry.”

“Aye, so ye realize,” he said. “Do ye know that if a man among us had done such a thing, to put the rest in danger, he would ha’ likely had his ears cropped, or been flogged, if not killed outright?” I blanched at this.

“No, I didn’t know.”

“Well, I know as you’re not yet familiar wi’ our ways, and it’s some excuse. Still I did tell ye to stay hid, and had ye done so, it would never have happened. Now the English will be lookin’ high and low for us; we shall have to lie hid during the days and travel at night now.”

He paused. “And as for Captain Randall … aye, that’s something else again.”

“He’ll be looking for you especially, you mean, now that he knows you’re here?” He nodded absently, looking off into the fire.

“Aye. He … it’s personal, with him, ye know?”

“I’m so sorry, Jamie,” I said. Jamie dismissed this with a wave of the hand.

“Eh, if it were only me ye’d hurt by it, I wouldna say more about it. Though since we’re talkin’,” he shot me a sharp glance, “I’ll tell ye that it near killed me to see that animal with his hands on you.” He looked off into the fire, grim-faced, as though reliving the afternoon’s events.

I thought of telling him about Randall’s … difficulties, but was afraid it would do more harm than good. I desperately wanted to hold Jamie and beg him to forgive me, but I didn’t dare to touch him. After a long moment of silence, he sighed and stood up, slapping the belt lightly against his thigh.

“Well, then,” he said. “Best get on wi’ it. You’ve done considerable damage by crossing my orders, and I’m going to punish ye for it, Claire. Ye’ll recall what I told ye when I left ye this morning?” I recalled all right, and I hastily flung myself across the bed so my back was pressed to the wall.

“What do you mean?”

“Ye know quite well what I mean,” he said firmly. “Kneel down by the bed and lift your skirts, lass.”

“I’ll do no such thing!” I took a good hold on the bedpost with both hands and wormed my way further into the corner.

Jamie watched me through narrowed eyes for a moment, debating what to do next. It occurred to me that there was nothing whatever to stop him doing anything he liked to me; he outweighed me by a good five stone. He at last decided on talk rather than action, though, and carefully laid the strap aside before crawling over the bedclothes to sit beside me.

“Now, Claire—” he began.

“I’ve said I’m sorry!” I burst out. “And I am. I’ll never do such a thing again!”

“Well, that’s the point,” he said slowly. “Ye might. And it’s because ye dinna take things as serious as they are. Ye come from a place where things are easier, I think. ’Tis not a matter of life or death where ye come from, to disobey orders or take matters into your own hands. At worst, ye might cause someone discomfort, or be a bit of a nuisance, but it isna likely to get someone killed.” I watched his fingers pleating the brownish plaid of his kilt as he arranged his thoughts.

“It’s the hard truth that a light action can have verra serious consequences in places and times like these—especially for a man like me.” He patted my shoulder, seeing that I was close to tears.

“I know ye would never endanger me or anyone else on purpose. But ye might easily do so without meanin’ it, like ye did today, because ye do not really believe me yet when I tell ye that some things are dangerous. You’re accustomed to think for yourself, and I know,” he glanced sidewise at me, “that you’re not accustomed to lettin’ a man tell ye what to do. But you must learn to do so, for all our sakes.”

“All right,” I said slowly. “I understand. You’re right, of course. All right; I’ll follow your orders, even if I don’t agree with them.”

“Good.” He stood up, and picked up the belt. “Now then, get off the bed, and we’ll get it over with.”

My mouth dropped open in outrage. “What?! I *said* I’d follow your orders!”

He sighed, exasperated, then sat down again on the stool. He looked at me levelly.

“Now, listen. Ye understand me, ye say, and I believe it. But there’s a difference between understandin’ something with your mind and really knowing it, deep down.” I nodded, reluctantly.

“All right. Now, I will have to punish you, and for two reasons: first, so that ye *will* know.” He smiled suddenly. “I can tell ye from my own experience that a good hiding makes ye consider things in a more serious light.” I took a tighter hold on the bedpost.

“The other reason,” he went on, “is because of the other men. Ye’ll have noticed how they were tonight?” I had; it had been so uncomfortable at dinner that I was glad to escape to the room.

“There’s such a thing as justice, Claire. You’ve done wrong to them all, and you’ll have to suffer for it.” He took a deep breath. “I’m your husband; it’s my duty to attend to it, and I mean to do it.”

I had strong objections to this proposal on several levels. Whatever the justice of the situation—and I had to admit that at least some of it lay on his side—my sense of amour-propre was deeply offended at the thought of being beaten, by whomever and for whatever reason.

I felt deeply betrayed that the man I depended on as friend, protector, and lover intended to do such a thing to me. And my sense of self-preservation was quietly terrified at the thought of submitting myself to the mercies of someone who handled a fifteen-pound claymore as though it were a flywhisk.

“I will not allow you to beat me,” I said firmly, keeping a tight hold on the bedpost.

“Oh, you won’t?” He raised sandy brows. “Well, I’ll tell ye, lass, I doubt you’ve much to say about it. You’re my wife, like it or not. Did I want to break your arm, or feed ye naught but bread and water, or lock ye in a closet for days—and don’t think ye don’t tempt me, either—I could do that, let alone warm your bum for you."

"I'll scream!"

"Likely. If not before, certainly during. I expect they'll hear ye at the next farm; you've got good lungs." He grinned odiously and came across the bed after me.

He pried my fingers loose with some difficulty, and pulled firmly, hauling me to the side of the bed. I kicked him in the shins, but did no damage, not having shoes on. Grunting slightly, he managed to turn me facedown on the bed, twisting my arm to hold me there.

"I mean to do it, Claire! Now, if you'll cooperate wi' me, we'll call the account square with a dozen strokes."

"And if not?" I quavered. He picked up the strap and slapped it against his leg with a nasty thwapping sound.

"Then I shall put a knee in your back and beat you 'til my arm tires, and I warn ye, you'll tire of it long before I do."

I bounced off the bed and whirled to face him, fists clenched.

"You barbarian! You … you sadist!" I hissed furiously. "You're doing this for your own pleasure! I'll never forgive you for this!" Jamie paused, twisting the belt.

He replied levelly, "I dinna know what's a sadist. And if I forgive you for this afternoon, I reckon you'll forgive me, too, as soon as ye can sit down again."

"As for my pleasure …" His lip twitched. "I said I would have to punish you. I did *not* say I wasna going to enjoy it." He crooked a finger at me.

"Come here."

* * *

I was reluctant to leave the sanctuary of the room next morning, and fiddled about, tying and untying ribbons and brushing my hair. I had not spoken to Jamie since the night before, but he noticed my hesitation and urged me to come out with him to breakfast.

"You dinna need to fear meetin' the others, Claire. They'll chaff ye a bit, likely, but it won't be bad. Chin up." He chucked me under the chin, and I bit his hand, sharply but not deep.

"Ooh!" He snatched his fingers back. "Be careful, lass; you don't know where they've been." He left me, chuckling, and went in to breakfast.

He might well be in a good mood, I thought bitterly. If it were revenge he'd wanted the night before, he'd had it.

It had been a most unpleasant night. My reluctant acquiescence had lasted precisely as far as the first searing crack of leather on flesh. This was followed by a short, violent struggle, which left Jamie with a bloody nose, three lovely gouges down one cheek, and a deeply bitten wrist. Not surprisingly, it left me half smothered in the greasy quilts with a knee in my back, being beaten within an inch of my life.

Jamie, damn his black Scottish soul, turned out to be right. The men were restrained in their greetings, but friendly enough; the hostility and contempt of the night before had vanished.

As I was dishing eggs at the sideboard, Dougal came up and slipped a fatherly arm around my shoulders. His beard tickled my ear as he spoke in a confidential rumble.

"I hope Jamie wasna too harsh wi' ye last night, lass. It sounded as though ye were bein' murderrt, at least."

I flushed hotly and turned away so he wouldn't see it. After Jamie's obnoxious remarks, I had resolved to keep my mouth firmly shut through the whole ordeal. However, when it came to the event, I would have challenged the Sphinx itself to keep a shut mouth while on the receiving end of a strap wielded by Jamie Fraser.

Dougal turned to call to Jamie, seated at the table eating bread and cheese. "Hey now, Jamie, it wasna necessary to half-kill the lass. A gentle reminder would ha' sufficed." He patted me firmly on the posterior in illustration, making me wince. I glowered at him.

"A blistered bum never did anyone no permanent harm," said Murtagh, through a mouthful of bread.

"No, indeed," said Ned, grinning. "Come have a seat, lassie."

"I'll stand, thank you," I said with dignity, making them all roar with laughter. Jamie was careful not to meet my eyes, as he studiously cut up a bit of cheese.

There was a bit more good-natured chaff during the day, and each of the men made some excuse to pat my rump in mock sympathy. On the whole, though, it was bearable, and I grudgingly began to consider that Jamie might have been right, though I still wanted to strangle him.

Since sitting down was completely out of the question, I busied myself during the morning with small chores such as hemming and button-sewing, which could be done at the window sill, with the excuse of needing the light to sew by. After lunch, which I ate standing, we all went to our rooms to rest. Dougal had decided that we would wait 'til full dark to set out for Bargrennan, the next stop on our journey. Jamie followed me to our room, but I shut the door firmly in his face. Let him sleep on the floor again.

He had been fairly tactful last night, buckling his belt back on and leaving the room without speaking immediately after he'd finished. He had come back an hour later, after I'd put out the light and gone to bed, but had had sense enough not to try to come into bed with me. After peering into the darkness where I lay unmoving, he had sighed deeply, wrapped himself in his plaid, and gone to sleep on the floor near the door.

Too angry, upset, and physically uncomfortable to sleep, I had lain awake most of the night, alternately thinking over what Jamie had said with wanting to get up and kick him in some sensitive spot.

Were I being objective, which I was in no mood to be, I might admit that he was right when he said that I didn't take things with the proper seriousness. He was wrong, though, when he said it was because things were less precarious in my own place—wherever that was. In fact, I thought, it was more likely the opposite was true.

This time was in many ways still unreal to me; something from a play or a fancy-dress pageant. Compared to the sights of mechanized mass warfare I had come from, the small pitched battles I had seen—a few men armed with swords and muskets—seemed picturesque rather than threatening to me.

I was having trouble with the scale of things. A man killed with a musket was just as dead as one killed with a mortar. It was just that the mortar killed impersonally, destroying dozens of men, while the musket was fired by one man who could see the eyes of the one he killed. That made it murder, it seemed to me, not war. How many men to make a war? Enough, perhaps, so they didn't really have to see each other? And yet this plainly was war—or serious business at least—to Dougal, Jamie, Rupert, and Ned. Even little rat-faced Murtagh had a reason for violence beyond his natural inclinations.

And what about those reasons? One king rather than another? Hanovers and Stuarts? To me, these were still no more than names on a chart on the schoolroom wall. What were they, compared with an unthinkable evil like Hitler's Reich? It made a difference to those who lived under the kings, I supposed, though the differences might seem trivial to me. Still, when had the right to live as one wished ever been considered trivial? Was a struggle to choose one's own destiny less worthwhile than the necessity to stop a great evil? I shifted irritably, gingerly rubbing my sore bottom. I glared at Jamie, curled into a ball by the door. He was breathing evenly, but lightly; perhaps he couldn't sleep either. I hoped not.

I had been inclined at first to take this whole remarkable misadventure as melodrama; such things just did not happen in real life. I had had many shocks since I stepped through the rock, but the worst to date had been this afternoon.

Jack Randall, so like and so horribly unlike Frank. His touch on my breasts had suddenly forged a link between my old life and this one, bringing my separate realities together with a bang like a thunderclap. And then there was Jamie: his face, stark with fear in the window of Randall's room, contorted with rage by the roadside, tight with pain at my insults.

Jamie. Jamie was real, all right, more real than anything had ever been to me, even Frank and my life in 1945. Jamie, tender lover and perfidious black-guard.

Perhaps that was part of the problem. Jamie filled my senses so completely that his surroundings seemed almost irrelevant. But I could no longer afford to ignore them. My recklessness had almost killed him this afternoon, and my stomach turned over at the thought of losing him. I sat up suddenly, intending to go and wake him to tell him to come to bed with me. As my weight fell full on the results of his handiwork, I just as suddenly changed my mind and flounced angrily back onto my stomach.

A night spent thus torn between fits of rage and philosophy had left me worn out. I slept all afternoon, and stumbled blearily down for a light supper when Rupert roused me just before dark.

Dougal, no doubt writhing at the expense, had procured another horse for me. A sound beast, if inelegantly built, with a kindly eye and a short, bristly mane; at once I named it Thistle.

I had not reckoned on the effects of a long horseback ride following a severe beating. I eyed Thistle's hard saddle dubiously, suddenly realizing what I was in for. A thick cloak plopped across the saddle, and Murtagh's shiny black rat-eye winked conspiratorially at me from the opposite side. I determined that I would at least suffer in dignified silence, and grimly set my jaw as I hoisted myself into the saddle.

There seemed to be an unspoken conspiracy of gallantry among the men; they took turns stopping at frequent intervals to relieve themselves, allowing me to dismount for a few minutes and surreptitiously rub my aching fundament. Now and again, one would suggest stopping for a drink, which necessitated my stopping as well, since Thistle carried the water bottles.

We jolted along for a couple of hours in this manner, but the pain grew steadily worse, keeping me shifting in the saddle incessantly. Finally I decided to hell with dignified suffering, I simply must get off for a while.

"Whoa!" I said to Thistle, and swung down. I pretended to examine her front left foot, as the other horses came to a milling stop around us.

"I'm afraid she's had a stone in her shoe," I lied. "I've got it out, but I'd better walk her a bit; don't want her to go lame."

"No, we can't have that," said Dougal. "All right, walk for a bit, then, but someone must stay wi' ye. 'Tis a quiet enough road, but I canna have ye walkin' alone." Jamie immediately swung down.

"I'll walk with her," he said quietly.

"Good. Dinna tarry too long; we must be in Bargrennan before dawn. The sign of the Red Boar; landlord's a friend." With a wave, he gathered the others and they set off at a brisk trot, leaving us, in the dust.

* * *

Several hours of torture by saddle had not improved my temper. Let him walk with me. I was damned if I'd speak to him, the sadistic, violent brute.

He didn't look particularly brutish in the light of the half-moon rising, but I hardened my heart and limped along, carefully not looking at him.

My abused muscles at first protested the unaccustomed exercise, but after a half hour or so I began to move much more easily.

"You'll feel much better by tomorrow," Jamie observed casually. "Though you won't sit easy 'til the next day."

"And what makes you such an expert?" I flared at him. "Do you beat people all that frequently?"

"Well, no," he said, undisturbed by my attitude. "This is the first time I've tried it. I've considerable experience on the other end, though."

"You?" I gaped at him. The thought of anyone taking a strap to this towering mass of muscle and sinew was completely untenable.

He laughed at my expression. "When I was a bit smaller, Sassenach. I've had my backside leathered more times than I could count, between the ages of eight and thirteen. That's when I got taller than my father, and it got unhandy for him to bend me over a fence rail."

"Your father beat you?"

"Aye, mostly. The schoolmaster, too, of course, and Dougal or one of the other uncles now and then, depending on where I was and what I'd been doing."

I was growing interested, in spite of my determination to ignore him.

"What *did* you do?"

He laughed again, a quiet but infectious sound in the still night air.

"Well, I canna remember everything. I will say I generally deserved it. I don't think my Da ever beat me unfairly, at least." He paced without speaking for a minute, thinking.

"Mm. Let's see, there was once for stoning the chickens, and once for riding the cows and getting them too excited for milking, and then for eating all of the jam out of the cakes and leaving the cakes behind. Ah, and letting the horses out of the barn by leaving the gate unlatched, and setting the thatch of the dovecote on fire—that was an accident, I didna do it on purpose—and losing my schoolbooks—I did do that on purpose—and …" He broke off, shrugging, as I laughed despite myself.

"The usual sorts of things. Most often, though, it was for opening my mouth when I should ha' kept it closed."

He snorted at some memory. "Once my sister Jenny broke a pitcher; I made her angry, teasing, and she lost her temper and threw it at me. When my Da came in and demanded to know who'd done it, she was too scared to speak up, and she just looked at me, with her eyes all wide and frightened—she's got blue eyes, like mine, but prettier, wi' black lashes all around." Jamie shrugged again. "Anyway, I told my father I'd done it."

"That was very noble of you," I said, sarcastically. "Your sister must have been grateful."

"Aye, well, she might have been. Only my father'd been on, the other side of the open door all along, and he'd seen what really happened. So she got whipped for losing her temper and breaking the pitcher, and I got whipped twice; once for teasing her and again for lying."

"That's not fair!" I said indignantly.

"My father wasna always gentle, but he was usually fair," Jamie said imperturbably. "He said the truth is the truth, and people should take responsibility for their own actions, which is right." He shot me a sidelong glance.

"But he said it was good-hearted of me to take the blame, so while he'd have to punish me, I could take my choice between being thrashed or going to bed without my supper." He laughed ruefully, shaking his head. "Father knew me pretty well. I took the thrashing with no questions."

"You're nothing but a walking appetite, Jamie," I said.

“Aye,” he agreed without rancor, “always have been. You too, glutton,” he said to his mount. “Wait a bit, ’til we stop for a rest.” He twitched the rein, pulling his horse’s questing nose from the tempting tufts of grass along the roadside.

“Aye, Father was fair,” he went on, “and considerate about it, though I certainly didna appreciate that at the time. He wouldn’t make me wait for a beating; if I did something wrong, I got punished at once—or as soon as he found out about it. He always made sure I knew what I was about to get walloped for, and if I wanted to argue my side of it, I could.”

Oh, so that’s what you’re up to, I thought. You disarming schemer. I doubted he could charm me out of my set intention of disemboweling him at the first opportunity, but he was welcome to try.

“Did you ever win an argument?” I asked.

“No. It was generally a straightforward-enough case, with the accused convicted out of his own mouth. But sometimes I got the sentence reduced a bit.” He rubbed his nose.

“Once I told him I thought beating your son was a most uncivilized method of getting your own way. He said I’d about as much sense as the post I was standing next to, if as much. He said respect for your elders was one of the cornerstones of civilized behavior, and until I learned that, I’d better get used to looking at my toes while one of my barbaric elders thrashed my arse off.”

This time I laughed along with him. It was peaceful on the road, with that sort of absolute quiet that comes when you are miles from any other person. The sort of quiet so hard to come by in my own more crowded time, when machines spread the influence of man, so that a single person could make as much noise as a crowd. The only sounds here were the stirrings of plants, the occasional *skreek* of a nightbird, and the soft thudding steps of the horses.

I was walking a little easier now, as my cramped muscles began to stretch freely with the exercise. My prickly feelings began to relax a little, too, listening to Jamie’s stories, all humorous and self-deprecating.

"I didna like being beaten at all, of course, but if I had a choice, I'd rather my Da than the schoolmaster. We'd mostly get it across the palm of the hand with a tawse, in the schoolhouse, instead of on the backside. Father said if he whipped me on the hand, I'd not be able to do any work, whereas if he whipped my arse, I'd at least not be tempted to sit down and be idle."

"We had a different schoolmaster each year, usually; they didna last long—usually turned farmer or moved on to richer parts. Schoolmasters are paid so little, they're always skinny and starving. Had a fat one once, and I could never believe he was a real schoolmaster; he looked like a parson in disguise." I thought of plump little Father Bain and smiled in agreement.

"One I remember especially, because he'd make ye stand out in the front of the schoolroom with your hand out, and then he'd lecture ye at great length about your faults before he started, and again in between strokes. I'd stand there wi' my hand out, smarting, just praying he'd stop yammering and get on with the job before I lost all my courage and started crying."

"I imagine that's what he wanted you to do," I said, feeling some sympathy in spite of myself.

"Oh, aye," he replied matter-of-factly. "It took some time for me to realize that, though. And once I did, as usual I couldna keep my mouth shut." He sighed.

"What happened?" I had all but forgotten to be furious by this time.

"Well, he had me up one day—I got it a lot because I couldna write properly with my right hand, kept doing it with my left. He'd smacked me three times—takin' nearly five minutes to do it, the bastard—and he was goin' on at me for being a stupid, idle, stubborn young lout before givin' me the next. My hand burned something fierce, because it was the second time that day, and I was scared because I knew I'd get an awful thrashing when I got home—that was the rule; if I got a beating at school, I'd get another directly I came home, for my father thought schooling important—anyway, I lost my temper." His left hand curled involuntarily around the rein, as though protecting the sensitive palm.

He paused and glanced at me. “I seldom lose my temper, Sassenach, and generally regret it when I do.” And that, I thought, was likely to be as close to an apology as I’d get.

“Did you regret it that time?”

“Well, I doubled up my fists and glared up at him—he was a tall, scrawny fellow, maybe twenty, I suppose, though he looked quite old to me—and I said ‘I’m not afraid o’ you, and ye can’t make me cry, no matter how hard you hit me!’ ” He drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I suppose it was a bit of a mistake in judgment to tell him that while he was still holding the strap.”

“Don’t tell me,” I said. “He tried to prove you were wrong?”

“Oh, aye, he tried.” Jamie nodded, head dark against the cloud-lit sky. His voice held a certain grim satisfaction on the word “tried.”

“He didn’t succeed, then?”

The shaggy head shook back and forth. “No. At least he couldna make me cry. He surely made me regret not keeping quiet, though.”

He paused for a moment, turning his own face toward me. The cloud cover had parted for a moment and the light touched the edges of jaw and cheek, making him look gilded, like one of Donatello’s archangels.

“When Dougal was describing my character to ye, before we wed, did he by chance mention that I’m sometimes a bit stubborn?” The slanted eyes glinted, much more Lucifer than Michael.

I laughed. “That’s putting it mildly. As I recall, what he said is that all the Frasers are stubborn as rocks, and you’re the worst of the lot. Actually,” I said, a little dryly, “I’d noticed something of the kind myself.”

He smiled as he reined the horse around a deep puddle in the road, leading mine by the checkrein after him.

“Mmph, well, I’ll no just say Dougal’s wrong,” he said, once the hazard had been negotiated. “But if I’m stubborn, I come by it honest. My father was just the same, and we’d get in wrangles from time to time that we couldna get out of without the application of force, usually wi’ me bent over the fence rail.”

Suddenly, he put out a hand to grab my horse’s rein, as the beast reared and snorted. “Hey now! Hush! *Stad, mo dhu!*” His own, less spooked, only jerked and tossed its head nervously.

"What is it?" I could see nothing, despite the patches of moonlight that mottled road and field. There was a pine grove up ahead, and the horses seemed disinclined to go any nearer to it.

"I don't know. Stay here and keep quiet. Mount your horse and hold mine. If I call to ye, drop the checkrein and run for it." Jamie's voice was low and casual, calming me as well as the horses. With a muttered *"Sguir!"* to the horse and a slap on the neck to urge it closer to me, he faded into the heather, hand on his dirk.

I strained eyes and ears to discern whatever it was still troubling the horses; they shifted and stamped, ears and tails twitching in agitation. The clouds by now had shredded and flown on the nightwind, leaving only scattered trails across the face of a brilliant half moon. In spite of the brightness, I could see nothing on the road ahead, or in the menacing grove.

It seemed a late hour and an unprofitable road for highwaymen, scarce as these were anywhere in the Highlands; there were too few travelers to make an ambush worthwhile.

The grove was dark, but not still. The pines roared softly to themselves, millions of needles scouring in the wind. Very ancient trees, pines, and eerie in the gloom. Gymnosperms, cone-bearers, winged-seed scatterers, older and sterner by far than the soft-leaved, frail-limbed oaks and aspens. A suitable home for Rupert's ghosts and evil spirits.

Only you, I thought crossly to myself, could work yourself up into being afraid of a lot of trees. Where was Jamie, though?

The hand gripping my thigh made me squeak like a startled bat; a natural consequence of trying to scream with your heart in your mouth. With the unreasonable fury of the irrationally afraid, I struck out at him, kicking him in the chest.

"Don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Hush," he said, "come with me." Tugging me unceremoniously from the saddle, he swung me down and hastily tethered the horses, who whickered uneasily after us as he led me into the tall grass.

"What is it?" I hissed, stumbling blindly over roots and rocks.

“Quiet. Don’t speak. Look down and watch my feet. Step where I step, and stop when I touch you.”

Slowly and more or less silently, we made our way into the edges of the pine grove. It was dark under the trees, with only crumbs of light falling through to the needle litter underfoot. Even Jamie couldn’t walk silently on that, but the rustle of dry needles was lost in that of the green ones overhead.

There was a rift in the litter, a mass of granite rising from the forest floor. Here Jamie put me in front of him, guiding my hands and feet to climb the sloping crumble of the mound. At the top, there was enough room to lie belly-flat, side by side. Jamie put his mouth next to my ear, barely breathing. “Thirty feet ahead, to the right. In the clearing. See them?”

Once I saw them, I could hear as well. Wolves, a small pack, eight or ten animals, perhaps. No howling, not these. The kill lay in the shadow, a blob of dark with an upthrust leg, stick-thin and vibrating under the impact of teeth yanking at the carcass. There was only the occasional soft growl and yip as a cub was batted away from an adult’s morsel, and the contented sounds of feeding, crunching, and the crack of a bone.

As my eyes grew more accustomed to the moon-flecked scene, I could pick out several shaggy forms stretched under the trees, glutted and peaceful. Bits of grey fur shone here and there, as those still at the carcass pushed and rooted for tender bits overlooked by the earlier diners.

A broad, yellow-eyed head thrust suddenly up into a blotch of light, ears pricked. The wolf made a soft, urgent noise, something between a whine and a growl, and there was a sudden stillness under the trees below.

The saffron eyes seemed fixed on my own. There was no fear in the animal’s posture, nor curiosity, only a wary acknowledgment. Jamie’s hand on my back warned me not to move, though I felt no desire to run. I could have stayed locked in the wolf’s eyes for hours, I think, but she—I was sure it was a female, though I didn’t know how I knew—flicked her ears once, as though dismissing me, and bent once more to her meal.

We watched them for a few minutes, peaceful in the scattered light. At last, Jamie signaled that it was time to go, with a touch on my arm.

He kept the hand on my arm to support me as we made our way back through the trees to the road. It was the first time I had willingly allowed him to touch me since he had rescued me from Fort William. Still charmed by the sight of the wolves, we did not speak much, but began to feel comfortable with each other again.

As we walked, considering the stories he had told me, I couldn't help but admire the job he had done. Without one word of direct explanation or apology, he had given me the message he intended. I gave you justice, it said, as I was taught it. And I gave you mercy, too, so far as I could. While I could not spare you pain and humiliation, I make you a gift of my own pains and humiliations, that yours might be easier to bear.

"Did you mind a lot?" I said abruptly. "Being beaten, I mean. Did you get over it easily?"

He squeezed my hand lightly before letting it go.

"Mostly I forgot it as soon as it was over. Except for the last time; that took awhile."

"Why?"

"Ah, well. I was sixteen, for one thing, and a man grown … I thought. For another, it hurt like hell."

"You don't have to tell me about it if you don't want to," I said, sensing his hesitation. "Is it a painful story?"

"Not nearly as painful as the beating," he said, laughing. "No, I don't mind tellin' ye. It's a long story, is all."

"It's a long way to Bargrennan yet."

"So it is. Well, then. You recall I told ye I spent a year at Castle Leoch when I was sixteen? It was an agreement between Colum and my father—so I'd be familiar wi' my mother's clan. I fostered wi' Dougal for two years, and then went to the Castle for a year, to learn manners, and Latin and such."

"Oh. I wondered how you'd come to be there."

"Aye, that was the way of it. I was big for my age, or tall at least; a good swordsman even then, and a better horseman than most."

“Modest, too,” I said.

“Not very. Cocky as hell, and even faster with my tongue than I am now.”

“The mind boggles,” I said, amused.

“Well it might, Sassenach. I found I could make people laugh wi’ my remarks, and I made them more frequent, without carin’ much what I said, or to whom. I was cruel sometimes, to the other lads, not meanin’ it, just not able to resist if I thought of something clever to say.”

He looked up at the sky, to gauge the time. Blacker still, now that the moon had gone down. I recognized Orion floating near the horizon, and was strangely comforted by the familiar sight.

“So, one day I went too far. I was with a couple of the other lads, going down a corridor when I saw Mistress FitzGibbons at the other end. She was carryin’ a big basket, near as big as she was, and bumping to and fro as she walked. You know what she looks like now; she wasna much smaller then.” He rubbed his nose, embarrassed.

“Well, I made a number of ungallant remarks concerning her appearance. Funny, but most ungallant. They amused my companions considerably. I didna realize she could hear me as well.”

I recalled the massive dame of Castle Leoch. While I had never seen her other than good-humored, she did not appear to be the sort of person to be insulted with impunity.

“What did she do?”

“Nothing—then. I didna know she’d heard, until she got up at the Hall gathering next day and told Colum all about it.”

“Oh, dear.” I knew how highly Colum regarded Mrs. Fitz, and didn’t think he would take any irreverence directed at her lightly. “What happened?”

“The same thing that happened to Laoghaire—or almost.” He chuckled.

“I got verra bold though, and I stood up and said I chose to take my beating wi’ fists. I was tryin’ to be verra calm and grown-up about it all, though my heart was going like a blacksmith’s hammer, and I felt a bit sick when I looked at Angus's hands; they looked like stones, and big ones at that. There were a few laughs from the folk gathered in the Hall; I wasna so tall then as I am now, and I weighed less than half as much. Wee Angus could ha' torn my head off with one blow.

"Anyway, Colum and Dougal both frowned at me, though I thought they were really a bit pleased I'd had the nerve to ask it. Then Colum said no, if I was goin' to behave like a child, I'd to be punished like one. He gave a nod, and before I could move, Angus bent me across his knee, turned up the edge of my kilt and blistered me with his strap, in front of the entire Hall."

"Oh, Jamie!"

"Mmmphm. You'll have noticed Angus is verra professional about his work? He gave me fifteen strokes, and to this day I could tell ye exactly where each one landed." He shuddered reminiscently. "I had the marks for a week."

He reached out and broke a clump of pine needles from the nearest tree, spreading them like a fan between thumb and fingers. The scent of turpentine was suddenly sharper.

"Well, I wasna allowed just to go quietly away and tend to my wounds, either. When Angus finished wi' me, Dougal took me by the scruff of the neck and marched me to the far end of the Hall. Then I was made to come all the way back on my knees, across the stones. I had to kneel before Colum's seat and beg Mrs. Fitz's pardon, then Colum's, then apologize to everyone in the Hall for my rudeness, and finally, I'd to thank Angus for the strapping. I nearly choked over that, but he was verra gracious about it; he reached down and gave me a hand to get up. Then I was plunked down on a stool next to Colum, and bid to sit there 'til Hall was ended."

He hunched his shoulders protectively. "That was the worst hour I ever had. My face was on fire, and so was my arse, my knees were skinned and I couldna look anywhere but at my feet, but the worst of it was that I had to piss something awful. I almost died; I'd ha' burst before I wet myself in front of everyone on top of it all, but it was a near thing. I sweated right through my shirt."

I suppressed my urge to laugh. “Couldn’t you have told Colum what was the matter?” I asked.

“He knew perfectly well what was the matter; so did everyone else in the Hall, the way I was squirming on that stool. People were making wagers as to whether I’d last or not.” He shrugged.

“Colum would, have let me go, if I’d asked. But—well, I got stubborn about it.” He grinned a bit sheepishly, teeth white in a dark face. “Thought I’d rather die than ask, and nearly did. When at last Colum said I could go, I made it out of the Hall, but only as far as the nearest door. Threw myself behind the wall and spurted streams; I thought I’d never stop.

“So,” he spread his hands deprecatingly, dropping the clump of pine needles, now you know the worst thing that ever happened to me.”

I couldn’t help it; I laughed until I had to sit down at the side of the road. Jamie waited patiently for a minute, then sank down on his knees.

“What are you laughing for?” he demanded. “It wasna funny at all.” But he was smiling himself.

I shook my head, still laughing. “No, it isn’t. It’s an awful story. It’s just … I can see you sitting there, being stubborn about it, with your jaw clenched and steam coming out of your ears.”

Jamie snorted, but laughed a little too. “Aye. It’s no verra easy to be sixteen, is it?”

“So you did help that girl Laoghaire because you felt sorry for her,” I said, when I had recovered my composure. “You knew what it was like.”

He was surprised. “Aye, I said so. It’s a lot easier to get punched in the face at three-and-twenty than to have your bum strapped in public at sixteen. Bruised pride hurts worse than anything, and it bruises easy then.”

“I wondered. I’d never seen anyone grin in anticipation of being punched in the mouth.”

“Couldna very well do it afterward.”

“Mmh.” I nodded agreement. “I thought—” I said, then stopped in embarrassment.

“Ye thought what? Oh, about me and Laoghaire, ye mean,” he said, divining my thought. “You and Alec and everyone else, including Laoghaire. I’d have done the same if she’d been plain.” He nudged me in the ribs. “Though I dinna expect you’ll believe that.”

“Well, I did see you together that day in the alcove,” I defended myself, “and *somebody* certainly taught you how to kiss.”

Jamie shuffled his feet in the dust, embarrassed. He ducked his head shyly. “Well now, Sassenach, I’m no better than most men. Sometimes I try, but I dinna always manage. Ye know that bit in St. Paul, where he says ’tis better to marry than burn? Well, I was burnin’ quite badly there.”

I laughed again, feeling light-hearted as a sixteen-year-old myself. “So you married me,” I teased, “to avoid the occasion of sin?”

“Aye. That’s what marriage is good for; it makes a sacrament out of things ye’d otherwise have to confess.”

I collapsed again.

“Oh, Jamie, I do love you!”

This time it was his turn to laugh. He doubled over, then sat down at the roadside, fizzing with mirth. He slowly fell over backward and lay in the long grass, wheezing and choking.

“What on earth is the matter with you?” I demanded, staring at him. At long last, he sat up, wiping his streaming eyes. He shook his head, gasping.

“Murtagh was right about women. Sassenach, I risked my life for ye, committing theft, arson, assault, and murder into the bargain. In return for which ye call me names, insult my manhood, kick me in the ballocks and claw my face. Then I beat you half to death and tell ye all the most humiliating things have ever happened to me, and you say ye love me.” He laid his head on his knees and laughed some more. Finally he rose and held out a hand to me, wiping his eyes with the other.

“You’re no verra sensible, Sassenach, but I like ye fine. Let’s go.”

* * *

It was getting late—or early, depending on your viewpoint, and it was necessary to ride, if we were to make Bargrennan by dawn. I was enough recovered by this time to bear sitting, though the effects were still noticeable.

We rode in a companionable silence for some way. Left to my own thoughts, I considered for the first time at leisure what would happen if and when I ever managed to find my way back to the circle of standing stones. Married to him by coercion and dependent on him from necessity, I had undeniably grown very fond of Jamie.

More to the point, perhaps, were his feelings about me. Linked at first by circumstance, then by friendship, and finally by a startlingly deep bodily passion, still he had never made even a casual statement to me about his feelings. And yet.

He had risked his life for me. That much he might do for the sake of his marriage vow; he would, he said, protect me to the last drop of his blood, and I believed he meant it.

I was more touched by the events of the last twenty-four hours, when he had suddenly admitted me to his emotions and his personal life, warts and all. If he felt as much for me as I thought perhaps he did, what would he feel if I suddenly disappeared? The remnants of physical discomfort receded as I grappled with these uncomfortable thoughts.

We were within three miles of Bargrennan when Jamie suddenly broke the silence.

"I havena told you how my father died," he said abruptly.

"Dougal said he had a stroke—an apoplexy, I mean," I said, startled. I supposed that Jamie, alone with his thoughts as well, had found them dwelling on his father as a result of our earlier conversation, but I could not imagine what led him to this particular subject.

"That's right. But it … he …" He paused, considering his words, then shrugged, abandoning carefulness. He drew a deep breath and let it out. "You should know about it. It's to do with … things." The road here was wide enough to ride easily abreast, provided only that we kept a sharp eye out for protruding rocks; my excuse to Dougal about my horse had not been chosen at random.

"It was at the Fort," Jamie said, picking his way around a bad patch, "where we were yesterday. Where Randall and his men took me from Lallybroch. Where they flogged me. Two days after the first time, Randall summoned me to his office—two soldiers came for me, and took me from the cells up to his room—the same where I found you; it's how I knew where to go."

"Just outside, we met my father in the courtyard. He'd found out where they'd taken me, and come to see if he could get me out some way—or at least to see for himself that I was all right."

Jamie kicked a heel gently into his horse's ribs, urging it on with a soft click of his tongue. There was no trace of daylight yet, but the look of the night had changed. Dawn could be no more than an hour away.

"I hadna realized until I saw him just how alone I'd felt there—or how scairt. The soldiers would not give us any time alone together, but at least they let me greet him." He swallowed and went on.

"I told him I was sorry—about Jenny, I meant, and the whole sorry mess. He told me to hush, though, and hugged me tight to him. He asked me was I hurt badly—he knew about the flogging—and I said I'd be all right. The soldiers said I must go then, so he squeezed my arms tight, and told me to remember to pray. He said he would stand by me, no matter what happened, and I must just keep my head up and try not to worrit myself. He kissed my cheek and the soldiers took me away. That was the last time I ever saw him."

His voice was steady, but a little thick. My own throat felt tight, and I would have touched him if I could, but the road narrowed through a small glen and I was forced to fall back behind him for a moment. By the time I came alongside again he had composed himself.

"So," he said, taking a deep breath, "I went in to see Captain Randall. He sent the soldiers out, so we were alone, and offered me a stool. He said my father had offered security for my bond, to have me released, but that my charge was a serious one, and I could not be bonded without a written clearance signed by the Duke of Argyll, whose boundaries we were under. I reckoned that was where my father was headed, then, to see Argyll.

“In the meantime, Randall went on, there was the matter of this second flogging I was sentenced to.” He stopped a minute, as though uncertain how to go on.

“He … was strange in his manner, I thought. Verra cordial, but with something under it I didna understand. He kept watching me, as though he expected me to do something, though I was just sitting still.

“He half-apologized to me, saying he was sorry that our relations had been so difficult to the present, and that he wished the circumstances had been different, and so on.” Jamie shook his head. “I couldna imagine what he was talking about; two days earlier, he’d been trying his best to beat me to death. When he finally got down to it, though, he was blunt enough.”

“What did he want, then?” I asked. Jamie glanced at me, then away. The dark hid his features, but I thought he seemed embarrassed.

“Me,” he said baldly.

I started so violently that the horse tossed its head and whickered reproachfully. Jamie shrugged again.

“He was quite plain about it. If I would … ah, make him free of my body, he’d cancel the second flogging. If I would not—then I’d wish I’d never been born, he said.”

I felt quite sick.

“I was already wishing something of the sort,” he said, with a glint of humor. “My belly felt as though I’d swallowed broken glass, and if I hadna been sitting, my knees would have knocked together.”

“But what …” My voice was hoarse, and I cleared my throat and started over. “But what did you do?”

He sighed. “Well, I’ll no lie to ye, Sassenach. I considered it. The first stripes were still so raw on my back I could scarce bear a shirt, and I felt giddy whenever I stood up. The thought of going through that again—being bound and helpless, waiting for the next lash …” He shuddered involuntarily.

“I’d no real idea,” he said wryly, “but I rather thought being buggered would be at least a bit less painful. Men have died under the lash sometimes, Sassenach, and from the look on his face, I thought he meant me to be one of them, were that my choice.” He sighed again.

“But … well, I could still feel my father’s kiss on my cheek, and thought of what he’d say, and … well, I couldna do it, that’s all. I did not stop to think what my death might mean to my father.” He snorted, as though finding something faintly amusing. “Then, too, I thought, the man’s already raped my sister—damned if he’ll have me too.”

I didn’t find this amusing. I was seeing Jack Randall again, in a new and revolting light. Jamie rubbed the back of his neck, then dropped his hand to the pommel.

“So, I took what little courage I had left by then, and said no. I said it loud, too, and added whatever filthy names I could think of to call him, all at the top of my lungs.”

He grimaced. “I was afraid I’d change my mind if I thought about it; I wanted to make sure there was no chance of going back. Though I dinna suppose,” he added thoughtfully, “that there’s any really tactful way to refuse an offer like that.”

“No,” I agreed dryly. “I don’t suppose he’d have been pleased, no matter what you said.”

“He wasn’t. He backhanded me across the mouth, to shut me up. I fell down—I was still a bit weak—and he stood over me, just staring down at me. I’d better sense than to try and get up, so I just lay there until he called the soldiers to take me back to my cell.” He shook his head. “He didna change expression at all; just said as I left, ‘I’ll see you on Friday,’ as though we had an appointment to discuss business or somesuch.”

The soldiers had not returned Jamie to the cell he had shared with three other prisoners. Instead, he was put into a small room by himself, to await Friday’s reckoning with no distractions save the daily visit of the garrison’s physician, who came to dress his back.

“He wasna much of a doctor,” Jamie said, “but he was kindly enough. The second day he came, along wi’ the goose grease and charcoal, he brought me a small Bible that belonged to a prisoner who’d died. Said he understood I was a Papist, and whether I found the word of God any comfort or not, at least I could compare my troubles with Job's." He laughed.

"Oddly enough, it *was* some comfort. Our Lord had to put up wi' being scourged too; and I could reflect that at least I wasna going to be hauled out and crucified afterward. On the other hand," he said judiciously, "Our Lord wasna forced to listen to indecent proposals from Pontius Pilate, either."

Jamie had kept the small Bible. He rummaged in his saddlebag, and handed it across now for me to look at. It was a worn, leather-covered volume, about five inches long, printed on paper so flimsy the print showed through from one side of each page to the other. On the flyleaf was written ALEXANDER WILLIAM RODERICK MACGREGOR, 1733. The ink was faded and blurred, and the covers warped as though the book had gotten wet on more than one occasion.

I turned the little book over curiously. Small as it was, it must have cost something in effort to keep it by him, through the travels and adventures of the last four years.

"I've never seen you read it," I handed it back.

"No, that's not why I keep it," he said. He tucked it away, stroking the edge of the worn cover with a thumb as he did so. He patted the saddlebag absently.

"There's a debt owing to Alex MacGregor; I mean to collect it sometime.

"Anyway," he continued, returning to his story, "Friday came at last, and I don't know whether I was glad or sorry to see it. The waiting and the fear were almost worse than I thought the pain would be. When it came, though …" He made that odd half-shrugging gesture of his, easing the shirt across his back. "Well, you've seen the marks. You know what it was like."

"Only because Dougal told me. He said he was there."

Jamie nodded. "Aye, he was there. And my father as well, though I didna know it at the time. I'd no mind for anything much beyond my own problems, then."

"Oh," I said slowly, "and your father—"

"Mmm. That's when it happened. Some of the men there told me after that they thought I was dead, halfway through, and I reckon my father thought so too." He hesitated, and his voice was thick when he resumed. "When I fell, Dougal told me, my father made a small sound and put his hand to his head. Then he dropped like a rock. And did not get up again."

The birds were moving in the heather, trilling and calling from the still-dark leaves of the trees. Jamie's head was bowed, face still invisible.

"I did not know he was dead," he said softly. "They didna tell me until a month later—when they thought I was strong enough to bear it. So I did not bury him, as his son should have done. And I have never seen his grave—because I am afraid to go home."

"Jamie," I said. "Oh, Jamie, dear."

After what seemed a long silence, I said, "But you don't—you *can't*—feel responsible. Jamie, there was nothing you could have done; or done differently."

"No?" he said. "No, maybe not; though I wonder would it still have happened, had I chosen the other way. But to know that does not much help the way I feel—and I feel as though I had done him to death with my own hands."

"Jamie—" I said again, and stopped, helpless. He rode silently for a bit, then straightened up and squared his shoulders once more.

"I've not told anyone about it," he said abruptly. "But I thought that now ye should know—about Randall, I mean. You've a right to know what it is that lies between him and me."

What it is that lies between him and me. The life of a good man, the honor of a girl, and an indecent lust that found its vent in blood and fear. And, I supposed, with a lurch of the stomach, that there was now one more item weighting the scales. Me. For the first time, I began to realize what Jamie had felt, crouching in the window of Randall's room, with an empty gun in his hand. And I began to forgive him for what he had done to me.

As though reading my mind, he said, not looking at me, "Do you know … I mean, can ye understand, maybe, why I thought it needful to beat you?"

I waited a moment before answering. I understood, all right, but that was not quite all there was to it.

"I understand," I said. "And so far as that goes, I forgive you. What I can't forgive," I said, my voice rising slightly in spite of myself, "is that you enjoyed it!"

He bent forward in the saddle, clasping the pommel, and laughed for a long time. He reveled in the release of tension before finally tossing his head back and turning to me. The sky was noticeably lighter now, and I could see his face, lined with exhaustion, strain, and mirth. The scratches down his cheek were black in the dim light.

"Enjoyed it! Sassenach," he said, gasping, "you don't know just how much I enjoyed it. You were so … God, you looked lovely. I was so angry, and you fought me so fierce. I hated to hurt you, but I wanted to do it at the same time … Jesus," he said, breaking off and wiping his nose, "yes. Yes, I did enjoy it.

"Though come to that," he said, "you might give me some credit for exercising restraint."

I was getting rather angry again. I could feel my cheeks flushing hotly against the cool dawn air.

"Restraint, was it? I was under the impression that what you were exercising was your good left arm. You almost crippled me, you arrogant Scottish bastard!"

"Did I want to cripple ye, Sassenach, you'd know it," he answered dryly. "I meant afterward. I slept on the floor, if ye recall."

I eyed him narrowly, breathing through my nose. "Oh, so that was restraint, was it?"

"Well, I didna think it right to roger you in that state, however fierce I wanted to. And I did want to," he added, laughing again. "Terrible strain on my natural instincts."

"Roger me?" I said, diverted by the expression.

"I would hardly call it 'love-making' under the circumstances, would you?"

"Whatever you might call it," I said evenly, "it's a good thing you didn't try it, or you'd now be missing a few valued bits of your anatomy."

"That thought occurred to me."

"And if you think you deserve applause for nobly refraining from committing rape on top of assault—" I choked on my choler.

We rode a half-mile or so in silence. Then he heaved a sigh. "I can see I should not have started this conversation. What I was tryin' to do was to work up to asking ye would you allow me to share your bed again, once we get to Bargrennan." He paused shyly. "It's a bit cold on the floor."

I rode for a good five minutes before answering. When I had decided what to say, I reined in, turning across the road, so as to force Jamie to stop as well. Bargrennan was in sight, rooftops just visible in the dawning light.

I urged my horse parallel with the other, so that I was no more than a foot away from Jamie. I looked him in the eye for a minute before speaking.

"Will you do me the honor of sharing my bed, O lord and master?" I asked politely.

Obviously suspecting something, he considered a moment, then nodded, just as formally. "I will. Thank you." He was raising the reins to go when I stopped him.

"There's just one more thing, master," I said, still polite.

"Aye?"

I whipped my hand from the concealed pocket in my skirt, and the dawn light struck sparks from the blade of the dagger pressed against his chest.

"If," I said through my teeth, "you ever raise a hand to me again, James Fraser, I'll cut out your heart and fry it for breakfast!"

There was a long silence, broken only by the shiftings and creakings of horses and harness. Then he held out his hand, palm up.

"Give it to me." When I hesitated, he said impatiently, "I'm no going to use it on ye. Give it to me!"

He held the dirk by the blade, upright so that the rising sun caught the moonstone in the hilt and made it glow. Holding the dagger like a crucifix, he recited something in Gaelic. I recognized it from the oath-taking ceremony in Colum's hall, but he followed it with the English translation for my benefit:

"I swear on the cross of my Lord Jesus, and by the holy iron which I hold, that I give ye my fealty and pledge ye my loyalty. If ever my hand is raised against you in rebellion or in anger, then I ask that this holy iron may pierce my heart." He kissed the dirk at the juncture of haft and tang, and handed it back to me.

"I don't make idle threats, Sassenach," he said, raising one brow, "and I don't take frivolous vows. Now, can we go to bed?"

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RETURN TO LEOCH

Dougal was waiting for us at the sign of the Red Boar, impatiently pacing to and fro outside.

"Made it, did ye?" he asked, watching with approval as I dismounted without assistance, staggering only slightly. "Gallant lass—ten miles without a whimper. Get up to your bed then; ye've earned it. Jamie and I will stable the horses." He patted me, very gently, on the rump in dismissal. I was only too glad to follow his suggestion, and was asleep almost before my head touched the pillow.

I didn't stir when Jamie crawled in beside me, but woke suddenly in the late afternoon, convinced that there was something important I had forgotten.

"Horrocks!" I exclaimed suddenly, sitting bolt upright in bed.

"Hah?" Jamie, startled out of a sound sleep, shot sideways out of bed, ending on the floor in a crouch, hand on the dirk he had left on top of his piled clothes. "What?" he demanded, staring wildly around the room. "What is it?"

I stifled a giggle at the sight of him, crouched naked on the floor, red hair standing on end like quills.

"You look like a fretful porpentine," I said.

He gave me a dirty look and rose to his feet, replacing the dirk on the stool that held his clothes.

"You couldna wait 'til I woke to tell me that?" he inquired. "You thought it would make more impression if ye woke me out of a sound sleep by shouting 'Hedgehog!' in my ear?"

"Not 'hedgehog,' " I explained. "Horrocks. I remembered all at once that I'd forgotten to ask you about him. Did you find him?"

He sat down on the bed and sank his head in his hands. He rubbed his face vigorously, as though to restore circulation.

"Oh, aye," he said through the muffling fingers. "Aye, I found him."

I could tell from the tone of voice that the deserter's information had not been good.

"Would he not tell you anything after all?" I asked sympathetically. That had always been a possibility, though Jamie had gone prepared to part with not only his own money, and some provided by Dougal and Colum, but even his father's ring if necessary.

Jamie lay back on the bed beside me, staring up at the ceiling.

"No," he said. "No, he told me all right. And at a reasonable price."

I rolled up onto an elbow in order to look down at his face.

"Well, then?" I demanded. "Who *did* shoot the sergeant-major?"

He looked up at me and smiled, a trifle grimly.

"Randall," he said, and shut his eyes.

"Randall?" I said blankly. "But why?"

"I don't know," he said, eyes still shut. "I could guess, perhaps, but it doesna much matter. Damn-all chance of proving it."

I had to agree that this was true. I sank back on the bed beside him and stared up at the black oak beams of the low ceiling.

"What can you do then?" I asked. "Go to France? Or perhaps"—a bright thought occurred to me—"perhaps to America? You could likely do well in the New World."

"Across the ocean?" A brief shudder ran through him. "No. No, I couldna do that."

"Well, what then?" I demanded, turning my head to look at him. He opened one eye enough to give me a jaundiced look.

"I'd thought for a start that I might get another hour's sleep," he said, "but apparently not." Resigned, he pulled himself up in bed, leaning against the wall. I had been too tired to pull the bedclothes off before retiring, and there was a suspicious black spot on the quilt near his knee. I kept a wary eye on it as he talked.

"You're right," he agreed, "we could go to France." I started, having momentarily forgotten that whatever he decided to do, I was now included in the decision.

"But there isna that much for me there," he said, idly scratching his thigh. "Only soldiering, and that's no life for you. Or to Rome, to join King James's court. That might be managed; I've some Fraser uncles and cousins with a foot in that camp, who would help me. I've no great taste for politics, and less for princes, but aye, it's a possibility. I'd rather try first to clear myself in Scotland, though. If I did, at the worst I might end up as a small crofter in the Fraser lands; at best, I might be able to go back to Lallybroch." His face clouded, and I knew he was thinking of his sister. "For myself," he said softly, "I wouldna go, but it isn't only me anymore."

He looked down at me and smiled, his hand gently smoothing my hair. "I forget sometimes, that there's you now, Sassenach," he said.

I felt extraordinarily uncomfortable. I felt like a traitor, in fact. Here he was, making plans that would affect his entire life, taking my comfort and safety into account, when I had been doing my best to abandon him completely, dragging him into substantial danger in the process. I had meant none of it, but the fact remained. Even now, I was thinking that I should try to talk him out of going to France, as that would carry me farther away from my own goal: the stone circle.

"Is there any way to stay in Scotland, though?" I asked, looking away from him. I thought the black spot on the quilt had moved, but I wasn't sure. I fixed my eyes on it, staring hard.

Jamie's hand traveled under my hair and began idly to fondle my neck.

"Aye," he said thoughtfully. "There may be. That's why Dougal waited up for me; he's had some news."

"Really? What sort?" I turned my head to look up at him again; the movement brought my ear within reach of his fingers, and he began to stroke lightly around it, making me want to arch my neck and purr like a cat. I repressed the impulse, though, in favor of finding out what he meant to do.

“A messenger from Colum,” he said. “He didna think to find us here, but he passed Dougal on the road by accident. Dougal’s to return at once to Leoch, and leave Ned Gowan to manage the rest of the rents. Dougal’s suggested we should go with him.”

“Back to Leoch?” It wasn’t France, but it wasn’t a lot better. “Why?”

“There’s a visitor expected shortly, an English noble that’s had dealings wi’ Colum before. He’s a powerful man, and it might be he could be persuaded to do something for me. I’ve not been tried or condemned on the charge of murder. He might be able to have it dismissed, or arrange to have me pardoned.” He grinned wryly. “It goes a bit against the grain to be pardoned for something I’ve not done, but it’s better than being hanged.”

“Yes, that’s true.” The spot *was* moving. I squinted, trying to focus on it. “Which English noble is it?”

“The Duke of Sandringham.”

I jerked upright with an exclamation.

“What is it, Sassenach?” Jamie asked, alarmed.

I pointed a trembling finger at the black spot, which was now proceeding up his leg at a slow but determined pace.

“What’s that?!” I said.

He glanced at it, and casually flicked it off with a fingernail.

“Oh, that? It’s only a bedbug, Sassenach. Nothing to—”

He was interrupted by my abrupt exit. At the word “bedbug,” I had shot out from under the covers, and stood pressed against the wall, as far away as possible from the teeming nest of vermin I now envisioned as our bed.

Jamie eyed me appreciatively.

“Fretful porpentine, was it?” he asked. He tilted his head, examining me inquisitively. “Mmm,” he said, running a hand over his head to smooth down his own hair. “Fretful, at least. You’re a fuzzy wee thing when ye wake, to be sure.” He rolled over toward me, reaching out a hand.

"Come here, my wee milkweed. We'll not leave before sunset. If we're not going to sleep …"

In the end, we did sleep a bit more, peacefully entangled on the floor, atop a hard but bugless bed composed of my cloak and Jamie's kilt.

* * *

It was a good thing that we had slept while we had the chance. Anxious to reach Castle Leoch before the Duke of Sandringham, Dougal kept to a fast pace and a grueling schedule. Traveling without the wagons, we made much better time, despite bad roads. Dougal pushed us, though, stopping only for the briefest of rests.

By the time we rode once more through the gates of Leoch, we were nearly as bedraggled as the first time we had arrived there, and certainly as tired.

I slid off my horse in the courtyard, then had to catch the stirrup to keep from falling. Jamie caught my elbow, then realizing that I couldn't stand, swung me up into his arms. He carried me through the archway, leaving the horses to the grooms and stableboys.

"Are ye hungry, Sassenach?" he asked, pausing in the corridor. The kitchens lay in one direction, the stairs to the bedchambers in the other. I groaned, struggling to keep my eyes open. I *was* hungry, but knew I would end up facedown in the soup if I tried to eat before sleeping.

There was a stir to one side and I groggily opened my eyes to see the massive form of Mrs. FitzGibbons, looming disbelievingly alongside.

"Why, what's the matter wi' the poor child?" she demanded of Jamie. "Has she had an accident o' some sort?"

"No, it's only she's married me," he said, "though if ye care to call it an accident, ye may." He moved to one side, to push through what proved to be an increasing throng of kitchen-maids, grooms, cooks, gardeners, men-at-arms, and assorted castle inhabitants, all inquisitively drawn to the scene by Mrs. Fitz's loud questions.

Making up his mind, Jamie pressed to the right, toward the stairs, making disjointed explanations to the hail of questions from every side. Blinking owlishly against his chest, I could do no more than nod to the surrounding welcomers, though most of the faces seemed friendly as well as curious.

As we came around a corner of the hallway, I saw one face that seemed a good deal friendlier than the rest. It was the girl Laoghaire, face shining and radiant as she heard Jamie's voice. Her eyes grew wide and the rosebud mouth dropped unbecomingly open, though, as she saw what he carried.

There was no time for her to ask questions, though, before the stir and bustle around us halted abruptly. Jamie stopped too. Raising my head, I saw Colum, whose startled face was now on a level with mine.

"What—" he began.

"They're married," said Mrs. Fitz, beaming. "How sweet! You can give them your blessing, sir, while I get a room ready." She turned and made off for the stairs, leaving a substantial gap in the crowd, through which I could see the now pasty-white face of the girl Laoghaire.

Colum and Jamie were both talking together, questions and explanations colliding in midair. I was beginning to wake up, though it would have been overstating matters to say I was entirely myself.

"Well," Colum was saying, not altogether approvingly, "if you're married, you're married. I'll have to talk to Dougal and Ned Gowan—there'll be legal matters to attend to. There are a few things you're entitled to when ye wed, by the terms of your mother's dower contract."

I felt Jamie straighten slightly.

"Since ye mention it," he said casually, "I believe that's true. And one of the things I'm entitled to is a share of the quarterly rents from the MacKenzie lands. Dougal's brought back what he'd collected so far; perhaps you'll tell him to leave aside my share when he does the reckoning? Now, if ye'll excuse me, Uncle, my wife is tired." And hoisting me into a more solid position, he turned to the stairs.

I staggered across the room, still wobbly-legged, and collapsed gratefully on the huge tester bed our newly married status apparently entitled us to. It was soft, inviting, and—thanks to the ever-vigilant Mrs. Fitz—clean. I wondered whether it was worth the effort to get up and wash my face before succumbing to the urge to sleep.

I had just about decided that I might get up for Gabriel's Trump, but not much else, when I saw that Jamie, who had not only washed face and hands but combed his hair to boot, was headed toward the door.

"Aren't you going to sleep?" I called. I thought he must be at least as tired as I, if less saddle sore.

"In a bit, Sassenach. I've a small errand to do, first." He went out, leaving me staring at the oaken door with a very unpleasant sensation in the pit of my stomach. I was remembering the look of gay anticipation on Laoghaire's face as she came around the corner, hearing Jamie's voice, and the look of angry shock that replaced it when she saw me cradled in his arms. I remembered the momentary tightening of his joints as he saw her, and wished most fervently that I had been able to see his face at that moment. I thought it likely he had gone now, unrested but washed and combed, to find the girl and break the news of his marriage. Had I seen his face, I would at least have some idea what he meant to say to her.

Absorbed in the events of the last month, I had forgotten the girl entirely—and what she might mean to Jamie, or he to her. Granted, I had thought of her when the question of our abrupt marriage first occurred, and Jamie then had given no sign that she constituted an impediment so far as he was concerned.

But, of course, if her father would not allow her to marry an outlaw—and if Jamie needed a wife, in order to collect his share of the MacKenzie rents … well, one wife would do as well as another, in that case, and doubtless he would take what he could get. I thought I knew Jamie well enough now to see that practicality with him went deep—as it must, with a man who had spent the last few years of his life on the run. He would not, I thought, be swayed in his decisions by sentiment or the attraction of rose-leaf cheeks and hair like liquid gold. But that didn't mean that neither sentiment nor attraction existed.

There was, after all, the little scene I had witnessed in the alcove, Jamie holding the girl on his knee and kissing her ardently (*I've held women in my arms before,* his voice came back to me, *and they've made my heart pound and my breath come short*…). I found that my hands were clenched, making bunched ridges in the green and yellow quilt. I released it and wiped my hands over my skirt, realizing in the process just how filthy they were, grimed with the dirt of two days of holding reins, with no respite in between for washing.

I rose and went to the basin, forgetting my tiredness. I found, a bit to my surprise, that I strongly disliked the memory of Jamie kissing Laoghaire. I remembered what he had said about that, too—'*Tis better to marry than burn, and I was burning badly then.* I burned a bit myself, flushing strongly as I remembered the effect of Jamie's kisses on my own lips. Burning, indeed.

I splashed water on my face, spluttering, trying to dissipate the feeling. I had no claim on Jamie's affections, I reminded myself firmly. I had married him from necessity. And he had married me for his own reasons, one of them being the frankly stated desire to alter his virginal state.

Another reason apparently being that he needed a wife in order to collect his income, and could not induce a girl of his own kind to marry him. A reason much less flattering than the first, if no more lofty.

Quite awake by now, I slowly changed from my stained traveling garments into a fresh shift, provided, as was the basin and ewer, by Mrs. Fitz's minions. How she had managed to make accommodation for two newlyweds in the time between Jamie's abrupt announcement to Colum and the time we had mounted the stairs was one of the mysteries of the ages. Mrs. Fitz, I reflected, would have done quite well in charge of the Waldorf-Astoria or the London Ritz.

Such reflections made me suddenly more lonely for my own world than I had been in many days. *What am I doing here?* I asked myself for the thousandth time. Here, in this strange place, unreachable distances from everything familiar, from home and husband and friends, adrift and alone among what amounted to savages? I had begun to feel safe and even intermittently happy during the last weeks with Jamie. But now I realized that the happiness was likely an illusion, even if the safety was not.

I had no doubt that he would abide by what he conceived to be his responsibilities, and continue to protect me from any harm that threatened. But here, returned from the dreamlike isolation of our days among the wild hills and dusty roads, the filthy inns and fragrant haystacks, he must surely feel the pull of his old associations, as I felt mine. We had grown very close in the month of our marriage, but I had felt that closeness crack under the strains of the last few days, and thought it might now shatter completely, back among the practical realities of life at Castle Leoch.

I leaned my head against the stone of the window casement, looking out across the courtyard. Alec McMahon and two of his stable lads were visible at the far side, rubbing down the horses we had ridden in. The beasts, fed and watered adequately for the first time in two days, exuded contentment as willing hands curried the glossy sides and cleansed the dirt from hock and fetlock with twists of straw. A stableboy led away my fat little Thistle, who followed him happily toward the well-earned rest of her stable.

And with her, I thought, went my hopes of any imminent escape and return to my own place. Oh, Frank. I closed my eyes, letting a tear slide down the side of my nose. I opened my eyes wide on the courtyard then, blinked and shut them tight, trying frantically to recall Frank's features. Just for a moment, when I closed my eyes, I had seen not my beloved husband, but his ancestor, Jack Randall, full lips curved in a mocking smile. And shying mentally from that image, my mind had summoned at once a picture of Jamie, face set in fear and anger, as I had seen him in the window of Randall's private office. Try as I might, I could not bring back Frank's remembered image with any certainty.

I felt suddenly quite cold with panic, and clasped my hands about my elbows. And what if I had succeeded in escaping and finding my way back to the circle of stone? I thought. What then? Jamie would, I hoped, soon find solace—with Laoghaire, perhaps. I had worried before about his reaction to finding me gone. But aside from that hasty moment of regret on the edge of the burn, it had not before occurred to me to wonder how I would feel to part with him.

I fiddled idly with the ribbon drawstring that gathered the neck of my shift, tying and untying it. If I meant to leave, as I did, I was doing neither of us a favor by allowing the bond between us to strengthen any further. I should not allow him to fall in love with me.

If he meant to do any such thing, I thought, remembering once more Laoghaire and the conversation with Colum. If he had married me so coldbloodedly as it seemed, perhaps his emotions were safer than mine.

Between fatigue, hunger, disappointment, and uncertainty, I had by this time succeeded in reducing myself to such a state of confused misery that I could neither sleep or sit still. Instead, I roamed unhappily about the room, picking up objects and putting them down at random.

The draft from the opening door upset the delicate equilibrium of the comb I had been balancing on its end, heralding Jamie's return. He looked faintly flushed and oddly excited.

"Oh, you're awake," he said, obviously surprised and disconcerted to find me so.

"Yes," I said unkindly, "were you hoping I'd be asleep so you could go back to her?"

His brows drew together for a moment, then raised in inquiry. "Her? To Laoghaire, ye mean?"

Hearing her name spoken in that casual Highland lilt—"L'heer"—suddenly made me irrationally angry.

"Oh, so you *have* been with her!" I snapped.

Jamie looked puzzled and wary, and slightly annoyed. "Aye," he said. "I met her by the stair as I went out. Are ye well, Sassenach? Ye look a bit fashed, all in all." He eyed me appraisingly. I picked up the looking glass, and found that my hair was standing out in a bushy mane round my head and there were dark circles under my eyes. I put it down again with a thump.

“No, I’m perfectly all right,” I said, with an effort at controlling myself. “And how is Laoghaire?” I asked, assuming casualness.

“Oh, quite bonny,” he said. He leaned back against the door, arms crossed, watching me speculatively. “A bit surprised to hear we were married, I reckon.”

“Bonny,” I said, and took a deep breath. I looked up to find him grinning at me.

“You’d not worrit yourself over the lassie, would ye now, Sassenach?” he asked shrewdly. “She’s naught to you—or me,” he added.

“Oh, no? She wouldn’t—or couldn’t—marry you. You had to have someone, so you took me when the chance offered. I don’t blame you for that”—not much I didn’t—“but I—”

He crossed the room in two steps and took me by the hands, interrupting me. He put a finger under my chin and forced my gaze up.

“Claire,” he said evenly, “I shall tell ye in my own time why I’ve wed ye—or I won’t. I asked honesty of you, and I’ve given ye the same. And I give it to you now. The girl has no claim on me beyond that of courtesy.” He squeezed my chin lightly. “But that claim she has, and I’ll honor it.” He released my chin and chucked me softly under it. “D’ye hear me, Sassenach?”

“Oh, I hear!” I jerked free, rubbing my chin resentfully. “And I’m sure you’ll be very courteous to her. But next time draw the drapes of the alcove—I don’t want to see it.”

The coppery brows shot up, and his face reddened slightly.

“Are ye suggesting I’ve played ye false?” he said, unbelievingly. “We’ve been back to the Castle less than an hour, I’m covered wi’ the sweat and dust of two days in the saddle, and so tired my knees wabble, and yet ye think I’ve gone straight out to seduce a maid of sixteen?” He shook his head, looking stunned. “I canna tell whether ye mean to compliment my virility, Sassenach, or insult my morals, but I dinna care much for either suggestion. Murtagh told me women were unreasonable, but Jesus God!” He ran a large hand through his hair, making the short ends stick up wildly.

“Of course I don’t mean I think you’ve been seducing her,” I said, struggling to inject an air of calmness into my tone. “All I mean …” It occurred to me that Frank had handled this kind of thing much more gracefully than I was managing to do, and yet I had been angry then too. Likely there was no good way to suggest such a possibility to one’s mate.

“I simply mean that … that I realize that you married me for your own reasons—and those reasons are your own business,” I added hastily, “and that I have no claim at all on you. You’re at perfect liberty to behave as you wish. If you … if there’s an attraction elsewhere … I mean … I won’t stand in your way,” I finished lamely. The blood was hot in my cheeks and I could feel my ears burning.

Looking up, I found that Jamie’s ears were burning as well, visibly, and so was the rest of him from the neck up. Even his eyes, bloodshot from lack of sleep, seemed to be flaming slightly.

“No claim on me!” he exclaimed. “And what d’ye think a wedding vow is, lassie? Just words in a church?” He brought one big fist down on the chest with a crash that shook the porcelain ewer. “No claim,” he muttered, as though to himself. “At liberty to behave as I wish. And you’ll not stand in my way?!”

He bent to pull off his boots, then picked them up and threw them, one after the other, as hard as he could at the wall. I winced as each one thudded off the stones and bounced to the floor. He yanked off his plaid and tossed it heedlessly behind him. Then he started toward me, glaring.

“So you’ve no claim on me, Sassenach? You’ll free me to take my pleasure where I like, is that it? Well, is it?” he demanded.

“Er, well, yes,” I said, taking a step backward despite myself. “That’s what I meant.” He grabbed my arms, and I found the combustion had spread to his hands as well. His callused palms were so hot on my skin that I jerked involuntarily.

“Well, if you’ve no claim on me, Sassenach,” he said, “I’ve one on you! Come here.” He took my face in his hands and set his mouth on mine. There was nothing either gentle or undemanding about that kiss, and I fought against it, trying to pull back from him.

He bent and scooped me up with an arm under my knees, ignoring my attempts to get down. I hadn't realized just how bloody strong he really was.

"Let go of me!" I said. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Well, I should ha' thought that was reasonably clear, Sassenach," he said through his teeth. He lowered his head, the clear gaze piercing me like a hot iron. "Though if ye want telling," he said, "I mean to take ye to bed. Now. And keep ye there until you've learned just what claim I have on you." And he kissed me again, deliberately hard, cutting off my protest.

"I don't want to sleep with you!" I said, when at last he freed my mouth.

"I dinna intend to sleep, Sassenach," he replied evenly. "Not just yet." He reached the bed and set me carefully on the rose-patterned quilt.

"You know bloody well what I mean!" I rolled, meaning to escape from the other side, but was stopped by a solid grip on my shoulder that flipped me back to face him. "I don't want to make love with you, either!"

Blue eyes blazed down at me from close range, and my breath came thick in my throat.

"I didna ask your preferences in the matter, Sassenach," he answered, voice dangerously low. "You are my wife, as I've told ye often enough. If ye didna wish to wed me, still ye chose to. And if ye didna happen to notice at the time, your part of the proceedings included the word 'obey.' You're my wife, and if I want ye, woman, then I'll have you, and be damned to ye!" His voice rose throughout, until he was near shouting.

I rose to my knees, fists balled at my sides, and shouted back at him. The contained misery of the last hour had reached explosion point and I let him have it, point-blank.

"I *will* be damned if I'll have *you,* you bullying swine! You think you can order me to your bed? Use me like a whore when you feel like it? Well, you can't you fucking bastard! Do that, and you're no better than your precious Captain Randall!"

He glared at me for a moment, then stood abruptly aside. "Leave, then," he said, jerking his head toward the door. "If that's what ye think of me, go! I'll not hinder ye."

I hesitated for a moment, watching him. His jaw was clenched with anger and he was looming over me like the Colossus of Rhodes. His temper this time was under tight rein, though he was as angry now as he had been by the roadside near Doonesbury. But he meant it. If I chose to leave, he wouldn't stop me.

I lifted my chin, my own jaw clenched as tightly as his. "No," I said. "No. I don't run away from things. And I'm not afraid of you."

His gaze fastened on my throat, where my pulse was going at a frantic rate.

"Aye, I see," he said. He stared down at me, and his face gradually relaxed into a look of grudging acquiescence. He sat down gingerly on the bed, keeping a good distance between us, and I sat back warily. He breathed deeply several times before speaking, his face fading a bit toward its natural ruddy bronze.

"I don't run either, Sassenach," he said gruffly. "Now, then. What does 'fucking' mean?"

My surprise must have shown plainly, for he said irritably, "If ye must call me names, that's one thing. But I dinna care to be called things I can't answer. I know it's a damn filthy word, from the way ye said it, but what does it mean?"

Taken off guard, I laughed, a little shakily. "It … it means … what you were about to do to me."

One brow lifted, and he looked sourly amused. "Oh, swiving? Then I was right; it is a damn filthy word. And what's a sadist? Ye called me that the other day."

I suppressed the urge to laugh. "It's, er, it's a person who … who, er, gets sexual pleasure from hurting someone." My face was crimsoning, but I couldn't stop the corners of my mouth from turning up slightly.

Jamie snorted briefly. "Well, ye dinna flatter me overmuch," he said, "but I canna fault your observations." He took a deep breath and leaned back, unclenching his hands. He stretched his fingers deliberately, then laid his hands flat on his knees and looked directly at me.

"What is it, then? Why are ye doing this? The girl? I've told ye the plain truth there. But it's not a matter for proof. It's a question of whether ye believe me or no. Do ye believe me?"

"Yes, I believe you," I admitted grudgingly. "But that's not it. Or not all of it," I added, in an attempt at honesty. "It's … I think it's finding that you married me for the money you'd get." I looked down, tracing the pattern of the quilt with my finger. "I know I've no right to complain—I married you for selfish reasons, too, but"—I bit my lip and swallowed to steady my voice—"but I have a small bit of pride, too, you know."

I stole a glance at him, and found him staring at me with an expression of complete dumbfoundedness.

"Money?" he said blankly.

"Yes, money!" I blazed, angered at his pretense of ignorance. "When we came back, you couldn't wait to tell Colum you were married and collect your share of the MacKenzie rents!"

He stared at me for a moment longer, mouth opening gradually as though to say something. Instead, he began to shake his head slowly back and forth, and then began to laugh. He threw his head back and roared, in fact, then sank his head between his hands, still laughing hysterically. I flung myself back on the pillows in indignation. Funny, was it?

Still shaking his head and wheezing intermittently, he stood up and set hands to the buckle of his belt. I flinched involuntarily as he did so, and he saw it.

Face still flushed with a mixture of anger and laughter, he looked down at me in total exasperation. "No," he said dryly, "I dinna mean to beat you. I gave ye my word I'd not do so again—though I didna think I'd regret it quite so soon." He laid the belt aside, groping in the sporran attached to it.

"My share of the MacKenzie rents comes to about twenty pounds a quarter, Sassenach," he said, digging through the oddments inside the badgerskin. “And that’s Scots, not sterling. About the price of half a cow.”

“That’s … that’s all?” I said stupidly. “But—”

“That’s all,” he confirmed. “And all I ever will have from the MacKenzies. Ye’ll have noticed Dougal’s a thrifty man, and Colum’s twice as tight-fisted wi’ his coin. But even the princely sum of twenty pound a quarter is hardly worth marrying to get, I should think,” he added sarcastically, eyeing me.

“I wouldna have asked for it straight away, at that,” he added, bringing out a small paper-wrapped parcel, “but there was something I wanted to buy with it. That’s where my errand took me; meeting Laoghaire was an accident.”

“And what did you want to buy so much?” I asked suspiciously.

He sighed and hesitated for a moment, then tossed the small package lightly into my lap.

“A wedding ring, Sassenach,” he said. “I got it from Ewen the armorer; he makes such things in his own time.”

“Oh,” I said in a small voice.

“Go ahead,” he said, a moment later. “Open it. It’s yours.”

The outlines of the little package blurred under my fingers. I blinked and sniffed, but made no move to open it. “I’m sorry,” I said.

“Well, so ye should be, Sassenach,” he said, but his voice was no longer angry. Reaching, he took the package from my lap and tore away the wrapping, revealing a wide silver band, decorated in the Highland interlace style, a small and delicate Jacobean thistle bloom carved in the center of each link.

So much I saw, and then my eyes blurred again.

I found a handkerchief thrust into my hand, and did my best to stanch the flow with it. “It’s … beautiful,” I said, clearing my throat and dabbling at my eyes.

“Will ye wear it, Claire?” His voice was gentle now, and his use of my name, mostly reserved for occasions of formality or tenderness, nearly made me break down again.

“You needna do so,” he said, looking at me seriously over his cupped palm. “The marriage contract between us is satisfied—it’s legal. You're protected, safe from anything much save a warrant, and even from that, so long as you're at Leoch. If ye wish, we may live apart—if that's what ye were trying to say wi' all yon rubbish about Laoghaire. You need have little more to do wi' me, if that's your honest choice." He sat motionless, waiting, holding the tiny circlet near his heart.

So he was giving me the choice I had started out to give him. Forced on me by circumstance, he would force himself on me no longer, if I chose to reject him. And there was the alternative, of course: to accept the ring, and all that went with it.

The sun was setting. The last rays of light shone through a blue glass flagon that stood on the table, streaking the wall with a shaft of brilliant lapis. I felt as fragile and as brilliant as the glass, as though I would shatter with a touch, and fall in glittering fragments to the floor. If I had meant to spare either Jamie's emotions or my own, it seemed I was very much too late.

I couldn't speak, but held out my right hand to him, fingers trembling. The ring slipped cool and bright over my knuckle and rested snug at the base of my finger—a good fit. Jamie held my hand a moment, looking at it, then suddenly pressed my knuckles hard against his mouth. He raised his head, and I saw his face for an instant, fierce and urgent, before he pulled me roughly onto his lap.

He held me hard against him then, without speaking, and I could feel the pulsebeat in his throat, hammering like my own. His hands went to my bare shoulders, and he held me slightly away, so that I was looking upward into his face. His hands were large and very warm, and I felt slightly dizzy.

"I want ye, Claire," he said, sounding choked. He paused a moment, as though unsure what to say next. "I want ye so much—I can scarcely breathe. Will—" He swallowed, then cleared his throat. "Will ye have me?"

By now I had found my voice. It squeaked and wobbled, but it worked.

"Yes," I said. "Yes, I'll have you."

"I think …" he began, then stopped. He fumbled loose the buckle of his kilt, but then looked up at me, bunching his hands at his sides. He spoke with difficulty, controlling something so powerful that his hands shook with the effort. “I’ll not … I can’t … Claire, I canna be gentle about it.”

I had time only to nod once, in acknowledgment or permission, before he bore me back before him, his weight pinning me to the bed.

He did not pause to undress further. I could smell the road dust in his shirt, and taste the sun and sweat of travel on his skin. He held me, arms outstretched, wrists pinioned. One hand brushed the wall, and I felt the tiny scrape of one wedding ring chiming against the stone. One ring for each hand, one silver, one gold. And the thin metal suddenly heavy as the bonds of matrimony, as though the rings were tiny shackles, fastening me spread-eagled to the bed, stretched forever between two poles, held in bondage like Prometheus on his lonely rock, divided love the vulture that tore at my heart.

He spread my thighs with his knee and sheathed himself to the root in a single thrust that made me gasp. He made a sound that was almost a groan, and gripped me tighter.

“You’re mine, *mo duinne,*” he said softly, pressing himself into my depths. “Mine alone, now and forever. Mine, whether ye will it or no.” I pulled against his grip, and sucked in my breath with a faint “ah” as he pressed even deeper.

“Aye, I mean to use ye hard, my Sassenach,” he whispered. “I want to own you, to possess you, body and soul.” I struggled slightly and he pressed me down, hammering me, a solid, inexorable pounding that reached my womb with each stroke. “I mean to make ye call me ‘Master,’ Sassenach.” His soft voice was a threat of revenge for the agonies of the last minutes. “I mean to make you mine.”

I quivered and moaned then, my flesh clutching in spasms at the invading, battering presence. The movement went on, disregarding, on and on for minutes, striking me over and over with an impact on the edge between pleasure and pain. I felt dissolved, as though I existed only at the point of the assault, being forced to the edge of some total surrender.

“No!” I gasped. “Stop, please, you’re hurting me!” Beads of sweat ran down his face and dropped on the pillow and on my breasts. Our flesh met now with the smack of a blow that was fast crossing the edge into pain. My thighs were bruising with the repeated impact, and my wrists felt as though they would break, but his grip was inexorable.

“Aye, beg me for mercy, Sassenach. Ye shallna have it, though; not yet.” His breath came hot and fast, but he showed no signs of tiring. My entire body convulsed, legs rising to wrap around him, seeking to contain the sensation.

I could feel the jolt of each stroke deep in my belly, and cringed from it, even as my hips rose traitorously to welcome it. He felt my response, and redoubled his assault, pressing now on my shoulders to keep me pinned under him.

There was no beginning and no end to my response, only a continuous shudder that rose to a peak with each thrust. The hammering was a question, repeated over and over in my flesh, demanding my answer. He pushed my legs flat again, and bore me down past pain and into pure sensation, over the edge of surrender.

“Yes!” I cried. “Oh God, Jamie, yes!” He gripped my hair and forced my head back to meet his eyes, glowing with furious triumph.

“Aye, Sassenach,” he muttered, answering my movements rather than my words. “Ride ye I will!” His hands dropped to my breasts, squeezing and stroking, then slid down my sides. His whole weight rested on me now as he cupped and raised me for still greater penetration. I screamed then and he stopped my mouth with his, not a kiss, but another attack, forcing my mouth open, bruising my lips and rasping my face with bearded stubble. He thrust harder and faster, as though he would force my soul as he forced my body. In body or soul, somewhere he struck a spark, and an answering fury of passion and need sprang from the ashes of surrender. I arched upward to meet him, blow for blow. I bit his lip and tasted blood.

I felt his teeth then on my neck and dug my nails into his back. I raked him from nape to buttocks, spurring him to rear and scream in his turn. We savaged each other in desperate need, biting and clawing, trying to draw blood, trying each to pull the other into ourselves, tearing each other's flesh in the consuming desire to be one. My cry mingled with his, and we lost ourselves finally in each other in that last moment of dissolution and completion.

I returned only slowly to myself, lying half on Jamie's breast, sweated bodies still glued together, thigh to thigh. He breathed heavily, eyes closed. I could hear his heart under my ear, beating with the preternaturally slow and powerful rhythm that follows climax.

He felt me wake, and drew me close, as though to preserve a moment longer the union we had reached in those last seconds of our perilous joining. I curled beside him, putting my arms around him.

He opened his eyes then and sighed, the long mouth curling in a faint smile as his glance met mine. I raised my brows in silent question.

"Oh, aye, Sassenach," he answered a bit ruefully. "I am your master … and you're mine. Seems I canna possess your soul without losing my own." He turned me on my side and curled his body around me. The room was cooling in the evening breeze from the window, and he reached to draw a quilt over us. You're too quick by half, lad, I thought drowsily to myself. Frank never did find that out. I fell asleep with his arms locked hard around me and his breathing warm in my ear.

I was lame and sore in every muscle when I woke next morning. I shuffled to the privy closet, then to the wash basin. My innards felt like churned butter. It felt as though I had been beaten with a blunt object, I reflected, then thought that that was very near the truth. The blunt object in question was visible as I came back to bed, looking now relatively harmless. Its possessor woke as I sat down next to him, and examined me with something that looked very much like male smugness.

"Looks as though it was a hard ride, Sassenach," he said, lightly touching a blue bruise on my inner thigh. "A bit saddle-sore, are ye?"

I narrowed my eyes and traced a deep bite-mark on his shoulder with my finger.

"You look a bit ragged around the edges yourself, my lad."

"Ah, weel," he said in broad Scots, "if ye bed wi' a vixen, ye must expect to get bit." He reached up and grasped me behind the neck, pulling me down to him. "Come here to me, vixen. Bite me some more."

"Oh, no, you don't," I said, pulling back. "I can't possibly; I'm too sore."

James Fraser was not a man to take no for an answer.

"I'll be verra gentle," he wheedled, dragging me inexorably under the quilt. And he was gentle, as only big men can be, cradling me like a quail's egg, paying me court with a humble patience that I recognized as reparation—and a gentle insistence that I knew was a continuation of the lesson so brutally begun the night before. Gentle he would be, denied he would not.

He shook in my arms at his own finish, shuddering with the effort not to move, not to hurt me by thrusting, letting the moment shatter him as it would.

Afterward, still joined, he traced the fading bruises his fingers had left on my shoulders by the roadside two days before.

"I'm sorry for those, *mo duinne,*" he said, gently kissing each one. "I was in a rare temper when I did it, but it's no excuse. It's shameful to hurt a woman, in a rage or no. I'll not do it again."

I laughed a bit ironically. "You're apologizing for *those*? What about the rest? I'm a mass of bruises, from head to toe!"

"Och?" He drew back to look me over judiciously. "Well now, these I've apologized for," touching my shoulder, *"those,"* slapping my rear lightly, "ye deserved, and I'll not say I'm sorry for it, because I'm not."

"As for these," he said, stroking my thigh, "I'll not apologize for that, either. Ye paid me full measure already." He rubbed his shoulder, grimacing. "Ye drew blood in at least two places, Sassenach, and my back stings like holy hell."

“Well, bed with a vixen …” I said, grinning. “You won’t get an apology for that.” He laughed in response and pulled me on top of him.

“I didna say I wanted an apology, did I? If I recall aright, what I said was ‘Bite me again.’ ”

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PART FOUR

A Whiff of Brimstone

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24

BY THE PRICKING OF MY THUMBS

The hubbub occasioned by our sudden arrival and the announcement of our marriage was overshadowed almost at once by an event of greater importance.

We were sitting at supper in the great Hall the next day, accepting the toasts and good wishes being offered in our honor.

“Buidheachas, mo caraid.” Jamie bowed gracefully to the latest toaster, and sat down amid the increasingly sporadic applause. The wooden bench shook under his weight, and he closed his eyes briefly.

“Getting a bit much for you?” I whispered. He had borne the brunt of the toasting, matching each cup drained on our behalf, while I had so far escaped with no more than token sips, accompanied by bright smiles at the incomprehensible Gaelic toasts.

He opened his eyes and looked down at me, smiling himself.

“Am I drunk, do ye mean? Nay, I could drink this stuff all night.”

“You practically have,” I said, peering at the array of empty wine bottles and stone ale-jars lined up on the board in front of us. “It’s getting rather late.” The candles on Colum’s table burned low in their holders, and the guttered wax glowed gold, the light marking the MacKenzie brothers with odd patches of shadow and glinting flesh as they leaned together, talking in low voices. They could have joined the company of carved gnomic heads that edged the huge fireplace, and I wondered how many of those caricatured figures had in fact been drawn from the patronizing features of earlier

MacKenzie lairds—perhaps by a carver with a sense of humor … or a strong family connection.

Jamie stretched slightly in his seat, grimacing in mild discomfort.

"On the other hand," he said, "my bladder's going to burst in another moment or two. I'll be back shortly." He put his hands on the bench and hopped nimbly up and over it, disappearing through the lower archway.

I turned my attention to my other side, where Geillis Duncan sat, demurely sipping at a silver cup of ale. Her husband, Arthur, sat at the next table with Colum, as befitted the procurator fiscal of the district, but Geilie had insisted on sitting next to me, saying that she had no wish to be wearied by hearing man-talk all through supper.

Arthur's deepset eyes were half-closed, blue-pouched and sunk with wine and fatigue. He leaned heavily on his forearms, face slack, ignoring the conversation of the MacKenzies next to him. While the light threw the sharp-cut features of the laird and his brother into a high relief, it merely made Arthur Duncan look fat and ill.

"Your husband isn't looking very well," I observed. "Has his stomach trouble got worse?" The symptoms were rather puzzling; not like ulcer, I thought, nor cancer—not with that much flesh still on his bones—perhaps just chronic gastritis, as Geilie insisted.

She cast the briefest of glances at her spouse before turning back to me with a shrug.

"Oh, he's well enough," she said. "No worse, at any rate. But what about *your* husband?"

"Er, what about him?" I replied cautiously.

She dug me familiarly in the ribs with a rather sharp elbow, and I realized that there were a fair number of bottles at her end of the table as well.

"Well, what d'ye think? Does he look as nice out of his sark as he does in it?"

"Um …" I groped for an answer, as she craned her neck toward the entryway.

"And you claiming you didna care a bit for him! Cleverboots. Half the girls in the castle would like to tear your hair out by the roots—

I'd be careful what I ate, if I were you."

"What I eat?" I looked down in bafflement at the wooden platter before me, empty but for a smear of grease and a forlorn boiled onion.

"Poison," she hissed dramatically in my ear, along with a considerable wafting of brandy fumes.

"Nonsense," I said, rather coldly, drawing away from her. "No one would want to poison me simply because I … well, because …" I was floundering a bit, and it occurred to me that I might have had a few sips more than I had realized.

"Now, really, Geilie. This marriage … I didn't plan it, you know. I didn't *want* it!" No lie there. "It was merely a … sort of … necessary business arrangement," I said, hoping the candlelight hid my blushes.

"Ha," she said cynically. "I ken the look of a lass that's been well bedded." She glanced toward the archway where Jamie had disappeared. "And damned if I think those are midge bites on the laddie's neck, either." She raised one silver brow at me. "If it was a business arrangement, I'd say ye got your money's worth."

She leaned close again.

"Is it true?" she whispered. "About the thumbs?"

"Thumbs? Geilie, what in God's name are you babbling about?"

She looked down her small, straight nose at me, frowning in concentration. The beautiful grey eyes were slightly unfocused, and I hoped she wouldn't fall over.

"Surely ye know that? Everyone knows! A man's thumbs tell ye the size of his cock. Great toes, too, of course," she added judiciously, "but those are harder to judge, usually, what wi' the shoon and all. Yon wee fox-cub," she nodded toward the archway, where Jamie had just reappeared, "he could cup a good-sized marrow in those hands of his. Or a good-sized arse, hm?" she added, nudging me once more.

"Geillis Duncan, will … you … shut … up!" I hissed, face flaming. "Someone will hear you!"

"Oh, no one who—" she began, but stopped, staring. Jamie had passed right by our table, as though he didn't see us. His face was pale, and his lips set firmly, as though bent on some unpleasant duty.

"Whatever ails him?" Geilie asked. "He looks like Arthur after he's eaten raw turnips."

"I don't know." I pushed back the bench, hesitating. He was heading for Colum's table. Should I follow him? Plainly something had happened.

Geilie, peering back down the room, suddenly tugged at my sleeve, pointing in the direction from which Jamie had appeared.

A man stood just within the archway, hesitating even as I was. His clothes were stained with mud and dust; a traveler of some sort. A messenger. And whatever the message, he had passed it on to Jamie, who was even now bending to whisper it in Colum's ear.

No, not Colum. Dougal. The red head bent low between the two dark ones, the broad handsome features of the three faces taking on an unearthly similarity in the light of the dying candles. And as I watched, I realized that the similarity was due not so much to the inheritance of bone and sinew that they shared, but to the expression of shocked grief that they now held in common.

Geilie's hand was digging into the flesh of my forearm.

"Bad news," she said, unnecessarily.

* * *

"Twenty-four years," I said softly. "It seems a long time to be married."

"Aye, it does," Jamie agreed. A warm wind stirred the branches of the tree above us, lifting the hair from my shoulders to tickle my face. "Longer than I've been alive."

I glanced at him leaning on the paddock fence, all lanky grace and strong bones. I tended to forget how young he really was; he seemed so self-assured and capable.

"Still," he said, flicking a straw into the churned mud of the paddock, "I doubt Dougal spent more than three years of that with her. He was generally here, ye ken, at the Castle—or here and there about the lands, doing Colum's business for him."

Dougal's wife, Maura, had died at their estate of Beannachd. A sudden fever. Dougal himself had left at dawn, in company with

Ned Gowan and the messenger who had brought the news the night before, to arrange the funeral and dispose of his wife's property.

"Not a close marriage, then?" I asked curiously.

Jamie shrugged.

"As close as most, I should reckon. She had the children and the running of the house to keep her busy; I doubt she missed him greatly, though she seemed glad enough to see him when he came home."

"That's right, you lived with them for a time, didn't you?" I was quiet, thinking. I wondered whether this was Jamie's idea of marriage; separate lives, joining only infrequently for the breeding of children. Yet, from the little he had said, his own parents' marriage had been a close and loving one.

With that uncanny trick of reading my thoughts, he said, "It was different wi' my own folk, ye ken. Dougal's was an arranged marriage, like Colum's and a matter more of lands and business than the wanting of each other. But my parents—well, they wed for love, against the wishes of both families, and so we were … not cut off, exactly; but more by ourselves at Lallybroch. My parents didna go often to visit relatives or do business outside, and so I think they turned more to each other than husband and wife usually do."

He laid a hand low on my back and urged me closer to him. He bent his head and brushed his lips across the top of my ear.

"It was an arrangement between us," he said softly. "Still, I would hope … perhaps one day—" He broke off awkwardly, with a crooked smile and a gesture of dismissal.

Not wanting to encourage him in that direction, I smiled back as neutrally as I could, and turned toward the paddock. I could feel him there beside me, not quite touching, big hands gripping the top rail of the fence. I gripped the rail myself, to keep from taking his hand. I wanted more than anything to turn to him, offer him comfort, assure him with body and words that what lay between us *was* more than a business arrangement. It was the truth of it that stopped me.

What it is between us, he had said. *When I lie with you, when you touch me*. No, it wasn't usual at all. It wasn't a simple infatuation, either, as I had first thought. Nothing could be less simple.

The fact remained that I was bound, by vows and loyalty and law, to another man. And by love as well.

I could not, could *not* tell Jamie what I felt for him. To do that and then to leave, as I must, would be the height of cruelty. Neither could I lie to him.

"Claire." He had turned to me, was looking down at me; I could feel it. I didn't speak, but raised my face to him as he bent to kiss me. I couldn't lie to him that way either, and didn't. After all, I thought dimly, I had promised him honesty.

We were interrupted by a loud "Ahem!" from behind the paddock fence. Jamie, startled, whirled toward the sound, instinctively thrusting me behind him. Then he stopped and grinned, seeing Old Alec MacMahon standing there in his filthy trews, viewing us sardonically with his one bright blue eye.

The old man held a wicked-looking pair of gelding shears, which he raised in ironic salute.

"I was goin' to use these on Mahomet," he remarked. "Perhaps they could be put to better use here, eh?" He snicked the thick blades invitingly. "It'd keep your mind on your work, and off your cock, laddie."

"Don't even jest about it, man," said Jamie, grinning. "Wanting me, were ye?"

Alec waggled an eyebrow like a woolly caterpillar.

"No, what gives ye to think that? I thought I'd like to try gelding a blooded two-year-old all by mysel', for the joy of it." He wheezed briefly at his own wit, then waved the shears toward the Castle.

"Off wi' ye, lassie. Ye can have him back at supper—for what good he'll be to ye by then."

Apparently not trusting the nature of this last remark, Jamie reached out a long arm and neatly snagged the shears.

"I'll feel safer if *I've* got these," he said, cocking an eyebrow at Old Alec. "Go along, Sassenach. When I've finished doing all of Alec's work for him, I'll come and find ye."

He leaned down to kiss my cheek, and whispered in my ear, "The stables. When the sun's mid-sky."

The stables of Castle Leoch were better built than many of the cottages I had seen on our journey with Dougal. Stone floored and stone walled, the only openings were the narrow windows at one end, the door at the other, and the narrow slits under the thick thatched roof, intended for the convenience of the owls who kept down the mice in the hay. They let in plenty of air, though, and enough light that the stables were pleasantly dim rather than gloomy.

Up in the hayloft, just under the roof, the light was even better, striping the piled hay with yellow bars and lighting the drifting dust motes like showers of gold dust. The air came in through the chinks in warm drafts, scented with stock and sweet william and garlic from the gardens outside, and the pleasant animal smell of the horses wafted up from below.

Jamie stirred under my hand and sat up, the movement bringing his head from the shadow into a blaze of sunlight like the lighting of a candle.

“What is it?” I asked sleepily, turning my head in the direction he was looking.

“Wee Hamish,” he said softly, peering over the edge of the loft into the stable below. “Wants his pony, I expect.”

I rolled awkwardly onto my stomach beside him, dragging the folds of my shift over me for modesty’s sake; a silly thought, as no one below could see more than the top of my head.

Colum’s son Hamish was walking slowly down the aisle of the stable between the stalls. He seemed to hesitate near some stalls, though he ignored the curious heads of chestnut and sorrel poking out to inspect him. Clearly he was looking for something, and it wasn’t his fat brown pony, placidly munching straw in its stall near the stable door.

“Holy God, he’s going for Donas!” Jamie seized his kilt and wrapped it hurriedly about himself before swinging down from the edge of the loft. Not bothering with the ladder, he hung by his hands and then dropped to the floor. He landed lightly on the straw-scattered stones, but with enough of a thud to make Hamish whirl around with a startled gasp.

The small freckled face relaxed somewhat as he realized who it was, but the blue eyes stayed wary.

"Needing a bit of help, coz?" Jamie inquired pleasantly. He moved toward the stalls and leaned against one of the uprights, managing to insert himself between Hamish and the stall the boy had been heading for.

Hamish hesitated, but then drew himself up, small chin thrust out.

"I'm going to ride Donas," he said, in a tone that tried for determination, but fell somewhat short.

Donas—his name meant "demon," and was in no way meant as flattery—was in a horse-box to himself at the far end of the stable, safely separated by an empty stall from the nearest neighboring horses. A huge, evil-tempered sorrel stallion, he was ridable by no one, and only Old Alec and Jamie dared go near him. There was an irritable squeal from the shadows of his stall, and an enormous copper head shot suddenly out, huge yellow teeth clacking together as the horse made a vain attempt to bite the bare shoulder so temptingly displayed.

Jamie stayed motionless, knowing that the stallion couldn't reach him. Hamish jumped back with a squeak, clearly scared speechless by the sudden appearance of that monstrous shimmering head, with its rolling, bloodshot eyes and flaring nostrils.

"I dinna think so," observed Jamie mildly. He reached down and took his small cousin by the shoulder, steering him away from the horse, who kicked his stall in protest. Hamish shuddered in concert with the boards of the stall as the lethal hooves crashed against the wood.

Jamie turned the boy around to face him and stood looking down at him, hands on his kilted hips.

"Now then," he said firmly. "What's this all about? Why are ye wanting aught to do wi' Donas?"

Hamish's jaw was set stubbornly, but Jamie's face was both encouraging and adamant. He punched the boy gently on the shoulder, getting a tiny smile response.

“Come on, *duine,*” Jamie said, softly. “Ye know I wilna tell anyone. Have ye done something foolish?”

A faint flush came up on the boy’s fair skin.

“No. At least … no. Well, maybe a bit foolish.”

After a bit more encouragement, the story came out, reluctantly at first, then in a tumbling flood of confession.

He had been out on his pony, riding with some of the other boys the day before. Several of the older lads had started competing, to see who could jump his horse over a higher obstacle. Jealously admiring them, Hamish’s better judgment was finally overcome by bravado, and he had tried to force his fat little pony over a stone fence. Lacking both ability and interest, the pony had come to a dead stop at the fence, tossing young Hamish over his head, over the fence, and ignominiously into a nettle patch on the other side. Stung both by nettles and by the hoots of his comrades, Hamish was determined to come out today on “a proper horse,” as he put it.

“They wouldna laugh if I came out on Donas,” he said, envisioning the scene with grim relish.

“No, they wouldna laugh,” Jamie agreed. “They’d be too busy picking up the pieces.”

He eyed his cousin, shaking his head slowly. “I’ll tell ye, lad. It takes courage and sense to make a good rider. You’ve the courage, but the sense is a wee bit lacking, yet.” He put a consoling arm round Hamish’s shoulders, drawing him down toward the end of the stable.

“Come along, man. Help me fork the hay, and we’ll get ye acquainted wi’ Cobhar. You’re right; ye should have a better horse if you’re ready, but it isna necessary to kill yourself to prove it.”

Glancing up into the loft as he passed, he raised his eyebrows and shrugged helplessly. I smiled and waved down at him, telling him to go ahead, it was all right. I watched them as Jamie took an apple from the basket of windfalls kept near the door. Fetching a pitchfork from the corner, he led Hamish back to one of the center stalls.

“Here, coz,” he said, pausing. He whistled softly through his teeth and a wide-browed bay horse put its head out, blowing through its nostrils. The dark eyes were large and kind, and the ears had a slight forward cock that gave the horse an expression of friendly alertness.

"Now then, Cobhar, *ciamar a tha thu*?" Jamie patted the sleek neck firmly, and scratched the cocked ears.

"Come on up," he said, motioning to his small cousin. "That's it, next to me. Near enough he can smell ye. Horses like to smell ye."

"*I* know." Hamish's high voice was scornful. He barely reached the horse's nose, but reached up and patted. He stood his ground as the big head came down and sniffed interestedly around his ear, whuffling in his hair.

"Give me an apple," he said to Jamie, who obliged. The soft velvet lips plucked the fruit delicately out of Hamish's palm, and flicked it back between the huge molars, where it vanished with a juicy crunch. Jamie watched approvingly.

"Aye. You'll get on fine. Go on and make friends, then, while I finish feeding the others, then ye can take him out to ride."

"By myself?" Hamish asked eagerly. Cobhar, whose name meant "Foam," was good-tempered, but a sound, spirited 14-hand gelding, nonetheless, and a far cry from the brown pony.

"Twice round the paddock wi' me watchin' ye, and if ye dinna fall off or jerk his mouth, ye can take him by yourself. No jumping him 'til I say, though." The long back bent, gleaming in the warm dusk of the stable, as Jamie caught up a forkful of hay from the pile in one corner and carried it to one of the stalls.

He straightened and smiled at his cousin. "Gi' me one of those, will ye?" He leaned the fork against a stall and bit into the proffered fruit. The two stood companionably eating, leaning side by side against the stable wall. When he finished, Jamie handed the core to a nuzzling sorrel and fetched his fork again. Hamish followed him down the aisle, chewing slowly.

"I've heard my father was a good rider," Hamish offered tentatively, after a moment's silence. "Before—before he couldn't anymore."

Jamie shot a swift glance at his cousin, but finished pitching hay into the sorrel's stall before speaking. When he did, he answered the thought, rather than the words.

"I never saw him ride, but I'll tell ye, lad, I hope never to need as much courage as Colum has."

I saw Hamish's gaze rest curiously on Jamie's scarred back, but he said nothing. After a second apple, his thoughts appeared to have shifted to another topic.

"Rupert said ye had to get married," he remarked, through a mouthful of apple.

"I *wanted* to get married," Jamie said firmly, replacing the pitchfork against the wall.

"Oh. Well … good," Hamish said uncertainly, as though disconcerted by this novel idea. "I only wondered … do ye mind?"

"Mind what?" Seeing that this conversation might take a while, Jamie sat down on a bale of hay.

Hamish's feet did not quite reach the floor, or he might have shuffled them. Instead, he drummed his heels lightly against the firm-packed hay.

"Do ye mind being married," he said, staring at his cousin. "Getting into bed every night with a lady, I mean."

"No," said Jamie. "No, in fact, it's verra pleasant."

Hamish looked doubtful.

"I dinna think I should like it much. But then all the girls I know are skinny as sticks, and they smell o' barley water. The lady Claire —your lady, I mean," he added hastily, as though wishing to avoid confusion, "she's, er, she looks as though she'd be nicer to sleep with. Soft, I mean."

Jamie nodded. "Aye, that's true. Smells all right, too," he offered. Even in the dim light, I could see a small muscle twitching near the corner of his mouth, and knew he didn't dare look up in the direction of the loft.

There was a long pause.

"How d'ye know?" Hamish said.

"Know what?"

"Which is the right lady to get married to," the boy said impatiently.

"Oh." Jamie rocked back and settled himself against the stone wall, hands behind his head.

“I asked my own Da that, once,” he said. “He said ye just ken. And if ye dinna ken, then she’s no the right lassie.”

“Mmmphm.” This seemed a less than satisfactory explanation, to judge from the expression on the small freckle-spattered face. Hamish sat back, consciously aping Jamie’s posture. His stockinged feet stuck out over the edge of the hay bale. Small as he was, his sturdy frame gave promise of someday matching his cousin’s. The set of the square shoulders, and the tilt of the solid, graceful skull were nearly identical.

“Where’s your shoon, then?” Jamie asked accusingly. “You’ll no ha’ left them in the pasture again? Your mother will box your ears for ye if ye’ve lost them.”

Hamish shrugged this off as a threat of no consequence. Clearly there was something of more importance on his mind.

“John—” he started, wrinkling his sandy brows in thought, “John says—”

“John the stable-lad, John the cook-boy, or John Cameron?” Jamie asked.

“The stable-lad.” Hamish waved a hand, pushing away the distraction. “He said, er, about getting married …”

“Mmm?” Jamie made an encouraging noise, keeping his face tactfully turned away. Rolling his eyes upward, his glance met mine, as I peered over the edge. I grinned down at him, causing him to bite his lip to keep from grinning back.

Hamish drew a deep breath, and let it out in a rush, propelling his words like a burst of birdshot. “He-said-ye-must-serve-a-lass-like-a-stallion-does-a-mare-and-I-didna-believe-him-but-is-it-true?”

I bit my finger hard to keep from laughing out loud. Not so fortunately placed, Jamie dug his fingers into the fleshy part of his leg, turning as red in the face as Hamish. They looked like two tomatoes, set side by side on a hay bale for judging at a county vegetable show.

“Er, aye … weel, in a way …” he said, sounding strangled. Then he got a grip on himself.

“Yes,” he said firmly, “yes, ye do.”

Hamish cast a half-horrified glance into the nearby stall, where the bay gelding was relaxing, a foot or so of reproductive equipment protruding from its sheath. He glanced doubtfully down into his lap then, and I stuffed a handful of fabric into my mouth as far as it would go.

"There's some difference, ye ken," Jamie went on. The rich color was beginning to fade from his face, though there was still an ominous quiver around his mouth. "For one thing, it's … more gentle."

"Ye dinna bite them on the neck, then?" Hamish had the serious, intent expression of one taking careful notes. "To make them keep still?"

"Er … no. Not customarily, anyway." Exercising his not inconsiderable willpower, Jamie faced up manfully to the responsibilities of enlightenment.

"There's another difference, as well," he said, carefully not looking upward. "Ye may do it face to face, instead of from the back. As the lady prefers."

"The lady?" Hamish seemed dubious about this. "I think *I'd* rather do it from the back. I dinna think I'd like to have anyone lookin' at me while I did something like that. Is it hard," he inquired, "is it hard to keep from laughing?"

* * *

I was still thinking about Jamie and Hamish when I came to bed that night. I turned down the thick quilts, smiling to myself. There was a cool draft from the window, and I looked forward to crawling under the quilts and nestling against Jamie's warmth. Impervious to cold, he seemed to carry a small furnace within himself, and his skin was always warm; sometimes almost hot, as though he burned more fiercely in answer to my own cool touch.

I was still a stranger and an outlander, but no longer a guest at the Castle. While the married women seemed somewhat friendlier, now that I was one of them, the younger girls seemed strongly to resent the fact that I had removed an eligible young bachelor from circulation. In fact, noting the number of cold glances and behind-the-hand remarks, I rather wondered just how many of the Castle maidens had found their way into a secluded alcove with Jamie MacTavish during his short residency.

MacTavish no longer, of course. Most of the Castle inhabitants had always known who he was, and whether I was an English spy or not, I now knew of necessity as well. So he became Fraser publicly, and so did I. It was as Mistress Fraser that I was welcomed into the room above the kitchens where the married women did their sewing and rocked their babies, exchanging bits of mother-lore and eyeing my own waistline with frank appraisal.

Because of my earlier difficulties in conceiving, I had not considered the possibility of pregnancy when I agreed to marry Jamie, and I waited in some apprehension until my monthly occurred on time. My feelings this time were entirely of relief, with none of the sadness that usually accompanied it. My life was more than complicated enough at the moment, without introducing a baby into it. I thought that Jamie perhaps felt a small twinge of regret, though he also professed himself relieved. Fatherhood was a luxury that a man in his position could ill afford.

The door opened and he came in, still rubbing his head with a linen towel, water droplets from his wet hair darkening his shirt.

"Where have you been?" I asked in astonishment. Luxurious as Leoch might be in contrast to the residences of village and croft, it didn't boast any bathing facilities beyond a copper tub that Colum used to soak his aching legs, and a slightly larger one used by such ladies as thought the labor involved in filling it worth the privacy. All other washing was done either in bits, using basin and ewer, or outside, either in the loch or in a small, stone-floored chamber off the garden, where the young women were accustomed to stand naked and let their friends throw buckets of water over them.

"In the loch," he answered, hanging the damp towel neatly over the windowsill. *"Someone,"* he said grimly, "left the stall door ajar, and the stable door as well, and Cobhar had a wee swim in the twilight."

"Oh, so that's why you weren't at supper. But horses don't like to swim, do they?" I asked.

He shook his head, running his fingers through his hair to dry it.

"No, they don't. But they're just like folk, ye ken; all different. And Cobhar is fond of the young water plants. He was down nibbling by the water's edge when a pack of dogs from the village came along and chased him into the loch. I had to run them off and then go in after him. Wait 'til I get my hands on wee Hamish," he said, with grim intent. "I'll teach him to leave gates ajar."

"Are you going to tell Colum about it?" I asked, feeling a qualm of sympathy for the culprit.

Jamie shook his head, groping in his sporran. He drew out a roll and a chunk of cheese, apparently filched from the kitchens on his way up to the chamber.

"No," he said. "Colum's fair strict wi' the lad. If he heard he'd been so careless, he'd not let him ride for a month—not that he could, after the thrashing he'd get. Lord, I'm starving." He bit ferociously into the roll, scattering crumbs.

"Don't get into bed with that," I said, sliding under the quilts myself. "What are you planning to do to Hamish, then?"

He swallowed the remainder of the roll and smiled at me. "Dinna worry. I'm going to row him out on the loch just before supper tomorrow and toss him in. By the time he makes it to shore and dries off, supper will be over." He finished the cheese in three bites and unashamedly licked his fingers. "Let *him* go to bed wet and hungry and see how he likes it," he concluded darkly.

He peered hopefully in the drawer of the desk where I sometimes kept apples or other small bits of food. There was nothing there tonight, though, and he shut the drawer with a sigh.

"I suppose I'll live 'til breakfast," he said philosophically. He stripped rapidly and crawled in next to me, shivering. Though his extremities were chilled from his swim in the icy loch, his body was still blissfully warm.

"Mm, you're nice to croodle wi'," he murmured, doing what I assumed was croodling. "You smell different; been digging plants today?"

"No," I said, surprised. "I thought it was you—the smell, I mean." It was a tangy, herbal smell, not unpleasant, but unfamiliar.

"*I* smell like fish," he observed, sniffing the back of his hand. "And wet horse. No," he leaned closer, inhaling. "No, it isna you, either. But it's close by."

He slid out of bed and turned back the quilts, searching. We found it under my pillow.

"What on earth …?" I picked it up, and promptly dropped it. "Ouch! It has thorns!"

"It was a small bundle of plants, plucked up roughly by the roots, and bound together with a bit of black thread. The plants were wilted, but a pungent smell still rose from the drooping leaves. There was one flower in the bouquet, a crushed primrose, whose thorny stem had pricked my thumb.

I sucked the offended digit, turning the bundle over more cautiously with my other hand. Jamie stood still, staring down at it for a moment. Then he suddenly picked it up, and crossing to the open window, flung it out into the light. Returning to the bed, he energetically brushed the crumbs of earth from the plants' roots into the palm of his hand and threw them out after the bundle. He closed the window with a slam and came back, dusting his palms.

"It's gone," he said, unnecessarily. He climbed back into bed. "Come back to bed, Sassenach."

"What was it?" I asked, climbing in beside him.

"A joke, reckon," he said. "A nasty one, but only a joke." He raised himself on one elbow and blew out the candle. "Come here, *mo duinne,*" he said. "I'm cold."

* * *

Despite the unsettling ill-wish, I slept well, secure in the dual protection of a bolted door and Jamie's arms. Toward dawn, I dreamed of grassy meadows filled with butterflies. Yellow, brown, white, and orange, they swirled around me like autumn leaves, lighting on my head and shoulders, sliding down my body like rain, the tiny feet tickling on my skin and the velvet wings beating like faint echoes of my own heart.

I floated gently to the surface of reality, and found that the butterfly feet against my stomach were the flaming tendrils of

Jamie's soft red thatch, and the butterfly trapped between my thighs was his tongue.

"Mmm," I said, sometime later. "Well, that's all very well for me, but what about you?"

"About three-quarters of a minute, if you keep on in that fashion," he said, putting my hand away with a grin. "But I'd rather take my time over it—I'm a slow and canny man by nature, d'ye see. Might I ask the favor of your company for this evening, Mistress?"

"You might," I said. I put my arms behind my head, and fixed him with a half-lidded look of challenge. "If you mean to tell me that you're so decrepit you can't manage more than once in a day anymore."

He regarded me narrowly from his seat on the edge of the bed. There was a sudden flash of white as he lunged, and I found myself pressed deep into the featherbed.

"Aye, well," he said into the tangles of my hair, "you'll no say I didna warn ye."

Two and a half minutes later, he groaned and opened his eyes. He scrubbed his face and head vigorously with both hands, making the shorter ends stick up like quills. Then, with a muffled Gaelic oath, he slid reluctantly out from under the blankets and began to dress, shivering in the chilly morning air.

"I don't suppose," I asked hopefully, "that you could tell Alec you're sick, and come back to bed?"

He laughed and bent to kiss me before groping under the bed for his stockings. "Would that I could, Sassenach. I doubt much short of pox, plague, or grievous bodily harm would answer as an excuse, though. If I weren't bleeding, old Alec would be up here in a trice, dragging me off my deathbed to help wi' the worming."

I eyed his graceful long calves as he pulled a stocking up neatly and folded the top. " 'Grievous bodily harm,' eh? I might manage something along those lines," I said darkly.

He grunted as he reached across for the other stocking. "Well, watch where ye toss your elf-darts, Sassenach." He tried a lewd wink, but wound up squinting at me instead. "Aim too high, and I'll be no good to *you,* either."

I arched one eyebrow and snuggled back under the quilts. "Not to worry. Nothing above the knee, I promise."

He patted one of my rounder bulges and left for the stables, singing rather loudly the air from "Up Among the Heather." The refrain floated back from the stairwell:

"Sittin' wi' a wee girl, holdin' on my knee—
When a bumblebee stung me, weel above the kneeeee—
Up among the heather, at the head o' Bendikee!"

He was right, I decided; he *didn't* have any ear for music.

I relapsed temporarily into a state of satisfied somnolence, but roused myself shortly to go down for breakfast. Most of the castle inhabitants had eaten and gone to their work already; those still in the hall greeted me pleasantly enough. There were no sidelong looks, no expressions of veiled hostility, of someone wondering how well their nasty little trick had worked. But I watched the faces, nonetheless.

The morning was spent alone in the garden and fields with my basket and digging stick. I was running short of some of the most popular herbs. Generally the village people went to Geillis Duncan for help, but there had been several patients from the village turning up of late in my dispensary, and the traffic in nostrums had been heavy. Maybe her husband's illness was keeping her too busy to care for her regular customers.

I spent the latter part of the afternoon in my dispensary. There were few patients to be seen; only a case of persistent eczema, a dislocated thumb, and a kitchen boy who had spilled a pot of hot soup down one leg. Having dispensed ointment of yawroot and blue flag and reset and bound the thumb, I settled down to the task of pounding some very aptly named stoneroot in one of the late Beaton's smaller mortars.

It was tedious work, but well suited to this sort of lazy afternoon. The weather was fair, and I could see blue shadows lengthening under the elms to the west when I stood on my table to peer out.

Inside, the glass bottles gleamed in orderly ranks, neat stacks of bandages and compresses in the cupboards next to them. The apothecary's cabinet had been thoroughly cleaned and disinfected, and now held stores of dried leaves, roots, and fungi, neatly packed in cotton-gauze bags. I took a deep breath of the sharp, spicy odors of my sanctum and let it out in a sigh of contentment.

Then I stopped pounding and set the pestle down. I *was* contented, I realized with a shock. Despite the myriad uncertainties of life here, despite the unpleasantness of the ill-wish, despite the small, constant ache of missing Frank, I was in fact not unhappy. Quite the contrary.

I felt immediately ashamed and disloyal. How *could* I bring myself to be happy, when Frank must be demented with worry? Assuming that time was in fact continuing without me—and I couldn't see why it wouldn't—I must have gone missing for upwards of four months. I imagined him searching the Scottish countryside, calling the police, waiting for some sign, some word of me. By now, he must nearly have given up hope and be waiting, instead, for word that my body had been found.

I set down the mortar and paced up and down the length of my narrow room, rubbing my hands on my apron in a spasm of guilty sorrow and regret. I should have got away sooner. I should have tried harder to return. But I had, I reminded myself. I had tried repeatedly. And look what had happened.

Yes, look. I was married to a Scottish outlaw, the both of us hunted by a sadistic captain of dragoons, and living with a lot of barbarians, who would as soon kill Jamie as look at him, if they thought him a threat to their precious clan succession. And the worst of it all was that I was happy.

I sat down, staring helplessly at the array of jars and bottles. I had been living day to day since our return to Leoch, deliberately suppressing the memories of my earlier life. Deep down, I knew that I must soon make some kind of decision, but I had delayed, putting off the necessity from day to day and hour to hour, burying my uncertainties in the pleasures of Jamie's company—and his arms.

There was a sudden bumping and cursing out in the corridor, and I rose hastily and went to the door, just in time to see Jamie himself stumble in, supported by the bowed form of Old Alec McMahon on one side, and the earnest but spindly efforts of one of the stable lads on the other. He sank onto my stool, left foot outstretched, and grimaced unpleasantly at it. The grimace seemed to be more of annoyance than pain, so I knelt to examine the offending appendage with relatively little concern.

"Mild strain," I said, after a cursory inspection. "What did you do?"

"Fell off," Jamie said succinctly.

"Off the fence?" I asked, teasing. He glowered.

"No. Off Donas."

"You were *riding* that thing?" I asked incredulously. "In that case, you're lucky to get off with a strained ankle." I fetched a length of bandage and began to wrap the joint.

"Weel, it wasna sae bad as a' that," said Old Alec judiciously. "In fact, lad, ye were doin' quiet weel wi' him for a bit."

"I know I was," snapped Jamie, gritting his teeth as I pulled the bandage tight. "A bee stung him."

The bushy brows lifted. "Oh, that was it? Beast acted like he'd been struck wi' an elf-dart," he confided to me. "Went straight up in the air on all fours, and came down again, then went stark, staring mad—all over the pen like a bumble-bee in a jar. Yon wee laddie stuck on too," he said, nodding at Jamie, who invented a new unpleasant expression in response, "until the big yellow fiend went ower the fence."

"Over the fence? Where is he now?" I asked, standing up and dusting my hands.

"Halfway back to hell, I expect," said Jamie, putting his foot down and trying his weight gingerly on it. "And welcome to stay there." Wincing, he sat back.

"I doubt the de'ils got much use for a half-broke stallion," observed Alec. "Bein' able to turn himself into a horse when needed."

"Perhaps that's who Donas really is," I suggested, amused.

"I wouldna doubt it," said Jamie, still smarting, but beginning to recover his usual good humor. "The de'il's customarily a black stallion, though, is he no?"

"Oh, aye," said Alec. "A great black stallion, that travels as fast as the thought between a man and a maid."

He grinned genially at Jamie and rose to go.

"And speakin' of that," he said, with a wink at me, "I'll no expect ye in the stables tomorrow. Keep to your bed, laddie, and, er … rest."

"Why is it," I demanded, looking after the crusty old horsemaster, "that everyone seems to assume we've no more on our minds than to get into bed with each other?"

Jamie tried his weight on the foot again, bracing himself on the counter.

"For one thing, we've been married less than a month," he observed. "For another—" He looked up and grinned, shaking his head. "I've told ye before, Sassenach. Everything ye think shows on your face."

"Bloody hell," I said.

* * *

Aside from a quick trip to the dispensary to check for emergencies, I spent the next morning ministering to the rather demanding needs of my solitary patient.

"You are supposed to be resting," I said reprovingly, at one point.

"I am. Well, my ankle is resting, at least. See?"

A long, unstockinged shin thrust up into the air, and a bony, slender foot waggled back and forth. It stopped abruptly in mid-waggle with a muffled "ouch" from its owner. He lowered it and tenderly massaged the still-puffy ankle.

"That'll teach you," I said, swinging my own legs out from under the blankets. "Come along now. You've been frowsting in bed quite long enough. You need fresh air."

He sat up, hair falling over his face.

"I thought ye said it was rest I needed."

"You can rest in the fresh air. Get up. I'm making up the bed."

Amid complaints about my general unfeelingness and lack of consideration for a gravely injured man, he got dressed and sat long enough for me to bind up the weak ankle before his natural exuberance asserted itself.

"It's a bit saft out," he said, with a glance through the casement, where the mild drizzle had just decided to buckle down to it and become a major downpour. "Let's go up to the roof."

"The roof? Oh, to be sure. I couldn't think of a better prescription for a strained ankle than climbing six flights of stairs."

"Five. Besides, I've a stick." He produced the stick in question, an aged hawthorn club, from behind the door with a triumphant flourish.

"Wherever did you get that?" I inquired, examining it. At closer range, it was even more battered, a three-foot length of chipped hardwood, age-hardened as a diamond.

"Alec lent it me. He uses it on the mules; raps them twixt the eyes wi' it to make them pay attention."

"Sounds very effective," I said, eyeing the scuffed wood. "I must try it sometime. On you."

We emerged at last in a small sheltered spot, just under the overhang of the slate roof. A low parapet guarded the edge of this small lookout.

"Oh, it's beautiful!" Despite the gusty rain, the view from the roof was magnificent; we could see the broad silver sweep of the loch and the towering crags beyond, thrusting into the solid grey of the sky like ridged black fists.

Jamie leaned on the parapet, taking the weight from his injured foot.

"Aye, it is. I used to come up here sometimes, when I was at the Castle before."

He pointed across the loch, dimpling under the beat of the rain.

"D'ye see the notch there, between those two *craigs*?"

"In the mountains? Yes."

"That's the way to Lallybroch. When I'd feel lonely for my home, sometimes I'd come up here and look that way. I'd imagine flying like a corbie across that pass, and the look of the hills and the fields, falling down the other side of the mountain, and the manor house at the end of the valley."

I touched him gently on the arm.

"Do you want to go back, Jamie?"

He turned his head and smiled down at me.

"Well, I've been thinking of it. I don't know if I want to, precisely, but I think we must. I canna say what we'll find there, Sassenach. But … aye. I'm wed now. You're lady of Broch Tuarach. Outlaw or no, I need to go back, even if just long enough to set things straight."

I felt a thrill, compounded of relief and apprehension, at the thought of leaving Leoch and its assorted intrigues.

"When will we go?"

He frowned, drumming his fingers on the parapet. The stone was dark and slick with rain.

"Well, I think we must wait for the Duke to come. It's possible that he might see his way to doing Colum a favor by taking up my case. If he cannot get me cleared, he might be able to arrange a pardon. There'd be a good deal less danger in going back to Lallybroch, then, ye see."

"Well, yes, but …" He glanced sharply at me as I hesitated.

"What is it, Sassenach?"

I took a deep breath. "Jamie … if I tell you something will you promise not to ask me how I know?"

He took me by both arms, looking down into my face. The rain misted his hair and small droplets ran down the sides of his face. He smiled at me.

"I told you that I wouldna ask for anything that ye dinna wish to tell me. Yes, I promise."

"Let's sit down. You shouldn't be standing on that foot so long."

We made our way to the wall where the overhanging slates of the roof sheltered a small dry patch of pavement, and settled ourselves comfortably, backs against the wall.

"All right, Sassenach. What is it?" Jamie asked.

"The Duke of Sandringham," I said. I bit my lip. "Jamie, don't trust him. I don't know everything about him myself, but I do know

—there's something about him. Something wrong."

"You know about that?" He looked surprised.

Now it was my turn to stare.

"You mean *you* know about him already? Have you met him?" I was relieved. Perhaps the mysterious links between Sandringham and the Jacobite cause were much better known than Frank and the vicar had thought.

"Oh, aye. He was here, visiting, when I was sixteen. When I … left."

"Why did you leave?" I was curious, remembering suddenly what Geillis Duncan had said when first I'd met her in the wood. The odd rumor that Jamie was the real father of Colum's son Hamish. I knew myself that he wasn't, couldn't have been—but I was quite possibly the only person in the Castle who *did* know. A suspicion of that sort could easily have led to Dougal's earlier attempt on Jamie's life—if in fact that's what the attack at Carryarick had been.

"It wasn't because of … the lady Letitia, was it?" I asked with some hesitation.

"Letitia?" His startled astonishment was plain, and something inside me that I hadn't known was clenched suddenly relaxed. I hadn't *really* thought there was anything to Geilie's supposition, but still.…

"What on earth makes ye mention Letitia?" Jamie asked curiously. "I lived at the Castle for a year, and had speech of her maybe once that I remember, when she called me to her chamber and gave me the raw side of her tongue for leading a game of shinty through her rose garden."

I told him what Geilie had said, and he laughed, breath misting in the cool, rainy air.

"God," he said, "as though I'd have the nerve!"

"You don't think Colum suspected any such thing, do you?" I asked.

He shook his head decidedly.

"No, I don't, Sassenach. If he had any inkling of such a thing, I wouldna have lived to be seventeen, let alone achieve the ripe old age of three-and-twenty."

This more or less confirmed my own impression of Colum, but I was relieved, nonetheless. Jamie's expression had grown thoughtful, blue eyes suddenly remote.

"Come to think on it, though, I don't know that Colum *does* know why I left the Castle so sudden, then. And if Geillis Duncan is goin' about the place spreading such rumors—that woman's a troublemaker, Sassenach; a gossip and a scold, if not the witch folk say she is—well, I'd best see that he finds out, then."

He glanced up at the sheet of water pouring from the eaves.

"Perhaps we'd best go down, Sassenach. It's getting a wee bit damp out."

We took a different way down, crossing the roof to an outer stairway that led down to the kitchen gardens, where I wanted to pull a bit of borage, if the downpour would let me. We sheltered under the wall of the Castle, one of the jutting window ledges diverting the rain above.

"What do ye do wi' borage, Sassenach?" Jamie asked with interest, looking out at the straggly vines and plants, beaten to the earth by the rain.

"When it's green, nothing. First you dry it, and then—"

I was interrupted by a terrific noise of barking and shouting, coming from outside the garden wall. I raced through the downpour toward the wall, followed more slowly by Jamie, limping.

Father Bain, the village priest, was running up the path, puddles exploding under his feet, pursued by a yelping pack of dogs. Hampered by his voluminous soutane, the priest tripped and fell, water and mud flying in spatters all around him. In a moment, the dogs were upon him, growling and snapping.

A blur of plaid vaulted over the wall next to me, and Jamie was among them, laying about with his stick and shouting in Gaelic, adding his voice to the general racket. If the shouts and curses had little effect, the stick had more. There were sharp yelps as the club struck hairy flesh, and gradually the pack retreated, finally turning and galloping off in the direction of the village.

Jamie wiped the hair out of his eyes, panting.

"Bad as wolves," he said. "I'd told Colum about that pack already; they're the ones that chased Cobhar into the loch two days ago. Best he has them shot before they kill someone." He looked down at me as I knelt next to the fallen priest, inspecting. The rain dripped from the ends of my hair, and I could feel my shawl growing sodden.

"They haven't yet," I said. "Bar a few toothmarks, he's basically all right."

Father Bain's soutane was ripped down one side, showing an expanse of hairless white thigh with an ugly gash and several puncture marks beginning to ooze blood. The priest, pasty-white with shock, was struggling to his feet; plainly he wasn't too badly injured.

"If you'll come to the surgery with me, Father, I'll cleanse those cuts for you," I offered, suppressing a smile at the spectacle the fat little priest presented, soutane flapping and argyle socks revealed.

At the best of times, Father Bain's face resembled a clenched fist. This similarity was made more pronounced at the moment by the red mottling that streaked his jowls and emphasized the vertical creases between cheeks and mouth. He glared at me as though I had suggested that he commit some public indecency.

Apparently I had, for his next words were "What, a man o' God to expose his pairsonal parts to the handling of a wumman? Weel, I'll tell ye, madam, I've no notion what sorts of immorality are practiced in the circles you're accustomed to move in, but I'll have ye to ken that such'll no be tolerated here—not sae long as I've the cure of the souls in this parish!" With that, he turned and stumped off, limping rather badly and trying unsuccessfully to hold up the torn side of his robe.

"Suit yourself," I called after him. "If you don't let me cleanse it, it will fester!"

The priest did not respond, but hunched his round shoulders and hitched his way up the garden stair a step at a time, like a penguin hopping up an ice floe.

"That man doesn't care overmuch for women, does he?" I remarked to Jamie.

"Considering his occupation, I imagine that's as well," he replied. "Let's go and eat."

* * *

After lunch, I sent my patient back to bed to rest—alone, this time, in spite of his protestations—and went down to the surgery. The heavy rain seemed to have made business slack; people tended to stay safely inside, rather than running over their feet with ploughshares or falling off roofs.

I passed the time pleasantly enough, bringing the records in Davie Beaton's book up to date. Just as I finished, though, a visitor darkened my door.

He literally darkened it, his bulk filling it from side to side. Squinting in the semidarkness, I made out the form of Alec MacMahon, swathed in an extraordinary get-up of coats, shawls, and odd bits of horse-blanket.

He advanced with a slowness that reminded me of Colum's first visit to the surgery with me, and gave me a clue to his problem.

"Rheumatism, is it?" I asked with sympathy, as he subsided stiffly into my single chair with a stifled groan.

"Aye. The damp settles in my bones," he said. "Aught to be done about it?" He laid his huge, gnarled hands on the table, letting the fingers relax. The hands opened slowly, like a night-blooming flower, to show the callused palms within. I picked up one of the knotted appendages and turned it gently to and fro, stretching the fingers and massaging the horny palm. The seamed old face above the hand contorted for a moment as I did it, but then relaxed as the first twinges passed.

"Like wood," I said. "A good slug of whisky and a deep massage is the best I can recommend. Tansy tea will do only so much."

He laughed, shawls slipping off his shoulder.

"Whisky, eh? I had my doubts, lassie, but I see ye've the makings of a fine physician."

I reached into the back of my medicine cupboard and pulled out the anonymous brown bottle that held my supply from the Leoch distillery. I plunked it on the table before him, with a horn cup.

"Drink up," I said, "then get stripped off as far as you think decent and lie on the table. I'll make up the fire so it will be warm enough."

The blue eye surveyed the bottle with appreciation, and a crooked hand reached slowly for the neck.

"Best have a nip yourself, lassie," he advised. "It'll be a big job."

He groaned, with a cross between pain and contentment, as I leaned hard on his left shoulder to loosen it, then lifted from underneath and rotated the whole quarter of his body.

"My wife used to iron my back for me," he remarked, "for the lumbago. But this is even better. Ye've a good strong pair of hands, lassie. Make a good stable-lad, ye would."

"I'll assume that's a compliment," I said dryly, pouring more of the heated oil-and-tallow mixture into my palm and spreading it over the broad white expanse of his back. There was a sharp line of demarcation between the weathered, mottled brown skin of his arms, where the rolled-up sleeves of his shirt stopped, and the milk-white skin of his shoulders and back.

"Well, you were a fine, fair laddie at one time," I remarked. "The skin of your back's as white as mine."

A deep chuckle shook the flesh under my hands.

"Never know now, would ye? Aye, Ellen MacKenzie once saw me wi' my sark off, birthin' a foal, and told me it looked like the good Lord had put the wrong head to my body—should have had a bag of milk-pudding on my shoulders, instead of a face from the altar-piece."

I gathered he was referring to the rood screen in the chapel, which featured a number of extremely unattractive demons, engaged in torturing sinners.

"Ellen MacKenzie sounds as though she were rather free with her opinions," I observed. I was more than slightly curious about Jamie's mother. From the small things he said now and then, I had some picture of his father Brian, but he had never mentioned his mother, and I knew nothing about her, other than that she had died young, in childbed.

"Oh, she had a tongue on her, did Ellen, and a mind of her own to go wi' it." Untying the garters of his trews, I tucked them up out of the way and began operations on the muscular calves of his legs. "But enough sweetness with it that no one minded much, other than her brothers. And she wasna one to pay much heed to Colum or Dougal."

"Mm. So I heard. Eloped, didn't she?" I dug my thumbs into the tendons behind his knee, and he let out a sound that would have been a squeak in anyone less dignified.

"Oh, aye. Ellen was the eldest o' the six MacKenzie bairns—a year or two older than Colum, and the apple of auld Jacob's eye. That's why she'd gone so long unwed; wouldna ha' aught to do wi' John Cameron or Malcolm Grant, or any of the others she might have gone to, and her father wouldna force her against her will."

When old Jacob died, though, Colum had less patience with his sister's foibles. Struggling desperately to consolidate his shaky hold on the clan, he had sought an alliance with Munro to the north, or Grant to the south. Both clans had young chieftains, who would make useful brothers-in-law. Young Jocasta, only fifteen, had obligingly accepted the suit of John Cameron, and gone north. Ellen, on the verge of spinsterhood at twenty-two, had been a good deal less cooperative.

"I take it Malcolm Grant's suit was rather firmly rejected, judging from his behavior two weeks ago," I observed.

Old Alec laughed, the laugh turning to a satisfied groan as I pressed deeper.

"Aye. I never heard exactly what she said to him, but I expect it stung. It was at the big Gathering, ye ken, that they met. Out in the rose garden they went, in the evening, and everyone waiting to see would she tak' him or no. And it grew dark, and they still waiting. And darker still, and the lanterns all lit, and the singing begun, and no sign yet of Ellen or Malcolm Grant."

"Goodness. It must have been quite a conversation." I poured another dollop of the liniment between his shoulder blades, and he grunted with the warm pleasure of it.

"So it seemed. But time went on, and they didna come back, and Colum began to fear as Grant had eloped wi' her; taken her by force, ye see. And it seemed as that must be the way of it, for they found the rose garden empty. And when he sent down to the stables for me, sure enough—I told him Grant's men had come for the horses, and the whole boiling of 'em gone awa' without a word of farewell."

Furious, eighteen-year-old Dougal had mounted his horse at once and set out on the track of Malcolm Grant, not waiting either for company nor for conference with Colum.

"When Colum heard as Dougal had gone after Grant, he sent me and some others helter-skelter after him, Colum being well acquent wi' Dougal's temper and not wishing to have his new brother-in-law slain in the road before the banns were called. For he reckoned as how Malcolm Grant, not being able to talk Ellen into wedding him, must ha' taken her away in order to have his way wi' her and force her into marriage that way."

Alec paused meditatively. "All Dougal could see was the insult, of course. But I dinna think Colum was that upset about it, to tell the truth, insult or no. It would ha' solved his problem—and Grant would likely have had to take Ellen wi'out her dower and pay reparation to Colum as well."

Alec snorted cynically. "Colum is no the man to let an opportunity pass by him. He's quick, and he's ruthless, is Colum." The single ice-blue eye swiveled back to regard me over one humped shoulder. "Ye'd be wise to bear that in mind, lassie."

"I'm not likely to forget it," I assured him, with some grimness. I remembered Jamie's story of his punishment at Colum's order, and wondered how much of that had been in revenge for his mother's rebellion.

Still, Colum had had no chance to seize the opportunity of marrying his sister to the laird of clan Grant. Toward dawn, Dougal had found Malcolm Grant camped along the main road with his followers, asleep under a gorse bush, wrapped in his plaid.

And when Alec and the others had come pelting along the road sometime later, they had been stopped in their tracks by the sight of Dougal MacKenzie and Malcolm Grant, both stripped to the waist and scarred with the marks of battle, swaying and staggering up and down the roadway, still exchanging random blows whenever they got within reach of each other. Grant's retainers were perched along the roadway like a row of owls, heads turning one way and then the other, as the waning fight meandered up and down in the dripping dawn.

"They were both of them puffing like blown horses, and the steam rising off their bodies in the chill. Grant's nose was swelled to twice its size, and Dougal could scarce see out o' either eye, and both wi' their blood dripping down and dried ower their breasts."

Upon the appearance of Colum's men, Grant's tacksmen had all sprung to their feet, hands upon their swords, and the meeting would likely have resulted in serious bloodshed, had some sharp-eyed lad among the MacKenzies not noted the rather important fact that Ellen MacKenzie was nowhere to be seen among the Grants.

"Weel, after they'd poured water on Malcolm Grant and brought him to his senses, he managed to tell them what Dougal wouldna pause to hear—that Ellen had spent but a quarter-hour wi' him in the rose garden. He wouldna say what had passed between them, but whatever it was, he'd been so offended as to wish to take his leave at once, without showing his face in the Hall. And he'd left her there, and seen her no more, nor did he wish ever to hear the name of Ellen MacKenzie spoken in his presence again. And wi' that, he mounted his horse—a bit unsteady, still—and rode awa'. And been no friend since, to anyone of the clan MacKenzie."

I listened, fascinated. "And where *was* Ellen all this time?"

Old Alec laughed, with the sound of a stable door hinge creaking.

"Ower the hills and far away. But they didna find it out for some time yet. We turned about and pelted home again, to find Ellen still missing and Colum standing white-faced in the courtyard, leanin' on Angus Mhor."

There followed more confusion still, for with all the guests, the rooms of the Castle were full, as were all the lofts and cubbyholes, the kitchens and closets. It seemed hopeless to tell which of all the folk in the Castle might also be missing, but Colum called all of the servants, and went doggedly down the lists of the invited, asking who had been seen the evening before, and where, and when. And finally he found a kitchen-maid who recalled seeing a man in a back passage, just before the supper was served.

She had noticed him only because he was so handsome; tall and sturdy, she said, with hair like a black silkie's and eyes like a cat. She had watched him down the passage, admiring him, and seen him meet someone at the outer door—a woman dressed in black from head to toe, and shrouded in a hooded cloak.

"What's a silkie?" I asked.

Alec's eye slanted toward me, crinkling at the corners.

"Ye call them seals in English. For quite a bit after that, even after they knew the truth of it, folk in the village would tell the tale to each other that Ellen MacKenzie was taken to the sea, to live among the seals. Did ye know that the silkies put aside their skins when they come ashore, and walk like men? And if ye find a silkie's skin and hide it, he—or she—" he added, fairly, "canna go into the sea again, but must stay with ye on the land. It's thought good to take a seal-wife that way, for they're very good cooks, and most devoted mothers.

"Still," he said judiciously, "Colum wasna inclined to believe his sister'd gone off wi' a seal, and said so. So he called the guests down, one by one, and asked them all who knew a man of that description. And at long last, they worked it out that his name was Brian, but no one knew his clan or his surname; he'd been at the Games, but there they only called him Brian Dhu."

So there the matter seemed to rest for a time, for the searchers had no idea in which direction to look. Still, even the best of hunters must stop at a cottage now and then, to ask for a handful of salt or a pannikin of milk. And eventually word of the pair reached Leoch, for Ellen MacKenzie was a maid of no ordinary appearance.

"Hair like fire," Alec said dreamily, enjoying the warmth of the oil on his back. "And eyes like Colum's—grey, and fringed wi' black lashes—verra pretty, but the kind would go through ye like a bolt. A tall woman; even taller than you. And sae fair it would hurt the eyes to see her.

"I heard tell later as they'd met at the Gathering, taken one look and decided on the spot as there could be none other for either one o' them. So they laid their plans and they stole awa', under the noses of Colum MacKenzie and three hundred guests."

He laughed suddenly, remembering. "Dougal finally found them, living in a crofter's cottage on the edge of the Fraser lands. They'd decided the only way to manage was to hide until Ellen was wi' child, and big enough that there'd be no question whose it was. Then Colum would have to give his blessing to the marriage, like it or no—and he didn't."

Alec grinned. "Whiles ye were on the road, did ye chance to see a scar Dougal carries, running down his breast?"

I had; a thin white line that crossed his heart and ran from shoulder to ribs.

"Did Brian do that?" I asked.

"No, Ellen," he replied, grinning at my expression. "To stop him cutting Brian's throat, which he was about to do. I wouldna mention it to Dougal, if I were you."

"No, I don't suppose I will."

Luckily, the plan had worked, and Ellen was five months gone with child by the time that Dougal found them.

"There was the great to-do about it all, and a lot of verra nasty letters exchanged between Leoch and Beauly, but they settled it in the end, and Ellen and Brian took up house at Lallybroch the week before the child was born. They were married in the dooryard," he added, as an afterthought, "so he could carry her over the threshold for the first time as a wife. He said after as he nearly ruptured himself, lifting her."

"You talk as though you knew them well," I said. Finishing my ministrations, I wiped the slippery ointment off my hands with a towel.

"Oh, a bit," Alec said, drowsy with warmth. The lid drooped over his single eye, and the lines of his old face had relaxed from the expression of mild discomfort that normally made him look so fierce.

"I kent Ellen weel, of course. Then Brian I met years later, when he brought the lad to stay—we got on. A good man wi' a horse." His voice trailed off, and the lid fell shut.

I drew a blanket up over the old man's prostrate form, and tiptoed away, leaving him dreaming by the fire.

* * *

Leaving Alec asleep, I had gone up to our chamber, only to find Jamie in the same condition. There are a limited number of activities suitable for indoor amusement on a dark, rainy day, and assuming that I didn't wish either to rouse Jamie or to join him in oblivion, that seemed to leave reading or needlework. Given the worse-than-mediocre state of my abilities in the latter direction, I had decided to borrow a book from Colum's library.

In accordance with the peculiar architectural principles governing the construction of Leoch—based on a general abhorrence of straight lines—the stair leading to Colum's suite had two right-angle bends in it, each marked by a small landing. An attendant usually stood on the second landing, ready to run errands or lend assistance to the laird, but he wasn't at his station today. I could hear the rumble of voices from above; perhaps the attendant was with Colum. I paused outside the door, uncertain whether to interrupt.

"I've always known ye to be a fool, Dougal, but I didna think ye *quite* such an idiot." Accustomed to the company of tutors since youth, and unused to venturing out as his brother did among fighting men and common people, Colum's voice normally lacked the broad Scots that marked Dougal's speech. The cultured accent had slipped a bit now, though, and the two voices were nearly indistinguishable, both thickened by anger. "I might have expected such behavior from ye when ye were in your twenties, but for God's sake, man, you're five-and-forty!"

"Well, it isna a matter *you'd* know owermuch about, now, is it?" Dougal's voice held an ugly sneer.

"No." Colum's response came in a cutting tone. "And while I've seldom found cause to thank the Lord, perhaps he's done better by me than I've thought. I've heard it said often enough that a man's brain stops workin' when his cock's standin', and now I think maybe

I believe it.” There was a loud scrape as chairlegs were pushed back across the stone flooring. “If the brothers MacKenzie have but one cock and one brain between the two of them, then I’m glad of my half of the bargain!”

I decided that a third participant in this particular conversation would be decidedly unwelcome, and stepped softly back from the door, turning to go down the stair.

The sound of rustling skirts from the first landing made me stop in my tracks. I didn’t wish to be discovered eavesdropping outside the laird’s study, and turned back toward the door. The landing here was wide, and a tapestry covered one wall almost from floor to ceiling. My feet would show, but it couldn’t be helped.

Lurking like a rat behind the arras, I heard the steps from below slow as they approached the door, and stop at the far side of the landing, as the unseen visitor realized, as I had, the private nature of the brothers’ conversation.

“No,” Colum was saying, calmer now. “No, of course not. The woman’s a witch, or next thing to it.”

“Aye, but—” Dougal’s response was cut short by his brother’s impatient tones.

“I’ve said I’ll attend to it, man. Don’t worry yourself over it, little brother; I’ll see she’s done rightly by.” A note of grudging affection had crept into Colum’s voice.

“I’ll tell ye, man. I’ve written the Duke as he may have leave to hunt the lands above Erlick—he’s keen to have a shot at the stags there. I mean to send Jamie along wi’ him; may be as he still has some feeling for the lad—”

Dougal interrupted with something in Gaelic, evidently a coarse, remark, for Colum laughed and said, “Nay, I reckon Jamie’s big enough to have a care for himself. But if the Duke’s a mind to intercede for him with His Royal Majesty, it’s the lad’s best chance for a pardon. If ye will, I’ll tell His Grace you’ll go as well. You can aid Jamie as ye may, and you’ll be out of the way while I settle matters here.”

There was a muffled thump from the far side of the landing, and I risked peeping out. It was the girl Laoghaire, pale as the plastered wall behind her. She was holding a tray with a decanter; a pewter cup had fallen from the tray to the carpeted floor, making the sound I had heard.

"What's that?" Colum's voice, suddenly sharp, spoke from inside the study. Laoghaire dropped the tray on the table next to the door, almost upsetting the decanter in her haste, and turning, fled precipitately.

I could hear Dougal's footsteps approaching the door, and knew I would never make it down the stairs without discovery. I barely had time to wriggle out of my hiding place and pick up the fallen cup, before the door opened.

"Oh, it's you." Dougal sounded mildly surprised. "Is that the stuff Mrs. Fitz sent for Colum's raw throat?"

"Yes," I said glibly. "She says she hopes he'll be better presently."

"I'll do." Moving more slowly, Colum came into view in the open door. He smiled at me. "Thank Mrs. Fitz for me. And my thanks to you, my dear, for bringing it. Will ye sit a moment while I drink it?"

The conversation I had overheard had effectually made me forget my original purpose, but I now remembered my intention of borrowing a book. Dougal excused himself, and I followed Colum slowly into his library, where he offered me the run of his shelves.

Colum's color was still high, the quarrel with his brother still fresh in his mind, but he answered my questions about the books with a good approximation of his usual poise. Only the brightness of his eyes and a certain tenseness of posture betrayed his thoughts.

I found one or two herbals that looked interesting and put them aside while I browsed a novel.

Colum crossed to the birds' cage, no doubt intending to soothe himself as per his usual custom by watching the beautiful little self-absorbed creatures hop about amongst the branches, each a world unto itself.

The sound of shouts from outside attracted my attention. From this high point, the fields behind the castle were visible, all the way to the loch. A small group of horsemen was sweeping around the end of the loch, shouting with exhilaration, as the rain pelted them on.

As they drew nearer, I could see that they weren't men after all, but boys, mostly teenagers, but with a younger lad here and there on a pony, pressing hard to stay up with the older youths. I wondered if Hamish was with them, and quickly found the telltale spot of bright hair, gleaming wildly from Cobhar's back in the middle of the pack.

The gang came charging toward the castle, headed for one of the innumerable stone walls that separated one field from another. One, two, three, four, the older boys on their mounts popped over the wall with the careless ease born of experience.

It was doubtless my imagination that made the bay seem to hang back a moment, for Cobhar followed the other horses with apparent eagerness. He charged the fence, set himself, braced and leaped.

He seemed to do it just as the others had, and yet something happened. Perhaps a hesitation by his rider, a too-hard pulling on the reins, or a not-quite-firm seat. For the front hooves struck the wall just a few inches too low, and horse, rider and all, somersaulted over the wall in the most spectacular parabola of doom I had ever seen.

"Oh!"

Drawn by my exclamation, Colum turned his head to the window in time to see Cobhar land heavily on his side, the small figure of Hamish pinned beneath. Crippled as he was, Colum moved with speed. He was by my side, leaning out of the window, before the horse had even begun to struggle to his feet.

The wind and rain beat in, soaking the velvet of Colum's coat. Peering anxiously over his shoulder, I saw a cluster of lads, pushing and shoving each other in their eagerness to help. It seemed a long time before the crowd parted, and we saw the small, sturdy figure stumble out of the press, clutching his stomach. He shook his head to the many offers of help, and staggered purposefully to the wall, where he leaned over and vomited profusely. Then he slid down the wall and sat in the wet grass, legs sprawled, face upturned to the rain. When I saw him stick out his tongue to catch the falling drops, I laid a hand on Colum's shoulder.

"He's all right," I said. "Only had the wind knocked out of him."

Colum closed his eyes and let his breath out, body sagging suddenly with the release of tension. I watched him with sympathy.

"You care for him as though he were your own, don't you?" I asked.

The grey eyes blazed suddenly into mine with the most extraordinary expression of alarm. For an instant, there was no sound in the study but the ticking of the glass clock on the shelf. Then a drop of water rolled down Colum's nose, to hang glimmering from the tip. I reached involuntarily to blot it with my handkerchief, and the tension in his face broke.

"Yes," he said simply.

* * *

In the end I told Jamie only about Colum's plan to send him hunting with the Duke. I was convinced by now that his feelings for Laoghaire were only those of a chivalrous friendship, but I didn't know what he might do if he knew that his uncle had seduced the girl and got her with child. Apparently Colum didn't mean to procure the services of Geilie Duncan in the emergency; I wondered if the girl would be wed to Dougal, or if Colum would find her another husband before the child began to show. In any case, if Jamie and Dougal were going to be shut up together in a hunting lodge for days on end, I thought it might be as well if the shade of Laoghaire were not one of the party.

"Hm," he said thoughtfully. "Worth a try. Ye get verra friendly wi' each other, hunting all day and coming back to drink whisky by the fire." He finished fastening my gown up the back and bent to kiss my shoulder briefly.

"I'd be sorry to leave ye, Sassenach, but it might be best."

"Don't mind for me," I said. I hadn't realized before that his departure would necessarily leave me alone at the Castle, and the thought made me more than slightly nervous. Still, I was resolved to manage, if it might help him.

"Are you ready for supper?" I asked. His hand lingered on my waist, and I turned toward him.

"Mmm," he said a moment later. "I'd be willing to go hungry."

"Well, *I* wouldn't," I said. "You'll just have to wait."

I glanced down the dinnertable and across the room. By now I knew most of the faces, some intimately. And a motley crew they were, I reflected. Frank would have been fascinated by the gathering—so many different facial types.

Thinking about Frank was rather like touching a sore tooth; my inclination was to shy away. But the time was coming when I would be able to delay no longer, and I forced my mind back, carefully drawing him in my mind, tracing the long, smooth arcs of his brows with my thoughts as I had once traced them with my fingers. No matter that my fingers tingled suddenly with the memory of rougher, thicker brows, and the deep blue of the eyes beneath them.

I hastily turned toward the nearest face, as an antidote to such disturbing thoughts. It happened to be Murtagh's. Well, at least he looked like neither of the men who haunted my thoughts.

Short, slightly built but sinewy as a gibbon, with long arms that reinforced the simian resemblance, he had a low brow and narrow jaw that for some reason made me think of cave dwellers and pictures of Early Man shown in some of Frank's texts. Not a Neanderthal, though. A Pict. That was it. There was something very durable about the small clansman that reminded me of the weathered, patterned stones, ancient even now, that stood their implacable guard over crossroads and burial grounds.

Amused at the idea, I looked over the other diners with an eye to spotting ethnic types. That man near the hearth, for example, John Cameron, his name was, was a Norman if I'd ever seen one—not that I had—high cheekbones and a high, narrow brow, long upper lip, and the dark skin of a Gaul.

The odd fair Saxon here and there … ah, Laoghaire, the perfect exemplar. Pale-skinned, blue-eyed, and just the tiniest bit plump … I repressed the uncharitable observation. She carefully avoided looking at either me or Jamie, chattering animatedly with her friends at one of the lower tables.

I looked in the opposite direction, toward the next table, where Dougal MacKenzie sat, apart from Colum for once. A bloody Viking, that one. With his impressive height and those broad, flat cheekbones, I could easily imagine him in command of a dragon ship, deepsunk eyes gleaming with avarice and lust as he peered through the fog at some rocky coastal village.

A large hand, wrist lightly haired with copper, reached past me to take a small loaf of oat-bread from the tray. Another Norseman, Jamie. He reminded me of Mrs. Baird's legends of the race of giants who once walked Scotland and laid their long bones in the earth of the north.

The conversation was general, as it usually was, small groups buzzing between mouthfuls. But my ears suddenly caught a familiar name, spoken at a nearby table. Sandringham. I thought the voice was Murtagh's, and turned around to see. He was seated next to Ned Gowan, munching industriously.

"Sandringham? Ah, old Willie the arse-bandit," said Ned, meditatively.

"What?!" said one of the younger men-at-arms, choking on his ale.

"Our revered duke has something of a taste for boys, or so I understand," Ned explained.

"Mmm," agreed Rupert, his mouth full. Swallowing, he added, "Had a wee bit of a taste for young Jamie here, last time he visited these parts, if I remember rightly. That were when, Dougal? Thirty-eight? Thirty-nine?"

"Thirty-seven," Dougal answered from the next table. He narrowed his eyes at his nephew. "Ye were rather a pretty lad at sixteen, Jamie."

Jamie nodded, chewing. "Aye. Fast, too."

When the laughter had died down, Dougal began to tease Jamie.

"I didna ken ye were a favorite, Jamie, lad. There's several about the Duke as ha' traded a sore arse for lands and offices."

"Ye'll notice I havena got either one," responded Jamie with a grin, to further roars of laughter.

"What? Never even got close?" said Rupert, chewing noisily.

"A good bit closer than I would have liked, truth be known."

"Ah, but how close would ye ha' liked it, hey, lad?" The shout came from further down the table, from a tall, brown-bearded man I didn’t recognize, and was greeted with more laughter and ribald remarks. Jamie smiled tranquilly and reached for another loaf, undisturbed by the teasing.

“Is that why ye left the Castle so sudden and went back to your father?” asked Rupert.

“Aye.”

“Why, ye should ha’ told me ye were having trouble that way, Jamie, lad,” said Dougal, with mock concern. Jamie made a low Scottish noise in his throat.

“And if I’d told ye about it, you old rogue, ye would have slipped a bit of poppy juice in my ale some evening, and left me in His Grace’s bed as a wee gift.”

The table roared, and Jamie dodged as Dougal hurled an onion at him.

Rupert squinted across at Jamie. “Seems to me, lad, I saw ye, soon before ye left, goin’ into the Duke’s chambers near nightfall. Ye’re sure ye’re not holdin’ back on us?” Jamie grabbed another onion and threw it at him. It missed and rolled away into the rushes.

“Nay,” Jamie said, laughing, “I’m a maiden still—that way, at least. But if ye must know all about it before you can sleep, Rupert, I’ll tell ye, and welcome.”

Amid shouts of “Tell! Tell!” he deliberately poured a mug of ale and sat back in the classic storyteller’s posture. I could see Colum at the head table, head cocked forward to hear, as attentive as the ostlers and fighting-men at our table.

“Well,” he began, “it’s true enough what Ned says; His Grace had something of an eye for me, though being the innocent I was at sixteen—” Here he was interrupted by a number of cynical remarks, and raised his voice to go on. “Bein’, as I say, innocent of such carryings on, I’d no idea what he meant, though it seemed a bit strange to me, the way His Grace was always wanting to pat me like a wee dog and was so interested in what I might ha’ in my sporran.” (“Or under it!” shouted a drunken voice.)

“I thought it stranger still,” he went on, “when he found me washing myself at the river and wanted to wash my back for me. When he finished my back and went on wi’ the rest, I began to get a wee bit nervous, and when he put his hand under my kilts, I began to get the general idea. I may have been an innocent, but no a complete fool, ye ken.

"I got out of that particular situation by diving into the water, kilts and all, and swimming across to the other side; His Grace being not of a mind to risk his costly clothes in the mud and water. Anyway, after that I was verra wary of being alone with him. He caught me once or twice in the garden or the courtyard, but there was room to get away, wi' no more harm than him kissing my ear. The only other bad time was when he came on me alone in the stables."

"In *my* stables?" Old Alec looked aghast. He half-rose to his feet and called across the room to the head table. "Colum, ye'll see that man stays oot o' my sheds! I'll not have him frightening my horses, duke or no! Or troubling the boys, neither!" he added, as an obvious afterthought.

Jamie went on with his story, unperturbed by the interruption. Dougal's two teenaged daughters were listening raptly, mouths slightly agape.

"I was in a horsebox, ye ken, and there wasna room to maneuver much. I was bendin' over [more ribald remarks]—bendin' over the manger, I say, muckin' up husks from the bottom, when I hear a sound behind me, and before I can straighten up, my kilts are tossed up round my waist, and there's something hard pressed against my arse."

He waved a hand to still the tumult before going on. "Weel, I didna care much for the thought of being buggered in a horsebox, but I didna see much way out at that point, either. I was just gritting my teeth and hoping it wouldn't hurt too much, when the horse—it was that big black gelding, Ned, the one ye got at Brocklebury—you know, the one Colum sold to Breadalbin—anyway, the horse took an objection to the noise His Grace was making. Now, most horses like ye to talk to them, and so did that one, but he had a peculiar aversion to verra high voices; I couldna take him in the yard when there were small bairns about, because he'd get nervous at their squeaks, and start pawing and stamping.

"His Grace, ye might recall, has a rather high-pitched voice, and it was a bit higher than usual on this occasion, him bein' a trifle excited. Weel, as I say, the horse didna care for it—nor did I, I must say—and he starts stamping, and snorting, and swings his body round and squashes His Grace flat against the side of the box. As soon as the Duke let go of me, I jumped into the manger and eased away round the other side of the horse, leavin' His Grace to get out as best he might."

Jamie paused for breath and a sip of ale. He had the attention of the whole room by this time, faces turned toward him, gleaming in the light of the torchères. Here and there might have been discerned a frown at these revelations concerning a most puissant noble of the English Crown, but the overriding reaction was an untrammeled delight in the scandal. I gathered that the Duke was not a particularly popular personage at Castle Leoch.

"Havin' been so close, as ye might say, His Grace made up his mind as he'd have me, come what might. So next day he tells The MacKenzie that his body servant's fallen ill, and can he borrow me to help him wash and dress." Colum covered his face in mock dismay, to the amusement of the crowd. Jamie nodded to Rupert.

"That's why ye saw me go to His Grace's room in the evening. Under orders, ye might say."

"You could have told me, Jamie. I'd not have made you go," Colum called, with a look of reproach.

Jamie shrugged and grinned. "I was prevented by my natural modesty, Uncle. Besides, I knew ye were trying to deal with the man; I thought it might impair your negotiations a bit if you were forced to tell His Grace to keep his hands off your nephew's bum."

"Very thoughtful of you, Jamie," said Colum dryly. "So you sacrificed yourself for my interests, did you?"

Jamie raised his mug in a mock-toast. "Your interests are always foremost in my mind, Uncle," he said, and I thought that in spite of the teasing tone, there was a sharp undercurrent of truth to this, one that Colum perceived as well as I.

He drained the mug and set it down. "But, no," he said, wiping his mouth, "in this case, I didna feel that family duty required quite that much of me. I went to the Duke's rooms, because you told me to, but that was all."

"And ye came out again wi' yer arse-hole unstretched?" Rupert sounded skeptical.

Jamie grinned. "Aye, I did. Ye see, directly I heard about it, I went to Mrs. Fitz, and told her I was in desperate need of a dose of syrup of figs. When she gave it to me, I saw where she put the bottle, and I came back quiet a bit later, and drank the whole lot."

The room rocked with laughter, including Mrs. Fitz, who turned so red in the face I thought she might have a seizure. She rose ceremoniously from her place, waddled round the table and cuffed Jamie good-naturedly on the ear.

"So that's what became of my good physick, ye young wretch!" Hands on her hips, she wagged her head, making the green ear-bobbles wink like dragonflies. "The best lot I ever made too!"

"Oh, it was most effective," he assured her, laughing up at the massive dame.

"I should think so! When I think what that much physick must have done to your innards, lad, I hope it was worth it to ye. Ye canna have been much good to yourself for days after."

He shook his head, still laughing.

"I wasn't, but then, I wasna much good for what His Grace had in mind, either. He did not seem to mind at all when I begged leave to remove myself from his presence. But I knew I couldna do it twice, so as soon as the cramps eased up, I got a horse from the stables and lit out. It took a long time to get home, since I had to stop every ten minutes or so, but I made it by supper next day."

Dougal beckoned for a new jug of ale, which he passed down the board hand-to-hand to Jamie.

"Aye, your father sent word he thought perhaps you'd learned enough of castle life for the present," he said, smiling ruefully. "I thought there was a tone to his letter I did not quite understand at the time."

"Weel, I hope ye've laid up a new batch of fig syrup, Mrs. Fitz," Rupert interrupted, poking her familiarly in the ribs. "His Grace is like to be here in a day or two. Or are ye counting on your new wife to guard ye this time, Jamie?" He leered at me. "From all accounts, ye may need to guard *her*. I hear the Duke's servant does not share His Grace's preferences, though he's every bit as active."

Jamie pushed back the bench and rose from the table, handing me out. He put an arm around my shoulders and smiled back at Rupert.

"Well, then, I suppose the two of us will just have to fight it out back-to-back."

Rupert's eyes flew open in horrified dismay.

"Back to back!?" he exclaimed. "I knew we'd forgot to tell ye something before your wedding, lad! No wonder you've not got her with child yet!"

Jamie's hand tightened on my shoulder, turning me toward the archway, and we made our escape, pelted by a hail of laughter and bawdy advice.

In the dark hall outside, Jamie leaned against the stones, doubled over. Unable to stand, I sank to the ground at his feet and giggled helplessly.

"You didn't tell him, did you?" Jamie gasped at last.

I shook my head. "No, of course not." Still wheezing, I groped for his hand, and he hauled me upright. I collapsed against his chest.

"Let me see if I've got it right, now." He cupped my face between his hands and pressed his forehead to mine, face so close that his eyes blurred into one large blue orb and his breath was warm on my chin.

"Face to face. Is that it?" The fizz of laughter was dying down in my blood, replaced by something else just as potent. I touched my tongue against his lips, while my hands busied themselves lower down.

"Faces are not the essential parts. But you're learning."

* * *

Next day, I was in my surgery, listening patiently to an elderly lady from the village, some relation to the soup cook, who was rather garrulously detailing her daughter-in-law's bout with the morbid sore throat which theoretically had something to do with her current complaint of quinsy, though I couldn't at the moment see the connection. A shadow fell across the doorway, interrupting the old lady's catalog of symptoms.

I looked up, startled, to see Jamie rush in, followed by Old Alec, both men looking worried and excited. Jamie unceremoniously removed the makeshift tongue depressor I was holding and pulled me to my feet, clasping both hands between his own.

"What—" I began, but was interrupted by Alec, peering over Jamie's shoulder at my hands, which Jamie was displaying to him.

"Aye, that's verra weel, but the arms, man? Has she the arm for it?"

"Look." Jamie grasped one of my hands and stretched my arm out straight, measuring it along one of his.

"Weel," said Alec, examining it doubtfully, "could do. Aye, it could."

"Would you care to tell me what you think you're doing?" I inquired, but before I could finish, I was being hustled down the stairs between the two men, leaving my aged patient to gape after us in perplexity.

A few moment later, I was dubiously eyeing the large, shiny, brown hindquarters of a horse, located some six inches from my face. The problem had been made clear on the way to the stables, Jamie explaining and Old Alec chiming in with remarks, imprecations, and interjections.

Losgann, customarily a good foaler, and a prize member of Colum's stable, was having trouble. This much I could see for myself; the mare lay on her side and periodically the shining flanks heaved and the enormous body seemed to shiver. Down on hands and knees at the rear of the horse, I could see the lips of the vagina gape slightly with each contraction, but nothing further happened; no sight of tiny hoof or delicate wet nose appeared at the opening. The foal, a late one, was evidently presenting side-on or backward. Alec thought side-on, Jamie thought backward, and they paused to argue about it for a moment, until I impatiently called the meeting to order to ask what they expected me to do about it, in either case.

Jamie looked at me as though I were a bit simple. "Turn the foal, of course," he said patiently. "Bring the forelegs round so it can get out.”

“Oh, is *that* all?” I looked at the horse. Losgann, whose elegant name actually meant “Frog,” was delicately boned for a horse, but bloody big for all that.

“Er, reach inside, you mean?” I glanced covertly at my hand. It probably would fit—the opening was big enough—but what then?

Both men’s hands were clearly too big for the job. And Roderick, the stable lad who was usually pressed into service in such delicate situations, was, of course, immobilized with a splint and sling of my devising on his right arm—he had broken his arm two days before. Willie, the other stable lad, had gone to fetch Roderick, nonetheless, to give advice and moral encouragement. At this juncture, he arrived, clad in nothing but a pair of ragged breeches, thin chest glimmering whitely in the dim stable.

“It’s hard work,” he said dubiously, apprised of the situation and the suggestion that I substitute for him. “Tricky, ye ken. There’s a knack to it, but it takes a bit of strength as well.”

“Nay worry,” said Jamie confidently. “Claire’s stronger by far than you, ye poor weed. If you’ll but tell her what to feel for and what to do, she’ll have it round in no time.”

I appreciated the vote of confidence, but was in no way so sanguine myself. Telling myself firmly that this was no worse than assisting at abdominal surgery, I retired to a stall to change my gown for breeches and a rough smock of sacking, and lathered my hand and arm up to the shoulder with greasy tallow soap.

“Well, over the top,” I muttered under my breath, and slid my hand inside.

There was very little room to maneuver, and at first I couldn’t tell what I was feeling. I closed my eyes to concentrate better, though, and groped cautiously. There were smooth expanses, and bumpy bits. The smooth parts would be body and the bumps legs or head. It was legs I wanted—forelegs, to be specific. Gradually I became accustomed to the feel of things, and the necessity for keeping quite still when a contraction came on; the amazingly powerful muscles of the uterus clamped down on my hand and arm like a vise, grinding my own bones very painfully until the constriction eased, and I could resume my groping.

At last, my fumbling fingers encountered something I was sure of.

"I've got my fingers in its nose!" I cried triumphantly. "I've found the head!"

"Good lass, good! Dinna let go!" Alec crouched anxiously alongside, patting the mare reassuringly as another contraction set in. I gritted my teeth and leaned my forehead against the shining rump as my wrist was crushed by the force. It eased, though, and I kept my grip. Feeling cautiously upward, I found the curve of eyesocket and brow, and the small ridge of the folded ear. Waiting through one more contraction, I followed the curve of the neck down to the shoulder.

"It's got its head turned back on its shoulder," I reported. "The head's pointing the right way, at least."

"Good." Jamie, at the horse's head, ran his hand soothingly down the sweating chestnut neck. "Likely the legs will be folded under the chest. See can you get a hand on one knee."

So it went on, feeling, fumbling, up to my shoulder in the warm darkness of the horse, feeling the awful force of the birth pangs and their grateful easing, struggling blindly to reach my goal. I felt rather as though I were giving birth myself, and bloody hard work it was, too.

At last I had my hand on a hoof; I could feel the rounded surface, and the sharp edge of the yet-unused curve. Following the anxious, often contradictory instructions of my guides as best I could, I alternately pulled and pushed, easing the unwieldy mass of the foal around, bringing one foot forward, pushing another back, sweating and groaning along with the mare.

And then suddenly everything worked. A contraction eased, and all at once, everything slid smoothly into place. I waited, not moving, for the next contraction. It came, and a small wet nose popped suddenly out, pushing my hand out with it. The tiny nostrils flared briefly, as though interested in this new sensation, then the nose vanished.

"Next one will do it!" Alec was almost dancing in ecstasy, his arthritic form capering up and down in the hay. "Come on, Losgann. Come on, my sweet wee froggie!"

As though in answer, there was a convulsive grunt from the mare. Her hindquarters flexed sharply and the foal slid smoothly onto the clean hay in a slither of knobbly legs and big ears.

I sat back on the hay, grinning idiotically. I was covered with soap and slime and blood, exhausted and aching, and smelt strongly of the less pleasant aspects of horse. I was euphoric.

I sat watching as Willy and the one-handed Roderick tended the new arrival, wiping him down with wisps of straw. And cheered with the rest when Losgann turned and licked him, butting him gently and nosing him to stand at last on his huge, wobbly feet.

"A damn good job, lassie! *Damn* good!" Alec was exuberant, pumping my unslimed hand in congratulation. Suddenly realizing that I was swaying on my perch, and much less than presentable, he turned and barked at one of the lads to bring some water. Then he circled behind me and set his horny old hands on my shoulders. With an amazingly deft and gentle touch, he pressed and stroked, easing the strain in my shoulders, relaxing the knots in my neck.

"There, lassie," he said at last. "Hard work, no?" He smiled down at me, then beamed adoringly at the new colt.

"Bonny laddie," he crooned. "Who's a sweet lad, then?"

Jamie helped me to clean up and change. My fingers were too stiff to manage the buttons of my bodice, and I knew my entire arm would be blue with bruising by morning, but I felt thoroughly peaceful and contented.

* * *

The rain seemed to have lasted forever, so that when a day finally dawned bright and fair, I squinted in the daylight like a newly emerged mole.

"Your skin is so fine I can see the blood moving beneath it," Jamie said, tracing the path of a sunbeam across my bare stomach. "I could follow the veins from your hand to your heart." He drew his finger gently up my wrist to the bend of the elbow, up the inner side of my upper arm, and across the slope below my collarbone.

"That's the subclavian vein," I remarked, looking down my nose at the path of his tracking finger.

"Is it? Oh, aye, because it's below your clavicle. Tell me some more." The finger moved slowly downward. "I like to hear the Latin names for things; I never dreamed it would be so pleasant to make love to a physician."

"That," I said primly, "is an areola, and you know it, because I told you last week."

"So ye did," he murmured. "And there's another one, fancy that." The bright head dipped to let his tongue replace the finger, then traveled lower.

"Umbilicus," I said with a short gasp.

"Um," he said, muffled lips stretching in a smile against my transparent skin. "And what's this, then?"

"You tell me," I said, clutching his head. But he was incapable of speech.

Later I lounged in my surgery chair, basking dreamily in memories of awaking in a bed of sunbeams, sheets tumbled in blinding shoals of white like the sands of a beach. One hand rested on my breast, and I toyed idly with the nipple, enjoying the feel of it rising against my palm beneath the thin calico of my bodice.

"Enjoying yourself?"

The sarcastic voice from the door brought me upright so quickly that I bumped my head on a shelf.

"Oh," I said, rather grumpily. "Geilie. Who else? What are you doing here?"

She glided into the surgery, moving as though on wheels. I knew she had feet; I'd seen them. What I couldn't figure out was where she put them when she walked.

"I came to bring Mrs. Fitz some saffron from Spain; she was wanting it against the Duke's coming."

"More spices?" I said, beginning to recover my good humor. "If the man eats half the things she's fixing for him, they'll need to roll him home."

"They could do that now. He's a wee round ball of a fellow, I've heard." Dismissing the Duke and his physique, she asked whether I'd like to join her for an expedition to the nearby foothills.

"I'm needing a bit of moss," she explained. She waved her long, boneless hands gracefully to and fro. "Makes a wonderful lotion for the hands, boiled in milk with a bit of sheep's wool."

I cast a look up at my slit window, where the dust motes were going mad in the golden light. A faint scent of ripe fruit and fresh-cut hay floated on the breeze.

"Why not?"

Waiting as I gathered my baskets and bottles together, Geilie strolled about my surgery, picking things up and putting them down at random. She stopped at a small table and picked up the object that lay there, frowning.

"What's this?"

I stopped what I was doing, and came to stand beside her. She was holding a small bundle of dried plants, tied with three twisted threads; black, white, and red.

"Jamie says it's an ill-wish."

"He's right. Where did ye come to get it?"

I told her about the finding of the small bundle in my bed.

"I went and found it under the window next day, where Jamie threw it. I meant to bring it round to your house and ask if you knew anything about it, but I forgot."

She stood tapping a fingernail thoughtfully against her front teeth, shaking her head.

"No, I canna say that I do. But there might be a way of finding out who left it for ye."

"Really?"

"Aye. Come to my house in the morning tomorrow, and I'll tell ye then."

Refusing to say more, she whirled about in a swirl of green cloak, leaving me to follow as I would.

She led me well up into the foothills, galloping when there was road enough to do so, walking when there wasn't. An hour's ride from the village, she stopped near a small brook, overhung by willows.

We forded the brook and wandered up into the foothills, gathering such late summer plants as still lingered, together with the ripening berries of early autumn and the thick yellow shelf fungus that sprouted from the trunks of trees in the small shady glens.

Geilie's figure disappeared into the bracken above me, as I paused to scrape a bit of aspen bark into my basket. The globules of dried sap on the papery bark looked like frozen drops of blood, the deep crimson refulgent with trapped sunlight.

A sound startled me out of my reverie, and I looked up the hill, in the direction it seemed to come from.

I heard the sound again; a high-pitched, mewling cry. It seemed to come from above, from a rocky notch near the crest of the hill. I set my basket down and began to climb.

"Geilie!" I shouted. "Come up here! Someone's left a baby!"

The sound of scrabbling and muttered imprecations preceded her up the hill, as she fought her way through the entangling bushes on the slope. Her fair face was flushed and cross and she had twigs in her hair.

"What in God's name—" she began, and then darted forward. "Christ's blood! Put it down!" She hastily snatched the baby from my arms, then laid it back where I had found it, in a small depression in the rock. The smooth, bowlshaped hollow was less than a yard across. At one side of the hollow was a shallow wooden bowl, half-full of fresh milk, and at the baby's feet was a small bouquet of wildflowers, tied with a bit of red twine.

"But it's sick!" I protested, stooping toward the child again. "Who would leave a sick child up here by itself?"

The baby was plainly very ill; the small pinched face was greenish, with dark hollows under the eyes, and the little fists waved weakly under the blanket. The child had hung slack in my arms when I picked it up; I wondered that it had had the strength to cry.

"Its parents," Geilie said briefly, restraining me with a hand on my arm. "Leave it. Let's get out of here."

"Its parents?" I said indignantly. "But—"

"It's a changeling," she said impatiently. "Leave it and come. Now!"

Dragging me with her, she dodged back into the undergrowth. Protesting, I followed her down the slope until we arrived, breathless and red faced, at the bottom, where I forced her to stop.

"What is this?" I demanded. "We can't just abandon a sick child, out in the open like that. And what do you mean, it's a changeling?"

"A changeling," she said impatiently. "Surely you know what a changeling is? When the fairies steal a human child away, they leave one of their own in its place. You know it's a changeling because it cries and fusses all the time and doesn't thrive or grow."

"Of course I know what it is," I said. "But you don't believe that nonsense, do you?"

She shot me a sudden strange look, full of wary suspicion. Then the lines of her face relaxed into their normal expression of half-amused cynicism.

"No, I don't," she admitted. "But the folk here do." She glanced nervously up the slope, but no further sound came from the rocky notch. "The family will be somewhere near about. Let's go."

Reluctantly, I allowed her to tow me away in the direction of the village.

"Why did they put it up there?" I asked, sitting on a rock to remove my stockings before wading across a small stream. "Do they hope the Wee Folk will come and cure it?" I was still bothered about the child; it seemed desperately ill. I didn't know what was wrong with it, but perhaps I could help.

Maybe I could leave Geilie in the village, then come back for the child. It would have to be soon, though; I glanced up at the eastern sky, where soft grey rain clouds were swiftly darkening into purple dusk. A pink glow still showed to the west, but there could be no more than half an hour's light left.

Geilie looped the twisted withy handle of her basket over her neck, picked up her skirt and stepped into the stream, shivering at the cold water.

"No," she said. "Or rather, yes. That's one of the fairies' hills, and it's dangerous to sleep there. If ye leave a changeling out overnight in such a place, the Folk will come and take it back, and leave the human child they've stolen in its place."

"But they won't, because it isn't a changeling," I said, sucking in my breath at the touch of the melted snow water. "It's only a sick child. It might very well not survive a night in the open!"

"It won't," she said briefly. "It will be dead by morning. And I hope to God no one saw us near it."

I stopped abruptly in the midst of putting on my shoes.

"Dead! Geilie, I'm going back for it. I can't leave it there." I turned and started back across the stream.

She caught me from behind and pushed me flat on my face into the shallow water. Floundering and gasping, I managed to rise to my knees, sloshing water in all directions. Geilie stood calf-deep in the stream, skirts soaked, glaring down at me.

"You bloody pig-headed English ass!" she shouted at me. "There's nothing ye can do! Do ye hear me? Nothing! That child's as good as dead! I'll not stand here and let ye risk your own life and mine for some crack-brained notion of yours!" Snorting and grumbling under her breath, she reached down and got me under the arms with both hands, lugging me to my feet.

"Claire," she said urgently, shaking me by the arms. "Listen to me. If ye go near that child and it dies—and it will, believe me, I've seen them like that—then the family will blame you for it. Do ye no see the danger of it? Don't ye know what they say about you in the village?"

I stood shivering in the cold breeze of sunset, torn between her obvious panic for my safety, and the thought of a helpless child, slowly dying alone in the dark, with wildflowers at its feet.

"No," I said, shaking the wet hair out of my face. "Geilie, no, I can't. I'll be careful, I promise, but I have to go." I pulled myself out of her grasp and turned toward the far bank, stumbling and splashing in the uncertain shadows of the streambed.

There was a muffled cry of exasperation from behind me, then a frenzied sploshing in the opposite direction. Well, at least she wouldn't hamper me further.

It was growing dark fast, and I pushed through the bushes and weeds as quickly as I could. I wasn't sure that I could find the right hill if it grew dark before I reached it; there were several nearby, all about the same height. And fairies or not, the thought of wandering about alone out here in the dark was not one I cared for. The question of how I was going to make it back to the Castle with a sick baby was something I would deal with when the time came.

I found the hill, finally, by spotting the stand of young larches I remembered at the base. It was nearly full dark by this time, a moonless night, and I stumbled and fell frequently. The larches stood huddled together, talking quietly in the evening breeze with clicks and creaks and rustling sighs.

Bloody place *is* haunted, I thought, listening to the leafy conversation overhead as I threaded my way through the slender trunks. I wouldn't be surprised to meet a ghost behind the next tree.

I *was* surprised, though. Actually, I was scared out of my wits when the shadowy figure slid out and grabbed me. I let out a piercing shriek and struck at it.

"Jesus Christ," I said, "what are you doing here?" I crumpled for a moment against Jamie's chest, relieved to see him, in spite of the fright he had given me.

He took me by the arm and turned to lead me out of the wood.

"Came for you," he said, low voiced. "I was coming to meet you because night was comin' on; I met Geillis Duncan near St. John's brook and she told me where you were."

"But the baby—" I began, turning back toward the hill.

"The child's dead," he said briefly, tugging me back. "I went up there first, to see."

I followed him then without demur, distressed over the child's death, but relieved that I would not, after all, have to face the climb to the fairies' crest or the long journey back alone. Oppressed by the dark and the whispering trees, I didn't speak until we had crossed the brook again. Still damp from the previous immersion, I didn't bother removing my stockings, but sloshed across regardless. Jamie, still dry, stayed that way by leaping from the bank to a central boulder that stood above the current, then vaulted to my bank like a broad-jumper.

"Have ye any idea how dangerous it is to be out alone at night like that, Sassenach?" he inquired. He didn't seem angry, just curious.

"No … I mean yes. I'm sorry if I worried you. But I *couldn't* leave a child out there, I just couldn't."

"Aye, I know." He hugged me briefly. "You've a kind heart, Sassenach. But you've no idea what you're dealing with, here."

"Fairies, hm?" I was tired, and disturbed over the incident, but covered it with flippancy. "I'm not afraid of superstitions." A thought struck me. "Do *you* believe in fairies, and changelings, and all that?"

He hesitated for a moment before answering.

"No. No, I dinna believe in such things, though damned if I'd care to sleep all night on a fairies' hill, for a' that. But I'm an educated man, Sassenach. I had a German tutor at Dougal's house, a good one, who taught me Latin and Greek and such, and later when I went to France at eighteen—well, I studied history and philosophy and I saw that there was a good deal more to the world than the glens and the moors, and the waterhorses in the lochs. But these people …" He waved an arm, taking in the darkness behind us.

"They've ne'er been more than a day's walk from the place they were born, except for a great thing like a clan Gathering, and that might happen twice in a lifetime. They live among the glens and the lochs, and they hear no more of the world than what Father Bain tells them in kirk of a Sunday. That and the old stories."

He held aside an alder branch and I stooped under it. We were on the deer trail Geilie and I had followed earlier, and I was heartened by this fresh evidence that he could find his way, even in the dark. Away from the fairies' hill, he spoke in his normal voice, only pausing occasionally to brush away some tangling growth from his path.

"Those tales are naught but entertainment in Gwyllyn's hands, when ye sit in the Hall drinking Rhenish wine." He preceded me down the path, and his voice floated back to me, soft and emphatic in the cool night air.

"Out here, though, and even in the village—nay, that's something else. Folk live by them. I suppose there's some truth behind some of them."

I thought of the amber eyes of the waterhorse, and wondered which others were true.

"And others … well," his voice grew softer, and I had to strain to hear him. "For the parents of that child, maybe it will ease them a bit to believe it is the changeling who died, and think of their own child, healthy and well, living forever with the fairies."

We reached the horses then, and within half an hour the lights of Castle Leoch shone through the darkness to welcome us. I had never thought I would consider that bleak edifice an outpost of advanced civilization, but just now the lights seemed those of a beacon of enlightenment.

It was not until we drew closer that I realized the impression of light was due to the string of lanterns blazing along the parapet of the bridge.

"Something's happened," I said, turning to Jamie. And seeing him for the first time in the light, I realized that he was not wearing his usual worn shirt and grubby kilt. His snowy linen shone in the lantern light, and his best—his only—velvet coat lay across his saddle.

"Aye," he nodded. "That's why I came to get you. The Duke's come at last."

* * *

The Duke was something of a surprise. I don't know quite what I had been expecting, but it wasn't the bluff, hearty, red-faced sportsman I met in Leoch's hall. He had a pleasantly blunt, weatherbeaten face, with light blue eyes that always squinted slightly, as though looking into the sun after the flight of a pheasant.

I wondered for a moment whether that earlier bit of theatrics regarding the Duke might have been overstated. Looking around the hall, though, I noticed that every boy under eighteen wore a slightly wary expression, keeping his eyes fixed on the Duke as he laughed and talked animatedly with Colum and Dougal. Not merely theatrics, then; they had been warned.

When I was presented to the Duke, I had some difficulty in keeping a straight face. He was a big man, fit and solid, the sort you so often see booming out their opinions in pubs, bearing down the opposition by dint of loudness and repetition. I had been warned, of course, by Jamie's story, but the physical impression was so overwhelming that when the Duke bowed low over my hand and said, "But how charming to find a countrywoman in this remote spot, Mistress," in a voice like an overwrought mouse, I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from disgracing myself in public.

Worn out from travel, the Duke and his party retired early to bed. The next night, though, there was music and conversation after dinner, and Jamie and I joined Colum, Dougal, and the Duke. Sandringham grew expansive over Colum's Rhenish wine, and talked volubly, expounding equally upon the horrors of travel in the Highlands and the beauties of the countryside. We listened politely, and I tried not to catch Jamie's eye as the Duke squeaked out the story of his travails.

"Broke an axle-tree outside of Stirling, and we were becalmed three days—*in* the pouring rain, mind you—before my footman could find a blacksmith to come and repair the blasted thing. And not half a day later, we bounced into the most tremendous pothole I've ever seen and broke the damn thing again! And then one horse threw a shoe, and we had to unload the coach and walk beside it—*in* the mud—leading the lame nag. And *then*…" As the tale went on, from misfortune to misfortune, I felt an increasing urge to giggle, and attempted to drown it with more wine—possibly an error in judgment.

"But the game, MacKenzie, the game!" the Duke exclaimed at one point, rolling his eyes in ecstasy. "I could scarce believe it. No wonder you set such a table." He gently patted his large, solid stomach. "I swear I'd give my eyeteeth for a try at a stag like the one we saw two days ago; splendid beast, simply splendid. Leapt out of the brush right in front of the coach, m'dear," he confided to me.

"Startled the horses so we near as a toucher went off the road *again*!"

Colum raised the bell-shaped decanter, with an inquiring cock of one dark brow. As he poured to the proffered glasses, he said, "Well, perhaps we might arrange a hunt for ye, your Grace. My nephew's a bonny huntsman." He glanced sharply from under his brows at Jamie; there was a scarcely perceptible nod in response.

Colum sat back, replacing the decanter, and said casually, "Aye, that'll do well, then. Perhaps early next week. It's too early for pheasant, but the stag hunting will be fine." He turned to Dougal, lounging in a padded chair to one side. "My brother might go along; if you have it in mind to travel northwards, he can show ye the lands we were discussing earlier."

"Capital, capital!" The Duke was delighted. He patted Jamie on the leg; I saw the muscles tighten, but Jamie didn't move. He smiled tranquilly, and the Duke let his hand linger just a moment too long. Then His Grace caught my eye on him, and smiled jovially at me, his expression saying "Worth a try, eh?" Despite myself, I smiled back. Much to my surprise, I quite liked the man.

* * *

In the excitement of the Duke's arrival, I had forgotten Geilie's offer to help me discover the sender of the ill-wish. And after the unpleasant scene with the changeling child on the fairies' hill, I wasn't sure that I wanted to try anything she might suggest.

Still, curiosity overcame suspicion, and when Colum asked Jamie to ride down and escort the Duncans to the castle for the Duke's banquet two days later, I went with him.

Thus it was that Thursday found me and Jamie in the Duncans' parlor, being entertained with a sort of awkward friendliness by the fiscal, while his wife finished her dressing upstairs. Largely recovered from the effects of his last gastric attack, Arthur still did not look terribly healthy. Like many fat men who lose too much weight abruptly, the weight had gone from his face, rather than his stomach. His paunch still swelled the green silk of his waistcoat, while the skin of his face drooped in flabby folds.

“Perhaps I could slip upstairs and help Geilie with her hair or something,” I suggested. “I’ve brought her a new ribbon.” Foreseeing the possible need of an excuse for talking to Geilie alone, I had brought a small package with me. Producing it as an excuse, I was through the door and up the stairs before Arthur could protest.

She was ready for me.

“Come on,” she said, “we’ll go up to my private room for this. We’ll have to hurry, but it won’t take too long.”

I followed Geilie up the narrow, twisting stair. The steps were irregular heights; some of the risers were so high I had to lift my skirts to avoid tripping on the way up. I concluded that seventeenth-century carpenters either had faulty methods of measuring or rich senses of humor.

Geilie’s private sanctum was at the top of the house, in one of the remote attics above the servants’ quarters. It was guarded by a locked door, opened by a truly formidable key which Geilie produced from her apron pocket; it must have been at least six inches long, with a broad fretwork head ornamented with a vine-and-flower pattern. The key must have weighed nearly a pound; held by the barrel, it would have made a good weapon. Both lock and hinges were well oiled, and the thick door swung inward silently.

The attic room was small, cramped by the gabled dormers that cut across the front of the house. Shelves lined every inch of wall space, holding jars, bottles, flasks, vials, and beakers. Bunches of drying herbs, carefully tied with threads of different colors, hung neatly in rows from the rafters overhead, brushing my hair with a fragrant dust as we passed beneath.

This was nothing like the clean, businesslike order of the herb room downstairs, though. It was crowded, almost cluttered, and dark in spite of the dormer windows.

One shelf held books, mostly old and crumbling, the spines unmarked. I ran a curious finger over the row of leather bindings. Most were calf, but there were two or three bound in something different; something soft, but unpleasantly oily to the touch. And one that to all appearances was bound in fish skin. I pulled a volume out and opened it gingerly. It was handwritten in a mixture of archaic French, and even more obsolete Latin, but I could make out the title. *L'Grimoire d'le Comte St. Germain*.

I closed the book and set it back on the shelf, feeling a slight shock. A grimoire. A handbook of magic. I could feel Geilie's gaze boring into my back, and turned to meet a mixture of mischief and wary speculation. What would I do, now that I knew?

"So it isn't a rumor, then, is it?" I said, smiling. "You really are a witch." I wondered just how far it went, and whether she believed it herself, or whether these were merely the trappings of an elaborate make-believe that she used to alleviate the boredom of marriage to Arthur. I also wondered just what sort of magic she practiced—or thought she practiced.

"Oh, white," she said, grinning. "Definitely white magic."

I thought ruefully that Jamie must be right about my face—*everyone* seemed to be able to tell what I was thinking.

"Well, that's good," I said. "I'm really not much of a one for dancing round bonfires at midnight and riding brooms, let alone kissing the Devil's arse."

Geilie tossed back her hair and laughed delightedly.

"Ye don't kiss anyone's much, that I can see," she said. "Nor do I. Though if I had a sweet fiery devil like yours in my bed, I'll not say I might not come to it in time."

"That reminds me—" I began, but she had already turned away, and was about her preparations, murmuring to herself.

Checking first to see that the door was securely locked behind us, Geilie crossed to the gabled window and rummaged in a chest built into the window seat. She pulled out a large, shallow pan and a tall white candle stuck in a pottery holder. A further foray produced a worn quilt, which she spread on the floor as protection against dust and splinters.

"What exactly is it you're planning to do, Geilie?" I asked, examining the preparations suspiciously. Off-hand, I couldn't see much sinister intent in a pan, a candle, and a quilt, but then I was a novice magician, to say the least.

"Summoning," she said, tugging the corners of the quilt around so that the sides lay straight with the boards of the floor.

"Summoning whom?" I asked. Or what.

She stood and brushed her hair back. Baby-fine and slippery, it was coming down from its fastenings. Muttering, she yanked the pins from her hair and let it fall down in a straight, shiny curtain, the color of heavy cream.

"Oh, ghosts, spirits, visions. Anything ye might have need of," she said. "It starts the same in any case, but the herbs and the words are different for each thing. What we want now is a vision—to see who it is who's ill-wished ye. Then we can turn the ill-wish back upon them."

"Er, well …" I really had no wish to be vindictive, but I *was* curious—both to see what summoning was like, and to know who had left me the ill-wish.

Setting the pan in the middle of the quilt, she poured water into it from a jug, explaining, "You can use any vessel big enough to make a good reflection, though the grimoire says to use a silver *bassin*. Even a pond or a puddle of water outside will do for some kinds of summoning, though it must be secluded. Ye need peace and quiet to do this."

She passed rapidly from window to window, drawing the heavy black curtains until virtually all the light in the room was extinguished. I could barely see Geilie's slender form flitting through the gloom, until she lit the candle. The wavering flame lit her face as she carried it back to the quilt, throwing wedge-shaped shadows under the bold nose and chiseled jaw.

She set the candle next to the pan of water, on the side away from me. She filled the pan very carefully, so full that the water bulged slightly above the rim, kept from spilling by its surface tension. Leaning over, I could see that the surface of the water provided an excellent reflection, far better than that obtainable in any of the Castle's looking glasses. As though mind reading again, Geilie explained that in addition to its use in summoning spirits, the reflecting pan was an excellent accessory for dressing the hair.

"Don't bump into it, or you'll get soaked," she advised, frowning in concentration as she lit the candle. Something about the practical tone of the remark, so prosaic in the midst of these supernatural preparations, reminded me of someone. Looking up at the slender, pallid figure, stooping elegantly over the tinderbox, I couldn't think at first of whom she reminded me. But of course. While no one could be less like that dowdy figure athwart the teapot in Reverend Wakefield's study, the tone of voice had been that of Mrs. Graham, exactly.

Perhaps it was an attitude they shared, a pragmatism that regarded the occult as merely a collection of phenomena like the weather. Something to be approached with cautious respect, of course—much as one would take care in using a sharp kitchen knife—but certainly nothing to avoid or fear.

Or it might have been the smell of lavender water. Geilie's loose, flowing gowns smelled always of the essences she distilled: marigold, chamomile, bay leaf, spikenard, mint, marjoram. Today, though, it was lavender that drifted from the folds of the white dress. The same scent that permeated Mrs. Graham's practical blue cotton and wafted from the corrugations of her bony chest.

If Geilie's chest was likewise underlaid by such skeletal supports, there was no hint of it visible, in spite of her robe's low neckline. It was the first time I had seen Geilie Duncan *en déshabille*; customarily she wore the severe and voluminous gowns, buttoned high at the neck, that were suitable to the wife of a fiscal. The swelling opulence now revealed was a surprise, a creamy abundance almost the same shade as the dress she wore, and gave me some idea why a man like Arthur Duncan might have married a penniless girl of no family. My eye went involuntarily to the line of neatly labeled jars along the wall, looking for saltpeter.

Geilie selected three of the jars from the shelf, pouring a small quantity from each into the bowl of a tiny metal brazier. She lit the layer of charcoal underneath from the candle flame, and blew on the dawning flame to encourage it. A fragrant smoke began to rise as the spark took hold.

The air in the attic was so still that the greyish smoke rose straight up without diffusing, forming a column that echoed the shape of the tall white candle. Geilie sat between the two columns like a priestess in her temple, legs folded gracefully under her.

"Well then, that will do nicely, I think." Briskly dusting crumbs of rosemary from her fingers, Geilie surveyed the scene with satisfaction. The black drapes, with their mystic symbols, shut out all intrusive beams of sunlight, and left the candle as the only source of direct illumination. The flame was reflected and diffused through the pan of still water, which seemed to glow as though it, too, were a source rather than a reflection of light.

"What now?" I inquired.

The large grey eyes glowed like the water, alight with anticipation. She waved her hands across the surface of the water, then folded them between her legs.

"Just sit quiet for a moment," she said. "Listen to your heartbeat. Do you hear it? Breathe easy, slow and deep." In spite of the liveliness of her expression, her voice was calm and slow, a distinct contrast to her usual sprightly conversation.

I obediently did as she instructed, feeling my heart slow as my breathing steadied to an even rhythm. I recognized the scent of rosemary in the smoke, but I wasn't sure of the other two herbs; foxglove, perhaps, or cinquefoil? I had thought the purple flowers were those of nightshade, but surely that couldn't be. Whatever they were, the slowness of my breathing did not seem to be attributable only to the power of Geilie's suggestion. I felt as though a weight were pressing against my breastbone, slowing my breathing without my having to will it.

Geilie herself sat perfectly still, watching me with unblinking eyes. She nodded, once, and I looked down obediently into the still surface of the water.

She began to talk, in an even, conversational way that reminded me again of Mrs. Graham, calling down the sun in the circle of stones.

The words were not English, and yet not quite *not* English, either. It was a strange tongue, but one I felt that I should know, as though the words were spoken just below the level of my hearing.

I felt my hands begin to go numb, and wanted to move them from their folded position in my lap, but they wouldn't move. Her even voice went on, soft and persuading. Now I *knew* that I understood what was being said, but still could not summon the words to the surface of my mind.

I realized dimly that I was either being hypnotized, or under the influence of some drug, and my mind took some last foothold on the edge of conscious thought, resisting the pull of the sweet-scented smoke. I could see my reflection in the water, pupils shrunk to pinpoints, eyes wide as a sun-blind owl's. The word "opium" drifted through my fading thoughts.

"Who are you?" I couldn't tell which of us had asked the question, but I felt my own throat move as I answered, "Claire."

"Who sent you here?"

"I came."

"Why did you come?"

"I can't tell."

"Why can't you tell?"

"Because no one will believe me."

The voice in my head grew still more soothing, friendly, beguiling.

"I will believe you. Believe me. Who are you?"

"Claire."

A sudden loud noise broke the spell. Geilie started and her knee bumped the bassin, startling the reflection back into the water.

"Geillis? My dear?" A voice called through the door, tentative yet commanding. "We must be going, my dear. The horses are ready, and you're not yet gowned."

Muttering something rude under her breath, Geilie rose and flung open the window, so that the fresh air rushed into my face, making me blink and dispelling some of the fog in my head.

She stood looking down at me speculatively, then stooped to help me up.

"Come along, then," she said. "Come over a bit queer, have you? Sometimes it takes folk that way. You'd best lie down on my bed while I dress."

I lay flat on the coverlet in her bedroom below, eyes closed, listening to the small rustling noises Geilie made in her privy closet, wondering what the hell *that* had been all about. Nothing to do with the ill-wish or its sender, clearly. Only with my identity. With sharpness returning gradually to my wits, it occurred to me to wonder whether Geilie perhaps was a spy for Colum. Placed as she was, she heard the business and the secrets of the whole district. And who, other than Colum, would be so interested in my origins?

What would have happened, I wondered, had Arthur not interrupted the summoning? Would I have heard, somewhere in the scented fog, the standard hypnotist's injunction, "When you wake, you will remember nothing"? But I did remember, and I wondered.

In the event, however, there was no chance to ask Geilie about it. The bedroom door flew open, and Arthur Duncan came in. Crossing to the door of the privy closet, he knocked once, hastily, and went in.

There was a small startled scream from within, and then dead silence.

Arthur Duncan reappeared in the door, eyes wide and staring-blind, face so white that I thought perhaps he was suffering an attack of some sort. I leaped to my feet and hurried toward him as he leaned heavily against the door jamb.

Before I reached him, though, he pushed himself away from the door and went out of the room, staggering slightly, pushing past me as though he didn't see me.

I knocked on the door myself.

"Geilie! Are you all right?"

There was a moment's silence, then a perfectly composed voice said, "Aye, of course. I'll be out in a moment."

When we at length descended the stairs, we found Arthur, apparently somewhat recovered, sipping brandy with Jamie. He seemed a bit abstracted, as though he were thinking of something, but greeted his wife with a mild compliment on her appearance, before sending the groom for the horses.

The banquet was just beginning as we arrived, and the fiscal and his wife were shown to their places of honor at the head table. Jamie and I, somewhat lower in status, took our places at a table with Rupert and Ned Gowan.

Mrs. Fitz had excelled herself, and beamed in gratification at the compliments heaped upon the food, the drink, and other preparations.

It was in fact delicious. I had never tasted roast pheasant stuffed with honeyed chestnuts, and was helping myself to a third slice, when Ned Gowan, watching in some amusement at my appetite, asked whether I had yet tried the suckling pig.

My reply was interrupted by a stir at the far end of the Hall. Colum had risen from his table, and was headed toward me, accompanied by Old Alec MacMahon.

"I see there is no end to your talents, Mistress Fraser," Colum remarked, bowing slightly. A broad smile marked the arresting features.

"From dressing wounds and healing the sick to delivering foals. We shall be calling upon you to raise the dead before long, I suppose." There was a general chuckle at this, though I noticed one or two men glancing nervously in the direction of Father Bain, in attendance this evening, who was methodically stuffing himself with roast mutton in the corner.

"In any case," Colum continued, reaching into his coat pocket, "you must allow me to present you with a small token of my gratitude." He handed me a small wooden box, lid carved with the MacKenzie badge. I hadn't realized just how valuable a horse Losgann was, and mentally thanked whatever benign spirits presided over such events that nothing had gone wrong.

"Nonsense," I said, trying to give it back. "I didn't do anything out of the way. It was only luck that I have small hands."

"Nevertheless." Colum was firm. "If you prefer, consider it a small wedding gift, but I wish you to have it."

At a nod from Jamie, I reluctantly accepted the box and opened it. It contained a beautiful rosary of jet, each bead intricately carved, and the crucifix inlaid with silver.

"It's lovely," I said sincerely. And it was, though I had no notion what I might do with it. Though nominally a Catholic, I had been raised by Uncle Lamb, the completest of agnostics, and had only the vaguest idea of the significance of a rosary. Nonetheless, I thanked Colum warmly, and gave the rosary to Jamie to keep for me in his sporran.

I curtsied to Colum, gratified to find that I was mastering the art of doing so without falling on my face. He opened his mouth to take a gracious leave, but was interrupted by a sudden crash that came from behind me. Turning, I could see nothing but backs and heads, as people leapt from their benches to gather round whatever had caused the uproar. Colum made his way with some difficulty around the table, clearing aside the crowd with an impatient wave of the hand. As people stepped respectfully out of his way, I could see the rotund form of Arthur Duncan on the floor, limbs flailing convulsively, batting away the helpful hands of would-be assistants. His wife pushed her way through the muttering throng, dropped to the floor beside him, and made a vain attempt to cradle his head in her lap. The stricken man dug his heels into the floor and arched his back, making gargling, choking noises.

Glancing up, Geilie's green eyes anxiously scanned the crowd as though looking for someone. Assuming that I was the one she was looking for, I took the path of least resistance, dodging under the table and crawling across on hands and knees.

Reaching Geilie's side, I grabbed her husband's face between my hands and tried to pry his jaws open. I thought, from the sounds he was making, that he had perhaps choked on a piece of meat, which might still be lodged in his windpipe.

His jaws were clamped and rigid, though, lips blue and flecked with a foamy spittle that didn't seem consistent with choking. Choking he surely was, though; the plump chest heaved vainly, fighting for breath.

"Quickly, turn him on his side," I said. Several hands reached out at once to help, and the heavy body was deftly turned, broad black-serge back toward me. I drove the heel of my hand hard between the shoulder-blades, smacking him repeatedly with a dull thumping noise. The massive back quivered slightly with the blows, but there was no answering jerk as of an obstruction suddenly released.

I gripped a meaty shoulder and pulled him onto his back once more. Geilie bent close over the staring face, calling his name, massaging his mottled throat. The eyes were rolled back now, and the drumming heels began to slacken their beat. The hands, clawed in agony, suddenly flung wide, smacking an anxiously crouching onlooker in the face.

The sputtering noises abruptly ceased, and the stout body went limp, lying inert as a sack of barley on the stone flags. I felt frantically for a pulse in one slack wrist, noticing with half an eye that Geilie was doing the same, pulling up the round, shaven chin and pressing her fingertips hard into the flesh under the angle of the jaw in search of the carotid artery.

Both searches were futile. Arthur Duncan's heart, already taxed by the necessity of pumping blood through that massive frame for so many years, had given up the struggle.

I tried all the resuscitative techniques at my disposal, useless though I knew them now to be: arm-flapping, chest-massage, even mouth-to-mouth breathing, distasteful as that was, but with the expected result. Arthur Duncan was dead as a doornail.

I straightened wearily and stood back, as Father Bain, with a nasty glare at me, dropped to his knees by the fiscal's side and began hastily to administer the final rites. My back and arms ached, and my face felt oddly numb. The hubbub around me seemed strangely remote, as though a curtain separated me from the crowded hall. I closed my eyes and rubbed a hand across my tingling lips, trying to erase the taste of death.

* * *

Despite the death of the fiscal, and the subsequent formalities of obsequies and burial, the Duke's stag hunt was delayed by no more than a week.

The realization of Jamie's imminent departure was deeply depressing; I suddenly realized just how much I looked forward to seeing him at dinner after the day's work, how my heart would leap when I saw him unexpectedly at odd moments during the day, and how much I depended on his company and his solid, reassuring presence amid the complexities of life in the castle. And, to be perfectly honest, how much I liked the smooth, warm strength of him in my bed each night, and waking to his tousled, smiling kisses in the mornings. The prospect of his absence was bleak.

He held me closely, my head snuggled under his chin.

"I'll miss you, Jamie," I said softly.

He hugged me tighter, and gave a rueful chuckle.

"So will I, Sassenach. I hadna expected it, to tell the truth—but it will hurt me to leave ye." He stroked my back gently, fingers tracing the bumps of the vertebrae.

"Jamie … you'll be careful?"

I could feel the deep rumble of amusement in his chest as he answered.

"Of the Duke or the horse?" He was, much to my apprehension, intending to ride Donas on the stag hunt. I had visions of the huge sorrel beast plunging over a cliff out of sheer wrong-headedness, or trampling Jamie under those lethal hooves.

"Both," I said dryly. "If the horse throws you and you break a leg, you'll be at the Duke's mercy."

"True. Dougal will be there, though."

I snorted. "He'll break the other leg."

He laughed and bent his head to kiss me.

"I'll be careful, *mo duinne*. Will ye give me the same promise?"

"Yes," I said, meaning it. "Do you mean whoever left the ill-wish?"

The momentary amusement was gone now.

"Perhaps. I dinna think you're in any danger, or I wouldna leave ye. But still … oh, and stay away from Geillis Duncan."

"What? Why?" I drew back a little to look up at him. It was a dark night and his face was invisible, but his tone was altogether serious.

"The woman's known as a witch, and the stories about her—well, they've got a deal worse since her husband died. I dinna want ye anywhere near her, Sassenach."

"Do you honestly think she's a witch?" I demanded. His strong hands cupped my bottom and scooped me in close to him. I put my arms around him, enjoying the feel of his smooth, solid torso.

"No," he said finally. "But it isna what *I* think that could be a danger to ye. Will ye promise?"

"All right." In truth, I had little reluctance to give the promise; since the incidents of the changeling and the summoning, I had not felt much desire to visit Geilie. I put my mouth on Jamie's nipple, flicking it lightly with my tongue. He made a small sound deep in his throat and pulled me nearer.

"Open your legs," he whispered. "I mean to be sure you'll remember me while I'm gone."

Sometime later, I woke feeling cold. Groping sleepily for the quilt, I couldn't find it. Suddenly it came up over me of its own accord. Surprised, I raised up on one elbow to look.

"I'm sorry," Jamie said. "I didna mean to wake ye, lass."

"What are you doing? Why are you awake?" I squinted over my shoulder at him. It was still dark, but my eyes were so accustomed that I could see the faintly sheepish expression on his face. He was wide awake, sitting on a stool by the side of the bed, his plaid flung around him for warmth.

"It's only … well, I dreamed you were lost, and I couldna find ye. It woke me, and … I wanted to look at ye, is all. To fix ye in my mind, to remember while I'm gone. I turned back the quilt; I'm sorry you were chilled."

"It's all right." The night was cold, and very quiet, as though we were the only two souls in the world. "Come into bed. You must be chilled too."

He slid in next to me and curled himself against my back. His hands stroked me from neck to shoulder, waist to hip, tracing the lines of my back, the curves of my body.

"Mo duinne," he said softly. "But now I should say *mo airgeadach*. My silver one. Your hair is silver-gilt and your skin is white velvet. *Calman geal*. White dove."

I pressed my hips back against him, inviting, and settled against him with a sigh as his solid hardness filled me. He held me against his chest and moved with me, slowly, deeply. I gasped a little and he slackened his hold.

"I'm sorry," he murmured. "I didna mean to hurt ye. But I do want to be in you, to stay in you, so deep. I want to leave the feel of me deep inside ye with my seed. I want to hold ye so and stay wi' you 'til dawn, and leave you sleeping and go, with the shapes of you warm in my hands."

I pressed firmly back against him.

"You won't hurt me."

* * *

After Jamie's departure, I moped about the castle. I saw patients in the surgery, I occupied myself as much as I could in the gardens, and I tried to distract myself by browsing in Colum's library, but still time hung heavy on my hands.

I had been alone nearly two weeks, when I met the girl Laoghaire in the corridor outside the kitchens. I had watched her covertly now and then, since the day when I had seen her on the landing outside Colum's study. She seemed blooming enough, but there was an air of tenseness about her that was easily discernible. She seemed distracted and moody—and little wonder, poor girl, I thought kindly.

Today, though, she looked somewhat excited.

"Mrs. Fraser!" she said. "I've a message for you." The widow Duncan, she said, had sent word that she was ill, and requested me to come and tend her.

I hesitated, remembering Jamie's injunctions, but the twin forces of compassion and boredom were sufficient to set me on the road to the village within the hour, my medicine box strapped behind me on the horse's saddle.

The Duncans' house when I arrived had an air of neglected abandon, a sense of disorder that extended through the house itself. There was no answer to my knock, and when I pushed the door open, I found the entry hall and parlor scattered with books and dirty glasses, mats askew and dust thick on the furniture. My calls produced no maidservant, and the kitchen proved to be as empty and disordered as the rest of the house.

Increasingly anxious, I went upstairs. The bedroom in front also was vacant, but I heard a faint shuffling noise from the stillroom across the landing.

Pushing open the door, I saw Geilie, sitting in a comfortable chair, feet propped on the counter. She had been drinking; there was a glass and decanter on the counter, and the room smelled strongly of brandy.

She was startled to see me, but struggled to her feet, smiling. Her eyes were slightly out of focus, I thought, but she certainly seemed well enough.

“What’s the matter?” I asked. “Aren’t you ill?”

She goggled at me in amazement. “Ill? Me? No. The servants have all left, and there’s no food in the house, but there’s plenty of brandy. Will ye have a drop?” She turned back toward the decanter. I grabbed her sleeve.

“You didn’t send for me?”

“No.” She stared at me, wide-eyed.

“Then why—” My question was interrupted by a noise from outside. A far-off, rumbling, muttering sort of noise. I had heard it before, from this room, and my palms had grown sweaty then at the thought of confronting the mob that made it.

I wiped my hands on the skirts of my dress. The rumbling was nearer, and there was neither need nor time for questions.

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25

THOU SHALT NOT SUFFER A WITCH TO LIVE

The drab-clad shoulders ahead of me parted on darkness. My elbow struck wood with a bone-numbing thump as I was shoved roughly over a threshold of some sort, and I fell headlong into a black stench, alive and wriggling with unseen forms. I shrieked and thrashed, trying to free myself from entanglement with innumerable scrabbling tiny feet and an attack by something larger, that squealed and struck me a hard blow on the thigh.

I succeeded in rolling away, though only a foot or two before I hit an earthen wall that sent a shower of dirt cascading down on my head. I huddled as close to it as I could get, trying to suppress my own gasping breath so that I could hear whatever was trapped in this reeking pit with me. Whatever it was, was large, and breathing hoarsely, but not growling. A pig, perhaps?

"Who's there?" came a voice from the Stygian black, sounding scared but defiantly loud. "Claire, is it you?"

"Geilie!" I gasped and groped toward her, meeting her hands likewise searching. We clasped each other tightly, rocking slightly back and forth in the gloom.

"Is there anything else in here besides us?" I asked, glancing cautiously around. Even with my eyes now accustomed to the dark, there was precious little to be seen. There were faint streaks of light coming from somewhere above, but the tenebrous shadows were shoulder-high here below; I could barely make out Geilie's face, level with my own and only a few inches away.

She laughed, a little shakily. “Several mice, I think, and other vermin. And a smell that would knock a ferret over.”

“I noticed the smell. Where in God’s name are we?”

“The thieves’ hole. Stand back!”

There was a grating sound from overhead and a sudden shaft of light. I pressed myself against the wall, barely in time to avoid a shower of mud and filth that cascaded through a small opening in the roof of our prison. A single soft plop followed the deluge. Geilie bent and picked up something from the floor. The opening above remained, and I could see that what she held was a small loaf, stale and smeared with assorted muck. She dusted it gingerly with a fold of her skirt.

“Dinner,” she said. “Hungry, are you?”

* * *

The hole above remained open, and empty, save for the occasional missile flung by a passerby. The drizzle came in, and a searching wind. It was cold, damp, and thoroughly miserable. Suitable, I supposed, for the malefactors it was meant to house. Thieves, vagrants, blasphemers, adulterers … and suspected witches.

Geilie and I huddled together for warmth against one wall, not speaking much. There was little to say, and precious little either of us could do for ourselves, beyond possess our souls in patience.

The hole above grew gradually darker as the night came on, until it faded into the black all around.

* * *

“How long do you think they mean to keep us here?”

Geilie shifted, stretching her legs so that the small oblong of morning light from above shone on the striped linen of her skirt. Originally a fresh pink and white, it was now considerably the worse for wear.

“Not too long,” she said. “They’ll be waiting for the ecclesiastical examiners. Arthur had letters last month, arranging for it. The second week of October, it was. They should be here any time.”

She rubbed her hands together to warm them, then put them on her knees, in the little square of sunlight.

"Tell me about the examiners," I said. "What will happen, exactly?"

"I canna say, exactly. I've ne'er seen a witch trial, though I've heard of them, of course." She paused a moment, considering. "They'll not be expecting a witch trial, since they were coming to try some land disputes. So they'll not have a witch-pricker, at least."

"A what?"

"Witches canna feel pain," Geilie explained. "Nor do they bleed when they're pricked." The witch-pricker, equipped with a variety of pins, lancets, and other pointed implements, was charged with testing for this condition. I vaguely recalled something of this from Frank's books, but had thought it a practice common to the seventeenth century, not this one. On the other hand, I thought wryly, Cranesmuir was not exactly a hotbed of civilization.

"In that case, it's too bad there won't be one," I said, though recoiling slightly at the thought of being stabbed repeatedly. "We could pass that test with no difficulty. Or I could," I added caustically. "I imagine they'd get ice water, not blood, when they tried it on you."

"I'd not be too sure," she said reflectively, overlooking the insult. "I've heard of witch-prickers with special pins—made to collapse when they're pressed against the skin, so it looks as though they don't go in."

"But why? Why try to prove someone a witch on purpose?"

The sun was on the decline now, but the afternoon light was enough to suffuse our hutch with a dim glow. The elegant oval of Geilie's face showed only pity for my innocence.

"Ye still dinna understand, do ye?" she said. "They mean to kill us. And it doesna matter much what the charge is, or what the evidence shows. We'll burn, all the same."

The night before, I had been too shocked from the mob's attack and the misery of our surroundings to do more than huddle with Geilie and wait for the dawn. With the light, though, what remained of my spirit was beginning to awake.

"Why, Geilie?" I asked, feeling rather breathless. "Do you know?" The atmosphere in the hole was thick with the stench of rot, filth, and damp soil, and I felt as though the impenetrable earthen walls were about to cave in upon me like the sides of an ill-dug grave.

I felt rather than saw her shrug; the shaft of light from above had moved with the sun, and now struck the wall of our prison, leaving us in cold dark below.

“If it’s much comfort to ye,” she said dryly, “I misdoubt ye were meant to be taken. It’s a matter between me and Colum—you had the ill-luck to be with me when the townsfolk came. Had ye been wi’ Colum, you’d likely have been safe enough, Sassenach or no.”

The term “Sassenach,” spoken in its usual derogatory sense, suddenly struck me with a sense of desperate longing for the man who called me so in affection. I wrapped my arms around my body, hugging myself to contain the lonely panic that threatened to envelop me.

“Why did you come to my house?” Geilie asked curiously.

“I thought you had sent for me. One of the girls at the castle brought me a message—from you, she said.”

“Ah,” she said thoughtfully. “Laoghaire, was it?”

I sat down and rested my back against the earth wall, despite my revulsion for the muddy, stinking surface. Feeling my movement, Geilie shifted closer. Friends or enemies, we were each other’s only source of warmth in the hole; we huddled together perforce.

“How did you know it was Laoghaire?” I asked, shivering.

“ ’Twas her that left the ill-wish in your bed,” Geilie replied. “I told ye at the first there were those minded your taking the red-haired laddie. I suppose she thought if ye were gone, she’d have a chance at him again.”

I was struck dumb at this, and it took a moment to find my voice.

“But she couldn’t!”

Geilie’s laugh was hoarsened by cold and thirst, but still held that edge of silver.

“Anyone seein’ the way the lad looks at ye would know that. But I dinna suppose she’s seen enough o’ the world to ken such things. Let her lie wi’ a man once or twice, and she’ll know, but not now.”

“That’s not what I meant!” I burst out. “It isn’t Jamie she wants; the girl’s with child by Dougal MacKenzie.”

“What?!” She was genuinely shocked for a moment, and her fingers bit into the flesh of my arm. “How d’ye come to think that?”

I told her of seeing Laoghaire on the stair below Colum’s study, and the conclusions I had come to.

Geilie snorted.

“Pah! She heard Colum and Dougal talking about me; that’s what made her blench—she’d think Colum had heard she’d been to me for the ill-wish. He’d have her whipped to bleeding for that; he doesna allow any truck wi’ such arts.”

“*You* gave her the ill-wish?” I was staggered.

Geilie drew herself sharply away at this.

“I didn’t *give* it to her, no. I sold it to her.”

I stared, trying to meet her eyes through the gathering darkness.

“There’s a difference?”

“Of course there is.” She spoke impatiently. “It was a matter of business, was all. And I don’t give away my customers’ secrets. Besides, she didna tell me who it was meant for. And you’ll remember that I did try to warn ye.”

“Thanks,” I said with some sarcasm. “But …” my brain was churning, trying to rearrange my ideas in light of this new information. “But if she put the ill-wish in my bed, then it was Jamie she wanted. That *would* explain her sending me to your house. But what about Dougal?”

Geilie hesitated for a moment, then seemed to come to some decision.

“The girl’s no more wi’ child by Dougal MacKenzie than you are.”

“How can you be so sure?”

She groped for my hand in the darkness. Finding it, she drew it close and placed it squarely on the swelling bulge beneath her gown.

“Because I am,” she said simply.

“Not Laoghaire then,” I said. “You.”

“Me.” She spoke quite simply, without any of her usual affectation. “What was it Colum said—‘I’ll see that she’s done rightly by'? Well, I suppose this is his idea of a suitable disposal of the problem."

I was silent for a long time, mulling things over.

"Geilie," I said at last, "that stomach trouble of your husband's …"

She sighed. "White arsenic," she said. "I thought it would finish him before the child began to show too much, but he hung on longer than I thought possible."

I remembered the look of mingled horror and realization on Arthur Duncan's face as he burst out of his wife's closet on the last day of his life.

"I see," I said. "He didn't know you were with child until he saw you half-dressed, the day of the Duke's banquet. And when he found out … I suppose he had good reason to know it wasn't his?"

There was a faint laugh from the far corner.

"The saltpeter came dear, but it was worth every farthing."

I shuddered slightly, hunched against the wall.

"But that's why you had to risk killing him in public, at the banquet. He would have denounced you as an adulteress—and a poisoner. Or do you think he realized about the arsenic?"

"Oh, Arthur knew," she said. "He wouldna admit it, to be sure—not even to himself. But he knew. We'd sit across the board from each other at supper, and I'd ask, 'Will ye have a bit more o' the cullen skink, my dear?' or 'A sup of ale, my own?' And him watching me, with those eyes like boiled eggs, and he'd say no, he didna feel himself with an appetite just then. And he'd push his plate back, and later I'd hear him in the kitchen, secret-like, gobbling his food standing by the hutch, thinking himself safe, because he ate no food that came from my hand."

Her voice was light and amused as though she had been recounting some bit of juicy gossip. I shuddered again, drawing away from the thing that shared the darkness with me.

"He didna guess it was in the tonic he took. He'd take no medicine I made; ordered a patent tonic from London—cost the earth too." Her voice was resentful at the extravagance. "The stuff had arsenic in it to start; he didna notice any difference in the taste when I added a bit more."

I had always heard that vanity was the besetting weakness of murderers; it seemed this was true, for she went on, ignoring our situation in the pride of recounting her accomplishments.

"It was a bit risky, to kill him before the whole company like that, but I had to manage something quickly." Not arsenic, either, to kill like that. I remembered the fiscal's hard blue lips and the numbness of my own where they had touched him. A quick and deadly poison.

And here I had thought that Dougal was confessing to an affair with Laoghaire. But in that case, while Colum might be disapproving, there would have been nothing to prevent Dougal marrying the girl. He was a widower, and free.

But an adulterous affair, with the wife of the fiscal? That was a different kettle of fish for all concerned. I seemed to recall that the penalties for adultery were severe. Colum could hardly smooth over an affair of that magnitude, but I couldn't see him condemning his brother to public whipping or banishment. And Geilie might well consider murder a reasonable alternative to being burnt on the face with a hot iron and shut up for several years in a prison, pounding hemp for twelve hours a day.

So she had taken her preventive measures, and Colum had taken his. And here was I, caught up in the middle.

"The child, though?" I asked. "Surely …"

There was a grim chuckle in the blackness. "Accidents happen, my friend. To the best of us. And once it happened …" I felt rather than saw her shrug. "I meant to get rid of it, but then I thought it might be a way to make him marry me, once Arthur was dead."

A horrible suspicion struck me.

"But Dougal's wife was still alive, then. Geillis, did you—?"

Her dress rustled as she shook her head, and I caught a faint gleam from her hair.

"I meant to," she said. "But God saved me the trouble. I rather thought that was a sign, you know. And it might all have worked nicely, too, if not for Colum MacKenzie."

I hugged my elbows against the cold. I was talking now only for distraction.

"Was it Dougal you wanted, or only his position and money?"

"Oh, I had plenty of money," she said, with a note of satisfaction. "I knew where Arthur kept the key to all his papers and notes, ye ken. And the man wrote a fair hand, I'll say that for him—'twas simple enough to forge his signature. I'd managed to divert near on to ten thousand pound over the last two years."

"But what for?" I asked, completely startled.

"For Scotland."

"What?" For a moment, I thought I had misheard. Then I decided that one of us was possibly a trifle unbalanced. And going on the evidence to hand, it wasn't me.

"What do you mean, Scotland?" I asked cautiously, drawing away a bit. I wasn't sure just how unstable she was; perhaps pregnancy had unhinged her mind.

"Ye needna fear; I'm not mad." The cynical amusement in her voice made me flush, grateful for the darkness.

"Oh, no?" I said, stung. "By your own admission, you've committed fraud, theft, and murder. It might be charitable to consider that you're mad, because if you're not—"

"Neither mad nor depraved," she said, decisively. "I'm a patriot."

The light dawned. I let out the breath I had been holding in expectation of a deranged attack.

"A Jacobite," I said. "Holy Christ, you're a bloody Jacobite!"

She was. And that explained quite a bit. Why Dougal, generally the mirror of his brother's opinions, should have shown such initiative in raising money for the House of Stuart. And why Geillis Duncan, so well equipped to lead any man she wanted to the altar, had chosen two such dissimilar specimens as Arthur Duncan and Dougal MacKenzie. The one for his money and position, the other for his power to influence public opinion.

"Colum would have been better," she continued. "A pity. His misfortune is my own, as well. It's him would have been the one I should have had; the only man I've seen could be my proper match. Together, we could … well, no help for it. The one man I'd want, and the one man in the world I couldn't touch with the weapon I had."

"So you took Dougal, instead."

"Oh, aye," she said, deep in her own thoughts. "A strong man, and with some power. A bit of property. The ear of the people. But really, he's no more than the legs, and the cock"—she laughed briefly—"of Colum MacKenzie. It's Colum has the strength. Almost as much as I have."

Her boastful tone annoyed me.

"Colum has a few small things that you haven't, so far as I can see. Such as a sense of compassion."

"Ah, yes. 'Bowels of mercy and compassion,' is it?" She spoke ironically. "Much good it may do him. Death sits on his shoulder; ye can see it with half an eye. The man may live two years past Hogmanay; not much longer than that."

"And how much longer will *you* live?" I asked.

The irony turned inward, but the silver voice stayed steady.

"A bit less than that, I expect. No great matter. I've managed a good deal in the time I had; ten thousand pounds diverted to France, and the district roused for Prince Charles. Come the Rising, I shall know I helped. If I live so long."

She stood nearly under the hole in the roof. My eyes were sufficiently accustomed to the darkness that she showed as a pale shape in the murk, a premature and unlaid ghost. She turned abruptly toward me.

"Whatever happens with the examiners, I have no regrets, Claire."

"I regret only that I have but one life to give for my country?" I asked ironically.

"That's nicely put," she said.

"Isn't it, just?"

We fell silent as it grew darker. The black of the hole seemed a tangible force, pressing cold and heavy on my chest, clogging my lungs with the scent of death. At last I huddled into as close a ball as I could, put my head on my knees, and gave up the fight, lapsing into an uneasy doze on the edge between cold and panic.

"Do ye love the man, then?" Geilie asked suddenly.

I raised my head from my knees, startled. I had no idea what time it was; one faint star shone overhead, but shed no light into the hole.

"Who, Jamie?"

"Who else?" she said dryly. "It's his name ye call out in your sleep."

"I didn't know I did that."

"Well, do ye?" The cold encouraged a sort of deadly drowsiness, but Geilie's prodding voice dragged me a bit further out of my stupor.

I hugged my knees, rocking slightly back and forth. The light from the hole above had faded away to the soft dark of early night. The examiners would arrive within the next day or so. It was getting a bit late for prevarications, either to myself or anyone else. While I still found it difficult to admit that I might be in serious danger of death, I was beginning to understand the instinct that made condemned prisoners seek shriving on the eve of execution.

"Really love him, I mean," Geilie persisted. "Not just want to bed him; I know you want that, and he does too. They all do. But do you love him?"

Did I love him? Beyond the urges of the flesh? The hole had the dark anonymity of the confessional, and a soul on the verge of death had no time for lies.

"Yes," I said, and laid my head back on my knees.

It was silent in the hole for some time, and I hovered once more on the verge of sleep, when I heard her speak once more, as though to herself.

"So it's possible," she said thoughtfully.

* * *

The examiners arrived a day later. From the dankness of the thieves' hole, we could hear the stir of their arrival; the shouts of the villagers, and the clopping of horses on the stone of the High Street. The bustle grew fainter as the procession passed down the street toward the distant square.

"They've come," said Geilie, listening to the excitement above.

We clasped hands reflexively, enmities buried in fear.

"Well," I said, with attempted bravado, "I suppose being burned is better than freezing to death."

In the event, we continued to freeze. It was not until noon of the next day that the door of our prison slid abruptly back, and we were pulled out of the pit to be taken to trial.

No doubt to accommodate the crowd of spectators, the session was held in the square, before the Duncans' house. I saw Geilie glance up briefly at the diamond-paned windows of her parlor, then turn away, expressionless.

There were two ecclesiastical examiners, seated on padded stools behind a table that had been erected in the square. One judge was abnormally tall and thin, the other short and stout. They reminded me irresistibly of an American comic-paper I had once seen; not knowing their names, I mentally christened the tall one Mutt and the other Jeff.

Most of the village was there. Looking about, I could see a good many of my former patients. But the inhabitants of the Castle were notably absent.

It was John MacRae, locksman of the village of Cranesmuir, who read out the dittay, or indictment, against the persons of one Geillis Duncan and one Claire Fraser, both accused before the Church's court of the crime of witchcraft.

"Stating in evidence whereof the accused did cause the death of Arthur Duncan, by means of witchcraft," MacRae read, in a firm, steady voice. "And whereas they did procure the death of the unborn child of Janet Robinson, did cause the boat of Thomas MacKenzie to sink, did bring upon the village of Cranesmuir a wasting sickness of the bowels …"

It went on for some time. Colum had been thorough in his preparations.

After the reading of the dittay, the witnesses were called. Most of them were villagers I didn't recognize; none of my own patients were among them, a fact for which I was grateful.

While the testimony of many of the witnesses was simply absurd, and other witnesses had plainly been paid for their services, some had a clear ring of truth to their words. Janet Robinson, for example, who was haled before the court by her father, pale and trembling, with a purple bruise on her cheek, to confess that she had conceived a child by a married man, and sought to rid herself of it, through the offices of Geillis Duncan.

"She gave me a draft to drink, and a charm to say three times, at the rising o' the moon," the girl mumbled, glancing fearfully from Geillis to her father, unsure which one posed the greatest threat. "She said 'twould bring my courses on."

"And did it?" Jeff asked with interest.

"Not at the first, your honor," the girl answered, bobbing her head nervously. "But I took the draft again, at the waning o' the moon, and then it started."

"Started?! The lassie near bled to death!" An elderly lady, plainly the girl's mother, broke in. " 'Twas only because she felt herself to be dyin' as she told me the truth o' the matter." More than willing to add to the gory details, Mrs. Robinson was shut up with some difficulty, in order to make way for the succeeding witnesses.

There seemed to be no one with anything in particular to say about me, aside from the vague accusation that since I had been present at Arthur Duncan's death, and had laid hands on him before he died, clearly I must have had something to do with it. I began to think that Geilie was right; I had not been Colum's target. That being so, I thought it possible that I would escape. Or at least I thought so until the hill woman appeared.

When she came forward, a thin, bowed woman with a yellow shawl, I sensed that we were in serious trouble. She was not one of the villagers; no one I had ever seen before. Her feet were bare, stained with the dust of the road she had walked to come here.

"Have ye a charge to make against either o' the women here?" asked the tall, thin judge.

The woman was afraid; she wouldn't raise her eyes to look at the judges. She bobbed her head briefly, though, and the crowd quieted its murmur to hear her.

Her voice was low, and Mutt had to ask her to repeat herself.

She and her husband had an ailing child, born healthy but then turned puny and unthrifty. Finally deciding that the child was a fairy changeling, they had placed it in the Fairy's Seat on the hill of Croich Gorm. Keeping watch so as to recover their own child when the fairies should return it, they had seen the two ladies standing here go to the Fairy's Seat, pick up the child and speak strange spells over it.

The woman twisted her thin hands together, working them under her apron.

"We watched through the nicht, sirs. And when the dark came, soon after there cam' a great demon, a huge black shape comin' through the shadows wi' no sound, to lean ower the spot where we'd laid the babe."

There was an awed murmur from the crowd, and I felt the hair on the back of my neck stir slightly, even knowing as I did that the "great demon" had been Jamie, gone to see whether the child still lived. I braced myself, knowing what was coming next.

"And when the sun rose, my man and I went to see. And there we found the changeling babe, dead on the hill, and no sign of our own wee bairn." At this, she broke, and threw her apron over her face to hide her weeping.

As though the mother of the changeling had been a signal of some sort, the crowd parted and the figure of Peter the drover came out. I groaned inwardly when I saw him. I had felt the emotions of the crowd turn against me as the woman spoke; all I needed now was for this man to tell the court about the waterhorse.

Enjoying his moment of celebrity, the drover drew himself up and pointed dramatically at me.

" 'Tis right ye are to call her witch, my lords! Wi' my own eyes I saw this woman call up a waterhorse from the waters of the Evil Loch, to do her bidding! A great fearsome creature, sirs, tall as a pine tree, wi' a neck like a great blue snake, an' eyes big as apples, wi' a look in them as would steal the soul from a man."

The judges appeared impressed with his testimony, and whispered between themselves for several minutes, while Peter glared defiantly at me, with a "that'll show *you*!" sort of look.

At length, the fat judge broke from the conference and beckoned imperiously to John MacRae, who stood to one side, alert for trouble.

"Locksman!" he said. He turned and pointed at the drover.

"Tak' that man away and shut him up in the pillory for public drunkenness. This is a solemn coort o' law; we'll no ha' the time of the examiners wasted by frivolous accusations from a sot who sees waterhorses when he's taken too much whisky!"

Peter the drover was so astonished that he did not even resist as the locksman strode firmly forward and took him by the arm. Mouth hanging open, he glared back wildly in my direction as he was led away. I couldn't resist fluttering my fingers in a tiny salute after him.

After this slight break in the tension of the proceedings, though, things got rapidly worse. There was a procession of girls and women to swear that they had bought charms and philtres from Geillis Duncan, for purposes such as causing illness, ridding oneself of an unwanted babe, or casting spells of love upon some man. All, without exception, swore that the charms had worked—an enviable record for a general practitioner, I thought cynically. While no one claimed such results for me, there were several to say—truthfully—that they had seen me often in Mrs. Duncan's herb room, mixing medicines and grinding herbs.

Still, that might not have been fatal; there were an equal number of people to claim that I had healed them, using nothing more than ordinary medicines, with nothing in the way of spells, charms, or general hocus-pocus. Given the force of public opinion, it took some nerve for these people to step forward to testify in my behalf, and I was grateful.

My feet were aching from standing so long; while the judges sat in relative comfort, no stools were provided for the prisoners. But when the next witness appeared, I entirely forgot my feet.

With an instinct for drama that rivaled Colum's, Father Bain flung wide the door of the kirk and emerged into the square, limping heavily on an oaken crutch. He advanced slowly to the center of the square, inclined his head to the judges, then turned and surveyed the crowd, until his steely glare had reduced the noise to a low, uneasy muttering. When he spoke, his voice lashed out like the crack of a whip.

"It's a judgment on ye, ye folk o' Cranesmuir! 'Before him went the pestilence, and burning coals went forth with his feet.' Aye, ye've allowed yerselves to be seduced from the paths o' righteousness! Ye've sown the wind, and the whirlwind's amongst ye now!"

I stared, somewhat taken aback by this unsuspected gift for rhetoric. Or perhaps he was capable of such flights of oratory only under the stimulus of crisis. The florid voice thundered on.

"The pestilence will come upon ye, and ye shall die o' your sins, unless ye be cleansed! Ye've welcomed the whore of Babylon into yer midst"—That was me, I assumed, from the glare he shot at me—"Ye've sold your soul to your enemies, ye've taken the English viper to your bosom, and now the vengeance o' the Lord God Almighty is on ye. 'Deliver thee from the strange woman, even from the stranger that flattereth with her words. For her house inclineth unto death, and her paths unto the dead.' Repent, people, before it's too late! Fall to your knees, I say, and pray for forgiveness! Cast out the English whore, and renounce your bargain wi' the spawn o' Satan!" He snatched the rosary from his belt and brandished the large wooden crucifix in my direction.

Entertaining as this all was, I could see Mutt becoming rather restive. Professional jealousy, perhaps.

"Er, your Reverence," the judge said, with a slight bow in Father Bain's direction, "have ye evidence to bring as to the charge regarding these women?"

"That I have." The first explosion of oratory spent, the little priest was calm now. He leveled a menacing forefinger in my direction and I had to brace myself to keep from taking a step backward.

"At noonday on a Tuesday, two weeks past, I met this woman in the gardens of Castle Leoch. Using unnatural powers, she called down a pack of hounds upon me, such that I fell before them, and was in mortal peril. Bein' wounded grievously in the leg, I made to leave her presence. The woman tried to lure me wi' her sinfulness, to go awa’ in private with her, and when I resisted her wiles, she cast a curse upon me.”

“What bloody nonsense!” I said indignantly. “That’s the most ridiculous exaggeration I’ve ever heard!”

Father Bain’s eye, dark and glittering as with fever, swiveled from the examiners and fixed on me.

“Do ye deny, woman, that ye said these words to me? ‘Come with me now, priest, or your wound shall fester and go putrid’?”

“Well, tone it down a bit, but something to that effect, perhaps,” I admitted.

Jaw clenched in triumph, the priest whipped aside the skirts of his soutane. A bandage stained with dried blood and wet with yellow pus encircled his thigh. The pale flesh of the leg puffed above and below the bandage, with ominous red streaks extending up from the hidden wound.

“Jesus Christ, man!” I said, shocked at the sight. “You’ve got blood poisoning. You need it tended, and right now, or you’ll die!”

There was a deep murmur of shock from the crowd. Even Mutt and Jeff seemed a bit stunned.

Father Bain shook his head slowly.

“You hear?” he demanded. “The temerity of the woman kens nae bounds. She curses me wi’ death, a man of God, before the judgment seat of the kirk itself!”

The excited murmuring of the crowd grew louder. Father Bain spoke again, raising his voice slightly in order to be heard over the noise.

“I leave ye, gentlemen, wi’ the judgment o’ your own senses, and the injunction o’ the Lord—‘Ye shallna suffer a witch to live!’ ”

* * *

Father Bain’s dramatic evidence put a stop to the testimony. Presumably no one was prepared to top *that* performance. The judges called a short recess and were brought refreshments from the inn. No such amenities were forthcoming for the accused.

I braced myself and pulled experimentally against my bonds. The leather of the straps creaked a bit, but didn’t give an inch. This, I thought cynically, trying to still my panic, was surely where the dashing young hero was meant to ride through the crowd, beating back the cringing townspeople and scooping the fainting heroine up onto his saddle.

But my own dashing young hero was out in the forest somewhere, swilling ale with an aging poofter of noble blood and slaughtering innocent deer. It was rather unlikely, I thought, gritting my teeth, that Jamie would return in time even to gather up my ashes for ceremonial disposal, before I was scattered to the four winds.

Preoccupied with my growing fear, I didn't at first hear the hoofbeats. It was only as the faint murmurs and head-turnings of the crowd attracted my attention that I noticed the rhythmic clopping, ringing from the stones of the High Street.

The murmurs of surprise grew louder, and the fringes of the crowd began to draw apart to admit the rider, still beyond the range of my sight. Despite my earlier despair, I began to feel a faint flicker of illogical hope. What if Jamie had come back early? Perhaps the Duke's advances had been too pressing, or the deer too few and far between. Whatever it might be, I strained on tiptoe to see the face of the approaching rider.

The ranks of the crowd parted reluctantly as the horse, a strong bay, poked its long nose between two sets of shoulders. Before the astonished eyes of everyone—including me—the sticklike figure of Ned Gowan spryly dismounted.

Jeff surveyed the spare, neat form before him with some astonishment.

"And you are, sir?" No doubt his tone of reluctant courtesy was a result of the visitor's silver shoe-buckles and velvet coat—employment with the laird of clan MacKenzie was not without its compensations.

"My name is Edward Gowan, your lordship," he said precisely. "Solicitor."

Mutt hunched his shoulders and wriggled a bit; the stool he had been provided had no back, and his lengthy torso was no doubt feeling the strain. I stared hard at him, wishing him a herniated lumbar disk. If I were about to be burnt for having an evil eye, I thought, let it count for something.

"Solicitor?" he rumbled. "What brings you here, then?"

Ned Gowan's grey peruke inclined itself in the most precise of formal bows.

"I have come to offer my humble services in the support of Mistress Fraser, your lordships," he said, "a most gracious lady, whom I know of my own witness to be as kind and beneficial in the administration of the healing arts as she is knowledgeable in their application."

Very nice, I thought approvingly. Get a blow in for our side first thing. Looking across the square, I could see Geilie's mouth quirk up in a half-admiring, half-derisive smile. While Ned Gowan wouldn't be everyone's choice as Prince Charming, I was not inclined to be picky at a time like this. I would take my champions as they came.

With a bow to the judges and another, no less formal, to myself, Mr. Gowan drew himself still straighter than his normal upright posture, braced both thumbs in the waist of his breeks, and prepared with all the romanticism of his aged, gallant heart to do battle, fighting with the law's chosen weapon of excruciating boredom.

Boring he most certainly was. With the deadly precision of an automated mincing machine, he arranged each charge of the dittay on the slab of his scrutiny and diced it ruthlessly into shreds with the blade of statute and the cleaver of precedent.

It was a noble performance. He talked. And he talked. And he talked some more, seeming occasionally to pause respectfully for instruction from the bench, but in fact only drawing breath for another onslaught of verbiage.

With my life hanging in the balance, and my future entirely dependent on the eloquence of this skinny little man, I should have hung rapt on his every word. Instead, I found myself yawning appallingly, unable to cover my gaping mouth, and shifting from foot to aching foot, wishing fervently that they would burn me at once and end this torture.

The crowd appeared to feel much the same, and as the high excitement of the morning faded into ennui, Mr. Gowan's small, tidy voice went on and on and on. People began to drift away, suddenly mindful of beasts that needed milking and floors that wanted sweeping, secure in the surety that nothing of any interest could possibly happen while that deadly voice droned on.

When Ned Gowan finally finished his initial defense, evening had set in; and the squatty judge I had named Jeff announced that the court would reconvene in the morning.

After a short, muttering conference amongst Ned Gowan, Jeff, and John MacRae the locksman, I was led off toward the inn between two burly townsmen. Casting a glance over my shoulder, I saw Geilie being moved away in the opposite direction, back straight, refusing to be hurried, or for that matter, to acknowledge her surroundings in any way.

In the dark back room of the inn, my bonds were at last removed, and a candle brought. Then Ned Gowan arrived, bearing a bottle of ale and a plate of meat and bread.

“I’ve but the few minutes with ye, my dear, and that hard-won, so listen closely.” The little man leaned nearer, conspiratorial in the flickering candlelight. His eyes were bright, and save a slight disarrangement of his peruke, he gave no hint of exertion or fatigue.

“Mr. Gowan, I am so glad to see you,” I said sincerely.

“Yes, yes, my dear,” he said, “but there’s no time for that now.” He patted my hand in a kindly but perfunctory fashion.

“I’ve succeeded in getting them to consider your case as separate from that of Mrs. Duncan, and that may be of help. It would appear that there was no original intent to arrest you, but that you were taken because of your association with the w—with Mrs. Duncan.”

“Still,” he continued briskly, “there is some danger to ye, and I’ll not hide it from you. The climate of opinion in the village is none too favorable to ye at present. What possessed ye,” he demanded, with uncharacteristic heatedness, “to touch that child?”

I opened my mouth to reply, but he waved the question aside impatiently.

“Ah, well, it’s of no matter now. What we must do is to play upon the fact of your Englishness—and hence your ignorance, ye ken, not your strangeness—and draw matters out so long as we may. Time is on our side, ye see, for the worst of these trials take place in a climate of hysteria, when the soundness of evidence may be disregarded for the sake of satisfyin' blood-hunger."

Blood-hunger. That captured completely the feeling of the emotion I had felt emanating from the faces of the mob. Here and there I saw some traces of doubt or sympathy, but it was a rare soul who would stand against a crowd, and Cranesmuir was rather lacking in characters of that stamp. Or no, I corrected myself. There was one—this dry little Edinburgh lawyer, tough as the old boot he so strongly resembled.

"The longer we go on," Mr. Gowan continued matter-of-factly, "the less inclined anyone will be to take hasty action. So," he said, hands on his knees, "your part on the morrow is only to keep silent. I shall do all the talkin', and pray God it will be to some effect."

"That seems sound enough," I said, with a weary attempt at a smile. I glanced at the door to the front of the inn, where voices were being raised. Catching my look, Mr. Gowan nodded.

"Aye, I'll have to leave ye momentarily. I've arranged that you'll spend the night here." He glanced around dubiously. A small shed tacked on to the inn, and used mostly for the storage of oddments and spare supplies, it was cold and dark, but an improvement of several-fold over the thieves' hole.

The door to the shed opened, silhouetting the form of the innkeeper, peering into the dark behind the pale waver of a candle flame. Mr. Gowan rose to go, but I gripped him by the sleeve. There was one thing I needed to know.

"Mr. Gowan—did Colum send you to help me?" He hesitated in his reply, but within the limits of his profession, he was a man of irreproachable honesty.

"No," he said bluntly. A look almost of embarrassment flitted over his withered features, and he added, "I came for … for myself." He clapped his hat upon his head and turned to the door, wishing me a brief "Good e'en," before disappearing into the light and bustle of the inn.

There had been little preparation for my accommodation, but a small jug of wine and a loaf of bread—clean, this time—sat on one of the hogsheads, and there was an old blanket folded on the ground at its foot.

I wrapped myself in the blanket and sat down on one of the smaller casks to dine, musing as I munched the sparse fare.

So Colum had not sent the lawyer. Had he known, even, that Mr. Gowan intended to come? Chances were that Colum had forbidden anyone to come down to the village, for fear of being caught up in the witch-hunt. The waves of fear and hysteria that swept over the village were palpable; I could feel them beating against the walls of my flimsy shelter.

A noisy outburst from the nearby taproom distracted me from my thoughts. Perhaps it was only deathwatch plus one. But on the edge of destruction, even an extra hour was cause for thanks. I rolled myself up in the blanket, pulled it over my head to shut out the noises from the inn, and tried very hard to feel nothing but gratitude.

* * *

After an exceedingly restless night, I was roused soon after dawn and marched back out to the square, though the judges didn't arrive for another hour.

Fine, fat, and full of breakfast, they buckled straight down to work. Jeff turned to John MacRae, who had returned to his station behind the accused.

"We find ourselves unable to determine guilt solely on the basis of the evidence presented." There was a burst of outrage from the regathered crowd, which had made its own determination, but this was quelled by Mutt, who turned a pair of eyes like gimlets on the young workmen in the front row, quieting their yapping like dogs doused with cold water. Order restored, he turned his angular face back to the locksman.

"Conduct the prisoners to the loch side, if ye please." There was a pleased sound of expectation at this that roused all my worst suspicions. John MacRae took me by one arm and Geilie by the other, to steer us along, but he had plenty of help. Vicious hands tore at my gown, pinching and pushing as I was yanked along. Some idiot had a drum, and was beating out a ragged tattoo. The crowd was chanting in a rough rhythm to the tuck of the drum, something that I didn't catch among the random shouts and cries. I didn't think I wanted to know what they were saying.

The procession flowed down the meadow to the edge of the loch, where a small wooden quay projected into the water. We were pulled out to the end of this, where the two judges had taken up their posts, one at either side of the quay. Jeff turned to the crowd waiting onshore.

"Bring out the cords!" There was a general mutter and expectant looking around from one to another, until someone ran up hastily with a length of thin rope. MacRae took it and approached me rather hesitantly. He stole a glance at the examiners, though, which seemed to harden his resolve.

"Please be so kind as to remove your shoon, Ma'am," he ordered.

"What the he—, what for?" I demanded, crossing my arms.

He blinked, plainly unprepared for resistance, but one of the judges forestalled his reply.

" 'Tis the proper procedure for trial by water. The suspected witch shall have the right thumb bound by a cord of hemp to the great toe of the left foot. Likewise, the left thumb shall be bound to the right great toe. And then …" He cast an eloquent glance at the waters of the loch. Two fishermen stood barefooted in the mud of the shore, trews rolled above their knees and tied with twine. Grinning insinuatingly at me, one of them picked up a small stone and heaved it out across the steely surface. It skipped once and sank.

"Upon entering the water," the short judge chimed in, "a guilty witch will float, as the purity of the water rejects her tainted person. An innocent woman will sink."

"So I've the choice of being condemned as a witch or being found innocent but drowned, have I?" I snapped. "No thank you!" I hugged my elbows harder, trying to still the shiver that seemed to have become a permanent part of my flesh.

The short judge puffed himself up like a threatened toad.

"You'll nae speak before this court without leave, woman! Do ye dare to refuse lawful examination?"

“Do I dare refuse to be drowned? Too right I do!” Too late I caught sight of Geilie, frantically shaking her head, so that the fair hair swirled around her face.

The judge turned to MacRae.

“Strip her and skelp her,” he said flatly.

Through a daze of disbelief, I heard a collective inhalation, presumably of shocked dismay—in truth, of anticipatory enjoyment. And I realized just what hate really meant. Not theirs. Mine.

They didn’t bother taking me back to the village square. So far as I was now concerned, I had little left to lose, and I didn’t make it easy for them.

Rough hands jerked me forward, yanking at the edges of blouse and bodice.

“Let go of me, you bloody lout!” I yelled, and kicked one manhandler squarely where it would do most good. He crumpled with a groan, but his doubled form was quickly lost in a boiling eruption of shouting, spitting, glaring faces. More hands seized my arms and hustled me stumbling onward, half-lifting me over bodies fallen in the crush, pushing me bodily through gaps too small to walk through.

Someone hit me in the stomach, and I lost my breath. My bodice was virtually in shreds by this time, so it was with no great difficulty that the remainder was stripped off. I had never suffered from excessive modesty, but standing half-naked before the jeers of that crowd of ill-wishers, with the prints of sweaty hands on my bare breasts, filled me with a hatred and humiliation I could not even have imagined.

John MacRae bound my hands before me, looping a woven rope about my wrists, leaving a length of several feet. He had the grace to look ashamed as he did it, but would not raise his eyes to mine, and it was clear I could expect neither help nor lenience from that quarter; he was as much at the mercy of the crowd as I was.

Geilie was there, no doubt similarly treated; I caught a glimpse of her platinum hair, flying in a sudden breeze. My arms stretched high above my head as the rope was thrown over the branch of a large oak and hauled tight. I gritted my teeth and held tight to my fury; it was the only thing I had to combat my fear. There was an air of breathless expectancy, punctuated by the excited murmurs and shouts from the crowd of watchers.

"Give it 'er, John!" one shouted. "Get on wi' it!"

John MacRae, sensitive to the theatrical responsibilities of his profession, paused, scourge held level at waist height, and surveyed the crowd. He walked forward and gently adjusted my position, so that I faced the trunk of the tree, almost touching the rough bark. Then he drew back two paces, raised the whip and let it fall.

The shock of it was worse than the pain. In fact, it was only after several blows that I realized the locksman was doing his level best to spare me what he could. Still, one or two blows were hard enough to break the skin; I felt the sharp tingle in the wake of the impact.

I had my eyes shut tight, cheek pressed hard against the wood, trying for all I was worth to be somewhere else. Suddenly, though, I heard something that recalled me at once to the here and now.

"Claire!"

There was a little slack in the rope that bound my wrists; enough to let me make a lunge that brought me clear around, facing the mob. My sudden escape disconcerted the locksman, who brought his lash down on empty air, stumbled forward off-balance, and knocked his head against a limb. This had a very good effect on the mob, who roared insults and started jeering at him.

My hair was in my eyes, stuck to my face with sweat, tears, and the filth of confinement. I shook my head to free it, and managed at least a sidelong glance that confirmed what my ears had heard.

Jamie was shoving his way through the hindering crowd, face like thunder, ruthlessly taking advantage of his size and muscle.

I felt very much like General MacAuliffe at Bastogne, sighting Patton's Third Army in the offing. In spite of the horrible danger to Geilie, to me, and now to Jamie himself, I had never been so happy to see anyone.

"The witch's man!" "Her husband, it is!" "Stinkin' Fraser! Crowner!" and similar epithets began to be heard among the more general abuse aimed at me and Geilie. "Take him too!" "Burn 'em!

Burn 'em all!" The crowd's hysteria, temporarily dispersed by the locksman's accident, was rising to fever pitch once more.

Hampered by the clinging forms of the locksman's assistants, who were trying to restrain him, Jamie had come to a dead halt. A man hanging from each arm, he struggled to force his hand toward his belt. Thinking him reaching for a knife, one man punched him hard in the belly.

Jamie doubled slightly, then came up, smashing an elbow to the nose of the man who'd hit him. One arm temporarily freed, he ignored the frantic pawings of the man on the other side. He dipped a hand into his sporran, raised his arm and threw. His shout reached me as the object left his hand.

"Claire! Stand *still*!"

Not much place for me to go, I thought dazedly. There was a dark blur headed straight for my face, and I started to flinch backward, but stopped in time. The blur struck my face with a clattering sting and the black beads fell on my shoulders as the jet rosary, flung bola-style, neatly ringed my neck. Or not quite neatly; the strand had caught on my right ear. I shook my head, eyes watering from the blow, and the circlet settled into place, crucifix swinging jauntily between my naked breasts.

The faces in the front row were staring at it in a kind of horrified bemusement. Their sudden silence affected those further back, and the roaring seethe of noise subsided. Jamie's voice, customarily soft-spoken, even in anger, rang out in the silence. There was nothing soft about it now.

"Cut her down!"

The hangers-on had dropped away, and the waves of the crowd parted before him as he strode forward. The locksman watched him come, standing gape-jawed and frozen.

"I said, cut her down! Now!" The locksman, freed from his trance by the apocalyptic vision of red-haired death bearing down on him, stirred himself and fumbled hastily for his dirk. The rope, sawn through, let go with a shuddering snap and my arms dropped like bolsters, aching with released strain. I staggered and would have fallen, but a strong, familiar hand caught my elbow and pulled me upright. Then my face was against Jamie's chest, and nothing mattered to me anymore.

I may have lost consciousness for a few moments, or only been so overcome with relief that it seemed that way. Jamie's arm was hard around my waist, holding me up, and his plaid had been thrown over me, hiding me at last from the stare of the villagers. There was a confusion of voices all around, but it was no longer the crazed and gleeful blood-lust of the mob.

The voice of Mutt—or was it Jeff?—cut through the confusion.

"Who are you? How dare ye to interfere wi' the investigations of the court?"

I could feel, rather than see, the crowd pushing forward. Jamie was large, and he was armed, but he was only one man. I cowered against him under the folds of the plaid. His right arm tightened around me, but his left hand went to the sheath on his hip. The silver-blue blade hissed with menace as it came half out of its scabbard, and those in the forefront of the crowd came to a sudden stop.

The judges were made of somewhat tougher fabric. Peering out from my hiding place, I could see Jeff glaring at Jamie. Mutt appeared more bemused than annoyed at this sudden intrusion.

"Do ye dare to draw arms against the justice of God?" snapped the tubby little judge.

Jamie drew the sword completely, with a flash of steel, then thrust it point-first into the ground, leaving the hilt quivering with the force of the blow.

"I draw it in defense of this woman, and the truth," he said. "If any here be against those two, they'll answer to me, and then God, in that order."

The judge blinked once or twice, as though unable to credit this behavior, then surged to the attack once more.

"You have no place in the workings o' this court, sir! I'll demand that ye surrender the prisoner at once. Your own behavior will be dealt with presently!"

Jamie looked the judges over coolly. I could feel his heart hammering beneath my cheek as I clung to him, but his hands were rock-steady, one resting on the hilt of his sword, the other on the dirk at his belt.

"As to that, sir, I swore an oath before the altar of God to protect this woman. And if you're tellin' me that ye consider your own authority to be greater than that of the Almighty, then I must inform ye that I'm no of that opinion, myself."

The silence that followed this was broken by an embarrassed titter, echoed here and there by a nervous laugh. While the sympathies of the crowd had not shifted to our side, still the momentum carrying us to disaster had been broken.

Jamie turned me with a hand on my shoulder. I couldn't bear to face the crowd, but I knew I must. I kept my chin as high as I could, and my eyes focused beyond the faces, to a small boat in the center of the loch. I stared at it 'til my eyes watered.

Jamie turned back the plaid, holding it around me, but letting it drop far enough to show my neck and shoulders. He touched the black rosary and set it swinging gently to and fro.

"Jet will burn a witch's skin, no?" he demanded of the judges. "Still more, I should think, would the cross of our Lord. But look." He dipped a finger under the beads and lifted up the crucifix. My skin beneath was pure white, unmarked save for the smudges of captivity, and there was a gasp and murmur from the crowd.

Raw courage, an ice-cold presence of mind, and that instinct for showmanship. Colum MacKenzie had been right to be apprehensive of Jamie's ambitions. And given his fear that I might reveal Hamish's parentage, or what he thought I knew of it, what he had done to me was understandable too. Understandable, but not forgivable.

The mood of the crowd now swayed to and fro, uncertain. The bloodlust that had driven it earlier was dissipating, but it might still tilt like a cresting wave and crush us. Mutt and Jeff glanced at each other, undecided; taken aback by this last development, the judges had momentarily lost control of the situation.

Geillis Duncan stepped forward into the breach. I do not know whether there was hope for her at that point or not. In any case, she now tossed her fair hair defiantly over one shoulder, and threw her life away.

“This woman is no witch,” she said simply. “But I am.”

Jamie’s show, good as it was, was no match for this. The resulting uproar drowned completely the voices of the judges, questioning and exclaiming.

There was no clue to what she thought or felt, no more than there ever was; her high white brow was clear, the big green eyes gleaming in what might be amusement. She stood straight in her ragged garments, daubed with filth, and stared down her accusers. When the tumult had quieted a bit, she began to speak, not deigning to raise her voice, but forcing them to quiet themselves to hear her.

“I, Geillis Duncan, do confess that I am a witch, and the mistress of Satan.” This caused another outcry, and she waited again with perfect patience for them to quiet.

“In obedience to my Master, I do confess that I killed my husband, Arthur Duncan, by means of witchcraft.” At this, she glanced aside, catching my eye, and the hint of a smile touched her lips. Her eyes rested on the woman in the yellow shawl, but did not soften. “Of malice, I placed a spell upon the changeling child, that it might die, and the human child it replaced remain with the fairies.” She turned and gestured in my direction.

“I took advantage of the ignorance of Claire Fraser, using her for my purposes. But she had neither part nor knowledge in my doings, nor does she serve my Master.”

The crowd was muttering again, people jostling to get a better look, pushing nearer. She stretched out both hands toward them, palm outward.

“Stay back!” The clear voice cracked like a whip, to much the same effect. She tilted back her head to the skies and froze, like one listening.

“Hear!” she said. “Hear the wind of his coming! Beware, ye people of Cranesmuir! For my Master comes on the wings o’ the wind!” She lowered her head and screamed, a high, eerie sound of triumph. The large green eyes were fixed and staring, trancelike.

The wind *was* rising; I could see the clouds of the storm rolling across the far side of the loch. People began to look uneasily around; a few souls dropped back from the edge of the crowd.

Geilie began to spin, twirling round and round, hair whipping in the wind, hand gracefully overhead like a maypole dancer's. I watched her in stunned disbelief.

As she turned, her hair hid her face. On the last turn, though, she snapped her head to throw the fair mane to one side and I saw her face clearly, looking at me. The mask of trance had vanished momentarily, and her mouth formed a single word. Then her turn took her around to face the crowd once more, and she began her eerie screaming again.

The word had been "Run!"

She stopped her spinning suddenly, and with a look of mad exultation, gripped the remnants of her bodice with both hands and tore it down the front. Tore it far enough to show the crowd the secret I had learned, huddled close beside her in the cold filth of the thieves' hole. The secret Arthur Duncan had learned, in the hour before his death. The secret for which he had died. The shreds of her loose gown dropped away, exposing the swelling bulge of a six-month pregnancy.

I still stood like a rock, staring. Jamie had no such hesitations. Seizing me with one hand and his sword with the other, he flung himself into the crowd, knocking people out of the way with elbows, knees, and sword hilt, bulling his way toward the edge of the loch. He let out a piercing whistle through his teeth.

Intent on the spectacle under the oak, few people at first realized what was happening. Then, as individuals began to shout and grab at us, there was the sound of galloping hooves on the hard-packed dirt above the shore.

Donas still didn't care much for people, and was all too willing to show it. He bit the first hand reaching for his bridle, and a man dropped back, crying out and dripping blood. The horse reared, squealing and pawing the air, and the few bold souls still intent on stopping him suddenly lost interest.

Jamie flung me over the saddle like a sack of meal and swung up himself in one fluid motion. Clearing a path with vicious swipes of his sword, he turned Donas through the hindering mass of the crowd. As people fell back from the onslaught of teeth, hooves, and blade, we picked up speed, leaving the loch, the village, and Leoch behind. Breath knocked out of me by the impact, I struggled to speak, to scream to Jamie.

For I hadn't stood frozen at the revelation of Geilie's pregnancy. It was something else I had seen that chilled me to the marrow of my bones. As Geilie had spun, white arms stretched aloft, I saw what she had seen when my own clothes were stripped away. A mark on one arm like the one I bore. Here, in this time, the mark of sorcery, the mark of a magus. The small, homely scar of a smallpox vaccination.

* * *

Rain pattered on the water, soothing my swollen face and the rope burns on my wrists. I dipped a handful of water from the stream and sipped it slowly, feeling the cold liquid trickle down my throat with gratitude.

Jamie disappeared for a few minutes. He came back with a handful of dark green oblate leaves, chewing something. He spat a glob of macerated green into the palm of his hand, stuffed another wad of leaves into his mouth and turned me away from him. He rubbed the chewed leaves gently over my back, and the stinging eased considerably.

"What is that?" I asked, making an effort to control myself. I was still shaky and snuffling, but the helpless tears were beginning to ebb.

"Watercress," he answered, voice slightly muffled by the leaves in his mouth. He spat them out and applied them to my back. "You're no the only one knows a bit about grass-cures, Sassenach," he said, a bit clearer.

"How—how does it taste?" I asked, gulping back the sobs.

"Fair nasty," he replied laconically. He finished his application and laid the plaid softly back across my shoulders.

"It won't—" he began, then hesitated, "I mean, the cuts are not deep. I—I think you'll no be … marked." He spoke gruffly, but his touch was very gentle, and reduced me to tears once more.

"I'm sorry," I mumbled, dabbling my nose on a corner of the plaid. "I—I don't know what's wrong with me. I don't know why I can't stop crying."

He shrugged. "I dinna suppose anyone's tried to hurt ye on purpose before, Sassenach," he said. "It's likely the shock of that, so much as the pain." He paused, picking up a plaid-end.

"I did just the same, lass," he said matter-of-factly. "Puked after, and cried while they cleansed the cuts. Then I shook." He wiped my face carefully with the plaid, then put a hand under my chin and tilted my face up to his.

"And when I stopped shaking, Sassenach," he said quietly, "I thanked God for the pain, because it meant I was still alive." He let go, nodding at me. "When ye get to that point, lassie, tell me; for I've a thing or two I want to be sayin' to ye then."

He got up and went down to the edge of the burn, to wash out the bloodstained handkerchief in cold water.

"What brought you back?" I asked, when he returned. I had managed to stop crying, but I still shook, and huddled deeper into the folds of the plaid.

"Alec MacMahon," he said, smiling. "I told him to watch over ye while I was gone. When the villagers took you and Mrs. Duncan, he rode all night and the next day to find me. And then I rode like the devil himself comin' back. Lord, that's a good horse." He looked approvingly up the slope to Donas, tethered to a tree at the top of the bank, his wet coat gleaming like copper.

"I'll have to move him," he said, thoughtfully. "I doubt anyone will follow, but it isna that far from Cranesmuir. Can ye walk now?"

I followed him up the steep slope with some difficulty, small rocks rolling under my feet and bracken and bramble catching my shift. Near the top of the slope was a grove of young alders, grown so close together that the lower branches interlaced, forming a green roof over the bracken beneath. Jamie shoved the branches up far enough for me to crawl into the narrow space, then carefully rearranged the crushed bracken before the entrance. He stood back and surveyed the hiding place critically, nodding in satisfaction.

"Aye, that's good. No one will find ye there." He turned to go, then turned back. "Try to sleep, if ye can, and don't worry if I'm not back at once. I'll hunt a bit on the way back; we've no food with us, and I dinna want to attract attention by stopping at a croft. Pull the tartan up over your head, and make sure it covers your shift; the white shows for a long way."

Food seemed irrelevant; I felt as though I would never want to eat again. Sleep was something else again. My back and arms still ached, the rope burns on my wrists were raw, and I felt sore and bruised all over; but worn out with fear, pain, and simple exhaustion, I fell asleep almost at once, the pungent scent of ferns rising around me like incense.

I awoke with something gripping my foot. Startled, I sat up straight, crashing into the springy branches overhead. Leaves and sticks showered down around me, and I flailed my arms wildly, trying to disentangle my hair from the snagging twigs. Scratched, disheveled, and irritated, I crawled out of my sanctuary to find an amused Jamie squatting nearby, watching my emergence. It was near sunset; the sun had dropped below the lip of the burn, leaving the rocky canyon in shadow. The smell of roasting meat rose from a small fire burning among the rocks near the stream, where two rabbits browned on a makeshift spit made of sharpened green sticks.

Jamie held out a hand to help me down the slope. I haughtily declined and swept down myself, tripping only once on the trailing ends of the plaid. My earlier nausea had vanished, and I fell ravenously on the meat.

"We'll move up into the forest after supper, Sassenach," Jamie said, tearing a joint from the rabbit carcass. "I dinna want to sleep near the burn; I canna hear anyone coming over the noise of the water."

There was not much conversation as we ate. The horror of the morning, and the thought of what we had left behind, oppressed us both. And for me there was a profound sense of mourning. I had lost not only the chance of finding out more about the why and wherefore of my presence here, but a friend as well. My only friend. I was often in doubt as to Geilie's motives, but I had no doubt at all that she had saved my life that morning. Knowing herself doomed, she had done her best to give me a chance of escape. The fire, almost invisible in daylight, was growing brighter now as darkness filled the burn. I looked into the flames, seeing the crisp skin and browned bones of the rabbits on their spits. A drop of blood from a broken bone fell into the fire, hissing into nothing. Suddenly the meat stuck in my throat. I set it down hastily and turned away, retching.

Still without speaking much, we moved out of the burn and found a comfortable place near the edge of a clearing in the forest. Hills rose in undulant mounds all around us, but Jamie had chosen a high spot, with a good view of the road from the village. The dusk momentarily heightened all the colors of the countryside, lighting the land with jewels; a glowing emerald in the hollows, a lovely shadowed amethyst among the clumps of heather, and burning rubies on the red-berried rowan trees that crowned the hills. Rowan berries, a specific against witchcraft. Far in the distance, the outline of Castle Leoch was still visible at the foot of Ben Aden. It faded quickly as the light died.

Jamie made a fire in a sheltered spot, and sat down next to it. The rain had eased to a faint drizzle that misted the air and spangled my eyelashes with rainbows when I looked at the flames.

He sat staring into the fire for a long time. Finally he looked up at me, hands clasped around his knees.

"I said before that I'd not ask ye things ye had no wish to tell me. And I'd not ask ye now; but I must know, for your safety as well as mine." He paused, hesitating.

"Claire, if you've never been honest wi' me, be so now, for I must know the truth. Claire, are ye a witch?"

I gaped at him. "A witch? You—you can really ask that?" I thought he must be joking. He wasn't.

He took me by the shoulders and gripped me hard, staring into my eyes as though willing me to answer him.

"I *must* ask it, Claire! And you must tell me!"

“And if I were?” I asked through dry lips. “If you had thought I were a witch? Would you still have fought for me?”

“I would have gone to the stake with you!” he said violently. “And to hell beyond, if I must. But may the Lord Jesus have mercy on my soul and on yours, tell me the truth!”

The strain of it all caught up with me. I tore myself out of his grasp and ran across the clearing. Not far, only to the edge of the trees; I could not bear the exposure of the open space. I clutched a tree; put my arms around it and dug my fingers hard into the bark, pressed my face to it and shrieked with hysterical laughter.

Jamie’s face, white and shocked, loomed up on the other side of the tree. With the dim realization that what I was doing must sound unnervingly like cackling, I made a terrific effort and stopped. Panting, I stared at him for a moment.

“Yes,” I said, backing away, still heaving with gasps of unhinged laughter. “Yes, I am a witch! To you, I must be. I’ve never had smallpox, but I can walk through a room full of dying men and never catch it. I can nurse the sick and breathe their air and touch their bodies, and the sickness can’t touch me. I can’t catch cholera, either, or lockjaw, or the morbid sore throat. And you must think it’s an enchantment, because you’ve never heard of vaccine, and there’s no other way you can explain it.”

“The things I know—” I stopped backing away and stood still, breathing heavily, trying to control myself. “I know about John Randall because I was told about him. I know when he was born and when he’ll die, I know about what he’s done and what he’ll do, I know about Sandringham because …, because Frank told me. He knew about Randall because he … he … oh, God!” I felt as though I might be sick, and closed my eyes to shut out the spinning stars overhead.

“And Colum … he thinks I’m a witch, because I know Hamish isn’t his own son. I know … he can’t sire children. But he thought I knew who Hamish’s father is … I thought maybe it was you, but then I knew it couldn’t be, and …” I was talking faster and faster, trying to keep the vertigo at bay with the sound of my own voice.

"Everything I've ever told you about myself was true," I said, nodding madly as though to reassure myself. "Everything. I haven't any people, I haven't any history, because I haven't happened yet."

"Do you know when I was born?" I asked, looking up. I knew my hair was wild and my eyes staring, and I didn't care. "On the twentieth of October, in the Year of Our Lord nineteen hundred and eighteen. Do you hear me?" I demanded, for he was blinking at me unmoving, as though paying no attention to a word I said. "I said nineteen eighteen! Nearly two hundred years from now! Do you hear?"

I was shouting now, and he nodded slowly.

"I hear," he said softly.

"Yes, you hear!" I blazed. "And you think I'm raving mad. Don't you? Admit it! That's what you think. You have to think so, there isn't any other way you can explain me to yourself. You *can't* believe me, you can't dare to. Oh, Jamie …" I felt my face start to crumple. All this time spent hiding the truth, realizing that I could never tell anyone, and now I realized that I could tell Jamie, my beloved husband, the man I trusted beyond all others, and he wouldn't—he *couldn't* believe me either.

"It was the rocks—the fairy hill. The standing stones. Merlin's stones. That's where I came through." I was gasping, half-sobbing, becoming less coherent by the second. "Once upon a time, but it's really two hundred years. It's always two hundred years, in the stories.… But in the stories, the people always get back. I couldn't get back." I turned away, staggering, grasping for support. I sank down on a rock, shoulders slumped, and put my head in my hands. There was a long silence in the wood. It went on long enough for the small night birds to recover their courage and start their noises once again, calling to each other with a thin, high *zeek!* as they hawked for the last insects of the summer.

I looked up at last, thinking that perhaps he had simply risen and left me, overcome by my revelations. He was still there, though, still sitting, hands braced on his knees, head bowed as though in thought.

The hairs on his arms shone stiff as copper wires in the firelight, though, and I realized that they stood erect, like the bristles on a dog. He was afraid of me.

"Jamie," I said, feeling my heart break with absolute loneliness. "Oh, Jamie."

I sat down and curled myself into a ball, trying to roll myself around the core of my pain. Nothing mattered any longer, and I sobbed my heart out.

His hands on my shoulders raised me, enough to see his face. Through the haze of tears, I saw the look he wore in battle, of struggle that had passed the point of strain and become calm certainty.

"I believe you," he said firmly. "I dinna understand it a bit—not yet—but I believe you. Claire, I believe you! Listen to me! There's the truth between us, you and I, and whatever ye tell me, I shall believe it." He gave me a gentle shake.

"It doesna matter what it is. You've told me. That's enough for now. Be still, *mo duinne*. Lay your head and rest. You'll tell me the rest of it later. And I'll believe you."

I was still sobbing, unable to grasp what he was telling me. I struggled, trying to pull away, but he gathered me up and held me tightly against himself, pushing my head into the folds of his plaid, and repeating over and over again, "I believe you."

At last, from sheer exhaustion, I grew calm enough to look up and say, "But you *can't* believe me."

He smiled down at me. His mouth trembled slightly, but he smiled.

"Ye'll no tell *me* what I canna do, Sassenach." He paused a moment. "How old are ye?" he asked curiously. "I never thought to ask."

The question seemed so preposterous that it took me a minute to think.

"I'm twenty-seven … or maybe twenty-eight," I added. That rattled him for a moment. At twenty-eight, women in this time were usually on the verge of middle-age.

"Oh," he said. He took a deep breath. "I thought ye were about my age—or younger."

He didn't move for a second. But then he looked down and smiled faintly at me. "Happy Birthday, Sassenach," he said.

It took me completely by surprise and I just stared stupidly at him for a moment. "What?" I managed at last.

"I said 'Happy Birthday.' It's the twentieth of October today."

"Is it?" I said dumbly. "I'd lost track." I was shaking again, from cold and shock and the force of my tirade. He drew me close against him and held me, smoothing his big hands lightly over my hair, cradling my head against his chest. I began to cry again, but this time with relief. In my state of upheaval, it seemed logical that if he knew my real age and still wanted me, then everything would be all right.

Jamie picked me up, and holding me carefully against his shoulder, carried me to the side of the fire, where he had laid the horse's saddle. He sat down, leaning against the saddle, and held me, light and close.

A long time later, he spoke.

"All right. Tell me now."

I told him. Told him everything, haltingly but coherently. I felt numb from exhaustion, but content, like a rabbit that has outrun a fox, and found temporary shelter under a log. It isn't sanctuary, but at least it is respite. And I told him about Frank.

"Frank," he said softly. "Then he isna dead, after all."

"He isn't *born*." I felt another small wave of hysteria break against my ribs, but managed to keep myself under control. "Neither am I."

He stroked and patted me back into silence, making his small murmuring Gaelic sounds.

"When I took ye from Randall at Fort William," he said suddenly, "you were trying to get back. Back to the stones. And … Frank. That's why ye left the grove."

"Yes."

"And I beat you for it." His voice was soft with regret.

"You couldn't know. I couldn't tell you." I was beginning to feel very drowsy indeed.

"No, I dinna suppose ye could." He pulled the plaid closer around me, tucking it gently around my shoulders. "Do ye sleep now, *mo duinne*. No one shall harm ye; I'm here."

I burrowed into the warm curve of his shoulder, letting my tired mind fall through the layers of oblivion. I forced myself to the surface long enough to ask, "Do you really believe me, Jamie?"

He sighed, and smiled ruefully down at me.

"Aye, I believe ye, Sassenach. But it would ha' been a good deal easier if you'd only been a witch."

I slept like the dead, awakening sometime after dawn with a terrible headache, stiff in every muscle. Jamie had a few handfuls of oats in a small bag in his sporran, and forced me to eat drammach—oats mixed with cold water. It stuck in my throat, but I choked it down.

He was slow and gentle with me, but spoke very little. After breakfast, he quickly packed up the small campsite and saddled Donas.

Numb with the shock of recent events, I didn't even ask where we were going. Mounted behind him, I was content to rest my face against the broad slope of his back, feeling the motion of the horse rock me into a state of mindless trance.

We came down from the braes near Loch Madoch, pressing through the chilly dawn mist to the edge of a still sheet of grey. Wild ducks began to rise from the reeds in untidy flocks that circled the marshes, quacking and calling to rouse late sleepers below. By contrast, a well-disciplined wedge of geese passed over us, calling of heartbreak and desolation.

The grey fog lifted near midday on the second day, and a weak sun lighted the meadows filled with yellow gorse and broom. A few miles past the loch, we came out onto a narrow road and turned northwest. The way took us up again, rising into low rolling hills that gave way gradually to granite tors and crags. We met few travelers on the road, and prudently turned aside into the brush whenever hoofbeats were heard ahead.

The vegetation turned to pine forest. I sniffed deeply, enjoying the crisp resinous air, though it was turning chill toward dusk. We stopped for the night in a small clearing some way from the path. We scooped together a nestlike wallow of pine needles and blankets and huddled close together for warmth, covered by Jamie's plaid and blanket.

He woke me sometime in the darkness and made love to me, slowly and tenderly, not speaking. I watched stars winking through the lattice of black branches overhead, and fell asleep again with his comforting weight still warm on top of me.

In the morning Jamie seemed more cheerful, or at least more peaceful, as though a difficult decision had been reached. He promised me hot tea for supper, which was small comfort then in the frigid air. Sleepily I followed him back to the path, brushing pine needles and small spiders from my skirt. The narrow path faded during the morning to no more than a faint trace through rough sheep's fescue, zigzagging around the more prominent rocks.

I had been paying little attention to our surroundings, as I dreamily enjoyed the growing warmth of the sun, but suddenly my eye struck a familiar rock formation and I started out of my torpor. I knew where we were. And why.

"Jamie!"

He turned at my exclamation.

"You didna know?" he asked curiously.

"That we were coming here? No, of course not." I felt mildly sick. The hill of Craigh na Dun was no more than a mile away; I could see the hump-backed shape of it through the last shreds of the morning mist.

I swallowed hard. I had tried for nearly six months to reach this place. Now that I was here at last, I wanted to be anywhere else. The standing stones on the hilltop were invisible from below, but they seemed to emanate a subtle terror that reached out for me.

Well below the summit, the footing grew too uncertain for Donas. We dismounted and tethered him to a scrubby pine, continuing on foot.

I was panting and sweating by the time we reached the granite ledge; Jamie showed no signs of exertion, save a faint flush rising from the neck of his shirt. It was quiet here above the pines, but with a steady wind whining faintly in the crevices of the rock. Swallows shot past the ledge, rising abruptly on the air currents in pursuit of insects, dropping like dive bombers, slender wings outspread.

Jamie took my hand to pull me up the last step to the wide flat ledge at the base of the cleft rock. He didn't release it, but drew me close, looking carefully at me, as though memorizing my features. "Why—?" I began, gasping for breath.

"It's your place," he said roughly. "Isn't it?"

"Yes." I stared as though hypnotized at the stone circle. "It looks just the same."

Jamie followed me into the circle. Taking me by the arm, he marched firmly up to the split rock.

"Is it this one?" he demanded.

"Yes." I tried to pull away. "Careful! Don't go too near it!" He glanced from me to the rock, clearly skeptical. Perhaps he was right to be. I felt suddenly doubtful of the truth of my own story.

"I—I don't know anything about it. Perhaps the … whatever it is … closed behind me. Maybe it only works at certain times of the year. It was near Beltane when I came through last."

Jamie glanced over his shoulder at the sun, a flat disc hanging in mid-sky behind a thin screen of cloud.

"It's almost Samhain now," he said. "All Hallows' Eve. Seems suitable, no?" He shivered involuntarily, in spite of the joke. "When you … came through. What did ye do?"

I tried to remember. I felt ice-cold, and I folded my hands under my armpits.

"I walked round the circle, looking at things. Just randomly, though; there was no pattern. And then I came near to the split rock, and I heard a buzzing, like bees—"

It was still like bees. I drew back as though it had been the rattle of a snake.

"It's still here!" I reared in panic, throwing my arms around Jamie, but he set me firmly away from him, his face white, and turned me once again toward the stone.

"What then?" The keening wind was sharp in my ears, but his voice was sharper still.

"I put my hand on the rock."

"Do it, then." He pushed me closer, and when I did not respond, he grasped my wrist and planted my hand firmly against the brindled surface.

Chaos reached out and grabbed me.

The sun stopped whirling behind my eyes at last, and the shriek faded out of my ears. There was another persistent noise, Jamie calling my name.

I felt too sick to sit up or open my eyes, but I flapped my hand weakly, to let him know I was still alive.

"I'm all right," I said.

"Are ye then? Oh, God, Claire!" He clasped me against his chest then, holding me tightly. "Jesus, Claire. I thought ye were dead, sure. You … you began to … go, somehow. You had the most awful look on your face, like ye were frightened to death. I—I pulled ye back from the stone. I stopped ye, I shouldna have done so—I'm sorry, lassie."

My eyes were open enough now to see his face above me, shocked and frightened.

"It's all right." It was still an effort to speak, and I felt heavy and disoriented, but things were coming clearer. I tried to smile, but felt nothing more than a twitch.

"At least … we know … it still works."

"Oh, God. Aye, it works." He cast a glance of fearful loathing at the stone.

He left me long enough to wet a kerchief in a puddle of rainwater that stood in one of the stony depressions. He wet my face, still muttering reassurances and apologies. At last I felt well enough to sit up.

"You didn't believe me after all, did you?" Groggy as I was, I felt somehow vindicated. "It's true, though."

"Aye, it's true." He sat next to me, staring at the stone for several minutes. I rubbed the wet cloth over my face, feeling still faint and dizzy. Suddenly he sprang to his feet, walked to the rock and slapped his hand against it.

Nothing whatsoever happened, and after a minute his shoulders slumped and he came back to me.

“Maybe it’s only women it works on,” I said fuzzily. “It’s always women in the legends. Or maybe it’s only me.”

“Well, it isna me,” he said. “Better make sure, though.”

“Jamie! Be careful!” I shouted, to no avail. He marched to the stone, slapped it again, threw himself against it, walked through the split and back again, but it remained no more than a solid stone monolith. As for myself, I shuddered at the thought of even approaching that door to madness once again.

And yet. Yet when I had begun to pass into the realm of chaos this time, I had been thinking of Frank. And I had *felt* him, I was sure of it. Somewhere in the void had been a tiny pinprick of light, and he was in it. I knew. I knew also that there had been another point of light, one that sat still beside me, staring at the stone, cheeks gleaming with sweat in spite of the chill of the day.

At last he turned to me and grasped both my hands. He raised them to his lips and kissed each one formally.

“My lady,” he said softly. “My … Claire. It’s no use in waiting. I must part wi’ ye now.”

My lips were too stiff to speak, but the expression on my face must have been as easily readable as usual.

“Claire,” he said urgently, “it’s your own time on the other side of … that thing. You’ve a home there, a place. The things that you’re used to. And … and Frank.”

“Yes,” I said, “there’s Frank.”

Jamie caught me by the shoulders, pulling me to my feet and shaking me gently in supplication.

“There’s nothing for ye on this side, lass! Nothing save violence and danger. Go!” He pushed me slightly, turning me toward the stone circle. I turned back to him, catching his hands.

“Is there really nothing for me here, Jamie?” I held his eyes, not letting him turn away from me.

He pulled himself gently from my grasp without answering and stood back, suddenly a figure from another time, seen in relief upon a background of hazy hills, the life in his face a trick of the shadowing rock, as if flattened beneath layers of paint, an artist's reminiscence of forgotten places and passions turned to dust.

I looked into his eyes, filled with pain and yearning, and he was flesh again, real and immediate, lover, husband, man.

The anguish I felt must have been reflected in my face, for he hesitated, then turned to the east and pointed down the slope. "Do ye see behind the small clump of oak down there? About halfway."

I saw the clump, and saw what he was pointing at, the half-ruined crofter's cottage, abandoned on the haunted hill.

"I shall go down to the house, and I shall stay there 'til the evening. To make sure—to be sure that you're safe." He looked at me, but made no move to touch me. He closed his eyes, as though he could no longer bear to look at me.

"Goodbye," he said, and turned to go.

I watched him, numb, and then remembered. There was something that I had to tell him. I called after him.

"Jamie!"

He stopped and stood motionless for a moment, fighting to control his face. It was white and strained and his lips were bloodless when he turned back to me.

"Aye?"

"There's something … I mean, I have to tell you something before … before I go."

He closed his eyes briefly, and I thought he swayed, but it might have been only the wind tugging at his kilts.

"There's no need," he said. "No. Do ye go, lass. Ye shouldna tarry. Go." He made to turn away, but I clutched him by the sleeve.

"Jamie, listen to me! You must!" He shook his head helplessly, lifting a hand as though to push me away.

"Claire … no. I can't." The wind was bringing the moisture to his eyes.

"It's the Rising," I said urgently, shaking his arm. "Jamie, listen. Prince Charlie—his army. Colum is right! Do you hear me, Jamie?

Colum is right, not Dougal."

"Eh? What d'ye mean, lass?" I had his attention now. He rubbed his sleeve across his face and the eyes that looked down at me were sharp and clear. The wind sang in my ears.

"Prince Charlie. There will be a Rising, Dougal's right about that, but it won't succeed. Charlie's army will do well for a bit, but it will end in slaughter. At Culloden, that's where it will end. The—the clans …" In my mind's eye I saw the clanstones, the grey boulders that would lie scattered on the field, each stone bearing the single clan name of the butchered men who lay under it. I took a breath and gripped his hand to steady myself. It was cold as a corpse's. I shuddered and closed my eyes to concentrate on what I was saying.

"The Highlanders—all the clans that follow Charlie—will be wiped out. Hundreds and hundreds of the clansmen will die at Culloden; those that are left will be hunted and killed. The clans will be crushed … and they'll not rise again. Not in your time—not even in mine."

I opened my eyes to find him staring at me, expressionless.

"Jamie, stay out of it!" I begged him. "Keep your people out of it if you can, but for the Lord's sake … Jamie, if you—" I broke off. I had been going to say "Jamie, if you love me." But I couldn't. I was going to lose him forever, and if I could not speak of love to him before, I could not do it now.

"Don't go to France," I said, softly. "Go to America, or to Spain, to Italy. But for the sake of the people who love you, Jamie, don't set foot on Culloden Field."

He went on staring at me. I wondered if he had heard.

"Jamie? Did you hear me? Do you understand?"

After a moment, he nodded numbly.

"Aye," he said quietly, so quietly I could hardly hear him, beneath the whining of the wind. "Aye, I hear." He dropped my hand.

"Go wi' God …*mo duinne*."

He stepped off the ledge and made his way down the steep incline, bracing his feet against tufts of grass, catching at branches to keep his balance, not looking back. I watched him until he disappeared into the oak clump, walking slowly, like a man wounded, who knows he must keep moving, but feels his life ebbing slowly away through the fingers he has clenched over the wound.

My knees were trembling. Slowly, I lowered myself to the granite shelf and sat cross-legged, watching the swallows about their business. Below, I could just see the roof of the cottage that now held my past. At my back loomed the cleft stone. And my future.

I sat without moving through the afternoon. I tried to force all emotion from my mind and use reason. Jamie certainly had logic on his side when he argued that I should go back: home, safety, Frank; even the small amenities of life that I sorely missed from time to time, like hot baths and indoor plumbing, to say nothing of larger considerations such as proper medical care and convenient travel.

And yet, while I would certainly admit the inconveniences and outright dangers of this place, I would have also to admit that I had enjoyed many aspects of it. If travel was inconvenient, there were no enormous stretches of concrete blanketing the countryside, nor any noisy, stinking autos—contrivances with their own dangers, I reminded myself. Life was much simpler, and so were the people. Not less intelligent, but much more direct—with a few sterling exceptions like Colum ban Campbell MacKenzie, I thought grimly.

Because of Uncle Lamb's work, I had lived in a great many places, many even cruder and more lacking in amenities than this one. I adapted quite easily to rough conditions, and did not really miss "civilization" when away from it, though I adapted just as easily to the presence of niceties like electric cookers and hot-water geysers. I shivered in the cold wind, hugging myself as I stared at the rock.

Rationality did not appear to be helping much. I turned to emotion, and began, shrinking from the task, to reconstruct the details of my married lives—first with Frank, then with Jamie. The only result of this was to leave me shattered and weeping, the tears forming icy trails on my face.

Well, if not reason nor emotion, what of duty? I had given Frank a wedding vow, and had meant it with all my heart. I had given Jamie the same, meaning to betray it as soon as possible. And which of them would I betray now? I continued to sit, as the sun sank lower in the sky and the swallows disappeared to their nests.

As the evening star began to glow among the black pines' branches, I concluded that in this situation reason was of little use. I would have to rely on something else; just what, I wasn't sure. I turned toward the split rock and took a step, then another, and another. Pausing, I faced around and tried it in the other direction. A step, then another, and another, and before I even knew that I had decided, I was halfway down the slope, scrabbling wildly at grass clumps, slipping and falling through the patches of granite scree.

When I reached the cottage, breathless with fear lest he had left already, I was reassured to see Donas hobbled and grazing nearby. The horse raised his head and eyed me unpleasantly. Walking softly, I pushed the door open.

He was in the front room, asleep on a narrow oak settle. He slept on his back, as he usually did, hands crossed on his stomach, mouth slightly open. The last rays of daylight from the window behind me limned his face like a metal mask; the silver tracks of dried tears glinted on golden skin, and the copper stubble of his beard gleamed dully.

I stood watching him for a moment, filled with an unutterable tenderness. Moving as quietly as I could, I lay down beside him on the narrow settle and nestled close. He turned to me in sleep as he so often did, gathering me spoon-fashion against his chest and resting his cheek against my hair. Half-conscious, he reached to smooth my hair away from his nose; I felt the sudden jerk as he came awake to realize that I was there, and then we overbalanced and crashed together onto the floor, Jamie on top of me.

I didn't have the slightest doubt that he was solid flesh. I pushed a knee into his abdomen, grunting.

"Get off! I can't breathe!"

Instead, he aggravated my breathless condition by kissing me thoroughly. I ignored the lack of oxygen temporarily in order to concentrate on more important things.

We held each other for a long time without speaking. At last he murmured "Why?"—his mouth muffled in my hair.

I kissed his cheek, damp and salty. I could feel his heart beating against my ribs, and wanted nothing more than to stay there forever, not moving, not making love, just breathing the same air.

"I had to," I said. I laughed, a little shakily. "You don't know how close it was. The hot baths nearly won." And I wept then, and shook a little, because the choice was so freshly made, and because my joy for the man I held in my arms was mingled with a tearing grief for the man I would never see again.

Jamie held me tightly, pressing me down with his weight, as though to protect me, to save me from being swept away by the roaring pull of the stone circle. At length my tears were spent, and I lay exhausted, head against his comforting chest. It had grown altogether dark by this time, but still he held me, murmuring softly as though I were a child afraid of the night. We clung to each other, unwilling to let go even long enough to start a fire or light a candle.

At length Jamie rose, and picking me up, carried me to the settle, where he sat with me cradled on his lap. The door of the cottage still hung open, and we could see the stars beginning to burn over the valley below.

"Do you know," I said drowsily, "that it takes thousands and thousands of years for the light of those stars to reach us? In fact, some of the stars we see may be dead by now, but we won't know it, because we still see the light."

"Is that so?" he answered, stroking my back. "I didna know that."

I must have fallen asleep, head on his shoulder, but roused briefly when he laid me gently on the floor, on a makeshift bed of blankets from the horse's saddleroll. He lay down beside me, and drew me close again.

"Lay your head, lass," he whispered. "In the morning, I'll take ye home."

* * *

We rose just before dawn, and were on the downward trail when the sun rose, eager to leave Craigh na Dun.

"Where are we going, Jamie?" I asked, rejoicing that I could look forward into a future that held him, even as I left behind the last chance of returning to the man who had—who would? once love me.

Jamie reined in the horse, pausing to look over his shoulder for a moment. The forbidding circle of standing stones was invisible from here, but the rocky hillside seemed to rise impassable behind us, bristling with boulders and gorse bushes. From here, the crumbling husk of the cottage looked like one more crag, a bony knuckle jutting from the granite fist of the hill.

"I wish I could have fought him for you," he said abruptly, looking back at me. His blue eyes were dark and earnest.

I smiled at him, touched.

"It wasn't your fight, it was mine. But you won it anyway." I reached out a hand, and he squeezed it.

"Aye, but that's not what I meant. If I'd fought him man to man and won, ye'd not need to feel any regret over it." He hesitated. "If ever—"

"There aren't any more ifs," I said firmly. "I thought of every one of them yesterday, and here I still am."

"Thank God," he said, smiling, "and God help you." Then he added, "Though I'll never understand why."

I put my arms around his waist and held on as the horse slithered down the last steep slope.

"Because," I said, "I bloody well can't do without you, Jamie Fraser, and that's all about it. Now, where are you taking me?"

Jamie twisted in his saddle, to look back up the slope.

"I prayed all the way up that hill yesterday," he said softly. "Not for you to stay; I didna think that would be right. I prayed I'd be strong enough to send ye away." He shook his head, still gazing up the hill, a faraway look in his eyes.

"I said 'Lord, if I've never had courage in my life before, let me have it now. Let me be brave enough not to fall on my knees and beg her to stay.' " He pulled his eyes away from the cottage and smiled briefly at me.

"Hardest thing I ever did, Sassenach." He turned in the saddle, and reined the horse's head toward the east. It was a rare bright morning, and the early sun gilded everything, drawing a thin line of fire along the edge of the reins, the curve of the horse's neck, and the broad planes of Jamie's face and shoulders.

He took a deep breath and nodded across the moor, toward a distant pass between two crags.

“So now I suppose I can do the second-hardest thing.” He kicked the horse gently, clicking his tongue. “We’re going home, Sassenach. To Lallybroch.”

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PART FIVE

Lallybroch

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26

THE LAIRD'S RETURN

At first, we were so happy only to be with each other and away from Leoch than we didn't talk much. Across the flat of the moor, Donas could carry us both without strain, and I rode with my arms about Jamie's waist, glorying in the feel of the sun-warmed muscle shifting under my cheek. Whatever problems we might be facing—and I knew there were plenty—we were together. Forever. And that was enough.

As the first shock of happiness mellowed into the glow of companionship, we began to talk again. About the countryside through which we were passing, at first. Then, cautiously, about me, and where I had come from. He was fascinated by my descriptions of modern life, though I could tell that most of my stories seemed like fairy tales to him. He loved especially the descriptions of automobiles, tanks, and airplanes, and made me describe them over and over, as minutely as I could. By tacit agreement, we avoided any mention of Frank.

As we covered more countryside, the conversation turned back to our present time; Colum, the Castle, then the stag hunt and the Duke.

"He seems a nice chap," Jamie remarked. As the going became rougher, he had dismounted and walked alongside, which made conversation easier.

"I thought so too," I answered. "But—"

"Oh, aye, ye canna put too much faith in what a man seems these days," he agreed. "Still, we got on, he and I. We'd sit together and talk of an evening, found the fire in the hunting lodge. He's a good bit brighter than he seems, for the one thing; he knows how that voice makes him seem, and I think he uses it to make himself look a bit of a fool, while all the time the mind is there, workin' behind his eyes."

"Mmm. That's what I'm afraid of. Did you … tell him?"

He shrugged. "A bit. He knew my name, of course, from that time before, at the castle."

I laughed at the memory of his account of that time. "Did you, er, reminisce about old times?"

He grinned, the ends of his hair floating about his face in the autumn breeze.

"Oh, just a bit. He asked me once whether I still suffered from stomach trouble. I kept my face straight and answered that as a rule, no, but I thought perhaps I felt a bit of griping coming on just now. He laughed, and said he hoped it did not discommode my beautiful wife."

I laughed myself. Right now, what the Duke might or mightn't do didn't seem of overwhelming importance. Nevertheless, he might one day be of use.

"I told him a little," Jamie went on. "That I was outlawed, but not guilty of the charge, though I'd have precious little chance of proving it. He seemed sympathetic, but I was cautious about telling him the circumstances—let alone the fact that there's a price on my head. I hadna yet made up my mind whether to trust him with the rest of it, when … well, when Old Alec came tearing into the camp like the devil himself was on his tail, and Murtagh and I left the same way."

This reminded me. "Where *is* Murtagh?" I asked. "He came back with you to Leoch?" I hoped the little clansman hadn't fallen afoul of either Colum or the villagers of Cranesmuir.

"He started back wi' me, but the beast he was riding was no match for Donas. Aye, a bonny wee lad ye are, Donas *mo buidheag*." He slapped the shimmering sorrel neck, and Donas snorted and ruffled his mane. Jamie glanced up at me and smiled.

"Dinna worry for Murtagh. There's a canty wee bird can mind for himself."

"Canty? Murtagh?" I knew the word meant "cheerful," which seemed incongruous to a degree. "I don't think I've ever seen him smile. Have you?"

"Oh, aye. At least twice."

"How long have you known him?"

"Twenty-three years. He's my godfather."

"Oh. Well, *that* explains a bit. I didn't think he'd bother on my account."

Jamie patted my leg. "Of course he would. He likes you."

"I'll take your word for it."

Having thus approached the subject of recent events, I took a deep breath and asked something I badly wanted to know.

"Jamie?"

"Aye?"

"Geillis Duncan. Will they … will they really burn her?"

He glanced up at me, frowning slightly, and nodded.

"I expect so. Not 'til after the child is born, though. Is that what troubles ye?"

"One of the things. Jamie, look at this." I tried to push up the voluminous sleeve, failed, and settled for pulling the neck of the shirt off my shoulder to display my vaccination scar.

"God in heaven," he said slowly, after I had explained. He looked sharply at me. "So that's why … is she from your own time then?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. All I can say is that she was likely born sometime after 1920; that's when public inoculation came in." I looked over my shoulder, but low-lying clouds hid the crags that now separated us from Leoch. "I don't suppose I ever will know … now."

Jamie took Donas's reins and led him aside, under a small pine grove, on the banks of a small stream. He grasped me around the waist and lifted me down.

"Dinna grieve for her," he said firmly, holding me. "She's a wicked woman; a murderer, if not a witch. She did kill her husband, no?"

"Yes," I said, with a shudder, remembering Arthur Duncan's glazed eyes.

"I still dinna understand why she should kill him, though," he said, shaking his head in puzzlement. "He had money, a good position. And I doubt he beat her."

I looked at him in exasperated amazement.

"And that's your definition of a good husband?"

"Well … yes," he said, frowning. "What else might she want?"

"What *else*?" I was so taken aback, I just looked at him for a moment, then slid down on the grass and started to laugh.

"What's funny? I thought this was murder." He smiled, though, and put an arm around me.

"I was just thinking," I said, still snorting a bit, "if your definition of a good husband is one with money and position who doesn't beat his wife … what does that make *you*?"

"Oh," he said. He grinned. "Well, Sassenach, I never said I was a good husband. Neither did you. 'Sadist,' I think ye called me, and a few other things that I wouldna repeat for the sake of decency. But not a good husband."

"Good. Then I won't feel obliged to poison you with cyanide."

"Cyanide?" He looked down curiously at me. "What's that?"

"The thing that killed Arthur Duncan. It's a bloody fast, powerful poison. Fairly common in my time, but not here." I licked my lips meditatively.

"I tasted it on his lips, and just that tiny bit was enough to make my whole face go numb. It acts almost instantly, as you saw. I should have known then—about Geilie, I mean. I imagine she made it from crushed peach pits or cherry stones, though it must have been the devil of a job."

"Did she tell ye why she did it, then?"

I sighed and rubbed my feet. My shoes had been lost in the struggle at the loch, and I tended to pick up stickers and cockleburs, my feet not being hardened as Jamie's were.

"That and a good deal more. If there's anything to eat in your saddlebags, why don't you fetch it, and I'll tell you all about it."

We entered the valley of Broch Tuarach the next day. As we came down out of the foothills, I spotted a solitary rider, some distance away, heading roughly in our direction. He was the first person I had seen since we had left Cranesmuir.

The man approaching us was stout and prosperous-looking, with a snowy stock showing at the neck of a serviceable grey serge coat, its long tails covering all but an inch or two of his breeches.

We had been traveling for the best part of a week, sleeping out-of-doors, washing in the cold, fresh water of the burns, and living quite well off such rabbits and fish as Jamie could catch, and such edible plants and berries as I could find. Between our efforts, our diet was better than that in the Castle, fresher, and certainly more varied, if a little unpredictable.

But if nutrition was well served by an outdoor life, appearance was another thing, and I took hasty stock of our looks as the gentleman on horseback hesitated, frowning, then changed direction and trotted slowly toward us to investigate.

Jamie, who had insisted on walking most of the way to spare the horse, was a disreputable sight indeed, hose stained to the knees with reddish dust, spare shirt torn by brambles and a week's growth of beard bristling fiercely from cheek and jaw.

His hair had grown long enough in the last months to reach his shoulders. Usually clubbed into a queue or laced back, it was free now, thick and unruly, with small bits of leaf and stick caught in the disordered coppery locks. Face burned a deep ruddy bronze, boots cracked from walking, dirk and sword thrust through his belt, he looked a wild Highlander indeed.

I was hardly better. Covered modestly enough in the billows of Jamie's best shirt and the remnants of my shirt, barefoot, and shawled in his plaid, I looked a right ragamuffin. Encouraged by the misty dampness and lacking any restraint in the form of comb or brush, my hair rioted all over my head. It had grown as well during my sojourn at the Castle, and floated in clouds and tangles about my shoulders, drifting into my eyes whenever the wind was behind us, as it was now.

Shoving the wayward locks out of my eyes, I watched the cautious approach of the gentleman in grey. Jamie, seeing him, brought our own horse to a stop and waited for him to draw near enough for speech.

"It's Jock Graham," he said to me, "from up the way at Murch Nardagh."

The man came within a few yards, reined up and sat looking us over carefully. His eyes, pouched with fat, crinkled and rested suspiciously on Jamie, then suddenly sprang wide.

"Lallybroch?" he said unbelievingly.

Jamie nodded benignly. With a completely unfounded air of proprietorial pride, he laid a hand on my thigh and said, "and my lady Lallybroch."

Jock Graham's mouth dropped an inch or two, then was hastily drawn up again into an expression of flustered respect.

"Ah … my … lady," he said, belatedly doffing his hat and bowing in my direction. "You'll be, er, going home, then?" he asked, trying to keep his fascinated gaze from resting on my leg, bared to the knee by a rent in my shift, and stained with elderberry juice.

"Aye." Jamie glanced over his shoulder, toward the rift in the hill he had told me was the entrance to Broch Tuarach. "You'll have been there lately, Jock?"

Graham pulled his eyes away from me and looked at Jamie. "Och? Oh, aye. Aye, I've been there. They're all well. Be pleased to see ye, I expect. Go well, then, Fraser." And with a hasty dig into his horse's ribs, he turned aside and headed up the valley.

We watched him go. Suddenly, a hundred yards away, he paused. Turning in the saddle, he rose in his stirrups and cupped his mouth to shout. The sound, borne by the wind, reached us thin but distinct.

"Welcome home!"

And he disappeared over a rise.

* * *

Broch Tuarach means "the north-facing tower." From the side of the mountain above, the broch that gave the small estate its name was no more than another mound of rocks, much like those that lay at the foot of the hills we had been traveling through.

We came down through a narrow, rocky gap between two crags, leading the horse between boulders. Then the going was easier, the land sloping more gently down through the fields and scattered cottages, until at last we struck a small winding road that led to the house.

It was larger than I had expected; a handsome three-story manor of harled white stone, windows outlined in the natural grey stone, a high slate roof with multiple chimneys, and several smaller whitewashed buildings clustered about it, like chicks about a hen. The old stone broch, situated on a small rise to the rear of the house, rose sixty feet above the ground, cone-topped like a witch's hat, girdled with three rows of tiny arrow-slits.

As we drew near, there was a sudden terrible racket from the direction of the outbuildings, and Donas shied and reared. No horseman, I promptly fell off, landing ignominiously in the dusty road. With an eye for the relative importance of things, Jamie leapt for the plunging horse's bridle, leaving me to fend for myself.

The dogs were almost upon me, baying and growling, by the time I found my feet. To my panicked eyes, there seemed to be at least a dozen of them, all with teeth bared and wicked. There was a shout from Jamie.

"Bran! Luke! *Sheas!*"

The dogs skidded to a halt within a few feet of me, confused. They milled, growling uncertainly, until he spoke again.

"*Sheas, mo maise*! Stand, ye wee heathen!" They did, and the largest dog's tail began gradually to wag, once, and then twice, questioningly.

"Claire. Come take the horse. He'll not let them close, and it's me they want. Walk slowly; they'll no harm ye." He spoke casually, not to alarm either horse or dogs further. I was not so sanguine, but edged carefully toward him. Donas jerked his head and rolled his eyes as I took the bridle, but I was in no mood to put up with tantrums, and I yanked the rein firmly down and grabbed the headstall.

The thick velvet lips writhed back from his teeth, but I jerked harder. I put my face close to the big glaring golden eye and glared back.

“Don’t try it!” I warned, “or you’ll end up as dogsmeat, and I won’t lift a hand to save you!”

Jamie meanwhile was slowly walking toward the dogs, one hand held out fistlike toward them. What had seemed a large pack was only four dogs: a small brownish rat-terrier, two ruffed and spotted shepherds, and a huge black and tan monster that could have stood in for the Hound of the Baskervilles with no questions asked.

This slavering creature stretched out a neck thicker than my waist and sniffed gently at the proffered knuckles. A tail like a ship’s cable beat back and forth with increasing fervor. Then it flung back its enormous head, baying with joy, and leaped on its master, knocking him flat in the road.

“ ‘In which Odysseus returns from the Trojan War and is recognized by his faithful hound,’ ” I remarked to Donas, who snorted briefly, giving his opinion either of Homer, or of the undignified display of emotion going on in the roadway.

Jamie, laughing, was ruffling the fur and pulling the ears of the dogs, who were all trying to lick his face at once. Finally he beat them back sufficiently to rise, keeping his feet with difficulty against their ecstatic demonstrations.

“Well, *someone’s* glad to see me, at any rate,” he said, grinning, as he patted the beast’s head. “That’s Luke—” he pointed to the terrier, “and Elphin and Mars. Brothers, they are, and bonny sheep-dogs. And this,” he laid an affectionate hand on the enormous black head, which slobbered in appreciation, “is Bran.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I said, cautiously extending a knuckle to be sniffed. “*What* is he?”

“A staghound.” He scratched the pricked ears, quoting

> *“Thus Fingal chose his hounds:*
> *Eye like sloe, ear like leaf,*
> *Chest like horse, hough like sickle*
> *And the tail joint far from the head.”*

"If those are the qualifications, then you're right," I said, inspecting Bran. "If his tail joint were any further from his head, you could ride him."

"I used to, when I was small—not Bran, I don't mean, but his grandfather, Nairn."

He gave the hound a final pat and straightened, gazing toward the house. He took the restive Donas's bridle and turned him downhill.

"In which Odysseus returns to his home, disguised as a beggar,…" he quoted in Greek, having picked up my earlier remark. "And now," he said, straightening his collar with some grimness, "I suppose it's time to go and deal with Penelope and her suitors."

When we reached the double doors, the dogs panting at our heels, Jamie hesitated.

"Should we knock?" I asked, a bit nervous. He looked at me in astonishment.

"It's my home," he said, and pushed the door open.

He led me through the house, ignoring the few startled servants we passed, past the entrance hall and through a small gun room, into the drawing room. It boasted a wide hearth with a polished mantel, and bits of silver and glass gleamed here and there, capturing the late-afternoon sun. For a moment, I thought the room was empty. Then I saw a faint movement in one corner near the hearth.

She was smaller than I had expected. With a brother like Jamie, I had imagined her at least my height, or even taller, but the woman by the fire barely reached five feet. Her back was to us as she reached for something on the shelf of the china cabinet, and the ends of her dress sash dipped close to the floor.

Jamie froze when he saw her.

"Jenny," he said.

The woman turned and I caught an impression of brows black as ink-squills, and blue eyes wide in a white face before she launched herself at her brother.

"Jamie!" Small as she was, she jarred him with the impact of her embrace. His arms went about her shoulders in reflex and they clung for a moment, her face tight against his shirtfront, his hand tender on the nape of her neck. On his face was an expression of such mingled uncertainty and yearning joy that I felt almost an intruder.

Then she pressed herself closer to him, murmuring something in Gaelic, and his expression dissolved in shock. He grasped her by the arms and held her away from him, looking down.

The faces were much alike; the same oddly slanted dark blue eyes and broad cheekbones. The same thin, blade-bridged nose, just a trifle too long. But she was dark where Jamie was fair, with cascades of black curly hair, bound back with green ribbon.

She was beautiful, with clear-drawn features and alabaster skin. She was also clearly in a state of advanced pregnancy.

Jamie had gone white at the lips. “Jenny,” he whispered, shaking his head. “Oh, Jenny. *Mo cridh.*”

Her attention was distracted just then by the appearance of a small child in the doorway, and she pulled away from her brother without noticing his discomposure. She took the little boy’s hand and led him into the room, murmuring encouragement. He hung back a little, thumb in mouth for comfort, peering up at the strangers from behind his mother’s skirts.

For his mother she plainly was. He had her mop of thick, curly black hair and the square set of her shoulders, though the face was not hers.

“This is wee Jamie,” she said, looking proudly down at the lad. “And this is your uncle Jamie, *mo cridh,* the one you’re named for.”

“For me? You named him for me?” Jamie looked like a fighter who has just been punched very hard in the stomach. He backed away from mother and child until he blundered into a chair, and sank into it as though the strength had gone from his legs. He hid his face in his hands.

His sister by this time was aware that something was amiss. She touched him tentatively on the shoulder.

“Jamie? What is it, my dearie? Are ye ill?”

He looked up at her then, and I could see his eyes were full of tears.

"Did ye have to do that, Jenny? Do ye think that I've not suffered enough for what happened—for what I let happen—that ye must name Randall's bastard for me, to be a reproach to me so long as I live?"

Jenny's face, normally pale, lost all vestiges of color.

"Randall's bastard?" she said blankly. "John Randall, ye mean? The Redcoat captain?"

"Aye, the Redcoat captain. Who else would I mean, for God's sake! You'll remember him, I suppose?" Jamie was recovering enough of his customary poise for sarcasm.

Jenny eyed her brother closely, one arched brow lifted in suspicion.

"Have ye lost your senses, man?" she inquired. "Or have ye taken a drop too much along the way?"

"I should never have come back," he muttered. He rose then, stumbling slightly and tried to pass without touching her. She stood her ground, however, and gripped him by the arm.

"Correct me, brother, if I'm wrong," Jenny said slowly, "but I've the strong impression you're saying I've played the whore to Captain Randall, and what I'm askin' myself is what maggots you've got in your brain to make ye say so?"

"Maggots, is it?" Jamie turned to her, mouth twisted with bitterness. "I wish it were so; I'd rather I was dead and in my grave than to see my sister brought to such a pass." He seized her by the shoulders, and shook her slightly, crying out, "Why, Jenny, why? To have ye ruin yourself for me was shame enough to kill me. But this …" He dropped his hands then, with a gesture of despair that took in the protruding belly, swelling accusingly under the light smocking.

He turned abruptly toward the door, and an elderly woman, who had been listening avidly with the child clinging to her skirts, drew back in alarm.

"I should not have come. I'll go."

"You'll do no such thing, Jamie Fraser," his sister said sharply. "Not before you've listened to me. Sit yourself down, then, and I'll tell ye about Captain Randall, since ye want to know."

“I *don’t* want to know! I don’t want to hear it!” As she advanced toward him, he turned sharply away to the window that looked out over the yard. She followed him, saying “Jamie …,” but he repelled her with a violent gesture.

“No! Don’t talk to me! I’ve said I canna bear to hear it!”

“Och, is that a fact?” She eyed her brother, standing at the window with his legs braced wide apart, hands on the sill and back stubbornly set against her. She bit her lip and a calculating look came over her face. Quick as lightning, she stooped and her hand shot under his kilt like a striking snake.

Jamie let out a roar of sheer outrage and stood bolt upright with shock. He tried to turn, then froze as she apparently tightened her grip.

“There’s men as are sensible,” she said to me, with a wicked smile, “and beasts as are biddable. Others ye’ll do nothing with, unless ye have ’em by the ballocks. Now, ye can listen to me in a civil way,” she said to her brother, “or I can twist a bit. Hey?”

He stood still, red-faced, breathing heavily through clenched teeth. “I’ll listen,” he said, “and then I’ll wring your wee neck, Janet! Let me go!”

No sooner did she oblige than he whirled on her.

“What in hell d’ye think you’re doing?” he demanded. “Tryin’ to shame me before my own wife?” Jenny was not fazed by his outrage. She rocked back on her heels, viewing her brother and me sardonically.

“Weel, and if she’s your wife, I expect she’s more familiar wi’ your balls than what I am. I havena seen them myself since ye got old enough to wash alone. Grown a bit, no?”

Jamie’s face went through several alarming transformations, as the dictates of civilized behavior struggled with the primitive impulse of a younger brother to clout his sister over the head. Civilization at length won out, and he said through his teeth, with what dignity he could summon, “Leave my balls out of it. And then, since you’ll not rest ’til ye make me hear it, *tell* me about Randall. Tell me why ye disobeyed my orders and chose to dishonor yourself and your family instead.”

Jenny put her hands on her hips and drew herself to her full height, ready for combat. Slower than he to lose her temper; still she had one, no doubt of that.

"Oh, disobey your orders, is it? That's what eats at ye, Jamie, isn't it? You know best, and we'll all do as ye say, or we'll come to rack and ruin, nae doubt." She flounced angrily. "And if I'd done as *you* said, that day, you'd ha' been dead in the dooryard, Faither hanged or in prison for killing Randall, and the lands gone forfeit to the Crown. To say nothing of me, wi' my home and family gone, needing to beg in the byroads to live."

Not pale at all now, Jamie was flushed with anger.

"Aye, so ye chose to sell yourself rather than beg! I'd sooner have died in my blood and seen Faither and the lands in hell along with me, and well ye know it!"

"Aye, I know it! You're a ninny, Jamie, and always have been!" his sister returned in exasperation.

"Fine thing for *you* to say! You're not content wi' ruining your good name and my own, ye must go on with the scandal, and flaunt your shame to the whole neighborhood!"

"You'll not speak to me in that way, James Fraser, brother or no! What d'ye mean, 'my shame'? Ye great fool, you—"

"What I *mean*? When you're goin' about swelled out to here like a mad toad?" He mimicked her belly with a contemptuous swipe of the hand.

She took one step back, drew back her hand and slapped him with all the force she could muster. The impact jarred his head back and left a white outline of her fingers printed on his cheek. He slowly raised a hand to the mark, staring at his sister. Her eyes were glittering dangerously and her bosom heaved. The words spilled out in a torrent between clenched white teeth.

"Toad, is it? Stinking coward—ye've no more courage than to leave me here, thinking ye dead or imprisoned, wi' no word from one day to the next, and then ye come strolling in one fine day—with a wife, no less—and sit in my drawing room calling me toad and harlot and—"

"I didna call ye harlot, but I should! How can ye—"

Despite the differences in their heights, brother and sister were almost nose to nose, hissing at one another in an effort to keep their carrying voices from ringing through the old manor house. The effort was largely wasted, judging from the glimpses I caught of various interested faces peeping discreetly from kitchen, hall, and window. The laird of Broch Tuarach was having an interesting homecoming, to be sure.

I thought it best to let them have it out without my presence, and so I stepped quietly into the hall, with an awkward nod to the elderly woman, and continued into the yard. There was a small arbor there with a bench, on which I seated myself, looking about with interest.

Besides the arbor, there was a small walled garden, blooming with the last of the summer roses. Beyond it was what Jamie referred to as “the doocot”; or so I assumed, from the assorted pigeons that were fluttering in and out of the pierced-work opening at the top of the building.

I knew there was a barn and a shed for silage; these must be to the other side of the house, with the farm’s granary and the henyard, kailyard, and disused chapel. Which still left a small stone building on this side unaccounted for. The light autumn wind was from that direction; I sniffed deeply, and was rewarded with the rich smell of hops and yeast. That was the brewhouse, then, where the beer and ale for the estate were made.

The road past the gate led up and over a small hill. As I looked, a small group of men appeared at the crest, silhouetted in the evening light. They seemed to hover a moment, as though taking leave of each other. This appeared to be the case, for only one came down the hill toward the house, the others striking off through the fields toward a clump of cottages in the distance.

As the single man came down the hill, I could see that he limped badly. When he came through the gate, the reason for it was apparent. The right leg was missing below the knee, and he wore a wooden peg in replacement.

In spite of the limp, he moved youthfully. In fact, as he drew near to the arbor, I could see that he was only in his twenties. He was tall, nearly as tall as Jamie, but much narrower through the shoulder, thin, in fact, nearly to the point of skinniness.

He paused at the entrance to the arbor, leaning heavily on the lattice, and looked in at me with interest. Thick brown hair fell smoothly over a high brow, and deepset brown eyes held a look of patient good humor.

The voices of Jamie and his sister had risen while I waited outside. The windows were open to the warm weather, and the disputants were quite audible from the arbor, though not all the words were clear.

"Interfering, nosy bitch!" came Jamie's voice, loud on the soft evening air.

"Havena the decency to …" His sister's reply was lost in a sudden breeze.

The newcomer nodded easily toward the house.

"Ah, Jamie's home, then."

I nodded in reply, not sure whether I should introduce myself. It didn't matter, for the young man smiled and inclined his head to me.

"I'm Ian Murray, Jenny's husband. And I imagine ye'll be … ah …"

"The Sassenach wench Jamie's married," I finished for him. "My name is Claire. Did you know about it, then?" I asked, as he laughed. My mind was racing. Jenny's *husband*?

"Oh, aye. We heard from Joe Orr, who'd got it from a tinker in Ardraigh. Ye canna keep anything secret long in the Highlands. You should know that, even if you've been wed as little as a month. Jenny's been wondering for weeks what you'd be like."

"Whore!" Jamie bellowed from inside the house. Jenny's husband didn't turn a hair, but went on examining me with friendly curiosity.

"You're a bonny lass," he said, looking me over frankly. "Are ye fond of Jamie?"

"Well … yes. Yes, I am," I answered, a bit taken aback. I was becoming accustomed to the directness that characterized most Highlanders, but it still took me unawares from time to time.

He pursed his lips and nodded as though satisfied, and sat down beside me on the bench.

"Better let them have a few minutes longer," he said, with a wave at the house, where the shouting had now turned to Gaelic. He seemed completely unconcerned as to the cause of the battle. "Frasers dinna listen to anything when they've their danders up. When they've shouted themselves out, sometimes ye can make them see reason, but not 'til then."

"Yes, I noticed," I said dryly, and he laughed.

"So you've been wed long enough to find that out, eh? We heard as how Dougal made Jamie wed ye," he said, ignoring the battle and concentrating his attention on me. "But Jenny said it would take more than Dougal MacKenzie to make Jamie do something he didna care to. Now that I see ye, of course I can see why he did it." He lifted his brows, inviting further explanation, but politely not forcing it.

"I imagine he had his reasons," I said, my attention divided between my companion and the house, where the sounds of combat continued. "I don't want … I mean, I hope …" Ian correctly interpreted my hesitations and my glance toward the drawing-room windows.

"Oh, I expect you've something to do with it. But she'd take it out of him whether you were here or not. She loves Jamie something fierce, ye know, and she worried a lot while he was gone, especially with her father goin' so sudden. Ye'll know about that?" The brown eyes were sharp and observant, as though to gauge the depth of confidence between me and Jamie.

"Yes, Jamie told me."

"Ah." He nodded toward the house. "Then, of course, she's wi' child."

"Yes, I noticed that too," I said.

"Hard to miss, is it no?" Ian answered with a grin, and we both laughed. "Makes her frachetty," he explained, "not that I'd blame her. But it would take a braver man than me to cross words wi' a woman in her ninth month." He leaned back, stretching his wooden leg out in front of him.

"Lost it at Daumier with Fergus nic Leodhas," he explained. "Grape shot. Aches a wee bit toward the end of the day." He rubbed the flesh just above the leather cuff that attached the peg to his stump.

"Have you tried rubbing it with Balm of Gilead?" I asked. "Water-pepper or stewed rue might help too."

"I've not tried the water-pepper," he answered, interested. "I'll ask Jenny does she know how to make it."

"Oh, I'd be glad to make it for you," I said, liking him. I looked toward the house again. "If we stay long enough," I added doubtfully. We chatted inconsequentially for a little, both listening with one ear to the confrontation going on beyond the window, until Ian hitched forward, carefully settling his artificial limb under him before rising.

"I imagine we should go in now. If either of them stops shouting long enough to hear the other, they'll be hurting each other's feelings."

"I hope that's all they hurt."

Ian chuckled. "Oh, I dinna think Jamie would strike her. He's used to forbearance in the face of provocation. As for Jenny, she might slap his face, but that's all."

"She already did that."

"Weel, the guns are locked up, and all the knives are in the kitchen, except what Jamie's wearing. And I don't suppose he'll let her close enough to get his dirk away from him. Nay, they're safe enough." He paused at the door. "Now, as for you and me …" He winked solemnly. "That's a different matter."

* * *

Inside, the maids started and flitted nervously away at Ian's approach. The housekeeper, though, was still hovering by the drawing room door in fascination, drinking in the scene within, Jamie's namesake cradled against her capacious bosom. Such was her concentration that when Ian spoke to her, she jumped as though he had run a hatpin into her, and put a hand to her palpitating heart.

Ian nodded politely to her, took the little boy in his arms, and led the way into the drawing room. We paused just inside the door to survey the scene. Brother and sister had paused for breath, both still bristling and glaring like a pair of angry cats.

Small Jamie, spotting his mother, struggled and kicked to get down from Ian's arms, and once on the floor, made for her like a homing pigeon. "Mama!" he cried. "Up! Jamie up!" Turning, she scooped up the little boy and held him like a weapon against her shoulder.

"Can ye tell your uncle how old ye are, sweetheart?" she asked him, throttling her voice down to a coo—under which the sound of clashing steel was still all too apparent. The boy heard it; he turned and burrowed his face into his mother's neck. She patted his back mechanically, still glaring at her brother.

"Since he'll not tell ye, I will. He's two, come last August. And if you're bright enough to count—which I take leave to doubt—you'll see he was conceived six months past the time I last saw yon Randall, which was in our own dooryard, beating the living daylight out of my brother with a saber."

"That's so, is it?" Jamie glowered at his sister. "I've heard a bit differently. It's common knowledge you've taken the man to your bed; not the once, but as your lover. That child's his." He nodded contemptuously at his namesake, who had turned to peer under his mother's chin at this big, loud stranger. "I believe ye when ye say the new bastard you're carrying is not; Randall was in France 'til this March. So you're not only a whore, but an unchoosy one too. Who fathered this last devil's-spawn on ye?"

The tall young man beside me coughed apologetically, breaking the tension in the room.

"I did," he said mildly. "That one too." Advancing stiffly on his wooden leg, he took the little boy from his fuming wife and set him in the crook of his arm. "Favors me a bit, some say."

In fact, seen side by side, the faces of man and boy were nearly identical, allowing for the round cheeks of the one and the crooked nose of the other. The same high brow and narrow lips. The same feathery brows arched over the same deep, liquid-brown eyes.

Jamie, staring at the pair of them, looked rather as though he'd been hit in the small of the back with a sandbag. He closed his mouth and swallowed once, clearly having no idea what to do next.

"Ian," he said, a little weakly. "You're married, then?"

"Oh, aye," his brother-in-law said cheerfully. "Wouldn't do, otherwise, would it?"

"I see," Jamie murmured. He cleared his throat and bobbed his head at his newly discovered brother-in-law. "It's, er, it's kind of ye, Ian. To take her, I mean. Most kind."

Feeling that he might be in need of some moral support at this point, I moved to Jamie's side, and touched his arm. His sister's eyes lingered on me speculatively, but she said nothing. Jamie looked around and seemed startled to find me there, as though he had forgotten my existence. And no wonder if he had, I thought. But he seemed relieved by the interruption, at least, and put out a hand to draw me forward.

"My wife," he said, rather abruptly. He nodded toward Jenny and Ian. "My sister, and, her, ah …" he trailed off, as Ian and I exchanged polite smiles.

Jenny was not to be distracted by social niceties.

"What d'ye mean, it's kind of him to take me?" she demanded, ignoring the introductions. "As if I didna ken!" Ian looked inquiringly at her, and she waved a disdainful hand at Jamie. "He means it was kind of ye to wed me in my soiled condition!" She gave a snort that would have done credit to someone twice her size. "Bletherer!"

"Soiled condition?" Ian looked startled, and Jamie suddenly leaned forward and grasped his sister hard about the upper arm.

"Did ye not tell him about Randall?" He sounded truly shocked. "Jenny, how could ye do such a thing?"

Only Ian's hand on Jenny's other arm restrained her from flying at her brother's throat. Ian drew her firmly behind him, and turning, set small Jamie in her arms, so that she was forced to grasp the child to save him falling. Then Ian put an arm about Jamie's shoulders and tactfully steered him a safe distance away.

"It's hardly a matter for the drawing room," he said, low-voiced and deprecating, "but ye might be interested to know that your sister was virgin on her wedding night. I was, after all, in a position to say."

Jenny's wrath was now more or less evenly divided between brother and husband.

"How dare ye to say such things in my presence, Ian Murray!?" she flamed. "Or out of it, either! My wedding night's no one's business but mine and yours—sure it's not *his*! Next you'll be showing him the sheets from my bridal bed!"

"Weel, if I did now, it would shut him up, no?" said Ian soothingly. "Come now, *mi dhu,* ye shouldna worrit yourself, it's bad for the babe. And the shouting troubles wee Jamie too." He reached out for his son, who was whimpering, not sure yet whether the situation required tears. Ian jerked his head at me and rolled an eye in Jamie's direction.

Taking my cue, I grabbed Jamie by the arm and dragged him to an armchair in a neutral corner. Ian had Jenny likewise installed on the loveseat, a firm arm across her shoulders to keep her in place.

"Now, then." In spite of his unassuming manner, Ian Murray had an undeniable authority. I had my hand on Jamie's shoulder, and could feel the tension begin to go out of it.

I thought that the room looked a bit like the ring of a boxing match, with the fighters twitching restlessly in the corners, each awaiting the signal for action under the soothing hand of a manager.

Ian nodded at his brother-in-law, smiling. "Jamie. It's good to see ye, man. We're pleased you're home, and your wife with ye. Are we not, *mi dhu*?" he demanded of Jenny, his fingers tightening perceptibly on her shoulder.

She was not one to be forced into anything. Her lips compressed into a thin tight line, as though forming a seal, then opened reluctantly to let one word escape.

"Depends," she said, and shut them tight again.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, then raised his head, ready for a fresh round.

"I saw ye go into the house with Randall," he said stubbornly. "And from things he said to me later—how comes he to know you've a mole on your breast, then?"

She snorted violently. "Do ye remember all that went on that day, or did the Captain beat it out of ye wi' his saber?"

"Of course I remember! I'm no likely to forget it!"

"Then perhaps you'll remember that I gave the Captain a fair jolt in the crutch wi' my knee at one point in the proceedings?"

Jamie hunched his shoulders, wary. "Aye, I remember."

Jenny smiled in a superior manner.

"Weel then, if your wife here—ye could tell me her name at least, Jamie, I swear you've no manners at all—anyway, if she was to give ye similar treatment—and richly you deserve it, I might add—d'ye think you'd be able to perform your husbandly duties a few minutes later?"

Jamie, who had been opening his mouth to speak, suddenly shut it. He stared at his sister for a long moment, then one corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

"Depends," he said. The mouth twitched again. He had been sitting hunched forward in his chair, but sat back now, looking at her with the half-skeptical expression of a younger brother listening to a sister's fairy tales, feeling himself too old to be amazed, but half-believing still against his will.

"Really?" he said.

Jenny turned to Ian. "Go and fetch the sheets, Ian," she ordered.

Jamie raised both hands in surrender. "No. No, I believe ye. It's just, the way he acted after …"

Jenny sat back, relaxed in the curve of Ian's arm, her son cuddling as close as the bulk of her belly would permit, gracious in victory.

"Weel, after all he'd said outside, he could hardly admit in front of his own men to being incapable, now could he? He'd have to seem as though he'd done as he promised, no? And," she admitted, "I'll have to say the man was verra unpleasant about it all; he did strike me and tear my gown. In fact, he knocked me half-senseless trying, and by the time I'd come to myself and got decently covered again, the English had gone, taking you along with them."

Jamie gave a long sigh and closed his eyes briefly. His broad hands rested on his knees, and I covered one of them with a gentle squeeze. He took my hand and opened his eyes, giving me a faint smile of acknowledgment before turning back to his sister.

"All right," he said. "But I want to know, Jenny; did ye know when ye went with him that he'd not harm you?"

She was silent for a moment, but her gaze was steady on her brother's face, and at last she shook her head, a slight smile on her lips.

She put out a hand to stop Jamie's protest, and the gull-winged brows rose in a graceful arc of inquiry. "And if your life is a suitable exchange for my honor, tell me why my honor is not a suitable exchange for your life?" The brows drew together in a scowl, the twin of the one adorning her brother's face. "Or are you telling me that I may not love you as much as you love me? Because if ye are, Jamie Fraser, I'll tell ye right now, it's not true!"

Opening his mouth to reply before she was finished, Jamie was taken suddenly at a loss by this conclusion. He closed his mouth abruptly as his sister pressed her advantage.

"Because I do love ye, for all you're a thick-headed, slack-witted, lack-brained gomerel. And I'll no have ye dead in the road at my feet just because you're too stubborn to keep your mouth shut for the once in your life!"

Blue eyes glared into blue eyes, shooting sparks in all directions. Swallowing the insults with difficulty, Jamie struggled for a rational reply. He seemed to be making up his mind to something. Finally he squared his shoulders, resigned to it.

"All right, then, I'm sorry," he said. "I was wrong, and I'll beg your pardon."

He and his sister sat staring at each other for a long moment, but whatever pardon he was expecting from her was not forthcoming. She examined him closely, biting her lip, but said nothing. Finally he grew impatient.

"I've said I'm sorry! What more d'ye want of me?" he demanded. "Do ye want me to go on my knees to ye? I'll do it if I must, but tell me!"

She shook her head slowly, lip still caught between her teeth.

"No," she said at last, "I'll not have ye on your knees in your own house. Stand up, though."

Jamie stood, and she set the child down on the loveseat and crossed the room to stand in front of him.

"Take off your shirt," she ordered.

"I'll not!"

She jerked the shirttail out of his kilt and reached for the buttons. Short of forcible resistance, clearly he was going to obey or submit to being undressed. Retaining as much dignity as he could, he backed away from her, and tightlipped, removed the disputed garment.

She circled behind him and surveyed his back, her face displaying the same carefully blank expression I had seen Jamie adopt when concealing some strong emotion. She nodded, as though confirming something long suspected.

"Weel, and if you've been a fool, Jamie, it seems you've paid for it." She laid her hand gently on his back, covering the worst of the scars.

"It looks as though it hurt."

"It did."

"Did you cry?"

His fists clenched involuntarily at his sides. "Yes!"

Jenny walked back around to face him, pointed chin lifted and slanted eyes wide and bright. "So did I," she said softly. "Every day since they took ye away."

The broad-cheeked faces were once more mirrors of each other, but the expression that they wore was such that I rose and stepped quietly through the kitchen door to leave them alone. As the door swung to behind me, I saw Jamie catch hold of his sister's hands and say something huskily in Gaelic. She stepped into his embrace, and the rough bright head bent to the dark.

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27

THE LAST REASON

We ate like wolves at dinner, retired to a large, airy bedroom, and slept like logs. The sun would have been high by the time we rose in the morning, save that the sky was covered in clouds. I could tell it was late by the bustling feel of the house, as of people going cheerfully about their business, and by the tempting aromas that drifted up the stairs.

After breakfast the men prepared to go out, visiting tenants, inspecting fences, mending wagons, and generally enjoying themselves. As they paused in the hall to don their coats, Ian spotted Jenny's large basket resting on the table beneath the hall mirror.

"Shall I fetch home some apples from the orchard, Jenny? 'Twould save ye walking so far."

"Good idea," said Jamie, casting an appraising eye at his sister's expansive frontage. "We dinna want her to drop it in the road."

"I'll drop *you* where ye stand, Jamie Fraser," she retorted, calmly holding up the coat for Ian to shrug into. "Be useful for the once, and take this wee fiend outside wi' ye. Mrs. Crook's in the washhouse; ye can leave him there." She moved her foot, dislodging small Jamie, who was clinging to her skirts, chanting "up, up" monotonously.

His uncle obediently grabbed the wee fiend around the middle and swept him out the door, upside down and shrieking with delight. "Ah," Jenny sighed contentedly, bending to inspect her appearance in the gold-framed mirror. She wet a finger and smoothed her brows, then finished doing up the buttons at her throat. “Nice to finish dressing wi’out someone clinging to your skirts or wrapped round your knees. Some days I can scarce go to the privy alone, or speak a single sentence wi’out being interrupted.”

Her cheeks were slightly flushed, and her dark hair gleamed against the blue silk of her dress. Ian smiled at her, warm brown eyes glowing at the blooming picture she presented.

“Weel, you’ll have time to talk wi’ Claire, perhaps,” he suggested. He cocked one eyebrow in my direction. “I expect she’s mannerly enough to listen, but for God’s sake, dinna tell her any of your poems, or she’ll be on the next coach to London before Jamie and I get back.”

Jenny snapped her fingers under his nose, unperturbed by the teasing.

“I’m none too worried, man. There’s no coach going before next April, and I reckon she’ll be used to us by that time. Get on wi’ ye; Jamie’s waiting.”

While the men went about their business, Jenny and I spent the day in the parlor, she stitching, I winding up stray bits of yarn and sorting the colored silks.

Outwardly friendly, we circled each other cautiously in conversation, watching each other from the corners of our eyes. Jamie’s sister, Jamie’s wife; Jamie was the central point, unspoken, about which our thoughts revolved.

Their shared childhood linked them forever, like the warp and the weft of a single fabric, but the patterns of their weave had been loosened, by absence and suspicion, then by marriage. Ian’s thread had been present in their weaving since the beginning, mine was a new one. How would the tensions pull in this new pattern, one thread against another?

Our conversation ran on casual lines, but with the words unspoken clearly heard beneath.

“You’ve run the house here alone since your mother died?”

“Oh, aye. Since I was ten.”

I had the nurturing and the loving of him as a boy. What will you do with the man I helped make?

"Jamie says as you're a rare fine healer."

"I mended his shoulder for him when we first met."

Yes, I am capable, and kind. I will care for him.

"I hear ye married very quickly."

Did you wed my brother for his land and money?

"Yes, it was quick. I didn't even know Jamie's true surname until just before the ceremony."

I didn't know he was laird of this place; I can only have married him for himself.

And so it went through the morning, a light luncheon, and into the hours of the afternoon, as we exchanged small talk, tidbits of information, opinions, small and hesitant jokes, taking each other's measure. A woman who had run a large household since the age of ten, who had managed the estate since her father's death and her brother's disappearance, was not a person to be lightly esteemed. I did wonder what she thought of me, but she seemed as capable as her brother of hiding her thoughts when she chose to.

As the clock on the mantelpiece began to strike five, Jenny yawned and stretched, and the garment she had been mending slid down the rounded slope of her belly onto the floor.

She began clumsily to reach for it, but I dropped to my knees beside her.

"No, I'll get it."

"Thank ye … Claire." Her first use of my name was accompanied by a shy smile, and I returned it.

Before we could return to our conversation, we were interrupted by the arrival of Mrs. Crook, the housekeeper, who poked a long nose into the parlor and inquired worriedly whether we had seen wee Master Jamie.

Jenny laid aside her sewing with a sigh.

"Got away again, has he? Nay worry, Lizzie. He's likely gone wi' his Da or his uncle. We'll go and see, shall we, Claire? I could use a breath of air before supper."

She rose heavily to her feet and pressed her hands against the small of her back. She groaned and gave me a wry smile.

"Three weeks, about. I canna wait."

We walked slowly through the grounds outside, Jenny pointing out the brewhouse and the chapel, explaining the history of the estate, and when the different bits had been built.

As we approached the corner of the dovecote, we heard voices in the arbor.

“There he is, the wee rascal!” Jenny exclaimed. “Wait ’til I lay hands on him!”

“Wait a minute.” I laid a hand on her arm, recognizing the deeper voice that underlaid the little boy’s.

“Dinna worrit yourself, man,” said Jamie’s voice. “You’ll learn. It’s a bit difficult, isn’t it, when your cock doesna stick out any further than your belly button?”

I stuck my head around the corner, to find him seated on a chopping block, engaged in converse with his namesake, who was struggling manfully with the folds of his smock.

“What are you doing with the child?” I inquired cautiously.

“I’m teachin’ young James here the fine art of not pissing on his feet,” he explained. “Seems the least his uncle could do for him.”

I raised one eyebrow. “Talk is cheap. Seems the least his uncle could do is show him.”

He grinned. “Well, we’ve had a few practical demonstrations. Had a wee accident last time, though.” He exchanged accusatory looks with his nephew. “Dinna look at *me,*” he said to the boy. “It was all your fault. I *told* ye to keep still.”

“Ahem,” said Jenny dryly, with a look at her brother and a matching one at her son. The smaller Jamie responded by pulling the front of his smock up over his head, but the larger one, unabashed, grinned cheerfully and rose from his seat, brushing dirt from his breeks. He set a hand on his nephew’s swathed head, and turned the little boy toward the house.

“ ‘To everything there is a season,’ ” he quoted, “ ‘and a time for every purpose under heaven.’ First we work, wee James, and then we wash. And *then*—thank God—it’s time for supper.”

The most pressing matters of business attended to, Jamie took time the next afternoon to show me over the house. Built in 1702, it was indeed modern for its time, with such innovations as porcelain stoves for heating, and a great brick oven built into the kitchen wall, so that bread was no longer baked in the ashes of the hearth. The ground floor hallway, the stairwell, and the drawing room walls were lined with pictures. Here and there was a pastoral landscape, or an animal study, but most were of the family and their connections.

I paused before a picture of Jenny as a young girl. She sat on the garden wall, a red-leaved vine behind her. Lined up in front of her along the top of the wall was a row of birds; sparrows, a thrush, a lark, and even a pheasant, all jostling and sidling for position before their laughing mistress. It was quite unlike most of the formally posed pictures, in which one ancestor or another glared out of their frames as though their collars were choking them.

"My mother painted that," Jamie said, noting my interest. "She did quite a few of the ones in the stairwell, but there are only two of hers in here. She always liked that one best herself." A large, blunt finger touched the surface of the canvas gently, tracing the line of the red-leaved vine. "Those were Jenny's tame birds. Anytime there was a bird found wi' a lame leg or a broken wing, whoever found it would bring it along, and in days she'd have it healed, and eatin' from her hand. That one always reminded me of Ian." The finger tapped above the pheasant, wings spread to keep its balance, gazing at its mistress with dark, adoring eyes.

"You're awful, Jamie," I said, laughing. "Is there one of you?"

"Oh, aye." He led me to the opposite wall, near the window.

Two red-haired, tartan-clad little boys stared solemnly out of the frame, seated with an enormous staghound. That must be Nairn, Bran's grandfather, Jamie, and his older brother Willie, who had died of the smallpox at eleven. Jamie could not have been more than two when it was painted, I thought; he stood between his elder brother's knees, one hand resting on the dog's head.

Jamie had told me about Willie during our journey from Leoch, one night by the fire at the bottom of a lonely glen. I remembered the small snake, carved of cherrywood, that he had drawn from his sporran to show me.

"Willie gave it me for my fifth birthday," he had said, finger gently stroking the sinuous curves. It was a comical little snake, body writhing artistically, and its head turned back to peer over what would have been its shoulder, if snakes had shoulders.

Jamie handed me the little wooden object, and I turned it over curiously.

"What's this scratched on the underside? S-a-w-n-y. Sawny?"

"That's me," Jamie said, ducking his head as though mildly embarrassed. "It's a pet name, like, a play on my second name, Alexander. It's what Willie used to call me."

The faces in the picture were very much alike; all the Fraser children had that forthright look that dared you to take them at less than their own valuation of themselves. In this portrait, though, Jamie's cheeks were rounded and his nose still snubbed with babyhood, while his brother's strong bones had begun to show the promise of the man within, a promise never kept.

"Were you very fond of him?" I asked softly, laying a hand on his arm. He nodded, looking away into the flames on the hearth.

"Oh, aye," he said with a faint smile. "He was five years older than I, and I thought he was God, or at least Christ. Used to follow him everywhere; or everywhere he'd let me, at least."

He turned away and wandered toward the bookshelves. Wanting to give him a moment alone, I stayed, looking out of the window.

From this side of the house I could see dimly through the rain the outline of a rocky, grass-topped hill in the distance. It reminded me of the fairies' dun where I had stepped through a rock and emerged from a rabbit hole. Only six months. But it seemed like a very long time ago.

Jamie had come to stand beside me at the window. Staring absently out at the driving rain, he said, "There was another reason. The main one."

"Reason?" I said stupidly.

"Why I married you."

"Which was?" I don't know what I expected him to say, perhaps some further revelation of his family's contorted affairs. What he did say was more of a shock, in its way.

"Because I wanted you." He turned from the window to face me. "More than I ever wanted anything in my life," he added softly.

I continued staring at him, dumbstruck. Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't this. Seeing my openmouthed expression, he continued lightly. "When I asked my Da how ye knew which was the right woman, he told me when the time came, I'd have no doubt. And I didn't. When I woke in the dark under that tree on the road to Leoch, with you sitting on my chest, cursing me for bleeding to death, I said to myself, 'Jamie Fraser, for all ye canna see what she looks like, and for all she weighs as much as a good draft horse, this is the woman.' "

I started toward him, and he backed away, talking rapidly. "I said to myself, 'She's mended ye twice in as many hours, me lad; life amongst the MacKenzies being what it is, it might be as well to wed a woman as can stanch a wound and set broken bones.' And I said to myself, 'Jamie, lad, if her touch feels so bonny on your collarbone, imagine what it might feel like lower down …' "

He dodged around a chair. "Of course, I thought it might ha' just been the effects of spending four months in a monastery, without benefit of female companionship, but then that ride through the dark together"—he paused to sigh theatrically, neatly evading my grab at his sleeve—"with that lovely broad arse wedged between my thighs"—he ducked a blow aimed at his left ear and sidestepped, getting a low table between us—"and that rock-solid head thumping me in the chest"—a small metal ornament bounced off his own head and went clanging to the floor—"I said to myself …"

He was laughing so hard at this point that he had to gasp for breath between phrases. "Jamie … I said … for all she's a Sassenach bitch … with a tongue like an adder's … with a bum like that … what does it matter if she's a f-face like a sh-sh-sheep?"

I tripped him neatly and landed on his stomach with both knees as he hit the floor with a crash that shook the house.

"You mean to tell me that you married me out of love?" I demanded. He raised his eyebrows, struggling to draw in breath.

"Have I not … just been … saying so?"

Grabbing me round the shoulders with one arm, he wormed the other hand under my skirt and proceeded to inflict a series of merciless pinches on that part of my anatomy he had just been praising.

Returning to pick up her embroidery basket, Jenny sailed in at this point and stood eyeing her brother with some amusement. “And what are *you* up to, young Jamie me lad?” she inquired, one eyebrow up.

“I’m makin’ love to my wife,” he panted, breathless between giggling and fighting.

“Well, ye could find a more suitable place for it,” she said, raising the other eyebrow. “That floor’ll give ye splinters in your arse.”

* * *

If Lallybroch was a peaceful place, it was also a busy one. Everyone in it seemed to stir into immediate life at cockcrow, and the farm then spun and whirred like a complicated bit of clockwork until after sunset, when one by one the cogs and wheels that made it run began to fall away, rolling off into the dark to seek supper and bed, only to reappear like magic in their proper places in the morning.

So essential did every last man, woman, and child seem to the running of the place that I could not imagine how it had fared these last few years, lacking its master. Now not only Jamie’s hands, but mine as well, were pressed into full employment. For the first time, I understood the stern Scotch strictures against idleness that had seemed like mere quaintness before—or after, as the case might be. Idleness would have seemed not only a sign of moral decay, but an affront to the natural order of things.

There were moments, of course. Those small spaces of time, too soon gone, when everything seems to stand still, and existence is balanced on a perfect point, like the moment of change between the dark and the light, when both and neither surround you.

I was enjoying such a moment on the evening of the second or third day following our arrival at the farmhouse. Sitting on the fence behind the house, I could see tawny fields to the edge of the cliff past the broch, and the mesh of trees on the far side of the pass, dimming to black before the pearly glow of the sky. Objects near and far away seemed to be at the same distance, as their long shadows melted into the dusk.

The air was chilly with a hint of the coming frost, and I thought I must go in soon, though I was reluctant to leave the still beauty of the place. I wasn't aware of Jamie approaching until he slid the heavy folds of a cloak around my shoulders. I hadn't realized quite how cold it was until I felt the contrasting warmth of the thick wool.

Jamie's arms came around me with the cloak, and I nestled back against him, shivering slightly.

"I could see ye shivering from the house," he said, taking my hands in his. "Catch a chill, if you're not careful."

"And what about you?" I twisted about to look at him. Despite the increasing bite of the air, he looked completely comfortable in nothing but shirt and kilt, with no more than a slight reddening of the nose to show it was not the balmiest of spring evenings.

"Ah, well, I'm used to it. Scotsmen are none so thin-blooded as ye bluenosed Southrons." He tilted my chin up and kissed my nose, smiling. I took him by the ears and adjusted his aim downward.

It lasted long enough for our temperatures to have equalized by the time he released me, and the warm blood sang in my ears as I leaned back, balancing on the fence rail. The breeze blew from behind me, fluttering strands of hair across my face. He brushed them off my shoulders, spreading the ruffled locks out with his fingers, so the setting sun shone through the strands.

"You look like you've a halo, with the light behind ye that way," he said, softly. "An angel crowned with gold."

"And you," I answered softly, tracing the edge of his jaw where the amber light sparked from his sprouting beard. "Why didn't you tell me before?"

He knew what I meant. One eyebrow went up, and he smiled, half his face lit by the glowing sun, the other half in shadow.

"Well, I knew ye didna want to wed me. I'd no wish to burden you or make myself foolish by telling you then, when it was plain you'd lie with me only to honor vows you'd rather not have made." He grinned, teeth white in the shadow, forestalling my protest. "The first time, at least. I've my pride, woman."

I reached out and drew him to me, pulling him close, so that he stood between my legs as I sat on the fence. Feeling the faint chill of his skin, I wrapped my legs around his hips and enfolded him with the wings of my cloak. Under the sheltering fabric, his arms came tight around me, pressing my cheek against the smudged cambric of his shirt.

"My love," he whispered. "Oh, my love. I do want ye so."

"Not the same thing, is it?" I said. "Loving and wanting, I mean."

He laughed, a little huskily. "Damn close, Sassenach, for me, at least." I could feel the strength of his wanting, hard and urgent. He stepped back suddenly, and stooping, lifted me from the fence.

"Where are we going?" We were headed away from the house, toward the cluster of sheds in the shadow of the elm grove.

"To find a haystack."

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28

KISSES AND DRAWERS

I gradually found my own place in the running of the estate. As Jenny could no longer manage the long walk to the tenants' cottages, I took to visiting them myself, accompanied sometimes by a stable lad, sometimes by Jamie or Ian. I took food and medicines with me, treated the sick as best I could, and made suggestions as to the improvement of health and hygiene, which were received with varying degrees of grace.

At Lallybroch itself, I poked about the house and grounds, making myself useful wherever I could, mostly in the gardens. Besides the lovely little ornamental garden, the manor had a small herb garden and an immense kitchen garden or kailyard that supplied turnips, cabbages, and vegetable marrows.

Jamie was everywhere; in the study with the account books, in the fields with the tenants, in the horse barn with Ian, making up for lost time. There was something more than duty or interest in it, too, I thought. We would have to leave soon; he wanted to set things running in a path that would continue while he was gone, until he—until *we*—could return for good.

I knew we would have to leave, yet surrounded by the peaceful house and grounds of Lallybroch and the cheerful company of Jenny, Ian, and small Jamie, I felt as though I had come home at last.

After breakfast one morning, Jamie rose from the table, announcing that he thought he would go as far as the head of the valley, to see a horse that Martin Mack had for sale.

Jenny turned from the sideboard, brows drawn together.

"D'ye think it safe, Jamie? There's been English patrols all through the district the last month or so."

He shrugged, taking his coat from the chair where he had laid it.

"I'll be careful."

"Oh, Jamie," said Ian, coming in with an armful of firewood for the hearth. "I meant to ask—can ye gang up to the mill this morning? Jock was up yestere'en to say something's gone amiss wi' the wheel. I had a quick look, but he and I together couldna shift it. I think there's a bit o' rubbish stuck in the works outside, but it's well under the water."

He stamped his wooden leg lightly, smiling at me.

"I can still walk, thank God, and ride as well, but I canna swim. I just thrash about, and gang in circles like a doodle-bug."

Jamie laid the coat back on the chair with a smile at his brother-in-law's description.

"None so bad, Ian, if it keeps ye from havin' to spend the morning in a freezing millpond. Aye, I'll go." He turned to me.

"Care to walk up wi' me, Sassenach? It's a fine morning, and ye can bring your wee basket." He cocked an ironic eye at the enormous withy basket I used for gathering. "I'll go and change my sark. Be wi' ye in a moment." He headed for the staircase and bounded athletically up the steps, three at a time.

Ian and I exchanged smiles. If there was any regret that such feats were now beyond him, it was hidden beneath his pleasure in seeing Jamie's exuberance.

"It's good to have him back," he said.

"I only wish we could stay," I said, with regret.

The soft brown eyes filled with alarm. "Ye'll no be going at once, surely?"

I shook my head. "No, not at once. But we'll need to leave well before the snow comes." Jamie had decided that our best course was to go to Beauly, seat of clan Fraser. Perhaps his grandfather, Lord Lovat, could be of help; if not, he might at least arrange us passage to France.

Ian nodded, reassured. "Oh, aye. But you've a few weeks yet."

It was a beautiful bright autumn day, with air like cider and a sky so blue you could drown in it. We walked slowly so that I could keep an eye out for late-blooming eglantine and teasel heads, chatting casually.

"It's Quarter Day next week," Jamie remarked. "Will your new gown be ready then?"

"I expect so. Why, is it an occasion?"

He smiled down at me, taking the basket while I stooped to pull up a stalk of tansy.

"Oh, in a way. Nothing like Colum's great affairs, to be sure, but all the Lallybroch tenants will come to pay their rents—and their respects to the new Lady Lallybroch."

"I expect they'll be surprised you've married an Englishwoman."

"I reckon there are a few fathers might be disappointed at that; I'd courted a lass or two hereabouts before I got arrested and taken to Fort William."

"Sorry you didn't wed a local girl?" I asked coquettishly.

"If ye think I'm going to say 'yes,' and you standin' there holding a pruning knife," he remarked, "you've less opinion of my good sense than I thought."

I dropped the pruning knife, which I'd taken to dig with, stretched my arms out, and stood waiting. When he released me at last, I stooped to pick up the knife again, saying teasingly, "I always wondered how it was you stayed a virgin so long. Are the girls in Lallybroch all plain, then?"

"No," he said, squinting up into the morning sun. "It was mostly my father was responsible for that. We'd stroll over the fields in the evenings, sometimes, he and I, and talk about things. And once I got old enough for such a thing to be a possibility, he told me that a man must be responsible for any seed he sows, for it's his duty to take care of a woman and protect her. And if I wasna prepared to do that, then I'd no right to burden a woman with the consequences of my own actions."

He glanced behind us, toward the house. And toward the small family graveyard, near the foot of the broch, where his parents were buried.

"He said the greatest thing in a man's life is to lie wi' a woman he loves," he said softly. He smiled at me, eyes blue as the sky overhead. "He was right."

I touched his face lightly, tracing the broad sweep downward from cheek to jaw.

"Rather hard on you, though, if he expected you to wait so long to marry," I said.

Jamie grinned, kilt flapping round his knees in the brisk autumn breeze.

"Well, the Church does teach that self-abuse is a sin, but my father said he thought that if it came to a choice between abusin' yourself or some poor woman, a decent man might choose to make the sacrifice."

When I stopped laughing, I shook my head and said, "No. No, I won't ask. You did stay a virgin, though."

"Strictly by the grace of God and my father, Sassenach. I dinna think I thought much about anything but the lasses, once I turned fourteen or so. But that was when I was sent to foster wi' Dougal at Beannachd."

"No girls there?" I asked. "I thought Dougal had daughters."

"Aye, he has. Four. The two younger are no much to look at, but the eldest was a verra handsome lassie. A year or two older than me, Molly was. And not much flattered by my attention, I dinna think. I used to stare at her across the supper table, and she'd look down her nose at me and ask did I have the catarrh? Because if so, I should go to bed, and if not, she would be much obliged if I'd close my mouth, as she didna care to look at my tonsils while she was eating."

"I begin to see how you stayed a virgin," I said, hiking my skirts to climb a stile. "But they can't all have been like that."

"No," he said reflectively, giving me a hand over the stile. "No, they weren't. Molly's younger sister, Tabitha, was a bit friendlier." He smiled reminiscently.

"Tibby was the first girl I kissed. Or perhaps I should say the first girl who kissed me. I was carrying two pails of milk for her, from the barn to the dairy, plotting all the way how I'd get her behind the door, where there wasna room to get away, and kiss her there. But my hands were full, and she had to open the door for me to go through. So it was me ended up behind the door, and Tib who walked up to me, took me by both ears and kissed me. Spilled the milk, too," he added.

"Sounds a memorable first experience," I said, laughing.

"I doubt I was *her* first," he said, grinning. "She knew a lot more about it than I did. But we didna get much practice; a day or two later, her mother caught us in the pantry. She didna do more than give me a sharpish look and tell Tibby to go and set the table for dinner, but she must have told Dougal about it."

If Dougal MacKenzie had been quick to resent an insult to his sister's honor, I could only imagine what he might have done in defense of his daughter's.

"I shudder to think," I said, grinning.

"So do I," said Jamie, shuddering. He shot me a sidelong glance, looking shy.

"You'll know that young men in the morning, sometimes they wake up with … well, with—" He was blushing.

"Yes, I know," I said. "So do old men of twenty-three. You think I don't notice? You've brought it to my attention often enough."

"Mmmphm. Well, the morning after Tib's mother caught us, I woke up just at dawn. I'd been dreaming about her—Tib, I mean, not her mother—and I wasna surprised to feel a hand on my cock. What was surprising was that it wasn't mine."

"Surely it wasn't Tibby's?"

"Well, no, it wasna. It was her father's."

"Dougal?! Whatever—?"

"Well, I opened my eyes wide and he smiled down at me, verra pleasant. And then he sat on the bed and we had a nice little chat, uncle and nephew, foster-father to foster-son. He said how much he was enjoying my being there, him not having a son of his own, and all that. And how his family was all so fond of me, and all. And how he would hate to think that there might be any advantage taken of such fine, innocent feelings as his daughters might have toward me, but how of course he was so pleased that he could trust me as he would his own son."

"And all the time he was talking and me lying there, he had his one hand on his dirk, and the other resting on my fine young balls. So I said yes, Uncle, and no, Uncle, and when he left, I rolled myself up in the quilt and dreamed about pigs. And I didna kiss a girl again until I was sixteen, and went to Leoch."

He looked over at me, smiling. His hair was laced back with a leather thong, but the shorter ends were sticking up at the crown as usual, glimmering red and gold in the brisk, clear air. His skin had darkened to a golden bronze during our journey from Leoch and Craigh na Dun, and he looked like an autumn leaf, swirling joyfully wind-borne.

"And what of you, my bonny Sassenach?" he asked, grinning. "Did ye have the wee laddies panting at your heels, or were ye shy and maidenly?"

"A bit less than you," I said circumspectly. "I was eight."

"Jezebel. Who was the lucky lad?"

"The dragoman's son. That was in Egypt. He was nine."

"Och, well, you're no to blame then. Led astray by an older man. And a bloody heathen, no less."

The mill came into sight below, picture-pretty, with a deep-red vine glowing up the side of the yellow plaster wall, and shutters standing open to the daylight, tidy in spite of the worn green paint. The water gushed happily down the sluice under the idle water-wheel into the millpond. There were even ducks on the pond, teal and goldeneye paused for a rest on their southern flight.

"Look," I said, pausing at the top of the hill, putting a hand on Jamie's arm to stop him. "Isn't it lovely?"

"Be a sight more lovely if the water-wheel were turnin'," he said practically. Then he glanced down at me and smiled.

"Aye, Sassenach. It's a bonny place. I used to swim here when I was a lad—there's a wide pool round the bend of the stream."

A little further down the hill, the pool became visible through the screen of willows. So did the boys. There were four of them, sporting and splashing and yelling, all naked as jays.

"Brrr," I said, watching them. The weather was fine for autumn, but there was enough of a nip in the air to make me glad of the shawl I'd brought. "It makes my blood run cold, just to see them."

"Och?" Jamie said. "Well, let me warm it for ye then."

With a glance down at the boys in the stream, he stepped back into the shade of a big horse chestnut tree. He put his hands about my waist and drew me into the shadow after him.

"Ye werena the first lass I kissed," he said softly. "But I swear you'll be the last." And he bent his head to my upturned face.

Once the miller had emerged from his lair, and hasty introductions were made, I retired to the bank of the millpond, while Jamie spent several minutes listening to an explanation of the problem. As the miller went back into the millhouse, to try turning the stone from within, Jamie stood a moment, staring into the dark, weedy depths of the millpond. Finally, with a shrug of resignation, he began to strip off his clothes.

"No help for it," he remarked to me. "Ian's right; there's something stuck in the wheel under the sluice. I'll have to go down and—" Stopped by my gasp, he turned around to where I sat on the bank with my basket.

"And what's amiss wi' *you*?" he demanded. "Have ye no seen a man in his drawers before?"

"Not … not like …*that*!" I managed to get out, between sputters. Anticipating possible submergence, he had donned beneath his kilt a short garment of incredible elderliness, originally of red flannel, now patched with a dazzling array of colors and textures. Obviously, this pair of drawers had originally belonged to someone who measured several inches more around the middle than Jamie. They hung precariously from his hipbones, the folds drooping in V's over his flat belly.

"Your grandfather's?" I guessed, making a highly unsuccessful effort to suppress my giggling. "Or your grandmother's?"

"My father's," he said coldly, looking down his nose at me. "Ye dinna expect me to be swimming bare as an egg before my wife and my tenants, do ye?"

With considerable dignity, he gathered the excess material up in one hand and waded into the millpond. Treading water near the wheel, he took his bearings, then with a deep breath, upended and submerged, my last sight of him the ballooning bottom of the red flannel drawers. The miller, leaning out of the millhouse window, shouted encouragement and directions whenever the sleek wet head broke the surface for air.

The edge of the pond bank was thick with water plants, and I foraged with my digging stick for mallow root and the small, fine-leaved dropwort. I had half the basket filled when I heard a polite cough behind me.

She was a very old lady indeed, or at least she looked it. She leaned on a hawthorn stick, enveloped in garments she must have worn twenty years before, now much too voluminous for the shrunken frame inside them.

"Good morn to ye," she said, nodding a head like a bobbin. She wore a starched white kertch that hid most of her hair, but a few wisps of iron-grey peeped out beside cheeks like withered apples.

"Good morning," I said, and started to scramble up, but she advanced a few steps and sank down beside me with surprising grace. I hoped she could get up again.

"I'm—" I started, but had barely opened my mouth when she interrupted.

"Ye'll be the new lady, o' course. I'm Mrs. MacNab—Grannie MacNab, they call me, along o' my daughters-in-law all bein' Mrs. MacNabs as weel." She reached out a skinny hand and pulled my basket toward her, peering into it.

"Mallow root—ah, that's good for cough. But ye dinna want to use that one, lassie." She poked at a small brownish tuber. "Looks like lily root, but it isna that."

"What is it?" I asked.

"Adder's-tongue. Eat that one, lassie, and ye'll be rollin' round the room wi' your heels behind yer head." She plucked the tuber from the basket and threw it into the pond with a splash. She pulled the basket onto her lap and pawed expertly through the remaining plants, while I watched with a mixture of amusement and irritation. At last, satisfied, she handed it back.

"Weel, you're none sae foolish, for a Sassenach lassie," she remarked. "Ye ken betony from lamb's-quarters, at least." She cast a glance toward the pond, where Jamie's head appeared briefly, sleek as a seal, before disappearing once again beneath the millhouse. "I see his lairdship didna wed ye for your face alone."

"Thank you," I said, choosing to construe this as a compliment. The old lady's eyes, sharp as needles, were fastened on my midsection.

"Not wi' child yet?" she demanded. "Raspberry leaves, that's the thing. Steep a handful wi' rosehips and drink it when the moon's waxing, from the quarter to the full. Then when it wanes from the full to the half, take a bit o' barberry to purge your womb."

"Oh," I said, "well—"

"I'd a bit of a favor to ask his lairdship," the old lady went on. "But as I see he's a bit occupied at present, I'll tell *you* about it."

"All right," I agreed weakly, not seeing how I could stop her anyway.

"It's my grandson," she said, fixing me with small grey eyes the size and shininess of marbles. "My grandson Rabbie, that is; I've sixteen altogether, and the three o' them named Robert, but the one's Bob and t'other Rob, and the wee one's Rabbie."

"Congratulations," I said politely.

"I want his lairdship to take the lad on as stable lad," she went on.

"Well, I can't say—"

"It's his father, ye ken," she said, leaning forward confidentially. "Not as I'll say there's aught wrong wi' a bit o' firmness; spare the rod and spoil the child, I've said often enough, and the good Lord kens weel enough that boys were meant to be smacked, or he'd not ha' filled 'em sae full o' the de'il. But when it comes to layin' a child out on the hearth, and a bruise on his face the size o' my hand, and for naught more than takin' an extra bannock from the platter, then —"

"Rabbie's father beats him, you mean?" I interrupted.

The old lady nodded, pleased with my ready intelligence. “To be sure. Is that no what I’ve been sayin’?” She held up a hand. “Now, in the regular way, o’ course I’d not interfere. A man’s son’s his ain to do as he sees fit wi’, but … weel, Rabbie’s a bit of a favorite o’ mine. And it’s no the lad’s fault as his father’s a drunken sot, shameful as ’tis for his own mither to say such a thing.”

She raised an admonitory finger like a stick. “Not but what Ronald’s father didna take a drop too much from time to time. But lay a hand on me or the bairns he never did—not after the first time, at any rate,” she added thoughtfully. She twinkled suddenly at me, little cheeks round and firm as summer apples, so I could see what a very lively and attractive girl she must have been.

“He struck me the once,” she confided, “and I snatched the girdle off the fire and crowned him wi’ it.” She rocked back and forth, laughing. “Thought I’d kilt him for sure, and me wailin’ and holdin’ of his heid in my lap, thinkin’ what would I do, a widow wi’ twa bairns to feed? But he came round,” she said matter-of-factly, “and ne’er laid a hand on me or the bairnies again. I bore thirteen, ye ken,” she said proudly. “And raised ten.”

“Congratulations,” I said, meaning it.

“Raspberry leaves,” she said, laying a confiding hand on my knee. “Mark me, lassie, raspberry leaves will do it. And if not, come to see me, and I’ll make ye a bittie drink o’ coneflower and marrow seed, wi’ a raw egg beaten up in it. That’ll draw yer man’s seed straight up into the womb, ye ken, and you’ll be swellin’ like a pumpkin by Easter.”

I coughed, growing a bit red in the face. “Mmmphm. And you want Jamie, er, his lairdship I mean, to take your grandson into his house as stable lad, to get him away from his father?”

“Aye, that’s it. Now he’s a brankie wee worker, is Rabbie, and his lairdship will no be—”

The old lady’s face froze in the midst of her animated conversation. I turned to look over my shoulder, and froze as well. Redcoats. Dragoons, six of them, on horseback, making their way carefully down the hill toward the millhouse.

With admirable presence of mind, Mrs. MacNab stood up and sat down again on top of Jamie's discarded clothes, her spreading skirts hiding everything.

There was a splash and an explosive gasp from the millpond behind me as Jamie surfaced again. I was afraid to call out or move, for fear of attracting the dragoons' attention to the pond, but the sudden dead silence behind me told me he had seen them. The silence was broken by a single word traveling across the water, softly spoken, but heartfelt in its sincerity.

"Merde," he said.

The old lady and I sat unmoving, stone-faced, watching the soldiers come down the hill. At the last moment, as they made the final turn around the mill-house path, she turned swiftly to me and laid a stick-straight finger across her withered lips. I mustn't speak and let them hear that I was English. I didn't have time even to nod in acknowledgment before the mud-caked hooves came to a halt a few feet away.

"Good morrow to you, ladies," said the leader. He was a corporal, but not, I was pleased to see, Corporal Hawkins. A quick glance showed me that none of the men were among those I had seen at Fort William, and I relaxed my grip on the handle of my basket just a fraction.

"We saw the mill from above," the dragoon said, "and thought perhaps to purchase a sack of meal?" He divided a bow between us, not sure who to address.

Mrs. MacNab was frosty, but polite.

"Good morrow," she said, inclining her head. "But if ye've come for meal, I fear me ye'll be sair disappointit. The mill wheel's nae workin' just now. Perhaps next time ye come this way."

"Oh? What's amiss, then?" The corporal, a short young man with a fresh complexion, seemed interested. He walked down to the edge of the pond to peer at the wheel. The miller, popping up in the mill to report the latest progress with the millstone, saw him and hastily popped back down out of sight.

The corporal called to one of his men. Climbing up the slope, he gestured to the other soldier, who obligingly stooped to let the corporal climb on his back. Reaching up, he managed to catch the edge of the roof with both hands, and squirmed up onto the thatch. Standing, he could barely reach the edge of the great wheel. He reached out and rocked it with both hands. Bending down, he shouted through the window to the miller to try turning the millstone by hand.

I willed myself to keep my eyes away from the bottom of the sluice. I wasn't sufficiently familiar with the workings of waterwheels to know for sure, but I was afraid that if the wheel gave way suddenly, anything near the underwater works might be crushed. Apparently this was no idle fear, for Mrs. MacNab spoke sharply to one of the soldiers near us.

"Ye should ca' your master doon now, laddie. He'll do no good tae the mill or himsel'. Ye shouldna meddle wi' things as ye dinna understand."

"Oh, you've no cause for worry, missus," said the soldier casually. "Corporal Silvers's father has a wheat mill in Hampshire. What the Corporal doesn't know about waterwheels would fit in me shoe."

Mrs. MacNab and I exchanged looks of alarm. The corporal, after a bit more clambering up and down and exploratory rockings and pokings, came down to where we sat. He was perspiring freely, and wiped his red face with a large, grubby handkerchief before addressing us.

"I can't move it from above, and that fool of a miller doesn't seem to speak any English at all." He glanced at Mrs. MacNab's sturdy stick and gnarled limbs, then at me. "Perhaps the young lady could come and talk to him for me?"

Mrs. MacNab stretched out a protective hand, gripping me by the sleeve.

"Ye'll hae to pardon my daughter-in-law, sorr. She's gone sair saft in the heid, ever syne her last babe was stillborn. Hasna spoke a word in ower a year, puir lassie. And I canna leave her for a minute, for fear she'll throw hersel' intae the water in her grief."

I did my best to look soft-headed, no great effort in my present state of mind.

The corporal looked disconcerted. “Oh,” he said. “Well …” He wandered down to the edge of the pond and stood frowning into the water. He looked just as Jamie had an hour before, and apparently for the same reason.

“No help for it, Collins,” he said to the old trooper. “I’ll have to go under and see what’s holding it.” He took off his scarlet coat and began to unfasten the cuffs of his shirt. I exchanged looks of horror with Mrs. MacNab. While there might be sufficient air under the millhouse for survival, certainly there was not room to hide very effectively.

I was considering, not very optimistically, the chances of throwing a convincing epileptic fit, when the great wheel suddenly creaked overhead. With a sound like a tree being murdered, the big arc made a swooping half-turn, stuck for a moment, then rolled into a steady revolution, scoops merrily pouring bright streamlets into the sluice.

The corporal paused in his undressing, admiring the arc of the wheel.

“Look at that, Collins! Wonder what was stuck in it?”

As though in answer, something came into sight at the top of the wheel. It hung from one of the scoops, sodden red folds dripping. The scoop hit the stream now churning down the sluice, the object came loose, and Jamie’s father’s erstwhile drawers floated majestically out onto the waters of the millpond.

The elderly trooper fished them out with a stick, presenting them gingerly to his commander, who plucked them off the stick like a man obliged to pick up a dead fish.

“Hm,” he said, holding up the garment critically. “Wonder where on earth *that* came from? Must have been caught around the shaft. Curious that something like that could cause so much trouble, isn’t it, Collins?”

“Yessir.” The trooper plainly did not consider the interior workings of a Scottish mill wheel to be of absorbing interest, but answered politely.

After turning the cloth over a time or two, the corporal shrugged, and used it to wipe the dirt from his hands.

"Decent bit of flannel," he said, wringing out the sopping cloth. "It'll do to polish tack, at least. Something of a souvenir, eh, Collins?" And with a polite bow to Mrs. MacNab and me, he turned to his horse.

The dragoons had barely disappeared from sight over the brow of the hill when a splashing from the millpond heralded the rising from the depths of the resident water sprite.

He was the bloodless white, blue-tinged, of Carrara marble, and his teeth chattered so hard that I could barely make out his first words, which were, in any case, in Gaelic.

Mrs. MacNab had no trouble making them out, and her ancient jaw dropped. She snapped it shut, though, and made a low reverence toward the emergent laird. Seeing her, he stopped his progress toward the shore, the water still lapping modestly about his hips. He took a deep breath, clenching his teeth to stop the chattering, and plucked a streamer of duckweed off his shoulder.

"Mrs. MacNab," he said, bowing to his elderly tenant.

"Sir," she said, bowing back once again. "A fine day, is it no?"

"A bit b-brisk," he said, casting an eye at me. I shrugged helplessly.

"We're pleased to see ye back in yer home, sir, and it's our hope, the lads and mysel', as you'll soon be back to stay."

"Mine too, Mrs. MacNab," Jamie said courteously. He jerked his head at me, glaring. I smiled blandly.

The old lady, ignoring this byplay, folded her gnarled hands in her lap and settled back with dignity.

"I've a wee favor I was wishin' to ask of your lairdship," she began, "havin' tae do wi'—"

"Grannie MacNab," Jamie interrupted, advancing a menacing half-step through the water, "whatever your wish is, I'll do it. Provided only that ye'll give me back my shirt before my parts fall off wi' cold."

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MORE HONESTY

In the evenings, when supper was cleared away, we generally sat in the drawing room with Jenny and Ian, talking companionably of this and that, or listening to Jenny's stories.

Tonight, though, it was my turn, and I held Jenny and Ian rapt as I told them about Mrs. MacNab and the Redcoats.

"God kens well enough that boys need to be smacked, or he'd no fill them sae full o' the de'il." My imitation of Grannie MacNab brought down the house.

Jenny wiped tears of laughter from her eyes.

"Lord, it's true enough. And she'd know it too. What has she got, Ian, eight boys?"

Ian nodded. "Aye, at least. I canna even remember all their names; seemed like there was always a couple of MacNabs about to hunt or fish or swim with, when Jamie and I were younger."

"You grew up together?" I asked. Jamie and Ian exchanged wide, complicitous grins.

"Oh, aye, we're familiar," Jamie said, laughing. "Ian's father was the factor for Lallybroch, like Ian is now. On a number of occasions during my reckless youth, I've found myself standing elbow to elbow with Mr. Murray there, explaining to one or other of our respective fathers how appearances can be deceiving, or failing that, why circumstances alter cases."

"And failin' *that,*" said Ian, "I've found myself on the same number of occasions, bent over a fence rail alongside Mr. Fraser there, listenin' to him yell his heid off while waitin' for my own turn."

"Never!" replied Jamie indignantly. "I never yelled."

"Ye call it what ye like, Jamie," his friend answered, "but ye were awful loud."

"Ye could hear the both of ye for miles," Jenny interjected. "And not only the yelling. Ye could hear Jamie arguing all the time, right up to the fence."

"Aye, ye should ha' been a lawyer, Jamie. But I dinna ken why I always let you do the talking," said Ian, shaking his head. "You always got us in worse trouble than we started."

Jamie began to laugh again. "You mean the broch?"

"I do." Ian turned to me, motioning toward the west, where the ancient stone tower rose from the hill behind the house.

"One of Jamie's better arguments, that was," he said, rolling his eyes upward. "He told Brian it was uncivilized to use physical force in order to make your point of view prevail. Corporal punishment was barbarous, he said, and old-fashioned, to boot. Thrashing someone just because they had committed an act with whose ram-ramifications, that was it—with whose ramifications ye didn't agree was not at a' a constructive form of punishment…."

All of us were laughing by this time.

"Did Brian listen to all of this?" I asked.

"Oh, aye." Ian nodded. "I just stood there wi' Jamie, nodding whenever he'd stop for breath. When Jamie finally ran out of words, his father sort of coughed a bit and said 'I see.' Then he turned and looked out of the window for a little, swinging the strap and nodding his head, as though he were thinking. We were standing there, elbow to elbow like Jamie said, sweating. At last Brian turned about and told us to follow him to the stables."

"He gave us each a broom, a brush, and a bucket, and pointed us in the direction of the broch," said Jamie, taking up the story. "Said I'd convinced him of my point, so he'd decided on a more 'constructive' form of punishment."

Ian's eyes rolled slowly up, as though following the rough stones of the broch upward.

"That tower rises sixty feet from the ground," he told me, "and it's thirty feet in diameter, wi' three floors." He heaved a sigh. "We swept it from the top to the bottom," he said, "and scrubbed it from the bottom to the top. It took five days, and I can taste rotted oat-straw when I cough, even now."

"And you tried to kill me on the third day," said Jamie, "for getting us into that." He touched his head gingerly. "I had a wicked gash over my ear, where ye hit me wi' the broom."

"Oh, weel," Ian said comfortably, "that was when ye broke my nose the second time, so we were even."

"Trust a Murray to keep score," Jamie said, shaking his head.

"Let's see," I said, counting on my fingers. "According to you, Frasers are stubborn, Campbells are sneaky, MacKenzies are charming but sly, and Grahams are stupid. What's the Murrays' distinguishing characteristic?"

"Ye can count on them in a fight," said Jamie and Ian together, then laughed.

"Ye can too," said Jamie, recovering. "You just hope they're on your side." And both men went off into fits again.

Jenny shook her head disapprovingly at spouse and brother.

"And we havena even had any wine yet," she said. She put down her sewing and heaved herself to her feet. "Come wi' me, Claire; we'll see has Mrs. Crook made any biscuits to have wi' the port."

* * *

Coming back down the hall a quarter of an hour later with trays of refreshments, I heard Ian say, "You'll not mind then, Jamie?"

"Mind what?"

"That we wed without your consent—me and Jenny, I mean."

Jenny, walking ahead of me, came to a sudden stop outside the drawing room door.

There was a brief snort from the love seat where Jamie lay sprawled, feet propped on a hassock. "Since I didna tell ye where I was, and ye had no notion when—if ever—I'd come back, I can hardly blame ye for not waiting."

I could see Ian in profile, leaning over the log basket. His long, good-natured face wore a slight frown.

“Weel, I didna think it right, especially wi’ me being crippled …”

There was a louder snort.

“Jenny couldna have a better husband, if you’d lost both legs and your arms as well,” Jamie said gruffly. Ian’s pale skin flushed slightly in embarrassment. Jamie coughed and swung his legs down from the hassock, leaning over to pick up a scrap of kindling that had fallen from the basket.

“How did ye come to wed anyway, given your scruples?” he asked, one side of his mouth curling up.

“Gracious, man,” Ian protested, “ye think I had any choice in the matter? Up against a Fraser?” He shook his head, grinning at his friend.

“She came up to me out in the field one day, while I was tryin’ to mend a wagon that sprang its wheel. I crawled out, all covered wi’ muck, and found her standin’ there looking like a bush covered wi’ butterflies. She looks me up and down and she says—” He paused and scratched his head. “Weel, I don’t know exactly *what* she said, but it ended with her kissing me, muck notwithstanding, and saying, ‘Fine, then, we’ll be married on St. Martin’s Day.’ ” He spread his hands in comic resignation. “I was still explaining why we couldna do any such thing, when I found myself in front of a priest, saying, ‘I take thee, Janet’… and swearing to a lot of verra improbable statements.”

Jamie rocked back in his seat, laughing.

“Aye, I ken the feeling,” he said. “Makes ye feel a bit hollow, no?”

Ian smiled, embarrassment forgotten. “It does and all. I still get that feeling, ye know, when I see Jenny sudden, standing against the sun on the hill, or holding wee Jamie, not lookin’ at me. I see her, and I think, ‘God, man, she can’t be yours, not really.’ ” He shook his head, brown hair flopping over his brow. “And then she turns and smiles at me …” He looked up at his brother-in-law, grinning.

“Weel, ye know yourself. I can see it’s the same wi’ you and your Claire. She’s … something special, no?”

Jamie nodded. The smile didn’t leave his face, but altered somehow.

“Aye,” he said softly. “Aye, she is that.”

Over the port and biscuits, Jamie and Ian reminisced further about their shared boyhood, and their fathers. Ian's father, William, had died just the past spring, leaving Ian to run the estate alone.

"You remember when your father came on us down by the spring, and made us go wi' him to the smithy to see how to fix a wagon-tree?"

"Aye, and he couldna understand why we kept squirming and shifting about—"

"And he kept asking ye did ye need to go to the privy—"

Both men were laughing too hard to finish the story, so I looked at Jenny.

"Toads," she said succinctly. "The two o' them each had five or six toads inside his shirt."

"Oh, Lord," said Ian. "When the one crawled up your neck and hopped out of your shirt into the forge, I thought I'd die."

"I cannot imagine why my father didna wring my neck on several occasions," said Jamie, shaking his head. "It's a wonder I ever grew up."

Ian looked consideringly at his own offspring, industriously engaged in piling wooden blocks on top of each other by the hearth. "I don't quite know how I'm goin' to manage it, when the time comes I have to beat my own son. I mean … he's, well, he's so *small.*" He gestured helplessly at the sturdy little figure, tender neck bent to his task.

Jamie eyed his small namesake cynically. "Aye, he'll be as much a devil as you or I, give him time. After all, I suppose even *I* must ha' looked small and innocent at one point."

"You did," said Jenny unexpectedly, coming to set a pewter cup of cider in her husband's hand. She patted her brother on the head.

"You were verra sweet as a baby, Jamie. I remember standing over your cot. Ye canna ha' been more than two, asleep wi' your thumb in your mouth, and we agreed we'd never seen a prettier lad. You had fat round cheeks and the dearest red curls."

The pretty lad turned an interesting shade of rose, and drained his cider at one gulp, avoiding my glance.

"Didna last long, though," Jenny said, flashing white teeth in a mildly malicious smile at her brother. "How old were ye when ye got your first thrashing, Jamie? Seven?"

"No, eight," Jamie said, thrusting a new log into the smoldering pile of kindling. "Christ, that hurt. Twelve strokes full across the bum, and he didna let up a bit, beginning to end. He never did." He sat back on his heels, rubbing his nose with the knuckles of one hand. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright from the exertion.

"Once it was over, Father went off a bit and sat down on a rock while I settled myself. Then when I'd quit howling and got down to a sort of wet snuffle, he called me over to him. Now that I think of it, I can remember just what he said. Maybe you can use it on young Jamie, Ian, when the time comes." Jamie closed his eyes, recalling.

"He stood me between his knees and made me look him in the face, and said, 'That's the first time, Jamie. I'll have to do it again, maybe a hundred times, before you're grown to a man.' He laughed a bit then and said, 'My father did it to me at least that often, and you're as stubborn and cockle-headed as ever I was.'

"He said, 'Sometimes I daresay I'll enjoy thrashing you, depending on what you've done to deserve it. Mostly I won't. But I'll do it nonetheless. So remember it, lad. If your head thinks up mischief, your backside's going to pay for it.' Then he gave me a hug and said, 'You're a braw lad, Jamie. Go away to the house now and let your mother comfort ye.' I opened my mouth to say something to that, and he said, quick-like, 'No, I know you don't need it, but *she* does. Get on wi' ye.' So I came down and Mother fed me bread with jam on it."

Jenny suddenly started to laugh. "I just remembered," she said, "Da used to tell that story about you, Jamie, about thrashing you, and what he said to you. He said when he sent ye back to the house after, you came halfway down, then all of a sudden stopped and waited for him.

"When he came down to ye, you looked up at him and said, 'I just wanted to ask, Faither—did ye enjoy it this time?' And when he said 'no,' you nodded and said, 'Good. I didna like it much either.' "

We all laughed for a minute together, then Jenny looked up at her brother, shaking her head. "He loved to tell that story. Da always said you'd be the death of him, Jamie."

The merriment died out of Jamie's face, and he looked down at the big hands resting on his knees.

"Aye," he said quietly. "Well, and I was, then, wasn't I?"

Jenny and Ian exchanged glances of dismay, and I looked down at my own lap, not knowing what to say. There was no sound for a moment but the crackling of the fire. Then Jenny, with a quick look at Ian, set down her glass and touched her brother on the knee.

"Jamie," she said. "It wasna your fault."

He looked up at her and smiled, a little bleakly.

"No? Who else's, then?"

She took a deep breath and said, "Mine."

"What?" He stared at her in blank astonishment.

She had gone a little paler even than usual, but remained composed.

"I said it was my fault, as much as anyone's. For—for what happened to you, Jamie. And Father."

He covered her hand with his own and rubbed it gently.

"Dinna talk daft, lass," he said. "Ye did what ye did to try to save me; you're right, if ye'd not gone wi' Randall, he'd likely have killed me here."

She studied her brother's face, a troubled frown wrinkling her rounded brow.

"No, I dinna regret taking Randall to the house—not even if he'd … well, no. But that wasn't it." She drew a deep breath again, steeling herself.

"When I took him inside, I brought him up to my room. I—I didna ken quite what to expect—I'd not … been wi' a man. He seemed verra nervous, though, all flushed and as though he were not certain himself, which seemed strange to me. He pushed me onto the bed, and then he stood there, rubbing himself. I thought at first I'd really damaged him wi' my knee, though I knew I hadna struck him so hard, really." The color was creeping up her cheeks, and she stole a sidelong glance at Ian before looking hastily back at her lap.

"I ken now that he was trying to—to make himself ready. I didna mean to let him know I was frightened, so I sat up straight on the bed and stared at him. That seemed to anger him, and he ordered me to turn round. I wouldna do it, though, and just kept looking at him."

Her face was the color of one of the roses by the doorstep. "He … unbuttoned himself, and I … well, I laughed at him."

"You did what?" Jamie said incredulously.

"I laughed. I mean—" Her eyes met her brother's with some defiance. "I kent well enough how a man's made. I'd seen you naked often enough, and Willy and Ian as well. But he—" A tiny smile appeared on her lips, despite her apparent efforts to suppress it. He looked so funny, all red in the face, and rubbing himself so frantic, and yet still only half—"

There was a choked sound from Ian, and she bit her lip, but went on bravely.

"He didna like it when I laughed, and I could see it, so I laughed some more. That's when he lunged at me and tore my dress half off me. I smacked him in the face, and he struck me across the jaw, hard enough to make me see stars. Then he grunted a bit, as though that pleased him, and started to climb onto the bed wi' me. I had just about sense enough left to laugh again. I struggled up onto my knees, and I—I taunted him. I told him I kent he was no a real man, and couldna manage wi' a woman. I—"

She bent her head still further, so the dark curls swung down past her flaming cheeks. Her words were very low, almost a whisper.

"I … spread the pieces of my gown apart, and I … taunted him wi' my breasts. I told him I knew he was afraid o' me, because he wasna fit to touch a woman, but only to sport wi' beasts and young lads …"

"Jenny," said Jamie, shaking his head helplessly.

Her head came up to look at him. "Weel, I did then," she said. "It was all I could think of, and I could see that he was fair off his head, but it was plain too that he … couldn't. And I stared right at his breeches and I laughed again. And then he got his hands round my throat, throttling me, and I cracked my head against the bedpost, and … and when I woke he'd gone, and you wi' him."

There were tears standing in her lovely blue eyes as she grasped Jamie's hands.

"Jamie, will ye forgive me? I know if I'd not angered him that way he wouldna have treated you as he did, and then Faither—"

"Oh, Jenny, love, *mo cridh,* don't." He was kneeling beside her, pulling her face into his shoulder. Ian, on her other side, looked as though he had been turned to stone.

Jamie rocked her gently as she sobbed. "Hush, little dove. Ye did right, Jenny. It wasna your fault, and maybe not mine either." He stroked her back.

"Listen, *mo cridh*. He came here to do damage, under orders. And it would ha' made no difference who he'd found here, or what you or I might have done. He meant to cause trouble, to rouse the countryside against the English, for his own purposes—and those of the man that hired him."

Jenny stopped crying and sat up, looking at him in amazement.

"To rouse folk against the English? But why?"

Jamie made an impatient gesture with one hand. "To find out the folk that might support Prince Charles, should it come to another Rising. But I dinna ken yet which side Randall's employer is on—if he wants to know so those that follow the Prince can be watched, and maybe have their property seized, or if it's that he—Randall's employer—means to go wi' the Prince himself, and wants the Highlands roused and ready for war when the time comes. I dinna ken, and it isna important now." He touched his sister's hair, smoothing it back from her brow.

"All that's important is that you're not harmed, and I am home. Soon I'll come back to stay, *mo cridh*. I promise."

She raised his hand to her lips and kissed it, her face glowing. She fumbled in her pocket for a handkerchief and blew her nose. Then she looked at Ian, still frozen by her side, a look of hurt anger in his eyes.

She touched him gently on the shoulder.

"You think I should ha' told you."

He didn't move, but went on looking at her. "Aye," he said quietly. "I do."

She put the handkerchief down in her lap and took him by both hands.

"Ian, man, I didna tell ye because I didna wish to lose you too. My brother was gone, and my father. I didna mean to lose my own heart's blood as well. For you are dearer to me even than home and family, love." She cast a lopsided smile at Jamie. "And that's saying quite a bit."

She looked into Ian's eyes, pleading, and I could see love and hurt pride struggling for mastery on his face. Jamie rose then and touched me on the shoulder. We left the room quietly, leaving them together before the dying fire.

It was a clear night, and the moonlight fell in floods through the tall casements. I could not fall asleep myself, and I thought perhaps it was the light also that kept Jamie awake; he lay quite still, but I could tell by his breathing that he was not asleep. He turned onto his back, and I heard him chuckle softly under his breath.

"What's funny?" I asked quietly.

He turned his head toward me. "Oh, did I wake ye, Sassenach? I'm sorry. I was only remembering about things."

"I wasn't asleep." I scooted closer. The bed had obviously been made for the days when a whole family slept together on one mattress; the gigantic feather-bed must have consumed the entire productivity of hundreds of geese, and navigating through the drifts was like crossing the Alps without a compass. "What were you remembering?" I asked, once I had safely reached his side.

"Oh, about my father, mostly. Things he said."

He folded his arms behind his head, staring musingly at the thick beams that crossed the low ceiling. "It's strange," he said, "when he was alive, I didna pay him much heed. But once he was dead, the things he'd told me had a good deal more influence." He chuckled briefly again. "What I was thinking about was the last time he thrashed me."

"Funny, was it?" I said. "Anyone ever told you that you have a very peculiar sense of humor, Jamie?" I fumbled through the quilts for his hand, then gave up and pushed them back. He began to stroke my back, and I snuggled next to him, making small noises of pleasure.

"Didn't your uncle beat you, then, when you needed it?" he asked curiously. I smothered a laugh at the thought.

"Lord, no! He would have been horrified at the thought. Uncle Lamb didn't believe in beating children—he thought they should be reasoned with, like adults." Jamie made a Scottish noise in his throat, indicating derision at this ludicrous idea.

"That accounts for the defects in your character, no doubt," he said, patting my bottom. "Insufficient discipline in your youth."

"What defects in my character?" I demanded. The moonlight was bright enough for me to see his grin.

"Ye want me to list them all?"

"No." I dug an elbow into his ribs. "Tell me about your father. How old were you then?" I asked.

"Oh, thirteen—fourteen maybe. Tall and skinny, with spots. I canna remember why I was being thrashed; at that point, it was more often something I'd said than something I'd done. All I remember is we were both of us boiling mad about it. That was one of the times he enjoyed beating me." He pulled me to him and settled me closer against his shoulder, his arm around me. I stroked his flat belly, toying with his navel.

"Stop that, it tickles. D'ye want to hear, or no?"

"Oh, I want to hear. What are we going to do if we ever have children—reason with them, or beat them?" My heart raced a little at the thought, though there was no sign that this would ever be more than an academic question. His hand trapped mine, holding it still over his belly.

"That's simple. You reason with them, and when you're through, I'll take them out and thrash them."

"I thought you *liked* children."

"I do. My father liked *me,* when I wasna being an idiot. And he loved me, too—enough to beat the daylights out of me when I *was* being an idiot."

I flopped onto my stomach. "All right, then. Tell me about it."

Jamie sat up and wadded the pillows more comfortably before lying back down, folded arms behind his head again.

"Well, he sent me up to the fence, as usual—he always made me go up first, so I could experience the proper mixture of terror and remorse while I waited for him, he said—but he was so angry, he was right behind me. I was bent over and taking it, then, gritting my teeth and determined I'd make no noise about it—damned if I'd let him know how much it hurt. I was digging my fingers into the wood of the fence rail as hard as I could—hard enough to leave splinters behind—and I could feel my face turnin' red from holding my breath." He drew a deep breath, as though making up for it, and let it out slowly.

"Usually I'd know when it was going to be over, but this time he didn't stop. It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut; I was grunting wi' each stroke and I could feel the tears starting, no matter how much I blinked, but I held on for dear life." He was uncovered to the waist, almost glowing in the moonlight, frosted with tiny silver hairs. I could see the pulse beat just below his breastbone, a steady throb just under my hand.

"I don't know how long it went on," he continued. "Not that long, likely, but it seemed like a long time to me. At last he stopped a moment and shouted at me. He was beside himself wi' fury, and I was so furious myself I could barely make out what he said at first, but then I could.

"He roared 'Damn you, Jamie! Can ye no cry out? You're grown now, and I dinna mean to beat you ever again, but I want one good yelp out of ye, lad, before I quit, just so I'll think I've made some impression on ye at last!' " Jamie laughed, disturbing the even movement of his pulsebeat.

"I was so upset at that, I straightened up and whirled round and yelled at him, 'Weel, why did ye no say so in the first place, ye auld fool! *OUCH!!*'

"Next thing I knew I was on the ground, wi' my ears ringing and a pain in my jaw, where he'd clouted me. He was standing over me, panting, and wi' his hair and his beard all on end. He reached down and got my hand and hauled me up.

"Then he patted my jaw, and said, still breathing hard, 'That's for calling your father a fool. It may be true, but it's disrespectful. Come on, we'll wash for supper.' And he never struck me again. He still shouted at me, but I shouted back, and it was mostly man to man, after that."

He laughed comfortably, and I smiled into the warmth of his shoulder.

"I wish I'd known your father," I said. "Or maybe it's better not," I said, struck by a thought. "He might not have liked you marrying an Englishwoman."

Jamie hugged me closer and pulled the quilts up over my bare shoulders. "He'd have thought I'd got some sense at last." He stroked my hair. "He'd have respected my choice, whoever it was, but you"—he turned his head and kissed my brow gently—"he would have liked you verra much, my Sassenach." And I recognized it for the accolade it was.

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CONVERSATIONS BY THE HEARTH

Whatever rift Jenny's revelations had caused between her and Ian, it seemed to have healed. We sat for a short time after dinner in the parlor next evening, Ian and Jamie talking over the farm's business in the corner, accompanied by a decanter of elderberry wine, while Jenny relaxed at last with her swollen ankles propped on a hassock. I tried to write down some of the receipts she had tossed over her shoulder at me as we whizzed through the day's work, consulting her for details as I scribbled.

TO TREAT CARBUNCLES, I headed one sheet.

> *Three iron nails, to be soaked for one week in sour ale. Add one handful of cedarwood shavings, allow to set. When shavings have sunk to the bottom, mixture is ready. Apply three times daily, beginning on the first day of a quarter moon.*

BEESWAX CANDLES began another sheet.

> *Drain honey from the comb. Remove dead bees, so far as possible. Melt comb with a small amount of water in a large cauldron. Skin bees, wings, and other impurities from surface of water. Drain water, replace. Stir frequently for half an hour, then allow to settle. Drain water, keep for use in sweetening. Purify with water twice more.*

My hand was getting tired, and I had not even gotten to the making of candle molds, the twisting of wicks, and the hanging of candles to dry.

"Jenny," I called, "how long does it take to make candles, counting everything?"

She laid the small shirt she was stitching in her lap, considering.

"Half a day to gather the combs, two to drain the honey—one if it's hot—one day to purify the wax, unless there's a lot or it's verra dirty—then two. Half a day to make the wicks, one or two to make the molds, half a day to melt the wax, pour the molds and hang them to dry. Say a week altogether."

The dim lamplight and the sputtering quill were too much to contend with after the day's labors. I sat down next to Jenny and admired the tiny garment she was embroidering with nearly invisible stitches.

Her rounded stomach suddenly heaved, as the inhabitant shifted position. I watched, fascinated. I had never been close to someone pregnant for a prolonged period, and hadn't realized the amount of activity that went on inside.

"Would you like to feel it?" Jenny offered, seeing me staring at her middle.

"Well …" She took my hand and placed it firmly on her mound.

"Right there. Just wait a moment; he'll kick again soon. They don't like ye lying back like this, ye know. It makes them restless and they start to squirm."

Sure enough, a surprisingly vigorous push raised my hand by several inches.

"Goodness! He's strong!" I exclaimed.

"Aye." Jenny patted her stomach with a touch of pride. "He'll be bonny, like his brother and his Da." She smiled across at Ian, whose attention had momentarily wandered from the breeding records of horses to his wife and child-to-be.

"Or even like his good-for-nothing red-heided uncle," she added, raising her voice slightly and nudging me.

"Hey?" Jamie looked up, distracted from his accounts. "Were ye speaking to me?"

"I wonder was it the 'red-heided' or the 'good-for-nothing' that caught his attention," Jenny said to me, sotto voce, with another nudge.

To Jamie she said sweetly, "Nothing at all, *mo cridh*. We were just speculating on the possibility that the new one would have the misfortune to resemble its uncle."

The uncle in question grinned and came across to sit on the hassock, Jenny amiably moving her feet, then replacing them in his lap.

"Rub them for me, Jamie," she begged. "You're better at it than Ian."

He obliged, and Jenny leaned back and closed her eyes in bliss. She dropped the tiny shirt on her central mound, which continued to heave as though in protest. Jamie stared entranced at the movements, just as I had.

"Isn't it uncomfortable?" he asked. "Havin' someone turn somersaults in your belly?"

Jenny opened her eyes and grimaced as a long swell arced across her stomach.

"Mmm. Sometimes I feel my liver's black and blue from bein' kicked. But mostly it's a good feeling, instead. It's like …" She hesitated, then grinned at her brother. "It's hard to describe to a man, you not having the proper parts. I don't suppose I could tell ye what carrying a child feels like, no more than you could tell me what it's like to be kicked in the ballocks."

"Oh, I could tell ye that." He promptly doubled up, clasping himself, and rolled his eyes back in his head with a hideous gurgling groan.

"Is that not right, Ian?" he asked, turning his head toward the stool where Ian sat laughing, wooden leg propped on the hearth.

His sister put a delicate foot on his chest and pushed him upright. "All right then, clown. In that case, I'm glad I havena got any."

Jamie straightened up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "No, really," he said, interested, "is it just that the parts are different? Could you describe it to Claire? After all, she's a woman, though she's not borne a child yet."

Jenny eyed my midriff appraisingly, and I felt that small pang once more.

"Mmm, perhaps." She spoke slowly, thinking. "You feel as though your skin is verra thin all over. You feel everything that touches you, even the rubbing of your clothes, and not just on your belly, but over your legs and flanks and breasts." Her hands went to them unconsciously, curving the lawn under the swelling rounds. "They feel heavy and full … and they're verra sensitive just at the tips." The small, blunt thumbs slowly circled the breasts and I saw the nipples rise against the cloth.

"And of course you're big and you're clumsy," Jenny smiled ruefully, rubbing the spot on her hip where she had banged against the table earlier. "You take up more room than you're used to."

"Here, though"—her hands rose protectively to the top of her stomach—"that's where you feel things most, of course." She caressed the rounded bulge as though it were her child's skin she stroked, rather than her own. Ian's eyes followed her hands as they moved from top to bottom of the curving hillock, over and over, smoothing the fabric again and again.

"In the early days, it's a bit like belly-gas," she said, laughing. She poked a toe into her brother's midsection. "Just there—like little bubbles rippling through your belly. But then later, you feel the child move, and it's like a fish on your line and then gone—like a quick tug, but so soon past you're not sure you felt it." As though in protest at this description, her unseen companion heaved to and fro, making her stomach bulge on one side, then the other.

"I imagine you're sure, by this time," Jamie remarked, following the movement with fascination.

"Oh, aye." She placed a hand on one bulge, as though to quiet it. "They sleep, ye know, for hours at a time. Sometimes ye fear they've died, when there's no movement for a long time. Then you try to wake them"—her hand pushed in sharply at the side, and was rewarded immediately by a strong push in the opposite direction—"and you're happy when they kick again. But it's not just the babe itself. You feel swollen all over, near the end. Not painful … just so ripe you could burst. It's as though you need to be touched, verra lightly, all over." Jenny was no longer looking at me. Her eyes held her husband's, and I knew she was no longer aware of me or her brother. There was an air of intimacy between her and Ian, as though this were a story often told, but one of which they never tired.

Her voice was lower now, and her hands rose again to her breasts, heavy and compelling under the light bodice.

"And in the last month or so, the milk begins to come in. You feel yourself filling, just a wee bit at a time, a little each time the child moves. And then suddenly, everything comes up hard and round." She cupped her stomach again. "There's no pain, then, just a breathless feeling, and then your breasts tingle as though they'll explode if they're not suckled." She closed her eyes and leaned back, stroking her massive belly, over and over, with a rhythm like the invocation of a spell. It came to me, watching her, that if ever there were such a thing as a witch, then Janet Fraser was one.

The smoky air was filled with the trance over the room; the feeling that lies at the root of lust, the terrible yearning need to join, and create. I could have counted every hair on Jamie's body without looking at him, and knew each one stood erect.

Jenny opened her eyes, dark in the shadows, and smiled at her husband, a slow, rich curve of infinite promise.

"And late in bearing, when the child moves a lot, sometimes there's a feeling like when you've your man inside ye, when he comes to ye deep and pours himself into you. Then, then when that throbbing starts deep inside ye along with him, it's like that, but it's much bigger; it ripples all through the walls of your womb and fills all of you. The child's quiet then, and it's as though it's him you've taken inside you instead."

Suddenly she turned to me, and the spell was broken. "That's what they want sometimes, ye know," she said quietly, smiling into my eyes. "They want to come back."

* * *

Some time later, Jenny rose, floating toward the door with a glance back that pulled Ian after her like iron to true north. She paused near the door for him, looking back at her brother, who sat still by the fire hearth.

“You’ll see to the fire, Jamie?” She stretched, arching her back, and the curve of her spine echoed the strangely sinuous curve of her belly. Ian’s knuckles pressed hard along the length of her back, and ground into the base of her spine, making her groan. And then they were gone.

I stretched too, arms upward, feeling the pleasant pull of tired muscles. Jamie’s hands ran down my sides and rested on the swell of my hips. I leaned back into him, drawing his hands forward, imagining them cupping the gentle curve of an unborn child.

As I turned my head to kiss him, I noticed the small form curled in the corner of the settle.

“Look. They’ve forgotten small Jamie.” The little boy customarily slept on a trundle in his parents’ room. Tonight he had fallen asleep by the fire while we sat talking over the wine, but no one had remembered to carry him up to his bed. My own Jamie turned me to face him, smoothing my hair away from his nose.

“Jenny never forgets anything,” he said. “I expect she and Ian do not care for company just now.” His hands went to the fastening at the back of my skirt. “He’ll do where he is for the present.”

“But what if he wakes up?”

The roving hands came up under the now-loose edge of the bodice. Jamie cocked an eyebrow at the recumbent form of his small nephew.

“Aye well. He’ll have to learn his job sometime, won’t he? Ye don’t want him to be as ignorant as his uncle was.” He tossed several cushions to the floor before the fire and lowered himself, carrying me with him.

The firelight gleamed on the silvery scars on his back, as though he were in fact the iron man I had once accused him of being, the metal core showing through rents in the fragile skin. I traced the lashmarks one by one, and he shivered under my touch.

“Do you think Jenny’s right?” I asked later. “Do men really want to come back inside? Is that why you make love to us?” A breath of laughter stirred the hair by my ear.

“Well, it’s no usually the first thing in my mind when I take ye to bed, Sassenach. Far from it. But then …” His hands cupped my breasts softly, and his lips closed on one nipple. “I’d no just say she was completely wrong either. Sometimes … aye, sometimes it would be good, to be inside again, safe and … one. Knowing we cannot, I suppose, is what makes us want to beget. If we cannot go back ourselves, the best we can do is to give that precious gift to our sons, at least for a little while …” He shook himself suddenly, like a dog flinging water from its coat.

“Pay me no mind, Sassenach,” he murmured. “I get verra maudlin, drinking elderberry wine.”

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31

QUARTER DAY

There was a light knock on the door, and Jenny stepped in, carrying a folded blue garment over her arm and a hat in one hand. She looked her brother over critically, then nodded.

"Aye, the shirt's well enough. And I've let out your best coat for ye; you've grown a bit through the shoulders since I saw ye last." She cocked her head to one side, considering. "Ye've done a braw job of it today—up to the neck, at least. Sit ye down over there, and I'll tend to your hair." She pointed to the stool by the window.

"My hair? What's wrong wi' my hair?" Jamie demanded, putting a hand up to check. Grown nearly to shoulder-length, he had as usual laced it back with a leather thong to keep it out of his face.

Wasting no time on chat, his sister pushed him down onto the stool, yanked the thong loose and began to brush him vigorously with the tortoiseshell brushes.

"What's wrong wi' your hair?" she asked rhetorically. "Weel, now. There's cockleburs in it, for one thing." She plucked a small brown object delicately from his head and dropped it on the dresser. "And bits of oak leaf. Where *were* ye yesterday—rootling under the trees like a hog? And more tangles than a skein of washed yarn—"

"Ouch!"

"Be still, *roy*." Frowning with concentration, she picked up a comb and teased out the tangles, leaving a smooth, shining mass of auburn, copper, cinnamon, and gold, all gleaming together in the morning sun from the window. Jenny spread it in her hands, shaking her head over it.

"I canna think why the good Lord should waste hair like that on a man," she remarked. "Like a red-deer's pelt, in places."

"It is wonderful isn't it?" I agreed. "Look, where the sun's bleached it on top, he's got those lovely blond streaks." The object of our admiration glowered up at us.

"If ye both dinna stop it, I shall shave my head." He stretched out a threatening hand toward the dresser, where his razor rested. His sister, deft in spite of the enormous bulge of pregnancy, reached out and smacked his wrist with the hairbrush. He yelped, then yelped again as she yanked the hair back into a fistful.

"Keep still," she ordered. She began to separate the hair into three thick strands. "I'll make ye a proper cockernonny," she declared with satisfaction. "I'll no have ye goin' down to your tenants looking like a savage."

Jamie muttered something rebellious under his breath, but subsided under his sister's ministrations. Dexterously tucking in stray bits here and there, she plaited the hair into a thick formal queue, tucking the ends under and binding them securely with thread. Then she reached into her pocket, pulled out a blue silk ribbon and triumphantly tied it in a bow.

"There!" she said. "Bonny, no?" She turned to me for confirmation, and I had to admit it. The closely bound hair set off the shape of his head and the bold modeling of his face. Clean and orderly, in snowy linen and grey breeches, he cut a wonderful figure.

"Especially the ribbon," I said, suppressing an urge to laugh. "The same color as his eyes."

Jamie glared at his sister.

"No," he said shortly. "No ribbons. This isna France, nor yet King Geordie's court! I dinna care if it's the color of the Virgin's cloak—no ribbons, Janet!"

"Oh, all right, then, fusspot. There." She pulled the ribbon loose and stood back.

"Aye, ye'll do," she said, with satisfaction. Then she turned her penetrating blue eyes on me.

"Hm," she said, tapping her foot thoughtfully.

As I had arrived more or less in rags, it had been necessary to make me two new gowns as quickly as possible; one of homespun for daily use, and one of silk for occasions of state such as this. Better at stitching wounds than cloth, I had helped with the cutting and pinning, but been obliged to leave the design and sewing to Jenny and Mrs. Crook.

They had done a beautiful job, and the primrose yellow silk fitted my torso like a glove, with deep folds rolling back over the shoulders and falling behind in panels that flowed into the luxuriant drape of the full skirt. Bowing reluctantly to my absolute refusal to wear corsets, they had instead ingeniously reinforced the upper bodice with whale-bone stays ruthlessly stripped from an old corset.

Jenny's eyes traveled slowly upward from my feet to my head, where they lingered. With a sigh, she reached for the hairbrush.

"You, too," she said.

I sat, face burning, avoiding Jamie's eyes, as she carefully removed small twigs and bits of oak leaf from my curls, depositing them on the dresser next to those seined from her brother's hair. Eventually my hair was combed out and pinned up, and she reached into her pocket and pulled out a small lace cap.

"There," she said, pinning it firmly to the top of my pile of curls. "Kertch and all. Verra respectable ye look, Claire."

I assumed this was meant as a compliment, and murmured something in reply.

"Have ye any jewelry, though?" Jenny asked.

I shook my head. "No, I'm afraid not. All I had were the pearls Jamie gave me for our wedding, and those—" Under the circumstances of our departure from Leoch, pearls had been the last thing on my mind.

"Oh!" Jamie exclaimed, suddenly reminded. He dug in the sporran resting on the dresser, and triumphantly pulled out the string of pearls.

"Where on earth did you get those?" I asked in amazement.

"Murtagh brought them, early this morning," he answered. "He went back to Leoch during the trial and got everything he could carry—thinking that we'd need it if we got away. He looked for us on the road here, but of course we'd gone to … to the hill, first."

"Is he still here?" I asked.

Jamie stood behind me to fasten the necklace.

"Oh, aye. He's downstairs eating everything in the kitchen and deviling Mrs. Crook."

Aside from his songs, I had heard the wiry little man say less than three dozen words throughout the course of our acquaintanceship, and the thought of his "deviling" anyone was incongruous. He must feel remarkably at home at Lallybroch, I thought.

"Who *is* Murtagh?" I asked. "I mean, is he a relation of yours?"

Jamie and Jenny both looked surprised.

"Oh, aye," the latter replied. She turned to her brother. "He's—what, Jamie?—Father's second cousin's uncle?"

"Nephew," he corrected. "Ye dinna remember? Old Leo had the two boys, and then—"

I put my hands over my ears in a marked manner. This seemed to remind Jenny of something, for she clapped her hands together.

"Earbobs!" she exclaimed. "I think I've some pearl ones that will just do with that necklace! I'll fetch them directly." She vanished with her usual light speed.

"Why does your sister call you Roy?" I asked curiously, watching as he tied his stock before the looking glass. He wore the customary expression of a man doing battle with a mortal enemy, common to all men adjusting their neckwear, but he unclamped his lips to grin at me.

"Och, that. It isna the English name Roy. It's a pet name in Gaelic; the color of my hair. The word's *'ruadh'*—means 'red.' " He had to spell the word and say it over several times before I could catch any difference.

"Sounds the same to me, roy," I said, shaking my head.

Jamie picked up his sporran and began tucking in the loose bits of things that had come out when he pulled out the pearls. Finding a tangled length of fishing line, he upended the bag over the bed, dumping everything in a pile. He began to sort through it, painstakingly winding up the bits of line and string, finding loose fish hooks and firmly re-imbedding them in the piece of cork where they normally rested. I moved over to the bed and inspected the array.

"I've never seen so much rubbish in my life," I observed. "You're a regular jackdaw, Jamie."

"It isna rubbish," he said, stung. "I've uses for all these things."

"Well, the fish lines, and the hooks, yes. And the string for snares. Even, stretching a point, the pistol wadding and the balls—you do carry a pistol now and again. And the little snake Willie gave you, I understand that. But the stones? And a snail shell? And a piece of glass? And …" I bent closer to peer at a dark, furry mass of *something*.

"What is—it isn't, is it? Jamie, why on earth are you carrying a dried mole's foot in your sporran?"

"Against rheumatism, of course." He snatched the object from under my nose and stuffed it back in the badger skin.

"Oh, of course," I agreed, surveying him with interest. His face was mildly flushed with embarrassment. "It must work; you don't creak anywhere." I picked a small Bible out of the remaining rubble and thumbed through it, while he stowed away the rest of his valuable equipment.

"Alexander William Roderick MacGregor." I read aloud the name on the flyleaf. "You said there was a debt owing him, Jamie. What did you mean by that?"

"Oh, that." He sat down beside me on the bed, took the small book from me and gently flipped the pages.

"I told ye this belonged to a prisoner who'd died at Fort William, no?"

"Yes."

"I didna know the lad myself; he died a month before I came there. But the doctor who gave it to me told me about him, while he tended my back. I think he needed to tell someone about it, and he couldna speak to anyone in the garrison." He closed the book, holding it on his knee, and stared out the window at the gay October sunshine.

Alex MacGregor, a lad of eighteen or so, had been arrested for the common offense of cattle-lifting. A fair, quiet lad, he had seemed likely to serve his sentence and be released without incident. A week before his release, though, he had been found hanging in the horseshed.

"There was no doubt he'd done it himself, the doctor said." Jamie caressed the leather cover of the small book, drawing one large thumb along the binding. "And he did not exactly *say* what he thought, himself. But he did say that Captain Randall had had a private conversation with the lad a week before."

I swallowed, suddenly cold despite the sunshine.

"And you think—"

"No." His voice was soft and certain. "I dinna think. I *know,* and so did the doctor. And I imagine the sergeant-major knew for certain, and that's why he died." He spread his hands flat on his knees, looking down at the long joints of his fingers. Large, strong and capable; the hands of a farmer, the hands of a warrior. He picked up the small Bible and put it into the sporran.

"I'll tell ye this, *mo duinne*. One day Jack Randall will die at my hands. And when he is dead, I shall send back that book to the mother of Alex MacGregor, with word that her son is avenged."

The air of tension was broken by the sudden reappearance of Jenny, now resplendent in blue silk and her own lace kertch, holding a large box of worn red morocco leather.

"Jamie, the Currans are come, and Willie Murray and the Jeffries. You'd best go down and have a second breakfast with them—I've put out fresh bannocks and salt herring, and Mrs. Crook's doing fresh jam cakes."

"Oh, aye. Claire, come down when you're ready." Rising hastily, he paused long enough to gather me up for a brief but thorough kiss, and disappeared. His footsteps clattered down the first flight of stairs, slowing on the second to the more sedate pace suitable to a laird's entrance, as he neared the ground floor.

Jenny smiled after him, then turned her attention to me. Placing the box on the bed, she threw back the lid, revealing a jumbled array of jewels and baubles. I was surprised to see it; it seemed unlike the neat, orderly Jenny Murray whose iron hand kept the household running smoothly from dawn to dusk.

She stirred a finger through the bright clutter, then as though picking up my thought, looked up and smiled at me.

"I keep thinking I must sort all these things one day. But when I was small, my mother would let me rummage in her box sometimes, and it was like finding magic treasure—I never knew what I'd pick up next. I suppose I think if it were all orderly, the magic would go, somehow. Daft, no?"

"No," I said, smiling back at her. "No, it isn't."

We rummaged slowly through the box, holding the cherished bits and pieces of four generations of women.

"That was my grandmother Fraser's," Jenny said, holding up a silver brooch. It was in the shape of a fret-worked crescent moon, a small single diamond shining above the tip like a star.

"And this—" She pulled out a slender gold band, with a ruby surrounded by brilliants. "That's my wedding ring. Ian spent half a year's salary on it, though I told him he was foolish to do it." The fond look on her face suggested that Ian had been anything but foolish. She polished the stone on the bosom of her dress and admired it once more before replacing it in the box.

"I'll be happy once the babe is born," she said, patting her bulge with a grimace. "My fingers are so swollen in the mornings I can scarcely do up my laces, let alone wear my rings."

I caught a strange nonmetallic gleam in the depths of the box, and pointed. "What's that?"

"Oh, those," she said, dipping into the box again. "I've never worn them; they don't suit me. But you could wear them—you're tall and queenly, like my mother was. They were hers, ye ken."

They were a pair of bracelets. Each made from the curving, almost-circular tusk of a wild boar, polished to a deep ivory glow, the ends capped with silver tappets, etched with flowered tracery.

"Lord, they're gorgeous! I've never seen anything so … so wonderfully barbaric."

Jenny was amused. "Aye, that they are. Someone gave them to Mother as a wedding gift, but she never would say who. My father used to tease her now and then about her admirer, but she wouldna tell him, either, just smiled like a cat that's had cream to its supper. Here, try them."

The ivory was cool and heavy on my arm. I couldn't resist stroking the deep yellow surface, grained with age.

"Aye, they suit ye," Jenny declared. "And they go wi' that yellow gown, as well. Here are the earbobs—put these on, and we'll go down."

* * *

Murtagh was seated at the kitchen table, industriously eating ham off the end of his dirk. Passing behind him with a platter, Mrs. Crook dexterously bent and slid three fresh hot bannocks onto his plate, hardly breaking her stride.

Jenny was bustling to and fro, preparing and overseeing. Pausing in her progress, she peered over Murtagh's shoulder at his rapidly emptying plate.

"Don't stint yourself, man," she remarked. "There's another hog in the pen, after all."

"Begrudge a kinsman a bite, do ye?" he asked, not interrupting his chewing.

"Me?" Jenny put both hands on her hips. "Heavens, no! After all, ye've only had the four helpings so far. Mrs. Crook," she turned to call to the departing housekeeper, "when you've done wi' the bannocks, fix this starveling man a bowl of parritch to fill in the chinks with. We dinna want him fainting on the doorstep, ye ken."

When Murtagh saw me standing in the doorway, he promptly choked on a bite of ham.

"Mmmphm," he said, by way of greeting, after Jenny had pounded him helpfully on the back.

"Nice to see you too," I replied, sitting down opposite him. "Thank you, by the way."

"Mmphm?" The question was muffled by half a bannock, spread with honey.

"For fetching my things from the Castle."

"Mmp." He dismissed any notion of thanks with a wave that ended in a reach for the butter dish.

"I brought your wee bits of plant and such as well," he said, with a jerk of the head at the window. "Out in the yard, in my saddlebags."

"You've brought my medicine box? That's wonderful!" I was delighted. Some of the medicinal plants were rare, and had taken no little trouble to find and prepare properly.

"But how did you manage?" I asked. Once I had recovered from the horror of the witchcraft trial, I often wondered how the occupants of the Castle had taken my sudden arrest and escape. "I hope you didn't have any difficulty."

"Och, no." He took another healthy bite, but waited until it had made its leisurely way down his throat before replying further.

"Mrs. Fitz had them put away, like, packed up in a box already. I went to her at the first, ye ken, for I wasna sure what reception I'd get."

"Very sensible. I don't imagine Mrs. Fitz would scream at sight of you," I agreed. The bannocks were steaming gently in the cool air, and smelt heavenly. I reached for one, the heavy boar's-tooth bracelets clinking together on my wrist. I saw Murtagh's eyes on them and adjusted them so he could see the engraved silver end pieces.

"Aren't they lovely?" I said. "Jenny said they were her mother's."

Murtagh's eyes dropped to the bowl of parritch that Mrs. Crook had thrust unceremoniously under his nose.

"They suit ye," he mumbled. Then, returning suddenly to the earlier subject, he said, "No, she wouldna summon help against me. I was well acquent' wi' Glenna FitzGibbons, some time ago."

"Oh, a long-lost love of yours, was she?" I teased, enjoying the incongruous thought of him entwined in amorous embrace with the ample Mrs. Fitz.

Murtagh glanced up coldly from his parritch.

"That she wasna, and I'll thank ye to keep a civil tongue when ye speak of the lady. Her husband was my mother's brother. And she was sore grieved for ye, I'll ha' ye to know."

I lowered my eyes, abashed, and reached for the honey to cover my embarrassment. The stone jar had been set in a pot of boiling water to liquefy the contents, and it was comfortingly warm to the touch.

"I'm sorry," I said, drizzling the sweet golden fluid over the bannock, watching carefully so as not to spill it. "I wondered, you know, what she felt like, when … when I …"

"They didna realize at the first ye were gone," the little man said matter-of-factly, ignoring my apology. "When ye didna come in to dinner, they thought maybe you'd stayed late in the fields and gone up to your bed without eating; your door was closed. And the next day, when there was all the outcry over the taking of Mistress Duncan, no one thought to look for ye. There was no mention of you, only of her, when the news came, and in all the excitement, no one thought to look for ye."

I nodded thoughtfully. No one would have missed me, save those seeking medical treatment; I had spent most of my time in Colum's library while Jamie was away.

"What about Colum?" I asked. I was more than idly curious; had he really planned it, as Geilie thought?

Murtagh shrugged. He scanned the table for further victuals, apparently spotted nothing to his liking, and leaned back, folding his hands comfortably over his lean midriff.

"When he had the news from the village, he had the gates closed at once, and forbade anyone from the Castle to go down, for fear of being caught up in the moil." He leaned further back, eyeing me speculatively.

"Mrs. Fitz thought to find ye, the second day. She said that she asked all the maids if they'd laid eyes on ye. No one had, but one of the girls said she thought perhaps ye'd gone to the village—maybe you'd taken shelter in a house there." One of the girls, I thought cynically. The one that knew bloody well where I was.

He belched softly, not bothering to stifle the sound.

"I heard Mrs. Fitz turned the Castle upside down, then, and made Colum send down a man to the village, once she was sure ye werena to be found. And when they learned what had happened.…" A faint look of amusement lighted the dark face.

"She didna tell me everything, but I gathered she made Himself's life more of a misery to him than it usually is, naggin' at him to send down and free ye by force of arms—and not the least bit of use, him arguin' that it had gone well beyond the point where he could do that, and now it was in the hands o' the examiners, and one thing and another. It must ha' been something to see," he said reflectively, "twa wills like that, set one against the other."

And in the end, it seemed, neither had either triumphed nor given way. Ned Gowan, with his lawyer's gift for compromise, had found the way between them, by offering to go himself to the trial, not as representative of the laird, but as an independent advocate.

"Did she think I might be a witch?" I asked curiously. Murtagh snorted briefly.

"I've yet to see the auld woman believes in witches, nor the young one, neither. It's men think there must be ill-wishes and magic in women, when it's only the natural way of the creatures."

"I begin to see why you've never married," I said.

"Do ye, then?" He pushed back his chair abruptly and rose, pulling the plaid forward over his shoulders.

"I'll be off. Gie my respects to the laird," he said to Jenny, who reappeared from the front hall, where she had been greeting tenants. "He'll be busy, I've nae doubt."

Jenny handed him a large cloth sack, tied in a knot at the mouth, and plainly holding enough provisions for a week.

"A wee bite for the journey home," she said, dimpling at him. "Might last ye at least out of sight o' the house."

He tucked the knot of the sack snugly into his belt and nodded briefly, turning toward the door.

"Aye," he said, "and if not, ye'll see the corbies gatherin' just beyond the rise, come to pick my bones."

"A lot of good they'd get from it," she answered cynically, eyeing his scrawny frame. "I've seen more sound flesh on a broomstick."

Murtagh's dour face remained unchanged, but a faint gleam showed in his eye, nonetheless.

"Oh, aye?" he said. "Weel, I'll tell ye, lass …" The voices passed down the hall, mingling in amiable insult and argument, vanishing at last in the echoes of the front hall.

I sat at the table for a moment longer, idly caressing the warm ivory of Ellen MacKenzie's bracelets. At the far-off slam of the door, I shook myself and stood up to take my place as the Lady of Lallybroch.

* * *

Usually a busy place, on Quarter Day the manor house simply bristled with activity. Tenants came and went all day. Many came only long enough to pay their rents; some stayed all day, wandering about the estate, visiting with friends, taking refreshment in the parlor. Jenny, blooming in blue silk, and Mrs. Crook, starched in white linen, flitted back and forth between kitchen and parlor, overseeing the two maidservants, who staggered to and fro under enormous platters of oatcake, fruitcake, "crumbly," and other sweets.

Jamie, having introduced me with ceremony to the tenants present in dining room and parlor, then retired into his study with Ian, to receive the tenants singly, to confer with them over the needs of the spring planting, to consult over the sale of wool and grain, to note the activities of the estate, and to set things in order for the next quarter of the year.

I puttered cheerfully about the place, visiting with tenants, lending a hand with the refreshments when needed, sometimes just drifting into the background to watch the comings and goings.

Recalling Jamie's promise to the old woman by the millpond, I waited with some curiosity for the arrival of Ronald MacNab.

He came shortly past noon, riding a tall, slip-jointed mule, with a small boy clinging to his belt behind. I viewed them covertly from the parlor door, wondering just how accurate his mother's assessment had been.

I decided that while "drunken sot" might be overstating things slightly, Grannie MacNab's general perceptions were acute. Ronald MacNab's hair was long and greasy, carelessly tied back with twine, and his collar and cuffs were grey with dirt. While surely a year or two younger than Jamie, he looked at least fifteen years older, the bones of his face submerged in bloat, small grey eyes dulled and bloodshot.

As for the child, he also was scruffy and dirty. Worse, so far as I was concerned, he slunk along behind his father, keeping his eyes on the floor, cringing when Ronald turned and spoke sharply to him. Jamie, who had come to the door of his study, saw it too, and I saw him exchange a sharp look with Jenny, bringing a fresh decanter in answer to his call.

She nodded imperceptibly and handed over the decanter. Then, taking the child firmly by the hand, she towed him toward the kitchen, saying, "Come along wi' me now, laddie. I believe we've a crumbly or two going wantin'. Or what about a slice of fruitcake?"

Jamie nodded formally to Ronald MacNab, standing aside as the man went into the study. Reaching out to shut the door, Jamie caught my eye and nodded toward the kitchen. I nodded back and turned to follow Jenny and young Rabbie.

I found them engaged in pleasant converse with Mrs. Crook, who was ladling punch from the big cauldron into a crystal bowl. She tipped a bit into a wooden cup and offered it to the lad, who hung back, eyeing her suspiciously, before finally accepting it. Jenny went on chatting casually to the lad as she loaded platters, receiving little more than grunts in return. Still, the half-wild little creature seemed to be relaxing a bit.

"Your sark's a bit grubby, lad," she observed, leaning forward to turn back the collar. "Take it off, and I'll give it a bit of a wash before ye go." "Grubby" was a gross understatement, but the boy pulled back defensively. I was behind him, though, and at a gesture from Jenny, grabbed him by the arms before he could dart away.

He kicked and yowled, but Jenny and Mrs. Crook closed in on him as well, and between the three of us, we peeled the filthy shirt off his back.

"Ah." Jenny drew in her breath sharply. She was holding the boy's head firmly under one arm, and the scrawny back was fully exposed. Welts and scabs scored the flesh on either side of the knobby backbone, some freshly healed, some so old as to be only faded shadows lapping the prominent ribs. Jenny took a good grip on the back of the boy's neck, speaking soothingly to him as she released his head. She jerked her head in the direction of the hall, looking at me.

"You'd better tell him."

I knocked tentatively at the study door, holding a plate of honeyed oatcakes as excuse. At Jamie's muffled bidding, I opened the door and went in.

My face as I served MacNab must have been sufficient, for I didn't have to ask to speak privately with Jamie. He stared meditatively at me for a moment, then turned back to his tenant.

"Well then, Ronnie, that will do for the grain allotment. There's the one other thing I meant to speak wi' you about, though. You've a likely lad named Rabbie, I understand, and I'm needing a boy of that size to help in the stables. Would ye be willing for him to come?" Jamie's long fingers played with a goosequill on the desk. Ian, seated at a smaller table to one side, propped his chin on his fists, staring at MacNab with frank interest.

MacNab glowered belligerently. I thought he had the irritable resentment of a man who isn't drunk but wishes he were.

"No, I've need of the lad," he said curtly.

"Mm." Jamie lounged back in his chair, hands folded across his middle. "I'd pay ye for his services, of course."

The man grunted and shifted in his chair.

"My mother's been at ye, eh? I said no, and I meant no. The lad's my son, and I'll deal wi' him as I see fit. And I see fit to keep him to hame."

Jamie eyed MacNab thoughtfully, but turned his attention back to the ledgers without further argument.

Late in the afternoon, as the tenants repaired to the warmer reaches of pantry and parlor for refreshment before departing, I spotted Jamie from the window, strolling in leisurely fashion toward the pigshed, arm slung about the scruffy MacNab in comradely style. The pair disappeared behind the shed, presumably to inspect something of agricultural interest, and reappeared within a minute or two, coming toward the house.

Jamie's arm was still about the shorter man's shoulders, but seemed now to be supporting him. MacNab's face was an unhealthy grey, slicked with sweat, and he walked very slowly, seeming unable to straighten up all the way.

"Weel, that's good, then," Jamie remarked cheerfully as they came within earshot. "Reckon your missus will be glad of the extra money, eh, Ronald? Ah, here's your animal for you—fine-looking beast, is he no?" The moth-eaten mule that had brought the MacNabs to the farm shambled out of the yard where it had been enjoying the hospitality of the estate. A wisp of hay still protruded from the corners of its mouth, jerking irregularly as the beast chewed.

Jamie gave MacNab a hand under the foot to assist him to his seat; much-needed help, by the look of it. MacNab did not speak or wave in response to Jamie's voluble "God-speeds" and "safe journeys," but only nodded in a dazed way as he left the yard at a walk, seemingly intent on some secret trouble that absorbed his attention.

Jamie stood leaning on the fence, exchanging pleasantries as other tenants wended their ways homeward, until the untidy figure of MacNab was out of sight over the crest of the hill. He straightened, gazing down the road, then turned and gave a whistle. A small figure in a torn but clean smock and stained kilt crept out from under the haywagon.

"Weel, then, young Rabbie," said Jamie genially. "Looks as though your father's given his permission for ye to be a stable lad after all. I'm sure as you'll be a hard worker and a credit to him, eh?" Round, bloodshot eyes stared up dumbly out of the dirty face, and the boy made no response at all, until Jamie reached out, and grasping him gently by the shoulder, turned him toward the horse trough.

"There'll be some supper waiting ye in the kitchen, laddie. Go and wash a bit first, though; Mrs. Crook's a picky woman. Oh, and Rabbie"—he leaned down to whisper to the lad—"mind your ears, or she'll do 'em for ye. She scrubbed mine for me this morning." He put his hands behind his ears and flapped them solemnly at the boy, who broke into a shy smile and fled toward the trough.

"I'm glad you managed it," I said, taking Jamie's arm to go in to supper. "With little Rabbie MacNab, I mean. How did you do it, though?"

He shrugged. "Took Ronald back of the brewhouse and fisted him once or twice in the soft parts. Asked him did he want to part wi' his son or his liver." He glanced down at me, frowning.

"It wasna right, but I couldn't think what else to do. And I didna want the lad to go back wi' him. It wasn't only I'd promised his grannie, either. Jenny told me about the lad's back." He hesitated. "I'll tell ye, Sassenach. My father whipped me as often as he thought I needed it, and a lot oftener than I thought I did. But I didna cower when he spoke to me. And I dinna think young Rabbie will lie in bed with his wife one day and laugh about it."

He hunched his shoulders, with that odd half-shrug, something I hadn't seen him do in months.

"He's right; the lad's his own son, he can do as he likes. And I'm not God; only the laird, and that's a good bit lower down. Still …" He looked down at me with a crooked half-smile.

"It's a damn thin line between justice and brutality, Sassenach. I only hope I've come down on the right side of it."

I put an arm around his waist and hugged him.

"You did right, Jamie."

"Ye think so?"

"Yes."

We strolled back toward the house, arms about each other. The whitewashed farm buildings glowed amber in the setting sun. Instead of going into the house, though, Jamie steered me up the slight rise behind the manor. Here, sitting on the top rail of a fenced field, we could see the whole of the home farm laid out before us.

I laid my head on Jamie's shoulder and sighed. He squeezed me gently in response.

"This is what you were born to do, isn't it, Jamie?"

"Perhaps, Sassenach." He looked out over the fields and buildings, the crofts and the roads, then looked down, a smile suddenly curving the wide mouth.

“And you, my Sassenach? What were you born for? To be lady of a manor, or to sleep in the fields like a gypsy? To be a healer, or a don’s wife, or an outlaw’s lady?”

“I was born for you,” I said simply, and held out my arms to him.

“Ye know,” he observed, letting go at last, “you’ve never said it.”

“Neither have you.”

“I have. The day after we came. I said I wanted you more than anything.”

“And *I* said that loving and wanting weren’t necessarily the same thing,” I countered.

He laughed. “Perhaps you’re right, Sassenach.” He smoothed the hair from my face and kissed my brow. “I wanted ye from the first I saw ye—but I loved ye when you wept in my arms and let me comfort you, that first time at Leoch.”

The sun sank below the line of black pines, and the first stars of the evening came out. It was mid-November, and the evening air was cold, though the days still kept fine. Standing on the opposite side of the fence, Jamie bent his head, putting his forehead against mine.

“You first.”

“No, you.”

“Why?”

“I’m afraid.”

“Of what, my Sassenach?” The darkness was rolling in over the fields, filling the land and rising up to meet the night. The light of the new crescent moon marked the ridges of brow and nose, crossing his face with light.

“I’m afraid if I start I shall never stop.”

He cast a glance at the horizon, where the sickle moon hung low and rising. “It’s nearly winter, and the nights are long, *mo duinne*.” He leaned across the fence, reaching, and I stepped into his arms, feeling the heat of his body and the beat of his heart.

“I love you.”

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HARD LABOR

A few days later, near sunset, I was on the hill behind the house, digging up the tubers of a small patch of corydalis I had found. Hearing the rustle of footsteps approaching through the grass, I turned, expecting to see Jenny or Mrs. Crook come to call me to supper. Instead it was Jamie, hair spiked with dampness from his predinner ablutions, still in his shirt, knotted together between his legs for working in the fields. He came up behind me and put his arms around me, resting his chin on my shoulder. Together we watched the sun sinking behind the pines, robed in gold and purple glory. The landscape faded quietly around us, but we stayed where we were, wrapped in contentment. Finally, as it began to grow dark, I could hear Jenny calling from the house below.

"We'd better go in," I said, reluctantly stirring.

"Mmm." Jamie didn't move, but merely tightened his hold, still gazing into the deepening shadows, as though trying to fix each stone and blade of grass in memory.

I turned to him and slipped my arms around his neck.

"What is it?" I asked quietly. "Must we leave soon?" My heart sank at the prospect of leaving Lallybroch, but I knew that it was dangerous for us to stay too much longer; another visit from the redcoats could happen at any time, with much more sinister results.

"Aye. Tomorrow, or the day after, at latest. There are English at Knockchoilum; it's twenty miles from here, but that's only two days' ride in fine weather." I started to slither off the fence, but Jamie slid an arm under my knees and lifted me, holding me against his chest.

I could feel the heat of the sun still in his skin, and smell the warm dusty scent of sweat and oat grass. He had been helping with the last of the harvesting, and the smell reminded me of a supper the week before, when I knew that Jenny, always friendly and polite, had finally accepted me fully as a member of the family.

Harvesting was grueling work, and Ian and Jamie were often nodding by the end of supper. On one occasion, I had left the table to fetch a brose pudding for dessert, and returned to find both of them sound asleep, and Jenny laughing quietly to herself amid the remains of supper. Ian lay slumped in his chair, chin resting on his chest, breathing heavily. Jamie had laid his cheek on his folded arms and sprawled forward across the table, snoring peacefully between the platter and the peppermill.

Jenny took the pudding from me and served us both, shaking her head at the slumbering men.

"They were yawning so much I wondered, ye know," she said, "what would happen if I stopped talking. So I kept quiet, and sure enough, two minutes later they were out, the both of them." She smoothed Ian's hair tenderly off his forehead.

"That's why there're so few babies born in July here," she said, with a wicked cock of the eyebrow at me. "The men can't keep awake long enough in November to start one." It was true enough, and I laughed. Jamie stirred and snorted next to me, and I laid a hand on the back of his neck to soothe him. His lips curved at once in a soft, reflexive smile, then relaxed into sleep once more.

Jenny, watching him, said, "That's funny, that is. I've not seen him do that since he was quite small."

"Do what?"

She nodded. "Smile in his sleep. He used always to do it, if ye came by and petted him in his cradle, or even later, in his trundle. Sometimes Mother and I would take it in turns to stroke his head and see could we make him smile; he always would."

"That's odd, isn't it?" I experimented, running a hand gently down the back of his head and neck. Sure enough, I was rewarded at once by a singularly sweet smile that lingered for a moment before the lines of his face relaxed once more into the rather stern expression he presented when asleep.

"I wonder why he does that," I said, watching him in fascination. Jenny shrugged and grinned at me.

"I imagine it means he's happy."

* * *

In the event, we did not leave next day. In the middle of the night, I was wakened by low conversation in the room. Rolling over, I saw Ian bending over the bed, holding a candle.

"The babe's on its way," said Jamie, seeing me awake. He sat up, yawning. "A bit early, Ian?"

"Ye never know. Small Jamie was late. Better early than late, I reckon." Ian's smile was quick and nervous.

"Sassenach, can ye deliver a child? Or had I best go for the midwife?" Jamie turned to me, questioning. I didn't hesitate in my answer.

I shook my head. "Get the midwife." I had seen only three births during my training; all conducted in a sterile operating room, the patient draped and anesthetized, nothing visible save the grotesquely swelling perineum and the suddenly emergent head.

Having seen Jamie on his way to fetch the midwife, Mrs. Martins, I followed Ian up the stairs.

Jenny was sitting in a chair near the window, leaning comfortably back. She had put on an old nightgown, stripped the bed and spread an aged quilt over the feather mattress, and was now just sitting. Waiting.

Ian hovered nervously over her. Jenny smiled too, but with a distracted, inward look, as though listening to something far off, which only she could hear. Ian, fully dressed, fidgeted about the room, picking things up and putting them down, until Jenny at last ordered him to leave.

"Go downstairs and rouse Mrs. Crook, Ian," she said, smiling to ease the dismissal. "Tell her to get things ready for Mrs. Martins. She'll ken what to do." She drew in her breath sharply then, and put both hands on her distended abdomen. I stared, seeing her belly draw up suddenly tight and round. She bit her lip and breathed heavily for a moment, then relaxed. Her belly had resumed its normal shape, a slightly pendant teardrop, rounded at both ends.

Ian put a hand hesitantly on her shoulder, and she covered it with her own, smiling up at him.

"Then tell her to feed ye, man. You and Jamie will be needing a bit to eat. They say the second babe comes faster than the first; maybe by the time you're done wi' breakfast, I'll be ready for a bite myself."

He squeezed her shoulder tightly, and kissed her, murmuring something in her ear before turning to go. He hesitated in the doorway, looking back, but she waved him firmly away.

It seemed a very long time before Jamie arrived with the midwife, and I grew more nervous as the contractions grew stronger. Second babies *were* said to be faster, as a rule. What if this one decided to arrive before Mrs. Martins?

At first, Jenny carried on light conversation with me, only pausing to bend forward slightly, holding her stomach, as the contractions tightened their grip. But she quickly lost the urge to talk, and lay back, resting quietly in between the increasingly powerful pains. Finally, after one that almost bent her double in her chair, she rose to her feet, staggering.

"Help me walk a bit, Claire," she said. Unsure what was the proper procedure, I did as she said, grasping her tightly under the arm to help her stand upright. We made several slow circuits of the room, pausing when a contraction struck, going on when it eased. Shortly before the midwife arrived, Jenny made her way to the bed and lay down.

Mrs. Martins was a reassuring-looking person; tallish and thin, she had wide shoulders and muscular forearms, and the sort of kind, down-to-earth expression that invited confidence. Two vertical creases between her iron-grey brows, always visible, deepened when she was concentrating.

They stayed shallow as she made her preliminary examination. Everything normal so far, then. Mrs. Crook had produced a pile of clean, ironed sheets for our use, and Mrs. Martins took one of these, still folded, and pushed it under Jenny. I was startled to see the dark stain of blood between her thighs, as she raised herself slightly.

Seeing my look, Mrs. Martins nodded reassuringly.

“Aye. Bloody show, it’s called. It’s all right. It’s only when the blood is bright red, and a terrible lot all at once, that ye worry. There’s nothing wrong.”

We all settled down to wait. Mrs. Martins talked quietly and comfortingly to Jenny, rubbing the small of her back, pressing hard during the contractions. As the pains became more frequent, Jenny began to clamp her lips together and snort heavily through her nose. Often, there was a deep, faint groan as the full force of the pain came on.

Jenny’s hair was soaked with perspiration by this time, and her face bright red with the strain. Watching her, I realized fully why it was called “labor.” Giving birth was bloody hard work.

Over the next two hours, little progress appeared to be made, except that the pains grew obviously stronger. Able at first to answer questions, Jenny quit responding, lying panting at the end of each contraction, face fading from red to white in a matter of seconds.

She clamped her lips through the next one, beckoning me to her side as it eased.

“If the child lives …” she said, gasping for air, “and it’s a girl … her name is Margaret. Tell Ian … name her Margaret Ellen.”

“Yes, of course,” I soothed. “But you’ll be able to tell him yourself. It won’t be long, now.”

She only shook her head in determined negation, and clenched her teeth as the next pain came. Mrs. Martins took me by the arm, steering me away.

“Dinna mind it, lassie,” she said matter-of-factly. “They always think they’re goin’ to die about now.”

“Oh,” I said, mildly relieved.

“Mind ye,” she said, in a lower voice, “sometimes they do.”

Even Mrs. Martins seemed a trifle worried as the pains went on, with no appreciable progress. Jenny was tiring badly; as each pain eased, her body went slack, and she even dozed off, as though seeking escape in small intervals of sleep. Then, as the remorseless fist grasped her once again, she would wake fighting and groaning with effort, writhing to the side to curl protectively over the rigid lump of the unborn child.

"Could the child be … backward?" I asked, in a low voice, shy about suggesting such a thing to an experienced midwife. Mrs. Martins seemed not at all offended by the suggestion, though; the lines between her brows merely deepened as she looked at the straining woman.

When the next pain eased, Mrs. Martins flung back the sheet and nightgown, and went rapidly to work, pressing here and there on the huge mound with quick, skilled fingers. It took several tries, as the probing seemed to incite the pains, and examination was impossible during the relentlessly powerful contractions.

At last she drew back, thinking, tapping one foot abstractedly as she watched Jenny writhe through two more of the spine-wrenching pains. As she jerked on the sheets, one of the strained linens parted suddenly with a rending tear.

As though this had been a signal, Mrs. Martins started forward with decision, beckoning to me.

"Lean her back a bit, lass," Mrs. Martins instructed me, not at all disconcerted by Jenny's cries. I supposed she had heard her share of screaming.

At the next relaxation, Mrs. Martins plunged into action. Grasping the child through the momentarily flaccid walls of the womb, she heaved, trying to turn it. Jenny screamed and jerked my arms as another contraction started.

Mrs. Martins tried again. And again. And again. Unable to keep from pushing, Jenny was wearing herself far past the point of exhaustion, her body struggling past the bounds of ordinary strength as it strove to force the child into the world.

Then it worked. There was a sudden strange fluid shifting, and the amorphous bulk of the child turned under Mrs. Martins's hands. All at once, the shape of Jenny's belly was altered, and there was an immediate sense of getting down to business.

"Now push." She did, and Mrs. Martins dropped to her knees beside the bed. Apparently she saw some sign of progress, for she rose and hastily snatched a small bottle from the table where she had put it when she came in. She poured a small amount of what looked like oil on her fingertips, and began to rub it gently between Jenny's legs.

Jenny made a deep and vicious sound of protest at being touched as the next pain came on, and Mrs. Martins took her hand away. Jenny sagged into inertness and the midwife resumed her gentle massage, crooning to her patient, telling her everything was well, just to rest, and now … push!

During the next contraction, Mrs. Martins put her hand on top of Jenny's belly and pushed down strongly. Jenny shrieked, but the midwife kept pushing until the contraction eased.

"Push with me on the next one," the midwife said. "It's almost here."

I put my hands above Mrs. Martins's on Jenny's belly, and at her signal, all three of us pushed together. There was a deep, victorious grunt from Jenny, and a slimy blob swelled suddenly between her thighs. She straightened her legs against the mattress and pushed once more, and Margaret Ellen Murray shot into the world like a greased pig.

A little later, I straightened from wiping Jenny's smiling face with a damp rag and glanced out the window. It was nearly sunset.

"I'm all right," Jenny said. "Quite all right." The broad grin of delight with which she had greeted the delivery of her daughter had turned into a small, permanent smile of deep contentment. She reached up with an unsteady hand and touched my sleeve.

"Go tell Ian," she said. "He'll be worrit."

To my cynical eyes, it didn't look it. The scene in the study, where Ian and Jamie had taken refuge, strongly resembled a premature celebratory debauch. An empty decanter stood on the sideboard, accompanied by several bottles, and a strong alcoholic fume hung over the room like a cloud.

The proud father appeared to have passed out, head resting on the laird's desk. The laird himself was still conscious, but bleary-eyed, leaning back against the paneling and blinking like an owl.

Outraged, I stamped over to the desk and gripped Ian by the shoulder, shaking him roughly and ignoring Jamie, who pushed himself upright, saying, “Sassenach, wait …”

Ian was not quite unconscious. His head came up reluctantly, and he looked at me with a set, rigid face, eyes bleak and pleading holes. I realized suddenly that he thought I had come to tell him that Jenny was dead.

I relaxed my grip and patted him gently instead.

“She’s all right,” I said, softly. “You have a daughter.”

He laid his head down on his arms again, and I left him, his thin shoulders shaking as Jamie patted his back.

The survivors now revived and cleaned up, the Murray-Fraser families gathered in Jenny’s room for a celebratory supper. Little Margaret, tidied for inspection and swaddled in a small blanket, was given to her father, who received his new offspring with an expression of beatific reverence.

“Hello, wee Maggie,” he whispered, touching the tiny button of a nose with one fingertip.

His new daughter, unimpressed by the introduction, closed her eyes in concentration, stiffened, and urinated on her father’s shirt.

During the brief bustle of hilarity and repair occasioned by this lapse of good manners, small Jamie succeeded in escaping from the clutches of Mrs. Crook and flung himself onto Jenny’s bed. She grunted slightly in discomfort, but put out a hand and gathered him in, waving at Mrs. Crook to let him be.

“*My* mama!” he declared, burrowing into Jenny’s side.

“Well, who else?” she asked reasonably. “Here, laddie.” She hugged him, and kissed the top of his head, and he relaxed, reassured, and snuggled against her. She gently pushed his head down, stroking his hair.

“Lay your head then, man,” she said. “Past your bedtime. Lay your head.” Comforted by her presence, he put a thumb in his mouth and fell asleep.

Given a turn to hold the baby, Jamie proved remarkably competent, cupping the small fuzzy skull in the palm of one hand like a tennis ball. He seemed reluctant to hand the child back to Jenny, who cuddled her against her breasts, crooning soft endearments.

At last we made our way to our own room, which seemed silent and empty in contrast to the warm family scene we had just left, Ian kneeling by his wife's bed, hand resting on small Jamie as Jenny nursed the new baby. I was conscious for the first time of just how tired I was; it was nearly twenty-four hours since Ian had roused me.

Jamie closed the door quietly behind him. Without speaking, he came behind me and undid the fastenings of my gown. His hands reached around me and I lay back gratefully against his chest. Then he bent his head to kiss me and I turned, putting my own arms around his neck. I felt not only very tired, but very tender, and not a little sad.

"Perhaps it's as well," Jamie said slowly, as though to himself.

"What's as well?"

"That you're barren." He couldn't see my face, buried in his chest, but he must have felt me stiffen.

"Aye, I knew that long ago. Geillis Duncan told me, soon after we wed." He stroked my back gently. "I regretted it a bit at first, but then I began to think it was as well; living as we must, it would be verra difficult if you were to get with child. And now"—he shivered slightly—"now I think I am glad of it; I wouldna want ye to suffer that way."

"I wouldn't mind," I said, after a long while, thinking of the rounded, fuzzy head and tiny fingers.

"I would." He kissed the top of my head. "I saw Ian's face; it was like his own flesh was being torn, each time Jenny screamed." My arms were around him, stroking the ridged scars on his back. "I can bear pain, myself," he said softly, "but I couldna bear yours. That would take more strength than I have."

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THE WATCH

Jenny recovered rapidly after Margaret's birth, insisting on coming downstairs the day following the delivery. At the combined insistence of Ian and Jamie, she reluctantly refrained from doing any work, only supervising from the sofa in the parlor where she reclined, baby Margaret sleeping in her cradle alongside.

Not content to sit idle, though, within a day or two she had ventured as far as the kitchen, and then the back garden. Sitting on the wall, the well-wrapped baby in a carrying sling, she was keeping me company as I simultaneously pulled dead vines and kept an eye on the enormous cauldron in which the household's laundry was boiled. Mrs. Crook and the maids had already removed the clean wash to be hung and dried; now I was waiting for the water to cool sufficiently to be dumped out.

Small Jamie was "helping" me, yanking out plants with mad abandon and flinging bits of stick in all directions. I called a warning as he ventured too near the cauldron, then raced after him as he ignored me. Luckily the pot had cooled quickly; the water was no more than warm. Warning him to keep back with his mother, I grasped the pot and tilted it away from the iron contrivance that held it and kept it from falling.

I sprang back out of the way as the dirty water cascaded over the lip of the pot, steaming in the chilly air. Young Jamie, squatting beside me on his heels, splatted his hands joyfully in the warm mud, and black droplets flew all over my skirts.

His mother slid down from the wall, yanked him up by the collar and dealt him a smart clout on the backside.

"Have ye no sense, *gille*? Look at ye! There's your shirt'll have to go and be washed again! And look what ye've done to your auntie's skirt, ye wee heathen!"

"It doesn't matter," I protested, seeing the miscreant's lower lip quiver.

"Weel, it matters to me," said Jenny, giving her offspring the benefit of a gimlet eye. "Say 'sorry' to your auntie, laddie, then get ye into the house and have Mrs. Crook give ye a bit of a wash." She patted his bottom, gently this time, and gave him a push in the direction of the house.

We were turning back to the mass of sodden clothes, when the sound of hoofbeats came from the road.

"That'll be Jamie back, I expect," I said, listening. "He's early, though."

Jenny shook her head, peering intently toward the road. "Not his horse."

The horse, when it appeared at the crest of a hill, was not one she knew, to judge from her frown. The man aboard, though, was no stranger. She stiffened beside me, then began to run toward the gate, wrapping both arms around the baby to hold it steady.

"It's Ian!" she called to me.

He was tattered and dusty and bruised about the face, as he slid off his horse. One bruise on his forehead was swollen, with a nasty split that went through the eyebrow. Jenny caught him under the arm as he hit the ground, and it was only then I saw that his wooden leg was gone.

"Jamie," he gasped. "We met the Watch near the mill. Waiting for us. They knew we were coming."

My stomach lurched. "Is he alive?"

He nodded, panting for breath. "Aye. Not wounded, either. They took him to the west, toward Killin."

Jenny's fingers were exploring his face.

"Are ye bad hurt, man?"

He shook his head. “No. They took my horse and my leg; they didna need to kill me to stop me following.”

Jenny glanced at the horizon, where the sun lay just above the trees. Maybe four o’clock, I estimated. Ian followed her gaze and anticipated her question.

“We met them near midday. It took me over two hours to get to a place that had a horse.”

She stood still, for a moment, calculating, then turned to me with decision.

“Claire. Help Ian to the house, will ye, and if he needs aught in the way of doctoring, do it as fast as ye can. I’ll give the babe to Mrs. Crook and fetch the horses.”

She was gone before either of us could protest.

“Does she mean … but she can’t!” I exclaimed. “She can’t mean to leave the baby!”

Ian was leaning heavily on my shoulder as we made our way slowly up the path to the house. He shook his head.

“Maybe not. But I dinna think she means to let the English hang her brother, either.”

* * *

It was growing dark by the time we reached the spot where Jamie and Ian had been ambushed. Jenny slid off her horse and cast about through the bushes like a small terrier, pushing branches out of her way and muttering things under her breath that sounded suspiciously like some of her brother’s better curses.

“East,” she said, finally coming out of the trees, scratched and dirty. She beat dead leaves from her skirt, and took her horse’s reins from my numbed hands. “We canna follow in the dark, but at least I know which way to go, come the dawn.”

We made a simple camp, hobbling the horses and building a small fire. I admired the efficiency with which Jenny had done it, and she smiled.

“I used to make Jamie and Ian show me things, when they were young. How to build fires, and climb trees—even how to skin things. And how to track.” She glanced again in the direction taken by the Watch.

"Dinna worry, Claire." She smiled at me and sat down by the fire. "Twenty horses canna go far through the brush, but two can. The Watch will be taking the road toward Eskadale, by the looks of it. We can cut over the hills and meet them near Midmains."

Her nimble fingers were tugging at the bodice of her gown. I stared in amazement as she spread the folds of cloth and pulled down the top of her underblouse to show her breasts. They were very large, and looked hard, swollen with milk. In my ignorance, I had not thought to wonder what a nursing mother does if deprived of her nursling.

"I canna leave the babe for long," she said in answer to my thoughts, grimacing as she cupped one breast from beneath. "I'll burst." In response to the touch, milk had begun to drip from the engorged nipple, thin and bluish. Pulling a large kerchief from her pocket, Jenny tucked it beneath her breast. There was a small pewter cup on the ground beside her, one she had taken from the saddlebag. Pressing the lip of the cup just below the nipple, she gently stroked the breast between two fingers, squeezing gently toward the nipple. The milk dripped faster in response, then suddenly the areole around the nipple contracted and the milk spurted out in a tiny jet of surprising force.

"I didn't know it did that!" I blurted, staring in fascination.

Jenny moved the cup to catch the stream, and nodded. "Oh, aye. The babe's sucking starts it, but once the milk lets down, all the child need do is swallow. Oh, that feels better." She closed her eyes briefly in relief.

She emptied the cup onto the ground, remarking, "Shame to waste it, but there isna much to do wi' it, is there?" Switching hands, she placed the cup again and repeated the process with the other breast.

"It's a nuisance," she said, looking up to see me still watching. "Everything to do wi' bairns is a nuisance, almost. Still, ye'd never choose not to have them."

"No," I answered softly. "You wouldn't choose that."

She looked across the fire at me, face kind and concerned.

“It isna your time yet,” she said. “But you’ll have bairns of your own one day.”

I laughed a little shakily. “First we’d better find the father.”

She emptied the second cup and began readjusting her dress.

“Oh, we’ll find them. Tomorrow. We have to, for I canna stay away from wee Maggie much longer than that.”

“And once we’ve found them?” I asked. “What then?”

She shrugged and reached for the blanket rolls.

“That depends on Jamie. And on how much he’s made them hurt him.”

Jenny was right; we did find the Watch the next day. We left our campsite before full day, pausing only long enough for her to express more milk. She seemed to be able to find trails where none existed, and I followed her without question into a heavily wooded area. Quick travel was impossible through the brushy undergrowth, but she assured me that we were taking a much more direct route than the one the Watch would have to follow, bound as they were to roads by the size of their group.

We came on them near noon. I heard the jingle of harness and the casual voices I had heard once before, and put out a hand to stop Jenny, who was following me for the moment.

“There’s a ford in the stream below,” she whispered to me. “It sounds as though they’ve stopped there to water the horses.” Sliding down, she took both sets of reins and tethered our own horses, then, beckoning to me to follow, she slid into the undergrowth like a snake.

From the vantage point to which she led me, on a small ledge overlooking the ford, we could see almost all of the men of the Watch, mostly dismounted and talking in casual groups, some sitting on the ground eating, some leading the horses in groups of two and three to the water. What we couldn’t see was Jamie.

“Do you suppose they’ve killed him?” I whispered in panic. I had counted every man twice, to be sure I had missed no one. There were twenty men and twenty-six horses; all in plain view, so far as I could see. But no hint of a prisoner, and no telltale gleam of sun on red hair.

“I doubt it,” Jenny answered. “But there’s only one way to find out.” She began to squirm backward from the ledge.

“What’s that?”

“Ask.”

The road narrowed as it left the ford, becoming little more than a dusty trail through dense stands of pine and alder on either side. The trail was not wide enough for the Watch to ride two abreast; each man would have to pass down it in single file.

As the last man in the line approached a bend in the trail, Jenny Murray stepped suddenly out in the road ahead of him. His horse shied, and the man struggled to rein it in, cursing. As he opened his mouth to demand indignantly what she meant by this behavior, I stepped out of the bush behind, and whacked him solidly behind the ear with a fallen branch.

Taken completely by surprise, he lost his balance as the horse shied again, and fell off into the roadway. He wasn’t stunned; the blow had only knocked him over. Jenny remedied this deficiency with the assistance of a good-sized rock.

She grabbed the horse’s reins and gestured violently to me.

“Come on!” she whispered. “Get him off the road before they notice he’s gone.”

So it was that when Robert MacDonald of the Glen Elrive Watch recovered consciousness, it was to find himself securely tied to a tree, looking down the barrel of a pistol held by the steely-eyed sister of his erstwhile prisoner.

“What have ye done wi’ Jamie Fraser?” she demanded.

MacDonald shook his head dazedly, obviously thinking her a figment of his imagination. An attempt to move put paid to this notion, and after an allowance for the statutory amount of cursing and threatening, he at last reconciled himself to the idea that the only way to get loose was to tell us what we wanted to know.

“He’s dead,” MacDonald said sullenly. Then, as Jenny’s finger tightened ominously on the trigger, he added in sudden panic, “It wasna me! It was his own fault!”

Jamie, he said, had been mounted double, arms bound with a leather strap, behind one of the Watch, riding between two other men. He had seemed docile enough, and they had taken no particular precautions when fording the river six miles from the mill.

“Damn fool threw himself off the horse and into the deep water,” said MacDonald, shrugging as well as he could with his hands tied behind him. “We fired at him. Must have hit him, for he didna come up again. But the stream’s swift just below the ford, and it’s deep. We searched a bit, but no body. Must ha’ been carried downstream. Now, for God’s sake, ladies, will ye no untie me!”

After repeated threats from Jenny had elicited no further details or changes in his story, we decided to accept it as true. Declining to free MacDonald altogether, Jenny did at least loosen his bonds, so that given time, he might struggle out of them. Then we ran.

“Do you think he’s dead?” I puffed, as we reached the tethered horse.

“I don’t. Jamie swims like a fish, and I’ve seen him hold his breath for three minutes at a time. Come on. We’re going to search the river bank.”

We cast up and down the banks of the river, stumbling on rocks, splashing in the shallows, scratching our hands and faces on the willows that trawled their branches in the pools.

At last Jenny gave a triumphant shout, and I splashed my way across, balancing precariously on the mossy rocks that lined the bottom of the burn, shallow at this spot.

She was holding a leather strap, still fastened in a circle. A smear of blood discolored one side.

“Wiggled out of it here,” she said, bending the circlet between her hands. She looked back in the direction we had come, down that jagged fall of tangled rocks, deep pools and foaming rapids, and shook her head.

“However did ye manage, Jamie?” she said, half to herself.

We found an area of flattened grass, not far from the verge, where he had evidently lain to rest. I found a small brownish smudge on the bark of an aspen nearby.

"He's hurt," I said.

"Aye, but he's moving," Jenny answered, looking at the ground as she paced back and forth.

"Are you good at tracking?" I asked hopefully.

"I'm no much of a hunter," she replied, setting off with me close behind, "but if I canna follow something the size of Jamie Fraser through dry bracken, then I'm daft as well as blind."

Sure enough, a broad track of crushed brown fern led up the side of the hill and disappeared into a thick clump of heather. Circling around this point turned up no further evidence, nor did calling produce any answer.

"He'll be gone," Jenny said, sitting down on a log and fanning herself. I thought she looked pale, and realized that kidnapping and threatening armed men was no pursuit for a woman who had given birth less than a week before.

"Jenny," I said, "you have to go back. Besides, he might go back to Lallybroch."

She shook her head. "No, that he wouldna. Whatever MacDonald told us, they're no likely to give up so easy, not with a reward at hand. If they havena hunted him down yet, it's because they couldn't. But they'll have sent someone back to keep an eye on the farm, just in case. No, that's the one place he wouldna go." She pulled at the neck of her gown. The day was cold, but she was sweating slightly, and I could see growing dark stains on the bosom of her dress, from leaking milk.

She saw me looking and nodded. "Aye, I'll have to go back soon. Mrs. Crook's nursing the lassie wi' goat's milk and sugar water, but she canna do without me much longer, nor me without her. I hate to leave ye alone, though."

I didn't much care for the thought of having to hunt alone through the Scottish Highlands for a man who might be anywhere, either, but I put a bold face on it.

"I'll manage," I said. "It could be worse. At least he's alive."

"True." She glanced at the sun, low over the horizon. "I'll stay wi' ye through the night, at least."

Huddled around the fire at night, we didn't talk much. Jenny was preoccupied with thoughts of her abandoned child, me with thoughts of just how I was to proceed on my own, alone with no real knowledge of geography or Gaelic.

Suddenly Jenny's head snapped up, listening. I sat up and listened myself, but heard nothing. I peered into the dark woods in the direction Jenny was looking, but saw no gleaming eyes in the depths, thank God.

When I turned back to the fire, Murtagh was sitting on the other side, calmly warming his hands at the blaze. Jenny snapped round at my exclamation, and uttered a short laugh of surprise.

"I could ha' cut both your throats before ye ever looked in the right direction," the little man observed.

"Oh, could ye then?" Jenny was sitting with her knees drawn up, hands clasped near her ankles. With a lightning dart, her hand went under her skirt and the blade of a *sgian dhu* flashed in the firelight.

"None sae bad," Murtagh agreed, nodding sagely. "Is the wee Sassenach that good?"

"No," said Jenny, restoring her blade to her stocking. "So it's good you'll be with her. Ian sent for ye, I expect?"

The little man nodded. "Aye. Did ye find the Watch yet?"

We told him of our progress to date. At the news that Jamie had escaped, I could have sworn that a muscle twitched near the corner of his mouth, but it would have been stretching matters to call it a smile.

At length, Jenny rose, folding her blanket.

"Where are you going?" I asked in surprise.

"Home." She nodded at Murtagh. "He'll be wi' ye now; you don't need me, and there's others that do."

Murtagh looked up at the sky. The waning moon was faintly visible behind a haze of cloud, and a soft spatter of rain whispered in the pine boughs above us.

"The morning will do. The wind's risin', and no one will move far tonight."

Jenny shook her head and went on tucking her hair beneath her kerchief. "I know my way. And if none will move tonight, there's none will hinder me on the road, no?”

Murtagh sighed impatiently. “You’re stubborn as your ox of a brother, beggin’ your pardon. Little reason to hurry back, so far as I can see—I doubt your good man will ha’ taken a doxy to his bed in the time ye’ve been gone.”

“You see as far as the end o’ your nose, *duine,* and that’s short enough,” Jenny answered sharply. “And if ye’ve lived so long without knowing better than to stand between a nursing mother and a hungry child, you’ve not sense enough to hunt hogs, let alone find a man in the heather.”

Murtagh raised his hands in surrender. “Oh, aye, ye’ll take your own way. I didna ken I was tryin’ to talk sense to a wild sow. Get a tush through the leg for my trouble, I expect.”

Jenny laughed unexpectedly, dimpling. “I expect ye might at that, ye auld rogue.” She bent and heaved the heavy saddle up on her knee. “See that ye take care with my good-sister, then, and send word when ye’ve found Jamie.”

As she turned to saddle the horse, Murtagh added, “By the bye, ye’ll reckon to find a new kitchen maid when ye reach home.”

She paused and eyed him, then slowly set the saddle on the ground. “And who might that be?” she asked.

“The Widow MacNab,” he replied, with deliberation.

She was still for a moment, nothing moving but the kerchief and cloak that stirred in the rising wind.

“How?” she asked at last.

Murtagh bent to pick up the saddle. He heaved it up and secured the girth with what seemed like one effortless motion.

“Fire,” he said, giving a final tug to the stirrup leather. “Watch your way as ye pass the high field; the ashes will still be warm.”

He cupped his hands to give her a foot up, but she shook her head and took the reins instead, beckoning to me.

“Walk wi’ me to the top of the hill, Claire, if ye will.”

The air was cold and heavy, away from the fire. My skirts were damp from sitting on the ground, and clung to my legs as I walked. Jenny’s head was bent against the wind, but I could see her profile, lips pale and set with chill.

"It was MacNab that gave Jamie to the Watch?" I asked at last. She nodded slowly.

"Aye. Ian will have found out, or one of the other men; it doesna matter which."

It was late November, well past Guy Fawkes Day, but I had a sudden vision of a bonfire, flames leaping up timbered walls and sprouting in the thatch like the tongues of the Holy Ghost, while the fire within roared its prayers for the damned. And inside, the guy, an effigy crouched in ash on his own hearthstone, ready to fall into black dust at the next blast of cold wind to sweep through the shell of his home. *There is a fine line sometimes, between justice and brutality*.

I realized Jenny was looking full at me, questioning, and I returned her gaze with a nod. We stood together, in this case at least, on the same side of that grim and arbitrary line.

We paused at the top of the hill, Murtagh a dark speck by the fire below. Jenny rummaged for a moment in the side pocket of her skirt, then pressed a small wash leather bag into my hand.

"The rents from quarter day," she said. "Ye might need it."

I tried to give the money back, insisting that Jamie would not want to take money that was needed for the running of the estate, but she would have none of it. And while Janet Fraser was half her brother's size, she more than matched his stubbornness.

Outclassed, I gave up at last, and tucked the money safely away in the recesses of my own costume. At Jenny's insistence, I took also the small *sgian dhu* she pressed upon me.

"It's Ian's, but he has another," she said. "Put it into your stocking top, and hold it with your garter. Don't leave it off, even when ye sleep."

She paused a moment, as though there were something else she meant to say. Apparently there was.

"Jamie said," she said carefully, "that ye might … tell me things sometimes. And he said that if ye did, I was to do as ye said. Is there … anything ye wish to tell me?"

Jamie and I had discussed the necessity for preparing Lallybroch and its inhabitants against the coming disasters of the Rising. But we had thought then that there was time. Now I had no time, or most a few minutes, in which to give this new sister I held dear enough information to guard Lallybroch against the coming storm.

Being a prophet was a very uncomfortable occupation, I thought, not for the first time. I felt considerable sympathy with Jeremiah and his Lamentations. I also realized exactly why Cassandra was so unpopular. Still, there was no help for it. On the crest of a Scottish hill, the night wind of an autumn storm whipping my hair and skirts like the sheets of a banshee, I turned my face to the shadowed skies and prepared to prophesy.

"Plant potatoes," I said.

Jenny's mouth dropped slightly open, then she firmed her jaw and nodded briskly. "Potatoes. Aye. There's none closer than Edinburgh, but I'll send for them. How many?"

"As many as you can. They're not planted in the Highlands now, but they will be. They're a root crop that will keep for a long time, and the yield is better than wheat. Put as much ground as you can into crops that can be stored. There's going to be a famine, a bad one, in two years. If there's land or property that's not productive now, sell it, for gold. There's going to be war, and slaughter. Men will be hunted, here and everywhere through the Highlands." I thought for a moment. "Is there a priest-hole in the house?"

"No, it was built well after the Protector's time."

"Make one then, or some safe place to hide. I hope Jamie won't need it," I swallowed hard at the thought, "but someone may."

"All right. Is that all?" Her face was serious and intent in the half-light. I blessed Jamie for his forethought in warning her, and her for her trust in her brother. She didn't ask me how, or why, but only took careful note of what I said, and I knew my hasty instructions would be followed.

"That's all. All I can think of just now, anyway." I tried to smile, but the effort seemed unconvincing, even to me.

Hers was better. She touched my cheek briefly in farewell.

"God go wi' ye, Claire. We'll meet again—when ye bring my brother home."

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PART SIX

The Search

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DOUGAL'S STORY

Whatever the disadvantages of civilization, I reflected grimly, the benefits were undeniable. Take telephones, for example. For that matter, take newspapers, which were popular in such metropolitan centers as Edinburgh or even Perth, but completely unknown in the wilderness of the Scottish Highlands.

With no such methods of mass communication, news spread from one person to the next at the speed of a man's stride. People generally found out what they needed to know, but with a delay of several weeks. Consequently, faced with the problem of finding exactly where Jamie was, there was little to rely on except the possibility of someone encountering him and sending word back to Lallybroch. That was a process that might take weeks. And the winter would set in shortly, making travel to Beauly impossible. I sat feeding sticks to the fire, pondering the possibilities.

Which way would Jamie have gone from the point of his escape? Not back to Lallybroch, to be sure, and almost certainly not north, into the MacKenzie lands. South to the border lands, where he might meet again with Hugh Munro or some of his earlier rough companions? No, most likely northeast, toward Beauly. But if I could figure that out, so could the men of the Watch.

Murtagh returned from his gathering, dumping an armload of sticks on the ground. He sat down crosslegged on a fold of his plaid, wrapping the rest around himself to keep out the chill. He cast an eye toward the sky, where the moon glowed behind racing clouds.

"It wilna snow just yet," he said, frowning. "Another week, maybe two. We might reach Beauly before then." Well, nice to have confirmation of my deductions, I supposed.

"You think he'll be there?"

The little clansman shrugged, hunching his plaid higher around his shoulders.

"No tellin'. The travel will no be as easy for him, lyin' hid during the day, and staying off the roads. And he hasna got a horse." He scratched his stubbled chin thoughtfully. "We canna find him; we'd best let him find us."

"How? Send up flares?" I suggested sarcastically. One thing about Murtagh; no matter what incongruous thing I said, he could be counted on to behave as though I hadn't spoken.

"I've brought your wee packet of medicines," he said, nodding toward the saddlebags on the ground. "And you've enough of a reputation near Lallybroch; you'll be known as a healer through most of the countryside near." He nodded to himself. "Aye, that'll do well enough." And without further explanations, he lay down, rolled up in his plaid and went calmly to sleep, ignoring the wind in the trees, the light patter of rain, and me.

I found out soon enough what he meant. Traveling openly—and slowly—along the main roads, we stopped at every croft and village and hamlet we came to. There he would make a quick survey of the local populace, round up anyone suffering from illness or injury, and bring them to me for treatment. Physicians being few and far between in these parts, there was always someone ailing to attend to.

While I was occupied with my tonics and salves, he would chat idly with the friends and relatives of the afflicted, taking care to describe the path of our journey toward Beauly. If by chance there were no patients to be seen in a place, we would pause nonetheless for the night, seeking shelter at a cottage or tavern. In these places, Murtagh would sing to entertain our hosts and earn our supper, stubbornly insisting that I preserve all the money I had with me, in case it should be needed when we found Jamie.

Not naturally inclined toward conversation, he taught me some of his songs, to pass the time as we plodded on from place to place.

"Ye've a decent voice," he observed, one day, after a moderately successful attempt at "The Dowie Dens of Yarrow." "Not well-trained, but strong and true enough. Try it once more and ye'll sing it wi' me tonight. There's a wee tavern at Limraigh."

"Do you really think this will work?" I asked. "What we're doing, I mean?"

He shifted about in the saddle before answering. No natural horseman, he always looked like a monkey trained to ride a horse, but still managed to dismount fresh as a daisy at day's end, while I could barely manage to hobble my horse before staggering off to collapse.

"Oh, aye," he said, at last. "Sooner or later. You're seein' more sick folk these days, no?"

This was true, and I admitted as much.

"Well, then," he said, proving his point, "that means word o' your skill is spreading. And that's what we want. But we could maybe do better. That's why you'll sing tonight. And perhaps …" He hesitated, as though reluctant to suggest something.

"Perhaps what?"

"Know anything about fortune-telling, do ye?" he asked warily. I understood the reason for his hesitancy; he had seen the frenzy of the witch-hunt at Cranesmuir.

I smiled. "A bit. You want me to try it?"

"Aye. The more we can offer, the more folk will come to see us—and go back to tell others. And word will spread about us, 'til the lad hears of us. And that's when we'll find him. Game to try, are ye?"

I shrugged. "If it will help, why not?"

I made my debut as singer and fortune-teller that night at Limraigh, with considerable success. I found that Mrs. Graham had been right in what she had told me—it was the faces, not the hands, that gave you the necessary clues.

Our fame spread, little by little, until by the next week, people were running out of their cottages to greet us as we rode into a village, and showering us with pennies and small gifts as we rode away.

"You know, we could really make something of this," I remarked one evening, stowing the night's takings away. "Too bad there's no theater anywhere near—we could do a proper music-hall turn: Magical Murtagh and His Glamorous Assistant, Gladys."

Murtagh treated this remark with his usual taciturn indifference, but it was true; we really did quite well together. Perhaps it was because we were united in our quest, despite our very basic personality differences.

The weather grew increasingly bad, and our pace even slower, but there was as yet no word from Jamie. Outside Belladrum one night, in a driving rain, we met with a band of real Gypsies.

I blinked disbelievingly at the tiny cluster of painted caravans in the clearing near the road. It looked exactly like a camp of the Gypsy bands that came to Hampstead Down every year.

The people looked the same, too; swarthy, cheerful, loud, and welcoming. Hearing the jingle of our harness, a woman's head poked out of the window of one caravan. She looked us over for a moment, then gave a shout, and the ground under the trees was suddenly alive with grinning brown faces.

"Gie me your purse for safekeeping," said Murtagh, unsmiling, watching the young man swaggering toward us with a gay disregard of the rain soaking his colorful shirt. "And dinna turn your back on anyone."

I was cautious, but we were welcomed with expansive motions, and invited to share the Gypsies' dinner. It smelt delicious—some sort of stew—and I eagerly accepted the invitation, ignoring Murtagh's dour speculations as to the basic nature of the beast that had provided the stewmeat.

They spoke little English, and less Gaelic; we conversed largely in gestures, and a sort of bastard tongue that owed its parentage largely to French. It was warm and companionable in the caravan where we ate; men and women and children all ate casually from bowls, sitting wherever they could find space, dipping the succulent stew up with chunks of bread. It was the best food I had had in weeks, and I ate until my sides creaked. I could barely muster breath to sing, but did my best, humming along in the difficult spots, and leaving Murtagh to carry the tunes.

Our performance was greeted with rapturous applause, and the Gypsies reciprocated, a young man singing some sort of wailing lament to the accompaniment of an ancient fiddle. His performance was punctuated by the crashing of a tambourine, wielded with some gravity by a little girl of about eight.

While Murtagh had been circumspect in his inquiries in the villages and crofts we visited, with the Gypsies he was entirely open. To my surprise, he told them bluntly who we sought; a big man, with hair like fire, and eyes like the summer skies. The Gypsies exchanged glances up and down the aisle of the caravan, but there was a unanimous shaking of regretful heads. No, they had not seen him. But … and here the leader, the purple-shirted young man who had welcomed us, pantomimed the sending of a messenger, should they happen across the man we sought.

I bowed, smiling, and Murtagh in turn pantomimed the handing across of money for information received. This bit of business was greeted with smiles, but also with gazes of speculation. I was glad when Murtagh declared that we could not stay the night, but must be on our way, thank ye just the same. He shook out a few coins from his sporran, taking care to exhibit the fact that it held only a small handful of coppers. Distributing these by way of thanks for the supper, we made our exit, followed by voluble protestations of farewell, gratitude, and good wishes—at least that's what I assumed they were.

They might actually have been promising to follow us and cut our throats, and Murtagh behaved rather as though this had been the case, leading the horses at a gallop to the crossroads two miles distant, then ducking aside into the vegetation for a substantial detour before reemerging onto the road again.

Murtagh glanced up and down the road, empty in the fading, rain-soaked dusk.

"Do you really think they followed us?" I asked curiously.

“I dinna ken, but since there’s twelve o’ them, and no but the twa o’ us, I thought we’d best act as though they did.” This seemed sound reasoning, and I followed him without question through several more evasive maneuvers, arriving at last in Rossmoor, where we found shelter in a barn.

Snow fell the next day. Only a light fall, enough to dust the ground with a white like the flour on the millhouse floor, but it worried me. I didn’t like to think of Jamie, alone and unsheltered in the heather, braving winter’s storms in nothing but the shirt and plaid he had been wearing at his capture by the Watch.

Two days later, the messenger came.

* * *

The sun was still above the horizon, but it was evening already in the rockwalled glens. The shadows lay so deep under the leafless trees that the path—what there was of one—was nearly invisible. Fearful of losing the messenger in the gathering dark, I walked so closely behind him that once or twice I actually trod on the trailing hem of his cloak. At last, with an impatient grunt, he turned and thrust me ahead of him, steering me through the dusk with a heavy hand on my shoulder.

It felt as though we had been walking for a long time. I had long since lost track of our turnings amid the towering boulders and thick dead undergrowth. I could only hope that Murtagh was somewhere behind, keeping within earshot if not within sight. The man who had come to the tavern to fetch me, a middle-aged Gypsy with no English, had flatly refused to have anyone but me accompany him, pointing emphatically first at Murtagh and then the ground, to indicate that he must stay put.

The night chill came on fast at this time of year, and my heavy cloak was barely enough protection against the sudden gusts of icy wind that met us in the open spaces of the clearings. I was torn between dismay at the thought of Jamie lying through the cold, wet nights of autumn without shelter, and excitement at the thought of seeing him again. A shiver ran up my spine that had nothing to do with the cold.

At last my guide pulled me to a halt, and with a precautionary squeeze of my shoulder, stepped off the path and disappeared. I stood, as patiently as could be managed, hands folded under my arms for warmth. I was sure my guide—or someone—would return; I hadn't paid him, for one thing. Still, the wind rattled through the dead brambles like the passing of a deer's ghost, still in panic-stricken flight from the hunter. And the damp was seeping through the seams of my boots; the otter-fat waterproofing had worn away, and I'd had no chance to reapply it.

My guide reappeared as suddenly as he had left, making me bite my tongue as I stifled a squeak of surprise. With a jerk of his head, he bade me follow him, and pressed aside a screen of dead alders for me to pass.

The cave entrance was narrow. There was a lantern burning on a ledge, silhouetting the tall figure that turned toward the entrance to meet me.

I flung myself forward, realizing even before I touched him that it was not Jamie. Disappointment struck me like a blow in the stomach, and I had to step back and swallow several times to choke back the heavy bile that rose in my throat.

I clenched my hands at my sides, digging my fists into my thighs until I felt calm enough to speak.

"Rather out of your territory, aren't you?" I said, in a voice that surprised me by its coolness.

Dougal MacKenzie had watched my struggle for control, not without some sympathy on his dark face. Now he took my elbow and led me farther into the cave. There were a number of bundles piled against the far side, many more than a single horse could carry. He wasn't alone, then. And whatever he and his men carried, it was something he preferred not to expose to the curious gaze of innkeepers and hostlers.

"Smuggling, I suppose?" I said, with a nod toward the bundle. Then I thought better and answered my own question. "No, not exactly smuggling—goods for Prince Charles, hm?"

He didn't bother to answer me, but sat down on a boulder opposite me, hands on his knees.

"I've news," he said abruptly.

I took a deep breath, bracing myself. News, and not good news, from the expression on his face. I took another breath, swallowed hard, and nodded.

"Tell me."

"He's alive," he said, and the largest of the ice lumps in my stomach dissolved. Dougal cocked his head to one side, watching intently. To see whether I were going to faint? I wondered dimly. It didn't matter; I wasn't.

"He was taken near Kiltorlity, two weeks ago," Dougal said, still watching me. "Not his fault; poor luck. He met six dragoons face-to-face round a turn in the path, and one recognized him."

"Was he hurt?" My voice was still calm, but my hands were beginning to shake. I pressed them flat against my legs to still them.

Dougal shook his head. "Not as I heard." He paused a moment. "He's in Wentworth Prison," he said reluctantly.

"Wentworth," I repeated mechanically. Wentworth Prison. Originally one of the mighty Border fortresses, it had been built sometime in the late sixteenth century, and added to at intervals over the next hundred and fifty years. The sprawling pile of rock now covered nearly two acres of ground, sealed behind three-foot walls of weathered granite. But even granite walls have gates, I thought. I looked up to ask a question, and saw the reluctance still stamped on Dougal's features.

"What else?" I demanded. The hazel eyes met mine, unflinching.

"He stood his trial three days ago," Dougal said. "And was condemned to hang."

The ice lump was back, with company. I closed my eyes.

"How long?" I asked. My voice seemed rather far-off to my own ears and I opened my eyes again, blinking to refocus them in the flickering lantern light. Dougal was shaking his head.

"I dinna ken. Not long, though."

My breath was coming a little easier now, and I was able to unclench my fists.

"We'd better hurry, then," I said, still calmly. "How many men are with you?"

Instead of answering, Dougal rose and came over to me. Reaching down, he took my hands and pulled me to my feet. The look of sympathy was back, and a deep grief lurking in his eyes frightened me more than anything he'd said so far. He shook his head slowly.

"Nay, lass," he said gently. "There's nothing we can do."

Panicked, I tore my hands away from him.

"There is!" I said. "There must be! You said he was still alive!"

"And I said 'Not long'!" he retorted sharply. "The lad's in Wentworth Prison, not the thieves' hole at Cranesmuir! They may hang him today, or tomorrow, or not 'til next week, for all I know o' the matter, but there is no way on earth that ten men can force a way into Wentworth Prison!"

"Oh, no?" I was trembling again, but with rage this time. "You don't know that—you don't know what might be done! You're just not willing to risk your skin, or your miserable … profit!" I flung an arm accusingly at the piled bundles.

Dougal grappled with me, seizing my flailing arms. I hammered his chest in a frenzy of grief and rage. He ignored the blows and put his arms around me, pulling me tight against him and holding me until I ceased struggling.

"Claire." It was the first time he had ever used my first name, and it frightened me still further.

"Claire," he said again, loosening his grip so that I could look up at him, "do ye not think I'd do all I could to free the lad, did I think there was the slightest chance? Damn it, he's my own foster-son! But there is no chance—none!" He shook me slightly, to emphasize his words.

"Jamie wouldna have me throw away good men's lives in a vain venture. Ye know that as well as I do."

I could keep back the tears no longer. They burned down my icy cheeks as I pushed against him, seeking to free myself. He held me tighter, though, trying to force my head against his shoulder.

"Claire, my dear," he said, voice gentler. "My heart's sore for the lad—and for you. D'ye come away wi' me. I'll take ye safe. To my own house," he added hastily, feeling me stiffen. "Not to Leoch."

"To your house?" I said slowly. A horrible suspicion was beginning to form in my mind.

"Aye," he said. "Ye dinna think I'd take ye back to Cranesmuir, surely?" He smiled briefly before the stern features relaxed back into seriousness. "Nay. I'll take ye to Beannachd. You'll be safe there."

"Safe?" I said, "or helpless?" His arms dropped away at the tone of my voice.

"What d'ye mean?" The pleasant voice was suddenly cold.

I felt rather cold myself, and pulled my cloak together as I moved away from him.

"You kept Jamie away from his home by telling him his sister had borne a child to Randall," I said, "so that you and that precious brother of yours would have a chance to lure him into your camp. But now the English have him, you've lost any chance of controlling the property through Jamie." I backed up another step, swallowing.

"You were party to your sister's marriage contract. It was by your insistence—yours and Colum's—that Broch Tuarach might be held by a woman. You think that if Jamie dies, Broch Tuarach will belong to me—or to you, if you can seduce or force me into marrying you."

"What?!" His voice was incredulous. "Ye think … ye think this is all some plot? Saint Agnes! Do ye think I'm lying to ye?"

I shook my head, keeping my distance. I didn't trust him an inch.

"No, I believe you. If Jamie weren't in prison, you'd never dare to tell me he was. It's too easy to check that. Nor do I think you betrayed him to the English—not even you could do something like that to your own blood. Besides, if you had, and word of it ever reached your men, they'd turn on you in a second. They'd tolerate a lot in you, but not treachery against your own kinsman." As I spoke I was reminded of something.

"Was it you who attacked Jamie near the Border last year?"

The heavy brows rose with surprise.

"Me? No! I found the lad near death, and saved him! Does that sound as though I meant him harm?"

Under cover of my cloak, I ran my hand down my thigh, feeling for the comforting bulk of my dagger.

"If it wasn't you, who was it?"

"I dinna ken." The handsome face was wary, but not hiding anything. " 'Twas one of three men—broken men, outlaws—that hunted wi' Jamie then. All of them accused each other, and there was no way of findin' out the truth o' the matter, not then." He shrugged, the traveling cloak falling back from one broad shoulder.

"It doesna matter much now; twa of the men are dead, and the third in prison. Over another matter, but it makes little difference, do ye think?"

"No, I don't suppose so." It was in a way a relief to find that he wasn't a murderer, whatever else he might be. He had no reason to lie to me now; so far as he knew, I was completely helpless. Alone, he could compel me to do whatever he wished. Or at least he likely thought so. I took a grip on the handle of my dirk.

The light was poor in the cave, but I was watching carefully, and I could see indecision flicker momentarily across his face as he chose his next move. He stepped toward me, hand out, but stopped when he saw me flinch away.

"Claire. My sweet Claire." The voice was soft now, and he ran an insinuating hand lightly down my arm. So he had decided to try seduction rather than compulsion.

"I know why ye talk so cold to me, and why ye think ill of me. You know that I burn for ye, Claire. And it's true—I've wanted ye since the night of the Gathering, when I kissed your sweet lips." He had two fingers resting lightly on my shoulder, inching toward my neck. "If I'd been a free man when Randall threatened ye, I'd ha' wed ye myself on the spot, and sent the man to the devil for ye." He was moving his body gradually closer, crowding me against the stone wall of the cavern. His fingertips moved to my throat, tracing the line of my cloak-fastening.

He must have seen my face then, for he stopped his advance, though he left his hand where it was, resting lightly above the rapid pulse that beat in my throat.

"Even so," he said, "even feeling as I do—for I'll hide it from ye no longer—even so, ye couldna imagine I'd abandon Jamie if there were any hope of saving him? Jamie Fraser is the closest thing I've got to a son!"

"Not quite," I said. "There's your real son. Or perhaps two, by now?" The fingers on my throat increased their pressure, just for a second, then dropped away.

"What d'ye mean?" And this time all pretense, all games, were dispensed with. The hazel eyes were intent and the full lips a grim line in the russet beard. He was very large, and very close to me. But I had gone too far already for caution.

"It means I know who Hamish's father really is," I said. He had been half-expecting it, and had his face well under control, but the last month spent telling fortunes had not been in vain. I saw the tiny flicker of shock that widened his eyes and the sudden panic, swiftly quelled, that tightened the corners of his mouth.

Bull's-eye. In spite of the danger, I knew a moment's fierce exultation. I had been right, then, and the knowledge might just possibly be the weapon I needed.

"Do ye, then?" he said softly.

"Yes," I said, "and I imagine Colum knows as well."

That stopped him for a moment. The hazel eyes narrowed, and I wondered for an instant whether he was armed.

"He thought it was Jamie for a time, I think," I said, staring directly into his eyes. "Because of the rumors. You must have started those, feeding them to Geillis Duncan. Why? Because Colum got suspicious of Jamie and started to question Letitia? She couldn't hold out for long against him. Or was it that Geilie thought you were Letitia's lover, and you told her it was Jamie to quiet her suspicions? She's a jealous woman, but she can't have any reason to protect you now."

Dougal smiled cruelly. The ice never left his eyes.

"No, she can't," he agreed, still speaking softly. "The witch is dead."

"Dead!" The shock must have shown as plainly on my face as in my voice. His smile broadened.

"Oh, aye," he said. "Burnt. Stuck feet first in a barrel of pitch and heaped about with dry peats. Bound to a stake and lit like a torch. Sent to the devil in a pillar of flame, under the branches of a rowan tree."

I thought at first this merciless recitation of detail was meant to impress me, but I was wrong. I shifted to one side, and as the light shone fresh on his face, I could see the lines of grief etched around his eyes. It wasn't a catalog of horror, then, but a lashing of himself. I felt no pity for him, under the circumstances.

"So you were fond of her," I said coldly. "Much good it did her. Or the child. What did you do with that?"

He shrugged. "Saw it placed in a good home. A son, and a healthy babe, for all its mother was a witch and an adulteress."

"And its father an adulterer and a betrayer," I snapped. "Your wife, your mistress, your nephew, your brother—is there anyone you haven't betrayed and deceived? You … you …" I choked on the words, quite sick with loathing. "I don't know why I'm surprised," I said, trying to speak calmly. "If you've no loyalty to your king, I suppose there's no reason to think you'd feel it for your nephew or your brother, either."

His head snapped round and he glared at me. He raised his thick dark brows, the same shape as Colum's, as Jamie's, as Hamish's. The deepset eyes, the broad cheekbones, the beautifully shaped skull. Old Jacob MacKenzie's legacy was a strong one.

A big hand clamped hard on my shoulder.

"My brother? You think I'd betray my brother?" For some reason, that had stung him; his face was dark with anger.

"You've just admitted that you did!" And then I realized.

"The both of you," I said slowly. "You did it together, you and Colum. Together, as you've always done things." I pulled his hand off my shoulder and flung it back at him.

"Colum couldn't be chieftain, unless you would go to war for him. He couldn't hold the clan together, without you to travel for him, to collect the rents and settle the claims. He couldn't ride, he couldn't travel. And he couldn't father a son, to pass the chieftainship on to. And you had no son by Maura. You swore to be his arms and legs"—

I was beginning to feel a little hysterical by this time—“why shouldn’t you be his cock, as well?”

Dougal had lost his anger; he stood watching me speculatively for a moment. Deciding that I was going nowhere, he sat down on one of the bales of goods and waited for me to finish.

“So you did it with Colum’s knowledge. Was Letitia willing?” Knowing by now just what sort of ruthlessness they possessed, I wouldn’t put it past the brothers MacKenzie to have forced her.

Dougal nodded. His anger had evaporated.

“Oh, aye, willing enough. She didna fancy me particularly, but she wanted a child—enough to take me to her bed for the three months it took to start Hamish. A boring damn job it was too,” Dougal added reflectively, scraping a bit of mud from his boot heel. “I’d as soon swive a warm bowl of milk pudding.”

“And did you tell Colum that?” I asked. Hearing the edge in my voice, he looked up. He regarded me levelly for a moment, then a faint smile lightened his face.

“No,” he said quietly. “No, I didna tell him that.” He looked down at his hands, turning them over as though looking for some secret hidden in the lines of his palms.

“I told him,” he said softly, not looking at me, “that she was tender and sweet as a ripe peach, and all that a man could want in a woman.”

He closed his hands abruptly and looked up at me, that momentary glimpse of Colum’s brother submerged once more in the sardonic eyes of Dougal MacKenzie.

“Tender and sweet is not precisely what I’d say of *you,*” he observed. “But all that a man could want …” The deepset hazel eyes traveled slowly downward over my body, lingering on the roundness of breast and hip that showed through my open cloak. One hand moved unconsciously back and forth, stroking lightly across the muscles of his thigh as he watched me.

“Who knows?” he said, as though to himself. “I might have yet another son—legitimate, this time. True”—he tilted his head appraisingly, looking at my midsection—“it hasna happened yet wi’

Jamie. You may be barren. But I'll take the chance. The property is worth it, at any rate."

He stood suddenly and took a step toward me.

"Who knows?" he said again, very softly. "If I were to plow that pretty brown-haired furrow and seed it deep each day …" The shadows on the cavern wall shifted suddenly as he took another step toward me.

"Well, you took your bloody time about it," I said crossly.

A look of incredulous shock spread across his features before he realized that I was looking beyond him, toward the cave mouth.

"It didna seem mannerly to interrupt," said Murtagh, advancing into the cave behind a loaded pair of flintlock pistols. He held one trained on Dougal, using the other to gesture with.

"Unless ye mean to accept that last proposal here and now, I'd suggest ye leave. And if ye *do* mean to accept it, then *I'll* leave."

"Nobody's leaving yet," I said shortly. "Sit down," I said to Dougal. He was still standing, staring at Murtagh as though at an apparition.

"Where's Rupert?" he demanded, finding his voice.

"Oh, Rupert." Murtagh scratched his chin thoughtfully with the muzzle of one pistol. "He's likely made it to Belladrum by now. Should be back before dawn," he added helpfully, "wi' the keg of rum he thinks ye sent him to fetch. The rest o' your men are still asleep in Quinbrough."

Dougal had the grace to laugh, if a little grudgingly. He sat down again, hands on his knees, and glanced from me to Murtagh and back again. There was a momentary silence.

"Well?" Dougal inquired. "Now what?"

That, I realized, was rather a good question. Surprised at finding Dougal instead of Jamie, shocked by his revelations, and infuriated at his consequent proposals, I had had no time to think of what ought to be done. Luckily, Murtagh was better prepared. Well, after all, *he* hadn't been occupied in fighting off lecherous advances.

"We'll need money," he said promptly. "And men." He cast an eye appraisingly over the bundles stacked against the wall. "Nay," he said thoughtfully. "That'll be for King James. But we'll take what ye've got on your person." The small black eyes swiveled back to Dougal and the muzzle of one pistol gestured gently in the vicinity of his sporran.

One thing to be said for life in the Highlands was that it apparently gave one a certain fatalistic attitude. With a sigh, Dougal reached into the sporran and tossed a small purse at my feet.

"Twenty gold pieces and thirty-odd shillings," he said, lifting one brow in my direction. "Take it and welcome."

Seeing my look of skepticism, he shook his head.

"Nay, I mean it. Think what ye like of me. Jamie's my sister's son, and if ye can free him, then God be wi' ye. But ye can't." His tone was final.

He looked at Murtagh, still holding his pistols steady.

"As to the men, no. If you and the lass mean to commit suicide, I canna stop ye. I'll even offer to bury ye, one on either side of Jamie. But you'll not take my men to hell with ye, pistols or no." He crossed his arms and leaned back against the cavern wall, calmly watching us.

Murtagh's hands didn't waver from his aim. His eyes flickered toward me, though. Did I wish him to shoot?

"I'll make you a bargain," I said.

Dougal raised one brow.

"You're in a bit better position to bargain than I am at present," he said. "What's your offer?"

"Let me talk to your men," I said. "And if they'll come with me of their own accord, then let them. If not, we'll go as we came—and we'll hand back your purse, as well."

One side of his mouth came up in a lopsided smile. He looked me over carefully, as though assessing my persuasiveness and my skills as an orator. Then he sat back, hands on his knees. He nodded once.

"Done," he said.

* * *

In the event, we left the glen of the cave with Dougal's purse and five men, in addition to Murtagh and myself: Rupert, John Whitlow, Willie MacMurtry, and the twin brothers, Rufus and Geordie Coulter. It was Rupert's decision that swayed the others; I could still see—with a feeling of grim satisfaction—the look on Dougal's face when his squat, black-bearded lieutenant eyed me speculatively, then patted the dags at his belt and said, "Aye, lass, why not?"

Wentworth Prison was thirty-five miles away. A half-hour's ride in a fast car over good roads. Two days' hard slog over half-frozen mud by horseback. *Not long*. Dougal's words echoed in my ears, and kept me in my saddle long past the point where I might have dropped from fatigue.

My body was pushed to its limits to keep to the saddle through the long weary miles, but my mind was free to worry. To keep it from thoughts of Jamie, I spent the time remembering my interview in the cave with Dougal.

And the last thing he had said to me. Standing outside the small cave, waiting as Rupert and his companions brought their horses down from a hiding place higher up the glen, Dougal had turned to me abruptly.

"I've a message for ye," he had said. "From the witch."

"From Geilie?" To say I was startled was the least of it.

I couldn't make out his face in the dark, but I saw his head tilt in affirmation.

"I saw her the once," he said softly, "when I came to take the child." Under other circumstances, I might have felt some sympathy for him, parting for the last time from his mistress, who was condemned to the stake, holding the child they had made together, a son whom he could never acknowledge. As it was, my voice was icy.

"What did she say?"

He paused; I wasn't sure if it was merely the disinclination to reveal information, or if he was trying to make sure of his words. Apparently it was the latter, for he spoke carefully.

"She said if ever I saw you again, I was to tell you two things, just as she told them to me. The first was, "I think it is possible, but I do not know." And the second—the second was just numbers. She made me say them over, to be sure I had them right, for I was to tell them to you in a certain order. The numbers were one, nine, six, and seven." The tall figure turned toward me in the dark, inquiring.

“Mean anything to ye?”

“No,” I said, and turned away to my horse. But it did, of course, mean something to me.

“I think it is possible.” There was only one thing she could mean by that. She thought, though she did not know, that it was possible to go back, through the circle of stone, to my proper place. Clearly she hadn’t tried it herself, but had chosen—to her cost—to stay. Likely she had had her own reasons. Dougal, perhaps?

As for the numbers, I thought I knew what those meant, too. She had told them to him separately, for the sake of a secrecy which must have gone bone-deep in her by that time, but they were all part of one number, really. One, nine, six, seven. Nineteen-sixty-seven. The year of *her* disappearance into the past.

I felt a small thrill of curiosity, and deep regret. What a pity that I had not seen the vaccination mark on her arm until it was too late! And yet, had I seen it sooner, would I have gone back to the circle of stone, perhaps with her help, and left Jamie?

Jamie. The thought of him was a leaden weight in my mind, a pendulum swinging slowly at the end of a rope. *Not long.* The road stretched endless and dreary before us, sometimes petering out altogether into frozen marshes or open sheets of water that had once been meadows and moors. In a freezing drizzle that would soon turn to snow, we reached our goal near evening of the second day.

The building loomed up black against the overcast sky. Built in the shape of a gigantic cube, four hundred feet on a side, with a tower on each corner, it could house three hundred prisoners, plus the forty soldiers of the garrison and their commander, the civilian governor and his staff, and the four dozen cooks, orderlies, grooms, and other menials necessary for the running of the establishment. Wentworth Prison.

I looked up at the menacing walls of greenish Argyll granite, two feet thick at the base. Tiny windows pierced the walls here and there. A few were beginning to wink with light. Others, serving what I assumed were the prisoners’ cells, stayed dark. I swallowed. Seeing the massive edifice, with its impenetrable walls, its monumental gate, and its red-coated guards, I began to have doubts.

“What if”—my mouth was dry and I had to stop and lick my lips —“what if we can’t do it?”

Murtagh’s expression was the same as always: grim-mouthed and dour, narrow chin receding into the grimy neck of his shirt. It didn’t alter as he turned to me.

“Then Dougal will bury us wi’ him, one on either side,” he answered. “Come on, there’s work to be done.”

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PART SEVEN

Sanctuary

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35

WENTWORTH PRISON

Sir Fletcher Gordon was a short and portly man, whose striped silk waistcoat fitted him like a second skin. Slope-shouldered and paunch-bellied, he looked rather like a large ham seated in the governor's wheel-backed chair.

The bald head and rich pinkish color of his complexion did little to dispel this impression, though few hams boasted such bright blue eyes. He turned over the sheaf of papers on his desk with a slow, deliberate forefinger.

"Yes, here it is," he said, after an interminable pause to read a page. "Fraser, James. Convicted of murder. Sentenced to hang. Now, where's the Warrant of Execution?" He paused again, shuffling nearsightedly through the papers. I dug my fingers deep into the satin of my reticule, willing my face to remain expressionless.

"Oh, yes. Date of execution, December 23. Yes, we still have him."

I swallowed, relaxing my hold on my bag, torn between exultation and panic. He was still alive, then. For another two days. And he was nearby, somewhere in the same building with me. The knowledge surged through my veins with a rush of adrenaline and my hands trembled.

I sat forward in the visitor's chair, trying to look winsomely appealing.

"May I see him, Sir Fletcher? Just for a moment, in case he … he might wish me to convey a message to his family?"

In the guise of an English friend of the Fraser family, I had found it reasonably easy to gain admittance to Wentworth, and to the office of Sir Fletcher, civilian governor of the prison. It was dangerous to ask to see Jamie; not knowing my cover story, he might well give me away if he saw me suddenly without warning. For that matter, I might give myself away; I was not at all sure that I could maintain my precarious self-control if I saw him. But the next step was clearly to find out where he was; in this huge stone rabbit warren, the chances of finding him without direction were almost nil.

Sir Fletcher frowned, considering. Plainly he considered this request from a mere family acquaintance a nuisance, but he was not an unfeeling man. Finally he shook his head reluctantly.

“No, my dear. No, I’m afraid I really cannot allow that. We are rather crowded at present, and haven’t sufficient facilities to permit private interviews. And the man is presently in”—he consulted his pile of papers again—“in one of the large cells in the west block, with several other condemned felons. It would be extremely perilous for you to visit him there—or at all. The man is a dangerous prisoner, you understand; I see here that we have been keeping him in chains since his arrival.”

I gripped my bag again; this time to keep from striking him.

He shook his head again, plump chest rising and falling with his labored breathing. “No, if you were an immediate member of his family, perhaps …” He looked up, blinking. I clamped my jaw tightly, determined to give nothing away. Surely a slight show of agitation was reasonable, under the circumstances.

“But perhaps, my dear …” He seemed struck by sudden inspiration. He got ponderously to his feet and went to an inner door, where a uniformed soldier stood on guard. He murmured to the man, who nodded once and vanished.

Sir Fletcher came back to his desk, pausing on the way to retrieve a decanter and glasses from the top of a cabinet. I accepted his offer of claret; I needed it.

We were both halfway through the second glass by the time the guard returned. He marched in without invitation, placed a wooden box on the desk at Sir Fletcher’s elbow, and turned to march out again. I caught his eye lingering on me and modestly lowered my own gaze. I was wearing a gown borrowed from a lady of Rupert's acquaintance in the nearby town, and from the scent that saturated the dress and its matching reticule, I had a reasonably good idea just what this particular lady's profession was. I hoped the guard didn't recognize the gown.

Draining his cup, Sir Fletcher set it down and pulled the box toward him. It was a plain, square box of unfinished wood, with a sliding lid. There were letters chalked on the lid. I could read them, even upside down. FRAYSER, they read.

Sir Fletcher slid back the lid, peered inside for a moment, then closed the box and pushed it toward me.

"The prisoner's personal effects," he explained. "Customarily, we send them to whomever the prisoner designates as next of kin, after execution. This man, though"—he shook his head—"has refused altogether to say anything about his family. Some estrangement, no doubt. Not unusual, of course, but regrettable under the circumstances. I hesitate to make the request, Mrs. Beauchamp, but I thought that perhaps, since you are acquainted with the family, you would consider taking it upon yourself to convey his effects to the appropriate person?"

I didn't trust myself to speak, but nodded and buried my nose in my cup of claret.

Sir Fletcher seemed relieved, whether at disposing of the box, or at the thought of my imminent departure. He sat back, wheezing slightly, and smiled expansively at me.

"That is very kind of you, Mrs. Beauchamp. I know such a thing cannot but be a painful duty to a young woman of feeling, and I am most sensible of your kindness in undertaking it, I do assure you."

"N-not at all," I stammered. I managed to stand up, and to gather up the box. It measured about eight inches by six, and was four or five inches deep. A small, light box, to hold the remains of a man's life.

I knew the things it held. Three fishing lines, neatly coiled; a cork stuck with fishhooks; a flint and steel; a small piece of broken glass, edges blunt with wear; various small stones that looked interesting or had a good feel between the fingers; a dried mole's foot, carried as a charm against rheumatism. A Bible—or perhaps they had let him keep that? I hoped so. A ruby ring, if it hadn't been stolen. And a small wooden snake, carved of cherry wood, with the name SAWNY scratched on its underside.

I paused at the door, gripping the frame with my fingers to steady myself.

Sir Fletcher, following courteously to see me out, was at my side in a moment.

"Mrs. Beauchamp! Are you feeling faint, my dear? Guard, a chair!"

I could feel the prickles of a cold sweat breaking out along the sides of my face, but I managed to smile and wave away the proffered chair. I wanted more than anything to get out of there—I needed fresh air, in large quantities. And I needed to be alone to cry.

"No, I'm quite all right," I said, trying to sound convincing. "It's only … a bit close in here, perhaps. No, I shall be perfectly all right. My groom is waiting outside, in any case."

Forcing myself to stand up straight and smile, I had a thought. It might not help, but it couldn't hurt.

"Oh, Sir Fletcher …"

Still worried by my appearance, he was all gallantry and attention.

"Yes, my dear?"

"It occurred to me.… How sad for a young man in this situation to be estranged from his family. I thought perhaps … if he wished to write to them—a letter of reconciliation, perhaps? I would be pleased to deliver it to—to his mother."

"You are thoughtfulness itself, my dear." Sir Fletcher was jovial, now that it seemed I was not going to collapse on his carpet after all. "Of course. I will inquire. Where are you staying, my dear? If there is a letter, I shall have it sent to you."

"Well," I was doing better with the smile, though it felt pasted on my face. "That is rather uncertain at the moment. I have several relatives and close acquaintances in the town, with whom I fear I shall be obliged to stay in turn, in order to avoid offending anyone, you see." I managed a small laugh.

"So if it does not disturb you too much, perhaps my groom could call to inquire for the letter?"

"Of course, of course. That will do excellently, my dear. Excellently!"

And with a quick glance back at his decanter, he took my arm to escort me to the gate.

* * *

"Better, lassie?" Rupert pushed back the curtain of my hair to peer at my face. "Ye look like an ill-cured pork belly. Here, better have a bit more."

I shook my head at the proffered whisky flask and sat up, wiping the damp rag he had brought across my face.

"No, I'm all right now." Escorted by Murtagh, who was disguised as my groom, I had barely made it out of sight of the prison before sliding off my horse and being sick in the snow. There I remained, weeping, with Jamie's box clutched to my bosom, until Murtagh had gathered me up bodily, forced me to mount, and led me to the small inn in Wentworth town where Rupert had found lodgings. We were in an upper room, from which the bulk of the prison was barely visible in the gathering dusk.

"Is the lad dead then?" Rupert's broad face, half-obscured by his beard, was grave and kind, lacking any of its usual clowning.

I shook my head and took a deep breath. "Not yet."

After hearing my story, Rupert paced slowly around the room, pushing his lips in and out as he thought. Murtagh sat still, as usual, no sign of agitation on his features. He would have made a wonderful poker player, I thought.

Rupert returned, sinking down on the bed beside me with a sigh.

"Weel, he's alive still, and that's the most important thing. Damned if I see what to do next, though. We've no way to get into the place."

"Aye, we have," Murtagh said, suddenly. "Thanks to the wee lassie's thought about the letter."

"Mmmphm. One man, though. And only so far as the governor's office. But aye, it's a start." Rupert drew his dirk and idly scratched his thick beard with the point. "It's a damn big place to search."

"I know where he is," I said, feeling better with the planning, and the knowledge that my companions weren't giving up, no matter how hopeless our enterprise seemed. "At least I know which wing he's in."

"Do ye, then? Hmm." He replaced the dirk and resumed his pacing, stopping to demand, "How much money have ye, lass?"

I fumbled in the pocket of my gown. I had Dougal's purse, the money Jenny had forced me to take, and my string of pearls. Rupert rejected the pearls, but took the purse, pouring a stream of coins into the palm of one capacious hand.

"That'll do," he said, jingling them experimentally. He cocked an eye at the Coulter twins. "You twa laddies and Willie—come wi' me. John and Murtagh can stay here wi' the lassie."

"Where are you going?" I asked.

He poured the coins into his sporran, keeping back one, which he tossed meditatively in the air.

"Och," he said vaguely. "Happen there's another inn, the other side of the town. The guards from the prison go there when they're off duty, for it's closer, and the drink's a penny cheaper." He flipped the coin with his thumb, and turning his hand, caught it between two knuckles.

I watched it, with a growing idea of what he intended.

"Is that so?" I said. "I wouldn't suppose they play cards there, too, would you?"

"I wouldna ken, lassie, wouldna ken," he answered. He tossed the coin once more and clapped his hands together, trapping it, then spread his hands apart, to show nothing but thin air. He smiled, teeth white in the black beard.

"But we might go and see, no?" He snapped his fingers, and the coin appeared once more between them.

* * *

Shortly past one o'clock on the following afternoon, I passed again beneath the spiked portcullis that had guarded the gate of

Wentworth since its construction in the late sixteenth century. It had lost very little of its forbidding aspect in the succeeding two hundred years, and I touched the dagger in my pocket for courage.

Sir Fletcher should now be well dug in at his midday repast, according to the information Rupert and his assistant spies had extracted from the prison guards during their foray the evening before. They had staggered in, red-eyed and reeking of ale, just before dawn. All Rupert would say in response to my questions was "Och, lassie, all it takes to win is luck. It takes *skill* to lose!" He curled up in the corner then and went soundly to sleep, leaving me to pace the floor in frustration, as I had been doing all night.

He woke an hour later, though, clear-eyed and clear-headed, and laid out the rudiments of the plan I was about to put into execution.

"Sir Fletcher doesna allow anyone or anything to disturb his meals," he said. "Anyone wantin' him then must just go on wantin' until he's done wi' his food and drink. And after the midday meal, it's his habit to retire to his quarters for a wee sleep."

Murtagh, in the character of my groom, had arrived a quarter of an hour previously, and been admitted without difficulty. Presumably, he would be shown to Sir Fletcher's office and asked to wait. While there, he was to search the office, first for a plan of the west wing, and then, on the off-chance, for keys that might open the cells.

I hung back a bit, glancing at the sky to judge the time. If I arrived before he had sat down, I might be invited to join Sir Fletcher for luncheon, which would be highly inconvenient. But Rupert's card-playing acquaintances among the guards had assured him that the governor's habits were invariable; the bell for dinner was rung promptly at one, and the soup served five minutes later.

The guard on duty at the entrance was the same as the day before. He looked surprised, but greeted me courteously.

"So vexing," I said, "I had meant my groom to bring a small present for Sir Fletcher, as some return for his kindness to me yesterday. But I found that the silly man had ridden off without it, and so I was obliged to follow with it myself, hoping to catch him up. Has he arrived already?" I displayed the small package I carried and smiled, thinking that it would help if I had dimples. Since I hadn't, I settled for a brilliant display of teeth.

It seemed to be sufficient. I was admitted and led through the corridors of the prison toward the governor's office. Though this part of the castle was decently furnished, there was little mistaking the place for anything other than a prison. There was a smell about the place, which I imagined as the smell of misery and fear, though I supposed it was no more than the niff of ancient squalor and an absence of drains.

The guard allowed me to precede him down the hall, following discreetly so as not to step on my cloak. And a damn good thing he did, for I rounded the corner toward Sir Fletcher's office a few feet ahead of him, just in time to see Murtagh through the open door, dragging the unconscious form of the office guard behind the enormous desk.

I took one step back and dropped my package onto the stone floor. There was a shattering of glass, and the air was filled with the smothering aroma of peach brandy.

"Oh, dear," I said, "what *have* I done?"

While the guard was calling for a prisoner to clear up the mess, I tactfully murmured something about waiting for Sir Fletcher in his private office, slipped in, and hastily shut the door behind me.

"What the bloody hell have you done?" I snapped at Murtagh. He looked up from his rummaging of the body, unconcerned at my tone.

"Sir Fletcher doesna keep keys in his office," he informed me in a low voice, "but *this* wee laddie has a set." He pulled the huge ring free of the man's coat, careful to keep the keys from jingling.

I dropped to my knees behind him. "Oh, good show!" I said. I cast an eye over the prostrate soldier; still breathing, at least. "What about a plan of the prison?"

He shook his head. "Not that either, but my friend here told me a bit while we waited. The condemned cells are on the same floor as this, in the middle of the west corridor. There're three cells, though, and I couldna ask more than that—he was a bit suspicious as it was."

"It's enough—I hope. All right, give me the keys and get out."

"Me? It's *you* should leave, lassie, and right smart too." He glanced at the door, but there was no sound on the other side.

"No, it has to be me," I said, reaching again for the keys. "Listen," I said impatiently. "If they find you wandering round the prison with a bunch of keys, and the guard here laid out like a mackerel, we're both done for, because why didn't I cry out for help?" I snatched the keys and crammed them in my pocket, with some difficulty.

Murtagh was still skeptical, but had risen to his feet.

"And if *you're* caught?" he demanded.

"I swoon," I said crisply. "And when I recover—eventually—I say that I saw you apparently murdering the guard and fled in terror, with no idea where I was going. I lost my way looking for help."

He nodded slowly. "Aye, all right." He moved toward the door, then stopped.

"But why did I—oh." He crossed swiftly to the desk and pulled out one drawer after another, stirring the contents with one hand and tossing items onto the floor with the other.

"Theft," he explained, coming back to the door. He opened it a crack, looking out.

"If it's theft, shouldn't you take something?" I suggested, looking about for something small and portable. I picked up an enameled snuffbox. "This, perhaps?"

He made an impatient gesture to me to put it down, still peering through the crack.

"Nay, lass! If I'm found wi' Sir Fletcher's property, that's a hanging offense. Attempted theft is only flogging or mutilation."

"Oh." I put the snuffbox down hastily and stood behind him, peering over his shoulder. The hall seemed empty.

"I go first," he said. "If I meet anyone, I'll draw 'em off. Wait to the count of thirty, then follow. We'll meet ye in the small wood to the north." He opened the door, then paused and turned back.

"If you're caught, mind ye throw the keys awa'." Before I could speak, he was through the door like an eel and down the corridor, moving silently as a shadow.

It seemed to take an eternity to find the west wing, dodging through the corridors of the old castle, peering around corners and hiding behind columns. I saw only one guard on my way, though, and managed to avoid him by diving back around a corner, pressing myself to the wall with hammering heart until he passed.

Once I found the west wing, though, I had little doubt that I was in the right place. There were three large doors in the corridor, each with a tiny barred window from which I could catch no more than a frustrating glimpse of the room behind it.

“Eenie, meenie, minie, mo,” I muttered to myself, and headed for the center cell. The keys on the ring were unlabeled, but of different sizes. Clearly only one of three big ones would fit the lock before me. Naturally, it was the third one. I took a deep breath as the lock clicked, then wiped my sweating hands on my skirt and shoved the door open.

I sorted frantically through the stinking mass of men in the cell, stepping over outstretched feet and legs, pushing past heavy bodies that moved with maddening sluggishness out of my way. The stir occasioned by my abrupt entrance had spread; those who had been asleep amid the filth on the floor began to sit up, roused by the rippling murmur of astonishment. Some were manacled to the walls; the chains grated and clanked in the half-light as they moved. I grabbed one of the standing men, a brown-bearded clansman in ragged yellow-and-green tartan. The bones of his arm under my hand were frighteningly near the skin; the English wasted little extra food on their prisoners.

“James Fraser! A big, redheaded man! Is he in this cell? Where is he?”

He was already moving toward the door with the others who were not chained, but paused a moment to glance down at me. The prisoners by now had seized the idea, and were pouring through the open door in a shuffling flood, peering and murmuring to each other.

“Who? Fraser? Och, they took him awa’ this mornin’.” The man shrugged, and pushed at my hands, trying to shake me off.

"I took hold of his belt with a grip that halted him in his tracks. "Where did they take him? Who took him?"

"I dinna ken where; was yon Captain Randall took 'im—a pinch-faced snark, he is." With an impatient wrench, he freed himself and headed for the door with a step born of long-nourished purpose.

Randall. I stood stunned for a moment, jostled by the escaping men, deaf to the shouts of the chained. Finally I shook myself from my stupor and tried to think. Geordie had watched the castle since dawn. No one had left in the morning save a small kitchen party going to fetch supplies. So they were still here, somewhere.

Randall was a captain; likely no one ranked higher in a prison garrison, save Sir Fletcher himself. Presumably Randall could thus command the castle's resources so as to provide him with some suitable spot in which to torture a prisoner at his leisure.

And torture it surely was. Even if it was meant to end in hanging, the man I had seen at Fort William was a cat by nature. He could no more resist the chance to play with this particular mouse than he could alter his height or the color of his eyes.

I took a deep breath, resolutely shoving aside thoughts of what might have happened since morning, and charged out the door myself, colliding full force with an English Redcoat rushing in. The man reeled backward, staggering with tiny running steps to keep his balance. Thrown off balance myself, I crashed heavily into the doorjamb, numbing my left side and banging my head. I clutched the doorpost for support, the ringing in my ears chiming with the echoes of Rupert's voice: *Ye have a moment of surprise, lass. Use it!*

It was open to question, I thought dizzily, who was more surprised. I groped madly for the pocket that held my dagger, cursing my stupidity for not having entered the cell with it already drawn.

The English soldier, balance recovered, was staring at me with his mouth agape, but I could feel my precious moment of surprise already slipping away. Abandoning the elusive pocket, I stooped and drew the dagger from my stocking in a move that continued upward with all the force I could muster. The knifepoint took the advancing soldier just under the chin as he reached for his belt. His hands rose halfway to his throat, then, with a look of surprise, he staggered back against the wall, and slid down it in slow motion, as the life drained away from him. Like me, he had come to investigate without bothering to draw his weapon first, and that small oversight had just cost him his life. The grace of God had saved me from this mistake; I could afford no more. Feeling very cold, I stepped over the twitching body, careful not to look.

I dashed back the way I had come, as far as the turning by the stairs. There was a spot here by the wall where I would be sheltered from view from both directions. I leaned against the wall and indulged myself in a moment of trembling nausea.

Wiping my sweaty hands on my skirt, I dredged the dirk from its hidden pocket. It was now my only weapon; I had neither time nor stomach enough to retrieve my sock-knife. Perhaps that was as well, I thought, rubbing my fingers on my bodice; there had been surprisingly little blood, and I shrank from the thought of the gush that would follow if I pulled the knife free.

Dagger now safely in hand, I peered cautiously out into the corridor. The prisoners I had inadvertently released had gone to the left. I had no idea what they were set on doing, but they would likely occupy the English while they were doing it. With no reason to pick one direction over another for my search, it made sense to move away from whatever commotion they caused.

The light from the high slit windows fell aslant behind me; this was the west side of the castle, then. I must keep my bearings as I moved, since Rupert would be waiting for me near the south gate.

Stairs. I forced my numbed mind to think, trying to reason my way to the spot I was looking for. If you wanted to torture someone, presumably you wanted both privacy and soundproofing. Both considerations pointed to an isolated dungeon as the most likely spot. And the dungeons in castles such as this were customarily underground, where tons of earth muffled any cries, and darkness hid all cruelty from the eyes of those responsible.

The wall rounded into a curve at the end of the corridor; I had reached one of the four corner towers—and the towers had stairs.

The spiral stair opened around another curve, the wedge-shaped steps plunging down in dizzying flights that deceived the eye and twisted the ankles. The plunge from the relative light of the corridor into the gloom of the stairwell made it even harder to judge the distance from one stair to the next, and I slipped several times, barking my knuckles and skinning my palms on the stone walls as I caught myself.

The stairway yielded one benefit. From a narrow window let in to save the stairwell from total darkness, I could see the main courtyard. At least I could now orient myself. A small group of soldiers was drawn up in neat red lines for inspection, but not, apparently, to witness the summary punishment of a Scottish rebel. There was a gibbet in the courtyard, black and foreboding, but unoccupied. The sight of it was like a blow in the stomach. Tomorrow morning. I clattered down the stairs, heedless of scraped elbows and stubbed toes.

Hitting the bottom in a swish of skirts, I stopped to listen. Dead silence all around, but at least this part of the castle was in use; there were torches in the wall sconces, dyeing the granite blocks in pools of flickering red, each pool ebbing into darkness at its edges before the pool of the next torch leached into light again. Smoke from the torches hung in grey swirls along the vaulted roof of the corridor.

There was only one way to go from this point. I went, dagger still gripped at the ready. It was eerie to be pacing softly down this corridor. I had seen similar dungeons before, as a day-tripper, visiting historic castles with Frank. But then the massive granite blocks had been stripped of their menace by the glare of fluorescent tubes hung from the arches of the cavernous ceiling. I remembered recoiling from the small, dank chambers, even in those days, when they had been in disuse for over a century. Seeing the remnants of old and horrible ways, the thick doors and the rusting manacles on the wall, I had been able, I thought, to imagine the torments of those imprisoned in these forbidding cells. I would have laughed now at my naivete. There were some things, as Dougal said, that the imagination was simply not equal to.

I tiptoed past bolted doors three inches thick; thick enough to smother any sound from inside. Bending close to the floor, I checked for a strip of light at the base of each door. Prisoners might be left to rot in darkness, but Randall would need to see what he was doing. The floor here was gummy with ancient dirt, covered with a thick layer of loose dust. Apparently this part of the prison was not in current use. But the torches showed that *someone* was down here.

The fourth door in the corridor showed the light I was looking for. I listened, kneeling on the floor with my ear pressed against the crack, but heard nothing more than the thin crackle of a fire.

The door was unlocked. I pushed it open a small crack and peered cautiously within. Jamie was there, sitting on the floor against one wall, curled into himself with his head between his knees. He was alone.

The room was small, but well lit, with a rather homely looking brazier in which burned a cheery fire. For a dungeon, it was remarkably cozy; the stone flags were halfway clean, and a small camp bed leaned against one wall. The room was further furnished with two chairs and a table, on which sat a number of objects, including a large pewter flask and horn cups. It was an astonishing sight, after my visions of dripping walls and scuttling rats. It occurred to me that perhaps the garrison officers had furnished this snuggery as a refuge in which to entertain such female companionship as they could induce to visit them within the prison; clearly it had the advantage of privacy over the barracks.

"Jamie!" I called softly. He didn't raise his head or answer me, and I felt a thrill of fear. Pausing only long enough to shut the door behind me, I crossed rapidly to him and touched his shoulder.

"Jamie!"

He looked up then; his face was dead-white, unshaven and sheened with a cold sweat that had soaked his hair and shirt. The room stank of fear and vomit.

"Claire!" he said, speaking hoarsely through lips cracked with dryness. "How did you—ye must get out of here at once. He'll be back soon."

"Don't be ridiculous." I was assessing the situation as rapidly as I could, hoping that concentration on the job at hand would ease the choking sensation and help melt the large ball of ice in the pit of my stomach.

He was chained by the ankle to a bolt in the wall, but otherwise unfettered. A coil of rope among the rubble of objects on the table had plainly been used, though; there were raw marks on his wrists and elbows.

I was puzzled by his condition. He was clearly dazed and every line of his body was eloquent with pain, but I could see no obvious damage. There was no blood and no wound visible. I dropped to my knees and began methodically to try the keys of my ring on the manacle around his ankle.

"What has he done to you?" I asked, keeping my voice low for fear of Randall's return.

Jamie swayed where he sat, eyes closed, the sweat beading in hundreds of tiny pearls on his skin. Plainly he was near to fainting, but opened his eyes for a moment at my voice. Moving with exquisite care, he used his left hand to lift the object he had been cradling in his lap. It was his right hand, almost unrecognizable as a human appendage. Grotesquely swollen, it was now a bloated bag, blotched with red and purple, the fingers dangling at crazy angles. A white shard of bone poked through the torn skin of the middle finger, and a trickle of blood stained the knuckles, puffed into shapeless dimples.

The human hand is a delicate marvel of engineering, an intricate system of joints and pulleys, served and controlled by a network of millions of tiny nerves, exquisitely sensitive to touch. A single broken finger is enough to sink a strong man to his knees with nauseated pain.

"Payment," Jamie said, "for his nose—with interest." I stared at the sight for a moment, then said in a voice that I didn't recognize as mine, "I'm going to kill him for this."

Jamie's mouth twitched slightly as a flicker of humor forced its way through the mask of pain and dizziness. "I'll hold your cloak, Sassenach," he whispered. His eyes closed again and he sagged against the wall, too far gone to protest my presence further.

I went back to work on the lock, glad to see that my hands were no longer shaking. The fear was gone, replaced by a glorious rage.

I had gone through the complete ring of keys twice, and still found none that would turn the lock. My hands were growing sweaty and the keys slid through my fingers like minnows as I began to try the most likely ones again. My muttered cursing roused Jamie from his stupor, and he leaned down slowly to look at what I was doing.

"Ye needn't find a key will turn it," he said, bracing a shoulder on the wall to keep upright. "If one will fit to the length of the barrel, you can spring the lock wi' a good bash on the head of it."

"You've seen this kind of lock before?" I wanted to keep him awake and talking; he was going to have to walk if we were to leave here.

"I've been in one. When they brought me here, they chained me in a big cell with a lot of others. A lad named Reilly was chained next to me; a Leinsterman—said he'd been in most of the jails in Ireland and decided to try Scotland for a change o' scenery." Jamie was struggling to talk; he realized as well as I that he must rouse himself. He managed a feeble smile. "He told me a good bit about locks and such, and showed me how we could break the ones we were wearing, *if* we'd had a spare bit of straight metal, which we didn't."

"Tell me, then." The effort of talking was making him sweat freely, but he seemed more alert. Concentrating on the problem of the lock seemed to help.

Following his directions, I found a suitable key and thrust it in as far as it would go. According to Reilly, a solid blow straight in on the end of the key would force the other end hard against the tumblers and spring them loose. I looked around for a suitable instrument for bashing.

"Use the mallet on the table, Sassenach," said Jamie. Caught by a grim note in his voice, I glanced from his face to the table, where a medium-sized wooden mallet lay, the handle wrapped with tarred twine.

"Is that what—" I began, aghast.

"Aye. Brace the manacle against the wall, lass, before ye hit it."

Grasping the handle gingerly, I picked up the mallet. It was awkward to get the iron manacle correctly positioned so that one side was braced by the wall, as this required that Jamie cross the manacled leg under the other and press his knee to the wall on the far side.

My first two blows were too weak and timorous. Gathering determination about me like a cloak, I smashed the rounded end of the key as hard as I could. The mallet slipped off the key and caught Jamie a glancing but hard blow on the ankle. Recoiling, he lost his precarious balance and fell, instinctively reaching out his right hand to save himself. He let out an unearthly moan as his right arm crumpled beneath him and his shoulder hit the floor.

"Oh, damn," I said wearily. Jamie had fainted, not that I could blame him. Taking advantage of his momentary immobility, I turned his ankle so that the manacle was well braced, and banged doggedly on the embedded key, with little apparent effect. I was thinking grim thoughts about Irish locksmiths, when the door beside me swung suddenly open.

Randall's face, like Frank's, seldom showed what he was thinking, presenting instead a bland and impenetrable facade. At the moment, though, the Captain's customary poise had deserted him, and he stood in the doorway with his jaw agape, looking not unlike the man who accompanied him. A very large man in a stained and ragged uniform, this assistant had the sloping brow, flat nose, and loose prominent lips characteristic of some types of mental retardation. His expression did not change as he peered over Randall's shoulder, showing no particular interest either in me or the unconscious man on the floor.

Recovering, Randall walked into the room and reached down to prod the manacle around Jamie's ankle. "Been damaging the Crown's property, I see, my girl. That's an offense punishable by law, you know. To say nothing of attempting to aid a dangerous prisoner in escaping." His pale grey eyes held a spark of amusement. "We'll have to arrange something suitable for you. In the meantime …" He jerked me to my feet and pulled my arms behind me, twisting his stock around my wrists.

Struggle was plainly fruitless, but I stamped on his toes as hard as I could, purely to vent some of my own frustration.

"Ouch!" He turned me and gave me a hard shove, so that my legs hit the bed and I fell, half-lying on the rough blankets. Randall surveyed me with grim satisfaction, rubbing the scuffed toe of his boot with a linen handkerchief. I glared back at him, and he gave a short laugh.

"You're no coward, I'll give you that. In fact, you're a fit match for him," he nodded at Jamie, who was beginning to stir a bit, "and I can't give you a better compliment than that." He tenderly fingered his throat, where a darkening bruise showed in the open neck of his shirt. "He tried to kill me, one-handed, when I untied him. And damned near managed it too. Pity I didn't realize he was left-handed."

"How unreasonable of him," I said.

"Quite," said Randall, with a nod. "I don't suppose you'd be so impolite, do you? Still, on the off-chance …" He turned to the large servant, who was simply standing in the doorframe, shoulders sloped, waiting for orders.

"Marley," said Randall, "come here and search this woman for weapons." He watched with some amusement as the man groped clumsily about my person, eventually coming upon and extracting my dirk.

"You don't care for Marley?" asked the Captain, watching me try to avoid the thick fingers that prodded me all too intimately. "Rather a pity; I'm sure he's quite taken with you."

"Poor Marley hasn't much luck with women," the Captain went on, a malicious gleam in his eye. "Have you, Marley? Even the whores won't have him." He fixed me with a designing sort of look, smiling wolfishly. "Too big, they say." He raised one eyebrow. "Which is quite a judgment, coming from a whore, is it not?" He raised the other brow, making his meaning quite clear.

Marley, who had begun to pant rather heavily during the search, stopped and wiped a thread of saliva from the side of his mouth. I moved as far away as I could manage, disgusted.

Randall, watching me, said, “I imagine Marley would like to entertain you privately in his quarters, once we’ve finished our conversation. Of course, he might decide later on to share his good fortune with his friends, but that’s up to him.”

“Oh, you don’t want to watch?” I asked sarcastically.

Randall laughed, truly amused.

“I may have what are called ‘unnatural tastes’ myself, as I imagine you know by this time. But give me credit for some aesthetic principles.” He glanced at the immense orderly, slouched in his filthy clothes, paunch straining over his belt. The loose, blubbery lips chewed and mumbled constantly, as though seeking some fragment of food, and the short, thick fingers worked nervously against the crotch of the stained breeches. Randall shuddered delicately.

“No,” he said. “You’re a very lovely woman, shrewish tongue notwithstanding. To see you with Marley—no, I don’t believe I want to watch that. Appearance aside, Marley’s personal habits leave quite a lot to be desired.”

“So do yours,” I said.

“That’s as may be. At any rate, they’ll not concern you much longer.” He paused, looking down at me. “I would still like to know who you are, you know. A Jacobite, plainly, but whose? Marischal’s? Seaforth’s? Lovat’s, most likely, since you’re with the Frasers.” Randall nudged Jamie gently with a polished boot-toe, but he still lay inert. I could see his chest rising and falling regularly; perhaps he had merely slipped from unconsciousness into sleep. The smudges under his eyes gave evidence that he had had little rest of late.

“I’ve even heard from some that you’re a witch,” the Captain went on. His tone was light, but he watched me closely, as though I might suddenly turn myself into an owl and flap away. “There was some kind of trouble at Cranesmuir, wasn’t there? A death of some kind? But no doubt that’s all superstitious nonsense.”

Randall eyed me speculatively. "I might be persuaded to make a bargain with you," he said abruptly. He leaned back, half-sitting on the table, inviting me.

I laughed bitterly. "I can't say I'm in either a position or a mood to bargain at the moment. What can you offer me?"

Randall glanced at Marley. The idiot's eyes were fixed on me, and he was mumbling under his breath.

"A choice, at least. Tell me—and convince me—who you are and who sent you to Scotland. What you're doing and what information you've sent to whom. Tell me that, and I'll take you to Sir Fletcher, instead of giving you to Marley."

I kept my eyes firmly away from Marley. I had seen the rotting stumps of teeth embedded in pustulant gums, and the thought of him kissing me, let alone—I choked the thought off. Randall was right; I wasn't a coward. But neither was I a fool.

"You can't take me to Sir Fletcher," I said, "and I know it as well as you do. Take me to him and risk my telling him about *this*?" My nod took in the snug little room, the cozy fire, the bed I sat on, and Jamie lying at my feet. "Whatever his own shortcomings, I don't imagine Sir Fletcher would stand, officially, for his officers torturing prisoners. Even the English army must have *some* standards."

Randall raised both eyebrows. "Torture? Oh, that." He waved negligently at Jamie's hand. "An accident. He fell in his cell and was trampled by the other prisoners. It's rather crowded in those cells, you know." He smiled derisively.

I was silent. While Sir Fletcher might or might not believe the damage to Jamie's hand was an accident, he was most unlikely to believe anything *I* said, once I was unmasked as an English spy.

Randall was watching me, eyes alert for any signs of weakening. "Well? The choice is yours."

I sighed and closed my eyes, tired of looking at him. The choice *wasn't* mine, but I could hardly tell him why not.

"It doesn't matter," I said wearily. "I can't tell you anything."

"Think it over for a moment." He stood up, and stepped carefully over Jamie's unconscious form, taking a key from his pocket. "I may need Marley's help for a bit, but then I'll send him back to his quarters—and you with him, if you don't mean to cooperate." He stooped, unlocked the manacle, and heaved the inert body up with an impressive display of strength for one so slightly built. The muscles of his forearms ridged the cloth of his snowy shirt as he carried Jamie, head lolling, to a stool in the corner. He nodded at the bucket standing nearby.

"Rouse him," he directed the silent hulk curtly. Cold water splashed from the stones in the corner and puddled on the floor, making a filthy pool underneath. "Once more," Randall said, inspecting Jamie, who was moaning slightly, head stirring against the stones of the wall. He flinched and coughed under the second drenching shower.

Randall strode forward and took him by the hair, yanking his head back, shaking it like a drowned animal, so that drops of fetid water spattered the walls. Jamie's eyes were dull slits. Randall threw Jamie's head back in disgust, wiping his hand down the side of his trousers as he turned away. His eye must have caught the flicker of movement, because he began to turn back, but not in time to brace himself against the big Scot's sudden lunge.

Jamie's arms went around Randall's neck. Lacking the use of his right hand, he gripped his right wrist with the able left and pulled, forearm braced on the Englishman's windpipe. As Randall turned purple and began to sag, he let go his left hand long enough to drive it into the captain's kidney. Even weakened as Jamie was, the blow was enough to make Randall give at the knees.

Dropping the limp captain, Jamie whirled to face the hulking orderly, who had been watching events so far without the slightest flicker of interest on his slack-jawed face. Although his expression remained rather inert, he did move, picking up the mallet from the table as Jamie came toward him, holding the stool by one leg in his good left hand. A certain dull wariness came into the orderly's face as the two men circled each other slowly, looking for an opening.

Better-armed, Marley tried first, swinging the mallet at Jamie's ribs. Jamie whirled away and feinted with the stool, forcing the orderly back toward the door. The next attempt, a murderous blow downward, would have split Jamie's skull had it landed on target. As it was, the stool split instead, one leg and the seat sheared away.

Impatiently, Jamie smashed the stool against the wall with his next swing, reducing it to a smaller but more manageable club; a two-foot length of wood with a ragged, splintered end.

The air in the cell, made stifling with smoke from the torches, was still except for the gasping breath of the two men and the occasional bruising thud of wood on flesh. Afraid to speak for fear of disturbing Jamie's precarious concentration, I pulled my feet up onto the bed and shrank back against the wall, trying to stay out of the way.

It was plain to me—and by his faint smile of anticipation, to the orderly also—that Jamie was tiring rapidly. Amazing enough that he was on his feet at all, let alone fighting. It was clear to all three of us that the fight couldn't last much longer; if he was to have any chance at all, he must move soon. With short, hard jabs of the stool-leg, he advanced cautiously on Marley, forcing the bigger man into the corner where the arc of his swing would be restricted. Realizing this by some instinct, the orderly came out with a vicious horizontal swing, expecting to force Jamie back.

Instead of stepping back, Jamie stepped forward into the swing, taking the full brunt of the blow in the left side as he brought his club down full-force on Marley's temple. Intent on the scene before me, I had paid no attention to Randall's prone body on the floor near the door. But as the orderly tottered, eyes glazing, I heard the scraping sounds of boots on stone, and a labored breathing rasped in my ear.

"Nicely fought, Fraser." Randall's voice was hoarse from the choking, but as composed as ever. "Cost you a few ribs, though, didn't it?"

Jamie leaned against the wall, breathing in sobbing gasps, still holding the club, elbow pressed hard to his side. His eyes dropped to the floor, measuring the distance.

"Don't try it, Fraser." The light voice was bland. "She'll be dead before you get two steps." The thin cool knife blade slid past my ear; I could feel the point gently pricking the corner of my jaw.

Jamie surveyed the scene with dispassionate eyes for a moment, still braced by the wall. With a sudden effort, he straightened painfully and stood swaying. The club clanked hollowly on the stone floor. The knifepoint pricked infinitesimally harder, but otherwise Randall stood motionless as Jamie slowly crossed the few feet to the table, stooping carefully on the way to pick up the twine-wrapped mallet. He held it dangling in two fingers in front of him, his nonoffensive intent apparent.

The mallet clattered on the table in front of me, the handle spinning hard enough to carry the weighty head nearly to the edge. It lay dark and heavy on the oak, a homely, solid tool. A reed basket of ha'penny nails to go with it lay in the jumble of objects at the far end of the table; something perhaps left behind by the carpenters who had furnished the room. Jamie's good hand, the fine straight fingers rimmed with gold in the light, gripped the table-edge hard. With an effort I could only guess at, he lowered himself slowly into a chair and deliberately spread both hands flat before him on the scarred wood surface, the mallet within easy reach.

His gaze had been locked with Randall's during the painful trip across the room, and did not waver now. He nodded briefly in my direction without looking at me and said, "Let her go."

The knife-hand seemed to relax a trifle. Randall's voice was amused and curious. "Why should I?"

Jamie seemed now in complete command of himself, despite his white face and the sweat that ran unregarded down his face like tears.

"You cannot hold a knife on two people at once. Kill the woman or leave her side, and I'll kill you." He spoke softly, a steely thread beneath the quiet Scots accent.

"And what's to stop me killing both of you, one at a time?"

I would have called the expression on Jamie's face a smile only because his teeth were showing. "What, and cheat the hangsman? Bit hard to explain, come morning, no?" He nodded briefly at the unconscious hulk on the floor. "You'll recall that ye had to have your wee helper bind me wi' rope before ye broke my hand."

"So?" The knife stayed steady at my ear.

“Your helper is no going to be much good to ye awhile yet.” This was undeniably true; the monstrous orderly was lying on his face in the corner, breathing in ragged, stertorous snores. Severe concussion, I thought, mechanically. Possible cerebral hemorrhage. I couldn’t care less if he died before my eyes.

“You can’t take me alone, one-handed or no.” Jamie shook his head slowly, appraising Randall’s size and strength. “No. I’m bigger, and far the better fighter, hand to hand. Did ye not have the woman there, I would take that wee knife from ye and cram it down your throat. And you know it, which is why you’ve not harmed her.”

“But I do have her. You could leave yourself, of course. There’s a way out, quite near. That would leave your wife—you did say she’s your wife?—to die, of course.”

Jamie shrugged. “And myself as well. I’d not get far, with the whole garrison hunting me. To be shot in the open might be preferable to being hanged in here, but not enough to make a difference.” A brief grimace of pain crossed his face and he held his breath for a moment. When he breathed again, it was in shallow, panting gulps. Whatever shock had been protecting him from the worst of the pain, it was apparently wearing off.

“So we seem to be at an impasse.” Randall’s well-bred English tones were casual. “Unless you have a suggestion?”

“I have. You want me.” The cool Scottish voice was matter-of-fact. “Let the woman go, and ye can have me.” The knifepoint moved slightly, nicking my ear. I felt a sting and the warm ooze of blood.

“Do what ye wish to me. I’ll not struggle, though I’ll allow you to bind me if ye think it needful. And I’ll not speak of it, come tomorrow. But first you’ll see the woman safe from the prison.” My eyes were on Jamie’s ruined hand. A small pool of blood under the middle finger was growing, and I realized with a shock that he was deliberately pressing the finger into the table, using the pain as a spur to stay conscious. He was bargaining for my life using the only thing he had left—himself. If he fainted now, that single chance was gone.

Randall had relaxed completely; the knife lay carelessly on my right shoulder as he thought it through. I was there before him.

Jamie was meant to hang in the morning. Sooner or later, he would be missed, and the Castle would be searched. While a certain amount of brutality might be tolerated among officers and gentlemen—I was sure it would extend to a broken hand or a flayed back—Randall's other inclinations were not so likely to be overlooked. No matter what Jamie's status as a condemned prisoner, if he stood at the foot of the gallows come morning and claimed abuse at the hands of Randall, his claims would be investigated. And if physical examination proved them true, Randall's career was at an end, and possibly his life as well. But with Jamie sworn to silence.…

"You'll give me your word?"

Jamie's eyes were like blue matchflames in the parchment of his face. After a moment, he nodded slowly. "In return for yours."

The attraction of a victim at once completely unwilling and completely compliant was irresistible.

"Done." The knife left my shoulder and I heard the susurrus of sheathed metal. Randall walked slowly past me, around the table, picking up the mallet as he went. He held it up, ironically questioning. "You'll allow me a brief test of your sincerity?"

"Aye." Jamie's voice was as steady as his hands, flat and motionless on the table. I tried to speak, to utter some protest, but my throat had dried to a sticky silence.

Moving without haste, Randall leaned past Jamie to pluck a ha'penny nail delicately from the reed basket. He positioned the point with care and brought the mallet down, driving the nail through Jamie's right hand into the table with four solid blows. The broken fingers twitched and sprang straight, like the legs of a spider pinned to a collection board.

Jamie groaned, his eyes wide and blank with shock. Randall set the mallet down with care. He took Jamie's chin in his hand and turned his face up. "Now kiss me," he said softly, and lowered his head to Jamie's unresisting mouth.

Randall's face when he rose was dreamy, eyes gentle and faraway, long mouth quirked in a smile. Once upon a time, I had loved a smile like that, and that dreamy look had roused me in anticipation. Now it sickened me. Tears ran into the corner of my mouth, though

I didn't remember starting to cry. Randall stood a moment in his trance, gazing down at Jamie. Then he stirred, remembering, and drew the knife once more from its sheath.

The blade slashed carelessly through the binding around my wrists, grazing the skin. I hardly had time to rub the circulation back into my hands before he was urging me up with a hand beneath my elbow, pushing me toward the door.

"Wait!" Jamie spoke behind us, and Randall turned impatiently.

"You'll allow me to say goodbye?" It was a statement more than a question, and Randall hesitated only briefly before nodding and giving me a shove back toward the motionless figure at the table.

Jamie's good arm was tight around my shoulders and my wet face was buried in his neck.

"You can't," I whispered. "You can't. I won't let you."

His mouth was warm against my ear. "Claire, I'm to hang in the morning. What happens to me between now and then doesna matter to anyone." I drew back and stared at him.

"It matters to me !" The strained lips quivered in what was almost a smile, and he raised his free hand and laid it against my wet cheek.

"I know it does, *mo duinne*. And that's why you'll go now. So I'll know there is someone still who minds for me." He drew me close again, kissed me gently and whispered in Gaelic, "He will let you go because he thinks you are helpless. I know you are not." Releasing me, he said in English, "I love you. Go now."

Randall paused as he ushered me out the door. "I'll be back very shortly." It was the voice of a man taking reluctant leave of his lover, and my stomach heaved.

Silhouetted in red by the torch behind him, Jamie inclined his head gracefully toward the pinioned hand. "I expect you'll find me here."

* * *

Black Jack. A common name for rogues and scoundrels in the eighteenth century. A staple of romantic fiction, the name conjured up charming highwaymen, dashing blades in plumed hats. The reality walked at my side.

One never stops to think what underlies romance. Tragedy and terror, transmuted by time. Add a little art in the telling, and voil?! a stirring romance, to make the blood run fast and maidens sigh. My blood was running fast, all right, and never maiden sighed like Jamie, cradling his mangled hand.

"This way." It was the first time Randall had spoken since we had left the cell. He indicated a narrow alcove in the wall, unlighted by torches. The way out, of which he had spoken to Jamie.

By now I had sufficient command of myself to speak, and I did so. I stepped back a pace, so that the torchlight fell full on me, for I wanted him to remember my face.

"You asked me, Captain, if I were a witch," I said, my voice low and steady. "I'll answer you now. Witch I am. Witch, and I curse you. You will marry, Captain, and your wife will bear a child, but you shall not live to see your firstborn. I curse you with knowledge, Jack Randall—I give you the hour of your death."

His face was in shadow, but the gleam of his eyes told me he believed me. And why should he not? For I spoke the truth, and I knew it. I could see the lines of Frank's genealogical chart as though they were drawn on the mortar lines between the stones of the wall, and the names listed by them. "Jonathan Wolverton Randall," I said softly, reading it from the stones. "Born, September the 3rd, 1705. Died—" He made a convulsive movement toward me, but not fast enough to prevent me from speaking.

A narrow door at the back of the alcove crashed open with a squeal of hinges. Expecting further darkness, my eyes were dazzled by a blinding flash of light on snow. A quick shove from behind sent me staggering headlong into the drifts, and the door slammed to behind me.

I was lying in a ditch of sorts, behind the prison. The drifts around me covered heaps of something—the prison's refuse, most likely. There was something hard beneath the drift I had fallen into; wood, perhaps. Looking up at the sheering wall above me, I could see streaks and runnels down the stone, marking the path of garbage tipped from a sliding door forty feet above. That must be the kitchen quarters.

I rolled over, bracing myself to rise, and found myself looking into a pair of wide blue eyes. The face was nearly as blue as the eyes, and hard as the log of wood I had mistaken him for. I stumbled to my feet, choking, and staggered back against the prison wall.

Head down, breathe deep, I told myself firmly. You are *not* going to faint, you have seen dead men before, lots of them, you are not going to faint—God, he has blue eyes like—*you are not going to faint, damn it!*

My breathing slowed at last, and with it my racing pulse. As the panic receded, I forced myself back to that pathetic figure, wiping my hands convulsively on my skirt. I don't know whether it was pity, curiosity, or simple shock that made me look again. Seen without the suddenness of surprise, there was nothing frightening about the dead man; there never is. No matter how ugly the manner in which a man dies, it's only the presence of a suffering human soul that is horrifying; once gone, what is left is only an object.

The blue-eyed stranger had been hanged. He was not the only inhabitant of the ditch. I didn't bother to excavate the drift, but now that I knew what it contained, I could plainly see the outline of frozen limbs and the softly rounded heads under the snow. At least a dozen men lay here, waiting either for a thaw that would make their burial easier, or for a cruder disposal by the beasts of the nearby forest.

The thought startled me out of my pensive immobility. I had no time to waste in graveside meditation, or one more pair of blue eyes would stare sightless up into falling snow.

I had to find Murtagh and Rupert. That hidden postern door could be used, perhaps. Clearly it was not fortified or guarded like the main gates and other entrances to the prison. But I needed help, and I needed it quickly.

I glanced up at the rim of the ditch. The sun was quite low, burning through a haze of cloud just above the treetops. The air felt heavy with moisture. Likely it would snow again by nightfall; the haze was thick across the sky in the east. There was perhaps an hour of light left.

I began to follow the ditch, not wanting to climb the steep rocky sides until I had to. The ravine curved away from the prison quite soon, and looked as though it would lead down toward the river; presumably the runoff of melting snow carried the prison's refuse away. I was nearly to the corner of the soaring wall when I heard a faint sound behind me. I whirled. The sound had been made by a rock falling from the lip of the ditch, dislodged by the foot of a large grey wolf.

As an alternative to the items under the snow, I had certain desirable characteristics, from a wolf's point of view. On the one hand, I was mobile, harder to catch, and posed the possibility of resistance. On the other, I was slow, clumsy, and above all, not frozen stiff, thus offering no danger of broken teeth. I also smelled of fresh blood, temptingly warm in this frozen waste. Were I a wolf, I thought, I wouldn't hesitate. The animal made up its mind at the same time I came to my own decision regarding our future relations.

There had been a Yank at Pembroke Hospital, name of Charlie Marshall. He was a pleasant chap, friendly as all the Yanks were, and most entertaining on his pet subject. His pet subject was dogs; Charlie was a sergeant in the K-9 Corps. He had been blown up, along with two of his dogs, by an antipersonnel mine outside a small village near Arles. He grieved for his dogs, and often told me stories about them when I would sit with him during the odd slack moments in my shift.

More to the immediate point, he had also once told me what to do, and not do, should I ever be attacked by a dog. I felt it was stretching a point to call the eerie creature picking its delicate way down the rocks a dog, but hoped that it might yet share a few basic character traits with its tame descendants.

"Bad dog," I said firmly, staring it in one yellow eyeball. "In fact," I said, backing very slowly toward the prison wall, "you are a perfectly horrible dog." (*Speak firmly and loudly,* I heard Charlie saying.) "Probably the worst I've ever seen," I said, firmly and loudly. I continued to back up, one hand feeling behind me for the stones of the wall, and once there, I sidled toward the corner, some ten yards away.

I pulled the ties at my throat and began to fumble at the brooch fastening my cloak, still telling the wolf firmly and loudly what I thought of him, his ancestors, and his immediate family. The beast seemed interested in the diatribe, tongue lolling in a doggy grin. He was in no hurry; he limped slightly, I could see, as he drew nearer, and was thin and mangy. Perhaps he had trouble hunting, and infirmity was what drew him to the prison midden to scavenge. I certainly hoped so; the more infirm, the better.

I found my leather gloves in the pocket of my cloak and put them on. Then I wrapped the heavy cloak several times around my right forearm, blessing the weight of the velvet. "They'll go for the throat," Charlie had instructed me, "unless their trainer tells them otherwise. Keep looking him in the eye; you'll see it when he makes up his mind to jump. That's your moment."

I could see a number of things in that wicked yellow orb, including hunger, curiosity, and speculation, but not yet a decision to leap.

"You disgusting creature," I told it, "don't you *dare* leap at my throat!" I had other ideas. I had wrapped the cloak in several loose folds about my right arm, leaving the bulk of it dangling, but providing enough padding, I hoped, to keep the beast's teeth from sinking through.

The wolf was thin, but not emaciated. I judged it to weigh perhaps eighty or ninety pounds; less than me, but not enough to give me any great advantage. The leverage was definitely in the animal's favor; four legs against two gave better balance on the slippery crust of snow. I hoped bracing my back against the wall would help.

A certain feeling of emptiness at my back told me I had reached the corner. The wolf was some twenty feet away. This was it. I scraped enough snow from under my feet to give good footing and waited.

I didn't even see the wolf leave the ground. I could swear I had been watching its eyes, but if the decision to leap had registered there, it had been followed by action too swiftly to note. It was instinct, not thought, that raised my arm as a whitish-grey blur hurtled toward me.

The teeth sank into the padding with a force that bruised my arm. It was heavier than I thought; I was unprepared for the weight, and my arm sagged. I had planned to try to throw the beast against the wall, perhaps stunning it. Instead, I heaved myself at the wall, squashing the wolf between the stone blocks and my hip. I struggled to wrap the loose cloak around it. Claws shredded my skirt and scraped my thigh. I drove a knee viciously into its chest, eliciting a strangled yelp. Only then did I realize that the odd, growling whimpers were coming from me and not the wolf.

Strangely enough, I was not at all frightened now, though I had been terrified watching the wolf stalk me. There was room in my mind for only one thought: I would kill this animal, or it would kill me. Therefore, I was going to kill it.

There comes a turning point in intense physical struggle where one abandons oneself to a profligate usage of strength and bodily resource, ignoring the costs until the struggle is over. Women find this point in childbirth; men in battle.

Past that certain point, you lose all fear of pain or injury. Life becomes very simple at that point; you will do what you are trying to do, or die in the attempt, and it does not really matter much which.

I had seen this sort of struggle during my training on the wards, but never had I experienced it before. Now all my concentration was focused on the jaws locked around my forearm and the writhing demon tearing at my body.

I managed to bang the beast's head against the wall, but not hard enough to do much good. I was growing tired rapidly; had the wolf been in good condition, I would have had no chance. I hadn't much now, but took what there was. I fell on the animal, pinning it under me and knocking the wind from it in a gust of carrion breath. It recovered almost immediately and began squirming beneath me, but the second's relaxation enabled me to get it off my arm, one hand clamped under its wet muzzle.

By forcing my fingers back into the corners of its mouth, I managed to keep them out from between the scissoring carnassial teeth. Saliva drizzled down my arm. I was lying flat on top of the wolf. The corner of the prison wall was perhaps eighteen inches ahead of me. Somehow I must get there, without releasing the fury that heaved and squirmed under me.

Scrabbling with my feet, pressing down with all my might, I pushed myself forward inch by inch, constantly straining to keep the fangs from my throat. It cannot have taken more than a few minutes to move those eighteen inches, but it seemed I had lain there most of my life, locked in battle with this beast whose hind claws raked my legs, seeking a good ripping purchase in my belly.

At last I could see around the corner. The blunt angle of stone was directly in front of my face. Now was the tricky part. I must maneuver the wolf's body to allow me to get both hands under the muzzle; I would never be able to exert the necessary force with one.

I rolled abruptly away, and the wolf slithered at once into the small clear space between my body and the wall. Before it could rise to its feet, I brought my knee up as hard as I could. The wolf grunted as my knee drove into its side, pinning it, however fleetingly, against the wall.

I had both hands beneath its jaw now. The fingers of one hand were actually in its mouth. I could feel a crushing sting across my gloved knuckles, but ignored it as I forced the hairy head back, and back, and back again, using the angle of the wall as a fulcrum for the lever of the beast's body. I thought my arms would break, but this was the only chance.

There was no audible noise, but I *felt* the reverberation through the whole body as the neck snapped. The straining limbs—and the bladder—at once relaxed. The intolerable strain on my arms now released, I dropped, as limp as the dying wolf. I could feel the beast's heart fibrillating beneath my cheek, the only part still capable of a death struggle. The stringy fur stank of ammonia and soggy hair. I wanted to move away, but could not.

I think I must have slept for a moment, odd as that sounds, cheek pillowed on the corpse. I opened my eyes to see the greenish stone of the prison a few inches in front of my nose. Only the thought of what was transpiring on the other side of that wall got me to my feet.

I stumbled down the ditch, cloak dragged over one shoulder, tripping on stones hidden in the snow, banging my shins painfully on half-buried tree branches. Subconsciously, I must have been aware that wolves usually run in packs, because I do not recall being surprised by the howl that wavered out of the forest above and behind me. If I felt anything, it was black rage at what seemed a conspiracy to thwart and delay me.

Wearily I turned to see where the sound had come from. I was in the open away from the prison by this time; no wall to brace my back against, and no weapon to hand. It had been luck as much as anything that helped me with the first wolf; there was not a chance in a thousand that I could kill another animal bare-handed—and how many more might there be? The pack I had seen feeding in the moonlight in the summer had had at least ten wolves. I could hear in memory the sounds of their teeth scraping, and the crack of breaking bones. The only question now was whether I bothered to fight at all, or whether I would rather just lie down in the snow and give up. That option seemed remarkably attractive, all things considered.

Still, Jamie had given up his life, and considerably more than that, to get me out of the prison. I owed it to him at least to try.

Once more I backed slowly away, moving farther down the ditch. The light was fading; soon the ravine would be filled with shadow. I doubted that that would help me. The wolves undoubtedly had better night-sight than I did.

The first of the hunters appeared on the rim of the ditch as the other had; a shaggy figure, standing motionless and alert. It was with something of a shock that I realized two more were already in the ravine with me, trotting slowly, almost in step with each other. They were almost the same color as the snow in the twilight—dirty grey—and almost invisible, though they moved with no attempt at concealment.

I stopped moving. Flight was clearly useless. Bending, I freed a dead pine branch from the snow. The bark was black with the wet, and rough even through my gloves. I waved the branch around my head and shouted. The animals stopped moving toward me, but did not retreat. The closest one flattened its ears, as though objecting to the noise.

“Don’t like it?” I screeched. “Too bloody bad! Back off, you fucking sod!” Scooping up a half-buried rock, I hurled it at the wolf. It missed, but the beast scooted to one side. Encouraged, I began to fling missiles wildly; rocks, twigs, handfuls of snow, anything I could grab one-handed. I shrieked until my throat was raw with cold air, howling like the wolves themselves.

At first I thought one of my missiles had scored a hit. The nearest wolf yelped and seemed to convulse. The second arrow passed within a foot of me and I caught the tiny blur of motion before it thudded home in the chest of the second wolf. That animal died where it stood. The first, struck less vitally, kicked and struggled in the snow, no more than a heaving lump in the growing dusk.

I stood stupidly staring at it for some time, then looked up by instinct to the lip of the ravine. The third wolf, wisely choosing discretion, had vanished back into the trees, from whence a shivering howl went up.

I was still looking up at the dark trees when a hand clutched my elbow. I whirled with a gasp to find myself looking up into the face of a stranger. Narrow-jawed and with a weak chin ill-disguised by a scabby beard, he was a stranger indeed, but his plaid and his dirk marked him a Scot.

“Help,” I said, and fell forward into his arms.

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MACRANNOCH

It was dark in the cottage and there was a bear in the corner of the room. In panic, I recoiled against my escort, wanting nothing more to do with wild beasts. He shoved me strongly forward, into the cottage. As I staggered toward the fire, the hulking shape turned toward me, and I realized belatedly that it was merely a large man in a bearskin.

A bearskin cloak, to be exact, fastened at the neck with a silver-gilt brooch as large as the palm of my hand. It was made in the shape of two leaping stags, backs arched and heads meeting to form a circle. The locking pin was a short, tapered fan, the head of it shaped like the tail of a fleeing deer.

I noticed the brooch in detail because it was directly in front of my nose. Looking up, I briefly considered the possibility that I had been wrong; perhaps it really *was* a bear.

Still, bears presumably did not wear brooches or have eyes like blueberries; small, round, and a dark, shiny blue. They were sunk in heavy cheeks whose lower slopes were forested with silver-shot black hair. Similar hair cascaded over thickset shoulders to mingle with the hair of the cloak, which, in spite of its new use, was still pungently redolent of its former owner.

The shrewd little eyes flickered over me, evaluating both the bedraggled state of my attire, and the good basic quality of it, including the two wedding rings, gold and silver. The bear's address was formulated accordingly.

"You seem to have had some difficulty, Mistress," he said formally, inclining a massive head still spangled with melting snow. "Perhaps we might assist ye?"

I hesitated over what to say. I desperately needed this man's help, yet I would be suspect immediately my speech revealed me to be English. The archer who had brought me here forestalled me.

"Found her near Wentworth," he said laconically. "Fightin' wolves. An English lassie," he added, with an emphasis that made my host's blueberry eyes fix on me with a rather unpleasant speculation in their depths. I pulled myself up to my full height and summoned as much of the Matron attitude as I could.

"English by birth, Scots by marriage," I said firmly. "My name is Claire Fraser. My husband is a prisoner in Wentworth."

"I see," said the bear, slowly. "Weel, my own name is MacRannoch, and ye're presently on my land. I can see by your dress as you're a woman of some family; how come ye to be alone in Eldridge Wood on a winter night?"

I caught at the opening; here was some chance to establish my bona fides, as well as to find Murtagh and Rupert.

"I came to Wentworth with some clansmen of my husband's. As I was English, we thought I could gain entrance to the prison, and perhaps find some way of, er, removing him. However, I—I left the prison by another way. I was looking for my friends when I was set upon by wolves—from which this gentleman kindly rescued me." I tried a grateful smile on the raw-boned archer, who received it in stony silence.

"Ye've certainly met *something* wi' teeth," MacRannoch agreed, eyeing the gaping rents in my skirt. Suspicion yielded temporarily to the demands of hospitality.

"Are ye hurt, then? Just a bit scratched? Weel, you're cold, nae doubt, and a wee bit shaken, I imagine. Sit here by the fire. Hector will fetch ye a sup of something, and then ye can tell me a bit more about these friends of yours." He pulled a rough three-legged stool up with one foot, and sat me firmly on it with a massive hand on my shoulder.

Peat fires give little light but are comfortingly hot. I shuddered involuntarily as the blood started to flow back into my frozen hands. A couple of gulps from the leather flask grudgingly provided by Hector started the blood flowing internally again as well.

I explained my situation as well as I could, which was not particularly well. My brief description of my exit from the prison and subsequent hand-to-hand encounter with the wolf was received with particular skepticism.

"Given that ye did manage to get into Wentworth, it doesna seem likely that Sir Fletcher would allow ye to wander about the place. Nor if this Captain Randall had found ye in the dungeons, he would merely ha' shown ye the back door."

"He—he had reasons for letting me go."

"Which were?" The blueberry eyes were implacable.

I gave up and put the matter baldly; I was much too tired for delicacy or circumlocutions.

MacRannoch appeared semiconvinced, but still reluctant to take any action.

"Aye, I see your concern," he argued, "still, that may not be so bad."

"Not so bad!" I sprang to my feet in outrage.

He shook his head as though plagued by deerflies. "What I mean," he explained, "is that if it's the lad's arse he's after, he's none so likely to hurt him badly. And, savin' your presence, ma'am"—he cocked a bushy eyebrow in my direction—"bein' buggered has seldom killed anyone." He held up placating hands the size of soup plates.

"Now, I'm no sayin' he'll enjoy it, mind, but I do say it's not worth a major set-to with Sir Fletcher Gordon, just to save the lad a sore arse. I've a precarious position here, ye know, verra precarious." And he puffed out his cheeks and beetled his brows at me.

Not for the first time, I regretted the fact that there were no real witches. Had I been one, I would have turned him into a toad on the spot. A big fat one, with warts.

I choked down my rage and tried reason yet again.

"I rather think his arse is beyond saving by this time; it's his neck I'm concerned with. The English mean to hang him in the morning."

MacRannoch was muttering to himself, twisting back and forth like a bear in a too-small cage. He stopped abruptly in front of me and thrust his nose to within an inch of my own. I would have recoiled, had I not been so exhausted. As it was, I merely blinked.

"And if I said I'd help ye, what good would that do?" he roared. He resumed his turning and pacing, two steps to one wall, hurling around in a fling of fur, and two steps to the other. He spoke as he paced, words keeping time to the steps, pausing to puff as he turned.

"If I were to go to Sir Fletcher myself, what would I say? Ye've a captain on your staff who's engaged in torturin' the prisoners in his spare time? And when he asks how I know that, I tell him a stray Sassenach wench my men found wanderin' in the dark told me this man's been makin' indecent advances to her husband, who's an outlaw wi' a price on his head, and a condemned murderer, to boot?"

MacRannoch stopped and thumped one paw on the flimsy table. "And as for takin' men into the place! If, and mind ye, I say *if* we could get in—"

"You could get in," I interrupted. "I can show you the way."

"Mmmphm. That's as may be. *If* we could get in, what happens when Sir Fletcher finds my men wanderin' about his fortress? He sends Captain Randall round next mornin' with a brace of cannon and levels Eldridge Hall to the ground, that's what!" He shook his head again, making the black locks fly.

"Nay, lass, I canna see—"

He was interrupted by the sudden flinging open of the cottage door to admit another bowman, this one pushing Murtagh in front of him at knife-point. MacRannoch stopped and stared in amazement.

"What *is* this?" he demanded. "Ye'd think 'twas May Day, and the lads and lassies all out gatherin' flowers in the wood, not the dead o' winter and snow comin' on!"

"This is my husband's clansman," I said. "As I told you—"

Murtagh, undisturbed by the less than cordial greeting, was eyeing the bear-clad figure closely, as though mentally stripping hair and years away.

"MacRannoch, is it no?" he said, in a tone almost accusing. "Ye'll have been at a Gathering, I think, some time ago at Castle Leoch?"

MacRannoch was more than startled. "Some time ago, I should say! Why, that must ha' been near on thirty year ago. How d'ye know that, man?"

Murtagh nodded, satisfied. "Och, I thought so. I was there. And I remember that Gathering, likely for the same reason ye do yourself."

MacRannoch was studying the wizened little man, trying to subtract thirty years from the seamed countenance.

"Aye, I know ye," he said at last. "Or not the name, but you. Ye killed a wounded boar single-handed with a dagger, during the tynchal. A gallant beast too. That's right, the MacKenzie gave ye the tushes—a bonny set, almost a complete double curve. Lovely work that, man." A look perilously close to gratification creased Murtagh's pitted cheek momentarily.

I started, remembering the magnificent, barbaric bracelets I had seen at Lallybroch. *My mother's,* Jenny had said, *given to her by an admirer*. I stared at Murtagh in disbelief. Even allowing for the passage of thirty years, he did not seem a likely candidate for the tender passion.

Thinking of Ellen MacKenzie, I remembered her pearls, which I was still carrying, sewn into the seam of my pocket. I groped for the free end, pulling them out into the firelight.

"I can pay you," I said. "I wouldn't expect your men to risk themselves for nothing."

Moving a good deal faster than I would have thought possible, he snatched the pearls from my hand. He stared at them disbelievingly.

"Where did ye get these, woman?" he demanded. "Fraser, did ye say your name is?"

"Yes." Tired as I was, I drew myself up straight. "And the pearls are mine. My husband gave them to me on our wedding day."

"Did he, then?" The hoarse voice was suddenly hushed. He turned to Murtagh, still holding the pearls.

"Ellen's son? Is this lass's husband Ellen's son?"

"Aye," Murtagh said, unemphatic as ever. "As ye'd ken at once if ye saw him; he's the spit of her."

Mindful at last of the pearls he was clutching, MacRannoch unfolded his hand and gently stroked the shining gems.

"I gave these to Ellen MacKenzie," he said. "For a wedding gift. I would ha' given them to her as my wife, but as she'd chosen elsewhere—well, I'd thought of them so often, around her bonny throat, I told her I couldna see them elsewhere. So I bade her keep them, and only think of me when she wore them. Hm!" He snorted briefly at some memory, then handed the pearls carefully back to me.

"So they're yours now. Well, wear them in good health, lassie."

"I'll stand a much better chance of doing so," I said, trying to control my impatience at these sentimental displays, "if you'll help me to get my husband back."

The small rosy mouth, which had been smiling slightly at its owner's thought, tightened suddenly.

"Ah," said Sir Marcus, pulling at his beard. "I see. But I've told ye, lassie, I canna see how it can be done. I've a wife and three weans at home. Aye, I'd do a bit for Ellen's lad. But it's a bit much ye're askin'."

Suddenly my legs gave way altogether, and I sat down with a thump, letting my shoulders sag and my head droop. Despair dragged at me like an anchor, pulling me down. I closed my eyes and retreated to some dim place within, where there was nothing but an aching grey blankness, and where the sound of Murtagh's voice, still arguing, was no more than a faint yapping.

It was the bawling of cattle that roused me from my stupor. I looked up to see MacRannoch swirl out of the cottage. As he opened the door, a blast of winter air came in, thick with the lowing of cattle and yelling of men. The door thumped shut behind the vast hairy figure, and I turned to ask Murtagh what he thought we should do next.

The look on his face stopped me, wordless. I had seldom seen him with anything more than a sort of patient dourness showing on his features, but now he positively glowed with suppressed excitement.

I caught at his arm. "What is it? Tell me quickly!"

He had time only to say, "The kine! They're MacRannoch's!" before MacRannoch himself plunged back into the cottage, pushing a lanky young man before him.

With a last shove, he brought the young man flat up against the plastered wall of the cottage. Apparently MacRannoch found confrontation effective; he tried the same nose-to-nose technique he had used on me earlier. Less poised, or less tired, than I, the young man hunched nervously back against the wall as far as he could go.

MacRannoch started out being sweetly reasonable. "Absalom, man, I sent ye out three hours ago to bring in forty head of cattle. I told ye it was important to find them, because there's about to be a damn awfu' snowstorm." The nicely modulated voice was rising. "And when I heard the sound of kine bellowin' outside, I said to meself, Ah, Marcus, there's Absalom gone and found all the cattle, what a good lad, now we can all go home and thaw ourselves by the fire, with the kine safe in their barns."

One ham-fist had fastened itself onto Absalom's jacket. The material, gathered between those stubby fingers, began to twist.

"And then I go out to congratulate you on a good job done, and begin to count the beasts. And how many do I count, Absalom, me bonny wee lad?" The voice had risen to a full-powered roar. While not possessed of a particularly deep voice, Marcus MacRannoch had enough lung-power for three ordinary-sized men.

"Fifteen!" he shouted, jerking the unfortunate Absalom to his tiptoes. "Fifteen beasts he finds, out of forty! And where are the rest o' them? Where? Out loose in the snow, to freeze to death!"

Murtagh had faded quietly back into the shadows in the corner while all this was going on. I was watching his face, though, and saw the sudden gleam of amusement in his eyes at these words. Suddenly I realized what he had started to tell me, and I knew where Rupert was now. Or, if not precisely where he was, at least what he was doing. And I began to hope a little.

It was full dark. The prison's lights below shone weakly through the snow like the lamps of a drowned ship. Waiting under the trees with my two companions, I mentally reviewed for the thousandth time everything that could go wrong.

Would MacRannoch carry out his part of the bargain? He'd have to, if he expected to get his prized purebred Highland cattle back. Would Sir Fletcher believe MacRannoch and order a search of the basement dungeons at once? Likely—the baronet wasn't a man to be taken lightly.

I had seen the cattle disappear, one shaggy beast at a time, down the ditch that led to the hidden postern door, under the expert driving of Rupert and his men. But would they be able to force the cattle through that door, singly or not? And if so, what would they do once inside; half-wild cattle, trapped suddenly in a stone corridor lit with glaring torchlight? Well, perhaps it would work. The corridor itself would be not unlike their stone-floored barn, including torches and the scent of humans. If they got so far, the plan might succeed. Randall himself was unlikely to call for help in the face of the invasion, for fear of having his own little games uncovered.

The handlers were to get away from the prison as fast as possible, once the beasts were well and truly launched on their chaotic path, and then to ride hell-for-leather for the MacKenzie lands. Randall didn't matter; what could he do alone, in the circumstances? But what if the noise attracted the rest of the prison garrison too soon? If Dougal had been reluctant to try to break his nephew *out* of Wentworth, I could imagine his choler if several MacKenzies were arrested for breaking *into* the place. I didn't want to be responsible for that, either, though Rupert had been more than willing to take the risk. I bit my thumb and tried to comfort myself, thinking of the tons of solid, sound-muffling granite that separated the dungeons from the prison quarters above.

Most worrying of all, of course, was the fear that everything might work, and might be still too late. Waiting hangsman or no, Randall might go too far. I knew too well, from stories told by returning soldiers from POW camps, that nothing is easier than for a prisoner to die by “accident,” and the body be conveniently disposed of before embarrassing official questions can be asked. Even if questions *were* asked, and Randall found out, it would be small comfort to me—and to Jamie.

I had been resolutely keeping myself from imagining the possible uses of the homely objects on the table of that room. But I could not keep from seeing over and over the bone-ends of that shattered finger pressing into the table. I rubbed my own knuckles hard against the saddle leather, trying to erase the image. I felt a slight burning, and pulled off the glove to examine the grazes left across my hand by the wolf’s teeth. Not bad, no more than a few scratches, with one small puncture where a cusp had penetrated the leather. I licked the wound absently. It was little use telling myself that I had done my best. I had done the only possible thing, but knowing it didn’t make the waiting easier.

At last, we heard a faint, confused shouting from the direction of the prison. One of the MacRannoch men put a hand on the bridle of my horse and motioned toward the shelter of the trees. The snow was much lighter on the ground and the flurries diminished under the interlaced branches of the grove, thin lines of snow stark and sudden on the rocky leaf-strewn ground. While the snow fell less thickly in here, visibility was still so poor that tree trunks a few feet away loomed surprisingly as I walked my horse restlessly around the small clearing, trunks springing up black in the pinkish light.

Muffled by the heavy snow, the approaching hoofbeats were almost upon us before we heard them. The two MacRannoch men drew their pistols and reined their horses up close to the trees, waiting, but I had picked up the dull lowing of cattle, and spurred my horse forward out of the grove.

Sir Marcus MacRannoch, distinguishable by his piebald mount and his bearskin cloak, was leading the way up the slope, snow spurting in small explosions from under the hooves of his horse. He was followed by several men, all in high good humor, from the sound of it. More of his men rode further back, chivvying the milling herd of cattle from behind, driving the band of bewildered beasts around the base of the hill, toward their well-earned shelter in the MacRannoch barns.

MacRannoch reined up beside me, laughing heartily. “I’ve to thank ye, Mistress Fraser,” he shouted through the snow, “for a most entertaining evening.” His earlier suspicion had vanished, and he greeted me with the utmost geniality. His eyebrows and mustache coated with snow, he looked like Father Christmas on a spree. Taking my bridle, he led my horse back into the quieter air of the grove. He waved my two companions down the hill to help with the cattle, then dismounted and swung me down from my saddle, still laughing to himself.

“Ye should ha’ seen it!” he chortled, hugging himself in ecstasy. “Sir Fletcher went red as a robin’s breast when I pushed in in the midst of his dinner, shouting that he was concealing stolen property on his premises. And then when we got below-stairs and he heard the beasts bellowin’ like thunder, I thought he’d dirtied his breeches. He—” I shook his arm impatiently.

“Never mind Sir Fletcher’s breeches. Did you find my husband?”

MacRannoch sobered a bit, wiping his eyes with his sleeve. “Oh, aye. We found him.”

“Is he all right?” I spoke calmly, though I wanted to scream.

MacRannoch nodded toward the trees behind me, and I whirled to see a rider making his way carefully through the branches, a bulky cloth-covered shape draped across the saddlebow in front of him. I dashed forward, followed by MacRannoch, explaining helpfully.

“He’s no deid, or at least he wasn’t when we found him. Been mistreated a good bit, though, poor laddie.” I had pushed aside the cloth over Jamie’s head, and was anxiously examining him as best I could, with the horse fidgeting from the excitement of the cold ride and the extra burden. I could see dark bruises and feel stiff patches of blood in the rumpled hair, but could tell little more in the dim light. I thought I could feel a pulse in the icy neck, but wasn’t sure.

MacRannoch caught my elbow and pulled me away. “We’ll do best to get him inside quick, lass. Come with me. Hector will bring him along to the house.”

In the main drawing room of Eldridge Manor, MacRannoch's home, Hector humped his burden onto the rug before the fire. Seizing one corner of the blanket, he unrolled it carefully, and a limp, naked figure flopped out onto the pink and yellow flowers of Lady Annabelle MacRannoch's pride and joy.

To do the Lady Annabelle credit, she didn't seem to notice the blood soaking into her expensive Aubusson rug. A birdlike woman in her early forties, arrayed like a goldfinch in a sunburst of yellow silk dressing gown, she had servants bustling in all directions with a brisk clap of her hands, and blankets, linen, hot water, and whisky appeared at my elbow almost before I had got my cloak off.

"Best turn him on his belly," advised Sir Marcus, pouring out two large whiskies. "He's had his back flayed, and it must feel fierce to lie on it. Not that he looks like he feels anything, much," he added, peering closely at Jamie's ashen face and sealed, bluish eyelids. "You're sure he's still alive?"

"Yes," I answered shortly, hoping I was right. I struggled to pull Jamie over. Unconsciousness seemed to have tripled his weight. MacRannoch lent a hand, and we got him positioned on a blanket, back to the fire.

A rapid triage having established that he was in fact alive, missing no body parts, and not in immediate danger of bleeding to death, I could afford to make a less hurried inventory of the damage.

"I can send for a physician," said Lady Annabelle, looking dubiously at the corpselike figure on her hearth, "but I doubt he can get here under an hour; it's snowing something fierce out." The reluctance in her tone was only partly on account of the snow, I thought. A physician would make one more dangerous witness to the presence of an escaped criminal in her home.

"Don't bother," I said absently, "I am a physician." Disregarding the looks of surprise from both MacRannochs, I knelt beside what was left of my husband, covered him with blankets and began to apply cloths soaked in hot water to the outlying parts. My chief concern was to get him warm; the blood from his back was a slow ooze, which could be dealt with later.

Lady Annabelle faded into the distance, her high goldfinch's voice summoning, beckoning, and arranging. Her spouse sank down on his haunches beside me, and began to rub Jamie's frozen feet in a businesslike way between large blunt-fingered hands, pausing occasionally to sip his whisky.

Turning back the blankets in bits, I surveyed the damage. He had been finely striped from nape to knees with something like a coachwhip, the weals crisscrossing neatly like hemstitching. The sheer orderliness of the damage, speaking as it did of a deliberation that reveled in each punishing stroke, made me feel sick with rage.

Something heavier, perhaps a cane, had been used with less restraint across his shoulders, cutting so deeply in spots that a gleam of bone showed over one shoulderblade. I pressed a thick pad of lint gently over the worst of the mess and went on with the examination.

The spot on his left side where the mallet had struck was an ugly contused swelling, a black and purple patch bigger than Sir Marcus's hand. Broken ribs there for sure, but those too could wait. My attention was caught by the livid patches on neck and breast, where the skin was puckered, reddened and blistered. The edges of one such patch were charred, rimmed with white ash.

"What in hell did that?" Sir Marcus had completed his ministrations and was looking over my shoulder with deep interest.

"A hot poker." The voice was weak and indistinct; it was a moment before I realized that it was Jamie who had spoken. He raised his head with an effort, showing the reason for his difficult speech; the lower lip was badly bitten on one side and puffed like a beesting.

With considerable presence of mind, Sir Marcus put a hand behind Jamie's neck and pressed the beaker of whisky to his lips. Jamie winced as the spirit stung his torn mouth, but drained the beaker before laying his head down again. His eyes slanted up at me, slightly filmed with pain and whisky, but alight with amusement nonetheless. "Cows?" he asked, "Was it really cows, or was I dreaming?"

“Well, it was all I could manage in the time,” I said, beaming in my relief at seeing him alive and conscious. I placed a hand on his head, turning it to inspect a large bruise over the cheekbone. “You look bloody awful. How do you feel?” I asked, from force of long-held habit.

“Alive.” He struggled up onto one elbow to accept with a nod a second beaker of whisky from Sir Marcus.

“Do you think you should drink so much all at once?” I asked, trying to examine his pupils for signs of concussion. He foiled me by closing his eyes and tilting his head back.

“Yes,” he said, handing back the empty beaker to Sir Marcus, who bore it back in the direction of the decanter.

“Now, that’ll be enough for the present, Marcus.” Lady Annabelle, reappearing like the sun in the east, stopped her husband with a commanding chirp. “The lad needs hot strong tea, not more whisky.” The tea followed her processionally in a silver pot, borne by a maidservant whose air of natural superiority was unimpaired by the fact that she was still attired in her nightdress.

“Hot strong tea with plenty of sugar in it,” I amended.

“And perhaps a wee tot of whisky as well,” said Sir Marcus, neatly removing the lid of the teapot as it passed and adding a generous dollop from his decanter. Accepting the steaming cup gratefully, Jamie raised it in mute tribute to Sir Marcus before cautiously bringing the hot liquid to his mouth. His hand shook badly, and I wrapped my own around his fingers to guide the cup.

More servants were bringing in a portable camp bed, a mattress, more blankets, more bandages and hot water, and a large wooden chest containing the household’s medical supplies.

“I thought we had best work here before the fire,” Lady Annabelle explained in her charming bird-voice. “There’s more light, and it’s far the warmest place in the house.”

At her direction, two of the larger menservants each seized an end of the blanket under Jamie and transferred it smoothly, contents and all, to the camp bed, now set up before the fire, where another servant was industriously poking the night-banked coals and feeding the growing blaze. The maid who had brought in the tea was efficiently lighting the wax tapers in the branched candelabra on the sideboard. Despite her songbird appearance, the Lady Annabelle plainly had the soul of a master-sergeant.

“Yes, now that he’s awake, the sooner the better,” I said. “Have you a flat board about two feet long,” I asked, “a stout strap, and perhaps some small straight flat sticks, about so long?” I held my fingers apart, measuring a length of four inches or so. One of the servants disappeared into the shadows, flicking out of sight like a djinn to do my bidding.

The whole house seemed magical, perhaps because of the contrast between the howling cold outside and the luxurious warmth within, or maybe only because of the relief of seeing Jamie safe, after so many hours of fear and worry.

Heavy dark furniture gleamed with polish in the lamplight, silver shone on the sideboard, and a collection of delicate glass and china ornamented the mantelpiece, in bizarre contrast to the bloody, bedraggled figure before it.

No questions were asked. We were Sir Marcus’s guests, and Lady Annabelle behaved as though it were an everyday occurrence to have people come and bleed on the carpet at midnight. It occurred to me for the first time that such a visit might have happened before.

“Verra nasty,” said Sir Marcus, examining the smashed hand with an expertise born of the battlefield. “And wretched painful, too, I expect. Still, it’s no going to kill ye, is it?” He straightened up and addressed me in confidential tones.

“I thought it might be worse than this, given what ye told me. Except the ribs and hand, there’s no bones broken, and the rest will heal fine. I’d say maybe ye were lucky, lad.”

There was a faint snort from the recumbent figure on the bed.

“I suppose ye could call it luck. They meant to be hanging me in the morning.” He moved his head restlessly on the pillow, trying to look up at Sir Marcus. “Did ye know that … sir?” he added, catching sight of Sir Marcus’s embroidered waistcoat, with its coat of arms worked in silver stitchery among the pigeons and roses.

MacRannoch waved a hand, dismissing this minor detail.

“Weel, if he meant to be keepin’ ye presentable for the hangsman, he went a bit far on your back, then,” Sir Marcus remarked, removing the soaked lint and replacing it with a fresh pad.

“Aye. He lost his head a bit when … when he …” Jamie struggled to get the words out, then gave it up as a bad job and turned his face to the fire, eyes closed. “God, I’m tired,” he said.

We let him rest until the manservant materialized by my elbow with the splints I had requested. Then I carefully picked up the smashed right hand, bringing it into the candlelight for examination.

It would have to be set, and as soon as possible. The injured muscles were already clawing the fingers inward. I felt hopeless as I saw the full extent of the damage. But if he was ever to have any use of the hand again, it would have to be attempted.

Lady Annabelle had hung back during my examination, watching interestedly. When I set the hand down, she stepped forward and opened the small chest of medical supplies.

“I suppose you’ll be wanting the boneset, and perhaps the cherry bark. I don’t know …” She eyed Jamie doubtfully. “Leeches, do you think?” Her well-kept hand hovered over a small lidded jar filled with murky liquid.

I shuddered and shook my head. “No, I don’t think so; not just now. What I could really use … do you by chance have any sort of opiate?” I sank to my knees beside her to pore over the contents of the box.

“Oh, yes!” Her hand went unerringly to a small green flask. “Flowers of laudanum,” she read from the label. “Will that do?”

“Perfect.” I accepted the flask gratefully.

“All right, then,” I said briskly to Jamie, pouring a small amount of the odorous liquid into a glass, “you’ll need to sit up just long enough to swallow this. Then you’ll go to sleep and stay that way for a good long time.” In fact, I had some doubts as to the advisability of administering laudanum on top of such a quantity of whisky, but the alternative—reconstructing that hand while he was conscious—was unthinkable. I tipped the bottle to pour a bit more.

Jamie’s good hand on my arm stopped me.

"I don't want drugs," he said firmly. "Just perhaps a wee drop more of whisky"—he hesitated, tongue touching the bitten lip—"and maybe something to bite down on."

Sir Marcus, hearing this, crossed to the lovely glowing Sheraton desk in the corner and began to rummage. He returned in a moment with a small piece of well-worn leather. Looking more closely, I could see the dozens of overlapping semicircular indentations in the thick leather—toothmarks, I realized with a shock.

"Here," Sir Marcus said helpfully. "I used this myself at St. Simone; got me through it while I had a musket ball dug out of my leg."

I looked on, open-mouthed, as Jamie took the leather with a nod of thanks, smoothing his thumb over the marks. I spoke slowly, stunned. "You actually expect me to set nine broken bones while you're *awake*?"

"Yes," he said briefly, placing the leather between his teeth and biting down experimentally. He shifted it back and forth, seeking a comfortable grip.

Overcome by the sheer theatricality of it, the precarious control I had been hoarding suddenly snapped.

"Will you stop being such a goddamned frigging hero!" I blazed at Jamie. "We all know what you've done, you don't have to prove how much you can stand! Or do you think we'll all fall apart if you're not in charge, telling everyone what to do every minute? Who in bloody hell do you think you are, frigging John Wayne!?"

There was an awkward silence. Jamie looked at me, openmouthed. Finally he spoke.

"Claire," he said softly, "we're perhaps two miles from Wentworth prison. I'm meant to hang in the morning. No matter what's happened to Randall, the English are going to notice I'm gone soon."

I bit my lip. What he said was true. My inadvertent release of the other prisoners might confuse the issue for a time, but eventually a tally would be made, and a search begun. And thanks to the flamboyant method of escape I had chosen, attention was bound to be focused on Eldridge Manor in short order.

“If we’re lucky,” the quiet voice continued, “the snow will delay a search ’til we’ve gone. If not …” He shrugged, staring into the flames. “Claire, I’ll not let them take me back. And to be drugged, to lie here helpless if they come, and maybe wake up chained in a cell again.… Claire, I couldna bear it.”

There were tears blurring on my lower lashes. I stared wide-eyed at him, not wanting to blink and let them run down my cheeks.

He closed his eyes against the fire’s heat. The glow lent a spurious look of ruddy health to the white cheeks. I could see the long muscles in his throat work as he swallowed.

“Don’t cry, Sassenach,” he said, so softly I could hardly hear him. He reached out and patted my leg with his good hand, trying to be reassuring. “I imagine we’re safe enough, lass. If I thought likely we’d be captured, I’d certainly no waste one of my last hours having you mend a hand I’d not be going to need. Go and fetch Murtagh for me. Then bring me a drink and we’ll get on wi’ it.”

Busy at the table with the medical preparations, I couldn’t hear what he said to Murtagh, but I saw the two heads close together for a moment, then Murtagh’s sinewy hand gently touch the younger man’s ear—one of the few uninjured spots available.

With a brief nod of farewell, Murtagh sidled toward the door. Like a rat, I thought, darting along the wainscoting, not to be noticed. I was behind him as he went out into the hall, and grabbed him by the plaid just before he escaped altogether through the front door.

“What did he tell you?” I demanded fiercely. “Where are you going?”

The dark stringy little man hesitated for a moment, but answered evenly, “I’m to go wi’ young Absalom toward Wentworth and keep watch in that direction. If any Redcoats are headin’ this way, I’m to beat them here, and if there’s time, I’m to see you and him both hidden, then ride off with three horses, to draw followers away from the Manor. There’s a cellar; it might do for hiding, if the search isna too thorough.”

“And if there isn’t time to hide?” I eyed him narrowly, daring him not to answer.

"Then I'm to kill him, and take you wi' me," he answered promptly. "Willing or no," he added, with an evil grin, and turned to go.

"Just a minute!" I spoke sharply and he stopped. "Do you have an extra dirk?"

His scruffy brows shot upward, but his hand went to his belt without hesitation.

"Do ye need one? Here?" His glance took in the opulence and serenity of the entrance hall, with its painted Adam ceiling and linenfold paneling.

My dagger-pocket was shredded beyond use. I took the proffered dagger, and slid it between kirtle and bodice in the back, as I had seen the Gypsy women do.

"One never knows, does one?" I said evenly.

* * *

Preparations complete, I probed as gently as possible, assessing harm, deciding what must be done. Jamie drew in his breath sharply when I touched an especially bad spot, but kept his eyes closed as I felt my way slowly along each separate bone and joint, noting the position of each fracture and dislocation. "Sorry," I murmured.

I took his good hand as well, and felt carefully down each finger of both the good hand and the injured, making comparisons. With neither X rays nor experience to guide me, I would have to depend on my own sensitivity to find and realign the smashed bones.

The first joint was all right, but the second phalange was cracked, I thought. I pressed harder to determine the length and direction of the crack. The damaged hand stayed motionless in my fingers, but the good one made a small, involuntary clenching gesture.

"I'm sorry," I murmured once more.

The good hand pulled suddenly out of my grasp as Jamie raised himself on one elbow. Spitting out the leather gag, he regarded me with an expression between amusement and exasperation.

"Sassenach," he said, "if you apologize each time ye hurt me, it's going to be a verra long night—and it's lasted some time already."

I must have looked stricken, because he started to reach toward me, then stopped, wincing at the movement. He controlled the pain, though, and spoke firmly. “I know you dinna wish to hurt me. But you’ve no more choice about it than I have, and there’s no need for more than one of us to suffer for it. You do what’s needed, and I’ll scream if I have to.”

Replacing the leather strip, he bared his clenched teeth ferociously at me, then slowly and deliberately crossed his eyes. This made him look so like an addlepated tiger that I burst into half-hysterical laughter before I could stop myself.

I clapped my hands over my mouth, cheeks flaming as I saw the astonished looks on the faces of Lady Annabelle and the servants, who, standing behind Jamie, naturally could see nothing of his face. Sir Marcus, who had caught a brief glimpse from his seat at the bedside, grinned in his spade-shaped beard.

“Besides,” said Jamie, spitting out the leather once more, “if the English turn up after *this,* I expect I’ll beg them to take me back.”

I picked up the leather, put it between his teeth and pushed his head down again.

“Clown,” I said. “Know-all. Sodding hero.” But he had relieved me of a burden, and I worked more calmly. If I still noticed every twitch and grimace, at least I no longer felt it as badly.

I began to lose myself in the concentration of the job, directing all my awareness to my fingertips, assessing each point of damage and deciding how best to draw the smashed bones back into alignment. Luckily the thumb had suffered least; only a simple fracture of the first joint. That would heal clean. The second knuckle on the fourth finger was completely gone; I felt only a pulpy grating of bone chips when I rolled it gently between my own thumb and forefinger, making Jamie groan. Nothing could be done about that, save splint the joint and hope for the best.

The compound fracture of the middle finger was the worst to contemplate. The finger would have to be pulled straight, drawing the protruding bone back through the torn flesh. I had seen this done before—under general anesthesia, with the guidance of X rays.

To this point, it had been more a mechanical problem than a real one, deciding how to reconstruct a smashed, disembodied hand. I was now smack up against the reason that physicians seldom treat members of their own families. Some jobs in medicine require a certain ruthlessness to complete successfully; detachment is necessary to inflict pain in the process of effecting a healing.

Quietly, Sir Marcus had brought up a stool by the side of the bed. He settled his bulk comfortably as I finished the strapping, and gripped Jamie's good hand with his own.

"Squeeze all ye like, lad," he said.

Divested of the bearskin, and with his grizzled locks neatly clubbed and laced back, MacRannoch was no longer the intimidating wildman of the forest, but appeared as a soberly clad man of late middle age, with a neatly trimmed spade-beard and a military bearing. Nervous at what I was about to attempt, I found his solid presence comforting.

I drew a deep breath and prayed for detachment.

* * *

It was a long, horrible, nerve-wracking job, though not without its fascination. Some parts, such as the splinting of the two fingers with simple fractures, went quite easily. Others did not. Jamie did scream—loudly—when I set his middle finger, exerting the considerable force necessary to draw the ends of splintered bone back through the skin. I hesitated for an instant, unnerved, but "Go on, lass!" Sir Marcus said with quiet urgency.

I remembered suddenly what Jamie had said to me, the night Jenny's baby was born: *I can bear pain, myself, but I could not bear yours. That would take more strength than I have*. He was right; it did take strength; I hoped that each of us had enough.

Jamie's face was turned away from me, but I could see the jaw muscles bunch as he clenched his teeth harder on the leather strip. I clenched my own teeth and did go on; the sharp bone end slowly disappeared back through the skin and the finger straightened with agonizing reluctance, leaving us both trembling.

As I worked, I began to lose consciousness of anything outside the job I was doing. Jamie groaned occasionally, and we had to stop twice briefly in order for him to be sick, retching up mostly whisky, as he had taken little food in prison. For the most part, though, he kept up a low, constant muttering in Gaelic, forehead pressed hard against Sir Marcus's knees. I couldn't tell through the leather gag whether he was cursing or praying.

All five fingers eventually lay straight as new pins, stiff as sticks in their bandaged splints. I was afraid of infection, particularly from the torn middle finger, but otherwise was fairly sure they would heal well. By good luck, only the one joint had been badly damaged. It would likely leave him with a stiff ring finger, but the others might function normally—in time. There was nothing I could do about the cracked metacarpal bones or the puncture wound except apply an antiseptic wash and a poultice and pray against a tetanus infection. I stepped back, shaking in every limb from the strain of the night, my bodice soaked with sweat from the fire's heat at my back.

Lady Annabelle was at my side at once, guiding me to a chair and pressing a cup of tea, laced with whisky, into my shaking hands. Sir Marcus, as good an operating-room assistant as any physician could have, was unfastening Jamie's captive arm and rubbing the marks where the strap had bitten deep into straining flesh. The older man's hand was red, I saw, where Jamie had gripped it.

I was not aware of having nodded off, but suddenly jerked, my head snapping on my neck. Lady Annabelle was urging me upward, soft hand under my elbow. "Come along, my dear. You're all in; you must have your own hurts seen to, and sleep a bit."

I shook her off as politely as possible. "No, I can't. I must finish …" My words trailed off into the fuzziness of my mind, as Sir Marcus smoothly took the vinegar bottle and rag from my hand.

"I'll take care of the rest," he said. "I've some experience wi' field dressing, ye understand." Flipping back the blankets, he began to swab the blood from the whip cuts, moving with a brisk gentleness that was impressive. Catching my eye, he grinned, beard tilted jauntily. "I've cleansed a good many stripes in my time," he said. "And applied a few too. These are naught, lass; they'll heal in a few days." Knowing he was right, I walked up to the head of the cot.

Jamie was awake, grimacing slightly at the sting of the antiseptic solution on the raw cuts, but his eyelids were heavy and the blue eyes darkened with pain and weariness.

"Go and sleep, Sassenach. I'll do."

Whether he would or not, I didn't know. It was clear, however, that I wouldn't do, or not for much longer. I was swaying with exhaustion and the scratches on my legs were beginning to burn and ache. Absalom had cleansed them for me at the cottage, but they needed salving.

I nodded numbly and turned in response to Lady Annabelle's gently insistent pressure on my elbow.

Halfway up the stairs, I remembered that I had forgotten to tell Sir Marcus how to bandage the cuts. The deep wounds over the shoulders would have to be bound and padded, to allow for wearing a shirt over them when we made our escape. But the lighter lash-marks should be left in the open air to scab over. I took a quick look at the guestroom Lady Annabelle showed me, then excused myself with a word and stumbled back down the stairs toward the drawing room.

I paused in the shadowed doorway, Lady Annabelle behind me. Jamie's eyes were closed; apparently he had fallen into a doze brought on by whisky and fatigue. The blankets were thrown back, rendered unnecessary by the heat of the fire. Sir Marcus casually rested a hand on Jamie's bare rump as he reached across the bed for a rag. The effect was electric. Jamie's back arched sharply, the muscles of his buttocks clenched tightly and he let out an involuntary sound of protest, flinging himself backward in spite of the shattered ribs, to glare up at Sir Marcus with startled, dazed eyes. Startled himself, Sir Marcus stood stock-still for a second, then leaned forward and took Jamie by the arm, gently settling him facedown once more. Thoughtfully he drew a finger very gingerly across Jamie's flesh. He rubbed his fingers together, leaving an oily sheen visible in the firelight.

"Oh," he said matter-of-factly. The old soldier drew the blanket up to Jamie's waist, and I saw the tense shoulders relax slightly under their dressing.

Sir Marcus seated himself companionably near Jamie's head and poured another pair of whiskies. "At least he had the consideration to grease ye a bit beforehand," he observed, handing one beaker to Jamie, who heaved himself laboriously up on his elbows to accept it.

"Aye, well. I dinna think it was so much for *my* convenience," he said dryly.

Sir Marcus took a gulp of his drink and smacked his lips meditatively. There was no sound for a moment save the crackle of flames, but neither Lady Annabelle nor I made any motion to enter the room.

"If it's any comfort to ye," Sir Marcus said suddenly, eyes fixed on the decanter, "he's dead."

"You're sure?" Jamie's tone was unreadable.

"I dinna see how anybody could live after bein' trampled flat by thirty half-ton beasts. He peeked out into the corridor to see what was causin' the noise, then tried to go back when he saw. A horn caught him by the sleeve and pulled him out, and I saw him go down next to the wall. Sir Fletcher an' I were on the stair, keepin' out o' the way. O' course Sir Fletcher was rare excited, and sent some men after 'im, but they couldna get anywhere near, with all the horns pokin' and beasts shovin', and the torches shook down from the wall wi' the ruckus. Christ, man, ye should ha' seen it!" Sir Marcus hooted at the memory, clutching the decanter by the neck. "Your wife's a rare lass, and no mistake, lad!" Snorting, he poured out another glass and gulped, choking a bit as the laugh interfered with the swallow.

"Anyway," he resumed, pounding himself on the chest, "by the time we'd cleared the cattle out, there was no much left but a rag doll rolled in blood. Sir Fletcher's men carried him awa', but if he was still livin' then, he didna last long. A bit more, lad?"

"Aye, thanks."

There was a short silence, broken by Jamie. "No, I canna say it's much comfort to me, but thank ye for tellin' me." Sir Marcus looked at him shrewdly.

"Mmphm. Ye're no goin' to forget it," he said abruptly. "Don't bother to try. If ye can, let it heal like the rest o' your wounds. Don't pick at it, and it'll mend clean." The old warrior held up a knotted forearm, from which the sleeve had been pushed back during his ministrations, to show the scar of a jagged tear running from elbow to wrist. "Scars are nothin' to trouble ye."

"Aye, well. Some scars, maybe." Apparently reminded of something, Jamie struggled to turn onto his side. Sir Marcus set down his glass with an exclamation.

"Here, lad, be careful! Ye'll get a rib-end through the lung, next thing." He helped Jamie balance on his right elbow, wadding a blanket behind to prop him there.

"I need a wee knife," said Jamie, breathing heavily. "A sharp one, if it's handy." Without question, Sir Marcus lumbered to the gleaming French walnut sideboard and rummaged through the drawers with a prodigious clatter, emerging at last with a pearl-handled fruit knife. He thrust it into Jamie's sound left hand and sat down again with a grunt, resuming his glass.

"Ye don't think ye have enough scars?" he inquired. "Going to add a few more?"

"Just one." Jamie balanced precariously on one elbow, chin pressed on his chest as he awkwardly aimed the razor-sharp knife under his left breast. Sir Marcus's hand shot out, a bit unsteadily, and gripped Jamie's wrist.

"Best let me help ye, man. Ye'll fall on it in a moment." After a moment's pause, Jamie reluctantly surrendered the knife and lay back against the wadded blanket. He touched his chest an inch or two below the nipple.

"There." Sir Marcus reached to the sideboard and snagged a lamp, setting it on the stool he had vacated. At this distance, I couldn't see what he was peering at; it looked like a small red burn, roughly circular in shape. He took another deliberate pull at his whisky glass, then set it down next to the lamp and pressed the tip of the knife against Jamie's chest. I must have made an involuntary movement, because the Lady Annabelle clutched my sleeve with a murmured caution. The knife point pressed in and twisted suddenly, flicking away in the motion one uses to cut a bad spot out of a ripe peach. Jamie grunted, once, and a thin stream of red ran down the slope of his belly to stain the blanket. He rolled onto his stomach, stanching the wound against the mattress.

Sir Marcus laid down the fruit knife. "As soon as ye're able, man," he advised, "take your wife to bed, and let her comfort ye. Women like to do that," he said, grinning toward the shadowed doorway, "God knows why."

Lady Annabelle said softly, "Come away now, dear. He's better alone for a bit." I decided that Sir Marcus could manage the bandaging by himself, and stumbled after her up the narrow stair to my room.

* * *

I woke with a start from a dream of endless winding stairs, with horror lurking at the bottom. Tiredness dragged at my back and my legs ached, but I sat up in my borrowed nightdress and groped for the candle and flintbox. I felt uneasy, so far from Jamie. What if he needed me? Worse, what if the English did come, while he was alone below, unarmed? I pressed my face against the cold casement, reassured by the steady hiss of snow against the panes. While the storm continued, we were likely safe. I pulled on a bedgown, and picking up candle and dirk, made my way to the stair.

The house was quiet, save for the fire's crackle. Jamie was asleep, or at least had his eyes closed, face turned to the fire. I sat down on the hearthrug, quietly, so as not to wake him. This was the first time we had been alone together since those few desperate minutes in the dungeon of Wentworth Prison. It felt as though that were many years ago. I studied Jamie carefully, as though inspecting a stranger.

He seemed not too bad physically, all things considered, but I worried nonetheless. He had had enough whisky during the surgery to fell a draft horse, and a good bit of it was plainly still inside him, despite the retching.

Jamie was not my first hero. The men moved too quickly through the field hospital, as a rule, for the nurses to become well acquainted with them, but now and again you would see a man who talked too little or joked too much, who held himself more stiffly than pain and loneliness would account for.

And I knew, roughly, what could be done for them. If there was time, and if they were the kind who talked to keep the dark at bay, you sat with them and listened. If they were silent, you touched them often in passing, and watched for the unguarded moment, when you might draw them outside of themselves and hold them while they exorcised their demons. If there was time. And if there wasn't, then you jabbed them with morphine, and hoped they would manage to find someone else to listen, while you passed on to a man whose wounds were visible.

Jamie would talk to someone, sooner or later. There was time. But I hoped it wouldn't be me.

He was uncovered to the waist, and I leaned forward to examine his back. It was a remarkable sight. Barely a hand's thickness separated the welted cuts, inflicted with a regularity that boggled the mind. He must have stood like a guardsman while it was done. I stole a quick glance at his wrists—unmarked. He had kept his word then, not to struggle. And had stood unmoving through the ordeal, paying the ransom agreed on for my life.

I rubbed my eyes on my sleeve. He wouldn't thank me, I thought, for blubbering over his prostrate form. I shifted my weight with a soft rustle of skirts. He opened his eyes at the sound, but did not seem particularly haunted. He gave me a smile, faint and tired, but a real one. I opened my mouth, and suddenly realized I had no idea what to say to him. Thanks were impossible. "How do you feel?" was ridiculous; obviously he felt like hell. While I considered, he spoke first.

"Claire? Are you all right, love?"

"Am *I* all right? My God, Jamie!" Tears stung my eyelids and I blinked hard, sniffing. He raised his good hand slowly, as though it were weighted with chains, and stroked my hair. He drew me toward him, but I pulled away, conscious for the first time what I must look like, face scratched and covered with tree sap, hair stiff with blotches of various unmentionable substances.

"Come here," he said. "I want to hold ye a moment."

"But I'm covered with blood and vomit," I protested, making a vain effort to tidy my hair.

He wheezed, the faint exhalation that was all his broken ribs would permit in the way of laughter. "Mother of God, Sassenach, it's my blood and my vomit. Come here."

His arm was comforting around my shoulders. I rested my head on the pillow next to his, and we sat in silence by the fire, drawing strength and peace from one another. His fingers gently touched the small wound under my jaw.

"I did not think ever to see ye again, Sassenach." His voice was low and a bit hoarse from whisky and screaming. "I'm glad you're here."

I sat up. "Not see me again! Why? Did you think I wouldn't get you out?"

He smiled, one-sided. "Weel, no, I didn't expect ye would. I thought if I said so, though, ye might get stubborn and refuse to go."

"*Me* get stubborn!" I said indignantly. "Look who's talking!"

There was a pause, which grew slightly awkward. There were things I should ask, necessary from the medical point of view, but rather touchy from the personal aspect. Finally, I settled for "How do you feel?"

His eyes were closed, shadowed and sunken in the candlelight, but the lines of the broad back were tense under the bandages. The wide, bruised mouth twitched, somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

"I don't know, Sassenach. I've never felt like this. I seem to want to do a number of things, all at once, but my mind's at war wi' me, and my body's turned traitor. I want to get out of here at once, and run as fast and as far as I can. I want to hit someone. God, I want to hit someone! I want to burn Wentworth Prison to the ground. I want to sleep."

"Stone doesn't burn," I said practically. "Maybe you'd better sleep, instead."

His good hand groped for mine and found it, and the mouth relaxed somewhat, though his eyes stayed closed.

"I want to hold you hard to me and kiss you, and never let you go. I want to take you to my bed and use you like a whore, 'til I forget that I exist. And I want to put my head in your lap and weep like a child."

The mouth turned up at one corner, and a blue eye opened slitwise.

"Unfortunately," he said, "I can't do any but the last of those without fainting or being sick again."

"Well, then, I suppose you'll just have to settle for that, and put the rest under the heading of future business," I said, laughing a little.

It took a bit of shifting, and he nearly was sick again, but at last I was seated on his cot, my back against the wall, and his head resting on my thigh.

"What was it Sir Marcus cut from your breast?" I asked. "A brand?" I said softly, as he gave me no reply. The bright head moved slightly in affirmation.

"A signet, with his initials." Jamie laughed shortly. "It's enough I'll carry his marks for the rest of my life, without letting him sign me, like a bloody painting."

His head lay heavy on my thigh and his breathing eased at last in drowsy exhalations. The white bandages on his hand were ghostly against the dark blanket. I gently traced a burn mark on his shoulder, gleaming faintly with sweet oil.

"Jamie?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you badly hurt?" Awake, he glanced from his bandaged hand to my face. His eyes closed and he began to shake. Alarmed, I thought I had triggered some unbearable memory, until I realized that he was laughing, hard enough to force tears from the corners of his eyes.

"Sassenach," he said at length, gasping, "I've maybe six square inches of skin left that are not bruised, burned, or cut. Am I *hurt*?" And he shook again, making the felted mattress rustle and squeak.

Somewhat crossly, I said, "I *meant*—" but he stopped me by putting his good hand over mine and bringing it to his lips.

“I know what ye meant, Sassenach,” he said, turning his head to look up at me. “Never worry, the six inches that are left are all between my legs.”

I appreciated the effort it took to make the joke, feeble as it was. I slapped his mouth lightly. “You’re drunk, James Fraser,” I said. I paused a moment. “Six, eh?”

“Aye, well. Maybe seven, then. Oh, God, Sassenach, dinna make me laugh again, my ribs won’t stand it.” I wiped his eyes with a fold of my skirt and fed him a sip of water, holding his head up with my knee.

“That isn’t what I meant, anyway,” I said.

Serious then, he reached for my hand again and squeezed it.

“I know,” he said. “Ye needna be delicate about it.” He drew a cautious breath, and winced at the results. “I was right, it did hurt less than flogging.” He closed his eyes. “But it was much less enjoyable.” A quick flash of bitter humor stirred one corner of his mouth. “At least I’ll not be costive for a bit.” I flinched, and he gritted his teeth, breathing in short, reedy gasps.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach. I … didna think I’d mind it so much. What you mean—that—it’s all right. I’m not damaged.”

I made an effort to keep my own voice steady and matter-of-fact. “You don’t have to tell me about it, if you don’t want to. If it might ease you, though …” My voice trailed off in embarrassed silence.

“I don’t *want* to.” His voice was suddenly bitter and emphatic. “I don’t want ever to think about it again, but short of cutting my throat, I think I have not got a choice about it. Nay, lass, I dinna want to tell ye about it, any more than ye want to hear it … but I think I am going to have to drag it all out before it chokes me.” The words came out now in a burst of bitterness.

“He wanted me to crawl and beg, and by Christ, I did so. I told ye once, Sassenach, ye can break anyone if you’re willing to hurt them enough. Well, he was willing. He made me crawl, and he made me beg; he made me do worse things than that, and before the end he made me want verra badly to be dead.”

He was silent for a long moment, looking into the fire, then heaved a deep sigh, grimacing at the pain.

"I wish ye could ease me, Sassenach, I do wish it most fervently, for I've little of ease in me now. But it's not like a poisoned thorn, where if ye found the right grip, ye could draw it clean out." His good hand rested on my knee. He flexed the fingers and spread them flat, ruddy in the firelight. "It's not even like a brokenness anywhere. If ye could mend it bit by bit, like ye did my hand, I'd stand the pain gladly." He bunched the fingers into a fist and rested it on my leg, frowning at it.

"It's … difficult to explain. It's … it's like … I think it's as though everyone has a small place inside themselves, maybe, a private bit that they keep to themselves. It's like a little fortress, where the most private part of you lives—maybe it's your soul, maybe just that bit that makes you yourself and not anyone else." His tongue probed his swollen lip unconsciously as he thought.

"You don't show that bit of yourself to anyone, usually, unless sometimes to someone that ye love greatly." The hand relaxed, curling around my knee. Jamie's eyes were closed again, lids sealed against the light.

"Now, it's like … like my own fortress has been blown up with gunpowder—there's nothing left of it but ashes and a smoking rooftree, and the little naked thing that lived there once is out in the open, squeaking and whimpering in fear, tryin' to hide itself under a blade of grass or a bit o' leaf, but … but not … makin' m-much of a job of it." His voice broke, and he turned his head so that his face was hidden in my skirt. Helpless, I could do nothing but stroke his hair.

He suddenly raised his head, face strained as though it would break apart along the seams of the bones. "I've been close to death a few times, Claire, but I've never really *wanted* to die. This time I did. I …" His voice cracked and he stopped speaking, clutching my knee hard. When he spoke again, his voice was high and oddly breathless, as though he had been running a long way.

"Claire, will you—I just—Claire, hold on to me. If I start to shake again now, I canna stop it. Claire, hold me!" He was in fact beginning to tremble violently, the shivering making him moan as it caught the splintered ribs. I was afraid to hurt him, but more afraid to let the shaking go on.

I crouched over him, wrapped my arms around his shoulders and held on as tightly as I could, rocking to and fro as though the comforting rhythm might break the racking spasms. I got one hand on the back of his neck and dug my fingers deep into the pillared muscles, willing the clenching to relax as I massaged the deep groove at the base of the skull. Finally the trembling eased, and his head fell forward onto my thigh, exhausted.

"I'm sorry," he said a minute later, in his normal voice. "I didna mean to go on so. The truth is I do hurt verra bad, and I am most awfully damn drunk. I'm no in much control of mysel'." For a Scot to admit, even privately, to being drunk, was some indication, I thought, of just how badly he did hurt.

"You need sleep," I said softly, still rubbing the back of his neck. "You need it badly." I used my fingers as best I could, gentling and pressing as Old Alec had showed me, and managed to ease him back into drowsiness.

"I'm cold," he murmured. There was a good fire, and several blankets on the bed, but his fingers were chilly to the touch.

"You're in shock," I said practically. "You've lost the hell of a lot of blood." I looked around, but MacRannochs and servants alike had all disappeared to their own beds. Murtagh, I assumed, was still out in the snow, keeping an eye out in the direction of Wentworth in case of pursuit. With a mental shrug for anyone's opinion of the proprieties, I stood up, stripped off the nightdress, and crawled under the blankets.

As gently as possible, I eased against him, giving him my warmth. He turned his face into my shoulder like a small boy. I stroked his hair, gentling him, rubbing the ridged columns of muscle at the back of his neck, avoiding the raw places. "Lay your head, then, man," I said, remembering Jenny and her boy.

Jamie gave a small grunt of amusement. "That's what my mother used to say to me," he murmured. "When I was a bairn."

"Sassenach," he said against my shoulder, a moment later.

"Mm?"

“Who in God’s name is John Wayne?”
“You are,” I said. “Go to sleep.”

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ESCAPE

His color was better in the morning, though the bruises had darkened through the night and now mottled a good part of his face. He sighed deeply, then stiffened with a groan and let his breath out much more cautiously.

"How do you feel?" I laid a hand on his head. Cool and damp. No fever, thank God.

He grimaced, eyes still closed. "Sassenach, if I've got one, it hurts." He extended his good hand, groping. "Help me up; I'm stiff as pudding."

The snow stopped at mid-morning. The sky was still grey as wool, threatening further flurries, but the threat of search from Wentworth was greater yet, so we set out from Eldridge Manor just before noon, heavily cloaked against the weather. Murtagh and Jamie bristled with arms beneath their cloaks. I carried nothing but my dagger, and that well hidden. Much against my own will, I was to pose as a kidnapped English hostage, should the worst happen.

"But they've seen me at the prison," I had argued. "Sir Fletcher already knows who I am."

"Aye." Murtagh was carefully loading the pistols, an array of balls, wadding, powder, patches, rods, and pouches neatly spread on Lady Annabelle's polished table, but looked up to nail me with a black glance. "That's just the point, lass. We must keep ye out o' Wentworth, no matter what. Do no one any good to have ye in there along wi' us."

He rammed a short rod down the mouth of a scroll-butted dag, punching the wad into place with hard, economical strokes. “Sir Fletcher willna be doin’ his own huntin’, not on a day like this. Any Redcoats we meet will likely not know ye. If we’re found out, ye mun say we forced ye along wi’ us unwillin’, and convince the Redcoats ye’ve nothin’ to do wi’ a pair o’ Scottish scalawags like me an’ yon ragtag.” He nodded at Jamie, balancing gingerly on a stool with a bowl of warm bread and milk.

Sir Marcus and I had padded Jamie’s hips and thighs as thickly as we could with linen bandages under a pair of worn breeches and hose, dark in color to hide any telltale blood spots that might seep through. Lady Annabelle had split one of her husband’s shirts down the back to accommodate the breadth of Jamie’s shoulders and the thickness of the bandage across them. Even so, the shirt would not meet across the front, and the ends of the strapping around his chest peeked through. He had refused to comb his hair, on grounds that even his scalp was sore, and he looked a wild and woolly sight, red spikes sticking up above a swollen purple face with one eye squeezed disreputably shut.

“If ye’re taken,” Sir Marcus chipped in, “tell them ye’re a guest of mine, kidnapped while riding near the estate. Make them bring ye to Eldridge for me to identify. That should convince ’em. We’ll tell ’em you’re a friend of Annabelle’s, from London.”

“And then get you safely out of here before Sir Fletcher comes round to offer his regards,” Annabelle added, practically.

Sir Marcus had offered us Hector and Absalom as escorts, but Murtagh pointed out that this would certainly implicate Eldridge, should we meet any English soldiers. So there were only the three of us, bundled against the cold, on the road toward Dingwall. I carried a fat purse and a note from the Master of Eldridge, one or both of which should insure our passage across the Channel.

It was hard going through the snow. Less than a foot deep, the treacherous white stuff hid rocks, holes, and other obstacles, making footing for the horses slippery and dangerous. Clods of snow and mud flew up with each step, spattering bellies and hocks, and clouds of horse-breath vanished steaming into the frozen air.

Murtagh led the way, following the faint depression that marked the road. I rode beside Jamie, to help if he should lose consciousness, though he was, at his own insistence, tied to his horse. Only his left hand was free, resting on the pistol looped to the saddle bow, concealed under his cloak.

We passed a few scattered bothies, smoke rising from the thatched roofs, but the inhabitants and their beasts seemed all within, secured against the cold. Here and there a lone man passed from cot to shed, carrying buckets or hay, but the road was deserted for the most part.

Two miles from Eldridge we passed under the shadow of Wentworth Castle, a grim bulk set in the hillside. The road was trampled here; traffic in and out did not cease even in the worst of weathers.

Our passage had been timed to coincide with the midday meal, in hopes that the sentries would be immersed in their pasties and ale. We plodded slowly past the short road that led to the gate, just a party of travelers with the ill-luck to be abroad on such a miserable day.

Once past the prison, we paused to rest the horses for a moment, in the shelter of a small pine grove. Murtagh bent to peer under the slouch hat that masked Jamie’s telltale hair.

“All right, lad? Ye’re quiet.”

Jamie lifted his head. His face was pale, and trickles of sweat ran down his neck, despite the icy wind, but he managed a half-hearted grin.

“I’ll do.”

“How do you feel?” I asked, anxious. He sat slumped in the saddle, without much sign of his usual erect grace. I got the other half of the grin.

“I’ve been trying to decide which hurts worst—my ribs, my hand, or my arse. Tryin’ to choose among them keeps my mind off my back.” He took a deep pull from the flask which Sir Marcus had thoughtfully provided, shuddered, and passed it to me. It was a good deal better than the raw spirit I had drunk on the road to

Leoch, but every bit as potent. We rode on, a small cheerful fire burning in my stomach.

The horses were laboring up a modest slope, snow spurting from their hooves, when I saw Murtagh's head jerk up. Following the direction of his gaze, I saw the Redcoat soldiers, four of them, mounted, at the top of the slope.

There was no help for it. We had been seen, and a shouted challenge echoed down the hill. There was no place to run. We were going to have to try to bluff it out. Without a backward glance, Murtagh spurred forward to meet them.

The corporal with the group was a middle-aged career soldier, erect in his winter greatcoat. He bowed politely to me, then turned his attention to Jamie.

"Your pardon, sir, madame. We have orders to stop all parties traveling this road, to inquire for details of prisoners lately escaped from Wentworth Prison."

Prisoners. So I *had* managed to release more than Jamie yesterday. I was glad of it, on various grounds. For one, they would dilute the search somewhat. Four against three was better odds than we might have expected.

Jamie didn't reply, but slouched farther forward, letting his head loll. I could see the gleam of his eyes beneath the hat brim; he wasn't unconscious. These must be men he knew; his voice would be recognized. Murtagh was edging his horse forward, between me and the soldiers.

"Aye, the master's a bit the worse for illness, sir, as ye can see," he said, obsequiously tugging his forelock. "Perhaps ye could point out the road toward Ballagh to me? I'm no convinced that we're headed right."

I wondered what on earth he was up to, until I caught his eye. His glance flickered back and down, then back to the soldier, so fast that the soldier would assume him to have been listening with rapt attention all the time. Was Jamie in danger of falling from the saddle? Pretending to adjust my bonnet, I glanced casually over my shoulder in the direction he had indicated, and nearly froze with shock.

Jamie was sitting upright, head bent to shadow his face. But blood was dripping gently from the tip of the stirrup under his foot, pocking the snow with gently steaming red pits.

Murtagh, pretending vast stupidity, had succeeded in drawing the soldiers ahead to the crest of the hill, so that they could point out that the road to Dingwall was the only road in sight, which ran down the other side of the hill. It ran through Ballagh, and straight toward the coast, still three miles away.

I slid hastily to the ground, yanking feverishly at my horse's girth strap. Floundering through the drifts, I kicked enough snow under the belly of Jamie's horse to obliterate the telltale drops. A quick look showed the soldiers apparently still engaged in argument with Murtagh, though one of them glanced down the hill at us, as though to insure that we had not wandered off. I gave a cheery wave, then as soon as the soldier turned his head, stooped and ripped off one of the three petticoats I was wearing. I whipped Jamie's cloak aside and stuffed the wadded petticoat under his thigh, ignoring his exclamation of pain. The cloak flipped back in place just in time for me to dash back to my own horse and be discovered fiddling with the girth when Murtagh and the Englishmen arrived.

"It seems to have worked its way loose," I explained guilelessly, batting my eyes at the nearest redcoat.

"Oh? And why are you not helping the lady?" he said to Jamie.

"My husband's not well," I said. "I can manage it myself, thank you."

The corporal seemed interested. "Sick, eh? What's the matter with you, then?" He urged his beast forward, staring closely under the slouch hat at Jamie's pale face. "Don't look well, I'll say that much. Take your hat off, fellow. What's the matter with your face?"

Jamie shot him through the folds of his cloak. The redcoat was no more than six feet away, and he toppled sideways out of the saddle before the stain on his chest grew bigger than my hand.

Murtagh had a pistol in each hand before the corporal hit the ground. One bullet went wild as his horse shied away from the sudden noise and movement. The second found its mark, ripping through a soldier's upper arm leaving a tuft of shredded fabric flapping from a rapidly reddening sleeve. The man kept his saddle, though, and was tugging at his saber, one-handed, as Murtagh plunged beneath his cloak for fresh weapons.

One of the two remaining soldiers turned his horse, slipping in the snow, and spurred away, back toward the prison, presumably in search of help.

“Claire!” The shout came from above. I looked up, startled, to see Jamie waving after the fleeing figure. “Stop him!” He had time to toss me a second pistol, then turned back, drawing his sword to meet the charge of the fourth soldier.

My horse was battle-trained; his ears were laid flat against his head and he stamped and pawed at the noise, but he hadn’t run at the sound of gunshots, and he stood his ground as I groped for the saddle iron. Glad to be leaving the fight behind, he dug in as soon as I was mounted, and we made off at good speed after the fleeing figure.

The snow hampered our going nearly as much as his, but mine was the better horse, and we had the advantage of the rough path the soldier’s flight had plowed through the fresh snow. We gained slowly on him, but I could see that it wouldn’t be enough. He had a rise ahead of him, though; if I cut to the right, perhaps I could make better time on the flat and meet him coming down the other side. I jerked the rein and leaned hard to keep my seat as the horse slithered into a messy turn, found his feet and plunged ahead.

I didn’t quite catch him up, but I had cut the distance between us to no more than ten yards. Given unlimited distance, I could likely catch him, but I didn’t have that luxury; the prison wall loomed less than a mile ahead. Much closer, and we would be seen from the walls.

I pulled up and slid off. Battle-trained or not, I didn’t know what the horse would do if I fired a pistol from his back. Even if he stood like a statue, I didn’t think my own aim was up to it. I knelt in the snow, bracing my elbow on my knee, the gun across my forearm as Jamie had shown me. “Brace it here, aim there, fire it *here,*” he had said. I did.

Much to my amazement, I hit the fleeing horse. It went into a skid, went to one knee and rolled in a flurry of snow and legs. My arm was numb from the pistol's recoil; I stood rubbing it, watching the fallen soldier.

He was injured; he struggled to rise, then fell back in the snow. His horse, bleeding from the shoulder, stumbled away, reins dangling.

I didn't realize until later what I had been thinking, but I knew when I approached him that I could not let him live. Near as we were to the prison, and with other patrols out seeking escaped prisoners, he was sure to be found before too long. And if he were found alive, he could not only describe us—so much for our hostage story in that case!—but tell which way we were traveling. We had still three miles to go to the coast; two hours' travel in the heavy snow. And a boat to find, once there. I simply could not take the chance of allowing him to tell anyone about us.

He struggled to his elbows as I approached. His eyes widened in surprise as he saw me, then relaxed. I was a woman. He wasn't afraid of me.

A more experienced man might have been apprehensive, my sex notwithstanding, but this was a boy. No more than sixteen, I thought, with a sense of sick shock. His spotty cheeks still held the last round curves of childhood, though his upper lip sported the fuzz of a hopeful mustache.

He opened his mouth, but only groaned in pain. He pressed his hand to his side, and I could see blood soaking through his tunic and coat. Internal injuries, then; the horse must have rolled on him.

It was possible, I thought, that he would die in any case. But that wasn't something I could count on.

The dirk in my right hand was hidden under my cloak. I laid my left hand on his head. Just so I had touched the heads of hundreds of men, comforting, examining, steadying them for whatever lay ahead. And they had looked up at me much as this boy did; with hope and trust.

I couldn't cut his throat. I sank to my knees beside him, and turned his head gently away from me. Rupert's techniques for swift killing had all assumed resistance. There was no resistance as I bent his head forward, as far as I could, and plunged the dirk into his neck at the base of his skull.

I left him lying facedown in the snow and went to join the others.

* * *

Our unwieldy cargo stowed under blankets on a bench below, Murtagh and I met on the *Cristabel*’s deck to survey the storm-tossed skies.

“Looks like a fair, steady wind,” I said hopefully, holding a wet finger aloft.

Murtagh gloomily scanned the clouds, hanging black-bellied over the harbor, their freight of snow wastefully melting into the frigid waves. “Aye, well. We’ll hope for a smooth crossing. If not, we’ll likely get there wi’ a corpse on our hands.”

Half an hour later, launched on the choppy waters of the English Channel, I discovered what he had meant by this remark.

“Seasick?” I said incredulously. “Scotsmen aren’t seasick!”

Murtagh was testy. “Then mayhap he’s a red-heided Hottentot. All I know is he’s green as a rotten fish and pukin’ his guts out. Are ye goin’ to come down and help me stop him puttin’ his ribs out through his chest?”

“Damn it,” I said to Murtagh, as we hung over the rail for fresh air during a brief hiatus in the unpleasantness belowdecks, “if he knows he’s seasick, why in the name of God did he insist on a boat?”

The basilisk stare was unwinking. “Because he knows bluidy well we’d never make it overland wi’ him in the state he’s in, and he’d no stay at Eldridge for fear o’ bringin’ the English down on MacRannoch.”

“So he’s going to kill himself quietly at sea, instead,” I said bitterly.

“Aye. He figures this way he’ll only kill himself, and no take anyone else along wi’ him. Unselfish, see. Nothin’ quiet about it, though,” added Murtagh, heading for the companionway in response to unmistakable sounds from below.

“Congratulations,” I said to Jamie an hour or two later, pushing dank wisps away from my cheeks and forehead. “I believe you’re going to make medical history by being the only documented person ever actually to die of seasickness."

"Oh, good," he mumbled into the wreck of pillows and blankets, "I'd hate to think it was all a waste." He heaved himself suddenly to one side. "God, here it comes again." Murtagh and I sprang once more to our stations. The job of holding a large man immobile while he succumbs to merciless spasms of retching is not one for the weak.

Afterward, I took his pulse yet again, and rested a hand briefly on the clammy forehead. Murtagh read my face, and followed me unspeaking up the gangway to the top deck. "He's no doin' verra weel, is he?" he said quietly.

"I don't know," I said helplessly, shaking out my sweat-drenched hair in the sharp wind. "I've honestly never heard of anyone dying of seasickness, but he's bringing up blood now." The little man's hands tightened on the rail, knuckles knifing through the sun-speckled skin. "I don't know if he's damaged himself internally with the sharp rib ends, or if it's just that his stomach is raw with the vomiting. Either way, it's not a good sign. And his pulse is much weaker, and irregular. It's a strain on his heart, you know."

"He's a heart like a lion." It was quietly said, and I wasn't sure I'd heard it at first. It might only have been the salt wind making the tears stand in his eyes. He turned abruptly to me. "And a heid like an ox. Have ye any o' that laudanum left that Lady Annabelle gave ye?"

"Yes, all of it. He wouldn't take it; doesn't want to sleep, he said."

"Aye, well. For most folk, what they want and what they get are no the same thing; I dinna see why he should be any different. Come on."

I followed him anxiously back belowdecks. "I don't think he can keep it down."

"Leave that to me. Get the bottle and help me sit him up."

Jamie was half-unconscious as it was, an unwieldy burden who protested being manhandled upright against the bulkhead. "I'm going to die," he said weakly but precisely, "and the sooner the better. Go away and let me do it in peace."

Taking firm hold of Jamie's blazing hair, Murtagh forced his head up and applied the flask to his lips. "Swallow this, me bonny wee dormouse, or I'll break yer neck. And forbye ye'll keep it down, too. I'm goin' to hold shut yer nose and yer mouth; if ye bring it up, it comes out yer ears."

By the concerted force of our wills, we transferred the contents of the flask slowly but inexorably into the young laird of Lallybroch. Choking and gagging, Jamie manfully drank as much as he could manage before subsiding, green-faced and gasping, against the bulkhead. Murtagh forestalled each threatened explosion of nausea by vicious nose-pinching, an expedient not uniformly successful, but one which allowed a gradual accumulation of the opiate in the patient's bloodstream. At length we laid him slack on the bed, the vivid flames of hair, brows, and lashes the only color on the pillow.

Murtagh came up beside me on deck a bit later. "Look," I said pointing. The dim light of sunset, shining in fugitive rays beneath the clouds, gilded the rocks of the French coast ahead. "The master says we'll be ashore in three or four hours."

"And not before time," said my companion, wiping lank brown hair out of his eyes. He turned to me, and gave me the closest thing I had ever seen to a smile on his dour countenance.

And so at length, following the prostrate body of our charge, laid on a board between two stout monks, we passed through the looming gates of the Abbey of Ste. Anne de Beaupré.

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THE ABBEY

The abbey was an enormous twelfth-century edifice, walled to resist both the smashing of sea storms and the onslaughts of land-based invaders. Now, in more peaceful times, its gates stood open to allow easy traffic with the nearby village, and the small stone cells of its guest wing had been softened by the addition of tapestries and comfortable furniture.

I rose from the padded chair in my own chamber, not sure exactly how one greeted an abbot; did one kneel and kiss his ring, or was that only for Popes? I settled for a respectful curtsy.

Jamie's slanted cat-eyes *did* come from the Fraser side. Likewise the solid jaw, though the one facing me was somewhat obscured by black beard.

Abbot Alexander had his nephew's wide mouth as well, though he looked as though he smiled somewhat less with it. The slanted blue eyes remained cool and speculative as he greeted me with a pleasant, warm smile. He was a good deal shorter than Jamie, about my height, and stocky. He wore the robe of a priest, but walked with a warrior's stride. I thought it likely he had been both in his time.

"You are welcome, *ma nièce,*" he said, inclining his head. I was a little startled at the greeting, but bowed back.

"I'm grateful for your hospitality," I said, meaning it. "Have—have you seen Jamie?" The monks had taken Jamie away to be bathed, a process in which I thought I had better not assist.

The Abbot nodded. “Oh, aye,” he said, a faint Scots accent showing through the cultured English. “I’ve seen him. I’ve set Brother Ambrose to tend his wounds.” I must have looked dubious at this, for he said, a bit dryly, “Do not worry, Madame; Brother Ambrose is most competent.” He looked me over with an air of frank appraisal disturbingly like that of his nephew.

“Murtagh said that you are an accomplished physician yourself.”

“I am,” I said bluntly.

This provoked a real smile. “I see that you do not suffer from the sin of false modesty,” he observed.

“I have others,” I said, smiling back.

“So do we all,” he said. “Brother Ambrose will be eager to converse with you, I’m sure.”

“Has Murtagh told you … what happened?” I asked hesitantly.

The wide mouth tightened. “He has. So far as he *knows* what happened.” He waited, as though expecting further contributions from me, but I stayed silent.

It was clear that he would have liked to ask questions, but he was kind enough not to press me. Instead, he raised his hand in a gesture of benediction and dismissal.

“You are welcome,” he said once more. “I will send a serving brother to bring you some food.” He looked me over once more. “And some facilities for washing.” He made the sign of the Cross over me, in farewell or possibly as an exorcism of filth, and left in a swirl of brown skirts.

Suddenly realizing how tired I was, I sank down on the bed, wondering whether I could stay awake long enough to both eat *and* wash. I was still wondering when my head hit the pillow.

I was having a dreadful nightmare. Jamie was on the other side of a solid stone wall without a door. I could hear him screaming, over and over, but couldn’t reach him. I pounded desperately on the wall, only to see my hands sink into the stone as if it were water.

“Ouch!” I sat up in the narrow cot, clutching the hand I had smashed against the unyielding wall next to my bed. I rocked back and forth, squeezing the throbbing hand between my thighs, then realized that the screaming was still going on.

It stopped abruptly as I ran into the hall. The door to Jamie's room was open, flickering lamplight flooding the corridor.

A monk I had not seen before was with Jamie, holding him tightly. A seepage of fresh blood stained the bandages on Jamie's back, and his shoulders shook as though with chill.

"A nightmare," the monk said in explanation, seeing me in the doorway. He relinquished Jamie into my arms, and went to the table for a cloth and the water jug.

Jamie was still trembling, and his face was glossy with sweat. His eyes were closed, and he breathed heavily, with a hoarse, gasping sound. The monk sat down beside me and began to swab his face with a gentle hand, smoothing the heavy, wet hair away from his temples.

"You would be his wife, of course," he said to me. "I think he'll be better presently."

The trembling did begin to ease within a minute or two, and Jamie opened his eyes with a sigh.

"I'm all right," he said. "Claire, I'm all right, now. But for God's sake, get rid of that stink!"

It was only then that I consciously noticed the scent in the room—a light, spicy, floral smell, so common a perfume that I had thought nothing of it. Lavender. A scent for soaps and toilet waters. I had last smelled it in the dungeons of Wentworth Prison, where it anointed the linen or the person of Captain Jonathan Randall.

The source of the scent was a small metal cup filled with herb-scented oil, suspended from a heavy, rose-bossed iron base and hung over a candle flame.

Meant to soothe the mind, its effects were plainly not as intended. Jamie was breathing more easily, sitting up by himself and holding the cup of water the monk had given him. But his face was still white, and the corner of his mouth twitched uneasily.

I nodded at the Franciscan to do as he said, and the monk quickly muffled the hot cup of oil in a folded towel, then carried it away down the hall.

Jamie heaved a long sigh of relief, then winced, ribs hurting.

"You've opened up your back a bit," I said, turning him slightly to get at the bandages. "Not bad, though."

"I know. I must have rolled onto my back in my sleep." The thick wedge of folded blanket meant to keep him propped on one side had slipped to the floor. I retrieved it and laid it on the bed beside him.

"That's what made me dream, I think. I dreamt of being flogged." He shuddered, took a sip of the water, then handed me the cup. "I need something a bit stronger, if it's handy."

As though on cue, our helpful visitor came through the door with a jug of wine in one hand and a small flask of poppy syrup in the other.

"Alcohol or opium?" he asked Jamie with a smile, holding up the two flasks. "You may have your choice of oblivions."

"I'll have the wine, if ye please. I've had enough of dreams for one night," Jamie said, with a lopsided answering smile. He drank the wine slowly, as the Franciscan helped me to change the stained bandages, smoothing fresh marigold ointment over the wounds. Not until I had resettled Jamie for sleep, back firmly propped and coverlet drawn up, did the visitor turn to go.

Passing the bed, he bent over Jamie and sketched the sign of the Cross above his head. "Rest well," he said.

"Thank ye, Father." Jamie answered drowsily, clearly half-asleep already. Seeing that Jamie would likely not need me now until morning, I touched him on the shoulder in farewell and followed the visitor out into the corridor.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm most grateful for your help."

The monk waved a graceful hand, dismissing my thanks.

"I was pleased to be able to assist you," he said, and I noticed that he spoke excellent English, though with a faint French accent. "I was passing through the guest wing on my way to the chapel of St. Giles when I heard the screaming."

I winced at the memory of that screaming, hoarse and dreadful, and hoped I would not hear it again. Glancing at the window at the end of the corridor, I saw no sign of dawn behind the shutter.

"To the chapel?" I said, surprised. "But I thought Matins were sung in the main church. And it's surely a bit early, in any case."

The Franciscan smiled. He was fairly young, perhaps in his early thirties, but his silky brown hair was threaded with grey. It was short and neatly tonsured and he had a brown beard, finely trimmed to a point that just skimmed the deep rolled collar of his habit.

"Very early, for Matins," he agreed. "I was on my way to the chapel because it is my turn for the perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament at this hour." He glanced back into Jamie's room, where a clock candle marked the time as half past two.

"I'm very late," he said. "Brother Bartolome will be wanting his bed." Raising his hand, he quickly blessed me, turned on a sandaled heel, and was through the swinging door at the end of the corridor before I could muster wits enough to ask his name.

I stepped into the room and bent to check Jamie. He was asleep again, breathing lightly, with a slight frown creasing his brow. Experimentally, I ran my hand lightly over his hair. The frown eased a bit, and then resumed. I sighed and tucked the blankets more securely around him.

* * *

I felt much better in the morning, but Jamie was hollow-eyed and queasy after the broken night. He emphatically rejected any suggestion of caudle or broth for breakfast, and snapped irritably at me when I tried to check the dressings on his hand.

"For Christ's sake, Claire, will ye no leave me alone! I dinna want to be poked at any more!"

He yanked his hand away, scowling. I turned away without speaking and went to busy myself with tidying the small pots and packets of medicines on the side table. I arranged them into small groups, sorted by function: marigold ointment and poplar balm for soothing, willowbark, cherry bark and chamomile for teas, St. John's wort, garlic, and yarrow for disinfection.

"Claire." I turned back, to find him sitting on the bed, looking at me with a shamefaced smile.

"I'm sorry, Sassenach. My bowels are griping, and I've a damn evil temper this morning. But I've no call to snarl at ye. D'ye forgive me?”

I crossed to him swiftly and hugged him lightly.

“You know there’s nothing to forgive. But what do you mean, your bowels are griping?” Not for the first time, I reflected that intimacy and romance are not synonymous.

He grimaced, bending forward slightly and folding his arms over his abdomen. “It means,” he said, “that I’d like ye to leave me to myself for a bit. If ye dinna mind?” I hastily complied with his request, and went to find my own breakfast.

Returning from the refectory a bit later, I spotted a trim figure in the black robes of a Franciscan, crossing the courtyard toward the cloister. I hurried to catch up with him.

“Father!” I called, and he turned, smiling when he saw me.

“Good morning,” he said. “Madame Fraser; is that the name? And how is your husband this morning?”

“Better,” I said, hoping it was true. “I wanted to thank you again for last night. You left before I could even ask your name.”

Clear hazel eyes sparkled as he bowed to me, hand over his heart. “François Anselm Mericoeur d’Armagnac, Madame,” he said. “Or so I was born. Known now only as Father Anselm.”

“Anselm of the Merry Heart?” I asked, smiling. He shrugged, a completely Gallic gesture, unchanged for centuries.

“One tries,” he said, with an ironic twist of the mouth.

“I don’t wish to keep you,” I said, glancing toward the cloister. “I only wanted to thank you for your help.”

“You do not detain me in the least, Madame. I was delaying going to my work, in fact; indulging most sinfully in idleness.”

“What is your work?” I asked, intrigued. Plainly this man was a visitor to the monastery, his black Franciscan robes conspicuous as an inkblot among the brown of the Benedictines. There were several such visitors, or so Brother Polydore, one of the serving brothers, had told me. Most of them were scholars, here to consult the works stored in the abbey’s renowned library. Anselm, it seemed, was one of these. He was, as he had been for several months, engaged in the translation of several works by Herodotus.

“Have you seen the library?” he asked. “Come, then,” he said, seeing me shake my head. “It is really most impressive, and I am sure the Abbot your uncle would have no objection.”

I was both curious to see the library, and reluctant to go back at once to the isolation of the guest wing, so I followed him without hesitation.

The library was beautiful, high-roofed, with soaring Gothic columns that joined in ogives in the multichambered roof. Full-length windows filled the spaces between columns, letting an abundance of light into the library. Most were of clear glass, but some had deceptively simple-looking stained-glass parables. Tiptoeing past the bent forms of studying monks, I paused to admire one of the Flight into Egypt.

Some of the bookshelves looked like those I was used to, the books nestling side by side. Other shelves held the books laid flat, to protect the ancient covers. There was even one glass-fronted bookshelf holding a number of rolled parchments. Overall, the library held a hushed exultation, as though the cherished volumes were all singing soundlessly within their covers. I left the library feeling soothed, and strolled slowly across the main courtyard with Father Anselm.

I tried again to thank him for his help the night before, but he shrugged off my thanks.

“Think nothing of it, my child. I hope that your husband is better today?”

“So do I,” I said. Not wanting to dwell on that subject, I asked, “What exactly is perpetual adoration? You said that was where you were going last night.”

“You are not a Catholic?” he asked in surprise. “Ah, but I forgot, you are English. So of course, I suppose you would be Protestant.”

“I’m not sure that I’m either one, in terms of belief,” I said. “But technically, at least, I suppose I am a Catholic.”

“Technically?” The smooth eyebrows shot up in astonishment. I hesitated, cautious after my experiences with Father Bain, but this man did not seem the sort to start waving crucifixes in my face.

“Well,” I said, bending to pull a small weed from between the paving stones, “I was baptized as a Catholic. But my parents died when I was five, and I went to live with an uncle. Uncle Lambert was …” I paused, recalling Uncle Lambert’s voracious appetite for knowledge, and that cheerfully objective cynicism that regarded all religion merely as one of the earmarks by which a culture could be cataloged. “Well, he was everything and nothing, I suppose, in terms of faith,” I concluded. “Knew them all, believed in none. So nothing further was ever done about my religious training. And my … first husband was Catholic, but not very observant, I’m afraid. So I suppose I’m really rather a heathen.”

I eyed him warily, but rather than being shocked by this revelation, he laughed heartily.

“Everything and nothing,” he said, savoring the phrase. “I like that very much. But as for you, I am afraid not. Once a member of Holy Mother Church, you are eternally marked as her child. However little you know about your faith, you are as much a Catholic as our Holy Father the Pope.” He glanced at the sky. It was cloudy, but the leaves of the alder bushes near the church hung still.

“The wind has dropped. I was going for a short stroll to clear my brain in the fresh air. Why do you not accompany me? You need air and exercise, and I can perhaps make the occasion spiritually beneficial as well, by enlightening you as to the ritual of Perpetual Adoration as we go.”

“Three birds with one stone, eh?” I said dryly. But the prospect of air, if not light, was enticing, and I went to fetch my cloak without demur.

With a glance at the form within, head bent in prayer, Anselm led me past the quiet darkness of the chapel entrance and down the cloister, out to the edge of the garden.

Beyond the possibility of disturbing the monks within the chapel, he said, “It’s a very simple idea. You recall the Bible, and the story of Gethsemane, where Our Lord waited out the hours before his trial and crucifixion, and his friends, who should have borne him company, all fell fast asleep?”

"Oh," I said, understanding all at once. "And he said 'Can you not watch with me one hour?' So that's what you're doing—watching with him for that hour—to make up for it." I liked the idea, and the darkness of the chapel suddenly seemed inhabited and comforting.

"Oui, madame," he agreed. "Very simple. We take it in turns to watch, and the Blessed Sacrament on the altar here is never left alone."

"Isn't it difficult, staying awake?" I asked curiously. "Or do you always watch at night?"

He nodded, a light breeze lifting the silky brown hair. The patch of his tonsure needed shaving; short bristly hairs covered it like moss.

"Each watcher chooses the time that suits him best. For me, that is two o'clock in the morning." He glanced at me, hesitating, as though wondering how I would take what he was about to say.

"For me, in that moment …" He paused. "It's as though time has stopped. All the humors of the body, all the blood and bile and vapors that make a man; it's as though just at once all of them are working in perfect harmony." He smiled. His teeth were slightly crooked, the only defect in his otherwise perfect appearance.

"Or as though they've stopped altogether. I often wonder whether that moment is the same as the moment of birth, or of death. I know that its timing is different for each man … or woman, I suppose," he added, with a courteous nod to me.

"But just then, for that fraction of time, it seems as though all things are possible. You can look across the limitations of your own life, and see that they are really nothing. In that moment when time stops, it is as though you know you could undertake any venture, complete it and come back to yourself, to find the world unchanged, and everything just as you left it a moment before. And it's as though …" He hesitated for a moment, carefully choosing words.

"As though, knowing that everything is possible, suddenly nothing is necessary."

"But … do you actually *do* anything?" I asked. "Er, pray, I mean?"

"I? Well," he said slowly, "I sit, and I look at Him." A wide smile stretched the fine-drawn lips. "And He looks at me."

Jamie was sitting up when I returned to the room, and essayed a short trip up and down the hall, leaning on my shoulder. But the effort left him pale and sweating, and he lay down without protest when I turned back the coverlet for him.

I offered him a little broth and milk, but he shook his head wearily. “I’ve no appetite, Sassenach. If I take anything, I think I shall be sick again.”

I didn’t press the matter, but took the broth away in silence.

At dinner I was more insistent, and succeeded in persuading him to try a few spoonsful of soup. He managed quite a bit of it, but didn’t manage to keep it down.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach,” he said, afterward. “I’m disgusting.”

“It doesn’t matter, Jamie, and you are not disgusting.” I set the basin outside the door and sat down beside him, smoothing back the tumbled hair from his brow.

“Don’t worry. It’s only that your stomach is still irritated from the seasickness. Perhaps I’ve pushed you too fast to eat. Let it rest and heal.”

He closed his eyes, sighing under my hand.

“I’ll be all right,” he said, without interest. “What did ye do today, Sassenach?”

He was obviously restless and uncomfortable, but eased a bit as I told him about my explorations of the day; the library, the chapel, the winepress, and finally, the herb garden, where I had at last met the famous Brother Ambrose.

“He’s amazing,” I said enthusiastically. “Oh, but I forgot, you’ve met him.” Brother Ambrose was tall—even taller than Jamie—and cadaverous, with the long, drooping face of a basset hound. And ten long, skinny fingers, every one of them bright green.

“He seems to be able to make *anything* grow,” I said. “He’s got all the normal herbs there, and a greenhouse so tiny that he can’t even stand up straight inside it, with things that shouldn’t grow at this season, or shouldn’t grow in this part of the world, or just shouldn’t grow. Not to mention the imported spices and drugs.”

The mention of drugs reminded me of the night before, and I glanced out the window. The winter twilight set in early, and it was already full dark outside, the lanterns of the monks who tended the stables and outdoor work bobbing to and fro as they passed on their rounds.

"It's getting dark. Do you think you can sleep by yourself? Brother Ambrose has a few things that might help."

His eyes were smudged with tiredness, but he shook his head.

"No, Sassenach. I dinna want anything. If I fall asleep … no, I think I'll read for a bit." Anselm had brought him a selection of philosophical and historical works from the library, and he stretched out a hand for a copy of Tacitus that lay on the table.

"You need sleep, Jamie," I said gently, watching him. He opened the book before him, propped on the pillow, but continued to stare at the wall above it.

"I didna tell ye what I dreamed," he said suddenly.

"You said you dreamed of being flogged." I didn't like the look on his face; already pale under the bruises, it was lightly sheened with dampness.

"That's right. I could look up and see the ropes, cutting into my wrists. My hands had gone almost black, and the rope scraped bone when I moved. I had my face pressed against the post. Then I could feel the lead plummets at the ends of the lashes, cutting through the flesh of my shoulders.

"The lashes kept coming, long past when they should have stopped, and I realized that he didn't mean to stop. The tips of the cords were biting out small chunks of my flesh. The blood … my blood was running down my sides and my back, soaking into my kilt. I was very cold.

"Then I looked up again, and I could see that the flesh had begun to fall away from my hands, and the bones of my fingers were scrabbling at the wood, leaving long raw scratches behind. The bones of my arms were bare, and only the ropes were holding them together. I think that's when I began to scream.

"I could hear a strange rattling noise when he hit me, and after a time I realized what it was. He'd stripped all the flesh off my bones, and the plummets of the whip were rattling on my dry rib bones. And I knew that I was dead, but it didn't matter. He would go on and on, and it would never stop, he would go on until I began to fall to pieces and crumble away from the post, and it would never stop, and …"

I moved to take hold of him and make him hush, but he had already stopped himself, gripping the edge of the book with his good hand. His teeth were set hard in the torn flesh of his lower lip.

"Jamie, I'll stay with you tonight," I said. "I can lay a pallet on the floor."

"No." Weak as he was, there was no mistaking the basic stubbornness. "I'll do best alone. And I'm not sleepy now. Do ye go and find your own supper, Sassenach. I'll … just read for a bit." He bent his head over the page. After a minute of helplessly watching him, I did as he said, and left.

* * *

I was becoming more and more worried by Jamie's condition. The nausea lingered; he ate almost nothing, and what he did eat seldom stayed with him. He grew paler and more listless, showing little interest in anything. He slept a great deal in the daytime, because of sleeping so little at night. Still, whatever his fears of dreaming, he would not allow me to share his chamber, so that his wakefulness need not impair my own rest.

Not wishing to hover over him, even if he would have allowed it, I spent much of my time in the herbarium or the drying shed with Brother Ambrose, or wandering idly through the Abbey's grounds, engaged in conversation with Father Anselm. He took the opportunity to engage in a gentle catechism, trying to instruct me in the basics of Catholicism, though I had assured him over and over of my basic agnosticism.

"Ma chère," he said at last, "do you recall the conditions necessary for the commission of sin that I told you yesterday?"

There was nothing wrong with my memory, whatever my moral shortcomings might be.

"First, that it be wrong, and secondly, that you give full consent to it," I parroted.

“That you give full consent to it,” he repeated. “And that, *ma chère,* is the condition for grace to occur, as well.” We were leaning on the fence of the abbey pigsty, watching several large brown hogs huddling together in the weak winter sun. He turned his head, resting his face on his forearms, folded on the fence rail.

“I don’t see how I can,” I protested. “Surely grace is something you have or you don’t. I mean”—I hesitated, not wishing to seem rude—“to you, the thing on the altar in the chapel is God. To me, it’s a bit of bread, no matter how lovely the holder it’s in.”

He sighed with impatience and straightened up, stretching his back.

“I have observed, on my way to my nightly watch, that your husband does not sleep well,” he said. “And consequently, neither do you. Since you are not asleep in any case, I invite you to come with me tonight. Join me in the chapel for an hour.”

I eyed him narrowly. “Why?”

He shrugged. “Why not?”

* * *

I had no difficulty in waking up for my appointment with Anselm, largely because I had not been asleep. Neither had Jamie. Whenever I poked my head out into the corridor, I could see the flicker of candlelight from the half-open door of his room, and hear the flip of pages and the occasional grunt of discomfort as he shifted his position.

Unable to rest, I had not bothered to undress, and so was ready when a tap at my door announced Anselm’s presence.

The monastery was quiet, in the way that all large institutions grow quiet at night; the rapid pulse of the day’s activities has dropped, but the heartbeat goes on, slower, softer, but unending. There is always someone awake, moving quietly through the halls, keeping watch, keeping things alive. And now it was my turn to join the watch.

The chapel was dark except for the burning of the red sanctuary lamp and a few of the clear white votive candles, flames rising straight in still air before the shadowed shrines of saints.

I followed Anselm down the short center aisle, genuflecting in his wake. The slight figure of Brother Bartolome knelt toward the front, head bowed. He didn't turn at the faint noise of our entrance, but stayed motionless, bent in adoration.

The Sacrament itself was almost obscured by the magnificence of its container. The huge monstrance, a sunburst of gold more than a foot across, sat serenely on the altar, guarding the humble bit of bread at its center.

Feeling somewhat awkward, I took the seat Anselm indicated, near the front of the chapel. The seats, ornately carved with angels, flowers, and demons, folded up against the wooden panels of the backing to allow easy passage in and out. I heard the faint creak of a lowered seat behind me, as Anselm found his place.

"But what shall I do?" I had asked him, voice lowered in respect of night and silence as we had approached the chapel.

"Nothing, *ma chère,*" he had replied, simply. "Only be."

So I sat, listening to my own breathing, and the tiny sounds of a silent place; the inaudible things normally hidden in other sounds. The settling of stone, the creak of wood. The hissing of the tiny, unquenchable flames. A faint skitter of some small creature, wandered from its place into the home of majesty.

It was a peaceful place, I would grant Anselm that. In spite of my own fatigue and my worry over Jamie, I gradually felt myself relaxing, the tightness of my mind gently unwinding, like the relaxation of a clock spring. Strangely, I didn't feel at all sleepy, despite the lateness of the hour and the strains of the last few days and weeks.

After all, I thought, what were days and weeks in the presence of eternity? And that's what this was, to Anselm and Bartolome, to Ambrose, to all the monks, up to and including the formidable Abbot Alexander.

It was in a way a comforting idea; if there was all the time in the world, then the happenings of a given moment became less important. I could see, perhaps, how one could draw back a little, seek some respite in the contemplation of an endless Being, whatever one conceived its nature to be.

The red of the sanctuary lamp burned steadily, reflected in the smooth gold. The flames of the white candles before the statues of St. Giles and the Blessed Mother flickered and jumped occasionally, as the burning wicks yielded an occasional imperfection, a momentary sputter of wax or moisture. But the red lamp burned serene, with no unseemly waver to betray its light.

And if there was eternity, or even the idea of it, then perhaps Anselm was right; all things were possible. And all love? I wondered. I had loved Frank; I still did. And I loved Jamie, more than my own life. But bound in the limits of time and flesh, I could not keep them both. Beyond, perhaps? Was there a place where time no longer existed, or where it stopped? Anselm thought so. A place where all things were possible. And none were necessary.

And was there love there? Beyond the limits of flesh and time, was all love possible? Was it necessary?

The voice of my thoughts seemed to be Uncle Lamb's. My family, and all I knew of love as a child. A man who had never spoken love to me, who had never needed to, for I knew he loved me, as surely as I knew I lived. For where all love is, the speaking is unnecessary. It is all. It is undying. And it is enough.

Time passed without my awareness of it, and I was startled by the sudden appearance of Anselm before me, coming through the small door near the altar. Surely he had been sitting behind me? I glanced behind, to see one of the young monks whose name I didn't know genuflecting near the rear entrance. Anselm bowed low before the altar, then motioned to me with a nod toward the door.

"You left?" I said, once outside the chapel. "But I thought you weren't supposed to leave the, er, the Sacrament, alone?"

He smiled tranquilly. "I didn't, *ma chère*. You were there."

I repressed the urge to argue that I didn't count. After all, I supposed, there was no such thing as a Qualified Official Adorer. You only had to be human, and I imagined I was still that, though I barely felt it at times.

Jamie's candle still burned as I passed his door, and I caught the rustle of turning pages. I would have stopped, but Anselm went on, to leave me at the door of my own chamber. I paused there to bid him good night, and to thank him for taking me to the chapel.

"It was … restful," I said, struggling to find the right word.

He nodded, watching me. "Oui, madame. It is." As I turned to go, he said, "I told you that the Blessed Sacrament was not alone, for you were there. But what of you, *ma chère?* Were you alone?"

I stopped, and looked at him for a moment before answering.

"No," I said. "I wasn't."

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TO RANSOM A MAN'S SOUL

In the morning, I went as usual to check Jamie, hoping that he had managed some breakfast. Just short of his room, Murtagh slid out of a wall alcove, barring my way.

"What is it?" I said abruptly. "What's wrong?" My heart began to beat faster and my palms were suddenly wet.

My panic must have been obvious, for Murtagh shook his head in reassurance. "Nay, he's all right." He shrugged, "Or as much all right as he's been." He turned me with a light hand under the elbow and began to walk me back down the corridor. I thought with a moment's shock that this was the first time Murtagh had ever deliberately touched me; his hand on my arm was light and strong as a pelican's wing.

"What's the matter with him?" I demanded. The little man's seamed face was as expressionless as usual, but the crinkled eyelids twitched at the corners.

"He doesna want to see ye just yet," he said.

I stopped dead and pulled my arm from his grasp.

"Why not?" I demanded.

Murtagh hesitated, as though choosing his words carefully. "Weel, it's just … he's decided as it would be best for ye to leave him here and go back to Scotland. He—"

The rest of what he was saying was lost as I pushed my way rudely past him.

The heavy door swung shut with a soft thump behind me. Jamie was dozing, facedown on the bed. He was uncovered, clad only in a novice's short gown; the charcoal brazier in the corner made the room comfortably warm, if smoky.

He started violently when I touched him. His eyes, still glazed with sleep, were sunk deep and his face was haunted by dreams. I took his hand between both of mine, but he wrenched it away. With a look of near-despair, he shut his eyes and buried his face in the pillow.

Trying not to exhibit any outward sign of disturbance, I quietly pulled up a stool and sat down near his head. "I won't touch you," I said, "but you must talk to me." I waited for several minutes while he lay unmoving, shoulders hunched defensively. At last he sighed and sat up, moving slowly and painfully, swinging his legs over the edge of the cot.

"Aye," he said flatly, not looking at me, "aye, I suppose I must. I should have done so before … but I was coward enough to hope I need not." His voice was bitter and he kept his head bowed, hands clasped loosely around his knees. "I didna used to think myself a coward, but I am. I should have made Randall kill me, but I did not. I had no reason to live, but I was not brave enough to die." His voice dropped, and he spoke so softly I could hardly hear him. "And I knew I would have to see you one last time … to tell you … but … Claire, my love … oh, my love."

He picked up the pillow from the bed and hugged it to him as though for protection, a substitute for the comfort he could not seek from me. He rested his forehead on it for a moment, gathering strength.

"When ye left me there at Wentworth, Claire," he said quietly, head still bowed, "I listened to your footsteps, going away on the flags outside, and I said to myself, I'll think of her now. I'll remember her; the feel of her skin and the scent of her hair and the touch of her mouth on mine. I'll think of her until that door opens again. And I'll think of her tomorrow, when I stand on the gallows, to give me courage at the last. Between the time the door opens, and the time I leave this place to die"—the big hands clenched briefly and relaxed—"I will not think at all," he finished softly.

In the small dungeon room, he had closed his eyes and sat waiting. The pain was not bad, so long as he sat still, but he knew it would grow worse soon. Fearing pain, still he had dealt with it often before. He knew it and his own response to it well enough that he was resigned to endurance, hoping only that it would not exceed his strength too soon. The prospect of physical violation, too, was only a matter of mild revulsion now. Despair was in its own way an anesthetic.

There was no window in the room by which to judge the time. It had been late afternoon when he was brought to the dungeon, but his sense of time was unreliable. How many hours could it be until dawn? Six, eight, ten? Until the end of everything. He thought with grim humor that Randall at least had done him the favor of rendering death welcome.

When the door opened, he had looked up, expecting—what? There was only a man, slightly built, handsome, and a little disheveled, linen shirt torn and hair disarranged, leaning against the wood of the door, watching him.

After a moment, Randall had crossed the room unspeaking and stood beside him. He rested a hand briefly on Jamie's neck, then bent and freed the trapped hand with a jerk of the nail that brought Jamie to the edge of fainting. A glass of brandy was set before him, and a firm hand raised his head and helped him to drink it.

"He lifted my face then, between his hands, and he licked the drops of brandy from my lips. I wanted to pull back from him, but I'd given my word, so I just sat still."

Randall had held Jamie's head for a moment, looking searchingly into his eyes, then released him and sat down on the table next to him.

"He sat there for quite a time, not saying anything, just swinging one leg back and forth. I had no idea what he wanted, and wasn't disposed to guess. I was tired and feeling a bit sick from the pain in my hand. So after a time I just laid my head down on my arms and turned my face away." He sighed heavily.

"After a moment, I could feel a hand on my head, but I didn't move. He began to stroke my hair, very gently, over and over. There wasn't any sound but the big fellow's hoarse breathing and the crackle of the fire in the brazier, and I think … I think I went to sleep for a few moments."

When he woke, Randall was standing in front of him.

"Are you feeling a bit better?" Randall had asked in a remote, courteous tone.

Wordless, Jamie had nodded, and stood up. Randall had stripped him, careful of the wounded hand, and led him to the bed.

"I'd given my word not to struggle, but I did not mean to help, either, so I just stood, as though I were made of wood. I thought I would let him do as he liked, but I'd take no part in it—I would keep a distance from him, in my mind at least." Randall had smiled then, and gripped Jamie's right hand, hard enough to make him sink onto the bed, sick and dizzy with the sudden stab of pain. Randall had knelt then on the floor before him, and taught him, in a few shattering minutes, that distance is an illusion.

"When he rose up, he took the knife and drew it across my chest, from one side to the other. It was not a deep cut, but it bled a bit. He watched my face a moment, then reached out a finger and dipped it in the blood." Jamie's voice was unsteady, tripping and stammering from time to time. "He licked my blood off his finger, with little flicks of his tongue, like a c-cat washing itself. He smiled a bit, then—very kind, like—and bent his head to my chest. I was not bound at all, but I could not have moved. I just … sat there, while he used his tongue to … It did not hurt, precisely, but it felt verra queer. After a time, he stood up and cleaned himself careful with a towel."

I watched Jamie's hand. With his face turned away, it was the best indicator of his feelings. It clenched convulsively on the edge of the cot as he went on.

"He—he told me that…. I was delicious. The cut had almost stopped bleeding, but he took the towel and scrubbed it hard over my chest to open the wound again." The knuckles of the clenched hand were knobs of bloodless bone. "He unbuttoned his breeches then, and smeared the fresh blood on himself, and said it was my turn now."

Afterward, Randall held his head and helped him to be sick, wiped his face gently with a wet cloth, and gave him brandy to cleanse his mouth of foulness. And so, by turns vicious and tender, bit by bit, using pain as his weapon, he had destroyed all barriers of mind and body.

I wanted to stop Jamie, to tell him that he didn't need to go on, must not go on, but I bit my lip hard to keep from speaking and clasped my own hands tight together to keep from touching him.

He told me the rest of it, then; the slow and deliberate whipstrokes, interspersed with kisses. The shocking pain of burns, administered to drag him from the brink of a desperately sought unconsciousness to face further degradations. He told me everything, with hesitations, sometimes with tears, much more than I could bear to hear, but I heard him out, silent as a confessor. He glanced quickly up at me, then away.

"I could have stood being hurt, no matter how bad it was. I expected to be … used, and I thought I could stand that too. But I couldn't … I … he …" I dug my nails fiercely into my palms in the struggle to keep quiet. He shook soundlessly for a time, then his voice came again, thick, but desperately steady.

"He did not just hurt me, or use me. He made love to me, Claire. He hurt me—hurt me badly—while he did it, but it was an act of love to him. And he made me answer him—damn his soul! He made me rouse to him!" The hand bunched into a fist and struck the bedframe with an impotent rage that made the whole bed tremble.

"The … first time, he was verra careful with me. He used oil, and took a long time, rubbing it all over me … touchin' me gentle in all my parts. I could no more stop myself rising to his touch than I could stop myself bleeding when he cut me." Jamie's voice was weary and wretched with despair. He paused, and looked directly at me for the first time since I had come in.

"Claire, I did not want to think of you. I couldna bear to be there, naked, and … like that … and to remember loving you. It was blasphemy. I meant to wipe you from my mind, and only to … exist, so long as I must. But he would not allow it." Wetness shone on his cheeks, but he was not crying now.

"He talked. All during it, he talked to me. Partly it was threats, and partly it was love talk, but often it was you."

"Me?" My voice, unused for so long, came out of my strained throat as little more than a croak. He nodded, looking down at the pillow again.

"Aye. He was most terribly jealous of you, you know."

"No. No, I didn't know."

He nodded again. "Oh, yes. He would ask me—while he touched me—he would ask, 'Does *she* do this for you? Can your woman r-rouse you like this?" His voice trembled. "I wouldna answer him—I couldn't. And then, he'd ask how I thought you would feel to see me … to see me …" He bit his lip hard, unable to go on for a moment.

"He'd hurt me a bit, then stop and love me 'til I began to rouse … and then he'd hurt me fierce and take me in the midst of the hurting. And all the time, he would talk of you, and keep you before my eyes. I fought, in my mind … I tried to keep myself from him, to keep my mind apart from my body, but the pain broke through, again and again, past every barrier I could put up. I tried, Claire—God, I tried so hard, but …"

He sank his head in his hands, fingers digging hard into his temples. He spoke abruptly. "I know why young Alex MacGregor hanged himself. I'd do the same, did I not know it to be mortal sin. If he's damned me in life, he'll not do so in heaven." There was a moment's silence while he struggled to control himself. I noticed automatically that the pillow on his knees was blotched with dampness, and wanted to get up and change it for him. He shook his head slowly, still gazing down at his feet.

"The … it's all linked for me now. I canna think of you, Claire, even of kissing you or touching your hand, without feeling the fear and the pain and the sickness come back. I lie here feeling that I will die without your touch, but when you touch me, I feel as though I will vomit with shame and loathing of myself. I canna even see you now without …" His forehead rested on knotted fists, knuckles dug hard into his eye-sockets. The tendons of his neck were sharply etched with strain, and his voice came half-muffled.

"Claire, I want you to leave me. Go back to Scotland, to Craigh na Dun. Go back to your place, to your … husband. Murtagh will take you safe, I've told him." He was silent for a moment, and I did not move.

He looked up again with desperate bravery, and spoke very simply.

"I will love you as long as I live, but I cannot be your husband any longer. And I will not be less to you." His face began to break apart. "Claire, I want you so badly that my bones shake in my body, but God help me, I am afraid to touch you!"

I started up to go to him, but he stopped me with a sudden motion of his hand. He was half doubled up, face contorted with internal struggle, and his voice was strangled and breathless.

"Claire … please. Please go. I'm going to be verra sick, and I don't want you to see it. Please."

I heard the pleading in his voice and knew I must spare him this one indignity, at least. I rose, and for the first time in my professional life, left a sick man to his own devices, helpless and alone.

I left his chamber, numbed, and leaned against the white stone wall outside, cooling my flushed cheek against the unyielding blocks, ignoring the stares of Murtagh and Brother William. *God help me,* he had said. *God help me, I am afraid to touch you*.

I straightened and stood alone. Well, why not? Surely there was no one else.

At the hour when time began to slow, I genuflected in the aisle of the chapel of St. Giles. Anselm was there, elegant shoulders straight beneath his habit, but no other. He neither moved nor looked around, but the living silence of the chapel embraced me.

I remained on my knees for a moment, reaching out to the quiet darkness, staying my mind from its hurry. Only when I felt my heart slow to the rhythms of the night did I slide into a seat near the back.

I sat rigid, lacking the form and ritual, the liturgical courtesies that eased the brothers into the depths of their sacred conversation.

I did not know how to begin. Finally, I said, silently, bluntly, I need help. Please.

And then I let the silence fall back in waves around me, lapping me like the folds of a cloak, comforting against the cold. And I waited, as Anselm had told me, and the minutes passed by uncounted.

There was a small table at the back of the chapel, covered with a linen cloth, bearing the stoup of holy water, and beside it, a Bible and two or three other inspirational works. For use by adorers for whom the silence was too much, I supposed.

It was becoming too much for me, and I rose and got the Bible, bringing it back to the prie-dieu with me. I was hardly the first person to have recourse to the sortes Virgilianae in time of confusion or trouble. There was sufficient light from the candles for me to read, turning the flimsy pages carefully and squinting over the lines of fine black type.

"… and he smote them with emerods, and they were very sore." No doubt they were, I thought. What in hell were emerods? Try Psalms, instead.

"But I am a worm, and no man … I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint: my heart is like wax; it is melted in the midst of my bowels." Well, yes, a competent diagnosis, I thought, with some impatience. But was there some treatment?

"But be not thou far from me, O Lord: O my strength, haste thee to help me. Deliver my soul from the sword; my darling from the power of the dog." Hmm.

I turned to the Book of Job, Jamie's favorite. Surely if anyone was in a position to offer helpful advice.…

"But his flesh upon him shall have pain, and his soul within him shall mourn." Mmm, yes, I thought, and turned the page.

"He is chastened also with pain upon his bed, and the multitude of his bones with strong pain.… His flesh is consumed away, that it cannot be seen; and his bones that were not seen stick out." Spot on, I thought. What next?

"Yea, his soul draweth near unto the grave, and his life to the destroyers." Not so good, but the next bit was more heartening. "If there be a messenger with him, an interpreter, one among a thousand, to shew unto man his uprightness: Then he is gracious unto him, and saith, Deliver him from going down to the pit: I have found a ransom. His flesh shall be fresher than a child's: he shall return to the days of his youth." And what was the ransom, then, that would buy a man's soul, and deliver my darling from the power of the dog?

I closed the book and my eyes. The words muddled together, blurring with my urgent need. An overriding misery struck me when I spoke Jamie's name. And yet there was some small peace there, a lessening of tension when I said, as I did over and over again, "O Lord, into thy hands I commend the soul of your servant James."

The thought came to me that perhaps Jamie would be better off dead; he had said he wanted to die. I was morally sure that if I left him as he wished, he would be dead soon, whether from the aftereffects of torture and illness, from hanging, or in some battle. And I was in no doubt that he knew it as well. Ought I to do as he said? Damned if I will, I said to myself. *Damned* if I will, I said fiercely to the sunburst on the altar and opened the book again.

It was some time before I became aware that my thread of petition was no longer a monologue. In fact, I knew it only when I realized that I had just answered a question I had no memory of asking. In my trance of sleepless misery, something had been asked of me, I wasn't sure just what, and I had answered without thinking, "Yes, I will."

I stopped all thought abruptly, listening to the ringing silence. And then, more cautiously, repeated, voiceless, "Yes. Yes, I will," and thought fleetingly, *The conditions of sin are these: first, you must give your full consent to it.… And the conditions of grace as well,* came an echo of Anselm's quiet voice.

There was a feeling, not sudden, but complete, as though I had been given a small object to hold unseen in my hands. Precious as opal, smooth as jade, weighty as a river stone, more fragile than a bird's egg. Infinitely still, live as the root of Creation. Not a gift, but a trust. Fiercely to cherish, softly to guard. The words spoke themselves and disappeared into the groined shadows of the roof.

I genuflected to the Presence then, and left the chapel, never doubting, in the eternity of the moment when time stops, that I had an answer, but having no idea what that answer was. I knew only that what I held was a human soul; my own or another's, I could not tell.

* * *

It did not appear to be an answer to prayer, when I woke to the resumption of ordinary time in the morning to find a lay brother standing over me, telling me that Jamie was burning with fever.

"How long has he been like this?" I asked, laying a practiced hand on brow and back, armpit and groin. No trace of relieving sweat; only the dry stretched skin of persistent parching, fiery with heat. He was awake, but heavy-eyed and groggy. The source of the fever was plain. The shattered right hand was puffy, with a foul-smelling ooze soaking the bandages. Ominous red streaks ran up the wrist. A bloody infection, I thought to myself. A filthy, suppurating, blood poisoning, life-threatening infection.

"I found him so when I came to look in on him after Matins," replied the serving brother who had come to fetch me. "I gave him water, but he began to vomit just after dawn."

"You should have fetched me at once," I said. "Still, never mind. Bring me hot water, raspberry leaves, and Brother Polydore, as quickly as possible." He left with the assurance that he would see some breakfast was brought for me as well, but I waved such amenities aside, reaching for the pewter jug of water.

By the time Brother Polydore appeared, I had tried the internal application of water, only to have it violently rejected, and was applying it externally instead, soaking the sheets and wrapping them loosely over the hot skin.

Simultaneously, I set the infected hand to soak in fresh-boiled water, as hot as could be stood without burning the skin. Lacking sulfa drugs or modern antibiotics, heat was the only defense against a bacterial infection. The patient's body was doing its best to supply that heat by means of high fever, but the fever itself posed a serious danger, wasting muscle and damaging brain cells. The trick was to apply sufficient local heat to destroy the infection, while keeping the rest of the body cool enough to prevent damage, and sufficiently hydrated to maintain its normal functions. A bloody three-tier balancing act, I thought bleakly.

Neither Jamie's state of mind nor his physical discomfort were relevant any longer. It was a straightforward struggle to keep him alive until the infection and the fever ran their course; nothing else mattered.

In the afternoon of the second day, he began to hallucinate. We tied him to the bed with soft rags to prevent his hurling himself to the floor. Finally, as a desperate measure to break the fever, I sent one of the lay brothers out to bring in a bushel basket of snow, which we packed around him. This resulted in a violent shivering fit that left him drained and exhausted, but did briefly bring his temperature down.

Unfortunately, the treatment had to be repeated at hourly intervals. By sunset, the room looked like a swamp, with puddles of melted snow standing on the floor, tussocks of sodden sheeting mounded among them, and steam like marsh gas rising from the brazier in the corner. Brother Polydore and myself were sodden, too, soaked with sweat, chilled with snow water, and near to exhaustion, in spite of the helpful assistance of Anselm and the lay brothers. Febrifuges such as coneflower, goldenseal, catnip, and hyssop had been tried, without effect. Willowbark tea, which might have helped with its content of salicylic acid, could not be consumed in amounts large enough to matter.

In one of his increasingly rare lucid intervals, Jamie asked me to let him die. I answered curtly, as I had the night before, "Damned if I will," and went on with what I was doing.

As the sun went down, there was a stir of approaching men in the corridor. The door opened and the abbot, Jamie's uncle Alex, came in, accompanied by Brother Anselm and three other monks, one carrying a small cedarwood box. The abbot came over to me and blessed me briefly, then took one of my hands in his.

"We are going to anoint the lad," he said, his deep voice kind. "Do not be frightened."

He turned toward the bed and I looked wildly to Anselm for explanation.

"The sacrament of Extreme Unction," he explained, moving close so that his low tones would not disturb the monks gathered around the bed. "The Last Anointing."

"Last Anointing! That's for people who are dying!"

"Ssh." He drew me farther away from the bed. "It might more properly be called anointing of the sick, though in fact it is usually reserved for those in danger of death." The monks had turned Jamie gently onto his back, arranging him tenderly so that he might lie with the least hurt to his raw shoulders.

"The purpose of the sacrament is twofold," Anselm went on, murmuring in my ear as the preparations went on. "First, it is intended as a sacrament of healing; we pray that the sufferer may be restored to health, if that be God's will for him. The chrism, the consecrated oil, is used as a symbol of life and healing."

"And the second purpose?" I asked, already knowing.

Anselm nodded. "If it is not God's will that he should recover, then he is given absolution of sins, and we commend him to God, that his soul may depart in peace." He saw me tighten in protest, and laid a warning hand on my arm.

"These are the last rites of the Church. He is entitled to them, and to whatever peace they may bring him."

The preparations were complete. Jamie lay on his back, a cloth modestly draped across his loins, with lighted candles at the head and the foot of the bed that reminded me most unpleasantly of grave lights. Abbot Alexander sat at the bedside, accompanied by a monk who held a tray with a covered ciborium, two small silver bottles containing holy water and chrism, and a white cloth draped across both forearms. Like a bloody wine steward, I thought crossly. The whole procedure unnerved me.

The rites were conducted in Latin, the soft antiphonal murmuring soothing to the ear, though I did not understand the meaning. Anselm whispered softly to me the meaning of some parts of the service; others were self-explanatory. At one point, the Abbot motioned to Polydore, who stepped forward and held a small vial under Jamie's nose. It must have contained spirits of ammonia or some other stimulant, because he jerked and turned his head away sharply, eyes still closed.

"Why are they trying to wake him?" I whispered.

"If possible, the person should be conscious in order to give assent to the statement that he is sorry for any sins committed during his life. Also, if he is capable of receiving it, the Abbot will give him the Blessed Sacrament."

The Abbot stroked Jamie's cheek softly, turning his head back to the vial, speaking quietly to him. He had dropped from Latin into the broad Scots of their family, and his voice was gentle.

"Jamie! Jamie, lad! It's Alex, lad. I'm here wi' ye. Ye must wake a bit now, only for a bit. I shall be givin' ye the absolution now, and then the Blessed Sacrament of Our Lord. Take a wee sup, now, so ye can answer me when ye must." The monk called Polydore held the cup against Jamie's lips, carefully pouring the water a drop at a time, until the parched tongue and throat could take more. His eyes were open, still heavy with fever, but alert enough.

The Abbot went on then, the questions in English, but pitched so low that I could scarcely catch them. "Do ye renounce Satan and all his works?" "Do ye believe in the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ?" and so on. To each one, Jamie answered "Aye," in a scratchy whisper.

Once the sacrament had been given, Jamie lay back with a sigh, closing his eyes once more. I could see his ribs as the deep-sprung chest moved with his breathing. He had wasted dreadfully, between the sickness and the fever. The Abbot, taking the vials of holy water and chrism in turn, made the sign of the Cross on his body, anointing forehead, lips, nose, ears, and eyelids. Then, in turn, he made the sign of the Cross with the holy oil in the hollow of the chest over the heart, on the palm of each hand, and the arch of each foot. He lifted the injured hand with infinite care, brushing the oil across the wound lightly and laying the hand back on Jamie's chest, where it lay below the livid slash of the knife scar.

The anointing was quick and immeasurably gentle, a feather touch by the Abbot's rapidly moving thumb. "Superstitious magic," said the rational side of my brain, but I was deeply moved by the love on the faces of the monks as they prayed. Jamie's eyes were open once more, but very calm, and his face was peaceful for the first time since we had left Lallybroch.

The ceremony concluded with a brief prayer in Latin. Laying his hand on Jamie's head, the Abbot said in English, "Lord, into thy hands we commend the soul of your servant, James. Heal him, we pray, if that be Thy will, and strengthen his soul, that he may be filled with grace, and know Thy peace throughout eternity."

"Amen," replied the other monks. And so did I.

By dark, the patient had lapsed into semiconsciousness again. As Jamie's strength waned, it was all we could do to rouse him for the sips of water that were keeping him alive. His lips were cracked and peeling, and he could no longer talk, though he would still open glazed eyes when shaken roughly. He no longer recognized us; his eyes stared fixedly, then gradually closed as he turned his head away, moaning.

I stood by the bed looking down at him, so exhausted from the rigors of the day that I felt no more than a sort of dull despair. Brother Polydore touched me gently, bringing me out of my daze.

"You cannot do any more for him now," he said, leading me firmly away. "You must go and rest."

"But—" I began, then stopped. He was right, I realized. We had done everything possible. Either the fever would break soon of itself, or Jamie would die. Even the strongest body could not endure the consuming ravages of high fever for more than a day or two, and Jamie had little strength left to see him through such a siege.

"I will stay with him," Polydore said. "Go to your bed. I'll summon you if …" He didn't finish the sentence, but waved me gently in the direction of my own chamber.

I lay sleepless on my cot, staring at the beamed ceiling. My eyes were dry and hot, and my throat ached, as though I were coming down with a fever as well. Was this the answer to my prayer, that we would die here together?

At last I rose, and took up the jug and basin from the table by the door. I set the heavy pottery dish in the center of the floor and filled it carefully, letting the water swell up over the thickened rim into a trembling bubble.

I had made a short detour to Brother Ambrose's stillroom on the way to my chamber. I undid the small packets of herbs and scattered the contents into my brazier, where the myrrh leaves gave off a fragrant smoke, and the crumbs of camphor flamed with tiny blue tongues between the red glow of the charcoal sticks.

I set the candlestick behind my reflecting pool, took my place before it, and sat down to summon a ghost.

* * *

The stone corridor was cold and dark, lit at intervals by dimly flickering oil lamps hung from the ceiling. My shadow stretched forward under my feet as I passed beneath each one, lengthening until it seemed to dive headfirst and disappear into the dark ahead.

In spite of the cold, I was barefoot and wearing only a coarse white cotton nightrobe. A small envelope of warmth moved with me under the robe, but the chill from the stones crept up my feet and legs.

I knocked once, softly, and pushed open the heavy door without waiting for an answer.

Brother Roger was with him, sitting by the bed, telling beads with bowed head. The wooden rosary rattled as he looked up, but his lips continued to move silently for a few seconds, finishing the Ave Maria before acknowledging my presence.

He met me near the door, speaking quietly, though it was clear that he could have shouted without disturbing the motionless figure on the bed.

"No change. I've just put fresh water in the hand bath." A few drops gleamed on the sides of the small pewter kettle on the brazier, freshly filled.

I nodded and put a hand on his arm in thanks. It was startlingly solid and warm after the imaginations of the last hour, and somehow comforting.

"I'd like to stay with him alone, if you don't mind."

“Of course. I’ll go to the chapel—or should I stay near in case …” His voice trailed off, hesitant.

“No.” I tried to smile reassuringly. “Go to the chapel. Or better yet, go to bed. I can’t sleep; I’ll stay here ’til morning. If I need help, I’ll send for you.”

Still dubious, he glanced back at the bed. But it was very late, and he was tired; there were shadows under the kind brown eyes.

The heavy door squeaked on its hinges, and I was alone with Jamie. Alone and afraid, and very, very doubtful about what I proposed to do.

I stood at the foot of the bed, watching him for a moment. The room was dimly lit by the glow of the brazier and by two enormous candlesticks, each nearly three feet tall, that stood on the table at the side of the room. He was naked, and the faint light seemed to accentuate the hollows left by the wasting fever. The multicolored bruise over the ribs stained the skin like a spreading fungus.

A dying man takes on a faint greenish tinge. At first just a touch at the edge of the jaw, this pallor spreads gradually, over the face and down the chest as the force of life begins to ebb. I had seen it many times. A few times, I had seen that deadly progress arrested and reversed, the skin flush with blood once more, and the man live. More often … I shook myself vigorously and turned away.

I brought my hand out of the folds of my robe and laid on the table the objects I had collected in a surreptitious visit to Brother Ambrose’s darkened workshop. A vial of spirits of ammonia. A packet of dried lavender. Another of valerian. A small metal incense burner, shaped like an open blossom. Two pellets of opium, sweet scented and sticky with resin. And a knife.

The room was close and stuffy with smoke from the brazier. The only window was covered with a heavy tapestry, one showing the execution of Saint Sebastian. I eyed the saint’s upturned face and arrow-punctured torso, wondering afresh at the mentality of the person who had chosen this particular decoration for a sickroom.

Indifferently rendered as it was, the tapestry was of heavy silk and wool, and excluded all but the strongest drafts. I lifted the lower edge and flapped it, urging the charcoal smoke out through the stone arch. The cold, damp air that streamed in was refreshing, and did something to calm the throbbing that had started in my temples as I stared into the reflecting water, remembering.

There was a faint moan behind me, and Jamie stirred in the draft. Good. He was not deeply unconscious, then.

Letting the tapestry fall back over the window, I next took up the incense burner. I fixed one of the opium pellets on the spike and lighted it with one of the wax tapers for the candlesticks. I placed it on the small table near Jamie's head, careful not to inhale the sickly fumes myself.

There was not much time. I must finish my preparations quickly, before the opium smoke drove him too far under to be roused.

I unlaced the front of my robe and rubbed my body quickly with handfuls of the lavender and valerian. It was a pleasant, spicy smell, distinctive and richly evocative. A smell that, to me, conjured the shade of the man who wore its perfume, and the shade of the man behind him; shades that evoked confusing images of present terror and lost love. A smell that, to Jamie, must recall the hours of pain and rage spent wrapped in its waves. I rubbed the last of it vigorously between my palms and dropped the fragrant shreds on the floor.

With a deep breath for courage, I picked up the vial of ammoniacal spirits. I stood by the bed a moment holding it, looking down at the gaunt, stubbled face. At most he might last a day; at the least, only a few more hours.

"All right, you bloody Scottish bastard," I said softly. "Let's see how stubborn you really are." I lifted the injured hand, dripping, from the water and set the soaking dish aside.

I opened the vial and waved it closely under his nose. He snorted and tried to turn his head away, but didn't open his eyes. I dug my fingers into the hair on the back of his head to prevent his turning away, and brought the vial back to his face. He shook his head slowly, swinging it from side to side like an ox roused from slumber, and his eyes came open just a crack.

"Not done yet, Fraser," I whispered in his ear, trying as best I could to catch the rhythm of Randall's clipped consonants.

Jamie moaned and hunched his shoulders. I grasped him by both shoulders and shook him roughly. His skin was so hot I nearly let go.

"Wake up, you Scottish bastard! I'm not done with you yet!" He began to struggle up onto his elbows with a pitiful effort at obedience that nearly broke my heart. His head was still shaking back and forth, and the cracked lips were muttering something that sounded like "please not yet" over and over again.

Strength failing, he rolled to one side and collapsed facedown on the pillow again. The room was beginning to fill with opium smoke and I felt mildly dizzy.

I gritted my teeth and plunged my hand between his buttocks, gripping one curving round. He screamed, a high breathy sound, and rolled painfully sideways, curling into a ball with his hands clasped between his legs.

I had spent the hour in my chamber, hovering over my pool of reflection, conjuring memories. Of Black Jack Randall and of Frank, his six-times-great-grandson. Such very different men, but with such startling physical similarities.

It tore me to think of Frank, to recall his face and voice, his mannerisms, his style of lovemaking. I had tried to obliterate him from my mind, once my choice was made in the circle of stone, but he was always there, a shadowy figure in the recesses of my mind.

I felt sick with betrayal of him, but in the extremity I had forced my mind to clear as Geilie had shown me, concentrating on the flame of the candle, breathing the astringency of the herbs, calming myself until I could bring him from the shadows, see the lines of his face, feel once more the touch of his hand without weeping.

There was another man in the shadows, with the same hands, the same face. Eyes filled with the candle flame, I had brought him forward, too, listening, watching, seeing the likenesses and the differences, building a—a what? A simulacrum, a persona, an impression, a masquerade. A shaded face, a whispered voice, and a loving touch that I might bring to deceive a mind adrift in delirium. And I left my chamber at last, with a prayer for the soul of the witch Geillis Duncan.

Jamie was on his back now, writhing slightly against the pain of his wounds. His eyes were fixed and staring, with no sign of recognition.

I caressed him in the way I knew so well, tracing the line of his ribs from breastbone to back, lightly as Frank would have done, pressing hard on the aching bruise, as I was sure the other would have. I leaned forward and ran my tongue slowly around his ear, tasting and probing, and whispered, "Fight me! Fight back, you filthy scut!"

His muscles tightened and his jaw clenched, but he continued to stare upward. No choice, then. I would have to use the knife after all. I knew the risk I was taking in this, but better to kill him myself, I thought, than to sit quietly by and let him die.

I took the knife from the table and drew it firmly across his chest, along the path of the freshly healed scar. He gasped with the shock of it, and arched his back. Seizing a towel, I scrubbed it briskly over the wound. Before I could falter, I forced myself to run my fingers over his chest, scooping up a gout of blood which I rubbed savagely over his lips. There was one phrase that I didn't have to invent, having heard it myself. Bending low over him, I whispered, "Now kiss me."

I was not at all prepared for it. He hurled me half across the room as he came up off the bed. I staggered and fell against the table, making the giant candlesticks sway. The shadows darted and swung as the wicks flared and went out.

The edge of the table had struck me hard across the back, but I recovered in time to dodge away as he lunged for me. With an inarticulate growl, he came after me, hands outstretched.

He was both faster and stronger than I expected, though he staggered awkwardly, bumping into things. He cornered me for a moment between the brazier and the table, and I could hear his breath rasping harshly in his throat as he grabbed for me. He smashed his left hand toward my face; had his strength and reflexes been anything like normal, the blow would have killed me. Instead, I jerked to one side, and his fist glanced off my forehead, knocking me to the floor, mildly stunned.

I crawled under the table. Reaching for me, he lost his balance and fell against the brazier. Glowing coals scattered across the stone floor of the chamber. He howled as his knee crunched heavily into a patch of hot coal. I seized a pillow from the bed and beat out a smoldering nest of sparks in the trailing bedcover. Preoccupied with this, I didn't notice his approach, until a solid clout across the head knocked me sprawling.

The cot overturned as I tried to pull myself up with a hand on the frame. I lay sheltering behind it for a moment, trying to get my senses back. I could hear Jamie hunting me in the semidarkness, breath rasping between incoherent phrases of Gaelic cursing. Suddenly he caught sight of me and flung himself over the bed, eyes mad in the dim light.

It is difficult to describe in detail what happened next, if only because everything happened a number of times, and the times all overlap in my memory. It seems as though Jamie's burning hands closed on my neck only once, but that once went on forever. In fact, it happened dozens of times. Each time I managed to break his grip and throw him off, to retreat once more, dodging and ducking around the wrecked furniture. And once again he would follow, a man pulled by rage from the edge of death, swearing and sobbing, staggering and flailing wildly.

Deprived of the sheltering brazier, the coals died quickly, leaving the room black as pitch and peopled with demons. In the last flickers of light, I saw him crouched against the wall, maned in fire and mantled in blood, penis stiff against the matted hair of his belly, eyes blue murder in a skull-white face. A Viking berserker. Like the Northern devils who burst from their dragon-ships into the mists of the ancient Scottish coast, to kill and plunder and burn. Men who would kill with the last ounce of their strength. Who would use that last strength to rape and sow their violent seed in the bellies of the conquered. The tiny incense burner gave no light, but the sickly smell of opium clogged my lungs. Though the coals were out, I saw lights in the darkness, colored lights that floated at the edge of my vision.

Movement was becoming harder; I felt as though I were wading through water thigh-deep, pursued by monstrous fish. I lifted my knees high, running in slow motion, feeling the water splash against my face.

I shook off the dream, to realize that there was in fact wetness on my face and hands. Not tears, but blood, and the sweat of the nightmare creature I grappled with in the dark.

Sweat. There was something I should remember about sweat, but I couldn't recall it. A hand tightened on my upper arm and I pulled away, a slick film left on my skin.

Around and around the mulberry bush, the monkey chased the weasel. But something was wrong, it was the weasel chasing me, a weasel with sharp white teeth that pierced my forearm. I hit out at it and the teeth let go, but the claws … around and around the mulberry bush …

The demon had me up against the wall; I could feel stone behind my head and stone beneath my grasping fingers, and a stone-hard body pressing hard against me, bony knee between my own, stone and bone, between my own … legs, more stony hardness … ah. A softness amidst the hardness of life, pleasant coolness in the heat, comfort in the midst of woe …

We fell locked together to the floor, rolling over and over, tangled in the folds of the fallen tapestry, washed in the drafts of cold air from the window. The mists of madness began to recede.

We bashed into some piece of furniture and both lay still. Jamie's hands were locked on my breasts, fingers digging bruisingly into the flesh. I felt the plop of dampness on my face, sweat or tears, I couldn't tell, but opened my eyes to see. Jamie was looking down at me, face blank in the moony light, eyes wide, unfocused. His hands relaxed. One finger gently traced the outline of my breast, from slope to tip, over and over. His hand moved to cup the breast, fingers spread like a starfish, soft as the grip of a nursing child.

"M-mother?" he said. The hair stood up on the back of my neck. It was the high, pure voice of a young boy. "Mother?"

The cold air laved us, whirling the unhealthy smoke away in a drift of snowflakes. I reached up and laid the palm of my hand along his cold cheek.

"Jamie, love," I said, whispering through a bruised throat, "Come then, come lay your head, man." The mask trembled then and broke, and I held the big body hard against me, the two of us shaking with the force of his sobbing.

* * *

It was, by considerable good luck, the unflappable Brother William who found us in the morning. I woke groggily to the sound of the door opening, and snapped to full consciousness when I heard him clear his throat emphatically before saying "Good morning to ye," in his soft Yorkshire drawl.

The heavy weight on my chest was Jamie. His hair had dried in bronze streaks and whorled over my breasts like the petals of a Chinese chrysanthemum. The cheek pressed against my sternum was warm and slightly sticky with sweat, but the back and arms I could touch were as cold as my thighs, chilled by the winter air gusting in on us.

Daylight streaming through the uncurtained window revealed the full extent of the wreckage I had only dimly realized the night before; smashed furniture and crockery littered the room, and the massive paired candlesticks lay like fallen logs in the midst of a tangle of torn hangings and scattered bedclothes. From the pattern of indentations impressing itself painfully into my back, I thought I must be lying on the indifferently executed tapestry of St. Sebastian the Human Pincushion; no great loss to the monastery, if so.

Brother William stood motionless in the doorway, jug and basin in hand. With great precision, he fixed his eyes on Jamie's left eyebrow and inquired, "And how do you feel this morning?"

There was a rather long pause, during which Jamie considerately remained in place, blanketing most of me from view. At last, in the hoarse tones of one to whom a revelation has been vouchsafed, he replied, "Hungry."

"Oh, good," said Brother William, still staring hard at the eyebrow, "I'll go and tell Brother Josef." The door closed soundlessly behind him.

“Nice of you not to move,” I remarked. “I shouldn’t like us to be responsible for giving Brother William impure thoughts.”

Dense blue eyes stared down at me. “Aye, well,” he said judiciously, “a view of *my* arse is no going to corrupt anyone’s Holy Orders; not in its present condition. Yours, though …” He paused to clear his throat.

“What *about* mine?” I demanded.

The bright head lowered slowly to plant a kiss on my shoulder. “Yours,” he said, “would compromise a bishop.”

“Mmmphm.” I was, I felt, getting rather good at Scottish noises myself. “Be that as it may, perhaps you should move now. I don’t suppose even Brother William’s tact is infinite.”

Jamie lowered his head next to mine with some care, laying it on a fold of tapestry, from which he peered sideways at me. “I dinna know how much of last night I dreamed and how much was real.” His hand unconsciously strayed to the scratch across his chest. “But if half what I thought happened really happened, I should be dead now.”

“You’re not. I looked.” With some hesitation, I asked, “Do you want to be?”

He smiled slowly, eyes half-closing. “No, Sassenach, I don’t.” His face was gaunt and shadowed with illness and fatigue, but peaceful, the lines around his mouth smoothed out and the blue eyes clear. “But I’m damned close to it, want to or not. The only reason I think I’m not dying now is that I’m hungry. I wouldna be hungry if I were about to die, do ye think? Seems a waste.” One eye closed altogether, but the other stayed half-open, fixed on my face with a quizzical expression.

“You can’t stand up?”

He considered carefully. “If my life depended on it, I might possibly lift my head again. But stand up? No.”

With a sigh, I wriggled out from under him and righted the bed before trying to lever him into a vertical position. He managed to stand for only a few seconds before his eyes rolled back and he fell across the bed. I groped frantically for the pulse in his neck, and found it, slow and strong, just below the three-cornered scar at the base of his throat. Simple exhaustion. After a month of imprisonment and a week of intense physical and mental stress, starvation, injury, sickness and high fever, even that vigorous frame had finally come to the end of its resources.

“The heart of a lion,” I said, shaking my head, “and the head of an ox. Too bad you haven’t also got the hide of a rhinoceros.” I touched a freshly bloodied weal on his shoulder.

He opened one eye. “What’s a rhinoceros?”

“I thought you were unconscious!”

“I was. I am. My head’s spinning like a top.”

I drew a blanket up over him. “What you need now are food and rest.”

“What *you* need now,” he said, “are clothes.” And shutting the eye again, he fell promptly asleep.

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ABSOLUTION

I had no memory of finding my way to bed, but I must have done so, because I woke up there. Anselm was sitting by the window, reading. I sat bolt upright in bed.

"Jamie?" I croaked.

"Asleep," he said, putting the book aside. He glanced at the hour-candle on the table. "Like you. You have been with the angels for the last thirty-six hours, *ma belle*." He filled a cup from the earthenware jug and held it to my lips. At one time I would have considered drinking wine in bed before brushing one's teeth to be the last word in decadence. Performed in a monastery, in company with a robed Franciscan, the act seemed somewhat less degenerate. And the wine did cut through the mossy feeling in my mouth.

I swung my feet over the side of the bed, and sat swaying. Anselm caught me by the arm and eased me back onto the pillow. He seemed suddenly to have four eyes, and altogether more noses and mouths than strictly necessary.

"I'm a bit dizzy," I said, closing my eyes. I opened one. Somewhat better. At least there was only one of him, if a trifle blurry around the edges.

Anselm bent over me, concerned.

"Shall I fetch Brother Ambrose or Brother Polydore, Madame? I have little skill in medicine, unfortunately."

"No, I don't need anything. I just sat up too suddenly." I tried again, more slowly. This time the room and its contents stayed relatively still. I became aware of numerous bruises and sore spots earlier submerged in the dizziness. I tried to clear my throat and discovered that it hurt. I grimaced.

"Really, *ma chère,* I think perhaps …" Anselm was poised by the door, ready to fetch assistance. He looked quite alarmed. I reached for the looking glass on the table and then changed my mind. I really wasn't ready for that. I grasped the wine jug instead.

Anselm came slowly back into the room and stood watching me. Once convinced that I wasn't going to collapse after all, he sat down again. I sipped the wine slowly as my head cleared, trying to shake off the aftereffects of opium-induced dreams. So we were alive, after all. Both of us.

My dreams had been chaotic, filled with violence and blood. I had dreamed over and over that Jamie was dead or dying. And somewhere in the fog had been the image of the boy in the snow, his surprised round face overlying the image of Jamie's bruised and battered one. Sometimes the pathetic, fuzzy mustache seemed to appear on Frank's face. I distinctly remembered killing all three of them. I felt as though I had spent the night in stabbing and butchery, and I ached in every muscle with a sort of dull depression.

Anselm was still there, patiently watching me, hands on his knees.

"There is something you could do for me, Father," I said.

He rose at once, eager to help, reaching for the jug.

"Of course? More wine?"

I smiled wanly.

"Yes, but later. Right now, I want you to hear my confession."

He was startled, but quickly gathered his professional self-possession around him like his robes.

"But of course, *chère madame,* if you wish it. But really, would it not be better to fetch Father Gerard? He is well known as a confessor, while I"—he gave a Gallic shrug—"I am allowed to hear confessions, of course, but in truth I seldom do so, being only a poor scholar."

"I want you," I said firmly. "And I want to do it now."

He sighed in resignation and went to fetch his stola. Arranging it about his neck so that the purple silk lay straight and shimmering down the black front of his habit, he took a seat on the stool, blessed me briefly and sat back, waiting.

And I told him. Everything. Who I was and how I came there. About Frank, and about Jamie. And about the young English dragoon with the pale, spotty face, dying against the snow.

He showed no change of expression while I spoke, except that the round brown eyes grew rounder still. When I finished, he blinked once or twice, opened his mouth as though to speak, closed it again, and shook his head as though to clear it.

"No," I said patiently. I cleared my throat again; I croaked like a bullfrog. "You haven't been hearing things. And you're not imagining it, either. Now you see why I wanted you to hear it under the seal of confession?"

He nodded, a bit abstractedly.

"Yes. Yes, to be sure. If … but yes. Of course, you wished me to tell no one. And also, since you tell it to me under the seal of the sacrament, then you expect that I must believe it. But …" He scratched his head, then looked up at me. A wide smile spread slowly across his countenance.

"But how marvelous!" he exclaimed softly. "How extraordinary, and how wonderful!"

" 'Wonderful' isn't precisely the word I would have chosen," I said dryly, "but 'extraordinary' is all right." I coughed and reached for more wine.

"But it is … a miracle," he said, as though to himself.

"If you insist," I said, sighing. "But what I want to know—what ought I to do? Am I guilty of murder? Or adultery, for that matter? Not that there's much to be done about it in either case, but I'd like to know. And since I *am* here, how ought I to act? Can I—*should* I, I mean—use what I know to … change things? I don't even know if such a thing is possible. But if it is, have I the right?"

He rocked back on his stool, considering. Slowly he raised both index fingers, placed them tip to tip and stared at them for a long time. Finally, he shook his head and smiled at me.

"I don't know, *ma bonne amie*. It is not, you will appreciate, a situation one is prepared to encounter in the confessional. I will have to think, and to pray. Yes, assuredly to pray. Tonight I will contemplate your situation when I hold my watch before the Blessed Sacrament. And tomorrow perhaps I can advise you."

He motioned me gently to kneel.

"But for now, my child, I will absolve you. Whatever your sins might be, have faith that they will be forgiven."

He lifted one hand in blessing, placing the other on my head. *"Te absolvo, in nomine Patri, et Filii,…"*

Rising, he lifted me to my feet.

"Thank you, Father," I said. Unbeliever that I was, I had used confession only to force him to take me seriously, and was somewhat surprised to feel a lightening of the burden on my spirits. Perhaps it was only the relief of telling someone the truth.

He waved a hand in dismissal. "I will see you tomorrow, *chère madame*. For now, you should rest more, if you can."

He headed for the door, winding his stola up neatly into a square. At the doorway, he paused for a moment, turning to smile at me. A childlike excitement lighted his eyes.

"And perhaps tomorrow …" he said, "perhaps you could … tell me what it is like?"

I smiled back.

"Yes, Father. I'll tell you."

After he left, I staggered down the hall to see Jamie. I had seen any number of corpses in much better condition, but his chest rose and fell regularly, and the sinister green tinge had faded from his skin.

"I've been waking him every few hours, just long enough to swallow a few spoonfuls of broth." Brother Roger was at my elbow, speaking softly. He moved his gaze from the patient to me, and recoiled noticeably at my appearance. I should probably have combed my hair. "Er, perhaps you would … like some?"

"No, thank you. I think … I think perhaps I will sleep a bit more, after all." I no longer felt weighed down by guilt and depression, but a drowsy, contented heaviness was spreading through my limbs. Whether it was due to the effects of confession or of wine, I found to my surprise that I was looking forward to bed and to oblivion.

I leaned forward to touch Jamie. He was warm, but with no trace of fever. I gently stroked his head, smoothing the tumbled red hair. The corner of his mouth stirred briefly and fell back into place. But it had turned up. I was sure of it.

The sky was cold and damp, filling the horizon with a grey blankness that blended into the grey mist of the hills and the grimy cover of last week's snow, so that the abbey seemed wrapped inside a ball of dirty cotton. Even inside the cloister, the winter's silence weighed on the inhabitants. The chanting from the Hours of Praise in the chapel was muted, and the thick stone walls seemed to absorb all sound, swaddling the bustle of daily activity.

Jamie slept for nearly two days, waking only to take a little broth or wine. Once awake, he began to heal in the usual fashion of a normally healthy young man, suddenly deprived of the strength and independence usually taken for granted. In other words, he enjoyed the cosseting for approximately twenty-four hours and then became in turn restive, restless, testy, irritable, cranky, fractious, and extremely bad tempered.

The cuts on his shoulders ached. The scars on his legs itched. He was sick of lying on his belly. The room was too hot. His hand hurt. The smoke from the brazier made his eyes burn so that he could not read. He was sick of broth, posset, and milk. He wanted meat.

I recognized the symptoms of returning health, and was glad of them, but was prepared to put up with only so much of this. I opened the window, changed his sheets, applied marigold salve to his back and rubbed his legs with aloe juice. Then I summoned a serving brother and ordered more broth.

"I don't want any more of this slop! I need food!" He pushed the tray irritably away, making the broth splash onto the napkin cradling the bowl.

I folded my arms and stared down at him. Imperious blue eyes stared right back. He was thin as a rail, the lines of jaw and cheekbone bold against the skin. Though he was mending well, the raw nerves of his stomach would take a little longer to heal. He still could not always keep down the broth and milk.

"You'll get food when I say you can have it," I informed him, "and not before."

"I'll have it now! D'ye think you can tell me what I'm to eat?"

"Yes, I bloody well do! I'm the doctor here, if you've forgotten."

He swung his feet over the edge of the bed, clearly intending to take steps. I put a hand on his chest and shoved him back.

"Your job is to stay in that bed and do as you're told, for once in your life," I snapped. "You're not fit to be up, and you're not fit for solid foot yet. Brother Roger said you vomited again this morning."

"Brother Roger can mind his own business, and so can you," he said through his teeth, struggling back up. He reached out and got a hold on the table edge. With considerable effort, he made it to his feet, and stood there, swaying.

"Get back in bed! You're going to fall down!" He was alarmingly pale, and even the small effort of standing had made him break out in a cold sweat.

"I'll not," he said. "And if I do, it's my own concern."

I was really angry by this time.

"Oh, is it! And who do you think saved your miserable life for you, anyway? Did it all by yourself, did you?" I grabbed his arm to steer him back to bed, but he jerked it away.

"I didna ask ye to, did I? I told ye to leave me, no? And I canna see why ye bothered to save my life, anyway, if it's only to starve me to death—unless ye enjoy watching it!"

This was altogether too much.

"Bloody ingrate!"

"Shrew!"

I drew myself to my full height, and pointed menacingly at the cot. With all the authority learned in years of nursing, I said, "Get back in that bed this instant, you stubborn, mulish, idiotic—"

"Scot," he finished for me, succinctly. He took a step toward the door, and would have fallen, had he not caught hold of a stool. He plumped heavily down on it and sat swaying, his eyes a little unfocused with dizziness. I clenched my fists and glared at him.

"Fine," I said. "Bloody fine! I'll order bread and meat for you, and after you vomit on the floor, you can just get down on your hands and knees and clean it up yourself! I won't do it, and if Brother Roger does, I'll skin him alive!"

I stormed into the hall and slammed the door behind me, just before the porcelain washbasin crashed into it from the other side. I turned to find an interested audience, no doubt attracted by the racket, standing in the hall. Brother Roger and Murtagh stood side by side, staring at my flushed face and heaving bosom. Roger looked disconcerted, but a slow smile spread over Murtagh's craggy countenance as he listened to the string of Gaelic obscenities going on behind the door.

"He's feeling better, then," he said contentedly. I leaned against the corridor wall, and felt an answering smile spread slowly across my own face.

"Well, yes," I said, "he is."

On my way back to the main building from a morning spent in the herbary, I met Anselm coming from the cloister near the library. His face lighted when he saw me, and he hurried to join me in the courtyard. We walked together through the abbey grounds, talking.

"Yours is an interesting problem, to be sure," he said, breaking a stick from a bush near the wall. He examined the winter-tight buds critically, then tossed it aside, and glanced up at the sky, where a feeble sun poked its way through the light cloud layer.

"Warmer, but a good way to go until the spring," he observed. "Still, the carp should be lively today—let us go down to the fish pools."

Far from being the delicate ornamental structures I had imagined them to be, the fish pools were little more than utilitarian rock-lined troughs, placed conveniently near to the kitchens. Stocked with carp, they provided the necessary food for Fridays and fast days, when the weather was too rough to permit ocean fishing for the more customary haddock, herring, and flounder.

True to Anselm's word, the fish were lively, the fat fusiform bodies gliding past each other, white scales reflecting the clouds overhead, the vigor of their movements occasionally stirring up small waves that sloshed against the sides of their rocky prison. As our shadows fell on the water, the carp turned toward us like compass needles surging toward the north.

"They expect to be fed, when they see people," Anselm explained. "It would be a shame to disappoint them. One moment, *chère madame*."

He darted into the kitchens, returning shortly with two loaves of stale bread. We stood on the lip of the pool, tearing crumbs from the loaves and tossing them to the endlessly hungry mouths below.

"You know, there are two aspects to this curious situation of yours," Anselm said, absorbed in tearing bread. He glanced aside at me, a sudden smile lighting his face. He shook his head in wonderment. "I can scarcely believe it still, you know. Such a marvel! Truly, God has been good, to show me such things."

"Well, that's nice," I said, a bit dryly, "I don't know whether He's been quite so obliging to me."

"Really? *I* think so." Anselm sank down on his haunches, crumbling bread between his fingers. "True," he said, "the situation has caused you no little personal inconvenience—"

"That's one way of putting it," I muttered.

"But it may also be regarded as a signal mark of God's favor," he went on, disregarding my interruption. The bright brown eyes regarded me speculatively.

"I prayed for guidance, kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament," he went on, "and as I sat in the silence of the chapel, I seemed to see you as a shipwrecked traveler. And it seems to me that that is a good parallel to your present situation, is it not? Imagine such a soul, Madame, suddenly cast away in a strange land, bereft of friends and familiarity, without resources save what the new land can provide. Such a happening is disaster, truly, and yet may be the opening for great opportunity and blessings. What if the new land shall be rich? New friends may be made, and a new life begun."

"Yes, but—" I began.

"So"—he said authoritatively, holding up a finger to hush me—"if you have been deprived of your earlier life, perhaps it is only that God has seen fit to bless you with another, that may be richer and fuller."

"Oh, it's full, all right," I agreed. "But—"

"Now, from the standpoint of canon law," he said frowning, "there is no difficulty regarding your marriages. Both were valid marriages, consecrated by the church. And strictly speaking, your marriage to the young chevalier in there antedates your marriage to Monsieur Randall."

"Yes, 'strictly speaking,' " I agreed, getting to finish a sentence for once. "But not in *my* time. I don't believe canon law was constructed with such contingencies in mind."

Anselm laughed, the pointed end of his beard quivering in the slight breeze.

"More than true, *ma chère,* more than true. All that I meant was that, considered from a strictly legal standpoint, you have committed neither sin nor crime in what you have done regarding these two men. Those were the two aspects of your situation, of which I spoke earlier: what you have done, and what you *will* do." He reached up a hand and took mine, tugging me down to sit beside him, so our eyes were on a level.

"That is what you asked me when I heard your confession, is it not? What have I done? And what shall I do?"

"Yes, that's it. And you're telling me that I haven't done anything wrong? But I've—"

He was, I thought, nearly as bad as Dougal MacKenzie for interrupting.

"No, you have not," he said firmly. "It is possible to act in strict accordance with God's law and with one's conscience, you comprehend, and still to encounter difficulties and tragedy. It is the painful truth that we still do not know why *le bon Dieu* allows evil to exist, but we have His word for it that this is true. 'I created good,' He says in the Bible, 'and I created evil.' Consequently, even good people sometimes, I think, *especially* good people," he added meditatively, "may encounter great confusion and difficulties in their lives. For example, take the young boy you were obliged to kill. No," he said, raising a hand against my interruption, "make no mistake. You were obliged to kill him, given the exigencies of your situation. Even Holy Mother Church, which teaches the sanctity of life, recognizes the need for defense of oneself and of one's family. And having seen the earlier condition of your husband"—he cast a look back at the guests' wing—"I have no doubt that you were obliged to take the path of violence. That being so, you have nothing with which to reproach yourself. You do, of course, feel pity and regret for the action, for you are, Madame, a person of great sympathy and feeling." He gently patted the hand that rested on my drawn-up knees.

"Sometimes our best actions result in things that are most regrettable. And yet you could not have acted otherwise. We do not know what God's plan for the young man was—perhaps it was His will that the boy should join him in heaven at that time. But you are not God, and there are limits to what you can expect of yourself."

I shivered briefly as a cold wind came round the corner, and drew my shawl closer. Anselm saw it, and motioned toward the pool.

"The water is warm, Madame. Perhaps you would care to soak your feet?"

"Warm?" I gaped incredulously at the water. I hadn't noticed before, but there were no broken sheets of ice in the corners of the trough, as there were on the holy water fonts outside the church, and small green plants floated in the water, sprouting from the cracks between the rocks that lined the pool.

In illustration, Anselm slipped off his own leather sandals. Cultured as his face and voice were, he had the square, sturdy hands and feet of a Normandy peasant. Hiking the skirt of his habit to his knees, he dipped his feet into the pool. The carp dashed away, turning almost at once to nose curiously at this new intrusion.

"They don't bite, do they?" I asked, viewing the myriad voracious mouths suspiciously.

"Not flesh, no," he assured me. "They have no teeth to speak of."

I shed my own sandals and gingerly inserted my feet into the water. To my surprise, it was pleasantly warm. Not hot, but a delightful contrast to the damp, chilly air.

"Oh, that's nice!" I wiggled my toes with pleasure, causing considerable consternation among the carp.

“There are several mineral springs near the abbey,” Anselm explained. “They bubble hot from the earth, and the waters hold great healing powers.” He pointed to the far end of the trough, were I could see a small opening in the rocks, half obscured by the drifting water plants.

“A small amount of the hot mineral water is piped here from the nearest spring. That is what enables the cook to maintain live fish for the table at all seasons; normally the winter weather would be too bitter for them.”

We paddled our feet in congenial silence for a time, the heavy bodies of the fish flicking past, occasionally bumping into our legs with a surprisingly weighty impact. The sun came out again, bathing us in a weak but perceptible warmth. Anselm closed his eyes, letting the light wash over his face. He spoke again without opening them.

“Your first husband—Frank was his name?—he, too, I think, must be commended to God as one of the regrettable things that you can do nothing about.”

“But I could have done something,” I argued. “I could have gone back—perhaps.”

He opened one eye and regarded me skeptically.

“Yes, ‘perhaps,’ ” he agreed. “And perhaps not. You need not reproach yourself for hesitating to risk your life.”

“It wasn’t the risk,” I said, flicking my toes at a big black-and-white splotched carp. “Or not entirely. It was—well, it was partly fear, but mostly it was that I—I couldn’t leave Jamie.” I shrugged helplessly. “I—simply couldn’t.”

Anselm smiled, opening both eyes.

“A good marriage is one of the most precious gifts from God,” he observed. “If you had the good sense to recognize and accept the gift, it is no reproach to you. And consider …” He tilted his head to one side, like a brown sparrow.

“You have been gone from your place for nearly a year. Your first husband will have begun to reconcile himself to your loss. Much as he may have loved you, loss is common to all men, and we are given means of overcoming it for our good. He will have started, perhaps, to build a new life. Would it do good for you to desert the man who needs you so deeply, and whom you love, to whom you are united in the bonds of holy matrimony, to return and disrupt this new life? And in particular, if you were to go back from a sense of duty, but feeling that your heart is given elsewhere—no." He shook his head decisively.

"No man can serve two masters, and no more can a woman. Now, if that were your only valid marriage, and this"—he nodded again toward the guest wing—"merely an irregular attachment, then your duty might lie elsewhere. But you were bound by God, and I think you may honor your duty to the chevalier.

"Now, as to the other aspect—what you shall do. That may require some discussion." He pulled his feet from the water, and dried them on the skirt of his habit.

"Let us adjourn this meeting to the abbey kitchens, where perhaps Brother Eulogius may be persuaded to provide us with a warming drink."

Finding a stray bit of bread on the ground, I tossed it to the carp and stooped to put my sandals on.

"I can't tell you what a relief it is to talk to someone about it," I said. "And I still can't get over the fact that you really do believe me."

He shrugged, gallantly offering me an arm to hold while I slipped the rough straps of the sandal over my instep.

"*Ma chère,* I serve a man who multiplied the loaves and fishes"—he smiled, nodding at the pool, where the swirls of the carps' feeding were still subsiding—"who healed the sick and raised the dead. Shall I be astonished that the master of eternity has brought a young woman through the stones of the earth to do His will?"

Well, I reflected, it was better than being denounced as the whore of Babylon.

The kitchens of the abbey were warm and cavelike, the arching roof blackened with centuries of grease-filled smoke. Brother Eulogius, up to his elbows in a vat of dough, nodded a greeting to Anselm and called in French to one of the lay brothers to come and serve us. We found a seat out of the bustle, and sat down with two cups of ale and a plate containing a hot pastry of some kind. I pushed the plate toward Anselm, too preoccupied to be interested in food.

“Let me put it this way,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “If I knew that some harm was going to occur to a group of people, should I feel obliged to try to avert it?”

Anselm rubbed his nose reflectively on his sleeve; the heat of the kitchen was beginning to make it run.

“In principle, yes,” he agreed. “But it would depend also upon a number of other things—what is the risk to yourself, and what are your other obligations? Also what is the chance of your success?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Of any of those things. Except obligation, of course—I mean, there’s Jamie. But he’s one of the group who might be hurt.”

He broke off a piece of pastry and passed it to me, steaming. I ignored it, studying the surface of my ale. “The two men I killed,” I said, “either of them might have had children, if I hadn’t killed them. They might have done—” I made a helpless gesture with the cup, “—who knows what they might have done? I may have affected the future … no, I *have* affected the future. And I don’t know how, and that’s what frightens me so much.”

“Um.” Anselm grunted thoughtfully, and motioned to a passing lay brother, who hastened over with a fresh pasty and more ale. He refilled both cups before speaking.

“If you have taken life, you have also preserved it. How many of the sick you have treated would have died without your intervention? They also will affect the future. What if a person you have saved should commit an act of great evil? Is that your fault? Should you on that account have let that person die? Of course not.” He rapped his pewter mug on the table for emphasis.

“You say that you are afraid to take any actions here for fear of affecting the future. This is illogical, Madame. *Everyone’s* actions affect the future. Had you remained in your own place, your actions would still have affected what was to happen, no less than they will now. You have still the same responsibilities that you would have had then—that any man has at any time. The only difference is that you may be in a position to see more exactly what effects your actions have—and then again, you may not." He shook his head, looking steadily across the table.

"The ways of the Lord are hidden to us, and no doubt for good reason. You are right, *ma chère;* the laws of the Church were not formulated with situations such as yours in mind, and therefore you have little guidance other than your own conscience and the hand of God. I cannot tell you what you should do, or not do.

"You have free choice; so have all the others in this world. And history, I believe, is the cumulation of all those actions. Some individuals are chosen by God to affect the destinies of many. Perhaps you are one of those. Perhaps not. I do not know why you are here. You do not know. It is likely that neither of us will ever know." He rolled his eyes, comically. "Sometimes I don't even know why *I* am here!" I laughed and he smiled in return. He leaned toward me across the rough planks of the table, intense.

"Your knowledge of the future is a tool, given to you as a shipwrecked castaway might find himself in possession of a knife or a fishing line. It is not immoral to use it, so long as you do so in accordance with the dictates of God's law, to the best of your ability."

He paused, drew a deep breath, and blew it out in an explosive sigh that ruffled his silky mustache. He smiled.

"And that, *ma chère madame,* is all I can tell you—no more than I can tell any troubled soul who comes to me for advice: put your trust in God, and pray for guidance."

He shoved the fresh pastry toward me.

"But whatever you are to do, you will require strength for it. So take one last bit of advice: when in doubt, eat."

* * *

When I came into Jamie's room in the evening, he was asleep, head pillowed on his forearms. The empty broth bowl sat virtuously on the tray, the untouched platter of bread and meat beside it. I looked from the innocent, dreaming face to the platter and back. I touched the bread. My finger left a slight depression in the moist surface. Fresh.

I left him asleep and went in search of Brother Roger, who I found in the buttery.

"Did he eat the bread and meat?" I demanded, without preliminaries.

Brother Roger smiled in his fluffy beard. "Yes."

"Did he keep it down?"

"No."

I eyed him narrowly. "You didn't clean up after him, I hope."

He was amused, the round cheeks pink above his beard. "Would I dare? No, he took the precaution of having a basin ready, in case."

"Damn wily Scot," I said, laughing despite myself. I returned to his chamber and kissed him lightly on the forehead. He stirred, but didn't wake. Heeding Father Anselm's advice, I took the platter of fresh bread and meat back to my chamber for my own supper.

* * *

Thinking I would give Jamie time to recover, both from pique and indigestion, I stayed in my own room most of the next day, reading an herbal Brother Ambrose had provided me. After lunch I went to check on my recalcitrant patient. Instead of Jamie, though, I found Murtagh, sitting on a stool tilted back against the wall, wearing a bemused expression.

"Where is he?" I said, looking blankly around the room.

Murtagh jerked a thumb toward the window. It was a cold, dark day, and the lamps were lit. The window was uncovered and the chilly draft set the little flame fluttering in its dish.

"He went *out*?" I asked incredulously. "Where? Why? And what on earth is he wearing?" Jamie had remained largely naked over the last several days, since the room was warm and any pressure on his healing wounds was painful. He had worn a monk's outer robe when leaving his room on necessary short excursions, with the support of Brother Roger, but the robe was still present, neatly folded at the foot of the bed.

Murtagh rocked his stool forward and regarded me owlishly.

"How many questions is that? Four?" He held up one hand, index finger pointing up.

"One: aye, he went out." The middle finger rose. "Two: Where? Damned if I know." The fourth finger joined its companions. "Three: Why? He said he was tired of bein' cooped up indoors." The little finger waggled briefly. "Four: Also damned if I know. He wasna wearin' anything at all last time I saw him."

Murtagh folded all four fingers and stuck out his thumb.

"Ye didna ask me, but he's been gone an hour or so."

I fumed, at a loss as to what to do. Since the offender wasn't available, I snapped at Murtagh instead.

"Don't you know it's near freezing out there, and snow coming on? Why didn't you stop him? And what do you mean he isn't wearing anything?"

The diminutive clansman was tranquil. "Aye, I know it. Reckon he does, too, not bein' blind. As for stoppin' him, I tried." He nodded at the robe on the bed.

"When he said he was goin' out, I said he wasna fit for it, and you'd have my head, did I let him go. I snatched up his gown and set my back against the door, and told him he wasna leavin', unless he was prepared to go through me."

Murtagh paused, then said irrelevantly, "Ellen MacKenzie had the sweetest smile I ever saw; would warm a man to the backbone just to see it."

"So you let her fat-headed son go out and freeze to death," I said impatiently. "What's his mother's smile to do with it?"

Murtagh rubbed his nose meditatively. "Weel, when I said I wouldna let him pass, young Jamie just looked at me for a moment. Then he gave me a smile looked just like his ma's, and stepped out of the window in naught but his skin. By the time I got to the window, he was gone."

I rolled my eyes heavenward.

"Reckoned I should let ye know where he'd gone," Murtagh continued, "so ye'd no be worrit for him."

"So I'd no be worrit for him!" I muttered under my breath as I strode toward the stables. "*He'd* better be 'worrit,' when I catch up to him!"

There was only the one main road heading inland. I rode along it at a good pace, keeping an eye on the fields as I passed. This part of France was a rich farming area, and luckily most of the forest had been cleared; wolves and bears would not be as much a danger as they might be further inland.

As it happened, I found him barely a mile beyond the gates of the monastery, sitting on one of the ancient Roman mile-markers that dotted the roads.

He was barefoot, but otherwise clad in a short jerkin and thin breeches, the property of one of the stable lads, to judge from the stains on them.

I reined up and stared at him for a moment, leaning on the pommel. "Your nose is blue," I remarked conversationally. I glanced downward. "And so are your feet."

He grinned and wiped his nose on the back of his hand.

"So are my balls. Want to warm them for me?" Cold or not, he was plainly in good spirits. I slid off the horse and stood in front of him, shaking my head.

"It's no use at all, is it?" I asked.

"What isn't?" He rubbed his hand on the ragged breeches.

"Being angry with you. You don't care a bit whether you give yourself pneumonia, or get eaten by bears, or worry me half to death, do you?"

"Well, I'm no much worrit about the bears. They sleep in the winter, ye know."

I lost my temper and swung my hand at him, intending to slap his ear through the side of his head. He caught my wrist and held it without difficulty, laughing at me. After a moment's fruitless struggle, I gave up and laughed too.

"Are you coming back, now?" I asked. "Or have you got anything else to prove?"

He gestured back along the road with his chin. "Take the horse back to that big oak tree and wait for me there. I'll walk that far. Alone."

I bit my tongue to repress the several remarks I felt bubbling to the surface, and mounted. At the oak tree, I got off and looked down the road. After a moment, though, I found I couldn't bear to watch his labored progress. When he fell the first time, I clutched the reins tight in my gloved hands, then resolutely turned my back, and waited.

We barely made it back to the guests' wing, but managed, staggering through the corridor, his arm looped over my shoulder for support. I spotted Brother Roger, anxiously lurking in the hall, and sent him. scampering for a warming pan, while I steered my awkward burden into the chamber and dumped him onto the bed. He grunted at the impact, but lay still, eyes closed, as I proceeded to strip the filthy rags off him.

"All right; in you get."

He rolled obediently under the covers I held back for him. I thrust the warming pan hastily between the sheets at the foot of the bed and shoved it back and forth. When I removed it, he stretched his long legs down and relaxed with a blissful sigh as his feet reached the pocket of warmth.

I went quietly about the room, picking up the discarded clothes, straightening the trifling disorder on the table, putting fresh charcoal in the brazier, adding a pinch of elecampane to sweeten the smoke. I thought he was asleep, and was startled when he spoke behind me.

"Claire."

"Yes?"

"I love you."

"Oh." I was mildly surprised, but undeniably pleased. "I love you too."

He sighed, and opened his eyes halfway.

"Randall," he said. "Toward the end. That's what he wanted." I was even more startled by this, and replied cautiously.

"Oh?"

"Aye." His eyes were fixed on the open window, where the snow clouds filled the space with a deep, even grey.

"I was lying on the floor, and he was lying next to me. He was naked by then, too, and both of us were smeared with blood—and other things. I remember trying to lift my head, and feeling my cheek stuck to the stone of the floor with dried blood." He frowned, a distant look in his eyes as he conjured the memory.

"I was far gone by then; so far that I didna even feel much pain—I was just terribly tired, and everything seemed far away and not very real."

"Just as well," I said, with some asperity, and he smiled briefly.

"Aye, just as well. I was drifting a bit, half-fainted, I expect, so I don't know how long we both lay there, but I came awake to find him holding me and pressing himself against me." He hesitated, as though the next part were difficult to say.

"I'd not fought him 'til then. But I was so tired, and I thought I couldna bear it again.… anyway, I started to squirm away from him, not really fighting, just pulling back. He had his arms round my neck, and he pulled on me, and buried his face in my shoulder, and I could feel he was crying. I couldna tell what he was saying for a bit, and then I could; he was saying 'I love you, I love you,' over and over, with his tears and his spittle running down my chest." Jamie shuddered briefly, from cold or memory. He blew out a long breath, disturbing the cloud of fragrant smoke that swirled near the ceiling.

"I canna think why I did it. But I put my arms about him, and we just lay still for a bit. He stopped crying, finally, and kissed me and stroked me. Then he whispered to me, 'Tell me that you love me.' " He paused in the recital, smiling faintly.

"I would not do it. I dinna know why. By then I would ha' licked his boots and called him the King of Scotland, if he'd wanted it. But I wouldna tell him that. I don't even remember thinking about it; I just—wouldn't." He sighed and his good hand twitched, gripping the coverlet.

"He used me again—hard. And he kept on saying it: 'Tell me that you love me, Alex. Say that you love me.' "

"He called you Alex?" I interrupted, not able to hold back.

"Aye. I remember I wondered how he knew my second name. Did not occur to me to wonder why he'd use it, even if he knew." He shrugged.

"Anyway, I didna move or say a word, and when he'd finished, he jumped up as though he'd gone mad, and started to beat me with something—I could not see what—cursing and shouting at me, saying 'You know you love me! Tell me so! I know it's true!" I got my arms up over my head to protect it, and after a bit I must have fainted again, because the pain in my shoulders was the last I remember, except for sort of a dream about bellowing kine. Then I woke, jouncing along belly-down on a horse for a few moments, and then nothing again 'til I came round on the hearthside at Eldridge, with you looking down on me." He closed his eyes again. His tone was dreamy, almost unconcerned.

"I think … if I had told him that … he would have killed me."

Some people have nightmares peopled by monsters. I dreamed of genealogical charts, thin black branches, bearing clusters of dates on every stem. The lines like snakes, with death between the brackets of their jaws. Once again I heard Frank's voice, saying *He became a soldier, a good choice for a second son. There was a third brother who became a curate, but I don't know much about him…* I didn't know much about him, either. Only his name. There were the three sons listed on that chart; the sons of Joseph and Mary Randall. I had seen it many times: the oldest, William; and the second, Jonathan; and the third, Alexander.

Jamie spoke again, summoning me from my thoughts.

"Sassenach?"

"Yes?"

"Ye know the fortress I told ye of, the one inside me?"

"I remember."

He smiled without opening his eyes, and reached out a hand for me.

"Well, I've a lean-to built, at least. And a roof to keep out the rain."

* * *

I went to bed tired but peaceful, and wondering. Jamie would recover. When that had been in doubt, I had looked no further than the next hour, the next meal, the next administration of medicine. But now I needed to look further.

The abbey was a sanctuary, but only a temporary one. We could not stay here indefinitely, no matter how hospitable the monks.

Scotland and England were too dangerous by far; unless Lord Lovat could help—a remote contingency, under the circumstances. Our future must lie on this side of the channel. Knowing what I now knew about Jamie's seasickness, I understood his reluctance to consider emigration to America—three months of nausea was a daunting prospect to anyone. So what was left?

France was the most likely. We both spoke French fluently. While Jamie could do as well in Spanish, German, or Italian, I was not so linguistically blessed. Also, the Fraser family was rich in connections here; perhaps we could find a place on an estate owned by a relative or friend, and live peacefully in the country. The idea held considerable attractions.

But there remained, as always, the question of time. It was the beginning of 1744—the New Year was but two weeks past. And in 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie would take ship from France to Scotland, the Young Pretender come to claim his father's throne. With him would come disaster; war and slaughter, the crushing of the Highland clans, and with them, the butchery of all that Jamie—and I—held dear.

And between now and then, there lay one year. One year, when things might happen. When steps might be taken to prevent disaster. How, and by what means? I had no idea, but neither had I any doubts about the consequences of inaction.

Could events be changed? Perhaps. My fingers stole to my left hand and idly caressed the gold ring on my fourth finger. I thought of what I had said to Jonathan Randall, burning with rage and horror in the dungeons under Wentworth Prison.

"I curse you," I had said, "with the hour of your death." And I had told him when he would die. Had told him the date written on the genealogical chart, in Frank's fine black calligraphic script—April 16, 1745. Jonathan Randall was to die at the battle of Culloden, caught up in the slaughter that the English would create. But he didn't. He had died instead a few hours later, trampled beneath the hooves of my revenge.

And he had died a childless bachelor. Or at least I thought so. The chart—that cursed chart!—had given the date of his marriage, sometime in 1744. And the birth of his son, Frank's five-times-great-grandfather, soon after. If Jack Randall was dead and childless, how would Frank be born? And yet his ring was still upon my hand. He had existed, would exist. I comforted myself with the thought, rubbing the ring in the darkness, as though it contained a jinni that could advise me.

I woke out of a sound sleep sometime later with a half-scream.

"Ssh. 'Tis only me." The large hand lifted from my mouth. With the candle out, the room was pitch-black. I groped blindly until my hand struck something solid.

"You shouldn't be out of bed!" I exclaimed, still groggy with sleep. My fingers slid over smooth cold flesh. "You're freezing!"

"Well, of course I am," he said, somewhat crossly. "I havena got any clothes on, and it's perishing in the corridor. Will ye let me in bed?"

I wriggled as far over as I could in the narrow cot, and he slid in naked beside me, clutching me for warmth. His breathing was uneven, and I thought his trembling was from weakness as much as from cold.

"God, you're warm." He snuggled closer, sighing. "It feels good to hold ye, Sassenach."

I didn't bother asking what he was doing there; that was becoming quite plain. Nor did I ask whether he was sure. I had my own doubts, but would not voice them for fear of making self-fulfilling prophecies. I rolled to face him, mindful of the injured hand.

There was that sudden startling moment of joining, that quick gliding strangeness that at once becomes familiar. Jamie sighed deeply, with satisfaction and, perhaps, relief. We lay still for a moment, as though afraid to disturb our fragile link by moving. Jamie's good hand caressed me slowly, feeling its way in the dark, fingers spread like a cat's whiskers, sensitive to vibration. He moved against me, once, as though asking a question, and I answered him in the same language.

We began a delicate game of slow movements, a balancing act between his desire and his weakness, between pain and the growing pleasure of the body. Somewhere in the dark, I thought to myself that I must tell Anselm that there was another way to make time stop, but then thought perhaps not, as it was not a way open to a priest.

I held Jamie steady, with a light hand on his scarred back. He set our rhythm, but let me carry the force of our movement. We were both silent save our breathing, until the end. Feeling him tiring, I grasped him firmly and pulled him to me, rocking my hips to take him deeper, forcing him toward the climax. "Now," I said softly, "come to me. Now!" He put his forehead hard against mine and yielded himself to me with a quivering sigh.

The Victorians called it "the little death," and with good reason. He lay so limp and heavy that I would have thought him dead, if not for the slow thump of his heart against my ribs. It seemed a long time before he stirred and mumbled something against my shoulder.

"What did you say?"

He turned his head so his mouth was just below my ear. I felt warm breath on my neck. "I said," he answered softly, "my hand doesna hurt at all just now."

The good hand gently explored my face, smoothing away the wetness on my cheeks.

"Were ye afraid for me?" he asked.

"Yes," I said. "I thought it was too soon."

He laughed softly in the dark. "It was; I almost killed myself. Aye, I was afraid too. But I woke with my hand painin' me and couldna go back to sleep. I was tossing about, feeling lonely for ye. The more I thought about ye, the more I wanted ye, and I was halfway down the corridor before I thought to worry about what I was going to do when I got here. And once I thought …" He paused, stroking my cheek. "Well, I'm no verra good, Sassenach, but I'm maybe not a coward, after all."

I turned my head to meet his kiss. His stomach rumbled loudly.

"Don't laugh, you," he grumbled. "It's your fault, starving me. It's a wonder I could manage at all, on nothing but beef broth and ale."

"All right," I said, still laughing. "You win. You can have an egg for your breakfast tomorrow."

"Ha," he said, in tones of deep satisfaction. "I knew ye'd feed me, if I offered ye a suitable inducement."

We fell asleep face to face, locked in each other's arms.

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FROM THE WOMB OF THE EARTH

Over the next two weeks, Jamie continued to heal, and I continued to wonder. Some days I would feel that we must go to Rome, where the Pretender's court held sway, and do … what? Other times, I wanted with all my heart only to find a safe and isolated spot, to live our lives in peace.

It was a warm, bright day, and the icicles hanging from the gargoyles' noses dripped incessantly, leaving deep ragged pits in the snow beneath the eaves. The door of Jamie's room had been left ajar and the window uncovered, to clear out some of the lingering vapors of smoke and illness.

I poked my head cautiously around the jamb, not wishing to wake him if he was asleep, but the narrow cot was empty. He was seated by the open window, turned half away from the door so that his face was mostly hidden.

He was desperately thin still, but the shoulders were broad and straight beneath the rough fabric of the novice's habit, and the grace of his strength was returning; he sat solidly without a tremor, back straight and legs curled back beneath the stool, the lines of his body firm and harmonious. He was holding his right wrist with his sound left hand, slowly turning the right hand in the sunlight.

There was a small pile of cloth strips on the table. He had removed the bandages from the injured hand and was examining it closely. I stood in the doorway, not moving. From here, I could see the hand clearly as he turned it back and forth, probing gingerly.

The stigma of the nail wound in the palm of the hand was quite small, and well healed, I was glad to see; no more than a small pink knot of scar tissue that would gradually fade. On the back of the hand, the situation was not so favorable. Eroded by infection, the wound there covered an area the size of sixpence, still patched with scabs and the rawness of a new scar.

The middle finger, too, showed a jagged ridge of pink scar tissue, running from just below the first joint almost to the knuckle. Released from their splints, the thumb and index finger were straight, but the little finger was badly twisted; that one had had three separate fractures, I remembered, and apparently I had not been able to set them all properly. The ring finger was set oddly, so that it protruded slightly upward when he laid the hand flat on the table, as he did now.

Turning the hand palm upward, he began to manipulate the fingers gently. None would bend more than an inch or two; the ring finger not at all. As I had feared, the second joint was likely permanently frozen.

He turned the hand to and fro, holding it before his face, watching the stiff, twisted fingers and the ugly scars, mercilessly vivid in the sunlight. Then he suddenly bent his head, clutching the injured hand to his chest, covering it protectively with the sound one. He made no sound, but the wide shoulders trembled briefly.

"Jamie." I crossed the room swiftly and knelt beside him, putting my hand softly on his knee.

"Jamie, I'm sorry," I said. "I did the best I could."

He looked down at me in astonishment. The thick auburn lashes sparkled with tears in the sunlight, and he dashed them hastily away with the back of his hand.

"What?" he said, gulping, clearly taken aback by my sudden appearance. "Sorry? For what, Sassenach?"

"Your hand." I reached out and took it, lightly tracing the crooked lines of the fingers, touching the sunken scar on the back.

"It will get better," I assured him anxiously. "Really it will. I know it seems stiff and useless right now, but that's only because it's been splinted so long, and the bones haven't fully knitted yet. I can show you how to exercise, and massage. You'll get back a good deal of the use of it, honestly—"

He stopped me by laying his good hand along my cheek.

"Did you mean …?" He started, then stopped, shaking his head in disbelief. "You thought …?" He stopped once more and started over.

"Sassenach," he said, "ye didna think that I was grieving for a stiff finger and a few more scars?" He smiled, a little crookedly. "I'm a vain man, maybe, but it doesna go that deep, I hope."

"But you—" I began. He took both my hands in both of his and stood up, drawing me to my feet. I reached up and smoothed away the single tear that had rolled down his cheek. The tiny smear of moisture was warm on my thumb.

"I was crying for joy, my Sassenach," he said softly. He reached out slowly and took my face between his hands. "And thanking God that I have two hands. That I have two hands to hold you with. To serve you with, to love you with. Thanking God that I am a whole man still, because of you."

I put my own hands up, cupping his.

"But why wouldn't you be?" I asked. And then I remembered the butcherous assortment of saws and knives I seen among Beaton's implements at Leoch, and I knew. Knew what I had forgotten when I had been faced with the emergency. That in the days before antibiotics, the usual—the only—cure for an infected extremity was amputation of the limb.

"Oh, Jamie," I said. I was weak-kneed at the thought, and sat down on the stool rather abruptly.

"I never thought of it," I said, still stunned. "I honestly never thought of it." I looked up at him. "Jamie. If I'd thought of it, I probably would have done it. To save your life."

"It's not how … they don't do it that way, then, in … your time?"

I shook my head. "No. There are drugs to stop infections. So I didn't even think of it," I marveled. I looked up suddenly. "Did you?"

He nodded. "I was expecting it. It's why I asked you to let me die, that once. I was thinking of it, in between the bouts of muzzyheadedness, and—just for that one moment—I didna think I could bear to live like that. It's what happened to Ian, ye know."

"No, really?" I was shocked. "He told me he'd lost it by grape shot, but I didn't think to ask about the details."

"Aye, a grape-shot wound in the leg went bad. The surgeons took it off to keep it from poisoning his blood." He paused.

"Ian does verra well, all things considered. But"—he hesitated, pulling on the stiff ring finger—"I knew him before. He's as good as he is only because of Jenny. She … keeps him whole." He smiled sheepishly at me. "As ye did for me. I canna think why women bother."

"Well," I said softly, "women like to do that."

He laughed quietly and drew me close. "Aye. God knows why."

We stood entwined for a bit, not moving. My forehead rested on his chest, my arms around his back, and I could feel his heart beating, slow and strong. Finally he stirred and released me.

"I've something to show ye," he said. He turned and opened the small drawer of the table, removing a folded letter which he handed to me.

It was a letter of introduction, from Abbot Alexander, commending his nephew, James Fraser, to the attention of the Chevalier-St. George—otherwise known as His Majesty King James of Scotland—as a most proficient linguist and translator.

"It's a place," Jamie said, watching as I folded the letter. "And we'll need a place to go, soon. But what ye told me on the hill at Craigh na Dun—that was true, no?"

I took a deep breath and nodded. "It's true."

He took the letter from me and tapped it thoughtfully on his knee.

"Then this"—he waved the letter—"is not without a bit of danger."

"It could be."

He tossed the parchment into the drawer and sat staring after it for a moment. Then he looked up and the dark blue eyes held mine. He laid a hand along my cheek.

"I meant it, Claire," he said quietly. "My life is yours. And it's yours to decide what we shall do, where we go next. To France, to

Italy, even back to Scotland. My heart has been yours since first I saw ye, and you've held my soul and body between your two hands here, and kept them safe. We shall go as ye say."

There was a light knock at the door, and we sprang apart like guilty lovers. I dabbed hastily at my hair, thinking that a monastery, while an excellent convalescent home, lacked something as a romantic retreat.

A lay brother came in at Jamie's bidding, and dumped a large leather saddlebag on the table. "From MacRannoch of Eldridge Manor," he said with a grin. "For my lady Broch Tuarach." He bowed then and left, leaving a faint breath of seawater and cold air behind.

I unbuckled the leather straps, curious to see what MacRannoch might have sent. Inside were three things: a note, unaddressed and unsigned, a small package addressed to Jamie, and the cured skin of a wolf, smelling strongly of the tanner's arts.

The note read: "For a virtuous woman is a pearl of great price, and her value is greater than rubies."

Jamie had opened the other parcel. He held something small and glimmering in one hand and was quizzically regarding the wolf pelt.

"A bit odd, that. Sir Marcus has sent ye a wolf pelt, Sassenach, and me a pearl bracelet. Perhaps he's got his labels mixed?"

The bracelet was a lovely thing, a single row of large baroque pearls, set between twisted gold chains.

"No," I said, admiring it. "He's got it right. The bracelet goes with the necklace you gave me when we wed. He gave that to your mother; did you know?"

"No, I didn't," he answered softly, touching the pearls. "Father gave them to me for my wife, whoever she was to be"—and a quick smile tugged at his mouth—"but he didna tell me where they came from."

I remembered Sir Marcus's help on the night we had burst so unceremoniously into his house, and the look on his face when we had left him next day. I could see from Jamie's face that he also was remembering the baronet who might have been his father. He reached out and took my hand, fastening the bracelet about my wrist.

"But it's not for me!" I protested.

"Aye, it is," he said firmly. "It isna suitable for a man to send jewelry to a respectable married woman, so he gave it to me. But clearly it's for you." He looked at me and grinned. "For one thing, it won't go round my wrist, even scrawny as I am."

He turned to the bundled wolfskin and shook it out.

"Whyever did MacRannoch send ye this, though?" He draped the shaggy wolfhide about his shoulders and I recoiled with a sharp cry. The head had been carefully skinned and cured as well, and equipped with a pair of yellow glass eyes, it was glaring nastily at me from Jamie's left shoulder.

"Ugh!" I said. "It looks just like it did when it was alive!"

Jamie, following the direction of my glance, turned his head and found himself suddenly face-to-face with the snarling countenance. With a startled exclamation, he jerked the skin off and flung it across the room.

"Jesus God," he said, and crossed himself. The skin lay on the floor, glowering balefully in the candlelight.

"What d'ye mean, 'when it was alive,' Sassenach? A personal friend, was it?" Jamie asked, eyeing it narrowly.

I told him then the things I had had no chance to tell him; about the wolf, and the other wolves, and Hector, and the snow, and the cottage with the bear, and the argument with Sir Marcus, and the appearance of Murtagh, and the cattle, and the long wait on the hillside in the pink mist of the snow-swept night, waiting to see whether he was dead or alive.

Thin or not, his chest was broad and his arms warm and strong. He pressed my face into his shoulder and rocked me while I sobbed. I tried for a bit to control myself, but he only hugged me harder, and said small and gentle things into the cloud of my hair, and I finally gave up and cried with the complete abandon of a child, until I was worn to utter limpness and hiccupping exhaustion.

"Come to think of it, I've a wee giftie for ye, myself, Sassenach," he said, smoothing my hair. I sniffed and wiped my nose on my skirt, having nothing else handy.

"I'm sorry I haven't got anything to give you," I said, watching as he stood up and began to dig through the tumbled bedclothes. Probably looking for a handkerchief, I thought, sniffing some more.

"Aside from such minor gifts as my life, my manhood, and my right hand?" he asked dryly. "They'll do nicely, *mo duinne*." He straightened up with a novice's robe in one hand. "Undress."

My mouth fell open. "What?"

"Undress, Sassenach, and put this on." He handed me the robe, grinning. "Or do ye want me to turn my back first?"

* * *

Clutching the rough homespun around me, I followed Jamie down yet another flight of dark stairs. This was the third, and the narrowest yet; the lantern he held lit the stone blocks of walls no more than eighteen inches apart. It felt rather like being swallowed up into the earth, as we went further and further down the narrow black shaft.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" I asked. My voice echoed in the stairwell, but with a curiously muffled sound, as though I were speaking underwater.

"Well, there's no much chance of taking the wrong turning, now is there?"

We had reached another landing, but true enough, the way ahead lay in only one direction—down.

At the bottom of this flight of steps, though, we came to a door. There was a small landing, carved out of the solid side of a mountain, from the looks of it, and a wide, low door made of oak planks and brass hinging. The planks were grey with age, but still solid, and the landing swept clean. Plainly this part of the monastery was still in use, then. The wine cellar perhaps?

There was a sconce near the door that held a torch, half-burnt from previous use. Jamie paused to light it with a paper spill from the pile that lay ready nearby, then pushed open the unlocked door and ducked beneath the lintel, leaving me to follow.

At first, I could see nothing at all inside but the glow of Jamie's lantern. Everything was black. The lantern bobbed along, moving away from me. I stood still, following the blob of light with my eyes. Every few feet he would stop, then continue, and a slow flame would rise up in his wake to burn in a small red glow. As my eyes slowly accustomed themselves, the flames became a row of lanterns, situated on rock pillars, shining into the black like beacons.

It was a cave. At first I thought it was a cave of crystals, because of the odd black shimmer beyond the lanterns. But I stepped forward to the first pillar and looked beyond, and then I saw it.

A clear black lake. Transparent water, shimmering like glass over fine black volcanic sand, giving off red reflections in the lantern light. The air was damp and warm, humid with the steam that condensed on the cool cavern walls, running down the ribbed columns of rock.

A hot spring. The faint scent of sulfur bit at my nostrils. A hot mineral spring, then. I remembered Anselm's mentioning the springs that bubbled up from the ground near the abbey, renowned for their healing powers.

Jamie stood behind me, looking out over the gently steaming expanse of jet and rubies.

"A hot bath," he said proudly. "Do ye like it?"

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said.

"Oh, ye do," he said, grinning at the success of his surprise. "Come in, then."

He dropped his own robe and stood glowing dimly in the darkness, patched with red in the glimmering reflections off the water. The arched ceiling of the cave seemed to swallow the light of the lanterns, so that the glow reached only a few feet before being engulfed.

A little hesitantly, I let the novice's robe drop from my arms.

"How hot is it?" I asked.

"Hot enough," he answered. "Dinna worry, it won't burn ye. But stay over an hour or so, and it might cook the flesh off your bones like soupmeat."

"What an appealing idea," I said, discarding the robe.

Following his straight, slender figure, I stepped cautiously into the water. There were steps cut in the stone, leading down underwater, with a knotted rope fastened along the wall to provide handholds.

The water flowed up over my hips, and the flesh of my belly shivered in delight as the heat swirled through me. At the bottom of the steps, I stood on clean black sand, the water just below the level of my shoulders, my breasts floating like glass fisher-floats. My skin was flushed with the heat, and small prickles of perspiration were starting on the back of my neck, under the heavy hair. It was pure bliss.

The surface of the spring was smooth and waveless, but the water wasn't still; I could feel small stirrings, currents running through the body of the pool like nerve impulses. It was that, I suppose, added to the incredible soothing heat, that gave me the momentary illusion that the spring was alive—a warm, welcoming entity that reached out to soothe and embrace. Anselm had said that the springs had healing powers, and I wasn't disposed to doubt it.

Jamie came up behind me, tiny wavelets marking his passage through the water. He reached around me to cup my breasts, softly smoothing the hot water over the upper slopes.

"Do ye like it, *mo duinne*?" He bent forward and planted a kiss on my shoulder.

I let my feet float out from under me, resting against him.

"It's wonderful! It's the first time I've been warm all the way through since August." He began to tow me, backing slowly through the water; my legs streamed out in the wake of our passage, the amazing warmth passing down my limbs like caressing hands.

He stopped, swung me around, and lowered me gently onto hard wood. Half-visible in the shadowy underwater light, I could see planks set into a rocky niche. He sat down on the bench beside me, stretching his arms out on the rocky ledge behind us.

"Brother Ambrose brought me down here the other day to soak," he said. "To soften the scars a bit. It does feel good, doesn't it?"

"More than good." The water was so buoyant that I felt I might float away if I loosed my hold on the bench. I looked upward into the black shadows of the roof.

"Does anything live in this cave? Bats, I mean? Or fish?"

He shook his head. “Nothing but the spirit of the spring, Sassenach. The water bubbles up from the earth through a narrow crack back there”—he nodded toward the Stygian blackness at the back of the cave—“and trickles out through a dozen tiny openings in the rock. But there’s no real opening to the outside, save the door into the monastery.”

“Spirit of the spring?” I said, amused. “Sounds rather pagan, to be hiding under a monastery.”

He stretched luxuriously, long legs wavering under the glassy surface like the stems of water plants.

“Well, whatever ye wish to call it, it’s been here a good deal longer than the monastery.”

“Yes, I can see that.”

The walls of the cave were of smooth, dark volcanic rock, almost like black glass, slick with the moisture of the spring. The whole chamber looked like a gigantic bubble, half-filled with that curiously alive but sterile water. I felt as though we were cradled in the womblike center of the earth, and that if I pressed my ear to the rock, I would hear the infinitely slow beat of a great heart nearby.

We were very quiet for a long time then, half-floating, half-dreaming, brushing now and then against each other as we drifted in the unseen currents of the cave.

When I spoke at last, my voice seemed slow and drugged.

“I’ve decided.”

“Ah. Will it be Rome, then?” Jamie’s voice seemed to come from a long way away.

“Yes. I don’t know, once there—”

“It doesna matter. We shall do what we can.” His hand reached for me, moving so slowly I thought it would never touch me.

He drew me close, until the sensitive tips of my breasts rubbed across his chest. The water was not only warm but heavy, almost oily to the touch, and his hands floated down my back to cup my buttocks and lift me.

The intrusion was startling. Hot and slippery as our skins were, we drifted over each other with barely a sensation of touching or pressure, but his presence within me was solid and intimate, a fixed point in a watery world, like an umbilical cord in the random driftings of the womb. I made a brief sound of surprise at the small inrush of hot water that accompanied his entrance, then settled firmly onto my fixed point of reference with a little sigh of pleasure.

"Oh, I like that one," he said appreciatively.

"Like what?" I asked.

"That sound that ye made. The little squeak."

It wasn't possible to blush; my skin was already as flushed as it could get. I let my hair swing forward to cover my face, the curls relaxing as they dragged the surface of the water.

"I'm sorry; I didn't mean to be noisy."

He laughed, the deep sound echoing softly in the columns of the roof.

"I said I like it. And I do. It's one of the things I like the best about bedding ye, Sassenach, the small noises that ye make."

He pulled me closer, so my forehead rested against his neck. Moisture sprang up at once between us, slick as the sulfur-laden water. He made a slight movement with his hips, and I drew in my breath in a half-stifled gasp.

"Yes, like that," he said softly. "Or … like that?"

"Urk," I said. He laughed again, but kept doing it.

"That's what I thought most about," he said, drawing his hands slowly up and down my back, cupping, curving, tracing the swell of my hips. "In prison at night, chained in a room with a dozen other men, listening to the snoring and farting and groaning. I thought of those small tender sounds that ye make when I love you, and I could feel ye there next to me in the dark, breathing soft and then faster, and the little grunt that ye give when I first take you, as though ye were settling yourself to your job."

My breathing was definitely coming faster. Supported by the dense, mineral-saturated water, I was buoyant as an oiled feather, kept from floating away only by my grip on the curved muscles of his shoulders, and the snug, firm clasp I kept of him lower down.

"Even better," his voice was a hot murmur in my ear, "when I come to ye fierce and wanting, and ye whimper under me, and struggle as though you wanted to get away, and I know it's only that you're struggling to come closer, and I'm fighting the same fight."

His hands were exploring, gently, slowly as tickling a trout, sliding deep into the rift of my buttocks, gliding lower, groping, caressing the stretched and yearning point of our joining. I quivered and the breath went from me in an unwilled gasp.

"Or when I come to you needing, and ye take me into you with a sigh and that quiet hum like a hive of bees in the sun, and ye carry me wi' you into peace with a little moaning sound."

"Jamie," I said hoarsely, my voice echoing off the water. "Jamie, please."

"Not yet, *mo duinne*." His hands came hard around my waist, settling and slowing me, pressing me down until I did groan.

"Not yet. We've time. And I mean to hear ye groan like that again. And to moan and sob, even though you dinna wish to, for ye canna help it. I mean to make you sigh as though your heart would break, and scream with the wanting, and at last to cry out in my arms, and I shall know that I've served ye well."

The rush began between my thighs, shooting like a dart into the depths of my belly, loosening my joints so that my hands slipped limp and helpless off his shoulders. My back arched and the slippery firm roundness of my breasts pressed flat against his chest. I shuddered in hot darkness, Jamie's steadying hands all that kept me from drowning.

Resting against him, I felt boneless as a jellyfish. I didn't know—or care—what sort of sounds I had been making, but I felt incapable of coherent speech. Until he began to move again, strong as a shark under the dark water.

"No," I said. "Jamie, no. I can't bear it like that again." The blood was still pounding in my fingertips and his movement within me was an exquisite torture.

"You can, for I love ye." His voice was half-muffled in my soaking hair. "And you will, for I want ye. But this time, I go wi' you."

He held my hips firm against him, carrying me beyond myself with the force of an undertow. I crashed formless against him, like breakers on a rock, and he met me with the brutal force of granite, my anchor in the pounding chaos.

Boneless and liquid as the water around us, contained only by the frame of his hands, I cried out, the soft, bubbling half-choked cry of a sailor sucked beneath the waves. And heard his own cry, helpless in return, and knew I had served him well.

We struggled upward, out of the womb of the world, damp and steaming, rubber-limbed with wine and heat. I fell to my knees at the first landing, and Jamie, trying to help me, fell down next to me in an untidy heap of robes and bare legs. Giggling helplessly, drunk more with love than with wine, we made our way side by side, on hands and knees up the second flight of steps, hindering each other more than helping, jostling and caroming softly off each other in the narrow space, until we collapsed at last in each other's arms on the second landing.

Here an ancient oriel window opened glassless to the sky, and the light of the hunter's moon washed us in silver. We lay clasped together, damp skins cooling in the winter air, waiting for our racing hearts to slow and breath to return to our heaving bodies.

The moon above was a Christmas moon, so large as almost to fill the empty window. It seemed no wonder that the tides of sea and woman should be subject to the pull of that stately orb, so close and so commanding.

But my own tides moved no longer to that chaste and sterile summons, and the knowledge of my freedom raced like danger through my blood.

"I have a gift for you too," I said suddenly to Jamie. He turned toward me and his hand slid, large and sure, over the plane of my still-flat stomach.

"Have you, now?" he said.

And the world was all around us, new with possibility.

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To the Memory of My Mother,
Who Taught Me to Read—
Jacqueline Sykes Gabaldon

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DIANA GABALDON

Q: Where did you get the idea for a time travel novel?

A: I had meant *Outlander* to be a straight historical novel, but when I introduced Claire Beauchamp Randall (around the third day of writing—it was the scene where she meets Dougal and the others in the cottage), she wouldn't cooperate. Dougal asked her who she was, and without my stopping to think who she *should* be, she drew herself up, stared belligerently at him, and said "Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp. And who the hell are you?" She promptly took over the story and began telling it herself, making smart-ass modern remarks about everything.

At this point I shrugged and said, "Fine. Nobody's ever going to see this book, so it doesn't matter *what* bizarre thing I do—go ahead and *be* modern, and I'll figure out how you got there later." So the time travel was entirely Claire's fault.

Q: Why did you choose Scotland during the Jacobite period as the setting for your books?

A: Well, like almost everything else about these books, it was an accident. I was looking for a time in which to set a historical novel, because I thought that would be the easiest kind of book to write for practice. While pondering, I happened to see a rerun of an ancient *Doctor Who* episode on PBS—one in which the Doctor had a young Scottish sidekick, picked up in 1745. The sidekick was a cute little guy, about seventeen, named Jamie MacCrimmon, and he looked rather nice in his kilt.

I was sitting in church the next day thinking about it, and thought, Well, you've got to start somewhere, and it doesn't really matter where, since no one's ever going to see this—so why not? Scotland, eighteenth century. And that is where I started—no outline, no characters, no plot—just a place and time.

Q: Have you ever been to Scotland?

A: I had never been there when I wrote *Outlander*, and did that book entirely from library research (since at the time, I thought the book was purely for practice, I hardly thought I could tell my husband I had to go to Scotland to do research). I did take part of the advance money from the sale of *Outlander* and go to Scotland for two weeks, though, while working on *Dragonfly*. It was (luckily!) just as I'd been imagining it. I've been back several times since, for book tours and the like, and would go back like a shot, at the slightest opportunity.

Q: Why is *Outlander* written in the first person point of view?

A: My initial impulse is to say, "Why on earth shouldn't it be?" However, I do get this question quite often at writers conferences, so I'll try to go into a bit more detail.

I like to experiment and try new and interesting things in terms of structure and literary technique (not that writing in the first person is what you'd call madly adventurous). However, the answer is simply that a first person narrative was the easiest and most comfortable for me to use at the time, and since I was writing the book for practice, I saw no reason to make things complicated.

Now that I know more about writing, there are other good reasons to have done it, but that's why I did it at the time; it felt natural to me. I think I may have felt most comfortable with this (aside from the minor fact that Claire Beauchamp Randall took over and began telling the story herself), because many of my favorite works of literature are first person narratives.

If you look at the classic novels of the English language, roughly half of them are written in the first person, from *Moby-Dick* to *David Copperfield*, *Swiss Family Robinson*, *Treasure Island*—even large chunks of the Bible are written in the first person!

Which is not to say that there are no drawbacks to using this technique, or that it suits everyone. But if it fits your style and your story, why on earth not?

Q: Are all the locations used in the books real?

A: Bear in mind that I had never been to Scotland when I wrote *Outlander*. When I finally did go, I found a stone circle very like the one I had described, at a place called Castlerigg. There is also a place near Inverness called the Clava Cairns, which has a stone circle, and another place called Tomnahurich, which is supposed to be a fairy's hill, but I've never been there, so I don't know how like Craigh na Dun it is. As for Lallybroch … well, I do repeatedly find things that really exist after I've written them, so I really wouldn't be at all surprised.

Q: Are you Claire?

A: Well, no. Though of course, I'm *all* the characters; I have to be, after all. But if you are asking whether I based the character of Claire on myself, no, I didn't.

Q: Who is the ghost in *Outlander*?

A: The ghost is Jamie—but as to exactly how his appearance fits into the story, All Will Be Explained—in the last book of the series.

Q: Where will the story end?

A: I think the *Outlander* books will end in about 1800, in Scotland. If this tells you anything, more power to you.

Q: Will the story have a happy ending?

A: Oh, yes, the last book will have a happy ending, though I confidently expect it to leave the readers in floods of tears, anyway.

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Readers' Guide to *Outlander*

Catherine MacGregor

If your book club is like mine, you probably have a mix of people who have just recently discovered *Outlander* and others who have read the entire series—perhaps multiple times—perhaps recently, or perhaps years ago.

This Readers' Guide to *Outlander* is intended to extend the pleasure individual readers feel when enjoying these remarkable books privately. I hope the questions serve to enrich fresh discussions with friends and book club members. The questions assume that you have read the entirety of *Outlander* and they are more or less chronological, but some link particular early details with larger patterns. Most questions refer only to *Outlander*; some in parentheses, however, suggest connections with the sequels. Don't worry: they are written in a way that will not spoil any suspense for those who still have those fresh treats in store! Page references in parentheses refer to the 2001 trade (large-size) paperback. I own multiple editions of *Outlander* with differing pagination, but this one seemed the most easily accessible.

Many book clubs enjoy using interviews with the author and other background material to broaden and deepen their reading experience, and Readers' Guides sometimes include those resources. Thanks to Diana Gabaldon's generosity and to lively online communities of readers, however, these are readily available elsewhere. If, like many of us, you want to deepen your enjoyment and appreciation of the *Outlander* universe even further—especially if, as I did, you go into withdrawal when finishing Diana Gabaldon's books—you will also enjoy these resources.

The Outlandish Companion, a hard-cover treasury which she wrote after the first four novels (a second volume will appear in the fullness of time!) is indispensable. Online resources abound: take a look at

Diana's own website: www.dianagabaldon.com (you'll find links to interviews here)

and her blog: http://voyagesoftheartemis.blogspot.com, Listen to her podcasts:

http://www.randomhouse.com/audio/podcasts/diana_gabaldon_rss.xml And see video interviews on her YouTube Channel:

http://www.youtube.com/user/voyagesoftheartemis You and your book club will discover kindred spirits and their intelligent and lively discussions of her work on discussion sites:

CompuServe Books and Writers Community: http://community.compuserve.com/Books and on the Ladies of Lallybroch site: www.lallybroch.com and on http://groups.yahoo.com/group/DianaGabaldon/summary

Questions and insights about the characters, plots, settings, themes, symbolism, historical backgrounds —and the creativity and discipline that transform them into these remarkable novels—await you … and will bring you back to the books, our own kind of time travel.

Happy reading!

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Part ONE Inverness, 1945

1. You undoubtedly knew that this was a time travel novel. If you had not known this, however, at what point would it have become clear to you that Claire has gone back in time?

2. Fantasy, the para-normal, the supernatural … if we as readers are willing to suspend our disbelief (to use Coleridge's phrase), narratives that make demands on our credulity require a very credible, trustworthy narrator. What qualities does Claire possess that make us willing to believe her tale? Are there aspects of Claire's personality with which you can personally identify? Can you think of other narrators whose credibility is the key to a reader's acceptance of an otherwise unacceptably incredible story?

3. Examine Claire's account of her second honeymoon with Frank, weighing their affection, relief at being reunited after the war, and sexual passion, on one hand, with the evident tensions, on the other. All marriages have some strains in them; what signs of possible trouble do you see in theirs? For example, Frank seems pedantic to Claire. Does he seem so to you? And she seems ambivalent about the ladylike deportment required of her as a don's wife. Perhaps most serious is their disagreement on the question of adopting a child. How significant, do you think, might these tensions have become had Claire not inadvertently disappeared through the stones? (If you and your group have read the sequels, how does Frank's initial belief that he could not love an adopted child affect your sense of his character in the later books?) At this point, how sympathetic a figure do you find Frank to be?

4. The ghost episode: Yes, Diana Gabaldon confirmed that the kilted figure gazing up at Claire's window was indeed Jamie and that we will know at the end of the series why he was doing so. Having read *Outlander*, however, why do you *think* he was there? The apparition provoked Frank's clumsy attempt to tell Claire that he would understand and accept that she might have been unfaithful during the pressures of war. What is your reaction to this: is her angry response to him justified or not, in your view? Why? Do you share

her intuition that he may have been referring to an infidelity of his own? If so, how does this affect your response to his character?

5. When Mrs. Graham reads Claire's tea leaves and palm, she deprecates her own psychic skills, saying that prognostication is more a matter of "reading" common-sense observations about people. And yet what she says about the divided marriage line in Claire's hand does come true. The novel is full of ancient, primitive superstitions and practices that the rational, skeptical Claire largely rejects—and yet her experiences suggest that at least some of the ancient ways contain some inexplicable truths, none the less true for being inexplicable. In this novel, what seems to you to be the dominant impression of the old beliefs and folkways—their barbarism and ignorance, or their secret access to truths of which the modern world has lost sight?

6. The horror of Claire's terrifying trip through the stones is striking. "There was a noise of battle, and the cries of dying men and shattered horses." She frequently recalls the horrors of World War II. Is she re-experiencing some of that trauma? (If you are re-reading *Outlander* after having read the sequels, do you think that this carnage is associated with any one battle in particular? If so, which one? Or does it make more sense to see it as a universal expression of pain engendered by violence?)

7. When Claire is apprehended by Black Jack Randall, she is surprised by his dragoon's uniform (which she believes to be a film costume) and shocked by his startling resemblance to her husband Frank. But she is also keenly aware of other details, including his scent of lavender, this scent growing in significance throughout this novel (and in the sequels) because of its subsequent effect on Jamie. A frequently-noted feature of Gabaldon's prose style is her skill in bringing a scene to life, not merely through visual details, but through her generous use of realistic odors – especially in the 18th c. episodes, where hygiene standards differed significantly from ours. What descriptions in *Outlander* are particular memorable for you because of the vivid focus on one or more smells? Is this realism

part of their appeal for you? (Be generous with your club: include page numbers for all references.)

8. When Claire meets Dougal and his men, the scene is almost cinematic: the scene builds slowly as the men puzzle over Claire's identity and odd clothing. We do not see Jamie, huddled in pain in the corner, for several pages. However, when the episode builds to its climax, Claire takes charge of the situation, ordering Rupert out of the way to avoid injuring Jamie further, resetting Jamie's shoulder, and disinfecting his wounds. The men, perhaps surprisingly, allow her to do so. This is the first episode in which we see two recurring conflicts: first, a conflict between 20th c. scientific medical practices and 18th c. assumptions; and second, the conflict between a modern, educated woman's expectation that she should be taken seriously and the tendency of 18th c. men to assume she may be merely a whore or otherwise insignificant. What accounts for their willingness to recognize—at least temporarily—her authority in this situation? Is it the force of her character, or merely their desperation about Jamie's injuries?

9. After the skirmish about which Claire warned the Scots at Cocknammon Rock (which indicates that Claire had been paying more attention to Frank's history lessons than we thought), Jamie faints from his wounds. His faint does not just give Claire another opportunity to display her medical skills; it introduces a gender reversal, in which Gabaldon plays with and undermines the formulaic conventions of romance novels. Female protagonists are expected to faint prettily, but Claire was knocked unconscious by Murtagh, and we don't expect young warriors to faint. If you are familiar with the conventions of romance writing, identify some other aspects of what you expect in a romance novel. Then reconsider your list when you discuss Chapter 15, "The Revelations of the Bridal Chamber."

10. Once they are safely inside the castle, Claire is finally able to process some of the shock and grief of her disturbing experience. Weeping for Frank, she is comforted by the young stranger whose wounds she has tended and who has shared his horse with her. Her

reaction as he soothes her: “slowly I began to quiet a bit, as Jamie stroked my neck and back, offering me the comfort of his broad, warm chest. My sobs lessened and I began to calm myself, leaning tiredly into the curve of his shoulder. No wonder he was so good with horses, I thought blearily, feeling his fingers rubbing gently behind my ears, listening to the soothing, incomprehensible speech. If I were a horse, I’d let him ride me anywhere.” In what subsequent moments in their relationship do images of horses and riding recur? What do these images ultimately suggest about their relationship?

11. Part One ends with Claire settling into Castle Leoch with clothing more suitable to the 18thc., thanks to Mrs. Fitz, a growing sense of safety with the young Jamie MacTavish, but an increasing—and horrifying—fear that she has indeed gone back in time two centuries. This fear is confirmed when she snoops in Colum’s letters, where she finds a fresh one with the date 20 April 1743. What character traits are evident in her reaction to this discovery? Have you ever made an utterly shocking discovery requiring that you fake, as Claire did, calmness and equanimity? Were you able to do so?

Part TWO Castle Leoch

12. Claire learns a good deal about life in Castle Leoch: she enjoys the musical entertainment and bardic story-telling, acquires a respect for Colum’s leadership skills and for his courage in bearing the pain of his disability, feels useful working in the herb beds and tending to the ailments of the residents, and once more tends to Jamie. This time, his injuries are sustained in a gallant offer to save Laoghaire from the disgrace of a public beating requested by her father and agreed to by Colum for her inappropriately flirtatious behavior—a state of affairs apparently accepted by everyone in this patriarchal culture. This episode dramatizes for Claire the brutality of this patriarchal world, the courage of young Jamie, the possibility of a romance between Jamie and Laoghaire, and the utility of leeches, a medical intervention demonstrated to good effect by Mrs. Fitz. But of everything Claire is learning, the most important

probably concerns details about the life of the mysterious young Jamie. Although she is shocked to learn that there is a price on his head for murder, why is she not really alarmed? How is their friendship evolving?

13. While cleaning the appalling mess out of Davie Beaton's closet and deciding which medications might actually have some utility and which are useless or perhaps even dangerous, Claire has time to consider her own predicament and the terrifying images from her passage through the stones. She remembers deliberately fighting away from some, and then wonders, "Had I fought towards others? I had some consciousness of fighting toward a surface of some kind. Had I actually chosen to come to this particular time because it offered some sort of haven from that whirling maelstrom?" She cannot answer that question at the moment; can you? From what you now know about her relationship with Jamie, do you believe that some sort of unconscious choice—his or hers—was involved, or was the timing purely random?

14. Consider the songs and supernatural folktales Claire hears during the entertainment in the castle ; she notes the pattern that the transported women are so often gone for about 200 years—but do sometimes return home. Applying the lessons of the poetry to herself, she acquires hope and courage to try to escape through Craigh na Dun again. Readers of Diana Gabaldon's fiction often express gratitude that emotionally powerful scenes in her books have empowered them to make positive changes in their own private lives. Has your life ever been touched profoundly by an insight from a poem, song, or piece of fiction? How?

15. Why is Jamie so much more comfortable with Claire seeing the scars from the horrendous flogging he endured than he is with even old friends like Alec MacMahon?

16. After Claire discovers Jamie and Laoghaire kissing, Alec shrewdly remarks that Jamie needs a woman, and that Laoghaire will be a girl when she is fifty. What evidence do you see of her immaturity in this book? If you have not read the sequels, how do you think this prediction might play out? (And if you *have* read

them, how *does* it play out?) How much sympathy or criticism do you have for Laoghaire in this novel? Why?

17. When Claire meets Geillis Duncan in Chapter 7, notice the cluster of references to poison: Geilie immediately identifies Claire's mushrooms as poisonous, jokes about poisoning husbands, discusses an abortifacient herb, and before Claire returns to the Castle—where there is an outbreak of food poisoning because of some tainted beef—Geilie tells her that Hamish is Jamie's child. This breath-taking lie is almost Shakespearean: the poison-in-the-ear motif in *Hamlet* refers not only to the way Claudius killed Old Hamlet, but also to the climate of destructive rumors and falsehoods that contaminate the kingdom. Consider the other, later toxic falsehoods in this novel: which ones have the most serious consequences? For instance, consider Dougal's telling Jamie that Jenny was with child by Randall and by a second British soldier; consider Randall's persecution of Jamie for the murder of a sergeant-major whom Randall himself had killed; consider Laoghaire's lie to Claire that Geillis was ill and wanted her to come, thereby luring her into the witchcraft arrest, and Geillis' lie to Jamie that Claire was barren.

18. In the episode with the tanner's lad, we see the petty vindictiveness of Father Bain (to be contrasted with the wisdom and compassion of the monks at St. Anne de Beaupré later), a hint of the cruelty of the mob (a foreshadowing of the witchcraft hysteria), and the first of the episodes in which Claire puts Jamie in danger by asking him to assist in freeing the tanner's lad. Is she right or wrong to do so? Why?

19. When Claire attempts to escape during the commotion of the Gathering, she again endangers Jamie, albeit inadvertently. He has been trying very hard to avoid being present—where either his failure to take the oath (possibly signifying disloyalty to the whole clan) or swearing his oath to the MacKenzies (signifying he is one of them, and therefore a possible rival for the chieftainship)—could ignite the turbulent clan factions and result in his death. He has to return her to the Castle, and Claire, who does not comprehend immediately, later understands and deeply regrets the position she has put him in. How do you read this: are you sympathetic to or

critical of her single-minded focus on escaping that endangers Jamie? Have you ever inadvertently put someone else in danger or been endangered yourself by someone else's unwitting actions? And why is Jamie so willing to subject himself to harm and danger in order to protect women?

Part THREE On the Road

20. Dougal's exploitation of Jamie's flogging to stir public support for the Jacobites is clearly manipulative. Dougal, however, is a complex character, and even Jamie has profoundly mixed feelings about him. Do you think there is any justification for what Dougal is doing to Jamie? Does he understand how humiliating the experience (which Claire, significantly, calls a "crucifixion") is?

21. Although the evidence is mounting that Black Jack Randall is a sadistic bully, Claire is still stunned—because of his remarkable resemblance to Frank—that he hits her. How might the resemblance complicate her memory of and love for Frank?

22. After he punches her, Claire's contemptuous response to Randall's question "Have you anything to say?" is "Your wig is crooked." When Dougal describes Jamie's great courage and composure during his flogging, he remembers Jamie's insulting "I'm afraid I'll freeze stiff before ye're done talking." Does their insolence to Randall increase or decrease the danger he poses to them? Do you see this verbal daring as heroic?

23. Dougal tells her the complete story of the flogging as a way of illustrating Jamie's character to her prior to the marriage, and also hints at the sexual interest Randall has in Jamie. From a purely practical perspective, would Claire have been safer marrying Rupert, ludicrous as this sounds? Dougal is clearly upset by Randall's brutality to Claire at Brockton. But how much of his scheme can be attributed to the fact that the MacKenzies would never accept a chief whose wife was an Englishwoman? In terms of his own political ambitions, is Dougal killing two birds with one stone here? Despite his Machiavellian instincts, some ancient spirituality lingers in Dougal: why does he take Claire to St. Ninian's spring?

24. Claire and Jamie's wedding—in the same church in which she married Frank—has touching and comic moments to it. What details do you find most striking or memorable?

25. In Chapter 15, "The Revelations of the Bridal Chamber," the awkwardness of the bride and groom delays the consummation considerably, but also gives them an opportunity to learn more about one another's families and personal experiences. As they sit side by side drinking wine and touching, what important insights do they learn about one another? How important is this ability to talk to one another in their growing relationship?

26. On their wedding night, Jamie says, "There are things that I canna tell *you*, at least not yet. And I'll ask nothing of ye that ye canna give me. But what I would ask of ye—when you do tell me something, let it be the truth. And I'll promise ye the same. We have nothing now between us, save—respect, perhaps. And I think that respect has maybe room for secrets, but not for lies. Do ye agree?" And do you readers agree that a good marriage can have secrets?

27. Gender and genre: Claire gently educates the virginal Jamie, who had been misinformed by Murtagh that it is best to get the act over with quickly, as women do not enjoy sex. It has often been observed that this novel does not fit readers' expectations of generic romances. Among other things, your group might wish to consider the age disparity of the protagonists, the unusual circumstances of their "courtship," the subsequent revelation that the male is a virgin, and the continuation of the story well beyond the marriage itself. As well as illustrating a difference between 18th c. and 20th c. expectations by having the older, experienced female take the lead, Gabaldon undermines yet another romance convention. "As yet too hungry and too clumsy for tenderness, still he made love with a sort of unflagging joy that made me think that male virginity might be a highly underrated commodity." Claire also suggests that her husband Frank, despite his sophistication and polish as a lover, had not discovered some aspects of her sexuality that Jamie had. She still intends, at this point, to return to Frank somehow. How would

this new dimension of her experience complicate her life with Frank?

28. If you are interested in hearing Diana Gabaldon's insights into the craft of erotic writing, including elements of other books in the *Outlander* series, listen to Episode 5 of the Diana Gabaldon Podcast and discuss what light it sheds on this scene. (http://a1018.g.akamai.net/f/1018/19024/1d/randomhouse1.download.akamai.com/19024/rhaudio/diana_gabaldon/episode5.mp3)

29. Modern marriage enhancement therapy (for example, Emotionally Focused Therapy) is based on the research behind Attachment Theory, the understanding that human infants (and indeed all primates) require physical cuddling—a need that extends into adult relationships. (If you are interested in reading an excellent contemporary overview of why this universal childhood need extends into adult marriages, see Dr. Sue Johnson's book *Hold Me Tight*, or her recent article summarizing the book: http://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200812/hold-me-tight). As their newlywed nervousness returns, Jamie seems to have an instinctive understanding of this need: "Now then," he said. "If we canna talk easy yet without touching, we'll touch for a bit. Tell me when you're accustomed to me again". How important is their ability to touch one another? What other episodes of touching—not necessarily sexual—strike you as memorable and significant? Is Jamie's need for touch any greater than Claire's?

30. Although Claire appreciates Jamie's protectiveness, she is sometimes quick to assume that he shares what seems to be a widespread 18th c. attitude that women are not intelligent enough to master certain skills; for example, using heavy pistols. Chastened, she realizes the men are right that a sgian dhu is a better weapon for her, and they teach her how to use it properly—to good effect when she kills her attacker in Chapter 20, "Deserted Glades." But her most difficult and complex adjustment to 18th c. mores—and the one most readers find most controversial—undoubtedly concerns the beating she receives at Jamie's hands following her rescue from Black Jack Randall at Fort William for her disobedience

in refusing to stay in the copse where Jamie had ordered her to stay. Her independent streak and determination to return to her husband Frank, despite the growing love she feels for Jamie, endanger Jamie's life and the life of his men far beyond what she had imagined. Re-read Chapter 21 and 22. Was Jamie justified in beating Claire? Why or why not? Did it affect your response to his character? When you read Jamie's anecdotes about the physical discipline he received from his beloved father Brian, how does that affect your judgment of him? What do both Claire and Jamie learn from the experience?

31. Given the information available, is Claire's jealousy of Laoghaire and her hurt pride when she thinks that Jamie may have married her primarily for his share of the rents that now accrue to him as a married man reasonable? Or do her jealousy and hurt pride point to a deep insecurity in her? How does the episode with the wedding ring reinforce Jamie's commitment to her?

Part FOUR A Whiff of Brimstone

32. When they return to Leoch, after the drama of the Fort William episode, Claire learns—almost anticlimactically—that Horrocks, the deserter who was in a position to confirm Jamie's innocence regarding the murder of the sergeant-major, identified Black Jack Randall as the killer. This disappointing information is useless, because of Randall's apparently unassailable status and power, but it does provide a segue to other examinations of the abuses of power (a recurring motif in the whole series), including the Duke of Sandringham's humorously inept attempts at seduction of young men like Jamie. His predatory behavior is treated comically here. Why does Claire rather like the Duke? Why is Jamie willing to go hunting with him?

33. When Geilie and Claire find the "changeling" baby, Claire is appalled by the ignorance and inadvertent cruelty of the ancient superstition, and appeals to Jamie for help in rescuing it. Despite his rationality, however, he is reluctant to challenge local mores—and against his better judgment, checks on the child, who is dead. But what do you think Jamie would have done had it been alive? When

Geilie warns her against her altruism, "Don't ye know what they say about you in the village?" do you think Geilie is telling the truth, or is she merely attempting to prevent Claire from doing something that would get them all into trouble?

34. In the complex drama of Claire's arrest as a witch, what seems to be the balance in this book between the world of the natural and the supernatural? Geilie's interest in the dark arts encompasses not only occult spells, about which Claire is skeptical, but also a practical expertise with the biochemical properties of substances such as opium, arsenic, and cyanide. (If you have read the sequels, what is the significance of the reference to the L'Grimoire d'le Comte St. Germain?) Some of the details for the pretext of Claire's incarceration as a witch are foolish and ignorant distortions, if not outright fabrications; for example, Fr. Bain's interpretation of Claire's warning of infection to be a curse. And yet, the episode with the waterhorse—ironically, Peter the Drover's testimony is rejected—points to an acceptance of the paranormal. Similarly, Colum's wedding gift to Claire, partly to reward her for saving Losgann and her foal, is a rosary, whose significance, despite her nominal adherence to Catholicism, she does not understand. But the rosary later becomes a significant element in demonstrating her innocence to the mob. For now, she merely prays, thanking "whatever benign spirits presided over such events that nothing had gone wrong." Are we to understand this as coincidence, or is it an authentic—and answered—albeit unfocused, prayer?

35. In the thieves' hole at Cranesmuir, Claire and Geillis await death. Claire discovers that Geillis is a Jacobite, and at the moment of Geilie's death, realizes from her vaccination that she too is a time traveler. But the hole has "the dark anonymity of the confessional", and as is the case in so many myths and stories in which someone descends into the underworld, Claire has her most important and transforming revelation: she tells Geilie—and herself—the truth that she does love Jamie. Consider, however, that she does not share this with Jamie for a considerable amount of time. Why not?

36. Another romantic convention is comically upended when the elderly lawyer Ned Gowan, rather than the dashing romantic hero,

arrives to buy much-needed time for Claire's defence. Jamie, of course, does arrive in time, and by means of tremendous personal courage and a theatrical use of the rosary, saves her from the mob and from ecclesiastical abuse of authority. But Claire's safety is also dependent on Geilie's altruism in declaring her innocence. How do you account for Geilie's dying act? How does it affect your estimate of her character?

37. Notice that previous tension in their marriage focused on the question of wifely obedience. Claire has once again disobeyed Jamie—he had told her, when he left with the Duke of Sandringham, to stay away from Geillis Duncan. Claire's failure to do so, when Laoghaire told her Geilie was sick and needed her, almost results in her death. And yet Jamie does not reproach her this time for her disobedience. Why not? How is their relationship evolving?

38. Jamie's love for Claire encompasses the possibility that she actually is a witch, and his direct question to her elicits, finally, her explanation of her improbable origins in the 20th c. Jamie's response is not merely acceptance of what is improbable at the level of fact, which would be remarkable enough, but a moral imperative: he believes that out of his love for her, he must give her up and return her to her "home." In one of the most moving episodes in the book, he takes her to Craigh na Dun and sets her free to return to Frank. Claire says that neither rationality, emotion, or duty helps her to make her decision, "and before I even knew I had decided, I was halfway down the slope" to Jamie, who lay asleep as "the silver tracks of dried tears glinted on golden skin." The powerfully emotional moment has a comic resolution (as is the case in the stable during her escape attempt, and his attempt to protect her by lying on the floor outside her room in the inn): they crash into each other. But if Claire herself cannot fully understand why she returned to him—beyond "I had to"—how do you account for it?

Part FIVE Lallybroch

39. Jenny emerges as a strong female character in this section. What personality traits are revealed in Jenny in her wrangling with

Jamie? Is Ian right that she and Jamie are similar? Much of the extended argument concerns the false rumor that Randall had sexually exploited her and fathered her first child. Why did Dougal spread that rumor?

40. As Jenny and Claire get to know one another, they have a conversation that both recognize is a polite kind of code: for example, “I hear ye married very quickly” meaning, *“Did you wed my brother for his land and money?”* Re-read this dialogue. Have you had conversations like this that you are willing to share? In your experience, did both parties understand what the other was really saying?

41. For all the passion and commitment already evident in their relationship, for some reason Jamie defers telling Claire that he married her out of love until he has a chance to show her his home and the portraits of his family. What is the link between their presence here and the timing of this major revelation? And why does Claire hold back until after the episode in which they take in Rabbie MacNab? Even then, she is reluctant to be the first one to speak. Claire is clearly capable of feeling great love: why does she have so much difficulty expressing it verbally?

42. The Lallybroch chapters are to a great extent relaxed and funny, including the adventure with Jamie’s father’s drawers in the millpond and the many anecdotes of boyhood thrashings Ian and Jamie received from their fathers for misbehavior, anecdotes which could have been told in a very dark way—and which disturb some modern readers, despite their light tone. The stories about Brian do segue into much darker narrative in two ways: first, in both Jenny’s and Jamie’s guilty belief that each was responsible for Brian’s death; and second, in the subsequent contrast between Brian’s heavy-handed but fair disciplinary style and the drunken, vicious beatings Rabbie MacNab receives from his father.

Should Jenny and Jamie feel guilty for Brian’s death? How does Jenny’s anecdote about Randall’s impotence prepare us for the horror in Wentworth prison?

The new cover of *Outlander* identifies moral ambiguity as an issue: does Jamie do the right thing on Quarter Day by beating

Rabbie's abusive father? Jamie worries about the line between justice and brutality.Which side of that line is he on?

43. Jenny's remarkable, sensuous description of her pregnancy, as you may know, was one of the early chunks of *Outlander* posted on the CompuServe Writers' Forum that attracted attention and encouragement for Diana Gabaldon to write more and publish. (Perhaps this pregnancy led not only to wee Maggie, but also to the novel itself!) If you have been pregnant, do these details ring true to your own experience? Could only a woman have written this passage? Debates about whether a male writer can write authentically in a female voice and vice versa have proliferated for years. Could this passage have been written by a man? Or by a woman who has never been pregnant? Why or why not?

44. When Jamie is taken by the Watch, having been betrayed by Ronald MacNab, Claire warns Jenny of the coming slaughter and famine, giving her the practical advice to plant potatoes. Is Claire running any risk of being considered a witch again here?

PART SIX The Search

45. Jamie has always had a complex relationship with his uncle Dougal. In their search for Jamie, Claire practices some fortune-telling skills she learned from Mrs. Graham, as well as her medical skills. Gypsies she and Murtagh encounter lead her to a cave where she meets Dougal, whom the Gypsies have understandably mistaken, from their description, for Jamie. Widower Dougal's attempt to seduce her for Jamie's property, in the belief that there is no hope of rescuing his nephew and foster son, enrages Claire and lowers him in our estimation. Surprisingly, however, in view of Jamie's theories, Dougal swears that he did not attempt to kill Jamie with the axe, the wound that sent him to St. Anne to Beaupré to convalesce. Is Dougal credible on this point? Do you believe him? He says he is unwilling to risk the lives of his men to save Jamie. Does this ring true to you, or is it an excuse? When Claire challenges him to allow his men to make their own choice, why does Rupert follow Claire rather than Dougal? What is the source of Claire's hope that Jamie can be freed?

PART SEVEN Sanctuary

46. Jamie is to be hanged on December 23. Although Claire does not make this point, the day she reaches Wentworth Prison is December 21, the Winter Solstice, one of the sacred days in pre-Christian Celtic tradition about which Frank spoke early in the novel. On this day, northern people rejoice that the sun is returning to a world that otherwise would die without its light and hope. If speculation about the standing stones is correct, this day is one in which one could travel through time. Claire, at the moment, however, is focused on the preciousness of the present and the immediate future. She charms Sir Fletcher, and Rupert gambles with the soldiers, both strategies eliciting some information about where Jamie is. Claire finds him, cold-bloodedly kills a guard, and sees the depths of Randall's depravity. Jamie promises to submit to him if he sets Claire free. Claire's rage, helpless against Randall, gives her the fury and physical strength to kill a wolf. Are you familiar with other examples of astonishing strength in traumatic circumstances and overcoming fear in order to act?

47. MacRannoch, initially unenthusiastic about provoking Sir Fletcher, who could level his castle, changes his mind when he and Murtagh recognize one another from a long-ago Tynchal at Castle Leoch. In their conversation, Claire realizes, with a shock, that the beautiful, barbaric boar-tusk bracelets at Lallybroch were a gift from Murtagh to Ellen; he was Ellen's secret admirer, and MacRannoch the suitor who gave her the pearls Claire now takes out. MacRannoch's stratagem with the stampeding cattle enables them to rescue Jamie. With the assistance of MacRannoch and his wife, Lady Annabelle, Claire tends to Jamie's very serious physical wounds, especially the nine broken bones that need surgery. There is some continuity here with the first episode in which Claire confidently and competently takes charge of Jamie's injuries: this time, however, she claims her full range of authority and skill by saying, for the first time, "I am a physician." How does this assertion mark her personal growth? Despite her stamina in conducting the surgery,

however, she hopes that he does not speak to her about his emotional trauma of. Why not?
48. Jamie does try to explain the psychology of rape, of a violation and breakdown that provokes suicidal thoughts:
"I think it's as though everyone has a small place inside themselves, maybe, a private bit that they keep to themselves. It's like a little fortress, where the most private part of you lives—maybe it's your soul, maybe just that bit that makes you yourself and not anybody else …"
"You don't show that bit of yourself to anyone, usually, unless sometimes to someone that ye love greatly …."

"Now it's like … like my own fortress has been blown up with gunpowder—there's nothing left of it but the ashes and a smoking rooftree, and the little naked thing that lived there once is out in the open, squeaking and whimpering in fear, trying to hide itself under a blade of grass or a bit o' leaf, but not … but not … making m-much of a job of it."

After more challenges—including killing a young English soldier in cold blood, the latest of a series of killings that illustrate Claire's own lethal tendencies (the British deserter, the guard, and the wolf)—Claire and Murtagh succeed in getting the dangerously seasick Jamie to St. Anne de Beaupré, where the more complex challenge of addressing his emotional and spiritual wounds must take place.

Jamie's terrible problem is one shared by many victims of sexual assault—that they have, albeit against their wills, been sexually aroused by and responsive to the stimuli. The shame and recurring images are a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, worsened by the victim's conviction that he or she is morally culpable. When Claire understands that she must give Jamie an experience that will reverse his disempowering trauma at the hands of Randall, she uses her medical skills—and, perhaps surprisingly, a strategy she learned from Geillis—to summon spirits. Conjuring up her memories of Frank for the shared voices and gestures, including sexual ones, she uses the power of suggestion and opium to stimulate a hallucinogenic experience in which he can fight his battles again against the dead Black Jack Randall, this time defending himself and therefore having a different outcome. In taking Jamie back into his own soul-deadening trauma, is this a sort of time travel?

49. Claire needs healing herself, particularly about her unresolved sense of guilt for having chosen to stay with Jamie rather than Frank. How important in Claire's own growth is her experience with the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, when time seems to have stopped? In your opinion, has Claire committed bigamy? Most readers want Claire to accept the theology Anselm offers her (Chapters 39 and 40), assuring her that she has not sinned, but not every reader agrees—and despite her joy in Jamie's recovery, she seems somewhat unsure, perhaps because of her lack of formal catechesis in Catholicism. How much of what Father Anselm tells her do you think she actually accepts? How much do you agree with?

50. Remember that when Claire returned from Craigh na Dun, having chosen to stay with Jamie, she told him that the hot baths nearly won. It seems only fair that they both enjoy the hot baths of the Abbey springs now. It seems a fitting symbol for the cleansing of their psychological wounds, their reconnection sexually, and the promise of new life. What does Claire mean in the last line of the novel?

Some general questions on the whole book:

Many readers are drawn to the *Outlander* novels because of the powerfully appealing character of Jamie. What is it about a character with an 18th c. sensibility that is so attractive to 21st c. readers? Scholar Jessica Matthews suggests that "part of its popularity stems from Diana Gabaldon's rehabilitation of masculinity after feminism tried its best to declaw it for a generation." What aspects of masculinity have been "rehabilitated" for us in Jamie?

The title of this first novel seems prescient, as so many characters in the subsequent volumes are, in so many ways, outsiders too. In what ways is Claire an “outlander”?

What, in your opinion, was the most moving moment? the most frightening one? the most surprising one? the funniest one? the most erotic one? the most beautifully descriptive passage? the most interesting detail(s) in terms of the novel’s depiction of a different historical era?

Who was (or were) your favorite secondary characters(s): Frank? Murtagh? Dougal? Colum? Rupert? Alec MacMahon? Mrs. Fitz? Laoghaire? Geillis? someone else?

The fresh new *Outlander* cover features these words: “history, warfare, medicine, sex, violence, spirituality, honor, betrayal, vengeance, hope and despair, relationships, the building and destruction of families and societies, time travel, moral ambiguity, swords, horses, herbs, gambling (with cards, dice, and lives), voyages of daring, journeys of both body and soul … you know, the usual stuff of literature …” True, but rarely found within the same covers … Are some of these more important to you, in your opinion, than others? Which ones? Why? Can you and your group come to a consensus on three that stand out? Why or why not?

I am deeply indebted to many people who have shared their love of and insights into these remarkable books with me over the years, none more than Jessica Matthews of George Mason University.

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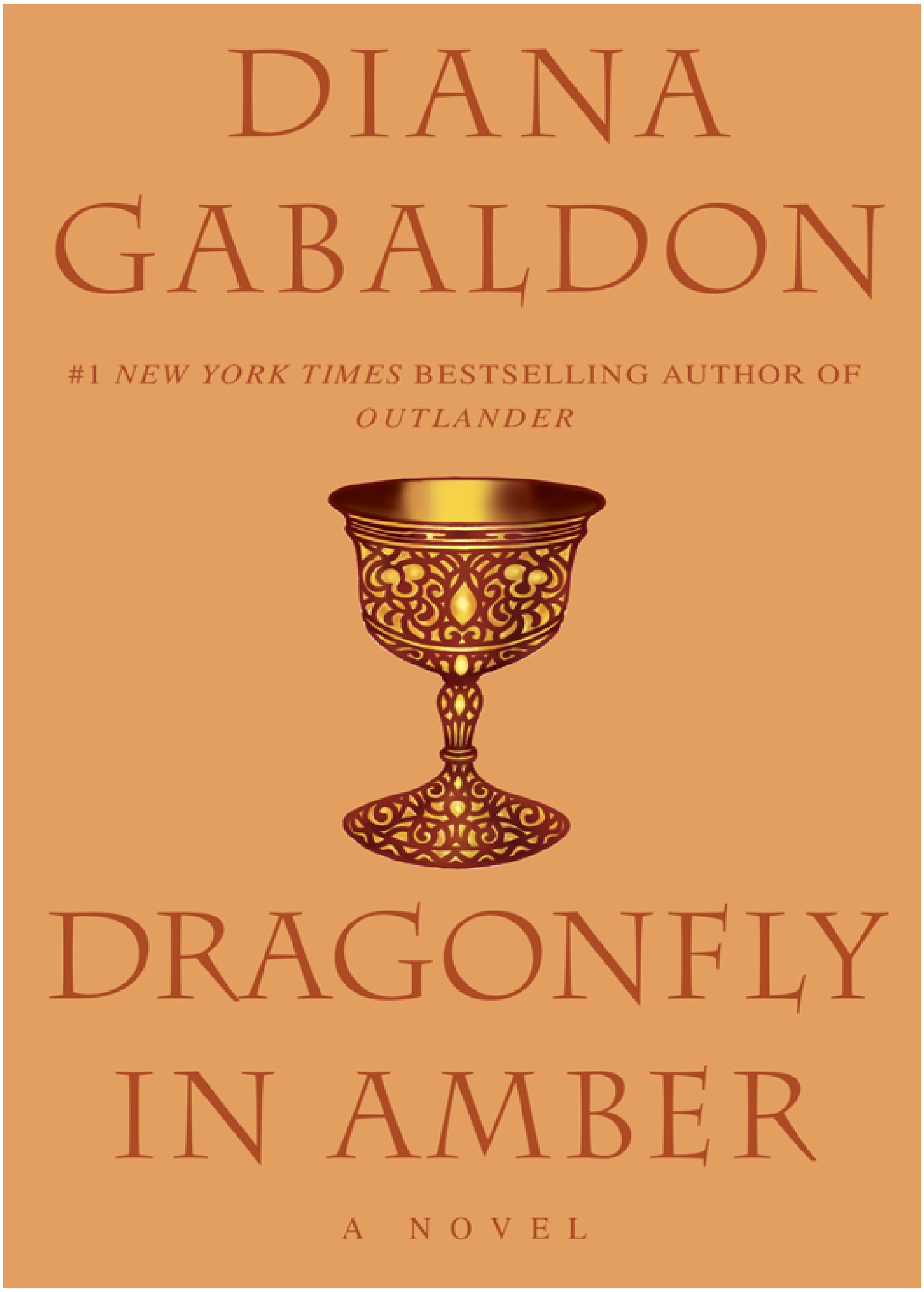

DIANA GABALDON

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *OUTLANDER*

DRAGONFLY IN AMBER

A NOVEL

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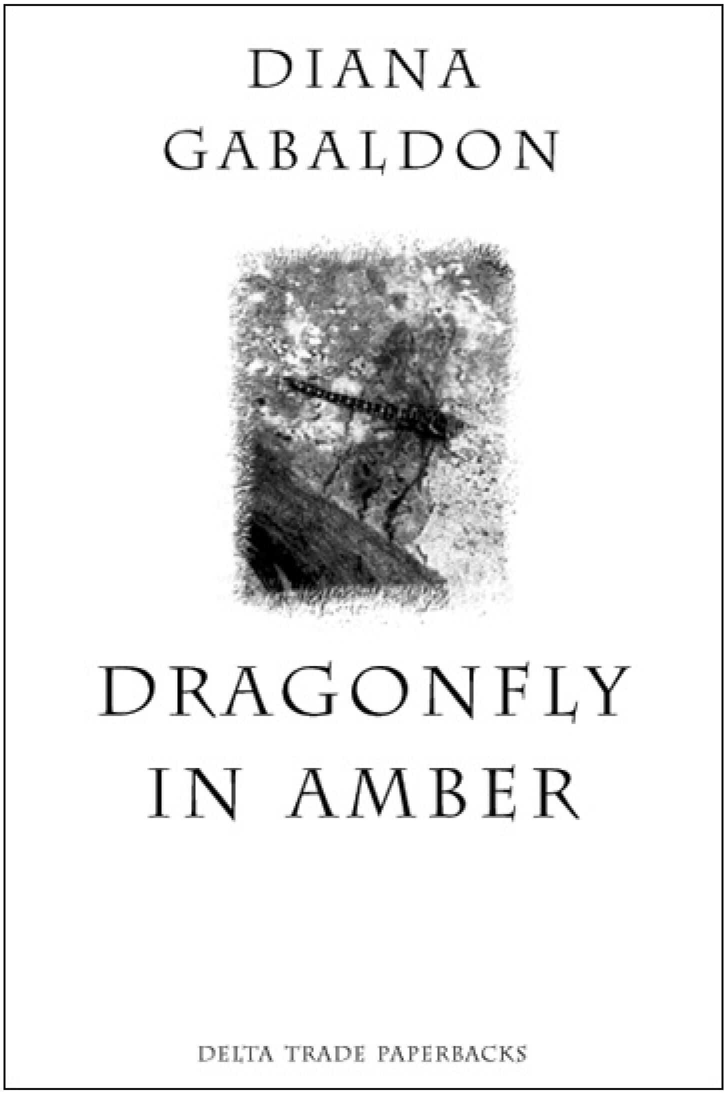

DIANA
GABALDON

DRAGONFLY IN AMBER

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PROLOGUE

I woke three times in the dark predawn. First in sorrow, then in joy, and at the last, in solitude. The tears of a bone-deep loss woke me slowly, bathing my face like the comforting touch of a damp cloth in soothing hands. I turned my face to the wet pillow and sailed a salty river into the caverns of grief remembered, into the subterranean depths of sleep.

I came awake then in fierce joy, body arched bowlike in the throes of physical joining, the touch of him fresh on my skin, dying along the paths of my nerves as the ripples of consummation spread from my center. I repelled consciousness, turning again, seeking the sharp, warm smell of a man's satisfied desire, in the reassuring arms of my lover, sleep.

The third time I woke alone, beyond the touch of love or grief. The sight of the stones was fresh in my mind. A small circle, standing stones on the crest of a steep green hill. The name of the hill is Craigh na Dun; the fairies' hill. Some say the hill is enchanted, others say it is cursed. Both are right. But no one knows the function or the purpose of the stones.

Except me.

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PART ONE

Through a Looking Glass, Darkly

Inverness, 1968

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1

MUSTERING THE ROLL

Roger Wakefield stood in the center of the room, feeling surrounded. He thought the feeling largely justified, insofar as he *was* surrounded: by tables covered with bric-a-brac and mementos, by heavy Victorian-style furniture, replete with antimacassars, plush and afghans, by tiny braided rugs that lay on the polished wood, craftily awaiting an opportunity to skid beneath an unsuspecting foot. Surrounded by twelve rooms of furniture and clothing and papers. And the books—my God, the books!

The study where he stood was lined on three sides by bookshelves, every one crammed past bursting point. Paperback mystery novels lay in bright, tatty piles in front of calf-bound tomes, jammed cheek by jowl with book-club selections, ancient volumes pilfered from extinct libraries, and thousands upon thousands of pamphlets, leaflets, and hand-sewn manuscripts.

A similar situation prevailed in the rest of the house. Books and papers cluttered every horizontal surface, and every closet groaned and squeaked at the seams. His late adoptive father had lived a long, full life, a good ten years past his biblically allotted threescore and ten. And in eighty-odd years, the Reverend Mr. Reginald Wakefield had never thrown anything away.

Roger repressed the urge to run out of the front door, leap into his Morris Minor, and head back to Oxford, abandoning the manse and its contents to the mercy of weather and vandals. Be calm, he told himself, inhaling deeply. You can deal with this. The books are the easy part; nothing more than a matter of sorting through them and then calling someone to come and haul them away. Granted, they'll need a lorry the size of a railcar, but it can be done. Clothes—no problem. Oxfam gets the lot.

He didn't know what Oxfam was going to do with a lot of vested black serge suits, circa 1948, but perhaps the deserving poor weren't all that picky. He began to breathe a little easier. He had taken a month's leave from the History department at Oxford in order to clear up the Reverend's affairs. Perhaps that would be enough, after all. In his more depressed moments, it had seemed as though the task might take years.

He moved toward one of the tables and picked up a small china dish. It was filled with small metal rectangles; lead "gaberlunzies," badges issued to eighteenth-century beggars by parishes as a sort of license. A collection of stoneware bottles stood by the lamp, a ramshorn snuff mull, banded in silver, next to them. Give them to a museum? he thought dubiously. The house was filled with Jacobite artifacts; the Reverend had been an amateur historian, the eighteenth century his favorite hunting ground.

His fingers reached involuntarily to caress the surface of the snuff mull, tracing the black lines of the inscriptions—the names and dates of the Deacons and Treasurers of the Incorporation of Tailors of the Canongate, from Edinburgh, 1726. Perhaps he should keep a few of the Reverend's choicer acquisitions … but then he drew back, shaking his head decidedly. "Nothing doing, cock," he said aloud, "this way lies madness." Or at least the incipient life of a pack rat. Get started saving things, and he'd end up keeping the lot, living in this monstrosity of a house, surrounded by generations of rubbish. "Talking to yourself, too," he muttered.

The thought of generations of rubbish reminded him of the garage, and he sagged a bit at the knees. The Reverend, who was in fact Roger's great-uncle, had adopted him at the age of five when his parents had been killed in World War II; his mother in the Blitz, his father out over the dark waters of the Channel. With his usual preservative instincts, the Reverend had kept all of Roger's parents' effects, sealed in crates and cartons in the back of the garage. Roger knew for a fact that no one had opened one of those crates in the past twenty years.

Roger uttered an Old Testament groan at the thought of pawing through his parents' memorabilia. "Oh, God," he said aloud. "Anything but that!"

The remark had not been intended precisely as prayer, but the doorbell pealed as though in answer, making Roger bite his tongue in startlement.

The door of the manse had a tendency to stick in damp weather, which meant that it was stuck most of the time. Roger freed it with a rending screech, to find a woman on the doorstep.

"Can I help you?"

She was middle height and very pretty. He had an overall impression of fine bones and white linen, topped with a wealth of curly brown hair in a sort of half-tamed chignon. And in the middle of it all, the most extraordinary pair of light eyes, just the color of well-aged sherry.

The eyes swept up from his size-eleven plimsolls to the face a foot above her. The sidelong smile grew wider. "I hate to start right off with a cliché," she said, "but my, how you have grown, young Roger!"

Roger felt himself flushing. The woman laughed and extended a hand. "You *are* Roger, aren't you? My name's Claire Randall; I was an old friend of the Reverend's. But I haven't seen you since you were five years old."

"Er, you said you *were* a friend of my father's? Then, you know already…."

The smile vanished, replaced by a look of regret.

"Yes, I was awfully sorry to hear about it. Heart, was it?"

"Um, yes. Very sudden. I've only just come up from Oxford to start dealing with … everything." He waved vaguely, encompassing the Reverend's death, the house behind him, and all its contents.

"From what I recall of your father's library, that little chore ought to last you 'til next Christmas," Claire observed.

"In that case, maybe we shouldn't be disturbing you," said a soft American voice.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Claire, half-turning to the girl who had stood out of sight in the corner of the porch. “Roger Wakefield—my daughter, Brianna.”

Brianna Randall stepped forward, a shy smile on her face. Roger stared for a moment, then remembered his manners. He stepped back and swung the door open wide, momentarily wondering just when he had last changed his shirt.

“Not at all, not at all!” he said heartily. “I was just wanting a break. Won’t you come in?”

He waved the two women down the hall toward the Reverend’s study, noting that as well as being moderately attractive, the daughter was one of the tallest girls he’d ever seen close-to. She had to be easily six feet, he thought, seeing her head even with the top of the hall stand as she passed. He unconsciously straightened himself as he followed, drawing up to his full six feet three. At the last moment, he ducked, to avoid banging his head on the study lintel as he followed the women into the room.

* * *

“I’d meant to come before,” said Claire, settling herself deeper in the huge wing chair. The fourth wall of the Reverend’s study was equipped with floor-to-ceiling windows, and the sunlight winked off the pearl clip in her light-brown hair. The curls were beginning to escape from their confinement, and she tucked one absently behind an ear as she talked.

“I’d arranged to come last year, in fact, and then there was an emergency at the hospital in Boston—I’m a doctor,” she explained, mouth curling a little at the look of surprise Roger hadn’t quite managed to conceal. “But I’m sorry that we didn’t; I would have liked so much to see your father again.”

Roger rather wondered why they had come now, knowing the Reverend was dead, but it seemed impolite to ask. Instead, he asked, “Enjoying a bit of sightseeing, are you?”

“Yes, we drove up from London,” Claire answered. She smiled at her daughter. “I wanted Bree to see the country; you wouldn’t think it to hear her talk, but she's as English as I am, though she's never lived here."

"Really?" Roger glanced at Brianna. She didn't really look English, he thought; aside from the height, she had thick red hair, worn loose over her shoulders, and strong, sharp-angled bones in her face, with the nose long and straight—maybe a touch too long.

"I was born in America," Brianna explained, "but both Mother and Daddy are—were—English."

"Were?"

"My husband died two years ago," Claire explained. "You knew him, I think—Frank Randall."

"*Frank* Randall! Of course!" Roger smacked himself on the forehead, and felt his cheeks grow hot at Brianna's giggle. "You're going to think me a complete fool, but I've only just realized who you are."

The name explained a lot; Frank Randall had been an eminent historian, and a good friend of the Reverend's; they had exchanged bits of Jacobite arcana for years, though it was at least ten years since Frank Randall had last visited the manse.

"So—you'll be visiting the historical sites near Inverness?" Roger hazarded. "Have you been to Culloden yet?"

"Not yet," Brianna answered. "We thought we'd go later this week." Her answering smile was polite, but nothing more.

"We're booked for a trip down Loch Ness this afternoon," Claire explained. "And perhaps we'll drive down to Fort William tomorrow, or just poke about in Inverness; the place has grown a lot since I was last here."

"When was that?" Roger wondered whether he ought to volunteer his services as tour guide. He really shouldn't take the time, but the Randalls had been good friends of the Reverend's. Besides, a car trip to Fort William in company with two attractive women seemed a much more appealing prospect than cleaning out the garage, which was next on his list.

"Oh, more than twenty years ago. It's been a long time." There was an odd note in Claire's voice that made Roger glance at her, but she met his eyes with a smile.

"Well," he ventured, "if there's anything I can do for you, while you're in the Highlands …"

Claire was still smiling, but something in her face changed. He could almost think she had been waiting for an opening. She glanced at Brianna, then back to Roger.

"Since you mention it," she said, her smile broadening.

"Oh, Mother!" Brianna said, sitting up in her chair. "You don't want to bother Mr. Wakefield! Look at all he's got to do!" She waved a hand at the crowded study, with its overflowing cartons and endless stacks of books.

"Oh, no bother at all!" Roger protested. "Er … what is it?"

Claire shot her daughter a quelling look. "I wasn't planning to knock him on the head and drag him off," she said tartly. "But he might well know someone who could help. It's a small historical project," she explained to Roger. "I need someone who's fairly well versed in the eighteenth-century Jacobites—Bonnie Prince Charlie and all that lot."

Roger leaned forward, interested. "Jacobites?" he said. "That period's not one of my specialties, but I do know a bit—hard not to, living so close to Culloden. That's where the final battle was, you know," he explained to Brianna. "Where the Bonnie Prince's lot ran up against the Duke of Cumberland and got slaughtered for their pains."

"Right," said Claire. "And that, in fact, has to do with what I want to find out." She reached into her handbag and drew out a folded paper.

Roger opened it and scanned the contents quickly. It was a list of names—maybe thirty, all men. At the top of the sheet was a heading: "JACOBITE RISING, 1745—CULLODEN"

"Oh, the '45?" Roger said. "These men fought at Culloden, did they?"

"They did," Claire replied. "What I want to find out is—how many of the men on this list survived that battle?"

Roger rubbed his chin as he perused the list. "That's a simple question," he said, "but the answer might be hard to find. So many of the Highland clansmen who followed Prince Charles were killed on Culloden Field that they weren't buried individually. They were put into mass graves, with no more than a single stone bearing the clan name as a marker."

"I know," Claire said. "Brianna hasn't been there, but I have—a long time ago." He thought he saw a fleeting shadow in her eyes, though it was quickly hidden as she reached into her handbag. No wonder if there was, he thought. Culloden Field was an affecting place; it brought tears to his own eyes, to look out over that expanse of moorland and remember the gallantry and courage of the Scottish Highlanders who lay slaughtered beneath the grass.

She unfolded several more typed sheets and handed them to him. A long white finger ran down the margin of one sheet. Beautiful hands, Roger noted; delicately molded, carefully kept, with a single ring on each hand. The silver one on her right hand was especially striking; a wide Jacobean band in the Highland interlace pattern, embellished with thistle blossoms.

"These are the names of the wives, so far as I know them. I thought that might help, since if the husbands were killed at Culloden, you'd likely find these women remarrying or emigrating afterward. Those records would surely be in the parish register? They're all from the same parish; the church was in Broch Mordha—it's a good bit south of here."

"That's a very helpful idea," Roger said, mildly surprised. "It's the sort of thing an historian would think of."

"I'm hardly an historian," Claire Randall said dryly. "On the other hand, when you live with one, you do pick up the occasional odd thought."

"Of course." A thought struck Roger, and he rose from his chair. "I'm being a terrible host; please, let me get you a drink, and then you can tell me a bit more about this. Perhaps I could help you with it myself."

Despite the disorder, he knew where the decanters were kept, and quickly had his guests supplied with whisky. He'd put quite a lot of soda in Brianna's, but noticed that she sipped at it as though her glass contained ant spray, rather than the best Glenfiddich single malt. Claire, who took her whisky neat by request, seemed to enjoy it much more.

"Well." Roger resumed his seat and picked up the paper again. "It's an interesting problem, in terms of historical research. You said these men came from the same parish? I suppose they came from a single clan or sept—I see a number of them were named Fraser."

Claire nodded, hands folded in her lap. "They came from the same estate; a small Highland farm called Broch Tuarach—it was known locally as Lallybroch. They were part of clan Fraser, though they never gave a formal allegiance to Lord Lovat as chief. These men joined the Rising early; they fought in the Battle of Prestonpans—while Lovat's men didn't come until just before Culloden."

"Really? That's interesting." Under normal eighteenth-century conditions, such small tenant-farmers would have died where they lived, and be filed tidily away in the village churchyard, neatly docketed in the parish register. However, Bonnie Prince Charlie's attempt to regain the throne of Scotland in 1745 had disrupted the normal course of things in no uncertain terms.

In the famine after the disaster of Culloden, many Highlanders had emigrated to the New World; others had drifted from the glens and moors toward the cities, in search of food and employment. A few stayed on, stubbornly clinging to their land and traditions.

"It would make a fascinating article," Roger said, thinking aloud. "Follow the fate of a number of individuals, see what happened to them all. Less interesting if they all *were* killed at Culloden, but chances were that a few made it out." He would be inclined to take on the project as a welcome break even were it not Claire Randall who asked.

"Yes, I think I can help you with this," he said, and was gratified at the warm smile she bestowed on him.

"Would you really? That's wonderful!" she said.

"My pleasure," Roger said. He folded the paper and laid it on the table. "I'll start in on it directly. But tell me, how did you enjoy your drive up from London?"

The conversation became general as the Randalls regaled him with tales of their transatlantic journey, and the drive from London.

Roger's attention drifted slightly, as he began to plan the research for this project. He felt mildly guilty about taking it on; he really shouldn't take the time. On the other hand, it was an interesting question. And it was possible that he could combine the project with some of the necessary clearing-up of the Reverend's material; he knew for a fact that there were forty-eight cartons in the garage, all labeled JACOBITES, MISCELLANEOUS. The thought of it was enough to make him feel faint.

With a wrench, he tore his mind away from the garage, to find that the conversation had made an abrupt change of subject.

"Druids?" Roger felt dazed. He peered suspiciously into his glass, checking to see that he really had added soda.

"You hadn't heard about them?" Claire looked slightly disappointed. "Your father—the Reverend—he knew about them, though only unofficially. Perhaps he didn't think it worth telling you; he thought it something of a joke."

Roger scratched his head, ruffling the thick black hair. "No, I really don't recall. But you're right, he may not have thought it anything serious."

"Well, I don't know that it is." She crossed her legs at the knee. A streak of sunlight gleamed down the shin of her stockings, emphasizing the delicacy of the long bone beneath.

"When I was here last with Frank—God, that was twenty-three years ago!—the Reverend told him that there was a local group of—well, modern Druids, I suppose you'd call them. I've no idea how authentic they might be; most likely not very." Brianna was leaning forward now, interested, the glass of whisky forgotten between her hands.

"The Reverend couldn't take official notice of them—paganism and all that, you know—but his housekeeper, Mrs. Graham, was involved with the group, so he got wind of their doings from time to time, and he tipped Frank that there would be a ceremony of some kind on the dawn of Beltane—May Day, that is."

Roger nodded, trying to adjust to the idea of elderly Mrs. Graham, that extremely proper person, engaging in pagan rites and dancing round stone circles in the dawn. All he could remember of Druid ceremonies himself was that some of them involved burning sacrificial victims in wicker cages, which seemed still more unlikely behavior for a Scottish Presbyterian lady of advanced years.

"There's a circle of standing stones on top of a hill, fairly nearby. So we went up there before dawn to, well, to spy on them," she continued, shrugging apologetically. "You know what scholars are like; no conscience at all when it comes to their own field, let alone a sense of social delicacy." Roger winced slightly at this, but nodded in wry agreement.

"And there they were," she said. "Mrs. Graham included, all wearing bedsheets, chanting things and dancing in the midst of the stone circle. Frank was fascinated," she added, with a smile. "And it *was* impressive, even to me."

She paused for a moment, eyeing Roger rather speculatively.

"I'd heard that Mrs. Graham had passed away a few years ago. But I wonder … do you know if she had any family? I believe membership in such groups is often hereditary; maybe there's a daughter or granddaughter who could tell me a bit."

"Well," Roger said slowly. "There is a granddaughter—Fiona's her name, Fiona Graham. In fact, she came to help out here at the manse after her grandmother died; the Reverend was really too elderly to be left all on his own."

If anything could displace his vision of Mrs. Graham dancing in a bedsheet, it was the thought of nineteen-year-old Fiona as a guardian of ancient mystic knowledge, but Roger rallied gamely and went on.

"She isn't here just now, I'm afraid. I could ask her for you, though."

Claire waved a slender hand in dismissal. "Don't trouble yourself. Another time will do. We've taken up too much of your time already."

To Roger's dismay, she set down her empty glass on the small table between the chairs and Brianna added her own full one with what looked like alacrity. He noticed that Brianna Randall bit her nails. This small evidence of imperfection gave him the nerve to take the next step. She intrigued him, and he didn't want her to go, with no assurance that he would see her again.

"Speaking of stone circles," he said quickly. "I believe I know the one you mentioned. It's quite scenic, and not too far from town." He smiled directly at Brianna Randall, registering automatically the fact that she had three small freckles high on one cheekbone. "I thought perhaps I'd start on this project with a trip down to Broch Tuarach. It's in the same direction as the stone circle, so maybe … aaagh!"

With a sudden jerk of her bulky handbag, Claire Randall had bumped both whisky glasses off the table, showering Roger's lap and thighs with single malt whisky and quite a lot of soda.

"I'm terribly sorry," she apologized, obviously flustered. She bent and began picking up pieces of shattered crystal, despite Roger's half-coherent attempts to stop her.

Brianna, coming to assist with a handful of linen napkins seized from the sideboard, was saying "Really, Mother, how they ever let you do surgery, I don't know. You're just not safe with anything smaller than a bread-box. Look, you've got his shoes soaked with whisky!" She knelt on the floor, and began busily mopping up spilled Scotch and fragments of crystal. "And his pants, too."

Whipping a fresh napkin from the stack over her arm, she industriously polished Roger's toes, her red mane floating deliriously around his knees. Her head was rising, as she peered at his thighs, dabbing energetically at damp spots on the corduroy. Roger closed his eyes and thought frantically of terrible car crashes on the motorway and tax forms for the Inland Revenue and the Blob from Outer Space—anything that might stop him disgracing himself utterly as Brianna Randall's warm breath misted softly through the wet fabric of his trousers.

"Er, maybe you'd like to do the rest yourself?" The voice came from somewhere around the level of his nose, and he opened his eyes to find a pair of deep blue eyes facing him above a wide grin. He rather weakly took the napkin she was offering him, breathing as though he had just been chased by a train.

Lowering his head to scrub at his trousers, he caught sight of Claire Randall watching him with an expression of mingled sympathy and amusement. There was nothing else visible in her expression; nothing of that flash he thought he'd seen in her eyes just before the catastrophe. Flustered as he was, it was probably his imagination, he thought. For why on earth should she have done it on purpose?

"Since when are you interested in Druids, Mama?" Brianna seemed disposed to find something hilarious in the idea; I had noticed her biting the insides of her cheeks while I was chatting with Roger Wakefield, and the grin she had been hiding then was now plastered across her face. "You going to get your own bedsheet and join up?"

"Bound to be more entertaining than hospital staff meetings every Thursday," I said. "Bit drafty, though." She hooted with laughter, startling two chickadees off the walk in front of us.

"No," I said, switching to seriousness. "It isn't the Druid ladies I'm after, so much. There's someone I used to know in Scotland that I wanted to find, if I can. I haven't an address for her—I haven't been in touch with her for more than twenty years—but she had an interest in odd things like that: witchcraft, old beliefs, folklore. All that sort of thing. She once lived near here; I thought if she was still here, she might be involved with a group like that."

"What's her name?"

I shook my head, grabbing at the loosened clip as it slid from my curls. It slipped through my fingers and bounced into the deep grass along the walk.

"Damn!" I said, stooping for it. My fingers were unsteady as I groped through the dense stalks, and I had trouble picking up the clip, slippery with moisture from the wet grass. The thought of Geillis Duncan tended to unnerve me, even now.

"I don't know," I said, brushing the curls back off my flushed face. "I mean—it's been such a long time, I'm sure she'd have a different name by now. She was widowed; she might have married again, or be using her maiden name."

"Oh." Brianna lost interest in the topic, and walked along in silence for a little. Suddenly she said, "What did you think of Roger

Wakefield, Mama?"

I glanced at her; her cheeks were pink, but it might be from the spring wind.

"He seems a very nice young man," I said carefully. "He's certainly intelligent; he's one of the youngest professors at Oxford." The intelligence I had known about; I wondered whether he had any imagination. So often scholarly types didn't. But imagination would be helpful.

"He's got the grooviest eyes," Brianna said, dreamily ignoring the question of his brain. "Aren't they the greenest you've ever seen?"

"Yes, they're very striking," I agreed. "They've always been like that; I remember noticing them when I first met him as a child."

Brianna looked down at me, frowning.

"Yes, Mother, really! Did you have to say 'My, how you've grown?' when he answered the door? How embarrassing!"

I laughed.

"Well, when you've last seen someone hovering round your navel, and suddenly you find yourself looking up his nose," I defended myself, "you can't help remarking the difference."

"Mother!" But she fizzed with laughter.

"He has a very nice bottom, too," I remarked, just to keep her going. "I noticed when he bent over to get the whisky."

"Mo-THERRR! They'll hear you!"

We were nearly at the bus stop. There were two or three women and an elderly gentleman in tweeds standing by the sign; they turned to stare at us as we came up.

"Is this the place for the Loch-side Tours bus?" I asked, scanning the bewildering array of notices and advertisements posted on the signboard.

"Och, aye," one of the ladies said kindly. "The bus will be comin' along in ten minutes or so." She scanned Brianna, so clearly American in blue jeans and white windbreaker. The final patriotic note was added by the flushed face, red with suppressed laughter. "You'll be going to see Loch Ness? Your first time, is it?"

I smiled at her. "I sailed down the loch with my husband twenty-odd years ago, but this is my daughter's first trip to Scotland."

"Oh, is it?" This attracted the attention of the other ladies and they crowded around, suddenly friendly, offering advice and asking questions until the big yellow bus came chugging round the corner.

Brianna paused before climbing the steps, admiring the picturesque drawing of green serpentine loops, undulating through a blue-paint lake, edged with black pines.

"This will be fun," she said, laughing. "Think we'll see the monster?"

"You never know," I said.

Roger spent the rest of the day in a state of abstraction, wandering absently from one task to another. The books to be packed for donation to the Society for the Preservation of Antiquities lay spilling out of their carton, the Reverend's ancient flatbed lorry sat in the drive with its bonnet up, halfway through a motor check, and a cup of tea sat half-drunk and milk-scummed at his elbow as he gazed blankly out at the falling rain of early evening.

What he should do, he knew, was get at the job of dismantling the heart of the Reverend's study. Not the books; massive as that job was, it was only a matter of deciding which to keep himself, and which should be dispatched to the SPA or the Reverend's old college library. No, sooner or later he would have to tackle the enormous desk, which had papers filling each huge drawer to the brim and protruding from its dozens of pigeonholes. And he'd have to take down and dispose of all of the miscellany decorating the cork wall that filled one side of the room; a task to daunt the stoutest heart.

Aside from a general disinclination to start the tedious job, Roger was hampered by something else. He didn't *want* to be doing these things, necessary as they were; he wanted to be working on Claire Randall's project, tracking down the clansmen of Culloden.

It was an interesting enough project in its way, though probably a minor research job. But that wasn't it. No, he thought, if he were being honest with himself, he wanted to tackle Claire Randall's project because he wanted to go round to Mrs. Thomas's guesthouse and lay his results at the feet of Brianna Randall, as knights were supposed to have done with the heads of dragons. Even if he didn't get results on that scale, he urgently wanted some excuse to see her and talk with her again.

It was a Bronzino painting she reminded him of, he decided. She and her mother both gave that odd impression of having been outlined somehow, drawn with such vivid strokes and delicate detail that they stood out from their background as though they'd been engraved on it. But Brianna had that brilliant coloring, and that air of absolute physical presence that made Bronzino's sitters seem to follow you with their eyes, to be about to speak from their frames. He'd never seen a Bronzino painting making faces at a glass of whisky, but if there had been one, he was sure it would have looked precisely like Brianna Randall.

"Well, bloody hell," he said aloud. "It won't take a lot of time just to look over the records at Culloden House tomorrow, will it? You," he said, addressing the desk and its multiple burdens, "can wait for a day. So can you," he said to the wall, and defiantly plucked a mystery novel from the shelf. He glanced around belligerently, as though daring any of the furnishings to object, but there was no sound but the whirring of the electric fire. He switched it off and, book under his arm, left the study, flicking off the light.

A minute later, he came back, crossing the room in the dark, and retrieved the list of names from the table.

"Well, bloody hell anyway!" he said, and tucked it into the pocket of his shirt. "Don't want to forget the damn thing in the morning." He patted the pocket, feeling the soft crackle of the paper just over his heart, and went up to bed.

We had come back from Loch Ness blown with wind and chilled with rain, to the warm comfort of a hot supper and an open fire in the parlor. Brianna had begun to yawn over the scrambled eggs, and soon excused herself to go and take a hot bath. I stayed downstairs for a bit, chatting with Mrs. Thomas, the landlady, and it was nearly ten o'clock before I made my way up to my own bath and nightgown.

Brianna was an early riser and an early sleeper; her soft breathing greeted me as I pushed open the bedroom door. An early sleeper, she was also a sound one; I moved carefully around the room, hanging up my clothes and tidying things away, but there was little danger of waking her. The house grew quiet as I went about my work, so that the rustle of my own movements seemed loud in my ears.

I had brought several of Frank's books with me, intending to donate them to the Inverness Library. They were laid neatly in the bottom of my suitcase, forming a foundation for the more squashable items above. I took them out one by one, laying them on the bed. Five hardbound volumes, glossy in bright dust covers. Nice, substantial things; five or six hundred pages each, not counting index and illustrations.

My late husband's Collected Works, in the Fully Annotated editions. Inches of admiring reviews covered the jacket flaps, comments from every recognized expert in the historical field. Not bad for a Life's Work, I thought. An accomplishment to be proud of. Compact, weighty, authoritative.

I stacked the books neatly on the table next to my bag, so as not to forget them in the morning. The titles on the spines were different, of course, but I stacked them so that the uniform "Frank W. Randall"'s at the ends lined up, one above the other. They glowed jewel-bright in the small pool of light from the bedside lamp.

The bed-and-breakfast was quiet; it was early in the year for guests, and those there were had long since gone to sleep. In the other twin bed, Brianna made a small whuffling noise and rolled over in her sleep, leaving long strands of red hair draped across her dreaming face. One long, bare foot protruded from the bedclothes, and I pulled the blanket gently over it.

The impulse to touch a sleeping child never fades, no matter that the child is a good deal larger than her mother, and a woman—if a young one—in her own right. I smoothed the hair back from her face and stroked the crown of her head. She smiled in her sleep, a brief reflex of contentment, gone as soon as it appeared. My own *smile lingered as I watched her, and whispered to her sleep-deaf ears, as I had so many times before, "God, you are so like him."*

I swallowed the faint thickening in my throat—it was nearly habit, by now—and took my dressing gown from the chair back. It was bloody cold at night in the Scottish Highlands in April, but I wasn't yet ready to seek the warm sanctuary of my own twin bed.

I had asked the landlady to leave the fire burning in the sitting room, assuring her that I would bank it before retiring. I closed the door softly, still seeing the sprawl of long limbs, the splash and tumble of red silk across the quilted blue spread.

"Not bad for a Life's Work, either," I whispered to the dark hallway. "Maybe not so compact, but damned authoritative."

The small parlor was dark and cozy, the fire burnt down to a steady glow of flame along the backbone of the main log. I pulled a small armchair up before the fire and propped my feet on the fender. I could hear all the small usual sounds of modern life around me; the faint whirr of the refrigerator in the basement below, the hum and whoosh of the central heating that made the fire a comfort rather than a necessity; the passing rush of an occasional car outside.

But under everything was the deep silence of a Highland night. I sat very still, reaching for it. It had been twenty years since I last felt it, but the soothing power of the dark was still there, cradled between the mountains.

I reached into the pocket of my dressing gown and pulled out the folded paper—a copy of the list I had given Roger Wakefield. It was too dark to read by firelight, but I didn't need to see the names. I unfolded the paper on my silk-clad knee and sat blindly staring at the lines of illegible type. I ran my finger slowly across each line, murmuring each man's name to myself like a prayer. They belonged to the cold spring night, more than I did. But I kept looking into the flames, letting the dark outside come to fill the empty places inside me.

And speaking their names as though to summon them, I began the first steps back, crossing the empty dark to where they waited.

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2

THE PLOT THICKENS

Roger left Culloden House next morning with twelve pages of notes and a growing feeling of bafflement. What had at first seemed a fairly straightforward job of historical research was turning up some odd twists, and no mistake.

He had found only three of the names from Claire Randall's list among the rolls of the dead of Culloden. This in itself was nothing remarkable. Charles Stuart's army had rarely had a coherent roll of enlistment, as some clan chieftains had joined the Bonnie Prince apparently on whim, and many had left for even less reason, before the names of their men could be inscribed on any official document. The Highland army's record-keeping, haphazard at best, had disintegrated almost completely toward the end; there was little point in keeping a payroll, after all, if you had nothing with which to pay the men on it.

He carefully folded his lanky frame and inserted himself into his ancient Morris, automatically ducking to avoid bumping his head. Taking the folder from under his arm, he opened it and frowned at the pages he had copied. What was odd about it was that nearly all of the men on Claire's list *had* been shown on another army list.

Within the ranks of a given clan regiment, men might have deserted as the dimensions of the coming disaster became clearer; that would have been nothing unusual. No, what made the whole thing so incomprehensible was that the names on Claire's list had shown up—entire and complete—as part of the Master of Lovat's regiment, sent late in the campaign to fulfill a promise of support made to the Stuarts by Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat.

Yet Claire had definitely said—and a glance at her original sheets confirmed it—that these men had all come from a small estate called Broch Tuarach, well to the south and west of the Fraser lands—on the border of the MacKenzie clan lands, in fact. More than that, she had said these men had been with the Highland army since the Battle of Prestonpans, which had occurred near the beginning of the campaign.

Roger shook his head. This made no kind of sense. Granted, Claire might have mistaken the timing—she had said herself that she was no historian. But not the location, surely? And how could men from the estate of Broch Tuarach, who had given no oath of allegiance to the chief of clan Fraser, have been at the disposal of Simon Fraser? True, Lord Lovat had been known as "the Old Fox," and for good reason, but Roger doubted that even that redoubtable old Earl had had sufficient wiliness to pull off something like this.

Frowning to himself, Roger started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. The archives at Culloden House were depressingly incomplete; mostly a lot of picturesque letters from Lord George Murray, beefing about supply problems, and things that looked good in the museum displays for the tourists. He needed a lot more than that.

"Hold on, cock," he reminded himself, squinting in the rearview mirror at the turn. "You're meant to be finding out what happened to the ones that *didn't* cark it at Culloden. What does it matter how they got there, so long as they left the battle in one piece?"

But he couldn't leave it alone. It was such an odd circumstance. Names got muddled with enormous frequency, especially in the Highlands, where half the population at any given moment seemed to be named "Alexander." Consequently, men had customarily been known by their place-names, as well as their clan or surnames. Sometimes *instead* of the surnames. "Lochiel," one of the most prominent Jacobite chieftains, was in fact Donald Cameron, *of* Lochiel, which distinguished him nicely from the hundreds of other Camerons named Donald.

And all the Highland men who hadn't been named Donald or Alec had been named John. Of the three names that he'd found on the death rolls that matched Claire's list, one was Donald Murray, one was Alexander MacKenzie Fraser, and one was John Graham Fraser. All without place-names attached; just the plain name, and the regiment to which they'd belonged. The Master of Lovat's regiment, the Fraser regiment.

But without the place-name, he couldn't be sure that they *were* the same men as the names on Claire's list. There were at least six John Frasers on the death roll, and even that was incomplete; the English had given little attention to completeness or accuracy—most of the records had been compiled after the fact, by clan chieftains counting noses and determining who hadn't come home. Frequently the chieftains themselves hadn't come home, which complicated matters.

He rubbed his hand hard through his hair with frustration, as though scalp massage might stimulate his brain. And if the three names *weren't* the same men, the mystery only deepened. A good half of Charles Stuart's army had been slaughtered at Culloden. And Lovat's men had been in the thick of it, right in the center of the battle. It was inconceivable that a group of thirty men had survived in that position without one fatality. The Master of Lovat's men had come late to the Rising; while desertion had been rife in other regiments, who had served long enough to have some idea what they were in for, the Frasers had been remarkably loyal—and suffered in consequence.

A loud horn-blast from behind startled him out of his concentration, and he pulled to the side to let a large, annoyed lorry rumble past. Thinking and driving were not compatible activities, he decided. End up smashed against a stone wall, if he kept this up.

He sat still for a moment, pondering. His natural impulse was to go to Mrs. Thomas's bed-and-breakfast, and tell Claire what he had found to date. The fact that this might involve basking for a few moments in the presence of Brianna Randall enhanced the appeal of this idea.

On the other hand, all his historian's instincts cried out for more data. And he wasn't at all sure that Claire was the person to provide it. He couldn't imagine why she should commission him to do this project, and at the same time, interfere with its completion by giving him inaccurate information. It wasn't sensible, and Claire Randall struck him as an eminently sensible person.

Still, there was that business with the whisky. His cheeks grew hot in memory. He was positive she'd done it on purpose—and as she didn't really seem the sort for practical jokes, he was compelled to assume she'd done it to stop him inviting Brianna to Broch Tuarach. Did she want to keep him away from the place, or only to stop him taking Brianna there? The more he thought about the incident, the more convinced he became that Claire Randall was keeping something from her daughter, but what it was, he couldn't imagine. Still less could he think what connection it had with him, or the project he had undertaken.

He'd give it up, were it not for two things. Brianna, and simple curiosity. He wanted to know what was going on, and he bloody well intended to find out.

He rapped his fist softly against the wheel, thinking, ignoring the rush of passing traffic. At last, decision made, he started the engine again and pulled into the road. At the next roundabout, he went three-quarters round the circle and headed for the town center of Inverness, and the railroad station.

The Flying Scotsman could have him in Edinburgh in three hours. The curator in charge of the Stuart Papers had been a close friend of the Reverend. And he had one clue to start with, puzzling as it was. The roll that had listed the names in the Master of Lovat's regiment had shown those thirty men as being under the command of a Captain James Fraser—of Broch Tuarach. This man was the only apparent link between Broch Tuarach and the Frasers of Lovat. He wondered why James Fraser had not appeared on Claire's list.

* * *

The sun was out; a rare event for mid-April, and Roger made the most of it by cranking down the tiny window on the driver's side, to let the bright wind blow past his ear.

He had had to stay overnight in Edinburgh, and coming back late the next day, had been so tired from the long train ride that he had done little more than eat the hot supper Fiona insisted on fixing him before he fell into bed. But today he had risen full of renewed energy and determination, and motored down to the small village of Broch Mordha, near the site of the estate called Broch Tuarach. If her mother didn't want Brianna Randall going to Broch Tuarach, there was nothing stopping *him* from having a look at the place.

He had actually found Broch Tuarach itself, or at least he assumed so; there was an enormous pile of fallen stone, surrounding the collapsed remnant of one of the ancient circular brochs, or towers, used in the distant past both for living and for defense. He had sufficient Gaelic to know that the name meant "north-facing tower," and had wondered briefly just how a circular tower could have come by such a name.

There was a manor house and its outbuildings nearby, also in ruins, though a good deal more of it was left. An estate agent's sign, weathered almost to illegibility, stood tacked to a stake in the dooryard. Roger stood on the slope above the house, looking around. At a glance, he could see nothing that would explain Claire's wanting to keep her daughter from coming here.

He parked the Morris in the dooryard, and climbed out. It was a beautiful site, but very remote; it had taken him nearly forty-five minutes of careful maneuvering to get his Morris down the rutted country lane from the main highway without fracturing his oil pan.

He didn't go into the house; it was plainly abandoned, and possibly dangerous—there would be nothing there. The name FRASER was carved into the lintel, though, and the same name adorned most of the small tombstones in what must have been the family graveyard—those that were legible. Not a great help, that, he reflected. None of these stones bore the names of men on his list. He'd have to go on along the road; according to the AA map, the village of Broch Mhorda was three miles farther on.

As he'd feared, the small village church had fallen into disuse and been knocked down years ago. Persistent knockings on doors elicited blank stares, dour looks, and finally a doubtful speculation from an aged farmer that the old parish records might have gone to the museum in Fort William, or maybe up to Inverness; there was a minister up that way who collected such rubbish.

Tired and dusty, but not yet discouraged, Roger trudged back to his car, sheltering in the lane by the village pub. This was the sort of setback that so often attended historical field research, and he was used to it. A quick pint—well, two, maybe, it was an unusually warm day—and then on to Fort William.

Serve him right, he reflected wryly, if the records he was looking for turned out to be in the Reverend's archives all along. That's what he got for neglecting his work to go on wild-goose chases to impress a girl. His trip to Edinburgh had done little more than serve to eliminate the three names he'd found at Culloden House; all three men proved to have come from different regiments, not the Broch Tuarach group.

The Stuart Papers took up three entire rooms, as well as untold packing cases in the basement of the museum, so he could hardly claim to have made an exhaustive study. Still, he had found a duplicate of the payroll he'd seen at Culloden House, listing the joining of the men as part of a regiment under the overall command of the Master of Lovat—the Old Fox's son, that would have been, Young Simon. Cagy old bastard split his vote, Roger thought; sent the heir to fight for the Stuarts, and stayed home himself, claiming to have been a loyal subject of King Geordie all along. Much good it did him.

That document had listed Simon Fraser the Younger as commander, and made no mention of James Fraser. A James Fraser was mentioned in a number of army dispatches, memoranda, and other documents, though. If it was the same man, he'd been fairly active in the campaign. Still, with only the name "James Fraser," it was impossible to tell if it was the Broch Tuarach one; James was as common a Highland name as Duncan or Robert. In only one spot was a James Fraser listed with additional middle names that might help in identification, but that document made no mention of his men.

He shrugged, irritably waving off a sudden cloud of voracious midges. To go through those records in coherent fashion would take several years. Unable to shake the attentions of the midges, he ducked into the dark, brewery atmosphere of the pub, leaving them to mill outside in a frenzied cloud of inquiry.

Sipping the cool, bitter ale, he mentally reviewed the steps taken so far, and the options open to him. He had time to go to Fort William today, though it would mean getting back to Inverness late. And if the Fort William museum turned up nothing, then a good rummage through the Reverend's archives was the logical, if ironic, next step.

And after that? He drained the last drops of bitter, and signaled the landlord for another glass. Well, if it came down to it, a tramp round every kirkyard and burying ground in the general vicinity of Broch Tuarach was likely the best he could do in the short term. He doubted that the Randalls would stay in Inverness for the next two or three years, patiently awaiting results.

He felt in his pocket for the notebook that is the historian's constant companion. Before he left Broch Mhorda, he should at least have a look at what was left of the old kirkyard. You never knew what might turn up, and it would at least save him coming back.

The next afternoon, the Randalls came to take tea at Roger's invitation, and to hear his progress report.

"I've found several of the names on your list," he told Claire, leading the way into the study. "It's very odd; I haven't yet found any who died for sure at Culloden. I thought I had three, but they turned out to be different men with the same names." He glanced at Dr. Randall; she was standing quite still, one hand clasping the back of a wing chair, as though she'd forgotten where she was.

"Er, won't you sit down?" Roger invited, and with a small, startled jerk, she nodded and sat abruptly on the edge of the seat. Roger eyed her curiously, but went on, pulling out his folder of research notes and handing it to her.

"As I say, it's odd. I haven't tracked down all the names; I think I'll need to go nose about among the parish registers and graveyards near Broch Tuarach. I found most of these records among my father's papers. But you'd think I'd have turned up one or two battle-deaths at least, given that they were all at Culloden. Especially if, as you say, they were with one of the Fraser regiments; those were nearly all in the center of the battle, where the fighting was thickest."

"I know." There was something in her voice that made him look at her, puzzled, but her face was invisible as she bent over the desk. Most of the records were copies, made in Roger's own hand, as the exotic technology of photocopying had not yet penetrated to the government archive that guarded the Stuart Papers, but there were a few original sheets, unearthed from the late Reverend Wakefield's hoard of eighteenth-century documents. She turned over the records with a gentle finger, careful not to touch the fragile paper more than necessary.

"You're right; that *is* odd." Now he recognized the emotion in her voice—it was excitement, but mingled with satisfaction and relief. She had been in some way expecting this—or hoping for it.

"Tell me …" She hesitated. "The names you've found. What happened to them, if they didn't die at Culloden?"

He was faintly surprised that it should seem to matter so much to her, but obligingly pulled out the folder that held his research notes and opened it. "Two of them were on a ship's roll; they emigrated to America soon after Culloden. Four died of natural causes about a year later—not surprising, there was a terrible famine after Culloden, and a lot of people died in the Highlands. And this one I found in a parish register—but not the parish he came from. I'm fairly sure it's one of your men, though."

It was only as the tension went out of her shoulders that he noticed it had been there.

"Do you want me to look for the rest, still?" he asked, hoping that the answer would be "yes." He was watching Brianna over her mother's shoulder. She was standing by the cork wall, half-turned as though uninterested in her mother's project, but he could see a small vertical crease between her brows.

Perhaps she sensed the same thing he did, the odd air of suppressed excitement that surrounded Claire like an electric field. He had been aware of it from the moment she walked into the room, and his revelations had only increased it. He imagined that if he touched her, a great spark of static electricity would leap between them.

A knock on the study door interrupted his thoughts. The door opened and Fiona Graham came in, pushing a tea cart, fully equipped with teapot, cups, doilies, three kinds of sandwiches, cream-cakes, sponge cake, jam tarts, and scones with clotted cream.

"Yum!" said Brianna at the sight. "Is that all for us, or are you expecting ten other people?"

Claire Randall looked over the tea preparations, smiling. The electric field was still there, but damped down by major effort. Roger could see one of her hands, clenched so hard in the folds of her skirt that the edge of her ring cut into the flesh.

"That tea is so high, we won't need to eat for weeks," she said. "It looks wonderful!"

Fiona beamed. She was short, plump and pretty as a small brown hen. Roger sighed internally. While he was pleased to be able to offer his guests hospitality, he was well aware that the lavish nature of the refreshments was intended for his appreciation, not theirs. Fiona, aged nineteen, had one burning ambition in life. To be a wife. Preferably of a professional man. She had taken one look at Roger when he arrived a week earlier to tidy up the Reverend's affairs, and decided that an assistant professor of history was the best prospect Inverness offered.

Since then, he had been stuffed like a Christmas goose, had his shoes polished, his slippers and toothbrush laid out, his bed turned down, his coat brushed, the evening paper bought for him and laid alongside his plate, his neck rubbed when he had been working over his desk for long hours, and constant inquiries made concerning his bodily comfort, state of mind, and general health. He had never before been exposed to such a barrage of domesticity.

In short, Fiona was driving him mad. His current state of unshaven dishabille was more a reaction to her relentless pursuit than it was a descent into that natural squalor enjoyed by men temporarily freed from the demands of job and society.

The thought of being united in bonds of holy wedlock with Fiona Graham was one that froze him to the marrow. She would drive him insane within a year, with her constant pestering. Aside from that, though, there was Brianna Randall, now gazing contemplatively at the tea cart, as though wondering where to start.

He had been keeping his attention firmly fixed on Claire Randall and her project this afternoon, avoiding looking at her daughter. Claire Randall was lovely, with the sort of fine bones and translucent skin that would make her look much the same at sixty as she had at twenty. But looking at Brianna Randall made him feel slightly breathless.

She carried herself like a queen, not slumping as tall girls so often do. Noting her mother’s straight back and graceful posture, he could see where that particular attribute had come from. But not the remarkable height, the cascade of waist-length red hair, sparked with gold and copper, streaked with amber and cinnamon, curling casually around face and shoulders like a mantle. The eyes, so dark a blue as almost to be black in some lights. Nor that wide, generous mouth, with a full lower lip that invited nibbling kisses and biting passion. Those things must have come from her father.

Roger was on the whole rather glad that her father was not present, since he would certainly have taken paternal umbrage at the sorts of thoughts Roger was thinking; thoughts he was desperately afraid showed on his face.

“Tea, eh?” he said heartily. “Splendid. Wonderful. Looks delicious, Fiona. Er, thanks, Fiona. I, um, don’t think we need anything else.”

Ignoring the broad hint to depart, Fiona nodded graciously at the compliments from the guests, laid out the doilies and cups with deft economy of motion, poured the tea, passed round the first plate of cake, and seemed prepared to stay indefinitely, presiding as lady of the house.

“Have some cream on your scones, Rog—I mean, Mr. Wakefield,” she suggested, ladling it on without waiting for his reply. “You’re much too thin; you want feeding up.” She glanced conspiratorially at Brianna Randall, saying, “You know what men are; never eat properly without a woman to look after them.”

“How lucky that he’s got you to take care of him,” Brianna answered politely.

Roger took a deep breath, and flexed his fingers several times, until the urge to strangle Fiona had passed.

“Fiona,” he said. “Would you, um, could you possibly do me a small favor?”

She lit up like a small jack-o’-lantern, mouth stretched in an eager grin at the thought of doing something for him. “Of course, Rog—Mr. Wakefield! Anything at all!”

Roger felt vaguely ashamed of himself, but after all, he argued, it was for her good as much as his. If she didn’t leave, he was shortly going to cease being responsible and commit some act they would both regret.

“Oh, thanks, Fiona. It’s nothing much; only that I’d ordered some … some”—he thought frantically, trying to remember the name of one of the village merchants—“some tobacco, from Mr. Buchan in the High Street. I wonder if you’d be willing to go and fetch it for me; I could just do with a good pipe after such a wonderful tea.”

Fiona was already untying her apron—the frilly, lace-trimmed one, Roger noted grimly. He closed his eyes briefly in relief as the study door shut behind her, dismissing for the moment the fact that he didn’t smoke. With a sigh of relief, he turned to conversation with his guests.

“You were asking whether I wanted you to look for the rest of the names on my list,” Claire said, almost at once. Roger had the odd impression that she shared his relief at Fiona’s departure. “Yes, I do—if it wouldn’t be too much trouble?”

“No, no! Not at all,” Roger said, with only slight mendacity. “Glad to do it.”

Roger's hand hovered uncertainly amid the largesse of the tea cart, then snaked down to grasp the crystal decanter of twelve-year-old Muir Breame whisky. After the skirmish with Fiona, he felt he owed it to himself.

"Will you have a bit of this?" he asked his guests politely. Catching the look of distaste on Brianna's face, he quickly added, "Or maybe some tea?"

"Tea," Brianna said with relief.

"You don't know what you're missing," Claire told her daughter, inhaling the whisky fumes with rapture.

"Oh yes I do," Brianna replied. "That's why I'm missing it." She shrugged and quirked an eyebrow at Roger.

"You have to be twenty-one before you can drink legally in Massachusetts," Claire explained to Roger. "Bree has another eight months to go, so she really isn't used to whisky."

"You act as though not liking whisky was a crime," Brianna protested, smiling at Roger above her teacup.

He raised his own brows in response. "My dear woman," he said severely. "This is *Scotland.* Of course not liking whisky is a crime!"

"Oh, aye?" said Brianna sweetly, in a perfect imitation of his own slight Scots burr. "Well, we'll hope it's no a capital offense like murrderrr, shall we?"

Taken by surprise, he swallowed a laugh with his whisky and choked. Coughing and pounding himself on the chest, he glanced at Claire to share the joke. A forced smile hung on her lips, but her face had gone quite pale. Then she blinked, the smile came back more naturally, and the moment passed.

Roger was surprised at how easily conversation flowed among them—both about trivialities, and about Claire's project. Brianna clearly had been interested in her father's work, and knew a great deal more about the Jacobites than did her mother.

"It's amazing they ever made it as far as Culloden," she said. "Did you know the Highlanders won the battle of Prestonpans with barely two thousand men? Against an English army of eight thousand? Incredible!"

"Well, and the Battle of Falkirk was nearly that way as well," Roger chimed in. "Outnumbered, outarmed, marching on foot … they should never have been able to do what they did … but they did!"

"Um-hm," said Claire, taking a deep gulp of her whisky. "They did!"

"I was thinking," Roger said to Brianna, with an assumed air of casualness. "Perhaps you'd like to come with me to some of the places—the battle sites and other places? They're interesting, and I'm sure you'd be a tremendous help with the research."

Brianna laughed and smoothed back her hair, which had a tendency to drop into her tea. "I don't know about the help, but I'd love to come."

"Terrific!" Surprised and elated with her agreement, he fumbled for the decanter and nearly dropped it. Claire fielded it neatly, and filled his glass with precision.

"The least I can do, after spilling it the last time," she said, smiling in answer to his thanks.

Seeing her now, poised and relaxed, Roger was inclined to doubt his earlier suspicions. Maybe it had been an accident after all? That lovely cool face told him nothing.

A half-hour later, the tea table lay in shambles, the decanter stood empty, and the three of them sat in a shared stupor of content. Brianna shifted once or twice, glanced at Roger, and finally asked if she might use his "rest room."

"Oh, the W.C.? Of course." He heaved himself to his feet, ponderous with Dundee cake and almond sponge. If he didn't get away from Fiona soon, he'd weigh three hundred pounds before he got back to Oxford.

"It's one of the old-fashioned kind," he explained, pointing down the hall in the direction of the bathroom. "With a tank on the ceiling and a pull-chain."

"I saw some of those in the British Museum," Brianna said, nodding. "Only they weren't in with the exhibits, they were in the ladies' room." She hesitated, then asked, "You haven't got the same sort of toilet paper they have in the British Museum, do you? Because if you do, I've got some Kleenex in my purse."

Roger closed one eye and looked at her with the other. "Either that's a very odd non sequitur," he said, "or I've drunk a good deal more than I thought." In fact, he and Claire had accounted very satisfactorily for the Muir Breame, though Brianna had confined herself to tea.

Claire laughed, overhearing the exchange, and got up to hand Brianna several folded facial tissues from her own bag. "It won't be waxed paper stamped with 'Property of H.M. Government,' like the Museum's, but it likely won't be much better," she told her daughter. "British toilet paper is commonly rather a stiff article."

"Thanks." Brianna took the tissues and turned to the door, but then turned back. "Why on earth would people deliberately make toilet paper that feels like tinfoil?" she demanded.

"Hearts of oak are our men," Roger intoned, "stainless steel are their bums. It builds the national character."

"In the case of Scots, I expect it's hereditary nerve-deadening," Claire added. "The sort of men who could ride horse-back wearing a kilt have bottoms like saddle leather."

Brianna fizzed with laughter. "I'd hate to see what they used for toilet paper *then*," she said.

"Actually, it wasn't bad," Claire said, surprisingly. "Mullein leaves are really very nice; quite as good as two-ply bathroom tissue. And in the winter or indoors, it was usually a bit of damp rag; not very sanitary, but comfortable enough."

Roger and Brianna both gawked at her for a moment.

"Er … read it in a book," she said, and blushed amazingly.

As Brianna, still giggling, made her way off in search of the facilities, Claire remained standing by the door.

"It was awfully nice of you to entertain us so grandly," she said, smiling at Roger. The momentary discomposure had vanished, replaced by her usual poise. "And remarkably kind of you to have found out about those names for me."

"My pleasure entirely," Roger assured her. "It's made a nice change from cobwebs and mothballs. I'll let you know as soon as

I've found out anything else about your Jacobites."

"Thank you." Claire hesitated, glanced over her shoulder, and lowered her voice. "Actually, since Bree's gone for the moment … there's something I wanted to ask you, in private."

Roger cleared his throat and straightened the tie he had donned in honor of the occasion.

"Ask away," he said, feeling cheerfully expansive with the success of the tea party. "I'm completely at your service."

"You were asking Bree if she'd go with you to do field research. I wanted to ask you … there's a place I'd rather you didn't take her, if you don't mind."

Alarm bells went off at once in Roger's head. Was he going to find out what the secret was about Broch Tuarach?

"The circle of standing stones—they call it Craigh na Dun." Claire's face was earnest as she leaned slightly closer. "There's an important reason, or I wouldn't ask. I want to take Brianna to the circle myself, but I'm afraid I can't tell you why, just now. I will, in time, but not quite yet. Will you promise me?"

Thoughts were chasing themselves through Roger's mind. So it hadn't been Broch Tuarach she wanted to keep the girl away from, after all! One mystery was explained, only to deepen another.

"If you like," he said at last. "Of course."

"Thank you." She touched his arm once, lightly, and turned to go. Seeing her silhouetted against the light, he was suddenly reminded of something. Perhaps it wasn't the moment to ask, but it couldn't do any harm.

"Oh, Dr. Randall—Claire?"

Claire turned back to face him. With the distractions of Brianna removed, he could see that Claire Randall was a very beautiful woman in her own right. Her face was flushed from the whisky, and her eyes were the most unusual light golden-brown color, he thought—like amber in crystal.

"In all the records that I found dealing with these men," Roger said, choosing his words carefully, "there was a mention of a Captain James Fraser, who seems to have been their leader. But he wasn't on your list. I only wondered; did you know about him?"

She stood stock-still for a moment, reminding him of the way she had behaved upon her arrival that afternoon. But after a moment, she shook herself slightly, and answered with apparent equanimity.

"Yes, I knew about him." She spoke calmly, but all the color had left her face, and Roger could see a small pulse beating rapidly at the base of her throat.

"I didn't put him on the list because I already knew what happened to him. Jamie Fraser died at Culloden."

"Are you sure?"

As though anxious to leave, Claire scooped up her handbag, and glanced down the hall toward the bathroom, where the rattling of the ancient knob indicated Brianna's attempts to get out.

"Yes," she said, not looking back. "I'm quite sure. Oh, Mr. Wakefield … Roger, I mean." She swung back now, fixing those oddly colored eyes on him. In this light, they looked almost yellow, he thought; the eyes of a big cat, a leopard's eyes.

"Please," she said, "don't mention Jamie Fraser to my daughter."

It was late, and he should have been abed long since, but Roger found himself unable to sleep. Whether from the aggravations of Fiona, the puzzling contradictions of Claire Randall, or from exaltation over the prospect of doing field research with Brianna Randall, he was wide-awake, and likely to remain so. Rather than toss, turn, or count sheep, he resolved to put his wakefulness to good use. A rummage through the Reverend's papers would probably put him to sleep in no time.

Fiona's light down the hall was still on, but he tiptoed down the stair, not to disturb her. Then, snapping on the study light, he stood for a moment, contemplating the magnitude of the task before him.

The wall exemplified the Reverend Wakefield's mind. Completely covering one side of the study, it was an expanse of corkboard measuring nearly twenty feet by twelve. Virtually none of the original cork was visible under the layers upon layers of papers, notes, photographs, mimeographed sheets, bills, receipts, bird feathers, torn-off corners of envelopes containing interesting postage stamps, address labels, key rings, postcards, rubber bands, and other impedimenta, all tacked up or attached by bits of string.

The trivia lay twelve layers deep in spots, yet the Reverend had always been able to set his hand unerringly on the bit he wanted. Roger thought that the wall must have been organized according to some underlying principle so subtle that not even American NASA scientists could discern it.

Roger viewed the wall dubiously. There was no logical point at which to start. He reached tentatively for a mimeographed list of General Assembly meeting dates sent out by the bishop's office, but was distracted by the sight underneath of a crayoned dragon, complete with artistic puffs of smoke from the flaring nostrils, and green flames shooting from the gaping mouth.

ROGER was written in large, straggling capitals at the bottom of the sheet. He vaguely remembered explaining that the dragon breathed green fire because it ate nothing but spinach. He let the General Assembly list fall back into place, and turned away from the wall. He could tackle that lot later.

The desk, an enormous oak rolltop with at least forty stuffed-to-bursting pigeonholes, seemed like pie by comparison. With a sigh, Roger pulled up the battered office chair and sat down to make sense of all the documents the Reverend thought worth keeping.

One stack of bills yet to be paid. Another of official-looking documents: automobile titles, surveyor's reports, building-inspection certificates. Another for historical notes and records. Another for family keepsakes. Another—by far the largest—for rubbish.

Deep in his task, he didn't hear the door open behind him, or the approaching footsteps. Suddenly a large teapot appeared on the desk next to him.

"Eh?" He straightened up, blinking.

"Thought you might do with some tea, Mr. Wake—I mean, Roger." Fiona set down a small tray containing a cup and saucer and a plate of biscuits.

"Oh, thanks." He was in fact hungry, and gave Fiona a friendly smile that sent the blood rushing into her round, fair cheeks. Seemingly encouraged by this, she didn't go away, but perched on the corner of the desk, watching him raptly as he went about his job between bites of chocolate biscuit.

Feeling obscurely that he ought to acknowledge her presence in some way, Roger held up a half-eaten biscuit and mumbled, “Good.”

“Are they? I made them, ye know.” Fiona’s flush grew deeper. An attractive little girl, Fiona. Small, rounded, with dark curly hair and wide brown eyes. He found himself wondering suddenly whether Brianna Randall could cook, and shook his head to clear the image.

Apparently taking this as a gesture of disbelief, Fiona leaned closer. “No, really,” she insisted. “A recipe of my gran’s, it is. She always said they were a favorite of the Reverend’s.” The wide brown eyes grew a trifle misty. “She left me all her cookbooks and things. Me being the only granddaughter, ye see.”

“I was sorry about your grandmother,” Roger said sincerely. “Quick, was it?”

Fiona nodded mournfully. “Oh, aye. Right as rain all day, then she said after supper as she felt a bit tired, and went up to her bed.” The girl lifted her shoulders and let them fall. “She went to sleep, and never woke up.”

“A good way to go,” Roger said. “I’m glad of it.” Mrs. Graham had been a fixture in the manse since before Roger himself had come, a frightened, newly orphaned five-year-old. Middle-aged even then, and widowed with grown children, still she had provided an abundant supply of firm, no-nonsense maternal affection during school holidays when Roger came home to the manse. She and the Reverend made an odd pair, and yet between them they had made the old house definitely a home.

Moved by his memories, Roger reached out and squeezed Fiona’s hand. She squeezed back, brown eyes suddenly melting. The small rosebud mouth parted slightly, and she leaned toward Roger, her breath warm on his ear.

“Uh, thank you,” Roger blurted. He pulled his hand out of her grasp as though scorched. “Thanks very much. For the … the … er, tea and things. Good. It was good. Very good. Thanks.” He turned and reached hastily for another stack of papers to cover his confusion, snatching a rolled bundle of newspaper clippings from a pigeonhole chosen at random.

He unrolled the yellowed clippings and spread them on the desk, holding them down between his palms. Frowning in apparent deep concentration, he bent his head lower over the smudged text. After a moment Fiona rose with a deep sigh, and her footsteps receded toward the door. Roger didn't look up.

Letting out a deep sigh of his own, he closed his eyes briefly and offered a quick prayer of thanks for the narrow escape. Yes, Fiona was attractive. Yes, she was undoubtedly a fine cook. She was also nosy, interfering, irritating, and firmly bent on marriage. Lay one hand on that rosy flesh again, and they'd be calling the banns by next month. But if there was any bann-calling to be done, the name linked with Roger Wakefield in the parish register was going to be Brianna Randall's, if Roger had anything to say about it.

Wondering just how much he *would* have to say about it, Roger opened his eyes and then blinked. For there in front of him was the name he had been envisioning on a wedding license—Randall.

Not, of course, Brianna Randall. Claire Randall. The headline read RETURNED FROM THE DEAD. Beneath was a picture of Claire Randall, twenty years younger, but looking little different than she did now, bar the expression on her face. She had been photographed sitting bolt upright in a hospital bed, hair tousled and flying like banners, delicate mouth set like a steel trap, and those extraordinary eyes glaring straight into the camera.

With a sense of shock, Roger thumbed rapidly through the bundle of clippings, then returned to read them more carefully. Though the papers had made as much sensation as possible of the story, the facts were sparse.

Claire Randall, wife of the noted historian Dr. Franklin W. Randall, had disappeared during a Scottish holiday in Inverness, late in the spring of 1946. A car she had been driving had been found, but the woman herself was gone without trace. All searches having proved futile, the police and bereaved husband had at length concluded that Claire Randall must have been murdered, perhaps by a roving tramp, and her body concealed somewhere in the rocky crags of the area.

And in 1948, nearly three years later, Claire Randall had returned. She had been found, disheveled and dressed in rags, wandering near the spot at which she had disappeared. While appearing to be in good physical health, though slightly malnourished, Mrs. Randall was disoriented and incoherent.

Raising his eyebrows slightly at the thought of Claire Randall ever being incoherent, Roger thumbed through the rest of the clippings. They contained little more than the information that Mrs. Randall was being treated for exposure and shock at a local hospital. There were photographs of the presumably overjoyed husband, Frank Randall. He looked stunned rather than overjoyed, Roger thought critically, not that one could blame him.

He examined the pictures curiously. Frank Randall had been a slender, handsome, aristocratic-looking man. Dark, with a rakish grace that showed in the angle of his body as he stood poised in the door of the hospital, surprised by the photographer on his way to visit his newly restored wife.

He traced the line of the long, narrow jaw, and the curve of the head, and realized that he was searching for traces of Brianna in her father. Intrigued by the thought, he rose and fetched one of Frank Randall's books from the shelves. Turning to the back jacket, he found a better picture. The jacket photograph showed Frank Randall in color, in full-face view. No, the hair was definitely dark brown, not red. That blazing glory must have come from a grandparent, along with the deep blue eyes, slanted as a cat's. Beautiful they were, but nothing like her mother's. And not like her father's either. Try as he might, he could see nothing of the flaming goddess in the face of the famous historian.

With a sigh, he closed the book and gathered up the clippings. He really must stop this mooning about and get on with the job, or he'd be sitting here for the next twelvemonth.

He was about to put the clippings into the keepsake pile, when one, headlined KIDNAPPED BY THE FAIRIES?, caught his eye. Or rather, not the clipping, but the date that appeared just above the headline. May 6, 1948.

He set the clipping down gently, as though it were a bomb that might go off in his hand. He closed his eyes and tried to summon up that first conversation with the Randalls. “You have to be twenty-one to drink in Massachusetts,” Claire had said. “Brianna still has eight months to go.” Twenty, then. Brianna Randall was twenty.

Unable to count backward fast enough, he rose and scrabbled through the perpetual calendar that the vicar had kept, in a clear space to itself on his cluttered wall. He found the date and stood with his finger pressed to the paper, blood draining from his face.

Claire Randall had returned from her mysterious disappearance disheveled, malnourished, incoherent—and pregnant.

In the fullness of time, Roger slept at last, but in consequence of his wakefulness, woke late and heavy-eyed, with an incipient headache, which neither a cold shower nor Fiona’s chirpiness over breakfast did much to dispel.

The feeling was so oppressive that he abandoned his work and left the house for a walk. Striding through a light rain, he found the fresh air improved his headache, but unfortunately cleared his mind enough to start thinking again about the implications of last night’s discovery.

Brianna didn’t know. That was clear enough, from the way she spoke about her late father—or about the man she *thought* was her father, Frank Randall. And presumably Claire didn’t mean her to know, or she would have told the girl herself. Unless this Scottish trip were meant to be a prelude to such a confession? The real father must have been a Scot; after all, Claire had disappeared—and reappeared—in Scotland. Was he still here?

That was a staggering thought. Had Claire brought her daughter to Scotland in order to introduce her to her real father? Roger shook his head doubtfully. Bloody risky, a thing like that. Bound to be confusing to Brianna, and painful as hell to Claire herself. Scare the shoes and socks off the father, too. And the girl plainly was devoted to Frank Randall. What was she going to feel like, realizing that the man she'd loved and idolized all her life in fact had no blood ties to her at all?

Roger felt bad for all concerned, including himself. He hadn't asked to have any part of this, and wished himself in the same state of blissful ignorance as yesterday. He liked Claire Randall, liked her very much, and he found the thought of her committing adultery distasteful. At the same time, he jeered at himself for his old-fashioned sentimentality. Who knew what her life with Frank Randall had been like? Perhaps she'd had good reason for going off with another man. But then why had she come back?

Sweating and moody, Roger wandered back to the house. He shed his jacket in the hallway and went up to have a bath. Sometimes bathing helped to soothe him, and he felt much in need of soothing.

He ran a hand along the row of hangers in his closet, groping for the fuzzy shoulder of his worn white toweling robe. Then, pausing for a moment, he reached instead far to the back of the closet, sweeping the hangers along the rod until he could grasp the one he wanted.

He viewed the shabby old dressing gown with affection. The yellow silk of the background had faded to ochre, but the multicolored peacocks were bold as ever, spreading their tails with lordly insouciance, regarding the viewer with eyes like black beads. He brought the soft fabric to his nose and inhaled deeply, closing his eyes. The faint whiff of Borkum Riff and spilled whisky brought back the Reverend Wakefield as not even his father's wall of trivia could do.

Many were the times he had smelled just that comforting aroma, with its upper note of Old Spice cologne, his face pressed against the smooth slickness of this silk, the Reverend's chubby arms wrapped protectively around him, promising him refuge. He had given the old man's other clothes to Oxfam, but somehow he couldn't bear to part with this.

On impulse, he slipped the robe over his bare shoulders, mildly surprised at the light warmth of it, like the caress of fingers across his skin. He shifted his shoulders pleasurably under the silk, then wrapped it closely about his body, tying the belt in a careless knot.

Keeping a wary eye out in case of raids by Fiona, he made his way along the upper hall to the bathroom. The hot-water geyser stood against the head of the bath like the guardian of a sacred spring, squat and eternal. Another of his youthful memories was the weekly terror of trying to light the geyser with a flint striker in order to heat the water for his bath, the gas escaping past his head with a menacing hiss as his hands, sweaty with the fear of explosion and imminent death, slipped ineffectively on the metal of the striker.

Long since rendered automatic by an operation on its mysterious innards, the geyser now gurgled quietly to itself, the gas ring at its base rumbling and whooshing with unseen flame beneath the metal shield. Roger twisted the cracked "Hot" tap as far as it would go, added a half-turn of the "Cold," then stood to study himself in the mirror while waiting for his bath to fill.

Nothing much wrong with him, he reflected, sucking in his stomach and pulling himself upright before the full-length reflection on the back of the door. Firm. Trim. Long-legged, but not spindle-shanked. Possibly a bit scrawny through the shoulders? He frowned critically, twisting his lean body back and forth.

He ran a hand through his thick black hair, until it stood on end like a shaving brush, trying to envision himself with a beard and long hair, like some of his students. Would he look dashing, or merely moth-eaten? Possibly an earring, while he was about it. He might look piratical then, like Edward Teach or Henry Morgan. He drew his brows together and bared his teeth.

"Grrrrr," he said to his reflection.

"Mr. Wakefield?" said the reflection.

Roger leaped back, startled, and stubbed his toe painfully against the protruding claw-foot of the ancient bath.

"Ow!"

"Are you all right, Mr. Wakefield?" the mirror said. The porcelain doorknob rattled.

"Of course I am!" he snapped testily, glaring at the door. "Go away, Fiona, I'm bathing!"

There was a giggle from the other side of the door.

"Ooh, twice in one day. *Aren't* we the dandy, though? Do you want some of the bay-rum soap? It's in the cupboard there, if you do."

"No, I don't," he snarled. The water level had risen midway in the tub, and he cut off the taps. The sudden silence was soothing, and he drew a deep breath of steam into his lungs. Wincing slightly at the heat, he stepped into the water and lowered himself gingerly, feeling a light sweat break out on his face as the heat rushed up his body.

"Mr. Wakefield?" The voice was back, chirping on the other side of the door like a hectoring robin.

"Go *away*, Fiona," he gritted, easing himself back in the tub. The steaming water rose around him, comforting as a lover's arms. "I have everything I want."

"No, you haven't," said the voice.

"Yes, I have." His eye swept the impressive lineup of bottles, jars, and implements arrayed on the shelf above the tub. "Shampoo, three kinds. Hair conditioner. Shaving cream. Razor. Body soap. Facial soap. After-shave. Cologne. Deodorant stick. I don't lack a thing, Fiona."

"What about towels?" said the voice, sweetly.

After a wild glance about the completely towel-less confines of the bathroom, Roger closed his eyes, clenched his teeth and counted slowly to ten. This proving insufficient, he made it twenty. Then, feeling himself able to answer without foaming at the mouth, he said calmly.

"All right, Fiona. Set them outside the door, please. And then, please … please, Fiona.… *go*."

A rustle outside was succeeded by the sound of reluctantly receding footsteps, and Roger, with a sigh of relief, gave himself up to the joys of privacy. Peace. Quiet. No Fiona.

Now, able to think more objectively about his upsetting discovery, he found himself more than curious about Brianna's mysterious real father. Judging from the daughter, the man must have had a rare degree of physical attractiveness; would that alone have been sufficient to lure a woman like Claire Randall?

He had wondered already whether Brianna's father might have been a Scot. Did he live—or *had* he lived—in Inverness? He supposed such proximity might account for Claire's nervousness, and the air she had of keeping secrets. But did it account for the puzzling requests she had made of him? She didn't want him to take Brianna to Craigh na Dun, nor to mention the captain of the Broch Tuarach men to her daughter. Why on earth not?

A sudden thought made him sit upright in the tub, water sloshing heedlessly against the cast-iron sides. What if it were not the eighteenth-century Jacobite soldier she was concerned about, but *only his name?* What if the man who had fathered her daughter in 1947 was also named James Fraser? It was a common enough name in the Highlands.

Yes, he thought, that might very well explain it. As for Claire's desire to show her daughter the stone circle herself, perhaps that was also connected with the mystery of her father; maybe that's where she'd met the man, or perhaps that's where Brianna had been conceived. Roger was well aware that the stone circle was commonly used as a trysting spot; he'd taken girls there himself in high school, relying on the circle's air of pagan mystery to loosen their reserve. It always worked.

He had a sudden startling vision of Claire Randall's fine white limbs, locked in wild abandon with the naked, straining body of a red-haired man, the two bodies slick with rain and stained with crushed grass, twisting in ecstasy among the standing stones. The vision was so shocking in its specificity that it left him trembling, sweat running down his chest to vanish into the steaming water of the bath.

Christ! How was he going to meet Claire Randall's eyes, next time they met? What was he going to say to Brianna, for that matter? "Read any good books lately?" "Seen any good flicks?" "D'you know you're illegitimate?"

He shook his head, trying to clear it. The truth was that he didn't know what to do next. It was a messy situation. He wanted no part in it, and yet he did. He liked Claire Randall; he liked Brianna Randall, too—much more than liked her, truth be told. He wanted to protect her, and save her whatever pain he could. And yet there seemed no way to do that. All he could do was keep his mouth shut until Claire Randall did whatever it was she planned to do. And then be there to pick up the pieces.

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3

MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS

I wondered just how many tiny tea shops there were in Inverness. The High Street is lined on both sides with small cafes and tourist shops, as far as the eye can see. Once Queen Victoria had made the Highlands safe for travelers by giving her Royal approval of the place, tourists had flocked north in ever-increasing numbers. The Scots, unaccustomed to receiving anything from the South but armed invasions and political interference, had risen to the challenge magnificently.

You couldn’t walk more than a few feet on the main street of any Highland town without encountering a shop selling shortbread, Edinburgh rock, handkerchiefs embroidered with thistles, toy bagpipes, clan badges of cast aluminum, letter-openers shaped like claymores, coin purses shaped like sporrans (some with an anatomically correct “Scotchman” attached underneath), and an eye-jangling assortment of spurious clan tartans, adorning every conceivable object made of fabric, from caps, neckties, and serviettes down to a particularly horrid yellow “Buchanan” sett used to make men’s nylon Y-front underpants.

Looking over an assortment of tea towels stenciled with a wildly inaccurate depiction of the Loch Ness monster singing “Auld Lang Syne,” I thought Victoria had a lot to answer for.

Brianna was wandering slowly down the narrow aisle of the shop, head tilted back as she stared in amazement at the assortment of merchandise hanging from the rafters.

"Do you think those are *real*?" she said, pointing upward at a set of mounted stag's antlers, poking their tines inquisitively through an absolute forest of bagpipe drones.

"The antlers? Oh, yes. I don't imagine plastics technology's got quite *that* good, yet," I replied. "Besides, look at the price. Anything over one hundred pounds is very likely real."

Brianna's eyes widened, and she lowered her head.

"Jeez. I think I'll get Jane a skirt-length of tartan instead."

"Good-quality wool tartan won't cost a lot less," I said dryly, "but it will be a lot easier to get home on the plane. Let's go across to the Kiltmaker store, then; they'll have the best quality."

It had begun to rain—of course—and we tucked our paper-wrapped parcels underneath the raincoats I had prudently insisted we wear. Brianna snorted with sudden amusement.

"You get so used to calling these things 'macs,' you forget what they're really called. I'm not surprised it was a Scot that invented them," she added, looking up at the water sheeting down from the edge of the canopy overhead. "Does it rain *all* the time here?"

"Pretty much," I said, peering up and down through the downpour for oncoming traffic. "Though I've always supposed Mr. Macintosh was rather a lily-livered sort; most Scots I've known were relatively impervious to rain." I bit my lip suddenly, but Brianna hadn't noticed the slip, minor as it was; she was eyeing the ankle-deep freshet running down the gutter.

"Tell you what, Mama, maybe we'd better go up to the crossing. We aren't going to make it jaywalking here."

Nodding assent, I followed her up the street, heart pounding with adrenaline under the clammy cover of my mac. *When are you going to get it over with?* my mind demanded. *You can't keep watching your words and swallowing half the things you start to say. Why not just tell her?*

Not yet, I thought to myself. I'm not a coward—or if I am, it doesn't matter. But it isn't quite time yet. I wanted her to see Scotland first. Not this lot—as we passed a shop offering a display of tartan baby booties—but the countryside. And Culloden. Most of all, I want to be able to tell her the end of the story. And for that, I need Roger Wakefield.

As though my thought had summoned it into being, the bright orange top of a battered Morris caught my eye in the parking lot to the left, glowing like a traffic beacon in the foggy wet.

Brianna had seen it too—there couldn't be many cars in Inverness of that specific color and disreputability—and pointed at it, saying, "Look, Mama, isn't that Roger Wakefield's car?"

"Yes, I think so," I said. There was a cafe on the right, from which the scent of fresh scones, stale toast, and coffee drifted to mingle with the fresh, rainy air. I grabbed Brianna's arm and pulled her into the cafe.

"I think I'm hungry after all," I explained. "Let's have some cocoa and biscuits."

Still child enough to be tempted by chocolate, and young enough to be willing to eat at any time, Bree offered no argument, but sat down at once and picked up the tea-stained sheet of green paper that served as the daily menu.

I didn't particularly want cocoa, but I did want a moment or two to think. There was a large sign on the concrete wall of the parking lot across the street, reading PARKING FOR SCOTRAIL ONLY, followed by various lowercase threats as to what would happen to the vehicles of people who parked there without being train riders. Unless Roger knew something about the forces of law and order in Inverness that I didn't know, chances were that he had taken a train. Granted that he could have gone anywhere, either Edinburgh or London seemed most likely. He was taking this research project seriously, dear lad.

We had come up on the train from Edinburgh ourselves. I tried to remember what the schedule was like, with no particular success.

"I wonder if Roger will be back on the evening train?" Bree said, echoing my thoughts with an uncanniness that made me choke on my cocoa. The fact that she wondered about Roger's reappearance made *me* wonder just how much notice she had taken of young Mr. Wakefield.

A fair amount, apparently.

"I was thinking," she said casually, "maybe we should get something for Roger Wakefield while we're out—like a thank-you for that project he's doing for you?"

"Good idea," I said, amused. "What do you think he'd like?"

She frowned into her cocoa as though looking for inspiration. "I don't know. Something nice; it looks like that project could be a lot of work." She glanced up at me suddenly, brows raised.

"Why did you ask him?" she said. "If you wanted to trace people from the eighteenth century, there're companies that do that. Genealogies and like that, I mean. Daddy always used Scot-Search, if he had to figure out a genealogy and didn't have time to do it himself."

"Yes, I know," I said, and took a deep breath. We were on shaky ground here. "This project—it was something special to … to your father. He would have wanted Roger Wakefield to do it."

"Oh." She was silent for a while, watching the rain spatter and pearl on the cafe window.

"Do you miss Daddy?" she asked suddenly, nose buried in her cup, lashes lowered to avoid looking at me.

"Yes," I said. I ran a forefinger up the edge of my own untouched cup, wiping off a drip of spilled cocoa. "We didn't always get on, you know that, but … yes. We respected each other; that counts for a lot. And we liked each other, in spite of everything. Yes, I do miss him."

She nodded, wordless, and put her hand over mine with a little squeeze. I curled my fingers around hers, long and warm, and we sat linked for a little while, sipping cocoa in silence.

"You know," I said at last, pushing back my chair with a squeak of metal on linoleum, "I'd forgotten something. I need to post a letter to the hospital. I'd meant to do it on the way into town, but I forgot. If I hurry, I think I can just catch the outgoing post. Why don't you go to the Kiltmaker's—it's just down the street, on the other side—and I'll join you there after I've been to the post office?"

Bree looked surprised, but nodded readily enough.

"Oh. Okay. Isn't the post office a long way, though? You'll get soaked."

"That's all right. I'll take a cab." I left a pound note on the table to pay for the meal, and shrugged back into my raincoat.

In most cities, the usual response of taxicabs to rain is to disappear, as though they were soluble. In Inverness, though, such behavior would render the species rapidly extinct. I'd walked less than a block before finding two squatty black cabs lurking outside a hotel, and I slid into the warm, tobacco-scented interior with a cozy feeling of familiarity. Besides the greater leg room and comfort, British cabs smelled different than American ones; one of those tiny things I had never realized I'd missed during the last twenty years.

"Number sixty-four? Tha's the auld manse, aye?" In spite of the efficiency of the cab's heater, the driver was muffled to the ears in a scarf and thick jacket, with a flat cap guarding the top of his head from errant drafts. Modern Scots had gone a bit soft, I reflected; a long way from the days when sturdy Highlanders had slept in the heather in nothing but shirt and plaid. On the other hand, I wasn't all that eager to go sleep in the heather in a wet plaid, either. I nodded to the driver, and we set off in a splash.

I felt a bit subversive, sneaking round to interview Roger's housekeeper while he was out, and fooling Bree into the bargain. On the other hand, it would be difficult to explain to either of them just what I was doing. I hadn't yet determined exactly how or when I would tell them what I had to say, but I knew it wasn't time yet.

My fingers probed the inner pocket of my mac, reassured by the scrunch of the envelope from Scot-Search. While I hadn't paid a great deal of attention to Frank's work, I did know about the firm, which maintained a staff of half a dozen professional researchers specializing in Scottish genealogy; not the sort of place that gave you a family tree showing your relationship to Robert the Bruce and had done with it.

They'd done their usual thorough, discreet job on Roger Wakefield. I knew who his parents and grandparents had been, back some seven or eight generations. What I didn't know was what he might be made of. Time would tell me that.

I paid off the cab and splashed up the flooded path to the steps of the old minister's house. It was dry on the porch, and I had a chance to shake off the worst of the wet before the door was opened to my ring.

Fiona beamed in welcome; she had the sort of round, cheerful face whose natural expression was a smile. She was attired in jeans and a frilly apron, and the scent of lemon polish and fresh baking wafted from its folds like incense.

"Why, Mrs. Randall!" she exclaimed. "Can I be helpin' ye at all, then?"

"I think perhaps you might, Fiona," I said. "I wanted to talk to you about your grandmother."

"Are you sure you're all right, Mama? I could call Roger and ask him to go tomorrow, if you'd like me to stay with you." Brianna hovered in the doorway of the guesthouse bedroom, an anxious frown creasing her brow. She was dressed for walking, in boots, jeans, and sweater, but she'd added the brilliant orange and blue silk scarf Frank had brought her from Paris, just before his death two years before.

"Just the color of your eyes, little beauty," he'd said, smiling as he draped the scarf around her shoulders, "—orange." It was a joke between them now, the "little beauty," as Bree had topped Frank's modest five feet ten since she was fifteen. It was what he'd called her since babyhood, though, and the tenderness of the old name lingered as he reached up to touch the tip of her nose.

The scarf—the blue part—was in fact the color of her eyes; of Scottish lochs and summer skies, and the misty blue of distant mountains. I knew she treasured it, and revised my assessment of her interest in Roger Wakefield upward by several notches.

"No, I'll be fine," I assured her. I gestured toward the bedside table, adorned with a small teapot, carefully keeping warm under a knitted cozy, and a silver-plated toast rack, just as carefully keeping the toast nice and cold. "Mrs. Thomas brought me tea and toast; perhaps I'll be able to nibble a little later on." I hoped she couldn't hear the rumbling of my empty stomach under the bedclothes, registering appalled disbelief at this prospect.

"Well, all right." She turned reluctantly to the door. "We'll come right back after Culloden, though."

"Don't hurry on my account," I called after her.

I waited until I heard the sound of the door closing below, and was sure she was on her way. Only then did I reach into the drawer of the bedtable for the large Hershey bar with almonds that I had hidden there the night before.

Cordial relations with my stomach reestablished, I lay back against the pillow, idly watching the gray haze thicken in the sky outside. The tip of a budding lime branch flicked intermittently against the window; the wind was rising. It was warm enough in the bedroom, with the central-heating vent roaring away at the foot of the bed, but I shivered nonetheless. It would be cold on Culloden Field.

Not, perhaps, as cold as it had been in the April of 1746, when Bonnie Prince Charlie led his men onto that field, to stand in the face of freezing sleet and the roar of English cannon fire. Accounts of the day reported that it was bitterly cold, and the Highland wounded had lain heaped with the dead, soaked in blood and rain, awaiting the mercies of their English victors. The Duke of Cumberland, in command of the English army, had given no quarter to the fallen.

The dead were heaped up like cordwood and burned to prevent the spread of disease, and history said that many of the wounded had gone to a similar fate, without the grace of a final bullet. All of them lay now beyond the reach of war or weather, under the greensward of Culloden Field.

I had seen the place once, nearly thirty years before, when Frank had taken me there on our honeymoon. Now Frank was dead, too, and I had brought my daughter back to Scotland. I wanted Brianna to see Culloden, but no power on earth would make me set foot again on that deadly moor.

I supposed I had better stay in bed, to maintain credence in the sudden indisposition that had prevented me accompanying Brianna and Roger on their expedition; Mrs. Thomas might blab if I got up and put in an order for lunch. I peeked into the drawer; three more candy bars and a mystery novel. With luck, those would get me through the day.

The novel was good enough, but the rush of the rising wind outside was hypnotic, and the embrace of the warm bed welcoming. I dropped peacefully into sleep, to dream of kilted Highland men, and the sound of soft-spoken Scots, burring round a fire like the sound of bees in the heather.

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4

CULLODEN

“What a mean little piggy face!” Brianna stooped to peer fascinated at the red-coated mannequin that stood menacingly to one side of the foyer in the Culloden Visitors Centre. He stood a few inches over five feet, powdered wig thrust belligerently forward over a low brow and pendulous, pink-tinged cheeks.

“Well, he was a fat little fellow,” Roger agreed, amused. “Hell of a general, though, at least as compared to his elegant cousin over there.” He waved a hand at the taller figure of Charles Edward Stuart on the other side of the foyer, gazing nobly off into the distance under his blue velvet bonnet with its white cockade, loftily ignoring the Duke of Cumberland.

“They called him ‘Butcher Billy.’ ” Roger gestured at the Duke, stolid in white knee breeches and gold-braided coat. “For excellent reason. Aside from what they did here”—he waved toward the expanse of the spring-green moor outside, dulled by the lowering sky—“Cumberland’s men were responsible for the worst reign of English terror ever seen in the Highlands. They chased the survivors of the battle back into the hills, burning and looting as they went. Women and children were turned out to starve, and the men shot down where they stood—with no effort to find out whether they’d ever fought for Charlie. One of the Duke’s contemporaries said of him, ‘He created a desert and called it peace’—and I’m afraid the Duke of Cumberland is still rather noticeably unpopular hereabouts.”

This was true; the curator of the visitors' museum, a friend of Roger's, had told him that while the figure of the Bonnie Prince was treated with reverent respect, the buttons off the Duke's jacket were subject to constant disappearance, while the figure itself had been the butt of more than one rude joke.

"He said one morning he came in early and turned on the light, to find a genuine Highland dirk sticking in His Grace's belly," Roger said, nodding at the podgy little figure. "Said it gave him a right turn."

"I'd think so," Brianna murmured, looking at the Duke with raised brows. "People still take it that seriously?"

"Oh, aye. Scots have long memories, and they're not the most forgiving of people."

"Really?" She looked at him curiously. "Are you Scottish, Roger? Wakefield doesn't sound like a Scottish name, but there's something about the way you talk about the Duke of Cumberland …" There was the hint of a smile around her mouth, and he wasn't sure whether he was being teased, but he answered her seriously enough.

"Oh, aye." He smiled as he said it. "I'm Scots. Wakefield's not my own name, see; the Reverend gave it me when he adopted me. He was my mother's uncle—when my parents were killed in the War, he took me to live with him. But my own name is MacKenzie. As for the Duke of Cumberland"—he nodded at the plate-glass window, through which the monuments of Culloden Field were plainly visible. "There's a clan stone out there, with the name of MacKenzie carved on it, and a good many of my relatives under it."

He reached out and flicked a gold epaulet, leaving it swinging. "I don't feel quite so personal about it as some, but I haven't forgotten, either." He held out a hand to her. "Shall we go outside?"

It was cold outside, with a gusty wind that lashed two pennons, flying atop the poles set at either side of the moor. One yellow, one red, they marked the positions where the two commanders had stood behind their troops, awaiting the outcome of the battle.

"Well back out of the way, I see," Brianna observed dryly. "No chance of getting in the way of a stray bullet."

Roger noticed her shivering, and drew her hand further through his arm, bringing her close. He thought he might burst from the sudden swell of happiness touching her gave him, but tried to disguise it with a retreat into historical monologue. "Well, that was how generals led, back then—from the rear. Especially Charlie; he ran off so fast at the end of the battle that he left behind his sterling silver picnic set."

"A *picnic* set? He brought a picnic to the battle?"

"Oh, aye." Roger found that he quite liked being Scottish for Brianna. He usually took pains to keep his accent modulated under the all-purpose Oxbridge speech that served him at the university, but now he was letting it have free rein for the sake of the smile that crossed her face when she heard it.

"D'ye know why they called him 'Prince Charlie'?" Roger asked. "English people always think it was a nickname, showing how much his men loved him."

"It wasn't?"

Roger shook his head. "No, indeed. His men called him Prince *Tcharlach"*—he spelled it carefully—"which is the Gaelic for Charles. *Tcharlach mac Seamus,* 'Charles, son of James.' Very formal and respectful indeed. It's only that *Tcharlach* in Gaelic sounds the hell of a lot like 'Charlie' in English."

Brianna grinned. "So he never was 'Bonnie Prince Charlie'?"

"Not then." Roger shrugged. "Now he is, of course. One of those little historical mistakes that get passed on for fact. There are a lot of them."

"And you a historian!" Brianna said, teasing.

Roger smiled wryly. "That's how I know."

They wandered slowly down the graveled paths that led through the battlefield, Roger pointing out the positions of the different regiments that had fought there, explaining the order of battle, recounting small anecdotes of the commanders.

As they walked, the wind died down, and the silence of the field began to assert itself. Gradually their conversation died away as well, until they were talking only now and then, in low voices, almost whispers. The sky was gray with cloud from horizon to horizon, and everything beneath its bowl seemed muted, with only the whisper of the moor plants speaking in the voices of the men who fed them.

"This is the place they call the Well of Death." Roger stooped by the small spring. Barely a foot square, it was a tiny pool of dark water, welling under a ridge of stone. "One of the Highland chieftains died here; his followers washed the blood from his face with the water from this spring. And over there are the graves of the clans."

The clan stones were large boulders of gray granite, rounded by weather and blotched with lichens. They sat on patches of smooth grass, widely scattered near the edge of the moor. Each one bore a single name, the carving so faded by weather as to be nearly illegible in some cases. MacGillivray. MacDonald. Fraser. Grant. Chisholm. MacKenzie.

"Look," Brianna said, almost in a whisper. She pointed at one of the stones. A small heap of greenish-gray twigs lay there; a few early spring flowers mingled, wilted, with the twigs.

"Heather," Roger said. "It's more common in the summer, when the heather is blooming—then you'll see heaps like that in front of every clan stone. Purple, and here and there a branch of the white heather—the white is for luck, and for kingship; it was Charlie's emblem, that and the white rose."

"Who leaves them?" Brianna squatted on her heels next to the path, touching the twigs with a gentle finger.

"Visitors." Roger squatted next to her. He traced the faded letters on the stone—FRASER. "People descended from the families of the men who were killed here. Or just those who like to remember them."

She looked sidelong at him, hair drifting around her face. "Have you ever done it?"

He looked down, smiling at his hands as they hung between his knees.

"Yes. I suppose it's very sentimental, but I do."

Brianna turned to the thicket of moor plants that edged the path on the other side.

“Show me which is heather,” she said.

On the way home, the melancholy of Culloden lifted, but the feeling of shared sentiment lingered, and they talked and laughed together like old friends.

“It’s too bad Mother couldn’t come with us,” Brianna remarked as they turned into the road where the Randalls’ bed-and-breakfast was.

Much as he liked Claire Randall, Roger didn’t agree at all that it was too bad she hadn’t come. Three, he thought, would have been a crowd, and no mistake. But he grunted noncommitally, and a moment later asked, “How *is* your mother? I hope she’s not terribly ill.”

“Oh, no, it’s just an upset stomach—at least that’s what she says.” Brianna frowned to herself for a moment, then turned to Roger, laying a hand lightly on his leg. He felt the muscles quiver from knee to groin, and had a hard time keeping his mind on what she was saying. She was still talking about her mother.

“… think she’s all right?” she finished. She shook her head, and copper glinted from the waves of her hair, even in the dull light of the car. “I don’t know; she seems awfully preoccupied. Not ill, exactly—more as though she’s kind of worried about something.”

Roger felt a sudden heaviness in the pit of his stomach.

“Mphm,” he said. “Maybe just being away from her work. I’m sure it will be all right.” Brianna smiled gratefully at him as they pulled up in front of Mrs. Thomas’s small stone house.

“It was great, Roger,” she said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. “But there wasn’t much here to help with Mama’s project. Can’t I help you with some of the grubby stuff?”

Roger’s spirits lightened considerably, and he smiled up at her. “I think that might be arranged. Want to come tomorrow and have a go at the garage with me? If it’s filth you want, you can’t get much grubbier than that.”

“Great.” She smiled, leaning on the car to look back in at him. “Maybe Mother will want to come along and help.”

He could feel his face stiffen, but kept gallantly smiling.

“Right,” he said. “Great. I hope so.”

In the event, it was Brianna alone who came to the manse the next day.

"Mama's at the public library," she explained. "Looking up old phone directories. She's trying to find someone she used to know."

Roger's heart skipped a beat at that. He had checked the Reverend's phonebook the night before. There were three local listings under the name "James Fraser," and two more with different first names, but the middle initial "J."

"Well, I hope she finds him," he said, still trying for casualness. "You're really sure you want to help? It's boring, filthy work." Roger looked at Brianna dubiously, but she nodded, not at all discomposed at the prospect.

"I know. I used to help my father sometimes, dredging through old records and finding footnotes. Besides, it's Mama's project; the least I can do is help you with it."

"All right." Roger glanced down at his white shirt. "Let me change, and we'll go have a look."

The garage door creaked, groaned, then surrendered to the inevitable and surged suddenly upward, amid the twanging of springs and clouds of dust.

Brianna waved her hands back and forth in front of her face, coughing. "Gack!" she said. "How long since anyone's been in this place?"

"Eons, I expect." Roger replied absently. He shone his torch around the inside of the garage, briefly lighting stacks of cardboard cartons and wooden crates, old steamer trunks smeared with peeling labels, and amorphous tarpaulin-draped shapes. Here and there, the upturned legs of furniture poked through the gloom like the skeletons of small dinosaurs, protruding from their native rock formations.

There was a sort of fissure in the junk; Roger edged into this and promptly disappeared into a tunnel bounded by dust and shadows, his progress marked by the pale spot of his torch as it shone intermittently on the ceiling. At last, with a cry of triumph, he seized the dangling tail of a string hanging from above, and the garage was suddenly illuminated in the glare of an oversized bulb.

“This way,” Roger said, reappearing abruptly and taking Brianna by the hand. “There’s sort of a clear space in back.”

An ancient table stood against the back wall. Perhaps originally the centerpiece of the Reverend Wakefield’s dining room, it had evidently gone through several successive incarnations as kitchen block, toolbench, sawhorse, and painting table, before coming to rest in this dusty sanctuary. A heavily cobwebbed window overlooked it, through which a dim light shone on the nicked, paint-splattered surface.

“We can work here,” Roger said, yanking a stool out of the mess and dusting it perfunctorily with a large handkerchief. “Have a seat, and I’ll see if I can pry the window open; otherwise, we’ll suffocate.”

Brianna nodded, but instead of sitting down, began to poke curiously through the nearer piles of junk, as Roger heaved at the warped window frame. He could hear her behind him, reading the labels on some of the boxes. “Here’s 1930–33,” she said, “And here’s 1942–46. What are these?”

“Journals,” said Roger, grunting as he braced his elbows on the grimy sill. “My father—the Reverend, I mean—he always kept a journal. Wrote it up every night after supper.”

“Looks like he found plenty to write about.” Brianna hoisted down several of the boxes, and stacked them to the side, in order to inspect the next layer. “Here’s a bunch of boxes with names on them—‘Kerse,’ ‘Livingston,’ ‘Balnain.’ Parishioners?”

“No. Villages.” Roger paused in his labors for a moment, panting. He wiped his brow, leaving a streak of dirt down the sleeve of his shirt. Luckily both of them were dressed in old clothes, suitable for rootling in filth. “Those will be notes on the history of various Highland villages. Some of those boxes ended up as books, in fact; you’ll see them in some of the local tourist shops through the Highlands.”

He turned to a pegboard from which hung a selection of dilapidated tools, and selected a large screwdriver to aid his assault on the window.

"Look for the ones that say 'Parish Registers,' he advised. "Or for village names in the area of Broch Tuarach."

"I don't know any of the villages in the area," Brianna pointed out.

"Oh, aye, I was forgetting." Roger inserted the point of the screwdriver between the edges of the window frame, grimly chiseling through layers of ancient paint. "Look for the names Broch Mordha … um, Mariannan, and … oh, St. Kilda. There's others, but those are ones I know had fair-sized churches that have been closed or knocked down."

"Okay." Pushing aside a hanging flap of tarpaulin, Brianna suddenly leaped backward with a sharp cry.

"What? What is it?" Roger whirled from the window, screwdriver at the ready.

"I don't know. Something skittered away when I touched that tarp." Brianna pointed, and Roger lowered his weapon, relieved.

"Oh, that all? Mouse, most like. Maybe a rat."

"A *rat!* You have *rats* in here?" Brianna's agitation was noticeable.

"Well, I hope not, because if so, they'll have been chewing up the records we're looking for," Roger replied. He handed her the torch. "Here, shine this in any dark places; at least you won't be taken by surprise."

"Thanks a lot." Brianna accepted the torch, but still eyed the stacks of cartons with some reluctance.

"Well, go on then," Roger said. "Or did you want me to do you a rat satire on the spot?"

Brianna's face split in a wide grin. "A rat satire? What's that?"

Roger delayed his answer, long enough for another try at the window. He pushed until he could feel his biceps straining against the fabric of his shirt, but at last, with a rending screech, the window gave way, and a reviving draft of cool air whooshed in through the six-inch gap he'd created.

"God, that's better." He fanned himself exaggeratedly, grinning at Brianna. "Now, shall we get on with it?"

She handed him the torch, and stepped back. "How about *you* find the boxes, and *I'll* sort through them? And what's a rat satire?"

"Coward," he said, bending to rummage beneath the tarpaulin. "A rat satire is an old Scottish custom; if you had rats or mice in your house or your barn, you could make them go away by composing a poem—or you could sing it—telling the rats how poor the eating was where they were, and how good it was elsewhere. You told them where to go, and how to get there, and presumably, if the satire was good enough—they'd go."

He pulled out a carton labeled JACOBITES, MISCELLANEOUS, and carried it to the table, singing,

"Ye rats, ye are too many,
If ye would dine in plenty,
Ye mun go, ye mun go."

Lowering the box with a thump, he bowed in response to Brianna's giggling and turned back to the stacks, continuing in stentorian voice.

"Go to Campbell's garden,
Where nae cat stands warden,
And the kale, it grows green.

Go and fill your bellies,
Dinna stay and gnaw my wellies—
Go, ye rats, go!"

Brianna snorted appreciatively. "Did you just make that up?"

"Of course." Roger deposited another box on the table with a flourish. "A good rat satire must always be original." He cast a glance at the serried ranks of cartons. "After that performance, there shouldn't be a rat within miles of this place."

"Good." Brianna pulled a jackknife from her pocket and slit the tape that sealed the topmost carton. "You should come do one at the bed-and-breakfast place; Mama says she's sure there's mice in the bathroom. Something chewed on her soap case."

"God knows what it would take to dislodge a mouse capable of eating bars of soap; far beyond my feeble powers, I expect." He rolled a tattered round hassock out from behind a teetering stack of obsolete encyclopedias, and plumped down next to Brianna. "Here, you take the parish registers, they're a bit easier to read."

They worked through the morning in amiable companionship, turning up occasional interesting passages, the odd silverfish, and recurrent clouds of dust, but little of value to the project at hand.

"We'd better stop for lunch soon," Roger said at last. He felt a strong reluctance to go back into the house, where he would once more be at Fiona's mercy, but Brianna's stomach had begun to growl almost as loudly as his own.

"Okay. We can do some more after we eat, if you're not worn out." Brianna stood and stretched herself, her curled fists almost reaching the rafters of the old garage. She wiped her hands on the legs of her jeans, and ducked between the stacks of boxes.

"Hey!" She stopped short, near the door. Roger, following her, was brought up sharp, his nose almost touching, the back of her head.

"What is it?" he asked. "Not another rat?" He noted with approval that the sun lit her thick single braid with glints of copper and gold. With a small golden nimbus of dust surrounding her, and the light of noon silhouetting her long-nosed profile, he thought she looked quite medieval; Our Lady of the Archives.

"No. Look at this, Roger!" She pointed at a cardboard carton near the middle of a stack. On the side, in the Reverend's strong black hand, was a label with the single word "Randall."

Roger felt a stab of mingled excitement and apprehension. Brianna's excitement was unalloyed.

"Maybe that's got the stuff we're looking for!" she exclaimed. "Mama said it was something my father was interested in; maybe he'd already asked the Reverend about it."

"Could be." Roger forced down the sudden feeling of dread that had struck him at sight of the name. He knelt to extract the box from its resting place. "Let's take it in the house; we can look in it after lunch."

The box, once opened in the Reverend's study, held an odd assortment of things. There were old photostats of pages from several parish registers, two or three army muster lists, a number of letters and scattered papers, a small, thin notebook, bound in gray cardboard covers, a packet of elderly photographs, curling at the edges, and a stiff folder, with the name "Randall" printed on the cover.

Brianna picked up the folder and opened it. "Why, it's daddy's family tree!" she exclaimed. "Look." She passed the folder to Roger. Inside were two sheets of thick parchment, with lines of descent neatly ruled across and down. The beginning date was 1633; the final entry, at the foot of the second page, showed

Frank Wolverton Randall m. Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp, 1937

"Done before you were born," Roger murmured.

Brianna peered over his shoulder as his finger passed slowly down the lines of the genealogical table. "I've seen it before; daddy had a copy in his study. He used to show it to me all the time. His had me at the bottom, though; this must be an early copy."

"Maybe the Reverend did some of the research for him." Roger handed Brianna back the folder, and picked up one of the papers from the stack on the desk.

"Now here's an heirloom for you," he said. He traced the coat of arms embossed at the head of the sheet. "A letter of commission in the army, signed by His Royal Majesty, King George II."

"George the *Second?* Jeez, that's even before the American Revolution."

"Considerably before. It's dated 1735. In the name of Jonathan Wolverton Randall. Know that name?"

"Yeah." Brianna nodded, stray wisps of hair falling in her face. She wiped them back carelessly and took the letter. "daddy used to talk about him every now and then; one of the few ancestors he knew much about. He was a captain in the army that fought Bonnie

Prince Charlie at Culloden.” She looked up at Roger, blinking. “I think maybe he was killed in that battle, in fact. He wouldn’t have been buried there, would he?”

Roger shook his head. “I shouldn’t think so. It was the English who cleared up after the battle. They shipped most of their own dead back home for burial—the officers, anyway.”

He was prevented from further observation by the sudden appearance in the doorway of Fiona, bearing a feather duster like a battle standard.

“Mr. Wakefield,” she called. “There’s the man come to take awa’ the Reverend’s truck, but he canna get it started. He says will ye be givin’ him a hand, like?”

Roger started guiltily. He had taken the battery to a garage for testing, and it was still sitting in the backseat of his own Morris. No wonder the Reverend’s truck wasn’t starting.

“I’ll have to go sort this out,” he told Brianna. “I’m afraid it might take a while.”

“That’s okay.” She smiled at him, blue eyes narrowing to triangles. “I should go too. Mama will be back by now; we thought we might go out to the Clava Cairns, if there was time. Thanks for the lunch.”

“My pleasure—and Fiona’s.” Roger felt a stab of regret at being unable to offer to go with her, but duty called. He glanced at the papers spread out on the desk, then scooped them up and deposited them back in the box.

“Here,” he said. “This is all your family records. You take it. Maybe your mother would be interested.”

“Really? Well, thanks, Roger. Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” he said, carefully laying the folder with the genealogical chart on top. “Oh, wait. Maybe not all of it.” The corner of the gray notebook stuck out from under the letter of commission; he pulled it free, and tidied the disturbed papers back into the box. “This looks like one of the Reverend’s journals. Can’t think what it’s doing in there, but I suppose I’d better put it with the others; the historical society says they want the whole lot.”

"Oh, sure." Brianna had risen to go, clutching the box to her chest, but hesitated, looking at him. "Do you—would you like me to come back?"

Roger smiled at her. There were cobwebs in her hair, and a long streak of dirt down the bridge of her nose.

"Nothing I'd like better," he said. "See you tomorrow, eh?"

* * *

The thought of the Reverend's journal stayed with Roger, all during the tedious business of getting the ancient truck started, and the subsequent visit of the furniture appraiser who came to sort the valuable antiques from the rubbish, and set a value on the Reverend's furnishings for auction.

This disposition of the Reverend's effects gave Roger a sense of restless melancholy. It was, after all, a dismantling of his own youth, as much as the clearing away of useless bric-a-brac. By the time he sat down in the study after dinner, he could not have said whether it was curiosity about the Randalls that compelled him to pick up the journal, or simply the urge somehow to regain a tenuous connection with the man who had been his father for so many years.

The journals were kept meticulously, the even lines of ink recording all major events of the parish and the community of which the Reverend Mr. Wakefield had been a part for so many years. The feel of the plain gray notebook and the sight of its pages conjured up for Roger an immediate vision of the Reverend, bald head gleaming in the glow of his desk lamp as he industriously inscribed the day's happenings.

"It's a discipline," he had explained once to Roger. "There's a great benefit to doing regularly something that orders the mind, you know. Catholic monks have services at set times every day, priests have their breviaries. I'm afraid I haven't the knack of such immediate devotion, but writing out the happenings of the day helps to clear my mind; then I can say my evening prayers with a calm heart."

A calm heart. Roger wished he could manage that himself, but calmness hadn't visited him since he'd found those clippings in the

Reverend's desk.

He opened the book at random, and slowly turned the pages, looking for a mention of the name "Randall." The dates on the notebook's cover were January–June, 1948. While what he had told Brianna about the historical society was true, that had not been his chief motive in keeping the book. In May of 1948, Claire Randall had returned from her mysterious disappearance. The Reverend had known the Randalls well; such an event was sure to have found mention in his journal.

Sure enough, the entry for May 7:

> *"Visit w. Frank Randall this evening; this business about his wife. So distressing! Saw her yesterday—so frail, but those eyes staring—made me uneasy to sit w. her, poor woman, though she talked sensibly.*
>
> *Enough to unhinge anyone, what she's been through—whatever it was. Terrible gossip about it all—so careless of Dr. Bartholomew to let on that she's pregnant. So hard for Frank—and for her, of course! My heart goes out to them both.*
>
> *Mrs. Graham ill this week—she could have chosen a better time; jumble sale next week, and the porch full of old clothes …"*

Roger flipped rapidly through the pages, looking for the next mention of the Randalls, and found it, later the same week.

> *"**May 10**—Frank Randall to dinner. Doing my best to associate publicly both w. him and his wife; I sit with her for an hour most days, in hopes of quelling some of the gossip. It's almost pitying now; word's gone round that she's demented. Knowing Claire Randall, I'm not sure that she would not be more offended at being thought insane than at being considered immoral—must be one or the other though?*
>
> *Tried repeatedly to talk to her about her experiences, but she says nothing of that. Talks all right about anything else, but always a sense that she's thinking of something else.*

Must make a note to preach this Sunday on the evils of gossip—though I'm afraid calling attention to the case with a sermon will only make it worse."

*"**May 12**—… Can't get free of the notion that Claire Randall is not deranged. Have heard the gossip, of course, but see nothing in her behaviour that seems unstable in the slightest.*

Do think she carries some terrible secret; one she's determined to keep. Spoke—cautiously—to Frank of this; he's reticent, but I'm convinced she has said something to him. Have tried to make it clear I wish to help, in any way I can."

*"**May 14**—A visit from Frank Randall. Very puzzling. He has asked my help, but I can't see why he asked what he has. Seems very important to him, though; he keeps himself under close rein, but wound tight as a watch. I fear the release—if it comes.*

Claire well enough to travel—he means to take her back to London this week. Assured him I would communicate any results to him by letter at his University address; no hint to his wife.

Have several items of interest on Jonathan Randall, though I can't imagine the significance of Frank's ancestor to this sorry business. Of James Fraser, as I told Frank—no inkling; a complete mystery."

A complete mystery. In more ways than one, Roger thought. What had Frank Randall asked the Reverend to do? To find out what he could about Jonathan Randall and about James Fraser, apparently. So Claire had told her husband about James Fraser—told him something, at least, if not everything.

But what conceivable connection could there be between an English army captain who had died at Culloden in 1746, and the man whose name seemed inextricably bound up with the mystery of Claire's disappearance in 1945—and the further mystery of Brianna's parentage?

The rest of the journal was filled with the usual miscellany of parish happenings; the chronic drunkenness of Derick Gowan, culminating in that parishioner's removal from the River Ness as a water-logged corpse in late May; the hasty wedding of Maggie Brown and William Dundee, a month before the christening of their daughter, June; Mrs. Graham's appendectomy, and the Reverend's attempts to cope with the resultant influx of covered dishes from the generous ladies of the parish—Herbert, the Reverend's current dog, seemed to have been the beneficiary of most of them.

Reading through the pages, Roger found himself smiling, hearing the Reverend's lively interest in his flock come to life once more in the old minister's words. Browsing and skimming, he nearly missed it—the last entry concerning Frank Randall's request.

> *"**June 18**—Had a brief note from Frank Randall, advising me that his wife's health is somewhat precarious; the pregnancy is dangerous and he asks my prayers.*
>
> *Replied with assurances of prayers and good wishes for both him and his wife. Enclosed also the information I had so far found for him; can't say what use it will be to him, but that must be his own judgement. Told him of the surprising discovery of Jonathan Randall's grave at St. Kilda; asked if he wishes me to photograph the stone."*

And that was all. There was no further mention of the Randalls, or of James Fraser. Roger laid the book down and massaged his temples; reading the slanting lines of handwriting had given him a mild headache.

Aside from confirming his suspicions that a man named James Fraser was mixed up in all this, the matter remained as impenetrable as ever. What in the name of God did Jonathan Randall have to do with it, and why on earth was the man buried at St. Kilda? The letter of commission had given Jonathan Randall's place of birth as an estate in Sussex; how did he end up in a remote Scottish kirkyard? True, it wasn't all that far from Culloden—but why hadn't he been shipped back to Sussex?

"Will ye be needin' anything else tonight, Mr. Wakefield?" Fiona's voice roused him from his fruitless meditations. He sat up, blinking, to see her holding a broom and a polishing cloth.

"What? Er, no. No, thanks, Fiona. But what are you doing with all that clobber? Not still cleaning at this time of night?"

"Well, it's the church ladies," Fiona explained. "You remember, ye told them they could hold their regular monthly meeting here tomorrow? I thought I'd best tidy up a bit."

The church ladies? Roger quailed at the thought of forty housewives, oozing sympathy, descending on the manse in an avalanche of tweeds, twin-sets, and cultured pearls.

"Will ye be takin' tea with the ladies?" Fiona was asking. "The Reverend always did."

The thought of entertaining Brianna Randall and the church ladies simultaneously was more than Roger could contemplate with equanimity.

"Er, no," he said abruptly. "I've … I've an engagement tomorrow."

His hand fell on the telephone, half-buried in the debris of the Reverend's desk. "If you'll excuse me, Fiona, I've got to make a call."

Brianna wandered back into the bedroom, smiling to herself. I looked up from my book and arched a brow in inquiry.

"Phone call from Roger?" I said.

"How'd you know?" She looked startled for a moment, then grinned, shucking off her robe. "Oh, because he's the only guy I know in Inverness?"

"I didn't think any of your boyfriends would be calling long-distance from Boston," I said. I peered at the clock on the table. "Not at this hour, anyway; they'll all be at football practice."

Brianna ignored this, and shoved her feet under the covers. "Roger's invited us to go up to a place called St. Kilda tomorrow. He says it's an interesting old church."

"I've heard of it," I said, yawning. "All right, why not? I'll take my plant press; maybe I can find some crown vetch—I promised some to Dr. Abernathy for his research. But if we're going to spend the day tramping round reading old gravestones, I'm turning in now. Digging up the past is strenuous work."

There was a brief flicker in Brianna's face, and I thought she was about to say something. But she merely nodded, and reached to turn out the light, the secretive smile still lurking in the corners of her mouth.

I lay looking up into the darkness, hearing her small tossings and turnings fade into the regular cadences of her sleeping breath. St. Kilda, eh? I had never been there, but I knew of the place; it was an old church, as Brianna had said, long deserted and out of the way for tourists—only the occasional researcher ever went there. Perhaps this was the opportunity I had been waiting for, then?

I would have Roger and Brianna together there, and alone, with little fear of interruption. And perhaps it was a suitable place to tell them—there among the long-dead parishioners of St. Kilda. Roger had not yet verified the whereabouts of the rest of the Lallybroch men, but it seemed fairly sure that they had at least left Culloden Field alive, and that was really all I needed to know, now. I could tell Bree the end of it, then.

My mouth grew dry at the thought of the coming interview. Where was I to find the words for this? I tried to visualize how it might go; what I might say, and how they might react, but imagination failed me. More than ever, I regretted my promise to Frank that had kept me from writing to the Reverend Wakefield. If I had, Roger at least might already know. Or perhaps not; the Reverend might not have believed me.

I turned restlessly, seeking inspiration, but weariness crept over me. And at last I gave up and turned onto my back, closing my eyes on the dark above me. As though my thinking of him had summoned the Reverend's spirit, a biblical quotation drifted into my fading consciousness: *Sufficient unto the day*, the Reverend's voice seemed to murmur to me, *sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof*. And then I slept.

I woke up in the shadowed dark, hands clenched in the bedclothes, heart beating with a force that shook me like the skin of a kettledrum. “Jesus!” I said.

The silk of my nightgown was hot and clinging; looking down, I could dimly see my nipples thrusting through it, hard as marbles. The quivering spasms were still rippling through wrists and thighs, like the aftershocks of an earthquake. I hoped I hadn’t cried out. Probably not; I could hear Brianna’s breathing, untroubled and regular across the room.

I fell back on the pillow, shaking with weakness, the sudden flush washing my temples with damp.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” I muttered, breathing deeply as my heart slowly returned to normal.

One of the effects of a disturbed sleep cycle is that one stops dreaming coherently. Through the long years of early motherhood, and then of internship, residency, and nights on-call, I had got used to falling at once into oblivion when I lay down, with such dreams as occurred nothing more than fragments and flashes, restless flickers in the dark as synapses fired at random, recharging themselves for the work of the day that would come too soon.

In more recent years, with the resumption of something resembling a normal schedule, I had begun to dream again. The usual kinds of dreams, whether nightmare or good dream—long sequences of images, wanderings in the wood of the mind. And I was familiar with this kind of dream, too; it was common to what might politely be called periods of deprivation.

Usually, though, such dreams came floating, soft as the touch of satin sheets, and if they woke me, I fell at once back into sleep, glowing dimly with a memory that would not last ’til morning.

This was different. Not that I remembered much about it, but I had a vague impression of hands that gripped me, rough and urgent, not wooing but compelling. And a voice, nearly shouting, that echoed in the chambers of my inner ear, along with the sound of my fading heartbeat.

I put my hand on my chest over the leaping pulse, feeling the soft fullness of my breast beneath the silk. Brianna’s breath caught in a soft snore, then resumed its even cadence. I remembered listening for that sound when she was small; the slow, stertorous rhythm of reassurance, sounding through the darkened nursery, even as a heartbeat.

My own heartbeat was slowing under my hand, under the deep rose silk, the color of a baby's sleep-flushed cheek. When you hold a child to your breast to nurse, the curve of the little head echoes exactly the curve of the breast it suckles, as though this new person truly mirrors the flesh from which it sprang.

Babies are soft. Anyone looking at them can see the tender, fragile skin and know it for the rose-leaf softness that invites a finger's touch. But when you live with them and love them, you feel the softness going inward, the round-checked flesh wobbly as custard, the boneless splay of the tiny hands. Their joints are melted rubber, and even when you kiss them hard, in the passion of loving their existence, your lips sink down and seem never to find bone. Holding them against you, they melt and mold, as though they might at any moment flow back into your body.

But from the very start, there is that small streak of steel within each child. That thing that says "I am," and forms the core of personality.

In the second year, the bone hardens and the child stands upright, skull wide and solid, a helmet protecting the softness within. And "I am" grows, too. Looking at them, you can almost see it, sturdy as heartwood, glowing through the translucent flesh.

The bones of the face emerge at six, and the soul within is fixed at seven. The process of encapsulation goes on, to reach its peak in the glossy shell of adolescence, when all softness then is hidden under the nacreous layers of the multiple new personalities that teenagers try on to guard themselves.

In the next years, the hardening spreads from the center, as one finds and fixes the facets of the soul, until "I am" is set, delicate and detailed as an insect in amber.

I had thought I was well beyond that stage, had lost all trace of softness and was well set on my way to a middle age of stainless steel. But now I thought that Frank's death had cracked me in some way. And the cracks were widening, so that I could no longer patch them with denial. I had brought my daughter back to Scotland, she with those bones strong as the ribs of Highland mountains, in the hope that her shell was strong enough to hold her together, while the center of her “I am” might still be reachable.

But my own core held no longer in the isolation of “I am,” and I had no protection to shield me from the softness from within. I no longer knew what I was or what she would be; only what I must do.

For I had come back, and I dreamed once more, in the cool air of the Highlands. And the voice of my dream still echoed through ears and heart, repeated with the sound of Brianna’s sleeping breath.

“You are mine,” it had said. “Mine! And I will not let you go.”

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5

BELOVED WIFE

The kirkyard of St. Kilda lay quiet in the sun. Not entirely flat, it occupied a plateau carved from the side of the hill by some geological freak. The land sloped and curved, so that the gravestones lay hidden in small hollows or jutted suddenly from the crest of a rise. The shifting of the earth had moved many, tilting them drunkenly or toppling them altogether, to lie flattened and broken in the long grass.

“It’s a bit untidy,” Roger said, apologetically. They paused in the kirkyard gate, looking over the small collection of ancient stones, overgrown and shadowed by the row of giant yews, planted long ago as a windbreak against the storms that rolled in from the northern sea. Clouds massed there now, far out over the distant firth, but the sun shone on the hilltop, and the air was still and warm.

“My father used to get together a gang of men from the church once or twice a year, and bring them up to keep the place in order, but I’m afraid it’s rather gone to seed lately.” He swung the lychgate experimentally, noting the cracked hinge and the latch-fitting, dangling by one nail.

“It’s a lovely, quiet place.” Brianna edged carefully past the splintery gate. “Really old, isn’t it?”

“Aye, it is. dad thought the kirk itself was built on the site of an early church or an even older temple of some kind; that’s why it’s up here in such an inconvenient spot. One of his friends from Oxford was always threatening to come up and excavate the place to see what was under it, but of course he couldn't get clearance from the Church authorities, even though the place has been deconsecrated for years."

"It's kind of a climb." The flush of exertion was beginning to fade from Brianna's face as she fanned her cheeks with a guidebook. "Beautiful, though." She eyed the facade of the kirk with appreciation. Built into a natural opening in the crag, the stones and timbers of the kirk had been fitted by hand, the chinks caulked with peat and mud, so that it seemed to have grown there, a natural part of the cliff face. Ancient carvings decorated door sill and window frame, some showing the symbols of Christianity, some obviously much older.

"Is Jonathan Randall's stone over there?" She waved toward the kirkyard, visible beyond the gate. "Mother will be so surprised!"

"Aye, I expect so. Haven't seen it myself." He hoped the surprise would be a pleasant one; when he had mentioned the stone cautiously to Brianna over the phone the night before, she had been enthusiastic.

"I know about Jonathan Randall," she was telling Roger. "Daddy always admired him; said he was one of the few interesting people in the family tree. I guess he was a good soldier; Daddy had lots of commendations and things he'd gotten."

"Really?" Roger looked back, in search of Claire. "Does your mother need help with that plant press?"

Brianna shook her head. "Nah. She just found a plant by the path she couldn't resist. She'll be up in a minute."

It was a silent place. Even the birds were quiet as midday approached, and the dark evergreens that edged the plateau were still, with no breeze to stir their branches. Without the raw scars of recent graves or the flags of plastic flowers as testimony to still-fresh grief, the kirkyard breathed only the peace of the long-dead. Removed from strife and trouble, only the fact of their life remained to give the comfort of a human presence on the lonely heights of an empty land.

The progress of the three visitors was slow; they wandered their way casually through the old kirkyard, Roger and Brianna pausing to read aloud quaint inscriptions from the weathered stones, Claire, on her own, stooping now and then to clip a vine or uproot a small flowering plant.

Roger bent over one stone, and grinning, beckoned Brianna to read the inscription.

" 'Approach and read, not with your hats on,' " she read. " 'For here lies Bailie William Watson/Who was famous for his thinking/And moderation in his drinking.' " Brianna rose from examining the stone, her face flushed with laughter. "No dates—I wonder when William Watson lived."

"Eighteenth century, most likely," Roger said. "The seventeenth-century stones are mostly too weathered to read, and no one's been buried here in two hundred years; the church was deconsecrated in 1800."

A moment later, Brianna let out a muffled whoop. "Here it is!" She stood up and waved to Claire, who was standing on the far side of the kirkyard, peering inquisitively at a length of greenery she held in one hand. "Mama! Come look at this!"

Claire waved back, and made her way to where they stood beside the flat, square stone, stepping carefully across the crowded graves.

"What is it?" she asked. "Find an interesting grave?"

"I think so. Recognize this name?" Roger stepped back, so she could have a clear view.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" Mildly startled, Roger glanced at Claire, and was alarmed to see how pale she was. She stared down at the weathered stone, and the muscles of her throat moved in a convulsive swallow. The plant she had pulled was crushed in her hand, unregarded.

"Dr. Randall—Claire—are you all right?"

The amber eyes were blank, and she appeared not to hear him for a moment. Then she blinked, and looked up. She was still pale, but seemed better now; back in control.

"I'm fine," she said, voice flat. She stooped, and ran her fingers over the letters of the stone as though reading them in Braille.

"Jonathan Wolverton Randall," she said softly, "1705–1746. I told you, didn't I? You bastard, I *told* you!" Her voice, so flat an instant before, was suddenly vibrant, filled with a restrained fury.

"Mama! Are you all right?" Brianna, obviously upset, pulled at her mother's arm.

Roger thought it was as though a shade had dropped behind Claire's eyes; the feeling that had shone there was suddenly hidden, as she snapped back to a realization of the two people staring at her, aghast. She smiled, a brief, mechanical grimace, and nodded.

"Yes. Yes, of course. I'm fine." Her hand opened, and the stalk of limp greenery dropped to the ground.

"I thought you'd be surprised." Brianna was looking worriedly at her mother. "Isn't this Daddy's ancestor? The soldier who died at Culloden?"

Claire glanced down at the gravestone near her feet.

"Yes, it is," she said. "And he *is* dead, isn't he?"

Roger and Brianna exchanged looks. Feeling responsible, Roger touched Claire on the shoulder.

"It's rather a hot day," he said, trying for a note of casual matter-of-factness. "Perhaps we should go into the church for a little shade. There are some very interesting carvings on the font; well worth seeing."

Claire smiled at him. A real smile this time, a little tired, but eminently sane.

"You go," she said, including Brianna with a tilt of her head. "I need a little air. I'll stay out here for a bit."

"I'll stay with you." Brianna was hovering, clearly unwilling to leave her mother on her own, but Claire had recovered both her equanimity and her air of command.

"Nonsense," she said briskly. "I'm perfectly all right. I'll go sit in the shade of the trees over there. You go along. I'd rather be by myself for a bit," she added firmly, seeing Roger opening his mouth to protest.

With no further ado, she turned and walked off, toward the line of dark yew trees that edged the kirkyard to the west. Brianna hesitated, looking after her, but Roger took the girl by the elbow, and drew her toward the church.

“Best leave her alone,” he murmured. “After all, your mother’s a doctor, isn’t she? She’ll know if it’s all right.”

“Yeah … I suppose so.” With a final troubled glance after Claire’s retreating figure, Brianna allowed him to lead her away.

* * *

The kirk was no more than an empty wood-floored room, with the abandoned font left in place only because it could not be removed. The shallow basin had been scooped out of the stone ledge that ran along one side of the room. Above the basin, the carved visage of St. Kilda gazed emptily toward the ceiling, eyes piously upturned.

“It was probably one of the pagan gods to start with,” Roger said, tracing the line of the carving with a finger. “You can see where they added the veil and wimple to the original figure—not to mention the eyes.”

“Like poached eggs,” Brianna agreed, rolling her own up in imitation. “What’s this carving over here? It looks a lot like the patterns on those Pictish stones outside Clava.”

They strolled casually around the walls of the kirk, breathing the dusty air, examining the ancient carvings in the stone walls, and reading the small wooden plaques affixed by long-vanished parishioners in memory of ancestors gone still longer. They spoke quietly, both keeping an ear out for any sounds from the kirkyard, but all was quiet, and slowly they began to relax again.

Roger followed Brianna toward the front of the room, watching the curling tendrils that escaped from her braid to coil damply on her neck.

All that remained now at the front of the kirk was a plain wooden ledge above the hole where the altarstone had been removed. Still, Roger felt something of a quiver up his spine as he stood beside Brianna, facing the vanished altar.

The sheer intensity of his feelings seemed to echo in the empty place. He hoped she couldn’t hear them. They had known each other barely a week, after all, and had had scarcely any private conversation. She would be taken aback, surely, or frightened, if she knew what he felt. Or worse yet, she would laugh.

Yet, when he stole a glance at her, her face was calm and serious. It was also looking back at him, with an expression in the dark blue of her eyes that turned him toward her and made him reach for her without conscious thought.

The kiss was brief and gentle, scarcely more than the formality that concludes a wedding, yet as striking in its impact as though they had this minute plighted a troth.

Roger's hands fell away, but the warmth of her lingered, in hands and lips and body, so that he felt as though he held her still. They stood a moment, bodies grazing, breathing each other's air, and then she stepped back. He could still feel the touch of her on the palms of his hands. He curled his fingers into fists, seeking to hold the feeling.

The still air of the church shivered suddenly into bits, the echoes of a scream scattering the dust motes. Without conscious thought, Roger was outside, running, stumbling and scrambling over the tumbled stones, heading for the dark line of the yews. He pushed his way between the overgrown branches, not bothering to hold back the scaly twigs for Brianna, hot on his heels.

Pale in the shadows, he saw Claire Randall's face. Completely drained of color, she looked like a wraith against the dark branches of the yew. She stood for a moment, swaying, then sank to her knees in the grass, as though her legs would no longer support her.

"Mother!" Brianna dropped to her knees beside the crouching figure, chafing one of the limp hands. "Mama, what is it? Are you faint? You should put your head between your knees. Here, why don't you lie down?"

Claire resisted the helpful proddings of her offspring, and the drooping head came upright on its slender neck once more.

"I don't want to lie down," she gasped. "I want.… oh, God. Oh, dear holy God." Kneeling among the unmowed grass she stretched out a trembling hand to the surface of the stone. It was carved of granite, a simple slab.

"Dr. Randall! Er, Claire?" Roger dropped to one knee on her other side, putting a hand under her other arm to support her. He was truly alarmed at her appearance. A fine sweat had broken out on her temples and she looked as though she might keel over at any moment. “Claire,” he said again, urgently, trying to rouse her from the staring trance she had fallen into. “What is it? Is it a name you know?” Even as he spoke, his own words were ringing in his ears. *No one’s been buried here since the eighteenth century*, he’d told Brianna. *No one’s been buried here in two hundred years*.

Claire’s fingers brushed his own away, and touched the stone, caressing, as though touching flesh, gently tracing the letters, the grooves worn shallow, but still clear.

“ ‘JAMES ALEXANDER MALCOLM MACKENZIE FRASER,’ ” she read aloud. “Yes, I know him.” Her hand dropped lower, brushing back the grass that grew thickly about the stone, obscuring the line of smaller letters at its base.

“ ‘Beloved husband of Claire,’ ” she read.

“Yes, I knew him,” she said again, so softly Roger could scarcely hear her. “I’m Claire. He was my husband.” She looked up then, into the face of her daughter, white and shocked above her. “And your father,” she said.

Roger and Brianna stared down at her, and the kirkyard was silent, save for the rustle of the yews above.

* * *

“No!” I said, quite crossly. “For the fifth time—no! I don’t want a drink of water. I have not got a touch of the sun. I am not faint. I am not ill. And I haven’t lost my mind, either, though I imagine that’s what you’re thinking.”

Roger and Brianna exchanged glances that made it clear that that was precisely what they were thinking. They had, between them, got me out of the kirkyard and into the car. I had refused to be taken to hospital, so we had gone back to the manse. Roger had administered medicinal whisky for shock, but his eyes darted toward the telephone now as though wondering whether to dial for additional help—like a straitjacket, I supposed.

“Mama.” Brianna spoke soothingly, reaching out to try to smooth the hair back from my face. “You’re upset.”

“Of course I’m upset!” I snapped. I took a long, quivering breath and clamped my lips tight together, until I could trust myself to speak calmly.

“I am certainly upset,” I began, “but I’m not mad.” I stopped, struggling for control. This wasn’t the way I’d intended to do it. I didn’t know quite what I *had* intended, but not this, blurting out the truth without preparation or time to organize my own thoughts. Seeing that bloody grave had disrupted any plan I might have formed.

“Damn you, Jamie Fraser!” I said, furious. “What are you doing there anyway; it’s *miles* from Culloden!”

Brianna’s eyes were halfway out on stalks, and Roger’s hand was hovering near the telephone. I stopped abruptly and tried to get a grip on myself.

Be calm, Beauchamp, I instructed myself. Breathe deeply. Once … twice … once more. Better. Now. It’s very simple; all you have to do is tell them the truth. That’s what you came to Scotland for, isn’t it?

I opened my mouth, but no sound came out. I closed my mouth, and my eyes as well, hoping that my nerve would return, if I couldn’t see the two ashen faces in front of me. Just … let … me … tell … the … truth, I prayed, with no idea who I was talking to. Jamie, I thought.

I’d told the truth once before. It hadn’t gone well.

I pressed my eyelids shut more tightly. Once more I could smell the carbolic surroundings of a hospital, and feel the unfamiliar starched pillowcase beneath my cheek. From the corridor outside came Frank’s voice, choked with baffled rage.

“What do you mean, don’t press her? Don’t *press* her? My wife’s been gone for nearly three years, and come back filthy, abused, and *pregnant*, for God’s sake, and I’m not to ask *questions*?”

And the doctor’s voice, murmuring soothingly. I caught the words “delusion,” and “traumatic state,” and “leave it for later, old man—just for a bit” as Frank’s voice, still arguing and interrupting, was gently but firmly eased down the hall. That so-familiar voice, which raised anew the storm of grief and rage and terror inside me.

I had curled my body into a defensive ball, pillow clutched to my chest, and bitten it, as hard as I could, until I felt the cotton casing give way and the silky grit of feathers grinding between my teeth.

I was grinding them now, to the detriment of a new filling. I stopped, and opened my eyes.

“Look,” I said, as reasonably as I could. “I’m sorry, I know how it sounds. But it’s true, and nothing I can do about it.”

This speech did nothing to reassure Brianna, who edged closer to Roger. Roger himself had lost that green-about-the-gills look, though, and was exhibiting signs of cautious interest. Could it be possible that he really did have enough imagination to be able to grasp the truth?

I took hope from his expression, and unclenched my fists.

“It’s the bloody stones,” I said. “You know, the standing stone circle, on the fairies’ hill, to the west?”

“Craigh na Dun,” Roger murmured. “That one?”

“Right.” I exhaled consciously. “You may know the legends about fairy hills—do you? About people who get trapped in rocky hills and wake up two hundred years later?”

Brianna was looking more alarmed by the moment.

“Mother, I really think you ought to go up and lie down,” she said. She half-rose from her seat. “I could go get Fiona …”

Roger put a hand on her arm to stop her.

“No, wait,” he said. He looked at me, with the sort of suppressed curiosity a scientist shows when putting a new slide under the microscope. “Go ahead,” he said to me.

“Thanks,” I said dryly. “Don’t worry, I’m not going to start driveling about fairies; I just thought you’d like to know there’s some basis to the legends. I haven’t any idea what it actually is up there, or how it works, but the fact is …” I took a deep breath, “Well, the fact is, that I walked through a bloody cleft stone in that circle in 1945, and I ended up on the hillside below in 1743.”

I’d said exactly that to Frank. He’d glared at me for a moment, picked up a vase of flowers from my bedside table, and smashed it on the floor.

Roger looked like a scientist whose new microbe has come through a winner. I wondered why, but was too engrossed in the struggle to find words that sounded halfway sane.

"The first person I ran into was an English dragoon in full fig," I said. "Which rather gave me a hint that something was wrong."

A sudden smile lighted Roger's face, though Brianna went on looking horrified. "I should think it might," he said.

"The difficulty was that I couldn't get back, you see." I thought I'd better address my remarks to Roger, who at least seemed disposed to listen, whether he believed me or not.

"The thing is, ladies then didn't go about the place unescorted, and if they did, they didn't do it wearing print dresses and oxford loafers," I explained. "Everyone I met, starting with that dragoon captain, knew there was something wrong about me—but they didn't know what. How could they? I couldn't explain then any better than I can now—and lunatic asylums back then were much less pleasant places than they are now. No basket weaving," I added, with an effort at a joke. It wasn't noticeably successful; Brianna grimaced and looked more worried than ever.

"That dragoon," I said, and a brief shudder went over me at the memory of Jonathan Wolverton Randall, Captain of His Majesty's Eighth Dragoons. "I thought I was hallucinating at first, because the man looked so very like Frank; at first glance, I thought it was he." I glanced at the table where a copy of one of Frank's books lay, with its back-cover photograph of a dark and handsome lean-faced man.

"That's quite a coincidence," Roger said. His eyes were alert, fixed on mine.

"Well, it was and it wasn't," I told him, wrenching my eyes with an effort from the stack of books. "You know he was Frank's ancestor. All the men in that family have a strong family resemblance—physically, at least," I added, thinking of the rather striking nonphysical differences.

"What—what was he like?" Brianna seemed to be coming out of her stupor, at least slightly.

"He was a bloody filthy pervert," I said. Two pairs of eyes snapped open wide and turned to each other with an identical look of consternation.

"You needn't look like that," I said. "They had perversion in the eighteenth century; it isn't anything new, you know. Only it was worse then, maybe, since no one really cared, so long as things were kept quiet and decent on the surface. And Black Jack Randall was a soldier; he captained a garrison in the Highlands, charged with keeping the clans under control—he had considerable scope for his activities, all officially sanctioned." I took a restorative gulp from the whisky glass I still held.

"He liked to hurt people," I said. "He liked it a lot."

"Did he … hurt you?" Roger put the question with some delicacy, after a rather noticeable pause. Bree seemed to be drawing into herself, the skin tightening across her cheekbones.

"Not directly. Or not much, at least." I shook my head. I could feel a cold spot in the pit of my stomach, which the whisky was doing little to thaw. Jack Randall had hit me there, once. I felt it in memory, like the ache of a long-healed wound.

"He had fairly eclectic tastes. But it was Jamie that he…. wanted." Under no circumstances would I have used the word "loved." My throat felt thick, and I swallowed the last drops of whisky. Roger held up the decanter, one brow raised questioningly, and I nodded and held out my glass.

"Jamie. That's Jamie Fraser? And he was …"

"He was my husband," I said.

Brianna shook her head like a horse driving off flies.

"But you *had* a husband," she said. "You couldn't … even if … I mean … you *couldn't*."

"I had to," I said flatly. "I didn't do it on purpose, after all."

"Mother, you can't get married accidentally!" Brianna was losing her kindly-nurse-with-mental-patient attitude. I thought this was probably a good thing, even if the alternative was anger.

"Well, it wasn't precisely an accident," I said. "It was the best alternative to being handed over to Jack Randall, though. Jamie married me to protect me—and bloody generous of him, too," I finished, glaring at Bree over my glass. "He didn't have to do it, but he did."

I fought back the memory of our wedding night. He was a virgin; his hands had trembled when he touched me. I had been afraid too—with better reason. And then in the dawn he had held me, naked back against bare chest, his thighs warm and strong behind my own, murmuring into the clouds of my hair, "Dinna be afraid. There's the two of us now."

"See," I turned to Roger again, "I couldn't get back. I was running away from Captain Randall when the Scots found me. A party of cattle-raiders. Jamie was with them, they were his mother's people, the MacKenzies of Leoch. They didn't know what to make of me, but they took me with them as a captive. And I couldn't get away again."

I remembered my abortive efforts to escape from Castle Leoch. And then the day when I had told Jamie the truth, and he—not believing, any more than Frank had, but at least willing to act as though he did—had taken me back to the hill and the stones.

"He thought I was a witch, perhaps," I said, eyes closed, smiling just a bit at the thought. "Now they think you're mad; then they thought you were a witch. Cultural mores," I explained, opening my eyes. "Psychology is just what they call it these days instead of magic. Not the hell of a lot of difference." Roger nodded, seeming a little stunned.

"They tried me for witchcraft," I said. "In the village of Cranesmuir, just below the castle. Jamie saved me, though, and then I told him. And he took me to the hill, and told me to go back. Back to Frank." I paused and drew a deep breath, remembering that October afternoon, where control of my destiny, taken from me for so long, had been suddenly thrust back into my hands, and the choice not given, but demanded of me.

"Go back!" he had said. "There's nothing here for ye! Nothing save danger."

"Is there really nothing here for me?" I had asked. Too honorable to speak, he had answered nonetheless, and I had made my choice.

“It was too late,” I said, staring down at my hands, lying open on my knees. The day was darkening to rain, but my two wedding rings still gleamed in the fading light, gold and silver. I hadn’t taken Frank’s gold band from my left hand when I married Jamie, but had worn Jamie’s silver ring on the fourth finger of my right hand, for every day of the twenty-odd years since he put it there.

“I loved Frank,” I said quietly, not looking at Bree. “I loved him a lot. But by that time, Jamie was my heart and the breath of my body. I couldn’t leave him. I *couldn’t*,” I said, raising my head suddenly to Bree in appeal. She stared back at me, stone-faced.

I looked down at my hands again, and went on.

“He took me to his own home—Lallybroch, it was called. A beautiful place.” I shut my eyes again, to get away from the look on Brianna’s face, and deliberately summoned the image of the estate of Broch Tuarach—Lallybroch, to the people who lived there. A beautiful Highland farm, with woods and streams; even a bit of fertile ground—rare for the Highlands. A lovely, peaceful place, sealed within high hills above a mountain pass that kept it remote from the recurrent strife that troubled the Highlands. But even Lallybroch had proved only a temporary sanctuary.

“Jamie was an outlaw,” I said, seeing behind my closed eyelids the scars of flogging that the English had left on his back. A network of thin white lines that webbed the broad shoulders like a branded grid. “There was a price on his head. One of his own tenants betrayed him to the English. They captured him, and took him to Wentworth Prison—to hang him.”

Roger gave a long, low whistle.

“Hell of a place,” he remarked. “Have you seen it? The walls must be ten feet thick!”

I opened my eyes. “They are,” I said wryly. “I’ve been inside them. But even the thickest walls have doors.” I felt a small flicker of the blaze of desperate courage that had taken me inside Wentworth Prison, in pursuit of my heart. If I could do that for you, I told Jamie silently, I can do this as well. But help me, you bloody big Scot—help me!

"I got him out," I said, taking a deep breath. "What was left of him. Jack Randall commanded the garrison at Wentworth." Now I didn't want to remember the images that my words brought back, but they wouldn't stop. Jamie, naked and bloody, on the floor of Eldridge Manor, where we had found sanctuary.

"I wilna let them take me back again, Sassenach," he'd said to me, teeth clenched against the pain as I'd set the crushed bones of his hand and cleansed his wounds. "Sassenach." He had called me that from the first; the Gaelic word for an outlander, a stranger. An Englishman. First in jest, and then in affection.

And I hadn't let them find him; with the help of his kinsman, a little Fraser clansman called Murtagh, I'd gotten him across the Channel to France, and to refuge in the Abbey of Ste. Anne de Beaupré, where one of his Fraser uncles was abbot. But once there in safety, I had found that saving his life was not the end of the task set me.

What Jack Randall had done to him had sunk into his soul as surely as the flails of the lash had sunk in his back, and had left scars every bit as permanent. I was not sure, even now, what I had done, when I had summoned his demons and fought them single-handed, in the dark of his mind; there is very little difference between medicine and magic, when it comes to some kinds of healing.

I could still feel the cold, hard stone that bruised me, and the strength of the fury that I had drawn from him, the hands that closed round my neck and the burning creature who had hunted me through the dark.

"But I did heal him," I said softly. "He came back to me."

Brianna was shaking her head slowly back and forth, bewildered, but with a stubborn set to her head that I knew very well indeed. "Grahams are stupid, Campbells are deceitful, MacKenzies are charming but sly, and Frasers are stubborn," Jamie had told me once, giving me his view of the general characteristics of the clans. He hadn't been far wrong, either; Frasers *were* extremely stubborn, not least him. Nor Bree.

"I don't believe it," she said flatly. She sat up straighter, eyeing me closely. "I think maybe you've been thinking too much about those men at Culloden," she said. "After all, you've been under a strain lately, and maybe Daddy's death …"

"Frank wasn't your father," I said bluntly.

"He was!" She flashed back with it immediately, so fast that it startled both of us.

Frank had, in time, bowed to the doctors' insistence that any attempt to "force me to accept reality," as one of them put it, might be harmful to my pregnancy. There had been a lot of murmuring in corridors—and shouting, now and then—but he had given up asking me for the truth. And I, in frail health and sick at heart, had given up telling it to him.

I wasn't going to give up, this time.

"I promised Frank," I said. "Twenty years ago, when you were born. I tried to leave him, and he wouldn't let me go. He loved you." I felt my voice soften as I looked at Brianna. "He couldn't believe the truth, but he knew—of course—that he wasn't your father. He asked me not to tell you—to let him be your only father—as long as he lived. After that, he said, it was up to me." I swallowed, licking dry lips.

"I owed him that," I said. "Because he loved you. But now Frank's dead—and you have a right to know who you are."

"If you doubt it," I said, "go to the National Portrait Gallery. They've a picture there of Ellen MacKenzie; Jamie's mother. She's wearing these." I touched the pearl necklace at my throat. A string of baroque freshwater pearls from Scottish rivers, strung with roundels of pierced gold. "Jamie gave them to me on our wedding day."

I looked at Brianna, sitting tall and stiff, the bones of her face stark in protest. "Take along a hand mirror," I said. "Take a good look at the portrait and then in the mirror. It's not an exact likeness, but you're very like your grandmother."

Roger stared at Brianna as though he'd never seen her before. He glanced back and forth between us, then, as though making up his mind, suddenly squared his shoulders and rose from the sofa where he had been sitting beside her.

"I've something I think you should see," he said firmly. He crossed quickly to the Reverend's old rolltop desk and pulled a rubber-banded bundle of yellowed newspaper clippings from one of the pigeonholes.

"When you've read them, look at the dates," he told Brianna, handing them to her. Then, still standing, he turned to me and looked me over, with the long, dispassionate gaze that I recognized as a that of a scholar, schooled in objectivity. He didn't yet believe, but he had the imagination to doubt.

"Seventeen forty-three," he said, as though to himself. He shook his head, marveling. "And I thought it was a man you'd met here, in 1945. God, I would *never* have thought—well, Christ, who would?"

I was surprised. "You knew? About Brianna's father?"

He nodded at the clippings in Brianna's hands. She hadn't yet looked at them, but was staring at Roger, half-bewildered, half-angry. I could see the storm gathering in her eyes, and so, I thought, could Roger. He looked hastily away from her, turning back to me in question.

"Then those men whose names you gave me, the ones who fought at Culloden—you *knew* them?"

I relaxed, ever so slightly. "Yes, I knew them." There was a grumble of thunder to the east, and the rain broke in a spatter against the long windows that lined the study from floor to ceiling on one side. Brianna's head was bent over the clippings, the wings of her hair hiding everything but the tip of her nose, which was bright red. Jamie always went red when he was furious or upset. I was all too familiar with the sight of a Fraser on the verge of explosion.

"And you were in France," Roger murmured as though to himself, still studying me closely. The shock in his face was fading into surmise, and a kind of excitement. "I don't suppose you knew …"

"Yes, I did," I told him. "That's why we went to Paris. I'd told Jamie about Culloden—the '45, and what would happen. We went to Paris to try to stop Charles Stuart."

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PART TWO

The Pretenders

Le Havre, France
February 1744

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6

MAKING WAVES

"Bread," I muttered feebly, keeping my eyes tightly closed. There was no response from the large, warm object next to me, other than the faint sigh of his breathing.

"Bread!" I said, a little louder. There was a sudden startled heave of the bedclothes, and I grasped the edge of the mattress and tightened all my muscles, hoping to stabilize the pitch and yaw of my internal organs.

Fumbling noises came from the far side of the bed, followed by the sliding of a drawer, a muffled exclamation in Gaelic, the soft thud of a bare foot stamping planks, and then the sinking of the mattress under the weight of a heavy body.

"Here, Sassenach," said an anxious voice, and I felt the touch of a dry bread crust against my lower lip. Groping blindly without opening my eyes, I grasped it and began to chew gingerly, forcing each choking bite down a parched throat. I knew better than to ask for water.

The dessicated wads of bread crumbs gradually made their way down my throat and took up residence in my stomach, where they lay like small heaps of ballast. The nauseating roll of my inner waves slowly calmed, and at last my innards lay at anchor. I opened my eyes, to see the anxious face of Jamie Fraser hovering a few inches above me.

"Ak!" I said, startled.

"All right, then?" he asked. When I nodded and feebly began to sit up, he put an arm around my back to help me. Sitting down beside me on the rough inn bed, he pulled me gently against him and stroked my sleep-tousled hair.

"Poor love," he said. "Would a bit of wine help? There's a flask of hock in my saddlebag."

"No. No, thank you." I shuddered briefly at the thought of drinking hock—I seemed to smell the dark, fruity fumes, just at the mention of it—and pushed myself upright.

"I'll be fine in a moment," I said, with forced cheerfulness. "Don't worry, it's quite normal for pregnant women to feel sick in the morning."

With a dubious look at me, Jamie rose and went to retrieve his clothes from the stool near the window. France in February is cold as hell frozen over, and the bubbled-glass panes of the window were coated thick with frost.

He was naked, and a ripple of gooseflesh brushed his shoulders and raised the red-gold hairs on his arms and legs. Accustomed to cold, though, he neither shivered nor hurried as he pulled on stockings and shirt. Pausing in his dressing, he came back to the bed and hugged me briefly.

"Go back to bed," he suggested. "I'll send up the chambermaid to light the fire. Perhaps ye can rest a bit, now you've eaten. You won't be sick now?" I wasn't entirely sure, but nodded reassuringly.

"I don't think so." I cast an eye back at the bed; the quilts, like most coverings supplied by public inns, were none too clean. Still, the silver in Jamie's purse had procured us the best room in the inn, and the narrow bed was stuffed with goose feathers rather than with chaff or wool.

"Um, perhaps I *will* just lie down a moment," I murmured, pulling my feet off the freezing floor and thrusting them under the quilts, in search of the last remnants of warmth. My stomach seemed to have settled sufficiently to risk a sip of water, and I poured a cupful from the cracked bedroom ewer.

"What were you stamping on?" I asked, sipping carefully. "There aren't spiders up here, are there?"

Fastening his kilt about his waist, Jamie shook his head.

"Och, no," he said. Hands busy, he tilted his head toward the table. "Just a rat. After the bread, I expect."

Glancing down, I saw the limp gray form on the floor, a small pearl of blood glistening on the snout. I made it out of bed just in time.

"It's all right," I said faintly, a bit later. "There isn't anything left to throw up."

"Rinse your mouth, Sassenach, but don't swallow, for God's sake." Jamie held the cup for me, wiped my mouth with a cloth as though I were a small and messy child, then lifted me and laid me carefully back in the bed. He frowned worriedly down at me.

"Perhaps I'd better stay here," he said. "I could send word."

"No, no, I'm all right," I said. And I was. Fight as I would to keep from vomiting in the mornings, I could hold nothing down for long. Yet once the bout was over, I felt entirely restored. Aside from a sour taste in my mouth, and a slight soreness in the abdominal muscles, I felt quite my normal self. I threw back the covers and stood up, to demonstrate.

"See? I'll be fine. And you have to go; it wouldn't do to keep your cousin waiting, after all."

I was beginning to feel cheerful again, despite the chilly air rushing under the door and beneath the folds of my nightgown. Jamie was still hesitating, reluctant to leave me, and I went to him and hugged him tightly, both in reassurance and because he was delightfully warm.

"Brrr," I said. "How on earth can you be warm as toast, dressed in nothing but a kilt?"

"I've a shirt on as well," he protested, smiling down at me.

We clung together for a bit, enjoying each other's warmth in the quiet cold of the early French morning. In the corridor, the clash and shuffle of the chambermaid with her scuttle of kindling grew nearer.

Jamie shifted a bit, pressing against me. Because of the difficulties of traveling in the winter, we had been nearly a week on the road from Ste. Anne to Le Havre. And between the late arrivals at dismal inns, wet, filthy, and shivering with fatigue and cold, and the increasingly unsettled wakenings as my morning sickness got worse, we had scarcely touched each other since our last night at the Abbey.

"Come to bed with me?" I invited, softly.

He hesitated. The strength of his desire was obvious through the fabric of his kilt, and his hands were warm on the cool flesh of my own, but he didn't move to take me in his arms.

"Well …" he said doubtfully.

"You want to, don't you?" I said, sliding a chilly hand under his kilt to make sure.

"Oh! er … aye. Aye, I do." The evidence at hand bore out this statement. He groaned faintly as I cupped my hand between his legs. "Oh, Lord. Don't do that, Sassenach; I canna keep my hands from ye."

He did hug me then, wrapping long arms about me and pulling my face into the snowy tucks of his shirt, smelling faintly of the laundry starch Brother Alfonse used at the Abbey.

"Why should you?" I said, muffled in his linen. "You've a bit of time to spare, surely? It's only a short ride to the docks."

"It isna that," he said, smoothing my riotous hair.

"Oh, I'm too fat?" In fact, my stomach was still nearly flat, and I was thinner than usual because of the sickness. "Or is it …?"

"No," he said, smiling. "Ye talk too much." He bent and kissed me, then scooped me up and sat down on the bed, holding me on his lap. I lay down and pulled him determinedly down on top of me.

"Claire, no!" he protested as I started unbuckling his kilt.

I stared at him. "Whyever not?"

"Well," he said awkwardly, blushing a bit. "The child … I mean, I dinna want to hurt it."

I laughed.

"Jamie, you can't hurt it. It's no bigger than the tip of my finger yet." I held up a finger in illustration, then used it to trace the full, curving line of his lower lip. He seized my hand and bent to kiss me abruptly, as though to erase the tickle of my touch.

"You're sure?" he asked. "I mean … I keep thinking he wouldna like being jounced about …"

"He'll never notice," I assured him, hands once more busy with the buckle of his kilt.

"Well … if you're sure of it."

There was a peremptory rap at the door, and with impeccable Gallic timing, the chambermaid pushed her way in backward, carelessly gouging the door with a billet of wood as she turned. From the scarred surfaces of door and jamb, it appeared that this was her usual method of operations.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur, Madame," she muttered, with a curt nod toward the bed as she shuffled toward the hearth. All right for *some* people, said her attitude, louder than words. Used by this time to the matter-of-factness with which servants treated the sight of inn patrons in any form of dishabille, I merely murmured "*Bonjour*, Mademoiselle," in return and let it go at that. I also let go of Jamie's kilt, and slid under the covers, pulling the quilt up to hide my scarlet cheeks.

Possessed of somewhat greater sang-froid, Jamie placed one of the bolsters strategically across his lap, parked his elbows on it, rested his chin on upturned palms, and made pleasant conversation with the maid, praising the cuisine of the house.

"And from where do you procure the wine, Mademoiselle?" he asked politely.

"From here, from there." She shrugged, stuffing kindling rapidly under the sticks with a practiced hand. "Wherever it's cheapest." The woman's plump face creased slightly as she gave Jamie a sidelong look from the hearth.

"I gathered as much," he said, grinning at her, and she gave a brief snort of amusement.

"I'll wager I can match the price you're getting, and double the quality," he offered. "Tell your mistress."

One eyebrow rose skeptically. "And what's your own price, Monsieur?"

He made an altogether Gallic gesture of self-abnegation. "Nothing, Mademoiselle. I go to call upon a kinsman who sells wine. Perhaps I can bring him some new business to ensure my welcome, no?"

She nodded, seeing the wisdom of this, and grunted as she rose from her knees.

"Well enough, Monsieur. I'll speak to the *patronne*."

The door thumped to behind the maid, aided by a skillful swing of her hip in passing. Putting the bolster aside, Jamie stood up and began to rebuckle his kilt.

"Where do you think you're going?" I protested.

He glanced down at me, and a reluctant smile curved the wide mouth.

"Oh. Well … you're sure you're up to it, Sassenach?"

"I am if you are," I said, unable to resist.

He eyed me austerely.

"Just for that, I should go at once," he said. "Still, I've heard that ye ought to humor expectant mothers." He let the kilt fall to the floor and sat down beside me in his shirt, the bed creaking beneath his weight.

His breath rose in a faint cloud as he turned back the quilt and spread the front of the nightdress to expose my breasts. Bending his head, he kissed each one, touching the nipple delicately with his tongue, so it rose as though by magic, a swelling dark pink against the white skin of my breast.

"God, they're so lovely," he murmured, repeating the process on the other side. He cupped both breasts, admiring them.

"They're heavier," he said, "just a bit. And the nipples are darker, too." One forefinger traced the springing curve of a single fine hair that rose near the dark areola, silver in the frosted light of the morning.

Lifting the quilt, he rolled next to me and I turned into his arms, clasping the solid curves of his back, letting my hands cup the firm rounds of his buttocks. His bare flesh was chilled by the morning air, but the goose bumps smoothed away under the warmth of my touch.

I tried to bring him to me at once, but he resisted me gently, forcing me down onto the pillow as he nibbled the edges of neck and ear. One hand slid up my thigh, the thin material of the nightgown gliding in waves before it.

His head dipped lower, and his hands gently spread my thighs apart. I shivered momentarily as the cold air hit the bare skin of my legs, then relaxed completely into the warm demand of his mouth.

His hair was loose, not yet laced back for the day, and the soft red tickle of it brushed my thighs. The solid weight of his body rested comfortably between my legs, broad hands cupped on the roundness of my hips.

"Mmmm?" came a interrogative sound from below.

I arched my hips slightly in response, and a brief chuckle grazed my skin with warmth.

The hands slid beneath my hips and raised me, and I relaxed into deliquescence as the tiny shudder grew and spread, rising in seconds to a fulfillment that left me limp and gasping, Jamie's head resting on my thigh. He waited a moment for me to recover, caressing the slope of my leg, before returning to his self-appointed task.

I smoothed the tumbled hair back, caressing those ears, so incongruously small and neat for such a large, blunt man. The upper curve glowed with a faint, translucent pink, and I ran my thumb along the edge of the curve.

"They're pointed at the tips," I said. "Just a bit. Like a faun's."

"Oh, aye?" he said, interrupting his labors for a moment. "Like a small deer, ye mean, or the things ye see in classical paintings wi' goat's legs, chasing naked women?"

I lifted my head and peered down across the roil of bedclothes, nightgown, and naked flesh, to the deep blue cat-eyes, gleaming above damp curls of brown hair.

"If the shoe fits," I said, "wear it." And let my head fall back on the pillow as the resultant muffled laugh vibrated against my all too sensitive flesh.

"Oh," I said, straining upward. "Oh, my. Jamie, come here."

"Not yet," he said, doing something with the tip of his tongue that made me squirm uncontrollably.

"Now," I said.

He didn't bother to reply, and I had no more breath to speak with.

"Oh," I said, a bit later. "That's …"

"Mmmm?"

“Good,” I murmured. “Come here.”

“No, I’ll do,” he said, face invisible behind the tangle of roan and cinnamon. “Would ye like it if I …”

“Jamie,” I said. “I want you. Come *here*.”

Sighing in resignation, he rose to his knees and let me pull him upward, settling at last with his weight balanced on his elbows, but comfortingly solid on top of me, belly to belly and lips to lips. He opened his mouth to protest further, but I promptly kissed him, and he slid between my thighs before he could stop himself. He moaned slightly in involuntary pleasure as he entered me, muscles tensing as he gripped my shoulders.

He was gentle and slow, pausing now and then to kiss me deeply, moving again only at my silent urging. I ran my hands softly down the slope of his back, careful not to press on the healing ridges of the fresh scars. The long muscles of his thigh trembled briefly against my own, but he held back, unwilling to move as quickly as he needed to.

I moved my hips against him, to bring him deeper.

He closed his eyes, and his brow furrowed slightly in concentration. His mouth was open, and his breath came hard.

“I can’t …” he said. “Oh, God, I canna help it.” His buttocks clenched suddenly, taut beneath my hands.

I sighed with deep satisfaction, and pulled him hard against me.

“You’re all right?” he asked, a few moments later.

“I won’t break, you know,” I said, smiling into his eyes.

He laughed huskily. “Maybe not, Sassenach, but *I* may.” He gathered me close against him, his cheek pressed against my hair. I flipped the quilt up and tucked it around his shoulders, sealing us in a pocket of warmth. The heat of the fire had not yet reached the bed, but the ice on the window was thawing, the crusted edge of the rime melted into glowing diamonds.

We lay quiet for a time, listening to the occasional crack of the burning applewood in the hearth and the faint sounds of the inn as the guests stirred to life. There were callings to and fro from the balconies across the courtyard, the swish and clop of hooves on the slushy stones outside, and the odd squeal now and then from below, from the piglets the landlady was raising in the kitchen behind the stove.

"Très français, n'est-ce pas?" I said, smiling at the sounds of an altercation drifting up through the floorboards, an amiable settling of accounts between the innkeeper's wife and the local vintner.

"Diseased son of a pox-ridden whore," the female voice remarked. "The brandy from last week tasted like horse-piss."

I didn't need to see the reply to imagine the one-shouldered shrug that went with it.

"How would you know, Madame? After the sixth glass, it all tastes the same, is it not so?"

The bed shook slightly as Jamie laughed with me. He lifted his head from the pillow and sniffed appreciatively at the scent of frying ham that filtered through the drafty chinks of the floorboards.

"Aye, it's France," he agreed. "Food, and drink—and love." He patted my bare hip before tugging the wrinkled gown down over it.

"Jamie," I said softly, "are you happy about it? About the baby?" Outlawed in Scotland, barred from his own home, and with only vague prospects in France, he could pardonably have been less than enthused about acquiring an additional obligation.

He was silent for a moment, only hugging me harder, then sighed briefly before answering.

"Aye, Sassenach." His hand strayed downward, gently rubbing my belly. "I'm happy. And proud as a stallion. But I am most awfully afraid, too."

"About the birth? I'll be all right." I could hardly blame him for apprehension; his own mother had died in childbirth, and birth and its complications were the leading cause of death for women in these times. Still, I knew a thing or two myself, and I had no intention whatever of exposing myself to what passed for medical care here.

"Aye, that—and everything," he said softly. "I want to protect ye, Sassenach—spread myself over ye like a cloak and shield you and the child wi' my body." His voice was soft and husky, with a slight catch in it. "I would do anything for ye … and yet … there's nothing I *can* do. It doesna matter how strong I am, or how willing; I canna go with you where ye must go … nor even help ye at all. And to think of the things that might happen, and me helpless to stop them … aye, I'm afraid, Sassenach.

"And yet"—he turned me toward him, hand closing gently over one breast—"yet when I think of you wi' my child at your breast … then I feel as though I've gone hollow as a soap bubble, and perhaps I shall burst with joy."

He pressed me tight against his chest, and I hugged him with all my might.

"Oh, Claire, ye do break my heart wi' loving you."

* * *

I slept for some time, and woke slowly, hearing the clang of a church bell ringing in the nearby square. Fresh from the Abbey of Ste. Anne, where all the day's activities took place to the rhythm of bells, I automatically glanced at the window, to gauge the intensity of the light and guess the time of day. Bright, clear light, and a window free of ice. The bells rang for the Angelus then, and it was noon.

I stretched, enjoying the blissful knowledge that I needn't get up at once. Early pregnancy made me tired, and the strain of travel had added to my fatigue, making the long rest doubly welcome.

It had rained and snowed unceasingly on the journey as the winter storms battered the French coast. Still, it could have been worse. We had originally intended to go to Rome, not Le Havre. That would have been three or four weeks' travel, in this weather.

Faced with the prospect of earning a living abroad, Jamie had obtained a recommendation as a translator to James Francis Edward Stuart, exiled King of Scotland—or merely the Chevalier St. George, Pretender to the Throne, depending on your loyalties—and we had determined to join the Pretender's court near Rome.

It had been a near thing, at that; we had been on the point of leaving for Italy, when Jamie's uncle Alexander, Abbot of Ste. Anne's, had summoned us to his study.

"I have heard from His Majesty," he announced without preamble.

“Which one?” Jamie asked. The slight family resemblance between the two men was exaggerated by their posture—both sat bolt upright in their chairs, shoulders squared. On the abbot’s part, the posture was due to natural asceticism; on Jamie’s, to reluctance to let the newly healed scars on his back contact the wood of the chair.

“His Majesty King James,” his uncle replied, frowning slightly at me. I was careful to keep my face blank; my presence in Abbot Alexander’s study was a mark of trust, and I didn’t want to do anything to jeopardize it. He had known me a bare six weeks, since the day after Christmas, when I had appeared at his gate with Jamie, who was near death from torture and imprisonment. Subsequent acquaintance had presumably given the abbot some confidence in me. On the other hand, I was still English. And the English King’s name was George, not James.

“Aye? Is he not in need of a translator, then?” Jamie was still thin, but he had been working outdoors with the Brothers who minded the stables and fields of the Abbey, and his face was regaining tinges of its normal healthy color.

“He is in need of a loyal servant—and a friend.” Abbot Alexander tapped his fingers on a folded letter that lay on his desk, the crested seal broken. He pursed his lips, glancing from me to his nephew and back.

“What I tell you now must not be repeated,” he said sternly. “It will be common knowledge soon, but for now—” I had tried to look trustworthy and close-mouthed; Jamie merely nodded, with a touch of impatience.

“His Highness, Prince Charles Edward, has left Rome, and will arrive in France within the week,” the Abbot said, leaning slightly forward as though to emphasize the importance of what he was saying.

And it was important. James Stuart had mounted an abortive attempt to regain his throne in 1715—an ill-considered military operation that had failed almost immediately for lack of support. Since then—according to Alexander—the exiled James of Scotland had worked tirelessly, writing ceaselessly to his fellow monarchs, and particularly to his cousin, Louis of France, reiterating the legitimacy of his claim to the throne of Scotland and England, and the position of his son, Prince Charles, as heir to that throne.

"His royal cousin Louis has been distressingly deaf to these entirely proper claims," the Abbot had said, frowning at the letter as though it were Louis. "If he's now come to a realization of his responsibilities in the matter, it's cause for great rejoicing among those who hold dear the sacred right of kingship."

Among the Jacobites, that was, James's supporters. Of whom Abbot Alexander of the Abbey of Ste. Anne—born Alexander Fraser of Scotland—was one. Jamie had told me that Alexander was one of the exiled King's most frequent correspondents, in touch with all that touched the Stuart cause.

"He's well placed for it," Jamie had explained to me, discussing the endeavor on which we were about to embark. "The papal messenger system crosses Italy, France, and Spain faster than almost any other. And the papal messengers canna be interfered with by government customs officers, so the letters they carry are less likely to be intercepted."

James of Scotland, exiled in Rome, was supported in large part by the Pope, in whose interest it very much was to have a Catholic monarchy restored to England and Scotland. Therefore, the largest part of James's private mail was carried by papal messenger—and passed through the hands of loyal supporters within the Church hierarchy, like Abbot Alexander of Ste. Anne de Beaupré, who could be depended on to communicate with the King's supporters in Scotland, with less risk than sending letters openly from Rome to Edinburgh and the Highlands.

I watched Alexander with interest, as he expounded the importance of Prince Charles's visit to France. A stocky man of about my own height, he was dark, and considerably shorter than his nephew, but shared with him the faintly slanted eyes, the sharp intelligence, and the talent for discerning hidden motive that seemed to characterize the Frasers I had met.

"So," he finished, stroking his full, dark-brown beard, "I cannot say whether His Highness is in France at Louis's invitation, or has come uninvited, on behalf of his father."

"It makes a wee bit of difference," Jamie remarked, raising one eyebrow skeptically.

His uncle nodded, and a wry smile showed briefly in the thicket of his beard.

"True, lad," he said, letting a faint hint of his native Scots emerge from his usual formal English. "Very true. And that's where you and your wife may be of service, if ye will."

The proposal was simple; His Majesty King James would provide travel expenses and a small stipend, if the nephew of his most loyal and most esteemed friend Alexander would agree to travel to Paris, there to assist his son, His Highness Prince Charles Edward, in whatever ways the latter might require.

I was stunned. We had meant originally to go to Rome because that seemed the best place to embark on our quest: the prevention of the second Jacobite Rising—the '45. From my own knowledge of history, I knew that the Rising, financed from France and carried out by Charles Edward Stuart, would go much farther than had his father's attempt in 1715—but not nearly far enough. If matters progressed as I thought they would, then the troops under Bonnie Prince Charlie would meet with disastrous defeat at Culloden in 1746, and the people of the Highlands would suffer the repercussions of defeat for two centuries thereafter.

Now, in 1744, apparently Charles himself was just beginning his search for support in France. Where better to try to stop a rebellion, than at the side of its leader?

I glanced at Jamie, who was looking over his uncle's shoulder at a small shrine set into the wall. His eyes rested on the gilded figure of Ste. Anne herself and the small sheaf of hothouse flowers laid at her feet, while his thoughts worked behind an expressionless face. At last he blinked once, and smiled at his uncle.

"Whatever assistance His Highness might require? Aye," he said quietly, "I think I can do that. We'll go."

And we had. Instead of proceeding directly to Paris, though, we had come down the coast from Ste. Anne to Le Havre, to meet first with Jamie's cousin, Jared Fraser.

A prosperous Scottish émigré, Jared was an importer of wines and spirits, with a small warehouse and large town house in Paris, and a very large warehouse indeed here in Le Havre, where he had asked Jamie to meet him, when Jamie had written to say we were en route to Paris.

Sufficiently rested by now, I was beginning to feel hungry. There was food on the table; Jamie must have told the chambermaid to bring it while I slept.

I had no dressing gown, but my heavy velvet traveling cloak was handy; I sat up and pulled the warm weight of it over my shoulders before rising to relieve myself, add another stick of wood to the fire, and sit down to my late breakfast.

I chewed hard rolls and baked ham contentedly, washing them down with the jug of milk provided. I hoped Jamie was being adequately fed as well; he insisted that Jared was a good friend, but I had my doubts about the hospitality of some of Jamie's relatives, having met a few of them by now. True, Abbot Alexander had welcomed us—insofar as a man in the abbot's position could be said to welcome having an outlaw nephew with a suspect wife descend upon him unexpectedly. But our sojourn with Jamie's mother's people, the MacKenzies of Leoch, had come within inches of killing me the autumn before, when I had been arrested and tried as a witch.

"Granted," I'd said, "this Jared's a Fraser, and they seem a trifle safer than your MacKenzie relatives. But have you actually met him before?"

"I lived with him for a time when I was eighteen," he told me, dribbling candle-wax onto his reply and pressing his father's wedding ring on the resultant greenish-gray puddle. A small cabochon ruby, its mount was engraved with the Fraser clan motto, *je suis prest*: "I am ready."

"He had me to stay with him when I came to Paris to finish my schooling, and learn a bit of the world. He was verra kind to me; a good friend of my father's. And there's no one knows more about Parisian society than the man who sells it drink," he added, cracking the ring loose from the hardened wax. "I want to talk to Jared before I walk into Louis's court by the side of Charles Stuart; I should like to feel that I have some chance of getting out again," he finished wryly.

"Why? Do you think there'll be trouble?" I asked. "Whatever assistance His Highness might require" seemed to offer quite a bit of latitude.

He smiled at my worried look.

"No, I dinna expect any difficulty. But what is it the Bible says, Sassenach? 'Put not your trust in princes'?" He rose and kissed me quickly on the brow, tucking the ring back in his sporran. "Who am I to ignore the word of God, eh?"

I spent the afternoon in reading one of the herbals that my friend Brother Ambrose had pressed upon me as a parting gift, then in necessary repairs with needle and thread. Neither of us owned many clothes, and while there were advantages in traveling light, it meant that holey socks and undone hems demanded immediate attention. My needlecase was nearly as precious to me as the small chest in which I carried herbs and medicines.

The needle dipped in and out of the fabric, winking in the light from the window. I wondered how Jamie's visit with Jared was going. I wondered still more what Prince Charles would be like. He would be the first historically famous person I had met, and while I knew better than to believe all the legends that had (not had, *would*, I reminded myself) sprung up around him, the reality of the man was a mystery. The Rising of the '45 would depend almost entirely on the personality of this one young man—its failure or success. Whether it took place at all might depend upon the efforts of another young man—Jamie Fraser. And me.

I was still absorbed in my mending and my thoughts, when heavy footsteps in the corridor aroused me to the realization that it was late in the day; the drip of water from the eaves had slowed as the temperature dropped, and the flames of the sinking sun glowed in the ice spears hanging from the roof. The door opened, and Jamie came in.

He smiled vaguely in my direction, then stopped dead by the table, face absorbed as though he were trying to remember something. He took his cloak off, folded it, and hung it neatly over the foot of the bed, straightened, marched over to the other stool, sat down on it with great precision, and closed his eyes.

I sat still, my mending forgotten in my lap, watching this performance with considerable interest. After a moment, he opened his eyes and smiled at me, but didn't say anything. He leaned forward, studying my face with great attention, as though he hadn't seen me in weeks. At last, an expression of profound revelation passed over his face, and he relaxed, shoulders slumping as he rested his elbows on his knees.

"Whisky," he said, with immense satisfaction.

"I see," I said cautiously. "A lot of it?"

He shook his head slowly from side to side, as though it were very heavy. I could almost hear the contents sloshing.

"Not me," he said, very distinctly. "You."

"Me?" I said indignantly.

"Your eyes," he said. He smiled beatifically. His own eyes were soft and dreamy, cloudy as a trout pool in the rain.

"My eyes? What have my eyes got to do with …"

"They're the color of verra fine whisky, wi' the sun shining through them from behind. I thought this morning they looked like sherry, but I was wrong. Not sherry. Not brandy. It's whisky. That's what it is." He looked so gratified as he said this that I couldn't help laughing.

"Jamie, you're terribly drunk. What have you been doing?"

His expression altered to a slight frown.

"I'm not drunk."

"Oh, no?" I laid the mending aside and came over to lay a hand on his forehead. It was cool and damp, though his face was flushed. He at once put his arms about my waist and pulled me close, nuzzling affectionately at my bosom. The smell of mingled spirits rose from him like a fog, so thick as almost to be visible.

"Come here to me, Sassenach," he murmured. "My whisky-eyed lass, my love. Let me take ye to bed."

I thought it a debatable point as to who was likely to be taking whom to bed, but didn't argue. It didn't matter why he thought he was going to bed, after all, provided he got there. I bent and got a shoulder under his armpit to help him up, but he leaned away, rising slowly and majestically under his own power.

"I dinna need help," he said, reaching for the cord at the neck of his shirt. "I told ye, I'm not drunk."

"You're right," I said. " 'Drunk' isn't anywhere near sufficient to describe your current state. Jamie, you're completely pissed."

His eyes traveled down the front of his kilt, across the floor, and up the front of my gown.

"No, I'm not," he said, with great dignity. "I did that outside." He took a step toward me, glowing with ardor. "Come here to me, Sassenach; I'm ready."

I thought "ready" was a bit of an overstatement in one regard; he'd gotten his buttons half undone, and his shirt hung askew on his shoulders, but that was as far as he was likely to make it unaided.

In other respects, though … the broad expanse of his chest was exposed, showing the small hollow in the center where I was accustomed to rest my chin, and the small curly hairs sprang up joyous around his nipples. He saw me looking at him, and reached for one of my hands, clasping it to his breast. He was startlingly warm, and I moved instinctively toward him. The other arm swept round me and he bent to kiss me. He made such a thorough job of it that I felt mildly intoxicated, merely from sharing his breath.

"All right," I said, laughing. "If you're ready, so am I. Let me undress you first, though—I've had enough mending today."

He stood still as I stripped him, scarcely moving. He didn't move, either, as I attended to my own clothes and turned down the bed.

I climbed in and turned to look at him, ruddy and magnificent in the sunset glow. He was finely made as a Greek statue, long-nosed and high-cheeked as a profile on a Roman coin. The wide, soft mouth was set in a dreamy smile, and the slanted eyes looked far away. He was perfectly immobile.

I viewed him with some concern.

"Jamie," I said, "how, exactly, do you decide whether you're drunk?"

Aroused by my voice, he swayed alarmingly to one side, but caught himself on the edge of the mantelpiece. His eyes drifted around the room, then fixed on my face. For an instant, they blazed clear and pellucid with intelligence.

"Och, easy, Sassenach. If ye can stand up, you're not drunk." He let go of the mantelpiece, took a step toward me, and crumpled slowly onto the hearth, eyes blank, and a wide, sweet smile on his dreaming face.

"Oh," I said.

* * *

The yodeling of roosters outside and the clashing of pots below woke me just after dawn the next morning. The figure next to me jerked, waking abruptly, then froze as the sudden movement jarred his head.

I raised up on one elbow to examine the remains. Not too bad, I thought critically. His eyes were screwed tightly shut against stray beams of sunlight, and his hair stuck out in all directions like a hedgehog's spines, but his skin was pale and clear, and the hands clutching the coverlet were steady.

I pried up one eyelid, peered within, and said playfully, "Anybody home?"

The twin to the eye I was looking at opened slowly, to add its baleful glare to the first. I dropped my hand and smiled charmingly at him.

"Good morning."

"That, Sassenach, is entirely a matter of opinion," he said, and closed both eyes again.

"Have you got any idea how much you weigh?" I asked conversationally.

"No."

The abruptness of the reply suggested that he not only didn't know, he didn't care, but I persisted in my efforts.

“Something around fifteen stone, I make it. About as much as a good-sized boar. Unfortunately, I didn’t have any beaters to hang you upside down from a spear and carry you home to the smoking shed.”

One eye opened again, and looked consideringly at me, then at the hearthstone on the far side of the room. One corner of his mouth lifted in a reluctant smile.

“How did you get me in bed?”

“I didn’t. I couldn’t budge you, so I just laid a quilt over you and left you on the hearth. You came to life and crawled in under your own power, somewhere in the middle of the night.”

He seemed surprised, and opened the other eye again.

“I did?”

I nodded and tried to smooth down the hair that spiked out over his left ear.

“Oh, yes. Very single-minded, you were.”

“Single-minded?” He frowned, thinking, and stretched, thrusting his arms up over his head. Then he looked startled.

“No. I couldn’t have.”

“Yes, you could. Twice.”

He squinted down his chest, as though looking for confirmation of this improbable statement, then looked back at me.

“Really? Well, that’s hardly fair; I dinna remember a thing about it.” He hesitated for a moment, looking shy. “Was it all right, then? I didna do anything foolish?”

I flopped down next to him and snuggled my head into the curve of his shoulder.

“No, I wouldn’t call it foolish. You weren’t very conversational, though.”

“Thank the Lord for small blessings,” he said, and a small chuckle rumbled through his chest.

“Mm. You’d forgotten how to say anything except ‘I love you,’ but you said that a lot.”

The chuckle came back, louder this time. “Oh, aye? Well, could have been worse, I suppose.”

He drew in his breath, then paused. He turned his head and sniffed suspiciously at the soft tuft of cinnamon under his raised arm.

"Christ!" he said. He tried to push me away. "Ye dinna want to put your head near my oxter, Sassenach. I smell like a boar that's been dead a week."

"And pickled in brandy after," I agreed, snuggling closer. "How on earth did you get so—ahem—stinking drunk, anyway?"

"Jared's hospitality." He settled himself in the pillows with a deep sigh, arm round my shoulder.

"He took me down to show me his warehouse at the docks. And the storeroom there where he keeps the rare vintages and the Portuguese brandy and the Jamaican rum." He grimaced slightly, recalling. "The wine wasna so bad, for that you just taste, and spit it on the floor when you've done wi' a mouthful. But neither of us could see wasting the brandy that way. Besides, Jared said ye need to let it trickle down the back of your throat, to appreciate it fully."

"How much of it did you appreciate?" I asked curiously.

"I lost count in the middle of the second bottle." Just then, a church bell started to ring nearby; the summons to early Mass. Jamie sat bolt upright, staring at the windowpane, bright with sun.

"Christ, Sassenach! What time is it?"

"About six, I suppose," I said, puzzled. "Why?"

He relaxed slightly, though he stayed sitting up.

"Oh, that's all right, then. I was afraid it was the Angelus bell. I'd lost all track of time."

"I'd say so. Does it matter?"

In a burst of energy, he threw back the quilts and stood up. He staggered a moment, but kept his balance, though both hands went to his head, to make sure it was still attached.

"Aye," he said, gasping a bit. "We've an appointment this morning down at the docks, at Jared's warehouse. The two of us."

"Really?" I clambered out of bed myself, and groped for the chamber pot under the bed. "If he's planning to finish the job, I shouldn't think he'd want witnesses."

Jamie's head popped through the neck of his shirt, eyebrows raised.

"Finish the job?"

"Well, most of your other relatives seem to want to kill you or me; why not Jared? He's made a good start at poisoning you, seems to me."

"Verra funny, Sassenach," he said dryly. "Have ye something decent to wear?"

I had been wearing a serviceable gray serge gown on our travels, acquired through the good offices of the almoner at the Abbey of Ste. Anne, but I did also have the gown in which I had escaped from Scotland, a gift from Lady Annabelle MacRannoch. A pretty leaf-green velvet, it made me look rather pale, but was stylish enough.

"I think so, if there aren't too many saltwater stains on it."

I knelt by the small traveling chest, unfolding the green velvet. Kneeling next to me, Jamie flipped back the lid of my medicine box, studying the layers of bottles and boxes and bits of gauze-wrapped herbs.

"Have ye got anything in here for a verra vicious headache, Sassenach?"

I peered over his shoulder, then reached in and touched one bottle.

"Horehound might help, though it's not the best. And willow-bark tea with sow fennel works fairly well, but it takes some time to brew. Tell you what—why don't I make you up a recipe for hobnailed liver? Wonderful hangover cure."

He bent a suspicious blue eye on me.

"That sounds nasty."

"It is," I said cheerfully. "But you'll feel lots better after you throw up."

"Mphm." He stood up and nudged the chamber pot toward me with one toe.

"Vomiting in the morning is *your* job, Sassenach," he said. "Get it over with and get dressed. I'll stand the headache."

Jared Munro Fraser was a small, spare, black-eyed man, who bore more than a passing resemblance to his distant cousin Murtagh, the Fraser clansman who had accompanied us to Le Havre. When I first saw Jared, standing majestically in the gaping doors of his warehouse, so that streams of longshoremen carrying casks were forced to go around him, the resemblance was strong enough that I blinked and rubbed my eyes. Murtagh, so far as I knew, was still at the inn, attending a lame horse.

Jared had the same lank, dark hair and piercing eyes; the same sinewy, monkey-like frame. But there all resemblance stopped, and as we drew closer, Jamie gallantly clearing a path for me through the mob with elbows and shoulders, I could see the differences as well. Jared's face was oblong, rather than hatchet-shaped, with a cheerful snub nose that effectively ruined the dignified air conferred at a distance by his excellent tailoring and upright carriage.

A successful merchant rather than a cattle-raider, he also knew how to smile—unlike Murtagh, whose natural expression was one of unrelieved dourness—and a broad grin of welcome broke out on his face as we were jostled and shoved up the ramp into his presence.

"My dear!" he exclaimed, clutching me by the arm and yanking me deftly out of the way of two burly stevedores rolling a gigantic cask through the huge door. "So pleased to see you at last!" The cask bumped noisily on the boards of the ramp, and I could hear the rolling slosh of its contents as it passed me.

"You can treat rum like that," Jared observed, watching the ungainly progress of the enormous barrel through the obstructions of the warehouse, "but not port. I always fetch that up myself, along with the bottled wines. In fact, I was just setting off to see to a new shipment of Belle Rouge port. Would you perhaps be interested in accompanying me?"

I glanced at Jamie, who nodded, and we set off at once in Jared's wake, sidestepping the rumbling traffic of casks and hogsheads, carts and barrows, and men and boys of all descriptions carrying bolts of fabric, boxes of grain and foodstuffs, rolls of hammered copper, sacks of flour, and anything else that could be transported by ship.

Le Havre was an important center of shipping traffic, and the docks were the heart of the city. A long, solid wharf ran nearly a quarter-mile round the edge of the harbor, with smaller docks protruding from it, along which were anchored three-masted barks and brigantines, dories and small galleys; a full range of the ships that provisioned France.

Jamie kept a firm hold on my elbow, the better to yank me out of the way of oncoming handcarts, rolling casks, and careless merchants and seamen, who were inclined not to look where they were going but rather to depend on sheer momentum to see them through the scrum of the docks.

As we made our way down the quay, Jared shouted genteelly into my ear on the other side, pointing out objects of interest as we passed, and explaining the history and ownership of the various ships in a staccato, disjointed manner. The *Arianna*, which we were on our way to see, was in fact one of Jared's own ships. Ships, I gathered, might belong to a single owner, more often to a company of merchants who owned them collectively, or, occasionally, to a captain who contracted his vessel, crew, and services for a voyage. Seeing the number of company-owned vessels, compared to the relatively few owned by individuals, I began to form a very respectful idea of Jared's worth.

The *Arianna* was in the middle of the anchored row, near a large warehouse with the name FRASER painted on it in sloping, whitewashed letters. Seeing the name gave me an odd little thrill, a sudden feeling of alliance and belonging, with the realization that I shared that name, and with it, an acknowledged kinship with those who bore it.

The *Arianna* was a three-masted ship, perhaps sixty feet long, with a wide bow. There were two cannon on the side of the ship that faced the dock; in case of robbery on the high seas, I supposed. Men were swarming all over the deck with what I assumed was some purpose, though it looked like nothing so much as an ant's nest under attack.

All sails were reefed and tied, but the rising tide shifted the vessel slightly, swinging the bowsprit toward us. It was decorated with a rather grim-visaged figurehead; with her formidable bare bosom and tangled curls all spangled with salt, the lady looked as though she didn't enjoy sea air all that much.

"Sweet little beauty, is she not?" Jared asked, waving a hand expansively. I assumed he meant the ship, not the figurehead.

"Verra nice," said Jamie politely. I caught his uneasy glance at the boat's waterline, where the small waves lapped dark gray against the hull. I could see that he was hoping we would not be obliged to go on board. A gallant warrior, brilliant, bold, and courageous in battle, Jamie Fraser was also a landlubber.

Definitely not one of the hardy, seafaring Scots who hunted whales from Tarwathie or voyaged the world in search of wealth, he suffered from a seasickness so acute that our journey across the Channel in December had nearly killed him, weakened as he then was by the effects of torture and imprisonment. And while yesterday's drinking orgy with Jared wasn't in the same league, it wasn't likely to have made him any more seaworthy.

I could see dark memories crossing his face as he listened to his cousin extolling the sturdiness and speed of the *Arianna*, and drew near enough to whisper to him.

"Surely not while it's at anchor?"

"I don't know, Sassenach," he replied, with a look at the ship in which loathing and resignation were nicely mingled. "But I suppose we'll find out." Jared was already halfway up the gangplank, greeting the captain with loud cries of welcome. "If I turn green, can ye pretend to faint or something? It will make a poor impression if I vomit on Jared's shoes."

I patted his arm reassuringly. "Don't worry. I have faith in you."

"It isna *me*," he said, with a last, lingering glance at terra firma, "it's my stomach."

The ship stayed comfortingly level under our shoes, however, and both Jamie and his stomach acquitted themselves nobly—assisted, perhaps, by the brandy poured out for us by the captain.

"A nice make," Jamie said, passing the glass briefly under his nose and closing his eyes in approval of the rich, aromatic fumes. "Portuguese, isn't it?"

Jared laughed delightedly and nudged the captain.

"You see, Portis? I told you he had a natural palate! He's only tasted it once before!"

I bit the inside of my cheek and avoided Jamie's eye. The captain, a large, scruffy-looking specimen, looked bored, but grimaced politely in Jamie's direction, exhibiting three gold teeth. A man who liked to keep his wealth portable.

"Ung," he said. "This the lad's going to keep your bilges dry, is it?"

Jared looked suddenly embarrassed, a slight flush rising under the leathery skin of his face. I noticed with fascination that one ear was pierced for an earring, and wondered just what sort of background had led to his present success.

"Aye, well," he said, betraying for the first time a hint of Scots accent, "that's to be seen yet. But I think—" He glanced through the port at the activity taking place on the dock, then back at the captain's glass, drained in three gulps while the rest of us were sipping. "Um, I say, Portis, would you allow me to use your cabin for a moment? I should like to confer with my nephew and his wife—and I see that the aft hold seems to be having a bit of trouble with the cargo nets, from the sound of it." This craftily added observation was enough to send Captain Portis out of the cabin like a charging boar, hoarse voice uplifted in a Spanish-French patois that I luckily didn't understand.

Jared stepped delicately to the door and closed it firmly after the captain's bulky form, cutting down the noise level substantially. He returned to the tiny captain's table and ceremoniously refilled all our glasses before speaking. Then he looked from Jamie to me and smiled once more, in charming deprecation.

"It's a bit more precipitous than I'd meant to make such a request," he said. "But I see the good captain has rather given away my hand. The truth of the matter is"—he raised his glass so the watery reflections from the port shivered through the brandy, striking patches of wavering light from the brass fittings of the cabin—"I need a man." He tipped the cup in Jamie's direction, then brought it to his lips and drank.

"A good man," he amplified, lowering the glass. "You see, my dear," bowing to me, "I have the opportunity of making an exceptional investment in a new winery in the Moselle region. But the evaluation of it is not one I should feel comfortable in entrusting to a subordinate; I should need to see the facilities myself, and advise in their development. The undertaking would require several months."

He gazed thoughtfully into his glass, gently swirling the fragrant brown liquid so its perfume filled the tiny cabin. I had drunk no more than a few sips from my own glass, but began to feel slightly giddy, more from a rising excitement than from drink.

"It's too good a chance to be missed," Jared said. "And there's the chance of making several good contracts with the wineries along the Rhône; the products there are excellent, but relatively rare in Paris. God, they'd sell among the nobility like snow in summer!" His shrewd black eyes gleamed momentarily with visions of avarice, then sparkled with humor as he looked at me.

"But—" he said.

"But," I finished for him, "you can't leave your business here without a guiding hand."

"Intelligence as well as beauty and charm. I congratulate you, Cousin." He tilted a well-groomed head toward Jamie, one eyebrow cocked in humorous approval.

"I confess that I was at something of a loss to see how I was to proceed," he said, setting the glass down on the small table with the air of a man putting aside social frivolity for the sake of serious business. "But when you wrote from Ste. Anne, saying you intended to visit Paris …" He hesitated a moment, then smiled at Jamie, with an odd little flutter of the hands.

"Knowing that you, my lad"—he nodded to Jamie—"have a head for figures, I was strongly inclined to consider your arrival an answer to prayer. Still, I thought that perhaps we should meet and become reacquainted before I took the step of making you a definite proposal."

You mean you thought you'd better see how presentable *I* was, I thought cynically, but smiled at him nonetheless. I caught Jamie's eye, and one of his brows twitched upward. This was our week for proposals, evidently. For a dispossessed outlaw and a suspected English spy, our services seemed to be rather in demand.

Jared's proposal was more than generous; in return for Jamie's running the French end of the business during the next six months, Jared would not only pay him a salary but would leave his Paris town house, complete with staff, at our disposal.

"Not at all, not at all," he said, when Jamie tried to protest this provision. He pressed a finger on the end of his nose, grinning charmingly at me. "A pretty woman to host dinner parties is a great asset in the wine business, Cousin. You have no idea how much wine you can sell, if you let the customers taste it first." He shook his head decidedly. "No, it will be a great service to me, if your wife would allow herself to be troubled by entertaining."

The thought of hosting supper parties for Parisian society was in fact a trifle daunting. Jamie looked at me, eyebrows raised in question, but I swallowed hard and smiled, nodding. It was a good offer; if he felt competent to take over the running of an importing business, the least I could do was order dinner and brush up my sprightly conversational French.

"Not at all," I murmured, but Jared had taken my agreement for granted, and was going on, intent black eyes fixed on Jamie.

"And then, I thought perhaps you'd be needing an establishment of sorts—for the benefit of the other interests which bring you to Paris."

Jamie smiled noncommittally, at which Jared uttered a short laugh and picked up his brandy glass. We had each been provided a glass of water as well, for cleansing the palate between sips, and he pulled one of these close with the other hand.

"Well, a toast!" he exclaimed. "To our association, Cousin—and to His Majesty!" He lifted the brandy glass in salute, then passed it ostentatiously over the glass of water and brought it to his lips.

I watched this odd behavior in surprise, but it apparently meant something to Jamie, for he smiled at Jared, picked up his own glass and passed it over the water.

“To His Majesty,” he repeated. Then, seeing me staring at him in bewilderment, he smiled and explained, “To His Majesty—over the water, Sassenach.”

“Oh?” I said, then, realization dawning, “oh!” The king over the water—King James. Which did a bit to explain this sudden urge on the part of everyone to see Jamie and myself established in Paris, which would otherwise have seemed an improbable coincidence.

If Jared were also a Jacobite, then his correspondence with Abbot Alexander was very likely more than coincidental; chances were that Jamie’s letter announcing our arrival had come together with one from Alexander, explaining the commission from King James. And if our presence in Paris fitted in with Jared’s own plans—then so much the better. With a sudden appreciation for the complexities of the Jacobite network, I raised my own glass, and drank to His Majesty across the water—and our new partnership with Jared.

Jared and Jamie then settled down to a discussion of the business, and were soon head to head, bent over inky sheets of paper, evidently manifests and bills of lading. The tiny cabin reeked of tobacco, brandy fumes, and unwashed sailor, and I began to feel a trifle queasy again. Seeing that I wouldn’t be needed for a while, I stood up quietly and found my way out on deck.

I was careful to avoid the altercation still going on around the rear cargo hatch, and picked my way through coils of rope, objects which I assumed to be belaying pins, and tumbled piles of sail fabric, to a quiet spot in the bow. From here, I had an unobstructed view over the harbor.

I sat on a chest against the taffrail, enjoying the salty breeze and the tarry, fishy smells of ships and harbor. It was still cold, but with my cloak pulled tight around me, I was warm enough. The ship rocked slowly, rising on the incoming tide; I could see the beards of algae on nearby dock pilings lifting and swirling, obscuring the shiny black patches of mussels between them.

The thought of mussels reminded me of the steamed mussels with butter I had had for dinner the night before, and I was suddenly starving. The absurd contrasts of pregnancy seemed to keep me always conscious of my digestion; if I wasn’t vomiting, I was ravenously hungry. The thought of food led me to the thought of menus, which led back to a contemplation of the entertaining Jared had mentioned. Dinner parties, hm? It seemed an odd way to begin the job of saving Scotland, but then, I couldn't really think of anything better.

At least if I had Charles Stuart across a dinner table from me, I could keep an eye on him, I thought, smiling to myself at the joke. If he showed signs of hopping a ship for Scotland, maybe I could slip something into his soup.

Perhaps that wasn't so funny, after all. The thought reminded me of Geillis Duncan, and my smile faded. Wife of the procurator fiscal in Cranesmuir, she had murdered her husband by dropping powdered cyanide into his food at a banquet. Accused as a witch soon afterward, she had been arrested while I was with her, and I had been taken to trial myself; a trial from which Jamie had rescued me. The memories of several days spent in the cold dark of the thieves' hole at Cranesmuir were all too fresh, and the wind seemed suddenly very cold.

I shivered, but not altogether from chill. I could not think of Geillis Duncan without that cold finger down my spine. Not so much because of what she had done, but because of who she had been. A Jacobite, too; one whose support of the Stuart cause had been more than slightly tinged with madness. Worse than that, she was what I was—a traveler through the standing stones.

I didn't know whether she had come to the past as I had, by accident, or whether her journey had been deliberate. Neither did I know precisely *where* she had come from. But my last vision of her, screaming defiance at the judges who would condemn her to burn, was of a tall, fair woman, arms stretched high, showing on one arm the telltale round of a vaccination scar. I felt automatically for the small patch of roughened skin on my own upper arm, beneath the comforting folds of my cloak, and shuddered when I found it.

I was distracted from these unhappy memories by a growing commotion on the next quay. A large knot of men had gathered by a ship's gangway, and there was considerable shouting and pushing going on. Not a fight; I peered over at the altercation, shading my eyes with my hand, but could see no blows exchanged. Instead, an effort seemed to be under way to clear a pathway through the milling crowd to the doors of a large warehouse on the upper end of the quay. The crowd was stubbornly resisting all such efforts, surging back like the tide after each push.

Jamie suddenly appeared behind me, closely followed by Jared, who squinted at the mob scene below. Absorbed by the shouting, I hadn't heard them come up.

"What is it?" I stood and leaned back into Jamie, bracing myself against the increasing sway of the ship underfoot. I was aware at close quarters of his scent; he had bathed at the inn and he smelled clean and warm, with a faint hint of sun and dust. A sharpening of the sense of smell was another effect of pregnancy, apparently; I could smell him even among the myriad stenches and scents of the seaport, much as you can hear a low-pitched voice close by in a noisy crowd.

"I don't know. Some trouble with the other ship, looks like." He reached down and put a hand on my elbow, to steady me. Jared turned and barked an order in gutteral French to one of the sailors nearby. The man promptly hopped over the rail and slid down one of the ropes to the quay, tarred pigtail dangling toward the water. We watched from the deck as he joined the crowd, prodded another seaman in the ribs, and received an answer, complete with expressive gesticulations.

Jared was frowning, as the pigtailed man scrambled back up the crowded gangplank. The sailor said something to him in that same thick-sounding French, too fast for me to follow it. After a few more words' conversation, Jared swung abruptly around and came to stand next to me, lean hands gripping the rail.

"He says there's sickness aboard the *Patagonia*."

"What sort of sickness?" I hadn't thought of bringing my medicine box with me, so there was little I could do in any case, but I was curious. Jared looked worried and unhappy.

"They're afraid it might be smallpox, but they don't know. The port's inspector and the harbor master have been called."

"Would you like me to have a look?" I offered. "I might at least be able to tell you whether it's a contagious disease or not."

Jared's sketchy eyebrows disappeared under the lank black fringe of his hair. Jamie looked mildly embarrassed.

"My wife's well known as a healer, Cousin," he explained, but then turned and shook his head at me.

"No, Sassenach. It wouldna be safe."

I could see the *Patagonia*'s gangway easily; now the gathered crowd moved suddenly back, jostling and stepping on each other's toes. Two seamen stepped down from the deck, a length of canvas slung between them as a stretcher. The white sail-fabric sagged heavily under the weight of the man they carried, and a bare, sun-darkened arm lolled from the makeshift hammock.

The seamen wore strips of cloth tied round their noses and mouths, and kept their faces turned away from the stretcher, jerking their heads as they growled at each other, maneuvering their burden over the splintered planks. The pair passed under the fascinated noses of the crowd and disappeared into a nearby warehouse.

Making a quick decision, I turned and headed for the rear gangplank of the *Arianna*.

"Don't worry," I called to Jamie over one shoulder, "if it is smallpox, I can't get that." One of the seamen, hearing me, paused and gaped, but I just smiled at him and brushed past.

The crowd was still now, no longer surging to and fro, and it was not so difficult to make my way between the muttering clusters of seamen, many of whom frowned or looked startled as I ducked past them. The warehouse was disused; no bales or casks filled the echoing shadows of the huge room, but the scents of sawn lumber, smoked meat, and fish lingered, easily distinguishable from the host of other smells.

The sick man had been hastily dumped near the door, on a pile of discarded straw packing. His attendants pushed past me as I entered, eager to get away.

I approached him cautiously, stopping a few feet away. He was flushed with fever, his skin a queer dark red, scabbed thick with white pustules. He moaned and tossed his head restlessly from side to side, cracked mouth working as though in search of water.

"Get me some water," I said to one of the sailors standing nearby. The man, a short, muscular fellow with his beard tarred into ornamental spikes, merely stared as though he had found himself suddenly addressed by a fish.

Turning my back on him impatiently, I sank to my knees by the sick man and opened his filthy shirt. He stank abominably; probably none too clean to start with, he had been left to lie in his own filth, his fellows afraid to touch him. His arms were relatively clear, but the pustules clustered thickly down his chest and stomach, and his skin was burning to the touch.

Jamie had come in while I made my examination, accompanied by Jared. With them was a small, pear-shaped man in a gold-swagged official's coat and two other men, one a nobleman or a rich bourgeois by his dress; the other a tall, lean individual, clearly a seafarer from his complexion. Probably the captain of the plague ship, if that's what it was.

And that's what it appeared to be. I had seen smallpox many times before, in the uncivilized parts of the world to which my uncle Lamb, an eminent archaeologist, had taken me during my early years. This fellow wasn't pissing blood, as sometimes happened when the disease attacked the kidneys, but otherwise he had every classic symptom.

"I'm afraid it is smallpox," I said.

The *Patagonia*'s captain gave a sudden howl of anguish, and stepped toward me, face contorted, raising his hand as though to strike me.

"No!" he shouted. "Fool of a woman! *Salope! Femme sans cervelle!* Do you want to ruin me?"

The last word was cut off in a gurgle as Jamie's hand closed on his throat. The other hand twisted hard in the man's shirtfront, lifting him onto his toes.

"I should prefer you to address my wife with respect, Monsieur," Jamie said, rather mildly. The captain, face turning purple, managed a short, jerky nod, and Jamie dropped him. He took a step back, wheezing, and sidled behind his companion as though for refuge, rubbing his throat.

The tubby little official was bending cautiously over the sick man, holding a large silver pomander on a chain close to his nose as he did so. Outside, the level of noise dropped suddenly as the crowd pulled back from the warehouse doors to admit another canvas stretcher.

The man before us sat up suddenly, startling the little official so that he nearly fell over. The man stared wildly around the warehouse, then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he fell back onto the straw as though he'd been poleaxed. He hadn't, but the end result was much the same.

"He's dead," I said, unnecessarily.

The official, recovering his dignity along with his pomander, stepped in once more, looked closely at the body, straightened up and announced, "Smallpox. The lady is correct. I'm sorry, Monsieur le Comte, but you know the law as well as anyone."

The man he addressed sighed impatiently. He glanced at me, frowning, then jerked his head at the official.

"I'm sure this can be arranged, Monsieur Pamplemousse. Please, a moment's private conversation …" He motioned toward the deserted foreman's hut that stood some distance away, a small derelict structure inside the larger building. A nobleman by dress as well as by title, Monsieur le Comte was a slender, elegant sort, with heavy brows and thin lips. His entire attitude proclaimed that he was used to getting his way.

But the little official was backing away, hands held out before him as though in self-defense.

"*Non,* Monsieur le Comte," he said, "*Je le regrette, mais c'est impossible*.… It cannot be done. Too many people know about it already. The news will be all over the docks by now." He glanced helplessly at Jamie and Jared, then waved vaguely at the warehouse door, where the featureless heads of spectators showed in silhouette, the late afternoon sun rimming them with gold halos.

"No," he said again, his pudgy features hardening with resolve. "You will excuse me, Monsieur—and Madame," he added belatedly, as though noticing me for the first time. “I must go and institute proceedings for the destruction of the ship.”

The captain uttered another choked howl at this, and clutched at his sleeve, but he pulled away, and hurried out of the building.

The atmosphere following his departure was a trifle strained, what with Monsieur le Comte and his captain both glaring at me, Jamie glowering menacingly at them, and the dead man staring sightlessly up at the ceiling forty feet above.

The Comte took a step toward me, eyes glittering. “Have you any notion what you have done?” he snarled. “Be warned, Madame; you will pay for this day’s work!”

Jamie moved suddenly in the Comte’s direction, but Jared was even faster, tugging at Jamie’s sleeve, pushing me gently in the direction of the door, and murmuring something unintelligible to the stricken captain, who merely shook his head dumbly in response.

“Poor bugger,” Jared said outside, shaking his head. “Phew!” It was chilly on the quay, with a cold gray wind that rocked the ships at anchor, but Jared mopped his face and neck with a large, incongruous red sailcloth handkerchief pulled from the pocket of his coat. “Come on, laddie, let’s find a tavern. I’m needing a drink.”

Safely ensconced in the upper room of one of the quayside taverns, with a pitcher of wine on the table, Jared collapsed into a chair, fanning himself, and exhaled noisily.

“God, what luck!” He poured a large dollop of wine into his cup, tossed it off, and poured another. Seeing me staring at him, he grinned and pushed the pitcher in my direction.

“Well, there’s wine, lassie,” he explained, “and then there’s stuff you drink to wash the dust away. Toss it back quick, before you have time to taste it, and it does the job handily.” Taking his own advice, he drained the cup and reached for the pitcher again. I began to see exactly what had happened to Jamie the day before.

“Good luck or bad?” I asked Jared curiously. I would have assumed the answer to be “bad,” but the little merchant’s air of jovial exhilaration seemed much too pronounced to be due to the red wine, which strongly resembled battery acid. I set down my own cup, hoping the enamel on my molars was intact.

"Bad for St. Germain, good for me," he said succinctly. He rose from his chair and peered out the window.

"Good," he said, sitting down again with a satisfied air. "They'll have the wine off and into the warehouse by sunset. Safe and sound."

Jamie leaned back in his chair, surveying his cousin with one eyebrow raised, a smile on his lips.

"Do we take it that Monsieur le Comte St. Germain's ship also carried spirits, Cousin?"

An ear-to-ear grin in reply displayed two gold teeth in the lower jaw, which made Jared look still more piratical.

"The best aged port from Pinhão," he said happily. "Cost him a fortune. Half the vintage from the Noval vineyards, and no more available for a year."

"And I suppose the other half of the Noval port is what's being unloaded into your warehouse?" I began to understand his delight.

"Right, my lassie, right as rain!" Jared chortled, almost hugging himself at the thought. "D'ye know what that will sell for in Paris?" he demanded, rocking forward and banging his cup down on the table. "A limited supply, and me with the monopoly? God, my profit's made for the year!"

I rose and looked out the window myself. The *Arianna* rode at anchor, already noticeably higher in the water, as the huge cargo nets swung down from the boom mounted on the rear deck, to be carefully unloaded, bottle by bottle, into handcarts for the trip to the warehouse.

"Not to impair the general rejoicing," I said, a little diffidently, "but did you say that your port came from the same place as St. Germain's shipment?"

"Aye, I did." Jared came to stand next to me, squinting down at the procession of loaders below. "Noval makes the best port in the whole of Spain and Portugal; I'd have liked to take the whole bottling, but hadn't the capital. What of it?"

"Only that if the ships are coming from the same port, there's a chance that some of your seamen might have smallpox too," I said.

The thought blanched the wine flush from Jared's lean cheeks, and he reached for a restorative gulp.

"God, what a thought!" he said, gasping as he set the cup down. "But I think it's all right," he said, reassuring himself. "The port's half unloaded already. But I'd best speak to the captain, anyway," he added, frowning. "I'll have him pay the men off as soon as the loading's finished—and if anyone looks ill, they can have their wages and leave at once." He turned decisively and shot out of the room, pausing at the door just long enough to call over his shoulder, "Order some supper!" before disappearing down the stair with a clatter like a small herd of elephants.

I turned to Jamie, who was staring bemusedly into his undrunk cup of wine.

"He shouldn't do that!" I exclaimed. "If he has got smallpox on board, he could spread it all over the city by sending men off with it."

Jamie nodded slowly.

"Then I suppose we'll hope he hasna got it," he observed mildly.

I turned uncertainly toward the door. "But … shouldn't we do something? I could at least go have a look at his men. And tell them what to do with the bodies of the men from the other ship …"

"Sassenach." The deep voice was still mild, but held an unmistakable note of warning.

"What?" I turned back to find him leaning forward, regarding me levelly over the rim of his cup. He looked at me thoughtfully for a minute before speaking.

"D'ye think what we've set ourselves to do is important, Sassenach?"

My hand dropped from the door handle.

"Stopping the Stuarts from starting a rising in Scotland? Yes, of course I do. Why do you ask?"

He nodded, patient as an instructor with a slow pupil.

"Aye, well. If ye do, then you'll come here, sit yourself down, and drink wine wi' me until Jared comes back. And if ye don't …" He paused and blew out a long breath that stirred the ruddy wave of hair above his forehead.

"If ye don't, then you'll go down to a quay full of seamen and merchants who think women near ships are the height of ill luck, who are already spreading gossip that you've put a curse on St. Germain's ship, and you'll tell them what they must do. With luck, they'll be too afraid of ye to rape you before they cut your throat and toss you in the harbor, and me after you. If St. Germain himself doesna strangle you first. Did ye no see the look on his face?"

I came back to the table and sat down, a little abruptly. My knees were a trifle wobbly.

"I saw it," I said. "But could he … he wouldn't …"

Jamie raised his brows and pushed a cup of wine across the table to me.

"He could, and he would if he thought it could be managed inconspicuously. For the Lord's sake, Sassenach, you've cost the man close on a year's income! And he doesna look the sort to take such a loss philosophically. Had ye not told the harbor master it was smallpox, out loud in front of witnesses, a few discreet bribes would have taken care of the matter. As it is, why do ye think Jared brought us up here so fast? For the quality of the drink?"

My lips felt stiff, as though I'd actually drunk a good bit of the vitriol from the pitcher.

"You mean … we're in danger?"

He sat back, nodding.

"Now you've got it," he said kindly. "I dinna suppose Jared wanted to alarm you. I expect he's gone to arrange a guard of some kind for us, as well as to see to his crew. He'll likely be safe enough—everyone knows him, and his crew and loaders are right outside."

I rubbed my hands over the gooseflesh that rippled up my forearms. There was a cheerful fire in the hearth, and the room was warm and smoky, but I felt cold.

"How do you know so much about what the Comte St. Germain might do?" I didn't doubt Jamie at all—I remembered all too well the malevolent black glare the Comte had shot at me in the warehouse—but I did wonder how he knew the man.

Jamie took a small sip of the wine, made a face and put it down.

"For the one thing, he's some reputation for ruthlessness—and other things. I heard a bit about him when I lived in Paris before, though I had the luck never to run afoul of the man then. For another, Jared spent some time yesterday warning me about him; he's Jared's chief business rival in Paris."

I rested my elbows on the battered table, and parked my chin on my folded hands.

"I've made rather a mess of things, haven't I?" I said ruefully. "Got you off on a fine footing in business."

He smiled, then got up and came behind me, bending to put his arms around me. I was still rather unnerved from his sudden revelations, but felt much better to feel the strength and the bulk of him behind me. He kissed me lightly on top of the head.

"Dinna worry, Sassenach," he said. "I can take care of myself. And I can take care of you, too—and you'll let me." There was a smile in his voice, but a question as well, and I nodded, letting my head fall back against his chest.

"I'll let you," I said. "The citizens of Le Havre will just have to take their chances with the pox."

* * *

It was nearly an hour before Jared came back, ears reddened with cold, but throat unslit, and apparently none the worse for wear. I was happy to see him.

"It's all right," he announced, beaming. "Nothing but scurvy and the usual fluxes and chills aboard. No pox." He looked around the room, rubbing his hands together. "Where's supper?"

His cheeks were wind-reddened and he looked cheerful and capable. Apparently dealing with business rivals who settled contentions by assassination was all in a day's work to this merchant. And why not? I thought cynically. He was a bloody Scot, after all.

As if to confirm this view, Jared ordered the meal, acquired an excellent wine to go with it by the simple expedient of sending to his own warehouse for it, and sat down to a genial postprandial discussion with Jamie on ways and means of dealing with French merchants.

"Bandits," he said. "Every man jack o' them would stab ye in the back as soon as look at ye. Filthy thieves. Don't trust them an inch. Half on deposit, half on delivery, and never let a nobleman pay on credit."

Despite Jared's assurances that he had left two men below on watch, I was still a bit nervous, and after supper, I placed myself near the window, where I could see the comings and goings along the pier. Not that my watching out was likely to do a lot of good, I thought; every second man on the dock looked like an assassin to me.

The clouds were closing in over the harbor; it was going to snow again tonight. The reefed sails fluttered wildly in the rising wind, rattling against the spars with a noise that nearly overwhelmed the shouts of the loaders. The harbor glowed with a moment of dull green light as the setting sun was driven into the water by the pressing clouds.

As it grew darker, the bustle to and fro died down, the loaders with their handcarts disappearing up the streets into the town, and the sailors disappearing into the lighted doors of establishments like the one in which I sat. Still, the place was far from deserted; in particular, there was a small crowd still gathered near the ill-fated *Patagonia*. Men in some sort of uniform formed a cordon at the foot of the gangplank; no doubt to prevent anyone going aboard or bringing the cargo off. Jared had explained that the healthy members of the crew would be allowed to come ashore, but not permitted to bring anything off the ship save the clothes that they wore.

"Better than they'd do under the Dutch," he said, scratching the rough black stubble that was beginning to emerge along his jaw. "If a ship's coming in from a port known to have plague of some kind, the damned Hollanders make the sailors swim ashore naked."

"What do they do for clothes once they get ashore?" I asked curiously.

"I don't know," said Jared absently, "but since they'll find a brothel within moments of stepping on land, I don't suppose they'd need any—begging your pardon, m'dear," he added hastily, suddenly remembering that he was talking to a lady.

Covering his momentary confusion with heartiness, he rose and came to peer out of the window beside me.

"Ah," he said. "They're getting ready to fire the ship. Given what she's carrying, they'd best tow it a good way out into the harbor first."

Towropes had been attached to the doomed *Patagonia*, and a number of small boats manned by oarsmen were standing ready, waiting for a signal. This was given by the harbor master, whose gold braid was barely visible as a gleam in the dying light of the day. He shouted, waving both hands slowly back and forth above his head like a semaphore.

His shout was echoed by the captains of the rowboats and galleys, and the towropes slowly lifted from the water as they tautened, water sluicing down the heavy hemp spirals with a splash audible in the sudden silence that struck the docks. The shouts from the towboats were the only sound as the dark hulk of the condemned ship creaked, quivered, and turned into the wind, shrouds groaning as she set out on her last brief voyage.

They left her in the middle of the harbor, a safe distance away from the other ships. Her decks had been soaked with oil, and as the towropes were cast off and the galleys pulled away, the small round figure of the harbor master rose from the seat of the dinghy that had rowed him out. He bent down, head close to one of the seated figures, then rose with the bright sudden flame of a torch in one hand.

The rower behind him leaned away as he drew back his arm and threw the torch. A heavy club wrapped with oil-soaked rags, it turned end over end, the fire shrinking to a blue glow, and landed out of sight behind the railing. The harbor master didn't wait to see the effects of his action; he sat down at once, gesturing madly to the rower, who heaved on the oars, and the small boat shot away across the dark water.

For long moments, nothing happened, but the crowd on the dock stood still, murmuring quietly. I could see the pale reflection of Jamie's face, floating above my own in the dark glass of the window. The glass was cold, and misted over quickly with our breath; I rubbed it clear with the edge of my cloak.

"There," Jamie said softly. The flame ran suddenly behind the railing, a small blue glowing line. Then a flicker, and the forward shrouds sprang out, orange-red lines against the sky. A silent leap, and the tongues of fire danced along the oil-drenched rails, and one furled sail sparked and burst into flame.

In less than a minute, the shrouds of the mizzen had caught, and the mainsail unfurled, its moorings burnt through, a falling sheet of flame. The fire spread too rapidly then to watch its progress; everything seemed alight at once.

"Now," Jared said suddenly. "Come downstairs. The hold will catch in a minute, and that will be the best time to make away. No one will notice us."

He was right; as we crept cautiously out of the tavern door, two men materialized beside Jared—his own seamen, armed with pistols and marlinspikes—but no one else noticed our appearance. Everyone was turned toward the harbor, where the superstructure of the *Patagonia* was visible now as a black skeleton inside a body of rippling flame. There was a series of pops, so close together they sounded like machine-gun fire, and then an almighty explosion that rose from the center of the ship in a fountain of sparks and burning timbers.

"Let's go." Jamie's hand was firm on my arm, and I made no protest. Following Jared, guarded by the sailors, we stole away from the quay, surreptitious as though we had started the fire.

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7

ROYAL AUDIENCE

Jared’s house in Paris stood in the Rue Tremoulins. It was a wealthy district, with stone-faced houses of three, four, and five stories crowded cheek by jowl together. Here and there a very large house stood alone in its own park, but for the most part, a reasonably athletic burglar could have leaped from rooftop to rooftop with no difficulty.

“Mmphm” was Murtagh’s solitary observation, upon beholding Jared’s house. “I’ll find my own lodging.”

“And it makes ye nervous to have a decent roof above your head, man, ye can sleep in the stables,” Jamie suggested. He grinned down at his small, dour godfather. “We’ll ha’ the footman bring ye out your parritch on a silver tray.”

Inside, the house was furnished with comfortable elegance, though as I was later to realize, it was Spartan by comparison with most of the houses of the nobility and the wealthy bourgeois. I supposed that this was at least in part because the house had no lady; Jared had never married, though he showed no signs of feeling the lack of a wife.

“Well, he has a mistress, of course,” Jamie had explained when I speculated about his cousin’s private life.

“Oh, of course,” I murmured.

“But she’s married. Jared told me once that a man of business should never form entanglements with unmarried ladies—he said they demand too much in terms of expense and time. And if ye marry them, they'll run through your money and you'll end up a pauper."

"Fine opinion he's got of wives," I said. "What does he think of your marrying, in spite of all this helpful advice?"

Jamie laughed. "Well, I havena got any money to start with, so I can hardly be worse off. He thinks you're verra decorative; he says I must buy ye a new gown, though."

I spread the skirt of the apple-green velvet, more than a little the worse for wear.

"I suppose so," I agreed. "Or I'll go round wrapped in a bedsheet after a while; this is already tight in the waist."

"Elsewhere, too," he said, grinning as he looked me over. "Got your appetite back, have ye, Sassenach?"

"Oaf," I said coldly. "You know perfectly well that Annabelle MacRannoch is the general size and shape of a shovel handle, whereas I am not."

"You are not," he agreed, eyeing me with appreciation. "Thank God." He patted me familiarly on the bottom.

"I'm to join Jared at the warehouse this morning to go over the ledgers, then we're going to call on some of his clients, to introduce me. Will ye be all right by yourself?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "I'll explore the house a bit, and get acquainted with the servants." I had met the servants en masse when we had arrived late in the previous afternoon, but since we had dined simply in our room, I had seen no one since but the footman who brought the food, and the maid who had come in early in the morning to put back the curtains, lay and light the fire, and carry away the chamber pot. I quailed a bit at the thought of suddenly being in charge of a "staff," but reassured myself by thinking that it couldn't be much different from directing orderlies and junior nurses, and I'd done that before, as a senior nurse at a French field station in 1943.

After Jamie's departure, I took my time in making what toilette could be made with a comb and water, which were the only grooming implements available. If Jared was serious about my holding dinner parties, I could see that a new gown was going to be merely the start of it.

I did have, in the side pocket of my medicine chest, the frayed willow twigs with which I cleaned my teeth, and I got one of these and set to work, thinking over the amazing fortune which had brought us here.

Essentially barred from Scotland, we would have had to find a place to make our future, either in Europe or by emigrating to America. And given what I now knew about Jamie's attitude toward ships, I wasn't at all surprised that he should have looked to France from the start.

The Frasers had strong ties with France; many of them, like Abbot Alexander and Jared Fraser, had made lives here, seldom if ever returning to their native Scotland. And there were many Jacobites as well, Jamie had told me, those who had followed their king into exile, and now lived as best they could in France or Italy while awaiting his restoration.

"There's always talk of it," he had said. "In the houses, mostly, not the taverns. And that's why nothing's come of it. When it gets to the taverns, you'll know it's serious."

"Tell me," I said, watching him brush the dust from his coat, "are all Scots born knowing about politics, or is it just you?"

He laughed, but quickly sobered as he opened the huge armoire and hung up the coat. It looked worn and rather pathetic, hanging by itself in the enormous, cedar-scented space.

"Well, I'll tell ye, Sassenach, I'd as soon not know. But born as I was, between the MacKenzies and the Frasers, I'd little choice in the matter. And ye don't spend a year in French society and two years in an army without learning how to listen to what's being said, and what's being meant, and how to tell the difference between the two. Given these times, though, it isna just me; there's neither laird nor cottar in the Highlands who can stand aside from what's to come."

"What's to come." What *was* to come? I wondered. What *would* come, if we were not successful in our efforts here, was an armed rebellion, an attempt at restoration of the Stuart monarchy, led by the son of the exiled king, Prince Charles Edward (Casimir Maria Sylvester) Stuart.

"Bonnie Prince Charlie," I said softly to myself, looking over my reflection in the large pier glass. He was here, now, in the same city, perhaps not too far away. What would he be like? I could think of him only in terms of his usual historical portrait, which showed a handsome, slightly effeminate youth of sixteen or so, with soft pink lips and powdered hair, in the fashion of the times. Or the imagined paintings, showing a more robust version of the same thing, brandishing a broadsword as he stepped out of a boat onto the shore of Scotland.

A Scotland he would ruin and lay waste in the effort to reclaim it for his father and himself. Doomed to failure, he would attract enough support to cleave the country, and lead his followers through civil war to a bloody end on the field of Culloden. Then he would flee back to safety in France, but the retribution of his enemies would be exacted upon those he left behind.

It was to prevent such a disaster that we had come. It seemed incredible, thinking about it in the peace and luxury of Jared's house. How did one stop a rebellion? Well, if risings were fomented in taverns, perhaps they could be stopped over dinner tables. I shrugged at myself in the mirror, blew an errant curl out of one eye, and went down to cozen the cook.

* * *

The staff, at first inclined to view me with frightened suspicion, soon realized that I had no intention of interfering with their work, and relaxed into a mood of wary obligingness. I had thought at first, in my blur of fatigue, that there were at least a dozen servants lined up in the hallway for my inspection. In fact, there were sixteen of them, counting the groom, the stable-lad and the knife-boy, whom I hadn't noticed in the general scrum. I was still more impressed at Jared's success in business, until I realized just how little the servants were paid: a new pair of shoes and two livres per year for the footmen, a trifle less for the housemaids and kitchenmaids, a little more for such exalted personages as Madame Vionnet, the cook, and the butler, Magnus.

While I explored the mechanics of the household and stored up what information I could glean at home from the gossip of the parlormaids, Jamie was out with Jared every day, calling upon customers, meeting people, preparing himself to "assist His Highness" by making those social connections that might prove of value to an exiled prince. It was among the dinner guests that we might find allies—or enemies.

"St. Germain?" I said, suddenly catching a familiar name in the midst of Marguerite's chatter as she polished the parquet floor. "The Comte St. Germain?"

"*Oui*, Madame." She was a small, fat girl, with an oddly flattened face and popeyes that made her look like a turbot, but she was friendly and eager to please. Now she pursed her mouth up into a tiny circle, portending the imparting of some really scandalous tidbit. I looked as encouraging as possible.

"The Comte, Madame, has a very bad reputation," she said portentously.

Since this was true—according to Marguerite—of virtually everyone who came to dinner, I arched my brows and waited for further details.

"He has sold his soul to the Devil, you know," she confided, lowering her voice and glancing around as though that gentleman might be lurking behind the chimney breast. "He celebrates the Black Mass, at which the blood and flesh of innocent children are shared amongst the wicked!"

A fine specimen you picked to make an enemy of, I thought to myself.

"Oh, everyone knows, Madame," Marguerite assured me. "But it does not matter; the women are mad for him, anyway; wherever he goes, they throw themselves at his head. But then, he is rich." Plainly this last qualification was at least sufficient to balance, if not to outweigh, the blood-drinking and flesh-eating.

"How interesting," I said. "But I thought that Monsieur le Comte was a competitor of Monsieur Jared; doesn't he also import wines?

Why does Monsieur Jared invite him here, then?”

Marguerite looked up from her floor-polishing and laughed.

“Why, Madame! It is so that Monsieur Jared can serve the best Beaune at dinner, tell Monsieur le Comte that he has just acquired ten cases, and at the conclusion of the meal, generously offer him a bottle to take home!”

“I see,” I said, grinning. “And is Monsieur Jared similarly invited to dine with Monsieur le Comte?”

She nodded, white kerchief bobbing over her oil-bottle and rag. “Oh, yes, Madame. But not as often!”

The Comte St. Germain was fortunately not invited for this evening. We dined simply en famille, so that Jared could rehearse Jamie in the few details left to be arranged before his departure. Of these, the most important was the King’s *lever* at Versailles.

Being invited to attend the King’s *lever* was a considerable mark of favor, Jared explained over dinner.

“Not to you, lad,” he said kindly, waving a fork at Jamie. “To me. The King wants to make sure I’m coming back from Germany—or Duverney, the Minister of Finance, does, at least. The latest wave of taxes hit the merchants hard, and a good many of the foreigners left —with the ill effects on the Royal Treasury you can imagine.” He grimaced at the thought of taxes, scowling at the baby eel on his fork.

“I mean to be gone by Monday-week. I’m waiting only for word that the *Wilhelmina*’s come in safe to Calais; then I’m off.” Jared took another bite of eel and nodded at Jamie, talking around the mouthful of food. “I’m leaving the business in good hands, lad; I’ve no worry on that score. We might talk a bit before I go about other matters, though. I’ve arranged with the Earl Marischal that we’ll go with him to Montmartre two days hence, for you to pay your respects to His Highness, Prince Charles Edward.”

I felt a sudden thump of excitement in the pit of my stomach, and exchanged a quick glance with Jamie. He nodded at Jared, as though this were nothing startling, but his eyes sparkled with anticipation as he looked at me. So this was the start of it.

"His Highness lives a very retired life in Paris," Jared was saying as he chased the last eels, slick with butter, around the edge of the plate. "It wouldn't be appropriate for him to appear in society, until and unless the King receives him officially. So His Highness seldom leaves his house, and sees few people, save those supporters of his father who come to pay their respects."

"That isn't what I've heard," I interjected.

"What?" Two pairs of startled eyes turned in my direction, and Jared laid down his fork, abandoning the final eel to its fate.

Jamie arched an eyebrow at me. "What have ye heard, Sassenach, and from whom?"

"From the servants," I said, concentrating on my own eels. Seeing Jared's frown, it occurred to me for the first time that it might not be considered quite the thing for the lady of the house to be gossiping with parlormaids. Well, the hell with it, I thought rebelliously. There wasn't much else for me to do.

"The parlormaid says that His Highness Prince Charles has been paying calls on the Princesse Louise de La Tour de Rohan," I said, plucking a single eel off the fork and chewing slowly. They were delicious, but felt rather disconcerting if swallowed whole, as though the creature were still alive. I swallowed carefully. So far, so good.

"In the absence of the lady's husband," I added delicately.

Jamie looked amused, Jared horrified.

"The Princesse de Rohan?" Jared said. "Marie-Louise-Henriette-Jeanne de La Tour d'Auvergne? Her husband's family are very close to the King." He rubbed his fingers across his lips, leaving a buttery shine around his mouth. "That could be very dangerous," he muttered, as though to himself. "I wonder if the wee fool … but no. Surely he's more sense than that. It must be only inexperience; he's not been so much in society, and things are different in Rome. Still …" He left off muttering and turned to Jamie with decision.

"That will be your first task, lad, in the service of His Majesty. You're much of an age with His Highness, but you have the experience and the judgment of your time in Paris—and my training, I flatter myself." He smiled briefly at Jamie. "You can befriend his Highness; smooth his path as much as may be with those men that will be of use to him; you've met most of them by now. And explain to His Highness—as tactfully as ye can—that gallantry in the wrong direction may do considerable damage to the aims of his father."

Jamie nodded absently, plainly thinking of something else.

"How does our parlormaid come to know about His Highness's vists, Sassenach?" he asked. "She doesna leave the house more than once a week, to go to Mass, does she?"

I shook my head, and swallowed the next mouthful in order to reply.

"So far as I've worked it out, our kitchenmaid heard it from the knife-boy, who heard it from the stable-lad, who got it from the groom next door. I don't know how many people there are in between, but the Rohan house is three doors down the street. I'd imagine the Princesse knows all about us, too," I added cheerfully. "At least she does, if she talks to her kitchenmaid."

"Ladies do *not* gossip with their kitchenmaids," Jared said coldly. He narrowed his eyes at Jamie in a silent adjuration to keep his wife in better order.

I could see the corner of Jamie's mouth twitching, but he merely sipped his Montrachet and changed the subject to a discussion of Jared's latest venture; a shipment of rum, on its way from Jamaica.

When Jared rang the bell for the dishes to be cleared and the brandy brought out, I excused myself. One of Jared's idiosyncrasies was the enjoyment of long black cheroots with his brandy, and I had the distinct feeling that, carefully chewed or not, the eels I had eaten wouldn't benefit from being smoked.

I lay on my bed and tried, with limited success, not to think about eels. I closed my eyes and tried to think of Jamaica—pleasant white beaches under tropical sun. But thoughts of Jamaica led to thoughts of the *Wilhelmina* and thought of ships made me think of the sea, which led directly back to images of giant eels, coiling and writhing through the heaving green waves. I greeted the distraction of Jamie's appearance with relief, sitting up as he came in.

"Phew!" He leaned against the closed door, fanning himself with the loose end of his jabot. "I feel like a smoked sausage. I'm fond of Jared, but I shall be verra pleased when he's taken his damned cheroots to Germany."

"Well, don't come near me, if you smell like a cheroot," I said. "The eels don't like smoke."

"I dinna blame them a bit." He took off his coat and unbuttoned his shirt. "I think it's a plan, ye ken," he confided, tossing his head toward the door as he took his shirt off. "Like the bees."

"Bees?"

"How ye move a hive of bees," he explained, opening the window and hanging his shirt outside from the crank of the casement. "You get a pipe full of the strongest tobacco ye can find, stick it into the hive and blow smoke up into the combs. The bees all fall down stunned, and you can take them where ye like. I think that's what Jared does to his customers; he smokes them into insensibility, and they've signed orders for three times more wine than they meant to before they recover their senses."

I giggled and he grinned, putting a finger to his lips as the sound of Jared's light footsteps came down the corridor, passing our door on his way to his own room.

Danger of discovery past, he came and stretched out beside me, wearing only his kilt and stockings.

"Not too bad?" he asked. "I can sleep in the dressing room, if it is. Or put my head out of the window for airing."

I sniffed his hair, where the scent of tobacco lingered among the ruddy waves. The candlelight shot the red with strands of gold, and I ruffled my fingers through it, enjoying the thick softness of it, and the hard, solid feel of the bone beneath.

"No, it's not too bad. You're not worried about Jared leaving so soon, then?"

He kissed my forehead and lay down, head on the bolster. He smiled up at me, shaking his head.

"No. I've met all the chief customers and the captains, I know all the warehousemen and the officials, I've the price lists and the inventories committed to memory. What's left to learn about the business I must just learn by trying; Jared canna teach me more."

"And Prince Charles?"

He half-closed his eyes and gave a small grunt of resignation. "Aye, well. For that, I must trust to the mercy of God, not Jared. And I daresay it will be easier if Jared isn't here to see what I'm doing."

I lay down beside him, and he turned toward me, sliding an arm around my waist so that we lay close together.

"What *shall* we do?" I asked. "Have you any idea, Jamie?"

His breath was warm on my face, scented with brandy, and I tilted my head up to kiss him. His soft, wide mouth opened on mine, and he lingered in the kiss for a moment before answering.

"Oh, I've ideas," he said, drawing back with a sigh. "God knows what they'll amount to, but I've ideas."

"Tell me."

"Mmphm." He settled himself more comfortably, turning on his back and cradling me in one arm, head on his shoulder.

"Well," he began, "as I see it, it's a matter of money, Sassenach."

"Money? I should have thought it was a matter of politics. Don't the French want James restored because it will cause the English trouble? From the little I recall, Louis wanted—*will* want"—I corrected myself—"Charles Stuart to distract King George from what Louis is up to in Brussels."

"I daresay he does," he said, "but restoring kings takes money. And Louis hasna got so much himself that he can be using it on the one hand to fight wars in Brussels, and on the other to finance invasions of England. You heard what Jared said about the Royal Treasury and the taxes?"

"Yes, but …"

"No, it isna Louis that will make it happen," he said, instructing me. "Though he's something to say about it, of course. No, there are other sources of money that James and Charles will be trying as well, and those are the French banking families, the Vatican, and the Spanish Court."

"James covering the Vatican and the Spanish, and Charles the French bankers, you think?" I asked, interested.

He nodded, staring up at the carved panels of the ceiling. The walnut panels were a soft, light brown in the flickering candle-glow, darker rosettes and ribbons twining from each corner.

"Aye, I do. Uncle Alex showed me correspondence from His Majesty King James, and I should say the Spanish are his best opportunity, judging from that. The Pope's compelled to support him, ye ken, as a Catholic monarch; Pope Clement supported James for a good many years, and now Clement's dead, Benedict continues it, but not at such a high level. But both Philip of Spain and Louis are James's cousins; it's the obligation of Bourbon blood he calls on there." He smiled wryly at me, sidelong. "And from the things I've seen, I can tell ye that Royal blood runs damn thin when it comes to money, Sassenach."

Lifting one foot at a time, he stripped off his stockings one handed and tossed them onto the bedroom stool.

"James got some money from Spain thirty years ago," he observed. "A small fleet of ships, and some men as well. That was the Rising in 1715. But he had ill luck, and James's forces were defeated at Sheriffsmuir—before James himself even arrived. So I'd say the Spanish are maybe none too eager to finance a second try at the Stuart restoration—not without a verra good idea that it might succeed."

"So Charles has come to France to work on Louis and the bankers," I mused. "And according to what I know of history, he'll succeed. Which leaves us where?"

Jamie's arm left my shoulders as he stretched, the shift of his weight tilting the mattress under me.

"It leaves me selling wine to bankers, Sassenach," he said, yawning. "And you talking to parlormaids. And if we blow enough smoke, perhaps we'll stun the bees."

* * *

Just before Jared's departure, he took Jamie to the small house in Montmartre where His Highness, Prince Charles Edward Louis Philip

Casimir, etc. Stuart was residing, biding his time while waiting to see what Louis would or would not do for an impecunious cousin with aspirations to a throne.

I had seen them off, both dressed in their best, and spent the time while they were gone picturing the encounter in my mind, wondering how it had gone.

“How did it go?” I asked Jamie, the moment I got him alone upon his return. “What was he like?”

He scratched his head, thinking.

“Well,” he said at last, “he had a toothache.”

“What?”

“He said so. And it looked verra painful; he kept his face screwed up to one side with his jaw puffed a bit. I canna say whether he’s stiff in his manner usually, or if it was only that it hurt him to talk, but he didna say much.”

After the formal introductions, in fact, the older men, Jared, the Earl Marischal, and a rather seedy-looking specimen referred to casually as “Balhaldy,” had gravitated together and begun talking Scottish politics, leaving Jamie and His Highness more or less to themselves.

“We had a cup of brandywine each,” Jamie obediently reported, under my goading. “And I asked him how he found Paris, and he said he was finding it rather tiresomely confining, as he couldna get any hunting. And so then we talked of hunting. He prefers hunting wi’ dogs to hunting with beaters, and I said I did, too. Then he told me how many pheasants he’d shot on one hunting trip in Italy. He talked about Italy until he said the cold air coming in through the window was hurting his tooth—it’s no a verra well-built house; just a small villa. Then he drank some more brandywine for his tooth, and I told him about stag-hunting in the Highlands, and he said he’d like to try that sometime, and was I a good shot with a bow? And I said I was, and he said he hoped he would have the opportunity to invite me to hunt with him in Scotland. And then Jared said he needed to stop at the warehouse on the way back, so His Highness gave me his hand and I kissed it and we left.”

"Hmm," I said. While reason asserted that naturally the famous—or about-to-be-famous, or possibly-famous, at any rate—were bound to be much like everyone else in their daily behavior, I had to admit that I found this report of the Bonnie Prince a bit of a letdown. Still, Jamie had been invited back. The important thing, as he pointed out, was to become acquainted with His Highness, in order to keep an eye on his plans as any developed. I wondered whether the King of France would be a trifle more impressive in person.

We were not long in finding out. A week later, Jamie rose in the cold, black dark and dressed himself for the long ride to Versailles, to attend the King's *lever*. Louis awoke punctually at six o'clock every morning. At this hour, the favored few chosen to attend the King's toilette should be assembled in the antechamber, ready to join the procession of nobles and attendants who were necessary to assist the monarch in greeting the new day.

Wakened in the small hours by Magnus the butler, Jamie stumbled sleepily out of bed and made ready, yawning and muttering. At this hour, my insides were tranquil, and I luxuriated in that delightful feeling that comes when we observe someone having to do something unpleasant that we are not required to do ourselves.

"Watch carefully," I said, my voice husky with sleep. "So you can tell me everything."

With a sleepy grunt of assent, he leaned over to kiss me, then shuffled off, candle in hand, to see to the saddling of his horse. The last I heard before sinking back under the surface of sleep was Jamie's voice downstairs, suddenly clear and alert in the crisp night air, exchanging farewells with the groom in the street outside.

Given the distance to Versailles, and the chance—of which Jared had warned—of being invited to lunch, I wasn't surprised when he didn't return before noon, but I couldn't help being curious, and waited in increasing impatience until his arrival—finally—near teatime.

“And how was the King’s *lever*?” I asked, coming to help Jamie remove his coat. Wearing the tight pigskin gloves de rigueur at Court, he couldn’t manage the crested silver buttons on the slippery velvet.

“Oh, that feels better,” he said, flexing his broad shoulders in relief as the buttons sprang free. The coat was much too tight in the shoulders; peeling him out of it was like shelling an egg.

“Interesting, Sassenach,” he said, in answer to my question, “at least for the first hour or so.”

As the procession of nobles came into the Royal Bedchamber, each bearing his ceremonial implement—towel, razor, alecup, royal seal, etc.—the gentlemen of the bedchamber drew back the heavy curtains that kept out the dawn, unveiled the draperies of the great bed of state, and exposed the face of *le roi Louis* to the interested eye of the rising sun.

Assisted to a sitting position on the edge of his bed, the King had sat yawning and scratching his stubbled chin while his attendants pulled a silk robe, heavy with embroidery of silver and gold, over the royal shoulders, and knelt to strip off the heavy felt stockings in which the King slept, to be replaced with hose of lighter silk, and soft slippers lined with rabbit fur.

One by one, the nobles of the court came to kneel at the feet of their sovereign, to greet him respectfully and ask how His Majesty had passed the night?

“Not verra well, I should say,” Jamie broke off to observe here. “He looked like he’d slept little more than an hour or two, and bad dreams with it.”

Despite bloodshot eyes and drooping jowls, His Majesty had nodded graciously to his courtiers, then risen slowly to his feet and bowed to those favored guests hovering in the back of the chamber. A dispirited wave of the hand summoned a gentleman of the bedchamber, who led His Majesty to the waiting chair, where he sat with closed eyes, enjoying the ministrations of his attendants, while the visitors were led forward one at a time by the Duc d’Orléans, to kneel before the King and offer a few words of greeting. Formal petitions would be offered a little later, when there was a chance of Louis being awake enough to hear them.

"I wasna there for petitioning, but only as a mark of favor," Jamie explained, "so I just knelt and said, 'Good morning, Your Majesty,' while the Duc told the King who I was."

"Did the King say anything to you?" I asked.

Jamie grinned, hands linked behind his head as he stretched. "Oh, aye. He opened one eye and looked at me as though he didna believe it."

One eye still open, Louis had surveyed his visitor with a sort of dim interest, then remarked, "Big, aren't you?"

"I said, 'Yes, Your Majesty,' " Jamie said. "Then he said, 'Can you dance?' and I said I could. Then he shut his eye again, and the Duc motioned me back."

Introductions complete, the gentlemen of the bedchamber, ceremoniously assisted by the chief nobles, had then proceeded to make the King's toilette. As they did so, the various petitioners came forward at the beckoning of the Duc d'Orléans, to murmur into the King's ear as he twisted his head to accommodate the razor, or bent his neck to have his wig adjusted.

"Oh? And were you honored by being allowed to blow His Majesty's nose for him?" I asked.

Jamie grinned, stretching his linked hands until the knuckles cracked.

"No, thank God. I skulked about against the wardrobe, trying to look like part of the furniture, wi' the bitty wee comtes and ducs all glancing at me out of the sides of their eyes as though Scottishness were catching."

"Well, at least you were tall enough to see everything?"

"Oh, aye. That I did, even when he eased himself on his *chaise percée*."

"He really did that? In front of everyone?" I was fascinated. I'd read about it, of course, but found it difficult to believe.

"Oh, aye, and everyone behaving just as they did when he washed his face and blew his nose. The Duc de Neve had the unspeakable honor," he added ironically, "of wiping His Majesty's arse for him. I didna notice what they did wi' the towel; took it out and had it gilded, no doubt.

"A verra wearisome business it was, too," he added, bending over and setting his hands on the floor to stretch the muscles of his legs. "Took forever; the man's tight as an owl."

"Tight as an owl?" I asked, amused at the simile. "Constipated, do you mean?"

"Aye, costive. And no wonder, the things they eat at Court," he added censoriously, stretching backward. "Terrible diet, all cream and butter. He should eat parritch every morning for breakfast—that'd take care of it. Verra good for the bowels, ye ken."

If Scotsmen were stubborn about anything—and, in fact, they tended to be stubborn about quite a number of things, truth be known—it was the virtues of oatmeal parritch for breakfast. Through eons of living in a land so poor there was little to eat but oats, they had as usual converted necessity into a virtue, and insisted that they liked the stuff.

Jamie had by now thrown himself on the floor and was doing the Royal Air Force exercises I had recommended to strengthen the muscles of his back.

Returning to his earlier remark, I said, "Why did you say 'tight as an owl'? I've heard that before, to mean drunk, but not costive. Are owls constipated, then?"

Completing his course, he flipped over and lay on the rug, panting.

"Oh, aye." He blew out a long sigh, and caught his breath. He sat up and pushed the hair out of his eyes. "Or not really, but that's the story ye hear. Folk will tell ye that owls havena got an arsehole, so they canna pass the things they eat—like mice, aye? So the bones and the hairs and such are all made up into a ball, and the owl vomits them out, not bein' able to get rid of them out the other end."

"Really?"

"Oh, aye, that's true enough, they do. That's how ye find an owl-tree; look underneath for the pellets on the ground. Make a terrible mess, owls do," he added, pulling his collar away from his neck to let air in.

"But they have got arseholes," he informed me. "I knocked one out of a tree once wi' a slingshot and looked."

"A lad with an inquiring mind, eh?" I said, laughing.

"To be sure, Sassenach." He grinned. "And they do pass things that way, too. I spent a whole day sitting under an owl-tree with Ian, once, just to make sure."

"Christ, you *must* have been curious," I remarked.

"Well, I wanted to know. Ian didna want to sit still so long, and I had to pound on him a bit to make him stop fidgeting." Jamie laughed, remembering. "So he sat still wi' me until it happened, and then he snatched up a handful of owl pellets, jammed them down the neck of my shirt, and was off like a shot. God, he could run like the wind." A tinge of sadness crossed his face, his memory of the fleet-footed friend of his youth clashing with more recent memories of his brother-in-law, hobbling stiffly, if good-naturedly, on the wooden leg a round of grapeshot taken in a foreign battle had left him with.

"That sounds an awful way to live," I remarked, wanting to distract him. "Not watching owls, I don't mean—the King. No privacy, ever, not even in the loo."

"I wouldna care for it myself," Jamie agreed. "But then he's the King."

"Mmm. And I suppose all the power and luxury and so forth makes up for a lot."

He shrugged. "Well, if it does or no, it's the bargain God's made for him, and he's little choice but to make the best of it." He picked up his plaid and drew the tail of it through his belt and up to his shoulder.

"Here, let me." I took the silver ring-brooch from him and fastened the flaming fabric at the crest of his shoulder. He arranged the drape, smoothing the vivid wool between his fingers.

"I've a bargain like that myself, Sassenach," he said quietly, looking down at me. He smiled briefly. "Though thank God it doesna mean inviting Ian to wipe my arse for me. But I was born laird. I'm the steward of that land and the people on it, and I must make the best of my own bargain wi' them."

He reached out and touched my hair lightly.

"That's why I was glad when ye said we'd come, to try and see what we might do. For there's a part of me would like no better than to take you and the bairn and go far away, to spend the rest of my life working the fields and the beasts, to come in in the evenings and lie beside ye, quiet through the night."

The deep blue eyes were hooded in thought, as his hand returned to the folds of his plaid, stroking the bright checks of the Fraser tartan, with the faint white stripe that distinguished Lallybroch from the other septs and families.

"But if I did," he went on, as though speaking more to himself than to me, "there's a part of my soul would feel forsworn, and I think—I think I would always hear the voices of the people that are mine, calling out behind me."

I laid a hand on his shoulder, and he looked up, a faint lopsided smile on the wide mouth.

"I think you would, too," I said. "Jamie … whatever happens, whatever we're able to do …" I stopped, looking for words. As so often before, the sheer enormity of the task we had taken on staggered me and left me speechless. Who were we, to alter the course of history, to change the course of events not for ourselves, but for princes and peasants, for the entire country of Scotland?

Jamie laid his hand over mine and squeezed it reassuringly.

"No one can ask more of us than our best, Sassenach. Nay, if there's blood shed, it wilna lie on our hands at least, and pray God it may not come to that."

I thought of the lonely gray clanstones on Culloden Moor, and the Highland men who might lie under them, if we were unsuccessful.

"Pray God," I echoed.

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8

UNLAID GHOSTS AND CROCODILES

Between Royal audiences and the daily demands of Jared’s business, Jamie seemed to be finding life full. He disappeared with Murtagh soon after breakfast each morning, to check new deliveries to the warehouse, make inventories, visit the docks on the Seine, and conduct tours of what sounded from his description to be extremely unsavory taverns.

“Well, at least you’ve got Murtagh with you,” I remarked, taking comfort from the fact, “and the two of you can’t get in too much trouble in broad daylight.” The wiry little clansman was unimpressive to look at, his attire varying from that of the ne’er-do-wells on the docks only by the fact that the lower half was tartan plaid, but I had ridden through half of Scotland with Murtagh to rescue Jamie from Wentworth Prison, and there was no one in the world whom I would sooner have trusted with his welfare.

After luncheon, Jamie would make his rounds of calls—social and business, and an increasing number of both—and then retire into his study for an hour or two with the ledgers and account books before dinner. He was busy.

I was not. A few days of polite skirmishing with Madame Vionnet, the head-cook, had left it clear who was in charge of the household, and it wasn’t me. Madame came to my sitting room each morning, to consult me on the menu for the day, and to present me with the list of expenditures deemed necessary for the provisioning of the kitchen-fruit, vegetables, butter, and milk from a farm just outside the city, delivered fresh each morning, fish caught from the Seine and sold from a barrow in the street, along with fresh mussels that poked their sealed black curves from heaps of wilting waterweed. I looked over the lists for form's sake, approved everything, praised the dinner of the night before, and that was that. Aside from the occasional call to open the linen cupboard, the wine cellar, the root cellar, or the pantry with a key from my bunch, my time was then my own, until the hour came to dress for dinner.

The social life of Jared's establishment continued much as it had when he was in residence. I was still cautious about entertaining on a large scale, but we held small dinners every night, to which came nobles, chevaliers, and ladies, poor Jacobites in exile, wealthy merchants and their wives.

However, I found that eating and drinking and preparing to eat and drink was not really sufficient occupation. I fidgeted to the point that Jamie at last suggested I come and copy ledger entries for him.

"Better do that than be gnawin' yourself," he said, looking critically at my bitten nails. "Beside, ye write a fairer hand than the warehouse clerks."

So it was that I was in the study, crouched industriously over the enormous ledger books, when Mr. Silas Hawkins came late one afternoon, with an order for two tuns of Flemish brandy. Mr. Hawkins was stout and prosperous; an émigré like Jared, he was an Englishman who specialized in the export of French brandies to his homeland.

I supposed that a merchant who looked like a teetotaler would find it rather difficult to sell people wines and spirits in quantity. Mr. Hawkins was fortunate in this regard, in that he had the permanently flushed cheeks and jolly smile of a reveler, though Jamie had told me that the man never tasted his own wares, and in fact seldom drank anything beyond rough ale, though his appetite for food was a legend in the taverns he visited. An expression of alert calculation lurked at the back of his bright brown eyes, behind the smooth bonhomie that oiled his transactions.

"My best suppliers, I do declare," he declared, signing a large order with a flourish. "Always dependable, always of the first quality. I shall miss your cousin sorely in his absence," he said, bowing to Jamie, "but he's done well in his choice of a substitute. Trust a Scotsman to keep the business in the family."

The small, bright eyes lingered on Jamie's kilt, the Fraser red of it bright against the dark wood paneling of the drawing room.

"Just over from Scotland recently?" Mr. Hawkins asked casually, feeling inside his coat.

"Nay, I've been in France for a time." Jamie smiled, turning the question away. He took the quill pen from Mr. Hawkins, but finding it too blunted for his taste, tossed it aside, pulling a fresh one from the bouquet of goose feathers that sprouted from a small glass jug on the sideboard.

"Ah. I see from your dress that you are a Highland Scot; I had thought perhaps you would be able to advise me as to the current sentiments prevailing in that part of the country. One hears such rumors, you know." Mr. Hawkins subsided into a chair at the wave of Jamie's hand, his round, rosy face apparently intent on the fat leather purse he had drawn from his pocket.

"As for rumors—well, that's the normal state of affairs in Scotland, no?" Jamie said, studiously sharpening the fresh quill. "But sentiments? Nay, if ye mean politics, I'm afraid I've little attention for such things myself." The small penknife made a sharp snicking sound as the horny slivers shaved off the thick stem of the quill.

Mr. Hawkins brought out several silver pieces from his purse, stacking them neatly in a tidy column between the two men.

" 'Strewth?" he said, almost absently. "If so, you're the first Highlander I've met who hadn't."

Jamie finished his sharpening and held the point of the quill up, squinting to judge its angle.

"Mm?" he said vaguely. "Aye, well, I've other matters that concern me; the running of a business such as this is time-consuming, as you'll know yourself, I imagine."

"So it is." Mr. Hawkins counted over the coins in his column once more and removed one, replacing it with two smaller ones. "I've heard that Charles Stuart has recently arrived in Paris," he said. His round tippler's face showed no more than mild interest, but the eyes were alert in their pockets of fat.

"Oh, aye," Jamie muttered, his tone of voice leaving it open whether this was acknowledgment of fact, or merely an expression of polite indifference. He had the order before him, and was signing each page with excessive care, crafting the letters rather than scribbling them, as was his usual habit. A left-handed man forced as a boy to write right-handed, he always found letters difficult, but he seldom made such a fuss of it.

"You do not share your cousin's sympathies in that direction, then?" Hawkins sat back a little, watching the crown of Jamie's bent head, which was naturally rather noncommital.

"Is that any concern of yours, sir?" Jamie raised his head, and fixed Mr. Hawkins with a mild blue stare. The plump merchant returned the look for a moment, then waved a podgy hand in airy dismissal.

"Not at all," he said smoothly. "Still, I am familiar with your cousin's Jacobite leanings—he makes no secret of them. I wondered only whether all Scots were of one mind on this matter of the Stuart pretensions to the throne."

"If you've had much to do wi' Highland Scots," Jamie said dryly, handing across a copy of the order, "then ye'll know that it's rare to find two of them in agreement on anything much beyond the color of the sky—and even that is open to question from time to time."

Mr. Hawkins laughed, his comfortable paunch shaking under his waistcoat, and tucked the folded paper away in his coat. Seeing that Jamie was not eager to have this line of inquiry pursued, I stepped in at this point with a hospitable offer of Madeira and biscuits.

Mr. Hawkins looked tempted for a moment, but then shook his head regretfully, pushing back his chair to rise.

"No, no, I thank you, milady, but no. The *Arabella* docks this Thursday, and I must be at Calais to meet her. And the devil of a lot there is to do before I set foot in the carriage to leave." He grimaced at a large sheaf of orders and receipts he had pulled from his pocket, added Jamie's receipt to the heap, and stuffed them back into a large leather traveling wallet.

"Still," he said, brightening, "I can do a bit of business on the way; I shall call in at the inns and public houses between here and Calais."

"If ye call in at *all* the taverns 'twixt here and the coast, you'll no reach Calais 'til next month," observed Jamie. He fished his own purse from his sporran and scooped the small column of silver into it.

"Too true, milord," Mr. Hawkins said, frowning ruefully. "I suppose I must give one or two the miss, and catch them up on my way back."

"Surely you could send someone to Calais in your place, if your time is so valuable?" I suggested.

He rolled his eyes expressively, pursing his jolly little mouth into something as close to mournfulness as could be managed within the limitations of its shape.

"Would that I could, milady. But the shipment the *Arabella* carries is, alas, nothing I can consign to the good offices of a functionary. My niece Mary is aboard," he confided, "bound even as we speak for the French coast. She is but fifteen, and has never been away from her home before. I am afraid I could scarce leave her to find her way to Paris alone."

"I shouldn't think so," I agreed politely. The name seemed familiar, but I couldn't think why. Mary Hawkins. Undistinguished enough; I couldn't connect it with anything in particular. I was still musing over it when Jamie rose to see Mr. Hawkins to the door.

"I trust your niece's journey will be pleasant," he said politely. "Does she come for schooling, then? Or to visit relatives?"

"For marriage," said her uncle with satisfaction. "My brother has been fortunate in securing a most advantageous match for her, with a member of the French nobility." He seemed to expand with pride at this, the plain gold buttons straining the fabric of his waistcoat. "My elder brother is a baronet, you know."

"She's fifteen?" I said, uneasily. I knew that early marriages were not uncommon, but fifteen? Still, I had been married at nineteen—and again at twenty-seven. I knew the hell of a lot more at twenty-seven.

“Er, has your niece been acquainted with her fiancé for very long?” I asked cautiously.

“Never met him. In fact”—Mr. Hawkins leaned close, laying a finger next to his lips and lowering his voice—“she doesn’t yet know about the marriage. The negotiations are not quite complete, you see.”

I was appalled at this, and opened my mouth to say something, but Jamie clutched my elbow tightly in warning.

“Well, if the gentleman is of the nobility, perhaps we shall see your niece at Court, then,” he suggested, shoving me firmly toward the door like the blade of a bulldozer. Mr. Hawkins, moving perforce to avoid my stepping on him, backed away, still talking.

“Indeed you may, milord Broch Tuarach. Indeed, I should deem it a great honor for yourself and your lady to meet my niece. I am sure she would derive great comfort from the society of a countrywoman,” he added with a smarmy smile at me. “Not that I would presume upon what is merely a business acquaintance, to be sure.”

The hell you wouldn’t presume, I thought indignantly. You’d do anything you could to squeeze your family into the French nobility, including marrying your niece to … to …

“Er, who *is* your niece’s fiancé?” I asked bluntly.

Mr. Hawkins’s face grew cunning, and he leaned close enough to whisper hoarsely into my ear.

“I really should not say until the contracts have been signed, but seeing as it is your ladyship.… I can tell you that it is a member of the House of Gascogne. And a very high-ranking member indeed!”

“Indeed,” I said.

Mr. Hawkins went off rubbing his hands together in a perfect frenzy of anticipation, and I turned at once to Jamie.

“Gascogne! He must mean … but he can’t, can he? That revolting old beast with the snuff stains on his chin who came to dinner last week?”

“The Vicomte Marigny?” Jamie said, smiling at my description. “I suppose so; he’s a widower, and the only single male of that house, so far as I know. I dinna think it’s snuff, though; it’s only the way his beard grows. A bit moth-eaten," he admitted, "but it's bound to be a hellish shave, wi' all those warts."

"He can't marry a fifteen-year-old girl to … to … *that*! And without even asking her!"

"Oh, I expect he can," Jamie said, with infuriating calmness. "In any case, Sassenach, it isna your affair." He took me firmly by both arms and gave me a little shake.

"D'ye hear me? I know it's strange to ye, but that's how matters are. After all"—the long mouth curled up at one corner—"you, were made to wed against your will. Reconciled yourself to it yet, have ye?"

"Sometimes I wonder!" I yanked, trying to pull my arms free, but he merely gathered me in, laughing, and kissed me. After a moment, I gave up fighting. I relaxed into his embrace, admitting surrender, if only temporarily. I *would* meet with Mary Hawkins, I thought, and we'd see just what she thought about this proposed marriage. If she didn't want to see her name on a marriage contract, linked with the Vicomte Marigny, then … Suddenly I stiffened, pushing away from Jamie's embrace.

"What is it?" he looked alarmed. "Are ye ill, lass? You've gone all white!"

And little wonder if I had. For I had suddenly remembered where I had seen the name of Mary Hawkins. Jamie was wrong. This *was* my affair. For I had seen the name, written in a copperplate hand at the top of a genealogy chart, the ink old and faded by time to a sepia brown. Mary Hawkins was not meant to be the wife of the decrepit Vicomte Marigny. She was to marry Jonathan Randall, in the year of our Lord 1745.

* * *

"Well, she can't, can she?" Jamie said. "Jack Randall is dead." He finished pouring the glass of brandy, and held it out to me. His hand was steady on the crystal stem, but the line of his mouth was set and his voice clipped the word "dead," giving it a vicious finality.

"Put your feet up, Sassenach," he said. "You're still pale." At his motion, I obediently pulled up my feet and stretched out on the sofa. Jamie sat down near my head, and absently rested a hand on my shoulder. His fingers felt warm and strong, gently massaging the small hollow of the joint.

"Marcus MacRannoch told me he'd seen Randall trampled to death by cattle in the dungeons of Wentworth Prison," he said again, as though seeking to reassure himself by repetition. "A 'rag doll, rolled in blood.' That's what Sir Marcus said. He was verra sure about it."

"Yes." I sipped my brandy, feeling the warmth come back into my cheeks. "He told me that, too. No, you're right, Captain Randall is dead. It just gave me a turn, suddenly remembering about Mary Hawkins. Because of Frank." I glanced down at my left hand, resting on my stomach. There was a small fire burning on the hearth, and the light of it caught the smooth gold band of my first wedding ring. Jamie's ring, of Scottish silver, circled the fourth finger of my other hand.

"Ah." Jamie's touch on my shoulder stilled. His head was bent, but he glanced up to meet my gaze. We had not spoken of Frank since I had rescued Jamie from Wentworth, nor had Jonathan Randall's death been mentioned between us. At the time it had seemed of little importance, except insofar as it meant that no more danger menaced us from that direction. And since then, I had been reluctant to bring back any memory of Wentworth to Jamie.

"You know he is dead, do ye not, *mo duinne*?" Jamie spoke softly, his fingers resting on my wrist, and I knew he spoke of Frank, not Jonathan.

"Maybe not," I said, my eyes still fixed on the ring. I raised my hand, so the metal gleamed in the fading afternoon light. "If he's dead, Jamie—if he won't exist, because Jonathan is dead—then why do I still have the ring he gave me?"

He stared at the ring, and I saw a small muscle twitch near his mouth. His face was pale, too, I saw. I didn't know whether it would do him harm to think of Jonathan Randall now, but there seemed little choice.

"You're sure that Randall had no children before he died?" he asked. "That would be an answer."

"It would," I said, "but no, I'm sure not. Frank"—my voice trembled a bit on the name, and Jamie's grip on my wrist tightened—"Frank made quite a bit of the tragic circumstances of Jonathan Randall's death. He said that he—Jack Randall—had died at Culloden Field, in the last battle of the Rising, and his son—that would be Frank's five-times great-grandfather—was born a few months after his father's death. His widow married again, a few years later. Even if there were an illegitimate child, it wouldn't be in Frank's line of descent."

Jamie's forehead was creased, and a thin vertical line ran between his brows. "Could it be a mistake, then—that the child was not Randall's at all? Frank may come only of Mary Hawkins's line—for we know she still lives."

I shook my head helplessly.

"I don't see how. If you'd known Frank—but no, I suppose I've never told you. When I first met Jonathan Randall, I thought for the first moment that he *was* Frank—they weren't the same, of course, but the resemblance was … startling. No, Jack Randall was Frank's ancestor, all right."

"I see." Jamie's fingers had grown damp; he took them away and wiped them absently on his kilt.

"Then … perhaps the ring means nothing, *mo duinne*," he suggested gently.

"Perhaps not." I touched the metal, warm as my own flesh, then dropped my hand helplessly. "Oh, Jamie, I don't know! I don't know anything!"

He rubbed his knuckles tiredly on the crease between his eyes. "Neither do I, Sassenach." He dropped his hand and tried to smile at me.

"There's the one thing," he said. "You said that Frank told you Jonathan Randall would die at Culloden?"

"Yes. In fact, I told Jack Randall that myself, to scare him—at Wentworth, when he put me out in the snow, before … before going back to you." His eyes and mouth clamped shut in sudden spasm, and I swung my feet down, alarmed.

"Jamie! Are you all right?" I tried to put a hand on his head, but he pulled away from my touch, rising and going to the window.

"No. Yes. It's all right, Sassenach. I've been writing letters all the morning, and my head's fit to burst. Dinna worry yourself." He waved me away, pressing his forehead against the cold pane of the window, eyes tight closed. He went on speaking, as though to distract himself from the pain.

"Then, if you—and Frank—knew that Jack Randall would die at Culloden, but we know that he shall not … then it can be done, Claire."

"What can be done?" I hovered anxiously, wanting to help, but not knowing what to do. Clearly he didn't want to be touched.

"What you know will happen can be changed." He raised his head from the window and smiled tiredly at me. His face was still white, but the traces of that momentary spasm were gone. "Jack Randall died before he ought, and Mary Hawkins will wed another man. Even if that means that your Frank wilna be born—or perhaps will be born some other way," he added, to be comforting, "then it also means that we have a chance of succeeding in what we've set ourselves to do. Perhaps Jack Randall didna die at Culloden Field, because the battle there will never happen."

I could see him make the effort to stir himself, to come to me and put his arms around me. I held him about the waist, lightly, not moving. He bent his head, resting his forehead on my hair.

"I know it must grieve ye, *mo duinne*. But may it not ease ye, to know that good may come of it?"

"Yes," I whispered at last, into the folds of his shirt. I disengaged myself gently from his arms and laid my hand along his cheek. The line between his eyes was deeper, and his eyes slightly unfocused, but he smiled at me.

"Jamie," I said, "go and lie down. I'll send a note to the d'Arbanvilles, to say we can't come tonight."

"Och, no," he protested. "I'll be fine. I know this kind of headache, Sassenach; it's only from the writing, and an hour's sleep will cure it. I'll go up now." He turned toward the door, then hesitated and turned back, half-smiling.

"And if I should call out in my sleep, Sassenach, just lay your hand upon me, and say to me, 'Jack Randall's dead.' And it will aye be well wi' me."

* * *

Both food and company at the d'Arbanvilles were good. We came home late, and I fell into a sound sleep the instant my head hit the pillow. I slept dreamlessly, but waked suddenly in the middle of the night, knowing something was wrong.

The night was cold, and the down quilt had slithered off onto the floor, as was its sneaky habit, leaving only the thin woolen blanket over me. I rolled over, half-asleep, reaching for Jamie's warmth. He was gone.

I sat up in bed, looking for him, and saw him almost at once, sitting on the window seat, head in his hands.

"Jamie! What is it? Have you got headache again?" I groped for the candle, meaning to find my medicine box, but something in the way he sat made me abandon the search and go to him at once.

He was breathing hard, as though he had been running, and cold as it was, his body was drenched with sweat. I touched his shoulder and found it hard and cold as a metal statue.

He jerked back at my touch and sprang to his feet, eyes wide and black in the night-filled room.

"I didn't mean to startle you," I said. "Are you all right?"

I wondered briefly if he were sleepwalking, for his expression didn't change; he looked straight through me, and whatever he saw, he didn't like it.

"Jamie!" I said sharply. "Jamie, wake up!"

He blinked then, and saw me, though his expression stayed fixed in the desperate lines of a hunted beast.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm awake." He spoke as though wanting to convince himself of the fact.

"What is it? Did you have a nightmare?"

"A dream. Aye. It was a dream."

I stepped forward and put a hand on his arm.

"Tell me. It will go away if you tell me about it."

He grasped me hard by the forearms, as much to keep me from touching him as for support. The moon was full, and I could see that every muscle of his body was tensed, hard and motionless as stone, but pulsing with furious energy, ready to explode into action.

"No," he said, still sounding dazed.

"Yes," I said. "Jamie, talk to me. Tell me. Tell me what you see."

"I canna … see anything. Nothing. I can't see."

I pulled, turning him from the shadows of the room to face the bright moonlight from the window. The light seemed to help, for his breathing slowed, and in halting, painful bits, the words came out.

It was the stones of Wentworth Prison that he dreamed of. And as he spoke, the shape of Jonathan Randall walked the room. And lay naked in my bed, atop the woolen blanket.

There had been the sound of hoarse breathing close behind him, and the feel of sweat-drenched skin, sliding against his own. He gritted his teeth in an agony of frustration. The man behind him sensed the small movement and laughed.

"Oh, we've some time yet before they hang you, my boy," he whispered. "Plenty of time to enjoy it." Randall moved suddenly, hard and abrupt, and he made a small involuntary sound.

Randall's hand stroked back the hair from his brow and smoothed it around his ear. The hot breath was close to his ear and he turned his head to escape, but it followed him, breathing words.

"Have you ever seen a man hanged, Fraser?" The words went on, not waiting for him to reply, and a long, slim hand came around his waist, gently stroking the slope of his belly, teasing its way lower with each word.

"Yes, of course you have; you were in France, you'll have seen deserters hanged now and then. A hanged man looses his bowels, doesn't he? As the rope tightens fast round his neck." The hand was gripping him, lightly, firmly, rubbing and stroking. He clenched his good hand tight around the edge of the bed and turned his face hard into the scratchy blanket, but the words pursued him.

"That will happen to you, Fraser. Just a few more hours, and you'll feel the noose." The voice laughed, pleased with itself. "You'll go to your death with your arse burning from my pleasure, and when you lose your bowels, it will be my spunk running down your legs and dripping on the ground below the gallows."

He made no sound. He could smell himself, crusted with filth from his imprisonment, acrid with the sweat of fear and anger. And the man behind him, the rank stench of the animal breaking through the delicate scent of the lavender toilet water.

"The blanket," he said. His eyes were closed, face strained in the moonlight. "It was rough under my face, and all I could see were the stones of the wall before me. There was nothing there to fix my mind to … nothing I could see. So I kept my eyes closed and thought of the blanket under my cheek. It was all I could feel besides the pain … and him. I … held to it."

"Jamie. Let me hold you." I spoke quietly, trying to calm the frenzy I could feel running through his blood. His grip on my arms was tight enough to numb them. But he wouldn't let me move closer; he held me away as surely as he clung to me.

Suddenly he freed me, jerking away and turning toward the moon-filled window. He stood tense and quivering as a bowstring just fired, but his voice was calm.

"No. I willna use ye that way, lassie. Ye shallna be part of it."

I took a step toward him, but he stopped me with a quick motion. He turned his face back to the window, calm now, and blank as the glass he looked through.

"Get ye to bed, lassie. Leave me to myself a bit; I'll be well enough presently. There's naught to worry ye now."

He stretched his arms out, grasping the window frame, blotting out the light with his body. His shoulders swelled with effort, and I could tell that he was pushing against the wood with all his might.

"It was only a dream. Jack Randall is dead."

* * *

I had at length fallen asleep, with Jamie still poised at the window, staring out into the face of the moon. When I woke at dawn, though, he was asleep, curled in the window seat, wrapped in his plaid, with my cloak dragged over his legs for warmth.

He woke to my stirring, and seemed his normal, irritatingly cheerful morning self. But I was not likely to forget the happenings of the night, and went to my medicine box after breakfast.

To my annoyance, I lacked several of the herbs I needed for the sleeping tonic I had in mind. But then I remembered the man Marguerite had told me about. Raymond the herb-seller, in the Rue de Varennes. A wizard, she had said. A place worth seeing. Well, then. Jamie would be at the warehouse all the morning. I had a coach and a footman at my disposal; I would go and see it.

A clean wooden counter ran the length of the shop on both sides, with shelves twice the height of a man extending from floor to ceiling behind it. Some of the shelves were enclosed with folding glass doors, protecting the rarer and more expensive substances, I supposed. Fat gilded cupids sprawled abandonedly above the cupboards, tooting horns, waving their draperies, and generally looking as though they had been imbibing some of the more alcoholic wares of the shop.

"Monsieur Raymond?" I inquired politely of the young woman behind the counter.

"*Maître* Raymond," she corrected. She wiped a red nose inelegantly on her sleeve and gestured toward the end of the shop, where sinister clouds of a brownish smoke floated out over the transom of a half-door.

Wizard or not, Raymond had the right setting for it. Smoke drifted up from a black slate hearth to coil beneath the low black beams of the roof. Above the fire, a stone table pierced with holes held glass alembics, copper "pelicans"—metal cans with long noses from which sinister substances dripped into cups—and what appeared to be a small but serviceable still. I sniffed cautiously. Among the other strong odors in the shop, a heady alcoholic note was clearly distinguishable from the direction of the fire. A neat lineup of clean bottles along the sideboard reinforced my original suspicions. Whatever his trade in charms and potions, Master Raymond plainly did a roaring business in high-quality cherry brandy.

The distiller himself was crouched over the fire, poking errant bits of charcoal back into the grate. Hearing me come in, he straightened up and turned to greet me with a pleasant smile.

"How do you do?" I said politely to the top of his head. So strong was the impression that I had stepped into an enchanter's den that I would not have been surprised to hear a croak in reply.

For Master Raymond resembled nothing so, much as a large, genial frog. A touch over four feet tall, barrel-chested and bandy-legged, he had the thick, clammy skin of a swamp dweller, and slightly bulbous, friendly black eyes. Aside from the minor fact that he wasn't green, all he lacked was warts.

"Madonna!" he said, beaming expansively. "What may I have the pleasure of doing for you?" He lacked teeth altogether, enhancing the froggy impression still more, and I stared at him in fascination.

"Madonna?" he said, peering up at me questioningly.

Snapped abruptly to a realization of how rudely I had been staring, I blushed and said without thinking, "I was just wondering whether you'd ever been kissed by a beautiful young girl."

I went still redder as he shouted with laughter. With a broad grin, he said "Many times, madonna. But alas, it does not help. As you see. *Ribbit.*"

We dissolved in helpless laughter, attracting the notice of the shopgirl, who peered over the half-door in alarm. Master Raymond waved her away, then hobbled to the window, coughing and clutching his sides, to open the leaded panes and allow some of the smoke to escape.

"Oh, that's better!" he said, inhaling deeply as the cold spring air rushed in. He turned to me, smoothing back the long silver hair that brushed his shoulders. "Now, madonna. Since we are friends, perhaps you will wait a moment while I attend to something?"

Still blushing, I agreed at once, and he turned to his firing shelf, still hiccupping with laughter as he refilled the canister of the still. Taking the opportunity to restore my poise, I strolled about the workroom, looking at the amazing array of clutter.

A fairly good-sized crocodile, presumably stuffed, hung from the ceiling. I gazed up at the yellow belly-scutes, hard and shiny as pressed wax.

"Real, is it?" I asked, taking a seat at the scarred oak table.

Master Raymond glanced upward, smiling.

"My *crocodile*? Oh, to be sure, madonna. Gives the customers confidence." He jerked his head toward the shelf that ran along the wall just above eye height. It was lined with white fired-porcelain jars, each ornamented with gilded curlicues, painted flowers and beasts, and a label, written in elaborate black script. Three of the jars closest to me were labeled in Latin, which I translated with some difficulty—crocodile's blood, and the liver and bile of the same beast, presumably the one swinging sinisterly overhead in the draft from the main shop.

I picked up one of the jars, removed the stopper and sniffed delicately.

"Mustard," I said, wrinkling my nose, "and thyme. In walnut oil, I think, but what did you use to make it nasty?" I tilted the jar, critically examining the sludgy black liquid within.

"Ah, so your nose is not purely decorative, madonna!" A wide grin split the toadlike face, revealing hard blue gums.

"The black stuff is the rotted pulp of a gourd," he confided, leaning closer and lowering his voice. "As for the smell … well, that actually is blood."

"Not from a crocodile," I said, glancing upward.

"Such cynicism in one so young," Raymond mourned. "The ladies and gentlemen of the Court are fortunately more trusting in nature, not that trust is the emotion that springs immediately to mind when one thinks of an aristocrat. No, in fact it is pig's blood, madonna. Pigs being so much more available than crocodiles."

"Mm, yes," I agreed. "That one must have cost you a pretty penny."

"Fortunately, I inherited it, along with much of my present stock, from the previous owner." I thought I saw a faint flicker of unease in the depths of the soft black eyes, but I had become oversensitive to nuances of expression of late, from watching the faces at parties for tiny clues that might be useful to Jamie in his manipulations.

The stocky little proprietor leaned still closer, laying a hand confidentially on mine.

"A professional, are you?" he said. "I must say, you don't look it."

My first impulse was to jerk my hand away, but his touch was oddly comfortable; quite impersonal, but unexpectedly warm and soothing. I glanced at the frost riming the edge of the leaded-glass panes, and thought that that was it; his ungloved hands were warm, a highly unusual condition for anyone's hands at this time of year.

"That depends entirely upon what you mean by the term 'professional,' " I said primly. "I'm a healer."

"Ah, a healer?" He tilted back in his chair, looking me over with interest. "Yes, I thought so. Anything else, though? No fortune-telling, no love philtres?"

I felt a twinge of conscience, recalling my days on the road with Murtagh, when we had sought Jamie through the Highlands of Scotland, telling fortunes and singing for our suppers like a couple of Gypsies.

"Nothing like that," I said, blushing only slightly.

"Not a professional liar, at any rate," he said, eyeing me in amusement. "Rather a pity. Still, how may I have the pleasure of serving you, madonna?"

I explained my needs, and he nodded sagely as he listened, the thick gray hair swinging forward over his shoulders. He wore no wig within the sanctum of his shop, nor did he powder his hair. It was brushed back from a high, wide forehead, and fell straight as a stick to his shoulders, where it ended abruptly, as though cut with a blunt pair of scissors.

He was easy to talk to, and very knowledgeable indeed about the uses of herbs and botanicals. He took down small jars of this and that, shaking bits out and crushing the leaves in his palm for me to smell or taste.

Our conversation was interrupted by the sound of raised voices in the shop. A nattily-dressed footman was leaning across the counter, saying something to the shopgirl. Or rather, trying to say something. His feeble attempts were being thrown back in his teeth by a gale of withering Provençale from the other side of the counter. It was too idiomatic for me to follow entirely, but I caught the general drift of her remarks. Something involving cabbages and sausages, none of it complimentary.

I was musing on the odd tendency of the French to bring food into virtually any kind of discussion, when the shop door banged suddenly open. Reinforcements swept in behind the footman, in the guise of a rouged and flounced Personage of some sort.

"Ah," murmured Raymond, peering interestedly beneath my arm at the drama unfolding in his shop. "La Vicomtesse de Rambeau."

"You know her?" The shopgirl evidently did, for she abandoned her attack on the footman and shrank back against the cabinet of purges.

"Yes, madonna," said Raymond, nodding. "She's rather expensive."

I saw what he meant, as the lady in question picked up the evident source of altercation, a small jar containing a pickled plant of some kind, took aim, and flung it with considerable force and accuracy into the glass front of the cabinet.

The crash silenced the commotion at once. The Vicomtesse pointed one long, bony finger at the girl.

"You," she said, in a voice like metal shavings, "fetch me the black potion. At once."

The girl opened her mouth as though to protest, then, seeing the Vicomtesse reaching for another missile, shut it and fled for the back room.

Anticipating her entrance, Raymond reached resignedly above his head and thrust a bottle into her hand as she came through the door.

"Give it to her," he said, shrugging. "Before she breaks something else."

As the shopgirl timidly returned to deliver the bottle, he turned to me, pulling a wry face.

"Poison for a rival," he said. "Or at least she thinks so."

"Oh?" I said. "And what is it really? Bitter cascara?"

He looked at me in pleased surprise.

"You're very good at this," he said. "A natural talent, or were you taught? Well, no matter." He waved a broad palm, dismissing the matter. "Yes, that's right, cascara. The rival will fall sick tomorrow, suffer visibly in order to satisfy the Vicomtesse's desire for revenge and convince her that her purchase was a good one, and then she will recover, with no permanent harm done, and the Vicomtesse will attribute the recovery to the intervention of the priest or a counterspell done by a sorcerer employed by the victim."

"Mm," I said. "And the damage to your shop?" The late-afternoon sun glinted on the shards of glass on the counter, and on the single silver écu that the Vicomtesse had flung down in payment.

Raymond tilted a palm from side to side, in the immemorial custom of a man indicating equivocation.

"It evens out," he said calmly. "When she comes in next month for an abortifacient, I shall charge her enough not only to repair the damage but to build three new cases. And she'll pay without argument." He smiled briefly, but without the humor he had previously shown. "It's all in the timing, you know."

I was conscious of the black eyes flickering knowledgeably over my figure. I didn't show at all yet, but I was quite sure he knew.

"And does the medicine you'll give the Vicomtesse next month work?" I asked.

"It's all in the timing," he replied again, tilting his head quizzically to one side. "Early enough, and all is well. But it is dangerous to wait too long."

The note of warning in his voice was clear, and I smiled at him.

"Not for me," I said. "For reference only."

He relaxed again.

"Ah. I didn't think so."

A rumble from the street below proclaimed the passing of the Vicomtesse's blue-and-silver carriage. The footman waved and shouted from behind as pedestrians were forced to scramble for the shelter of doors and alleyways to avoid being crushed.

"A la lanterne," I murmured under my breath. It was rare that my unusual perspective on current affairs afforded me much satisfaction, but this was certainly one occasion when it did.

"Ask not for whom the tumbril calls," I remarked, turning to Raymond. "It calls for thee."

He looked mildly bewildered.

“Oh? Well, in any case, you were saying that black betony is what you use for purging? I would use the white, myself.”

“Really? Why is that?”

And with no further reference to the recent Vicomtesse, we sat down to complete our business.

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9

THE SPLENDORS OF VERSAILLES

I closed the door of the drawing room quietly behind me and stood still a moment, gathering courage. I essayed a restorative deep breath, but the tightness of the whalebone corseting made it come out as a strangled gasp.

Jamie, immersed in a handful of shipping orders, glanced up at the sound and froze, eyes wide. His mouth opened, but he made no sound.

"How do you like it?" Handling the train a bit gingerly, I stepped down into the room, swaying gently as the seamstress had instructed, to show off the filmy gussets of silk plissé let into the overskirt.

Jamie shut his mouth and blinked several times.

"It's … ah … red, isn't it?" he observed.

"Rather." *Sang-du-Christ*, to be exact. Christ's blood, the most fashionable color of the season, or so I had been given to understand.

"Not every woman could wear it, Madame," the seamstress had declared, speech unhampered by a mouthful of pins. "But you, with that skin! Mother of God, you'll have men crawling under your skirt all night!"

"If one tries, I'll stamp on his fingers," I said. That, after all, was not at all the intended effect. But I did mean to be visible. Jamie had urged me to have something made that would make me stand out in the crowd. Early-morning fog notwithstanding, the King had evidently remembered him from his appearance at the *lever*, and we had been invited to a ball at Versailles.

"I'll need to get the ears of the men with the money," Jamie had said, making plans with me earlier. "And as I've neither great position nor power myself, it will have to be managed by making them seek my company." He heaved a sigh, looking at me, decidedly unglamorous in my woolen bedgown.

"And I'm afraid in Paris that means we'll have to go out a bit in society; appear at Court, if it can be managed. They'll know I'm a Scot; it will be natural for folk to ask me about Prince Charles, and whether Scotland is eagerly awaiting the return of the Stuarts. Then I can assure them discreetly that most Scots would pay a good price *not* to have the Stuarts back again—though it goes against the grain a bit to say so."

"Yes, you'd better be discreet," I agreed. "Or the Bonnie Prince may set the dogs on you next time you go to visit." In accordance with his plan to keep abreast of Charles's activities, Jamie had been paying weekly duty calls on the small house at Montmartre.

Jamie smiled briefly. "Aye. Well, so far as His Highness, and the Jacobite supporters are concerned, I'm a loyal upholder of the Stuart cause. And so long as Charles Stuart is not received at Court and I am, the chances of his finding out what I'm saying there are not great. The Jacobites in Paris keep to themselves, as a rule. For the one thing, they haven't the money to appear in fashionable circles. But we have, thanks to Jared."

Jared had concurred—for entirely different reasons—in Jamie's proposal that we widen the scope of Jared's usual business entertaining, so that the French nobility and the heads of the wealthy banking families might beat a path to our door, there to be seduced and cozened with Rhenish wine, good talk, fine entertainment, and large quantities of the good Scotch whisky that Murtagh had spent the last two weeks shepherding across the Channel and overland to our cellars.

"It's entertainment of one kind or another that draws them, ye ken," Jamie had said, sketching out plans on the back of a broadsheet poem describing the scurrilous affair between the Comte de Sévigny and the wife of the Minister of Agriculture. “All the nobility care about is appearances. So to start with, we must offer them something interesting to look at.”

Judging from the stunned look on his face now, I had made a good beginning. I sashayed a bit, making the huge overskirt swing like a bell.

“Not bad, is it?” I asked. “Very visible, at any rate.”

He found his voice at last.

“Visible?” he croaked. “*Visible*? God, I can see every inch of ye, down to the third rib!”

I peered downward.

“No, you can’t. That isn’t me under the lace, it’s a fining of white charmeuse.”

“Aye well, it *looks* like you!” He came closer, bending to inspect the bodice of the dress. He peered into my cleavage.

“Christ, I can see down to your navel! Surely ye dinna mean to go out in public like that!”

I bristled a bit at this. I had been feeling a trifle nervous myself over the general revealingness of the dress, the fashionable sketches the seamstress had shown me notwithstanding. But Jamie’s reaction was making me feel defensive, and thus rebellious.

“*You* told me to be visible,” I reminded him. “And this is absolutely nothing, compared to the latest Court fashions. Believe me, I shall be modesty personified, in comparison with Madame de Pérignon and the Duchesse de Rouen.” I put my hands on my hips and surveyed him coldly. “Or do you want me to appear at Court in my green velvet?”

Jamie averted his eyes from my décolletage and tightened his lips.

“Mphm,” he said, looking as Scotch as possible.

Trying to be conciliatory, I came closer and laid a hand on his arm.

“Come now,” I said. “You’ve been at Court before; surely you know what ladies dress like. You know this isn’t terribly extreme by those standards.”

He glanced down at me and smiled, a trifle shamefaced.

"Aye," he said. "Aye, that's true. It's only … well, you're my wife, Sassenach. I dinna want other men to look at you the way I've looked at those ladies."

I laughed and put my hands behind his neck, pulling him down to kiss me. He held me around the waist, his thumbs unconsciously stroking the softness of the red silk where it sheathed my torso. His touch traveled upward, sliding across the slipperiness of the fabric to the nape of my neck. His other hand grasped the soft roundness of my breast, swelling up above the tethering grip of the corsets, voluptuously free under a single layer of sheer silk. He let go at last and straightened up, shaking his head doubtfully.

"I suppose ye'll have to wear it, Sassenach, but for Christ's sake be careful."

"Careful? Of what?"

His mouth twisted in a rueful smile.

"Lord, woman, have ye no notion what ye look like in that gown? It makes me want to commit rape on the spot. And these damned frog-eaters havena got my restraint." He frowned slightly. "You couldna … cover it up at bit at the top?" He waved a large hand vaguely in the direction of his own lace jabot, secured with a ruby stickpin. "A … ruffle or something? A handkerchief?"

"Men," I told him, "have no notion of fashion. But not to worry. The seamstress says that's what the fan is for." I flipped the matching lace-trimmed fan open with a gesture that had taken fifteen minutes' practice to perfect, and fluttered it enticingly over my bosom.

Jamie blinked meditatively at this performance, then turned to take my cloak from the wardrobe.

"Do me the one favor, Sassenach," he said, draping the heavy velvet over my shoulders. "Take a larger fan."

* * *

In terms of attracting notice, the dress was an unqualified success. In terms of the effects on Jamie's blood pressure, it was somewhat more equivocal.

He hovered protectively at my elbow, glaring ferociously at any male who glanced in my direction, until Annalise de Marillac, spotting us from across the room, came floating in our direction, her delicate features wreathed in a welcoming smile. I felt the smile freezing on my own face. Annalise de Marillac was an "acquaintance"—he said—of Jamie's, from his former residence in Paris. She was also beautiful, charming, and exquisitely tiny.

"Mon petit sauvage!" she greeted Jamie. "I have someone you must meet. Several someones, in fact." She tilted a head like a china doll in the direction of a group of men, gathered around a chess table in the corner, arguing heatedly about something. I recognized the Duc d'Orléans, and Gérard Gobelin, a prominent banker. An influential group, then.

"Come and play chess for them," Annalise urged, placing a mothlike hand on Jamie's arm. "It will be a good place for His Majesty to meet you, later."

The King was expected to appear after the supper he was attending, sometime in the next hour or two. In the meantime, the guests wandered to and fro, conversing, admiring the paintings on the walls, flirting behind fans, consuming confits, tartlets, and wine, and disappearing at more or less discreet intervals into the odd little curtained alcoves. These were cleverly fitted into the paneling of the rooms, so that you scarcely noticed them, unless you got close enough to hear the sounds inside.

Jamie hesitated, and Annalise pulled a bit harder.

"Come along," she urged. "Have no fear for your lady"—she cast an appreciative glance at my gown—"she won't be alone long."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Jamie muttered under his breath. "All right, then, in a moment." He disengaged himself momentarily from Annalise's grasp and bent to whisper in my ear.

"If I find ye in one of those alcoves, Sassenach, the man you're with is dead. And as for you …" His hands twitched unconsciously in the direction of his swordbelt.

"Oh no you don't," I said. "You swore on your dirk you'd never beat me again. What price the Holy Iron, eh?"

A reluctant grin tugged at his mouth.

"No, I wilna beat ye, much as I'd like to."

"Good. What do you mean to do, then?" I asked, teasing.

"I'll think of something," he replied, with a certain grimness. "I dinna ken what, but ye wilna like it."

And with a final glare round and a proprietary squeeze of my shoulder, he allowed Annalise to lead him away, like a small but enthusiastic tug towing a reluctant barge.

Annalise was right. No longer deterred by Jamie's glowering presence, the gentlemen of the Court descended upon me like a flock of parrots on a ripe passion fruit.

My hand was kissed repeatedly and held lingeringly, dozens of flowery compliments were paid me, and cups of spiced wine were brought me in endless procession. After half an hour of this, my feet began to hurt. So did my face, from smiling. And my hand, from fan-wielding.

I had to admit some gratitude to Jamie for his intransigence in the matter of the fan. Bowing to his sensibilities, I had brought the largest I possessed, a foot-long whopper painted with what purported to be Scottish stags leaping through the heather. Jamie had been critical of the artistry, but approving of the size. Graciously fanning away the attentions of an ardent young man in purple, I then spread the thing inconspicuously beneath my chin to deflect crumbs while I nibbled at a piece of toast with salmon on it.

And not only toast crumbs. While Jamie, from his vantage point a foot above me, had claimed to be able to see my navel, my umbilicus was by and large safe from scrutiny by the French courtiers, most of whom were shorter than I was. On the other hand …

I had often enjoyed snuggling into Jamie's chest, my nose fitting comfortably into the small hollow in the center. A few of the shorter and bolder souls among my admirers seemed bent on enjoying a similar experience, and I was kept busy, flapping my fan hard enough to blow their curls back from their faces, or if that didn't suffice to discourage them, snapping the fan shut and rapping them smartly on the head with it.

It came as a considerable relief to hear the footman at the door suddenly draw himself up and intone, *“Sa Majesté, Le Roi Louis!”*

While the King might rise at dawn, apparently he blossomed at night. Not much taller than my own five feet six, Louis entered with the carriage of a much taller man, glancing left and right, nodding in gracious acknowledgment of his bowing subjects.

Now this, I thought, looking him over, was a good deal more in line with my ideas of what a king *ought* to look like. Not particularly handsome, he acted as though he were; an impression enhanced not only by the richness of his clothes, but by the attitude of those around him. He wore the latest backswept wig, and his coat was cut velvet, embroidered all over with hundreds of frivolous silk butterflies. It was cut away at the middle to display a waistcoat of voluptuous cream-colored silk with diamond buttons, matching the wide, butterfly-shaped buckles on his shoes.

The dark, hooded eyes swept restlessly over the crowd, and the haughty Bourbon nose lifted as though smelling out any item of interest.

Dressed in kilt and plaid, but with a coat and waistcoat of stiffened yellow silk, and with his flaming hair loose to his shoulders, a single small braid down one side in ancient Scots fashion, Jamie definitely qualified. At least I thought it was Jamie who had attracted the King’s attention, as *Le Roi Louis* purposefully changed direction and swerved toward us, parting the crowd before him like the waves of the Red Sea. Madame Nesle de La Tourelle, whom I recognized from a previous party, followed close behind him like a dinghy in his wake.

I had forgotten the red dress; His Majesty halted directly in front of me and bowed extravagantly, hand over his waist.

“Chère Madame!” he said. “We are enchanted!”

I heard a deep intake of breath from Jamie, and then he stepped forward and bowed to the King.

“May I present my wife, Your Majesty—my lady Broch Tuarach.” He rose and stepped back. Attracted by a quick flutter of Jamie’s fingers, I stared at him for a moment of incomprehension, before suddenly realizing that he was signaling me to curtsy.

I dipped automatically, struggling to keep my eyes on the floor and wondering where I would look when I bobbed up again. Madame Nesle de la Tourelle was standing just behind Louis, watching the introduction with a slightly bored look on her face. Gossip said that "Nesle" was Louis's current favorite. She was, in current vogue, wearing a gown cut *below* both breasts, with a bit of supercedent gauze which was clearly meant for the sake of fashion, as it couldn't possibly function for either warmth or concealment.

It was neither the gown nor the prospect it revealed that had rattled me, though. The breasts of "Nesle," while reasonably adequate in size, pleasant in proportion, and tipped with large brownish areolae, were further adorned with a pair of nipple jewels that caused their settings to recede into insignificance. A pair of diamond-encrusted swans with ruby eyes stretched their necks toward each other, swinging precariously in their gold-hooped perches. The workmanship was superb and the materials stunning, but it was the fact that each gold hoop passed *through* her nipple that made me feel rather faint. The nipples themselves were rather seriously inverted, but this fact was disguised by the large pearl that covered each one, dangling on a thin gold chain that looped from side to side of the main hoop.

I rose, red-faced and coughing, and managed to excuse myself, hacking politely into a handkerchief as I backed away. I felt a presence in my rear and stopped just in time to avoid backing into Jamie, who was watching the King's mistress with no pretense whatever of tactful obliviousness.

"She told Marie d'Arbanville that Master Raymond did the piercing for her," I remarked under my breath. His fascinated gaze didn't waver.

"Shall I make an appointment?" I asked. "I imagine he'd do it for me if I gave him the recipe for caraway tonic."

Jamie glanced down at me at last. Taking my elbow, he steered me toward a refreshment alcove.

"If you so much as *speak* to Master Raymond again," he said, out of the corner of his mouth, "I'll pierce them for ye myself—wi' my teeth."

The King had by now wandered off toward the Salon of Apollo, the space left by his passage quickly filled by others coming from the supper room. Seeing Jamie distracted into conversation with a Monsieur Genet, head of a wealthy shipping family, I looked surreptitiously about for a place in which to remove my shoes for a moment.

One of the alcoves was at hand and, from the sounds of it, unoccupied. I sent a lingering admirer off to fetch some more wine, then, with a quick glance round, slid into the alcove.

It was furnished rather suggestively with a couch, a small table, and a pair of chairs—more suitable for laying aside garments than for sitting upon, I thought critically. I sat down nonetheless, pried my shoes off, and with a sigh of relief, propped my feet up on the other chair.

A faint jingling of curtain rings behind me announced the fact that my departure had not been unnoticed after all.

“Madame! At last we are alone!”

“Yes, more’s the pity,” I said, sighing. It was one of the countless Comtes, I thought. Or no, this one was a Vicomte; someone had introduced him to me earlier as the Vicomte de Rambeau. One of the short ones. I seemed to recall his beady little eyes gleaming up at me in appreciation from below the edge of my fan.

Wasting no time, he slid adroitly onto the other chair, lifting my feet into his lap. He clasped my silk-stockinged toes fervently against his crotch.

“Ah, *ma petite*! Such delicacy! Your beauty distracts me!”

I thought it must, if he was under the delusion that my feet were particularly delicate. Raising one to his lips, he nibbled at my toes.

“C’est un cochon qui vit dans la ville, c’est un cochon qui vit …”

I jerked my foot from his grasp and stood up hastily, rather impeded by my voluminous petticoats.

“Speaking of *cochons* who live in the city,” I said, rather nervously, “I don’t think my husband would be at all pleased to find you here.”

“Your husband? Pah!” He dismissed Jamie with an airy wave of the hand. “He will be occupied for some time, I am sure. And while the cat's away.… come to me, *ma petite souris*; let me hear you squeak a bit."

Presumably intending to fortify himself for the fray, the Vicomte produced an enameled snuffbox from his pocket, deftly sprinkled a line of dark grains along the back of his hand, and wiped it delicately against his nostrils.

He took a deep breath, eyes glistening in anticipation, then jerked his head as the curtain was suddenly thrust aside with a jangling of brass rings. His aim distracted by the intrusion, the Vicomte sneezed directly into my bosom with considerable vigor.

I shrieked.

"You *disgusting* man!" I said, and walloped him across the face with my closed fan.

The Vicomte staggered back, eyes watering. He tripped over my size-nine shoes, which lay on the floor, and fell headfirst into the arms of Jamie, who was standing in the doorway.

* * *

"Well, you *did* attract a certain amount of notice," I said at last.

"Bah," he said. "The *salaud*'s lucky I didna tear off his head and make him swallow it."

"Well, that would have provided an interesting spectacle," I agreed dryly. "Sousing him in the fountain was nearly as good, though."

He looked up, his frown replaced with a reluctant grin.

"Aye, well. I didna drown the man, after all."

"I trust the Vicomte appreciates your restraint."

He snorted again. He was standing in the center of a sitting room, part of a small *appartement* in the palace, to which the King, once he had stopped laughing, had assigned us, insisting that we should not undertake the return journey to Paris tonight.

"After all, *mon chevalier*," he had said, eyeing Jamie's large, dripping form on the terrace, "we should dislike exceedingly for you to take a chill. I feel sure that the Court would be deprived of a great deal of entertainment in such a case, and Madame would never forgive me. Would you, sweetheart?" He reached out and pinched Madame de La Tourelle playfully on one nipple.

His mistress looked mildly annoyed, but smiled obediently. I noticed, though, that once the King's attention had been distracted, it was Jamie on whom her gaze lingered. Well, he was impressive, I had to admit, standing dripping in the torchlight with his clothes plastered to his body. That didn't mean I liked her doing it.

He peeled his wet shirt off and dropped it in a sodden heap. He looked even better without it.

"As for you," he said, eyeing me in a sinister manner, "did I not tell ye to stay away from those alcoves?"

"Yes. But aside from that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you enjoy the play?" I asked politely.

"What?" He stared at me as though I had lost my mind on the spot.

"Never mind; it's a bit out of your frame of reference. I only meant, did you meet anyone useful before you came to defend your marital rights?"

He rubbed his hair vigorously with a towel plucked from the washstand. "Oh, aye. I played a game of chess with Monsieur Duverney. Beat him, too, and made him angry."

"Oh, that sounds promising. And who's Monsieur Duverney?"

He tossed me the towel, grinning. "The French Minister of Finance, Sassenach."

"Oh. And you're pleased because you made him angry?"

"He was angry at himself for losing, Sassenach," Jamie explained. "Now he won't rest until he's beaten me. He's coming round to the house on Sunday to play again."

"Oh, well done!" I said. "And in the process, you can assure him that the Stuarts' prospects are exceedingly dim, and convince him that Louis doesn't want to assist them financially, blood kin or not."

He nodded, combing back his wet hair with both hands. The fire had not yet been lit, and he shivered slightly.

"Where did you learn to play chess?" I asked curiously. "I didn't know you knew how."

“Colum MacKenzie taught me,” he said. “When I was sixteen, and spent a year at Castle Leoch. I had tutors for French and German and mathematics and such, but I’d go up to Colum’s room for an hour every evening to play chess. Not that it usually took him an hour to beat me,” he added ruefully.

“No wonder you’re good,” I said. Jamie’s uncle Colum, the victim of a deforming disease that had deprived him of most of his mobility, made up for it with a mind that would have put Machiavelli to shame.

Jamie stood up and unbuckled his swordbelt, narrowing his eyes at me. “Dinna think I don’t know what you’re up to, Sassenach. Changing the subject and flattering me like a courtesan. Did I not tell ye about those alcoves?”

“You said you didn’t mean to beat me,” I reminded him, sitting a bit farther back in my chair, just to be on the safe side.

He snorted again, tossing the swordbelt onto the chest of drawers and dropping his kilt next to the sodden shirt.

“Do I look the sort of man would beat a woman who’s with child?” he demanded.

I eyed him doubtfully. Stark naked, with his hair in damp red snarls and the white scars still visible on his body, he looked as though he had just leaped off a Viking ship, rape and pillage on his mind.

“Actually, you look capable of just about anything,” I told him. “As for the alcoves, yes, you told me. I suppose I should have gone outside to take my shoes off, but how was I to know that idiot would follow me in and begin nibbling on my toes? And if you don’t mean to beat me, just what did you have in mind?” I took a firm grip on the arms of my chair.

He lay down on the bed and grinned at me.

“Take off that whore’s dress, Sassenach, and come to bed.”

“Why?”

“Well, I canna wallop you, or drench ye in the fountain.” He shrugged. “I meant to give ye a terrible scolding, but I dinna think I can keep my eyes open long enough.” He gave a terrific yawn, then blinked and grinned at me again. “Remind me to do it in the morning, eh?”

“Better, is it?” Jamie’s dark-blue eyes were clouded with worry. “Is it right for ye to be sick so much, Sassenach?”

I pushed the hair back from my sweaty temples and dabbed a damp towel over my face.

“I don’t know whether it’s *right*,” I said weakly, “but at least I believe it’s normal. Some women are sick all through.” Not a pleasant thought at the moment.

Jamie glanced, not at the gaily painted clock on the table, but as usual, out the window at the sun.

“Do ye feel well enough to go down to breakfast, Sassenach, or ought I to tell the chambermaid to bring up something on a tray?”

“No. I’m quite all right now.” And I was. In the odd way of morning sickness, once the inexorable nausea had had its way with me, I felt perfectly fine within a moment or two. “Let me just rinse my mouth.”

As I bent over the basin, sluicing cool water over my face, there was a rap at the door of the *appartement*. Likely the servant who had been dispatched to the house in Paris to bring us fresh clothes, I thought.

To my surprise, though, it was a courtier, with a written invitation to lunch.

“His Majesty is dining today with an English nobleman,” the courtier explained, “newly arrived in Paris. His Majesty has summoned several of the prominent English merchants from the Cité to lunch, for the purpose of providing His Grace the Duke with the company of some of his countrymen. And someone pointed out to His Majesty that Madame your wife is an English lady, too, and thus should be invited to attend.”

“All right,” Jamie said, after a quick glance at me. “You may tell His Majesty that we will be honored to remain.”

Soon thereafter, Murtagh had arrived, dour as ever, bearing a large bundle of fresh clothes, and my medicine box, which I had asked for. Jamie took him into the sitting room to give him instructions for the day, while I hastily struggled into my fresh gown, for the first time rather regretting my refusal to employ a lady's maid. Always unruly, the state of my hair had not been improved by sleeping in close embrace with a large, damp Scot; wild tangles shot off in several directions, resisting all attempts to tame them with brush and comb.

At length I emerged, pink and cross with effort, but with my hair in some semblance of order. Jamie looked at me and murmured something about hedgehogs under his breath, but caught a searing glance in return and had the good sense to shut up.

A stroll among the parterres and fountains of the palace gardens did a good bit to restore my equanimity. Most of the trees were still leafless, but the day was unexpectedly warm for late March, and the smell of the swelling buds on the twigs was green and pungent. You could almost feel the sap rising in the towering chestnuts and poplars that edged the paths and sheltered the hundreds of white marble statues.

I paused beside a statue of a half-draped man with grapes in his hair and a flute at his lips. A large, silky goat nibbled hungrily at more grapes that were cascading from the marble folds of the draperies.

"Who's this?" I asked, "Pan?"

Jamie shook his head, smiling. He was dressed in his old kilt and a worn, if comfortable coat, but he looked much better to me than did the luxuriously clad courtiers who passed us in chattering groups.

"No, I think there is a statue of Pan about, but it isna that one. That's one of the Four Humors of Man."

"Well, he looks fairly humorous," I said, glancing up at the goat's smiling friend.

Jamie laughed.

"And you a physician, Sassenach! Not that sort of humor. Do ye not know the four humors that make up the human body? That one's Blood"—he motioned at the flute-player, then pointed down the path—"and there's Melancholy." This was a tall man in a sort of toga, holding an open book.

Jamie pointed across the path. "And over there is Choler"—a nude and muscular young man, who certainly was scowling ferociously, without regard to the marble lion that was about to bite him smartly in the leg—"and that's Phlegm."

"Is it, by Jove?" Phlegm, a bearded gent with a folded hat, had both arms crossed on his chest, and a tortoise at his feet.

"Hum," I remarked.

"Do physicians not learn about humors in your time?" Jamie asked curiously.

"No," I said. "We have germs, instead."

"Really? Germs," he said to himself, trying the word over, rolling it on his tongue with a Scottish burr, which made it sound sinister in the extreme. "Gerrrms. And what do *germs* look like?"

I glanced up at a representation of "America," a nubile young maiden in a feathered skirt and headdress, with a crocodile at her feet.

"Well, they wouldn't make nearly such picturesque statues," I said.

The crocodile at America's feet reminded me of Master Raymond's shop.

"Did you mean it about not wanting me to go to Master Raymond's?" I asked. "Or do you just not want me to pierce my nipples?"

"I most definitely dinna want ye to pierce your nipples," he said firmly, taking me by the elbow and hurrying me onward, lest I derive any untoward inspiration from America's bare breasts. "But no, I dinna want ye to go to Master Raymond's, either. There are rumors about the man."

"There are rumors about everyone in Paris," I observed, "and I'd be willing to bet that Master Raymond knows all of them."

Jamie nodded, hair glinting in the pale spring sunshine.

"Oh, aye, I expect so. But I think I can learn what's needful in the taverns and drawing rooms. Master Raymond's said to be at the center of a particular circle, but it isna Jacobite sympathizers."

"Really? Who, then?"

"Cabalists and occultists. Witches, maybe."

"Jamie, you aren't seriously worried about witches and demons, are you?"

We had arrived at the part of the gardens known as the "Green Carpet." This early in the spring, the green of the huge lawn was only a faint tinge, but people were lounging on it, taking advantage of the rare balmy day.

"Not witches, no," he said at last, finding a place near a hedge of forsythia and sitting down on the grass. "The Comte St. Germain, possibly."

I remembered the look in the Comte St. Germain's dark eyes at Le Havre, and shivered, in spite of the sunshine and the woolen shawl I wore.

"You think he's associated with Master Raymond?"

Jamie shrugged. "I don't know. But it was you told me the rumors about St. Germain, no? And if Master Raymond is part of that circle—then I think you should keep the hell away from him, Sassenach." He gave me a wry half-smile. "After all, I'd as soon not have to save ye from burning again."

The shadows under the trees reminded me of the cold gloom of the thieves' hole in Cranesmuir, and I shivered and moved closer to Jamie, farther into the sunlight.

"I'd as soon you didn't, either."

The pigeons were courting on the grass below a flowering forsythia bush. The ladies and gentlemen of the Court were performing similar activities on the paths that led through the sculpture gardens. The major difference was that the pigeons were quieter about it.

A vision in watered aqua silk hove abaft our resting place, in loud raptures over the divinity of the play the night before. The three ladies with him, while not so spectacular, echoed his opinions faithfully.

"Superb! Quite superb, the voice of La Couelle!"

"Oh, superb! Yes, wonderful!"

"Delightful, delightful! Superb is the only word for it!"

“Oh, yes, superb!”

The voices—all four of them—were shrill as nails being pulled from wood. By contrast, the gentleman pigeon doing his turn a few feet from my nose had a low and mellifluous coo, rising from a deep, amatory rumble to a breathy whistle as he puffed his breast and bowed repeatedly, laying his heart at the feet of his ladylove, who looked rather unimpressed so far.

I looked beyond the pigeon toward the aqua-satined courtier, who had hastened back to snatch up a lace-trimmed handkerchief, coyly dropped as bait by one of his erstwhile companions.

“The ladies call that one ‘L’Andouille,’ ” I remarked. “I wonder why?”

Jamie grunted sleepily, and opened one eye to look after the departing courtier.

“Mm? Oh, ‘The Sausage.’ It means he canna keep his roger in his breeches. You know the sort … ladies, footmen, courtesans, pageboys. Lapdogs, too, if rumor is right,” he added, squinting in the direction of the vanished aqua silk, where a lady of the court was now approaching, a fluffy white bundle clasped protectively to her ample bosom. “Reckless, that. I wouldna risk mine anywhere near one o’ those wee yapping hairballs.”

“Your roger?” I said, amused. “I used to hear it called peter, now and again. And the Yanks, for some peculiar reason, used to call theirs a dick. I once called a patient who was teasing me a ‘Clever Dick,’ and he nearly burst his stitches laughing.”

Jamie laughed himself, stretching luxuriously in the warming spring sun. He blinked once or twice and rolled over, grinning at me upside down.

“You have much the same effect on me, Sassenach,” he said. I stroked back the hair from his forehead, kissing him between the eyes.

“Why do men call it names?” I asked. “John Thomas, I mean. Or Roger, for that matter. Women don’t do that.”

“They don’t?” Jamie asked, interested.

“No, of course not. I’d as soon call my nose Jane.”

His chest moved up and down as he laughed. I rolled on top of him, enjoying the solid feel of him beneath me. I pressed my hips downward, but the layers of intervening petticoats rendered it more of a gesture than anything else.

"Well," Jamie said logically, "yours doesna go up and down by itself, after all, nor go carryin' on regardless of your own wishes in the matter. So far as I know, anyway," he added, cocking one eyebrow questioningly.

"No, it doesn't, thank God. I wonder if Frenchmen call theirs 'Pierre,' " I said, glancing at a passing dandy in green velvet-faced moiré.

Jamie burst into a laugh that startled the pigeons out of the forsythia bush. They flapped off in a ruffle of indignation, scattering wisps of gray down in their wake. The fluffy white lapdog, hitherto content to loll in its mistress's arms like a bundle of rags, awoke at once to an awareness of its responsibilities. It popped out of its warm nest like a Ping-Pong ball and galloped off in enthusiastic pursuit of the pigeons, barking dementedly, its mistress in similar cry behind it.

"I dinna ken, Sassenach," he said, recovering enough to wipe the tears from his eyes. "The only Frenchman I ever heard call it a name called his 'Georges.' "

"Georges!" I said, loudly enough to attract the attention of a small knot of passing courtiers. One, a short but vivacious specimen in dramatic black slashed with white satin, stopped alongside and bowed deeply, sweeping the ground at my feet with his hat. One eye was still swelled shut, and a livid welt showed across the bridge of his nose, but his style was unimpaired.

"*A votre service*, Madame," he said.

* * *

I might have managed if it weren't for the bloody nightingales. The dining salon was hot and crowded with courtiers and onlookers, one of the stays in my dress frame had come loose and was stabbing me viciously beneath the left kidney each time I drew breath, and I was suffering from that most ubiquitous plague of pregnancy, the urge to urinate every few minutes. Still, I might have managed. It was, after all, a serious breach of manners to leave the table before the King, even though luncheon was a casual affair, in comparison with the formal dinners customary at Versailles—or so I was given to understand. "Casual," however, is a relative term.

True, there were only three varieties of spiced pickle, not eight. And one soup, clear, not thick. The venison was merely roasted, not presented *en brochette*, and the fish, while tastily poached in wine, was served fileted, not whole and riding on a sea of aspic filled with shrimp.

As though frustrated by so much rustic simplicity, though, one of the chefs had provided a charming hors d'oeuvre—a nest, cunningly built from strips of pastry, ornamented with real sprigs of flowering apple, on the edge of which perched two nightingales, skinned and roasted, stuffed with apple and cinnamon, then redressed in their feathers. And in the nest was the entire family of baby birds, tiny stubs of outstretched wings brown and crispy, tender bare skins glazed with honey, blackened mouths agape to show the merest hint of the almond-paste stuffing within.

After a triumphal tour of the table to show it off—to the accompaniment of murmurs of admiration all round—the dainty dish was set before the King, who turned from his conversation with Madame de La Tourelle long enough to pluck one of the nestlings from its place and pop it into his mouth.

Crunch, crunch, crunch went Louis's teeth. Mesmerized, I watched the muscles of his throat ripple, and felt the rubble of small bones slide down my own gullet. Brown fingers reached casually for another baby.

At this point, I concluded that there were probably worse things than insulting His Majesty by leaving the table, and bolted.

Rising from my knees amid the shrubbery a few minutes later, I heard a sound behind me. Expecting to meet the eye of a justifiably irate gardener, I turned guiltily to meet the eye of an irate husband.

"Damn it, Claire, d'ye have to do this all the time?" he demanded.

"In a word—yes," I said, sinking exhaustedly onto the rim of an ornamental fountain. My hands were damp, and I smoothed them over my skirt. "Did you think I did it for fun?" I felt light-headed, and closed my eyes, trying to regain my internal balance before I fell into the fountain.

Suddenly there was a hand at the small of my back, and I half-leaned, half-fell into his arms as he sat beside me and gathered me in.

"Oh, God. I'm sorry, *mo duinne*. Are ye all right, Claire?"

I pushed away enough to look up at him and smile.

"I'm all right. Just a bit light-headed, is all." I reached up and tried to smooth away the deep line of concern on his forehead. He smiled back, but the line stayed, a thin vertical crease between the thick sandy curves of his eye-brows. He swished a hand in the fountain and smoothed it over my cheeks. I must have looked rather pale.

"I'm sorry," I added. "Really, Jamie, I couldn't help it."

His damp hand squeezed the back of my neck reassuringly, strong and steady. A fine spray of droplets from the mouth of a bug-eyed dolphin misted my hair.

"Och, dinna mind me, Sassenach. I didna mean to snap at ye. It's only …" He made a helpless gesture with one hand. "… only that I feel such a thick-heided clot. I see ye in a misery, and I know I've done it to ye, and there isna the slightest thing I can do to aid you. So I blame ye for it instead, and act cross and growl at you … why do ye no just tell me to go to the devil, Sassenach?" he burst out.

I laughed until my sides hurt under the tight corseting, holding on to his arm.

"Go to hell, Jamie," I said at last, wiping my eyes. "Go directly to hell. Do not pass Go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. There. Do you feel better now?"

"Aye, I do," he said, his expression lightening. "When ye start to talk daft, I know you're all right. Do *you* feel better, Sassenach?"

"Yes," I said, sitting up and beginning to take notice of my surroundings. The grounds of Versailles were open to the public, and small groups of merchants and laborers mingled oddly with the brightly colored nobles, all enjoying the good weather.

Suddenly the nearby door onto the terrace burst open, spilling the King's guests out into the garden in a tide of chatter. The exodus from luncheon had been augmented by a new deputation, apparently just decanted from the two large coaches I could see driving past the edge of the garden toward distant stables.

It was a large group of people, men and women, soberly clad by comparison with the bright colors of the courtiers around them. It was the sound of them, though, rather than the appearance, that had caught my attention. French, spoken by a number of people at a distance, strongly resembles the quacking conversation of ducks and geese, with its nasal elements. English, on the other hand, has a slower pace, and much less rise and fall in its intonations. Spoken at a distance where individual voices are impossible to distinguish, it has the gruff, friendly monotony of a sheepdog's barking. And the general effect of the mass exodus presently coming in our direction was of a gaggle of geese being driven to market by a pack of dogs.

The English party had arrived, somewhat belatedly. No doubt they were being tactfully shooed into the garden while the kitchen staff hastily prepared another dinner and reset the massive table for them.

I scanned the group curiously. The Duke of Sandringham I knew, of course, having met him once before in Scotland at Castle Leoch. His barrelchested figure was easy to pick out, walking side by side with Louis, modish wig tilted in polite attention.

Most of the other people were strangers, though I thought the stylish lady of middle age just coming through the doors must be the Duchess of Claymore, whom I had heard was expected. The Queen, normally left behind at some country house to amuse herself as best she could, had been trotted out for the occasion. She was talking to the visitor, her sweet, anxious face flushed with the unaccustomed excitement of the occasion.

The young girl just behind the Duchess caught my eye. Quite plainly dressed, she had the sort of beauty that would make her stand out in any crowd. She was small, fine-boned but nicely rounded in figure, with dark, shiny, unpowdered hair and the most extraordinary white skin, flushed across the cheeks with a clear deep pink that made her look exactly like a flower petal.

Her coloring reminded me of a dress I'd once had in my own time, a light cotton frock decorated with red poppies. The thought for some reason struck me with a sudden unexpected wave of homesickness, and I gripped the edge of the marble bench, eyelids prickling with longing. It must be hearing plain bluff English spoken, I thought, after so many months among the lilt of Scotland and the quacking of France. The visitors sounded like home.

Then I saw him. I could feel all of the blood draining from my head as my eye traced disbelievingly over the elegant curve of the skull, dark-haired and bold amid the powdered wigs around it. Alarms rang in my head like air-raid sirens, as I fought to accept and repel the impressions that assaulted me. My subconscious saw the line of the nose, thought "Frank," and turned my body to fly toward him in welcome. "Not-Frank," came the slightly higher, rational center of my brain, freezing me in my tracks as I saw the familiar curve of a half-smiling mouth, repeating, "You *know* it's not Frank" as the muscles of my calves knotted. And then the lurch into panic and the clenching of hands and stomach, as the slower processes of logical thought came doggedly on the trail of instinct and knowledge, seeing the high brow and the arrogant tilt of the head, assuring me of the unthinkable. It could not be Frank. And if it were not, then it could only be …

"Jack Randall." It wasn't my voice that spoke, but Jamie's, sounding oddly calm and detached. Attention attracted by my peculiar behavior, he had looked where I was looking, and had seen what I had seen.

He didn't move. So far as I could tell through the increasing haze of panic, he didn't breathe. I was dimly aware of a nearby servant peering curiously upward at the towering form of the frozen Scottish warrior next to me, silent as a statue of Mars. But all my concern was for Jamie.

He was entirely still. Still as a lion is still, part of the grass of the plain, its stare hot and unblinking as the sun that burns the veldt. And I saw something move in the depths of his eyes. The telltale twitch of the stalking cat, the tiny jerk of the tuft at the end of the tail, precursor to carnage.

To draw arms in the presence of the King was death. Murtagh was on the far side of the garden, much too far away to help. Two more paces would bring Randall within hearing distance. Within sword's reach. I laid a hand on his arm. It was rigid as the steel of the swordhilt under his hand. The blood roared in my ears.

"Jamie," I said. "Jamie!" And fainted.

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10

A LADY, WITH BROWN HAIR CURLING LUXURIANTLY

I swam up out of a flickering yellow haze composed of sunlight, dust, and fragmented memories, feeling completely disoriented.

Frank was leaning over me, face creased in concern. He was holding my hand, except that he wasn't. The hand I held was much larger than Frank's, and my fingers brushed the wiriness of coarse hairs on the wrist. Frank's hands were smooth as a girl's.

"Are you all right?" The voice was Frank's, low and cultured.

"Claire!" That voice, deeper and rougher, wasn't Frank's at all. Neither was it cultured. It was full of fright and anguish.

"Jamie." I found the name at last to match the mental image for which I had been seeking. "Jamie! Don't …" I sat bolt upright, staring wildly from one face to the other. I was surrounded by a circle of curious faces, courtiers two and three deep around me, with a small clear space left for His Majesty, who was leaning over, peering down at me with an expression of sympathetic interest.

Two men knelt in the dust beside me. Jamie on the right, eyes wide and face pale as the hawthorn blossoms above him. And on my left …

"Are you all right, Madame?" The light hazel eyes held only respectful concern, the fine dark brows arched over them in inquiry. It wasn't Frank, of course. Neither was it Jonathan Randall. This man was younger than the Captain by a good ten years, perhaps close to my own age, his face pale and unlined by exposure to weather. His lips had the same chiseled lines, but lacked the marks of ruthlessness that bracketed the Captain's mouth.

"You.…" I croaked, leaning away from him. "You're …"

"Alexander Randall, Esquire, Madame," he answered quickly, making an abortive gesture toward his head, as though to doff a hat he wasn't wearing. "I don't believe we have met?" he said, with a hint of doubt.

"I, er, that is, no, we haven't," I said, sagging back against Jamie's arm. The arm was steady as an iron railing, but the hand holding mine was trembling, and I pulled our clasped hands into the fold of my skirt to hide it.

"Rather an informal introduction, Mrs., er, no … it's Lady Broch Tuarach, is it not?" The high, piping voice pulled my attention back above me, to the flushed, cherubic countenance of the Duke of Sandringham peering interestedly over the shoulders of the Comte de Sévigny and the Duc d'Orléans. He pushed his ungainly body through the narrow opening afforded, and extended a hand to help me to my feet. Still holding my sweaty palm in his own, he bowed in the direction of Alexander Randall, Esquire, who was frowning in a puzzled sort of way.

"Mr. Randall is in my employ as secretary, Lady Broch Tuarach. Holy Orders is a noble calling, but unfortunately nobility of purpose does not pay the cobbler's bill, does it, Alex?" The young man flushed slightly at this barb, but he inclined his head civilly toward me, acknowledging his employer's introduction. Only then did I notice the sober dark suit and high white stock that marked him as a junior cleric of some sort.

"His Grace is correct, my lady. And that being so, I must hold his offer of employment in the deepest gratitude." A faint tightening of the lips at this speech seemed to indicate that the gratitude felt might not perhaps go so deep as all that, pleasant words notwithstanding. I glanced at the Duke, to find his small blue eyes creased against the sun, his expression blandly impenetrable.

This little tableau was broken by a clap of the King's hands summoning two footmen, who, at Louis's direction, grasped me by both arms and lifted me forcibly into a sedan chair, despite my protests.

"Certainly not, Madame," he said, graciously dismissing both protests and thanks. "Go home and rest; we do not wish you to be indisposed for the ball tomorrow, *non*?" His large brown eyes twinkled at me as he raised my hand to his lips. Not taking his eyes from my face, he bowed formally toward Jamie, who had gathered his wits sufficiently to be making a gracious speech of thanks, and said, "I shall perhaps accept your thanks, my lord, in the form of your permission to request a dance from your lovely wife."

Jamie's lips tightened at this, but he bowed in return and said, "My wife shares my honor at your attention, Your Majesty." He glanced in my direction. "If she is well enough to attend the ball tomorrow evening, I am sure she will look forward to dancing with Your Majesty." He turned without waiting for formal dismissal, and jerked his head toward the chair-bearers.

"Home," he said.

Home at last after a hot, jolting ride through streets that smelled of flowers and open sewers, I shed my heavy dress and its uncomfortable frame in favor of a silk dressing gown.

I found Jamie sitting by the empty hearth, eyes closed, hands on his knees as though thinking. He was pale as his linen shirt, glimmering in the shadow of the mantelpiece like a ghost.

"Holy Mother," he muttered, shaking his head. "Dear God and saints, so close. I came within a hairsbreadth of murdering that man. Do ye realize, Claire, if ye hadna fainted … Jesus, *I meant to kill him*, with every last morsel of will I had." He broke off, shuddering again with reaction.

"Here, you'd better put your feet up," I urged, tugging at a heavy carved footstool.

"No, I'm all right now," he said, waving it away. "He's … Jack Randall's brother, then?"

"I should think it likely in the extreme," I said dryly. "He could scarcely be anyone else, after all."

"Mm. Did ye know he worked for Sandringham?"

I shook my head. "I didn't—don't—know anything about him other than his name and the fact that he's a curate. F-Frank wasn't particularly interested in him, as he wasn't a direct ancestor of his." The slight quaver of my voice as I spoke Frank's name gave me away.

Jamie put down the flask and came toward me. Stooping purposefully, he picked me up and cradled me against his chest. The smell of the gardens of Versailles rose sharp and fresh from the folds of his shirt. He kissed the top of my head and turned toward the bed.

"Come lay your head, Claire," he said quietly. "It's been a long day for us both."

* * *

I had been afraid that the encounter with Alexander Randall would set Jamie dreaming again. It did not happen often, but now and again, I would feel him wake beside me, body tensed in sudden battle. He would lurch out of bed then, and spend the night by the window as though it offered escape, refusing any form of solace or interference. And by the morning, Jack Randall and the other demons of the dark hours had been forced back into their box, battened down and held fast by the steel bands of Jamie's will, and all was well again.

But Jamie fell asleep quickly, and the stresses of the day had already fled from his face, leaving it peaceful and smooth by the time I put out the candle.

It was bliss to lie unmoving, with the warmth growing about my cold limbs, the myriad small aches of back and neck and knees fading into the softness of oncoming sleep. But my mind, released from watchfulness, replayed a thousand times that scene outside the palace—a quick glimpse of a dark head and a high brow, close-set ears and a fine-edged jaw—that first harsh flash of mistaken recognition, which struck my heart with a blow of joy and anguish. Frank, I had thought. Frank. And it was Frank's face I saw as I sank into sleep.

The lecture room was one of those at London University; ancient timbered ceiling and modern floors, lino scuffed by restless feet. The seats were the old smooth benches; new desks were saved for the science lectures. History could make do with sixty-year-old scarred wood; after all, the subject was fixed and would not change—why should its accommodation?

"Objects of *vertu*," Frank's voice said, "and objects of use." His long fingers touched the rim of a silver candlestick, and the sun from the window sparked from the metal, as though his touch were electric.

The objects, all borrowed from the collections of the British Museum, were lined up along the edge of the table, close enough for the students in the front row to see the tiny cracks in the yellowed ivory of the French counterbox, and the stains of tobacco smoked long ago that browned the edges of the white clay pipe. An English gold-mounted scent bottle, a gilt-bronze inkstand with gadrooned lid, a cracked horn spoon, and a small marble clock topped with two swans drinking.

And behind the row of objects, a row of painted miniatures, laid flat on the table, features obscured by the light reflecting off their surfaces.

Frank's dark head bent over the objects, absorbed. The afternoon sun picked up a stray reddish gleam in his hair. He lifted the clay pipe, cupped onehanded like an eggshell.

"For some periods of history," he said, "we have history itself; the written testimony of the people who lived then. For others, we have only the objects of the period, to show us how men lived."

He put the pipe to his mouth and pursed his lips around the stem, puffing out his cheeks, brows raised comically. There was a muffled giggle from the audience, and he smiled and laid the pipe down.

"The art, and the objects of *vertu*"—he waved a hand over the glittering array—"these are what we most often see, the decorations of a society. And why not?" He picked an intelligent-looking brown-haired boy to address. An accomplished lecturer's trick; pick one member of the audience to talk to as though you were alone with him. A moment later, shift to another. And everyone in the room will feel the focus of your remarks.

"These are pretty things, after all." A finger's touch set the swans on the clock revolving, curved necks stately in twofold procession. "Worth preserving. But who'd bother keeping an old, patched tea cozy, or a worn-out automobile-tire?" A pretty blonde in glasses this time, who smiled and tittered briefly in response.

"But it's the useful objects, the things that aren't noted in documents, which are used and broken and discarded without a second thought, that tell you how the common man lived. The numbers of these pipes, for example, tell us something about the frequency and types of tobacco use among the classes of society, from high"—a finger tap on the lid of the enameled snuffbox—"to low." The finger moved to stroke the long, straight pipestem with affectionate familiarity.

Now a middle-aged woman, scribbling frantically to catch every word, hardly aware of the singular regard upon her. The lines creased beside smiling hazel eyes.

"You needn't take down *everything*, Miss Smith," he chided. "It's an hour's lecture, after all—your pencil will never last."

The woman blushed and dropped her pencil, but smiled shyly in answer to the friendly grin on Frank's lean, dark face. He had them now, everyone warmed by the glow of good humor, attention attracted by the small flashes of gilt and glitter. Now they would follow him without flagging or complaint, along the path of logic and into the thickets of discussion. A certain tenseness left his neck as he felt the students' attention settle and fix on him.

"The best witness to history is the man—or woman"—a nod to the pretty blonde—"who's lived it, right?" He smiled and picked up the cracked horn spoon. "Well, perhaps. After all, it's human nature to put the best face on things when you know someone will read what you've written. People tend to concentrate on the things they think important, and often enough, they tidy it up a bit for public consumption. It's rare to find a Pepys who records with equal interest the details of a Royal procession, and the number of times each night that he's obliged to use his chamber pot."

The laugh this time was general, and he relaxed, leaning casually back against the table, gesturing with the spoon.

"Similarly, the lovely objects, the artful artifacts, are the ones most often preserved. But the chamber pots and the spoons and the cheap clay pipes can tell us as much or more about the people who used them.

"And what about those people? We think of historical persons as something different than ourselves, sometimes halfway mythological. But someone played games with this"—the slender index finger stroked the counter-box—"a lady used this"—nudged the scent bottle—"dabbing scent behind her ears, on her wrists … where else do you ladies dab scent?" Lifting his head suddenly, he smiled at the plump blond girl in the front row, who blushed, giggled, and touched herself demurely just above the V of her blouse.

"Ah, yes. Just there. Well, so did the lady who owned this."

Still smiling at the girl, he unstoppered the scent bottle and passed it gently under his nose.

"What is it, Professor? Arpège?" Not so shy, this student; dark-haired, like Frank, with gray eyes that held more than a hint of flirtation.

He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, nostrils flaring over the mouth of the bottle.

"No. It's L'Heure Bleu. My favorite."

He turned back to the table, hair falling over his brow in concentration as his hand hovered over the row of miniatures.

"And then there's a special class of objects—portraits. A bit of art, and at the same time, as much as we can see of the people themselves. But how real are they to us?"

He lifted a tiny oval and turned it to face the class, reading from the small gummed label affixed to its back.

"A Lady, by Nathaniel Plimer, signed with initials and dated 1786, with curled brown hair piled high, wearing a pink dress and a ruffle-collared chemise, cloud and sky background." He held up a square beside it.

"A Gentleman, by Horace Hone, signed with monogram and dated 1780, with powdered hair *en queue*, wearing a brown coat, blue waistcoat, lawn jabot, and an Order, possibly the Most Honorable Order of the Bath."

The miniature showed a round-faced man, mouth rosily pursed in the formal pose of eighteenth-century portraits.

"The artists we know," he said, laying the portrait down. "They signed their work, or they left clues to their identity in the techniques and the subjects they used. But the people they painted? We see them, and yet we know nothing of them. The strange hairstyles, the odd clothes—they don't seem people that you'd know, do they? And the way so many artists painted them, the faces are all alike; pudding-faced and pale, most of them, and not a lot more you can say about them. Here and there, one stands out…." Hand hovering over the row, he selected another oval.

"A Gentleman …"

He held up the miniature, and Jamie's blue eyes blazed out under the fiery thatch of his hair, combed for once, braided and ribboned into an unaccustomed formal order. The knife-edged nose was bold above the lace of his stock, and the long mouth seemed about to speak, half-curled at one corner.

"But they *were* real people," Frank's voice insisted. "They did much the same things you do—give or take a few small details like going to the pictures or driving down the motorway"—there were appreciative titters amongst the class—"but they cared about their children, they loved their husbands or wives … well, sometimes they did …" More laughter.

"A Lady," he said softly, cradling the last of the portraits in his palm, shielding it for the moment. "With brown hair curling luxuriantly to her shoulders, and a necklace of pearls. Undated. The artist unknown."

It was a mirror, not a miniature. My cheeks were flushed, and my lips trembled as Frank's finger gently traced the edge of my jaw, the graceful line of my neck. The tears welled in my eyes and spilled down my cheeks as I heard his voice, still lecturing, as he laid down the miniature, and I stared upward at the timbered ceiling.

"Undated. Unknown. But once … once, she was real."

I was having trouble breathing, and thought at first that I was being smothered by the glass over the miniature. But the material pressing on my nose was soft and damp, and I twisted my head away and came awake, feeling the linen pillow wet with tears beneath my cheek. Jamie's hand was large and warm on my shoulder, gently shaking me.

"Hush, lassie. Hush! You're but dreaming—I'm here."

I turned my face into the warmth of his naked shoulder, feeling the tears slick between cheek and skin. I clung tightly to his solidness, and the small night sounds of the Paris house came slowly to my ears, bringing me back to the life that was mine.

"I'm sorry," I whispered. "I was dreaming about … about …"

He patted my back, and reached under the pillow for a handkerchief.

"I know. Ye were calling his name." He sounded resigned.

I laid my head back on his shoulder. He smelled warm and rumpled, his own sleepy scent blending with the smell of the down-filled quilt and the clean linen sheets.

"I'm sorry," I said again.

He snorted briefly, not quite a laugh.

"Well, I'll no say I'm not wicked jealous of the man," he said ruefully, "because I am. But I can hardly grudge him your dreams. Or your tears." His finger gently traced the wet track down one cheek, then blotted it with the handkerchief.

"You don't?"

His smile in the dimness was lopsided.

"No. Ye loved him. I canna hold it against either of you that ye mourn him. And it gives me some comfort to know …" He hesitated, and I reached up to smooth the rumpled hair off his face.

"To know what?"

"That should the need come, you might mourn for me that way," he said softly.

I pressed my face fiercely into his chest, so my words were muffled.

"I *won't* mourn you, because I won't have to. I won't lose you, I won't!" A thought struck me, and I looked up at him, the faint roughness of his beard stubble a shadow on his face.

"You aren't afraid I would go back, are you? You don't think that because I … think of Frank…."

"No." His voice was quick and soft, a response fast as the possessive tightening of his arms around me.

"No," he said again, more softly. "We are bound, you and I, and nothing on this earth shall part me from you." One large hand rose to stroke my hair. "D'ye mind the blood vow that I swore ye when we wed?"

"Yes, I think so. 'Blood of my blood, bone of my bone …' "

"I give ye my body, that we may be one," he finished. "Aye, and I have kept that vow, Sassenach, and so have you." He turned me slightly, and one hand cupped itself gently over the tiny swell of my stomach.

"Blood of my blood," he whispered, "and bone of my bone. You carry me within ye, Claire, and ye canna leave me now, no matter what happens. You are mine, always, if ye will it or no, if ye want me or nay. Mine, and I wilna let ye go."

I put a hand over his, pressing it against me.

"No," I said softly, "nor can you leave me."

"No," he said, half-smiling. "For I have kept the last of the vow as well." He clasped both hands about me, and bowed his head on my shoulder, so I could feel the warm breath of the words upon my ear, whispered to the dark.

"For I give ye my spirit, 'til our life shall be done."

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11

USEFUL OCCUPATIONS

“Who is that peculiar little man?” I asked Jamie curiously. The man in question was making his way slowly through the groups of guests gathered in the main salon of the de Rohans’ house. He would pause a moment, scanning the group with a critical eye, then either shrug a bony shoulder and pass on, or suddenly step in close to a man or woman, hold something to their face and issue some sort of command. Whatever he was doing, his actions appeared to be the occasion of considerable hilarity.

Before Jamie could answer, the man, a small, wizened specimen in gray serge, spotted us, and his face lit up. He swooped down on Jamie like a tiny bird of prey suddenly descending upon a large and startled rabbit.

“Sing,” he commanded.

“Eh?” Jamie blinked down at the little figure in astonishment.

“I said ‘Sing,’ ” answered the man, patiently. He prodded Jamie admiringly in the chest. “With a resonating cavity like that, you should have a wonderful volume.”

“Oh, he has volume,” I said, amused. “You can hear him across three squares of the city when he’s roused.”

Jamie shot me a dirty look. The little man was circling him, measuring the breadth of his back and tapping on him like a woodpecker sampling a prime tree.

“I can’t sing,” he protested.

“Nonsense, nonsense. Of course you can. A nice, deep baritone, too,” the little man murmured approvingly. “Excellent. Just what we need. Here, a bit of help for you. Try to match this tone."

Deftly whipping a small tuning fork from his pocket, he struck it smartly against a pillar and held it next to Jamie's left ear.

Jamie rolled his eyes heavenward, but shrugged and obligingly sang a note. The little man jerked back as though he'd been shot.

"No," he said disbelievingly.

"I'm afraid so," I said sympathetically. "He's right, you know. He really *can't* sing."

The little man squinted accusingly at Jamie, then struck his fork once more and held it out invitingly.

"Once more," he coaxed. "Just listen to it, and let the same sound come out."

Patient as ever, Jamie listened carefully to the "A" of the fork, and sang again, producing a sound wedged somewhere in the crack between E-flat and D-sharp.

"Not possible," said the little man, looking thoroughly disillusioned. "No one could be that dissonant even on purpose."

"*I* can," said Jamie cheerfully, and bowed politely to the little man. We had by now begun to collect a small crowd of interested onlookers. Louise de Rohan was a great hostess, and her salons attracted the cream of Parisian society.

"Yes, he can," I assured our visitor. "He's tone-deaf, you see."

"Yes, I do see," the little man said, looking thoroughly depressed. Then he began to eye me speculatively.

"Not me!" I said, laughing.

"You surely aren't tone-deaf as well, Madame?" Eyes glittering like a snake slithering toward a paralyzed bird, the little man began to move toward me, tuning fork twitching like the flicking tongue of a viper.

"Wait a minute," I said, holding out a repressive hand. "Just who *are* you?"

"This is Herr Johannes Gerstmann, Sassenach." Looking amused, Jamie bowed again to the little man. "The King's singing-master. May I present you to my wife, Lady Broch Tuarach, Herr Gerstmann?" Trust Jamie to know every last member of the Court, no matter how insignificant.

Johannes Gerstmann. Well, that accounted for the faint accent I had detected under the formality of Court French. German, I wondered, or Austrian?

"I am assembling a small impromptu chorus," the little singing-master explained. "The voices need not be trained, but they must be strong and true." He cast a glance of disillusionment at Jamie, who merely grinned in response. He took the tuning fork from Herr Gerstmann and held it inquiringly in my direction.

"Oh, all right," I said, and sang.

Whatever he heard appeared to encourage Herr Gerstmann, for he put away the tuning fork and peered at me interestedly. His wig was a trifle too big, and tended to slide forward when he nodded. He did so now, then pushed the wig carelessly back, and said "Excellent tone, Madame! Really very nice, very nice indeed. Are you acquainted perhaps with *Le Papillon*?" He hummed a few bars.

"Well, I've heard it at least," I replied cautiously. "Um, the melody, I mean; I don't know the words."

"Ah! No difficulty, Madame. The chorus is simplicity; like this …"

My arm trapped in the singing-master's grip, I found myself being ineluctably drawn away toward the sound of harpsichord music in a distant room, Herr Gerstmann humming in my ear like a demented bumblebee.

I cast a helpless glance back at Jamie, who merely grinned and raised his cup of sorbet in a farewell salute before turning to take up a conversation with Monsieur Duverney the younger, the son of the Minister of Finance.

The Rohans' house—if you could use a mere word like "house" in description of such a place—was alight with lanterns strung through the back garden and edging the terrace. As Herr Gerstmann towed me through the corridors, I could see servants hurrying in and out of the supper rooms, laying linen and silver for the dining that would take place later. Most "salons" were small, intimate affairs, but the Princesse Louise de La Tour de Rohan was an expansive personality.

I had met the Princesse a week before, at another evening party, and had found her something of a surprise. Plump and rather plain, she had a round face with a small round chin, pale lashless blue eyes, and a star-shaped false beauty mark that did very little to fulfill its function in life. So this was the lady who enticed Prince Charles into ignoring the dictates of propriety? I thought, curtsying in the receiving line.

Still, she had an air of lively animation about her that was quite attractive, and a lovely soft pink mouth. Her mouth was the most animated part of her, in fact.

"But I am charmed!" she had exclaimed, grabbing my hand as I was presented to her. "How wonderful to meet you at last! My husband and my father have both sung the praises of milord Broch Tuarach unendingly, but of his delightful wife they have said nothing. I am enchanted beyond measure by your coming, my dear, sweet lady—must I really say Broch Tuarach, or won't it do if I only say Lady Tuarach? I'm not sure I could remember all of it, but one word, surely, even if such a strange-sounding word—is it Scottish? How enchanting!"

In fact, Broch Tuarach meant "the north-facing tower," but if she wanted to call me "Lady North-facing," it was all right with me. In the event, she quickly gave up trying to remember "Tuarach," and had since called me only *"ma chère Claire."*

Louise herself was with the group of singers in the music room, fluttering plumply from one to another, talking and laughing. When she saw me, she dashed across the room as fast as her draperies would allow, her plain face alight with animation.

"Ma chère Claire!" she exclaimed, ruthlessly commandeering me from Herr Gerstmann. "You are just in time! Come, you must talk to this silly English child for me."

The "silly English child" was in fact very young; a girl of not more than fifteen, with dark, shiny ringlets, and cheeks flushed so hotly with embarrassment that she reminded me of a brilliant poppy. In fact, it was the cheeks that recalled her to me; the girl I had glimpsed in the garden at Versailles, just before the unsettling appearance of Alexander Randall.

"Madame Fraser is English, too," Louise was explaining to the girl. "She will soon make you feel at home. She's shy," Louise explained, turning to me without pausing to draw breath. "Talk to her;

persuade her to sing with us. She has a delightful voice, I am assured. There, *mes enfants*, enjoy yourselves!" And with a pat of benediction, she was off to the other side of the room, exclaiming, cajoling, marveling at a new arrival's gown, pausing to fondle the overweight youth who sat at the harpsichord, twisting ringlets of his hair around her finger as she chattered to the Duc di Castellotti.

"Makes you rather tired just to watch her, doesn't it?" I said in English, smiling at the girl. A tiny smile appeared on her own lips and she bobbed her head briefly, but didn't speak. I thought this must all be rather overwhelming; Louise's parties tended to make my own head spin, and the little poppy girl could scarcely be out of the schoolroom.

"I'm Claire Fraser," I said, "but Louise didn't remember to tell me your name." I paused invitingly, but she didn't reply. Her face got redder and redder, lips pressed tight together, and her fists clenched at her sides. I was a trifle alarmed at her appearance, but she finally summoned the will to speak. She took a deep breath, and raised her chin like one about to mount the scaffold.

"M-m-my-name is … M-M-M," she began, and at once I understood her silence and her painful shyness. She closed her eyes, biting her lip savagely, then opened her eyes and gamely had another try. "M-M-Mary Hawkins," she managed at last. "I d-d-don't sing," she added defiantly.

If I had found her interesting before, I was fascinated now. So this was Silas Hawkins's niece, the baronet's daughter, the intended fiancée of the Vicomte Marigny! It seemed a considerable weight of male expectation for such a young girl to bear. I glanced around to see whether the Vicomte was in evidence, and was relieved to find that he wasn't.

"Don't worry about it," I said, stepping in front of her, to shield her from the waves of people now filling the music room. "You needn't talk if you don't want to. Though perhaps you should try to sing," I said, struck by a thought. "I knew a physician once who specialized in the treatment of stammering; he said that people who stammer don't do it when they sing."

Mary Hawkins's eyes grew wide with astonishment at this. I looked around and saw a nearby alcove, curtained to hide a cozy bench.

"Here," I said, taking her by the hand. "You can sit in here, so you don't have to talk to people. If you want to sing, you can come out when we start; if not, just stay in here 'til the party's over." She stared at me for a minute, then gave me a sudden blinding smile of gratitude, and ducked into the alcove.

I loitered outside, to prevent any nosy servants from disturbing her hiding place, chatting with passersby.

"How lovely you look tonight, *ma chère*!" It was Madame de Ramage, one of the Queen's ladies. An older, dignified woman, she had come to supper in the Rue Tremoulins once or twice. She embraced me warmly, then looked around to be sure that we were unobserved.

"I had hoped to see you here, my dear," she said, leaning a bit closer and lowering her voice. "I wished to advise you to take care concerning the Comte St. Germain."

Half-turning in the direction of her gaze, I saw the lean-faced man from the docks of Le Havre, entering the music room with a younger, elegantly dressed woman on his arm. He hadn't seen me, apparently, and I hastily turned back to Madame de Remage.

"What … has he … I mean …" I could feel myself flushing still more deeply, rattled by the appearance of the saturnine Comte.

"Well, yes, he has been heard to speak of you," Madame de Ramage said, kindly helping me out of my confusion. "I gather that there was some small difficulty in Le Havre?"

"Something of the kind," I said. "All I did was to recognize a case of smallpox, but it resulted in the destruction of his ship, and … he wasn't pleased about it," I concluded weakly.

"Ah, so that was it." Madame de Ramage looked pleased. I imagined having the inside story, so to speak, would give her an advantage in the trade of gossip and information that was the commerce of Parisian social life.

"He has been going about telling people that he believes you to be a witch," she said, smiling and waving at a friend across the room.

"A fine story! Oh, no one believes it," she assured me. "Everyone knows that if anyone is mixed up in such matters, it is Monsieur le Comte himself."

"Really?" I wanted to ask just what she meant by this, but just then Herr Gerstmann bustled up, clapping his hands as though shooing a flock of hens.

"Come, come, mesdames!" he said. "We are all complete; the singing commences!"

As the chorale hastily assembled near the harpsichord, I looked back toward the alcove where I had left Mary Hawkins. I thought I saw the curtain twitch, but wasn't sure. And as the music began, and the joined voices rose, I thought I heard a clear, high soprano from the direction of the alcove—but again, I wasn't sure.

* * *

"Verra nice, Sassenach," Jamie said when I rejoined him, flushed and breathless, after the singing. He grinned down at me and patted my shoulder.

"How would you know?" I said, accepting a glass of wine-punch from a passing servant. "You can't tell one song from another."

"Well, ye were loud, anyway," he said, unperturbed. "I could hear every word." I felt him stiffen slightly beside me, and turned to see what—or whom—he was looking at.

The woman who had just entered was tiny, scarcely as high as Jamie's lowest rib, with hands and feet like a doll's, and brows delicate as Chinese tracery, over eyes the deep black of sloes. She advanced with a step that mocked its own lightness, so she looked as though she were dancing just above the ground.

"There's Annalise de Marillac," I said, admiring her. "Doesn't she look lovely?"

"Oh, aye." Something in his voice made me glance sharply upward. A faint pink tinged the tips of his ears.

"And here I thought you spent your years in France fighting, not making romantic conquests," I said tartly.

To my surprise, he laughed at this. Catching the sound, the woman turned toward us. A brilliant smile lit her face as she saw

Jamie looming among the crowd. She turned as though to come in our direction, but was distracted by a gentleman, wigged and resplendent in lavender satin, who laid an importuning hand on her fragile arm. She flicked her fan charmingly at Jamie in a gesture of regretful coquetry before devoting her attention to her new companion.

"What's so funny?" I asked, seeing him still grinning broadly after the lady's gently oscillating lace skirts.

He snapped suddenly back to an awareness of my presence, and smiled down at me.

"Oh, nothing, Sassenach. Only what ye said about fighting. I fought my first duel—well, the only one, in fact—over Annalise de Marillac. When I was eighteen."

His tone was mildly dreamy, watching the sleek, dark head bob away through the crowd, surrounded wherever it went by white clusters of wigs and powdered hair, with here and there a fashionably pink-tinged peruke for variety.

"A duel? With whom?" I asked, glancing around warily for any male attachments to the China doll who might feel inclined to follow up an old quarrel.

"Och, he isna here," Jamie said, catching and correctly interpreting my glance. "He's dead."

"You *killed* him?" Agitated, I spoke rather louder than intended. As a few nearby heads turned curiously in our direction, Jamie took me by the elbow and steered me hastily toward the nearest French doors.

"Mind your voice, Sassenach," he said, mildly enough. "No, I didna kill him. Wanted to," he added ruefully, "but didn't. He died two years ago, of the morbid sore throat. Jared told me."

He guided me down one of the garden paths, lit by lantern-bearing servants, who stood like bollards at five-yard intervals from the terrace to the fountain at the bottom of the path. In the midst of a big reflecting pool, four dolphins sprayed sheets of water over an annoyed-looking Triton in the center, who brandished a trident rather ineffectually at them.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," I urged as we passed out of hearing of the groups on the terrace. "What happened?"

"All right, then," he said, resigned. "Well, ye will have observed that Annalise is rather pretty?"

"Oh, really? Well, perhaps, now that you mention it, I can see something of the kind," I answered sweetly, provoking a sudden sharp look, followed by a lopsided smile.

"Aye. Well, I wasna the only young gallant in Paris to be of the same opinion, nor the only one to lose his head over her, either. Went about in a daze, tripping over my feet. Waited in the street, in hopes of seeing her come out of her house to the carriage. Forgot to eat, even; Jared said my coat hung on me like a scarecrow's, and the state of my hair didna much help the resemblance." His hand went absently to his head, patting the immaculate queue that lay clubbed tight against his neck, bound with blue ribbon.

"Forgot to eat? Christ, you *did* have it bad," I remarked.

He chuckled. "Oh, aye. And still worse when she began to flirt wi' Charles Gauloise. Mind ye," he added fairly, "she flirted with everyone—that was all right—but she chose him for her supper partner ower-often for my taste, and danced with him too much at the parties, and … well, the long and the short of it, Sassenach, is that I caught him kissing her in the moonlight on her father's terrace one night, and challenged him."

By this time, we had reached the fountain in our promenade. Jamie drew to a stop and we sat on the rim of the fountain, upwind of the spray from the puff-lipped dolphins. Jamie drew a hand through the dark water and lifted it dripping, abstractedly watching the silver drops run down his fingers.

"Dueling was illegal in Paris then—as it is now. But there were places; there always are. It was his to choose, and he picked a spot in the Bois de Boulogne. Close by the road of the Seven Saints, but hidden by a screen of oaks. The choice of weapon was his, too. I expected pistols, but he chose swords."

"Why would he do that? You must have had a six-inch reach on him—or more." I was no expert, but was perforce learning a small bit about the strategy and tactics of swordfighting; Jamie and

Murtagh took each other on every two or three days to keep in practice, clashing and parrying and lunging up and down the garden, to the untrammeled delight of the servants, male and female alike, who all surged out onto the balconies to watch.

"Why did he choose smallswords? Because he was bloody good with one. Also, I suspected he thought I might kill him accidentally with a pistol, while he knew I'd be satisfied only to draw blood with a blade. I didna mean to kill him, ye ken," he explained. "Only to humiliate him. And he knew it. No fool, was our Charles," he said, ruefully shaking his head.

The mist from the fountain was making ringlets escape from my coiffure, to curl around my face. I brushed back a wisp of hair, asking, "And did you humiliate him?"

"Well, I wounded him, at least." I was surprised to hear a small note of satisfaction in his voice, and raised an eyebrow at him. "He'd learnt his craft from LeJeune, one of the best swordmasters in France." Jamie explained. "Like fighting a damn flea, it was, and I fought him right-handed, too." He pushed a hand through his hair once more, as though checking the binding.

"My hair came loose, midway through," he said. "The thong holding it broke, and the wind was blowing it into my eyes, so all I could see was the wee white shape of Charles in his shirt, darting to and fro like a minnow. And that's how I got him, finally—the way ye spear a fish with a dirk." He snorted through his nose.

"He let out a skelloch as though I'd run him through, though I knew I'd but pinked him in one arm. I got the hair out of my face at last and looked beyond him to see Annalise standing there at the edge of the clearing, wi' her eyes wide and dark as yon pool." He gestured out over the silver-black surface beside us.

"So I sheathed my blade and smoothed back my hair, and stood there—half-expectin' her to come and throw herself into my arms, I suppose."

"Um," I said, delicately. "I gather she didn't?"

"Well, I didna ken anything about women then, did I?" he demanded. "No, she came and threw herself on *him*, of course." He made a Scottish noise deep in his throat, one of self-derision and humorous disgust. “Married him a month later, I heard.”

“Aye, well.” He shrugged suddenly, with a rueful smile. “So my heart was broken. Went home to Scotland and moped about for weeks, until my father lost patience wi’ me.” He laughed. “I even thought of turning monk over it. Said to my father over supper one night as I thought perhaps in the spring I’d go across to the Abbey and become a novice.”

I laughed at the thought. “Well, you’d have no difficulty with the vow of poverty; chastity and obedience might come a bit harder. What did your father say?”

He grinned, teeth white in a dark face. “He was eating brose. He laid down the spoon and looked at me for a moment. Then he sighed and shook his head, and said, ‘It’s been a long day, Jamie.’ Then he picked up the spoon again and went back to his supper, and I never said another word about it.”

He looked up the slope to the terrace, where those not dancing strolled to and fro, cooling off between dances, sipping wine and flirting behind fans. He sighed nostalgically.

“Aye, a verra pretty lass, Annalise de Marillac. Graceful as the wind, and so small that ye wanted to tuck her inside your shirt and carry her like a kitten.”

I was silent, listening to the faint music from the open doors above, as I contemplated the gleaming satin slipper that encased my size-nine foot.

After a moment, Jamie became aware of my silence.

“What is it, Sassenach?” he asked, laying a hand on my arm.

“Oh, nothing,” I said with a sigh. “Only thinking that I rather doubt anyone will ever describe me as ‘graceful as the wind.’ ”

“Ah.” His head was half-turned, the long, straight nose and firm chin lighted from behind by the glow of the nearest lantern. I could see the half-smile on his lips as he turned back toward me.

“Well, I’ll tell ye, Sassenach, ‘graceful’ is possibly not the first word that springs to mind at thought of you.” He slipped an arm behind me, one hand large and warm around my silk-clad shoulder.

"But I talk to you as I talk to my own soul," he said, turning me to face him. He reached up and cupped my cheek, fingers light on my temple.

"And, Sassenach," he whispered, "your face is my heart."

It was the shifting of the wind, several minutes later, that parted us at last with a fine spray from the fountain. We broke apart and rose hastily, laughing at the sudden chill of the water. Jamie inclined his head inquiringly toward the terrace, and I took his arm, nodding.

"So," I observed, as we made our way slowly up the wide steps to the ballroom, "you've learnt a bit more about women now, I see."

He laughed, low and deep, tightening his grasp on my waist.

"The most important thing I've learned about women, Sassenach, is which one to choose." He stepped away, bowing to me, and gesturing through the open doors to the brilliant scene inside. "May I have this dance, milady?"

I spent the next afternoon at the d'Arbanvilles', where I met the King's singing-master once again. This time, we found time for a conversation, which I recounted to Jamie after supper.

"You what?" Jamie squinted at me, as though he suspected me of pulling some practical joke.

"I said, Herr Gerstmann suggested that I might be interested in meeting a friend of his. Mother Hildegarde is in charge of L'Hôpital des Anges—you know, the charity hospital down near the cathedral."

"I know where it is." His voice was marked by a general lack of enthusiasm.

"He had a sore throat, and that led to me telling him what to take for it, and a bit about medicines in general, and how I was interested in diseases and, well, you know how one thing leads to another."

"With you, it customarily does," he agreed, sounding distinctly cynical. I ignored his tone and went on.

“So, I’m going to go to the hospital tomorrow.” I stretched on tiptoe to reach down my medicine box from its shelf. “Maybe I won’t take it along with me the first time,” I said, scanning the contents meditatively. “It might seem too pushing. Do you think?”

“Pushing?” He sounded stunned. “Are ye meaning to visit the place, or move into it?”

“Er, well,” I said. I took a deep breath. “I, er, thought perhaps I could work there regularly. Herr Gerstmann says that all the physicians and healers who go there donate their time. Most of them don’t turn up every day, but I have plenty of time, and I could—”

“Plenty of time?”

“Stop repeating everything I say,” I said. “Yes, plenty of time. I know it’s important to go to salons and supper parties and all that, but it doesn’t take all day—at least it needn’t. I could—”

“Sassenach, you’re with child! Ye dinna mean to go out to nurse beggars and criminals?” He sounded rather helpless now, as though wondering how to deal with someone who had suddenly gone mad in front of him.

“I hadn’t forgotten,” I assured him. I pressed my hands against my belly, squinting down.

“It isn’t really noticeable yet; with a loose gown I can get away with it for a time. And there’s nothing wrong with me except the morning sickness; no reason why I shouldn’t work for some months yet.”

“No reason, except I wilna have ye doing it!” Expecting no company this evening, he had taken off his stock and opened his collar when he came home. I could see the tide of dusky red advancing up his throat.

“Jamie,” I said, striving for reasonableness. “You know what I am.”

“You’re my wife!”

“Well, that, too.” I flicked the idea aside with my fingers. “I’m a nurse, Jamie. A healer. You have reason to know it.”

He flushed hotly. “Aye, I do. And because ye’ve mended me when I’m wounded, I should think it right for ye to tend beggars and prostitutes? Sassenach, do ye no ken the sort of people that

L'Hôpital des Anges takes in?" He looked pleadingly at me, as though expecting me to return to my senses any minute.

"What difference does that make?"

He looked wildly around the room, imploring witness from the portrait over the mantelpiece as to my unreasonableness.

"You could catch a filthy disease, for God's sake! D'ye have no regard for your child, even if ye have none for me?"

Reasonableness was seeming a less desirable goal by the moment.

"Of course I have! What kind of careless, irresponsible person do you think I am?"

"The kind who would abandon her husband to go and play with scum in the gutter!" he snapped. "Since you ask." He ran a big hand through his hair, making it stick up at the crown.

"Abandon you? Since when is it abandoning you to suggest really doing something, instead of rotting away in the d'Arbanvilles' salon, watching Louise de Rohan stuff herself with pastry, and listening to bad poetry and worse music? I want to be useful!"

"Taking care of your own household isna useful? Being married to me isna useful?" The lacing round his hair broke under the stress, and the thick locks fluffed out like a flaming halo. He glared down his nose at me like an avenging angel.

"Sauce for the gander," I retorted coldly. "Is being married to *me* sufficient occupation for *you*? I don't notice you hanging round the house all day, adoring me. And as for the household, bosh."

"Bosh? What's bosh?" he demanded.

"Stuff and nonsense. Rot. Horsefeathers. In other words, don't be ridiculous. Madame Vionnet does everything, and does it several dozen times better than I could."

This was so patently true that it stopped him for a moment. He glared down at me, jaw working.

"Oh, aye? And if I forbid ye to go?"

This stopped me for a moment. I drew myself up and looked him up and down. His eyes were the color of rain-dark slate, the wide, generous mouth clamped in a straight line. Shoulders broad and back erect, arms folded across his chest like a cast-iron statue, "forbidding" was precisely the word that best described him.

"*Do* you forbid me?" The tension crackled between us. I wanted to blink, but wouldn't give him the satisfaction of breaking off my own steely gaze. What *would* I do if he forbade me to go? Alternatives raced through my mind, everything from planting the ivory letter-opener between his ribs to burning down the house with him in it. The only idea I rejected absolutely was that of giving in.

He paused, and drew a deep breath before speaking. His hands were curled into fists at his sides, and he uncurled them with conscious effort.

"No," he said. "No, I dinna forbid ye." His voice shook slightly with the effort to control it. "But if I asked you?"

I looked down then, and stared at his reflection in the polished tabletop. At first, the idea of visiting L'Hôpital des Anges had seemed merely an interesting idea, an attractive alternative to the endless gossip and petty intrigues of Parisian society. But now … I could feel the muscles of my arms swell as I clenched my own fists. I didn't just *want* to work again; I *needed* to.

"I don't know," I said at last.

He took a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Will ye think about it, Claire?" I could feel his eyes on me. After what seemed a long time, I nodded.

"I'll think about it."

"Good." His tension broken, he turned restlessly away. He wandered round the drawing room, picking up small objects and putting them down at random, finally coming to roost by the bookshelf, where he leaned, staring unseeingly at the leather-bound titles. I came tentatively up beside him, and laid a hand on his arm.

"Jamie, I didn't mean to upset you."

He glanced down at me and gave me a sidelong smile.

"Aye, well. I didna mean to fight wi' you, either, Sassenach. I'm short-tempered and over-touchy, I expect." He patted my hand in apology, then moved aside, to stand looking down at his desk.

"You've been working hard," I said soothingly, following him.

"It's not that." He shook his head, and reached out to flip open the pages of the huge ledger that lay in the center of the desk.

"The wine business; that's all right. It's a great deal of work, aye, but I dinna mind it. It's the other." He gestured at a small stack of letters, held down by an alabaster paperweight. One of Jared's, it was carved in the shape of a white rose—the Stuarts' emblem. The letters it secured were from Abbot Alexander, from the Earl of Mar, from other prominent Jacobites. All filled with veiled inquiry, misty promises, contradictory expectations.

"I feel as though I'm fighting feathers!" Jamie said, violently. "A real fight, something I could get my hands on, that I could do. But this …" He snatched up the handful of letters from the desk, and tossed them into the air. The room was drafty, and the papers zigzagged wildly, sliding under furniture and fluttering on the carpet.

"There's nothing to get hold of," he said helplessly. "I can talk to a thousand people, write a hundred letters, drink wi' Charles 'til I'm blind, and never know if I'm getting on or not."

I let the scattered letters lie; one of the maids could retrieve them later.

"Jamie," I said softly. "We can't do anything but try."

He smiled faintly, hands braced on the desk. "Aye. I'm glad you said 'we,' Sassenach. I do feel verra much alone with it all sometimes."

I put my arms around his waist and laid my face against his back.

"You know I wouldn't leave you alone with it," I said. "I got you into it in the first place, after all."

I could feel the small vibration of a laugh under my cheek.

"Aye, you did. I wilna hold it against ye, Sassenach." He turned, leaned down, and kissed me lightly on the forehead. "You look tired, *mo duinne*. Go up to bed, now. I've a bit more work to do, but I'll join ye soon."

"All right." I *was* tired tonight, though the chronic sleepiness of early pregnancy was giving way to new energy; I was beginning to feel alert in the daytime, brimming with the urge to be active.

I paused at the door on my way out. He was still standing by the desk, staring down into the pages of the open ledger.

"Jamie?" I said.

"Aye?"

"The hospital—I said I'd think about it. You think, too, hm?"

He turned his head, one brow sharply arched. Then he smiled, and nodded briefly.

"I'll come to ye soon, Sassenach," he said.

* * *

It was still sleeting, and tiny particles of frozen rain rattled against the windows and hissed into the fire when the night wind turned to drive them down the flue. The wind was high, and it moaned and grumbled among the chimneys, making the bedroom seem all the cozier by contrast. The bed itself was an oasis of warmth and comfort, equipped with goose-down quilts, huge fluffy pillows, and Jamie, faithfully putting out British Thermal Units like an electric storage heater.

His large hand stroked lightly across my stomach, warm through the thin silk of my nightdress.

"No, there. You have to press a little harder." I took his hand and pressed the fingers downward, just above my pubic bone, where the uterus had begun to make itself obvious, a round, hard swelling a little larger than a grapefruit.

"Aye, I feel it," he murmured. "He's really there." A tiny smile of awed delight tugged at the corner of his mouth, and he looked up at me, eyes sparkling. "Can ye feel him move, yet?"

I shook my head. "Not yet. Another month or so, I think, from what your sister Jenny said."

"Mmm," he said, kissing the tiny bulge. "What d'ye think of 'Dalhousie,' Sassenach?"

"What do I think of 'Dalhousie' as *what*?" I inquired.

"Well, as a name," he said. He patted my stomach. "He'll need a name."

"True," I said. "Though what makes you think it's a boy? It might just as easily be a girl."

"Oh? Oh, aye, that's true," he admitted, as though the possibility had just occurred to him. "Still, why not start with the boys' names? We could name him for your uncle who raised you."

"Umm." I frowned at my midsection. Dearly as I had loved my uncle Lamb, I didn't know that I wanted to inflict either "Lambert" or "Quentin" on a helpless infant. "No, I don't think so. On the other hand, I don't think I'd want to name him for one of *your* uncles, either."

Jamie stroked my stomach absently, thinking.

"What was your father's name, Sassenach?" he asked.

I had to think for a moment to remember.

"Henry," I said. "Henry Montmorency Beauchamp. Jamie, I am *not* having a child named 'Montmorency Fraser,' no matter what. I'm not so keen on 'Henry,' either, though it's better than Lambert. How about William?" I suggested. "For your brother?" His older brother, William, had died in late childhood, but had lived long enough for Jamie to remember him with great affection.

His brow was furrowed in thought. "Hmm," he said. "Aye, maybe. Or we could call him …"

"James," said a hollow, sepulchral voice from the flue.

"What?" I said, sitting straight up in bed.

"James," said the fireplace, impatiently. "James, James!"

"Sweet bleeding Jesus," said Jamie, staring at the leaping flames on the hearth. I could feel the hair standing up on his forearm, stiff as wire. He sat frozen for a moment; then, a thought occurring to him, he jumped to his feet and went to the dormer window, not bothering to put anything on over his shirt.

He flung up the sash, admitting a blast of frigid air, and thrust his head out into the night. I heard a muffled shout, and then a scrabbling sound across the slates of the roof. Jamie leaned far out, rising on his toes to reach, then backed slowly into the room, rain-dampened and grunting with effort. He dragged with him, arms clasped about his neck, the form of a handsome boy in dark clothing, thoroughly soaked, with a bloodstained cloth wrapped around one hand.

The visitor caught his foot on the sill and landed clumsily, sprawling on the floor. He scrambled up at once, though, and bowed to me, snatching off his slouch hat.

“Madame,” he said, in thickly accented French. “I must beg your pardon, I arrive so without ceremony. I intrude, but it is of necessity that I call upon my friend James at such an unsocial hour.”

He was a sturdy, good-looking lad, with thick, light-brown hair curling loose upon his shoulders, and a fair face, cheeks flushed red with cold and exertion. His nose was running slightly, and he wiped it with the back of his wrapped hand, wincing slightly as he did so.

Jamie, both eyebrows raised, bowed politely to the visitor.

“My house is at your service, Your Highness,” he said, with a glance that took in the general disorder of the visitor’s attire. His stock was undone and hung loosely around his neck, half his buttons were done up awry, and the flies of his breeches flopped partially open. I saw Jamie frown slightly at this, and he moved unobtrusively in front of the boy, to screen me from the indelicate sight.

“If I may present my wife, Your Highness?” he said. “Claire, my lady Broch Tuarach. Claire, this is His Highness, Prince Charles, son of King James of Scotland.”

“Um, yes,” I said. “I’d rather gathered that. Er, good evening, Your Highness.” I nodded graciously, pulling the bedclothes up around me. I supposed that under the circumstances, I could dispense with the usual curtsy.

The Prince had taken advantage of Jamie’s long-winded introduction to fumble his trousers into better order, and now nodded back at me, full of Royal dignity.

“It is my pleasure, Madame,” he said, and bowed once more, making a much more elegant production of it. He straightened and stood turning his hat in his hands, obviously trying to think what to say next. Jamie, standing bare-legged in his shirt alongside, glanced from me to Charles, seemingly at an equal loss for words.

“Er …” I said, to break the silence. “Have you had an accident, Your Highness?” I nodded at the handkerchief wrapped around his hand, and he glanced down as though noticing it for the first time.

“Yes,” he said, “ah … no. I mean … it is nothing, my lady.” He flushed redder, staring at his hand. His manner was odd; something between embarrassment and anger. I could see the stain on the cloth spreading, though, and put my feet out of bed, groping for my dressing gown.

"You'd better let me have a look at it," I said.

The injury, exposed with some reluctance by the Prince, was not serious, but it was unusual.

"That looks like an animal bite," I said incredulously, dabbing at the small semicircle of puncture wounds in the webbing between thumb and forefinger. Prince Charles winced as I squeezed the flesh around it, meaning to cleanse the wound by bleeding before binding it.

"Yes," he said. "A monkey bite. Disgusting, flea-ridden beast!" he burst out. "I told her she must dispose of it. Undoubtedly the animal is diseased!"

I had found my medicine box, and now applied a thin layer of gentian ointment. "I don't think you need worry," I said, intent on my work. "So long as it isn't rabid, that is."

"Rabid?" The Prince went quite pale. "Do you think it could be?" Plainly he had no idea what "rabid" might mean, but wanted no part of it.

"Anything's possible," I said cheerfully. Surprised by his sudden appearance, it was just beginning to dawn on me that it would save everyone a great deal of trouble in the long run, if this young man would succumb gracefully to some quick and deadly disease. Still, I couldn't quite find it in my heart to wish him gangrene or rabies, and I tied up his hand neatly in a fresh linen bandage.

He smiled, bowed again, and thanked me very prettily in a mixture of French and Italian. Still apologizing effusively for his untimely visit, he was towed away by Jamie, now respectably kilted, for a drink downstairs.

Feeling the chill of the room seep through gown and robe, I crawled back into bed and drew the quilts up under my chin. So this was Prince Charles! Bonnie enough, to be sure; at least to look at. He seemed very young—much younger than Jamie, though I knew Jamie was only a year or two older. His Highness did have considerable charm of manner, though, and quite a bit of self-important dignity, despite his disordered dress. Was that really enough to take him to Scotland, at the head of an army of restoration? As I drifted off, I wondered exactly what the heir to the throne of Scotland had been doing, wandering over the Paris rooftops in the middle of the night, with a monkey bite on one hand.

The question was still on my mind when Jamie woke me sometime later by sliding into bed and planting his large, ice-cold feet directly behind my knees.

“Don’t scream like that,” he said, “you’ll wake the servants.”

“What in hell was Charles Stuart doing running about the rooftops with monkeys?” I demanded, taking evasive action. “Take those bloody ice cubes off me.”

“Visiting his mistress,” said Jamie succinctly. “All right, then; stop kicking me.” He removed the feet and embraced me, shivering, as I turned to him.

“He has a mistress? Who?” Stimulated by whiffs of cold and scandal, I was quickly waking up.

It’s Louise de La Tour,” Jamie explained reluctantly, in response to my prodding. His nose looked longer and sharper than usual, with the thick brows drawn together above it. Having a mistress was bad enough, in his Scottish Catholic view, but it was well known that royalty had certain privileges in this regard. The Princesse Louise de La Tour was married, however. And royalty or not, taking a married woman as one’s mistress was positively immoral, his cousin Jared’s example notwithstanding.

“Ha,” I said with satisfaction. “I knew it!”

“He says he’s in love with her,” he reported tersely, yanking the quilts up over his shoulders. “He insists she loves him too; says she’s been faithful only to him for the last three months. Tcha!”

“Well, it’s been known to happen,” I said, amused. “So he was visiting her? How did he get out on the roof, though? Did he tell you that?”

“Oh, aye. He told me.”

Charles, fortified against the night with several glasses of Jared’s best aged port, had been quite forthcoming. The strength of true love had been tried severely this evening, according to Charles, by his inamorata's devotion to her pet, a rather ill-tempered monkey that reciprocated His Highness's dislike and had more concrete means of demonstrating its opinions. Snapping his fingers under the monkey's nose in derision, His Highness had suffered first a sharp bite in the hand, and then the sharper bite of his mistress's tongue, exercised in bitter reproach. The couple had quarreled hotly, to the point that Louise, Princesse de Rohan, had ordered Charles from her presence. He had expressed himself only too willing to go—never, he emphasized dramatically, to return.

The Prince's departure, however, had been considerably hampered by the discovery that the Princesse's husband had returned early from his evening of gaming, and was comfortably ensconced in the anteroom with a bottle of brandy.

"So," said Jamie, smiling despite himself at the thought, "he wouldna stay with the lassie, but he couldna go out of the door—so he threw up the sash and jumped out on the roof. He got down almost to the street, he said, along the drainage pipes; but then the City guard came along, and he had to scramble back up to stay out of their sight. He had a rare time of it, he said, dodging about the chimneys and slipping on the wet slates, until it occurred to him that our house was only three houses down the row, and the rooftops close enough to hop them like lily pads."

"Mm," I said, feeling warmth reestablish itself around my toes. "Did you send him home in the coach?"

"No, he took one of the horses from the stable."

"If he's been drinking Jared's port, I hope they both make it to Montmartre," I remarked. "It's a good long way."

"Well, it will be a cold, wet journey, no doubt," said Jamie, with the smugness of a man virtuously tucked up in a warm bed with his lawfully wedded wife. He blew out the candle and pulled me close against his chest, spoon-fashion.

"Serve him right," he murmured. "A man ought to be married."

* * *

The servants were up before dawn, polishing and cleaning in preparation for entertaining Monsieur Duverney at a small, private supper in the evening.

"I don't know why they bother," I told Jamie, lying in bed with my eyes closed, listening to the bustle downstairs. "All they need do is dust off the chess set and put out a bottle of brandy; he won't notice anything else."

He laughed and bent to kiss me goodbye. "That's all right; I'll need a good supper if I'm to go on beating him." He patted my shoulder in farewell. "I'm going to the warehouse, Sassenach; I'll be home in time to dress, though."

In search of something to do that would take me out of the servants' way, I finally decided to have a footman escort me down to the Rohans'. Perhaps Louise could use a bit of solace, I thought, after her quarrel of the night before. Vulgar curiosity, I told myself primly, had nothing whatsoever to do with it.

When I returned in the late afternoon, I found Jamie slouched in a chair near the bedroom window with his feet propped on the table, collar undone and hair rumpled as he pored over a sheaf of scribbled papers. He looked up at the sound of the door closing, and the absorbed expression melted into a broad grin.

"Sassenach! There you are!" He swung his long legs down and came across to embrace me. He buried his face in my hair, nuzzling, then drew back and sneezed. He sneezed again, and let go of me to grope in his sleeve for the handkerchief he carried there, military style.

"What do ye smell like, Sassenach?" he demanded, pressing the linen square to his nose just in time to muffle the results of another explosive sneeze.

I reached into the bosom of my dress and plucked the small sachet from between my breasts.

"Jasmine, roses, hyacinth, and lily of the valley…. ragweed, too, apparently," I added as he snorted and wheezed into the capacious depths of the handkerchief. "Are you all right?" I looked around for some means of disposal, and settled for dropping the sachet into a stationery box on my desk at the far side of the room.

"Aye, I'll do. It's the hya … hya … hyaCHOO!"

"Goodness!" I hastily flung the window open, and motioned to him. He obligingly stuck his head and shoulders out into the wet drizzle of the morning, breathing in gusts of fresh, hyacinth-free air.

"Och, that's better," he said with relief, pulling in his head a few minutes later. His eyes widened. "What are ye doing now, Sassenach?"

"Washing," I explained, struggling with the back laces of my gown. "Or getting ready to, at least. I'm covered with oil of hyacinth," I explained, as he blinked. "If I don't wash it off, you're liable to explode."

He dabbed meditatively at his nose and nodded.

"You've a point there, Sassenach. Shall I have the footman fetch up some hot water?"

"No, don't bother. A quick rinse should take most of it off," I assured him, unbuttoning and unlacing as quickly as possible. I raised my arms, reaching behind my head to gather my hair into a bun. Suddenly Jamie leaned forward and grasped my wrist, pulling my arm into the air.

"What are you doing?" I said, startled.

"What have *you* done, Sassenach?" he demanded. He was staring under my arm.

"Shaved," I said proudly. "Or rather, waxed. Louise had her *servante aux petits soins*—you know, her personal groomer?—there this morning, and she did me, too."

"Waxed?" Jamie looked rather wildly at the candlestick by the ewer, then back at me. "You put wax in your oxters?"

"Not that kind of wax," I assured him. "Scented beeswax. The grooming lady heated it, then spread the warm wax on. Once it's cooled, you just jerk it off," I winced momentarily in recollection, "and Bob's your uncle."

"My uncle Bob wouldna countenance any such goings-on," said Jamie severely. "What in hell would ye do that for?" He peered closely at the site, still holding my wrist up. "Didn't it hur … hurt … choof!" He dropped my hand and backed up rapidly.

"Didn't it hurt?" he asked, handkerchief to nose once more.

"Well, a bit," I admitted. "Worth it, though, don't you think?" I asked, raising both arms like a ballerina and turning slightly to and fro. "First time I've felt entirely clean in months."

"Worth it?" he said, sounding a little dazed. "What's it to do wi' clean, that you've pulled all of the hairs out from under your arms?"

A little belatedly, I realized that none of the Scottish women I had encountered employed any form of depilation. Furthermore, Jamie had almost certainly never been in sufficiently close contact with an upper-class Parisienne to know that many of them *did*. "Well," I said, suddenly realizing the difficulty an anthropologist faces in trying to interpret the more singular customs of a primitive tribe. "It smells much less," I offered.

"And what's wrong wi' the way ye smell?" he said heatedly. "At least ye smelt like a woman, not a damn flower garden. What d'ye think I am, a man or a bumblebee? Would ye wash yourself, Sassenach, so I can get within less than ten feet of ye?"

I picked up a cloth and began sponging my torso. Madame Laserre, Louise's groomer, had applied scented oil all over my body; I rather hoped it would come off easily. It was disconcerting to have him hovering just outside sniffing range, glaring at me like a wolf circling its prey.

I turned my back to dip the cloth into the bowl, and said offhandedly over my shoulder, "Er, I did my legs, too."

I stole a quick glance over my shoulder. The original shock was fading into a look of total bewilderment.

"Your legs dinna smell like anything," he said. "Unless you've been walkin' knee-deep in the cow-byre."

I turned around and pulled my skirt up to my knees, pointing one toe forward to display the delicate curves of calf and shin.

"But they look so much nicer," I pointed out. "All nice and smooth; not like Harry the hairy ape."

He glanced down at his own fuzzy knees, offended.

"An ape, am I?"

"Not you, me!" I said, getting exasperated.

"My legs are any amount hairier than yours ever were!"

"Well, they're *supposed* to be; you're a man!"

He drew in breath as though about to reply, then let it out again, shaking his head and muttering something to himself in Gaelic. He flung himself back into the chair and sat back, watching me through narrowed eyes, every now and then muttering to himself again. I decided not to ask for a translation.

After most of my bath had been accomplished in what might best be described as a charged atmosphere, I decided to attempt conciliation.

"It might have been worse, you know," I said, sponging the inside of one thigh. "Louise had *all* her body hair removed."

That startled him back into English, at least temporarily.

"What, she's taken the hairs off her honeypot?" he said, horrified into uncharacteristic vulgarity.

"Mm-hm," I replied, pleased that this vision had at least distracted him from my own distressingly hairless condition. "Every hair. Madame Laserre plucked out the stray ones."

"Mary, Michael, and Bride!" He closed his eyes tightly, either in avoidance, or the better to contemplate the prospect I had described.

Evidently the latter, for he opened his eyes again and glared at me, demanding, "She's goin' about now bare as a wee lassie?"

"She says," I replied delicately, "that men find it erotic."

His eyebrows nearly met his hairline, a neat trick for someone with such a classically high brow.

"I do wish you would stop that muttering," I remarked, hanging the cloth over a chairback to dry. "I can't understand a word you say."

"On the whole, Sassenach," he replied, "that's as well."

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12

L’HÔPITAL DES ANGES

“All right,” Jamie said resignedly over breakfast. He pointed a spoon at me in warning. “Go ahead, then. But you’ll take Murtagh as escort, besides the footman; it’s a poor neighborhood near the cathedral.”

“Escort?” I sat up straight, pushing back the bowl of parritch which I had been eyeing with something less than enthusiasm. “Jamie! Do you mean you don’t mind if I visit. L’Hôpital des Anges?”

“I don’t know if I mean that, exactly,” he said, spooning in his own parritch in a businesslike way. “But I expect I’ll mind a lot more if ye don’t. And if ye work at the Hôpital, at least it will keep ye from spending all your time with Louise de Rohan. I suppose there are worse things than associating wi’ beggars and criminals,” he said darkly. “At least I don’t expect you’ll come home from a hospital wi’ your privates plucked bare.”

“I’ll try not,” I assured him.

* * *

I had seen a number of good hospital matrons in my time, and a few of the really excellent ones, who had exalted a job into a vocation. With Mother Hildegarde, the process had been reversed, with impressive results.

Hildegarde de Gascogne was the most suitable person I could imagine to be in charge of a place like L’Hôpital des Anges. Nearly six feet tall, her gaunt, rawboned frame swathed in yards of black wool, she loomed over her nursing sisters like a broomstick scarecrow guarding a field of pumpkins. Porters, patients, sisters, orderlies, novices, visitors, apothecaries, all were swept up by the force of her presence, to be tidied away into neat heaps, wherever Mother Hildegarde might decree.

With that height, plus a face of an ugliness so transcendant as to be grotesquely beautiful, it was obvious why she had embraced a religious life—Christ was the only man from whom she might expect embrace in return.

Her voice was deep and resonant; with its nasal Gascony accent, it bonged through the corridors of the hospital like the echo of the church bells next door. I could hear her sometime before I saw her, the powerful voice increasing in volume as she came down the hall toward the office where six ladies of the Court and I huddled behind Herr Gerstmann, like island dwellers awaiting the arrival of a hurricane behind a flimsy barricade.

She filled the narrow doorway with a swoosh of batwings, and descended upon Herr Gerstmann with a cry of rapture, kissing him soundly on both cheeks.

"*Mon cher ami!* How unexpected a pleasure—and so much the more sweet for its unexpectedness. What brings you to me?"

Straightening, she turned a wide smile on the rest of us. The smile remained wide as Herr Gerstmann explained our mission, though a less experienced fortune-teller than I could have seen the tightening cheek muscles that turned it from a social grace to a rictus of necessity.

"We are most appreciative of your thoughts and your generosity, mesdames." The deep, bell-like voice went on with a gracious speech of gratitude. Meanwhile, I could see the small, intelligent eyes, set deep beneath bony brow ridges, darting back and forth, deciding how best to dispose of this nuisance in short order, while still extracting such money as these pious ladies might be induced to part with for the good of their souls.

Having come to a decision, she clapped her hands sharply. A short nun, on the general order of Cock-Robin, popped up in the doorway like a jack-in-the-box.

"Sister Angelique, be so kind as to take these ladies to the dispensary," she ordered. "Give them some suitable garments and then show them the wards. They may assist with the distribution of food to the patients—if they are so inclined." A slight twitch of the wide, thin mouth made it evident that Mother Hildegarde did not expect the ladies' pious inclination to survive the tour of the wards.

Mother Hildegarde was a shrewd judge of human nature. Three of the ladies made it through the first ward, with its cases of scrofula, scabies, eczema, defluxions, and stinking pyemia, before deciding that their charitable inclinations could be entirely satisfied by a donation to L'Hôpital, and fleeing back to the dispensary to shed the rough hopsacking gowns with which we had been furnished.

In the center of the next ward, a tall, gangly man in a dark frock coat was carrying out what appeared to be the skillful amputation of a leg; particularly skillful in that the patient was not sedated in any visible way, and was being restrained at the moment by the efforts of two husky orderlies and a solidly built nun who was sitting upon the patient's chest, her flowing draperies fortunately obscuring the man's face.

One of the ladies behind me made a small gagging sound; when I looked round, all I saw was the rather wide rear aspect of two of the would-be Samaritans, jammed hip to hip in the narrow doorway leading toward the dispensary and freedom. With a last desperate tug and the rending of silk, they burst through and fled precipitately down the dark hallway, nearly knocking over an orderly coming on the trot with a tray piled high with linens and surgical instruments.

I glanced to the side, and was amused to find Mary Hawkins still there. Somewhat whiter than the surgical linens—which were quite a disgraceful shade of gray, truth be told—and a bit green about the gills, but still there.

"Vite! Dépêchez-vous!" the surgeon uttered a peremptory shout, aimed presumably at the shaken orderly, who hastily reassembled his tray and came on the gallop to the spot where the tall, dark man was poised, bone saw in hand, ready to sever an exposed thigh bone. The orderly bent to tie a second tourniquet above the site of operation, the saw descended with an indescribable grating sound,

and I took pity on Mary Hawkins, turning her in the other direction. Her arm trembled under my hand, and the peony lips were blanched and pinched as a frostbitten flower.

"Would you like to leave?" I asked politely. "I'm sure Mother Hildegarde could summon a carriage for you." I glanced over one shoulder to the vacant darkness of the hallway. "I'm afraid the Comtesse and Madame Lambert have left already."

Mary gulped audibly, but tightened an already firm jaw in determination.

"N-no," she said. "If you stay, I'll stay."

I definitely intended staying; curiosity and the urge to worm my way into the operations of L'Hôpital des Anges were much too strong to weigh against any pity I might feel for Mary's sensibilities.

Sister Angelique had gone some distance before noticing that we had stopped. Returning, she stood patiently waiting, a small smile on her plump face, as though expecting that we, too, would turn and run. I bent over a pallet at the edge of the floor. A very thin woman lay listlessly under a single blanket, her eyes drifting dully over us without interest. It wasn't the woman who had attracted my attention, so much as the oddly shaped glass vessel standing on the floor alongside her pallet.

The vessel was brimming with a yellow fluid—urine, undoubtedly. I was mildly surprised; without chemical tests, or even litmus paper, what conceivable use could a urine sample be? Thinking over the various things one tested urine for, though, I had an idea.

I picked up the vessel carefully, ignoring Sister Angelique's exclamation of alarmed protest. I sniffed carefully. Sure enough; half-obscured by sour ammoniac fumes, the fluid smelled sickly sweet—rather like soured honey. I hesitated, but there was only one way to make sure. With a moue of distaste, I gingerly dipped the tip of one finger into the liquid and touched it delicately to my tongue.

Mary, watching bug-eyed at my side, choked slightly, but Sister Angelique was watching with sudden interest. I placed a hand on the woman's forehead; it was cool—no fever to account for the wasting.

"Are you thirsty, Madame?" I asked the patient. I knew the answer before she spoke, seeing the empty carafe near her head.

"Always, Madame," she replied. "And always hungry, as well. Yet no flesh gathers on my bones, no matter how much I eat." She raised a stick-thin arm, displaying a bony wrist, then let it fall as though the effort had exhausted her.

I patted the skinny hand gently, and murmured something in farewell, my exhilaration at having made a correct diagnosis substantially quenched by the knowledge that there was no possible cure for diabetes mellitus in this day; the woman before me was doomed.

In subdued spirits, I rose to follow Sister Angelique, who slowed her bustling steps to walk next to me.

"Could you tell from what she suffers, Madame?" the nun asked curiously. "Only from the urine?"

"Not only from that," I answered. "But yes, I know. She has—" Drat. What would they have called it now? "She has … um, sugar sickness. She gets no nourishment from the food she eats, and has a tremendous thirst. Consequently, she produces large quantities of urine."

Sister Angelique was nodding, a look of intense curiosity stamped on her pudgy features.

"And can you tell whether she will recover, Madame?"

"No, she won't," I said bluntly. "She's far gone already; she may not last out the month."

"Ah." The fair brows lifted, and the look of curiosity was replaced by one of respect. "That's what Monsieur Parnelle said."

"And who's he, when he's at home?" I asked flippantly.

The plump nun frowned in bewilderment. "Well, at his own establishment, I believe he is a maker of trusses, and a jeweler. When he comes here, though, he acts usually as a urinoscopist."

I felt my own brows rising. "A urinoscopist?" I said unbelievingly. "There actually are such things?"

"*Oui,* Madame. And he said just what you said, about the poor thin lady. I have never seen a woman who knew about the science of urinoscopy," Sister Angelique said, staring at me in frank fascination.

"Well, there are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Sister," I said graciously. She nodded seriously, making me feel rather ashamed of my facetiousness.

"That is true, Madame. Will you have a look at the gentleman in the end bed? He has a complaint of the liver, we believe."

We continued, from one bed to another, making the complete circuit of the enormous hall. We saw examples of diseases I had seen only in textbooks, and every kind of traumatic injury, from head wounds inflicted in drunken brawls to a carter whose chest had been crushed by a rolling wine barrel.

I paused by some beds, asking questions of those patients who seemed able to answer. I could hear Mary breathing through her mouth behind my shoulder, but didn't check to see whether she was in fact holding her nose.

At the conclusion of the tour, Sister Angelique turned to me with an ironic smile.

"Well, Madame? Do you still desire to serve the Lord by helping his unfortunates?"

I was already rolling up the sleeves of my gown.

"Bring me a basin of hot water, Sister," I said, "and some soap."

"How was it, Sassenach?" Jamie asked.

"Horrible!" I answered, beaming broadly.

He raised one eyebrow, smiling down at me as I lay sprawled on the chaise.

"Oh, enjoyed yourself, did ye?"

"Oh, Jamie, it was so nice to be useful again! I mopped floors and I fed people gruel, and when Sister Angelique wasn't looking, I managed to change a couple of filthy dressings and lance an abscess."

"Oh, good," he said. "Did ye remember to eat, in the midst of all this frivolity?"

“Er, no, as a matter of fact, I didn’t,” I said guiltily. “On the other hand, I forgot to be sick, too.” As though reminded of delinquency, the walls of my stomach took a sudden lurch inward. I pressed a fist under my breastbone. “Perhaps I should have a bite.”

“Perhaps ye should,” he agreed, a little grimly, reaching for the bell.

He watched as I obediently downed meat pie and cheese, describing L’Hôpital des Anges and its inmates in enthusiastic detail between bites as I ate.

“It’s very crowded in some of the wards—two or three to a bed, which is awful, but—don’t you want some of this?” I broke off to ask. “It’s very good.”

He eyed the piece of pastry I was holding out to him.

“If ye think ye can keep from telling me about gangrenous toenails long enough for a bite to make it from my gullet to my stomach, then yes.”

Belatedly, I noticed the slight pallor on his cheeks, and the faint pinching of his nostrils. I poured a cup of wine and handed it to him before picking up my own plate again.

“And how was *your* day, my dear?” I asked demurely.

* * *

L’Hôpital des Anges became a refuge for me. The blunt and unsophisticated directness of nuns and patients was a wonderful refreshment from the continual chattering intrigues of the Court ladies and gentlemen. I was also positive that without the relief of allowing my facial muscles to relax into their normal expressions at the Hôpital, my face would quickly have frozen into an expression of permanent simpering vapidity.

Seeing that I appeared to know what I was doing, and required nothing of them beyond a few bandages and linens, the nuns quickly accepted my presence. And after an initial shock at my accent and title, so did the patients. Social prejudice is a strong force, but no match for simple competence when skill is in urgent demand and short supply.

Mother Hildegarde, busy as she was, took somewhat more time to make her own assessment of me. She never spoke to me at first, beyond a simple "*Bonjour*, Madame," in passing, but I often felt the weight of those small, shrewd eyes boring into my back as I stooped over the bed of an elderly man with shingles, or smeared aloe ointment on the blisters of a child burned in one of the frequent house fires that beset the poorer quarters of the city.

She never gave the appearance of hurrying, but covered an immense amount of ground during the day, pacing the flat gray stones of the Hôpital wards with a stride that covered a yard at a time, her small white dog Bouton hurrying at her heels to keep up.

A far cry from the fluffy lapdogs so popular with the ladies of the Court, he looked vaguely like a cross between a poodle and a dachshund, with a rough, kinky coat whose fringes fluttered along the edges of a wide belly and stumpy, bowed legs. His feet, splay-toed and black-nailed, clicked frantically over the stones of the floor as he trotted after Mother Hildegarde, pointed muzzle almost touching the sweeping black folds of her habit.

"Is that a *dog*?" I had asked one of the orderlies in amazement, when I first beheld Bouton, passing through the Hôpital at the heels of his mistress.

He paused in his floor-sweeping to look after the curly, plumed tail, disappearing into the next ward.

"Well," he said doubtfully, "Mother Hildegarde says he's a dog. I wouldn't like to be the one to say he isn't."

As I became more friendly with the nuns, orderlies, and visiting physicians of the Hôpital, I heard various other opinions of Bouton, ranging from the tolerant to the superstitious. No one knew quite where Mother Hildegarde had got him, nor why. He had been a member of the Hôpital staff for several years, with a rank—in Mother Hildegarde's opinion, which was the only one that counted—well above that of the nursing sisters, and equal to that of most of the visiting physicians and apothecaries.

Some of the latter regarded him with suspicious aversion, others with jocular affability. One chirurgeon referred to him routinely—out of Mother's hearing—as "that revolting rat," another as "the smelly rabbit," and one small, tubby truss-maker greeted him quite openly as "Monsieur le Dishcloth." The nuns considered him something between a mascot and a totem, while the junior priest from the cathedral next door, who had been bitten in the leg when he came to administer the sacraments to the patients, confided to me his own opinion that Bouton was one of the lesser demons, disguised as a dog for his own fell purposes.

In spite of the unflattering tone of the priest's remarks, I thought that he had perhaps come the closest to the truth. For after several weeks of observing the pair, I had come to the conclusion that Bouton was in fact Mother Hildegarde's familiar.

She spoke to him often, not in the tone one generally uses for dogs, but as one discussing important matters with an equal. As she paused beside this bed or that, often Bouton would spring onto the mattress, nuzzling and sniffing at the startled patient. He would sit down, often on the patient's legs, bark once, and glance up inquiringly at Mother, wagging his silky plumed tail as though asking her opinion of his diagnosis—which she always gave.

Though I was rather curious about this behavior, I had had no opportunity of closely observing the odd pair at work until one dark, rainy morning in March. I was standing by the bed of a middle-aged carter, making casual conversation with him while I tried to figure out what in bloody hell was wrong with the man.

It was a case that had come in the week before. He had had his lower leg caught in the wheel of a cart when he carelessly dismounted before the vehicle had stopped moving. It was a compound fracture, but a fairly uncomplicated one. I had reset the bone, and the wound seemed to be healing nicely. The tissue was a healthy pink, with good granulation, no bad smell, no telltale red streaks, no extreme tenderness, nothing at all to explain why the man still smoldered with fever and produced the dark, odorous urine of a lingering infection.

"*Bonjour*, Madame." The deep, rich voice spoke above me, and I glanced up at the towering form of Mother Hildegarde. There was a *whish* past my elbow, and Bouton landed on the mattress with a thump that made the patient groan slightly.

"What do you think?" said Mother Hildegarde. I wasn't at all sure whether she was addressing me or Bouton, but took the benefit of the doubt and explained my observations.

"So, there must be a secondary source of infection," I concluded, "but I can't find it. I'm wondering now whether perhaps he has an internal infection that's not related to the leg wound. A mild appendicitis, or a bladder infection, perhaps, though I don't find any abdominal tenderness, either."

Mother Hildegarde nodded. "A possibility, certainly. Bouton!" The dog cocked his head toward his mistress, who jerked an oblong chin in the direction of the patient. "*A la bouche*, Bouton," she ordered. With a mincing step, the dog pushed the round black nose that presumably gave him his name into the carter's face. The man's eyes, heavy-lidded with fever, sprang open at this intrusion, but a glance at the imposing presence of Mother Hildegarde stopped whatever complaint he might have been forming.

"Open your mouth," Mother Hildegarde instructed, and such was her force of character that he did so, even though his lips twitched at the nearness of Bouton's. Dog-kissing plainly wasn't on his agenda of desirable activities.

"No," said Mother Hildegarde thoughtfully, watching Bouton. "That isn't it. Have a look elsewhere, Bouton, but carefully. The man has a broken leg, remember."

As though he had in fact understood every word, the dog began to sniff curiously at the patient, nosing into his armpits, putting stubby feet on his chest in order to investigate, nudging gently along the crease of the groin. When it came to the injured leg, he stepped carefully over the limb before putting his nose to the surface of the bandages round it.

He returned to the groin area—well, what else, I thought impatiently, he's a dog, after all—nudged at the top of the thigh, then sat down and barked once, wagging triumphantly.

"There it is," said Mother Hildegarde, pointing to a small brown scab just below the inguinal crease.

"But that's almost healed," I protested. "It isn't infected."

“No?” The tall nun placed a hand on the man’s thigh and pressed hard. Her muscular fingers dented the pale, clammy flesh, and the carter screamed like a banshee.

“Ah,” she said in satisfaction, observing the deep prints left by her touch. “A pocket of putrefaction.”

It was; the scab had loosened at one edge, and a thick ooze of yellow pus showed under it. A little probing, with Mother Hildegarde holding the man by leg and shoulder, revealed the problem. A long sliver of wood, flying free of the splintered cartwheel, had driven upward, deep into the thigh. Disregarded because of the apparently insignificant entrance wound, it had gone unnoticed by the patient himself, to whom the whole leg was one giant pain. While the tiny entrance wound had healed cleanly, the deeper wound had festered and formed a pocket of pus around the intrusion, buried in the muscle tissue where no surface symptoms were visible—to human senses, at least.

A little scalpel work to enlarge the entrance wound, a quick grip with a pair of long-nosed forceps, a smooth, forceful pull—and I held up a three-inch sliver of wood, coated with blood and slime.

“Not bad, Bouton,” I said, with a nod of acknowledgment. A long pink tongue lolled happily, and the black nostrils sniffed in my direction.

“Yes, she’s a good one,” said Mother Hildegarde, and this time there was no doubt which of us she was speaking to, Bouton being male. Bouton leaned forward and sniffed politely at my hand, then licked my knuckles once in reciprocal acknowledgment of a fellow professional. I repressed the urge to wipe my hand on my gown.

“Amazing,” I said, meaning it.

“Yes,” said Mother Hildegarde, casually, but with an unmistakable note of pride. “He’s very good at locating tumors beneath the skin, as well. And while I cannot always tell what he finds in the odors of breath and urine, he has a certain tone of bark that indicates unmistakably the presence of a derangement of the stomach.”

Under the circumstances, I saw no reason to doubt it. I bowed to Bouton, and picked up a vial of powdered St.-John’s-wort to dress the infection.

“Pleased to have your assistance, Bouton. You can work with me anytime.”

“Very sensible of you,” said Mother Hildegarde, with a flash of strong teeth. “Many of the physicians and *chirurgiens* who work here are less inclined to take advantage of his skills.”

“Er, well....” I didn’t want to disparage anyone’s reputation, but my glance across the hall at Monsieur Voleru must have been transparent.

Mother Hildegarde laughed. “Well, we take what God sends us, though occasionally I wonder whether He sends them to us only in order to keep them out of greater trouble elsewhere. Still, the bulk of our physicians are better than nothing—even if only marginally so. You”—and the teeth flashed once more, reminding me of a genial draft horse—“are a great deal better than nothing, Madame.”

“Thanks.”

“I have wondered, though,” Mother Hildegarde went on, watching as I applied the medicated dressing, “why you see only the patients with wounds and broken bones? You avoid those with spots and coughs and fevers, yet it is more common for *les maîtresses* to deal with such things. I don’t think I have ever seen a female *chirurgien* before.” *Les maîtresses* were the unlicensed healers, mostly from the provinces, who dealt in herbals, poultices, and charms. *Les maîtresses sage-femme* were the midwives, the top of the heap so far as popular healers were concerned. Many were accorded more respect than the licensed practitioners, and were much preferred by the lower-class patients, as they were likely to be both more capable and much less expensive.

I wasn’t surprised that she had observed my proclivities; I had gathered long since that very little about her Hôpital escaped Mother Hildegarde’s notice.

“It isn’t lack of interest,” I assured her. “It’s only that I’m with child, so I can’t expose myself to anything contagious, for the child’s sake. Broken bones aren’t catching.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” said Mother Hildegarde, with a glance at an incoming stretcher. “We’re having a plague of them this week.

No, don't go." She motioned me back. "Sister Cecile will see to it. She'll call you if there's need."

The nun's small gray eyes regarded me with curiosity, mingled with appraisal.

"So, you are not only a milady, you are with child, but your husband does not object to your coming here? He must be a most unusual man."

"Well, he's Scottish," I said, by way of explanation, not wishing to go into the subject of my husband's objections.

"Oh, Scottish." Mother Hildegarde nodded understandingly. "Just so."

The bed trembled against my thigh as Bouton leaped off and trotted toward the door.

"He smells a stranger," Mother Hildegarde remarked. "Bouton assists the doorkeeper as well as the physicians—with no more gratitude for his efforts, I fear."

The sounds of peremptory barks and a high voice raised in terror came through the double doors of the entryway.

"Oh, it's Father Balmain again! Curse the man, can't he learn to stand still and let Bouton smell him?" Mother Hildegarde turned in haste to the succor of her companion, turning back at the last moment to smile engagingly at me. "Perhaps I will send him to assist you with your tasks, Madame, while I soothe Father Balmain. While no doubt a most holy man, he lacks true appreciation for the work of an artist."

She strode toward the doors with her long, unhurried stride, and with a last word for the carter, I turned to Sister Cecile and the latest stretcher case.

* * *

Jamie was lying on the carpet in the sitting room when I came back to the house, with a small boy sitting cross-legged on the floor beside him. Jamie was holding a bilboquet in one hand, and had the other poised over one eye.

"Of course I can," he was saying. "Anyday and twice on Sundays. Watch."

Placing the hand over his eye, he fixed the other piercingly on the bilboquet and gave the ivory cup a toss. The tethered ball leaped from its socket into an arc, and dropped as though guided by radar, landing back in its cup with a snug little plop.

"See?" he said, removing the hand from his eye. He sat up and handed the cup to the boy. "Here, you try it." He grinned at me, and slid a hand under the hem of my skirt, clasping my green silk ankle in greeting.

"Having fun?" I inquired.

"Not yet," he replied, giving the ankle a squeeze. "I was waiting for you, Sassenach." The long, warm fingers curled around my ankle slid higher, playfully stroking the curve of my calf, as a pair of limpid blue eyes gazed up at me, all innocence. His face had a streak of dried mud down one side, and there were dirty blotches on his shirt and kilt.

"Is that so?" I said, trying to pull my leg free of his grasp inconspicuously. "I should have thought your little playmate would have been all the company you needed."

The boy, understanding none of the English in which these exchanges were conducted, ignored them, intent on trying to work the bilboquet with one eye closed. The first two attempts having failed, he opened the second eye and glared at the toy, as though daring it not to work. The second eye closed again, but not all the way; a small slit remained, gleaming alertly below the thick fringe of dark lashes.

Jamie clicked his tongue disapprovingly, and the eye hastily snapped tight shut.

"Nah, then, Fergus, we'll have nay cheatin', if ye please," he said. "Fair's fair." The boy obviously caught the meaning, if not the words; he grinned sheepishly, displaying a pair of large, white, gleamingly perfect front teeth, square as a squirrel's.

Jamie's hand exerted an invisible pull, obliging me to move closer to him to avoid being toppled off my moroccan heels.

"Ah," he said. "Well, Fergus here is a man of many talents, and a boon companion for the idle hours when a man's wife has deserted him and left him to seek his own pursuits amidst the wickedness of the city"—the long fingers curled delicately into the hollow behind my knee, tickling suggestively—"but he isna qualified as a partner for the pastime I had in mind."

"Fergus?" I said, eyeing the boy, and trying to ignore the goings-on below. The lad was possibly nine or ten, but small for his age, and fine-boned as a ferret. Clad in clean, worn clothes several sizes too big for him, he was also as French as they come, with the pale, sallow skin and big, dark eyes of a Parisian street child.

"Well, his name is really Claudel, but we decided that didna sound verra manly, so he's to be called Fergus instead. A suitable warrior's name, that." Catching the sound of his name—or names—the boy glanced up and grinned shyly at me.

"This is Madame," Jamie explained to the boy, gesturing to me with his free hand. "You may call her milady. I dinna think he could manage 'Broch Tuarach,' " he added to me, "or even Fraser, for that matter."

" 'Milady' will be fine," I said, smiling. I wriggled my leg harder, trying to shake off the leechlike grip. "Er, *why*, if I may ask?"

"Why what? Oh, why Fergus, ye mean?"

"That's what I mean, all right." I wasn't sure just how far his arm would reach, but the hand was creeping slowly up the back of my thigh. "Jamie, take your hand away this minute!"

The fingers darted to one side, and deftly pulled loose the ribbon garter that held up my stocking. The stocking slithered down my leg to puddle round my ankle.

"You beast!" I kicked at him, but he dodged aside, laughing.

"Oh, beast, is it? What kind?"

"A cur!" I snapped, trying to bend over to pull up my stocking without falling off my heels. The child Fergus, after a brief, incurious glance at us, had resumed his trials with the bilboquet.

"As for the lad," he continued blithely, "Fergus is now in my employ."

"To do what?" I asked. "We already have a boy who cleans the knives and boots, and a stable-lad."

Jamie nodded. "Aye, that's true. We havena got a pickpocket, though. Or rather, we hadn't; we have, now."

I drew in my breath and blew it out again slowly.

"I see. I suppose it would be dense of me to ask exactly why we need to add a pickpocket to the household?"

"To steal letters, Sassenach," Jamie said calmly.

"Oh," I said, light beginning to dawn.

"I canna get anything sensible out of His Highness; when he's with me, he wilna do anything but moan about Louise de La Tour, or grind his teeth and curse because they've been quarreling again. In either case, all he wants to do is to get drunk as quickly as possible. Mar is losing all patience with him, for he's haughty and sullen by turns. And I canna get anything out of Sheridan."

The Earl of Mar was the most respected of the exiled Scottish Jacobites in Paris. A man whose long and illustrious prime was only now beginning to edge into elderliness, he had been the primary supporter of King James at the abortive Rising in 1715, and had followed his king into exile after the defeat at Sheriffsmuir. I had met the Earl and liked him; an elderly, courtly man with a personality as straight as his backbone. He was now doing his best—with little reward, it seemed—for his lord's son. I had met Thomas Sheridan, too; the Prince's tutor—an elderly man who handled His Highness's correspondence, translating impatience and illiteracy into courtly French and English.

I sat down and pulled my stocking back up. Fergus, apparently hardened to the sight of female limbs, ignored me altogether, concentrating grimly on the bilboquet.

"Letters, Sassenach," he said. "I need the letters. Letters from Rome, sealed with the Stuart crest. Letters from France, letters from England, letters from Spain. We can get them either from the Prince's house—Fergus can go with me, as a page—or possibly from the papal messenger who brings them; that would be a bit better, as we'd have the information in advance."

"So, we've made the bargain," Jamie said, nodding at his new servant. "Fergus will do his best to get what I need, and I will provide him with clothes and lodging and thirty écus a year. If he's caught while doing my service, I'll do my best to buy him off. If it canna be done, and he loses a hand or an ear, then I maintain him for the rest of his life, as he wilna be able to pursue his profession. And if he's hanged, then I guarantee to have Masses said for his soul for the space of a year. I think that's fair, no?"

I felt a cold hand pass down my spine.

"Jesus Christ, Jamie" was all I could find to say.

He shook his head, and reached out a hand for the bilboquet. "Not our Lord, Sassenach. Pray to St. Dismas. The patron saint of thieves and traitors."

Jamie reached over and took the bilboquet from the boy. He flicked his wrist sharply and the ivory ball rose in a perfect parabola, to descend into its cup with an inevitable plop.

"I see," I said. I eyed the new employee with interest as he took the toy Jamie offered him and started in on it once more, dark eyes gleaming with concentration. "Where did you get him?" I asked curiously.

"I found him in a brothel."

"Oh, of course," I said. "To be sure." I eyed the dirt and smears on his clothes. "Which you were visiting for some really excellent reason, I expect?"

"Oh, aye," he said. He sat back, arms wrapped about his knees, grinning as he watched me make repairs to my garter. "I thought you'd prefer me to be found in such an establishment, to the alternative of bein' found in a dark alleyway, wi' my head bashed in."

I saw the boy Fergus's eyes focus at a spot somewhat past the bilboquet, where a tray of iced cakes stood on a table near the wall. A small, pointed pink tongue darted out across his lower lip.

"I think your protégé is hungry," I said. "Why don't you feed him, and then you can tell me just what in bloody hell happened this afternoon."

"Well, I was on my way to the docks," he began, obediently rising to his feet, "and just past the Rue Eglantine, I began to have a queer feeling up the back of my neck."

Jamie Fraser had spent two years in the army of France, fought and stolen with a gang of Scottish "broken men," and been hunted as an outlaw through the moors and mountains of his native land.

All of which had left him with an extreme sensitivity to the sensation of being followed.

He couldn't have said whether it was the sound of a footfall, too close behind, or the sight of a shadow that shouldn't be there, or something less tangible—the scent of evil on the air, perhaps—but he had learned that the prickle of warning among the short hairs of his neck was something to be ignored at his peril.

Promptly obeying the dictates of his cervical vertebrae, he turned left instead of right at the next corner, ducked around a whelk-seller's stall, cut between a barrow filled with steamed puddings and another of fresh vegetable marrows, and into a small charcuterie.

Pressed against the wall near the doorway, he peered out through a screen of hanging duck carcasses. Two men entered the street no more than a second later, walking close together, glancing quickly from side to side.

Every workingman in Paris carried the marks of his trade upon his person, and it didn't take much of a nose to detect the whiff of sea-salt on these two. If the small gold hoop in the shorter man's ear had not been a dead giveaway, the deep reddish-brown of their faces would have made it clear they were deep-water sailors.

Accustomed to the cramped quarters of shipboard and quay taverns, seamen seldom walked in a straight line. These two slid through the crowded alley like eels through rocks, eyes flicking past beggars, servingmaids, housewives, merchants; sea wolves assessing potential prey.

"I let them get well past the shop," Jamie explained, "and I was just about to step out and go back the other way, when I saw another of them at the mouth of the alley."

This man wore the same uniform as the other two; sidelocks heavily coated with grease, a fish knife at his side and a marlinspike the length of a man's forearm thrust through his belt. Short and thickset, the man stood still at the end of the alley, holding his ground against the buffeting waves of commerce that ebbed and flowed through the narrow passage. Clearly he had been left on guard, while his fellows quested ahead.

“So I was left wondering what best to do,” Jamie said, rubbing his nose. “I was safe enough where I was, but there was no back way from the shop, and the moment I stepped from the doorway, I’d be seen.” He glanced down reflectively, smoothing the crimson fabric of his kilt across his thigh. An enormous red barbarian was going to be conspicuous, no matter how thick the crowd.

“So what did you do?” I asked. Fergus, ignoring the conversation, was stuffing his pockets methodically with cakes, pausing for a hasty bite every so often in the process. Jamie caught my glance at the boy and shrugged.

“He’ll not have been in the habit of eating regularly,” he said. “Let him be.”

“All right,” I said. “But go on—what did you do?”

“Bought a sausage,” he said promptly.

A Dunedin, to be exact. Made of spiced duck, ham and venison, boiled, stuffed and sun-dried, a Dunedin sausage measured eighteen inches from end to end and was as hard as seasoned oakwood.

“I couldna step out wi’ my sword drawn,” Jamie explained, “but I didna like the idea of stepping past the fellow in the alleyway wi’ no one at my back, and empty hands.”

Bearing the Dunedin at port arms, and keeping a weather eye on the passing crowd, Jamie had stepped boldly down the alley, toward the watcher at its mouth.

The man had met his gaze quite calmly, showing no sign of any malign intent. Jamie might have thought his original premonition mistaken, had he not seen the watcher’s eyes flick briefly to something over Jamie’s shoulder. Obeying the instincts that had kept him alive thus far, he had dived forward, knocking the watcher down and sliding on his face across the filthy cobbles of the street.

The crowd scattered before him with shrieks of alarm, and he rolled to his feet to see the flung knife that had missed him, quivering in the boards of a ribbon stall.

“If I’d had a bit of doubt it was me they wanted, I didna fret about it longer,” he said dryly.

He had kept hold of the sausage, and now found use for it, swinging it smartly across the face of one attacker.

"I broke his nose, I think," he said meditatively. "Anyway, he reeled back, and I shoved past and took off running, down the Rue Pelletier."

The inhabitants of the street scattered before him like geese, startled by the sight of a hurtling Scotsman, kilts flying around his churning knees. He didn't stop to look behind; by the shouts of indignant passersby, he could tell that the assailants were still in pursuit.

This part of the city was seldom patrolled by the King's Guard, and the crowd itself offered little protection other than a simple obstruction that might slow his pursuers. No one was likely to interfere in a matter of violence on a foreigner's behalf.

"There are no alleys off the Rue Pelletier. I needed at least to get to a place where I could draw my sword and have a wall at my back," Jamie explained. "So I pushed at the doors as I passed, 'til I hit one that opened."

Dashing into a gloomy hallway, past a startled porter, and through a hanging drape, he had shot into the center of a large, well-lighted room, and come to a screeching halt in the middle of one Madame Elise's salon, the scent of perfume heavy in his nostrils.

"I see," I said, biting my lip. "I, um, trust you didn't draw your sword in there?"

Jamie narrowed his eyes at me, but didn't deign to reply directly.

"I'll leave it to you, Sassenach," he said dryly, "to imagine what it feels like to arrive unexpectedly in the midst of a brothel, in possession of a verra large sausage."

My imagination proved fully equal to this task, and I burst out laughing.

"God, I wish I could have seen you!" I said.

"Thank God ye didn't!" he said fervently. A furious blush glowed on his cheekbones.

Ignoring remarks from the fascinated inmates, Jamie had made his way awkwardly through what he described, shuddering, as "tangles o' bare limbs," until he had spotted Fergus against one wall, regarding the intruder with a round-eyed astonishment.

Seizing upon this unexpected manifestation of maleness, Jamie had gripped the lad by the shoulder, and fervently implored him to show the way to the nearest exit, without loss of a moment.

"I could hear a hurly-burly breakin' out in the hallway," he explained, "and I kent they were in after me. I didna want to be having to fight for my life wi' a lot of naked women getting in the way."

"I can see that the prospect might be daunting," I agreed, rubbing my upper lip. "But obviously he got you out."

"Aye. He didna hesitate a moment, the dear lad. 'This way, Monsieur!' he says, and it was up the stair, and through a room, and out a window onto the roof, and awa' wi' us both." Jamie cast a fond glance at his new employee.

"You know," I observed, "there are *some* wives who wouldn't believe one word of a story like that."

Jamie's eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"They wouldna? Whyever not?"

"Possibly," I said dryly, "because they aren't married to *you.* I'm pleased that you escaped with your virtue intact, but for the moment, I'm rather more interested in the chaps who chased you in there."

"I didna have a great deal of leisure to think about it at the time," Jamie replied. "And now that I have, I still couldna say who they were, or why they were hunting me."

"Robbery, do you think?" The cash receipts of the wine business were conveyed between the Fraser warehouse, the Rue Tremoulins, and Jared's bank by strongbox, under heavy guard. Still, Jamie was very visible among the crowds near the river docks, and was undoubtedly known to be a wealthy foreign merchant—wealthy by contrast with most of the denizens of that neighborhood, at any rate.

He shook his head, flicking crumbs of dried mud off his shirtfront.

"It might be, I suppose. But they didna try to accost me; it was straightout murder they meant."

His tone was quite matter-of-fact, but it gave me rather a wobbly feeling in the knees, and I sank down onto a settee. I licked my lips, gone suddenly dry.

"Who—who do you think …?"

He shrugged, frowning as he scooped up a dab of icing from the plate and licked it off his finger.

"The only man I could think of who's threatened me is the Comte St. Germain. But I canna think what he'd gain from having me killed."

"He's Jared's business rival, you said."

"Oh, aye. But the Comte's no interest in German wines, and I canna see him going to the trouble of killing me, only to ruin Jared's new enterprise by bringing him back to Paris. That seems a trifle extreme," he said dryly, "even for a man wi' the Comte's temper."

"Well, do you think …" The idea made me mildly ill, and I swallowed twice before going on. "Do you think it might have been … revenge? For the *Patagonia* being burned?"

Jamie shook his head, baffled.

"I suppose it could be, but it seems a long time to wait. And why me, come to that?" he added. "It's you annoyed him, Sassenach. Why not kill you, if that's what he meant?"

The sick feeling got slightly worse.

"Do you have to be so bloody logical?" I said.

He saw the look on my face, and smiled suddenly, putting an arm around me for comfort.

"Nay, *mo duinne*. The Comte's a quick temper, but I canna see him going to the trouble and expense of killing either of us, only for revenge. If it might get him his ship back, then yes," he added, "but as it is, I expect he'd only think the price of three hired assassins throwing good money after bad."

He patted my shoulder and stood up.

"Nay, I expect it was only a try at robbery, after all. Dinna trouble yourself about it. I'll take Murtagh with me to the docks from now on, to be safe."

He stretched himself, and brushed the last of the crumbling dirt from his kilt. "Am I decent to go in to supper?" he asked, looking critically down his chest. "It must be nearly ready by now."

"What's ready?"

He opened the door, and a rich, spicy scent wafted up at once from the dining room below.

"Why, the sausage, of course," he said, with a grin over one shoulder. "Ye dinna think I'd let it go to waste?"

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13

DECEPTIONS

Barberry leaves, three handfuls in a decoction, steeped overnight, poured over half a handful of black hellebore." I laid the list of … ingredients down on the inlaid table as though it were slightly slimy to the touch. "I got it from Madame Rouleaux. She's the best of the angel-makers, but even she says it's dangerous. Louise, are you sure you want to do this?"

Her round pink face was blotched, and the plump lower lip had a tendency to quiver.

"What choice do I have?" She picked up the recipe for the abortifacient and gazed at it in repulsed fascination.

"Black hellebore," she said, and shuddered. "The very name of it sounds evil!"

"Well, it's bloody nasty stuff," I said bluntly. "It will make you feel as though your insides are coming out. But the baby may come, too. It doesn't always work." I remembered Master Raymond's warning—*It is dangerous to wait too long*—and wondered how far gone she might be. Surely no more than six weeks or so; she had told me the instant she suspected.

She glanced at me, startled, with red-rimmed eyes.

"You have used it yourself?"

"God, no!" I startled myself with the vehemence of my exclamation, and took a deep breath.

"No. I've seen women who have, though—at L'Hôpital des Anges." The abortionists—the angel-makers—practiced largely in the privacy of homes, their own or their clients'. Their successes were not the ones that came to the hospital. I laid a hand unobtrusively over my own abdomen, as though for protection of its helpless occupant. Louise caught the gesture and hurled herself into the sofa, burying her head in her hands.

"Oh, I wish I were dead!" she moaned. "Why, why couldn't I be as fortunate as you—to be bearing the child of a husband I loved?" She clutched her own plump stomach with both hands, staring down at it as though expecting the child to peek out between her fingers.

There were any number of answers to that particular question, but I didn't think she really wanted to hear any of them. I took a deep breath and sat down beside her, patting a heaving damask shoulder.

"Louise," I said. "Do you want the child?"

She lifted her head and stared at me in astonishment.

"But of course I want it!" she exclaimed. "It's his—it's Charles's! It's …" Her face crumpled, and she bowed her head once more over her hands, clasped so tightly over her belly. "It's mine," she whispered. After a long moment, she raised her streaming face, and with a pathetic attempt to pull herself together, wiped her nose on a trailing sleeve.

"But it's no good," she said. "If I don't …" She glanced at the recipe on the table and swallowed heavily. "Then Jules will divorce me—he'll cast me out. There would be the most terrible scandal. I might be excommunicated! Not even Father could protect me."

"Yes," I said. "But …" I hesitated, then cast caution to the winds. "Is there any chance Jules might be convinced the child is his?" I asked bluntly.

She looked blank for a moment, and I wanted to shake her.

"I don't see how, unless—oh!" Light dawned, and she looked at me, horrified.

"Sleep with Jules, you mean? But Charles would be furious!"

"Charles," I said through my teeth, "is not pregnant!"

"Well, but he's … that is … I couldn't!" The look of horror was fading, though, being slowly replaced with the growing realization of possibility.

I didn't want to push her; still, I saw no good reason for her to risk her life for the sake of Charles Stuart's pride, either.

"Do you suppose Charles would want you to endanger yourself?" I said. "For that matter—does he know about the child?"

She nodded, mouth slightly open as she thought about it, hands still clenched together over her stomach.

"Yes. That's what we quarreled about last time." She sniffed. "He was angry; he said it was all my fault, that I should have waited until he had reclaimed his father's throne. Then he would be king someday, and he could come and take me away from Jules, and have the Pope annul my marriage, and his sons could be heirs to England and Scotlan…." She gave way once more, sniveling and wailing incoherently into a fold of her skirt.

I rolled my eyes in exasperation.

"Oh, do be quiet, Louise!" I snapped. It shocked her enough to make her stop weeping, at least momentarily, and I took advantage of the hiatus to press my point.

"Look," I said, as persuasively as possible, "you don't suppose Charles would want you to sacrifice his son, do you? Legitimate or not?" Actually, I rather thought Charles would be in favor of any step that removed inconvenience from his own path, regardless of the effects on Louise or his putative offspring. On the other hand, the Prince did have a marked streak of romanticism; perhaps he could be induced to view this as the sort of temporary adversity common to exiled monarchs. Obviously, I was going to need Jamie's help. I grimaced at the thought of what he was likely to say about it.

"Well…." Louise was wavering, wanting desperately to be convinced. I had a momentary pang of pity for Jules, Prince de Rohan, but the vision of a young servant-girl, dying in protracted, blood-smeared agony on a pallet spread in the stone hallway of L'Hôpital des Anges was brutally clear in my mind.

It was nearly sunset when I left the de Rohans', footsteps dragging. Louise, palpitating with nervousness, was upstairs in her boudoir, her maid putting up her hair and arraying her in her most daring gown before she went down to a private supper with her husband. I felt completely drained, and hoped that Jamie hadn't brought anyone home for supper; I could use a spot of privacy, too.

He hadn't; when I entered the study, he was seated at the desk, poring over three or four sheets of close-written paper.

"Do you think 'the fur merchant' is more likely to be Louis of France, or his minister Duverney?" he asked, without looking up.

"Fine, thank you, darling, and how are *you*?" I said.

"All right," he said absently. The cowlicks on the top of his head were sticking up straight; he massaged his scalp vigorously as I watched, scowling down his long nose at the paper.

"I'm sure 'the tailor from Vendôme' must be Monsieur Geyer," he said, running a finger along the lines of the letter, "and 'our mutual friend'—that could be either the Earl of Mar, or possibly the papal envoy. I think the Earl, from the rest of it, but the—"

"What on earth is that?" I peered over his shoulder, and gasped when I saw the signature at the foot of the letter. James Stuart, by the grace of God King of England and Scotland.

"Bloody Christ! It worked, then!" Swinging around, I spotted Fergus, crouched on a stool in front of the fire, industriously stuffing pastries into his face. "Good lad," I said, smiling at him. He grinned back at me, cheeks puffed like a chipmunk's with chestnut tart.

"We got it from the papal messenger," Jamie explained, coming to the surface long enough to realize I was there. "Fergus took it from the bag while he was eating supper in a tavern. He'll spend the night there, so we'll have to put this back before morning. No difficulties there, Fergus?"

The boy swallowed and shook his head. "No, milord. He sleeps alone—not trusting his bedmates not to steal the contents of his bag." He grinned derisively at this. "The second window on the left, above the stables." He waved an airy hand, the deft, grubby fingers reaching for another pie. "It is nothing, milord."

I had a sudden vision of that fine-boned hand held squirming on a block, with an executioner's blade raised above the broomstick wrist. I gulped, forcing down the sudden lurch of my stomach. Fergus wore a small greenish copper medal on a string about his neck; the image of St. Dismas, I hoped.

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath to steady myself, “what’s all this about fur merchants?”

* * *

There was no time then for leisurely inspection. In the end, I made a quick fair copy of the letter, and the original was carefully refolded and its original seal replaced with the aid of a knife blade heated in a candle flame.

Watching this operation critically, Fergus shook his head at Jamie. “You have the touch, milord. It is a pity that the one hand is crippled.”

Jamie glanced dispassionately at his right hand. It really wasn’t too bad; a couple of fingers set slightly askew, a thick scar down the length of the middle finger. The only major damage had been to the fourth finger, which stuck out stiffly, its second joint so badly crushed that the healing had fused two fingerbones together. The hand had been broken in Wentworth Prison, less than four months ago, by Jack Randall.

“Never mind,” he said, smiling. He flexed the hand and flicked the fingers playfully at Fergus. “My great paws are too big to make a living picking pockets, anyway.” He had regained an astounding degree of movement, I thought. He still carried the soft ball of rags I had made for him, squeezing it unobtrusively hundreds of times a day as he went about his business. And if the knitting bones hurt him, he never complained.

“Off with ye, then,” he told Fergus. “Come and find me when you’re safe back, so I’ll know ye havena been taken up by the police or the landlord of the tavern.”

Fergus wrinkled his nose scornfully at such an idea, but nodded, tucking the letter carefully inside his smock before disappearing down the back stair toward the night that was both natural element and protection for him.

Jamie looked after him for a long minute, then turned to me. He truly looked at me for the first time, and his brows flew up.

“Christ, Sassenach!” he said. “You’re pale as my sark! Are ye all right?”

"Just hungry," I said.

He rang at once for supper, and we ate it before the fire, while I told him about Louise. Rather to my surprise, while he knit his brows over the situation and muttered uncomplimentary things under his breath in Gaelic about both Louise and Charles Stuart, he agreed with my solution to the problem.

"I thought you'd be upset," I said, scooping up a mouthful of succulent cassoulet with a bit of bread. The warm, bacon-spiced beans soothed me, filling me with a sense of peaceful well-being. It was cold and dark outside, and loud with the rushing of the wind, but it was warm and quiet here by the fire together.

"Oh, about Louise de La Tour foisting a bastard on her husband?" Jamie frowned at his own dish, running a finger around the edge to pick up the last of the juice.

"Well, I'm no verra much in favor of it, I'll tell ye, Sassenach. It's a filthy trick to play on a man, but what's the poor bloody woman to do otherwise?" He shook his head, then glanced at the desk across the room and smiled wryly.

"Besides, it doesna become me to be takin' a high moral stand about other people's behavior. Stealing letters and spying and trying generally to subvert a man my family holds as King? I shouldna like to have someone judging me on the grounds of the things I'm doing, Sassenach."

"You have a damn good reason for what you're doing!" I objected.

He shrugged. The firelight flickering on his face hollowed his cheeks and threw shadows into the orbits of his eyes. It made him look older than he was; I tended to forget that he was not quite twenty-four.

"Aye, well. And Louise de La Tour has a reason, too," he said. "She wants to save one life, I want ten thousand. Does that excuse my risking wee Fergus—and Jared's business—and you?" He turned his head and smiled at me, the light gleaming from the long, straight bridge of his nose, glowing like sapphire in the one eye turned toward the fire.

"Nay, I think I wilna lose my sleep over the need for opening another man's letters," he said. "It may come to much worse than that before we've done, Claire, and I canna say ahead of time what my conscience will stand; it's best not to test it too soon."

There was nothing to be said to that; it was all true. I reached out and laid my hand against his cheek. He laid his own hand over mine, cradling it for a moment, then turned his head and gently kissed my palm.

"Well," he said, drawing a deep breath and returning to business. "Now that we've eaten, shall we have a look at this letter?"

The letter was coded; that much was obvious. To foil possible interceptors, Jamie explained.

"Who would want to intercept His Highness's mail?" I asked. "Besides us, I mean."

Jamie snorted with amusement at my naiveté.

"Almost anyone, Sassenach. Louis's spies, Duverney's spies, Philip of Spain's spies. The Jacobite lords and the ones who think they might turn Jacobite if the wind sets right. Dealers in information, who dinna care a fart in a breeze who lives or dies by it. The Pope himself; the Holy See's been supporting the Stuarts in exile for fifty years—I imagine he keeps an eye on what they're doing." He tapped a finger on the copy I'd made of James's letter to his son.

"The seal on this letter had been removed maybe three times before I took it off myself," he said.

"I see," I said. "No wonder James codes his letters. Do you think you can make out what he says?"

Jamie picked up the sheets, frowning.

"I don't know; some, yes. Some other things, I've no idea. I think perhaps I can work it out, though, if I can see some other letters King James has sent. I'll see what Fergus can do for me there." He folded the copy and put it carefully away in a drawer, which he locked.

"Ye canna trust anyone, Sassenach," he explained, seeing my eyes widen. "We might easily have spies among the servants." He dropped the small key in the pocket of his coat, and held out his arm to me.

I took the candle in one hand and his arm in the other, and we turned toward the stairs. The rest of the house was dark, the servants—all but Fergus—virtuously asleep. I felt a trifle creepy, with the realization that one or more of the silent sleepers below or above might not be what they seemed.

"Doesn't it make you feel a bit nervous?" I asked as we went up the stairs. "Never being able to trust anyone?"

He laughed softly. "Well, I wouldna say *anyone*, Sassenach. There's you—and Murtagh, and my sister Jenny and her husband Ian. I'd trust the four of you wi' my life—I have, for that matter, more than once."

I shivered as he pulled back the drapes of the big bed. The fire had been banked for the night, and the room was growing cold.

"Four people you can trust doesn't seem like all that many," I said, unlacing my gown.

He pulled his shirt over his head and tossed it on the chair. The scars on his back shone silver in the faint light from the night sky outside.

"Aye, well," he said matter-of-factly. "It's four more than Charles Stuart has."

* * *

There was a bird singing outside, though it was long before first light. A mockingbird, practicing his trills and runs over and over, perched on a rain gutter somewhere in the dark nearby.

Moving sleepily, Jamie rubbed his cheek against the smooth skin of my freshly waxed underarm, then turned his head and planted a soft kiss in the warm hollow that sent a small, delicious shudder down my side.

"Mm," he murmured, running a light hand over my ribs. "I like it when ye come out all gooseflesh like that, Sassenach."

"Like this?" I answered, running the nails of my right hand gently over the skin of his back, which obligingly rippled into goose bumps under the teasing of the touch.

"Ah."

"Ah, yourself, then," I answered softly, doing it some more.

"Mmmm." With a luxurious groan, he rolled to the side, wrapping his arms around me as I followed, enjoying the sudden contact of every inch of our naked skins, all down the front from head to toe. He was warm as a smothered fire, the heat of him safely banked for the night, to kindle again to a blaze in the black cold of dawn.

His lips fastened gently on one nipple, and I groaned myself, arching slightly to encourage him to take it deeper into the warmth of his mouth. My breasts were growing fuller, and more sensitive by the day; my nipples ached and tingled sometimes under the tight binding of my gowns, wanting to be suckled.

“Will ye let me do this later?” he murmured, with a soft bite. “When the child’s come, and your breasts fill wi’ milk? Will ye feed me, too, then, next to your heart?”

I clasped his head and cradled it, fingers deep in the baby-soft hair that grew thick at the base of his skull.

“Always,” I whispered.

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14

MEDITATIONS ON THE FLESH

Fergus was more than adept at his profession, and nearly every day brought in a new selection of His Highness's correspondence; sometimes I was hard pressed to copy everything before Fergus's next expedition, when he would replace the items abstracted, before stealing the new letters.

Some of these were further coded communications from King James in Rome; Jamie put aside the copies of these, to puzzle over at leisure. The bulk of His Highness's correspondence was innocuous—notes from friends in Italy, an increasing number of bills from local merchants—Charles had a taste for gaudy clothing and fine boots, as well as for brandywine—and the occasional note from Louise de La Tour de Rohan. These were fairly easy to pick out; aside from the tiny, mannered handwriting she employed, that made her letters look as though a small bird had been making tracks on them, she invariably saturated the paper with her trademark hyacinth scent. Jamie resolutely refused to read these.

"I willna be reading the man's love letters," he said firmly. "Even a plotter must scruple at *something.*" He sneezed, and dropped the latest missive back into Fergus's pocket. "Besides," he added more practically, "Louise tells ye everything, anyway."

This was true; Louise had become a close friend, and spent nearly as much time in my drawing room as she did in her own, wringing her hands over Charles, then forgetting him in the fascination of discussing the marvels of pregnancy—*she* never had morning sickness, curse her! Scatterbrained as she was, I liked her very much; still, it was a great relief to escape from her company to L'Hôpital des Anges every afternoon.

While Louise was unlikely ever to set foot within L'Hôpital des Anges, I was not without company when I went there. Undaunted by her first exposure to the Hôpital, Mary Hawkins summoned up the courage to accompany me again. And yet again. While she couldn't quite bring herself to look directly at a wound yet, she was useful at spooning gruel into people and sweeping floors. Apparently she considered these activities a welcome change from either the gatherings of the Court or the life at her uncle's house.

While she was frequently shocked at some of the behavior she saw at Court—not that she saw much, but she was easily shocked—she didn't betray any particular distaste or horror at the sight of the Vicomte Marigny, which led me to conclude that her wretched family had not yet completed the negotiations for her marriage—and therefore hadn't told her about it.

This conclusion was borne out one day in late April, when, en route to L'Hôpital des Anges, she blushingly confided to me that she was in love.

"Oh, he's so handsome!" she enthused, her stammer entirely forgotten. "And so … well, so *spiritual*, as well."

"Spiritual?" I said. "Mm, yes, very nice." Privately I thought that that particular quality was not one which would have topped my own list of desirable attributes in a lover, but then tastes differed.

"And who is the favored gentleman, then?" I teased gently. "Anyone I know?"

The rosy blush deepened. "No, I shouldn't think so." She looked up then, eyes sparkling. "But—oh, I shouldn't tell you this, but I can't help myself. He wrote to my father. He's coming back to Paris next week!"

"Really?" This was interesting news. "I'd heard that the Comte de Palles is expected at Court next week," I said. "Is your, um, intended, one of his party?"

Mary looked aghast at the suggestion.

"A Frenchman! Oh, no, Claire; really, how could I marry a Frenchman?"

“Is there something wrong with Frenchmen?” I asked, rather surprised at her vehemence. “You do speak French, after all.” Perhaps that was the trouble, though; while Mary did speak French very nicely, her shyness made her stammer even worse in that language than in English. I had come across a couple of kitchen-boys only the day before, entertaining each other with cruel imitations of *“la petite Anglaise maladroite.”*

“You don’t know about Frenchmen?” she whispered, eyes wide and horrified. “Oh, but of course, you wouldn’t. Your husband is so gentle and so kind.… he wouldn’t, I m-mean I know he d-doesn’t trouble you that way …” Her face was suffused with a rich peony that reached from chin to hairline, and the stammer was about to strangle her.

“Do you mean …” I began, trying to think of some tactful way of extricating her without entangling myself in speculations about the habits of Frenchmen. However, considering what Mr. Hawkins had told me about Mary’s father and his plans for her marriage, I rather thought perhaps I should try to disabuse her of the notions that she had clearly picked up from the gossip of salon and dressing room. I didn’t want her to die of fright if she *did* end up married to a Frenchman.

“What they d-do … in … in *bed*!” she whispered hoarsely.

“Well,” I said matter-of-factly, “there are only so many things you *can* do in bed with a man, after all. And since I see quite a large number of children about the city, I’d assume that even Frenchmen are fairly well versed in the orthodox methods.”

“Oh! Children … well, yes, of course,” she said vaguely, as though not seeing much connection. “B-b-but they said”—she cast her eyes down, embarrassed, and her voice sank even lower—“th-that he … a Frenchm-man’s *thing*, you know.…”

“Yes, I know,” I said, striving for patience. “So far as I know, they’re much like any other man’s. Englishmen and Scotsmen are quite similarly endowed.”

“Yes, but they, they … p-p-put it between a lady’s l-l-legs! I mean, right up *inside* her!” This bit of stop-press news finally out, she took a deep breath, which seemed to steady her, for the violent crimson of her face receded slightly. “An Englishman, or even a Scot … oh, I didn’t m-mean it *that* way …” Her hand flew to her mouth in embarrassment. “But a decent man like your husband; surely he would n-never dream of forcing a wife to endure s-something like that!”

I placed a hand on my slightly bloated stomach and regarded her thoughtfully. I began to see why spirituality ranked so highly in Mary Hawkins’s catalog of manly virtues.

“Mary,” I said, “I think we must have a small talk.”

I was still smiling privately to myself when I walked out into the Great Hall of the Hôpital, my own dress covered with the drab, sturdy fabric of a novice’s habit.

A good many of the *chirurgiens,* urinoscopists, bonesetters, physicians, and other healers were donating their time and services as a charity; others came to learn or refine their skills. The hapless patients of L’Hôpital des Anges were in no position to protest being the subjects of assorted medical experiments.

Aside from the nuns themselves, the medical staff changed almost daily, depending upon who found themselves without paying patients that day, or who had a new technique that needed trial. Still, most of the free-lance medicos came often enough that I learned to recognize the regulars in short order.

One of the most interesting was the tall, gaunt man whom I had seen amputating a leg on my first visit to the Hôpital. Upon inquiry, I determined that his name was Monsieur Forez. Primarily a bonesetter, occasionally he would attempt the trickier types of amputation, particularly when a whole limb, rather than a joint, was involved. The nuns and orderlies seemed a bit in awe of Monsieur Forez; they never chaffed him or exchanged rude jokes, as they did with most of the other volunteer medical help.

Monsieur Forez was at work today. I approached quietly, to see what he was doing. The patient, a young workman, lay white-faced and gasping on a pallet. He had fallen from the scaffolding on the cathedral—always under construction—and broken both an arm and a leg. I could see that the arm was no particular challenge to a professional bonesetter—only a simple fracture of the radius. The leg, though, was something else; an impressive double compound fracture, involving both the mid-femur and the tibia. Sharp bone fragments protruded through the skin of both thigh and shin, and the lacerated flesh was blue with traumatic bruising over most of the upper aspect of the leg.

I didn't wish to distract the bonesetter's attention to his case, but Monsieur Forez appeared sunk in thought, slowly circling the patient, sidling back and forth like a large carrion crow, cautious lest the victim not be really dead yet. He did look rather like a crow, I thought, with that prominent beak of a nose, and the smooth black hair that he wore unpowdered, slicked back to a wispy knot at the nape of his neck. His clothes, too, were black and somber, though of good quality—evidently he had a profitable practice outside the Hôpital.

At last deciding on his course of action, Monsieur Forez lifted his chin from his hand and glanced around for assistance. His eye lighted on me, and he beckoned me forward. I was dressed in a coarse linen novice's gown, and lost in his concentration, he did not notice that I didn't wear the wimple and veil of a nursing sister.

"Here, *ma soeur*," he directed, taking hold of the patient's ankle. "Grasp it tightly just behind the heel. Do not apply pressure until I tell you, but when I give the word, draw the foot directly toward you. Pull very slowly, but with force—it will take considerable strength, you understand."

"I understand." I grasped the foot as directed, while Monsieur Forez made his slow and gangling way toward the other end of the pallet, glancing contemplatively at the fractured leg.

"I have a stimulant here to assist," he said, drawing a small vial out of his coat pocket and setting it beside the patient's head. "It constricts the blood vessels of the surface skin, and drives the blood inward, where it may be of more use to our young friend." So speaking, he grasped the patient by the hair and thrust the vial into the young man's mouth, skillfully decanting the medicine down his throat without spilling a drop.

"Ah," he said approvingly as the man gulped and breathed deeply. "That will help. Now, as to the pain—yes, it is better if we can numb the leg, so he will be less inclined to resist our efforts as we straighten it."

He reached into his capacious pocket once more, this time coming out with a small brass pin, some three inches in length, with a wide, flat head. One bony, thick-jointed hand tenderly explored the inside of the patient's thigh near the groin, following the thin blue line of a large vein beneath the skin. The groping fingers hesitated, paused, palpated in a small circle, then settled on a point. Digging a sharp forefinger into the skin as though to mark his place, Monsieur Forez brought the point of the brass pin to bear in the same place. Another quick reach into the pocket of marvels produced a small brass hammer, with which he drove the pin straight into the leg with one blow.

The leg twitched violently, then seemed to relax into limpness. The vaso-constrictor administered earlier did in fact seem to be working; the ooze of blood from the severed tissues was markedly less.

"That's amazing!" I exclaimed. "What did you do?"

Monsieur Forez smiled shyly, a faint rosiness staining his blue-shadowed cheeks with pleasure at my admiration.

"Well, it does not always work quite so well," he admitted modestly. "Luck was with me this time." He pointed at the brass pin, explaining, "There is a large bundle of nerve endings there, Sister, what I have heard the anatomists call a *plexus*. If you are fortunate enough to pierce it directly, it numbs a great deal of the sensations in the lower extremity." He straightened abruptly, realizing that he was wasting time in talk that might better be spent in action.

"Come, *ma soeur*," he ordered. "Back to your post! The action of the stimulant is not long-lasting; we must work now, while the bleeding is suppressed."

Almost limp, the leg straightened easily, the splintered ends of bone drawing back through the skin. Following Monsieur Forez's orders, I now grasped the young man about the torso, while he maneuvered the foot and lower leg, so that we applied a constant traction while the final small adjustments were made.

“That will do, Sister. Now, if you will but hold the foot steady for a moment.” A shout summoned an orderly with a couple of stout sticks and some rags for binding, and in no time we had the limb neatly splinted and the open wounds firmly dressed with pressure bandages.

Monsieur Forez and I exchanged a broad smile of congratulation over the body of our patient.

“Lovely work, that,” I praised, shoving back a lock of hair that had come unbound during our exertions. I saw Monsieur Forez’s face change suddenly, as he realized that I wore no veil, and just then the loud bonging of the Vespers bell rang from the adjacent church. I glanced openmouthed at the tall window at the end of the ward, left unglassed to allow unwholesome vapors to pass out. Sure enough, the oblong of sky was the deep half-indigo of early evening.

“Excuse me,” I said, starting to wriggle out of the covering gown. “I must go at once; my husband will be worried about me coming home so late. I’m so glad to have had the chance of assisting you, Monsieur Forez.” The tall bonesetter watched this disrobing act in patent astonishment.

“But you … well, no, of course you are not a nun, I should have realized that before … but you … who are you?” he asked curiously.

“My name’s Fraser,” I told him briefly. “Look, I *must* go, or my husband …”

He drew himself up to his full gawky height, and bowed with deep seriousness.

“I should esteem it a privilege if you would allow me to see you home, Madame Fraser.”

“Oh … why, thank you,” I said, touched at his thoughtfulness. “I have an escort, though,” I said, looking vaguely around the hall for Fergus, who had taken over escort duty from Murtagh, when he was not needed to steal something. He was there, leaning against the doorjamb, twitching with impatience. I wondered how long he had been there—the sisters wouldn’t allow him into the main hall or the wards, always insisting that he wait for me by the door.

Monsieur Forez eyed my escort dubiously, then took me firmly by the elbow.

"I will see you to your door, Madame," he declared. "This section of the city is much too dangerous in the evening hours for you to be abroad with no more than a child for protection."

I could see Fergus swelling with indignation at being called a child, and hastened to protest that he was an excellent escort, always taking care to guide me by the safest streets. Monsieur Forez paid no attention to either of us, merely nodding in a stately manner to Sister Angelique as he steered me through the huge double doors of the Hôpital.

Fergus trotted at my heels, plucking at my sleeve. "Madame!" he said in a urgent whisper. "Madame! I promised the master that I would see you safely home each day, that I would not allow you to associate with undesirable—"

"Ah, here we are. Madame, you sit here; your boy may have the other seat." Ignoring Fergus's yapping, Monsieur Forez picked him up and tossed him casually into the waiting carriage.

The carriage was a small open one, but elegantly equipped, with deep blue velvet seats and a small canopy to protect the passengers from sudden inclemencies of weather or slops flung from above. There was no coat of arms or other decoration on the equipage's door; Monsieur Forez was not of the nobility—must be a rich bourgeois, I thought.

We made polite conversation on the way home, discussing medical matters, while Fergus sulked in the corner, glowering under the ragged thatch of his hair. When we pulled up in the Rue Tremoulins, he leaped over the side without waiting for the coachman to open the door, and sprinted inside. I stared after him, wondering what ailed him, then turned to take my farewell of Monsieur Forez.

"Really, it is nothing," he assured me graciously, in response to my profuse thanks. "Your residence lies along the path I take to my own house, in any case. And I could not have trusted the person of such a gracious lady to the Paris streets at this hour." He handed me down from the carriage, and was opening his mouth to say more, when the gate slammed open behind us.

I turned in time to see Jamie's expression change from mild annoyance to startled surprise.

"Oh!" he said. "Good evening, Monsieur." He bowed to Monsieur Forez, who returned the salute with great solemnity.

"Your wife has allowed me the great pleasure of delivering her safely to your door, milord. As for her late arrival, I beg you will lay the blame for that on my own shoulders; she was most nobly assisting me in a small endeavor at L'Hôpital des Anges."

"I expect she was," said Jamie in a resigned tone. "After all," he added in English, raising an eyebrow at me, "ye couldna expect a mere husband to hold the same sort of appeal as an inflamed bowel or a case of bilious spots, could ye?" The corner of his mouth twitched, though, and I knew he wasn't really annoyed, only concerned that I hadn't come home; I felt a twinge of regret at having worried him.

Bowing once more to Monsieur Forez, he grasped me by the upper arm and hustled me through the gate.

"Where's Fergus?" I asked, as soon as the gate was closed behind us. Jamie snorted.

"In the kitchen, awaiting retribution, I expect."

"Retribution? What do you mean by that?" I demanded. Unexpectedly, he laughed.

"Well," he said, "I was sittin' in the study, wondering where in bloody hell you'd got to, and on the verge of going down to the Hôpital myself, when the door flew open, and young Fergus shot in and threw himself on the floor at my feet, begging me to kill him on the spot."

"Kill him? Whatever for?"

"Well, that's what I asked him myself, Sassenach. I thought perhaps you and he had been waylaid by footpads along the way—there are dangerous gangs of ruffians about the streets, ye ken, and I thought losin' you that way would be the only thing would make him behave so. But he said you were at the gate, so I came tearing along to see were ye all right, with Fergus at my heels, babbling about betraying my trust and being unworthy to call me master, and begging me to beat him to death. I found it a bit difficult to think, what wi' all that going on, so I told him I'd attend to him later, and sent him to the kitchen."

"Oh, bloody hell!" I said. "Does he really think he's betrayed your trust, just because I've come home a bit late?"

Jamie glanced aside at me.

"Aye, he does. And so he did, for that matter, letting ye ride in company with a stranger. He swears that he would ha' thrown himself in front of the horses before he would let ye enter the carriage, save that *you*," he added pointedly, "seemed on good terms wi' the man."

"Well, of course I was on good terms with him," I said indignantly. "I'd just been helping him set a leg."

"Mphm." This line of argument appeared to strike him as unconvincing.

"Oh, all right," I agreed reluctantly. "Perhaps it was a bit unwise. But he really did seem entirely respectable, and I *was* in a hurry to get home—I knew you'd be worried." Still, I was now wishing I had paid a little more attention to Fergus's frantic mumblings and pluckings at my sleeve. At the time, I had been concerned only to reach home as soon as possible.

"You aren't really going to beat him, are you?" I asked in some alarm. "It wasn't his fault in the slightest—I insisted on going with Monsieur. Forez. I mean, if anyone deserves beating, it's me."

Turning in the direction of the kitchen, Jamie cocked a sardonic eyebrow at me.

"Aye, it is," he agreed. "Having sworn to refrain from any such actions, though, I may have to settle for Fergus."

"Jamie! You wouldn't!" I stopped dead, yanking on his arm. "Jamie! Please!" Then I saw the smile hidden in the corner of his mouth, and sighed in relief.

"No," he said, letting the smile become visible. "I dinna mean to kill him—or even beat him, for that matter. I may have to go clout him over the ear a time or two, though, if only to save his honor," he added. "He thinks he's committed a major crime by not following my orders to guard ye—I can hardly let it pass without some sign of official displeasure."

He paused outside the baize door to the kitchens to fasten his cuffs and rewind the stock about his throat.

"Am I decent?" he inquired, smoothing back his thick, unruly hair. "Perhaps I should go and fetch my coat—I'm not sure what's proper for administering rebukes."

"You look fine," I said, suppressing a smile. "Very severe."

"Oh, that's good," he said, straightening his shoulders and compressing his lips. "I hope I don't laugh, that wouldna do at all," he muttered, pushing open the door to the kitchen stair.

The atmosphere in the kitchen was far from hilarious, though. At our entrance, the customary gabble ceased at once, and there was a hasty drawing up of the staff at one side of the room. Everyone stood stock-still for a moment, then there was a small stir between two kitchenmaids, and Fergus stepped out into the open space before us.

The boy's face was white and tracked with tears, but he was not weeping now. With considerable dignity, he bowed, first to me and then Jamie, in turn.

"Madame, Monsieur, I am ashamed," he said, low-voiced but distinct. "I am unworthy to be in your employment, but still I beg that you will not dismiss me." His high-pitched voice quavered a little at the thought, and I bit my lip. Fergus glanced aside at the ranks of the servants, as though for moral support, and received a nod of encouragement from Fernand the coachman. Drawing a deep breath for courage, he straightened up and addressed Jamie directly.

"I am ready to suffer my punishment now, milord," he said. As though this had been the signal, one of the footmen stepped out of the rigid crowd, led the boy to the scrubbed plank table, and passing on the other side, took hold of the lad's hands, pulling him half across the surface of the table and holding him so extended.

"But …" Jamie began, taken aback by the speed of events. He got no further before Magnus, the elderly butler, stepped gravely up and presented him with the leather strop used for sharpening the kitchen knives, laid ceremonially atop the meat platter.

“Er,” Jamie said, looking helplessly at me.

“Um,” I said, and took one step back. Eyes narrowed, he grabbed my hand, squeezing it tightly.

“No, ye don’t, Sassenach,” he muttered in English. “If I have to do it, you have to watch it!”

Glancing desperately back and forth between his would-be victim and the proffered instrument of execution, he hesitated for a moment longer, then gave up.

“Oh, bloody fucking hell,” he muttered under his breath in English, grabbing the strop from Magnus. He flexed the broad strap dubiously between his hands; three inches wide and a quarter-inch thick, it was a formidable weapon. Clearly wishing himself anywhere else, he advanced upon the prone body of Fergus.

“All right, then,” he said, glaring ferociously round the room. “Ten strokes, and I don’t wish to hear a fuss about it.” Several of the female servants blanched visibly at this, and clung to each other for support, but there was dead silence in the big room as he raised the strap.

The resultant crack at impact made me jump, and there were small squeaks of alarm from the kitchenmaids, but no sound from Fergus. The small body quivered, and Jamie closed his eyes briefly, then set his lips and proceeded to inflict the remainder of the sentence, strokes evenly spaced. I felt sick, and surreptitiously wiped my damp palms on my skirt. At the same time, I felt an unhinged urge to laugh at the terrible farce of the situation.

Fergus endured everything in total silence, and when Jamie had finished and stepped back, pale and sweating, the small body lay so still that I was afraid for a moment that he had died—of shock, if not from the actual effects of the beating. But then a deep shudder seemed to run over the small frame, and the boy slid backward and raised himself stiffly off the table.

Jamie leaped forward to grasp him by an arm, anxiously smoothing back the sweat-drenched hair from his forehead.

“Are ye all right, man?” he asked. “God, Fergus, tell me you’re all right!”

The boy was white to the lips, and his eyes were the size of saucers, but he smiled at this evidence of goodwill on the part of his employer, buck teeth gleaming in the lamplight.

"Oh yes, milord," he gasped. "Am I forgiven?"

"Jesus Christ," Jamie muttered, and clasped the boy tightly against his chest. "Yes, of course ye are, fool." He held the boy at arm's length and shook him slightly. "I dinna want to do that ever again, d'ye hear me?"

Fergus nodded, eyes glowing, then broke away and fell to his knees before me.

"Do you forgive me also, Madame?" he asked, folding his hands formally in front of him, and looking trustfully up, like a chipmunk begging for nuts.

I thought I would expire on the spot of mortification, but mustered sufficient self-possession to reach down and raise the boy to his feet.

"There is nothing to forgive," I told him firmly, my cheeks burning. "You're a very courageous lad, Fergus. Why … er, why don't you go and have some supper now?"

At this, the atmosphere of the kitchen relaxed, as though everyone had drawn a massive sigh of relief at once. The other servants pushed forward, babbling concern and congratulations, and Fergus was swept off to a hero's reception, while Jamie and I beat a precipitous retreat back to our quarters abovestairs.

"Oh, God," Jamie said, collapsing into his chair as though completely drained. "Sweet bleeding Jesus. Mary, Michael, and Bride. Lord, I need a drink. Don't ring!" he exclaimed in alarm, though I hadn't made a move toward the bell rope. "I couldna bear to face one of the servants just now."

He got up and rummaged in the cupboard. "I think I've a bottle in here, though."

He had indeed, a nice aged Scotch. Removing the cork unceremoniously with his teeth, he lowered the level of the spirit by an inch or so, then handed the bottle to me. I followed his example without hesitation.

"Jesus Christ," I said, when I had recovered breath enough to speak.

"Yes," he said, taking the bottle back and taking another gulp. Setting the bottle down, he clutched his head, running his fingers through his hair until it stood on end in wild disarray. He laughed weakly.

"I've never felt so foolish in my entire life. God, I felt a clot-heid!"

"So did I," I said, taking my turn at the bottle. "Even more than you, I imagine. After all, it was all my fault. Jamie, I can't tell you how sorry I am; I never imagined …"

"Ah, dinna worry yourself." The tension of the last half-hour released, he squeezed my shoulder affectionately. "You couldna have any idea. Neither did I, for that matter," he added reflectively. "I suppose he thought I'd dismiss him, and he'd be back in the streets … poor little bugger. No wonder he thought himself lucky to take a beating instead."

I shuddered briefly, remembering the streets through which Monsieur Forez's carriage had traveled. Beggars dressed in rags and sores clung stubbornly to their territories, sleeping on the ground even on the coldest nights, lest some rival steal a profitable corner from them. Children much smaller than Fergus darted through the market crowds like hungry mice, eyes always watching for the dropped crumb, the unguarded pocket. And for those too unhealthy to work, too unattractive to sell to the brothels, or simply too unlucky—it would be a short life indeed, and far from merry. Little wonder if the prospect of being thrust from the luxury of three meals a day and clean clothes back into that sordid stew had been sufficient to send Fergus into paroxysms of needless guilt.

"I suppose so," I said. My manner of intake had declined from gulps to a more genteel sipping by this time. I sipped genteelly, then handed the bottle back, noting in a rather detached manner that it was more than half empty. "Still, I hope you didn't hurt him."

"Weel, nay doubt he'll be a bit sore." His Scots accent, usually faint, always grew more pronounced when he drank a lot. He shook his head, squinting through the bottle to judge the level of spirit remaining. "D'ye know, Sassenach, I never 'til tonight realized just how difficult it must ha’ been for my father to beat me? I always thought it was me had the hardest part of that particular transaction.” He tilted his head back and drank again, then set down the bottle and stared owl-eyed into the fire. “Being a father might be a bit more complicated than I’d thought. I’ll have to think about it.”

“Well, don’t think too hard,” I said. “You’ve had a lot to drink.”

“Och, don’t worry,” he said cheerfully. “There’s another bottle in the cupboard.”

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15

IN WHICH MUSIC PLAYS A PART

We stayed up late with the second bottle, going over and over the latest of the abstracted letters from the Chevalier de St. George—otherwise known as His Majesty, James III—and the letters to Prince Charles from Jacobite supporters.

"Fergus got a large packet, bound for His Highness," Jamie explained. "There was a lot of stuff in it, and we couldna copy it all quickly enough, so I kept some to go back the next time."

"See," he said, extracting one sheet from the pile and laying it on my knee, "the majority of the letters are in code, like this one—'I hear that the prospects for grouse seem most favorable this year in the hills above Salerno; hunters in that region should find themselves successful.' That's easy; it's a reference to Manzetti, the Italian banker; he's from Salerno. I found that Charles had been dining with him, and managed to borrow fifteen thousand livres—apparently James's advice was good. But here—" He shuffled through the stack, pulling out another sheet.

"Look at this," Jamie said, handing me a sheet covered with his lopsided scrawls.

I squinted obediently at the paper, from which I could pick out single letters, connected with a network of arrows and question marks.

"What language is that?" I asked, peering at it. "Polish?" Charles Stuart's mother, the late Clementina Sobieski, had been Polish, after all.

"No, it's in English," Jamie said, grinning. "You canna read it?"

“You can?”

“Oh, aye,” he said smugly. “It’s a cipher, Sassenach, and no a verra complicated one. See, all ye must do is break the letters up into groups of five, to start—only ye don’t count the letters Q or X. The X’s are meant as breaks between sentences, and the Q’s are only stuck in here and there to make it more confusing.”

“If you say so,” I said, looking from the extremely confusing-looking letter, which began “Mrti ocruti dlopro qahstmin …” to the sheet in Jamie’s hand, with a series of five-letter groups written on one line, single letters printed in carefully above them, one at a time.

“So, one letter is only substituted for another, but in the same order,” Jamie was explaining, “so if you have a fair amount of text to work from, and you can guess a word here or there, then all ye need do is to translate from one alphabet to the other—see?” He waved a long strip of paper under my nose, with two alphabets printed one above the other, slightly offset.

“Well, more or less,” I said. “I gather you do, though, which is what’s important. What does it say?”

The expression of lively interest with which Jamie greeted all manner of puzzles faded a bit, and he let the sheet of paper fall to his knee. He looked at me, lower lip caught between his teeth in introspection.

“Well,” he said, “that’s what’s odd. And yet I dinna see how I can be mistaken. The tone of James’s letters overall tend one way, and this ciphered one spells it out clearly.”

Blue eyes met mine under thick, ruddy brows.

“James wants Charles to find favor with Louis,” he said slowly, “but he isna looking for support for an invasion of Scotland. James has no interest in seeking restoration to the throne.”

“What?” I snatched the sheaf of letters from his hand, my eyes feverishly scanning the scribbled text.

Jamie was right; while the letters from supporters spoke hopefully of the impending restoration, James’s letters to his son mentioned no such thing, but were all concerned with Charles’s making a good impression upon Louis. Even the loan from Manzetti of Salerno had been sought to enable Charles to live with the appearance of a gentleman in Paris; not to support any military end.

"Well, I'm thinking James is a canny wee man," Jamie had said, tapping one of the letters. "For see, Sassenach, he's verra little money of his own; his wife had a great deal, but Uncle Alex told me that she left it all to the church when she died. The Pope has been maintaining James's establishment—after all, he's a Catholic monarch, and the Pope is bound to uphold his interests against those of the Elector of Hanover."

He clasped his hands around one knee, gazing meditatively at the pile of papers now laid between us on the sofa.

"Philip of Spain and Louis—the Old King, I mean—gave him a small number of troops and a few ships, thirty years ago, with which to try to regain his throne. But it all went wrong; bad weather sank some of the ships, and the rest had no pilots and landed in the wrong place—everything went awry, and in the end, the French simply sailed off again, with James not even setting foot upon the soil of Scotland. So perhaps in the years since, he gave up any thought of getting back his throne. But still, he had two sons coming to manhood, and no way to see them properly settled in life.

"So I ask myself, Sassenach"—he rocked backward a bit—"what would I do, in such a situation? The answer being, that I might try and see if my good cousin Louis—who's King of France, after all—might maybe see one son established in a good position; given a military appointment, maybe, and men to lead. A General of France is no bad position in life."

"Mm." I nodded, thinking. "Yes, but if I were a very smart man, I might not just come to Louis and beg, as a poor relation. I might send my son to Paris, and try to shame Louis into accepting him at Court. And meanwhile keep alive the illusion that I was actively seeking restoration."

"For once James admits openly that the Stuarts will never rule Scotland again," Jamie added softly, "then he has no more value to Louis."

And without the possibility of an armed Jacobite invasion to occupy the English, Louis would have little reason to give his young cousin Charles anything beyond the pittance that decency and public opinion would force him to provide.

It wasn't certain; the letters Jamie had been able to get, a few at a time, went back only as far as last January, when Charles had arrived in France. And, couched in code, cipher, and guarded language generally, the situation was far from clear. But taken all in all, the evidence did point in that direction.

And if Jamie's guess as to the Chevalier's motives was correct—then our task was accomplished already; had never in fact existed at all.

Thinking over the events of the night before, I was abstracted all the next day, through a visit to Marie d'Arbanville's morning salon to hear a Hungarian poet, through a visit to a neighborhood herbalist's to pick up some valerian and orris root, and through my rounds at L'Hôpital des Anges in the afternoon.

Finally, I abandoned my work, afraid that I might accidentally damage someone while wool-gathering. Neither Murtagh nor Fergus had yet arrived to escort me home, so I changed out of my covering gown and sat down in Mother Hildegarde's vacant office to wait, just inside the vestibule of the Hôpital.

I had been there for perhaps half an hour, idly pleating the stuff of my gown between my fingers, when I heard the dog outside.

The porter was absent, as he often was. Gone to buy food, no doubt, or run an errand for one of the nuns. As usual in his absence, the guardianship of the Hôpital's portals was given into the capable paws—and teeth—of Bouton.

The first warning yip was followed by a low, burring growl that warned the intruder to stay where he was, on pain of instant dismemberment. I rose and stuck my head out of the office door, to see whether Father Balmain might be braving the peril of the demon once more, in pursuit of his sacramental duties. But the figure outlined against the huge stained-glass window of the entry hall was not the spare form of the junior priest. It was a tall figure, whose silhouetted kilts swayed gracefully around his legs as he drew back from the small, toothed animal at his feet.

Jamie blinked, brought up short by the assault. Shading his eyes against the dazzle from the window, he peered down into the shadows.

“Oh, hallo there, wee dog,” he said politely, and took a step forward, knuckles stretched out. Bouton raised the growl a few decibels, and he took a step back.

“Oh, like that, is it?” Jamie said. He eyed the dog narrowly.

“Think it over, laddie,” he advised, squinting down his long, straight nose. “I’m a damn sight bigger than you. I wouldna undertake any rash ventures, if I were you.”

Bouton shifted his ground slightly, still making a noise like a distant Fokker.

“Faster, too,” said Jamie, making a feint to one side. Bouton’s teeth snapped together a few inches from Jamie’s calf, and he stepped back hastily. Leaning back against the wall, he folded his arms and nodded down at the dog.

“Well, you’ve a point there, I’ll admit. When it comes to teeth, ye’ve the edge on me, and no mistake.” Bouton cocked an ear suspiciously at this gracious speech, but went back to the low-pitched growl.

Jamie hooked one foot over the other, like one prepared to pass the time of day indefinitely. The multicolored light from the window washed his face with blue, making him look like one of the chilly marble statues in the cathedral next door.

“Surely you’ve better things to do than harry innocent visitors?” he asked, conversationally. “I’ve heard of you—you’re the famous fellow that sniffs out sickness, no? Weel, then, why are they wastin’ ye on silly things like door-guarding, when ye might be makin’ yourself useful smelling gouty toes and pustulant arseholes? Answer me that, if ye will!”

A sharp bark in response to his uncrossing his feet was the only answer.

There was a stir of robes behind me as Mother Hildegarde entered from the inner office.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing me peering round the corner. "Have we visitors?"

"Bouton seems to be having a difference of opinion with my husband," I said.

"I don't have to put up wi' this, ye ken," Jamie was threatening. One hand was stealing toward the brooch that held his plaid at the shoulder. "One quick spring wi' my plaid, and I'll have ye trussed like a—oh, *bonjour*, Madame!" he said, changing swiftly to French at sight of Mother Hildegarde.

"*Bonjour*, Monsieur Fraser." She inclined her veil gracefully, more to hide the broad smile on her face than in greeting, I thought. "I see you have made the acquaintance of Bouton. Are you perhaps in search of your wife?"

This seeming to be my cue, I sidled out of the office behind her. My devoted spouse glanced from Bouton to the office door, plainly drawing conclusions.

"And just how long have ye been standin' there, Sassenach?" he asked dryly.

"Long enough," I said, with the smug self-assurance of one in Bouton's good books. "What would you have done with him, once you'd got him wrapped up in your plaid?"

"Thrown him out the window and run like hell," he answered, with a brief glance of awe at Mother Hildegarde's imposing form. "Does she by chance speak English?"

"No, luckily for you," I answered. I switched to French for the introductions. *"Ma mère, je vous présente mon mari, le seigneur de Broch Tuarach."*

"Milord." Mother Hildegarde had by now mastered her sense of humor, and greeted him with her usual expression of formidable geniality. "We shall miss your wife, but if you require her, of course—"

"I didn't come for my wife," Jamie interrupted. "I came to see you, *ma mère*."

Seated in Mother Hildegarde's office, Jamie laid the bundle of papers he carried on the shining wood of her desk. Bouton, keeping a wary eye on the intruder, lay down at his mistress's feet. He laid his nose upon his feet, but kept his ears cocked, lip raised over one eyetooth in case he should be called upon to rend the visitor limb from limb.

Jamie narrowed his eyes at Bouton, pointedly pulling his feet away from the twitching black nose. "Herr Gerstmann recommended that I consult you, Mother, about these documents," he said, unrolling the thick sheaf and flattening it beneath his palms.

Mother Hildegarde regarded Jamie for a moment, one heavy brow raised quizzically. Then she turned her attention to the sheaf of papers, with that administrator's trick of seeming to focus entirely on the matter at hand, while still keeping her sensitive antennae tuned to catch the faintest vibration of emergency from the far-off reaches of the Hôpital.

"Yes?" she said. One blunt finger ran lightly over the lines of scribbled music, one by one, as though she heard the notes by touching them. A flick of the finger, and the sheet slid aside, half-exposing the next.

"What is it that you wish to know, Monsieur Fraser?" she asked.

"I don't know, Mother." Jamie was leaning forward, intent. He touched the black lines himself, dabbing gently at the smear where the writer's hand had carelessly brushed the staves before the ink had dried.

"There is something odd about this music, Mother."

The nun's wide mouth moved slightly in what might have been a smile.

"Really, Monsieur Fraser? And yet I understand—you will not be offended, I trust—that to you, music is … a lock to which you have no key?"

Jamie laughed, and a sister passing in the hallways turned, startled by such a sound in the confines of the Hôpital. It was a noisy place, but laughter was unusual.

"That is a very tactful description of my disability, Mother. And altogether true. Were you to sing one of these pieces"—his finger, longer and more slender, but nearly the same size as Mother Hildegarde's, tapped the parchment with a soft rustling noise—"I could not tell it from the Kyrie Eleison or from 'La Dame fait bien'—except by the words," he added, with a grin.

Now it was Mother Hildegarde's turn to laugh.

"Indeed, Monsieur Fraser," she said. "Well, at least you listen to the words!" She took the sheaf of papers into her hands, riffling the tops. I could see the faint swelling of her throat above the tight band of her wimple as she read, as though she was singing silently to herself, and one large foot twitched slightly, keeping time.

Jamie sat very still upon his stool, good hand folded over the crooked one on his knee, watching her. The slanted blue eyes were intent, and he paid no attention to the ongoing noise from the depths of the Hôpital behind him. Patients cried out, orderlies and nuns shouted back and forth, family members shrieked in sorrow or dismay, and the muted clang of metal instruments echoed off the ancient stones of the building, but neither Jamie nor Mother Hildegarde moved.

At last she lowered the pages, peering at him over the tops. Her eyes were sparkling, and she looked suddenly like a young girl.

"I think you are right!" she said. "I cannot take time to think it over carefully just now"—she glanced toward the doorway, momentarily darkened by the form of an orderly dashing past with a large sack of lint—"but there is something odd here." She tapped the pages on the desk, straightening them into an orderly stack.

"How extraordinary," she said.

"Be that as it may, Mother—can you, with your gift, discern what this particular pattern is? It would be difficult; I have reason to suppose that it is a cipher, and that the language of the message is English, though the text of the songs is in German."

Mother Hildegarde uttered a small grunt of surprise.

"English? You are sure?"

Jamie shook his head. "Not sure, no, but I think so. For one reason, there is the country of origin; the songs were sent from

England.”

“Well, Monsieur,” she said, arching one eyebrow. “Your wife speaks English, does she not? And I imagine that you would be willing to sacrifice her company to assist me in performing this endeavor for you?”

Jamie eyed her, the half-smile on his face the mirror image of hers. He glanced down at his feet, where Bouton’s whiskers quivered with the ghost of a growl.

“I’ll make ye a bargain, Mother,” he said. “If your wee dog doesna bite me in the arse on the way out, you can have my wife.”

* * *

And so, that evening, instead of returning home to Jared’s house in the Rue Tremoulins, I took supper with the sisters of the Couvent des Anges at their long refectory table, and then retired for the evening’s work to Mother Hildegarde’s private rooms.

There were three rooms in the Superior’s suite. The outer one was furnished as a sitting room, with a fair degree of richness. This, after all, was where she must often receive official visitors. The second room was something of a shock, simply because I wasn’t expecting it. At first, I had the impression that there was nothing in the small room but a large harpsichord, made of gleaming, polished walnut, and decorated with small, hand-painted flowers sprouting from a twisting vine that ran along the sounding board above glowing ebony keys.

On second look, I saw a few other bits of furniture in the room, including a set of bookshelves that ran the length of one wall, stuffed with works on musicology and hand-stitched manuscripts much like the one Mother Hildegarde now laid on the harpsichord’s rack.

She motioned me to a chair placed before a small secretary against one wall.

“You will find blank paper and ink there, milady. Now, let us see what this little piece of music may tell us.”

The music was written on heavy parchment, the lines of the staves cleanly ruled across the page. The notes themselves, the clef signs, rests, and accidentals, were all drawn with considerable care; this was plainly a final clean copy, not a draft or a hastily scribbled tune. Across the top of the page was the title “Lied des Landes.” A Song of the Country.

“The title, you see, suggests something simple, like a *volkslied*,” Mother Hildegarde said, pointing one long, bony forefinger at the page. “And yet the form of the composition is something quite different. Can you read music at sight?” The big right hand, large-knuckled and short-nailed, descended on the keys with an impossibly delicate touch.

Leaning over Mother Hildegarde’s black-clad shoulder, I sang the first three lines of the piece, making the best I could of the German pronunciation. Then she stopped playing, and twisted to look up at me.

“That is the basic melody. It then repeats itself in variations—but *such* variations! You know, I have seen some things reminiscent of this. By a little old German named Bach; he sends me things now and again—” She waved carelessly at the shelf of manuscripts. “He calls them ‘Inventions,’ and they’re really quite clever; playing off the variations in two or three melodic lines simultaneously. *This*”—she pursed her lips at the ‘Lied’ before us—“is like a clumsy imitation of one of his things. In fact, I would swear that….” Muttering to herself, she pushed back the walnut bench and went to the shelf, running a finger rapidly down the rows of manuscripts.

She found what she was looking for, and returned to the bench with three bound pieces of music.

“Here are the Bach pieces. They’re fairly old, I haven’t looked at them in several years. Still, I’m almost sure …” She lapsed into silence, flipping quickly through the pages of the Bach scripts on her knee, one at a time, glancing back now and then at the “Lied” on the rack.

“Ha!” she let out a cry of triumph, and held out one of the Bach pieces to me. “See there?”

The paper was titled “Goldberg Variations,” in a crabbed, smeared hand. I touched the paper with some awe, swallowed hard, and looked back at the "Lied." It took only a moment's comparison to see what she meant.

"You're right, it's the same!" I said. "A note different here and there, but basically it's exactly the same as the original theme of the Bach piece. How very peculiar!"

"Isn't it?" she said, in tones of deep satisfaction. "Now, why is this anonymous composer stealing melodies and treating them in such an odd fashion?"

This was clearly a rhetorical question, and I didn't bother with an answer, but asked one of my own.

"Is Bach's music much in vogue these days, Mother?" I certainly hadn't heard any at the musical salons I attended.

"No," she said, shaking her head as she peered at the music. "Herr Bach is not well known in France; I believe he had some small popularity in Germany and in Austria fifteen or twenty years ago, but even there his music is not performed much publicly. I am afraid his music is not the sort to endure; clever, but no heart. Hmph. Now, see here?" The blunt forefinger tapped here, and here, and here, turning pages rapidly.

"He has repeated the same melody—almost—but changed the key each time. I think this is perhaps what attracted your husband's notice; it is obvious even to someone who doesn't read music, because of the changing signatures—the *note tonique*."

It was; each key change was marked by a double vertical line followed by a new treble clef sign and the signature of sharps or flats.

"Five key changes in such a short piece," she said, tapping the last one again for emphasis. "And changes that make no sense at all, in terms of music. Look, the basic line is precisely the same, yet we move from the key of two flats, which is B-flat major, to A-major, with three sharps. Stranger yet, now he goes to a signature of two sharps, and yet he uses the G-sharp accidental!"

"How very peculiar," I said. Adding a G-sharp accidental to the section in D-major had the effect of making the musical line identical with the A-major section. In other words, there was no reason whatsoever to have changed the key signature.

“I don’t know German,” I said. “Can you read the words, Mother?”

She nodded, the folds of her black veil rustling with the movement, small eyes intent on the manuscript.

“What truly execrable lyrics!” she murmured to herself. “Not that one expects great poetry from Germans in general, but really … still—” She broke off with a shake of her veil. “We must assume that if your husband is correct in assuming this to be a cipher of some sort, that the message lies embedded in these words. They may therefore not be of great import in themselves.”

“What does it say?” I asked.

“ ‘My shepherdess frolics with her lambs among the verdant hills,’ ” she read. “Horrible grammar, though of course liberties are often taken in writing songs, if the lyricist insists upon the lines rhyming, which they nearly always do if it is a love song.”

“You know a lot about love songs?” I asked curiously. Full of surprises tonight, was Mother Hildegarde.

“Any piece of good music is in essence a love song,” she replied matter-of-factly. “But as for what you mean—yes, I have seen a great many. When I was a young girl”—she flashed her large white teeth in a smile, acknowledging the difficulty of imagining her as a child—“I was something of a prodigy, you understand. I could play from memory anything I heard, and I wrote my first composition at the age of seven.” She gestured at the harpsichord, the rich veneer shining with polish.

“My family has wealth; had I been a man, no doubt I would have been a musician.” She spoke simply, with no trace of regret.

“Surely you could still have composed music, if you’d married?” I asked curiously.

Mother Hildegarde spread her hands, grotesque in the lamplight. I had seen those hands wrench loose a dagger embedded in bone, guide a displaced joint back into alignment, cup the blood-smeared head of a child emerging from between its mother’s thighs. And I had seen those fingers linger on the ebony keys with the delicacy of moths’ feet.

“Well,” she said, after a moment’s contemplation, “it is the fault of St. Anselm.”

“It is?”

She grinned at my expression, her ugly face quite transformed from its stern public facade.

“Oh, yes. My godfather—the Old Sun King,” she added casually, “gave to me a book of the Lives of the Saints for my own Saint’s Day when I was eight. It was a beautiful book,” she said reminiscently, “with gilded pages and a jeweled cover; intended more as a work of art than a work of literature. Still, I read it. And while I enjoyed all of the stories—particularly those of the martyrs—still there was one phrase in the story of St. Anselm that seemed to strike a response in my soul.”

She closed her eyes and tilted back her head, recalling.

“St. Anselm was a man of great wisdom and great learning, a Doctor of the Church. But also a bishop, a man who cared for the people of his flock, and looked after their temporal needs as well as those of the spirit. The story detailed all of his works, and then concluded in these words—‘And so he died, at the conclusion of an eminently useful life, and thus obtained his crown in Paradise.’ ” She paused, flexing her hands lightly on her knees.

“There was something about that that appealed most strongly to me. ‘An eminently useful life.’ ” She smiled at me. “I could think of many worse epitaphs than that, milady.” She spread her hands suddenly and shrugged, an oddly graceful gesture.

“I wished to be useful,” she said. Then, dismissing idle conversation, she turned abruptly back to the music on the rack.

“So,” she said. “Plainly the change in the key signatures—the *note tonique*—that is the oddity. Where can we go with that?”

My mouth dropped open with a small exclamation. Speaking in French as we had been, I hadn’t noticed before. But observing Mother Hildegarde as she told her story, I had been thinking in English, and when I glanced back at the music it hit me.

“What is it?” the nun asked. “You have thought of something?”

“The key!” I said, half-laughing. “In French, a musical key is the *note tonique*, but the word for an object that unlocks …” I pointed to the large bunch of keys—normally carried on her girdle—that Mother Hildegarde had laid aside on the bookshelf when we came in. “That is a *passe-partout*, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” she said, watching me in puzzlement. She touched the skeleton key in turn. “*Une passe-partout.* That one,” she said, pointing to a key with barrel and wards, “is more likely called a *clef*.”

“A clef!” I exclaimed joyously. “Perfect!” I stabbed a finger at the sheet of music before us. “See, *ma mère,* in English, the words are the same. A ‘key’ gives the basis of a piece of music, and a ‘key’ unlocks. In French, the *clef* is a key, and in English, the ‘clef’ is also part of the musical signature. And the key of the music is also the key to the cipher. Jamie *said* he thought it was an English cipher! Made by an Englishman with a really diabolical sense of humor, too,” I added.

With that small insight, the cipher proved not too difficult to unravel. If the maker was English, the ciphered message likely was in English, too, which meant that the German words were provided only as a source of letters. And having seen Jamie’s earlier efforts with alphabets and shifting letters, it took only a few tries to determine the pattern of the cipher.

“Two flats means you must take every second letter, starting from the beginning of the section,” I said, frantically scribbling down the results. “And three sharps means to take every third letter, beginning at the end of the section. I suppose he used German both for concealment and because it’s so bloody wordy; it takes nearly twice as many words to say the same thing as it would in English.”

“You have got ink on your nose,” Mother Hildegarde observed. She peered over my shoulder. “Does it make sense?”

“Yes,” I said, my mouth gone suddenly dry. “Yes, it makes sense.”

Deciphered, the message was brief and simple. Also deeply disturbing.

“His Majesty’s loyal subjects of England await his lawful restoration. The sum of fifty thousand pounds is at your disposal. As an earnest of good faith, this will be paid only in person, upon His Highness’s arrival on the soil of England,” I read. “And there’s a letter left over, an 'S.' I don't know if that's a signature of sorts, or only something the maker needed to make the German word come out right."

"Hmph." Mother Hildegarde glanced curiously at the scribbled message, then at me. "You will know already, of course," she said, with a nod, "but you may assure your husband that I will keep this in confidence."

"He wouldn't have asked your help if he didn't trust you," I protested.

The sketchy brows rose to the edge of her wimple, and she tapped the scribbled paper firmly.

"If this is the sort of endeavor in which your husband engages, he takes considerable risk in trusting anyone. Assure him that I am sensible of the honor," she added dryly.

"I'll do that," I said, smiling.

"Why, *chère Madame*," she said, catching sight of me, "you are looking quite pale! I myself often stay awake far into the night when I am working on a new piece, so I tend to pay little attention to the hour, but it must be late for you." She glanced at the hour-candle burning on the little table near the door.

"Gracious! It *is* growing late. Shall I summon Sister Madeleine to take you to your chamber?" Jamie had agreed, reluctantly, with Mother Hildegarde's suggestion that I spend the night at the Couvent des Anges, so that I need not return home through the dark streets late at night.

I shook my head. I was tired, and my back ached from sitting on the stool, but I didn't want to go to bed. The implications of the musical message were too disturbing to permit me to sleep right away, in any case.

"Well, then, let us take a little refreshment, in celebration of your accomplishment." Mother Hildegarde rose and went to the outer room, where I heard the ringing of a bell. Shortly one of the serving sisters came, bearing a tray of hot milk and small, iced cakes, and followed by Bouton. The serving sister placed a cake on a small china plate and set it on the floor before him as a matter of course, laying beside it a bowl of milk.

While I sipped my own hot milk, Mother Hildegarde set aside the source of our labors, laying it on the secretary, and instead placed a loose sheaf of music manuscript on the rack of the harpsichord.

"I shall play for you," she announced. "It will help to compose your mind for sleep."

The music was light and soothing, with a singing melody that wove back and forth from treble voice to bass in a pattern of pleasing complexity, but without the driving force of Bach.

"Is that yours?" I asked, choosing a pause as she lifted her hands at the conclusion of the piece.

She shook her head without turning around.

"No. A friend of mine, Jean Philippe Rameau. A good theorist, but he does not write with great passion."

I must have dozed, the music lulling my senses, for I woke suddenly to the murmur of Sister Madeleine's voice in my ear, and her warm, firm grip under my arm, lifting me to my feet and leading me away.

Looking back, I could see the broad span of Mother Hildegarde's black-swathed back, and the flex of powerful shoulders beneath the drape of her veil as she played, oblivious now to the world beyond the sanctum of her chamber. On the boards near her feet lay Bouton, nose on his paws, small body laid straight as the needle of a compass.

"So," Jamie said, "it's gone a little further than talk—maybe."

"Maybe?" I echoed. "An offer of fifty thousand pounds sounds fairly definite." Fifty thousand pounds, by current standards, was the yearly income of a good-sized duchy.

He raised one eyebrow cynically at the musical manuscript I had brought back with me from the convent.

"Aye, well. An offer like that is fairly safe, if it's contingent on either Charles or James setting foot in England. If Charles is in England, it means he's gotten sufficient backing from other places to get him to Scotland, first. No," he said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "what's interesting about this offer is that it's the first definite sign we've seen that the Stuarts—or one of them, at least—are actually making an effort at mounting a restoration attempt."

"One of them?" I caught the emphasis. "You mean you think James isn't in on this?" I looked at the coded message with even more interest.

"The message came to Charles," Jamie reminded me, "and it came from England—not through Rome. Fergus got it from a regular messenger, in a packet marked with English seals; not from a papal messenger. And everything I've seen in James's letters—" He shook his head, frowning. He hadn't yet shaved, and the morning light caught random sparks of copper among the auburn stubble of his beard.

"The packet had been opened; Charles has seen this manuscript. There was no date on it, so I dinna ken how long ago it came to him. And of course, we don't have the letters Charles has sent to his father. But there's no reference in any of James's letters to anyone who could possibly be the composer, let alone to any definite promises of support from England."

I could see the direction in which he was heading.

"And Louise de La Tour was babbling about how Charles meant to have her marriage annulled and claim her as his wife, once he was king. So you think perhaps Charles wasn't just talking through his hat to impress her?"

"Maybe not," he said. He poured water from the bedroom ewer into the basin and laved his face with water, preparatory to shaving.

"So it's possible that Charles is acting on his own?" I said, horrified and intrigued by the possibility. "That James has set him up for a masquerade of pretending to start a restoration attempt, in order to keep Louis impressed with the Stuarts' potential value, but—"

"But Charles isn't pretending?" Jamie interrupted. "Aye, that's how it seems. Is there a towel there, Sassenach?" Eyes screwed shut and face dripping, he was patting about on the surface of the table. I moved the manuscript to safety and found the towel, draped over the foot of the bed.

He examined his razor critically, decided it would do, and leaned over my dressing table to look in the mirror as he applied shaving soap to his cheeks.

“Why is it barbaric of me to take the hair off my legs and armpits, and it isn’t barbaric for you to take it off your face?” I asked, watching him draw his upper lip down over his teeth as he scraped under his nose with tiny, delicate strokes.

“It is,” he replied, squinting at himself in the mirror. “But it itches like a fiend if I don’t.”

“Have you ever grown a beard?” I asked curiously.

“Not on purpose,” he replied, half-smiling as he scraped one cheek, “but I’ve had one now and then when I couldna help it—when I lived as an outlaw in Scotland. When it came to a choice between shaving in a cold burn with a dull razor every morning or itching, I chose to itch.”

I laughed, watching him draw the razor along the edge of his jawbone with one long sweep.

“I can’t imagine what you’d look like with a full beard. I’ve only seen you in the stubbly stage.”

He smiled on one side of his mouth, drawing the other up as he scraped under the high, broad cheekbone on that side.

“Next time we’re invited to Versailles, Sassenach, I’ll ask if we may visit the Royal zoo. Louis has a creature there that one of his sea-captains brought him from Borneo, called an orang-utan. Ever seen one?”

“Yes,” I said, “the zoo in London had a pair before the war.”

“Then you’ll know what I look like in a beard,” he said, smiling at me as he finished his shave with a careful negotiation of the curve of his chin. “Scraggly and moth-eaten. Rather like the Vicomte Marigny,” he added, “only red.”

As though the name had reminded him, he returned to the main topic of discussion, wiping the remains of soap off his face with the linen towel.

“So I suppose what we must do now, Sassenach,” he said, “is to keep a sharp eye out for Englishmen in Paris.” He picked up the manuscript off the bed and riffled the pages thoughtfully. “If anyone is actually willing to contemplate support on this scale, I think they might be sending an envoy to Charles. If I were risking fifty thousand pounds, I might like to see what I was getting for my money, wouldn’t you?”

“Yes, I would,” I answered. “And speaking of Englishmen—does His Highness patriotically buy his brandywine from you and Jared, or does he by chance patronize the services of Mr. Silas Hawkins?”

“Mr. Silas Hawkins, who is so eager to know what the political climate is like in the Scottish Highlands?” Jamie shook his head at me admiringly. “And here I thought I married you because ye had a fair face and a fine fat arse. To think you’ve a brain as well!” He neatly dodged the blow I aimed at his ear, and grinned at me.

“I don’t know, Sassenach, but I will before the day is out.”

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16

THE NATURE OF SULFUR

Prince Charles *did* purchase his brandywine from Mr. Hawkins. Beyond that discovery, though, we made little progress over the course of the next four weeks. Things continued much as before. Louis of France continued to ignore Charles Stuart. Jamie continued to run the wine business and to visit Prince Charles. Fergus continued to steal letters. Louise, Princesse de Rohan, appeared in public on the arm of her husband, looking doleful, but blooming. I continued to throw up in the mornings, work at the Hôpital in the afternoons, and smile graciously over the supper table in the evenings.

Two things happened, though, that looked like being progress toward our goal. Charles, bored at confinement, began to invite Jamie to go to taverns with him in the evenings—often without the restraining and discretionary presence of his tutor, Mr. Sheridan, who professed himself much too old for such revels.

“God, the man drinks like a fish!” Jamie had exclaimed, returning from one of these jaunts reeking of cheap wine. He examined a large stain on the front of his shirt critically.

“I’ll have to order a new shirt,” he said.

“Worth it,” I said, “if he tells you anything while he’s drinking. What does he talk about?”

“Hunting and women,” Jamie said succinctly, and declined firmly to elaborate further. Either politics did not weigh as heavily on Charles’s mind as did Louise de La Tour, or else he was capable of discretion, even in the absence of his tutor Mr. Sheridan.

The second thing that happened was that Monsieur Duverney, the Minister of Finance, lost at chess to Jamie. Not once, but repeatedly. As Jamie had foreseen, the effect of losing was merely to make Monsieur Duverney more determined to win, and we were invited frequently to Versailles, where I circulated, collecting gossip and avoiding alcoves, and Jamie played chess, generally collecting an admiring crowd to watch, though I didn't myself consider it much of a spectator sport.

Jamie and the Minister of Finance, a small, round man with stooped shoulders, were bent over the chessboard, both apparently so intent on the game as to be oblivious to their surroundings, despite the murmur of voices and the clink of glasses just beyond their shoulders.

"I have seldom seen anything so wearisome as chess," murmured one of the ladies to another. "Amusement, they call it! I should be more amused watching my maid pick fleas off the black pageboys. At least they squeal and giggle a bit."

"I shouldn't mind making the red-haired lad squeal and giggle a bit," said her companion, smiling charmingly at Jamie, who had lifted his head and was gazing absently past Monsieur Duverney. Her companion caught sight of me, and dug the lady, a luscious blonde, in the ribs.

I smiled pleasantly at her, rather nastily enjoying the deep flush that rose from her low neckline, leaving her complexion in rosy blotches. As for Jamie, she could have twined her plump fingers in his hair for all the notice he would have paid, so abstracted did he seem.

I wondered just what was occupying his concentration. Surely it wasn't the game; Monsieur Duverney played a dogged game of cautious positioning, but used the same gambits repeatedly. The middle two fingers of Jamie's right hand moved slightly against his thigh, a brief flutter of quickly masked impatience, and I knew that whatever he was thinking of, it wasn't the game. It might take another half-hour, but he held Monsieur Duverney's king in the palm of his hand.

The Duc de Neve was standing next to me. I saw his dark little eyes fix on Jamie's fingers, then flick away. He paused meditatively for a moment, surveying the board, then glided away to increase his wager.

A footman paused by my shoulder and dipped obsequiously, offering me yet another glass of wine. I waved him away; I had had enough during the evening that my head was feeling light and my feet dangerously far away.

Turning to look for a place to sit down, I caught sight of the Comte St. Germain across the room. Perhaps he was what Jamie had been looking at. The Comte in turn was looking at me; staring at me, in fact, with a smile on his face. It wasn't his normal expression, and it didn't suit him. I didn't care for it at all, in fact, but bowed as graciously as I could in his direction, and then pushed off into the throng of ladies, chatting of this and that, but trying wherever possible to lead the conversation in the direction of Scotland and its exiled king.

By and large, the prospects for a Stuart restoration did not seem to be preoccupying the aristocracy of France. When I mentioned Charles Stuart now and then, the usual response was a rolling of the eyes or a shrug of dismissal. Despite the good offices of the Earl of Mar and the other Paris Jacobites, Louis was stubbornly refusing to receive Charles at Court. And a penniless exile who was not in the King's favor was not going to find himself invited out in society to make the acquaintance of wealthy bankers.

"The King is not particularly pleased that his cousin should have arrived in France without seeking his permission," the Comtesse de Brabant told me when I had introduced the topic. "He has been heard to say that England can stay Protestant, so far as he himself is concerned," she confided. "And if the English burn in hell with George of Hanover, so much the better." She pursed her lips in sympathy; she was a kindly sort. "I am sorry," she said. "I know that must be disappointing to you and your husband, but really …" She shrugged.

I thought we might be able to accommodate this sort of disappointment, and scouted eagerly for further bits of gossip along these lines, but met with little success this evening. Jacobites, I was given to understand, were a bore.

"Rook to queen's pawn five," Jamie mumbled later that evening as we prepared for bed. We were staying as guests in the palace once more. As the chess game had lasted well past midnight, and the Minister would not hear of our undertaking the journey back to Paris at such an hour, we had been accommodated in a small *appartement*—this one a notch or two above the first, I noted. It had a featherbed, and a window overlooking the south parterre.

"Rooks, eh?" I said, sliding into the bed and stretching out with a groan. "Are you going to dream about chess tonight?"

Jamie nodded, with a jaw-cracking yawn that made his eyes water.

"Aye, I'm sure I will. I hope it willna disturb ye, Sassenach, if I castle in my sleep."

My feet curled in the sheer joy of being unfettered and relieved of my increasing weight, and my lower spine sent out sharp jolts of a mildly pleasant pain as it readjusted to lying down.

"You can stand on your head in your sleep if you want," I said, yawning myself. "Nothing will bother me tonight."

I have seldom been more wrong.

I was dreaming of the baby. Grown almost to the birthing, it kicked and heaved in my swollen belly. My hands went to the mound, massaging the stretched skin, trying to quiet the turmoil within. But the squirming went on, and in the unexcited fashion of dreams, I realized that it was not a baby, but a snake that writhed in my belly. I doubled, drawing up my knees as I wrestled the serpent, my hands groping and pummeling, searching for the head of the beast that darted and thrust under my skin. My skin was hot to the touch, and my intestines coiled, turning into snakes themselves, biting and thrashing as they twined together.

"Claire! Wake up, lass! What's amiss?" The shaking and calling roused me at last to a fuzzy apprehension of my surroundings. I was in bed, and it was Jamie's hand on my shoulder, and the linen sheets over me. But the snakes continued to writhe in my belly, and

I moaned loudly, the sound alarming me almost as much as it did Jamie.

He flung back the sheets and rolled me onto my back, trying to push my knees down. I stayed stubbornly rolled into a ball, clutching my stomach, trying to contain the pangs of sharp agony that stabbed through me.

He yanked the quilt back over me and rushed out of the room, barely pausing to snatch his kilt from the stool.

I had little attention to spare for anything other than my inner turmoil. My ears were ringing, and a cold sweat soaked my face.

“Madame? Madame!”

I opened my eyes enough to see the maid assigned to our *appartement,* eyes frantic and hair awry, bending over the bed. Jamie, half-naked and still more frantic, was behind her. I shut my eyes, groaning, but not before I saw him grab the maid by the shoulder, hard enough to shake her curls loose from her nightcap.

“Is she losing the child? Is she?”

It seemed extremely likely. I twisted on the bed, grunting, and doubled tighter, as though to protect the burden of pain I contained.

There was an increasing babble of voices in the room, mostly female, and a number of hands poked and prodded at me. I heard a male voice speaking amid the babble; not Jamie, someone French. At the voice’s direction, a number of hands fastened themselves to my ankles and shoulders and stretched me flat upon the bed.

A hand reached under my nightdress and probed my belly. I opened my eyes, panting, and saw Monsieur Flèche, the Royal Physician, kneeling by the bed as he frowned in concentration. I should have felt flattered at this evidence of the King’s favor, but had little attention to spare for it. The character of the pain seemed to be changing; while it grew stronger in spasms, it was more or less constant, and yet it seemed to be almost *moving,* traveling from somewhere high up in my abdomen to a lower spot.

“Not a miscarriage,” Monsieur Flèche was assuring Jamie, who hovered anxiously over his shoulder. “There is no bleeding.” I saw one of the attending ladies staring in rapt horror at the scars on his back. She grasped a companion by the sleeve, calling her attention to them.

"Perhaps an inflammation of the gallbladder," Monsieur Flèche was saying. "Or a sudden chill of the liver."

"Idiot," I said through clenched teeth.

Monsieur Flèche stared haughtily down his rather large nose at me, belatedly adding his gold-rimmed pince-nez to increase the effect. He laid a hand upon my clammy brow, incidentally covering my eyes so that I could no longer glare at him.

"Most likely the liver," he was saying to Jamie. "Impaction of the gallbladder causes this accumulation of bilious humors in the blood, which cause pain—and temporary derangement," he added authoritatively, pressing down harder as I thrashed to and fro. "She should be bled at once. Plato, the basin!"

I yanked one hand free and batted the restraining hand off my head.

"Get away from me, you bloody quack! Jamie! Don't let them touch me with that!" Plato, Monsieur Flèche's assistant, was advancing upon me with lancet and basin, while the ladies in the background gasped and fanned each other, lest they be overcome with excitement at this drama.

Jamie, white-faced, glanced helplessly between me and Monsieur Flèche. Coming to a sudden decision, he grabbed the hapless Plato and pulled him back from the bed, turned him and propelled him toward the door, lancet stabbing the air. The maids and ladies fell back shrieking before him.

"Monsieur! Monsieur *le chevalier*!" The physician was expostulating. He had clapped his wig professionally upon his head when called, but had not taken time to dress, and the sleeves of his bedgown flapped like wings as he followed Jamie across the room, waving his arms like a demented scarecrow.

The pain increased once more, a vise squeezing my insides, and I gasped and doubled up once more. As it eased a bit, I opened my eyes and saw one of the ladies, her eyes fixed alertly on my face. A look of dawning realization passed over her features, and still looking at me, she leaned over to whisper to one of her companions.

There was too much noise in the room to hear, but I read her lips clearly.

"Poison," she said.

The pain shifted abruptly lower with an ominous interior gurgle, and I realized finally what it was. Not a miscarriage. Not appendicitis, still less a chilled liver. Nor was it poison, precisely. It was bitter cascara.

* * *

"You," I said, advancing menacingly on Master Raymond, crouched defensively behind his worktable, beneath the protective aegis of his stuffed crocodile. "You! You bloody frog-faced little worm!"

"Me, madonna? I have done you no harm, have I?"

"Aside from causing me to have violent diarrhea in the presence of thirty-odd people, making me think I was having a miscarriage, and scaring my husband out of his skin, no harm at all!"

"Oh, your husband was present?" Master Raymond looked uneasy.

"He was," I assured him. It was in fact with considerable difficulty that I had succeeded in preventing Jamie from coming up to the apothecary's shop and extracting, by force, such information as Master Raymond possessed. I had finally persuaded him to wait with the coach outside, while I talked to the amphibious proprietor.

"But you aren't dead, madonna," the little herbalist pointed out. He had no brows to speak of, but one side of his wide, heavy forehead crinkled upward. "You could have been, you know."

In the stress of the evening and the physical shakiness that followed, I had rather overlooked this fact.

"So it wasn't just a practical joke?" I said, a little weakly. "Someone really meant to poison me, and I'm not dead only because you have scruples?"

"Perhaps my scruples are not entirely responsible for your survival, madonna; it is possible that it was a joke—I imagine there are other purveyors from whom one might obtain bitter cascara. But I have sold that substance to two persons within the last month—and neither of them asked for it."

"I see." I drew a long breath, and wiped the perspiration from my brow with my glove. So we had *two* potential poisoners loose; just what I needed.

"Will you tell me who?" I asked bluntly. "They might buy from someone else, next time. Someone without your scruples."

He nodded, his wide, froggy mouth twitching in thought.

"It is a possibility, madonna. As for the actual purchasers, I doubt that information would help you. They were servants; plainly acting on the orders of a master. One was maid to the Vicomtesse de Rambeau; the other a man I did not recognize."

I drummed my fingers on the counter. The only person who had made threats against me was the Comte St. Germain. Could he have hired an anonymous servant to procure what he thought was poison, and then slipped it into my glass himself? Casting my mind back to the gathering at Versailles, I thought it certainly possible. The goblets of wine had been passed around on trays by servants; while the Comte had not come within arm's length of me himself, it would have been no great problem to bribe a servant to give me a particular glass.

Raymond was eyeing me curiously. "I would ask you, madonna, have you done something to antagonize la Vicomtesse? She is a very jealous woman; this would not be the first time she has sought my aid in disposing of a rival, though fortunately her jealousies are short-lived. The Vicomte has a roving eye, you understand—there is always a new rival to displace her thoughts of the last one."

I sat down, uninvited.

"Rambeau?" I said, trying to attach the name to a face. Then the mists of memory cleared, revealing a stylishly dressed body and a homely round face, both liberally splashed with snuff.

"Rambeau!" I exclaimed. "Well, yes, I've met the man, but all I did was to smack him across the face with my fan when he bit my toes."

"In some moods, that would be sufficient provocation for la Vicomtesse," Master Raymond observed. "And if so, then I believe you are likely safe from further attacks."

"Thanks," I said dryly. "And if it wasn't the Vicomtesse?"

The little apothecary hesitated for a moment, his eyes narrowed against the glare of the morning sun that shone through the lozenged panes behind me. Then he made up his mind, and turned toward the stone table where his alembics simmered, jerking his head at me to follow.

"Come with me, madonna. I have something for you."

To my surprise, he ducked beneath the table and disappeared. As he didn't come back, I bent down and peered under the table myself. A bed of charcoal was glowing on the hearth, but there was space to either side of it. And in the wall beneath the table, concealed by the shadows, was the darker space of an opening.

With only a little hesitation, I kilted up my skirts and waddled under the table after him.

On the other side of the wall, there was room to stand up, though the room was quite small. The building's outer structure gave no hint of it.

Two walls of the hidden room were taken up by a honeycomb of shelves, each cell dustless and immaculate, each displaying the skull of a beast. The impact of the wall was enough to make me take a step backward; all the empty eyes seemed trained on me, teeth bared in gleaming welcome.

I blinked several times before I was able to locate Raymond, crouched cautiously at the foot of this ossuary like the resident acolyte. He held his arms raised nervously before him, eying me rather as though he expected me either to scream or to throw myself upon him. But I had seen sights a good deal more grisly than a mere rank of polished bone, and walked forward calmly to examine them more closely.

He had everything, it seemed. Tiny skulls, of bat, mouse and shrew, the bones transparent, little teeth spiked in pinpoints of carnivorous ferocity. Horses, from the huge Percherons, with massive scimitar-shaped jaws looking eminently suitable for flattening platoons of Philistines, down to the skulls of donkeys, as stubbornly enduring in their miniature curves as those of the enormous draft horses.

They had a certain appeal, so still and so beautiful, as though each object held still the essence of its owner, as if the lines of bone held the ghost of the flesh and fur that once they had borne.

I reached out and touched one of the skulls, the bone not cold as I would have expected, but strangely inert, as though the vanished warmth, long gone, hovered not far off.

I had seen human remains treated with far less reverence; the skulls of early Christian martyrs jammed cheek by bony jowl together in heaps in the catacombs, thigh bones tossed in a pile like jackstraws underneath.

“A bear?” I said, speaking softly. A big skull, this one, the canine teeth curved for ripping, but the molars oddly flattened.

“Yes, madonna.” Seeing that I was not afraid, Raymond relaxed. His hand floated out, barely skimming the curves of the blunt, solid skull. “You see the teeth? An eater of fish, of meat”—a small finger traced the long, wicked curve of the canine, the flat serrations of molar—“but a grinder of berries, of grubs. They seldom starve, because they will eat anything.”

I turned slowly from side to side, admiring, touching one here and there.

“They’re lovely,” I said. We spoke in quiet tones, as though to speak loudly might rouse the silent sleepers.

“Yes.” Raymond’s fingers touched them as mine did, stroking the long frontal bones, tracing the delicate squamosal arch of the cheek. “They hold the character of the animal, you see. You can tell much about what was, only from what is left.”

He turned over one of the smaller skulls, pointing out the swelling bulges on the underside, like small, thin-walled balloons.

“Here—the canal of the ear enters into these, so that the sounds echo within the skull. Hence the sharp ears of the rat, madonna.”

“Tympanic bullae,” I said, nodding.

“Ah? I have but little Latin. My names for such things are … my own.”

“Those …” I gestured upward. “Those are special, aren’t they?”

“Ah. Yes, madonna. They are wolves. Very old wolves.” He lifted down one of the skulls, handling it with reverent care. The snout was long and canid, with heavy canines and broad carnassial teeth. The sagittal crest rose stark and commanding from the back of the skull, testimony to the heavy muscles of the brawny neck that had once supported it.

Not a soft dull white like the other skulls, these were stained and streaked with brown, and shone glossy with much polishing.

“Such beasts are no more, madonna.”

“No more? Extinct, you mean?” I touched it once more, fascinated. “Where on earth did you get them?”

“Not *on* the earth, madonna. Under it. They came from a peat bog, buried many feet down.”

Looking closely, I could see the differences between these skulls and the newer, whiter ones on the opposite wall. These animals had been larger than ordinary wolves, with jaws that might have cracked the leg bones of a running elk or torn the throat from a fallen deer.

I shuddered slightly at the touch, reminded of the wolf I had killed outside Wentworth Prison, and its pack-mates who had stalked me in the icy twilight, barely six months ago.

“You do not care for wolves, madonna?” Raymond asked. “Yet the bears and the foxes do not trouble you? They also are hunters, eaters of flesh.”

“Yes, but not mine,” I said wryly, handing him back the age-dark skull. “I feel a good deal more sympathy with our friend the elk.” I patted the high jutting nose with some affection.

“Sympathy?” The soft black eyes regarded me curiously. “It is an unusual emotion to feel for a bone, madonna.”

“Well … yes,” I said, slightly embarrassed, “but they don’t really seem like just bones, you know. I mean, you can tell something about them, and get a feeling for what the animal was like, looking at these. They aren’t just inanimate objects.”

Raymond’s toothless mouth stretched wide, as though I had inadvertently said something that pleased him, but he said nothing in reply.

“Why do you have all these?” I asked abruptly, suddenly realizing that racks of animal skulls were hardly the usual appurtenances of an apothecary's shop. Stuffed crocodiles, possibly, but not all this lot.

He shrugged good-naturedly.

"Well, they are company, of a sort, while I pursue my work." He gestured toward a cluttered workbench in one corner. "And while they may talk to me of many things, they are not so noisy as to attract the attention of the neighbors. Come here," he said, changing subjects abruptly. "I have something for you."

I followed him toward a tall cabinet at the end of the room, wondering.

He was not a naturalist, certainly not a scientist, as I understood the term. He kept no notes, made no drawings, no records that others might consult and learn from. And yet I had the odd conviction that he wanted very much to teach me the things that he knew—a sympathy for bones, perhaps?

The cabinet was painted with a number of odd signs, tailed and whorled, among what appeared to be pentagons and circles; Cabbalistic symbols. I recognized one or two, from some of Uncle Lamb's historical references.

"Interested in the Cabbala, are you?" I asked, eyeing the symbols with some amusement. That would account for the hidden workroom. While there was a strong interest in occult matters among some of the French literati and the aristocracy, it was an interest kept highly clandestine, for fear of the Church's cleansing wrath.

To my surprise, Raymond laughed. His blunt, short-nailed fingers pressed here and there on the front of the cabinet, touching the center of one symbol, the tail of another.

"Well, no, madonna. Most Cabbalists tend to be rather poor, so I do not seek their company often. But the symbols *do* keep curious people out of my cabinet. Which, if you think of it, is no small power for a bit of paint to exercise. So perhaps the Cabbalists are right, after all, when they say these signs hold power?"

He smiled mischievously at me, as the cabinet door swung open. I could see that it was in fact a double cabinet; if a nosy person ignored the warning of the symbols and merely opened the door, he or she would no doubt see only the harmless contents of an apothecary's closet. But if the proper sequence of hidden catches was pressed, then the inner shelves swung out as well, revealing a deep cavity behind them.

He pulled out one of the small drawers that lined the cavity, and upended it into his hand. Stirring the contents, he plucked out a single large white crystalline stone and handed it to me.

"For you," he said. "For protection."

"What? Magic?" I asked cynically, tilting the crystal from side to side in my palm.

Raymond laughed. He held his hand over the desk and let a handful of small colored stones trickle through his fingers, to bounce on the stained felt blotting-pad.

"I suppose you can call it so, madonna. Certainly I can charge more for it when I do." One fingertip nudged a pale greenish crystal free from the pile of colored stones.

"They have no more—and surely no less—magic than the skulls. Call them the bones of the earth. They hold the essence of the matrix in which they grew, and whatever powers that held, you may find here as well." He flicked a small yellowish nodule in my direction.

"Sulfur. Grind it with a few other small things, touch it with a match, and it will explode. Gunpowder. Is that magic? Or is it only the nature of sulfur?"

"I suppose it depends who you're talking to," I observed, and his face split in a delighted grin.

"If you ever seek to leave your husband, madonna," he said, chuckling, "be assured that you won't starve. I *said* you were a professional, did I not?"

"My husband!" I exclaimed, paling. My mind suddenly made sense of the muffled noises coming from the distant shop. There was a loud thump, as of a large fist brought down with considerable force on a countertop, and the deep rumble of a voice inclined to brook no interference made itself heard amid the babble of other sounds.

"Bloody Christ! I forgot Jamie!"

“Your husband is here?” Raymond’s eyes went wider even than usual, and had he not already been so pale, I imagine he would have gone white, too.

“I left him outside,” I explained, stooping to cross back through the secret opening. “He must have got tired of waiting.”

“Wait, madonna!” Raymond’s hand gripped my elbow, stopping me. He put his other hand over mine, the one that held the white crystal.

“That crystal, madonna. I said it is for your protection.”

“Yes, yes,” I said impatiently, hearing my name being shouted outside with increasing volume. “What does it do, then?”

“It is sensitive to poison, madonna. It will change color, in the presence of several harmful compounds.”

That stopped me. I straightened up and stared at him.

“Poison?” I said, slowly. “Then …”

“Yes, madonna. You may be still in some danger.” Raymond’s froglike face was grim. “I cannot say for sure, or from which direction, for I do not know. If I find out, be assured I will tell you.” His eyes flicked uneasily toward the entrance through the hearth. A thunder of blows sounded on the outer wall. “Assure your husband as well, please, madonna.”

“Don’t worry,” I told him, ducking under the low lintel. “Jamie doesn’t bite—I don’t think.”

“I was not worried about his *teeth,* madonna” came from behind me as I walked duckfooted over the ashes of the hearth.

Jamie, in the act of raising his dagger-hilt to hammer again on the paneling, caught sight of me emerging from the fireplace and lowered it.

“Och, there ye are,” he observed mildly. He tilted his head to one side, watching me brush soot and ashes from the hem of my gown, then scowled at the sight of Raymond peeping cautiously out from under the drying table.

“Ah, and there’s our wee toadling, as well. Has he some explanation, Sassenach, or had I best pin him up wi’ the rest?” Not taking his eyes off Raymond, he nodded toward the wall of the outer workshop, where a number of dried toads and frogs were pinned to a long strip of hanging felt.

"No, no," I said hastily as Raymond made to duck back into his sanctuary. "He's told me everything. In fact, he's been *most* helpful."

With some reluctance, Jamie put up his dirk, and I reached down a hand to draw Raymond out of hiding. He flinched slightly at the sight of Jamie.

"This man is your husband, madonna?" he asked, in the tones of someone hoping the answer would be "no."

"Yes, of course," I answered. "My husband, James Fraser, my lord Broch Tuarach," I said, waving at Jamie, though I could scarcely have been referring to anyone else. I waved in the other direction. "Master Raymond."

"So I gathered," said Jamie dryly. He bowed and extended a hand toward Raymond, whose head reached a few inches past Jamie's waist. Raymond touched the outstretched hand briefly and yanked his own back, unable to repress a mild shiver. I stared at him in amazement.

Jamie merely raised one eyebrow, then leaned back and settled himself against the edge of the table. He crossed his arms across his chest.

"All right, then," he said. "What about it?"

I made most of the explanations, Raymond contributing only monosyllables of confirmation from time to time. The little apothecary seemed deprived of all his normal sly wit, and huddled on a stool near the fire, shoulders hunched in wariness. Only when I had finished with an explanation of the white crystal—and the presumed need for it—did he stir and seem to take on a little life once more.

"It is true, milord," he assured Jamie. "I do not know, in fact, whether it is your wife or yourself that may be in danger, or perhaps the two of you together. I have heard nothing specific; only the name 'Fraser,' spoken in a place where names are seldom named in blessing."

Jamie glanced sharply at him. "Aye? And you frequent such places, do you, Master Raymond? Are the people you speak of associates of yours?"

Raymond smiled, a little wanly. "I should be inclined to describe them more as a business rivals, milord."

Jamie grunted. "Mmmphm. Aye, well, and anyone who tries something may get a bit more of a blessing than he's bargained for." He touched the dirk at his belt, and straightened up.

"Still, I thank ye for the warning, Master Raymond." He bowed to the apothecary, but didn't offer his hand again. "As for the other"—he cocked an eyebrow at me—"if my wife is disposed to forgive your actions, then it isna my place to say more about it. Not," he added, "that I wouldna advise ye to pop back in your wee hole, the next time the Vicomtesse comes into your shop. Come along then, Sassenach."

As we rattled toward the Rue Tremoulins, Jamie was silent, staring out the window of the coach as the stiff fingers of his right hand tapped against his thigh.

"A place where names are seldom named in blessing," he murmured as the coach turned into the Rue Gamboge. "What might that be, I wonder?"

I remembered the Cabbalistic signs on Raymond's cabinet, and a small shiver raised the hairs on my forearms. I remembered Marguerite's gossip about the Comte St. Germain, and Madame de Ramage's warning. I told Jamie about them, and what Raymond had said.

"*He* may regard it as paint and window dressing," I finished, "but plainly he knows people who don't, or who is he looking to keep out of his cabinet?"

Jamie nodded. "Aye. I've heard a bit—only a bit—about such goings-on around the Court. I paid no attention at the time, thinking it only silliness, but now I'll find out a bit more." He laughed, suddenly, and drew me close to his side. "I'll set Murtagh to follow the Comte St. Germain. That'll give the Comte a *real* demon to play with."

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17

POSSESSION

Murtagh was duly set to watch the comings and goings of the Comte St. Germain, but beyond reporting that the Comte entertained a remarkable number of persons in his home—of both sexes and all classes—detected nothing particularly mysterious. The Comte did have one visitor of note, though—Charles Stuart, who came one afternoon, stayed for an hour, and left.

Charles had begun to require Jamie's company more frequently on his expeditions through the taverns and low places of the city. I personally thought this had more to do with Jules de La Tour de Rohan's party, held to celebrate the announcement of his wife's pregnancy, than it did with any sinister influence of the Comte's.

These expeditions sometimes lasted well into the night, and I became accustomed to going to bed without Jamie, waking when he crawled in beside me, his body chilled with walking through the evening fog, and the smell of tobacco smoke and liquor clinging to his hair and skin.

"He's so distraught about that woman that I dinna think he even remembers he's the heir to the thrones of Scotland and England," Jamie said, returning from one of these expeditions.

"Goodness, he *must* be upset," I said, sarcastically. "Let's hope he stays that way."

A week later, though, I woke to the cold gray light of dawn to find the bed beside me still vacant, the coverlet flat and undisturbed.

“Is milord Broch Tuarach in his study?” I leaned over the banister in my nightgown, startling Magnus, who was passing through the lower hall. Perhaps Jamie had chosen to sleep on the sofa in the study, so as not to disturb me.

“No, milady,” he answered, staring up at me. “I came to unbolt the front door, and found that it had never been bolted. Milord did not come home last night.”

I sat down heavily on the top step. I must have looked rather alarming, because the elderly butler nearly sprinted up the stairs to me.

“Madame,” he said, anxiously chafing one of my hands. “Madame, are you all right?”

“I’ve been better, but it isn’t important. Magnus, send one of the footmen to Prince Charles’s house in Montmartre at once. Have him see if my husband is there.”

“At once, milady. And I will send Marguerite up to attend you, as well.” He turned and hurried down the stairs, the soft felt slippers he wore for his morning duties making a soft, shushing noise on the polished wood.

“And Murtagh!” I called after Magnus’s departing back. “My husband’s kinsman. Bring him to me, please!” The first thought that had sprung into my mind was that Jamie had perhaps stayed the night at Charles’s villa; the second, that something had happened to him, whether by accident or by someone’s deliberate intent.

“Where is he?” Murtagh’s cracked voice spoke at the foot of the stair. He had obviously just awakened; his face was creased from whatever he had been lying on, and there were bits of straw in the folds of his ratty shirt.

“How should I know?” I snapped. Murtagh always looked as though he suspected everyone of something, and being rudely wakened had not improved his habitual scowl. The sight of him was nonetheless reassuring; if anything rough was in the offing, Murtagh looked the person to be dealing with it.

“He went out with Prince Charles last night, and didn’t come back. That’s all I know.” I pulled myself up by the banister railing and smoothed down the silk folds of my nightgown. The fires had been lit, but hadn't had time to warm the house, and I was shivering.

Murtagh rubbed a hand over his face to assist thought.

"Mphm. Has someone gone to Montmartre?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll wait 'til they come back with word. If Jamie's there, well and good. If he isn't, mayhap they'll know when he parted company with His Highness, and where."

"And what if they're both gone? What if the Prince didn't come home either?" I asked. If there were Jacobites in Paris, there were also those who opposed the restoration of the Stuart line. And while assassinating Charles Stuart might not assure the failure of a potential Scottish Rising—he did, after all, have a younger brother, Henry—it might go some way toward damping James's enthusiasm for such a venture—if he had any to start with, I thought distractedly.

I remembered vividly the story Jamie had told me, of the attempt on his life during which he had met Fergus. Street assassinations were far from uncommon, and there were gangs of ruffians who hunted the Paris streets after dark.

"You'd best go dress yourself, lassie," Murtagh remarked. "I can see the gooseflesh from here."

"Oh! Yes, I suppose so." I glanced down at my arms; I had been hugging myself as suppositions raced through my mind, but to little effect; my teeth were beginning to chatter.

"Madame! You will give yourself a chill, surely!" Marguerite came stumping rapidly up the stairs, and I allowed her to shoo me into the bedroom, glancing back to see Murtagh below, carefully examining the point of his dirk before ramming it home in its sheath.

"You should be in bed, Madame!" Marguerite scolded. "It isn't good for the child, for you to let yourself be chilled like that. I will fetch a warming pan at once; where is your nightrobe? Get into it at once, yes, that's right …" I shrugged the heavy woolen nightrobe over the thin silk of my nightgown, but ignored Marguerite's clucking to go to the window and open the shutters.

The street outside was beginning to glow as the rising sun struck the upper facades of the stone houses along the Rue Tremoulins. There was a good deal of activity on the street, early as it was; maids and footmen engaged in scrubbing steps or polishing brass gate-fittings, barrowmen selling fruit, vegetables, and fresh seafood, crying their wares along the street, and the cooks of the great houses popping up from their basement doors like so many jinni, summoned by the cries of the barrowmen. A delivery cart loaded with coal clopped slowly along the street, pulled by an elderly horse who looked as though he would much rather be in his stable. But no sign of Jamie.

I at last allowed an anxious Marguerite to persuade me into bed, for the sake of warmth, but couldn't go back to sleep. Every sound from below brought me to the alert, hoping that each footstep on the pavement outside would be followed by Jamie's voice in the hall below. The face of the Comte St. Germain kept coming between me and sleep. Alone among the French nobility, he had some connection with Charles Stuart. He had, in all likelihood, been behind the earlier attempt on Jamie's life … and on mine. He was known to have unsavory associations. Was it possible that he had arranged to have both Charles and Jamie removed? Whether his purposes were political or personal made little difference, at this point.

When at last the sound of steps below did come, I was so occupied with visions of Jamie lying in a gutter with his throat cut, that I didn't realize he was home until the bedroom door opened.

"Jamie!" I sat up in bed with a cry of joy.

He smiled at me, then yawned immensely, making no effort to cover his mouth. I could see a goodly distance down his throat, and observed with relief that it wasn't cut. On the other hand, he looked distinctly the worse for wear. He lay down on the bed next to me and stretched, long and rackingly, then settled with a half-contented groan.

"What," I demanded, "happened to *you*?"

He opened one red-rimmed eye.

"I need a bath," he said, and closed it again.

I leaned toward him and sniffed delicately. The nose detected the usual smoky smell of closed rooms and damp wool, underlying a truly remarkable combination of alcoholic stenches—ale, wine, whisky, and brandy—which matched the variety of stains on his shirt. And forming a high note to the mixture, a horrible cheap cologne, of a particularly penetrating and noxious pungency.

"You do," I agreed. I scrambled out of bed and leaning out into the corridor, shouted for Marguerite, sending her on arrival for a hip bath and sufficient water to fill it. As a parting gift from Brother Ambrose, I had several cakes of a fine-milled hard soap, made with attar of roses, and told her to fetch those, as well.

As the maid set about the tedious business of bringing up the huge copper bath-cans, I turned my attention to the hulk on the bed.

I stripped off his shoes and stockings, then loosening the buckle of his kilt, I flipped it open. His hands went reflexively to his crotch, but my eyes were focused elsewhere.

"What," I said again, "happened to you?"

Several long scratches marked his thighs, angry red welts against the pale skin. And high on the inside of one leg was what could be nothing other than a bite; the toothmarks were plainly visible.

The maid, pouring hot water, cast an interested eye at the evidence and thought fit to put in her tuppence at this delicate moment.

"Un petit chien?" she asked. A little dog? Or something else. While I was far from fluent in the idiom of the times, I *had* learned that *les petits chiens* often walked the street on two legs with painted faces.

"Out," I said briefly in French, with a Head Matron intonation. The maid picked up the cans and left the room, pouting slightly. I turned back to Jamie, who opened one eye, and after a glance at my face, closed it again.

"Well?" I asked.

Instead of answering, he shuddered. After a moment, he sat up and rubbed his hands over his face, the stubble making a rasping noise. He cocked one ruddy eyebrow interrogatively. "I wouldna suppose a gently reared young lady such as yourself would be familiar wi' an alternate meaning for the term *soixante-neuf?*"

"I've heard the term," I said, folding my arms across my chest and regarding him with a certain amount of suspicion. "And may I ask just where *you* encountered that particular interesting number?"

"It was suggested to me—with some force—as a desirable activity by a lady I happened to meet last night."

"Was that by any chance the lady who bit you in the thigh?"

He glanced down and rubbed the mark meditatively.

"Mm, no. As a matter of fact, it wasn't. That lady seemed preoccupied wi' rather lower numbers. I think she meant to settle for the six, and the nine could go hang."

"Jamie," I said, tapping my foot in a marked manner, "*where* have you been all night?"

He scooped up a handful of water from the basin and splashed it over his face, letting the rivulets run down among the dark red hairs on his chest.

"Mm," he said, blinking drops from his thick lashes, "well, let me see. First there was supper at a tavern. We met Glengarry and Millefleurs there." Monsieur Millefleurs was a Parisian banker, while Glengarry was one of the younger Jacobites, chief of one sept of the MacDonell clan. A visitor in Paris, rather than a resident, he had been much in Charles's company lately, by Jamie's report. "And after supper, we went to the Duc di Castellotti's, for cards."

"And then?" I asked.

A tavern, apparently. And then another tavern. And then an establishment which appeared to share some of the characteristics of a tavern, but was embellished by the addition of several ladies of interesting appearance and even more interesting talents.

"Talents, eh?" I said, with a glance at the marks on his leg.

"God, they did it in public," he said, with a reminiscent shudder. "Two of them, on the table. Right between the saddle of mutton and the boiled potatoes. With the quince jelly."

"Mon dieu," said the newly returned maid, setting down the fresh bathcan long enough to cross herself.

"You be quiet," I said, scowling at her. I turned my attention back to my husband. "And then what?"

Then, apparently, the action had become somewhat more general, though still accomplished in fairly public fashion. With due regard to Marguerite's sensibilities, Jamie waited until she had left for another round of water before elaborating further.

"… and then Castellotti took the fat one with red hair and the small blond one off to a corner, and—"

"And what were *you* doing all this time?" I broke in on the fascinating recitative.

"Watching," he said, as though surprised. "It didna seem decent, but there wasna much choice about it, under the circumstances."

I had been groping in his sporran as he talked, and now fished out not only a small purse, but a wide metal ring, embellished with a coat of arms. I tried it curiously on a finger; it was much larger than any normal ring, and hung like a quoit on a stick.

"Whoever does this belong to?" I asked, holding it out. "It looks like the Duc di Castellotti's coat of arms, but whoever it belongs to must have fingers like sausages." Castellotti was an etiolated Italian stringbean, with the pinched face of a man with chronic dyspepsia—no wonder, judging from Jamie's story. Quince jelly, forsooth!

I glanced up to find Jamie blushing from navel to hairline.

"Er," he said, taking an exaggerated interest in a mud stain on one knee, "it … doesna go on a man's finger."

"Then what … oh." I looked at the circular object with renewed interest. "Goodness. I've heard of them before …"

"You have?" said Jamie, thoroughly scandalized.

"But I've never seen one. Does it fit you?" I reached out to try it. He clasped his hands reflexively over his private parts.

Marguerite, arriving with more water, assured him, "*Ne vous en faîtes pas*, Monsieur. *J'en ai déjà vu un*." Don't worry yourself, monsieur; I've already seen one.

Dividing a glare between me and the maid, he pulled a quilt across his lap.

"Bad enough to spend all night defending my virtue," he remarked with some asperity, "without havin' it subjected to comment in the morning."

“Defending your virtue, hm?” I tossed the ring idly from hand to hand, catching it on opposing index fingers. “A gift, was it?” I asked, “or a loan?”

“A gift. Don’t do that, Sassenach,” he said, wincing. “It brings back memories.”

“Ah yes,” I said, eying him. “Now *about* those memories …”

“Not *me*!” he protested. “Surely ye dinna think I’d do such things? I’m a married man!”

“Monsieur Millefleurs isn’t married?”

“He’s not only married, he has two mistresses,” Jamie said. “But he’s French—that’s different.”

“The Duc di Castellotti isn’t French—he’s Italian.”

“But he’s a duke. That’s different, too.”

“Oh, it is, is it? I wonder if the Duchess thinks so.”

“Considering a few things the Duc claimed he learnt from the Duchess, I would imagine so. Isn’t that bath ready yet?”

Clutching the quilt about him, he lumbered from the bed to the steaming tub and stepped in. He dropped the quilt and lowered himself quickly, but not quite quickly enough.

“Enorme!” said the maid, crossing herself.

“C’est tout,” I said repressively. *“Merci bien.”* She dropped her eyes, blushed, and scuttled out.

As the door closed behind the maid, Jamie relaxed into the tub, high at the back to allow for lounging; the feeling of the times seemed to be that once having gone to the trouble of filling a bath, one might as well enjoy it. His stubbled face assumed an expression of bliss as he sank gradually lower into the steaming water, a flush of heat reddening his fair skin. His eyes were closed, and a faint mist of moisture gleamed across the high, broad cheekbones and shone in the hollows beneath his eyesockets.

“Soap?” he asked hopefully, opening his eyes.

“Yes, indeed.” I fetched a cake and handed it to him, then sat down on a stool alongside the bath. I watched for some time as he scrubbed industriously, fetching him a cloth and a pumice stone, with which he painstakingly rasped the soles of his feet and his elbows.

"Jamie," I said at last.

"Aye?"

"I don't mean to quarrel with your methods," I said, "and we agreed that you might have to go to some lengths, but … did you *really* have to …"

"To what, Sassenach?" He had stopped washing and was watching me intently, head on one side.

"To … to …" To my annoyance, I was flushing as deeply as he was, but without the excuse of hot water.

A large hand rose dripping out of the water and rested on my arm. The wet heat burned through the thin fabric of my sleeve.

"Sassenach," he said, "what do ye think I've been doing?"

"Er, well," I said, trying and failing to keep my eyes away from the marks on his thigh. He laughed, though he didn't sound truly amused.

"O ye of little faith!" he said sardonically.

I withdrew beyond his reach.

"Well," I said, "when one's husband comes home covered with bites and scratches and reeking with perfume, admits he's spent the night in a bawdy house, and …"

"And tells ye flat-out he's spent the night watching, not doing?"

"You didn't get those marks on your leg from watching!" I snapped suddenly, then clamped my lips together. I felt like a jealous biddy, and I didn't care for it. I had vowed to take it all calmly, like a woman of the world, telling myself that I had complete faith in Jamie and—just in case—that you can't make omelets without breaking eggs. Even if something *had* happened …

I smoothed the wet spot on my sleeve, feeling the air chill through the cooling silk. I struggled to regain my former light tone.

"Or are those the scars of honorable combat, gained in defending your virtue?" Somehow the light tone didn't quite come off. Listening to myself, I had to admit that the overall tone was really quite nasty. I was rapidly ceasing to care.

No slouch at reading tones of voice, Jamie narrowed his eyes at me and seemed about to reply. He drew in his breath, then apparently thought better of whatever he had been going to say and let it out again.

"Yes," he said calmly. He fished about in the tub between his legs, coming up at length with the cake of soap, a roughly shaped ball of white slickness. He held it out on his palm.

"Will ye help me to wash my hair? His Highness vomited on me in the coach coming home, and I reek a bit, all things considered."

I hesitated a moment, but accepted the olive branch, temporarily at least.

I could feel the solid curve of his skull under the thick, soapy hair, and the welt of the healed scar across the back of his head. I dug my thumbs firmly into his neck muscles, and he relaxed slightly under my hands.

The soap bubbles ran down across the wet, gleaming curves of his shoulders, and my hands followed them, spreading the slickness so that my fingers seemed to float on the surface of his skin.

He *was* big, I thought. Near him so much, I tended to forget his size, until I saw him suddenly from a distance, towering among smaller men, and I would be struck anew by his grace and the beauty of his body. But he sat now with his knees nearly underneath his chin, and his shoulders filled the tub from one side to the other. He leaned forward slightly to assist my ministrations, exposing the hideous scars on his back. The thick red welts of Jack Randall's Christmas gift lay heavily over the thin white lines of the earlier floggings.

I touched the scars gently, my heart squeezed by the sight. I had seen those wounds when they were fresh, seen him driven to the edge of madness by torture and abuse. But I had healed him, and he had fought with all the power of a gallant heart to be whole once more, to come back to me. Moved by tenderness, I brushed the trailing ends of his hair aside, and bent to kiss the back of his neck.

I straightened abruptly. He felt my movement and turned his head slightly.

"What is it, Sassenach?" he asked, voice slow with drowsy contentment.

"Not a thing," I said, staring at the dark-red blotches on the side of his neck. The nurses in the quarters at Pembroke used to conceal them with jaunty scarves tied about their necks the morning after their dates with soldiers from the nearby base. I always thought the scarves were really meant as a means of advertisement, rather than concealment.

"No, not a thing," I said again, reaching for the ewer on the stand. Placed near the window, it was ice-cold to the touch. I stepped behind Jamie and upended it on his head.

I lifted the silk skirts of my nightdress to avoid the sudden wave that spilled over the side of the bath. He was sputtering from the cold, but too shocked yet to form any of the words I could see gathering force on his lips. I beat him to it.

"Just watched, did you?" I asked coldly. "I wouldn't suppose you enjoyed it a bit, did you, poor thing?"

He thrust himself back in the tub with a violence that made the water slosh over the sides, splattering on the stone floor, and twisted around to look up at me.

"What d'ye want me to say?" he demanded. "Did I want to rut with them? Aye, I did! Enough to make my balls ache with not doing it. And enough to make me feel sick wi' the thought of touching one of the sluts."

He shoved the sopping mass of his hair out of his eyes, glaring at me.

"Is that what ye wanted to know? Are ye satisfied now?"

"Not really," I said. My face was hot, and I pressed my cheek against the icy pane of the window, hands clenched on the sill.

"Who looks on a woman with lust in his heart hath committed adultery with her already. Is that how ye see it?"

"Is it how *you* see it?"

"No," he said shortly. "I don't. And what would ye do if I *had* lain wi' a whore, Sassenach? Slap my face? Order me out of your chamber? Keep yourself from my bed?"

I turned and looked at him.

"I'd kill you," I said through my teeth.

Both eyebrows shot up, and his mouth dropped slightly with incredulity.

"Kill *me*? God, if I found you wi' another man, I'd kill *him*." He paused, and one corner of his mouth quirked wryly.

"Mind ye," he said, "I'd no be verra pleased wi' *you*, either, but still, it's him I'd kill."

"Typical man," I said. "Always missing the point."

He snorted with a bitter humor.

"Am I, then? So you dinna believe me. Want me to prove it to ye, Sassenach, that I've lain wi' no one in the last few hours?" He stood up, water cascading down the stretches of his long legs. The light from the window highlighted the reddish-gold hairs of his body and the steam rose off his flesh in wisps. He looked like a figure of freshly molten gold. I glanced briefly down.

"Ha," I said, with the maximum of scorn it was possible to infuse into one syllable.

"Hot water," he said briefly, stepping out of the tub. "Dinna worry yourself, it won't take long."

"That," I said, with delicate precision, "is what *you* think."

His face flushed still more deeply, and his hands curled involuntarily into fists.

"No reasoning wi' you, is there?" he demanded. "God, I spend the night torn between disgust and agony, bein' tormented by my companions for being unmanly, then come home to be tormented for being unchaste! *Mallaichte bàs!*"

Looking wildly about, he spotted his discarded clothing on the floor near the bed and lunged for it.

"Here, then!" he said, scrabbling for his belt. "Here! If lusting is adultery and you'll kill me for adultery, then ye'd best do it, hadn't ye!" He came up with his dirk, a ten-inch piece of dark steel, and thrust it at me, haft first. He squared his shoulders, presenting the broad expanse of his chest to me, and glared belligerently.

"Go ahead," he insisted. "Ye dinna mean to be forsworn, I hope? Being so sensitive to your honor as a wife and all?"

It was a real temptation. My clenched hands quivered at my sides with the longing to take the dagger and plant it firmly between his ribs. Only the knowledge that, all his dramatizing aside, he certainly wouldn't allow me to stab him, stopped me from trying. I felt sufficiently ridiculous, without humiliating myself further. I whirled away from him in a flurry of silk.

After a moment, I heard the clank of the dirk on the floorboards. I stood without moving, staring out of the window at the back courtyard below. I heard faint rustling sounds behind me, and glanced into the faint reflections of the window. My face showed in the windowpane as a smudged oval in a nimbus of sleep-snarled brown hair. Jamie's naked figure moved dimly in the glass like someone seen underwater, searching for a towel.

"The towel is on the bottom shelf of the ewer-stand," I said, turning around.

"Thank you." He dropped the dirty shirt with which he had begun gingerly dabbing himself and reached for the towel, not looking at me.

He wiped his face, then seemed to make some decision. He lowered the towel and looked directly at me. I could see the emotions struggling for mastery on his face, and felt as though I were still looking into the mirror of the window. Sense triumphed in both of us at once.

"I'm sorry," we said, in unison. And laughed.

The damp of his skin soaked through the thin silk, but I didn't care.

Minutes later, he mumbled something into my hair.

"What?"

"Too close," he repeated, moving back a bit. "It was too damn close, Sassenach, and it scared me."

I glanced down at the dirk, lying forgotten on the floor.

"Scared? I've never seen anyone less scared in my life. You knew damned well I wouldn't do it."

"Oh, that." He grinned. "No, I didna think you'd kill me, much as ye might like to." He sobered quickly. "No, it was … well, those women. What I felt like with them. I didna want them, truly not …"

"Yes, I know," I said, reaching for him, but he wasn't stopping there. He held back from me, looking troubled.

"But the … the lusting, I suppose ye'd call it … that was … too close to what I feel sometimes for you, and it … well, it doesna seem right to me."

He turned away, rubbing at his hair with the linen towel, so his voice came half-muffled.

"I always thought it would be a simple matter to lie wi' a woman," he said softly. "And yet … I want to fall on my face at your feet and worship you"—he dropped the towel and reached out, taking me by the shoulders—"and still I want to force ye to your knees before me, and hold ye there wi' my hands tangled in your hair, and your mouth at my service … and I want both things *at the same time*, Sassenach." He ran his hands up under my hair and gripped my face between them, hard.

"I dinna understand myself at all, Sassenach! Or maybe I do." He released me and turned away. His face had long since dried, but he picked up the fallen towel and wiped the skin of his jaw with it, over and over. The stubble made a faint rasping sound against the fine linen. His voice was still quiet, barely audible from a few feet away.

"Such things—the knowledge of them, I mean—it came to me soon after … after Wentworth." Wentworth. Where he had given his soul to save my life, and suffered the tortures of the damned in retrieving it.

"I thought at the first that Jack Randall had stolen a bit of my soul, and then I knew it was worse than that. All of it was my own, and had been all along; it was only he'd shown it to me, and made me know it for myself. That's what he did that I canna forgive, and may his own soul rot for it!"

He lowered the towel and looked at me, face worn with the strains of the night, but eyes bright with urgency.

"Claire. To feel the small bones of your neck beneath my hands, and that fine, thin skin on your breasts and your arms … Lord, you are my wife, whom I cherish and I love wi' all my life, and still I want to kiss ye hard enough to bruise your tender lips, and see the marks of my fingers on your skin."

He dropped the towel. He raised his hands and held them trembling in the air before his face, then very slowly brought them down to rest on my head as though in benediction.

"I want to hold you like a kitten in my shirt, *mo duinne*, and still I want to spread your thighs and plow ye like a rutting bull." His fingers tightened in my hair. "I dinna understand myself!"

I pulled my head back, freeing myself, and took a half-step backward. The blood seemed all to be on the surface of my skin, and a chill ran down my body at the brief separation.

"Do you think it's different for me? Do you think I don't feel the same?" I demanded. "That I don't sometimes want to bite you hard enough to taste blood, or claw you 'til you cry out?"

I reached out slowly to touch him. The skin of his breast was damp and warm. Only the nail of my forefinger touched him, just below the nipple. Lightly, barely touching, I drew the nail upward, downward, circling round, watching the tiny nub rise hard amid the curling ruddy hairs.

The nail pressed slightly harder, sliding down, leaving a faint red streak on the fair skin of his chest. I was trembling all over by this time, but did not turn away.

"Sometimes I want to ride you like a wild horse, and bring you to the taming—did you know that? I can do it, you know I can. Drag you over the edge and drain you to a gasping husk. I can drive you to the edge of collapse and sometimes I delight in it, Jamie, I do! And yet so often I want"—my voice broke suddenly and I had to swallow hard before continuing—"I want … to hold your head against my breast and cradle you like a child and comfort you to sleep."

My eyes were so full of tears that I couldn't see his face clearly; couldn't see if he wept as well. His arms went tight around me and the damp heat of him engulfed me like the breath of a monsoon.

"Claire, ye do kill me, knife or no," he whispered, face buried in my hair. He bent and picked me up, carrying me to the bed. He sank to his knees, laying me amid the rumpled quilts.

"You'll lie wi' me now," he said quietly. "And I shall use ye as I must. And if you'll have your revenge for it, then take it and welcome, for my soul is yours, in all the black corners of it.”

The skin of his shoulders was warm with the heat of the bath, but he shivered as with cold as my hands traveled up to his neck, and I pulled him down to me.

And when I had at length taken my last revenge of him, I did cradle him, stroking back the roughened, half-dry locks.

“And sometimes,” I whispered to him, “I wish it could be you inside me. That I could take you into me and keep you safe always.”

His hand, large and warm, lifted slowly from the bed and cupped the small round swell of my belly, sheltering and caressing.

“You do, my own,” he said. “You do.”

* * *

I felt it for the first time while lying in bed the next morning, watching Jamie dress for the day. A tiny fluttering sensation, at once entirely familiar and completely new. Jamie had his back turned to me, as he wriggled into his knee-length shirt and stretched his arms, settling the folds of white linen across the breadth of his shoulders.

I lay quite still, waiting, hoping for it to come again. It did, this time as a series of infinitesimal quick movements, like the bursting of bubbles rising to the surface of a carbonated liquid.

I had a sudden memory of Coca-Cola; that odd, dark, fizzy American drink. I had tasted it once, while having supper with an American colonel, who served it as a delicacy—which it was, in wartime. It came in thick greenish bottles, smooth-ribbed and tapered, with a high-waisted nip to the glass, so that the bottle was roughly woman-shaped, with a rounded bulge just below the neck, swelling to a broader one farther down.

I remembered how the millions of tiny bubbles had rushed into the narrow neck when the bottle was opened, smaller and finer than the bubbles of champagne, bursting joyous in the air. I laid one hand very gently on my abdomen, just above the womb.

There it was. There was no sense of him, or her, as I had thought there might be—but there was certainly a sense of Someone. I wondered whether perhaps babies had no gender—physical characteristics aside—until birth, when the act of exposure to the outside world set them forever as one or the other.

"Jamie," I said. He was tying back his hair, gathering it into a thick handful at the base of his neck and winding a leather lace about it. Head bent in the task, he looked up at me from under his brows and smiled.

"Awake, are ye? It's early yet, *mo duinne*. Go back to sleep for a bit."

I had been going to tell him, but something stopped me. He couldn't feel it, of course, not yet. It wasn't that I thought he wouldn't care, but there was something about that first awareness that seemed suddenly private; the second shared secret between me and the child—the first being our knowledge of its existence, mine a conscious knowing, the embryo's a simple being. The sharing of that knowledge linked us close as did the blood that passed through both of us.

"Do you want me to braid your hair for you?" I asked. When he went to the docks, sometimes he would ask me to plait his ruddy mane in a tight queue, proof against the tugging winds on deck and quay. He always teased that he would have it dipped in tar, as the sailors did, to solve the problem permanently.

He shook his head, and reached for his kilt.

"No, I'm going to call on His Highness Prince Charles today. And drafty as his house is, I think it wilna be blowing my hair in my eyes." He smiled at me, coming to stand by the bed. He saw my hand lying on my stomach, and put his own lightly over it.

"Feeling all right, are ye, Sassenach? The sickness is better?"

"Much." The morning sickness had in fact abated, though waves of nausea still assailed me at odd moments. I found I could not bear the smell of frying tripe with onions, and had had to ban this popular dish from the servants' menu, since the smell crept from the basement kitchen like a ghost up the back stairs, to pop out at me unexpectedly when I opened the door of my sitting room.

"Good." He raised my hand, and bent over to kiss my knuckles in farewell. "Go back to sleep, *mo duinne*," he repeated.

He closed the door gently behind him, as though I were already sleeping, leaving me to the early morning silence of the chamber, with the small busy noises of the household safely barred by paneled oak.

Squares of pale sunlight from the casement window lay bright on the opposite wall. It would be a beautiful day, I could tell, the spring air ripening with warmth, and the plum blossoms bursting pink and white and bee-rich in the gardens of Versailles. The courtiers would be outside in the gardens today, rejoicing in the weather as much as the barrowmen who wheeled their wares through the streets.

So did I rejoice, alone and not alone, in my peaceful cocoon of warmth and quiet.

“Hello,” I said softly, one hand over the butterfly wings that beat inside me.

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PART THREE

Malchance

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18

RAPE IN PARIS

There was an explosion at the Royal Armory, near the beginning of May. I heard later that a careless porter had put down a torch in the wrong place, and a minute later, the largest assortment of gunpowder and firearms in Paris had gone up with a noise that startled the pigeons off Notre Dame.

At work in L'Hôpital des Anges, I didn't hear the explosion itself, but I certainly noticed the echoes. Though the Hôpital was on the opposite side of the city from the Armory, there were sufficient victims of the explosion that a good many of them overflowed the other hospitals and were brought to us, mangled, burned, and moaning in the backs of wagons, or supported on pallets by friends who carried them through the streets.

It was full dark before the last of the victims had been attended to, and the last bandage-swathed body laid gently down among the grubby, anonymous ranks of the Hôpital's patients.

I had dispatched Fergus home with word that I would be late, when I saw the magnitude of the task awaiting the sisters of des Anges. He had come back with Murtagh, and the two of them were lounging on the steps outside, waiting to escort us home.

Mary and I emerged wearily from the double doors, to find Murtagh demonstrating the art of knife-throwing to Fergus.

"Go on then," he was saying, back turned to us. "Straight as ye can, on the count of three. One … two … three!" At "three," Fergus bowled the large white onion he was holding, letting it bounce and hop over the uneven ground.

Murtagh stood relaxed, arm drawn back at a negligent cock, dirk held by the tip between his fingers. As the onion spun past, his wrist flicked once, quick and sharp. Nothing else moved, not so much as a stir of his kilts, but the onion leaped sideways, transfixed by the dirk, and fell mortally wounded, rolling feebly in the dirt at his feet.

"B-bravo, Mr. Murtagh!" Mary called, smiling. Startled, Murtagh turned, and I could see the flush rising on his lean cheeks in the light from the double doors behind us.

"Mmmphm," he said.

"Sorry to take so long," I said apologetically. "It took rather a time to get everyone squared away."

"Och, aye," the little clansman answered laconically. He turned to Fergus. "We'll do best to find a coach, lad; it's late for the ladies to be walking."

"There aren't any here," Fergus said, shrugging. "I've been up and down the street for the last hour; every spare coach in the Cité has gone to the Armory. We might get something in the Rue du Faubourg St. Honoré, though." He pointed down the street, at a dark, narrow gap between buildings that betrayed the presence of a passageway through to the next street. "It's quick through there."

After a short, frowning pause for thought, Murtagh nodded agreement. "All right, lad. Let's go, then."

It was cold in the alleyway, and I could see my breath in small white puffs, despite the moonless night. No matter how dark it got in Paris, there was always light somewhere; the glow of lamps and candles seeped through shutters and chinks in the walls of wooden buildings, and light pooled around the stalls of the street vendors and scattered from the small horn and metal lanterns that swung from cart tails and coach trees.

The next street was one of merchants, and here and there the proprietors of the various businesses had hung lanterns of pierced metal above their doors and shopyard entrances. Not content to rely upon the police to protect their property, often several businessmen would join together and hire a watchman to guard their premises at night. When I saw one such figure in front of the sailmaker's shop, sitting hunched in the shadows atop a pile of folded canvas, I nodded in response to his gruff “*Bonsoir*, Monsieur, mesdames.”

As we passed the sailmaker’s shop, though, I heard a sudden cry of alarm from the watchman.

“Monsieur! Madame!”

Murtagh swung round at once to meet the challenge, sword already hissing from its scabbard. Slower in my reflexes, I was only halfway turned as he stepped forward, and my eye caught the flicker of movement from the doorway behind him. The blow took Murtagh from behind before I could shout a warning, and he went sprawling facedown in the street, arms and legs gone loose and nerveless, sword and dirk flying from his hands to clatter on the stones.

I stooped quickly for the dirk as it slid past my foot, but a pair of hands seized my arms from behind.

“Take care of the man,” ordered a voice behind me. “Quickly!”

I wrenched at my captor’s grip; the hands dropped to my wrists and twisted them sharply, making me cry out. There was a billow of white, ghost-like in the dim street, and the “watchman” bent over Murtagh’s prone body, a length of white fabric trailing from his hands.

“Help!” I shrieked. “Leave him alone! Help! Brigands! Assassins! HELP!”

“Be still!” A quick clout over the ear made my head spin for a moment. When my eyes stopped watering, I could make out a long, white sausage-shape in the gutter; Murtagh, shrouded and neatly secured in a canvas sail-bag. The false watchman was crouched over him; he rose, grinning, and I could see that he was masked, a dark strip of fabric extending from forehead to upper lip.

A thin strip of light from the nearby chandler’s fell across his body as he rose. In spite of the cold evening, he was wearing no more than a shirt that glowed momentarily emerald green in the passing light. A pair of breeches, buckled at the knee, and what amazingly appeared to be silk hose and leather shoes, not the bare feet or sabots I had expected. Not ordinary bandits, then.

I caught a quick glimpse of Mary, at one side. One of the masked figures had her in a tight grip from behind, one arm clasped across her midriff, the other rummaging its way under her skirts like a burrowing animal.

The one in front of me put a hand ingratiatingly behind my head and pulled me close. The mask covered him from forehead to upper lip, leaving his mouth free for obvious reasons. His tongue thrust into my mouth, tasting strongly of drink and onions. I gagged, bit it, and spat as it was removed. He cuffed me heavily, knocking me to my knees in the gutter.

Mary's silver-buckled shoes were kicking dangerously near my nose as the ruffian holding her unceremoniously yanked her skirt above her waist. There was a tearing of satin, and a loud screech from above as his fingers plunged between her struggling thighs.

"A virgin! I've got a virgin!" he crowed. One of the men bowed mockingly to Mary.

"Mademoiselle, my congratulations! Your husband will have cause to thank us on his wedding night, as he will encounter no awkward obstructions to hinder his pleasure. But we are selfless—we ask for no thanks for the performance of our duties. The doing of service is pleasure in itself."

If I had needed anything beyond the silk hose to tell me that our assailants were not street ruffians, this speech—greeted with howls of laughter—would have done it. Fitting names to the masked faces was something else again.

The hands that grasped my arm to haul me to my feet were manicured, with a small beauty mark just above the fork of the thumb. I must remember that, I thought grimly. If they let us live afterward, it might be useful.

Someone else grabbed my arms from behind, yanking them back so strongly that I cried out. The posture thus induced made my breasts stand out in the low-cut bodice as though they were being offered on a platter.

The man who seemed in charge of operations wore a loose shirt of some pale color, decorated with darker spots—embroidery perhaps. It gave him an imprecise outline in the shadows, making it difficult to look at him closely. As he leaned forward and ran a finger appraisingly over the tops of my breasts, though, I could see the dark hair greased flat to his head and smell the heavy pomade. He had large ears, the better to hold up the strings of his mask.

"Do not worry yourselves, mesdames," Spotted-shirt said. "We mean you no harm; we intend only to give you a little gentle exercise—your husbands or fiancés need never know—and then we shall release you."

"Firstly, you may honor us with your sweet lips, mesdames," he announced, stepping back and tugging at the lacings of his breeches.

"Not that one," protested Green-shirt, pointing at me. "She bites."

"Not if she wants to keep her teeth," replied his companion. "On your knees, Madame, if you please." He shoved down strongly on my shoulders, and I jerked back, stumbling. He grabbed me to keep me from getting away, and the full hood of my cloak fell back, freeing my hair. Pins loosened in the struggle, it fell over my shoulders, strands flying like banners in the night wind, blinding me as they whipped across my face.

I staggered backward, pulling away from my assailant, shaking my head to clear my eyes. The street was dark, but I could see a few things in the faint gleam of lanterns through the shuttered shop windows, or in the glow of starlight that struck through the shadows to the street.

Mary's silver shoe buckles caught the light, kicking. She was on her back, struggling, with one of the men on top of her, swearing as he fought to get his breeches down and to control her at the same time. There was the sound of tearing cloth, and his buttocks gleamed white in a shaft of light from a court-yard gate.

Someone's arms seized me round the waist and dragged me backward, raising my feet off the ground. I scraped my heel down the length of his shin, and he squealed in outrage.

"Hold her!" ordered Spotted-shirt, coming out of the shadows.

"You hold her!" My captor thrust me unceremoniously into the arms of his friend, and the light from the courtyard shone into my eyes, temporarily blinding me.

"Mother of God!" The hands clutching my arms slackened their grip, and I yanked loose, to see Spotted-shirt, mouth hanging open in horrified amazement below the mask. He backed away from me, crossing himself as he went.

"In nomine Patris, et Filii, et Spiritus Sancti," he babbled, crossing and recrossing. "La Dame Blanche!"

"La Dame Blanche!" The man behind me echoed the cry, in tones of terror.

Spotted-shirt was still backing away, now making signs in the air which were considerably less Christian than the sign of the Cross, but which presumably had the same intent. Pointing index and little fingers at me in the ancient horned sign against evil, he was working his way steadily down a list of spiritual authorities, from the Trinity to powers on a considerably lower level, muttering the Latin names so fast that the syllables blurred together.

I stood in the street, shaken and dazed, until a terrible shriek from the ground near my feet recalled me to my senses. Too occupied with his own business to pay any attention to matters above him, the man on top of Mary made a gutteral sound of satisfaction and began to move his hips rhythmically, to the accompaniment of throat-tearing screams from Mary.

Acting purely from instinct, I took a step toward them, drew back my leg, and kicked him as hard as I could in the ribs. The breath exploded from his lungs in a startled "Oof!" and he rocked to one side.

One of his friends darted forward and seized him by the arm, shouting urgently, "Up! Up! It's La Dame Blanche! Run!"

Still sunk in the frenzy of rape, the man stared stupidly and tried to turn back to Mary, who was frantically writhing and twisting, trying to free the folds of her skirts from the weight that held her trapped. Both Green-shirt and Spotted-shirt were now pulling on her assailant's arms, and succeeded in getting him to his feet. His torn breeches drooped about his thighs, the blood-smeared rod of his erection trembling with mindless eagerness between the dangling shirttails.

The clatter of running feet approaching seemed finally to rouse him. His two helpers, hearing the sound, dropped his arms and fled precipitately, leaving him to his fate. With a muffled curse, he made his way down the nearest alley, hopping and hobbling as he tried to yank his breeches up around his waist.

"Au secours! Au secours! Gendarmes!" A breathless voice was shouting down the alleyway for help, as its owner fumbled his way in our direction, stumbling over rubbish in the dark. I hardly thought a footpad or other miscreant would be staggering down an alleyway shouting for the gendarmerie, though in my present state of shock, almost nothing would have surprised me.

I *was* surprised, though, when the black shape that flapped out of the alley proved to be Alexander Randall, swathed in black cape and slouch hat. He glanced wildly around the small cul-de-sac, from Murtagh, masquerading as a bag of rubbish, to me, standing frozen and gasping against a wall, to the huddled shape of Mary, nearly invisible among the other shadows. He stood helpless for a moment, then whirled and clambered up the iron gate from which our assailants had emerged. From the top of this, he could just reach the lantern suspended from the rafter above.

The light was a comfort; pitiful as was the sight it revealed, at least it banished the lurking shadows that threatened at any moment to turn into new dangers.

Mary was on her knees, curled into herself. Head buried in her arms, she was shaking, in total silence. One shoe lay on its side on the cobbles, silver buckle winking in the swaying light of the lantern.

Like a bird of ill omen, Alex swooped down beside her.

"Miss Hawkins! Mary! Miss Hawkins! Are you all right?"

"Of all the damn-fool questions," I said with some asperity as she moaned and shrank away from him. "Naturally she isn't all right. She's just been raped." With a considerable effort, I pried myself from the comforting wall at my back, and started toward them, noting with clinical detachment that my knees were wobbling.

They gave way altogether in the next moment as a huge, batlike shape swooped down a foot in front of me, landing on the cobbles with a substantial thud.

“Well, well, look who’s dropped in!” I said, and started to laugh in an unhinged sort of way. A large pair of hands grabbed me by the shoulders and administered a good shake.

“Be quiet, Sassenach,” said Jamie, blue eyes gleaming black and dangerous in the lanternlight. He straightened up, the folds of his blue velvet cloak falling back over his shoulders as he stretched his arms toward the roof from which he had jumped. He could just grasp the edge of it, standing on his toes.

“Well, come down, then!” he said impatiently, looking up. “Put your feet over the edge onto my shoulders, and ye can slide down my back.” With a grating of loose roof slates, a small black figure wriggled its way cautiously backward, then swarmed down the tall figure like a monkey on a stick.

“Good man, Fergus.” Jamie clapped the boy casually on the shoulder, and even in the dim light I could see the glow of pleasure that rose in his cheeks. Jamie surveyed the landscape with a tactician’s eye, and with a muttered word, sent the lad down the alley to keep watch for approaching gendarmes. The essentials taken care of, he squatted down before me once more.

“Are ye all right, Sassenach?” he inquired.

“Nice of you to ask,” I said politely. “Yes, thanks. She’s not so well, though.” I waved vaguely in Mary’s direction. She was still rolled into a ball, shuddering and quaking like a jelly, oozing away from Alex’s fumbling efforts to pat her.

Jamie spared no more than a glance at her. “So I see. Where in hell is Murtagh?”

“Over there,” I answered. “Help me up.”

I staggered over to the gutter, where the sack that held Murtagh was heaving to and fro like an agitated caterpillar, emitting a startling mixture of muffled profanities in three languages.

Jamie drew his dirk, and with what seemed to be a rather callous disregard for the contents, slit the sack from end to end. Murtagh popped out of the opening like a Jack out of its box. Half his spiky black hair was pasted to his head by whatever noisome liquid the bag had rested in. The rest stood on end, lending a fiercer cast to a face rendered already sufficiently warlike by a large purple knot on the forehead and a rapidly darkening eye.

"Who hit me?" he barked.

"Well, it wasn't me," answered Jamie, raising one eyebrow. "Come along, man, we havena got all night."

* * *

"This is never going to work," I muttered, stabbing pins decorated with brilliants at random through my hair. "She ought to have medical care, for one thing. She needs a doctor!"

"She has one," Jamie pointed out, lifting his chin and peering down his nose into the mirror as he tied his stock. "You." Stock tied, he grabbed a comb and pulled it hurriedly through the thick, ruddy waves of his hair.

"No time to braid it," he muttered, holding a thick tail behind his head as he rummaged in a drawer. "Have ye a bit of ribbon, Sassenach?"

"Let me." I moved swiftly behind him, folding under the ends of the hair and wrapping the club in a length of green ribbon. "Of all the bloody nights to have a dinner party on!"

And not just any dinner party, either. The Duke of Sandringham was to be guest of honor, with a small but select party to greet him. Monsieur Duverney was coming, with his eldest son, a prominent banker. Louise and Jules de La Tour were coming, and the d'Arbanvilles. Just to make things interesting, the Comte St. Germain had also been invited.

"St. Germain!" I had said in astonishment, when Jamie had told me the week before. "Whatever for?"

"I do business with the man," Jamie had pointed out. "He's been to dinner here before, with Jared. But what I want is to have the opportunity of watching him talk to you over dinner. From what I've seen of him in business, he's not the man to hide his thoughts." He picked up the white crystal that Master Raymond had given me and weighed it thoughtfully in his palm.

"It's pretty enough," he had said. "I'll have it set in a gold mounting, so you can wear it about your neck. Toy with it at dinner until someone asks ye about it, Sassenach. Then tell them what it's for, and make sure to watch St. Germain's face when ye do. If it was him gave ye the poison at Versailles, I think we'll see some sign of it."

What I wanted at the moment was peace, quiet, and total privacy in which to shake like a rabbit. What I had was a dinner party with a duke who might be a Jacobite or an English agent, a Comte who might be a poisoner, and a rape victim hidden upstairs. My hands shook so that I couldn't fasten the chain that held the mounted crystal; Jamie stepped behind me and snicked the catch with one flick of his thumb.

"Haven't you got any nerves?" I demanded of him. He grimaced at me in the mirror and put his hands over his stomach.

"Aye, I have. But it takes me in the belly, not the hands. Have ye some of that stuff for cramp?"

"Over there." I waved at the medicine box on the table, left open from my dosing of Mary. "The little green bottle. One spoonful."

Ignoring the spoon, he tilted the bottle and took several healthy gulps. He lowered it and squinted at the liquid within.

"God, that's foul stuff! Are ye nearly ready, Sassenach? The guests will be here any minute."

Mary was concealed for the moment in a spare room on the second floor. I had checked her carefully for injuries, which seemed limited to bruises and shock, then dosed her quickly with as large a slug of poppy syrup as seemed feasible.

Alex Randall had resisted all Jamie's attempts to send him home, and instead had been left to stand guard over Mary, with strict instructions to fetch me if she woke.

"How on earth did that idiot happen to be there?" I asked, scrabbling in the drawer for a box of powder.

"I asked him that," Jamie replied. "Seems the poor fool's in love with Mary Hawkins. He's been following her to and fro about the town, drooping like a wilted flower because he knows she's to wed Marigny."

I dropped the box of powder.

“*H-h-he’s* in love with *her*?” I wheezed, waving away the cloud of floating particles.

“So he says, and I see nay reason to doubt it,” Jamie said, brushing powder briskly off the bosom of my dress. “He was a bit distraught when he told me.”

“I should imagine so.” To the conflicting welter of emotions that filled me, I now added pity for Alex Randall. Of course he wouldn’t have spoken to Mary, thinking the devotion of an impoverished secretary nothing compared to the wealth and position of a match with the House of Gascogne. And now what must he feel, seeing her subjected to brutal attack, virtually under his nose?

“Why in hell didn’t he speak up? She would have run off with him in a moment.” For the pale English curate, of course, must be the “spiritual” object of Mary’s speechless devotion.

“Randall’s a gentleman,” Jamie replied, handing me a feather and the pot of rouge.

“You mean he’s a silly ass,” I said uncharitably.

Jamie’s lip twitched. “Well, perhaps,” he agreed. “He’s also a poor one; he hasna the income to support a wife, should her family cast her off—which they certainly would, if she eloped with him. And his health is feeble; he’d find it hard to find another position, for the Duke would likely dismiss him without a character.”

“One of the servants is bound to find her,” I said, returning to an earlier worry in order to avoid thinking about this latest manifestation of tragedy.

“No, they won’t. They’ll all be busy serving. And by the morning, she may be recovered enough to go back to her uncle’s house. I sent round a note,” he added, “to tell them she was staying the night with a friend, as it was late. Didna want them searching for her.”

“Yes, but—”

“Sassenach.” His hands on my shoulders stopped me, and he peered over my shoulder to meet my eyes in the mirror. “We canna let her be seen by anyone, until she’s able to speak and to act as usual. Let it be known what’s happened to her, and her reputation will be ruined entirely.”

"Her reputation! It's hardly her fault she was raped!" My voice shook slightly, and his grip on my shoulders tightened.

"It isna right, Sassenach, but it's how it is. Let it be known that she's a maid no more, and no man will take her—she'll be disgraced, and live a spinster to the end of her days." His hand squeezed my shoulder, left it, and returned to help guide a pin into the precariously anchored hair.

"It's all we can do for her, Claire," he said. "Keep her from harm, heal her as best we can—and find the filthy bastards who did it." He turned away and groped in my casket for his stick pin. "Christ," he added softly, speaking into the green velvet lining, "d'ye think I don't know what it is to her? Or to him?"

I laid my hand on his groping fingers and squeezed. He squeezed back, then lifted my hand and kissed it briefly.

"Lord, Sassenach! Your fingers are cold as snow." He turned me around to look earnestly into my face. "Are *you* all right, lass?"

Whatever he saw in my face made him mutter "Christ" again, sink to his knees, and pull me against his ruffled shirtfront. I gave up the pretense of courage, and clung to him, burying my face in the starchy warmth.

"Oh, God, Jamie. I was so scared. I *am* so scared. Oh, God, I wish you could make love to me now."

His chest vibrated under my cheek with his laugh, but he hugged me closer.

"You think that would help?"

"Yes."

In fact, I thought that I would not feel safe again, until I lay in the security of our bed, with the sheltering silence of the house all about us, feeling the strength and the heat of him around and within me, buttressing my courage with the joy of our joining, wiping out the horror of helplessness and near-rape with the sureness of mutual possession.

He held my face between his hands and kissed me, and for a moment, the fear of the future and the terror of the night fell away. Then he drew back and smiled. I could see his own worry etched in the lines of his face, but there was nothing in his eyes but the small reflection of my face.

"On account, then," he said softly.

* * *

We had reached the second course without incident, and I was beginning to relax slightly, though my hand still had a tendency to tremble over the consommé.

"How perfectly fascinating!" I said, in response to a story of the younger Monsieur Duverney's, to which I wasn't listening, my ears being tuned for any suspicious noises abovestairs. "Do tell me more."

I caught Magnus's eye as he served the Comte St. Germain, seated across from me, and beamed congratulations at him as well as I could with a mouthful of fish. Too well trained to smile in public, he inclined his head a respectful quarter-inch and went on with the service. My hand went to the crystal at my neck, and I stroked it ostentatiously as the Comte, with no sign of perturbation on his saturnine features, dug into the trout with almonds.

Jamie and the elder Duverney were close in conversation at the other end of the table, food ignored as Jamie scribbled left-handed figures on a scrap of paper with a stub of chalk. Chess, or business? I wondered.

As guest of honor, the Duke sat at the center of the table. He had enjoyed the first courses with the gusto of a natural-born trencherman, and was now engaged in animated conversation with Madame d'Arbanville, on his right. As the Duke was the most obviously prominent Englishman in Paris at the time, Jamie had thought it worthwhile cultivating his acquaintance, in hopes of uncovering any rumors that might lead to the sender of the musical message to Charles Stuart. My attention, though, kept straying from the Duke to the gentleman seated across from him—Silas Hawkins.

I had thought I might just die on the spot and save trouble all round when the Duke had walked through the door, gesturing casually over his shoulder, and saying, "I say, Mrs. Fraser, you do know Hawkins here, don't you?"

The Duke’s small, merry blue eyes had met mine with a look of guileless confidence that his whims would be accommodated, and I had had no choice but to smile and nod, and tell Magnus to be sure another place was set. Jamie, seeing Mr. Hawkins as he came through the door of the drawing room, had looked as though he were in need of another dose of stomach medicine, but had pulled himself together enough to extend a hand to Mr. Hawkins and start a conversation about the quality of the inns on the road to Calais.

I glanced at the carriage clock over the mantelpiece. How long before they would all be gone? I mentally tallied the courses already served, and those to come. Nearly to the sweet course. Then the salad and cheese. Brandy and coffee, port for the men, liqueurs for the ladies. An hour or two for stimulating conversation. Not too stimulating, please God, or they would linger ’til dawn.

Now they were talking of the menace of street gangs. I abandoned the fish and picked up a roll.

“And I have heard that some of these roving bands are composed not of rabble, as you would expect, but of some of the younger members of the nobility!” General d’Arbanville puffed out his lips at the monstrousness of the idea. “They do it for sport—sport! As though the robbery of decent men and the outraging of ladies were nothing more than a cockfight!”

“How extraordinary,” said the Duke, with the indifference of a man who never went anywhere without a substantial escort. The platter of savouries hovered near his chin, and he scooped half a dozen onto his plate.

Jamie glanced at me, and rose from the table.

“If you’ll excuse me, mesdames, messieurs,” he said with a bow, “I have something rather special in the way of port that I would like to have His Grace taste. I’ll fetch it from the cellar.”

“It must be the Belle Rouge,” said Jules de La Tour, licking his lips in anticipation. “You have a rare treat in store, Your Grace. I have never tasted such a wine anywhere else.”

“Ah? Well, you soon will, Monsieur le Prince,” the Comte St. Germain broke in. “Something even better.”

“Surely there is nothing better than Belle Rouge!” General d’Arbanville exclaimed.

“Yes, there is,” the Comte declared, looking smug. “I have found a new port, made and bottled on the island of Gostos, off the coast of Portugal. A color rich as rubies, and a flavor that makes Belle Rouge taste like colored water. I have a contract for delivery of the entire vintage in August.”

“Indeed, Monsieur le Comte?” Silas Hawkins raised thick, graying brows toward our end of the table. “Have you found a new partner for investment, then? I understood that your own resources were.… depleted, shall we say? following the sad destruction of the *Patagonia*.” He took a cheese savoury from the plate and popped it delicately into his mouth.

The Comte’s jaw muscles bulged, and a sudden chill descended on our end of the table. From Mr. Hawkins’s sidelong glance at me, and the tiny smile that lurked about his busily chewing mouth, it was clear that he knew all about my role in the destruction of the unfortunate *Patagonia*.

My hand went again to the crystal at my neck, but the Comte didn’t look at me. A hot flush had risen from his lacy stock, and he glared at Mr. Hawkins with open dislike. Jamie was right; not a man to hide his emotions.

“Fortunately, Monsieur,” he said, mastering his choler with an apparent effort, “I *have* found a partner who wishes to invest in this venture. A fellow countryman, in fact, of our gracious host.” He nodded sardonically toward the doorway, where Jamie had just appeared, followed by Magnus, who bore an enormous decanter of the Belle Rouge port.

Hawkins stopped chewing for a moment, his mouth unattractively open with interest. “A Scotsman? Who? I didn’t think there were any Scots in the wine business in Paris besides the house of Fraser.”

A definite gleam of amusement lit the Comte’s eyes as he glanced from Mr. Hawkins to Jamie. “I suppose it is debatable whether the investor in question could be considered Scottish at the moment; nonetheless, he is milord Broch Tuarach’s fellow countryman. Charles Stuart is his name.”

This bit of news had all the impact the Comte might have hoped for. Silas Hawkins sat bolt upright with an exclamation that made him choke on the remnants of his mouthful. Jamie, who had been about to speak, closed his mouth and sat down, regarding the Comte thoughtfully. Jules de La Tour began to spray exclamations and globules of spit, and both d'Arbanvilles made ejaculations of amazement. Even the Duke took his eyes off his plate and blinked at the Comte in interest.

"Really?" he said. "I understood the Stuarts were poor as church mice. You're sure he's not gulling you?"

"I have no wish to cast aspersions, or arouse suspicions," chipped in Jules de La Tour, "but it is well known at Court that the Stuarts have no money. It is true that several of the Jacobite supporters have been seeking funds lately, but without luck, so far as I have heard."

"That's true," interjected the younger Duverney, leaning forward with interest. "Charles Stuart himself has spoken privately with two bankers of my acquaintance, but no one is willing to advance him any substantial sum in his present circumstances."

I shot a quick glance at Jamie, who answered with an almost imperceptible nod. This came under the heading of good news. But then what about the Comte's story of an investment?

"It is true," he said belligerently. "His Highness has secured a loan of fifteen thousand livres from an Italian bank, and has placed the entire sum at my disposal, to be used in commissioning a ship and purchasing the bottling of the Gostos vineyard. I have the signed letter right here." He tapped the breast of his coat with satisfaction, then sat back and looked triumphantly around the table, stopping at Jamie.

"Well, milord," he said, with a wave at the decanter that sat on the white cloth in front of Jamie, "are you going to allow us to taste this famous wine?"

"Yes, of course," Jamie murmured. He reached mechanically for the first glass.

Louise, who had sat quietly eating through most of the dinner, noted Jamie's discomfort. A kind friend, she turned to me in an obvious effort to change the course of the conversation to a neutral topic.

"That is a beautiful stone you wear about your neck, *ma chère*," she said, gesturing at my crystal. "Where did you get it?"

"Oh, this?" I said. "Well, in fact—"

I was interrupted by a piercing scream. It stopped all conversation, and the brittle echoes of it chimed in the crystals of the chandelier overhead.

"*Mon Dieu*," said the Comte St. Germain, into the silence. "What—"

The scream was repeated, and then repeated again. The noise spilled down the wide stairway and into the foyer.

The guests, rising from the dinner table like a covey of flushed quail, also spilled into the foyer, in time to see Mary Hawkins, clad in the shredded remnants of her shift, lurch into view at the top of the stair. There she stood, as though for maximum effect, mouth stretched wide, hands splayed across her bosom, where the ripped fabric all too clearly displayed the bruises left by grappling hands on her breasts and arms.

Her pupils shrunk to pinpoints in the light of the candelabra, her eyes seemed blank pools in which horror was reflected. She looked down, but plainly saw neither stairway nor crowd of gaping onlookers.

"No!" she shrieked. "No! Let me go! Please, I beg you! DON'T TOUCH ME!" Blinded by the drug as she was, apparently she sensed some movement behind her, for she turned and flailed wildly, hands clawing at the figure of Alex Randall, who was trying vainly to get hold of her, to calm her.

Unfortunately, from below, his attempts looked rather like those of a rejected seducer bent on further attack.

"Nom de Dieu," burst out General d'Arbanville. "*Racaille!* Let her go at once!" The old soldier leaped for the stair with an agility belying his years, hand reaching instinctively for his sword—which, luckily, he had laid aside at the door.

I hastily thrust myself and my voluminous skirts in front of the Comte and the younger Duverney, who showed symptoms of following the General to the rescue, but I could do nothing about Mary's uncle, Silas Hawkins. Eyes popping from his head, the wine merchant stood stunned for a moment, then lowered his head and charged like a bull, forcing his way through the onlookers.

I looked wildly about for Jamie, and found him on the edge of the crowd. I caught his eye and raised my brows in silent question; in any case, nothing I said could have been heard above the hubbub in the foyer, punctuated by Mary's steam-whistle shrieks from above.

Jamie shrugged at me, then glanced around him. I saw his eyes light for a moment on a three-legged table near the wall, holding a tall vase of chrysanthemums. He glanced up, measuring the distance, closed his eyes briefly as though commending his soul to God, then moved with decision.

He sprang from the floor to the table, grasped the banister railing and vaulted over it, onto the stairway, a few feet in advance of the General. It was such an acrobatic feat that one or two ladies gasped, little cries of admiration intermingled with their exclamations of horror.

The exclamations grew louder as Jamie bounded up the remaining stairs, elbowed his way between Mary and Alex, and seizing the latter by the shoulder, took careful aim and hit him solidly on the point of the jaw.

Alex, who had been staring at his employer below in openmouthed amazement, folded gently at the knees and crumpled into a heap, eyes still wide, but gone suddenly blank and empty as Mary's.

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AN OATH IS SWORN

The clock on the mantelpiece had an annoyingly loud tick. It was the only sound in the house, other than the creakings of the boards, and the far-off thumps of servants working late in the kitchens below. I had had enough noise to last me some time, though, and wanted only silence to mend my frazzled nerves. I opened the clock's case and removed the counterweight, and the tick ceased at once.

It had undeniably been the dinner party of the season. People not fortunate enough to have been present would be claiming for months that they had been, bolstering their case with bits of repeated gossip and distorted description.

I had finally got my hands on Mary long enough to force another strong dose of poppy juice down her throat. She collapsed in a pitiful heap of bloodstained clothes, leaving me free to turn my attention to the three-sided argument going on among Jamie, the General, and Mr. Hawkins. Alex had the good sense to stay unconscious, and I arranged his limp form neatly alongside Mary's on the landing, like a couple of dead mackerel. They looked like Romeo and Juliet laid out in the public square as a reproach to their relatives, but the resemblance was lost on Mr. Hawkins.

"Ruined!" he kept shrieking. "You've ruined my niece! The Vicomte will never have her now! Filthy Scottish prick! You and your strumpet"—he swung on me—"whore! Procuress! Seducing innocent young girls into your vile clutches for the pleasure of bastardly scum! You—" Jamie, with a certain long-suffering grimness, put a hand on Mr. Hawkins's shoulders, turned him about, and hit him, just under the fleshy jaw. Then he stood abstractedly rubbing his abused knuckles, watching as the stout wine merchant's eyes rolled upward. Mr. Hawkins fell back against the paneling and slid gently down the wall into a sitting position.

Jamie turned a cold blue gaze on General d'Arbanville, who, observing the fate of the fallen, wisely put down the wine bottle he had been waving, and took a step back.

"Oh, go ahead," urged a voice behind my shoulder. "Why stop now, Tuarach? Hit all three of them! Make a clean sweep of it!" The General and Jamie focused a glance of united dislike on the dapper form behind me.

"Go away, St. Germain," Jamie said. "This is none of your affair." He sounded weary, but raised his voice in order to be heard above the uproar below. The shoulder seams of his coat had been split, and folds of his linen shirt showed white through the rents.

St. Germain's thin lips curved upward in a charming smile. Plainly the Comte was having the time of his life.

"Not my affair? How can such happenings not be the affair of every public-spirited man?" His amused gaze swept the landing, littered with bodies. "After all, if a guest of His Majesty has so perverted the meaning of hospitality as to maintain a brothel in his house, is that not the—no, you don't!" he said, as Jamie took a step toward him. A blade gleamed suddenly in his hand, appearing as though by magic from the ruffled lace cascading over his wrist. I saw Jamie's lip curl slightly, and he shifted his shoulders inside the ruins of his coat, settling himself for battle.

"Stop it at once!" said an imperious voice, and the two Duverneys, older and younger, pushed their way onto the already overcrowded landing. Duverney the younger turned and waved his arms commandingly at the herd of people on the stairs, who were sufficiently cowed by his scowl to move back a step.

"You," said the elder Duverney, pointing at St. Germain. "If you have any feeling of public spirit, as you suggest, you will employ yourself usefully in removing some of those below."

St. Germain locked eyes with the banker, but after a moment, the noble shrugged, and the dagger disappeared. St. Germain turned without comment and made his way downstairs, pushing those before him and loudly urging them to leave.

Despite his exhortations, and those of Gérard, the younger Duverney, behind him, the bulk of the dinner guests departed, brimming with scandal, only upon the arrival of the King's Guard.

Mr. Hawkins, recovered by this time, at once lodged a charge of kidnapping and pandering against Jamie. For a moment, I really thought Jamie was going to hit him again; his muscles bunched under the azure velvet, but then relaxed as he thought better of it.

After a considerable amount of confused argument and explanation, Jamie agreed to go to the Guard's headquarters in the Bastille, there—perhaps—to explain himself.

Alex Randall, white-faced, sweating, and clearly having no idea what was going on, was taken, too—the Duke had not waited to see the fate of his secretary, but had discreetly summoned his coach and left before the arrival of the Guard. Whatever his diplomatic mission, being involved in a scandal wouldn't help it. Mary Hawkins, still insensible, was removed to her uncle's house, wrapped in a blanket.

I had narrowly avoided being included in the roundup when Jamie flatly refused to allow it, insisting that I was in a delicate condition and could on no account be removed to a prison. At last, seeing that Jamie was more than willing to start hitting people again in order to prove his point, the Guard Captain relented, on condition that I agreed not to leave the city. While the thought of fleeing Paris had its attractions, I could hardly leave without Jamie, and gave my *parole d'honneur* with no reservations.

As the group milled confusedly about the foyer, lighting lanterns and gathering hats and cloaks, I saw Murtagh, bruised face set grimly, hovering on the outskirts of the mob. Plainly he intended to accompany Jamie, wherever he was going, and I felt a quick stab of relief. At least my husband wouldn't be alone.

"Dinna worry yourself, Sassenach." He hugged me briefly, whispering in my ear. "I'll be back in no time. If anything goes wrong …" He hesitated, then said firmly, "It wilna be necessary, but if ye need a friend, go to Louise de La Tour."

"I will." I had no time for more than a glancing kiss, before the Guardsmen closed in about him.

The doors of the house swung open, and I saw Jamie glance behind him, catch sight of Murtagh, and open his mouth as though to say something. Murtagh, setting hands to his swordbelt, glared fiercely and pushed his way toward Jamie, nearly shoving the younger Duverney into the street. A short, silent battle of wills ensued, conducted entirely by means of ferocious glares, and then Jamie shrugged and tossed up his hands in resignation.

He stepped out into the street, ignoring the Guardsmen who pressed close on all sides, but stopped at sight of a small figure standing near the gate. He stooped and said something, then straightened, turned toward the house and gave me a smile, clearly visible in the lanternlight. Then, with a nod to the elder Monsieur Duverney, he stepped into the waiting coach and was borne away, Murtagh clinging to the rear of the carriage.

Fergus stood in the street, looking after the coach as long as it was in sight. Then, mounting the steps with a firm tread, he took me by the hand and led me inside.

"Come, milady," he said. "Milord has said I am to care for you, 'til his return."

* * *

Now Fergus slipped into the salon, the door closing silently behind him.

"I have made the rounds of the house, milady," he whispered. "All buttoned up." Despite the worry, I smiled at his tone, so obviously an imitation of Jamie's. His idol had entrusted him with a responsibility, and he plainly took his duties seriously.

Having escorted me to the sitting room, he had gone to make the rounds of the house as Jamie did each night, checking the fastenings of the shutters, the bars on the outer doors—which I knew he could barely lift—and the banking of the fires. He had a smudge of soot from forehead to cheekbone on one side, but had rubbed his eye with a fist at one point, so his eye blinked out of a clear white ring, like a small raccoon.

"You should rest, milady," he said. "Don't worry, I'll be here."

I didn't laugh, but smiled at him. "I couldn't sleep, Fergus. I'll just sit here for a bit. Perhaps you should go to bed, though; you've had an awfully long night of it." I was reluctant to order him to bed, not wanting to impair his new dignity as temporary man of the house, but he was clearly exhausted. The small, bony shoulders drooped, and dark smudges showed beneath his eyes, darker even than the coating of soot.

He yawned unashamedly, but shook his head.

"No, milady. I will stay with you … if you do not mind?" he added hastily.

"I don't mind." In fact, he was too tired either to talk or to fidget in his usual manner, and his sleepy presence on the hassock was comforting, like that of a cat or a dog.

I sat gazing into the low-burning flames, trying to conjure up some semblance of serenity. I tried summoning images of still pools, forest glades, even the dark peace of the Abbey chapel, but nothing seemed to be working; over all the images of peace lay those of the evening: hard hands and gleaming teeth, coming out of a darkness filled with fear; Mary's white and stricken face, a twin to Alex Randall's; the flare of hatred in Mr. Hawkins's piggy eyes; the sudden mistrust on the faces of the General and the Duverneys; St. Germain's ill-concealed delight in scandal, shimmering with malice like the crystal drops of the chandeliers. And last of all, Jamie's smile, reassurance and uncertainty mingled in the shifting light of jostling lanterns.

What if he didn't come back? That was the thought I had been trying to suppress, ever since they took him away. If he was unable to clear himself of the charge? If the magistrate was one of those suspicious of foreigners—well, more suspicious than usual, I amended—he could easily be imprisoned indefinitely. And above and beyond the fear that this unlooked-for crisis could undo all the careful work of the last weeks, was the image of Jamie in a cell like the one where I had found him at Wentworth. In light of the present crisis, the news that Charles Stuart was investing in wine seemed trivial.

Left alone, I now had plenty of time to think, but my thoughts didn't seem to be getting me anywhere. Who or what was "La Dame Blanche"? What sort of "white lady," and why had the mention of that name made the attackers run off?

Thinking back over the subsequent events of the dinner party, I remembered the General's remarks about the criminal gangs that roamed the streets of Paris, and how some of them included members of the nobility. That was consistent with the speech and the dress of the leader of the men who had attacked me and Mary, though his companions seemed a good deal rougher in aspect. I tried to think whether the man reminded me of anyone I knew, but the memory of him was indistinct, clouded by darkness and the receding haze of shock.

In general form, he had been not unlike the Comte St. Germain, though surely the voice was different. But then, if the Comte was involved, surely he would take pains to disguise his voice as well as his face? At the same time, I found it almost impossible to believe that the Comte could have taken part in such an attack, and then sat calmly across the table from me two hours later, sipping soup.

I ran my fingers through my hair in frustration. There was nothing that could be done before morning. If morning came, and Jamie didn't, then I could begin to make the rounds of acquaintances and presumed friends, one of whom might have news or help to offer. But for the hours of the night, I was helpless; powerless to move as a dragonfly in amber.

My fingers jammed against one of the decorated hairpins, and I yanked at it impatiently. Tangled in my hair, it stuck.

"Ouch!"

"Here, milady. I'll get it."

I hadn't heard him pass behind me, but I felt Fergus's small, clever fingers in my hair, disentangling the tiny ornament. He laid it aside, then, hesitating, said, "The others, milady?"

"Oh, thank you, Fergus," I said, grateful. "If you wouldn't mind."

His pickpocket's touch was light and sure, and the thick locks began to fall around my face, released from their moorings. Little by little, my breathing slowed as my hair came down.

"You are worried, milady?" said the small, soft voice behind me.

"Yes," I said, too tired to keep up a false bravado.

"Me, too," he said simply.

The last of the hairpins clinked on the table, and I slumped in the chair, eyes closed. Then I felt a touch again, and realized that he was brushing my hair, gently combing out the tangles.

"You permit, milady?" he said, feeling it as I tensed in surprise. "The ladies used to say it helped them, if they were feeling worried or upset."

I relaxed again under the soothing touch.

"I permit," I said. "Thank you." After a moment, I said, "What ladies, Fergus?"

There was a momentary hesitation, as of a spider disturbed in the building of a web, and then the delicate ordering of strands resumed.

"At the place where I used to sleep, milady. I couldn't come out because of the customers, but Madame Elise would let me sleep in a closet under the stairs, if I was quiet. And after all the men had gone, near morning, then I would come out and sometimes the ladies would share their breakfast with me. I would help them with the fastening of their underthings—they said I had the best touch of anyone," he added, with some pride, "and I would comb their hair, if they liked."

"Mm." The soft whisper of the brush through my hair was hypnotic. Without the clock on the mantel, there was no telling time, but the silence of the street outside meant it was very late indeed.

"How did you come to sleep at Madame Elise's, Fergus?" I asked, barely suppressing a yawn.

"I was born there, milady," he answered. The strokes of the brush grew slower, and his voice was growing drowsy. "I used to wonder which of the ladies was my mother, but I never found out."

The opening of the sitting-room door woke me. Jamie stood there, red-eyed and white-faced with fatigue, but smiling in the first gray light of the day.

"I was afraid you weren't coming back," I said, a moment later, into the top of his head. His hair had the faint acrid scent of stale smoke and tallow, and his coat had completed its descent into total disreputability, but he was warm and solid, and I wasn't disposed to be critical about the smell of the head I was cradling next my bosom.

"So was I," he said, somewhat muffled, and I could feel his smile. The arms around my waist tightened and released, and he sat back, smoothing my hair out of my eyes.

"God, you are so beautiful," he said softly. "Unkempt and unslept, wi' the waves of your hair all about your face. Bonny love. Have ye sat here all night long, then?"

"I wasn't the only one." I motioned toward the floor, where Fergus lay curled up on the carpet, head on a cushion by my feet. He shifted slightly in his sleep, mouth open a bit, soft pink and full-lipped as the baby he so nearly was.

Jamie laid a big hand gently on his shoulder.

"Come on, then, laddie. Ye've done well to guard your mistress." He scooped the boy up and laid him against his shoulder, mumbling and sleepy-eyed. "You're a good man, Fergus, and ye've earned your rest. Come on to your bed." I saw Fergus's eyes flare wide in surprise, then half-close as he relaxed, nodding in Jamie's arms.

I had opened the shutters and rekindled the fire by the time Jamie returned to the sitting room. He had shed his ruined coat, but still wore the rest of last night's finery.

"Here." I handed him a glass of wine, and he drank it standing, in three gulps, shuddered, then collapsed onto the small sofa, and held out the cup for more.

"Not a drop," I said, "until you tell me what's going on. You aren't in prison, so I assume everything's all right, but—"

"Not all right, Sassenach," he interrupted, "but it could be worse."

After a great deal of argument to and fro—a good deal of it Mr. Hawkins's reiterations of his original impressions—the judge-magistrate who had been hustled out of his cozy bed to preside over this impromptu investigation had ruled grumpily that since Alex Randall was one of the accused, he could hardly be considered an impartial witness. Nor could I, as the wife and possible accomplice of the other accused. Murtagh had been, by his own testimony, insensible during the alleged attack, and the child Claudel was not legally capable of bearing witness.

Clearly, Monsieur le Juge had said, aiming a vicious glare at the Guard Captain, the only person capable of providing the truth of the matter was Mary Hawkins, who was by all accounts incapable of doing so at the present time. Therefore, all the accused should be locked up in the Bastille until such time as Mademoiselle Hawkins could be interviewed, and surely Monsieur le Capitaine should have been able to think that out for himself?

“Then why aren’t you locked up in the Bastille?” I asked.

“Monsieur Duverney the elder offered security for me,” Jamie replied, pulling me down onto the sofa beside him. “He sat rolled up in the corner like a hedgehog, all through the clishmaclaver. Then when the judge made his decision, he stood up and said that, having had the opportunity to play chess with me on several occasions, he didna feel that I was of a moral character so dissolute as to permit of my having conspired in the commission of an act so depraved—” He broke off and shrugged.

“Well, ye ken what he talks like, once he’s got going. The general idea was that a man who could take him at chess six times in seven wouldna lure innocent young lasses to his house to be defiled.”

“Very logical,” I said dryly. “I imagine what he really meant was, if they locked you up, you wouldn’t be able to play with him anymore.”

“I expect so,” he agreed. He stretched, yawned, and blinked at me, smiling.

“But I’m home, and right now, I don’t greatly care why. Come here to me, Sassenach.” Grasping my waist with both hands, he boosted me onto his lap, wrapped his arms around me, and sighed with pleasure.

"All I want to do," he murmured in my ear, "is to shed these filthy clouts, and lie wi' you on the hearthrug, go to sleep straight after, with my head on your shoulder, and stay that way 'til tomorrow."

"Rather an inconvenience to the servants," I remarked. "They'll have to sweep round us."

"Damn the servants," he said comfortably. "What are doors for?"

"To be knocked on, evidently," I said as a soft rap sounded outside.

Jamie paused a moment, nose buried in my hair, then sighed, and raised his head, sliding me off his lap onto the sofa.

"Thirty seconds," he promised me in an undertone, then said, *"Entrez!"* in a louder voice.

The door swung open and Murtagh stepped into the room. I had rather overlooked Murtagh in the bustles and confusion of the night before, and now thought to myself that his appearance had not been improved by neglect.

He lacked as much sleep as Jamie; the one eye that was open was red-rimmed and bloodshot. The other had darkened to the color of a rotten banana, a slit of glittering black visible in the puffed flesh. The knot on his forehead had now achieved full prominence: a purple goose-egg just over one brow, with a nasty split through it.

The little clansman had said barely a word since his release from the bag the night before. Beyond a brief inquiry as to the whereabouts of his knives—retrieved by Fergus, who, questing in his usual rat-terrier fashion, had found both dirk and *sgian dhu* behind a pile of rubbish—he had preserved a grim silence through the exigencies of our getaway, guarding the rear as we hurried on foot through the dim Paris alleys. And once arrived at the house, a piercing glance from his operating eye had been sufficient to quell any injudicious questions from the kitchen servants.

I supposed he must have said something at the *commissariat de police* if only to bear witness to the good character of his employer—though I did wonder just how much credibility I would be inclined to place in Murtagh, were I a French judge. But now he was silent as the gargoyles on Notre Dame, one of which he strongly resembled.

However disreputable his appearance, though, Murtagh never seemed to lack for dignity, nor did he now. Back straight as a ramrod, he advanced across the carpet, and knelt formally before Jamie, who looked nonplussed at this behavior.

The wiry little man drew the dirk from his belt, without flourishes, but with a good deal of deliberateness, and held it out, haft first. The bony, seamed face was expressionless, but the one black eye rested unwaveringly on Jamie's face.

"I've failed ye," the little man said quietly. "And I'll ask ye, as my chief, to take my life now, so I needna live longer wi' the shame of it."

Jamie drew himself slowly upright, and I felt him push away his own tiredness as he brought his gaze to bear on his retainer. He was quite still for a moment, hands resting on his knees. Then he reached out and placed one hand gently over the purple knot on Murtagh's head.

"There's nay shame to ha' fallen in battle, *mo caraidh,*" he said softly. "The greatest of warriors may be overcome."

But the little man shook his head stubbornly, black eye unwinking.

"Nay," he said. "I didna fall in battle. Ye gave me your trust; your own lady and your child unborn to guard, and the wee English lassie as well. And I gave the task sae little heed that I had nay chance to strike a blow when the danger came. Truth to tell, I didna even see the hand that struck me down." He did blink then, once.

"Treachery—" Jamie began.

"And now see what's come of it," Murtagh interrupted. I had never heard him speak so many words in a row in all the time I had known him. "Your good name smirched, your wife attacked, and the wee lass …" The thin line of his mouth clamped tight for a moment, and his stringy throat bobbed once as he swallowed. "For that alone, the bitter sorrow chokes me."

"Aye." Jamie spoke softly, nodding. "Aye, I do see, man. I feel it, too." He touched his chest briefly, over his heart. The two men might have been alone together, their heads inches apart as Jamie bent toward the older man. Hands folded in my lap, I neither moved nor spoke; it was not my affair.

"But I'm no your chief, man," Jamie went on, in a firmer tone. "Ye've sworn me no vow, and I hold nay power ower ye."

"Aye, that ye do." Murtagh's voice was firm as well, and the haft of the dirk never trembled.

"But—"

"I swore ye my oath, Jamie Fraser, when ye were no more than a week old, and a bonny lad at your mother's breast."

I could feel the tiny start of astonishment as Jamie's eyes opened wide.

"I knelt at Ellen's feet, as I kneel now by yours," the little clansman went on, narrow chin held high. "And I swore to her by the name o' the threefold God, that I would follow ye always, to do your bidding, and guard your back, when ye became a man grown, and needing such service." The harsh voice softened then, and the eyelid drooped over the one tired eye.

"Aye, lad. I do cherish ye as the son of my own loins. But I have betrayed your service."

"That ye havena and never could." Jamie's hands rested on Murtagh's shoulders, squeezing firmly. "Nay, I wilna have your life from ye, for I've need of ye still. But I will lay an oath on ye, and you'll take it."

There was a long moment's hesitation, then the spiky black head nodded imperceptibly.

Jamie's voice dropped still further, but it was not a whisper. Holding the middle three fingers of his right hand stiff, he laid them together over the hilt of the dirk, at the juncture of haft and tang.

"I charge ye, then, by your oath to me and your word to my mother—find the men. Hunt them, and when they be found, I do charge ye wi' the vengeance due my wife's honor—and the blood of Mary Hawkins's innocence."

He paused a moment, then took his hand from the knife. The clansman raised it, holding it upright by the blade. Acknowledging my presence for the first time, he bowed his head toward me and said, “As the laird has spoken, lady, so I will do. I will lay vengeance at your feet.”

I licked dry lips, not knowing what to say. No response seemed necessary, though; he brought the dirk to his lips and kissed it, then straightened with decision and thrust it home in its sheath.

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LA DAME BLANCHE

The dawn had broadened into day by the time we had changed our clothes, and breakfast was on its way up the stairs from the kitchen.

"What I want to know," I said, pouring out the chocolate, "is who in bloody hell is La Dame Blanche?"

"La Dame Blanche?" Magnus, leaning over my shoulder with a basket of hot bread, started so abruptly that one of the rolls fell out of the basket. I fielded it neatly and turned round to look up at the butler, who was looking rather shaken.

"Yes, that's right," I said. "You've heard the name, Magnus?"

"Why, yes, milady," the old man answered. "La Dame Blanche is *une sorcière*."

"A sorceress?" I said incredulously.

Magnus shrugged, tucking in the napkin around the rolls with excessive care, not looking at me.

"The White Lady," he murmured. "She is called a wisewoman, a healer. And yet … she sees to the center of a man, and can turn his soul to ashes, if evil be found there." He bobbed his head, turned, and shuffled off hastily in the direction of the kitchen. I saw his elbow bob, and realized that he was crossing himself as he went.

"Jesus H. Christ," I said, turning back to Jamie. "Did you ever hear of La Dame Blanche?"

"Um? Oh? Oh, aye, I've … heard the stories." Jamie's eyes were hidden by long auburn lashes as he buried his nose in his cup of chocolate, but the blush on his cheeks was too deep to be put down to the heat of the rising steam.

I leaned back in my chair, crossed my arms, and regarded him narrowly.

"Oh, you have?" I said. "Would it surprise you to hear that the men who attacked Mary and me last night referred to me as La Dame Blanche?"

"They did?" He looked up quickly at that, startled.

I nodded. "They took one look at me in the light, shouted 'La Dame Blanche,' and then ran off as though they'd just noticed I had plague."

Jamie took a deep breath and let it out slowly. The red color was fading from his face, leaving it pale as the white china plate before him.

"God in heaven," he said, half to himself. "God … in … heaven!"

I leaned across the table and took the cup from his hand.

"Would you like to tell me just what you know about La Dame Blanche?" I suggested gently.

"Well …" He hesitated, but then looked at me sheepishly. "It's only … I told Glengarry that you were La Dame Blanche."

"You told Glengarry *what*?" I choked on the bite of roll I had taken. Jamie pounded me helpfully on the back.

"Well, it was Glengarry and Castellotti, was what it was," he said defensively. "I mean, playing at cards and dice is one thing, but they wouldna leave it at that. And they thought it verra funny that I'd wish to be faithful to my wife. They said … well, they said a number of things, and I … I got rather tired of it." He looked away, the tips of his ears burning.

"Mm," I said, sipping tea. Having heard Castellotti's tongue in action, I could imagine the sort of merciless teasing Jamie had taken.

He drained his own cup at one swallow, then occupied himself with carefully refilling it, keeping his eyes fixed on the pot to avoid meeting mine. "But I couldna just walk out and leave them, either, could I?" he demanded. "I had to stay with His Highness through the evening, and it would do no good to have him thinkin' me unmanly."

“So you told them I was La Dame Blanche,” I said, trying hard to keep any hint of laughter out of my voice. “And if you tried any funny business with ladies of the evening, I’d shrivel your private parts.”

“Er, well …”

“My God, they *believed* it?” I could feel my own face flushing as hotly as Jamie’s, with the effort to control myself.

“I was verra convincing about it,” he said, one corner of his mouth beginning to twitch. “Swore them all to secrecy on their mothers’ lives.”

“And how much did you all have to drink before this?”

“Oh, a fair bit. I waited ’til the fourth bottle.”

I gave up the struggle and burst out laughing.

“Oh, Jamie!” I said. “You darling!” I leaned over and kissed his furiously blushing cheek.

“Well,” he said awkwardly, slathering butter over a chunk of bread. “It was the best I could think of. And they did stop pushing trollops into my arms.”

“Good,” I said. I took the bread from him, added honey, and gave it back.

“I can hardly complain about it,” I observed. “Since in addition to guarding your virtue, it seems to have kept me from being raped.”

“Aye, thank God.” He set down the roll and grasped my hand. “Christ, if anything had happened to you, Sassenach, I’d—”

“Yes,” I interrupted, “but if the men who attacked us knew I was supposed to be La Dame Blanche …”

“Aye, Sassenach.” He nodded down at me. “It canna have been either Glengarry nor Castellotti, for they were with me at the house where Fergus came to fetch me when you were attacked. But it must have been someone they told of it.”

I couldn’t repress a slight shiver at the memory of the white mask and the mocking voice behind it.

With a sigh, he let go of my hand. “Which means, I suppose, that I’d best go and see Glengarry, and find out just how many people he’s been regaling wi’ tales of my married life.” He rubbed a hand through his hair in exasperation. “And then I must go call on His

Highness, and find out what in hell he means by this arrangement with the Comte St. Germain."

"I suppose so," I said thoughtfully, "though knowing Glengarry, he's probably told half of Paris by now. I have some calls to make this afternoon, myself."

"Oh, aye? And who are you going to call upon, Sassenach?" he asked, eyeing me narrowly. I took a deep breath, bracing myself at the thought of the ordeal that lay ahead.

"First, on Master Raymond," I said. "And then, on Mary Hawkins."

* * *

"Lavender, perhaps?" Raymond stood on tiptoe to take a jar from the shelf. "Not for application, but the aroma is soothing; it calms the nerves."

"Well, that depends on whose nerves are involved," I said, recalling Jamie's reaction to the scent of lavender. It was the scent Jack Randall had favored, and Jamie found exposure to the herb's perfume anything but soothing. "In this case, though, it might help. Do no harm, at any rate."

"Do no harm," he quoted thoughtfully. "A very sound principle."

"That's the first bit of the Hippocratic Oath, you know," I said, watching him as he bent to rummage in his drawers and bins. "The oath a physician swears. 'First, do no harm.' "

"Ah? And have you sworn this oath yourself, madonna?" The bright, amphibious eyes blinked at me over the edge of the high counter.

I felt myself flushing before that unblinking gaze.

"Er, well, no. Not actually. I'm not a real physician. Not yet." I couldn't have said what made me add that last sentence.

"No? Yet you are seeking to mend that which a 'real' physician would never try, knowing that a lost maidenhead is not restorable." His irony was evident.

"Oh, isn't it?" I answered dryly. Fergus had, with encouragement, told me quite a bit about the "ladies" at Madame Elise's house. "What's that bit with the shoat's bladder full of chicken blood, hm?

Or do you claim that things like that fall into an apothecary's realm of competence, but not a physician's?"

He had no eyebrows to speak of, but the heavy shelf of his forehead lifted slightly when he was amused.

"And who is harmed by that, madonna? Surely not the seller. Not the buyer, either—he is likely to get more enjoyment for his money than the purchaser of the genuine article. Not even the maidenhead itself is harmed! Surely a very moral and Hippocratic endeavor, which any physician might be pleased to assist?"

I laughed. "And I expect you know more than a few who do?" I said. "I'll take the matter up with the next Medical Review Board I see. In the meantime, short of manufactured miracles, what can we do in the present case?"

"Mm." He laid out a gauze square on the counter and poured a handful of finely shredded dried leaves into the center of it. A sharp, pleasant tang rose from the small heap of grayish-green vegetation.

"This is Saracen's consound," he said, skilfully folding the gauze into a tidy square with the ends tucked in. "Good for soothing irritated skin, minor lacerations, and sores of the privy parts. Useful, I think?"

"Yes, indeed," I said, a little grimly. "As an infusion or a decoction?"

"Infusion. Warm, probably, under the circumstances." He turned to another shelf and abstracted one of the large white jars of painted porcelain. This one said CHELIDONIUM on the side.

"For the inducement of sleep," he explained. His lipless mouth stretched back at the corners. "I think perhaps you had better avoid the use of the opium-poppy derivatives; this particular patient appears to have an unpredictable response to them."

"Heard all about it already, have you?" I said resignedly. I could hardly have hoped he hadn't. I was well aware that information was one of the more important commodities he sold; consequently the little shop was a nexus for gossip from dozens of sources, from street vendors to gentlemen of the Royal Bedchamber.

"From three separate sources," Raymond replied. He glanced out the window, craning his neck to see the huge *horloge* that hung from the wall of the building near the corner. “And it’s barely two o’clock. I expect I will hear several more versions of the events at your dinner before nightfall.” The wide, gummy mouth opened, and a soft chuckle emerged. “I particularly liked the version in which your husband challenged General d’Arbanville to a duel in the street, while you more pragmatically offered Monsieur le Comte the enjoyment of the unconscious girl’s body, if he would refrain from calling the King’s Guard.”

“Mmphm,” I said, sounding self-consciously Scottish. “Have you any particular interest in knowing what actually *did* happen?”

The horned-poppy tonic, a pale amber in the afternoon sunlight, sparkled as he poured it into a small vial.

“The truth is always of use, madonna,” he answered, eyes fixed on the slender stream. “It has the value of rarity, you know.” He set the porcelain jar on the counter with a soft thump. “And thus is worth a fair price in exchange,” he added. The money for the medicines I had bought was lying on the counter, the coins gleaming in the sun. I narrowed my eyes at him, but he merely smiled blandly, as though he had never heard of froglegs in garlic butter.

The *horloge* outside struck two. I calculated the distance to the Hawkins’s house in Rue Malory. Barely half an hour, if I could get a carriage. Plenty of time.

“In that case,” I said, “shall we step into your private room for a bit?”

“And that’s it,” I said, taking a long sip of cherry brandy. The fumes in the workroom were nearly as strong as those rising from my glass, and I could feel my head expanding under their influence, rather like a large, cheerful red balloon. “They let Jamie go, but we’re still under suspicion. I can’t imagine that will last long, though, do you?”

Raymond shook his head. A draft stirred the crocodile overhead, and he rose to shut the window.

“No. A nuisance, nothing more. Monsieur Hawkins has money and friends, and of course he is distraught, but still. Plainly you and your husband were guilty of nothing more than excessive kindness, in trying to keep the girl's misfortune a secret." He took a deep swallow from his own glass.

"And that is your concern at present, of course. The girl?"

I nodded. "One of them. There's nothing I can do about her reputation at this point. All I can do is try to help her to heal."

A sardonic black eye peered over the rim of the metal goblet he was holding.

"Most physicians of my acquaintance would say, 'All I can do is try to heal her.' You will help her to heal? It's interesting that you perceive the difference, madonna. I thought you would."

I set down the cup, feeling that I had had enough. Heat was radiating from my cheeks, and I had the distinct feeling that the tip of my nose was pink.

"I told you I'm not a real physician." I closed my eyes briefly, determined that I could still tell which way was up, and opened them again. "Besides, I've … er, dealt with a case of rape once before. There isn't a great deal you can do, externally. Maybe there isn't a great deal you can do, period," I added. I changed my mind and picked up the cup again.

"Perhaps not," Raymond agreed. "But if anyone is capable of reaching the patient's center, surely it would be La Dame Blanche?"

I set the cup down, staring at him. My mouth was unbecomingly open, and I closed it. Thoughts, suspicions, and realizations were rioting through my head, colliding with each other in tangles of conjecture. Temporarily sidestepping the traffic jam, I seized on the other half of his remark, to give me time to think.

"The patient's center?"

He reached into an open jar on the table, withdrew a pinch of white powder, and dropped it into his goblet. The deep amber of the brandy immediately turned the color of blood, and began to boil.

"Dragon's blood," he remarked, casually waving at the bubbling liquid. "It only works in a vessel lined with silver. It ruins the cup, of course, but it's most effective, done under the proper circumstances."

I made a small, gurgling noise.

"Oh, the patient's center," he said, as though recalling something we had talked about many days ago. "Yes, of course. All healing is done essentially by reaching the … what shall we call it? the soul? the essence? say, the center. By reaching the patient's center, from which they can heal themselves. Surely you have seen it, madonna. The cases so ill or so wounded that plainly they will die—but they don't. Or those who suffer from something so slight that surely they must recover, with the proper care. But they slip away, despite all you can do for them."

"Everyone who minds the sick has seen things like that," I replied cautiously.

"Yes," he agreed. "And the pride of the physician being what it is, most often he blames himself for those that die, and congratulates himself upon the triumph of his skill for those that live. But La Dame Blanche sees the essence of a man, and turns it to healing—or to death. So an evildoer may well fear to look upon her face." He picked up the cup, raised it in a toast to me, and drained the bubbling liquid. It left a faint pink stain on his lips.

"Thanks," I said dryly. "I think. So it wasn't just Glengarry's gullibility?"

Raymond shrugged, looking pleased with himself. "The inspiration was your husband's," he said modestly. "And a really excellent idea, too. But of course, while your husband has the respect of men for his own natural gifts, he would not be considered an authority on supernatural manifestations."

"You, of course, *would*."

The massive shoulders lifted slightly under the gray velvet robe. There were several small holes in one sleeve, charred around the edges, as though a number of tiny coals had burned their way through. Carelessness while conjuring, I supposed.

"You have been seen in my shop," he pointed out. "Your background is a mystery. And as your husband noted, my own reputation is somewhat suspect. I do move in … circles, shall we say?"—the lipless mouth broadened in a grin—"where a speculation as to your true identity may be taken with undue seriousness. And you know how people talk," he added with an air of prim disapproval that made me burst out laughing.

He set down the cup and leaned forward.

"You said that Mademoiselle Hawkins's health was *one* concern, madonna. Have you others?"

"I have." I took a small sip of brandy. "I'd guess that you hear a great deal about what goes on in Paris, don't you?"

He smiled, black eyes sharp and genial. "Oh, yes, madonna. What is it that you want to know?"

"Have you heard anything about Charles Stuart? Do you know who he is, for that matter?"

That surprised him; the shelf of his forehead lifted briefly. Then he picked up a small glass bottle from the table in front of him, rolling it meditatively between his palms.

"Yes, madonna," he said. "His father is—or should be—King of Scotland, is he not?"

"Well, that depends on your perspective," I said, stifling a small belch. "He's either the King of Scotland in exile, or the Pretender to the throne, but that's of no great concern to me. What I want to know is … is Charles Stuart doing anything that would make one think he might be planning an armed invasion of Scotland or England?"

He laughed out loud.

"Goodness, madonna! You are a most uncommon woman. Have you any idea how rare such directness is?"

"Yes," I admitted, "but there isn't really any help for it. I'm not good at beating round bushes." I reached out and took the bottle from him. "*Have* you heard anything?"

He glanced instinctively toward the half-door, but the shopgirl was occupied in mixing perfume for a voluble customer.

"Something small, madonna, only a casual mention in a letter from a friend—but the answer is most definitely yes."

I could see him hesitating in how much to tell me. I kept my eyes on the bottle in my hand, to give him time to make up his mind. The contents rolled with a pleasant sensation as the little vial twisted in my palm. It was oddly heavy for its size, and had a strange, dense, fluid feel to it, as though it was filled with liquid metal.

"It's quicksilver," Master Raymond said, answering my unspoken question. Apparently whatever mind-reading he had been doing had decided him in my favor, for he took back the bottle, poured it out in a shimmering silver puddle on the table before us, and sat back to tell me what he knew.

"One of His Highness's agents has made inquiries in Holland," he said. "A man named O'Brien—and a man more inept at his job I hope never to employ," he added. "A secret agent who drinks to excess?"

"Everyone around Charles Stuart drinks to excess," I said. "What was O'Brien doing?"

"He wished to open negotiations for a shipment of broadswords. Two thousand broadswords, to be purchased in Spain, and sent through Holland, so as to conceal their place of origin."

"Why would he do that?" I asked. I wasn't sure whether I was naturally stupid, or merely fuddled with cherry brandy, but it seemed a pointless undertaking, even for Charles Stuart.

Raymond shrugged, prodding the puddle of quicksilver with a blunt forefinger.

"One can guess, madonna. The Spanish king is a cousin of the Scottish king, is he not? As well as of our good King Louis?"

"Yes, but …"

"Might it not be that he is willing to help the cause of the Stuarts, but not openly?"

The brandy haze was receding from my brain.

"It might."

Raymond tapped his finger sharply downward, making the puddle of quicksilver shiver into several small round globules, that shimmied wildly over the tabletop.

"One hears," he said mildly, eyes still on the droplets of mercury, "that King Louis entertains an English duke at Versailles. One hears also that the Duke is there to seek some arrangements of trade. But then it is rare to hear *everything*, madonna."

I stared at the rippling drops of mercury, fitting all this together. Jamie, too, had heard the rumor that Sandringham's embassage concerned more than trade rights. What if the Duke's visit really concerned the possibilities of an agreement between France and England—perhaps with regard to the future of Brussels? And if Louis was negotiating secretly with England for support for his invasion of Brussels—then what might Philip of Spain be inclined to do, if approached by an impecunious cousin with the power to distract the English most thoroughly from any attention to foreign ventures?

"Three Bourbon cousins," Raymond murmured to himself. He shepherded one of the drops toward another; as the droplets touched, they merged at once, a single shining drop springing into rounded life as though by magic. The prodding finger urged another droplet inward, and the single drop grew larger. "One blood. But one interest?"

The finger struck down again, and glittering fragments ran over the tabletop in every direction.

"I think not, madonna," Raymond said calmly.

"I see," I said, with a deep breath. "And what do you think about Charles Stuart's new partnership with the Comte St. Germain?"

The wide amphibian smile grew broader.

"I have heard that His Highness goes often to the docks these days—to talk with his new partner, of course. And he looks at the ships at anchor—so fine and quick, so … expensive. The land of Scotland *does* lie across the water, does it not?"

"It does indeed," I said. A ray of light hit the quicksilver with a flash, attracting my attention to the lowering sun. I would have to go.

"Thank you," I said. "Will you send word? If you hear anything more?"

He inclined his massive head graciously, the swinging hair the color of mercury in the sun, then jerked it up abruptly.

"Ah! Do not touch the quicksilver, madonna!" he warned as I reached toward a droplet that had rolled toward my edge of the table. "It bonds at once with any metal it touches." He reached across and tenderly scooped the tiny pellet toward him. “You do not wish to spoil your lovely rings.”

“Right,” I said. “Well, I’ll admit you’ve been helpful so far. No one’s tried to poison me lately. I don’t suppose you and Jamie between you are likely to get me burnt for witchcraft in the Place de la Bastille, do you?” I spoke lightly, but my memories of the thieves’ hole and the trial at Cranesmuir were still fresh.

“Certainly not,” he said, with dignity. “No one’s been burnt for witchcraft in Paris in … oh, twenty years, at least. You’re perfectly safe. As long as you don’t kill anyone,” he added.

“I’ll do my best,” I said, and rose to go.

Fergus found me a carriage with no difficulty, and I spent the short trip to the Hawkins house musing over recent developments. I supposed that Raymond had in fact done me a service by expanding on Jamie’s original wild story to his more superstitious clients, though the thought of having my name bandied about in séances or Black Masses left me with some misgivings.

It also occurred to me that, rushed for time, and beset with speculations of kings and swords and ships, I had not had time to ask Master Raymond where—if anywhere—the Comte St. Germain entered into his own realm of influence.

Public opinion seemed to place the Comte firmly in the center of the mysterious “circles” to which Raymond referred. But as a participant—or a rival? And did the ripples of these circles spread as far as the King’s chamber? Louis was rumored to take interest in astrology; could there be some connection, through the dark channels of Cabbalism and sorcery, among Louis, the Comte, and Charles Stuart?

I shook my head impatiently, to clear it of brandy fumes and pointless questions. The only thing that could be said for certain was that he had entered into a dangerous partnership with Charles Stuart, and that was concern enough for the present.

The Hawkins residence on the Rue Malory was a solid, respectable-looking house of three stories, but its internal disruption was apparent even to the casual observer. The day was warm, but all the shutters were still sealed tight against any intrusion of prying eyes. The steps had not been scrubbed this morning, and the marks of dirty feet smeared the white stone. No sign of cook or housemaid out front to bargain for fresh meat and gossip with the barrowmen. It was a house battened down against the coming of disaster.

Feeling not a little like a harbinger of doom myself, despite my relatively cheerful yellow gown, I sent Fergus up the steps to knock for me. There was some give-and-take between Fergus and whoever opened the door, but one of Fergus's better character traits was an inability to take "no" for an answer, and shortly I found myself face-to-face with a woman who appeared to be the lady of the house, and therefore Mrs. Hawkins, Mary's aunt.

I was forced to draw my own conclusions, as the woman seemed much too distraught to assist me by offering any sort of tangible information, such as her name.

"But we can't see anybody!" she kept exclaiming, glancing furtively over her shoulder, as though expecting the bulky form of Mr. Hawkins suddenly to materialize accusingly behind her. "We're … we have … that is …"

"I don't want to see you," I said firmly. "I want to see your niece, Mary."

The name seemed to throw her into fresh paroxysms of alarm.

"She … but … Mary? No! She's … she's not well!"

"I don't suppose she is," I said patiently. I lifted my basket into view. "I've brought some medicines for her."

"Oh! But … but … she … you … aren't you …?"

"Havers, woman," said Fergus in his best Scots accent. He viewed this spectacle of derangement disapprovingly. "The maid says the young mistress is upstairs in her room."

"Just so," I said. "Lead on, Fergus." Waiting for no further encouragement, he ducked under the outstretched forearm that barred our way, and made off into the gloomy depths of the house. Mrs. Hawkins turned after him with an incoherent cry, allowing me to slip past her.

There was a maid on duty outside Mary's door, a stout party in a striped apron, but she offered no resistance to my statement that I intended to go in. She shook her head mournfully. "I can do nothing with her, Madame. Perhaps you will have better luck."

This didn't sound at all promising, but there was little choice. At least I wasn't likely to do further harm. I straightened my gown and pushed open the door.

It was like walking into a cave. The windows were covered with heavy brown velvet draperies, drawn tight against the daylight, and what chinks of light seeped through were immediately quenched in the hovering layer of smoke from the hearth.

I took a deep breath and let it out again at once, coughing. There was no stir from the figure on the bed; a pathetically small, hunched shape under a goose-feather duvet. Surely the drug had worn off by now, and she couldn't be asleep, after all the racket there had been in the hallway. Probably playing possum, in case it was her aunt come back for further blithering harangues. I would have done the same, in her place.

I turned and shut the door firmly in Mrs. Hawkins's wretched face, then walked over to the bed.

"It's me," I said. "Why don't you come out, before you suffocate in there?"

There was a sudden upheaval of bedclothes, and Mary shot out of the quilts like a dolphin rising from the sea waves, and clutched me round the neck.

"Claire! Oh, Claire! Thank God! I thought I'd n-never see you again! Uncle said you were in prison! He s-said you—"

"Let go!" I managed to detach her grip, and force her back enough to get a look at her. She was red-faced, sweaty, and disheveled from hiding beneath the covers, but otherwise looked fine. Her brown eyes were wide and bright, with no sign of opium intoxication, and while she looked excited and alarmed, apparently a night's rest, coupled with the resilience of youth, had taken care of most of her physical injuries. The others were what worried me.

"No, I'm not in prison," I said, trying to stem her eager questions. "Obviously not, though it isn't for any lack of trying on your uncle's part."

"B-but I *told* him—" she began, then stammered and let her eyes fall. "—at least I *t-t-tried* to tell him, but he—but I …"

"Don't worry about it," I assured her. "He's so upset he wouldn't listen to anything you said, no matter how you said it. It doesn't matter, anyway. The important thing is you. How do you feel?" I pushed the heavy dark hair back from her forehead and looked her over searchingly.

"All right," she answered, and gulped. "I … bled a little bit, but it stopped." The blood rose still higher in her fair cheeks, but she didn't drop her eyes. "I … it's … sore. D-does that go away?"

"Yes, it does," I said gently. "I brought some herbs for you. They're to be brewed in hot water, and as the infusion cools, you can apply it with a cloth, or sit in it in a tub, if one's handy. It will help." I got the bundles of herbs from my reticule and laid them on her side table.

She nodded, biting her lip. Plainly there was something more she wanted to say, her native shyness battling her need for confidence.

"What is it?" I asked, as matter-of-factly as I could.

"Am I going to have a baby?" she blurted out, looking up fearfully. "You said …"

"No," I said, as firmly as I could. "You aren't. He wasn't able to … finish." In the folds of my skirt, I crossed both pairs of fingers, hoping fervently that I was right. The chances were very small indeed, but such freaks had been known to happen. Still, there was no point in alarming her further over the faint possibility. The thought made me faintly ill. Could such an accident be the possible answer to the riddle of Frank's existence? I put the notion aside; a month's wait would prove or dispel it.

"It's hot as a bloody oven in here," I said, loosening the ties at my throat in order to breathe. "And smoky as hell's vestibule, as my old uncle used to say." Unsure what on earth to say to her next, I rose and went round the room throwing back drapes and opening windows.

"Aunt Helen said I mustn't let anyone see me," Mary said, kneeling up in bed as she watched me. "She says I'm d-disgraced, and people will point at me in the street if I go out."

"They might, the ghouls." I finished my airing and came back to her. "That doesn't mean you need bury yourself alive and suffocate in the process." I sat down beside her, and leaned back in my chair, feeling the cool fresh air blow through my hair as it swept the smoke from the room.

She was silent for a long time, toying with the bundles of herbs on the table. Finally she looked up at me, smiling bravely, though her lower lip trembled slightly.

"At least I won't have to m-marry the Vicomte. Uncle says he'll n-never have me now."

"No, I don't suppose so."

She nodded, looking down at the gauze wrapped square on her knee. Her fingers fiddled restlessly with the string, so that one end came loose and a few crumbs of goldenrod fell out onto the coverlet.

"I … used to th-think about it; what you told me, about how a m-man …" She stopped and swallowed, and I saw a single tear fall onto the gauze. "I didn't think I could stand to let the Vicomte do that to me. N-now it's been done … and n-nobody can undo it and I'll never have to d-do it again … and … and … oh, Claire, Alex will never speak to me again! I'll never see him again, never!"

She collapsed into my arms, weeping hysterically and scattering herbs. I clutched her against my shoulder and patted her, making small shushing noises, though I shed a few tears myself that fell unnoticed into the dark shininess of her hair.

"You'll see him again," I whispered. "Of course you will. It won't make a difference to him. He's a good man."

But I knew it would. I had seen the anguish on Alex Randall's face the night before, and at the time thought it only the same helpless pity for suffering that I saw in Jamie and Murtagh. But since I had learned of Alex Randall's professed love for Mary, I had realized how much deeper his own pain must go—and his fear.

He seemed a good man. But he was also a poor, younger son, in ill health and with little chance of advancement; what position he did have was entirely dependent on the Duke of Sandringham's goodwill. And I had little hope that the Duke would look kindly on the idea of his secretary’s union with a disgraced and ruined girl, who had now neither social connections nor dowry to bless herself with.

And if Alex found somewhere the courage to wed her in spite of everything—what chance would they have, penniless, cast out of polite society, and with the hideous fact of the rape overshadowing their knowledge of each other?

There was nothing I could do but hold her, and weep with her for what was lost.

* * *

It was twilight by the time I left, with the first stars coming out in faint speckles over the chimneypots. In my pocket was a letter written by Mary, properly witnessed, containing her statement of the events of the night before. Once this was delivered to the proper authorities, we should at least have no further trouble from the law. Just as well; there was plenty of trouble pending from other quarters.

Mindful, this time, of danger, I made no objection to Mrs. Hawkins’s unwilling offer to have me and Fergus transported home in the family carriage.

I tossed my hat on the card table in the vestibule, observing the large number of notes and small nosegays that overflowed the salver there. Apparently we weren’t yet pariahs, though the news of the scandal must long since have spread through the social strata of Paris.

I waved away the anxious inquiries of the servants, and drifted upward toward the bedchamber, shedding my outer garments carelessly along the way. I felt too drained to care about anything.

But when I pushed open the bedchamber door and saw Jamie, lying back in a chair by the fire, my apathy was at once supplanted by a surge of tenderness. His eyes were closed and his hair sticking up in all directions, sure sign of mental turmoil at some point. But he opened his eyes at the slight noise of my entrance and smiled at me, eyes clear and blue in the warm light of the candelabrum.

“It’s all right” was all he whispered to me as he gathered me into his arms. “You’re home.” Then we were silent, as we undressed each other and went finally to earth, each finding delayed and wordless sanctuary in the other’s embrace.

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21

UNTIMELY RESURRECTION

My mind was still on bankers when our coach pulled up to the Duke's rented residence on the Rue St. Anne. It was a large, handsome house, with a long, curving drive lined with poplar trees, and extensive grounds. A wealthy man, the Duke.

"Do you suppose it was the loan Charles got from Manzetti that he's investing with St. Germain?" I asked.

"It must be," Jamie replied. He pulled on the pigskin gloves suitable for a formal call, grimacing slightly as he smoothed the tight leather over the stiff fourth finger of his right hand. "The money his father thinks he's spending to maintain himself in Paris."

"So Charles really is trying to raise money for an army," I said, feeling a reluctant admiration for Charles Stuart. The coach came to a halt, and the footman hopped down to open the door.

"Well, he's trying to raise money, at least," Jamie corrected, handing me out of the coach. "For all I ken, he wants it to elope with Louise de La Tour and his bastard."

I shook my head. "I don't think so. Not from what Master Raymond told me yesterday. Besides, Louise says she hasn't seen him since she and Jules … well …"

Jamie snorted briefly. "At least she's got some sense of honor, then."

"I don't know whether that's it," I observed, taking his arm as we climbed the steps to the door. "She said Charles was so furious at her for sleeping with her husband that he stormed off, and she hasn't seen him since. He writes her passionate letters from time to time, swearing to come and take her and the child away with him as soon as he comes into his rightful place in the world, but she won't let him come to see her; she's too afraid of Jules finding out the truth."

Jamie made a disapproving Scottish noise.

"God, is there any man safe from cuckoldry?"

I touched his arm lightly. "Likely some more than others."

"Ye think so?" he said, but smiled down at me.

The door swung open to reveal a short, tubby butler, with a bald head, a spotless uniform, and immense dignity.

"Milord," he said, bowing to Jamie, "and milady. You are expected. Please come in."

* * *

The Duke was charm itself as he received us in the main drawing room.

"Nonsense, nonsense," he said, dismissing Jamie's apologies for the contretemps of the dinner party. "Damned excitable fellows, the French. Make an ungodly fuss over everything. Now, do let us look over all these fascinating propositions, shall we? And perhaps your good lady would like to … um, amuse herself with a perusal of … eh?" He waved an arm vaguely in the direction of the wall, leaving it open to question whether I might amuse myself by looking at the several large paintings, the well-furnished bookshelf, or the several glass cases in which the Duke's collection of snuffboxes resided.

"Thank you," I murmured, with a charming smile, and wandered over to the wall, pretending to be absorbed in a large Boucher, featuring the backview of an amply endowed nude woman seated on a rock in the wilderness. If this was a reflection of current tastes in female anatomy, it was no wonder that Jamie appeared to think so highly of my bottom.

"Ha," I said. "What price foundation garments, eh?"

"Eh?" Jamie and the Duke, startled, looked up from the portfolio of investment papers that formed the ostensible reason for our visit.

"Never mind me," I said, waving a gracious hand. "Just enjoying the art."

"I'm deeply gratified, ma'am," said the Duke politely, and at once reimmersed himself in the papers, as Jamie began the tedious and painstaking real business of the visit—the inconspicuous extraction of such information as the Duke might be willing to part with regarding his own sympathies—or otherwise—toward the Stuart cause.

I had my own agenda for this visit, as well. As the men became more immersed in their discussions, I edged my way toward the door, pretending to look through the well-furnished shelves. As soon as the coast looked clear, I meant to slip out into the hallway and try to find Alex Randall. I had done what I could to repair the damage done to Mary Hawkins; anything further would have to come from him. Under the rules of social etiquette, he couldn't call upon her at her uncle's house, nor could she contact him. But I could easily make an opportunity for them to meet at the Rue Tremoulins.

The conversation behind me had dropped to a confidential murmur. I stuck my head into the hall, but didn't see a footman immediately. Still, one couldn't be far away; a house of this size must have a staff numbering in the dozens. As large as it was, I would need directions in order to locate Alexander Randall. I chose a direction at random and walked along the hallway, looking for a servant of whom to inquire.

I saw a flicker of motion at the end of the hall, and called out. Whoever it was made no answer, but I heard a surreptitious scuttle of feet on polished boards.

That seemed curious behavior for a servant. I stopped at the end of the hall and looked around. Another hall extended at right angles to the one I stood in, lined on one side with doors, on the other with long windows that opened on the drive and the garden. Most of the doors were closed, but the one closest to me was slightly ajar.

Moving quietly, I stepped up to it and put my ear next to the paneling. Hearing nothing, I took hold of the handle and boldly pushed the door open.

"What in the name of God are *you* doing here?" I exclaimed in astonishment.

"Oh, you scared me! Gracious, I thought I was g-going to die." Mary Hawkins pressed both hands against her bodice. Her face was blanched white, and her eyes dark and wide with terror.

"You're not," I said. "Unless your uncle finds out you're here; then he'll probably kill you. Or does he know?"

She shook her head. "No. I didn't t-tell anyone. I took a public fiacre."

"*Why*, for God's sake?"

She glanced around like a frightened rabbit looking for a bolthole, but failing to find one, instead drew herself up and tightened her jaw.

"I had to find Alex. I had to t-talk to him. To see if he—if he …" Her hands were wringing together, and I could see the effort it cost her to get the words out.

"Never mind," I said, resigned. "I understand. Your uncle won't, though, and neither will the Duke. His Grace doesn't know you're here, either?"

She shook her head, mute.

"All right," I said, thinking. "Well, the first thing we must do is—"

"Madame? May I assist you?"

Mary started like a hare, and I felt my own heart leap uncomfortably into the back of my throat. Bloody footmen; never in the right place at the right time.

There was nothing to do now but brazen it out. I turned to the footman, who was standing stiff as a ramrod in the doorway, looking dignified and suspicious.

"Yes," I said, with as much hauteur as I could summon on short notice. "Will you please tell Mr. Alexander Randall that he has visitors."

"I regret that I cannot do so, Madame," said the footman, with remote formality.

"And why not?" I demanded.

"Because, Madame," he answered, "Mr. Alexander Randall is no longer in His Grace's employ. He was dismissed." The footman glanced at Mary, then lowered his nose an inch and unbent sufficiently to say, "I understand that Monsieur Randall has taken ship back to England."

"No! He can't be gone, he can't!"

Mary darted toward the door, and nearly cannoned into Jamie as he entered. She drew up short with a startled gasp, and he stared at her in astonishment.

"What—" he began, then saw me behind her. "Oh, there ye are, Sassenach. I made an excuse to come and find ye—His Grace just told me that Alex Randall—"

"I know," I interrupted. "He's gone."

"No!" Mary moaned. "No!" She darted toward the door, and was through it before either of us could stop her, her heels clattering on the polished parquet.

"Bloody fool!" I kicked off my own shoes, picked up my skirts, and whizzed after her. Stocking-footed, I was much faster than she in her high-heeled slippers. Maybe I could catch her before she ran into someone else and was caught, with the concomitant scandal *that* would involve.

I followed the whisk of her disappearing skirts round the bend of the hall. The floor here was carpeted; if I didn't hurry, I might lose her at an intersection, unable to hear from the footsteps which way she had gone. I put my head down, charged round the last corner, and crashed head-on into a man coming the other way.

He let out a startled "Whoof!" as I struck him amidships, and clutched me by the arms to keep upright as we swayed and staggered together.

"I'm sorry," I began, breathlessly. "I thought you were—oh, Jesus H. fucking Christ!"

My initial impression—that I had encountered Alexander Randall—had lasted no more than the split second necessary to see the eyes above that finely chiseled mouth. The mouth was much like Alex's, bar the deep lines around it. But those cold eyes could belong to only one man.

The shock was so great that for a moment everything seemed paradoxically normal; I had an impulse to apologize, dust him off, and continue my pursuit, leaving him forgotten in the corridor, as just a chance encounter. My adrenal glands hastened to remedy this impression, dumping such a dose of adrenaline into my bloodstream that my heart contracted like a squeezed fist.

He was recovering his own breath by now, along with his momentarily shattered self-possession.

“I am inclined to concur with your sentiments, Madam, if not precisely with their manner of expression.” Still clutching me by the elbows, he held me slightly away from him, squinting to see my face in the shadowed hall. I saw the shock of recognition blanch his features as my face came into the light. “Bloody hell, it’s you!” he exclaimed.

“I thought you were dead!” I wrenched at my arms, trying to free them from the iron-tight grip of Jonathan Randall.

He let go of one arm, in order to rub his middle, surveying me coldly. The thin, fine-cut features were bronzed and healthy; he gave no outward sign of having been trampled five months before by thirty quarter-ton beasts. Not so much as a hoofprint on his forehead.

“Once more, Madam, I find myself sharing your sentiments. I was under a very similar misapprehension concerning *your* state of health. Possibly you are a witch, after all—what did you do, turn yourself into a wolf?” The wary dislike stamped on his face was mingled with a touch of superstitious awe. After all, when you turn someone out into the midst of a pack of wolves on a cold winter evening, you rather expect them to cooperate by being eaten forthwith. The sweatiness of my own palms and the drumlike beating of my heart were testimony to the unsettling effect of having someone you thought safely dead suddenly rise up in front of you. I supposed he must be feeling a trifle queasy as well.

“Wouldn’t *you* like to know?” The urge to annoy him—to disturb that icy calm—was the first emotion to surface from the seething mass of feelings that had erupted within me at sight of his face. His fingers tightened on my arm, and his lips thinned. I could see his mind working, starting to tick off possibilities.

“If it wasn’t yours, whose body did Sir Fletcher’s men take out of the dungeon?” I demanded, trying to take advantage of any break in his composure. An eyewitness had described to me the removal of “a rag doll, rolled in blood”—presumably Randall—from the scene of the cattle stampede that had masked Jamie’s escape from that same dungeon.

Randall smiled, without much humor. If he was as rattled as I, he didn’t show it. His breathing was a trifle faster than usual, and the lines that edged mouth and eyes cut deeper than I remembered, but he wasn’t gasping like a landed fish. I was. I took in as much oxygen as my lungs would allow and tried to breathe through my nose.

“It was my orderly, Marley. Though if you aren’t answering my questions, why should I answer yours?” He looked me up and down, carefully evaluating my appearance: silk gown, hair ornaments, jewelry, and stockinged feet.

“Married a Frenchman, did you?” he asked. “I always did think you were a French spy. I trust your new husband keeps you in better order than …”

The words died in his throat as he looked up to see the source of the footsteps that had just turned into the hall behind me. If I had wanted to discompose him, that urge was now fully gratified. No Hamlet on the stage had ever reacted to the appearance of a ghost with more convincing terror than I saw stamped on that aristocratic face. The hand still holding my arm clawed deep into my flesh, and I felt the jolt of shock that surged through him like an electric charge.

I knew what he saw behind me, and was afraid to turn. There was a deep silence in the hall; even the wash of the cypress branches against the windows seemed part of the quiet, like the ear-roaring silence that waves make, at the bottom of the sea. Very slowly, I disengaged my arm from his grasp, and his hand fell nerveless to his side. There was no sound behind me, though I could hear voices start up from the room at the end of the hall. I prayed that the door would stay closed, and tried desperately to remember how Jamie was armed.

My mind went blank, then blazed with the reassuring vision of his small-sword, hung by its belt from a hook on the wardrobe, sun glowing on the enameled hilt. But he still had his dirk, of course, and the small knife he habitually carried in his stocking. Come to that, I was entirely sure that in a pinch, he would consider his bare hands perfectly adequate. And if you cared to describe my present situation, standing between the two of them, as a pinch … I swallowed once and slowly turned around.

He was standing quite still, no more than a yard behind me. One of the tall, paned casements opened near him, and the dark shadows of the cypress needles rippled over him like water over a sunken rock. He showed no more expression than a rock, either. Whatever lived behind those eyes was hidden; they were wide and blank as windowpanes, as though the soul they mirrored were long since flown.

He didn't speak, but after a moment, reached out one hand to me. It floated open in the air, and I finally summoned the presence of mind to take it. It was cool and hard, and I clung to it like the wood of a raft.

He drew me in, close to his side, took my arm and turned me, all without speaking or changing expression. As we reached the turning of the hall, Randall spoke behind us.

"Jamie," he said. The voice was hoarse with shock, and held a note halfway between disbelief and pleading.

Jamie stopped then, and turned to look at him. Randall's face was a ghastly white, with a small red patch livid on each cheekbone. He had taken off his wig, clenched in his hands, and sweat pasted the fine dark hair to his temples.

"No." The voice that spoke above me was soft, almost expressionless. Looking up, I could see that the face still matched it, but a quick, hot pulse beat in his neck, and the small, triangular scar above his collar flushed red with heat.

"I am called Lord Broch Tuarach for formality's sake," the soft Scottish voice above me said. "And beyond the requirements of formality, you will never speak to me again—until you beg for your life at the point of my sword. Then, you may use my name, for it will be the last word you ever speak."

With sudden violence, he swept around, and his flaring plaid swung wide, blocking my view of Randall as we turned the corner of the hall.

* * *

The carriage was still waiting by the gate. Afraid to look at Jamie, I climbed in and absorbed myself in tucking the folds of yellow silk around my legs. The click of the carriage door shutting made me look up abruptly, but before I could reach the handle, the carriage started with a jerk that threw me back in my seat.

Struggling and swearing, I fought my way to my knees and peered out of the back window. He was gone. Nothing moved on the drive but the swaying shadows of cypress and poplar.

I hammered frenziedly on the roof of the carriage, but the coachman merely shouted to the horses and urged them on faster. There was little traffic at this hour, and we hurtled through the narrow streets as though the devil were after us.

When we drew up in the Rue Tremoulins, I sprang out of the coach, at once panicked and furious.

"Why didn't you stop?" I demanded of the coachman. He shrugged, safely impervious atop his perch.

"The master ordered me to drive you home without delay, Madame." He picked up the whip and touched it lightly to the off-horse's rump.

"Wait!" I shouted. "I want to go back!" But he only hunched himself turtle-like into his shoulders, pretending not to hear me, as the coach rattled off.

Fuming with impotence, I turned toward the door, where the small figure of Fergus appeared, thin brows raised questioningly at my appearance.

"Where's Murtagh?" I snapped. The little clansman was the only person I could think of who might be able first, to find Jamie, and secondly, to stop him.

"I don't know, Madame. Maybe down there." The boy nodded in the direction of the Rue Gamboge, where there were several taverns, ranging in respectability from those where a traveling lady might dine with her husband, to the dens near the river, which even an armed man might hesitate to enter alone.

I laid a hand on Fergus's shoulder, as much for support as in exhortation.

"Run and find him, Fergus. Quickly as you can!"

Alarmed by my tone, he leaped off the step and was gone, before I could add "Be careful!" Still, he knew the lower levels of Paris life much better than I did; no one was better adapted to eeling through a tavern crowd than an ex-pickpocket. At least I hoped he was an ex-pickpocket.

But I could worry effectively about only one thing at a time, and visions of Fergus being captured and hanged for his activities receded before the vision Jamie's final words to Randall had evoked.

Surely, *surely* he would not have gone back into the Duke's house? No, I reassured myself. He had no sword. Whatever he might be feeling—and my soul sank within me to think of what he felt—he wouldn't act precipitously. I had seen him in battle before, mind working in an icy calm, severed from the emotions that could cloud his judgment. And for this, above all things, surely he would adhere to the formalities. He would seek the rigid prescriptions, the formulae for the satisfaction of honor, as a refuge—something to cling to against the tides that shook him, the bone-deep surge of bloodlust and revenge.

I stopped in the hallway, mechanically shedding my cloak and pausing by the mirror to straighten my hair. *Think, Beauchamp*, I silently urged my pale reflection. If he's going to fight a duel, what's the first thing he'll need?

A sword? No, couldn't be. His own was upstairs, hanging on the armoire. While he might easily borrow one, I couldn't imagine his setting out to fight the most important duel of his life armed with any but his own. His uncle, Dougal MacKenzie, had given it to him at seventeen, seen him schooled in its use, taught him the tricks and the strengths of a left-handed swordsman, using that sword. Dougal had made him practice, left hand against left hand, for hours on end, until, he told me, he felt the length of Spanish metal come alive, an extension of his arm, hilt welded to his palm. Jamie had said he felt naked without it. And this was not a fight to which he would go naked.

No, if he had needed the sword at once, he would have come home to fetch it. I ran my hand impatiently through my hair, trying to think. Damn it, what was the protocol of dueling? Before it came to swords, what happened? A challenge, of course. Had Jamie's words in the hallway constituted that? I had vague ideas of people being slapped across the face with gloves, but had no idea whether that was really the custom, or merely an artifact of memory, born of a film-maker's imagination.

Then it came to me. First the challenge, then a place must be arranged—a suitably circumspect place, unlikely to come to the notice of the police or the King's Guard. And to deliver the challenge, to arrange the place, a second was required. Ah. That was where he had gone, then; to find his second. Murtagh.

Even if Jamie found Murtagh before Fergus did, still there would be the formalities to arrange. I began to breathe a little easier, though my heart was still pounding, and my laces still seemed too tight. None of the servants was visible; I yanked the laces loose and drew a deep, expanding breath.

"I didna know ye were in the habit of undressing in the hallways, or I would ha' stayed in the drawing room," said an ironic Scots voice behind me.

I whirled, my heart leaping high enough to choke me. The man standing stretched in the drawing room doorway, arms outspread to brace him casually against the frame, was big, nearly as large as Jamie, with the same taut grace of movement, the same air of cool self-possession. The hair was dark, though, and the deep-set eyes a cloudy green. Dougal MacKenzie, appearing suddenly in my home as though called by my thought. Speak of the devil.

"What in God's name are you doing here?" The shock of seeing him was subsiding, though my heart still pounded. I hadn't eaten since breakfast, and a sudden wave of queasiness washed over me. He stepped forward and grasped me by the arm, pulling me toward a chair.

"Sit ye down, lass," he said. "Ye'll no be feeling just the thing, it looks like."

"Very observant of you," I said. Black spots floated at the edge of my vision, and small bright flashes danced before my eyes. "Excuse me," I said politely, and put my head between my knees.

Jamie. Frank. Randall. Dougal. The faces flickered in my mind, the names seemed to ring in my ears. My palms were sweating, and I pressed them under my arms, hugging myself to try to stop the tremblings of shock. Jamie wouldn't be facing Randall immediately; that was the important thing. There was a little time, in which to think, to take preventive action. But what action? Leaving my subconscious to wrestle with this question, I forced my breathing to slow and turned my attention to matters closer to hand.

"I repeat," I said, sitting up and smoothing back my hair, "what are you doing here?"

The dark brows flickered upward.

"Do I need a reason to visit a kinsman?"

I could still taste the bile at the back of my throat, but my hands had stopped trembling, at least.

"Under the circumstances, yes," I said. I drew myself up, grandly ignoring my untied laces, and reached for the brandy decanter. Anticipating me, Dougal took a glass from the tray and poured out a teaspoonful. Then, after a considering glance at me, he doubled the dose.

"Thanks," I said dryly, accepting the glass.

"Circumstances, eh? And which circumstances would those be?" Not waiting for answer or permission, he calmly poured out another glass for himself and lifted it in a casual toast. "To His Majesty."

I felt my mouth twist sideways. "King James, I suppose?" I took a small sip of my own drink, and felt the hot aromatic fumes sear the membranes behind my eyes. "And does the fact that you're in Paris mean that you've converted Colum to your way of thinking?" For while Dougal MacKenzie might be a Jacobite, it was his brother

Colum who led the MacKenzies of Leoch as chieftain. Legs crippled and twisted by a deforming disease, Colum no longer led his clan into battle; Dougal was the war chieftain. But while Dougal might lead men into battle, it was Colum who held the power to say whether the battle would take place.

Dougal ignored my question, and having drained his glass, immediately poured out another drink. He savored the first sip of this one, rolling it visibly around his mouth and licking a final drop from his lips as he swallowed.

“Not bad,” he said. “I must take some back for Colum. He needs something a bit stronger than the wine, to help him sleep nights.”

This was indeed an oblique answer to my question. Colum’s condition was degenerating, then. Always in some pain from the disease that eroded his body, Colum had taken fortified wine in the evenings, to help him to sleep. Now he needed straight brandy. I wondered how long it would be before he might be forced to resort to opium for relief.

For when he did, that would be the end of his reign as chieftain of his clan. Deprived of physical resources, still he commanded by sheer force of character. But if the strength of Colum’s mind were lost to pain and drugs, the clan would have a new leader—Dougal.

I gazed at him over the rim of my glass. He returned my stare with no sign of abashment, a slight smile on that wide MacKenzie mouth. His face was much like his brother’s—and his nephew’s—strong and boldly modeled, with broad, high cheekbones and a long, straight nose like the blade of a knife.

Sworn as a boy of eighteen to support his brother’s chieftainship, he had kept that vow for nearly thirty years. And would keep it, I knew, until the day that Colum died or could lead no longer. But on that day, the mantle of chief would descend on his shoulders, and the men of clan MacKenzie would follow where he led—after the saltire of Scotland, and the banner of King James, in the vanguard of Bonnie Prince Charlie.

“Circumstances?” I said, turning to his earlier question. “Well, I don’t suppose one would consider it in the best of taste to come calling on a man whom you'd left for dead and whose wife you'd tried to seduce."

Being Dougal MacKenzie, he laughed. I didn't know quite what it would take to disconcert the man, but I certainly hoped I was there to see it when it finally happened.

"Seduction?" he said, lips quirked in amusement. "I offered ye marriage."

"You offered to rape me, as I recall," I snapped. He had, in fact, offered to marry me—by force—after declining to help me in rescuing Jamie from Wentworth Prison the winter before. While his principal motive had been the possession of Jamie's estate of Lallybroch—which would belong to me upon Jamie's death—he hadn't been at all averse to the thought of the minor emoluments of marriage, such as the regular enjoyment of my body.

"As for leaving Jamie in the prison," he went on, ignoring me as usual, "there seemed no way to get him out, and no sense in risking good men in a vain attempt. He'd be the first to understand that. And it was my duty as his kinsman to offer his wife my protection, if he died. I was the lad's foster father, no?" He tilted back his head and drained his glass.

I took a good gulp of my own, and swallowed quickly so as not to choke. The spirit burned down my throat and gullet, matching the heat that was rising in my cheeks. He was right; Jamie hadn't blamed him for his reluctance to break into Wentworth Prison—he hadn't expected *me* to do it, either, and it was only by a miracle that I had succeeded. But while I had told Jamie, briefly, of Dougal's intention of marrying me, I hadn't tried to convey the carnal aspects of that intention. I had, after all, never expected to see Dougal MacKenzie again.

I knew from past experience that he was a seizer of opportunities; with Jamie about to be hanged, he had not even waited for execution of the sentence before trying to secure me and my about-to-be-inherited property. If—no, I corrected myself, *when*—Colum died or became incompetent, Dougal would be in full command of clan MacKenzie within a week. And if Charles Stuart found the backing he was seeking, Dougal would be there. He had some experience in being a power behind the throne, after all.

I tipped up the glass, considering. Colum had business interests in France; wine and timber, mostly. These undoubtedly were the pretext for Dougal's visit to Paris, might even be his major ostensible reason. But he had other reasons, I was sure. And the presence in the city of Prince Charles Edward Stuart was almost certainly one of them.

One thing to be said for Dougal MacKenzie was that an encounter with him stimulated the mental processes, out of the sheer necessity of trying to figure out what he was actually up to at any given moment. Under the inspiration of his presence and a good slug of Portuguese brandy, my subconscious was stirring with the birth of an idea.

"Well, be that as it may, I'm glad you're here now," I said, replacing my empty glass on the tray.

"You are?" The thick dark brows rose incredulously.

"Yes." I rose and gestured toward the hall. "Fetch my cloak while I do up my laces. I need you to come to the *commissariat de police* with me."

Seeing his jaw drop, I felt the first tiny upsurge of hope. If I had managed to take Dougal MacKenzie by surprise, surely I could stop a duel?

* * *

"D'ye want to tell me what you think you're doing?" Dougal inquired, as the coach bumped around the Cirque du Mireille, narrowly avoiding an oncoming barouche and a cart full of vegetable marrows.

"No," I said briefly, "but I suppose I'll have to. Did you know that Jack Randall is still alive?"

"I'd not heard he was dead," Dougal said reasonably.

That took me up short for a moment. But of course he was right; we had thought Randall dead only because Sir Marcus MacRannoch had mistaken the trampled body of Randall's orderly for the officer himself, during Jamie's rescue from Wentworth Prison. Naturally no news of Randall's death would have gone round the Highlands, since it hadn't occurred. I tried to gather my scattered thoughts.

"He *isn't* dead," I said. "But he is in Paris."

"In Paris?" That got his attention; his brows went up, and then his eyes widened with the next thought.

"Where's Jamie?" he asked sharply.

I was glad to see he appreciated the main point. While he didn't know what had passed between Jamie and Randall in Wentworth Prison—no one was ever going to know that, save Jamie, Randall, and, to some extent, me—he knew more than enough about Randall's previous actions to realize exactly what Jamie's first impulse would be on meeting the man here, away from the sanctuary of England.

"I don't know," I said, looking out the window. We were passing Les Halles, and the smell of fish was ripe in my nostrils. I pulled out a scented handkerchief and covered my nose and mouth. The strong, sharp tang of the wintergreen with which I scented it was no match for the reek of a dozen eel-sellers' stalls, but it helped a bit. I spoke through the spicy linen folds.

"We met Randall unexpectedly at the Duke of Sandringham's today. Jamie sent me home in the coach, and I haven't seen him since."

Dougal ignored both the stench and the raucous cries of fishwives calling their wares. He frowned at me.

"He'll mean to kill the man, surely?"

I shook my head, and explained my reasoning about the sword.

"I can't let a duel happen," I said, dropping the handkerchief in order to speak more clearly. "I won't!"

Dougal nodded abstractedly.

"Aye, that would be dangerous. Not that the lad couldna take Randall with ease—I taught him, ye ken," he added with some boastfulness, "but the sentence for dueling …"

"Got it in one," I said.

"All right," he said slowly. "But why the police? You dinna mean to have the lad locked up beforehand, do ye? Your own husband?"

"Not Jamie," I said. "Randall."

A broad grin broke out on his face, not unmixed with skepticism.

"Oh, aye? And how d'ye mean to work that one?"

"A friend and I were … attacked on the street a few nights ago," I said, swallowing at the memory. "The men were masked; I couldn't tell who they were. But one of them was about the same height and build as Jonathan Randall. I mean to say that I met Randall at a house today and recognized him as one of the men who attacked us."

Dougal's brows shot up and then drew together. His cool gaze flickered over me. Suddenly there was a new speculation in his appraisal.

"Christ, you've the devil's own nerve. Robbery, was it?" he asked softly. Against my will, I could feel the rage rising in my cheeks.

"No," I said, clipping the word between my teeth.

"Ah." He sat back against the coach's squabs, still looking at me. "Ye'll have taken no harm, though?" I glanced aside, at the passing street, but could feel his eyes, prying at the neck of my gown, sliding over the curve of my hips.

"Not me," I said. "But my friend …"

"I see." He was quiet for a moment, then said meditatively, "Ever heard of 'Les Disciples,' have you?"

I jerked my head back around to him. He lounged in the corner like a crouching cat, watching me through eyes narrowed against the sun.

"No. What are they?" I demanded.

He shrugged and sat upright, peering past me at the approaching bulk of the Quai des Orfèvres, hovering gray and dreary above the glitter of the Seine.

"A society—of a sort. Young men of family, with an interest in things … unwholesome, shall we say?"

"Let's," I said. "And just what do you know about Les Disciples?"

"Only what I heard in a tavern in the Cité," he said. "That the society demands a good deal from its members, and the price of initiation is high … by some standards."

"That being?" I dared him with my eyes. He smiled rather grimly before replying.

“A maidenhead, for one thing. The nipples of a married woman, for another.” He shot a quick glance at my bosom. “Your friend’s a virgin, is she? Or was?”

I felt hot and cold by turns. I wiped my face with the handkerchief and tucked it into the pocket of my cloak. I had to try twice, for my hand trembled.

“She was. What else have you heard? Do you know who’s involved with Les Disciples?”

Dougal shook his head. There were threads of silver in the russet hair over his temples, that caught the light of the afternoon.

“Only rumors. The Vicomte de Busca, the youngest of the Charmisse sons—perhaps. The Comte St. Germain. Eh! Are ye all right, lass?”

He leaned forward in some consternation, peering at me.

“Fine,” I said, breathing deeply through my nose. “Bloody fine.” I pulled out the handkerchief and wiped the cold sweat off my brow.

“We mean you no harm, mesdames.” The ironic voice echoed in the dark of my memory. The green-shirted man was medium-height and dark, slim and narrow-shouldered. If that description fit Jonathan Randall, it also fit the Comte St. Germain. Would I have recognized his voice, though? Could any normal man conceivably have sat across from me at dinner, eating salmon mousse and making genteel conversation, barely two hours after the incident in the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré?

Considered logically, though, why not? *I* had, after all. And I had no particular reason for supposing the Comte to be a normal man—by my standards—if rumor were true.

The coach was drawing to a halt, and there was little time for contemplation. Was I about to ensure that the man responsible for Mary’s violation went free, while I also ensured the safety of Jamie’s most loathed enemy? I took a deep, quivering breath. Damn little choice about it, I thought. Life was paramount; justice would just have to wait its turn.

The coachman had alighted and was reaching for the door handle. I bit my lip and glanced at Dougal MacKenzie. He met my gaze with a slight shrug. What did I want of him?

“Will you back my story?” I asked abruptly.

He looked up at the towering bulk of the Quai des Orfèvres. Brilliant afternoon light blazed through the open door.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Yes.” My mouth was dry.

He slid across the seat and extended a hand to me.

“Pray God we dinna both end in a cell, then,” he said.

* * *

An hour later, we stepped into the empty street outside the *commissariat de police*. I had sent the coach home, lest anyone who knew us should see it standing outside the Quai des Orfèvres. Dougal offered me an arm, and I took it perforce. The ground here was muddy underfoot, and the cobbles in the street made uncertain going in high-heeled slippers.

“Les Disciples,” I said as we made our way slowly along the banks of the Seine toward the towers of Notre Dame. “Do you really think the Comte St. Germain might have been one of the men who … who stopped us in the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré?” I was beginning to tremble with reaction and fatigue—and with hunger; I had had nothing since breakfast, and the lack was making itself felt. Sheer nerve had kept me going through the interview with the police. Now the need to think was passing, and with it, the ability to do so.

Dougal’s arm was hard under my hand, but I couldn’t look up at him; I needed all my attention to keep my footing. We had turned into the Rue Elise and the cobbles were shiny with damp and smeared with various kinds of filth. A porter lugging a crate paused in our path to clear his throat and hawk noisily into the street at my feet. The greenish glob clung to the curve of a stone, finally slipping off to float sluggishly onto the surface of a small mud puddle that lay in the hollow of a missing cobble.

“Mphm.” Dougal was looking up and down the street for a carriage, brow creased in thought. “I canna say; I’ve heard worse than that of the man, but I havena had the honor of meeting him.” He glanced down at me.

"You've managed brawly so far," he said. "They'll have Jack Randall in the Bastille within the hour. But they'll have to let the man go sooner or later, and I wouldna wager much on the chances of Jamie's temper cooling in the meantime. D'ye want me to speak to him—convince him to do nothing foolish?"

"No! For God's sake, stay out of it!" The thunder of carriage wheels was loud on the cobbles, but my voice was rose high enough to make Dougal brows lift in surprise.

"All right, then," he said, mildly. "I'll leave it to you to manage him. He's stubborn as a stone … but I suppose you have your ways, no?" This was said with a sidelong glance and knowing smirk.

"I'll manage." I would. I would have to. For everything I had told Dougal was true. All true. And yet so far from the truth. For I would send Charles Stuart and his father's cause to the devil gladly, sacrifice any hope of stopping his headlong dash to folly, even risk the chance of Jamie's imprisonment, for the sake of healing the breach Randall's resurrection had opened in Jamie's mind. I would help him to kill Randall, and feel only joy in the doing of it, except for the one thing. The one consideration strong enough to outweigh Jamie's pride, loom larger than his sense of manhood, than his threatened soul's peace. Frank.

That was the single idea that had driven me through this day, sustained me well past the point where I would have welcomed collapse. For months I had thought Randall dead and childless, and feared for Frank's life. But for those same months I had been comforted by the presence of the plain gold ring on the fourth finger of my left hand.

The twin of Jamie's silver ring upon my right, it was a talisman in the dark hours of the night, when doubts came on the heels of dreams. If I wore his ring still, then the man who had given it to me would live. I had told myself that a thousand times. No matter that I didn't know how a man dead without issue could sire a line of descent that led to Frank; the ring was there, and Frank would live.

Now I knew why the ring still shone on my hand, metal chilly as my own cold finger. Randall was alive, could still marry, could still father the child who would pass life on to Frank. Unless Jamie killed him first.

I had taken what steps I could for the moment, but the fact I had faced in the Duke's corridor remained. The price of Frank's life was Jamie's soul, and how was I to choose between them?

The oncoming fiacre, ignoring Dougal's hail, barreled past without stopping, wheels passing close enough to splash muddy water on Dougal's silk hose and the hem of my gown.

Desisting from a volley of heartfelt Gaelic, Dougal shook a fist after the retreating coach.

"Well, and now what?" he demanded rhetorically.

The blob of mucus-streaked spittle floated on the puddle at my feet, reflecting gray light. I could feel its cold slime viscid on my tongue. I put out a hand and grasped Dougal's arm, hard as a smooth-skinned sycamore branch. Hard, but it seemed to be swaying dizzily, swinging me far out over the cold and glittering, fish-smelling, slimy water nearby. Black spots floated before my eyes.

"Now," I said, "I'm going to be sick."

It was nearly sunset when I returned to the Rue Tremoulins. My knees trembled, and it was an effort to put one foot in front of the other on the stairs. I went directly to the bedroom to shed my cloak, wondering whether Jamie had returned yet.

He had. I stopped dead in the doorway, surveying the room. My medicine box lay open on the table. The scissors I used for cutting bandages lay half-open on my dressing table. They were fanciful things, given to me by a knifemaker who worked now and then at L'Hôpital des Anges; the handles were gilt, worked in the shape of storks' heads, with the long bills forming the silver blades of the scissors. They gleamed in the rays of the setting sun, lying amid a cloud of reddish gold silk threads.

I took several steps toward the dressing table, and the silky, shimmering strands lifted in the disturbed air of my movement, drifting across the tabletop.

"Jesus bloody Christ," I breathed. He had been here, all right, and now he was gone. So was his sword.

The hair lay in thick, gleaming strands where it had fallen, littering dressing table, stool and floor. I plucked a shorn lock from the table and held it, feeling the fine, soft hairs separate between my fingers like the threads of embroidery silk. I felt a cold panic that started somewhere between my shoulder blades and prickled down my spine. I remembered Jamie, sitting on the fountain behind the Rohans' house, telling me how he had fought his first duel in Paris.

"The lace that held my hair back broke, and the wind whipped it into my face so I could scarcely see what I was doing."

He was taking no chance of that happening again. Seeing the evidence left behind, feeling the lock of hair in my hand, soft and alive-feeling still, I could imagine the cold deliberation with which he had done it; the snick of metal blades against his skull as he cut away all softness that might obscure his vision. Nothing would stand between him and the killing of Jonathan Randall.

Nothing but me. Still holding the lock of his hair, I went to the window and stared out, as though hoping to see him in the street. But the Rue Tremoulins was quiet, nothing moving but the flickering shadows of the poplar trees by the gates and the small movement of a servant, standing at the gate of the house to the left, talking to a watchman who brandished his pipe to emphasize a point.

The house hummed quietly around me, with dinner preparations taking place belowstairs. No company was expected tonight, so the usual bustle was subdued; we ate simply when alone.

I sat down on the bed and closed my eyes, folding my hands across my swelling stomach, the lock of hair gripped tight, as though I could keep him safe, so long as I didn't let go.

Had I been in time? Had the police found Jack Randall before Jamie did? What if they had arrived concurrently, or just in time to find Jamie challenging Randall to a formal duel? I rubbed the lock of hair between thumb and forefinger, splaying the cut ends in a small spray of roan and amber. Well, if so, at least they would both be safe. In prison, perhaps, but that was a minor consideration by contrast to other dangers.

And if Jamie had found Randall first? I glanced outside; the light was fading fast. Duels were traditionally fought at dawn, but I didn't know whether Jamie would have waited for morning. They might at this moment be facing each other, somewhere in seclusion, where the clash of steel and the cry of mortal wounding would attract no attention.

For a mortal fight it would be. What lay between those two men would be settled only by death. And whose death would it be? Jamie's? Or Randall's—and with him, Frank's? Jamie was likely the better swordsman, but as the challenged, Randall would have the choice of weapons. And success with pistols lay less with the skill of the user than with his fortune; only the best-made pistols aimed true, and even those were prone to misfire or other accidents. I had a sudden vision of Jamie, limp and quiet on the grass, blood welling from an empty eye socket, and the smell of black powder strong among the scents of spring in the Boìs de Boulogne.

"What in hell are you doing, Claire?"

My head snapped up, so hard I bit my tongue. Both his eyes were present and in their correct positions, staring at me from either side of the knife-edged nose. I had never seen him with his hair so close-clipped before. It made him look like a stranger, the strong bones of his face stark beneath the skin and the dome of his skull visible under the short, thick turf of his hair.

"What am I doing?" I echoed. I swallowed, working some moisture back into my dry mouth. "What am I doing? I'm sitting here with a lock of your hair in my hand, wondering whether you were dead or not! That's what I'm doing!"

"I'm not dead." He crossed to the armoire and opened it. He wore his sword, but had changed clothes since our visit to Sandringham's house; now he was dressed in his old coat—the one that allowed him free movement of his arms.

"Yes, I noticed," I said. "Thoughtful of you to come tell me."

"I came to fetch my clothes." He pulled out two shirts and his full-length cloak and laid them across a stool while he went to rummage in the chest of drawers for clean linen.

"Your clothes? Where on earth are you going?" I hadn't known what to expect when I saw him again, but I certainly hadn't expected this.

"To an inn." He glanced at me, then apparently decided I deserved more than a three-word explanation. He turned and looked at me, his eyes blue and opaque as azurite.

"When I sent ye home in the coach, I walked for a bit, until I had a grip on myself once more. Then I came home to fetch my sword, and returned to the Duke's house to give Randall a formal challenge. The butler told me Randall had been arrested."

His gaze rested on me, remote as the ocean depths. I swallowed once more.

"I went to the Bastille. They told me you'd sworn to an accusation against Randall, saying he'd attacked you and Mary Hawkins the other night. Why, Claire?"

My hands were shaking, and I dropped the lock of hair I had been holding. Its cohesion disturbed by handling, it disintegrated, and the fine red hairs spilled loose across my lap.

"Jamie," I said, and my voice was shaking, too, "Jamie, you can't kill Jack Randall."

One corner of his mouth twitched, very slightly.

"I dinna ken whether to be touched at your concern for my safety, or to be offended at your lack of confidence. But in either case, you needna worry. I can kill him. Easily." The last word was spoken quietly, with an underlying tone that mingled venom with satisfaction.

"That isn't what I mean! Jamie—"

"Fortunately," he went on, as though not hearing me, "Randall has proof that he was at the Duke's residence all during the evening of the rape. As soon as the police finish interviewing the guests who were present, and satisfy themselves that Randall is innocent—of *that* charge, at least—then he'll be let go. I shall stay at the inn until he's free. And then I shall find him." His eyes were fixed on the wardrobe, but plainly he was seeing something else. "He'll be waiting for me," he said softly.

He stuffed the shirts and linen into a traveling-bag and slung his cloak over his arm. He was turning to go through the door when I sprang up from the bed and caught him by the sleeve.

"Jamie! For God's sake, Jamie, listen to me! You can't kill Jack Randall because I won't let you!"

He stared down at me in utter astonishment.

"Because of Frank," I said. I let go of his sleeve and stepped back.

"Frank," he repeated, shaking his head slightly as though to clear a buzzing in his ears. "Frank."

"Yes," I said. "If you kill Jack Randall now, then Frank … he won't exist. He won't be born. Jamie, you can't kill an innocent man!"

His face, normally a pale, ruddy bronze, had faded to a blotchy white as I spoke. Now the red began to rise again, burning the tips of his ears and flaming in his cheeks.

"An innocent man?"

"Frank is an innocent man! I don't care about Jack Randall—"

"Well, I do!" He snatched up the bag and strode toward the door, cloak streaming over one arm. "Jesus God, Claire! You'd try to stop me taking my vengeance on the man who made me play whore to him? Who forced me to my knees and made me suck his cock, smeared with my own blood? *Christ*, Claire!" He flung the door open with a crash and was in the hallway by the time I could reach him.

It had grown dark by now, but the servants had lit the candles, and the hallway was aglow with soft light. I grasped him by the arm and yanked at him.

"Jamie! Please!"

He jerked his arm impatiently out of my grasp. I was almost crying, but held back the tears. I caught the bag and pulled it out of his hand.

"Please, Jamie! Wait, just for a year! The child—Randall's—it will be conceived next December. After that, it won't matter. But please —for my sake, Jamie—wait that long!"

The candelabra on the gilt-edged table threw his shadow huge and wavering against the far wall. He stared up at it, hands clenched, as though facing a giant, blank-faced and menacing, that towered above him.

"Aye," he whispered, as though to himself, "I'm a big chap. Big and strong. I can stand a lot. Yes, I can stand it." He whirled on me, shouting.

"I can stand a lot! But just because I can, does that mean I must? Do I have to bear everyone's weakness? Can I not have my own?"

He began to pace up and down the hall, the shadow following in silent frenzy.

"You cannot ask it of me! You, you of all people! You, who know what … what …" He choked, speechless with rage.

He hit the stone wall of the passage repeatedly as he walked, smashing the side of his fist viciously into the limestone wall. The stone swallowed each blow in soundless violence.

He turned back and came to a halt facing me, breathing heavily. I stood stock-still, afraid to move or speak. He nodded once or twice, rapidly, as though making up his mind about something, then drew the dirk from his belt with a hiss and held it in front of my nose. With a visible effort, he spoke calmly.

"You may have your choice, Claire. Him, or me." The candle flames danced in the polished metal as he turned the knife slowly. "I cannot live while he lives. If ye wilna have me kill him, then kill me now, yourself!" He grabbed my hand and forced my fingers around the handle of the dirk. Ripping the lacy jabot open, he bared his throat and yanked my hand upward, fingers hard around my own.

I pulled back with all my strength, but he forced the tip of the blade against the soft hollow above the collarbone, just below the livid cicatrice that Randall's own knife had left there years before.

"Jamie! Stop it! Stop it right now!" I brought my other hand down on his wrist as hard as I could, jarring his grip enough to jerk my fingers free. The knife clattered to the floor, bouncing from the stones to a quiet landing on a corner of the leafy Aubusson carpet. With that clarity of vision for small details that afflicts life's most awful moments, I saw that the blade lay stark across the curling stem of a bunch of fat green grapes, as though about to sever it and cut them free of the weft to roll at our feet.

He stood frozen before me, face white as bone, eyes burning. I gripped his arm, hard as wood beneath my fingers.

"Please believe me, please. I wouldn't do this if there were any other way." I took a deep, quivering breath to quell the leaping pulse beneath my ribs.

"You owe me your life, Jamie. Not once, twice over. I saved you from hanging at Wentworth, and when you had fever at the Abbey. You owe me a life, Jamie!"

He stared down at me for a long moment before answering. When he did, his voice was quiet again, with an edge of bitterness.

"I see. And ye'll claim your debt now?" His eyes burned with the clear, deep blue that burns in the heart of a flame.

"I have to! I can't make you see reason any other way!"

"Reason. Ah, reason. No, I canna say that reason is anything I see just now." He folded his arms behind his back, gripping the stiff fingers of his right hand with the curled ones of his left. He walked slowly away from me, down the endless hall, head bowed.

The passage was lined with paintings, some lighted from below by torchere or candelabra, some from above by the gilded sconces; a few less favored, skulked in the darkness between. Jamie walked slowly between them, glancing up now and again as though in converse with the wigged and painted gallery.

The hall ran the length of the second floor, carpeted and tapestried, with enormous stained-glass windows set into the walls at either end of the corridor. He walked all the way to the far end, then, wheeling with the precision of a soldier on parade, all the way back, still at a slow and formal pace. Down and back, down and back, again and again.

My legs trembling, I subsided into a fauteuil near the end of the passage. Once one of the omnipresent servants approached obsequiously to ask if Madame required wine, or perhaps a biscuit? I waved him away with what politeness I could muster, and waited.

At last he came to a halt before me, feet planted wide apart in silver-buckled shoes, hands still clasped behind his back. He waited for me to look up at him before he spoke. His face was set, with no twitch of agitation to betray him, though the lines near his eyes were deep with strain.

"A year, then" was all he said. He turned at once and was several feet away by the time I struggled out of the deep green-velvet chair. I had barely gained my feet when he suddenly whirled back past me, reached the huge stained-glass window in three strides, and smashed his right hand through it.

The window was made up of thousands of tiny colored panes, held in place by strips of melted lead. Though the entire window, a mythological scene of the Judgment of Paris, shuddered in its frame, the leading held most of the panes intact; in spite of the crash and tinkle, only a jagged hole at the feet of Aphrodite let in the soft spring air.

Jamie stood a moment, pressing both hands tight into his midriff. A dark red stain grew on the frilled cuff, lacy as a bridal shirt. He brushed past me once again as I moved toward him, and stalked away unspeaking.

* * *

I collapsed once more into the armchair, hard enough to make a small puff of dust rise from the plush. I lay there limp, eyes closed, feeling the cool night breeze wash over me. The hair was damp at my temples, and I could feel my pulse, quick as a bird's, racing at the base of my throat.

Would he ever forgive me? My heart clenched like a fist at the memory of the knowledge of betrayal in his eyes. *"How could you ask it?"* he had said. *"You, you who know …"* Yes, I knew, and I thought the knowing might tear me from Jamie as I had been torn from Frank.

But whether Jamie could forgive me or not, I could never forgive myself, if I condemned an innocent man—and one I had once loved.

"The sins of the fathers," I murmured to myself. "The sins of the fathers shall not be visited upon the children."

"Madame?"

I jumped, opening my eyes to find an equally startled chambermaid backing away. I put a hand to my pounding heart, gasping for air.

"Madame, you are unwell? Shall I fetch—"

"No," I said, as firmly as I could. "I am quite well. I wish to sit here for a time. Please go away."

The girl seemed only too anxious to oblige. "*Qui*, Madame!" she said, and vanished down the corridor, leaving me gazing blankly at a scene of amorous love in a garden, hanging on the opposite wall. Suddenly cold, I drew up the folds of the cloak I had had no time to shed, and closed my eyes again.

* * *

It was past midnight when I went at last to our bedroom. Jamie was there, seated before a small table, apparently watching a pair of lacewings fluttering dangerously around the single candlestick which was all the light there was in the room. I dropped my cape on the floor and went toward him.

"Don't touch me," he said. "Go to bed." He spoke almost abstractedly, but I halted in my tracks.

"But your hand—" I started.

"It doesn't matter. Go to bed," he repeated.

The knuckles of his right hand were laced with blood, and the cuff of his shirt was stiff with it, but I would not have dared touch him then had he had a knife stuck in his belly. I left him staring at the death-dance of the lacewings and went to bed.

I woke sometime near dawn, with the first light of the coming day fuzzing the outlines of the furniture in the room. Through the double doors to the anteroom, I could see Jamie as I had left him, still seated at the table. Now the candle was burnt out, the lacewings gone, and he sat with his head in his hands, fingers furrowed in the brutally cropped hair. The light stole all color from the room; even the hair spiking up like flames between his fingers was quenched to the color of ashes.

I slid out of bed, cold in the thin embroidered nightdress. He didn't turn as I came up behind him, but he knew I was there. When I touched his hand he let it drop to the table, and allowed his head to fall back until it rested just below my breasts. He sighed deeply as

I rubbed it, and I felt the tension begin to go out of him. My hands worked their way down over neck and shoulders, feeling the chill of his flesh through the thin linen. Finally I came around in front of him. He reached up and grasped me around the waist, pulling me to him and burying his head in my nightdress, just above the round swell of the unborn child.

"I'm cold," I said at last, very softly. "Will you come and warm me?"

After a moment, he nodded, and stumbled blindly to his feet. I led him to bed, stripped him as he sat unresisting, and tucked him under the quilts. I lay in the curve of his arm, pressed tight against him, until the chill of his skin had faded and we lay ensconced in a pocket of soft warmth.

Tentatively, I laid a hand on his chest, stroking lightly back and forth until the nipple stood up, a tiny nub of desire. He laid his hand over mine, stilling it. I was afraid he would push me away, and he did, but only so that he could roll toward me.

The light was growing stronger, and he spent a long time just looking down at my face, stroking it from temple to chin, drawing his thumb down the line of my throat and out along the wing of my collarbone.

"God, I do love you," he whispered, as though to himself. He kissed me, preventing response, and circling one breast with his maimed right hand, prepared to take me.

"But your hand—" I said, for the second time that night.

"It doesn't matter," he said, for the second time that night.

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PART FOUR

Scandale

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22

THE ROYAL STUD

The coach bumped slowly over a particularly bad stretch of road, one left pitted and holed by the winter freeze and the beating of spring rains. It had been a wet year; even now, in early summer, there were moist, boggy patches under the lush growth of gooseberry bushes by the sides of the road.

Jamie sat beside me on the narrow, padded bench that formed one seat of the coach. Fergus sprawled in the corner of the other bench, asleep, and the motion of the coach made his head rock and sway like the head of a mechanical doll with a spring for its neck. The air in the coach was warm, and dust came through the windows in small golden spurts whenever we hit a patch of dry earth.

We had talked desultorily at first of the surrounding countryside, of the Royal stables at Argentan for which we were headed, of the small bits of gossip that composed the daily fare of conversation in Court and business circles. I might have slept, too, lulled by the coach's rhythm and the warmth of the day, but the changing contours of my body made sitting in one position uncomfortable, and my back ached from the jolting. The baby was becoming increasingly active, too, and the small flutters of the first movements had developed into definite small pokes and proddings; pleasant in their own fashion, but distracting.

"Perhaps ye should have stayed at home, Sassenach," Jamie said, frowning slightly as I twisted, adjusting my position yet again.

"I'm all right," I said with a smile. "Just twitchy. And it would have been a shame to miss all this." I waved at the coach window, where the broad sweep of fields shone green as emeralds between the windbreak rows of dark, straight poplars. Dusty or not, the fresh air of the countryside was rich and intoxicating after the close, fetid smells of the city and the medicinal stenches of L'Hôpital des Anges.

Louis had agreed, as a gesture of cautious amity toward the English diplomatic overtures, to allow the Duke of Sandringham to purchase four Percheron broodmares from the Royal stud at Argentan, with which to improve the bloodlines of the small herd of draft horses which His Grace maintained in England. His Grace was therefore visiting Argentan today, and had invited Jamie along to give advice on which mares should be chosen. The invitation was given at an evening party, and one thing leading to another, the visit had ended up as a full-scale picnic expedition, involving four coaches and several of the ladies and gentlemen of the Court.

"It's a good sign, don't you think?" I asked, with a cautious glance to be sure our companions were indeed fast asleep. "Louis giving the Duke permission to buy horses, I mean. If he's making gestures toward the English, then he's presumably not inclined to be sympathetic to James Stuart—at least not openly."

Jamie shook his head. He declined absolutely to wear a wig, and the bold, clean shape of his polled head had occasioned no little excitement at Court. It had its advantages at the present moment; while a faint sheen of perspiration glowed on the bridge of his long, straight nose, he wasn't nearly as wilted as I.

"No, I'm fairly sure now that Louis means to have nothing to do with the Stuarts—at least so far as any move toward restoration goes. Monsieur Duverney assures me that the Council is entirely opposed to any such thing; while Louis may eventually yield to the Pope's urgings so far as to make Charles a small allowance, he isna disposed to bring the Stuarts into any kind of prominence in France, wi' Geordie of England looking over his shoulder." He wore his plaid today pinned with a brooch at the shoulder—a beautiful thing his sister had sent him from Scotland, made in the shape of two running stags, bodies bent so that they joined in a circle, heads and tails touching. He pulled up a fold of the plaid and wiped his face with it.

"I think I've spoken with every banker in Paris of any substance over the last months, and they're united in basic disinterest." He smiled wryly. "Money's none so plentiful that anyone wants to back a dicey proposition like the Stuart restoration."

"And that," I said, stretching my back with a groan, "leaves Spain."

Jamie nodded. "It does. And Dougal MacKenzie." He looked smug, and I sat up, intrigued.

"Have you heard from him?" Despite an initial wariness, Dougal had accepted Jamie as a devoted fellow Jacobite, and the usual crop of coded letters had been augmented by a series of discreet communications sent by Dougal from Spain, meant to be read by Jamie and passed on to Charles Stuart.

"I have indeed." I could tell from his expression that it was good news, and it was—though not for the Stuarts.

"Philip has declined to lend any assistance to the Stuarts," Jamie said. "He's had word from the papal office, ye ken; he's to keep awa' from the whole question of the Scottish throne."

"Do we know why?" The latest interception from a papal messenger had contained several letters, but as these were all addressed to James or Charles Stuart, they might well contain no reference to His Holiness's conversations with Spain.

"Dougal thinks he knows." Jamie laughed. "He's fair disgusted, is Dougal. Said he'd been kept cooling his heels in Toledo for nearly a month, and sent awa' at last with no more than a vague promise of aid 'in the fullness of time, *Deo volente*.' " His deep voice captured a pious intonation perfectly, and I laughed myself.

"Benedict wants to avoid friction between Spain and France; he doesna want Philip and Louis wasting money that he might have a use for, ye ken," he added cynically. "It's hardly fitting for a pope to say so, but Benedict has his doubts as to whether a Catholic king could hold England anymore. Scotland's got its Catholic chiefs among the Highland clans, but it's some time since England owned a Catholic king—likely to be the hell of a lot longer before they do again—*Deo volente*," he added, grinning.

He scratched his head, ruffling the short red-gold hair above his temple. "It looks verra dim for the Stuarts, Sassenach, and that's good news. No, there'll be no aid from the Bourbon monarchs. The only thing that concerns me now is this investment Charles Stuart's made with the Comte St. Germain."

"You don't think it's just a business arrangement, then?"

"Well, it is," he said, frowning, "and yet there's more behind it. I've heard talk, aye?"

While the banking families of Paris were not inclined to take the Young Pretender to the throne of Scotland with any seriousness, that situation might easily change, were Charles Stuart suddenly to have money to invest.

"His Highness tells me he's been talking to the Gobelins," Jamie said. "St. Germain introduced him; otherwise they'd not give him the time o' day. And old Gobelin thinks him a wastrel and a fool, and so does one of the Gobelin sons. The other, though—he says that he'll wait and see; if Charles succeeds with this venture, then perhaps he can put other opportunities in his way."

"Not at all good," I observed.

Jamie shook his head. "No. Money breeds money, ye ken. Let him succeed at one or two large ventures, and the bankers will begin to listen to him. The man's no great thinker," he said, with a wry twist of his mouth, "but he's verra charming in person; he can persuade people into things against their better judgment. Even so, he'll make no headway without a small bit of capital to his name—but he'll have that, if this investment succeeds."

"Mm." I shifted my position once more, wriggling my toes in their hot leather prison. The shoes had fit when made for me, but my feet were beginning to swell a bit, and my silk stockings were damp with sweat. "Is there anything we can do about it?"

Jamie shrugged, with a lopsided smile. "Pray for bad weather off Portugal, I suppose. Beyond the ship sinking, I dinna see much way for the venture to fail, truth be told. St. Germain has contracts already for the sale of the entire cargo. Both he and Charles Stuart stand to triple their money."

I shivered briefly at the mention of the Comte. I couldn't help recalling Dougal's speculations. I had not told Jamie about Dougal's visit, nor about his speculations as to the Comte's nocturnal activities. I didn't like keeping secrets from him, but Dougal had demanded my silence as his price for helping me in the matter of Jonathan Randall, and I had had little choice but to agree.

Jamie smiled suddenly at me, and stretched out a hand.

"I'll think of something, Sassenach. For now, give me your feet. Jenny said it helped to have me rub her feet when she was wi' child."

I didn't argue, but slipped my feet out of the hot shoes and swung them up onto his lap with a sigh of relief as the air from the window cooled the damp silk over my toes.

His hands were big, and his fingers at once strong and gentle. He rubbed his knuckles down the arch of my foot and I leaned back with a soft moan. We rode silently for several minutes, while I relaxed into a state of mindless bliss.

Head bent over my green silk toes, Jamie remarked casually, "It wasna really a debt, ye ken."

"What wasn't?" Fogged as I was by warm sun and foot massage, I hadn't any idea what he meant.

Not stopping his rubbing, he looked up at me. His expression was serious, though the hint of a smile lit his eyes.

"You said that I owed ye a life, Sassenach, because you'd saved mine for me." He took hold of one big toe and wiggled it. "But I've been reckoning, and I'm none so sure that's true. Seems to me that it's nearly even, taken all in all."

"What you do mean, even?" I tried to pull my foot loose, but he held tight.

"If you've saved my life—and ye have—well, I've saved yours as well, and at least as often. I saved ye from Jack Randall at Fort William, you'll recall—and I took ye from the mob at Cranesmuir, no?"

"Yes," I said cautiously. I had no idea where he was going, but he wasn't just making idle conversation. "I'm grateful for it, of course."

He made a small Scottish noise of dismissal, deep in his throat. "It isna a matter for gratitude, Sassenach, on your part *or* mine—my point is only that it's no a matter of obligation, either." The smile had vanished from his eyes, and he was entirely serious.

"I didna give ye Randall's life as an exchange for my own—it wouldna be a fair trade, for one thing. Close your mouth, Sassenach," he added practically, "flies will get in." There were in fact a number of the insects present; three were resting on the Fergus's shirtfront, undisturbed by its constant rise and fall.

"Why did you agree, then?" I stopped struggling, and he wrapped both hands around my feet, running his thumbs slowly over the curves of my heels.

"Well, it wasna for any of the reasons you tried to make me see. As for Frank," he said, "well, it's true enough that I've taken his wife, and I do pity him for it—more sometimes than others," he added, with an impudent quirk of one eyebrow. "Still, is it any different than if he were my rival here? You had free choice between us, and you chose me—even with such luxuries as hot baths thrown in on his side. Oof!" I jerked one foot loose and drove it into his ribs. He straightened up and grabbed it, in time to prevent me repeating the blow.

"Regretting your choice, are you?"

"Not yet," I said, struggling to repossess my foot, "but I may any minute. Keep talking."

"Well then. I couldna see that the fact that you picked me entitled Frank Randall to particular consideration. Besides," he said frankly, "I'll admit to bein' just a wee bit jealous of the man."

I kicked with my other foot, aiming lower. He caught that one before it landed, twisting my ankle skillfully.

"As for owing him his life, on general principles," he continued, ignoring my attempts to escape, "that's an argument Brother Anselm at the Abbey could answer better than I. Certainly I wouldna kill an innocent man in cold blood. But there again, I've killed men in battle, and is this different?"

I remembered the soldier, and the boy in the snow that I had killed in our escape from Wentworth. I no longer tormented myself with memories of them, but I knew they would never leave me.

He shook his head. “No, there are a good many arguments ye might make about that, but in the end, such choices come down to one: You kill when ye must, and ye live with it after. I remember the face of every man I’ve killed, and always will. But the fact remains, I am alive and they are not, and that is my only justification, whether it be right or no.”

“But that’s not true in this case,” I pointed out. “It isn’t a case of kill or be killed.”

He shook his head, dislodging a fly that had settled on his hair. “Now there you’re wrong, Sassenach. What it is that lies between Jack Randall and me will be settled only when one of us is dead—and maybe not then. There are ways of killing other than with a knife or a gun, and there are things worse than physical death.” His tone softened. “In Ste. Anne, you pulled me back from more than one kind of death, *mo duinne,* and never think I don’t know it.” He shook his head. “Perhaps I do owe you more than you owe me, after all.”

He let go my feet and rearranged his long legs. “And that leads me to consider your conscience as well as mine. After all, you had no idea what would happen when ye made your choice, and it’s one thing to abandon a man, and another to condemn him to death.”

I did not at all like this manner of describing my actions, but I couldn’t shirk the facts. I had in fact abandoned Frank, and while I could not regret the choice I had made, still I did and always would regret its necessity. Jamie’s next words echoed my thoughts eerily.

He continued, “If ye had known it might mean Frank’s—well, his death, shall we say—perhaps you would have chosen differently. Given that ye did choose me, have I the right to make your actions of more consequence than you intended?”

Absorbed in his argument, he had been oblivious of its effect on me. Catching sight of my face now, he stopped suddenly, watching me in silence as we jostled our way through the greens of the countryside.

“I dinna see how it can have been a sin for you to do as ye did, Claire,” he said at last, reaching out to lay a hand on my stockinged foot. “I am your lawful husband, as much as he ever was—or will be. You do not even know that ye could have returned to him; *mo duinne*, ye might have gone still further back, or gone forward to a different time altogether. You acted as ye thought ye must, and no one can do better than that.” He looked up, and the look in his eyes pierced my soul.

“I’m honest enough to say that I dinna care what the right and wrong of it may be, so long as you are here wi’ me, Claire,” he said softly. “If it was a sin for you to choose me … then I would go to the Devil himself and bless him for tempting ye to it.” He lifted my foot and gently kissed the tip of my big toe.

I laid my hand on his head; the short hair felt bristly but soft, like a very young hedgehog.

“I don’t think it was wrong,” I said softly. “But if it was … then I’ll go to the Devil with you, Jamie Fraser.”

He closed his eyes and bowed his head over my foot. He held it so tightly that I could feel the long, slender metatarsals pressed together; still, I didn’t pull back. I dug my fingers into his scalp and tugged his hair gently.

“Why then, Jamie? Why did you decide to let Jack Randall live?”

He still gripped my foot, but opened his eyes and smiled at me.

“Well, I thought a number of things, Sassenach, as I walked up and down that evening. For one thing, I thought that you would suffer, if I did kill the filthy scut. I would do, or not do, quite a few things to spare you distress, Sassenach, but—how heavily does your conscience weigh, against my honor?

“No.” He shook his head again, disposing of another point. “Each one of us can be responsible only for his own actions and his own conscience. What I do canna be laid to your account, no matter what the effects.” He blinked, eyes watering from the dusty wind, and passed a hand across his hair in a vain attempt to smooth the disheveled ends. Clipped short, the spikes of a cowlick stood up on the crest of his skull in a defiant spray.

“Why, then?” I demanded, leaning forward. “You’ve told me all the reasons why not; what’s left?”

He hesitated for a moment, but then met my eyes squarely.

"Because of Charles Stuart, Sassenach. So far we have stopped all the earths, but with this investment of his—well, he might yet succeed in leading an army in Scotland. And if so … well, ye ken better than I do what may come, Sassenach."

I did, and the thought turned me cold. I could not help remembering one historian's description of the Highlanders' fate at Culloden—"the dead lay four deep, soaking in rain and their own blood."

The Highlanders, mismanaged and starving, but ferocious to the end, would be wasted in one decisive half-hour. They would be left to lie in heaps, bleeding in a cold April rain, the cause they had cherished for a hundred years dead along with them.

Jamie reached forward suddenly and took my hands.

"I think it will not happen, Claire; I think we will stop him. And if not, then still I dinna expect anything to happen to me. But if it should …" He was in deadly earnest now, speaking soft and urgently. "If it does, then I want there to be a place for you; I want someone for you to go to if I am … not there to care for you. If it canna be me, then I would have it be a man who loves you." His grasp on my fingers grew tighter; I could feel both rings digging into my flesh, and felt the urgency in his hands.

"Claire, ye know what it cost me to do this for you—to spare Randall's life. Promise me that if the time should come, you'll go back to Frank." His eyes searched my face, deep blue as the sky in the window behind him. "I tried to send ye back twice before. And I thank God ye wouldna go. But if it comes to a third time—then promise me you will go back to him—back to Frank. For that is why I spare Jack Randall for a year—for your sake. Promise me, Claire?"

"Allez! Allez! Montez!" the coachman shouted from above, encouraging the team up a slope. We were nearly there.

"All right," I said at last. "I promise."

* * *

The stables at Argentan were clean and airy, redolent of summer and the smell of horses. In an open box stall, Jamie circled a Percheron mare, enamored as a horsefly.

"Ooh, what a bonnie wee lass ye are! Come here, sweetheart, let me see that beautiful fat rump. Mm, aye, that's grand!"

"I wish my husband would talk that way to *me*," remarked the Duchesse de Neve, provoking giggles from the other ladies of the party, who stood in the straw of the central aisle, watching.

"Perhaps he would, Madame, if your own back view provided such stimulation. But then, perhaps your husband does not share my lord Broch Tuarach's appreciation for a finely shaped rump." The Comte St. Germain allowed his eyes to drift over me with a hint of contemptuous amusement. I tried to imagine those black eyes gleaming through the slits of a mask, and succeeded only too well. Unfortunately, the lace of his wrist frills fell well past his knuckles; I couldn't see the fork of his thumb.

Catching the byplay, Jamie leaned comfortably on the mare's broad back, only his head, shoulders and forearms showing above the bulk of the Percheron.

"My lord Broch Tuarach appreciates beauty wherever it may be encountered, Monsieur le Comte; in animal or woman. Unlike some I might name, though, I am capable of telling the difference between the two." He grinned maliciously at St. Germain, then patted the mare's neck in farewell as the party broke out laughing.

Jamie took my arm to lead me toward the next stable, followed more slowly by the rest of the party.

"Ah," he said, inhaling the mixture of horse, harness, manure, and hay as though it were incense. "I do miss the smell of a stable. And the country makes me sick for Scotland."

"Doesn't look a lot like Scotland," I said, squinting in the bright sun as we emerged from the dimness of the stable.

"No, but it's country," he said, "it's clean, and it's green, and there's nay smoke in the air, or sewage underfoot—unless ye count horse dung, which I don't."

The sun of early summer shone on the roofs of Argentan, nestled among gently rolling green hills. The Royal stud was just outside the town, much more solidly constructed than the houses of the King's subjects nearby. The barns and stables were of quarried stone, stone-floored, slate-roofed, and maintained in a condition of cleanliness that surpassed that of L'Hôpital des Anges by a fair degree.

A loud whooping came from behind the corner of the stable, and Jamie stopped short, just in time to avoid Fergus, who shot out in front of us as though fired from a slingshot, hotly pursued by two stable-lads, both a good deal bigger. A dirty green streak of fresh manure down the side of the first boy's face gave some clue as to the cause of the altercation.

With considerable presence of mind, Fergus doubled on his tracks, shot past his pursuers, and whizzed into the middle of the party, whence he took refuge behind the bulwark of Jamie's kilted hips. Seeing their prey thus safely gone to earth, his pursuers glanced fearfully at the oncoming phalanx of courtiers and gowns, exchanged a look of decision, and, as one, turned and loped off.

Seeing them go, Fergus stuck his head out from behind my skirt and yelled something in gutter French that earned him a sharp cuff on the ear from Jamie.

"Off wi' ye," he said brusquely. "And for God's sake, dinna be throwin' horse apples at people bigger than you are. Now, go and keep out of trouble." He followed up this advice with a healthy smack on the seat of the breeches that sent Fergus staggering off in the opposite direction to that taken by his erstwhile assailants.

I had been of two minds as to the wisdom of taking Fergus with us on this expedition, but most of the ladies were bringing pageboys with them, to run errands and carry the baskets of food and other paraphernalia deemed essential to a day's outing. And Jamie had wanted to show the lad a bit of country, feeling that he'd earned a holiday. All well and good, except that Fergus, who had never been outside Paris in his life, had got the exhilaration of air, light, and beautiful huge animals right up his nose, and, demented with excitement, had been in constant trouble since our arrival.

"God knows what he'll do next," I said darkly, looking after Fergus's retreating form. "Set one of the hayricks on fire, I expect."

Jamie was unperturbed at the suggestion.

"He'll be all right. All lads get into manure fights."

"They do?" I turned around, scrutinizing St. Germain, immaculate in white linen, white serge, and white silk, bending courteously to listen to the Duchesse, as she minced slowly across the straw-strewn yard.

"Maybe *you* did," I said. "Not him. Not the Bishop, either, I don't think." I was wondering whether this excursion had been a good idea, at least on my part. Jamie was in his element with the giant Percherons, and the Duke was clearly impressed with him, which was all to the good. On the other hand, my back ached miserably from the carriage ride, and my feet felt hot and swollen, pressing painfully against the tight leather of my shoes.

Jamie looked down at me and smiled, pressing my hand where it lay on his arm.

"None so long now, Sassenach. The guide wants to show us the breeding sheds, and then you and the other ladies can go and sit down wi' the food, while the men stand about makin' crude jests about the size of each other's cock."

"Is that the general effect of watching horses bred?" I asked, fascinated.

"Well, on men it is; I dinna ken what it does to ladies. Keep an ear out, and ye can tell me later."

There was in fact an air of suppressed excitement among the members of the party as we all pressed into the rather cramped quarters of a breeding shed. Stone, like the other buildings, this one was equipped not with partitioned stalls down both sides, but with a small fenced pen, with holding stalls at either side, and a sort of chute or runway along the back, with several gates that could be opened or closed to control a horse's movement.

The building itself was light and airy, owing to huge, unglazed windows that opened at either end, giving a view of a grassy paddock outside. I could see several of the enormous Percheron mares grazing near the edge of this; one or two seemed restless, breaking into a rocking gallop for a few paces, then dropping back to a trot or a walk, shaking heads and manes with a high, whinnying noise. Once, when this happened, there was a loud, nasal scream from one of the holding stalls at the end of the shed, and the paneling shook with the thud of a mighty kick from its inhabitant.

"*He's* ready," a voice murmured appreciatively behind me. "I wonder which is the lucky mademoiselle?"

"The one nearest the gate," the Duchesse suggested, always ready to wager. "Five livres on that one."

"Ah, no! You're wrong, Madame, she's too calm. It will be the little one, under the apple tree, rolling her eyes like a coquette. See how she tosses her head? That one's my choice."

The mares had all stopped at the sound of the stallion's cry, lifting inquiring noses and flicking their ears nervously. The restless ones tossed their heads and whickered; one stretched her neck and let out a long, high call.

"That one," Jamie said quietly, nodding at her. "Hear her call him?"

"And what is she saying, my lord?" the Bishop asked, a glint in his eye.

Jamie shook his head solemnly.

"It is a song, my lord, but one that a man of the cloth is deaf to—or should be," he added, to gales of laughter.

Sure enough, it was the mare who had called who was chosen. Once inside, she stopped dead, head up, and stood testing the air with flaring nostrils. The stallion could smell her; his cries echoed eerily off the timbered roof, so loud that conversation was impossible.

No one wanted to talk now, anyway. Uncomfortable as I was, I could feel the quick tingle of arousal through my breasts, and a tightening of my swollen belly as the mare once more answered the stallion's call.

Percherons are very large horses. A big one stands over five feet at the shoulder, and the rump of a well-fed mare is almost a yard across, a pale, dappled gray or shining black, adorned with a waterfall of black hair, thick as my arm at the root of it.

The stallion burst from his stall toward the tethered mare with a suddenness that made everyone fall back from the fence. Puffs of dust flew up in clouds as the huge hooves struck the packed dirt of the pen, and drops of saliva flew from his open mouth. The groom who had opened his stall door jumped aside, tiny and insignificant next to the magnificent fury let loose in the pen.

The mare curvetted and squealed in alarm, but then he was on her, and his teeth closed on the sturdy arch of her neck, forcing her head down into submission. The great swathe of her tail swept high, leaving her naked, exposed to his lust.

"Jésus," whispered Monsieur Prudhomme.

It took very little time, but it seemed a lot longer, watching the heaving of sweat-darkened flanks, and the play of light on swirling hair and the sheen of great muscles, tense and straining in the flexible agony of mating.

Everyone was very quiet as we left the shed. Finally the Duke laughed, nudged Jamie, and said, "You are accustomed to such sights, my lord Broch Tuarach?"

"Aye," Jamie answered. "I've seen it a good many times."

"Ah?" the Duke said. "And tell me, my lord, how does the sight make you feel, after so many times?"

One corner of Jamie's mouth twitched as he replied, but he remained otherwise straight-faced.

"Verra modest, Your Grace," he said.

"What a sight!" the Duchesse de Neve said. She broke a biscuit, dreamy-eyed, and munched it slowly. "So arousing, was it not?"

"What a prick, you mean," said Madame Prudhomme, rather coarsely. "I wish Philibert had one like that. As it is …" She cocked an eyebrow toward a plate of tiny sausages, each perhaps two inches long, and the ladies seated on the picnic cloth broke into giggles.

"A bit of chicken, please, Paul," said the Comtesse St. Germain to her pageboy. She was young, and the bawdy conversation of the older ladies was making her blush. I wondered just what sort of marriage she had with St. Germain; he never took her out in public, save on occasions like this, where the presence of the Bishop prevented his appearing with one of his mistresses.

"Bah," said Madame Montresor, one of the ladies-in-waiting, whose husband was a friend of the Bishop's. "Size isn't everything. What difference if it's the size of a stallion's, if he lasts no longer than one? Less than two minutes? I ask you, what good is that?" She held up a cornichon between two fingers and delicately licked the tiny pale-green pickle, the pink tip of her tongue pointed and dainty. "It isn't what they have in their breeches, I say; it's what they do with it."

Madame Prudhomme snorted. "Well, if you find one who knows how to do anything with it but poke it into the nearest hole, tell me. I would be interested to see what else can be done with a thing like that."

"At least you have one who's interested," broke in the Duchesse de Neve. She cast a glance of disgust at her husband, huddled with the other men near one of the paddocks, watching a harnessed mare being put through her paces.

"Not tonight, my dearest," she imitated the sonorous, nasal tones of her husband to perfection. "I am *fatigued*." She put a hand to her brow and rolled her eyes up. "The press of business is so wearing." Encouraged by the giggles, she went on with her imitation, now widening her eyes in horror and crossing her hands protectively over her lap. "What, *again*? Do you not know that to expend the male essence gratuitously is to court ill-health? Is it not enough that your demands have worn me to a nubbin, Mathilde? Do you wish me to have an *attack*?"

The ladies cackled and screeched with laughter, loud enough to attract the attention of the Bishop, who waved at us and smiled indulgently, provoking further gales of hilarity.

"Well, at least he is not expending all his male essence in brothels—or elsewhere," said Madame Prudhomme, with an eloquently pitying glance at the Comtesse St. Germain.

"No," said Mathilde gloomily. "He hoards it as though it were gold. You'd think there was no more to be had, the way he … oh, Your Grace! Will you not have a cup of wine?" She smiled charmingly up at the Duke, who had approached quietly from behind. He stood smiling at the ladies, one fair brow slightly arched.

If he had heard the subject of our conversation, he gave no sign of it.

Seating himself beside me on the cloth, His Grace made casual, witty conversation with the ladies, his oddly high-pitched voice forming no contrast to theirs. While he seemed to pay close attention to the conversation, I noticed that his eyes strayed periodically to the small cluster of men who stood by the paddock fence. Jamie's kilt was bright even amid the gorgeous cut velvets and stiffened silk.

I had had some hesitation in meeting the Duke again. After all, our last visit had ended in the arrest of Jonathan Randall, upon my accusation of attempted rape. But the Duke had been all charming urbanity on this outing, with no mention of either of the Randall brothers. Neither had there been any public mention of the arrest; whatever the Duke's diplomatic activities, they seemed to rank highly enough to merit a Royal seal of silence.

On the whole, I welcomed the Duke's appearance at the picnic cloth. For one thing, his presence kept the ladies from asking me—as some bold souls did every so often, at parties—whether it was true about what Scotsmen wore beneath their kilts. Given the mood of the present party, I didn't think my customary reply of "Oh, the usual" would suffice.

"Your husband has a fine eye for horses," the Duke observed to me, freed for a moment when the Duchesse de Neve, on his other side, leaned across the cloth to talk to Madame Prudhomme. "He tells me that both his father and his uncle kept small but quite fine stables in the Highlands."

"Yes, that's true." I sipped my wine. "But you've visited Colum MacKenzie at Castle Leoch; surely you've seen his stable for yourself." I had in fact first met the Duke at Leoch the year before, though the meeting had been brief; he had left on a hunting expedition shortly before I was arrested for witchcraft. I thought surely he must have known about that, but if so, he gave no sign of it.

"Of course." The Duke's small, shrewd blue eyes darted left, then right, to see whether he was observed, then shifted into English. "At the time, your husband informed me that he did not reside upon his own estates, owing to an unfortunate—and mistaken—charge of murder laid against him by the English Crown. I wondered, my lady, whether that charge of outlawry still holds?"

"There's still a price on his head," I said bluntly.

The Duke's expression of polite interest didn't change. He reached absently for one of the small sausages on the platter.

"That is not an irremediable matter," he said quietly. "After my encounter with your husband at Leoch, I made some inquiries—oh, suitably discreet, I assure you, my dear lady. And I think that the matter might be arranged without undue difficulty, given a word in the right ear—from the right sources."

This was interesting. Jamie had first told the Duke of Sandringham about his outlawry at Colum MacKenzie's suggestion, in the hopes that the Duke might be persuaded to intervene in the case. As Jamie had not in fact committed the crime in question, there could be little evidence against him; it was quite possible that the Duke, a powerful voice among the nobles of England, could indeed arrange to have the charges dismissed.

"Why?" I said. "What do you want in return?"

The sketchy blond brows shot upward, and he smiled, showing small white even teeth.

"My word, you *are* direct, are you not? Might it not be only that I appreciate your husband's expertise and assistance in the selection of horses, and would like to see him restored to a place where that skill might once again be profitably exercised?"

"It might be, but it isn't," I said. I caught Madame Prudhomme's sharp eyes on us, and smiled pleasantly at him. "Why?"

He popped the sausage whole into his mouth and chewed it slowly, his bland round face reflecting nothing more than enjoyment of the day and the meal. At last he swallowed and patted his mouth delicately with one of the linen napkins.

"Well," he said, "as a matter of supposition only, you understand —"

I nodded, and he went on. "*As* a matter of supposition, then, perhaps we may suppose that your husband's recent friendship with

—a certain personage recently arrived from Rome? Ah, I see you understand me. Yes. Let us suppose that that friendship has become a matter of some concern to certain parties who would prefer this personage to return peaceably to Rome—or alternatively, to settle in France, though Rome would be better—safer, you know?"

"I see." I took a sausage myself. They were richly spiced, and little bursts of garlic wafted up my nose at each bite. "And these parties take a sufficiently serious view of this friendship to offer a dismissal of the charges against my husband in return for its severance? Again, why? My husband is no one of great importance."

"Not now," the Duke agreed. "But he may be in future. He has linkages to several powerful interests among the French banking families, and more among the merchants. He is also received at Court, and has some access to Louis's ear. In short, if he does not at present hold the power to command substantial sums of money and influence, he is likely to do so soon. He is also a member of not one but *two* of the more powerful Highland clans. And the parties who wish the personage in question to return to Rome harbor a not unreasonable fear that this influence might be exerted in undesirable directions. So much better if your husband were to return—his good name restored—to his lands in Scotland, do you not think?"

"It's a thought," I said. It was also a bribe, and an attractive one. Sever all connection with Charles Stuart, and be free to return to Scotland and Lallybroch, without the risk of being hanged. The removal of a possibly troublesome supporter of the Stuarts, at no expense to the Crown, was an attractive proposition from the English side, too.

I eyed the Duke, trying to figure out just where he fitted into the scheme of things. Ostensibly an envoy from George II, Elector of Hanover and King—so long as James Stuart remained in Rome—of England, he could well have a dual purpose in his visit to France. To engage with Louis in the delicate exchange of civility and threat that constituted diplomacy, and simultaneously to quash the specter of a fresh Jacobite rising? Several of Charles's usual coterie had disappeared of late, pleading the press of urgent business abroad. Bought off or scared away? I wondered.

The bland countenance gave no clue to his thoughts. He pushed back the wig from a balding brow and scratched his head unselfconsciously.

"Do think about it, my dear," he urged. "And when you have thought—speak to your husband."

"Why don't you speak to him yourself?"

He shrugged and took more sausages, three this time. "I find that so often men are more amenable to a word spoken from the home quarter, from one they trust, rather than to what they may perceive as pressure from an outside source." He smiled. "There is the matter of pride to be considered; that must be handled delicately. And for delicate handling—well, they do talk of 'the woman's touch,' do they not?"

I hadn't time to respond to this, when a shout from the main stable jerked all heads in that direction.

A horse was coming toward us, up the narrow alley between the main stable and the long, open shed that held the forge. A Percheron colt, and a young one, no more than two or three, judging from the dappling of his hide. Even young Percherons are big, and the colt seemed huge, as he blundered to and fro at a slow trot, tail lashing from side to side. Plainly the colt was not yet broken to a saddle; the massive shoulders twitched in an effort to dislodge the small form that straddled his neck, both hands buried deep in the thick black mane.

"Bloody hell, it's Fergus!" The ladies, disturbed by the shouting, had all gotten to their feet by now, and were peering interestedly at the sight.

I didn't realize that the men had joined us until one woman said, "But how dangerous it seems! Surely the boy will be injured if he falls!"

"Well, if he doesna hurt himself falling off, I'll attend to it directly, once I've got my hands on the wee bugger," said a grim voice behind me. I turned to see Jamie peering over my head at the rapidly approaching horse.

"Should you get him off?" I asked.

He shook his head. "No, let the horse take care of it."

In fact, the horse seemed more bewildered than frightened by the strange weight on his back. The dappled gray skin twitched and shivered as though beset by hordes of flies, and the colt shook its head confusedly, as though wondering what was going on.

As for Fergus, his legs were stretched nearly at right angles across the Percheron's broad back; clearly the only hold he had on the horse was his death-grip on the mane. At that, he might have managed to slide down or at least tumble off unscathed, had the victims of the manure fight not completed their plan to exact a measure of revenge.

Two or three grooms were following the horse at a cautious distance, blocking the alleyway behind it. Another had succeeded in running ahead, and opening the gate to an empty paddock that stood near us. The gate was between the group of visiting picnickers and the end of the alleyway between the buildings; clearly the intention was to nudge the horse quietly into the paddock, where it could trample Fergus or not as it chose, but at least would itself be safe from escape or injury.

Before this could be accomplished, though, a lithe form popped its head through a small loft window, high above the alleyway. The spectators intent on the horse, no one noticed but me. The boy in the loft observed, withdrew, and reappeared almost at once, holding a large flake of hay in both hands. Judging the moment to a nicety, he dropped it as Fergus and his mount passed directly beneath.

The effect was much like a bomb going off. There was an explosion of hay where Fergus had been, and the colt gave a panicked whinny, got its hindquarters under it, and took off like a Derby winner, heading straight for the little knot of courtiers, who scattered to the four winds, screeching like geese.

Jamie had flung himself on me, pushing me out of the way and knocking me to the ground in the process. Now he rose off my supine form, cursing fluently in Gaelic. Without pausing to inquire after my welfare, he raced off in the direction taken by Fergus.

The horse was rearing and twisting, altogether spooked, churning forelegs keeping at bay a small gang of grooms and stable-lads, all of whom were rapidly losing their professional calm at the thought of one of the King's valuable horses damaging itself before their eyes.

By some miracle of stubbornness or fear, Fergus was still in place, skinny legs flailing as he slithered and bounced on the heaving back. The grooms were all shouting at him to let go, but he ignored this advice, eyes squeezed tight shut as he clung to the two handfuls of horsehair like a lifeline. One of the grooms was carrying a pitchfork; he waved this menacingly in the air, causing a shriek of dismay from Madame Montresor, who plainly thought he meant to skewer the child.

The shriek didn't ease the colt's nerves to any marked extent. It danced and skittered, backing away from the people who were beginning to surround it. While I didn't think the groom actually intended to stab Fergus off the horse's back, there was a real danger that the child would be trampled if he fell off—and I didn't see how he was going to avoid that fate for much longer. The horse made a sudden dash for a small clump of trees that grew near the paddock, either seeking shelter from the mob, or possibly having concluded that the incubus on its back might be scraped off on a branch.

As it passed beneath the first branches, I caught a glimpse of red tartan among the greenery, and then there was a flash of red as Jamie launched himself from the shelter of a tree. His body struck the colt a glancing blow and he tumbled to the ground in a flurry of plaid and bare legs that would have revealed to a discerning observer that this particular Scotsman wasn't wearing anything under his kilt at the moment.

The party of courtiers rushed up as one, concentrating on the fallen Lord Broch Tuarach, as the grooms pursued the disappearing horse on the other side of the trees.

Jamie lay flat on his back under the beech trees, his face a dead greenish-white, both eyes and mouth wide open. Both arms were locked tight around Fergus, who clung to his chest like a leech. Jamie blinked at me as I dashed up to him, and made a faint effort at a smile. The faint wheezings from his open mouth deepened into a shallow panting, and I relaxed in relief; he'd only had his wind knocked out.

Finally realizing that he was no longer moving, Fergus raised a cautious head. Then he sat bolt upright on his employer's stomach and said enthusiastically, "That was fun, milord! Can we do it again?"

Jamie had pulled a muscle in his thigh during the rescue at Argentan, and was limping badly by the time we returned to Paris. He sent Fergus—none the worse either for the escapade or the scolding that followed it—down to the kitchen to seek his supper, and sank into a chair by the hearth, rubbing the swollen leg.

"Hurt much?" I asked sympathetically.

"A bit. All it needs is rest, though." He stood up and stretched luxuriously, long arms nearly reaching the blackened oak beams above the mantel. "Cramped in that coach; I'd've sooner ridden."

"Mmm. So would I." I rubbed the small of my back, aching with the strain of the trip. The ache seemed to press downward through my pelvis to my legs—joints loosening from pregnancy, I supposed.

I ran an exploratory hand over Jamie's leg, then gestured to the chaise.

"Come and lie on your side. I've some nice ointment I can rub your leg with; it might ease the ache a bit."

"Well, if ye dinna mind." He rose stiffly and lay down on his left side, kilt pulled above his knee.

I opened my medicine box and rummaged through the boxes and jars. Agrimony, slippery elm, pellitory-of-the-wall … ah, there it was. I pulled out the small blue glass jar Monsieur Forez had given me and unscrewed the lid. I sniffed cautiously; salves went rancid easily, but this one appeared to have a good proportion of salt mixed in for preservation. It had a nice mellow scent, and was a beautiful color—the rich yellow-white of fresh cream.

I scooped out a good bit of the salve and spread it down the long muscle of the thigh, pushing Jamie's kilt above his hip to keep out of the way. The flesh of his leg was warm; not the heat of infection, only the normal heat of a young male body, flushed with exercise and the glowing pulse of health. I massaged the cream gently into the skin, feeling the swell of the hard muscle, probing the divisions of quadriceps and hamstring. Jamie made a small grunting sound as I rubbed harder.

"Hurt?" I asked.

"Aye, a bit, but don't stop," he answered. "Feels as though it's doing me good." He chuckled. "I wouldna admit it to any but you, Sassenach, but it *was* fun. I havena moved like that in months."

"Glad you enjoyed yourself," I said dryly, taking another dab of cream. "I had an interesting time myself." Not pausing in the massage, I told him of Sandringham's offer.

He grunted in response, wincing slightly as I hit a tender spot. "So Colum was right, when he thought the man might be able to help with the charges against me."

"So it would seem. I suppose the question is—do you want to take him up on it?" I tried not to hold my breath, as I waited for his answer. For one thing, I knew what it would be; the Frasers as a family were renowned for stubbornness, and despite his mother's having been a MacKenzie, Jamie was a Fraser through and through. Having made up his mind to stopping Charles Stuart, he was hardly likely to abandon the effort. Still, it was tempting bait—to me, as well as to him. To be able to go back to Scotland, to his home; to live in peace.

But there was another rub, of course. If we did go back, leaving Charles's plans to run their course into the future I knew, then any peace in Scotland would be short-lived indeed.

Jamie gave a small snort, apparently having followed my own thought processes. "Well, I'll tell ye, Sassenach. If I thought that Charles Stuart might succeed—might free Scotland from English rule—then I would give my lands, my liberty, and life itself to help him. Fool he might be, but a royal fool, and not an ungallant one, I think." He sighed.

"But I know the man, and I've talked with him—and with all the Jacobites that fought with his father. And given what you tell me will happen if it comes to a Rising again … I dinna see that I've any choice but to stay, Sassenach.

Once he is stopped, then there may be a chance to go back—or there may not. But for now, I must decline His Grace's offer wi' thanks."

I patted his thigh gently. "That's what I thought you'd say."

He smiled at me, then glanced down at the yellowish cream that coated my fingers. "What's that stuff?"

"Something Monsieur Forez gave me. He didn't say what it's called. I don't think it's got any active ingredients, but it's a nice, greasy sort of cream."

The body under my hands stiffened and Jamie glanced over his shoulder at the blue jar.

"Monsieur Forez gave it ye?" he said uneasily.

"Yes," I answered, surprised. "What's the matter?" For he had put aside my cream-smeared hands and, swinging his legs over the side of the chaise longue, was reaching for a towel.

"Has that jar a fleur-de-lys on the lid, Sassenach?" he asked, wiping the ointment from his leg.

"Yes, it has," I said. "Jamie, what's wrong with that salve?" The look on his face was peculiar in the extreme; it kept vacillating between dismay and amusement.

"Oh, I wouldna say there's anything *wrong* about it, Sassenach," he answered finally. Having rubbed his leg hard enough to leave the curly red-gold hair bristling above reddened skin, he tossed the towel aside and looked thoughtfully at the jar.

"Monsieur Forez must think rather highly of ye, Sassenach," he said. "It's expensive stuff, that."

"But—"

"It's not that I dinna appreciate it," he assured me hastily. "It's only that havin' come within a day's length of being one of the ingredients myself, it makes me feel a bit queer."

"Jamie!" I felt my voice rising. "*What* is that stuff?" I grabbed the towel, hastily swabbing my salve-coated hands.

"Hanged-men's grease," he answered reluctantly.

"H-h-h …" I couldn't even get the word out, and started over. "You mean …" Goose bumps rippled up my arms, raising the fine hairs like pins in a cushion.

"Er, aye. Rendered fat from hanged criminals." He spoke cheerfully, regaining his composure as quickly as I was losing mine. "Verra good for the rheumatism and joint-ill, they say."

I recalled the tidy way in which Monsieur Forez had gathered up the results of his operations in L'Hôpital des Anges, and the odd look on Jamie's face when he had seen the tall *chirurgien* escort me home. My knees were watery, and I felt my stomach flip like a pancake.

"Jamie! Who in bloody fucking hell is *Monsieur Forez?"* I nearly screamed.

Amusement was definitely getting the upper hand in his expression.

"He's the public hangman for the Fifth Arondissement, Sassenach. I thought ye knew."

* * *

Jamie returned damp and chilled from the stableyard, where he had gone to scrub himself, the required ablutions being on a scale greater than the bedroom basin could provide.

"Don't worry, it's all off," he assured me, skinning out of his shirt and sliding naked beneath the covers. His flesh was rough and chilly with gooseflesh, and he shivered briefly as he took me in his arms.

"What is it, Sassenach? I don't still smell of it, do I?" he asked, as I huddled stiff under the bedclothes, hugging myself with my arms.

"No," I said. "I'm scared. Jamie, I'm bleeding."

"Jesus," he said softly. I could feel the sudden thrill of fear that ran through him at my words, identical to the one that ran through me. He held me close to him, smoothing my hair and stroking my back, but both of us felt the awful helplessness in the face of physical disaster that made his actions futile. Strong as he was, he couldn't protect me; willing he might be, but he couldn't help. For the first time, I wasn't safe in his arms, and the knowledge terrified both of us.

"D'ye think—" he began, then broke off and swallowed. I could feel the tremor run down his throat and hear the gulp as he swallowed his fear. "Is it bad, Sassenach? Can ye tell?"

"No," I said. I held him tighter, trying to find an anchorage. "I don't know. It isn't heavy bleeding; not yet, anyway."

The candle was still alight. He looked down at me, eyes dark with worry.

"Had I better fetch someone to ye, Claire? A healer, one of the women from the Hôpital?"

I shook my head and licked dry lips.

"No. I don't … I don't think there's anything they could do." It was the last thing I wanted to say; more than anything, I wanted there to be someone we could find who knew how to make it all right. But I remembered my early nurse's training, the few days I had spent on the obstetrical ward, and the words of one of the doctors, shrugging as he left the bed of a patient who'd had a miscarriage. "There's really nothing you can do," he'd said. "If they're going to lose a child, they generally do, no matter what you try. Bed rest is really the only thing, and even that often won't do it."

"It may be nothing," I said, trying to hearten both of us. "It isn't unusual for women to have slight bleeding sometimes during pregnancy." It wasn't unusual—during the first three months. I was more than five months along, and this was by no means usual. Still, there were many things that could cause bleeding, and not all of them were serious.

"It may be all right," I said. I laid a hand on my stomach, pressing gently. I felt an immediate response from the occupant, a lazy, stretching push that at once made me feel better. I felt a rush of passionate gratitude that made tears come to my eyes.

"Sassenach, what can I do?" Jamie whispered. His hand came around me and lay over mine, cupping my threatened abdomen.

I put my other hand on top of his, and held on.

"Just pray," I said. "Pray for us, Jamie."

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THE BEST-LAID PLANS OF MICE AND MEN …

The bleeding had stopped by the morning. I rose very cautiously, but all remained well. Still, it was obvious that the time had come for me to stop working at L'Hôpital des Anges, and I sent Fergus with a note of explanation and apology to Mother Hildegarde. He returned with her prayers and good wishes, and a bottle of a brownish elixir much esteemed—according to the accompanying note—by *les maîtresses sage-femme* for the prevention of miscarriage. After Monsieur Forez's salve, I was more than a little dubious about using any medication I hadn't prepared myself, but a careful sniff reassured me that at least the ingredients were purely botanical.

After considerable hesitation, I drank a spoonful. The liquid was bitter and left a nasty taste in my mouth, but the simple act of doing something—even something I thought likely to be useless—made me feel better. I spent the greater part of each day now lying on the chaise longue in my room, reading, dozing, sewing, or simply staring into space with my hands over my belly.

When I was alone, that is. When he was home, Jamie spent most of his time with me, talking over the day's business, or discussing the most recent Jacobite letters. King James had apparently been told of his son's proposed investment in port wine, and approved it wholeheartedly as "… a very sounde scheme, which I cannot but feel will go a great way in providing for you as I should wish to see you established in France."

“So James thinks the money’s intended merely to establish Charles as a gentleman, and give him some position here,” I said. “Do you think that could be all he has in mind? Louise was here this afternoon; she says Charles came to see her last week—insisted on seeing her, though she refused to receive him at first. She says he was very excited and puffed up about something, but he wouldn’t tell her what; just kept hinting mysteriously about something great he was about to do. ‘A great adventure’ is what she says he said. That doesn’t sound like a simple investment in port, does it?”

“It doesn’t.” Jamie looked grim at the thought.

“Hm,” I said. “Well, all things taken together, it seems a good bet that Charles isn’t meaning just to settle down upon the profits of his venture and become an upstanding Paris merchant.”

“If I were a wagering man, I’d lay my last garter on it,” Jamie said. “The question now is, how do we stop him?”

* * *

The answer came several days later, after any amount of discussion and useless suggestions. Murtagh was with us in my bedroom, having brought up several bolts of cloth from the docks for me.

“They say there’s been an outbreak of pox in Portugal,” he observed, dumping the expensive watered silk on the bed as though it were a load of used burlap. “There was a ship carrying iron from Lisbon came in this morning, and the harbor master was over it with a toothcomb, him and three assistants. Found naught, though.” Spotting the brandy bottle on my table, he poured a tumbler half-full and drank it like water, in large, healthy swallows. I watched this performance openmouthed, pulled from the spectacle only by Jamie’s exclamation.

“Pox?”

“Aye,” said Murtagh, pausing between swallows. “Smallpox.” He lifted the glass again and resumed his systematic refreshment.

“Pox,” Jamie muttered to himself. “Pox.”

Slowly, the frown left his face and the vertical crease between his eyebrows disappeared. A deeply contemplative look came over him, and he lay back in his chair, hands linked behind his neck, staring fixedly at Murtagh. The hint of a smile twitched his wide mouth sideways.

Murtagh observed this process with considerable skeptical resignation. He drained his cup and sat stolidly hunched on his stool as Jamie sprang to his feet and began circling the little clansman, whistling tunelessly through his teeth.

"I take it you have an idea?" I said.

"Oh, aye," he said, and began to laugh softly to himself. "Oh, aye, that I have."

He turned to me, eyes alight with mischief and inspiration.

"Have ye anything in your box of medicines that would make a man feverish? Or give him flux? Or spots?"

"Well, yes," I said slowly, thinking. "There's rosemary. Or cayenne. And cascara, of course, for diarrhea. Why?"

He looked at Murtagh, grinning widely, then, overcome with his idea, cackled and ruffled his kinsman's hair, so it stuck up in black spikes. Murtagh glared at him, exhibiting a strong resemblance to Louise's pet monkey.

"Listen," Jamie said, bending toward us conspiratorially. "What if the Comte St. Germain's ship comes back from Portugal wi' pox aboard?"

I stared at him. "Have you lost your mind?" I inquired politely. "What if it did?"

"If it did," Murtagh interrupted, "they'd lose the cargo. It would be burnt or dumped in the harbor, by law." A gleam of interest showed in the small black eyes. "And how d'ye mean to manage that, lad?"

Jamie's exhilaration dropped slightly, though the light in his eyes remained.

"Well," he admitted, "I havena got it thought out all the way as yet, but for a start …"

The plan took several days of discussion and research to refine, but was at last settled. Cascara to cause flux had been rejected as being too debilitating in action. However, I'd found some good substitutes in one of the herbals Master Raymond had lent me.

Murtagh, armed with a pouch full of rosemary essence, nettle juice, and madder root, would set out at the end of the week for Lisbon, where he would gossip among the sailors' taverns, find out the ship chartered by the Comte St. Germain, and arrange to take passage on it, meanwhile sending back word of the ship's name and sailing date to Paris.

"No, that's common," said Jamie, in answer to my question as to whether the captain might not find this behavior fishy. "Almost all cargo ships carry a few passengers; however many they can squeeze between decks. And Murtagh will have enough money to make him a welcome addition, even if they have to give him the captain's cabin." He wagged an admonitory finger at Murtagh.

"And get a cabin, d'ye hear? I don't care what it costs; ye'll need privacy for taking the herbs, and we dinna want the chance of someone seeing ye, if you've naught but a hammock slung in the bilges." He surveyed his godfather with a critical eye. "Have ye a decent coat? If you go aboard looking like a beggar, they're like to hurl ye off into the harbor before they find out what ye've got in your sporran."

"Mmphm," said Murtagh. The little clansman usually contributed little to the discussion, but what he did say was cogent and to the point. "And when do I take the stuff?" he asked.

I pulled out the sheet of paper on which I had written the instructions and dosages.

"Two spoonfuls of the rose madder—that's this one"—I tapped the small clear-glass bottle, filled with a dark pinkish fluid—"to be taken four hours before you plan to demonstrate your symptoms. Take another spoonful every two hours after the first dose—we don't know how long you'll have to keep it up."

I handed him the second bottle, this one of green glass filled with a purplish-black liquor. "This is concentrated essence of rosemary leaves. This one acts faster. Drink about one-quarter of the bottle half an hour before you mean to show yourself; you should start flushing within half an hour. It wears off quickly, so you'll need to take more when you can manage inconspicuously." I took another, smaller vial from my medicine box. "And once you're well advanced with the ‘fever,’ then you can rub the nettle juice on your arms and face, to raise blisters. Do you want to keep these instructions?”

He shook his head decidedly. “Nay, I’ll remember. There’s more risk to being found wi’ the paper than there is to forgetting how much to take.” He turned to Jamie.

“And you’ll meet the ship at Orvieto, lad?”

Jamie nodded. “Aye. She’s bound to make port there; all the wine haulers do, to take on fresh water. If by chance she doesna do so, then—” He shrugged. “I shall hire a boat and try to catch her up. So long as I board her before we reach Le Havre, it should be all right, but best if we can do it while we’re still close off the coast of Spain. I dinna mean to spend longer at sea than I must.” He pointed with his chin at the bottle in Murtagh’s hand.

“Ye’d best wait to take the stuff ’til ye see me come on board. With no witnesses, the captain might take the easy way out and just put ye astern in the night.”

Murtagh grunted. “Aye, he might try.” He touched the hilt of his dirk, and there was the faintest ironic emphasis on the word “try.”

Jamie frowned at him. “Dinna forget yourself. You’re meant to be suffering from the pox. With luck, they’ll be afraid to touch ye, but just in case … wait ’til I’m within call and we’re well offshore.”

“Mmphm.”

I looked from one to the other of the two men. Farfetched as it was, it might conceivably work. If the captain of the ship could be convinced that one of his passengers was infected with smallpox, he would under no circumstances take his ship into the harbor at Le Havre, where the French health restrictions would require its destruction. And, faced with the necessity of sailing back with his cargo to Lisbon and losing all profit on the voyage, or losing two weeks at Orvieto while word was sent to Paris, he might very well instead consent to sell the cargo to the wealthy Scottish merchant who had just come aboard.

The impersonation of a smallpox victim was the crucial role in this masquerade. Jamie had volunteered to be the guinea pig for testing the herbs, and they had worked magnificently on him. His fair skin had flushed dark red within minutes, and the nettle juice raised immediate blisters that could easily be mistaken for those of pox by a ship's doctor or a panicked captain. And should any doubt remain, the madder-stained urine gave an absolutely perfect illusion of a man pissing blood as the smallpox attacked his kidneys.

"Christ!" Jamie had exclaimed, startled despite himself at the first demonstration of the herb's efficacy.

"Oh, jolly good!" I said, peering over his shoulder at the white porcelain chamber pot and its crimson contents. "That's better than I expected."

"Oh, aye? How long does it take to wear off, then?" Jamie had asked, looking down rather nervously.

"A few hours, I think," I told him. "Why? Does it feel odd?"

"Not odd, exactly," he said, rubbing. "It itches a bit."

"That's no the herb," Murtagh interjected dourly. "It's just the natural condition for a lad of your age."

Jamie grinned at his godfather. "Remember back that far, do ye?"

"Farther back than you were born or thought of, laddie," Murtagh had said, shaking his head.

The little clansman now stowed the vials in his sporran, methodically wrapping each one in a bit of soft leather to prevent breakage.

"I'll send word of the ship and her sailing so soon as I may. And I'll see ye within the month off Spain. You'll have the money before then?"

Jamie nodded. "Oh, aye. By next week, I imagine." Jared's business had prospered under Jamie's stewardship, but the cash reserves were not sufficient to purchase entire shiploads of port, while still fulfilling the other commitments of the House of Fraser. The chess games had borne fruit in more than one regard, though, and Monsieur Duverney the younger, a prominent banker, had willingly guaranteed a sizable loan for his father's friend.

"It's a pity we can't bring the stuff into Paris," Jamie had remarked during the planning, "but St. Germain would be sure to find out. I expect we'll do best to sell it through a broker in Spain—I know a good man in Bilbao. The profit will be much smaller than it would be in France, and the taxes are higher, but ye canna have everything, can ye?"

"I'll settle for paying back Duverney's loan," I said. "And speaking of loans, what's Signore Manzetti going to do about the money he's loaned Charles Stuart?"

"Whistle for it, I expect," said Jamie cheerfully. "And ruin the Stuarts' reputation with every banker on the Continent while he's about it."

"Seems a bit hard on poor old Manzetti," I observed.

"Aye well. Ye canna make an omelet wi'out breakin' eggs, as my auld grannie says."

"You haven't got an auld grannie," I pointed out.

"No," he admitted, "but if I had, that's what she'd say." He had dropped the playfulness then, momentarily. "It's no verra fair to the Stuarts, forbye. In fact, should any of the Jacobite lords come to know what I've been doing, I expect they'd call it treason, and they'd be right." He rubbed a hand over his brow, and shook his head, and I saw the deadly seriousness that his playfulness covered.

"It canna be helped, Sassenach. If you're right—and I've staked my life so far on it—then it's a choice between the aspirations of Charles Stuart and the lives of a hell of a lot of Scotsmen. I've no love for King Geordie—me, wi' a price on my head?—but I dinna see that I can do otherwise."

He frowned, running a hand through his hair, as he always did when thinking or upset. "If there were a chance of Charles succeeding … aye, well, that might be different. To take a risk in an honorable cause—but your history says he willna succeed, and I must say, all I know of the man makes it seem likely that you're right. They're my folk and my family at stake, and if the cost of their lives is a banker's gold … well, it doesna seem more a sacrifice than that of my own honor."

He shrugged in half-humorous despair. "So now I've gone from stealing His Highness's mail to bank robbery and piracy on the high seas, and it seems there's nay help for it."

He was silent for a moment, looking down at his hands, clenched together on the desk. Then he turned his head to me and smiled.

"I always wanted to be a pirate, when I was a bairn," he said. "Pity I canna wear a cutlass."

* * *

I lay in bed, head and shoulders propped on pillows, hands clasped lightly over my stomach, thinking. Since the first alarm, there had been very little bleeding, and I felt well. Still, any sort of bleeding at this stage was cause for alarm. I wondered privately what would happen if any emergency arose while Jamie was gone to Spain, but there was little to be gained by worrying. He had to go; there was too much riding on that particular shipload of wine for any private concerns to intrude. And if everything went all right, he should be back well before the baby was due.

As it was, all personal concerns would have to be put aside, danger or no. Charles, unable to contain his own excitement, had confided to Jamie that he would shortly require two ships—possibly more—and had asked his advice on hull design and the mounting of deck cannon. His father's most recent letters from Rome had betrayed a slight tone of questioning—with his acute Bourbon nose for politics, James Stuart smelled a rat, but plainly hadn't yet been informed of what his son was up to. Jamie, hip-deep in decoded letters, thought it likely that Philip of Spain had not yet mentioned Charles's overtures or the Pope's interest, but James Stuart had his spies, as well.

After a little while, I became aware of some slight change in Jamie's attitude. Glancing toward him, I saw that while he was still holding a book open on his knee, he had ceased to turn the pages—or to look at them, for that matter. His eyes were fixed on me instead; or, to be specific, on the spot where my nightrobe parted, several inches lower than strict modesty might dictate, strict modesty hardly seeming necessary in bed with one's husband.

His gaze was abstracted, dark blue with longing, and I realized that if not socially required, modesty in bed with one's husband might be at least considerate, under the circumstances. There were alternatives, of course.

Catching me looking at him, Jamie blushed slightly and hastily returned to an exaggerated interest in his book. I rolled onto my side and rested a hand on his thigh.

"Interesting book?" I asked, idly caressing him.

"Mphm. Oh, aye." The blush deepened, but he didn't take his eyes from the page.

Grinning to myself, I slipped my hand under the bedclothes. He dropped the book.

"Sassenach!" he said. "Ye know you canna …"

"No," I said, "but you can. Or rather, I can for you."

He firmly detached my hand and gave it back to me.

"No, Sassenach. It wouldna be right."

"It wouldn't?" I said, surprised. "Whyever not?"

He squirmed uncomfortably, avoiding my eyes.

"Well, I … I wouldna feel right, Sassenach. To take my pleasure from ye, and not be able to give ye … well, I wouldna feel right about it, is all."

I burst into laughter, laying my head on his thigh.

"Jamie, you are too sweet for words!"

"I am not sweet," he said indignantly. "But I'm no such a selfish—Claire, stop that!"

"You were planning to wait several more months?" I asked, not stopping.

"I could," he said, with what dignity was possible under the circumstances. "I waited tw-twenty-two years, and I can …"

"No, you can't," I said, pulling back the bedclothes and admiring the shape so clearly visible beneath his nightshirt. I touched it, and it moved slightly, eager against my hand. "Whatever God meant you to be, Jamie Fraser, it wasn't a monk."

With a sure hand, I pulled up his nightshirt.

"But …" he began.

"Two against one," I said, leaning down. "You lose."

* * *

Jamie worked hard for the next few days, readying the wine business to look after itself during his absence. Still, he found time to come up and sit with me for a short time after lunch most days, and so it was that he was with me when a visitor was announced. Visitors were not uncommon; Louise came every other day or so, to chatter about pregnancy or to moan over her lost love—though I privately thought she enjoyed Charles a great deal more as the object of noble renunciation than she did as a present lover. She had promised to bring me some Turkish sweetmeats, and I rather expected her plump pink face to peek through the door.

To my surprise, though, the visitor was Monsieur Forez. Magnus himself showed him into my sitting room, taking his hat and cloak with an almost superstitious reverence.

Jamie looked surprised at this visitation, but rose to his feet to greet the hangman politely and offer him refreshment.

"As a general rule, I take no spirits," Monsieur Forez said with a smile. "But I would not insult the hospitality of my esteemed colleague." He bowed ceremoniously in the direction of the chaise where I reclined. "You are well, I trust, Madame Fraser?"

"Yes," I said cautiously. "Thank you." I wondered to what we owed the honor of the visit. For while Monsieur Forez enjoyed considerable prestige and a fair amount of wealth in return for his official duties, I didn't think his job got him many dinner invitations. I wondered suddenly whether hangmen had any social life to speak of.

He crossed the room and laid a small package on the chaise beside me, rather like a fatherly vulture bringing home dinner for his chicks. Keeping in mind the hanged-men's grease, I picked the package up gingerly and weighed it in my hand; light for its size, and smelling faintly astringent.

"A small remembrance from Mother Hildegarde," he explained. "I understand it is a favorite remedy of *les maîtresses sage-femme*. She has written directions for its use, as well." He withdrew a folded, sealed note from his inner pocket and handed it over.

I sniffed the package. Raspberry leaves and saxifrage; something else I didn't recognize. I hoped Mother Hildegarde had included a list of the ingredients as well.

"Please thank Mother Hildegarde for me," I said. "And how is everyone at the Hôpital?" I greatly missed my work there, as well as the nuns and the odd assortment of medical practitioners. We gossiped for some time about the Hôpital and its personnel, with Jamie contributing the occasional comment, but usually just listening with a polite smile, or—when the subject turned to the clinical—burying his nose in his glass of wine.

"What a pity," I said regretfully, as Monsieur Forez finished his description of the repair of a crushed shoulder blade. "I've never seen that done. I do miss the surgical work."

"Yes, I will miss it as well," Monsieur Forez nodded, taking a small sip from his wineglass. It was still more than half-full; apparently he hadn't been joking about his abstention from spirits.

"You're leaving Paris?" Jamie said in some surprise.

Monsieur Forez shrugged, the folds of his long coat rustling like feathers.

"Only for a time," he said. "Still, I will be gone for at least two months. In fact, Madame," he bowed his head toward me again, "that is the main reason for my visit today."

"It is?"

"Yes. I am going to England, you understand, and it occurred to me that if you wished it, Madame, it would be a matter of the greatest simplicity for me to carry any message that you desired. Should there be anyone with whom you wished to communicate, that is," he added, with his usual precision.

I glanced at Jamie, whose face had suddenly altered, from an open expression of polite interest to that pleasantly smiling mask that hid all thoughts. A stranger wouldn't have noticed the difference, but I did.

"No," I said hesitantly. "I have no friends or relatives in England; I'm afraid I have no connections there at all, since I was—widowed." I felt the usual small stab at this reference to Frank, but suppressed it.

If this seemed odd to Monsieur Forez, he didn't show it. He merely nodded, and set down his half-drunk glass of wine.

"I see. It is fortunate indeed that you have friends here, then." His voice seemed to hold a warning of some kind, but he didn't look at me as he bent to straighten his stocking before rising. "I shall call upon you on my return, then, and hope to find you again in good health."

"What is the business that takes you to England, Monsieur?" Jamie said bluntly.

Monsieur Forez turned to him with a faint smile. He cocked his head, eyes bright, and I was struck once more by his resemblance to a large bird. Not a carrion crow at the moment, though, but a raptor, a bird of prey.

"And what business should a man of my profession travel on, Monsieur Fraser?" he asked. "I have been hired to perform my usual duties, at Smithfield."

"An important occasion, I take it," said Jamie. "To justify the summoning of a man of your skill, I mean." His eyes were watchful, though his expression showed nothing beyond polite inquiry.

Monsieur Forez's eyes grew brighter. He rose slowly to his feet, looking down at Jamie where he sat near the window.

"That is true, Monsieur Fraser," he said softly. "For it is a matter of skill, make no mistake. To choke a man to death at the end of a rope—pah! Anyone can do that. To break a neck cleanly, with one quick fall, that requires some calculation in terms of weight and drop, and a certain amount of practice in the placing of the rope, as well. But to walk the line between these methods, to properly execute the sentence of a traitor's death; that requires great skill indeed."

My mouth felt suddenly dry, and I reached for my own glass. "A traitor's death?" I said, feeling as though I really didn't want to hear the answer.

"Hanging, drawing, and quartering," Jamie said briefly. "That's what you mean, of course, Monsieur Forez?"

The hangman nodded. Jamie rose to his feet, as though against his will, facing the gaunt, black-clad visitor. They were much of a height, and could look each other in the face without difficulty. Monsieur Forez took a step toward Jamie, expression suddenly abstracted, as though he were about to make a demonstration of some medical point.

"Oh, yes," he said. "Yes, that is the traitor's death. First, the man must be hanged, as you say, but with a nice judgment, so that the neck is not broken, nor the windpipe crushed—suffocation is not the desired result, you understand."

"Oh, I understand." Jamie's voice was soft, with an almost mocking edge, and I glanced at him in bewilderment.

"Do you, Monsieur?" Monsieur Forez smiled faintly, but went on without waiting for an answer. "It is a matter of timing then; you judge by the eyes. The face will darken with blood almost immediately—more quickly if the subject is of fair complexion—and as choking proceeds, the tongue is forced from the mouth. That is what delights the crowds, of course, as well as the popping eyes. But you watch for the signs of redness at the corners of the eyes, as the small blood vessels burst. When that happens, you must give at once the signal for the subject to be cut down—a dependable assistant is indispensable, you understand," he half-turned, to include me in this macabre conversation, and I nodded, despite myself.

"Then," he continued, turning back to Jamie, "you must administer at once a stimulant, to revive the subject while the shirt is being removed—you must insist that a shirt opening down the front is provided; often it is difficult to get them off over the head." One long, slender finger reached out, pointing at the middle button of Jamie's shirt, but not quite touching the fresh-starched linen.

"I would suppose so," Jamie said.

Monsieur Forez retracted the finger, nodding in approval at this evidence of comprehension.

"Just so. The assistant will have kindled the fire beforehand; this is beneath the dignity of the executioner. And then the time of the knife is at hand."

There was a dead silence in the room. Jamie's face was still set in inscrutability, but a slight moisture gleamed on the side of his neck.

"It is here that the utmost of skill is required," Monsieur Forez explained, raising a finger in admonition. "You must work quickly, lest the subject expire before you have finished. Mixing a dose with the stimulant which constricts the blood vessels will give you a few moments' grace, but not much."

Spotting a silver letter-opener on the table, he crossed to it and picked it up. He held it with his hand wrapped about the hilt, forefinger braced on top of the blade, pointed down at the shining walnut of the tabletop.

"Just there," he said, almost dreamily. "At the base of the breastbone. And quickly, to the crest of the groin. You can see the bone easily in most cases. Again"—and the letter opener flashed to one side and then the other, quick and delicate as the zigzag flight of a hummingbird—"following the arch of the ribs. You must not cut deeply, for you do not wish to puncture the sac which encloses the entrails. Still, you must get through skin, fat, and muscle, and do it with one stroke. This," he said with satisfaction, gazing down at his own reflection in the tabletop, "is artistry."

He laid the knife gently on the table, and turned back to Jamie. He shrugged pleasantly.

"After that, it is a matter of speed and some dexterity, but if you have been exact in your methods, it will present little difficulty. The entrails are sealed within a membrane, you see, resembling a bag. If you have not severed this by accident, it is a simple matter, needing only a little strength, to force your hands beneath the muscular layer and pull free the entire mass. A quick cut at stomach and anus"—he glanced disparagingly at the letter opener—"and then the entrails may be thrown upon the fire."

"Now"—he raised an admonitory finger—"if you have been swift and delicate in your work, there is now a moment's leisure, for mark you, as yet no large vessels will have been severed."

I felt quite faint, although I was sitting down, and I was sure that my face was as white as Jamie's. Pale as he was, Jamie smiled, as though humoring a guest in conversation.

"So the … subject … can live a bit longer?"

"*Mais oui*, Monsieur." The hangman's bright black eyes swept over Jamie's powerful frame, taking in the width of shoulder and the muscular legs. "The effects of such shock are unpredictable, but I have seen a strong man live for more than a quarter of an hour in this state.”

“I imagine it seems a lot longer to the subject,” Jamie said dryly.

Monsieur Forez appeared not to hear this, picking up the letter opener again and flourishing it as he spoke.

“As death approaches, then, you must reach up into the cavity of the body to grasp the heart. Here skill is called upon again. The heart retracts, you see, without the downward anchorage of the viscera, and often it is surprisingly far up. In addition, it is most slippery.” He wiped one hand on the skirt of his coat in pantomime. “But the major difficulty lies in severing the large vessels above very quickly, so that the organ may be pulled forth while still beating. You wish to please the crowd,” he explained. “It makes a great difference to the remuneration. As to the rest—” He shrugged a lean, disdainful shoulder. “Mere butchery. Once life is extinct, there is no further need of skill.”

“No, I suppose not,” I said faintly.

“But you are pale, Madame! I have detained you far too long in tedious conversation!” he exclaimed. He reached for my hand, and I resisted the very strong urge to yank it back. His own hand was cool, but the warmth of his lips as he brushed his mouth lightly across my hand was so unexpected that I tightened my own grasp in surprise. He gave my hand a slight, invisible squeeze, and turned to bow formally to Jamie.

“I must take my leave, Monsieur Fraser. I shall hope to meet you and your charming wife again … under such pleasant circumstances as we have enjoyed today.” The eyes of the two men met for a second. Then Monsieur Forez appeared to recall the letter opener he was still holding in one hand. With an exclamation of surprise, he held it out on his open palm. Jamie arched one brow, and picked the knife up delicately by the point.

“*Bon voyage*, Monsieur Forez,” he said. “And I thank you”—his mouth twisted wryly—“for your most instructive visit.”

He insisted upon seeing our visitor to the door himself. Left alone, I got up and went to the window, where I stood practicing deep-breathing exercises until the dark-blue carriage disappeared around the corner of the Rue Gamboge.

The door opened behind me, and Jamie stepped in. He still held the letter opener. He crossed deliberately to the large famille rose jar that stood by the hearth and dropped the paper knife into it with a clang, then turned to me, doing his best to smile.

"Well, as warnings go," he said, "that one was verra effective."

I shuddered briefly.

"Wasn't it, though?"

"Who do you think sent him?" Jamie asked. "Mother Hildegarde?"

"I expect so. She warned me, when we decoded the music. She said what you were doing was dangerous." The fact of just *how* dangerous had been lost upon me, until the hangman's visit. I hadn't suffered from morning nausea for some time, but I felt my gorge rising now. *If the Jacobite lords knew what I was doing, they'd call it treason.* And what steps might they take, if they did find out?

To all outward intents, Jamie was an avowed Jacobite supporter; in that guise, he visited Charles, entertained the Earl Marischal to dinner, and attended court. And so far, he had been skillful enough, in his chess games, his tavern visits, and his drinking parties, to undercut the Stuart cause while seeming outwardly to support it. Besides the two of us, only Murtagh knew that we sought to thwart a Stuart rising—and even he didn't know why, merely accepting his chief's word that it was right. That pretense was necessary, while operating in France. But the same pretense would brand Jamie a traitor, should he ever set foot on English soil.

I had known that, of course, but in my ignorance, had thought that there was little difference between being hanged as an outlaw, and executed as a traitor. Monsieur Forez's visit had taken care of *that* bit of naiveté.

"You're bloody calm about it," I said. My own heart was still thumping erratically, and my palms were cold, but sweaty. I wiped them on my gown, and tucked them between my knees to warm them.

Jamie shrugged slightly and gave me a lopsided smile.

"Well, there's the hell of a lot of unpleasant ways to die, Sassenach. And if one of them should fall to my lot, I wouldna like it much. But the question is: Am I scairt enough of the possibility that I would stop what I'm doing to avoid it?" He sat down on the chaise beside me, and took one of my hands between his own. His palms were warm, and the solid bulk of him next to me was reassuring.

"I thought that over for some time, Sassenach, in those weeks at the Abbey while I healed. And again, when we came to Paris. And again, when I met Charles Stuart." He shook his head, bent over our linked hands.

"Aye, I can see myself standing on a scaffold. I saw the gallows at Wentworth—did I tell ye that?"

"No. No, you didn't."

He nodded, eyes gone blank in remembrance.

"They marched us down to the courtyard; those of us in the condemned cell. And made us stand in rows on the stones, to watch an execution. They hanged six men that day, men I knew. I watched each man mount the steps—twelve steps, there were—and stand, hands bound behind his back, looking down at the yard as they put the rope around his neck. And I wondered then, how I would manage come my turn to mount those steps. Would I weep and pray, like John Sutter, or could I stand straight like Willie MacLeod, and smile at a friend in the yard below?"

He shook his head suddenly, like a dog flinging off drops of water, and smiled at me a little grimly. "Anyway, Monsieur Forez didna tell me anything I hadna thought of before. But it's too late, *mo duinne*." He laid a hand over mine. "Aye, I'm afraid. But if I would not turn back for the chance of home and freedom, I shallna do it for fear. No, *mo duinne*. It's too late."

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THE BOIS DE BOULOGNE

Monsieur Forez's visit proved merely to be the first of a series of unusual disruptions.

"There is an Italian person downstairs, Madame," Magnus informed me. "He would not give me his name." There was a pinched look about the butler's mouth; I gathered that if the visitor would not give his name, he had been more than willing to give the butler a number of other words.

That, coupled with the "Italian person" designation, was enough to give me a clue as to the visitor's identity, and it was with relatively little surprise that I entered the drawing room to find Charles Stuart standing by the window.

He swung about at my entrance, hat in his hands. He was plainly surprised to see *me*; his mouth dropped open for a second, then he caught himself and gave me a quick, brief bow of acknowledgment.

"Milord Broch Tuarach is not at home?" he inquired. His brows drew together in displeasure.

"No, he isn't," I said. "Will you take a little refreshment, Your Highness?"

He looked around the richly appointed drawing-room with interest, but shook his head. So far as I knew, he had been in the house only once before, when he had come over the rooftops from his rendezvous with Louise. Neither he nor Jamie had thought it appropriate for him to be invited to the dinners here; without official recognition by Louis, the French nobility scorned him.

"No. I thank you, Madame Fraser. I shall not stay; my servant waits outside, and it is a long ride to return to my lodgings. I wished only to make a request of my friend James."

"Er … well, I'm sure that my husband would be happy to oblige Your Highness—if he can," I answered cautiously, wondering just what the request was. A loan, probably; Fergus's gleanings of late had included quite a number of impatient letters from tailors, bootmakers, and other creditors.

Charles smiled, his expression altering to one of surprising sweetness.

"I know; I cannot tell you, Madame, how greatly I esteem the devotion and service of your husband; the sight of his loyal face warms my heart amid the loneliness of my present surroundings."

"Oh?" I said.

"It is not a difficult thing I ask," he assured me. "It is only that I have made a small investment; a cargo of bottled port."

"Really?" I said. "How interesting." Murtagh had left for Lisbon that morning, vials of nettle juice and madder root in his pouch.

"It is a small thing," Charles flipped a lordly hand, disdaining the investment of every cent he had been able to borrow. "But I wish that my friend James shall accomplish the task of disposing of the cargo, once it shall arrive. It is not appropriate, you know"—and here he straightened his shoulders and elevated his nose just a trifle, quite unconsciously—"for a—a person such as myself, to be seen to engage in trade."

"Yes, I quite see, Your Highness," I said, biting my lip. I wondered whether he had expressed this point of view to his business partner, St. Germain—who undoubtedly regarded the young pretender to the Scottish throne as a person of less consequence than any of the French nobles—who engaged in "trade" with both hands, whenever the chance of profit offered.

"Is Your Highness quite alone in this enterprise?" I inquired innocently.

He frowned slightly. "No, I have a partner; but he is a Frenchman. I should much prefer to entrust the proceeds of my venture to the hands of a countryman. Besides," he added thoughtfully, "I have heard that my dear James is a most astute and capable merchant; it is possible that he might be able to increase the value of my investment by means of judicious sale."

I supposed whoever had told him of Jamie's capability hadn't bothered to add the information that there was probably no wine merchant in Paris whom St. Germain more disliked. Still, if everything worked out as planned, that shouldn't matter. And if it didn't, it was possible that St. Germain would solve all of our problems by strangling Charles Stuart, once he found out that the latter had contracted delivery of half his exclusive Gostos port to his most hated rival.

"I'm sure that my husband will do his utmost to dispose of Your Highness's merchandise to the maximum benefit of all concerned," I said, with complete truth.

His Highness thanked me graciously, as befitting a prince accepting the service of a loyal subject. He bowed, kissed my hand with great formality, and departed with continuing protestations of gratitude to Jamie. Magnus, looking dourly unimpressed by the Royal visit, closed the door upon him.

In the event, Jamie didn't come home until after I had fallen asleep, but I told him over breakfast of Charles's visit, and his request.

"God, I wonder if His Highness will tell the Comte?" he said. Having ensured the health of his bowels by disposing of his parritch in short order, he proceeded to add a French breakfast of buttered rolls and steaming chocolate on top of it. A broad grin spread across his face in contemplation of the Comte's reaction, as he sipped his cocoa.

"I wonder is it *lèse-majesté* to hammer an exiled prince? For if it's not, I hope His Highness has Sheridan or Balhaldy close by when St. Germain hears about it."

Further speculation along these lines was curtailed by the sudden sound of voices in the hallway. A moment later, Magnus appeared in the door, a note borne on his silver tray.

"Your pardon, milord," he said, bowing. "The messenger who brought this desired most urgently that it be brought to your attention at once."

Brows raised, Jamie took the note from the tray, opened and read it.

"Oh, bloody hell!" he said in disgust.

"What is it?" I asked. "Not word from Murtagh already?"

He shook his head. "No. It's from the foreman of the warehouse."

"Trouble at the docks?"

An odd mixture of emotions was visible on Jamie's face; impatience struggling with amusement.

"Well, not precisely. The man's got himself into a coil at a brothel, it seems. He humbly begs my pardon"—he waved ironically at the note—"but hopes I'll see fit to come round and assist him. In other words," he translated, crumpling his napkin as he rose, "will I pay his bill?"

"Will you?" I said, amused.

He snorted briefly and dusted crumbs from his lap.

"I suppose I'll have to, unless I want to supervise the warehouse myself—and I havena time for that." His brow creased as he mentally reviewed the duties of the day. This was a task that might take some little time, and there were orders waiting on his desk, ship's captains waiting on the docks, and casks waiting in the warehouse.

"I'd best take Fergus wi' me to carry messages," he said, resigned. "He can maybe go to Montmartre wi' a letter, if I'm too short of time."

"Kind hearts are more than coronets," I told Jamie as he stood by his desk, ruefully flipping through the impressive pile of waiting paperwork.

"Oh, aye?" he said. "And whose opinion is that?"

"Alfred, Lord Tennyson, I think," I said. "I don't believe he's come along yet, but he's a poet. Uncle Lamb had a book of famous British poets. There was a bit from Burns in there, too, I recall—he's a Scot," I explained. "He said, 'Freedom and Whisky gang tegither.' "

Jamie snorted. "I canna say if he's a poet, but he's a Scot, at least." He smiled then, and bent to kiss me on the forehead. "I'll be home to my supper, *mo duinne*. Keep ye well."

I finished my own breakfast, and thriftily polished off Jamie's toast as well, then waddled upstairs for my morning nap. I had had small episodes of bleeding since the first alarm, though no more than a spot or two, and nothing at all for several weeks. Still, I kept to my bed or the chaise as much as possible, only venturing down to the salon to receive visitors, or to the dining room for meals with Jamie. When I descended for lunch, though, I found the table laid for one.

"Milord has not come back yet?" I asked in some surprise. The elderly butler shook his head.

"No, milady."

"Well, I imagine he'll be back soon; make sure there's food waiting for him when he arrives." I was too hungry to wait for Jamie; the nausea tended to return if I went too long without eating.

After lunch, I lay down to rest again. Conjugal relations being temporarily in abeyance, there wasn't that much one could do in bed, other than read or sleep, which meant I did quite a lot of both. Sleeping on my stomach was impossible, sleeping on my back uncomfortable, as it tended to make the baby squirm. Consequently, I lay on my side, curling around my growing abdomen like a cocktail shrimp round a caper. I seldom slept deeply, but tended rather to doze, letting my mind drift to the gentle random movements of the child.

Somewhere in my dreams, I thought I felt Jamie near me, but when I opened my eyes the room was empty, and I closed them again, lulled as though I, too, floated weightless in a blood-warm sea.

I was wakened at length, somewhere in the late afternoon, by a soft tap on the bedroom door.

"Entrez," I said, blinking as I came awake. It was the butler, Magnus, apologetically announcing more visitors.

"It is the Princesse de Rohan, Madame," he said. "The Princesse wished to wait until you awakened, but when Madame d'Arbanville also arrived, I thought perhaps …"

"That's all right, Magnus," I said, struggling upright and swinging my feet over the side of the bed. "I'll come down."

I looked forward to the visitors. We had stopped entertaining during the last month, and I rather missed the bustle and conversation, silly as much of it was. Louise came frequently to sit with me and regale me with the latest doings of the Court, but I hadn't seen Marie d'Arbanville in some time. I wondered what brought her here today.

I was ungainly enough to take the stairs slowly, my increased weight jarring upward from the soles of my feet on each step. The paneled door of the drawing room was closed, but I heard the voice inside clearly.

"Do you think she *knows*?"

The question, asked in the lowered tones that portended the juiciest of gossip, reached me just as I was about to enter the drawing room. Instead, I paused at the threshold, just out of sight.

It was Marie d'Arbanville who had spoken. Welcome everywhere because of her elderly husband's position, and gregarious even by French standards, Marie heard everything worth hearing within the environs of Paris.

"Does she know what?" The reply was Louise's; her high, carrying voice had the perfect self-confidence of the born aristocrat, who doesn't care who hears what.

"Oh, you haven't heard!" Marie pounced on the opening like a kitten, delighted to find a new mouse to play with. "Goodness! Of course, I only heard myself an hour ago."

And raced directly over here to tell me about it, I thought. Whatever "it" was. I thought I stood a better chance of hearing the unexpurgated version from my position in the hallway.

"It is my lord Broch Tuarach," Marie said, and I didn't need to see her, to imagine her leaning forward, green eyes darting back and forth, snapping with enjoyment of her news. "Only this morning, he challenged an Englishman to a duel—over a whore!"

"What!" Louise's cry of astonishment drowned out my own gasp. I grabbed hold of a small table and held on, black spots whirling before my eyes as the world came apart at the seams.

"Oh, yes!" Marie was saying. "Jacques Vincennes was there; he told my husband all about it! It was in that brothel down near the fish market—imagine going to a brothel at that hour of the morning! Men are so odd. Anyway, Jacques was having a drink with Madame Elise, who runs the place, when all of a sudden there was the most frightful outcry upstairs, and all kinds of thumping and shouting."

She paused for breath—and dramatic effect—and I heard the sound of liquid being poured.

"So, Jacques of course raced to the stairs—well, that's what he *says*, anyway; I expect he actually hid behind the sofa, he's such a coward—and after more shouting and thumping, there was a terrible crash, and an English officer came hurtling down the stairs, half-undressed, with his wig off, staggering and smashing into the walls. And who should appear at the top of the stairs, looking like the vengeance of God, but our own *petit* James!"

"No! And I would have sworn he was the last … but go on! What happened then?"

A teacup chimed softly against its saucer, followed by Marie's voice, released by excitement from the modulations of secrecy.

"Well—the man reached the foot of the stairs still on his feet, by some miracle, and he turned at once, and looked up at Lord Tuarach. Jacques says the man was very self-possessed, for someone who'd just been kicked downstairs with his breeches undone. He smiled—not a real smile, you know, the nasty sort—and said, 'There's no need for violence, Fraser; you could have waited for your turn, surely? I should have thought you get enough at home. But then, some men derive pleasure from paying for it.' "

Louise made shocked noises. "How awful! The *canaille*! But of course, it is no reproach to milord Tuarach—" I could hear the strain in her voice as friendship warred with the urge to gossip. Not surprisingly, gossip won.

"Milord Tuarach cannot enjoy his wife's favors at the moment; she carries a child, and the pregnancy is dangerous. So of course he would relieve his needs at a brothel; what gentleman would do otherwise? But go on, Marie! What happened then?"

"Well." Marie drew breath as she approached the high point of the story. "Milord Tuarach rushed down the stairs, seized the

Englishman by the throat, and shook him like a rat!”

“Non! Ce n’est pas vrai!”

“Oh, yes! It took three of Madame’s servants to restrain him—such a wonderful big man, isn’t he? So fierce-looking!”

“Yes, but then what?”

“Oh—well, Jacques said the Englishman gasped for a bit, then straightened up and said to milord Tuarach, ‘That’s twice you’ve come near killing me, Fraser. Someday you may succeed.’ And then milord Tuarach cursed in that terrible Scottish tongue—I don’t understand a word, do you?—and then he wrenched himself free from the men holding him, struck the Englishman across the face with his bare hand”—Louise gasped at the insult—“and said, ‘Tomorrow’s dawn will see you dead!’ Then he turned about and ran up the stairs, and the Englishman left. John said he looked quite white—and no wonder! Just imagine!”

I imagined, all right.

“Are you well, Madame?” Magnus’s anxious voice drowned out Louise’s further exclamations. I put out a hand, groping, and he took it at once, putting his other hand under my elbow in support.

“No. I’m not well. Please … tell the ladies?” I waved weakly toward the drawing room.

“Of course, Madame. In a moment; but now let me see you to your chamber. This way, *chère Madame* …” He led me up the stairs, murmuring consolingly as he supported me. He escorted me to the bedroom chaise, where he left me, promising to send up a maid at once to attend me.

I didn’t wait for assistance; the first shock passing, I could navigate well enough, and I stood and made my way across the room to where my small medicine box sat on the dressing table. I didn’t think I was going to faint now, but there was a bottle of spirits of ammonia in there that I wanted handy, just in case.

I turned back the lid and stood still, staring into the box. For a moment, my mind refused to register what my eyes saw; the folded white square of paper, carefully wedged upright between the multicolored bottles. I noted rather abstractedly that my fingers shook as I took the paper out; it took several tries to unfold it.

I am sorry. The words were bold and black, the letters carefully formed in the center of the sheet, the single letter "J" written with equal care below. And below that, two more words, these scrawled hastily, done as a postscript of desperation: *I must!*

"You must," I murmured to myself, and then my knees buckled. Lying on the floor, with the carved panels of the ceiling flickering dimly above, I found myself thinking that I had always heretofore assumed that the tendency of eighteenth-century ladies to swoon was due to tight stays; now I rather thought it might be due to the idiocy of eighteenth-century men.

There was a cry of dismay from somewhere nearby, and then helpful hands were lifting me, and I felt the yielding softness of the wool-stuffed mattress under me, and cool cloths on my brow and wrists, smelling of vinegar.

I was soon restored to what senses I had, but strongly disinclined to talk. I reassured the maids that I was in fact all right, shooed them out of the room, and lay back on the pillows, trying to think.

It was Jack Randall, of course, and Jamie had gone to kill him. That was the only clear thought in the morass of whirling horror and speculation that filled my mind. Why, though? What could have made him break the promise he had made me?

Trying to consider carefully the events Marie had related—third-hand as they were—I thought there had to have been something more than just the shock of an unexpected encounter. I knew the Captain, knew him a great deal better than I wanted to. And if there was one thing of which I was reasonably sure, it was that he would not have been purchasing the usual services of a brothel—the simple enjoyment of a woman was not in his nature. What he enjoyed—needed—was pain, fear, humiliation.

These commodities, of course, could also be purchased, if at a somewhat higher price. I had seen enough, in my work at L'Hôpital des Anges, to know that there were *les putains* whose chief stock in trade lay not between their legs, but in strong bones overlaid with expensive fragile skin that bruised at once, and showed the marks of whips and blows.

And if Jamie, his own fair skin scarred with the marks of Randall's favor, had come upon the Captain, enjoying himself in similar fashion with one of the ladies of the establishment—That, I thought, could have carried him past any thought of promises or restraint. There was a small mark on his left breast, just below the nipple; a tiny whitish pucker, where he had cut from his skin the branded mark of Jonathan Randall's heated signet ring. The rage that had led him to suffer mutilation rather than bear that shameful mark could easily break forth again, to destroy its inflictor—and his hapless progeny.

"Frank," I said, and my left hand curled involuntarily over the shimmer of my gold wedding ring. "Oh, dear God. Frank." For Jamie, Frank was no more than a ghost, the dim possibility of a refuge for me, in the unlikely event of necessity. For me, Frank was the man I had lived with, had shared my bed and body with—had abandoned, at the last, to stay with Jamie Fraser.

"I can't," I whispered, to the empty air, to the small companion who stretched and twisted lazily within me, undisturbed by my own distress. "I can't let him do it!"

The afternoon light had faded into the gray shades of dusk, and the room seemed filled with all the despair of the world's ending. *Tomorrow's dawn will see you dead.* There was no hope of finding Jamie tonight. I knew he would not return to the Rue Tremoulins; he wouldn't have left that note if he were coming back. He could never lie beside me through the night, knowing what he intended doing in the morning. No, he had undoubtedly sought refuge in some inn or tavern, there to ready himself in solitude for the execution of justice that he had sworn.

I thought I knew where the place of execution would be. With the memory of his first duel strong in his mind, Jamie had shorn his hair in preparation. The memory would have come to him again, I was sure, when choosing a spot to meet his enemy. The Bois de Boulogne, near the path of the Seven Saints. The Bois was a popular place for illicit duels, its dense growth sheltering the participants from detection. Tomorrow, one of its shady clearings would see the meeting of Jamie Fraser and Jack Randall. And me.

I lay on the bed, not bothering to undress or cover myself, hands clasped across my belly. I watched the twilight fade to black, and knew I would not sleep tonight. I took what comfort I could in the small movements of my unseen inhabitant, with the echo of Jamie's words ringing in my ears: *Tomorrow's dawn will see you dead.*

* * *

The Bois de Boulogne was a small patch of almost-virgin forest, perched incongruously on the edge of Paris. It was said that wolves as well as foxes and badgers were still to be found lurking in its depths, but this story did nothing to discourage the amorous couples that dallied under the branches on the grassy earth of the forest. It was an escape from the noise and dirt of the city, and only its location kept it from becoming a playground for the nobility. As it was, it was patronized largely by those who lived nearby, who found a moment's respite in the shade of the large oaks and pale birches of the Bois, and by those from farther away who sought privacy.

It was a small wood, but still too large to quarter on foot, looking for a clearing large enough to hold a pair of duelists. It had begun to rain during the night, and the dawn had come reluctantly, glowing sullen through a cloud-dark sky. The forest whispered to itself, the faint patter of rain on the leaves blending with the subdued rustle and rub of leaf and branches.

The carriage pulled to a stop on the road that led through the Bois, near the last small cluster of ramshackle buildings. I had told the coachman what to do; he swung down from his seat, tethered the horses, and disappeared among the buildings. The folk who lived near the Bois knew what went on there. There could not be that many spots suitable for dueling; those there were would be known.

I sat back and pulled the heavy cloak tighter around me, shivering in the cold of the early dawn. I felt terrible, with the fatigue of a sleepless night dragging at me, and the leaden weight of fear and grief resting in the pit of my stomach. Overlying everything was a seething anger that I tried to push away, lest it interfere with the job at hand.

It kept creeping back, though, bubbling up whenever my guard was down, as it was now. How could he do this? my mind kept muttering, in a cold fury. I shouldn't be here; I should be home, resting quietly by Jamie's side. I shouldn't have to be pursuing him, preventing him, fighting both anger and illness. A nagging pain from the coach ride knotted at the base of my spine. Yes, he might well be upset; I could understand that. But it was a man's *life* at stake, for God's sake. How could his bloody pride be more important than that? And to leave me, with no word of explanation! To leave me to find out from the gossip of neighbors what had happened.

"You promised me, Jamie, damn you, you *promised* me!" I whispered, under my breath. The wood was quiet, dripping and mist-shrouded. Were they here already? Would they be here? Was I wrong in my guess about the place?

The coachman reappeared, accompanied by a young lad, perhaps fourteen, who hopped nimbly up on the seat beside the coachman, and waved his hand, gesturing ahead and to the left. With a brief crack of the whip and a click of the tongue, the coachman urged the horses into a slow trot, and we turned down the road into the shadows of the wakening wood.

We stopped twice, pausing while the lad hopped down and darted into the undergrowth, each time reappearing within a moment or two, shaking his head in negation. The third time, he came tearing back, the excitement on his face so evident that I had the carriage door open before he got near enough to call out to the coachman.

I had money ready in my hand; I thrust it at him, simultaneously clutching at his sleeve, saying, "Show me where! Quickly, quickly!"

I scarcely noticed either the clutching branches that laced across the path, nor the sudden wetness that soaked my clothing as I brushed them. The path was soft with fallen leaves, and neither my shoes nor those of my guide made any sound as I followed the shadow of his ragged, damp-spotted shirt.

I heard them before I saw them; they had started. The clash of metal was muffled by the wet shrubbery, but clear enough, nonetheless. No birds sang in the wet dawn, but the deadly voice of battle rang in my ears.

It was a large clearing, deep in the Bois, but accessible by path and road. Large enough to accommodate the footwork needed for a serious duel. They were stripped to their shirts, fighting in the rain, the wet fabric clinging, showing the outline of shoulder and backbone.

Jamie had said he was the better fighter; he might be, but Jonathan Randall was no mean swordsman, either. He wove and dodged, lithe as a snake, sword striking like a silver fang. Jamie was just as fast, amazing grace in such a tall man, light-footed and sure-handed. I watched, rooted to the ground, afraid to cry out for fear of distracting Jamie's attention. They spun in a tight circle of stroke and parry, feet touching lightly as a dance on the turf.

I stood stock-still, watching. I had come through the fading night to find this, to stop them. And having found them, now I could not intervene, for fear of causing a fatal interruption. All I could do was wait, to see which of my men would die.

Randall had his blade up and in place to deflect the stroke, but not quickly enough to brace it against the savagery that sent his sword flying.

I opened my mouth to scream. I had meant to call Jamie's name, to stop him now, in that moment's grace between the disarming of his opponent and the killing stroke that must come next. I did scream, in fact, but the sound emerged weak and strangled. As I had stood there, watching, the nagging pain in my back had deepened, clenching like a fist. Now I felt a sudden breaking somewhere, as though the fist had torn loose what it held.

I groped wildly, clutching at a nearby branch. I saw Jamie's face, set in a sort of calm exultance, and realized that he could hear nothing through the haze of violence that enveloped him. He would see nothing but his goal, until the fight was ended. Randall, retreating before the inexorable blade, slipped on the wet grass and went down. He arched his back, attempting to rise, but the grass was slippery. The fabric of his stock was torn, and his head was thrown back, dark hair rain-soaked, throat exposed like that of a wolf begging mercy. But vengeance knows no mercy, and it was not the exposed throat that the descending blade sought.

Through a blackening mist, I saw Jamie's sword come down, graceful and deadly, cold as death. The point touched the waist of the doeskin breeches, pierced and cut down in a twisting wrench that darkened the fawn with a sudden flood of black-red blood.

The blood was a hot rush down my thighs, and the chill of my skin moved inward, toward the bone. The bone where my pelvis joined my back was breaking; I could feel the strain as each pain came on, a stroke of lightning flashing down my backbone to explode and flame in the basin of my hips, a stroke of destruction, leaving burnt and blackened fields behind.

My body as well as my senses seemed to fragment. I saw nothing, but could not tell whether my eyes were open or closed; everything was spinning dark, patched now and then with the shifting patterns you see at night as a child, when you press your fists against shut eyelids.

The raindrops beat on my face, on my throat and shoulders. Each heavy drop struck cold, then dissolved into a tiny warm stream, coursing across my chilled skin. The sensation was quite distinct, apart from the wrenching agony that advanced and retreated, lower down. I tried to focus my mind on that, to force my attention from the small, detached voice in the center of my brain, the one saying, as though making notes on a clinical record: "You're having a hemorrhage, of course. Probably a ruptured placenta, judging from the amount of blood. Generally fatal. The loss of blood accounts for the numbness in hands and feet, and the darkened vision. They say that the sense of hearing is the last to go; that seems to be true."

Whether it were the last of my senses to be left to me or not, hearing I still had. And it was voices I heard, most agitated, some striving for calmness, all speaking in French. There was one word I could hear and understand—my own name, shouted over and over, but at a distance. "Claire! Claire!"

“Jamie,” I tried to say, but my lips were stiff and numb with cold. Movement of any kind was beyond me. The commotion near me was settling to a steadier level; someone had arrived who was at least willing to act as though they knew what to do.

Perhaps they did. The soaked wad of my skirt was lifted gently from between my thighs, and a thick pad of cloth thrust firmly into place instead. Helpful hands turned me onto my left side, and drew my knees up toward my chest.

“Take her to the Hôpital,” suggested one voice near my ear.

“She won’t live that long,” said another, pessimistically. “Might as well wait a few minutes, then send for the meat wagon.”

“No,” insisted another. “The bleeding is slowing; she may live. Besides, I know her; I’ve seen her at L’Hôpital des Anges. Take her to Mother Hildegarde.”

I summoned all the strength I had left, and managed to whisper, “Mother.” Then I gave up the struggle, and let the darkness take me.

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RAYMOND THE HERETIC

The high, vaulted ceiling over me was supported by ogives, those fourteenth-century architectural features in which four ribs rise from the tops of pillars, to join in double crossing arches.

My bed was set under one of these, gauze curtains drawn around me for privacy. The central point of the ogive was not directly above me, though; my bed had been placed a few feet off-center. This bothered me whenever I glanced upward; I kept wanting to move the bed by force of will, as though being centered beneath the roof would help to center me within myself.

If I had a center any longer. My body felt bruised and tender, as though I had been beaten. My joints ached and felt loose, like teeth undermined by scurvy. Several thick blankets covered me, but they could do no more than trap heat, and I had none to save. The chill of the rainy dawn had settled in my bones.

All these physical symptoms I noted objectively, as though they belonged to someone else; otherwise I felt nothing. The small, cold, logical center of my brain was still there, but the envelope of feeling through which its utterances were usually filtered was gone; dead, or paralyzed, or simply no longer there. I neither knew nor cared. I had been in L'Hôpital des Anges for five days.

Mother Hildegarde's long fingers probed in relentless gentleness through the cotton of the bedgown I wore, probing the depths of my belly, seeking the hard edges of a contracting uterus. The flesh was soft as ripe fruit, though, and tender beneath her fingers. I winced as her fingers sank deep, and she frowned, muttering something under her breath that might have been a prayer.

I caught a name in the murmurings, and asked, “Raymond? You know Master Raymond?” I could think of few less likely pairings than this redoubtable nun and the little gnome of the cavern of skulls.

Mother Hildegarde’s thick brows shot up, astonished.

“Master Raymond, you say? That heretical charlatan? *Que Dieu nous en garde!*” May God protect us.

“Oh. I thought I heard you say ‘Raymond.’ ”

“Ah.” The fingers had returned to their work, probing the crease of my groin in search of the lumps of enlarged lymph nodes that would signal infection. They were there, I knew; I had felt them myself, moving my hands in restless misery over my empty body. I could feel the fever, an ache and a chill deep in my bones, that would burst into flame when it reached the surface of my skin.

“I was invoking the aid of St. Raymond Nonnatus,” Mother Hildegarde explained, wringing out a cloth in cold water. “He is an aid most invaluable in the assistance of expectant mothers.”

“Of which I am no longer one.” I noticed remotely the brief stab of pain that creased her brows; it disappeared almost at once as she busied herself in mopping my brow, smoothing the cold water briskly over the rounds of my cheeks and down into the hot, damp creases of my neck.

I shivered suddenly at the touch of the cold water, and she stopped at once, laying a considering hand on my forehead.

“St. Raymond is not one to be picky,” she said, absently reproving. “I myself take help where it can be found; a course I would recommend to you.”

“Mmm.” I shut my eyes, retreating into the haven of gray fog. Now there seemed to be faint lights in the fog, brief cracklings like the scatter of sheet lightning on a summer horizon.

I heard the clicking of jet rosary beads as Mother Hildegarde straightened up, and the soft voice of one of the sisters in the doorway, summoning her to another in the day’s string of emergencies. She had almost reached the door when a thought struck her. She turned with a swish of heavy skirts, pointing at the foot of my bed with an authoritative finger.

"Bouton!" she said. *"Au pied, reste!"*

The dog, as unhesitating as his mistress, whirled smartly in mid-step and leaped to the foot of the bed. Once there, he took a moment to knead the bedclothes with his paws and turn three times widdershins, as though taking the curse off his resting place, before lying down at my feet, resting his nose on his paws with a deep sigh.

Satisfied, Mother Hildegarde murmured, *"Que Dieu vous bénisse, mon enfant,"* in farewell, and disappeared.

Through the gathering fog and the icy numbness that wrapped me, I dimly appreciated her gesture. With no child to lay in my arms, she had given me her own best substitute.

The shaggy weight on my feet was in fact a small bodily comfort. Bouton lay still as the dogs beneath the feet of the kings carved on the lids of their tombs at St. Denis, his warmth denying the marble chill of my feet, his presence an improvement on either solitude or the company of humans, as he required nothing of me. Nothing was precisely what I felt, and all I had to give.

Bouton emitted a small, popping dog-fart and settled into sleep. I drew the covers over my nose and tried to do likewise.

I slept, eventually. And I dreamed. Fever dreams of weariness and desolation, of an impossible task done endlessly. Unceasing painful effort, carried out in a stony, barren place. Of thick gray fog, through which loss pursued me like a demon in the mist.

I woke, quite suddenly, to find that Bouton was gone, but I was not alone.

Raymond's hairline was completely level, a flat line drawn across the wide brow as though with a rule. He wore his thick, graying hair swept back and hanging straight to the shoulder, so the massive forehead protruded like a block of stone, completely overshadowing the rest of his face. It hovered over me now, looking to my fevered eyes like the slab of a tombstone.

The lines and furrows moved slightly as he spoke to the sisters, and I thought they seemed like letters, written just below the surface of the stone, trying to burrow their way to the surface so that the name of the dead could be read. I was convinced that in another moment, my name would be legible on that white slab, and at that moment, I would truly die. I arched my back and screamed.

"Now, see there! She doesn't want you, you disgusting old creature—you're disturbing her rest. Come away at once!" Mother Hildegarde clutched Raymond imperatively by the arm, tugging him away from the bed. He resisted, standing rooted like a stone gnome in a lawn, but Sister Celeste added her not inconsiderable efforts to Mother Hildegarde's, and they lifted him clean off his feet and bore him away between them, the clog dropping from one frantically kicking foot as they went.

The clog lay where it had fallen, on its side, square in the center of a scrubbed flagstone. With the intense fixation of fever, I was unable to take my eyes off it. I traced the impossibly smooth curve of the worn edge over and over, each time pulling back my gaze from the impenetrable darkness of the inside. If I let myself enter that blackness, my soul would be sucked out into chaos. As my eyes rested on it, I could hear again the sounds of the time passage through the circle of stones, and I flung out my arms, clutching frantically at the wadded bedding, seeking some anchorage against confusion.

Suddenly an arm shot through the draperies, and a work-reddened hand snatched up the shoe and disappeared. Deprived of focus, my heat-addled mind spun round the grooves of the flags for a time, then, soothed by the geometric regularity, turned inward and wobbled into sleep like a dying top.

There was no stillness in my dreams, though, and I stumbled wearily through mazes of repeating figures, endless loopings and whorls. It was with a sense of profound relief that I saw at last the irregularities of a human face.

And an irregular face it was, to be sure, screwed up as it was in a ferocious frown, lips pursed in adjuration. It was only as I felt the pressure of the hand over my mouth that I realized I was no longer asleep.

The long, lipless mouth of the gargoyle hovered next to my ear.

"Be still, *ma chère*! If they find me here again, I'm done for!" The large, dark eyes darted from side to side, keeping watch for any movement of the drapes.

I nodded slowly, and he released my mouth, his fingers leaving a faint whiff of ammonium and sulfur behind. He had somewhere found—or stolen, I thought dimly—a ragged gray friar's gown to cover the grimy velvet of his apothecary's robe, and the depths of the hood concealed both the telltale silver hair and that monstrous forehead.

The fevered delusions receded slightly, displaced by what remnants of curiosity remained to me. I was too weak to say more than "What …" when he placed a finger once more across my lips, and threw back the sheet covering me.

I watched in some bemusement as he rapidly unknotted the strings of my shift and opened the garment to the waist. His movements were swift and businesslike, completely lacking in lechery. Not that I could imagine anyone capable of trying to ravish a fever-wracked carcass like mine, particularly not within hearing of Mother Hildegarde. But still …

I watched with remote fascination as he placed his cupped hands on my breasts. They were broad and almost square, the fingers all of a length, with unusually long and supple thumbs that curved around my breasts with amazing delicacy. Watching them, I had an unusually vivid memory of Marian Jenkinson, a girl with whom I had trained at Pembroke Hospital, telling the rapt inmates of the nurses' quarters that the size and shape of a man's thumbs were a sure indication of the quality of his more intimate appendage.

"And it's true, I swear it," Marian would declare, shaking back her blond hair dramatically. But when pressed for examples, she would only giggle and dimple, rolling her eyes toward Lieutenant Hanley, who strongly resembled a gorilla, opposable—and sizable—thumbs notwithstanding.

The large thumbs were pressing gently but firmly into my flesh, and I could feel my swollen nipples rising against the hard palms, cold by comparison with my own heated skin.

"Jamie," I said, and a shiver passed over me.

"Hush, madonna," said Raymond. His voice was low, kind but somehow abstracted, as though he were paying no attention to me, in spite of what he was doing.

The shiver came back; it was as though the heat passed from me to him, but his hands did not warm. His fingers stayed cool, and I chilled and shook as the fever ebbed and flowed, draining from my bones.

The afternoon light was dim through the thick gauze of the drapes around my bed, and Raymond's hands were dark on the white flesh of my breasts. The shadows between the thick, grimy fingers were not black, though. They were … blue, I thought.

I closed my eyes, looking at the particolored swirl of patterns that immediately appeared behind my lids. When I opened them again, it was as though something of the color remained behind, coating Raymond's hands.

As the fever ebbed, leaving my mind clearer, I blinked, trying to raise my head for a better look. Raymond pressed slightly harder, urging me to lie back, and I let my head fall on the pillow, peering slantwise over my chest.

I wasn't imagining it after all—or was I? While Raymond's hands weren't moving themselves, a faint flicker of colored light seemed to move over them, shedding a glow of rose and a pallor of blue across my own white skin.

My breasts were warming now, but warming with the natural heat of health, not the gnawing burn of fever. The draft from the open archway outside found a way through the drapes and lifted the damp hair at my temples, but I wasn't chilled now.

Raymond's head was bent, face hidden by the cowl of his borrowed robe. After what seemed a long time, he moved his hands from my breasts, very slowly over my arms, pausing and squeezing gently at the joints of shoulder and elbow, wrists and fingers. The soreness eased, and I thought I could see briefly a faint blue line within my upper arm, the glowing ghost of the bone.

Always touching, never hurrying, he brought his hands back over the shallow curve of my collarbone and down the meridian of my body, splaying his palms across my ribs.

The oddest thing about all this was that I was not at all astonished. It seemed an infinitely natural thing, and my tortured body relaxed gratefully into the hard mold of his hands, melting and reforming like molded wax. Only the lines of my skeleton held firm.

An odd feeling of warmth now emanated from those broad, square, workman's hands. They moved with painstaking slowness over my body, and I could *feel* the tiny deaths of the bacteria that inhabited my blood, small explosions as each scintilla of infection disappeared. I could feel each interior organ, complete and three-dimensional, and see it as well, as though it sat on a table before me. There the hollow-walled stomach, here the lobed solidness of my liver, and each convolution and twist of intestine, turned in and on and around itself, neatly packed in the shining web of its mesentery membrane. The warmth glowed and spread within each organ, illuminating it like a small sun within me, then died and moved on.

Raymond paused, hands pressed side by side on my swollen belly. I thought he frowned, but it was hard to tell. The cowled head turned, listening, but the usual noises of the hospital continued in the distance, with no warning heeltaps coming our way.

I gasped and moved involuntarily, as one hand moved lower, cupped briefly between my legs. An increase in pressure from the other hand warned me to be silent, and the blunt fingers eased their way inside me.

I closed my eyes and waited, feeling my inner walls adjust to this odd intrusion, the inflammation subsiding bit by bit as he probed gently deeper.

Now he touched the center of my loss, and a spasm of pain contracted the heavy walls of my inflamed uterus. I breathed a small moan, then clamped my lips as he shook his head.

The other hand slid down to rest comfortingly on my belly as the groping fingers of the other touched my womb. He was still then, holding the source of my pain between his two hands as though it were a sphere of crystal, heavy and fragile.

"Now," he said softly. "Call him. Call the red man. Call him."

The pressure of the fingers within and the palm without grew harder, and I pressed my legs against the the bed, fighting it. But there was no strength left in me to resist, and the inexorable pressure went on, cracking the crystal sphere, freeing the chaos within.

My mind filled with images, worse than the misery of the fever-dreams, because more real. Grief and loss and fear racked me, and the dusty scent of death and white chalk filled my nostrils. Casting about in the random patterns of my mind for help, I heard the voice still muttering, patiently but firmly, “Call him,” and I sought my anchor.

“Jamie! JAMIE!”

A bolt of heat shot through my belly, from one hand to the other, like an arrow through the center of the basin of my bones. The pressing grip relaxed, slid free, and the lightness of harmony filled me.

The bedframe quivered as he ducked beneath it, barely in time.

“Milady! Are you all right?” Sister Angelique shoved through the drapes, round face creased with worry beneath her wimple. The concern in her eyes was underlaid with resignation; the sisters knew I would die soon—if this looked to be my last struggle, she was prepared to summon the priest.

Her small, hard hand rested briefly against my cheek, moved quickly to my brow, then back. The sheet still lay crumpled around my thighs, and my gown lay open. Her hands slid inside it, into my armpits, where they remained for a moment before withdrawing.

“God be praised!” she cried, eyes moistening. “The fever is gone!” She bent close, peering in sudden alarm, to be sure that the disappearance of the fever was not due to the fact that I was dead. I smiled at her weakly.

“I’m all right,” I said. “Tell Mother.”

She nodded eagerly, and pausing only long enough to draw the sheet modestly over me, she hurried from the room. The drapes had hardly swung closed behind her when Raymond emerged from under the bed.

"I must go," he said. He laid a hand upon my head. "Be well, madonna."

Weak as I was, I rose up, grasping his arm. I slid my hand up the length of forge-tough muscle, seeking, but not finding. The smoothness of his skin was unblemished, clear to the crest of the shoulder. He stared down at me in astonishment.

"What are you doing, madonna?"

"Nothing." I sank back, disappointed. I was too weak and too light-headed to be careful of my words.

"I wanted to see whether you had a vaccination scar."

"Vaccination?" Skilled as I was at reading faces by now, I would have seen the slightest twitch of comprehension, no matter how swiftly it was concealed. But there was none.

"Why do you call me madonna still?" I asked. My hands rested on the slight concavity of my stomach, gently as though not to disturb the shattering emptiness. "I've lost my child."

He looked mildly surprised.

"Ah. I did not call you madonna because you were with child, my lady."

"Why, then?" I didn't really expect him to answer, but he did. Tired and drained as we both were, it was as though we were suspended together in a place where neither time nor consequence existed; there was room for nothing but truth between us.

He sighed.

"Everyone has a color about them," he said simply. "All around them, like a cloud. Yours is blue, madonna. Like the Virgin's cloak. Like my own."

The gauze curtain fluttered briefly and he was gone.

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26

FONTAINEBLEAU

For several days, I slept. Whether this was a necessary part of physical recovery, or a stubborn retreat from waking reality, I do not know, but I woke only reluctantly to take a little food, falling at once back into a stupor of oblivion, as though the small, warm weight of broth in my stomach were an anchor that pulled me after it, down through the murky fathoms of sleep.

A few days later I woke to the sound of insistent voices near my ear, and the touch of hands lifting me from the bed. The arms that held me were strong and masculine, and for a moment, I felt afloat in joy. Then I woke all the way, struggling feebly against a wave of tobacco and cheap wine, to find myself in the grasp of Hugo, Louise de La Tour's enormous footman.

"Put me down!" I said, batting at him weakly. He looked startled at this sudden resurrection from the dead, and nearly dropped me, but a high, commanding voice stopped both of us.

"Claire, my dear friend! Do not be afraid, *ma chère,* it's all right. I am taking you to Fontainebleau. The air, and good food—it's what you need. And rest, you need rest …"

I blinked against the light like a newborn lamb. Louise's face, round, pink, and anxious, floated nearby like a cherub on a cloud. Mother Hildegarde stood behind her, tall and stern as the angel at the gates of Eden, the heavenly illusion enhanced by the fact that they were both standing in front of the stained-glass window in the vestibule of the Hôpital.

“Yes,” she said, her deep voice making the simplest word more emphatic than all Louise’s twittering. “It will be good for you. *Au revoir*, my dear.”

And with that, I was borne down the steps of the Hôpital and stuffed willy-nilly into Louise’s coach, with neither strength nor will to protest.

The bumping of the coach over potholes and ruts kept me awake on the journey to Fontainebleau. That, and Louise’s constant conversation, aimed at reassurance. At first I made some dazed attempt to respond, but soon realized that she required no answers, and in fact, talked more easily without them.

After days in the cool gray stone vault of the Hôpital, I felt like a freshly unwrapped mummy, and shrank from the assault of so much brightness and color. I found it easier to deal with if I drew back a bit, and let it all wash past me without trying to distinguish its elements.

This strategy worked until we reached a small wood just outside Fontainebleau. The trunks of the oaks were dark and thick, with low, spreading canopies that shadowed the ground beneath with shifting light, so that the whole wood seemed to be moving slightly in the wind. I was vaguely admiring the effect, when I noticed that some of what I had assumed to be tree trunks *were* in fact moving, turning very slowly to and fro.

“Louise!” My exclamation and my grip on her arm stopped her chatter in mid-word.

She lunged heavily across me to see what I was looking at, then flopped back to her side of the carriage and thrust her head out of the window, shouting at the coachman.

We came to a slithering, dusty halt just opposite the wood. There were three of them, two men and a woman. Louise’s high, agitated voice went on, expostulating and questioning, punctuated by the coachman’s attempts to explain or apologize, but I paid no attention.

In spite of their turning and the small fluttering of their clothing, they were very still, more inert than the trees that held them. The faces were black with suffocation; Monsieur Forez wouldn’t have approved at all, I thought, through the haze of shock. An amateur execution, but effective, for all that. The wind shifted, and a faint, gassy stink blew over us.

Louise shrieked and pounded on the window frame in a frenzy of indignation, and the carriage started with a jerk that rocked her back in the seat.

"Merde!" she said, rapidly fanning her flushed face. "The idiocy of that fool, stopping like that right there! What recklessness! The shock of it is bad for the baby, I am sure, and you, my poor dear.… oh, dear, my poor Claire! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to remind you … how can you forgive me, I'm so tactless …"

Luckily her agitation at possibly having upset me made her forget her own upset at sight of the bodies, but it was very wearying, trying to stem her apologies. At last, in desperation, I changed the subject back to the hanged ones.

"Who?" The distraction worked; she blinked, and remembering the shock to her *système*, pulled out a bottle of ammoniac spirits and took a hearty sniff that made her sneeze in reflex.

"Hugue … choo! Huguenots," she got out, snorting and wheezing. "Protestant heretics. That's what the coachman says."

"They hang them? Still?" Somehow, I had thought such religious persecution a relic of earlier times.

"Well, not just for being Protestants usually, though that's enough," Louise said, sniffing. She dabbed her nose delicately with an embroidered handkerchief, examined the results critically, then reapplied the cloth to her nose and blew it with a satisfying honk.

"Ah, that's better." She tucked the handkerchief back in her pocket and leaned back with a sigh. "Now I am restored. What a shock! If they have to hang them, that's all well, but must they do so by a public thoroughfare, where ladies must be exposed to such disgustingness? Did you *smell* them? Pheew! This is the Comte Medard's land; I'll send him a very nasty letter about it, see if I don't."

"But why did they hang these people?" I asked, interrupting in the brutal manner that was the only possible way of actually conversing with Louise.

“Oh, witchcraft, most likely. There was a woman, you saw. Usually it’s witchcraft when the women are involved. If it’s only men, most often it’s just preaching sedition and heresy, but the women don’t preach. Did you see the ugly dark clothes she had on? Horrible! So depressing only to wear dark colors all the time; what kind of religion would make its followers wear such plain clothes all the time? Obviously the Devil’s work, anyone can see that. They are afraid of women, that’s what it is, so they …”

I closed my eyes and leaned back in the seat. I hoped it wasn’t very far to Louise’s country house.

In addition to the monkey, from whom she would not be parted, Louise’s country house contained a number of other decorations of dubious taste. In Paris, her husband’s taste and her father’s must be consulted, and the rooms of the house there were consequently done richly, but in subdued tones. But Jules seldom came to the country house, being too busy in the city, and so Louise’s taste was allowed free rein.

“This is my newest toy; is it not lovely?” she cooed, running her hand lovingly over the carved dark wood of a tiny house that sprouted incongruously from the wall next to a gilt-bronze sconce in the shape of Eurydice.

“That looks like a cuckoo clock,” I said disbelievingly.

“You have seen one before? I didn’t think there were any to be found anywhere in Paris!” Louise pouted slightly at the thought that her toy might not be unique, but brightened as she twisted the hands of the clock to the next hour. She stood back, beaming proudly as the tiny clockwork bird stuck its head out and emitted several shrill *Cuckoo!*s in succession.

“Isn’t it precious?” She touched the bird’s head briefly as it disappeared back into its hidey-hole. “Berta, the housekeeper here, got it for me; her brother brought it all the way from Switzerland. Whatever you want to say about the Swiss, they are clever woodcarvers, no?”

I wanted to say no, but instead merely murmured something tactfully admiring.

Louise's grasshopper mind leaped nimbly to a new topic, possibly triggered by thoughts of Swiss servants.

"You know, Claire," she said, with a touch of reproof, "you ought really to come to Mass in the chapel each morning."

"Why?"

She tossed her head in the direction of the doorway, where one of the maids was passing with a tray.

"I don't care at all, myself, but the servants—they're very superstitious out here in the countryside, you know. And one of the footmen from the Paris house was foolish enough to tell the cook all about that silly story of your being La Dame Blanche. I have told them that's all nonsense, of course, and threatened to dismiss anyone I catch spreading such gossip, but … well, it might help if you came to Mass. Or at least prayed out loud now and then, so they could hear you."

Unbeliever that I was, I thought daily Mass in the house's chapel might be going a bit far, but with vague amusement, agreed to do what I could to allay the servants' fears; consequently, Louise and I spent the next hour reading psalms aloud to each other, and reciting the Lord's Prayer in unison—loudly. I had no idea what effect this performance might have on the servants, but it did at least exhaust me sufficiently that I went up to my room for a nap, and slept without dreaming until the next morning.

I often had difficulty sleeping, possibly because my waking state was little different from an uneasy doze. I lay awake at night, gazing at the white-gesso ceiling with its furbishes of fruit and flowers. It hung above me like a dim gray shape in the darkness, the personification of the depression that clouded my mind by day. When I did close my eyes at night, I dreamed. I couldn't block the dreams with grayness; they came in vivid colors to assault me in the dark. And so I seldom slept.

There was no word from Jamie—or of him. Whether it was guilt or injury that had kept him from coming to me at the Hôpital, I didn't know. But he hadn't come, nor did he come to Fontainebleau. By now he likely had left for Orvieto.

Sometimes I found myself wondering when—or whether—I would see him again, and what—if anything—we might say to each other. But for the most part, I preferred not to think about it, letting the days come and go, one by one, avoiding thoughts of both the future and the past by living only in the present.

Deprived of his idol, Fergus drooped. Again and again, I saw him from my window, sitting disconsolately beneath a hawthorn bush in the garden, hugging his knees and looking down the road toward Paris. At last, I stirred myself to go out to him, making my way heavily downstairs and down the garden path.

"Can't you find anything to do, Fergus?" I asked him. "Surely one of the stable-lads could use a hand, or something."

"Yes, milady," he agreed doubtfully. He scratched absentmindedly at his buttocks. I observed this behavior with deep suspicion.

"Fergus," I said, folding my arms, "have you got lice?" He snatched his hand back as though burned.

"Oh, no, milady!"

I reached down and pulled him to his feet, sniffed delicately in his general vicinity, and put a finger inside his collar, far enough to reveal the grimy ring around his neck.

"Bath," I said succinctly.

"No!" He jerked away, but I grabbed him by the shoulder. I was surprised by his vehemence; while no fonder of bathing than the normal Parisian—who regarded the prospect of immersion with a repugnance akin to horror—still, I could scarcely reconcile the usually obliging child I knew with the little fury that suddenly squirmed and twisted under my hand.

There was a ripping noise, and he was free, bounding through the black-berry bushes like a rabbit pursued by a weasel. There was a rustle of leaves and a scrabble of stones, and he was gone, over the wall and headed for the outbuildings at the back of the estate.

I made my way through the maze of rickety outbuildings behind the château, cursing under my breath as I skirted mud puddles and heaps of filth. Suddenly, there was a high-pitched whining buzz and a cloud of flies rose from the pile a few feet ahead of me, bodies sparking blue in the sunlight.

I wasn't close enough to have disturbed them; there must have been some movement from the darkened doorway beside the dungheap.

"Aha!" I said out loud. "Got you, you filthy little son of a whatnot! Come out of there this instant!"

No one emerged, but there was an audible stir inside the shed, and I thought I caught a glimpse of white in the shadowed interior. Holding my nose, I stepped over the manure pile into the shed.

There were two gasps of horror; mine, at beholding something that looked like the Wild Man of Borneo flattened against the back wall, and his, at beholding me.

The sunlight trickled through the cracks between the boards, giving enough light for us to see each other clearly, once my eyes had adapted to the relative dark. He wasn't, after all, quite as awful-looking as I'd thought at first, but he wasn't a lot better, either. His beard was as filthy and matted as his hair, flowing past his shoulders onto a shirt ragged as any beggar's. He was barefoot, and if the term *sans-culottes* wasn't yet in common use, it wasn't for lack of trying on his part.

I wasn't afraid of him, because he was so obviously afraid of *me*. He was pressing himself against the wall as though trying to get through it by osmosis.

"It's all right," I said soothingly. "I won't hurt you."

Instead of being soothed, he drew himself abruptly upright, reached into the bosom of his shirt and pulled out a wooden crucifix on a leather thong. He held this out toward me and started praying, in a voice shaking with terror.

"Oh, bother," I said crossly. "Not another one!" I took a deep breath. *"Pater-Noster-qui-es-in-coeliset-in-terra …"* His eyes bugged out, and he kept holding the crucifix, but at least he stopped his own praying in response to this performance.

"… Amen!" I concluded with a gasp. I held up both hands and waggled them in front of his face. "See? Not a word backward, not a single *quotidianus da nobis hodie* out of place, right? Didn't even have my fingers crossed. So I can't be a witch, can I?"

The man slowly lowered his crucifix and stood gaping at me. "A witch?" he said. He looked as though he thought *I* were crazy, which I felt was a bit thick under the circumstances.

"You didn't think I was a witch?" I said, beginning to feel a trifle foolish.

Something that looked like a smile twitched into existence and out again among the tangles of his beard.

"No, Madame," he said. "I am accustomed to people saying such things of *me*."

"You are?" I eyed him closely. Besides the rags and filth, the man was obviously starving; the wrists that stuck out of his shirt were scrawny as a child's. At the same time, his French was graceful and educated, if oddly accented.

"If you're a witch," I said, "you aren't very successful at it. Who the hell are you?"

At this, the fright came back into his eyes again. He looked from side to side, seeking escape, but the shed was solidly built, if old, with no entrance other than the one in which I was standing. At last, calling on some hidden reserve of courage, he drew himself up to his full height—some three inches below my own—and with great dignity, said "I am the Reverend Walter Laurent, of Geneva."

"You're a *priest*?" I was thunderstruck. I couldn't imagine what might have brought a priest—Swiss or not—to this state.

Father Laurent looked nearly as horror-struck as I.

"A priest?" he echoed. "A papist? Never!"

Suddenly the truth struck me.

"A Huguenot!" I said. "That's it—you're a Protestant, aren't you?" I remembered the bodies I had seen hanging in the forest. That, I thought, explained rather a lot.

His lips quivered, but he pressed them tightly together for a moment before opening them to reply.

"Yes, Madame. I am a pastor; I have been preaching in this district for a month." He licked his lips briefly, eyeing me. "Your pardon, Madame—I think you are not French?"

"I'm English," I said, and he relaxed suddenly, as though someone had taken all the stiffening out of his spine.

"Great Father in Heaven," he said, prayerfully. "You are then a Protestant also?"

"No, I'm a Catholic," I answered. "But I'm not at all vicious about it," I added hastily, seeing the look of alarm spring back into his light-brown eyes. "Don't worry, I won't tell anyone you're here. I suppose you came to try to steal a little food?" I asked sympathetically.

"To steal is a sin!" he said, horrified. "No, Madame. But …" He clamped his lips shut, but his glance in the direction of the château gave him away.

"So one of the servants brings you food," I said. "So you let them do the stealing for you. But then I suppose you can absolve them from the sin, so it all works out. Rather thin moral ice you're on, if you ask me," I said reprovingly, "but then it isn't any of my business, I suppose."

A light of hope shone in his eyes. "You mean—you will not have me arrested, Madame?"

"No, of course not. I've a sort of fellow-feeling for fugitives from the law, having come rather close to being burnt at the stake once myself." I didn't know quite why I was being so chatty; the relief of meeting someone who seemed intelligent, I supposed. Louise was sweet, devoted and kind, and had precisely as much brain as the cuckoo clock in her drawing room. Thinking of the Swiss clock, I suddenly realized who Pastor Laurent's secret parishioners must be.

"Look," I said, "if you want to stay here, I'll go up to the château and tell Berta or Maurice that you're here."

The poor man was nothing but skin, bones, and eyes. Everything he thought was reflected in those large, gentle brown orbs. Right now, he was plainly thinking that whoever had tried to burn me at the stake had been on the right track.

"I have heard," he began slowly, reaching for a fresh grip on his crucifix, "of an Englishwoman whom the Parisians call 'La Dame Blanche.' An associate of Raymond the Heretic."

I sighed. "That's me. Though I'm not an associate of Master Raymond's, I don't think. He's just a friend." Seeing him squint doubtfully at me, I inhaled again. *"Pater Noster …"*

"No, no, Madame, please." To my surprise, he had lowered the crucifix, and was smiling.

"I also am an acquaintance of Master Raymond's, whom I knew in Geneva. There he was a reputable physician and herbalist. Now, alas, I fear that he has turned to darker pursuits, though of course nothing was proved."

"Proved? About what? And what's all this about Raymond the Heretic?"

"You did not know?" Thin brows lifted over the brown eyes. "Ah. Then you are not associated with Master Raymond's … activities." He relaxed noticeably.

"Activity" seemed like a poor description for the way in which Raymond had healed me, so I shook my head.

"No, but I wish you'd tell me. Oh, but I shouldn't be standing here talking; I should go and send Berta with food."

He waved a hand, with some dignity.

"It is of no urgency, Madame. The appetites of the body are of no importance when weighed against the appetites of the soul. And Catholic or not, you have been kind to me. If you are not now associated with Master Raymond's occult activities, then it is right that you should be warned in time."

And ignoring the dirt and the splintered boards of the floor, he folded his legs and sat down against the wall of the shed, gracefully motioning me also to sit. Intrigued, I collapsed opposite him, tucking up the folds of my skirt to keep them from dragging in the manure.

"Have you heard of a man named du Carrefours, Madame?" the Pastor said. "No? Well, his name is well known in Paris, I assure you, but you would do well not to speak it. This man was the organizer and the leader of a ring of unspeakable vice and depravity, in association with the most debased occult practices. I cannot bring myself to mention to you some of the ceremonies that were performed in secret among the nobility. And they call *me* a witch!" he muttered, almost under his breath.

He raised one bony forefinger, as though to forestall my unspoken objection.

"I am aware, Madame, of the sort of gossip that is commonly spread, without reference to fact—who should know it better than we? But the activities of du Carrefours and his followers—these are a matter of common knowledge, for he was tried for them, imprisoned, and eventually burned in the Place de la Bastille as punishment for his crimes."

I remembered Raymond's light remark, "No one's been burned in Paris in—oh, twenty years at least," and shuddered, in spite of the warm weather.

"And you say that Master Raymond was associated with this du Carrefours?"

The Pastor frowned, scratching absently at his matted beard. He likely had both lice and fleas, I thought, and tried to move back imperceptibly.

"Well, it is difficult to say. No one knows where Master Raymond came from; he speaks several tongues, all without noticeable accent. A very mysterious man, Master Raymond, but—I would swear by the name of my God—a good one."

I smiled at him. "I think so, too."

He nodded, smiling, but then grew serious as he resumed his story. "Just so, Madame. Still, he corresponded with du Carrefours from Geneva; I know this, for he told me so himself—he supplied various substances to order: plants, elixirs, the dried skins of animals. Even a sort of fish—a most peculiar and frightening thing, which he told me was brought up from the darkest depths of the sea; a horrible thing, all teeth, with almost no flesh—but with the most horrifying small … *lights* … like tiny lanterns, beneath its eyes."

"Really," I said, fascinated.

Pastor Laurent shrugged. "All this may be quite innocent, of course, a mere matter of business. But he disappeared from Geneva at the same time that du Carrefours came at first under suspicion—and within weeks of du Carrefours's execution, I had begun to hear stories that Master Raymond had established his business in Paris, and that he had taken over a number of du Carre-fours's clandestine activities as well."

"Hmm," I said. I was thinking of Raymond's inner room, and the cabinet painted with Cabbalistic signs. To keep out those who believed in them. "Anything else?"

The Reverend Laurent's eyebrows arched skyward.

"No, Madame," he said, rather weakly. "Nothing else, to my knowledge."

"Well, I'm really not given to that sort of thing myself," I assured him.

"Oh? Good," he said, hesitantly. He sat silently for a moment, as though making up his mind about something, then inclined his head courteously toward me.

"You will pardon me if I intrude, Madame? Berta and Maurice have told me something of your loss. I am sorry, Madame."

"Thank you," I said, staring at the stripes of sunlight on the floor.

There was another silence, then Pastor Laurent said delicately, "Your husband, Madame? He is not here with you?"

"No," I said, still keeping my eyes on the floor. Flies lighted momentarily, then zoomed off, finding no nourishment. "I don't know where he is."

I didn't mean to say any more, but something made me look up at the ragged little preacher.

"He cared more for his honor than he did for me or his child or an innocent man," I said bitterly. "I don't *care* where he is; I never want to see him again!"

I stopped abruptly, shaken. I had not put it into words before, even to myself. But it was true. There had been a great trust between us, and Jamie had broken it, for the sake of revenge. I understood; I had seen the power of the thing that drove him, and knew it couldn't be denied forever. But I had asked for a few months' grace, which he had promised me. And then, unable to wait, he had broken his word, and by so doing, sacrificed everything that lay between him and me. Not only that: He had jeopardized the undertaking in which we were engaged. I could understand, but I would not forgive.

Pastor Laurent laid a hand on mine. It was grimy with crusted dirt, and his nails were broken and black-edged, but I didn't draw away. I expected platitudes or a homily, but he didn't speak, either; just held my hand, very gently, for a long time, as the sun moved across the floor and the flies buzzed slow and heavy past our heads.

"You had better go," he said at last, releasing my hand. "You will be missed."

"I suppose so." I drew a deep breath, feeling at least steadier, if not better. I felt in the pocket of my gown; I had a small purse with me.

I hesitated, not wanting to offend him. After all, by his lights I was a heretic, even if not a witch.

"Will you let me give you some money?" I asked carefully.

He thought for a moment, then smiled, the light-brown eyes glowing.

"On one condition, Madame. If you will allow me to pray for you?"

"A bargain," I said, and gave him the purse.

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27

AN AUDIENCE WITH HIS MAJESTY

As the days passed at Fontainebleau, I gradually regained my bodily strength, though my mind continued to drift, my thoughts shying away from any sort of memory or action.

There were few visitors; the country house was a refuge, where the frenetic social life of Paris seemed like one more of the uneasy dreams that haunted me. I was surprised, then, to have a maid summon me to the drawing room to meet a visitor. The thought crossed my mind that it might be Jamie, and I felt a surge of dizzy sickness. But then reason reasserted itself; Jamie must have left for Spain by now; he could not possibly return before late August. And when he did?

I couldn't think of it. I pushed the idea into the back of my mind, but my hands shook as I fastened my laces to go downstairs.

Much to my surprise, the "visitor" was Magnus, the butler from Jared's Paris house.

"Your pardon, Madame," he said, bowing deeply when he saw me. "I did not wish to presume … but I could not tell whether perhaps the matter was of importance … and with the master gone …" Lordly in his own sphere of influence, the old man was badly discomposed by being so far afield. It took some time to extract a coherent story from him, but at length a note was produced, folded and sealed, addressed to me.

"The hand is that of Monsieur Murtagh," Magnus said, in a tone of half-repugnant awe. That explained his hesitance, I thought. The servants in the Paris house all regarded Murtagh with a sort of respectful horror, which had been exaggerated by reports of the events in the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré.

It had come to the Paris house two weeks earlier, Magnus explained. Unsure what to do with it, the servants had dithered and conferred, but at length, he had decided that it must be brought to my attention.

"The master being gone," he repeated. This time I paid attention to what he was saying.

"Gone?" I said. The note was crumpled and stained from its journey, light as a leaf in my hand. "You mean Jamie left *before* this note arrived?" I could make no sense of this; this must be Murtagh's note giving the name and sailing date of the ship that would bear Charles Stuart's port from Lisbon. Jamie could not have left for Spain before receiving the information.

As though to verify this, I broke the seal and unfolded the note. It was addressed to me, because Jamie had thought there was less chance of my mail being intercepted than his. From Lisbon, dated nearly a month before, the letter boasted no signature, but didn't need one.

"The *Scalamandre* sails from Lisbon on the 18th of July" was all the note said. I was surprised to see what a small, neat hand Murtagh wrote; somehow I had been expecting a formless scrawl.

I looked up from the paper to see Magnus and Louise exchanging a very odd kind of look.

"What is it?" I said abruptly. "Where's Jamie?" I had put down his absence from L'Hôpital des Anges after the miscarriage to his guilt at the knowledge that his reckless action had killed our child, had killed Frank, and had nearly cost me my life. At that point, I didn't care; I didn't want to see him, either. Now I began to think of another, more sinister explanation for his absence.

It was Louise who spoke at last, squaring her plump shoulders to the task.

"He's in the Bastille," she said, taking a deep breath. "For dueling."

My knees felt watery, and I sat down on the nearest available surface.

"Why in hell didn't you tell me?" I wasn't sure what I felt at this news; shock, or horror—fear? or a small sense of satisfaction?

"I—I didn't want to upset you, *chérie*," Louise stammered, taken aback at my apparent distress. "You were so weak … and there was nothing you could do, after all. And you didn't ask," she pointed out.

"But what … how … how long is the sentence?" I demanded. Whatever my initial emotion, it was superseded by a sudden rush of urgency. Murtagh's note had arrived at the Rue Tremoulins two weeks ago. Jamie should have left upon its receipt—but he hadn't.

Louise was summoning servants and ordering wine and ammoniac spirits and burnt feathers, all at once; I must look rather alarming.

"It is a contravention of the King's order," she said, pausing in her flutter. "He will remain in prison at the King's pleasure."

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I muttered, wishing I had something stronger to say.

"It is fortunate that *le petit* James did not kill his opponent," Louise hastened to add. "In that case, the penalty would have been much more … eek!" She twitched her striped skirts aside just in time to avoid the cascade of chocolate and biscuits as I knocked over the newly arrived refreshments. The tray clanged to the floor unregarded as I stared down at her. My hands were clasped tightly against my ribs, the right protectively curled over the gold ring on my left hand. The thin metal seemed to burn against my skin.

"He isn't dead, then?" I asked, like one in a dream. "Captain Randall … he's alive?"

"Why, yes," she said, peering curiously up at me. "You did not know? He is badly wounded, but it is said that he recovers. Are you quite well, Claire? You look …" But the rest of what she was saying was lost in the roaring that filled my ears.

* * *

"You did too much, too soon," Louise said severely, pulling back the curtains. "I said so, didn't I?"

"I imagine so," I said. I sat up and swung my legs out of bed, checking cautiously for any residual signs of faintness. No swimming of head, ringing of ears, double vision, or inclination to fall on the floor. Vital signs all right.

"I need my yellow gown, and then would you send for the carriage, Louise?" I asked.

Louise looked at me in horror. "You are not meaning to go out? Nonsense! Monsieur Clouseau is coming to attend you! I have sent a messenger to fetch him here at once!"

The news that Monsieur Clouseau, a prominent society physician, was coming from Paris to examine me, would have been sufficient grounds to get me on my feet, had I needed them.

The eighteenth of July was ten days away. With a fast horse, good weather, and a disregard for bodily comfort, the journey from Paris to Orvieto could be made in six. That left me four days to contrive Jamie's release from the Bastille; no time to fiddle about with Monsieur Clouseau.

"Hmm," I said, looking round the room thoughtfully. "Well, call the maid to dress me, at any rate. I don't want Monsieur Clouseau to find me in my shift."

Though she still looked suspicious, this sounded plausible; most ladies of the Court would rise from a deathbed in order to make sure they were dressed appropriately for the occasion.

"All right," she agreed, turning to go. "But you stay in bed until Yvonne arrives, you hear?"

The yellow gown was one of my best, a loose, graceful thing made in the modish sacque style, with a wide rolled collar, full sleeves, and a beaded closure down the front. Powdered, combed, stockinged, and perfumed at last, I surveyed the pair of shoes Yvonne had laid out for me to step into. I turned my head this way and that, frowning appraisingly.

"Mm, no," I said at last. "I don't think so. I'll wear the others, the ones with the red morocco heels, instead."

The maid looked dubiously at my dress, as though mentally assessing the effect of red morocco with yellow moiré silk, but obediently turned to rummage in the foot of the huge armoire.

Tiptoeing silently up behind her in my stockinged feet, I shoved her headfirst into the armoire, and slammed the door on the heaving, shrieking mass beneath the pile of fallen dresses within. Turning the key in the door, I dropped it neatly into my pocket, mentally shaking hands with myself. Neat job, Beauchamp, I thought. All this political intrigue is teaching you things they never dreamt of in nursing school, no doubt about it.

"Don't worry," I told the shaking armoire soothingly. "Someone will be along to let you out soon, I imagine. And you can tell La Princesse that you didn't *let* me go anywhere."

A despairing wail from inside the armoire seemed to be mentioning Monsieur Clouseau's name.

"Tell him to have a look at the monkey," I called over my shoulder, "It's got mange."

* * *

The success of my encounter with Yvonne buoyed my mood. Once ensconced in the carriage, rattling back toward Paris, though, my spirits sank appreciably.

While I was no longer quite so angry at Jamie, I still did not wish to see him. My feelings were in complete turmoil, and I had no intention of examining them closely; it hurt too much. Grief was there, and a horrible sense of failure, and over all, the sense of betrayal; his and mine. He should never have gone to the Bois de Boulogne; I should never have gone after him.

But we both did as our natures and our feelings dictated, and together we had—perhaps—caused the death of our child. I had no wish to meet my partner in the crime, still less to expose my grief to him, to match my guilt with his. I fled from anything that reminded me of the dripping morning in the Bois; certainly I fled from any memory of Jamie, caught as I had last seen him, rising from the body of his victim, face glowing with the vengeance that would shortly claim his own family.

I could not think of it even in passing, without a terrible clenching in my stomach, that brought back the ghost of the pain of premature labor. I pressed my fists into the blue velvet of the carriage seat, raising myself to ease the imagined pressure on my back.

I turned to look out the window, hoping to distract myself, but the sights went blindly by, as my mind returned, unbidden, to thoughts of my journey. Whatever my feelings for Jamie, whether we would ever see each other again, what we might be, or not be, to one another—still the fact remained that he was in prison. And I rather thought I knew just what imprisonment might mean to him, with the memories of Wentworth that he carried; the groping hands that fondled him in dreams, the stone walls he hammered in his sleep.

More importantly, there was the matter of Charles and the ship from Portugal; the loan from Monsieur Duverney, and Murtagh, about to take ship from Lisbon for a rendezvous off Orvieto. The stakes were too high to allow my own emotions any play. For the sake of the Scottish clans, and the Highlands themselves, for Jamie's family and tenants at Lallybroch, for the thousands who would die at Culloden and in its aftermath—it had to be tried. And to try, Jamie would have to be free; it wasn't something I could undertake myself.

No, there was no question. I would have to do whatever I must to have him released from the Bastille.

And just what could I do?

I watched the beggars scramble and gesture toward the windows as we entered the Rue du Faubourg St.-Honoré. When in doubt, I thought, seek the assistance of a Higher Authority.

I rapped on the panel beside the driver's seat. It slid back with a grating noise, and the mustached face of Louise's coachman peered down at me.

"Madame?"

"Left," I said. "To L'Hôpital des Anges."

* * *

Mother Hildegarde tapped her blunt fingers thoughtfully on a sheet of music paper, as though drumming out a troublesome sequence. She sat at the mosaic table in her private office, across from Herr Gerstmann, summoned to join us in urgent council.

“Well, yes,” said Herr Gerstmann doubtfully. “Yes, I believe I can arrange a private audience with His Majesty, but … you are certain that your husband … um …” The music master seemed to be having unusual trouble in expressing himself, which made me suspect that petitioning the King for Jamie’s release might be just a trifle more complicated than I had thought. Mother Hildegarde verified this suspicion with her own reaction.

“Johannes!” she exclaimed, so agitated as to drop her usual formal manner of address. “She cannot do that! After all, Madame Fraser is not one of the Court ladies—she is a person of virtue!”

“Er, thank you,” I said politely. “If you don’t mind, though … what, precisely, would my state of virtue have to do with my seeing the King to ask for Jamie’s release?”

The nun and the singing-master exchanged looks in which horror at my naiveté was mingled with a general reluctance to remedy it. At last Mother Hildegarde, braver of the two, bit the bullet.

“If you go alone to ask such a favor from the King, he will expect to lie with you,” she said bluntly. After all the carry-on over telling me, I was hardly surprised, but I glanced at Herr Gerstmann for confirmation, which he gave in the form of a reluctant nod.

“His Majesty is susceptible to requests from ladies of a certain personal charm,” he said delicately, taking a sudden interest in one of the ornaments on the desk.

“But there is a price to such requests,” added Mother Hildegarde, not nearly so delicate. “Most of the courtiers are only too pleased when their wives find Royal favor; the gain to them is well worth the sacrifice of their wives’ virtue.” The wide mouth curled with scorn at the thought, then straightened into its usual grimly humorous line.

“But your husband,” she said, “does not appear to me to be the sort who makes a complaisant cuckold.” The heavy arched brows supplied the question mark at the end of the sentence, and I shook my head in response.

“I shouldn’t think so.” In fact, this was one of the grosser understatements I had ever heard. If “complaisant” was not the very last word that came to mind at the thought of Jamie Fraser, it was certainly well down toward the bottom of the list. I tried to imagine just what Jamie would think, say, or do, if he ever learned that I had lain with another man, up to and including the King of France.

The thought made me remember the trust that had existed between us, almost since the day of our marriage, and a sudden feeling of desolation swept over me. I shut my eyes for a moment, fighting illness, but the prospect had to be faced.

“Well,” I said, taking a deep breath, “is there another way?”

Mother Hildegarde knitted her brows, frowning at Herr Gerstmann, as though expecting him to produce the answer. The little music master shrugged, though, frowning in his turn.

“If there were a friend of some importance, who might intercede for your husband with His Majesty?” he asked tentatively.

“Not likely.” I had examined all such alternatives myself, in the coach from Fontainebleau, and been forced to conclude that there was no one whom I could reasonably ask to undertake such an ambassage. Owing to the illegal and scandalous nature of the duel—for of course Marie d’Arbanville had spread her gossip all over Paris—none of the Frenchmen of our acquaintance could very well afford to take an interest in it. Monsieur Duverney, who had agreed to see me, had been kind, but discouraging. Wait, had been his advice. In a few months, when the scandal has died down a bit, then His Majesty might be approached. But now …

Likewise the Duke of Sandringham, so bound by the delicate proprieties of diplomacy that he had dismissed his private secretary for only the appearance of involvement in scandal, was in no position to petition Louis for a favor of this sort.

I stared down at the inlaid tabletop, scarcely seeing the complex curves of enamel that swept through abstractions of geometry and color. My forefinger traced the loops and whorls before me, providing a precarious anchor for my racing thoughts. If it was indeed necessary for Jamie to be released from prison, in order to prevent the Jacobite invasion of Scotland, then it seemed that I would have to do the releasing, whatever the method, and whatever its consequences.

At last I looked up, meeting the music master’s eyes. “I’ll have to,” I said softly. “There’s no other way.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Herr Gerstmann glanced at Mother Hildegarde.

“She will stay here,” Mother Hildegarde declared firmly. “You may send to tell her the time of the audience, Johannes, once you have arranged it.”

She turned to me. “After all, if you are really set upon this course, my dear friend …” Her lips pressed tightly together, then opened to say, “It may be a sin to assist you in committing immorality. Still, I will do it. I know that your reasons seem good to you, whatever they may be. And perhaps the sin will be outweighed by the grace of your friendship.”

“Oh, Mother.” I thought I might cry if I said more, so contented myself with merely squeezing the big, work-roughened hand that rested on my shoulder. I had a sudden longing to fling myself into her arms and bury my face against the comforting black serge bosom, but her hand left my shoulder and went to the long jet rosary that clicked among the folds of her skirt as she walked.

“I will pray for you,” she said, smiling what would have been a tremulous smile on a face less solidly carved. Her expression changed suddenly to one of deep consideration. “Though I do wonder,” she added meditatively, “exactly *who* would be the proper patron saint to invoke in the circumstances?”

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Mary Magdalene was the name that came to mind as I raised my hands overhead in a simulation of prayer, to allow the small wicker dress frame to slip over my shoulders and settle onto my hips. Or Mata Hari, but I was quite sure *she’d* never make the Calendar of Saints. I wasn’t sure about the Magdalene, for that matter, but a reformed prostitute seemed the most likely among the heavenly host to be sympathetic to the venture being now undertaken.

I reflected that the Convent of the Angels had probably never before seen a robing such as this. While the postulants about to take their final vows were most splendidly arrayed as brides of Christ, red silk and rice powder probably didn’t figure heavily in the ceremonies.

Very symbolic, I thought, as the rich scarlet folds slithered over my upturned face. White for purity, and red for … whatever this was. Sister Minèrve, a young sister from a wealthy noble family, had been selected to assist me in my toilette; with considerable skill and aplomb, she dressed my hair, tucking in the merest scrap of ostrich feather trimmed with seed pearls. She combed my brows carefully, darkening them with the small lead combs, and painted my lips with a feather dipped in a pot of rouge. The feel of it on my lips tickled unbearably, exaggerating my tendency to break into unhinged giggles. Not hilarity; hysteria.

Sister Minèrve reached for the hand mirror. I stopped her with a gesture; I didn’t want to look myself in the eye. I took a deep breath, and nodded.

“I’m ready,” I said. “Send for the coach.”

* * *

I had never been in this part of the palace before. In fact, after the multiple twists and turnings through the candle-lit corridors of mirrors, I was no longer sure exactly how many of me there were, let alone where any of them were going.

The discreet and anonymous Gentleman of the Bedchamber led me to a small paneled door in an alcove. He rapped once, then bowed to me, whirled, and left without waiting for an answer. The door swung inward, and I entered.

The King still had his breeches on. The realization slowed my heartbeat to something like a tolerable rate, and I ceased feeling as though I might throw up any minute.

I didn’t know quite what I had been expecting, but the reality was mildly reassuring. He was informally dressed, in shirt and breeches, with a dressing gown of brown silk draped across his shoulders for warmth. His Majesty smiled, and urged me to rise with a hand under my arm. His palm was warm—I had subconsciously expected his touch to be clammy—and I smiled back, as best I could.

The attempt must not have been altogether successful, for he patted my arm kindly, and said "Don't be afraid of me, *chère* Madame. I don't bite."

"No," I said. "Of course not."

He was a lot more poised than I was. Well, of course he is, I thought to myself, he does this all the time. I took a deep breath and tried to relax.

"You will have a little wine, Madame?" he asked. We were alone; there were no servants, but the wine was already poured, in a pair of goblets that stood on the table, glowing like rubies in the candlelight. The chamber was ornate, but very small, and aside from the table and a pair of oval-backed chairs, held only a luxuriously padded green-velvet chaise longue. I tried to avoid looking at it as I took my goblet, with a murmur of thanks.

"Sit, please." Louis sank down upon one of the chairs, gesturing to me to take the other. "Now please," he said, smiling at me, "tell me what it is that I may do for you."

"M-my husband," I began, stammering a little from nervousness. "He's in the Bastille."

"Of course," the King murmured. "For dueling. I recall." He took my free hand in his own, fingers resting lightly on my pulse. "What would you have me do, *chère* Madame? You know it is a serious offense; your husband has broken my own decree." One finger stroked the underside of my wrist, sending small tickling sensations up my arm.

"Y-yes, I understand that. But he was … provoked." I had an idea. "You know he's a Scot; men of that country are"—I tried to think of a good synonym for "berserk"—"most fierce where questions of their honor are concerned."

Louis nodded, head bent in apparent absorption over the hand he held. I could see the faint greasy shine to his skin, and smell his perfume. Violets. A strong, sweet smell, but not enough to completely mask his own acrid maleness.

He drained his wine in two long swallows and discarded the goblet, the better to clasp my hand in both his own. One short-nailed finger traced the lines of my wedding ring, with its interlaced links and thistle blossoms.

"Quite so," he said, bringing my hand closer, as though to examine the ring. "Quite so, Madame. However …"

"I'd be … most grateful, Your Majesty," I interrupted. His head rose and I met his eyes, dark and quizzical. My heart was going like a trip-hammer. "Most … grateful."

He had thin lips and bad teeth; I could smell his breath, thick with onion and decay. I tried holding my own breath, but this could hardly be more than a temporary expedient.

"Well …" he said slowly, as though thinking it over. "I would myself be inclined toward mercy, Madame …"

I released my breath in a short gasp, and his fingers tightened on mine in warning. "But you see, there are complications."

"There are?" I said faintly.

He nodded, eyes still fixed on my face. His fingers wandered lightly over the back of my hand, tracing the veins.

"The Englishman who was so unfortunate as to have offended milord Broch Tuarach," he said. "He was in the employ of … a certain man—an English noble of some importance."

Sandringham. My heart lurched at the mention of him, indirect as it was.

"This noble is engaged in—shall we say, certain negotiations which entitle him to consideration?" The thin lips smiled, emphasizing the imperious prow of the nose above. "And this nobleman has interested himself in the matter of the duel between your husband and the English Captain Randall. I am afraid that he was most exigent in demanding that your husband suffer the full penalty of his indiscretion, Madame."

Bloody tub of lard, I thought. Of course—since Jamie had refused the bribe of a pardon, what better way to prevent his "involving himself" in the Stuarts' affairs than to ensure Jamie's staying safely jugged in the Bastille for the next few years? Sure, discreet, and inexpensive; a method bound to appeal to the Duke.

On the other hand, Louis was still breathing heavily on my hand, which I took as a sign that all was not necessarily lost. If he wasn't going to grant my request, he could scarcely expect me to go to bed with him—or if he did, he was in for a rude surprise.

I girded my loins for another try.

“And does Your Majesty take orders from the English?” I asked boldly.

Louis’s eyes flew open with momentary shock. Then he smiled wryly, seeing what I intended. Still, I had touched a nerve; I saw the small twitch of his shoulders as he resettled his conviction of power like an invisible mantle.

“No, Madame, I do not,” he said with some dryness. “I do, however, take account of … various factors.” The heavy lids drooped over his eyes for a moment, but he still held my hand.

“I have heard that your husband interests himself in the affairs of my cousin,” he said.

“Your Majesty is well informed,” I said politely. “But since that is so, you will know that my husband does not support the restoration of the Stuarts to the throne of Scotland.” I prayed that this was what he wanted to hear.

Apparently it was; he smiled, raised my hand to his lips, and kissed it briefly.

“Ah? I had heard … conflicting stories about your husband.”

I took a deep breath and resisted the impulse to snatch my hand back.

“Well, it’s a matter of business,” I said, trying to sound as matter-of-fact as possible. “My husband’s cousin, Jared Fraser, is an avowed Jacobite; Jamie—my husband—can’t very well go about letting his real views be made public, when he’s in partnership with Jared.” Seeing the doubt begin to fade from his face, I hurried it along. “Ask Monsieur Duverney,” I suggested. “He’s well acquainted with my husband’s true sympathies.”

“I have.” Louis paused for a long moment, watching his own fingers, dark and stubby, tracing delicate circles over the back of my hand.

“So very pale,” he murmured. “So fine. I believe I could see the blood flow beneath your skin.”

He let go of my hand then and sat regarding me. I was extremely good at reading faces, but Louis's was quite impenetrable at the moment. I realized suddenly that he'd been a king since the age of five; the ability to hide his thoughts was as much a part of him as his Bourbon nose or the sleepy black eyes.

This thought brought another in its wake, with a chill that struck me deep in the pit of the stomach. He was the King. The Citizens of Paris would not rise for forty years or more; until that day, his rule within France was absolute. He could free Jamie with a word—or kill him. He could do with me as he liked; there was no recourse. One nod of his head, and the coffers of France could spill the gold that would launch Charles Stuart, loosing him like a deadly bolt of lightning to strike through the heart of Scotland.

He was the King. He would do as he wished. And I watched his dark eyes, clouded with thought, and waited, trembling, to see what the Royal pleasure might be.

"Tell me, *ma chère* Madame," he said at last, stirring from his introspection. "If I were to grant your request, to free your husband …" he paused, considering.

"Yes?"

"He would have to leave France," Louis said, one thick brow raised in warning. "That would be a condition of his release."

"I understand." My heart was pounding so hard that it nearly drowned out his words. Jamie leaving France was, after all, precisely the point. "But he's exiled from Scotland …"

"I think that might be arranged."

I hesitated, but there seemed little choice but to agree on Jamie's behalf. "All right."

"Good." The King nodded, pleased. Then his eyes returned to me, rested on my face, glided down my neck, my breasts, my body. "I would ask a small service of you in return, Madame," he said softly.

I met his eyes squarely for one second. Then I bowed my head. "I am at Your Majesty's complete disposal," I said.

"Ah." He rose and threw off the dressing gown, leaving it flung carelessly over the back of his armchair. He smiled and held out a hand to me. "*Très bien, ma chère*. Come with me, then."

I closed my eyes briefly, willing my knees to work. You've been married twice, for heaven's sake, I thought to myself. Quit making such a bloody fuss about it.

I rose to my feet and took his hand. To my surprise, he didn't turn toward the velvet chaise, but instead led me toward the door at the far side of the room.

I had one moment of ice-cold clarity as he let go my hand to open the door.

Damn you, Jamie Fraser, I thought. *Damn you to hell!*

I stood quite still on the threshold, blinking. My meditations on the protocol of Royal disrobing faded into sheer astonishment.

The room was quite dark, lit only by numerous tiny oil-lamps, set in groups of five in alcoves in the wall of the chamber. The room itself was round, and so was the huge table that stood in its center, the dark wood gleaming with pinpoint reflections. There were people sitting at the table, no more than hunched dark blurs against the blackness of the room.

There was a murmur at my entrance, quickly stilled at the King's appearance. As my eyes grew more accustomed to the murk, I realized with a sense of shock that the people seated at the table wore hoods; the nearest man turned toward me, and I caught the faint gleam of eyes through holes in the velvet. It looked like a convention of hangmen.

Apparently I was the guest of honor. I wondered for a nervous moment just what might be expected of me. From Raymond's hints, and Marguerite's, I had nightmare visions of occult ceremonies involving infant sacrifice, ceremonial rape, and general-purpose satanic rites. It is, however, quite rare for the supernatural actually to live up to its billing, and I hoped this occasion would be no exception.

"We have heard of your great skill, Madame, and your … reputation." Louis smiled, but there was a tinge of caution in his eyes as he looked at me, as though not quite certain what I might do. “We should be most obliged, my dear Madame, should you be willing to give us the benefits of such skill this evening.”

I nodded. Most obliged, eh? Well, that was all to the good; I wanted him obliged to me. What was he expecting me to do, though? A servant placed a huge wax candle on the table and lighted it, shedding a pool of mellow light on the polished wood. The candle was decorated with symbols like those I had seen in Master Raymond’s secret chamber.

“*Regardez*, Madame.” The King’s hand was under my elbow, directing my attention beyond the table. Now that the candle was lighted, I could see the two figures who stood silently among the flickering shadows. I started at the sight, and the King’s hand tightened on my arm.

The Comte St. Germain and Master Raymond stood there, side by side, separated by a distance of six feet or so. Raymond gave no sign of acknowledgment, but stood quietly, staring off to one side with the pupil-less black eyes of a frog in a bottomless well.

The Comte saw me, and his eyes widened in disbelief; then he scowled at me. He was dressed in his finest, all in white, as usual; a white stiffened satin coat over cream-colored silk vest and breeches. A tracery of seed pearls decorated his cuffs and lapels, gleaming in the candlelight. Sartorial splendor aside, the Comte looked rather the worse for wear, I thought—his face was drawn with strain, and the lace of his stock was wilted, his collar darkened with sweat.

Raymond, conversely, looked calm as a turbot on ice, standing stolidly with both hands folded into the sleeves of his usual scruffy velvet robe, broad, flat face placid and inscrutable.

“These two men stand accused, Madame,” said Louis, with a gesture at Raymond and the Comte. “Of sorcery, of witchcraft, of the perversion of the legitimate search for knowledge into an exploration of arcane arts.” His voice was cold and grim. “Such practices flourished during the reign of my grandfather; but we shall not suffer such wickedness in our realm.”

The King flicked his fingers at one of the hooded figures, who sat with pen and ink before a sheaf of papers. “Read the indictments, if you please,” he said.

The hooded man rose obediently to his feet and began to read from one of the papers: charges of bestiality and foul sacrifice, of the spilling of the blood of innocents, the profanation of the most holy rite of the Mass by desecration of the Host, the performance of amatory rites upon the altar of God—I had a quick flash of just what the healing Raymond had performed on me at L'Hôpital des Anges must have looked like, and felt profoundly grateful that no one had discovered him.

I heard the name "du Carrefours" mentioned, and swallowed a sudden rising of bile. What had Pastor Laurent said? The sorcerer du Carrefours had been burned in Paris, only twenty years before, on just such charges as those I was hearing: "—the summoning of demons and powers of darkness, the procurement of illness and death for payment"—I put a hand to my stomach, in vivid memory of bitter cascara—"the ill-wishing of members of the Court, the defilement of virgins—" I shot a quick look at the Comte, but his face was stony, lips pressed tight as he listened.

Raymond stood quite still, silver hair brushing his shoulders, as though listening to something as inconsequential as the song of a thrush in the bushes. I had seen the Cabbalistic symbols on his cabinet, but I could hardly reconcile the man I knew—the compassionate poisoner, the practical apothecary—with the list of vileness being read.

At last the indictments ceased. The hooded man glanced at the King, and at a signal, sank back into his chair.

"Extensive inquiry has been made," the King said, turning to me. "Evidence has been presented, and the testimony of many witnesses taken. It seems clear"—he turned a cold gaze on the two accused magic—"that both men have undertaken investigations into the writings of ancient philosophers, and have employed the art of divinations, using calculation of the movements of heavenly bodies. Still …" He shrugged. "This is not of itself a crime. I am given to understand"—he glanced at a heavyset man in a hood, whom I suspected of being the Bishop of Paris—"that this is not necessarily at variance with the teachings of the Church; even the blessed St.

Augustine was known to have made inquiries into the mysteries of astrology."

I rather dimly recalled that St. Augustine had indeed looked into astrology, and had rather scornfully dismissed it as a load of rubbish. Still, I doubted that Louis had read Augustine's *Confessions*, and this line of argument was undoubtedly a good one for an accused sorcerer; star-gazing seemed fairly harmless, by comparison with infant sacrifice and nameless orgies.

I was beginning to wonder, with considerable apprehension, just what I was doing in this assemblage. Had someone seen Master Raymond with me in the Hôpital after all?

"We have no quarrel with the proper use of knowledge, nor the search for wisdom," the King went on in measured tones. "There is much that can be learned from the writings of the ancient philosophers, if they are approached with proper caution and humility of spirit. But it is true that while much good may be found in such writings, so, too, may evil be discovered, and the pure search for wisdom be perverted into the desire for power and wealth—the things of this world."

He glanced back and forth between the two accused sorcerers once more, obviously drawing conclusions as to who might be more inclined to *that* sort of perversion. The Comte was still sweating, damp patches showing dark on the white silk of his coat.

"No, Your Majesty!" he said, shaking back his dark hair and fixing burning eyes on Master Raymond. "It is true that there are dark forces at work in the land—the vileness of which you speak walks among us! But such wickedness does not dwell in the breast of your most loyal subject"—he smote himself on the breast, lest we have missed the point—"no, Your Majesty! For the perversion of knowledge and the use of forbidden arts, you must look beyond your own Court." He didn't accuse Master Raymond directly, but the direction of his pointed gaze was obvious.

The King was unmoved by this outburst. "Such abominations flourished during the reign of my grandfather," he said softly. "We have rooted them out wherever they have been found; destroyed the threat of such evil where it shall exist in our realm. Sorcerers, witches, those who pervert the teachings of the Church … Monsieurs, we shall not suffer such wickedness to arise again.”

“So.” He slapped both palms lightly against the table and straightened himself. Still staring at the Raymond and the Comte, he held out a hand in my direction.

“We have brought here a witness,” he declared. “An infallible judge of truth, of purity of heart.”

I made a small, gurgling noise, which made the King turn to look at me.

“A White Lady,” he said softly. “La Dame Blanche cannot lie; she sees the heart and the soul of a man, and may turn that truth to good … or to destruction.”

The air of unreality that had hung over the evening vanished in a pop. The faint wine-buzz was gone, and I was suddenly stone-cold sober. I opened my mouth, and then shut it, realizing that there was precisely nothing I could say.

Horror snaked down my backbone and coiled in my belly as the King made his dispositions. Two pentagrams were to be drawn on the floor, within which the two sorcerers would stand. Each would then bear witness to his own activities and motives. And the White Lady would judge the truth of what was said.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I said, under my breath.

“Monsieur le Comte?” The King gestured to the first pentagram, chalked on the carpet. Only a king would treat a genuine Aubusson with that kind of cavalier disregard.

The Comte brushed close to me as he went to take his place. As he passed me, I caught the faintest whisper: “Be warned, Madame. I do not work alone.” He took up his spot and turned to face me with an ironic bow, outwardly composed.

The implication was reasonably clear; I condemned him, and his minions would be round promptly to cut off my nipples and burn Jared’s warehouse. I licked dry lips, cursing Louis. Why couldn’t he just have wanted my body?

Raymond stepped casually into his own chalk-limned space, and nodded cordially in my direction. No hint of guidance in those round black eyes.

I hadn't the faintest idea what to do next. The King motioned to me to stand opposite him, between the two pentagrams. The hooded men rose to stand behind the King; a blank-faced crowd of menace.

Everything was extremely quiet. Candle smoke hung in a pall near the gilded ceiling, wisps drifting the languid air currents. All eyes were trained on me. Finally, out of desperation, I turned to the Comte and nodded.

"You may begin, Monsieur le Comte," I said.

He smiled—at least I assumed it was meant to be a smile—and began, starting out with an explication of the foundation of the Cabbala and moving right along to an exegesis on the twenty-three letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and the profound symbolism of it all. It sounded thoroughly scholarly, completely innocuous, and terribly dull. The King yawned, not bothering to cover his mouth.

Meanwhile, I was turning over alternatives in my mind. This man had threatened and attacked me, and tried to have Jamie assassinated—whether for personal or political reasons, it made little difference. He had in all likelihood been the ringleader of the gang of rapists who had waylaid me and Mary. Beyond all this, and beyond the rumors I had heard of his other activities, he was a major threat to the success of our attempt at stopping Charles Stuart. Was I going to let him get away? Let him go on to exert his influence with the King on the Stuarts' behalf, and to go on roaming the darkened streets of Paris with his band of masked bullies?

I could see my nipples, erect with fright, standing out boldly against the silk of my dress. But I drew myself up and glared at him anyway.

"Just one minute," I said. "All that you say so far is true, Monsieur le Comte, but I see a shadow behind your words."

The Comte's mouth fell open. Louis, suddenly interested, ceased slouching against the table and stood upright. I closed my eyes and laid my fingers against my lids, as though looking inward.

"I see a name in your mind, Monsieur le Comte," I said. I sounded breathless and half-choked with fright, but there was no help for it. I dropped my hands and looked straight at him. "Les Disciples du

Mal," I said. "What have you to do with Les Disciples, Monsieur le Comte?"

He really wasn't good at hiding his emotions. His eyes bulged and his face went white, and I felt a small fierce surge of satisfaction under my fear.

The name of Les Disciples du Mal was familiar to the King as well; the sleepy dark eyes narrowed suddenly to slits.

The Comte may have been a crook and a charlatan, but he wasn't a coward. Summoning his resources, he glared at me and flung back his head.

"This woman lies," he said, sounding as definite as he had when informing the audience that the letter aleph was symbolic of the font of Christ's blood. "She is no true White Lady, but the servant of Satan! In league with her master, the notorious sorcerer, du Carrefours's apprentice!" He pointed dramatically at Raymond, who looked mildly surprised.

One of the hooded men crossed himself, and I heard the soft whisper of a brief prayer among the shadows.

"I can prove what I say," the Comte declared, not letting anyone else get a word in edgewise. He reached into the breast of his coat. I remembered the dagger he had produced from his sleeve on the night of the dinner party, and tensed myself to duck. It wasn't a knife that he brought out, though.

"The Holy Bible says, 'They shall handle serpents unharmed,' " he thundered. " 'And by such signs shall ye know the servants of the true God!' "

I thought it was probably a small python. It was nearly three feet long, a smooth, gleaming length of gold and brown, slick and sinuous as oiled rope, with a pair of disconcerting golden eyes.

There was a concerted gasp at its appearance, and two of the hooded judges took a quick step back. Louis himself was more than slightly taken aback, and looked hastily about for his bodyguard, who stood goggle-eyed by the door of the chamber.

The snake flicked its tongue once or twice, tasting the air. Apparently deciding that the mix of candle wax and incense wasn't edible, it turned and made an attempt to burrow back into the warm pocket from which it had been so rudely removed. The Comte caught it expertly behind the head, and shoved it toward me.

"You see?" he said triumphantly. "The woman shrinks away in fear! She is a witch!"

Actually, compared to one judge, who was huddling against the far wall, I was a monument of fortitude, but I must admit that I had taken an involuntary step backward when the snake appeared. Now I stepped forward again, intending to take it away from him. The bloody thing wasn't poisonous, after all. Maybe we'd see how harmless it was if I wrapped it round his neck.

Before I could reach him, though, Master Raymond spoke behind me. What with all the commotion, I'd rather forgotten him.

"That is not all the Bible says, Monsieur le Comte," Raymond observed. He didn't raise his voice, and the wide amphibian face was bland as pudding. Still, the buzz of voices stopped, and the King turned to listen.

"Yes, Monsieur?" he said.

Raymond nodded in polite acknowledgment of having the floor, and reached into his robe with both hands. From one pocket he produced a flask, from the other a small cup.

" 'They shall handle serpents unharmed,' " he quoted, " 'and if they drink any deadly poison, they shall not die.' " He held the cup out on the palm of his hand, its silver lining gleaming in the candlelight. The flask was poised above it, ready to pour.

"Since both milady Broch Tuarach and myself have been accused," Raymond said, with a quick glance at me, "I would suggest that all three of us partake of this test. With your permission, Your Majesty?"

Louis looked rather stunned by the rapid progress of events, but he nodded, and a thin stream of amber liquid splashed into the cup, which at once turned red and began to bubble, as though the contents were boiling.

"Dragon's blood," Raymond said informatively, waving at the cup. "Entirely harmless to the pure of heart." He smiled a toothless, encouraging smile, and handed me the cup.

There didn't seem much to do but drink it. Dragon's blood appeared to be some form of sodium bicarbonate; it tasted like brandy with seltzer. I took two or three medium-sized swallows and handed it back.

With due ceremony, Raymond drank as well. He lowered the cup, exhibiting pink-stained lips, and turned to the King.

"If La Dame Blanche may be asked to give the cup to Monsieur le Comte?" he said. He gestured to the chalk lines at his feet, to indicate that he might not step outside the protection of the pentagram.

At the King's nod, I took the cup and turned mechanically toward the Comte. Perhaps six feet of carpeting to cross. I took the first step, and then another, knees trembling more violently than they had in the small anteroom, alone with the King.

The White Lady sees a man's true nature. Did I? Did I really know about either of them, Raymond or the Comte?

Could I have stopped it? I asked myself that a hundred times, a thousand times—later. Could I have done otherwise?

I remembered my errant thought on meeting Charles Stuart; how convenient for everyone if he should die. But one cannot kill a man for his beliefs, even if the exercise of those beliefs means the death of innocents—or can one?

I didn't know. I didn't know that the Comte was guilty, I didn't know that Raymond was innocent. I didn't know whether the pursuit of an honorable cause justified the use of dishonorable means. I didn't know what one life was worth—or a thousand. I didn't know the true cost of revenge.

I did know that the cup I held in my hands was death. The white crystal hung around my neck, its weight a reminder of poison. I hadn't seen Raymond add anything to it; no one had, I was sure. But I didn't need to dip the crystal into the bloodred liquid to know what it now contained.

The Comte saw the knowledge in my face; La Dame Blanche cannot lie. He hesitated, looking at the bubbling cup.

"Drink, Monsieur," said the King. The dark eyes were hooded once more, showing nothing. "Or are you afraid?"

The Comte might have a number of things to his discredit, but cowardice wasn't one of them. His face was pale and set, but he met the King's eyes squarely, with a slight smile.

"No, Majesty," he said.

He took the cup from my hand and drained it, his eyes fixed on mine. They stayed fixed, staring into my face, even as they glazed with the knowledge of death. The White Lady may turn a man's nature to good, or to destruction.

The Comte's body hit the floor, writhing, and a chorus of shouts and cries rose from the hooded watchers, drowning any sound he might have made. His heels drummed briefly, silent on the flowered carpet; his body arched, then subsided into limpness. The snake, thoroughly disgruntled, struggled free of the disordered folds of white satin and slithered rapidly away, heading for the sanctuary of Louis's feet.

All was pandemonium.

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THE COMING OF THE LIGHT

I returned from Paris to Louise's house at Fontainebleau. I didn't want to go to the Rue Tremoulins—or anywhere else that Jamie might find me. He would have little time to look; he would have to leave for Spain virtually at once, or risk the failure of his scheme.

Louise, good friend that she was, forgave my subterfuge, and—to her credit—forbore to ask me where I had gone, or what I had done there. I didn't speak much to anyone, but stayed in my room, eating little, and staring at the fat, naked *putti* that decorated the white ceiling. The sheer necessity of the trip to Paris had roused me for a time, but now there was nothing I must do, no daily routine to support me. Rudderless, I began to drift again.

Still, I tried sometimes to make an effort. Prodded by Louise, I would come down to a social dinner, or join her for tea with a visiting friend. And I tried to pay attention to Fergus, the only person in the world for whom I had still some sense of responsibility.

So, when I heard his voice raised in altercation on the other side of an outbuilding as I dutifully took my afternoon walk, I felt obliged to go and see what was the matter.

He was face to face with one of the stable-lads, a bigger boy with a sullen expression and broad shoulders.

"Shut your mouth, ignorant toad," the stable-lad was saying. "You don't know what you're talking about!"

"I know better than you—you, whose mother mated with a pig!" Fergus put two fingers in his nostrils, pushed his nose up and danced to and fro, shouting “Oink, oink!” repeatedly.

The stable-lad, who did have a rather noticeably upturned proboscis, wasted no time in idle repartee, but waded in with both fists clenched and swinging. Within seconds, the two were rolling on the muddy ground, squalling like cats and ripping at each other’s clothes.

While I was still debating whether to interfere, the stable-lad rolled on top of Fergus, got his neck in both hands, and began to bang his head on the ground. On the one hand, I rather considered that Fergus had been inviting some such attention. On the other, his face was turning a dark, dusky red, and I had some reservations about seeing him cut off in his prime. With a certain amount of deliberation, I walked up behind the struggling pair.

The stable-lad was kneeling astride Fergus’s body, choking him, and the seat of his breeches was stretched tight before me. I drew back my foot and booted him smartly in the trouser seam. Precariously balanced, he fell forward with a startled cry, atop the body of his erstwhile victim. He rolled to the side and bounced to his feet, fists clenched. Then he saw me, and fled without a word.

“What do you think you’re playing at?” I demanded. I yanked Fergus, gasping and spluttering, to his feet, and began to beat his clothes, knocking the worst of the mud clumps and hay wisps off of him.

“Look at that,” I said accusingly. “You’ve torn not only your shirt, but your breeches as well. We’ll have to ask Berta to mend them.” I turned him around and fingered the torn flap of fabric. The stable-lad had apparently gotten a hand in the waistband of the breeches, and ripped them down the side seam; the buckram fabric drooped from his slender hips, all but baring one buttock.

I stopped talking suddenly, and stared. It wasn’t the disgraceful expanse of bare flesh that riveted me, but a small red mark that adorned it. About the size of a halfpenny piece, it was the dark, purplish-red color of a freshly healed burn. Disbelievingly, I touched it, making Fergus start in alarm. The edges of the mark were incised; whatever had made it had sunk into the flesh. I grabbed the boy by the arm to stop him running away, and bent to examine the mark more closely.

At a distance of six inches, the shape of the mark was clear; it was an oval, carrying within it smudged shapes that must have been letters.

“Who did this to you, Fergus?” I asked. My voice sounded queer to my own ears; preternaturally calm and detached.

Fergus yanked, trying to pull away, but I held on.

“Who, Fergus?” I demanded, giving him a little shake.

“It’s nothing, Madame; I hurt myself sliding off the fence. It’s just a splinter.” His large black eyes darted to and fro, seeking a refuge.

“That’s not a splinter. I know what it is, Fergus. But I want to know who did it.” I had seen something like it only once before, and that wound freshly inflicted, while this had had some time to heal. But the mark of a brand is unmistakable.

Seeing that I meant it, he quit struggling. He licked his lips, hesitating, but his shoulders slumped, and I knew I had him now.

“It was … an Englishman, milady. With a ring.”

“When?”

“A long time ago, Madame! In May.”

I drew a deep breath, calculating. Three months. Three months earlier when Jamie had left the house to visit a brothel, in search of his warehouse foreman. In Fergus’s company. Three months since Jamie had encountered Jack Randall in Madame Elise’s establishment, and seen something that made all promises null and void, that had formed in him the determination to kill Jack Randall. Three months since he had left—never to return.

It took considerable patience, supplemented by a firm grip on Fergus’s upper arm, but I succeeded at last in extracting the story from him.

When they arrived at Madame Elise’s establishment, Jamie had told Fergus to wait for him while he went upstairs to make the financial arrangements. Judging from prior experience that this might take some time, Fergus had wandered into the large salon, where a number of young ladies that he knew were “resting,” chattering together and fixing each other's hair in anticipation of customers.

"Business is sometimes slow in the mornings," he explained to me. "But on Tuesdays and Fridays, the fishermen come up the Seine to sell their catch at the morning market. Then they have money, and Madame Elise does a fine business, so *les jeunes filles* must be ready right after breakfast."

Most of the "girls" were in fact the older inhabitants of the establishment; fishermen were not considered the choicest of clients, and so went by default to the less desirable prostitutes. Among these were most of Fergus's former friends, though, and he passed an agreeable quarter of an hour in the salon, being petted and teased. A few early clients appeared, made their choice, and departed for the upstairs rooms—Madame Elise's house boasted four narrow stories—without disturbing the conversation of the remaining ladies.

"And then the Englishman came in, with Madame Elise." Fergus stopped and swallowed, the large Adam's apple bobbing uneasily in his skinny throat.

It was obvious to Fergus, who had seen men in every state of inebriation and arousal, that the Captain had been making a night of it. He was flushed and untidy, and his eyes were bloodshot. Ignoring Madame Elise's attempts to guide him toward one of the prostitutes, he had broken away and wandered through the room, restlessly scanning the wares on display. Then his eye had lighted on Fergus.

"He said, 'You. Come along,' and took me by the arm. I held back, Madame—I told him my employer was above, and that I couldn't—but he wouldn't listen. Madame Elise whispered in my ear that I should go with him, and she would split the money with me afterward." Fergus shrugged, and looked at me helplessly. "I knew the ones who like little boys don't usually take very long; I thought he would be finished long before milord was ready to leave."

"Jesus bloody Christ," I said. My fingers relaxed their grip and slid nervelessly down his sleeve. "Do you mean—Fergus, had you done it before?"

He looked as though he wanted to cry. So did I.

“Not very often, Madame,” he said, and it was almost a plea for understanding. “There are houses where that is the specialty, and usually the men who like that go there. But sometimes a customer would see me and take a fancy …” His nose was starting to run and he wiped it with the back of his hand.

I rummaged in my pocket for a handkerchief and gave it to him. He was beginning to sniffle as he recalled that Friday morning.

“He was much bigger than I thought. I asked him if I could take it in my mouth, but he … but he wanted to …”

I pulled him to me and pressed his head tight against my shoulder, muffling his voice in the cloth of my gown. The frail blades of his shoulder bones were like a bird’s wings under my hand.

“Don’t tell me any more,” I said. “Don’t. It’s all right, Fergus; I’m not angry. But don’t tell me any more.”

This was a futile order; he couldn’t stop talking, after so many days of fear and silence.

“But it’s all my fault, Madame!” he burst out, pulling away. His lip was trembling, and tears welled in his eyes. “I should have kept quiet; I shouldn’t have cried out! But I couldn’t help it, and milord heard me, and … and he burst in … and … oh, Madame, I shouldn’t have, but I was so glad to see him, and I ran to him, and he put me behind him and hit the Englishman in the face. And then the Englishman came up from the floor with the stool in his hand, and threw it, and I was so afraid, I ran out of the room and hid in the closet at the end of the hall. Then there was so much shouting and banging, and a terrible crash, and more shouting. And then it stopped, and soon milord opened the door of the closet and took me out. He had my clothes, and he dressed me himself, because I couldn’t fasten the buttons—my fingers shook.”

He grabbed my skirt with both hands, the necessity of making me believe him tightening his face into a monkey mask of grief.

“It’s my fault, Madame, but I didn’t know! I didn’t know he would go to fight the Englishman. And now milord is gone, and he’ll never come back, and it’s all my fault!”

Wailing now, he fell facedown on the ground at my feet. He was crying so loudly that I didn't think he heard me as I bent to lift him up, but I said it anyway.

"It isn't your fault, Fergus. It isn't mine, either—but you're right; he's gone."

* * *

Following Fergus's revelation, I sank ever deeper into apathy. The gray cloud that had surrounded me since the miscarriage seemed to draw closer, wrapping me in swaddling folds that dimmed the light of the brightest day. Sounds seemed to reach me faintly, like the far-off ringing of a buoy through fog at sea.

Louise stood in front of me, frowning worriedly as she looked down at me.

"You're much too thin," she scolded. "And white as a plate of tripes. Yvonne said you didn't eat any breakfast again!"

I couldn't remember when I had last been hungry. It hardly seemed important. Long before the Bois de Boulogne, long before my trip to Paris. I fixed my gaze on the mantelpiece and drifted off into the curlicues of the rococo carving. Louise's voice went on, but I didn't pay attention; it was only a noise in the room, like the brushing of a tree branch against the stone wall of the château, or the humming of the flies that had been drawn in by the smell of my discarded breakfast.

I watched one of them, rising off the eggs in sudden motion as Louise clapped her hands. It buzzed in short, irritable circles before settling back to its feeding spot. The sound of hurrying footsteps came behind me, there was a sharp order from Louise, a submissive "*Oui*, Madame," and the sudden *thwap!* of a flywhisk as the maid set about removing the flies, one by one. She dropped each small black corpse into her pocket, plucking it off the table and polishing the smear left behind with a corner of her apron.

Louise bent down, thrusting her face suddenly into my field of view.

"I can see all the bones in your face! If you won't eat, at least go outside for a bit!" she said impatiently. "The rain's stopped; come along, and we'll see if there are any muscats left in the arbor. Maybe you'll eat some of those."

Outside or inside was much the same to me; the soft, numbing grayness was still with me, blurring outlines and making every place seem like every other. But it seemed to matter to Louise, so I rose obediently to go with her.

Near the garden door, though, she was waylaid by the cook, with a list of questions and complaints about the menu for dinner. Guests had been invited, with the intention of distracting me, and the bustle of preparation had been causing small explosions of domestic discord all morning.

Louise emitted a martyred sigh, then patted me on the back.

"You go on," she said, urging me toward the door. "I'll send a footman with your cloak."

It was a cool day for August because of the rain that had been coming down since the night before. Pools of water lay in the graveled paths, and the dripping from the drenched trees was nearly as incessant as the rain itself.

The sky was still filled with gray, but it had faded from the angry black of water-logged cloud. I folded my arms around my elbows; it looked as though the sun might come out soon, but it was still cold enough to want a cloak.

When I heard steps behind me on the path, I turned to find François, the second footman, but he carried nothing. He looked oddly hesitant, peering as though to make sure I was the person he was looking for.

"Madame," he said, "there is a visitor for you."

I sighed internally; I didn't want to be bothered with the effort of rousing myself to be civil to company.

"Tell them I'm indisposed, please," I said, turning to continue my walk. "And when they've gone, bring me my cloak."

"But Madame," he said behind me, "it is le seigneur Broch Tuarach—your husband."

Startled, I whirled to look at the house. It was true; I could see Jamie's tall figure, already coming around the corner of the house. I turned, pretending I hadn't seen him, and walked off toward the arbor. The shrubbery was thick down there; perhaps I could hide.

"Claire!" Pretending was useless; he had seen me as well, and was coming down the path after me. I walked faster, but I was no match for those long legs. I was puffing before I had covered half the distance to the arbor, and had to slow down; I was in no condition for strenuous exercise.

"Wait, Claire!"

I half-turned; he was almost upon me. The soft gray numbness around me quivered, and I felt a sort of frozen panic at the thought that the sight of him might rip it away from me. If it did, I would die, I thought, like a grub dug up from the soil and tossed onto a rock to shrivel, naked and defenseless in the sun.

"No!" I said. "I don't want to talk to you. Go away." He hesitated for a moment, and I turned away from him and began to walk rapidly down the path toward the arbor. I heard his steps on the gravel of the path behind me, but kept my back turned, and walked faster, almost running.

As I paused to duck under the arbor, he made a sudden lunge forward and grasped my wrist. I tried to pull away from him, but he held on tight.

"Claire!" he said again. I struggled, but kept my face turned away; if I didn't look at him, I could pretend he wasn't there. I could stay safe.

He let go of my wrist, but grabbed me by both shoulders instead, so that I had to lift my head to keep my balance. His face was sunburned and thin, with harsh lines cut beside his mouth, and his eyes above were dark with pain. "Claire," he said more softly, now that he could see me looking at him. "Claire—it was my child, too."

"Yes, it was—and you killed it!" I ripped away from him, flinging myself through the narrow arch. I stopped inside, panting like a terrified dog. I hadn't realized that the arch led into a tiny vine-covered folly. Latticed walls surrounded me on all sides—I was trapped. The light behind me failed as his body blocked the arch.

"Don't touch me." I backed away, staring at the ground. *Go away!* I thought frantically. *Please, for God's sake, leave me in peace!* I could feel my gray wrappings being inexorably stripped away, and small, bright streaks of pain shot through me like lightning bolts piercing cloud.

He stopped, a few feet away. I stumbled blindly toward the latticed wall and half-sat, half-fell onto a wooden bench. I closed my eyes and sat shivering. While it was no longer raining, there was a cold, damp wind coming through the lattice to chill my neck.

He didn't come closer. I could feel him, standing there, looking down at me. I could hear the raggedness of his breathing.

"Claire," he said once more, with something like despair in his voice, "Claire, do ye not see … Claire, you must speak to me! For God's sake, Claire, I don't know even was it a girl or a boy!"

I sat frozen, hands gripping the rough wood of the bench. After a moment, there was a heavy, crunching noise on the ground in front of me. I cracked my eyes open, and saw that he had sat down, just as he was, on the wet gravel at my feet. He sat with bowed head, and the rain had left spangles in his damp-darkened hair.

"Will ye make me beg?" he said.

"It was a girl," I said after a moment. My voice sounded funny; hoarse and husky. "Mother Hildegarde baptized her. Faith. Faith Fraser. Mother Hildegarde has a very odd sense of humor."

The bowed head didn't move. After a moment, he said quietly, "Did you see the child?"

My eyes were open all the way now. I stared at my knees, where blown drops of water from the vines behind me were making wet spots on the silk.

"Yes. The *mâitresse sage-femme* said I ought, so they made me." I could hear in memory the low, matter-of-fact tones of Madame Bonheur, most senior and respected of the midwives who gave of their time at L'Hôpital des Anges.

"Give her the child; it's always better if they see. Then they don't imagine things."

So I didn't imagine. I remembered.

"She was perfect," I said softly, as though to myself. "So small. I could cup her head in the palm of my hand. Her ears stuck out just a little—I could see the light shine through them.

The light had shone through her skin as well, glowing in the roundness of cheek and buttock with the light that pearls have; still and cool, with the strange touch of the water world still on them.

"Mother Hildegarde wrapped her in a length of white satin," I said, looking down at my fists, clenched in my lap. "Her eyes were closed. She hadn't any lashes yet, but her eyes were slanted. I said they were like yours, but they said all babies' eyes are like that."

Ten fingers, and ten toes. No nails, but the gleam of tiny joints, kneecaps and fingerbones like opals, like the jeweled bones of the earth itself. Remember man, that thou art dust….

I remembered the far-off clatter of the Hôpital, where life still went on, and the subdued murmur of Mother Hildegarde and Madame Bonheur, closer by, talking of the priest who would say a special Mass at Mother Hildegarde's request. I remembered the look of calm appraisal in Madame Bonheur's eyes as she turned to look me over, seeing my weakness. Perhaps she saw also the telltale brightness of the approaching fever; she had turned again to Mother Hildegarde and her voice had dropped further—perhaps suggesting that they wait; two funerals might be needed.

And unto dust thou shalt return.

But I had come back from the dead. Only Jamie's hold on my body had been strong enough to pull me back from that final barrier, and Master Raymond had known it. I knew that only Jamie himself could pull me back the rest of the way, into the land of the living. That was why I had run from him, done all I could to keep him away, to make sure he would never come near me again. I had no wish to come back, no desire to feel again. I didn't want to know love, only to have it ripped away once more.

But it was too late. I knew that, even as I fought to hold the gray shroud around me. Fighting only hastened its dissolution; it was like grasping shreds of cloud, that vanished in cold mist between my fingers. I could feel the light coming, blinding and searing.

He had risen, was standing over me. His shadow fell across my knees; surely that meant the cloud had broken; a shadow doesn't fall without light.

"Claire," he whispered. "Please. Let me give ye comfort."

“Comfort?” I said. “And how will you do that? Can you give me back my child?”

He sank to his knees before me, but I kept my head down, staring into my upturned hands, laid empty on my lap. I felt his movement as he reached to touch me, hesitated, drew back, reached again.

“No,” he said, his voice scarcely audible. “No, I canna do that. But … with the grace of God … I might give ye another?”

His hand hovered over mine, close enough that I felt the warmth of his skin. I felt other things as well: the grief that he held tight under rein, the anger and the fear that choked him, and the courage that made him speak in spite of it. I gathered my own courage around me, a flimsy substitute for the thick gray shroud. Then I took his hand and lifted my head, and looked full into the face of the sun.

* * *

We sat, hands clasped and pressed together on the bench, unmoving, unspeaking, for what seemed like hours, with the cool rain-breeze whispering our thoughts in the grape leaves above. Water drops scattered over us with the passing of the wind, weeping for loss and separation.

“You’re cold,” Jamie murmured at last, and pulled a fold of his cloak around me, bringing with it the warmth of his skin. I came slowly against him under its shelter, shivering more at the startling solidness, the sudden heat of him, than from the cold.

I laid my hand on his chest, tentative as though the touch of him might burn me in truth, and so we sat for a good while longer, letting the grape leaves talk for us.

“Jamie,” I said softly, at last. “Oh, Jamie. Where were you?”

His arm tightened about me, but it was some time before he answered.

“I thought ye were dead, *mo duinne*,” he said, so softly I could hardly hear him above the rustling of the arbor.

“I saw ye there—on the ground, at the last. God! Ye were so white, and your skirts all soaked wi’ blood … I tried to go to ye, Claire, so soon as I saw—I ran to ye, but it was then the Guard took me.”

He swallowed hard; I could feel the tremor pass down him, through the long curve of his backbone.

"I fought them … I fought, and aye I pleaded … but they wouldna stay, and they carried me awa' wi' them. And they put me in a cell, and left me there … thinking ye were dead, Claire; knowing that I'd killed you."

The fine tremor went on, and I knew he was weeping, though I could not see his face above me. How long had he sat alone in the dark of the Bastille, alone but for the scent of blood and the empty husk of vengeance?

"It's all right," I said, and pressed my hand harder against his chest, as though to still the hasty beating of his heart. "Jamie, it's all right. It … it wasn't your fault."

"I tried to bash my head against the wall—only to stop thinking," he said, nearly in a whisper. "So they tied me, hand and foot. And next day, de Rohan found me, and told me that ye lived, though likely not for long."

He was silent then, but I could feel the pain inside him, sharp as crystal spears of ice.

"Claire," he murmured at last. "I am sorry."

I am sorry. The words were those of the note he had left me, before the world shattered. But now I understood them.

"I know," I said. "Jamie, I *know*. Fergus told me. I know why you went."

He drew a deep, shuddering breath.

"Aye, well …" he said, and stopped.

I let my hand fall to his thigh; chilled and damp from the rain, his riding breeches were rough under my palm.

"Did they tell you—when they let you go—why you were released?" I tried to keep my own breathing steady, but failed.

His thigh tensed under my hand, but his voice was under better control now.

"No," he said. "Only that it was … His Majesty's pleasure." The word "pleasure" was ever so faintly underlined, spoken with a delicate ferocity that made it abundantly clear that he did indeed know the means of his release, whether the warders had told him or not.

I bit my lower lip hard, trying to make up my mind what to tell him now.

"It was Mother Hildegarde," he went on, voice steady. "I went at once to L'Hôpital des Anges, in search of you. And found Mother Hildegarde, and the wee note ye'd left for me. She … told me."

"Yes," I said, swallowing. "I went to see the King …"

"I know!" His hand tightened on mine, and from the sound of his breathing, I could tell that his teeth were clenched together.

"But Jamie … when I went …"

"Christ!" he said, and sat up suddenly, turning to face me. "Do ye not know what I … Claire." He closed his eyes briefly, and took a deep breath. "I rode all the way to Orvieto, seeing it; seeing his hands on the white of your skin, his lips on your neck, his—his cock—I saw it at the *lever*—I saw the damn filthy, stubby thing sliding up … God, Claire! I sat in prison thinking ye dead, and then I rode to Spain, wishing to Christ ye were!"

The knuckles of the hand holding mine were white, and I could feel the small bones of my fingers crackle in his grip.

I jerked my hand free.

"Jamie, listen to me!"

"No!" he said. "No, I dinna want to hear …"

"Listen, damn you!"

There was enough force in my voice to shut him up for an instant, and while he was mute, I began rapidly to tell him the story of the King's chamber; the hooded men, and the shadowed room, the sorcerers' duel, and the death of the Comte St. Germain.

As I talked, the high color faded from his wind-brisked cheeks, and his expression softened from anguish and fury to bewilderment, and gradually, to astonished belief.

"Jesus," he breathed at last. "Oh, holy God."

"Didn't know what you were starting with that silly story, did you?" I felt exhausted, but managed a smile. "So … so the Comte … it's all right, Jamie. He's … gone."

He didn't say anything in reply, but drew me gently to him, so my forehead rested on his shoulder, and my tears soaked into the fabric of his shirt. After a minute, though, I sat up, and stared at him, wiping my nose.

"I just thought, Jamie! The port—Charles Stuart's investment! If the Comte is dead …"

He shook his head, smiling faintly.

"No, *mo duinne*. It's safe."

I felt a flood of relief.

"Oh, thank God. You managed, then? Did the medicines work on Murtagh?"

"Well, no," he said, the smile broadening, "but they did on me."

Relieved at once of fear and anger, I felt light-headed, and half-giddy. The smell of the rain-swept grapes was strong and sweet, and it was a blessed relief to lean against him, feeling his warmth as comfort, not as threat, as I listened to the story of the port-wine piracy.

"There are men that are born to the sea, Sassenach," he began, "but I'm afraid I'm no one of them."

"I know," I said. "Were you sick?"

"I have seldom been sicker," he assured me wryly.

The seas off Orvieto had been rough, and within an hour it became clear that Jamie was not going to be able to carry out his original part in the plan.

"I couldna do anything but lie in my hammock and groan, in any case," he said, shrugging, "so it seemed I might as well have pox, too."

He and Murtagh had hastily changed roles, and twenty-four hours off the coast of Spain, the master of the *Scalamandre* had discovered to his horror that plague had broken out below.

Jamie scratched his neck reflectively, as though still feeling the effects of the nettle juice.

"They thought of throwing me overboard when they found out," he said, "and I must say it seemed a verra fine idea to me." He gave me a lopsided grin. "Have ye ever had seasickness while covered wi' nettle rash, Sassenach?"

“No, thank God.” I shuddered at the thought. “Did Murtagh stop them?”

“Oh, aye. He’s verra fierce, is Murtagh. He slept across the threshold wi’ his hand on his dirk, until we came safe to port at Bilbao.”

True to forecast, the *Scalamandre*’s captain, faced with the unprofitable choice of proceeding to Le Havre and forfeiting his cargo, or returning to Spain and cooling his heels while word was sent to Paris, had leaped at the opportunity to dispose of his hold’s worth of port to the new purchaser chance had thrown in his way.

“Not that he didna drive a hard bargain,” Jamie observed, scratching his forearm. “He haggled for half a day—and me dying in my hammock, pissing blood and puking my guts out!”

But the bargain had been concluded, both port and smallpox patient unloaded with dispatch at Bilbao, and—aside from a lingering tendency to urinate vermilion—Jamie’s recovery had been rapid.

“We sold the port to a broker there in Bilbao,” he said. “I sent Murtagh at once to Paris, to repay Monsieur Duverney’s loan—and then … I came here.”

He looked down at his hands, lying quiet in his lap. “I couldna decide,” he said softly. “To come or no. I walked, ye ken, to give myself time to think. I walked all the way from Paris to Fontainebleau. And nearly all the way back. I turned back half a dozen times, thinking myself a murderer and a fool, not knowing if I would rather kill myself or you …”

He sighed then, and looked up at me, eyes dark with reflections of the fluttering leaves.

“I had to come,” he said simply.

I didn’t say anything, but laid my hand over his and sat beside him. Fallen grapes littered the ground under the arbor, the pungent scent of their fermentation promising the forgetfulness of wine.

The cloud-streaked sun was setting, and a blur of gold silhouetted the respectful form of Hugo, looming black in the entrance to the arbor.

“Your pardon, Madame,” he said. “My mistress wishes to know—will *le seigneur* be staying for supper?”

I looked at Jamie. He sat still, waiting, the sun through the grape leaves streaking his hair with a tiger’s blaze, shadows falling across his face.

“I think you’d better,” I said. “You’re awfully thin.”

He looked me over with a half-smile. “So are you, Sassenach.”

He rose and offered me his arm. I took it and we went in together to supper, leaving the grape leaves to their muted conversation.

* * *

I lay next to Jamie, close against him, his hand resting on my thigh as he slept. I stared upward into the darkness of the bedroom, listening to the peaceful sigh of his sleeping breath, breathing myself the fresh-washed scent of the damp night air, tinged with the smell of wisteria.

The collapse of the Comte St. Germain had been the end of the evening, so far as all were concerned save Louis. As the company made to depart, murmuring excitedly among themselves, he took my arm, and led me out through the same small door by which I had entered. Good with words when required, he had no need of them here.

I was led to the green silk chaise, laid on my back and my skirts gently lifted before I could speak. He did not kiss me; he did not desire me. This was the ritual claiming of the payment agreed upon. Louis was a shrewd bargainer, and not one to forgive a debt he thought owed to him, whether the payment had value to him or not. And perhaps it did, after all; there was more than a hint of half-fearful excitement in his preparations—who but a king would dare to take La Dame Blanche in his embrace?

I was closed and dry, unready. Impatient, he seized a flagon of rose-scented oil from the table, and massaged it briefly between my legs. I lay unmoving, soundless, as the hastily probing finger withdrew, replaced at once by a member little larger, and—“suffered” is the wrong word, there was neither pain nor humiliation involved; it was a transaction—I waited, then, through the quick thrusting, and then he was on his feet, face flushed with excitement, hands fumbling to refasten his breeches over the small swelling within. He would not risk the possibility of a half-Royal, half-magic bastard; not with Madame de La Tourelle ready—a good deal readier than I, I hoped—and waiting in her own chambers down the hall.

I had given what was implicitly promised; now he could with honor accede to my request, feeling no *virtu* had gone forth from him. As for me, I met his courteous bow with my own, took my elbow from the grip with which he had gallantly escorted me to the door, and left the audience chamber only a few minutes after entering it, with the King's assurance that the order for Jamie's freedom would be given in the morning.

The Gentleman of the Bedchamber was standing in the hall, waiting. He bowed to me, and I bowed back, then followed him down the Hall of Mirrors, feeling the slipperiness of my oily thighs as they brushed each other, and smelling the strong scent of roses between my legs.

Hearing the gate of the palace shut behind me, I had closed my eyes and thought that I would never see Jamie again. And if by chance I did, I would rub his nose in the scent of roses, until his soul sickened and died.

But now instead I held his hand on my thigh, listening to his breathing, deep and even in the dark beside me. And I let the door close forever on His Majesty's audience.

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TO GRASP THE NETTLE

“Scotland.” I sighed, thinking of the cool brown streams and dark pines of Lallybroch, Jamie’s estate. “Can we really go home?”

“I expect we’ll have to,” he answered wryly. “The King’s pardon says I leave France by mid-September, or I’m back in the Bastille. Presumably, His Majesty has arranged a pardon as well from the English Crown, so I willna be hanged directly I get off the ship in Inverness.”

“I suppose we could go to Rome, or to Germany,” I suggested, tentatively. I wanted nothing more than to go home to Lallybroch, and heal in the quiet peace of the Scottish Highlands. My heart sank at the thought of royal courts and intrigue, the constant press of danger and insecurity. But if Jamie felt we must …

He shook his head, red hair falling over his face as he stooped to pull on his stockings.

“Nay, it’s Scotland or the Bastille,” he said. “Our passage is already booked, just to make sure.” He straightened and brushed the hair out of his eyes with a wry smile. “I imagine the Duke of Sandringham—and possibly King George—want me safe at home, where they can keep an eye on me. Not spying in Rome, or raising money in Germany. The three weeks’ grace, I gather, is a courtesy to Jared, giving him time to come home before I leave.”

I was sitting in the window seat of my bedroom, looking out over the tumbled green sea of the Fontainebleau woods. The hot, languid air of summer seemed to press down, sapping all energy.

"I can't say I'm not glad." I sighed, pressing my cheek against the glass in search of a moment's coolness. The legacy of yesterday's chill rain was a blanketing humidity that made hair and clothes cling to my skin, itching and damp. "Do you think it's safe, though? I mean, will Charles give up, now that the Comte is dead, and the money from Manzetti lost?"

Jamie frowned, rubbing his hand along the edge of his jaw to judge the growth of the stubble.

"I wish I knew whether he'd had a letter from Rome in the last two weeks," he said, "and if so, what was in it. But aye, I think we've managed. No banker in Europe will advance anyone of the name of Stuart a brass centime, that's for sure. Philip of Spain has other fish to fry, and Louis—" He shrugged, his mouth twisting wryly. "Between Monsieur Duverney and the Duke of Sandringham, I'd say Charles's expectations in that direction are somewhat less than poor. Shall I shave, d'ye think?"

"Not on my account," I said. The casual intimacy of the question made me suddenly shy. We had shared a bed the night before, but we had both been exhausted, and the delicate web woven between us in the arbor had seemed too fragile to support the stress of attempting to make love. I had spent the night in a terrible consciousness of his warm proximity, but thought I must, under the circumstances, leave the first move to him.

Now I caught the play of light across his shoulders as he turned to find his shirt, and was seized with the desire to touch him; to feel him, smooth and hard and eager against me once more.

His head popped through the neck of his shirt, and his eyes met mine, suddenly and unguarded. He paused for a moment, looking at me, but not speaking. The morning sounds of the château were clearly audible, outside the bubble of silence that surrounded us; the bustling of servants, the high thin sound of Louise's voice, raised in some sort of altercation.

Not here, Jamie's eyes said. *Not in the midst of so many people*.

He looked down, carefully fastening his shirt buttons. "Does Louise keep horses for riding?" he asked, eyes on his task. "There are some cliffs a few miles away; I thought perhaps we might ride there—the air may be cooler.”

“I think she does,” I said. “I’ll ask.”

We reached the cliffs just before noon. Not cliffs so much as jutting pillars and ridges of limestone that sat among the yellowing grass of the surrounding hills like the ruins of an ancient city. The pale ridges were split and fissured from time and weather, spattered with thousands of strange, tiny plants that had found a foothold in the merest scrape of eroded soil.

We left the horses hobbled in the grass, and climbed on foot to a wide, flat shelf of limestone covered with tufts of rough grass, just below the highest tumble of stone. There was little shade from the scruffy bushes, but up this high, there was a small breeze.

“God, it’s hot!” Jamie said. He flipped loose the buckle of his kilt, so it fell around his feet, and started to wriggle out of his shirt.

“What are you doing, Jamie?” I said, half-laughing.

“Stripping,” he replied, matter-of-factly. “Why don’t ye do the same, Sassenach? You’re more soaked than I am, and there’s none here to see.”

After a moment’s hesitation, I did as he suggested. It was entirely isolated here; too craggy and rocky for sheep, the chance of even a stray shepherd coming upon us was remote. And alone, naked together, away from Louise and her throngs of intrusive servants … Jamie spread his plaid on the rough ground as I peeled out of my sweat-clinging garments.

He stretched lazily and settled back, arms behind his head, completely oblivious to curious ants, stray bits of gravel and the stubs of prickly vegetation.

“You must have the hide of a goat,” I remarked. “How can you lie on the bare ground like that?” As bare as he, I reposed more comfortably on a thick fold of the plaid he had thoughtfully spread out for me.

He shrugged, eyes closed against the warm afternoon sun. The light gilded him in the hollow where he lay, making him glow red-gold against the dark of the rough grass beneath him.

"I'll do," he said comfortably, and lapsed into silence, the sound of his breathing near enough to reach me over the faint whine of the wind that crossed the ridges above us.

I rolled onto my belly and laid my chin on my crossed forearms, watching him. He was wide at the shoulder and narrow at the hip, with long, powerful haunches slightly dented by muscles held taut even as he relaxed. The small, warm breeze stirred the drying tufts of soft cinnamon hair beneath his arms, and ruffled the copper and gold that waved gently over his wrists, where they braced his head. The slight breeze was welcome, for the early autumn sun was still hot on my shoulders and calves.

"I love you," I said softly, not meaning him to hear me, but only for the pleasure of saying it.

He did hear, though, for the hint of a smile curved the wide mouth. After a moment, he rolled over onto his belly on the plaid beside me. A few blades of grass clung to his back and buttocks. I brushed one lightly away, and his skin shivered briefly at my touch.

I leaned to kiss his shoulder, enjoying the warm scent of his skin and the faint salty taste of him.

Instead of kissing me back, though, he pulled away a bit, and lay propped on one elbow, looking at me. There was something in his expression that I didn't understand, and it made me faintly uneasy.

"Penny for your thoughts," I said, running a finger down the deep groove of his backbone. He moved just far enough to avoid my touch, and took a deep breath.

"Well, I was wondering—" he began, and then stopped. He was looking down, fiddling with a tiny flower that sprang out of the grass.

"You were wondering what?"

"What it was like … with Louis."

I thought my heart had stopped for a moment. I knew all the blood had left my face, because I could feel the numbness of my lips as I forced the words out.

"What … it … was like?"

He looked up then, making only a passing-fair attempt at a lopsided smile.

"Well," he said. "He *is* a king. You'd think it would be … different, somehow. You know … special, maybe?"

The smile was slipping, and his face had gone as white as my own. He looked down again, avoiding my stricken gaze.

"I suppose all I was wondering," he murmured, "was … was he … was he different from me?" I saw him bite his lip as though wishing the words unsaid, but it was far too late for that.

"How in hell did you know?" I said. I felt dizzy and exposed, and rolled onto my stomach, pressing myself hard to the short turf.

He shook his head, teeth still clenched in his lower lip. When he finally released it, a deep red mark showed where he had bitten it.

"Claire," he said softly. "Oh, Claire. You gave me all yourself from the first time, and held nothing back from me. You never did. When I asked ye for honesty, I told ye then that it isna in you to lie. When I touched ye so—" His hand moved, cupping my buttock, and I flinched, not expecting it.

"How long have I loved you?" he asked, very quietly. "A year? Since the moment I saw you. And loved your body how often—half a thousand times or more?" One finger touched me then, gently as a moth's foot, tracing the line of arm and shoulder, gliding down my rib cage 'til I shivered at the touch and rolled away, facing him now.

"You never shrank from my touch," he said, eyes intent on the path his finger took, dipping down to follow the curve of my breast. "Not even at the first, when ye might have done so, and no surprise to me if ye had. But you didn't. You gave me everything from the very first time; held nothing back, denied me no part of you."

"But now …" he said, drawing back his hand. "I thought at first it was only that you'd lost the child, and maybe were shy of me, or feeling strange after so long apart. But then I knew that wasn't it."

There was a very long silence, then. I could feel the steady, painful thudding of my heart against the cold ground, and hear the conversation of the wind in the pines down below. Small birds called, far away. I wished I were one. Or far away, at any rate.

"Why?" he asked softly. "Why lie to me? When I had come to you thinking I knew, anyway?"

I stared down at my hands, linked beneath my chin, and swallowed.

"If …" I began, and swallowed again. "If I told you that I had let Louis … you would have asked about it. I thought you couldn't forget … maybe you could forgive me, but you'd never forget, and it would always be there between us." I swallowed once more, hard. My hands were cold despite the heat, and I felt a ball of ice in my stomach. But if I was telling him the truth now, I must tell him all of it.

"If you'd asked—and you did, Jamie, you did! I would have had to talk about it, live it over, and I was afraid …" I trailed off, unable to speak, but he wasn't going to let me off.

"Afraid of what?" he prodded.

I turned my head slightly, not meeting his eye, but enough to see his outline dark against the sun, looming through the sun-sparked curtain of my hair.

"Afraid I'd tell you why I did it," I said softly. "Jamie … I had to, to get you freed from the Bastille—I would have done worse, if I'd had to. But then … and afterward … I half-hoped someone would tell you, that you'd find out. I was so angry, Jamie—for the duel, and the baby. And because you'd forced me to do it … to go to Louis. I wanted to do something to drive you away, to make sure I never saw you again. I did it … partly … because I wanted to hurt you," I whispered.

A muscle contracted near the corner of his mouth, but he went on staring downward at his clasped hands. The chasm between us, so perilously bridged, gaped yawning and impassable once more.

"Aye. Well, you did."

His mouth clamped shut in a tight line, and he didn't speak for some time. Finally he turned his head and looked directly at me. I would have liked to avoid his eyes, but couldn't.

"Claire," he said softly. "What did ye feel—when I gave my body to Jack Randall? When I let him take me, at Wentworth?"

A tiny shock ran through me, from scalp to toenails. It was the last question I had expected to hear. I opened and closed my mouth several times before finding an answer.

"I … don't know," I said weakly. "I hadn't thought. Angry, of course. I was furious—outraged. And sick. And frightened for you. And … sorry for you."

"Were ye jealous? When I told you about it later—that he'd roused me, though I didna want it?"

I drew a deep breath, feeling the grass tickle my breasts.

"No. At least I don't think so; I didn't think so then. After all, it wasn't as though you'd … wanted to do it." I bit my lip, looking down. His voice was quiet and matter-of-fact at my shoulder.

"I dinna think you wanted to bed Louis—did you?"

"No!"

"Aye, well," he said. He put his thumbs together on either side of a blade of grass, and concentrated on pulling it up slowly by the roots. "I was angry, too. And sick and sorry." The grass blade came free of its sheath with a tiny squeaking sound.

"When it was me," he went on, almost whispering, "I thought you could not bear the thought of it, and I would not have blamed you. I knew ye must turn from me, and I tried to send you away, so I wouldna have to see the disgust and the hurt in your face." He closed his eyes and raised the grass blade between his thumbs, barely brushing his lips.

"But you wouldna go. You took me to your breast and cherished me. You healed me, instead. You loved me, in spite of it." He took a deep, unsteady breath and turned his head to me again. His eyes were bright with tears, but no wetness escaped to slide down his cheeks.

"I thought, maybe, that I could bring myself to do that for you, as you did it for me. And that is why I came to Fontainebleau, at last."

He blinked once, hard, and his eyes cleared.

"Then when ye told me that nothing had happened—for a bit, I believed you, because I wanted to so much. But then … I could tell, Claire. I couldna hide it from myself, and I knew you had lied to me.

I thought you wouldna trust me to love you, or … that you *had* wanted him, and were afraid to let me see it."

He dropped the grass, and his head sank forward to rest on his knuckles.

"Ye said you wanted to hurt me. Well, the thought of you lying with the King hurt worse than the brand on my breast, or the cut of the lash on my naked back. But the knowledge that ye thought ye couldna trust me to love you is like waking from the hangman's noose to feel the gutting knife sunk in my belly. Claire—" His mouth opened soundlessly, then closed tight for a moment, until he found the strength to go on.

"I do not know if the wound is mortal, but Claire—I do feel my heart's blood leave me, when I look at you."

The silence between us grew and deepened. The small buzz of an insect calling in the rocks vibrated in the air.

Jamie was still as a rock, his face blank as he stared down at the ground below him. I couldn't bear that blank face, and the thought of what must lie concealed behind it. I had seen a hint of his despairing fury in the arbor, and my heart felt hollow at the thought of that rage, mastered at such fearful cost, now held under an iron control that kept in not only rage, but trust and joy.

I wished desperately for some way to break the silence that parted us; some act that could restore the lost truth between us. Jamie sat up then, arms folded tight about his thighs, and turned away as he gazed out over the peaceful valley.

Better violence, I thought, than silence. I reached across the chasm between us and laid a hand on his arm. It was warm from the sun, live to my touch.

"Jamie," I whispered. "Please."

His head turned slowly toward me. His face seemed still calm, though the cat-eyes narrowed further as he looked at me in silence. He reached out, finally, and one hand gripped me by the wrist.

"Do ye wish me to beat you, then?" he said softly. His grasp tightened hard, so that I jerked unconsciously, trying to pull away from him. He pulled back, yanking me across the rough grass, bringing my body against him.

I felt myself trembling, and gooseflesh lifted the hairs on my forearms, but I managed to speak.

"Yes," I said.

His expression was unfathomable. Still holding my eyes with his own, he reached out his free hand, fumbling over the rocks until he touched a bunch of nettles. He drew in his breath as his fingers touched the prickly stems, but his jaw clenched; he closed his fist and ripped the plants up by the roots.

"The peasants of Gascony beat a faithless wife wi' nettles," he said. He lowered the spiky bunch of leaves and brushed the flower heads lightly across one breast. I gasped from the sudden sting, and a faint red blotch appeared as though by magic on my skin.

"Will ye have me do so?" he asked. "Shall I punish you that way?"

"If you … if you like." My lips were trembling so hard I could barely get out the words. A few crumbs of earth from the nettles' roots had fallen between my breasts; one rolled down the slope of my ribs, dislodged by my pounding heart, I imagined. The welt on my breast burned like fire. I closed my eyes, imagining in vivid detail exactly what being thrashed with a bunch of nettles would feel like.

Suddenly the viselike grip on my wrist relaxed. I opened my eyes to find Jamie sitting cross-legged by me, the plants thrown aside and scattered on the ground. He had a faint, rueful smile on his lips.

"I beat you once in justice, Sassenach, and ye threatened to disembowel me with my own dirk. Now you'll ask me to whip ye wi' nettles?" He shook his head slowly, wondering, and his hand reached as though by its own volition to cup my cheek. "Is my pride worth so much to you, then?"

"Yes! Yes, it bloody is!" I sat up myself, and grasped him by the shoulders, taking both of us by surprise as I kissed him hard and awkwardly.

I felt his first involuntary start, and then he pulled me to him, arm tight around my back, mouth answering mine. Then he had me pressed flat to the earth, his weight holding me immobile beneath him. His shoulders darkened the bright sky above, and his hands held my arms against my sides, keeping me prisoner.

"All right," he whispered. His eyes bored into mine, daring me to close them, forcing me to hold his gaze. "All right. And ye wish it, I shall punish you." He moved his hips against me in imperious command, and I felt my legs open for him, my gates thrown wide to welcome ravishment.

"Never," he whispered to me. "*Never*. Never another but me! Look at me! Tell me! *Look at me, Claire!*" He moved in me, strongly, and I moaned and would have turned my head, but he held my face between his hands, forcing me to meet his eyes, to see his wide, sweet mouth, twisted in pain.

"Never," he said, more softly. "For you are mine. My wife, my heart, my soul." The weight of him held me still, like a boulder on my chest, but the friction of our flesh made me thrust against him, wanting more. And more.

"My body," he said, gasping for breath as he gave me what I sought. I bucked beneath him as though I wanted to escape, my back arching like a bow, pressing me into him. He lay then at full length on me, scarcely moving, so that our most intimate connection seemed barely closer than the marriage of our skins.

The grass was harsh and prickly under me, the pungence of crushed stems sharp as the smell of the man who took me. My breasts were flattened under him, and I felt the small tickle of the hairs on his chest as we rubbed together, back and forth. I squirmed, urging him to violence, feeling the swell of his thighs as he pressed me down.

"Never," he whispered to me, face only inches from mine.

"Never," I said, and turned my head, closing my eyes to escape the intensity of his gaze.

A gentle, inexorable pressure turned me back to face him, as the small, rhythmic movements went on.

"No, my Sassenach," he said softly. "Open your eyes. Look at me. For that is your punishment, as it is mine. See what you have done to me, as I know what I have done to you. Look at me."

And I looked, held prisoner, bound to him. Looked, as he dropped the last of his masks, and showed me the depths of himself, and the wounds of his soul. I would have wept for his hurt, and for mine, had I been able. But his eyes held mine, tearless and open, boundless as the salt sea. His body held mine captive, driving me before his strength, like the west wind in the sails of a bark.

And I voyaged into him, as he into me, so that when the last small storms of love began to shake me, he cried out, and we rode the waves together as one flesh, and saw ourselves in each other's eyes.

* * *

The afternoon sun was hot on the white limestone rocks, casting deep shadows into the clefts and hollows. I found what I was looking for at last, growing from a narrow crack in a giant boulder, in gay defiance of the lack of soil. I broke a stalk of aloe from its clump, split the fleshy leaf, and spread the cool green gel inside across the welts on Jamie's palm.

"Better?" I said.

"Much." Jamie flexed his hand, grimacing. "Christ, those nettles sting!"

"They do." I pulled down the neck of my bodice and spread a little aloe juice on my breast with a gingerly touch. The coolness brought relief at once.

"I'm rather glad you didn't take me up on my offer," I said wryly, with a glance at a nearby bunch of blooming nettle.

He grinned and patted me on the bottom with his good hand.

"Well, it was a near thing, Sassenach. Ye shouldna tempt me like that." Then, sobering, he bent and kissed me gently.

"No, *mo duinne*. I swore to ye the once, and I was meaning it. I shallna raise a hand to you in anger, ever. After all," he added softly, turning away, "I have done enough to hurt you."

I shrank from the pain of memory, but I owed him justice as well.

"Jamie," I said, lips trembling a bit. "The … baby. It wasn't your fault. I felt as though it was, but it wasn't. I think … I think it would have happened anyway, whether you'd fought Jack Randall or not."

"Aye? Ah … well." His arm was warm and comforting about me, and he pressed my head into the curve of his shoulder. "It eases me a bit to hear ye say so. It wasna the child so much as Frank that I meant, though. D'ye think you can forgive me for that?" The blue eyes were troubled as he looked down at me.

"Frank?" I felt a shock of surprise. "But … there's nothing to forgive." Then a thought struck me; perhaps he really didn't know that Jack Randall was still alive—after all, he had been arrested immediately after the duel. But if he didn't know…. I took a deep breath. He would have to find it out in any case; perhaps better from me.

"You didn't kill Jack Randall, Jamie," I said.

To my puzzlement, he didn't seem shocked or surprised. He shook his head, the afternoon sun striking sparks from his hair. Not yet long enough to lace back again, it had grown considerably in prison, and he had to brush it out of his eyes continuously.

"I know that, Sassenach," he said.

"You do? But … what …" I was at a loss.

"You … dinna know about it?" he said hesitantly.

A cold feeling crept up my arms, despite the heat of the sun.

"Know what?"

He chewed his lower lip, eyeing me reluctantly. At last he took a deep breath and let it out with a sigh.

"No, I didna kill him. But I wounded him."

"Yes, Louise said you wounded him badly. But she said he was recovering." Suddenly, I saw again in memory that last scene in the Bois de Boulogne; the last thing I had seen before the blackness took me. The sharp tip of Jamie's sword, slicing through the rain-spattered doeskin. The sudden red stain that darkened the fabric … and the angle of the blade, glinting with the force that drove it downward.

"Jamie!" I said, eyes widening with horror. "You didn't … Jamie, what have you done!"

He looked down, rubbing his welted palm against the side of his kilt. He shook his head, wondering at himself.

"I was such a fool, Sassenach. I couldna think myself a man and let him go unpunished for what he'd done to the wee lad, and yet … all the time, I kept thinking to myself, 'Ye canna kill the bastard outright, you've promised. Ye canna kill him.' " He smiled faintly, without humor, looking down at the marks on his palm.

"My mind was boiling over like a pot of parritch on the flame, yet I held to that thought. 'Ye canna kill him.' And I didn't. But I was half-mad wi' the fury of the fighting, and the blood singing in my ears—and I didna stop a moment to remember why it was I must not kill him, beyond that I had promised you. And when I had him there on the ground before me, and the memory of Wentworth and Fergus, and the blade live in my hand—" He broke off suddenly.

I felt the blood draining from my head and sat down heavily on a rock outcropping.

"Jamie," I said. He shrugged helplessly.

"Well, Sassenach," he said, still avoiding my gaze, "all I can say is, it's a hell of a place to be wounded."

"Jesus." I sat still, stunned by this revelation. Jamie sat quiet beside me, studying the broad backs of his hands. There was still a small pink mark on the back of the right one. Jack Randall had driven a nail through it, in Wentworth.

"D'ye hate me for it, Claire?" His voice was soft, almost tentative.

I shook my head, eyes closed.

"No." I opened them, and saw his face close by, wearing a troubled frown. "I don't know *what* I think now, Jamie. I really don't. But I don't hate you." I put a hand on his, and squeezed it gently. "Just … let me be by myself for a minute, all right?"

Clad once more in my now-dry gown, I spread my hands flat on my thighs. One silver, one gold. Both my wedding rings were still there, and I had no idea what that meant.

Jack Randall would never father a child. Jamie seemed sure of it, and I wasn't inclined to question him. And yet I still wore Frank's ring, I still remembered the man who had been my first husband, could summon at will thoughts and memories of who he had been, what he would do. How was it possible, then, that he would not exist?

I shook my head, thrusting back the wind-dried curls behind my ears. I didn't know. Chances were, I never *would* know. But whether one could change the future or not—and it seemed we had—I was certain that I couldn't change the immediate past. What had been done had been done, and nothing I could do now would alter it. Jack Randall would sire no children.

A stone rolled down the slope behind me, bouncing and setting off small slides of gravel. I turned and glanced up, to where Jamie, dressed once more, was exploring.

The rockfall above was recent. Fresh white surfaces showed where the stained brown of the weathered limestone had fractured, and only the smallest of plants had yet gained a foothold in this tumbled pile of rock, unlike the thick growth of shrubs that blanketed the rest of the hillside.

Jamie inched to one side, absorbed in finding handholds through the intricacies of the fall. I saw him edge around a giant boulder, hugging the rock, and the faint scrape of his dirk against the stone came to me through the still afternoon air.

Then he disappeared. Expecting him to reappear round the other side of the rock, I waited, enjoying the sun on my shoulders. But he didn't come back into sight, and after a few moments, I grew worried. He might have slipped and fallen or banged his head on a rock.

I took what seemed forever to undo the fastenings of my heeled boots again, and still he had not come back. I rucked up my skirts, and started up the hill, bare toes cautious on the rough warm rocks.

"Jamie!"

"Here, Sassenach." He spoke behind me, startling me, and I nearly lost my balance. He caught me by the arm and lifted me down to a small clear space between the jagged fallen stones.

He turned me toward the limestone wall, stained with water rust, and smoke. And something more.

"Look," he said softly.

I looked where he pointed, up across the smooth expanse of the cave wall, and gasped at the sight.

Painted beasts galloped across the rock face above me, hooves spurning the air as they leaped toward the light above. There were bison, and deer, grouped together in tail-raised flight, and at the end of the rock shelf, a tracing of delicate birds, wings spread as they hovered above the charge of the earthbound beasts.

Done in red and black and ochre with a delicate grace that used the lines of the rock itself for emphasis, they thundered soundlessly, haunches rounded with effort, wings taking flight through the crevices of stone. They had lived once in the dark of a cave, lit only by the flames of those who made them. Exposed to the sun by the fall of their sheltering roof, they seemed alive as anything that walked upon the earth.

Lost in contemplation of the massive shoulders that thrust their way from the rock, I didn't miss Jamie until he called me.

"Sassenach! Come here, will ye?" There was something odd about his voice, and I hurried toward him. He stood at the entrance of a small side-cave, looking down.

They lay behind an outcrop of the rock, as though they had sought shelter from the wind that chased the bison.

There were two of them, lying together on the packed earth of the cave floor. Sealed in the dry air of the cave, the bones had endured, though flesh had long since dried to dust. A tiny remnant of brown-parchment skin clung to the round curve of one skull, a strand of hair gone red with age stirring softly in the draft of our presence.

"My God," I said, softly, as though I might disturb them. I moved closer to Jamie, and his hand slid around my waist.

"Do you think … were they … killed here? A sacrifice, perhaps?"

Jamie shook his head, staring pensively down at the small heap of delicate, friable bones.

"No," he said. He, too, spoke softly, as though in the sanctuary of a church. He turned and lifted a hand to the wall behind us, where the deer leaped and the cranes soared into space beyond the stone.

"No," he said again. "The folk that made such beasts … they couldna do such things." He turned again then to the two skeletons, entwined at our feet. He crouched over them, tracing the line of the bones with a gentle finger, careful not to touch the ivory surface.

"See how they lie," he said. "They didna fall here, and no one laid out their bodies. They lay down themselves." His hand glided above the long armbones of the larger skeleton, a dark shadow fluttering like a large moth as it crossed the jackstraw pile of ribs.

"He had his arms around her," he said. "He cupped his thighs behind her own, and held her tight to him, and his head is resting on her shoulder."

His hand made passes over the bones, illuminating, indicating, clothing them once more with the flesh of imagination, so I could see them as they had been, embraced for the last time, for always. The small bones of the fingers had fallen apart, but a vestige of gristle still joined the metacarpals of the hands. The tiny phalanges overlay each other; they had linked hands in their last waiting.

Jamie had risen and was surveying the interior of the cavern, the late afternoon sun painting the walls with splashes of crimson and ochre.

"There." He pointed to a spot near the cavern entrance. The rocks there were brown with dust and age, but not rusty with water and erosion, like those deeper in the cave.

"That was the entrance, once," he said. "The rocks fell once before, and sealed this place." He turned back and rested a hand on the rocky outcrop that shielded the lovers from the light.

"They must have felt their way around the cave, hand in hand," I said. "Looking for a way out, in the dust and the dark."

"Aye." He rested his forehead against the stone, eyes closed. "And the light was gone, and the air failed them. And so they lay down in the dark to die." The tears made wet tracks through the dust on his cheeks. I brushed a hand beneath my own eyes, and took his free hand, carefully weaving my fingers with his.

He turned to me, wordless, and the breath rushed from him as he pulled me hard against him. Our hands groped in the dying light of the setting sun, urgent in the touch of warmth, the reassurance of flesh, reminded by the hardness of the invisible bone beneath the skin, how short life is.

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PART FIVE

“I Am Come Home”

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LALLYBROCH

It was called Broch Tuarach, for the ancient cylinder of stone, built some hundreds of years before, that poked up from the hillside behind the manor. The people who lived on the estate called it "Lallybroch." Insofar as I could gather, this meant "lazy tower," which made at least as much sense as applying the term "North-facing Tower" to a cylindrical structure.

"How can something that's round face north?" I asked as we made our way slowly down a long slope of heather and granite, leading the horses in single file down the narrow, twisting path the red deer had trampled through the springy growth. "It hasn't *got* a face."

"It has a door," Jamie said reasonably. "The door faces north." He dug in his feet as the slope dropped sharply, hissing through his teeth in signal to the horse he led behind him. The muscular hindquarters in front of me bunched suddenly, as the cautious stride altered to a tentative mincing, each hoof sliding a few inches in the damp earth before another step was risked. The horses, purchased in Inverness, were good-sized, handsome beasts. The wiry little Highland ponies would have made much better work of the steep slope, but these horses, all mares, were meant for breeding, not work.

"All right," I said, stepping carefully over a tiny runnel of water that crossed the deer path. "Good enough. What about 'Lallybroch,' though? Why is it a lazy tower?"

"It leans a bit," Jamie replied. I could see the back of his head, bent in concentration on the footing, a few tendrils of red-gold hair lifting from the crown in the afternoon breeze that blew up the slope. "Ye canna see it much from the house, but if you stand on the west side, you'll see it leans to the north a bit. And if ye look from one of the slits on the top floor over the door, ye canna see the wall beneath you because of the slant."

"Well, I suppose no one had heard of plumb lines in the thirteenth century," I observed. "It's a wonder it hasn't fallen down by now."

"Oh, it's fallen down a number of times," Jamie said, raising his voice slightly as the wind freshened. "The folk who lived there just put it back up again; that's likely why it leans."

"I see it! I see it!" Fergus's voice, shrill with excitement, came from behind me. He had been allowed to stay on his mount, as his negligible weight was unlikely to cause the horse any great difficulty, bad footing notwithstanding. Glancing back, I could see him kneeling on his saddle, bouncing up and down with excitement. His horse, a patient, good-natured bay mare, gave a grunt at this, but kindly refrained from flinging him off into the heather. Ever since his adventure with the Percheron colt at Argentan, Fergus had seized every chance to get on a horse, and Jamie, amused and sympathetic to a fellow horse-lover, had indulged him, taking him up behind his own saddle when he rode through the Paris streets, allowing him now and then to get up alone on one of Jared's coach horses, large stolid creatures that merely flicked their ears in a puzzled sort of way at Fergus's kicks and shouts.

I shaded my eyes, looking in the direction where he pointed. He was right; from his higher vantage point, he had spotted the dark form of the old stone broch, perched on its hill. The modern manor-house below was harder to see; it was built of white-harled stone, and the sun reflected from its walls as from the surrounding fields. Set in a hollow of sloping barley fields, it was still partly obscured to our view by a row of trees that formed the windbreak at the foot of a field.

I saw Jamie's head rise, and fix as he saw the home farm of Lallybroch below. He stood quite still for a minute, not speaking, but I saw his shoulders lift and set themselves square. The wind caught his hair and the folds of his plaid and lifted them, as though he might rise in the air, joyous as a kite.

It reminded me of the way the sails of the ships had filled, turning past the headland into the shipping roads as they left the harbor of Le Havre. I had stood on the end of the quay, watching the bustle and the comings and goings of shipping and commerce. The gulls dived and shrieked among the masts, their voices raucous as the shouting of the seamen.

Jared Munro Fraser had stood by me, watching benignly the flow of passing seaborne wealth, some of it his. It was one of his ships, the *Portia*, that would carry us to Scotland. Jamie had told me that all Jared's ships were named for his mistresses, the figureheads carved in the likenesses of the ladies in question. I squinted against the wind at the prow of the ship, trying to decide whether Jamie had been teasing me. If not, I concluded, Jared preferred his women well endowed.

"I shall miss you both," Jared said, for the fourth time in half an hour. He looked truly regretful, even his cheerful nose seeming less upturned and optimistic than usual. The trip to Germany had been a success; he sported a large diamond in his stock, and the coat he wore was a rich bottle-green velvet with silver buttons.

"Ah, well," he said, shaking his head. "Much as I should like to keep the laddie with me, I canna grudge him joy of his homecoming. Perhaps I shall come to visit ye someday, my dear; it's been long since I set foot in Scotland."

"We'll miss you, too," I told him, truthfully. There were other people I would miss—Louise, Mother Hildegarde, Herr Gerstmann. Master Raymond most of all. Yet I looked forward to returning to Scotland, to Lallybroch. I had no wish to go back to Paris, and there were people there I most certainly had no desire to see again—Louis of France, for one.

Charles Stuart, for another. Cautious probing amongst the Jacobites in Paris had confirmed Jamie's initial impression; the small burst of optimism fired by Charles's boasting of his "grand venture" had faded, and while the loyal supporters of King James held true to their sovereign, there seemed no chance that this stolid loyalty of stubborn endurance would lead to action.

Let Charles make his own peace with exile, then, I thought. Our own was over. We were going home.

"The baggage is aboard," said a dour Scots voice in my ear. "The master of the ship says come ye along now; we sail wi' the tide."

Jared turned to Murtagh, then glanced right and left down the quay. "Where's the laddie, then?" he asked.

Murtagh jerked his head down the pier. "In the tavern yon. Gettin' stinkin' drunk."

I had wondered just how Jamie had planned to weather the Channel crossing. He had taken one look at the lowering red sky of dawn that threatened later storms, excused himself to Jared, and disappeared. Looking in the direction of Murtagh's nod, I saw Fergus, sitting on a piling near the entrance to one grogshop, plainly doing sentry duty.

Jared, who had exhibited first disbelief and then hilarity when informed of his nephew's disability, grinned widely at this news.

"Oh, aye?" he said. "Well, I hope he's left the last quart 'til we come for him. He'll be hell to carry up the gangplank, if he hasn't."

"What did he do that for?" I demanded of Murtagh, in some exasperation. "I told him I had some laudanum for him." I patted the silk reticule I carried. "It would knock him out a good deal faster."

Murtagh merely blinked once. "Aye. He said if he was goin' to have a headache, he'd as soon enjoy the gettin' of it. And the whisky tastes a good bit better goin' down than yon filthy black stuff." He nodded at my reticule, then at Jared. "Come on, then, if ye mean to help me wi' him."

In the forward cabin of the *Portia*, I had sat on the captain's bunk, watching the steady rise and fall of the receding shoreline, my husband's head cradled on my knees.

One eye opened a slit and looked up at me. I stroked the heavy damp hair off his brow. The scent of ale and whisky hung about him like perfume.

“You are going to feel exactly like hell when you wake up in Scotland,” I told him.

The other eye opened, and regarded the dancing waves of light reflected across the timbered ceiling. Then they fixed on me, deep pools of limpid blue.

“Between hell now, and hell later, Sassenach,” he said, his speech measured and precise, “I will take later, every time.” His eyes closed. He belched softly, once, and the long body relaxed, rocked at ease on the cradle of the deep.

The horses seemed as eager as we; sensing the nearness of stables and food, they began to push the pace a bit, heads up and ears cocked forward in anticipation.

I was just reflecting that I could do with a wash and a bite to eat, myself, when my horse, slightly in the lead, dug in its feet and came to a slithering halt, hooves buried fetlock deep in the reddish dust. The mare shook her head violently from side to side, snorting and whooshing.

“Hey, lass, what’s amiss? Got a bee up your nose?” Jamie swung down from his own mount and hurried to grab the gray mare’s bridle. Feeling the broad back shiver and twitch beneath me, I slid down as well.

“Whatever is the matter with her?” I gazed curiously at the horse, which was pulling backward against Jamie’s grip on the bridle, shaking her mane, with eyes bugging. The other horses, as though infected by her unease, began to stamp and shift as well.

Jamie glanced briefly over his shoulder at the empty road.

“She sees something.”

Fergus raised himself in his shortened stirrups and shaded his eyes, staring over the mare’s back. Lowering his hand, he looked at me and shrugged.

I shrugged back; there seemed to be nothing whatever to cause the mare’s distress—the road and the fields lay vacant all around us, grain-heads ripening and drying in the late summer sun. The nearest grove of trees was more than a hundred yards away, beyond a small heap of stones that might have been the remnants of a tumbled chimneystack. Wolves were almost unheard of in cleared land like this, and surely no fox or badger would disturb a horse at this distance.

Giving up the attempt to coax the mare forward, Jamie led her in a half-circle; she went willingly enough, back in the direction we had come.

He motioned to Murtagh to lead the other horses out of the way, then swung himself into the saddle, and leaning forward, one hand clutched in the mare's mane, urged her slowly forward, speaking softly in her ear. She came hesitantly, but without resistance, until she reached the point of her previous stopping. There she halted again and stood shivering, and nothing would persuade her to move a step farther.

"All right, then," said Jamie, resigned. "Have it your way." He turned the horse's head and led her into the field, the yellow grain-heads brushing the shaggy hairs of her belly. We rustled after them, the horses bending their necks to snatch a mouthful of grain here and there as we passed through the field.

As we rounded a small granite outcrop just below the crest of the hill, I heard a brief warning bark just ahead. We emerged onto the road to find a black and white shepherd dog on guard, head up and tail stiff as he kept a wary eye on us.

He uttered another short yap, and a matching black and white figure shot out of a clump of alders, followed more slowly by a tall, slender figure wrapped in a brown hunting plaid.

"Ian!"

"Jamie!"

Jamie tossed the mare's reins back to me, and met his brother-in-law in the middle of the road, where the two men clutched each other round the shoulders, laughing and pounding each other on the back. Released from suspicion, the dogs frolicked happily around them, tails wagging, darting aside now and then to sniff at the legs of the horses.

"We didna expect ye 'til tomorrow at the earliest," Ian was saying, his long, homely face beaming.

“We had a good wind crossing,” Jamie explained. “Or at least Claire tells me we did; I wasna taking much notice, myself.” He cast a glance back at me, grinning, and Ian came up to grasp my hand.

“Good-sister,” he said in formal greeting. Then he smiled, the warmth of it lighting his soft brown eyes. “Claire.” Impulsively, he kissed my fingers, and I squeezed his hand.

“Jenny’s gone daft wi’ cleaning and cooking,” he said, still smiling at me. “You’ll be lucky to have a bed to sleep in tonight; she’s got all the mattresses outside, being beaten.”

“After three nights in the heather, I wouldn’t mind sleeping on the floor,” I assured him. “Are Jenny and the children all well?”

“Oh, aye. She’s breeding again,” he added. “Due in February.”

“Again?” Jamie and I spoke together, and a rich blush rose in Ian’s lean cheeks.

“God, man, wee Maggie’s less than a year old,” Jamie said, with a censorious cock of one brow. “Have ye no sense of restraint?”

“Me?” Ian said indignantly. “Ye think I had anything to do with it?”

“Well, if ye didn’t, I should think ye’d be interested in who did,” Jamie said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

The blush deepened to a rich rose color, contrasting nicely with Ian’s smooth brown hair. “Ye know damn well what I mean,” he said. “I slept on the trundle bed wi’ Young Jamie for two months, but then Jenny …”

“Oh, you’re saying my sister’s a wanton, eh?”

“I’m saying she’s as stubborn as her brother when it comes to getting what she wants,” Ian said. He feinted to one side, dodged neatly back and landed a blow in the pit of Jamie’s stomach. Jamie doubled over, laughing.

“Just as well I’ve come home, then,” he said. “I’ll help ye keep her under control.”

“Oh, aye?” Ian said skeptically. “I’ll call all the tenants to watch.”

“Lost a few sheep, have ye?” Jamie changed the subject with a gesture that took in the dogs and Ian’s long crook, dropped in the dust of the roadway.

"Fifteen yows and a ram," Ian said, nodding. "Jenny's own flock of merinos, that she keeps for the special wool. The ram's a right bastard; broke down the gate. I thought they might have been in the grain up here, but nay sign o' them."

"We didn't see them up above," I said.

"Oh, they wouldna be up there," Ian said, waving a dismissive hand. "None o' the beasts will go past the cottage."

"Cottage?" Fergus, growing impatient with this exchange of civilities, had kicked his mount up alongside mine. "I saw no cottage, milord. Only a pile of stones."

"That's all that's left of MacNab's cottage, laddie," said Ian. He squinted up at Fergus, silhouetted against the late afternoon sun. "And ye'd be well-advised to keep away from there yourself."

The hair prickled on the back of my neck, despite the heat of the day. Ronald MacNab was the tenant who had betrayed Jamie to the men of the Watch a year before, the man who had died for his treachery within a day of its being found out. Died, I remembered, among the ashes of his home, burned over his head by the men of Lallybroch. The pile of chimneystones, so innocent when we had passed them a moment ago, had now the grim look of a cairn. I swallowed, forcing back the bitter taste that rose at the back of my throat.

"MacNab?" Jamie said softly. His expression was at once alert. "Ronnie MacNab?"

I had told Jamie of MacNab's betrayal, and his death, but I hadn't told him the means of it.

Ian nodded. "Aye. He died there, the night the English took ye, Jamie. The thatch must ha' caught from a spark, and him too far gone in drink to get out in time." He met Jamie's eyes straight on, all teasing gone.

"Ah? And his wife and child?" Jamie's look was the same as Ian's; cool and inscrutable.

"Safe. Mary MacNab's kitchen-maid at the house, and Rabbie works in the stables." Ian glanced involuntarily over his shoulder in the direction of the ruined cottage. "Mary comes up here now and again; she's the only one on the place will go there."

“Was she fond of him, then?” Jamie had turned to look in the direction of the cottage, so his face was hidden from me, but there was tension in the line of his back.

Ian shrugged. “I shouldna think so. A drunkard, and vicious with it, was Ronnie; not even his auld mother had much use for him. No, I think Mary feels it her duty to pray for his soul—much good it’ll do him,” he added.

“Ah.” Jamie paused a moment as though in thought, then tossed his horse’s reins over its neck and turned up the hill.

“Jamie,” I said, but he was already walking back up the road, toward the small clearing beside the grove. I handed the reins I was holding to a surprised Fergus.

“Stay here with the horses,” I said. “I have to go with him.” Ian moved to come with me, but Murtagh stopped him with a shake of the head, and I went on alone, following Jamie up over the crest of the hill.

He had the long, tireless stride of a hill-walker, and had reached the small clearing before I caught him up. He stood at the edge of what had been the outer wall. The square shape of the cottage’s earth floor was still barely visible, the new growth that covered it sparser than the nearby barley, greener and wild in the shade of the trees.

There was little trace of the fire left; a few chunks of charred wood poked through the grass near the stone hearth that lay open now, flat and exposed as a tombstone. Careful not to step within the outlines of the vanished walls, Jamie began to walk around the clearing. He circled the hearthstone three times, walking always widdershins, left, and left, and left again, to confound any evil that might follow.

I stood to one side and watched. This was a private confrontation, but I couldn’t leave him to face it alone, and though he didn’t glance at me, still I knew he was glad of my presence.

At last he stopped by the fallen pile of stones. Reaching out, he laid a hand gingerly on it and closed his eyes for a moment, as though in prayer. Then, stooping, he picked up a stone the size of his fist, and placed it carefully on the pile, as though it might weigh down the uneasy soul of the ghost. He crossed himself, turned and came toward me with a firm, unhurried step.

"Don't look back," he said quietly, taking me by the arm as we turned toward the road.

I didn't.

* * *

Jamie, Fergus, and Murtagh went with Ian and the dogs in search of the sheep, leaving me to take the string of horses down to the house alone. I was far from being an accomplished horse-handler, but thought I could manage half a mile, so long as nothing popped out at me unexpectedly.

This was very different from our first homecoming to Lallybroch; then, we had been in flight, both of us. Me from the future, Jamie from his past. Our residence then had been happy, but tenuous and insecure; always there was the chance of discovery, of Jamie's arrest. Now, thanks to the Duke of Sandringham's intervention, Jamie had come to take possession of his birthright, and I, my lawful place beside him as his wife.

Then, we had arrived disheveled, unexpected, a violent disruption in the household. This time, we had come announced, with due ceremony, bearing presents from France. While I was sure our reception would be cordial, I did wonder how Ian and Jamie's sister Jenny would take our permanent return. After all, they had lived as master and mistress of the estate for the last several years, ever since the death of Jamie's father, and the disastrous events that had precipitated him into a life of outlawry and exile.

I topped the last hill without incident, and the manor house and its outbuildings lay below me, slate roofs darkening as the first banks of rain clouds rolled in. Suddenly, my mare started, and so did I, struggling to keep a hold on the reins as she curvetted and plunged in alarm.

Not that I could blame her; from around the corner of the house had emerged two huge, puffy objects, rolling along the ground like overweight clouds.

"Stop that!" I shouted "Whoa!" All the horses were now swerving and pulling, and I was inches away from a stampede. Fine homecoming, I thought, if I let all Jamie's new breeding stock break their collective legs.

One of the clouds rose slightly, then sank flat to the ground, and Jenny Fraser Murray, released from the burden of the feather mattress she had been carrying, raced for the road, dark curls flying.

Without a moment's hesitation, she leaped for the bridle of the nearest animal, and jerked down, hard.

"Whoa!" she said. The horse, obviously recognizing the voice of authority, did whoa. With a little effort, the other horses were calmed, and by the time I could slide down from my saddle, we had been joined by another woman and a boy of nine or ten, who lent an experienced hand with the remaining beasts.

I recognized young Rabbie MacNab, and deduced that the woman must be his mother, Mary. The bustle and shuffle of horses, bundles and mattresses precluded much conversation, but I had time for a quick hug of greeting with Jenny. She smelled of cinnamon and honey and the clean sweat of exertion, with an undertone of baby-scent, that paradoxical smell composed of spit-up milk, soft feces, and the ultimate cleanliness of fresh, smooth skin.

We clung together for a moment, hugging tight, remembering our last embrace, when we had parted on the edge of a night-dark wood —me to go in search of Jamie, she to return to a newborn daughter.

"How's little Maggie?" I asked, breaking away at last.

Jenny made a face, wryness mingled with pride. "She's just walking, and the terror o' the house." She glanced up the empty road. "Met Ian, did ye?"

"Yes, Jamie, Murtagh, and Fergus went with him to find the sheep."

"Better them than us," she said, with a quick gesture toward the sky. "It's coming on to rain any minute. Let Rabbie stable the horses and you come lend a hand wi' the mattresses, or we'll all sleep wet tonight."

A frenzy of activity ensued, but when the rain came, Jenny and I were snug in the parlor, undoing the parcels we had brought from

France, and admiring the size and precocity of wee Maggie, a sprightly miss of some ten months, with round blue eyes and a head of strawberry fuzz, and her elder brother, Young Jamie, a sturdy almost-four-year-old. The impending arrival was no more than a tiny bulge beneath their mother's apron, but I saw her hand rest tenderly there from time to time, and felt a small pang to see it.

"You mentioned Fergus," Jenny said, as we talked. "Who's that?"

"Oh, Fergus? He's—well, he's—" I hesitated, not sure quite how to describe Fergus. A pickpocket's prospects for employment on a farm seemed limited. "He's Jamie's," I said at last.

"Oh, aye? Well, I suppose he can sleep in the stable," said Jenny, resigned. "Speaking of Jamie"—she glanced at the window, where the rain was streaming down—"I hope they find those sheep soon. I've a good dinner planned, and I dinna want it to spoil with keeping."

In fact, darkness had fallen, and Mary MacNab had laid the table before the men returned. I watched her at her work; a small, fine-boned woman with dark-brown hair and a faintly worried look that faded into a smile when Rabbie returned from the stables and went to the kitchen, hungrily asking when dinner would be.

"When the men are back, *mo luaidh,*" she said, "Ye know that. Go and wash, so you'll be ready."

When the men finally did appear, they seemed a good deal more in need of a wash than did Rabbie. Rain-soaked, draggled, and muddy to the knees, they trailed slowly into the parlor. Ian unwound the wet plaid from his shoulders and hung it over the firescreen, where it dripped and steamed in the heat of the fire. Fergus, worn out by his abrupt introduction to farm life, simply sat down where he was and stared numbly at the floor between his legs.

Jenny looked up at the brother she had not seen for nearly a year. Glancing from his rain-drenched hair to his mud-crusted feet, she pointed to the door.

"Outside, and off wi' your boots," she said firmly. "And if ye've been in the high field, remember to piss on the doorposts on your way back in. That's how ye keep a ghost from comin' in the house," she explained to me in a lowered tone, with a quick look at the door through which Mary MacNab had disappeared to fetch the dinner.

Jamie, slumped into a chair, opened one eye and gave his sister a dark-blue look.

"I land in Scotland near dead wi' the crossing, ride for four days over the hills to get here, and when I arrive, I canna even come in the house for a drop to wet my parched throat; instead I'm off through the mud, huntin' lost sheep. And once I *do* get here, ye want to send me out in the dark again to piss on doorposts. Tcha!" He closed the eye again, crossed his hands across his stomach, and sank lower in his chair, a study in stubborn negation.

"Jamie, my dearie," his sister said sweetly. "D'ye want your dinner, or shall I feed it to the dogs?"

He remained motionless for a long moment, eyes closed. Then, with a hissing sigh of resignation, he got laboriously to his feet. With a moody twitch of his shoulder, he summoned Ian and the two of them turned, following Murtagh, who was already out the door. As he passed, Jamie reached down a long arm, hauled Fergus to his feet, and dragged the boy sleepily along.

"Welcome home," Jamie said morosely, and with a last wistful glance at fire and whisky, trudged out into the night once more.

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MAIL CALL

After this inauspicious homecoming, matters rapidly improved. Lallybroch absorbed Jamie at once, as though he had never left, and I found myself pulled effortlessly into the current of farm life as well. It was an unsettled autumn, with frequent rain, but with fair, bright days that made the blood sing, too. The place bustled with life, everyone hurrying through the harvest time and the preparations that must be made for the coming winter.

Lallybroch was remote, even for a Highland farm. No real roads led there, but the post still reached us by messenger, over the crags and the heather-clad slopes, a connection with the world outside. It was a world that sometimes seemed unreal in memory, as though I had never danced among the mirrors of Versailles. But the letters brought back France, and reading them, I could see the poplar trees along the Rue Tremoulins, or hear the reverberating bong of the cathedral bell that hung above L'Hôpital des Anges.

Louise's child was born safely; a son. Her letters, rife with exclamations and underlinings, overflowed with besotted descriptions of the angelic Henri. Of his father, putative or real, there was no mention.

Charles Stuart's letter, arriving a month later, made no mention of the child, but according to Jamie, was even more incoherent than usual, seething with vague plans and grandiosities.

The Earl of Mar wrote soberly and circumspectly, but his general annoyance with Charles was clear. The Bonnie Prince was not behaving. He was rude and overbearing to his most loyal followers, ignored those who might be of help to him, insulted whom he should not, talked wildly, and—reading between the lines—drank to excess. Given the attitude of the times regarding alcoholic intake on the part of gentlemen, I thought Charles's performance must have been fairly spectacular, to occasion such comment. I supposed the birth of his son had not, in fact, escaped his notice.

Mother Hildegarde wrote from time to time, brief, informative notes squeezed into a few minutes that could be snatched from her daily schedule. Each letter ended with the same words; "Bouton also sends his regards."

Master Raymond did not write, but every so often, a parcel would come addressed to me, unsigned and unmarked, but containing odd things: rare herbs and small, faceted crystals; a collection of stones, each the size of Jamie's thumbnail, smooth and disc-shaped. Each one had a tiny figure carved into one side, some with lettering above or on the reverse. And then there were the bones—a bear's digit, with the great curved claw still attached; the complete vertebrae of a small snake, articulated and strung on a leather thong, so the whole string flexed in a lifelike manner; an assortment of teeth, ranging from a string of round, peglike things that Jamie said came from a seal, through the high-crowned, scythe-cusped teeth of deer, to something that looked suspiciously like a human molar.

From time to time, I carried some of the smooth, carved stones in my pocket, enjoying the feel of them between my fingers. They were old; I knew that much. From Roman times at least; perhaps even earlier. And from the look of some of the creatures on them, whoever had carved them had meant them to be magic. Whether they were like the herbs—having some actual virtue—or only a symbol, like the signs of the Cabbala, I didn't know. They seemed benign, though, and I kept them.

While I enjoyed the daily round of domestic tasks, what I liked best were the long walks to the various cottages on the estate. I always carried a large basket with me on these visits, containing an assortment of things, from small treats for the children to the most commonly needed medicines. These were called for frequently, for poverty and poor hygiene made illness common, and there were no physicians north of Fort William or south of Inverness.

Some ailments I could treat readily, like the bleeding gums and skin eruptions characteristic of mild scurvy. Other things were beyond my power to heal.

* * *

I laid a hand on Rabbie MacNab's head. The shaggy hair was damp at his temples, but his jaw hung open, slack, relaxed, and the pulse in his neck beat slowly.

"He's all right now," I said. His mother could see that as well as I could; he lay sprawled in the peaceful abandon of sleep, cheeks flushed from the heat of the nearby fire. Still, she stayed tense and watchful, hovering over the bedstead until I spoke. Once I had given absolution to the evidence of her own eyes, she was willing to believe, though; her bunched shoulders slumped under her shawl.

"Thank the Blessed Mother," Mary MacNab murmured, crossing herself briefly, "and you, my lady."

"I didn't do anything," I protested. This was quite literally true; the only service I had been able to render young Rabbie was to make his mother let him alone. It had, in fact, taken a certain amount of forcefulness to discourage her efforts to feed him bran mixed with cock's blood, wave burning feathers under his nose, or dash cold water over him—none of these remedies being of marked use to someone suffering an epileptic seizure. When I arrived, his mother had been volubly regretting her inability to administer the most effective of remedies: spring water drunk from the skull of a suicide.

"It frichts me so when he's taen like that," Mary MacNab said, gazing longingly at the bed where her son lay. "I had Father MacMurtry to him the last time, and he prayed a terrible long time, and sprinkled holy water on the lad to drive the de'ils out. But noo they've come back." She clasped her hands tight together, as though she wished to touch her son, but couldn't bring herself to do so.

"It isn't devils," I said. "It's only a sickness, and not all that bed a one, at that."

“Aye, my lady, an’ ye say so,” she murmured, unwilling to contradict me, but plainly unconvinced.

“He’ll be all right.” I tried to reassure the woman, without raising hopes that couldn’t be met. “He always recovers from these fits, doesn’t he?” The fits had come on two years ago—probably the result of head injury from beatings administered by his late father, I thought—and while the seizures were infrequent, they were undeniably terrifying to his mother when they occurred.

She nodded reluctantly, plainly unconvinced.

“Aye … though he bangs his heid something fearful now and then, thrashin’ as he does.”

“Yes, that’s a risk,” I said patiently. “If he does it again, just pull him away from anything hard, and let him alone. I know it looks bad, but really, he’ll be quite all right. Just let the fit run its course, and when it’s over, put him to bed and let him sleep.” I knew that words were of limited value, no matter how true they might be. Something more concrete was needed for reassurance.

As I turned to go, I heard a small click in the deep pocket of my skirt, and had a sudden inspiration. Reaching in, I pulled out two or three of the small smooth charmstones Raymond had sent me. I selected the milky white one—chalcedony, perhaps—with the tiny figure of a writhing man carved into one side. So that’s what it’s for, I thought.

“Sew this into his pocket,” I said, laying the tiny charm ceremoniously in the woman’s hand. “It will protect him from … from devils.” I cleared my throat. “You needn’t worry about him, then, even if he has another fit; he’ll come out of it all right.”

I left then, feeling at once extremely foolish and halfway pleased, amidst an eager flood of relieved thanks. I wasn’t sure whether I was becoming a better physician or merely a more practiced charlatan. Still, if I couldn’t do much for Rabbie, I could help his mother—or let her help herself, at least. Healing comes from the healed; not from the physician. That much, Raymond had taught me.

I left the house then, to do my errands for the day, calling on two of the cottages near the west end of the farm. All was well at the Kirbys and the Weston Frasers, and I was soon on my way back to the house. At the top of a slope, I sat down under a large beech tree to rest for a moment before the long walk back. The sun was coming down the sky, but hadn't yet reached the row of pines that topped the ridge on the west side of Lallybroch. It was still late afternoon, and the world glowed with the colors of late autumn.

The fallen beechmast was cool and slippery under me, but a good many leaves still clung, yellowed and curling, to the tree above. I leaned back against the smooth-barked trunk and closed my eyes, dimming the bright glare of ripe barley fields to a dark red glow behind my eyelids.

The stifling confines of the crofters' cottages had given me a headache. I leaned my head against the birch's smooth bark and began to breathe slowly and deeply, letting the fresh outdoor air fill my lungs, beginning what I always thought of as "turning in."

This was my own imperfect attempt to duplicate the feeling of the process Master Raymond had shown me in L'Hôpital des Anges; a summoning of the look and feel of each bit of myself, imagining exactly what the various organs and systems looked and felt like when they were functioning properly.

I sat quietly, hands loose in my lap, and listened to the beat of my heart. Beating fast from the exertion of the climb, it slowed quickly to a resting pace. The autumn breeze lifted the tendrils of hair from my neck and cooled my fire-flushed cheeks.

I sat, eyes closed, and traced the path of my blood, from the secret, thick-walled chambers of my heart, blue-purple through the pulmonary artery, reddening swiftly as the sacs of the lungs dumped their burden of oxygen. Then out in a bursting surge through the arch of the aorta, and the tumbling race upward and down and out, through carotids, renals, subclavians. To the smallest capillaries, blooming beneath the surface of the skin, I traced the path of my blood through the systems of my body, remembering the feel of perfection, of health. Of peace.

I sat still, breathing slowly, feeling languorous and heavy as though I had just risen from the act of love. My skin felt thin, my lips slightly swollen, and the pressure of my clothes was like the touch of Jamie's hands. It was no random choice that had invoked his name to cure me. Whether it was health of mind or body, the love of him was necessary to me as breath or blood. My mind reached out for him, sleeping or waking, and finding him, was satisfied. My body flushed and glowed, and as it came to full life, it hungered for his.

The headache was gone. I sat a moment longer, breathing. Then I got to my feet and walked down the hill toward home.

* * *

I had never actually had a home. Orphaned at five, I had lived the life of a academic vagabond with my uncle Lamb for the next thirteen years. In tents on a dusty plain, in caves in the hills, in the swept and garnished chambers of an empty pyramid, Quentin Lambert Beauchamp, M.S., Ph.D., F.R.A.S., etc., had set up the series of temporary camps in which he did the archaeological work that would make him famous long before a car crash ended his brother's life and threw me into his. Not one to dither over petty details like an orphaned niece, Uncle Lamb had promptly enrolled me in a boarding school.

Not one to accept the vagaries of fate without a fight, I declined absolutely to go there. And, recognizing something in me that he had himself in abundant measure, Uncle Lamb had shrugged, and on the decision of a heartbeat, had taken me forever from the world of order and routine, of sums, clean sheets, and daily baths, to follow him into vagabondage.

The roving life had continued with Frank, though with a shift from field to universities, as the digging of a historian is usually conducted within walls. So, when the war came in 1939, it was less a disruption to me than to most.

I had moved from our latest hired flat into the junior nurses' quarters at Pembroke Hospital, and from there to a field station in France, and back again to Pembroke before war's end. And then, those few brief months with Frank, before we came to Scotland, seeking to find each other again. Only to lose each other once and for all, when I had walked into a stone circle, through madness, and out the other side, into the past that was my present.

It was strange, then, and rather wonderful, to wake in the upper bedroom at Lallybroch, next to Jamie, and realize, as I watched the dawn touch his sleeping face, that he had been born in this bed. All the sounds of the house, from the creak of the back stair under an early-rising maid's foot, to the drumming rain on the roofslates, were sounds he had heard a thousand times before; heard so often, he didn't hear them anymore. I did.

His mother, Ellen, had planted the late-blooming rosebush by the door. Its faint, rich scent still wafted up the walls of the house to the bedroom window. It was as though she reached in herself, to touch him lightly in passing. To touch me, too, in welcome.

Beyond the house itself lay Lallybroch; fields and barns and village and crofts. He had fished in the stream that ran down from the hills, climbed the oaks and towering larches, eaten by the hearthstone of every croft. It was his place.

But he, too, had lived with disruption and change. Arrest, and the flight of outlawry; the rootless life of a mercenary soldier. Arrest again, imprisonment and torture, and the flight into exile so recently ended. But he had lived in one place for his first fourteen years. And even at that age, when he had been sent, as was the custom, to foster for two years with his mother's brother, Dougal MacKenzie, it was part and parcel of the life expected for a man who would return to live forever on his land, to care for his tenants and estate, to be a part of a larger organism. Permanence was his destiny.

But there had been that space of absence, and the experience of things beyond the boundaries of Lallybroch, even beyond the rocky coasts of Scotland. Jamie had spoken with kings, had touched law, and commerce, seen adventure and violence and magic. Once the boundaries of home had been transgressed, could destiny be enough to hold him? I wondered.

As I came down from the crest of the hill, I saw him below, heaving boulders into place as he repaired a rift in a drystone dike that bordered one of the smaller fields. Near him on the ground lay a pair of rabbits, neatly gutted but not yet skinned.

" 'Home is the sailor, home from the sea, and the hunter home from the hill,' " I quoted, smiling at him as I came up beside him.

He grinned back, wiped the sweat from his brow, then pretended to shudder.

"Dinna mention the sea to me, Sassenach. I saw two wee laddies sailing a bit of wood in the millpond this morning and nearly heaved up my breakfast at the sight."

I laughed. "You haven't any urge to go back to France, then?"

"God, no. Not even for the brandy." He heaved one last stone to the top of the wall and settled it into place. "Going back to the house?"

"Yes. Do you want me to take the rabbits?"

He shook his head, and bent to pick them up. "No need; I'm going back myself. Ian needs a hand wi' the new storage cellar for the potatoes."

The first potato crop ever planted on Lallybroch was due for harvest within a few days, and—on my timorous and inexpert advice—a small root-cellar was being dug to house them. I had distinctly mixed feelings, whenever I looked at the potato field. On the one hand, I felt considerable pride in the sprawling, leafy vines that covered it. On the other, I felt complete panic at the thought that sixty families might depend on what lay under those vines for sustenance through the winter. It was on my advice—given hastily a year ago—that a prime barley field had been planted in potatoes, a crop hitherto unknown in the Highlands.

I knew that in the fullness of time, potatoes would become an important staple of life in the Highlands, less susceptible to blight and failure than the crops of oats and barley. Knowing that from a paragraph read in a geography book long ago was a far cry from deliberately taking responsibility for the lives of the people who would eat the crop.

I wondered if the taking of risks for other people got easier with practice. Jamie did it routinely, managing the affairs of the estate and the tenants as though he had been born to it. But, of course, he *had* been born to it.

"Is the cellar nearly ready?" I asked.

"Oh, aye. Ian's got the doors built, and the pit's nearly dug. It's only there's a soft bit of earth near the back, and his peg gets stuck in when he stands there." While Ian managed very well on the wooden peg he wore in substitute for his lower right leg, there were the occasional awkwardnesses such as this.

Jamie glanced thoughtfully up the hill behind us. "We'll need the cellar finished and covered by tonight; it's going to rain again before dawn."

I turned to look in the direction of his gaze. Nothing showed on the slope but grass and heather, a few trees, and the rocky seams of granite that poked bony ridges through the scruffy overgrowth.

"How in hell can you tell that?"

He smiled, pointing uphill with his chin. "See the small oak tree? And the ash nearby?"

I glanced at the trees, baffled. "Yes. What about them?"

"The leaves, Sassenach. See how both trees look lighter than usual? When there's damp in the air, the leaves of an oak or an ash will turn, so ye see the underside. The whole tree looks several shades lighter."

"I suppose it does," I agreed doubtfully. "If you happen to know what color the tree is normally."

Jamie laughed and took my arm. "I may not have an ear for music, Sassenach, but I've eyes in my head. And I've seen those trees maybe ten thousand times, in every weather there is."

It was some way from the field to the farmhouse, and we walked in silence for the most part, enjoying the brief warmth of the afternoon sun on our backs. I sniffed the air, and thought that Jamie was probably right about the coming rain; all the normal autumn smells seemed intensified, from the sharp pine resins to the dusty smell of ripe grain. I thought that I must be learning, myself; becoming attuned to the rhythms and sights and smells of Lallybroch. Maybe in time, I would come to know it as well as

Jamie did. I squeezed his arm briefly, and felt the pressure of his hand on mine in response.

"D'ye miss France, Sassenach?" he said suddenly.

"No," I said, startled. "Why?"

He shrugged, not looking at me. "Well, it's only I was thinking, seeing ye come down the hill wi' the basket on your arm, how bonny ye looked wi' the sun on your brown hair. I thought you looked as though ye grew there, like one of the saplings—like ye'd always been a part of this place. And then it struck me, that to you, Lallybroch's maybe a poor wee spot. There's no grand life, like there was in France; not even interesting work, as ye had at the Hôpital." He glanced down at me shyly.

"I suppose I worry you'll grow bored wi' it here—in time."

I paused before answering, though it wasn't something I hadn't thought about.

"In time," I said carefully. "Jamie—I've seen a lot of things in my life, and been in a lot of places. Where I came from—there were things there that I miss sometimes. I'd like to ride a London omnibus again, or pick up a telephone and talk to someone far away. I'd like to turn a tap, and have hot water, not carry it from the well and heat it in a cauldron. I'd like all that—but I don't need it. As for a grand life, I didn't want it when I had it. Nice clothes are all very well, but if gossip and scheming and worry and silly parties and tiny rules of etiquette go with them … no. I'd as soon live in my shift and say what I like."

He laughed at that, and I squeezed his arm once more.

"As for the work … there's work for me here." I glanced down into the basket of herbs and medicines on my arm. "I can be useful. And if I miss Mother Hildegarde, or my other friends—well, it isn't as fast as a telephone, but there are always letters."

I stopped, holding his arm, and looked up at him. The sun was setting, and the light gilded one side of his face, throwing the strong bones into relief.

"Jamie … I only want to be where you are. Nothing else."

He stood still for a moment, then leaned forward and kissed me very gently on the forehead.

"It's funny," I said as we came over the crest of the last small hill that led down to the house. "I had just been wondering the same kinds of things about *you*. Whether you'd be happy here, after the things you did in France."

He smiled, half-ruefully, and looked toward the house, its three stories of white-harled stone glowing gold and umber in the sunset.

"Well, it's home, Sassenach. It's my place."

I touched him gently on the arm. "And you were born to it, you mean?"

He drew a deep breath, and reached out to rest a hand on the wooden fence-rail that separated this lower field from the grounds near the house.

"Well, in fact I wasna born to it, Sassenach. By rights, it should have been Willie was lairdie here. Had he lived, I expect I would have been a soldier—or maybe a merchant, like Jared."

Willie, Jamie's elder brother, had died of the smallpox at the age of eleven, leaving his small brother, aged six, as the heir to Lallybroch.

He made an odd half-shrugging gesture, as though seeking to ease the pressure of his shirt across his shoulders. It was something he did when feeling awkward or unsure; I hadn't seen him do it in months.

"But Willie died. And so I am laird." He glanced at me, a little shyly, then reached into his sporran and pulled something out. A little cherrywood snake that Willie had carved for him as a birthday gift lay on his palm, head twisted as though surprised to see the tail following it.

Jamie stroked the little snake gently; the wood was shiny and seasoned with handling, the curves of the body gleaming like scales in early twilight.

"I talk to Willie, sometimes, in my mind," Jamie said. He tilted the snake on his palm. "If you'd lived, Brother, if ye'd been laird as you were meant to be, would ye do what I've done? or would ye find a better way?" He glanced down at me, flushing slightly. "Does that sound daft?"

"No." I touched the snake's smooth head with a fingertip. The high clear call of a meadowlark came from the far field, thin as crystal in the evening air.

"I do the same," I said softly, after a moment. "With Uncle Lamb. And my parents. My mother especially. I—I didn't think of her often, when I was young, just every now and then I'd dream about someone soft and warm, with a lovely singing voice. But when I was sick, after … Faith—sometimes I imagined she was there. With me." A sudden wave of grief swept over me, remembrance of losses recent and long past.

Jamie touched my face gently, wiping away the tear that had formed at the corner of one eye but not quite fallen.

"I think sometimes the dead cherish us, as we do them," he said softly. "Come on, Sassenach. Let's walk a bit; there's time before dinner."

He linked my arm in his, tight against his side, and we turned along the fence, walking slowly, the dry grass rustling against my skirt.

"I ken what ye mean, Sassenach," Jamie said. "I hear my father's voice sometimes, in the barn, or in the field. When I'm not even thinkin' of him, usually. But all at once I'll turn my head, as though I'd just heard him outside, laughing wi' one of the tenants, or behind me, gentling a horse."

He laughed suddenly, and nodded toward a corner of the pasture before us.

"It's a wonder I dinna hear him here, but I never have."

It was a thoroughly unremarkable spot, a wood-railed gate in the stone fence that paralleled the road.

"Really? What did he used to say here?"

"Usually it was 'If ye're through talkin', Jamie, turn about and bend ower.' "

We laughed, pausing to lean on the fence. I bent closer, squinting at the wood.

"So this is where you got smacked? I don't see any toothmarks," I said.

"No, it wasna all that bad," he said, laughing. He ran a hand affectionately along the worn ash fence rail.

"We used to get splinters in our fingers, sometimes, Ian and me. We'd go up to the house after, and Mrs. Crook or Jenny would pick them out for us—scolding all the time."

He glanced toward the manor, where all the first-floor windows glowed with light against the gathering night. Dark forms moved briefly past the windows; small, quick-moving shadows in the kitchen windows, where Mrs. Crook and the maids were at the dinner preparations. A larger form, tall and slender as a fence rail, loomed suddenly in one of the drawing room windows. Ian stood a moment, silhouetted in the light as though called by Jamie's reminiscence. Then he drew the curtains and the window dulled to a softer, shrouded glow.

"I was always glad when Ian was with me," Jamie said, still looking toward the house. "When we got caught at some devilry and got thrashed for it, I mean."

"Misery loves company?" I said, smiling.

"A bit. I didna feel quite so wicked when there were the two of us to share the guilt between. But it was more that I could always count on him to make a lot of noise."

"What, to cry out, you mean?"

"Aye. He'd always howl and carry on something awful, and I knew he would do it, so I didna feel so ashamed of my own noise, if I had to cry out." It was too dark to see his face anymore, but I could still see the half-shrugging gesture he made when embarrassed or uncomfortable.

"I always tried not to, of course, but I couldna always manage. If my da thought it worth thrashing me over, he thought it worth doing a proper job. And Ian's father had a right arm like a tree bole."

"You know," I said, glancing down at the house, "I never thought of it particularly before, but why on earth did your father thrash you out here, Jamie? Surely there's enough room in the house—or the barn."

Jamie was silent for a moment, then shrugged again.

"I didna ever ask. But I reckon it was something like the King of France."

"The King of France." This apparent non sequitur took me aback a bit.

"Aye. I dinna ken," he said dryly, "quite what it's like to have to wash and dress and move your bowels in public, but I can tell ye that it's a verra humbling experience to have to stand there and explain to one of your father's tenants just what ye did that's about to get your arse scalded for ye."

"I imagine it must be," I said, sympathy mingled with the urge to laugh. "Because you were going to be laird, you mean? That's why he made you do it here?"

"I expect so. The tenants would know I understood justice—at least, from the receiving end."

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FIELD OF DREAMS

The field had been plowed in the usual “rigs,” high ridges of piled earth, with deep furrows drawn between them. The rigs rose knee-high, so a man walking down the furrows could sow his seed easily by hand along the top of the rig beside him. Designed for the planting of barley or oats, no reason had been seen to alter them for the planting of potatoes.

“It said ‘hills,’ ” Ian said, peering over the leafy expanse of the potato field, “but I thought the rigs would do as well. The point of the hills seemed to be to keep the things from rotting wi’ too much water, and an old field wi’ high rigs seemed like to do that as well.”

“That seems sensible,” Jamie agreed. “The top parts seem to be flourishing, anyway. Does the man say how ye ken when to dig the things up, though?”

Charged with the planting of potatoes in a land where no potato had ever been seen, Ian had proceeded with method and logic, sending to Edinburgh both for seed potatoes, and for a book on the subject of planting. In due course, *A Scientific Treatise on Methods of Farming,* by Sir Walter O’Bannion Reilly had made its appearance, with a small section on potato planting as presently practiced in Ireland.

Ian was carrying this substantial volume under one arm—Jenny had told me that he wouldn’t go near the potato field without it, lest some knotty question of philosophy or technique occur to him while there—and now flipped it open, bracing it on one forearm as he groped in his sporran for the spectacles he wore when reading.

These had belonged to his late father; small circles of glass, set in wire rims, and customarily worn on the end of his nose, they made him look like a very earnest young stork.

“Harvesting of the crop should be undertaken simultaneously with the appearance of the first winter goose,” he read, then looked up, squinting accusingly over his spectacles at the potato field, as though expecting an indicative goose to stick its head up among the furrowed rigs.

“Winter goose?” Jamie peered frowning at the book over Ian’s shoulder. “What sort of goose does he mean? Greylags? But ye see those all year. That canna be right.”

Ian shrugged. “Maybe ye only see them in the winter in Ireland. Or maybe it’s some kind of Irish goose he means, and not greylags at all.”

Jamie snorted. “Well, the fat lot of good that does us. Does he say anything useful?”

Ian ran a finger down the lines of type, moving his lips silently. We had by now collected a small crowd of cottars, all fascinated by this novel approach to agriculture.

“Ye dinna dig potatoes when it’s wet,” Ian informed us, eliciting a louder snort from Jamie.

“Hmm,” Ian murmured to himself. “Potato rot, potato bugs—we didna ha’ any potato bugs, I suppose that’s lucky—potato vines … umm, no, that’s only what to do if the vines wilt. Potato blight—we canna tell if we have that until we see the potatoes. Seed potatoes, potato storage—”

Impatient, Jamie turned away from Ian, hands on his hips.

“Scientific farming, eh?” he demanded. He glared at the field of darkgreen, leafy vines. “I suppose it’s too damn scientific to explain how ye tell when the bloody things are ready to eat!”

Fergus, who had been tagging along behind Jamie as usual, looked up from a caterpillar, inching its slow and fuzzy way along his forefinger.

“Why don’t you just dig one up and see?” he asked.

Jamie stared at Fergus for a moment. His mouth opened, but no sound emerged. He shut it, patted Fergus gently on the head, and went to fetch a pitchfork from its place against the fence.

The cottars, all men who had helped to plant and tend the field under Ian's direction—assisted by Sir Walter—clustered round to see the results of their labor.

Jamie chose a large and flourishing vine near the edge of the field and poised the fork carefully near its roots. Visibly holding his breath, he put a foot on the heel of the fork and pushed. The tines slid slowly into the damp brown dirt.

I was holding my own breath. There was a good deal more depending on this experiment than the reputation of Sir Walter O'Bannion Reilly. Or my own, for that matter.

Jamie and Ian had confirmed that the barley crop this year was smaller than normal, though still sufficient for the needs of the Lallybroch tenants. Another bad year would exhaust the meager reserves of grain, though. For a Highland estate, Lallybroch was prosperous; but that was saying something only by comparison with other Highland farms. Successful potato planting could well make the difference between hunger and plenty for the folk of Lallybroch over the next two years.

Jamie's heel pressed down and he leaned back on the handle of the fork. The earth crumbled and cracked around the vine, and with a sudden, rending *pop* the potato vine lifted up and the earth revealed its bounty.

A collective "Ah!" went up from the spectators, at sight of the myriad brown globules clinging to the roots of the uprooted vine. Ian and I both fell to our knees in the dirt, scrabbling in the loosened soil for potatoes severed from the parent vine.

"It worked!" Ian kept saying as he pulled potato after potato out of the ground. "Look at that! See the size of it?"

"Yes, look at this one!" I exclaimed in delight, brandishing one the size of my two fists held together.

At length, we had the produce of our sample vine laid in a basket; perhaps ten good-sized potatoes, twenty-five or so fist-size specimens, and a number of small things the size of golf balls.

"What d'ye think?" Jamie scrutinized our collection quizzically. "Ought we to leave the rest, so the little ones will grow more? Or take them now, before the cold comes?"

Ian groped absently for his spectacles, then remembered that Sir Walter was over by the fence, and abandoned the effort. He shook his head.

"No, I think this is right," he said. "The book says ye keep the bittie ones for the seed potatoes for next year. We'll want a lot of those." He gave me a grin of relieved delight, his hank of thick, straight brown hair dropping across his forehead. There was a smudge of dirt down the side of his face.

One of the cottars' wives was bending over the basket, peering at its contents. She reached out a tentative finger and prodded one of the potatoes.

"Ye eat them, ye say?" Her brow creased skeptically. "I dinna see how ye'd ever grind them in a quern for bread or parritch."

"Well, I dinna believe ye grind them, Mistress Murray," Jamie explained courteously.

"Och, aye?" The woman squinted censoriously at the basket. "Well, what d'ye do wi' them, then?"

"Well, you …" Jamie started, and then stopped. It occurred to me, as it no doubt had to him, that while he had eaten potatoes in France, he had never seen one prepared for eating. I hid a smile as he stared helplessly at the dirt-crusted potato in his hand. Ian also stared at it; apparently Sir Walter was mute on the subject of potato cooking.

"You roast them." Fergus came to the rescue once more, bobbing up under Jamie's arm. He smacked his lips at the sight of the potatoes. "Put them in the coals of the fire. You eat them with salt. Butter's good, if you have it."

"We have it," said Jamie, with an air of relief. He thrust the potato at Mrs. Murray, as though anxious to be rid of it. "You roast them," he informed her firmly.

"You can boil them, too," I contributed. "Or mash them with milk. Or fry them. Or chop them up and put them in soup. A very versatile vegetable, the potato."

"That's what the book says," Ian murmured, with satisfaction.

Jamie looked at me, the corner of his mouth curling in a smile.

"Ye never told me you could cook, Sassenach."

"I wouldn't call it cooking, exactly," I said, "but I probably can boil a potato."

"Good." Jamie cast an eye at the group of tenants and their wives, who were passing the potatoes from hand to hand, looking them over rather dubiously. He clapped his hands loudly to attract attention.

"We'll be having supper here by the field," he told them. "Let's be fetching a bit of wood for a fire, Tom and Willie, and Mrs. Willie, if ye'd be so kind as to bring your big kettle? Aye, that's good, one of the men will help ye to bring it down. You, Kincaid—" He turned to one of the younger men, and waved off in the direction of the small cluster of cottages under the trees. "Go and tell everyone—it's potatoes for supper!"

And so, with the assistance of Jenny, ten pails of milk from the dairy shed, three chickens caught from the coop, and four dozen large leeks from the kailyard, I presided over the preparation of cock-a-leekie soup and roasted potatoes for the laird and tenants of Lallybroch.

The sun was below the horizon by the time the food was ready, but the sky was still alight, with streaks of red and gold that lanced through the dark branches of the pine grove on the hill. There was a little hesitation when the tenants came face-to-face with the proposed addition to their diet, but the party-like atmosphere—helped along by a judicious keg of home-brewed whisky—overcame any misgivings, and soon the ground near the potato field was littered with the forms of impromptu diners, hunched over bowls held on their knees.

"What d'ye think, Dorcas?" I overheard one woman say to her neighbor. "It's a wee bit queer-tasting, no?"

Dorcas, so addressed, nodded and swallowed before replying.

"Aye, it is. But the laird's eaten six o' the things so far, and they havena kilt him yet."

The response from the men and children was a good deal more enthusiastic, likely owing to the generous quantities of butter supplied with the potatoes.

"Men would eat horse droppings, if ye served them wi' butter," Jenny said, in answer to an observation along these lines. "Men! A full belly, and a place to lie down when they're drunk, and that's all they ask o' life."

"A wonder ye put up wi' Jamie and me," Ian teased, hearing her, "seein' ye've such a low opinion of men."

Jenny waved her soup ladle dismissively at husband and brother, seated side by side on the ground near the kettle.

"Och, you two aren't 'men.' "

Ian's feathery brows shot upward, and Jamie's thicker red ones matched them.

"Oh, we're not? Well, what are we, then?" Ian demanded.

Jenny turned toward him with a smile, white teeth flashing in the firelight. She patted Jamie on the head, and dropped a kiss on Ian's forehead.

"You're mine," she said.

* * *

After supper, one of the men began to sing. Another brought out a wooden flute and accompanied him, the sound thin but piercing in the cold autumn night. The air was chilly, but there was no wind, and it was cozy enough, wrapped in shawls and blankets, huddled in small family clusters round the fire. The blaze had been built up after the cooking, and now made a substantial dent in the darkness.

It was warm, if a trifle active, in our own family huddle. Ian had gone to fetch another armload of wood, and baby Maggie clung to her mother, forcing her elder brother to seek refuge and body warmth elsewhere.

"I'm going to stick ye upside down in yonder kettle, an' ye dinna leave off pokin' me in the balls," Jamie informed his nephew, who was squirming vigorously on his uncle's lap. "What's the matter, then—have ye got ants in your drawers?"

This query was greeted with a gale of giggles and a marked effort to burrow into his host's midsection. Jamie groped in the dark, making deliberately clumsy grabs at his namesake's arms and legs, then wrapped his arms around the boy and rolled suddenly over on top of him, forcing a startled whoop of delight from small Jamie.

Jamie pinned his nephew forcibly to the ground and held him there with one hand while he groped blindly on the ground in the dark. Seizing a handful of wet grass with a grunt of satisfaction, he raised himself enough to jam the grass down the neck of small Jamie's shirt, changing the giggling to a high-pitched squeal, no less delighted.

"There, then," Jamie said, rolling off the small form. "Go plague your auntie for a bit."

Small Jamie obligingly scrambled over to me on hands and knees, still giggling, and nestled on my lap among the folds of my cloak. He sat as still as is possible for an almost four-year-old boy—which is not very still, all things considered—and let me remove the bulk of the grass from his shirt.

"You smell nice, Auntie," he said, buffing my chin affectionately with his mop of black curls. "Like food."

"Well, thank you," I said. "Ought I to take that to mean you're hungry again?"

"Aye. Is there milk?"

"There is." I could just reach the stoneware jug by stretching out my fingers. I shook the bottle, decided there was not enough left to make it worthwhile to fetch a cup, and tilted the jug, holding it for the little boy to drink from.

Temporarily absorbed in the taking of nourishment, he was still, the small, sturdy body heavy on my thigh, back braced against my arm as he wrapped his own pudgy hands around the jug.

The last drops of milk gurgled from the jug. Small Jamie relaxed all at once, and emitted a soft burp of repletion. I could feel the heat glowing from him, with that sudden rise of temperature which presages falling asleep in very young children. I wrapped a fold of the cloak around him, and rocked him slowly back and forth, humming softly to the tune of the song beyond the fire. The small bumps of his vertebrae were round and hard as marbles under my fingers.

"Gone to sleep, has he?" The larger Jamie's bulk loomed near my shoulder, the firelight picking out the hilt of his dirk, and the gleam of copper in his hair.

"Yes," I said. "At least he's not squirming, so he must have. It's rather like holding a large ham."

Jamie laughed, then was still himself. I could feel the hardness of his arm just brushing mine, and the warmth of his body through the folds of plaid and arisaid.

A night breeze brushed a strand of hair across my face. I brushed it back, and discovered that small Jamie was right; my hands smelled of leeks and butter, and the starchy smell of cut potatoes. Asleep, he was a dead weight, and while holding him was comforting, he was cutting off the circulation in my left leg. I twisted a bit, intending to lay him across my lap.

"Don't move, Sassenach," Jamie's voice came softly, next to me. "Just for a moment, *mo duinne*—be still."

I obligingly froze, until he touched me on the shoulder.

"That's all right, Sassenach," he said, with a smile in his voice. "It's only that ye looked so beautiful, wi' the fire on your face, and your hair waving in the wind. I wanted to remember it."

I turned to face him, then, and smiled at him, across the body of the child. The night was dark and cold, alive with people all around, but there was nothing where we sat but light and warmth—and each other.

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THY BROTHER’S KEEPER

Fergus, after an initial period of silent watchfulness from corners, had become a part of the household, taking on the official position of stable-lad, along with young Rabbie MacNab.

While Rabbie was a year or two younger than Fergus, he was as big as the slight French lad, and they quickly became inseparable friends, except on the occasions when they argued—which was two or three times a day—and then attempted to kill each other. After a fight one morning had escalated into a punching, kicking, fist-swinging brawl that rolled through the dairy shed and spilled two pannikins of cream set out to sour, Jamie took a hand.

With an air of long-suffering grimness, he had taken each miscreant by the scruff of a skinny neck, and removed them to the privacy of the barn, where, I assumed, he overcame any lingering scruples he might have had about the administration of physical retribution. He strode out of the barn, shaking his head and buckling his belt back on, and left with Ian to ride up the valley to Broch Mordha. The boys had emerged some time later, substantially subdued and—united in tribulation—once more the best of friends.

Sufficiently subdued, in fact, to allow young Jamie to tag along with them as they did their chores. As I glanced out the window later in the morning, I saw the three of them playing in the dooryard with a ball made of rags. It was a cold, misty day, and the boys’ breath rose in soft clouds as they galloped and shouted.

“Nice sturdy little lad you’ve got there,” I remarked to Jenny, who was sorting through her mending basket in search of a button. She glanced up, saw what I was looking at, and smiled.

"Oh, aye, wee Jamie's a dear lad." She came to join me by the window, peering out at the game below.

"He's the spit of his da," she remarked fondly, "but he's going to be a good bit wider through the shoulder, I think. He'll maybe be the size of his uncle; see those legs?" I thought she was probably right; while small Jamie, nearly four, still had the chunky roundness of a toddler, his legs were long, and the small back was wide and flat with muscle. He had the long, graceful bones of his uncle, and the same air his larger namesake projected, of being composed of something altogether tougher and springier than mere flesh.

I watched the little boy pounce on the ball, scoop it up with a deft snatch, and throw it hard enough to sail past the head of Rabbie MacNab, who raced off, shouting, to retrieve it.

"Something else is like his uncle," I said. "I think he's maybe going to be left-handed, too."

"Oh, God!" said Jenny, brow furrowed as she peered at her offspring. "I hope not, but you're maybe right." She shook her head, sighing.

"Lord, when I think of the trouble poor Jamie had, from being caurry-fisted! Everybody tried to break him of it, from my parents to the schoolmaster, but he always was stubborn as a log, and wouldna budge. Everybody but Ian's father, at least," she added, as an afterthought.

"He didn't think being left-handed was wrong?" I asked curiously, aware that the general opinion of the times was that left-handedness was at the best unlucky, and at the worst, a symptom of demonic possession. Jamie wrote—with difficulty—with his right hand, because he had been beaten regularly at school for picking up the quill with his left.

Jenny shook her head, black curls bobbing under her kertch.

"No, he was a queer man, auld John Murray. He said if the Lord had chosen to strengthen Jamie's left arm so, then 'twould be a sin to spurn the gift. And he was a rare man wi' a sword, auld John, so my father listened, and he let Jamie learn to fight left-handed."

"I thought Dougal MacKenzie taught Jamie to fight left-handed," I said. I rather wondered what Jenny thought of her uncle Dougal.

She nodded, licking the end of a thread before putting it through the eye of her needle with one quick poke.

"Aye, it was, but that was later, when Jamie was grown, and went to foster wi' Dougal. It was Ian's father taught him his first strokes." She smiled, eyes on the shirt in her lap.

"I remember, when they were young, auld John told Ian it was his job to stand to Jamie's right, for he must guard his chief's weaker side in a fight. And he did—they took it verra seriously, the two of them. And I suppose auld John was right, at that," she added, snipping off the excess thread. "After a time, nobody would fight them, not even the MacNab lads. Jamie and Ian were both fair-sized, and bonny fighters, and when they stood shoulder to shoulder, there was no one could take the pair o' them down, even if they were outnumbered."

She laughed suddenly, and smoothed back a lock of hair behind her ear.

"Watch them sometime, when they're walking the fields together. I dinna suppose they even realize they do it still, but they do. Jamie always moves to the left, so Ian can take up his place on the right, guardin' the weak side."

Jenny gazed out the window, the shirt momentarily forgotten in her lap, and laid a hand over the small swelling of her stomach.

"I hope it's a boy," she said, looking at her black-haired son below. "Left-handed or no, it's good for a man to have a brother to help him." I caught her glance at the picture on the wall—a very young Jamie, standing between the knees of his elder brother, Willie. Both young faces were snub-nosed and solemn; Willie's hand rested protectively on his little brother's shoulder.

"Jamie's lucky to have Ian," I said.

Jenny looked away from the picture, and blinked once. She was two years older than Jamie; she would have been three years younger than William.

"Aye, he is. And so am I," she said softly, picking up the shirt once more.

I took a child's smock from the mending basket and turned it inside out, to get at the ripped seam beneath the armhole. It was too cold out for anyone but small boys at play or men at work, but it was warm and cozy in the parlor; the windows fogged over quickly as we worked, isolating us from the icy world outside.

"Speaking of brothers," I said, squinting as I threaded my own needle, "did you see Dougal and Colum MacKenzie much, as you were growing up?"

Jenny shook her head. "I've never met Colum. Dougal came here a time or two, bringing Jamie home for Hogmanay or such, but I canna say I know him well." She looked up from her mending, slanted eyes bright with interest. "You'll know them, though. Tell me, what's Colum MacKenzie like? I always wondered, from the bits of things I'd hear from visitors, but my parents never would speak of him." She paused a moment, a crease between her brows.

"No, I'm wrong; my da did say something about him, once. 'Twas just after Dougal had left, to go back to Beannachd wi' Jamie. Da was leaning on the fence outside, watching them ride out o' sight, and I came up to wave to Jamie—it always grieved me sore when he left, for I didna ken how long he'd be gone. Anyway, we watched them over the crest of the hill, and then Da stirred a bit, and grunted, and said, 'God help Dougal MacKenzie when his brother Colum dies.' Then he seemed to remember I was there, for he turned round and smiled at me, and said, 'Well, lassie, what's for our dinner, then?' and wouldna say more about it." The black brows, fine and bold as the strokes of calligraphy, lifted in puzzled inquiry.

"I thought that odd, for I'd heard—who hasn't?—that Colum is sore crippled, and Dougal does the chief's work for him, collecting rents and settling claims—and leading the clan to battle, when needs be."

"He does. But—" I hesitated, unsure how to describe that odd symbiotic relationship. "Well," I said with a smile, "the closest I can come is to tell you that once I overheard them arguing, and Colum said to Dougal, 'I'll tell ye, if the brothers MacKenzie have but one cock and one brain between them, then I'm glad of my half of the bargain!' "

Jenny gave a sudden laugh of surprise, then stared at me, a speculative gleam deep in her blue eyes, so like her brother's.

"Och, so that's the way of it, is it? I did wonder once, hearing Dougal talk about Colum's son, wee Hamish; he seemed a bit fonder than an uncle might be."

"You're quick, Jenny," I said, staring back at her. "Very quick. It took me a long time to work that out, and I saw them every day for months."

She shrugged modestly, but a small smile played about her lips.

"I listen," she said simply. "To what folk say—and what they don't. And people do gossip something terrible here in the Highlands. So"—she bit off a thread and spat the ends neatly into the palm of her hand—"tell me about Leoch. Folk say it's big, but not so grand as Beauly or Kilravock."

We worked and talked through the morning, moving from mending to winding wool for knitting, to laying out the pattern for a new baby dress for Maggie. The shouts from the boys outside ceased, to be replaced by murmurous noises and banging from the back of the house, suggesting that the younger male element had gotten cold and come to infest the kitchens, instead.

"I wonder will it snow soon?" Jenny said, with a glance at the window. "There's wetness in the air; did ye see the haze over the loch this morning?"

I shook my head. "I hope not. That will make it hard for Jamie and Ian, coming back." The village of Broch Mordha was less than ten miles from Lallybroch, but the way lay over steadily rising hills, with steep and rocky slopes, and the road was little more than a deer track.

In the event, it did snow, soon after noon, and the flakes kept swirling down long past nightfall.

"They'll have stayed in Broch Mordha," Jenny said, pulling her nightcapped head in from an inspection of the cloudy sky, with its snow-pink glow. "Dinna worry for them; they'll be tucked up cozy in someone's cottage for the night." She smiled reassuringly at me as she pulled the shutters to. A sudden wail came from down the hall, and she picked up the skirts of her nightrobe with a muffled exclamation.

"Good night, Claire," she called, already hurrying off on her maternal errand of mercy. "Sleep well."

I usually did sleep well; in spite of the cold, damp climate, the house was tightly constructed, and the goosefeather bed was plentifully supplied with quilts. Tonight, though, I found myself restless without Jamie. The bed seemed vast and clammy, my legs twitchy, and my feet cold.

I tried lying on my back, hands lightly clasped across my ribs, eyes closed, breathing deep, to summon up a picture of Jamie; if I could imagine him there, breathing deeply in the dark beside me, perhaps I could fall asleep.

The sound of a cock crowing at full blast lifted me off the pillow, as though a stick of dynamite had been touched off beneath the bed.

"Idiot!" I said, every nerve in my body twanging from the shock. I got up and cracked the shutter. It had stopped snowing, but the sky was still pale with cloud, a uniform color from horizon to horizon. The rooster let loose another bellow in the hen-coop below.

"Shut up!" I said. "It's the middle of the night, you feathered bastard!" The avian equivalent of a raspberry echoed through the still night, and down the hall, a child began to cry, followed by a rich but muffled Gaelic expletive in Jenny's voice.

"You," I said to the invisible rooster, "are living on borrowed time." There was no response to this, and after a pause to make certain that the rooster had in fact called it a night, I closed the shutters and did the same.

The commotion had derailed any coherent train of thought. Instead of trying to start another, I decided to try turning inward, in the hopes that physical contemplation would relax me enough to sleep.

It worked. As I began to hover on the edge of sleep, my mind fixed somewhere around my pancreas, I could dimly hear the sounds of small Jamie pattering down the hall to his mother's bedroom—roused from sleep by a full bladder, he seldom had the presence of mind to take the obvious step, and would frequently blunder down the stair from the nursery in search of assistance instead.

I had wondered, coming to Lallybroch, whether I might find it difficult to be near Jenny; if I would be envious of her easy fruitfulness. And I might have been, had I not seen that abundant motherhood had its price as well.

"There's a pot right by your bed, clot-heid," Jenny's exasperated voice came outside my door as she steered small Jamie back to his bed. "Ye must have stepped in it on your way out; why can ye no get it through your heid to use that one? Why have ye got to come use mine, every night in creation?" Her voice faded as she turned up the stair, and I smiled, visualization moving down the sweeping curve of my intestines.

There was another reason I did not envy Jenny. I had at first feared that the birth of Faith had done me some internal damage, but that fear had disappeared with Raymond's touch. As I completed the inventory of my body, and felt my spine go slack on the edge of sleep, I could feel that all was well there. It had happened once, it could happen again. All that was needed was time. And Jamie.

Jenny's footsteps sounded on the boards of the hallway, quickening in response to a sleepy squawk from Maggie, at the far end of the house.

"Bairns are certain joy, but nay sma' care," I murmured to myself, and fell asleep.

* * *

Through the next day, we waited, doing our chores and going through the daily routine with one ear cocked for the sound of horses in the dooryard.

"They'll have stayed to do some business," Jenny said, outwardly confident. But I saw her pause every time she passed the window that overlooked the lane leading to the house.

As for me, I had a hard time controlling my imagination. The letter, signed by King George, confirming Jamie's pardon, was locked in the drawer of the desk in the laird's study. Jamie regarded it as a humiliation, and would have burned it, but I had insisted it be kept, just in case. Now, listening for sounds through the rush of winter wind, I kept having visions of it having all been a mistake, or a hoax of some kind—of Jamie once more arrested by red-coated dragoons, taken away again to the misery of prison, and the impending danger of the hangman's noose.

The men returned at last just before nightfall, horses laden with bags containing the salt, needles, pickling spice, and other small items that Lallybroch could not produce for itself.

I heard one of the horses whinny as it came into the stableyard, and ran downstairs, meeting Jenny on her way out through the kitchens.

Relief swept through me as I saw Jamie's tall figure, shadowed against the barn. I ran through the yard, disregarding the light covering of snow that lingered on the ground, and flung myself into his arms.

"Where the hell have you been?" I demanded.

He took time to kiss me before replying. His face was cold against mine, and his lips tasted faintly and pleasantly of whisky.

"Mm, sausage for supper?" he said approvingly, sniffing at my hair, which smelled of kitchen smoke. "Good, I'm fair starved."

"Bangers and mash," I said. "Where have you been?"

He laughed, shaking out his plaid to get the blown snow off. "Bangers and mash? That's food, is it?"

"Sausages with mashed potatoes," I translated. "A nice traditional English dish, hitherto unknown in the benighted reaches of Scotland. Now, you bloody Scot, where in hell have you been for the last two days? Jenny and I were worried!"

"Well, we had a wee accident—" Jamie began, when he spotted the small figure of Fergus, bearing a lantern. "Och, ye've brought a light, then, Fergus? Good lad. Set it there, where ye won't set fire to the straw, and then take this poor beast into her stall. When ye've got her settled, come along to your own supper. You'll be able to sit to it by now, I expect?" He aimed a friendly cuff at Fergus's ear. The boy dodged and grinned back; apparently whatever had happened in the barn yesterday had left no hard feelings.

“Jamie,” I said, in measured tones. “If you don’t stop talking about horses and sausages and tell me what sort of accident you had, I am going to kick you in the shins. Which will be very hard on my toes, because I’m only wearing slippers, but I warn you, I’ll do it anyway.”

“That’s a threat, is it?” he said, laughing. “It wasna serious, Sassenach, only that—”

“Ian!” Jenny, delayed momentarily by Maggie, had just arrived, in time to see her husband step into the circle of lanternlight. Startled by the shock in her voice, I turned to see her dart forward and put a hand to Ian’s face.

“Whatever happened to ye, man?” she said. Plainly, whatever the accident had been, Ian had borne the brunt of it. One eye was blackened and swollen half-shut, and there was a long, raw scrape down the slope of one cheekbone.

“I’m all right, *mi dhu*,” he said, patting Jenny gently as she embraced him, little Maggie squeezed uncomfortably between them. “Only a bit bruised here and there.”

“We were comin’ down the slope of the hill two miles outside the village, leading the horses because the footing was bad, and Ian stepped in a molehole and broke his leg,” Jamie explained.

“The wooden one,” Ian amplified. He grinned, a little sheepishly. “The mole had a bit the best o’ that encounter.”

“So we stayed at a cottage nearby long enough to carve him a new one,” Jamie ended the story. “Can we eat? The sides of my belly are flapping together.”

We went in without further ado, and Mrs. Crook and I served the supper while Jenny bathed Ian’s face with witch hazel and made anxious inquiries about other injuries.

“It’s nothing,” he assured her. “Only bruises here and there.” I had watched him coming into the house, though, and seen that his normal limp was badly exaggerated. I had a few quiet words with Jenny as we cleared away the supper plates, and once we were settled in the parlor, the contents of the saddlebags safely disposed of, she knelt on the rug beside Ian and took hold of the new leg.

“Let’s have it off, then,” she said firmly. “You’ve hurt yourself, and I want Claire to look it over. She can maybe help ye more than I can.”

The original amputation had been done with some skill, and greater luck; the army surgeon who had taken the lower leg off had been able to save the knee joint. This gave Ian a great deal more flexibility of movement than he might otherwise have had. For the moment, though, the knee joint was more a liability than an advantage.

The fall had twisted his leg cruelly; the end of the stump was blue with bruising, and lacerated where the sharp edge of the cuff had pressed through the skin. It must have been agony to set any weight on it, even had all else been normal. As it was, the knee had twisted, too, and the flesh on the inside of the joint was swollen, red and hot.

Ian’s long, good-natured face was nearly as red as the injured joint. While perfectly matter-of-fact about his disability, I knew he hated the occasional helplessness it imposed. His embarrassment at being so exposed now was likely as painful to him as my touching of his leg.

“You’ve torn a ligament through here,” I told him, tracing the swelling inside his knee with a gentle finger. “I can’t tell how bad it is, but bad enough. You’ve got fluid inside the joint; that’s why it’s swollen.”

“Can ye help it, Sassenach?” Jamie was leaning over my shoulder, frowning worriedly at the angry-looking limb.

I shook my head. “Not a lot I can do for it, beyond cold compresses to reduce the swelling.” I looked up at Ian, fixing him with my best approximation of a Mother Hildegarde look.

“What *you* can do,” I said, “is stay in bed. You can have whisky for the pain tomorrow; tonight, I’ll give you laudanum so you can sleep. Keep off it for a week, at least, and we’ll see how it does.”

“I canna do that!” Ian protested. “There’s the stable wall needs mending, two dikes down in the upper field, and the ploughshares to be sharpened, and—”

“And a leg to mend, too,” said Jamie, firmly. He gave Ian what I privately called his “laird’s look,” a piercing blue glare that caused most people to leap to his bidding. Ian, who had shared meals, toys, hunting expeditions, fights, and thrashings with Jamie, was a good deal less susceptible than most people.

“The hell I will,” he said flatly. His hot brown eyes met Jamie’s with a look in which pain and anger mingled with resentment—and something else I didn’t recognize. “D’ye think ye can order me?”

Jamie sat back on his heels, flushing as though he’d been slapped. He bit back several obvious retorts, finally saying quietly, “No. I wilna try to order ye. May I ask ye, though—to care for yourself?”

A long look passed between the men, containing some message I couldn’t read. At last, Ian’s shoulders slumped as he relaxed, and he nodded, with a crooked smile.

“You can ask.” He sighed, and rubbed at the scrape on his cheekbone, wincing as he touched the abraded skin. He took a deep breath, steeling himself, then held out a hand to Jamie. “Help me up, then?”

It was an awkward job, getting a man with one leg up two flights of stairs, but it was managed at last. At the bedroom door, Jamie left Ian to Jenny. As he stepped back, Ian said something soft and quick to Jamie in Gaelic. I still was not proficient in the tongue, but I thought he had said, “Be well, brother.”

Jamie paused, looking back, and smiled, the candle lighting his eyes with warmth.

“You, too, *mo brathair*.”

I followed Jamie down the hall to our own room. I could tell from the slump of his shoulders that he was tired, but I had a few questions I wanted to ask before he fell asleep.

“It’s only bruises here and there,” Ian had said, reassuring Jenny. It was. Here and there. Besides the bruises on his face and leg, I had seen the darkened marks that lay half-hidden under the collar of his shirt. No matter how much Ian’s intrusion had been resented, I couldn’t imagine a mole trying to strangle him in retaliation.

In the event, Jamie didn't want to sleep at once.

"Oh, absence makes the heart grow fonder, does it?" I said. The bed, so vast the night before, now seemed scarcely big enough.

"Mm?" he said, eyes half-closed in content. "Oh, the heart? Aye, that, too. Oh, God, don't stop; that feels wonderful."

"Don't worry, I'll do it some more," I assured him. "Let me put out the candle, though." I rose and blew it out; with the shutters left open, there was plenty of light reflected into the room from the snowy sky, even without the candle's flame. I could see Jamie clearly, the long shape of his body relaxed beneath the quilts, hands curled half-open at his side. I crawled in beside him and took up his right hand, resuming my slow massage of his fingers and palm.

He gave a long sigh, almost a groan, as I rubbed a thumb in firm circles over the pads at the base of his fingers. Stiffened by hours of clenching around his horse's reins, the fingers warmed and relaxed slowly under my touch. The house was quiet, and the room cold, outside the sanctuary of the bed. It was pleasant to feel the length of his body warming the space beside me, and enjoy the intimacy of touch, with no immediate feeling of demand. In time, this touch might token more; it was winter, and the nights were long. He was there; so was I, and content with things as they were for the moment.

"Jamie," I said, after a time, "who hurt Ian?"

He didn't open his eyes, but gave a long sigh before answering. He didn't stiffen in resistance, though; he had been expecting the question.

"I did," he said.

"What?" I dropped his hand in shock. He closed his fist and opened it, testing the movement of his fingers. Then he laid his left hand on the counter-pane beside it, showing me the knuckles, slightly puffed by contact with the protuberances of Ian's bony countenance.

"Why?" I said, appalled. I could tell that there was something new and edgy between Jamie and Ian, though it didn't look exactly like hostility. I couldn't imagine what might have made Jamie strike Ian;

his brother-in-law was nearly as close to him as was his sister, Jenny.

Jamie's eyes were open now, but not looking at me. He rubbed his knuckles restlessly, looking down at them. Aside from the mild bruising of his knuckles, there were no marks on Jamie; apparently Ian hadn't fought back.

"Well, Ian's been married too long," he said defensively.

"I'd say you'd been out in the sun too long," I remarked, staring at him, "except that there isn't any. Have you got a fever?"

"No," he said, evading my attempts to feel his forehead. "No, it's only—stop that, Sassenach, I'm all right." He pressed his lips together, but then gave up and told me the whole story.

Ian had in fact broken his wooden leg by stepping into a molehole near Broch Mordha.

"It was near evening—we'd had a lot to do in the village—and snowing. And I could see Ian's leg was paining him a lot, even though he kept insisting he could ride. Anyway, there were two or three cottages near, so I got him up on one of the ponies, and brought him up the slope to beg shelter for the night."

With characteristic Highland hospitality, both shelter and supper were offered with alacrity, and after a warm bowl of brose and fresh oatcake, both visitors had been accommodated with a pallet before the fire.

"There was scarce room to lay a quilt by the hearth, and we were squeezed a bit, but we lay down side by side and made ourselves as comfortable as might be." He drew a deep breath, and looked at me half-shyly.

"Well, I was worn out by the journey, and slept deep, and I suppose Ian did the same. But he's slept every night wi' Jenny for the last five years, and I suppose, havin' a warm body next to him in the bed—well, somewhere in the night, he rolled toward me, put his arm about me and kissed me on the back o' the neck. And I"—he hesitated, and I could see the deep color flood his face, even in the grayish light of the snow-lit room—"I woke from a sound sleep, thinking he was Jack Randall."

I had been holding my breath through this story; now I let it out slowly.

“That must have been the hell of a shock,” I said.

One side of Jamie’s mouth twitched. “It was the hell of a shock to Ian, I’ll tell ye,” he said. “I rolled over and punched him in the face, and by the time I came all the way to myself, I was on top of him, throttling him, wi’ his tongue sticking out of his head. Hell of a shock to the Murrays in the bed, too,” he added reflectively. “I told them I’d had a nightmare—well, I had, in a way—but it caused the hell of a stramash, what wi’ the bairns shriekin’, and Ian choking in the corner, and Mrs. Murray sittin’ bolt upright in bed, sayin’ ‘Who, who?’ like a wee fat owl.”

I laughed despite myself at the image.

“Oh God, Jamie. Was Ian all right?”

Jamie shrugged a little. “Well, ye saw him. Everyone went back to sleep, after a time, and I just lay before the fire for the rest of the night, staring at the roof beams.” He didn’t resist as I picked up his left hand, gently stroking the bruised knuckles. His fingers closed over mine, holding them.

“So when we left the next morning,” he went on, “I waited ’til we’d come to a spot where ye can sit and look over the valley below. And then”—he swallowed, and his hand tightened slightly on mine—“I told him. About Randall. And everything that happened.”

I began to understand the ambiguity of the look Ian had given Jamie. And I now understood the look of strain on Jamie’s face, and the smudges under his eyes. Not knowing what to say, I just squeezed his hands.

“I hadna thought I’d ever tell anyone—anyone but you,” he added, returning the squeeze. He smiled briefly, then pulled one hand away to rub his face.

“But Ian … well, he’s …” He groped for the right word. “He *knows* me, d’ye see?”

“I think so. You’ve known him all your life, haven’t you?”

He nodded, looking sightlessly out the window. The swirling snow had begun to fall again, small flakes dancing against the pane, whiter than the sky.

"He's only a year older than me. When I was growing, he was always there. Until I was fourteen, there wasna a day went by when I didna see Ian. And even later, after I'd gone to foster wi' Dougal, and to Leoch, and then later still to Paris, to university—when I'd come back, I'd walk round a corner and there he would be, and it would be like I'd never left. He'd just smile when he saw me, like he always did, and then we'd be walkin' away together, side by side, ower the fields and the streams, talkin' of everything." He sighed deeply, and rubbed a hand through his hair.

"Ian … he's the part of me that belongs here, that never left," he said, struggling to explain. "I thought … I must tell him; I didna want to feel … apart. From Ian. From here." He gestured toward the window, then turned toward me, eyes dark in the dim light. "D'ye see why?"

"I think so," I said again, softly. "Did Ian?"

He made that small, uncomfortable shrugging motion, as though easing a shirt too tight across his back. "Well, I couldna tell. At first, when I began to tell him, he just kept shaking his head, as though he couldna believe me, and then when he did—" He paused and licked his lips, and I had some idea of just how much that confession in the snow had cost him. "I could see he wanted to jump to his feet and stamp back and forth, but he couldn't, because of his leg. His fists were knotted up, and his face was white, and he kept saying 'How? Damn ye, Jamie, *how* could ye let him do it?' "

He shook his head. "I dinna remember what I said. Or what he said. We shouted at each other, I know that much. And I wanted to hit him, but I couldn't, because of his leg. And he wanted to hit me, but couldn't—because of his leg." He gave a brief snort of laughter. "Christ, we must ha' looked a rare pair of fools, wavin' our arms and shouting at each other. But I shouted longer, and finally he shut up and listened to the end of it.

"Then all of a sudden, I couldna go on talking; it just seemed like no use. And I sat down all at once on a rock, and put my head in my hands. Then after a time, Ian said we'd best be going on. And I nodded, and got up, and helped him on his horse, and we started off again, not speakin' to each other."

Jamie seemed suddenly to realize how tightly he was holding my hand. He released his grip, but continued to hold my hand, turning my wedding ring between his thumb and forefinger.

"We rode for a long time," he said softly. "And then I heard a small sound behind me, and reined up so Ian's horse came alongside, and I could see he'd been weeping—still was, wi' the tears streaming down his face. And he saw me look at him, and shook his head hard, as if he was still angry, but then he held out his hand to me. I took it, and he gave me a squeeze, hard enough to break the bones. Then he let go, and we came on home."

I could feel the tension go out of him, with the ending of the story. "Be well, brother," Ian had said, balanced on his one leg in the bedroom door.

"It's all right, then?" I asked.

"It will be." He relaxed completely now, sinking back into the goose-down pillows. I slid down under the quilts beside him, and lay close, fitted against his side. We watched the snow fall, hissing softly against the glass.

"I'm glad you're safe home," I said.

* * *

I woke to the same gray light in the morning. Jamie, already dressed for the day, was standing by the window.

"Oh, you're awake, Sassenach?" he said, seeing me lift my head from the pillow. "That's good. I brought ye a present."

He reached into his sporran and pulled out several copper doits, two or three small rocks, a short stick wrapped with fishline, a crumpled letter, and a tangle of hair ribbons.

"Hair ribbons?" I said. "Thank you; they're lovely."

"No, those aren't for you," he said, frowning as he disentanged the blue strands from the mole's foot he carried as a charm against rheumatism. "They're for wee Maggie." He squinted dubiously at the rocks remaining in his palm. To my astonishment, he picked one up and licked it.

"No, not that one," he muttered, and dived back into his sporran.

"What on earth do you think you're doing?" I inquired with interest, watching this performance. He didn't answer, but came out with another handful of rocks, which he sniffed at, discarding them one by one until he came to a nodule that struck his fancy. This one he licked once, for certainty, then dropped it into my hand, beaming.

"Amber," he said, with satisfaction, as I turned the irregular lump over with a forefinger. It seemed warm to the touch, and I closed my hand over it, almost unconsciously.

"It needs polishing, of course," he explained. "But I thought it would make ye a bonny necklace." He flushed slightly, watching me. "It's … it's a gift for our first year of marriage. When I saw it, I was minded of the bit of amber Hugh Munro gave ye, when we wed."

"I still have that," I said softly, caressing the odd little lump of petrified tree sap. Hugh's chunk of amber, one side sheared off and polished into a small window, had a dragonfly embedded in the matrix, suspended in eternal flight. I kept it in my medicine box, the most powerful of my charms.

A gift for our first anniversary. We had married in June, of course, not in December. But on the date of our first anniversary, Jamie had been in the Bastille, and I … I had been in the arms of the King of France. No time for a celebration of wedded bliss, that.

"It's nearly Hogmanay," Jamie said, looking out the window at the soft snowfall that blanketed the fields of Lallybroch. "It seems a good time for beginnings, I thought."

"I think so, too." I got out of bed and came to him at the window, putting my arms around his waist. We stayed locked together, not speaking, until my eye suddenly fell on the other small, yellowish lumps that Jamie had removed from his sporran.

"What on earth are those things, Jamie?" I asked, letting go of him long enough to point.

"Och, those? They're honey balls, Sassenach." He picked up one of the objects, dusting at it with his fingers. "Mrs. Gibson in the village gave them to me. Verra good, though they got a bit dusty in my sporran, I'm afraid." He held out his open hand to me, smiling. "Want one?"

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THE POSTMAN ALWAYS RINGS TWICE

I didn't know what—or how much—Ian had told Jenny of his conversation in the snow with Jamie. She behaved toward her brother just as always, matter-of-fact and acerbic, with a slight touch of affectionate teasing. I had known her long enough, though, to realize that one of Jenny's greatest gifts was her ability to see something with utter clarity—and then to look straight through it, as though it wasn't there.

The dynamics of feeling and behavior shifted among the four of us during the months, and settled into a pattern of solid strength, based on friendship and founded in work. Mutual respect and trust were simply a necessity; there was so much to be done.

As Jenny's pregnancy progressed, I took on more and more of the domestic duties, and she deferred to me more often. I would never try to usurp her place; she had been the axis of the household since the death of her mother, and it was to her that the servants or tenants most frequently came. Still, they grew used to me, treating me with a friendly respect which bordered sometimes on acceptance, and sometimes on awe.

The spring was marked first by the planting of an enormous crop of potatoes; over half the available land was given to the new crop—a decision justified within weeks by a hailstorm that flattened the new-sprung barley. The potato vines, creeping low and stolid over the ground, survived.

The second event of the spring was the birth of a second daughter, Katherine Mary, to Jenny and Ian. She arrived with a suddenness that startled everyone, including Jenny. One day Jenny complained of an aching back and went to lie down. Very shortly it became clear what was really happening, and Jamie went posthaste for Mrs. Martins, the midwife. The two of them arrived back just in time to share in a celebratory glass of wine as the thin, high squalls of the new arrival echoed through the halls of the house.

And so the year burgeoned and greened, and I bloomed, the last of my hurts healing in the heart of love and work.

Letters arrived irregularly; sometimes there would be mail once a week, sometimes nothing would come for a month or more. Considering the lengths to which messengers had to go to deliver mail in the Highlands, I thought it incredible that anything ever arrived.

Today, though, there was a large packet of letters and books, wrapped against the weather in a sheet of oiled parchment, tied with twine. Sending the postal messenger to the kitchen for refreshment, Jenny untied the string carefully and thriftily stowed it in her pocket. She thumbed through the small pile of letters, putting aside for the moment an enticing-looking package addressed from Paris.

"A letter for Ian—that'll be the bill for the seed, I expect, and one from Auntie Jocasta—oh, good, we've not heard from her in months, I thought she might be ill, but I see her hand is firm on the pen—"

A letter addressed with bold black strokes fell onto Jenny's pile, followed by a note from one of Jocasta's married daughters. Then another for Ian from Edinburgh, one for Jamie from Jared—I recognized the spidery, half-legible writing—and another, a thick, creamy sheet, sealed with the Royal crest of the House of Stuart. Another of Charles's complaints about the rigors of life in Paris, and the pains of intermittently requited love, I imagined. At least this one looked short; usually he went on for several pages, unburdening his soul to "*cher* James," in a misspelled quadrilingual patois that at least made it clear he sought no secretarial help for his personal letters.

“Ooh, three French novels and a book of poetry from Paris!” Jenny said in excitement, opening the paper-wrapped package. “*C’est un embarras de richesse*, hm? Which shall we read tonight?” She lifted the small stack of books from their wrappings, stroking the soft leather cover of the top one with a forefinger that trembled with delight. Jenny loved books with the same passion her brother reserved for horses. The manor boasted a small library, in fact, and if the evening leisure between work and bed was short, still it usually included at least a few minutes’ reading.

“It gives ye something to think on as ye go about your work,” Jenny explained, when I found her one night swaying with weariness, and urged her to go to bed, rather than stay up to read aloud to Ian, Jamie, and myself. She yawned, fist to her mouth. “Even if I’m sae tired I hardly see the words on the page, they’ll come back to me next day, churning or spinning or waulkin’ wool, and I can turn them over in my mind.”

I hid a smile at the mention of wool waulking. Alone among the Highland farms, I was sure, the women of Lallybroch waulked their wool not only to the old traditional chants but also to the rhythms of Molière and Piron.

I had a sudden memory of the waulking shed, where the women sat in two facing rows, barefooted and bare-armed in their oldest clothes, bracing themselves against the walls as they thrust with their feet against the long, sodden worm of woolen cloth, battering it into the tight, felted weave that would repel Highland mists and even light rain, keeping the wearer safe from the chill.

Every so often one woman would rise and go outside, to fetch the kettle of steaming urine from the fire. Skirts kilted high, she would walk spraddle-legged down the center of the shed, drenching the cloth between her legs, and the hot fumes rose fresh and suffocating from the soaking wool, while the waulkers pulled back their feet from random splashes, and made crude jokes.

“Hot piss sets the dye fast,” one of the women had explained to me as I blinked, eyes watering, on my first entrance to the shed. The other women had watched at first, to see if I would shrink back from the work, but wool-waulking was no great shock, after the things I had seen and done in France, both in the war of 1944 and the hospital of 1744. Time makes very little difference to the basic realities of life. And smell aside, the waulking shed was a warm, cozy place, where the women of Lallybroch visited and joked between bolts of cloth, and sang together in the working, hands moving rhythmically across a table, or bare feet sinking deep into the steaming fabric as we sat on the floor, thrusting against a partner thrusting back.

I was pulled back from my memories of wool-waulking by the noise of heavy boots in the hallway, and a gust of cool, rainy air as the door opened. Jamie, and Ian with him, talking together in Gaelic, in the comfortable, unemphatic manner that meant they were discussing farm matters.

"That field's going to need draining next year," Jamie was saying as he came past the door. Jenny, seeing them, had put down the mail and gone to fetch fresh linen towels from the chest in the hallway.

"Dry yourselves before ye come drip on the rug," she ordered, handing one to each of the men. "And tak' off your filthy boots, too. The post's come, Ian—there's a letter for ye from that man in Perth, the one ye wrote to about the seed potatoes."

"Oh, aye? I'll come read it, then, but is there aught to eat while I do it?" Ian asked, rubbing his wet head with the towel until the thick brown hair stood up in spikes. "I'm famished, and I can hear Jamie's belly garbeling from here."

Jamie shook himself like a wet dog, making his sister emit a small screech as the cold drops flew about the hall. His shirt was pasted to his shoulders and loose strands of rain-soaked hair hung in his eyes, the color of rusted iron.

I draped a towel around his neck. "Finish drying off, and I'll go fetch you something."

I was in the kitchen when I heard him cry out. I had never heard such a sound from him before. Shock and horror were in it, and something else—a note of finality, like the cry of a man who finds himself seized in a tiger's jaws. I was down the hall and running for the drawing room without conscious thought, a tray of oatcakes still clutched in my hands.

When I burst through the door, I saw him standing by the table where Jenny had laid the mail. His face was dead white, and he swayed slightly where he stood, like a tree cut through, waiting for someone to shout "Timber" before falling.

"What?" I said, scared to death by the look on his face. "Jamie, what? What is it?!"

With a visible effort, he picked up one of the letters on the table and handed it to me.

I set down the oatcakes and took the sheet of paper, scanning it rapidly. It was from Jared; I recognized the thin, scrawly handwriting at once. " 'Dear Nephew,' " I read to myself, " '… so pleased … words cannot express my admiration … your boldness and courage will be an inspiration … cannot fail of success … my prayers shall be with you …' " I looked up from the paper, bewildered. "What on earth is he talking about? What have you done, Jamie?"

The skin was stretched tight across the bones of his face, and he grinned, mirthless as a death's-head, as he picked up another sheet of paper, this one a cheaply printed handbill.

"It's not what *I've* done, Sassenach," he said. The broadsheet was headed by the crest of the Royal House of Stuart. The message beneath was brief, couched in stately language.

It stated that by the ordination of Almighty God, King James, VIII of Scotland and III of England and Ireland asserted herewith his just rights to claim the throne of three kingdoms. And herewith acknowledged the support of these divine rights by the chieftains of the Highland clans, the Jacobite lords, and "various other such loyal subjects of His Majesty, King James, as have subscribed their names upon this Bill of Association in token thereof."

My fingers grew icy as I read, and I was conscious of a feeling of terror so acute that it was a real effort to keep on breathing. My ears rang with pounding blood, and there were dark spots before my eyes.

At the bottom of the sheet were signed the names of the Scottish chieftains who had declared their loyalty to the world, and staked their lives and reputations on the success of Charles Stuart. Clanranald was there, and Glengarry. Stewart of Appin, Alexander MacDonald of Keppoch, Angus MacDonald of Scotus.

And at the bottom of the list was written, "James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, of Broch Tuarach."

"Jesus bloody fucking Christ," I whispered, wishing there were something stronger I could say, as a form of relief. "The filthy bastard's signed your name to it!"

Jamie, still pale and tight-faced, was beginning to recover.

"Aye, he has," he said briefly. His hand snaked out for the unopened letter remaining on the table—a heavy vellum, with the Stuart crest showing plainly in the wax seal. Jamie ripped the letter open impatiently, tearing the paper. He read it quickly, then dropped it on the table as though it burned his hands.

"An apology," he said hoarsely. "For lacking the time to send me the document, in order that I might sign it myself. And his gratitude, for my loyal support. Jesus, Claire! What am I going to do?"

It was a cry from the heart, and one to which I had no answer. I watched helplessly as he sank onto a hassock and sat staring, rigid, at the fire.

Jenny, transfixed by all this drama, moved now to take up the letters and the broadsheet. She read them over carefully, her lips moving slightly as she did so, then set them gently down on the polished tabletop. She looked at them, frowning, then crossed to her brother, and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Jamie," she said. Her face was very pale. "There's only the one thing ye *can* do, my dearie. Ye must go and fight for Charles Stuart. Ye must help him win."

The truth of her words penetrated slowly through the layers of shock that wrapped me. The publication of this Bond of Association branded those who signed it as rebels, and as traitors to the English crown. It didn't matter now how Charles had managed, or where he had gotten the funds to begin; he was well and truly launched on the seas of rebellion, and Jamie—and I—were launched with him, willy-nilly. There was, as Jenny had said, no choice.

My eye caught Charles's letter, where it had fallen from Jamie's hand. "… Though there be manie who tell me I am foolish to embark in this werk without the support of Louis—or at least of his bankes!—I will entertain no notion at all of returning to that place from whence I come," it read. "Rejoice with me, my deare frend, for I am come Home."

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MOONLIGHT

As the preparations for leaving went forward, a current of excitement and speculation ran all through the estate. Weapons hoarded since the Rising of the ’15 were excavated from thatch and hayrick and hearth, burnished and sharpened. Men met in passing and paused to talk in earnest groups, heads together under the hot August sun. And the women grew quiet, watching them.

Jenny shared with her brother the capacity to be opaque, to give no clue of what she was thinking. Transparent as a pane of glass myself, I rather envied this ability. So, when she asked me one morning if I would fetch Jamie to her in the brewhouse, I had no notion of what she might want with him.

Jamie stepped in behind me and stood just within the door of the brewhouse, waiting as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. He took a deep breath, inhaling the bitter, damp pungency with evident enjoyment.

“Ahh,” he said, sighing dreamily. “I could get drunk in here just by breathing.”

“Weel, hold your breath, then, for a moment, for I need ye sober,” his sister advised.

He obligingly inflated his lungs and puffed out his cheeks, waiting. Jenny poked him briskly in the stomach with the handle of her masher, making him double over in an explosion of breath.

“Clown,” she said, without rancor. “I wanted to talk to ye about Ian.”

Jamie took an empty bucket from the shelf, and upturning it, sat down on it. A faint glow from the oiled-paper window above him lit his hair with a deep copper gleam.

"What about Ian?" he asked.

Now it was Jenny's turn to take a deep breath. The wide bran tub before her gave off a damp warmth of fermentation, filled with the yeasty aroma of grain, hops, and alcohol.

"I want ye to take Ian with you, when ye go."

Jamie's eyebrows flew up, but he didn't say anything immediately. Jenny's eyes were fixed on the motions of the masher, watching the smooth roil of the mixture. He looked at her thoughtfully, big hands hanging loose between his thighs.

"Tired of marriage, are ye?" he asked conversationally. "Likely it would be easier just for me to take him out in the wood and shoot him for ye." There was a quick flash of blue eyes over the mash tub.

"If I want anyone shot, Jamie Fraser, I'll do it myself. And Ian wouldna be my first choice as target, either."

He snorted briefly, and one corner of his mouth quirked up.

"Oh, aye? Why, then?"

Her shoulders moved in a seamless rhythm, one motion fading into the next.

"Because I'm asking ye."

Jamie spread his right hand out on his knee, absently stroking the jagged scar that zigzagged its way down his middle finger.

"It's dangerous, Jenny," he said quietly.

"I know that."

He shook his head slowly, still gazing down at his hand. It had healed well, and he had good use of it, but the stiff fourth finger and the roughened patch of scar tissue on the back gave it an odd, crooked appearance.

"You think ye know."

"I know, Jamie."

His head came up, then. He looked impatient, but was striving to stay reasonable.

"Aye, I know Ian will ha' told ye stories, about fighting in France, and all. But you've no notion how it really is, Jenny. *Mo cridh,* it isna a matter of a cattle raid. It's a war, and likely to be a damn bloody shambles of one, too. It's—"

The masher struck the side of the tub with a clack and fell back into the mash.

"Don't tell me I dinna ken what it's like!" Jenny blazed at him. "Stories, is it? Who d'ye think nursed Ian when he came home from France wi' half a leg and a fever that nearly killed him?"

She slapped her hand flat on the bench. The stretched nerves had snapped.

"Don't know? *I* don't know? *I* picked the maggots out of the raw flesh of his stump, because his own mother couldna bring herself to do it! *I* held the hot knife against his leg to seal the wound! *I* smelled his flesh searing like a roasted pig and listened to him scream while I did it! D'ye dare to stand there and tell me I … don't … KNOW how it is!"

Angry tears ran down her cheeks. She brushed at them, groping in her pocket for a handkerchief.

Lips pressed tight together, Jamie rose, pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve, and handed it to her. He knew better than to touch or try to comfort her. He stood staring at her for a moment as she wiped furiously at her eyes and dripping nose.

"Aye, well, ye know, then," he said. "And yet you want me to take him?"

"I do." She blew her nose and wiped it briskly, then tucked the handkerchief in her pocket.

"He kens well enough that he's crippled, Jamie. Kens it a good bit too well. But he could manage with ye. There's a horse for him; he wouldna have to walk."

He made an impatient gesture with one hand.

"Could he manage is no the question, is it? A man can do what he thinks he must—why do *you* think he must?"

Composed once more, she fished the tool out of the mash and shook it. Brown droplets spattered into the tub.

"He hasna asked ye, has he? Whether ye'll need him or no?"

"No."

She stabbed the masher back into the tub and resumed her work.

“He thinks ye wilna want him because he’s lame, and that he’d be no use to ye.” She looked up then, troubled dark-blue eyes the twins of her brother’s. “Ye knew Ian before, Jamie. He’s different now.”

He nodded reluctantly, resuming his seat on the bucket.

“Aye. Well, but ye’d expect it, no? And he seems well enough.” He looked up at his sister and smiled.

“He’s happy wi’ ye, Jenny. You and the bairns.”

She nodded, black curls bobbing.

“Aye, he is,” she said softly. “But that’s because he’s a whole man to me, and always will be.” She looked directly at her brother. “But if he thinks he’s of no use to you, he wilna be whole to himself. And that’s why I’ll have ye take him.”

Jamie laced his hands together, elbows braced on his knees, and rested his chin on his linked knuckles.

“This wilna be like France,” he said quietly. “Fighting there, ye risk no more than your life in battle. Here …” He hesitated, then went on. “Jenny, this is treason. If it goes wrong, those that follow the Stuarts are like to end on a scaffold.”

Her normally pale complexion went a shade whiter, but her motions didn’t slow.

“There’s nay choice for me,” he went on, eyes steady on her. “But will ye risk us both? Will ye have Ian look down from the gallows on the fire waiting for his entrails? You’ll chance raising your bairns wi’out their father—to save his pride?” His face was nearly as pale as hers, glimmering in the darkness of the brewhouse.

The strokes of the masher were slower now, without the fierce velocity of her earlier movements, but her voice held all the conviction of her slow, inexorable mashing.

“I’ll have a whole man,” she said steadily. “Or none.”

Jamie sat without moving for a long moment, watching his sister’s dark head bent over her work.

“All right,” he said at last, quietly. She didn’t look up or vary her movements, but the white kertch seemed to incline slightly toward him.

He sighed explosively, then rose and turned abruptly to me.

"Come on out of here, Sassenach," he said. "Christ, I *must* be drunk."

"What makes ye think you can order me about?" The vein in Ian's temple throbbed fiercely. Jenny's hand squeezed mine tighter.

Jamie's assertion that Ian would accompany him to join the Stuart army had been met first with incredulity, then with suspicion, and—as Jamie persisted—anger.

"You're a fool," Ian declared flatly. "I'm a cripple, and ye ken it well enough."

"I ken you're a bonny fighter, and there's none I'd rather have by my side in a battle," Jamie said firmly. His face gave no sign of doubts or hesitation; he had agreed to Jenny's request, and would carry it out, no matter what. "You've fought there often enough; will ye desert me now?"

Ian waved an impatient hand, dismissing this flattery. "That's as may be. If my leg comes off or gives way, there's precious little fighting I'll do—I'll be lyin' on the ground like a worm, waiting for the first Redcoat who comes by to spit me. And beyond that"—he scowled at his brother-in-law—"who d'ye think will mind this place for ye until you come back, and I'm off to the wars with ye?"

"Jenny," Jamie replied promptly. "I shall leave enough men behind that they can be seeing to the work; she can manage the accounts well enough."

Ian's brows shot up, and he said something very rude in Gaelic.

"*Pog ma mahon!* You'll ha' me leave her to run the place alone, wi' three small bairns at her apron, and but half the men needed? Man, ye've taken leave o' your senses!" Flinging up both hands, Ian swung around to the sideboard where the whisky was kept.

Jenny, seated next to me on the sofa with Katherine on her lap, made a small sound under her breath. Her hand sought mine under cover of our mingled skirts, and I squeezed her fingers.

"What makes ye think ye can order me about?"

Jamie eyed his brother-in-law's tense back for a moment, scowling. Suddenly, a muscle at the corner of his mouth twitched.

"Because I'm bigger than you are," he said belligerently, still scowling.

Ian rounded on him, incredulity stamped on his face. Indecision played in his eyes for less than a second. His shoulders squared up and his chin lifted.

"I'm older than you," he answered, with an identical scowl.

"I'm stronger."

"No, you're not!"

"Aye, I am!"

"No, *I* am!"

A vein of dead seriousness underlay the laughter in their voices; while this little confrontation might be passed off as all in fun, they were as intent on each other as they had ever been in youth or childhood, and the echoes of challenge rang in Jamie's voice as he ripped loose his cuff and jerked back the sleeve of his shirt.

"Prove it," he said. He cleared the chess table with a careless sweep of the hand, sat down and braced his elbow on the inlaid surface, fingers flexed for an offensive. Deep blue eyes glared up into Ian's dark-brown ones, hot with the same anger.

Ian took half a second to appraise the situation, then jerked his head in a brief nod of acceptance, making his heavy sheaf of dark hair flop into his eyes.

With calm deliberation, he brushed it back, unfastened his cuff, and rolled his sleeve to the shoulder, turn by turn, never taking his eyes from his brother-in-law.

From where I stood, I could see Ian's face, a little flushed under his tan, long, narrow chin set in determination. I couldn't see Jamie's face, but the determination was eloquently expressed by the line of back and shoulders.

The two men set their elbows carefully, maneuvering to find a good spot, rubbing back and forth with the point of the elbow to be sure the surface was not slippery.

With due ritual, Jamie spread his fingers, palm toward Ian. Ian carefully placed his own palm against it. The fingers matched, touching for a moment in a mirror image, then shifted, one to the right and one to the left, linked and clasping.

“Ready?” Jamie asked.

“Ready.” Ian’s voice was calm, but his eyes gleamed under the feathery brows.

The muscles tensed at once, all along the length of the two arms, springing into sharp definition as they shifted in their seats, seeking leverage.

Jenny caught my eye and rolled her eyes heavenward. Whatever she had been expecting of Jamie, it wasn’t this.

Both men were focused on the straining knot of fingers, to the exclusion of everything else. Both faces were deep red with exertion, sweat damping the hair on their temples, eyes bulging slightly with effort. Suddenly I saw Jamie’s gaze break from its concentration on the clenched fists as he saw Ian’s lips clamp tighter. Ian felt the shift, looked up, met Jamie’s eyes … and the two men burst into laughter.

The hands clung for a moment longer, locked in spasm, then fell apart.

“A draw, then,” said Jamie, pushing back a strand of sweat-damp hair. He shook his head good-naturedly at Ian.

“All right, man. If I could order ye, I wouldna do it. But I can ask, no? Will ye come with me?”

Ian dabbed at the side of his neck, where a runnel of sweat dampened his collar. His gaze roamed about the room, resting for a moment on Jenny. Her face was no paler than usual, but I could see the hasty pulse, beating just below the angle of her jaw. Ian stared at her intently as he rolled his sleeve down again, in careful turns. I could see a deep pink flush begin to rise from the neck of her gown.

Ian rubbed his jaw as though thinking, then turned toward Jamie and shook his head.

“No, my jo,” he said softly. “Ye need me here, and here I shall stay.” His eyes rested on Jenny, with Katherine held against her shoulder, and on small Maggie, clutching her mother’s skirt with grubby hands. And on me. Ian’s long mouth curled in a slight smile. “I shall stay here,” he repeated. “Guardin’ your weak side, man.”

* * *

“Jamie?”

"Aye?" The answer came at once; I knew he hadn't been asleep, though he lay still as a figure carved on a tomb. It was moon-bright in the room, and I could see his face when I rose on my elbow; he was staring upward, as though he could see beyond the heavy beams to the open night and the stars beyond.

"You aren't going to try to leave me behind, are you?" I wouldn't have thought of asking were it not for the scene with Ian, earlier in the evening. For once it was settled that Ian would stay, Jamie had sat down with him to issue orders—choosing who would march with the laird to the aid of the Prince, who would stay behind to tend to animals and pasture and the maintenance of Lallybroch.

I knew it had been a wrenching process of decision, though he gave no sign of it, calmly discussing with Ian whether Ross the smith could be spared to go and deciding that he could, though the ploughshares needed for the spring must all be in good repair before leaving. Whether Joseph Fraser Kirby might go, and deciding that he should not, as he was the main support not only of his own family but that of his widowed sister. Brendan was the oldest boy of both families, and at nine, ill-prepared to replace his father, should Joseph not come home.

It was a matter for the most delicate planning. How many men should go, to have some impact on the course of the war? For Jenny was right, Jamie had no choice now—no choice but to help Charles Stuart win. And to that end, as many men and arms as could possibly be summoned should be thrown into the cause.

But on the other side was me, and my deadly knowledge—and lack of it. We had succeeded in preventing Charles Stuart from getting money to finance his rebellion; and still the Bonnie Prince, reckless, feckless, and determined to claim his legacy, had landed to rally the clans at Glenfinnan. From a further letter from Jared, we had learned that Charles had crossed the Channel with two small frigates, provided by one Antoine Walsh, a sometime-slaver with an eye for opportunity. Apparently, he saw Charles's venture as less risky than a slaving expedition, a gamble in which he might or might not be justified. One frigate had been waylaid by the English; the other had landed Charles safe on the isle of Eriskay.

Charles had landed with only seven companions, including the owner of a small bank named Aeneas MacDonald. Unable to finance an entire expedition, MacDonald had provided the funds for a small stock of broadswords, which constituted Charles's entire armament. Jared sounded simultaneously admiring and horrified by the recklessness of the venture, but, loyal Jacobite that he was, did his best to swallow his misgivings.

And so far, Charles had succeeded. From the Highland grapevine, we learned that he had landed at Eriskay, crossed to Glenfinnan, and there waited, accompanied only by several large casks of brandywine, to see whether the clans would answer the call to his standard. And after what must have been several nerve-racking hours, three hundred men of clan Cameron had come down the defiles of the steep green hills, led not by their chieftain, who was away from his home—but by his sister, Jenny Cameron.

The Camerons had been the first, but they had been joined by others, as the Bill of Association showed.

If Charles should now proceed to disaster, despite all efforts, then how many men of Lallybroch could be spared, left at home to save something from the wreck?

Ian himself would be safe; that much was sure, and some balm to Jamie's spirit. But the others—the sixty families who lived on Lallybroch? Choosing who would go and who would stay must seem in some lights like choosing men for sacrifice. I had seen commanders before; the men whom war forced to make such choices—and I knew what it cost them.

Jamie had done it—he had no choice—but on two matters he had held firm; no women would accompany his troop, and no lads under eighteen years of age would go. Ian had looked mildly surprised at this—while most women with young children would normally stay behind, it was far from unusual for Highland wives to follow their men to battle, cooking and caring for them, and sharing the army's rations. And the lads, who considered themselves men at fourteen, would be grossly humiliated at being omitted from the tally. But Jamie had given his orders in a tone that brooked no argument, and

Ian, after a moment's hesitation, had merely nodded and written them down.

I hadn't wanted to ask him, in the presence of Ian and Jenny, whether his ban on womenfolk was intended to include me. Because, whether it was or not, I was going with him, and that, I thought, was bloody all about it.

"Leave you behind?" he said now, and I saw his mouth curl into a sideways grin. "D'ye think I'd stand a chance of it?"

"No," I said, snuggling next to him in sudden relief. "You wouldn't. But I thought you might think about it."

He gave a small snort, and drew me down, head on his shoulder. "Oh, aye. And if I thought I could leave ye, I'd chain ye to the banister; not much else would stop ye." I could feel his head shake above me, in negation. "No. I must take ye wi' me, Sassenach, whether I will or no. There are things you'll maybe know along the way—even if they dinna seem like anything now, they may later. And you're a rare fine healer, Sassenach—I canna deny the men your skill, and it be needed."

His hand patted my shoulder, and he sighed. "I would give anything, *mo duinne,* could I leave ye here safe, but I cannot. So you will go with me—you and Fergus."

"Fergus?" I was surprised by this. "But I thought you wouldn't take any of the younger lads!"

He sighed again, and I put my hand flat on the center of his chest, where his heart beat beneath the small hollow, slow and steady.

"Well, Fergus is a bit different. The other lads—I willna take them, because they belong here; if it all goes to smash, they'll be left to keep their families from starving, to work the fields and tend beasts. They'll likely need to grow up fast, if it happens, but at least they'll be here to do it. But Fergus … this isna his place, Sassenach. Nor is France, or I would send him back. But he has no place there, either."

"His place is with you," I said softly, understanding. "Like mine."

He was silent for a long time, then his hand squeezed me gently.

"Aye, that's so," he said quietly. "Sleep now, *mo duinne,* it's late."

The fretful wail pulled me toward the surface of wakefulness for the third time. Baby Katherine was teething, and didn't care who knew it. From their room down the hall, I heard Ian's sleepy mumble, and Jenny's higher voice, resigned, as she got out of bed and went to soothe the infant.

Then I heard the soft, heavy footfalls in the corridor, and realized that Jamie, still wakeful, was walking barefoot through the house.

"Jenny?" His voice, low-pitched to avoid disturbance, was still plainly audible in the creaking silence of the manor house,

"I heard the wee lassie greetin'," he said. "If she canna sleep, neither can I, but you can. If she's fed and dry, perhaps we can bear each other company for a bit, while you go back to your bed."

Jenny smothered a yawn, and I could hear the smile in her voice.

"Jamie dear, you're a mother's blessing. Aye, she's full as a drum, and a dry clout on her this minute. Take her, and I wish ye joy of each other." A door closed, and I heard the heavy footfall again, heading back toward our room, and the low murmur of Jamie's voice as he muttered soothingly to the baby.

I snuggled deeper into the comfort of the goose-down bed and turned toward sleep again, hearing with half an ear the baby's whining, interspersed with hiccuping sobs, and Jamie's deep, tuneless humming, the sound as comforting as the thought of beehives in the sun.

"Eh, wee Kitty, *ciamar a tha thu? Much, mo naoidheachan, much*."

The sound of them went up and down the passage, and I dropped further toward sleep, but kept half-wakeful on purpose to hear them. One day perhaps he would hold his own child so, small round head cradled in the big hands, small solid body cupped and held firm against his shoulder. And thus he would sing to his own daughter, a tuneless song, a warm, soft chant in the dark.

The constant small ache in my heart was submerged in a flood of tenderness. I had conceived once; I could do so again. Faith had given me the gift of that knowledge, Jamie the courage and means to use it. My hands rested lightly on my breasts, cupping the deep swell of them, knowing beyond doubt that one day they would nourish the child of my heart. I drifted into sleep with the sound of Jamie's singing in my ears.

Sometime later I drifted near the surface again, and opened my eyes to the light-filled room. The moon had risen, full and beaming, and all the objects in the room were plainly visible, in that flat, two-dimensional way of things seen without shadow.

The baby had quieted, but I could hear Jamie's voice in the hall, still speaking, but much more quietly, hardly more than a murmur. And the tone of it had changed; it wasn't the rhythmic, half-nonsense way one talks to babies, but the broken, halting speech of a man seeking the way through the wilderness of his own heart.

Curious, I slipped out of bed and crept quietly to the door. I could see them there at the end of the hall. Jamie sat leaning back against the side of the window seat, wearing only his shirt. His bare legs were raised, forming a back against which small Katherine Mary rested as she sat facing him in his lap, her own chubby legs kicking restlessly over his stomach.

The baby's face was blank and light as the moon's, her eyes dark pools absorbing his words. He traced the curve of her cheek with one finger, again and again, whispering with heartbreaking gentleness.

He spoke in Gaelic, and so low that I could not have told what he said, even had I known the words. But the whispering voice was thick, and the moonlight from the casement behind him showed the tracks of the tears that slid unregarded down his own cheeks.

It was not a scene that bore intrusion. I came back to the still-warm bed, holding in my mind the picture of the laird of Lallybroch, half-naked in the moonlight, pouring out his heart to an unknown future, holding in his lap the promise of his blood.

* * *

When I woke in the morning, there was a warm, unfamiliar scent next to me, and something tangled in my hair. I opened my eyes to find Katherine Mary's rosebud lips smacking dreamily an inch from my nose, her fat fingers clutched in the hair above my left ear. I cautiously disengaged myself, and she stirred, but flopped over onto her stomach, drew her knees up and went back to sleep.

Jamie was lying on the other side of the child, face half-buried in his pillow. He opened one eye, clear blue as the morning sky.

"Good morning, Sassenach," he said, speaking quietly so as not to disturb the small sleeper. He smiled at me as I sat up in bed. "Ye looked verra sweet, the two of you, asleep face-to-face like that."

I ran a hand through my tangled hair, and smiled myself at Kitty's upturned bottom, jutting absurdly into the air.

"That doesn't look at all comfortable," I observed. "But she's still asleep, so it can't be that bad. How late were you up with her last night? I didn't hear you come to bed."

He yawned and ran a hand through his hair, smoothing it away from his face. There were shadows under his eyes, but he seemed peacefully content.

"Oh, some time. Before moonset, at least. I didna want to wake Jenny by taking the wean back to her, so I laid her in the bed between us, and she didna twitch once, the rest of the night."

The baby was kneading the mattress with elbows and knees, rootling in the bedclothes with a low grunting noise. It must be close to time for her morning feed. This supposition was borne out in the next moment, when she raised her head, eyes still tight shut, and let out a healthy howl. I reached hastily for her and picked her up.

"There-there-there," I soothed, patting the straining little back. I swung my legs out of bed, then reached back and patted Jamie on the head. The rough bright hair was warm under my hand.

"I'll take her to Jenny," I said. "It's early yet; you sleep some more."

"I may do that, Sassenach," Jamie said, flinching at the noise. "I'll see ye at breakfast, shall I?" He rolled onto his back, crossed his hands on his chest in his favorite sleeping posture, and was breathing deeply again by the time Katherine Mary and I had reached the door.

The baby squirmed vigorously, rooting for a nipple and squawking in frustration when none was immediately forthcoming.

Hurrying along the hall, I met Jenny, hurrying out of her bedroom in response to her offspring's cries, pulling on a green dressing gown as she came. I held out the baby, waving little fists in urgent demand.

"There, *mo mùirninn*, hush now, hush," Jenny soothed. With a cock of the eyebrow in invitation, she took the child from me and turned back into her room.

I followed her in and sat on the rumpled bed as she sat down on a nursing stool by the hearth and hastily bared one breast. The yowling little mouth clamped at once on to a nipple and we all relaxed in relief as sudden silence descended.

"Ah," Jenny sighed. Her shoulders slumped a fraction as the flow of milk started. "That's better, my wee piggie, no?" She opened her eyes and smiled at me, eyes clear and blue as her brother's.

" 'Twas kind of ye to keep the lassie all night; I slept like the dead."

I shrugged, smiling at the picture of mother and child, relaxed together in total content. The curve of the baby's head exactly echoed the high, round curve of Jenny's breast and small, slurping noises came from the little bundle as her body sagged against her mother's, fitting easily into the curve of Jenny's lap.

"It was Jamie, not me," I said. "He and his niece seem to have got on well together." The picture of them came back to me, Jamie talking in earnest, low tones to the child, tears slipping down his face.

Jenny nodded, watching my face.

"Aye. I thought perhaps they'd comfort each other a bit. He doesna sleep well these days?" Her voice held a question.

"No," I answered softly. "He has a lot on his mind."

"Well he might," she said, glancing at the bed behind me. Ian was gone already, risen at dawn to see to the stock in the barn. The horses that could be spared from the farming—and some that couldn't—needed shoeing, needed harness, in preparation for their journey to rebellion.

"You can talk to a babe, ye ken," she said suddenly, breaking into my thought. "Really talk, I mean. Ye can tell them anything, no matter how foolish it would sound did ye say it to a soul could understand ye."

"Oh. You heard him, then?" I asked. She nodded, eyes on the curve of Katherine's cheek, where the tiny dark lashes lay against the fair skin, eyes closed in ecstasy.

"Aye. Ye shouldna worrit yourself," she added, smiling gently at me. "It isna that he feels he canna talk to you; he knows he can. But it's different to talk to a babe that way. It's a person; ye ken that you're not alone. But they dinna ken your words, and ye don't worry a bit what they'll think of ye, or what they may feel they must do. You can pour out your heart to them wi'out choosing your words, or keeping anything back at all—and that's a comfort to the soul."

She spoke matter-of-factly, as though this were something that everyone knew. I wondered whether she spoke that way often to her child. The generous wide mouth, so like her brother's, lifted slightly at one side.

"It's the way ye talk to them before they're born," she said softly. "You'll know?"

I placed my hands gently over my belly, one atop the other, remembering.

"Yes, I know."

She pressed a thumb against the baby's cheek, breaking the suction, and with a deft movement, shifted the small body to bring the full breast within reach.

"I've thought that perhaps that's why women are so often sad, once the child's born," she said meditatively, as though thinking aloud. "Ye think of them while ye talk, and you have a knowledge of them as they are inside ye, the way you think they are. And then they're born, and they're different—not the way ye thought of them inside, at all. And ye love them, o' course, and get to know them the way they are … but still, there's the thought of the child ye once talked to in your heart, and that child is gone. So I think it's the grievin' for the child unborn that ye feel, even as ye hold the born one in your arms." She dipped her head and kissed her daughter's downy skull.

"Yes," I said. "Before … it's all possibility. It might be a son, or a daughter. A plain child, a bonny one. And then it's born, and all the things it might have been are gone, because now it *is*."

She rocked gently back and forth, and the small clutching hand that seized the folds of green silk over her breast began to loose its grip.

"And a daughter is born, and the son that she might have been is dead," she said quietly. "And the bonny lad at your breast has killed the wee lassie ye thought ye carried. And ye weep for what you didn't know, that's gone for good, until you know the child you have, and then at last it's as though they could never have been other than they are, and ye feel naught but joy in them. But 'til then, ye weep easy."

"And men …" I said, thinking of Jamie, whispering secrets to the unhearing ears of the child.

"Aye. They hold their bairns, and they feel all the things that might be, and the things that will never be. But it isna so easy for a man to weep for the things he doesna ken."

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PART SIX

The Flames of Rebellion

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PRESTONPANS

Scotland, September 1745

Four days' march found us on the crest of a hill near Calder. A sizable moor stretched out at the foot of the hill, but we set up camp within the shelter of the trees above. There were two small streams cutting through the moss-covered rock of the hillside, and the crisp weather of early fall made it seem much more like picnicking than a march to war.

But it was the seventeenth of September, and if my sketchy knowledge of Jacobite history was correct, war it would be, in a matter of days.

"Tell it to me again, Sassenach," Jamie had said, for the dozenth time, as we made our way along the winding trails and dirt roads. I rode Donas, while Jamie walked alongside, but now slid down to walk beside him, to make conversation easier. While Donas and I had reached an understanding of sorts, he was the kind of horse that demanded your full concentration to ride; he was all too fond of scraping an unwary rider off by walking under low branches, for example.

"I told you before, I don't know that much," I said. "There was very little written about it in the history books, and I didn't pay a great deal of attention at the time. All I can tell you is that the battle was fought—er, *will* be fought—near the town of Preston, and so it's called the Battle of Prestonpans, though the Scots called—call—it the Battle of Gladsmuir, because of an old prophecy that the returning king will be victorious at Gladsmuir. Heaven knows where the real Gladsmuir is, if there is one."

"Aye. And?"

I furrowed my brow, trying to recall every last scrap of information. I could conjure a mental picture of the small, tattered brown copy of *A Child's History of England*, read by the flickering light of a kerosene lantern in a mud hut somewhere in Persia. Mentally flicking the pages, I could just recall the two-page section that was all the author had seen fit to devote to the second Jacobite Rising, known to historians as "the '45." And within that two-page section, the single paragraph dealing with the battle we were about to fight.

"The Scots win," I said helpfully.

"Well, that's the important point," he agreed, a bit sarcastically, "but it would be a bit of help to know a little more."

"If you wanted prophecy, you should have gotten a seer," I snapped, then relented. "I'm sorry. It's only that I don't *know* much, and it's very frustrating."

"Aye, it is." He reached down and took my hand, squeezing it as he smiled at me. "Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach. Ye canna say more than ye know, but tell me it all, just once more."

"All right." I squeezed back, and we walked on, hand in hand. "It was a remarkable victory," I began, reading from my mental page, "because the Jacobites were so greatly outnumbered. They surprised General Cope's army at dawn—they charged out of the rising sun, I remember that—and it was a rout. There were hundreds of casualties on the English side, and only a few from the Jacobite side—thirty men, that was it. Only thirty men killed."

Jamie glanced behind us, at the straggling tail of the Lallybroch men, strung out as they walked along the road, chatting and singing in small groups. Thirty men was what we had brought from Lallybroch. It didn't seem that small a number, looking at them. But I had seen the battlefields of Alsace-Lorraine, and the acres of meadowland converted to muddy boneyards by the burial of the thousands slain.

"Taken all in all," I said, feeling faintly apologetic, "I'm afraid it was really rather … unimportant, historically speaking."

Jamie blew out his breath through pursed lips, and looked down at me rather bleakly.

"Unimportant. Aye, well."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Not your fault, Sassenach."

But I couldn't help feeling that it was, somehow.

* * *

The men sat around the fire after their supper, lazily enjoying the feeling of full stomachs, exchanging stories and scratching. The scratching was endemic; close quarters and lack of hygiene made body lice so common as to excite no remark when one man detached a representative specimen from a fold of his plaid and tossed it into the fire. The louse flamed for an instant, one among the sparks of the fire, and then was gone.

The young man they called Kincaid—his name was Alexander, but there were so many Alexanders that most of them ended up being called by nicknames or middle names—seemed particularly afflicted with the scourge this evening. He dug viciously under one arm, into his curly brown hair, then—with a quick glance to see whether I was looking in his direction—at his crotch.

"Got 'em bad, have ye, lad?" Ross the smith observed sympathetically.

"Aye," he answered, "the wee buggers are eatin' me alive."

"Bloody hell to get out of your cock hairs," Wallace Fraser observed, scratching himself in sympathy. "Gives me the yeuk to watch ye, laddie."

"D'ye ken the best way to rid yourself o' the wee beasties?" Sorley McClure asked helpfully, and at Kincaid's negative shake of the head, leaned forward and carefully pulled a flaming stick from the fire.

"Lift your kilt a moment, laddie, and I'll smoke 'em out for ye," he offered, to catcalls and jeers of laughter from the men.

"Bloody farmer," Murtagh grumbled. "And what would ye know about it?"

"You know a better way?" Wallace raised thick brows skeptically, wrinkling the tanned skin of his balding forehead.

"O' course." He drew his dirk with a flourish. "The laddie's a soldier now; let him do it like a soldier does."

Kincaid's open face was guileless and eager. "How's that?"

"Weel, verra simple. Ye take your dirk, lift your plaidie, and shave off half the hairs on your crutch." He raised the dirk warningly. "Only half, mind."

"Half? Aye, well …" Kincaid looked doubtful, but was paying close attention. I could see the grins of anticipation broadening on the faces of the men around the fire, but no one was laughing yet.

"Then …" Murtagh gestured at Sorley and his stick. "*Then*, laddie, ye set the other half on fire, and when the beasties rush out, ye spear them wi' your dirk."

Kincaid blushed hotly enough to be seen even by firelight as the circle of men erupted in hoots and roars. There was a good deal of rude shoving as a couple of the men pretended to try the fire cure on each other, brandishing flaming billets of wood. Just as it seemed that the horseplay was getting out of hand, and likely to lead to blows in earnest, Jamie returned from hobbling the animals. He stepped into the circle, and tossed a stone bottle from under one arm to Kincaid. Another went to Murtagh, and the shoving died down.

"Ye're fools, the lot o' ye," he declared. "The second best way to rid yourself of lice is to pour whisky on them and get them drunk. When they've fallen down snoring, then ye stand up and they'll drop straight off."

"Second best, eh?" said Ross. "And what's the best way, sir, and I might ask?"

Jamie smiled indulgently round the circle, like a parent amused by the antics of his children.

"Why, let your wife pick them off ye, one by one." He cocked an elbow and bowed to me, one eyebrow raised. "If you'd oblige me, my lady?"

While put forward as a joke, individual removal was in fact the only effective method of ridding oneself of lice. I fine-combed my own hair—all of it—morning and evening, washed it with yarrow whenever we paused near water deep enough to bathe in, and had so far avoided any serious infestations. Aware that I would remain louseless only so long as Jamie did, I administered the same treatment to him, whenever I could get him to sit still long enough.

"Baboons do this all the time," I remarked, delicately disentangling a foxtail from his thick red mane. "But I believe they eat the fruits of their labors."

"Dinna let me prevent ye, Sassenach, and ye feel so inclined," he responded. He hunched his shoulders slightly in pleasure as the comb slid through the thick, glossy strands. The firelight filled my hands with a cascade of sparks and golden streaks of fire. "Mm. Ye wouldna think it felt so nice to have someone comb your hair for ye."

"Wait 'til I get to the rest of it," I said, tweaking him familiarly and making him giggle. "Tempted though I am to try Murtagh's suggestion instead."

"Touch my cock hairs wi' a torch, and you'll get the same treatment," he threatened. "What was it Louise de La Tour says bald lassies are?"

"Erotic." I leaned forward and nipped the upper flange of one ear between my teeth.

"Mmmphm."

"Well, tastes differ," I said. "*Chacun à son gout*, and all that."

"A bloody French sentiment, and I ever heard one."

"Isn't it, though?"

A loud, rolling growl interrupted my labors. I laid down the comb and peered ostentatiously into the tree-filled shadows.

"Either," I said, "there are bears in this wood, or … why haven't you eaten?"

"I was busy wi' the beasts," he answered. "One of the ponies has a cracked hoof and I had to bind it with a poultice. Not that I've so much appetite, what wi' all this talk of eating lice."

"What sort of poultice do you use on a horse's hoof?" I asked, ignoring this remark.

"Different things; fresh dung will do in a pinch. I used chewed vetch leaves mixed wi' honey this time."

The saddlebags had been dumped by our private fire, near the edge of the small clearing where the men had erected my tent. While I would have been willing to sleep under the stars, as they did, I admitted to a certain thankfulness for the small privacy afforded me by the sheet of canvas. And, as Murtagh had pointed out with his customary bluntness, when I thanked him for his assistance in erecting the shelter, the arrangement was not solely for *my* benefit.

"And if he takes his ease between your thighs of a night, there's none will grudge it to him," the little clansman had said, with a jerk of the head toward Jamie, deep in conversation with several of the other men. "But there's nay need to make the lads think ower-much o' things they canna have, now is there?"

"Quite," I said, with an edge to my voice. "Very thoughtful of you."

One of his rare smiles curled the corner of the thin-lipped mouth.

"Och, quite," he said.

A quick rummage through the saddlebags turned up a heel of cheese and several apples. I gave these to Jamie, who examined them dubiously.

"No bread?" he asked.

"There may be some in the other bag. Eat those first, though; they're good for you." He shared the Highlanders' innate suspicion of fresh fruit and vegetables, though his great appetite made him willing to eat almost anything in extremity.

"Mm," he said, taking a bite of one apple. "If ye say so, Sassenach."

"I do say so. Look." I pulled my lips back, baring my teeth. "How many women of my age do you know who still have all their teeth?"

A grin bared his own excellent teeth.

"Well, I'll admit you're verra well preserved, Sassenach, for such an auld crone."

“Well nourished, is what I am,” I retorted. “Half the people on your estate are suffering from mild scurvy, and from what I’ve seen on the road, it’s even worse elsewhere. It’s vitamin C that prevents scurvy, and apples are full of it.”

He took the apple away from his mouth and frowned at it suspiciously.

“They are?”

“Yes, they are,” I said firmly. “So are most other kinds of plants—oranges and lemons are best, but of course you can’t get those here—but onions, cabbage, apples … eat something like that every day, and you won’t get scurvy. Even green herbs and meadow grass have vitamin C.”

“Mmphm. And that’s why deer dinna lose their teeth as they get old?”

“I daresay.”

He turned the apple to and fro, examining it critically, then shrugged.

“Aye, well,” he said, and took another bite.

I had just turned to fetch the bread when a faint crackling sound drew my attention. I caught sight from the corner of my eye of shadowy movement in the darkness and the firelight flashed from something near Jamie’s head. I whirled toward him, shouting, just in time to see him topple backward off the log and disappear into the void of the night.

There was no moon, and the only clue to what was happening was a tremendous scuffling sound in the dry alder leaves, and the noise of men locked in effortful but silent conflict, with grunts, gasps, and the occasional muffled curse. There was a short, sharp cry, and then complete quiet. It lasted, I suppose, only a few seconds, though it seemed to go on forever.

I was still standing by the fire, frozen in my original position, when Jamie reemerged from the Stygian dark of the forest, a captive before him, one arm twisted behind its back. Loosing his grip, he whirled the dark figure around and gave it an abrupt shove that sent it crashing backward into a tree. The man hit the trunk hard, loosing a shower of leaves and acorns, and slid slowly down to lie dazed in the leaf-meal.

Attracted by the noise, Murtagh, Ross, and a couple of the other Fraser men materialized by the fire. Hauling the intruder to his feet, they pulled him roughly into the circle of firelight. Murtagh grabbed the captive by the hair and jerked his head backward, bringing his face into view.

It was a small, fine-boned face, with big, long-lashed eyes that blinked dazedly at the crowding faces.

"But he's only a boy!" I exclaimed. "He can't be more than fifteen!"

"Sixteen!" said the boy. He shook his head, senses returning. "Not that that makes any difference," he added haughtily, in an English accent. Hampshire, I thought. He was a long way from home.

"It doesn't," Jamie grimly agreed. "Sixteen or sixty, he's just made a verra creditable attempt at cutting my throat." I noticed then the reddened handkerchief pressed against the side of his neck.

"I shan't tell you anything," the boy said. His eyes were dark pools in the pale face, though the firelight shone on the gleam of fair hair. He was clutching one arm tightly in front of him; I thought perhaps it was injured. The boy was clearly making a major effort to stand upright among the men, lips compressed against any wayward expression of fear or pain.

"Some things you don't need to tell me," said Jamie, looking the lad over carefully. "One, you're an Englishman, so likely you've come with troops nearby. And two, you're alone."

The boy seemed startled. "How do you know that?"

Jamie raised his eyebrows. "I suppose that ye'd not have attacked me unless you thought that the lady and I were alone. If you were with someone else who also thought that, they would presumably have come to your assistance just now—is your arm broken, by the way? I thought I felt something snap. If you were with someone else who knew we were not alone, they would ha' stopped ye from trying anything so foolish." Despite this diagnosis, I noticed three of the men fade discreetly into the forest in response to a signal from Jamie, presumably to check for other intruders.

The boy's expression hardened at hearing his act described as foolish. Jamie dabbed at his neck, then inspected the handkerchief critically.

"If you're tryin' to kill someone from behind, laddie, pick a man who's not sitting in a pile of dry leaves," he advised. "And if you're using a knife on someone larger than you, pick a surer spot; throat-cutting's chancy unless your victim will sit still for ye."

"Thank you for the valuable advice," the boy sneered. He was doing a fair job at maintaining his bravado, though his eyes flicked nervously from one threatening, whiskered face to another. None of the Highlanders would have won any beauty prizes in broad daylight; by night, they weren't the sort of thing you wanted to meet in a dark place.

Jamie answered courteously, "You're quite welcome. It's unfortunate that ye won't get the chance to apply it in future. Why *did* you attack me, since I think to ask?"

Men, attracted by the noise, had begun filtering in from the surrounding campsites, sliding wraithlike out of the woods. The boy's glance flickered around the growing circle of men, resting at length on me. He hesitated for a moment, but answered, "I was hoping to release the lady from your custody."

A small stir of suppressed amusement ran around the circle, only to be quelled by a brief gesture from Jamie. "I see," he said noncommittally. "You heard us talking and determined that the lady is English and well-born. Whereas I—"

"Whereas you, sir, are a conscienceless outlaw, with a reputation for thievery and violence! Your face and description are on broadsheets throughout Hampshire and Sussex! I recognized you at once; you're a rebel and an unprincipled voluptuary!" the boy burst out hotly, face stained a deeper red even than the firelight.

I bit my lip and looked down at my shoes, so as not to meet Jamie's eye.

"Aye, well. Just as ye say," Jamie agreed cordially. "That being the case, perhaps you can advance some reason why I shouldna kill ye immediately?" Drawing the dirk smoothly from its sheath, he twisted it delicately, making the fire jump from the blade.

The blood had faded from the young man's face, leaving him ghostly in the shadows, but he drew himself upright at this, pulling against the captors on either side. "I expected that. I am quite prepared to die," he said, stiffening his shoulders.

Jamie nodded thoughtfully, then, stooping, laid the blade of his dirk in the fire. A plume of smoke rose around the blackening metal, smelling strongly of the forge. We all watched in silent fascination as the flame, spectral blue where it touched the blade, seemed to bring the deadly iron to life in a flush of deep red heat.

Wrapping his hand in the bloodstained cloth, Jamie cautiously pulled the dirk from the fire. He advanced slowly toward the boy, letting the blade fall, as though of its own volition, until it touched the lad's jerkin. There was a strong smell of singed cloth from the handkerchief wrapped around the haft of the knife, which grew stronger as a narrow burnt line traced its way up the front of the jerkin in the dagger's path. The point, darkening as it cooled, stopped just short of the upwardly straining chin. I could see thin lines of sweat shining in the stretched hollows of the slender neck.

"Aye, well, I'm afraid that I'm no prepared to kill ye—just yet." Jamie's voice was soft, filled with a quiet menace all the more frightening for its control.

"Who d'ye march with?" The question snapped like a whip, making its hearers flinch. The knife point hovered slightly nearer, smoking in the night wind.

"I'll—I'll not tell you!" The boy's lips closed tight on the stammered answer, and a tremor ran down the delicate throat.

"Nor how far away your comrades lie? Nor their number? Nor their direction of march?" The questions were put lightly again, with a finicking touch of the blade along the edge of the boy's jaw. His eyes showed white all around, like a panicked horse, but he shook his head violently, making the golden hair fly. Ross and Kincaid tightened their grip against the pull of the boy's arms.

The darkened blade pressed suddenly flat along its length, hard under the angle of the jaw. There was a thin and breathy scream, and the stink of burning skin.

"Jamie!" I said, shocked beyond bearing. He did not turn to look at me, but kept his eyes fixed on his prisoner, who, released from the grip on his arms, had sunk to his knees in the drift of dead leaves, hand clutched to his neck.

"This is no concern of yours, Madam," he said between his teeth. Reaching down, he grabbed the boy by the shirtfront and jerked him to his feet. Wavering, the knife blade rose between them, and poised itself just under the lad's left eye. Jamie tilted his head in silent question, to receive a minimal but definite negative shake in return.

The boy's voice was no more than a shaky whisper; he had to clear his throat to make himself heard. "N-no," he said. "No. There is nothing you can do to me that will make me tell you anything."

Jamie held him for a moment longer, eye to eye, then let go of the bunched fabric and stepped back. "No," he said slowly, "I dinna suppose there is. Not to you. But what about the lady?"

I didn't at first realize that he meant me, until he grabbed me by the wrist and yanked me to him, making me stumble slightly on the rough ground. I fell toward him, and he twisted my arm roughly behind my back.

"You may be indifferent to your own welfare, but ye might perhaps have some concern for the lady's honor, since you were at such pains to rescue her." Turning me toward himself, he twined his fingers in my hair, forced my head back and kissed me with a deliberate brutality that made me squirm involuntarily in protest.

Freeing my hair, he pulled me hard against him, facing the boy on the other side of the fire. The boy's eyes were enormous, aghast with reflections of flame in the wide dark pupils.

"Let her go!" he demanded hoarsely. "What are you proposing to do with her?"

Jamie's hands reached to the neck of my gown. With a sudden jerk, he tore the fabric of gown and shift, baring most of my bosom. Reacting instinctively, I kicked him in the shin. The boy made an inarticulate sound and jerked forward, but was stopped short once more by Ross and Kincaid.

"Since you ask," said Jamie's voice pleasantly behind me, "I am proposing to ravish this lady before your eyes. I shall then give her to my men, to do what they will with. Perhaps ye would like to have a turn before I kill you? A man should no die a virgin, do ye think?"

I was struggling in good earnest now, my arm held in an iron grip behind my back, my protests muffled by Jamie's large, warm palm clapped over my mouth. I sank my teeth hard into the heel of his hand, tasting blood. He took his hand sharply away with a smothered exclamation, but returned it almost immediately, forcing a wadded piece of cloth past my teeth. I made strangled sounds around the gag as Jamie's hands darted to my shoulders, forcing the torn pieces of my gown farther apart. With a rending of linen and fustian, he bared me to the waist, pinning my arms at my sides. I saw Ross glance at me and quickly away, fixing his gaze with dogged intent on the prisoner, a slow flush staining his cheekbones. Kincaid, himself no more than nineteen, stared in shock, his mouth open as a flytrap.

"Stop it!" The boy's voice was trembling, but with outrage now rather than fear. "You—you unspeakable poltroon! How dare you dishonor a lady, you Scottish jackal!" He stood for a moment, chest heaving with emotion, then made up his mind. He raised his jaw and thrust out his chin.

"Very well. I do not see that in honor I have any choice. Release the lady and I will tell you what you want to know."

One of Jamie's hands left my shoulder momentarily. I didn't see his gesture, but Ross released the boy's injured arm and went quickly to fetch my cloak, which had fallen unheeded to the ground during the excitement of the boy's capture. Jamie pulled both my hands behind me, and, yanking off my belt, used it to bind them securely behind my back. Taking the cloak from Ross, he swirled it around my shoulders and fastened it carefully. Stepping back, he bowed ironically to me, then turned to face his captive.

"You have my word that the lady will be safe from my advances," he said. The note in his voice could have been due to the strain of anger and frustrated lust; I recognized it as the agonized restraint of an overwhelming impulse to laugh, and could cheerfully have killed him.

Face like stone, the boy gave the required information, speaking in brief syllables.

His name was William Grey, second son of Viscount Melton. He accompanied a troop of two hundred men, traveling to Dunbar, intending to join there with General Cope's army. His fellows were presently encamped some three miles to the west. He, William, out walking through the forest, had seen the light of our fire, and come to investigate. No, he had no companion with him. Yes, the troop carried heavy armament, sixteen carriage-mounted "galloper" cannon, and two sixteen-inch mortars. Most of the troop were armed with muskets, and there was one company of thirty horse.

The boy was beginning to wilt under the combined strain of the questioning and his injured arm, but refused an offer to be seated. Instead, he leaned against the tree, cradling his elbow in his left palm.

The questions went on for nearly an hour, covering the same ground over and over, pinpointing discrepancies, enlarging details, searching out the telltale omission, the point evaded. Satisfied at last, Jamie sighed deeply and turned from the boy, who slumped in the wavering shadows of the oak. He held out a hand without speaking; Murtagh, as usual divining his intent, handed him a pistol.

He turned back to the prisoner, busying himself in checking the priming and loading of the pistol. The twelve inches of heart-butted metal gleamed dark, the firelight picking out sparks of silver at trigger and priming pin. "Head or heart?" Jamie asked casually, raising his head at last.

"Eh?" The boy's mouth hung open in blank incomprehension.

"I am going to shoot you," Jamie explained patiently. "Spies are usually hanged, but in consideration of your gallantry, I am willing to give you a quick, clean death. Do ye prefer to take the ball in the head, or the heart?"

The boy straightened quickly, squaring his shoulders. "Oh, ah, yes, of course." He licked his lips and swallowed. "I think … in the —in the heart. Thank you," he added, as an obvious afterthought. He raised his chin, compressing lips that still held a suggestion of their soft, childish curve.

Nodding, Jamie cocked the pistol with a click that echoed in the silence under the oak trees.

"Wait!" said the prisoner. Jamie looked at him inquiringly, pistol leveled at the thin chest.

"What assurance have I that the lady will remain unmolested after I am—after I have gone?" the boy demanded, looking belligerently around the circle of men. His single working hand was clenched hard, but shook nonetheless. Ross made a sound which he skillfully converted into a sneeze.

Jamie lowered the pistol, and with an iron control, kept his face carefully composed in an expression of solemn gravity.

"Weel," he said, the Scots accent growing broader under the strain, "ye ha' my own word, of course, though I quite see that ye might have some hesitation in accepting the word of a …"—his lip twitched despite himself—"of a Scottish poltroon. Perhaps ye would accept the assurances of the lady herself?" He raised an eyebrow in my direction and Kincaid sprang at once to free me, fumbling awkwardly with the gag.

"Jamie!" I exclaimed furiously, mouth freed at last. "This is unconscionable! How could you do such a thing? You—you—"

"Poltroon," he supplied helpfully. "Or jackal, if ye like that better. What d'ye say, Murtagh," turning to his lieutenant, "am I a poltroon or a jackal?"

Murtagh's seam of a mouth twisted sourly. "I'd say ye're dogsmeat, if you untie yon lass wi'out a dirk in yer hand."

Jamie turned apologetically to his prisoner. "I must apologize to my wife for forcing her to take part in this deception. I assure you that her participation was entirely unwilling." He ruefully examined his bitten hand in the light from the fire.

"Your wife!" The boy stared wildly from me to Jamie.

"I'll assure ye likewise that while the lady on occasion honors my bed with her presence, she has never done so under duress. And won't now," he added pointedly, "but let's no untie her just yet, Kincaid."

"James Fraser," I hissed between clenched teeth. "If you touch that boy, you'll certainly never share my bed again!"

Jamie raised one eyebrow. His canines gleamed briefly in the firelight. "Well, that's a serious threat, to an unprincipled voluptuary such as myself, but I dinna suppose I can consider my own interests in such a situation. War's war, after all." The pistol, which had been allowed to fall, began to rise once more.

"Jamie!" I screamed.

He lowered the pistol again, and turned to me with an expression of exaggerated patience. "Yes?"

I took a deep breath, to keep my voice from shaking with rage. I could only guess what he was up to, and hoped I was doing the right thing. Right or not, when this was over … I choked off an intensely pleasing vision of Jamie writhing on the ground with my foot on his Adam's apple, in order to concentrate on my present role.

"You haven't any evidence whatever that he's a spy," I said. "He says he stumbled on you by accident. Who wouldn't be curious if they saw a fire out in the woods?"

Jamie nodded, following the argument. "Aye, and what about attempted murder? Spy or no, he tried to kill me, and admits as much." He tenderly fingered the raw scratch at the side of his throat.

"Well, of course he did," I said hotly. "He says he knew you were an outlaw. There's a bloody price on your head, for heaven's sake!"

Jamie rubbed his chin dubiously, at last turning to the prisoner. "Well, it's a point," he said. "William Grey, your advocate makes a good case for ye. It's no the policy either of His Highness Prince Charles or myself to execute persons unlawfully, enemy or no." He summoned Kincaid with a wave of the hand.

"Kincaid, you and Ross take this man in the direction he says his camp lies. If the information he gave us proves to be true, tie him to a tree a mile from the camp in the line of march. His friends will find him there tomorrow. If what he told us is *not* true …"—he paused, cold eyes bent on the prisoner—"cut his throat."

He looked the boy in the face and said, without a shadow of mockery, "I give you your life. I hope ye'll use it well."

Moving behind me, he cut the cloth binding my wrists. As I turned furiously, he motioned toward the boy, who had sat down suddenly on the ground beneath the oak. “Perhaps ye’d be good enough to tend the boy’s arm before he goes?” The scowl of pretended ferocity had left his face, leaving it blank as a wall. His eyelids were lowered, preventing me from meeting his gaze.

Without a word, I went to the boy and sank to my knees beside him. He seemed dazed, and didn’t protest my examination, or the subsequent manipulations, though the handling must have been painful.

The split bodice of my gown kept sliding off my shoulders, and I muttered beneath my breath as I irritably hitched up one side or the other for the dozenth time. The bones of the boy’s forearm were light and angular under the skin, hardly thicker than my own. I splinted the arm and slung it, using my own kerchief. “It’s a clean break,” I told him, keeping my voice impersonal. “Try to keep it still for two weeks, at least.” He nodded, not looking at me.

Jamie had been sitting quietly on a log watching my ministrations. My breath coming unevenly, I walked up to him and slapped him as hard as I could. The blow left a white patch on one cheek and made his eyes water, but he didn’t move or change expression.

Kincaid pulled the boy to his feet and propelled him to the edge of the clearing with a hand at his back. At the edge of the shadows he halted and turned back. Avoiding looking at me, he spoke only to Jamie.

“I owe you my life,” he said formally. “I should greatly prefer not to, but since you have forced the gift upon me, I must regard it as a debt of honor. I shall hope to discharge that debt in the future, and once it is discharged …” The boy’s voice shook slightly with suppressed hatred, losing all its assumed formality in the utter sincerity of his feelings. “… I’ll kill you!”

Jamie rose from the log to his full height. His face was calm, free of any taint of amusement. He inclined his head gravely to his departing prisoner. “In that case, sir, I must hope that we do not meet again.”

The boy straightened his shoulders and returned the bow stiffly. “A Grey does not forget an obligation, sir,” he said, and vanished into the darkness, Kincaid at his elbow.

There was a discreet interval of breathless waiting, as the leaf-shuffling sounds of feet moved off through the darkness. Then the laughter started, first with a soft, fizzing noise through the nostrils of one man, then a tentative chuckle from another. Never raucous, still it gathered volume, spiraling round the circle of men.

Jamie took one step into the circle, face turned toward his men. The laughter stopped abruptly. Glancing down at me, he said briefly, “Go to the tent.”

Warned by my expression, he gripped my wrist before I could raise my hand.

“If you’re going to slap me again, at least let me turn the other cheek,” he said dryly. “Besides, I think I can save ye the trouble. But I’d advise you to go to the tent, just the same.”

Dropping my hand, he strode out to the edge of the fire, and with one peremptory jerk of the head, gathered the scattered men into a reluctant, half-wary clump before him. Their faces were big-eyed, orbits scooped with darkness by the shadows.

I didn’t understand everything he said, as he spoke in an odd mixture of Gaelic and English, but I gathered sufficient sense to realize that he was inquiring, in a soft, level tone that seemed to turn his listeners to stone, as to the identity of the sentinels on duty for the evening.

There was a furtive glancing to and fro, and uneasy movement among the men, who seemed to clump more strongly together in the face of danger. But then the closed ranks parted, and two men stepped out, glanced up—once—then hastily down, and stood shoulder to shoulder, eyes on the ground, outside the protection of their fellows.

It was the McClure brothers, George and Sorley. Close in age, somewhere in their thirties, they stood hang-dog near each other, fingers of the work-toughened hands twitching as though longing to link and clasp together, as some small protection before the coming storm.

There was a brief, wordless pause as Jamie looked over the two delinquent sentinels. Then followed five solid minutes of unpleasantness, all conducted in that same soft, level voice. There wasn't a sound from the grouped men, and the McClures, both burly men, seemed to dwindle and shrink under the weight of it. I wiped my sweating palms on my skirt, glad that I didn't understand it all, and beginning to regret not following Jamie's order to return to the tent.

I regretted it still more in the next moment, when Jamie turned suddenly to Murtagh, who, expecting the command, was ready with a leather strip, some two feet long, knotted at one end to provide a rough grip.

"Strip and stand to me, the both of ye." The McClures moved at once, thick fingers fumbling with shirt fastenings, as though eager to obey, relieved that the preliminaries were over and the reckoning arrived.

I thought perhaps I would be sick, though I gathered that the punishment was light enough, by the standards applied to such things. There was no sound in the clearing, save the slap of the lash and an occasional gasp or groan from the man being flogged.

At the last stroke, Jamie let the thong fall to his side. He was sweating heavily, and the grimed linen of his shirt was pasted to his back. He nodded to the McClures in dismissal, and wiped his wet face on his sleeve as one man bent painfully to retrieve the discarded shirts, his brother, shaky himself, bracing him on the other side.

The men in the clearing seemed to have ceased even breathing, during the punishment. Now there was a tremor through the group, as though a collective breath had been released in a sigh of relief.

Jamie eyed them, shaking his head slightly. The night wind was rising, stirring and lifting the hair on his crown.

"We canna afford carelessness, *mo duinnen*," he said softly. "Not from anyone." He took a deep breath and his mouth twisted wryly. "And that includes me. It was my unshielded fire drew the lad to us." Fresh sweat had sprung out on his brow, and he wiped a hand roughly across his face, drying it on his kilt. He nodded toward

Murtagh, standing grimly apart from the other men, and held the leather strap out toward him.

"If ye'll oblige me, sir?"

After a moment's hesitation, Murtagh's gnarled hand reached out and took the strap. An expression that might have been amusement flickered in the little clansman's bright black eyes.

"Wi' pleasure … sir."

Jamie turned his back to his men, and began to unfasten his shirt. His eye caught me, standing frozen between the tree trunks, and one eyebrow lifted in ironic question. Did I want to watch? I shook my head frantically, whirled, and blundered away through the trees, belatedly taking his advice.

* * *

In fact, I didn't return to the tent. I couldn't bear the thought of its stifling enclosure; my chest felt tight and I needed air.

I found it on the crest of a small rise, just beyond the tent. I stumbled to a stop in a small open space, flung myself full-length on the ground, and put both arms over my head. I didn't want to hear the faintest echo of the drama's final act, down behind me by the fire.

The rough grass beneath me was cold on bare skin, and I hunched to wrap the cloak around me. Cocooned and insulated, I lay quiet, listening to the pounding of my heart, waiting for the turmoil inside me to calm.

Sometime later, I heard men passing by in small groups of four or five, returning to their sleeping spots. Muffled by folds of cloth, I couldn't distinguish their words, but they sounded subdued, perhaps a little awed. Some time passed before I realized that he was there. He didn't speak or make a noise, but I suddenly knew that he was nearby. When I rolled over and sat up, I could see his bulk shadowed on a stone, head resting on forearms, folded across his knees.

Torn between the impulse to stroke his head, and the urge to cave it in with a rock, I did neither.

“Are you all right?” I asked, after a moment’s pause, voice neutral as I could make it.

“Aye, I’ll do.” He unfolded himself slowly, and stretched, moving gingerly, with a deep sigh.

“I’m sorry for your gown,” he said, a minute later. I realized that he could see my bare flesh shining dim-white in the darkness, and pulled the edges of my cloak sharply together.

“Oh, for the *gown?*” I said, more than a slight edge to my voice.

He sighed again. “Aye, and for the rest of it, too.” He paused, then said, “I thought perhaps ye might be willing to sacrifice your modesty to prevent my havin’ to damage the lad, but under the circumstances, I hadna time to ask your permission. If I was wrong, then I’ll ask your pardon, lady.”

“You mean you would have tortured him further?”

He was irritated, and didn’t trouble to hide it. “Torture, forbye! I didna hurt the lad.”

I drew the folds of my cloak more tightly around me. “Oh, you don’t consider breaking his arm and branding him with a hot knife as hurting him, then?”

“No, I don’t.” He scooted across the few feet of grass between us, and grasped me by the elbow, pulling me around to face him. “Listen to me. He broke his own silly arm, trying to force his way out of an unbreakable lock. He’s brave as any man I’ve got, but he’s no experience at hand-to-hand fighting.”

“And the knife?”

Jamie snorted. “Tcha! He’s a small sore spot under one ear, that won’t pain him much past dinner tomorrow. I expect it hurt a bit, but I meant to scare him, not wound him.”

“Oh.” I pulled away and turned back to the dark wood, looking for our tent. His voice followed me.

“I could have broken him, Sassenach. It would have been messy, though, and likely permanent. I’d rather not use such means if I dinna have to. Mind ye, Sassenach”—his voice reached me from the shadows, holding a note of warning—“sometime I may have to. I had to know where his fellows were, their arms and the rest of it. I couldna scare him into it; it was trick him or break him.”

"He said you couldn't do anything that would make him talk."

Jamie's voice was weary. "Christ, Sassenach, of course I could. Ye can break anyone if you're prepared to hurt them enough. I know that, if anyone does."

"Yes," I said quietly, "I suppose you do."

Neither of us moved for a time, nor spoke. I could hear the murmurs of men bedding down for the night, the occasional stamp of boots on hard earth and the rustle of leaves heaped up as a barrier against the autumn chill. My eyes had adjusted sufficiently to the dark that I could now see the outline of our tent, some thirty feet away in the shelter of a big larch. I could see Jamie, too, his figure black against the lighter darkness of the night.

"All right," I said at last. "All right. Given the choice between what you did, and what you might have done … yes, all right."

"Thank you." I couldn't tell whether he was smiling or not, but it sounded like it.

"You were taking the hell of a chance with the rest of it," I said. "If I hadn't given you an excuse for not killing him, what would you have done?"

The large figure stirred and shrugged, and there was a faint chuckle in the shadows.

"I don't know, Sassenach. I reckoned as how you'd think of something. If ye hadn't—well, I suppose I would have had to shoot the lad. Couldna very well disappoint him by just lettin' him go, could I?"

"You bloody Scottish bastard," I said without heat.

He heaved a deep exasperated sigh. "Sassenach, I've been stabbed, bitten, slapped, and whipped since supper—which I didna get to finish. I dinna like to scare children and I dinna like to flog men, and I've had to do both. I've two hundred English camped three miles away, and no idea what to do about them. I'm tired, I'm hungry, and I'm sore. If you've anything like womanly sympathy about ye, I could use a bit!"

He sounded so aggrieved that I laughed in spite of myself. I got up and walked toward him.

"I suppose you could, at that. Come here, and I'll see if I can find a bit for you." He had put his shirt back on loose over his shoulders, not troubling to do it up. I slid my hands under it and over the hot, tender skin of his back. "Didn't cut the skin," I said, feeling gently upward.

"A strap doesn't; it just stings."

I removed the shirt and sat him down to have his back sponged with cold water from the stream.

"Better?" I asked.

"Mmmm." The muscles of his shoulders relaxed, but he flinched slightly as I touched a particularly tender spot.

I turned my attention to the scratch under his ear. "You wouldn't really have shot him, would you?"

"What d'ye take me for, Sassenach?" he said, in mock outrage.

"A Scottish poltroon. Or at best, a conscienceless outlaw. Who knows what a fellow like that would do? Let alone an unprincipled voluptuary."

He laughed with me, and his shoulder shook under my hand. "Turn your head. If you want womanly sympathy, you'll have to keep still while I apply it."

"Mmm." There was a moment of silence. "No," he said at last, "I wouldna have shot him. But I had to save his pride somehow, after making him feel ridiculous over you. He's a brave lad; he deserved to feel he was worth killing."

I shook my head. "I will never understand men," I muttered, smoothing marigold ointment over the scratch.

He reached back for my hands and brought them together under his chin.

"You dinna need to understand me, Sassenach," he said quietly. "So long as ye love me." His head tilted forward and he gently kissed my clasped hands.

"And feed me," he added, releasing them.

"Oh, womanly sympathy, love *and* food?" I said, laughing. "Don't want a lot, do you?"

There were cold bannocks in the saddlebags, cheese, and a bit of cold bacon as well. The tensions and absurdities of the last two hours had been more draining than I realized, and I hungrily joined in the meal.

The sounds of the men surrounding us had now died down, and there was neither sound nor any flicker of an unguarded fire to indicate that we were not a thousand miles from any human soul. Only the wind rattled busily among the leaves, sending the odd twig bouncing down through the branches.

Jamie leaned back against a tree, face dim in the starlight, but body instinct with mischief.

"I gave your champion my word that I'd no molest ye wi' my loathsome advances. I suppose that means unless ye invite me to share your bed, I shall have to go and sleep wi' Murtagh or Kincaid. And Murtagh snores."

"So do you," I said.

I looked at him for a moment, then shrugged, letting half my ruined gown slide off my shoulder. "Well, you've made a good start at ravishing me." I dropped the other shoulder, and the torn cloth fell free to my waist. "You may as well come and finish the job properly."

The warmth of his arms was like heated silk, sliding over my cold skin.

"Aye, well," he murmured into my hair, "war's war, no?"

* * *

"I'm very bad at dates," I said to the star-thick sky sometime later. "Has Miguel de Cervantes been born yet?"

Jamie was lying—perforce—on his stomach next to me, head and shoulders protruding from the tent's shelter. One eye slowly opened, and swiveled toward the eastern horizon. Finding no trace of dawn, it traveled slowly back and rested on my face, with an expression of jaundiced resignation.

"You've a sudden urge to discuss Spanish novels?" he said, a little hoarsely.

"Not particularly," I said. "I just wondered whether perhaps you were familiar with the term 'quixotic.' "

He heaved himself onto his elbows, scrubbed at his scalp with both hands to wake himself fully, then turned toward me, blinking but alert.

"Cervantes was born almost two hundred years ago, Sassenach, and, me having had the benefit of a thorough education, aye, I'm familiar with the gentleman. Ye wouldna be implying anything personal by that last remark, would ye?"

"Does your back hurt?"

He hunched his shoulders experimentally. "Not much. A wee bit bruised, I expect."

"Jamie, *why*, for God's sake?" I burst out.

He rested his chin on his folded forearms, the sidelong turn of his head emphasizing the slant of his eyes. The one I could see narrowed still further with his smile.

"Well, Murtagh enjoyed it. He's owed me a hiding since I was nine and put pieces of honeycomb in his boots while he had them off to cool his feet. He couldna catch me at the time, but I learned a good many interesting new words whilst he was chasing me barefoot. He—"

I put a stop to this by punching him as hard as I could on the point of the shoulder. Surprised, he let the arm collapse under him with a sharp "Oof!" and rolled onto his side, back toward me.

I brought my knees up behind him and wrapped an arm around his waist. His back blotted out the stars, wide and smoothly muscled, still gleaming faintly with the moisture of exertion. I kissed him between the shoulder blades, then drew back and blew gently, for the pleasure of feeling his skin shiver under my fingertips and the tiny fine hairs stand up in goose bumps down the furrow of his spine.

"Why?" I said again. I rested my face against his warm, damp back. Shadowed by the darkness, the scars were invisible, but I could feel them, faint tough lines hard under my cheek.

He was quiet for a moment, his ribs rising and falling under my arm with each deep, slow breath.

"Aye, well," he said, then fell silent again, thinking.

"I dinna ken exactly, Sassenach," he said finally. "Could be I thought I owed it to you. Or maybe to myself."

I laid a light palm across the width of one shoulder blade, broad and flat, the edges of the bone clear-drawn beneath the skin.

"Not to me."

"Aye? Is it the act of a gentleman to unclothe his wife in the presence of thirty men?" His tone was suddenly bitter, and my hands stilled, pressing against him. "Is it the act of a gallant man to use violence against a captive enemy, and a child to boot? To consider doing worse?"

"Would it have been better to spare me—or him—and lose half your men in two days' time? You had to know. You couldn't—you *can't* afford to let notions of gentlemanly conduct sway you."

"No," he said softly, "I can't. And so I must ride wi' a man—with the son of my King—whom duty and honor call me to follow—and seek meanwhiles to pervert his cause that I am sworn to uphold. I am forsworn for the lives of those I love—I betray the name of honor that those I honor may survive."

"Honor has killed one bloody hell of a lot of men," I said to the dark groove of his bruised back. "Honor without sense is … foolishness. A gallant foolishness, but foolishness nonetheless."

"Aye, it is. And it will change—you've told me. But if I shall be among the first who sacrifice honor for expedience … shall I feel nay shame in the doing of it?" He rolled suddenly to face me, eyes troubled in the starlight.

"I willna turn back—I cannot, now—but Sassenach, sometimes I do sorrow for that bit of myself I have left behind."

"It's my fault," I said softly. I touched his face, the thick brows, wide mouth, and the sprouting stubble along the clean, long jaw. "Mine. If I hadn't come … and told you what would happen …" I felt a true sorrow for his corruption, and shared a sense of loss for the naive, gallant lad he had been. And yet … what choice had either of us truly had, being who we were? I had had to tell him, and he had had to act on it. An Old Testament line drifted through my mind: "When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long."

As though he had picked up this biblical strain of thought, he smiled faintly.

"Aye, well," he said. "I dinna recall Adam's asking God to take back Eve—and look what she did to *him*." He leaned forward and kissed my forehead as I laughed, then drew the blanket up over my bare shoulders. "Go to sleep, my wee rib. I shall be needin' a helpmeet in the morning."

* * *

An odd metallic noise woke me. I poked my head out of the blanket and blinked in the direction of the noise, to find my nose a foot from Jamie's plaid-covered knee.

"Awake, are ye?" Something silvery and chinking suddenly descended in front of my face, and a heavy weight settled around my neck.

"What on earth is this?" I asked, sitting up in astonishment and peering downward. I seemed to be wearing a necklace composed of a large number of three-inch metal objects, each with a divided shank and a hooped top, strung together on a leather bootlace. Some of the objects were rusted at the tops, others brand-new. All showed scratches along the length of the shanks, as though they had been wrenched by force out of some larger object.

"Trophies of war, Sassenach," said Jamie.

I looked up at him, and uttered a small shriek at the sight.

"Oh," he said, putting a hand to his face. "I forgot. I hadna time to wash it off."

"You scared me to death," I said, hand pressed to my palpitating heart. "What *is* it?"

"Charcoal," he said, voice muffled in the cloth he was rubbing over his face. He let it down and grinned at me. The rubbing had removed some of the blackening from nose, chin and forehead, which glowed pinkish-bronze through the remaining smears, but his eyes were still ringed black as a raccoon's, and charcoal lines bracketed his mouth. It was barely dawn, and in the dim light of the tent, his darkened face and hair tended to fade into the drab background of the canvas wall behind him, giving the distinctly unsettling impression that I was speaking to a headless body.

"It was your idea," he said.

"*My* idea? You look like the end man in a minstrel show," I replied. "What the hell have you been doing?"

His teeth gleamed a brilliant white amid the sooty creases of his face.

"Commando raid," he said, with immense satisfaction. "Commando? Is that the right word?"

"Oh, God," I said. "You've been in the English camp? Christ! Not alone, I hope?"

"I couldna leave my men out of the fun, could I? I left three of them to guard you, and the rest of us had a verra profitable night." He gestured at my necklace with pride.

"Cotter pins from the cannon carriages. We couldna take the cannon, or damage them without noise, but they'll no be goin' far, wi' no wheels to them. And the hell of a lot of good sixteen gallopers will do General Cope, stranded out on the moor."

I examined my necklace critically.

"That's well and good, but can't they contrive new cotter pins? It looks like you could make something like this from heavy wire."

He nodded, his air of smugness abating not a whit.

"Oh, aye. They could. But nay bit o' good it will do them, wi' no new wheels to put them to." He lifted the tent flap, and gestured down toward the foot of the hill, where I could now see Murtagh, black as a wizened demon, supervising the activities of several similarly decorated subdemons, who were gaily feeding the last of thirty-two large wooden wheels into a roaring fire. The iron rims of the wheels lay in a stack to one side; Fergus, Kincaid, and one of the other young men had improvised a game with one of them, rolling it to and fro with sticks. Ross sat on a log nearby, sipping at a horn cup and idly twirling another round his burly forearm.

I laughed at the sight.

"Jamie, you *are* clever!"

"I may be clever," he replied, "but *you're* half-naked, and we're leaving now. Have ye something to put on? We left the sentinels tied up in an abandoned sheep-pen, but the rest of them will be up by now, and none so far behind us. We'd best be off."

As though to emphasize his words, the tent suddenly shook above me, as someone jerked free the lines on one side. I uttered an alarmed squeak and dived for the saddlebags as Jamie left to superintend the details of departure.

* * *

It was midafternoon before we reached the village of Tranent. Perched on the hills above the seaside, the usually tranquil hamlet was reeling under the impact of the Highland army. The main bulk of the army was visible on the hills beyond, overlooking the small plain that stretched toward the shore. But with the usual disorganized comings and goings, there were as many men in Tranent as out of it, with detachments coming and going in more or less military formation, messengers galloping to and fro—some on ponies, some by shanks' mare—and the wives, children, and camp followers, who overflowed the cottages and sat outside, leaning on stone walls and nursing babies in the intermittent sun, calling to passing messengers for word of the most recent action.

We halted at the edge of this seethe of activity, and Jamie sent Murtagh to discover the whereabouts of Lord George Murray, the army's commander in chief, while he made a hasty toilet in one of the cottages.

My own appearance left a good bit to be desired; while not deliberately covered with charcoal, my face undoubtedly sported a few streaks of grime left as tokens of several nights spent sleeping out-of-doors. The goodwife kindly lent me a towel and a comb, and I was seated at her table, doing battle with my ungovernable locks, when the door opened and Lord George himself burst in without ceremony.

His usually impeccable dress was disheveled, with several buttons of his waistcoat undone, his stock slipped loose, and one garter come untied. His wig had been thrust unceremoniously into his pocket, and his own thinning brown curls stood on end, as though he had been tugging at them in frustration.

"Thank God!" he said. "A sane face, at last!" Then he leaned forward, squinting as he peered at Jamie. Most of the charcoal dust had been rinsed from the blazing hair, but gray rivulets ran down his face and dripped on his shirtfront, and his ears, which had been overlooked in the hastiness of his ablutions, were still coal-black.

"What—" began a startled Lord George, but he broke off, shook his head rapidly once or twice as though to dismiss some figment of his imagination, and resumed his conversation as though he had noticed nothing out of the ordinary.

"How does it go, sir?" said Jamie respectfully, also affecting not to notice the ribboned tail of the periwig which hung out of Lord George's pocket, wagging like the tail of a small dog as His Lordship gestured violently.

"How does it go?" he echoed. "Why, I'll tell you, sir! It goes to the east, and then it goes to the west, and then half of it comes downhill to have luncheon, while the other half marches off to devil-knows-where! *That's* how it goes!"

" 'It,' " he said, momentarily relieved by his outburst, "being His Highness's loyal Highland army." Somewhat calmer, he began to tell us of the events transpiring since the army's first arrival in Tranent the day before.

Arriving with the army, Lord George had left the bulk of the men in the village and rushed with a small detachment to take possession of the ridge above the plain. Prince Charles, coming along somewhat later, had been displeased with this action and said so—loudly and publicly. His Highness had then taken half the army and marched off westward, the Duke of Perth—nominally the other commander in chief—tamely in tow, presumably to assess the possibilities of attacking through Preston.

With the army divided, and His Lordship occupied in conferring with villagemen who knew the hell of a lot more about the surrounding terrain than did either His Highness *or* His Lordship, O'Sullivan, one of the Prince's Irish confidants, had taken it upon himself to order a contingent of Lochiel's Cameron clansmen to the Tranent churchyard.

"Cope, of course, brought up a pair of galloper guns and bombarded them," Lord George said grimly. "And I've had the devil of a time with Lochiel this afternoon. He was rather understandably upset at having a number of his men wounded for no evident purpose. He asked that they be withdrawn, which request I naturally acceded to. Whereupon here comes His Highness's frog-spawn, O'Sullivan—pest! Simply because he landed at Eriskay with His Highness, the man thinks he—well, anyway, he comes whining that the presence of the Camerons in the churchyard is essential—*essential*, mind you!—if we are to attack from the west. Told him in no uncertain terms that we attack from the east, if at all. Which prospect is exceedingly doubtful at the moment, insofar as we do not presently know exactly where half of our men are—nor His Highness, come to that," he added, in a tone that made it clear that he considered the whereabouts of Prince Charles a matter of academic interest only.

"And the chiefs! Lochiel's Camerons drew the lot that gives them the honor of fighting on the right hand in the battle—if there is one—but the MacDonalds, having agreed to the arrangement, now energetically deny having done any such thing, and insist that they will not fight at all if they're denied their traditional privilege of fighting on the right."

Having started this recitation calmly enough, Lord George had grown heated again in the telling, and at this point sprang to his feet again, rubbing his scalp energetically with both hands.

"The Camerons have been drilled all day. By now, they've been marched to and fro so much that they can't tell their pricks from their arseholes—saving your presence, mum," he added, with a distracted glance at me, "and Clanranald's men have been having fistfights with Glengarry's." He paused, lower jaw thrust out, face red. "If Glengarry wasn't who he is, I'd … ah, well." He dismissed Glengarry with a flip of the hand and resumed his pacing.

"The only saving grace of the matter," he said, "is that the English have been forced to turn themselves about as well, in response to our movements. They've turned Cope's entire force no less than four times, and now he's strung his right flank out nearly to the sea, no doubt wondering what in God's name we'll do next." He bent and peered out the window, as though expecting to see General Cope himself advancing down the main road to inquire.

"Er … where exactly *is* your half of the army at present, sir?" Jamie made a move as though to join His Lordship in his random peregrinations about the cottage, but was restrained by my grip on his collar. Armed with a towel and a bowl of warm water, I had occupied myself during His Lordship's exegesis with removing the soot from my husband's ears. They stood out now, glowing pinkly with earnestness.

"On the ridge just south of town."

"We still hold the high ground, then?"

"Yes, it sounds good, doesn't it?" His Lordship smiled bleakly. "However, occupation of the high ground profits us relatively little, in consideration of the fact that the ground just below the ridge is riddled with pools and boggy marsh. God's eyes! There's a six-foot ditch filled with water that runs a hundred feet along the base of that ridge! There's scarce five hundred yards between the armies this moment, and it might as well be five hundred miles, for all we can do." Lord George plunged a hand into his pocket in search of a handkerchief, brought it out, and stood staring blankly at the wig with which he had been about to wipe his face.

I delicately offered him the sooty handkerchief. He closed his eyes, inhaled strongly through both nostrils, then opened them and bowed to me with his usual courtly manner.

"Your servant, mum." He polished his face thoroughly with the filthy rag, handed it politely back to me, and clapped the tousled wig on his head.

"Damn my liver," he said distinctly, "if I let that fool lose this engagement for us." He turned to Jamie with decision.

"How many men have you, Fraser?"

"Thirty, sir."

"Horses?"

"Six, sir. And four ponies for pack animals."

"Pack animals? Ah. Carrying provisions for your men?"

"Yes, sir. And sixty sacks of meal abstracted from an English detachment last night. Oh, and one sixteen-inch mortar, sir."

Jamie imparted this last bit of information with an air of such perfect offhand casualness that I wanted to cram the handkerchief down his throat. Lord George stared at him for a moment, then one corner of his mouth twitched upward in a smile.

"Ah? Well, come with me, Fraser. You can tell me all about it on the way." He wheeled toward the door, and Jamie, with a wide-eyed glance at me, caught up his hat and followed.

At the cottage door, Lord George stopped suddenly, and turned back. He glanced up at Jamie's towering form, shirt collar undone and coat flung hastily over one arm.

"I may be in a hurry, Fraser, but we have still sufficient time to observe the civilities. Go and kiss your wife goodbye, man. Meet me outside."

Turning on his heel, he made a leg to me, bowing deeply, so that the tail of his wig flopped forward.

"Your servant, mum."

I knew enough about armies to realize that nothing apparent was likely to happen for some time, and sure enough, it didn't. Random parties of men marched up and down the single main street of Tranent. Wives, camp followers, and the displaced citizens of Tranent milled aimlessly, uncertain whether to stay or go. Messengers darted sideways through the crowd, carrying notes.

I had met Lord George before, in Paris. He was not a man to stand on ceremony when action would better suit, though I thought it likely that the fraying of his temper at Prince Charles's actions, and a desire to escape the company of O'Sullivan, were more responsible for his coming in person to meet Jamie than any desire either for expeditiousness or confidentiality. When the total strength of the Highland army stood somewhere between fifteen hundred and two thousand, thirty men were neither to be regarded as a gift from the gods, nor sneered at altogether.

I glanced at Fergus, fidgeting to and fro like a hoptoad with St. Vitus's dance, and decided that I might as well send a few messages myself. There is a saying, "In the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king." I promptly invented its analogy, based on experience: "When no one knows what to do, anyone with a sensible suggestion is going to be listened to."

There was paper and ink in the saddlebags. I sat down, watched with an almost superstitious awe by the goodwife, who had likely never seen a woman write anything before, and composed a note to Jenny Cameron. It was she who had led three hundred Cameron clansmen across the mountains to join Prince Charles, when he had raised his banner at Glenfinnan on the coast. Her brother Hugh, arriving home belatedly and hearing what had happened, had ridden posthaste to Glenfinnan to take the chieftain's place at the head of his men, but Jenny had declined to go home and miss the fun. She had thoroughly enjoyed the brief stop in Edinburgh, where Charles received the plaudits of his loyal subjects, but she had been equally willing to accompany her Prince on his way to battle.

I hadn't a signet, but Jamie's bonnet was in one of the bags, bearing a badge with the Fraser clan crest and motto. I dug it out and pressed it into the splodge of warm candle wax with which I had sealed the note. It looked very official.

"For the Scottish milady with the freckles," I instructed Fergus, and with satisfaction saw him dart out the door and into the melee in the street. I had no idea where Jenny Cameron was at the moment, but the officers were quartered in the manse near the kirk, and that was as good a place to start as any. At least the search would keep Fergus out of mischief.

That errand out of the way, I turned to the cottage wife.

"Now, then," I said. "What have you got in the way of blankets, napkins, and petticoats?"

* * *

I soon found that I had been correct in my surmise as to the force of Jenny Cameron's personality. A woman who could raise three hundred men and lead them across the mountains to fight for an

Italian-accented fop with a taste for brandywine was bound to have both a low threshold of boredom and a rare talent for bullying people into doing what she wanted.

"Verra sensible," she said, having heard my plan. "Cousin Archie's made some arrangements, I expect, but of course he's wanting to be with the army just now." Her firm chin stuck out a little farther. "That's where the fun is, after all," she said wryly.

"I'm surprised you didn't insist on going along," I said.

She laughed, her small, homely face with its undershot jaw making her look like a good-humored bulldog.

"I would if I could, but I can't," she admitted frankly. "Now that Hugh's come, he keeps trying to make me go home. Told him I was"—she glanced around to be sure we weren't overheard, and lowered her voice conspiratorially—"*damned* if I'd go home and sit. Not while I can be of use here."

Standing on the cottage doorstep, she looked thoughtfully up and down the street.

"I didn't think they'd listen to me," I said. "Being English."

"Aye, you're right," she said, "but they will to me. I don't know how many the wounded will be—pray God not many," and she crossed herself unobtrusively. "But we'd best start with the houses near the manse; it'll be less trouble to carry water from the well." With decision, she stepped off the doorstep and headed down the street, me following close behind.

We were aided not only by the persuasion of Miss Cameron's position and person but by the fact that sitting and waiting is one of the most miserable occupations known to man—not that it usually is known to men; women do it much more often. By the time the sun sank behind Tranent kirk, we had the bare rudiments of a hospital brigade organized.

* * *

The leaves were beginning to fall from larch and alder in the nearby wood, lying loose, flat and yellow on the sandy ground. Here and there a leaf had crisped and curled to brown, and took off scudding in the wind like a small boat over rough seas.

One of these spiraled past me, settling gently as its wind current failed. I caught it on my palm and held it for a moment, admiring the perfection of midribs and veins, a lacy skeleton that would remain past the rotting of the blade. There was a sudden puff of wind, and the cup-curled leaf lifted off my hand, to tumble to the ground and go rolling along, down the empty street.

Shading my eyes against the setting sun, I could see the ridge beyond the town where the Highland army was camped. His Highness's half of the army had returned an hour before, sweeping the last stragglers from the village as they marched to join Lord George. At this distance, I could only pick out an occasional tiny figure, black against the graying sky, as here and there a man came over the crest of the ridge. A quarter-mile past the end of the street, I could see the first lighting of the English fires, burning pale in the dying light. The thick smell of burning peat from the cottages joined the sharper scent of the English wood fires, overlying the tang of the nearby sea.

Such preparations as could be made were under way. The wives and families of the Highland soldiers had been welcomed with generous hospitality, and were now mostly housed in the cottages along the main street, sharing their hosts' plain supper of brose and salt herring. My own supper was waiting inside, though I had little appetite.

A small form appeared at my elbow, quiet as the lengthening shadows.

"Will you come and eat, Madame? The goodwife is keeping food for you."

"Oh? Oh, yes, Fergus. Yes, I'll come." I cast a last glance toward the ridge, then turned back to the cottages.

"Are you coming, Fergus?" I asked, seeing him still standing in the street. He was shading his eyes, trying to see the activities on the ridge beyond the town. Firmly ordered by Jamie to stay with me, he was plainly longing to be with the fighting men, preparing for battle on the morrow.

"Uh? Oh, yes, Madame." He turned with a sigh, resigned for the moment to a life of boring peace.

The long days of summer were yielding quickly to darkness, and the lamps were lit well before we had finished our preparations. The night outside was restless with constant movement and the glow of fires on the horizon. Fergus, unable to keep still, flitted in and out of the cottages, carrying messages, collecting rumors and bobbing up out of the shadows periodically like a small, dark ghost, eyes gleaming with excitement.

"Madame," he said, plucking at my sleeve as I ripped linens into strips and threw them into a pile for sterilization. "Madame!"

"What is it this time, Fergus?" I was mildly irritated at the intrusion; I had been in the middle of a lecture to a group of housewives on the importance of washing the hands frequently while treating the wounded.

"A man, Madame. He is wanting to speak with the commander of His Highness's army. He has important information, he says."

"Well, I'm not stopping him, am I?" I tugged at a recalcitrant shirt seam, then used my teeth to wrench loose the end, and yanked. It tore cleanly, with a satisfying ripping sound.

I spit out a thread or two. He was still there, waiting patiently.

"All right," I said, resigned. "What do you—or he—think I can do about it?"

"If you will give me permission, Madame," he said eagerly, "I could guide him to my master. *He* could arrange for the man to speak to the commander."

"He," of course, could do anything, so far as Fergus was concerned; including, no doubt, walking on water, turning water into wine, and inducing Lord George to talk to mysterious strangers who materialized out of the darkness with important information.

I brushed the hair out of my eyes; I had tied it back under a kertch, but curly strands kept escaping.

"Is this man somewhere nearby?"

That was all the encouragement he needed; he disappeared through the open door, returning momentarily with a thin young man whose eager gaze fastened at once on my face.

"Mrs. Fraser?" He bowed awkwardly at my nod, wiping his hands on his breeches as though he didn't know quite what to do with them, but wanted to be ready if something suggested itself.

"I—I'm Richard Anderson, of Whitburgh."

"Oh? Well, good for you," I said politely. "My servant says you have some valuable information for Lord George Murray."

He nodded, bobbing his head like a water ouzel. "Ye see, Mrs. Fraser, I've lived in these parts all my life. I—I know all of that ground where the armies are, know it like the back o' my hand. And there's a way down from the ridge where the Highland troops are camped—a trail that will lead them past the ditch at the bottom."

"I see." I felt a hollowing of the stomach at these words. If the Highlanders were to charge out of the rising sun next morning, they would have to leave the high ground of the ridge during the night watches. And if a charge was to be successful, plainly that ditch must be crossed or bypassed.

While I *thought* I knew what was to come, I had no certainty at all about it. I had been married to an historian—and the usual faint stab came at the thought of Frank—and knew just how unreliable historical sources often were. For that matter, I had no surety that my own presence couldn't or wouldn't change anything.

For the space of a moment, I wondered wildly what might happen if I tried to keep Richard Anderson from speaking to Lord George. Would the outcome of tomorrow's battle be changed? Would the Highland army—including Jamie and his men—be slaughtered as they ran downhill over boggy ground and into a ditch? Would Lord George come up with another plan that would work? Or would Richard Anderson merely go off on his own and find a way of speaking to Lord George himself, regardless of what I did?

It wasn't a risk I cared to take for experiment's sake. I looked down at Fergus, fidgeting with impatience to be gone.

"Do you think you can find your master? It's black as the inside of a coal hole up on that ridge. I wouldn't like either of you to be shot by mistake, traipsing around up there."

"I can find him, Madame," Fergus said confidently. He probably could, I thought. He seemed to have a sort of radar where Jamie was concerned.

"All right, then," I conceded. "But for God's sake, be careful."

"*Oui,* Madame!" In a flash, he was at the door, vibrating with eagerness to be gone.

It was half an hour after they had left that I noticed the knife I had left on the table was gone as well. And only then did I remember, with a sickening lurch of my stomach, that while I had told Fergus to be careful, I had forgotten altogether to tell him to come back.

* * *

The sound of the first cannon came in the lightening predawn, a dull, booming noise that seemed to echo through the plank boards on which I slept. My buttocks tightened, the involuntary flattening of a tail I didn't possess, and my fingers clasped those of the woman lying under the blanket next to me. The knowledge that something is going to happen should be some defense, but somehow it never is.

There was a faint moan from one corner of the cottage, and the woman next to me muttered, "Mary, Michael, and Bride preserve us," under her breath. There was a stirring over the floor as the women began to rise. There was little talk, as though all ears were pricked to catch the sounds of battle from the plain below.

I caught sight of one of the Highlanders' wives, a Mrs. MacPherson, as she folded her blanket next to the graying window. Her face was blank with fear, and she closed her eyes with a small shudder as another muffled boom came from below.

I revised my opinion as to the uselessness of knowledge. These women had no knowledge of secret trails, sunrise charges, and surprise routs. All these women knew was that their husbands and sons were now facing the cannon and musket fire of an English army four times their number.

Prediction is a risky business at the best of times, and I knew they would pay me no mind. The best thing I could do for them was to keep them busy. A fleeting image crossed my mind, of the rising sun shining bright off blazing hair, making a perfect target of its owner. A second image followed hard on its heels; a squirrel-toothed boy, armed with a stolen butcher knife and a bright-eyed belief in the glories of war. I closed my own eyes and swallowed hard. Keeping busy was the best thing I could do for myself.

"Ladies!" I said. "We've done a lot, but there's a lot more to do. We shall be needing boiling water. Cauldrons for boiling, cream pans for soaking. Parritch for those who can eat; milk for those who can't. Tallow and garlic for dressings. Wood laths for splints. Bottles and jugs, cups and spoons. Sewing needles and stout thread. Mrs. MacPherson, if you would be so kind …"

* * *

I knew little of the battle, except which side was supposed to win, and that the casualties of the Jacobite army were to be "light." From the far-off, blurry page of the textbook, I again retrieved that tiny bit of information: "… while the Jacobites triumphed, with only thirty casualties."

Casualties. Fatalities, I corrected. Any injury is a casualty, in nursing terms, and there were a good many more than thirty in my cottage as the sun burned its way upward through the sea mist toward noon. Slowly, the victors of the battle were making their way in triumph back toward Tranent, the sound of body helping their wounded comrades.

Oddly enough, His Highness had ordered that the English wounded be retrieved first from the field of battle and carefully tended. "They are my Father's subjects," he said firmly, making the capital "F" thoroughly audible, "and I will have them well cared for." The fact that the Highlanders who had just won the battle for him were also presumably his Father's subjects seemed to have escaped his notice for the moment.

"Given the behavior of the Father and the Son," I muttered to Jenny Cameron on hearing this, "the Highland army had better hope that the Holy Ghost doesn't choose to descend today."

A look of shock at this blasphemous observation crossed the face of Mrs. MacPherson, but Jenny laughed.

The whoops and shrieks of Gaelic celebration overwhelmed the faint groans of the wounded, borne in on makeshift stretchers made of planks or bound-together muskets, or more often, leaning on the arms of friends for support. Some of the casualties staggered in under their own power, beaming and drunk on their own exuberance, the pain of their wounds seeming a minor inconvenience in the face of glorious vindication of their faith. Despite the injuries that brought them here to be tended, the intoxicating knowledge of victory filled the house with a mood of hilarious exhilaration.

"Christ, did ye see 'em scutter like wee mousies wi' a cat on their tails?" said one patient to another, seemingly oblivious of the nasty powder burn that had singed his left arm from knuckles to shoulder.

"And a rare good many of 'em missin' their tails," answered his friend, with a chortle.

Joy was not quite universal; here and there, small parties of subdued Highlanders could be seen making their way across the hills, carrying the still form of a friend, plaid's end covering a face gone blank and empty with heaven's seeing.

It was the first test of my chosen assistants, and they rose to the challenge as well as had the warriors of the field. That is, they balked and complained and made nuisances of themselves, and then, when necessity struck, threw themselves into battle with unparalleled fierceness.

Not that they stopped complaining while they did it.

Mrs. McMurdo returned with yet another full bottle, which she hung in the assigned place on the cottage wall, before stooping to rummage in the tub that held the bottles of honey water. The elderly wife of a Tranent fisherman pressed into army service, she was the waterer on this shift; in charge of going from man to man, urging each to sip as much of the sweetened fluid as could be tolerated—and then making a second round to deal with the results, equipped with two or three empty bottles.

"If ye didna gie them so much to drink, they'd no piss sae much," she complained—not for the first time.

"They need the water," I explained patiently—not for the first time. "It keeps their blood pressure up, and replaces some of the fluids they've lost, and helps avoid shock—well, look, woman, do you see many of them dying?” I demanded, suddenly losing a good deal of my patience in the face of Mrs. McMurdo’s continuing dubiousness and complaints; her nearly toothless mouth lent a note of mournfulness to an already dour expression—all is lost, it seemed to say; why trouble further?

“Mphm,” she said. Since she took the water and returned to her rounds without further remonstrance, I took this sound for at least temporary assent.

I stepped outside to escape both Mrs. McMurdo and the atmosphere in the cottage. It was thick with smoke, heat, and the fug of unwashed bodies, and I felt a bit dizzy.

The streets were filled with men, drunk, celebrating, laden with plunder from the battlefield. One group of men in the reddish tartan of the MacGillivrays pulled an English cannon, tethered with ropes like a dangerous wild beast. The resemblance was enhanced by the fanciful carvings of crouching wolves that decorated the touch-hole and muzzle. One of General Cope’s showpieces, I supposed.

Then I recognized the small black figure riding astride the cannon’s muzzle, hair sticking up like a bottle brush. I closed my eyes in momentary thankfulness, then opened them and hastened down the street to drag him off the cannon.

“Wretch!” I said, giving him a shake and then a hug. “What do you mean sneaking off like that? If I weren’t so busy, I’d box your ears ’til your head rattled!”

“Madame,” he said, blinking stupidly in the afternoon sun. “Madame.”

I realized he hadn’t heard a word I’d said. “Are you all right?” I asked, more gently.

A look of puzzlement crossed his face, smeared with mud and powder-stains. He nodded, and a sort of dazed smile appeared through the grime.

“I killed an English soldier, Madame.”

“Oh?” I was unsure whether he wanted congratulation, or needed comfort. He was ten.

His brow wrinkled, and his face screwed up as though trying very hard to remember something.

"I *think* I killed him. He fell down, and I stuck him with my knife." He looked at me in bewilderment, as though I could supply the answer.

"Come along, Fergus," I said. "We'll find you some food and a place to sleep. Don't think about it anymore."

"*Oui*, Madame." He stumbled obediently along beside me, but within moments, I could see that he was about to fall flat on his face. I picked him up, with some difficulty, and lugged him toward the cottages near the church where I had centered our hospital operation. I had intended to feed him first, but he was sound asleep by the time I reached the spot where O'Sullivan was attempting—with little success—to organize his commissary wagons.

Instead, I left him curled in the box bed in one of the cottages, where a woman was looking after assorted children while their mothers tended wounded men. It seemed the best place for him.

* * *

The cottage had filled up with twenty or thirty men by midafternoon, and my two-woman staff was hopping. The house normally held a family of five or six, and the men able to stand were standing on the plaids of those lying down. In the distance across the small flat, I could see officers coming and going to the manse, the minister's residence commandeered by the High Command. I kept an eye on the battered door, which hung constantly ajar, but didn't see Jamie among those arriving to report casualties and receive congratulations.

I batted away the recurrent small gnat of worry, telling myself that I didn't see him among the wounded, either. I had not had time since early on to visit the small tent up the slope, where the dead of the battle were being laid out in orderly rows, as though awaiting a last inspection. But surely he could not be there.

Surely not, I told myself.

The door swung open and Jamie walked in.

I felt my knees give slightly at sight of him, and put out a hand to steady myself on the cottage's wooden chimney. He had been looking for me; his eyes darted around the room before they lighted on me, and a heart-stopping smile lit his face.

He was filthy, grimed with black-powder smoke, splattered with blood, and barefoot, legs and feet caked with mud. But he was whole, and standing. I wasn't inclined to quibble with the details.

Cries of greeting from some of the wounded men on the floor dragged his gaze away from me. He glanced down, smiled at George McClure, grinning up at his commander despite an ear that hung from his head by a sliver of flesh, then looked quickly back at me.

Thank God, his dark-blue eyes said, and *Thank God*, my own echoed back.

There was no time for more; wounded men were still coming in, and every able-bodied nonmilitary person in the village had been pressed into service to care for them. Archie Cameron, Lochiel's doctor brother, bustled back and forth among the cottages, nominally in charge, and actually doing some good here and there.

I had arranged that any Fraser men from Lallybroch should be brought to the cottage where I was conducting my own triage, quickly evaluating the severity of wounds, sending the still-mobile down the street to be dealt with by Jenny Cameron, the dying across to Archie Cameron's headquarters in the church—I did think him competent to dispense laudanum, and the surroundings might provide some consolation.

Serious wounds I dealt with as I could. Broken bones next door, where two surgeons from the Macintosh regiment could apply splints and bandages. Nonfatal chest wounds propped as comfortably as possible against one wall in a half-sitting position to assist breathing; lacking oxygen or facilities for surgical repair, there was little else I could do for them. Serious head wounds were dispatched to the church with the obviously dying; I had nothing to offer them, and they were better off in the hands of God, if not Archie Cameron.

Shattered and missing limbs and abdominal wounds were the worst. There was no possibility of sterility; all I could do was to cleanse my own hands between patients, browbeat my assistants into doing the same—so long as they were under my direct scrutiny, anyway—and try to ensure that the dressings we applied had all been boiled before application. I knew, beyond doubt, that similar precautions were being ignored as a waste of time in the other cottages, despite my lectures. If I couldn't convince the sisters and physicians of L'Hôpital des Anges of the existence of germs, I was unlikely to succeed with a mixed bag of Scottish housewives and army surgeons who doubled as farriers.

I blocked my mind to the thought of the men with treatable injuries who would die from infection. I could give the men of Lallybroch, and a few more, the benefit of clean hands and bandages; I couldn't worry about the rest. One dictum I had learned on the battlefields of France in a far distant war: You cannot save the world, but you might save the man in front of you, if you work fast enough.

Jamie stood a moment in the doorway, assessing the situation, then moved to help with the heavy work, shifting patients, lifting cauldrons of hot water, fetching buckets of clean water from the well in Tranent square. Relieved of fear for him, and caught up in the whirlwind of work and detail, I forgot about him for the most part.

The triage station of any field hospital always bears a strong resemblance to an abattoir, and this was no exception. The floor was pounded dirt, not a bad surface, insofar as it absorbed blood and other liquids. On the other hand, saturated spots did become muddy, making the footing hazardous.

Steam billowed from the boiling cauldron over the fire, adding to the heat of exertion. Everyone streamed with moisture; the workers with the sticky wash of exercise, the wounded men with the stinking sweat of fear and long-spent rage. The dissipating fog of black-powder smoke from the battlefield below drifted through the streets of Tranent and in through the open doors, its eye-stinging haze threatening the purity of the freshly boiled linens, hung dripping from the mackeral-drying rack by the fire.

The flow of the wounded came in waves, washing into the cottage like surf-scour, churning everything into confusion with the arrival of each fresh surge. We thrashed about, fighting the pull of the tide, and were left at last, gasping, to deal with the new flotsam left behind as each wave ebbed.

There are lulls, of course, in the most frantic activity. These began to come more frequently in the afternoon, and toward sundown, as the flow of wounded dropped to a trickle, we began to settle into a routine of caring for the patients who remained with us. It was still busy, but there was at last time to draw breath, to stand in one place for a moment and look around.

I was standing by the open door, breathing in the freshening breeze of the offshore wind, when Jamie came back into the cottage, carrying an armload of firewood. Dumping it by the hearth, he came back to stand by me, one hand resting briefly on my shoulder. Trickles of sweat ran down the edge of his jaw, and I reached up to dab them with a corner of my apron.

"Have you been to the other cottages?" I asked.

He nodded, breath beginning to slow. His face was so blotched with smoke and blood that I couldn't tell for sure, but thought he looked pale.

"Aye. There's still looting going on in the field, and a good many men still missing. All of our own wounded are here, though—none elsewhere." He nodded at the far end of the cottage where the three wounded men from Lallybroch lay or sat companionably near the hearth, trading good-natured insults with the other Scots. The few English wounded in this cottage lay by themselves, near the door. They talked much less, content to contemplate the bleak prospects of captivity.

"None bad?" he asked me, looking at the three.

I shook my head. "George McClure might lose the ear; I can't tell. But no; I think they'll be all right."

"Good." He gave me a tired smile, and wiped his hot face on the end of his plaid. I saw he had wrapped it carelessly around his body instead of draping it over one shoulder. Probably to keep it out of the way, but it must have been hot.

Turning to go, he reached for the water bottle hanging from the door peg.

"Not that one!" I said.

"Why not?" he asked, puzzled. He shook the wide-mouthed flask, with a faint sloshing sound. "It's full."

"I know it is," I said. "That's what I've been using as a urinal."

"Oh." Holding the bottle by two fingers, he reached to replace it, but I stopped him.

"No, go ahead and take it," I suggested. "You can empty it outside, and fill this one at the well." I handed him another gray stone bottle, identical with the first.

"Try not to get them mixed up," I said helpfully.

"Mmphm," he replied, giving me a Scottish look to go along with the noise, and turned toward the door.

"Hey!" I said, seeing him clearly from the back. "What's that?"

"What?" he said, startled, trying to peer over one shoulder.

"That!" My fingers traced the muddy shape I had spotted above the sagging plaid, printed on the grubby linen of his shirt with the clarity of a stencil. "It looks like a horseshoe," I said disbelievingly.

"Oh, that," he said, shrugging.

"A *horse* stepped on you?"

"Well, not on purpose," he said, defensive on the horse's behalf. "Horses dinna like to step on people; I suppose it feels a wee bit squashy underfoot."

"I would suppose it does," I agreed, preventing his attempts to escape by holding on to one sleeve. "Stand still. How the hell did this happen?"

"It's no matter," he protested. "The ribs don't feel broken, only a trifle bruised."

"Oh, just a trifle," I agreed sarcastically. I had worked the stained fabric free in back, and could see the clear, sharp imprint of a curved horseshoe, embedded in the fair flesh of his back, just above the waist. "Christ, you can see the horseshoe nails." He winced involuntarily as I ran my finger over the marks.

It had happened during one brief sally by the mounted dragoons, he explained. The Highlanders, mostly unaccustomed to horses other than the small, shaggy Highland ponies, were convinced that the English cavalry horses had been trained to attack them with hooves and teeth. Panicked at the horses' charge, they had dived under the horses' hooves, slashing ferociously at legs and bellies with swords and scythes and axes.

"And you think they aren't?"

"Of course not, Sassenach," he said impatiently. "He wasna trying to attack me. The rider wanted to get away, but he was sealed in on either side. There was noplace to go but over me."

Seeing this realization dawn in the eyes of the horse's rider, a split second before the dragoon applied spurs to his mount's sides, Jamie had flung himself flat on his face, arms over his head.

"Then the next was the breath bursting from my lungs," he explained. "I felt the dunt of it, but it didna hurt. Not then." He reached back and rubbed a hand absently over the mark, grimacing slightly.

"Right," I said, dropping the edge of the shirt. "Have you had a piss since then?"

He stared at me as though I had gone suddenly barmy.

"You've had four-hundredweight of horse step smack on one of your kidneys," I explained, a trifle impatiently. There were wounded men waiting. "I want to know if there's blood in your urine."

"Oh," he said, his expression clearing. "I don't know."

"Well, let's find out, shall we?" I had placed my big medicine box out of the way in one corner; now I rummaged about in it and withdrew one of the small glass urinoscopy cups I had acquired from L'Hôpital des Anges.

"Fill it up and give it back to me." I handed it to him and turned back toward the hearth, where a cauldron full of boiling linens awaited my attention.

I glanced back to find him still regarding the cup with a slightly quizzical expression.

"Need help, lad?" A big English soldier on the floor was peering up from his pallet, grinning at Jamie.

A flash of white teeth showed in the filth of Jamie's face. "Oh, aye," he said. He leaned down, offering the cup to the Englishman. "Here, hold this for me while I aim."

A ripple of mirth passed through the men nearby, distracting them momentarily from their distress.

After a moment's hesitation, the Englishman's big fist closed around the fragile cup. The man had taken a dose of shrapnel in one hip, and his grip was none too steady, but he still smiled, despite the sweat dewing his upper lip.

"Sixpence says you can't make it," he said. He moved the cup, so it stood on the floor three or four feet from Jamie's bare toes. "From where you stand now."

Jamie looked down thoughtfully, rubbing his chin with one hand as he measured the distance. The man whose arm I was dressing had stopped groaning, absorbed in the developing drama.

"Weel, I'll no say it would be easy," Jamie said, letting his Scots broaden on purpose. "But for sixpence? Aye, weel, that's a sum might make it worth the effort, eh?" His eyes, always faintly slanted, turned catlike with his grin.

"Easy money, lad," said the Englishman, breathing heavily but still grinning. "For me."

"Two silver pennies on the lad," called one of the MacDonald clansmen in the chimney corner.

An English soldier, coat turned inside-out to denote his prisoner status, fumbled inside the skirts, searching for the opening of his pocket.

"Ha! A pouch of weed against!" he called, triumphantly holding up a small cloth bag of tobacco.

Shouted wagers and rude remarks began to fly through the air as Jamie squatted down and made a great show of estimating the distance to the cup.

"All right," he said at last, standing up and throwing back his shoulders. "Are ye set, then?"

The Englishman on the floor chuckled. "Oh, *I'm* set, lad."

"Well, then."

An expectant hush fell over the room. Men raised on their elbows to watch, ignoring both discomfort and enmity in their interest.

Jamie glanced around the room, nodded at his Lallybroch men, then slowly raised the hem of his kilt and reached beneath it. He frowned in concentration, groping randomly, then let an expression of doubt flit across his countenance.

“I had it when I went out,” he said, and the room erupted in laughter.

Grinning at the success of his joke, he raised his kilt further, grasped his clearly visible weapon and took careful aim. He squinted his eyes, bent his knees slightly, and his fingers tightened their grip.

Nothing happened.

“It’s a misfire!” crowed one of the English.

“His powder’s wet!” Another hooted.

“No balls to your pistol, lad?” jibed his accomplice on the floor.

Jamie squinted dubiously at his equipment, bringing on a fresh riot of howls and catcalls. Then his face cleared.

“Ha! My chamber’s empty, that’s all!” He snaked an arm toward the array of bottles on the wall, cocked an eyebrow at me, and when I nodded, took one down and upended it over his open mouth. The water splashed over his chin and onto his shirt, and his Adam’s apple bobbed theatrically as he drank.

“Ahhh.” He lowered the bottle, swabbed some of the grime from his face with a sleeve, and bowed to his audience.

“Now, then,” he began, reaching down. He caught sight of my face, though, and stopped in mid-motion. He couldn’t see the open door at his back, nor the man standing in it, but the sudden quiet that fell upon the room must have told him that all bets were off.

His Highness Prince Charles Edward bent his head under the lintel to enter the cottage. Come to visit the wounded, he was dressed for the occasion in plum velvet breeches with stockings to match, immaculate linen, and—to show solidarity with the troops, no doubt—a coat and waistcoat in Cameron tartan, with a subsidiary plaid looped over one shoulder through a cairngorm brooch. His hair was freshly powdered, and the Order of St. Andrew glittered brilliantly upon his breast.

He stood in the doorway, nobly inspiring everyone in sight and noticeably impeding the entrance of those behind him. He looked slowly about him, taking in the twenty-five men crammed cheek by jowl on the floor, the helpers crouching over them, the mess of bloodied dressings tossed into the corner, the scatter of medicines and instruments across the table, and me, standing behind it.

His Highness didn't care overmuch for women with the army in general, but he was thoroughly grounded in the rules of courtesy. I *was* a woman, despite the smears of blood and vomit that streaked my skirt, and the fact that my hair was shooting out from under my kertch in half a dozen random sprays.

"Madame Fraser," he said, bowing graciously to me.

"Your Highness." I bobbed a curtsy back, hoping he didn't intend to stay long.

"Your labors in our behalf are very much appreciate, Madame," he said, his soft Italian accent stronger than usual.

"Er, thank you," I said. "Mind the blood. It's slippery just there."

The delicate mouth tightened a bit as he skirted the puddle I had pointed out. The doorway freed, Sheridan, O'Sullivan, and Lord Balmerino came in, adding to the congestion in the cottage. Now that the demands of courtesy had been attended to, Charles crouched carefully between two pallets.

He laid a gentle hand on the shoulder of one man.

"What is your name, my brave fellow?"

"Gilbert Munro … erm, Your Highness," added the man, hastily, awed at the sight of the Prince.

The manicured fingers touched the bandage and splints that swathed what was left of Gilbert Munro's right arm.

"Your sacrifice was great, Gilbert Munro," Charles said simply. "I promise you it will not be forgotten." The hand brushed across a whiskered cheek, and Munro reddened with embarassed pleasure.

I had a man before me with a scalp wound that needed stitching, but was able to watch from the corner of my eye as Charles made the rounds of the cottage. Moving slowly, he went from bed to bed, missing no one, stopping to inquire each man's name and home, to offer thanks and affection, congratulations, and condolence.

The men were stunned into silence, English and Highlander alike, barely managing to answer His Highness in soft murmurs. At last he stood and stretched, with an audible creaking of ligaments. An end of his plaid had trailed in the mud, but he didn't seem to notice.

"I bring you the blessing and the thanks of my Father," he said. "Your deeds of today will always be remembered." The men on the floor were not in the proper mood to cheer, but there were smiles, and a general murmur of appreciation.

Turning to go, Charles caught sight of Jamie, standing out of the way in the corner, so as not to have his bare toes trampled by Sheridan's boots. His Highness's face lighted with pleasure.

"Mon cher! I had not seen you today. I feared some malchance had overtaken you." A look of reproach crossed the handsome, ruddy face. "Why did you not come to supper at the manse with the other officers?"

Jamie smiled and bowed respectfully.

"My men are here, Highness."

The Prince's brows shot up at this, and he opened his mouth as though to say something, but Lord Balmerino stepped forward and whispered something in his ear. Charles's expression changed to one of concern.

"But what this is I hear?" he said to Jamie, losing control of his syntax as he did in moments of emotion. "His Lordship tells me that you have yourself suffered a wound."

Jamie looked mildly discomfited. He shot a quick glance my way, to see if I had heard, and seeing that I most certainly had, jerked his eyes back to the Prince.

"It's nothing, Highness. Only a scratch."

"Show me." It was simply spoken, but unmistakably an order, and the stained plaid fell away without protest.

The folds of dark tartan were nearly black on the inner side. His shirt beneath was reddened from armpit to hip, with stiff brown patches where the blood had begun to dry.

Leaving my head injury to mind himself for a moment, I stepped forward and opened the shirt, pulling it gently away from the injured side. Despite the quantity of blood, I knew it must not be a serious wound; he stood like a rock, and the blood no longer flowed.

It was a saber-slash, slanting across the ribs. A lucky angle; straight in and it would have gone deep into the intercostal muscles between the ribs. As it was, an eight-inch flap of skin gaped loose, red beginning to ooze beneath it again with the release of pressure. It would take a goodly number of stitches to repair, but aside from the constant danger of infection, the wound was in no way serious.

Turning to report this to His Highness, I halted, stopped by the odd look on his face. For a split second, I thought it was "rookie's tremors," the shock of a person unaccustomed to the sight of wounds and blood. Many a trainee nurse at the combat station had removed a field dressing, taken one look and bolted, to vomit quietly outside before returning to tend the patient. Battle wounds have a peculiarly nasty look to them.

But it couldn't be that. By no means a natural warrior, still Charles had been blooded, like Jamie, at the age of fourteen, in his first battle at Gaeta. No, I decided, even as the momentary expression of shock faded from the soft brown eyes. He would not be startled by blood or wounds.

This wasn't a cottar or a herder that stood before him. Not a nameless subject, whose duty was to fight for the Stuart cause. This was a friend. And I thought that perhaps Jamie's wound had suddenly brought it home to him; that blood was shed on *his* order, men wounded for *his* cause—little wonder if the realization struck him, deep as a sword-cut.

He looked at Jamie's side for a long moment, then looked up to meet his eyes. He grasped Jamie by the hand, and bowed his own head.

"Thank you," he said softly.

And just for that one moment, I thought perhaps he might have made a king, after all.

On a small slope behind the church, a tent had been erected at His Highness's order, for the last shelter of those dead in battle. Given preference in treatment, the English soldiers received none here; the men lay in rows, cloths covering their faces, Highlanders distinguished only by their dress, all awaiting burial on the morrow. MacDonald of Keppoch had brought a French priest with him; the man, shoulders sagging with weariness, purple stole worn incongruously over a stained Highland plaid, moved slowly through the tent, pausing to pray at the foot of each recumbent figure.

"Perpetual rest grant unto him, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon him." He crossed himself mechanically, and moved on to another corpse.

I had seen the tent earlier, and—heart in mouth—counted the bodies of the Highland dead. Twenty-two. Now, as I entered the tent, I found the toll had risen to twenty-six.

A twenty-seventh lay in the nearby church, on the last mile of his journey. Alexander Kincaid Fraser, dying slowly of the wounds that riddled his belly and chest, of a slow internal seepage that couldn't be halted. I had seen him when they brought him in, bleached white from an afternoon of bleeding slowly to death, alone in the field among the bodies of his foes.

He had tried to smile at me, and I had wetted his cracked lips with water and coated them with tallow. To give him a drink was to kill him at once, as the liquid would rush through his perforated intestines and cause fatal shock. I hesitated, seeing the seriousness of his wounds, and thinking that a quick death might be better … but then I had stopped. I realized that he would want to see a priest and make his confession, at least. And so I had dispatched him to the church, where Father Benin tended the dying as I tended the living.

Jamie had made short visits to the church every half-hour or so, but Kincaid held his own for an amazingly long time, clinging to life despite the constant ebbing of its substance. But Jamie had not come back from his latest visit. I knew that the fight was ending now at last, and went to see if I could help.

The space under the windows where Kincaid had lain was empty, save for a large, dark stain. He wasn't in the tent of the dead, either, and neither was Jamie anywhere in sight.

I found them at length some distance up the hill behind the church. Jamie was sitting on a rock, the form of Alexander Kincaid cradled in his arms, curly head resting on his shoulder, the long, hairy legs trailing limp to one side. Both were still as the rock on which they sat. Still as death, though only one was dead.

I touched the white, slack hand, to be sure, and rested my hand on the thick brown hair, feeling still so incongruously alive. A man should not die a virgin, but this one did.

"He's gone, Jamie," I whispered.

He didn't move for a moment, but then nodded, opening his eyes as though reluctant to face the realities of the night.

"I know. He died soon after I brought him out, but I didna want to let him go."

I took the shoulders and we lowered him gently to the ground. It was grassy here, and the night wind stirred the stems around him, brushing them lightly across his face, a welcome to the caress of the earth.

"You didn't want him to die under a roof," I said, understanding. The sky swept over us, cozy with cloud, but endless in its promise of refuge.

He nodded slowly, then knelt by the body and kissed the wide, pale forehead.

"I would have someone do the same for me," he said softly. He drew a fold of the plaid up over the brown curls, and murmured something in Gaelic that I didn't understand.

A medical casualties station is no place for tears; there is much too much to be done. I had not wept all day, despite the things I had seen, but now gave way, if only for a moment. I leaned my face against Jamie's shoulder for strength, and he patted me briefly. When I looked up, wiping the tears from my face, I saw him still staring, dry-eyed, at the quiet figure on the ground. He felt me watching him and looked down at me.

"I wept for him while he was still alive to know it, Sassenach," he said quietly. "Now, how is it in the house?"

I sniffed, wiped my nose, and took his arm as we turned back to the cottage.

"I need your help with one."

"Which is it?"

"Hamish MacBeth."

Jamie's face, strained for so many hours, relaxed a bit under the stains and smudges.

"He's back, then? I'm glad. How bad is he, though?"

I rolled my eyes. "You'll see."

MacBeth was one of Jamie's favorites. A massive man with a curly brown beard and a reticent manner, he had been always there within Jamie's call, ready when something was needed on the journey. Seldom speaking, he had a slow, shy smile that blossomed out of his beard like a night-blooming flower, rare but radiant.

I knew the big man's absence after the battle had been worrying Jamie, even among the other details and stresses. As the day wore on and the stragglers came back one by one, I had been keeping an eye out for MacBeth. But sundown came and the fires sprang up amid the army camp, with no Hamish MacBeth, and I had begun to fear we would find him among the dead, too.

But he had come into the casualties station half an hour before, moving slowly, but under his own power. One leg was stained with blood down to the ankle, and he walked with a ginger, spraddled gait, but he would on no account let a "wumman" lay hands on him to see what was the matter.

The big man was lying on a blanket near a lantern, hands clasped across the swell of his belly, eyes fastened patiently on the raftered ceiling. He swiveled his eyes around as Jamie knelt down beside him, but didn't move otherwise. I lingered tactfully in the background, hidden from view by Jamie's broad back.

"All right, then, MacBeth," said Jamie, laying a hand on the thick wrist in greeting. "How is it, man?"

"I'll do, sir," the giant rumbled. "I'll do. Just that it's a bit …" He hesitated.

"Well, then, let's have a look at it." MacBeth made no protest as Jamie flipped back the edge of the kilt. Peeking through a crack between Jamie's arm and body, I could see the cause of MacBeth's hesitations.

A sword or pike had caught him high in the groin and ripped its way downward. The scrotum was torn jaggedly on one side, and one testicle hung halfway out, its smooth pink surface shiny as a peeled egg.

Jamie and the two or three other men who saw the wound turned pale, and I saw one of the aides touch himself reflexively, as though to assure that his own parts were unscathed.

Despite the horrid look of the wound, the testicle itself seemed undamaged, and there was no excessive bleeding. I touched Jamie on the shoulder and shook my head to signify that the wound was not serious, no matter what its effect on the male psyche. Catching my gesture with the tail of his eye, Jamie patted MacBeth on the knee.

"Och, it's none so bad, MacBeth. Nay worry, ye'll be a father yet."

The big man had been looking down apprehensively, but at these words, transferred his gaze to his commander. "Weel, that's no such a consairn to me, sir, me already havin' the six bairns. It's just what my wife'd say, if I …" MacBeth blushed crimson as the men surrounding him laughed and hooted.

Casting an eye back at me for confirmation, Jamie suppressed his own grin and said firmly, "That'll be all right, too, MacBeth."

"Thank ye, sir," the man breathed gratefully, with complete trust in his commander's assurance.

"Still," Jamie went on briskly, "it'll need to be stitched up, man. Now, ye've your choice about that."

He reached into the open kit for one of my handmade suture needles. Appalled by the crude objects barber-surgeons customarily used to sew up their customers, I'd made three dozen of my own, by selecting the finest embroidery needles I could get, and heating them in forceps over the flame of an alcohol lamp, bending them gently until I had the proper half-moon curve needed for stitching severed tissues. Likewise, I'd made my own catgut sutures; a messy, disgusting business, but at least I was sure of the sterility of my materials.

The tiny suture needle looked ridiculous, pinched between Jamie's large thumb and index finger. The illusion of medical competence was not furthered by Jamie's cross-eyed attempts to thread the needle.

"Either I'll do it myself," he said, tongue-tip protruding slightly in his concentration, "or—" He broke off as he dropped the needle and fumbled about in the folds of MacBeth's plaid for it. "Or," he resumed, holding it up triumphantly before his patient's apprehensive eyes, "my wife can do it for ye." A slight jerk of the head summoned me into view. I did my best to look as matter-of-fact as possible, taking the needle from Jamie's incompetent grasp and threading it neatly with one thrust.

MacBeth's large brown eyes traveled slowly between Jamie's big paws, which he contrived to make look as clumsy as possible by setting the crooked right hand atop the left, and my own small, swift hands. At last he lay back with a dismal sigh, and mumbled his consent to let a "wumman" lay hands on his private parts.

"Dinna worry yourself, man," Jamie said, patting him companionably on the shoulder. "After all, she's had the handling of my own for some time now, and she's not unmanned me yet." Amid the laughter of the aides and nearby patients, he started to rise, but I stopped him by thrusting a small flask into his hands.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Alcohol and water," I said. "Disinfectant solution. If he's not to have fever or pustulence or something worse, the wound will have to be washed out." MacBeth had plainly walked some way from where the injury had occurred, and there were smears of dirt as well as blood near the wound. Grain alcohol was a harsh disinfectant, even cut 50/50 with distilled sterile water as I used it. Still, it was the single most effective tool I had against infection, and I was adamant about its usage, in spite of complaints from the aides and screams of anguish from the patients who were subjected to it.

Jamie glanced from the alcohol flask to the gaping wound and shuddered slightly. He'd had his own dose when I stitched his side, earlier in the evening.

"Weel, MacBeth, better you than me," he said, and, placing his knee firmly in the man's midriff, sloshed the contents of the flask over the exposed tissues.

A dreadful roar shook the walls, and MacBeth writhed like a cut snake. When the noise at last subsided, his face had gone a mottled greenish color, and he made no objection at all as I began the routine, if painful, job of stitching up the scrotum. Most of the patients, even those horribly wounded, were stoic about the primitive treatment to which we subjected them, and MacBeth was no exception. He lay unmoving in hideous embarrassment, eyes fixed on the lantern flame, and didn't move a muscle as I made my repairs. Only the changing colors of his face, from green to white to red and back again, betrayed his emotions.

At the last, however, he went purple. As I finished the stitching, the limp penis began to stiffen slightly, brushed in passing by my hand. Thoroughly rattled by this justification of his faith in Jamie's word, MacBeth snatched down his kilts the instant I was finished, lurched to his feet, and staggered away into the darkness, leaving me giggling over my kit.

* * *

I found a corner where a chest of medical supplies made a seat, and leaned against the wall. A surge of pain shot up my calves; the sudden release of tension, and the nerves' reaction to it. I slipped off my shoes and leaned back against the wall, reveling in the smaller spasms that shot up backbone and neck as the strain of standing was relieved.

Every square inch of skin seems newly sensitive in such a state of fatigue; when the necessity of forcing the body to perform is suddenly suspended, the lingering impetus seems to force the blood to the perimeter of the body, as though the nervous system is reluctant to believe what the muscles have already gratefully accepted; you need not move, just now.

The air in the cottage was warm and noisy with breathing; not the healthy racket of snoring men, but the shallow gasps of men for whom breathing hurts, and the moans of those who have found a temporary oblivion that frees them from the manly obligation of suffering in silence.

The men in this cottage were those badly wounded, but in no immediate danger. I knew, though, that death walks at night in the aisles of a sick ward, searching for those whose defenses are lowered, who may stray unwittingly into its path through loneliness and fear. Some of the wounded had wives who slept next to them, to comfort them in the dark, but none in this cottage.

They had me. If I could do little to heal them or stop their pain, I could at least let them know that they didn't lie alone; that someone stood here, between them and the shadow. Beyond anything I could do, it was my job only to be there.

I rose and made my way slowly once again through the pallets on the floor, stooping at each one, murmuring and touching, straightening a blanket, smoothing tangled hair, rubbing the knots that form in cramped limbs. A sip of water here, a change of dressing there, the reading of an attitude of tense embarrassment that meant a urinal was needed, and the matter-of-fact presentation that allowed the man to ease himself, the stone bottle growing warm and heavy in my hand.

I stepped outdoors to empty one of these, and paused for a moment, gathering the cool, rainy night to myself, letting the soft moisture wipe away the touch of coarse, hairy skin and the smell of sweating men.

"Ye dinna sleep much, Sassenach." The soft Scottish voice came from the direction of the road. The other hospital cottages lay in that direction; the officers' quarters, the other way, in the village manse.

"You dinna sleep much, either," I responded dryly. How long had he gone without sleep? I wondered.

"I slept in the field last night, with the men."

"Oh, yes? Very restful," I said, with an edge that made him laugh. Six hours' sleep in a wet field, followed by a battle in which he'd been stepped on by a horse, wounded by a sword, and done God knows what else. Then he had gathered his men, collected the wounded, tended the hurt, mourned his dead, and served his Prince. And through none of it had I seen him pause for food, drink, or rest.

I didn't bother scolding. It wasn't even worth mentioning that he ought to have been among the patients on the floor. It was his job to be here, as well.

"There are other women, Sassenach," he said gently. "Shall I have Archie Cameron send someone down?"

It was a temptation, but one I pushed away before I could think about it too long, for fear that if I acknowledged my fatigue, I would never move again.

I stretched, hands against the small of my back.

"No," I said. "I'll manage 'til the dawn. Then someone else can take over for a time." Somehow I felt that I must get them through the night; at dawn they would be safe.

He didn't scold, either; just laid a hand on my shoulder and drew me to lean against him for a moment. We shared what strength we had, unspeaking.

"I'll stay with ye, then," he said, drawing away at last. "I canna sleep before light, myself."

"The other men from Lallybroch?"

He moved his head toward the fields near the town where the army was camped.

"Murtagh's in charge."

"Oh, well, then. Nothing to worry about," I said, and saw him smile in the light from the window. There was a bench outside the cottage, where the goodwife would sit on sunny days to clean fish or mend clothes. I drew him down to sit beside me, and he sagged back against the wall of the house with a sigh. His patent exhaustion reminded me of Fergus, and the boy's expression of confused bewilderment after the battle.

I reached to caress the back of Jamie's neck, and he turned his head blindly toward me, resting his brow against my own.

"How was it, Jamie?" I asked softly, fingers rubbing hard and slow over the tight-ridged muscles of his neck and shoulders. "What was it like? Tell me."

There was a short silence, then he sighed, and began to talk, haltingly at first, and then faster, as if wanting to get it out.

"We had no fire, for Lord George thought we must move off the ridge before daylight, and wanted no hint of movement to be seen below. We sat in the dark for a time. Couldna even talk, for the sound would carry to the plain. So we sat.

"Then I felt something grab my thigh in the dark, and near jumped out of my skin." He inserted a finger in his mouth and rubbed gingerly. "Nearly bit my tongue off." I felt the shift of his muscles as he smiled, though his face was hidden.

"Fergus?"

The ghost of a laugh floated through the dark.

"Aye, Fergus. Crawled through the grass on his belly, the little bastard, and I thought he was a snake, at that. He whispered to me about Anderson, and I crawled off after him and took Anderson to see Lord George."

His voice was slow and dreamy, talking under the spell of my touch.

"And then the order came that we'd move, following Anderson's trail. And the whole of the army got to its feet, and set off in the dark."

* * *

The night was clear black and moonless, without the usual cover of cloud that trapped starlight and diffused it toward the earth. As the Highland army made its way in silence down the narrow path behind Richard Anderson, each man could see no farther than the shuffling heels of the man before him, each step widening the trodden path through wet grass.

The army moved almost without noise. Orders were relayed in murmurs from man to man, not shouted. Broadswords and axes were muffled in the folds of their plaids, powder flasks tucked inside shirts against fast-beating hearts.

Once on sound footing, still in total silence, the Highlanders sat down, made themselves as comfortable as was possible without fire, ate what cold rations there were, and composed themselves to rest, wrapped in their plaids, in sight of the enemy's campfires.

"We could hear them talking," Jamie said. His eyes were closed, hands clasped behind his head, as he leaned against the cottage wall. "Odd, to hear men laughing over a jest, or asking for a pinch of salt or a turn at the wineskin—and know that in a few hours, ye may kill them—or them you. Ye can't help wondering, ye ken; what does the face behind that voice look like? Will you know the fellow if ye meet him in the morning?"

Still, the tremors of anticipated battle were no match for sheer fatigue, and the "Black Frasers"—so called for the traces of charcoal that still adorned their features—and their chief had been awake for more than thirty-six hours by then. He had picked a sheaf of marrow-grass for a pillow, tucked the plaid around his shoulders, and lain down in the waving grass beside his men.

During his time with the French army, years before, one of the sergeants had explained to the younger mercenaries the trick of falling asleep the night before a battle.

"Make yourself comfortable, examine your conscience, and make a good Act of Contrition. Father Hugo says that in time of war, even if there is no priest to shrive you, your sins can be forgiven this way. Since you cannot commit sins while asleep—not even *you,* Simenon!—you will awake in a state of grace, ready to fall on the bastards. And with nothing to look forward to but victory or heaven—how can you be afraid?"

While privately noting a few flaws in this argument, Jamie had found it still good advice; freeing the conscience eased the soul, and the comforting repetition of prayer distracted the mind from fearful imaginings and lulled it toward sleep.

He gazed upward into the black vault of the sky, and willed the tightness of neck and shoulders to relax into the ground's hard embrace. The stars were faint and hazy tonight, no match for the nearby glow of the English fires.

His mind reached out to the men around him, resting briefly on each, one by one. The stain of sin was small weight on his conscience, compared with these. Ross, McMurdo, Kincaid, Kent, McClure … he paused to give brief thanks that his wife and the boy Fergus at least were safe. His mind lingered on his wife, wanting to bask in the memory of her reassuring smile, the solid, wonderful warmth of her in his arms, pressed tight against him as he had kissed her goodbye that afternoon. Despite his own weariness and the waiting presence of Lord George outside, he had wanted to tumble her onto the waiting mattress right then and take her quickly, at once, without undressing. Strange how the imminence of fighting made him so ready, always. Even now …

But he hadn't yet finished his mental roster, and he felt his eyelids closing already, as tiredness sought to pull him under. He dismissed the faint tightening of his testicles that came at thought of her, and resumed his roll call, a shepherd treacherously lulled to sleep by counting the sheep he was leading to slaughter.

But it wouldn't be a slaughter, he tried to reassure himself. Light casualties for the Jacobite side. Thirty men killed. Out of two thousand, only a slim chance that some of the Lallybroch men would be among that number, surely? If she was right.

He shuddered faintly under the plaid, and fought down the momentary doubt that wrenched his bowels. If. God, if. Still he had trouble believing it, though he had seen her by that cursed rock, face dissolving in terror around the panic-wide gold eyes, the very outlines of her body blurring as he, panicked also, had clutched at her, pulling her back, feeling little more than the frail double bone of her forearm under his hand. Perhaps he should have let her go, back to her own place. No, no perhaps. He knew that he should. But he had pulled her back. Given her the choice, but kept her with him by the sheer force of his wanting her. And so she had stayed. And given *him* the choice—to believe her, or not. To act, or to run. And the choice was made now, and no power on earth could stop the dawn from coming.

His heart beat heavily, pulse echoing in wrists and groin and the pit of his stomach. He sought to calm it, resuming his count, one name to each heartbeat. Willie McNab, Bobby McNab, Geordie McNab … thank God, young Rabbie McNab was safe, left at home … Will Fraser, Ewan Fraser, Geoffrey McClure … McClure … had he touched on both George and Sorley? Shifted slightly, smiling faintly, feeling for the soreness left along his ribs. Murtagh. Aye, Murtagh, tough old boot … my mind is no troubled on your account, at least. William Murray, Rufus Murray, Geordie, Wallace, Simon …

And at last, had closed his eyes, commended all of them to the care of the black sky above, and lost himself in the murmured words that came to him still most naturally in French—*“Mon Dieu, je regrette …”*

* * *

I made my rounds inside the cottage, changing a blood-soaked dressing on one man’s leg. The bleeding should have stopped by now, but it hadn’t. Poor nutrition and brittle bones. If the bleeding hadn’t stopped before cockcrow, I would have to fetch Archie Cameron or one of the farrier-surgeons to amputate the leg, and cauterize the stump.

I hated the thought of it. Life was sufficiently hard for a man with all his limbs in good working order. Hoping for the best, I coated the new dressing with a light sprinkling of alum and sulfur. If it didn’t help, it wouldn’t hinder. Likely it *would* hurt, but that couldn’t be helped.

“It will burn a bit,” I murmured to the man, as I wrapped his leg in the layers of cloth.

“Dinna worry yourself, Mistress,” he whispered. He smiled at me, in spite of the sweat that ran down his cheeks, shiny in the light of my candle. “I’ll stand it.”

“Good.” I patted his shoulder, smoothed the hair off his brow, and gave him a drink of water. “I’ll check again in an hour, if you can bear it that long.”

“I’ll stand it,” he said again.

* * *

Outside once more, I thought Jamie had fallen asleep. His face rested on his folded forearms, crossed on his knees. But he looked up at the sound of my step, and took my hand as I sat beside him.

“I heard the cannon at dawn,” I said, thinking of the man inside, leg broken by a cannonball. “I was afraid for you.”

He laughed softly. “So was I, Sassenach. So were we all.”

Quiet as wisps of mist, the Highlanders advanced through the sea grass, one foot at a time. There was no sense of darkness lessening, but the feel of the night had changed. The wind had changed, that was it; it blew from the sea over the cold dawning land, and the faint thunder of waves on distant sand could be heard.

Despite his impression of continued dark, the light was coming. He saw the man at his feet just in time; one more step and he would have been headlong across the man's curled body.

Heart pounding from the shock of the near-meeting, he dropped to his haunches to get a better look. A Redcoat, and sleeping, not dead or wounded. He squinted hard into the darkness around them, willing his ears to listen for the breathing of other sleeping men. Nothing but sea sounds, grass and wind sounds, the tiny swish of stealthy feet almost hidden in their muted roar.

He glanced hastily back, licking lips gone dry despite the moist air. There were men close behind him; he dared not hesitate long. The next man might not be so careful where he stepped, and they could risk no outcry.

He set hand to his dirk, but hesitated. War was war, but it went against the grain to slay a sleeping enemy. The man seemed to be alone, some distance from his companions. Not a sentinel; not even the slackest of guards would sleep, knowing the Highlanders to be camped on the ridge above. Perhaps the soldier had gotten up to relieve himself, thoughtfully come some distance from his fellows to do it, then, losing his direction in the dark, lain down to sleep where he was.

The metal of his musket was slick from his sweating palm. He rubbed his hand on his plaid, then stood, grasped the barrel of the musket, and swung the butt in a vicious arc, down and around. The shock of impact jolted him to the shoulder blades; an immobile head is solid. The man's arms had flown out with the force of the impact, but beyond an explosion of breath, he had made no noise, and now lay sprawled on his face, limp as a clout.

Palms tingling, he stooped again and groped beneath the man's jaw, looking for a pulse. He found one, and reassured, stood up. There was a muffled cry of startlement from behind, and he swung around, musket already at his shoulder, to find its barrel poking into the face of one of Keppoch's MacDonald clansmen.

"Mon Dieu!" the man whispered, crossing himself, and Jamie clenched his teeth with aggravation. It was Keppoch's bloody French

priest, dressed, at O'Sullivan's suggestion, in shirt and plaid like the fighting men.

"The man insisted that it was his duty to bring the sacraments to the wounded and dying on the field," Jamie explained to me, hitching his stained plaid higher on his shoulder. The night was growing colder. "O'Sullivan's idea was that if the English caught him on the battlefield in his cassock, they'd tear him to pieces. As to that, maybe so, maybe no. But he looked a right fool in a plaid," he added censoriously.

Nor had the priest's behavior done anything to ameliorate the impression caused by his attire. Realizing belatedly that his assailant was a Scot, he had sighed in relief, and then opened his mouth. Moving quickly, Jamie had clapped a hand over it before any ill-advised questions could emerge.

"What are ye doing here, Father?" he growled, mouth pressed to the priest's ear. "You're meant to be behind the lines."

A widening of the priest's eyes at this told Jamie the truth—the man of God, lost in the darkness, had thought he *was* behind the lines, and the belated realization that he was, in fact, in the vanguard of the advancing Highlanders, made him buckle slightly at the knees.

Jamie glanced backward; he didn't dare send the priest back through the lines. In the misty dark, he could easily stumble into an advancing Highlander, be mistaken for an enemy, and be killed on the spot. Gripping the smaller man by the back of the neck, he pushed him to his knees.

"Lie flat and stay that way until the firing stops," he hissed into the man's ear. The priest nodded frantically, then suddenly saw the body of the English soldier, lying on the ground a few feet away. He glanced up at Jamie in awed horror, and reached for the bottles of chrism and holy water that he wore at his belt in lieu of a dirk.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Jamie made a series of violent motions, meant to indicate that the man was not dead, and thus in no need of the priest's services. These failing to make their point, he bent, seized the priest's hand, and pressed the fingers on the Englishman's neck, as the simplest method of illustrating that the man was not in fact the first victim of the battle. Caught in this ludicrous position, he froze as a voice cut through the mist behind him.

"Halt!" it said. "Who goes there?"

* * *

"Have ye got a bit of water, Sassenach?" asked Jamie. "I'm gettin' a bit dry with the talking."

"Bastard!" I said. "You can't stop there! What happened?"

"Water," he said, grinning, "and I'll tell ye."

"All right," I said, handing him a water bottle and watching as he tilted it into his mouth. "What happened then?"

"Nothing," he said, lowering the bottle and wiping his mouth on his sleeve. "What did ye think, I was going to answer him?" He grinned impudently at me and ducked as I aimed a slap at his ear.

"Now, now," he reproved. "No way to treat a man wounded in the service of his King, now is it?"

"Wounded, are you?" I said. "Believe me, Jamie Fraser, a mere saber slash is as nothing compared to what I will do to you if …"

"Oh, threats, too, is it? What was that poem ye told me about, 'When pain and anguish wring the brow, a ministering angel' … ow!"

"Next time, I twist it right off at the roots," I said, releasing the ear. "Get on with it, I have to go back in a minute."

He rubbed the ear gingerly, but leaned back against the wall and resumed his story.

"Well, we just sat there on our haunches, the padre and I, staring at each other and listening to the sentries six feet away. "What's that?" says the one, and me thinking can I get up in time to take him with my dirk before he shoots me in the back, and what about his friend? For I canna expect help from the priest, unless maybe it's a last prayer over my body."

There was a long, nerve-racking silence, as the two Jacobites squatted in the grass, hands still clasped, afraid to move enough even to let go.

“Ahhh, yer seein’ things,” came from the other sentry at last, and Jamie felt the shudder of relief run through the priest, as his damp fingers slid free. “Nothin’ up there but furze bushes. Never mind, lad,” the sentry said reassuringly, and Jamie heard the clap of a hand on a shoulder and the stamp of booted feet, trying to keep warm. “There’s the damn lot of ’em, sure, and in this dark, they could be the whole bloody Highland army, for all you can see.” Jamie thought he heard the breath of a smothered laugh from one of the “furze bushes,” on the hillside within hearing.

He glanced at the crest of the hill, where the stars were beginning to dim. Less than ten minutes to first light, he judged. At which point, Johnnie Cope’s troops would swiftly realize that the Highland army was not, as they thought, an hour’s march away in the opposite direction, but already face-to-face with their front lines.

There was a noise to the left, in the direction of the sea. It was faint, and indistinct, but the note of alarm was clear to battle-trained ears. Someone, he supposed, had tripped over a furze bush.

“Hey?” The note of alarm was taken up by one of the sentries nearby. “What’s happening?”

The priest would have to take care of himself, he thought. Jamie drew the broadsword as he rose, and with one long step, was within reach. The man was no more than a shape in the darkness, but distinct enough. The merciless blade smashed down with all his strength, and split the man’s skull where he stood.

“Highlanders!” The shriek broke from the man’s companion, and the second sentry sprang out like a rabbit flushed from a copse, bounding away into the fading dark before Jamie could free his weapon from its gory cleft. He put a foot on the fallen man’s back and jerked, gritting his teeth against the unpleasant sensation of slack flesh and grating bone.

Alarm was spreading up and down the English lines; he could feel as much as hear it—an agitation of men rudely wakened, groping blindly for weapons, searching in all directions for the unseen threat.

Clanranald’s pipers were behind to the right, but no signal as yet came for the charge. Continue the advance, then, heart pounding and left arm tingling from the death blow, belly muscles clenched and eyes straining through the waning dark, the spray of warm blood across his face going cold and sticky in the chill.

"I could hear them first," he said, staring off into the night as though still searching for the English soldiers. He bent forward, hugging his knees. "Then I could see, too. The English, wriggling over the ground like maggots in meat, and the men behind me. George McClure came up with me, and Wallace and Ross on the other side, and we were walkin' still, one pace at a time, but faster and faster, seein' the sassenaches breaking before us."

There was a dull boom off to the right; the firing of a single cannon. A moment later, another, and then, as though this were the signal, a wavering cry rose from the oncoming Highlanders.

"The pipes started then," he said, eyes closed. "I didna remember my musket 'til I heard one fire close behind me; I'd left it in the grass next to the priest. When it's like that, ye dinna see anything but the small bit that's happening round you.

"Ye hear a shout, and of a sudden, you're running. Slow, for a step or two, while ye free your belt, and then your plaid falls free and you're bounding, wi' your feet splashing mud up your legs and the chill of the wet grass on your feet, and your shirttails flying off your bare arse. The wind blows into your shirt and up your belly and out along your arms.… Then the noise takes ye and you're screaming, like runnin' down a hill yelling into the wind when you're a bairn, to see can ye lift yourself on the sound."

They rode the waves of their own shrieking onto the plain, and the force of the Highland charge crashed onto the shoals of the English army, smothering them in a boiling surge of blood and terror.

"They ran," he said softly. "One man stood to face me—all during the fight, only one. The others I took from behind." He rubbed a grimy hand over his face, and I could feel a fine tremor start somewhere deep inside him.

"I remember … everything," he said, almost whispering. "Every blow. Every face. The man lying on the ground in front of me who wet himself wi' fear. The horses screaming. All the stinks—black powder and blood and the smell of my own sweat. Everything. But it's like I was standin' outside, watching myself. I wasna really there." He opened his eyes and looked sidelong at me. He was bent almost double, head on his knees, the shivering visible now.

"D'ye know?" he asked.

"I know."

While I hadn't fought with sword or knife, I had fought often enough with hands and will; getting through the chaos of death only because there is no other choice. And it did leave behind that odd feeling of detachment; the brain seemed to rise above the body, coldly judging and directing, the viscera obediently subdued until the crisis passed. It was always sometime later that the shaking started.

I hadn't reached that point yet. I slid the cloak from my shoulders and covered him before going back into the cottage.

* * *

The dawn came, and relief with it, in the person of two village women and an army surgeon. The man with the wounded leg was pale and shaky, but the bleeding had stopped. Jamie took me by the arm and led me away, down the street of Tranent.

O'Sullivan's constant difficulties with the commissary had been temporarily relieved by the captured wagons, and there was food in plenty. We ate quickly, scarcely tasting the hot porridge, aware of food only as a bodily necessity, like breathing. The feeling of nourishment began to creep through my body, freeing me to think of the next most pressing need—sleep.

Wounded men were quartered in every house and cottage, the sound of body mostly sleeping in the fields outside. While Jamie could have claimed a place in the manse with the other officers, he instead took my arm and turned me aside, heading between the cottages and up a hill, into one of the scattered small groves that lay outside Tranent.

"It's a bit of a walk," he said apologetically, looking down at me, "but I thought perhaps ye'd rather be private."

"I would." While I had been raised under conditions that would strike most people of my time as primitive—often living in tents and mud houses on Uncle Lamb's field expeditions—still, I wasn't used to living crowded cheek by jowl with numbers of other people, as was customary here. People ate, slept, and frequently copulated, crammed into tiny, stifling cottages, lit and warmed by smoky peat fires. The only thing they didn't do together was bathe—largely because they didn't bathe.

Jamie led the way under the drooping limbs of a huge horse chestnut, and into a small clearing, thick with the fallen leaves of ash, alder, and sycamore. The sun was barely up, and it was still cold under the trees, a faint edge of frost rimming some of the yellowed leaves.

He scraped a rough trench in the layer of leaves with one heel, then stood at one end of the hollow, set his hand to the buckle of his belt, and smiled at me.

"It's a bit undignified to get into, but it's verra easy to take off." He jerked the belt loose, and his plaid dropped around his ankles, leaving him clad to mid-thigh in only his shirt. He usually wore the military "little kilt," which buckled about the waist, with the plaid a separate strip of cloth around the shoulders. But now, his own kilt rent and stained from the battle, he had acquired one of the older belted plaids—nothing more than a long strip of cloth, tucked about the waist and held in place with no fastening but a belt.

"How *do* you get into it?" I asked curiously.

"Well, ye lay it out on the ground, like this"—he knelt, spreading the cloth so that it lined the leaf-strewn hollow—"and then ye pleat it every few inches, lie down on it, and roll."

I burst out laughing, and sank to my knees, helping to smooth the thick tartan wool.

"*That*, I want to see," I told him. "Wake me up before you get dressed."

He shook his head good-naturedly, and the sunlight filtering through the leaves glinted off his hair.

"Sassenach, the chances of me wakin' before you do are less than those of a worm in a henyard. I dinna care if another horse steps on me, I'll no be moving 'til tomorrow." He lay down carefully, pushing back the leaves.

"Come lie wi' me." He extended an inviting hand upward. "We'll cover ourselves with your cloak."

The leaves beneath the smooth wool made a surprisingly comfortable mattress, though at this point I would cheerfully have slept on a bed of nails. I relaxed bonelessly against him, reveling in the exquisite delight of simply lying down.

The initial chill faded quickly as our bodies warmed the pocket where we lay. We were far enough from the town that the sounds of its occupation reached us only in wind-borne snatches, and I thought with drowsy satisfaction that it might well *be* tomorrow before anyone looking for Jamie found us.

I had removed my petticoats and torn them up for additional bandages the night before, and there was nothing between us but the thin fabric of skirt and shirt. A hard, solid warmth stirred briefly against my stomach.

"Surely not?" I said, amused despite my tiredness. "Jamie, you must be half-dead."

He laughed tiredly, holding me close with one large, warm hand on the small of my back.

"A lot more than half, Sassenach. I'm knackered, and my cock's the only thing too stupid to know it. I canna lie wi' ye without wanting you, but wanting's all I'm like to do."

I fumbled with the hem of his shirt, then pushed it up and wrapped my hand gently around him. Even warmer than the skin of his belly, his penis was silken under the touch of my stroking thumb, pulsing strongly with each beat of his heart.

He made a small sound of half-painful content, and rolled slowly onto his back, letting his legs sprawl loosely outward, half-covered by my cloak.

The sun had reached our pile of leaves, and my shoulders relaxed under the warming touch of the light. Everything seemed slightly tinged with gold, the mingled result of early autumn and extreme fatigue. I felt languid and vaguely disembodied, watching the small stirrings of his flesh under my fingers. All the terror and the tiredness and the noise of the two days past ebbed slowly away, leaving us alone together.

The haze of fatigue seemed to act as a magnifying glass, exaggerating tiny details and sensations. The tail of his saber wound was visible beneath the rucked-up shirt, crusted black against the fair skin. Two or three small flies buzzed low, investigating, and I waved them away. My ears rang with the silence, the breath of the trees no match for the echoes of the town.

I laid my cheek against him, feeling the hard, smooth curve of his hip bone, close under the skin. His skin was transparent in the crease of his groin, the branching veins blue and delicate as a child's.

His hand rose slowly, floating like the leaves, and rested lightly on my head.

"Claire. I need you," he whispered. "I need ye so."

Without the hampering petticoats, it was easy. I felt as though I were floating myself, rising without volition, drifting my skirts up the length of his body, settling over him like a cloud on a hilltop, sheltering his need.

His eyes were closed, head laid back, the red gold of his hair tumbled coarsely in the leaves. But his hands rose together and settled surely on my waist, resting without weight on the curve of my hips.

My eyes closed as well, and I felt the shapes of his mind, as surely as I felt those of his body under me; exhaustion blocked our every thought and memory; every sensation but the knowledge of each other.

"Not … long," he whispered. I nodded, knowing he felt what he did not see, and rose above him, thighs powerful and sure under the stained fabric of my gown.

Once, and twice, and again, and once again, and the tremor rose through him and through me, like the rising of water through the roots of a plant and into its leaves.

The breath left him in a sigh, and I felt his descent into unconsciousness like the dimming of a lamp. I fell beside him, with barely time to draw the heavy folds of the cloak up over us before the darkness filled me, and I lay weighted to the earth by the heavy warmth of his seed in my belly. We slept.

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HOLYROOD

Edinburgh, October 1745

The knock on my door surprised me from an inspection of my newly replenished medical boxes. After the stunning victory at Prestonpans, Charles had led his triumphant army back to Edinburgh, to bask in adulation. While he was basking, his generals and chieftains labored, rallying their men and procuring what equipment was to be had, in preparation for whatever was coming next.

Buoyed by early success, Charles talked freely of taking Stirling, then Carlyle, and then, perhaps, of advancing south, even to London itself. I spent my spare time counting suture needles, hoarded willow bark, and stole every spare ounce of alcohol I could find, to be brewed into disinfectant.

“What is it?” I asked, opening the door. The messenger was a young boy, scarcely older than Fergus. He was trying to look grave and deferential, but couldn’t suppress his natural curiosity. I saw his eyes dart around the room, resting on the large medicine chest in the corner with fascination. Clearly the rumors concerning me had spread through the palace of Holyrood.

“His Highness has asked for ye, Mistress Fraser,” he answered. Bright brown eyes scanned me closely, no doubt looking for signs of supernatural possession. He seemed slightly disappointed at my depressingly normal appearance.

“Oh, has he?” I said. “Well, all right. Where is he, then?”

"In the morning drawing room, Mistress. I'm to take ye. Oh …" The thought struck him as he turned, and he swung back before I could close the door. "You're to bring your box of medicines, if ye'd be so kind."

My escort brimmed with self-importance at his mission as he escorted me down the long hallway to the Royal wing of the palace. Plainly someone had been schooling him in the behavior appropriate to a Royal page, but an occasional exuberant skip in his step betrayed his newness to the job.

What on earth did Charles want with me? I wondered. While he tolerated me on Jamie's account, the story of La Dame Blanche had plainly disconcerted him and made him uneasy. More than once, I had surprised him crossing himself surreptitiously in my presence, or making the quick two-fingered "horns" sign against evil. The idea that he would ask me to treat him medically was unlikely in the extreme.

When the heavy cross-timbered door swung open into the small morning drawing room, it seemed still more unlikely. The Prince, plainly in good health, was leaning on the painted harpsichord, picking out a hesitant tune with one finger. His delicate skin was mildly flushed, but with excitement, not fever, and his eyes were clear and attentive when he looked up at me.

"Mistress Fraser! How kind of you to attend me so shortly!" He was dressed this morning with even more lavishness than usual, bewigged and wearing a new cream-colored silk waistcoat, embroidered with flowers. He must be excited about something, I thought; his English went to pot whenever he became agitated.

"My pleasure, Your Highness," I said demurely, dropping a brief curtsy. He was alone, an unusual state of affairs. Could he want my medical services for himself after all?

He made a quick, nervous gesture toward one of the gold damask chairs, urging me to be seated. A second chair was pulled up, facing it, but he walked up and down in front of me, too restless to sit.

"I need your help," he said abruptly.

"Um?" I made a politely inquiring noise. Gonorrhea? I wondered, scanning him covertly. I hadn't heard of any women since Louise de

La Tour, but then, it only took once. He worked his lips in and out, as though searching for some alternative to telling me, but finally gave it up.

"I have a *capo*—a chief, you understand?—here. He thinks of joining my Father's cause, but has still some doubt."

"A clan chieftain, you mean?" He nodded, brow furrowed beneath the careful curls of his wig.

"*Oui*, Madame. He is of course in support of my Father's claims …"

"Oh, of course," I murmured.

"… but he is wishing to speak to you, Madame, before he will commit his men to follow me."

He sounded incredulous, hearing his own words, and I realized that the flush on his cheeks came from a combination of bafflement and suppressed fury.

I was more than a little baffled myself. My imagination promptly visualized a clan chieftain with some dread disease, whose adherence to the cause depended on my performing a miraculous cure.

"You're sure he wants to speak to me?" I said. Surely my reputation hadn't gone *that* far.

Charles inclined his head coldly in my direction. "So he says, Madame."

"But I don't *know* any clan chieftains," I said. "Bar Glengarry and Lochiel, of course. Oh, and Clanranald and Keppoch, of course. But they've all committed themselves to you already. And why on earth …"

"Well, he is of the opinion you are knowing him," the Prince interrupted, syntax becoming more mangled with his rising temper. He clenched his hands, obviously forcing himself to speak courteously. "It is of importance—*most* importance, Madame, that he should become convinced to join me. I require … I *request* … you therefore, that you … convince him."

I rubbed my nose thoughtfully, looking at him. One more point of decision. One more opportunity to make events move in the path I chose. And once more, the inability to know what best to do.

He was right; it was important to convince this chieftain to commit his resources to the Jacobite cause. With the Camerons, the various MacDonalds, and the others so far committed, the Jacobite army numbered barely two thousand men, and those the most ill-assorted lot of ragtag and draggletail that any general had ever been lumbered with. And yet, that ragged-arsed lot had taken the city of Edinburgh, routed a greatly superior English force at Preston, and showed every disposition to continue going through the countryside like a dose of salts.

We had been unable to stop Charles; perhaps, as Jamie said, the only way to avert calamity was now to do everything possible to help him. The addition of an important clan chieftain to the roster of supporters would greatly influence the odds of others joining. This might be a turning point, where the Jacobite forces could be increased to the level of a true army, actually capable of the proposed invasion of England. And if so, what in bloody hell would happen then?

I sighed. No matter what I decided to do, I couldn't make any decision until I saw this mysterious person. I glanced down to make sure my gown was suitable for interviewing clan chieftains, infected or otherwise, and rose, tucking the medicine box under my arm.

"I'll try, Your Highness," I said.

The clenched hands relaxed, showing the bitten nails, and his frown lessened.

"Ah, good," he said. He turned toward the door of the larger afternoon drawing room. "Come, I shall take you myself."

* * *

The guard at the door jumped back in surprise as Charles flung the door open and strode past him without a glance. On the far side of the long, tapestry-hung room was an enormous marble fireplace, lined with white Delft tiles, painted with Dutch country scenes in shades of blue and mulberry. A small sofa was drawn up before the fire, and a big, broad-shouldered man in Highland dress stood beside it.

In a room less imposing, he would have bulked huge, legs like tree trunks in their checkered stockings beneath the kilt. As it was, in this immense room with its high gessoed ceilings, he was merely big—quite in keeping with the heroic figures of mythology that decorated the tapestries at either end of the room.

I stopped dead at sight of the enormous visitor, the shock of recognition still mingled with absolute incredulity. Charles had kept on, and now glanced back with some impatience, beckoning me to join him before the fire. I nodded to the big man. Then I walked slowly around the end of the sofa and gazed down at the man who lay upon it.

He smiled faintly when he saw me, the dove-gray eyes lighting with a spark of amusement.

"Yes," he said, answering my expression. "I hadn't really expected to meet *you* again, either. One might almost believe we are fated." He turned his head and lifted a hand toward his enormous body-servant.

"Angus. Will ye fetch a drop of the brandy for Mistress Claire? I'm afraid the surprise of seeing me may have somewhat discomposed her."

That, I thought, was putting it mildly. I sank into a splay-footed chair and accepted the crystal goblet Angus Mhor held out to me.

Colum MacKenzie's eyes hadn't changed; neither had his voice. Both held the essence of the man who had led clan MacKenzie for thirty years, despite the disease that had crippled him in his teens. Everything else had changed sadly for the worse, though; the black hair streaked heavily with gray, the lines of his face cut deep into skin that had fallen slack over the sharp outlines of bone. Even the broad chest was sunken and the powerful shoulders hunched, flesh fallen away from the fragile skeleton beneath.

He already held a glass half-filled with amber liquid, glowing in the firelight. He raised himself painfully to a sitting position and lifted the cup in ironic salute.

"You're looking very well … niece." From the corner of my eye, I saw Charles's mouth drop open.

"You aren't," I said bluntly.

He glanced dispassionately down at the bowed and twisted legs. In a hundred years' time, they would call this disease after its most famous sufferer—the Toulouse-Lautrec syndrome.

"No," he said. "But then, it's been two years since you saw me last. Mrs. Duncan estimated my survival at less than two years, then."

I took a swallow of the brandy. One of the best. Charles *was* anxious.

"I shouldn't have thought you'd put much stock in a witch's curse," I said.

A smile twitched the fine-cut lips. He had the bold beauty of his brother Dougal, ruined as it was, and when he lifted the veil of detachment from his eyes, the power of the man overshone the wreck of his body.

"Not in curses, no. I had the distinct impression that the lady was dealing in observation, however, not malediction. And I have seldom met a more acute observer than Geillis Duncan—with one exception." He inclined his head gracefully toward me, making his meaning clear.

"Thanks," I said.

Colum glanced up at Charles, who was gaping in bewilderment at these exchanges.

"I thank you for your graciousness in permitting me to use your premises for my meeting with Mrs. Fraser, Your Highness," he said, with a slight bow. The words were sufficiently civil, but the tone made it an obvious dismissal. Charles, who was by no means used to being dismissed, flushed hotly and opened his mouth. Then, recalling himself, he snapped it shut, bowed shortly, and turned on his heel.

"We won't need the guard, either," I called after him. His shoulders hunched and the back of his neck grew red beneath the tail of his wig, but he gestured abruptly, and the guard at the door, with an astonished glance at me, followed him out.

"Hm." Colum cast a brief glance of disapproval at the door, then returned his attention to me.

"I asked to see you because I owe ye an apology," he said, without preamble.

I leaned back in my chair, goblet resting nonchalantly on my stomach.

"Oh, an apology?" I said, with as much sarcasm as could be mustered on short notice. "For trying to have me burnt for witchcraft, I suppose you mean?" I flipped a hand in gracious dismissal. "Pray think nothing of it." I glared at him. *"Apology?!"*

He smiled, not disconcerted in the slightest.

"I suppose it seems a trifle inadequate," he began.

"Inadequate?! For having me arrested and thrown into a thieves' hole for three days without decent food or water? For having me stripped half-naked and whipped before every person in Cranesmuir? For leaving me a hairsbreadth away from a barrel of pitch and a bundle of faggots?" I stopped and took a deep breath. "Now that you mention it," I said, a little more calmly, " 'inadequate' is precisely what I'd call it."

The smile had vanished.

"I beg your pardon for my apparent levity," he said softly. "I had no intent to mock you."

I looked at him, but could see no lingering gleam of amusement in the black-lashed eyes.

"No," I said, with another deep breath. "I don't suppose you did. I suppose you're going to say that you had no intent to have me arrested for witchcraft, either."

The gray eyes sharpened. "You knew that?"

"Geilie said so. While we were in the thieves' hole. She said it was her you meant to dispose of; I was an accident."

"You were." He looked suddenly very tired. "Had ye been in the castle, I could have protected you. What in the name of God led ye to go down to the village?"

"I was told that Geilie Duncan was ill and asking for me," I replied shortly.

"Ah," he said softly. "You were told. By whom, and I may ask?"

"Laoghaire." Even now, I could not repress a brief spurt of rage at the girl's name. Out of thwarted jealousy over my having married

Jamie, she had deliberately tried to have me killed. Considerable depths of malice for a sixteen-year-old girl. And even now, mingled with the rage was that tiny spark of grim satisfaction; he's mine, I thought, almost subconsciously. Mine. You'll never take him from me. Never.

"Ah," Colum said again, staring thoughtfully at my flushed countenance. "I thought perhaps that was the way of it. Tell me," he continued, raising one dark brow, "if a mere apology strikes you as inadequate, will ye have vengeance instead?"

"Vengeance?" I must have looked startled at the idea, for he smiled faintly, though without humor.

"Aye. The lass was wed six months ago, to Hugh MacKenzie of Muldaur, one of my tacksmen. He'll do with her as I say, and ye want her punished. What will ye have me do?"

I blinked, taken aback by his offer. He appeared in no hurry for an answer; he sat quietly, sipping the fresh glass of brandy that Angus Mhor poured for him. He wasn't staring at me, but I got up and moved away toward the windows, wanting to be alone for a moment.

The walls here were five feet thick; by leaning forward into the deep window embrasure I could assure myself of privacy. The bright sun illuminated the fine blond hairs on my forearms as I rested them on the sill. It made me think of the thieves' hole, that damp, reeking pit, and the single bar of sunlight that had shone through an opening above, making the dark hole below seem that much more like a grave by contrast.

I had spent my first day there in cold and dirt, full of stunned disbelief; the second in shivering misery and growing fear as I discovered the full extent of Geillis Duncan's treachery and Colum's measures against it. And on the third day, they had taken me to trial. And I had stood, filled with shame and terror, under the clouds of a lowering autumn sky, feeling the jaws of Colum's trap close round me, sprung by a word from the girl Laoghaire.

Laoghaire. Fair-skinned and blue-eyed, with a round, pretty face, but nothing much to distinguish her from the other girls at Leoch. I had thought about her—in the pit with Geillis Duncan, I had had time to think of a lot of things. But furious and terrified as I had been, furious as I remained, I couldn't, either then or now, bring myself to see her as intrinsically evil.

"She was only sixteen, for God's sake!"

"Old enough to marry," said a sardonic voice behind me, and I realized that I had spoken aloud.

"Yes, she wanted Jamie," I said, turning around. Colum was still sitting on the sofa, stumpy legs covered with a rug. Angus Mhor stood silent behind him, heavy-lidded eyes fixed on his master. "Perhaps she thought she loved him."

Men were drilling in the courtyard, amid shouts and clashing of arms. The sun glanced off the metal of swords and muskets, the brass studding of targes—and off the red-gold of Jamie's hair, flying in the breeze as he wiped a hand across his face, flushed and sweating from the exercise, laughing at one of Murtagh's deadpan remarks.

I had perhaps done Laoghaire an injustice, after all, in assuming her feelings to be less than my own. Whether she had acted from immature spite or from a true passion, I could never know. In either case, she had failed. I had survived. And Jamie was mine. As I watched, he rucked up his kilt and casually scratched his bottom, the sunlight catching the reddish-gold fuzz that softened the iron-hard curve of his thigh. I smiled, and went back to my seat near Colum.

"I'll take the apology," I said.

He nodded, gray eyes thoughtful.

"You've a belief in mercy, then, Mistress?"

"More in justice," I said. "Speaking of which, I don't imagine you traveled all the way from Leoch to Edinburgh merely to apologize to me. It must have been a hellish journey."

"Aye, it was." The huge, silent bulk of Angus Mhor shifted an inch or two behind him, and the massive head bent toward his laird in eloquent witness. Colum sensed the movement and raised a hand briefly—it's all right, the gesture said, I'm all right for the present.

"No," Colum went on. "I did not know ye were in Edinburgh, in fact, until His Highness mentioned Jamie Fraser, and I asked." A sudden smile grew on his face. "His Highness isn't over fond of you, Mistress Claire. But I suppose ye knew that?"

I ignored this. "So you really are considering joining Prince Charles?"

Colum, Dougal, and Jamie all had the capacity for hiding what they were thinking when they chose to, but of the three, Colum was undoubtedly best at it. You'd get more from one of the carved heads on the fountain in the front courtyard, if he was feeling uncommunicative.

"I've come to see him" was all he said.

I sat a moment, wondering what, if anything, I could—or should—say in Charles's behalf. Perhaps I would do better to leave it to Jamie. After all, the fact that Colum felt regret over nearly killing me by accident didn't mean he was necessarily inclined to trust me. And while the fact that I was here, part of Charles's entourage, surely argued against my being an English spy, it wasn't impossible that I was.

I was still debating with myself when Colum suddenly put down his glass of brandy and looked straight at me.

"D'ye know how much of this I've had since morning?"

"No." His hands were steady, calloused and roughened from his disease, but well kept. The reddened lids and slightly bloodshot eyes could as easily be from the rigors of travel as from drink. There was no slurring of speech, and no more than a certain deliberateness of movement to indicate that he wasn't sober as a judge. But I had seen Colum drink before, and had a very respectful idea of his capacity.

He waved away Angus Mhor's hand, hovering above the decanter. "Half a bottle. I'll have finished it by tonight."

"Ah." So that was why I had been asked to bring my medicine box. I reached for it, where I had set it on the floor.

"If you're needing that much brandy, there isn't much that will help you besides some form of opium," I said, flicking through my assortment of vials and jars. "I think I have some laudanum here, but I can get you some—"

"That isn't what I want from you." The tone of authority in his voice stopped me, and I looked up. If he could keep his thoughts to himself, he could also let them show when he chose.

"I could get laudanum easily enough," he said. "I imagine there's an apothecarist in the city who sells it—or poppy syrup, or undiluted opium, for that matter."

I let the lid of the small chest fall shut and rested my hands on top of it. So he didn't mean to waste away in a drugged state, leaving the leadership of the clan uncertain. And if it were not a temporary oblivion he sought from me, what else? A permanent one, perhaps. I knew Colum MacKenzie. And the clear, ruthless mind that had planned Geillis Duncan's destruction would not hesitate over his own.

Now it was clear. He had come to see Charles Stuart, to make the final decision whether to commit the MacKenzies of Leoch to the Jacobite cause. Once committed, it would be Dougal who led the clan. And then …

"I was under the impression that suicide was considered a mortal sin," I said.

"I imagine it is," he said, undisturbed. "A sin of pride, at least, that I should choose a clean death at the time of my own devising, as best suits my purpose. I don't, however, expect to suffer unduly for my sin, having put no credence in the existence of God since I was nineteen or so."

It was quiet in the room, beyond the crackle of the fire and the muffled shouts of mock battle from below. I could hear his breathing, a slow and steady sigh.

"Why ask me?" I said. "You're right, you could get laudanum where you liked, so long as you have money—and you do. Surely you know that enough of it will kill you. It's an easy death, at that."

"Too easy." He shook his head. "I have had little to depend on in life, save my wits. I would keep them, even to meet death. As for ease …" He shifted slightly on the sofa, making no effort to hide his discomfort. "I shall have enough, presently."

He nodded toward my box. "You shared Mrs. Duncan's knowledge of medicines. I thought it possible that you knew what she used to kill her husband. That seemed quick and certain. And appropriate," he added wryly.

"She used witchcraft, according to the verdict of the court." The court that condemned her to death, in accordance with your plan, I thought. "Or do you not believe in witchcraft?" I asked.

He laughed, a pure, carefree sound in the sunlit room. "A man who doesn't believe in God can scarce credit power to Satan, can he?"

I still hesitated, but he was a man who judged others as shrewdly as he did himself. He had asked my pardon before asking my favor, and satisfied himself that I had a sense of justice—or of mercy. And it was, as he said, appropriate. I opened the box and took out the small vial of cyanide that I kept to kill rats.

"I thank ye, Mistress Claire," he said, formal again, though the smile still lingered in his eyes. "Had my nephew not proved your innocence with such flamboyance at Cranesmuir, still I would never believe you a witch. I have no more notion now than I had at our first meeting, as to who you are, or why you are here, but a witch is not one of the possibilities I've ever considered." He paused, one brow raised. "I don't suppose you'd be inclined to tell me who—or what—you are?"

I hesitated for a moment. But a man with belief in neither God nor Devil was not likely to believe the truth of my presence here, either. I squeezed his fingers lightly and released them.

"Better call me a witch," I said. "It's as close as you're likely to get."

* * *

On my way out to the courtyard next morning, I met Lord Balmerino on the stairs.

"Oh, Mistress Fraser!" he greeted me jovially. "Just who I was looking for."

I smiled at him; a chubby, cheerful man, he was one of the refreshing features of life in Holyrood.

"If it isn't fever, flux, or French pox," I said, "can it wait for a moment? My husband and his uncle are giving a demonstration of Highland sword-fighting for the benefit of Don Francisco de la Quintana."

"Oh, really? I must say, I should like to see that myself." Balmerino fell into step beside me, head bobbing cheerfully at the level of my shoulder. "I do like a pretty man with a sword," he said. "And anything that will sweeten the Spaniards has my most devout approval."

"Mine, too." Deeming it too dangerous for Fergus to lift His Highness's correspondence inside Holyrood, Jamie was dependent for information on what he learned from Charles himself. This seemed to be quite a lot, though; Charles considered Jamie one of his intimates—virtually the only Highland chief to be accorded such a mark of favor, small as was his contribution in men and money.

So far as money went, though, Charles had confided that he had high hopes of support from Philip of Spain, whose latest letter to James in Rome had been distinctly encouraging. Don Francisco, while not quite an envoy, was certainly a member of the Spanish Court, and might be relied upon to carry back his report of how matters stood with the Stuart rising. This was Charles's opportunity to see how far his own belief in his destiny would carry him, in convincing Highland chiefs and foreign kings to join him.

"What did you want to see me for?" I asked as we came out onto the walkway that edged the courtyard of Holyrood. A small crowd of spectators was assembling, but neither Don Francisco nor the two combatants were yet in sight.

"Oh!" Reminded, Lord Balmerino groped inside his coat. "Nothing of great importance, my dear lady. I received these from one of my messengers, who obtained them from a kinsman to the South. I thought you might find them amusing."

He handed me a thin sheaf of crudely printed papers. I recognized them as broadsheets, the popular circulars distributed in taverns or that fluttered from doorposts and hedges through towns and villages.

"CHARLES EDWARD STUART, known to all as The Younge Pretender" read one. "Be it Known to all Present that this Depraved and Dangerous Person, having landed Unlawfully upon the shores of Scotland, hath Incited to Riot the Population of that Country, and hath Unleashed upon Innocent Citizens the Fury of an Unjust War."

There was quite a lot more of it, all in the same vein, concluding with an exhortation to the Innocent Citizens reading this indictment "to do all in their Power to Deliver ye this Person to the Justice which he so Richly Deserves." The sheet was decorated at the top with what I supposed was meant as a drawing of Charles; it didn't bear much resemblance to the original, but definitely looked Depraved and Dangerous, which I supposed was the general idea.

"That one's quite fairly restrained," said Balmerino, peering over my elbow. "Some of the others show a most impressive range both of imagination and invective, though; look at this one. That's me," he said, pointing at the paper with evident delight.

The broadsheet showed a rawboned Highlander, thickly bewhiskered, with beetling brows and eyes that glared wildly under the shadow of a Scotch bonnet. I looked askance at Lord Balmerino, clad, as was his habit, in breeches and coat in the best of taste; made of fine stuff, but subdued both in cut and color, to flatter his tubby little form. He stared at the broadsheet, meditatively stroking his round, clean-shaven cheeks.

"I don't know," he said. "The whiskers do lend me a most romantic air, do they not? Still, a beard itches most infernally; I'm not sure I could bear it, even for the sake of being picturesque."

I turned to the next page, and nearly dropped the whole sheaf.

"They did a slightly better job in rendering a likeness of your husband," Balmerino observed, "but of course our dear Jamie does actually look somewhat like the popular English conception of a Highland thug—begging your pardon, my dear, I mean no offense. He *is* large, though, isn't he?"

"Yes," I said faintly, perusing the broadsheet's charges.

"Didn't realize your husband was in the habit of roasting and eating small children, did you?" said Balmerino, chortling. "I always thought his size was due to something special in his diet."

The little earl's irreverent attitude did a good deal to steady me. I could almost smile myself at the ridiculous charges and descriptions, though I wondered just how much credence the readers of the broadsheets placed in them. Rather a lot, I was afraid; people so often seemed not only willing but eager to believe the worst—and the worse, the better.

"It's the last one I thought you'd be interested in." Balmerino interrupted my thoughts, flipping over the next-to-last sheet.

"The Stuart witch" proclaimed the heading. A long-nosed female with pinpoint pupils stared back at me, over a text which accused Charles Stuart of invoking "ye Pow'rs of Darkeness" in support of his unlawful cause. By retaining among his intimate entourage a well-known witch—one holding power of life and death over men, as well as the more usual power of blighting crops, drying up cattle, and causing blindness—Charles gave evidence of the fact that he had sold his own soul to the devil, and thus would "Frye in Hell Forever!" as the tract gleefully concluded.

"I assume it must be you," Balmerino said. "Though I assure you, my dear, the picture hardly does you justice."

"Very entertaining," I said. I gave the sheaf back to his lordship, restraining the urge to wipe my hand on my skirt. I felt a trifle ill, but did my best to smile at Balmerino. He glanced at me shrewdly, then took my elbow with a reassuring squeeze.

"Don't trouble yourself, my dear," he said. "Once His Majesty has regained his crown, all this nonsense will be forgotten in short order. Yesterday's villain is tomorrow's hero in the eyes of the populace; I've seen it time and again."

"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose," I murmured. And if His Majesty King James *didn't* regain his crown …

"And if our efforts should by misfortune be unsuccessful," Balmerino said, echoing my thoughts, "what the broadsheets say will be the least of our worries."

* * *

"En garde." With the formal French opening, Dougal fell into a classic dueler's stance, side-on to his opponent, sword-arm bent with the blade at the ready, back arm raised in a graceful arc, hand dropping from the wrist in open demonstration that no dagger was held in reserve.

Jamie's blade crossed Dougal's, the metal meeting with the whisper of a clash.

"Je suis prest." Jamie caught my eye, and I could see the flicker of humor cross his face. The customary dueler's response was his own clan motto. *Je suis prest.* "I am ready."

For a moment, I thought he might not be, and gasped involuntarily as Dougal's sword shot out in a lunging flash. But Jamie had seen the motion start, and by the time the blade crossed the place where he had been standing, he was no longer there.

Sidestep, a quick beat of the blade, and a counter-lunge that brought the blades screeching together along their lengths. The two swords held fast together at the hilt for only a second, then the swordsmen broke, stepped back, circled and returned to the attack.

With a clash and a beat, a parry and a lunge in *tierce,* Jamie came within an inch of Dougal's hip, swung adroitly aside with a flare of green kilt. A parry and a dodge and a quick upward beat that knocked the pressing blade aside, and Dougal stepped forward, forcing Jamie back a pace.

I could see Don Francisco, standing on the opposite side of the courtyard with Charles, Sheridan, the elderly Tullibardine, and a few others. A small smile curved the Spaniard's lips under a wisp of waxed mustache, but I couldn't tell whether it was admiration for the fighters, or merely a variation on his normally supercilious expression. Colum was nowhere in sight. I wasn't surprised; aside from his normal reluctance to appear in public, he must have been exhausted by the journey to Edinburgh.

Both gifted swordsmen, and both left-handed, uncle and nephew were putting on a skilled display—a show made more impressive by the fact that they were fighting in accordance with the most exacting rules of French dueling, but using neither the rapier-like smallsword that formed part of a gentleman's *costume,* nor the saber of a soldier. Instead, both men wielded Highland broadswords, each a full yard of tempered steel, with a flat blade that could cleave a man from crown to neck. They handled the enormous weapons with a grace and an irony that could not have been managed by smaller men.

I saw Charles murmur in Don Francisco's ear, and the Spaniard nod, never taking his eyes off the flash and clang of the battle in the grass-lined court. Well matched in size and agility, Jamie and his uncle gave every appearance of intending to kill each other. Dougal had been Jamie's teacher in the art of swordsmanship, and they had fought back to back and shoulder to shoulder many times before; each man knew the subtleties of the other's style as well as he knew his own—or at least I hoped so.

Dougal pressed his advantage with a double lunge, forcing Jamie back toward the edge of the courtyard. Jamie stepped quickly to one side, struck Dougal's blade away with one beat, then slashed back the other way, with a speed that sent the blade of his broadsword through the cloth of Dougal's right sleeve. There was a loud ripping noise, and a strip of white linen hung free, fluttering in the breeze.

"Oh, nicely fought, sir!" I turned to see who had spoken, and found Lord Kilmarnock standing at my shoulder. A serious, plain-faced man in his early thirties, he and his young son Johnny were also housed in the guest quarters of Holyrood.

The son was seldom far from his father, and I glanced around in search of him. I hadn't far to look; he was standing on the other side of his father, jaw slightly agape as he watched the swordplay. My eye caught a faint movement from the far side of a pillar: Fergus, black eyes fixed unblinkingly on Johnny. I lowered my brows and glowered at him menacingly.

Johnny, rather overconscious of being Kilmarnock's heir, and still more conscious of his privilege in going to war with his father at the age of twelve, tended to lord it over the other lads. In the manner of lads, most of them either avoided Johnny, or bided their time, waiting for him to step out of his father's protective shadow.

Fergus most definitely fell into the latter group. Taking umbrage at a disparaging remark of Johnny's about "bonnet lairds," which he had—quite accurately—interpreted as an insult to Jamie, Fergus had been forcibly prevented from assaulting Johnny in the rock garden a few days before. Jamie had administered swift justice on a physical level, and then pointed out to Fergus that while loyalty was an admirable virtue, and highly prized by its recipient, stupidity was not.

"That lad is two years older than you, and two stone heavier," he had said, shaking Fergus gently by the shoulder. "D'ye think you'll help me by getting your own head knocked in? There's times to fight wi'out counting the cost, but there's times ye bite your tongue and bide your time. *"Ne pétez plus haut que votre cul*, eh?"

Fergus had nodded, wiping his tear-stained cheeks with the tail of his shirt, but I had my doubts as to whether Jamie's words had made much impression on him. I didn't like the speculative look I saw now in those wide black eyes, and thought that had Johnny been a trifle brighter, he would have been standing between me and his father.

Jamie dropped halfway to one knee, with a murderous jab upward that brought his blade whizzing past Dougal's ear. The MacKenzie jerked back, looking startled for a moment, then grinned with a flash of white teeth, and banged his blade flat on top of Jamie's head, with a resounding *clong*.

I heard the sound of applause from across the square. The fight was degenerating from elegant French duel into Highland brawl, and the spectators were thoroughly enjoying the joke of it.

Lord Kilmarnock, also hearing the sound, looked across the square and grimaced sourly.

"His Highness's advisers are summoned to meet the Spaniard," he observed sarcastically. "O'Sullivan, and that ancient fop Tullibardine. Does he take advice of Lord Elcho? Balmerino, Lochiel, or even my humble self?"

This was plainly a rhetorical question, and I contented myself with a faint murmur of sympathy, keeping my eyes on the fighters. The clash of steel rang off the stones, nearly drowning out Kilmarnock's words. Once having started, though, he seemed unable to contain his bitterness.

"No, indeed!" he said. "O'Sullivan and O'Brien and the rest of the Irish; they risk nothing! If the worst should ever happen, they can plead immunity from prosecution by reason of their nationality. But we—we who are risking property, honor—life itself! We are ignored and treated like common dragoons. I said good morning to His Highness yesterday, and he swept by me, nose in the air, as though I had committed a breach in etiquette by so addressing him!"

Kilmarnock was plainly furious, and with good reason. Ignoring the men whom he had charmed and courted into providing the men and money for his adventure, Charles then had rejected them, turning to the comfort of his old advisers from the Continent—most of whom regarded Scotland as a howling wilderness, and its inhabitants as little more than savages.

There was a whoop of surprise from Dougal, and a wild laugh from Jamie. Dougal's left sleeve hung free from the shoulder, the flesh beneath brown and smooth, unmarred by a scratch or a drop of blood.

"I'll pay ye for that, wee Jamie," Dougal said, grinning. Droplets of sweat ran down his face.

"Will ye, Uncle?" Jamie panted. "With what?" A flash of metal, judged to a nicety, and Dougal's sporran flew jingling across the stones, clipped free from the belt.

I caught a movement from the corner of my eye, and turned my head sharply.

"Fergus!" I said.

Kilmarnock turned in the direction I was looking, and saw Fergus. The boy carried a large stick in one hand, with a casualness so assumed as to be laughable, if it weren't for the implicit threat.

"Don't trouble yourself, my lady Broch Tuarach," said Lord Kilmarnock, after a brief glance. "You may depend upon my son to defend himself honorably, if the occasion demands it." He beamed indulgently at Johnny, then turned back to the swordsmen. I turned back, too, but kept an ear cocked in Johnny's direction. It wasn't that I thought Fergus lacked a sense of honor; I just had the impression that it diverged rather sharply from Lord Kilmarnock's notion of that virtue.

"Gu leoir!" At the cry from Dougal, the fight stopped abruptly. Sweating freely, both swordsmen bowed toward the applause of the Royal party, and stepped forward to accept congratulations and be introduced to Don Francisco.

"Milord!" called a high voice from the pillars. "Please—*le parabola*!"

Jamie turned, half-frowning at the interruption, but then shrugged, smiled, and stepped back into the center of the courtyard. *Le parabola* was the name Fergus had given this particular trick.

With a quick bow to His Highness, Jamie took the broadsword carefully by the tip of the blade, stooped slightly, and with a tremendous heave, sent the blade whirling straight up into the air. Every eye fixed on the basket-hilted sword, the tempered length of it glinting in the sun as it turned end over end over end, with such inertia that it seemed to hang in the air for a moment before plunging earthward.

The essence of the trick, of course, was to hurl the weapon so that it buried itself point-first in the earth as it came down. Jamie's refinement of this was to stand directly under the arc of descent, stepping back at the last moment to avoid being skewered by the falling blade.

The sword chunked home at his feet to the accompaniment of a collective "ah!" from the spectators. It was only as Jamie bent to pull the sword from its grassy sheath that I noticed the ranks of the spectators had been reduced by two.

One, the twelve-year-old Master of Kilmarnock, lay facedown on the grassy verge, the swelling bump on his head already apparent through the lank brown hair. The second was nowhere visible, but I caught a faint whisper from the shadows behind me.

"Ne pétez plus haut que votre cul," it said, with satisfaction. Don't fart above your arsehole.

* * *

The weather was unseasonably warm for November, and the omnipresent clouds had broken, letting a fugitive autumn sun shine briefly on the grayness of Edinburgh. I had taken advantage of the transient warmth to be outside, however briefly, and was crawling on my knees through the rock garden behind Holyrood, much to the amusement of several Highlanders hanging about the grounds, enjoying the sunshine in their own manner, with a jug of homebrewed whisky.

"Art huntin' *burras*, Mistress?" called one man.

"Nay, it'll be fairies, surely, not caterpillars," joked another.

"You're more likely to find fairies in that jug than I am under rocks," I called back.

The man held the jug up, closed one eye and squinted theatrically into its depths.

"Aye, well, so long as it isna caterpillars in my jug," he replied, and took a deep swig.

In fact, what I was hunting would make as little—or as much—sense to them as caterpillars, I reflected, shoving one boulder a few inches to the side to expose the orange-brown lichen on its surface. A delicate scraping with the small penknife, and several flakes of the odd symbiont fell into my palm, to be transferred with due care to the cheap tin snuffbox that held my painfully acquired hoard.

Something of the relatively cosmopolitan attitude of Edinburgh had rubbed off on the visiting Highlanders; while in the remote mountain villages, such behavior would have gotten me viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility, here it seemed no more than a harmless quirk. While the Highlanders treated me with great respect, I was relieved to find that there was no fear mingled with it.

Even my basic Englishness was forgiven, once it was known who my husband was. I supposed I was never going to know more than Jamie had told me about what he had done at the Battle of Prestonpans, but whatever it was, it had mightily impressed the Scots, and "Red Jamie" drew shouts and hails whenever he ventured outside Holyrood.

In fact, a shout from the nearby Highlanders drew my attention at this point, and I looked up to see Red Jamie himself, strolling across the grass, waving absently to the men as he scanned the serried rocks behind the palace.

His face lightened as he saw me, and he came across the grass to where I knelt in the rockery.

"There you are," he said. "Can ye come with me for a bit? And bring your wee basket along, if ye will."

I scrambled to my feet, dusting the dried grass from the knees of my gown, and dropped my scraping knife into the basket.

"All right. Where are we going?"

"Colum's sent word he wishes to speak with us. Both of us."

"Where?" I asked, stretching my steps to keep up with his long stride down the path.

"The kirk in the Canongate."

This was interesting. Whatever Colum wished to see us about, he clearly didn't want the fact that he had spoken with us privately to be known in Holyrood.

Neither did Jamie; hence the basket. Passing arm in arm through the gate, my basket gave an apparent excuse for our venturing up the Royal Mile, whether it were to convey purchases home or distribute medicines to the men and their families quartered in the wynds and closes of Edinburgh.

Edinburgh sloped upward steeply along its one main street. Holyrood sat in dignity at the foot, the creaking Abbey vault alongside conferring a spurious air of gracious security. It loftily ignored the glowering presence of Edinburgh Castle, perched high on the crest of the rocky hill above. In between the two castles, the Royal Mile rose at a rough angle of forty-five degrees. Puffing redfaced at Jamie's side, I wondered how in hell Colum MacKenzie had ever negotiated the quarter-mile of cobbled slope from the palace to the kirk.

We found Colum in the kirkyard, sitting on a stone bench where the late afternoon sun could warm his back. His blackthorn stick lay on the bench beside him, and his short, bowed legs dangled a few inches above the ground. Shoulders hunched and head bowed in thought, at a distance he looked like a gnome, a natural inhabitant of this man-made rock garden, with its tilted stones and creeping lichens. I eyed a prime specimen on a weathered vault, but supposed we had better not stop.

The grass was soundless under our feet, but Colum raised his head while we were still some distance away. There was nothing wrong with his senses, at least.

The shadow under a nearby lime tree moved slightly at our approach. There was nothing wrong with Angus Mhor's senses, either. Satisfied of our identity, the big servant resumed his silent guardianship, becoming again part of the landscape.

Colum nodded in greeting and motioned to the seat beside him. Near at hand, there was no suggestion of the gnomish, despite his twisted body. Face-to-face, you saw nothing but the man within.

Jamie found me a seat on a nearby stone, before taking up the place indicated next to Colum. The marble was surprisingly cold, even through my thick skirts, and I shifted a bit, the carved skull and crossbones atop the memorial lumpy and uncomfortable under me. I saw the epitaph carved below it and grinned:

Here lies Martin Elginbrod,
Have mercie on my soul, Lord God,
As I would do were I Lord God,
And thou wert Martin Elginbrod.

Jamie raised one brow at me in warning, then turned back to Colum. "You asked to see us, Uncle?"

"I've a question for ye, Jamie Fraser," Colum said, without preamble. "D'ye hold me as your kinsman?"

Jamie was silent for a moment, studying his uncle's face. Then he smiled faintly.

"You've my mother's eyes," he said. "Shall I deny that?"

Colum looked startled for a moment. His eyes were the clear, soft gray of a dove's wing, fringed thick with black lashes. For all their beauty, they could gleam cold as steel, and I wondered, not for the first time, just what Jamie's mother had been like.

"You remember your mother? You were no more than a wee laddie when she died."

Jamie's mouth twisted slightly at this, but he answered calmly.

"Old enough. For that matter, my father's house had a looking glass; I'm told I favor her a bit."

Colum laughed shortly. "More than a bit." He peered closely at Jamie, eyes squinting slightly in the bright sun. "Oh, aye, lad; you're

Ellen's son, not a doubt of it. That hair, for the one thing …" He gestured vaguely toward Jamie's hair, glinting auburn and amber, roan and cinnabar, a thick, wavy mass with a thousand colors of red and gold. "… And that mouth." Colum's own mouth rose at one side, as though in reluctant reminiscence. "Wide as a nightjar's, I used to tease her. Ye could catch bugs like a toad, I'd say to her, had ye no but a sticky tongue."

Taken by surprise, Jamie laughed.

"Willie said that once, to me," he said, and then the full lips clamped shut; he spoke rarely of his dead elder brother, and never, I imagined, had he mentioned Willie to Colum before.

If Colum noticed the slip, he gave no sign of it.

"I wrote to her then," he said, looking abstractedly at one of the tilted stones nearby. "When your brother and the babe died of the pox. That was the first time, since she left Leoch."

"Since she wed my father, ye mean."

Colum nodded slowly, still looking away.

"Aye. She was older than me, ye ken, by two years or so; about the same as between your sister and you." The deep-set gray eyes swiveled back and fixed on Jamie.

"I've never met your sister. Were ye close, the two of you?"

Jamie didn't speak, but nodded slightly, studying his uncle closely, as though looking for the answer to a puzzle in the worn face before him.

Colum nodded, too. "It was that way between Ellen and myself. I was a sickly wee thing, and she nursed me often. I remember the sun shining through her hair, and she telling me tales as I lay in bed. Even later"—the fine-cut lips lifted in a slight smile—"when my legs first gave way; she'd come and go, all about Leoch, and stop each morning and night in my chamber, to tell me who she'd seen and what they'd said. We'd talk, about the tenants and the tacksmen, and how things might be arranged. I was married then, but Letitia had no mind for such matters, and less interest." He flipped a hand, dismissing his wife.

"We talked between us—sometimes with Dougal, sometimes alone—of how the fortunes of the clan might best be maintained; how peace might be kept among the septs, which alliances could be made with other clans, how the lands and the timber should be managed…. And then she left," he said abruptly, looking down at the broad hands folded on his knee. "With no asking of leave nor word of farewell. She was gone. And I heard of her from others now and then, but from herself—nothing."

"She didn't answer your letter?" I asked softly, not wanting to intrude. He shook his head, still looking down.

"She was ill; she'd lost a child, as well as having the pox. And perhaps she meant to write later; it's an easy task to put off." He smiled briefly, without humor, and then his face relaxed into somberness. "But by Christmas twelve-month, she was dead."

He looked directly at Jamie, who met his gaze squarely.

"I was a bit surprised, then, when your father wrote to tell me he was taking you to Dougal, and wished ye then to come to me at Leoch for your schooling."

"It was agreed so, when they wed," Jamie answered. "That I should foster with Dougal, and then come to you for a time." The dry twigs of a larch rattled in a passing wind, and he and Colum both hunched their shoulders against the sudden chill of it, their family resemblance exaggerated by the similarity of the gesture.

Colum saw my smile at their resemblance, and one corner of his mouth turned up in answer.

"Oh, aye," he said to Jamie. "But agreements are worth as much as the men who make them, and nay more. And I didna know your father then."

He opened his mouth to go on, but then seemed to reconsider what he had been about to say. The silence of the kirkyard flowed back into the space their conversation had made, filling in the gap as though no word were ever spoken.

It was Jamie, finally, who broke the silence once more.

"What did ye think of my father?" he asked, and I glimpsed in his tone that curiosity of a child who has lost his parents early, seeking clues to the identity of these people known only from a child's restricted point of view. I understood the impulse; what little I knew of my own parents came almost entirely from Uncle Lamb's brief and unsatisfactory answers to my questions—he was not a man given to character analysis.

Colum, on the other hand, was.

“What was he like, d’ye mean?” He looked his nephew over carefully, then gave a short grunt of amusement.

“Look ye in the mirror, lad,” he said, a half-grudging smile lingering on his face. “If it’s your mother’s face ye see, it’s your father looking back at ye through those damned Fraser cat-eyes.” He stretched and shifted his position, easing his bones on the lichened stone bench. His lips were pressed tight, by habit, against any exclamation of discomfort, and I could see what had made those deep creases between nose and mouth.

“To answer ye, though,” he went on, once more comfortably settled, “I didn’t like the man overmuch—nor he me—but I knew him at once for a man of honor.” He paused, then said, very softly, “I know you for the same, Jamie MacKenzie Fraser.”

Jamie didn’t change expression, but there was a faint quiver to his eyelids; only one as familiar with him as I was—or as observant as Colum was—would have noticed.

Colum let out his breath in a long sigh.

“So, lad, that’s why I wished to talk with you. I must decide, ye see, whether the MacKenzies of Leoch go for King James or King Geordie.” He smiled sourly. “It’s a case, I think, of the devil ye know, or the devil ye don’t, but it’s a choice I must make.”

“Dougal—” Jamie began, but his uncle cut him off with a sharp motion of his hand.

“Aye, I know what Dougal thinks—I’ve had little rest from it, these two years past,” he said impatiently. “But I am the MacKenzie of Leoch, and it’s mine to decide. Dougal will abide by what I say. I’d know what you’d advise me to do—for the sake of the clan whose blood runs in your veins.”

Jamie glanced up, eyes dark blue and impervious, hooded against the afternoon sun that shone in his face.

“I am here, and my men with me,” he said. “Surely my choice is plain?”

Colum shifted himself again, head cocked attentively to his nephew, as though to catch any nuances of voice or expression that might give him a clue.

"Is it?" he asked. "Men give their allegiance for any number of reasons, lad, and few of them have much to do with the reasons they speak aloud. I've talked with Lochiel, and Clanranald, and Angus and Alex MacDonald of Scotus. D'ye think they're here only because they feel James Stuart their rightful king? Now I would talk with you—and hear the truth, for the sake of your father's honor."

Seeing Jamie hesitate, Colum went on, still watching his nephew keenly.

"I don't ask for myself; if you've eyes, ye can see that the matter isn't one that will trouble me long. But for Hamish—the lad is your cousin, remember. If there's to be a clan for him to lead, once he's of age—then I must choose rightly, now."

He stopped speaking and sat still, the usual caution now relaxed from his features, the gray eyes open and listening.

Jamie sat as still as Colum, frozen like the marble angel on the tomb behind him. I knew the dilemma that preoccupied him, though no trace of it showed on the stern, chiseled face. It was the same one we had faced before, choosing to come with the men from Lallybroch. Charles's Rising was balanced on a knife edge; the allegiance of a large clan such as the MacKenzies of Leoch might encourage others to join the brash Young Pretender, and lead to his success. But if it ended in failure nonetheless, the MacKenzies of Leoch could well end with it.

At last Jamie turned his head deliberately, and looked at me, blue eyes holding my own. *You have some say in this,* his look said. *What shall I do?*

I could feel Colum's eyes upon me, too, and felt rather than saw the questioning lift of the thick, dark brows above them. But what I saw in my mind's eye was young Hamish, a redheaded ten-year-old who looked enough like Jamie to be his son, rather than his cousin. And what life might be for him, and the rest of his clan, if the MacKenzies of Leoch fell with Charles at Culloden. The men of Lallybroch had Jamie to save them from final slaughter, if it came to that. The men of Leoch would not. And yet the choice could not be mine. I shrugged and bowed my head. Jamie took a deep breath, and made up his mind.

“Go home to Leoch, Uncle,” he said. “And keep your men there.”

Colum sat motionless for a long minute, looking straight at me. Finally, his mouth curled upward, but the expression was not quite a smile.

“I nearly stopped Ned Gowan, when he went to keep you from burning,” he said to me. “I suppose I’m glad I didn’t.”

“Thanks,” I said, my tone matching his.

He sighed, rubbing the back of his neck with a calloused hand, as though it ached under the weight of leadership.

“Well, then. I shall see His Highness in the morning, and tell him my decision.” The hand descended, lying inert on the stone bench, halfway between him and his nephew. “I thank ye, Jamie, for your advice.” He hesitated, then added, “And may God go with you.”

Jamie leaned forward and laid his hand over Colum’s. He smiled his mother’s wide, sweet smile and said, “And with you, too, *mo caraidh.*”

* * *

The Royal Mile was busy, thronged with people taking advantage of the brief hours of warmth. We walked in silence through the crowd, my hand tucked deep into the crook of Jamie’s elbow. Finally he shook his head, muttering something to himself in Gaelic.

“You did right,” I said to him, answering the thought rather than the words. “I would have done the same. Whatever happens, at least the MacKenzies will be safe.”

“Aye, perhaps.” He nodded to a greeting from a passing officer, jostling through the crowd that surrounded the World’s End. “But what of the rest—the MacDonalds and MacGillivrays, and the others that have come? Will they be destroyed now, where maybe they wouldn’t, had I had the nerve to tell Colum to join them?” He shook his head, face clouded. “There’s no knowing, is there, Sassenach?”

“No,” I said softly, squeezing his arm. “Never enough. Or maybe too much. But we can’t do nothing on that account, surely?”

He gave me a half-smile back, and pressed my hand against his side.

"No, Sassenach. I dinna suppose we can. And it's done now, and naught can change it, so it's no good worrying. The MacKenzies will stay out of it."

The sentry at the gate of Holyrood was a MacDonald, one of Glengarry's men. He recognized Jamie and nodded us into the courtyard, barely looking up from his louse-searching. The warm weather made the vermin active, and as they left their cozy nests in crotch and armpit, often they could be surprised while crossing the perilous terrain of shirt or tartan and removed from the body of their host.

Jamie said something to him in Gaelic, smiling. The man laughed, picked something from his shirt, and flicked it at Jamie, who pretended to catch it, eyed the imaginary beastie critically, then, with a wink at me, popped it into his mouth.

* * *

"Er, how is your son's head, Lord Kilmarnock?" I inquired politely as we stepped out together onto the floor of Holyrood's Great Gallery. I didn't care greatly, but I thought as the topic couldn't be avoided altogether, it was perhaps better to air it in a place where hostility was unlikely to be openly exhibited.

The Gallery met that criterion, I thought. The long, high-ceiled room with its two vast fireplaces and towering windows had been the scene of frequent balls and parties since Charles's triumphant entry into Edinburgh in September. Now, crowded with the luminaries of Edinburgh's upper class, all anxious to do honor to their Prince—once it appeared that he might actually win—the room positively glittered. Don Francisco, the guest of honor, stood at the far end of the room with Charles, dressed in the depressing Spanish style, with baggy dark pantaloons, shapeless coat, and even a small ruff, which seemed to provoke considerable suppressed amusement among the younger and more fashionable element.

"Oh, well enough, Mistress Fraser," replied Kilmarnock imperturbably. "A dunt on the skull will not discommode a lad of that age for long; though his pride may take a bit more mending," he added, with a sudden humorous twist to his long mouth.

I smiled at him, relieved to see it.

"You're not angry?"

He shook his head, looking down to be sure that his feet were clear of my sweeping skirt.

"I have tried to teach John the things he should know as heir to Kilmarnock. In teaching him humility I seem to have signally failed; perhaps your servant may have had more success."

"I suppose you didn't whack him outside," I said absently.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing," I said flushing. "Look, is that Lochiel? I thought he was ill."

Dancing required most of my breath, and Lord Kilmarnock appeared not to wish for conversation, so I had time to look around. Charles was not dancing; though he was a good dancer, and the young women of Edinburgh vied for his attentions, tonight he was thoroughly engrossed in the entertainment of his guest. I had seen a small cask with a Portuguese brand-mark burned into its side being rolled into the kitchens in the afternoon, and glasses of the ruby liquid kept reappearing by Don Francisco's left hand as though by magic through the evening.

We crossed the path of Jamie, propelling one of the Misses Williams through the figures of the dance. There were three of them, nearly indistinguishable from one another—young, brown-haired, comely, and all "so terribly interested, Mr. Fraser, in this noble Cause." They made me quite tired, but Jamie, ever the soul of patience, danced with them all, one by one, and answered the same silly questions over and over.

"Well, it's a change for them to get out, poor things," he explained kindly. "And their father's a rich merchant, so His Highness would like to encourage the sympathy of the family."

The Miss Williams with him looked enthralled, and I wondered darkly just how encouraging he was being. Then my attention shifted, as Balmerino danced by with Lord George Murray's wife. I saw the Murrays exchange affectionate glances as they passed, he with another of the Misses Williams, and felt mildly ashamed of my noticing who Jamie danced with.

Not surprisingly, Colum wasn't at the ball. I wondered whether he had had a chance to speak to Charles beforehand, but decided probably not; Charles looked much too cheerful and animated to have been the recipient of bad news anytime recently.

At one side of the Gallery, I caught sight of two stocky figures, almost identical in uncomfortable and unaccustomed formal dress. It was John Simpson, Master of the Swordmakers Guild of Glasgow, and his son, also John Simpson. Arrived earlier in the week to present His Highness with one of the magnificent basket-hilted broadswords for which they were famed throughout Scotland, the two artisans had plainly been invited tonight to show Don Francisco the depth of support that the Stuarts enjoyed.

Both men had thick, dark hair and beards, lightly frosted with gray. Simpson senior was salt with a sprinkle of pepper, while Simpson junior gave the impression of a dark hillside with a rim of snow crusted lightly round its frostline, white hairs confined to the temples and upper cheeks. As I watched, the older swordmaker poked his son sharply in the back and nodded with significance toward one of the merchants' daughters, hovering near the edge of the floor under her father's protection.

Simpson junior gave his father a skeptical glance, but then shrugged, stepped out, and offered his arm with a bow to the third Miss Williams.

I watched with amusement and fascination as they whirled out into the steps of the dance, for Jamie, who had met the Simpsons earlier, had told me that Simpson junior was quite deaf.

"From all the hammering at the forge, I should think," he had said, showing me with pride the beautiful sword he had bought from the artisans. "Deaf as a stone; his father does the talkin', but the young one sees everything."

I saw the sharp dark eyes flick rapidly across the floor now, judging to a nicety the distance from one couple to the next. The young swordmaster trod a little heavily, but kept the measure of the dance well enough—at least as well as I did. Closing my eyes, I felt the thrum of the music vibrating through the wooden floor, from the cellos resting on it, and assumed that was what he followed. Then, opening my eyes so as not to crash into anyone, I saw Junior wince at a screeching miscue among the violins. Perhaps he did hear some sounds, then.

The circling of the dancers brought Kilmarnock and myself close to the place where Charles and Don Francisco stood, warming their coattails before the huge, tile-lined fireplace. To my surprise, Charles scowled at me over Don Francisco's shoulder, motioning me away with a surreptitious movement of one hand. Seeing it as we turned, Kilmarnock gave a short laugh.

"So His Highness is afraid to have you introduced to the Spaniard!" he said.

"Really?" I looked back over my shoulder as we whirled away, but Charles had returned to his conversation, waving his hands with expressive Italian gestures as he talked.

"I expect so." Lord Kilmarnock danced skillfully, and I was beginning to relax enough to be able to speak, without worrying incessantly about tripping over my skirts.

"Did you see that silly broadsheet Balmerino was showing everyone?" he asked, and when I nodded, went on, "I imagine His Highness saw it, too. And the Spanish are sufficiently superstitious to be ridiculously sensitive to idiocies of that sort. No person of sense or breeding could take such a thing seriously," he assured me, "but no doubt His Highness thinks it best to be safe. Spanish gold is worth a considerable sacrifice, after all," he added. Apparently including the sacrifice of his own pride; Charles still treated the Scottish earls and the Highland chieftains like beggars at his table, though they had at least been invited to the festivities tonight—no doubt to impress Don Francisco.

"Have you noticed the pictures?" I asked, wanting to change the subject. There were more than a hundred of them lining the walls of the Great Gallery, all portraits, all of kings and queens. And all with a most striking similarity.

"Oh, the nose?" he said, an amused smile replacing the grim expression that had taken possession of his face at sight of Charles and the Spaniard. “Yes, of course. Do you know the story behind it?”

The portraits, it seemed, were all the work of a single painter, one Jacob DeWitt, who had been commissioned by Charles II, upon that worthy’s restoration, to produce portraits of all the King’s ancestors, from the time of Robert the Bruce onward.

“To assure everyone of the ancientness of his lineage, and the entire appropriateness of his restoration,” Kilmarnock explained, a wry twist to his mouth. “I wonder if King James will undertake a similar project when he regains the throne?”

In any case, he continued, DeWitt had painted furiously, completing one portrait every two weeks in order to comply with the monarch’s demand. The difficulty, of course, was that DeWitt had no way of knowing what Charles’s ancestors had actually looked like, and had therefore used as sitters anyone he could drag into his studio, merely equipping each portrait with the same prominent nose, by way of ensuring a family resemblance.

“That’s King Charles himself,” Kilmarnock said, nodding at a full-length portrait, resplendent in red velvet and plumed hat. He cast a critical glance at the younger Charles, whose flushed face gave evidence that he had been hospitably keeping his guest company in his potations.

“A better nose, anyway,” the Earl murmured, as though to himself. “His mother was Polish.”

It was growing late, and the candles in the silver candelabra were beginning to gutter and go out before the gentlefolk of Edinburgh had had their fill of wine and dancing. Don Francisco, possibly not as accustomed as Charles to unrestrained drinking, was nodding into his ruff.

Jamie, having with an obvious expression of relief restored the last Miss Williams to her father for the journey home, came to join me in the corner where I had found a seat that enabled me to slip off my shoes under cover of my spreading skirts. I hoped I wouldn’t have to put them on again in a hurry.

Jamie sat down on a vacant seat beside me, mopping his glowing face with a large white handkerchief. He reached past me to the small table, where a tray with a few leftover cakes was sitting.

"I'm fair starved," he said. "Dancing gives ye a terrible appetite, and the talking's worse." He popped a whole cake into his mouth at once, chewed it briefly, and reached for another.

I saw Prince Charles bend over the slumped form of the guest of honor and shake him by the shoulder, to little effect. The Spanish envoy's head was fallen back and his mouth was slack beneath the drooping mustache. His Highness stood, rather unsteadily, and glanced about for help, but Sheridan and Tullibardine, both elderly gentlemen, had fallen asleep themselves, leaning companionably together like a couple of old village sots in lace and velvet.

"Maybe you'd better give His Highness a hand?" I suggested.

"Mmphm."

Resigned, Jamie swallowed the rest of his cake, but before he could rise, I saw the younger Simpson, who had taken quick note of the situation, nudge his father in the ribs.

Senior advanced and bowed ceremoniously to Prince Charles, then, before the glazed prince could respond, the swordmakers had the Spanish envoy by wrists and ankles. With a heave of forge-toughened muscles, they lifted him from his seat, and bore him away, gently swinging him between them like some specimen of big game. They disappeared through the door at the far end of the hall, followed unsteadily by His Highness.

This rather unceremonious departure signaled the end of the ball.

The other guests began to relax and move about, the ladies disappearing into an anteroom to retrieve shawls and cloaks, the gentlemen standing about in small, impatient knots, exchanging complaints about the time the women were taking to make ready.

As we were housed in Holyrood, we left by the other door, at the north end of the gallery, going through the morning and evening drawing rooms to the main staircase.

The landing and the soaring stairwell were lined with tapestries, their figures dim and silvery in candlelight. And below them stood the giant form of Angus Mhor, his shadow huge on the wall, wavering like one of the tapestry figures as they shimmered in the draft.

"My master is dead," he said.

* * *

"His Highness said," Jamie reported, "that perhaps it was as well." He spoke with a tone of sarcastic bitterness.

"Because of Dougal," he added, seeing my shocked bewilderment at this statement. "Dougal has always been more than willing to join His Highness in the field. Now Colum's gone, Dougal is chief. And so the MacKenzies of Leoch will march with the Highland army," he said softly, "to victory—or not."

The lines of grief and weariness were cut deep into his face, and he didn't resist as I moved behind him and laid my hands on the broad swell of his shoulders. He made a small sound of incoherent relief as my fingertips pressed hard into the muscles at the base of his neck, and let his head fall forward, resting on his folded arms. He was seated before the table in our room, and piles of letters and dispatches lay neatly stacked around him. Amid the documents lay a small notebook, rather worn, bound in red morocco leather. Colum's diary, which Jamie had taken from his uncle's rooms in hopes that it would contain a recent entry confirming Colum's decision not to support the Jacobite cause.

"Not that it would likely sway Dougal," he had said, grimly thumbing the close-written pages, "but there's nothing else to try."

In the event, though, there had been nothing in Colum's diary for the last three days, save one brief entry, clearly made upon his return from the churchyard the day before.

Met with young Jamie and his wife. Have made my peace with Ellen at last. And that was, of course, important—to Colum, to Jamie, and possibly to Ellen—but of little use in swaying the convictions of Dougal MacKenzie.

Jamie straightened up after a moment and turned to me. His eyes were dark with worry and resignation.

"What it means is that now we are committed to him, Claire—to Charles, I mean. There's less choice than there ever was. We must try to assure his victory."

My mouth felt dry with too much wine. I licked my lips before answering, to moisten them.

"I suppose so. Damn! Why couldn't Colum have waited a little longer? Just 'til the morning, when he could have seen Charles?"

Jamie smiled lopsidedly.

"I dinna suppose he had so much to say about it, Sassenach. Few men get to choose the hour of their death."

"Colum meant to." I had been of two minds whether to tell Jamie what had passed between me and Colum at our first meeting in Holyrood, but now there was no point in keeping Colum's secrets.

Jamie shook his head in disbelief and sighed, his shoulders slumping under the revelation that Colum had meant to take his own life.

"I wonder then," he murmured, half to himself. "Was it a sign, do ye think, Claire?"

"A sign?"

"Colum's death now, before he could do as he meant to and refuse Charles's plea for help. Is it a sign that Charles is destined to win his fight?"

I remembered my last sight of Colum. Death had come for him as he sat in bed, a glass of brandy untouched near his hand. He had met it as he wished, then, clearheaded and alert; his head had fallen back, but his eyes were wide open, dulled to the sights he had left behind. His mouth was pressed tight, the habitual lines carved deep from nose to chin. The pain that was his constant companion had accompanied him as far as it could.

"God knows," I said at last.

"Aye?" he said, voice once more muffled in his arms. "Aye, well. I hope somebody does."

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A BARGAIN WITH THE DEVIL

Catarrh settled on Edinburgh like the cloud of cold rain that masked the Castle from sight on its hill. Water ran day and night in the streets, and if the cobbles were temporarily clean of sewage, the relief from stench was more than made up for by the splatter of expectorations that slimed every close and wynd, and the choking cloud of fireplace smoke that filled every room from waist-height to ceiling.

Cold and miserable as the weather was outside, I found myself spending a good deal of time walking the grounds of Holyrood and the Canongate. A faceful of rain seemed preferable to lungfuls of woodsmoke and germ-filled air indoors. The sounds of coughing and sneezing rang through the Palace, though the constraint of His Highness's genteel presence caused most hawking sufferers to spit into filthy handerchiefs or the Delft-lined fireplaces, rather than on the polished Scotch oak floors.

The light failed early at this time of year, and I turned back, halfway up the High Street, in order to reach Holyrood before dark. I had no fear at all of assault in the darkness; even had I not been known by now to all the Jacobite troops occupying the city, the prevailing horror of fresh air kept everyone indoors.

Men still well enough to leave their homes on business completed their errands with dispatch before diving thankfully into the smoke-filled sanctuary of Jenny Ha's tavern, and stayed there, nestled cozily into warm airlessness, where the smell of damp wool, unwashed bodies, whisky, and ale nearly succeeded in overcoming the reek of the stove.

My only fear was of losing my footing in the dark and breaking an ankle on the slippery cobbles. The city was lit only by the feeble lanterns of the town watchmen, and these had a disconcerting habit of ducking from doorway to doorway, appearing and disappearing like fireflies. And sometimes disappearing altogether for half an hour at a time, as the lantern-bearer darted into The World's End at the bottom of the Canongate for a life-saving draught of hot ale.

I eyed the faint glow over the Canongate kirk, estimating how much time remained 'til dark. With luck, I might have time to stop at Mr. Haugh's apothecary's shop. While boasting nothing of the variety to be found in Raymond's Paris emporium, Mr. Haugh did a sound trade in horse chestnuts and slippery-elm bark, and usually was able to provide me with peppermint and barberry, as well. At this time of year, his chief income was derived from the sale of camphor balls, considered a sovereign remedy for colds, catarrh, and consumption. If it was no more effective than modern cold remedies, I reflected, it was no worse, and at least smelled invigoratingly healthy.

Despite the prevalence of red noses and white faces, parties were held at the palace several nights a week, as the noblesse of Edinburgh welcomed their Prince with enthusiasm. Another two hours, and the lanterns of servants accompanying ball-goers would start to flicker in the High Street.

I sighed at the thought of another ball, attended by sneezing gallants, paying compliments in phlegm-thickened voices. Perhaps I'd better add some garlic to the list; worn in a silver pomander-locket about the neck, it was supposed to ward off disease. What it actually did do, I supposed, was to keep disease-ridden companions at a safe distance—equally satisfactory, from my point of view.

The city was occupied by Charles's troops, and the English, while not besieged, were at least sequestered in the Castle above. Still, news—of dubious veracity—tended to leak in both directions. According to Mr. Haugh, the most recent rumor held that the Duke of Cumberland was gathering troops south of Perth, with the intent of marching north almost immediately. I hadn't any idea whether this was true; I doubted it, in fact, recalling no mention of Cumberland's activities much before the spring of 1746, which hadn't arrived. Still, I could hardly ignore the rumor.

The sentry at the gate nodded me in, coughing. The sound was taken up by the guards stationed down the hallways and on the landings. Resisting the impulse to wave my basket of garlic at them like a censer as I passed, I made my way upstairs to the afternoon drawing room, where I was admitted without question.

I found His Highness with Jamie, Aeneas MacDonald, O'Sullivan, His Highness's secretary, and a saturnine man named Francis Townsend, who was lately much in His Highness's good graces. Most of them were red-nosed and sneezing, and splattered phlegm smeared the hearth before the gracious mantel. I cast a sharp look at Jamie, who was slumped wearily in his chair, whitefaced and drooping.

Accustomed to my forays into the city, and eager for any intelligence regarding the English movements, the men heard me out with great attention.

"We are indebted greatly to you for your news, Mistress Fraser," said His Highness, with a gracious bow and a smile. "You must tell me if there some way in which I might repay your generous service."

"There is," I said, seizing the opportunity. "I want to take my husband home to bed. Now."

The Prince's eyes bulged slightly, but he recovered himself quickly. Not so restrained, Aeneas MacDonald broke out into a fit of suspiciously strangled coughing. Jamie's white face blazed suddenly crimson. He sneezed, and buried his countenance in a handkerchief, blue eyes shooting sparks at me over its folds.

"Ah … your husband," said Charles, rallying gallantly to the challenge. "Um …" A soft pink blush began to tint his cheeks.

"He's ill," I said, with some asperity. "Surely you can see that? I want him to go to bed and rest."

"Oh, *rest,*" murmured MacDonald, as though to himself.

I searched for some sufficiently courtly words.

"I should be sorry to deprive Your Highness temporarily of my husband's attendance, but if he isn't allowed to take sufficient rest, he isn't likely to go on attending you much longer."

Charles, recovered from his momentary discomposure, seemed now to be finding Jamie's patent discomfiture entertaining.

"To be sure," he said, eyeing Jamie, whose complexion had faded now into a sort of mottled pallor. "We should dislike exceedingly the contemplation of such a prospect as you wish, Madam." He inclined his head in my direction. "It shall be as you wish, Madam. *Cher* James is excused from attendance upon our person until he shall be recovering. By all means, take your husband to your rooms at once, and, er … undertake what cure seems … ah … fitting." The corner of the Prince's mouth twitched suddenly, and pulling a large handkerchief from his pocket, he followed Jamie's example and buried the lower half of his face, coughing delicately.

"Best take care, Highness," MacDonald advised somewhat caustically. "You may catch Mr. Fraser's ailment."

"One could wish to have *half* Mr. Fraser's complaint," murmured Francis Townsend, with no attempt at concealing the sardonic smile that made him look like a fox in a hen coop.

Jamie, now bearing a strong resemblance to a frostbitten tomato, rose abruptly, bowed to the Prince with a brief "I thank ye, Highness," and headed for the door, clutching me by the arm.

"Let go," I snarled as we swept past the guards in the anteroom. "You're breaking my arm."

"Good," he muttered. "As soon as I've got ye in private, I'm going to break your neck." But I caught sight of the curl of his mouth, and knew the gruffness was only a facade.

Once in our apartment, with the door safely shut, he pulled me to him, leaned against the door and laughed, his cheek pressed to the top of my head.

"Thank ye, Sassenach," he said, wheezing slightly.

"You're not angry?" I asked, voice somewhat muffled in his shirtfront. "I didn't mean to embarrass you."

"Nay, I'm no minding it." he said, releasing me. "God, I wouldna ha' cared if ye'd said ye meant to set me on fire in the Great Gallery, so long as I could leave His Highness and come to rest for a bit. I'm tired to death of the man, and every muscle I've got is aching." A sudden spasm of coughing shook his frame, and he leaned against the door once more, this time for support.

"Are you all right?" I stretched up on tiptoe to feel his forehead. I wasn't surprised, but was somewhat alarmed, to feel how hot his skin was beneath my palm.

"You," I said accusingly, "have a fever!"

"Aye well, everyone's got a fever, Sassenach," he said, a bit crossly. "Only some are hotter than others, no?"

"Don't quibble," I said, relieved that he still felt well enough to chop logic. "Take off your clothes. And don't say it," I added crisply, seeing the grin forming as he opened his mouth to reply. "I have no designs whatever on your disease-ridden carcass, beyond getting it into a nightshirt."

"Oh, aye? Ye dinna think I'd benefit from the exercise?" He teased, beginning to unfasten his shirt. "I thought ye said exercise was healthy." His laugh turned suddenly to an attack of hoarse coughing that left him breathless and flushed. He dropped the shirt on the floor, and almost immediately began to shiver with chill.

"Much too healthy for you, my lad." I yanked the thick woolen nightshirt over his head, leaving him to struggle into it as I got him out of kilt, shoes, and stockings. "Christ, your feet are like ice!"

"You could … warm them … for me." But the words were forced out between chattering teeth, and he made no protest when I steered him toward the bed.

He was shaking too hard to speak by the time I had snatched a hot brick from the fire with tongs, wrapped it in flannel, and thrust it in at his feet.

The chill was hard but brief, and he lay still again by the time I had set a pan of water to steep with a handful of peppermint and black currant.

"What's that?" he asked, suspiciously, sniffing the air as I opened another jar from my basket. "Ye dinna mean me to drink it, I hope? It smells like a duck that's been hung ower-long."

"You're close," I said. "It's goose grease mixed with camphor. I'm going to rub your chest with it."

"No!" He snatched the covers protectively up beneath his chin.

"Yes," I said firmly, advancing with purpose.

In the midst of my labors, I became aware that we had an audience. Fergus stood on the far side of the bed, watching the proceedings with fascination, his nose running freely. I removed my knee from Jamie's abdomen and reached for a handkerchief.

"And what are *you* doing here?" Jamie demanded, trying to yank the front of his nightshirt back into place.

Not noticeably disconcerted by the unfriendly tone of this greeting, Fergus ignored the proffered handkerchief and wiped his nose on his sleeve, meanwhile staring with round-eyed admiration at the broad expanse of muscular, gleaming chest on display.

"The skinny milord sent me to fetch a packet he says you have for him. Do all Scotsmen have such quantities of hair upon their chests, milord?"

"Christ! I forgot all about the dispatches. Wait, I'll take them to Cameron myself." Jamie began to struggle up in bed, a process that brought his nose close to the site of my recent endeavors.

"Phew!" He flapped the nightshirt in an effort to dispel the penetrating aroma, and glared accusingly at me. "How am I to get this reek off me? D'ye expect me to go out in company smellin' like a dead goose, Sassenach?"

"No, I don't," I said. "I expect you to lie quietly in bed and rest, or you'll *be* a dead goose." I uncorked a fairly high-caliber glare of my own.

"I can carry the package, milord," Fergus was assuring him.

"You will do nothing of the kind," I said, noting the boy's flushed cheeks and overbright eyes. I put a hand to his forehead.

"Don't tell me," said Jamie sarcastically. "He's got a fever?"

"Yes, he has."

"Ha," he said to Fergus with gloomy satisfaction. "Now you're for it. See how *you* like bein' basted."

A short period of intense effort saw Fergus tucked up in his pallet by the fire, goose grease and medicinal hot tea administered lavishly all round, and a clean handkerchief deposited beneath the chin of each sufferer.

"There," I said, fastidiously rinsing my hands in the basin. "Now, *I* will take this precious packet of dispatches across to Mr. Cameron. *You* will both rest, drink hot tea, rest, blow your nose, and rest, in that order. Got it, troops?"

The tip of a long, reddened nose was barely visible above the bedclothes. It oscillated slowly back and forth as Jamie shook his head.

"Drunk wi' power," he remarked disapprovingly to the ceiling. "Verra unwomanly attitude, that."

I dropped a kiss on his hot forehead and swung my cloak down from its hook.

"How little you know of women, my love," I said.

* * *

Ewan Cameron was in charge of what passed for intelligence operations at Holyrood. His quarters were at the end of the west wing, tucked away near the kitchens. On purpose, I suspected, having witnessed the man's appetite in action. Possibly a tapeworm, I thought, viewing the officer's cadaverous countenance as he opened the packet and scanned the dispatches.

"All in order?" I asked after a moment. I had to repress the automatic urge to add "sir."

Startled from his train of thought, he jerked his head up from the dispatches and blinked at me.

"Um? Oh!" Recalled to himself, he smiled and hastened to make apologies.

"I'm sorry, Mistress Fraser. How impolite of me to forget myself and leave you standing there. Yes, everything appears to be in order—most interesting," he murmured to himself. Then, snapping back to an awareness of me, "Would you be so kind as to tell your husband that I wish to discuss these with him as soon as possible? I understand that he is unwell," he added delicately, carefully avoiding my eye. Apparently it hadn't taken Aeneas MacDonald long to relay an account of my interview with the Prince.

“He is,” I said unhelpfully. The last thing I wanted was Jamie leaving his bed and sitting up poring over intelligence dispatches all night with Cameron and Lochiel. That would be nearly as bad as staying up dancing all night with the ladies of Edinburgh. Well, possibly not *quite* as bad, I amended to myself, recalling the three Misses Williams.

“I’m sure he will attend upon you as soon as he’s able,” I said, pulling the edges of the cloak together. “I’ll tell him.” And I would—tomorrow. Or possibly the next day. Wherever the English forces presently were, I was positive they weren’t within a hundred miles of Edinburgh.

* * *

A quick peek into the bedroom upon my return showed two lumps, immobile beneath the bedclothes, and the sounds of breathing—slow and regular, if a trifle congested—filled the room. Reassured, I removed my cloak and sat down in the sitting room with a preventative cup of hot tea, to which I had added a fair dollop of medicinal brandy.

Sipping slowly, I felt the liquid heat flow down the center of my chest, spread comfortably through my abdomen, and begin working its steady way down toward my toes, quick-frozen after a dash across the courtyard, undertaken in preference to the circuitous inside passage with its endless stairs and turnings.

I held the cup below my chin, inhaling the pleasant, bitter smell, feeling the heated fumes of the brandy clarify my sinuses. Sniffing, it occurred to me to wonder exactly *why*, in a city and a building plagued with colds and influenza, my own sinuses remained unclogged.

In fact, aside from the childbed fever, I had not been ill once since my passage through the stone circle. That *was* odd, I thought; given the standards of hygiene and sanitation, and the crowded conditions in which we frequently lived, I ought surely to have come down at least with a case of sniffles by this time. But I remained as disgustingly healthy as always.

Plainly I was not immune to all diseases, or I would not have had the fever. But the common communicable ones? Some were explainable on the basis of vaccination, of course. I couldn't, for example, catch smallpox, typhus, cholera, or yellow fever. Not that yellow fever was likely, but still. I set down the cup and felt my left arm, through the cloth of the sleeve. The vaccination scar had faded with time, but was still prominent enough to be detectable; a roughly circular patch of pitted skin, perhaps a half-inch in diameter.

I shuddered briefly, reminded again of Geillis Duncan, then pushed the thought away, diving back into a contemplation of my state of health in order to avoid thinking either of the woman who had gone to a death by fire, or of Colum MacKenzie, the man who had sent her there.

The cup was nearly empty, and I rose to refill it, thinking. An acquired immunity, perhaps? I had learned in nurses' training that colds are caused by innumerable viruses, each distinct and ever-evolving. Once exposed to a particular virus, the instructor had explained, you became immune to it. You continued to catch cold as you encountered new and different viruses, but the chances of meeting something you hadn't been exposed to before became smaller as you got older. So, he had said, while children caught an average of six colds per year, people in middle age caught only two, and elderly folk might go for years between colds, only because they had already met most of the common viruses and become immune.

Now there was a possibility, I thought. What if some types of immunity became hereditary, as viruses and people co-evolved? Antibodies to many diseases could be passed from mother to child, I knew that. Via the placenta or the breast milk, so that the child was immune—temporarily—to any disease to which the mother had been exposed. Perhaps I never caught cold because I harbored ancestral antibodies to eighteenth-century viruses—benefiting from the colds caught by all my ancestors for the past two hundred years?

I was pondering this entertaining idea, so caught up in it that I hadn't bothered to sit down, but was sipping my tea standing in the middle of the room, when a soft knock sounded on the door.

I sighed impatiently, annoyed at being distracted. I didn't bother to set the cup down, but came to the door prepared to receive—and repel—the expected inquiries about Jamie's health. Likely Cameron had come across an unclear passage in a dispatch, or His Highness had thought better of his generosity in dismissing Jamie from attendance at the ball. Well, they would get him out of bed tonight only over my dead and trampled body.

I yanked open the door, and the words of greeting died in my throat. Jack Randall stood in the shadows of the doorway.

* * *

The wetness of the spilled tea soaking through my skirt brought me to my senses, but he had already stepped inside. He looked me up and down with his usual air of disdainful appraisal, then glanced at the closed bedroom door.

"You are alone?"

"Yes!"

The hazel glance flickered back and forth between me and the door, assessing my truthfulness. His face was lined from ill health, pale from poor nutrition and a winter spent indoors, but showed no diminution of alertness. The quick, ruthless brain had retreated a bit further back, behind the curtain of those ice-glazed eyes, but it was still there; no doubt of that.

Making his decision, he grasped me by the arm, scooping up my discarded cloak with his other hand.

"Come with me."

I would have allowed him to chop me in pieces before I made a sound that would cause the bedroom door to open.

We were halfway down the corridor outside before I felt it safe to speak. There were no guards stationed within the confines of the staff quarters, but the grounds were heavily patrolled. He couldn't hope to get me through the rockery or the side gates without detection, let alone through the main palace entrance. Therefore, whatever he wanted with me, it must be a business that could be conducted within the precincts of Holyrood.

Murder, perhaps, in revenge for the injury Jamie had done him? Stomach lurching at the thought, I inspected him as closely as I could as we walked swiftly through the pools of light cast from the candleholders on the wall. Not intended for decoration or for graciousness, the candles in this part of the palace were small and widely spaced and the flames feeble, meant only to provide sufficient light to assist visitors returning to their chambers.

He wasn't in uniform, and appeared completely unarmed. He was dressed in nondescript homespun, with a thick coat over plain brown breeks and hose. Nothing but the straightness of his carriage and the arrogant tilt of his unwigged head gave evidence of his identity—he could easily have slipped inside the grounds with one of the parties arriving for the ball, posing as a servant.

No, I decided, glancing warily at him as we passed from dimness to light, he *wasn't* armed, though his hand clamped around my arm was hard as iron. Still, if it was strangling he had in mind, he wouldn't find me an easy victim; I was nearly as tall as he was, and a good deal better nourished.

As though he sensed my thought, he paused near the end of the corridor and turned me to face him, hands tight above my elbows.

"I mean you no harm," he said, low-voiced but firm.

"Tell me another one," I said, estimating the chances of anyone hearing me if I screamed here. I knew there would be a guard at the foot of the stair, but that was on the other side of two doors, a short landing, and a long staircase.

On the other hand, it was stalemate. If he couldn't take me farther, neither could I summon aid where I was. This end of the corridor was sparsely populated, and such residents as there were would undoubtedly be in the other wing now, either attending the ball or serving at it.

He spoke impatiently.

"Don't be idiotic. If I wished to kill you, I could do it here. It would be a great deal safer than taking you outside. For that matter," he added, "if I meant you harm, inside or out, why should I have brought your cloak?" He lifted the garment from his arm in illustration.

"How the hell should I know?" I said, though it seemed a definite point. "Why *did* you bring it?"

"Because I wish you to go outside with me. I have a proposal to make to you, and I will brook no chance of being overheard." He glanced toward the door at the end of the corridor. Like all the others in Holyrood, it was constructed in the cross-and-Book style, the upper four panels arranged to form a cross, the lower two panels standing tall, forming the likeness of an open Bible. Holyrood had once been an abbey.

"Will you come into the church? We can speak there without fear of interruption." This was true; the church adjoining the palace, part of the original Abbey, was abandoned, rendered unsafe by lack of maintenance over the years. I hesitated, wondering what to do.

"Think, woman!" He gave me a slight shake, then released me and stood back. The candlelight silhouetted him, so that his features were no more than a dark blur facing me. "Why should I take the risk of entering the palace?"

This was a good question. Once he had left the shelter of the Castle in disguise, the streets of Edinburgh were open to him. He could have lurked about the alleys and wynds until he caught sight of me on my daily expeditions, and waylaid me there. The only possible reason not to do so was the one he gave; he needed to speak to me without risk of being overseen or overheard.

He saw conclusion dawn in my face, and his shoulders relaxed slightly. He spread the cloak, holding it for me.

"You have my word that you will return from our conversation unmolested, Madam."

I tried to read his expression, but nothing showed on the thin, chiseled features. The eyes were steady, and told me no more than would my own, seen in a looking glass.

I reached for the cloak.

"All right," I said.

We went out into the dimness of the rock garden, passing the sentry with no more than a nod. He recognized me, and it was not unusual for me to go out at night, to attend to an urgent case of sickness in the city. The guard glanced sharply at Jack Randall—it was usually Murtagh who accompanied me, if Jamie could not—but dressed as he was, there was no hint of the Captain's real identity. He returned the guard's glance with indifference, and the door of the palace closed behind us, leaving us in the chill dark outside.

It had been raining earlier, but the storm was breaking up. Thick clouds shredded and flew overhead, driven by a wind that whipped aside my cloak and plastered my skirt to my legs.

"This way." I clutched the heavy velvet close around me, bent my head against the wind, and followed Jack Randall's lean figure through the path of the rockery.

We emerged at the lower end, and after a pause for a quick look around, crossed rapidly across the grass to the portal of the church.

The door had warped and hung ajar; it had been disused for several years because of structural faults that made the building dangerous, and no one had troubled to repair it. I kicked my way through a barrier of dead leaves and rubbish, ducking from the flickering moonlight of the palace's back garden into the absolute darkness of the church.

Or not quite absolute; as my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I could see the tall lines of the pillars that marched down each side of the nave, and the delicate stonework of the enormous window at the far end, glass mostly gone.

A movement in the shadows showed me where Randall had gone; I turned between the pillars and found him in a space where a recess once used as a baptismal font had left a stone ledge along the wall. To either side were pale blotches on the walls; the memorial tablets of those buried in the church. Others lay flat, embedded in the floor on either side of the central aisle, the names blurred by the traffic of feet.

"All right," I said. "We can't be overheard now. What do you want of me?"

"Your skill as a physician, and your complete discretion. In exchange for such information as I possess regarding the movements and plans of the Elector's troops," he answered promptly.

That rather took my breath away. Whatever I had been expecting, it wasn't this. He couldn't possibly mean …

“You’re looking for medical treatment?” I asked, making no effort to disguise the mingled horror and amazement in my voice. “From me? I understood that you … er, I mean …” With a major effort of will, I stopped myself floundering and said firmly, “Surely you have already received whatever medical treatment is possible? You appear to be in reasonably good condition.” Externally, at least. I bit my lip, suppressing an urge toward hysteria.

“I am informed that I am fortunate to be alive, Madam,” he answered coldly. “The point is debatable.” He set the lantern in a niche in the wall, where the scooped basin of a piscina lay dry and empty in its recess.

“I assume your inquiry to be motivated by medical curiosity rather than concern for my welfare,” he went on. The lanternlight, shed at waist height, illuminated him from the ribs downward, leaving head and shoulders hidden. He laid a hand on the waistband of his breeches, turning slightly toward me.

“Do you wish to inspect the injury, in order to judge the effectiveness of treatment?” The shadows hid his face, but the splinters of ice in his voice were tipped with poison.

“Perhaps later,” I said, as cool as he. “If not yourself, for whom do you seek my skill?”

He hesitated, but it was far too late for reticence.

“For my brother.”

“Your brother?” I couldn’t keep the shock from my voice. “Alexander?”

“Since my elder brother William is, so far as I know, virtuously engaged in stewardship of the family estates in Sussex, and in need of no assistance,” he said dryly. “Yes, my brother Alex.”

I spread my hands on the cold stone of a sarcophagus to steady myself.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

It was a simple enough story, and a sad one. Had it been anyone other than Jonathan Randall who told it, I might have found myself prey to sympathy.

Deprived of his employment with the Duke of Sandringham because of the scandal over Mary Hawkins, and too frail of health to secure another appointment, Alexander Randall had been forced to seek aid from his brothers.

"William sent him two pounds and a letter of earnest exhortations." Jack Randall leaned back against the wall, crossing his ankles. "William is a very earnest sort, I'm afraid. But he wasn't prepared to have Alex come home to Sussex. William's wife is a bit … extreme, shall we say? in her religious opinions." There was a wisp of amusement in his voice that suddenly made me like him for a moment. In different circumstances, might he have been like the great-grandson he resembled?

The sudden thought of Frank so unsettled me that I missed his next remark.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I clutched my left hand with my right, fingers pinching tight on my gold wedding ring. Frank was gone. I must stop thinking of him.

"I said that I had procured rooms for Alex near the Castle, so that I might look in on him myself, as my funds did not stretch far enough to allow of employing a proper servant for him."

But the occupation of Edinburgh had of course made such attendance difficult, and Alex Randall had been left more or less to his own devices for the past month, aside from the intermittent offices of a woman who came in to clean now and then. In ill health to start with, his condition had been worsened by cold weather, poor diet, and squalid conditions until, seriously alarmed, Jack Randall had been moved to seek my help. And to offer for that help, the betrayal of his King.

"Why would you come to me?" I asked at last, turning from the plaque.

He looked faintly surprised.

"Because of who you are." His lips curved in a slight, self-mocking smile. If one seeks to sell one's soul, is it not proper to go to the powers of darkness?"

"You really think that I'm a power of darkness, do you?" Plainly he did; he was more than capable of mockery, but there had been none in his original proposal.

"Aside from the stories about you in Paris, you told me so yourself," he pointed out. "When I let you go from Wentworth." He turned in the dark, shifting himself on the stone ledge.

"That was a serious mistake," he said softly. "You should never have left that place alive, dangerous creature. And yet I had no choice; your life was the price he set. And I would have paid still higher stakes than that, for what he gave me."

I made a slight hissing noise, which I muffled at once, but too late to stop him hearing me. He half-sat on the ledge, one hip resting on the stone, one leg stretched down to balance him. The moon broke through the scudding clouds outside, backlighting him through the broken window. In the dimness, head half-turned and the lines of cruelty around his mouth erased by darkness, I could mistake him again, as I had once before, for a man I had loved. For Frank.

Yet I had betrayed that man; because of my choice, that man would never be. *For the sins of the fathers shall be visited on the children … and thou shalt destroy him, root and branch, so that his name shall no more be known among the tribes of Israel*.

"Did he tell you?" the light, pleasant voice asked from the shadows. "Did he ever tell you all the things that passed between us, him and me, in that small room at Wentworth?" Through my shock and rage, I noticed that he obeyed Jamie's injunction; not once did he use his name. "He." "Him." Never "Jamie." That was mine.

My teeth were clenched tight, but I forced the words through them.

"He told me. Everything."

He made a small sound, half a sigh.

"Whether the idea pleases you or not, my dear, we are linked, you and I. I cannot say it pleases me, but I admit the truth of it. You know, as I do, the touch of his skin—so warm, is he not? Almost as though he burned from within. You know the smell of his sweat and the roughness of the hairs on his thighs. You know the sound that he makes at the last, when he has lost himself. So do I."

"Be quiet," I said. *"Be still!"* He ignored me, leaning back, speaking thoughtfully, as though to himself. I recognized, with a fresh burst of rage, the impulse that led him to this—not the intention, as I had thought, to upset me, but an overwhelming urge to talk of a beloved; to rehearse aloud and live again vanished details. For after all, to whom might he speak of Jamie in this way, but to me?

"I am leaving!" I said loudly, and whirled on my heel.

"Will you leave?" said the calm voice behind me. "I can deliver General Hawley into your hands. Or you can let him take the Scottish army. Your choice, Madam."

I had the strong urge to reply that General Hawley wasn't worth it. But I thought of the Scottish chieftains now quartered in Holyroodhouse—Kilmarnock and Balmerino and Lochiel, only a few feet away on the other side of the abbey wall. Of Jamie himself. Of the thousands of clansmen they led. Was the chance of victory worth the sacrifice of my feelings? And was this the turning point, again a place of choice? If I didn't listen, if I didn't accept the bargain Randall proposed, what then?

I turned, slowly. "Talk, then," I said. "If you must." He seemed unmoved by my anger, and unworried by the possibility that I would refuse him. The voice in the dark church was even, controlled as a lecturer's.

"I wonder, you know," he said. "Whether you have had from him as much as I?" He tilted his head to one side, sharp features coming into focus as he moved out of the shadow. The fugitive light caught him momentarily from the side, lighting the pale hazel of his eyes and making them shine, like those of a beast glimpsed hiding in the bushes.

The note of triumph in his voice was faint, but unmistakable.

"I," he said softly, "I have had him as you could never have him. You are a woman; you cannot understand, even witch as you are. I have held the soul of his manhood, have taken from him what he has taken from me. I know him, as he now knows me. We are bound, he and I, by blood."

I give ye my Body, that we Two may be One …

"You choose a very odd way of seeking my help," I said, my voice shaking. My hands were clenched in the folds of my skirt, the fabric cold and bunched between my fingers.

"Do I? I think it best you understand, Madam. I do not beseech your pity, do not call upon your power as a man might seek mercy from a woman, depending upon what people call womanly sympathy. For that cause, you might come to my brother on his own account." A lock of dark hair fell loose across his forehead; he brushed it back with one hand.

"I prefer that it be a straight bargain made between us, Madam; of service rendered and price paid—for realize, Madam, that my feelings toward you are much as yours toward me must be."

That was a shock; while I struggled to find an answer, he went on.

"We are linked, you and I, through the body of one man—through *him*. I would have no such link formed through the body of my brother; I seek your help to heal his body, but I take no risk that his soul shall fall prey to you. Tell me, then; is the price I offer acceptable to you?"

I turned away from him and walked down the center of the echoing nave. I was shaking so hard that my steps felt uncertain, and the shock of the hard stone beneath my soles jolted me. The tracery of the great window over the disused altar stood black against the white of racing clouds, and dim shafts of moonlight lit my path.

At the end of the nave, as far as I could get from him, I stopped and pressed my hands against the wall for support. It was too dark even to see the letters of the marble tablet under my hands, but I could feel the cool, sharp lines of the carving. The curve of a small skull, resting on crossed thigh bones, a pious version of the jolly Roger. I let my head fall forward, forehead to forehead with the invisible skull, smooth as bone against my skin.

I waited, eyes closed, for my gorge to subside, and the heated pulse that throbbed in my temples to cool.

It makes no difference, I told myself. No matter what he is. No matter what he says.

We are linked, you and I, through the body of one man … Yes, but not through Jamie. *Not through him!* I insisted, to him, to myself. Yes, you took him, you bastard! But I took him back, I freed him from you. *You have no part of him!* But the sweat that trickled down my ribs and the sound of my own sobbing breath belied my conviction.

Was this the price I must pay for the loss of Frank? A thousand lives that might be saved, perhaps, in compensation for that one loss?

The dark mass of the altar loomed to my right, and I wished with all my heart that there might be some presence there, whatever its nature; something to turn to for an answer. But there was no one here in Holyrood; no one but me. The spirits of the dead kept their own counsel, silent in the stones of wall and floor.

I tried to put Jack Randall out of my mind. If it weren't him, if it were any other man who asked, would I go? There was Alex Randall to be considered, all other things aside. "For that cause, you might come to my brother on his own account," the Captain had said. And of course I would. Whatever I might offer him in the way of healing, could I withhold it because of the man who asked it?

It was a long time before I straightened, pushing myself wearily erect, my hands damp and slick on the curve of the skull. I felt drained and weak, my neck aching and my head heavy, as though the sickness in the city had laid its hand on me after all.

He was still there, patient in the cold dark.

"Yes," I said abruptly, as soon as I came within speaking distance. "All right. I'll come tomorrow, in the forenoon. Where?"

"Ladywalk Wynd," he said. "You know it?"

"Yes." Edinburgh was a small city—no more than the single High Street, with the tiny, ill-lit wynds and closes opening off it. Ladywalk Wynd was one of the poorer ones.

"I will meet you there," he said. "I shall have the information for you." He slid to his feet and took a step forward, then stood, waiting for me to move. I saw that he didn't want to pass close by me, in order to reach the door.

"Afraid of me, are you?" I said, with a humorless laugh. "Think I'll turn you into a toadstool?"

"No," he said, surveying me calmly. "I do not fear you, Madam. You cannot have it both ways, you know. You sought to terrify me at Wentworth, by giving me the day of my death. But having told me that, you cannot now threaten me, for if I shall die in April of next year, you cannot harm me now, can you?"

Had I had a knife with me, I might have shown him otherwise, in a soul-satisfying moment of impulse. But the doom of prophecy lay on me, and the weight of a thousand Scottish lives. He was safe from me.

"I keep my distance, Madam," he said, "merely because I would prefer to take no chance of touching you."

I laughed once more, this time genuinely.

"And that, Captain," I said, "is an impulse with which I am entirely in sympathy." I turned and left the church, leaving him to follow as he would.

I had no need to ask or to wonder whether he would keep his word. He had freed me once from Wentworth, because he had given his word to do so. His word, once given, was his bond. Jack Randall was a gentleman.

* * *

What did you feel, when I gave my body to Jack Randall? Jamie had asked me.

Rage, I had said. *Sickness. Horror*.

I leaned against the door of the sitting room, feeling them all again. The fire had died out and the room was cold. The smell of camphorated goose grease tingled in my nostrils. It was quiet, save for the heavy rasp of breathing from the bed, and the faint sound of the wind, passing by the six-foot walls.

I knelt at the hearth and began to rebuild the fire. It had gone out completely, and I pushed back the half-burnt log and brushed the ashes away before breaking the kindling into a small heap in the center of the hearthstone. We had wood fires in Holyrood, not peat. Unfortunate, I thought; a peat fire wouldn't have gone out so easily.

My hands shook a little, and I dropped the flint box twice before I succeeded in striking a spark. The cold, I said to myself. It was very cold in here.

Did he tell you all the things that passed between us? said Jack Randall's mocking voice.

"All I need to know," I muttered to myself, touching a paper spill to the tiny flame and carrying it from point to point, setting the tinder aglow in half a dozen spots. One at a time, I added small sticks, poking each one into the flame and holding it there until the fire caught. When the pile of kindling was burning merrily, I reached back and caught the end of the big log, lifting it carefully into the heart of the fire. It was pinewood; green, but with a little sap, bubbling from a split in the wood in a tiny golden bead.

Crystallized and frozen with age, it would make a drop of amber, hard and permanent as gemstone. Now, it glowed for a moment with the sudden heat, popped and exploded in a tiny shower of sparks, gone in an instant.

"All I need to know," I whispered. Fergus's pallet was empty; waking and finding himself cold, he had crawled off in search of a warm haven.

He was curled up in Jamie's bed, the dark head and the red one resting side by side on the pillow, mouths slightly open as they snored peacefully together. I couldn't help smiling at the sight, but I didn't mean to sleep on the floor myself.

"Out you go," I murmured to Fergus, manhandling him to the edge of the bed, and rolling him into my arms. He was light-boned and thin for a ten-year-old, but still awfully heavy. I got him to his pallet without difficulty and plunked him in, still unconscious, then came back to Jamie's bed.

I undressed slowly, standing by the bed, looking down at him. He had turned onto his side and curled himself up against the cold. His lashes lay long and curving against his cheek; they were a deep auburn, nearly black at the tips, but a pale blond near the roots. It gave him an oddly innocent air, despite the long, straight nose and the firm lines of mouth and chin.

Clad in my chemise, I slid into bed behind him, snuggling against the wide, warm back in its woolen nightshirt. He stirred a little, coughing, and I put a hand on the curve of his hip to soothe him. He shifted, curling further and thrusting himself back against me with a small exhalation of awareness. I put my arm around his waist, my hand brushing the soft mass of his testicles. I could rouse him, I knew, sleepy as he was; it took very little to bring him standing, no more than a few firm strokes of my fingers.

I didn't want to disturb his rest, though, and contented myself with gently patting his belly. He reached back a large hand and clumsily patted my thigh in return.

"I love you," he muttered, half-awake.

"I know," I said, and fell asleep at once, holding him.

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FAMILY TIES

It was not quite a slum, but the next thing to it. I stepped gingerly aside to avoid a substantial puddle of filth, left by the emptying of chamber pots from the windows overhead, awaiting removal by the next hard rain.

Randall caught my elbow to save my slipping on the slimy cobblestones. I stiffened at the touch, and he withdrew his hand at once.

He saw my glance at the crumbling doorpost, and said defensively, "I couldn't afford to move him to better quarters. It isn't so bad inside."

It wasn't—quite. Some effort had been made at furnishing the room comfortably, at least. There was a large bowl and ewer, a sturdy table with a loaf, a cheese, and a bottle of wine upon it, and the bed was equipped with a feather mattress, and several thick quilts.

The man who lay on the mattress had thrown off the quilts, overheated by the effort of coughing, I assumed. He was quite red in the face, and the force of his coughing shook the bed frame, sturdy as it was.

I crossed to the window and threw it up, disregarding Randall's exclamation of protest. Cold air swept into the stifling room, and the stench of unwashed flesh, unclean linen, and overflowing chamber pot lightened a bit.

The coughing gradually eased, and Alexander Randall's flushed countenance faded to a pasty white. His lips were slightly blue, and his chest labored as he fought to recover his breath.

I glanced around the room, but didn't see anything suitable to my purpose. I opened my medical kit and drew out a stiff sheet of parchment. It was a trifle frayed at the edges, but would still serve. I sat down on the edge of the bed, smiling as reassuringly at Alexander as I could manage.

"It was … kind of you … to come," he said, struggling not to cough between words.

"You'll be better in a moment," I said. "Don't talk, and don't fight the cough. I'll need to hear it."

His shirt was unfastened already; I spread it apart to expose a shockingly sunken chest. It was nearly fleshless; the ribs were clearly visible from abdomen to clavicle. He had always been thin, but the last year's illness had left him emaciated.

I rolled the parchment into a tube and placed one end against his chest, my ear against the other. It was a crude stethoscope, but amazingly effective.

I listened at various spots, instructing him to breathe deeply. I didn't need to tell him to cough, poor boy.

"Roll onto your stomach for a moment." I pulled up the shirt and listened, then tapped gently on his back, testing the resonance over both lungs. The bare flesh was clammy with sweat under my fingers.

"All right. Onto your back again. Just lie still, now, and relax. This won't hurt at all." I kept up the soothing talk as I checked the whites of his eyes, the swollen lymph glands in his neck, the coated tongue and inflamed tonsils.

"You've a touch of catarrh," I said, patting his shoulder. "I'll brew you something that will ease the cough. Meanwhile …" I pointed a toe distastefully at the lidded china receptacle under the bed, and glanced at the man who stood waiting by the door, back braced and rigid as though on parade.

"Get rid of that," I ordered. Randall glared at me, but came forward and stooped to obey.

"Not out the window!" I said sharply, as he made a move toward it. "Take it downstairs." He about-faced and left without looking at me.

Alexander drew a shallow breath as the door closed behind his brother. He smiled up at me, hazel eyes glowing in his pale face. The skin was nearly transparent, stretched tight over the bones of his face.

"You'd better hurry, before Johnny comes back. What is it?"

His dark hair was disordered by the coughing; trying to restrain the feelings it roused in me, I smoothed it for him. I didn't want to tell him, but he clearly knew already.

"You have got catarrh. You also have tuberculosis—consumption."

"And?"

"And congestive heart failure," I said, meeting his eyes straight on.

"Ah. I thought … something of the kind. It flutters in my chest sometimes … like a very small bird." He laid a hand lightly over his heart.

I couldn't bear the look of his chest, heaving under its impossible burden, and I gently closed his shirt and fastened the tie at the neck. One long, white hand grasped mine.

"How long?" he said. His tone was light, almost unconcerned, displaying no more than a mild curiosity.

"I don't know," I said. "That's the truth. I don't know."

"But not long," he said, with certainty.

"No. Not long. Months perhaps, but almost surely less than a year."

"Can you … stop the coughing?"

I reached for my kit. "Yes. I can help it, at least. And the heart palpitations; I can make you a digitalin extract that will help." I found the small packet of dried foxglove leaves; it would take a little time to brew them.

"Your brother," I said, not looking at him. "Do you want me—"

"No," he said, definitely. One corner of his mouth curved up, and he looked so like Frank that I wanted momentarily to weep for him.

"No," he said. "He'll know already, I think. We've always … known things about each other."

"Have you, then?" I asked, looking directly at him. He didn't turn away from my eyes, but smiled faintly.

"Yes," he said softly. "I know about him. It doesn't matter."

Oh, doesn't it? I thought. Not to you, perhaps. Not trusting either my face or my voice, I turned away and busied myself in lighting the small alcohol lamp I carried.

"He *is* my brother," the soft voice said behind me. I took a deep breath and steadied my hands to measure out the leaves.

"Yes," I said, "at least he's that."

Since news had spread of Cope's amazing defeat at Prestonpans, offers of support, of men and money, poured in from the north. In some cases, these offers even materialized: Lord Ogilvy, the eldest son of the Earl of Airlie, brought six hundred of his father's tenants, while Stewart of Appin appeared at the head of four hundred men from the shires of Aberdeen and Banff. Lord Pitsligo was single-handedly responsible for most of the Highland cavalry, bringing in a large number of gentlemen and their servants from the northeastern counties, all well mounted and well armed—at least by comparison with some of the miscellaneous clansmen, who came armed with claymores saved by their grandsires from the Rising of the '15, rusty axes, and pitchforks lately removed from the more homely tasks of cleaning cow-byres.

They were a motley crew, but none the less dangerous for that, I reflected, making my way through a knot of men gathered round an itinerant knifegrinder, who was sharpening dirks, razors, and scythes with perfect indifference. An English soldier facing them might be risking tetanus rather than instant death, but the results were likely to be the same.

While Lord Lewis Gordon, the Duke of Gordon's younger brother, had come to do homage to Charles in Holyrood, holding out the glittering prospect of raising the whole of clan Gordon, it was a long way from hand-kissing to the actual provisioning of men.

And the Scottish Lowlands, while perfectly willing to cheer loudly at news of Charles's victory, were singularly unwilling to send men to support him; nearly the whole of the Stuart army was composed of Highlanders, and likely to remain so. The Lowlands hadn't been a total washout, though; Lord George Murray had told me that levies of food, goods, and money on the southern burghs had resulted in a very useful sum being contributed to the army's treasury, which might tide them over for a time.

"We've gotten fifty-five hundred pounds from Glasgow, alone. Though it's but a pittance, compared to the promised moneys from France and Spain," His Lordship had confided to Jamie. "But I'm not inclined to turn up my nose at it, particularly as His Highness has had nothing from France but soothing words, and no gold."

Jamie, who knew just how unlikely the French gold was to materialize, had merely nodded.

* * *

"Have ye found out anything more today, *mo duinne?*" he asked me as I came in. He had a half-written dispatch in front of him, and stuck his quill into the inkpot to wet it again. I pulled the damp hood off my hair with a crackle of static electricity, nodding.

"There's a rumor that General Hawley is forming cavalry units in the south. He has orders for the formation of eight regiments."

Jamie grunted. Given the Highlanders' aversion to cavalry, this wasn't good news. Absentmindedly, he rubbed his back, where the hoofprint-shaped bruise from Prestonpans had all but faded.

"I'll put it down for Colonel Cameron, then," he said. "How good a rumor do ye think it is, Sassenach?" Almost automatically, he glanced over his shoulder, to be sure we were alone. He called me "Sassenach" now only in privacy, using the formality of "Claire" in public.

"You can take it to the bank," I said. "I mean, it's good."

It wasn't a rumor at all; it was the latest bit of intelligence from Jack Randall, the latest installment payment on the debt he insisted on assuming for my care of his brother.

Jamie knew, of course, that I visited Alex Randall, as well as the sick of the Jacobite army. What he didn't know, and what I could never tell him, was that once a week—sometimes more often—I would meet Jack Randall, to hear what news seeped into Edinburgh Castle from the South.

Sometimes he came to Alex's room when I was there; other times, I would be coming home in the winter twilight, watching my footing on the slippery cobbles of the Royal Mile, when suddenly a stick-straight form in brown homespun would beckon from the mouth of a close, or a quiet voice come out of the mist behind my shoulder. It was unnerving; like being haunted by Frank's ghost.

It would have been simpler in many ways for him to leave a letter for me at Alex's lodging, but he would have nothing put in writing, and I could see his point. If such a letter was ever found, even unsigned, it could implicate not only him but Alex as well. As it was, Edinburgh teemed with strangers; volunteers to King James's standard, curious visitors from south and north, foreign envoys from France and Spain, spies and informers in plenty. The only people not abroad on the streets were the officers and men of the English garrison, who remained mewed up in the Castle. So long as no one heard him speak to me, no one would recognize him for what he was, nor think anything odd of our encounters, even were we seen—and we seldom were, such were his precautions.

For my part, I was just as pleased; I would have had to destroy anything put in writing. While I doubted that Jamie would recognize Randall's hand, I couldn't explain a regular source of information without outright lying. Far better to make it appear that the information he gave me was merely part of the gleanings of my daily rounds.

The drawback, of course, was that by treating Randall's contributions in the same light as the other rumors I collected, they might be discounted or ignored. Still, while I believed that Jack Randall was supplying information in good faith—assuming one could entertain such a concept in conjunction with the man—it didn't necessarily follow that it was always correct. As well to have it regarded skeptically.

I relayed the news of Hawley's new regiments with the usual faint twinge of guilt at my quasi deception. However, I had concluded that while honesty between husband and wife was essential, there was such a thing as carrying it too bloody far. And I saw no reason why the supplying of useful information to the Jacobites should cause Jamie further pain.

"The Duke of Cumberland is still waiting for his troops to return from Flanders," I added. "And the siege of Stirling Castle is getting nowhere."

Jamie grunted, scribbling busily. "That much I knew; Lord George had a dispatch from Francis Townsend two days ago; he holds the town, but the ditches His Highness insisted on are wasting men and time. There's no need for them; they'd do better just to batter the Castle from a distance with cannon fire, and then storm it."

"So why are they digging ditches?"

Jamie waved a hand distractedly, still concentrating on his writing. His ears were pink with frustration.

"Because the Italian army dug ditches when they took Verano Castle, which is the only siege His Highness has seen, so plainly that's how it must be done, aye?"

"Och, aye," I said.

It worked; he looked up at me and laughed, his eyes slanting half-shut with it.

"That's a verra fair try, Sassenach," he said. "What else can ye say?"

"Settle for the Lord's Prayer in Gaelic, would you?" I asked.

"No," he said, scattering sand across his dispatch. He got up, kissed me briefly, and reached for his coat. "But I'll settle for some supper. Come along, Sassenach. We'll find a nice, cozy tavern and I'll teach you a lot of things ye mustn't say in public. They're all fresh in my mind."

* * *

Stirling Castle fell at last. The cost had been high, the likelihood of holding it low, and the benefit in keeping it dubious. Still, the effect on Charles was euphoric—and disastrous.

"I have succeeded at last in convincing Murray—such a stubborn fool as he is!" Charles interjected, frowning. Then he remembered his victory, and beamed around the room once more. "I have prevailed, I say, though. We march into England on this day a week, to reclaim *all* of my Father's lands!"

The Scottish chieftains gathered in the morning drawing room glanced at each other, and there was considerable coughing and shifting of weight. The overall mood didn't seem to be one of wild enthusiasm at the news.

"Er, Your Highness," Lord Kilmarnock began, carefully. "Would it not be wiser to consider …?"

They tried. They all tried. Scotland, they pointed out, already belonged to Charles, lock, stock, and barrel. Men were still pouring in from the north, while from the south there seemed little promise of support. And the Scottish lords were all too aware that the Highlanders, while fierce fighters and loyal followers, were also farmers. Fields needed to be tilled for the spring planting; cattle needed to be provisioned for overwintering. Many of the men would resist going deeply into the South in the winter months.

"And these men—they are not my subjects? They go not where I command them? Nonsense," Charles said firmly. And that was that. Almost.

"James, my friend! Wait, I speak with you a moment in private, if you please." His Highness turned from a few sharp words with Lord Pitsligo, his long, stubborn chin softening a bit as he waved a hand at Jamie.

I didn't think I was included in this invitation. I hadn't any intention of leaving, though, and settled more firmly into one of the gold damask chairs as the Jacobite lords and chieftains filed out, muttering to each other.

"Ha!" Charles snapped his fingers contemptuously in the direction of the closing door. "Old women, all of them! They will see. So will my cousin Louis, so will Philip—do I need their help? I show them all." I saw the pale, manicured fingers touch briefly at a spot just over his breast. A faint rectangular outline showed through the silk of his coat. He was carrying Louise's miniature; I had seen it.

"I wish Your Highness every good fortune in the endeavor," Jamie murmured, "but …"

“Ah, I thank you, *cher* James! *You* at least believe in me!” Charles threw an arm about Jamie’s shoulders, massaging his deltoids affectionately.

“I am desolated that you will not accompany me, that you will not be at my side to receive the applause of my subjects as we march into England,” Charles said, squeezing vigorously.

“I won’t?” Jamie looked stunned.

“Alas, *mon cher ami*, duty demands of you a great sacrifice. I know how much your great heart yearns for the glories of battle, but I require you for another task.”

“You do?” said Jamie.

“What?” I said bluntly.

Charles cast a glance of well-mannered dislike in my direction, then turned back to Jamie and resumed the bonhomie.

“It is a task of the greatest import, my James, and one that only you can do. It is true that men flock to my Father’s standard; more come every day. Still, we must not haste to feel secure, no? By such luck, your kinsmen the MacKenzies have come to my aid. But you have to your family another side, eh?”

“No,” Jamie said, a look of horror dawning on his face.

“But yes,” said Charles, with a final squeeze. He swung around to face Jamie, beaming. “You will go to the north, to the land of your fathers, and return to me at the head of the men of clan Fraser!”

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THE FOX'S LAIR

"Do you know your grandfather well?" I asked, waving away an unseasonable deerfly that seemed unable to make up its mind whether I or the horse would make a better meal.

Jamie shook his head.

"No. I've heard he acts like a terrible auld monster, but ye shouldna be scairt of him." He smiled at me as I swatted at the deerfly with the end of my shawl. "I'll be with you."

"Oh, crusty old gentlemen don't bother me," I assured him. "I've seen a good many of those in my time. Soft as butter underneath, the most of them. I imagine your grandfather's much the same."

"Mm, no," he replied thoughtfully. "He really *is* a terrible auld monster. It's only, if ye act scairt of him, it makes him worse. Like a beast scenting blood, ye ken?"

I cast a look ahead, where the far-off hills that hid Beaufort Castle suddenly loomed in a rather sinister manner. Taking advantage of my momentary lack of attention, the deerfly made a strafing run past my left ear. I squeaked and ducked to the side, and the horse, taken aback by this sudden movement, shied in a startled manner.

"Hey! *Cuir stad*!" Jamie dove sideways to grab my reins, dropping his own. Better schooled than my own mount, his horse snorted, but accommodated this maneuver, merely flicking its ears in a complacently superior way.

Jamie dug his knees into his horse's sides, pulling mine to a stop alongside.

“Now then,” he said, narrowed eyes following the zigzag flight of the humming deerfly. “Let him light, Sassenach, and I’ll get him.” He waited, hands raised at the ready, squinting slightly in the sunlight.

I sat like a mildly nervous statue, half-hypnotized by the menacing buzz. The heavy winged body, deceptively slow, hummed lazily back and forth between the horse’s ears and my own. The horse’s ears twitched violently, an impulse with which I was in complete sympathy.

“If that thing lands in my ear, Jamie, I’m going to—” I began.

“Shh!” he ordered, leaning forward in anticipation, left hand cupped like a panther about to strike. “Another second, and I’ll have him.”

Just then I saw the dark blob alight on his shoulder. Another deerfly, seeking a basking place. I opened my mouth again.

“Jamie …”

“Hush!” He clapped his hands together triumphantly on my tormentor, a split second before the deerfly on his collar sank its fangs into his neck.

Scottish clansmen fought according to their ancient traditions. Disdaining strategy, tactics, and subtlety, their method of attack was simplicity itself. Spotting the enemy within range, they dropped their plaids, drew their swords, and charged the foe, shrieking at the tops of their lungs. Gaelic shrieking being what it is, this method was more often successful than not. A good many enemies, seeing a mass of hairy, bare-limbed banshees bearing down on them, simply lost all nerve and fled.

Well schooled as it might ordinarily be, nothing had prepared Jamie’s horse for a grade-A, number one Gaelic shriek, uttered at top volume from a spot two feet behind its head. Losing all nerve, it laid back its ears and fled as though the devil itself were after it.

My mount and I sat transfixed in the road, watching an outstanding exhibition of Scottish horsemanship as Jamie, both stirrups lost and the reins free, flung half out of his saddle by his horse’s abrupt departure, heaved himself desperately forward, grappling for the mane. His plaid fluttered madly about him, stirred by the wind of his passing, and the horse, thoroughly panicked by this time, took the thrashing mass of color as an excuse to run even faster.

One hand tangled in the long mane, Jamie was grimly hauling himself upright, long legs clasping the horse's sides, ignoring the stirrup irons that danced beneath the beast's belly. Scraps of what even my limited Gaelic recognized as extremely bad language floated back on the gentle wind.

A slow, clopping sound made me look behind, to where Murtagh, leading the pack horse, was coming over the small rise we had just descended. He made his careful way down the road to where I waited. He pulled his animal to a leisurely stop, shaded his eyes, and looked ahead, to the spot where Jamie and his panicked mount were just vanishing over the next hilltop.

"A deerfly," I said, in explanation.

"Late for them. Still, I didna think he'd be in such a hurry to meet his grandsire as to leave ye behind," Murtagh remarked, with his customary dryness. "Not that I'd say a wife more or less will make much difference in his reception."

He picked up his reins and booted his pony into reluctant motion, the packhorse amiably coming along for the journey. My own mount, cheered by the company and reassured by a temporary absence of flies, stepped out quite gaily alongside.

"Not even an English wife?" I asked curiously. From the little I knew, I didn't think Lord Lovat's relations with anything English were much to cheer about.

"English, French, Dutch, or German. It isna like to make much difference; it'll be the lad's liver the Old Fox will be eatin' for breakfast, not yours."

"What do you mean by that?" I stared at the dour little clansman, looking much like one of his own bundles, under the loose wrapping of plaid and shirt. Somehow every garment that Murtagh put on, no matter how new or how well tailored, immediately assumed the appearance of something narrowly salvaged from a rubbish heap.

"What kind of terms is Jamie on with Lord Lovat?"

I caught a sidelong glance from a small, shrewd black eye, and then his head turned toward Beaufort Castle. He shrugged, in resignation or anticipation.

"No terms at all, 'til now. The lad's never spoken to his grandsire in his life."

"But how do you know so much about him if you've never met him?"

At least I was beginning to understand Jamie's earlier reluctance to approach his grandfather for help. Reunited with Jamie and his horse, the latter looking rather chastened, and the former irritable to a degree, Murtagh had gazed speculatively at him, and offered to ride ahead to Beaufort with the pack animal, leaving Jamie and me to enjoy lunch at the side of the road.

Over a restorative ale and oatcake, he had at length told me that his grandfather, Lord Lovat, had not approved of his son's choice of bride, and had not seen fit either to bless the union or to communicate with his son—or his son's children—anytime since the marriage of Brian Fraser and Ellen MacKenzie, more than thirty years before.

"I've heard a good bit about him, one way and another, though." Jamie replied, chewing a bite of cheese. "He's the sort of man that makes an impression on folk, ye ken."

"So I gather." The elderly Tullibardine, one of the Parisian Jacobites, had regaled me with a number of uncensored opinions regarding the leader of clan Fraser, and I thought that perhaps Brian Fraser had not been desolated at his father's inattention. I said as much, and Jamie nodded.

"Oh, aye. I canna recall my father having much good to say of the old man, though he wouldna be disrespectful of him. He just didna speak of him often." He rubbed at the side of his neck, where a red welt from the deerfly bite was beginning to show. The weather was freakishly warm, and he had unfolded his plaid for me to sit on. The deputation to the head of clan Fraser had been thought worth some investment in dignity, and Jamie wore a new kilt, of the buckled military cut, with the plaid a separate strip of cloth. Less enveloping for shelter from the weather than the older, belted plaid, it was a good deal more efficient to put on in a hurry.

"I wondered a bit," he said thoughtfully, "whether my father was the sort of father he was because of the way old Simon treated *him*. I didna realize it at the time, of course, but it's no so common for a man to show his feelings for his sons."

"You've thought about it a lot." I offered him another flask of ale, and he took it with a smile that lingered on me, more warming than the feeble autumn sun.

"Aye, I did. I was wondering, ye see, what sort of father I'd be to my own bairns, and looking back a bit to see, my own father being the best example I had. Yet I knew, from the bits that he said, or that Murtagh told me, that his own father was nothing like him, so I thought as how he must have made up his mind to do it all differently, once he had the chance."

I sighed a bit, setting down my bit of cheese.

"Jamie," I said. "Do you really think we'll ever—"

"I do," he said, with certainty, not letting me finish. He leaned over and kissed my forehead. "I know it, Sassenach, and so do you. You were meant to be a mother, and I surely dinna intend to let anyone else father your children."

"Well, *that's* good," I said. "Neither do I."

He laughed and tilted my chin up to kiss my lips. I kissed him back, then reached up to brush away a breadcrumb that clung to the stubble around his mouth.

"Ought you to shave, do you think?" I asked. "In honor of seeing your grandfather for the first time?"

"Oh, I've seen him the once before," he said casually. "And he's seen me, for that matter. As for what he thinks of my looks now, he can take me as I am, and be damned to him."

"But Murtagh said you'd never met him!"

"Mphm." He brushed the rest of the crumbs from his shirtfront, frowning slightly as if deciding how much to tell me. Finally he shrugged and lay back in the shade of a gorse bush, hands clasped behind his head as he stared at the sky.

“Well, we never have *met,* as ye’d say. Or not exactly. ’Twas like this …”

At the age of seventeen, young Jamie Fraser set sail for France, to finish his education at the University of Paris, and to learn further such things as are not taught in books.

“I sailed from the harbor at Beauly,” he said, nodding over the next hill, where a narrow slice of gray on the far horizon marked the edge of the Moray Firth. “There were other ports I could have gone by—Inverness would have been most like—but my father booked my passage, and from Beauly it was. He rode with me, to see me off into the world, ye might say.”

Brian Fraser had seldom left Lallybroch in the years since his marriage, and took pleasure as they rode in pointing out various spots to his son, where he had hunted or traveled as boy and young man.

“But he grew much quieter as we drew near Beaufort. He hadna spoken of my grandsire on this trip, and I knew better than mention him myself. But I kent he had reason for sending me from Beauly.”

A number of small sparrows edged their way cautiously nearer, popping in and out of the low shrubs, ready to dart back to safety at the slightest hint of danger. Seeing them, Jamie reached for a remnant of bread, and tossed it with considerable accuracy into the middle of the flock, which exploded like shrapnel, all fleeing the sudden intrusion.

“They’ll be back,” he said, motioning toward the scattered birds. He put an arm across his face as though to shield it from the sun, and went on with his story.

“There was a sound of horses along the road from the castle, and when we turned to see, there was a small party coming down, six horsemen with a wagon, and one of them held Lovat’s banner, so I knew my grandfather was with them. I looked quick at my father, to see did he mean to do anything, but he just smiled and squeezed my shoulder quick and said, ‘Let’s go aboard, then, lad.’

“I could feel my grandsire’s eyes on me as I walked down the shore, wi’ my hair and my height fair shriekin’ ‘MacKenzie,’ and I was glad I had my best clothes on and didna look a beggar. I didna look round, but I stood as tall as I could, and was proud that I had half a head's height above the tallest man there. My father walked by my side, quiet like he was, and he didna look aside, either, but I could feel him there, proud that he'd sired me."

He smiled at me, lopsided.

"That was the last time I was sure I'd done well by him, Sassenach. I wasna so sure, times after, but I was glad of that one day."

He locked his arms around his knees, staring ahead as though reliving the scene on the quay.

"We stepped aboard the ship, and met the master, then we stood by the rail, talking a bit about nothing, both of us careful not to look at the men from Beaufort who were loading the bundles, or glance to the shore where the horsemen stood. Then the master gave the order to cast off. I kissed my father, and he jumped over the rail, down to the dock, and walked to his horse. He didna look back until he was mounted, and by then the ship had started out into the harbor.

"I waved, and he waved back, then he turned, leading my horse, and started on the road back to Lallybroch. And the party from Beaufort turned then, too, and started back. I could see my grandsire at the head of the party, sitting straight in his saddle. And they rode, my father and grandfather, twenty yards apart, up the hill and over it, out of my sight, and neither one turned to the other, or acted as though the other one was there at all."

He turned his head down the road, as though looking for signs of life from the direction of Beaufort.

"I met his eyes," he said softly. "The once. I waited until Father reached his horse, and then I turned and looked at Lord Lovat, bold as I could. I wanted him to know we'd ask nothing of him, but that I wasna scairt of him." He smiled at me, one-sided. "I was, though."

I put a hand over his, stroking the grooves of his knuckles.

"Was he looking back at you?"

He snorted briefly.

"Aye, he was. Reckon he didna take his eyes off me from the time I came down the hill 'til my ship sailed away; I could feel them borin' into my back like an auger. And when I looked at him, there he was, wi' his eyes black under his brows, starin' into mine."

He fell silent, still looking at the castle, 'til I gently prodded him.

"How did he look, then?"

He pulled his eyes from the dark cloud mass on the far horizon to look down at me, the customary expression of good humor missing from the curve of his mouth, the depths of his eyes.

"Cold as stone, Sassenach," he replied. "Cold as the stone."

* * *

We were lucky in the weather; it had been warm all the way from Edinburgh.

"It's no going to last," Jamie predicted, squinting toward the sea ahead. "See the bank of cloud out there? It will be inland by tonight." He sniffed the air, and pulled his plaid across his shoulders. "Smell the air? Ye can feel weather coming."

Not so experienced at olfactory meteorology, I still thought that perhaps I *could* smell it; a dampness in the air, sharpening the usual smells of dried heather and pine resin, with a faint, moist scent of kelp from the distant shore mixed in.

"I wonder if the men have got back to Lallybroch yet," I said.

"I doubt it." Jamie shook his head. "They've less distance to go than we've had, but they're all afoot, and it will ha' been slow getting them all away." He rose in his stirrups, shading his eyes to peer toward the distant cloud bank. "I hope it's just rain; that willna trouble them overmuch. And it might not be a big storm, in any case. Perhaps it willna reach so far south."

I pulled my arisaid, a warm tartan shawl, tighter around my own shoulders, in response to the rising breeze. I had thought this few days' stretch of warm weather a good omen; I hoped it hadn't been deceptive.

Jamie had spent an entire night sitting by the window in Holyrood, after receipt of Charles's order. And in the morning, he had gone first to Charles, to tell His Highness that he and I would ride alone to Beauly, accompanied only by Murtagh, to convey His

Highness's respects to Lord Lovat, and his request that Lovat honor his promise of men and aid.

Next, Jamie had summoned Ross the smith to our chamber, and given him his orders, in a voice so low that I could not make out the words from my place near the fire. I had seen the burly smith's shoulders rise, though, and set firm, as he absorbed their import.

The Highland army traveled with little discipline, in a ragtag mob that could scarcely be dignified as a "column." In the course of one day's movement, the men of Lallybroch were to drop away, one by one. Stepping aside into the shrubbery as though to rest a moment or relieve themselves, they were not to return to the main body, but to steal quietly away, and make their way, one by one, to a rendezvous with the other men from Lallybroch. And once regathered under the command of Ross the smith, they were to go home.

"I doubt they'll be missed for some time, if at all," Jamie had said, discussing the plan with me beforehand. "Desertion is rife, all through the army. Ewan Cameron told me they'd lost twenty men from his regiment within the last week. It's winter, and men want to be settling their homes and making things ready for the spring planting. In any case, it's sure there's no one to spare to go after them, even should their leavin' be noticed."

"Have you given up, then, Jamie?" I had asked, laying a hand on his arm. He had rubbed a hand tiredly over his face before answering.

"I dinna ken, Sassenach. It may be too late; it may not. I canna tell. It was foolish to go south so near to the winter; and more foolish still to waste time in beseiging Stirling. But Charles hasna been defeated, and the chiefs—some of them—are coming in answer to his summons. The MacKenzies, now, and others because of them. He's twice as many men now as we had at Preston. What will that mean?" He flung up his hands, frustrated.

"I dinna ken. There's no opposition; the English are terrified. Well, ye know; you've seen the broadsheets." He smiled without humor. "We spit small children and roast them ower the fire, and dishonor the wives and daughters of honest men." He gave a snort of wry disgust. While such crimes as theft and insubordination were common among the Highland army, rape was virtually unknown.

He sighed, a brief, angry sound. “Cameron’s heard a rumor that King Geordie’s makin’ ready to flee from London, in fear that the Prince’s army will take the city soon.” He had—a rumor that had reached Cameron through me, from Jack Randall. “And there’s Kilmarnock, and Cameron. Lochiel, and Balmerino, and Dougal, with his MacKenzies. Bonny fighters all. And should Lovat send the men he’s promised—God, maybe it would be enough. Christ, should we march into London—” He hunched his shoulders, then stretched suddenly, shrugging as though to fight his way out of a strangling shirt.

“But I canna risk it,” he said simply. “I canna go to Beauly, and leave my own men here, to be taken God knows where. If I were there to head them—that would be something else. But damned if I’ll leave them for Charles or Dougal to throw at the English, and me a hundred miles away at Beauly.”

So it was arranged. The Lallybroch men—including Fergus, who had protested vociferously, but been overruled—would desert, and depart inconspicuously for home. Once our business at Beauly was completed, and we had returned to join Charles—well, then it would be time enough to see how matters went.

“That’s why I’m takin’ Murtagh with us,” Jamie had explained. “If it looks all right, then I shall send him to Lallybroch to fetch them back.” A brief smile lightened his somber face. “He doesna look much on a horse, but he’s a braw rider, is Murtagh. Fast as chain lightning.”

He didn’t look it at the moment, I reflected, but then, there was no emergency at hand. In fact, he was moving even slower than usual; as we topped one hill, I could see him at the bottom, pulling his horse to a halt. By the time we had reached him, he was off, glaring at the packhorse’s saddle.

“What’s amiss, then?” Jamie made to get down from his own saddle, but Murtagh waved him irritably off.

“Nay, nay, naught to trouble ye. A binding’s snapped, is all. Get ye on.”

With no more than a nod of acknowledgment, Jamie reined away, and I followed him.

“Not very canty today, is he?” I remarked, with a flip of the hand back in Murtagh’s direction. In fact, the small clansman had grown more testy and irritable with each step in the direction of Beauly. “I take it he’s not enchanted with the prospect of visting Lord Lovat?”

Jamie smiled, with a brief backward glance at the small, dark figure, bent in absorption over the rope he was splicing.

“Nay, Murtagh’s no friend of Old Simon. He loved my father dearly”—his mouth quirked to one side—“and my mother, as well. He didna care for Lovat’s treatment of them. Or for Lovat’s methods of getting wives. Murtagh’s got an Irish grandmother, but he’s related to Primrose Campbell through his mother’s side,” he explained, as though this made everything crystal clear.

“Who’s Primrose Campbell?” I asked, bewildered.

“Oh.” Jamie scratched his nose, considering. The wind off the sea was rising steadily, and his hair was being whipped from its lacing, ruddy wisps flickering past his face.

“Primrose Cambell was Lovat’s third wife—still is, I suppose,” he added, “though she’s left him some years since and gone back to her father’s house.”

“Popular with women, is he?” I murmured.

Jamie snorted. “I suppose ye can call it that. He took his first wife by a forced marriage. Snatched the Dowager Lady Lovat from her bed in the middle o’ the night, married her then and there, and went straight back to bed with her. Still,” he added fairly, “she did later decide she loved him, so maybe he wasna so bad.”

“Must have been rather special in bed, at least,” I said flippantly. “Runs in the family, I expect.”

He cast me a mildly shocked look, which dissolved into a sheepish grin.

“Aye, well,” he said. “If he was or no, it didna help him much. The Dowager’s maids spoke up against him, and Simon was outlawed and had to flee to France.”

Forced marriages and outlawry, hm? I refrained from further remark on family resemblances, but privately trusted that Jamie wouldn’t follow in his grandfather’s footsteps with regard to subsequent wives. One had apparently been insufficient for Simon.

“He went to visit King James in Rome and swear his fealty to the Stuarts,” Jamie went on, “and then turned round and went straight to William of Orange, King of England, who was visiting in France. He got James to promise him his title and estates, should a restoration come about, and then—God knows how—got a full pardon from William, and was able to come home to Scotland.”

Now it was my turn for raised eyebrows. Apparently it wasn’t just attractiveness to the opposite sex, then.

Simon had continued his adventures by returning later to France, this time to spy on the Jacobites. Being found out, he was thrown into prison, but escaped, returned to Scotland, masterminded the assembling of the clans under the guise of a hunting-party on the Braes of Mar in 1715—and then managed to get full credit with the English Crown for putting down the resultant Rising.

“Proper old twister, isn’t he?” I said, completely intrigued. “Though I suppose he can’t have been so old then; only in his forties.” Having heard that Lord Lovat was now in his middle seventies, I had been expecting something fairly doddering and decrepit, but was rapidly revising my expectations, in view of these stories.

“My grandsire,” Jamie observed evenly, “has by all reports got a character that would enable him to hide conveniently behind a spiral staircase. Anyway,” he went on, dismissing his grandfather’s character with a wave of his hand, “then he married Margaret Grant, the Grant o’ Grant’s daughter. It was after she died that he married Primrose Campbell. She was maybe eighteen at the time.”

“Was Old Simon enough of a catch for her family to force her into it?” I asked sympathetically.

“By no means, Sassenach.” He paused to brush the hair out of his face, tucking the stray locks back behind his ears. “He kent well enough that she wouldna have him, no matter if he was rich as Croesus—which he wasn’t—so he had her sent a letter, saying her mother was fallen sick in Edinburgh, and giving the house there she was to go to.”

Hastening to Edinburgh, the young and beautiful Miss Campbell had found not her mother, but the old and ingenious Simon Fraser, who had informed her that she was in a notorious house of pleasure, and that her only hope of preserving her good name was to marry him immediately.

"She must have been a right gump, to fall for that one," I remarked cynically.

"Well, she was verra young," Jamie said defensively, "and it wasna an idle threat, either; had she refused him, Old Simon would ha' ruined her reputation without a second thought. In any event, she married him—and regretted it."

"Hmph." I was busy doing sums in my head. The encounter with Primrose Campbell had been only a few years ago, he'd said. Then … "Was it the Dowager Lady Lovat or Margaret Grant who was your grandmother?" I asked curiously.

The high cheekbones were chapped by sun and wind; now they flushed a sudden, painful red.

"Neither one," he said. He didn't look at me, but kept his gaze fixed straight ahead, in the direction of Beaufort Castle. His lips were pressed tightly together.

"My father was a bastard," he said at last. He sat straight as a sword in the saddle, and his knuckles were white, fist clenched on the reins. "Acknowledged, but a bastard. By one of the Castle Downie maids."

"Oh," I said. There didn't seem a lot to add.

He swallowed hard; I could see the ripple in his throat.

"I should ha' told ye before," he said stiffly. "I'm sorry."

I reached out to touch his arm; it was hard as iron.

"It doesn't matter, Jamie," I said, knowing even as I spoke that nothing I said could make a difference. "I don't mind in the slightest."

"Aye?" he said at last, still staring straight ahead. "Well … I do."

* * *

The steadily freshening wind off Moray Firth rustled its way through a hillside of dark pines. The country here was an odd combination of mountain slope and seashore. Thick growth of alders, larch, and birch blanketed the ground on both sides of the narrow track we followed, but as we approached the dark bulk of Beaufort Castle, over everything floated the effluvium of mud flats and kelp.

We were in fact expected; the kilted, ax-armed sentries at the gate made no challenge as we rode through. They looked at us curiously enough, but seemingly without enmity. Jamie sat straight as a king in his saddle. He nodded once to the man on his side, and received a similar nod in return. I had the distinct feeling that we entered the castle flying a white flag of truce; how long that state would last was anyone's guess.

We rode unchallenged into the courtyard of Beaufort Castle, a small edifice as castles went, but sufficiently imposing, for all that, built of the native stone. Not so heavily fortified as some of the castles I had seen to the south, it looked still capable of withstanding a certain amount of abrasion. Wide-mouthed gun-holes gaped at intervals along the base of the outer walls, and the keep still boasted a stable opening onto the courtyard.

Several of the small Highland ponies were housed in this, heads poking over the wooden half-door to whicker in welcome to our own mounts. Near the wall lay a number of packs, recently unloaded from the ponies in the stable.

"Lovat's summoned a few men to meet us," Jamie observed grimly, noting the packs. "Relatives, I expect." He shrugged. "At least they'll be friendly enough to start with."

"How do you know?"

He slid to the ground and reached up to help me down.

"They've left the broadswords wi' the luggage."

Jamie handed over the reins to an ostler who came out of the stables to meet us, dusting his hands on his breeks.

"Er, now what?" I murmured to Jamie under my breath. There was no sign of chatelaine or majordomo; nothing like the cheery, authoritative figure of Mrs. FitzGibbons that had welcomed us to Castle Leoch two years before.

The few ostlers and stable-lads about glanced at us now and then, but continued about their tasks, as did the servants who crossed the courtyard, lugging baskets of laundry, bundles of peat, and all the other cumbrous paraphernalia that living in a stone castle demanded. I looked approvingly after a burly manservant sweating under the burden of two five-gallon copper cans of water. Whatever its shortcomings in the hospitality department, Beaufort Castle at least boasted a bathtub somewhere.

Jamie stood in the center of the courtyard, arms crossed, surveying the place like a prospective buyer of real estate who harbors black doubts about the drains.

"Now we wait, Sassenach," he said. "The sentries will ha' sent word that we're here. Either someone will come down to us … or they won't."

"Um," I said. "Well, I hope they make up their minds about it soon; I'm hungry, and I could do with a wash."

"Aye, ye could," Jamie agreed, with a brief smile as he looked me over. "You've a smut on your nose, and there's teasel-heads caught in your hair. No, leave them," he added, as my hand went to my head in dismay. "It looks bonny, did ye do it on purpose or no."

Definitely no, but I left them. Still, I sidled over to a nearby watering trough, to inspect my appearance and remedy it so far as was possible using nothing but cold water.

It was something of a delicate situation, so far as old Simon Fraser was concerned, I thought, bending over the trough and trying to make out which blotches on my reflected complexion were actual smudges and which caused by floating bits of hay.

On the one hand, Jamie was a formal emissary from the Stuarts. Whether Lovat's promises of support for the cause were honest, or mere lip service, chances were that he would feel obliged to welcome the Prince's representative, if only for the sake of courtesy.

On the other hand, said representative was an illegitimately descended grandson who, if not precisely disowned in his own person, certainly wasn't a bosom member of the family, either. And I knew enough by now of Highland feuds to know that ill feeling of this sort was unlikely to be diminished by the passage of time.

I ran a wet hand across my closed eyes and back across my temples, smoothing down stray wisps of hair. On the whole, I didn't think Lord Lovat would leave us standing in the courtyard. He might, however, leave us there long enough to realize fully the dubious nature of our reception.

After that—well, who knew? We would most likely be received by Lady Frances, one of Jamie's aunts, a widow who—from all we had heard from Tullibardine—managed domestic affairs for her father. Or, if he chose to receive us as a diplomatic ambassage rather than as family connections, I supposed that Lord Lovat himself might appear to receive us, supported by the formal panoply of secretary, guards, and servants.

This last possibility seemed most likely, in view of the time it was taking; after all, you wouldn't keep a full-dress entourage standing about—it would take some time to assemble the necessary personnel. Envisioning the sudden appearance of a fully equipped earl, I had second thoughts about leaving teasel-heads tangled in my hair, and leaned over the trough again.

At this point, I was interrupted by the sound of footsteps in the passageway behind the mangers. A squat-bodied elderly man in open shirt and unbuckled breeks stepped out into the courtyard, shoving aside a plump chestnut mare with a sharp elbow and an irritable "Tcha!" Despite his age, he had a back like a ramrod, and shoulders nearly as broad as Jamie's.

Pausing by the horse trough, he glanced around the courtyard as though looking for someone. His eye passed over me without registering, then suddenly snapped back, clearly startled. He stepped forward and thrust his face pugnaciously forward, an unshaven gray beard bristling like a porcupine's quills.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

"Claire Fraser, er, I mean, Lady Broch Tuarach," I said, belatedly remembering my dignity. I gathered my self-possession, and wiped a drop of water off my chin. "Who the hell are *you?*" I demanded.

A firm hand gripped my elbow from behind, and a resigned voice from somewhere above my head said, "That, Sassenach, is my grandsire. My lord, may I present my wife?"

"Ah?" said Lord Lovat, giving me the benefit of a cold blue eye. "I'd heard you'd married an Englishwoman." His tone made it clear that this act confirmed all his worst suspicions about the grandson he'd never met.

He raised a thick gray brow in my direction, and shifted the gimlet stare to Jamie. "No more sense than your father, it seems."

I could see Jamie's hands twitch slightly, resisting the urge to clench into fists.

"At the least, I had nay need to take a wife by rape or trickery," he observed evenly.

His grandfather grunted, unfazed by the insult. I thought I saw the corner of his wrinkled mouth twitch, but wasn't sure.

"Aye, and ye've gained little enough by the bargain ye struck," he observed. "Though at that, this one's less expensive than that MacKenzie harlot Brian fell prey to. If this sassenach wench brings ye naught, at least she looks as though she costs ye little." The slanted blue eyes, so much like Jamie's own, ran over my travel-stained gown, taking in the unstitched hem, the burst seam, and the splashes of mud on the skirt.

I could feel a fine vibration run through Jamie, and wasn't sure whether it was anger or laughter.

"Thanks," I said, with a friendly smile at his lordship. "I don't eat much, either. But I could use a bit of a wash. Just water; don't bother about the soap, if it comes too dear."

This time I was sure about the twitch.

"Aye, I see," his lordship said. "I shall send a maid to see ye to your rooms, then. *And* provide ye with soap. We shall see ye in the library before supper … grandson," he added to Jamie, and turning on his heel, disappeared back under the archway.

"Who's *we?*" I asked.

"Young Simon, I suppose," Jamie answered. "His lordship's heir. A stray cousin or two, maybe. And some of the tacksmen, I should imagine, judging from the horses in the courtyard. If Lovat's going to consider sending troops to join the Stuarts, his tacksmen and tenants may have a bit to say about it."

“Ever seen a small worm in a barnyard, in the middle of a flock of chickens?” he murmured as we walked down the hall an hour later behind a servant. “That’s me—or us, I should say. Stick close to me, now.”

The various connections of clan Fraser were indeed assembled; when we were shown into the Beaufort Castle library, it was to find more than twenty men seated around the room.

Jamie was formally introduced, and gave a formal statement on behalf of the Stuarts, giving the respects of Prince Charles and King James to Lord Lovat and appealing for Lovat’s help, to which the old man replied briefly, eloquently and noncommittally. Etiquette attended to, I was then brought forward and introduced, and the general atmosphere became more relaxed.

I was surrounded by a number of Highland gentlemen, who took turns exchanging words of welcome with me as Jamie chatted with someone named Graham, who seemed to be Lord Lovat’s cousin. The tacksmen eyed me with a certain amount of reserve, but were all courteous enough—with one exception.

Young Simon, much like his father in squatty outline, but nearly fifty years younger, came forward and bowed over my hand. Straightening up, he looked me over with an attention that seemed just barely this side of rudeness.

“Jamie’s wife, hm?” he asked. He had the slanted eyes of his father and half-nephew, but his were brown, muddy as bogwater. “I suppose that means I may call ye ‘niece,’ does it not?” He was just about Jamie’s age, clearly a few years younger than I.

“Ha-ha,” I said politely, as he chortled at his own wit. I tried to retrieve my hand, but he wasn’t letting go. Instead, he smiled jovially, giving me the once-over again.

“I’d heard of ye, you know,” he said. “You’ve a bit of fame through the Highlands, Mistress.”

“Oh, really? How nice.” I tugged inconspicuously; in response, his hand tightened around mine in a grip that was nearly painful.

“Oh, aye. I’ve heard you’re verra popular with the men of your husband’s command,” he said, smiling so hard his eyes narrowed to dark-brown slits. “They call ye *neo-geimnidh meala,* I hear. That means ‘Mistress Honeylips,’ ” he translated, seeing my look of bewilderment at the unfamiliar Gaelic.

“Why, thank you …” I began, but got no more than the first words out before Jamie’s fist crashed into Simon Junior’s jaw and sent his half-uncle reeling into a piecrust table, scattering sweetmeats and serving spoons across the polished slates with a terrific clatter.

He dressed like a gentleman, but he had a brawler’s instincts. Young Simon rolled up onto his knees, fists clenched, and froze there. Jamie stood over him, fists doubled but loose, his stillness more menacing than open threat.

“No,” he said evenly, “she doesna have much Gaelic. And now that ye’ve proved it to everyone’s satisfaction, ye’ll kindly apologize to my wife, before I kick your teeth down your throat.” Young Simon glowered up at Jamie, then glanced aside at his father, who nodded imperceptibly, looking impatient at this interruption. The younger Fraser’s shaggy black hair had come loose from its lacing, and hung like tree moss about his face. He eyed Jamie warily, but with a strange tinge of what looked like amusement as well, mingled with respect. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and bowed gravely to me, still on his knees.

“Your pardon, Mistress Fraser, and my apologies for any offense ye may have suffered.”

I could do no more than nod graciously in return, before Jamie was steering me out into the corridor. We had almost reached the door at the end before I spoke, glancing back to see that we were not overheard.

“*What* on earth does *neo-geimnidh meala* mean?” I said, jerking on his sleeve to slow him. He glanced down, as though I had just been recalled to his wandering attention.

“Ah? Oh, it means honeylips, all right. More or less.”

“But—”

“It’s no your mouth he was referring to, Sassenach,” Jamie said dryly.

“Why, that—” I made as if to turn back to the study, but Jamie tightened his grip on my arm.

"Cluck, cluck, cluck," he murmured in my ear. "Dinna worry, Sassenach. They're only tryin' me. It will be all right."

I was left in the care of Lady Frances, Young Simon's sister, while Jamie returned to the library, shoulders squared for battle. I hoped he wouldn't hit any more of his relatives; while the Frasers were, on the whole, not as sizable as the MacKenzies, they had a sort of tough watchfulness that boded ill for anyone trying something on in their immediate vicinity.

Lady Frances was young, perhaps twenty-two, and inclined to view me with a sort of terrorized fascination, as though I might spring upon her if not incessantly placated with tea and sweetmeats. I exerted myself to be as pleasant and unthreatening as possible, and after a time, she relaxed sufficiently to confess that she had never met an Englishwoman before. "Englishwoman," I gathered, was an exotic and dangerous species.

I was careful to make no sudden moves, and after a bit, she grew comfortable enough to introduce me shyly to her son, a sturdy little chap of three or so, maintained in a state of unnatural cleanliness by the constant watchfulness of a stern-faced maidservant.

I was telling Frances and her younger sister Aline about Jenny and her family, whom they had never met, when there was a sudden crash and a cry in the hallway outside. I sprang to my feet, and reached the sitting-room door in time to see a huddled bundle of cloth struggling to rise to its feet in the stone corridor. The heavy door to the library stood open, and the squat figure of Simon Fraser the elder stood framed in it, malevolent as a toad.

"Ye'll get worse than that, my lass, and ye make no better job of it," he said. His tone was not particularly menacing; only a statement of fact. The bundled figure raised its head, and I saw an odd, angularly pretty face, dark eyes wide over the red blotch deepening on her cheekbone. She saw me, but made no acknowledgment of my presence, only getting to her feet and hurrying away without a word. She was very tall and extremely thin, and moved with the strange, half-clumsy grace of a crane, her shadow following her down the stones.

I stood staring at Old Simon, silhouetted against the firelight from the library behind him. He felt my eyes upon him, and turned his head to look at me. The old blue eyes rested on me, cold as sapphires.

"Good evening, my dear," he said, and closed the door.

I stood looking blankly at the dark wooden door.

"What was *that* all about?" I asked Frances, who had come up behind me.

"Nothing," she said, licking her lips nervously. "Come away, Cousin." I let her pull me away, but resolved to ask Jamie later what had happened in the library.

* * *

We had reached the chamber allotted us for the night, and Jamie graciously dismissed our small guide with a pat on the head.

I sank down on the bed, gazing around helplessly.

"*Now* what do we do?" I asked. Dinner had passed with little to remark, but I had felt the weight of Lovat's eyes on me from time to time.

Jamie shrugged, pulling his shirt over his head.

"Damned if I know, Sassenach," he said. "They asked me the state of the Highland army, the condition of the troops, what I knew of His Highness's plans. I told them. And then they asked it all again. My grandfather's no inclined to think anyone could be giving him a straight answer," he added dryly. "He thinks everyone must be as twisted as himself, wi' a dozen different motives; one for every occasion."

He shook his head and tossed the shirt onto the bed next to me.

"He canna tell whether I might be lying about the state of the Highland army or no. For if I wanted him to join the Stuarts, then I might say as how things were better than they are, where if I didna care personally, one way or the other, then I might tell the truth. And he doesna mean to commit himself one way or the other until he thinks he knows where I stand."

"And just how does he mean to tell whether you *are* telling the truth?" I asked skeptically.

"He has a seer," he replied casually, as though this were one of the normal furnishings of a Highland castle. For all I knew, it was.

"Really?" I sat up on the bed, intrigued. "Is that the odd-looking woman he threw out into the hall?"

"Aye. Her name's Maisri, and she's had the Sight since she was born. But she couldna tell him anything—or wouldn't," he added. "It was clear enough she knows *something*, but she'd do naught but shake her head and say she couldn't see. That's when my grandsire lost patience and struck her."

"Bloody old crumb!" I said, indignant.

"Well, he's no the flower o' gallantry," Jamie agreed.

He poured out a basin of water and began to splash handfuls over his face. He looked up, startled and streaming, at my gasp.

"Hah?"

"Your stomach …" I said, pointing. The skin between breastbone and kilt was mottled with a large fresh bruise, spreading like a large, unsightly blossom on his fair skin.

Jamie glanced down, said "Oh, that," dismissively, and returned to his washing.

"Yes, *that*," I said, coming to take a closer look. "What happened?"

"It's no matter," he said, speech coming thickly through a towel. "I spoke a bit hasty this afternoon, and my grandsire had Young Simon give me a small lesson in respect."

"So he had a couple of minor Frasers hold you while he punched you in the belly?" I said, feeling slightly ill.

Tossing the towel aside, Jamie reached for his nightshirt.

"Verra flattering of you to suppose it took two to hold me," he said, grinning as his head popped through the opening. "Actually, there were three; one was behind, chokin' me."

"Jamie!"

He laughed, shaking his head ruefully as he pulled back the quilt on the bed.

"I don't know what it is about ye, Sassenach, that always makes me want to show off for ye. Get myself killed one of these days, tryin' to impress ye, I expect." He sighed, gingerly smoothing the woolen shirt over his stomach. “It’s only play-acting, Sassenach; ye shouldna worry.”

“Play-acting! Good God, Jamie!”

“Have ye no seen a strange dog join a pack, Sassenach? The others sniff at him, and nip at his legs, and growl, to see will he cower or growl back at them. And sometimes it comes to biting, and sometimes not, but at the end of it, every dog in the pack knows his place, and who’s leader. Old Simon wants to be sure I ken who leads this pack; that’s all.”

“Oh? And do you?” I lay down, waiting for him to come to bed. He picked up the candle and grinned down at me, the flickering light picking up a blue gleam in his eyes.

“Woof,” he said, and blew out the candle.

* * *

I saw very little of Jamie for the next two weeks, save at night. During the day, he was always with his grandfather, hunting or riding—for Lovat was a vigorous man, despite his age—or drinking in the study, as the Old Fox slowly drew his conclusions and laid his plans.

I spent most of my time with Frances and the other women. Out of the shadow of her redoubtable old father, Frances gained enough courage to speak her own mind, and proved an intelligent and interesting companion. She had the responsibility for the smooth running of the castle and its staff, but when her father appeared on the scene, she dwindled into insignificance, seldom raising her eyes or speaking above a whisper. I wasn’t sure I blamed her.

Two weeks after our arrival, Jamie came to fetch me from the drawing room where I sat with Frances and Aline, saying that Lord Lovat wished to see me.

Old Simon waved a casual hand at the decanters set on the table by the wall, then sat down in a wide-seated chair of carved walnut, with crushed padding in well-worn blue velvet. The chair fitted his short, stocky form as though it had been built around him; I wondered whether it had in fact been built to order, or whether, from long use, he had grown into the shape of the chair.

I sat down quietly in a corner with my glass of port, and kept quiet while Simon questioned Jamie once again about Charles Stuart's situation and prospects.

For the twentieth time in a week, Jamie patiently rehearsed the number of troops available, the structure of command—insofar as one existed—the armament on hand and its condition—mostly poor—the prospects of Charles being joined by Lord Lewis Gordon or the Farquharsons, what Glengarry had said following Prestonpans, what Cameron knew or deduced of the movement of English troops, why Charles had decided to march south, and so on and so forth. I found myself nodding over the cup in my hand, and jerked myself into wakefulness, just in time to keep the ruby liquid from tipping onto my skirt.

"… and Lord George Murray and Kilmarnock both think His Highness would be best advised to pull back into the Highlands for the winter," Jamie concluded, yawning widely. Cramped on the narrow-backed chair he had been given, he rose and stretched, his shadow flickering on the pale hangings that covered the stone walls.

"And what d'ye think, yourself?" Old Simon's eyes glittered under half-fallen lids as he leaned back in his chair. The fire burned high and bright on the hearth; Frances had smoored the fire in the main hall, covering it with peats, but this one had been rekindled at Lovat's order, and with wood, not peat. The smell of pine resin from the burning wood was sharp, mingled with the thicker smell of smoke.

The light cast Jamie's shadow high on the wall as he turned restlessly, not wanting to sit down again. It was close and dark in the small study, with the window draped against the night—very different from the open, sunny kirkyard in which Column had asked him the same question. And the situation now had shifted; no longer the popular darling to whom clan chieftains deferred, Charles now was sending to the chiefs, grimly calling in his obligations. But the shape of the problem was the same—a dark, amorphous shape, hanging like a shadow over us.

"I've told ye what I think—a dozen times or more." Jamie spoke abruptly. He moved his shoulders impatiently, shrugging as though the fit of his coat was too tight.

"Oh, aye. You've told me. But this time I think we shall have the truth." The old man settled more comfortably into his padded chair, hands linked across his belly.

"Will ye, then?" Jamie uttered a short laugh, and turned to face his grandfather. He leaned back against the table, hands braced behind him. Despite the differences in posture and figure, there was a tension between the two men that brought out a fugitive resemblance between them. The one tall and the other squat, but both of them strong, stubborn, and determined to win this encounter.

"Am I not your kinsman? And your chief? I command your loyalty, do I not?"

So that was the point. Colum, so accustomed to physical weakness, had known the secret of turning another man's weakness to his own purposes. Simon Fraser, strong and vigorous even in old age, was accustomed to getting his own way by more direct means. I could see from the sour smile on Jamie's face that he, too, was contrasting Colum's appeal with his grandfather's demand.

"Can ye? I dinna recall that I've sworn ye an oath."

Several long stiff hairs grew out of Simon's eyebrows, in the way of old men. These quivered in the firelight, though I couldn't tell whether with indignation or amusement.

"Oath, is it? And is it not Fraser blood in your veins?"

Jamie's mouth twisted wryly as he answered. "They do say that it's a wise child as kens his own father, no? My mother was a MacKenzie; I know that much."

Simon's face grew dark with blood, and his brows drew together. Then his mouth fell open, and he shouted with laughter. He laughed until he was forced to pull himself up in the chair and bend forward, sputtering and choking. At last, beating one hand on the arm of the chair in helpless mirth, he reached into his mouth with the other and pulled out his false teeth.

"Dod," he sputtered, gasping and wheezing. Face streaming with tears and saliva, he groped blindly for the small table by his chair, and dropped the teeth onto the cake plate. The gnarled fingers closed on a linen napkin, and he pressed it to his face, still emitting strangled grunts of laughter as he conducted his mopping up.

"Chritht, laddie," he said at last, lisping heavily. "Path me the whithky."

Eyebrows raised, Jamie took the decanter from the table behind him and passed it to his grandfather, who removed the stopper and gulped a substantial amount of the contents without bothering about the formality of a glass.

"You think you're not a Frather?" he said, lowering the decanter and exhaling gustily. "Ha!" He leaned back once more, belly rising and falling rapidly as he caught his breath. He pointed a long, skinny finger at Jamie.

"Your own father thtood right where you're thstanding, laddie, and told me jutht what you did, the day he left Beaufort Cathtle once and for all." The old man was growing calmer now; he coughed several times and wiped his face again.

"Did ye know that I'd tried to thtop your parents' marriage by claiming that Ellen MacKenzie's child wathn't Brian's?"

"Aye, I knew." Jamie was leaning back on the table again, surveying his grandfather through narrowed eyes.

Lord Lovat snorted. "I'll not thay there's been always goodwill atween me and mine, but I know my thons. *And* my grandthons," he added pointedly. "De'il take me and I think any one of 'em could be a cuckold, nay more than I could."

Jamie didn't turn a hair, but I couldn't stop myself from glancing away from the old man. I found myself staring at his discarded teeth, the stained beechwood gleaming wetly amid the cake crumbs. Luckily Lord Lovat hadn't noticed my slight motion.

He went on, serious once more. "Now, then. Dougal MacKenzie of Leoch hath declared for Charles. D'ye call him your chief? Is that what ye're telling me—that ye've given him an oath?"

"No. I havena sworn to anyone."

"Not even Charles?" The old man was fast, pouncing on this like a cat on a mouse. I could almost see his tail twitch as he watched Jamie, slanted eyes deep-set and gleaming under crepey lids.

Jamie's eyes were fixed on the leaping flames, his shadow motionless on the wall behind him.

"He hasna asked me." This was true. Charles had had no need to request an oath from Jamie—having precluded the necessity by signing Jamie's name to his Bond of Association. Still, I knew that he had not, in fact, given his word to Charles was important to Jamie. If he must betray the man, let it not be as an acknowledged chief. The idea that the entire world thought such an oath existed was a matter of much less concern.

Simon grunted again. Without his false teeth, his nose and chin came close together, making the lower half of his face oddly foreshortened.

"Then nothing hampers you to thwear to me, as chief of your clan," he said quietly. The twitching tail was less visible, but still there. I could almost hear the thoughts in his head, gliding round on padded feet. With Jamie's loyalty sworn to him, rather than Charles, Lovat's power would be increased. As would his wealth, with a share of the income from Lallybroch that he might claim as his chieftain's due. The prospect of a dukedom drew slightly nearer, gleaming through the mist.

"Nothing save my own will," Jamie agreed pleasantly. "But that's some small obstacle, no?" His own eyes creased at the corners as they narrowed further.

"Mmphm." Lovat's eyes were almost closed, and he shook his head slowly from side to side. "Oh, aye, lad, you're your father's thon. Thtubborn as a block, and twith ath thtupid. I thould have known that Brian would thire nothing but fools from that harlot."

Jamie reached forward and plucked the beechwood teeth from the plate. "Ye'd better put these back, ye auld gomerel," he said rudely. "I canna understand a word ye say."

His grandfather's mouth widened in a humorless smile that showed the yellowed stump of a lone broken tooth in the lower jaw.

"No?" he said. "Will ye underthand a bargain?" He shot a quick look at me, seeing nothing more than another counter to be put into play. "Your oath for your wife's honor, how's that?"

Jamie laughed out loud, still holding the teeth in one hand.

"Oh, aye? D'ye mean to force her before my eyes, then, Grandsire?" He lounged back contemptuously, hand on the table. "Go ahead, and when she's done wi' ye, I'll send Aunt Frances up to sweep up the pieces."

His grandfather looked him over calmly. "Not I, lad." One side of the toothless mouth rose in a lopsided smile as he turned his head to look at me. "Though I've taken my pleasure with worthe." The cold malice in the dark eyes made me want to pull my cloak over my breasts in protection; unfortunately, I wasn't wearing one.

"How many men are there in Beaufort, Jamie? How many, who'd be of a mind to put your thathenach wench to the only uth thee's good for? You cannot guard her night and day."

Jamie straightened slowly, the great shadow echoing his movements on the wall. He stared down at his grandfather with no expression on his face.

"Oh, I think I needna worry, Grandsire," he said softly. "For my wife's a rare woman. A wisewoman, ye ken. A white lady, like Dame Aliset."

I had never heard of Dame Aliset, but Lord Lovat plainly had; his head jerked round to stare at me, eyes sprung wide with shocked alarm. His mouth drooped open, but before he could speak, Jamie had gone on, an undercurrent of malice clearly audible in his smooth speech.

"The man that takes her in unholy embrace will have his privates blasted like a frostbitten apple," he said, with relish, "and his soul will burn forever in hell." He bared his teeth at his grandfather, and drew back his hand. "Like this." The beechwood teeth landed in the midst of the fire with a plop, and at once began to sizzle.

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THE SEER’S CURSE

Most of the Lowland Scots had gone over to Presbyterianism in the two centuries before. Some of the Highland clans had gone with them, but others, like the Frasers and MacKenzies, had kept their Catholic faith. Especially the Frasers, with their strong family ties to Catholic France.

There was a small chapel in Beaufort Castle, to serve the devotional uses of the Earl and his family, but Beauly Priory, ruined as it was, remained the burying place of the Lovats, and the floor of the open-roofed chancel was paved thick with the flat tombstones of those who lay under them.

It was a peaceful place, and I walked there sometimes, in spite of the cold, blustery weather. I had no idea whether Old Simon had meant his threat against me, or whether Jamie’s comparing me to Dame Aliset—who turned out to be a legendary “white woman” or healer, the Scottish equivalent of La Dame Blanche—was sufficient to put a stop to that threat. But I thought that no one was likely to accost me among the tombs of extinct Frasers.

One afternoon, a few days after the scene in the study, I walked through a gap in the ruined Priory wall and found that for once, I didn’t have it to myself. The tall woman I had seen outside Lovat’s study was there, leaning against one of the red-stone tombs, arms folded about her for warmth, long legs thrust out like a stork.

I made to turn aside, but she saw me, and motioned me to join her.

"You'll be my lady Broch Tuarach?" she said, though there was no more than a hint of question in her soft Highland voice.

"I am. And you're … Maisri?"

A small smile lit her face. She had a most intriguing face, slightly asymmetrical, like a Modigliani painting, and long black hair that flowed loose around her shoulders, streaked with white, though she was plainly still young. A seer, hm? I thought she looked the part.

"Aye, I have the Sight," she said, the smile widening a bit on her lopsided mouth.

"Do mind-reading, too, do you?" I asked.

She laughed, the sound vanishing on the wind that moaned through the ruined walls.

"No, lady. But I do read faces, and …"

"And mine's an open book. I know," I said, resigned.

We stood side by side for a time then, watching tiny spatters of fine sleet dashing against the sandstone and the thick brown grass that overgrew the kirkyard.

"They do say as you're a white lady," Maisri observed suddenly. I could feel her watching me intently, but with none of the nervousness that seemed common to such an observation.

"They do say that," I agreed.

"Ah." She didn't speak again, just stared down at her feet, long and elegant, stockinged in wool and clad in leather sandals. My own toes, rather more sheltered, were growing numb, and I thought hers must be frozen solid, if she'd been here any time.

"What are you doing up here?" I asked. The Priory was a beautiful, peaceful place in good weather, but not much of a roost in the cold winter sleet.

"I come here to think," she said. She gave me a slight smile, but was plainly preoccupied. Whatever she was thinking, her thoughts weren't overly pleasant.

"To think about what?" I asked, hoisting myself up to sit on the tomb beside her. The worn figure of a knight lay on the lid, his claymore clasped to his bosom, the hilt forming a cross over his heart.

"I want to know why!" she burst out. Her thin face was suddenly alight with indignation.

"Why what?"

"Why! Why can I see what will happen, when there's no mortal thing I can be doin' to change it or stop it? What's the good of a gift like that? It's no a gift, come to that—it's a damn curse, though I havena done anything to be cursed like this!"

She turned and glared balefully at Thomas Fraser, serene under his helm, with the hilt of his sword clasped under crossed hands.

"Aye, and maybe it's *your* curse, ye auld gomerel! You and the rest o' your damned family. Did ye ever think that?" she asked suddenly, turning to me. Her brows arched high over brown eyes that sparked with furious intelligence.

"Did ye ever think perhaps that it's no your own fate at all that makes you what ye are? That maybe ye have the Sight or the power only because it's necessary to someone else, and it's nothing to do wi' you at all—except that it's you has it, and has to suffer the having of it. Have you?"

"I don't know," I said slowly. "Or yes, since you say it, I have wondered. Why me? You ask that all the time, of course. But I've never come up with a satisfactory answer. You think perhaps you have the Sight because it's a curse on the Frasers—to know their deaths ahead of time? That's a hell of an idea."

"A hell is right," she agreed bitterly. She leaned back against the sarcophagus of red stone, staring out at the sleet that sprayed across the top of the broken wall.

"What d'ye think?" she asked suddenly. "Do I tell him?"

I was startled.

"Who? Lord Lovat?"

"Aye, his lordship. He asks what I see, and beats me when I tell him there's naught to see. He knows, ye ken; he sees it in my face when I've had the Sight. But that's the only power I've got; the power not to say." The long white fingers snaked out from her cloak, playing nervously with the folds of soaked cloth.

"There's always the chance of it, isn't there?" she said. Her head was bent so that the hood of her cloak shielded her face from my gaze. “There’s a chance that my telling would make a difference. It has, now and then, ye know. I told Lachlan Gibbons when I saw his son-in-law wrapped in seaweed, and the eels stirring beneath his shirt. Lachlan listened; he went out straightaway and stove a hole in his son-in-law’s boat.” She laughed, remembering. “Lord, there was the kebbie-lebbie to do! But when the great storm came the next week, three men were drowned, and Lachlan’s son-in-law was safe at hame, still mending his boat. And when I saw him next, his shirt hung dry on him, and the seaweed was gone from his hair.”

“So it can happen,” I said softly. “Sometimes.”

“Sometimes,” she said, nodding, still staring at the ground. Lady Sarah Fraser lay at her feet, the lady’s stone surmounted with a skull atop crossed bones. *Hodie mihi cras tibi,* said the inscription. *Sic transit gloria mundi.* My turn today, yours tomorrow. And thus passes away the glory of the world.

“Sometimes not. When I see a man wrapped in his winding sheet, the illness follows—and there’s naught to be done about that.”

“Perhaps,” I said. I looked at my own hands, spread on the stone beside me. Without medicine, without instruments, without knowledge—yes, then illness was fate, and naught to be done. But if a healer was near, and had the things to heal with … was it possible that Maisri saw the shadow of a coming illness, as a real—if usually invisible—symptom, much like a fever or a rash? And then only the lack of medical facilities made the reading of such symptoms a sentence of death? I would never know.

“We aren’t ever going to know,” I said, turning to her. “We can’t say. We know things that other people don’t know, and we can’t say why or how. But we have got it—and you’re right, it’s a curse. But if you have knowledge, and it *may* prevent harm … do you think it could *cause* harm?”

She shook her head.

“I canna say. If you knew ye were to die soon, are there things you’d do? And would they be good things only that ye’d do, or would ye take the last chance ye might have to do harm to your enemies—harm that might otherwise be left alone?”

“Damned if I know.” We were quiet for a time, watching the sleet turn to snow, and the blowing flakes whirl up in gusts through the ruined tracery of the Priory wall.

“Sometimes I know there’s something there, like,” Maisri said suddenly, “but I can block it out of my mind, not look. ’Twas like that with his lordship; I knew there was something, but I’d managed not to see it. But then he bade me look, and say the divining spell to make the vision come clear. And I did.” The hood of her cloak slipped back as she tilted her head, looking up at the wall of the Priory as it soared above us, ochre and white and red, with the mortar crumbling between its stones. White-streaked black hair spilled down her back, free in the wind.

“He was standing there before the fire, but it was daylight, and clear to see. A man stood behind him, still as a tree, and his face covered in black. And across his lordship’s face there fell the shadow of an ax.”

She spoke matter-of-factly, but the shiver ran up my spine nonetheless. She sighed at last, and turned to me.

“Weel, I will tell him, then, and let him do what he will. Doom him or save him, that I canna do. It’s his choice—and the Lord Jesus help him.”

She turned to go, and I slid off the tomb, landing on the Lady Sarah’s slab.

“Maisri,” I said. She turned back to look at me, eyes black as the shadows among the tombs.

“Aye?”

“What do you see, Maisri?” I asked, and stood waiting, facing her, hands dropped to my sides.

She stared at me hard, above and below, behind and beside. At last she smiled faintly, nodding.

“I see naught but you, lady,” she said softly. “There’s only you.”

She turned and disappeared down the path between the trees, leaving me among the blowing flakes of snow.

Doom, or save. That I cannot do. For I have no power beyond that of knowledge, no ability to bend others to my will, no way to stop them doing what *they* will. There is only me.

I shook the snow from the folds of my cloak, and turned to follow Maisri down the path, sharing her bitter knowledge that there was only me. And I was not enough.

Old Simon's manner was much as usual over the course of the next two or three weeks, but I imagined that Maisri had kept her intention of telling him about her visions. While he had seemed on the verge of summoning the tacksmen and tenants to march, suddenly he backed off, saying that there was no hurry, after all. This shilly-shallying infuriated Young Simon, who was champing at the bit to go to war and cover himself with glory.

"It's not a matter of urgency," Old Simon said, for the dozenth time. He lifted an oatcake, sniffed at it, and set it down again. "Perhaps we'll do best to wait for the spring planting, after all."

"They could be in London before spring!" Young Simon glowered across the dinner table at his father and reached for the butter. "If ye will not go yourself, then let me take the men to join His Highness!"

Lord Lovat grunted. "You've the Devil's own impatience," he said, "but not half his judgment. Will ye never learn to wait?"

"The time for waiting's long since past!" Simon burst out. "The Camerons, the MacDonalds, the MacGillivrays—they've all been there since the first. Are we to come meachin' along at the finish, to find ourselves beggars, and taking second place to Clanranald and Glengarry? Fat chance you'll have of a dukedom then!"

Lovat had a wide, expressive mouth; even in old age, it retained some trace of humor and sensuality. Neither was visible at the moment. He pressed his lips tight together, surveying his heir without enthusiasm.

"Marry in haste, repent at leisure," he said. "And it's more true when choosing a laird than a lass. A woman can be got rid of."

Young Simon snorted and looked at Jamie for support. Over the last two months, his initial suspicious hostility had faded into a reluctant respect for his bastard relative's obvious expertise in the art of war.

"Jamie says …" he began.

"I ken well enough what he says," Old Simon interrupted. "He's said it often enough. I shall make up my own mind in my own time. But bear it in mind, lad—when it comes to declaring yourself in a war, there's little to be lost by waiting."

"Waiting to see who wins," Jamie murmured, studiously wiping his plate with a bit of bread. The old man looked up sharply, but evidently decided to ignore this contribution.

"Ye gave your word to the Stuarts," Young Simon continued stubbornly, paying no heed to his father's displeasure. "Ye dinna mean to break it, surely? What will people say of your honor?"

"The same things they said in '15," his father calmly replied. "Most of those who 'said things' then are dead, bankrupt, or paupers in France. But I am still here."

"But …" Young Simon was red in the face, the usual result of this sort of conversation with his father.

"That will do," the old Earl interrupted sharply. He shook his head as he glared at his son, lips tight with disapproval. "Christ. Sometimes I could wish that Brian hadna died. He may have been a fool, too, but at least he knew when to stop talking."

Both Young Simon and Jamie flushed with anger, but after a wary glance at each other, turned their attentions to their food.

"And what are you looking at?" Lord Lovat growled, catching my eye on him as he turned away from his son.

"You," I said bluntly. "You don't look at all well." He didn't, even for a man in his seventies. No more than middle-height, slumped and broadened by age, he was normally still a solid-looking man, giving the impression that his barrel chest and rounded paunch were firm and healthy under his linen. Lately he had begun to look flabby, though, as if he had shrunk a bit within his skin. The wrinkled bags beneath his eyes were darkened, and his skin had a sickly pallor to it.

"Mphm," he grunted. "And why not? I get nay rest when I sleep, nor comfort when I'm awake. No wonder if I dinna look like a bridegroom."

"Oh, but ye do, Father," said Young Simon maliciously, seeing a chance to get a bit of his own back. "One at the end of his honeymoon, wi' all the juice sapped out of him."

"Simon!" said Lady Frances. Still, there was a ripple of laughter around the table at this, and even Lord Lovat's mouth twitched slightly.

"Aye?" he said. "Well, I'd sooner suffer soreness from that cause, I'll tell ye, lad." He shifted uncomfortably in his seat, and pushed away the platter of boiled turnips being offered. He reached for his wineglass, raised it to his nose for a sniff, then morosely put it down again.

"It's ill-mannered to stare," he remarked coldly to me. "Or perhaps the English have different standards of politeness?"

I flushed slightly, but didn't drop my eyes. "I was just wondering—you don't have an appetite, and you don't drink. What other symptoms have you?"

"Going to prove yourself some worth, eh?" Lovat leaned back in his chair, folding his hands across his broad stomach like an elderly frog. "A healer, my grandson says. A white lady, aye?" He flicked a basilisk glance at Jamie, who simply went on eating, ignoring his grandfather. Lovat grunted, and tilted his head ironically in my direction.

"Well, I dinna drink, lady, for I canna piss, and I've little wish to blow up like a pig's bladder. And I dinna rest, for I rise a dozen times a night to make use of my pot, and damn little use it gets. So what have ye to say to that, Dame Aliset?"

"Father," murmured Lady Frances, "really, I don't think you should …"

"Could be an infection of the bladder, but it sounds like prostatitis to me," I replied. I picked up my wineglass and took a mouthful, savoring it before letting it slide down my throat. I smiled demurely at his lordship across my glass as I set it down.

"Oh, it does?" he said, eyebrows raised high. "And what's that, pray?"

I pushed back my sleeves and raised my hands, flexing my fingers like a magician about to perform some act of prestidigitation. I held up my left forefinger.

"The prostate gland in males," I said instructively, "encircles the tube of the urethra—which is the passage that leads from the bladder to the outside." I clasped two fingers of my right hand in a circle around my left forefinger, in illustration. "When the prostate becomes inflamed or enlarged—and that's called prostatitis, when it does—it clamps down on the urethra"—I narrowed the circle of my fingers—"cutting off the flow of urine. Very common in older men. Do you see?"

Lady Frances, failing to make any impression on her father with her opinions of proper dinner conversation, was whispering agitatedly to her younger sister, both of them watching me with deeper suspicion than usual.

Lord Lovat watched my little demonstration in fascination.

"Aye, I see," he said. The slanted cat-eyes narrowed, looking speculatively at my fingers. "What's to do about it, then, if ye've so much learning on the subject?"

I thought, frowning as I searched my memory. I had never actually seen—much less treated—a case of prostatitis, as it wasn't a condition that much afflicted young soldiers. Still, I had read medical texts where it was described; I remembered the treatment, because it had caused such hilarity among the student nurses, who had pored in fascinated horror over the rather graphic illustrations in the text.

"Well," I said, "barring surgery, there are really only two things you can do. You can insert a metal rod through the penis and up into the bladder, to force the urethra open"—I jabbed my forefinger through the constricting circle—"or you can massage the prostate itself, to reduce the swelling. Through the rectum," I added helpfully.

I heard a faint choking noise next to me, and glanced up at Jamie. His eyes were still fixed on his plate, but the tide of crimson was creeping upward from his collar, and the tips of his ears blazed red. He quivered slightly. I looked around the table, to find a phalanx of fascinated gazes fixed on me. The Lady Frances, Aline, and the other women were staring at me with varying expressions, ranging from curiosity to disgust, while the men all wore variations of revolted horror.

The exception to the general reaction was Lord Lovat himself, who was rubbing his chin thoughtfully, eyes half-closed.

“Mmphm,” he said. “Hell of a choice, there. A stick up the cock, or a finger up the backside, eh?”

“More like two or three,” I said. “Repeatedly.” I gave him a small, decorous smile.

“Ah.” A similar small smile decorated Lord Lovat’s mouth, and he slowly lifted his gaze, fixing deep blue eyes on mine with an expression of mockery tinged with challenge.

“That sounds … diverting,” he observed mildly. The slanted eyes slid down over my hands, assessing.

“You’ve lovely hands, my dear,” he said. “Prettily kept, and such long white slender fingers, aye?”

Jamie brought both his own hands down on the table with a crash and stood up. He leaned across the table, bringing his face within a foot of his grandfather’s.

“And you’re needing such attentions, Grandsire,” he said. “I’ll see to it myself.” He spread out his hands on the tabletop, broad and massive, each long finger the rough diameter of a pistol barrel. “It’s no pleasure to me to be stickin’ my fingers up your hairy auld arse,” he informed his grandfather, “but I expect it’s my filial duty to save ye from exploding in a shower of piss, no?”

Frances emitted a faint squeak.

Lord Lovat eyed his grandson with considerable disfavor, then rose slowly from his seat.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” he said shortly. “I’ll ha’ one of the maidservants do it.” He waved a hand at the company, giving notice that we might continue the meal, and left the hall, pausing to look speculatively at a young serving girl coming in with a platter of sliced pheasant. Eyes wide, she turned sideways to edge past him.

There was a dead silence over the dinner table following his lordship’s exit. Young Simon looked at me and opened his mouth. Then he glanced at Jamie, and closed it again. He cleared his throat.

“I’ll have the salt, if ye please,” he said.

"… and in consequence of the regrettable infirmity that prevents me from personal attendance upon Your Highness, I send by the hand of my son and heir a token of the loyalty—nay, make that 'regard'—a token of the regard in which I have long cherished His Majesty and Your Highness." Lord Lovat paused, frowning at the ceiling.

"What shall we send, Gideon?" he asked the secretary. "Rich-looking, but not so much I can't say it was only a trifling present of no importance."

Gideon sighed and wiped his face with a handkerchief. A stout, middle-aged man with thinning hair and round red cheeks, he plainly found the heat of the bedroom fire oppressive.

"The ring your lordship had from the Earl of Mar?" he suggested, without hope. A drop of sweat fell from his double chin onto the letter he was taking down, and he surreptitiously blotted it with his sleeve.

"Not expensive enough," his lordship judged, "and too many political associations." The mottled fingers tapped pensively on the coverlet as he thought.

Old Simon had done it up brown, I thought. He was wearing his best nightshirt, and was propped up in bed with an impressive panoply of medicines arrayed on the table, attended by his personal physician, Dr. Menzies, a small man with a squint who kept eyeing me with considerable doubt. I supposed the old man simply distrusted Young Simon's powers of imagination, and had staged this elaborate tableau so that his heir might faithfully report Lord Lovat's state of decrepitude when he presented himself to Charles Stuart.

"Ha," said his lordship with satisfaction. "We'll send the gold and sterling picnic set. That's rich enough, but too frivolous to be interpreted as political support. Besides," he added practically, "the spoon's dented. All right then," he said to the secretary, "let's go on with 'As Your Highness is aware …' "

I exchanged a glance with Jamie, who hid a smile in response.

"I think you've given him what he needs, Sassenach," he had told me as we undressed after our fateful dinner the week before.

"And what's that?" I asked, "an excuse to molest the maidservants?"

"I doubt he bothers greatly wi' excuses of that sort," Jamie said dryly. "Nay, you've given him a way to walk both sides—as usual. If he's got an impressive-sounding disease that keeps him to his bed, then he canna be blamed for not appearing himself wi' the men he promised. At the same time, if he sends his heir to fight, the Stuarts will credit Lovat with keeping his promise, and if it goes wrong, the Old Fox will claim to the English that he didna intend to give any aid to the Stuarts, but Young Simon went on his own account."

"Spell 'prostatitis' for Gideon, would ye, lass?" Lord Lovat called to me, breaking into my thoughts. "And mind ye write it out carefully, clot," he said to his secretary, "I dinna want His Highness to misread it."

"P-r-o-s-t-a-t-i-t-i-s," I spelled slowly, for Gideon's benefit. "And how is it this morning, anyway?" I asked, coming to stand by his lordship's bedside.

"Greatly improved, I thank ye," the old man said, grinning up at me with a fine display of false teeth. "Want to see me piss?"

"Not just now, thanks," I said politely.

* * *

It was a clear, icy day in mid-December when we left Beauly to join Charles Stuart and the Highland army. Against all advice, Charles had pressed on into England, defying weather and common sense, as well as his generals. But at last, in Derby, the generals had prevailed, the Highland chiefs refusing to go farther, and the Highland army was returning northward. An urgent letter from Charles to Jamie had urged us to head south "without delay," to rendezvous with His Highness upon his return to Edinburgh. Young Simon, looking every inch the clan chieftain in his crimson tartan, rode at the head of a column of men. Those men with mounts followed him, while the larger number on foot walked behind.

Being mounted, we rode with Simon at the head of the column, until such time as we would reach Comar. There we would part company, Simon and the Fraser troops to go to Edinburgh, Jamie ostensibly escorting me to Lallybroch before returning to Edinburgh himself. He had, of course, no intention of so returning, but that was none of Simon's business.

At midmorning, I emerged from a small wooded clump by the side of the track, to find Jamie waiting impatiently. Hot ale had been served to the departing men, to hearten them for the journey. And while I had myself found that hot ale made a surprisingly good breakfast, I had also found it had a marked effect on the kidneys.

Jamie snorted. "Women," he said. "How can ye all take such the devil of a time to do such a simple thing as piss? Ye make as much fuss over it as my grandsire."

"Well, you can come along next time and watch," I suggested acerbically. "Perhaps you'll have some helpful suggestions."

He merely snorted again, and turned back to watch the column of men filing past, but he was smiling nonetheless. The clear, bright day raised everyone's spirits, but Jamie was in a particularly good mood this morning. And no wonder; we were going home. I knew he didn't deceive himself that all would be well; this war would have its price. But if we had failed to stop Charles, it might still be that we could save the small corner of Scotland that lay closest to us—Lallybroch. That much might be still within our power.

I glanced at the trailing column of clansmen.

"Two hundred men make a fair show."

"A hundred and seventy," Jamie corrected absently, reaching for his horse's reins.

"Are you sure?" I asked curiously. "Lord Lovat said he was sending two hundred. I heard him dictating the letter saying so."

"Well, he didn't." Jamie swung into the saddle, then stood up in his stirrups, pointing down the slope ahead, to the distant spot where the Fraser banner with its stag's-head crest fluttered at the head of the column.

"I counted them while I waited for you," he explained. "Thirty cavalry up there wi' Simon, then fifty wi' broadswords and targes—those will be the men from the local Watch—and then the cottars, wi' everything from scythes to hammers at their belts, and there's ninety of those."

"I suppose your grandfather's betting on Prince Charles not counting them personally," I observed cynically. "Trying to get credit for more than he's sent."

"Aye, but the names will be entered on the army rolls when they reach Edinburgh," Jamie said, frowning. "I'd best see."

I followed more sedately. I judged my mount to be approximately twenty years old, and capable of no more than a staid amble. Jamie's mount was a trifle friskier, though still no match for Donas. The huge stallion had been left in Edinburgh, as Prince Charles wished to ride him on public occasions. Jamie had acceded to this request, as he harbored suspicions that Old Simon might well be capable of appropriating the big horse, should Donas come within reach of his rapacious grasp.

Judging from the tableau unfolding before me, Jamie's estimate of his grandfather's character had not been in error. Jamie had first ridden up alongside Young Simon's clerk, and what looked from my vantage point like a heated argument ended when Jamie leaned from his saddle, grabbed the clerk's reins, and dragged the indignant man's horse out of line, onto the verge of the muddy track.

The two men dismounted and stood face-to-face, obviously going at it hammer and tongs. Young Simon, seeing the altercation, reined aside himself, motioning the rest of the column to proceed. A good deal of to and fro then ensued; we were close enough to see Simon's face, flushed red with annoyance, the worried grimace on the clerk's countenance, and a series of rather violent gestures on Jamie's part.

I watched this pantomime in fascination, as the clerk, with a shrug of resignation, unfastened his saddlebag, scrabbled in the depths, and came up with several sheets of parchment. Jamie snatched these and skimmed rapidly through them, forefinger tracing the lines of writing. He seized one sheet, letting the rest drop to the ground, and shook it in Simon Fraser's face. The Young Fox looked taken aback. He took the sheet, peered at it, then looked up in bewilderment. Jamie grabbed back the sheet, and with a sudden effort, ripped the tough parchment down, then across, and stuffed the pieces into his sporran.

I had halted my pony, who took advantage of the recess to nose about among the meager shreds of plant life still to be found. The back of Young Simon's neck was bright red as he turned back to his horse, and I decided to keep out of the way. Jamie, remounted, came trotting back along the verge to join me, red hair flying like a banner in the wind, eyes gleaming with anger over tight-set lips.

"The filthy auld arse-wipe," he said without ceremony.

"What's he done?" I inquired.

"Listed the names of my men on his own rolls," Jamie said. "Claimed them as part of his Fraser regiment. Mozie auld pout-worm!" He glanced back up the track with longing. "Pity we've come such a way; it's too far to go back and proddle the auld mumper."

I resisted the temptation to egg Jamie on to call his grandfather more names, and asked instead, "Why would he do that? Just to make it look as though he were making more of a contribution to the Stuarts?"

Jamie nodded, the tide of fury receding slightly from his cheeks.

"Aye, that. Make himself look better, at no cost. But not only that. The wretched auld nettercap wants my land back—he has, ever since he was forced to give it up when my parents wed. Now he thinks if it all comes right and he's made Duke of Inverness, he can claim Lallybroch has been his all along, and me just his tenant—the proof being that he's raised men from the estate to answer the Stuarts' call to the clans."

"Could he actually get away with something like that?" I asked doubtfully.

Jamie drew in a deep breath and released it, the cloud of vapor rising like dragon smoke from his nostrils. He smiled grimly and patted the sporran at his waist.

"Not now he can't," he said.

* * *

It was a two-day trip from Beauly to Lallybroch in good weather, given sound horses and dry ground, pausing for nothing more than the necessities of eating, sleeping, and personal hygiene. As it was, one of the horses went lame six miles out of Beauly, it snowed and sleeted and blew by turns, the boggy ground froze in patches of slippery ice, and what with one thing and another, it was nearly a week before we made our way down the last slope that led to the farmhouse at Lallybroch—cold, tired, hungry, and far from hygienic.

We were alone, just the two of us. Murtagh had been sent to Edinburgh with Young Simon and the Beaufort men-at-arms, to judge how matters stood with the Highland army.

The house stood solid among its outbuildings, white as the snow-streaked fields that surrounded it. I remembered vividly the emotions I had felt when I first saw the place. Granted, I had seen it first in the glow of a fine autumn day, not through sheets of blowing, icy snow, but even then it had seemed a welcoming refuge. The house's impression of strength and serenity was heightened now by the warm lamplight spilling through the lower windows, soft yellow in the deepening gray of early evening.

The feeling of welcome grew even stronger when I followed Jamie through the front door, to be met by the mouth-watering smell of roasting meat and fresh bread.

"Supper," Jamie said, closing his eyes in bliss as he inhaled the fragrant aromas. "God, I could eat a horse." Melting ice dripped from the hem of his cloak, making wet spots on the wooden floor.

"I thought we were going to *have* to eat one of them," I remarked, untying the strings of my cloak and brushing melting snow from my hair. "That poor creature you traded in Kirkinmill could barely hobble."

The sound of our voices carried through the hall, and a door opened overhead, followed by the sound of small running feet and a cry of joy as the younger Jamie spotted his namesake below.

The racket of their reunion attracted the attention of the rest of the household, and before we knew it, we were enveloped in greetings and embraces as Jenny and the baby, little Maggie, Ian, Mrs. Crook, and assorted maidservants all rushed into the hall.

"It's so good to see ye, my dearie!" Jenny said for the third time, standing on tiptoe to kiss Jamie. "Such news as we've heard of the army, we feared it would be months before ye came home."

“Aye,” Ian said, “have ye brought any of the men back with ye, or is this only a visit?”

“Brought them back?” Arrested in the act of greeting his elder niece, Jamie stared at his brother-in-law, momentarily forgetting the little girl in his arms. Brought to a realization of her presence by her yanking his hair, he kissed her absently and handed her to me.

“What d’ye mean, Ian?” he demanded. “The men should all ha’ returned a month ago. Did some of them not come home?”

I held small Maggie tight, a dreadful feeling of foreboding coming over me as I watched the smile fade from Ian’s face.

“None of them came back, Jamie,” he said slowly, his long, good-humored face suddenly mirroring the grim expression he saw on Jamie’s. “We havena seen hide nor hair of any of them, since they marched awa’ with you.”

There was a shout from the dooryard outside, where Rabbie MacNab was putting away the horses. Jamie whirled, turned to the door and pushed it open, leaning out into the storm.

Over his shoulder, I could see a rider coming through the blowing snow. Visibility was too poor to make out his face, but that small, wiry figure, clinging monkeylike to the saddle, was unmistakable. “Fast as chain lightning,” Jamie had said, and clearly he was right; to make the trip from Beauly to Edinburgh, and then to Lallybroch in a week was a true feat of endurance. The coming rider was Murtagh, and it didn’t take Maisri’s gift of prophecy to tell us that the news he bore was ill.

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REUNIONS

White with rage, Jamie flung back the door of Holyrood’s morning drawing room with a crash. Ewan Cameron leaped to his feet, upsetting the inkpot he had been using. Simon Fraser, Master of Lovat, was seated across the table, but merely raised thick black brows at his half-nephew’s entrance.

“Damn!” Ewan said, scrabbling in his sleeve for a handkerchief to mop the spreading puddle with. “What’s the matter wi’ ye, Fraser? Oh, good morning to ye, Mistress Fraser,” he added, seeing me behind Jamie.

“Where’s His Highness?” Jamie demanded without preamble.

“Stirling Castle,” Cameron replied, failing to find the handkerchief he was searching for. “Got a cloth, Fraser?”

“If I did, I’d choke ye with it,” Jamie said. He had relaxed slightly, upon finding that Charles Stuart was not in residence, but the corners of his lips were still tight. “Why have ye let my men be kept in the Tolbooth? I’ve just seen them, kept in a place I wouldna let pigs live! Surely to God you could have done something!”

Cameron flushed at this, but his clear brown eyes met Jamie’s steadily.

“I tried,” he said. “I told his Highness that I was sure it was a mistake—aye, and the thirty of them ten miles from the army when they were found, some mistake!—and besides, even if they’d really meant to desert, he didna have such a strength of men that he could afford to do without them. That’s all that kept him from ordering the lot of them to be hanged on the spot, ye ken,” he said, beginning to grow angry as the shock of Jamie's entrance wore off. "God, man, it's treason to desert in time of war!"

"Aye?" Jamie said skeptically. He nodded briefly to Young Simon, and pushed a chair in my direction before sitting down himself. "And have you sent orders to hang the twenty of your men who've gone home, Ewan? Or is it more like forty, now?"

Cameron flushed more deeply and dropped his eyes, concentrating on mopping up the ink with the cloth Simon Fraser handed him.

"They weren't caught," he muttered at last. He glanced up at Jamie, his thin face earnest. "Go to His Highness at Stirling," he advised. "He was furious about the desertion, but after all, it was his orders sent ye to Beauly and left your men untended, aye? And he's always thought well of ye, Jamie, and called ye friend. It might be he'll pardon your men, and ye beg him for their lives."

Picking up the ink-soaked cloth, he looked dubiously at it, then, with a muttered excuse, left to dispose of it outside, obviously eager to get away from Jamie.

Jamie sat sprawled in his chair, breathing through clenched teeth with a small hissing noise, eyes fixed on the small embroidered hanging on the wall that showed the Stuart coat of arms. The two stiff fingers of his right hand tapped slowly on the table. He had been in much the same state ever since Murtagh's arrival at Lallybroch with the news that the thirty men of Jamie's command had been apprehended in the act of desertion and imprisoned in Edinburgh's notorious Tolbooth Prison, under sentence of death.

I didn't myself think that Charles intended to execute the men. As Ewan Cameron pointed out, the Highland army had need of every able-bodied man it could muster. The push into England that Charles had argued for had been costly, and the influx of support he had foreseen from the English countryside had not materialized. Not only that; to execute Jamie's men in his absence would have been an act of political idiocy and personal betrayal too great even for Charles Stuart to contemplate.

No, I imagined that Cameron was right, and the men would be pardoned eventually. Jamie undoubtedly realized it, too, but the realization was poor consolation to him, faced with the matching realization that rather than seeing his men safely removed from the risks of a deteriorating campaign, his orders had landed them in one of the worst prisons in all of Scotland, branded as cowards and sentenced to a shameful death by hanging.

This, coupled with the imminent prospect of leaving the men in their dark, filthy imprisonment, to go to Stirling and face the humiliation of pleading with Charles, was more than sufficient to explain the look on Jamie's face—that of a man who has just breakfasted on broken glass.

Young Simon also was silent, frowning, wide forehead creasing with thought.

"I'll come with ye to His Highness," he said abruptly.

"You will?" Jamie glanced at his half-uncle in surprise, then his eyes narrowed at Simon. "Why?"

Simon gave a half-grin. "Blood's blood, after all. Or do ye think I'd try to claim your men, like Father did?"

"Would you?

"I might," Simon said frankly, "if I thought there was a chance of it doing me some good. More likely to cause trouble, though, is what I think. I've no wish to fight wi' the MacKenzies—or you, nevvie," he added, the grin widening. "Rich as Lallybroch might be, it's a good long way from Beauly, and likely to be the devil of a fight to get hold of it, either by force or by the courts. I told Father so, but he hears what he wants to."

The young man shook his head and settled his swordbelt around his hips.

"There's like to be better pickings with the army; certainly there will be with a restored king. And—" he concluded, "if that army's going to fight again like they did at Preston, they'll need every man they can get. I'll go with ye," he repeated firmly.

Jamie nodded, a slow smile dawning on his face. "I thank ye, then, Simon. It will be of help."

Simon nodded. "Aye, well. It wouldna hurt matters any for ye to ask Dougal MacKenzie to come speak for ye, either. He's in Edinburgh just now."

“Dougal MacKenzie?” Jamie’s brows rose quizzically. “Aye, I suppose it would do no harm, but …”

“Do no harm? Man, did ye no hear? The MacKenzie’s Prince Charles’s fair-haired boy the noo.” Simon lounged back in his seat, looking mockingly at his half-nephew.

“What for?” I asked. “What on earth has he done?” Dougal had brought two hundred and fifty men-at-arms to fight for the Stuart cause, but there were a number of chieftains who had made greater contributions.

“Ten thousand pounds,” Simon said, savoring the words as he rolled them around on his tongue. “Ten thousand pounds in fine sterling, Dougal MacKenzie’s brought to lay at the feet of his sovereign. And it willna come amiss, either,” he said matter-of-factly, dropping his lounging pose. “Cameron was just telling me that Charles had gone through the last of the Spanish money, and damn little coming in from the English supporters he’d counted on. Dougal’s ten thousand will keep the army in weapons and food for a few more weeks, at least, and with luck, by then he’ll ha’ got more from France.” At last, realizing that his reckless cousin was providing him with an excellent distraction for the English, Louis was reluctantly agreeing to cough up a bit of money. It was a long time coming, though.

I stared at Jamie, his face reflecting my own bewilderment. Where on earth would Dougal MacKenzie have gotten ten thousand pounds? Suddenly I remembered where I had heard that sum mentioned once before—in the thieves’ hole at Cranesmuir, where I had spent three endless days and nights, awaiting trial on charges of witchcraft.

“Geillis Duncan!” I exclaimed. I felt cold at the memory of that conversation, carried out in the pitch-blackness of a miry pit, my companion no more than a voice in the dark. The drawing-room fire was warm, but I pulled my cloak tighter around me.

“I diverted near on to ten thousand pounds,” Geillis had said, boasting of the thefts accomplished by judicious forgery of her late husband’s name. Arthur Duncan, whom she had killed by poison, had been the procurator fiscal for the district. “Ten thousand pounds for the Jacobite cause. When it comes to rebellion, I shall know that I helped."

"She stole it," I said, feeling a tremor run up my arms at the thought of Geillis Duncan, convicted of witchcraft, gone to a fiery death beneath the branches of a rowan tree. Geillis Duncan, who had escaped death just long enough to give birth to the child she bore to her lover—Dougal MacKenzie. "She stole it and she gave it to Dougal; or he took it from her, no telling which, now." Agitated, I stood up and paced back and forth before the fire.

"That bastard!" I said. "That's what he was doing in Paris two years ago!"

"What?" Jamie was frowning at me, Simon staring openmouthed.

"Visiting Charles Stuart. He came to see whether Charles were really planning a rebellion. Maybe he promised the money then, maybe that's what encouraged Charles to risk coming to Scotland—the promise of Geillis Duncan's money. But Dougal couldn't give Charles the money openly while Colum was alive—Colum would have asked questions; he was much too honest a man to have used stolen money, no matter who stole it in the first place."

"I see." Jamie nodded, eyes hooded in thought. "But now Colum is dead," he said quietly. "And Dougal MacKenzie is the Prince's favorite."

"Which is all to the good for you, as I've been saying," Simon put in, impatient with talk of people he didn't know and matters he only half-understood. "Go find him; likely he'll be in the World's End at this time o' day."

"Do you think he'll speak to the Prince for you?" I asked Jamie, worried. Dougal had been Jamie's foster father for a time, but the relationship had assuredly had its ups and downs. Dougal might not want to risk his newfound popularity with the Prince by speaking out for a bunch of cowards and deserters.

The Young Fox might lack his father's years, but he had a good bit of his sire's acumen. The heavy black brows quirked upward.

"MacKenzie still wants Lallybroch, no? And if he thinks Father and I might have an eye on reclaiming your land, he'll be more eager to help you get your men back, aye? Cost him a lot more to fight us for it than to deal wi' you, once the war's over." He nodded, happily chewing his upper lip as he contemplated the ramifications of the situation.

"I'll go wave a copy of Father's list under his nose before ye speak to him. You come in and tell him you'll see me in hell before ye let me claim your men, and then we'll all go to Stirling together." He grinned at Jamie complicitously.

"I always thought there was some reason why 'Scot' rhymed with 'plot,' " I remarked.

"What?" Both men looked up, startled.

"Never mind," I said, shaking my head. "Blood will tell."

* * *

I stayed in Edinburgh while Jamie and his rival uncles rode to Stirling to straighten out matters with the Prince. Under the circumstances, I couldn't stay at Holyroodhouse, but found lodgings in one of the wynds above the Canongate. It was a small, cold, cramped room, but I wasn't in it much.

The Tolbooth prisoners couldn't come out, but there was nothing barring visitors who wanted to get in. Fergus and I visited the prison daily, and a small amount of discriminating bribery allowed me to pass food and medicine to the men from Lallybroch. Theoretically, I wasn't allowed to talk privately to the prisoners, but here again, the system had a certain amount of slip to it, when suitably greased, and I managed to talk alone with Ross the smith on two or three occasions.

" 'Twas my fault, lady," he said at once, the first time I saw him. "I should ha' had the sense to make the men go in small groups of three and four, not altogether like we did. I was afraid of losing some, though; the most of them had never been more than five mile from home before."

"You needn't blame yourself," I assured him. "From what I heard, it was only ill luck that you were caught. Don't worry; Jamie has gone to see the Prince at Stirling; he'll have you out of here in no time."

He nodded, tiredly brushing back a lock of hair. He was filthy and unkempt, and a good bit diminished from the burly, robust craftsman he had been a few months before. Still, he smiled at me, and thanked me for the food.

"It willna come amiss," he said frankly. "It's little we get but slops. D'ye think …" He hesitated. "D'ye think ye might manage a few blankets, my lady? I wouldna ask, only four of the men have the ague, and …"

"I'll manage," I said.

I left the prison, wondering exactly *how* I would manage. While the main army had gone south to invade England, Edinburgh was still an occupied city. With soldiers, lords, and hangers-on drifting constantly in and out, goods of all sorts were high-priced and in short supply. Blankets and warm clothes could be found, but they would cost a lot, and I had precisely ten shillings left in my purse.

There was a banker in Edinburgh, a Mr. Waterford, who had in the past handled some of Lallybroch's business and investments, but Jamie had removed all his funds from the bank some months before, fearing that bank-held assets might be seized by the Crown. The money had been converted to gold, some of it sent to Jared in France for safekeeping, the rest of it hidden in the farmhouse. All of it equally inaccessible to me at the moment.

I paused on the street to think, passersby jostling past me on the cobbles. If I didn't have money, I had still a few things of value. The crystal Raymond had given me in Paris—while the crystal itself was of no particular value, its gold mounting and chain were. My wedding rings—no, I didn't want to part with those, even temporarily. But the pearls … I felt inside my pocket, checking to see that the pearl necklace Jamie had given me on our wedding day was still safely sewn into the seam of my skirt.

It was; the small, irregular beads of the freshwater pearls were hard and smooth under my fingers. Not as expensive as oriental pearls, but it was still a fine necklace, with gold pierced-work roundels between the pearls. It had belonged to Jamie's mother, Ellen. I thought she would have liked to see it used to comfort his men.

"Five pounds," I said firmly. "It's worth ten, and I could get six for it, if I cared to walk all the way up the hill to another shop." I had no idea whether this was true or not, but I reached out as though to pick up the necklace from the counter anyway, pretending that I was about to leave the pawnbroker's shop. The pawnbroker, Mr. Samuels, placed a quick hand over the necklace, his eagerness letting me know that I should have asked six pounds to start with.

"Three pound ten, then," he said. "It's beggaring me own family to do it, but for a fine lady like yourself …"

The small bell over the shop door chimed behind me as the door opened, and there was the sound of hesitant footsteps on the worn boards of the pawnshop floor.

"Excuse me," began a girl's voice, and I whirled around, pearl necklace forgotten, to see the shadow of the pawnbroker's balls falling across the face of Mary Hawkins. She had grown in the last year, and filled out as well. There was a new maturity and dignity in her manner, but she was still very young. She blinked once, and then fell on me with a shriek of joy, her fur collar tickling my nose as she hugged me tight.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, disentangling myself at last.

"Father's sister lives here," she replied. "I'm st-staying with her. Or do you mean why am I here?" She waved a hand at the dingy confines of Mr. Samuels's emporium.

"Well, that too," I said. "But that can wait a bit." I turned to the pawnbroker. "Four pound six, or I'll walk up the hill," I told him. "Make up your mind, I'm in a hurry."

Grumbling to himself, Mr. Samuels reached beneath his counter for the cash box, as I turned back to Mary.

"I have to buy some blankets. Can you come with me?"

She glanced outside, to where a small man in a footman's livery stood by the door, clearly waiting for her. "Yes, if you'll come with me afterward. Oh, Claire, I'm *so* glad to see you!"

"He sent a message to me," Mary confided, as we walked down the hill. "Alex. A friend brought me his letter." Her face glowed as she spoke his name, but there was a small frown between her brows as well.

"When I found he was in Edinburgh, I m-made Father send me to visit Aunt Mildred. He didn't mind," she added bitterly. "It m-made him ill to look at me, after what happened in Paris. He was happy to get me out of his house."

"So you've seen Alex?" I asked. I wondered how the young curate had fared, since I had last seen him. I also wondered how he had found the courage to write to Mary.

"Yes. He didn't ask me to come," she added quickly. "I c-came by myself." Her chin lifted in defiance, but there was a small quiver as she said, "He.… he wouldn't have written to me, but he thought he was d-dying, and he wanted me to know … to know …" I put an arm about her shoulders and turned quickly into one of the closes, standing with her out of the flow of jostling street traffic.

"It's all right," I said to her, patting her helplessly, knowing that nothing I could do would make it right. "You came, and you've seen him, that's the important thing."

She nodded, speechless, and blew her nose. "Yes," she said thickly, at last. "We've had … two months. I k-keep telling myself that that's more than most people ever have, two months of happiness … but we lost so much time that we might have h-had, and … it's not enough. Claire, it isn't enough!"

"No," I said quietly. "A lifetime isn't enough, for that kind of love." With a sudden pang, I wondered where Jamie was, and how he was faring.

Mary, more composed now, clutched me by the sleeve. "Claire, can you come with me to see him? I know there's n-not much you can do …" Her voice faltered, and she steadied it with a visible effort. "But maybe you could … help." She caught my look at the footman, who stood stolidly outside the wynd, oblivious to the passing traffic. "I pay him," she said simply. "My aunt thinks I go w-walking every afternoon. Will you come?"

"Yes, of course." I glanced between the towering buildings, judging the level of the sun over the hills outside the city. It would be dark in an hour; I wanted the blankets delivered to the prison before night made the damp stone walls of the Tolbooth still colder. Making a sudden decision, I turned to Fergus, who had been standing patiently next to me, watching Mary with interest. Returned to Edinburgh with the rest of the Lallybroch men, he had escaped imprisonment by virtue of his French citizenship, and had survived hardily by reverting to his customary trade. I had found him faithfully hanging about near the Tolbooth, where he brought bits of food for his imprisoned companions.

"Take this money," I said, handing him my purse, "and find Murtagh. Tell him to get as many blankets as that will buy, and see they're taken to the gaolkeeper at the Tolbooth. He's been bribed already, but keep back a few shillings, just in case."

"But Madame," he protested, "I promised milord I would not let you go alone …"

"Milord isn't here," I said firmly, "and I am. Go, Fergus."

He glanced from me to Mary, evidently decided she was less a threat to me than my temper was to him, and departed, shrugging his shoulders and muttering in French about the stubbornness of women.

* * *

The little room at the top of the building had changed considerably since my last visit. It was clean, for one thing, with polish gleaming on every horizontal surface. There was food in the hutch, a down quilt on the bed, and numerous small comforts provided for the patient. Mary had confided on the way that she had been quietly pawning her mother's jewelry, to ensure that Alex Randall was as comfortable as money could make him.

There were limits to what money could manage, but Alex's face glowed like a candle flame when Mary came through the door, temporarily obscuring the ravages of illness.

"I've brought Claire, dearest." Mary dropped her cloak unheeded onto a chair and knelt beside him, taking his thin, blue-veined hands in her own.

"Mrs. Fraser." His voice was light and breathless, though he smiled at me. "It's good to see a friendly face again."

"Yes, it is." I smiled at him, noting half-consciously the rapid, fluttering pulse visible in his throat, and the transparency of his skin. The hazel eyes were soft and warm, holding most of the life left in his frail body.

Lacking medicine, there was nothing I could do for him, but I examined him carefully, and saw him tucked up comfortably afterward, his lips slightly blue from the minor exertion of the examination.

I covered the anxiety I felt at his condition, and promised to come next day with some medicine to help him sleep more easily. He hardly noticed my assurances; all his attention was for Mary, sitting anxiously by him, holding his hand. I saw her glance at the window, where light was fading rapidly, and realized her concern; she would have to return to her aunt's house before nightfall.

"I'll take my leave, then," I told Alex, removing myself as tactfully as I could, to leave them a few precious moments alone together.

He glanced from me to Mary, then smiled back at me in gratitude.

"God bless you, Mrs. Fraser," he said.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said, and left, hoping that I would.

* * *

I was busy over the next few days. The men's arms had been confiscated, of course, when they were arrested, and I did my best to recover what I could, bullying and threatening, bribing and charming where necessary. I pawned two brooches that Jared had given me as a farewell present, and bought enough food to ensure that the men of Lallybroch ate as well as the army in general—poorly as that might be.

I talked my way into the cells of the prison, and spent some time in treating the prisoners' ailments, ranging from scurvy and the more generalized malnutrition common in winter, to chafing sores, chilblains, arthritis, and a variety of respiratory ailments.

I made the rounds of those chieftains and lords still in Edinburgh—not many—who might be helpful to Jamie, if his visit to Stirling should fail. I didn't think it would, but it seemed wise to take precautions.

And among the other activities of my days, I made time to see Alex Randall once a day. I took pains to come in the mornings, so as not to use up his time with Mary. Alex slept little, and that little, ill; consequently, he tended to be tired and drooping in the morning, not wanting to talk, but always smiling in welcome when I arrived. I would give him a light mixture of mint and lavender, with a few drops of poppy syrup stirred in; this would generally allow him a few hours of sleep, so that he could be alert when Mary arrived in the afternoon.

Aside from me and Mary, I had seen no other visitors at the top of the building. I was therefore surprised, coming up the stairs to his room one morning, to hear voices behind the closed door.

I knocked once, briefly, as was our agreed custom, and let myself in. Jonathan Randall was sitting by his brother's bed, clad in his captain's uniform of red and fawn. He rose at my entrance and bowed correctly, face cold.

"Madam," he said.

"Captain," I said. We then stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, staring at each other, each unwilling to go further.

"Johnny," said Alex's hoarse voice from the bed. It had a note of coaxing, as well as one of command, and his brother shrugged irritably when he heard it.

"My brother has summoned me to give you a bit of news," he said, tightlipped. He wore no wig this morning, and with his dark hair tied back, his resemblance to his brother was startling. Pale and frail as Alex was, he looked like Jonathan's ghost.

"You and Mr. Fraser have been kind to my Mary," Alex said, rolling onto his side to look at me. "And to me as well. I … knew of my brother's bargain with you"—the faintest of pinks rose in his cheeks—"but I know, too, what you and your husband did for Mary … in Paris." He licked his lips, cracked and dry from the constant heat in the room. "I think you should hear the news Johnny brought from the Castle yesterday."

Jack Randall eyed me with dislike, but he was good as his word.

"Hawley has succeeded Cope, as I told you earlier that he would," he said. "Hawley has little gift for leadership, bar a certain blind confidence in the men under his command. Whether that will stand him in better stead than did Cope's cannon—" He shrugged impatiently.

"Be that as it may, General Hawley has been directed to march north to recover Stirling Castle."

"Has he?" I said. "Do you know how many troops he has?"

Randall nodded shortly. "He has eight thousand troops at the moment, thirteen hundred of them cavalry. He is also in daily expectation of the arrival of six thousand Hessians." He frowned, thinking. "I have heard that the chief of clan Campbell is sending a thousand men to join with Hawley's forces as well, but I cannot say whether that information is reliable; there seems no way of predicting what Scots will do."

"I see." This was serious; the Highland army at this point had between six and seven thousand men. Against Hawley, minus his expected reinforcements, they might manage. To wait until his Hessians and Campbells arrived was clearly madness, to say nothing of the fact that the Highlanders' fighting skills were much better suited to attack than defense. This news had best reach Lord George Murray at once.

Jack Randall's voice called me back from my ruminations.

"Good day to you, Madam," he said, formal as ever, and there was no trace of humanity on the hard, handsome features as he bowed to me and took his leave.

"Thank you," I said to Alex Randall, waiting for Jonathan to descend the long, twisting stair before leaving myself. "I appreciate it very much."

He nodded. The shadows under his eyes were pronounced; another bad night.

"You're welcome," he said simply. "I suppose you'll be leaving some of the medicine for me? I imagine it may be some time before I see you again."

I halted, struck by his assumption that I would go myself to Stirling. That was what every fiber of my being urged me to do, but there was the matter of the men in the Tolbooth to be considered.

"I don't know," I said. "But yes; I'll leave the medicine."

I walked slowly back to my lodgings, my mind still spinning. Obviously, I must get word to Jamie immediately. Murtagh would have to go, I supposed. Jamie would believe me, of course, if I wrote him a note. But could he convince Lord George, the Duke of Perth, or the other army commanders?

I couldn't tell him where I had come by this knowledge; would the commanders be willing to believe a woman's unsupported, written word? Even the word of a woman popularly supposed to have supernatural powers? I thought of Maisri suddenly, and shivered. *It's a curse,* she had said. Yes, but what choice was there? *I have no power but the power not to say what I know*. I had that power, too, but dared not risk using it.

To my surprise, the door to my small room was open, and there were clashing, banging noises coming from inside it. I had been storing the recovered arms under my bed, and stacking swords and assorted blades by the hearth once the space under the bed was filled, until there was virtually no floor space left, save the small square of floorboards where Fergus laid his blankets.

I stood on the stair, amazed at the scene visible through the open door above. Murtagh, standing on the bed, was overseeing the handing-out of weaponry to the men who crowded the room to overflowing—the men of Lallybroch.

"Madame!" I turned at the cry, to find Fergus at my elbow, beaming up at me, a square-toothed grin on his sallow face.

"Madame! Is it not wonderful? Milord has received pardon for his men—a messenger came from Stirling this morning, with the order to release them, and we are ordered at once to join milord at Stirling!"

I hugged him, grinning a bit myself. "That *is* wonderful, Fergus." A few of the men had noticed me, and were beginning to turn to me, smiling and plucking at each other's sleeves. An air of exhilaration and excitement filled the small room. Murtagh, perched on the bedstead like the Gnome King on a toadstool, saw me then, and smiled—an expression which rendered him virtually unrecognizable, so much did it transform his face.

“Will Mr. Murtagh take the men to Stirling?” Fergus asked. He had received a whinger, or short sword, as his share of the weaponry, and was practicing drawing and sheathing it as he spoke.

I met Murtagh’s eye and shook my head. After all, I thought, if Jenny Cameron could lead her brother’s men to Glenfinnan, I could take my husband’s troops to Stirling. And just let Lord George and His Highness try to disregard my news, delivered in person.

“No,” I said. “I will.”

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FALKIRK

I could feel the men close by, all around me in the dark. There was a piper walking next to me; I could hear the creak of the bag under his arm and see the outline of the drones, poking out behind. They moved as he walked, so that he seemed to be carrying a small, feebly struggling animal.

I knew him, a man named Labhriunn MacIan. The pipers of the clans took it in turns to call the dawn at Stirling, walking to and fro in the encampment with the piper's measured stride, so that the wail of the drones bounced from the flimsy tents, calling all within to the battle of the new day.

Again in the evening a single piper would come out, strolling slow across the yard, and the camp would stop to listen, voices stilling and the glow of the sunset fading from the tents' canvas. The high, whining notes of the pibroch called down the shadows from the moor, and when the piper was done, the night had come.

Evening or morning, Labhriunn MacIan played with his eyes closed, stepping sure and slow across the yard and back, elbow tight on the bag and his fingers lively on the chanters' holes. Despite the cold, I sat sometimes to watch in the evenings, letting the sound drive its spikes through my heart. MacIan paced to and fro, ignoring everything around him, making his turns on the ball of his foot, pouring his being out through his chanter.

There are the small Irish pipes, used indoors for making music, and the Great Northern pipes, used outdoors for reveille, and for calling of clans to order, and the spurring of men to battle. It was the Northern pipes that MacIan played, walking to and fro with his eyes shut tight.

Rising from my seat as he finished one evening, I waited while he pressed the last of the air from his bag with a dying wail, and fell in alongside him as he came in through Stirling’s gate with a nod to the guard.

“Good e’en to ye, Mistress,” he said. His voice was soft, and his eyes, now open, softer still with the unbroken spell of his playing still on him.

“Good evening to you, MacIan,” I said. “I wondered, MacIan, why do you play with your eyes tight shut?”

He smiled and scratched his head, but answered readily enough.

“I suppose it is because my grandsire taught me, Mistress, and he was blind. I see him always when I play, pacing the shore with his beard flying in the wind and his blind eyes closed against the sting of the sand, hearing the sound of the pipes come down to him off the rocks of the cliffside and knowing from that where he was in his walk.”

“So you see him, and you play, too, to the cliffs and the sea? From where do you come, MacIan?” I asked. His speech was low and sibilant, even more than that of most Highlanders.

“It is from the Shetlands, Mistress,” he replied, making the last word almost “Zetlands.” “A long way from here.” He smiled again, and bowed to me as we came to the guest quarters, where I would turn. “But then, I am thinking that you have come farther still, Mistress.”

“That’s’true,” I said. “Good night, MacIan.”

Later that week, I wondered whether his skill at playing unseeing would help him, here in the dark. A large body of men moving makes a good bit of noise, no matter how quietly they go, but I thought any echoes they created would be drowned in the howl of the rising wind. The night was moonless, but the sky was light with clouds, and an icy sleet was falling, stinging my cheeks.

The men of the Highland army covered the ground in small groups of ten or twenty, moving in uneven bumps and patches, as though the earth thrust up small hillocks here and there, or as though the groves of larch and alder were walking through the dark. My news had not come unsupported; Ewan Cameron's spies had reported Hawley's moves as well, and the Scottish army was now on its way to meet him, somewhere south of Stirling Castle.

Jamie had given up urging me to go back. I had promised to stay out of the way, but if there was a battle to be fought, then the army's physicians must be at hand afterward. I could tell when his attention shifted to his men, and the prospects ahead, by the sudden cock of his head. On Donas, he sat high enough to be visible as a shadow, even in the dark, and when he threw up an arm, two smaller shadows detached themselves from the moving mass and came up beside his stirrup. There was a moment's whispered conversation; then he straightened in his saddle and turned to me.

"The scouts say we've been seen; English guards have gone flying for Callendar House, to warn General Hawley. We shallna wait longer; I'm taking my men and circling beyond Dougal's troops to the far side of Falkirk Hill. We'll come down from behind as the MacKenzies come in from the west. There's a wee kirk up the hill to your left, maybe a quarter-mile. That's your place, Sassenach. Ride there now, and stay." He groped for my arm in the darkness, found it, and squeezed.

"I shall come for ye when I can, or send Murtagh if I can't. If things should go wrong, go into the kirk and claim sanctuary there. It's the best I can think of."

"Don't worry about me," I said. My lips were cold, and I hoped my voice didn't sound as shaky as I felt. I bit back the "Be careful" that would have been my next words, and contented myself with touching him quickly, the cold surface of his cheek hard as metal under my hand, and the brush of a lock of hair, cold and smooth as a deer's pelt.

I reined to the left, picking my way slowly as the oncoming men flowed around me. The gelding was excited by the stir; he tossed his head, snorting, and fidgeted under me. I pulled him up sharply, as

Jamie had taught me, and kept a close rein as the ground sloped suddenly up beneath the horse's hooves. I glanced back once, but Jamie had disappeared into the night, and I needed all my attention to find the church in the dark.

It was a tiny building, stone with a thatched roof, crouched in a small depression of the hill, like a cowering animal. I felt a strong feeling of kinship with it. The English watchfires were visible from here, glimmering through the sleet, and I could hear shouting in the distance—Scots or English, I couldn't tell.

Then the pipes began, a thin, eerie scream in the storm. There were discordant shrieks, rising unearthly from several different places on the hill. Having seen it before at close hand, I could imagine the pipers blowing up their bags, chests inflating with quick gasps and blue lips clamped tight on the chanters' stems, cold-stiff fingers fumbling to guide the blowing into coherence.

I could almost feel the stubborn resistance of the leathern bag, kept warm and flexible under a plaid, but reluctant to be coaxed into fullness, then suddenly springing to life, part of the piper's body, like a third lung, breathing for him when the wind stole his breath, as though the shouting of the clansmen near him filled it.

The shouting was louder, now, and reached me in waves as the wind turned, carrying eddying blasts of sleet. There was no porch to give shelter, or any trees on the hillside to break the wind. My horse turned and put his head down, facing into the wind, and his mane whipped hard against my face, rough with ice.

The church offered sanctuary from the elements, as well as from the English. I pushed the door open and, tugging on the bridle, led the horse inside after me.

It was dark inside, with the single oiled-skin window no more than a dim patch in the blackness over the altar. It seemed warm, by contrast with the weather outside, but the smell of stale sweat made it suffocating. There were no seats for the horse to knock over; nothing save a small shrine set into one wall, and the altar itself. Oppressed by the strong smell of people, the horse stood still, snorting and blowing, but not fidgeting overmuch. Keeping a wary eye on him, I went back to the door and thrust my head out.

No one could tell what was happening on Falkirk Hill. The sparks of gunfire twinkled randomly in the dark. I could hear, faint and intermittent, the ring of metal and the thump of an occasional explosion. Now and then came the scream of a wounded man, high as a bagpipe's screech, different from the Gaelic cries of the warriors. And then the wind would turn, and I would hear nothing, or would imagine I heard voices that were nothing but the shrieking wind.

I had not seen the fight at Prestonpans; subconsciously accustomed to the ponderous movements of huge armies bound to tanks and mortars, I had not realized just how quickly things could happen in a small pitched battle of hand-to-hand fighting and small, light arms.

The first warning I had was a shout from near at hand. *"Tulacb Ard!"* Deafened by wind, I hadn't heard them as they came up the hill. *"Tulacb Ard!"* It was the battle cry of clan MacKenzie; some of Dougal's troops, forced backward in the direction of my sanctuary. I ducked back inside, but kept the door ajar, so that I could peer out.

They were coming up the hill, a small group of men in flight. Highlanders, both from the sound and the sight of them, plaids and beards and hair flying around them, so they looked like black clouds against the grassy slope, scudding uphill before the wind.

I jumped back into the church as the first of them burst through the door. Dark as it was, I couldn't see his face, but I recognized his voice when he crashed headfirst into my horse.

"Jesus!"

"Willie!" I shouted. "Willie Coulter!"

"Sweet bleeding Jesus! Who's that!"

I hadn't time to answer before the door crashed against the wall, and two more black forms shot into the tiny church. Incensed by this noisy intrusion, my horse reared and whinnied, pawing the air. This gave rise to cries of alarm from the intruders, who clearly had thought the building unoccupied, and were disconcerted to find otherwise.

The entrance of several more men only increased the confusion, and I gave up any idea of trying to subdue the horse. Forced to the rear of the church, I squeezed myself into the small space between altar and wall and waited for things to sort themselves out.

They began to show signs of doing so when one of the confused voices in the darkness rose above the others.

“Be QUIET!” it shouted, in a tone that brooked no opposition. Everyone but the horse obeyed, and as the racket died down, even the horse subsided, backing into a corner and making snorting noises, mixed with querulous squeals of disgust.

“It is MacKenzie of Leoch,” said the imperious voice. “Who else bides here?”

“It is Geordie, Dougal, and my brother with me,” said a voice nearby, in tones of profound relief. “We’ve brought Rupert with us, too; he’s wounded. Christ, I thought it was the de’il himself in here!”

“Gordon McLeod of Ardsmuir,” said another voice I didn’t recognize.

“And Ewan Cameron of Kinnoch,” said another. “Whose is the horse?”

“Mine,” I said, sidling cautiously out from behind the altar. The sound of my voice caused another outbreak, but Dougal put a stop to it once more, raising his own voice above the racket.

“QUIET, damn the lot of ye! Is that you, Claire Fraser?”

“Well, it isn’t the Queen,” I said testily. “Willie Coulter’s in here, too, or he was a minute ago. Hasn’t anyone got a flint box?”

“No light!” said Dougal. “Little chance that the English will overlook this place if they follow us, but little sense in drawing their attention to it if they don’t.”

“All right,” I said, biting my lip. “Rupert, can you talk? Say something so I can tell where you are.” I didn’t know how much I could do for him in the dark; as it was, I couldn’t even reach my medicine box. Still, I couldn’t leave him to bleed to death on the floor.

There was a nasty-sounding cough from the side of the church opposite me, and a hoarse voice said, “Here, lass,” and coughed again.

I felt my way across the floor, cursing under my breath. I could tell merely from the bubbling sound of that cough that it was bad;

the sort of bad that my medicine box wasn't likely to help. I crouched and duck-walked the last few feet, waving my arms in a wide swathe to feel what might be in my way.

One hand struck a warm body, and a big hand fastened on to me. It had to be Rupert; I could hear him breathing, a stertorous sound with a faint gurgle behind it.

"I'm here," I said, patting him blindly in what I hoped was a reassuring spot. I supposed it was, because he gave a sort of gasping chuckle and arched his hips, pressing my hand down hard against him.

"Do that again, lass, and I'll forget all about the musket ball," he said. I grabbed my hand back.

"Perhaps a bit later," I said dryly. I moved my hand upward, skimming over his body in search of his head. The thick bristle of beard told me I'd reached my goal, and I felt carefully under the dense growth for the pulse in his throat. Fast and light, but still fairly regular. His forehead was slick with sweat, though his skin felt clammy to the touch. The tip of his nose was cold when I brushed it, chilled from the air outside.

"Pity I'm no a dog," he said, a thread of laughter coming between the gasps for air. "Cold nose … would be a good sign."

"Be a better sign if you'd quit talking," I said. "Where did the ball take you? No, don't tell me, take my hand and put it on the wound … and if you put it anywhere else, Rupert MacKenzie, you can die here like a dog, and good riddance to you."

I could feel the wide chest vibrate with suppressed laughter under my hand. He drew my hand slowly under his plaid, and I pushed back the obstructing fabric with my other hand.

"All right, I've got it," I whispered. I could feel the small tear in his shirt, damp with blood around the edges, and I put both hands to it and ripped it open. I brushed my fingers very lightly down his side, feeling the ripple of gooseflesh under them, and then the small hole of the entrance wound. It seemed a remarkably small hole, compared to the bulk of Rupert, who was a burly man.

"Did it come out anywhere?" I whispered. The inside of the church was quiet, except for the horse, who was moving restlessly in his own corner. With the door closed, the sounds of battle outside were still audible, but diffuse; it was impossible to tell how close they were.

"No," he said, and coughed again. I could feel his hand move toward his mouth, and I followed it with a fold of his plaid. My eyes were as accustomed to the darkness as they were likely to get, but he was still no more than a hunched black shape on the floor before me. For some things, though, touch was enough. There was little bleeding at the site of the wound, but the cloth I held to his mouth flooded my hand with sudden damp warmth.

The ball had taken him through one lung at least, possibly both, and his chest was filling with blood. He could last a few hours in this condition, perhaps a day if one lung remained functional. If the pericardium had been nicked, he would go faster. But only surgery would save him, and that of a kind I couldn't do.

I could feel a warm presence behind me, and heard normal breathing as someone groped toward me. I reached back and felt my hand gripped tight. Dougal MacKenzie.

He made his way up beside me, and laid a hand on Rupert's supine body.

"How is it, man?" he asked softly. "Can ye walk?" My other hand still on Rupert, I could feel his head shake in answer to Dougal's question. The men in the church behind us had begun to talk among themselves in whispers.

Dougal's hand pressed down on my shoulder.

"What d'ye need to help him? Your wee box? Is it on the horse?" He had risen before I could tell him that there was nothing in the box to help Rupert.

A sudden loud crack from the altar stopped the whispers, and there was a quick movement all around, as men snatched up the weapons they had laid down. Another crack, and a ripping noise, and the oiled-skin covering of the window gave way to a rush of cold, clean air and a few swirling snowflakes.

"Sassenach! Claire! Are ye there?" The low voice from the window brought me to my feet in momentary forgetfulness of Rupert.

“Jamie!” All around me was a collective exhalation, and the clank of falling swords and targes. The new faint light from outdoors was blotted out for a moment by the bulk of Jamie’s head and shoulders. He dropped down lightly from the altar, silhouetted against the open window.

“Who’s here?” he said softly, looking around. “Dougal, is that you?”

“Aye, it’s me, lad. Your wife and a few more. Did ye see the sassenach bastards anywhere near outside?”

Jamie uttered a short laugh.

“Why d’ye think I came in through the window? There’s maybe twenty of them at the foot of the hill.”

Dougal made a displeased noise deep in his throat. “The bastards that cut us off from the main troop, I’ll be bound.”

“Just so. *Ho, mo cridh! Ciamar a tha thu*?” Recognizing a familiar voice in the midst of madness, my horse had thrust its nose up with a loud whinny of greeting.

“Hush, ye wee fool!” Dougal said to it violently. “D’ye want the English to hear?”

“I dinna suppose the English would hang *him*,” Jamie observed mildly. “As for them telling you’re here, they won’t need ears, if they’ve eyes in their heads; the slope’s half mud outside, and the prints of all your feet show clear.”

“Mmphm.” Dougal cast an eye toward the window, but Jamie was already shaking his head.

“No good, Dougal. The main body’s to the south, and Lord George Murray’s gone to meet them, but there’s the few English from the party we met still left on this side. A group of them chased me over the hill; I dodged to the side and crawled up to the church on my belly through the grass, but I’ll guess they’re still combing the hillside above.” He reached out a hand in my direction, and I took it. It was cold and damp from crawling through grass, but I was glad just to touch him, to have him there.

“Crawled in, eh? And how were ye planning to get out again?” Dougal asked.

I could feel Jamie shrug. He tilted his head in the direction of my horse. “I’d thought I might burst out and ride them down; they’ll not know about the horse. That would cause enough kerfuffle maybe for Claire to slip free.”

Dougal snorted. “Aye, and they’d pick ye off your horse like a ripe apple.”

“It hardly matters,” Jamie said dryly. “I canna see the lot of ye to be slipping out quietly with no one noticing, no matter how much fuss I made over it.”

As though in confirmation of this, Rupert gave a loud groan by the wall. Dougal and I dropped onto our knees beside him at once, followed more slowly by Jamie.

He wasn’t dead, but wasn’t doing well, either. His hands were chilly, and his breathing had a wheezing, whining note to it.

“Dougal,” he whispered.

“I’m here, Rupert. Be still, man, you’ll be all right soon.” The MacKenzie chieftain quickly pulled off his own plaid and folded it into a pillow, which he thrust beneath Rupert’s head and shoulders. Raised a bit, his breathing seemed easier, but a touch below his beard showed me wet blotches on his shirt. He still had some strength; he reached out a hand and grasped Dougal’s arm.

“If … they’ll find us anyway … give me a light,” he said, gasping. “I’d see your face once more, Dougal.”

Close as I was to Dougal, I felt the shock run through him at these words and their implication. His head turned sharply toward me, but of course he couldn’t see my face. He muttered an order over his shoulder, and after a bit of shuffling and murmuring, someone cut loose a handful of the thatch, which was twisted into a torch and lit with a spark from a flint. It burned fast, but gave enough light for me to examine Rupert while the men worked at chiseling loose a long splinter of wood from the poles of the roof, to serve as a less temporary torch.

He was white as a fish belly, hair matted with sweat, and a faint smear of blood still showed on the flesh of his full lower lip. Dark spots showed on the glossy black beard, but he smiled faintly at me as I bent over him to check his pulse again. Lighter, and very fast, missing beats now and then. I smoothed the hair back from his face, and he touched my hand in thanks.

I felt Dougal's hand on my elbow, and sat back on my heels, turning to face him. I had faced him once like this before, over the body of a man mortally wounded by a boar. He had asked me then, "Can he live?" and I saw the memory of that day cross his face. The same question stood in his eyes again, but this time in eyes glazed with fear of my answer. Rupert was his closest friend, the kinsman who rode and who fought on his right-hand side, as Ian did for Jamie.

This time I didn't answer; Rupert did it for me.

"Dougal," he said, and smiled as his friend bent anxiously over him. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed as deeply as he could, gathering strength for the moment.

"Dougal," he said again, opening his eyes. "Ye'll no grieve for me, man."

Dougal's face twitched in the torchlight. I could see the denial of death come to his lips, but he bit it back and forced it aside.

"I'm your chief, man," he said, with a quivering half-smile. "Ye'll not order me; I shall grieve ye and I like." He clasped Rupert's hand, where it lay across his chest, and held it tightly.

There was a faint, wheezing chuckle from Rupert, and another coughing spell.

"Weel, grieve for me and ye will, Dougal," he said, when he'd finished. "And I'm glad for it. But ye canna grieve 'til I be deid, can ye? I would die by your hand, *mo caraidh*, not in the hands of the strangers."

Dougal jerked, and Jamie and I exchanged appalled glances behind his back.

"Rupert …" Dougal began helplessly, but Rupert interrupted him, clasping his hand and shaking it gently.

"You *are* my chief, man, and it's your duty," he whispered. "Come now. Do it now. This dying hurts me, Dougal, and I would have it over." His eyes moved restlessly, lighting on me.

"Will ye hold my hand while I go, lass?" he asked. "I'd like it so."

There seemed nothing else to do. Moving slowly, feeling that this was all a dream, I took the broad, black-haired hand in both of mine, pressing it as though I might force my own warmth into the cooling flesh.

With a grunt, Rupert heaved himself slightly to one side and glanced up at Jamie, who sat by his head.

"She should ha' married me, lad, when she had the choice," he wheezed. "You're a poor weed, but do your best." One eye squeezed shut in a massive wink. "Gi'e her a good one for me, lad."

The black eyes swiveled back to me, and a final grin spread across his face.

"Goodbye, bonnie lassie," he said softly.

Dougal's dirk took him under the breastbone, hard and straight. The burly body convulsed, turning to the side with an coughing explosion of air and blood, but the brief sound of agony came from Dougal.

The MacKenzie chieftain stayed frozen for a moment, eyes shut, hands clenched on the hilt of the dirk. Then Jamie rose, took him by the shoulders, and turned him away, murmuring something in Gaelic. Jamie glanced at me, and I nodded and held out my arms. He turned Dougal gently toward me, and I gathered him to me as we both crouched on the floor, holding him while he wept.

Jamie's own face was streaked with tears, and I could hear the brief sighs and sobbing breaths of the other men. I supposed it was better they wept for Rupert than for themselves. If the English did come for us here, all of us stood to be hanged for treason. It was easier to mourn for Rupert, who was safely gone, sped on his way by the hand of a friend.

* * *

They did not come anytime in the long winter night. We huddled together against one wall, under plaids and cloaks, waiting. I dozed fitfully, leaning against Jamie's shoulder, with Dougal hunched and silent on my other side. I thought that neither of them slept, but kept watch through the night over Rupert's corpse, quiet under his own draped plaid across the church, on the other side of the abyss that separates the dead from the living.

We spoke little, but I knew what they were thinking. They were wondering, as I was, whether the English troops had left, regrouping with the main army at Callendar House below, or whether they still watched outside, waiting for the dawn before making a move, lest anyone in the tiny church escape under cover of darkness.

The matter was settled with the coming of first light.

"Ho, the church! Come out and give yourselves up!" The call came from the slope below, in a strong English voice.

There was a stir among the men in the church, and the horse, who had been dozing in his corner, snapped his head up with a startled snort at the movement nearby. Jamie and Dougal exchanged a glance, then, as though they had planned it together, rose and stood, shoulder to shoulder, before the closed door. A jerk of Jamie's head sent me to the rear of the church, back to my shelter behind the altar.

Another shout from the outside was met with silence. Jamie drew the snaphance pistol from his belt and checked the loading of it, casually, as though there were all the time in the world. He sank to one knee and braced the pistol, pointing it at the door at the level of a man's head.

Geordie and Willie guarded the window to the rear, swords and pistols to the ready. But it was likely from the front that an attack would come; the hill behind the church sloped steeply up, with barely room between the slope and the wall of the church for one man to squeeze past.

I heard the squelching of footsteps, approaching the door through the mud, and the faint clanking of sidearms. The sounds stopped at a distance, and a voice came again, closer and louder.

"In the name of His Majesty King George, come out and surrender! We know you are there!"

Jamie fired. The report inside the tiny church was deafening. It must have been sufficiently impressive from outside as well; I could hear the hasty sounds of slipping retreat, accompanied by muffled curses. There was a small hole in the door, made by the pistol ball; Dougal sidled up to it and peered out.

"Damn," he said under his breath. "There's a lot of them."

Jamie cast a glance at me, then set his lips and turned his attention to reloading his pistol. Clearly, the Scots had no intention of surrendering. Just as clearly, the English had no desire to storm the church, given the easily defended entrances. They couldn't mean to starve us out? Surely the Highland army would be sending out men to search for the wounded of the battle from the night before. If they arrived before the English had opportunity to bring a cannon to bear on the church, we might be saved.

Unfortunately, there was a thinker outside. The sound of footsteps came once more, and then a measured English voice, full of authority.

"You have one minute to come out and give yourselves up," it said, "or we fire the thatch."

I glanced upward in complete horror. The walls of the church were stone, but the thatch would burn in short order, even soaked with rain and sleet, and once well caught, would send flames and smoking embers raining down to engulf us. I remembered the awful speed with which the torch of twisted reed had burned the night before; the charred remnant lay on the floor near Rupert's shrouded corpse, a grisly token in the gray dawn light.

"No!" I screamed. "Bloody bastards! This is a church! Have you never heard of sanctuary?"

"Who is that?" came the sharp voice from outside. "Is that an English-woman in there?!"

"Yes!" shouted Dougal, springing to the door. He cracked it ajar and bellowed out at the English soldiers on the hillside below. "Yes! We hold an English lady captive! Fire the thatch, and she dies with us!"

There was an outbreak of voices at the bottom of the hill, and a sudden shifting among the men in the church. Jamie whirled on Dougal with a scowl, saying, "What …!"

"It's the only chance!" Dougal hissed back. "Let them take her, in return for our freedom. They'll not harm her if they think she's our hostage, and we'll get her back later, once we're free!"

I came out of my hiding space and went to Jamie, gripping his sleeve.

"Do it!" I said urgently. "Dougal is right, it's the only chance!"

He looked down at me helplessly, rage and fear mingled on his face. And under it all, a trace of humor at the underlying irony of the situation.

"I am a sassenach, after all," I said, seeing it.

He touched my face briefly with a rueful smile.

"Aye, *mo duinne*. But you're *my* sassenach." He turned to Dougal, squaring his shoulders. He drew in a deep breath, and nodded.

"All right. Tell them we took her"—he thought quickly, rubbing one hand through his hair—"from Falkirk road, late yesterday."

Dougal nodded, and without waiting for more, slipped out of the church door, a white handkerchief held high overhead in signal of truce.

Jamie turned to me, frowning, glancing at the church door, where the sounds of English voices were still audible, though we couldn't make out words as they talked.

"I don't know what you're to tell them, Claire; perhaps ye'd better pretend to be so shocked that ye canna speak of it. It's maybe better than telling a tale; for if they should realize who you are—" He stopped suddenly and rubbed his hand hard over his face.

If they realized who I was, it would be London, and the Tower—followed quite possibly by swift execution. But while the broadsheets had made much of "the Stuart Witch," no one, so far as I knew, had realized or published the fact that the witch was English.

"Don't worry," I said, realizing just what a silly remark this was, but unable to come up with anything better. I laid a hand on his sleeve, feeling the swift pulse that beat in his wrist. "You'll get me back before they have a chance to realize anything. Do you think they'll take me to Callendar House?"

He nodded, back in control. "Aye, I think so. If ye can, try to be alone near a window, just after nightfall. I'll come for ye then."

There was time for no more. Dougal slipped back through the door, closing it carefully behind him.

"Done," he said, looking from me to Jamie. "We give them the woman, and we'll be allowed to leave unmolested. No pursuit. We keep the horse. We'll need it, for Rupert, ye see," he said to me, half-apologetically.

"It's all right," I told him. I looked at the door, with its small dark spot where the bullet had passed, the same size as the hole in Rupert's side. My mouth was dry and I swallowed hard. I was a cuckoo's egg, about to be laid in the wrong nest. The three of us hesitated before the door, all reluctant to take the final step.

"I'd b-better go," I said, trying hard to control my shaking voice and limbs. "They'll wonder what's keeping us."

Jamie closed his eyes for a moment, nodded, then stepped toward me.

"I think you'd better swoon, Sassenach," he said. "It will be easier that way, maybe." He stooped, picked me up in his arms, and carried me through the door that Dougal held open.

His heart pounded beneath my ear, and I could feel the trembling in his arms as he carried me. After the stuffiness of the church, with its smells of sweat, blood, black powder and horse manure, the cold fresh air of early morning took my breath away, and I huddled against him, shivering. His hands tightened under my knees and shoulders, hard as a promise; he would never let me go.

"God," he said once, under his breath, and then we had reached them. Sharp questions, mumbled answers, the reluctant loosening of his grip as he laid me on the ground, and then the swish of his feet, going away through wet grass. I was alone, in the hands of the strangers.

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IN WHICH QUITE A LOT OF THINGS GANG AGLEY

I hunched closer to the fire, holding out my hands to thaw. They were grimy from holding the reins all day, and I wondered briefly whether it was worthwhile walking the distance to the stream to wash them. Maintaining modern standards of hygiene in the absence of all forms of plumbing sometimes seemed a good deal more trouble than it was worth. No bloody wonder if people got ill and died frequently, I thought sourly. They died of simple filth and ignorance more than anything.

The thought of dying in filth was sufficient to get me to my feet, tired as I was. The tiny streamlet that passed by the campsite was boggy near the edges, and my shoes sank deep into the marshy growth. Having traded dirty hands for wet feet, I slogged back to the fire, to find Corporal Rowbotham waiting for me with a bowl of what he said was stew.

"The Captain's compliments, Mum," he said, actually tugging his forelock as he handed me the bowl, "and he says to tell yer as we'll be in Tavistock tomorrow. There's an inn there." He hesitated, his round, homely, middle-aged face concerned, then added, "The Captain's apologies for the lack of accommodation, Mum, but we've fixed a tent for yer for tonight. 'S not much, but mebbe'll keep the rain off yer."

"Thank the Captain for me, Corporal," I said, as graciously as I could manage. "And thank *you*, too," I added, with more warmth. I was entirely aware that Captain Mainwaring considered me a burdensome nuisance, and would have taken no thought at all for my night's shelter. The tent—a spare length of canvas draped carefully over a tree limb and pegged at both sides—was undoubtedly the sole idea of Corporal Rowbotham.

The Corporal went away and I sat by myself, slowly eating scorched potatoes and stringy beef. I'd found a late patch of charlock near the stream, leaves wilting and brown around the edges, and had brought back a handful in my pocket, along with a few juniper berries picked during a stop earlier in the day. The mustard leaves were old and very bitter, but I managed to get them down by wodging them between bites of potato. I finished the meal with the juniper berries, biting each one briefly to avoid choking and then swallowing the tough, flattened berry, seed and all. The oily burst of flavor sent fumes up the back of my throat that made my eyes water, but they did cleanse my tongue of the taste of grease and scorch, and would, with the charlock leaves, maybe be sufficient to ward off scurvy.

I had had a large store of dried fiddleheads, rose hips, dried apples and dill seeds in the larger of my two medicine chests, carefully collected as a defense against nutritional deficiency during the long winter months. I hoped Jamie was eating them.

I put my head down on my knees; I didn't think anyone was looking at me, but I didn't want my face to show when I thought of Jamie.

I had stayed in my pretended swoon on Falkirk Hill as long as I could, but was roused before too long by a British dragoon trying to force brandy from a pocket flask down my throat. Unsure quite what to do with me, my "rescuers" had taken me to Callendar House and turned me over to General Hawley's staff.

So far, all had gone according to plan. Within the hour, though, things had gone rather seriously awry. From sitting in an anteroom and listening to everything that was said around me, I soon learned that what I had thought was a major battle during the night had in fact been no more than a small skirmish between the MacKenzies and a detachment of English troops on their way to join the main body of the army. Said army was even now assembling itself to meet the expected Highland charge on Falkirk Hill; the battle I thought I had lived through had not, in fact, happened yet!

General Hawley himself was overseeing this process, and as no one seemed to have any idea what ought to be done with me, I was consigned to the custody of a young private, along with a letter describing the circumstances of my rescue, and dispatched to a Colonel Campbell's temporary headquarters at Kerse. The young private, a stocky specimen named Dobbs, was distressingly zealous in his urge to perform his duty, and despite several tries along the way, I had been unable to get away from him.

We had arrived in Kerse, only to find that Colonel Campbell was not there, but had been summoned to Livingston.

"Look," I had suggested to my escorting gaoler, "plainly Colonel Campbell is not going to have time or inclination to talk to me, and there's nothing I could tell him in any case. Why don't I just find lodging in the town here, until I can make some arrangement for continuing my journey to Edinburgh?" For lacking any better idea, I had given the English basically the same story I had given to Colum MacKenzie, two years earlier; that I was a widowed lady from Oxford, traveling to visit a relative in Scotland, when I had been set upon and abducted by Highland brigands.

Private Dobbs shook his head, flushing stubbornly. He couldn't be more than twenty, and he wasn't very bright, but once he got an idea in his head, he hung on to it.

"I can't let you do that, Mrs. Beauchamp," he said—for I had used my own maiden name as an alias—"Captain Bledsoe'll have my liver for it, an' I don't bring you safe to the Colonel."

So to Livingston we had gone, mounted on two of the sorriest-looking nags I had ever seen. I was finally relieved of the attentions of my escort, but with no improvement in my circumstances. Instead, I found myself immured in an upper room in a house in Livingston, telling the story once again, to one Colonel Gordon MacLeish Campbell, a Lowland Scot in command of one of the Elector's regiments.

"Aye, I see," he said, in the sort of tone that suggested that he didn't see at all. He was a small, foxy-faced man, with balding reddish hair brushed back from his temples. He narrowed his eyes still further, glancing down at the crumpled letter on his blotter.

"This says," he said, placing a pair of half-spectacles on his nose in order to peer more closely at the sheet of paper, "that one of your captors, Mistress, was a Fraser clansman, very large, and with red hair. Is this information correct?"

"Yes," I said, wondering what he was getting at.

He tilted his head so the spectacles slid down his nose, the better to fix me with a piercing stare over the tops.

"The men who rescued you near Falkirk gave it as their impression that one of your captors was none other than the notorious Highland chief known as 'Red Jamie.' Now, I am aware, Mrs. Beauchamp, that you were … distressed, shall we say?"—his lips pulled back from the word, but it wasn't a smile—"during the period of your captivity, and perhaps in no fit frame of mind to make close observations, but did you notice at any time whether the other men present referred to this man by name?"

"They did. They called him Jamie." I couldn't imagine any harm that could be done by telling him this; the broadsheets I had seen made it abundantly clear that Jamie was a supporter of the Stuart cause. The placing of Jamie at the battle of Falkirk was possibly of interest to the English, but could hardly incriminate him further.

"They canna very well hang me more than once," he'd said. Once would be more than enough. I glanced at the window. Night had fallen half an hour ago, and lanterns glowed in the street below, carried by soldiers passing to and fro. Jamie would be at Callendar House, searching for the window where I should be waiting.

I had the absurd certainty, all of a sudden, that he had followed me, had known somehow where I was going, and would be waiting in the street below, for me to show myself.

I rose abruptly and went to the window. The street below was empty, save for a seller of pickled herrings, seated on a stool with his lantern at his feet, waiting for the possibility of customers. It wasn't Jamie, of course. There was no way for him to find me. No one in the Stuart camp knew where I was; I was entirely alone. I pressed my hands hard against the glass in sudden panic, not caring that I might shatter it.

"Mistress Beauchamp! Are ye well?" The Colonel's voice behind me was sharp with alarm.

I clamped my lips tight together to stop them shaking and took several deep breaths, clouding the glass so the street below vanished in mist. Outwardly calm, I turned back to face the Colonel.

"I'm quite well," I said. "If you've finished asking questions, I'd like to go now."

"Would ye? Mmm." He looked me over with something like doubt, then shook his head decidedly.

"Ye'll stay the night here," he declared. "In the morning, I shall be sendin' ye southward."

I felt a spasm of shock clench my insides. "South! What the hell for?" I blurted.

His fox-fur eyebrows rose in astonishment and his mouth fell open. Then he shook himself slightly, and clamped it shut, opening it only a slit to deliver himself of his next words.

"I have orders to send on any information pertaining to the Highland criminal known as Red Jamie Fraser," he said. "Or any person associated with him."

"I'm not associated with him!" I said. Unless you wanted to count marriage, of course.

Colonel Campbell was oblivious. He turned to his desk and shuffled through a stack of dispatches.

"Aye, here it is. Captain Mainwaring will be the officer who escorts you. He will come to fetch ye here at dawn." He rang a small silver bell shaped like a goblin, and the door opened to reveal the inquiring face of his private orderly. "Garvie, ye'll see the lady to her quarters. Lock the door." He turned to me and bowed perfunctorily. "I think we shall not meet again, Mrs. Beauchamp; I wish ye good rest and God-speed." And that was that.

* * *

I didn't know quite how fast God-speed was, but it was likely faster than Captain Mainwaring's detachment had ridden. The Captain was in charge of a supply train of wagons, bound for Lanark. After delivery of these and their drivers, he was then to proceed south with the rest of his detachment, delivering nonvital dispatches as he went. I was apparently in the category of nonurgent intelligence, for we had been more than a week on the road, and no sign of reaching whatever place I was bound for.

"South." Did that mean London? I wondered, for the thousandth time. Captain Mainwaring had not told me my final destination, but I could think of no other possibility.

Lifting my head, I caught one of the dragoons across the fire staring at me. I stared flatly back at him, until he flushed and dropped his eyes to the bowl in his hands. I was accustomed to such looks, though most were less bold about it.

It had started from the beginning, with a certain reserved embarrassment on the part of the young idiot who had taken me to Livingston. It had taken some little time for me to realize that what caused the attitude of distant reserve on the part of the English officers was not suspicion, but a mixture of contempt and horror, mingled with a trace of pity and a sense of official responsibility that kept their true feelings from showing openly.

I had not merely been rescued from a band of the rapacious, marauding Scots. I had been delivered from a captivity during which I had spent an entire night in a single room with a number of men who were, to the certain knowledge of all right-thinking Englishmen, "Little more than Savage Beasts, guilty of Rapine, Robbery, and countless other such Hideous Crimes." Not thinkable, therefore, that a young Englishwoman had passed a night in the company of such beasts and emerged unscathed.

I reflected grimly that Jamie's carrying me out in an apparent swoon might have eased matters originally, but had undoubtedly contributed to the overall impression that he—and the other assorted Scots—had been having their forcible way with me. And thanks to the detailed letter written by the captain of my original band of rescuers, everyone to whom I had later been passed on—and everyone to whom they talked, I imagined—knew about it. Schooled in Paris, I understood the mechanics of gossip very well.

Corporal Rowbotham had certainly heard the stories, but continued to treat me kindly, with none of the smirking speculation I occasionally surprised on the faces of the other soldiers. If I had been inclined to offer up bedtime prayers, I would have included his name therein.

I rose, dusted off my cloak, and went to my tent. Seeing me go, Corporal Rowbotham also rose, and circling the fire discreetly, sat down by his comrades again, his back in direct line with the entrance to my tent. When the soldiers retired to their beds, I knew he would seek a spot at a respectful distance, but still within call of my resting place. He had done this for the past three nights, whether we slept in inn or field.

Three nights earlier I had tried yet another escape. Captain Mainwaring was well aware that I traveled with him under compulsion, and while he didn't like being burdened with me, he was too conscientious a soldier to shirk the responsibility. I had two guards, who watched me closely, riding on each side by day.

At night, the guard was relaxed, the Captain evidently thinking it unlikely that I would strike out on foot over deserted moors in the dead of winter. The Captain was correct. I had no interest in committing suicide.

On the night in question, however, we had passed through a small village about two hours before we stopped for the night. Even on foot, I was sure I could backtrack and reach the village before dawn. The village boasted a small distillery, from which wagons bearing loads of barrels departed for several towns in the surrounding region. I had seen the distiller's yard, piled high with barrels, and thought I had a decent chance of hiding there, and leaving with the first wagon.

So after the camp was quiet, and the soldiers lumped and snoring in their blankets round the fire, I had crept out of my own blanket, carefully laid near the edge of a willow grove, and made my way through the trailing fronds, with no more sound than the rustle of the wind.

Leaving the grove, I had thought it was the rustle of the wind behind me, too, until a hand clamped down on my shoulder.

"Don't scream. Y' don't want the Capting to know yer out wi'out leave." I didn't scream, only because all the breath had been startled out of me. The soldier, a tallish man called "Jessie" by his mates, because of the trouble he took in combing out his yellow curls, smiled at me, and I smiled a little uncertainly back at him.

His eyes dropped to my bosom. He sighed, raised his eyes to mine, and took a step toward me. I took three steps back, fast.

"It doesn't matter, really, does it, sweet'art?" he said, still smiling lazily. "Not after what's 'appened already. What's once more, eh? And I'm an Englishman, too," he coaxed. "Not a filthy Scot."

"Leave the poor woman alone, Jess," Corporal Rowbotham said, emerging silently from the screen of willows behind him. "She's had enough trouble, poor lady." He spoke softly enough, but Jessie glared at him, then, thinking better of whatever he'd had in mind, turned without another word and disappeared under the willow leaves.

The Corporal had waited, unspeaking, for me to gather up my fallen cloak, and then had followed me back to the camp. He had gone to pick up his own blanket, motioned to me to lie down, and placed himself six feet away, sitting up with his blanket about his shoulders Indian-style. Whenever I woke during the night, I had seen him still sitting there, staring shortsightedly into the fire.

Tavistock did have an inn. I didn't have much time to enjoy its amenities, though. We arrived in the village at midday, and Captain Mainwaring set off at once to deliver his current crop of dispatches. He returned within the hour, though, and told me to fetch my cloak.

"Why?" I said, bewildered. "Where are we going?"

He glanced at me indifferently and said "To Bellhurst Manor."

"Right," I said. It sounded a trifle more impressive than my current surroundings, which featured several soldiers playing at chuck-a-luck on the floor, a flea-ridden mongrel asleep by the fire, and a strong smell of hops.

The manor house, without regard to the natural beauty of its site, stubbornly turned its back on the open meadows and huddled inland instead, facing the stark cliffside.

The drive was straight, short, and unadorned, unlike the lovely curving approaches to French manors. But the entrance was equipped with two utilitarian stone pillars, each bearing the heraldic device of the owner. I stared at it as my horse clopped past, trying to place it. A cat—perhaps a leopard?—couchant, with a lily in its paw. It was familiar, I knew. But whose?

There was a stir in the long grass near the gate, and I caught a quick glimpse of pale blue eyes as a hunched bundle of rags scuttled into the shadows, away from the churn of the horses' hooves. Something about the ragged beggar seemed faintly familiar, too. Perhaps I was merely hallucinating; grasping at anything that didn't remind me of English soldiers.

The escort waited in the dooryard, not bothering to dismount, while I mounted the steps with Captain Mainwaring, and waited while he hammered at the door, rather wondering what might be on the other side of it.

"Mrs. Beauchamp?" The butler, if that's what he was, looked rather as though he suspected the worst. No doubt he was right.

"Yes," I said. "Er, whose house is this?"

But even as I asked, I raised my eyes and looked into the gloom of the inner hall. A face stared back at me, doe-eyes wide and startled.

Mary Hawkins.

* * *

As the girl opened her mouth, I opened mine as well. And screamed as loudly as I could. The butler, taken unprepared, took a step back, tripped on a settee, and fell over sideways like a bowls pin. I could hear the startled noises of the soldiers outside, coming up the steps.

I picked up my skirts, shrieked "A mouse! A mouse!" and fled toward the parlor, yelling like a banshee.

Infected by my apparent hysteria, Mary shrieked as well, and clutched me about the middle as I cannoned into her. I bore her back into the recesses of the parlor with me, and grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Don't tell anyone who I am," I breathed into her ear. "No one! My life depends on it!" I had thought I was being melodramatic, but it occurred to me, as I spoke the words, that I could very well be telling the exact truth. Being married to Red Jamie Fraser was likely a dicey proposition.

Mary had time only to nod in a dazed sort of way, when the door at the far side of the room opened, and a man came in.

"Whatever is all this wretched noise, Mary?" he demanded. A plump, contented-looking man, he had also the firm chin and tightly satisfied lips of the man who is contented because he generally gets his own way.

"N-nothing, Papa," said Mary, stuttering in her nervousness. "Only a m-m-mouse."

The baronet squeezed his eyes shut and inhaled deeply, seeking patience. Having found a simulacrum of that state, he opened them and gazed at his offspring.

"Say it again, child," he ordered. "But straight. I'll not have you mumbling and blithering. Take a deep breath, steady yourself. Now. Again."

Mary obeyed, inhaling 'til the laces of her bodice strained across the budding chest. Her fingers wound themselves in the silk brocade of her skirt, seeking support.

"It w-was a mouse, Papa. Mrs. Fr … er, this lady was frightened by a mouse."

Dismissing this attempt as barely satisfactory, the baronet stepped forward, examining me with interest.

"Oh? And who might you be, Madam?"

Captain Mainwaring, arriving belatedly after the search for the mythical mouse, popped up at my elbow and introduced me, handing over the note of introduction from Colonel MacLeish.

"Hum. So, it seems His Grace is to be your host, Madam, at least temporarily." He handed the note to the waiting butler, and took the hat the latter had taken from the nearby rack.

"I regret that our acquaintance should be so short, Mrs. Beauchamp. I was just leaving myself." He glanced over his shoulder, to a short stairway that branched off the hall. The butler, dignity restored, was already mounting it, grubby note reposing on a salver held before him. “I see Walmisley has gone to tell His Grace of your arrival. I must go, or I shall miss the post-coach. *Adieu,* Mrs. Beauchamp.”

He turned to Mary, hanging back against the paneled wainscoting. “Goodbye, daughter. Do try to … well.” The corners of his mouth turned up in what was meant to be a fatherly smile. “Goodbye, Mary.”

“Goodbye, Papa,” she murmured, eyes on the ground. I glanced from one to the other. What on earth was Mary Hawkins, of all people, doing here? Plainly she was staying at the house; I supposed the owner must be some connection of her family’s.

“Mrs. Beauchamp?” A small, tubby footman was bowing at my elbow. “His Grace will see you now, Madam.”

Mary’s hands clutched at my sleeve as I turned to follow the footman. “B-b-b-but …” she began. In my keyed-up state, I didn’t think I could manage sufficient patience to hear her out. I smiled vaguely and patted her hand.

“Yes, yes,” I said. “Don’t worry, it will be all right.”

“B-but it’s my …”

The footman bowed and pushed open a door at the end of the corridor. Light within fell on the richness of brocade and polished wood. The chair I could see to one side had a family crest embroidered on its back; a clearer version of the worn stone shield I had seen outside.

A leopard couchant, holding in its paw a bunch of lilies—or were they crocuses? Alarm bells rang in my mind as the chair’s occupant rose, his shadow falling across the polished doorsill as he turned. Mary’s final anguished word made it out, neck and neck with the footman’s announcement.

“My *g-g-godfather*!” she said.

“His Grace, the Duke of Sandringham,” said the footman.

“Mrs.… Beauchamp?” said the Duke, his mouth dropping open in astonishment.

“Well,” I said weakly. “Something like that.”

The door of the drawing room closed behind me, leaving me alone with His Grace. My last sight of Mary had been of her standing out in the hall, eyes like saucers, mouth opening and shutting silently like a goldfish.

There were huge Chinese jars flanking the windows, and inlaid tables under them. A bronze Venus posed coquettishly on the mantelpiece, companioned by a pair of gold-rimmed porcelain bowls and silver-gilt candelabra, blazing with beeswax candles. A close-napped carpet that I recognized as a very good Kermanshah covered most of the floor and a spinet crouched in one corner; what little space was left bare was occupied by marquetried furniture and the odd bit of statuary.

"Nice place you have here," I remarked graciously to the Duke, who had been standing before the fire, hands folded beneath his coattail as he watched me, an expression of wary amusement on the broad, florid face.

"Thank you," he said, in the piping tenor that came so oddly from that barrel-chested frame. "Your presence adorns it, my dear." Amusement won out over wariness, and he smiled, a bluff, disarming grin.

"Why Beauchamp?" he asked. "That isn't by chance your real name, is it?"

"My maiden name," I answered, rattled into the truth. His thick blond eyebrows shot up.

"*Are* you French?"

"No. English. I couldn't use Fraser, though, could I?"

"I see." Brows still raised, he nodded at a small brocaded love seat, inviting me to be seated. It was richly carved and beautifully proportioned, a museum piece, like everything else in the room. I swept my sodden skirts to one side as gracefully as I could, ignoring their liberal stains of mud and horsehair, and delicately lowered myself onto the primrose satin.

The Duke paced slowly back and forth before the fire, watching me, still with a slight smile on his features. I fought the growing warmth and comfort that spread through my aching legs, threatening to drag me into the abyss of fatigue that gaped open at my feet. This was no time to let down my guard.

“Which are you?” the Duke inquired suddenly. “An English hostage, a fervent Jacobite, or a French agent?”

I rubbed two fingers over the ache between my eyes. The correct answer was “none of the above,” but I didn’t think it would get me very far.

“The hospitality of this house seems a trifle lacking by comparison with its appointments,” I said, as haughtily as I could manage under the circumstances, which wasn’t all that much. Still, Louise’s example of great-ladydom had not been entirely in vain.

The Duke laughed, a high, chittering sort of laugh, like a bat that has just heard a good one.

“Your pardon, Madam. You’re quite right; I should have thought to offer you refreshment before presuming to question you. *Most* thoughtless of me.”

He murmured something to the footman who appeared in answer to his ring, then waited calmly before the fire for the tray to arrive. I sat in silence, glancing around the room, occasionally stealing a look at my host. Neither of us was interested in making small talk. Despite his outward geniality, this was an armed truce, and both of us knew it.

What I wanted to know was why. No stranger to people wondering who in hell I was, I rather wondered myself where the Duke came into it. Or where he thought *I* did. He had met me twice before, as Mrs. Fraser, wife of the laird of Lallybroch. Now I had turned up on his doorstep, posing as an English hostage named Beauchamp lately rescued from a gang of Scottish Jacobites. That was enough to make anyone wonder. But his attitude toward me went a long way past simple curiosity.

The tea arrived, complete with scones and cake. The Duke picked up his own cup, motioned to mine with a lift of one brow, and we took tea, still both in silence. Somewhere on the other side of the house, I could hear a muffled banging, as of someone hammering. The soft chime of the Duke’s cup against its saucer was the signal for the resumption of hostilities.

"Now, then," he said, with as much firmness as a man who sounded like Mickey Mouse could manage. "Let me begin, Mrs. Fraser—I may call you so? Thank you. Let me begin by saying that I know a great deal about you already. I intend to know more. You will do well to answer me fully and without hesitations. I must say, Mrs. Fraser, that you are amazingly difficult to kill"—he bowed slightly in my direction, that smile still on his lips—"but I feel sure that it could be accomplished, given sufficient determination."

I stared at him, unmoving; not out of any native sang-froid, but from simple dumbfoundedness. Adopting another of Louise's mannerisms, I raised both eyebrows inquiringly, sipped tea, then patted my lips delicately with the monogrammed serviette provided.

"I am afraid you will think me dense, Your Grace," I said politely, "but I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"Haven't you, my dear?"

The small, jolly blue eyes didn't blink. He reached for the silver-gilt bell on the tray and rang it once.

The man must have been waiting in the next room for the summons, for the door opened immediately. A tall, lean man in the dark habiliments and good linen of an upper servant advanced to the Duke's side and bowed deeply.

"Your Grace?" He spoke English, but the French accent was unmistakable. The face was French, too; long-nosed and white, with thin, tight lips and a pair of ears that stood out from his head like small wings on either side, their tips fiercely red. His lean face grew still paler as he looked up and spotted me, and he took an involuntary step backward.

Sandringham watched this with a frown of irritation, then switched his gaze to me.

"You don't recognize him?" he asked.

I was beginning to shake my head, when the man's right hand twitched suddenly against the cloth of his breeches. As unobtrusively as possible, he was making the sign of the horns, middle fingers folded down, index and little finger pointed at me. I knew, then, and in the next instant had seen the confirmation of my knowledge—the small beauty mark above the fork of his thumb.

I hadn't the slightest doubt; it was the man in the spotted shirt who had attacked me and Mary in Paris. And all too obviously in the Duke's employ.

"You bloody *bastard*!" I said. I leaped to my feet, overturning the tea table, and snatched up the nearest object to hand, a carved alabaster tobacco jar. I hurled it at the man's head, and he turned and fled precipitately, the heavy jar missing him by inches to smash against the door frame.

The door slammed to as I started after him, and I stopped in my tracks, breathing heavily. I glared at Sandringham, hands braced on my hips.

"Who is he?" I demanded.

"My valet," said the Duke calmly. "Albert Danton, by name. A good fellow with neckcloths and stockings, but a trifle excitable, as so many of these Frenchmen are. Incredibly superstitious, too." He frowned disapprovingly at the closed door. "Bloody papists, with all these saints and smells and such. Believe anything at all."

My breathing was slowing, though my heart still banged against the whalebones of my bodice. I had trouble drawing a deep breath.

"You filthy, disgusting, outrageous.… *pervert*!"

The Duke seemed bored by this, and nodded negligently.

"Yes, yes, my dear. All that, I'm sure, and more. A trifle unlucky, too, at least on that occasion."

"Unlucky? Is that what you'd call it?" Unsteadily, I moved to the love seat, and sat down. My hands were shaking with nerves, and I clasped them together, hidden in the folds of my skirt.

"On several counts, my dear lady. Just look at it." He spread out both hands in graceful entreaty. "I send Danton to dispose of you. He and his companions decide to entertain themselves a bit first; that's all well and good, but in the process, they get a good look at you, leap unaccountably to the conclusion that you're a witch of some kind, lose their heads entirely and run off. But not before debauching my goddaughter, who is present by accident, thus ruining all chance of the excellent marriage I had painstakingly arranged for her. Consider the irony of it!"

The shocks were coming thick and fast, and I hardly knew which to respond to first. There seemed one particularly striking statement in this speech, though.

"What do you mean 'dispose of me'?" I demanded. "Do you mean to say you actually tried to have me *killed*?" The room seemed to be swaying a bit, and I took a deep gulp of tea as being the nearest thing to a restorative available. It wasn't terribly effective.

"Well, yes," Sandringham said pleasantly. "That was the point I was endeavoring to make. Tell me, my dear, would you care for a cup of sherry?"

I eyed him narrowly for a moment. Having just stated that he'd tried to have me killed, he now expected me to accept a cup of sherry from his hands?

"Brandy," I said. "Lots of it."

He giggled in that high-pitched way again, and made his way to the sideboard, remarking over his shoulder, "Captain Randall said you were a most diverting woman. Quite an encomium from the Captain, you know. He hasn't much use for women ordinarily, though they swarm over him. His looks, I suppose; it can't be his manner."

"So Jack Randall *does* work for you," I said, taking the glass he handed me. I had watched him pour out two glasses, and was sure that both contained nothing but brandy. I took a large and sorely needed swallow.

The Duke matched me, blinking his eyes at the effect of the pungent liquid.

"Of course," he said. "Often the best tool is the most dangerous. One doesn't hesitate to use it on that account; one merely makes sure to take adequate precautions."

"Dangerous, eh? Just how much do you know about Jonathan Randall?" I asked curiously.

The Duke tittered. "Oh, virtually everything, I should think, my dear. Most likely a great deal more than you do, in fact. It doesn't do to employ a man like that without having a means at hand to control him, you know. And money is a good bridle, but a weak rein."

“Unlike blackmail?” I said dryly.

He sat back, hands clasped across his bulging stomach, and regarded me with bland interest.

“Ah. You are thinking that blackmail might work both ways, I suppose?” He shook his head, dislodging a few grains of snuff that floated down onto the silk waistcoat.

“No, my dear. For one thing, there is something of a difference in our stations. While rumor of that sort might affect my reception in some circles of society, that is not a matter of grave concern to me. While for the good Captain—well, the army takes a very dim view of such unnatural predilections. The penalty is often death, in fact. No, not much comparison, really.” He cocked his head to one side, so far as the multiple chins allowed.

“But it is neither the promise of wealth nor the threat of exposure that binds John Randall to me,” he said. The small, watery blue eyes gleamed in their orbits. “He serves me because I can give him what he desires.”

I eyed the corpulent frame with unconcealed disgust, making His Grace shake with laughter.

“No, not that,” he said. “The Captain’s tastes are somewhat more refined than that. Unlike my own.”

“What, then?”

“Punishment,” he said softly. “But you know that, don’t you? Or at least your husband does.”

I felt unclean simply from being near him, and rose to get away. The shards of the alabaster tobacco jar lay on the floor, and I kicked one inadvertently, so that it pinged off the wall, ricocheting and spinning off under the love seat, reminding me of the recent Danton.

I wasn’t at all sure that I wanted to discuss the subject of my aborted murder with him, but it seemed at the moment preferable to some alternatives.

“What did you want to kill me for?” I asked abruptly, turning to face him. I glanced quickly over the collection of objects on a piecrust table, looking for a suitable weapon of defense, just in case he still felt the urge.

He didn't seem to. Instead, he bent laboriously over and picked up the teapot—miraculously unbroken—and set it upright on the restored tea table.

"It seemed expedient at the time," he said calmly. "I had learned that you and your husband were attempting to thwart a particular affair in which I had interested myself. I considered removing your husband instead, but it seemed too dangerous, what with his close relation to two of the greatest families in Scotland."

"Considered removing him?" A light dawned—one of many that were going off in my skull like fireworks. "Was it you who sent the seamen who attacked Jamie in Paris?"

The Duke nodded in offhand manner.

"That seemed the simplest method, if a bit crude. But then, Dougal Mac-Kenzie turned up in Paris, and I wondered whether in fact your husband was in fact working *for* the Stuarts. I became unsure where his interests lay."

What I was wondering was just where the *Duke*'s interests lay. This odd speech made it sound very much as though he was a secret Jacobite—and if so, he'd done a really masterly job of keeping his secrets.

"And then," he went on, delicately placing the teapot's lid back in place, "there was your growing friendship with Louis of France. Even had your husband failed with the bankers, Louis could have supplied Charles Stuart with what he needed—provided you kept your pretty nose out of the affair."

He frowned closely at the scone he was holding, flicked a couple of threads off it, then decided against eating it and tossed it onto the table.

"Once it became clear what was really happening, I tried to lure your husband back to Scotland, with the offer of a pardon; very expensive, that was," he said reflectively. "And all for nothing, too!

"But then I recalled your husband's apparent devotion to you—quite touching," he said, with a benevolent smile that I particularly disliked. "I supposed that your tragic demise might well distract him from the endeavor in which he was engaged without provoking the sort of interest his own murder would have involved."

Suddenly thinking of something, I turned to look at the harpsichord in the corner of the room. Several sheets of music adorned its rack, written in a fine, clear hand. *Fifty thousand pounds, upon the occasion of Your Highness's setting foot in Scotland*. Signed S. "S," of course, for Sandringham. The Duke laughed, in apparent delight.

"That was really very clever of you, my dear. It must have been you; I'd heard of your husband's unfortunate inability with music."

"Actually, it wasn't," I replied, turning back from the piano. The table at my side lacked anything useful in the way of letter openers or blunt objects, but I hastily picked up a vase, and buried my face in the mass of hothouse flowers it held. I closed my eyes, feeling the brush of cool petals against my suddenly heated cheeks. I didn't dare to look up, for fear my telltale face would give me away.

For behind the Duke's shoulder, I had seen a round, leathery object, shaped like a pumpkin, framed by the green velvet draperies like one of the Duke's exotic art objects. I opened my eyes, peering cautiously through the petals, and the wide, snaggle-toothed mouth split in a grin like a jack-o'-lantern's.

I was torn between terror and relief. I had been right, then, about the beggar near the gate. It was Hugh Munro, an old companion from Jamie's days as a Highland outlaw. A one-time schoolmaster, he had been captured by the Turks at sea, disfigured by torture, and driven to beggary and poaching—professions he augmented by successful spying. I had heard he was an agent of the Highland army, but hadn't realized his activities had brought him so far south.

How long had he been there, perched like a bird on the ivy outside the second-story window? I didn't dare try to communicate with him; it was all I could do to keep my eyes fixed on a point just above the Duke's shoulder, gazing with apparent indifference into space.

The Duke was regarding me with interest. "Really? Not Gerstmann, surely? I shouldn't have thought he had a sufficiently devious mind."

"And you think I do? I'm flattered." I kept my nose in the flowers, speaking distractedly into a peony.

The figure outside released his grip on the ivy long enough to bring one hand up into view. Deprived of his tongue by his Saracen captors, Hugh Munro's hands spoke for him. Staring intently at me, he pointed deliberately, first at me, then at himself, then off to one side. The broad hand tilted and the first two fingers became a pair of running legs, racing away to the east. A final wink, a clenched fist in salute, and he was gone.

I relaxed, trembling slightly with reaction, and took a deep, restorative breath. I sneezed, and put the flowers down.

"So you're a Jacobite, are you?" I asked.

"Not necessarily," the Duke answered genially. "The question is, my dear—are you?" Completely unselfconscious, he took off his wig and scratched his fair, balding head before putting it back on.

"You tried to stop the effort to restore King James to his throne when you were in Paris. Failing at that, you and your husband appear now to be His Highness's most loyal supporters. Why?" The small blue eyes showed nothing more than a mild interest, but it wasn't a mild interest that had tried to have me killed.

Ever since finding out who my host was, I had been trying as hard as I could to remember what it was that Frank and the Reverend Mr. Wakefield had once said about him. *Was* he a Jacobite? So far as I could recall, the verdict of history—in the persons of Frank and the Reverend—was uncertain. So was I.

"I don't believe I'm going to tell you," I said slowly.

One blond brow arched high, the Duke took a small enameled box from his pocket and abstracted a pinch of the contents.

"Are you sure that's wise, my dear? Danton is still within call, you know."

"Danton wouldn't touch me with a ten-foot pole," I said bluntly. "Neither would you, for that matter. Not," I added hastily, seeing his mouth open, "on that account. But if you want so badly to know which side I'm on, you aren't going to kill me before finding out, now, are you?"

The Duke choked on his pinch of snuff and coughed heavily, thumping himself on the chest of his embroidered waistcoat. I drew myself up and stared coldly down my nose at him as he sneezed and spluttered.

"You're trying to frighten me into telling you things, but it won't work," I said, with a lot more confidence than I felt.

Sandringham dabbed gently at his streaming eyes with a handkerchief. At last he drew a deep breath, and blew it out between plump, pursed lips as he stared at me.

"Very well, then," he said, quite calmly. "I imagine my workmen have finished their alterations to your quarters by now. I shall summon a maid to take you to your room."

I must have gawped foolishly at him, for he smiled derisively as he hoisted himself out of his chair.

"To a point, you know, it doesn't matter," he said. "Whatever else you may be or whatever information you may possess, you have one invaluable attribute as a houseguest."

"And what's that?" I demanded. He paused, hand on the bell, and smiled.

"You're Red Jamie's wife," he said softly. "And he *is* fond of you, my dear, is he not?"

* * *

As prisons go, I had seen worse. The room measured perhaps thirty feet in each dimension, and was furnished with a lavishness exceeded only by the sitting room downstairs. The canopied bed stood on a small dais, with baldachins of ostrich feathers sprouting from the corners of its damask drapes, and a pair of matching brocaded chairs squatted comfortably before a huge fireplace.

The maidservant who had accompanied me in set down the basin and ewer she carried, and hurried to light the ready-laid fire. The footman laid his covered supper-tray on the table by the door, then stood stolidly in the doorway, dishing any thoughts I might have had of trying a quick dash down the hall. Not that it would do me much good to try, I thought gloomily; I'd be hopelessly lost in the house after the first turn of the corridor; the bloody place was as big as Buckingham Palace.

"I'm sure His Grace hopes as you'll be comfortable, ma'am," said the servant, curtsying prettily on her way out.

"Oh, I'll bet he does," I said, ungraciously.

The door closed behind her with a depressingly solid thud, and the grating sound of the big key turning seemed to scrape away the last bit of insulation covering my raw nerves.

Shivering in the chill of the vast room, I clutched my elbows and walked to the fire, where I subsided into one of the chairs. My impulse was to take advantage of the solitude to have a nice private little fit of hysterics. On the other hand, I was afraid that if I allowed my tight-reined emotions any play at all, I would never get them in check again. I closed my eyes tight and watched the red flicker of the firelight on my inner eyelids, willing myself to calmness.

After all, I was in no danger for the moment, and Hugh Munro was on his way to Jamie. Even if Jamie had lost my trail over the course of the week's travel, Hugh would find him and lead him right. Hugh knew every cottar and tinker, every farmhouse and manor within four parishes. A message from the speechless man would travel through the network of news and gossip as quickly as the wind-driven clouds passed over the mountains. If he had made it down from his lofty perch in the ivy and safely off the Duke's grounds without being apprehended, that was.

"Don't be ridiculous," I said aloud, "the man's a professional poacher. Of course he made it." The echo of my words against the ornate white-plaster ceiling was somehow comforting.

"And if so," I continued firmly, still talking to hear myself, "then Jamie will come."

Right, I thought suddenly. And Sandringham's men will be waiting for him, when he does. *You're Red Jamie's wife*, the Duke had said. My one invaluable attribute. I was bait.

"I'm a salmon egg!" I exclaimed, sitting up straight in my chair. The sheer indignity of the image summoned up a small but welcome spurt of rage that pushed the fear back a little way. I tried to fan the flames of anger by getting up and striding back and forth, thinking of new names to call the Duke next time we met. I'd gotten as far in my compositions as "skulking pederast," when a muffled shouting from outside distracted my attention.

Pushing back the heavy velvet drapes from the window, I found that the Duke had been as good as his word. Stout wooden bars crisscrossed the window frame, latticed so closely together that I could scarcely thrust an arm between them. I could see, though.

Dusk had fallen, and the shadows under the park trees were black as ink. The shouting was coming from there, matched by answering cries from the stables, where two or three figures suddenly appeared, bearing lit torches.

The small, dark figures ran toward the wood, the fire of their pine torches streaming backward, flaring orange in the cold, damp wind. As they reached the edge of the park, a knot of vaguely human shapes became visible, tumbling onto the grass before the house. The ground was wet, and the force of their struggle left deep gashes of black in the winter-dead lawn.

I stood on tiptoe, gripping the bars and pressing my head against the wood in an effort to see more. The light of the day had failed utterly, and by the torchlight, I could distinguish no more than the occasional flailing limb in the riot below.

It couldn't be Jamie, I told myself, trying to swallow the lump in my throat that was my heart. Not so soon, not now. And not alone, surely he wouldn't have come alone? For I could see by now that the fight centered on one man, now on his knees, no more than a hunched black shape under the fists and sticks of the Duke's gamekeepers and stable-lads.

Then the hunched figure sprawled flat, and the shouting died, though a few more blows were given for good measure before the small gang of servants stood back. A few words of conversation were exchanged, inaudible from my vantage point, and two of the men stooped and seized the figure beneath the arms. As they passed beneath my third-floor window on their way toward the back of the house, the torchlight illuminated a pair of dragging, sandal-shod feet, and the tatters of a grimy smock. Not Jamie.

One of the stable-lads scampered alongside, triumphantly carrying a thick leather wallet on a strap. I was too far above to hear the clink of the tiny metal ornaments on the strap, but they glittered in the torchlight, and all the strength went from my arms in a rush of horror and despair.

They were coins and buttons, the small metal objects. And gaberlunzies. The tiny lead seals that gave a beggar license to plead his poverty through a given parish. Hugh Munro had four of them, a mark of favor for his trials at the hands of the Turk. Not Jamie, but Hugh.

I was shaking so badly that my legs would hardly carry me, but I ran to the door and pounded on it with all my strength.

"Let me out!" I shrieked. "I have to see the Duke! Let me out, I say!"

There was no response to my continued yelling and pounding, and I dashed back to the window. The scene below was eminently peaceful now; a boy stood holding a torch for one of the gardeners, who was kneeling at the edge of the lawn, tenderly replacing the divots of turf dug up by the fight.

"Hoy!" I roared. Covered as they were by bars, I couldn't crank the casements outward. I ran across the room to fetch one of the heavy silver candlesticks, dashed back, and smashed a pane of glass, heedless of the flying fragments.

"Help! Ahoy, down there! Tell the Duke I want to see him! Now! Help!" I thought one of the figures turned its head toward me, but neither made any motion toward the house, going on with their work as though no more than a night bird's cry disturbed the darkness around them.

Back to the door I ran, hammering and shouting, and back to the window, and back to the door again. I shouted, pleaded, and threatened until my throat was raw and hoarse, and beat upon the unyielding door until my fists were red and bruised, but no one came. I might have been alone in the great house, for all I could hear. The silence in the hallway was as deep as that of the night outside; as silent as the grave. All check on my fear was gone, and I sank at last to my knees before the door, sobbing without restraint.

I woke, chilled and stiff, with a throbbing headache, to feel something wide and solid shoving me across the floor. I came awake with a jerk as the opening edge of the heavy door pinched my thigh against the floor.

"Ow!" I rolled clumsily, then scrabbled to my hands and knees, hair hanging in my face.

"Claire! Oh, do be quiet, p-please! Darling, are you hurt?" With a rustle of starched lawn, Mary dropped to her knees beside me. Behind her, the door swung shut and I heard the click of the lock above.

"Yes—I mean, no. I'm all right," I said dazedly. "But Hugh …" I clamped my lips shut and shook my head, trying to clear it. "What in bloody hell are you doing here, Mary?"

"I b-bribed the housekeeper to let me in," she whispered. "Must you talk so loudly?"

"It doesn't matter much," I said, in a normal tone of voice. "That door's so thick, nothing short of a football match could be heard through it."

"A what?"

"Never mind." My mind was beginning to clear, though my eyes were sticky and swollen and my head still throbbed like a drum. I pushed myself to my feet and staggered to the basin, where I splashed cold water over my face.

"You bribed the housekeeper?" I said, wiping my face with a towel. "But we're still locked in, aren't we? I heard the key turn."

Mary was pale in the dimness of the room. The candle had guttered out while I slept on the floor, and there was no light but the deep red glow of the fireplace embers. She bit her lip.

"It was the b-best I could do. Mrs. Gibson was too afraid of the Duke to give me a key. All she would do was agree to lock me in with you, and let me out in the morning. I thought you m-might like company," she added timidly.

"Oh," I said. "Well … thank you. It was a kind thought." I took a new candle from the drawer and went to the fireplace to light it. The candlestick was clotted with wax from the burned-out candle; I tipped a small puddle of melted wax onto the tabletop and set the fresh candle in it, heedless of damage to the Duke's intaglio.

"Claire," Mary said. "Are you … are you in trouble?"

I bit my lip to prevent a hasty reply. After all, she was only seventeen, and her ignorance of politics was probably even more profound than her lack of knowledge of men had been.

"Er, yes," I said. "Rather a lot, I'm afraid." My brain was starting to work again. Even if Mary was not equipped to be of much practical help in escaping, she might at least be able to provide me with information about her godfather and the doings of his household.

"Did you hear the racket out by the wood earlier?" I asked. She shook her head. She was beginning to shiver; in such a large room, the heat of the fire died away long before it reached the bed dais.

"No, but I heard one of the cookmaids saying the keepers had caught a poacher in the park. It's awfully cold. Can't we get into b-bed?"

She was already crawling across the coverlet, burrowing beneath the bolster for the edge of the sheet. Her bottom was round and neat, childlike under the white nightdress.

"That wasn't a poacher," I said. "Or rather it was, but it was also a friend. He was on his way to find Jamie, to tell him I was here. Do you know what happened after the keepers took him?"

Mary swung around, face a pale blur within the shadows of the bed hangings. Even in this light, I could see that the dark eyes had grown huge.

"Oh, Claire! I'm so sorry!"

"Well, so am I," I said impatiently. "Do you know where the poacher is, though?" If Hugh had been imprisoned somewhere accessible, like the stables, there was a bare chance that Mary might be able to release him somehow in the morning.

The trembling of her lips, making her normal stutter seem comprehensible by comparison, should have warned me. But the words, once she got them out, struck through my heart, sharp and sudden as a thrown dirk.

"Th-they h-h-hanged him," she said. "At the p-park g-gate."

It was some time before I was able to pay attention to my surroundings. The flood of shock, grief, fear, and shattered hope washed over me, swamping me utterly. I was dimly conscious of Mary's small hand timidly patting my shoulder, and her voice offering handkerchiefs and drinks of water, but remained curled in a ball, not speaking, but shaking, and waiting for the relaxation of the wrenching despair that clenched my stomach like a fist. Finally I exhausted the panic, if not myself, and opened my eyes blearily.

"I'll be all right," I said at last, sitting up and wiping my nose inelegantly on my sleeve. I took the proffered towel and blotted my eyes with it. Mary hovered over me, looking concerned, and I reached out and squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"Really," I said. "I'm all right now. And I'm very glad you're here." A thought struck me, and I dropped the towel, looking curiously at her.

"Come to think of it, why *are* you here?" I asked. "In this house, I mean."

She looked down, blushing, and picked at the coverlet.

"The D-Duke is my godfather, you know."

"Yes, so I gathered," I said. "Somehow I doubt that he merely wanted the pleasure of your company, though."

She smiled a little at the remark. "N-no. But he—the Duke, I mean—he thinks he's found another h-h-husband for me." The effort to get out "husband" left her red-faced. "Papa brought me here to meet him."

I gathered from her demeanor that this wasn't news requiring immediate congratulations. "Do you know the man?"

Only by name, it turned out. A Mr. Isaacson, an importer, of London. Too busy to travel all the way to Edinburgh to meet his intended, he had agreed to come to Bellhurst, where the marriage would take place, all parties being agreeable.

I picked up the silver-backed hairbrush from the bed table and abstractedly began to tidy my hair. So, having failed to secure an alliance with the French nobility, the Duke was intending to sell his goddaughter to a wealthy Jew.

"I have a new trousseau," Mary said, trying to smile. "Forty-three embroidered petticoats—two with g-gold thread." She broke off, her lips pressed tight together, staring down sightlessly at her bare left hand. I put my own hand over it.

"Well." I tried to be encouraging. "Perhaps he'll be a kind man."

"That's what I'm af-fraid of." Avoiding my questioning look, she glanced down, twisting her hands together in her lap.

"They didn't tell Mr. Isaacson—about P-Paris. And they say I mustn't, either." Her face crumpled miserably. "They brought a horrible old woman to tell me how I must act on my w-w-wedding night, to—to pretend it's the first time, but I … oh, Claire, how can I do it?" she wailed. "And Alex—I didn't tell him; I couldn't! I was such a coward, I d-didn't even say goodbye!"

She threw herself into my arms, and I patted her back, losing a little of my own grief in the effort to comfort her. At length, she grew calmer, and sat up, hiccuping, to take a little water.

"Are you going to go through with it?" I asked. She looked up at me, her lashes spiked and wet.

"I haven't any choice," she said simply.

"But—" I started, and then stopped, helpless.

She was quite right. Young and female, with no resources, and no man who could come to her rescue, there was simply nothing to do but to accede to her father's and godfather's wishes, and marry the unknown Mr. Isaacson of London.

Heavyhearted, neither of us had any appetite for the food on the tray. We crawled under the covers to keep warm, and Mary, worn out with emotion, was sound asleep within minutes. No less exhausted, I found myself unable to sleep, grieving for Hugh, worried for Jamie, and curious about the Duke.

The sheets were chilly, and my feet seemed like chunks of ice. Avoiding the more distressful things on my mind, I turned my thoughts to Sandringham. What was his place in this affair?

To all appearances, the man was a Jacobite. He had, by his own admission, been willing to do murder—or pay for it, at least—in order to ensure that Charles got the backing he needed to launch his expedition to Scotland. And the evidence of the musical cipher made it all but certain that it was the Duke who had finally induced Charles to set sail in August, with his promise of help.

There were certainly men who took pains to conceal their Jacobite sympathies; given the penalties for treason, it was hardly peculiar. And the Duke had a good deal more to lose than some, should he back a failing cause.

Still, Sandringham hardly struck me as an enthusiastic supporter of the Stuart monarchy. Given his remarks about Danton, clearly he wouldn't be in sympathy with a Catholic ruler. And why wait so long to provide support, when Charles was in desperate need of money now—and had been, in fact, ever since his arrival in Scotland?

I could think of two conceivable reasons for the Duke's behavior, neither particularly creditable to the gentleman, but both well within the bounds of his character.

He could in fact be a Jacobite, willing to countenance an unpalatable Catholic king in return for the future benefits he might anticipate as chief backer of the restored Stuart monarchy. I could see that; "principle" wasn't in the man's vocabulary, whereas "self-interest" clearly was a term he knew well. He might wish to wait until Charles reached England, in order that the money not be wasted before the Highland army's final, crucial push to London. Anyone familiar with Charles Stuart could see the common sense in not entrusting him with too much money at once.

Or, for that matter, he might have wished to ensure that the Stuarts did in fact have some substantial backing for their cause before becoming financially involved himself; after all, contributing to a rebellion is not the same thing as supporting an entire army single-handed.

Contrariwise, I could see a much more sinister reason for the conditions of the Duke's offer. Making support conditional on the Jacobite army reaching English soil ensured that Charles would struggle on against the increasing opposition of his own leaders, dragging his reluctant, straggling army farther and farther south, away from the sheltering mountains in which they might find refuge.

If the Duke could expect benefits from the Stuarts for help in restoring them, what might he expect from the Hanovers, in return for luring Charles Stuart within their reach—and betraying him and his followers into the hands of the English army?

History had not been able to say what the Duke's true leanings had been. That struck me as odd; surely he would have to reveal his true intent sooner or later. Of course, I mused, the Old Fox, Lord Lovat, had managed to play off both sides of the Jacobite Rising last time, simultaneously ingratiating himself with the Hanovers and retaining the favor of the Stuarts. And Jamie had done it himself, for a time. Maybe it wasn't all that difficult to hide one's loyalties, in the constantly shifting morass of Royal politics.

The chill was creeping up my feet, and I moved my legs restlessly, my skin seeming numb as I rubbed my calves together. Legs obviously generated much less friction than dry sticks; no perceptible warmth resulted from this activity.

Lying sleepless, restless and clammy, I suddenly became aware of a tiny, rhythmic popping noise next to me. I turned my head, listening, then raised up on one elbow and peered incredulously at my companion. She was curled on her side, delicate skin flushed with sleep, so that she looked like a hothouse flower in full bloom, thumb tucked securely in the soft pink recesses of her mouth. Her lower lip moved as I watched, in the faintest of sucking motions.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. In the end, I did neither; merely pulled the thumb gently free and laid the limp hand curled upon her bosom. I blew out the candle and cuddled close to Mary.

Whether it was the innocence of that small gesture, with the far-off memories of trust and safety it provoked, the simple comfort of a warm body nearby, or only the exhaustion of fear and grief, my feet thawed, I relaxed at last, and fell asleep.

Wrapped in a warm cocoon of quilts, I slept deep and dreamlessly. It was all the greater a shock, then, when I was jerked abruptly from the soft, quiet dark of oblivion. It was still dark—black as a coachman's hat, in fact, as the fire had gone out—but the surroundings were neither soft nor quiet. Something heavy had landed suddenly on the bed, striking my arm in the process, and was apparently in the process of murdering Mary.

The bed heaved and the mattress tilted sharply under me, the bedframe shuddering with the force of the struggle taking place next to me. Agonized grunts and whispered threats came from close at hand, and a flailing hand—Mary's, I thought—struck me in the eye.

I rolled hastily out of bed, tripping on the step of the dais and falling flat on the floor. The sounds of struggle above me intensified, with a horrible, high-pitched squealing noise that I took to be Mary's best effort at a scream while being strangled.

There was a sudden startled exclamation, in a deep male voice, then a further convulsion of bedclothes, and the squealing stopped abruptly. Moving hastily, I found the flint box on the table and struck a light for the candle. Its wavering flame strengthened and rose, revealing what I had suspected from the sound of that vigorous Gaelic expletive—Mary, invisible save for a pair of wildly scrabbling hands, face smothered under a pillow and body flattened by the prostrate form of my large and agitated husband, who despite his advantage of size, appeared to have his hands well and truly full.

Intent on subduing Mary, he hadn't glanced up at the newly lit candle, but went on trying to capture her hands, while simultaneously holding the pillow over her face. Suppressing the urge to laugh hysterically at the spectacle, I instead set down the candle, leaned over the bed, and tapped him on the shoulder.

"Jamie?" I said.

"Jesus!" He leaped like a salmon, springing off the bed and coming to rest on the floor in a crouch, dirk half-drawn. He saw me then, and sagged in relief, closing his eyes for an instant.

"Jesus God, Sassenach! Never do that again, d'ye hear? Be quiet," he said briefly to Mary, who had escaped from the pillow and was now sitting bolt upright in bed, bug-eyed and spluttering. "I didna mean ye harm; I thought ye were my wife." He strode purposefully round the bed, took me by both shoulders and kissed me hard, as though to reassure himself that he'd got the right woman now. He had, and I kissed him back with considerable fervor, reveling in the scrape of his unshaven beard and the warm, pungent scent of him; damp linen and wool, with a strong hint of male sweat.

"Get dressed," he said, letting go. "The damn house is crawling wi' servants. It's like an ant's nest below."

"How did you get in here?" I asked, looking around for my discarded gown.

"Through the door, of course," he said impatiently. "Here." He seized my gown from the back of a chair and tossed it at me. Sure enough, the massive door stood open, a great ring of keys protruding from the lock.

"But how …" I began.

"Later," he said brusquely. He spotted Mary, out of bed and struggling into her nightrobe. "Best get back in bed, lassie," he advised. "The floor's cold."

"I'm coming with you." The words were muffled by the folds of cloth, but her determination was evident as her head popped through the neck of the robe and emerged, tousled-haired and defiant.

"The hell you are," Jamie said. He glared at her, and I noticed the fresh, raw scratches down his cheek. Seeing the quiver of her lips, though, he mastered his temper with an effort, and spoke reassuringly. "Dinna mind, lassie. You'll have no trouble over it. I'll lock the door behind us, and ye can tell everyone in the morning what's happened. No one shall hold ye to blame."

Ignoring this, Mary thrust her feet hastily into her slippers and ran toward the door.

"Hey! Where d'ye think you're going?" Startled, Jamie swung around after her, but not soon enough to stop her reaching the door. She stood in the hallway just outside, poised like a deer.

"I'm going with you!" she said fiercely. "If you don't take me, I shall run down the corridor, screaming as loudly as I can. So there!"

Jamie stared at her, his hair gleaming copper in the candlelight and the blood rising in his face, obviously torn between the necessity for silence and the urge to kill her with his bare hands and damn the noise. Mary glared back, one hand holding up her skirts, ready to run. Now dressed and shod, I poked him in the ribs, breaking his concentration.

"Take her," I said briefly. "Let's go."

He gave me a look that was twin to the one he'd been giving Mary, but hesitated no more than a moment. With a short nod, he took my arm and the three of us hurried out into the chill darkness of the corridor.

* * *

The house was at once deathly still and full of noises; boards squeaked loud beneath our feet and our garments rustled like leaves in a gale. The walls seemed to breathe with the settlings of wood, and small, half-heard sounds beyond the corridor suggested the secretive burrowings of animals underground. And over all was the deep and frightening silence of a great, dark house, sunk in a sleep that must not be broken.

Mary's hand was tight on my arm, as we crept down the hall behind Jamie. He moved like a shadow, hugging the wall, but quickly, for all his silence.

As we passed one door, I heard the sound of soft footsteps on the other side. Jamie heard them, too, and flattened himself against the wall, motioning Mary and me ahead of him. The plaster of the wall was cold against the palms of my hands, as I tried to press backward into it.

The door opened cautiously, and a head in a puffy white mobcap poked out, peering down the hall in the direction away from us.

"Hullo?" it said in a whisper. "Is that you, Albert?" A tickle of cold sweat ran down my spine. A housemaid, apparently expecting a visitation from the Duke's valet, who seemed to be keeping up the reputation of Frenchmen.

I didn't think she was going to consider an armed Highlander an adequate substitute for her absent lover. I could feel Jamie tense beside me, trying to overcome his scruples against striking a woman. Another instant, and she would turn, see him, and scream the house down.

I stepped out from the wall.

"Er, no," I said apologetically, "I'm afraid it's only me."

The maidservant started convulsively, and I took a swift step past, so that she was facing me, with Jamie still behind her.

"Sorry to alarm you," I said, smiling cheerily. "I couldn't sleep, you see. Thought I'd try a spot of hot milk. Tell me, am I headed right for the kitchens?"

"Eh?" The maid, a plump miss in her early twenties, gaped unbecomingly, exposing evidence of a distressing lack of concern for dental hygiene. Luckily, it wasn't the same maid who had seen me to my room; she might not realize that I was a prisoner, not a guest.

"I'm a guest in the house," I said, driving the point home. Continuing on the principle that the best defense is a good offense, I stared accusingly at her.

"Albert, eh? Does His Grace know that you are in the habit of entertaining men in your room at night?" I demanded. This seemed to hit a nerve, for the woman paled and dropped to her knees, clutching at my skirt. The prospect of exposure was so alarming that she didn't pause to ask exactly why a guest should be wandering about the halls in the wee hours of the morning, wearing not only gown and shoes, but a traveling cloak as well.

"Oh, mum! Please, you won't say nothing to His Grace, will you? I can see you've a kind face, mum, surely you'd not want to see me dismissed from my place? Have pity on me, my lady, I've six brothers and sisters still at home, and I …"

"Now, now," I soothed, patting her on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it. I won't tell the Duke. You just go back to your bed, and …" Talking in the sort of voice one uses with children and mental patients, I eased her, still volubly protesting her innocence, back into the small closet of a room.

I shut the door on her and leaned against it for support. Jamie's face loomed up from the shadows before me, grinning. He said nothing, but patted me on the head in congratulation, before taking my arm and urging me down the hall once more.

Mary was waiting under the window on the landing, her nightrobe glowing white in the moonlight that beamed momentarily through scudding clouds outside. A storm was gathering, from the looks of it, and I wondered whether this would help or hinder our escape.

Mary clutched at Jamie's plaid as he stepped onto the landing.

"Shh!" she whispered. "Someone's coming!"

Someone was; I could hear the faint thud of footsteps coming from below, and the pale wash of a candle lit the stairwell. Mary and I looked wildly about, but there was absolutely no place to hide. This was a back stair, meant for the servants' use, and the landings were simple squares of flooring, totally unrelieved by furniture or convenient hangings.

Jamie sighed in resignation. Then, motioning me and Mary back into the hallway from which we had come, he drew his dirk and waited, poised in the shadowed corner of the landing.

Mary's fingers clutched and twined with mine, squeezing tight in an agony of apprehension. Jamie had a pistol hanging from his belt, but plainly couldn't use it within the house—and a servant would realize that, making it useless for threat. It would have to be the knife, and my stomach quivered with pity for the hapless servant who was just about to come face-to-face with fifteen stone of keyed-up Scot and the threat of black steel.

I was taking stock of my apparel, and thinking that I could spare one of my petticoats to be used for bindings, when the bowed head of the candle-bearer came in sight. The dark hair was parted down the middle and slicked with a stinkingly sweet pomade that at once brought back the memory of a dark Paris street and the curve of thin, cruel lips beneath a mask.

My gasp of recognition made Danton look up sharply, one step below the landing. The next instant, he was grasped by the neck and flung against the wall of the landing with a force that sent the candlestick flying through the air.

Mary had seen him too.

"That's him!" she exclaimed, in her shock forgetting either to whisper or to stutter. "The man in Paris!"

Jamie had the feebly struggling valet squashed against the wall, held by one muscled forearm pressed across his chest. The man's face, fading in and out as the light ebbed and flooded with the passing clouds, was ghastly pale. It grew paler in the next moment, as Jamie laid the edge of his blade against Danton's throat.

I stepped onto the landing, not sure either what Jamie would do, or what I wanted him to do. Danton let out a strangled moan when he saw me, and made an abortive attempt to cross himself.

"La Dame Blanche!" he whispered, eyes starting in horror.

Jamie moved with sudden violence, grasping the man's hair and jerking his head back so hard that it thumped against the paneling.

"Had I time, *mo garhe*, ye would die slow," he whispered, and his voice lacked nothing in conviction, quiet as it was. "Count it God's mercy I have not." He yanked Danton's head back even further, so I could see the bobbing of his Adam's apple as he swallowed convulsively, his eyes fixed on me in fear.

"You call her 'Dame Blanche,' " Jamie said, between his teeth. "I call her wife! Let her face be the last that ye see, then!"

The knife ripped across the man's throat with a violence that made Jamie grunt with the effort, and a dark sheet of blood sprayed over his shirt. The stench of sudden death filled the landing, with a wheezing, gurgling sound from the crumpled heap on the floor that seemed to go on for a very long time.

The sounds behind me brought me finally to my senses: Mary, being violently sick in the hallway. My first coherent thought was that the servants were going to have the hell of a mess to clean up in the morning. My second was for Jamie, seen in a flash of the fleeting moon. His face was spattered and his hair matted with droplets of blood, and he was breathing heavily. He looked as though he might be going to be sick, too.

I turned toward Mary, and saw, far beyond her down the hall, the crack of light behind an opening door. Someone was coming to investigate the noise. I grabbed the hem of her nightrobe, wiped it roughly across her mouth, and seized her by the arm, tugging her toward the landing.

"Come on!" I said. "Let's get out of here!" Starting from his dazed contemplation of Danton's corpse, Jamie shook himself suddenly, and returning to his senses, turned to the stair.

He seemed to know where we were going, leading us through the darkened corridors without hesitation. Mary stumbled along beside me, puffing, her breath loud as an engine in my ear.

At the scullery door, Jamie came to a sudden halt, and gave a low whistle. This was returned immediately, and the door swung open on a darkness inhabited by indistinct forms. One of these detached itself from the murk and hastened forward. A few muttered words were exchanged, and the man—whichever it was—reached for Mary and pulled her into the shadows. A cold draft told me there was an open door somewhere ahead.

Jamie's hand on my shoulder steered me through the obstacles of the darkened scullery and some smaller chamber that seemed to be a lumber room of some sort; I barked my shin against something, but bit back the exclamation of pain.

Out in the free night at last, the wind seized my cloak and whirled it out in a exuberant balloon. After the nerve-stretching trek through the darkened house, I felt as though I might take wing, and sail for the sky.

The men around me seemed to share the mood of relief; there was a small outbreak of whispered remarks and muffled laughter, quickly shushed by Jamie. One at a time, the men flitted across the open space before the house, no more than shadows under the dancing moon. At my side, Jamie watched as they disappeared into the woods of the park.

"Where's Murtagh?" he muttered, as though to himself, frowning after the last of his men. "Gone to look for Hugh, I suppose," he said, in answer to his own question. "D'ye ken where he might be, Sassenach?"

I swallowed, feeling the wind bite cold beneath my cloak, memory killing the sudden exhilaration of freedom.

"Yes," I said, and told him the bad news, as briefly as I could. His expression darkened under its mask of blood, and by the time I had finished, his face was hard as stone.

"D'ye mean just to stand there all night," inquired a voice behind us, "or ought we to sound an alarm, so they'll know where to look first?"

Jamie's expression lightened slightly as Murtagh appeared from the shadows beside us, quiet as a wraith. He had a cloth-wrapped bundle under one arm; a joint from the kitchens, I thought, seeing the blotch of dark blood on the cloth. This impression was borne out by the large ham he had tucked beneath the other arm, and the strings of sausages about his neck.

Jamie wrinkled his nose, with a faint smile.

"Ye smell like a butcher, man. Can ye no go anywhere without thinkin' of your stomach?"

Murtagh cocked his head to one side, taking in Jamie's blood-spattered appearance.

"Better to look like the butcher than his wares, lad," he said. "Shall we go?"

* * *

The trip through the park was dark and frightening. The trees were tall and widely spaced here, but there were saplings left to grow between them that changed abruptly into the menacing shapes of gamekeepers in the uncertain light. The clouds were gathering thicker, at least, and the full moon made fewer appearances, which was something to be grateful for. As we reached the far side of the park, it began to rain.

Three men had been left with the horses. Mary was already mounted before one of Jamie's men. Plainly embarrassed by the necessity of riding astride, she kept tucking the folds of her nightrobe under her thighs, in a vain attempt to hide the fact that she had legs.

More experienced, but still cursing the heavy folds of my skirt, I plucked them up and set a foot in Jamie's offered hand, swinging aboard with a practiced thump. The horse snorted at the impact and set his ears back.

"Sorry, cully," I said without sympathy. "If you think that's bad, just wait 'til *he* gets back on."

Glancing around for the "he" in question, I found him under one of the trees, hand on the shoulder of a strange boy of about fourteen.

"Who's that?" I asked, leaning over to attract the attention of Geordie Paul Fraser, who was busy tightening his girth next to me.

"Eh? Oh, him." He glanced at the boy, then back at his reluctant girth, frowning. "His name's Ewan Gibson. Hugh Munro's eldest stepson. He was wi' his da, seemingly, when the Duke's keepers came on 'em. The lad got awa', and we found him near the edge o' the moor. He brought us here." With a final unnecessary tug, he glared at the girth as though daring it to say something, then looked up at me.

"D'ye ken where the lad's da is?" he asked abruptly.

I nodded, and the answer must have been plain in my face, for he turned to look at the boy. Jamie was holding the boy, hugged hard against his chest, and patting his back. As we watched, he held the boy away from him, both hands on his shoulders, and said something, looking down intently into his face. I couldn't hear what it was, but after a moment, the boy straightened himself and nodded. Jamie nodded as well, and with a final clap on the shoulder, turned the lad toward one of the horses, where George McClure was already reaching down a hand to him. Jamie strode toward us, head down, and the end of his plaid fluttering free behind him, despite the cold wind and the spattering rain.

Geordie spat on the ground. "Poor bugger," he said, without specifying whom he meant, and swung into his own saddle.

Near the southeast corner of the park we halted, the horses stamping and twitching, while two of the men disappeared back into the trees. It cannot have been more than twenty minutes, but it seemed twice as long before they came back.

The men rode double now, and the second horse bore a long, hunched shape bound across its saddle, wrapped in a Fraser plaid. The horses didn't like it; mine jerked its head, nostrils flaring, as the horse bearing Hugh's corpse came alongside. Jamie yanked the rein and said something angrily in Gaelic, though, and the beast desisted.

I could feel Jamie rise in the stirrups behind me, looking backward as though counting the remaining members of his band. Then his arm came around my waist, and we set off, on our way north.

We rode all night, with only brief stops for rest. During one of these, sheltering under a horse-chestnut tree, Jamie reached to embrace me, then suddenly stopped.

"What is it?" I said, smiling. "Afraid to kiss your wife in front of your men?"

"No," he said, proving it, then stepped back, smiling. "No, I was afraid for a moment ye were going to scream and claw my face." He dabbed gingerly at the marks Mary had left on his cheek.

"Poor thing," I said, laughing. "Not the welcome you expected, was it?"

"Well, by that time, actually it was," he said, grinning. He had taken two sausages from one of Murtagh's strings, and now handed me one. I couldn't remember when I had last eaten, but it must have been quite some time, for not even my fears of botulism kept the fatty, spiced meat from being delicious.

"What do you mean by that? You thought I wouldn't recognize you after only a week?"

He shook his head, still smiling, and swallowed the bite of sausage.

"Nay. It's only, when I got in the house to start, I kent where ye were, more or less, because of the bars on your windows." He arched one brow. "From the looks of them, ye must have made one hell of an impression on His Grace."

"I did," I said shortly, not wanting to think about the Duke. "Go on."

"Well," he said, taking another bite and shifting it expertly to his cheek while he talked, "I kent the room, but I needed the key, didn't I?"

"Oh, yes," I said. "You were going to tell me about that."

He chewed briefly and swallowed.

"I got it from the housekeeper, but not without trouble." He rubbed himself tenderly, a few inches below the belt. "From appearances, I'd say the woman's been waked in her bed a few times before—and didna care for the experience."

"Oh, yes," I said, entertained by the mental picture this provoked. "Well, I daresay you came as rare and refreshing fruit to her."

"I doubt it extremely, Sassenach. She screeched like a banshee and kneed me in the stones, then came altogether too near to braining me wi' a candle-stick whilst I was doubled up groaning."

"What did you do?"

"Thumped her a good one—I wasna feeling verra chivalrous just at the moment—and tied her up wi' the strings to her nightcap. Then I put a towel in her mouth to put a stop to the things she was callin' me, and searched her room 'til I found the keys."

"Good work," I said, something occurring to me, "but how did you know where the housekeeper slept?"

"I didn't," he said calmly. "The laundress told me—after I told her who I was, and threatened to gut her and roast her on a spit if she didna tell me what I wanted to know." He gave me a wry smile. "Like I told ye, Sassenach, sometimes it's an advantage to be thought a barbarian. I reckon they've all heard of Red Jamie Fraser by now."

"Well, if they hadn't, they will," I said. I looked him over, as well as I could in the dim light. "What, didn't the laundress get a lick in?"

"She pulled my hair," he said reflectively. "Took a clump of it out by the roots. I'll tell ye, Sassenach; if ever I feel the need to change my manner of employment, I dinna think I'll take up attacking women—it's a bloody hard way to make a living."

* * *

It was beginning to sleet heavily near dawn, but we rode for some time before Ewan Gibson dragged his pony uncertainly to a stop, rose up clumsily in the stirrups to look around, then motioned up the hillside that rose to the left.

Dark as it was, it was impossible to ride the horses uphill. We had to descend to the ground and lead them, foot by muddy, slogging foot, along the nearly invisible track that zigzagged through heather and granite. Dawn was beginning to lighten the sky as we paused for breath at the crest of the hill. The horizon was hidden, thick with clouds, but a dull gray of no apparent source began to replace the darker gray of the night. Now I could at least see the cold streamlets that I sank in, ankle-deep, and avoid the worst of the foot-twisting snags of rock and bramble that we encountered on the way down the hill.

At the bottom was a small corrie, with six houses—though "house" was an overdignified word for the rude structures crouched beneath the larch trees there. The thatched roofs came down within a few feet of the ground, leaving only a bit of the stone walls showing.

Outside one bothy, we came to a halt. Ewan looked at Jamie, hesitating as though lost for direction, then at his nod, ducked and disappeared beneath the low rooftree of the hut. I drew closer to Jamie, putting my hand on his arm.

"This is Hugh Munro's house," he said to me, low-voiced. "I've brought him home to his wife. The lad's gone in to tell her."

I glanced from the dark, low doorway of the hut to the limp, plaid-draped bundle that two of the men were now unstrapping from the horse. I felt a small tremor run through Jamie's arm. He closed his eyes for a moment, and I saw his lips move; then he stepped forward and held out his arms for the burden. I drew a deep breath, brushed my hair back from my face, and followed him, stooping below the lintel of the door.

It wasn't as bad as I had feared it might be, though bad enough. The woman, Hugh's widow, was quiet, accepting Jamie's soft Gaelic speech of condolence with bowed head, the tears slipping down her face like rain. She reached tentatively for the covering plaid, as though meaning to draw it down, but then her nerve failed, and she stood, one hand resting awkwardly on the curve of the shroud, while the other drew a small child close against her thigh.

There were several children huddled near the fire—Hugh's stepchildren—and a swaddled mass in the rough cradle nearest the hearth. I felt some small comfort, looking at the baby; at least this much of Hugh was left. Then the comfort was overwhelmed with a cold fear as I looked at the children, grimy faces blending with the shadows. Hugh had been their main support. Ewan was brave and willing, but he was no more than fourteen, and the next eldest child was a girl of twelve or so. How would they manage?

The woman's face was worn and lined, nearly toothless. I realized with a shock that she could be only a few years older than I was. She nodded toward the single bed, and Jamie laid the body gently on it. He spoke to her again in Gaelic; she shook her head hopelessly, still staring down at the long shape upon her bed.

Jamie knelt down by the bed; bowed his head, and placed one hand on the corpse. His words were soft, but clearly spoken, and even my limited Gaelic could follow them.

"I swear to thee, friend, and may God Almighty bear me witness. For the sake of your love to me, never shall those that are yours go wanting, while I have aught to give." He knelt unmoving for a long moment, and there was no sound in the cottage but the crackle of the peat on the hearth and the soft patter of rain on the thatch. The wet had darkened Jamie's bowed head; droplets of moisture shone jewel-like in the folds of his plaid. Then his hand tightened once in final farewell, and he rose.

Jamie bowed to Mrs. Munro and turned to take my arm. Before we could leave, though, the cowhide that hung across the low doorway was thrust aside, and I stood back to make way for Mary Hawkins, followed by Murtagh.

Mary looked both bedraggled and bewildered, a damp plaid clasped around her shoulders and her muddy bedroom slippers protruding under the sodden hem of her nightrobe. Spotting me, she pressed close to me as though grateful for my presence.

"I didn't w-want to come in," she whispered to me, glancing shyly at Hugh Munro's widow, "but Mr. Murtagh insisted."

Jamie's brows were raised in inquiry, as Murtagh nodded respectfully to Mrs. Munro and said something to her in Gaelic. The little clansman looked just as he always did, dour and competent, but I thought there was an extra hint of dignity in his demeanor. He carried one of the saddlebags before him, bulging heavily with something. Perhaps a parting gift for Mrs. Munro, I thought.

Murtagh laid the bag on the floor at my feet, then straightened up and looked from me to Mary, to Hugh Munro's widow, and at last to

Jamie, who looked as puzzled as I felt. Having thus assured himself of his audience, Murtagh bowed formally to me, a lock of wet dark hair falling free over his brow.

"I bring ye your vengeance, lady," he said, as quietly as I'd ever heard him speak. He straightened and inclined his head in turn to Mary and Mrs. Munro. "And justice for the wrong done to ye."

Mary sneezed, and wiped her nose hastily with a fold of her plaid. She stared at Murtagh, eyes wide and baffled. I gazed down at the bulging saddle-bag, feeling a sudden deep chill that owed nothing to the weather outside. But it was Hugh Munro's widow who sank to her knees, and with steady hands opened the bag and drew out the head of the Duke of Sandringham.

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45

DAMN ALL RANDALLS

It was a torturous trip northward into Scotland. We had to dodge and hide, always afraid of being recognized as Highlanders, unable to buy or beg food, needing to steal small bits from unattended sheds or pluck the few edible roots I could find in the fields.

Slowly, slowly, we made our way north. There was no telling where the Scottish army was by now, except that it lay to the north. With no way of telling where the army was, we decided to make for Edinburgh; there at least there would be news of the campaign. We had been out of touch for several weeks; I knew the relief of Stirling Castle by the English had failed, Jamie knew the Battle of Falkirk had succeeded, ending in victory for the Scots. But what had come after?

When we rode at last into the cobbled gray street of the Royal Mile, Jamie went at once to the army's headquarters, leaving me to go with Mary to Alex Randall's quarters. We hurried up the street together, barely speaking, both too afraid of what we might find.

He was there, and I saw Mary's knees give way as she entered the room and collapsed by his bed. Startled from a doze, he opened his eyes and blinked once, then Alex Randall's face blazed as though he had received a heavenly visitation.

"Oh, God!" he kept muttering brokenly into her hair. "Oh, God. I thought … oh, Lord, I had prayed … one more sight of you. Just one. Oh, Lord!"

Simply averting my gaze seemed insufficient; I went out onto the landing, and sat on the stairs for half an hour, resting my weary head on my knees.

When it seemed decent to return, I went back into the small room, grown grimy and cheerless again in the weeks of Mary's absence. I examined him, my hands gentle on the wasted flesh. I was surprised that he had lasted so long; it couldn't be much longer.

He saw the truth in my face, and nodded, unsurprised.

"I waited," he said softly, lying back in exhaustion on his pillows. "I hoped … she would come once more. I had no reason … but I prayed. And now it is answered. I shall die in peace now."

"Alex!" Mary's cry of anguish burst out of her as though his words had struck her a physical blow, but he smiled and pressed her hand.

"We have known it for a long time, my love," he whispered to her. "Don't despair. I will be with you always, watching you, loving you. Don't cry, my dearest." She brushed obediently at her pink-washed cheeks, but could do nothing to stem the tears that came streaming down them. Despite her obvious despair, she had never looked so blooming.

"Mrs. Fraser," Alex said, clearly mustering his strength to ask one more favor. "I must ask … tomorrow … will you come again, and bring your husband? It is important."

I hesitated for a moment. Whatever Jamie found out, he was going to want to leave Edinburgh immediately, to join the army and find the rest of his men. But surely one more day could make no difference to the outcome of the war—and I could not deny the appeal in the two pairs of eyes that looked at me so hopefully.

"We'll come," I said.

* * *

"I am a fool," Jamie grumbled, climbing the steep, cobbled streets to the wynd where Alex Randall had his lodgings. "We should have left yesterday, at once, as soon as we got back your pearls from the pawnbroker! D'ye no ken how far it is to Inverness? And we wi' little more than nags to get us there?"

"I know," I said impatiently. "But I promised. And if you'd seen him … well, you will see him in a moment, and then you'll understand."

"Mphm." But he held the street door for me and followed me up the winding stair of the decrepit building without further complaint.

Mary was half-sitting, half-lying on the bed. Still dressed in her tattered traveling clothes, she was holding Alex, cradling him fiercely against her bosom. She must have stayed with him so all night.

Seeing me, he gently freed himself from her grasp, patting her hands as he laid them aside. He propped himself on one elbow, face paler than the linen sheets on which he lay.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said. He smiled faintly, despite the sheen of unhealthy sweat and the gray pallor that betokened a bad attack.

"It was good of you to come," he said, gasping a little. He glanced beyond me. "Your husband … he is with you?"

As though in answer, Jamie stepped into the room behind me. Mary, stirred from her misery by the noise of our entry, glanced from me to Jamie, then rose to her feet, laying a hand timidly on his arm.

"I … we … n-need you, Lord Tuarach." I thought it was the stammer, more than the use of his title, that touched him. Though he was still grim-faced, some of the tension went out of him. He inclined his head courteously toward her.

"I asked your wife to bring you, my lord. I am dying, as you see." Alex Randall had pushed himself upright, sitting on the edge of the bed. His slender shins gleamed white as bone beneath the frayed hem of his nightshirt. The toes, long, slim, and bloodless, were shadowed with the bluing of poor circulation.

I had seen death often enough before, in all its forms, but this was always the worst—and the best; a man who met death with knowledge and courage, while the healer's futile arts fell aside. Futile or not, I rummaged through the contents of my case for the digitalin I had made for him. I had several infusions, in varying strengths, a spectrum of brown liquids in glass vials. I chose the darkest vial without hesitation; I could hear his breath bubbling through the water in his lungs.

It wasn't digitalin, but his purpose that sustained him now, lighting him with a glow as though a candle burned behind the waxy skin of his face. I had seen that a few times before, too; the man—or woman—whose will was strong enough to override for a time the imperatives of the body.

I thought that was perhaps how some ghosts were made; where a will and a purpose had survived, heedless of the frail flesh that fell by the wayside, unable to sustain life long enough. I didn't much want to be haunted by Alex Randall; that, among other reasons, was why I had made Jamie come with me today.

Jamie himself appeared to be coming to similar conclusions.

"Aye," he said softly. "I do see. Do ye ask aught of me?"

Alex nodded, closing his eyes briefly. He lifted the vial I handed him and drank, shuddering briefly at the bitter taste. He opened his eyes and smiled at Jamie.

"The indulgence of your presence only. I promise I shall not detain you long. We are waiting for one more person."

While we waited, I did what I could for Alex Randall, which under the circumstances was not much. The foxglove infusion again, and a bit of camphor to help ease his breathing. He seemed a little better after the administration of such medicine as I had, but placing my homemade stethoscope against the sunken chest, I could hear the labored thud of his heart, interrupted by such frequent flutters and palpitations that I expected it to stop at any moment.

Mary held his hand throughout, and he kept his eyes fixed on her, as though memorizing every line of her face. It seemed almost an intrusion to be in the same room with them.

The door opened, and Jack Randall stood on the threshold. He looked uncomprehendingly at me and Mary for a moment, then his gaze lighted on Jamie and he turned to stone. Jamie met his eyes squarely, then turned, nodding toward the bed.

Seeing that haggard face, Jack Randall crossed the room rapidly and fell on his knees beside the bed.

"Alex!" he said. "My God, Alex …"

"It's all right," his brother said. He held Jack's face between frail hands and smiled at him, trying to reassure him. "It's all right, Johnny," he said.

I put a hand under Mary's elbow, gently urging her off the bed. Whatever Jack Randall might be, he deserved a few last words in privacy with his brother. Stunned with despair, she didn't resist, but came with me to the far side of the room, where I perched her on a stool. I poured a little water from the ewer and wet my handkerchief. I tried to give it to her to swab her eyes, but she simply sat, clutching it lifelessly. Sighing, I took it and wiped her face, smoothing her hair as much as I could.

There was a small, choked sound from behind that made me glance toward the bed. Jack, still on his knees, had his face buried in his brother's lap, while Alex stroked his head, holding one of his hands.

"John," he said. "You'll know that I do not ask this lightly. But for the sake of your love for me …" He broke off to cough, the effort flushing his cheeks with hectic color.

I felt Jamie's body stiffen still further, if such a thing were possible. Jonathan Randall stiffened, too, as though he felt the force of Jamie's eyes upon him, but didn't look up.

"Alex," he said quietly. He laid a hand on his younger brother's shoulder, as though to quiet the cough. "Don't trouble your mind, Alex. You know you needn't ask; I'll do whatever you wish. Is it the —the girl?" He glanced in Mary's direction, but couldn't quite bring himself to look at her.

Alex nodded, still coughing.

"It's all right," John said. He put both hands on Alex's shoulders, trying to ease him back on the pillow. "I won't let her want for anything. Put your mind at rest."

Jamie looked down at me, eyes wide. I shook my head slowly, feeling the hair prickle from my neck to the base of my spine. Everything made sense now; the bloom on Mary's cheeks, despite her distress, and her apparent willingness to wed the wealthy Jew of London.

"It isn't money," I said. "She's with child. He wants …" I stopped, clearing my throat, "I think he wants you to marry her."

Alex nodded, eyes still closed. He breathed heavily for a moment, then opened them, bright pools of hazel, fixed on his brother's stunned and incomprehending face.

"Yes," he said. "John … Johnny, I need you to take care of her for me. I want … my child to have the Randall name. You can … give them some position in the world—so much more than I could." He reached out a hand, groping, and Mary seized it, clutching it to her bosom as though it were a life preserver. He smiled tenderly at her, and stretched up a hand to touch the shiny, dark ringlets that fell by her cheek, hiding her face.

"Mary. I wish … well, you know what I wish, my dear; so many things. And so many things I am sorry for. But I cannot regret the love between us. Having known such joy, I would die content, save for my fear that you might be exposed to shame and disgrace."

"I don't care!" Mary burst out fiercely. "I don't care who knows!"

"But I care for you," Alex said, softly. He stretched out a hand to his brother, who took it after a moment's hesitation. Then he brought them together, laying Mary's hand in Randall's. Mary's lay inert, and Jack Randall's stiff, like a dead fish on a wooden slab, but Alex pressed his hands tightly around the two, pressing them together.

"I give you to each other, my dear ones," he said softly. He looked from one face to the other, each reflecting the horror of the suggestion, submerged in the overwhelming grief of impending loss.

"But …" For the first time in our acquaintance, I saw Jonathan Randall completely at a loss for words.

"Good." It was almost a whisper. Alex opened his eyes and let out the breath he had been holding, smiling at his brother. "There is not much time. I shall marry you myself. Now. That is why I asked Mrs. Fraser to bring her husband—if you will be witness with your wife, sir?" He looked up at Jamie, who, after a moment's stunned immobility, nodded his head like an automation.

I do not believe I have ever seen three people look so entirely wretched.

Alex was so weak that his brother, with a face like stone, had to help him, tying his minister's high white stock about the pallid throat. Jonathan himself looked little better. Gaunt from illness, the lines in his face were carved so deep that he looked years older than his age, and his eyes peered out from deep sockets like caves of bone. Impeccably attired as always, he looked like a badly made tailor's dummy, features carelessly hacked from a block of wood.

As for Mary, she sat miserably on the bed, weeping helplessly into the folds of her cloak, hair disheveled and static with electricity. I did what I could for her, straightening her gown and combing out her hair. She sat drearily sniffling, her eyes fixed on Alex.

Bracing himself with a hand on the bureau, Alex groped in the drawer, coming out at last with his large *Book of Common Prayer*. It was too heavy for him to hold open before him in the normal fashion. He couldn't stand, but sat heavily on the bed, holding the book open on his knees. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily, and a drop of sweat fell from his face, making a blot on the page.

"Dearly beloved," Alex began, and I hoped for his own sake, as well as everyone else's, that he was using the short form of the ceremony.

Mary had stopped crying, but her nose was red and shiny in her white face, and a small snail track showed on her upper lip. Jonathan saw it, and expressionless, pulled a large square of linen from his sleeve and offered it to her silently.

She took it with a faint nod, not looking at him, and carelessly mopped her face.

"I will," she said, when the time came, as though not caring at all what she said now.

Jack Randall made his promises in a firm voice, but one remote from the scene. It gave me an odd feeling to see a marriage contracted between two people who were quite unaware of each other; the complete attention of both was focused on the man who sat before them, eyes fixed on the pages of his book.

It was done. Congratulations to the bridal pair hardly seemed in order, and there was an awkward silence. Jamie glanced at me questioningly and I shrugged. I had fainted immediately after marrying him, and Mary looked rather as though she meant to follow my example.

The act complete, Alex sat quite still for a moment. He smiled slightly, and looked deliberately round the room, his eyes resting for a moment on each face in turn. Jonathan, Jamie, Mary, and me. I saw the glow in those soft hazel depths as his glance met mine. The candle's stub grew low, but the last of the wick blazed up, for a moment bright and strong.

His gaze lingered on Mary's face, then he closed his eyes briefly, as though he could not stand to look upon her, and I could hear the slow, labored rasp of his breathing. The glow of his skin was blanching and fading, the candle guttering.

Without opening his eyes, he reached up a hand, groping blindly. Jonathan grasped it, caught him behind the shoulders and eased him slowly back, onto the pillows. The long hands, smooth as a boy's, twitched uneasily, whiter than the shirt they lay against.

"Mary." The blue lips moved in a whisper, and she trapped the nervous hands between her own, holding them still against her bosom.

"I'm here, Alex. Oh, Alex, I'm here!" She bent close to him, murmuring in his ear. The movement forced Jonathan Randall back a bit, so that he stepped away from the bed. He stood, staring expressionlessly down.

The heavy, domed lids lifted once more, only halfway this time, seeking a face and finding it.

"Johnny. So … good to me. Always, Johnny."

Mary bent over him, the shadow of her fallen hair hiding his face. Jonathan Randall stood, still as one of the stones in a henge, watching his brother and his wife. There was no sound in the room but the whisper of the fire and the soft sobbing of Mary Randall.

I felt a touch on my shoulder, and looked up at Jamie. He nodded in Mary's direction.

"Stay with her," he said quietly. "It wilna be long, will it?"

"No."

He nodded. Then he took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and crossed the room to Jonathan Randall. He took the frozen figure by one arm and turned him gently toward the door.

"Come, man," he said quietly. "I'll see ye safe to your quarters."

The crooked door creaked to as he left, assisting Jack Randall to the place where he would spend his wedding night, alone.

I closed the door of our inn room behind me and leaned against it, exhausted. It was first dark outside, and the watchmen's cries echoed down the street.

Jamie was by the window, watching for me. He came to me at once, pulling me tight against him before I had even got my cloak off. I sagged against him, grateful for his warmth and solid strength. He scooped me up with an arm beneath my knees and carried me to the window seat.

"Have a bit of a drink, Sassenach," he urged. "Ye look all in, and no wonder." He took the flask from the table and mixed something that appeared to be brandy and water without the water.

I shoved a hand tiredly through my hair. It had been just after breakfast when we went to the room in Ladywalk Wynd; now it was past six o'clock. It seemed as though I had been gone for days.

"It wasn't long, poor chap. It was as though he was only waiting to see her safely taken care of. I sent word to her aunt's house; the aunt and two cousins came to fetch her. They'll take care of … him." I sipped gratefully at the brandy. It burned my throat and the fumes rose inside my head like fog on the moors, but I didn't care.

"Well," I said, attempting a smile, "at least we know Frank is safe, after all."

Jamie glowered down at me, ruddy brows nearly touching each other.

"Damn Frank!" he said ferociously. "Damn all Randalls! Damn Jack Randall, and damn Mary Hawkins Randall, and damn Alex Randall—er, God rest his soul, I mean," he amended hastily, crossing himself.

"I thought you didn't begrudge—" I started. He glared at me.

"I lied."

He grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me slightly, holding me at arm's length.

"And damn you, too, Claire Randall Fraser, while I'm at it!" he said. "Damn right I begrudge! I grudge every memory of yours that doesna hold me, and every tear ye've shed for another, and every second you've spent in another man's bed! Damn you!" He knocked the brandy glass from my hand—accidentally, I think—pulled me to him and kissed me hard.

He drew back enough to shake me again.

"You're mine, damn ye, Claire Fraser! Mine, and I wilna share ye, with a man or a memory, or anything whatever, so long as we both shall live. You'll no mention the man's name to me again. D'ye hear?" He kissed me fiercely to emphasize the point. "Did ye hear me?" he asked, breaking off.

"Yes," I said, with some difficulty. "If you'd … stop … shaking me, I might … answer you."

Rather sheepishly, he released his grip on my shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Sassenach. It's only … God, why did ye … well, aye, I see why … but did you have to—" I interrupted this incoherent sputtering by putting my hand behind his head and drawing him down to me.

"Yes," I said firmly, releasing him. "I had to. But it's over now." I loosened the ties of my cloak and let it fall back off my shoulders to the floor. He bent to pick it up, but I stopped him.

"Jamie," I said. "I'm tired. Will you take me to bed?"

He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, staring down at me, eyes sunk deep with tiredness and strain.

"Aye," he said softly, at last. "Aye, I will."

He was silent, and rough at the start, the edges of his anger sharpening his love.

"Ooh!" I said, at one point.

"Christ, I'm sorry, *mo duinne*. I couldna …"

"It's all right." I stopped his apologies with my mouth and held him tightly, feeling the wrath ebb away as the tenderness grew between us. He didn't break away from the kiss, but held himself motionless, gently exploring my lips, the tip of his tongue caressing, barely stroking.

I touched his tongue with my own, and held his face between my hands. He hadn't shaved since morning, and the faint red stubble rasped pleasantly beneath my fingertips.

He lowered himself and rolled slightly to one side, so as not to crush me with his weight, and we went on, touching all along our lengths, joined in closeness, speaking in silent tongues.

Alive, and one. We are one, and while we love, death will never touch us. "The grave's a fine and private place/But none, I think, do there embrace." Alex Randall lay cold in his bed, and Mary Randall alone in hers. But we were here together, and no one and nothing mattered beyond that fact.

He grasped my hips, large hands warm on my skin, and pulled me toward him, and the shudder that went through me went through him, as though we shared one flesh.

I woke in the night, still in his arms, and knew he was not asleep.

"Go back to sleep, *mo duinne*." His voice was soft, low and soothing, but with a catch that made me reach up to feel the wetness on his cheeks.

"What is it, love?" I whispered. "Jamie, I do love you."

"I know it," he said quietly. "I do know it, my own. Let me tell ye in your sleep how much I love you. For there's no so much I can be saying to ye while ye wake, but the same poor words, again and again. While ye sleep in my arms, I can say things to ye that would be daft and silly waking, and your dreams will know the truth of them. Go back to sleep, *mo duinne*."

I turned my head, enough that my lips brushed the base of his throat, where his pulse beat slow beneath the small three-cornered scar. Then I laid my head upon his chest and gave my dreams up to his keeping.

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TIMOR MORTIS CONTURBAT ME

There were men and their traces all around, as we made our way north, following the retreat of the Highland army. We passed small groups of men on foot, walking doggedly, heads down against the windy rain. Others lay in the ditches and under the hedgerows, too exhausted to go on. Equipment and weapons had been abandoned along the way; here a wagon lay overturned, its sacks of flour split and ruined in the wet, there a brace of small culverin stood beneath a tree, twin barrels gleaming darkly in the shadows.

The weather had been bad all the way, delaying us. It was April 13, and I rode and walked with a constant, gnawing feeling of dread beneath my heart. Lord George and the clan chieftains, the Prince and his chief advisers—all were at Culloden House, or so we had been told by one of the MacDonalds that we met along the way. He knew little more than that, and we did not detain him; the man stumbled away into the mist, moving like a zombie. Rations had been short when I was captured by the English a month gone; matters had plainly gone from bad to worse. The men we saw moved slowly, many of them staggering with exhaustion and starvation. But they moved stubbornly north, all the same, following their Prince's orders. Moving toward the place the Scots called Drumossie Moor. Toward Culloden.

At one point, the road became too bad for the faltering ponies. They would have to be led around the outer edge of a small wood, through the wet spring heather, to where the road became passable, a half-mile beyond.

“It will be swifter to walk through the wood,” Jamie told me, taking the reins from my numbed hand. He nodded toward the small grove of pine and oak, where the sweet, cool smell of wet leaves rose from the soaked ground. “D’ye go that way, Sassenach; we’ll meet wi’ ye on the other side.”

I was too tired to argue. Putting one foot in front of the other was a distinct effort, and the effort would undoubtedly be less on the smooth layer of leaves and fallen pine needles in the wood than through the boggy, treacherous heather.

It was quiet in the wood, the whine of the wind softened by the pine boughs overhead. What rain came through the branches pattered lightly on the layers of leathery fallen oak leaves, rustling and crackled, even when wet.

He lay only a few feet from the far edge of the wood, next to a big gray boulder. The pale green lichens of the rock were the same color as his tartan, and its browns blended with the fallen leaves that had drifted half across him. He seemed so much a part of the wood that I might have stumbled over him, had I not been stopped by the patch of brilliant blue.

Soft as velvet, the strange fungus spread its cloak over the naked, cold white limbs. It followed the curve of bone and sinew, sending up small trembling fronds, like the grasses and trees of a forest, invading barren land.

It was an electric, vivid blue, stark and alien. I had never seen it, but had heard of it, from an old soldier I had nursed, who had fought in the trenches of the first world war.

“We called it corpse-candle,” he had told me. “Blue, bright blue. You never see it anywhere but on a battlefield—on dead men.” He had looked up at me, old eyes puzzled beneath the white bandage.

“I always wondered where it lives, between wars.”

In the air, perhaps, its invisible spores waiting to seize an opportunity, I thought. The color was brilliant, incongruous, bright as the woad with which this man’s ancestors had painted themselves before going forth to war.

A breeze passed through the wood, ruffling the man’s hair. It stirred and rose, silky and lifelike. There was a crunch of leaves behind me, and I started convulsively from the trance in which I had stood, staring at the corpse.

Jamie stood beside me, looking down. He said nothing; only took me by the elbow and led me from the wood, leaving the dead man behind, clothed in the saprophytic hues of war and sacrifice.

* * *

It was mid-morning of April 15 by the time we came to Culloden House, having pushed ourselves and our ponies unmercifully to reach it. We approached it from the south, coming first through a cluster of outbuildings. There was a stir—almost a frenzy—of men on the road, but the stableyard was curiously deserted.

Jamie dismounted and handed his reins to Murtagh.

"D'ye wait here a moment," he said. "Something doesna seem quite right here."

Murtagh glanced at the door of the stables, standing slightly ajar, and nodded. Fergus, mounted behind the clansman, would have followed Jamie, but Murtagh prevented him with a curt word.

Stiff from the ride, I slid off my own horse and followed Jamie, slipping in the mud of the stableyard. There *was* something odd about the stableyard. Only as I followed him through the door of the stable building did I realize what it was—it was too quiet.

Everything inside was still; the building was cold and dim, without the usual warmth and stir of a stable. Still, the place was not entirely devoid of life; a dark figure stirred in the gloom, too big to be a rat or a fox.

"Who is that?" Jamie said, stepping forward to put me behind him automatically. "Alec? Is it you?"

The figure in the hay raised its head slowly, and the plaid fell back. The Master of Horse of Castle Leoch had but one eye; the other, lost in an accident many years before, was patched with black cloth. Normally, one eye sufficed him; brisk and snapping blue, it was enough to command the obedience of stable-lads and horses, grooms and riders alike.

Now Alec McMahon MacKenzie's eye was dull as dusty slate. The broad, once vigorous body was curled in upon itself, and the cheeks of his face were sunk with the apathy of starvation.

Knowing the old man suffered from arthritis in damp weather, Jamie squatted beside him to prevent him rising.

“What has been happening?” he asked. “We are newly come; what is happening here?”

It seemed to take Old Alec a long time to absorb the question, assimilate it, and form his reply into words; perhaps it was only the stillness of the empty, shadowed stable that made his words ring hollow when they finally came.

“It has all gone to pot,” he said. “They marched to Nairn two nights ago, and came fleeing back yesterday. His Highness has said they will take a stand on Culloden; Lord George is there now, with what troops he has gathered.”

I couldn’t repress a small moan at the name of Culloden. It was here, then. Despite everything, it had come to pass, and we were here.

A shiver passed through Jamie, as well; I saw the red hairs standing erect on his forearms, but his voice betrayed nothing of the anxiety he must feel.

“The troops—they are ill-provisioned to fight. Does Lord George not realize they must have rest, and food?”

The creaking sound from Old Alec might have been the shade of a laugh.

“What His Lordship knows makes little difference, lad. His Highness has taken command of the army. And His Highness says we shall stand against the English on Drumossie. As for food—” His old-man’s eyebrows were thick and bushy, gone altogether white in the last year, with coarse hairs sprouting from them. One brow raised now, heavily, as though even this small change of expression was an exhaustion. One gnarled hand stirred in his lap, gesturing toward the empty stalls.

“They ate the horses last month,” he said, simply. “There’s been little else, since.”

Jamie stood abruptly, and leaned against the wall, head bowed in shock. I couldn’t see his face, but his body was stiff as the boards of the stable.

"Aye," he said at last. "Aye. My men—did they have their fair share of the meat? Donas … he was … a good-sized horse." He spoke quietly, but I saw from the sudden sharpness of Alec's one-eyed glance that he heard as well as I did the effort that kept Jamie's voice from breaking.

The old man rose slowly from the hay, crippled body moving with painful deliberation. He set one gnarled hand on Jamie's shoulder; the arthritic fingers could not close, but the hand rested there, a comforting blunt weight.

"They didna take Donas," he said quietly. "They kept him—for Prince *Tcharlach* to ride, on his triumphal return to Edinburgh. O'Sullivan said it wouldna be … fitting … for His Highness to walk."

Jamie covered his face in his hands and stood shaking against the boards of the empty stall.

"I am a fool," he said at last, gasping to recover his breath. "Oh, God, I am a fool." He dropped his hands, showing his face, tears streaking through the grime of travel. He dashed the back of his hand across his cheek, but the moisture continued to overflow from his eyes, as though it were a process quite out of his control.

"The cause is lost, my men are being taken to slaughter, there are dead men rotting in the wood … and I am weeping for a horse! Oh, God," he whispered, shaking his head. "I am a fool."

Old Alec heaved a sigh, and his hand slid heavily down Jamie's arm.

"It's as well that ye still can, lad," he said. "I'm past it, myself."

The old man folded one leg awkwardly at the knee and eased himself down once more. Jamie stood for a moment, looking down at Old Alec. The tears still streamed unchecked down his face, but it was like rain washing over a sheet of polished granite. Then he took my elbow, and turned away without a word.

I looked back at Alec when we reached the stable door. He sat quite still, a dark, hunched shape shawled in his plaid, the one blue eye unseeing as the other.

Men sprawled through the house, worn to exhaustion, seeking oblivion from gnawing hunger and the knowledge of certain and imminent disaster. There were no women here; those chiefs whose womenfolk had accompanied them had sent the ladies safely away—the coming doom cast a long shadow.

Jamie left me with a murmured word outside the door that led to the Prince's temporary quarters. My presence would help nothing. I walked softly through the house, murmurous with the heavy breathing of sleeping men, the air thick with the dullness of despair.

At the top of the house, I found a small lumber-room. Crowded with junk and discarded furniture, it was otherwise unoccupied. I crept into this warren of oddities, feeling much like a small rodent, seeking refuge from a world in which huge and mysterious forces were let loose to destruction.

There was one small window, filled with the misty gray morning. I rubbed dirt away from one pane with the corner of my cloak, but there was nothing to be seen but the encompassing mist. I leaned my forehead against the cold glass. Somewhere out there was Culloden Field, but I saw nothing but the dim silhouette of my own reflection.

News of the gruesome and mysterious death of the Duke of Sandringham had reached Prince Charles, I knew; we had heard of it from almost everyone we spoke to as we passed to the north and it became safe for us to show ourselves again. What exactly had we done? I wondered. Had we doomed the Jacobite cause for good and all in that one night's adventure, or had we inadvertently saved Charles Stuart from an English trap? I drew a squeaking finger in a line down the misty glass, chalking up one more thing I would never find out.

It seemed a very long time before I heard a step on the uncarpeted boards of the stair outside my refuge. I came to the door to find Jamie coming onto the landing. One look at his face was enough.

"Alec was right," he said, without preliminaries. The bones of his face were stark beneath the skin, made prominent by hunger, sharpened by anger. "The troops are moving to Culloden—as they can. They havena slept or eaten in two days, there is no ordnance for the cannon—but they are going." The anger erupted suddenly and he slammed his fist down on a rickety table. A cascade of small brass dishes from the pile of household rubble woke the echoes of the attic with an ungodly clatter.

With an impatient gesture, he snatched the dirk from his belt and jabbed it violently into the table, where it stood, quivering with the force of the blow.

"The country folk say that if ye see blood on your dirk, it means death." He drew in his breath with a hiss, fist clenched on the table. "Well, I have seen it! So have they all. They know—Kilmarnock, Lochiel, and the rest. And no bit of good does the seeing of it do!"

He bent his head, hands braced on the table, staring at the dirk. He seemed much too large for the confines of the room, an angry smoldering presence that might break suddenly into flame. Instead, he flung up his hands, and threw himself onto a decrepit settle, where he sat, head buried in his hands.

"Jamie," I said, and swallowed. I could barely speak the next words, but they had to be said. I had known what news he would bring, and I had thought of what might still be done. "Jamie. There's only one thing left—only the one possibility."

His head was bent, forehead resting on his knuckles. He shook his head, not looking at me.

"There is no way," he said. "He's bent on it. Murray has tried to turn him, so has Lochiel. Balmerino. Me. But the men are standing on the plain this hour. Cumberland has set out for Drumossie. There is no way."

The healing arts are powerful ones, and any physician versed in the use of substances that heal knows also the power of those that harm. I had given Colum the cyanide he had not had time to use, and taken back the deadly vial from the table by the bed where his body lay. It was in my box now, the crudely distilled crystals a dull brownish-white, deceptively harmless in appearance.

My mouth was so dry that I couldn't speak at once. There was a little wine left in my flask; I drank it, the acid taste like bile on my tongue.

"There is one way," I said. "Only one."

Jamie's head stayed sunk in his hands. It had been a long ride, and the shock of Alec's news had added depression to his tiredness. We had detoured to find his men, or most of them, a miserable, ragged crew, indistinguishable from the skeletal Frasers of Lovat who surrounded them. The interview with Charles was far beyond the last straw.

"Aye?" he said.

I hesitated, but had to speak. The possibility had to be mentioned; whether he—or I—could bring ourselves to it or not.

"It's Charles Stuart," I said, at last. "It's him—everything. The battle, the war—everything depends on him, do you see?"

"Aye?" Jamie was looking up at me now, bloodshot eyes quizzical.

"If he were dead…." I whispered at last.

Jamie's eyes closed, and the last vestiges of blood drained from his face.

"If he were to die … now. Today. Or tonight. Jamie, without Charles, there's nothing to fight for. No one to order the men to Culloden. There wouldn't be a battle."

The long muscles of his throat rippled briefly as he swallowed. He opened his eyes and stared at me, appalled.

"Christ," he whispered. "Christ, ye canna mean it."

My hand closed on the smoky, gold-mounted crystal around my neck.

They had called me to attend the Prince, before Falkirk. O'Sullivan, Tullibardine, and the others. His Highness was ill—an indisposition, they said. I had seen Charles, made him bare his breast and arms, examined his mouth and the whites of his eyes.

It was scurvy, and several of the other diseases of malnutrition. I said as much.

"Nonsense!" said Sheridan, outraged. "His Highness cannot suffer from the yeuk, like a common peasant!"

"He's been eating like one," I retorted. "Or rather worse than one." The "peasants" were forced to eat onions and cabbage, having nothing else. Scorning such poor fare, His Highness and his advisers ate meat—and little else. Looking around the circle of scared, resentful faces, I saw few that didn't show symptoms of the lack of fresh food. Loose and missing teeth, soft, bleeding gums, the pus-filled, itching follicles of "the yeuk" that so lavishly decorated His Highness's white skin.

I was loath to surrender any of my precious supply of rose hips and dried berries, but had offered, reluctantly, to make the Prince a tea of them. The offer had been rejected, with a minimum of courtesy, and I understood that Archie Cameron had been summoned, with his bowl of leeches and his lancet, to see whether a letting of the Royal blood would relieve the Royal itch.

"I could do it," I said. My heart was beating heavily in my chest, making it hard to breathe. "I could mix him a draught. I think I could persuade him to take it."

"And if he should die upon drinking your medicine? Christ, Claire! They would kill ye on the spot!"

I folded my hands beneath my arms, trying to warm them.

"D-does that matter?" I asked, desperately trying to steady my voice. The truth was that it did. Just at the moment, my own life weighed a good deal more in the balance than did the hundreds I might save. I clenched my fists, shaking with terror, a mouse in the jaws of the trap.

Jamie was at my side in an instant. My legs didn't work very well; he half-carried me to the broken settle and sat down with me, his arms wrapped tight around me.

"You've the courage of a lion, *mo duinne,*" he murmured in my ear. "Of a bear, a wolf! But you know I willna let ye do it."

The shivering eased slightly, though I still felt cold, and sick with the horror of what I was saying.

"There might be another way," I said. "There's little food, but what there is goes to the Prince. I think it might not be difficult to add something to his dish without being noticed; things are so disorganized." This was true; all over the house, officers lay sleeping on tables and floors, still clad in their boots, too tired to lay aside their arms. The house was in chaos, with constant comings and goings. It would be a simple matter to distract a servant long enough to add a deadly powder to the evening dish.

The immediate terror had receded slightly, but the awfulness of my suggestion lingered like poison, chilling my own blood. Jamie's arm tightened briefly around my shoulders, then fell away as he contemplated the situation.

The death of Charles Stuart would not end the matter of the Rising; things had gone much too far for that. Lord George Murray, Balmerino, Kilmarnock, Lochiel, Clanranald—all of us were traitors, lives and property forfeit to the Crown. The Highland army was in tatters; without the figurehead of Charles to rally to, it would dissipate like smoke. The English, terrorized and humiliated at Preston and Falkirk, would not hesitate to pursue the fugitives, seeking to retrieve their lost honor and wash out the insult in blood.

There was little chance that Henry of York, Charles's pious younger brother, already bound by churchly vows, would take his brother's place to continue the fight for restoration. There was nothing ahead but catastrophe and wreck, and no possible way to avert it. All that might be salvaged now was the lives of the men who would die on the moor tomorrow.

It was Charles who had chosen to fight at Culloden, Charles whose stubborn, shortsighted autocracy had defied the advice of his own generals and gone to invade England. And whether Sandringham had meant his offer for good or ill, it had died with him. There was no support from the South; such English Jacobites as there were did not rally as expected to the banner of their king. Forced against his will to retreat, Charles had chosen this last stubborn stand, to place ill-armed, exhausted, starving men in a battle line on a rain-soaked moor, to face the wrath of Cumberland's cannon fire. If Charles Stuart were dead, the battle of Culloden might not take place. One life, against two thousand. One life—but that life a Royal one, and taken not in battle, but in cold blood.

The small room where we sat had a hearth, but a fire had not been lit—there was no fuel. Jamie sat gazing at it as though seeking an answer in invisible flames. Murder. Not only murder, but regicide. Not only murder, but the killing of a sometime friend.

And yet—the clansmen of the Highlands shivered already on the open moor, shifting in their serried ranks as the plan of battle was adjusted, rearranged, reordered, as more men drifted to join them. Among them were the MacKenzies of Leoch, the Frasers of Beauly, four hundred men of Jamie's blood. And the thirty men of Lallybroch, his own.

His face was blank, immobile as he thought, but the hands laced together on his knee knotted tight with the struggle. The crippled fingers and the straight strove together, twisting. I sat beside him, scarcely daring to breathe, awaiting his decision.

At last the breath went from him in an almost inaudible sigh, and he turned to me, a look of unutterable sadness in his eyes.

"I cannot," he whispered. His hand touched my face briefly, cupping my cheek. "Would God that I could, Sassenach. I cannot do it."

The wave of relief that washed through me robbed me of speech, but he saw what I felt, and grasped my hands between his own.

"Oh, God, Jamie, I'm glad of it!" I whispered.

He bowed his head over my hands. I turned my head to lay my cheek against his hair, and froze.

In the doorway, watching me with a look of absolute revulsion, was Dougal MacKenzie.

The last months had aged him; Rupert's death, the sleepless nights of fruitless argument, the strains of the hard campaign, and now the bitterness of imminent defeat. There were gray hairs in the russet beard, a gray look to his skin, and deep lines in his face that had not been there in November. With a shock, I realized that he looked like his brother, Colum. He had wanted to lead, Dougal MacKenzie. Now he had inherited the chieftainship, and was paying its price.

"Filthy … traitorous … whoring … *witch*!"

Jamie jerked as though he had been shot, face gone white as the sleet outside. I sprang to my feet, overturning the bench with a clatter that echoed through the room.

Dougal MacKenzie advanced on me slowly, putting aside the folds of his cloak, so that the hilt of his sword was freed to his hand. I hadn't heard the door behind me open; it must have stood ajar. How long had he been on the other side, listening?

"You," he said softly. "I should have known it; from the first I saw ye, I should have known." His eyes were fixed on me, something between horror and fury in the cloudy green depths.

There was a sudden stir in the air beside me; Jamie was there, a hand on my arm, urging me back behind him.

"Dougal," he said. "It isna what ye think, man. It's—"

"No?" Dougal cut in. His gaze left me for a second, and I shrank behind Jamie, grateful for the respite.

"Not what I think?" he said, still speaking softly. "I hear the woman urging ye to foul murder—to the murder of your Prince! Not only vile murder, but treason as well! And ye tell me I havena heard it?" He shook his head, the tangled russet curls lank and greasy on his shoulders. Like the rest of us, he was starving; the bones jutted in his face, but his eyes burned from their shadowy orbits.

"I dinna blame ye, lad," he said. His voice was suddenly weary, and I remembered that he was a man in his fifties. "It isna your fault, Jamie. She's bewitched ye—anyone can see that." His mouth twisted as he looked again at me.

"Aye, I ken weel enough how it's been for ye. She's worked the same sorcery on me, betimes." His eyes raked over me, burning. "A murdering, lying slut, would take a man by the cock and lead him to his doom, wi' her claws sunk deep in his balls. That's the spell that they lay on ye, lad—she and the other witch. Take ye to their beds and steal the soul from you as ye lie sleeping wi' your head on their breasts. They take your soul, and eat your manhood, Jamie."

His tongue darted out and wetted his lips. He was still staring at me, and his hand tightened on the hilt of his sword.

"Stand aside, laddie. I'll free ye of the *sassenach* whore."

Jamie stepped in front of me, momentarily blocking Dougal from my view.

"You're tired, Dougal," he said, speaking calmly, soothingly. "Tired, and hearin' things, man. D'ye go down now. I shall—"

He had no chance to finish. Dougal wasn't listening to him; the deep-set green eyes were fixed on my face, and the MacKenzie chief had drawn the dirk from its sheath at his waist.

"I shall cut your throat," he said to me softly. "I should ha' done it when first I saw ye. It would have saved us all a great grief."

I wasn't sure that he wasn't right, but that didn't mean I intended to let him remedy the matter. I took three quick steps back, and fetched up hard against the table.

"Get back, man!" Jamie thrust himself before me, holding up a shielding forearm as Dougal advanced on me.

The MacKenzie chieftain shook his head, bull-like, red-rimmed eyes fixed on me.

"She's mine," he said hoarsely. "Witch. Traitoress. Step aside, lad. I wouldna harm ye, but by God, if ye shield that woman, I shall kill you, too, foster son or no."

He lunged past Jamie, grabbing my arm. Exhausted, starved, and aging as he was, he was still a formidable man, and his fingers bit deep into my flesh.

I yelped with pain, and kicked frantically at him as he jerked me toward him. He snatched at my hair and caught it, forcing my head hard back. His breath was hot and sour on my face. I shrieked and struck at him, digging my nails into his cheek in an effort to get free.

The air exploded from his lungs as Jamie's fist struck him in the ribs, and his grip on my hair tore loose as Jamie's other fist came down in a numbing blow on the point of his shoulder. Suddenly freed, I fell back against the table, whimpering with shock and pain.

Dougal whirled to face Jamie then, dropping into a fighter's crouch, the dirk held blade upward.

"Let it be, then," he said, breathing heavily. He swayed slightly from side to side, shifting his weight as he sought the advantage. "Blood will tell. Ye damned Fraser spawn. Treachery runs in your blood. Come here to me, fox cub. I'll kill ye quick, for your mother's sake."

There was little room for maneuver in the small attic. No room to draw a sword; with his dirk stuck fast in the tabletop, Jamie was effectively unarmed. He matched Dougal's stance, eyes watchful, fixed on the point of the menacing dirk.

“Put it down, Dougal,” he said. “If ye bear my mother in mind, then listen to me, for her sake!”

The MacKenzie made no answer, but jabbed suddenly, a ripping blow aimed upward.

Jamie dodged aside, dodged again the wide-armed sweep that came from the other side. Jamie had the agility of youth on his side—but Dougal held the knife.

Dougal closed with a rush, and the dirk slid up Jamie’s side, ripping his shirt, scoring a dark line in his flesh. With a hiss of pain, he jerked back, grabbing for Dougal’s wrist, catching it as the blade struck down.

The dull gleam of the blade flashed once, disappeared between the struggling bodies. They strove together, locked like lovers, the air filled with the smell of male sweat and fury. The blade rose again, two hands grappling on its rounded hilt. A shift, and a jerk, a sudden grunt of effort, one of pain. Dougal stepped back, staggering, face congested and pouring sweat, the hilt of the dagger socketed at the base of his throat.

Jamie half-fell, gasping, and leaned against the table. His eyes were dark with shock, and his hair sweat-soaked, the rent edges of his shirt tinged with blood from the scratch.

There was a terrible sound from Dougal, a sound of shock and stifled breath. Jamie caught him as he tottered and fell, Dougal’s weight bringing him to his knees. Dougal’s head lay on Jamie’s shoulder, Jamie’s arms locked around his foster father.

I dropped to my knees beside them, reaching to help, trying to get hold of Dougal. It was too late. The big body went limp, then spasmed, sliding out of Jamie’s grasp. Dougal lay crumpled on the floor, muscles jerking with involuntary contractions, struggling like a fish out of water.

His head was pillowed on Jamie’s thigh. One heave brought his face into view. It was contorted, and dark red, eyes gone to slits. His mouth moved continuously, saying something, talking with great force—but without sound, save the bubbling rasp from his ruined throat.

Jamie's face was ashen; apparently he could tell what Dougal was saying. He struggled violently, trying to hold the thrashing body still. There was a final spasm, then a dreadful rattling sound, and Dougal MacKenzie lay still, Jamie's hands clenched tight upon his shoulders, as though to prevent his rising again.

"Blessed Michael defend us!" The hoarse whisper came from the doorway. It was Willie Coulter MacKenzie, one of Dougal's men. He stared in stupefied horror at the body of his chief. A small puddle of urine was forming under it, creeping out from under the sprawled plaid. The man crossed himself, still staring.

"Willie." Jamie rose, passing a trembling hand across his face. "Willie." The man seemed struck dumb. He looked at Jamie in complete bewilderment, mouth open.

"I need one hour, man." Jamie had a hand on Willie Coulter's shoulder, easing him into the room. "An hour to see my wife safe. Then I shall come back to answer for this. I give ye my word, on my honor. But I must have an hour free. One hour. Will ye give me one hour, man, before ye speak?"

Willie licked dry lips, looking back and forth between the body of his chief and his chieftain's nephew, clearly frightened out of his wits. At last he nodded, plainly having no idea what to do, choosing to follow this request because no reasonable alternative presented itself.

"Good." Jamie swallowed heavily, and wiped his face on his plaid. He patted Willie on the shoulder. "Stay here, man. Pray for his soul"—he nodded toward the still form on the floor, not looking at it—"and for mine." He leaned past Willie to pry his dirk from the table, then pushed me before him, out the door and down the stairs.

Halfway down, he stopped, leaning against the wall with his eyes closed. He drew deep, ragged breaths, as though he were about to faint, and I put my hands on his chest, alarmed. His heart was beating like a drum, and he was trembling, but after a moment, he drew himself upright, nodded at me, and took my arm.

"I need Murtagh," he said.

We found the clansman just outside, cowled in his plaid against the sleety rain, sitting in a dry spot beneath the eaves of the house.

Fergus was curled up next to him, dozing, tired from the long ride.

Murtagh took one look at Jamie's face, and rose to his feet, dark and dour, ready for anything.

"I've killed Dougal MacKenzie," Jamie said bluntly, without preliminary.

Murtagh's face went quite blank for a moment, then his normal expression of wary grimness reasserted itself.

"Aye," he said. "What's to do, then?"

Jamie groped in his sporran and brought out a folded paper. His hands shook as he tried to unfold it, and I took it from him, spreading it out under the shelter of the eaves.

"Deed of Sasine" it said, at the top of the sheet. It was a short document, laid out in a few black lines, conveying title of the estate known as Broch Tuarach to one James Jacob Fraser Murray, said property to be held in trust and administered by the said James Murray's parents, Janet Fraser Murray and Ian Gordon Murray, until the said James Murray's majority. Jamie's signature was at the bottom, and there were two blank spaces provided below, each with the word "Witness" written alongside. It was dated 1 July, 1745—a month before Charles Stuart had launched his rebellion on the shores of Scotland, and made Jamie Fraser a traitor to the Crown.

"I need ye to sign this, you and Claire," Jamie said, taking the note from me and handing it to Murtagh. "But it means forswearing yourself; I have nay right to ask it."

Murtagh's small black eyes scanned the deed quickly. "No," he said dryly. "No right—nor any need, either." He nudged Fergus with a foot, and the boy sat bolt upright, blinking.

"Nip into the house and fetch your chief ink and a quill, lad," Murtagh said. "And quick about it—go!"

Fergus shook his head once to clear it, glanced at Jamie for a confirming nod—and went.

Water was dripping from the eaves down the back of my neck. I shivered and drew the woolen arisaid closer around my shoulders. I wondered when Jamie had written the document. The false date made it seem the property had been transferred before Jamie became a traitor, with his goods and lands subject to seizure—if it was not questioned, the property would pass safely to small Jamie. Jenny's family at least would be safe, still in possession of land and farmhouse.

Jamie had seen the possible need for this; yet he had not executed the document before we left Lallybroch; he had hoped somehow to return, and claim his own place once again. Now that was impossible, but the estate might still be saved from seizure. There was no one to say when the document had really been signed—save the witnesses, me and Murtagh.

Fergus returned, panting, with a small glass inkpot and a ragged quill. We signed one at a time, leaning against the side of the house, careful to shake the quill first to keep the ink from dripping down. Murtagh went first; his middle name, I saw, was FitzGibbons.

"Will ye have me take it to your sister?" Murtagh asked as I shook the paper carefully to dry it.

Jamie shook his head. The rain made damp, coin-sized splotches on his plaid, and glittered on his lashes like tears.

"No. Fergus will take it."

"Me?" The boy's eyes went round with astonishment.

"You, man." Jamie took the paper from me, folded it, then knelt and tucked it inside Fergus's shirt.

"This must reach my sister—Madame Murray—without fail. It is worth more than my life, man—or yours."

Practically breathless with the enormity of the responsibility entrusted to him, Fergus stood up straight, hands clasped over his middle.

"I will not fail you, milord!"

A faint smile crossed Jamie's lips, and he rested a hand briefly on the smooth cap of Fergus's hair.

"I know that, man, and I am grateful," he said. He twisted the ring off his left hand; the cabochon ruby that had belonged to his father. "Here," he said, handing it to Fergus. "Go to the stables, and show this to the old man ye'll see there. Tell him I said you are to take Donas. Take the horse, and ride for Lallybroch. Stop for nothing, except as you must, to sleep, and when ye do sleep, hide yourself well."

Fergus was speechless with alarmed excitement, but Murtagh frowned dubiously at him.

"D'ye think the bairn can manage yon wicked beast?" he said.

"Aye, he can," Jamie said firmly. Overcome, Fergus stuttered, then sank to his knees and kissed Jamie's hand fervently. Springing to his feet, he darted away in the direction of the stables, his slight figure disappearing in the mist.

Jamie licked dry lips, and closed his eyes briefly, then turned to Murtagh with decision.

"And you—*mo caraidh*—I need ye to gather the men."

Murtagh's sketchy brows shot up, but he merely nodded.

"Aye," he said. "And when I have?"

Jamie glanced at me, then back at his godfather. "They'll be on the moor now, I think, with Young Simon. Just gather them together, in one place. I shall see my wife safe, and then—" He hesitated, then shrugged. "I will find you. Wait my coming."

Murtagh nodded once more, and turned to go. Then he paused, and turned back to face Jamie. The thin mouth twitched briefly, and he said, "I would ask the one thing of ye, lad—let it be the English. Not your ain folk."

Jamie flinched slightly, but after a moment, he nodded. Then, without speaking, he held out his arms to the older man. They embraced quickly, fiercely, and Murtagh, too, was gone, in a swirl of ragged tartan.

I was the last bit of business on the agenda.

"Come on, Sassenach," he said, seizing me by the arm. "We must go."

No one stopped us; there was so much coming and going by the roads that we were scarcely noticed while we were near the moor. Farther away, when we left the main road, there was no one to see.

Jamie was completely silent, concentrating single-mindedly on the job at hand. I said nothing to him, too occupied with my own shock and dread to wish for conversation.

"I shall see my wife safe." I hadn't known what he meant by that, but it became obvious within two hours, when he turned the head of his horse farther south, and the steep green hill called Craigh na Dun came in view.

"No!" I said, when I saw it, and realized where we were headed. "Jamie, no! I won't go!"

He didn't answer me, only spurred his horse and galloped ahead, leaving me no option but to follow.

My feelings were in turmoil; beyond the doom of the coming battle and the horror of Dougal's death, now there was the prospect of the stones. That accursed circle, through which I had come here. Plainly Jamie meant to send me back, back to my own time—if such a thing was possible.

He could mean all he liked, I thought, clenching my jaw as I followed him down the narrow trail through the heather. There was no power on earth that could make me leave him now.

* * *

We stood together on the hillside, in the small dooryard of the ruined cottage that stood below the crest of the hill. No one had lived there for years; the local folk said the hill was haunted—a fairy's dun.

Jamie had half-urged, half-dragged me up the slope, paying no attention to my protests. At the cottage he had stopped, though, and sunk to the ground, chest heaving as he gasped for breath.

"It's all right," he said at last. "We have a bit of time now; no one will find us here."

He sat on the ground, his plaid wrapped around him for warmth. It had stopped raining for the moment, but the wind blew cold from the mountains nearby, where snow still capped the peaks and choked the passes. He let his head fall forward onto his knees, exhausted by the flight.

I sat close by him, huddled within my cloak, and felt his breathing gradually slow as the panic subsided. We sat in silence for a long time, afraid to move from what seemed a precarious perch above the chaos below. Chaos I felt I had somehow helped create.

"Jamie," I said, at last. I reached out a hand to touch him, but then drew back and let it fall. "Jamie—I'm sorry."

He continued to look out, into the darkening void of the moor below. For a moment, I thought he hadn't heard me. He closed his eyes. Then he shook his head very slightly.

"No," he said softly. "There is no need."

"But there is." Grief nearly choked me, but I felt as though I must say it; must tell him that I knew what I had done to him.

"I should have gone back. Jamie—if I had gone, then, when you brought me here from Cranesmuir … maybe then—"

"Aye, maybe," he interrupted. He swung toward me abruptly, and I could see his eyes fixed on me. There was longing there, and a grief that matched mine, but no anger, no reproach.

He shook his head again.

"No," he said once more. "I ken what ye mean, *mo duinne*. But it isna so. Had ye gone then, matters might still have happened as they have. Maybe so, maybe no. Perhaps it would have come sooner. Perhaps differently. Perhaps—just perhaps—not at all. But there are more folk have had a hand in this than we two, and I willna have ye take the guilt of it upon yourself."

His hand touched my hair, smoothing it out of my eyes. A tear rolled down my cheek, and he caught it on his finger.

"Not that," I said. I flung a hand out toward the dark, taking in the armies, and Charles, and the starved man in the wood, and the slaughter to come. "Not that. What I did to you."

He smiled then, with great tenderness, and smoothed his palm across my cheek, warm on my spring-chilled skin.

"Aye? And what have I done to you, Sassenach? Taken ye from your own place, led ye into poverty and outlawry, taken ye through battlefields and risked your life. D'ye hold it against me?"

"You know I don't."

He smiled. "Aye, well; neither do I, my Sassenach." The smile faded from his face as he glanced up at the crest of the hill above us. The stones were invisible, but I could feel the menace of them, close at hand.

"I won't go, Jamie," I repeated stubbornly. "I'm staying with you."

"No." He shook his head. He spoke gently, but his voice was firm, with no possibility of denial. "I must go back, Claire."

“Jamie, you can’t!” I clutched his arm urgently. “Jamie, they will have found Dougal by now! Willie Coulter will have told someone.”

“Aye, he will.” He put a hand over my arm and patted it. He had reached his decision on the ride to the hill; I could see it in his shadowed face, resignation and determination mingled. There was grief there, and sadness, too, but those had been put aside; he had no time for mourning now.

“We could try to get away to France,” I said. “Jamie, we must!” But even as I spoke, I knew I could not turn him from the course he had decided on.

“No,” he said again, softly. He turned and lifted a hand, gesturing toward the darkening valley below, the shaded hills beyond. “The country is roused, Sassenach. The ports are closed; O’Brien has been trying for the last three months to bring a ship to rescue the Prince, to take him to safety in France—Dougal told me … before.” A tremor passed over his face, and a sudden spasm of grief knit his brows. He pushed it aside, though, and went on, explaining in a steady voice.

“It’s only the English who are hunting Charles Stuart. It will be the English, and the clans as well, who hunt me. I am a traitor twice over, a rebel and a murderer. Claire …” He paused, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck, then said gently, “Claire, I am a dead man.”

The tears were freezing on my cheeks, leaving icy trails that burned my skin.

“No,” I said again, but to no effect.

“I’m no precisely inconspicuous, ye ken,” he said, trying to make a joke of it as he ran a hand through the rusty locks of his hair. “Red Jamie wouldna get far, I think. But you …” He touched my mouth, tracing the line of my lips. “I can save you, Claire, and I will. That is the most important thing. But then I shall go back—for my men.”

“The men from Lallybroch? But how?”

Jamie frowned, absently fingering the hilt of his sword as he thought.

“I think I can get them away. It will be confused on the moor, wi’ men and horses moving to and fro, and orders shouted and contradicted; battles are verra messy affairs. And even if it's known by then what I—what I have done," he continued, with a momentary catch in his voice, "there are none who would stop me then, wi' the English in sight and the battle about to begin. Aye, I can do it," he said. His voice had steadied, and his fists clenched at his sides with determination.

"They will follow me without question—God help them, that's what's brought them here! Murtagh will have gathered them for me; I shall take them and lead them from the field. If anyone tries to stop me, I shall say that I claim the right to lead my own men in battle; not even Young Simon will deny me that."

He drew a deep breath, brows knit as he visualized the scene on the battlefield come morning.

"I shall bring them safely away. The field is broad enough, and there are enough men that no one will realize that we havena but moved to a new position. I shall bring them off the moor, and see them set on the road toward Lallybroch."

He fell silent, as though this were as far as he had thought in his plans.

"And then?" I asked, not wanting to know the answer, but unable to stop myself.

"And then I shall turn back to Culloden," he said, letting out his breath. He gave me an unsteady smile. "I'm no afraid to die, Sassenach." His mouth quirked wryly. "Well … not a lot, anyway. But some of the ways of accomplishing the fact …" A brief, involuntary shudder ran through him, but he tried to keep smiling.

"I doubt I should be thought worthy of the services of a true professional, but I expect in such a case, both Monsieur Forez and myself might find it … awkward. I mean, havin' my heart cut out by someone I've shared wine with …"

With a sound of incoherent distress, I flung my arms around him, holding him as tightly as I could.

"It's all right," he whispered into my hair. "It's all right, Sassenach. A musket ball. Maybe a blade. It will be over quickly."

I knew this was a lie; I had seen enough of battle wounds and the deaths of warriors. All that was true was that it was better than waiting for the hangman's noose. The terror that had ridden with me from Sandringham's estate rose now to high tide, choking, drowning me. My ears rang with my own pulsebeat, and my throat closed so tight that I felt I could not breathe.

Then all at once, the fear left me. I could not leave him, and I would not.

"Jamie," I said, into the folds of his plaid. "I'm going back with you."

He started back, staring down at me.

"The hell you are!" he said.

"I am." I felt very calm, with no trace of doubt. "I can make a kilt of my arisaid; there are enough young boys with the army that I can pass for one. You've said yourself it will all be confusion. No one will notice."

"No!" he said. "No, Claire!" His jaw was clenched, and he was glaring at me with a mixture of anger and horror.

"If you're not afraid, I'm not either," I said, firming my own jaw. "It will … be over quickly. You said so." My chin was beginning to quiver, despite my determination. "Jamie—I won't … I can't … I bloody won't live without you, and that's all!"

He opened his mouth, speechless, then closed it, shaking his head. The light over the mountains was failing, painting the clouds with a dull red glow. At last he reached for me, drew me close and held me.

"D'ye think I don't know?" he asked softly. "It's me that has the easy part now. For if ye feel for me as I do for you—then I am asking you to tear out your heart and live without it." His hand stroked my hair, the roughness of his knuckles catching in the blowing strands.

"But ye must do it, *mo duinne*. My brave lioness. Ye must."

"Why?" I demanded, pulling back to look up at him. "When you took me from the witch trial at Cranesmuir—you said then that you would have died with me, you would have gone to the stake with me, had it come to that!"

He grasped my hands, fixing me with a steady blue gaze.

"Aye, I would," he said. "But I wasna carrying your child."

The wind had frozen me; it was the cold that made me shake, I told myself. The cold that took my breath away.

"You can't tell," I said, at last. "It's much too soon to be sure."

He snorted briefly, and a tiny flicker of amusement lit his eyes.

"And me a farmer, too! Sassenach, ye havena been a day late in your courses, in all the time since ye first took me to your bed. Ye havena bled now in forty-six days."

"You bastard!" I said, outraged. "You counted! In the middle of a bloody war, you counted!"

"Didn't you?"

"No!" I hadn't; I had been much too afraid to acknowledge the possibility of the thing I had hoped and prayed for so long, come now so horribly too late.

"Besides," I went on, trying still to deny the possibility, "that doesn't mean anything. Starvation could cause that; it often does."

He lifted one brow, and cupped a broad hand gently beneath my breast.

"Aye, you're thin enough; but scrawny as ye are, your breasts are full—and the nipples of them gone the color of Champagne grapes. You forget," he said, "I've seen ye so before. I have no doubt—and neither have you."

I tried to fight down the waves of nausea—so easily attributable to fright and starvation—but I felt the small heaviness, suddenly burning in my womb. I bit my lip hard, but the sickness washed over me.

Jamie let go of my hands, and stood before me, hands at his sides, stark in silhouette against the fading sky.

"Claire," he said quietly. "Tomorrow I will die. This child … is all that will be left of me—ever. I ask ye, Claire—I beg you—see it safe."

I stood still, vision blurring, and in that moment, I heard my heart break. It was a small, clean sound, like the snapping of a flower's stem.

At last I bent my head to him, the wind grieving in my ears.

"Yes," I whispered. "Yes. I'll go."

It was nearly dark. He came behind me and held me, leaning back against him as he looked over my shoulder, out over the valley. The lights of watchfires had begun to spring up, small glowing dots in the far distance. We were silent for a long time, as the evening deepened. It was very quiet on the hill; I could hear nothing but Jamie's even breathing, each breath a precious sound.

"I will find you," he whispered in my ear. "I promise. If I must endure two hundred years of purgatory, two hundred years without you—then that is my punishment, which I have earned for my crimes. For I have lied, and killed, and stolen; betrayed and broken trust. But there is the one thing that shall lie in the balance. When I shall stand before God, I shall have one thing to say, to weigh against the rest."

His voice dropped, nearly to a whisper, and his arms tightened around me.

"Lord, ye gave me a rare woman, and God! I loved her well."

He was slow, and careful; so was I. Each touch, each moment must be savored, remembered—treasured as a talisman against a future empty of him.

I touched each soft hollow, the hidden places of his body. Felt the grace and the strength of each curving bone, the marvel of his firm-knit muscles, drawn lean and flexible across the span of his shoulders, smooth and solid down the length of his back, hard as seasoned oakwood in the columns of his thighs.

Tasted the salty sweat in the hollow of his throat, smelled the warm muskiness of the hair between his legs, the sweetness of the soft, wide mouth, tasting faintly of dried apple and the bitter tang of juniper berries.

"You are so beautiful, my own," he whispered to me, touching the slipperiness between my legs, the tender skin of my inner thighs.

His head was no more than a dark blur against the white blur of my breasts. The holes in the roof admitted only the faintest light from the overcast sky; the soft grumble of spring thunder muttered constantly in the hills beyond our fragile walls. He was hard in my hand, so stiff with the wanting that my touch made him groan in a need close to pain.

When he could wait no longer, he took me, a knife to its scabbard, and we moved hard together, pressing, wanting, needing so urgently that moment of ultimate joining, and fearing to reach it, for the knowledge that beyond it lay eternal separation.

He brought me again and again to the peaks of sensation, holding back himself, stopping, gasping and shuddering on the brink. Until at last I touched his face, twined my fingers in his hair, pressed him tight and arched my back and hips beneath him, urging, forcing.

"Now," I said to him, softly. "Now. Come with me, come to me, now. Now!"

He yielded to me, and I to him, despair lending edge to passion, so the echo of our cries seemed to die away slowly, ringing in the darkness of the cold stone hut.

We lay pressed together, unmoving, his weight a heavy blessing, a shield and reassurance. A body so solid, so filled with heat and life; how could it be possible that he would cease to exist within hours?

"Listen," he said at last, softly. "Do you hear?"

At first I heard nothing but the rushing of the wind, and the trickle of rain, dripping through the holes of the roof. Then I heard it, the steady, slow thump of his heartbeat, pulsing against me, and mine against his, each matching each, in the rhythm of life. The blood coursed through him, and through our fragile link, through me, and back again.

We lay so, warm beneath the makeshift covering of plaid and cloak, on a bed of our clothing, tangled together. Then at last he slipped free, and turning me away from him, cupped his hand across my belly, his breath warm on the nape of my neck.

"Sleep now a bit, *mo duinne*," he whispered. "I would sleep once more this way—holding you, holding the babe."

I had thought I could not sleep, but the pull of exhaustion was too much, and I slipped beneath the surface with scarcely a ripple. Near dawn I woke, Jamie's arms still around me, and lay watching the imperceptible bloom of night into day, futilely willing back the friendly shelter of the dark.

I rolled to the side and lifted myself to watch him, to see the light touch the bold shape of his face, innocent in sleep, to see the dawning sun touch his hair with flame—for the last time.

A wave of anguish broke through me, so acute that I must have made some sound, for he opened his eyes. He smiled when he saw me, and his eyes searched my face. I knew that he was memorizing my features, as I was his.

"Jamie," I said. My voice was hoarse with sleep and swallowed tears. "Jamie. I want you to mark me."

"What?" he said, startled.

The tiny *sgian dhu* he carried in his stocking was lying within reach, its handle of carved staghorn dark against the piled clothing. I reached for it and handed it to him.

"Cut me," I said urgently. "Deep enough to leave a scar. I want to take away your touch with me, to have something of you that will stay with me always. I don't care if it hurts; nothing could hurt more than leaving you. At least when I touch it, wherever I am, I can feel your touch on me."

His hand was over mine where it rested on the knife's hilt. After a moment, he squeezed it and nodded. He hesitated for a moment, the razor-sharp blade in his hand, and I offered him my right hand. It was warm beneath our coverings, but his breath came in wisps, visible in the cold air of the room.

He turned my palm upward, examining it carefully, then raised it to his lips. A soft kiss in the well of the palm, then he seized the base of my thumb in a hard, sucking bite. Letting go, he swiftly cut into the numbed flesh. I felt no more than a mild burning sensation, but the blood welled at once. He brought the hand quickly to his mouth again, holding it there until the flow of blood slowed. He bound the wound, now stinging, carefully in a handkerchief, but not before I saw that the cut was in the shape of a small, slightly crooked letter "J."

I looked up to see that he was holding out the tiny knife to me. I took it, and somewhat hesitantly, took the hand he offered me.

He closed his eyes briefly, and set his lips, but a small grunt of pain escaped him as I pressed the tip of the knife into the fleshy pad at the base of his thumb. The Mount of Venus, a palm-reader had told me; indicator of passion and love.

It was only as I completed the small semicircular cut that I realized he had given me his left hand.

“I should have taken the other,” I said. “Your sword hilt will press on it.”

He smiled faintly.

“I could ask no more than to feel your touch on me in my last fight—wherever it comes.”

Unwrapping the blood-spotted handkerchief, I pressed my wounded hand tightly against his, fingers gripped together. The blood was warm and slick, not yet sticky between our hands.

“Blood of my Blood …” I whispered.

“… and Bone of my Bone,” he answered softly. Neither of us could finish the vow, “so long as we both shall live,” but the unspoken words hung aching between us. Finally he smiled crookedly.

“Longer than that,” he said firmly, and pulled me to him once more.

* * *

“Frank,” he said at last, with a sigh. “Well, I leave it to you what ye shall tell him about me. Likely he’ll not want to hear. But if he does, if ye find ye can talk to him of me, as you have to me of him—then tell him … I’m grateful. Tell him I trust him, because I must. And tell him—” His hands tightened suddenly on my arms, and he spoke with a mixture of laughter and absolute sincerity. “Tell him I hate him to his guts and the marrow of his bones!”

We were dressed, and the dawn light had strengthened into day. There was no food, nothing with which to break our fast. Nothing left that must be done … and nothing left to say.

He would have to leave now, to make it to Drumossie Moor in time. This was our final parting, and we could find no way to say goodbye.

At last, he smiled crookedly, bent, and kissed me gently on the lips.

“They say …” he began, and stopped to clear his throat. “They say, in the old days, when a man would go forth to do a great deed—he would find a wisewoman, and ask her to bless him. He would stand looking forth, in the direction he would go, and she would come behind him, to say the words of the prayer over him. When she had finished, he would walk straight out, and not look back, for that was ill-luck to his quest.”

He touched my face once, and turned away, facing the open door. The morning sun streamed in, lighting his hair in a thousand flames. He straightened his shoulders, broad beneath his plaid, and drew a deep breath.

“Bless me, then, wisewoman,” he said softly, “and go.”

I laid a hand on his shoulder, groping for words. Jenny had taught me a few of the ancient Celtic prayers of protection; I tried to summon the words in my mind.

“Jesus, Thou Son of Mary,” I started, speaking hoarsely, “I call upon Thy name; and on the name of John the Apostle beloved, And on the names of all the saints in the red domain, To shield thee in the battle to come …”

I stopped, interrupted by a sound from the hillside below. The sound of voices, and of footsteps.

Jamie froze for a second, shoulder hard beneath my hand, then whirled, pushing me toward the rear of the cottage, where the wall had fallen away.

“That way!” he said. “They are English! Claire, go!”

I ran toward the opening in the wall, heart in my throat, as he turned back to the doorway, hand on his sword. I stopped, just for a moment, for the last sight of him. He turned his head, caught sight of me, and suddenly he was with me, pushing me hard against the wall in an agony of desperation. He gripped me fiercely to him. I could feel his erection pressing into my stomach and the hilt of his dagger dug into my side.

He spoke hoarsely into my hair. “Once more. I must! But quick!” He pushed me against the wall and I scrabbled up my skirts as he raised his kilts. This was not lovemaking; he took me quickly and powerfully and it was over in seconds. The voices were nearer; only a hundred yards away.

He kissed me once more, hard enough to leave the taste of blood in my mouth. “Name him Brian,” he said, “for my father.” With a push, he sent me toward the opening. As I ran for it, I glanced back to see him standing in the middle of the doorway, sword half-drawn, dirk ready in his right hand.

The English, unaware that the cottage was occupied, had not thought to send a scout round the back. The slope behind the cottage was deserted as I dashed across it and into the thicket of alders below the hillcrest.

I pushed my way through the brush and the branches, stumbling over rocks, blinded by tears. Behind me I could hear shouts and the clash of steel from the cottage. My thighs were slick and wet with Jamie’s seed. The crest of the hill seemed never to grow nearer; surely I would spend the rest of my life fighting my way through the strangling trees!

There was a crashing in the brush behind me. Someone had seen me rush from the cottage. I dashed aside the tears and scrabbled upward, groping on all fours as the ground grew steeper. I was in the clear space now, the shelf of granite I remembered. The small dogwood growing out of the cliff was there, and the tumble of small boulders.

I stopped at the edge of the stone circle, looking down, trying desperately to see what was happening. How many soldiers had come to the cottage? Could Jamie break free of them and reach his hobbled horse below? Without it, he would never reach Culloden in time.

All at once, the brush below me parted with a flash of red. An English soldier. I turned, ran gasping across the turf of the circle, and hurled myself through the cleft in the rock.

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PART SEVEN

Hindsight

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LOOSE ENDS

He was right, of course. Bloody man, he was almost always right." Claire sounded half-cross as she spoke. A rueful smile crossed her face, then she looked at Brianna, who sat on the hearthrug, gripping her knees, her face completely blank. Only the faint stir of her hair, lifting and moving in the rising heat of the fire, showed any motion at all.

"It was a dangerous pregnancy—again—and a hazardous birth. Had I risked it there, it would almost certainly have killed us both." She spoke directly to her daughter, as though they were alone in the room. Roger, waking slowly from the spell of the past, felt like an intruder.

"The truth, then, all of it. I couldn't bear to leave him," Claire said softly. "Even for you … I hated you for a bit, before you were born, because it was for you that he'd made me go. I didn't mind dying—not with him. But to have to go on, to live without him—he was right, I had the worst of the bargain. But I kept it, because I loved him. And we lived, you and I, because he loved you."

Brianna didn't move; didn't take her eyes from her mother's face. Only her lips moved, stiffly, as though unaccustomed to talking.

"How long … did you hate me?"

Gold eyes met blue ones, innocent and ruthless as the eyes of a falcon.

"Until you were born. When I held you and nursed you and saw you look up at me with your father's eyes."

Brianna made a faint, strangled sound, but her mother went on, voice softening a little as she looked at the girl at her feet.

"And then I began to know you, something separate from myself or from Jamie. And I loved you for yourself, and not only for the man who fathered you."

There was a blur of motion on the hearthrug, and Brianna shot erect. Her hair bristled out like a lion's mane, and the blue eyes blazed like the heart of the flames behind her.

"Frank Randall was my father!" she said. "He was! I know it!" Fists clenched, she glared at her mother. Her voice trembled with rage.

"I don't know why you're doing this. Maybe you did hate me, maybe you still do!" Tears were beginning to make their way down her cheeks, unbidden, and she dashed them angrily away with the back of one hand.

"Daddy … Daddy loved me—he couldn't have, if I weren't his! Why are you trying to make me believe he wasn't my father? Were you jealous of me? Is that it? Did you mind so much that he loved me? He didn't love *you*, I know that!" The blue eyes narrowed, cat-like, blazing in a face gone dead-white.

Roger felt a strong desire to ease behind the door before she noticed his presence and turned that molten wrath on him. But beyond his own discomfort he was conscious of a sense of growing awe. The girl that stood on the hearthrug, hissing and spitting in defense of her paternity, flamed with the wild strength that had brought the Highland warriors down on their enemies like shrieking banshees. Her long, straight nose lengthened still further by the shadows, eyes slitted like a snarling cat's, she was the image of her father—and her father was patently not the dark, quiet scholar whose photo adorned the jacket of the book on the table.

Claire opened her mouth once, but then closed it again, watching her daughter with absorbed fascination. That powerful tension of the body, the flexing arch of the broad, flat cheekbones; Roger thought that she had seen that many times before—but not in Brianna.

With a suddenness that made them both flinch, Brianna spun on her heel, grabbed the yellowed news-clippings from the desk, and thrust them into the fire. She snatched the poker and jabbed it viciously into the tindery mass, heedless of the shower of sparks that flew from the hearth and hissed about her booted feet.

Whirling from the rapidly blackening mass of glowing paper, she stamped one foot on the hearth.

"Bitch!" she shouted at her mother. "You hated me? Well, I hate *you*!" She drew back the arm with the poker, and Roger's muscles tensed instinctively, ready to lunge for her. But she turned, arm drawn back like a javelin thrower, and hurled the poker through the full-length window, where the panes of night-dark glass reflected the image of a burning woman for one last instant before the crash and shiver into empty black.

* * *

The silence in the study was shattering. Roger, who had leaped to his feet in pursuit of Brianna, was left standing in the middle of the room, awkwardly frozen. He looked down at his hands as if not quite sure what to do with them, then at Claire. She sat perfectly still in the sanctuary of the wing chair, like an animal frozen by the passing shadow of a raptor.

After several moments, Roger moved across to the desk and leaned against it.

"I don't know what to say," he said.

Claire's mouth twitched faintly. "Neither do I."

They sat in silence for several minutes. The old house creaked, settling around them, and a faint noise of banging pots came down the hallway from the kitchen, where Fiona was doing something about dinner. Roger's feeling of shock and constrained embarrassment gradually gave way to something else, he wasn't sure what. His hands felt icy, and he rubbed them on his legs, feeling the warm rasp of the corduroy on his palms.

"I …" He started to speak, then stopped and shook his head.

Claire drew a deep breath, and he realized that it was the first movement he had seen her make since Brianna had left. Her gaze was clear and direct.

“Do you believe me?” she asked.

Roger looked thoughtfully at her. “I’ll be damned if I know,” he said at last.

That provoked a slightly wavering smile. “That’s what Jamie said,” she said, “when I asked him at the first where he thought I’d come from.”

“I can’t say I blame him.” Roger hesitated, then, making up his mind, got off the desk and came across the room to her. “May I?” He knelt and took her unresisting hand in his, turning it to the light. You can tell real ivory from the synthetic, he remembered suddenly, because the real kind feels warm to the touch. The palm of her hand was a soft pink, but the faint line of the “J” at the base of her thumb was white as bone.

“It doesn’t prove anything,” she said, watching his face. “It could have been an accident; I could have done it myself.”

“But you didn’t, did you?” He laid the hand back in her lap very gently, as though it were a fragile artifact.

“No. But I can’t prove it. The pearls”—her hand went to the shimmer of the necklace at her throat—“they’re authentic; that can be verified. But can I prove where I got them? No.”

“And the portrait of Ellen MacKenzie—” he began.

“The same. A coincidence. Something to base my delusion upon. My lies.” There was a faintly bitter note in her voice, though she spoke calmly enough. There was a patch of color in each cheek now, and she was losing that utter stillness. It was like watching a statue come to life, he thought.

Roger got to his feet. He paced slowly back and forth, rubbing a hand through his hair.

“But it’s important to you, isn’t it? It’s very important.”

“Yes.” She rose herself and went to the desk, where the folder of his research sat. She laid a hand on the manila sheeting with reverence, as though it were a gravestone; he supposed to her it was.

“I had to know.” There was a faint quaver in her voice, but he saw her chin firm instantly, suppressing it. “I had to know if he’d done it—if he'd saved his men—or if he'd sacrificed himself for nothing. And I had to tell Brianna. Even if she doesn't believe it—if she never believes it. Jamie was her father. I had to tell her."

"Yes, I see that. And you couldn't do it while Dr. Randall—your hus—I mean, Frank," he corrected himself, flushing, "was alive."

She smiled faintly. "It's all right; you can call Frank my husband. He was, after all, for a good many years. And Bree's right, in a way—he was her father, as well as Jamie." She glanced down at her hands, and spread the fingers of both, so the light gleamed from the two rings she wore, silver and gold. Roger was struck by a thought.

"Your ring," he said, coming to stand close by her again. "The silver one. Is there a maker's mark in it? Some of the eighteenth-century Scottish silversmiths used them. It might not be proof positive, but it's something."

Claire looked startled. Her left hand covered the right protectively, fingers rubbing the wide silver band with its pattern of Highland interlace and thistle blooms.

"I don't know," she said. A faint blush rose in her cheeks. "I haven't seen inside it. I've never taken it off." She twisted the ring slowly over the joint of the knuckle; her fingers were slender, but from long wearing, the ring had left a groove in her flesh.

She squinted at the inside of the ring, then rose and brought it to the table, where she stood next to Roger, tilting the silver circle to catch the light from the table lamp.

"There are words in it," she said wonderingly. "I never realized that he'd … Oh, dear God." Her voice broke, and the ring slipped from her fingers, rattling on the table with a tiny metal chime. Roger hurriedly scooped it up, but she had turned away, fists held tight against her middle. He knew she didn't want him to see her face; the control she had kept through the long hours of the day and the scene with Brianna had deserted her now.

He stood for a minute, feeling unbearably awkward and out of place. With a terrible feeling that he was violating a privacy that ran deeper than anything he had ever known, but not knowing what else to do, he lifted the tiny metal circle to the light and read the words inside.

“Da mi basia mille …” But it was Claire’s voice that spoke the words, not his. Her voice was shaky, and he could tell that she was crying, but it was coming back under her control. She couldn’t let go for long; the power of what she held leashed could so easily destroy her.

“It’s Catullus. A bit of a love poem. Hugh.… Hugh Munro—he gave me the poem for a wedding present, wrapped around a bit of amber with a dragonfly inside it.” Her hands, still curled into fists, had now dropped to her sides. “I couldn’t say it all, still, but the one bit—I know that much.” Her voice was growing steadier as she spoke, but she kept her back turned to Roger. The small silver circle glowed in his palm, still warm with the heat of the finger it had left.

> *“… da mi basia mille …”*

Still turned away, she went on, translating,

> *“Then let amorous kisses dwell*
> *On our lips, begin and tell*
> *A Thousand and a Hundred score*
> *A Hundred, and a Thousand more.”*

When she had finished, she stood still a moment, then slowly turned to face him again. Her cheeks were flushed and wet, and her lashes clumped together, but she was superficially calm.

“A hundred, and a thousand more,” she said, with a feeble attempt at a smile. “But no maker’s mark. So that isn’t proof, either.”

“Yes, it is.” Roger found there seemed to be something sticking in his own throat, and hastily cleared it. “It’s absolute proof. To me.”

Something lit in the depths of her eyes, and the smile grew real. Then the tears welled up and overflowed as she lost her grip once and for all.

“I’m sorry,” she said at last. She was sitting on the sofa, elbows on her knees, face half-buried in one of the Reverend Mr. Wakefield’s huge white handkerchiefs. Roger sat close beside her, almost touching. She seemed very small and vulnerable. He wanted to pat the ash-brown curls, but felt too shy to do it.

"I never thought … it never occurred to me," she said, blowing her nose again. "I didn't know how much it would mean, to have someone believe me."

"Even if it isn't Brianna?"

She grimaced slightly at his words, brushing back her hair with one hand as she straightened.

"It was a shock," she defended her daughter. "Naturally, she couldn't—she was so fond of her father—of Frank, I mean," she amended hastily. "I knew she might not be able to take it all in at first. But … surely when she's had time to think about it, ask questions …" Her voice faded, and the shoulders of her white linen suit slumped under the weight of the words.

As though to distract herself, she glanced at the table, where the stack of shiny-covered books still sat, undisturbed.

"It's odd, isn't it? To live twenty years with a Jacobite scholar, and to be so afraid of what I might learn that I could never bear to open one of his books?" She shook her head, still staring at the books. "I don't know what happened to many of them—I couldn't stand to find out. All the men I knew; I couldn't forget them. But I could bury them, keep their memory at bay. For a time."

And that time now was ended, and another begun. Roger picked up the book from the top of the stack, weighing it in his hands, as if it were a responsibility. Perhaps it would take her mind off Brianna, at least.

"Do you want me to tell you?" he asked quietly.

She hesitated for a long moment, but then nodded quickly, as though afraid she would regret the action if she paused to think about it longer.

He licked dry lips, and began to talk. He didn't need to refer to the book; these were facts known to any scholar of the period. Still, he held Frank Randall's book against his chest, solid as a shield.

"Francis Townsend," he began. "The man who held Carlisle for Charles. He was captured. Tried for treason, hanged and disemboweled."

He paused, but the white face was drained of blood already, no further change was possible. She sat across the table from him, motionless as a pillar of salt.

"MacDonald of Keppoch charged the field at Culloden on foot, with his brother Donald. Both of them were cut down by English cannon fire. Lord Kilmarnock fell on the field of battle, but Lord Ancrum, scouting the fallen, recognized him and saved his life from Cumberland's men. No great favor; he was beheaded the next August on Tower Hill, together with Balmerino." He hesitated. "Kilmarnock's young son was lost on the field; his body was never recovered."

"I always liked Balmerino," she murmured. "And the Old Fox? Lord Lovat?" Her voice was little more than a whisper. "The shadow of an ax …"

"Yes." Roger's fingers stroked the slick jacket of the book unconsciously, as though reading the words within by Braille. "He was tried for treason, and condemned to be beheaded. He made a good end. All the accounts say that he met his death with great dignity."

A scene flashed through Roger's mind; an anecdote from Hogarth. He recited from memory, as closely as he could. " 'Carried through the shouts and jeers of an English mob on his way to the Tower, the old chieftain of clan Fraser appeared nonchalant, indifferent to the missiles that sailed past his head, and almost good-humored. In reply to a shout from one elderly woman—"You're going to get your head chopped off, you old Scotch cur!"—he leaned from his carriage window and shouted jovially back, "I expect I shall, you ugly old English bitch!" ' "

She was smiling, but the sound she made was a cross between a laugh and a sob.

"I'll bet he did, the bloody old bastard."

"When he was led to the block," Roger went on cautiously, "he asked to inspect the blade, and instructed the executioner to do a good job. He told the man, 'Do it right, for I shall be very angry indeed if you don't.' "

Tears were running down beneath her closed lids, glittering like jewels in the firelight. He made a motion toward her, but she sensed it and shook her head, eyes still closed.

"I'm all right. Go on."

"There isn't much more. Some of them survived, you know. Lochiel escaped to France." He carefully refrained from mention of the chieftain's brother, Archibald Cameron. The doctor had been hanged, disemboweled, and beheaded at Tyburn, his heart torn out and given to the flames. She did not seem to notice the omission.

He finished the list rapidly, watching her. Her tears had stopped, but she sat with her head hung forward, the thick curly hair hiding all expression.

He paused for a moment when he had finished speaking, then got up and took her firmly by the arm.

"Come on," he said. "You need a little air. It's stopped raining; we'll go outside."

The air outside was fresh and cool, almost intoxicating after the stuffiness of the Reverend's study. The heavy rain had ceased about sunset, and now, in the early evening, only the pit-a-pat dripping of trees and shrubs echoed the earlier downpour.

I felt an almost overwhelming relief at being released from the house. I had feared this for so long, and now it was done. Even if Bree never … but no, she would. Even if it took a long time, surely she would recognize the truth. She must; it looked her in the face every morning in the mirror; it ran in the very blood of her veins. For now, I had told her everything, and I felt the lightness of a shriven soul, leaving the confessional, unburdened as yet by thought of the penance ahead.

Rather like giving birth, I thought. A short period of great difficulty and rending pain, and the certain knowledge of sleepless nights and nerve-racking days in future. But for now, for a blessed, peaceful moment, there was nothing but a quiet euphoria that filled the soul and left no room for misgivings. Even the fresh-felt grief for the men I had known was muted out here, softened by the stars that shone through rifts in the shredding cloud.

The night was damp with early spring, and the tires of cars passing on the main road nearby hissed on the wet pavement. Roger led me without speaking down the slope behind the house, up another past a small, mossy glade, and down again, where there was a path that led to the river. A black iron railroad bridge spanned the river here; there was an iron ladder from the path's edge, attached to one of the girders. Someone armed with a can of white spray-paint had inscribed FREE SCOTLAND on the span with random boldness.

In spite of the sadness of memory, I felt at peace, or nearly so. I'd done the hardest part. Bree knew now who she was. I hoped fervently that she would come to believe it in time—not only for her own sake, I knew, but also for mine. More than I could ever have admitted, even to myself, I wanted to have someone with whom to remember Jamie; someone I could talk to about him.

I felt an overwhelming tiredness, one that touched both mind and body. But I straightened my spine just once more, forcing my body past its limits, as I had done so many times before. Soon, I promised my aching joints, my tender mind, my freshly riven heart. Soon, I could rest. I could sit alone in the small, cozy parlor of the bed-and-breakfast, alone by the fire with my ghosts. I could mourn them in peace, letting the weariness slip away with my tears, and go at last to seek the temporary oblivion of sleep, in which I might meet them alive once more.

But not yet. There was one thing more to be done before I slept.

They walked in silence for some time, with no sound but the passing of distant traffic, and the closer lapping of the river at its banks. Roger felt reluctant to start any conversation, lest he risk reminding her of things she wished to forget. But the floodgates had been opened, and there was no way of holding back.

She began to ask him small questions, hesitant and halting. He answered them as best he could, and hesitant in return, asked a few questions of his own. The freedom of talking, suddenly, after so many years of pent-up secrecy, seemed to act on her like a drug, and Roger, listening in fascination, drew her out despite herself. By the time they reached the railroad bridge, she had recovered the vigor and strength of character he had first seen in her.

"He was a fool, and a drunkard, and a weak, silly man," she declared passionately. "They were all fools—Lochiel, Glengarry, and the rest. They drank too much together, and filled themselves with Charlie's foolish dreams. Talk is cheap, and Dougal was right—it's easy to be brave, sitting over a glass of ale in a warm room. Stupid with drink, they were, and then too proud of their bloody honor to back down. They whipped their men and threatened them, bribed them and lured them—took them all to bloody ruin … for the sake of honor and glory."

She snorted through her nose, and was silent for a moment. Then, surprisingly, she laughed.

"But do you know what's really funny? That poor, silly sot and his greedy, stupid helpers; and the foolish, honorable men who couldn't bring themselves to turn back … they had the one tiny virtue among them; they believed. And the odd thing is, that that's all that's endured of them—all the silliness, the incompetence, the cowardice and drunken vainglory; that's all gone. All that's left now of Charles Stuart and his men is the glory that they sought for and never found.

"Perhaps Raymond was right," she added in a softer tone; "it's only the essence of a thing that counts. When time strips everything else away, it's only the hardness of the bone that's left."

"I suppose you must feel some bitterness against the historians," Roger ventured. "All the writers who got it wrong—made him out a hero. I mean, you can't go anywhere in the Highlands without seeing the Bonnie Prince on toffee tins and souvenir tourist mugs."

Claire shook her head, gazing off in the distance. The evening mist was growing heavier, the bushes beginning to drip again from the tips of their leaves.

"Not the historians. No, not them. Their greatest crime is that they presume to know what happened, how things come about, when they have only what the past chose to leave behind—for the most part, they think what they were meant to think, and it's a rare one that sees what really happened, behind the smokescreen of artifacts and paper."

There was a faint rumble in the distance. The evening passenger train from London, Roger knew. You could hear the whistle from the manse on clear nights.

"No, the fault lies with the artists," Claire went on. "The writers, the singers, the tellers of tales. It's them that take the past and re-create it to their liking. Them that could take a fool and give you back a hero, take a sot and make him a king."

"Are they all liars, then?" Roger asked. Claire shrugged. In spite of the chilly air, she had taken off the jacket to her suit; the damp molded the cotton shirt to show the fineness of collarbone and shoulder blades.

"Liars?" she asked, "or sorcerers? Do they see the bones in the dust of the earth, see the essence of a thing that was, and clothe it in new flesh, so the plodding beast reemerges as a fabulous monster?"

"And are they wrong to do it, then?" Roger asked. The rail bridge trembled as the Flying Scotsman hit the switch below. The wavering white letters shook with vibration—FREE SCOTLAND.

Claire stared upward at the letters, her face lit by fugitive starlight.

"You still don't understand, do you?" she said. She was irritated, but the husky voice didn't rise above its normal level.

"You don't *know* why," she said. "You don't know, and I don't know, and we never *will* know. Can't you see? You don't know, because you can't say what the end is—there isn't any end. You can't say, 'This particular event' was 'destined' to happen, and therefore all these other things happened. What Charles did to the people of Scotland—was that the 'thing' that had to happen? Or was it 'meant' to happen as it did, and Charles's real purpose was to be what he is now—a figurehead, an icon? Without him, would Scotland have endured two hundred years of union with England, and still—*still*"—she waved a hand at the sprawling letters overhead—"have kept its own identity?"

"I don't know!" said Roger, having to shout as the swinging searchlight lit the trees and track, and the train roared over the bridge above them.

There was a solid minute of clash and roar, earthshaking noise that held them rooted to the spot. Then at last it was past, and the clatter died to a lonely crying wail as the red light of the end car swept out of sight beyond them.

"Well, that's the hell of it, isn't it?" she said, turning away. "You never *know*, but you have to act anyway, don't you?"

She spread her hands suddenly, flexing the strong fingers so her rings flashed in the light.

"You learn it when you become a doctor. Not in school—that isn't where you learn, in any case—but when you lay your hands on people and presume to heal them. There are so many there, beyond your reach. So many you can never touch, so many whose essence you can't find, so many who slip through your fingers. But you can't think about them. The only thing you can do—the *only* thing—is to try for the one who's in front of you. Act as though this one patient is the only person in the world—because to do otherwise is to lose that one, too. One at a time, that's all you can do. And you learn not to despair over all the ones you can't help, but only to do what you can."

She turned back to him, face haggard with fatigue, but eyes glowing with the rain-light, spangles of water caught in the tangles of her hair. Her hand rested on Roger's arm, compelling as the wind that fills a boat's sail and drives it on.

"Let's go back to the manse, Roger," she said. "I have something particular to tell you."

* * *

Claire was quiet on the walk back to the manse, avoiding Roger's tentative queries. She refused his proffered arm, walking alone, head down in thought. Not as though she were making up her mind, Roger thought; she had already done that. She was deciding what to say.

Roger himself was wondering. The quiet gave him respite from the turmoil of the day's revelations—enough to wonder precisely why Claire had chosen to include him in them. She could easily have told Brianna alone, had she wished to. Was it only that she had feared what Brianna's reaction to the story might be, and been reluctant to meet it alone? Or had she gambled that he would—as he had—believe her, and thus sought to enlist him as an ally in the cause of truth—her truth, and Brianna's?

His curiosity had reached near boiling point by the time they reached the manse. Still, there was work to do first; together, they unloaded one of the tallest bookshelves, and pushed it in front of the shattered window, shutting out the cold night air.

Flushed from the exertion, Claire sat down on the sofa while he went to pour a pair of whiskies from the small drinks-table in the corner. When Mrs. Graham had been alive, she had always brought drinks on a tray, properly napkined, doilied, and adorned with accompanying biscuits. Fiona, if allowed, would willingly have done the same, but Roger much preferred the simplicity of pouring his own drink in solitude.

Claire thanked him, sipped from the glass, then set it down and looked up at him, tired but composed.

"You'll likely be wondering why I wanted you to hear the whole story," she said, with that unnerving ability to see into his thoughts.

"There were two reasons. I'll tell you the second presently, but as for the first, I thought you had some right to hear it."

"Me? What right?"

The golden eyes were direct, unsettling as a leopard's guileless stare. "The same as Brianna. The right to know who you are." She moved across the room to the far wall. It was cork-lined from floor to ceiling, encrusted with layers of photographs, charts, notes, stray visiting cards, old parish schedules, spare keys, and other bits of rubbish pinned to the cork.

"I remember this wall." Claire smiled, touching a picture of Prize Day at the local grammar school. "Did your father ever take anything off it?"

Roger shook his head, bewildered. “No, I don’t believe he did. He always said he could never find things put away in drawers; if it was anything important, he wanted it in plain sight.”

“Then it’s likely still here. He thought it was important.”

Reaching up, she began to thumb lightly through the overlapping layers, gently separating the yellowed papers.

“This one, I think,” she murmured, after some riffling back and forth. Reaching far up under the detritus of sermon notes and car-wash tickets, she detached a single sheet of paper and laid it on the desk.

“Why, it’s my family tree,” Roger said in surprise. “I haven’t seen that old thing in years. And never paid any attention to it when I did see it, either,” he added. “If you’re going to tell me I’m adopted, I already know that.”

Claire nodded, intent on the chart. “Oh, yes. That’s why your father—Mr. Wakefield, I mean—drew up this chart. He wanted to be sure that you would know your real family, even though he gave you his own name.”

Roger sighed, thinking of the Reverend, and the small silver-framed picture on his bureau, with the smiling likeness of an unknown young man, darkhaired in World War II RAF uniform.

“Yes, I know that, too. My family name was MacKenzie. Are you going to tell me I’m connected to some of the MacKenzies you … er, knew? I don’t see any of those names on this chart.”

Claire acted as though she hadn’t heard him, tracing a finger down the spidery hand-drawn lines of the genealogy.

“Mr. Wakefield was a terrible stickler for accuracy,” she murmured, as though to herself. “He wouldn’t want any mistakes.” Her finger came to a halt on the page.

“Here,” she said. “This is where it happened. Below this point”—her finger swept down the page—“everything is right. These were your parents, and your grandparents, and your great-grandparents, and so on. But not above.” The finger swept upward.

Roger bent over the chart, then looked up, moss-green eyes thoughtful.

“This one? William Buccleigh MacKenzie, born 1744, of William John MacKenzie and Sarah Innes. Died 1782.”

Claire shook her head. “Died 1744, aged two months, of smallpox.” She looked up, and the golden eyes met his with a force that sent a shiver down his spine. “Yours wasn’t the first adoption in that family, you know,” she said. Her finger tapped the entry. “He needed a wet nurse,” she said. “His own mother was dead—so he was given to a family that had lost a baby. They called him by the name of the child they had lost—that was common—and I don’t suppose anyone wanted to call attention to his ancestry by recording the new child in the parish register. He would have been baptized at birth, after all; it wasn’t necessary to do it again. Colum told me where they placed him.”

“Geillis Duncan’s son,” he said slowly. “The witch’s child.”

“That’s right.” She gazed at him appraisingly, head cocked to one side. “I knew it must be, when I saw you. The eyes, you know. They’re hers.”

Roger sat down, feeling suddenly quite cold, in spite of the bookshelf blocking the draft, and the newly kindled fire on the hearth.

“You’re sure of this?” he said, but of course she was sure. Assuming that the whole story was not a fabrication, the elaborate construction of a diseased mind. He glanced up at her, sitting unruffled with her whisky, composed as though about to order cheese straws.

Diseased mind? Dr. Claire Beauchamp-Randall, chief of staff at a large, important hospital? Raving insanity, rampant delusions? Easier to believe himself insane. In fact, he was beginning to believe just that.

He took a deep breath and placed both hands flat on the chart, blotting out the entry for William Buccleigh MacKenzie.

“Well, it’s interesting all right, and I suppose I’m glad you told me. But it doesn’t really change anything, does it? Except that I suppose I can tear off the top half of this genealogy and throw it away. After all, we don’t know where Geillis Duncan came from, nor the man who fathered her child; you seem sure it wasn't poor old Arthur."

Claire shook her head, a distant look in her eyes.

"Oh, no, it wasn't Arthur Duncan. It was Dougal MacKenzie who fathered Geilie's child. That was the real reason she was killed. Not witchcraft. But Colum MacKenzie couldn't let it be known that his brother had had an adulterous affair with the fiscal's wife. And she wanted to marry Dougal; I think perhaps she threatened the MacKenzies with the truth about Hamish."

"Hamish? Oh, Colum's son. Yes, I remember." Roger rubbed his forehead. His head was starting to spin.

"Not Colum's son," Claire corrected. "Dougal's. Colum couldn't sire children, but Dougal could—and did. Hamish was the heir to the chieftainship of clan MacKenzie; Colum would have killed anyone who threatened Hamish—and did."

She drew a deep breath. "And that," she said, "leads to the second reason why I told you the story."

Roger buried both hands in his hair, staring down at the table, where the lines of the genealogical chart seemed to writhe like mocking snakes, forked tongues flickering between the names.

"Geillis Duncan," he said hoarsely. "She had a vaccination scar."

"Yes. It was that, finally, that made me come back to Scotland. When I left with Frank, I swore I would never come back. I knew I could never forget, but I could bury what I knew; I could stay away, and never seek to know what happened after I left. It seemed the least I could do, for both of them, for Frank and Jamie. And for the baby coming." Her lips pressed tightly together for a moment.

"But Geilie saved my life, at the trial in Cranesmuir. Perhaps she was doomed herself in any case; I think she believed so. But she threw away any chance she might have had, in order to save me. And she left me a message. Dougal gave it to me, in a cave in the Highlands, when he brought me the news that Jamie was in prison. There were two pieces to the message. A sentence, 'I do not know if it is possible, but I think so,' and a sequence of four numbers—one, nine, six, and eight."

"Nineteen sixty-eight," Roger said, with the feeling that this was a dream. Surely he would be waking soon. "This year. What did she mean, she thought it was possible?"

"To go back. Through the stones. She hadn't tried, but she thought I could. And she was right, of course." Claire turned and picked up her whisky from the table. She stared at Roger across the rim of the glass, eyes the same color as the contents. "This is 1968; the year she went back herself. Except that I think she hasn't yet gone."

The glass slipped in Roger's hand, and he barely caught it in time.

"What … here? But she … why not … you can't tell …" He was sputtering, thoughts jarred into incoherency.

"I don't *know*," Claire pointed out. "But I think so. I'm fairly sure she was Scots, and the odds are good that she came through somewhere in the Highlands. Granted that there are any number of standing stones, we know that Craigh na Dun *is* a passage—for those that can use it. Besides," she added, with the air of one presenting the final argument, "Fiona's seen her."

"Fiona?" This, Roger felt, was simply too much. The crowning absurdity. Anything else he could manage to believe—time passages, clan treachery, historical revelations—but bringing Fiona into it was more than his reason could be expected to stand. He looked pleadingly at Claire. "Tell me you don't mean that," he begged. "Not Fiona."

Claire's mouth twitched at one corner. "I'm afraid so," she said, not without sympathy. "I asked her—about the Druid group that her grandmother belonged to, you know. She's been sworn to secrecy, of course, but I knew quite a bit about them already, and well …" She shrugged, mildly apologetic. "It wasn't too difficult to get her to talk. She told me that there'd been another woman asking questions—a tall, fair-haired woman, with very striking green eyes. Fiona said the woman reminded her of someone," she added delicately, carefully not looking at him, "but she couldn't think who."

Roger merely groaned, and bending at the waist, collapsed slowly forward until his forehead rested on the table. He closed his eyes, feeling the cool hardness of the wood under his head.

“Did Fiona know who she was?” he asked, eyes still closed.

“Her name is Gillian Edgars,” Claire replied. He heard her rising, crossing the room, adding another tot of whisky to her glass. She came back and stood by the table. He could feel her gaze on the back of his neck.

“I’ll leave it to you.” Claire said quietly. “It’s your right to say. Shall I look for her?”

Roger lifted his head off the table and blinked at her incredulously. “Shall you look for her?” he said. “If this—if it’s all true—then we have to find her, don’t we? If she’s going back to be burned alive? Of course you have to find her!” he burst out. “How could you consider anything else?”

“And if I do find her?” she replied. She placed a slender hand on the grubby chart and raised her eyes to his. “What happens to you?” she asked softly.

He looked around helplessly, at the bright, cluttered study, with the wall of miscellanea, the chipped old teapot on the ancient oak table. Solid as … He gripped his thighs, clutching the rough corduroy as though for reassurance that he was as solid as the chair on which he sat.

“But … I’m *real*!” he burst out. “I can’t just … evaporate!”

Claire raised her brows consideringly. “I don’t know that you would. I have no idea what would happen. Perhaps you would never have existed? In which case, you oughtn’t to be too agitated now. Perhaps the part of you that makes you unique, your soul or whatever you want to call it—perhaps that’s fated to exist in any case, and you would still be you, though born of a slightly different lineage. After all, how much of your physical makeup can be due to ancestors six generations back? Half? Ten percent?” She shrugged, and pursed her lips, looking him over carefully.

“Your eyes come from Geilie, as I told you. But I see Dougal in you, too. No specific feature, though you have the MacKenzie cheekbones; Bree has them, too. No, it’s something more subtle, something in the way you move; a grace, a suddenness—no …” She shook her head. “I can’t describe it. But it’s there. Is it something you *need*, to be who you are? Could you do without that bit from Dougal?”

She rose heavily, looking her age for the first time since he had met her.

“I’ve spent more than twenty years looking for answers, Roger, and I can tell you only one thing: There aren’t any answers, only choices. I’ve made a number of them myself, and no one can tell me whether they were right or wrong. Master Raymond perhaps, though I don’t suppose he would; he was a man who believed in mysteries.

“I can see the right of it only far enough to know that I must tell you—and leave the choice to you.”

He picked up the glass and drained the rest of the whisky.

The Year of our Lord 1968. The year when Geillis Duncan stepped into the circle of standing stones. The year she went to meet her fate beneath the rowan trees in the hills near Leoch. An illegitimate child—and death by fire.

He rose and wandered up and down the rows of books that lined the study. Books filled with history, that mocking and mutable subject.

No answers, only choices.

Restless, he fingered the books on the top shelf. These were the histories of the Jacobite movement, the stories of the Rebellions, the ’15 and the ’45. Claire had known a number of the men and women described in these books. Had fought and suffered with them, to save a people strange to her. Had lost all she held dear in the effort. And in the end, had failed. But the choice had been hers, as now it was his.

Was there a chance that this was a dream, a delusion of some kind? He stole a glance at Claire. She lay back in her chair, eyes closed, motionless but for the beating of her pulse, barely visible in the hollow of her throat. No. He could, for a moment, convince himself that it was make-believe, but only while he looked away from her. However much he wanted to believe otherwise, he could not look at her and doubt a word of what she said.

He spread his hands flat on the table, then turned them over, seeing the maze of lines that crossed his palms. Was it only his own fate that lay here in his cupped hands, or did he hold an unknown woman's life as well?

No answers. He closed his hands gently, as though holding something small trapped inside his fists, and made his choice.

"Let's find her," he said.

There was no sound from the still figure in the wing chair, and no movement save the rise and fall of the rounded breast. Claire was asleep.

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WITCH-HUNT

The old-fashioned buzzer whirred somewhere in the depths of the flat. It wasn't the best part of town, nor was it the worst. Working-class houses, for the most part, some, like this one, divided into two or three flats. A hand-lettered notice under the buzzer read MCHENRY UPSTAIRS—RING TWICE. Roger carefully pressed the buzzer once more, then wiped his hand on his trousers. His palms were sweating, which annoyed him considerably.

There was a trough of yellow jonquils by the doorstep, half-dead for lack of water. The tips of the blade-shaped leaves were brown and curling, and the frilly yellow heads drooped disconsolately near his shoe.

Claire saw them, too. "Perhaps no one's home," she said, stooping to touch the dry soil in the trough. "These haven't been watered in over a week."

Roger felt a mild wave of relief at the thought; whether he believed Geillis Duncan was Gillian Edgars or not, he hadn't been looking forward to this visit. He was turning to go when the door suddenly opened behind him, with a screech of sticking wood that brought his heart into his mouth.

"Aye?" The man who answered the door squinted at them, eyes swollen in a flushed, heavy face shadowed with unshaven beard.

"Er … We're sorry to disturb your sleep, sir," said Roger, making an effort to calm himself. His stomach felt slightly hollow. "We're looking for a Miss Gillian Edgars. Is this her residence?"

The man rubbed a stubby, black-furred hand over his head, making the hair stick up in belligerent spikes.

"That's *Mrs*. Edgars to you, jimmy. And what's it you want wi' my wife?" The alcoholic fumes from the man's breath made Roger want to step backward, but he stood his ground.

"We only want to talk with her," he said, as conciliatingly as he could. "Is she at home, please?"

"Is she at home, please?" said the man who must be Mr. Edgars, squinching his mouth in a savage, high-pitched mockery of Roger's Oxford accent. "No, she's not home. Bugger off," he advised, and swung the door to with a crash that left the lace curtain shivering with the vibration.

"I can see why she *isn't* home," Claire observed, standing on tiptoe to peer through the window. "I wouldn't be, either, if that's what was waiting for me."

"Quite," said Roger shortly. "And that would appear to be that. Have you any other suggestions for finding this woman?"

Claire let go of the windowsill.

"He's settled in front of the telly," she reported. "Let's leave him, at least until after the pub's opened. Meanwhile, we can go try this Institute. Fiona said Gillian Edgars took courses there."

* * *

The Institute for the Study of Highland Folklore and Antiquities was housed on the top floor of a narrow house just outside the business district. The receptionist, a small, plump woman in a brown cardigan and print dress, seemed delighted to see them; she mustn't get much company up here, Roger reflected.

"Oh, Mrs. *Edgars*," she said, upon hearing their business. Roger thought that a sudden note of doubt had crept into Mrs. Andrews's voice, but she remained bright and cheerful. "Yes," she said, "she's a regular member of the Institute, all paid up for her classes. She's around here quite a bit, is Mrs. Edgars." A lot more than Mrs. Andrews really cared for, from the sound of it.

"She isn't here now, by chance, is she?" Claire asked.

Mrs. Andrews shook her head, making the dozens of gray-streaked pincurls dance on her head.

"Oh, no," she said. "It's a Monday. Only me and Dr. McEwan are here on the Monday. He's the Director, you know." She looked reproachfully at Roger, as though he ought really to have known that. Then, apparently reassured by their evident respectability, she relented slightly.

"If you want to ask about Mrs. Edgars, you should see Dr. McEwan. I'll just go and tell him you're here, shall I?"

As she began to ease out from behind her desk, Claire stopped her, leaning forward.

"Have you perhaps got a photograph of Mrs. Edgars?" she asked bluntly. At Mrs. Andrews's stare of surprise, Claire smiled charmingly, explaining, "We wouldn't want to waste the Director's time, if it's the wrong person, you see."

Mrs. Andrews mouth dropped open slightly, and she blinked in confusion, but she nodded after a moment, and began fussing round her desk, opening drawers and talking to herself.

"I know they're here somewhere. I saw them just yesterday, so they can't have gone far … oh, here!" She bobbed up with a folder of eight-by-ten black-and-white photographs in her hand, and sorted rapidly through them.

"There," she said. "That's her, with one of the digging expeditions, out near town, but you can't see her face, can you? Let me see if there's any more …"

She resumed her sorting, muttering to herself, as Roger peered interestedly over Claire's shoulder at the photograph Mrs. Andrews had laid on the desk. It showed a small group of people standing near a Land-Rover, with a number of burlap sacks and small tools on the ground beside them. It was an impromptu shot, and several of the people were turned away from the camera. Claire's finger reached out without hesitation, touching the image of a tall girl with long, straight, fair hair hanging halfway down her back. She tapped the photograph and nodded silently to Roger.

"You can't possibly be sure," he muttered to her under his breath.

"What's that, luv?" said Mrs. Andrews, looking up absently over her spectacles. "Oh, you weren't talking to me. That's all right, then, I've found one a little better. It's still not her whole face—she's turned sideways, like—but it's better nor the other." She plopped the new picture down on top of the other with a triumphant little splat.

This one showed an older man with half-spectacles and the same fairhaired girl, bent over a table holding what looked like a collection of rusted motor parts to Roger, but which were undoubtedly valuable artifacts. The girl's hair swung down beside her cheek, and her head was turned toward the older man, but the slant of a short, straight nose, a sweetly rounded chin, and the curve of a beautiful mouth showed clearly. The eye was cast down, hidden under long, thick lashes. Roger repressed the admiring whistle that rose unbidden to his lips. Ancestress or not, she was a real dolly, he thought irreverently.

He glanced at Claire. She nodded, without speaking. She was paler even than usual, and he could see the pulse beating rapidly in her throat, but she thanked Mrs. Andrews with her usual composure.

"Yes, that's the one. I think perhaps we *would* like to talk to the Director, if he's available."

Mrs. Andrews cast a quick glance at the white-paneled door behind her desk.

"Well, I'll go and ask for you, dearie. Could I tell him what it's for, though?"

Roger was opening his mouth, groping for some excuse, when Claire stepped smoothly into the breach.

"We're from Oxford, actually," she said. "Mrs. Edgars has applied for a study grant with the Department of Antiquities, and she'd given the Institute as a reference with the rest of her credentials. So, if you wouldn't mind …?"

"Oh, I see," said Mrs. Andrews, looking impressed. "Oxford. Just think! I'll ask Dr. McEwan if he can see you just now."

As she disappeared behind the white-paneled door, pausing for no more than a perfunctory rap before entering, Roger leaned down to whisper in Claire's ear.

"There is no such thing as a Department of Antiquities at Oxford," he hissed, "and you know it."

"You know that," she replied demurely, "and I, as you so cleverly point out, do too. But there are any number of people in the world who don't, and we've just met one of them."

The white-paneled door was beginning to open.

"Let's hope they're thick on the ground hereabouts," Roger said, wiping his brow, "or that you're a quick liar."

Claire rose, smiling at the beckoning figure of Mrs. Andrews as she spoke out of the side of her mouth.

"I? I, who read souls for the King of France?" She brushed down her skirt and set it swinging. "This will be pie."

Roger bowed ironically, gesturing toward the door. "*Aprés vous*, Madame."

As she stepped ahead of him, he added, *"Aprés vous, le déluge,"* under his breath. Her shoulders stiffened, but she didn't turn around.

Rather to Roger's surprise, it *was* pie. He wasn't sure whether it was Claire's skill at misrepresentation, or Dr. McEwan's own preoccupation, but their bona fides went unquestioned. It didn't seem to occur to the man that it was highly unlikely for scouting parties from Oxford to penetrate to the wilds of Inverness to make inquiries about the background of a potential graduate student. But then, Roger thought, Dr. McEwan appeared to have something on his mind; perhaps he wasn't thinking as clearly as usual.

"Weeeel … yes, Mrs. Edgars unquestionably has a fine mind. Very fine," the Director said, as though convincing himself. He was a tall, spare man, with a long upper lip like a camel's, which wobbled as he searched hesitantly for each new word. "Have you … has she … that is …" He trailed off, lip twitching, then, "Have you ever actually *met* Mrs. Edgars?" he finally burst out.

"No," said Roger, eyeing Dr. McEwan with some austerity. "That's why we're asking about her."

"Is there anything …" Claire paused delicately, inviting, "that you think perhaps the committee should know, Dr. McEwan?" She leaned forward, opening her eyes very wide. "You know, inquiries like this are *completely* confidential. But it's so important that we be fully informed; there is a position of trust involved." Her voice dropped suggestively. "The Ministry, you know."

Roger would dearly have loved to strangle her, but Dr. McEwan was nodding sagely, lip wobbling like mad.

"Oh, yes, dear lady. Yes, of course. The Ministry. I completely understand. Yes, yes, Well, I … hm, perhaps—I shouldn't like to mislead you in any respect, you know. And it is a wonderful chance, no doubt …"

Now Roger wanted to throttle both of them. Claire must have noticed his hands twitching in his lap with irresistible desire, for she put a firm stop to the Director's maundering.

"We're basically interested in two things," she said briskly, opening the notebook she carried and poising it on her knee as if for reference. *Pick up bottle sherry for Mrs. T*, Roger read out of the corner of one eye. *Sliced ham for picnic*.

"We want to know, first, your opinion of Mrs. Edgars's scholarship, and secondly, your opinion of her overall personality. The first we have of course evaluated ourselves"—she made a small tick in the notebook, next to an entry that read *Change traveler's cheques*—"but you have a much more substantial and detailed grasp, of course." Dr. McEwan was nodding away by this time, thoroughly mesmerized.

"Yes, well …" He puffed a little, then, with a glance at the door to make sure it was shut, leaned confidentially across his desk. "The quality of her work—well, about that I think I can satisfy you completely. I'll show you a few things she's been working on. And the other …" Roger thought he was about to go in for another spot of lip-twitching and leaned forward menacingly.

Dr. McEwan leaned back abruptly, looking startled. "It's nothing very much, really," he said. "It's only … well, she's such an *intense* young lady. Perhaps her interest seems at times a trifle … obsessive?” His voice went up questioningly. His eyes darted from Roger to Claire, like a trapped rat’s.

“Would the direction of this intense interest perhaps be focused on the standing stones? The stone circles?” Claire suggested gently.

“Oh, it showed up in her application materials, then?” The Director hauled a large, grubby handkerchief out of his pocket and mopped his face with it. “Yes, that’s it. Of course, a lot of people get quite carried away with them,” he offered. “The romance of it, the mystery. Look at those benighted souls out at Stonehenge on Midsummer’s Day, in hoods and robes. Chanting … all that nonsense. Not that I would compare Gillian Edgars to …”

There was quite a lot more of it, but Roger quit listening. It seemed stifling in the narrow office, and his collar was too tight; he could hear his heart beating, a slow, incessant thrumping in both ears that was very irritating.

It simply couldn’t be! he thought. *Positively impossible.* True, Claire Randall’s story was convincing—quite awfully convincing. But then, look at the effect she was having on this poor old dodderer, who wouldn’t know scholarship if it was served up on a plate with piccalilli relish. She could obviously talk a tinker out of his pans. Not that he, Roger, was as susceptible as Dr. McEwan surely, but …

Beset with doubt and dripping with sweat, Roger paid little attention as Dr. McEwan fetched a set of keys from his drawer and rose to lead them out through a second door into a long hallway studded with doors.

“Study carrels,” the Director explained. He opened one of the doors, revealing a cubicle some four feet on a side, barely big enough to contain a narrow table, a chair, and a small bookshelf. On the table, neatly stacked, were a series of folders in different colors. To the side, Roger saw a large notebook with gray covers, and a neat hand-lettered label on the front—MISCELLANEOUS. For some reason, the sight of the handwriting sent a shiver through him.

This was getting more personal by the moment. First photographs, now the woman’s writings. He was assailed by a moment’s panic at the thought of actually meeting Geillis Duncan. Gillian Edgars, he meant. *Whoever* the woman was.

The Director was opening various folders, pointing and explaining to Claire, who was putting on a good show of having some idea what he was talking about. Roger peered over her shoulder, nodding and saying, “Um-hm, very interesting,” at intervals, but the slanted lines and loops of the script were incomprehensible to him.

She wrote this, he kept thinking. *She’s real. Flesh and blood and lips and long eyelashes*. And if she goes back through the stone, she’ll burn—crackle and blacken, with her hair lit like a torch in the black dawn. And if she doesn’t, then … I don’t exist.

He shook his head violently.

“You disagree, Mr. Wakefield?” The Director of the Institute was peering at him in puzzlement.

He shook his head again, this time in embarrassment.

“No, no. I mean … it’s only … do you think I could have a drink of water?”

“Of course, of course! Come with me, there’s a fountain just round the corner, I’ll show you.” Dr. McEwan bustled him out of the carrel and down the hall, expressing voluble, disjointed concern for his state of health.

Once away from the claustrophobic confines of the carrel and the proximity of Gillian Edgars’s books and folders, Roger began to feel slightly better. Still, the thought of going back into that tiny room, where all Claire’s words about her past seemed to echo off the thin partitions … no. He made up his mind. Claire could finish with Dr. McEwan by herself. He passed the carrel quickly, not looking inside, and went through the door that led back to the receptionist’s desk.

Mrs. Andrews stared at him as he came in, her spectacles gleaming with concern and curiosity.

“Dear me, Mr. Wakefield. Are ye not feeling just right, then?” Roger rubbed a hand over his face; he must look really ghastly. He smiled weakly at the plump little secretary.

“No, thanks very much. I just got a bit hot back there; thought I’d step down for a little fresh air.”

“Oh, aye.” The secretary nodded understandingly. “The radiators.” She pronounced it “raddiators.” “They get stuck on, ye know, and won’t turn off. I’d best see about it.” She rose from her desk, where the picture of Gillian Edgars still rested. She glanced down at the picture, then up at Roger.

"Isn't that odd?" she said conversationally. "I was just looking at this and wondering what it was about Mrs. Edgars's face that struck me all of a sudden. And I couldn't think what it was. But she's quite a look of *you,* Mr. Wakefield—especially round the eyes. Isn't that a coincidence? Mr. Wakefield?" Mrs. Andrews stared in the direction of the stair, where the thump of Roger's footsteps echoed from the wooden risers.

"Taken a bit short, I expect," she said kindly. "Poor lad."

The sun was still above the horizon when Claire rejoined him on the street, but it was late in the day; people were going home to their tea, and there was a feeling of general relaxation in the air—a looking forward to leisured peace after the long day's work.

Roger himself had no such feeling. He moved to open the car door for Claire, conscious of such a mix of emotions that he couldn't decide what to say first. She got in, glancing up at him sympathetically.

"Rather a jar, isn't it?" was all she said.

The fiendish maze of new one-way streets made getting through the town center a task that demanded all his attention. They were well on their way before he could take his eyes off the road long enough to ask, "What next?"

Claire was leaning back in her seat, eyes closed, the tendrils of her hair coming loose from their clip. She didn't open her eyes at his question, but stretched slightly, easing herself in the seat.

"Why don't you ask Brianna out for supper somewhere?" she said. Supper? Somehow it seemed subtly wrong to stop for supper in the midst of a life-or-death detective endeavor, but on the other hand, Roger was suddenly aware that the hollowness in his stomach wasn't entirely due to the revelations of the last hour.

"Well, all right," he said slowly. "But then tomorrow—"

"Why wait 'til tomorrow?" Claire broke in. She was sitting up now, combing out her hair. It was thick and unruly, and loosed swirling on her shoulders, Roger thought it made her look suddenly very young. “You can go talk to Greg Edgars again after supper, can’t you?”

“How do you know his name is Greg?” Roger asked curiously. “And if he wouldn’t talk to me this afternoon, why should he tonight?”

Claire looked at Roger as though suddenly doubting his basic intelligence.

“I know his name because I saw it on a letter in his mailbox,” she said. “As for why he’ll talk to you tonight, he’ll talk to you because you’re going to take along a bottle of whisky when you come this time.”

“And you think that will make him invite us in?”

She lifted one brow. “Did you see the collection of empty bottles in his waste bin? Of course he will. Like a shot.” She sat back, fists thrust into the pockets of her coat, and stared out at the passing street.

“You might see if Brianna will go with you,” she said casually.

“She said she isn’t having anything to do with this,” Roger objected.

Claire glanced at him impatiently. The sun was setting behind her, and it made her eyes glow amber, like a wolf’s.

“In that case, I suggest you don’t tell her what you’re up to,” she said, in a tone that made Roger remember that she was chief of staff at a large hospital.

His ears burned, but he stubbornly said, “You can’t very well hide it, if you and I—”

“Not me,” Claire interrupted. “You. I have something else to do.”

This was too much, Roger thought. He pulled the car over without signaling and skidded to a stop at the side of the road. He glared at her.

“Something else to do, have you?” he demanded. “I like that! You’re landing me with the job of trying to entice a drunken sot who will likely assault me on sight, *and* luring your daughter along to watch! What, do you think she’ll be needed to drive me to hospital after Edgars has finished beating me over the head with a bottle?”

“No,” Claire said, ignoring his tone. “I think you and Greg Edgars together may succeed where I couldn’t, in convincing Bree that Gillian Edgars is the woman I knew as Geillis Duncan. She won’t listen to me. She likely won’t listen to you, either, if you try to tell her what we found at the Institute today. But she’ll listen to Greg Edgars.” Her tone was flat and grim, and Roger felt his annoyance ebbing slightly. He started the car once more, and pulled out into the stream of traffic.

“All right, I’ll try,” he said grudgingly, not looking at her. “And just where are you going to be, while I do this?”

There was a small, shuffling movement alongside as she groped in her pocket again. Then she drew out her hand and opened it. His eye caught the silvery gleam of a small object in the darkness of her palm. A key.

“I’m going to burgle the Institute,” she said calmly. “I want that notebook.”

* * *

After Claire excused herself to run her unspecified “errand”—making Roger shudder only slightly—he and Brianna had driven to the pub, but then decided to wait for their supper, since the evening was unexpectedly fine. They strolled down the narrow walk by the River Ness, and he had forgotten his misgivings about the evening in the pleasure of Brianna’s company.

They talked carefully at first, avoiding anything controversial. Then the chat turned to Roger’s work, and grew gradually more animated.

“And how do you know so much about it, anyway?” Roger demanded, breaking off in the middle of a sentence.

“My father taught me,” she replied. At the word “father,” she stiffened a bit, and drew back, as though expecting him to say something. “My *real* father,” she added pointedly.

“Well, he certainly knew,” Roger replied mildly, leaving the challenge strictly alone. Plenty of time for that later, my girl, he thought cynically. But it isn't going to be me that springs the trap.

Just down the street, Roger could see a light in the window of the Edgars's house. The quarry was denned, then. He felt an unexpected surge of adrenaline at the thought of the coming confrontation.

Adrenaline lost out to the surge of gastric juices that resulted when they stepped into the pub's savory atmosphere, redolent of shepherd's pie. Conversation was general and friendly, with an unspoken agreement to avoid any reference to the scene at the manse the day before. Roger had noticed the coolness between Claire and her daughter, before he had left her at the cab stand on their way to the pub. Seated side by side in the backseat, they had reminded him of two strange cats, ears laid flat and tails twitching, but both avoiding the eye-locking stare that would lead to claws and flying fur.

After dinner, Brianna fetched their coats while he paid the bill.

"What's that for?" she asked, noticing the bottle of whisky in his hand. "Planning a rave-up for later on?"

"Rave-up?" he said, grinning at her. "You *are* getting on, aren't you? And what else have you picked up in your linguistic studies?"

She cast her eyes down in exaggerated demureness.

"Oh, well. There's a dance in the States, called the Shag. I gather I shouldn't ask you to do it with me here, though."

"Not unless you mean it," he said. They both laughed, but he thought the flush on her cheeks had deepened, and he was conscious of a certain stirring at the suggestion that made him keep his coat hung over one arm instead of putting it on.

"Well, after enough of *that* stuff, anything's possible," she said, indicating the whisky bottle with a mildly malicious smile. "Terrible taste, though."

"It's acquired, lassie," Roger informed her, letting his accent broaden. "Only Scots are born wi' it. I'll buy ye a bottle of your own to practice with. This one's a gift, though—something I promised to leave off. Want to come along, or shall I do it later?" he asked. He didn't know whether he wanted her to come or not, but felt a surge of happiness when she nodded and shrugged into her own coat.

"Sure, why not?"

“Good.” He reached out and delicately turned down the flap of her collar, so it lay flat on her shoulder. “It’s just down the street—let’s walk, shall we?”

* * *

The neighborhood looked a little better at night. Some of its shabbiness was hidden by the darkness, and the lights glowing from windows into the tiny front gardens gave the street an air of coziness that it lacked during the day.

“This won’t take a minute,” Roger told Brianna as he pressed the buzzer. He wasn’t sure whether to hope he was right or not. His first fear passed as the door opened; someone was home, and still conscious.

Edgars had plainly spent the afternoon in the company of one of the bottles lined up along the edge of the swaybacked buffet visible behind him. Luckily, he appeared not to connect his evening visitors with the intrusion of the afternoon. He squinted at Roger’s introduction, composed on the way to the house.

“Gilly’s cousin? I didn’ know she had a cousin.”

“Well, she has,” said Roger, boldly taking advantage of this admission. “I’m him.” He would deal with Gillian herself when he saw her. If he saw her.

Edgars blinked once or twice, then rubbed an inflamed eye with one fist, as though to get a better look at them. His eyes focused with some difficulty on Brianna, hovering diffidently behind Roger.

“Who’s that?” he demanded.

“Er … my girlfriend,” Roger improvised. Brianna narrowed her eyes at him, but said nothing. Plainly she was beginning to smell a rat, but went ahead of him without protest as Greg Edgars swung the door wider to admit them.

The flat was small and stuffy, overfurnished with secondhand furniture. The air reeked of stale cigarettes and insufficiently taken-out garbage, and the remnants of take-away meals were scattered heedlessly over every horizontal surface in the room. Brianna gave Roger a sidelong look that said *Nice relatives you have,* and he shrugged slightly. *Not my fault.* The woman of the house was plainly not at home, and hadn't been for some time.

Or not in the physical sense, at least. Turning to take the chair Edgars offered him, Roger came face-to-face with a large studio photograph, framed in brass, standing in the center of the tiny mantelpiece. He bit his tongue to stifle a startled exclamation.

The woman seemed to be looking out of the photograph into his face, a slight smile barely creasing the corner of her mouth. Wings of platinum-fair hair fell thick and glossy past her shoulders, framing a perfect heart-shaped face. Eyes deep green as winter moss glowed under thick, dark lashes.

"Good likeness, i'n't?" Greg Edgars looked at the photo, his expression one of mingled hostility and longing.

"Er, yes. Just like her." Roger felt a little breathless, and turned to remove a crumpled fish-and-chips paper from his chair. Brianna was staring at the portrait with interest. She glanced from the photo to Roger and back, clearly drawing comparisons. Cousins, was it?

"I take it Gillian's not here?" Roger started to wave away the bottle Edgars had tilted inquiringly in his direction, then changed his mind and nodded. Perhaps a shared drink would gain Edgars's confidence. If Gillian wasn't here, he needed to find out where she was.

Occupied in removing the excise seal with his teeth, Edgars shook his head, then delicately plucked the bit of wax and paper off his lower lip.

"Not hardly, mate. 'S not quite so much a slum as this when she's here." A sweeping gesture took in the overflowing ashtrays and tumbled paper drinks cups. "Close, maybe, but not quite this bad." He took down three wineglasses from the china cupboard, peering dubiously into each one, as though checking for dust.

He poured the whisky with the exaggerated care of the very drunk, taking the glasses one by one across the room to his guests. Brianna accepted hers with equal care, but declined a chair, instead leaning gracefully against the corner of the china cabinet.

Edgars plumped at last onto the rump-sprung sofa, ignoring the debris, and raised his glass.

"Cheers, mate," he said briefly, and took a long, slurping gulp. "Wotcher say yer name is?" he demanded, emerging abruptly from his immersion. "Oh, Roger, right. Gilly never mentioned ye … but then, she wouldn'," he added moodily. "Never knew nothin' about her family, and she wasn' sayin'. Think she was ashamed of 'em all … but you don't look such a nelly," he said, generously. "Yer lass is a looker, at least. Aye, that sounds right, eh? 'Yer lass is a looker, at least!' Hear 'at, eh?" He laughed uproariously, spraying whisky droplets.

"Yeah," said Roger. "Thanks." He took a small sip of his drink. Brianna, offended, turned her back on Edgars and affected to be examining the contents of the china closet through the bevel-cut glass doors.

There seemed no point in beating around the bush, Roger decided. Edgars wouldn't recognize subtlety if it bit him on the bum at this point, and there seemed a substantial danger that he might pass out soon, at the rate he was going.

"D'you know where Gillian is?" he asked bluntly. Every time he said her name, it felt strange on his tongue. This time, he couldn't help glancing up at the mantelpiece, where the photo smiled serenely on the debauch below.

Edgars shook his head, swinging it slowly back and forth over his glass like an ox over a corncrib. He was a short, heavyset man, about Roger's age, perhaps, but looking older because of the heavy growth of unshaved beard and disheveled black hair.

"Nah," he said. "Thought maybe you knew. It'll be the Nats or the Roses, likely, but I've no kep' up. I couldny say who, specially."

"Nats?" Roger's heart began to speed up. "You mean the Scottish Nationalists?"

Edgars's eyelids were beginning to droop, but they blinked open once more.

"Oh, aye. Bloody Nats. 'S where I met Gilly, aye?"

"When was this, Mr. Edgars?"

Roger looked up in surprise at the soft voice from above. It wasn't the photograph that had spoken, though, but Brianna, looking intently down at Greg Edgars. Roger couldn't tell whether she was merely making conversation, or if she suspected something. Her face showed nothing beyond polite interest.

"Dunno … maybe two, three years gone. Fun at first, hm? Toss the bloody English out, join the Common Market on our own … beer in the pub and a cuddle i' the back of the van comin' home from rallies. Mmm." Edgars shook his head again, dreamy-eyed at the vision. Then the smile faded from his face, and he frowned into his drink. "That's before she went potty."

"Potty?" Roger took another quick glance at the photo. Intense, yes. She looked that. But not barking mad, surely. Or could you tell, from a photo?

"Aye. Society o' the White Rose. Charlie's m' darlin'. Will ye no come back again, and all that rot. Lot of jimmies dressed up in kilts and full rig, wi' swords and all. All right if ye like it, o' course," he added, with a cockeyed attempt at objectivity. "But Gilly'd always take a thing too far. On and on about the Bonnie Prince, and wouldn' it be a thing if he'd won the '45? Blokes in the kitchen 'til all hours, drinking up the beer and arguing why he hadn't. In the Gaelic, too." He rolled his eyes. "Load o' rubbish." He drained his glass to emphasize this opinion.

Roger could feel Brianna's eyes boring into the side of his neck like gimlets. He pulled at his collar to loosen it, though he wasn't wearing a tie and his collar button was undone.

"I don't suppose your wife's also interested in standing stones, is she, Mr. Edgars?" Brianna wasn't bothering a lot with the polite interest anymore; her voice was sharp enough to cut cheese. The effect was largely wasted on Edgars.

"Stones?" He seemed fuddled, and stuck a forefinger into one ear, screwing it in industriously, as though in hopes of improving his hearing.

"The prehistoric stone circles. Like the Clava Cairns," Roger offered, naming one of the more famous local landmarks. In for a penny, in for a pound, he thought, with a mental sigh of resignation. Brianna was plainly never going to speak to him again, so he might as well find out what he could.

"Oh, those." Edgars uttered a short laugh. "Aye, and every other bit o' auld rubbish ye could name. That's the last bit, and the worst. Down at that Institewt day an' night, spendin' all my money on courses … courses! Make a cat laugh, ay? Fairy tales, they teach 'em there. Ye'll learn nothin' useful in that place, lass, I told her. Whyna learn to type? Get a job, if she's bored. 'S what I tell't her. So she left," he said morosely. "Not seen her in two weeks." He stared into his wineglass as though surprised to find it empty.

"Have another?" he offered, reaching for the bottle, but Brianna shook her head decidedly.

"Thanks, no. We have to be going. *Don't* we, Roger?"

Seeing the dangerous glint in her eye, Roger wasn't at all sure that he wouldn't be better off staying to split the rest of the bottle with Greg Edgars. Still, it was a long walk home, if he let Brianna take the car. He rose with a sigh, and shook Edgars's hand in farewell. It was warm and surprisingly firm in its grip, if a trifle moist.

Edgars followed them to the door, clutching the bottle by the neck. He peered after them through the screen, suddenly calling down the walk, "If ye see Gilly, tell her to come home, eh?"

Roger turned and waved at the blurry figure in the lighted rectangle of the door.

"I'll try," he called, the words sticking in his throat.

They made it to the walk and half down the street toward the pub before she rounded on him.

"What in bloody hell are you up to?" she said. She sounded angry, but not hysterical. "You told me you haven't any family in the Highlands, so what's all this about cousins? Who is that woman in the picture?"

He looked round the darkened street for inspiration, but there was no help for it. He took a deep breath and took her by the arm.

"Geillis Duncan," he said.

She stopped stock-still, and the shock of it jarred up his own arm. With great deliberation, she detached her elbow from his grip. The delicate tissue of the evening had torn down the middle.

"Don't … touch … me," she said through her teeth. "Is this something Mother thought up?"

Despite his resolve to be understanding, Roger felt himself growing angry in return.

"Look," he said, "can you not think of anyone but yourself in this? I know it's been a shock to you—God, how could it not be? And if you cannot bring yourself even to think about it … well, I'll not push you to it. But there's your mother to consider. And there's me, as well."

"You? What have you got to do with it?" It was too dark to see her face, but the surprise in her voice was evident.

He had not meant to complicate matters further by telling her of his involvement, but it was clearly too late for keeping secrets. And no doubt Claire had seen that, when she suggested his taking Brianna out this evening.

In a flash of revelation, he realized for the first time just what Claire had meant. She did have one means of proving her story to Brianna, beyond question. She had Gillian Edgars, who had—perhaps—not yet vanished to meet her fate as Geillis Duncan, tied to a flaming stake beneath the rowan trees of Leoch. The most stubborn cynic would be convinced, he supposed, by the sight of someone disappearing into the past before their eyes. No wonder Claire had wanted to find Gillian Edgars.

In a few words, he told Brianna his relationship with the would-be witch of Cranesmuir.

"And so it looks like being my life or hers," he ended, shrugging, hideously conscious of how ridiculously melodramatic it sounded. "Claire—your mother—she left it to me. But I thought I had to find her, at the least."

Brianna had stopped walking to listen to him. The dim light from a corner shop caught the gleam of her eyes as she stared at him.

"You believe it, then?" she asked. There was no incredulity or scorn in her voice; she was altogether serious.

He sighed and reached for her arm again. She didn't resist, but fell into step beside him.

"Yes," he said. "I had to. You didn't see your mother's face, when she saw the words written inside her ring. That was real—real enough to break my heart."

“You’d better tell me,” she said, after a short silence. “What words?”

By the time he had finished the story, they had reached the car-park behind the pub.

“Well …” Brianna said hesitantly. “If …” She stopped again, looking into his eyes. She was standing near enough for him to feel the warmth of her breasts, close to his chest, but he didn’t reach for her. The kirk of St. Kilda was a long way off, and neither of them wanted to remember the grave beneath the yew trees, where the names of her parents were written in stone.

“I don’t know, Roger,” she said, shaking her head. The neon sign over the pub’s back door made purple glints in her hair. “I just can’t … I can’t think about it yet. But …” Words failed her, but she lifted a hand and touched his cheek, light as the brush of the evening wind. “I’ll think of you,” she whispered.

When you come right down to it, committing burglary with a key is not really a difficult proposition. The chance that either Mrs. Andrews or Dr. McEwan was going to come back and cop me in the act were vanishingly small. Even if they had, all I would have to do is say that I’d come back to look for a lost pocketbook, and found the door open. I was out of practice, but deception had at one point been second nature to me. Lying was like riding a bicycle, I thought; you don’t forget how.

So it wasn’t the act of getting hold of Gillian Edgars’s notebook that made my heart race and my breath sound loud in my own ears. It was the book itself.

As Master Raymond had told me in Paris, the power and the danger of magic lie in the people who believe it. From the glimpse I had had of the contents earlier, the actual information written in this cardboard notebook was an extraordinary mishmash of fact, speculation, and flat-out fantasy that could be of importance only to the writer. But I felt an almost physical revulsion at touching it. Knowing who had written it, I knew it for what it likely was: a grimoire, a magician’s book of secrets.

Still, if there existed any clue to Geillis Duncan's whereabouts and intentions, it would be here. Suppressing a shudder at the touch of the slick cover, I tucked it under my coat, holding it in place with my elbow for the trip down the stairs.

Safely out on the street, still I kept the book under my elbow, the cover growing clammy with perspiration as I walked. I felt as though I were transporting a bomb, something which must be handled with scrupulous carefulness, in order to prevent an explosion.

I walked for some time, finally turning into the front garden of a small Italian restaurant with a terrace near the river. The night was chilly, but a small electric fire made the terrace tables warm enough for use; I chose one and ordered a glass of Chianti. I sipped at it for some time, the notebook lying on the paper placemat in front of me, in the concealing shadow of a basket of garlic bread.

It was late April. Only a few days until May Day—the Feast of Beltane. That was when I had made my own impromptu voyage into the past. I supposed it was possible that there was something about the date—or just the general time of year? It had been mid-April when I returned—that made that eerie passage possible. Or maybe not; maybe the time of year had nothing to do with it. I ordered another glass of wine.

It could be that only certain people had the ability to penetrate a barrier that was solid to everyone else—something in the genetic makeup? Who knew? Jamie had not been able to enter it, though I could. And Geillis Duncan obviously had—or would. Or wouldn't, depending. I thought of young Roger Wakefield, and felt mildly queasy. I thought perhaps I had better have some food to go with the wine.

The visit to the Institute had convinced me that wherever Gillian/Geillis was, she had not yet made her own fateful passage. Anyone who had studied the legends of the Highlands would know that the Feast of Beltane was approaching; surely anyone planning such an expedition would undertake it then? But I had no idea where she might be, if she wasn't at home; in hiding? Performing some peculiar rite of preparation, picked up from Fiona's group of neo-Druids? The notebook might hold a clue, but God only knew.

God only also knew what my own motives were in this; I had thought I did, but was no longer sure. Had I involved Roger in the search for Geillis because it seemed the only way of convincing Brianna? And yet—even if we found her in time, my own purpose would be served only if Gillian succeeded in going back. And thus, in dying by fire.

When Geillis Duncan had been condemned as a witch, Jamie had said to me, "Dinna grieve for her, Sassenach; she's a wicked woman." And whether she had been wicked or mad, it had made little difference at the time. Should I not have left well enough alone, and left her to find her own fate? Still, I thought, she had once saved my life. In spite of what she was—would be—did I owe it to her to try to save her life? And thus perhaps doom Roger? What right did I have to meddle any further?

It isna a matter of right, Sassenach, I heard Jamie's voice saying, with a tinge of impatience. *It's a question of duty. Of honor*.

"Honor, is it?" I said aloud. "And what's that?" The waiter with my plate of tortellini Portofino looked startled.

"Eh?" he said.

"Never mind," I said, too distracted to care much what he thought of me. "Perhaps you'd better bring the rest of the bottle."

I finished my meal surrounded by ghosts. Finally, fortified by food and wine, I pushed my empty plate aside, and opened Gillian Edgars's gray notebook.

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49

BLESSED ARE THOSE …

There's no place darker than a Highland road in the middle of a moonless night. I could see the flash of passing headlights now and then, silhouetting Roger's head and shoulders in a sudden flare of light. They were hunched forward, as though in defense against oncoming danger. Bree sat hunched as well, curled into the corner of the seat beside me. We were all three self-contained, insulated from each other, sealed in small, individual pockets of silence, inside the larger silence of the car and its rushing flight.

My fists curled in the pockets of my coat, idly scooping up coins and small bits of debris; shredded tissue, a pencil stub, a tiny rubber ball left on the floor of my office by a small patient. My thumb circled and identified the milled edge of an American quarter, the broad embossed face of an English penny, and the serrated edge of a key—the key to Gillian Edgars's carrel, which I had neglected to return to the Institute.

I had tried again to call Greg Edgars, just before we left the old manse. The phone had rung again and again without answer.

I stared at the dark glass of the window beside me, seeing neither my own faint reflection nor the massy shapes of stone walls and scattered trees that rushed by in the night. Instead, I saw the row of books, arranged on the carrel's single shelf in a line as neat as a row of apothecary's jars. And below, the notebook filled with fine cursive script, laying out in strict order conclusion and delusion, mingling myth and science, drawing from learned men and legends, all of it based on the power of dreams. To any casual observer, it could be either a muddle of half-thought-out nonsense or, at best, the outline for a clever-silly novel. Only to me did it have the look of a careful, deliberate plan.

In a parody of the scientific method, the first section of the book was titled "Observations." It contained disjointed references, tidy drawings, and carefully numbered tables. "The position of sun and moon on the Feast of Beltane" was one, with a list of more than two hundred paired figures laid out beneath. Similar tables existed for Hogmanay and Midsummer's Day, and another for Samhainn, the Feast of All Hallows. The ancient feasts of fire and sun, and Beltane's sun would rise tomorrow.

The central section of the notebook was titled "Speculations." That was accurate, at least, I reflected wryly. One page had borne this entry, in neat, slanting script: "The Druids burnt sacrificial victims in wicker cages shaped like men, but individuals were killed by strangling, and the throat slit to drain the body of blood. Was it fire or blood that was the necessary element?" The coldblooded curiosity of the question brought Geillis Duncan's face before me clearly—not the wide-eyed, straight-haired student whose portrait adorned the Institute, but the secretive, half-smiling fiscal's wife, ten years older, versed in the uses of drugs and the body, who lured men to her purposes, and killed without passion to achieve her ends.

And the last few pages of the book, neatly labeled "Conclusions," which had led us to this dark journey, on the eve of the Feast of Beltane. I curled my fingers around the key, wishing with all my heart that Greg Edgars had answered his phone.

* * *

Roger slowed, turning onto the bumpy dirt lane that led past the base of the hill called Craigh na Dun.

"I don't see anything," he said. He hadn't spoken in so long that the statement came out gruffly, sounding belligerent.

"Well, of course not," Brianna said impatiently. "You can't see the stone circle from here."

Roger grunted in reply, and slowed the car still more. Obviously, Brianna's nerves were stretched, but so were his own. Only Claire seemed calm, unaffected by the growing air of tension in the car.

"She's here," Claire said suddenly. Roger slammed on the brakes so abruptly that both Claire and her daughter pitched forward, thumping into the back of the seat in front of them.

"Be careful, you idiot!" Brianna snapped furiously at Roger. She shoved a hand through her hair, pushing it off her face with a quick, nervous gesture. A swallow ran visibly down her throat as she bent to peer through the dark window.

"Where?" she said.

Claire nodded ahead to the right, keeping her hands shoved deep into her pockets.

"There's a car parked, just behind that thicket."

Roger licked his lips and reached for the door handle.

"It's Edgars's car. I'll go and look; you stay here."

Brianna flung her door open with a squeal of metal from the unoiled hinges. Her silent look of scorn made Roger flush red in the dim glow of the dome light overhead.

She was back almost before Roger had gotten out of the car himself.

"No one there," she reported. She glanced up at the top of the hill. "Do you think …?"

Claire finished buttoning up her coat, and stepped into the darkness without answering her daughter's question.

"The path is this way," she said.

She led the way, perforce, and Roger, watching the pale form drift ghostlike up the hill ahead of him, was forcibly reminded of that earlier trip up a steep hill, to St. Kilda's kirkyard. So was Brianna; she hesitated and he heard her mutter something angrily under her breath, but then her hand reached for his elbow, and gave it a hard squeeze—whether as encouragement or as a plea for support, he couldn't tell. It encouraged *him*, in any case, and he patted the hand and tugged it through the curve of his arm. In spite of his general doubts, and the undeniable eeriness of the whole expedition, he felt a sense of excitement as they approached the crest of the hill.

It was a clear night, moonless and very dark, with no more than the tiny gleams of mica flecks in the starlight serving to distinguish the looming stones of the ancient circle from the night around them. The trio paused on the gently rounded top of the hill, huddling together like a misplaced flock of sheep. Roger's own breath sounded unnaturally loud to himself.

"This," said Brianna through her teeth, "is *silly*!"

"No, it isn't," said Roger. He felt suddenly breathless, as though a constricting band had squeezed the air from his chest. "There's a light over there."

It was barely there—no more than a flicker that promptly disappeared—but she saw it. He heard the sharp intake of her breath.

Now what? Roger wondered. Ought they to shout? Or would the noise of visitors frighten their quarry into precipitate action? And if so, what action might that be?

He saw Claire shake her head suddenly, as though trying to dismiss a buzzing insect. She took a step back, away from the nearest stone, and blundered into him.

He grabbed her by the arm, murmuring, "Steady, steady there," as one might to a horse. Her face was a dim blur in the starlight, but he could feel the quiver that ran through her, like electricity through a wire. He stood frozen, holding her arm, stiff with indecision.

It was the sudden stink of petrol that jerked him into motion. He was vaguely conscious of Brianna, head flung up as the smell met her nostrils, turning toward the north end of the circle, and then he had dropped Claire's arm, and was through the surrounding bushes and the stones themselves, striding toward the center of the ring, where a hunched black figure made an inkblot on the lighter darkness of the grass.

Claire's voice came from behind him, strong and urgent, shattering the silence.

"Gillian!" she called.

There was a soft, sudden whoosh, and the night lit up in brilliance. Dazzled, Roger fell back a pace, stumbling and dropping to his knees.

For a moment, there was nothing but the sharp pain of light on his retinas, and the blaze of brightness that hid everything behind it. He heard a cry beside him, and felt Brianna's hand on his shoulder. He blinked hard, eyes streaming, and sight began to return.

The slim figure stood between them and the fire, silhouetted like an hourglass. As his sight cleared, he realized that she was dressed in a long, full skirt and tight bodice—the clothes of another time. She had turned at the call, and he had a brief impression of wide eyes and fair, flying hair, lifted and tossed in the hot wind of the fire.

He found time, struggling to his feet, to wonder how she had dragged a log of that size up here. Then the smell of burned hair and crackled skin hit his face like a blow, and he remembered. Greg Edgars was not at home tonight. Not knowing whether blood or fire was the necessary element, she had chosen both.

He pushed past Brianna, focused only on the tall, slim girl before him, and the image of a face that mirrored his own. She saw him coming, turned and ran like the wind for the cleft stone at the end of the circle. She had a knapsack of rough canvas, slung over one shoulder; he heard her grunt as it swung heavily and struck her in the side.

She paused for an instant, hand outstretched to the rock, and looked back. He could have sworn that her eyes rested on him, met his own and held them, beyond the barrier of the fire's blaze. He opened his mouth in a wordless shout. She whirled then, light as a dancing spark, and vanished in the cleft of the rock.

The fire, the body, the night itself, disappeared abruptly in a shriek of blinding noise. Roger found himself facedown in the grass, clutching at the earth in frantic search of a familiar sensation to which to anchor his sanity. The search was vain; none of his senses seemed to function—even the touch of the ground was insubstantial, amorphous as though he lay on quicksand, not granite.

Blinded by whiteness, deafened by the scream of rending stone, he groped, flailing wildly, out of touch with his own extremities, conscious only of an immense pull and the need to resist it.

There was no sense of time passing; it felt as though he had been struggling in emptiness forever, when he at last became aware of something outside himself. Hands that gripped his arms with desperate strength, and the smothering softness of breasts thrust against his face.

Hearing began gradually to return, and with it the sound of a voice calling his name. Calling *him* names, in fact, panting between phrases.

"You idiot! You … jerk! Wake *up*, Roger, you … ass!" Her voice was muffled, but the sense of it reached him clearly. With a superhuman effort, he reached up and got hold of her wrists. He rolled, feeling ponderous as the start of an avalanche, and found himself blinking stupidly at the tear-streaked face of Brianna Randall, eyes dark as caves in the dying light of the fire.

The smell of petrol and roasting flesh was overwhelming. He turned aside and gagged, retching heavily into the damp grass. He was too occupied even to be grateful that his sense of smell had returned.

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve and groped unsteadily for Brianna's arm. She was huddled into herself, shaking.

"Oh, God," she said. "Oh, God. I didn't think I could stop you. You were crawling straight to it. Oh, God."

She didn't resist as he pulled her to him, but neither did she respond to him. She merely went on shaking, the tears running from wide, empty eyes, repeating "Oh, God," at intervals, like a broken record.

"Hush," he said, patting her. "It will be all right. Hush." The spinning sensation in his head was easing, though he still felt as though he had been split into several pieces and scattered violently among the points of the compass.

There was a faint, crackling *pop* from the darkening object on the ground, but beyond that and Brianna's mechanical ejaculations, the stillness of the night was returning. He put his hands to his ears, as though to still the echoes of the killing noise.

"You heard it, too?" he asked. Brianna went on crying, but nodded her head, jerky as a puppet.

“Did your—” he began, still laboriously assembling his thoughts piecemeal, then snapped upright as one came to him full-formed.

“Your mother!” he exclaimed, gripping Brianna hard by both arms. “Claire! Where is she?”

Brianna’s mouth dropped open in shock, and she scrambled to her feet, wildly scanning the confines of the empty circle, where the man-high stones loomed stark, half-seen in the shadows of the dying fire.

“Mother!” she screamed. “Mother, *where are you*?”

“It’s all right,” Roger said, trying to sound authoritatively reassuring. “She’ll be all right now.”

In truth, he had no idea whether Claire Randall would ever be all right. She was alive, at least, and that was all he could vouch for.

They had found her, senseless in the grass near the edge of the circle, white as the rising moon above, with nothing but the slow, dark seep of blood from her abraded palms to testify that her heart still beat. Of the hellish journey down the path to the car, her dead weight slung across his shoulder, bumping awkwardly as stones rolled under his feet and twigs snatched at his clothing, he preferred to remember nothing.

The trip down the cursed hill had exhausted him; it was Brianna, the bones of her face stark with concentration, who had driven them back to the manse, hands clamped to the wheel like vises. Slumped in the seat beside her, Roger had seen in the rearview mirror the last faint glow of the hilltop behind them, where a small, luminous cloud floated like a puff of cannon smoke, mute evidence of battle past.

Brianna hovered now over the sofa where her mother lay, motionless as a tomb figure on a sarcophagus. With a shudder, Roger had avoided the hearth where the banked fire lay sleeping, and had instead pulled up the small electric fire with which the Reverend had warmed his feet on winter nights. Its bars glowed orange and hot, and it made a loud, friendly whirring noise that covered the silence in the study.

Roger sat on a low stool beside the sofa, feeling limp and starchless. With the last remnants of resolve, he reached toward the telephone table, his hand hovering a few inches above the instrument.

"Should we—" He had to stop to clear his throat. "Should we … call a doctor? The police?"

"No." Brianna's voice was intent, almost absentminded, as she bent over the still figure on the couch. "She's coming around."

The domed eyelids stirred, tightened briefly in the returning memory of pain, then relaxed and opened. Her eyes were clear and soft as honey. They drifted to and fro, skimmed over Brianna, standing tall and stiff at his side, and fixed on Roger's face.

Claire's lips were bloodless as the rest of her face; it took more than one try to get the words out, in a hoarse whisper.

"Did she … go back?"

Her fingers were twisted in the fabric of her skirt, and he saw the faint, dark smear of blood they left behind. His own hands clutched instinctively on his knees, palms tingling. She had held on, too, then, grappling among the grass and gravel for any small hold against the engulfment of the past. He closed his eyes against the memory of that pulling rupture, nodding.

"Yes," he said. "She went."

The clear eyes went at once to her daughter's face, brows above them arched as though in question. But it was Brianna who asked.

"It was true, then?" she asked hesitantly. "Everything was true?"

Roger felt the small shudder that ran through the girl's body, and without thinking about it, reached up to take her hand. He winced involuntarily as she squeezed it, and suddenly in memory heard one of the Reverend's texts: "Blessed are those who have not seen, and have believed." And those who *must* see, in order to believe? The effects of belief wrought by seeing trembled fearful at his side, terrified at what else must now be believed.

Even as the girl tightened, bracing herself to meet a truth she had already seen, the lines of Claire's tensed body on the sofa relaxed. The pale lips curved in the shadow of a smile, and a look of profound peace smoothed the strained white face, and settled glowing in the golden eyes.

"It's true," she said. A tinge of color came back into the pallid cheeks. "Would your mother lie to you?" And she closed her eyes once more.

* * *

Roger reached down to switch off the electric fire. The night was cold, but he could stay no longer in the study, his temporary sanctuary. He still felt groggy, but he couldn't delay longer. The decision had to be made.

It had been dawn before the police and the doctor had finished their work the night before, filling in their forms, taking statements and vital signs, doing their best to explain away the truth. "Blessed are they who have not seen," he thought again, devoutly, "but who have believed." Especially in this case.

Finally, they had left, with their forms and badges and cars with flashing lights, to oversee the removal of Greg Edgars's body from the ring of stone, to issue a warrant for the arrest of his wife, who, having lured her husband to his death, had fled the scene. To put it mildly, Roger thought dazedly.

Exhausted in mind and body, Roger had left the Randalls to the care of the doctor and Fiona, and had gone to bed, not bothering to undress or turn back the quilts, merely collapsing into a welcome oblivion. Roused near sunset by gnawing hunger, he had stumbled downstairs to find his guests, similarly silent, if less disheveled, helping Fiona with the preparation of supper.

It had been a quiet meal. The atmosphere was not strained; it was as though communication ran unseen among the people at the table. Brianna sat close to her mother, touching her now and then in the passing of food, as though to reassure herself of her presence. She had glanced occasionally at Roger, shy small looks from beneath her lashes, but didn't talk to him.

Claire said little, and ate almost nothing, but sat quite still, quiet and peaceful as a loch in the sun, her thoughts turned inward. After dinner, she had excused herself and gone to sit in the deep window seat at the end of the hall, pleading tiredness. Brianna had cast a quick glance at her mother, silhouetted in the last glow of the fading sun as she faced the window, and gone to help Fiona in the kitchen with the dishes. Roger had gone to the study, Fiona's good meal heavy in his stomach, to think.

Two hours later, he was still thinking, to remarkably little effect. Books were stacked untidily on the desk and table, left half-open on the seats of chairs and the back of the sofa, and gaping holes in the crowded bookshelves testified to the effort of his haphazard research.

It had taken some time, but he had found it—the short passage he remembered from his earlier search on Claire Randall's behalf. Those results had brought her comfort and peace; this wouldn't—if he told her. And if he were right? But he must be; it accounted for that misplaced grave, so far from Culloden.

He rubbed a hand over his face, and felt the rasp of beard. Not surprising that he had forgotten to shave, what with everything. When he closed his eyes, he could still smell smoke and blood; see the blaze of fire on dark rock, and the strands of fair hair, flying just beyond the reach of his fingers. He shuddered at the memory, and felt a sudden surge of resentment. Claire had destroyed his own peace of mind; did he owe her any less? And Brianna—if she knew the truth now, should she not know all of it?

Claire was still there at the end of the hall; feet curled under her on the window seat, staring out at the blank black stretch of the night-filled glass.

"Claire?" His voice felt scratchy from disuse, and he cleared his throat and tried again. "Claire? I … have something to tell you."

She turned and looked up at him, no more than the faintest curiosity visible on her features. She wore a look of calm, the look of one who has borne terror, despair, and mourning, and the desperate burden of survival—and has endured. Looking at her, he felt suddenly that he couldn't do it.

But she had told the truth; he must do likewise.

"I found something." He raised the book in a brief, futile gesture. "About … Jamie." Speaking that name aloud seemed to brace him, as though the big Scot himself had been conjured by his calling, to stand solid and unmoving in the hallway, between his wife and Roger. Roger took a deep breath in preparation.

"What is it?"

"The last thing he meant to do. I think … I think he failed."

Her face paled suddenly, and she glanced wide-eyed at the book.

"His men? But I thought you found—"

"I did," Roger interrupted. "No, I'm fairly sure he succeeded in that. He got the men of Lallybroch out; he saved them from Culloden, and set them on the road home."

"But then …"

"He meant to turn back—back to the battle—and I think he did that, too." He was increasingly reluctant, but it had to be said. Finding no words of his own, he flipped the book open, and read aloud:

> *"After the final battle at Culloden, eighteen Jacobite officers, all wounded, took refuge in the old house and for two days, their wounds untended, lay in pain; then they were taken out to be shot. One of them, a Fraser of the Master of Lovat's regiment, escaped the slaughter; the others were buried at the edge of the domestic park."*

"One man, a Fraser of the Master of Lovat's regiment, escaped.…" Roger repeated softly. He looked up from the stark page to see her eyes, wide and unseeing as a deer's fixed in the headlights of an oncoming car.

"He meant to die on Culloden Field," Roger whispered. "But he didn't."

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For my husband,

Doug Watkins—
In thanks for the Raw Material

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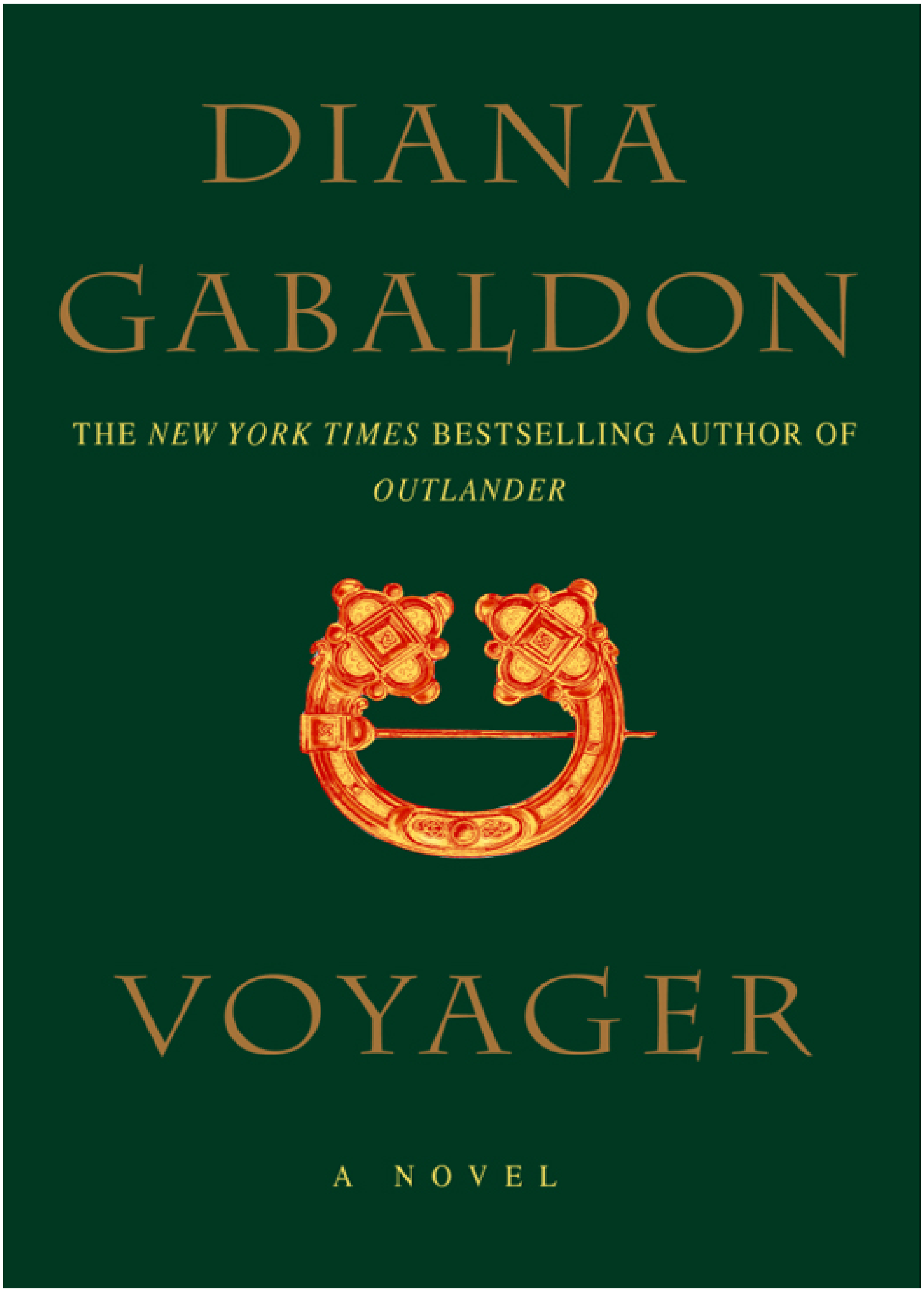

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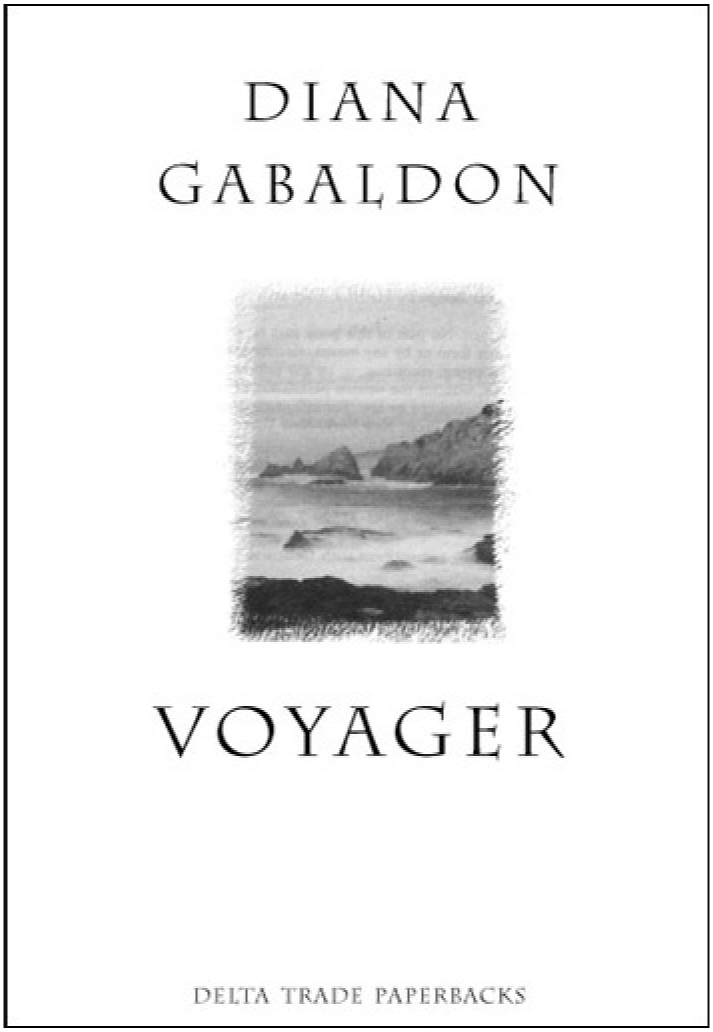

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VOYAGER

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Dedication

Acknowledgments

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PROLOGUE

When I was small, I never wanted to step in puddles. Not because of any fear of drowned worms or wet stockings; I was by and large a grubby child, with a blissful disregard for filth of any kind.

It was because I couldn't bring myself to believe that that perfect smooth expanse was no more than a thin film of water over solid earth. I believed it was an opening into some fathomless space. Sometimes, seeing the tiny ripples caused by my approach, I thought the puddle impossibly deep, a bottomless sea in which the lazy coil of tentacle and gleam of scale lay hidden, with the threat of huge bodies and sharp teeth adrift and silent in the far-down depths.

And then, looking down into reflection, I would see my own round face and frizzled hair against a featureless blue sweep, and think instead that the puddle was the entrance to another sky. If I stepped in there, I would drop at once, and keep on falling, on and on, into blue space.

The only time I would dare to walk through a puddle was at twilight, when the evening stars came out. If I looked in the water and saw one lighted pinprick there, I could splash through unafraid—for if I should fall into the puddle and on into space, I could grab hold of the star as I passed, and be safe.

Even now, when I see a puddle in my path, my mind half-halts—though my feet do not—then hurries on, with only the echo of the thought left behind.

What if, this time, you fall?

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PART ONE

Battle, and the Loves of Men

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1

THE CORBIES' FEAST

Many a Highland chieftain fought,
Many a gallant man did fall.
Death itself were dearly bought,
All for Scotland's King and law.
—"Will Ye No Come Back Again"

April 16, 1746

He was dead. However, his nose throbbed painfully, which he thought odd in the circumstances. While he placed considerable trust in the understanding and mercy of his Creator, he harbored that residue of elemental guilt that made all men fear the chance of hell. Still, all he had ever heard of hell made him think it unlikely that the torments reserved for its luckless inhabitants could be restricted to a sore nose.

On the other hand, this couldn't be heaven, on several counts. For one, he didn't deserve it. For another, it didn't look it. And for a third, he doubted that the rewards of the blessed included a broken nose, any more than those of the damned.

While he had always thought of Purgatory as a gray sort of place, the faint reddish light that hid everything around him seemed suitable. His mind was clearing a bit, and his power to reason was coming back, if slowly. Someone, he thought rather crossly, ought to see him and tell him just what the sentence was, until he should have suffered enough to be purified, and at last to enter the Kingdom of God. Whether he was expecting a demon or an angel was uncertain. He had no idea of the staffing requirements of Purgatory; it wasn't a matter the dominie had addressed in his schooldays.

While waiting, he began to take stock of whatever other torments he might be required to endure. There were numerous cuts, gashes, and bruises here and there, and he was fairly sure he'd broken the fourth finger of his right hand again—difficult to protect it, the way it stuck out so stiff, with the joint frozen. None of that was too bad, though. What else?

Claire. The name knifed across his heart with a pain that was more racking than anything his body had ever been called on to withstand.

If he had had an actual body anymore, he was sure it would have doubled up in agony. He had known it would be like this, when he sent her back to the stone circle. Spiritual anguish could be taken as a standard condition in Purgatory, and he had expected all along that the pain of separation would be his chief punishment—sufficient, he thought, to atone for anything he'd ever done: murder and betrayal included.

He did not know whether persons in Purgatory were allowed to pray or not, but tried anyway. *Lord,* he prayed, *that she may be safe. She and the child.* He was sure she would have made it to the circle itself; only two months gone with child, she was still light and fleet of foot—and the most stubbornly determined woman he had ever met. But whether she had managed the dangerous transition back to the place from which she had come—sliding precariously through whatever mysterious layers lay between then and now, powerless in the grip of the rock—that he could never know, and the thought of it was enough to make him forget even the throbbing in his nose.

He resumed his interrupted inventory of bodily ills, and became inordinately distressed at the discovery that his left leg appeared to be missing. Sensation stopped at the hip, with a sort of pins-and-needles tingling at the joint. Presumably he would get it back in due time, either when he finally arrived in Heaven, or at the least, at Judgment Day. And after all, his brother-in-law Ian managed very well on the wooden peg he wore to replace *his* missing leg.

Still, his vanity was troubled. Ah, that must be it; a punishment meant to cure him of the sin of vanity. He mentally set his teeth, determined to accept whatever came to him with fortitude, and such humility as he could manage. Still, he couldn't help reaching an exploratory hand (or whatever he was using for a hand) tentatively downward, to see just where the limb now ended.

The hand struck something hard, and the fingers tangled in wet, snarled hair. He sat up abruptly, and with some effort, cracked the layer of dried blood that had sealed his eyelids shut. Memory flooded back, and he groaned aloud. He had been mistaken. This *was* hell. But James Fraser was unfortunately not dead, after all.

* * *

The body of a man lay across his own. Its dead weight crushed his left leg, explaining the absence of feeling. The head, heavy as a spent cannonball, pressed facedown into his abdomen, the damp-matted hair a dark spill on the wet linen of his shirt. He jerked upward in sudden panic; the head rolled sideways into his lap and a half-open eye stared sightlessly up behind the sheltering strands of hair.

It was Jack Randall, his fine red captain's coat so dark with the wet it looked almost black. Jamie made a fumbling effort to push the body away, but found himself amazingly weak; his hand splayed feebly against Randall's shoulder, and the elbow of his other arm buckled suddenly as he tried to support himself. He found himself lying once more flat on his back, the sleeting sky pale gray and whirling dizzily overhead. Jack Randall's head moved obscenely up and down on his stomach with each gasping breath.

He pressed his hands flat against the boggy ground—the water rose up cold through his fingers and soaked the back of his shirt—and wriggled sideways. Some warmth was trapped between them; as the limp dead weight slid slowly free, the freezing rain struck his newly exposed flesh with a shock like a blow, and he shivered violently with sudden chill.

As he squirmed on the ground, struggling with the crumpled, mudstained folds of his plaid, he could hear sounds above the keening of the April wind; far-off shouts and a moaning and wailing, like the calling of ghosts in the wind. And overall, the raucous calling of crows. Dozens of crows, from the sound.

That was strange, he thought dimly. Birds shouldn't fly in a storm like this. A final heave freed the plaid from under him, and he fumbled it over his body. As he reached to cover his legs, he saw that his kilt and left leg were soaked with blood. The sight didn't distress him; it seemed only vaguely interesting, the dark red smears a contrast to the grayish green of the moor plants around him. The echoes of battle faded from his ears, and he left Culloden Field to the calling of the crows.

* * *

He was wakened much later by the calling of his name.

"Fraser! Jamie Fraser! Are ye here?"

No, he thought groggily. I'm not. Wherever he had been while unconscious, it was a better place than this. He lay in a small declivity, half-filled with water. The sleeting rain had stopped, but the wind hadn't; it whined over the moor, piercing and chilling. The sky had darkened nearly to black; it must be near evening, then.

"I saw him go down here, I tell ye. Right near a big clump of gorse." The voice was at a distance, fading as it argued with someone.

There was a rustle near his ear, and he turned his head to see the crow. It stood on the grass a foot away, a blotch of wind-ruffled black feathers, regarding him with a bead-bright eye. Deciding that he posed no threat, it swiveled its neck with casual ease and jabbed its thick sharp bill into Jack Randall's eye.

Jamie jerked up with a cry of revulsion and a flurry of movement that sent the crow flapping off, squawking with alarm.

"Ay! Over there!"

There was a squelching through boggy ground, and a face before him, and the welcome feel of a hand on his shoulder.

"He's alive! Come on, MacDonald! D'ye lend a hand here; he'll no be walkin' on his own." There were four of them, and with a good deal of effort, they got him up, arms draped helpless about the shoulders of Ewan Cameron and Iain MacKinnon.

He wanted to tell them to leave him; his purpose had returned to him with the waking, and he remembered that he had meant to die. But the sweetness of their company was too much to resist. The rest had restored the feeling in his dead leg, and he knew the seriousness of the wound. He would die soon in any case; thank God that it need not be alone, in the dark.

* * *

"Water?" The edge of the cup pressed against his lip, and he roused himself long enough to drink, careful not to spill it. A hand pressed briefly against his forehead and dropped away without comment.

He was burning; he could feel the flames behind his eyes when he closed them. His lips were cracked and sore from the heat, but it was better than the chills that came at intervals. At least when he was fevered, he could lie still; the shaking of the chills woke the sleeping demons in his leg.

Murtagh. He had a terrible feeling about his godfather, but no memory to give it shape. Murtagh was dead; he knew that must be it, but didn't know why or how he knew. A good half of the Highland army was dead, slaughtered on the moor—so much he had gathered from the talk of the men in the farmhouse, but he had no memory of the battle himself.

He had fought with armies before, and knew such loss of memory was not uncommon in soldiers; he had seen it, though never before suffered it himself. He knew the memories would come back, and hoped he would be dead before they did. He shifted at the thought, and the movement sent a jolt of white-hot pain through his leg that made him groan.

"All right, Jamie?" Ewan rose on one elbow next to him, worried face wan in the dawning light. A bloodstained bandage circled his head, and there were rusty stains on his collar, from the scalp wound left by a bullet's graze.

"Aye, I'll do." He reached up a hand and touched Ewan's shoulder in gratitude. Ewan patted it, and lay back down.

The crows were back. Black as night themselves, they had gone to roost with the darkness, but with the dawn they were back—birds of war, the corbies had come to feast on the flesh of the fallen. It could as well be his own eyes the cruel beaks picked out, he thought. He could feel the shape of his eyeballs beneath his lids, round and hot, tasty bits of jelly rolling restless to and fro, looking vainly for oblivion, while the rising sun turned his lids a dark and bloody red.

Four of the men were gathered near the single window of the farmhouse, talking quietly together.

“Make a run for it?” one said, with a nod outside. “Christ, man, the best of us can barely stagger—and there’s six at least canna walk at all.”

“If ye can go, be going,” said a man from the floor. He grimaced toward his own leg, wrapped in the remains of a tattered quilt. “Dinna linger on our account.”

Duncan MacDonald turned from the window with a grim smile, shaking his head. The window’s light shone off the rough planes of his face, deepening the lines of fatigue.

“Nay, we’ll bide,” he said. “For one thing, the English are thick as lice on the ground; ye can see them swarm from the window. There’s no man would get away whole from Drumossie now.”

“Even those that fled the field yesterday will no get far,” MacKinnon put in softly. “Did ye no hear the English troops passing in the night at the quick-march? D’ye think it will be hard for them to hunt down our ragtag lot?”

There was no response to this; all of them knew the answer too well. Many of the Highlanders had been barely able to stand on the field before the battle, weakened as they were by cold, fatigue, and hunger.

Jamie turned his face to the wall, praying that his men had started early enough. Lallybroch was remote; if they could get far enough from Culloden, it was unlikely they would be caught. And yet Claire had told him that Cumberland’s troops would ravage the Highlands, ranging far afield in their thirst for revenge.

The thought of her this time caused only a wave of terrible longing. God, to have her here, to lay her hands on him, to tend his wounds and cradle his head in her lap. But she was gone—gone away two hundred years from him—and thank the Lord that she was! Tears trickled slowly from under his closed lids, and he rolled painfully onto his side, to hide them from the others.

Lord, that she might be safe, he prayed. *She and the child.*

* * *

Toward midafternoon, the smell of burning came suddenly on the air, wafting through the glassless window. It was thicker than the smell of blackpowder smoke, pungent, with an underlying odor that was faintly horrible in its reminiscent smell of roasting meat.

"They are burning the dead," said MacDonald. He had scarcely moved from his seat by the window in all the time they had been in the cottage. He looked like a death's-head himself, hair coal-black and matted with dirt, scraped back from a face in which every bone showed.

Here and there, a small, flat crack sounded on the moor. Gunshots. The coups de grace, administered by those English officers with a sense of compassion, before a tartan-clad wretch should be stacked on the pyre with his luckier fellows. When Jamie looked up, Duncan MacDonald still sat by the window, but his eyes were closed.

Next to him, Ewan Cameron crossed himself. "May we find as much mercy," he whispered.

* * *

They did. It was just past noon on the second day when booted feet at last approached the farmhouse, and the door swung open on silent leather hinges.

"Christ." It was a muttered exclamation at the sight within the farmhouse. The draft from the door stirred the fetid air over grimed, bedraggled, bloodstained bodies that lay or sat huddled on the packed-dirt floor.

There had been no discussion of the possibility of armed resistance; they had no heart and there was no point. The Jacobites simply sat, waiting the pleasure of their visitor.

He was a major, all fresh and new in an uncreased uniform, with polished boots. After a moment's hesitation to survey the inhabitants, he stepped inside, his lieutenant close behind.

“I am Lord Melton,” he said, glancing around as though seeking the leader of these men, to whom his remarks might most properly be addressed.

Duncan MacDonald, after a glance of his own, stood slowly, and inclined his head. “Duncan MacDonald, of Glen Richie,” he said. “And others”—he waved a hand—“late of the forces of His Majesty, King James.”

“So I surmised,” the Englishman said dryly. He was young, in his early thirties, but he carried himself with a seasoned soldier’s confidence. He looked deliberately from man to man, then reached into his coat and produced a folded sheet of paper.

“I have here an order from His Grace, the Duke of Cumberland,” he said. “Authorizing the immediate execution of any man found to have engaged in the treasonous rebellion just past.” He glanced around the confines of the cottage once more. “Is there any man here who claims innocence of treason?”

There was the faintest breath of laughter from the Scots. Innocence, with the smoke of battle still black on their faces, here on the edge of the slaughter-field?

“No, my lord,” said MacDonald, the faintest of smiles on his lips. “Traitors all. Shall we be hanged, then?”

Melton’s face twitched in a small grimace of distaste, then settled back into impassivity. He was a slight man, with small, fine bones, but carried his authority well, nonetheless.

“You will be shot,” he said. “You have an hour, in which to prepare yourselves.” He hesitated, shooting a glance at his lieutenant, as though afraid to sound overgenerous before his subordinate, but continued. “If any of you wish writing materials—to compose a letter, perhaps—the clerk of my company will attend you.” He nodded briefly to MacDonald, turned on his heel, and left.

It was a grim hour. A few men availed themselves of the offer of pen and ink, and scribbled doggedly, paper held against the slanted wooden chimney for lack of another firm writing surface. Others prayed quietly, or simply sat, waiting.

MacDonald had begged mercy for Giles McMartin and Frederick Murray, arguing that they were barely seventeen, and should not be held to the same account as their elders. This request was denied, and the boys sat together, white-faced against the wall, holding each other's hands.

For them, Jamie felt a piercing sorrow—and for the others here, loyal friends and gallant soldiers. For himself, he felt only relief. No more to worry, nothing more to do. He had done all he could for his men, his wife, his unborn child. Now let this bodily misery be ended, and he would go grateful for the peace of it.

More for form's sake than because he felt the need of it, he closed his eyes and began the Act of Contrition, in French, as he always said it. *Mon Dieu, je regrette* … And yet he didn't; it was much too late for any sort of regret.

Would he find Claire at once when he died, he wondered? Or perhaps, as he expected, be condemned to separation for a time? In any case, he would see her again; he clung to the conviction much more firmly than he embraced the tenets of the Church. God had given her to him; He would restore her.

Forgetting to pray, he instead began to conjure her face behind his eyelids, the curve of cheek and temple, a broad fair brow that always moved him to kiss it, just there, in that small smooth spot between her eyebrows, just at the top of her nose, between clear amber eyes. He fixed his attention on the shape of her mouth, carefully imagining the full, sweet curve of it, and the taste and the feel and the joy of it. The sounds of praying, the pen-scratching and the small, choked sobs of Giles McMartin faded from his ears.

It was midafternoon when Melton returned, this time with six soldiers in attendance, as well as the Lieutenant and the clerk. Again, he paused in the doorway, but MacDonald rose before he could speak.

"I'll go first," he said, and walked steadily across the cottage. As he bent his head to go through the door, though, Lord Melton laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Will you give your full name, sir? My clerk will make note of it."

MacDonald glanced at the clerk, a small bitter smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"A trophy list, is it? Aye, well." He shrugged and drew himself upright. "Duncan William MacLeod MacDonald, of Glen Richie." He bowed politely to Lord Melton. "At your service—sir." He passed through the door, and shortly there came the sound of a single pistol-shot from near at hand.

The boys were allowed to go together, hands still clutched tightly as they passed through the door. The rest were taken one by one, each asked for his name, that the clerk might make a record of it. The clerk sat on a stool by the door, head bent to the papers in his lap, not looking up as the men passed by.

When it came Ewan's turn, Jamie struggled to prop himself on his elbows, and grasped his friend's hand, as hard as he could.

"I shall see ye soon again," he whispered.

Ewan's hand shook in his, but the Cameron only smiled. Then he leaned across simply and kissed Jamie's mouth, and rose to go.

They left the six who could not walk to the last.

"James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser," he said, speaking slowly to allow the clerk time to get it down right. "Laird of Broch Tuarach." Patiently, he spelled it, then glanced up at Melton.

"I must ask your courtesy, my lord, to give me help to stand."

Melton didn't answer him, but stared down at him, his expression of remote distaste altering to one of mingled astonishment and something like dawning horror.

"Fraser?" he said. "Of Broch Tuarach?"

"I am," Jamie said patiently. Would the man not hurry a bit? Being resigned to being shot was one thing, but listening to your friends being killed in your hearing was another, and not just calculated to settle the nerves. His arms were trembling with the strain of propping him, and his bowels, not sharing the resignation of his higher faculties, were twitching with a gurgling dread.

"Bloody hell," the Englishman muttered. He bent and peered at Jamie where he lay in the shadow of the wall, then turned and beckoned to his lieutenant.

"Help me get him into the light," he ordered. They weren't gentle about it, and Jamie grunted as the movement sent a bolt of pain from his leg right up through the top of his head. It made him dizzy for a moment, and he missed what Melton was saying to him.

"Are you the Jacobite they call 'Red Jamie'?" he asked again, impatiently.

A streak of fear went through Jamie at that; let them know he was the notorious Red Jamie, and they wouldn't shoot him. They'd take him in chains to London to be tried—a prize of war. And after that, it would be the hangman's rope, and lying half strangled on the gallows platform while they slit his belly and ripped out his bowels. His bowels gave another long, rumbling gurgle; they didn't think much of the notion either.

"No," he said, with as much firmness as he could manage. "Just get on wi' it, eh?"

Ignoring this, Melton dropped to his knees, and ripped open the throat of Jamie's shirt. He gripped Jamie's hair and jerked back his head.

"Damn!" Melton said. Melton's finger prodded him in the throat, just above the collarbone. There was a small triangular scar there, and this appeared to be what was causing his interrogator's concern.

"James Fraser of Broch Tuarach; red hair and a three-cornered scar on his throat." Melton let go of the hair and sat back on his heels, rubbing his chin in a distracted sort of way. Then he pulled himself together and turned to the lieutenant, gesturing at the five men remaining in the farm cottage.

"Take the rest," he ordered. His fair brows were knitted together in a deep frown. He stood over Jamie, scowling, while the other Scottish prisoners were removed.

"I have to think," he muttered. "Damme, I must think!"

"Do that," said Jamie, "if you're able. I must lie down, myself." They had propped him sitting against the far wall, his leg stretched out in front of him, but sitting upright after two days of lying flat was more than he could manage; the room was tilting drunkenly, and small flashing lights kept coming before his eyes. He leaned to one side, and eased himself down, hugging the dirt floor, eyes closed as he waited for the dizziness to pass.

Melton was muttering under his breath, but Jamie couldn't make out the words; didn't care greatly in any case. Sitting up in the sunlight, he had seen his leg clearly for the first time, and he was fairly sure that he wouldn't live long enough to be hanged.

The deep angry red of inflammation spread from midthigh upward, much brighter than the remaining smears of dried blood. The wound itself was purulent; with the stench of the other men lessening, he could smell the faint sweet-foul odor of the discharge. Still, a quick bullet through the head seemed much preferable to the pain and delirium of death by infection. Did you hear the bang? he wondered, and drifted off, the cool pounded dirt smooth and comforting as a mother's breast under his hot cheek.

He wasn't really asleep, only drifting in a feverish doze, but Melton's voice in his ear jerked him to alertness.

"Grey," the voice was saying, "John William Grey! Do you know that name?"

"No," he said, mazy with sleep and fever. "Look, man, either shoot me or go away, aye? I'm ill."

"Near Carryarrick." Melton's voice was prodding, impatient. "A boy, a fair-haired boy, about sixteen. You met him in the wood."

Jamie squinted up at his tormentor. The fever distorted his vision, but there seemed something vaguely familiar about the fine-boned face above him, with those large, almost girlish eyes.

"Oh," he said, catching a single face from the flood of images that swirled erratically through his brain. "The wee laddie that tried to kill me. Aye, I mind him." He closed his eyes again. In the odd way of fever, one sensation seemed to blend into another. He had broken John William Grey's arm; the memory of the boy's fine bone beneath his hand became the bone of Claire's forearm as he tore her from the grip of the stones. The cool misty breeze stroked his face with Claire's fingers.

"Wake up, damn you!" His head snapped on his neck as Melton shook him impatiently. "Listen to me!"

Jamie opened his eyes wearily. "Aye?"

"John William Grey is my brother," Melton said. "He told me of his meeting with you. You spared his life, and he made you a promise—is that true?"

With great effort, he cast his mind back. He had met the boy two days before the first battle of the rebellion; the Scottish victory at Prestonpans. The six months between then and now seemed a vast chasm; so much had happened in between.

"Aye, I recall. He promised to kill me. I dinna mind if you do it for him, though." His eyelids were drooping again. Did he have to be awake in order to be shot?

"He said he owed you a debt of honor, and he does." Melton stood up, dusting the knees of his breeches, and turned to his lieutenant, who had been watching the questioning with considerable bewilderment.

"It's the deuce of a situation, Wallace. This … this Jacobite scut is famous. You've heard of Red Jamie? The one on the broadsheets?" The Lieutenant nodded, looking curiously down at the bedraggled form in the dirt at his feet. Melton smiled bitterly.

"No, he doesn't look so dangerous now, does he? But he's still Red Jamie Fraser, and His Grace would be more than pleased to hear of such an illustrious prisoner. They haven't yet found Charles Stuart, but a few well-known Jacobites would please the crowds at Tower Hill nearly as much."

"Shall I send a message to His Grace?" The Lieutenant reached for his message box.

"No!" Melton wheeled to glare down at his prisoner. "That's the difficulty! Besides being prime gallows bait, this filthy wretch is also the man who captured my youngest brother near Preston, and rather than shooting the brat, which is what he deserved, spared his life and returned him to his companions. Thus," he said through his teeth, "incurring a bloody great debt of honor upon my family!"

"Dear me," said the Lieutenant. "So you can't give him to His Grace, after all."

"No, blast it! I can't even shoot the bastard, without dishonoring my brother's sworn word!"

The prisoner opened one eye. "I willna tell anyone if you don't," he suggested, and promptly closed it again.

“Shut up!” Losing his temper entirely, Melton kicked the prisoner, who grunted at the impact, but said nothing more.

“Perhaps we could shoot him under an assumed name,” the Lieutenant suggested helpfully.

Lord Melton gave his aide a look of withering scorn, then looked out the window to judge the time.

“It will be dark in three hours. I’ll oversee the burial of the other executed prisoners. Find a small wagon, and have it filled with hay. Find a driver—pick someone discreet, Wallace, that means bribable, Wallace—and have them here as soon as it’s dark.”

“Yes, sir. Er, sir? What about the prisoner?” The Lieutenant gestured diffidently toward the body on the floor.

“What about him?” Melton said brusquely. “He’s too weak to crawl, let alone walk. He isn’t going anywhere—at least not until the wagon gets here.”

“Wagon?” The prisoner was showing signs of life. In fact, under the stimulus of agitation, he had managed to raise himself onto one arm. Bloodshot blue eyes gleamed wide with alarm, under the spikes of matted red hair. “Where are ye sending me?” Turning from the door, Melton cast him a glance of intense dislike.

“You’re the laird of Broch Tuarach, aren’t you? Well, that’s where I’m sending you.”

“I dinna want to go home! I want to be shot!”

The Englishmen exchanged a look.

“Raving,” the Lieutenant said significantly, and Melton nodded.

“I doubt he’ll live through the journey—but his death won’t be on my head, at least.”

The door shut firmly behind the Englishmen, leaving Jamie Fraser quite alone—and still alive.

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2

THE HUNT BEGINS

Inverness
May 2, 1968

"Of course he's dead!" Claire's voice was sharp with agitation; it rang loudly in the half-empty study, echoing among the rifled bookshelves. She stood against the cork-lined wall like a prisoner awaiting a firing squad, staring from her daughter to Roger Wakefield and back again.

"I don't think so." Roger felt terribly tired. He rubbed a hand over his face, then picked up the folder from the desk; the one containing all the research he'd done since Claire and her daughter had first come to him, three weeks before, and asked his help.

He opened the folder and thumbed slowly through the contents. The Jacobites of Culloden. The Rising of the '45. The gallant Scots who had rallied to the banner of Bonnie Prince Charlie, and cut through Scotland like a blazing sword—only to come to ruin and defeat against the Duke of Cumberland on the gray moor at Culloden.

"Here," he said, plucking out several sheets clipped together. The archaic writing looked odd, rendered in the black crispness of a photocopy. "This is the muster roll of the Master of Lovat's regiment."

He thrust the thin sheaf of papers at Claire, but it was her daughter, Brianna, who took the sheets from him and began to turn the pages, a slight frown between her reddish brows.

“Read the top sheet,” Roger said. “Where it says ‘Officers.’ ”

“All right.‘Officers,’ ” she read aloud, “ ‘Simon, Master of Lovat’ …”

“The Young Fox,” Roger interrupted. “Lovat’s son. And five more names, right?”

Brianna cocked one brow at him, but went on reading.

“ ‘William Chisholm Fraser, Lieutenant; George D’Amerd Fraser Shaw, Captain; Duncan Joseph Fraser, Lieutenant; Bayard Murray Fraser, Major,” she paused, swallowing, before reading the last name, “ ‘… James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser. Captain.’ ” She lowered the papers, looking a little pale. “My father.”

Claire moved quickly to her daughter’s side, squeezing the girl’s arm. She was pale, too.

“Yes,” she said to Roger. “I know he went to Culloden. When he left me … there at the stone circle … he meant to go back to Culloden Field, to rescue his men who were with Charles Stuart. And we know he did”—she nodded at the folder on the desk, its manila surface blank and innocent in the lamplight—“you found their names. But … but … Jamie …” Speaking the name aloud seemed to rattle her, and she clamped her lips tight.

Now it was Brianna’s turn to support her mother.

“He meant to go back, you said.” Her eyes, dark blue and encouraging, were intent on her mother’s face. “He meant to take his men away from the field, and then go back to the battle.”

Claire nodded, recovering herself slightly.

“He knew he hadn’t much chance of getting away; if the English caught him … he said he’d rather die in battle. That’s what he meant to do.” She turned to Roger, her gaze an unsettling amber. Her eyes always reminded him of hawk’s eyes, as though she could see a good deal farther than most people. “I can’t believe he didn’t die there—so many men did, and *he* meant to!”

Almost half the Highland army had died at Culloden, cut down in a blast of cannonfire and searing musketry. But not Jamie Fraser.

“No,” Roger said doggedly. “That bit I read you from Linklater’s book—” He reached to pick it up, a white volume, entitled *The Prince in the Heather*.

"Following the battle," he read, *"eighteen wounded Jacobite officers took refuge in the farmhouse near the moor. Here they lay in pain, their wounds untended, for two days. At the end of that time, they were taken out and shot. One man, a Fraser of the Master of Lovat's regiment, escaped the slaughter. The rest are buried at the edge of the domestic park.*

"See?" he said, laying the book down and looking earnestly at the two women over its pages. "An officer, of the Master of Lovat's regiment." He grabbed up the sheets of the muster roll.

"And here they are! Just six of them. Now, we know the man in the farmhouse can't have been Young Simon; he's a well-known historical figure, and we know very well what happened to him. He retreated from the field—unwounded, mind you—with a group of his men, and fought his way north, eventually making it back to Beaufort Castle, near here." He waved vaguely at the full-length window, through which the nighttime lights of Inverness twinkled faintly.

"Nor was the man who escaped Leanach farmhouse any of the other four officers—William, George, Duncan, or Bayard," Roger said. "Why?" He snatched another paper out of the folder and brandished it, almost triumphantly. "Because they all *did* die at Culloden! All four of them were killed on the field—I found their names listed on a plaque in the church at Beauly."

Claire let out a long breath, then eased herself down into the old leather swivel chair behind the desk.

"Jesus H. Christ," she said. She closed her eyes and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, and her head against her hands, the thick, curly brown hair spilling forward to hide her face. Brianna laid a hand on Claire's back, face troubled as she bent over her mother. She was a tall girl, with large, fine bones, and her long red hair glowed in the warm light of the desk lamp.

"If he didn't die …" she began tentatively.

Claire's head snapped up. "But he *is* dead!" she said. Her face was strained, and small lines were visible around her eyes. "For God's sake, it's two hundred years; whether he died at Culloden or not, he's dead now!"

Brianna stepped back from her mother's vehemence, and lowered her head, so the red hair—her father's red hair—swung down beside her cheek.

"I guess so," she whispered. Roger could see she was fighting back tears. And no wonder, he thought. To find out in short order that first, the man you had loved and called "Father" all your life really *wasn't* your father, secondly, that your real father was a Highland Scot who had lived two hundred years ago, and thirdly, to realize that he had likely perished in some horrid fashion, unthinkably far from the wife and child he had sacrificed himself to save … enough to rattle one, Roger thought.

He crossed to Brianna and touched her arm. She gave him a brief, distracted glance, and tried to smile. He put his arms around her, even in his pity for her distress thinking how marvelous she felt, all warm and soft and springy at once.

Claire still sat at the desk, motionless. The yellow hawk's eyes had gone a softer color now, remote with memory. They rested sightlessly on the east wall of the study, still covered from floor to ceiling with the notes and memorabilia left by the Reverend Wakefield, Roger's late adoptive father.

Looking at the wall himself, Roger saw the annual meeting notice sent by the Society of the White Rose—those enthusiastic, eccentric souls who still championed the cause of Scottish independence, meeting in nostalgic tribute to Charles Stuart, and the Highland heroes who had followed him.

Roger cleared his throat slightly.

"Er … if Jamie Fraser didn't die at Culloden …" he said.

"Then he likely died soon afterward." Claire's eyes met Roger's, straight on, the cool look back in the yellow-brown depths. "You have no idea how it was," she said. "There was a famine in the Highlands—none of the men had eaten for days before the battle. He was wounded—we know that. Even if he escaped, there would have been … no one to care for him." Her voice caught slightly at that; she was a doctor now, had been a healer even then, twenty years before, when she had stepped through a circle of standing stones, and met destiny with James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser.

Roger was conscious of them both; the tall, shaking girl he held in his arms, and the woman at the desk, so still, so poised. She had traveled through the stones, through time; been suspected as a spy, arrested as a witch, snatched by an unimaginable quirk of circumstance from the arms of her first husband, Frank Randall. And three years later, her second husband, James Fraser, had sent her back through the stones, pregnant, in a desperate effort to save her and the unborn child from the onrushing disaster that would soon engulf him.

Surely, he thought to himself, she's been through enough? But Roger was a historian. He had a scholar's insatiable, amoral curiosity, too powerful to be constrained by simple compassion. More than that, he was oddly conscious of the third figure in the family tragedy in which he found himself involved—Jamie Fraser.

"If he didn't die at Culloden," he began again, more firmly, "then perhaps I can find out what did happen to him. Do you want me to try?" He waited, breathless, feeling Brianna's warm breath through his shirt.

Jamie Fraser had had a life, and a death. Roger felt obscurely that it was his duty to find out all the truth; that Jamie Fraser's women deserved to know all they could of him. For Brianna, such knowledge was all she would ever have of the father she had never known. And for Claire—behind the question he had asked was the thought that had plainly not yet struck her, stunned with shock as she was: she had crossed the barrier of time twice before. She could, just possibly, do it again. And if Jamie Fraser had not died at Culloden …

He saw awareness flicker in the clouded amber of her eyes, as the thought came to her. She was normally pale; now her face blanched white as the ivory handle of the letter opener before her on the desk. Her fingers closed around it, clenching so the knuckles stood out in knobs of bone.

She didn't speak for a long time. Her gaze fixed on Brianna and lingered there for a moment, then returned to Roger's face.

“Yes,” she said, in a whisper so soft he could barely hear her. “Yes. Find out for me. Please. Find out.”

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3

FRANK AND FULL DISCLOSURE

Inverness
May 9, 1968

The foot traffic was heavy on the bridge over the River Ness, with folk streaming home to their teas. Roger moved in front of me, his wide shoulders protecting me from the buffets of the crowd around us.

I could feel my heart beating heavily against the stiff cover of the book I was clutching to my chest. It did that whenever I paused to think what we were truly doing. I wasn't sure which of the two possible alternatives was worse; to find that Jamie had died at Culloden, or to find that he hadn't.

The boards of the bridge echoed hollowly underfoot, as we trudged back toward the manse. My arms ached from the weight of the books I carried, and I shifted the load from one side to the other.

"Watch your bloody wheel, man!" Roger shouted, nudging me adroitly to the side, as a workingman on a bicycle plowed head-downward through the bridge traffic, nearly running me against the railing.

"Sorry!" came back the apologetic shout, and the rider gave a wave of the hand over his shoulder, as the bike wove its way between two groups of schoolchildren, coming home for their teas. I glanced back across the bridge, in case Brianna should be visible behind us, but there was no sign of her.

Roger and I had spent the afternoon at the Society for the Preservation of Antiquities. Brianna had gone down to the Highland Clans office, there to collect photocopies of a list of documents Roger had compiled.

"It's very kind of you to take all this trouble, Roger," I said, raising my voice to be heard above the echoing bridge and the river's rush.

"It's all right," he said, a little awkwardly, pausing for me to catch him up. "I'm curious," he added, smiling a little. "You know historians—can't leave a puzzle alone." He shook his head, trying to brush the windblown dark hair out of his eyes without using his hands.

I did know historians. I'd lived with one for twenty years. Frank hadn't wanted to leave this particular puzzle alone, either. But neither had he been willing to solve it. Frank had been dead for two years, though, and now it was my turn—mine and Brianna's.

"Have you heard yet from Dr. Linklater?" I asked, as we came down the arch of the bridge. Late in the afternoon as it was, the sun was still high, so far north as we were. Caught among the leaves of the lime trees on the riverbank, it glowed pink on the granite cenotaph that stood below the bridge.

Roger shook his head, squinting against the wind. "No, but it's been only a week since I wrote. If I don't hear by the Monday, I'll try telephoning. Don't worry"—he smiled sideways at me—"I was very circumspect. I just told him that for purposes of a study I was making, I needed a list—if one existed—of the Jacobite officers who were in Leanach farmhouse after Culloden, and if any information exists as to the survivor of that execution, could he refer me to the original sources?"

"Do you know Linklater?" I asked, easing my left arm by tilting the books sideways against my hip.

"No, but I wrote my request on the Balliol College letterhead, and made tactful reference to Mr. Cheesewright, my old tutor, who *does* know Linklater." Roger winked reassuringly, and I laughed.

His eyes were a brilliant, lucent green, bright against his olive skin. Curiosity might be his stated reason for helping us to find out

Jamie's history, but I was well aware that his interest went a good bit deeper—in the direction of Brianna. I also knew that the interest was returned. What I didn't know was whether Roger realized that as well.

Back in the late Reverend Wakefield's study, I dropped my armload of books on the table in relief, and collapsed into the wing chair by the hearth, while Roger went to fetch a glass of lemonade from the manse's kitchen.

My breathing slowed as I sipped the tart sweetness, but my pulse stayed erratic, as I looked over the imposing stack of books we had brought back. Was Jamie in there somewhere? And if he was … my hands grew wet on the cold glass, and I choked the thought off. Don't look too far ahead, I cautioned myself. Much better to wait, and see what we might find.

Roger was scanning the shelves in the study, in search of other possibilities. The Reverend Wakefield, Roger's late adoptive father, had been both a good amateur historian, and a terrible pack rat; letters, journals, pamphlets and broadsheets, antique and contemporary volumes—all were crammed cheek by jowl together on the shelves.

Roger hesitated, then his hand fell on a stack of books sitting on the nearby table. They were Frank's books—an impressive achievement, so far as I could tell by reading the encomiums printed on the dust jackets.

"Have you ever read this?" he asked, picking up the volume entitled *The Jacobites*.

"No," I said. I took a restorative gulp of lemonade, and coughed. "No," I said again. "I couldn't." After my return, I had resolutely refused to look at any material dealing with Scotland's past, even though the eighteenth century had been one of Frank's areas of specialty. Knowing Jamie dead, and faced with the necessity of living without him, I avoided anything that might bring him to mind. A useless avoidance—there was no way of keeping him out of my mind, with Brianna's existence a daily reminder of him—but still, I could not read books about the Bonnie Prince—that terrible, futile young man—or his followers.

"I see. I just thought you might know whether there might be something useful in here." Roger paused, the flush deepening over his cheekbones. "Did—er, did your husband—Frank, I mean," he added hastily. "Did you tell him … um … about …" His voice trailed off, choked with embarrassment.

"Well, of course I did!" I said, a little sharply. "What did you think—I'd just stroll back into his office after being gone for three years and say, 'Oh, hullo there, darling, and what would you like for supper tonight?' "

"No, of course not," Roger muttered. He turned away, eyes fixed on the bookshelves. The back of his neck was deep red with embarrassment.

"I'm sorry," I said, taking a deep breath. "It's a fair question to ask. It's only that it's—a bit raw, yet." A good deal more than a bit. I was both surprised and appalled to find just how raw the wound still was. I set the glass down on the table at my elbow. If we were going on with this, I was going to need something stronger than lemonade.

"Yes," I said. "I told him. All about the stones—about Jamie. Everything."

Roger didn't reply for a moment. Then he turned, halfway, so that only the strong, sharp lines of his profile were visible. He didn't look at me, but down at the stack of Frank's books, at the back-cover photo of Frank, leanly dark and handsome, smiling for posterity.

"Did he believe you?" Roger asked quietly.

My lips felt sticky from the lemonade, and I licked them before answering.

"No," I said. "Not at first. He thought I was mad; even had me vetted by a psychiatrist." I laughed, shortly, but the memory made me clench my fists with remembered fury.

"Later, then?" Roger turned to face me. The flush had faded from his skin, leaving only an echo of curiosity in his eyes. "What did he think?"

I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. "I don't know."

The tiny hospital in Inverness smelled unfamiliar, like carbolic disinfectant and starch.

I couldn't think, and tried not to feel. The return was much more terrifying than my venture into the past had been, for there, I had been shrouded by a protective layer of doubt and disbelief about where I was and what was happening, and had lived in constant hope of escape. Now I knew only too well where I was, and I knew that there was no escape. Jamie was dead.

The doctors and nurses tried to speak kindly to me, to feed me and bring me things to drink, but there was no room in me for anything but grief and terror. I had told them my name when they asked, but wouldn't speak further.

I lay in the clean white bed, fingers clamped tight together over my vulnerable belly, and kept my eyes shut. I visualized over and over the last things I had seen before I stepped through the stones—the rainy moor and Jamie's face—knowing that if I looked too long at my new surroundings, these sights would fade, replaced by mundane things like the nurses and the vase of flowers by my bed. I pressed one thumb secretly against the base of the other, taking an obscure comfort in the tiny wound there, a small cut in the shape of a J. Jamie had made it, at my demand—the last of his touch on my flesh.

I must have stayed that way for some time; I slept sometimes, dreaming of the last few days of the Jacobite Rising—I saw again the dead man in the wood, asleep beneath a coverlet of bright blue fungus, and Dougal MacKenzie dying on the floor of an attic in Culloden House; the ragged men of the Highland army, asleep in the muddy ditches; their last sleep before the slaughter.

I would wake screaming or moaning, to the scent of disinfectant and the sound of soothing words, incomprehensible against the echoes of Gaelic shouting in my dreams, and fall asleep again, my hurt clutched tight in the palm of my hand.

And then I opened my eyes and Frank was there. He stood in the door, smoothing back his dark hair with one hand, looking uncertain—and no wonder, poor man.

I lay back on the pillows, just watching him, not speaking. He had the look of his ancestors, Jack and Alex Randall; fine, clear, aristocratic features and a well-shaped head, under a spill of *straight dark hair. His face had some indefinable difference from theirs, though, beyond the small differences of feature. There was no mark of fear or ruthlessness on him; neither the spirituality of Alex nor the icy arrogance of Jack. His lean face looked intelligent, kind, and slightly tired, unshaven and with smudges beneath his eyes. I knew without being told that he had driven all night to get here.*

"Claire?" He came over to the bed, and spoke tentatively, as though not sure that I really was Claire.

I wasn't sure either, but I nodded and said, "Hullo, Frank." My voice was scratchy and rough, unaccustomed to speech.

He took one of my hands, and I let him have it.

"Are you … all right?" he said, after a minute. He was frowning slightly as he looked at me.

"I'm pregnant." That seemed the important point, to my disordered mind. I had not thought of what I would say to Frank, if I ever saw him again, but the moment I saw him standing in the door, it seemed to come clear in my mind. I would tell him I was pregnant, he would leave, and I would be alone with my last sight of Jamie's face, and the burning touch of him on my hand.

His face tightened a bit, but he didn't let go of my other hand. "I know. They told me." He took a deep breath and let it out. "Claire—can you tell me what happened to you?"

I felt quite blank for a moment, but then shrugged.

"I suppose so," I said. I mustered my thoughts wearily; I didn't want to be talking about it, but I had some feeling of obligation to this man. Not guilt, not yet; but obligation nonetheless. I had been married to him.

"Well," I said, "I fell in love with someone else, and I married him. I'm sorry," I added, in response to the look of shock that crossed his face, "I couldn't help it."

He hadn't been expecting that. His mouth opened and closed for a bit and he gripped my hand, hard enough to make me wince and jerk it out of his grasp.

"What do you mean?" he said, his voice sharp. "Where have you been, Claire?" He stood up suddenly, looming over the bed.

"Do you remember that when I last saw you, I was going up to the stone circle on Craigh na Dun?"

"Yes?" He was staring down at me with an expression somewhere between anger and suspicion.

"Well"—I licked my lips, which had gone quite dry—"the fact is, I walked through a cleft stone in that circle, and ended up in 1743."

"Don't be facetious, Claire!"

"You think I'm being funny?" The thought was so absurd that I actually began to laugh, though I felt a good long way from real humor.

"Stop that!"

I quit laughing. Two nurses appeared at the door as though by magic; they must have been lurking in the hall nearby. Frank leaned over and grabbed my arm.

"Listen to me," he said through his teeth. "You are going to tell me where you've been and what you've been doing!"

"I am telling you! Let go!" I sat up in bed and yanked at my arm, pulling it out of his grasp. "I told you; I walked through a stone and ended up two hundred years ago. And I met your bloody ancestor, Jack Randall, there!"

Frank blinked, entirely taken aback. "Who?"

"Black Jack Randall, and a bloody, filthy, nasty pervert he was, too!"

Frank's mouth hung open, and so did the nurses'. I could hear feet coming down the corridor behind them, and hurried voices.

"I had to marry Jamie Fraser to get away from Jack Randall, but then—Jamie—I couldn't help it, Frank, I loved him and I would have stayed with him if I could, but he sent me back because of Culloden, and the baby, and—" I broke off, as a man in a doctor's uniform pushed past the nurses by the door.

"Frank," I said tiredly, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to happen, and I tried all I could to come back—really, I did—but I couldn't. And now it's too late."

Despite myself, tears began to well up in my eyes and roll down my cheeks. Mostly for Jamie, and myself, and the child I carried, *but a few for Frank as well. I sniffed hard and swallowed, trying to stop, and pushed myself upright in the bed.*

"Look," I said, "I know you won't want to have anything more to do with me, and I don't blame you at all. Just—just go away, will you?"

His face had changed. He didn't look angry anymore, but distressed, and slightly puzzled. He sat down by the bed, ignoring the doctor who had come in and was groping for my pulse.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, quite gently. He took my hand again, though I tried to pull it away. "This—Jamie. Who was he?"

I took a deep, ragged breath. The doctor had hold of my other hand, still trying to take my pulse, and I felt absurdly panicked, as though I were being held captive between them. I fought down the feeling, though, and tried to speak steadily.

"James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser," I said, spacing the words, formally, the way Jamie had spoken them to me when he first told me his full name—on the day of our wedding. The thought made another tear overflow, and I blotted it against my shoulder, my hands being restrained.

"He was a Highlander. He was k-killed at Culloden." It was no use, I was weeping again, the tears no anodyne to the grief that ripped through me, but the only response I had to unendurable pain. I bent forward slightly, trying to encapsulate it, wrapping myself around the tiny, imperceptible life in my belly, the only remnant left to me of Jamie Fraser.

Frank and the doctor exchanged a glance of which I was only half-conscious. Of course, to them, Culloden was part of the distant past. To me, it had happened only two days before.

"Perhaps we should let Mrs. Randall rest for a bit," the doctor suggested. "She seems a wee bit upset just now."

Frank looked uncertainly from the doctor to me. "Well, she certainly does seem upset. But I really want to find out … what's this, Claire?" Stroking my hand, he had encountered the silver ring on my fourth finger, and now bent to examine it. It was the ring Jamie had given me for our marriage; a wide silver band in the

Highland interlace pattern, the links engraved with tiny, stylized thistle blooms.

"No!" I exclaimed, panicked, as Frank tried to twist it off my finger. I jerked my hand away and cradled it, fisted, beneath my bosom, cupped in my left hand, which still wore Frank's gold wedding band. "No, you can't take it, I won't let you! That's my wedding ring!"

"Now, see here, Claire—" Frank's words were interrupted by the doctor, who had crossed to Frank's side of the bed, and was now bending down to murmur in his ear. I caught a few words—"not trouble your wife just now. The shock"—and then Frank was on his feet once more, being firmly urged away by the doctor, who gave a nod to one of the nurses in passing.

I barely felt the sting of the hypodermic needle, too engulfed in the fresh wave of grief to take notice of anything. I dimly heard Frank's parting words, "All right—but Claire, I will know!" And then the blessed darkness came down, and I slept without dreaming, for a long, long time.

Roger tilted the decanter, bringing the level of the spirit in the glass up to the halfway point. He handed it to Claire with a half-smile.

"Fiona's grannie always said whisky is good for what ails ye."

"I've seen worse remedies." Claire took the glass and gave him back the half-smile in change.

Roger poured out a drink for himself, then sat down beside her, sipping quietly.

"I tried to send him away, you know," she said suddenly, lowering her glass. "Frank. I told him I knew he couldn't feel the same for me, no matter what he believed had happened. I said I would give him a divorce; he must go away and forget about me—take up the life he'd begun building without me."

"He wouldn't do it, though." Roger said. It was growing chilly in the study as the sun went down, and he bent and switched on the ancient electric fire. "Because you were pregnant?" he guessed.

She shot him a sudden sharp look, then smiled, a little wryly.

"Yes, that was it. He said no one but a cad would dream of abandoning a pregnant woman with virtually no resources. Particularly one whose grip on reality seemed a trifle tenuous," she added ironically. "I wasn't quite without resources—I had a bit of money from my uncle Lamb—but Frank wasn't a cad, either." Her glance shifted to the bookshelves. Her husband's historical works stood there, side by side, spines gleaming in the light of the desklamp.

"He was a very decent man," she said softly. She took another sip of her drink, closing her eyes as the alcoholic fumes rose up.

"And then—he knew, or suspected, that he couldn't have children himself. Rather a blow, for a man so involved in history and genealogies. All those dynastic considerations, you see."

"Yes, I can see that," Roger said slowly. "But wouldn't he feel—I mean, another man's child?"

"He might have." The amber eyes were looking at him again, their clearness slightly softened by whisky and reminiscence. "But as it was, since he didn't—*couldn't*—believe anything I said about Jamie, the baby's father was essentially unknown. If he didn't know who the man was—and convinced himself that I didn't really know either, but had just made up these delusions out of traumatic shock—well, then, there was no one ever to say that the child *wasn't* his. Certainly not me," she added, with just a tinge of bitterness.

She took a large swallow of whisky that made her eyes water slightly, and took a moment to wipe them.

"But to make sure, he took me clean away. To Boston," she went on. "He'd been offered a good position at Harvard, and no one knew us there. That's where Brianna was born."

> *The fretful crying jarred me awake yet again. I had gone back to bed at 6:30, after getting up five times during the night with the baby. A bleary-eyed look at the clock showed the time now as 7:00. A cheerful singing came from the bathroom, Frank's voice raised in "Rule, Britannia," over the noise of rushing water.*
>
> *I lay in bed, heavy-limbed with exhaustion, wondering whether I had the strength to endure the crying until Frank got out of the shower and could bring Brianna to me. As though the baby knew*

what I was thinking, the crying rose two or three tones and escalated to a sort of periodic shriek, punctuated by frightening gulps for air. I flung back the covers and was on my feet, propelled by the same sort of panic with which I had greeted air raids during the War.

I lumbered down the chilly hall and into the nursery, to find Brianna, aged three months, lying on her back, yelling her small red head off. I was so groggy from lack of sleep that it took a moment for me to realize that I had left her on her stomach.

"Darling! You turned over! All by yourself!" Terrorized by her audacious act, Brianna waved her little pink fists and squalled louder, eyes squeezed shut.

I snatched her up, patting her back and murmuring to the top of her red-fuzzed head.

"Oh, you precious darling! What a clever girl you are!"

"What's that? What's happened?" Frank emerged from the bathroom, toweling his head, a second towel wrapped about his loins. "Is something the matter with Brianna?"

He came toward us, looking worried. As the birth grew closer, we had both been edgy; Frank irritable and myself terrified, having no idea what might happen between us, with the appearance of Jamie Fraser's child. But when the nurse had taken Brianna from her bassinet and handed her to Frank, with the words "Here's Daddy's little girl," his face had grown blank, and then—looking down at the tiny face, perfect as a rosebud—gone soft with wonder. Within a week, he had been hers, body and soul.

I turned to him, smiling. "She turned over! All by herself!"

"Really?" His scrubbed face beamed with delight. "Isn't it early for her to do that?"

"Yes, it is. Dr. Spock says she oughtn't to be able to do it for another month, at least!"

"Well, what does Dr. Spock know? Come here, little beauty; give Daddy a kiss for being so precocious." He lifted the soft little body, encased in its snug pink sleep-suit, and kissed her button of a nose. Brianna sneezed, and we both laughed.

I stopped then, suddenly aware that it was the first time I had laughed in nearly a year. Still more, that it was the first time I had laughed with Frank.

He realized it too; his eyes met mine over the top of Brianna's head. They were a soft hazel, and at the moment, filled with tenderness. I smiled at him, a little tremulous, and suddenly very much aware that he was all but naked, with water droplets sliding down his lean shoulders and shining on the smooth brown skin of his chest.

The smell of burning reached us simultaneously, jarring us from this scene of domestic bliss.

"The coffee!" Thrusting Bree unceremoniously into my arms, Frank bolted for the kitchen, leaving both towels in a heap at my feet. Smiling at the sight of his bare buttocks, gleaming an incongruous white as he sprinted into the kitchen, I followed him more slowly, holding Bree against my shoulder.

He was standing at the sink, naked, amid a cloud of malodorous steam rising from the scorched coffeepot.

"Tea, maybe?" I asked, adroitly anchoring Brianna on my hip with one arm while I rummaged in the cupboard. "None of the orange pekoe leaf left, I'm afraid; just Lipton's teabags."

Frank made a face; an Englishman to the bone, he would rather lap water out of the toilet than drink tea made from teabags. The Lipton's had been left by Mrs. Grossman, the weekly cleaning woman, who thought tea made from loose leaves messy and disgusting.

"No, I'll get a cup of coffee on my way to the university. Oh, speaking of which, you recall that we're having the Dean and his wife to dinner tonight? Mrs. Hinchcliffe is bringing a present for Brianna."

"Oh, right," I said, without enthusiasm. I had met the Hinchcliffes before, and wasn't all that keen to repeat the experience. Still, the effort had to be made. With a mental sigh, I shifted the baby to the other side and groped in the drawer for a pencil to make a grocery list.

Brianna burrowed into the front of my red chenille dressing gown, making small voracious grunting noises.

"You can't be hungry again," I said to the top of her head. "I fed you not two hours ago." My breasts were beginning to leak in response to her rooting, though, and I was already sitting down and loosening the front of my gown.

"Mrs. Hinchcliffe said that a baby shouldn't be fed every time it cries," Frank observed. "They get spoilt if they aren't kept to a schedule."

It wasn't the first time I had heard Mrs. Hinchcliffe's opinions on child-rearing.

"Then she'll be spoilt, won't she?" I said coldly, not looking at him. The small pink mouth clamped down fiercely, and Brianna began to suck with mindless appetite. I was aware that Mrs. Hinchcliffe also thought breast-feeding both vulgar and insanitary. I, who had seen any number of eighteenth-century babies nursing contentedly at their mothers' breasts, didn't.

Frank sighed, but didn't say anything further. After a moment, he put down the pot holder and sidled toward the door.

"Well," he said awkwardly. "I'll see you around six then, shall I? Ought I to bring home anything—save you going out?"

I gave him a brief smile, and said, "No, I'll manage."

"Oh, good." He hesitated a moment, as I settled Bree more comfortably on my lap, head resting on the crook of my arm, the round of her head echoing the curve of my breast. I looked up from the baby, and found him watching me intently, eyes fixed on the swell of my half-exposed bosom.

My own eyes flicked downward over his body. I saw the beginnings of his arousal, and bent my head over the baby, to hide my flushing face.

"Goodbye," I muttered, to the top of her head.

He stood still a moment, then leaned forward and kissed me briefly on the cheek, the warmth of his bare body unsettlingly near.

"Goodbye, Claire," he said softly. "I'll see you tonight."

He didn't come into the kitchen again before leaving, so I had a chance to finish feeding Brianna and bring my own feelings into *some semblance of normality.*

I hadn't seen Frank naked since my return; he had always dressed in bathroom or closet. Neither had he tried to kiss me before this morning's cautious peck. The pregnancy had been what the obstetrician called "high-risk," and there had been no question of Frank's sharing my bed, even had I been so disposed—which I wasn't.

I should have seen this coming, but I hadn't. Absorbed first in sheer misery, and then in the physical torpor of oncoming motherhood, I had pushed away all considerations beyond my bulging belly. After Brianna's birth, I had lived from feeding to feeding, seeking small moments of mindless peace, when I could hold her oblivious body close and find relief from thought and memory in the pure sensual pleasure of touching and holding her.

Frank, too, cuddled the baby and played with her, falling asleep in his big chair with her stretched out atop his lanky form, rosy cheek pressed flat against his chest, as they snored together in peaceful companionship. He and I did not touch each other, though, nor did we truly talk about anything beyond our basic domestic arrangements—except Brianna.

The baby was our shared focus; a point through which we could at once reach each other, and keep each other at arm's length. It looked as though arm's length was no longer close enough for Frank.

I could do it—physically, at least. I had seen the doctor for a checkup the week before, and he had—with an avuncular wink and a pat on the bottom—assured me that I could resume "relations" with my husband at any time.

I knew Frank hadn't been celibate since my disappearance. In his late forties, he was still lean and muscular, dark and sleek, a very handsome man. Women clustered about him at cocktail parties like bees round a honeypot, emitting small hums of sexual excitement.

There had been one girl with brown hair whom I had noticed particularly at the departmental party; she stood in the corner and stared at Frank mournfully over her drink. Later she became tearfully and incoherently drunk, and was escorted home by two *female friends, who took turns casting evil looks at Frank and at me, standing by his side, silently bulging in my flowered maternity dress.*

He'd been discreet, though. He was always home at night, and took pains not to have lipstick on his collar. So, now he meant to come home all the way. I supposed he had some right to expect it; was that not a wifely duty, and I once more his wife?

There was only one small problem. It wasn't Frank I reached for, deep in the night, waking out of sleep. It wasn't his smooth, lithe body that walked my dreams and roused me, so that I came awake moist and gasping, my heart pounding from the half-remembered touch. But I would never touch that man again.

"Jamie," I whispered, "Oh, Jamie." My tears sparkled in the morning light, adorning Brianna's soft red fuzz like scattered pearls and diamonds.

It wasn't a good day. Brianna had a bad diaper rash, which made her cross and irritable, needing to be picked up every few minutes. She nursed and fussed alternately, pausing to spit up at intervals, making clammy wet patches on whatever I wore. I changed my blouse three times before eleven o'clock.

The heavy nursing bra I wore chafed under the arms, and my nipples felt cold and chapped. Midway through my laborious tidying-up of the house, there was a whooshing clank from under the floorboards, and the hot-air registers died with a feeble sigh.

"No, next week won't do," I said over the telephone to the furnace-repair shop. I looked at the window, where the cold February fog was threatening to seep under the sill and engulf us. "It's forty-two degrees in here, and I have a three-month-old baby!" The baby in question was sitting in her baby seat, swaddled in all her blankets, squalling like a scalded cat. Ignoring the quacking of the person on the other end, I held the receiver next to Brianna's wide open mouth for several seconds.

"See?" I demanded, lifting the phone to my ear again.

"Awright, lady," said a resigned voice on the other end of the line. "I'll come out this afternoon, sometime between noon and six."

"Noon and six? Can't you narrow it down a little more than that? I have to get out to the market," I protested.

"You ain't the only dead furnace in town, lady," the voice said with finality, and hung up. I glanced at the clock; eleven-thirty. I'd never be able to get the marketing done and get back in half an hour. Marketing with a small baby was more like a ninety-minute expedition into Darkest Borneo, requiring massive amounts of equipment and tremendous expenditures of energy.

Gritting my teeth, I called the expensive market that delivered, ordered the necessities for dinner, and picked up the baby, who was by now the shade of an eggplant, and markedly smelly.

"That looks ouchy, darling. You'll feel much better if we get it off, won't you?" I said, trying to talk soothingly as I wiped the brownish slime off Brianna's bright-red bottom. She arched her back, trying to escape the clammy washcloth, and shrieked some more. A layer of Vaseline and the tenth clean diaper of the day; the diaper service truck wasn't due 'til tomorrow, and the house reeked of ammonia.

"All right, sweetheart, there, there." I hoisted her up on my shoulder, patting her, but the screeching went on and on. Not that I could blame her; her poor bottom was nearly raw. Ideally, she should be let to lie about on a towel with nothing on, but with no heat in the house, that wasn't feasible. She and I were both wearing sweaters and heavy winter coats, which made the frequent feedings even more of a nuisance than usual; excavating a breast could take several minutes, while the baby screamed.

Brianna couldn't sleep for more than ten minutes at a time. Consequently, neither could I. When we did drift off together at four o'clock, we were roused within a quarter of an hour by the crashing arrival of the furnace man, who pounded on the door, not bothering to set down the large wrench he was holding.

Jiggling the baby against my shoulder with one hand, I began cooking the dinner with the other, to the accompaniment of screeches in my ear and the sounds of violence from the cellar below.

"I ain't promising nothin', lady, but you got heat for now." The furnace man appeared abruptly, wiping a smear of grease from his

creased forehead. He leaned forward to inspect Brianna, who was lying more or less peacefully across my shoulder, loudly sucking her thumb.

"How's that thumb taste, sweetie?" he inquired. "They say you shouldn't oughta let 'em suck their thumbs, you know," he informed me, straightening up. "Gives 'em crooked teeth and they'll need braces."

"Is that so?" I said through my own teeth. "How much do I owe you?"

Half an hour later, the chicken lay in its pan, stuffed and basted, surrounded by crushed garlic, sprigs of rosemary, and curls of lemon peel. A quick squeeze of lemon juice over the buttery skin, and I could stick it in the oven and go get myself and Brianna dressed. The kitchen looked like the result of an incompetent burglary, with cupboards hanging open and cooking paraphernalia strewn on every horizontal surface. I banged shut a couple of cupboard doors, and then the kitchen door itself, trusting that that would keep Mrs. Hinchcliffe out, even if good manners wouldn't.

Frank had brought a new pink dress for Brianna to wear. It was a beautiful thing, but I eyed the layers of lace around the neck dubiously. They looked not only scratchy, but delicate.

"Well, we'll give it a try," I told her. "Daddy will like you to look pretty. Let's try not to spit up in it, hm?"

Brianna responded by shutting her eyes, stiffening, and grunting as she extruded more slime.

"Oh, well done!" I said, sincerely. It meant changing the crib sheet, but at least it wouldn't make the diaper rash worse. The mess attended to and a fresh diaper in place, I shook out the pink dress, and paused to carefully wipe the snot and drool from her face before popping the garment over her head. She blinked at me and gurgled enticingly, windmilling her fists.

I obligingly lowered my head and went "Pfffft!" into her navel, which made her squirm and gurgle with joy. We did it a few more times, then began the painstaking job of getting into the pink dress.

Brianna didn't like it; she started to complain as I put it over her head, and as I crammed her chubby little arms into the puffed *sleeves, put back her head and let out a piercing cry.*

"What is it?" I demanded, startled. I knew all her cries by now and mostly, what she meant by them, but this was a new one, full of fright and pain. "What's the matter, darling?"

She was screaming furiously now, tears rolling down her face. I turned her frantically over and patted her back, thinking she might have had a sudden attack of colic, but she wasn't doubled up. She was struggling violently, though, and as I turned her back over to pick her up, I saw the long red line running up the tender inside of her waving arm. A pin had been left in the dress, and had scored her flesh as I forced the sleeve up her arm.

"Oh, baby! Oh, I'm so sorry! Mummy's so sorry!" Tears were running down my own face as I eased the stabbing pin free and removed it. I clutched her to my shoulder, patting and soothing, trying to calm my own feelings of panicked guilt. Of course I hadn't meant to hurt her, but she wouldn't know that.

"Oh, darling," I murmured. "It's all right now. Yes, Mummy loves you, it's all right." Why hadn't I thought to check for pins? For that matter, what sort of maniac would package a baby's clothes using straight pins? Torn between fury and distress, I eased Brianna into the dress, wiped her chin, and carried her into the bedroom, where I laid her on my twin bed while I hastily changed to a decent skirt and a fresh blouse.

The doorbell rang as I was pulling on my stockings. There was a hole in one heel, but no time to do anything about it now. I stuck my feet into the pinching alligator pumps, snatched up Brianna, and went to answer the door.

It was Frank, too laden with packages to use his key. One-handed, I took most of them from him and parked them on the hall table.

"Dinner all ready, dear? I've brought a new tablecloth and napkins—thought ours were a bit shabby. And the wine, of course." He lifted the bottle in his hand, smiling, then leaned forward to peer at me, and stopped smiling. He looked disapprovingly from my disheveled hair to my blouse, freshly stained with spit-up milk.

“Christ, Claire,” he said. “Couldn’t you fix yourself up a bit? I mean, it’s not as though you have anything else to do, at home all day—couldn’t you take a few minutes for a—”

“No,” I said, quite loudly. I pushed Brianna, who was wailing again with fretful exhaustion, into his arms.

“No,” I said again, and took the wine bottle from his unresisting hand.

“NO!” I shrieked, stamping my foot. I swung the bottle widely, and he dodged, but it was the doorjamb I struck, and purplish splatters of Beaujolais flew across the stoop, leaving glass shards glittering in the light from the entryway.

I flung the shattered bottle into the azaleas and ran coatless down the walk and into the freezing fog. At the foot of the walk, I passed the startled Hinchcliffes, who were arriving half an hour early, presumably in hopes of catching me in some domestic deficiency. I hoped they’d enjoy their dinner.

I drove aimlessly through the fog, the car’s heater blasting on my feet, until I began to get low on gas. I wasn’t going home; not yet. An all-night cafe? Then I realized that it was Friday night, and getting on for twelve o’clock. I had a place to go, after all. I turned back toward the suburb where we lived, and the Church of St. Finbar.

At this hour, the chapel was locked to prevent vandalism and burglary. For the late adorers, there was a push-button lock set just below the door handle. Five buttons, numbered one to five. By pushing three of them, in the proper combination, the latch could be sprung to allow lawful entry.

I moved quietly along the back of the chapel, to the logbook that sat at the feet of St. Finbar, to record my arrival.

“St. Finbar?” Frank had said incredulously. “There isn’t such a saint. There can’t possibly be.”

“There is,” I said, with a trace of smugness. “An Irish bishop, from the twelfth century.”

“Oh, Irish,” said Frank dismissively. “That explains it. But what I can’t understand,” he said, careful to be tactful, “is, er, well … why?”

"Why what?"

"Why go in for this Perpetual Adoration business? You've never been the least devout, no more than I have. And you don't go to Mass or anything; Father Beggs asks me every week where you are."

I shook my head. "I can't really say, Frank. It's just something … I need to do." I looked at him, helpless to explain adequately. "It's … peaceful there," I said, finally.

He opened his mouth as though to speak further, then turned away, shaking his head.

It was peaceful. The car park at the church was deserted, save for the single car of the adorer on duty at this hour, gleaming an anonymous black under the arc lights. Inside, I signed my name to the log and walked forward, coughing tactfully to alert the eleven o'clock adorer to my presence without the rudeness of direct speech. I knelt behind him, a heavyset man in a yellow windcheater. After a moment, he rose, genuflected before the altar, turned and walked to the door, nodding briefly as he passed me.

The door hissed shut and I was alone, save for the Sacrament displayed on the altar, in the great golden sunburst of the monstrance. There were two candles on the altar, big ones. Smooth and white, they burned steadily in the still air, without a flicker. I closed my eyes for a moment, just listening to the silence.

Everything that had happened during the day whirled through my mind in a disjointed welter of thoughts and feelings. Coatless, I was shaking with cold from the short walk through the parking lot, but slowly I grew warm again, and my clenched hands relaxed in my lap.

At last, as usually happened here, I ceased to think. Whether it was the stoppage of time in the presence of eternity, or only the overtaking of a bone-deep fatigue, I didn't know. But the guilt over Frank eased, the wrenching grief for Jamie lessened, and even the constant tug of motherhood upon my emotions receded to the level of background noise, no louder than the slow beating of my own heart, regular and comforting in the dark peace of the chapel.

"O Lord," I whispered, "I commend to your mercy the soul of your servant James." And mine, I added silently. And mine.

I sat there without moving, watching the flickering glow of the candle flames in the gold surface of the monstrance, until the soft footsteps of the next adorer came down the aisle behind me, ending in the heavy creak of genuflection. They came once each hour, day and night. The Blessed Sacrament was never left alone.

I stayed for a few minutes more, then slid out of the pew, with my own nod toward the altar. As I walked toward the back of the chapel, I saw a figure in the back row, under the shadow of the statue of St. Anthony. It stirred as I approached, then the man rose to his feet and made his way to the aisle to meet me.

"What are you doing here?" I hissed.

Frank nodded toward the form of the new adorer, already kneeling in contemplation, and took my elbow to guide me out.

I waited until the chapel door had closed behind us before pulling away and whirling to confront him.

"What is this?" I said angrily. "Why did you come after me?"

"I was worried about you." He gestured toward the empty car park, where his large Buick nestled protectively next to my small Ford. "It's dangerous, a lone woman walking about in the very late night in this part of town. I came to see you home. That's all."

He didn't mention the Hinchcliffes, or the dinner party. My annoyance ebbed a bit.

"Oh," I said. "What did you do with Brianna?"

"Asked old Mrs. Munsing from next door to keep an ear out in case she cried. But she seemed dead asleep; I didn't think there was much chance. Come along now, it's cold out."

It was; the freezing air off the bay was coiling in white tendrils around the posts of the arc lights, and I shivered in my thin blouse.

"I'll meet you at home, then," I said.

The warmth of the nursery reached out to embrace me as I went in to check Brianna. She was still asleep, but restless, turning her russet head from side to side, the groping little mouth opening and closing like the breathing of a fish.

"She's getting hungry," I whispered to Frank, who had come in behind me and was hovering over my shoulder, peering fondly at the

baby. "I'd better feed her before I come to bed; then she'll sleep later in the morning."

"I'll get you a hot drink," and he vanished through the door to the kitchen as I picked up the sleepy, warm bundle.

She had only drained one side, but she was full. The slack mouth pulled slowly away from the nipple, rimmed with milk, and the fuzzy head fell heavily back on my arm. No amount of gentle shaking or calling would rouse her to nurse on the other side, so at last I gave up and tucked her back in her crib, patting her back softly until a faint, contented belch wafted up from the pillow, succeeded by the heavy breathing of absolute satiation.

"Down for the night, is she?" Frank drew the baby blanket, decorated with yellow bunnies, up over her.

"Yes." I sat back in my rocking chair, mentally and physically too exhausted to get up again. Frank came to stand behind me; his hand rested lightly on my shoulder.

"He's dead, then?" he asked gently.

I told you so, I started to say. Then I stopped, closed my mouth and only nodded, rocking slowly, staring at the dark crib and its tiny occupant.

My right breast was still painfully swollen with milk. No matter how tired I was, I couldn't sleep until I took care of it. With a sigh of resignation, I reached for the breast pump, an ungainly and ridiculous-looking rubber contraption. Using it was undignified and uncomfortable, but better than waking up in an hour in bursting pain, sopping wet from overflowing milk.

I waved a hand at Frank, dismissing him.

"Go ahead. It will only take a few minutes, but I have to …"

Instead of leaving or answering, he took the pump from my hand and laid it down on the table. As though it moved of its own will, without direction from him, his hand rose slowly through the warm, dark air of the nursery and cupped itself gently around the swollen curve of my breast.

His head bowed and his lips fastened softly on my nipple. I groaned, feeling the half-painful prickle of the milk rushing through *the tiny ducts. I put a hand behind his head, and pressed him slightly closer.*

"Harder," I whispered. His mouth was soft, gentle in its pressure, nothing like the relentless grasp of a baby's hard, toothless gums, that fasten on like grim death, demanding and draining, releasing the bounteous fountain at once in response to their greed.

Frank knelt before me, his mouth a supplicant. Was this how God felt, I wondered, seeing the adorers before Him—was He, too, filled with tenderness and pity? The haze of fatigue made me feel as though everything happened in slow motion, as though we were under water. Frank's hands moved slowly as sea fronds, swaying in the current, moving over my flesh with a touch as gentle as the brush of kelp leaves, lifting me with the strength of a wave, and laying me down on the shore of the nursery rug. I closed my eyes, and let the tide carry me away.

The front door of the old manse opened with a screech of rusty hinges, announcing the return of Brianna Randall. Roger was on his feet and into the hall at once, drawn by the sound of girls' voices.

"A pound of best butter—that's what you told me to ask for, and I did, but I kept wondering whether there was such a thing as second-best butter, or worst butter—" Brianna was handing over wrapped packages to Fiona, laughing and talking at once.

"Well, and if ye got it from that auld rascal Wicklow, worst is what it's likely to be, no matter what he says," Fiona interrupted. "Oh, and ye've got the cinnamon, that's grand! I'll make cinnamon scones, then; d'ye want to come and watch me do it?"

"Yes, but first I want supper. I'm starved!" Brianna stood on tiptoe, sniffing hopefully in the direction of the kitchen. "What are we having—haggis?"

"Haggis! Gracious, ye silly Sassenach—ye dinna have haggis in the spring! Ye have it in the autumn when the sheep are killed."

"Am I a Sassenach?" Brianna seemed delighted at the name.

"Of course ye are, gowk. But I like ye fine, anyway."

Fiona laughed up at Brianna, who towered over the small Scottish girl by nearly a foot. Fiona was nineteen, prettily charming and slightly plump; next to her, Brianna looked like a medieval carving, strong-boned and severe. With her long, straight nose and the long hair glowing red-gold beneath the glass bowl of the ceiling fixture, she might have walked out of an illuminated manuscript, vivid enough to endure a thousand years unchanged.

Roger was suddenly conscious of Claire Randall, standing near his elbow. She was looking at her daughter, with an expression in which love, pride, and something else were mingled—memory, perhaps? He realized, with a slight shock, that Jamie Fraser too must have had not only the striking height and Viking red hair he had bequeathed to his daughter, but likely the same sheer physical presence.

It was quite remarkable, he thought. She didn't do or say anything so out of the ordinary, and yet Brianna undeniably drew people. There was some attraction about her, almost magnetic, that drew everyone near into the glow of her orbit.

It drew him; Brianna turned and smiled at him, and without consciousness of having moved, he found himself near enough to see the faint freckles high on her cheekbones, and smell the whiff of pipe tobacco that lingered in her hair from her expeditions to the shops.

"Hullo," he said, smiling. "Any luck with the Clans office, or have you been too busy playing dogsbody for Fiona?"

"Dogsbody?" Brianna's eyes slanted into blue triangles of amusement. "*Dogsbody?* First I'm a Sassenach, and now I'm a dogsbody. What do you Scots call people when you're trying to be *nice*?"

"Darrrrlin'," he said, rolling his *r*'s exaggeratedly, and making both girls laugh.

"You sound like an Aberdeen terrier in a bad mood," Claire observed. "Did you find anything at the Highland Clans library, Bree?"

"Lots of stuff," Brianna replied, rummaging through the stack of photocopies she had set down on the hall table. "I managed to read most of it while they were making the copies—this one was the most interesting." She pulled a sheet from the stack and handed it to Roger.

It was an extract from a book of Highland legends; an entry headed “Leap O’ the Cask.”

“Legends?” said Claire, peering over his shoulder. “Is that what we want?”

“Could be.” Roger was perusing the sheet, and spoke absently, his attention divided. “So far as the Scottish Highlands go, most of the history is oral, up to the mid-nineteenth century or so. That means there wasn’t a great distinction made between stories about real people, stories of historical figures, and the stories about mythical things like water horses and ghosts and the doings of the Auld Folk. Scholars who wrote the stories down often didn’t know for sure which they were dealing with, either—sometimes it was a combination of fact and myth, and sometimes you could tell that it was a real historical occurrence being described.

“This one, for instance”—he passed the paper to Claire-“sounds like a real one. It’s describing the story behind the name of a particular rock formation in the Highlands.”

Claire brushed the hair behind her ear and bent her head to read, squinting in the dim light of the ceiling fixture. Fiona, too accustomed to musty papers and boring bits of history to be interested, disappeared back into her kitchen to see to the dinner.

“ ‘Leap O’ the Cask,’ ” Claire read. *“ ‘This unusual formation, located some distance above a burn, is named after the story of a Jacobite laird and his servant. The laird, one of the few fortunates to escape the disaster of Culloden, made his way with difficulty to his home, but was compelled to lie hidden in a cave on his lands for nearly seven years, while the English hunted the Highlands for the fugitive supporters of Charles Stuart. The laird’s tenants loyally kept his presence a secret, and brought food and supplies to the laird in his hiding place. They were careful always to refer to the hidden man only as the “Dunbonnet,” in order to avoid any chance of giving him away to the English patrols who frequently crossed the district.*

“ ‘One day, a boy bringing a cask of ale up the trail to the laird’s cave met a group of English dragoons. Bravely refusing either to answer the soldiers’ questions, or to give up his burden, the boy was attacked by one

of the dragoons, and dropped the cask, which bounded down the steep hill, and into the burn below.' "

She looked up from the paper, raising her eyebrows at her daughter.

"Why this one? We know—or we think we know," she corrected, with a wry nod toward Roger, "that Jamie escaped from Culloden, but so did a lot of other people. What makes you think this laird might have been Jamie?"

"Because of the Dunbonnet bit, of course," Brianna answered, as though surprised that she should ask.

"What?" Roger looked at her, puzzled. "What about the Dunbonnet?"

In answer, Brianna picked up a hank of her thick red hair and waggled it under his nose.

"Dunbonnet!" she said impatiently. "A dull brown bonnet, right? He wore a hat all the time, because he had hair that could be recognized! Didn't you say the English called him 'Red Jamie'? They knew he had red hair—he had to hide it!"

Roger stared at her, speechless. The hair floated loose on her shoulders, alive with fiery light.

"You could be right," Claire said. Excitement made her eyes bright as she looked at her daughter. "It was like yours—Jamie's hair was just like yours, Bree." She reached up and softly stroked Brianna's hair. The girl's face softened as she looked down at her mother.

"I know," she said. "I was thinking about that while I was reading—trying to see him, you know?" She stopped and cleared her throat, as though something might be caught in it. "I could see him, out in the heather, hiding, and the sun shining off his hair. You said he'd been an outlaw; I just—I just thought he must have known pretty well … how to hide. If people were trying to kill him," she finished softly.

"Right." Roger spoke briskly, to dispel the shadow in Brianna's eyes. "That's a marvelous job of guesswork, but maybe we can tell for sure, with a little more work. If we can find Leap O' the Cask on a map—"

“What kind of dummy do you think I am?” Brianna said scornfully. “I thought of that.” The shadow disappeared, replaced by an expression of smugness. “That’s why I was so late; I made the clerk drag out every map of the Highlands they had.” She withdrew another photocopied sheet from the stack and poked a finger triumphantly near the upper edge.

“See? It’s so tiny, it doesn’t show up on most maps, but this one had it. Right there; there’s the village of Broch Mordha, which Mama says is near the Lallybroch estate, and there”—her finger moved a quarter-inch, pointing to a line of microscopic print. “See?” she repeated. “He went back to his estate—Lallybroch—and that’s where he hid.”

“Not having a magnifying glass to hand, I’ll take your word for it that that says ‘Leap O’ the Cask,’ ” Roger said, straightening up. He grinned at Brianna. “Congratulations, then,” he said. “I think you’ve found him—that far, at least.”

Brianna smiled, her eyes suspiciously bright. “Yeah,” she said softly. She touched the two sheets of paper with a gentle finger. “My father.”

Claire squeezed her daughter’s hand. “If you have your father’s hair, it’s nice to see you have your mother’s brains,” she said, smiling. “Let’s go and celebrate your discovery with Fiona’s dinner.”

“Good job,” Roger said to Brianna, as they followed Claire toward the dining room. His hand rested lightly on her waist. “You should be proud of yourself.”

“Thanks,” she said, with a brief smile, but the pensive expression returned almost at once to the curve of her mouth.

“What is it?” Roger asked softly, stopping in the hall. “Is something the matter?”

“No, not really.” She turned to face him, a small line visible between the ruddy brows. “It’s only—I was just thinking, trying to imagine—what do you think it was like for him? Living in a cave for seven years? And what happened to him then?”

Moved by an impulse, Roger leaned forward and kissed her lightly between the brows.

“I don’t know, darlin’,” he said. “But maybe we’ll find out.”

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PART TWO

Lallybroch

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4

THE DUNBONNET

Lallybroch
November 1752

He came down to the house once a month to shave, when one of the boys brought him word it was safe. Always at night, moving soft-footed as a fox through the dark. It seemed necessary, somehow, a small gesture toward the concept of civilization.

He would slip like a shadow through the kitchen door, to be met with Ian's smile or his sister's kiss, and would feel the transformation begin. The basin of hot water, the freshly stropped razor would be laid ready for him on the table, with whatever there was for shaving soap. Now and then it was real soap, if Cousin Jared had sent some from France; more often just half-rendered tallow, eye-stinging with lye.

He could feel the change begin with the first scent of the kitchen—so strong and rich, after the wind-thin smells of loch and moor and wood—but it wasn't until he had finished the ritual of shaving that he felt himself altogether human once more.

They had learned not to expect him to talk until he had shaved; words came hard after a month's solitude. Not that he could think of nothing to say; it was more that the words inside formed a logjam in his throat, battling each other to get out in the short time he had. He needed those few minutes of careful grooming to pick and choose, what he would say first and to whom.

There was news to hear and to ask about—of English patrols in the district, of politics, of arrests and trials in London and Edinburgh. That he could wait for. Better to talk to Ian about the estate, to Jenny about the children. If it seemed safe, the children would be brought down to say hello to their uncle, to give him sleepy hugs and damp kisses before stumbling back to their beds.

"He'll be getting a man soon" had been his first choice of conversation when he came in September, with a nod toward Jenny's eldest child, his namesake. The ten-year-old sat at the table with a certain constraint, immensely conscious of the dignity of his temporary position as man of the house.

"Aye, all I need's another of the creatures to worry over," his sister replied tartly, but she touched her son's shoulder in passing, with a pride that belied her words.

"Have ye word from Ian, then?" His brother-in-law had been arrested—for the fourth time—three weeks before, and taken to Inverness under suspicion of being a Jacobite sympathizer.

Jenny shook her head, bringing a covered dish to set before him. The thick warm smell of partridge pie drifted up from the pricked crust, and made his mouth water so heavily, he had to swallow before he could speak.

"It's naught to fret for," Jenny said, spooning out the pie onto his plate. Her voice was calm, but the small vertical line between her brows deepened. "I've sent Fergus to show them the deed of sasine, and Ian's discharge from his regiment. They'll send him home again, so soon as they realize he isna the laird of Lallybroch, and there's naught to be gained by deviling him." With a glance at her son, she reached for the ale jug. "Precious chance they have of provin' a wee bairn to be a traitor."

Her voice was grim, but held a note of satisfaction at the thought of the English court's confusion. The rain-spattered deed of sasine that proved transfer of the title of Lallybroch from the elder James to the younger had made its appearance in court before, each time foiling the Crown's attempt to seize the estate as the property of a Jacobite traitor.

He would feel it begin to slip away when he left—that thin veneer of humanity—more of it gone with each step away from the farmhouse. Sometimes he would keep the illusion of warmth and family all the way to the cave where he hid; other times it would disappear almost at once, torn away by a chill wind, rank and acrid with the scent of burning.

The English had burned three crofts, beyond the high field. Pulled Hugh Kirby and Geoff Murray from their firesides and shot them by their own doorsteps, with no question or word of formal accusation. Young Joe Fraser had escaped, warned by his wife, who had seen the English coming, and had lived three weeks with Jamie in the cave, until the soldiers were well away from the district—and Ian with them.

* * *

In October, it had been the older lads he spoke to; Fergus, the French boy he had taken from a Paris brothel, and Rabbie MacNab, the kitchenmaid's son, Fergus's best friend.

He had drawn the razor slowly down one cheek and round the angle of his jaw, then wiped the lathered blade against the edge of the basin. From the corner of one eye, he caught a faint glimpse of fascinated envy on the face of Rabbie MacNab. Turning slightly, he saw that the three boys—Rabbie, Fergus, and Young Jamie—were all watching him intently, mouths slightly open.

"Have ye no seen a man shave before?" he asked, cocking one brow.

Rabbie and Fergus glanced at each other, but left it to Young Jamie, as titular owner of the estate, to answer.

"Oh, well … aye, Uncle," he said, blushing. "But … I m-mean"—he stammered slightly and blushed even harder—"with my Da gone, and even when he's home, we dinna see him shave himself always, and well, you've just such a lot of *hair* on your face, Uncle, after a whole month, and it's only we're so glad to see you again, and …"

It dawned on Jamie quite suddenly that to the boys he must seem a most romantic figure. Living alone in a cave, emerging at dark to hunt, coming down out of the mist in the night, filthy and wild-haired, beard all in a fierce red sprout—yes, at their age, it likely seemed a glamorous adventure to be an outlaw and live hidden in the heather, in a dank, cramped cave. At fifteen and sixteen and ten, they had no notion of guilt or bitter loneliness, of the weight of a responsibility that could not be relieved by action.

They might understand fear, of a sort. Fear of capture, fear of death. Not the fear of solitude, of his own nature, fear of madness. Not the constant, chronic fear of what his presence might do to them—if they thought about that risk at all, they dismissed it, with the casual assumption of immortality that was the right of boys.

"Aye, well," he had said, turning casually back to the looking glass as Young Jamie stuttered to a halt. "Man is born to sorrow and whiskers. One of the plagues of Adam."

"Of Adam?" Fergus looked openly puzzled, while the others tried to pretend they had the slightest idea what Jamie was talking about. Fergus, as a Frenchie, was not expected to know everything.

"Oh, aye." Jamie pulled his upper lip down over his teeth and scraped delicately beneath his nose. "In the beginning, when God made man, Adam's chin was as hairless as Eve's. And their bodies both smooth as a newborn child's," he added, seeing Young Jamie's eyes dart toward Rabbie's crotch. Beardless Rabbie still was, but the faint dark down on his upper lip bespoke new sproutings elsewhere.

"But when the angel wi' the flaming sword drove them out of Eden, no sooner had they passed the gate of the garden, when the hair began to sprout and itch on Adam's chin, and ever since, man has been cursed with shaving." He finished his own chin with a final flourish, and bowed theatrically to his audience.

"But what about the other hair?" Rabbie demanded. "Ye dinna shave *there*!" Young Jamie giggled at the thought, going red again.

"And a damn good thing, too," his elder namesake observed. "Ye'd need the devil of a steady hand. No need of a looking glass, though," he added, to a chorus of giggles.

"What about the ladies?" Fergus said. His voice broke on the word "ladies," in a bullfrog croak that made the other two laugh harder. "Certainly *les filles* have hair there, too, but they do not shave it—usually not, anyway," he added, clearly thinking of some of the sights of his early life in the brothel.

Jamie heard his sister's footsteps coming down the hall.

"Oh, well, that's no a curse," he told his rapt audience, picking up the basin and tossing the contents neatly through the open window. "God gave that as a consolation to man. If ye've ever the privilege of seeing a woman in her skin, gentlemen," he said, looking over his shoulder toward the door and lowering his voice confidentially, "ye'll observe that the hair there grows in the shape of an arrow—pointing the way, ye ken, so as a poor ignorant man can find his way safe home."

He turned grandly away from the guffawing and sniggers behind him, to be struck suddenly with shame as he saw his sister, coming down the hall with the slow, waddling stride of advanced pregnancy. She was holding the tray with his supper on top of her swelling stomach. How could he have demeaned her so, for a crude jest and the sake of a moment's camaraderie with the boys?

"Be still!" he had snapped at the boys, who stopped giggling abruptly and stared at him in puzzlement. He hastened forward to take the tray from Jenny and set it on the table.

It was a savoury made of goat's meat and bacon, and he saw Fergus's prominent Adam's apple bob in the slender throat at the smell of it. He knew they saved the best of the food for him; it didn't take much looking at the pinched faces across the table. When he came, he brought what meat he could, snared rabbits or grouse, sometimes a nest of plover's eggs—but it was never enough, for a house where hospitality must stretch to cover the needs of not only family and servants, but the families of the murdered Kirby and Murray. At least until spring, the widows and children of his tenants must bide here, and he must do his best to feed them.

"Sit down by me," he said to Jenny, taking her arm and gently guiding her to a seat on the bench beside him. She looked surprised—it was her habit to wait on him when he came—but sat down gladly enough. It was late, and she was tired; he could see the dark smudges beneath her eyes.

With great firmness, he cut a large slab of the savoury and set the plate before her.

"But that's all for you!" Jenny protested. "I've eaten."

"Not enough," he said. "Ye need more—for the babe," he added, with inspiration. If she would not eat for herself, she would for the child. She hesitated a moment longer, but then smiled at him, picked up her spoon, and began to eat.

Now it was November, and the chill struck through the thin shirt and breeches he wore. He hardly noticed, intent on his tracking. It was cloudy, but with a thin-layered mackerel sky, through which the full moon shed plenty of light.

Thank God it wasn't raining; impossible to hear through the pattering of raindrops, and the pungent scent of wet plants masked the smell of animals. His nose had grown almost painfully acute through the long months of living outdoors; the smells of the house sometimes nearly knocked him down when he stepped inside.

He wasn't quite close enough to smell the musky scent of the stag, but he heard the telltale rustle of its brief start when it scented *him*. Now it would be frozen, one of the shadows that rippled across the hillside around him, under the racing clouds.

He turned as slowly as he possibly could toward the spot where his ears had told him the stag stood. His bow was in his hand, an arrow ready to the string. He would have one shot—maybe—when the stag bolted.

Yes, there! His heart sprang into his throat as he saw the antlers, pricking sharp and black above the surrounding gorse. He steadied himself, took a deep breath, and then the one step forward.

The crash of a deer's flight was always startlingly loud, to frighten back a stalker. This stalker was prepared, though. He neither startled nor pursued, but stood his ground, sighting along the shaft of the arrow, following with his eye the track of the springing deer, judging the moment, holding fire, and then the bowstring slapped his wrist with stinging force.

It was a clean shot, just behind the shoulder, and a good thing, too; he doubted he had the strength to run down a full-grown stag. It had fallen in a clear spot behind a clump of gorse, legs stuck out, stiff as sticks, in the oddly helpless way of dying ungulates. The hunter's moon lit its glazing eye, so the soft dark stare was hidden, the mystery of its dying shielded by blank silver.

He pulled the dirk from his belt and knelt by the deer, hastily saying the words of the gralloch prayer. Old John Murray, Ian's father, had taught him. His own father's mouth had twisted slightly, hearing it, from which he gathered that this prayer was perhaps not addressed to the same God they spoke to in church on Sunday. But his father had said nothing, and he had mumbled the words himself, scarcely noticing what he said, in the nervous excitement of feeling old John's hand, steady on his own, for the first time pressing down the knife blade into hairy hide and steaming flesh.

Now, with the sureness of practice, he thrust up the sticky muzzle in one hand, and with the other, slit the deer's throat.

The blood spurted hot over knife and hand, pumping two or three times, the jet dying away to a steady stream as the carcass drained, the great vessels of the throat cut through. Had he paused to think, he might not have done it, but hunger and dizziness and the cold fresh intoxication of the night had taken him far past the point of thinking. He cupped his hands beneath the running stream and brought them steaming to his mouth.

The moon shone black on his cupped, spilling hands, and it was as though he absorbed the deer's substance, rather than drank it. The taste of the blood was salt and silver, and the heat of it was his own. There was no startlement of hot or cold as he swallowed, only the taste of it, rich in his mouth, and the head-swimming, hot-metal smell, and the sudden clench and rumble of his belly at the nearness of food.

He closed his eyes and breathed, and the cold damp air came back, between the hot reek of the carcass and his senses. He swallowed once, then wiped the back of his hand across his face, cleaned his hands on the grass, and set about the business at hand.

There was the sudden effort of moving the limp, heavy carcass, and then the gralloch, the long stroke of mingled strength and delicacy that slit the hide between the legs, but did not penetrate the sac that held the entrails. He forced his hands into the carcass, a hot wet intimacy, and again there was an effortful tug that brought out the sac, slick and moon-shining in his hands. A slash above and another below, and the mass slid free, the transformation of black magic that changed a deer to meat.

It was a small stag, although it had points to its antlers. With luck, he could carry it alone, rather than leave it to the mercy of foxes and badgers until he could bring help to move it. He ducked a shoulder under one leg, and slowly rose, grunting with effort as he shifted the burden to a solid resting place across his back.

The moon cast his shadow on a rock, humped and fantastic, as he made his slow, ungainly way down the hill. The deer's antlers bobbed above his shoulder, giving him in shadowed profile the semblance of a horned man. He shivered slightly at the thought, remembering tales of witches' sabbats, where the Horned One came, to drink the sacrifice of goat's or rooster's blood.

He felt a little queasy, and more than a little light-headed. More and more, he felt the disorientation, the fragmenting of himself between day and night. By day, he was a creature of the mind alone, as he escaped his damp immobility by a stubborn, disciplined retreat into the avenues of thought and meditation, seeking refuge in the pages of books. But with the rising of the moon, all sense fled, succumbing at once to sensation, as he emerged into the fresh air like a beast from its lair, to run the dark hills beneath the stars, and hunt, driven by hunger, drunk with blood and moonlight.

He stared at the ground as he walked, night-sight keen enough to keep his footing, despite the heavy burden. The deer was limp and cooling, its stiff, soft hair scratching against the back of his neck, and his own sweat cooling in the breeze, as though he shared his prey's fate.

It was only as the lights of Lallybroch manor came into view that he felt at last the mantle of humanity fall upon him, and mind and body joined as one again as he prepared himself to greet his family.

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5

TO US A CHILD IS GIVEN

Three weeks later, there was still no word of Ian's return. No word of any kind, in fact. Fergus had not come to the cave in several days, leaving Jamie in a fret of worry over how things might be at the house. If nothing else, the deer he had shot would have gone long since, with all the extra mouths to feed, and there would be precious little from the kailyard at this time of year.

He was sufficiently worried to risk an early visit, checking his snares and coming down from the hills just before sunset. Just in case, he was careful to pull on the woolen bonnet, knitted of rough dun yarn, that would hide his hair from any telltale fingering of late sunbeams. His size alone might provoke suspicion, but not certainty, and he had full confidence in the strength of his legs to carry him out of harm's way should he have the ill luck to meet with an English patrol. Hares in the heather were little match for Jamie Fraser, given warning.

The house was strangely quiet as he approached. There was none of the usual racket made by children: Jenny's five, and the six bairns belonging to the tenants, to say nothing of Fergus and Rabbie MacNab, who were a long way from being too old to chase each other round the stables, screeching like fiends.

The house felt strangely empty round him, as he paused just inside the kitchen door. He was standing in the back hall, the pantry to one side, the scullery to the other, and the main kitchen just beyond. He stood stock-still, reaching out with all his senses, listening as he inhaled the overpowering smells of the house. No, there was someone here; the faint sound of a scrape, followed by a soft, regular clinking came from behind the cloth-padded door that kept the heat of the kitchen from seeping out into the chilly back pantry.

It was a reassuringly domestic sound, so he pushed open the door cautiously, but without undue fear. His sister, Jenny, alone and vastly pregnant, was standing at the table, stirring something in a yellow bowl.

"What are you doing in here? Where's Mrs. Coker?"

His sister dropped the spoon with a startled shriek.

"Jamie!" Pale-faced, she pressed a hand to her breast and closed her eyes. "Christ! Ye scairt the bowels out of me." She opened her eyes, dark blue like his own, and fixed him with a penetrating stare. "And what in the name of the Holy Mother are ye doing here now? I wasna expecting ye for a week at least."

"Fergus hasna come up the hill lately; I got worried," he said simply.

"Ye're a sweet man, Jamie." The color was coming back into her face. She smiled at her brother and came close to hug him. It was an awkward business, with the impending baby in the way, but pleasant, nonetheless. He rested his cheek for a moment on the sleek darkness of her head, breathing in her complex aroma of candle wax and cinnamon, tallow-soap and wool. There was an unusual element to her scent this evening; he thought she was beginning to smell of milk.

"Where is everyone?" he asked, releasing her reluctantly.

"Well, Mrs. Coker's dead," she answered, the faint crease between her brows deepening.

"Aye?" he said softly, and crossed himself. "I'm sorry for it." Mrs. Coker had been first housemaid and then housekeeper for the family, since the marriage of his own parents, forty-odd years before. "When?"

"Yesterday forenoon. 'Twasn't unexpected, poor soul, and it was peaceful. She died in her own bed, like she wanted, and Father McMurtry prayin' over her."

Jamie glanced reflexively toward the door that led to the servants' rooms, off the kitchen. "Is she still here?"

His sister shook her head. "No. I told her son they should have the wake here at the house, but the Cokers thought, everything being like it is"—her small moue encompassed Ian's absence, lurking Redcoats, refugee tenants, the dearth of food, and his own inconvenient presence in the cave—"they thought better to have it at Broch Mordha, at her sister's place. So that's where everyone's gone. I told them I didna feel well enough to go," she added, then smiled, raising an impish brow. "But it was really that I wanted a few hours' peace and quiet, wi' the lot of them gone."

"And here I've come, breakin' in on your peace," Jamie said ruefully. "Shall I go?"

"No, clot-heid," his sister said affably. "Sit ye down, and I'll get on wi' the supper."

"What's to eat, then?" he asked, sniffing hopefully.

"Depends on what ye've brought," his sister replied. She moved heavily about the kitchen, taking things from cupboard and hutch, pausing to stir the large kettle hung over the fire, from which a thin steam was rising.

"If ye've brought meat, we'll have it. If not, it's brose and hough."

He made a face at this; the thought of boiled barley and shin-beef, the last remnants of the salted beef carcass they'd bought two months before, was unappealing.

"Just as well I had luck, then," he said. He upended his game bag and let the three rabbits fall onto the table in a limp tumble of gray fur and crumpled ears. "And blackthorn berries," he added, tipping out the contents of the dun bonnet, now stained inside with the rich red juice.

Jenny's eyes brightened at the sight. "Hare pie," she declared. "There's no currants, but the berries will do even better, and there's enough butter, thank God." Catching a tiny blink of movement among the gray fur, she slapped her hand down on the table, neatly obliterating the minuscule intruder.

"Take them out and skin 'em, Jamie, or the kitchen will be hopping wi' fleas."

Returning with the skinned carcasses, he found the piecrust well advanced, and Jenny with smears of flour on her dress.

"Cut them into collops and break the bones for me, will ye, Jamie?" she said, frowning at *Mrs. McClintock's Receipts for Cookery and Pastry-Work*, laid open on the table beside the pie pan.

"Surely ye can make hare pie without looking in the wee book?" he said, obligingly taking the big bone-crushing wooden mallet from the top of the hutch where it was kept. He grimaced as he took it into his hand, feeling the weight of it. It was very like the one that had broken his right hand several years before, in an English prison, and he had a sudden vivid memory of the shattered bones in a hare pie, splintered and cracked, leaking salty blood and marrow-sweetness into the meat.

"Aye, I can," his sister answered abstractedly, thumbing through the pages. "It's only that when ye havena got half the things ye need to make a dish, sometimes there's something else you'll come across in here, that ye can use instead." She frowned at the page before her. "Ordinarily, I'd use claret in the sauce, but we've none in the house, save one of Jared's casks in the priest hole, and I dinna want to broach that yet—we might need it."

He didn't need telling what she might use it for. A cask of claret might grease the skids for Ian's release—or at least pay for news of his welfare. He stole a sidewise glance at the great round of Jenny's belly. It wasn't for a man to say, but to his not inexperienced eyes, she looked damn near her time. Absently, he reached over the kettle and swished the blade of his dirk to and fro in the scalding liquid, then pulled it out and wiped it clean.

"Whyever did ye do that, Jamie?" He turned to find Jenny staring at him. The black curls were coming undone from their ribbon, and it gave him a pang to see the glimmer of a single white hair among the ebony.

"Oh," he said, too obviously offhand as he picked up one carcass, "Claire—she told me ye ought to wash off a blade in boiling water before ye touched food with it."

He felt rather than saw Jenny's eyebrows rise. She had asked him about Claire only once, when he had come home from Culloden, half-conscious and mostly dead with fever.

"She is gone," he had said, and turned his face away. "Dinna speak her name to me again." Loyal as always, Jenny had not, and neither had he. He could not have said what made him say it today; unless perhaps it was the dreams.

He had them often, in varying forms, and it always unsettled him the day after, as though for a moment Claire had really been near enough to touch, and then had drawn away again. He could swear that sometimes he woke with the smell of her on him, musky and rich, pricked with the sharp, fresh scents of leaves and green herbs. He had spilled his seed in his sleep more than once while dreaming, an occurrence that left him faintly shamed and uneasy in mind. To distract both of them, he nodded at Jenny's stomach.

"How close is it?" he asked, frowning at her swollen midsection. "Ye look like a puffball mushroom—one touch, and poof!" He flicked his fingers wide in illustration.

"Oh, aye? Well, and I could wish it was as easy as poof." She arched her back, rubbing at the small of it, and making her belly protrude in an alarming fashion. He pressed back against the wall, to give it room. "As for when, anytime, I expect. No telling for sure." She picked up the cup and measured out the flour; precious little left in the bag, he noted with some grimness.

"Send up to the cave when it starts," he said suddenly. "I'll come down, Redcoats or no."

Jenny stopped stirring and stared at him.

"You? Why?"

"Well, Ian's not here," he pointed out, picking up one skinned carcass. With the expertise of long practice, he neatly disjointed a thigh and cut it free from the backbone. Three quick smacks with the boning mallet and the pale flesh lay flattened and ready for the pie.

"And a great lot of help he'd be if he was," Jenny said. "He took care of his part o' the business nine months ago." She wrinkled her nose at her brother and reached for the plate of butter.

"Mmphm." He sat down to continue his work, which brought her belly close to his eye-level. The contents, awake and active, was shifting to and fro in a restless manner, making her apron twitch and bulge as she stirred. He couldn't resist reaching out to put a light hand against the monstrous curve, to feel the surprising strong thrusts and kicks of the inhabitant, impatient of its cramped confinement.

"Send Fergus for me when it's time," he said again.

She looked down at him in exasperation and batted his hand away with the spoon. "Have I no just been telling ye, I dinna need ye? For God's sake, man, have I not enough to worry me, wi' the house full of people, and scarce enough to feed them, Ian in gaol in Inverness, and Redcoats crawling in at the windows every time I look round? Should I have to worry that ye'll be taken up, as well?"

"Ye needna be worrit for me; I'll take care." He didn't look at her, but focused his attention on the forejoint he was slicing through.

"Well, then, have a care and stay put on the hill." She looked down her long, straight nose, peering at him over the rim of the bowl. "I've had six bairns already, aye? Ye dinna think I can manage by now?"

"No arguing wi' you, is there?" he demanded.

"No," she said promptly. "So you'll stay."

"I'll come."

Jenny narrowed her eyes and gave him a long, level look.

"Ye're maybe the most stubborn gomerel between here and Aberdeen, no?"

A smile spread across her brother's face as he looked up at her.

"Maybe so," he said. He reached across and patted her heaving belly. "And maybe no. But I'm coming. Send Fergus when it's time."

* * *

It was near dawn three days later that Fergus came panting up the slope to the cave, missing the trail in the dark, and making such a crashing through the gorse bushes that Jamie heard him coming long before he reached the opening.

"Milord …" he began breathlessly as he emerged by the head of the trail, but Jamie was already past the boy, pulling his cloak around his shoulders as he hurried down toward the house.

"But, milord …" Fergus's voice came behind him, panting and frightened. "Milord, the soldiers …"

"Soldiers?" He stopped suddenly and turned, waiting impatiently for the French lad to make his way down the slope. "What soldiers?" he demanded, as Fergus slithered the last few feet.

"English dragoons, milord. Milady sent me to tell you—on no account are you to leave the cave. One of the men saw the soldiers yesterday, camped near Dunmaglas."

"Damn."

"Yes, milord." Fergus sat down on a rock and fanned himself, narrow chest heaving as he caught his breath.

Jamie hesitated, irresolute. Every instinct fought against going back into the cave. His blood was heated by the surge of excitement caused by Fergus's appearance, and he rebelled at the thought of meekly crawling back into hiding, like a grub seeking refuge beneath its rock.

"Mmphm," he said. He glanced down at Fergus. The changing light was beginning to outline the boy's slender form against the blackness of the gorse, but his face was still a pale smudge, marked with a pair of darker smudges that were his eyes. A certain suspicion was stirring in Jamie. Why had his sister sent Fergus at this odd hour?

If it had been necessary urgently to warn him about the dragoons, it would have been safer to send the boy up during the night. If the need was not urgent, why not wait until the next night? The answer to that was obvious—because Jenny thought she might not be able to send him word the next night.

"How is it with my sister?" he asked Fergus.

"Oh, well, milord, quite well!" The hearty tone of this assurance confirmed all Jamie's suspicions.

"She's having the child, no?" he demanded.

"No, milord! Certainly not!"

Jamie reached down and clamped a hand on Fergus's shoulder. The bones felt small and fragile beneath his fingers, reminding him uncomfortably of the rabbits he had broken for Jenny. Nonetheless, he forced his grip to tighten. Fergus squirmed, trying to ease away.

"Tell me the truth, man," Jamie said.

"No, milord! Truly!"

The grip tightened inexorably. "Did she tell you not to tell me?"

Jenny's prohibition must have been a literal one, for Fergus answered this question with evident relief.

"Yes, milord!"

"Ah." He relaxed his grip and Fergus sprang to his feet, now talking volubly as he rubbed his scrawny shoulder.

"She said I must not tell you anything except about the soldiers, milord, for if I did, she would cut off my cods and boil them like turnips and sausage!"

Jamie could not repress a smile at this threat.

"Short of food we may be," he assured his protégé, "but not that short." He glanced at the horizon, where a thin line of pink showed pure and vivid behind the black pines' silhouette. "Come along, then; it'll be full light in half an hour."

There was no hint of silent emptiness about the house this dawn. Anyone with half an eye could see that things were not as usual at Lallybroch; the wash kettle sat on its plinth in the yard, with the fire gone out under it, full of cold water and sodden clothes. Moaning cries from the barn—like someone being strangled—indicated that the sole remaining cow urgently required milking. An irritable blatting from the goat shed let him know that the female inhabitants would like some similar attention as well.

As he came into the yard, three chickens ran past in a feathery squawk, with Jehu the rat terrier in close pursuit. With a quick dart, he leaped forward and booted the dog, catching it just under the ribs. It flew into the air with a look of intense surprise on its face, then, landing with a yip, picked itself up and made off.

He found the children, the older boys, Mary MacNab, and the other housemaid, Sukie, all crammed into the parlor, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Kirby, a stern and rock-ribbed widow, who was reading to them from the Bible.

" *'And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression,'* " read Mrs. Kirby. There was a loud, rolling scream from upstairs, that seemed to go on and on. Mrs. Kirby paused for a moment, to allow everyone to appreciate it, before resuming the reading. Her eyes, pale gray and wet as raw oysters, flickered toward the ceiling, then rested with satisfaction on the row of strained faces before her.

" '*Notwithstanding, she shall be saved in childbearing, if she continue in faith and charity and holiness with sobriety,*' " she read. Kitty burst into hysterical sobbing and buried her head in her sister's shoulder. Maggie Ellen was growing bright red beneath her freckles, while her elder brother had gone dead-white at the scream.

"Mrs. Kirby," said Jamie. "Be still, if ye please."

The words were civil enough, but the look in his eyes must have been the one that Jehu saw just before his boot-assisted flight, for Mrs. Kirby gasped and dropped the Bible, which landed on the floor with a papery thump.

Jamie bent and picked it up, then showed Mrs. Kirby his teeth. The expression evidently was not successful as a smile, but had some effect nonetheless. Mrs. Kirby went quite pale, and put a hand to her ample bosom.

"Perhaps ye'd go to the kitchen and make yourself useful," he said, with a jerk of his head that sent Sukie the kitchenmaid scuttling out like a windblown leaf. With considerably more dignity, but no hesitation, Mrs. Kirby rose and followed her.

Heartened by this small victory, Jamie disposed of the parlor's other occupants in short order, sending the widow Murray and her daughters out to deal with the wash kettle, the smaller children out to catch chickens under the supervision of Mary MacNab. The older lads departed, with obvious relief, to tend the stock.

The room empty at last, he stood for a moment, hesitating as to what to do next. He felt obscurely that he should stay in the house, on guard, though he was acutely aware that he could—as Jenny had said—do nothing to help, whatever happened. There was an unfamiliar mule hobbled in the dooryard; presumably the midwife was upstairs with Jenny.

Unable to sit, he prowled restlessly around the parlor, the Bible in his hand, touching things. Jenny's bookshelf, battered and scarred from the last incursion of Redcoats, three months ago. The big silver epergne. That was slightly dented, but had been too heavy to fit in a soldier's knapsack, and so had escaped the pilfering of smaller objects. Not that the English had got so much; the few truly valuable items, along with the tiny store of gold they had left, were safely tucked away in the priest hole with Jared's wine.

Hearing a prolonged moan from above, he glanced down involuntarily at the Bible in his hand. Not really wanting to, still he let the book fall open, showing the page at the front where the marriages, births, and deaths of the family were recorded.

The entries began with his parents' marriage. Brian Fraser and Ellen MacKenzie. The names and the date were written in his mother's fine round hand, with underneath, a brief notation in his father's firmer, blacker scrawl. *Marrit for love*, it said—a pointed observation, in view of the next entry, which showed Willie's birth, which had occurred scarcely two months past the date of the marriage.

Jamie smiled, as always, at sight of the words, and glanced up at the painting of himself, aged two, standing with Willie and Bran, the huge deerhound. All that was left of Willie, who had died of the smallpox at eleven. The painting had a slash through the canvas—the work of a bayonet, he supposed, taking out its owner's frustration.

"And if ye hadna died," he said softly to the picture, "then what?"

Then what, indeed. Closing the book, his eye caught the last entry—*Caitlin Maisri Murray, born December 3, 1749, died December 3, 1749*. Aye, if. If the Redcoats had not come on December 2, would Jenny have borne the child too early? If they had had enough food, so that she, like the rest of them, was no more than skin and bones and the bulge of her belly, would that have helped?

"No telling, is there?" he said to the painting. Willie's painted hand rested on his shoulder; he had always felt safe, with Willie standing behind him.

Another scream came from upstairs, and a spasm of fear clenched his hands on the book.

"Pray for us, Brother," he whispered, and crossing himself, laid down the Bible and went out to the barn to help with the stock.

There was little to do here; Rabbie and Fergus between them were more than able to take care of the few animals that remained, and Young Jamie, at ten, was big enough to be a substantial help. Looking about for something to do, Jamie gathered up an armful of scattered hay and took it down the slope to the midwife's mule. When the hay was gone, the cow would have to be slaughtered; unlike the goats, it couldn't get enough forage on the winter hills to sustain it, even with the picked grass and weeds the small children brought in. With luck, the salted carcass would last them through 'til spring.

As he came back into the barn, Fergus looked up from his manure fork.

"This is a proper midwife, of good repute?" Fergus demanded. He thrust out a long chin aggressively. "Madame should not be entrusted to the care of a peasant, surely!"

"How should I know?" Jamie said testily. "D'ye think I had anything to do wi' engaging midwives?" Mrs. Martin, the old midwife who had delivered all previous Murray children, had died—like so many others—during the famine in the year following Culloden. Mrs. Innes, the new midwife, was much younger; he hoped she had sufficient experience to know what she was doing.

Rabbie seemed inclined to join the argument as well. He scowled blackly at Fergus. "Aye, and what d'ye mean 'peasant'? Ye're a peasant, too, or have ye not noticed?"

Fergus stared down his nose at Rabbie with some dignity, despite the fact that he was forced to tilt his head backward in order to do so, he being several inches shorter than his friend.

"Whether I am a peasant or not is of no consequence," he said loftily. "I am not a midwife, am I?"

"No, ye're a fiddle-ma-fyke!" Rabbie gave his friend a rough push, and with a sudden whoop of surprise, Fergus fell backward, to land heavily on the stable floor. In a flash, he was up. He lunged at Rabbie, who sat laughing on the edge of the manger, but Jamie's hand snatched him by the collar and pulled him back.

"None of that," said his employer. "I willna have ye spoilin' what little hay's left." He set Fergus back on his feet, and to distract him, asked, "And what d'ye ken of midwives anyway?"

"A great deal, milord." Fergus dusted himself off with elegant gestures. "Many of the ladies at Madame Elise's were brought to bed while I was there—"

"I daresay they were," Jamie interjected dryly. "Or is it childbed ye mean?"

"Childbed, certainly. Why, I was born there myself!" The French boy puffed his narrow chest importantly.

"Indeed." Jamie's mouth quirked slightly. "Well, and I trust ye made careful observations at the time, so as to say how such matters should be arranged?"

Fergus ignored this piece of sarcasm.

"Well, of course," he said, matter-of-factly, "the midwife will naturally have put a knife beneath the bed, to cut the pain."

"I'm none so sure she did that," Rabbie muttered. "At least it doesna sound much like it." Most of the screaming was inaudible from the barn, but not all of it.

"And an egg should be blessed with holy water and put at the foot of the bed, so that the woman shall bring forth the child easily," Fergus continued, oblivious. He frowned.

"I gave the woman an egg myself, but she did not appear to know what to do with it. And I had been keeping it especially for the last month, too," he added plaintively, "since the hens scarcely lay anymore. I wanted to be sure of having one when it was needed.

"Now, following the birth," he went on, losing his doubts in the enthusiasm of his lecture, "the midwife must brew a tea of the placenta, and give it to the woman to drink, so that her milk will flow strongly."

Rabbie made a faint retching sound. "Of the *afterbirth*, ye mean?" he said disbelievingly. "God!"

Jamie felt a bit queasy at this exhibition of modern medical knowledge himself.

"Aye, well," he said to Rabbie, striving for casualness, "they eat frogs, ye know. And snails. I suppose maybe afterbirth isna so strange, considering.” Privately, he wondered whether it might not be long before they were all eating frogs and snails, but thought that a speculation better kept to himself.

Rabbie made mock puking noises. “Christ, who’d be a Frenchie!”

Fergus, standing close to Rabbie, whirled and shot out a lightning fist. Fergus was small and slender for his age, but strong for all that, and with a deadly aim for a man’s weak points, knowledge acquired as a juvenile pickpocket on the streets of Paris. The blow caught Rabbie squarely in the wind, and he doubled over with a sound like a stepped-on pig’s bladder.

“Speak with respect of your betters, if you please,” Fergus said haughtily. Rabbie’s face turned several shades of red and his mouth opened and closed like a fish’s, as he struggled to get his breath back. His eyes bulged with a look of intense surprise, and he looked so ridiculous that it was a struggle for Jamie not to laugh, despite his worry over Jenny and his irritation at the boys’ squabbling.

“Will ye wee doiters no keep your paws off—” he began, when he was interrupted by a cry from Young Jamie, who had until now been silent, fascinated by the conversation.

“What?” Jamie whirled, hand going automatically to the pistol he carried whenever he left the cave, but there was not, as he had half-expected, an English patrol in the stableyard.

“What the hell is it?” he demanded. Then, following Young Jamie’s pointing finger, he saw them. Three small black specks, drifting across the brown crumple of dead vines in the potato field.

“Ravens,” he said softly, and felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. For those birds of war and slaughter to come to a house during a birth was the worst sort of ill luck. One of the filthy beasts was actually settling on the rooftree, as he watched.

With no conscious thought, he took the pistol from his belt and braced the muzzle across his forearm, sighting carefully. It was a long shot, from the door of the stable to the rooftree, and sighted upward, too. Still …

The pistol jerked in his hand and the raven exploded in a cloud of black feathers. Its two companions shot into the air as though blown there by the explosion, and flapped madly away, their hoarse cries fading quickly on the winter air.

“Mon Dieu!” Fergus exclaimed. *“C’est bien, ça!”*

“Aye, bonny shooting, sir.” Rabbie, still red-faced and a little breathless, had recovered himself in time to see the shot. Now he nodded toward the house, pointing with his chin. “Look, sir, is that the midwife?”

It was. Mrs. Innes poked her head out of the second-story window, fair hair flying loose as she leaned out to peer into the yard below. Perhaps she had been drawn by the sound of the shot, fearing some trouble. Jamie stepped into the stableyard and waved at the window to reassure her.

“It’s all right,” he shouted. “Only an accident.” He didn’t mean to mention the ravens, lest the midwife tell Jenny.

“Come up!” she shouted, ignoring this. “The bairn’s born, and your sister wants ye!”

* * *

Jenny opened one eye, blue and slightly slanted like his own.

“So ye came, aye?”

“I thought someone should be here—if only to pray for ye,” he said gruffly.

She closed the eye and a small smile curved her lips. She looked, he thought, very like a painting he had seen in France—an old one by some Italian fellow, but a good picture, nonetheless.

“Ye’re a silly fool—and I’m glad of it,” she said softly. She opened her eyes and glanced down at the swaddled bundle she held in the crook of her arm.

“D’ye want to see him?”

“Oh, a him, is it?” With hands experienced by years of unclehood, he lifted the tiny package and cuddled it against himself, pushing back the flap of blanket that shaded its face.

Its eyes were closed tight shut, the lashes not visible in the deep crease of the eyelids. The eyelids themselves lay at a sharp angle above the flushed smooth rounds of the cheeks, giving promise that it might—in this one recognizable feature, at least—resemble its mother.

The head was oddly lumpy, with a lopsided appearance that made Jamie think uncomfortably of a kicked-in melon, but the small fat mouth was relaxed and peaceful, the moist pink underlip quivering faintly with the snore attendant on the exhaustion of being born.

"Hard work, was it?" he said, speaking to the child, but it was the mother who answered him.

"Aye, it was," Jenny said. "There's whisky in the armoire—will ye fetch me a glass?" Her voice was hoarse and she had to clear her throat before finishing the request.

"Whisky? Should ye not be having ale wi' eggs beaten up in it?" he asked, repressing with some difficulty a mental vision of Fergus's suggestion of appropriate sustenance for newly delivered mothers.

"Whisky," his sister said definitely. "When ye were lyin' downstairs crippled and your leg killin' ye, did I give ye ale wi' eggs beaten up in it?"

"Ye fed me stuff a damn sight worse than that," her brother said, with a grin, "but ye're right, ye gave me whisky, too." He laid the sleeping child carefully on the coverlet, and turned to get the whisky.

"Has he a name, yet?" he asked, nodding toward the baby as he poured out a generous cup of the amber liquid.

"I'll call him Ian, for his Da." Jenny's hand rested gently for a moment on the rounded skull, lightly furred with a gold-brown fuzz. A pulse beat visibly in the soft spot on top; it seemed hideously fragile to Jamie, but the midwife had assured him the babe was a fine, lusty lad, and he supposed he must take her word for it. Moved by an obscure impulse to protect that nakedly exposed soft spot, he picked up the baby once more, pulling the blanket up over its head.

"Mary MacNab told me about you and Mrs. Kirby," Jenny remarked, sipping. "Pity I didna see it—she said the wretched auld besom nearly swallowed her tongue when ye spoke to her."

Jamie smiled in return, gently patting the baby's back as it lay against his shoulder. Dead asleep, the little body lay inert as a boneless ham, a soft comforting weight.

"Too bad she didn't. How can ye stand the woman, living in the same house wi' ye? I'd strangle her, were I here every day."

His sister snorted and closed her eyes, tilting her head back to let the whisky slide down her throat.

"Ah, folk fash ye as much as ye let them; I dinna let her, much. Still," she added, opening her eyes, "I canna say as I'll be sorry to be rid of her. I have it in my mind to palm her off on auld Kettrick, down at Broch Mordha. His wife and his daughter both died last year, and he'll be wanting someone to do for him."

"Aye, but if I were Samuel Kettrick, I'd take the widow Murray," Jamie observed, "not the widow Kirby."

"Peggy Murray's already provided for," his sister assured him. "She'll wed Duncan Gibbons in the spring."

"That's fast work for Duncan," he said, a little surprised. Then a thought occurred to him, and he grinned at her. "Do either o' them know it yet?"

"No," she said, grinning back. Then the smile faded into a speculative look.

"Unless you were thinking of Peggy yourself, that is?"

"Me?" Jamie was as startled as if she had suddenly suggested he might wish to jump out of the second-story window.

"She's only five and twenty," Jenny pursued. "Young enough for more bairns, and a good mother."

"How much of that whisky have ye had?" Her brother bent forward and pretended to examine the level of the decanter, cupping the baby's head in one palm to prevent it wobbling. He straightened up and gave his sister a look of mild exasperation.

"I'm living like an animal in a cave, and ye wish me to take a wife?" He felt suddenly hollow inside. To prevent her seeing that the suggestion had upset him, he rose and walked up and down the room, making unnecessary small humming noises to the bundle in his arms.

"How long is it since ye've lain wi' a woman, Jamie?" his sister asked conversationally behind him. Shocked, he turned on his heel to stare at her.

"What the hell sort of question is that to ask a man?"

"You've not gone wi' any of the unwed lasses between Lallybroch and Broch Mordha," she went on, paying no attention. "Or I'd have heard of it. None of the widows, either, I dinna think?" She paused delicately.

"Ye know damn well I haven't," he said shortly. He could feel his cheeks flushing with annoyance.

"Why not?" his sister asked bluntly.

"Why *not*?" He stared at her, his mouth slightly open. "Have ye lost your senses? What d'ye think, I'm the sort of man would slink about from house to house, bedding any woman who didna drive me out wi' a girdle in her hand?"

"As if they would. No, you're a good man, Jamie." Jenny smiled, half sadly. "Ye wouldna take advantage of any woman. Ye'd marry first, no?"

"No!" he said violently. The baby twitched and made a sleepy sound, and he transferred it automatically to his other shoulder, patting, as he glared at his sister. "I dinna mean to marry again, so ye just abandon all thought of matchmaking, Jenny Murray! I willna have it, d'ye hear?"

"Oh, I hear," she said, unperturbed, She pushed herself higher on the pillow, so as to look him in the eye.

"Ye mean to live a monk to the end of your days?" she asked. "Go to your grave wi' no son to bury you or bless your name?"

"Mind your own business, damn ye!" Heart pounding, he turned his back on her and strode to the window, where he stood staring sightlessly out over the stableyard.

"I ken ye mourn Claire." His sister's voice came softly from behind him. "D'ye think I could forget Ian, if he doesna come back? But it's time ye went on, Jamie. Ye dinna think Claire would mean ye to live alone all your life, with no one to comfort ye or bear your children?"

He didn't answer for a long time, just stood, feeling the soft heat of the small fuzzy head pressed against the side of his neck. He could see himself dimly in the misted glass, a tall dirty gangle of a man, the round white bundle incongruous beneath his own grim face.

"She was with child," he said softly at last, speaking to the reflection. "When she—when I lost her." How else could he put it?

There was no way to tell his sister, where Claire was—where he hoped she was. That he could not think of another woman, hoping that Claire still lived, even knowing her truly lost to him for good.

There was a long silence from the bed. Then Jenny said quietly, "Is that why ye came today?"

He sighed and turned sideways toward her, leaning his head against the cool glass. His sister was lying back, her dark hair loose on the pillow, eyes gone soft as she looked at him.

"Aye, maybe," he said. "I couldna help my wife; I suppose I thought I might help you. Not that I could," he added, with some bitterness. "I am as useless to you as I was to her."

Jenny stretched out a hand to him, face filled with distress. "Jamie, *mo chridhe*," she said, but then stopped, eyes widening in sudden alarm as a splintering crash and the sound of screams came from the house below.

"Holy Mary!" she said, growing even whiter. "It's the English!"

"Christ." It was as much a prayer as an exclamation of surprise. He glanced quickly from the bed to the window, judging the possibilities of hiding versus those of escape. The sounds of booted feet were already on the stair.

"The cupboard, Jamie!" Jenny whispered urgently, pointing. Without hesitation, he stepped into the armoire, and pulled the door to behind him.

The door of the chamber sprang open with a crash a moment later, to be filled with a red-coated figure in a cocked hat, holding a drawn sword before him. The Captain of dragoons paused, and darted his eyes all round the chamber, finally settling on the small figure in the bed.

"Mrs. Murray?" he said.

Jenny struggled to pull herself upright.

"I am. And what in flaming hell are ye doing in my house?" she demanded. Her face was pale and shiny with sweat, and her arms trembled, but she held her chin up and glared at the man. "Get out!"

Disregarding her, the man moved into the room and over to the window; Jamie could see his indistinct form disappear past the edge of the wardrobe, then reappear, back turned as he spoke to Jenny.

“One of my scouts reported hearing a shot from the vicinity of this house, not long since. Where are your men?”

“I have none.” Her trembling arms would not support her longer, and Jamie saw his sister ease herself back, collapsing on the pillows. “You’ve taken my husband already—my eldest son is no more than ten.” She did not mention Rabbie or Fergus; boys of their age were old enough to be treated—or mistreated—as men, should the Captain take the notion. With luck, they would have taken to their heels at the first sight of the English.

The Captain was a hard-bitten man of middle age, and not overly given to credulity.

“The keeping of weapons in the Highlands is a serious offense,” he said, and turned to the soldier who had come into the room behind him. “Search the house, Jenkins.”

He had to raise his voice in the giving of the order, for there was a rising commotion in the stairwell. As Jenkins turned to leave the room, Mrs. Innes, the midwife, burst past the soldier who tried to bar her way.

“Leave the poor lady alone!” she cried, facing the Captain with fists clenched at her sides. The midwife’s voice shook and her hair was coming down from its snood, but she stood her ground. “Get out, ye wretches! Leave her be!”

“I am not mistreating your mistress,” the Captain said, with some irritation, evidently mistaking Mrs. Innes for one of the maids. “I am merely—”

“And her not delivered but an hour since! It isna decent even for ye to lay eyes on her, so much as—”

“Delivered?” The Captain’s voice sharpened, and he glanced from the midwife to the bed in sudden interest. “You have borne a child, Mrs. Murray? Where is the infant?”

The infant in question stirred inside its wrappings, disturbed by the tightened grip of its horror-stricken uncle.

From the depths of the wardrobe, he could see his sister’s face, white to the lips and set like stone.

“The child is dead,” she said.

The midwife's mouth dropped open in shock, but luckily the Captain's attention was riveted on Jenny.

"Oh?" he said slowly. "Was it—"

"Mama!" The cry of anguish came from the doorway as Young Jamie broke free of a soldier's grip and hurled himself at his mother. "Mama, the baby's dead? No, no!" Sobbing, he flung himself on his knees and buried his head in the bedclothes.

As though to refute his brother's statement, baby Ian gave evidence of his living state by kicking his legs with considerable vigor against his uncle's ribs and emitting a series of small snuffling grunts, which fortunately went unheard in the commotion outside.

Jenny was trying to comfort Young Jamie, Mrs. Innes was futilely attempting to raise the boy, who kept a death grip on his mother's sleeve, the Captain was vainly trying to make himself heard above Young Jamie's grief-stricken wails, and over all, the muted sound of boots and shouting vibrated through the house.

Jamie rather thought the Captain was inquiring as to the location of the infant's body. He clutched the body in question closer, joggling it in an attempt to prevent any disposition on its part to cry. His other hand went to the hilt of his dirk, but it was a vain gesture; it was doubtful that even cutting his own throat would be of help, if the wardrobe were opened.

Baby Ian made an irascible noise, suggesting that he disliked being joggled. With visions of the house in flames and the inhabitants slaughtered, the noise sounded as loud to Jamie as his elder nephew's anguished howls.

"You did it!" Young Jamie had gotten to his feet, face wet and swollen with tears and rage, and was advancing on the Captain, curly black head lowered like a small ram's. "You killed my brother, ye English prick!"

The Captain was somewhat taken aback by this sudden attack, and actually took a step back, blinking at the boy. "No, boy, you're quite mistaken. Why, I only—"

"Prick! Cod! *A mhic an diabhoil!*" Entirely beside himself, Young Jamie was stalking the Captain, yelling every obscenity he had ever heard used, in Gaelic or English.

"Enh," said baby Ian in the elder Jamie's ear. "Enh, enh!" This sounded very much like the preliminary to a full-fledged screech, and in a panic, Jamie let go of his dirk and thrust his thumb into the soft, moist opening from which the sounds were issuing. The baby's toothless gums clamped onto his thumb with a ferocity that nearly made him exclaim aloud.

"Get out! Get out! Get out or I'll kill ye!" Young Jamie was screaming at the Captain, face contorted with rage. The Redcoat looked helplessly at the bed, as though to ask Jenny to call off this implacable small foe, but she lay as though dead with her eyes closed.

"I shall wait for my men downstairs," the Captain said, with what dignity he could, and withdrew, shutting the door hastily behind him. Deprived of his enemy, Young Jamie fell to the floor and collapsed into helpless weeping.

Through the crack in the door, Jamie saw Mrs. Innes look at Jenny, mouth opening to ask a question. Jenny shot up from the bedclothes like Lazarus, scowling ferociously, finger pressed to her lips to enjoin silence. Baby Ian champed viciously at the thumb, growling at its failure to yield any sustenance.

Jenny swung herself to the side of the bed and sat there, waiting. The sounds of the soldiers below throbbed and eddied through the house. Jenny was shaking with weakness, but she reached out a hand toward the armoire where her men lay hidden.

Jamie drew a deep breath and braced himself. It would have to be risked; his hand and wrist were wet with saliva, and the baby's growls of frustration were growing louder.

He stumbled from the wardrobe, drenched with sweat, and thrust the infant at Jenny. Baring her breast with a single wrench, she pressed the small head to her nipple, and bent over the tiny bundle, as though to protect it. The beginnings of a squawk disappeared into the muffled sounds of vigorous sucking, and Jamie sat down on the floor quite suddenly, feeling as though someone had run a sword behind his knees.

Young Jamie had sat up at the sudden opening of the wardrobe, and now sat spraddled against the door, his face blank with bewildered shock as he looked from his mother to his uncle and back again. Mrs. Innes knelt beside him, whispering urgently in his ear, but no sign of comprehension showed on the small, tear-streaked face.

By the time shouts and the creaking of harness outside betokened the soldiers' departure, Young Ian lay replete and snoring in his mother's arms. Jamie stood by the window, just out of sight, watching them go.

The room was silent, save for the liquid noise of Mrs. Innes, drinking whisky. Young Jamie sat close against his mother, cheek pressed to her shoulder. She had not looked up once since taking the baby, and still sat, head lowered over the child in her lap, her black hair hiding her face.

Jamie stepped forward and touched her shoulder. The warmth of her seemed shocking, as though cold dread were his natural state and the touch of another person somehow foreign and unnatural.

"I'll go to the priest hole," he said softly, "and to the cave when it's dark."

Jenny nodded, but without looking up at him. There were several white hairs among the black, he saw, glinting silver by the parting down the center of her head.

"I think … I should not come down again," he said at last. "For a time."

Jenny said nothing, but nodded once more.

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6

BEING NOW JUSTIFIED BY HIS BLOOD

As it was, he did come down to the house once more. For two months, he stayed close hidden in the cave, scarcely daring to come out at night to hunt, for the English soldiers were still in the district, quartered at Comar. The troops went out by day in small patrols of eight or ten, combing the countryside, looting what little there was to steal, destroying what they could not use. And all with the blessing of the English Crown.

A path led close by the base of the hill where his cavern was concealed. No more than a rude track, it had begun as a deer path, and still largely served that use, though it was a foolish stag that would venture within smelling distance of the cave. Still, sometimes when the wind was right, he would see a small group of the red deer on the path, or find fresh spoor in the exposed mud of the track next day.

It was helpful as well for such people as had business on the mountainside—few enough as those were. The wind had been blowing downwind from the cave, and he had no expectation of seeing deer. He had been lying on the ground just within the cave entrance, where enough light filtered through the overhanging screen of gorse and rowan for him to read on fine days. There were not a great many books, but Jared managed still to smuggle a few with his gifts from France.

> *This violent rain forced me to a new work, viz., to cut a hole through my new fortification, like a sink, to let the water go out,*

which would else have drowned my cave. After I had been in my cave some time, and found still no more shocks of the earthquake follow, I began to be more composed; and now, to support my spirits, which indeed wanted it very much, I went to my little store and took a small sup of rum, which however, I did then and always very sparingly, knowing I could have no more when that was gone.

It continued raining all that night, and great part of the next day, so that I could not stir abroad; but my mind being more composed, I began to think …

The shadows across the page moved as the bushes above him stirred. Instincts attuned, he caught the shift of the wind at once—and on it, the sound of voices.

He sprang to his feet, hand on the dirk that never left his side. Barely pausing to put the book carefully on its ledge, he grasped the knob of granite that he used as a handhold and pulled himself up into the steep narrow crevice that formed the cave's entrance.

The bright flash of red and metal on the path below hit him with a blow of shock and annoyance. Damn. He had little fear that any of the soldiers would leave the path—they were poorly equipped for making their way even through the normal stretches of open, spongy peat and heather, let alone an overgrown, brambly slope like this—but having them so close meant he could not risk leaving the cave before dark, even to get water or relieve himself. He cast a quick glance at his water jug, knowing as he did so that it was nearly empty.

A shout pulled his attention back to the track below, and he nearly lost his grip on the rock. The soldiers had bunched themselves around a small figure, humped under the weight of a small cask it bore on its shoulder. Fergus, on his way up with a cask of fresh-brewed ale. Damn, and damn again. He could have done with that ale; it had been months since he'd had any.

The wind had changed again, so he caught only small snatches of words, but the small figure seemed to be arguing with the soldier in front of him, gesticulating violently with its free hand.

"Idiot!" said Jamie, under his breath. "Give it to them and begone, ye wee clot!"

One soldier made a two-handed grab at the cask, and missed as the small dark-haired figure jumped nimbly back. Jamie smacked himself on the forehead with exasperation. Fergus could never resist insolence when confronted with authority—especially English authority.

The small figure now was skipping backward, shouting something at his pursuers.

"Fool!" Jamie said violently. "Drop it and run!"

Instead of either dropping the cask or running, Fergus, apparently sure, of his own speed, turned his back on the soldiers and waggled his rump insultingly at them. Sufficiently incensed to risk their footing in the soggy vegetation, several of the Redcoats jumped the path to follow.

Jamie saw their leader raise an arm and shout in warning. It had evidently dawned on him that Fergus might be a decoy, trying to lead them into ambush. But Fergus too was shouting, and evidently the soldiers knew enough gutter French to interpret what he was saying, for while several of the men halted at their leader's shout, four of the soldiers hurled themselves at the dancing boy.

There was a scuffle and more shouting as Fergus dodged, twisting like an eel between the soldiers. In all the commotion and above the whining wind, Jamie could not have heard the rush of the saber being drawn from its scabbard, but ever after felt as though he had, as though the faint swish and ring of drawn metal had been the first inkling of disaster. It seemed to ring in his ears whenever he remembered the scene—and he remembered it for a very long time.

Perhaps it was something in the attitudes of the soldiers, an irritableness of mood that communicated itself to him in the cave. Perhaps only the sense of doom that had clung to him since Culloden, as though everything in his vicinity were tainted; at risk by virtue only of being near him. Whether he had heard the sound of the saber or not, his body had tensed itself to spring before he saw the silver arc of the blade swing through the air.

It moved almost lazily, slowly enough for his brain to have tracked its arc, deduced its target, and shouted, wordless, *no*! Surely it moved slowly enough that he could have darted down into the midst of the swarming men, seized the wrist that wielded the sword and twisted the deadly length of metal free, to tumble harmless to the ground.

The conscious part of his brain told him this was nonsense, even as it froze his hands around the granite knob, anchoring him against the overwhelming impulse to heave himself out of the earth and run forward.

You can't, it said to him, a thready whisper under the fury and the horror that filled him. *He has done this for you; you cannot make it senseless. You can't,* it said, cold as death beneath the searing rush of futility that drowned him. *You can do nothing.*

And he did nothing, nothing but watch, as the blade completed its lazy swing, crashed home with a small, almost inconsequential thunk! and the disputed cask tumbled end over end over end down the slope of the burn, its final splash lost in the merry gurgle of brown water far below.

The shouting ceased abruptly in shocked silence. He scarcely heard when it resumed; it sounded so much like the roaring in his ears. His knees gave way, and he realized dimly that he was about to faint. His vision darkened into reddish black, shot with stars and streaks of light—but not even the encroaching dark would blot out the final sight of Fergus's hand, that small and deft and clever pickpocket's hand, lying still in the mud of the track, palm turned upward in supplication.

* * *

He waited for forty-eight long, dragging hours before Rabbie MacNab came to whistle on the path below the cave.

"How is he?" he said without preliminary.

"Mrs. Jenny says he'll be all right," Rabbie answered. His young face was pale and drawn; plainly he had not yet recovered from the shock of his friend's accident. "She says he's not fevered, and there's no trace of rot yet in the"—he swallowed audibly—"in the … stump."

"The soldiers took him down to the house, then?" Not waiting for an answer, he was already making his way down the hillside.

"Aye, they were all amoil wi' it—I think"—Rabbie paused to distentangle his shirt from a clinging brier, and had to hurry to catch up with his employer—"I think they were sorry about it. The Captain said so, at least. And he gave Mrs. Jenny a gold sovereign—for Fergus."

"Oh, aye?" Jamie said. "Verra generous." And did not speak again, until they reached the house.

Fergus was lying in state in the nursery, ensconced in a bed by the window. His eyes were closed when Jamie entered the room, long lashes lying softly against thin cheeks. Seen without its customary animation, his usual array of grimaces and poses, his face looked quite different. The slightly beaked nose above the long, mobile mouth gave him a faintly aristocratic air, and the bones hardening beneath the skin gave some promise that his face might one day pass from boyish charm to outright handsomeness.

Jamie moved toward the bed, and the dark lashes lifted at once.

"Milord," Fergus said, and a weak smile restored his face at once to its familiar contours. "You are safe here?"

"God, laddie, I'm sorry." Jamie sank to his knees by the bed. He could scarcely bear to look at the slender forearm that lay across the quilt, its frail bandaged wrist ending in nothing, but forced himself to grip Fergus's shoulder in greeting, and rub a palm gently over the shock of dark hair.

"Does it hurt much?" he asked.

"No, milord," Fergus said. Then a sudden belying twinge of pain crossed his features, and he grinned shamefacedly. "Well, not so much. And Madame has been most generous with the whisky."

There was a tumbler full of it on the sidetable, but no more than a thimbleful had been drunk. Fergus, weaned on French wine, did not really like the taste of whisky.

"I'm sorry," Jamie said again. There was nothing else to say. Nothing he *could* say, for the tightening in his throat. He looked hastily down, knowing that it would upset Fergus to see him weep.

"Ah, milord, do not trouble yourself." There was a note of the old mischief in Fergus's voice. "Me, I have been fortunate."

Jamie swallowed hard before replying.

"Aye, you're alive—and thank God for it!"

"Oh, beyond that, milord!" He glanced up to see Fergus smiling, though still very pale. "Do you not recall our agreement, milord?"

"Agreement?"

"Yes, when you took me into your service in Paris. You told me then that should I be arrested and executed, you would have Masses said for my soul for the space of a year." The remaining hand fluttered toward the battered greenish medal that hung about his neck—St. Dismas, patron saint of thieves. "But if I should lose an ear or a hand while doing your service—"

"I would support you for the rest of your life." Jamie was unsure whether to laugh or cry, and contented himself with patting the hand that now lay quiet on the quilt. "Aye, I remember. You may trust me to keep the bargain."

"Oh, I have always trusted you, milord," Fergus assured him. Clearly he was growing tired; the pale cheeks were even whiter than they had been, and the shock of black hair fell back against the pillow. "So I am fortunate," he murmured, still smiling. "For in one stroke, I am become a gentleman of leisure, *non*?"

* * *

Jenny was waiting for him when he left Fergus's room.

"Come down to the priest hole wi' me," he said, taking her by the elbow. "I need to talk wi' ye a bit, and I shouldna stay in the open longer."

She followed him without comment, down to the stone-floored back hall that separated kitchen and pantry. Set into the flags of the floor was a large wooden panel, perforated with drilled holes, apparently mortared into the floorstones. Theoretically, this gave air to the root cellar below, and in fact—should any suspicious person choose to investigate, the root cellar, reached by a sunken door outside the house, did have just such a panel set into its ceiling.

What was not apparent was that the panel also gave light and air to a small priest hole that had been built just behind the root cellar, which could be reached by pulling up the panel, mortared frame and all, to reveal a short ladder leading down into the tiny room.

It was no more than five feet square, equipped with nothing in the way of furniture beyond a rude bench, a blanket, and a chamber pot. A large jug of water and a small box of hard biscuit completed the chamber's accoutrements. It had in fact been added to the house only within the last few years, and therefore was not really a priest hole, as no priest had occupied it or was likely to. A hole it definitely was, though.

Two people could occupy the hole only by sitting side by side on the bench, and Jamie sat down beside his sister as soon as he had replaced the panel overhead and descended the ladder. He sat still for a moment, then took a breath and started.

"I canna bear it anymore," he said. He spoke so softly that Jenny was forced to bend her head close to hear him, like a priest receiving some penitent's confession. "I can't. I must go."

They sat so close together that he could feel the rise and fall of her breast as she breathed. Then she reached out and took hold of his hand, her small firm fingers tight on his.

"Will ye try France again, then?" He had tried to escape to France twice before, thwarted each time by the tight watch the English placed on all ports. No disguise was sufficient for a man of his remarkable height and coloring.

He shook his head. "No. I shall let myself be captured."

"Jamie!" In her agitation, Jenny allowed her voice to rise momentarily, then lowered it again in response to the warning squeeze of his hand.

"Jamie, ye canna do that!" she said, lower. "Christ, man, ye'll be hangit!"

He kept his head bent as though in thought, but shook it, not hesitating.

"I think not." He glanced at his sister, then quickly away. "Claire—she had the Sight." As good an explanation as any, he thought, if not quite the real truth. "She saw what would happen at Culloden—she knew. And she told me what would come after."

"Ah," said Jenny softly. "I wondered. So that was why she bade me plant potatoes—and build this place."

"Aye." He gave his sister's hand a small squeeze, then let go and turned slightly on the narrow seat to face her. "She told me that the Crown would go on hunting Jacobite traitors for some time—and they have," he added wryly. "But that after the first few years, they would no longer execute the men that were captured—only imprison them."

"Only!" his sister echoed. "If ye mun go, Jamie, take to the heather then, but to give yourself up to an English prison, whether they'll hang ye or no—"

"Wait." His hand on her arm stopped her. "I havena told it all to ye yet. I dinna mean just to walk up to the English and surrender. There's a goodly price on my head, no? Be a shame to let that go to waste, d'ye not think?" He tried to force a smile in his voice; she heard it and glanced sharply up at him.

"Holy Mother," she whispered. "So ye mean to have someone betray ye?"

"Seemingly, aye." He had decided upon the plan, alone in the cave, but it had not seemed quite real until now. "I thought perhaps Joe Fraser would be best for it."

Jenny rubbed her fist hard against her lips. She was quick; he knew she had grasped the plan at once—and all its implications.

"But Jamie," she whispered. "Even if they dinna hang ye outright—and that's the hell of a risk to take—Jamie, ye could be killed when they take ye!"

His shoulders slumped suddenly, under the weight of misery and exhaustion.

"God, Jenny," he said, "d'ye think I care?"

There was a long silence before she answered.

"No, I don't," she said. "And I canna say as I blame ye, either." She paused a moment, to steady her voice. "But I still care." Her fingers gently touched the back of his head, stroking his hair. "So ye'll mind yourself, won't ye, clot-heid?"

The ventilation panel overhead darkened momentarily, and there was the tapping sound of light footsteps. One of the kitchenmaids, on her way to the pantry, perhaps. Then the dim light came back, and he could see Jenny's face once more.

"Aye," he whispered at last. "I'll mind."

* * *

It took more than two months to complete the arrangements. When at last word came, it was full spring.

He sat on his favorite rock, near the cave's entrance, watching the evening stars come out. Even in the worst of the year after Culloden, he had always been able to find a moment of peace at this time of the day. As the daylight faded, it was as though objects became faintly lit from within, so they stood outlined against sky or ground, perfect and sharp in every detail. He could see the shape of a moth, invisible in the light, now limned in the dusk with a triangle of deeper shadow that made it stand out from the trunk it hid upon. In a moment, it would take wing.

He looked out across the valley, trying to stretch his eyes as far as the black pines that edged the distant cliffside. Then up, among the stars. Orion there, striding stately over the horizon. And the Pleiades, barely visible in the darkening sky. It might be his last sight of the sky for some time, and he meant to enjoy it. He thought of prison, of bars and locks and solid walls, and remembered Fort William. Wentworth Prison. The Bastille. Walls of stone, four feet thick, that blocked all air and light. Filth, stench, hunger, entombment …

He shrugged such thoughts away. He had chosen his way, and was satisfied with it. Still, he searched the sky, looking for Taurus. Not the prettiest of constellations, but his own. Born under the sign of the bull, stubborn and strong. Strong enough, he hoped, to do what he intended.

Among the growing night sounds, there was a sharp, high whistle. It might have been the homing song of a curlew on the loch, but he recognized the signal. Someone was coming up the path—a friend.

It was Mary MacNab, who had become kitchenmaid at Lallybroch, after the death of her husband. Usually it was her son Rabbie, or Fergus, who brought him food and news, but she had come a few times before.

She had brought a basket, unusually well-supplied, with a cold roast partridge, fresh bread, several young green onions, a bunch of early cherries, and a flask of ale. Jamie examined the bounty, then looked up with a wry smile.

“My farewell feast, eh?”

She nodded, silent. She was a small woman, dark hair heavily streaked with gray, and her face lined by the difficulties of life. Still, her eyes were soft and brown, and her lips still full and gently curved.

He realized that he was staring at her mouth, and hastily turned again to the basket.

“Lord, I’ll be so full I’ll not be able to move. Even a cake, now! However did ye ladies manage that?”

She shrugged—she wasn’t a great chatterer, Mary MacNab—and taking the basket from him, proceeded to lay the meal on the wooden tabletop, balanced on stones. She laid places for both of them. This was nothing out of the ordinary; she had supped with him before, to give him the gossip of the district while they ate. Still, if this was his last meal before leaving Lallybroch, he was surprised that neither his sister nor the boys had come to share it. Perhaps the farmhouse had visitors that would make it difficult for them to leave undetected.

He gestured politely for her to sit first, before taking his own place, crosslegged on the hard dirt floor.

“Ye’ve spoken wi’ Joe Fraser? Where is it to be, then?” he asked, taking a bite of cold partridge.

She told him the details of the plan; a horse would be brought before dawn, and he would ride out of the narrow valley by way of the pass. Then turn, cross the rocky foothills and come down, back into the valley by Feesyhant’s Burn, as though he were coming home. The English would meet him somewhere between Struy and Eskadale, most likely at Midmains; it was a good place for an ambush, for the glen rose steeply there on both sides, but with a wooded patch by the stream where several men could conceal themselves.

After the meal, she packed the basket tidily, leaving out enough food for a small breakfast before his dawn leaving. He expected her to go then, but she did not. She rummaged in the crevice where he kept his bedding, spread it neatly upon the floor, turned back the blankets and knelt beside the pallet, hands folded on her lap.

He leaned back against the wall of the cave, arms folded. He looked down at the crown of her bowed head in exasperation.

"Oh, like that, is it?" he demanded. "And whose idea was this? Yours, or my sister's?"

"Does it matter?" She was composed, her hands perfectly still on her lap, her dark hair smooth in its snood.

He shook his head and bent down to pull her to her feet.

"No, it doesna matter, because it's no going to happen. I appreciate your meaning, but—"

His speech was interrupted by her kiss. Her lips were as soft as they looked. He grasped her firmly by both wrists and pushed her away from him.

"No!" he said. "It isna necessary, and I dinna want to do it." He was uncomfortably aware that his body did not agree at all with his assessments of necessity, and still more uncomfortable at the knowledge that his breeches, too small and worn thin, made the magnitude of the disagreement obvious to anyone who cared to look. The slight smile curving those full, sweet lips suggested that she was looking.

He turned her toward the entrance and gave her a light push, to which she responded by stepping aside and reaching behind her for the fastenings to her skirt.

"Don't do that!" he exclaimed.

"How d'ye mean to stop me?" she asked, stepping out of the garment and folding it tidily over the single stool. Her slender fingers went to the laces of her bodice.

"If ye won't leave, then I'll have to," he replied with decision. He whirled on his heel and headed for the cave entrance, when he heard her voice behind him.

"My lord!" she said.

He stopped, but did not turn around. "It isna suitable to call me that," he said.

"Lallybroch is yours," she said. "And will be so long as ye live. If ye're its laird, I'll call ye so."

"It isna mine. The estate belongs to Young Jamie."

"It isna Young Jamie that's doing what you are," she answered with decision. "And it isna your sister that's asked me to do what I'm doin'. Turn round."

He turned, reluctantly. She stood barefoot in her shift, her hair loose over her shoulders. She was thin, as they all were these days, but her breasts were larger than he had thought, and the nipples showed prominently through the thin fabric. The shift was as worn as her other garments, frayed at the hem and shoulders, almost transparent in spots. He closed his eyes.

He felt a light touch on his arm, and willed himself to stand still.

"I ken weel enough what ye're thinkin'," she said. "For I saw your lady, and I know how it was between the two of ye. I never had that," she added, in a softer voice, "not wi' either of the two men I wed. But I know the look of a true love, and it's not in my mind to make ye feel ye've betrayed it."

The touch, feather-light, moved to his cheek, and a work-worn thumb traced the groove that ran from nose to mouth.

"What I want," she said quietly, "is to give ye something different. Something less, mayhap, but something ye can use; something to keep ye whole. Your sister and the bairns canna give ye that—but I can." He heard her draw breath, and the touch on his face lifted away.

"Ye've given me my home, my life, and my son. Will ye no let me gi'e ye this small thing in return?"

He felt tears sting his eyelids. The weightless touch moved across his face, wiping the moisture from his eyes, smoothing the roughness of his hair. He lifted his arms, slowly, and reached out. She stepped inside his embrace, as neatly and simply as she had laid the table and the bed.

"I … havena done this in a long time," he said, suddenly shy.

“Neither have I,” she said, with a tiny smile. “But we’ll remember how ’tis.”

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PART THREE

When I Am Thy Captive

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7

A FAITH IN DOCUMENTS

Inverness
May 25, 1968

The envelope from Linklater arrived in the morning post.

"Look how fat it is!" Brianna exclaimed. "He's sent something!" The tip of her nose was pink with excitement.

"Looks like it," said Roger. He was outwardly calm, but I could see the pulse beating in the hollow of his throat. He picked up the thick manila envelope and held it for a moment, weighing it. Then he ripped the flap recklessly with his thumb, and yanked out a sheaf of photocopied pages.

The cover letter, on heavy university stationery, fluttered out. I snatched it from the floor and read it aloud, my voice shaking a little.

" *'Dear Dr. Wakefield,'* " I read. " *'This is in reply to your inquiry regarding the execution of Jacobite officers by the Duke of Cumberland's troops following the Battle of Culloden. The main source of the quote in my book to which you refer, was the private journal of one Lord Melton, in command of an infantry regiment under Cumberland at the time of Culloden. I have enclosed photocopies of the relevant pages of the journal; as you will see, the story of the survivor, one James Fraser, is an odd and touching one. Fraser is not an important historical character, and not in line with the thrust of my own work, but I have often thought of investigating further, in hopes of determining his eventual fate. Should you find that he did survive the journey to his own estate, I should be* *happy if you would inform me. I have always rather hoped that he did, though his situation as described by Melton makes the possibility seem unlikely. Sincerely yours, Eric Linklater.' "*

The paper rattled in my hand, and I set it down, very carefully, on the desk.

"Unlikely, huh?" Brianna said, standing on tiptoe to see over Roger's shoulder. "Ha! He *did* make it back, we know he did!"

"We think he did," Roger corrected, but it was only scholarly caution; his grin was as broad as Brianna's.

"Will ye be havin' tea or cocoa to your elevenses?" Fiona's curly dark head poked through the study doorway, interrupting the excitement. "There's fresh ginger-nut biscuits, just baked." The scent of warm ginger came into the study with her, wafting enticingly from her apron.

"Tea, please," said Roger, just as Brianna said, "Oh, cocoa sounds great!" Fiona, wearing a smug expression, pushed in the tea cart, sporting both tea cozy and pot of cocoa, as well as a plate of fresh ginger-nut biscuits.

I accepted a cup of tea myself, and sat down in the wing chair with the pages of Melton's journal. The flowing eighteenth-century handwriting was surprisingly clear, in spite of the archaic spelling, and within minutes, I was in the confines of Leanach farmhouse, imagining the sound of buzzing flies, the stir of close-packed bodies, and the harsh smell of blood soaking into the packed-dirt floor.

" … in satisfaction of my brother's debt of honor, I could not do otherwise than to spare Fraser's life. I therefore omitted his name from the list of traitors executed at the farmhouse, and have made arrangement for his transport to his own estate. I cannot feel myself either altogether merciful toward Fraser in the taking of this action, nor yet altogether culpable with respect to my service toward the Duke, as Fraser's situation, with a great wound in his leg festering and pustulent, makes it unlikely that he will survive the journey to his home. Still, honor prevents my acting otherwise, and I will confess that my spirit was lightened to see the man removed, still living, from the field, as I turned my own attentions to the melancholy task of disposing of the bodies of

his comrades. So much killing as I have seen these last two days oppresses me," the entry ended simply.

I laid the pages down on my knee, swallowing heavily. *"A great wound … festering and pustulent …"* I knew, as Roger and Brianna could not, just how serious such a wound would have been, with no antibiotics, nothing in the way of proper medical treatment; not even the crude herbal poultices available to a Highland charmer at the time. How long would it have taken, jolting from Culloden to Broch Tuarach in a wagon? Two days? Three? How could he have lived, in such a state, and neglected for so long?

"He did, though." Brianna's voice broke in upon my thoughts, answering what seemed to be a similar thought expressed by Roger. She spoke with simple assurance, as though she had seen all the events described in Melton's journal, and were sure of their outcome. "He did get back. He was the Dunbonnet, I know it."

"The Dunbonnet?" Fiona, tut-tutting over my cold cup of undrunk tea, looked over her shoulder in surprise. "Heard of the Dunbonnet, have ye?"

"Have *you*?" Roger looked at the young housekeeper in astonishment.

She nodded, casually dumping my tea into the aspidistra that stood by the hearth and refilling my cup with fresh steaming brew.

"Oh, aye. My grannie tellt me that tale, often and often."

"Tell us!" Brianna leaned forward, intent, her cocoa cupped between her palms. "Please, Fiona! What's the story?"

Fiona seemed mildly surprised to find herself suddenly the center of so much attention, but shrugged good-naturedly.

"Och, it's just the story of one o' the followers o' the Bonnie Prince. When there was the great defeat at Culloden, and sae many were killed, a few escaped. Why, one man fled the field and swam the river to get away, but the Redcoats were after him, nonetheless. He came to a kirk along his way, and a service going on inside, and he dashing in, prayed mercy from the minister. The minister and the people took pity on him, and he put on the minister's robe, so when the Redcoats burst in moments later, there he was, standing at the pulpit, preachin' the sermon, and the water from his beard and clothes puddled up about his feet. The Redcoats thought they were mistaken, and went on down the road, and so he escaped—and everyone in the kirk said ’twas the best sermon they ever heard!" Fiona laughed heartily, while Brianna frowned, and Roger looked puzzled.

"That was the Dunbonnet?" he said. "But I thought—"

"Och, no!" she assured him. "That was no the Dunbonnet—only the Dunbonnet was another o’ the men who got away from Culloden. He came back to his own estate, but because the Sassenachs were hunting men all across the Highlands, he lay hidden there in a cave for seven years."

Hearing this, Brianna slumped back in her chair with a sigh of relief. "And his tenants called him the Dunbonnet so as not to speak his name and betray him," she murmured.

"Ye ken the story?" Fiona asked, astonished. "Aye, that’s right."

"And did your grannie say what happened to him after that?" Roger prompted.

"Oh, aye!" Fiona’s eyes were round as butterscotch drops. "That’s the best part o’ the story. See, there was a great famine after Culloden; folk were starvin’ in the glens, turned out of their houses in winter, the men shot and the cots set afire. The Dunbonnet’s tenants managed better than most, but even so, there came a day when the food ran out, and their bellies garbeled from dawn ’til dark—no game in the forest, nay grain in the field, and the weans dyin’ in their mothers’ arms for lack o’ milk to feed them."

A cold chill swept over me at her words. I saw the faces of the Lallybroch inhabitants—the people I had known and loved—pinched with cold and starvation. Not only horror filled me; there was guilt, too. I had been safe, warm, and well-fed, instead of sharing their fate—because I had done as Jamie wanted, and left them. I looked at Brianna, smooth red head bent in absorption, and the tight feeling in my chest eased a bit. She too had been safe for these past years, warm, well-fed, and loved—because I had done as Jamie wanted.

"So he made a bold plan, the Dunbonnet did," Fiona was continuing. Her round face was alight with the drama of her tale.

"He arranged that one of his tenants should go to the English, and offer to betray him. There was a good price on his head, for he'd been a great warrior for the Prince. The tenant would take the gold o' the reward—to use for the folk on the estate, o' course—and tell the English where the Dunbonnet might be taken."

My hand clenched so convulsively at this that the delicate handle of my teacup snapped clean off.

"Taken?" I croaked, my voice hoarse with shock. "Did they hang him?"

Fiona blinked at me in surprise. "Why, no," she said. "They wanted to, my grannie said, and took him to trial for treason, but in the end, they shut him up in a prison instead—but the gold went to his tenants, and so they lived through the famine," she ended cheerfully, obviously regarding this as the happy ending.

"Jesus Christ," Roger breathed. He set his cup down carefully, and sat staring into space, transfixed. "Prison."

"You sound like that's *good,*" Brianna protested. The corners of her mouth were tight with distress, and her eyes slightly shiny.

"It is," Roger said, not noticing her distress. "There weren't that many prisons where the English imprisoned Jacobite traitors, and they all kept official records. Don't you see?" he demanded, looking from Fiona's bewilderment to Brianna's scowl, then settling on me in hope of finding understanding. "If he went to prison, I can find him." He turned then, to look up at the towering shelves of books that lined three walls of the study, holding the late Reverend Wakefield's collection of Jacobite arcana.

"He's in there," Roger said softly. "On a prison roll. In a document—real evidence! Don't you see?" he demanded again, turning back to me. "Going to prison made him a part of written history again! And somewhere in there, we'll find him!"

"And what happened to him then," Brianna breathed. "When he was released."

Roger's lips pressed tight together, to cut off the alternative that sprang to his mind, as it had to mine—"or died."

"Yes, that's right," he said, taking Brianna's hand. His eyes met mine, deep green and unfathomable. "When he was released."

A week later, Roger's faith in documents remained unshaken. The same could not be said for the eighteenth-century table in the late Reverend Wakefield's study, whose spindly legs wobbled and creaked alarmingly beneath their unaccustomed burden.

This table normally was asked to accommodate no more than a small lamp, and a collection of the Reverend's smaller artifacts; it was pressed into service now only because every other horizontal surface in the study already overflowed with papers, journals, books, and bulging manila envelopes from antiquarian societies, universities, and research libraries across England, Scotland, and Ireland.

"If you set one more page on that thing, it's going to collapse," Claire observed, as Roger carelessly reached out, meaning to drop the folder he was carrying on the little inlaid table.

"Ah? Oh, right." He switched direction in midair, looked vainly for another place to put the folder, and finally settled for placing it on the floor at his feet.

"I've just about finished with Wentworth," Claire said. She indicated a precarious stack on the floor with her toe. "Have we got in the records for Berwick yet?"

"Yes, just this morning. Where did I put them, though?" Roger stared vaguely about the room, which strongly resembled the sacking of the library at Alexandria, just before the first torch was lit. He rubbed his forehead, trying to concentrate. After a week of spending ten-hour days thumbing the handwritten registers of British prisons, and the letters, journals, and diaries of their governors, searching for any official trace of Jamie Fraser, Roger was beginning to feel as though his eyes had been sandpapered.

"It was blue," he said at last. "I distinctly remember it was blue. I got those from McAllister, the History Lecturer at Trinity at Cambridge, and Trinity College uses those big envelopes in pale blue, with the college's coat of arms on the front. Maybe Fiona's seen it. Fiona!"

He stepped to the study door and called down the hall toward the kitchen. Despite the lateness of the hour, the light was still on, and the heartening scent of cocoa and freshly baked almond cake lingered in the air. Fiona would never abandon her post while there was the faintest possibility that someone in her vicinity might require nourishment.

"Och, aye?" Fiona's curly brown head poked out of the kitchen. "There'll be cocoa ready directly," she assured him. "I'm only waiting for the cake to be out of the oven."

Roger smiled at her with deep affection. Fiona had not the slightest use herself for history—never read anything beyond *My Weekly* magazine—but she never questioned his activities, tranquilly dusting the heaps of books and papers daily, without bothering about their contents.

"Thanks, Fiona," he said. "I was only wondering, though; have you seen a big blue envelope—a fat one, about so?" He measured with his hands. "It came in the morning post, but I've misplaced it."

"Ye left it in the upstairs bath," she said promptly. "There's that great thick book wi' the gold writing and the picture of the Bonnie Prince on the front up there, and three letters ye'd just opened, and there's the gas bill, too, which ye dinna want to be forgetting, it's due on the fourteenth o' the month. I've put it all on the top of the geyser, so as to be out of the way." A tiny, sharp ding from the oven timer made her withdraw her head abruptly with a smothered exclamation.

Roger turned and went up the stairs two at a time, smiling. Given other inclinations, Fiona's memory might have made her a scholar. As it was, she was no mean research assistant. So long as a particular document or book could be described on the basis of its appearance, rather than its title or contents, Fiona was bound to know exactly where it was.

"Och, it's nothing," she had assured Roger airily, when he had tried to apologize earlier for the mess he was making of the house. "Ye'd think the Reverend was still alive, wi' such a moil of papers strewn everywhere. It's just like old times, no?"

Coming down more slowly, with the blue envelope in his hands, he wondered what his late adoptive father might have thought of this present quest.

"In it up to the eyebrows, I shouldn't wonder," he murmured to himself. He had a vivid memory of the Reverend, bald head gleaming under the old-fashioned bowl lamps that hung from the hall ceiling, as he pottered from his study to the kitchen, where old Mrs. Graham, Fiona's grandmother, would have been manning the stove, supplying the old man's bodily needs during bouts of late-night scholarship, just as Fiona was now doing for him.

It made one wonder, he thought, as he went into the study. In the old days, when a man's son usually followed his father's profession, was that only a matter of convenience—wanting to keep the business in the family—or was there some sort of family predisposition for some kinds of work? Were some people actually born to be smiths, or merchants, or cooks—born to an inclination and an aptitude, as well as to the opportunity?

Clearly it didn't apply to everyone; there were always the people who left their homes, went a-wandering, tried things hitherto unknown in their family circles. If that weren't so, probably there would be no inventors, no explorers; still, there seemed to be a certain affinity for some careers in some families, even in these restless modern times of widespread education and easy travel.

What he was really wondering about, he thought to himself, was Brianna. He watched Claire, her curly gold-shot head bent over the desk, and found himself wondering how much Brianna would be like her, and how much like the shadowy Scot—warrior, farmer, courtier, laird—who had been her father?

His thoughts were still running on such lines a quarter-hour later, when Claire closed the last folder on her stack and sat back, sighing.

"Penny for your thoughts?" she asked, reaching for her drink.

"Not worth that much," Roger replied with a smile, coming out of his reverie. "I was only wondering how people come to be what they are. How did you come to be a doctor, for instance?"

"How did I come to be a doctor?" Claire inhaled the steam from her cup of cocoa, decided it was too hot to drink, and set it back on the desk, among the litter of books and journals and pencil-scribbled sheets of paper. She gave Roger a half-smile and rubbed her hands together, dispersing the warmth of the cup.

"How did you come to be a historian?"

"More or less honestly," he answered, leaning back in the Reverend's chair and waving at the accumulation of papers and trivia all around them. He patted a small gilt traveling clock that sat on the desk, an elegant bit of eighteenth-century workmanship, with miniature chimes that struck the hour, the quarter, and the half.

"I grew up in the midst of it all; I was ferreting round the Highlands in search of artifacts with my father from the time I could read. I suppose it just seemed natural to keep doing it. But you?"

She nodded and stretched, easing her shoulders from the long hours of stooping over the desk. Brianna, unable to stay awake, had given up and gone to bed an hour before, but Claire and Roger had gone on with their search through the administrative records of British prisons.

"Well, it was something like that for me," she said. "It wasn't so much that I suddenly decided I must become a doctor—it was just that I suddenly realized one day that I'd *been* one for a long time—and then I wasn't, and I missed it."

She spread her hands out on the desk and flexed her fingers, long and supple, the nails buffed into neat, shiny ovals.

"There used to be an old song from the First World War," she said reflectively. "I used to hear it sometimes when some of Uncle Lamb's old army friends would come round and stay up late and get drunk. It went, 'How You Gonna Keep 'em Down on the Farm, After They've Seen Paree?' " She sang the first line, then broke off with a wry smile.

"I'd seen Paree," she said softly. She looked up from her hands, alert and present, but with the traces of memory in her eyes, fixed on Roger with the clarity of a second sight. "And a lot of other things besides. Caen and Amiens, Preston, and Falkirk, the Hôpital des Anges and the so-called surgery at Leoch. I'd *been* a doctor, in every way there is—I'd delivered babies, set bones, stitched wounds, treated fevers …" She trailed off, and shrugged. "There was a terrible lot I didn't know, of course. I knew how much I could learn—and that's why I went to medical school. But it didn't really make a difference, you know." She dipped a finger into the whipped cream floating on her cocoa, and licked it off. “I have a diploma with an M.D. on it—but I was a doctor long before I set foot in medical school.”

“It can’t possibly have been as easy as you make it sound.” Roger blew on his own cocoa, studying Claire with open interest. “There weren’t many women in medicine then—there aren’t that many women doctors *now*, come to that—and you had a family, besides.”

“No, I can’t say it was easy at all.” Claire looked at him quizzically. “I waited until Brianna was in school, of course, and we had enough money to afford someone to come in to cook and clean—but …” She shrugged and smiled ironically. “I stopped sleeping for several years, there. That helped a bit. And oddly enough, Frank helped, too.”

Roger tested his own cup and found it almost cool enough to drink. He held it between his hands, enjoying the heat of the thick white porcelain seeping into his palms. Early June it might be, but the nights were cool enough to make the electric fire still a necessity.

“Really?” he said curiously. “Only from the things you’ve said about him, I shouldn’t have thought he’d have liked your wanting to go to medical school or be a doctor.”

“He didn’t.” Her lips pressed tight together; the motion told Roger more than words might, recalling arguments, conversations half-finished and abandoned, an opposition of stubbornness and devious obstruction rather than of open disapproval.

What a remarkably expressive face she had, he thought, watching her. He wondered quite suddenly whether his own were as easily readable. The thought was so unsettling that he dipped his face into his mug, gulping the cocoa, although it was still a bit too hot.

He emerged from the cup to find Claire watching him, slightly sardonic.

“Why?” he asked quickly, to distract her. “What made him change his mind?”

“Bree,” she said, and her face softened as it always did at the mention of her daughter. “Bree was the only thing really important to Frank.”

I had, as I'd said, waited until Brianna began school before beginning medical school myself. But even so, there was a large gap between her hours and my own, which we filled haphazardly with a series of more or less competent housekeepers and baby-sitters; some more, most of them less.

My mind went back to the frightful day when I had gotten a call at the hospital, telling me that Brianna was hurt. I had dashed out of the place, not pausing to change out of the green linen scrub-suit I was wearing, and raced for home, ignoring all speed limits, to find a police car and an ambulance lighting the night with blood-red pulses, and a knot of interested neighbors clustered on the street outside.

As we pieced the story together later, what had happened was that the latest temporary sitter, annoyed at my being late yet again, had simply put on her coat at quitting time and left, abandoning seven-year-old Brianna with instructions to "wait for Mommy." This she had obediently done, for an hour or so. But as it began to get dark, she had become frightened in the house alone, and determined to go out and find me. Making her way across one of the busy streets near our house, she had been struck by a car turning into the street.

She wasn't—thank God!—hurt badly; the car had been moving slowly, and she had only been shaken and bruised by the experience. Not nearly as shaken as I was, for that matter. Nor as bruised, when I came into the living room to find her lying on the sofa, and she looked at me, tears welling afresh on her stained cheeks and said, "Mommy! Where were you? I couldn't find you!"

It had taken just about all my reserves of professional composure to comfort her, to check her over, re-tend her cuts and scrapes, thank her rescuers—who, to my fevered mind, all glared accusingly at me—and put her to bed with her teddy bear clutched securely in her arms. Then I sat down at the kitchen table and cried myself.

Frank patted me awkwardly, murmuring, but then gave it up, and with more practicality, went to make tea.

"I've decided," I said, when he set the steaming cup in front of me. I spoke dully, my head feeling thick and clogged. "I'll resign. I'll

do it tomorrow.”

“Resign?” Frank’s voice was sharp with astonishment. “From the school? What for?”

“I can’t stand it anymore.” I never took cream or sugar in my tea. Now I added both, stirring and watching the milky tendrils swirl through the cup. “I can’t stand leaving Bree, and not knowing if she’s well cared for—and knowing she isn’t happy. You know she doesn’t really like any of the sitters we’ve tried.”

“I know that, yes.” He sat opposite me, stirring his own tea. After a long moment, he said, “But I don’t think you should resign.”

It was the last thing I had expected; I had thought he would greet my decision with relieved applause. I stared at him in astonishment, then blew my nose yet again on the wadded tissue from my pocket.

“You don’t?”

“Ah, Claire.” He spoke impatiently, but with a tinge of affection nonetheless. “You’ve known forever who you are. Do you realize at all how unusual it is to know that?”

“No.” I wiped my nose with the shredding tissue, dabbing carefully to keep it in one piece.

Frank leaned back in his chair, shaking his head as he looked at me.

“No, I suppose not,” he said. He was quiet for a minute, looking down at his folded hands. They were long-fingered, narrow; smooth and hairless as a girl’s. Elegant hands, made for casual gestures and the emphasis of speech.

He stretched them out on the table and looked at them as though he’d never seen them before.

“I haven’t got that,” he said quietly at last. “I’m good, all right. At what I do—the teaching, the writing. Bloody splendid sometimes, in fact. And I like it a good bit, enjoy what I do. But the thing is—” He hesitated, then looked at me straight on, hazel-eyed and earnest. “I could do something else, and be as good. Care as much, or as little. I haven’t got that absolute conviction that there’s something in life I’m meant to do—and you have.”

“Is that good?” The edges of my nostrils were sore, and my eyes puffed from crying.

He laughed shortly. "It's damned inconvenient, Claire. To you and me and Bree, all three. But my God, I do envy you sometimes."

He reached out for my hand, and after a moment's hesitation, I let him have it.

"To have that passion for anything"—a small twitch tugged the corner of his mouth—"or anyone. That's quite splendid, Claire, and quite terribly rare." He squeezed my hand gently and let it go, turning to reach behind him for one of the books on the shelf beside the table.

It was one of his references, Woodhill's Patriots, a series of profiles of the American Founding Fathers.

He laid his hand on the cover of the book, gently, as though reluctant to disturb the rest of the sleeping lives interred there.

"These were people like that. The ones who cared so terribly much—enough to risk everything, enough to change and do things. Most people aren't like that, you know. It isn't that they don't care, but that they don't care so greatly." He took my hand again, this time turning it over. One finger traced the lines that webbed my palm, tickling as it went.

"Is it there, I wonder?" he said, smiling a little. "Are some people destined for a great fate, or to do great things? Or is it only that they're born somehow with that great passion—and if they find themselves in the right circumstances, then things happen? It's the sort of thing you wonder, studying history … but there's no way of telling, really. All we know is what they accomplished.

"But Claire—" His eyes held a definite note of warning, as he tapped the cover of his book. "They paid for it," he said.

"I know." I felt very remote now, as though I were watching us from a distance; I could see it quite clearly in my mind's eye; Frank, handsome, lean, and a little tired, going beautifully gray at the temples. Me, grubby in my surgical scrubs, my hair coming down, the front of my shirt crumpled and stained with Brianna's tears.

We sat in silence for some time, my hand still resting in Frank's. I could see the mysterious lines and valleys, clear as a road map—but a road to what unknown destination?

I had had my palm read once years before, by an old Scottish lady named Graham—Fiona's grandmother, in fact. "The lines in your hand change as you change," she had said. "It's no so much what you're born with, as what ye make of yourself."

And what had I made of myself, what was I making? A mess, that was what. Neither a good mother, nor a good wife, nor a good doctor. A mess. Once I had thought I was whole—had seemed to be able to love a man, to bear a child, to heal the sick—and know that all these things were natural parts of me, not the difficult, troubled fragments into which my life had now disintegrated. But that had been in the past, the man I had loved was Jamie, and for a time, I had been part of something greater than myself.

"I'll take Bree."

I was so deep in miserable thought that for a moment, Frank's words didn't register, and I stared at him stupidly.

"What did you say?"

"I said," he repeated patiently, "that I'll take Bree. She can come from her school to the university, and play at my office until I'm ready to come home."

I rubbed my nose. "I thought you didn't think it appropriate for staff to bring their children to work." He had been quite critical of Mrs. Clancy, one of the secretaries, who had brought her grandson to work for a month when his mother was sick.

He shrugged, looking uncomfortable.

"Well, circumstances alter cases. And Brianna's not likely to be running up and down the halls shrieking and spilling ink like Bart Clancy."

"I wouldn't bet my life on it," I said wryly. "But you'd do that?" A small feeling was growing in the pit of my clenched stomach; a cautious, unbelieving feeling of relief. I might not trust Frank to be faithful to me—I knew quite well he wasn't—but I did trust him unequivocally to care for Bree.

Suddenly the worry was removed. I needn't hurry home from the hospital, filled with dread because I was late, hating the thought of finding Brianna crouched in her room sulking because she didn't like *the current sitter. She loved Frank; I knew she would be ecstatic at the thought of going to his office every day.*

"Why?" I asked bluntly. "It isn't that you're dead keen on my being a doctor; I know that."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "It isn't that. But I do think there isn't any way to stop you—perhaps the best I can do is to help, so that there will be less damage to Brianna." His features hardened slightly then, and he turned away.

"So far as he ever felt he had a destiny—something he was really meant to do—he felt that Brianna was it," Claire said. She stirred her cocoa meditatively.

"Why do you care, Roger?" she asked him suddenly. "Why are you asking me?"

He took a moment to answer, slowly sipping his cocoa. It was rich and dark, made with new cream and a sprinkle of brown sugar. Fiona, always a realist, had taken one look at Brianna and given up her attempts to lure Roger into matrimony via his stomach, but Fiona was a cook the same way Claire was a doctor; born to skill, and unable not to use it.

"Because I'm a historian, I suppose," he answered finally. He watched her over the rim of his cup. "I need to know. What people really did, and why they did it."

"And you think I can tell you that?" She glanced sharply at him. "Or that I know?"

He nodded, sipping. "You know, better than most people. Most of a historian's sources haven't your"—he paused and gave her a grin—"your unique perspective, shall we say?"

There was a sudden lessening of tension. She laughed and picked up her own cup. "We shall say that," she agreed.

"The other thing," he went on, watching her closely, "is that you're honest. I don't think you *could* lie, even if you wanted to."

She glanced at him sharply, and gave a short, dry laugh.

"Everyone can lie, young Roger, given cause enough. Even me. It's only that it's harder for those of us who live in glass faces; we have to think up our lies ahead of time."

She bent her head and shuffled through the papers before her, turning the pages over slowly, one by one. They were lists of names, these sheets, lists of prisoners, copied from the ledger books of British prisons. The task was complicated by the fact that not all prisons had been well-run.

Some governors kept no official lists of their inmates, or listed them haphazardly in their journals, in among the notations of daily expenditure and maintenance, making no great distinction between the death of a prisoner and the slaughter of two bullocks, salted for meat.

Roger thought Claire had abandoned the conversation, but a moment later she looked up again.

"You're quite right, though," she said. "I'm honest—from default, more than anything. It isn't easy for me *not* to say what I'm thinking. I imagine you see it because you're the same way."

"Am I?" Roger felt absurdly pleased, as though someone had given him an unexpected present.

Claire nodded, a small smile on her lips as she watched him.

"Oh, yes. It's unmistakable, you know. There aren't many people like that—who will tell you the truth about themselves and anything else right out. I've only met three people like that, I think—four now," she said, her smile widening to warm him.

"There was Jamie, of course." Her long fingers rested lightly on the stack of papers, almost caressing in their touch. "Master Raymond, the apothecary I knew in Paris. And a friend I met in medical school—Joe Abernathy. Now you. I think."

She tilted her cup and swallowed the last of the rich brown liquid. She set it down and looked directly at Roger.

"Frank was right, in a way, though. It isn't necessarily easier if you know what it is you're meant to do—but at least you don't waste time in questioning or doubting. If you're honest—well, that isn't necessarily easier, either. Though I suppose if you're honest with yourself and know what you are, at least you're less likely to feel that you've wasted your life, doing the wrong thing."

She set aside the stack of papers and drew up another—a set of folders with the characteristic logo of the British Museum on the covers.

“Jamie had that,” she said softly, as though to herself. “He wasn’t a man to turn away from anything he thought his job. Dangerous or not. And I think he won’t have felt himself wasted—no matter what happened to him.”

She lapsed into silence, then, absorbed in the spidery tracings of some long-dead writer, looking for the entry that might tell her what Jamie Fraser had done and been, and whether his life had been wasted in a prison cell, or ended in a lonely dungeon.

The clock on the desk struck midnight, its chimes surprisingly deep and melodious for such a small instrument. The quarter-hour struck, and then the half, punctuating the monotonous rustle of pages. Roger put down the sheaf of flimsy papers he had been thumbing through, and yawned deeply, not troubling to cover his mouth.

“I’m so tired I’m seeing double,” he said. “Shall we go on with it in the morning?”

Claire didn’t answer for a moment; she was looking into the glowing bars of the electric fire, a look of unutterable distance on her face. Roger repeated his question, and slowly she came back from wherever she was.

“No,” she said. She reached for another folder, and smiled at Roger, the look of distance lingering in her eyes. “You go on, Roger,” she said. “I’ll—just look a little longer.”

* * *

When I finally found it, I nearly flipped right past it. I had not been reading the names carefully, but only skimming the pages for the letter “J.” “John, Joseph, Jacques, James.” There were James Edward, James Alan, James Walter, ad infinitum. Then it was there, the writing small and precise across the page: “Jms. MacKenzie Fraser, of Brock Turac.”

I put the page down carefully on the table, shut my eyes for a moment to clear them, then looked again. It was still there.

“Jamie,” I said aloud. My heart was beating heavily in my chest. “Jamie,” I said again, more quietly.

It was nearly three o'clock in the morning. Everyone was asleep, but the house, in the manner of old houses, was still awake around me, creaking and sighing, keeping me company. Strangely enough, I had no desire to leap up and wake Brianna or Roger, to tell them the news. I wanted to keep it to myself for a bit, as though I were alone here in the lamp-lit room with Jamie himself.

My finger traced the line of ink. The person who had written that line had seen Jamie—perhaps had written this with Jamie standing in front of him. The date at the top of the page was May 16, 1753. It had been close to this time of year, then. I could imagine how the air had been, chilly and fresh, with the rare spring sun across his shoulders, lighting sparks in his hair.

How had he worn his hair then—short, or long? He had preferred to wear it long, plaited or tailed behind. I remembered the casual gesture with which he would lift the weight of it off his neck to cool himself in the heat of exercise.

He would not have worn his kilt—the wearing of all tartans had been outlawed after Culloden. Breeks, then, likely, and a linen shirt. I had made such sarks for him; I could feel the softness of the fabric in memory, the billowing length of the three full yards it took to make one, the long tails and full sleeves that let the Highland men drop their plaids and sleep or fight with a sark their only garment. I could imagine his shoulders broad beneath the rough-woven cloth, his skin warm through it, hands touched with the chill of the Scottish spring.

He had been imprisoned before. How would he have looked, facing an English prison clerk, knowing all too well what waited for him? Grim as hell, I thought, staring down that long, straight nose with his eyes a cold, dark blue—dark and forbidding as the waters of Loch Ness.

I opened my own eyes, realizing only then that I was sitting on the edge of my chair, the folder of photocopied pages clasped tight to my chest, so caught up in my conjuration that I had not even paid attention to which prison these registers had come from.

There were several large prisons that the English had used regularly in the eighteenth century, and a number of minor ones. I turned the folder over, slowly. Would it be Berwick, near the border? The notorious Tolbooth of Edinburgh? Or one of the southern prisons, Leeds Castle or even the Tower of London?

"Ardsmuir," said the notecard neatly stapled to the front of the folder.

"Ardsmuir?" I said blankly. "Where the hell is *that*?"

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8

HONOR'S PRISONER

Ardsmuir, Scotland
February 15, 1755

"Ardsmuir is the carbuncle on God's bum," Colonel Harry Quarry said. He raised his glass sardonically to the young man by the window. "I've been here a twelvemonth, and that's eleven months and twenty-nine days too long. Give you joy of your new posting, my Lord."

Major John William Grey turned from the window over the courtyard, where he had been surveying his new domain.

"It does appear a trifle incommodious," he agreed dryly, picking up his own glass. "Does it rain *all* the time?"

"Of course. It's Scotland—and the backside of bloody Scotland, at that." Quarry took a deep pull at his whisky, coughed, and exhaled noisily as he set down the empty glass.

"The drink is the only compensation," he said, a trifle hoarsely. "Call on the local booze-merchants in your best uniform, and they'll make you a decent price. It's astounding cheap, without the tariff. I've left you a note of the best stills." He nodded toward the massive oaken desk at the side of the room, planted four-square on its island of carpet like a small fortress confronting the barren room. The illusion of fortifications was enhanced by the banners of regiment and nation that hung from the stone wall behind it.

"The guards' roster is here," Quarry said, rising and groping in the top desk drawer. He slapped a battered leather folder on the desktop, and added another on top of that. “And the prisoners’ roll. You have one hundred and ninety-six at the moment; two hundred is the usual count, give or take a few deaths from sickness or the odd poacher taken up in the countryside.”

“Two hundred,” Grey said. “And how many in the guards’ barracks?”

“Eighty-two, by number. In use, about half that.” Quarry reached into the drawer again and withdrew a brown glass bottle with a cork. He shook it, heard it slosh, and smiled sardonically. “The commander isn’t the only one to find consolation in drink. Half the sots are usually incapable at roll call. I’ll leave this for you, shall I? You’ll need it.” He put the bottle back and pulled out the lower drawer.

“Requisitions and copies here; the paperwork’s the worst of the post. Not a great deal to do, really, if you’ve a decent clerk. You haven’t, at the moment; I had a corporal who wrote a fairish hand, but he died two weeks ago. Train up another, and you’ll have nothing to do save to hunt for grouse and the Frenchman’s Gold.” He laughed at his own joke; rumors of the gold that Louis of France had supposedly sent to his cousin Charles Stuart were rife in this end of Scotland.

“The prisoners are not difficult?” Grey asked. “I had understood them to be mostly Jacobite Highlanders.”

“They are. But they’re docile enough.” Quarry paused, looking out of the window. A small line of ragged men was issuing from a door in the forbidding stone wall opposite. “No heart in them after Culloden,” he said matter-of-factly. “Butcher Billy saw to that. And we work them hard enough that they’ve no vigor left for troublemaking.”

Grey nodded. Ardsmuir fortress was undergoing renovation, rather ironically using the labor of the Scots incarcerated therein. He rose and came to join Quarry at the window.

“There’s a work crew going out now, for peat-cutting.” Quarry nodded at the group below. A dozen bearded men, ragged as scarecrows, formed an awkward line before a red-coated soldier, who walked up and down, inspecting them. Evidently satisfied, he shouted an order and jerked a hand toward the outer gate.

The prisoners' crew was accompanied by six armed soldiers, who fell in before and behind, muskets held in marching order, their smart appearance a marked contrast to the ragged Highlanders. The prisoners walked slowly, oblivious to the rain that soaked their rags. A mule-drawn wagon creaked behind, a bundle of peat knives gleaming dully in its bed.

Quarry frowned, counting them. "Some must be ill; a work crew is eighteen men—three prisoners to a guard, because of the knives. Though surprisingly few of them try to run," he added, turning away from the window. "Nowhere to go, I suppose." He left the desk, kicking aside a large woven basket that sat on the hearth, filled with crude chunks of a rough dark-brown substance.

"Leave the window open, even when it's raining," he advised. "The peat smoke will choke you, otherwise." He took a deep breath in illustration and let it out explosively. "God, I'll be glad to get back to London!"

"Not much in the way of local society, I collect?" Grey asked dryly. Quarry laughed, his broad red face creasing in amusement at the notion.

"Society? My dear fellow! Bar one or two passable blowzabellas down in the village, 'society' will consist solely of conversation with your officers—there are four of them, one of whom is capable of speaking without the use of profanity—your orderly, and one prisoner."

"A prisoner?" Grey looked up from the ledgers he had been perusing, one fair brow lifted in inquiry.

"Oh, yes." Quarry was prowling the office restlessly, eager to be off. His carriage was waiting; he had stayed only to brief his replacement and make the formal handover of command. Now he paused, glancing at Grey. One corner of his mouth curled up, enjoying a secret joke.

"You've heard of Red Jamie Fraser, I expect?"

Grey stiffened slightly, but kept his face as unmoved as possible.

"I should imagine most people have," he said coldly. "The man was notorious during the Rising." Quarry had heard the story, damn him! All of it, or only the first part?

Quarry's mouth twitched slightly, but he merely nodded.

"Quite. Well, we have him. He's the only senior Jacobite officer here; the Highlander prisoners treat him as their chief. Consequently, if any matters arise involving the prisoners—and they will, I assure you—he acts as their spokesman." Quarry was in his stockinged feet; now he sat and tugged on long cavalry boots, in preparation for the mud outside.

"*Seumas, mac an fhear dhuibh,* they call him, *or just Mac Dubh.* Speak Gaelic, do you? Neither do I—Grissom does, though; he says it means 'James, son of the Black One.' Half the guards are afraid of him—those that fought with Cope at Prestonpans. Say he's the Devil himself. Poor devil, now!" Quarry gave a brief snort, forcing his foot into the boot. He stamped once, to settle it, and stood up.

"The prisoners obey him without question; but give orders without his putting his seal to them, and you might as well be talking to the stones in the courtyard. Ever had much to do with Scots? Oh, of course; you fought at Culloden with your brother's regiment, didn't you?" Quarry struck his brow at his pretended forgetfulness. Damn the man! He *had* heard it all.

"You'll have an idea, then. Stubborn does not begin to describe it." He flapped a hand in the air as though to dismiss an entire contingent of recalcitrant Scots.

"Which means," Quarry paused, enjoying it, "you'll need Fraser's good-will—or at least his cooperation. I had him take supper with me once a week, to talk things over, and found it answered very well. You might try the same arrangement."

"I suppose I might." Grey's tone was cool, but his hands were clenched tight at his sides. When icicles grew in hell, he might take supper with James Fraser!

"He's an educated man," Quarry continued, eyes bright with malice, fixed on Grey's face. "A great deal more interesting to talk to than the officers. Plays chess. You have a game now and then, do you not?"

"Now and then." The muscles of his abdomen were clenched so tightly that he had trouble drawing breath. Would this bullet-headed fool not stop talking and leave?

"Ah, well, I'll leave you to it." As though divining Grey's wish, Quarry settled his wig more firmly, then took his cloak from the hook by the door and swirled it rakishly about his shoulders. He turned toward the door, hat in hand, then turned back.

"Oh, one thing. If you do dine with Fraser alone—don't turn your back on him." The offensive jocularity had left Quarry's face; Grey scowled at him, but could see no evidence that the warning was meant as a joke.

"I mean it," Quarry said, suddenly serious. "He's in irons, but it's easy to choke a man with the chain. And he's a very large fellow, Fraser."

"I know." To his fury, Grey could feel the blood rising in his cheeks. To hide it, he swung about, letting the cold air from the half-open window play on his countenance. "Surely," he said, to the rain-slick gray stones below, "if he is the intelligent man you say, he would not be so foolish as to attack me in my own quarters, in the midst of the prison? What would be the purpose in it?"

Quarry didn't answer. After a moment, Grey turned around, to find the other staring at him thoughtfully, all trace of humor gone from the broad, ruddy face.

"There's intelligence," Quarry said slowly. "And then there are other things. But perhaps you're too young to have seen hate and despair at close range. There's been a deal of it in Scotland, these last ten years." He tilted his head, surveying the new commander of Ardsmuir from his vantage point of fifteen years' seniority.

Major Grey *was* young, no more than twenty-six, and with a fair-complexioned face and girlish lashes that made him look still younger than his years. To compound the problem, he was an inch or two shorter than the average, and fine-boned, as well. He drew himself up straight.

"I am aware of such things, Colonel," he said evenly. Quarry was a younger son of good family, like himself, but still his superior in rank; he must keep his temper.

Quarry's bright hazel gaze rested on him in speculation.

"I daresay."

With a sudden motion, he clapped his hat on his head. He touched his cheek, where the darker line of a scar sliced across the ruddy skin; a memento of the scandalous duel that had sent him into exile at Ardsmuir.

"God knows what you did to be sent here, Grey," he said, shaking his head. "But for your own sake, I hope you deserved it! Luck to you!" And with a swirl of blue cloak, he was gone.

* * *

"Better the Devil ye ken, than the Devil ye don't," Murdo Lindsay said, shaking his head lugubriously. "Handsome Harry was nain sae bad."

"No, he wasna, then," agreed Kenny Lesley. "But ye'll ha' been here when he came, no? He was a deal better than that shite-face Bogle, aye?"

"Aye," said Murdo, looking blank. "What's your meaning, man?"

"So if Handsome was better than Bogle," Lesley explained patiently, "then Handsome was the Devil we didna ken, and Bogle the one that we did—but Handsome was better, in spite of that, so you're wrong, man."

"I am?" Murdo, hopelessly confused by this bit of reasoning, glowered at Lesley. "No, I'm not!"

"Ye are, then," Lesley said, losing patience. "Ye're always wrong, Murdo! Why d'ye argue, when ye're never in the right of it?"

"I'm no arguin'!" Murdo protested indignantly. "Ye're takin' exception to *me*, not t'other way aboot."

"Only because you're wrong, man!" Lesley said. "If ye were right, I'd have said not a word."

"I'm not wrong! At least I dinna think so," Murdo muttered, unable to recall precisely what he had said. He turned, appealing to the large figure seated in the corner. "Mac Dubh, was I wrong?"

The tall man stretched himself, the chain of his irons chiming faintly as he moved, and laughed.

"No, Murdo, ye're no wrong. But we canna say if ye're right yet awhile. Not 'til we see what the new Devil's like, aye?" Seeing

Lesley's brows draw down in preparation for further dispute, he raised his voice, speaking to the room at large. "Has anyone seen the new Governor yet? Johnson? MacTavish?"

"I have," Hayes said, pushing gladly forward to warm his hands at the fire. There was only one hearth in the large cell, and room for no more than six men before it at a time. The other forty were left in bitter chill, huddling together in small groups for warmth.

Consequently, the agreement was that whoever had a tale to tell or a song to sing might have a place by the hearth, for as long as he spoke. Mac Dubh had said this was a bard-right, that when the bards came to the auld castles, they would be given a warm place and plenty to eat and drink, to the honor of the laird's hospitality. There was never food or drink to spare here, but the warm place was certain.

Hayes relaxed, eyes closed and a beatific smile on his face as he spread his hands to the warmth. Warned by restive movement to either side, though, he hastily opened his eyes and began to speak.

"I saw him when he came in from his carriage, and then again, when I brought up a platter o' sweeties from the kitchens, whilst he and Handsome Harry were nattering to ain another." Hayes frowned in concentration.

"He's fair-haired, wi' long yellow locks tied up wi' blue ribbon. And big eyes and long lashes, too, like a lassie's." Hayes leered at his listeners, batting his own stubby lashes in mock flirtation.

Encouraged by the laughter, he went on to describe the new Governor's clothes—"fine as a laird's"—his equipage and servant—"one of they Sassenachs as talks like he's burnt his tongue"—and as much as had been overheard of the new man's speech.

"He talks sharp and quick, like he'll know what's what," Hayes said, shaking his head dubiously. "But he's verra young, forbye—he looks scarce more than a wean, though I'd reckon he's older than his looks."

"Aye, he's a bittie fellow, smaller than wee Angus," Baird chimed in, with a jerk of the head at Angus MacKenzie, who looked down at himself in startlement. Angus had been twelve when he fought beside his father at Culloden. He had spent nearly half his life in

Ardsmuir, and in consequence of the poor fare of prison, had never grown much bigger.

"Aye," Hayes agreed, "but he carries himself well; shoulders square and a ramrod up his arse."

This gave rise to a burst of laughter and ribald comment, and Hayes gave way to Ogilvie, who knew a long and scurrilous story about the laird of Donibristle and the hogman's daughter. Hayes left the hearth without resentment, and went—as was the custom—to sit beside Mac Dubh.

Mac Dubh never took his place on the hearth, even when he told them the long stories from the books that he'd read—*The Adventures of Roderick Random, The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling,* or everyone's favorite, *Robinson Crusoe*. Claiming that he needed the room to accommodate his long legs, Mac Dubh sat always in his same spot in the corner, where everyone might hear him. But the men who left the fire would come, one by one, and sit down on the bench beside him, to give him the warmth that lingered in their clothes.

"Shall ye speak to the new Governor tomorrow, d'ye think, Mac Dubh?" Hayes asked as he sat. "I met Billy Malcolm, coming in from the peat-cutting, and he shouted to me as the rats were grown uncommon bold in their cell just now. Six men bitten this sennight as they slept, and two of them festering."

Mac Dubh shook his head, and scratched at his chin. He had been allowed a razor before his weekly audiences with Harry Quarry, but it had been five days since the last of these, and his chin was thick with red stubble.

"I canna say, Gavin," he said. "Quarry did say as he'd tell the new fellow of our arrangement, but the new man might have his own ways, aye? If I'm called to see him, though, I shall be sure to say about the rats. Did Malcolm ask for Morrison to come and see to the festering, though?" The prison had no doctor; Morrison, who had a touch for healing, was permitted by the guards to go from cell to cell to tend the sick or injured, at Mac Dubh's request.

Hayes shook his head. "He hadna time to say more—they were marching past, aye?"

“Best I send Morrison,” Mac Dubh decided. “He can ask Billy is there aught else amiss there.” There were four main cells where the prisoners were kept in large groups; word passed among them by means of Morrison’s visits and the mingling of men on the work crews that went out daily to haul stone or cut peats on the nearby moor.

Morrison came at once when summoned, pocketing four of the carved rats’ skulls with which the prisoners improvised games of draughts. Mac Dubh groped under the bench where he sat, drawing out the cloth bag he carried when he went to the moor.

“Och, not more o’ the damn thistles,” Morrison protested, seeing Mac Dubh’s grimace as he groped in the bag. “I canna make them eat those things; they all say, do I think them kine, or maybe pigs?”

Mac Dubh gingerly set down a fistful of wilted stalks, and sucked his pricked fingers.

“They’re stubborn as pigs, to be sure,” he remarked. “It’s only milk thistle. How often must I tell ye, Morrison? Take the thistle heads off, and mash the leaves and stems fine, and if they’re too prickly to eat spread on a bannock, then make a tea of them and have them drink it. I’ve yet to see pigs drink tea, tell them.”

Morrison’s lined face cracked in a grin. An elderly man, he knew well enough how to handle recalcitrant patients; he only liked to complain for the fun of it.

“Aye, well, I’ll say have they ever seen a toothless cow?” he said, resigned, as he tucked the limp greens carefully into his own sack. “But you’ll be sure to bare your teeth at Joel McCulloch, next time ye see him. He’s the worst o’ them, for not believin’ as the greens do help wi’ the scurvy.”

“Say as I’ll bite him in the arse,” Mac Dubh promised, with a flash of his excellent teeth, “if I hear he hasna eaten his thistles.”

Morrison made the small amused noise that passed for a belly laugh with him, and went to gather up the bits of ointment and the few herbs he had for medicines.

Mac Dubh relaxed for the moment, glancing about the room to be sure no trouble brewed. There were feuds at the moment; he’d settled Bobby Sinclair and Edwin Murray’s trouble a week back, and while they were not friends, they were keeping their distance from one another.

He closed his eyes. He was tired; he had been hauling stone all day. Supper would be along in a few minutes—a tub of parritch and some bread to be shared out, a bit of brose too if they were lucky—and likely most of the men would go to sleep soon after, leaving him a few minutes of peace and semiprivacy, when he need not listen to anyone or feel he must do anything.

He had had no time as yet even to wonder about the new Governor, important as the man would be to all their lives. Young, Hayes had said. That might be good, or might be bad.

Older men who had fought in the Rising were often prejudiced against Highlanders—Bogle, who had put him in irons, had fought with Cope. A scared young soldier, though, trying to keep abreast of an unfamiliar job, could be more rigid and tyrannical than the crustiest of old colonels. Aye well, and nothing to be done but wait to see.

He sighed and shifted his posture, incommoded—for the ten-thousandth time—by the manacles he wore. He shifted irritably, banging one wrist against the edge of the bench. He was large enough that the weight of the irons didn't trouble him overmuch, but they chafed badly with the work. Worse was the inability to spread his arms more than eighteen inches apart; this gave him cramp and a clawing feeling, deep in the muscle of chest and back, that left him only when he slept.

"Mac Dubh," said a soft voice beside him. "A word in your ear, if I might?" He opened his eyes to see Ronnie Sutherland perched alongside, pointed face intent and foxlike in the faint glow from the fire.

"Aye, Ronnie, of course." He pushed himself upright, and put both his irons and the thought of the new Governor firmly from his mind.

* * *

Dearest mother, *John Grey wrote*, later that night.

> *I am arrived safely at my new post, and find it comfortable. Colonel Quarry, my predecessor—he is the Duke of Clarence's nephew, you*

> *recall?—made me welcome and acquainted with my charge. I am provided with a most excellent servant, and while I am bound to find many things about Scotland strange at first, I am sure I will find the experience interesting. I was served an object for my supper which the steward told me was called a "haggis." Upon inquiry, this proved to be the interior organ of a sheep, filled with a mixture of ground oats and a quantity of unidentifiable cooked flesh. Though I am assured the inhabitants of Scotland esteem this dish a particular delicacy, I sent it to the kitchens and requested a plain boiled saddle of mutton in its place. Having thus made my first—humble!—meal here, and being somewhat fatigued by the long journey—of whose details I shall inform you in a subsequent missive—I believe I shall now retire, leaving further descriptions of my surroundings—with which I am imperfectly acquainted at present, as it is dark—for a future communication.*

He paused, tapping the quill on the blotter. The point left small dots of ink, and he abstractedly drew lines connecting these, making the outlines of a jagged object.

Dared he ask about George? Not a direct inquiry, that wouldn't do, but a reference to the family, asking whether his mother had happened to encounter Lady Everett lately, and might he ask to be remembered to her son?

He sighed and drew another point on his object. No. His widowed mother was ignorant of the situation, but Lady Everett's husband moved in military circles. His brother's influence would keep the gossip to a minimum, but Lord Everett might catch a whiff of it, nonetheless, and be quick enough to put two and two together. Let him drop an injudicious word to his wife about George, and the word pass on from Lady Everett to his mother … the Dowager Countess Melton was not a fool.

She knew quite well that he was in disgrace; promising young officers in the good graces of their superiors were not sent to the arse-end of Scotland to oversee the renovation of small and unimportant prison-fortresses. But his brother Harold had told her that the trouble was an unfortunate affair of the heart, implying sufficient indelicacy to stop her questioning him about it. She likely thought he had been caught with his colonel's wife, or keeping a whore in his quarters.

An unfortunate affair of the heart! He smiled grimly, dipping his pen. Perhaps Hal had a greater sensitivity than he'd thought, in so describing it. But then, all his affairs had been unfortunate, since Hector's death at Culloden.

With the thought of Culloden, the thought of Fraser came back to him; something he had been avoiding all day. He looked from the blotter to the folder which held the prisoners' roll, biting his lip. He was tempted to open it, and look to see the name, but what point was there in that? There might be scores of men in the Highlands named James Fraser, but only one known also as Red Jamie.

He felt himself flush as waves of heat rolled over him, but it was not nearness to the fire. In spite of that, he rose and went to the window, drawing in great lungfuls of air as though the cold draft could cleanse him of memory.

"Pardon, sir, but will ye be wantin' your bed warmed now?" The Scottish speech behind him startled him, and he whirled round to find the tousled head of the prisoner assigned to tend his quarters poking through the door that led to his private rooms.

"Oh! Er, yes. Thank you … MacDonell?" he said doubtfully.

"MacKay, my lord," the man corrected, without apparent resentment, and the head vanished.

Grey sighed. There was nothing that could be done tonight. He came back to the desk and gathered up the folders, to put them away. The jagged object he had drawn on the blotter looked like one of those spiked maces, with which ancient knights had crushed the heads of their foes. He felt as though he had swallowed one, though perhaps this was no more than indigestion occasioned by half-cooked mutton.

He shook his head, pulled the letter to him and signed it hastily.

With all affection, your obt. son, John Wm. Grey. He shook sand over the signature, sealed the missive with his ring and set it aside to be posted in the morning.

He rose and stood hesitating, surveying the shadowy reaches of the office. It was a great, cold, barren room, with little in it bar the huge desk and a couple of chairs. He shivered; the sullen glow of the peat bricks on the hearth did little to warm its vast spaces, particularly with the freezing wet air coming in at the window.

He glanced once more at the prisoners' roll. Then he bent, opened the lower drawer of the desk, and drew out the brown glass bottle. He pinched out the candle, and made his way toward his bed by the dull glow of the hearth.

* * *

The mingled effects of exhaustion and whisky should have sent him to sleep at once, but sleep kept its distance, hovering over his bed like a bat, but never lighting. Every time he felt himself sinking into dreams, a vision of the wood at Carryarrick came before his eyes, and he found himself lying once more wide-awake and sweating, his heart thundering in his ears.

He had been sixteen then, excited beyond bearing by his first campaign. He had not got his commission then, but his brother Hal had taken him along with the regiment, so that he might get a taste of soldiering.

Camped at night near a dark Scottish wood, on their way to join General Cope at Prestonpans, John had found himself too nervous to sleep. What would the battle be like? Cope was a great general, all Hal's friends said so, but the men around the fires told frightful stories of the fierce Highlanders and their bloody broadswords. Would he have the courage to face the dreadful Highland charge?

He couldn't bring himself to mention his fears even to Hector. Hector loved him, but Hector was twenty, tall and muscular and fearless, with a lieutenant's commission and dashing stories of battles fought in France.

He didn't know, even now, whether it had been an urge to emulate Hector, or merely to impress him, that had led him to do it. In either case, when he saw the Highlander in the wood, and recognized him from the broadsheets as the notorious Red Jamie Fraser, he had determined to kill or capture him.

The notion of returning to camp for help *had* occurred to him, but the man was alone—at least John had thought he was alone—and evidently unawares, seated quietly upon a log, eating a bit of bread.

And so he had drawn his knife from his belt and crept quietly through the wood toward that shining red head, the haft slippery in his grasp, his mind filled with visions of glory and Hector's praise.

Instead, there had been a glancing blow as his knife flashed down, his arm locked tight round the Scot's neck to choke him, and then—

Lord John Grey flung himself over in his bed, hot with remembrance. They had fallen back, rolling together in the crackling oak-leaf dark, grappling for the knife, thrashing and fighting—for his life, he had thought.

First the Scot had been under him, then twisting, somehow over. He had touched a great snake once, a python that a friend of his uncle's had brought from the Indies, and that was what it had been like, Fraser's touch, lithe and smooth and horribly powerful, moving like the muscular coils, never where you expected it to be.

He had been flung ignominiously on his face in the leaves, his wrist twisted painfully behind his back. In a frenzy of terror, convinced he was about to be slain, he had wrenched with all his strength at his trapped arm, and the bone had snapped, with a red-black burst of pain that rendered him momentarily senseless.

He had come to himself moments later, slumped against a tree, facing a circle of ferocious-looking Highlanders, all in their plaids. In the midst of them stood Red Jamie Fraser—and the woman.

Grey clenched his teeth. Curse that woman! If it hadn't been for her—well, God knew what might have happened. What *had* happened was that she had spoken. She was English, a lady by her speech, and he—idiot that he was!—had leapt at once to the conclusion that she was a hostage of the vicious Highlanders, no doubt kidnapped for the purpose of ravishment. Everyone said that Highlanders indulged in rapine at every opportunity, and took delight in dishonoring Englishwomen; how should he have known otherwise!

And Lord John William Grey, aged sixteen and filled to the brim with regimental notions of gallantry and noble purpose, bruised, shaken, and fighting the pain of his broken arm, had tried to bargain, to save her from her fate. Fraser, tall and mocking, had played him like a salmon, stripping the woman half-naked before him to force from him information about the position and strength of his brother's regiment. And then, when he had told all he could, Fraser had laughingly revealed that the woman was his wife. They'd all laughed; he could hear the ribald Scottish voices now, hilarious in memory.

Grey rolled over, shifting his weight irritably on the unaccustomed mattress. And to make it all worse, Fraser had not even had the decency to kill him, but instead had tied him to a tree, where he would be found by his friends in the morning. By which time Fraser's men had visited the camp and—with the information *he* had given them!—had immobilized the cannon they were bringing to Cope.

Everyone had found out, of course, and while excuses were made because of his age and his noncommissioned status, he had been a pariah and an object of scorn. No one would speak to him, save his brother—and Hector. Loyal Hector.

He sighed, rubbing his cheek against the pillow. He could see Hector still, in his mind's eye. Dark-haired and blue-eyed, tender-mouthed, always smiling. It had been ten years since Hector had died at Culloden, hacked to pieces by a Highland broadsword, and still John woke in the dawn sometimes, body arched in clutching spasm, feeling Hector's touch.

And now this. He had dreaded this posting, being surrounded by Scots, by their grating voices, overwhelmed with the memory of what they had done to Hector. But never, in the most dismal moments of anticipation, had he thought he would ever meet James Fraser again.

The peat fire on the hearth died gradually to hot ash, then cold, and the window paled from deep black to the sullen gray of a rainy Scottish dawn. And still John Grey lay sleepless, burning eyes fixed on the smoke-blackened beams above him.

Grey rose in the morning unrested, but with his mind made up. He was here. Fraser was here. And neither could leave, for the foreseeable future. So. He must see the man now and again—he would be speaking to the assembled prisoners in an hour, and must inspect them regularly thereafter—but he would not see him privately. If he kept the man himself at a distance, perhaps he could also keep at bay the memories he stirred. And the feelings.

For while it was the memory of his past rage and humiliation that had kept him awake to begin with, it was the other side of the present situation that had left him still wakeful at dawn. The slowly dawning realization that Fraser was now *his* prisoner; no longer his tormentor, but a prisoner, like the others, entirely at his mercy.

He rang the bell for his servant and padded to the window to see how the weather kept, wincing at the chill of the stone under his bare feet.

It was, not surprisingly, raining. In the courtyard below, the prisoners were already being formed up in work crews, wet to the skin. Shivering in his shirt, Grey pulled in his head and shut the window halfway; a nice compromise between death from suffocation and death from the ague.

It had been visions of revenge that kept him tossing in his bed as the window lightened and the rain pattered on the sill; thoughts of Fraser confined to a tiny cell of freezing stone, kept naked through the winter nights, fed on slops, stripped and flogged in the courtyard of the prison. All that arrogant power humbled, reduced to groveling misery, dependent solely on his word for a moment's relief.

Yes, he thought all those things, imagined them in vivid detail, reveled in them. He heard Fraser beg for mercy, imagined himself disdaining, haughty. He thought these things, and the spiked object turned over in his guts, piercing him with self-disgust.

Whatever he might once have been to Grey, Fraser now was a beaten foe; a prisoner of war, and the charge of the Crown. He was *Grey's* charge, in fact; a responsibility, and his welfare the duty of honor.

His servant had brought hot water for shaving. He splashed his cheeks, feeling the warmth soothe him, laying to rest the tormented fancies of the night. That was all they were, he realized—fancies, and the realization brought him a certain relief.

He might have met Fraser in battle and taken a real and savage pleasure in killing or maiming him. But the inescapable fact was that so long as Fraser was his prisoner, he could not in honor harm the man. By the time he had shaved and his servant had dressed him, he was recovered enough to find a certain grim humor in the situation.

His foolish behavior at Carryarrick had saved Fraser's life at Culloden. Now, that debt discharged, and Fraser in his power, Fraser's sheer helplessness as a prisoner made him completely safe. For whether foolish or wise, naive or experienced, all the Greys were men of honor.

Feeling somewhat better, he met his gaze in the looking glass, set his wig to rights, and went to eat breakfast before giving his first address to the prisoners.

* * *

"Will you have your supper served in the sitting room, sir, or in here?" MacKay's head, uncombed as ever, poked into the office.

"Um?" Grey murmured, absorbed in the papers spread out on the desk. "Oh," he said, looking up. "In here, if you please." He waved vaguely at the corner of the huge desk and returned to his work, scarcely looking up when the tray with his food arrived sometime later.

Quarry had not been joking about the paperwork. The sheer quantity of food alone required endless orders and requisitions—all orders to be submitted in duplicate to London, *if* he pleased!—let alone the hundreds of other necessities required by the prisoners, the guards, and the men and women from the village who came in by the day to clean the barracks and work in the kitchens. He had done nothing all day but write and sign requisitions. He *must* find a clerk soon, or die of sheer ennui.

Two hundred lb. wheat flowr, he wrote, *for prisoners' use. Six hogsheads ale, for use of barracks*. His normally elegant handwriting had quickly degenerated into a utilitarian scrawl, his stylish signature become a curt *J. Grey.*

He laid down his pen with a sigh and closed his eyes, massaging the ache between his brows. The sun had not bothered to show its face once since his arrival, and working all day in a smoky room by candlelight left his eyes burning like lumps of coal. His books had arrived the day before, but he had not even unpacked them, too exhausted by nightfall to do more than bathe his aching eyes in cold water and go to sleep.

He heard a small, stealthy sound, and sat up abruptly, his eyes popping open. A large brown rat sat on the corner of his desk, a morsel of plum cake held in its front paws. It didn't move, but merely looked at him speculatively, whiskers twitching.

"Well, God damn my eyes!" Grey exclaimed in amazement. "Here, you bugger! That's *my* supper!"

The rat nibbled pensively at the plum cake, bright beady eyes fixed on the Major.

"Get out of it!" Enraged, Grey snatched up the nearest object and let fly at the rat. The ink bottle exploded on the stone floor in a spray of black, and the startled rat leapt off the desk and fled precipitously, galloping between the legs of the even more startled MacKay, who appeared at the door to see what the noise was.

"Has the prison got a cat?" Grey demanded, dumping the contents of his supper tray into the waste can by his desk.

"Aye, sir, there's cats in the storerooms," MacKay offered, crawling backward on hands and knees to wipe up the small black footprints the rat had left in its precipitous flight through the ink puddle.

"Well, fetch one up here, if you please, MacKay," Grey ordered. "At once." He grunted at the memory of that obscenely naked tail draped nonchalantly over his plate. He had encountered rats often enough in the field, of course, but there was something about having his own personal supper molested before his eyes that seemed particularly infuriating.

He strode to the window and stood there, trying to clear his head with fresh air, as MacKay finished his mopping-up. Dusk was drawing down, filling the courtyard with purple shadows. The stones of the cell wing opposite looked even colder and more dreary than usual.

The turnkeys were coming through the rain from the kitchen wing; a procession of small carts laden with the prisoners' food; huge pots of steaming oatmeal and baskets of bread, covered with cloths against the rain. At least the poor devils had hot food after their wet day's work in the stone quarry.

A thought struck him as he turned from the window.

"Are there many rats in the cells?" he asked MacKay.

"Aye, sir, a great many," the prisoner replied, with a final swipe to the threshold. "I'll tell the cook to make ye up a fresh tray, shall I, sir?"

"If you please," Grey said. "And then if you will, Mr. MacKay, please see that each cell is provided with its own cat."

MacKay looked slightly dubious at this. Grey paused in the act of retrieving his scattered papers.

"Is there something wrong, MacKay?"

"No, sir," MacKay replied slowly. "Only the wee brown beasties do keep down the cockchafers. And with respect, sir, I dinna think the men would care to have a cat takin' all their rats."

Grey stared at the man, feeling mildly queasy.

"The prisoners eat the rats?" he asked, with a vivid memory of sharp yellow teeth nibbling at his plum cake.

"Only when they're lucky enough to catch one, sir," MacKay said. "Perhaps the cats would be a help wi' that, after all. Will that be all for tonight, sir?"

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9

THE WANDERER

Grey's resolve concerning James Fraser lasted for two weeks. Then the messenger arrived from the village of Ardsmuir, with news that changed everything.

"Does he still live?" he asked the man sharply. The messenger, one of the inhabitants of Ardsmuir village who worked for the prison, nodded.

"I saw him mysel', sir, when they brought him in. He's at the Lime Tree now, being cared for—but I didna think he looked as though care would be enough, sir, if ye take my meaning." He raised one brow significantly.

"I take it," Grey answered shortly. "Thank you, Mr.—"

"Allison, sir, Rufus Allison. Your servant, sir." The man accepted the shilling offered him, bowed with his hat under his arm, and took his leave.

Grey sat at his desk, staring out at the leaden sky. The sun had scarcely shone for a day since his arrival. He tapped the end of the quill with which he had been writing on the desk, oblivious to the damage he was inflicting on the sharpened tip.

The mention of gold was enough to prick up any man's ears, but especially his.

A man had been found this morning, wandering in the mist on the moor near the village. His clothes were soaked not only with the damp, but with seawater, and he was out of his mind with fever.

He had talked unceasingly since he was found, babbling for the most part, but his rescuers were unable to make much sense of his ravings. The man appeared to be Scottish, and yet he spoke in an incoherent mixture of French and Gaelic, with here and there the odd word of English thrown in. And one of those words had been "gold."

The combination of Scots, gold, and the French tongue, mentioned in this area of the country, could bring only one thought to the mind of anyone who had fought through the last days of the Jacobite rising. The Frenchman's Gold. The fortune in gold bullion that Louis of France had—according to rumor—sent secretly to the aid of his cousin, Charles Stuart. But sent far too late.

Some stories said that the French gold had been hidden by the Highland army during the last headlong retreat to the North, before the final disaster at Culloden. Others held that the gold had never reached Charles Stuart, but had been left for safekeeping in a cave near the place where it had come ashore on the northwestern coast.

Some said that the secret of the hiding place had been lost, its guardian killed at Culloden. Others said that the hiding place was still known, but a close-kept secret, held among the members of a single Highland family. Whatever the truth, the gold had never been found. Not yet.

French and Gaelic. Grey spoke passable French, the result of several years fighting abroad, but neither he nor any of his officers spoke the barbarous Gaelic, save a few words Sergeant Grissom had learned as a child from a Scottish nursemaid.

He could not trust a man from the village; not if there was anything to this tale. The Frenchman's Gold! Beyond its value as treasure—which would belong to the Crown in any case—the gold had a considerable and personal value to John William Grey. The finding of that half-mythical hoard would be his passport out of Ardsmuir—back to London and civilization. The blackest disgrace would be instantly obscured by the dazzle of gold.

He bit the end of the blunted quill, feeling the cylinder crack between his teeth.

Damn. No, it couldn't be a villager, nor one of his officers. A prisoner, then. Yes, he could use a prisoner without risk, for a prisoner would be unable to make use of the information for his own ends.

Damn again. All of the prisoners spoke Gaelic, many had some English as well—but only one spoke French besides. *He is an educated man*, Quarry's voice echoed in his memory.

"Damn, damn, *damn*!" Grey muttered. It couldn't be helped. Allison had said the wanderer was very ill; there was no time to look for alternatives. He spat out a shred of quill.

"Brame!" he shouted. The startled corporal poked his head in.

"Yes, sir?"

"Bring me a prisoner named James Fraser. At once."

* * *

The Governor stood behind his desk, leaning on it as though the huge slab of oak were in fact the bulwark it looked. His hands were damp on the smooth wood, and the white stock of his uniform felt tight around his neck.

His heart leapt violently as the door opened. The Scot came in, his irons chinking slightly, and stood before the desk. The candles were all lit, and the office nearly as bright as day, though it was nearly full dark outside.

He had seen Fraser several times, of course, standing in the courtyard with the other prisoners, red head and shoulders above most of the other men, but never close enough to see his face clearly.

He looked different. That was both shock and relief; for so long, he had seen a clean-shaven face in memory, dark with threat or alight with mocking laughter. This man was short-bearded, his face calm and wary, and while the deep blue eyes were the same, they gave no sign of recognition. The man stood quietly before the desk, waiting.

Grey cleared his throat. His heart was still beating too fast, but at least he could speak calmly.

"Mr. Fraser," he said. "I thank you for coming."

The Scot bent his head courteously, but did not answer that he had had no choice in the matter; his eyes said that.

"Doubtless you wonder why I have sent for you," Grey said. He sounded insufferably pompous to his own ears, but was unable to remedy it. "I find that a situation has arisen in which I require your assistance."

"What is that, Major?" The voice was the same—deep and precise, marked with a soft Highland burr.

He took a deep breath, bracing himself on the desk. He would rather have done anything but ask help of this particular man, but there was no bloody choice. Fraser was the only possibility.

"A man has been found wandering the moor near the coast," he said carefully. "He appears to be seriously ill, and his speech is deranged. However, certain … matters to which he refers appear to be of … substantial interest to the Crown. I require to talk with him, and discover as much as I can of his identity, and the matters of which he speaks."

He paused, but Fraser merely stood there, waiting.

"Unfortunately," Grey said, taking another breath, "the man in question has been heard to speak in a mixture of Gaelic and French, with no more than a word or two of English."

One of the Scot's ruddy eyebrows stirred. His face didn't change in any appreciable way, but it was evident that he had grasped the implications of the situation.

"I see, Major." The Scot's soft voice was full of irony. "And you would like my assistance to interpret for ye what this man might have to say."

Grey couldn't trust himself to speak, but merely jerked his head in a short nod.

"I fear I must decline, Major." Fraser spoke respectfully, but with a glint in his eye that was anything but respectful. Grey's hand curled tight around the brass letter-opener on his blotter.

"You decline?" he said. He tightened his grasp on the letter-opener in order to keep his voice steady. "Might I inquire why, Mr. Fraser?"

"I am a prisoner, Major," the Scot said politely. "Not an interpreter."

“Your assistance would be—appreciated,” Grey said, trying to infuse the word with significance without offering outright bribery. “Conversely,” his tone hardened, “a failure to render legitimate assistance—”

“It is not legitimate for ye either to extort my services or to threaten me, Major.” Fraser’s voice was a good deal harder than Grey’s.

“I did not threaten you!” The edge of the letter-opener was cutting into his hand; he was forced to loosen his grip.

“Did ye no? Well, and I’m pleased to hear it.” Fraser turned toward the door. “In that case, Major, I shall bid ye good night.”

Grey would have given a great deal simply to have let him go. Unfortunately, duty called.

“Mr. Fraser!” The Scot stopped, a few feet from the door, but didn’t turn.

Grey took a deep breath, steeling himself to it.

“If you do what I ask, I will have your irons struck off,” he said.

Fraser stood quite still. Young and inexperienced Grey might be, but he was not unobservant. Neither was he a poor judge of men. Grey watched the rise of his prisoner’s head, the increased tension of his shoulders, and felt a small relaxation of the anxiety that had gripped him since the news of the wanderer had come.

“Mr. Fraser?” he said.

Very slowly, the Scot turned around. His face was quite expressionless.

“You have a bargain, Major,” he said softly.

* * *

It was well past midnight when they arrived in the village of Ardsmuir. No lights showed in the cottages they passed, and Grey found himself wondering what the inhabitants thought, as the sound of hooves and the jingle of arms passed by their windows late at night, a faint echo of the English troops who had swept through the Highlands ten years before.

The wanderer had been taken to the Lime Tree, an inn so called because for many years, it had boasted a huge lime tree in the yard; the only tree of any size for thirty miles. There was nothing left now but a broad stump—the tree, like so many other things, had perished in the aftermath of Culloden, burned for firewood by Cumberland's troops—but the name remained.

At the door, Grey paused and turned to Fraser.

"You will recall the terms of our agreement?"

"I will," Fraser answered shortly, and brushed past him.

In return for having the irons removed, Grey had required three things: firstly, that Fraser would not attempt to escape during the journey to or from the village. Secondly, Fraser would undertake to give a full and true account of all that the vagrant should say. And thirdly, Fraser would give his word as a gentleman to speak to no one but Grey of what he learned.

There was a murmur of Gaelic voices inside; a sound of surprise as the innkeeper saw Fraser, and deference at the sight of the red coat behind him. The goodwife stood on the stair, an oil-dip in her hand making the shadows dance around her.

Grey laid a hand on the innkeeper's arm, startled.

"Who is that?" There was another figure on the stairs, an apparition, clothed all in black.

"That is the priest," Fraser said quietly, beside him. "The man will be dying, then."

Grey took a deep breath, trying to steady himself for what might come.

"Then there is little time to waste," he said firmly, setting a booted foot on the stair. "Let us proceed."

* * *

The man died just before dawn, Fraser holding one of his hands, the priest the other. As the priest leaned over the bed, mumbling in Gaelic and Latin, making Popish signs over the body, Fraser sat back on his stool, eyes closed, still holding the small, frail hand in his own.

The big Scot had sat by the man's side all night, listening, encouraging, comforting. Grey had stood by the door, not wishing to frighten the man by the sight of his uniform, both surprised and oddly touched at Fraser's gentleness.

Now Fraser laid the thin weathered hand gently across the still chest, and made the same sign as the priest had, touching forehead, heart, and both shoulders in turn, in the sign of a cross. He opened his eyes, and rose to his feet, his head nearly brushing the low rafters. He nodded briefly to Grey, and preceded him down the narrow stair.

"In here." Grey motioned to the door of the taproom, empty at this hour. A sleepy-eyed barmaid laid the fire for them and brought bread and ale, then went out, leaving them alone.

He waited for Fraser to refresh himself before asking.

"Well, Mr. Fraser?"

The Scot set down his pewter mug and wiped a hand across his mouth. Already bearded, with his long hair neatly plaited, he didn't look disheveled by the long night watch, but there were dark smudges of tiredness under his eyes.

"All right," he said. "It doesna make a great deal of sense, Major," he added warningly, "but this is all he said." And he spoke carefully, pausing now and then to recall a word, stopping again to explain some Gaelic reference. Grey sat listening in deepening disappointment; Fraser had been correct—it didn't make much sense.

"The white witch?" Grey interrupted. "He spoke of a white witch? And seals?" It scarcely seemed more farfetched than the rest of it, but still he spoke disbelievingly.

"Aye, he did."

"Say it to me again," Grey commanded. "As best you remember. If you please," he added.

He felt oddly comfortable with the man, he realized, with a feeling of surprise. Part of it was sheer fatigue, of course; all his usual reactions and feelings were numbed by the long night and the strain of watching a man die by inches.

The entire night had seemed unreal to Grey; not least was this odd conclusion, wherein he found himself sitting in the dim dawn light of a country tavern, sharing a pitcher of ale with Red Jamie Fraser.

Fraser obeyed, speaking slowly, stopping now and then to recall. With the difference of a word here or there, it was identical to the first account—and those parts of it that Grey himself had been able to understand were faithfully translated.

He shook his head, discouraged. Gibberish. The man's ravings had been precisely that—ravings. If the man had ever seen any gold—and it did sound as though he had, at one time—there was no telling where or when from this hodgepodge of delusion and feverish delirium.

"You are quite positive that is all he said?" Grey grasped at the slim hope that Fraser might have omitted some small phrase, some statement that would yield a clue to the lost gold.

Fraser's sleeve fell back as he lifted his cup; Grey could see the deep band of raw flesh about his wrist, dark in the gray early light of the taproom. Fraser saw him looking at it, and set down the cup, the frail illusion of companionship shattered.

"I keep my bargains, Major," Fraser said, with cold formality. He rose to his feet. "Shall we be going back now?"

They rode in silence for some time. Fraser was lost in his own thoughts, Grey sunk in fatigue and disappointment. They stopped at a small spring to refresh themselves, just as the sun topped the small hills to the north.

Grey drank cold water, then splashed it on his face, feeling the shock of it revive him momentarily. He had been awake for more than twenty-four hours, and was feeling slow and stupid.

Fraser had been awake for the same twenty-four hours, but gave no apparent sign of being troubled by the fact. He was crawling busily around the spring on his hands and knees, evidently plucking some sort of weed from the water.

"What are you doing, Mr. Fraser?" Grey asked, in some bewilderment.

Fraser looked up, mildly surprised, but not embarrassed in the slightest.

"I am picking watercress, Major."

"I see that," Grey said testily. "What for?"

"To eat, Major," Fraser replied evenly. He took the stained cloth bag from his belt and dropped the dripping green mass into it.

"Indeed? Are you not fed sufficiently?" Grey asked blankly. "I have never heard of people eating watercress."

"It's green, Major."

In his fatigued state, the Major had suspicions that he was being practiced upon.

"What in damnation other color ought a weed to be?" he demanded.

Fraser's mouth twitched slightly, and he seemed to be debating something with himself. At last he shrugged slightly, wiping his wet hands on the sides of his breeks.

"I only meant, Major, that eating green plants will stop ye getting scurvy and loose teeth. My men eat such greens as I take them, and cress is better-tasting than most things I can pick on the moor."

Grey felt his brows shoot up.

"Green plants stop scurvy?" he blurted. "Wherever did you get that notion?"

"From my wife!" Fraser snapped. He turned away abruptly, and stood, tying the neck of his sack with hard, quick movements.

Grey could not prevent himself asking.

"Your wife, sir—where is she?"

The answer was a sudden blaze of dark blue that seared him to the backbone, so shocking was its intensity.

Perhaps you are too young to know the power of hate and despair. Quarry's voice spoke in Grey's memory. He was not; he recognized them at once in the depths of Fraser's eyes.

Only for a moment, though; then the man's normal veil of cool politeness was back in place.

"My wife is gone," Fraser said, and turned away again, so abruptly that the movement verged on rudeness.

Grey felt himself shaken by an unexpected feeling. In part it was relief. The woman who had been both cause of and party to his humiliation was dead. In part, it was regret.

Neither of them spoke again on the journey back to Ardsmuir.

Three days later, Jamie Fraser escaped. It had never been a difficult matter for prisoners to escape from Ardsmuir; no one ever did, simply because there was no place for a man to go. Three miles from the prison, the coast of Scotland dropped into the ocean in a spill of crumbled granite. On the other three sides, nothing but empty moorland stretched for miles.

Once, a man might take to the heather, depending on clan and kinsmen for support and protection. But the clans were crushed, the kin dead, the Scottish prisoners removed far away from their own clan lands. Starving on the bleak moor was little improvement on a prison cell. Escape was not worth it—to anyone but Jamie Fraser, who evidently had a reason.

* * *

The dragoons' horses kept to the road; while the surrounding moor looked smooth as a velvet counterpane, the purpling heather was a thin layer, deceptively spread over a foot or more of wet, spongy peat moss. Even the red deer didn't walk at random in that boggy mass—Grey could see four of the animals now, stick figures a mile away, the line of their track through the heather seeming no wider than a thread.

Fraser, of course, was not mounted. That meant that the escaped prisoner might be anywhere on the moor, free to follow the red deer's paths.

It was John Grey's duty to pursue his prisoner and attempt his recapture. It was something more than duty that had made him strip the garrison for his search party, and urge them on with only the briefest of stops for rest and food. Duty, yes, and an urgent desire to find the French gold and win approval from his masters—and reprieve from this desolate Scottish exile. But there was anger, too, and an odd sense of personal betrayal.

Grey wasn't sure whether he was more angry at Fraser for breaking his word, or at himself, for having been fool enough to believe that a Highlander—gentleman or not—held a sense of honor equal to his own. But angry he was, and determined to search every deer path on this moor if necessary, in order to lay James Fraser by the heels.

They reached the coast the next night, well after dark, after a laborious day of combing the moor. The fog had thinned away over the rocks, swept out by the offshore wind, and the sea spread out before them, cradled by cliffs and strewn with tiny barren islets.

John Grey stood beside his horse on the clifftops, looking down at the wild black sea. It was a clear night on the coast, thank God, and the moon was at the half; its gleam painted the spray-wet rocks, making them stand out hard and shining as silver ingots against black velvet shadows.

It was the most desolate place he had ever seen, though it had a sort of terrible beauty about it that made the blood run cold in his veins. There was no sign of James Fraser. No sign of life at all.

One of the men with him gave a sudden exclamation of surprise, and drew his pistol.

"There!" he said. "On the rocks!"

"Hold your fire, fool," said another of the soldiers, grabbing his companion's arm. He made no effort to disguise his contempt. "Have you ne'er seen seals?"

"Ah … no," said the first man, rather sheepishly. He lowered his pistol, staring out at the small dark forms on the rocks below.

Grey had never seen seals, either, and he watched them with fascination. They looked like black slugs from this distance, the moonlight gleaming wetly on their coats as they raised restless heads, seeming to roll and weave unsteadily as they made their awkward way on land.

His mother had had a cloak made of sealskin, when he was a boy. He had been allowed to touch it once, marveling at the feel of it, dark and warm as a moonless summer night. Amazing that such thick, soft fur came from these slick, wet creatures.

"The Scots call them silkies," said the soldier who had recognized them. He nodded at the seals with the proprietary air of special knowledge.

"Silkies?" Grey's attention was caught; he stared at the man with interest. "What else do you know about them, Sykes?"

The soldier shrugged, enjoying his momentary importance. "Not a great deal, sir. The folk hereabout have stories about them, though;

they say sometimes one of them will come ashore and leave off its skin, and inside is a beautiful woman. If a man should find the skin, and hide it, so she can't go back, why then—she'll be forced to stay and be his wife. They make good wives, sir, or so I'm told."

"At least they'd always be wet," murmured the first soldier, and the men erupted in guffaws that echoed among the cliffs, raucous as seabirds.

"That's enough!" Grey had to raise his voice, to be heard above the rash of laughter and crude suggestions.

"Spread out!" Grey ordered. "I want the cliffs searched in both directions—and keep an eye out for boats below; God knows there's room enough to hide a sloop behind some of those islands."

Abashed, the men went without comment. They returned an hour later, wet from spray and disheveled with climbing, but with no sign of Jamie Fraser—or the Frenchman's Gold.

At dawn, as the light stained the slippery rocks red and gold, small parties of dragoons were sent off to search the cliffs in both directions, making their way carefully down the rocky clefts and tumbled piles of stone.

Nothing was found. Grey stood by a fire on the clifftop, keeping an eye on the search. He was swathed in his greatcoat against the biting wind, and fortified periodically by hot coffee, supplied by his servant.

The man at the Lime Tree had come from the sea, his clothes soaked in saltwater. Whether Fraser had learned something from the man's words that he had not told, or had decided only to take the chance of looking for himself, surely he also would have gone to the sea. And yet there was no sign of James Fraser, anywhere along this stretch of coast. Worse yet, there was no sign of the gold.

"If he went in anywhere along this stretch, Major, you'll have seen the last of him, I'm thinking." It was Sergeant Grissom, standing beside him, gazing down at the crash and whirl of water through the jagged rocks below. He nodded at the furious water.

"They call this spot the Devil's Cauldron, because of the way it boils all the time. Fishermen drowned off this coast are seldom found; there are wicked currents to blame for it, of course, but folk say the Devil seizes them and pulls them below."

"Do they?" Grey said bleakly. He stared down into the smash and spume forty feet below. "I wouldn't doubt it, Sergeant."

He turned back toward the campfire.

"Give orders to search until nightfall, Sergeant. If nothing is found, we'll start back in the morning."

* * *

Grey lifted his gaze from his horse's neck, squinting through the dim early light. His eyes felt swollen from peat smoke and lack of sleep, and his bones ached from several nights spent lying on damp ground.

The ride back to Ardsmuir would take no more than a day. The thought of a soft bed and a hot supper was delightful—but then he would have to write the official dispatch to London, confessing Fraser's escape—the reason for it—and his own shameful failure to recapture the man.

The feeling of bleakness at this prospect was reinforced by a deep griping in the major's lower abdomen. He raised a hand, signaling a halt, and slid wearily to the ground.

"Wait here," he said to his men. There was a small hillock a few hundred feet away; it would afford him sufficient privacy for the relief he sorely needed; his bowels, unaccustomed to Scottish parritch and oatcake, had rebelled altogether at the exigencies of a field diet.

The birds were singing in the heather. Away from the noise of hooves and harness, he could hear all the tiny sounds of the waking moor. The wind had changed with the dawn, and the scent of the sea came inland now, whispering through the grass. Some small animal made a rustling noise on the other side of a gorse bush. It was all very peaceful.

Straightening up from what too late struck him as a most undignified posture, Grey raised his head and looked straight into the face of James Fraser.

He was no more than six feet away. He stood still as one of the red deer, the moor wind brushing over him, with the rising sun tangled in his hair.

They stood frozen, staring at each other. The smell of the sea came faintly on the wind. There was no sound but the sea wind and the singing of meadowlarks for a moment. Then Grey drew himself up, swallowing to bring his heart down from his throat.

“I fear you take me at a disadvantage, Mr. Fraser,” he said coolly, fastening his breeches with as much self-possession as he could muster.

The Scot’s eyes were the only part of him to move, down over Grey and slowly back up. Looked over his shoulder, to where six armed soldiers stood, pointing their muskets. Dark blue eyes met his, straight on. At last, the edge of Fraser’s mouth twitched, and he said, “I think ye take me at the same, Major.”

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10

WHITE WITCH'S CURSE

Jamie Fraser sat shivering on the stone floor of the empty storeroom, clutching his knees and trying to get warm. He thought he likely would never be warm again. The chill of the sea had seeped into his bones, and he could still feel the churn of the crashing breakers, deep in his belly.

He wished for the presence of the other prisoners—Morrison, Hayes, Sinclair, Sutherland. Not only for company, but for the heat of their bodies. On bitter nights, the men would huddle close together for warmth, breathing each other's stale breath, tolerating the bump and knock of close quarters for the sake of warmth.

He was alone, though. Likely they would not return him to the large cell with the other men until after they had done whatever they meant to do to him as punishment for escaping. He leaned back against the wall with a sigh, morbidly aware of the bones of his spine pressing against the stone, and the fragility of the flesh covering them.

He was very much afraid of being flogged, and yet he hoped that would be his punishment. It would be horrible, but it would be soon over—and infinitely more bearable than being put back in irons. He could feel in his flesh the crash of the smith's hammer, echoing through the bones of his arm as the smith pounded the fetters firmly into place, holding his wrist steady on the anvil.

His fingers sought the rosary around his neck. His sister had given it to him when he left Lallybroch; the English had let him keep it, as the string of beechwood beads had no value.

"Hail Mary, full of grace," he muttered, "blessed art thou amongst women."

He hadn't much hope. That wee yellow-haired fiend of a major had seen, damn his soul—he knew just how terrible the fetters had been.

"Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners …"

The wee Major had made him a bargain, and he had kept it. The major would not be thinking so, though.

He had kept his oath, had done as he promised. Had relayed the words spoken to him, one by one, just as he had heard them from the wandering man. It was no part of his bargain to tell the Englishman that he knew the man—or what conclusions he had drawn from the muttered words.

He had recognized Duncan Kerr at once, changed though he was by time and mortal illness. Before Culloden, he had been a tacksman of Colum MacKenzie, Jamie's uncle. After, he had escaped to France, to eke out what living might be made there.

"Be still, *a charaid; bi sàmhach,*" he had said softly in Gaelic, dropping to his knees by the bed where the sick man lay. Duncan was an elderly man, his worn face wasted by illness and fatigue, and his eyes were bright with fever. At first he had thought Duncan too far gone to know him, but the wasted hand had gripped his with surprising strength, and the man had repeated through his rasping breath, *"mo charaid."* My kinsman.

The innkeeper was watching, from his place near the door, peering over Major Grey's shoulder. Jamie had bent his head and whispered in Duncan's ear, "All you say will be told to the English. Speak wary." The landlord's eyes narrowed, but the distance between them was too far; Jamie was sure he hadn't heard. Then the Major had turned and ordered the innkeeper out, and he was safe.

He couldn't tell whether it was the effect of his warning, or only the derangement of fever, but Duncan's speech wandered with his mind, often incoherent, images of the past overlapping with those of the present. Sometimes he had called Jamie "Dougal," the name of

Colum's brother, Jamie's other uncle. Sometimes he dropped into poetry, sometimes he simply raved. And within the ravings and the scattered words, sometimes there was a grain of sense—or more than sense.

"It is cursed," Duncan whispered. "The gold is cursed. Do ye be warned, lad. It was given by the white witch, given for the King's son. But the Cause is lost, and the King's son fled, and she will not let the gold be given to a coward."

"Who is she?" Jamie asked. His heart had sprung up and choked him at Duncan's words, and it beat madly as he asked. "The white witch—who is she?"

"She seeks a brave man. A MacKenzie, it is for Himself. MacKenzie. It is theirs, she says it, for the sake of him who is dead."

"Who is the witch?" Jamie asked again. The word Duncan used was *ban-druidh*—a witch, a wisewoman, a white lady. They had called his wife that, once. Claire—his own white lady. He squeezed Duncan's hand tight in his own, willing him to keep his senses.

"Who?" he said again. "Who is the witch?"

"The witch," Duncan muttered, his eyes closing. "The witch. She is a soul-eater. She is death. He is dead, the MacKenzie, he is dead."

"Who is dead? Colum MacKenzie?"

"All of them, all of them. All dead. All dead!" cried the sick man, clutching tight to his hand. "Colum, and Dougal, and Ellen, too."

Suddenly his eyes opened, and fixed on Jamie's. The fever had dilated his pupils, so his gaze seemed a pool of drowning black.

"Folk do say," he said, with surprising clarity, "as how Ellen MacKenzie did leave her brothers and her home, and go to wed with a silkie from the sea. She heard them, aye?" Duncan smiled dreamily, the black stare swimming with distant vision. "She heard the silkies singing, there upon the rocks, one, and two, and three of them, and she saw from her tower, one and two, and three of them, and so she came down, and went to the sea, and so under it, to live wi' the silkies. Aye? Did she no?"

"So folk say," Jamie had answered, mouth gone dry. Ellen had been his mother's name. And that was what folk had said, when she had left her home, to elope with Brian Dubh Fraser, a man with the shining black hair of a silkie. The man for whose sake he was himself now called Mac Dubh—Black Brian's son.

Major Grey stood close, on the other side of the bed, brow furrowed as he watched Duncan's face. The Englishman had no Gaelic, but Jamie would have been willing to wager that he knew the word for gold. He caught the Major's eye, and nodded, bending again to speak to the sick man.

"The gold, man," he said, in French, loud enough for Grey to hear. "Where is the gold?" He squeezed Duncan's hand as hard as he could, hoping to convey some warning.

Duncan's eyes closed, and he rolled his head restlessly, to and fro upon the pillow. He muttered something, but the words were too faint to catch.

"What did he say?" the Major demanded sharply. "What?"

"I don't know." Jamie patted Duncan's hand to rouse him. "Speak to me, man, tell me again."

There was no response save more muttering. Duncan's eyes had rolled back in his head, so that only a thin line of gleaming white showed beneath the wrinkled lids. Impatient, the Major leaned forward and shook him by one shoulder.

"Wake up!" he said. "Speak to us!"

At once Duncan Kerr's eyes flew open. He stared up, up, past the two faces bending over him, seeing something far beyond them.

"She will tell you," he said, in Gaelic. "She will come for you." For a split second, his attention seemed to return to the inn room where he lay, and his eyes focused on the men with him. "For both of you," he said distinctly.

Then he closed his eyes, and spoke no more, but clung ever tighter to Jamie's hand. Then after a time, his grip relaxed, his hand slid free, and it was over. The guardianship of the gold had passed.

And so, Jamie Fraser had kept his word to the Englishman—and his obligation to his countrymen. He had told the Major all that Duncan had said, and the devil of a help to him that had been! And when the opportunity of escape offered, he had taken it—gone to the heather and sought the sea, and done what he could with

Duncan Kerr's legacy. And now he must pay the price of his actions, whatever that turned out to be.

There were footsteps coming down the corridor outside. He clutched his knees harder, trying to quell the shivering. At least it would be decided now, either way.

" … pray for us sinners now, and at the hour of our death, amen."

The door swung open, letting in a shaft of light that made him blink. It was dark in the corridor, but the guard standing over him held a torch.

"On your feet." The man reached down and pulled him up against the stiffness of his joints. He was pushed toward the door, stumbling. "You're wanted upstairs."

"Upstairs? Where?" He was startled at that—the smith's forge was downstairs from where he was, off the courtyard. And they wouldn't flog him so late in the evening.

The man's face twisted, fierce and ruddy in the torchlight. "To the Major's quarters," the guard said, grinning. "And may God have mercy on your soul, Mac Dubh."

* * *

"No, sir, I will not say where I have been." He repeated it firmly, trying not to let his teeth chatter. He had been brought not to the office, but to Grey's private sitting room. There was a fire on the hearth, but Grey was standing in front of it, blocking most of the warmth.

"Nor why you chose to escape?" Grey's voice was cool and formal.

Jamie's face tightened. He had been placed near the bookshelf, where the light of a triple-branched candlestick fell on his face; Grey himself was no more than a silhouette, black against the fire's glow.

"That is my private affair," he said.

"Private affair?" Grey echoed incredulously. "Did you say your private affair?"

"I did."

The Governor inhaled strongly through his nose.

"That is possibly the most outrageous thing I have heard in my life!"

"Your life has been rather brief, then, Major," Fraser said. "If you will pardon my saying so." There was no point in dragging it out or trying to placate the man. Better to provoke a decision at once and get it over with. He had certainly provoked something; Grey's fists clenched tight at his sides, and he took a step toward him, away from the fire.

"Have you any notion what I could do to you for this?" Grey inquired, his voice low and very much controlled.

"Aye, I have. Major." More than a notion. He knew from experience what they might do to him, and he wasn't looking forward to it. It wasn't as though he'd a choice about it, though.

Grey breathed heavily for a moment, then jerked his head.

"Come here, Mr. Fraser," he ordered. Jamie stared at him, puzzled.

"Here!" he said peremptorily, pointing to a spot directly before him on the hearthrug. "Stand here, sir!"

"I am not a dog, Major!" Jamie snapped. "Ye'll do as ye like wi' me, but I'll no come when ye call me to heel!"

Taken by surprise, Grey uttered a short, involuntary laugh.

"My apologies, Mr. Fraser," he said dryly. "I meant no offense by the address. I merely wish you to approach nearer. If you will?" He stepped aside and bowed elaborately, gesturing to the hearth.

Jamie hesitated, but then stepped warily onto the patterned rug. Grey stepped close to him, nostrils flared. So close, the fine bones and fair skin of his face made him look almost girlish. The Major put a hand on his sleeve, and the long-lashed eyes sprang wide in shock.

"You're wet!"

"Yes, I am wet," Jamie said, with elaborate patience. He was also freezing. A fine, continuous shiver ran through him, even this close to the fire.

"Why?"

"Why?" Jamie echoed, astonished. "Did you not order the guards to douse me wi' water before leaving me in a freezing cell?"

"I did not, no." It was clear enough that the Major was telling the truth; his face was pale under the ruddy flush of the firelight, and he looked angry. His lips thinned to a fine line.

“I apologize for this, Mr. Fraser.”

“Accepted, Major.” Small wisps of steam were beginning to rise from his clothes, but the warmth was seeping through the damp cloth. His muscles ached from the shivering, and he wished he could lie down on the hearthrug, dog or not.

“Did your escape have anything to do with the matter of which you learned at the Lime Tree Inn?”

Jamie stood silent. The ends of his hair were drying, and small wisps floated across his face.

“Will you swear to me that your escape had *nothing* to do with that matter?”

Jamie stood silent. There seemed no point in saying anything, now.

The little Major was pacing up and down the hearth before him, hands locked behind his back. Now and then, the Major glanced up at him, and then resumed his pacing.

Finally he stopped in front of Jamie.

“Mr. Fraser,” he said formally. “I will ask you once more—why did you escape from the prison?”

Jamie sighed. He wouldn’t get to stand by the fire much longer.

“I cannot tell you, Major.”

“Cannot or will not?” Grey asked sharply.

“It doesna seem a useful distinction, Major, as ye willna hear anything, either way.” He closed his eyes and waited, trying to soak up as much heat as possible before they took him away.

Grey found himself at a loss, both for words and action. *Stubborn does not begin to describe it,* Quarry had said. It didn’t.

He took a deep breath, wondering what to do. He found himself embarrassed by the petty cruelty of the guards’ revenge; the more so because it was just such an action he had first contemplated upon hearing that Fraser was his prisoner.

He would be perfectly within his rights now to order the man flogged, or put back in irons. Condemned to solitary confinement, put on short rations—he could in justice inflict any of a dozen different punishments. And if he did, the odds of his ever finding the Frenchman’s Gold became vanishingly small.

The gold *did* exist. Or at least there was a good probability that it did. Only a belief in that gold would have stirred Fraser to act as he had.

He eyed the man. Fraser's eyes were closed, his lips set firmly. He had a wide, strong mouth, whose grim expression was somewhat belied by the sensitive lips, set soft and exposed in their curly nest of red beard.

Grey paused, trying to think of some way to break past the man's wall of bland defiance. To use force would be worse than useless—and after the guards' actions, he would be ashamed to order it, even had he the stomach for brutality.

The clock on the mantelpiece struck ten. It was late; there was no sound in the fortress, save the occasional footsteps of the soldier on sentry in the courtyard outside the window.

Clearly neither force nor threat would work in gaining the truth. Reluctantly, he realized that there was only one course open to him, if he still wished to pursue the gold. He must put aside his feelings about the man and take Quarry's suggestion. He must pursue an acquaintance, in the course of which he might worm out of the man some clue that would lead him to the hidden treasure.

If it existed, he reminded himself, turning to his prisoner. He took a deep breath.

"Mr. Fraser," he said formally, "will you do me the honor to take supper tomorrow in my quarters?"

He had the momentary satisfaction of having startled the Scottish bastard, at least. The blue eyes opened wide, and then Fraser regained the mastery of his face. He paused for a moment, and then bowed with a flourish, as though he wore a kilt and swinging plaid, and not damp prison rags.

"It will be my pleasure to attend ye, Major," he said.

March 7, 1755

Fraser was delivered by the guard and left to wait in the sitting room, where a table was laid. When Grey came through the door from his bedroom a few moments later, he found his guest standing by the bookshelf, apparently absorbed in a copy of *Nouvelle Héloïse*.

"You are interested in French novels?" he blurted, not realizing until too late how incredulous the question sounded.

Fraser glanced up, startled, and snapped the book shut. Very deliberately, he returned it to its shelf.

"I *can* read, Major," he said. He had shaved; a slight flush burned high on his cheekbones.

"I—yes, of course I did not mean—I merely—" Grey's own cheeks were more flushed than Fraser's. The fact was that he *had* subconsciously assumed that the other did not read, his evident education notwithstanding, merely because of his Highland accent and shabby dress.

While his coat might be shabby, Fraser's manners were not. He ignored Grey's flustered apology, and turned to the bookshelf.

"I have been telling the men the story, but it has been some time since I read it; I thought I would refresh my memory as to the sequence of the ending."

"I see." Just in time, Grey stopped himself from saying "They understand it?"

Fraser evidently read the unspoken question in his face, for he said dryly, "All Scottish children are taught their letters, Major. Still, we have a great tradition of storytelling in the Highlands."

"Ah. Yes. I see."

The entry of his servant with dinner saved him from further awkwardness, and the supper passed uneventfully, though there was little conversation, and that little, limited to the affairs of the prison.

The next time, he had had the chess table set up before the fire, and invited Fraser to join him in a game before the supper was served. There had been a brief flash of surprise from the slanted blue eyes, and then a nod of acquiescence.

That had been a small stroke of genius, Grey thought in retrospect. Relieved of the need for conversation or social courtesies, they had slowly become accustomed to each other as they sat over the inlaid board of ivory and ebony-wood, gauging each other silently by the movements of the chessmen.

When they had at length sat down to dine, they were no longer quite strangers, and the conversation, while still wary and formal, was at least true conversation, and not the awkward affair of starts and stops it had been before. They discussed matters of the prison, had a little conversation of books, and parted formally, but on good terms. Grey did not mention gold.

* * *

And so the weekly custom was established. Grey sought to put his guest at ease, in the hopes that Fraser might let drop some clue to the fate of the Frenchman's Gold. It had not come so far, despite careful probing. Any hint of inquiry as to what had transpired during the three days of Fraser's absence from Ardsmuir met with silence.

Over the mutton and boiled potatoes, he did his best to draw his odd guest into a discussion of France and its politics, by way of discovering whether there might exist any links between Fraser and a possible source of gold from the French Court.

Much to his surprise, he was informed that Fraser had in fact spent two years living in France, employed in the wine business, prior to the Stuart rebellion.

A certain cool humor in Fraser's eyes indicated that the man was well aware of the motives behind this questioning. At the same time, he acquiesced gracefully enough in the conversation, though taking some care always to lead questions away from his personal life, and instead toward more general matters of art and society.

Grey had spent some time in Paris, and despite his attempts at probing Fraser's French connections, found himself becoming interested in the conversation for its own sake.

"Tell me, Mr. Fraser, during your time in Paris, did you chance to encounter the dramatic works of Monsieur Voltaire?"

Fraser smiled. "Oh, aye, Major. In fact, I was privileged to entertain Monsieur Arouet—Voltaire being his nom de plume, aye?—at my table, on more than one occasion."

"Really?" Grey cocked a brow in interest. "And is he as great a wit in person as with the pen?"

"I couldna really say," Fraser replied, tidily forking up a slice of mutton. "He seldom said anything at all, let alone much sparkling with wit. He only sat hunched over in his chair, watching everyone, wi' his eyes rolling about from one to another. I shouldna be at all surprised to hear that things said at my dinner table later appeared on the stage, though fortunately I never encountered a parody of myself in his work." He closed his eyes in momentary concentration, chewing his mutton.

"Is the meat to your taste, Mr. Fraser?" Grey inquired politely. It was gristled, tough, and seemed barely edible to him. But then, he might well think differently, had he been eating oatmeal, weeds, and the occasional rat.

"Aye, it is, Major, I thank ye." Fraser dabbed up a bit of wine sauce and brought the last bite to his lips, making no demur when Grey signaled MacKay to bring back the platter.

"Monsieur Arouet wouldna appreciate such an excellent meal, I'm afraid," Fraser said, shaking his head as he helped himself to more mutton.

"I should expect a man so feted in French society to have somewhat more exacting tastes," Grey answered dryly. Half his own meal remained on his plate, destined for the supper of the cat Augustus.

Fraser laughed. "Scarcely that, Major," he assured Grey. "I have never seen Monsieur Arouet consume anything beyond a glass of water and a dry biscuit, no matter how lavish the occasion. He's a weazened wee scrap of a man, ye ken, and a martyr to the indigestion."

"Indeed?" Grey was fascinated. "Perhaps that explains the cynicism of some of the sentiments I have seen expressed in his plays. Or do you not think that the character of an author shows in the construction of his work?"

"Given some of the characters that I have seen appear in plays and novels, Major, I should think the author a bit depraved who drew them entirely from himself, no?"

"I suppose that is so," Grey answered, smiling at the thought of some of the more extreme fictional characters with whom he was acquainted. "Though if an author constructs these colorful personages from life, rather than from the depths of imagination, surely he must boast a most varied acquaintance!"

Fraser nodded, brushing crumbs from his lap with the linen napkin.

"It was not Monsieur Arouet, but a colleague of his—a lady novelist—who remarked to me once that writing novels was a cannibal's art, in which one often mixed small portions of one's friends and one's enemies together, seasoned them with imagination, and allowed the whole to stew together into a savory concoction."

Grey laughed at the description, and beckoned to MacKay to take away the plates and bring in the decanters of port and sherry.

"A delightful description, indeed! Speaking of cannibals, though, have you chanced to be acquainted with Mr. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*? It has been a favorite of mine since boyhood."

The conversation turned then to romances, and the excitement of the tropics. It was very late indeed when Fraser returned to his cell, leaving Major Grey entertained, but no wiser concerning either the source or the disposition of the wanderer's gold.

April 2, 1755

John Grey opened the packet of quills his mother had sent from London. Swan's quills, both finer and stronger than common goose-quills. He smiled faintly at the sight of them; an unsubtle reminder that his correspondence was in arrears.

His mother would have to wait until tomorrow, though. He took out the small, monogrammed penknife he always carried, and slowly trimmed a quill to his liking, composing in his mind what he meant to say. By the time he dipped his quill into the ink, the words were clear in his mind, and he wrote quickly, seldom pausing.

2 April, 1755

To Harold, Lord Melton, Earl of Moray

My dear Hal, he wrote, *I write to inform you of a recent occurrence which has much engaged my attention. It may amount in the end to nothing, but if there be any substance in the matter, it is of great import.* The details of the wandering man's appearance, and the report of his ravings followed swiftly, but Grey found himself slowing as he told of Fraser's escape and recapture.

> *The fact that Fraser vanished from the precincts of the prison so soon following these events suggests strongly to me that there was in truth some substance in the vagrant's words.*
>
> *If this were the case, however, I find myself at a loss to account for Fraser's subsequent actions. He was recaptured within three days of his escape, at a point no more than a mile from the coast. The country-side beyond the prison is deserted for a great many miles beyond the village of Ardsmuir, and there is little likelihood of his meeting with a confederate to whom he might pass word of the treasure. Every house in the village has been searched, as was Fraser himself, with no trace discovered of any gold. It is a remote district, and I am reasonably sure that he communicated with no one outside the prison prior to his escape—I am positive that he has not done so since, for he is closely watched.*

Grey stopped, seeing once more the windswept figure of James Fraser, wild as the red stags and as much at home on the moor as one of them.

He had not the slightest doubt that Fraser could have eluded the dragoons easily, had he so chosen, but he had not. He had deliberately allowed himself to be recaptured. Why? He resumed writing, more slowly.

> *It may be, of course, that Fraser failed to find the treasure, or that such a treasure does not exist. I find myself somewhat inclined to this belief, for if he were in possession of a great sum, surely he would have departed from the district at once? He is a strong man, well-accustomed to rough living, and entirely capable, I believe, of making his way overland to some point on the coast from which he might make an escape by sea.*

Grey bit the end of the quill gently, tasting ink. He made a face at the bitterness, rose, and spat out the window. He stood there for a minute, looking out into the cold spring night, absently wiping his mouth.

It had finally occurred to him to ask; not the question he had been asking all along, but the more important one. He had done it at the conclusion of a game of chess, which Fraser had won. The guard was standing at the door, ready to escort Fraser back to his cell; as the prisoner had risen from his seat, Grey had stood up, too.

"I shall not ask you again why you left the prison," he had said, calmly conversational. "But I will ask you—why did you come back?"

Fraser had frozen briefly, startled. He turned back and met Grey's eyes directly. For a moment he said nothing. Then his mouth curled up in a smile.

"I suppose I must value the company, Major; I can tell ye, it's not the food."

Grey snorted slightly, remembering. Unable to think of a suitable response, he had allowed Fraser to leave. It was only later that night that he had laboriously arrived at an answer, at last having had the wit to ask questions of himself, rather than of Fraser. What would he, Grey, have done, had Fraser *not* returned?

The answer was that his next step would have been an inquiry into Fraser's family connections, in case the man had sought refuge or help from them.

And that, he was fairly sure, was the answer. Grey had not taken part in the subjugation of the Highlands—he had been posted to Italy and France—but he had heard more than enough of that particular campaign. He had seen the blackened stones of too many charred cottages, rising like cairns amid the ruined fields, as he traveled north to Ardsmuir.

The fierce loyalties of the Scottish Highlanders were legendary. A Highlander who had seen those cots in flames might well choose to suffer prison, irons, or even flogging, to save his family a visitation from English soldiers.

Grey sat and took up his quill, dipping it afresh.

You will know, I think, the mettle of the Scots, he wrote. That one in particular, he thought wryly.

> *It is unlikely that any force or threat I can exert will induce Fraser to reveal the whereabouts of the gold—should it exist, and if it does not, I can still less expect any threat to be effective! I have instead chosen to begin a formal acquaintance with Fraser, in his capacity as chief of the Scottish prisoners, in hopes of surprising some clue from his conversation. So far, I have gained nothing from this process. One further avenue of approach suggests itself, however.*

For obvious reasons, he went on, writing slowly as he formed the thought, *I do not wish to make this matter known officially.* To call attention to a hoard that might well prove to be chimerical was dangerous; the chance of disappointment was too great. Time enough, if the gold were found, to inform his superiors and collect his deserved reward—escape from Ardsmuir; a posting back to civilization.

> *Therefore I approach you, dear brother, and ask for your help in discovering what particulars may obtain regarding the family of James Fraser. I pray you, do not let anyone be alarmed by your inquiries; if such family connections exist, I would have them ignorant of my interest for the present. My deepest thanks for any efforts you may be able to exert on my behalf, and believe me always,*

He dipped the pen once more and signed with a small flourish,

Your humble servant and most affectionate brother,

John William Grey.

May 15, 1755

“The men sick of *la grippe,*” Grey inquired, “how do they fare?” Dinner was over, and with it their conversation of books. Now it was time for business.

Fraser frowned over the single glass of sherry that was all he would accept in the way of drink. He still had not tasted it, though dinner had been over for some time.

“None so well. I have more than sixty men ill, fifteen of them verra badly off.” He hesitated. “Might I ask …”

“I can promise nothing, Mr. Fraser, but you may ask,” Grey answered formally. He had barely sipped his own sherry, nor more than tasted his dinner; his stomach had been knotted with anticipation all day.

Jamie paused a moment longer, calculating his chances. He wouldn’t get everything; he must try for what was most important, but leave Grey room to reject some requests.

“We have need of more blankets, Major, more fires, and more food. And medicines.”

Grey swirled the sherry in his cup, watching the light from the fire play in the vortex. Ordinary business first, he reminded himself. Time enough for the other, later.

“We have no more than twenty spare blankets in store,” he answered, “but you may have those for the use of the very sick. I fear I cannot augment the ration of food; the rat-spoilage has been considerable, and we lost a great quantity of meal in the collapse of the storeroom two months ago. We have limited resources, and—”

“It is not so much a question of more,” Fraser put in quickly. “But rather of the type of food. Those who are most ill cannot readily digest the bread and parritch. Perhaps a substitution of some sort might be arranged?” Each man was given, by law, a quart of oatmeal parritch and a small wheaten loaf each day. Thin barley brose supplemented this twice each week, with a quart of meat stew added on Sunday, to sustain the needs of men working at manual labor for twelve to sixteen hours per day.

Grey raised one eyebrow. “What are you suggesting, Mr. Fraser?”

“I assume that the prison does have some allowance for the purchase of salt beef, turnips and onions, for the Sunday stew?”

“Yes, but that allowance must provide for the next quarter’s supplies.”

“Then what I suggest, Major, is that you might use that money now to provide broth and stew for those who are sick. Those of us who are hale will willingly forgo our share of meat for the quarter.”

Grey frowned. “But will the prisoners not be weakened, with no meat at all? Will they not be unable to work?”

“Those who die of the grippe will assuredly not work,” Fraser pointed out acerbically.

Grey snorted briefly. “True. But those of you who remain healthy will not be healthy long, if you give up your rations for so long a time.” He shook his head. “No, Mr. Fraser, I think not. It is better to let the sick take their chances than to risk many more falling ill.”

Fraser was a stubborn man. He lowered his head for a moment, then looked up to try again.

“Then I would ask your leave to hunt for ourselves, Major, if the Crown cannot supply us with adequate food.”

“Hunt?” Grey’s fair brows rose in astonishment. “Give you weapons and allow you to wander the moors? God’s teeth, Mr. Fraser!”

“I think God doesna suffer much from the scurvy, Major,” Jamie said dryly. “*His* teeth are in no danger.” He saw the twitch of Grey’s mouth and relaxed slightly. Grey always tried to suppress his sense of humor, no doubt feeling that put him at a disadvantage. In his dealings with Jamie Fraser, it did.

Emboldened by that telltale twitch, Jamie pressed on.

“Not weapons, Major. And not wandering. Will ye give us leave to set snares upon the moor when we cut peats, though? And to keep such meat as we take?” A prisoner would now and then contrive a snare as it was, but as often as not, the catch would be taken from him by the guards.

Grey drew a deep breath and blew it out slowly, considering.

“Snares? Would you not require materials for the construction of these snares, Mr. Fraser?”

“Only a bit of string, Major,” Jamie assured him. “A dozen balls, no more, of any sort of twine or string, and ye may leave the rest to us."

Grey rubbed slowly at his cheek in contemplation, then nodded.

"Very well." The Major turned to the small secretary, plucked the quill out of its inkwell and made a note. "I shall give orders to that effect tomorrow. Now, as to the rest of your requests …"

A quarter-hour later, it was settled. Jamie sat back at last, sighing, and finally took a sip of his sherry. He considered that he had earned it.

He had permission not only for the snares, but for the peat-cutters to work an extra half-hour per day, the extra peats to provide for an additional small fire in each cell. No medicines were to be had, but he had leave for Sutherland to send a message to a cousin in Ullapool, whose husband was an apothecary. If the cousin's husband were willing to send medicines, the prisoners could have them.

A decent evening's work, Jamie thought. He took another sip of sherry and closed his eyes, enjoying the warmth of the fire against his cheek.

Grey watched his guest beneath lowered lids, seeing the broad shoulders slump a little, tension eased now that their business was finished. Or so Fraser thought. Very good, Grey thought to himself. Yes, drink your sherry and relax. I want you thoroughly off guard.

He leaned forward to pick up the decanter, and felt the crackle of Hal's letter in his breast pocket. His heart began to beat faster.

"Will you not take a drop more, Mr. Fraser? And tell me—how does your sister fare these days?"

He saw Fraser's eyes spring open, and his face whiten with shock.

"How are matters there at—Lallybroch, they call it, do they not?" Grey pushed aside the decanter, keeping his eyes fixed on his guest.

"I could not say, Major." Fraser's voice was even, but his eyes were narrowed to slits.

"No? But I daresay they do very well these days, what with the gold you have provided them."

The broad shoulders tightened suddenly, bunched under the shabby coat. Grey carelessly picked up one of the chessmen from the nearby board, tossing it casually from one hand to the other.

"I suppose Ian—your brother-in-law is named Ian, I think?—will know how to make good use of it."

Fraser had himself under control again. The dark blue eyes met Grey's directly.

"Since you are so well informed as to my connections, Major," he said evenly, "I must suppose that you also are aware that my home lies well over a hundred miles from Ardsmuir. Perhaps you will explain how I might have traveled that distance twice within the space of three days?"

Grey's eyes stayed on the chess piece, rolling idly from hand to hand. It was a pawn, a cone-headed little warrior with a fierce face, carved from a cylinder of walrus ivory.

"You might have met someone upon the moor who would have borne word of the gold—or borne the gold itself—to your family."

Fraser snorted briefly.

"On Ardsmuir? How likely is it, Major, that I should by happenstance encounter a person known to me on that moor? Much less that it should be a person whom I would trust to convey a message such as you suggest?" He set down his glass with finality. "I met no one on the moor, Major."

"And should I trust *your* word to that effect, Mr. Fraser?" Grey allowed considerable skepticism to show in his voice. He glanced up, brows raised. Fraser's high cheekbones flushed slightly.

"No one has ever had cause to doubt my word, Major," he said stiffly.

"Have they not, indeed?" Grey was not altogether feigning his anger. "I believe you gave *me* your word, upon the occasion of my ordering your irons stricken off!"

"And I kept it!"

"Did you?" The two men sat upright, glaring at each other over the table.

"You asked three things of me, Major, and I have kept that bargain in every particular!"

Grey gave a contemptuous snort.

"Indeed, Mr. Fraser? And if that is so, pray what was it caused you suddenly to despise the company of your fellows and seek congress with the coneys on the moor? Since you assure me that you met no one else—you give me *your word* that it is so.” This last was spoken with an audible sneer that brought the color surging into Fraser’s face.

One of the big hands curled slowly into a fist.

“Aye, Major,” he said softly. “I give ye *my word* that that is so.” He seemed to realize at this point that his fist was clenched; very slowly, he unfolded it, laying his hand flat on the table.

“And as to your escape?”

“And as to my escape, Major, I have told you that I will say nothing.” Fraser exhaled slowly and sat back in his chair, eyes fixed on Grey under thick, ruddy brows.

Grey paused for a moment, then sat back himself, setting the chess piece on the table.

“Let me speak plainly, Mr. Fraser. I do you the honor of assuming you to be a sensible man.”

“I am deeply sensible of the honor, Major, I do assure you.”

Grey heard the irony, but did not respond; he held the upper hand now.

“The fact is, Mr. Fraser, that it is of no consequence whether you did in fact communicate with your family regarding the matter of the gold. You might have done so. That possibility alone is sufficient to warrant my sending a party of dragoons to search the premises of Lallybroch—thoroughly—and to arrest and interrogate the members of your family.”

He reached into his breast pocket and withdrew a piece of paper. Unfolding it, he read the list of names.

“Ian Murray—your brother-in-law, I collect? His wife, Janet. That would be your sister, of course. Their children, James—named for his uncle, perhaps?”—he glanced up briefly, long enough to catch a glimpse of Fraser’s face, than returned to his list—“Margaret, Katherine, Janet, Michael, and Ian. Quite a brood,” he said, in a tone of dismissal that equated the six younger Murrays with a litter of piglets. He laid the list on the table beside the chess piece.

“The three eldest children are old enough to be arrested and interrogated with their parents, you know. Such interrogations are frequently ungentle, Mr. Fraser."

In this, he spoke no less than the truth, and Fraser knew it. All color had faded from the prisoner's face, leaving the strong bones stark under the skin. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them.

Grey had a brief memory of Quarry's voice, saying *"If you dine alone with the man, don't turn your back on him."* The hair rose briefly on the back of his neck, but he controlled himself, returning Fraser's blue stare.

"What do you want of me?" The voice was low, and hoarse with fury, but the Scot sat motionless, a figure carved in cinnabar, gilded by the flame.

Grey took a deep breath.

"I want the truth," he said softly.

There was no sound in the chamber save the pop and hiss of the peats in the grate. There was a flicker of movement from Fraser, no more than the twitch of his fingers against his leg, and then nothing. The Scot sat, head turned, staring into the fire as though he sought an answer there.

Grey sat quietly, waiting. He could afford to wait. At last, Fraser turned back to face him.

"The truth, then." He took a deep breath; Grey could see the breast of his linen shirt swell with it—he had no waistcoat.

"I kept my word, Major. I told ye faithfully all that the man said to me that night. What I didna tell ye was that some of what he said had meaning to me."

"Indeed." Grey held himself still, scarcely daring to move. "And what meaning was that?"

Fraser's wide mouth compressed to a thin line.

"I—spoke to you of my wife," he said, forcing the words out as though they hurt him.

"Yes, you said that she was dead."

"I said that she was *gone*, Major," Fraser corrected softly. His eyes were fixed on the pawn. "It is likely she is dead, but—" He stopped and swallowed, then went on more firmly.

"My wife was a healer. What they call in the Highlands a charmer, but more than that. She was a white lady—a wisewoman."

He glanced up briefly. “The word in Gaelic is *ban-druidh;* it also means witch.”

“The white witch.” Grey also spoke softly, but excitement was thrumming through his blood. “So the man’s words referred to your wife?”

“I thought they might. And if so—” The wide shoulders stirred in a slight shrug. “I had to go,” he said simply. “To see.”

“How did you know where to go? Was that also something you gleaned from the vagrant’s words?” Grey leaned forward slightly, curious. Fraser nodded, eyes still fixed on the ivory chess piece.

“There is a spot I knew of, not too far distant from this place, where there is a shrine to St. Bride. St. Bride was also called ‘the white lady,’ ” he explained, looking up. “Though the shrine has been there a verra long time—since long before St. Bride came to Scotland.”

“I see. And so you assumed that the man’s words referred to this spot, as well as to your wife?”

Again the shrug.

“I did not know,” Fraser repeated. “I couldna say whether he meant anything to do with my wife, or whether ‘the white witch’ only meant St. Bride—was only meant to direct me to the place—or perhaps neither. But I felt I must go.”

He described the place in question, and at Grey’s prodding, gave directions for reaching it.

“The shrine itself is a small stone in the shape of an ancient cross, so weathered that the markings scarce show on it. It stands above a small pool, half-buried in the heather. Ye can find small white stones in the pool, tangled among the roots of the heather that grows on the bank. The stones are thought to have great powers, Major,” he explained, seeing the other’s blank look. “But only when used by a white lady.”

“I see. And your wife …?” Grey paused delicately.

Fraser shook his head briefly.

“There was nothing there to do with her,” he said softly. “She is truly gone.” His voice was low and controlled, but Grey could hear the undertone of desolation.

Fraser's face was normally calm and unreadable; he did not change expression now, but the marks of grief were clear, etched in the lines beside mouth and eyes, thrown into darkness by the flickering fire. It seemed an intrusion to break in upon such a depth of feeling, unstated though it was, but Grey had his duty.

"And the gold, Mr. Fraser?" he asked quietly. "What of that?"

Fraser heaved a deep sigh.

"It was there," he said flatly.

"What!" Grey sat bolt upright in his chair, staring at the Scot. "You found it?"

Fraser glanced up at him then, and his mouth twisted wryly.

"I found it."

"Was it indeed the French gold that Louis sent for Charles Stuart?" Excitement was racing through Grey's bloodstream, with visions of himself delivering great chests of gold louis d'or to his superiors in London.

"Louis never sent gold to the Stuarts," Fraser said, with certainty. "No, Major, what I found at the saint's pool was gold, but not French coin."

What he had found was a small box, containing a few gold and silver coins, and a small leather pouch, filled with jewels.

"Jewels?" Grey blurted. "Where the devil did they come from?"

Fraser cast him a glance of mild exasperation.

"I havena the slightest notion, Major," he said. "How should I know?"

"No, of course not," Grey said, coughing to cover his flusterment. "Certainly. But this treasure—where is it now?"

"I threw it into the sea."

Grey stared blankly at him.

"You—what?"

"I threw it into the sea," Fraser repeated patiently. The slanted blue eyes met Grey's steadily. "Ye'll maybe have heard of a place called the Devil's Cauldron, Major? It's no more than half a mile from the saint's pool."

"Why? Why would you have done such a thing?" Grey demanded. "It isn't sense, man!"

“I wasna much concerned with sense at the time, Major,” Fraser said softly. “I had gone there hoping—and with that hope gone, the treasure seemed no more to me than a wee box of stones and bits of tarnished metal. I had no use for it.” He looked up, one brow slightly raised in irony. “But I didna see the ‘sense’ in giving it to King Geordie, either. So I flung it into the sea.”

Grey sat back in his chair and mechanically poured out another cup of sherry, hardly noticing what he was doing. His thoughts were in turmoil.

Fraser sat, head turned away and chin propped on his fist, gazing into the fire, his face gone back to its usual impassivity. The light glowed behind him, lighting the long, straight line of his nose and the soft curve of his lip, shadowing jaw and brow with sternness.

Grey took a good-sized swallow of his drink and steadied himself.

“It is a moving story, Mr. Fraser,” he said levelly. “Most dramatic. And yet there is no evidence that it is the truth.”

Fraser stirred, turning his head to look at Grey. Jamie’s slanted eyes narrowed, in what might have been amusement.

“Aye, there is, Major,” he said. He reached under the waistband of his ragged breeches, fumbled for a moment, and held out his hand above the tabletop, waiting.

Grey extended his own hand in reflex, and a small object dropped into his open palm.

It was a sapphire, dark blue as Fraser’s own eyes, and a good size, too.

Grey opened his mouth, but said nothing, choked with astonishment.

“There is your evidence that the treasure existed, Major.” Fraser nodded toward the stone in Grey’s hand. His eyes met Grey’s across the tabletop. “And as for the rest—I am sorry to say, Major, that ye must take my word for it.”

“But—but—you said—”

“I did.” Fraser was as calm as though they had been discussing the rain outside. “I kept that one wee stone, thinking that it might be some use, if I were ever to be freed, or that I might find some chance of sending it to my family. For ye’ll appreciate, Major”—a light glinted derisively in Jamie's blue eyes—"that my family couldna make use of a treasure of that sort, without attracting a deal of unwelcome attention. One stone, perhaps, but not a great many of them."

Grey could scarcely think. What Fraser said was true; a Highland farmer like his brother-in-law would have no way of turning such a treasure into money without causing talk that would bring down the King's men on Lallybroch in short order. And Fraser himself might well be imprisoned for the rest of his life. But still, to toss away a fortune so lightly! And yet, looking at the Scot, he could well believe it. If ever there was a man whose judgment would not be distorted by greed, James Fraser was it. Still—

"How did you keep this by you?" Grey demanded abruptly. "You were searched to the skin when you were brought back."

The wide mouth curved slightly in the first genuine smile Grey had seen.

"I swallowed it," Fraser said.

Grey's hand closed convulsively on the sapphire. He opened his hand and rather gingerly set the gleaming blue thing on the table by the chess piece.

"I see," he said.

"I'm sure ye do, Major," said Fraser, with a gravity that merely made the glint of amusement in his eyes more pronounced. "A diet of rough parritch has its advantages, now and again."

Grey quelled the sudden urge to laugh, rubbing a finger hard over his lip.

"I'm sure it does, Mr. Fraser." He sat for a moment, contemplating the blue stone. Then he looked up abruptly.

"You are a Papist, Mr. Fraser?" He knew the answer already; there were few adherents of the Catholic Stuarts who were not. Without waiting for a reply, he rose and went to the bookshelf in the corner. It took a moment to find; a gift from his mother, it was not part of his usual reading.

He laid the calf-bound Bible on the table, next to the stone.

"I am myself inclined to accept your word as a gentleman, Mr. Fraser," he said. "But you will understand that I have my duty to consider.”

Fraser gazed at the book for a long moment, then looked up at Grey, his expression unreadable.

“Aye, I ken that fine, Major,” he said quietly. Without hesitation, he laid a broad hand on the Bible.

“I swear in the name of Almighty God and by His Holy Word,” he said firmly. “The treasure is as I told you.” His eyes glowed in the firelight, dark and unfathomable. “And I swear on my hope of heaven,” he added softly, “that it rests now in the sea.”

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THE TORREMOLINOS GAMBIT

With the question of the French gold thus settled, they returned to what had become their routine; a brief period of formal negotiation over the affairs of the prisoners, followed by informal conversation and sometimes a game of chess. This evening, they had come from the dinner table, still discussing Samuel Richardson's immense novel *Pamela*.

"Do you think that the size of the book is justified by the complexity of the story?" Grey asked, leaning forward to light a cheroot from the candle on the sideboard. "It must after all be a great expense to the publisher, as well as requiring a substantial effort from the reader, a book of that length."

Fraser smiled. He did not smoke himself, but had chosen to drink port this evening, claiming that to be the only drink whose taste would be unaffected by the stink of tobacco.

"What is it—twelve hundred pages? Aye, I think so. After all, it is difficult to sum up the complications of a life in a short space with any hope of constructing an accurate account."

"True. I have heard the point made, though, that the novelist's skill lies in the artful selection of detail. Do you not suppose that a volume of such length may indicate a lack of discipline in such selection, and hence a lack of skill?"

Fraser considered, sipping the ruby liquid slowly.

"I have seen books where that is the case, to be sure," he said. "An author seeks by sheer inundation of detail to overwhelm the reader into belief. In this case, however, I think it isna so. Each character is most carefully considered, and all the incidents chosen seem necessary to the story. No, I think it is true that some stories simply require a greater space in which to be told.” He took another sip and laughed.

“Of course, I admit to some prejudice in that regard, Major. Given the circumstances under which I read *Pamela*, I should have been delighted had the book been twice as long as it was.”

“And what circumstances were those?” Grey pursed his lips and blew a careful smoke ring that floated toward the ceiling.

“I lived in a cave in the Highlands for several years, Major,” Fraser said wryly. “I seldom had more than three books with me, and those must last me for months at a time. Aye, I’m partial to lengthy tomes, but I must admit that it is not a universal preference.”

“That’s certainly true,” Grey agreed. He squinted, following the track of the first smoke ring, and blew another. Just off target, it drifted to the side.

“I remember,” he continued, sucking fiercely on his cheroot, encouraging it to draw, “a friend of my mother’s—saw the book—in Mother’s drawing room—” He drew deeply, and blew once more, giving a small grunt of satisfaction as the new ring struck the old, dispersing it into a tiny cloud.

“Lady Hensley, it was. She picked up the book, looked at it in that helpless way so many females affect and said, ‘Oh, Countess! You are so *courageous* to attack a novel of such stupendous size. I fear I should never dare to start so lengthy a book myself.’ ” Grey cleared his throat and lowered his voice from the falsetto he had affected for Lady Hensley.

“To which Mother replied,” he went on in his normal voice, “ ‘Don’t worry about it for a moment, my dear; you wouldn’t understand it anyway.’ ”

Fraser laughed, then coughed, waving away the remnants of another smoke ring.

Grey quickly snuffed out the cheroot, and rose from his seat.

“Come along then; we’ve just time for a quick game.”

They were not evenly matched; Fraser was much the better player, but Grey could now and then contrive to rescue a match through sheer bravado of play.

Tonight, he tried the Torremolinos Gambit. It was a risky opening, a queen's knight opening. Successfully launched, it paved the way for an unusual combination of rook and bishop, depending for its success upon a piece of misdirection by the king's knight and king bishop's pawn. Grey used it seldom, for it was a trick that would not work on a mediocre player, one not sharp enough to detect the knight's threat, or its possibilities. It was a gambit for use against a shrewd and subtle mind, and after nearly three months of weekly games, Grey knew quite well what sort of mind he was facing across the tinted ivory squares.

He forced himself not to hold his breath as he made the next-to-final move of the combination. He felt Fraser's eyes rest on him briefly, but didn't meet them, for fear of betraying his excitement. Instead, he reached to the sideboard for the decanter, and refilled both glasses with the sweet dark port, keeping his eyes carefully on the rising liquid.

Would it be the pawn, or the knight? Fraser's head was bent over the board in contemplation, small reddish lights winking in his hair as he moved slightly. The knight, and all was well; it would be too late. The pawn, and all was likely lost.

Grey could feel his heart beating heavily behind his breastbone as he waited. Fraser's hand hovered over the board, then suddenly decided, swooped down and touched the piece. The knight.

He must have let his breath out too noisily, for Fraser glanced sharply up at him, but it was too late. Careful to keep any overt expression of triumph off his face, Grey castled.

Fraser frowned at the board for a long moment, eyes flicking among the pieces, assessing. Then he jerked slightly, seeing it, and looked up, eyes wide.

"Why ye cunning wee bastard!" he said, in a tone of surprised respect. "Where in the bloody hell did ye learn *that* trick?"

"My elder brother taught it to me," Grey answered, losing his customary wariness in a rush of delight at his success. He normally beat Fraser no more than three times in ten, and victory was sweet.

Fraser uttered a short laugh, and reaching out a long index finger, delicately tipped his king over.

"I should have expected something like that from a man like my Lord Melton," he observed casually.

Grey stiffened in his seat. Fraser saw the movement, and arched one brow quizzically.

"It is Lord Melton ye mean, is it not?" he said. "Or perhaps you have another brother?"

"No," Grey said. His lips felt slightly numb, though that might only be the cheroot. "No, I have only one brother." His heart had begun to pound again, but this time with a heavy, dull beat. Had the Scottish bastard remembered all the time who he was?

"Our meeting was necessarily rather brief," the Scot said dryly. "But memorable." He picked up his glass and took a drink, watching Grey across the crystal rim. "Perhaps ye didna know that I had met Lord Melton, on Culloden Field?"

"I knew. I fought at Culloden." All Grey's pleasure in his victory had evaporated. He felt slightly nauseated from the smoke. "I didn't know that you would recall Hal, though—or know of the relationship between us."

"As I have that meeting to thank for my life, I am not likely to forget it," Fraser said dryly.

Grey looked up. "I understand that you were not so thankful when Hal met you at Culloden."

The line of Fraser's mouth tightened, then relaxed.

"No," he said softly. He smiled without humor. "Your brother verra stubbornly refused to shoot me. I wasna inclined to be grateful for the favor at the time."

"You wished to be shot?" Grey's eyebrows rose.

The Scot's eyes were remote, fixed on the chessboard, but clearly seeing something else.

"I thought I had reason," he said softly. "At the time."

"What reason?" Grey asked. He caught a gimlet glance and added hastily, "I mean no impertinence in asking. It is only—at that time, I —I felt similarly. From what you have said of the Stuarts, I cannot think that the loss of their cause would have led you to such despair."

There was a faint flicker near Fraser's mouth, much too faint to be called a smile. He inclined his head briefly, in acknowledgment.

"There were those who fought for love of Charles Stuart—or from loyalty to his father's right of kingship. But you are right; I wasna one of those."

He didn't explain further. Grey took a deep breath, keeping his eyes fixed on the board.

"I said that I felt much as you did, at the time. I—lost a particular friend at Culloden," he said. With half his mind he wondered why he should speak of Hector to this man, of all men; a Scottish warrior who had slashed his way across that deadly field, whose sword might well have been the one … At the same time, he could not help but speak; there was no one to whom he *could* speak of Hector, save this man, this prisoner who could speak to no one else, whose words could do him no damage.

"He made me go and look at the body—Hal did, my brother," Grey blurted. He looked down at his hand, where the deep blue of Hector's sapphire burned against his skin, a smaller version of the one Fraser had reluctantly given him.

"He said that I must; that unless I saw him dead, I should never really believe it. That unless I knew Hector—my friend—was really gone, I would grieve forever. If I saw, and knew, I would grieve, but then I should heal—and forget." He looked up, with a painful attempt at a smile. "Hal is generally right, but not always."

Perhaps he had healed, but he would never forget. Certainly he would not forget his last sight of Hector, lying wax-faced and still in the early morning light, long dark lashes resting delicately on his cheeks as they did when he slept. And the gaping wound that had half-severed his head from his body, leaving the windpipe and large vessels of the neck exposed in butchery.

They sat silent for a moment. Fraser said nothing, but picked up his glass and drained it. Without asking, Grey refilled both glasses for the third time.

He leaned back in his chair, looking curiously at his guest.

"Do you find your life greatly burdensome, Mr. Fraser?"

The Scot looked up then, and met his eyes with a long, level gaze. Evidently, Fraser found nothing in his own face save curiosity, for the broad shoulders across the board relaxed their tension somewhat, and the wide mouth softened its grim line. The Scot leaned back, and flexed his right hand slowly, opening and closing it to stretch the muscles. Grey saw that the hand had been damaged at one time; small scars were visible in the firelight, and two of the fingers were set stiffly.

"Perhaps not greatly so," the Scot replied slowly. He met Grey's eyes with dispassion. "I think perhaps the greatest burden lies in caring for those we cannot help."

"Not in having no one for whom to care?"

Fraser paused before answering; he might have been weighing the position of the pieces on the table.

"That is emptiness," he said at last, softly. "But no great burden."

It was late; there was no sound from the fortress around them save the occasional step of the soldier on sentry in the courtyard below.

"Your wife—she was a healer, you said?"

"She was. She … her name was Claire." Fraser swallowed, then lifted his cup and drank, as though trying to dislodge something stuck in his throat.

"You cared very much for her, I think?" Grey said softly.

He recognized in the Scot the same compulsion he had had a few moments earlier—the need to speak a name kept hidden, to bring back for a moment the ghost of a love.

"I had meant to thank you sometime, Major," the Scot said softly.

Grey was startled.

"Thank me? For what?"

The Scot looked up, eyes dark over the finished game.

"For that night at Carryarrick where we first met." His eyes were steady on Grey's. "For what ye did for my wife."

"You remembered," Grey said hoarsely.

"I hadna forgotten," Fraser said simply. Grey steeled himself to look across the table, but when he did so, he found no hint of laughter in the slanted blue eyes.

Fraser nodded at him, gravely formal. “Ye were a worthy foe, Major; I wouldna forget you.”

John Grey laughed bitterly. Oddly enough, he felt less upset than he had thought he would, at having the shameful memory so explicitly recalled.

“If you found a sixteen-year-old shitting himself with fear a worthy foe, Mr. Fraser, then it is little wonder that the Highland army was defeated!”

Fraser smiled faintly.

“A man that doesna shit himself with a pistol held to his head, Major, has either no bowels, or no brains.”

Despite himself, Grey laughed. One edge of Fraser’s mouth turned slightly up.

“Ye wouldna speak to save your own life, but ye would do it to save a lady’s honor. The honor of my own lady,” Fraser said softly. “That doesna seem like cowardice to me.”

The ring of truth was too evident in the Scot’s voice to mistake or ignore.

“I did nothing for your wife,” Grey said, rather bitterly. “She was in no danger, after all!”

“Ye didna ken that, aye?” Fraser pointed out. “Ye thought to save her life and virtue, at the risk of your own. Ye did her honor by the notion—and I have thought of it now and again, since I—since I lost her.” The hesitation in Fraser’s voice was slight; only the tightening of the muscles in his throat betrayed his emotion.

“I see.” Grey breathed deep, and let it out slowly. “I am sorry for your loss,” he added formally.

They were both quiet for a moment, alone with their ghosts. Then Fraser looked up and drew in his breath.

“Your brother was right, Major,” he said. “I thank ye, and I’ll bid ye good e’en.” He rose, set down his cup and left the room.

* * *

It reminded him in some ways of his years in the cave, with his visits to the house, those oases of life and warmth in the desert of solitude. Here, it was the reverse, going from the crowded, cold squalor of the cells up to the Major's glowing suite, able for a few hours to stretch both mind and body, to relax in warmth and conversation and the abundance of food.

It gave him the same odd sense of dislocation, though; that sense of losing some valuable part of himself that could not survive the passage back to daily life. Each time, the passage became more difficult.

He stood in the drafty passageway, waiting for the turnkey to unlock the cell door. The sounds of sleeping men buzzed in his ears and the smell of them wafted out as the door opened, pungent as a fart.

He filled his lungs with a quick deep breath, and ducked his head to enter.

There was a stir among the bodies on the floor as he stepped into the room, his shadow falling black across the prone and bundled shapes. The door swung closed behind him, leaving the cell in darkness, but there was a ripple of awareness through the room, as men stirred awake to his coming.

"You're back late, Mac Dubh," said Murdo Lindsay, voice rusty with sleep. "Ye'll be sair tuckered tomorrow."

"I'll manage, Murdo," he whispered, stepping over bodies. He pulled off his coat and laid it carefully over the bench, then took up the rough blanket and sought his space on the floor, his long shadow flickering across the moon-barred window.

Ronnie Sinclair turned over as Mac Dubh lay down beside him. He blinked sleepily, sandy lashes nearly invisible in the moonlight.

"Did Wee Goldie feed ye decent, Mac Dubh?"

"He did, Ronnie, thank ye." He shifted on the stones, seeking a comfortable position.

"Ye'll tell us about it tomorrow?" The prisoners took an odd pleasure in hearing what he had been served for dinner, taking it as an honor that their chief should be well fed.

"Aye, I will, Ronnie," Mac Dubh promised. "But I must sleep now, aye?"

"Sleep well, Mac Dubh," came a whisper from the corner where Hayes was rolled up, curled like a set of teaspoons with MacLeod, Innes, and Keith, who all liked to sleep warm.

"Sweet dreams, Gavin," Mac Dubh whispered back, and little by little, the cell settled back into silence.

He dreamed of Claire that night. She lay in his arms, heavy-limbed and fragrant. She was with child; her belly round and smooth as a muskmelon, her breasts rich and full, the nipples dark as wine, urging him to taste them.

Her hand cupped itself between his legs, and he reached to return the favor, the small, fat softness of her filling his hand, pressing against him as she moved. She rose over him, smiling, her hair falling down around her face, and threw her leg across him.

"Give me your mouth," he whispered, not knowing whether he meant to kiss her or to have her take him between her lips, only knowing he must have her somehow.

"Give me yours," she said. She laughed and leaned down to him, hands on his shoulders, her hair brushing his face with the scent of moss and sunlight, and he felt the prickle of dry leaves against his back and knew they lay in the glen near Lallybroch, and her the color of the copper beeches all around; beech leaves and beechwood, gold eyes and a smooth white skin, skimmed with shadows.

Then her breast pressed against his mouth, and he took it eagerly, drawing her body tight against him as he suckled her. Her milk was hot and sweet, with a faint taste of silver, like a deer's blood.

"Harder," she whispered to him, and put her hand behind his head, gripping the back of his neck, pressing him to her. "Harder."

She lay at her length upon him, his hands holding for dear life to the sweet flesh of her buttocks, feeling the small solid weight of the child upon his own belly, as though they shared it now, protecting the small round thing between their bodies.

He flung his arms about her, tight, and she held him tight as he jerked and shuddered, her hair in his face, her hands in his hair and the child between them, not knowing where any of the three of them began or ended.

He came awake suddenly, panting and sweating, half-curled on his side beneath one of the benches in the cell. It was not yet quite light, but he could see the shapes of the men who lay near him, and hoped he had not cried out. He closed his eyes at once, but the dream was gone. He lay quite still, his heart slowing, and waited for the dawn.

June 18, 1755

John Grey had dressed carefully this evening, with fresh linen and silk stockings. He wore his own hair, simply plaited, rinsed with a tonic of lemon-verbena. He had hesitated for a moment over Hector's ring, but at last had put it on, too. The dinner had been good; a pheasant he had shot himself, and a salad of greens, in deference to Fraser's odd tastes for such things. Now they sat over the chessboard, lighter topics of conversation set aside in the concentration of the midgame.

"Will you have sherry?" He set down his bishop, and leaned back, stretching.

Fraser nodded, absorbed in the new position.

"I thank ye."

Grey rose and crossed the room, leaving Fraser by the fire. He reached into the cupboard for the bottle, and felt a thin trickle of sweat run down his ribs as he did so. Not from the fire, simmering across the room; from sheer nervousness.

He brought the bottle back to the table, holding the goblets in his other hand; the Waterford crystal his mother had sent. The liquid purled into the glasses, shimmering amber and rose in the firelight. Fraser's eyes were fixed on the cup, watching the rising sherry, but with an abstraction that showed he was deep in his thoughts. The dark blue eyes were hooded. Grey wondered what he was thinking; not about the game—the outcome of that was certain.

Grey reached out and moved his queen's bishop. It was no more than a delaying move, he knew; still, it put Fraser's queen in danger, and might force the exchange of a rook.

Grey got up to put a brick of peat on the fire. Rising, he stretched himself, and strolled behind his opponent to view the situation from this angle.

The firelight shimmered as the big Scot leaned forward to study the board, picking up the deep red tones of James Fraser's hair, echoing the glow of the light in the crystalline sherry.

Fraser had bound his hair back with a thin black cord, tied in a bow. It would take no more than a slight tug to loosen it. John Grey could imagine running his hand up under that thick, glossy mass, to touch the smooth, warm nape beneath. To touch …

His palm closed abruptly, imagining sensation.

"It is your move, Major." The soft Scots voice brought him to himself again, and he took his seat, viewing the chessboard through sightless eyes.

Without really looking, he was intensely aware of the other's movements, his presence. There was a disturbance of the air around Fraser; it was impossible not to look at him. To cover his glance, he picked up his sherry glass and sipped, barely noticing the liquid gold taste of it.

Fraser sat still as a statue of cinnabar, only the deep blue eyes alive in his face as he studied the board. The fire had burned down, and the lines of his body were limned with shadow. His hand, all gold and black with the light of the fire on it, rested on the table, still and exquisite as the captured pawn beside it.

The blue stone in John Grey's ring glinted as he reached for his queen's bishop. *Is it wrong, Hector?* he thought. *That I should love a man who might have killed you?* Or was it a way at last to put things right; to heal the wounds of Culloden for them both?

The bishop made a soft thump as he set the felted base down with precision. Without stopping, his hand rose, as though it moved without his volition. The hand traveled the short distance through the air, looking as though it knew precisely what it wanted, and set itself on Fraser's, palm tingling, curved fingers gently imploring.

The hand under his was warm—so warm—but hard, and motionless as marble. Nothing moved on the table but the shimmer of the flame in the heart of the sherry. He lifted his eyes then, to meet Fraser's.

"Take your hand off me," Fraser said, very, very softly. "Or I will kill you."

The hand under Grey's did not move, nor did the face above, but he could feel the shiver of revulsion, a spasm of hatred and disgust that rose from the man's core, radiating through his flesh.

Quite suddenly, he heard once more the memory of Quarry's warning, as clearly as though the man spoke in his ear this moment.

If you dine with him alone—don't turn your back on him.

There was no chance of that; he could not turn away. Could not even look away or blink, to break the dark blue gaze that held him frozen. Moving as slowly as though he stood atop an unexploded mine, he drew back his hand.

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the rain's patter and the hissing of the peat fire, when neither of them seemed to breathe. Then Fraser rose without a sound, and left the room.

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12

SACRIFICE

The rain of late November pattered down on the stones of the courtyard, and on the sullen rows of men, standing huddled under the downpour. The Redcoats who stood on guard over them didn't look much happier than the sodden prisoners.

Major Grey stood under the overhang of the roof, waiting. It wasn't the best weather for conducting a search and cleaning of the prisoners' cells, but at this time of year, it was futile to wait for good weather. And with more than two hundred prisoners in Ardsmuir, it was necessary to swab the cells at least monthly in order to prevent major outbreaks of illness.

The doors to the main cell block swung back, and a small file of prisoners emerged; the trustys who did the actual cleaning, closely watched by the guards. At the end of the line, Corporal Dunstable came out, his hands full of the small bits of contraband a search of this sort usually turned up.

"The usual rubbish, sir," he reported, dumping the collection of pitiful relics and anonymous junk onto the top of a cask that stood near the Major's elbow. "Just this, you might take notice of."

"This" was a small strip of cloth, perhaps six inches by four, in a green tartan check. Dunstable glanced quickly at the lines of standing prisoners, as if intending to catch someone in a telltale action.

Grey sighed, then straightened his shoulders. "Yes, I suppose so." The possession of any Scottish tartan was strictly forbidden by the Diskilting Act that had likewise disarmed the Highlanders and prevented the wearing of their native dress. He stepped in front of the rows of men, as Corporal Dunstable gave a sharp shout to attract their attention.

"Whose is this?" The corporal raised the scrap high, and raised his voice as well. Grey glanced from the scrap of bright cloth to the row of prisoners, mentally ticking off the names, trying to match them to his imperfect knowledge of tartans. Even within a single clan, the patterns varied so wildly that a given pattern couldn't be assigned with any certainty, but there were general patterns of color and design.

MacAlester, Hayes, Innes, Graham, MacMurtry, MacKenzie, MacDonald … stop. MacKenzie. That one. It was more an officer's knowledge of men than any identification of the plaid with a particular clan that made him sure. MacKenzie was a young prisoner, and his face was a shade too controlled, too expressionless.

"It's yours, MacKenzie. Isn't it?" Grey demanded. He snatched the scrap of cloth from the corporal and thrust it under the young man's nose. The prisoner was white-faced under the blotches of dirt. His jaw was clamped hard, and he was breathing hard through his nose with a faint whistling sound.

Grey fixed the young man with a hard, triumphant stare. The young Scot had that core of implacable hate that they all had, but he hadn't managed to build the wall of stoic indifference that held it in. Grey could feel the fear building in the lad; another second and he would break.

"It's mine." The voice was calm, almost bored, and spoke with such flat indifference that neither MacKenzie nor Grey registered it at once. They stood locked in each other's eyes, until a large hand reached over Angus MacKenzie's shoulder and gently plucked the scrap of cloth from the officer's hand.

John Grey stepped back, feeling the words like a blow in the pit of his stomach. MacKenzie forgotten, he lifted his eyes the several inches necessary to look Jamie Fraser in the face.

"It isn't a Fraser tartan," he said, feeling the words force their way past wooden lips. His whole face felt numb, a fact for which he was dimly grateful; at least his expression couldn't betray him before the ranks of the watching prisoners.

Fraser's mouth widened slightly. Grey kept his gaze fastened on it, afraid to meet the dark blue eyes above.

"No, it isn't," Fraser agreed. "It's MacKenzie. My mother's clan."

In some far-off corner of his mind, Grey stored away another tiny scrap of information with the small hoard of facts kept in the jeweled coffer labeled "Jamie"—his mother was a MacKenzie. He knew that was true, just as he knew that the tartan didn't belong to Fraser.

He heard his voice, cool and steady, saying "Possession of clan tartans is illegal. You know the penalty, of course?"

The wide mouth curled in a one-sided smile.

"I do."

There was a shifting and a muttering among the ranks of the prisoners; there was little actual movement, but Grey could feel the alignment changing, as though they were in fact drawing toward Fraser, circling him, embracing him. The circle had broken and re-formed, and he was alone outside it. Jamie Fraser had gone back to his own.

With an effort of will, Grey forced his gaze away from the soft, smooth lips, slightly chapped from exposure to sun and wind. The look in the eyes above them was what he had been afraid of; neither fear nor anger—but indifference.

He motioned to a guard.

"Take him."

* * *

Major John William Grey bent his head over the work on his desk, signing requisitions without reading them. He seldom worked so late at night, but there had not been time during the day, and the paperwork was piling up. The requisitions must be sent to London this week.

"Two hundred pound wheat flowr," he wrote, trying to concentrate on the neatness of the black squiggles under his quill. The trouble with such routine paperwork was that it occupied his attention but not his mind, allowing memories of the day to creep in unawares.

"Six hogsheds ale, for use of barracks." He set down the quill and rubbed his hands briskly together. He could still feel the chill that had settled in his bones in the courtyard that morning. There was a hot fire, but it didn't seem to be helping. He didn't go nearer; he had tried that once, and stood mesmerized, seeing the images of the afternoon in the flames, roused only when the cloth of his breeches began to scorch.

He picked up the quill and tried again to banish the sights of the courtyard from his mind.

It was better not to delay execution of sentences of this kind; the prisoners became restless and nervy in anticipation and there was considerable difficulty in controlling them. Executed at once, though, such discipline often had a salutary effect, showing the prisoners that retribution would be swift and dire, enhancing their respect for those who held their guardianship. Somehow John Grey suspected that this particular occasion had not much enhanced his prisoners' respect—for him, at least.

Feeling little more than the trickle of ice water through his veins, he had given his orders, swift and composed, and they had been obeyed with equal competence.

The prisoners had been drawn up in ranks around the four sides of the courtyard square, with shorter lines of guards arranged facing them, bayonets fixed to the ready, to prevent any unseemly outbreak.

But there had been no outbreak, seemly or otherwise. The prisoners had waited in a chill silence in the light rain that misted the stones of the courtyard, with little sound other than the normal coughs and throat-clearings of any assemblage of men. It was the beginning of winter, and catarrh was almost as common a scourge in the barracks as it was in the damp cells.

He had stood watching impassively, hands folded behind his back, as the prisoner was led to the platform. Watched, feeling the rain seep into the shoulders of his coat and run in tiny rivulets down the neck of his shirt, as Jamie Fraser stood on the platform a yard away and stripped to the waist, moving without haste or hesitation, as though this were something he had done before, an accustomed task, of no importance in itself.

He had nodded to the two privates, who seized the prisoner's unresisting hands and raised them, binding them to the arms of the whipping post. They gagged him, and Fraser stood upright, the rain running down his raised arms, and down the deep seam of his backbone, to soak the thin cloth of his breeches.

Another nod, to the sergeant who held the charge sheet, and a small surge of annoyance as the gesture caused a cascade of collected rain from one side of his hat. He straightened his hat and sodden wig, and resumed his stance of authority in time to hear the charge and sentence read.

" … in contravention of the Diskilting Act, passed by His Majesty's Parliament, for which crime the sentence of sixty lashes shall be inflicted."

Grey glanced with professional detachment at the sergeant-farrier designated to give the punishment; this was not the first time for any of them. He didn't nod this time; the rain was still falling. A half-closing of the eyes instead, as he spoke the usual words:

"Mr. Fraser, you will take your punishment."

And he stood, eyes front and steady, watching, and hearing the thud of the landing flails and the grunt of the prisoner's breath, forced past the gag by the blow.

The man's muscles tightened in resistance to the pain. Again and again, until each separate muscle stood hard under the skin. His own muscles ached with tension, and he shifted inconspicuously from one leg to another, as the brutal tedium continued. Thin streams of red ran down the prisoner's spine, blood mixed with water, staining the cloth of his breeches.

Grey could feel the men behind him, soldiers and prisoners both, all eyes fixed on the platform and its central figure. Even the coughing was silenced.

And over it all like a sticky coat of varnish sealing off Grey's feelings was a thin layer of self-disgust, as he realized that his eyes were fixed on the scene not out of duty, but from sheer inability to look away from the sheen of mingled rain and blood that gleamed on muscle, tightened in anguish to a curve of wrenching beauty.

The sergeant-farrier paused only briefly between blows. He was hurrying it slightly; everyone wanted to get it over and get out of the rain. Grissom counted each stroke in a loud voice, noting it on his sheet as he did so. The farrier checked the lash, running the strands with their hard-waxed knots between his fingers to free them of blood and bits of flesh, then raised the cat once more, swung it slowly twice round his head, and struck again. “Thirty!” said the sergeant.

Major Grey pulled out the lowest drawer of his desk, and was neatly sick, all over a stack of requisitions.

* * *

His fingers were dug hard into his palms, but the shaking wouldn’t stop. It was deep in his bones, like the winter cold.

“Put a blanket over him; I’ll tend him in a moment.”

The English surgeon’s voice seemed to come from a long way off; he felt no connection between the voice and the hands that gripped him firmly by both arms. He cried out as they shifted him, the torsion splitting the barely clotted wounds on his back. The trickle of warm blood across his ribs made the shaking worse, despite the rough blanket they laid over his shoulders.

He gripped the edges of the bench on which he lay, cheek pressed against the wood, eyes closed, struggling against the shaking. There was a stir and a shuffle somewhere in the room, but he couldn’t take notice, couldn’t take his attention from the clenching of his teeth and the tightness of his joints.

The door closed, and the room grew quiet. Had they left him alone?

No, there were footsteps near his head, and the blanket over him lifted, folded back to his waist.

“Mm. Made a mess of you, didn’t he, boy?”

He didn’t answer; no answer seemed expected, in any case. The surgeon turned away for a moment; then he felt a hand beneath his cheek, lifting his head. A towel slid beneath his face, cushioning it from the rough wood.

"I'm going to cleanse the wounds now," the voice said. It was impersonal, but not unfriendly.

He drew in his breath through his teeth as a hand touched his back. There was an odd whimpering noise. He realized he had made it, and was ashamed.

"How old are you, boy?"

"Nineteen." He barely got the word out, before biting down hard on a moan.

The doctor touched his back gently here and there, then stood up. He heard the sound of the bolt being shot to, then the doctor's steps returning.

"No one will come in now," the voice said kindly. "Go ahead and cry."

"Hey!" the voice was saying. "Wake up, man!"

He came slowly to consciousness; the roughness of wood beneath his cheek brought dream and waking together for a moment, and he couldn't remember where he was. A hand came out of the darkness, touching him tentatively on the cheek.

"Ye were greetin' in your sleep, man," the voice whispered. "Does it pain ye much?"

"A bit." He realized the other link between dreaming and waking as he tried to raise himself and the pain crackled over his back like sheet lightning. He let out his breath in an involuntary grunt and dropped back on the bench.

He had been lucky; he had drawn Dawes, a stout, middle-aged soldier who didn't really like flogging prisoners, and did it only because it was part of his job. Still, sixty lashes did damage, even if applied without enthusiasm.

"Nah, then, that's too hot by half. Want to scald him, do ye?" It was Morrison's voice, scolding. It would be Morrison, of course.

Odd, he thought dimly. How whenever you had a group of men, they seemed to find their proper jobs, no matter whether it was a thing they'd done before. Morrison had been a cottar, like most of them. Likely a good hand with his beasts, but not thinking much about it. Now he was the natural healer for the men, the one they turned to with a griping belly or a broken thumb. Morrison knew little more than the rest, but the men turned to him when they were hurt, as they turned to Seumus Mac Dubh for reassurance and direction. And for justice.

The steaming cloth was laid across his back and he grunted with the sting of it, pressing his lips tight to keep from crying out. He could feel the shape of Morrison's small hand, lightly laid in the center of his back.

"Bide ye, man,'til the heat passes."

As the nightmare faded, he blinked for a moment, adjusting himself to the nearby voices and the perception of company. He was in the large cell, in the shadowy nook by the chimney breast. Steam rose from the fire; there must be a cauldron boiling. He saw Walter MacLeod lower a fresh armful of rags into its depths, the fire touching MacLeod's dark beard and brows with red. Then, as the heated rags on his back cooled to a soothing warmth, he closed his eyes and sank back into a half-doze, lulled by the soft conversation of the men nearby.

It was familiar, this state of dreamy detachment. He had felt much the same ever since the moment when he had reached over young Angus's shoulder and closed his fist on the scrap of tartan cloth. As though with that choice, some curtain had come down between him and the men around him; as though he were alone, in some quiet place of infinite remoteness.

He had followed the guard who took him, stripped himself when told, but all without feeling as though he had truly waked. Taken his place on the platform and heard the words of crime and sentence pronounced, without really listening. Not even the rough bite of the rope on his wrists or the cold rain on his naked back had roused him. These seemed all things that had happened before; nothing he said or did could change a thing; it was all fated.

As for the flogging, he had borne it. There was no room then for thought or regret, or for anything beyond the stubborn, desperate struggle such bodily insult required.

"Still, now, still." Morrison's hand rested on his neck, to prevent his moving as the sodden rags were taken off and a fresh, hot poultice applied, momentarily rousing all the dormant nerves to fresh startlement.

One consequence of his odd state of mind was that all sensations seemed of equal intensity. He could, if he tried, feel each separate stripe across his back, see each one in his mind's eye as a vivid streak of color across the dark of imagination. But the pain of the gash that ran from ribs to shoulder was of no more weight or consequence than the almost pleasant feeling of heaviness in his legs, the soreness in his arms, or the soft tickling brush of his hair across his cheek.

His pulse beat slow and regular in his ears; the sigh of his breath was a thing apart from the heave of his chest as he breathed. He existed only as a collection of fragments, each small piece with its own sensations, and none of them of any particular concern to the central intelligence.

"Here, Mac Dubh," said Morrison's voice, next to his ear. "Lift your head, and drink this."

The sharp scent of whisky struck him, and he tried to turn his head away.

"I don't need it," he said.

"That ye do," Morrison said, with that firm matter-of-factness that all healers seemed to have, as though they always knew better than you did what you felt like or what you required. Lacking strength or will to argue, he opened his mouth and sipped the whisky, feeling his neck muscles quiver under the strain of holding his head up.

The whisky added its own bit to the chorus of sensations that filled him. A burn in throat and belly, sharp tingle up the back of the nose, and a sort of whirling in his head that told him he had drunk too much, too fast.

"A bit more, now, aye, that's it," Morrison said, coaxing. "Good lad. Aye, that'll be better, won't it?" Morrison's thick body moved, so his vision of the darkened room was obscured. A draft blew from the high window, but there seemed more stir about him than was accounted for by the wind.

"Now, how's the back? Ye'll be stiff as a cornstook by the morrow, but I think it's maybe no so bad as it might be. Here, man, ye'll have a sup more." The rim of the horn cup pressed insistently against his mouth.

Morrison was still talking, rather loudly, of nothing in particular. There was something wrong about that. Morrison was not a talkative man. Something was happening, but he couldn't see. He lifted his head, searching for what was wrong, but Morrison pressed it down again.

"Dinna trouble yourself, Mac Dubh," he said softly. "Ye canna stop it, anyway."

Surreptitious sounds were coming from the far corner of the cell, the sounds Morrison had tried to keep him from hearing. Scraping noises, brief mutters, a thud. Then the muffled sound of blows, slow and regular, and a heavy gasping of fright and pain, punctuated with a small whimpering sound of indrawn breath.

They were beating young Angus MacKenzie. He braced his hands beneath his chest, but the effort made his back blaze and his head swim. Morrison's hand was back, forcing him down.

"Be still, Mac Dubh," he said. His tone was a mixture of authority and resignation.

A wave of dizziness washed through him, and his hands slipped off the bench. Morrison was right in any case, he realized. He couldn't stop them.

He lay still then under Morrison's hand, eyes closed, and waited for the sounds to stop. Despite himself, he wondered who it was, that administrator of blind justice in the dark. Sinclair. His mind supplied the answer without hesitation. And Hayes and Lindsay helping, no doubt.

They could no more help themselves than he could, or Morrison. Men did as they were born to. One man a healer, another a bully.

The sounds had stopped, except for a muffled, sobbing gasp. His shoulders relaxed, and he didn't move as Morrison took away the last wet poultice and gently blotted him dry, the draft from the window making him shiver in sudden chill. He pressed his lips tight, to make no noise. They had gagged him this afternoon, and he was glad of it; the first time he had been flogged, years ago, he had bitten his lower lip nearly in two.

The cup of whisky pressed against his mouth, but he turned his head aside, and it disappeared without comment to some place where it would find a more cordial reception. Milligan, likely, the Irishman.

One man with the weakness for drink, another with a hatred of it. One man a lover of women, and another …

He sighed and shifted slightly on the hard plank bed. Morrison had covered him with a blanket and gone away. He felt drained and empty, still in fragments, but with his mind quite clear, perched at some far remove from the rest of him.

Morrison had taken away the candle as well; it burned at the far end of the cell, where the men sat hunched companionably together, the light making black shapes of them, one indistinguishable from another, rimmed in gold light like the pictures of faceless saints in old missals.

He wondered where they came from, these gifts that shaped a man's nature. From God?

Was it like the descent of the Paraclete, and the tongues of fire that came to rest on the apostles? He remembered the picture in the Bible in his mother's parlor, the apostles all crowned with fire, and looking fair daft with the shock of it, standing about like a crowd of beeswax candles, lit for a party.

He smiled to himself at the memory, and closed his eyes. The candle shadows wavered red on his lids.

Claire, his own Claire—who knew what had sent her to him, had thrust her into a life she had surely not been born to? And yet she had known what to do, what she was meant to be, despite that. Not everyone was so fortunate as to know their gift.

There was a cautious shuffling in the darkness beside him. He opened his eyes and saw no more than a shape, but knew nonetheless who it was.

"How are ye, Angus?" he said softly in Gaelic.

The youngster knelt awkwardly by him, and took his hand.

"I am … all right. But you—sir, I mean … I—I'm sorry …"

Was it experience or instinct that made him tighten his own hand in reassurance?

"I am all right, too," he said. "Lay ye down, wee Angus, and take your rest."

The shape bent its head in an oddly formal gesture, and pressed a kiss on the back of his hand.

"I—may I stay by ye, sir?"

His hand weighed a ton, but he lifted it nonetheless and laid it on the young man's head. Then it slipped away, but he felt Angus's tension relax, as the comfort flowed from his touch.

He had been born a leader, then bent and shaped further to fit such a destiny. But what of a man who had not been born to the role he was required to fill? John Grey, for one. Charles Stuart for another.

For the first time in ten years, from this strange distance, he could find it in himself to forgive that feeble man who had once been his friend. Having so often paid the price exacted by his own gift, he could at last see the more terrible doom of having been born a king, without the gift of kingship.

Angus MacKenzie sat slumped against the wall next to him, head bowed upon his knees, his blanket over his shoulders. A small, gurgling snore came from the huddled form. He could feel sleep coming for him, fitting back the shattered, scattered parts of himself as it came, and knew he would wake whole—if very sore—in the morning.

He felt relieved at once of many things. Of the weight of immediate responsibility, of the necessity for decision. Temptation was gone, along with the possibility of it. More important, the burden of anger had lifted; perhaps it was gone for good.

So, he thought, through the gathering fog, John Grey had given him back his destiny.

Almost, he could be grateful.

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MIDGAME

Inverness
June 2, 1968

It was Roger who found her in the morning, curled up on the study sofa under the hearthrug, papers scattered carelessly over the floor where they had spilled from one of the folders.

The light from the floor-length windows streamed in, flooding the study, but the high back of the sofa had shaded Claire's face and prevented the dawn from waking her. The light was just now pouring over the curve of dusty velvet to flicker among the strands of her hair.

A glass face in more ways than one, Roger thought, looking at her. Her skin was so fair that the blue veins showed through at temple and throat, and the sharp, clear bones were so close beneath that she might have been carved of ivory.

The rug had slipped half off, exposing her shoulders. One arm lay relaxed across her chest, trapping a single, crumpled sheet of paper against her body. Roger lifted her arm carefully, to pull the paper loose without waking her. She was limp with sleep, her flesh surprisingly warm and smooth in his grasp.

His eyes found the name at once; he had known she must have found it.

"James MacKenzie Fraser," he murmured. He looked up from the paper to the sleeping woman on the sofa. The light had just touched the curve of her ear; she stirred briefly and turned her head, then her face lapsed back into somnolence.

"I don't know who you were, mate," he whispered to the unseen Scot, "but you must have been something, to deserve her."

Very gently, he replaced the rug over Claire's shoulders, and lowered the blind of the window behind her. Then he squatted and gathered up the scattered papers from the Ardsmuir folder. Ardsmuir. That was all he needed for now; even if Jamie Fraser's eventual fate was not recorded in the pages in his hands, it would be somewhere in the history of Ardsmuir prison. It might take another foray into the Highland archives, or even a trip to London, but the next step in the link had been forged; the path was clear.

Brianna was coming down the stairs as he pulled the door of the study closed, moving with exaggerated caution. She arched a brow in question and he lifted the folder, smiling.

"Got him," he whispered.

She didn't speak, but an answering smile spread across her face, bright as the rising sun outside.

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PART FOUR

The Lake District

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14

GENEVA

Helwater
September 1756

"I think," Grey said carefully, "that you might consider changing your name."

He didn't expect an answer; in four days of travel, Fraser had not spoken a single word to him, managing even the awkward business of sharing an inn room without direct communication. Grey had shrugged and taken the bed, while Fraser, without gesture or glance, had wrapped himself in his threadbare cloak and lain down before the hearth. Scratching an assortment of bites from fleas and bedbugs, Grey thought that Fraser might well have had the better end of the sleeping arrangements.

"Your new host is not well disposed toward Charles Stuart and his adherents, having lost his only son at Prestonpans," he went on, addressing the iron-set profile visible next to him. Gordon Dunsany had been only a few years older than himself, a young captain in Bolton's regiment. They might easily have died together on that field—if not for that meeting in the wood near Carryarrick.

"You can scarcely hope to conceal the fact that you are a Scot, and a Highlander at that. If you will condescend to consider a piece of well-meant advice, it might be judicious not to use a name which would be as easily recognized as your own."

Fraser's stony expression didn't alter in the slightest particular. He nudged his horse with a heel and guided it ahead of Grey's bay, seeking the remains of the track, washed out by a recent flood.

It was late afternoon when they crossed the arch of Ashness Bridge and started down the slope toward Watendlath Tarn. The Lake District of England was nothing like Scotland, Grey reflected, but at least there were mountains here. Round-flanked, fat and dreamy mountains, not sternly forbidding like the Highland crags, but mountains nonetheless.

Watendlath Tarn was dark and ruffled in the early autumn wind, its edges thick with sedge and marsh grass. The summer rains had been more generous even than usual in this damp place, and the tips of drowned shrubs poked limp and tattered above water that had run over its banks.

At the crest of the next hill, the track split, going off in two directions. Fraser, some distance ahead, pulled his horse to a stop and waited for direction, the wind ruffling his hair. He had not plaited it that morning, and it blew free, the flaming strands lifting wild about his head.

Squelching his way up the slope, John William Grey looked up at the man above him, still as a bronze statue on his mount, save for that rippling mane. The breath dried in his throat, and he licked his lips.

"O Lucifer, thou son of the morning," he murmured to himself, but forbore to add the rest of the quotation.

* * *

For Jamie, the four-day ride to Helwater had been torture. The sudden illusion of freedom, combined with the certainty of its immediate loss, gave him a dreadful anticipation of his unknown destination.

This, with the anger and sorrow of his parting from his men fresh in memory—the wrenching loss of leaving the Highlands, with the knowledge that the parting might well be permanent—and his waking moments suffused with the physical pain of long-unused saddle muscles, were together enough to have kept him in torment for the whole of the journey. Only the fact that he had given his parole kept him from pulling Major John William Grey off his horse and throttling him in some peaceful lane.

Grey's words echoed in his ears, half-obliterated by the thrumming beat of his angry blood.

"As the renovation of the fortress has largely been completed—with the able assistance of yourself and your men"—Grey had allowed a tinge of irony to show in his voice—"the prisoners are to be removed to other accommodation, and the fortress of Ardsmuir garrisoned by troops of His Majesty's Twelfth Dragoons.

"The Scottish prisoners of war are to be transported to the American Colonies," he continued. "They will be sold under bond of indenture, for a term of seven years."

Jamie had kept himself carefully expressionless, but at that news, had felt his face and hands go numb with shock.

"Indenture? That is no better than slavery," he said, but did not pay much attention to his own words. America! A land of wilderness and savages—and one to be reached across three thousand miles of empty, roiling sea! Indenture in America was a sentence tantamount to permanent exile from Scotland.

"A term of indenture is not slavery," Grey had assured him, but the Major knew as well as he that the difference was merely a legality, and true only insofar as indentured servants would—if they survived—regain their freedom upon some predetermined date. An indentured servant *was* to most other intents and purposes the slave of his or her master—to be misused, whipped or branded at will, forbidden by law to leave the master's premises without permission.

As James Fraser was now to be forbidden.

"You are not to be sent with the others." Grey had not looked at him while speaking. "You are not merely a prisoner of war, you are a convicted traitor. As such, you are imprisoned at the pleasure of His Majesty; your sentence cannot be commuted to transportation without royal approval. And His Majesty has not seen fit to give that approval."

Jamie was conscious of a remarkable array of emotions; beneath his immediate rage was fear and sorrow for the fate of his men, mingled with a small flicker of ignominious relief that, whatever his own fate was to be, it would not involve entrusting himself to the sea. Shamed by the realization, he turned a cold eye on Grey.

"The gold," he said flatly. "That's it, aye?" So long as there remained the slightest chance of his revealing what he knew about that half-mythical hoard, the English Crown would take no chance of having him lost to the sea demons or the savages of the Colonies.

The Major still would not look at him, but gave a small shrug, as good as assent.

"Where am I to go, then?" His own voice had sounded rusty to his ears, slightly hoarse as he began to recover from the shock of the news.

Grey had busied himself putting away his records. It was early September, and a warm breeze blew through the half-open window, fluttering the papers.

"It's called Helwater. In the Lake District of England. You will be quartered with Lord Dunsany, to serve in whatever menial capacity he may require." Grey did look up then, the expression in his light blue eyes unreadable. "I shall visit you there once each quarter—to ensure your welfare."

* * *

He eyed the Major's red-coated back now, as they rode single-file through the narrow lanes, seeking refuge from his miseries in a satisfying vision of those wide blue eyes, bloodshot and popping in amazement as Jamie's hands tightened on that slender throat, thumbs digging into the sun-reddened flesh until the Major's small, muscular body should go limp as a killed rabbit in his grasp.

His Majesty's pleasure, was it? He was not deceived. This had been Grey's doing; the gold only an excuse. He was to be sold as a servant, and kept in a place where Grey could see it, and gloat. This was the Major's revenge.

He had lain before the inn hearth each night, aching in every limb, acutely aware of every twitch and rustle and breath of the man in the bed behind him, and deeply resentful of that awareness. By the pale gray of dawn, he was keyed to fury once more, longing for the man to rise from his bed and make some disgraceful gesture toward him, so that he might release his fury in the passion of murder. But Grey had only snored.

Over Helvellyn Bridge and past another of the strange grassy tarns, the red and yellow leaves of maple and larch whirling down in showers past the lightly sweated quarters of his horse, striking his face and sliding past him with a papery, whispering caress.

Grey had stopped just ahead, and turned in the saddle, waiting. They had arrived, then. The land sloped steeply down into a valley, where the manor house lay half-concealed in a welter of autumn-bright trees.

Helwater lay before him, and with it, the prospect of a life of shameful servitude. He stiffened his back and kicked his horse, harder than he intended.

* * *

Grey was received in the main drawing room, Lord Dunsany being cordially dismissive of his disheveled clothes and filthy boots, and Lady Dunsany, a small round woman with faded fair hair, fulsomely hospitable.

“A drink, Johnny, you must have a drink! And Louisa, my dear, perhaps you should fetch the girls down to greet our guest.”

As Lady Dunsany turned to give orders to a footman, his Lordship leaned close over the glass to murmur to him. “The Scottish prisoner—you’ve brought him with you?”

“Yes,” Grey said. Lady Dunsany, now in animated conversation with the butler about the altered dispositions for dinner, was unlikely to overhear, but he thought it best to keep his own voice low. “I left him in the front hall—I wasn’t sure quite what you meant to do with him.”

“You said the fellow’s good with horses, eh? Best make him a groom then, as you suggested.” Lord Dunsany glanced at his wife, and carefully turned so that his lean back was to her, further guarding their conversation. “I haven’t told Louisa who he is,” the baronet muttered. “All that scare about the Highlanders during the Rising—country was quite paralyzed with fear, you know? And she’s never got over Gordon’s death.”

“I quite see.” Grey patted the old man’s arm reassuringly. He didn’t think Dunsany himself had got over the death of his son, though he had rallied himself gamely for the sake of his wife and daughters.

"I'll just tell her the man's a servant you've recommended to me. Er … he's safe, of course? I mean … well, the girls …" Lord Dunsany cast an uneasy eye toward his wife.

"Quite safe," Grey assured his host. "He's an honorable man, and he's given his parole. He'll neither enter the house, nor leave the boundaries of your property, save with your express permission." Helwater covered more than six hundred acres, he knew. It was a long way from freedom, and from Scotland as well, but perhaps something better either than the narrow stones of Ardsmuir or the distant hardships of the Colonies.

A sound from the doorway swung Dunsany around, restored to beaming joviality by the appearance of his two daughters.

"You'll remember Geneva, Johnny?" he asked, urging his guest forward. "Isobel was still in the nursery last time you came—how time does fly, does it not?" And he shook his head in mild dismay.

Isobel was fourteen, small and round and bubbly and blond, like her mother. Grey didn't, in fact, remember Geneva—or rather he did, but the scrawny schoolgirl of years past bore little resemblance to the graceful seventeen-year-old who now offered him her hand. If Isobel resembled their mother, Geneva rather took after her father, at least in the matter of height and leanness. Lord Dunsany's grizzled hair might once have been that shining chestnut, and the girl had Dunsany's clear gray eyes.

The girls greeted the visitor with politeness, but were clearly more interested in something else.

"Daddy," said Isobel, tugging on her father's sleeve. "There's a *huge* man in the hall! He watched us all the time we were coming down the stairs! He's scary-looking!"

"Who is he, Daddy?" Geneva asked. She was more reserved than her sister, but clearly also interested.

"Er … why, that must be the new groom John's brought us," Lord Dunsany said, obviously flustered. "I'll have one of the footmen take him—" The baronet was interrupted by the sudden appearance of a footman in the doorway.

“Sir,” he said, looking shocked at the news he bore, “there is a Scotchman in the hall!” Lest this outrageous statement not be believed, he turned and gestured widely at the tall, silent figure standing cloaked behind him.

At this cue, the stranger took a step forward, and spotting Lord Dunsany, politely inclined his head.

“My name is Alex MacKenzie,” he said, in a soft Highland accent. He bowed toward Lord Dunsany, with no hint of mockery in his manner. “Your servant, my lord.”

* * *

For one accustomed to the strenuous life of a Highland farm or a labor prison, the work of a groom on a Lake District stud farm was no great strain. For a man who had been mewed up in a cell for two months—since the others had left for the Colonies—it was the hell of a sweat. For the first week, while his muscles reaccustomed themselves to the sudden demands of constant movement, Jamie Fraser fell into his hayloft pallet each evening too tired even to dream.

He had arrived at Helwater in such a state of exhaustion and mental turmoil that he had at first seen it only as another prison—and one among strangers, far away from the Highlands. Now that he was ensconced here, imprisoned as securely by his word as by bars, he found both body and mind growing easier, as the days passed by. His body toughened, his feelings calmed in the quiet company of horses, and gradually he found it possible to think rationally again.

If he had no true freedom, he did at least have air, and light, space to stretch his limbs, and the sight of mountains and the lovely horses that Dunsany bred. The other grooms and servants were understandably suspicious of him, but inclined to leave him alone, out of respect for his size and forbidding countenance. It was a lonely life—but he had long since accepted the fact that for him, life was unlikely ever to be otherwise.

The soft snows came down upon Helwater, and even Major Grey’s official visit at Christmas—a tense, awkward occasion—passed without disturbing his growing feelings of content.

Very quietly, he made such arrangements as could be managed, to communicate with Jenny and Ian in the Highlands. Aside from the infrequent letters that reached him by indirect means, which he read and then destroyed for safety's sake, his only reminder of home was the beechwood rosary he wore about his neck, concealed beneath his shirt.

A dozen times a day he touched the small cross that lay over his heart, conjuring each time the face of a loved one, with a brief word of prayer—for his sister, Jenny; for Ian and the children—his namesake, Young Jamie, Maggie, and Katherine Mary, for the twins Michael and Janet, and for Baby Ian. For the tenants of Lallybroch, the men of Ardsmuir. And always, the first prayer at morning, the last at night—and many between—for Claire. *Lord, that she may be safe. She and the child.*

As the snow passed and the year brightened into spring, Jamie Fraser was aware of only one fly in the ointment of his daily existence—the presence of the Lady Geneva Dunsany.

Pretty, spoilt, and autocratic, the Lady Geneva was accustomed to get what she wanted when she wanted it, and damn the convenience of anyone standing in her way. She was a good horsewoman—Jamie would give her that—but so sharp-tongued and whim-ridden that the grooms were given to drawing straws to determine who would have the misfortune of accompanying her on her daily ride.

Of late, though, the Lady Geneva had been making her own choice of companion—Alex MacKenzie.

"Nonsense," she said, when he pleaded first discretion, and then temporary indisposition, to avoid accompanying her into the secluded mist of the foothills above Helwater; a place she was forbidden to ride, because of the treacherous footing and dangerous fogs. "Don't be silly. Nobody's going to see us. Come on!" And kicking her mare brutally in the ribs, was off before he could stop her, laughing back over her shoulder at him.

Her infatuation with him was sufficiently obvious as to make the other grooms grin sidelong and make low-voiced remarks to each other when she entered the stable. He had a strong urge, when in her company, to boot her swiftly where it would do most good, but so far had settled for maintaining a strict silence when in her company, replying to all overtures with a mumpish grunt.

He trusted that she would get tired of this taciturn treatment sooner or later, and transfer her annoying attentions to another of the grooms. Or—pray God—she would soon be married, and well away from both Helwater and him.

* * *

It was a rare sunny day for the Lake Country, where the difference between the clouds and the ground is often imperceptible, in terms of damp. Still, on this May afternoon it was warm, warm enough for Jamie to have found it comfortable to remove his shirt. It was safe enough up here in the high field, with no likelihood of company beyond Bess and Blossom, the two stolid drayhorses pulling the roller.

It was a big field, and the horses old and well-trained to the task, which they liked; all he need do was twitch the reins occasionally, to keep their noses heading straight. The roller was made of wood, rather than the older kind of stone or metal, and constructed with a narrow slit between each board, so that the interior could be filled with well-rotted manure, which dribbled out in a steady stream as the roller turned, lightening the heavy contrivance as it drained.

Jamie thoroughly approved this innovation. He must tell Ian about it; draw a diagram. The gypsies would be coming soon; the kitchenmaids and grooms were all talking of it. He would maybe have time to add another installment to the ongoing letter he kept, sending the current crop of pages whenever a band of roving tinkers or gypsies came onto the farm. Delivery might be delayed for a month, or three, or six, but eventually the packet would make its way into the Highlands, passed from hand to hand, and on to his sister at Lallybroch, who would pay a generous fee for its reception.

Replies from Lallybroch came by the same anonymous route—for as a prisoner of the Crown, anything he sent or received by the mails must be inspected by Lord Dunsany. He felt a moment's excitement at the thought of a letter, but tried to damp it down; there might be nothing.

"Gee!" he shouted, more as a matter of form than anything. Bess and Blossom could see the approaching stone fence as well as he could, and were perfectly well aware that this was the spot to begin the ponderous turnabout. Bess waggled one ear and snorted, and he grinned.

"Aye, I know," he said to her, with a light twitch of the rein. "But they pay me to say it."

Then they were settled in the new track, and there was nothing more to do until they reached the wagon standing at the foot of the field, piled high with manure for refilling the roller. The sun was on his face now, and he closed his eyes, reveling in the feel of warmth on his bare chest and shoulders.

The sound of a horse's high whinny stirred him from somnolence a quarter-hour later. Opening his eyes, he could see the rider coming up the lane from the lower paddock, neatly framed between Blossom's ears. Hastily, he sat up and pulled the shirt back over his head.

"You needn't be modest on my account, MacKenzie." Geneva Dunsany's voice was high and slightly breathless as she pulled her mare to a walk beside the moving roller.

"Mmphm." She was dressed in her best habit, he saw, with a cairngorm brooch at her throat, and her color was higher than the temperature of the day warranted.

"What are you doing?" she asked, after they had rolled and paced in silence for some moments.

"I am spreading shit, my lady," he answered precisely, not looking at her.

"Oh." She rode on for the space of half a track, before venturing further into conversation.

"Did you know I am to be married?"

He did; all the servants had known it for a month, Richards the butler having been in the library, serving, when the solicitor came from Derwentwater to draw up the wedding contract. The Lady Geneva had been informed two days ago. According to her maid, Betty, the news had not been well received.

He contented himself with a noncommittal grunt.

“To Ellesmere,” she said. The color rose higher in her cheeks, and her lips pressed together.

“I wish ye every happiness, my lady.” Jamie pulled briefly on the reins as they came to the end of the field. He was out of the seat before Bess had set her hooves; he had no wish at all to linger in conversation with the Lady Geneva, whose mood seemed thoroughly dangerous.

“Happiness!” she cried. Her big gray eyes flashed and she slapped the thigh of her habit. “Happiness! Married to a man old enough to be my own grandsire?”

Jamie refrained from saying that he suspected the Earl of Ellesmere’s prospects for happiness were somewhat more limited than her own. Instead, he murmured, “Your pardon, my lady,” and went behind to unfasten the roller.

She dismounted and followed him. “It’s a filthy bargain between my father and Ellesmere! He’s selling me, that’s what it is. My father cares not the slightest trifle for me, or he’d never have made such a match! Do you not think I am badly used?”

On the contrary, Jamie thought that Lord Dunsany, a most devoted father, had probably made the best match possible for his spoilt elder daughter. The Earl of Ellesmere *was* an old man. There was every prospect that within a few years, Geneva would be left as an extremely wealthy young widow, and a countess, to boot. On the other hand, such considerations might well not weigh heavily with a headstrong miss—a stubborn, spoilt bitch, he corrected, seeing the petulant set of her mouth and eyes—of seventeen.

“I am sure your father acts always in your best interests, my lady,” he answered woodenly. Would the little fiend not go away?

She wouldn’t. Assuming a more winsome expression, she came and stood close to his side, interfering with his opening the loading hatch of the roller.

“But a match with such a dried-up old man?” she said. “Surely it is heartless of Father to give me to such a creature.” She stood on tiptoe, peering at Jamie. “How old are *you*, MacKenzie?”

His heart stopped beating for an instant.

"A verra great deal older than you, my lady," he said firmly. "Your pardon, my lady." He slid past her as well as he might without touching her, and leaped up onto the manure wagon, whence he was reasonably sure she wouldn't follow him.

"But not ready for the boneyard yet, are you, MacKenzie?" Now she was in front of him, shading her eyes with her hand as she peered upward. A breeze had come up, and wisps of her chestnut hair floated about her face. "Have you ever been married, MacKenzie?"

He gritted his teeth, overcome with the urge to drop a shovelful of manure over her chestnut head, but mastered it and dug the shovel into the pile, merely saying "I have," in a tone that brooked no further inquiries.

The Lady Geneva was not interested in other people's sensitivities. "Good," she said, satisfied. "You'll know what to do, then."

"To do?" He stopped short in the act of digging, one foot braced on the shovel.

"In bed," she said calmly. "I want you to come to bed with me."

In the shock of the moment, all he could think of was the ludicrous vision of the elegant Lady Geneva, skirts thrown up over her face, asprawl in the rich crumble of the manure wagon.

He dropped the shovel. *"Here?"* he croaked.

"No, silly," she said impatiently. "In bed, in a proper bed. In my bedroom."

"You have lost your mind," Jamie said coldly, the shock receding slightly. "Or I should think you had, if ye had one to lose."

Her face flamed and her eyes narrowed. "How dare you speak that way to me!"

"How dare ye speak so to *me*?" Jamie replied hotly. "A wee lassie of breeding to be makin' indecent proposals to a man twice her age? And a groom in her father's house?" he added, recollecting who he was. He choked back further remarks, recollecting also that this dreadful girl *was* the Lady Geneva, and he *was* her father's groom.

"I beg your pardon, my lady," he said, mastering his choler with some effort. "The sun is verra hot today, and no doubt it has addled your wits a bit. I expect ye should go back to the house at once and ask your maid to put cold cloths on your head."

The Lady Geneva stamped her morocco-booted foot. "My wits are not addled in the slightest!"

She glared up at him, chin set. Her chin was little and pointed, so were her teeth, and with that particular expression of determination on her face, he thought she looked a great deal like the bloody-minded vixen she was.

"Listen to me," she said. "I cannot prevent this abominable marriage. But I am"—she hesitated, then continued firmly—"I am *damned* if I will suffer my maidenhood to be given to a disgusting, depraved old monster like Ellesmere!"

Jamie rubbed a hand across his mouth. Despite himself, he felt some sympathy for her. But *he* would be damned if he allowed this skirted maniac to involve him in her troubles.

"I am fully sensible of the honor, my lady," he said at last, with a heavy irony, "but I really cannot—"

"Yes, you can." Her eyes rested frankly on the front of his filthy breeches. "Betty says so."

He struggled for speech, emerging at first with little more than incoherent sputterings. Finally he drew a deep breath and said, with all the firmness he could muster, "Betty has not the slightest basis for drawing conclusions as to my capacity. I havena laid a hand on the lass!"

Geneva laughed delightedly. "So you didn't take her to bed? She said you wouldn't, but I thought perhaps she was only trying to avoid a beating. That's good; I couldn't possibly share a man with my maid."

He breathed heavily. Smashing her on the head with the shovel or throttling her were unfortunately out of the question. His inflamed temper slowly calmed. Outrageous she might be, but essentially powerless. She could scarcely force him to go to her bed.

"Good day to ye, my lady," he said, as politely as possible. He turned his back on her and began to shovel manure into the hollow roller.

“If you don’t,” she said sweetly, “I’ll tell my father you made improper advances to me. He’ll have the skin flayed off your back.”

His shoulders hunched involuntarily. She couldn’t possibly know. He had been careful never to take his shirt off in front of anyone since he came here.

He turned carefully and stared down at her. The light of triumph was in her eye.

“Your father may not be so well acquent’ with me,” he said, “but he’s kent *you* since ye were born. Tell him, and be damned to ye!”

She puffed up like a game cock, her face growing bright red with temper. “Is that so?” she cried. “Well, look at this, then, and be damned to *you*!” She reached into the bosom of her habit and pulled out a thick letter, which she waved under his nose. His sister’s firm black hand was so familiar that a glimpse was enough.

“Give me that!” He was down off the wagon and after her in a flash, but she was too fast. She was up in the saddle before he could grab her, backing with the reins in one hand, waving the letter mockingly in the other.

“Want it, do you?”

“Yes, I want it! Give it to me!” He was so furious, he could easily have done her violence, could he get his hands on her. Unfortunately, her bay mare sensed his mood, and backed away, snorting and pawing uneasily.

“I don’t think so.” She eyed him coquettishly, the red of ill temper fading from her face. “After all, it’s really my duty to give this to my father, isn’t it? He ought really to know that his servants are carrying on clandestine correspondences, shouldn’t he? Is Jenny your sweetheart?”

“You’ve read my letter? Ye filthy wee bitch!”

“Such language,” she said, wagging the letter reprovingly. “It’s my duty to help my parents, by letting them know what sorts of dreadful things the servants are up to, isn’t it? And I am a dutiful daughter, am I not, submitting to this marriage without a squeak?” She leaned forward on her pommel, smiling mockingly, and with a fresh spurt of rage, he realized that she was enjoying this very much indeed.

"I expect Papa will find it very interesting reading," she said. "Especially the bit about the gold to be sent to Lochiel in France. Isn't it still considered treason to be giving comfort to the King's enemies? *Tsk*," she said, clicking her tongue roguishly. "How wicked."

He thought he might be sick on the spot, from sheer terror. Did she have the faintest idea how many lives lay in that manicured white hand? His sister, Ian, their six children, all the tenants and families of Lallybroch—perhaps even the lives of the agents who carried messages and money between Scotland and France, maintaining the precarious existence of the Jacobite exiles there.

He swallowed, once, and then again, before he spoke.

"All right," he said. A more natural smile broke out on her face, and he realized how very young she was. Aye, well, and a wee adder's bite was as venomous as an auld one's.

"I won't tell," she assured him, looking earnest. "I'll give you your letter back afterward, and I won't ever say what was in it. I promise."

"Thank you." He tried to gather his wits enough to make a sensible plan. Sensible? Going into his master's house to ravish his daughter's maidenhood—at her request? He had never heard of a less sensible prospect.

"All right," he said again. "We must be careful." With a feeling of dull horror, he felt himself being drawn into the role of conspirator with her.

"Yes. Don't worry, I can arrange for my maid to be sent away, and the footman drinks; he's always asleep before ten o'clock."

"Arrange it, then," he said, his stomach curdling. "Mind ye choose a safe day, though."

"A safe day?" She looked blank.

"Sometime in the week after ye've finished your courses," he said bluntly. "You're less likely to get wi' child then."

"Oh." She blushed rosily at that, but looked at him with a new interest.

They looked at each other in silence for a long moment, suddenly linked by the prospect of the future.

"I'll send you word," she said at last, and wheeling her horse about, galloped away across the field, the mare's hooves kicking up spurts of the freshly spread manure.

* * *

Cursing fluently and silently, he crept beneath the row of larches. There wasn't much moon, which was a blessing. Six yards of open lawn to cross in a dash, and he was knee-deep in the columbine and germander of the flowerbed.

He looked up the side of the house, its bulk looming dark and forbidding above him. Yes, there was the candle in the window, as she'd said. Still, he counted the windows carefully, to verify it. Heaven help him if he chose the wrong room. Heaven help him if it was the right one, too, he thought grimly, and took a firm hold on the trunk of the huge gray creeper that covered this side of the house.

The leaves rustled like a hurricane and the stems, stout as they were, creaked and bent alarmingly under his weight. There was nothing for it but to climb as swiftly as possible, and be ready to hurl himself off into the night if any of the windows should suddenly be raised.

He arrived at the small balcony panting, heart racing, and drenched in sweat, despite the chilliness of the night. He paused a moment, alone beneath the faint spring stars, to draw breath. He used it to damn Geneva Dunsany once more, and then pushed open her door.

She had been waiting, and had plainly heard his approach up the ivy. She rose from the chaise where she had been sitting and came toward him, chin up, chestnut hair loose over her shoulders.

She was wearing a white nightgown of some sheer material, tied at the throat with a silk bow. The garment didn't look like the nightwear of a modest young lady, and he realized with a shock that she was wearing her bridal-night apparel.

"So you came." He heard the note of triumph in her voice, but also the faint quaver. So she hadn't been sure of him?

"I hadn't much choice," he said shortly, and turned to close the French doors behind him.

"Will you have some wine?" Striving for graciousness, she moved to the table, where a decanter stood with two glasses. How had she managed that? he wondered. Still, a glass of something wouldn't come amiss in the present circumstances. He nodded, and took the full glass from her hand.

He looked at her covertly as he sipped it. The nightdress did little to conceal her body, and as his heart gradually slowed from the panic of his ascent, he found his first fear—that he wouldn't be able to keep his half of the bargain—allayed without conscious effort. She was built narrowly, slim-hipped and small-breasted, but most definitely a woman.

Finished, he set down the glass. No point in delay, he thought.

"The letter?" he said abruptly.

"Afterward," she said, tightening her mouth.

"Now, or I leave." And he turned toward the window, as though about to execute the threat.

"Wait!" He turned back, but eyed her with ill-disguised impatience.

"Don't you trust me?" she said, trying to sound winsome and charming.

"No," he said bluntly.

She looked angry at that, and thrust out a petulant lower lip, but he merely looked stonily over his shoulder at her, still facing the window.

"Oh, all right then," she said at last, with a shrug. Digging under the layers of embroidery in a sewing box, she unearthed the letter and tossed it onto the washing stand beside him.

He snatched it up and unfolded the sheets, to be sure of it. He felt a surge of mingled fury and relief at the sight of the violated seal, and Jenny's familiar hand within, neat and strong.

"Well?" Geneva's voice broke in upon his reading, impatient. "Put that down and come here, Jamie. I'm ready." She sat on the bed, arms curled around her knees.

He stiffened, and turned a very cold blue look on her, over the pages in his hands.

"You'll not use that name to me," he said. She lifted the pointed chin a trifle more and raised her plucked brows.

"Why not? It's yours. Your sister calls you so."

He hesitated for a moment, then deliberately laid the letter aside, and bent his head to the laces of his breeches.

"I'll serve ye properly," he said, looking down at his working fingers, "for the sake of my own honor as a man, and yours as a woman. But"—he raised his head and the narrowed blue eyes bored into hers—"having brought me to your bed by means of threats against my family, I'll not have ye call me by the name they give me." He stood motionless, eyes fixed on hers. At last she gave a very small nod, and her eyes dropped to the quilt.

She traced the pattern with a finger.

"What must I call you, then?" she asked at last, in a small voice. "I *can't* call you MacKenzie!"

The corners of his mouth lifted slightly as he looked at her. She looked quite small, huddled into herself with her arms locked around her knees and her head bowed. He sighed.

"Call me Alex, then. It's my own name, as well."

She nodded without speaking. Her hair fell forward in wings about her face, but he could see the brief shine of her eyes as she peeped out from behind its cover.

"It's all right," he said gruffly. "You can watch me." He pushed the loose breeches down, rolling the stockings off with them. He shook them out and folded them neatly over a chair before beginning to unfasten his shirt, conscious of her gaze, still shy, but now direct. Out of some idea of thoughtfulness, he turned to face her before removing the shirt, to spare her for a moment the sight of his back.

"Oh!" The exclamation was soft, but enough to stop him.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, no … I mean, it's only that I didn't expect …" The hair swung forward again, but not before he had seen the telltale reddening of her cheeks.

"You've not seen a man naked before?" he guessed. The shiny brown head swayed back and forth.

"Noo," she said doubtfully, "I have, only … it wasn't …"

"Well, it usually isn't," he said matter-of-factly, sitting down on the bed beside her. "But if one is going to make love, it has to be, ye see."

"I see," she said, but still sounded doubtful. He tried to smile, to reassure her.

"Don't worry. It doesna get any bigger. And it wilna do anything strange, if ye want to touch it." At least he hoped it wouldn't. Being naked, in such close proximity to a half-clad girl, was doing terrible things to his powers of self-control. His traitorous, deprived anatomy didn't care a whit that she was a selfish, blackmailing little bitch. Perhaps fortunately, she declined his offer, shrinking back a little toward the wall, though her eyes stayed on him. He rubbed his chin dubiously.

"How much do you … I mean, have ye any idea how it's done?"

Her gaze was clear and guileless, though her cheeks flamed.

"Well, like the horses, I suppose?" He nodded, but felt a pang, recalling his wedding night, when he too had expected it to be like horses.

"Something like that," he said, clearing his throat. "Slower, though. More gentle," he added, seeing her apprehensive look.

"Oh. That's good. Nurse and the maids used to tell stories, about … men, and, er, getting married, and all … it sounded rather frightening." She swallowed hard. "W-will it hurt much?" She raised her head suddenly and looked him in the eye.

"I don't mind if it does," she said bravely, "it's only that I'd like to know what to expect." He felt an unexpected small liking for her. She might be spoiled, selfish, and reckless, but there was some character to her, at least. Courage, to him, was no small virtue.

"I think not," he said. "If I take my time to ready you" (if he *could* take his time, amended his brain), "I think it will be not much worse than a pinch." He reached out and nipped a fold of skin on her upper arm. She jumped and rubbed the spot, but smiled.

"I can stand that."

"It's only the first time it's like that," he assured her. "The next time it will be better."

She nodded, then after a moment's hesitation, edged toward him, reaching out a tentative finger.

"May I touch you?" This time he really did laugh, though he choked the sound off quickly.

"I think you'll have to, my lady, if I'm to do what you asked of me."

She ran her hand slowly down his arm, so softly that the touch tickled, and his skin shivered in response. Gaining confidence, she let her hand circle his forearm, feeling the girth of it.

"You're quite … big." He smiled, but stayed motionless, letting her explore his body, at as much length as she might wish. He felt the muscles of his belly tighten as she stroked the length of one thigh, and ventured tentatively around the curve of one buttock. Her fingers approached the twisting, knotted line of the scar that ran the length of his left thigh, but stopped short.

"It's all right," he assured her. "It doesna hurt me anymore." She didn't reply, but drew two fingers slowly along the length of the scar, exerting no pressure.

The questing hands, growing bolder, slid up over the rounded curves of his broad shoulders, slid down his back—and stopped dead. He closed his eyes and waited, following her movements by the shifting of weight on the mattress. She moved behind him, and was silent. Then there was a quivering sigh, and the hands touched him again, soft on his ruined back.

"And you weren't afraid, when I said I'd have you flogged?" Her voice was queerly hoarse, but he kept still, eyes closed.

"No," he said. "I am not much afraid of things, anymore." In fact, he was beginning to be afraid that he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her, or to handle her with the necessary gentleness, when the time came. His balls ached with need, and he could feel his heartbeat, pounding in his temples.

She got off the bed, and stood in front of him. He rose suddenly, startling her so that she stepped back a pace, but he reached out and rested his hands on her shoulders.

"May I touch *you*, my lady?" The words were teasing, but the touch was not. She nodded, too breathless to speak, and his arms came around her.

He held her against his chest, not moving until her breathing slowed. He was conscious of an extraordinary mixture of feelings. He had never in his life taken a woman in his arms without some feeling of love, but there was nothing of love in this encounter, nor could there be, for her own sake. There was some tenderness for her youth, and pity at her situation. Rage at her manipulation of him, and fear at the magnitude of the crime he was about to commit. But overall there was a terrible lust, a need that clawed at his vitals and made him ashamed of his own manhood, even as he acknowledged its power. Hating himself, he lowered his head and cupped her face between his hands.

He kissed her softly, briefly, then a bit longer. She was trembling against him as his hands undid the tie of her gown and slid it back off her shoulders. He lifted her and laid her on the bed.

He lay beside her, cradling her in one arm as the other hand caressed her breasts, one and then the other, cupping each so she felt the weight and the warmth of them, even as he did.

"A man should pay tribute to your body," he said softly, raising each nipple with small, circling touches. "For you are beautiful, and that is your right."

She let out her breath in a small gasp, then relaxed under his touch. He took his time, moving as slowly as he could make himself do it, stroking and kissing, touching her lightly all over. He didn't like the girl, didn't want to be here, didn't want to be doing this, but —it had been more than three years since he'd touched a woman's body.

He tried to gauge when she might be readiest, but how in hell could he tell? She was flushed and panting, but she simply lay there, like a piece of porcelain on display. Curse the girl, could she not even give him a clue?

He rubbed a trembling hand through his hair, trying to quell the surge of confused emotion that pulsed through him with each heartbeat. He was angry, scared, and most mightily roused, most of which feelings were of no great use to him now. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply, striving for calm, seeking for gentleness.

No, of course she couldn't show him. She'd never touched a man before. Having forced him here, she was, with a damnable, unwanted, unwarrantable trust, leaving the conduct of the whole affair up to him!

He touched the girl, gently, stroking her between the thighs. She didn't part them for him, but didn't resist. She was faintly moist there. Perhaps it would be all right now?

"All right," he murmured to her. "Be still, *mo chridhe*." Murmuring what he hoped sounded like reassurances, he eased himself on top of her, and used his knee to spread her legs. He felt her slight start at the heat of his body covering her, at the touch of his cock, and he wrapped his hands in her hair to steady her, still muttering things in soft Gaelic.

He thought dimly that it was a good thing he was speaking Gaelic, as he was no longer paying any attention at all to what he was saying. Her small, hard breasts poked against his chest.

"Mo nighean," he murmured.

"Wait a minute," said Geneva. "I think perhaps …"

The effort of control made him dizzy, but he did it slowly, only easing himself the barest inch within.

"Ooh!" said Geneva. Her eyes flew wide.

"Uh," he said, and pushed a bit farther.

"Stop it! It's too big! Take it out!" Panicked, Geneva thrashed beneath him. Pressed beneath his chest, her breasts wobbled and rubbed, so that his own nipples leapt erect in pinpoints of abrupt sensation.

Her struggles were accomplishing by force what he had tried to do with gentleness. Half-dazed, he fought to keep her under him, while groping madly for something to say to calm her.

"But—" he said.

"Stop it!"

"I—"

"Take it *out*!" she screamed.

He clapped one hand over her mouth and said the only coherent thing he could think of.

"No," he said definitely, and shoved.

What might have been a scream emerged through his fingers as a strangled “Eep!” Geneva’s eyes were huge and round, but dry.

In for a penny, in for a pound. The saying drifted absurdly through his head, leaving nothing in its wake but a jumble of incoherent alarms and a marked feeling of terrible urgency down beween them. There was precisely one thing he was capable of doing at this point, and he did it, his body ruthlessly usurping control as it moved into the rhythm of its inexorable pagan joy.

It took no more than a few thrusts before the wave came down upon him, churning down the length of his spine and erupting like a breaker striking rocks, sweeping away the last shreds of conscious thought that clung, barnacle-like, to the remnants of his mind.

He came to himself a moment later, lying on his side with the sound of his own heartbeat loud and slow in his ears. He cracked one eyelid, and saw the shimmer of pink skin in lamplight. He must see if he’d hurt her much, but God, not just this minute. He shut his eye again and merely breathed.

“What … what are you thinking?” The voice sounded hesitant, and a little shaken, but not hysterical.

Too shaken himself to notice the absurdity of the question, he answered it with the truth.

“I was wondering why in God’s name men want to bed virgins.”

There was a long moment of silence, and then a tremulous intake of breath.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a small voice. “I didn’t know it would hurt you too.”

His eyes popped open in astonishment, and he raised himself on one elbow to find her looking at him like a startled fawn. Her face was pale, and she licked dry lips.

“Hurt me?” he said, in blank astonishment. “It didna hurt *me*.”

“But”—she frowned as her eyes traveled slowly down the length of his body—“I thought it must. You made the most terrible face, as though it hurt awfully, and you … you *groaned* like a—”

“Aye, well,” he interrupted hastily, before she could reveal any more unflattering observations of his behavior. “I didna mean … I mean … that's just how men act, when they … do that," he ended lamely.

Her shock was fading into curiosity. "Do all men act like that when they're … doing that?"

"How should I—?" he began irritably, then stopped himself with a shudder, realizing that he did in fact know the answer to that.

"Aye, they do," he said shortly. He pushed himself up to a sitting position, and brushed the hair back from his forehead. "Men are disgusting horrible beasts, just as your nurse told you. Have I hurt ye badly?"

"I don't think so," she said doubtfully. She moved her legs experimentally. "It did hurt, just for a moment, like you said it would, but it isn't so bad now."

He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that while she had bled, the stain on the towel was slight, and she seemed not to be in pain. She reached tentatively between her thighs and made a face of disgust.

"Ooh!" she said. "It's all nasty and sticky!"

The blood rose to his face in mingled outrage and embarrassment.

"Here," he muttered, and reached for a washcloth from the stand. She didn't take it, but opened her legs and arched her back slightly, obviously expecting him to attend to the mess. He had a strong urge to stuff the rag down her throat instead, but a glance at the stand where his letter lay stopped him. It was a bargain, after all, and she'd kept her part.

Grimly, he wet the cloth and began to sponge her, but he found the trust with which she presented herself to him oddly moving. He carried out his ministrations quite gently, and found himself, at the end, planting a light kiss on the smooth slope of her belly.

"There."

"Thank you," she said. She moved her hips tentatively, and reached out a hand to touch him. He didn't move, letting her fingers trail down his chest and toy with the deep indentation of his navel. The light touch hesitantly descended.

"You said … it would be better next time," she whispered.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. It was a long time until the dawn.

"I expect it will," he said, and stretched himself once more beside her.

* * *

"Ja—er, Alex?"

He felt as though he had been drugged, and it was an effort to answer her. "My lady?"

Her arms came around his neck and she nestled her head in the curve of his shoulder, breath warm against his chest.

"I love you, Alex."

With difficulty, he roused himself enough to put her away from him, holding her by the shoulders and looking down into the gray eyes, soft as a doe's.

"No," he said, but gently, shaking his head. "That's the third rule. You may have no more than the one night. You may not call me by my first name. And you may not love me."

The gray eyes moistened a bit. "But if I can't help it?"

"It isna love you feel now." He hoped he was right, for his sake as well as her own. "It's only the feeling I've roused in your body. It's strong, and it's good, but it isna the same thing as love."

"What's the difference?"

He rubbed his hands hard over his face. She *would* be a philosopher, he thought wryly. He took a deep breath and blew it out before answering her.

"Well, love's for only one person. This, what you feel from me—ye can have that with any man, it's not particular."

Only one person. He pushed the thought of Claire firmly away, and wearily bent again to his work.

* * *

He landed heavily in the earth of the flowerbed, not caring that he crushed several small and tender plants. He shivered. This hour before dawn was not only the darkest, but the coldest, as well, and his body strongly protested being required to rise from a warm, soft nest and venture into the chilly blackness, shielded from the icy air by no more than a thin shirt and breeks.

He remembered the heated, rosy curve of the cheek he had bent to kiss before leaving. The shapes of her lingered, warm in his hands, curving his fingers in memory, even as he groped in the dark for the darker line of the stableyard’s stone wall. Drained as he was, it was a dreadful effort to haul himself up and climb over, but he couldn’t risk the creak of the gate awakening Hughes, the head groom.

He felt his way across the inner yard, crowded with wagons and packed bales, ready for the journey of the Lady Geneva to the home of her new lord, following the wedding on Thursday next. At last he pushed open the stable door and found his way up the ladder to his loft. He lay down in the icy straw and pulled the single blanket over him, feeling empty of everything.

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15

BY MISADVENTURE

Helwater
January 1758

Appropriately enough, the weather was dark and stormy when the news reached Helwater. The afternoon exercise had been canceled, owing to the heavy downpour, and the horses were snug in their stalls below. The homely, peaceful sounds of munching and blowing rose up to the loft above, where Jamie Fraser reclined in a comfortable, haylined nest, an open book propped on his chest.

It was one of several he had borrowed from the estate's factor, Mr. Grieves, and he was finding it absorbing, despite the difficulty of reading by the poor light from the owl-slits beneath the eaves.

> *My lips, which I threw in his way, so as that he could not escape kissing them, fix'd, fir'd and embolden'd him: and now, glancing my eyes towards that part of his dress which cover'd the essential object of enjoyment, I plainly discover'd the swell and commotion there; and as I was now too far advanc'd to stop in so fair a way, and was indeed no longer able to contain myself, or wait the slower progress of his maiden bashfulness, I stole my hand upon his thighs, down one of which I could both see and feel a stiff hard body, confin'd by his breeches, that my fingers could discover no end to.*

"Oh, aye?" Jamie muttered skeptically. He raised his eyebrows and shifted himself on the hay. He had been aware that books like this existed, of course, but—with Jenny ordering the reading matter at Lallybroch—had not encountered one personally before. The type of mental engagement demanded was somewhat different from that required for the works of Messieurs Defoe and Fielding, but he was not averse to variety.

> *Its prodigious size made me shrink again; yet I could not, without pleasure, behold, and even ventur'd to feel, such a length, such a breadth of animated ivory! perfectly well turn'd and fashion'd, the proud stiffness of which distended its skin, whose smooth polish and velvet softness might vie with that of the most delicate of our sex, and whose exquisite whiteness was not a little set off by a sprout of black curling hair round the root; then the broad and blueish casted incarnate of the head, and blue serpentines of its veins, altogether compos'd the most striking assemblage of figures and colors in nature. In short, it stood an object of terror and delight!*

Jamie glanced at his own crotch and snorted briefly at this, but flipped the page, the crash of thunder outside meriting no more than a twinge of his attention. He was so absorbed that at first he failed to hear the noises down below, the sound of voices drowned in the heavy rush and beat of the rain on the planks a few feet above his head.

"MacKenzie!" The repeated stentorian bellow finally penetrated his awareness, and he rolled hastily to his feet, quickly straightening his clothes as he went toward the ladder.

"Aye?" He thrust his head over the edge of the loft to see Hughes, just opening his mouth for another bellow.

"Oh, there 'ee are." Hughes shut his mouth, and beckoned with one gnarled hand, wincing as he did so. Hughes suffered mightily from rheumatics in damp weather; he had been riding out the storm snug in the small chamber beside the tack room, where he kept a bed and a jug of crudely distilled spirits. The aroma was perceptible from the loft, and grew substantially stronger as Jamie descended the ladder.

"You're to help ready the coach to drive Lord Dunsany and Lady Isobel to Ellesmere," Hughes told him, the moment his foot touched the flags of the stable floor. The old man swayed alarmingly, hiccuping softly to himself.

"Now? Are ye daft, man? Or just drunk?" He glanced at the open half-door behind Hughes, which seemed a solid sheet of streaming water. Even as he looked, the sky beyond lit up with a sudden flare of lightning that threw the mountain beyond into sudden sharp relief. Just as suddenly, it disappeared, leaving its afterimage printed on his retina. He shook his head to clear the image, and saw Jeffries, the coachman, making his way across the yard, head bowed against the force of wind and water, cloak clutched tight about him. So it wasn't only a drunken fancy of Hughes's.

"Jeffries needs help wi' the horses!" Hughes was forced to lean close and shout to be heard over the noise of the storm. The smell of rough alcohol was staggering at close distance.

"Aye, but why? Why must Lord Dunsany—ah, feckit!" The head groom's eyes were red-rimmed and bleary; clearly there was no sense to be got out of him. Disgusted, Jamie pushed past the man and mounted the ladder two rungs at a time.

A moment to wrap his own worn cloak about him, a moment more to thrust the book he had been reading under the hay—stable lads were no respecters of property—and he was slithering down the ladder again, and out into the roar of the storm.

It was a hellish journey. The wind screamed through the pass, striking the bulky coach and threatening to overturn it at any moment. Perched aloft beside Jeffries, a cloak was little protection against the driving rain; still less was it a help when he was forced to dismount—as he did every few minutes, it seemed—and put his shoulder to the wheel to free the miserable contrivance from the clinging grip of a mudhole.

Still, he scarcely noticed the physical inconvenience of the journey, preoccupied as he was with the possible reasons for it. There couldn't be many matters of such urgency as to force an old man like Lord Dunsany outside on a day like this, let alone over the rutted road to Ellesmere. Some word had come from Ellesmere, and it could only concern the Lady Geneva or her child.

Hearing through the servants' gossip that Lady Geneva was due to be delivered in January, he had counted quickly backward, cursed

Geneva Dunsany once more, and then said a hasty prayer for her safe delivery. Since then, he had done his best not to think about it. He had been with her only three days before her wedding; he couldn't be sure.

A week before, Lady Dunsany had gone to Ellesmere to be with her daughter. Since then, she had sent daily messengers home, to fetch the dozen things she had forgotten to take and must have at once, and each of them, upon arrival at Helwater, had reported "No news yet." Now there was news, and it was plainly bad.

Passing back toward the front of the coach, after the latest battle with the mud, he saw the Lady Isobel's face peering out from beneath the isinglass sheet that covered the window.

"Oh, MacKenzie!" she said, her face contorted in fear and distress. "Please, is it much farther?"

He leaned close to shout in her ear, over the gurgle and rush of the gullies running down both sides of the road.

"Jeffries says it's four mile yet, milady! Two hours, maybe." If the damned and hell-bent coach didn't tip itself and its hapless passengers off the Ashness Bridge into Watendlath Tarn, he added silently to himself.

Isobel nodded her thanks, and lowered the window, but not before he had seen that the wetness upon her cheeks was due as much to tears as to the rain. The snake of anxiety wrapped round his heart slithered lower, to twist in his guts.

It was closer to three hours by the time the coach rolled at last into the courtyard at Ellesmere. Without hesitation, Lord Dunsany leapt down and, scarcely pausing to give his younger daughter an arm, hurried into the house.

It took nearly another hour to unharness the team, rub down the horses, wash the caked-on mud from the coach's wheels, and put everything away in Ellesmere's stables. Numb with cold, fatigue, and hunger, he and Jeffries sought refuge and sustenance in Ellesmere's kitchens.

"Poor fellows, you're gone right blue wi' the cold," the cook observed. "Sit ye down 'ere, and I'll soon 'ave yer a hot bite." A sharp-faced, spare-framed woman, her figure belied her skill, for within minutes, a huge, savoury omelet was laid before them, garnished with liberal amounts of bread and butter, and a small pot of jam.

"Fair, quite fair," Jeffries pronounced, casting an appreciative eye on the spread. He winked at the cook. "Not as it wouldn' go down easier wi' a drop o' something to pave the way, eh? You look the sort would have mercy on a pair o' poor half-frozen chaps, wouldn't ye, darlin'?"

Whether it was this piece of Irish persuasion or the sight of their dripping, steaming clothes, the argument had its effect, and a bottle of cooking brandy made its appearance next to the peppermill. Jeffries poured a large tot and drank it off without hesitation, smacking his lips.

"Ah, that's more like! Here, boyo." He passed the bottle to Jamie, then settled himself comfortably to a hot meal and gossip with the female servants. "Well, then, what's to do here? Is the babe born yet?"

"Oh, yes, last night!" the kitchen maid said eagerly. "We were up all night, with the doctor comin', and fresh sheets and towels called for, and the house all topsle-turvy. But the babe's the least of it!"

"Now, then," the cook broke in, frowning censoriously. "There's too much work to be standin' about gossiping. Get yer on, Mary Ann—up to the study, and see if his Lordship'll be wantin' anything else served now."

Jamie, wiping his plate with a slice of bread, observed that the maid, far from being abashed at this rebuke, departed with alacrity, causing him to deduce that something of considerable interest was likely transpiring in the study.

The undivided attention of her audience thus obtained, the cook allowed herself to be persuaded into imparting the gossip with no more than a token demur.

"Well, it started some months ago, when the Lady Geneva started to show, poor thing. His Lordship'd been nicer than pie to 'er, ever since they was married couldn't do enough for 'er, anything she wanted ordered from Lunnon, always askin' was she warm enough,'ad she what she wanted to eat—fair dotin', 'is Lordship was. But then, when ’e found she was with child!” The cook paused, to screw up her face portentously.

Jamie wanted desperately to know about the child; what was it, and how did it fare? There seemed no way to hurry the woman, though, so he composed his face to look as interested as possible, leaning forward encouragingly.

“Why, the shouting, and the carryings-on!” the cook said, throwing up her hands in dismayed illustration, “ ’im shoutin’, and ’er cryin’, and the both of ’em stampin’ up and down and slammin’ doors, and ’im callin’ ’er names as isn’t fit to be used in a stableyard—and so I told Mary Ann, when she told me.…”

“Was his lordship not pleased about the child, then?” Jamie interrupted. The omelet was settling into a hard lump somewhere under his breastbone. He took another gulp of brandy, in hopes of dislodging it.

The cook turned a bright, birdlike eye on him, eyebrow cocked in appreciation at his intelligence. “Well, you’d think as ’e would be, wouldn’t yer? But no indeed! Far from it,” she added with emphasis.

“Why not?” said Jeffries, only mildly interested.

“ ’E said,” the cook said, dropping her voice in awe at the scandalousness of the information, “as the child wasn’t ’is!”

Jeffries, well along with his second glass, snorted in contemptuous amusement. “Old goat with a young gel? I should think it like enough, but how on earth would his Lordship know for sure whose the spawn was? Could be his as much as anyone’s, couldn’t it, with only her ladyship’s word to go by, eh?”

The cook’s thin mouth stretched in a bright, malicious smile. “Oh, I don’t say as ’e’d know whose it *was*, now—but there’s one sure way ’e’d know it wasn’t *’is*, now isn’t there?”

Jeffries stared at the cook, tilting back on his chair. “What?” he said. “You mean to tell me his Lordship’s incapable?” A broad grin at this juicy thought split his weatherbeaten face. Jamie felt the omelet rising, and hastily gulped more brandy.

“Well, *I* couldn’t say, I’m sure.” The cook’s mouth assumed a prim line, then split asunder to add, “though the chambermaid did say as the sheets she took off the weddin' bed was as white as when they'd gone on, to be sure."

It was too much. Interrupting Jeffries's delighted cackle, Jamie set down his glass with a thump, and bluntly said, "Did the child live?"

The cook and Jeffries both stared in astonishment, but the cook, after a moment's startlement, nodded in answer.

"Oh, yes, to be sure. Fine 'ealthy little lad,'e is, too, or so I 'ear. I thought you knew a'ready. It's 'is mother that's dead."

That blunt statement struck the kitchen with silence. Even Jeffries was still for a moment, sobered by death. Then he crossed himself quickly, muttered, "God rest her soul," and swallowed the rest of his brandy.

Jamie could feel his own throat burning, whether with brandy or tears, he could not say. Shock and grief choked him like a ball of yarn wedged in his gullet; he could barely manage to croak, "When?"

"This morning," the cook said, wagging her head mournfully. "Just afore noon, poor girl. They thought for a time as she'd be all right, after the babe was born; Mary Ann said she was sittin' up, holdin' the wee thing and laughin'." She sighed heavily at the thought. "But then near dawn, she started to bleed again bad. They called back the doctor, and he came fast as could be, but—"

The door slamming open interrupted her. It was Mary Ann, eyes wide under her cap, gasping with excitement and exertion.

"Your master wants you!" she blurted out, eyes flicking between Jamie and the coachman. "The both of ye, at once, and oh, sir"—she gulped, nodding at Jeffries—"he says for God's sake, to bring your pistols!"

The coachman exchanged a glance of consternation with Jamie, then leapt to his feet and dashed out, in the direction of the stables. Like most coachmen, he carried a pair of loaded pistols beneath his seat, against the possibility of highwaymen.

It would take Jeffries a few minutes to find the arms, and longer if he waited to check that the priming had not been harmed by the wet weather. Jamie rose to his feet and gripped the dithering maidservant by the arm.

"Show me to the study," he said. "Now!"

The sound of raised voices would have led him there, once he had reached the head of the stair. Pushing past Mary Ann without ceremony, he paused for a moment outside the door, uncertain whether he should enter at once, or wait for Jeffries.

"That you can have the sheer heartless effrontery to make such accusations!" Dunsany was saying, his old man's voice shaking with rage and distress. "And my poor lamb not cold in her bed! You blackguard, you poltroon! I will not suffer the child to stay a single night under your roof!"

"The little bastard stays here!" Ellesmere's voice rasped hoarsely. It would have been apparent to a far less experienced observer that his Lordship was well the worse for drink. "Bastard that he is, he's my heir, and he stays with me! He's bought and paid for, and if his dam was a whore, at least she gave me a boy."

"Damn you!" Dunsany's voice had reached such a pitch of shrillness that it was scarcely more than a squeak, but the outrage in it was clear nonetheless. "Bought? You—you—you dare to suggest …"

"I don't suggest." Ellesmere's voice was still hoarse, but under better control. "You sold me your daughter—and under false pretenses, I might add," the hoarse voice said sarcastically. "I paid thirty thousand pound for a virgin of good name. The first condition wasn't met, and I take leave to doubt the second." The sound of liquid being poured came through the door, followed by the scrape of a glass across a wooden tabletop.

"I would suggest that your burden of spirits is already excessive, sir," Dunsany said. His voice shook with an obvious attempt at mastery of his emotions. "I can only attribute the disgusting slurs you have cast upon my daughter's purity to your apparent intoxication. That being so, I shall take my grandson, and go."

"Oh, your *grand*son, is it?" Ellesmere's voice was slurred and sneering. "You seem damned sure of your daughter's 'purity.' Sure the brat isn't yours? She said—"

He broke off with a cry of astonishment, accompanied by a crash. Not daring to wait longer, Jamie plunged through the door, to find

Ellesmere and Lord Dunsany entangled on the hearthrug, rolling to and fro in a welter of coats and limbs, both heedless of the fire behind them.

He took a moment to appraise the situation, then, seizing a fortuitous opening, reached into the fray and snatched his employer upright.

"Be still, my lord," he muttered in Dunsany's ear, dragging him back from Ellesmere's gasping form. Then, "Give over, ye auld fool!" he hissed, as Dunsany went on mindlessly struggling to reach his opponent. Ellesmere was almost as old as Dunsany, but more strongly built and clearly in better health, despite his drunkenness.

The Earl staggered to his feet, balding hair disheveled and bloodshot eyes glaring fixedly at Dunsany. He wiped his spittle-flecked mouth with the back of his hand, fat shoulders heaving.

"Filth," he said, almost conversationally. "Lay hands … on me, would you?" Still gasping for breath, he lurched toward the bell rope.

It was by no means certain that Lord Dunsany would stay on his feet, but there was no time to worry about that. Jamie let go of his employer, and lunged for Ellesmere's groping hand.

"No, my lord," he said, as respectfully as possible. Holding Ellesmere in a crude bear-leading embrace, he forced the heavyset Earl back across the room. "I think it would be … unwise … to involve your … servants." Grunting, he pushed Ellesmere into a chair.

"Best stay there, my lord." Jeffries, a drawn pistol in each hand, advanced warily into the room, his darting glance divided between Ellesmere, struggling to rise from the depths of the armchair, and Lord Dunsany, who clung precariously to a table edge, his aged face white as paper.

Jeffries glanced at Dunsany for instructions, and seeing none forthcoming, instinctively looked to Jamie. Jamie was conscious of a monstrous irritation; why should he be expected to deal with this imbroglio? Still, it was important that the Helwater party remove themselves from the premises with all haste. He stepped forward and took Dunsany by the arm.

"Let us go now, my lord," he said. Detaching the wilting Dunsany from the table, he tried to edge the tall old nobleman toward the door. Just at this moment of escape, though, the door was blocked.

"William?" Lady Dunsany's round face, splotched with the marks of recent grief, showed a sort of dull bewilderment at the scene in the study. In her arms was what looked like a large, untidy bundle of washing. She lifted this in a movement of vague inquiry. "The maid said you wanted me to bring the baby. What—" A roar from Ellesmere interrupted her. Heedless of the pointing pistols, the Earl sprang from his chair and shoved the gawking Jeffries out of the way.

"He's mine!" Knocking Lady Dunsany roughly against the paneling, Ellesmere snatched the bundle from her arms. Clutching it to his bosom, the Earl retreated toward the window. He glared at Dunsany, panting like a cornered beast.

"Mine, d'ye hear?"

The bundle emitted a loud shriek, as if in protest at this asseveration, and Dunsany, roused from his shock by the sight of his grandson in Ellesmere's arms, started forward, his features contorted in fury.

"Give him to me!"

"Go to hell, you codless scut!" With an unforeseen agility, Ellesmere dodged away from Dunsany. He flung back the draperies and cranked the window open with one hand, clutching the wailing child with the other.

"Get—out—of—my—house!" he panted, gasping with each revolution that edged the casement wider. "Go! Now, or I'll drop the little bastard, I swear I will!" To mark his threat, he thrust the yelling bundle toward the sill, and the empty dark where the wet stones of the courtyard waited, thirty feet below.

Past all conscious thought or any fear of consequence, Jamie Fraser acted on the instinct that had seen him through a dozen battles. He snatched one pistol from the transfixed Jeffries, turned on his heel, and fired in the same motion.

The roar of the shot struck everyone silent. Even the child ceased to scream. Ellesmere's face went quite blank, thick eyebrows raised in question. Then he staggered, and Jamie leapt forward, noting with a sort of detached clarity the small round hole in the baby's trailing drapery, where the pistol ball had passed through it.

He stood then rooted on the hearthrug, heedless of the fire scorching the backs of his legs, of the still-heaving body of Ellesmere at his feet, of the regular, hysterical shrieks of Lady Dunsany, piercing as a peacock's. He stood, eyes tight closed, shaking like a leaf, unable either to move or to think, arms wrapped tight about the shapeless, squirming, squawking bundle that contained his son.

* * *

"I wish to speak to MacKenzie. Alone."

Lady Dunsany looked distinctly out of place in the stable. Small, plump, and impeccable in black linen, she looked like a china ornament, removed from its spot of cherished safety on the mantelpiece, and in imminent and constant peril of breakage, here in this world of rough animals and unshaven men.

Hughes, with a glance of complete astonishment at his mistress, bowed and tugged at his forelock before retreating to his den behind the tack room, leaving MacKenzie face-to-face with her.

Close to, the impression of fragility was heightened by the paleness of her face, touched faintly with pink at the corners of nose and eyes. She looked like a very small and dignified rabbit, dressed in mourning. Jamie felt that he should ask her to sit down, but there was no place for her to sit, save on a pile of hay or an upturned barrow.

"The coroner's court met this morning, MacKenzie," she said.

"Aye, milady." He had known that—they all had, and the other grooms had kept their distance from him all morning. Not out of respect; out of the dread for one who suffers from a deadly disease. Jeffries knew what had happened in the drawing room at Ellesmere, and that meant all the servants knew. But no one spoke of it.

"The verdict of the court was that the Earl of Ellesmere met his death by misadventure. The coroner's theory is that his lordship was—distraught"—she made a faint moue of distaste—"over my daughter's death." Her voice quivered faintly, but did not break. The fragile Lady Dunsany had borne up much better beneath the tragedy than had her husband; the servants' rumor had it that his lordship had not risen from his bed since his return from Ellesmere.

"Aye, milady?" Jeffries had been called to give evidence. MacKenzie had not. So far as the coroner's court was concerned, the groom MacKenzie had never set foot on Ellesmere.

Lady Dunsany's eyes met his, straight on. They were a pale bluish-green, like her daughter Isobel's, but the blond hair that glowed on Isobel was faded on her mother, touched with white strands that shone silver in the sun from the open door of the stable.

"We are grateful to you, MacKenzie," she said quietly.

"Thank ye, milady."

"Very grateful," she repeated, still gazing at him intently. "MacKenzie isn't your real name, is it?" she said suddenly.

"No, milady." A sliver of ice ran down his spine, despite the warmth of the afternoon sun on his shoulders. How much had the Lady Geneva told her mother before her death?

She seemed to feel his stiffening, for the edge of her mouth lifted in what he thought was meant as a smile of reassurance.

"I think I need not ask what it is, just yet," she said. "But I do have a question for you. MacKenzie—do you want to go home?"

"Home?" He repeated the word blankly.

"To Scotland." She was watching him intently. "I know who you are," she said. "Not your name, but that you're one of John's Jacobite prisoners. My husband told me."

Jamie watched her warily, but she didn't seem upset; no more so than would be natural in a woman who has just lost a daughter and gained a grandson, at least.

"I hope you will forgive the deception, milady," he said. "His Lordship—"

"Wished to save me distress," Lady Dunsany finished for him. "Yes, I know. William worries too much." Still, the deep line between her brows relaxed a bit at the thought of her husband's concern. The sight, with its underlying echo of marital devotion, gave him a faint and unexpected pang.

"We are not rich—you will have gathered that from Ellesmere's remarks," Lady Dunsany went on. "Helwater is rather heavily in debt. My grandson, however, is now the possessor of one of the largest fortunes in the county."

There seemed nothing to say to this but "Aye, milady?" though it made him feel rather like the parrot who lived in the main salon. He had seen it as he crept stealthily through the flowerbeds at sunset the day before, taking the chance of approaching the house while the family were dressing for dinner, in an attempt to catch a glimpse through a window of the new Earl of Ellesmere.

"We are very retired here," she went on. "We seldom visit London, and my husband has little influence in high circles. But—"

"Aye, milady?" He had some inkling by now of where her ladyship was heading with this roundabout conversation, and a feeling of sudden excitement hollowed the space beneath his ribs.

"John—Lord John Grey, that is—comes from a family with considerable influence. His stepfather is—well, that's of no consequence." She shrugged, the small black-linen shoulders dismissing the details.

"The point is that it might be possible to exert sufficient influence on your behalf to have you released from the conditions of your parole, so that you might return to Scotland. So I have come to ask you—do you want to go home, MacKenzie?"

He felt quite breathless, as though someone had punched him very hard in the stomach.

Scotland. To go away from this damp, spongy atmosphere, set foot on that forbidden road and walk it with a free, long stride, up into the crags and along the deer trails, to feel the air clearing and sharpening with the scent of gorse and heather. To go home!

To be a stranger no longer. To go away from hostility and loneliness, come down into Lallybroch, and see his sister's face light with joy at the sight of him, feel her arms around his waist, Ian's hug about his shoulders and the pummeling, grasping clutch of the children's hands, tugging at his clothes.

To go away, and never to see or hear of his own child again. He stared at Lady Dunsany, his face quite blank, so that she should not guess at the turmoil her offer had caused within him.

He had, at last, found the baby yesterday, lying asleep in a basket near the nursery window on the second floor. Perched precariously on the branch of a huge Norway spruce, he had strained his eyes to see through the screen of needles that hid him.

The child's face had been visible only in profile, one fat cheek resting on its ruffled shoulder. Its cap had slipped awry, so he could see the smooth, arching curve of the tiny skull, lightly dusted with a pale gold fuzz.

"Thank God it isn't red," had been his first thought, and he had crossed himself in reflexive thanksgiving.

"God, he's so small!" had been his second, coupled with an overwhelming urge to step through the window and pick the boy up. The smooth, beautifully shaped head would just fit, resting in the palm of his hand, and he could feel in memory the small squirming body that he had held so briefly to his heart.

"You're a strong laddie," he had whispered. "Strong and braw and bonny. But my God, you are so small!"

Lady Dunsany was waiting patiently. He bowed his head respectfully to her, not knowing whether he was making a terrible mistake, but unable to do otherwise.

"I thank ye, milady, but—I think I shall not go … just yet."

One pale eyebrow quivered slightly, but she inclined her head to him with equal grace.

"As you wish, MacKenzie. You have only to ask."

She turned like a tiny clockwork figure and left, going back to the world of Helwater, a thousand times more his prison now than it had ever been.

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16

WILLIE

To his extreme surprise, the next few years were in many ways among the happiest of Jamie Fraser's life, aside from the years of his marriage.

Relieved of responsibility for tenants, followers, or anyone at all beyond himself and the horses in his charge, life was relatively simple. While the coroner's court had taken no notice of him, Jeffries had let slip enough about the death of Ellesmere that the other servants treated him with distant respect, but did not presume on his company.

He had enough to eat, sufficient clothes to keep warm and decent, and the occasional discreet letter from the Highlands reassured him that similar conditions obtained there.

One unexpected benefit of the quiet life at Helwater was that he had somehow resumed his odd half-friendship with Lord John Grey. The Major had, as promised, appeared once each quarter, staying each time for a few days to visit with the Dunsanys. He had made no attempt to gloat, though, or even to speak with Jamie, beyond the barest formal inquiry.

Very slowly, Jamie had realized all that Lady Dunsany had implied, in her offer to have him released. "John—Lord John Grey, that is—comes from a family with considerable influence. His stepfather is—well, that's of no consequence," she had said. It was of consequence, though. It had not been His Majesty's pleasure that had brought him here, rather than condemning him to the perilous ocean crossing and near-slavery in America; it had been John Grey's influence.

And he had not done it for revenge or from indecent motives, for he never gloated, made no advances; never said anything beyond the most commonplace civilities. No, he had brought Jamie here because it was the best he could do; unable simply to release him at the time, Grey had done his best to ease the conditions of captivity—by giving him air, and light, and horses.

It took some effort, but he did it. When Grey next appeared in the stableyard on his quarterly visit, Jamie had waited until the Major was alone, admiring the conformation of a big sorrel gelding. He had come to stand beside Grey, leaning on the fence. They watched the horse in silence for several minutes.

"King's pawn to king four," Jamie said quietly at last, not looking at the man beside him.

He felt the other's start of surprise, and felt Grey's eyes on him, but didn't turn his head. Then he felt the creak of the wood beneath his forearm as Grey turned back, leaning on the fence again.

"Queen's knight to queen bishop three," Grey replied, his voice a little huskier than usual.

Since then, Grey had come to the stables during each visit, to spend an evening perched on Jamie's crude stool, talking. They had no chessboard and seldom played verbally, but the late-night conversations continued—Jamie's only connection with the world beyond Helwater, and a small pleasure to which both of them looked forward once each quarter.

Above everything else, he had Willie. Helwater was dedicated to horses; even before the boy could stand solidly on his feet, his grandfather had him propped on a pony to be led round the paddock. By the time Willie was three, he was riding by himself—under the watchful eye of MacKenzie, the groom.

Willie was a strong, courageous, bonny little lad. He had a blinding smile, and could charm birds from the trees if he liked. He was also remarkably spoilt. As the ninth Earl of Ellesmere and the only heir to both Ellesmere and Helwater, with neither mother nor father to keep him under control, he ran roughshod over his doting grandparents, his young aunt, and every servant in the place—except MacKenzie.

And that was a near thing. So far, threats of not allowing the boy to help him with the horses had sufficed to quash Willie's worst excesses in the stables, but sooner or later, threats alone were not going to be sufficient, and MacKenzie the groom found himself wondering just what was going to happen when he finally lost his own control and clouted the wee fiend.

As a lad, he would himself have been beaten senseless by the nearest male relative within earshot, had he ever dared to address a woman the way he had heard Willie speak to his aunt and the maidservants, and the impulse to haul Willie into a deserted box stall and attempt to correct his manners was increasingly frequent.

Still, for the most part, he had nothing but joy in Willie. The boy adored MacKenzie, and as he grew older would spend hours in his company, riding on the huge draft horses as they pulled the heavy roller through the high fields, and perched precariously on the hay wagons as they came down from the upper pastures in summer.

There was a threat to this peaceful existence, though, which grew greater with each passing month. Ironically, the threat came from Willie himself, and was one he could not help.

"What a handsome little lad he is, to be sure! And such a lovely little rider!" It was Lady Grozier who spoke, standing on the veranda with Lady Dunsany to admire Willie's peregrinations on his pony around the edge of the lawn.

Willie's grandmother laughed, eyeing the boy fondly. "Oh, yes. He loves his pony. We have a terrible time getting him even to come indoors for meals. And he's even more fond of his groom. We joke sometimes that he spends so much time with MacKenzie that he's even starting to *look* like MacKenzie!"

Lady Grozier, who had of course paid no attention to a groom, now glanced in MacKenzie's direction.

"Why, you're right!" she exclaimed, much amused. "Just look; Willie's got just that same cock to his head, and the same set to his shoulders! How funny!"

Jamie bowed respectfully to the ladies, but felt cold sweat pop out on his face.

He had seen this coming, but hadn't wanted to believe the resemblance was sufficiently pronounced as to be visible to anyone but himself. Willie as a baby had been fat and pudding-faced, and resembled no one at all. As he had grown, though, the pudginess had vanished from cheeks and chin, and while his nose was still the soft snub of childhood, the hint of high, broad cheekbones was apparent, and the slaty-blue eyes of babyhood had grown dark blue and clear, thickly fringed with sooty lashes, and slightly slanted in appearance.

Once the ladies had gone into the house, and he could be sure no one was watching, Jamie passed a hand furtively over his own features. Was the resemblance truly that great? Willie's hair was a soft middle brown, with just a tinge of his mother's chestnut gleam. And those large, translucent ears—surely his own didn't stick out like that?

The trouble was that Jamie Fraser had not actually seen himself clearly for several years. Grooms did not have looking glasses, and he had sedulously avoided the company of the maids, who might have provided him with one.

Moving to the watering trough, he bent over it, casually, as though inspecting one of the water striders that skated over its surface. Beneath the wavering surface, flecked with floating bits of hay and crisscrossed by the dimpling striders, his own face stared up at him.

He swallowed, and saw the reflection's throat move. It was by no means a complete resemblance, but it was definitely there. More in the set and shape of the head and shoulders, as Lady Grozier had observed—but most definitely the eyes as well. Fraser eyes; his father, Brian, had had them, and his sister, Jenny, as well. Let the boy's bones go on pressing through his skin; let the child-snub nose grow long and straight, and the cheekbones still broader—and anyone would be able to see it.

The reflection in the trough vanished as he straightened up, and stood, staring blindly at the stable that had been home for the last several years. It was July and the sun was hot, but it made no impression on the chill that numbed his fingers and sent a shiver up his back.

It was time to speak to Lady Dunsany.

* * *

By the middle of September, everything had been arranged. The pardon had been procured; John Grey had brought it the day before. Jamie had a small amount of money saved, enough for traveling expenses, and Lady Dunsany had given him a decent horse. The only thing that remained was to bid farewell to his acquaintances at Helwater—and Willie.

"I shall be leaving tomorrow." Jamie spoke matter-of-factly, not taking his eyes off the bay mare's fetlock. The horny growth he was filing flaked away, leaving a dust of coarse black shavings on the stable floor.

"Where are you going? To Derwentwater? Can I come with you?" William, Viscount Dunsany, ninth Earl of Ellesmere, hopped down from the edge of the box stall, landing with a thump that made the bay mare start and snort.

"Don't do that," Jamie said automatically. "Have I not told ye to move quiet near Milly? She's skittish."

"Why?"

"You'd be skittish, too, if I squeezed your knee." One big hand darted out and pinched the muscle just above the boy's knee. Willie squeaked and jerked back, giggling.

"Can I ride Millyflower when you're done, Mac?"

"No," Jamie answered patiently, for the dozenth time that day. "I've told ye a thousand times, she's too big for ye yet."

"But I *want* to ride her!"

Jamie sighed but didn't answer, instead moving around to the other side of Milles Fleurs and picking up the left hoof.

"I *said* I want to ride Milly!"

"I heard ye."

"Then saddle her for me! Right now!"

The ninth Earl of Ellesmere had his chin thrust out as far as it would go, but the defiant look in his eye was tempered with a certain doubt as he intercepted Jamie's cold blue gaze. Jamie set the horse's hoof down slowly, just as slowly stood up, and drawing himself to his full height of six feet four, put his hands on his hips, looked down at the Earl, three feet six, and said, very softly, "No."

"Yes!" Willie stamped his foot on the hay-strewn floor. "You *have* to do what I tell you!"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do!"

"No, I …" Shaking his head hard enough to make the red hair fly about his ears, Jamie pressed his lips tight together, then squatted down in front of the boy.

"See here," he said, "I havena got to do what ye say, for I'm no longer going to be groom here. I told ye, I shall be leaving tomorrow."

Willie's face went quite blank with shock, and the freckles on his nose stood out dark against the fair skin.

"You can't!" he said. "You can't leave."

"I have to."

"No!" The small Earl clenched his jaw, which gave him a truly startling resemblance to his paternal great-grandfather. Jamie thanked his stars that no one at Helwater had likely ever seen Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat. "I won't *let* you go!"

"For once, my lord, ye have nothing to say about it," Jamie replied firmly, his distress at leaving tempered somewhat by finally being allowed to speak his mind to the boy.

"If you leave …" Willie looked around helplessly for a threat, and spotted one easily to hand. "If you leave," he repeated more confidently, "I'll scream and shout and scare all the horses, so there!"

"Make a peep, ye little fiend, and I'll smack ye a good one!" Freed from his usual reserve, and alarmed at the thought of this spoiled brat upsetting the highly-strung and valuable horses, Jamie glared at the boy.

The Earl's eyes bulged with rage, and his face went red. He took a deep breath, then whirled and ran down the length of the stable, shrieking and waving his arms.

Milles Fleurs, already on edge from having her hoofs fiddled with, reared and plunged, neighing loudly. Her distress was echoed by kicks and high-pitched whinnying from the box stalls nearby, where Willie was roaring out all the bad words he knew—no small store—and kicking frenziedly at the doors of the stalls.

Jamie succeeded in catching Milles Fleurs's lead-rope and with considerable effort, managed to get the mare outside without damage to himself or the horse. He tied her to the paddock fence, and then strode back into the stable to deal with Willie.

"Damn, damn, *damn*!" the Earl was shrieking. "Sluire! Quim! Shit! Swive!"

Without a word, Jamie grabbed the boy by the collar, lifted him off his feet and carried him, kicking and squirming, to the farrier's stool he had been using. Here he sat down, flipped the Earl over his knee, and smacked his buttocks five or six times, hard. Then he jerked the boy up and set him on his feet.

"I *hate* you!" The Viscount's tear-smudged face was bright red and his fists trembled with rage.

"Well, I'm no verra fond of you either, ye little bastard!" Jamie snapped.

Willie drew himself up, fists clenched, purple in the face.

"I'm not a bastard!" he shrieked. "I'm not, I'm not! Take it back! Nobody can say that to me! Take it *back*, I said!"

Jamie stared at the boy in shock. There *had* been talk, then, and Willie had heard it. He had delayed his going too long.

He drew a deep breath, and then another, and hoped that his voice would not tremble.

"I take it back," he said softly. "I shouldna have used the word, my lord."

He wanted to kneel and embrace the boy, or pick him up and comfort him against his shoulder—but that was not a gesture a groom might make to an earl, even a young one. The palm of his left hand stung, and he curled his fingers tight over the only fatherly caress he was ever likely to give his son.

Willie knew how an earl should behave; he was making a masterful effort to subdue his tears, sniffing ferociously and swiping at his face with a sleeve.

"Allow me, my lord." Jamie did kneel then, and wiped the little boy's face gently with his own coarse handkerchief. Willie's eyes looked at him over the cotton folds, red-rimmed and woeful.

"Have you really got to go, Mac?" he asked, in a very small voice.

"Aye, I have." He looked into the dark blue eyes, so heartbreakingly like his own, and suddenly didn't give a damn what was right or who saw. He pulled the boy roughly to him, hugging him tight against his heart, holding the boy's face close to his shoulder, that Willie might not see the quick tears that fell into his thick, soft hair.

Willie's arms went around his neck and clung tight. He could feel the small, sturdy body shake against him with the force of suppressed sobbing. He patted the flat little back, and smoothed Willie's hair, and murmured things in Gaelic that he hoped the boy would not understand.

At length, he took the boy's arms from his neck and put him gently away.

"Come wi' me to my room, Willie; I shall give ye something to keep."

He had long since moved from the hayloft, taking over Hughes's snuggery beside the tack room when the elderly head groom retired. It was a small room, and very plainly furnished, but it had the twin virtues of warmth and privacy.

Besides the bed, the stool, and a chamber pot, there was a small table, on which stood the few books that he owned, a large candle in a pottery candlestick, and a smaller candle, thick and squat, that stood to one side before a small statue of the Virgin. It was a cheap wooden carving that Jenny had sent him, but it had been made in France, and was not without artistry.

"What's that little candle for?" Willie asked. "Grannie says only stinking Papists burn candles in front of heathen images."

"Well, I am a stinking Papist," Jamie said, with a wry twist of his mouth. "It's no a heathen image, though; it's a statue of the Blessed Mother."

“You are?” Clearly this revelation only added to the boy’s fascination. “Why do Papists burn candles before statues, then?”

Jamie rubbed a hand through his hair. “Aye, well. It’s … maybe a way of praying—and remembering. Ye light the candle, and say a prayer and think of people ye care for. And while it burns, the flame remembers them for ye.”

“Who do you remember?” Willie glanced up at him. His hair was standing on end, rumpled by his earlier distress, but his blue eyes were clear with interest.

“Oh, a good many people. My family in the Highlands—my sister and her family. Friends. My wife.” And sometimes the candle burned in memory of a young and reckless girl named Geneva, but he did not say that.

Willie frowned. “You haven’t got a wife.”

“No. Not anymore. But I remember her always.”

Willie put out a stubby forefinger and cautiously touched the little statue. The woman’s hands were spread in welcome, a tender maternity engraved on the lovely face.

“I want to be a stinking Papist, too,” Willie said firmly.

“Ye canna do that!” Jamie exclaimed, half-amused, half-touched at the notion. “Your grandmama and your auntie would go mad.”

“Would they froth at the mouth, like that mad fox you killed?” Willie brightened.

“I shouldna wonder,” Jamie said dryly.

“I want to do it!” The small, clear features were set in determination. “I won’t tell Grannie or Auntie Isobel; I won’t tell anybody. Please, Mac! Please let me! I want to be like you!”

Jamie hesitated, both touched by the boy’s earnestness, and suddenly wanting to leave his son with something more than the carved wooden horse he had made to leave as a farewell present. He tried to remember what Father McMurtry had taught them in the schoolroom about baptism. It was all right for a lay person to do it, he thought, provided that the situation was an emergency, and no priest was to hand.

It might be stretching a point to call the present situation an emergency, but … a sudden impulse made him reach down the jug of water that he kept on the sill.

The eyes that were like his watched, wide and solemn, as he carefully brushed the soft brown hair back from the high brow. He dipped three fingers into the water and carefully traced a cross on the lad's forehead.

"I baptize thee William James," he said softly, "in the name o' the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Amen."

Willie blinked, crossing his eyes as a drop of water rolled down his nose. He stuck out his tongue to catch it, and Jamie laughed, despite himself.

"Why did you call me William James?" Willie asked curiously. "My other names are Clarence Henry George." He made a face; Clarence wasn't his idea of a good name.

Jamie hid a smile. "Ye get a new name when you're baptized; James is your special Papist name. It's mine, too."

"It is?" Willie was delighted. "I'm a stinking Papist now, like you?"

"Aye, as much as I can manage, at least." He smiled down at Willie, then, struck by another impulse, reached into the neck of his shirt.

"Here. Keep this, too, to remember me by." He laid the beechwood rosary gently over Willie's head. "Ye canna let anyone see that, though," he warned. "And for God's sake, dinna tell anyone you're a Papist."

"I won't," Willie promised. "Not a soul." He tucked the rosary into his shirt, patting carefully to be sure that it was hidden.

"Good." Jamie reached out and ruffled Willie's hair in dismissal. "It's almost time for your tea; ye'd best go on up to the house now."

Willie started for the door, but stopped halfway, suddenly distressed again, with a hand pressed flat to his chest.

"You said to keep this to remember you. But I haven't got anything for you to remember me by!"

Jamie smiled slightly. His heart was squeezed so tight, he thought he could not draw breath to speak, but he forced the words out.

"Dinna fret yourself," he said. "I'll remember ye."

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17

MONSTERS RISING

Loch Ness
August 1968

Brianna blinked, brushing back a bright web of hair caught by the wind. “I’d almost forgotten what the sun looks like,” she said, squinting at the object in question, shining with unaccustomed ferocity on the dark waters of Loch Ness.

Her mother stretched luxuriously, enjoying the light wind. “To say nothing of what fresh air is like. I feel like a toadstool that’s been growing in the dark for weeks—all pale and squashy.”

“Fine scholars the two of you would make,” Roger said, but grinned. All three of them were in high spirits. After the arduous slog through the prison records to narrow the search to Ardsmuir, they had had a run of luck. The records for Ardsmuir were complete, in one spot, and—in comparison to most others—remarkably clear. Ardsmuir had been a prison for only fifteen years; following its renovation by Jacobite prison-labor, it had been converted into a small permanent garrison, and the prison population dispersed—mostly transported to the American Colonies.

“I still can’t imagine why Fraser wasn’t sent along to America with the rest,” Roger said. He had had a moment’s panic there, going over and over the list of transported convicts from Ardsmuir, searching the names one by one, nearly letter by letter, and still finding no Frasers. He had been certain that Jamie Fraser had died in prison, and had been in a cold sweat of fear over the thought of telling the Randall women—until the flip of a page had showed him Fraser's parole to a place named Helwater.

"I don't know," Claire said, "but it's a bloody good thing he wasn't. He's—he *was*—" she caught herself quickly, but not quickly enough to stop Roger noticing the slip—"terribly, terribly seasick." She gestured at the surface of the loch before them, dancing with tiny waves. "Even going out on something like that would turn him green in minutes."

Roger glanced at Brianna with interest. "Are you seasick?"

She shook her head, bright hair lifting in the wind. "Nah." She patted her bare midriff smugly. "Cast-iron."

Roger laughed. "Want to go out, then? It's your holiday, after all."

"Really? Could we? Can you fish in there?" Brianna shaded her eyes, looking eagerly out over the dark water.

"Certainly. I've caught salmon and eels many a time in Loch Ness," Roger assured her. "Come along; we'll rent a wee boat at the dock in Drumnadrochit."

The drive to Drumnadrochit was a delight. The day was one of those clear, bright summer days that cause tourists from the South to stampede into Scotland in droves during August and September. With one of Fiona's larger breakfasts inside him, one of her lunches stowed in a basket in the boot, and Brianna Randall, long hair blowing in the wind, seated beside him, Roger was strongly disposed to consider that all was right with the world.

He allowed himself to dwell with satisfaction on the results of their researches. It had meant taking additional leave from his college for the summer term, but it had been worth it.

After finding the record of James Fraser's parole, it had taken another two weeks of slog and inquiry—even a quick weekend trip by Roger and Bree to the Lake District, another by all three of them to London—and then the sight that had made Brianna whoop out loud in the middle of the British Museum's sacrosanct Reading Room, causing their hasty departure amid waves of icy disapproval. The sight of the Royal Warrant of Pardon, stamped with the seal of

George III, *Rex Angleterre,* dated 1764, bearing the name of “James Alex^{drl} M’Kensie Frazier.”

“We’re getting close,” Roger had said, gloating over the photocopy of the Warrant of Pardon. “Bloody close!”

“Close?” Brianna had said, but then had been distracted by the sight of their bus approaching, and had not pursued the matter. Roger had caught Claire’s eye on him, though; she knew very well what he meant.

She would, of course, have been thinking of it; he wondered whether Brianna had. Claire had disappeared into the past in 1945, vanishing through the circle of standing stones on Craigh na Dun and reappearing in 1743. She had lived with Jamie Fraser for nearly three years, then returned through the stones. And she had come back nearly three years past the time of her original disappearance, in April of 1948.

All of which meant—just possibly—that if she were disposed to try the trip back through the stones once more, she would likely arrive twenty years past the time she had left—in 1766. And 1766 was only two years past the latest known date at which Jamie Fraser had been located, alive and well. If he had survived another two years, and if Roger could find him …

“There it is!” Brianna said suddenly. “ ‘Boats for Rent.’ ” She pointed at the sign in the window of the dockside pub, and Roger nosed the car into a parking slot outside, with no further thought of Jamie Fraser.

“I wonder why short men are so often enamored of very tall women?” Claire’s voice behind him echoed Roger’s thoughts with an uncanny accuracy—and not for the first time.

“Moth and flame syndrome, perhaps?” Roger suggested, frowning at the diminutive barman’s evident fascination with Brianna. He and Claire were standing before the counter for rentals, waiting for the clerk to write up the receipt while Brianna bought bottles of Coca-Cola and brown ale to augment their lunch.

The young barman, who came up approximately to Brianna’s armpit, was hopping to and fro, offering pickled eggs and slices of smoked tongue, eyes worshipfully upturned to the yellow-haltered goddess before him. From her laughter, Brianna appeared to think the man "cute."

"I always told Bree not to get involved with short men," Claire observed, watching this.

"Did you?" Roger said dryly. "Somehow I didn't envision you being all that much in the motherly advice line."

She laughed, disregarding his momentary sourness. "Well, I'm not, all that much. When you notice an important principle like that, though, it seems one's motherly duty to pass it along."

"Something wrong with short men, is there?" Roger inquired.

"They tend to turn mean if they don't get their way," Claire answered. "Like small yapping dogs. Cute and fluffy, but cross them and you're likely to get a nasty nip in the ankle."

Roger laughed. "This observation is the result of years of experience, I take it?"

"Oh, yes." She nodded, glancing up at him. "I've never met an orchestra conductor over five feet tall. Vicious specimens, practically all of them. But tall men"—her lips curved slightly as she surveyed his six-feet-three-inch frame—"tall men are almost always very sweet and gentle."

"Sweet, eh?" said Roger, with a cynical glance at the barman, who was cutting up a jellied eel for Brianna. Her face expressed a wary distaste, but she leaned forward, wrinkling her nose as she took the bite offered on a fork.

"With women," Claire amplified. "I've always thought it's because they realize that they don't have anything to prove; when it's perfectly obvious that they can do anything they like whether you want them to or not, they don't need to try to prove it."

"While a short man—" Roger prompted.

"While a short one knows he can't do anything unless you let him, and the knowledge drives him mad, so he's always trying something on, just to prove he can."

"Mmphm." Roger made a Scottish noise in the back of his throat, meant to convey both appreciation of Claire's acuity, and general suspicion of what the barman might be wanting to prove to Brianna.

“Thanks,” he said to the clerk, who shoved the receipt across the counter to him. “Ready, Bree?” he asked.

The loch was calm and the fishing slow, but it was pleasant on the water, with the August sun warm on their backs and the scent of raspberry canes and sun-warmed pine trees wafting from the nearby shore. Full of lunch, they all grew drowsy, and before long, Brianna was curled up in the bow, asleep with her head pillowed on Roger’s jacket. Claire sat in the stern, blinking, but still awake.

“What about short and tall women?” Roger asked, resuming their earlier conversation as he sculled slowly across the loch. He glanced over his shoulder at the amazing length of Brianna’s legs, awkwardly curled under her. “Same thing? The little ones nasty?”

Claire shook her head meditatively, the curls beginning to work their way loose from her hairclip. “No, I don’t think so. It doesn’t seem to have anything to do with size. I think it’s more a matter of whether they see men as The Enemy, or just see them as men, and on the whole, rather like them for it.”

“Oh, to do with women’s liberation, is it?”

“No, not at all,” Claire said. “I saw just the same kinds of behavior between men and women in 1743 that you see now. Some differences, of course, in how they each behave, but not so much in how they behave to each other.”

She looked out over the dark waters of the loch, shading her eyes with her hand. She might have been keeping an eye out for otters and floating logs, but Roger thought that far-seeing gaze was looking a bit farther than the cliffs of the opposite shore.

“You like men, don’t you?” he said quietly. “Tall men.”

She smiled briefly, not looking at him.

“One,” she said softly.

“Will you go, then—if I can find him?” he rested his oars momentarily, watching her.

She drew a deep breath before answering. The wind flushed her cheeks with pink and molded the fabric of the white shirt to her figure, showing off a high bosom and a slender waist. Too young to be a widow, he thought, too lovely to be wasted.

"I don't know," she said, a little shakily. "The thought of it—or rather, the *thoughts* of it! On the one hand, to find Jamie—and then, on the other, to … go through again." A shudder went through her, closing her eyes.

"It's indescribable, you know," she said, eyes still closed as though she saw inside them the ring of stones on Craigh na Dun. "Horrible, but horrible in a way that isn't like other horrible things, so you can't say." She opened her eyes and smiled wryly at him.

"A bit like trying to tell a man what having a baby is like; he can more or less grasp the idea that it's painful, but he isn't equipped actually to understand what it feels like."

Roger grunted with amusement. "Oh, aye? Well, there's some difference, you know. I've actually heard those bloody stones." He shivered himself, involuntarily. The memory of the night, three months ago, when Gillian Edgars had gone through the stones, was not one he willingly called to mind; it had come back to him in nightmares several times, though. He heaved strongly on the oars, trying to erase it.

"Like being torn apart, isn't it?" he said, his eyes intent on hers. "There's something pulling at you, ripping, dragging, and not just outside—inside you as well, so you feel your skull will fly to pieces any moment. And the filthy noise." He shuddered again. Claire's face had gone slightly pale.

"I didn't know you could hear them," she said. "You didn't tell me."

"It didn't seem important." He studied her a moment, as he pulled, then added quietly, "Bree heard them as well."

"I see." She turned to look back over the loch, where the wake of the tiny boat spread its V-shaped wings. Far behind, the waves from the passage of a larger boat reflected back from the cliffs and joined again in the center of the loch, making a long, humped form of glistening water—a standing wave, a phenomenon of the loch that had often been mistaken for a sighting of the monster.

"It's there, you know," she said suddenly, nodding down into the black, peat-laden water.

He opened his mouth to ask what she meant, but then realized that he *did* know. He had lived near Loch Ness for most of his life, fished for eels and salmon in its waters, and heard—and laughed at—every story of the “fearsome beastie” that had ever been told in the pubs of Drumnadrochit and Fort Augustus.

Perhaps it was the unlikeliness of the situation—sitting here, calmly discussing whether the woman with him should or should not take the unimaginable risk of catapulting herself into an unknown past. Whatever the cause of his certainty, it seemed suddenly not only possible, but sure, that the dark water of the loch hid unknown but fleshly mystery.

“What do you think it is?” he asked, as much to give his disturbed feelings time to settle, as out of curiosity.

Claire leaned over the side, watching intently as a log drifted into view.

“The one I saw was probably a plesiosaur,” she said at last. She didn’t look at Roger, but kept her gaze astern. “Though I didn’t take notes at the time.” Her mouth twisted in something not quite a smile.

“How many stone circles are there?” she asked abruptly. “In Britain, in Europe. Do you know?”

“Not exactly. Several hundred, though,” he answered cautiously. “Do you think they’re all—”

“How should I know?” she interrupted impatiently. “The point is, they may be. They were set up to mark something, which means there may be the hell of a lot of places where that something has happened.” She tilted her head to one side, wiping the windblown hair out of her face, and gave him a lopsided smile.

“That would explain it, you know.”

“Explain what?” Roger felt fogged by the rapid shifts of her conversation.

“The monster.” She gestured out over the water. “What if there’s another of those—places—under the loch?”

“A time corridor—passage—whatever?” Roger looked out over the purling wake, staggered by the idea.

"It would explain a lot." There was a smile hiding at the corner of her mouth, behind the veil of blowing hair. He couldn't tell whether she was serious or not. "The best candidates for monster are all things that have been extinct for hundreds of thousands of years. If there's a time passage under the loch, that would take care of that little problem."

"It would also explain why the reports are sometimes different," Roger said, becoming intrigued by the idea. "If it's different creatures who come through."

"And it would explain why the creature—or creatures—haven't been caught, and aren't seen all that often. Maybe they go back the other way, too, so they aren't in the loch all the time."

"What a marvelous idea!" Roger said. He and Claire grinned at each other.

"You know what?" she said. "I'll bet that isn't going to make it on the list of popular theories."

Roger laughed, catching a crab, and droplets of water sprayed over Brianna. She snorted, sat up abruptly, blinking, then sank back down, face flushed with sleep, and was breathing heavily within seconds.

"She was up late last night, helping me box up the last set of records to go back to the University of Leeds," Roger said, defensive on her behalf.

Claire nodded abstractedly, watching her daughter.

"Jamie could do that," she said softly. "Lie down and sleep anywhere."

She fell silent. Roger rowed steadily on, toward the point of the loch where the grim bulk of the ruins of Castle Urquhart stood amid its pines.

"The thing is," Claire said at last, "it gets harder. Going through the first time was the most terrible thing I'd ever had happen to me. Coming back was a thousand times worse." Her eyes were fixed on the looming castle.

"I don't know whether it was because I didn't come back on the right day—it was Beltane when I went, and two weeks before, when I came back."

"Geilie—Gillian, I mean—she went on Beltane, too." In spite of the heat of the day, Roger felt slightly cold, seeing again the figure of the woman who had been both his ancestor and his contemporary, standing in the light of a blazing bonfire, fixed for a moment in the light, before disappearing forever into the cleft of the standing stones.

"That's what her notebook said—that the door is open on the Sun Feasts and the Fire Feasts. Perhaps it's only partly open as you near those times. Or perhaps she was wrong altogether; after all, she thought you had to have a human sacrifice to make it work."

Claire swallowed heavily. The petrol-soaked remains of Greg Edgars, Gillian's husband, had been recovered from the stone circle by the police, on May Day. The record concluded of his wife only, "Fled, whereabouts unknown."

Claire leaned over the side, trailing a hand in the water. A small cloud drifted over the sun, turning the loch a sudden gray, with dozens of small waves rising on the surface as the light wind increased. Directly below, in the wake of the boat, the water was darkly impenetrable. Seven hundred feet deep is Loch Ness, and bitter cold. What can live in a place like that?

"Would you go down there, Roger?" she asked softly. "Jump overboard, dive in, go on down through that dark until your lungs were bursting, not knowing whether there are things with teeth and great heavy bodies waiting?"

Roger felt the hair on his arms rise, and not only because the sudden wind was chilly.

"But that's not all the question," she continued, still staring into the blank, mysterious water. "Would you go, if Brianna were down there?" She straightened up and turned to face him.

"Would you go?" The amber eyes were intent on his, unblinking as a hawk's.

He licked his lips, chapped and dried by the wind, and cast a quick look over his shoulder at Brianna, sleeping. He turned back to face Claire.

"Yes. I think I would."

She looked at him for a long moment, and then nodded, unsmiling.

“So would I.”

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PART FIVE

You Can’t Go Home Again

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18

ROOTS

September 1968

The woman next to me probably weighed three hundred pounds. She wheezed in her sleep, lungs laboring to lift the burden of her massive bosom for the two-hundred-thousandth time. Her hip and thigh and pudgy arm pressed against mine, unpleasantly warm and damp.

There was no escape; I was pinned on the other side by the steel curve of the plane's fuselage. I eased one arm upward and flicked on the overhead light in order to see my watch. Ten-thirty, by London time; at least another six hours before the landing in New York promised escape.

The plane was filled with the collective sighs and snorts of passengers dozing as best they might. Sleep for me was out of the question. With a sigh of resignation, I dug into the pocket in front of me for the half-finished romance novel I had stashed there. The tale was by one of my favorite authors, but I found my attention slipping from the book—either back to Roger and Brianna, whom I had left in Edinburgh, there to continue the hunt, or forward, to what awaited me in Boston.

I wasn't sure just what *did* await me, which was part of the problem. I had been obliged to come back, if only temporarily; I had long since exhausted my vacation, plus several extensions. There were matters to be dealt with at the hospital, bills to be collected and paid at home, the maintenance of the house and yard to be attended to—I shuddered to think what heights the lawn in the backyard must have attained by now—friends to be called on …

One friend in particular. Joseph Abernathy had been my closest friend, from medical school on. Before I made any final—and likely irrevocable—decisions, I wanted to talk to him. I closed the book in my lap and sat tracing the extravagant loops of the title with one finger, smiling a little. Among other things, I owed a taste for romance novels to Joe.

* * *

I had known Joe since the beginning of my medical training. He stood out among the other interns at Boston General, just as I did. I was the only woman among the budding doctors; Joe was the only black intern.

Our shared singularity gave us each a special awareness for the other; both of us sensed it clearly, though neither mentioned it. We worked together very well, but both of us were wary—for good reason—of exposing ourselves, and the tenuous bond between us, much too nebulous to be called friendship, remained unacknowledged until near the end of our internship.

I had done my first unassisted surgery that day—an uncomplicated appendectomy, done on a teenaged boy in good health. It had gone well, and there was no reason to think there would be postoperative complications. Still, I felt an odd kind of possessiveness about the boy, and didn't want to go home until he was awake and out of Recovery, even though my shift had ended. I changed clothes and went to the doctors' lounge on the third floor to wait.

The lounge wasn't empty. Joseph Abernathy sat in one of the rump-sprung stuffed chairs, apparently absorbed in a copy of *U.S. News & World Report*. He looked up as I entered, and nodded briefly to me before returning to his reading.

The lounge was equipped with stacks of magazines—salvaged from the waiting rooms—and a number of tattered paperbacks, abandoned by departing patients. Seeking distraction, I thumbed past a six-month-old copy of *Studies in Gastroenterology*, a ragged copy of *Time* magazine, and a neat stack of *Watchtower* tracts. Finally picking up one of the books, I sat down with it.

It had no cover, but the title page read *The Impetuous Pirate*. "A sensuous, compelling love story, boundless as the Spanish Main!" said the line beneath the title. The Spanish Main, eh? If escape was what I wanted, I couldn't do much better, I thought, and opened the book at random. It fell open automatically to page 42.

> *Tipping up her nose scornfully, Tessa tossed her lush blond tresses back, oblivious to the fact that this caused her voluptuous breasts to become even more prominent in the low-necked dress. Valdez's eyes widened at the sight, but he gave no outward sign of the effect such wanton beauty had on him.*
>
> *"I thought that we might become better acquainted, Señorita," he suggested, in a low, sultry voice that made little shivers of anticipation run up and down Tessa's back.*
>
> *"I have no interest in becoming acquainted with a … a … filthy, despicable, underhanded pirate!" she said.*
>
> *Valdez's teeth gleamed as he smiled at her, his hand stroking the handle of the dagger at his belt. He was impressed at her fearlessness; so bold, so impetuous … and so beautiful.*

I raised an eyebrow, but went on reading, fascinated.

> *With an air of imperious possession, Valdez swooped an arm about Tessa's waist.*
>
> *"You forget, Señorita," he murmured, the words tickling her sensitive earlobe, "you are a prize of war; and the Captain of a pirate ship has first choice of the booty!"*
>
> *Tessa struggled in his powerful arms as he bore her to the berth and tossed her lightly onto the jeweled coverlet. She struggled to catch her breath, watching in terror as he undressed, laying aside his azure-blue velvet coat and then the fine ruffled white linen shirt. His chest was magnificent, a smooth expanse of gleaming bronze. Her fingertips ached to touch it, even though her heart pounded deafeningly in her ears as he reached for the waistband of his breeches.*
>
> *"But no," he said, pausing. "It is unfair of me to neglect you, Señorita. Allow me." With an irresistible smile, he bent and gently*

cupped Tessa's breasts in the heated palms of his calloused hands, enjoying the voluptuous weight of them through the thin silken fabric. With a small scream, Tessa shrank away from his probing touch, pressing back against the lace-embroidered feather pillow.

"You resist? What a pity to spoil such fine clothing, Señorita …" He took a firm grasp on her jade-silk bodice and yanked, causing Tessa's fine white breasts to leap out of their concealment like a pair of plump partridges taking wing.

I made a sound, causing Dr. Abernathy to look sharply over the top of his *U.S. News & World Report*. Hastily rearranging my face into a semblance of dignified absorption, I turned the page.

Valdez's thick black curls swept her chest as he fastened his hot lips on Tessa's rose-pink nipples, making waves of anguished desire wash through her being. Weakened by the unaccustomed feelings that his ardor aroused in her, she was unable to move as his hand stealthily sought the hem of her gown and his blazing touch traced tendrils of sensation up the length of her slender thigh.

"Ah, mi amor," he groaned. "So lovely, so pure. You drive me mad with desire, mi amor. I have wanted you since I first saw you, so proud and cold on the deck of your father's ship. But not so cold now, my dear, eh?"

In fact, Valdez's kisses were wreaking havoc on Tessa's feelings. How, how could she be feeling such things for this man, who had cold-bloodedly sunk her father's ship, and murdered a hundred men with his own hands? She should be recoiling in horror, but instead she found herself gasping for breath, opening her mouth to receive his burning kisses, arching her body in involuntary abandon beneath the demanding pressure of his burgeoning manhood.

"Ah, mi amor," he gasped. "I cannot wait. But … I do not wish to hurt you. Gently, mi amor, gently."

Tessa gasped as she felt the increasing pressure of his desire making its presence known between her legs.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh, please! You can't! I don't want you to!"

[Fine time to start making protests, I thought.]

"Don't worry, mi amor. Trust me."

> *Gradually, little by little, she relaxed under the touch of his hypnotic caresses, feeling the warmth in her stomach grow and spread. His lips brushed her breast, and his hot breath, murmuring reassurances, took away all her resistance. As she relaxed, her thighs opened without her willing it. Moving with infinite slowness, his engorged shaft teased aside the membrane of her innocence …*

I let out a whoop and lost my grasp on the book, which slid off my lap and fell on the floor with a plop near Dr. Abernathy's feet.

"Excuse me," I murmured, and bent to retrieve it, my face flaming. As I came up with *The Impetuous Pirate* in my sweaty grasp, though, I saw that far from preserving his usual austere mien, Dr. Abernathy was grinning widely.

"Let me guess," he said. "Valdez just teased aside the membrane of her innocence?"

"Yes," I said, breaking out into helpless giggling again. "How did you know?"

"Well, you weren't too far into it," he said, taking the book from my hand. His short, blunt fingers flicked the pages expertly. "It had to be that one, or maybe the one on page 73, where he laves her pink mounds with his hungry tongue."

"He *what*?"

"See for yourself." He thrust the book back into my hands, pointing to a spot halfway down the page.

Sure enough, *" … lifting aside the coverlet, he bent his coal-black head and laved her pink mounds with his hungry tongue. Tessa moaned and …"* I gave an unhinged shriek.

"You've actually *read* this?" I demanded, tearing my eyes away from Tessa and Valdez.

"Oh, yeah," he said, the grin widening. He had a gold tooth, far back on the right side. "Two or three times. It's not the best one, but it isn't bad."

"The best one? There are *more* like this?"

"Sure. Let's see …" He rose and began digging through the pile of tattered paperbacks on the table. "You want to look for the ones with no covers," he explained. "Those are the best."

"And here I thought you never read anything but *Lancet* and the *Journal of the AMA*,"I said.

"What, I spend thirty-six hours up to my elbows in people's guts, and I want to come up here and read 'Advances in Gallbladder Resection?' Hell, no—I'd rather sail the Spanish Main with Valdez." He eyed me with some interest, the grin still not quite gone. "I didn't think you read anything but *The New England Journal of Medicine*, either, Lady Jane," he said. "Appearances are deceiving, huh?"

"Must be," I said dryly. "What's this 'Lady Jane'?"

"Oh, Hoechstein started that one," he said, leaning back with his fingers linked around one knee. "It's the voice, that accent that sounds like you just drank tea with the Queen. That's what you've got, keeps the guys from bein' worse than they are. See, you sound like Winston Churchill—if Winston Churchill was a lady, that is—and that scares them a little. You've got somethin' else, though"—he viewed me thoughtfully, rocking back in his chair. "You have a way of talking like you expect to get your way, and if you don't, you'll know the reason why. Where'd you learn that?"

"In the war," I said, smiling at his description.

His eyebrows went up. "Korea?"

"No, I was a combat nurse during the Second World War; in France. I saw a lot of Head Matrons who could turn interns and orderlies to jelly with a glance." And later, I had had a good deal of practice, where that air of inviolate authority—assumed though it might be—had stood me in good stead against people with a great deal more power than the nursing staff and interns of Boston General Hospital.

He nodded, absorbed in my explanation. "Yeah, that makes sense. I used Walter Cronkite, myself."

"Walter *Cron*kite?" I goggled at him.

He grinned again, showing his gold tooth. "You can think of somebody better? Besides, I got to hear him for free on the radio or the TV every night. I used to entertain my mama—she wanted me to be a preacher." He smiled, half ruefully. "If I talked like Walter

Cronkite where we lived in those days, I wouldn't have *lived* to go to med school."

I was liking Joe Abernathy more by the second. "I hope your mother wasn't disappointed that you became a doctor intstead of a preacher."

"Tell you the truth, I'm not sure," he said, still grinning. "When I told her, she stared at me for a minute, then heaved a big sigh and said, 'Well, at least you can get my rheumatism medicine for me cheap.' "

I laughed wryly. "I didn't get *that* much enthusiasm when I told my husband I was going to be a doctor. He stared at me, and finally said if I was bored, why didn't I volunteer to write letters for the inmates of the nursing home."

Joe's eyes were a soft golden brown, like toffee drops. There was a glint of humor in them as they fixed on me.

"Yeah, folks still think it's fine to say to your face that you can't be doing what you're doing. 'Why are you here, little lady, and not home minding your man and child?' " he mimicked.

He grinned wryly, and patted my hand. "Don't worry, they'll give it up sooner or later. They mostly don't ask me to my face anymore why I ain't cleanin' the toilets, like God made me to."

Then the nurse had come with word that my appendix was awake, and I had left, but the friendship begun on page 42 had flourished, and Joe Abernathy had become one of my best friends; possibly the only person close to me who truly understood what I did, and why.

I smiled a little, feeling the slickness of the embossing on the cover. Then I leaned forward and put the book back into the seat pocket. Perhaps I didn't want to escape just now.

Outside, a floor of moonlit cloud cut us off from the earth below. Up here, everything was silent, beautiful and serene, in marked contrast to the turmoil of life below.

I had the odd feeling of being suspended, motionless, cocooned in solitude, even the heavy breathing of the woman next to me only a part of the white noise that makes up silence, one with the tepid rush of the air-conditioning and the shuffle of the stewardesses' shoes along the carpet. At the same time, I knew we were rushing on inexorably through the air, propelled at hundreds of miles per hour to some end—as for it being a safe one, we could only hope.

I closed my eyes, in suspended animation. Back in Scotland, Roger and Bree were hunting Jamie. Ahead, in Boston, my job—and Joe—were waiting. And Jamie himself? I tried to push the thought away, determined not to think of him until the decision was made.

I felt a slight ruffling of my hair, and one lock brushed against my cheek, light as a lover's touch. But surely it was no more than the rush of air from the vent overhead, and my imagination that the stale smells of perfume and cigarettes were suddenly underlaid by the scents of wool and heather.

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19

TO LAY A GHOST

Home at last, to the house on Furey Street, where I had lived with Frank and Brianna for nearly twenty years. The azaleas by the door were not quite dead, but their leaves hung in limp, shabby clusters, a thick layer of fallen leaves curling on the dry-baked bed underneath. It was a hot summer—there wasn't any other kind in Boston—and the August rains hadn't come, even though it was mid-September by now.

I set my bags by the front door and went to turn on the hose. It had been lying in the sun; the green rubber snake was hot enough to burn my hand, and I shifted it uneasily from palm to palm until the rumble of water brought it suddenly alive and cooled it with a burst of spray.

I didn't like azaleas all that much to start with. I would have pulled them out long since, but I had been reluctant to alter any detail of the house after Frank's death, for Brianna's sake. Enough of a shock, I thought, to begin university and have your father die in one year, without more changes. I had been ignoring the house for a long time; I could go on doing so.

"All right!" I said crossly to the azaleas, as I turned off the hose. "I hope you're happy, because that's all you get. I want to go have a drink myself. And a bath," I added, seeing their mud-spattered leaves.

* * *

I sat on the edge of the big sunken tub in my dressing gown, watching the water thunder in, churning the bubble bath into clouds of perfumed sea-foam. Steam rose from the boiling surface; the water would be almost too hot.

I turned it off—one quick, neat twist of the tap—and sat for a moment, the house around me still save for the crackle of popping bath bubbles, faint as the sounds of a far-off battle. I realized perfectly well what I was doing. I had been doing it ever since I stepped aboard the Flying Scotsman in Inverness, and felt the thrum of the track come alive beneath my feet. I was testing myself.

I had been taking careful note of the machines—all the contrivances of modern daily life—and more important, of my own response to them. The train to Edinburgh, the plane to Boston, the taxicab from the airport, and all the dozens of tiny mechanical flourishes attending—vending machines, street lights, the plane's mile-high lavatory, with its swirl of nasty blue-green disinfectant, whisking waste and germs away with the push of a button. Restaurants, with their tidy certificates from the Department of Health, guaranteeing at least a better than even chance of escaping food poisoning when eating therein. Inside my own house, the omnipresent buttons that supplied light and heat and water and cooked food.

The question was—did I care? I dipped a hand into the steaming bathwater and swirled it to and fro, watching the shadows of the vortex dancing in the marble depths. Could I live without all the "conveniences," large and small, to which I was accustomed?

I had been asking myself that with each touch of a button, each rumble of a motor, and was quite sure that the answer was "yes." Time didn't make all the difference, after all; I could walk across the city and find people who lived without many of these conveniences—farther abroad and there were entire countries where people lived in reasonable content and complete ignorance of electricity.

For myself, I had never cared a lot. I had lived with my uncle Lamb, an eminent archaeologist, since my own parents' death when I was five. Consequently, I had grown up in conditions that could conservatively be called "primitive," as I accompanied him on all his field expeditions. Yes, hot baths and light bulbs were nice, but I had lived without them during several periods of my life—during the war, for instance—and never found the lack of them acute.

The water had cooled enough to be tolerable. I dropped the dressing gown on the floor and stepped in, feeling a pleasant shiver as the heat at my feet made my shoulders prickle in cool contrast.

I subsided into the tub and relaxed, stretching my legs. Eighteenth-century hip baths were barely more than large barrels; one normally bathed in segments, immersing the center of the body first, with the legs hanging outside, then stood up and rinsed the upper torso while soaking the feet. More frequently, one bathed from a pitcher and basin, with the aid of a cloth.

No, conveniences and comforts were merely that. Nothing essential, nothing I couldn't do without.

Not that conveniences were the only issue, by a long chalk. The past was a dangerous country. But even the advances of so-called civilization were no guarantee of safety. I had lived through two major "modern" wars—actually served on the battlefields of one of them—and could see another taking shape on the telly every evening.

"Civilized" warfare was, if anything, more horrifying than its older versions. Daily life might be safer, but only if one chose one's walk in it with care. Parts of Roxbury now were as dangerous as any alley I had walked in the Paris of two hundred years past.

I sighed and pulled up the plug with my toes. No use speculating about impersonal things like bathtubs, bombs, and rapists. Indoor plumbing was no more than a minor distraction. The real issue was the people involved, and always had been. Me, and Brianna, and Jamie.

The last of the water gurgled away. I stood up, feeling slightly light-headed, and wiped away the last of the bubbles. The big mirror was misted with steam, but clear enough to show me myself from the knees upward, pink as a boiled shrimp.

Dropping the towel, I looked myself over. Flexed my arms, raised them overhead, checking for bagginess. None; biceps and triceps all nicely defined, deltoids neatly rounded and sloping into the high curve of the pectoralis major. I turned slightly to one side, tensing and relaxing my abdominals—obliques in decent tone, the rectus abdominis flattening almost to concavity.

"Good thing the family doesn't run to fat," I murmured. Uncle Lamb had remained trim and taut to the day of his death at seventy-five. I supposed my father—Uncle Lamb's brother—had been constructed similarly, and wondered suddenly what my mother's backside had looked like. Women, after all, had a certain amount of excess adipose tissue to contend with.

I turned all the way round and peered back over my shoulder at the mirror. The long columnar muscles of my back gleamed wetly as I twisted; I still had a waist, and a good narrow one, too.

As for my own backside—"Well, no dimples, anyway," I said aloud. I turned around and stared at my reflection.

"It could be a lot worse," I said to it.

* * *

Feeling somewhat heartened, I put on my nightgown and went about the business of putting the house to bed. No cats to put out, no dogs to feed—Bozo, the last of our dogs, had died of old age the year before, and I had not wanted to get another, with Brianna off at school and my own hours at the hospital long and irregular.

Adjust the thermostat, check the locks of windows and doors, see that the burners of the stove were off. That was all there was to it. For eighteen years, the nightly route had included a stop in Brianna's room, but not since she had left for university.

Moved by a mixture of habit and compulsion, I pushed open the door to her room and clicked on the light. Some people have the knack of objects, and others haven't. Bree had it; scarcely an inch of wall space showed between the posters, photographs, dried flowers, scraps of tie-dyed fabric, framed certificates and other impedimenta on the walls.

Some people have a way of arranging everything about them, so the objects take on not only their own meaning, and a relation to the other things displayed with them, but something more besides—an indefinable aura that belongs as much to their invisible owner as to the objects themselves. *I am here because Brianna placed me here,* the things in the room seemed to say. *I am here because she is who she is*.

It was odd that she should have that, really, I thought. Frank had had it; when I had gone to empty his university office after his death, I had thought it like the fossilized cast of some extinct animal; books and papers and bits of rubbish holding exactly the shape and texture and vanished weight of the mind that had inhabited the space.

For some of Brianna's objects, the relation to her was obvious—pictures of me, of Frank, of Bozo, of friends. The scraps of fabric were ones she had made, her chosen patterns, the colors she liked—a brilliant turquoise, deep indigo, magenta, and clear yellow. But other things—why should the scatter of dried freshwater snail shells on the bureau say to me "Brianna"? Why that one lump of rounded pumice, taken from the beach at Truro, indistinguishable from a hundred thousand others—except for the fact that she had taken it?

I didn't have a way with objects. I had no impulse either to acquire or to decorate—Frank had often complained of the Spartan furnishings at home, until Brianna grew old enough to take a hand. Whether it was the fault of my nomadic upbringing, or only the way I was, I lived mostly inside my skin, with no impulse to alter my surroundings to reflect me.

Jamie was the same. He had had the few small objects, always carried in his sporran for utility or as talismans, and beyond that, had neither owned nor cared for things. Even during the short period when we had lived luxuriously in Paris, and the longer time of tranquillity at Lallybroch, he had never shown any disposition to acquire objects.

For him as well, it might have been the circumstances of his early manhood, when he had lived like a hunted animal, never owning anything beyond the weapons he depended on for survival. But perhaps it was natural to him also, this isolation from the world of things, this sense of self-sufficiency—one of the things that had made us seek completion in each other.

Odd all the same, that Brianna should have so much resembled both her fathers, in their very different ways. I said a silent good night to the ghost of my absent daughter, and put out the light.

The thought of Frank went with me into the bedroom. The sight of the big double bed, smooth and untroubled under its dark blue satin spread, brought him suddenly and vividly to mind, in a way I had not thought of him in many months.

I supposed it was the possibility of impending departure that made me think of him now. This room—this bed, in fact—was where I had said goodbye to him for the last time.

* * *

"Can't you come to bed, Claire? It's past midnight." Frank looked up at me over the edge of his book. He was already in bed himself, reading with the book propped upon his knees. The soft pool of light from the lamp made him look as though he were floating in a warm bubble, serenely isolated from the dark chilliness of the rest of the room. It was early January, and despite the furnace's best efforts, the only truly warm place at night was bed, under heavy blankets.

I smiled at him, and rose from my chair, dropping the heavy wool dressing gown from my shoulders.

"Am I keeping you up? Sorry. Just reliving this morning's surgery."

"Yes, I know," he said dryly. "I can tell by looking at you. Your eyes glaze over and your mouth hangs open."

"Sorry," I said again, matching his tone. "I can't be responsible for what my face is doing when I'm thinking."

"But what good does thinking do?" he asked, sticking a bookmark in his book. "You've done whatever you could—worrying about it now won't change … ah, well." He shrugged irritably and closed the book. "I've said it all before."

"You have," I said shortly.

I got into bed, shivering slightly, and tucked my gown down round my legs. Frank scooted automatically in my direction, and I slid down under the sheets beside him, huddling together to pool our warmth against the cold.

"Oh, wait; I've got to move the phone." I flung back the covers and scrambled out again, to move the phone from Frank's side of the bed to mine. He liked to sit in bed in the early evening, chatting

with students and colleagues while I read or made surgical notes beside him, but he resented being wakened by the late calls that came from the hospital for me. Resented it enough that I had arranged for the hospital to call only for absolute emergencies, or when I left instructions to keep me informed of a specific patient's progress. Tonight I had left instructions; it was a tricky bowel resection. If things went wrong, I might have to go back in in a hurry.

Frank grunted as I turned out the light and slipped into bed again, but after a moment, he rolled toward me, throwing an arm across my middle. I rolled onto my side and curled against him, gradually relaxing as my chilled toes thawed.

I mentally replayed the details of the operation, feeling again the chill at my feet from the refrigeration in the operating room and the initial, unsettling feeling of the warmth in the patient's belly as my gloved fingers slid inside. The diseased bowel itself, coiled like a viper, patterned with the purple splotches of ecchymosis and the slow leakage of bright blood from tiny ruptures.

"I'd been thinking." Frank's voice came out of the darkness behind me, excessively casual.

"Mm?" I was still absorbed in the vision of the surgery, but struggled to pull myself back to the present. "About what?"

"My sabbatical." His leave from the university was due to start in a month. He had planned to make a series of short trips through the northeastern United States, gathering material, then go to England for six months, returning to Boston to spend the last three months of the sabbatical writing.

"I'd thought of going to England straight off," he said carefully.

"Well, why not? The weather will be dreadful, but if you're going to spend most of the time in libraries …"

"I want to take Brianna with me."

I stopped dead, the cold in the room suddenly coalescing into a small lump of suspicion in the pit of my stomach.

"She can't go now; she's only a semester from graduation. Surely you can wait until we can join you in the summer? I've put in for a long vacation then, and perhaps …"

“I’m going now. For good. Without you.”

I pulled away and sat up, turning on the light. Frank lay blinking up at me, dark hair disheveled. It had gone gray at the temples, giving him a distinguished air that seemed to have alarming effects on the more susceptible of his female students. I felt quite astonishingly composed.

“Why now, all of a sudden? The latest one putting pressure on you, is she?”

The look of alarm that flashed into his eyes was so pronounced as to be comical. I laughed, with a noticeable lack of humor.

“You actually thought I didn’t know? God, Frank! You are the most … oblivious man!”

He sat up in bed, jaw tight.

“I thought I had been most discreet.”

“You may have been at that,” I said sardonically. “I counted six over the last ten years—if there were really a dozen or so, then you were quite the model of discretion.”

His face seldom showed great emotion, but a whitening beside his mouth told me that he was very angry indeed.

“This one must be something special,” I said, folding my arms and leaning back against the headboard in assumed casualness. “But still—why the rush to go to England now, and why take Bree?”

“She can go to boarding school for her last term,” he said shortly. “Be a new experience for her.”

“Not one I expect she wants,” I said. “She won’t want to leave her friends, especially not just before graduation. And certainly not to go to an English boarding school!” I shuddered at the thought. I had come within inches of being immured in just such a school as a child; the scent of the hospital cafeteria sometimes evoked memories of it, complete with the waves of terrified helplessness I had felt when Uncle Lamb had taken me to visit the place.

“A little discipline never hurt anyone,” Frank said. He had recovered his temper, but the lines of his face were still tight. “Might have done you some good.” He waved a hand, dismissing the topic. “Let that be. Still, I’ve decided to go back to England permanently. I’ve a good position offered at Cambridge, and I mean to take it up.

You won't leave the hospital, of course. But I don't mean to leave my daughter behind."

"Your daughter?" I felt momentarily incapable of speech. So he had a new job all set, and a new mistress to go along. He'd been planning this for some time, then. A whole new life—but not with Brianna.

"My daughter," he said calmly. "You can come to visit whenever you like, of course …"

"You … bloody … bastard!" I said.

"Do be reasonable, Claire." He looked down his nose, giving me Treatment A, long-suffering patience, reserved for students appealing failing grades. "You're scarcely ever home. If I'm gone, there will be no one to look after Bree properly."

"You talk as though she's eight, not almost eighteen! For heaven's sake, she's nearly grown."

"All the more reason she needs care and supervision," he snapped. "If you'd seen what I'd seen at the university—the drinking, the drugging, the …"

"I do see it," I said through my teeth. "At fairly close range in the emergency room. Bree is not likely to—"

"She damn well is! Girls have no sense at that age—she'll be off with the first fellow who—"

"Don't be idiotic! Bree's very sensible. Besides, all young people experiment, that's how they learn. You can't keep her swaddled in cotton wool all her life."

"Better swaddled than fucking a black man!" he shot back. A mottled red showed faintly over his cheekbones. "Like mother, like daughter, eh? But that's not how it's going to be, damn it, not if I've anything to say about it!"

I heaved out of bed and stood up, glaring down at him.

"You," I said, "have not got one bloody, filthy, stinking thing to say, about Bree or anything else!" I was trembling with rage, and had to press my fists into the sides of my legs to keep from striking him. "You have the absolute, unmitigated gall to tell me that you are leaving me to live with the latest of a succession of mistresses,

and then imply that I have been having an affair with Joe Abernathy? That is what you mean, isn't it?"

He had the grace to lower his eyes slightly.

"Everyone thinks you have," he muttered. "You spend all your time with the man. It's the same thing, so far as Bree is concerned. Dragging her into … situations, where she's exposed to danger, and … and to those sorts of people …"

"Black people, I suppose you mean?"

"I damn well do," he said, looking up at me with eyes flashing. "It's bad enough to have the Abernathys to parties all the time, though at least he's educated. But that obese person I met at their house with the tribal tattoos and the mud in his hair? That repulsive lounge lizard with the oily voice? And young Abernathy's taken to hanging round Bree day and night, taking her to marches and rallies and orgies in low dives …"

"I shouldn't think there are any high dives," I said, repressing an inappropriate urge to laugh at Frank's unkind but accurate assessment of two of Leonard Abernathy's more outré friends. "Did you know Lenny's taken to calling himself Muhammad Ishmael Shabazz now?"

"Yes, he told me," he said shortly, "and I am taking no risk of having my daughter become Mrs. Shabazz."

"I don't think Bree feels that way about Lenny," I assured him, struggling to suppress my irritation.

"She isn't going to, either. She's going to England with me."

"Not if she doesn't want to," I said, with great finality.

No doubt feeling that his position put him at a disadvantage, Frank climbed out of bed and began groping for his slippers.

"I don't need your permission to take my daughter to England," he said. "And Bree's still a minor; she'll go where I say. I'd appreciate it if you'd find her medical records; the new school will need them."

"Your daughter?" I said again. I vaguely noticed the chill in the room, but was so angry that I felt hot all over. "Bree's my daughter, and you'll take her bloody nowhere!"

"You can't stop me," he pointed out, with aggravating calmness, picking up his dressing gown from the foot of the bed.

"The hell I can't," I said. "You want to divorce me? Fine. Use any grounds you like—with the exception of adultery, which you can't prove, because it doesn't exist. But if you try to take Bree away with you, I'll have a thing or two to say about adultery. Do you want to know how many of your discarded mistresses have come to see me, to ask me to give you up?"

His mouth hung open in shock.

"I told them all that I'd give you up in a minute," I said, "if you asked." I folded my arms, tucking my hands into my armpits. I was beginning to feel the chilliness again. "I did wonder why you never asked—but I supposed it was because of Brianna."

His face had gone quite bloodless now, and showed white as a skull in the dimness on the other side of the bed.

"Well," he said, with a poor attempt at his usual self-possession, "I shouldn't have thought you minded. It's not as though you ever made a move to stop me."

I stared at him, completely taken aback.

"Stop you?" I said. "What should I have done? Steamed open your mail and waved the letters under your nose? Made a scene at the faculty Christmas party? Complained to the Dean?"

His lips pressed tight together for a moment, then relaxed.

"You might have behaved as though it mattered to you," he said quietly.

"It mattered." My voice sounded strangled.

He shook his head, still staring at me, his eyes dark in the lamplight.

"Not enough." He paused, face floating pale in the air above his dark dressing gown, then came round the bed to stand by me.

"Sometimes I wondered if I could rightfully blame you," he said, almost thoughtfully. "He looked like Bree, didn't he? He was like her?"

"Yes."

He breathed heavily, almost a snort.

“I could see it in your face—when you’d look at her, I could see you thinking of him. Damn you, Claire Beauchamp,” he said, very softly. “Damn you and your face that can’t hide a thing you think or feel.”

There was a silence after this, of the sort that makes you hear all the tiny unbearable noises of creaking wood and breathing houses—only in an effort to pretend you haven’t heard what was just said.

“I did love you,” I said softly, at last. “Once.”

“Once,” he echoed. “Should I be grateful for that?”

The feeling was beginning to come back to my numb lips.

“I did tell you,” I said. “And then, when you wouldn’t go … Frank, I did try.”

Whatever he heard in my voice stopped him for a moment.

“I did,” I said, very softly.

He turned away and moved toward my dressing table, where he touched things restlessly, picking them up and putting them down at random.

“I couldn’t leave you at the first—pregnant, alone. Only a cad would have done that. And then … Bree.” He stared sightlessly at the lipstick he held in one hand, then set it gently back on the glassy tabletop. “I couldn’t give her up,” he said softly. He turned to look at me, eyes dark holes in a shadowed face.

“Did you know I couldn’t sire a child? I … had myself tested, a few years ago. I’m sterile. Did you know?”

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak.

“Bree is mine, my daughter,” he said, as though to himself. “The only child I’ll ever have. I couldn’t give her up.” He gave a short laugh. “I couldn’t give her up, but you couldn’t see her without thinking of him, could you? Without that constant memory, I wonder—would you have forgotten him, in time?”

“No.” The whispered word seemed to go through him like an electric shock. He stood frozen for a moment, then whirled to the closet and began to jerk on his clothes over his pajamas. I stood, arms wrapped around my body, watching as he pulled on his overcoat and stamped out of the room, not looking at me. The collar of his blue silk pajamas stuck up over the astrakhan trim of his coat.

A moment later, I heard the closing of the front door—he had sufficient presence of mind not to slam it—and then the sound of a cold motor turning reluctantly over. The headlights swept across the bedroom ceiling as the car backed down the drive, and then were gone, leaving me shaking by the rumpled bed.

* * *

Frank didn't come back. I tried to sleep, but found myself lying rigid in the cold bed, mentally reliving the argument, listening for the crunch of his tires in the drive. At last, I got up and dressed, left a note for Bree, and went out myself.

The hospital hadn't called, but I might as well go and have a look at my patient; it was better than tossing and turning all night. And, to be honest, I would not have minded had Frank come home to find me gone.

The streets were slick as butter, black ice gleaming in the streetlights. The yellow phosphor glow lit whorls of falling snow; within an hour, the ice that lined the streets would be concealed beneath fresh powder, and twice as perilous to travel. The only consolation was that there was no one on the streets at 4:00 A.M. to be imperiled. No one but me, that is.

Inside the hospital, the usual warm, stuffy institutional smell wrapped itself round me like a blanket of familiarity, shutting out the snow-filled black night outside.

"He's okay," the nurse said to me softly, as though a raised voice might disturb the sleeping man. "All the vitals are stable, and the count's okay. No bleeding." I could see that it was true; the patient's face was pale, but with a faint undertone of pink, like the veining in a white rose petal, and the pulse in the hollow of his throat was strong and regular.

I let out the deep breath I hadn't realized I was holding. "That's good," I said. "Very good." The nurse smiled warmly at me, and I had to resist the impulse to lean against him and dissolve. The hospital surroundings suddenly seemed like my only refuge.

There was no point in going home. I checked briefly on my remaining patients, and went down to the cafeteria. It still smelled *like a boarding school, but I sat down with a cup of coffee and sipped it slowly, wondering what I would tell Bree.*

It might have been a half-hour later when one of the ER nurses hurried through the swinging doors and stopped dead at the sight of me. Then she came on, quite slowly.

I knew at once; I had seen doctors and nurses deliver the news of death too often to mistake the signs. Very calmly, feeling nothing whatever, I set down the almost full cup, realizing as I did so that for the rest of my life, I would remember that there was a chip in the rim, and that the "B" of the gold lettering on the side was almost worn away.

" … said you were here. Identification in his wallet … police said … snow on black ice, a skid … DOA … " the nurse was talking, babbling, as I strode through the bright white halls, not looking at her, seeing the faces of the nurses at the station turn toward me in slow motion, not knowing, but seeing from a glance at me that something final had happened.

He was on a gurney in one of the emergency room cubicles; a spare, anonymous space. There was an ambulance parked outside—perhaps the one that had brought him here. The double doors at the end of the corridor were open to the icy dawn. The ambulance's red light was pulsing like an artery, bathing the corridor in blood.

I touched him briefly. His flesh had the inert, plastic feel of the recently dead, so at odds with the lifelike appearance. There was no wound visible; any damage was hidden beneath the blanket that covered him. His throat was smooth and brown; no pulse moved in its hollow.

I stood there, my hand on the motionless curve of his chest, looking at him, as I had not looked for some time. A strong and delicate profile, sensitive lips, and a chiseled nose and jaw. A handsome man, despite the lines that cut deep beside his mouth, lines of disappointment and unspoken anger, lines that even the relaxation of death could not wipe away.

I stood quite still, listening. I could hear the wail of a new ambulance approaching, voices in the corridor. The squeak of gurney wheels, the crackle of a police radio, and the soft hum of a *fluorescent light somewhere. I realized with a start that I was listening for Frank, expecting … what? That his ghost would be hovering still nearby, anxious to complete our unfinished business?*

I closed my eyes, to shut out the disturbing sight of that motionless profile, going red and white and red in turn as the light throbbed through the open doors.

"Frank," I said softly, to the unsettled, icy air, "if you're still close enough to hear me—I did love you. Once. I did."

Then Joe was there, pushing through the crowded corridor, face anxious over his green scrub suit. He had come straight from surgery; there was a small spray of blood across the lenses of his glasses, a smear of it on his chest.

"Claire," he said, "God, Claire!" and then I started to shake. In ten years, he had never called me anything but "Jane" or "L.J." If he was using my name, it must be real. My hand showed startlingly white in Joe's dark grasp, then red in the pulsing light, and then I had turned to him, solid as a tree trunk, rested my head on his shoulder, and—for the first time—wept for Frank.

I leaned my face against the bedroom window of the house on Furey Street. It was hot and humid on this blue September evening, filled with the sound of crickets and lawn sprinklers. What I saw, though, was the uncompromising black and white of that winter's night two years before—black ice and the white of hospital linen, and then the blurring of all judgments in the pale gray dawn.

My eyes blurred now, remembering the anonymous bustle in the corridor and the pulsing red light of the ambulance that had washed the silent cubicle in bloody light, as I wept for Frank.

Now I wept for him for the last time, knowing even as the tears slid down my cheeks that we had parted, once and for all, twenty-odd years before, on the crest of a green Scottish hill.

My weeping done, I rose and laid a hand on the smooth blue coverlet, gently rounded over the pillow on the left—Frank's side.

"Goodbye, my dear," I whispered, and went out to sleep downstairs, away from the ghosts.

It was the doorbell that woke me in the morning, from my makeshift bed on the sofa.

"Telegram, ma'am," the messenger said, trying not to stare at my nightgown.

Those small yellow envelopes have probably been responsible for more heart attacks than anything besides fatty bacon for breakfast. My own heart squeezed like a fist, then went on beating in a heavy, uncomfortable manner.

I tipped the messenger and carried the telegram down the hall. It seemed important not to open it until I had reached the relative safety of the bathroom, as though it were an explosive device that must be defused under water.

My fingers shook and fumbled as I opened it, sitting on the edge of the tub, my back pressed against the tiled wall for reinforcement.

It was a brief message—of course, a Scot would be thrifty with words, I thought absurdly.

HAVE FOUND HIM STOP, it read. WILL YOU COME BACK QUERY ROGER.

I folded the telegram neatly and put it back into its envelope. I sat there and stared at it for quite a long time. Then I stood up and went to dress.

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DIAGNOSIS

Joe Abernathy was seated at his desk, frowning at a small rectangle of pale cardboard he held in both hands.

“What’s that?” I said, sitting on the edge of his desk without ceremony.

“A business card.” He handed the card to me, looking at once amused and irritated.

It was a pale gray laid-finish card; expensive stock, fastidiously printed in an elegant serif type. *Muhammad Ishmael Shabazz III,* the center line read, with address and phone number below.

“Lenny?” I asked, laughing. “Muhammad Ishmael Shabazz the *third*?”

“Uh-huh.” Amusement seemed to be getting the upper hand. The gold tooth flashed briefly as he took the card back. “He says he’s not going to take a white man’s name, no slave name. He’s going to reclaim his African heritage,” he said sardonically. “All right, I say; I ask him, you gonna go round with a bone through your nose next thing? It’s not enough he’s got his hair out to *here*”—he gestured, fluffing his hands on either side of his own close-cropped head—“and he’s going round in a thing down to his knees, looks like his sister made it in Home Ec class. No, Lenny—excuse me, Muhammad—he’s got to be *African* all the way.”

Joe waved a hand out the window, at his privileged vista over the park. “I tell him, look around, man, you see any lions? This look like Africa to you?” He leaned back in his padded chair, stretching out his legs. He shook his head in resignation. “There’s no talkin’ to a boy that age.”

“True,” I said. “But what’s this ‘third’ about?”

A reluctant gleam of gold answered me. “Well, he was talking all about his ‘lost tradition’ and his ‘missing history’ and all. He says, ‘How am I going to hold my head up, face-to-face with all these guys I meet at Yale named Cadwallader IV and Sewell Lodge, Jr., and I don’t even know my own grandaddy’s name, I don’t know where I come from?’ ”

Joe snorted. “I told him, you want to know where you come from, kid, look in the mirror. Wasn’t the *Mayflower*, huh?”

He picked up the card again, a reluctant grin on his face.

“So he says, if he’s taking back his heritage, why not take it back all the way? If his grandaddy wouldn’t give him a name, he’ll give his grandaddy one. And the only trouble with *that,*” he said, looking up at me under a cocked brow, “is that it kind of leaves me man in the middle. Now I have to be Muhammad Ishmael Shabazz, *Junior*, so Lenny can be a ‘proud African-American’.” He thrust himself back from the desk, chin on his chest, staring balefully at the pale gray card.

“You’re lucky, L.J.,” he said. “At least Bree isn’t giving you grief about who her granddaddy was. All you have to worry about is will she be doing dope and getting pregnant by some draft dodger who takes off for Canada.”

I laughed, with more than a touch of irony. “That’s what *you* think,” I told him.

“Yeah?” He cocked an interested eyebrow at me, then took off his gold-rimmed glasses and wiped them on the end of his tie. “So how was Scotland?” he asked, eyeing me. “Bree like it?”

“She’s still there,” I said. “Looking for *her* history.”

Joe was opening his mouth to say something when a tentative knock on the door interrupted him.

“Dr. Abernathy?” A plump young man in a polo shirt peered doubtfully into the office, leaning over the top of a large cardboard box he held clutched to his substantial abdomen.

“Call me Ishmael,” Joe said genially.

“What?” The young man’s mouth hung slightly open, and he glanced at me in bewilderment, mingled with hope. “Are *you* Dr. Abernathy?”

“No,” I said, “he is, when he puts his mind to it.” I rose from the desk, brushing down my skirts. “I’ll leave you to your appointment, Joe, but if you have time later—”

“No, stay a minute, L. J.,” he interrupted, rising. He took the box from the young man, then shook his hand formally. “You’d be Mr. Thompson? John Wicklow called to tell me you’d be coming. Pleased to meet you.”

“Horace Thompson, yes,” the young man said, blinking slightly. “I brought, er, a specimen …” He waved vaguely at the cardboard box.

“Yes, that’s right. I’d be happy to look at it for you, but I think Dr. Randall here might be of assistance, too.” He glanced at me, the glint of mischief in his eyes. “I just want to see can you do it to a dead person, L. J.”

“Do *what* to a dead—” I began, when he reached into the opened box and carefully lifted out a skull.

“Oh, pretty,” he said in delight, turning the object gently to and fro.

“Pretty” was not the first adjective that struck me; the skull was stained and greatly discolored, the bone gone a deep streaky brown. Joe carried it to the window and held it in the light, his thumbs gently stroking the small bony ridges over the eye sockets.

“Pretty lady,” he said softly, talking as much to the skull as to me or Horace Thompson. “Full-grown, mature. Maybe late forties, middle fifties. Do you have the legs?” he asked, turning abruptly to the plump young man.

“Yeah, right here,” Horace Thompson assured him, reaching into the box. “We have the whole body, in fact.”

Horace Thompson was probably someone from the coroner’s office, I thought. Sometimes they brought bodies to Joe that had been found in the countryside, badly deteriorated, for an expert opinion as to the cause of death. This one looked considerably deteriorated.

“Here, Dr. Randall.” Joe leaned over and carefully placed the skull in my hands. “Tell me whether this lady was in good health, while I check her legs.”

“Me? I’m not a forensic scientist.” Still, I glanced automatically down. It was either an old specimen, or had been weathered extensively; the bone was smooth, with a gloss that fresh specimens never had, stained and discolored by the leaching of pigments from the earth.

“Oh, all right.” I turned the skull slowly in my hands, watching the bones, naming them each in my mind as I saw them. The smooth arch of the parietals, fused to the declivity of the temporal, with the small ridge where the jaw muscle originated, the jutting projection that meshed itself with the maxillary into the graceful curve of the squamosal arch. She had had lovely cheekbones, high and broad. The upper jaw had most of its teeth—straight and white.

Deep eyes. The scooped bone at the back of the orbits was dark with shadow; even by tilting the skull to the side, I couldn’t get light to illuminate the whole cavity. The skull felt light in my hands, the bone fragile. I stroked her brow and my hand ran upward, and down behind the occiput, my fingers seeking the dark hole at the base, the foremen magnum, where all the messages of the nervous system pass to and from the busy brain.

Then I held it close against my stomach, eyes closed, and felt the shifting sadness, filling the cavity of the skull like running water. And an odd faint sense—of surprise?

“Someone killed her,” I said. “She didn’t want to die.” I opened my eyes to find Horace Thompson staring at me, his own eyes wide in his round, pale face. I handed him the skull, very gingerly. “Where did you find her?” I asked.

Mr. Thompson exchanged glances with Joe, then looked back at me, both eyebrows still high.

“She’s from a cave in the Caribbean,” he said. “There were a lot of artifacts with her. We think she’s maybe between a hundred-fifty and two hundred years old.”

“She’s *what*?”

Joe was grinning broadly, enjoying his joke.

"Our friend Mr. Thompson here is from the anthropology department at Harvard," he said. "His friend Wicklow knows me; asked me would I have a look at this skeleton, to tell them what I could about it."

"The nerve of you!" I said indignantly. "I thought she was some unidentified body the coroner's office dragged in."

"Well, she's unidentified," Joe pointed out. "And certainly liable to stay that way." He rooted about in the cardboard box like a terrier. The end flap said PICT-SWEET CORN.

"Now what have we got here?" he said, and very carefully drew out a plastic sack containing a jumble of vertebrae.

"She was in pieces when we got her," Horace explained.

"Oh, de headbone connected to de … neckbone," Joe sang softly, laying out the vertebrae along the edge of the desk. His stubby fingers darted skillfully among the bones, nudging them into alignment. "De neckbone connected to de … backbone …"

"Don't pay any attention to him," I told Horace. "You'll just encourage him."

"Now hear … de word … of de Lawd!" he finished triumphantly. "Jesus Christ, L. J., you're somethin' else! Look here." Horace Thompson and I bent obediently over the line of spiky vertebral bones. The wide body of the axis had a deep gouge; the posterior zygapophysis had broken clean off, and the fracture plane went completely through the centrum of the bone.

"A broken neck?" Thompson asked, peering interestedly.

"Yeah, but more than that, I think." Joe's finger moved over the line of the fracture plane. "See here? The bone's not just cracked, it's *gone* right there. Somebody tried to cut this lady's head clean off. With a dull blade," he concluded with relish.

Horace Thompson was looking at me queerly. "How did you know she'd been killed, Dr. Randall?" he asked.

I could feel the blood rising in my face. "I don't know," I said. "I—she—*felt* like it, that's all."

"Really?" He blinked a few times, but didn't press me further. "How odd."

“She does it all the time,” Joe informed him, squinting at the femur he was measuring with a pair of calipers. “Mostly on live people, though. Best diagnostician I ever saw.” He set down the calipers and picked up a small plastic ruler. “A *cave*, you said?”

“We think it was a … er, secret slave burial,” Mr. Thompson explained, blushing, and I suddenly realized why he had seemed so abashed when he realized which of us was the Dr. Abernathy he had been sent to see. Joe shot him a sudden sharp glance, but then bent back to his work. He kept humming “Dem Dry Bones” faintly to himself as he measured the pelvic inlet, then went back to the legs, this time concentrating on the tibia. Finally he straightened up, shaking his head.

“Not a slave,” he said.

Horace blinked. “But she must have been,” he said. “The things we found with her … a clear African influence …”

“No,” Joe said flatly. He tapped the long femur, where it rested on his desk. His fingernail clicked on the dry bone. “She wasn’t black.”

“You can tell that? From bones?” Horace Thompson was visibly agitated. “But I thought—that paper by Jensen, I mean—theories about racial physical differences—largely exploded—” He blushed scarlet, unable to finish.

“Oh, they’re there,” said Joe, very dryly indeed. “If you want to think blacks and whites are equal under the skin, be my guest, but it ain’t scientifically so.” He turned and pulled a book from the shelf behind him. *Tables of Skeletal Variance*, the title read.

“Take a look at this,” Joe invited. “You can see the differences in a lot of bones, but especially in the leg bones. Blacks have a completely different femur-to-tibia ratio than whites do. And that lady”—he pointed to the skeleton on his desk—“was white. Caucasian. No question about it.”

“Oh,” Horace Thompson murmured. “Well. I’ll have to think—I mean—it was very kind of you to look at her for me. Er, thank you,” he added, with an awkward little bow. We silently watched him bundle his bones back into the PICT-SWEET box, and then he was gone, pausing at the door to give us both another brief bob of the head.

Joe gave a short laugh as the door closed behind him. “Want to bet he takes her down to Rutgers for a second opinion?”

“Academics don’t give up theories easily,” I said, shrugging. “I lived with one long enough to know that.”

Joe snorted again. “So you did. Well, now that we’ve got Mr. Thompson and his dead white lady sorted out, what can I do for *you*, L. J.?”

I took a deep breath and turned to face him.

“I need an honest opinion, from somebody I can depend on to be objective. No,” I amended, “I take that back. I need an opinion and then—depending on the opinion—maybe a favor.”

“No problem,” Joe assured me. “Especially the opinion. My specialty, opinions.” He rocked back in his chair, unfolded his gold-rimmed glasses and set them firmly atop his broad nose. Then he folded his hands across his chest, fingers steepled, and nodded at me. “Shoot.”

“Am I sexually attractive?” I demanded. His eyes always reminded me of coffee drops, with their warm golden-brown color. Now they went completely round, enhancing the resemblance.

Then they narrowed, but he didn’t answer immediately. He looked me over carefully, head to toe.

“It’s a trick question, right?” he said. “I give you an answer and one of those women’s libbers jumps out from behind the door, yells ‘Sexist pig!’ And hits me over the head with a sign that says ‘Castrate Male Chauvinists.’ Huh?”

“No,” I assured him. “A sexist male chauvinist answer is basically what I want.”

“Oh, okay. As long as we’re straight, then.” He resumed his perusal, squinting closely as I stood up straight.

“Skinny white broad with too much hair, but a great ass,” he said at last. “Nice tits, too,” he added, with a cordial nod. “That what you want to know?”

“Yes,” I said, relaxing my rigid posture. “That’s exactly what I wanted to know. It isn’t the sort of question you can ask just anybody.”

He pursed his lips in a silent whistle, then threw back his head and roared with delight.

"Lady Jane! You've got you a *man*!"

I felt the blood rising in my cheeks, but tried to keep my dignity. "I don't know. Maybe. Just maybe."

"Maybe, hell! Jesus Christ on a piece of toast, L. J., it's about *time*!"

"Kindly quit cackling," I said, lowering myself into his visitor's chair. "It doesn't become a man of your years and station."

"My years? O*ho*," he said, peering shrewdly at me through the glasses. "He's younger than you? That's what you're worried about?"

"Not a lot," I said, the blush beginning to recede. "But I haven't seen him in twenty years. You're the only person I know who's known me for a long time; have I changed terribly since we met?" I looked at him straight on, demanding honesty.

He looked at me, took off his glasses and squinted, then replaced them.

"No," he said. "You wouldn't, though, unless you got fat."

"I wouldn't?"

"Nah. Ever been to your high school reunion?"

"I didn't go to a high school."

His sketchy brows flicked upward. "No? Well, I have. And I tell you what, L.J.; you see all these people you haven't seen for twenty years, and there's this split second when you meet somebody you used to know, when you think, 'My *God*, he's changed!,' and then all of a sudden, he hasn't—it's just like the twenty years weren't there. I mean"—he rubbed his head vigorously, struggling for meaning—"you see they've got some gray, and some lines, and maybe they aren't just the same as they were, but two minutes past that shock, and you don't see it anymore. They're just the same people they always were, and you have to make yourself stand back a ways to see that they aren't eighteen anymore.

"Now, if people get fat," he said meditatively, "*they* change some. It's harder to see who they were, because the faces change. But you"—he squinted at me again—"you're never going to be fat; you don't have the genes for it."

"I suppose not," I said. I looked down at my hands, clasped together in my lap. Slender wristbones; at least I wasn't fat yet. My rings gleamed in the autumn sun from the window.

"Is it Bree's daddy?" he asked softly.

I jerked my head up and stared at him. "How the hell did you know that?" I said.

He smiled slightly. "I've known Bree how long? Ten years, at least." He shook his head. "She's got a lot of you in her, L. J., but I've never seen anything of Frank. Daddy's got red hair, huh?" he asked. "And he's one big son of a bitch, or everything I learned in Genetics 101 was a damn lie."

"Yes," I said, and felt a kind of delirious excitement at that simple admission. Until I had told Bree herself and Roger about Jamie, I had said nothing about him for twenty years. The joy of suddenly being able to talk freely about him was intoxicating.

"Yes, he's big and red-haired, and he's Scottish," I said, making Joe's eyes go round once more.

"And Bree's in Scotland now?"

I nodded. "Bree is where the favor comes in."

Two hours later, I left the hospital for the last time, leaving behind me a letter of resignation, addressed to the Hospital Board, all the necessary documents for the handling of my property until Brianna should be of age, and another one, to be executed at that time, turning everything over to her. As I drove out of the parking lot, I experienced a feeling of mingled panic, regret, and elation. I was on my way.

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21

Q.E.D

Inverness
October 5, 1968

“I found the deed of sasine.” Roger’s face was flushed with excitement. He had hardly been able to contain himself, waiting with open impatience at the train station in Inverness while Brianna hugged me and my bags were retrieved. He had barely got us stuffed into his tiny Morris and the car’s ignition started before blurting out his news.

“What, for Lallybroch?” I leaned over the seat back between him and Brianna, in order to hear him over the noise of the motor.

“Yes, the one Jamie—your Jamie—wrote, deeding the property to his nephew, the younger Jamie.”

“It’s at the manse,” Brianna put in, twisting to look at me. “We were afraid to bring it with us; Roger had to sign his name in blood to get it out of the SPA collection.” Her fair skin was pinkened by excitement and the chilly day, raindrops in her ruddy hair. It was always a shock to me to see her again after an absence—mothers always think their children beautiful, but Bree really was.

I smiled at her, glowing with affection tinged with panic. Could I really be thinking of leaving her? Mistaking the smile for one of pleasure in the news, she went on, gripping the back of the seat in excitement.

“And you’ll never guess what else we found!”

“What *you* found,” Roger corrected, squeezing her knee with one hand as he negotiated the tiny orange car through a roundabout. She gave him a quick glance and a reciprocal touch with an air of intimacy about it that set off my maternal alarm bells on the spot. Like that already, was it?

I seemed to feel Frank’s shade glaring accusingly over my shoulder. Well, at least Roger wasn’t black. I coughed and said, “Really? What is it?”

They exchanged a glance and grinned widely at each other.

“Wait and see, Mama,” said Bree, with irritating smugness.

* * *

“See?” she said, twenty minutes later, as I bent over the desk in the manse’s study. On the battered surface of the late Reverend Wakefield’s desk lay a sheaf of yellowed papers, foxed and browned at the edges. They were carefully enclosed in protective plastic covers now, but obviously had been carelessly used at one time; the edges were tattered, one sheet was torn roughly in half, and all the sheets had notes and annotations scribbled in the margins and inserted in the text. This was obviously someone’s rough draft—of something.

“It’s the text of an article,” Roger told me, shuffling through a pile of huge folio volumes that lay on the sofa. “It was published in a sort of journal called *Forrester’s*, put out by a printer called Alexander Malcolm, in Edinburgh, in 1765.”

I swallowed, my shirtwaist dress feeling suddenly too tight under the arms; 1765 was almost twenty years past the time when I had left Jamie.

I stared at the scrawling letters, browned with age. They were written by someone of difficult penmanship, here cramped and there sprawling, with exaggerated loops on “g” and “y.” Perhaps the writing of a left-handed man, who wrote most painfully with his right hand.

“See, here’s the published version.” Roger brought the opened folio to the desk and laid it before me, pointing. “See the date? It’s 1765, and it matches this handwritten manuscript almost exactly; only a few of the marginal notes aren’t included.”

“Yes,” I said. “And the deed of sasine …”

“Here it is.” Brianna fumbled hastily in the top drawer and pulled out a much crumpled paper, likewise encased in protective plastic. Protection here was even more after the fact than with the manuscript; the paper was rain-spattered, filthy and torn, many of the words blurred beyond recognition. But the three signatures at the bottom still showed plainly.

By my hand, read the difficult writing, here executed with such care that only the exaggerated loop of the “y” showed its kinship with the careless manuscript, *James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser*. And below, the two lines where the witnesses had signed. In a thin, fine script, *Murtagh FitzGibbons Fraser*, and, below that, in my own large, round hand, *Claire Beauchamp Fraser*.

I sat down quite suddenly, putting my hand over the document instinctively, as though to deny its reality.

“That’s it, isn’t it?” said Roger quietly. His outward composure was belied by his hands, trembling slightly as he lifted the stack of manuscript pages to set them next to the deed. “You signed it. Proof positive—if we needed it,” he added, with a quick glance at Bree.

She shook her head, letting her hair fall down to hide her face. They didn’t need it, either of them. The vanishing of Geilie Duncan through the stones five months before had been all the evidence anyone could need as to the truth of my story.

Still, having it all laid out in black and white was rather staggering. I took my hand away and looked again at the deed, and then at the handwritten manuscript.

“Is it the same, Mama?” Bree bent anxiously over the pages, her hair brushing softly against my hand. “The article wasn’t signed—or it was, but with a pseudonym.” She smiled briefly. “The author signed himself ‘Q.E.D.’ It looked the same to us, but we aren’t either of us handwriting experts and we didn’t want to give these to an expert until you’d seen them.”

“I think so.” I felt breathless, but quite certain at the same time, with an upwelling of incredulous joy. “Yes, I’m almost sure. Jamie wrote this.” Q.E.D., indeed! I had an absurd urge to tear the manuscript pages out of their plastic shrouds and clutch them in my hands, to feel the ink and paper he had touched; the certain evidence that he had survived.

"There's more. Internal evidence." Roger's voice betrayed his pride. "See there? It's an article against the Excise Act of 1764, advocating the repeal of the restrictions on export of liquor from the Scottish Highlands to England. Here it is"—his racing finger stopped suddenly on a phrase—" 'for as has been known for ages past, "Freedom and Whisky gang tegither." ' See how he's put that Scottish dialect phrase in quotes? He got it from somewhere else."

"He got it from me," I said softly. "I told him that—when he was setting out to steal Prince Charles's port."

"I remembered." Roger nodded, eyes shining with excitement. "But it's a quote from Burns," I said, frowning suddenly. "Perhaps the writer got it there—wasn't Burns alive then?"

"He was," said Bree smugly, forestalling Roger. "But Robert Burns was six years old in 1765."

"And Jamie would be forty-four." Suddenly, it all seemed real. He was alive—had been alive, I corrected myself, trying to keep my emotions in check. I laid my fingers flat against the manuscript pages, trembling.

"And if—" I said, and had to stop to swallow again.

"And if time goes on in parallel, as we think it does—" Roger stopped, too, looking at me. Then his eyes shifted to Brianna.

She had gone quite pale, but both lips and eyes were steady, and her fingers were warm when she touched my hand.

"Then you can go back, Mama," she said softly. "You can find him."

* * *

The plastic hangers rattled against the steel tubing of the dress rack as I thumbed my way slowly through the available selection.

"Can I be helpin' ye at all, miss?" The salesgirl peered up at me like a helpful Pekingese, blue-ringed eyes barely visible through bangs that brushed the top of her nose.

"Have you got any more of these old-fashioned sorts of dresses?" I gestured at the rack before me, thick with examples of the current craze—laced-bodiced, long-skirted dresses in gingham cotton and velveteen.

The salesgirl's mouth was caked so thickly that I expected the white lipstick to crack when she smiled, but it didn't.

"Oh, aye," she said. "Got a new lot o' the Jessica Gutenburgs in just today. Aren't they the grooviest, these old-style gowns?" She ran an admiring finger over a brown velvet sleeve, then whirled on her ballet flats and pointed toward the center of the store. "Just there, aye? Where it says, on the sign."

The sign, stuck on the top of a circular rack, said CAPTURE THE CHARM OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY in large white letters across the top. Just below, in curlicue script, was the signature, *Jessica Gutenburg.*

Reflecting on the basic improbability of anyone actually being named Jessica Gutenburg, I waded through the contents of the rack, pausing at a truly stunning number in cream velvet, with satin inserts and a good deal of lace.

"Look lovely on, that would." The Pekingese was back, pug nose sniffing hopefully for a sale.

"Maybe so," I said, "but not very practical. You'd get filthy just walking out of the store." I pushed the white dress away with some regret, proceeding to the next size ten.

"Oh, I just love the red ones!" The girl clasped her hands in ecstasy at the brilliant garnet fabric.

"So do I," I murmured, "but we don't want to look too garish. Wouldn't do to be taken for a prostitute, would it?" The Peke gave me a startled look through the thickets, then decided I was joking, and giggled appreciatively.

"Now, that one," she said decisively, reaching past me, "that's perfect, that is. That's your color, here."

Actually, it *was* almost perfect. Floor-length, with three-quarter sleeves edged with lace. A deep, tawny gold, with shimmers of brown and amber and sherry in the heavy silk.

I lifted it carefully off the rack and held it up to examine it. A trifle fancy, but it might do. The construction seemed halfway decent; no loose threads or unraveling seams. The machine-made lace on the bodice was just tacked on, but that would be easy enough to reinforce.

"Want to try it on? The dressing rooms are just over there." The Peke was frisking about near my elbow, encouraged by my interest. Taking a quick look at the price tag, I could see why; she must work on commission. I took a deep breath at the figure, which would cover a month's rent on a London flat, but then shrugged. After all, what did I need money for?

Still, I hesitated.

"I don't know …" I said doubtfully, "it is lovely. But …"

"Oh, don't worry a bit about it's being too young for you," the Pekingese reassured me earnestly. "You don't look a day over twenty-five! Well … maybe thirty," she concluded lamely, after a quick glance at my face.

"Thanks," I said dryly. "I wasn't worried about that, though. I don't suppose you have any without zippers, do you?"

"Zippers?" Her small round face went quite blank beneath the makeup. "Erm … no. Don't think we do."

"Well, not to worry," I said, taking the dress over my arm and turning toward the dressing room. "If I go through with this, zippers will be the least of it."

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22

ALL HALLOWS' EVE

Two golden guineas, six sovereigns, twenty-three shillings, eighteen florins ninepence, ten halfpence, and … twelve farthings." Roger dropped the last coin on the tinkling pile, then dug into his shirt pocket, lean face absorbed as he searched. "Oh, here." He brought out a small plastic bag and carefully poured a handful of tiny copper coins into a pile alongside the other money.

"Doits," he explained. "The smallest denomination of Scottish coinage of the time. I got as many as I could, because that's likely what you'd use most of the time. You wouldn't use the large coins unless you had to buy a horse or something."

"I know." I picked up a couple of sovereigns and tilted them in my hand, letting them clink together. They were heavy—gold coins, nearly an inch in diameter. It had taken Roger and Bree four days in London, going from one rare-coin dealer to the next, to assemble the small fortune gleaming in the lamplight before me.

"You know, it's funny; these coins are worth a lot more now than their face value," I said, picking up a golden guinea, "but in terms of what they'll buy, they were worth then just about as much as now. This is six months' income for a small farmer."

"I was forgetting," Roger said, "that you know all this already; what things were worth and how they were sold."

"It's easy to forget," I said, eyes still on the money. From the corner of my vision, I saw Bree draw suddenly close to Roger, and his hand go out to her automatically.

I took a deep breath and looked up from the tiny heaps of gold and silver. “Well, that’s that. Shall we go and have some dinner?”

* * *

Dinner—at one of the pubs on River Street—was a largely silent affair. Claire and Brianna sat side by side on the banquette, with Roger opposite. They barely looked at each other while they ate, but Roger could see the frequent small touches, the tiny nudges of shoulder and hip, the brushing of fingers that went on.

How would he manage, he wondered to himself. If it were his choice, or his parent? Separation came to all families, but most often it was death that intervened, to sever the ties between parent and child. It was the element of choice here that made it so difficult—not that it could ever be easy, he thought, forking in a mouthful of hot shepherd’s pie.

As they rose to leave after supper, he laid a hand on Claire’s arm.

“Just for the sake of nothing,” he said, “will you try something for me?”

“I expect so,” she said, smiling. “What is it?”

He nodded at the door. “Close your eyes and step out of the door. When you’re outside, open them. Then come in and tell me what’s the first thing you saw.”

Her mouth twitched with amusement. “All right. We’ll hope the first thing I see isn’t a policeman, or you’ll have to come bail me out of jail for being drunk and disorderly.”

“So long as it isn’t a duck.”

Claire gave him a queer look, but obediently turned toward the door of the pub and closed her eyes. Brianna watched her mother disappear through the door, hand extended to the paneling of the entry to keep her bearings. She turned to Roger, copper eyebrows raised.

“What are you up to, Roger? *Ducks*?”

“Nothing,” he said, eyes still fixed on the empty entrance. “It’s just an old custom. Samhain—Hallowe’en, you know?—that’s one of the feasts when it was customary to try to divine the future. And one of the ways of divination was to walk to the end of the house, and then step outside with your eyes closed. The first thing you see when you open them is an omen for the near future."

"Ducks are bad omens?"

"Depends what they're doing," he said absently, still watching the entry. "If they have their heads under their wings, that's death. What's keeping her?"

"Maybe we'd better go see," Brianna said nervously. "I don't expect there are a lot of sleeping ducks in downtown Inverness, but with the river so close …"

Just as they reached the door, though, its stained-glass window darkened and it swung open to reveal Claire, looking mildly flustered.

"You'll never believe what's the first thing I saw," she said, laughing as she saw them.

"Not a duck with its head under its wing?" asked Brianna anxiously.

"No," her mother said, giving her a puzzled look. "A policeman. I turned to the right and ran smack into him."

"He was coming toward you, then?" Roger felt inexplicably relieved.

"Well, he was until I ran into him," she said. "Then we waltzed round the pavement a bit, clutching each other." She laughed, looking flushed and pretty, with her brown-sherry eyes sparkling in the amber pub lights. "Why?"

"That's good luck," Roger said, smiling. "To see a man coming toward you on Samhain means you'll find what you seek."

"Does it?" Her eyes rested on his, quizzical, then her face lit with a sudden smile. "Wonderful! Let's go home and celebrate, shall we?"

The anxious constraint that had lain on them over dinner seemed suddenly to have vanished, to be replaced with a sort of manic excitement, and they laughed and joked on the trip back to the manse, where they drank toasts to past and future—Loch Minneaig Scotch for Claire and Roger, Coca-Cola for Brianna—and talked excitedly about the plans for the next day. Brianna had insisted on carving a pumpkin into a jack-o'-lantern, which sat on the sideboard, grinning benevolently on the proceedings.

"You've got the money, now," Roger said, for the tenth time.

"And your cloak," Brianna chimed in.

"Yes, yes, yes," Claire said impatiently. "Everything I need—or everything I can manage, at least," she amended. She paused, then impulsively reached out and took both Bree and Roger by the hand.

"Thank you both," she said, squeezing their hands. Her eyes shone moist, and her voice was suddenly husky. "Thank you. I can't say what I feel. I can't. But—oh, my dears, I will miss you!"

Then she and Bree were in each other's arms, Claire's head tucked into her daughter's neck, the both of them hugged tight, as though simple force could somehow express the depth of feeling between them.

Then they broke apart, eyes wet, and Claire laid a hand on her daughter's cheek. "I'd better go up now," she whispered. "There are things to do, still. I'll see you in the morning, Baby." She rose on tiptoe to plant a kiss on her daughter's nose, then turned and hurried from the room.

After her mother's exit, Brianna sat down again with her glass of Coke, and heaved a deep sigh. She didn't speak, but sat looking into the fire, turning the glass slowly between her hands.

Roger busied himself, setting the room to rights for the night, closing the windows, tidying the desk, putting away the reference books he had used to help Claire prepare for her journey. He paused by the jack-o'-lantern, but it looked so jolly, with the candlelight streaming from its slanted eyes and jagged mouth, that he couldn't bring himself to blow it out.

"I shouldn't think it's likely to set anything on fire," he remarked. "Shall we leave it?"

There was no answer. When he glanced at Brianna, he found her sitting still as stone, eyes fixed on the hearth. She hadn't heard him. He sat down beside her and took her hand.

"She might be able to come back," he said gently. "We don't know."

Brianna shook her head slowly, not taking her eyes from the leaping flames.

"I don't think so," she said softly. "She told you what it was like. She may not even make it through." Long fingers drummed restlessly on a denimed thigh.

Roger glanced at the door, to be sure that Claire was safely upstairs, then sat down on the sofa next to Brianna.

"She belongs with him, Bree," he said. "Can ye not see it? When she speaks of him?"

"I see it. I know she needs him." The full lower lip trembled slightly. "But … I need *her*!" Brianna's hands clenched suddenly tight on her knees, and she bent forward, as though trying to contain some sudden pain.

Roger stroked her hair, marveling at the softness of the glowing strands that slid through his fingers. He wanted to take her into his arms, as much for the feel of her as to offer comfort, but she was rigid and unresponsive.

"You're grown, Bree," he said softly. "You live on your own now, don't you? You may love her, but you don't need her anymore—not the way you did when you were small. Has she no right to her own joy?"

"Yes. But … Roger, you don't understand!" she burst out. She pressed her lips tight together and swallowed hard, then turned to him, eyes dark with distress.

"She's all that's left, Roger! The only one who really *knows* me. She and Daddy—Frank"—she corrected herself—"they were the ones who knew me from the beginning, the ones who saw me learn to walk and were proud of me when I did something good in school, and who—" She broke off, and the tears overflowed, leaving gleaming tracks in the firelight.

"This sounds really *dumb*," she said with sudden violence. "Really, really *dumb*! But it's—" she groped, helpless, then sprang to her feet, unable to stay still.

"It's like—there are all these things I don't even know!" she said, pacing with quick, angry steps. "Do you think I remember what I looked like, learning to walk, or what the first word I said was? No, but Mama does! And that's so *stupid*, because what difference does it make, it doesn't make any difference at all, but it's important, it matters because *she* thought it was, and … oh, Roger, if she's gone, there won't be a soul left in the world who cares what I'm like, or thinks I'm special not because of anything, but just because I'm me! She's the only person in the world who really, really cares I was born, and if she's gone …" She stood still on the hearthrug, hands clenched at her sides, and mouth twisted with the effort to control herself, tears wet on her cheeks. Then her shoulders slumped and the tension went out of her tall figure.

"And that's just really dumb and selfish," she said, in a quietly reasonable tone. "And you don't understand, and you think I'm awful."

"No," Roger said quietly. "I think maybe not." He stood and came behind her, putting his arms around her waist, urging her to lean back against him. She resisted at first, stiff in his arms, but then yielded to the need for physical comfort and relaxed, his chin propped on her shoulder, head tilted to touch her own.

"I never realized," he said. "Not 'til now. D'ye remember all those boxes in the garage?"

"Which ones?" she said, with a sniffling attempt at a laugh. "There are hundreds."

"The ones that say 'Roger' on them." He gave her a slight squeeze and brought his arms up, crisscrossed on her chest, holding her snug against himself.

"They're full of my parents' old clobber," he said. "Pictures and letters and baby clothes and books and old bits of rubbish. The Reverend packed them up when he took me to live with him. Treated them just like his most precious historical documents—double-boxing, and mothproofing and all that."

He rocked slowly back and forth, swaying from side to side, carrying her with him as he watched the fire over her shoulder.

"I asked him once why he bothered to keep them—I didn't want any of it, didn't care. But he said we'd keep it just the same; it was my history, he said—and everyone needs a history."

Brianna sighed, and her body seemed to relax still further, joining him in his rhythmic, half-unconscious sway.

"Did you ever look inside them?"

He shook his head. “It isn’t important what’s in them,” he said. “Only that they’re there.”

He let go of her then, and stepped back so that she turned to face him. Her face was blotched and her long, elegant nose a little swollen.

“You’re wrong, you know,” he said softly, and held out his hand to her. “It isn’t only your mother who cares.”

* * *

Brianna had gone to bed long since, but Roger sat on in the study, watching the flames die down in the hearth. Hallowe’en had always seemed to him a restless night, alive with waking spirits. Tonight was even more so, with the knowledge of what would happen in the morning. The jack-o’-lantern on the desk grinned in anticipation, filling the room with the homely scent of baking pies.

The sound of a footfall on the stair roused him from his thoughts. He had thought it might be Brianna, unable to sleep, but the visitor was Claire.

“I thought you might still be awake,” she said. She was in her nightdress, a pale glimmer of white satin against the dark hallway.

He smiled and stretched out a hand, inviting her in. “No. I never could sleep on All Hallows’. Not after all the stories my father told me; I always thought I could hear ghosts talking outside my window.”

She smiled, coming into the firelight. “And what did they say?”

“ ‘See’st thou this great gray head, with jaws which have no meat?’ ” Roger quoted. “You know the story? The little tailor who spent the night in a haunted church, and met the hungry ghost?”

“I do. I think if I’d heard *that* outside my window, I’d have spent the rest of the night hiding under the bedclothes.”

“Oh, I usually did,” Roger assured her. “Though once, when I was seven or so, I got up my nerve, stood up on the bed and peed on the windowsill—the Reverend had just told me that pissing on the doorposts is supposed to keep a ghost from coming in the house.”

Claire laughed delightedly, the firelight dancing in her eyes. “Did it work?”

"Well, it would have worked better had the window been open," Roger said, "but the ghosts didn't come in, no."

They laughed together, and then one of the small awkward silences that had punctuated the evening fell between them, the sudden realization of enormity gaping beneath the tightrope of conversation. Claire sat beside him, watching the fire, her hands moving restlessly among the folds of her gown. The light winked from her wedding rings, silver and gold, in sparks of fire.

"I'll take care of her, you know," Roger said quietly, at last. "You do know that, don't you?"

Claire nodded, not looking at him.

"I know," she said softly. He could see the tears, caught trembling at the edge of her lashes, glowing with firelight. She fumbled in the pocket of her gown, and drew out a long white envelope.

"You'll think me a dreadful coward," she said, "and I am. But I … I honestly don't think I can do it—say goodbye to Bree, I mean." She stopped, to bring her voice under control, and then held out the envelope to him.

"I wrote it all down for her—everything I could. Will you …?"

Roger took the envelope. It was warm from resting next to her body. From some obscure feeling that it must not be allowed to grow cold before it reached her daughter, he thrust it into his own breast pocket, feeling the crackle of paper as the envelope bent.

"Yes," he said, hearing his own voice thicken. "Then you'll go …"

"Early," she said, taking a deep breath. "Before dawn. I've arranged for a car to pick me up." Her hands twisted together in her lap. "If I—" She bit her lip, then looked at Roger pleadingly. "I don't know, you see," she said. "I don't know whether I can do it. I'm very much afraid. Afraid to go. Afraid not to go. Just—afraid."

"I would be, too." He held out his hand and she took it. He held it for a long time, feeling the pulse in her wrist, light and fast against his fingers.

After a long time, she squeezed his hand gently and let go.

"Thank you, Roger," she said. "For everything." She leaned over and kissed him lightly on the lips. Then she rose and went out, a white ghost in the darkness of the hall, borne on the Hallowe’en wind.

Roger sat on for some time alone, feeling her touch still warm on his skin. The jack-o’-lantern was nearly burned out. The smell of candle wax rose strongly in the restless air, and the pagan gods looked out for the last time, through eyes of guttering flame.

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23

CRAIGH NA DUN

The early morning air was cold and misty, and I was glad of the cloak. It had been twenty years since I'd worn one, but with the sorts of things people wore nowadays, the Inverness tailor who'd made it for me had not found an order for a woolen cloak with a hood at all odd.

I kept my eyes on the path. The crest of the hill had been invisible, wreathed in mist, when the car had left me on the road below.

"Here?" the driver had said, peering dubiously out of his window at the deserted countryside. "Sure, mum?"

"Yes," I'd said, half-choked with terror. "This is the place."

"Aye?" He looked dubious, in spite of the large note I put in his hand. "D'ye want me to wait, mum? Or to come later, to fetch ye back?"

I was sorely tempted to say yes. After all, what if I lost my nerve? At the moment, my grip on that slippery substance seemed remarkably feeble.

"No," I said, swallowing. "No, that won't be necessary." If I couldn't do it, I would just have to walk back to Inverness, that was all. Or perhaps Roger and Brianna would come; I thought that would be worse, to be ignominiously retrieved. Or would it be a relief?

The granite pebbles rolled beneath my feet and a clod of dirt fell in a small rushing shower, dislodged by my passage. I couldn't possibly really be doing this, I thought. The weight of the money in my reinforced pocket swung against my thigh, the heavy certainty of gold and silver a reminder of reality. I *was* doing it.

I couldn't. Thoughts of Bree as I had seen her late last night, peacefully asleep in her bed, assaulted me. The tendrils of remembered horror reached out from the hilltop above, as I began to sense the nearness of the stones. Screaming, chaos, the feeling of being torn in pieces. I couldn't.

I couldn't, but I kept on climbing, palms sweating, my feet moving as though no longer under my control.

It was full dawn by the time I reached the top of the hill. The mist lay below, and the stones stood clear and dark against a crystal sky. The sight of them left me wet-palmed with apprehension, but I walked forward, and passed into the circle.

They were standing on the grass in front of the cleft stone, facing each other. Brianna heard my footsteps and whirled around to face me.

I stared at her, speechless with astonishment. She was wearing a Jessica Gutenburg dress, very much like the one I had on, except that hers was a vivid lime green, with plastic jewels stitched across the bosom.

"That's a perfectly horrible color for you," I said.

"It's the only one they had in a size sixteen," she answered calmly.

"What in the name of goodness are you doing here?" I demanded, recovering some remnant of coherence.

"We came to see you off," she said, and a hint of a smile flickered on her lips. I looked at Roger, who shrugged slightly and gave me a lopsided smile of his own.

"Oh. Yes. Well," I said. The stone stood behind Brianna, twice the height of a man. I could look through the foot-wide crack, and see the faint morning sun shining on the grass outside the circle.

"You're going," she said firmly, "or I am."

"You! Are you out of your mind?"

"No." She glanced at the cleft stone and swallowed. It might have been the lime-green dress that made her face look chalk-white. "I can do it—go through, I mean. I know I can. When Geilie Duncan went through the stones, I heard them. Roger did too.” She glanced at him as though for reassurance, then fixed her gaze firmly on me.

“I don’t know whether I could find Jamie Fraser or not; maybe only you can. But if you won’t try, then I will.”

My mouth opened, but I couldn’t find anything to say.

“Don’t you see, Mama? He has to know—has to know he did it, he did what he meant to for us.” Her lips quivered, and she pressed them together for a minute.

“We owe it to him, Mama,” she said softly. “Somebody has to find him, and tell him.” Her hand touched my face, briefly. “Tell him I was born.”

“Oh, Bree,” I said, my voice so choked I could barely speak. “Oh, Bree!”

She was holding my hands tight between her own, squeezing hard.

“He gave you to me,” she said, so low I could hardly hear her. “Now I have to give you back to him, Mama.”

The eyes that were so like Jamie’s looked down at me, blurred by tears.

“If you find him,” she whispered, “when you find my father—give him this.” She bent and kissed me, fiercely, gently, then straightened and turned me toward the stone.

“Go, Mama,” she said, breathless. “I love you. Go!”

From the corner of my eye, I saw Roger move toward her. I took one step, and then another. I heard a sound, a faint roaring. I took the last step, and the world disappeared.

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PART SIX

Edinburgh

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A. MALCOLM, PRINTER

My first coherent thought was, “It’s raining. This must be Scotland.” My second thought was that this observation was no great improvement over the random images jumbling around inside my head, banging into each other and setting off small synaptic explosions of irrelevance.

I opened one eye, with some difficulty. The lid was stuck shut, and my entire face felt cold and puffy, like a submerged corpse’s. I shuddered faintly at the thought, the slight movement making me aware of the sodden fabric all around me.

It was certainly raining—a soft, steady drum of rain that raised a faint mist of droplets above the green moor. I sat up, feeling like a hippopotamus emerging from a bog, and promptly fell over backward.

I blinked and closed my eyes against the downpour. Some small sense of who I was—and where I was—was beginning to come back to me. *Bree*. Her face emerged suddenly into memory, with a jolt that made me gasp as though I’d been punched in the stomach. Jagged images of loss and the rip of separation pulled at me, a faint echo of the chaos in the stone passage.

Jamie. There it was; the anchor point to which I had clung, my single hold on sanity. I breathed slow and deep, hands folded over my pounding heart, summoning Jamie’s face. For a moment, I thought I had lost him, and then it came, clear and bold in my mind’s eye.

Once again, I struggled upright, and this time stayed, propped by my outstretched hands. Yes, certainly it was Scotland. It could hardly by anything else, of course, but it was also the Scotland of the past. At least, I *hoped* it was the past. It wasn't the Scotland I'd left, at any rate. The trees and bushes grew in different patterns; there was a patch of maple saplings just below me that hadn't been there when I'd climbed the hill—when? That morning? Two days ago?

I had no idea how much time had passed since I had entered the standing stones, or how long I had lain unconscious on the hillside below the circle. Quite a while, judging from the sogginess of my clothing; I was soaked through to the skin, and small chilly rivulets ran down my sides under my gown.

One numbed cheek was beginning to tingle; putting my hand to it, I could feel a pattern of incised bumps. I looked down and saw a layer of fallen rowan berries, gleaming red and black among the grass. Very appropriate, I thought, vaguely amused. I had fallen down under a rowan—the Highland protection against witchcraft and enchantment.

I grasped the smooth trunk of the rowan tree, and laboriously hauled myself to my feet. Still holding onto the tree for support, I looked to the northeast. The rain had faded the horizon to a gray invisibility, but I knew that Inverness lay in that direction. No more than an hour's trip by car, along modern roads.

The road existed; I could see the outline of a rough track that led along the base of the hill, a dark, silvery line in the gleaming green wetness of the moor plants. However, forty-odd miles on foot was a far cry from the journey by car that had brought me here.

I was beginning to feel somewhat better, standing up. The weakness in my limbs was fading, along with the feeling of chaos and disruption in my mind. It had been as bad as I'd feared, this passage; perhaps worse. I could feel the terrible presence of the stones above me, and shuddered, my skin prickling with cold.

I was alive, though. Alive, and with a small feeling of certainty, like a tiny glowing sun beneath my ribs. *He was here*. I knew it now, though I hadn't known it when I threw myself between the stones;

that had been a leap of faith. But I had cast out my thought of Jamie like a lifeline tossed into a raging torrent—and the line had tightened in my grasp, and pulled me free.

I was wet, cold, and felt battered, as though I had been washing about in the surf against a rocky shore. But I was here. And somewhere in this strange country of the past was the man I had come to find. The memories of grief and terror were receding, as I realized that my die was cast. I could not go back; a return trip would almost surely be fatal. As I realized that I was likely here to stay, all hesitations and terrors were superseded by a strange calm, almost exultant. I could not go back. There was nothing to do but go forward—to find him.

Cursing my carelessness in not having thought to tell the tailor to make my cloak with a waterproof layer between fabric and lining, I pulled the water-soaked garment closer. Even wet, the wool held some warmth. If I began to move, I would grow warmer. A quick pat reassured me that my bundle of sandwiches had made the trip with me. That was good; the thought of walking forty miles on an empty stomach was a daunting one.

With luck, I wouldn't have to. I might find a village or a house that had a horse I could buy. But if not, I was prepared. My plan was to go to Inverness—by whatever means offered itself—and there take a public coach to Edinburgh.

There was no telling where Jamie was at the moment. He might be in Edinburgh, where his article had been published, but he might easily be somewhere else. If I could not find him there, I could go to Lallybroch, his home. Surely his family would know where he was—if any of them were left. The sudden thought chilled me, and I shivered.

I thought of a small bookstore that I passed every morning on my way from the parking lot to the hospital. They had been having a sale on posters; I had seen the display of psychedelic examples when I left Joe's office for the last time.

"Today is the first day of the rest of your life," said one poster, above an illustration of a foolish-looking chick, absurdly poking its head out of an eggshell. In the other window, another poster showed a caterpillar, inching its way up a flower stalk. Above the stalk soared a brilliantly colored butterfly, and below was the motto "A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step."

The most irritating thing about clichés, I decided, was how frequently they were true. I let go of the rowan tree, and started down the hill toward my future.

* * *

It was a long, jolting ride from Inverness to Edinburgh, crammed cheek by jowl into a large coach with two other ladies, the small and whiny son of one of the ladies, and four gentlemen of varying sizes and dispositions.

Mr. Graham, a small and vivacious gentleman of advanced years who was seated next to me, was wearing a bag of camphor and asafoetida about his neck, to the eyewatering discomfort of the rest of the coach.

"Capital for dispelling the evil humors of influenza," he explained to me, waving the bag gently under my nose like a censer. "I have worn this daily through the autumn and winter months, and haven't been sick a day in nearly thirty years!"

"Amazing!" I said politely, trying to hold my breath. I didn't doubt it; the fumes probably kept everyone at such a distance that germs couldn't reach him.

The effects on the little boy didn't seem nearly so beneficial. After a number of loud and injudicious remarks about the smell in the coach, Master Georgie had been muffled in his mother's bosom, from which he now peeped, looking rather green. I kept a close eye on him, as well as on the chamber pot beneath the seat opposite, in case quick action involving a conjunction of the two should be called for.

I gathered that the chamber pot was for use in inclement weather or other emergency, as normally the ladies' modesty required stops every hour or so, at which point the passengers would scatter into the roadside vegetation like a covey of quail, even those who did not require relief of bladder or bowels seeking some relief from the stench of Mr. Graham's asafoetida bag.

After one or two changes, Mr. Graham found his place beside me superseded by Mr. Wallace, a plump young lawyer, returning to Edinburgh after seeing to the disposition of the estate of an elderly relative in Inverness, as he explained to me.

I didn't find the details of his legal practice nearly as fascinating as he did, but under the circumstances, his evident attraction to me was mildly reassuring, and I passed several hours in playing with him upon a small chess set that he produced from a pocket and laid upon his knee.

My attention was distracted both from the discomforts of the journey and the intricacies of chess by anticipation of what I might find in Edinburgh. A. Malcolm. The name kept running through my mind like an anthem of hope. A. Malcolm. It had to be Jamie, it simply had to! James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser.

"Considering the way the Highland rebels were treated after Culloden, it would be very reasonable for him to use an assumed name in a place like Edinburgh," Roger Wakefield had explained to me. "Particularly him—he was a convicted traitor, after all. Made rather a habit of it, too, it looks like," he had added critically, looking over the scrawled manuscript of the antitax diatribe. "For the times, this is bloody near sedition."

"Yes, that sounds like Jamie," I had said dryly, but my heart had leapt at the sight of that distinctively untidy scrawl, with its boldly worded sentiments. My Jamie. I touched the small hard rectangle in my skirt pocket, wondering how long it would be, before we reached Edinburgh.

The weather kept unseasonably fine, with no more than the occasional drizzle to hinder our passage, and we completed the journey in less than two days, stopping four times to change horses and refresh ourselves at posthouse taverns.

The coach debouched into a yard at the back of Boyd's Whitehorse tavern, near the foot of the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. The passengers emerged into the watery sunshine like newly hatched chrysalids, rumpled of wing and jerky in movement, unaccustomed to mobility. After the dimness of the coach, even the cloudy gray light of Edinburgh seemed blinding.

I had pins and needles in my feet from so long sitting, but hurried nonetheless, hoping to escape from the courtyard while my erstwhile companions were busy with the retrieval of their belongings. No such luck; Mr. Wallace caught up with me near the street.

"Mrs. Fraser!" he said. "Might I beg the pleasure of accompanying you to your destination? You will surely require some assistance in the removal of your luggage." He looked over his shoulder toward the coach, where the ostlers were heaving the bags and portmanteaux apparently at random into the crowd, to the accompaniment of incoherent grunts and shouts.

"Er …" I said. "Thank you, but I … er, I'm leaving my luggage in charge of the landlord. My … my …" I groped frantically. "My husband's servant will come fetch it later."

His plump face fell slightly at the word "husband," but he rallied gallantly, taking my hand and bowing low over it.

"I quite see. May I express my profound appreciation for the pleasure of your company on our journey, then, Mrs. Fraser? And perhaps we shall meet again." He straightened up, surveying the crowd that eddied past us. "Is your husband meeting you? I should be delighted to make his acquaintance."

While Mr. Wallace's interest in me had been rather flattering, it was rapidly becoming a nuisance.

"No, I shall be joining him later," I said. "So nice to have met you, Mr. Wallace; I'll hope to see you again sometime." I shook Mr. Wallace's hand enthusiastically, which disconcerted him enough for me to slither off through the throng of passengers, ostlers and food sellers.

I didn't dare pause near the coachyard for fear he would come out after me. I turned and darted up the slope of the Royal Mile, moving as quickly as my voluminous skirts would allow, jostling and bumping my way through the crowd. I had had the luck to pick a market day for my arrival, and I was soon lost to sight from the coachyard among the luckenbooths and oyster sellers who lined the street.

Panting like an escaped pickpocket, I stopped for breath halfway up the hill. There was a public fountain here, and I sat down on the rim to catch my breath.

I was here. Really here. Edinburgh sloped up behind me, to the glowering heights of Edinburgh Castle, and down before me, to the gracious majesty of Holyrood Palace at the foot of the city.

The last time I had stood by this fountain, Bonnie Prince Charlie had been addressing the gathered citizenry of Edinburgh, inspiring them with the sight of his royal presence. He had bounded exuberantly from the rim to the carved center finial of the fountain, one foot in the basin, clinging to one of the spouting heads for support, shouting "On to England!" The crowd had roared, pleased at this show of youthful high spirits and athletic prowess. I would myself have been more impressed had I not noticed that the water in the fountain had been turned off in anticipation of the gesture.

I wondered where Charlie was now. He had gone back to Italy after Culloden, I supposed, there to live whatever life was possible for royalty in permanent exile. What he was doing, I neither knew nor cared. He had passed from the pages of history, and from my life as well, leaving wreck and ruin in his wake. It remained to be seen what might be salvaged now.

I was very hungry; I had had nothing to eat since a hasty breakfast of rough parritch and boiled mutton, made soon after dawn at a posthouse in Dundaff. I had one last sandwich remaining in my pocket, but had been reluctant to eat it in the coach, under the curious gaze of my fellow travelers.

I pulled it out and carefully unwrapped it. Peanut butter and jelly on white bread, it was considerably the worse for wear, with the purple stains of the jelly seeping through the limp bread, and the whole thing mashed into a flattened wodge. It was delicious.

I ate it carefully, savoring the rich, oily taste of the peanut butter. How many mornings had I slathered peanut butter on bread, making sandwiches for Brianna's school lunches? Firmly suppressing the thought, I examined the passersby for distraction. They did look somewhat different from their modern equivalents; both men and women tended to be shorter, and the signs of poor nutrition were evident. Still, there was an overwhelming familiarity to them—these were people I knew, Scots and English for the most part, and hearing the rich burring babble of voices in the street, after so many years of the flat nasal tones of Boston, I had quite an extraordinary feeling of coming home.

I swallowed the last rich, sweet bite of my old life, and crumpled the wrapper in my hand. I glanced around, but no one was looking in my direction. I opened my hand, and let the bit of plastic film fall surreptitiously to the ground. Wadded up, it rolled a few inches on the cobbles, crinkling and unfolding itself as though alive. The light wind caught it, and the small transparent sheet took sudden wing, scudding over the gray stones like a leaf.

The draft of a set of passing wheels sucked it under a drayman's cart; it winked once with reflected light, and was gone, disappearing without notice from the passersby. I wondered whether my own anachronistic presence would cause as little harm.

"You are dithering, Beauchamp," I said to myself. "Time to get on." I took a deep breath and stood up.

"Excuse me," I said, catching the sleeve of a passing baker's boy. "I'm looking for a printer—a Mr. Malcolm. Alexander Malcolm." A feeling of mingled dread and excitement gurgled through my middle. What if there was no printshop run by Alexander Malcolm in Edinburgh?

There was, though; the boy's face screwed up in thought and then relaxed.

"Oh, aye, mum—just down the way and to your left. Carfax Close." And hitching his loaves up under his arm with a nod, he plunged back into the crowded street.

Carfax Close. I edged my way back into the crowd, pressing close to the buildings, to avoid the occasional shower of slops that splattered into the street from the windows high above. There were several thousand people in Edinburgh, and the sewage from all of them was running down the gutters of the cobbled street, depending on gravity and the frequent rain to keep the city habitable.

The low, dark opening to Carfax Close yawned just ahead, across the expanse of the Royal Mile. I stopped dead, looking at it, my heart beating hard enough to be heard a yard away, had anyone been listening.

It wasn't raining, but was just about to, and the dampness in the air made my hair curl. I pushed it off my forehead, tidying it as best I could without a mirror. Then I caught sight of a large plate-glass window up ahead, and hurried forward.

The glass was misty with condensation, but provided a dim reflection, in which my face looked flushed and wide-eyed, but otherwise presentable. My hair, however, had seized the opportunity to curl madly in all directions, and was writhing out of its hairpins in excellent imitation of Medusa's locks. I yanked the pins out impatiently, and began to twist up my curls.

There was a woman inside the shop, leaning across the counter. There were three small children with her, and I watched with half an eye as she turned from her business to address them impatiently, swatting with her reticule at the middle one, a boy who was fiddling with several stalks of fresh anise that stood in a pail of water on the floor.

It was an apothecary's shop; glancing up, I saw the name "Haugh" above the door, and felt a thrill of recognition. I had bought herbs here, during the brief time I had lived in Edinburgh. The decor of the window had been augmented sometime since by the addition of a large jar of colored water, in which floated something vaguely humanoid. A fetal pig, or perhaps an infant baboon; it had leering, flattened features that pressed against the rounded side of the jar in a disconcerting fashion.

"Well, at least I look better than *you*!" I muttered, shoving in a recalcitrant pin.

I looked better than the woman inside, too, I thought. Her business concluded, she was stuffing her purchase into the bag she carried, her thin face frowning as she did so. She had the rather pasty look of a city dweller, and her skin was deeply lined, with sharp creases running from nose to mouth, and a furrowed forehead.

"De'il tak' ye, ye wee ratten," she was saying crossly to the little boy as they all clattered out of the shop together. "Have I no told ye time and again to keep yer paws in yer pockets?"

"Excuse me." I stepped forward, interrupting, impelled by a sudden irresistible curiosity.

"Aye?" Distracted from maternal remonstration, she looked blankly at me. Up close, she looked even more harried. The corners of her mouth were pinched, and her lips folded in—no doubt because of missing teeth.

"I couldn't help admiring your children," I said, with as much pretense of admiration as I could manage on short notice. I beamed kindly at them. "Such pretty babies! Tell me, how old are they?"

Her jaw dropped, confirming the absence of several teeth. She blinked at me, then said, "Oh! Well, that's maist kind o' ye, mum. Ah … Maisri here is ten," she said, nodding at the eldest girl, who was in the act of wiping her nose on her sleeve, "Joey's eight—tak' yer finger out o' yer nose, ye clattie imp!" she hissed, then turned and proudly patted her youngest on the head. "And wee Polly's just turned six this May."

"Really!" I gazed at the woman affecting astonishment. "You scarcely look old enough to have children of that age. You must have married very young."

She preened slightly, smirking.

"Och, no! Not so young as all that; why, I was all o' nineteen when Maisri was born."

"Amazing," I said, meaning it. I dug in my pocket and offered the children each a penny, which they took with shy bobs of thanks. "Good day to you—and congratulations on your lovely family," I said to the woman, and walked away with a smile and a wave.

Nineteen when the eldest was born, and Maisri was ten now. She was twenty-nine. And I, blessed by good nutrition, hygiene, and dentistry, not worn down by multiple pregnancies and hard physical labor, looked a good deal younger than she. I took a deep breath, pushed back my hair, and marched into the shadows of Carfax Close.

* * *

It was a longish, winding close, and the printshop was at the foot. There were thriving businesses and tenements on either side, but I had no attention to spare for anything beyond the neat white sign that hung by the door.

A. MALCOLM
PRINTER AND BOOKSELLER

it said, and beneath this, *Books, calling cards, pamphlets, broadsheets, letters, etc.*

I stretched out my hand and touched the black letters of the name. A. Malcolm. Alexander Malcolm. James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser. Perhaps.

Another minute, and I would lose my nerve. I shoved open the door and walked in.

There was a broad counter across the front of the room, with an open flap in it, and a rack to one side that held several trays of type. Posters and notices of all sorts were tacked up on the opposite wall; samples, no doubt.

The door into the back room was open, showing the bulky angular frame of a printing press. Bent over it, his back turned to me, was Jamie.

“Is that you, Geordie?” he asked, not turning around. He was dressed in shirt and breeches, and had a small tool of some kind in his hand, with which he was doing something to the innards of the press. “Took ye long enough. Did ye get the—”

“It isn’t Geordie,” I said. My voice was higher than usual. “It’s me,” I said. “Claire.”

He straightened up very slowly. He wore his hair long; a thick tail of a deep, rich auburn sparked with copper. I had time to see that the neat ribbon that tied it back was green, and then he turned around.

He stared at me without speaking. A tremor ran down the muscular throat as he swallowed, but still he didn’t say anything.

It was the same broad, good-humored face, dark blue eyes aslant the high, flat cheekbones of a Viking, long mouth curling at the ends as though always on the verge of smiling. The lines surrounding eyes and mouth were deeper, of course. The nose had changed just a bit. The knife-edge bridge was slightly thickened near the base by the ridge of an old, healed fracture. It made him look fiercer, I thought, but lessened that air of aloof reserve, and lent his appearance a new rough charm.

I walked through the flap in the counter, seeing nothing but that unblinking stare. I cleared my throat.

“When did you break your nose?”

The corners of the wide mouth lifted slightly.

“About three minutes after I last saw ye—Sassenach.”

There was a hesitation, almost a question in the name. There was no more than a foot between us. I reached out tentatively and touched the tiny line of the break, where the bone pressed white against the bronze of his skin.

He flinched backward as though an electric spark had arced between us, and the calm expression shattered.

“You’re real,” he whispered. I had thought him pale already. Now all vestiges of color drained from his face. His eyes rolled up and he slumped to the floor in a shower of papers and oddments that had been sitting on the press—he fell rather gracefully for such a large man, I thought abstractedly.

It was only a faint; his eyelids were beginning to flutter by the time I knelt beside him and loosened the stock at his throat. I had no doubts at all by now, but still I looked automatically as I pulled the heavy linen away. It was there, of course, the small triangular scar just above the collarbone, left by the knife of Captain Jonathan Randall, Esquire, of His Majesty’s Eighth Dragoons.

His normal healthy color was returning. I sat cross-legged on the floor and hoisted his head onto my thigh. His hair felt thick and soft in my hand. His eyes opened.

“That bad, is it?” I said, smiling down at him with the same words he had used to me on the day of our wedding, holding my head in his lap, twenty-odd years before.

“That bad, and worse, Sassenach,” he answered, mouth twitching with something almost a smile. He sat up abruptly, staring at me.

“God in heaven, you *are* real!”

"So are you." I lifted my chin to look up at him. "I th-thought you were dead." I had meant to speak lightly, but my voice betrayed me. The tears spilled down my cheeks, only to soak into the rough cloth of his shirt as he pulled me hard against him.

I shook so that it was some time before I realized that he was shaking, too, and for the same reason. I don't know how long we sat there on the dusty floor, crying in each other's arms with the longing of twenty years spilling down our faces.

His fingers twined hard in my hair, pulling it loose so that it tumbled down my neck. The dislodged pins cascaded over my shoulders and pinged on the floor like pellets of hail. My own fingers were clasped around his forearm, digging into the linen as though I were afraid he would disappear unless physically restrained.

As though gripped by the same fear, he suddenly grasped me by the shoulders and held me away from him, staring desperately into my face. He put his hand to my cheek, and traced the bones over and over again, oblivious to my tears and to my abundantly running nose.

I sniffed loudly, which seemed to bring him to his senses, for he let go and groped hastily in his sleeve for a handkerchief, which he used clumsily to swab first my face, then his own.

"Give me that." I grabbed the erratically waving swatch of cloth and blew my nose firmly. "Now you." I handed him the cloth and watched as he blew his nose with a noise like a strangled goose. I giggled, undone with emotion.

He smiled too, knuckling the tears away from his eyes, unable to stop staring at me.

Suddenly I couldn't bear not to be touching him. I lunged at him, and he got his arms up just in time to catch me. I squeezed until I could hear his ribs crack, and felt his hands roughly caressing my back as he said my name over and over.

At last I could let go, and sat back a little. He glanced down at the floor between his legs, frowning.

"Did you lose something?" I asked, surprised.

He looked up and smiled, a little shyly.

"I was afraid I'd lost hold altogether and pissed myself, but it's all right. I've just sat on the alepot."

Sure enough, a pool of aromatic brown liquid was spreading slowly beneath him. With a squeak of alarm, I scrambled to my feet and helped him up. After trying vainly to assess the damage behind, he shrugged and unfastened his breeches. He pushed the tight fabric down over his haunches, then stopped and looked at me, blushing slightly.

"It's all right," I said, feeling a rich blush stain my own cheeks. "We're married." I cast my eyes down, nonetheless, feeling a little breathless. "At least, I suppose we are."

He stared at me for a long moment, then a smile curved his wide, soft mouth.

"Aye, we are," he said. Kicking free of the stained breeches, he stepped toward me.

I stretched out a hand toward him, as much to stop as to welcome him. I wanted more than anything to touch him again, but was unaccountably shy. After so long, how were we to start again?

He felt the constraint of mingled shyness and intimacy as well. Stopping a few inches from me, he took my hand. He hesitated for a moment, then bent his head over it, his lips barely brushing my knuckles. His fingers touched the silver ring and stopped there, holding the metal lightly between thumb and forefinger.

"I never took it off," I blurted. It seemed important he should know that. He squeezed my hand lightly, but didn't let go.

"I want—" He stopped and swallowed, still holding my hand. His fingers found and touched the silver ring once more. "I want verra much to kiss you," he said softly. "May I do that?"

The tears were barely dammed. Two more welled up and overflowed; I felt them, full and round, roll down my cheeks.

"Yes," I whispered.

He drew me slowly close to him, holding our linked hands just under his breast.

"I havena done this for a verra long time," he said. I saw the hope and the fear dark in the blue of his eyes. I took the gift and gave it back to him.

"Neither have I," I said softly.

His hands cupped my face with exquisite gentleness, and he set his mouth on mine.

I didn't know quite what I had been expecting. A reprise of the pounding fury that had accompanied our final parting? I had remembered that so often, lived it over in memory, helpless to change the outcome. The half-rough, timeless hours of mutual possession in the darkness of our marriage bed? I had longed for that, wakened often sweating and trembling from the memory of it.

But we were strangers now, barely touching, each seeking the way toward joining, slowly, tentatively, seeking and giving unspoken permission with our silent lips. My eyes were closed, and I knew without looking that Jamie's were, as well. We were, quite simply, afraid to look at each other.

Without raising his head, he began to stroke me lightly, feeling my bones through my clothes, familiarizing himself again with the terrain of my body. At last his hand traveled down my arm and caught my right hand. His fingers traced my hand until they found the ring again, and circled it, feeling the interlaced silver of the Highland pattern, polished with long wear, but still distinct.

His lips moved from mine, across my cheeks and eyes. I gently stroked his back, feeling through his shirt the marks I couldn't see, the remnants of old scars, like my ring, worn but still distinct.

"I've seen ye so many times," he said, his voice whispering warm in my ear. "You've come to me so often. When I dreamed sometimes. When I lay in fever. When I was so afraid and so lonely I knew I must die. When I needed you, I would always see ye, smiling, with your hair curling up about your face. But ye never spoke. And ye never touched me."

"I can touch you now." I reached up and drew my hand gently down his temple, his ear, the cheek and jaw that I could see. My hand went to the nape of his neck, under the clubbed bronze hair, and he raised his head at last, and cupped my face between his hands, love glowing strong in the dark blue eyes.

"Dinna be afraid," he said softly. "There's the two of us now."

We might have gone on standing there gazing at each other indefinitely, had the shop bell over the door not rung. I let go of Jamie and looked around sharply, to see a small, wiry man with coarse dark hair standing in the door, mouth agape, holding a small parcel in one hand.

"Oh, there ye are, Geordie! What's kept ye?" Jamie said.

Geordie said nothing, but his eyes traveled dubiously over his employer, standing bare-legged in his shirt in the middle of the shop, his breeches, shoes, and stockings discarded on the floor, and me in his arms, with my gown all crumpled and my hair coming down. Geordie's narrow face creased into a censorious frown.

"I quit," he said, in the rich tones of the West Highlands. "The printing's one thing—I'm wi' ye there, and ye'll no think otherwise—but I'm Free Church and my daddy before me and my grandsire before him. Workin' for a Papist is one thing—the Pope's coin's as good as any, aye?—but workin' for an immoral Papist is another. Do as ye like wi' your own soul, man, but if it's come to orgies in the shop, it's come too far, that's what I say. I quit!"

He placed the package precisely in the center of the counter, spun on his heel and stalked toward the door. Outside, the Town Clock on the Tolbooth began to strike. Geordie turned in the doorway to glare accusingly at us.

"And it not even noon yet!" he said. The shop door slammed behind him.

Jamie stared after him for a moment, then sank slowly down onto the floor again, laughing so hard, the tears came to his eyes.

"And it's not even noon yet!" he repeated, wiping the tears off his cheeks. "Oh, God, Geordie!" He rocked back and forth, grasping his knees with both hands.

I couldn't help laughing myself, though I was rather worried.

"I didn't mean to cause you trouble," I said. "Will he come back, do you think?"

He sniffed and wiped his face carelessly on the tail of his shirt.

"Oh, aye. He lives just across the way, in Wickham Wynd. I'll go and see him in a bit, and … and explain," he said. He looked at me, realization dawning, and added, "God knows how!" It looked for a minute as though he might start laughing again, but he mastered the impulse and stood up.

“Have you got another pair of breeches?” I asked, picking up the discarded ones and draping them across the counter to dry.

“Aye, I have—upstairs. Wait a bit, though.” He snaked a long arm into the cupboard beneath the counter, and came out with a neatly lettered notice that said GONE OUT. Attaching this to the outside of the door, and firmly bolting the inside, he turned to me.

“Will ye step upstairs wi’ me?” he said. He crooked an arm invitingly, eyes sparkling. “If ye dinna think it immoral?”

“Why not?” I said. The impulse to explode in laughter was just below the surface, sparkling in my blood like champagne. “We’re married, aren’t we?”

The upstairs was divided into two rooms, one on either side of the landing, and a small privy closet just off the landing itself. The back room was plainly devoted to storage for the printing business; the door was propped open, and I could see wooden crates filled with books, towering bundles of pamphlets neatly tied with twine, barrels of alcohol and powdered ink, and a jumble of odd-looking hardware that I assumed must be spare parts for a printing press.

The front room was spare as a monk’s cell. There was a chest of drawers with a pottery candlestick on it, a washstand, a stool, and a narrow cot, little more than a camp bed. I let out my breath when I saw it, only then realizing that I had been holding it. He slept alone.

A quick glance around confirmed that there was no sign of a feminine presence in the room, and my heart began to beat with a normal rhythm again. Plainly no one lived here but Jamie; he had pushed aside the curtain that blocked off a corner of the room, and the row of pegs revealed there supported no more than a couple of shirts, a coat and long waistcoat in sober gray, a gray wool cloak, and the spare pair of breeches he had come to fetch.

He had his back turned to me as he tucked in his shirt and fastened the new breeches, but I could see the self-consciousness in the tense line of his shoulders. I could feel a similar tension in the back of my own neck. Given a moment to recover from the shock of seeing each other, we were both stricken now with shyness. I saw his shoulders straighten and then he turned around to face me. The hysterical laughter had left us, and the tears, though his face still showed the marks of so much sudden feeling, and I knew mine did, too.

"It's verra fine to see ye, Claire," he said softly. "I thought I never … well." He shrugged slightly, as though to ease the tightness of the linen shirt across his shoulders. He swallowed, then met my eyes directly.

"The child?" he said. Everything he felt was evident on his face; urgent hope, desperate fear, and the struggle to contain both.

I smiled at him, and put out my hand. "Come here."

I had thought long and hard about what I might bring with me, should my journey through the stones succeed. Given my previous brush with accusations of witchcraft, I had been very careful. But there was one thing I had had to bring, no matter what the consequences might be if anyone saw them.

I pulled him down to sit beside me on the cot, and pulled out of my pocket the small rectangular package I had done up with such care in Boston. I undid its waterproof wrapping, and thrust its contents into his hands. "There," I said.

He took them from me, gingerly, like one handling an unknown and possibly dangerous substance. His big hands framed the photographs for a moment, holding them confined. Brianna's round newborn face was oblivious between his fingers, tiny fists curled on her blanket, slanted eyes closed in the new exhaustion of existence, her small mouth slightly open in sleep.

I looked up at his face; it was absolutely blank with shock. He held the pictures close to his chest, unmoving, wide-eyed and staring as though he had just been transfixed by a crossbow bolt through the heart—as I supposed he had.

"Your daughter sent you this," I said. I turned his blank face toward me and gently kissed him on the mouth. That broke the trance; he blinked and his face came to life again.

"My … she …" His voice was hoarse with shock. "Daughter. My daughter. She … knows?"

“She does. Look at the rest.” I slid the first picture from his grasp, revealing the snapshot of Brianna, uproariously festooned with the icing of her first birthday cake, a four-toothed smile of fiendish triumph on her face as she waved a new plush rabbit overhead.

Jamie made a small inarticulate sound, and his fingers loosened. I took the small stack of photographs from him and gave them back, one at a time.

Brianna at two, stubby in her snowsuit, cheeks round and flushed as apples, feathery hair wisping from under her hood.

Bree at four, hair a smooth bell-shaped gleam as she sat, one ankle propped on the opposite knee as she smiled for the photographer, proper and poised in a white pinafore.

At five, in proud possession of her first lunchbox, waiting to board the school bus to kindergarten.

“She wouldn’t let me go with her; she wanted to go alone. She’s very b-brave, not afraid of anything …” I felt half-choked as I explained, displayed, pointed to the changing images that fell from his hands and slid down to the floor as he began to snatch each new picture.

“Oh, God!” he said, at the picture of Bree at ten, sitting on the kitchen floor with her arms around Smoky, the big Newfoundland. That one was in color; her hair a brilliant shimmer against the dog’s shiny black coat.

His hands were shaking so badly that he couldn’t hold the pictures anymore; I had to show him the last few—Bree full-grown, laughing at a string of fish she’d caught; standing at a window in secretive contemplation; red-faced and tousled, leaning on the handle of the ax she had been using to split kindling. These showed her face in all the moods I could capture, always that face, long-nosed and wide-mouthed, with those high, broad, flat Viking cheekbones and slanted eyes—a finer-boned, more delicate version of her father’s, of the man who sat on the cot beside me, mouth working wordlessly, and the tears running soundless down his own cheeks.

He splayed a hand out over the photographs, trembling fingers not quite touching the shiny surfaces, and then he turned and leaned toward me, slowly, with the improbable grace of a tall tree falling. He buried his face in my shoulder and went very quietly and thoroughly to pieces.

I held him to my breast, arms tight around the broad, shaking shoulders, and my own tears fell on his hair, making small dark patches in the ruddy waves. I pressed my cheek against the top of his head, and murmured small incoherent things to him as though he were Brianna. I thought to myself that perhaps it was like surgery—even when an operation is done to repair existing damage, the healing still is painful.

"Her name?" He raised his face at last, wiping his nose on the back of his hand. He picked up the pictures again, gently, as though they might disintegrate at his touch. "What did ye name her?"

"Brianna," I said proudly.

"Brianna?" he said, frowning at the pictures. "What an awful name for a wee lassie!"

I started back as though struck. "It is not awful!" I snapped. "It's a beautiful name, and besides you *told* me to name her that! What do you mean, it's an awful name?"

"*I* told ye to name her that?" He blinked.

"You most certainly did! When we—when we—the last time I saw you." I pressed my lips tightly together so I wouldn't cry again. After a moment, I had mastered my feelings enough to add, "You told me to name the baby for your father. His name was Brian, wasn't it?"

"Aye, it was." A smile seemed to be struggling for dominance of the other emotions on his face. "Aye," he said. "Aye, you're right, I did. It's only—well, I thought it would be a boy, is all."

"And you're sorry she wasn't?" I glared at him, and began snatching up the scattered photographs. His hands on my arms stopped me.

"No," he said. "No, I'm not sorry. Of course not!" His mouth twitched slightly. "But I willna deny she's the hell of a shock, Sassenach. So are you."

I sat still for a moment, looking at him. I had had months to prepare myself for this, and still my knees felt weak and my stomach was clenched in knots. He had been taken completely unawares by my appearance; little wonder if he was reeling a bit under the impact.

"I expect I am. Are you sorry I came?" I asked. I swallowed. "Do—do you want me to go?"

His hands clamped my arms so tightly that I let out a small yelp. Realizing that he was hurting me, he loosened his grip, but kept a firm hold nonetheless. His face had gone quite pale at the suggestion. He took a deep breath and let it out.

"No," he said, with an approximation of calmness. "I don't. I—" He broke off abruptly, jaw clamped. "No," he said again, very definitely.

His hand slid down to take hold of mine, and with the other he reached down to pick up the photographs. He laid them on his knee, looking at them with head bent, so I couldn't see his face.

"Brianna," he said softly. "Ye say it wrong, Sassenach. Her name is Brianna." He said it with an odd Highland lilt, so that the first syllable was accented, the second barely pronounced. *Bree*anah.

"*Bree*anah?" I said, amused. He nodded, eyes still fixed on the pictures.

"Brianna," he said. "It's a beautiful name."

"Glad you like it," I said.

He glanced up then, and met my eyes, with a smile hidden in the corner of his long mouth.

"Tell me about her." One forefinger traced the pudgy features of the baby in the snowsuit. "What was she like as a wee lassie? What did she first say, when she learned to speak?"

His hand drew me closer, and I nestled close to him. He was big, and solid, and smelled of clean linen and ink, with a warm male scent that was as exciting to me as it was familiar.

" 'Dog,' " I said. "That was her first word. The second one was 'No!' "

The smile widened across his face. "Aye, they all learn that one fast. She'll like dogs, then?" He fanned the pictures out like cards, searching out the one with Smoky. "That's a lovely dog with her there. What sort is that?"

"A Newfoundland." I bent forward to thumb through the pictures. "There's another one here with a puppy a friend of mine gave her …"

The dim gray daylight had begun to fade, and the rain had been pattering on the roof for some time, before our talk was interrupted by a fierce subterranean growl emanating from below the lace-trimmed bodice of my Jessica Gutenburg. It had been a long time since the peanut butter sandwich.

"Hungry, Sassenach?" Jamie asked, rather unnecessarily, I thought.

"Well, yes, now that you mention it. Do you still keep food in the top drawer?" When we were first married, I had developed the habit of keeping small bits of food on hand, to supply his constant appetite, and the top drawer of any chest of drawers where we lived generally provided a selection of rolls, small cakes, or bits of cheese.

He laughed and stretched. "Aye, I do. There's no much there just now, though, but a couple of stale bannocks. Better I take ye down to the tavern, and—" The look of happiness engendered by perusing the photographs of Brianna faded, to be replaced by a look of alarm. He glanced quickly at the window, where a soft purplish color was beginning to replace the pale gray, and the look of alarm deepened.

"The tavern! Christ! I've forgotten Mr. Willoughby!" He was on his feet and groping in the chest for fresh stockings before I could say anything. Coming out with the stockings in one hand and two bannocks in the other, he tossed the latter into my lap and sat down on the stool, hastily yanking on the former.

"Who's Mr. Willoughby?" I bit into a bannock, scattering crumbs.

"Damn," he said, more to himself than me, "I said I'd come for him at noon, but it went out o' my head entirely! It must be four o'clock by now!"

"It is; I heard the clock strike a little while ago."

"Damn!" he repeated. Thrusting his feet into a pair of pewter-buckled shoes, he rose, snatched his coat from the peg, and then paused at the door.

"You'll come wi' me?" he asked anxiously.

I licked my fingers and rose, pulling my cloak around me.

“Wild horses couldn’t stop me,” I assured him.

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HOUSE OF JOY

"Who is Mr. Willoughby?" I inquired, as we paused under the arch of Carfax Close to peer out at the cobbled street. "Er … he's an associate of mine," Jamie replied, with a wary glance at me. "Best put up your hood, it's pouring."

It was in fact raining quite hard; sheets of water fell from the arch overhead and gurgled down the gutters, cleansing the streets of sewage and rubbish. I took a deep breath of the damp, clean air, feeling exhilarated by the wildness of the evening and the closeness of Jamie, tall and powerful by my side. I had found him. I had found him, and whatever unknowns life now held, they didn't seem to matter. I felt reckless and indestructible.

I took his hand and squeezed it; he looked down and smiled at me, squeezing back.

"Where are we going?"

"To The World's End." The roar of the water made conversation difficult. Without further speech, Jamie took me by the elbow to help me across the cobbles, and we plunged down the steep incline of the Royal Mile.

Luckily, the tavern called The World's End was no more than a hundred yards away; hard as the rain was, the shoulders of my cloak were scarcely more than dampened when we ducked beneath the low lintel and into the narrow entry-hall.

The main room was crowded, warm and smoky, a snug refuge from the storm outside. There were a few women seated on the benches that ran along the walls, but most of the patrons were men.

Here and there was a man in the well-kept dress of a merchant, but most men with homes to go to were in them at this hour; the tavern hosted a mix of soldiers, wharf rats, laborers and apprentices, with here and there the odd drunkard for variety.

Heads looked up at our appearance, and there were shouts of greeting, and a general shuffling and pushing, to make room at one of the long tables. Clearly Jamie was well-known in The World's End. A few curious glances came my way, but no one said anything. I kept my cloak pulled close around me, and followed Jamie through the crush of the tavern.

"Nay, mistress, we'll no be stayin'," he said to the young barmaid who bustled forward with an eager smile. "I've only come for himself."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Oh, aye, and no before time, either! Mither's put him doon the stair."

"Aye, I'm late," Jamie said apologetically. "I had … business that kept me."

The girl looked curiously at me, but then shrugged and dimpled at Jamie.

"Och, it's no trouble, sir. Harry took him doon a stoup of brandy, and we've heard little more of him since."

"Brandy, eh?" Jamie sounded resigned. "Still awake, is he?" He reached into the pocket of his coat and brought out a small leather pouch, from which he extracted several coins, which he dropped into the girl's outstretched hand.

"I expect so," she said cheerfully, pocketing the money. "I heard him singin' a whiles since. Thankee, sir!"

With a nod, Jamie ducked under the lintel at the back of the room, motioning me to follow. A tiny, barrel-ceilinged kitchen lay behind the main taproom, with a huge kettle of what looked like oyster stew simmering in the hearth. It smelled delicious, and I could feel my mouth starting to water at the rich aroma. I hoped we could do our business with Mr. Willoughby over supper.

A fat woman in a grimy bodice and skirt knelt by the hearth, stuffing billets of wood into the fire. She glanced up at Jamie and nodded, but made no move to get up.

He lifted a hand in response, and headed for a small wooden door in the corner. He lifted the bolt and swung the door open to reveal a dark stairway leading down, apparently into the bowels of the earth. A light flickered somewhere far below, as though elves were mining diamonds beneath the tavern.

Jamie's shoulders filled the narrow stairwell, obstructing my view of whatever lay below us. When he stepped out into the open space below, I could see heavy oak rafters, and a row of huge casks, standing on a long plank set on hurdles against the stone wall.

Only a single torch burned at the foot of the stair. The cellar was shadowy, and its cavelike depths seemed quite deserted. I listened, but didn't hear anything but the muffled racket of the tavern upstairs. Certainly no singing.

"Are you sure he's down here?" I bent to peer beneath the row of casks, wondering whether perhaps the bibulous Mr. Willoughby had been overcome with an excess of brandy and sought some secluded spot to sleep it off.

"Oh, aye." Jamie sounded grim, but resigned. "The wee bugger's hiding, I expect. He knows I dinna like it when he drinks in public houses."

I raised an eyebrow at this, but he merely strode into the shadows, muttering under his breath. The cellar stretched some way, and I could hear him, shuffling cautiously in the dark, long after I lost sight of him. Left in the circle of torchlight near the stairs, I looked around with interest.

Besides the row of casks, there were a number of wooden crates stacked near the center of the room, against an odd little chunk of wall that stood by itself, rising some five feet out of the cellar floor, running back into the darkness.

I had heard of this feature of the tavern when we had stayed in Edinburgh twenty years before with His Highness Prince Charles, but what with one thing and another, I had never actually seen it before. It was the remnant of a wall constructed by the city fathers of Edinburgh, following the disastrous Battle of Flodden Field in 1513. Concluding—with some justice—that no good was likely to come of association with the English to the south, they had built a wall defining both the city limits and the limit of the civilized world of Scotland. Hence "The World's End," and the name had stuck through several versions of the tavern that had eventually been built upon the remnants of the old Scots' wishful thinking.

"Damned little bugger." Jamie emerged from the shadows, a cobweb stuck in his hair, and a frown on his face. "He must be back of the wall."

Turning, he put his hands to his mouth and shouted something. It sounded like incomprehensible gibberish—not even like Gaelic. I dug a finger dubiously into one ear, wondering whether the trip through the stones had deranged my hearing.

A sudden movement caught the corner of my eye, causing me to look up, just in time to see a ball of brilliant blue fly off the top of the ancient wall and smack Jamie squarely between the shoulderblades.

He hit the cellar floor with a frightful thump, and I dashed toward his fallen body.

"Jamie! Are you all right?"

The prone figure made a number of coarse remarks in Gaelic and sat up slowly, rubbing his forehead, which had struck the stone floor a glancing blow. The blue ball, meanwhile, had resolved itself into the figure of a very small Chinese, who was giggling in unhinged delight, sallow round face shining with glee and brandy.

"Mr. Willoughby, I presume?" I said to this apparition, keeping a wary eye out for further tricks.

He appeared to recognize his name, for he grinned and nodded madly at me, his eyes creased to gleaming slits. He pointed to himself, said something in Chinese, and then sprang into the air and executed several backflips in rapid succession, bobbing up on his feet in beaming triumph at the end.

"Bloody flea." Jamie got up, wiping the skinned palms of his hands gingerly on his coat. With a quick snatch, he caught hold of the Chinaman's collar and jerked him off his feet.

"Come on," he said, parking the little man on the stairway and prodding him firmly in the back. "We need to be going, and quick now.” In response, the little blue-clad figure promptly sagged into limpness, looking like a bag of laundry resting on the step.

“He’s all right when he’s sober,” Jamie explained apologetically to me, as he hoisted the Chinese over one shoulder. “But he really shouldna drink brandy. He’s a terrible sot.”

“So I see. Where on earth did you get him?” Fascinated, I followed Jamie up the stairs, watching Mr. Willoughby’s pigtail swing back and forth like a metronome across the felted gray wool of Jamie’s cloak.

“On the docks.” But before he could explain further, the door above opened, and we were back in the tavern’s kitchen. The stout proprietor saw us emerge, and came toward us, her fat cheeks puffed with disapproval.

“Now, Mr. Malcolm,” she began, frowning, “ye ken verra weel as you’re welcome here, and ye’ll ken as weel that I’m no a fussy woman, such not bein’ a convenient attitude when maintainin’ a public hoose. But I’ve telt ye before, yon wee yellow mannie is no —”

“Aye, ye’ve mentioned it, Mrs. Patterson,” Jamie interrupted. He dug in his pocket and came up with a coin, which he handed to the stout publican with a bow. “And your forbearance is much appreciated. It willna happen again. I hope,” he added under his breath. He placed his hat on his head, bowed again to Mrs. Patterson, and ducked under the low lintel into the main tavern.

Our reentry caused another stir, but a negative one this time. People fell silent, or muttered half-heard curses under their breath. I gathered that Mr. Willoughby was perhaps not this local’s most popular patron.

Jamie edged his way through the crowd, which gave way reluctantly. I followed as best I could, trying not to meet anyone’s eyes, and trying not to breathe. Unused as I was to the unhygienic miasma of the eighteenth century, the stench of so many unwashed bodies in a small space was nearly overwhelming.

Near the door, though, we met trouble, in the person of a buxom young woman whose dress was a notch above the sober drab of the landlady and her daughter. Her neckline was a notch lower, and I hadn't much trouble in guessing her principal occupation. Absorbed in flirtatious conversation with a couple of apprentice lads when we emerged from the kitchen, she looked up as we passed, and sprang to her feet with a piercing scream, knocking over a cup of ale in the process.

"It's him!" she screeched, pointing a wavering finger at Jamie. "The foul fiend!" Her eyes seemed to have trouble focusing; I gathered that the spilled ale wasn't her first of the evening, early as it was.

Her companions stared at Jamie with interest, the more so when the young lady advanced, stabbing her finger in the air like one leading a chorus. "Him! The wee poolie I telt ye of—him that did the disgustin' thing to me!"

I joined the rest of the crowd in looking at Jamie with interest, but quickly realized, as did they, that the young woman was not talking to him, but rather to his burden.

"Ye neffit qurd!" she yelled, addressing her remarks to the seat of Mr. Willoughby's blue-silk trousers. "Hiddie-pyke! Slug!"

This spectacle of maidenly distress was rousing her companions; one, a tall, burly lad, stood up, fists clenched, and leaned on the table, eyes gleaming with ale and aggro.

"S'him, aye? Shall I knivvle him for ye, Maggie?"

"Dinna try, laddie," Jamie advised him shortly, shifting his burden for better balance. "Drink your drink, and we'll be gone."

"Oh, aye? And you're the little ked's pimpmaster, are ye?" The lad sneered unbecomingly, his flushed face turning in my direction. "At least your other whore's no yellow—le's ha' a look at her." He flung out a paw and grabbed the edge of my cloak, revealing the low bodice of the Jessica Gutenburg.

"Looks pink enough to me," said his friend, with obvious approval. "Is she like it all over?" Before I could move, he snatched at the bodice, catching the edge of the lace. Not designed for the rigors of eighteenth-century life, the flimsy fabric ripped halfway down the side, exposing quite a lot of pink.

"Leave off, ye whoreson!" Jamie swung about, eyes blazing, free fist doubled in threat.

“Who ye miscallin’, ye skrae-shankit skoot?” The first youth, unable to get out from behind the table, leapt on top of it, and launched himself at Jamie, who neatly sidestepped the lad, allowing him to crash face-first into the wall.

Jamie took one giant step toward the table, brought his fist down hard on top of the other apprentice’s head, making the lad’s jaw go slack, then grabbed me by the hand and dragged me out the door.

“Come on!” he said, grunting as he shifted the Chinaman’s slippery form for a better grip. “They’ll be after us any moment!”

They were; I could hear the shouting as the more boisterous elements poured out of the tavern into the street behind us. Jamie took the first opening off the Royal Mile, into a narrow, dark wynd, and we splashed through mud and unidentifiable slops, ducked through an archway, and down another twisting alleyway that seemed to lead through the bowels of Edinburgh. Dark walls flashed past, and splintered wooden doors, and then we were round a corner, in a small courtyard, where we paused for breath.

“What … on earth … did he do?” I gasped. I couldn’t imagine what the little Chinese could have done to a strapping young wench like the recent Maggie. From all appearances, she could have squashed him like a fly.

“Well, it’s the feet, ye ken,” Jamie explained, with a glance of resigned irritation at Mr. Willoughby.

“Feet?” I glanced involuntarily at the tiny Chinese man’s feet, neat miniatures shod in felt-soled black satin.

“Not his,” Jamie said, catching my glance. “The women’s.”

“*What* women?” I asked.

“Well, so far it’s only been whores,” he said, glancing through the archway in search of pursuit, “but ye canna tell what he may try. No judgment,” he explained briefly. “He’s a heathen.”

“I see,” I said, though so far, I didn’t. “What—”

“There they are!” A shout at the far end of the alley interrupted my question.

“Damn, I thought they’d give it up. Come on, this way!”

We were off once more, down an alley, back onto the Royal Mile, a few steps down the hill, and back into a close. I could hear shouts and cries behind us on the main street, but Jamie grasped my arm and jerked me after him through an open doorway, into a yard full of casks, bundles, and crates. He looked frantically about, then heaved Mr. Willoughby's limp body into a large barrel filled with rubbish. Pausing only long enough to drop a piece of canvas on the Chinese's head for concealment, he dragged me behind a wagon loaded with crates, and pulled me down beside him.

I was gasping from the unaccustomed exertion, and my heart was racing from the adrenaline of fear. Jamie's face was flushed with cold and exercise, and his hair was sticking up in several directions, but he was scarcely breathing hard.

"Do you do this sort of thing all the time?" I asked, pressing a hand to my bosom in a vain effort to make my heart slow down.

"Not exactly," he said, peering warily over the top of the wagon in search of pursuit.

The echo of pounding feet came faintly, then disappeared, and everything was quiet, save for the patter of rain on the boxes above us.

"They've gone past. We'd best stay here a bit, to make sure, though." He lifted down a crate for me to sit on, procured another for himself, and sat down sighing, pushing the loose hair out of his face with one hand.

He gave me a lopsided smile. "I'm sorry, Sassenach. I didna think it would be quite so …"

"Eventful?" I finished for him. I smiled back and pulled out a handkerchief to wipe a drop of moisture from the end of my nose. "It's all right." I glanced at the large barrel, where stirrings and rustlings indicated that Mr. Willoughby was returning to a more or less conscious state. "Er … how do you know about the feet?"

"He told me; he's a taste for the drink, ye ken," he explained, with a glance at the barrel where his colleague lay concealed. "And when he's taken a drop too much, he starts talkin' about women's feet, and all the horrible things he wants to do wi' them."

"What sort of horrible things can you do with a foot?" I was fascinated. "Surely the possibilities are limited."

“No, they aren’t,” Jamie said grimly. “But it isna something I want to be talking about in the public street.”

A faint singsong came from the depths of the barrel behind us. It was hard to tell, amid the natural inflections of the language, but I thought Mr. Willoughby was asking a question of some sort.

“Shut up, ye wee poutworm,” Jamie said rudely. “Another word, and I’ll walk on your damn face myself; see how ye like that.” There was a high-pitched giggle, and the barrel fell silent.

“He wants someone to walk on his face?” I asked.

“Aye. You,” Jamie said briefly. He shrugged apologetically, and his cheeks flushed a deeper red. “I hadna time to tell him who ye were.”

“Does he speak English?”

“Oh, aye, in a way, but not many people understand him when he does. I mostly talk to him in Chinee.”

I stared at him. “You speak Chinese?”

He shrugged, tilting his head with a faint smile. “Well, I speak Chinee about as well as Mr. Willoughby speaks English, but then, he hasna got all that much choice in who he talks to, so he puts up wi’ me.”

My heart showed signs of returning to normal, and I leaned back against the wagon bed, my hood farther forward against the drizzle.

“Where on earth did he get a name like Willoughby?” I asked. While I was curious about the Chinese, I was even more curious about what a respectable Edinburgh printer was doing with one, but I felt a certain hesitance in prying into Jamie’s life. Freshly returned from the supposed dead—or its equivalent—I could hardly demand to know all the details of his life on the spot.

Jamie rubbed a hand across his nose. “Aye, well. It’s only that his real name’s Yi Tien Cho. He says it means ‘Leans against heaven.’ ”

“Too hard for the local Scots to pronounce?” Knowing the insular nature of most Scots, I wasn’t surprised that they were disinclined to venture into strange linguistic waters. Jamie, with his gift for tongues, was a genetic anomaly.

He smiled, teeth a white gleam in the gathering darkness. “Well, it’s no that, so much. It’s only, if ye say his name just a wee bit off, like, it sounds verra much like a coarse word in Gaelic. I thought Willoughby would maybe do better."

"I see." I thought perhaps under the circumstances, I shouldn't ask just what the indelicate Gaelic word was. I glanced over my shoulder, but the coast seemed clear.

Jamie caught the gesture and rose, nodding. "Aye, we can go now; the lads will ha' gone back to the tavern by now."

"Won't we have to pass by The World's End on the way back to the printshop?" I asked dubiously. "Or is there a back way?" It was full dark by now, and the thought of stumbling through the middens and muddy back passages of Edinburgh was unappealing.

"Ah … no. We willna be going to the printshop." I couldn't see his face, but there seemed a certain reserve in his manner. Perhaps he had a residence somewhere else in the city? I felt a certain hollowness at the prospect; the room above the printshop was very clearly a monk's cell; but perhaps he had an entire house somewhere else—with a family in it? There had been no time for any but the most essential exchange of information at the printshop. I had no way of knowing what he had done over the last twenty years, or what he might now be doing.

Still, he had plainly been glad—to say the least—to see me, and the air of frowning consideration he now bore might well have to do with his inebriated associate, rather than with me.

He bent over the barrel, saying something in Scots-accented Chinese. This was one of the odder sounds I had ever heard; rather like the squeaks of a bagpipe tuning up, I thought, vastly entertained by the performance.

Whatever he'd said, Mr. Willoughby replied to it volubly, interrupting himself with giggles and snorts. At last, the little Chinese climbed out of the barrel, his diminutive figure silhouetted by the light of a distant lantern in the alleyway. He sprang down with fair agility and promptly prostrated himself on the ground before me.

Bearing in mind what Jamie had told me about the feet, I took a quick step back, but Jamie laid a reassuring hand on my arm.

“Nay, it’s all right, Sassenach,” he said. “He’s only makin’ amends for his disrespect to ye earlier.”

“Oh. Well.” I looked dubiously at Mr. Willoughby, who was gabbling something to the ground under his face. At a loss for the proper etiquette, I stooped down and patted him on the head. Evidently that was all right, for he leapt to his feet and bowed to me several times, until Jamie told him impatiently to stop, and we made our way back to the Royal Mile.

The building Jamie led us to was discreetly hidden down a small close just above the Kirk of the Canongate, perhaps a quarter-mile above Holyrood Palace. I saw the lanterns mounted by the gates of the palace below, and shivered slightly at the sight. We had lived with Charles Stuart in the palace for nearly five weeks, in the early, victorious phase of his short career. Jamie’s uncle, Colum MacKenzie, had died there.

The door opened to Jamie’s knock, and all thoughts of the past vanished. The woman who stood peering out at us, candle in hand, was petite, dark-haired and elegant. Seeing Jamie, she drew him in with a glad cry, and kissed his cheek in greeting. My insides squeezed tight as a fist, but then relaxed again, as I heard him greet her as “Madame Jeanne.” Not what one would call a wife—nor yet, I hoped, a mistress.

Still, there was something about the woman that made me uneasy. She was clearly French, though she spoke English well—not so odd; Edinburgh was a seaport, and a fairly cosmopolitan city. She was dressed soberly, but richly, in heavy silk cut with a flair, but she wore a good deal more rouge and powder than the average Scotswoman. What disturbed me was the way she was looking at me—frowning, with a palpable air of distaste.

“Monsieur Fraser,” she said, touching Jamie on the shoulder with a possessive air that I didn’t like at all, “if I might have a word in private with you?”

Jamie, handing his cloak to the maid who came to fetch it, took a quick look at me, and read the situation at once.

“Of course, Madame Jeanne,” he said courteously, reaching out a hand to draw me forward. “But first—allow me to introduce my wife, Madame Fraser."

My heart stopped beating for a moment, then resumed, with a force that I was sure was audible to everyone in the small entry hall. Jamie's eyes met mine, and he smiled, the grip of his fingers tightening on my arm.

"Your … wife?" I couldn't tell whether astonishment or horror was more pronounced on Madame Jeanne's face. "But Monsieur Fraser … you bring her *here*? I thought … a woman … well enough, but to insult our own *jeune filles* is not good … but then … a *wife*…" Her mouth hung open unbecomingly, displaying several decayed molars. Then she shook herself suddenly back into an attitude of flustered poise, and inclined her head to me with an attempt at graciousness. "*Bonsoir* … Madame."

"Likewise, I'm sure," I said politely.

"Is my room ready, Madame?" Jamie said. Without waiting for an answer, he turned toward the stair, taking me with him. "We shall be spending the night."

He glanced back at Mr. Willoughby, who had come in with us. He had sat down at once on the floor, where he sat dripping rain, a dreamy expression on his small, flat face.

"Er …?" Jamie made a small questioning motion toward Mr. Willoughby, his eyebrows raised at Madame Jeanne. She stared at the little Chinese for a moment as though wondering where he had come from, then, returned to herself, clapped her hands briskly for the maid.

"See if Mademoiselle Josie is at liberty, if you please, Pauline," she said. "And then fetch up hot water and fresh towels for Monsieur Fraser and his … wife." She spoke the word with a sort of stunned amazement, as though she still didn't quite believe it.

"Oh, and one more thing, if you would be so kind, Madame?" Jamie leaned over the banister, smiling down at her. "My wife will require a fresh gown; she has had an unfortunate accident to her wardrobe. If you could provide something suitable by morning? Thank you, Madame Jeanne. *Bonsoir*!"

I didn't speak, as I followed him up four flights of winding stairs to the top of the house. I was much too busy thinking, my mind in a whirl. “Pimpmaster,” the lad in the pub had called him. But surely that was only an epithet—such a thing was absolutely impossible. For the Jamie Fraser I had known, it was impossible, I corrected myself, looking up at the broad shoulders under the dark gray serge coat. But for this man?

I didn’t know quite what I had been expecting, but the room was quite ordinary, small and clean—though that was extraordinary, come to think of it—furnished with a stool, a simple bed and chest of drawers, upon which stood a basin and ewer and a clay candlestick with a beeswax candle, which Jamie lighted from the taper he had carried up.

He shucked off his wet coat and draped it carelessly on the stool, then sat down on the bed to remove his wet shoes.

“God,” he said, “I’m starving. I hope the cook’s not gone to bed yet.”

“Jamie …” I said.

“Take off your cloak, Sassenach,” he said, noticing me still standing against the door. “You’re soaked.”

“Yes. Well … yes.” I swallowed, then went on. “There’s just … er … Jamie, why have you got a regular room in a brothel?” I burst out.

He rubbed his chin, looking mildly embarrassed. “I’m sorry, Sassenach,” he said. “I know it wasna right to bring ye here, but it was the only place I could think of where we might get your dress mended at short notice, besides finding a hot supper. And then I had to put Mr. Willoughby where he wouldna get in more trouble, and as we had to come here anyway … well”—he glanced at the bed—“it’s a good deal more comfortable than my cot at the printshop. But perhaps it was a poor idea. We can leave, if ye feel it’s not—”

“I don’t mind about that,” I interrupted. “The question is—why have you got a room in a brothel? Are you such a good customer that—”

“A customer?” He stared up at me, eyebrows raised. “Here? God, Sassenach, what d’ye think I am?”

“Damned if I know,” I said. “That’s why I’m asking. Are you going to answer my question?”

He stared at his stockinged feet for a moment, wiggling his toes on the floorboard. At last he looked up at me, and answered calmly, "I suppose so. I'm not a customer of Jeanne's, but she's a customer of mine—and a good one. She keeps a room for me because I'm often abroad late on business, and I'd as soon have a place I can come to where I can have food and a bed at any hour, and privacy. The room is part of my arrangement with her."

I had been holding my breath. Now I let out about half of it. "All right," I said. "Then I suppose the next question is, what business has the owner of a brothel got with a printer?" The absurd thought that perhaps he printed advertising circulars for Madame Jeanne flitted through my brain, to be instantly dismissed.

"Well," he said slowly. "No. I dinna think that's the question."

"It's not?"

"No." With one fluid move, he was off the bed and standing in front of me, close enough for me to have to look up into his face. I had a sudden urge to take a step backward, but didn't, largely because there wasn't room.

"The question is, Sassenach, why have ye come back?" he said softly.

"That's a hell of a question to ask me!" My palms pressed flat against the rough wood of the door. "Why do you *think* I came back, damn you?"

"I dinna ken." The soft Scottish voice was cool, but even in the dim light, I could see the pulse throbbing in the open throat of his shirt.

"Did ye come to be my wife again? Or only to bring me word of my daughter?" As though he sensed that his nearness unnerved me, he turned away suddenly, moving toward the window, where the shutters creaked in the wind.

"You are the mother of my child—for that alone, I owe ye my soul—for the knowledge that my life hasna been in vain—that my child is safe." He turned again to face me, blue eyes intent.

"But it has been a time, Sassenach, since you and I were one. You'll have had your life—then—and I have had mine here. You'll know nothing of what I've done, or been. Did ye come now because ye wanted to—or because ye felt ye must?"

My throat felt tight, but I met his eyes.

"I came now because before … I thought you were dead. I thought you'd died at Culloden."

His eyes dropped to the windowsill, where he picked at a splinter.

"Aye, I see," he said softly. "Well … I meant to be dead." He smiled, without humor, eyes intent on the splinter. "I tried hard enough." He looked up at me again.

"How did ye find out I hadna died? Or where I was, come to that?"

"I had help. A young historian named Roger Wakefield found the records; he tracked you to Edinburgh. And when I saw 'A. Malcolm,' I knew … I thought … it might be you," I ended lamely. Time enough for the details later.

"Aye, I see. And then ye came. But still … why?"

I stared at him without speaking for a moment. As though he felt the need of air, or perhaps only for something to do, he fumbled with the latch of the shutters and thrust them halfway open, flooding the room with the sound of rushing water, and the cold, fresh smell of rain.

"Are you trying to tell me you don't want me to stay?" I said, finally. "Because if so … I mean, I know you'll have a life now … maybe you have … other ties …" With unnaturally acute senses, I could hear the small sounds of activity throughout the house below, even above the rush of the storm, and the pounding of my own heart. My palms were damp, and I wiped them surreptitiously against my skirt.

He turned from the window to stare at me.

"Christ!" he said. "Not want ye?" His face was pale now, and his eyes unnaturally bright.

"I have burned for you for twenty years, Sassenach," he said softly. "Do ye not know that? Jesus!" The breeze stirred the loose wisps of hair around his face, and he brushed them back impatiently.

"But I'm no the man ye knew, twenty years past, am I?" He turned away, with a gesture of frustration. "We know each other now less than we did when we wed."

"Do you want me to go?" The blood was pounding thickly in my ears.

"No!" He swung quickly toward me, and gripped my shoulder tightly, making me pull back involuntarily. "No," he said, more quietly. "I dinna want ye to go. I told ye so, and I meant it. But … I must know." He bent his head toward me, his face alive with troubled question.

"Do ye want me?" he whispered. "Sassenach, will ye take me—and risk the man that I am, for the sake of the man ye knew?"

I felt a great wave of relief, mingled with fear. It ran from his hand on my shoulder to the tips of my toes, weakening my joints.

"It's a lot too late to ask that," I said, and reached to touch his cheek, where the rough beard was starting to show. It was soft under my fingers, like stiff plush. "Because I've already risked everything I had. But whoever you are now, Jamie Fraser—yes. Yes, I do want you."

The light of the candle flame glowed blue in his eyes, as he held out his hands to me, and I stepped wordless into his embrace. I rested my face against his chest, marveling at the feel of him in my arms; so big, so solid and warm. Real, after the years of longing for a ghost I could not touch.

Disentangling himself after a moment, he looked down at me, and touched my cheek, very gently. He smiled slightly.

"You've the devil's own courage, aye? But then, ye always did."

I tried to smile at him, but my lips trembled.

"What about you? How do you know what *I'm* like? You don't know what I've been doing for the last twenty years, either. I might be a horrible person, for all you know!"

The smile on his lips moved into his eyes, lighting them with humor. "I suppose ye might, at that. But, d'ye know, Sassenach—I dinna think I care?"

I stood looking at him for another minute, then heaved a deep sigh that popped a few more stitches in my gown.

"Neither do I."

It seemed absurd to be shy with him, but shy I was. The adventures of the evening, and his words to me, had opened up the chasm of reality—those twenty unshared years that gaped between us, and the unknown future that lay beyond. Now we had come to the place where we would begin to know each other again, and discover whether we were in fact the same two who had once existed as one flesh—and whether we might be one again.

A knock at the door broke the tension. It was a small servingmaid, with a tray of supper. She bobbed shyly to me, smiled at Jamie, and laid both supper—cold meat, hot broth, and warm oatbread with butter—and the fire with a quick and practiced hand, then left us with a murmured "Good e'en to ye."

We ate slowly, talking carefully only of neutral things; I told him how I had made my way from Craigh na Dun to Inverness, and made him laugh with stories of Mr. Graham and Master Georgie. He in turn told me about Mr. Willoughby; how he had found the little Chinese, half-starved and dead drunk, lying behind a row of casks on the docks at Burntisland, one of the shipping ports near Edinburgh.

We said nothing much of ourselves, but as we ate, I became increasingly conscious of his body, watching his fine, long hands as he poured wine and cut meat, seeing the twist of his powerful torso under his shirt, and the graceful line of neck and shoulder as he stooped to retrieve a fallen napkin. Once or twice, I thought I saw his gaze linger on me in the same way—a sort of hesitant avidity—but he quickly glanced away each time, hooding his eyes so that I could not tell what he saw or felt.

As the supper concluded, the same thought was uppermost in both our minds. It could scarcely be otherwise, considering the place in which we found ourselves. A tremor of mingled fear and anticipation shot through me.

At last, he drained his wineglass, set it down, and met my eyes directly.

"Will ye …" He stopped, the flush deepening on his features, but met my eyes, swallowed once, and went on. "Will ye come to bed wi' me, then? I mean," he hurried on, "it's cold, and we're both damp, and—"

"And there aren't any chairs," I finished for him. "All right." I pulled my hand loose from his, and turned toward the bed, feeling a queer mix of excitement and hesitance that made my breath come short.

He pulled off his breeches and stockings quickly, then glanced at me.

"I'm sorry, Sassenach; I should have thought ye'd need help wi' your laces."

So he didn't undress women often, I thought, before I could stop myself, and my lips curved in a smile at the thought.

"Well, it's not laces," I murmured, "but if you'd give a hand in the back there …" I laid aside my cloak, and turned my back to him, lifting my hair to expose the neck of the dress.

There was a puzzled silence. Then I felt a finger sliding slowly down the groove of my backbone.

"What's that?" he said, sounding startled.

"It's called a zipper," I said, smiling, though he couldn't see me. "See the little tab at the top? Just take hold of that, and pull it straight down."

The zipper teeth parted with a muted ripping noise, and the remnants of Jessica Gutenburg sagged free. I pulled my arms out of the sleeves and let the dress drop heavily around my feet, turning to face Jamie before I lost my nerve.

He jerked back, startled by this sudden chrysalis-shedding. Then he blinked, and stared at me.

I stood in front of him in nothing but my shoes and gartered rose-silk stockings. I had an overwhelming urge to snatch the dress back up, but I resisted it. I stiffened my spine, raised my chin, and waited.

He didn't say a word. His eyes gleamed in the candlelight as he moved his head slightly, but he still had that trick of hiding all his thoughts behind an inscrutable mask.

"Will you bloody say something?" I demanded at last, in a voice that shook only a little.

His mouth opened, but no words came out. He shook his head slowly from side to side.

"Jesus," he whispered at last. "Claire … you are the most beautiful woman I have ever seen."

"You," I said with conviction, "are losing your eyesight. It's probably glaucoma; you're too young for cataracts."

He laughed at that, a little unsteadily, and then I saw that he was in fact blinded—his eyes shone with moisture, even as he smiled. He blinked hard, and held out his hand.

"I," he said, with equal conviction, "ha' got eyes like a hawk, and always did. Come here to me."

A little reluctantly, I took his hand, and stepped out of the inadequate shelter of the remains of my dress. He drew me gently in, to stand between his knees as he sat on the bed. Then he kissed me softly, once on each breast, and laid his head between them, his breath coming warm on my bare skin.

"Your breast is like ivory," he said softly, the word almost "breest" in the Highland Scots that always grew broad when he was truly moved. His hand rose to cup one breast, his fingers tanned into darkness against my own pale glow.

"Only to see them, sae full and sae round—Christ, I could lay my head here forever. But to touch ye, my Sassenach … you wi' your skin like white velvet, and the sweet long lines of your body …" He paused, and I could feel the working of his throat muscles as he swallowed, his hand moving slowly down the curving slope of waist and hip, the swell and taper of buttock and thigh.

"Dear God," he said, still softly. "I couldna look at ye, Sassenach, and keep my hands from you, nor have ye near me, and not want ye." He lifted his head then, and planted a kiss over my heart, then let his hand float down the gentle curve of my belly, lightly tracing the small marks left there by Brianna's birth.

"You … really don't mind?" I said hesitantly, brushing my own fingers over my stomach.

He smiled up at me with something half-rueful in his expression. He hesitated for a moment, then drew up the hem of his shirt.

"Do you?" he asked.

The scar ran from midthigh nearly to his groin, an eight-inch length of twisted, whitish tissue. I couldn't repress a gasp at its appearance, and dropped to my knees beside him.

I laid my cheek on his thigh, holding tight to his leg, as though I would keep him now—as I had not been able to keep him then. I could feel the slow, deep pulse of the blood through his femoral artery under my fingers—a bare inch away from the ugly gully of that twisting scar.

"It doesna fright ye, nor sicken ye, Sassenach?" he asked, laying a hand on my hair. I lifted my head and stared up at him.

"Of course not!"

"Aye, well." He reached to touch my stomach, his eyes holding mine. "And if ye bear the scars of your own battles, Sassenach," he said softly, "they dinna trouble me, either."

He lifted me to the bed beside him then, and leaned to kiss me. I kicked off my shoes, and curled my legs up, feeling the warmth of him through his shirt. My hands found the button at the throat, fumbling to open it.

"I want to see you."

"Well, it's no much to see, Sassenach," he said, with an uncertain laugh. "But whatever it is, it's yours—if ye want it."

He pulled the shirt over his head and tossed it on the floor, then leaned back on the palms of his hands, displaying his body.

I didn't know quite what I had been expecting. In fact, the sight of his naked body took my breath away. He was still tall, of course, and beautifully made, the long bones of his body sleek with muscle, elegant with strength. He glowed in the candlelight, as though the light came from within him.

He had changed, of course, but the change was subtle; as though he had been put into an oven and baked to a hard finish. He looked as though both muscle and skin had drawn in just a bit, grown closer to the bone, so he was more tightly knit; he had never seemed gawky, but the last hint of boyish looseness had vanished.

His skin had darkened slightly, to a pale gold, burned to bronze on face and throat, paling down the length of his body to a pure white, tinged with blue veins, in the hollow of his thighs. His pubic hair stood out in a ferocious auburn bush, and it was quite obvious that he had not been lying; he did want me, and very badly.

My eyes met his, and his mouth quirked suddenly.

"I did say once I would be honest with ye, Sassenach."

I laughed, feeling tears sting my eyes at the same time, a rush of confused emotion surging up in me.

"So did I." I reached toward him, hesitant, and he took my hand. The strength and warmth of it were startling, and I jerked slightly. Then I tightened my grasp, and he rose to his feet, facing me.

We stood still then, awkwardly hesitating. We were intensely aware of each other—how could we not be? It was quite a small room, and the available atmosphere was completely filled with a charge like static electricity, almost strong enough to be visible. I had a feeling of empty-bellied terror, like the sort you get at the top of a roller coaster.

"Are you as scared as I am?" I finally said, sounding hoarse to my own ears.

He looked me over carefully, and raised one eyebrow.

"I dinna think I can be," he said. "You're covered wi' gooseflesh. Are ye scairt, Sassenach, or only cold?"

"Both," I said, and he laughed.

"Get in, then," he said. He released my hand and bent to turn back the quilt.

I didn't stop shaking when he slid under the quilt beside me, though the heat of his body was a physical shock.

"God, you're not cold!" I blurted. I turned toward him, and the warmth of him shimmered against my skin from head to toes. Instinctively drawn, I pressed close against him, shivering. I could feel my nipples tight and hard against his chest, and the sudden shock of his naked skin against my own.

He laughed a little uncertainly. "No, I'm not. I suppose I must be afraid, aye?" His arms came around me, gently, and I touched his chest, feeling hundreds of tiny goose bumps spring up under my fingertips, among the ruddy curling hairs.

"When we were afraid of each other before," I whispered, "on our wedding night—you held my hands. You said it would be easier if we touched."

He made a small sound as my fingertip found his nipple.

"Aye, I did," he said, sounding breathless. "Lord, touch me like that again." His hands tightened suddenly, holding me against him.

"Touch me," he said again softly, "and let me touch you, my Sassenach." His hand cupped me, stroking, touching, and my breast lay taut and heavy in his palm. I went on trembling, but now he was doing it, too.

"When we wed," he whispered, his breath warm against my cheek, "and I saw ye there, so bonny in your white dress—I couldna think of anything but when we'd be alone, and I could undo your laces and have ye naked, next to me in the bed."

"Do you want me now?" I whispered, and kissed the sunburned flesh in the hollow above his collarbone. His skin was faintly salty to the taste, and his hair smelled of woodsmoke and pungent maleness.

He didn't answer, but moved abruptly, so I felt the hardness of him, stiff against my belly.

It was terror as much as desire that pressed me close against him. I wanted him, all right; my breasts ached and my belly was tight with it, the unaccustomed rush of arousal slippery between my legs, opening me for him. But as strong as lust, was the desire simply to be taken, to have him master me, quell my doubts in a moment of rough usage, take me hard and swiftly enough to make me forget myself.

I could feel the urge to do it tremble in the hands that cupped my buttocks, in the involuntary jerk of his hips, brought up short as he stopped himself.

Do it, I thought, in an agony of apprehension. For God's sake, do it now and don't be gentle!

I couldn't say it. I saw the need of it on his face, but he couldn't say it, either; it was both too soon and too late for such words between us.

But we had shared another language, and my body still recalled it. I pressed my hips against him sharply, grasping his, the curves of his buttocks clenched hard under my hands. I turned my face upward, urgent to be kissed, at the same moment that he bent abruptly to kiss me.

My nose hit his forehead with a sickening crunch. My eyes watered profusely as I rolled away from him, clutching my face.

"Ow!"

"Christ, have I hurt ye, Claire?" Blinking away the tears, I could see his face, hovering anxiously over me.

"No," I said stupidly. "My nose is broken, though, I think."

"No, it isn't," he said, gently feeling the bridge of my nose. "When ye break your nose, it makes a nasty crunching sound, and ye bleed like a pig. It's all right."

I felt gingerly beneath my nostrils, but he was right; I wasn't bleeding. The pain had receded quickly, too. As I realized that, I also realized that he was lying on me, my legs sprawled wide beneath him, his cock just touching me, no more than a hairsbreadth from the moment of decision.

I saw the realization dawn in his eyes as well. Neither of us moved, barely breathing. Then his chest swelled as he took a deep breath, reached and took both my wrists in one hand. He pulled them up, over my head, and held me there, my body arched taut and helpless under him.

"Give me your mouth, Sassenach," he said softly, and bent to me. His head blotted out the candlelight, and I saw nothing but a dim glow and the darkness of his flesh as his mouth touched mine. Gently, brushing, then pressing, warm, and I opened to him with a little gasp, his tongue seeking mine.

I bit his lip, and he drew back a little, startled.

"Jamie," I said against his lips, my own breath warm between us. "Jamie!" That was all I could say, but my hips jerked against him, and jerked again, urging violence. I turned my head and fastened my teeth in the flesh of his shoulder.

He made a small sound deep in his throat and came into me hard. I was tight as any virgin and cried out, arching under him.

"Don't stop!" I said. "For God's sake, don't stop!"

His body heard me and answered in the same language, his grasp of my wrists tightening as he plunged hard into me, the force of it reaching my womb with each stroke.

Then he let go of my wrists and half-fell on me, the weight of him pinning me to the bed as he reached under, holding my hips hard, keeping me immobile.

I whimpered and writhed against him, and he bit my neck.

"Be still," he said in my ear. I was still, only because I couldn't move. We lay pressed tight together, shuddering. I could feel the pounding against my ribs, but didn't know whether it was my heart, or his.

Then he moved in me, very slightly, a question of the flesh. It was enough; I convulsed in answer, held helpless under him, and felt the spasms of my release stroke him, stroke him, seize and release him, urging him to join me.

He reared up on both hands, back arched and head thrown back, eyes closed and breathing hard. Then very slowly, he bent his head forward and opened his eyes. He looked down at me with unutterable tenderness, and the candlelight gleamed briefly on the wetness on his cheek, maybe sweat or maybe tears.

"Oh, Claire," he whispered. "Oh, God, Claire."

And his release began, deep inside me, without his moving, shivering through his body so that his arms trembled, the ruddy hairs quivering in the dim light, and he dropped his head with a sound like a sob, his hair hiding his face as he spilled himself, each jerk and pulse of his flesh between my legs rousing an echo in my own.

When it was over, he held himself over me, still as stone for a long moment. Then, very gently, he lowered himself, pressed his head against mine, and lay as if dead.

* * *

I stirred at last from a deep, contented stupor, lifting my hand to lay it over the spot where his pulse beat slow and strong, just at the base of his breastbone.

"It's like bicycle riding, I expect," I said. My head rested peacefully in the curve of his shoulder, my hand idly playing with the red-gold curls that sprang up in thickets across his chest. "Did you know you've got lots more hairs on your chest than you used to?"

"No," he said drowsily, "I dinna usually count them. Have byesickles got lots of hair, then?"

It caught me by surprise, and I laughed.

"No," I said. "I just meant that we seemed to recall what to do all right."

Jamie opened one eye and looked down at me consideringly. "It would take a real daftie to forget *that,* Sassenach," he said. "I may be lacking practice, but I havena lost all my faculties yet."

We were still for a long time, aware of each other's breathing, sensitive to each small twitch and shifting of position. We fitted well together, my head curled into the hollow of his shoulder, the territory of his body warm under my hand, both strange and familiar, awaiting rediscovery.

The building was a solid one, and the sound of the storm outside drowned most noises from within, but now and then the sounds of feet or voices were dimly audible below us; a low, masculine laugh, or the higher voice of a woman, raised in professional flirtation.

Hearing it, Jamie stirred a little uncomfortably.

"I should maybe have taken ye to a tavern," he said. "It's only—"

"It's all right," I assured him. "Though I must say, of all the places I'd imagined being with you again, I somehow never thought of a brothel." I hesitated, not wanting to pry, but curiosity got the best of me. "You … er … don't *own* this place, do you, Jamie?"

He pulled back a little, staring down at me.

"Me? God in heaven, Sassenach, what d'ye think I am?"

"Well, I don't know, do I?" I pointed out, with some asperity. "The first thing you do when I find you is faint, and as soon as I've got you back on your feet, you get me assaulted in a pub and chased through Edinburgh in company with a deviant Chinese, ending up in a brothel—whose madam seems to be on awfully familiar terms with you, I might add." The tips of his ears had gone pink, and he seemed to be struggling between laughter and indignation.

"You then take off your clothes, announce that you're a terrible person with a depraved past, and take me to bed. What did you *expect* me to think?”

Laughter won out.

“Well, I’m no a saint, Sassenach,” he said. “But I’m no a pimp, either.”

“Glad to hear it,” I said. There was a momentary pause, and then I said, “Do you mean to tell me what you *are,* or shall I go on running down the disreputable possibilities until I come close?”

“Oh, aye?” he said, entertained by this suggestion. “What’s your best guess?”

I looked him over carefully. He lay at ease amid the tumbled sheets, one arm behind his head, grinning at me.

“Well, I’d bet my shift you’re not a printer,” I said.

The grin widened.

“Why not?”

I poked him rudely in the ribs. “You’re much too fit. Most men in their forties have begun to go soft round the middle, and you haven’t a spare ounce on you.”

“That’s mostly because I havena got anyone to cook for me,” he said ruefully. “If you ate in taverns all the time, ye wouldna be fat, either. Luckily, it looks as though ye eat regularly.” He patted my bottom familiarly, and then ducked, laughing, as I slapped at his hand.

“Don’t try to distract me,” I said, resuming my dignity. “At any rate, you didn’t get muscles like that slaving over a printing press.”

“Ever tried to work one, Sassenach?” He raised a derisive eyebrow.

“No.” I furrowed my brow in thought. “I don’t suppose you’ve taken up highway robbery?”

“No,” he said, the grin widening. “Guess again.”

“Embezzlement.”

“No.”

“Well, likely not kidnapping for ransom,” I said, and began to tick other possibilities off on my fingers. “Petty thievery? No. Piracy? No, you couldn’t possibly, unless you’ve got over being seasick. Usury? Hardly.” I dropped my hand and stared at him.

“You were a traitor when I last knew you, but that scarcely seems a good way of making a living.”

“Oh, I’m still a traitor,” he assured me. “I just havena been convicted lately.”

“Lately?”

“I spent several years in prison for treason, Sassenach,” he said, rather grimly. “For the Rising. But that was some time back.”

“Yes, I knew that.”

His eyes widened. “Ye knew that?”

“That and a bit more,” I said. “I’ll tell you later. But putting that all aside for the present and returning to the point at issue—what *do* you do for a living these days?”

“I’m a printer,” he said, grinning widely.

“*And* a traitor?”

“And a traitor,” he confirmed, nodding. “I’ve been arrested for sedition six times in the last two years, and had my premises seized twice, but the court wasna able to prove anything.”

“And what happens to you if they *do* prove it, one of these times?”

“Oh,” he said airily, waving his free hand in the air, “the pillory. Earnailing. Flogging. Imprisonment. Transportation. That sort of thing. Likely not hanging.”

“What a relief,” I said dryly. I felt a trifle hollow. I hadn’t even tried to imagine what his life might be like, if I found him. Now that I had, I was a little taken aback.

“I did warn ye,” he said. The teasing was gone now, and the dark blue eyes were serious and watchful.

“You did,” I said, and took a deep breath.

“Do ye want to leave now?” He spoke casually enough, but I saw his fingers clench and tighten on a fold of the quilt, so that the knuckles stood out white against the sunbronzed skin.

“No,” I said. I smiled at him, as best I could manage. “I didn’t come back just to make love with you once. I came to be with you—if you’ll have me,” I ended, a little hesitantly.

“If I’ll have you!” He let out the breath he had been holding, and sat up to face me, cross-legged on the bed. He reached out and took my hands, engulfing them between his own.

"I—canna even say what I felt when I touched you today, Sassenach, and knew ye to be real," he said. His eyes traveled over me, and I felt the heat of him, yearning, and my own heat, melting toward him. "To find you again—and then to lose ye …" He stopped, throat working as he swallowed.

I touched his face, tracing the fine, clean line of cheekbone and jaw.

"You won't lose me," I said. "Not ever again." I smiled, smoothing back the thick ruff of ruddy hair behind his ear. "Not even if I find out you've been committing bigamy and public drunkenness."

He jerked sharply at that, and I dropped my hand, startled.

"What is it?"

"Well—" he said, and stopped. He pursed his lips and glanced at me quickly. "It's just—"

"Just what? Is there something else you haven't told me?"

"Well, printing seditious pamphlets isna all that profitable," he said, in explanation.

"I don't suppose so," I said, my heart starting to speed up again at the prospect of further revelations. "What else have you been doing?"

"Well, it's just that I do a wee bit of smuggling," he said apologetically. "On the side, like."

"A *smuggler?*" I stared. "Smuggling what?"

"Well, whisky mostly, but rum now and then, and a fair bit of French wine and cambric."

"So that's it!" I said. The pieces of the puzzle all settled into place—Mr. Willoughby, the Edinburgh docks, and the riddle of our present surroundings. "That's what your connection is with this place—what you meant by saying Madame Jeanne is a customer?"

"That's it." He nodded. "It works verra well; we store the liquor in one of the cellars below when it comes in from France. Some of it we sell directly to Jeanne; some she keeps for us until we can ship it on."

"Um. And as part of the arrangements …" I said delicately, "you, er …"

The blue eyes narrowed at me.

“The answer to what you’re thinking, Sassenach, is no,” he said very firmly.

“Oh, is it?” I said, feeling extremely pleased. “Mind reader, are you? And what am I thinking?”

“You were wondering do I take out my price in trade sometimes, aye?” He lifted one brow at me.

“Well, I was,” I admitted. “Not that it’s any of my business.”

“Oh, isn’t it, then?” He raised both ruddy brows and took me by both shoulders, leaning toward me.

“Is it?” he said, a moment later. He sounded a little breathless.

“Yes,” I said, sounding equally breathless. “And you don’t—”

“I don’t. Come here.”

He wrapped his arms around me, and pulled me close. The body’s memory is different from the mind’s. When I thought, and wondered, and worried, I was clumsy and awkward, fumbling my way. Without the interference of conscious thought, my body knew him, and answered him at once in tune, as though his touch had left me moments before, and not years.

“I was more afraid this time than on our wedding night,” I murmured, my eyes fixed on the slow, strong pulsebeat in the hollow of his throat.

“Were ye, then?” His arm shifted and tightened round me. “Do I frighten ye, Sassenach?”

“No.” I put my fingers on the tiny pulse, breathing the deep musk of his effort. “It’s only … the first time … I didn’t think it would be forever. I meant to go, then.”

He snorted faintly, the sweat gleaming lightly in the small hollow in the center of his chest.

“And ye did go, and came again,” he said. “You’re here; there’s no more that matters, than that.”

I raised myself slightly to look at him. His eyes were closed, slanted and catlike, his lashes that striking color I remembered so well because I had seen it so often; deep auburn at the tips, fading to a red so pale as nearly to be blond at the roots.

"What did you think, the first time we lay together?" I asked. The dark blue eyes opened slowly, and rested on me.

"It has always been forever, for me, Sassenach," he said simply.

Sometime later, we fell asleep entwined, with the sound of the rain falling soft against the shutters, mingling with the muffled sounds of commerce below.

* * *

It was a restless night. Too tired to stay awake a moment longer, I was too happy to fall soundly asleep. Perhaps I was afraid he would vanish if I slept. Perhaps he felt the same. We lay close together, not awake, but too aware of each other to sleep deeply. I felt every small twitch of his muscles, every movement of his breathing, and knew he was likewise aware of me.

Half-dozing, we turned and moved together, always touching, in a sleepy, slow-motion ballet, learning again in silence the language of our bodies. Somewhere in the deep, quiet hours of the night, he turned to me without a word, and I to him, and we made love to each other in a slow, unspeaking tenderness that left us lying still at last, in possession of each other's secrets.

Soft as a moth flying in the dark, my hand skimmed his leg, and found the thin deep runnel of the scar. My fingers traced its invisible length and paused, with the barest of touches at its end, wordlessly asking, "How?"

His breathing changed with a sigh, and his hand lay over mine.

"Culloden," he said, the whispered word an evocation of tragedy. Death. Futility. And the terrible parting that had taken me from him.

"I'll never leave you," I whispered. "Not again."

His head turned on the pillow, his features lost in darkness, and his lips brushed mine, light as the touch of an insect's wing. He turned onto his back, shifting me next to him, his hand resting heavy on the curve of my thigh, keeping me close.

Sometime later, I felt him shift again, and turn the bedclothes back a little way. A cool draft played across my forearm; the tiny hairs prickled upright, and then flattened beneath the warmth of his touch. I opened my eyes, to find him turned on his side, absorbed in the sight of my hand. It lay still on the quilt, a carved white thing, all the bones and tendons chalked in gray as the room began its imperceptible shift from night to day.

“Draw her for me,” he whispered, head bent as he gently traced the shapes of my fingers, long and ghostly beneath the darkness of his own touch.

“What has she of you, of me? Can ye tell me? Are her hands like yours, Claire, or mine? Draw her for me, let me see her.” He laid his own hand down beside my own. It was his good hand, the fingers straight and flat-jointed, the nails clipped short, square and clean.

“Like mine,” I said. My voice was low and hoarse with waking, barely loud enough to register above the drumming of the rain outside. The house beneath was silent. I raised the fingers of my immobile hand an inch in illustration.

“She has long, slim hands like mine—but bigger than mine, broad across the backs, and a deep curve at the outside, near the wrist—like that. Like yours; she has a pulse just there, where you do.” I touched the spot where a vein crossed the curve of his radius, just where the wrist joins the hand. He was so still I could feel his heartbeat under my fingertip.

“Her nails are like yours; square, not oval like mine. But she has the crooked little finger on her right hand that I have,” I said, lifting it. “My mother had it, too; Uncle Lambert told me.” My own mother had died when I was five. I had no clear memory of her, but thought of her whenever I saw my own hand unexpectedly, caught in a moment of grace like this one. I laid the hand with the crooked finger on his, then lifted it to his face.

“She has this line,” I said softly, tracing the bold sweep from temple to cheek. “Your eyes, exactly, and those lashes and brows. A Fraser nose. Her mouth is more like mine, with a full bottom lip, but it’s wide, like yours. A pointed chin, like mine, but stronger. She’s a big girl—nearly six feet tall.” I felt his start of astonishment, and nudged him gently, knee to knee. “She has long legs, like yours, but very feminine.”

“And has she that small blue vein just there?” His hand touched my own face, thumb tender in the hollow of my temple. “And ears like tiny wings, Sassenach?"

"She always complained about her ears—said they stuck out," I said, feeling the tears sting my eyes as Brianna came suddenly to life between us.

"They're pierced. You don't mind, do you?" I said, talking fast to keep the tears at bay. "Frank did; he said it looked cheap, and she shouldn't, but she wanted to do it, and I let her, when she was sixteen. Mine were; it didn't seem right to say she couldn't when I did, and her friends all did, and I didn't—didn't want—"

"Ye were right," he said, interrupting the flow of half-hysterical words. "Ye did fine," he repeated, softly but firmly, holding me close. "Ye were a wonderful mother, I know it."

I was crying again, quite soundlessly, shaking against him. He held me gently, stroking my back and murmuring. "Ye did well," he kept saying. "Ye did right." And after a little while, I stopped crying.

"Ye gave me a child, *mo nighean donn,*" he said softly, into the cloud of my hair. "We are together for always. She is safe; and we will live forever now, you and I." He kissed me, very lightly, and laid his head upon the pillow next to me. "Brianna," he whispered, in that odd Highland way that made her name his own. He sighed deeply, and in an instant, was asleep. In another, I fell asleep myself, my last sight his wide, sweet mouth, relaxed in sleep, half-smiling.

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26

WHORE'S BRUNCH

From years of answering the twin calls of motherhood and medicine, I had developed the ability to wake from even the soundest sleep at once and completely. I woke so now, immediately aware of the worn linen sheets around me, the dripping of the eaves outside, and the warm scent of Jamie's body mingling with the cold, sweet air that breathed through the crack of the shutters above me.

Jamie himself was not in bed; without reaching out or opening my eyes, I knew that the space beside me was empty. He was close by, though. There was a sound of stealthy movement, and a faint scraping noise nearby. I turned my head on the pillow and opened my eyes.

The room was filled with a gray light that washed the color from everything, but left the pale lines of his body clear in the dimness. He stood out against the darkness of the room, solid as ivory, vivid as though he were etched upon the air. He was naked, his back turned to me as he stood in front of the chamber pot he had just pulled from its resting place beneath the washstand.

I admired the squared roundness of his buttocks, the small muscular hollow that dented each one, and their pale vulnerability. The groove of his backbone, springing in a deep, smooth curve from hips to shoulders. As he moved slightly, the light caught the faint silver shine of the scars on his back, and the breath caught in my throat.

He turned around then, face calm and faintly abstracted. He saw me watching him, and looked slightly startled.

I smiled but stayed silent, unable to think of anything to say. I kept looking at him, though, and he at me, the same smile upon his lips. Without speaking, he moved toward me and sat on the bed, the mattress shifting under his weight. He laid his hand open on the quilt, and I put my own into it without hesitation.

"Sleep well?" I asked idiotically.

A grin broadened across his face. "No," he said. "Did you?"

"No." I could feel the heat of him, even at this distance, in spite of the chilly room. "Aren't you cold?"

"No."

We fell quiet again, but could not take our eyes away from each other. I looked him over carefully in the strengthening light, comparing memory to reality. A narrow blade of early sun knifed through the shutters' crack, lighting a lock of hair like polished bronze, gilding the curve of his shoulder, the smooth flat slope of his belly. He seemed slightly larger than I had remembered, and one hell of a lot more immediate.

"You're bigger than I remembered," I ventured. He tilted his head, looking down at me in amusement.

"You're a wee bit smaller, I think."

His hand engulfed mine, fingers delicately circling the bones of my wrist. My mouth was dry; I swallowed and licked my lips.

"A long time ago, you asked me if I knew what it was between us," I said.

His eyes rested on mine, so dark a blue as to be nearly black in a light like this.

"I remember," he said softly. His fingers tightened briefly on mine. "What it is—when I touch you; when ye lie wi' me."

"I said I didn't know."

"I didna ken either." The smile had faded a bit, but was still there, lurking in the corners of his mouth.

"I still don't," I said. "But—" and stopped to clear my throat.

"But it's still there," he finished for me, and the smile moved from his lips, lighting his eyes. "Aye?"

It was. I was still as aware of him as I might have been of a lighted stick of dynamite in my immediate vicinity, but the feeling between us had changed. We had fallen asleep as one flesh, linked by the love of the child we had made, and had waked as two people —bound by something different.

"Yes. Is it—I mean, it's not just because of Brianna, do you think?"

The pressure on my fingers increased.

"Do I want ye because you're the mother of my child?" He raised one ruddy eyebrow in incredulity. "Well, no. Not that I'm no grateful," he added hastily. "But—no." He bent his head to look down at me intently, and the sun lit the narrow bridge of his nose and sparked in his lashes.

"No," he said. "I think I could watch ye for hours, Sassenach, to see how you have changed, or how ye're the same. Just to see a wee thing, like the curve of your chin"—he touched my jaw gently, letting his hand slide up to cup my head, thumb stroking my earlobe —"or your ears, and the bittie holes for your earbobs. Those are all the same, just as they were. Your hair—I called ye *mo nighean donn*, d'ye recall? My brown one." His voice was little more than a whisper, his fingers threading my curls between them.

"I expect that's changed a bit," I said. I hadn't gone gray, but there were paler streaks where my normal light brown had faded to a softer gold, and here and there, the glint of a single silver strand.

"Like beechwood in the rain," he said, smiling and smoothing a lock with one forefinger, "and the drops coming down from the leaves across the bark."

I reached out and stroked his thigh, touching the long scar that ran down it.

"I wish I could have been there to take care of you," I said softly. "It was the most horrible thing I ever did—leaving you, knowing … that you meant to be killed." I could hardly bear to speak the word.

"Well, I tried hard enough," he said, with a wry grimace that made me laugh, in spite of my emotion. "It wasna my fault I didna succeed." He glanced dispassionately at the long, thick scar that ran down his thigh. "Not the fault of the Sassenach wi' the bayonet, either."

I heaved myself up on one elbow, squinting at the scar. “A *bayonet* did that?”

“Aye, well. It festered, ye see,” he explained.

“I know; we found the journal of the Lord Melton who sent you home from the battlefield. He didn’t think you’d make it.” My hand tightened on his knee, as though to reassure myself that he was in fact here before me, alive.

He snorted. “Well, I damn nearly didn’t. I was all but dead when they pulled me out of the wagon at Lallybroch.” His face darkened with memory.

“God, sometimes I wake up in the night, dreaming of that wagon. It was two days’ journey, and I was fevered or chilled, or both together. I was covered wi’ hay, and the ends of it sticking in my eyes and my ears and through my shirt, and fleas hopping all through it and eating me alive, and my leg killing me at every jolt in the road. It was a verra bumpy road, too,” he added broodingly.

“It sounds horrible,” I said, feeling the word quite inadequate. He snorted briefly.

“Aye. I only stood it by imagining what I’d do to Melton if I ever met him again, to get back at him for not shooting me.”

I laughed again, and he glanced down at me, a wry smile on his lips.

“I’m not laughing because it’s funny,” I said, gulping a little. “I’m laughing because otherwise I’ll cry, and I don’t want to—not now, when it’s over.”

“Aye, I know.” He squeezed my hand.

I took a deep breath. “I—I didn’t look back. I didn’t think I could stand to find out—what happened.” I bit my lip; the admission seemed a betrayal. “It wasn’t that I tried—that I wanted—to forget,” I said, groping clumsily for words. “I couldn’t forget you; you shouldn’t think that. Not ever. But I—”

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach,” he interrupted. He patted my hand gently. “I ken what ye mean. I try not to look back myself, come to that.”

“But if I had,” I said, staring down at the smooth grain of the linen, “if I had—I might have found you sooner.”

The words hung in the air between us like an accusation, a reminder of the bitter years of loss and separation. Finally he sighed, deeply, and put a finger under my chin, lifting my face to his.

"And if ye had?" he said. "Would ye have left the lassie there without her mother? Or come to me in the time after Culloden, when I couldna care for ye, but only watch ye suffer wi' the rest, and feel the guilt of bringing ye to such a fate? Maybe see ye die of the hunger and sickness, and know I'd killed ye?" He raised one eyebrow in question, then shook his head.

"No. I told ye to go, and I told ye to forget. Shall I blame ye for doing as I said, Sassenach? No."

"But we might have had more time!" I said. "We might have—" He stopped me by the simple expedient of bending and putting his mouth on mine. It was warm and very soft, and the stubble of his face was faintly scratchy on my skin.

After a moment he released me. The light was growing, putting color in his face. His skin glowed bronze, sparked with the copper of his beard. He took a deep breath.

"Aye, we might. But to think of that—we cannot." His eyes met mine steadily, searching. "I canna look back, Sassenach, and live," he said simply. "If we have no more than last night, and this moment, it is enough."

"Not for me, it isn't!" I said, and he laughed.

"Greedy wee thing, are ye no?"

"Yes," I said. The tension broken, I returned my attention to the scar on his leg, to keep away for the moment from the painful contemplation of lost time and opportunity.

"You were telling me how you got that."

"So I was." He rocked back a little, squinting down at the thin white line down the top of his thigh.

"Well, it was Jenny—my sister, ye ken?" I did indeed remember Jenny; half her brother's size, and dark as he was blazing fair, but a match and more for him in stubbornness.

"She said she wasna going to let me die," he said, with a rueful smile. "And she didn't. My opinion didna seem to have anything to do wi’ the matter, so she didna bother to ask me.”

“That sounds like Jenny.” I felt a small glow of comfort at the thought of my sister-in-law. Jamie hadn’t been alone as I feared, then; Jenny Murray would have fought the Devil himself to save her brother—and evidently had.

“She dosed me for the fever, and put poultices on my leg to draw the poison, but nothing worked, and it only got worse. It swelled and stank, and then began to go black and rotten, so they thought they must take the leg off, if I was to live.”

He recounted this quite matter-of-factly, but I felt a little faint at the thought.

“Obviously they didn’t,” I said. “Why not?”

Jamie scratched his nose and rubbed a hand back through his hair, wiping the wild spill of it out of his eyes. “Well, that was Ian,” he said. “He wouldna let her do it. He said he kent well enough what it was like to live wi’ one leg, and while he didna mind it so much himself, he thought I wouldna like to—all things considered,” he added, with a wave of the hand and a glance at me that encompassed everything—the loss of the battle, of the war, of me, of home and livelihood—of all the things of his normal life. I thought Ian might well have been right.

“So instead Jenny made three of the tenants come to sit on me and hold me still, and then she slit my leg to the bone wi’ a kitchen knife and washed the wound wi’ boiling water,” he said casually.

“Jesus H. Christ!” I blurted, shocked into horror.

He smiled faintly at my expression. “Aye, well, it worked.”

I swallowed heavily, tasting bile. “Jesus. I’d think you’d have been a cripple for life!”

“Well, she cleansed it as best she could, and stitched it up. She said she wasna going to let me die, and she wasna going to have me be a cripple, and she wasna going to have me lie about all the day feelin’ sorry for myself, and—” He shrugged, resigned. “By the time she finished tellin’ me all the things she wouldna let me do, it seemed the only thing left to me was to get well.”

I echoed his laugh, and his smile broadened at the memory. “Once I could get up, she made Ian take me outside after dark and make me walk. Lord, we must ha' been a sight, Ian wi' his wooden leg, and me wi' my stick, limping up and down the road like a pair of lame cranes!"

I laughed again, but had to blink back tears; I could see all too well the two tall, limping figures, struggling stubbornly against darkness and pain, leaning on each other for support.

"You lived in a cave for a time, didn't you? We found the story of it."

His eyebrows went up in surprise. "A story about it? About me, ye mean?"

"You're a famous Highland legend," I told him dryly, "or you will be, at least."

"For living in a cave?" He looked half-pleased, half-embarrassed. "Well, that's a foolish thing to make a story about, aye?"

"Arranging to have yourself betrayed to the English for the price on your head was maybe a little more dramatic," I said, still more dryly. "Taking rather a risk there, weren't you?"

The end of his nose was pink, and he looked somewhat abashed.

"Well," he said awkwardly, "I didna think prison would be verra dreadful, and everything considered.…"

I spoke as calmly as I could, but I wanted to shake him, suddenly and ridiculously furious with him in retrospect.

"Prison, my arse! You knew perfectly well you might have been hanged, didn't you? And you bloody did it anyway!"

"I had to do something," he said, shrugging. "And if the English were fool enough to pay good money for my lousy carcass—well, there's nay law against takin' advantage of fools, is there?" One corner of his mouth quirked up, and I was torn between the urge to kiss him and the urge to slap him.

I did neither, but sat up in bed and began combing the tangles out of my hair with my fingers.

"I'd say it's open to question who the fool was," I said, not looking at him, "but even so, you should know that your daughter's very proud of you."

"She is?" He sounded thunderstruck, and I looked up at him, laughing despite my irritation.

"Well, of course she is. You're a bloody hero, aren't you?"

He went quite red in the face at this, and stood up, looking thoroughly disconcerted.

"Me? No!" He rubbed a hand through his hair, his habit when thinking or disturbed in his mind.

"No. I mean," he said slowly, "I wasna heroic at all about it. It was only … I couldna bear it any longer. To see them all starving, I mean, and not be able to care for them—Jenny, and Ian and the children; all the tenants and their families." He looked helplessly down at me. "I really didna care if the English hanged me or not," he said. "I didna think they would, because of what ye'd told me, but even if I'd known for sure it meant that—I would ha' done it, Sassenach, and not minded. But it wasna bravery—not at all." He threw up his hands in frustration, turning away. "There was nothing else I could do!"

"I see," I said softly, after a moment. "I understand." He was standing by the chiffonier, still naked, and at this, he turned half-round to face me.

"Do ye, then?" His face was serious.

"I know you, Jamie Fraser." I spoke with more certainty than I had felt at any time since the moment I stepped through the rock.

"Do ye, then?" he asked again, but a faint smile shadowed his mouth.

"I think so."

The smile on his lips widened, and he opened his mouth to reply. Before he could speak, though, there was a knock upon the chamber door.

I started as though I had touched a hot stove. Jamie laughed, and bent to pat my hip as he went to the door.

"I expect it's the chambermaid with our breakfast, Sassenach, not the constable. And we *are* marrit, aye?" One eyebrow rose quizzically.

"Even so, shouldn't you put something on?" I asked, as he reached for the doorknob.

He glanced down at himself.

"I shouldna think it's likely to come as a shock to anyone in this house, Sassenach. But to honor your sensibilities—" He grinned at me, and taking a linen towel from the washstand, wrapped it casually about his loins before pulling open the door.

I caught sight of a tall male figure standing in the hall, and promptly pulled the bedclothes over my head. This was a reaction of pure panic, for if it had been the Edinburgh constable or one of his minions, I could scarcely expect much protection from a couple of quilts. But then the visitor spoke, and I was glad that I was safely out of sight for the moment.

"Jamie?" The voice sounded rather startled. Despite the fact that I had not heard it in twenty years, I recognized it at once. Rolling over, I surreptitiously lifted a corner of the quilt and peeked out beneath it.

"Well, of course it's me," Jamie was saying, rather testily. "Have ye no got eyes, man?" He pulled his brother-in-law, Ian, into the room and shut the door.

"I see well enough it's you," Ian said, with a note of sharpness. "I just didna ken whether to believe my eyes!" His smooth brown hair showed threads of gray, and his face bore the lines of a good many years' hard work. But Joe Abernathy had been right; with his first words, the new vision merged with the old, and this was the Ian Murray I had known before.

"I came here because the lad at the printshop said ye'd no been there last night, and this was the address Jenny sends your letters to," he was saying. He looked round the room with wide, suspicious eyes, as though expecting something to leap out from behind the armoire. Then his gaze flicked back to his brother-in-law, who was making a perfunctory effort to secure his makeshift loincloth.

"I never thought to find ye in a kittle-hoosie, Jamie!" he said. "I wasna sure, when the … the lady answered the door downstairs, but then—"

"It's no what ye think, Ian," Jamie said shortly.

"Oh, it's not, aye? And Jenny worrying that ye'd make yourself ill, living without a woman so long!" Ian snorted. "I'll tell her she needna concern herself wi' your welfare. And where's my son, then, down the hall with another o' the harlots?"

"Your son?" Jamie's surprise was evident. "Which one?"

Ian stared at Jamie, the anger on his long, half-homely face fading into alarm.

"Ye havena got him? Wee Ian's not here?"

"Young Ian? Christ, man, d'ye think I'd bring a fourteen-year-old lad into a brothel?"

Ian opened his mouth, then shut it, and sat down on the stool.

"Tell ye the truth, Jamie, I canna say what ye'd do anymore," he said levelly. He looked up at his brother-in-law, jaw set. "Once I could. But not now."

"And what the hell d'ye mean by that?" I could see the angry flush rising in Jamie's face.

Ian glanced at the bed, and away again. The red flush didn't recede from Jamie's face, but I saw a small quiver at the corner of his mouth. He bowed elaborately to his brother-in-law.

"Your pardon, Ian, I was forgettin' my manners. Allow me to introduce ye to my companion." He stepped to the side of the bed and pulled back the quilts.

"No!" Ian cried, jumping to his feet and looking frantically at the floor, the wardrobe, anywhere but at the bed.

"What, will ye no give your regards to my wife, Ian?" Jamie said.

"Wife?" Forgetting to look away, Ian goggled at Jamie in horror. "Ye've marrit a whore?" he croaked.

"I wouldn't call it that, exactly," I said. Hearing my voice, Ian jerked his head in my direction.

"Hullo," I said, waving cheerily at him from my nest of bedclothes. "Been a long time, hasn't it?"

I'd always thought the descriptions of what people did when seeing ghosts rather exaggerated, but had been forced to revise my opinions in light of the responses I had been getting since my return to the past. Jamie had fainted dead away, and if Ian's hair was not literally standing on end, he assuredly looked as though he had been scared out of his wits.

Eyes bugging out, he opened and closed his mouth, making a small gobbling noise that seemed to entertain Jamie quite a lot.

"That'll teach ye to go about thinkin' the worst of my character," he said, with apparent satisfaction. Taking pity on his quivering brother-in-law, Jamie poured out a tot of brandy and handed him the glass. "Judge not, and ye'll no be judged, eh?"

I thought Ian was going to spill the drink on his breeches, but he managed to get the glass to his mouth and swallow.

"What—" he wheezed, eyes watering as he stared at me. "How—?"

"It's a long story," I said, with a glance at Jamie. He nodded briefly. We had had other things to think about in the last twenty-four hours besides how to explain me to people, and under the circumstances, I rather thought explanations could wait.

"I don't believe I know Young Ian. Is he missing?" I asked politely.

Ian nodded mechanically, not taking his eyes off me.

"He stole away from home last Friday week," he said, sounding rather dazed. "Left a note that he'd gone to his uncle." He took another swig of brandy, coughed and blinked several times, then wiped his eyes and sat up straighter, looking at me.

"It'll no be the first time, ye see," he said to me. He seemed to be regaining his self-confidence, seeing that I appeared to be flesh and blood, and showed no signs either of getting out of bed, or of putting my head under my arm and strolling round without it, in the accepted fashion of Highland ghosts.

Jamie sat down on the bed next to me, taking my hand in his.

"I've not seen Young Ian since I sent him home wi' Fergus six months ago," he said. He was beginning to look as worried as Ian. "You're sure he said he was coming to me?"

"Well, he hasna got any other uncles that I know of," Ian said, rather acerbically. He tossed back the rest of the brandy and set the cup down.

"Fergus?" I interrupted. "Is Fergus all right, then?" I felt a surge of joy at the mention of the French orphan whom Jamie had once hired in Paris as a pickpocket, and brought back to Scotland as a servant lad.

Distracted from his thoughts, Jamie looked down at me.

"Oh, aye, Fergus is a bonny man now. A bit changed, of course." A shadow seemed to cross his face, but it cleared as he smiled, pressing my hand. "He'll be fair daft at seein' you once more, Sassenach."

Uninterested in Fergus, Ian had risen and was pacing back and forth across the polished plank floor.

"He didna take a horse," he muttered. "So he'd have nothing anyone would rob him for." He swung round to Jamie. "How did ye come, last time ye brought the lad here? By the land round the Firth, or did ye cross by boat?"

Jamie rubbed his chin, frowning as he thought. "I didna come to Lallybroch for him. He and Fergus crossed through the Carryarrick Pass and met me just above Loch Laggan. Then we came down through Struan and Weem and … aye, now I remember. We didna want to cross the Campbell lands, so we came to the east, and crossed the Forth at Donibristle."

"D'ye think he'd do that again?" Ian asked. "If it's the only way he knows?"

Jamie shook his head doubtfully. "He might. But he kens the coast is dangerous."

Ian resumed his pacing, hands clasped behind his back. "I beat him 'til he could barely stand, let alone sit, the last time he ran off," Ian said, shaking his head. His lips were tight, and I gathered that Young Ian was perhaps rather a trial to his father. "Ye'd think the wee fool would think better o' such tricks, aye?"

Jamie snorted, but not without sympathy.

"Did a thrashing ever stop you from doing anything you'd set your mind on?"

Ian stopped his pacing and sat down on the stool again, sighing.

"No," he said frankly, "but I expect it was some relief to my father." His face cracked into a reluctant smile, as Jamie laughed.

"He'll be all right," Jamie declared confidently. He stood up and let the towel drop to the floor as he reached for his breeches. "I'll go and put about the word for him. If he's in Edinburgh, we'll hear of it by nightfall."

Ian cast a glance at me in the bed, and stood up hastily.

"I'll go wi' ye."

I thought I saw a shadow of doubt flicker across Jamie's face, but then he nodded and pulled the shirt over his head.

"All right," he said, as his head popped through the slit. He frowned at me.

"I'm afraid ye'll have to stay here, Sassenach," he said.

"I suppose I will," I said dryly. "Seeing that I haven't any clothes." The maid who brought our supper had removed my dress, and no replacement had as yet appeared.

Ian's feathery brows shot up to his hairline, but Jamie merely nodded.

"I'll tell Jeanne on the way out," he said. He frowned slightly, thinking. "It may be some time, Sassenach. There are things—well, I've business to take care of." He squeezed my hand, his expression softening as he looked at me.

"I dinna want to leave ye," he said softly. "But I must. You'll stay here until I come again?"

"Don't worry," I assured him, waving a hand at the linen towel he had just discarded. "I'm not likely to go anywhere in that."

The thud of their feet retreated down the hall and faded into the sounds of the stirring house. The brothel was rising, late and languid by the stern Scottish standards of Edinburgh. Below me I could hear the occasional slow muffled thump, the clatter of shutters thrust open nearby, a cry of "Gardyloo!" and a second later, the splash of slops flung out to land on the street far below.

Voices somewhere far down the hall, a brief inaudible exchange, and the closing of a door. The building itself seemed to stretch and sigh, with a creaking of timbers and a squeaking of stairs, and a sudden puff of coal-smelling warm air came out from the back of the cold hearth, the exhalation of a fire lit on some lower floor, sharing my chimney.

I relaxed into the pillows, feeling drowsy and heavily content. I was slightly and pleasantly sore in several unaccustomed places, and while I had been reluctant to see Jamie go, there was no denying that it was nice to be alone for a bit to mull things over.

I felt much like one who has been handed a sealed casket containing a long-lost treasure. I could feel the satisfying weight and the shape of it, and know the great joy of its possession, but still did not know exactly what was contained therein.

I was dying to know everything he had done and said and thought and been, through all the days between us. I had of course known that if he had survived Culloden, he would have a life—and knowing what I did of Jamie Fraser, it was unlikely to be a simple one. But knowing that, and being confronted with the reality of it, were two different things.

He had been fixed in my memory for so long, glowing but static, like an insect frozen in amber. And then had come Roger's brief historical sightings, like peeks through a keyhole; separate pictures like punctuations, alterations; adjustments of memory, each showing the dragonfly's wings raised or lowered at a different angle, like the single frames of a motion picture. Now time had begun to run again for us, and the dragonfly was in flight before me, flickering from place to place, so I saw little more yet than the glitter of its wings.

There were so many questions neither of us had had a chance to ask yet—what of his family at Lallybroch, his sister Jenny and her children? Obviously Ian was alive, and well, wooden leg notwithstanding—but had the rest of the family and the tenants of the estate survived the destruction of the Highlands? If they had, why was Jamie here in Edinburgh?

And if they were alive—what would we tell them about my sudden reappearance? I bit my lip, wondering whether there was *any* explanation—short of the truth—which might make sense. It might depend on what Jamie had told them when I disappeared after Culloden; there had seemed no need to concoct a reason for my vanishing at the time; it would simply be assumed that I had perished in the aftermath of the Rising, one more of the nameless corpses lying starved on the rocks or slaughtered in a leafless glen.

Well, we'd manage that when we came to it, I supposed. I was more curious just now about the extent and the danger of Jamie's less legitimate activities. Smuggling and sedition, was it? I was aware that smuggling was nearly as honorable a profession in the

Scottish Highlands as cattle-stealing had been twenty years before, and might be conducted with relatively little risk. Sedition was something else, and seemed like an occupation of dubious safety for a convicted ex-Jacobite traitor.

That, I supposed, was the reason for his assumed name—or one reason, at any rate. Disturbed and excited as I had been when we arrived at the brothel the night before, I had noticed that Madame Jeanne referred to him by his own name. So presumably he smuggled under his own identity, but carried out his publishing activities—legal and illegal—as Alex Malcolm.

I had seen, heard and felt enough, during the all too brief hours of the night, to be fairly sure that the Jamie Fraser I had known still existed. How many other men he might be now remained to be seen.

There was a tentative rap at the door, interrupting my thoughts. Breakfast, I thought, and not before time. I was ravenous.

"Come in," I called, and sat up in bed, pulling up the pillows to lean against.

The door opened very slowly, and after quite a long pause, a head poked its way through the opening, much in the manner of a snail emerging from its shell after a hailstorm.

It was topped with an ill-cut shag of dark brown hair so thick that the cropped edges stuck out like a shelf above a pair of large ears. The face beneath was long and bony; rather pleasantly homely, save for a pair of beautiful brown eyes, soft and huge as a deer's, that rested on me with a mingled expression of interest and hesitancy.

The head and I regarded each other for a moment.

"Are you Mr. Malcolm's … woman?" it asked.

"I suppose you could say so," I replied cautiously. This was obviously not the chambermaid with my breakfast. Neither was it likely to be one of the other employees of the establishment, being evidently male, though very young. He seemed vaguely familiar, though I was sure I hadn't seen him before. I pulled the sheet a bit higher over my breasts. "And who are you?" I inquired.

The head thought this over for some time, and finally answered, with equal caution, "Ian Murray."

"Ian Murray?" I shot up straight, rescuing the sheet at the last moment. "Come in here," I said peremptorily. "If you're who I think you are, why aren't you where you're supposed to be, and what are you doing here?" The face looked rather alarmed, and showed signs of withdrawal.

"Stop!" I called, and put a leg out of bed to pursue him. The big brown eyes widened at the sight of my bare limb, and he froze. "Come in, I said."

Slowly, I withdrew the leg beneath the quilts, and equally slowly, he followed it into the room.

He was tall and gangly as a fledgling stork, with perhaps nine stone spread sparsely over a six-foot frame. Now that I knew who he was, the resemblance to his father was clear. He had his mother's pale skin, though, which blushed furiously red as it occurred to him suddenly that he was standing next to a bed containing a naked woman.

"I … er … was looking for my … for Mr. Malcolm, I mean," he murmured, staring fixedly at the floorboards by his feet.

"If you mean your uncle Jamie, he's not here," I said.

"No. No, I suppose not." He seemed unable to think of anything to add to this, but remained staring at the floor, one foot twisted awkwardly to the side, as though he were about to draw it up under him, like the wading bird he so much resembled.

"Do ye ken where …" he began, lifting his eyes, then, as he caught a glimpse of me, lowered them, blushed again and fell silent.

"He's looking for you," I said. "With your father," I added. "They left here not half an hour ago."

His head snapped up on its skinny neck, goggling.

"My father?" he gasped. "My father was here? Ye know him?"

"Why, yes," I said, without thinking. "I've known Ian for quite a long time."

He might be Jamie's nephew, but he hadn't Jamie's trick of inscrutability. Everything he thought showed on his face, and I could easily trace the progression of his expressions. Raw shock at learning of his father's presence in Edinburgh, then a sort of awestruck horror at the revelation of his father's long-standing acquaintance with what appeared to be a woman of a certain occupation, and finally the beginnings of angry absorption, as the young man began an immediate revision of his opinions of his father's character.

"Er—" I said, mildly alarmed. "It isn't what you think. I mean, your father and I—it's really your uncle and I, I mean—" I was trying to figure out how to explain the situation to him without getting into even deeper waters, when he whirled on his heel and started for the door.

"Wait a minute," I said. He stopped, but didn't turn around. His well-scrubbed ears stood out like tiny wings, the morning light illuminating their delicate pinkness. "How old are you?" I asked.

He turned around to face me, with a certain painful dignity. "I'll be fifteen in three weeks," he said. The red was creeping up his cheeks again. "Dinna worry, I'm old enough to know—what sort of place this is, I mean." He jerked his head toward me in an attempt at a courtly bow.

"Meaning no offense to ye, mistress. If Uncle Jamie—I mean, I—" he groped for suitable words, failed to find any, and finally blurted, "verra pleased to meet ye, mum!" turned and bolted through the door, which shut hard enough to rattle in its frame.

I fell back against the pillows, torn between amusement and alarm. I did wonder what the elder Ian was going to say to his son when they met—and vice versa. As long as I was wondering, I wondered what had brought the younger Ian here in search of Jamie. Evidently, he knew where his uncle was likely to be found; yet judging from his diffident attitude, he had never before ventured into the brothel.

Had he extracted the information from Geordie at the printshop? That seemed unlikely. And yet, if he hadn't—then that meant he had learned of his uncle's connection with this place from some other source. And the most likely source was Jamie himself.

But in that case, I reasoned, Jamie likely already knew that his nephew was in Edinburgh, so why pretend he hadn't seen the boy? Ian was Jamie's oldest friend; they had grown up together. If whatever Jamie was up to was worth the cost of deceiving his brother-in-law, it was something serious.

I had got no further with my musings, when there came another knock on the door.

“Come in,” I said, smoothing out the quilts in anticipation of the breakfast tray to be placed thereon.

When the door opened, I had directed my attention at a spot about five feet above the floor, where I expected the chambermaid’s head to materialize. Upon the last opening of the door, I had had to adjust my vision upward a foot, to accommodate the appearance of Young Ian. This time, I was obliged to drop it.

“What in the bloody hell are you doing here?” I demanded as the diminutive figure of Mr. Willoughby entered on hands and knees. I sat up and hastily tucked my feet underneath me, pulling not only sheet but quilts well up around my shoulders.

In answer, the Chinese advanced to within a foot of the bed, then let his head fall to the floor with a loud clunk. He raised it and repeated the process with great deliberation, making a horrid sound like a melon being cleaved with an ax.

“Stop that!” I exclaimed, as he prepared to do it a third time.

“Thousand apology,” he explained, sitting up on his heels and blinking at me. He was quite a bit the worse for wear, and the dark red mark where his forehead had smacked the floor didn’t add anything to his appearance. I trusted he didn’t mean he’d been going to hit his head on the floor a thousand times, but I wasn’t sure. He obviously had the hell of a hangover; for him to have attempted it even once was impressive.

“That’s quite all right,” I said, edging cautiously back against the wall. “There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“Yes, apology,” he insisted. “Tsei-mi saying wife. Lady being most honorable First Wife, not stinking whore.”

“Thanks a lot,” I said. “Tsei-mi? You mean Jamie? Jamie Fraser?”

The little man nodded, to the obvious detriment of his head. He clutched it with both hands and closed his eyes, which promptly disappeared into the creases of his cheeks.

"Tsei-mi," he affirmed, eyes still closed. "Tsei-mi saying apology to most honored First Wife. Yi Tien Cho most humble servant." He bowed deeply, still holding onto his head. "Yi Tien Cho," he added, opening his eyes and tapping his chest to indicate that that was his name; in case I should be confusing him with any other humble servants in the vicinity.

"That's quite all right," I said. "Er, pleased to meet you."

Evidently heartened by this, he slid bonelessly onto his face, prostrating himself before me.

"Yi Tien Cho lady's servant," he said. "First Wife please to walk on humble servant, if like."

"Ha," I said coldly. "I've heard about you. Walk on you, eh? Not bloody likely!"

A slit of gleaming black eye showed, and he giggled, so irrepressibly that I couldn't help laughing myself. He sat up again, smoothing down the spikes of dirt-stiffened black hair that sprang, porcupine-like, from his skull.

"I wash First Wife's feet?" he offered, grinning widely.

"Certainly not," I said. "If you really want to do something helpful, go and tell someone to bring me breakfast. No, wait a minute," I said, changing my mind. "First, tell me where you met Jamie. If you don't mind," I added, to be polite.

He sat back on his heels, head bobbing slightly. "Docks," he said. "Two year ago. I come China, long way, no food. Hiding barrel," he explained, reaching his arms in a circle, to demonstrate his means of transportation.

"A stowaway?"

"Trade ship," he nodded. "On docks here, stealing food. Stealing brandy one night, getting stinking drunk. Very cold to sleep; die soon, but Tsei-mi find." He jabbed a thumb at his chest once more. "Tsei-mi's humble servant. Humble servant First Wife." He bowed to me, swaying alarmingly in the process, but came upright again without mishap.

"Brandy seems to be your downfall," I observed. "I'm sorry I haven't anything to give you for your head; I don't have any medicines with me at the moment."

"Oh, not worry," he assured me. "I having healthy balls."

"How nice for you," I said, trying to decide whether he was gearing up for another attempt on my feet, or merely still too drunk to distinguish basic anatomy. Or perhaps there was some connection in Chinese philosophy, between the well-being of head and testicles? Just in case, I looked round for something that might be used as a weapon, in case he showed a disposition to begin burrowing under the bedclothes.

Instead, he reached into the depths of one baggy blue-silk sleeve and with the air of a conjuror, drew out a small white silk bag. He upended this, and two balls dropped out into his palm. They were larger than marbles and smaller than baseballs; about the size, in fact, of the average testicle. A good deal harder, though, being apparently made of some kind of polished stone, greenish in color.

"Healthy balls," Mr. Willoughby explained, rolling them together in his palm. They made a pleasant clicking noise. "Streaked jade, from Canton," he said. "Best kind of healthy balls."

"Really?" I said, fascinated. "And they're medicinal—good for you, that's what you're saying?"

He nodded vigorously, then stopped abruptly with a faint moan. After a pause, he spread out his hand, and rolled the balls to and fro, keeping them in movement with a dextrous circling of his fingers.

"All body one part; hand all parts," he said. He poked a finger toward his open palm, touching delicately here and there between the smooth green spheres. "Head there, stomach there, liver there," he said. "Balls make all good."

"Well, I suppose they're as portable as Alka-Seltzer," I said. Possibly it was the reference to stomach that caused my own to emit a loud growl at this point.

"First Wife wanting food," Mr. Willoughby observed shrewdly.

"Very astute of you," I said. "Yes, I do want food. Do you suppose you could go and tell someone?"

He dumped the healthy balls back into their bag at once, and springing to his feet, bowed deeply.

"Humble servant go now," he said, and went, crashing rather heavily into the door post on his way out.

This was becoming ridiculous, I thought. I harbored substantial doubt as to whether Mr. Willoughby's visit would result in food; he'd be lucky to make it to the bottom of the stair without falling on his head, if I was any judge of his condition.

Rather than go on sitting here in the nude, receiving random deputations from the outside world, I thought it time to take steps. Rising and carefully wrapping a quilt around my body, I took a few, out into the corridor.

The upper floor seemed deserted. Aside from the room I had left, there were only two other doors up here. Glancing up, I could see unadorned rafters overhead. We were in the attic then; chances were that the other rooms here were occupied by servants, who were presumably now employed downstairs.

I could hear faint noises drifting up the stairwell. Something else drifted up, as well—the scent of frying sausage. A loud gustatory rumble informed me that my stomach hadn't missed this, and furthermore, that my innards considered the consumption of one peanut butter sandwich and one bowl of soup in one twenty-four-hour period a wholly inadequate level of nutrition.

I tucked the ends of the quilt in, sarong-fashion, just above my breasts, and picking up my trailing skirts, followed the scent of food downstairs.

The smell—and the clinking, clattering, sloshing noises of a number of people eating—were coming from a closed door on the first floor above ground level. I pushed it open, and found myself at the end of a long room equipped as a refectory.

The table was surrounded by twenty-odd women, a few gowned for day, but most of them in a state of dishabille that made my quilt modest by comparison. A woman near the end of the table caught sight of me hovering in the doorway, and beckoned, companionably sliding over to make room for me on the end of the long bench.

"You'll be the new lass, aye?" she said, looking me over with interest. "You're a wee bit older than Madame usually takes on—she likes ’em no more than five and twenty. You’re no bad at all, though,” she assured me hastily. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“Good skin and a pretty face,” observed the dark-haired lady across from us, sizing me up with the detached air of one appraising horseflesh. “And nice bubbies, what I can see.” She lifted her chin slightly, peering across the table at what could be seen of my cleavage.

“Madame doesna like us to take the kivvers off the beds,” my original acquaintance said reprovingly. “Ye should wear your shift, if ye havena something pretty to show yourself in yet.”

“Aye, be careful with the quilt,” advised the dark-haired girl, still scrutinizing me. “Madame’ll dock your wages, an’ ye get spots on the bedclothes.”

“What’s your name, my dearie?” A short, rather plump girl with a round, friendly face leaned past the dark girl’s elbow to smile at me. “Here we’re all chatterin’ at ye, and not welcomed ye proper at all. I’m Dorcas, this is Peggy”—she jerked a thumb at the dark-haired girl, then pointed across the table to the fair-haired woman beside me—“and that’s Mollie.”

“My name is Claire,” I said, smiling and hitching the quilt a bit higher in self-consciousness. I wasn’t sure how to correct their impression that I was Madame Jeanne’s newest recruit; for the moment, that seemed less important than getting some breakfast.

Apparently divining my need, the friendly Dorcas reached to the sideboard behind her, passed me a wooden plate, and shoved a large dish of sausages in my direction.

The food was well-cooked and would have been good in any case; starved as I was, it was ambrosial. A hell of a lot better than the hospital cafeteria’s breakfasts, I observed to myself, taking another ladle of fried potatoes.

“Had a rough one for your first, aye?” Millie, next to me, nodded at my bosom. Glancing down, I was mortified to see a large red patch peeking above the edge of my quilt. I couldn’t see my neck, but the direction of Millie’s interested gaze made it clear that the small tingling sensations there were evidence of further bite-marks.

“Your nose is a wee bit puffed, too,” Peggy said, frowning at me critically. She reached across the table to touch it, disregarding the fact that the gesture caused her flimsy wrap to fall open to the waist. “Slap ye, did he? If they get too rough, ye should call out, ye know; Madame doesna allow the customers to mistreat us—give a good screech and Bruno will be in there in a moment.”

“Bruno?” I said, a little faintly.

“The porter,” Dorcas explained, busily spooning eggs into her mouth. “Big as a bear—that’s why we call him Bruno. What’s his name really?” she asked the table at large, “Horace?”

“Theobald,” corrected Millie. She turned to call to a servingmaid at the end of the room, “Janie, will ye fetch in more ale? The new lassie’s had none yet!”

“Aye, Peggy’s right,” she said, turning back to me. She wasn’t at all pretty, but had a nicely shaped mouth and a pleasant expression. “If ye get a man likes to play a bit rough, that’s one thing—and don’t sic Bruno on a good customer, or there’ll be hell to pay, and you’ll do the paying. But if ye think ye might really be damaged, then just give a good skelloch. Bruno’s never far away during the night. Oh, here’s the ale,” she added, taking a big pewter mug from the servingmaid and plonking it in front of me.

“She’s no damaged,” Dorcas said, having completed her survey of the visible aspects of my person. “A bit sore between the legs, though, aye?” she said shrewdly, grinning at me.

“Ooh, look, she’s *blushing,*” said Mollie, giggling with delight. “Ooh, you *are* a fresh one, aren’t ye?”

I took a deep gulp of the ale. It was dark, rich, and extremely welcome, as much for the width of the cup rim that hid my face as for its taste.

“Never mind.” Mollie patted my arm kindly. “After breakfast, I’ll show ye where the tubs are. Ye can soak your parts in warm water, and they’ll be good as new by tonight.”

“Be sure to show her where the jars are, too,” put in Dorcas. “Sweet herbs,” she explained to me. “Put them in the water before ye sit in it. Madame likes us to smell sweet.”

“Eef ze men want to lie wiz a feesh, zey would go to ze docks; eet ees more cheap,” Peggy intoned, in what was patently meant to be an imitation of Madame Jeanne. The table erupted in giggles, which were rapidly quelled by the sudden appearance of Madame herself, who entered through a door at the end of the room.

Madame Jeanne was frowning in a worried fashion, and seemed too preoccupied to notice the smothered hilarity.

“Tsk!” murmured Mollie, seeing the proprietor. “An early customer. I hate it when they come in the middle o’ breakfast,” she grumbled. “Stop ye digesting your food proper, it does.”

“Ye needn’t worry, Mollie; it’s Claire’ll have to take him,” Peggy said, tossing her dark plait out of the way. “Newest lass takes the ones no one wants,” she informed me.

“Stick your finger up his bum,” Dorcas advised me. “That brings ’em off faster than anything. I’ll save ye a bannock for after, if ye like.”

“Er … thanks,” I said. Just then, Madame Jeanne’s eye lit upon me, and her mouth dropped open in a horrified “O.”

“What are *you* doing here?” she hissed, rushing up to grab me by the arm.

“Eating,” I said, in no mood to be snatched at. I detached my arm from her grasp and picked up my ale cup.

“Merde!” she said. “Did no one bring you food this morning?”

“No,” I said. “Nor yet clothes.” I gestured at the quilt, which was in imminent danger of falling off.

“Nez de Cleopatre!” she said violently. She stood up and glanced around the room, eyes flashing daggers. “I will have the worthless scum of a maid flayed for this! A thousand apologies, Madame!”

“That’s quite all right,” I said graciously, aware of the looks of astonishment on the faces of my breakfast companions. “I’ve had a wonderful meal. Nice to have met you all, ladies,” I said, rising and doing my best to bow graciously while clutching my quilt. “Now, Madame … about my gown?”

* * *

Amid Madame Jeanne’s agitated protestations of apology, and reiterated hopes that I would not find it necessary to tell Monsieur

Fraser that I had been exposed to an undesirable intimacy with the working members of the establishment, I made my clumsy way up two more flights of stairs, and into a small room draped with hanging garments in various stages of completion, with bolts of cloth stacked here and there in the corners of the chamber.

"A moment, please," Madame Jeanne said, and with a deep bow, left me to the company of a dressmaker's dummy, with a large number of pins protruding from its stuffed bosom.

Apparently this was where the costuming of the inmates took place. I walked around the room, quilt trailing, and observed several flimsy silk wrappers under construction, together with a couple of elaborate gowns with very low necks, and a number of rather imaginative variations on the basic shift and camisole. I removed one shift from its hook, and put it on.

It was made of fine cotton, with a low, gathered neck, and embroidery in the form of multiple hands that curled enticingly under the bosom and down the sides of the waist, spreading out into a rakish caress atop the hips. It hadn't been hemmed, but was otherwise complete, and gave me a great deal more freedom of movement than had the quilt.

I could hear voices in the next room, where Madame was apparently haranguing Bruno—or so I deduced the identity of the male rumble.

"I do not care *what* the miserable girl's sister has done," she was saying, "do you not realize that the wife of Monsieur Jamie was left naked and starving—"

"Are you sure she's his wife?" the deep male voice asked. "I had heard—"

"So had I. But if he says this woman is his wife, I am not disposed to argue, *n'est-ce pas?*" Madame sounded impatient. "Now, as to this wretched Madeleine—"

"It's not her fault, Madame," Bruno broke in. "Have you not heard the news this morning—about the Fiend?"

Madame gave a small gasp. "No! Not another?"

"Yes, Madame." Bruno's voice was grim. "No more than a few doors away—above the Green Owl tavern. The girl was Madeleine's sister; the priest brought the news just before breakfast. So you can see—"

"Yes, I see." Madame sounded a little breathless. "Yes, of course. Of course. Was it—the same?" Her voice quivered with distaste.

"Yes, Madame. A hatchet or a big knife of some sort." He lowered his voice, as people do when recounting horrid things. "The priest told me that her head had been completely severed. Her body was near the door of her room, and her head"—his voice dropped even lower, almost to a whisper—"her head was sitting on the mantelpiece, looking into the room. The landlord swooned when he found her."

A heavy thud from the next room suggested that Madame Jeanne had done likewise. Gooseflesh rippled up my arms, and my own knees felt a trifle watery. I was beginning to agree with Jamie's fear that his installing me in a house of prostitution had been injudicious.

At any rate, I was now clad, if not entirely dressed, and I went into the room next door, to find Madame Jeanne in semi-recline on the sofa of a small parlor, with a burly, unhappy-looking man sitting on the hassock near her feet.

Madame started up at the sight of me. "Madame Fraser! Oh, I am so sorry! I did not mean to leave you waiting, but I have had …" she hesitated, looking for some delicate expression " … some distressing news."

"I'd say so," I said. "What's this about a Fiend?"

"You heard?" She was already pale; now her complexion went a few shades whiter, and she wrung her hands. "What will he say? He will be furious!" she moaned.

"Who?" I asked. "Jamie, or the Fiend?"

"Your husband," she said. She looked about the parlor, distracted. "When he hears that his wife has been so shamefully neglected, mistaken for a *fille de joie* and exposed to—to—"

"I really don't think he'll mind," I said. "But I would like to hear about the Fiend."

"You would?" Bruno's heavy eyebrows rose. He was a big man, with sloping shoulders and long arms that made him look rather like a gorilla; a resemblance enhanced by a low brow and a receding chin. He looked eminently suited to the role of bouncer in a brothel.

"Well," he hesitated, glancing at Madame Jeanne for guidance, but the proprietor caught sight of the small enameled clock on the mantelpiece and jumped to her feet with an exclamation of shock.

"Crottin!" she exclaimed. "I must go!" And with no more than a perfunctory wave in my direction, she sped from the room, leaving Bruno and me looking after her in surprise.

"Oh," he said, recovering himself. "That's right, it was coming at ten o'clock." It was a quarter-past ten, by the enamel clock. Whatever "it" was, I hoped it would wait.

"Fiend," I prompted.

Like most people, Bruno was only too willing to reveal all the gory details, once past a pro forma demur for the sake of social delicacy.

The Edinburgh Fiend was—as I had deduced from the conversation thus far—a murderer. Like an early-day Jack the Ripper, he specialized in women of easy virtue, whom he killed with blows from a heavy-bladed instrument. In some cases, the bodies had been dismembered or otherwise "interfered with," as Bruno said, in lowered voice.

The killings—eight in all—had occurred at intervals over the last two years. With one exception, the women had been killed in their own rooms; most lived alone—two had been killed in brothels. Hence Madame's agitation, I supposed.

"What was the exception?" I asked.

Bruno crossed himself. "A nun," he whispered, the words evidently still a shock to him. "A French Sister of Mercy."

The Sister, coming ashore at Edinburgh with a group of nuns bound for London, had been abducted from the docks, without any of her companions noticing her absence in the confusion. By the time she was discovered in one of Edinburgh's wynds, after nightfall, it was far too late.

"Raped?" I asked, with clinical interest.

Bruno eyed me with considerable suspicion.

"I do not know," he said formally. He rose heavily to his feet, his simian shoulders drooping with fatigue. I supposed he had been on duty all night; it must be his bedtime now. "If you will excuse me, Madame," he said, with remote formality, and went out.

I sat back on the small velvet sofa, feeling mildly dazed. Somehow I hadn't realized that quite so much went on in brothels in the daytime.

There was a sudden loud hammering at the door. It didn't sound like knocking, but as though someone really were using a metal-headed hammer to demand admittance. I got to my feet to answer the summons, but without further warning, the door burst open, and a slender imperious figure strode into the room, speaking French in an accent so pronounced and an attitude so furious that I could not follow it all.

"Are you looking for Madame Jeanne?" I managed to put in, seizing a small pause when he stopped to draw breath for more invective. The visitor was a young man of about thirty, slightly built and strikingly handsome, with thick black hair and brows. He glared at me under these, and as he got a good look at me, an extraordinary change went across his face. The brows rose, his black eyes grew huge, and his face went white.

"Milady!" he exclaimed, and flung himself on his knees, embracing me about the thighs as he pressed his face into the cotton shift at crotch level.

"Let go!" I exclaimed, shoving at his shoulders to detach him. "I don't work here. Let go, I say!"

"Milady!" he was repeating in tones of rapture. "Milady! You have come back! A miracle! God has restored you!"

He looked up at me, smiling as tears streamed down his face. He had large white perfect teeth. Suddenly memory stirred and shifted, showing me the outlines of an urchin's face beneath the man's bold visage.

"Fergus!" I said. "Fergus, is that really you? Get up, for God's sake—let me see you!"

He rose to his feet, but didn't pause to let me inspect him. He gathered me into a rib-cracking hug, and I clutched him in return, pounding his back in the excitement of seeing him again. He had been ten or so when I last saw him, just before Culloden. Now he was a man, and the stubble of his beard rasped against my cheek.

"I thought I was seeing a ghost!" he exclaimed. "It is really you, then?"

"Yes, it's me," I assured him.

"You have seen milord?" he asked excitedly. "He knows you are here?"

"Yes."

"Oh!" He blinked and stepped back half a pace, as something occurred to him. "But—but what about—" He paused, clearly confused.

"What about what?"

"There ye are! What in the name of God are ye doing up here, Fergus?" Jamie's tall figure loomed suddenly in the doorway. His eyes widened at the sight of me in my embroidered shift. "Where are your clothes?" he asked. "Never mind," he said then, waving his hand impatiently as I opened my mouth to answer. "I havena time just now. Come along, Fergus, there's eighteen ankers of brandy in the alleyway, and the excisemen on my heels!"

And with a thunder of boots on the wooden staircase, they were gone, leaving me alone once more.

* * *

I wasn't sure whether I should join the party downstairs or not, but curiosity got the better of discretion. After a quick visit to the sewing room in search of more extensive covering, I made my way down, a large shawl half-embroidered with hollyhocks flung round my shoulders.

I had gathered only a vague impression of the layout of the house the night before, but the street noises that filtered through the windows made it clear which side of the building faced the High Street. I assumed the alleyway to which Jamie had referred must be on the other side, but wasn't sure. The houses of Edinburgh were frequently constructed with odd little wings and twisting walls, to take advantage of every inch of space.

I paused on the large landing at the foot of the stairs, listening for the sound of rolling casks as a guide. As I stood there, I felt a sudden draft on my bare feet, and turned to see a man standing in the open doorway from the kitchen.

He seemed as surprised as I, but after blinking at me, he smiled and stepped forward to grip me by the elbow.

"And a good morning to you, my dear. I didn't expect to find any of you ladies up and about so early in the morning."

"Well, you know what they say about early to bed and early to rise," I said, trying to extricate my elbow.

He laughed, showing rather badly stained teeth in a narrow jaw. "No, what do they say about it?"

"Well, it's something they say in America, come to think of it," I replied, suddenly realizing that Benjamin Franklin, even if currently publishing, probably didn't have a wide readership in Edinburgh.

"Got a wit about you, chuckie," he said, with a slight smile. "Send you down as a decoy, did she?"

"No. Who?" I said.

"The madam," he said, glancing around. "Where is she?"

"I have no idea," I said. "Let go!"

Instead, he tightened his grip, so that his fingers dug uncomfortably into the muscles of my upper arm. He leaned closer, whispering in my ear with a gust of stale tobacco fumes.

"There's a reward, you know," he murmured confidentially. "A percentage of the value of the seized contraband. No one would need to know but you and me." He flicked one finger gently under my breast, making the nipple stand up under the thin cotton. "What d'ye say, chuck?"

I stared at him. "The excisemen are on my heels," Jamie had said. This must be one, then; an officer of the Crown, charged with the prevention of smuggling and the apprehension of smugglers. What had Jamie said? "The pillory, transportation, flogging, imprisonment, ear-nailing," waving an airy hand as though such penalties were the equivalent of a traffic ticket.

"Whatever are you talking about?" I said, trying to sound puzzled. "And for the last time, let go of me!" He couldn't be alone, I thought. How many others were there around the building?

"Yes, please let go," said a voice behind me. I saw the exciseman's eyes widen as he glanced over my shoulder.

Mr. Willoughby stood on the second stair in rumpled blue silk, a large pistol gripped in both hands. He bobbed his head politely at the excise officer.

"Not stinking whore," he explained, blinking owlishly. "Honorable wife."

The exciseman, clearly startled by the unexpected appearance of a Chinese, gawked from me to Mr. Willoughby and back again.

"Wife?" he said disbelievingly. "You say she's your *wife*?"

Mr. Willoughby, clearly catching only the salient word, nodded pleasantly.

"Wife," he said again. "Please letting go." His eyes were mere bloodshot slits, and it was apparent to me, if not to the exciseman, that his blood was still approximately 80 proof.

The exciseman pulled me toward himself and scowled at Mr. Willoughby. "Now, listen here—" he began. He got no further, for Mr. Willoughby, evidently assuming that he had given fair warning, raised the pistol and pulled the trigger.

There was a loud crack, an even louder shriek, which must have been mine, and the landing was filled with a cloud of gray powder-smoke. The exciseman staggered back against the paneling, a look of intense surprise on his face, and a spreading rosette of blood on the breast of his coat.

Moving by reflex, I leapt forward and grasped the man under the arms, easing him gently down to the floorboards of the landing. There was a flurry of noise from above, as the inhabitants of the house crowded chattering and exclaiming onto the upper landing, attracted by the shot. Bounding footsteps came up the lower stairs two at a time.

Fergus burst through what must be the cellar door, a pistol in his hand.

"Milady," he gasped, catching sight of me sitting in the corner with the exciseman's body sprawled across my lap. "What have you done?"

"Me?" I said indignantly. "*I* haven't done anything; it's Jamie's pet Chinaman." I nodded briefly toward the stair, where Mr. Willoughby, the pistol dropped unregarded by his feet, had sat down on the step and was now regarding the scene below with a benign and bloodshot eye.

Fergus said something in French that was too colloquial to translate, but sounded highly uncomplimentary to Mr. Willoughby. He strode across the landing, and reached out a hand to grasp the little Chinaman's shoulder—or so I assumed, until I saw that the arm he extended did not end in a hand, but in a hook of gleaming dark metal.

"Fergus!" I was so shocked at the sight that I stopped my attempts to stanch the exciseman's wound with my shawl. "What—what—" I said incoherently.

"What?" he said, glancing at me. Then, following the direction of my gaze, said, "Oh, that," and shrugged. "The English. Don't worry about it, milady, we haven't time. You, *canaille*, get downstairs!" He jerked Mr. Willoughby off the stairs, dragged him to the cellar door and shoved him through it, with a callous disregard for safety. I could hear a series of bumps, suggesting that the Chinese was rolling downstairs, his acrobatic skills having temporarily deserted him, but had no time to worry about it.

Fergus squatted next to me, and lifted the exciseman's head by the hair. "How many companions are with you?" he demanded. "Tell me quickly, *cochon*, or I slit your throat!"

From the evident signs, this was a superfluous threat. The man's eyes were already glazing over. With considerable effort, the corners of his mouth drew back in a smile.

"I'll see … you … burn … in … hell," he whispered, and with a last convulsion that fixed the smile in a hideous rictus upon his face, he coughed up a startling quantity of bright red foamy blood, and died in my lap.

More feet were coming up the stairs at a high rate of speed. Jamie charged through the cellar door and barely stopped himself before stepping on the excise officer's trailing legs. His eyes traveled up the body's length and rested on my face with horrified amazement.

"What have ye done, Sassenach?" he demanded.

"Not her—the yellow pox," Fergus put in, saving me the trouble. He thrust the pistol into his belt and offered me his real hand. "Come, milady, you must get downstairs!"

Jamie forestalled him, bending over me as he jerked his head in the direction of the front hall.

"I'll manage here," he said. "Guard the front, Fergus. The usual signal, and keep your pistol hidden unless there's need."

Fergus nodded and vanished at once through the door to the hall.

Jamie had succeeded in bundling the corpse awkwardly in the shawl; he lifted it off me, and I scrambled to my feet, greatly relieved to be rid of it, in spite of the blood and other objectionable substances soaking the front of my shift.

"Ooh! I think he's *dead*!" An awestruck voice floated down from above, and I looked up to see a dozen prostitutes peering down like cherubim from on high.

"Get back to your rooms!" Jamie barked. There was a chorus of frightened squeals, and they scattered like pigeons.

Jamie glanced around the landing for traces of the incident, but luckily there were none—the shawl and I had caught everything.

"Come on," he said.

The stairs were dim and the cellar at the foot pitch-black. I stopped at the bottom, waiting for Jamie. The exciseman had not been lightly built, and Jamie was breathing hard when he reached me.

"Across to the far side," he said, gasping. "A false wall. Hold my arm."

With the door above shut, I couldn't see a thing; luckily Jamie seemed able to steer by radar. He led me unerringly past large objects that I bumped in passing, and finally came to a halt. I could smell damp stone, and putting out a hand, felt a rough wall before me.

Jamie said something loudly in Gaelic. Apparently it was the Celtic equivalent of "Open Sesame," for there was a short silence, then a grating noise, and a faint glowing line appeared in the darkness before me. The line widened into a slit, and a section of the wall swung out, revealing a small doorway, made of a wooden framework, upon which cut stones were mounted so as to look like part of the wall.

The concealed cellar was a large room, at least thirty feet long. Several figures were moving about, and the air was ripely suffocating with the smell of brandy. Jamie dumped the body unceremoniously in a corner, then turned to me.

"God, Sassenach, are ye all right?" The cellar seemed to be lighted with candles, dotted here and there in the dimness. I could just see his face, skin drawn tight across his cheekbones.

"I'm a little cold," I said, trying not to let my teeth chatter. "My shift is soaked with blood. Otherwise I'm all right. I think."

"Jeanne!" He turned and called toward the far end of the cellar, and one of the figures came toward us, resolving itself into a very worried-looking madam. He explained the situation in a few words, causing the worried expression to grow considerably worse.

"Horreur!" she said. "Killed? On my premises? With *witnesses*?"

"Aye, I'm afraid so." Jamie sounded calm. "I'll manage about it. But in the meantime, ye must go up. He might not have been alone. You'll know what to do."

His voice held a tone of calm assurance, and he squeezed her arm. The touch seemed to calm her—I hoped that was why he had done it—and she turned to leave.

"Oh, and Jeanne," Jamie called after her. "When ye come back, can ye bring down some clothes for my wife? If her gown's not ready, I think Daphne is maybe the right size."

"Clothes?" Madame Jeanne squinted into the shadows where I stood. I helpfully stepped out into the light, displaying the results of my encounter with the exciseman.

Madame Jeanne blinked once or twice, crossed herself, and turned without a word, to disappear through the concealed doorway, which swung to behind her with a muffled thud.

I was beginning to shake, as much with reaction as with the cold. Accustomed as I was to emergency, blood, and even sudden death, the events of the morning had been more than a little harrowing. It was like a bad Saturday night in the emergency room.

"Come along, Sassenach," Jamie said, putting a hand gently on the small of my back. "We'll get ye washed." His touch worked on me as well as it had on Madame Jeanne; I felt instantly better, if still apprehensive.

"Washed? In what? Brandy?"

He gave a slight laugh at that. "No, water. I can offer ye a bathtub, but I'm afraid it will be cold."

It was extremely cold.

"Wh-wh-where did this water come from?" I asked, shivering. "Off a glacier?" The water gushed out of a pipe set in the wall, normally kept plugged with an insanitary-looking wad of rags, wrapped to form a rough seal around the chunk of wood that served as a plug.

I pulled my hand out of the chilly stream and wiped it on the shift, which was too far gone for anything to make much difference. Jamie shook his head as he maneuvered the big wooden tub closer to the spout.

"Off the roof," he answered. "There's a rainwater cistern up there. The guttering pipe runs down the side of the building, and the cistern pipe is hidden inside it." He looked absurdly proud of himself, and I laughed.

"Quite an arrangement," I said. "What do you use the water for?"

"To cut the liquor," he explained. He gestured at the far side of the room, where the shadowy figures were working with notable industry among a large array of casks and tubs. "It comes in a hundred and eighty degrees above proof. We mix it here wi' pure water, and recask it for sale to the taverns."

He shoved the rough plug back into the pipe, and bent to pull the big tub across the stone floor. "Here, we'll take it out of the way; they'll be needing the water." One of the men was in fact standing by with a small cask clasped in his arms; with no more than a curious glance at me, he nodded to Jamie and thrust the cask beneath the stream of water.

Behind a hastily arranged screen of empty barrels, I peered dubiously down into the depths of my makeshift tub. A single candle burned in a puddle of wax nearby, glimmering off the surface of the water and making it look black and bottomless. I stripped off, shivering violently, thinking that the comforts of hot water and modern plumbing had seemed a hell of a lot easier to renounce when they were close at hand.

Jamie groped in his sleeve and pulled out a large handkerchief, at which he squinted dubiously.

“Aye, well, it’s maybe cleaner than your shift,” he said, shrugging. He handed it to me, then excused himself to oversee operations at the other end of the room.

The water was freezing and so was the cellar, and as I gingerly sponged myself, the icy trickles running down my stomach and thighs brought on small fits of shivering.

Thoughts of what might be happening overhead did little to ease my feelings of chilly apprehension. Presumably, we were safe enough for the moment, so long as the false cellar wall deceived any searching excisemen.

But if the wall failed to hide us, our position was all but hopeless. There appeared to be no way out of this room but by the door in the false wall—and if that wall were breached, we would not only be caught red-handed in possession of quite a lot of contraband brandy, but also in custody of the body of a murdered King’s Officer.

And surely the disappearance of that officer would provoke an intensive search? I had visions of excisemen combing the brothel, questioning and threatening the women, emerging with complete descriptions of myself, Jamie, and Mr. Willoughby, as well as several eyewitness accounts of the murder. Involuntarily, I glanced at the far corner, where the dead man lay beneath his bloodstained shroud, covered with pink and yellow hollyhocks. The Chinaman was nowhere to be seen, having apparently passed out behind the ankers of brandy.

“Here, Sassenach. Drink this; your teeth are chattering so, you’re like to bite through your tongue.” Jamie had reappeared by my seal hole like a St. Bernard dog, bearing a firkin of brandy.

“Th-thanks.” I had to drop the washcloth and use both hands to steady the wooden cup so it wouldn’t clack against my teeth, but the brandy helped; it dropped like a flaming coal into the pit of my stomach and sent small curling tendrils of warmth through my frigid extremities as I sipped.

"Oh, God, that's better," I said, stopping long enough to gasp for breath. "Is this the uncut version?"

"No, that would likely kill ye. This is maybe a little stronger than what we sell, though. Finish up and put something on; then ye can have a bit more." Jamie took the cup from my hand and gave me back the handkerchief washcloth. As I hurriedly finished my chilly ablutions, I watched him from the corner of my eye. He was frowning as he gazed at me, clearly deep in thought. I had imagined that his life was complicated; it hadn't escaped me that my presence was undoubtedly complicating it a good bit more. I would have given a lot to know what he was thinking.

"What are you thinking about, Jamie?" I said, watching him sidelong as I swabbed the last of the smudges from my thighs. The water swirled around my calves, disturbed by my movements, and the candlelight lit the waves with sparks, as though the dark blood I had washed from my body now glowed once more live and red in the water.

The frown vanished momentarily as his eyes cleared and fixed on my face.

"I am thinking that you're verra beautiful, Sassenach," he said softly.

"Maybe if one has a taste for gooseflesh on a large scale," I said tartly, stepping out of the tub and reaching for the cup.

He grinned suddenly at me, teeth flashing white in the dimness of the cellar.

"Oh, aye," he said. "Well, you're speaking to the only man in Scotland who has a terrible cockstand at sight of a plucked chicken."

I spluttered in my brandy and choked, half-hysterical from tension and terror.

Jamie quickly shrugged out of his coat and wrapped the garment around me, hugging me close against him as I shivered and coughed and gasped.

“Makes it hard to pass a poulterer’s stall and stay decent,” he murmured in my ear, briskly rubbing my back through the fabric. “Hush, Sassenach, hush now. It’ll be fine.”

I clung to him, shaking. “I’m sorry,” I said. “I’m all right. It’s my fault, though. Mr. Willoughby shot the exciseman because he thought he was making indecent advances to me.”

Jamie snorted. “That doesna make it your fault, Sassenach,” he said dryly. “And for what it’s worth, it’s no the first time the Chinaman’s done something foolish, either. When he’s drink taken, he’ll do anything, and never mind how mad it is.”

Suddenly Jamie’s expression changed as he realized what I had said. He stared down at me, eyes wide. “Did ye say ‘exciseman,’ Sassenach?”

“Yes, why?”

He didn’t answer, but let go my shoulders and whirled on his heel, snatching the candle off the cask in passing. Rather than be left in the dark, I followed him to the corner where the corpse lay under its shawl.

“Hold this.” Jamie thrust the candle unceremoniously into my hand and knelt by the shrouded figure, pulling back the stained fabric that covered the face.

I had seen quite a few dead bodies; the sight was no shock, but it still wasn’t pleasant. The eyes had rolled up beneath half-closed lids, which did nothing to help the generally ghastly effect. Jamie frowned at the dead face, drop-jawed and waxy in the candlelight, and muttered something under his breath.

“What’s wrong?” I asked. I had thought I would never be warm again, but Jamie’s coat was not only thick and well-made, it held the remnants of his own considerable body heat. I was still cold, but the shivering had eased.

“This isna an exciseman,” Jamie said, still frowning. “I know all the Riding Officers in the district, and the superintending officers, too. But I’ve no seen this fellow before.” With some distaste, he turned back the sodden flap of the coat and groped inside.

He felt about gingerly but thoroughly inside the man’s clothing, emerging at last with a small penknife, and a small booklet bound in red paper.

" 'New Testament,' " I read, with some astonishment.

Jamie nodded, looking up at me with one brow raised. "Exciseman or no, it seems a peculiar thing to bring with ye to a kittle-hoosie." He wiped the little booklet on the shawl, then drew the folds of fabric quite gently back over the face, and rose to his feet, shaking his head.

"That's the only thing in his pockets. Any Customs inspector or exciseman must carry his warrant upon his person at all times, for otherwise he's no authority to carry out a search of premises or seize goods." He glanced up, eyebrows raised. "Why did ye think he was an exciseman?"

I hugged the folds of Jamie's coat around myself, trying to remember what the man had said to me on the landing. "He asked me whether I was a decoy, and where the madam was. Then he said that there was a reward—a percentage of seized contraband, that's what he said—and that no one would know but him and me. And you'd said there were excisemen after you," I added. "So naturally I thought he was one. Then Mr. Willoughby turned up and things rather went to pot."

Jamie nodded, still looking puzzled. "Aye, well. I havena got any idea who he is, but it's a good thing that he isna an exciseman. I thought at first something had come verra badly unstuck, but it's likely all right."

"Unstuck?"

He smiled briefly. "I've an arrangement with the Superintending Customs Officer for the district, Sassenach."

I gaped at him. "Arrangement?"

He shrugged. "Well, bribery then, if ye like to be straight out about it." He sounded faintly irritated.

"No doubt that's standard business procedure?" I said, trying to sound tactful. One corner of his mouth twitched slightly.

"Aye, it is. Well, in any case, there's an understanding, as ye might say, between Sir Percival Turner and myself, and to find him sending excise officers into this place would worry me considerably."

"All right," I said slowly, mentally juggling all the half-understood events of the morning, and trying to make a pattern of them. "But in that case, what did you mean by telling Fergus the excisemen were on your heels? And why has everyone been racing round like chickens with their heads off?"

"Oh, that." He smiled briefly, and took my arm, turning me away from the corpse at our feet. "Well, it's an arrangement, as I said. And part of it is that Sir Percival must satisfy his own masters in London, by seizing sufficient amounts of contraband now and again. So we see to it that he's given the opportunity. Wally and the lads brought down two wagonloads from the coast; one of the best brandy, and the other filled with spiled casks and the punked wine, topped off with a few ankers of cheap swill, just to give it all flavor.

"I met them just outside the city this morning, as we planned, and then we drove the wagons in, takin' care to attract the attention of the Riding Officer, who just happened to be passing with a small number of dragoons. They came along and we led them a canty chase through the alleyways, until the time for me and the good tubs to part company wi' Wally and his load of swill. Wally jumped off his wagon then, and made awa', and I drove like hell down here, wi' two or three dragoons following, just for show, like. Looks well in a report, ye ken." He grinned at me, quoting, " *'The smugglers escaped in spite of industrious pursuit, but His Majesty's valiant soldiers succeeded in capturing an entire wagonload of spirits, valued at sixty pounds, ten shillings.'* You'll know the sort of thing?"

"I expect so," I said. "Then it was you and the good liquor that was arriving at ten? Madame Jeanne said—"

"Aye," he said, frowning. "She was meant to have the cellar door open and the ramp in place at ten sharp—we havena got long to get everything unloaded. She was bloody late this morning; I had to circle round twice to keep from bringing the dragoons straight to the door."

"She was a bit distracted," I said, remembering suddenly about the Fiend. I told Jamie about the murder at the Green Owl, and he grimaced, crossing himself.

"Poor lass," he said.

I shuddered briefly at the memory of Bruno's description, and moved closer to Jamie, who put an arm about my shoulders. He kissed me absently on the forehead, glancing again at the shawl-covered shape on the ground.

"Well, whoever he was, if he wasna an exciseman, there are likely no more of them upstairs. We should be able to get out of here soon."

"That's good." Jamie's coat covered me to the knees, but I felt the covert glances cast from the far end of the room at my bare calves, and was all too uncomfortably aware that I was naked under it. "Will we be going back to the printshop?" What with one thing and another, I didn't think I wanted to take advantage of Madame Jeanne's hospitality any longer than necessary.

"Maybe for a bit. I'll have to think." Jamie's tone was abstracted, and I could see that his brow was furrowed in thought. With a brief hug, he released me, and began to walk about the cellar, staring meditatively at the stones underfoot.

"Er … what did you do with Ian?"

He glanced up, looking blank; then his face cleared.

"Oh, Ian. I left him making inquiries at the taverns above the Market Cross. I'll need to remember to meet him, later," he muttered, as though making a note to himself.

"I met Young Ian, by the way," I said conversationally.

Jamie looked startled. "He came here?"

"He did. Looking for you—about a quarter of an hour after you left, in fact."

"Thank God for small mercies!" He rubbed a hand through his hair, looking simultaneously amused and worried. "I'd have had the devil of a time explaining to Ian what his son was doing here."

"You *know* what he was doing here?" I asked curiously.

"No, I don't! He was supposed to be—ah, well, let it be. I canna be worrit about it just now." He relapsed into thought, emerging momentarily to ask, "Did Young Ian say where he was going, when he left ye?"

I shook my head, gathering the coat around myself, and he nodded, sighed, and took up his slow pacing once more.

I sat down on an upturned tub and watched him. In spite of the general atmosphere of discomfort and danger, I felt absurdly happy simply to be near him. Feeling that there was little I could do to help the situation at present, I settled myself with the coat wrapped round me, and abandoned myself to the momentary pleasure of looking at him—something I had had no chance to do, in the tumult of events.

In spite of his preoccupation, he moved with the surefooted grace of a swordsman, a man so aware of his body as to be able to forget it entirely. The men by the casks worked by torchlight; it gleamed on his hair as he turned, lighting it like a tiger's fur, with stripes of gold and dark.

I caught the faint twitch as two fingers of his right hand flickered together against the fabric of his breeches, and felt a strange little lurch of recognition in the gesture. I had seen him do that a thousand times as he was thinking, and seeing it now again, felt as though all the time that had passed in our separation was no more than the rising and setting of a single sun.

As though catching my thought, he paused in his strolling and smiled at me.

"You'll be warm enough, Sassenach?" he asked.

"No, but it doesn't matter." I got off my tub and went to join him in his peregrinations, slipping a hand through his arm. "Making any progress with the thinking?"

He laughed ruefully. "No. I'm thinking of maybe half a dozen things together, and half of them things I canna do anything about. Like whether Young Ian's where he should be."

I stared up at him. "Where he should be? Where do you think he should be?"

"He *should* be at the printshop," Jamie said, with some emphasis. "But he *should* ha' been with Wally this morning, and he wasn't."

"With Wally? You mean you knew he wasn't at home, when his father came looking for him this morning?"

He rubbed his nose with a finger, looking at once irritated and amused. "Oh, aye. I'd promised Young Ian I wouldna say anything to his Da, though, until he'd a chance to explain himself. Not that an explanation is likely to save his arse," he added.

Young Ian had, as his father said, come to join his uncle in Edinburgh without the preliminary bother of asking his parents' leave. Jamie had discovered this dereliction fairly quickly, but had not wanted to send his nephew alone back to Lallybroch, and had not yet had time to escort him personally.

"It's not that he canna look out for himself," Jamie explained, amusement winning in the struggle of expressions on his face. "He's a nice capable lad. It's just—well, ye ken how things just happen around some folk, without them seeming to have anything much to do wi' it?"

"Now that you mention it, yes," I said wryly. "I'm one of them."

He laughed out loud at that. "God, you're right, Sassenach! Maybe that's why I like Young Ian so well; he 'minds me of you."

"He reminded me a bit of *you*," I said.

Jamie snorted briefly. "God, Jenny will maim me, and she hears her baby son's been loitering about a house of ill repute. I hope the wee bugger has the sense to keep his mouth shut, once he's home."

"I hope he *gets* home," I said, thinking of the gawky almost-fifteen-year-old I had seen that morning, adrift in an Edinburgh filled with prostitutes, excisemen, smugglers, and hatchet-wielding Fiends. "At least he isn't a girl," I added, thinking of this last item. "The Fiend doesn't seem to have a taste for young boys."

"Aye, well, there are plenty of others who have," Jamie said sourly. "Between Young Ian and you, Sassenach, I shall be lucky if my hair's not gone white by the time we get out of this stinking cellar."

"Me?" I said in surprise. "You don't need to worry about me."

"I don't?" He dropped my arm and rounded on me, glaring. "I dinna need to worry about ye? Is that what ye said? Christ! I leave ye safely in bed waiting for your breakfast, and not an hour later, I find ye downstairs in your shift, clutching a corpse to your bosom! And now you're standing in front of me bare as an egg, with fifteen men over there wondering who in hell ye are—and how d'ye think

I’m going to explain ye to them, Sassenach? Tell me that, eh?” He shoved a hand through his hair in exasperation.

“Sweet bleeding Jesus! And I’ve to go up the coast in two days without fail, but I canna leave ye in Edinburgh, not wi’ Fiends creepin’ about with hatchets, and half the people who’ve seen ye thinking you’re a prostitute, and … and …” The lacing around his pigtail broke abruptly under the pressure, and his hair fluffed out round his head like a lion’s mane. I laughed. He glared for a moment longer, but then a reluctant grin made its way slowly through the frown.

“Aye, well,” he said, resigned. “I suppose I’ll manage.”

“I suppose you will,” I said, and stood on tiptoe to brush his hair back behind his ears. Working on the same principle that causes magnets of opposing polarities to snap together when placed in close proximitry, he bent his head and kissed me.

“I had forgotten,” he said, a moment later.

“Forgotten what?” His back was warm through the thin shirt.

“Everything.” He spoke very softly, mouth against my hair. “Joy. Fear. Fear, most of all.” His hand came up and smoothed my curls away from his nose.

“I havena been afraid for a verra long time, Sassenach,” he whispered. “But now I think I am. For there is something to be lost, now.”

I drew back a little, to look up at him. His arms were locked tight around my waist, his eyes dark as bottomless water in the dimness. Then his face changed and he kissed me quickly on the forehead.

“Come along, Sassenach,” he said, taking me by the arm. “I’ll tell the men you’re my wife. The rest of it will just have to bide.”

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27

UP IN FLAMES

The dress was a trifle lower-cut than necessary, and a bit tight in the bosom, but on the whole, not a bad fit.

"And how did you know Daphne would be the right size?" I asked, spooning up my soup.

"I said I didna bed wi' the lasses," Jamie replied circumspectly. "I never said I didna look at them." He blinked at me like a large red owl—some congenital tic made him incapable of closing one eye in a wink—and I laughed.

"That gown becomes ye a good deal more than it did Daphne, though." He cast a glance of general approval at my bosom and waved at a servingmaid carrying a platter of fresh bannocks.

Moubray's tavern was doing a thriving dinner business. Several cuts above the snug, smoky atmosphere to be found in The World's End and similar serious drinking establishments, Moubray's was a large and elegant place, with an outside stair that ran up to the second floor, where a commodious dining room accommodated the appetites of Edinburgh's prosperous tradesmen and public officials.

"Who are you at the moment?" I asked. "I heard Madame Jeanne call you 'Monsieur Fraser'—are you Fraser in public, though?"

He shook his head and broke a bannock into his soup bowl. "No, at the moment, I'm Sawney Malcolm, Printer and Publisher."

"Sawney? That's a nickname for Alexander, is it? I should have thought 'Sandy' was more like it, especially considering your hair." Not that his hair was sandy-colored in the least, I reflected, looking at it. It was like Bree's hair—very thick, with a slight wave to it, and all the colors of red and gold mixed; copper and cinnamon, auburn and amber, red and roan and rufous, all mingled together.

I felt a sudden wave of longing for Bree; at the same time, I longed to untie Jamie's hair from its formal plait and run my hands up under it, to feel the solid curve of his skull, and the soft strands tangled in my fingers. I could still recall the tickle of it, spilling loose and rich across my breasts in the morning light.

My breath coming a little short, I bent my head to my oyster stew.

Jamie appeared not to have noticed; he added a large pat of butter to his bowl, shaking his head as he did so.

"Sawney's what they say in the Highlands," he informed me. "And in the Isles, too. Sandy's more what ye'd hear in the Lowlands—or from an ignorant Sassenach." He lifted one eyebrow at me, smiling, and raised a spoonful of the rich, fragrant stew to his mouth.

"All right," I said. "I suppose more to the point, though—who am *I*?"

He had noticed, after all. I felt one large foot nudge mine, and he smiled at me over the rim of his cup.

"You're my wife, Sassenach," he said gruffly. "Always. No matter who I may be—you're my wife."

I could feel the flush of pleasure rise in my face, and see the memories of the night before reflected in his own. The tips of his ears were faintly pink.

"You don't suppose there's too much pepper in this stew?" I asked, swallowing another spoonful. "Are you sure, Jamie?"

"Aye," he said. "Aye, I'm sure," he amended, "and no, the pepper's fine. I like a wee bit of pepper." The foot moved slightly against mine, the toe of his shoe barely brushing my ankle.

"So I'm Mrs. Malcolm," I said, trying out the name on my tongue. The mere fact of saying "Mrs." gave me an absurd little thrill, like a new bride. Involuntarily, I glanced down at the silver ring on my right fourth finger.

Jamie caught the glance, and raised his cup to me.

"To Mrs. Malcolm," he said softly, and the breathless feeling came back.

He set down the cup and took my hand; his own was big and so warm that a general feeling of glowing heat spread rapidly through my fingers. I could feel the silver ring, separate from my flesh, its metal heated by his touch.

"To have and to hold," he said, smiling.

"From this day forward," I said, not caring in the least that we were attracting interested glances from the other diners.

Jamie bent his head and pressed his lips against the back of my hand, an action that turned the interested glances into frank stares. A clergyman was seated across the room; he glared at us and said something to his companions, who turned round to stare. One was a small, elderly man; the other, I was surprised to see, was Mr. Wallace, my companion from the Inverness coach.

"There are private rooms upstairs," Jamie murmured, blue eyes dancing over my knuckles, and I lost interest in Mr. Wallace.

"How interesting," I said. "You haven't finished your stew."

"Damn the stew."

"Here comes the servingmaid with the ale."

"Devil take her." Sharp white teeth closed gently on my knuckle, making me jerk slightly in my seat.

"People are watching you."

"Let them, and I trust they've a fine day for it."

His tongue flicked gently between my fingers.

"There's a man in a green coat coming this way."

"To hell—" Jamie began, when the shadow of the visitor fell upon the table.

"A good day to you, Mr. Malcolm," said the visitor, bowing politely. "I trust I do not intrude?"

"You do," said Jamie, straightening up but keeping his grip on my hand. He turned a cool gaze on the newcomer. "I think I do not know ye, sir?"

The gentleman, an Englishman of maybe thirty-five, quietly dressed, bowed again, not intimidated by this marked lack of hospitality.

"I have not had the pleasure of your acquaintance as yet, sir," he said deferentially. "My master, however, bade me greet you, and inquire whether you—and your companion—might be so agreeable as to take a little wine with him."

The tiny pause before the word "companion" was barely discernible, but Jamie caught it. His eyes narrowed.

"My wife and I," he said, with precisely the same sort of pause before "wife," "are otherwise engaged at the moment. Should your master wish to speak wi' me—"

"It is Sir Percival Turner who sends to ask, sir," the secretary—for so he must be—put in quickly. Well-bred as he was, he couldn't resist a tiny flick of one eyebrow, as one who uses a name he expects to conjure with.

"Indeed," said Jamie dryly. "Well, with all respect to Sir Percival, I am preoccupied at present. If you will convey him my regrets?" He bowed, with a politeness so pointed as to come within a hair of rudeness, and turned his back on the secretary. That gentleman stood for a moment, his mouth slightly open, then pivoted smartly on his heel and made his way through the scatter of tables to a door on the far side of the dining room.

"Where was I?" Jamie demanded. "Oh, aye—to hell wi' gentlemen in green coats. Now, about these private rooms—"

"How are you going to explain me to people?" I asked.

He raised one eyebrow.

"Explain what?" He looked me up and down. "Why must I make excuses for ye? You're no missing any limbs; you're not poxed, hunchbacked, toothless or lame—"

"You know what I mean," I said, kicking him lightly under the table. The lady sitting near the wall nudged her companion and widened her eyes disapprovingly at us. I smiled nonchalantly at them.

"Aye, I do," he said, grinning. "However, what wi' Mr. Willoughby's activities this morning, and one thing and another, I havena had much chance to think about the matter. Perhaps I'll just say—"

"My dear fellow, so you are married! Capital news! Simply capital! My deepest congratulations, and may I be—dare I hope to be?—the first to extend my felicitations and best wishes to your lady?"

A small, elderly gentleman in a tidy wig leaned heavily on a gold-knobbed stick, beaming genially at us both. It was the little gentleman who had been sitting with Mr. Wallace and the clergyman.

"You will pardon the minor discourtesy of my sending Johnson to fetch you earlier, I am sure," he said deprecatingly. "It is only that my wretched infirmity prevents rapid movement, as you see."

Jamie had risen to his feet at the appearance of the visitor, and with a polite gesture, now drew out a chair.

"You'll join us, Sir Percival?" he said.

"Oh, no, no indeed! Shouldn't dream of intruding on your new happiness, my dear sir. Truly, I had no idea—" Still protesting gracefully, he sank down into the proffered chair, wincing as he extended his foot beneath the table.

"I am a martyr to gout, my dear," he confided, leaning close enough for me to smell his foul old-man's breath beneath the wintergreen that spiced his linen.

He didn't look corrupt, I thought—breath notwithstanding—but then appearances could be deceiving; it was only about four hours since I had been mistaken for a prostitute.

Making the best of it, Jamie called for wine, and accepted Sir Percival's continued effusions with some grace.

"It is rather fortunate that I should have encountered you here, my dear fellow," the elderly gentleman said, breaking off his flowery compliments at last. He laid a small, manicured hand on Jamie's sleeve. "I had something particular to say to you. In fact, I had sent a note to the printshop, but my messenger failed to find you there."

"Ah?" Jamie cocked an eyebrow in question.

"Yes," Sir Percival went on. "I believe you had spoken to me—some weeks ago, I scarce recall the occasion—of your intention to travel north on business. A matter of a new press, or something of the sort?" Sir Percival had quite a sweet face, I thought, handsomely patrician despite his years, with large, guileless blue eyes.

"Aye, that's so," Jamie agreed courteously. "I am invited by Mr. McLeod of Perth, to see a new style of letterpress he's recently put in use."

"Quite." Sir Percival paused to remove a snuffbox from his pocket, a pretty thing enameled in green and gold, with cherubs on the lid.

"I really should not advise a trip to the north just now," he said, opening the box and concentrating on its contents. "Really I should not. The weather is like to be inclement at this season; I am sure it would not suit Mrs. Malcolm." Smiling at me like an elderly angel, he inhaled a large pinch of snuff and paused, linen handkerchief at the ready.

Jamie sipped at his wine, his face blandly composed.

"I am grateful for your advice, Sir Percival," he said. "You'll perhaps have received word from your agents of recent storms to the north?"

Sir Percival sneezed, a small, neat sound, like a mouse with a cold. He was rather like a white mouse altogether, I thought, seeing him dab daintily at his pointed pink nose.

"Quite," he said again, putting away the kerchief and blinking benevolently at Jamie. "No, I would—as a particular friend with your welfare at heart—most strongly advise that you remain in Edinburgh. After all," he added, turning the beam of his benevolence on me, "you surely have an inducement to remain comfortably at home now, do you not? And now, my dear young people, I am afraid I must take my leave; I must not detain you any longer from what must be your wedding breakfast."

With a little assistance from the hovering Johnson, Sir Percival got up and tottered off, his gold-knobbed stick tap-tapping on the floor.

"He seems a nice old gent," I remarked, when I was sure he was far enough away not to hear me.

Jamie snorted. "Rotten as a worm-riddled board," he said. He picked up his glass and drained it. "Ye'd think otherwise," he said meditatively, putting it down and staring after the wizened figure, now cautiously negotiating the head of the stairs. "A man as close as

Sir Percival is to Judgment Day, I mean. Ye'd think fear o' the Devil would prevent him, but not a bit."

"I suppose he's like everyone else," I said cynically. "Most people think they're going to live forever."

Jamie laughed, his exuberant spirits returning with a rush.

"Aye, that's true," he said. He pushed my wineglass toward me. "And now you're here, Sassenach, I'm convinced of it. Drink up, *mo nighean donn*, and we'll go upstairs."

* * *

"Post coitum omne animalium triste est," I remarked, with my eyes closed.

There was no response from the warm, heavy weight on my chest, save the gentle sigh of his breathing. After a moment, though, I felt a sort of subterranean vibration, which I interpreted as amusement.

"That's a verra peculiar sentiment, Sassenach," Jamie said, his voice blurred with drowsiness. "Not your own, I hope?"

"No." I stroked the damp bright hair back from his forehead, and he turned his face into the curve of my shoulder, with a small contented snuffle.

The private rooms at Moubray's left a bit to be desired in the way of amorous accommodation. Still, the sofa at least offered a padded horizontal surface, which, if you came right down to it, was all that was necessary. While I had decided that I was not past wanting to commit passionate acts after all, I was still too old to want to commit them on the bare floorboards.

"I don't know who said it—some ancient philosopher or other. It was quoted in one of my medical textbooks; in the chapter on the human reproductive system."

The vibration made itself audible as a small chuckle.

"Ye'd seem to have applied yourself to your lessons to good purpose, Sassenach," he said. His hand passed down my side and wormed its way slowly underneath to cup my bottom. He sighed with contentment, squeezing slightly.

"I canna think when I have felt less *triste,*" he said.

"Me either," I said, tracing the whorl of the small cowlick that lifted the hair from the center of his forehead. "That's what made me think of it—I rather wondered what led the ancient philosopher to that conclusion.”

“I suppose it depends on the sorts of *animaliae* he’d been fornicating with,” Jamie observed. “Maybe it was just that none o’ them took to him, but he must ha’ tried a fair number, to make such a sweeping statement.”

He held tighter to his anchor as the tide of my laughter bounced him gently up and down.

“Mind ye, dogs sometimes do look a trifle sheepish when they’ve done wi’ mating,” he said.

“Mm. And how do sheep look, then?”

“Aye, well, female sheep just go on lookin’ like sheep—not havin’ a great deal of choice in the matter, ye ken.”

“Oh? And what do the male sheep look like?”

“Oh, they look fair depraved. Let their tongues hang out, drooling, and their eyes roll back, while they make disgusting noises. Like most male animals, aye?” I could feel the curve of his grin against my shoulder. He squeezed again, and I pulled gently on the ear closest to hand.

“I didn’t notice your tongue hanging out.”

“Ye werena noticing; your eyes were closed.”

“I didn’t hear any disgusting noises, either.”

“Well, I couldna just think of any on the spur of the moment,” he admitted. “Perhaps I’ll do better next time.”

We laughed softly together, and then were quiet, listening to each other breathe.

“Jamie,” I said softly at last, smoothing the back of his head, “I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy.”

He rolled to one side, shifting his weight carefully so as not to squash me, and lifted himself to lie face-to-face with me.

“Nor me, my Sassenach,” he said, and kissed me, very lightly, but lingering, so that I had time just to close my lips in a tiny bite on the fullness of his lower lip.

“It’s no just the bedding, ye ken,” he said, drawing back a little at last. His eyes looked down at me, a soft deep blue like the warm tropic sea.

"No," I said, touching his cheek. "It isn't."

"To have ye with me again—to talk wi' you—to know I can say anything, not guard my words or hide my thoughts—God, Sassenach," he said, "the Lord knows I am lust-crazed as a lad, and I canna keep my hands from you—or anything else—" he added, wryly, "but I would count that all well lost, had I no more than the pleasure of havin' ye by me, and to tell ye all my heart."

"It was lonely without you," I whispered. "So lonely."

"And me," he said. He looked down, long lashes hiding his eyes, and hesitated for a moment.

"I willna say that I have lived a monk," he said quietly. "When I had to—when I felt that I must or go mad—"

I laid my fingers against his lips, to stop him.

"Neither did I," I said. "Frank—"

His own hand pressed gently against my mouth. Both dumb, we looked at each other, and I could feel the smile growing behind my hand, and my own under his, to match it. I took my hand away.

"It doesna signify," he said. He took his hand off my mouth.

"No," I said. "It doesn't matter." I traced the line of his lips with my finger.

"So tell me all your heart," I said. "If there's time."

He glanced at the window to gauge the light—we were to meet Ian at the print shop at five o'clock, to check the progress of the search for Young Ian—and then rolled carefully off me.

"There's two hours, at least, before we must go. Sit up and put your clothes on, and I'll have them bring some wine and biscuits."

This sounded wonderful. I seemed to have been starving ever since I found him. I sat up and began to rummage through the pile of discarded clothes on the floor, looking for the set of stays the low-necked gown required.

"I'm no ways sad, but I do maybe feel a bit ashamed," Jamie observed, wriggling long, slender toes into a silk stocking. "Or I should, at least."

"Why is that?"

"Well, here I am, in paradise, so to speak, wi' you and wine and biscuits, while Ian's out tramping the pavements and worrying for his son."

"Are you worried about Young Ian?" I asked, concentrating on my laces.

He frowned slightly, pulling on the other stocking.

"Not so much worried for him, as afraid he may not turn up before tomorrow."

"What happens tomorrow?" I asked, and then belatedly recalled the encounter with Sir Percival Turner. "Oh, your trip to the north—that was supposed to be tomorrow?"

He nodded. "Aye, there's a rendezvous set at Mullin's Cove, tomorrow being the dark of the moon. A lugger from France, wi' a load of wine and cambric."

"And Sir Percival was warning you not to make that rendezvous?"

"So it seems. What's happened, I canna say, though I expect I'll find out. Could be as there's a visiting Customs Officer in the district, or he's had word of some activity on the coast there that has nothing to do wi' us, but could interfere." He shrugged and finished his last garter.

He spread out his hands upon his knees then, palm up, and slowly curled the fingers inward. The left curled at once into a fist, compact and neat, a blunt instrument ready for battle. The fingers of his right hand curled more slowly; the middle finger was crooked, and would not lie along the second. The fourth finger would not curl at all, but stuck out straight, holding the little finger at an awkward angle beside it.

He looked from his hands to me, smiling.

"D'ye remember the night when ye set my hand?"

"Sometimes, in my more horrible moments." That night was one to remember—only because it couldn't be forgotten. Against all odds, I had rescued him from Wentworth Prison and a death sentence—but not in time to prevent his being cruelly tortured and abused by Black Jack Randall.

I picked up his right hand and transferred it to my own knee. He let it lie there, warm, heavy and inert, and didn't object as I felt each finger, pulling gently to stretch the tendons and twisting to see the range of motion in the joints.

"My first orthopedic surgery, that was," I said wryly.

"Have ye done a great many things like that since?" he asked curiously, looking down at me.

"Yes, a few. I'm a surgeon—but it doesn't mean then what it means now," I added hastily. "Surgeons in my time don't pull teeth and let blood. They're more like what's meant now by the word 'physician'—a doctor with training in all the fields of medicine, but with a specialty."

"Special, are ye? Well, ye've always been that," he said, grinning. The crippled fingers slid into my palm and his thumb stroked my knuckles. "What is it a surgeon does that's special, then?"

I frowned, trying to think of the right phrasing. "Well, as best I can put it—a surgeon tries to effect healing … by means of a knife."

His long mouth curled upward at the notion.

"A nice contradiction, that; but it suits ye, Sassenach."

"It does?" I said, startled.

He nodded, never taking his eyes off my face. I could see him studying me closely, and wondered self-consciously what I must look like, flushed from lovemaking, with my hair in wild disorder.

"Ye havena been lovelier, Sassenach," he said, smile growing wider as I reached up to smooth my hair. He caught my hand, and kissed it gently. "Leave your curls be.

"No," he said, holding my hands trapped while he looked me over, "no, a knife is verra much what you are, now I think of it. A clever-worked scabbard, and most gorgeous to see, Sassenach"—he traced the line of my lips with a finger, provoking a smile—"but tempered steel for a core … and a wicked sharp edge, I do think."

"Wicked?" I said, surprised.

"Not heartless, I don't mean," he assured me. His eyes rested on my face, intent and curious. A smile touched his lips. "No, never that. But you can be ruthless strong, Sassenach, when the need is on ye."

I smiled, a little wryly. "I can," I said.

"I have seen that in ye before, aye?" His voice grew softer and his grasp on my hand tightened. "But now I think ye have it much more than when ye were younger. You'll have needed it often since, no?"

I realized quite suddenly why he saw so clearly what Frank had never seen at all.

"You have it too," I said. "And you've needed it. Often." Unconsciously, my fingers touched the jagged scar that crossed his middle finger, twisting the distal joints.

He nodded.

"I have wondered," he said, so low I could scarcely hear him. "Wondered often, if I could call that edge to my service, and sheathe it safe again. For I have seen a great many men grow hard in that calling, and their steel decay to dull iron. And I have wondered often, was I master in my soul, or did I become the slave of my own blade?

"I have thought again and again," he went on, looking down at our linked hands … "that I had drawn my blade too often, and spent so long in the service of strife that I wasna fit any longer for human intercourse."

My lips twitched with the urge to make a remark, but I bit them instead. He saw it, and smiled, a little wryly.

"I didna think I should ever laugh again in a woman's bed, Sassenach," he said. "Or even come to a woman, save as a brute, blind with need." A note of bitterness came into his voice.

I lifted his hand, and kissed the small scar on the back of it.

"I can't see you as a brute," I said. I meant it lightly, but his face softened as he looked at me, and he answered seriously.

"I know that, Sassenach. And it is that ye canna see me so that gives me hope. For I am—and know it—and yet perhaps …" He trailed off, watching me intently.

"You have that—the strength. Ye have it, and your soul as well. So perhaps my own may be saved."

I had no notion what to say to this, and said nothing for a while, but only held his hand, caressing the twisted fingers and the large, hard knuckles. It was a warrior's hand—but he was not a warrior, now.

I turned the hand over and smoothed it on my knee, palm up. Slowly, I traced the deep lines and rising hillocks, and the tiny letter "C" at the base of his thumb; the brand that marked him mine.

"I knew an old lady in the Highlands once, who said the lines in your hand don't predict your life; they reflect it."

"Is that so, then?" His fingers twitched slightly, but his palm lay still and open.

"I don't know. She said you're born with the lines of your hand—with a life—but then the lines change, with the things you do, and the person you are." I knew nothing about palmistry, but I could see one deep line that ran from wrist to midpalm, forking several times.

"I think that might be the one they call a life-line," I said. "See all the forks? I suppose that would mean you'd changed your life a lot, made a lot of choices."

He snorted briefly, but with amusement rather than derision.

"Oh, aye? Well, that's safe enough to say." He peered into his palm, leaning over my knee. "I suppose the first fork would be when I met Jack Randall, and the second when I wed you—see, they're close together, there."

"So they are." I ran my finger slowly along the line, making his fingers twitch slightly as it tickled. "And Culloden maybe would be another?"

"Perhaps." But he did not wish to talk of Culloden. His own finger moved on. "And when I went to prison, and came back again, and came to Edinburgh."

"And became a printer." I stopped and looked up at him, brows raised. "How on earth *did* you come to be a printer? It's the last thing I would have thought of."

"Oh, that." His mouth widened in a smile. "Well—it was an accident, aye?"

To start with he had only been looking for a business that would help to conceal and facilitate the smuggling. Possessed of a sizable sum from a recent profitable venture, he had determined to purchase a business whose normal operations involved a large wagon and team of horses, and some discreet premises that could be used for the temporary storage of goods in transit.

Carting suggested itself, but was rejected precisely because the operations of that business made its practitioners subject to more or less constant scrutiny from the Customs. Likewise, the ownership of a tavern or inn, while superficially desirable because of the large quantities of supplies brought in, was too vulnerable in its legitimate operation to hide an illegitimate one; tax collectors and Customs agents hung about taverns like fleas on a fat dog.

"I thought of printing, when I went to a place to have some notices made up," he explained. "As I was waiting to put in my order, I saw the wagon come rumbling up, all loaded wi' boxes of paper and casks of alcohol for the ink powder, and I thought, by God, that's it! For excisemen would never be troubling a place like that."

It was only after purchasing the shop in Carfax Close, hiring Geordie to run the press, and actually beginning to fill orders for posters, pamphlets, folios, and books, that the other possibilities of his new business had occurred to him.

"It was a man named Tom Gage," he explained. He loosed his hand from my grasp, growing eager in the telling, gesturing and rubbing his hands through his hair as he talked, disheveling himself with enthusiasm.

"He brought in small orders for this or that—innocent stuff, all of it—but often, and stayed to talk over it, taking trouble to talk to me as well as to Geordie, though he must have seen I knew less about the business than he did himself."

He smiled at me wryly.

"I didna ken much about printing, Sassenach, but I do ken men."

It was obvious that Gage was exploring the sympathies of Alexander Malcolm; hearing the faint sibilance of Jamie's Highland speech, he had prodded delicately, mentioning this acquaintance and that whose Jacobite sympathies had led them into trouble after the Rising, picking up the threads of mutual acquaintance, skillfully directing the conversation, stalking his prey. Until at last, the amused prey had bluntly told him to bring what he wanted made; no King's man would hear of it.

"And he trusted you." It wasn't a question; the only man who had ever trusted Jamie Fraser in error was Charles Stuart—and in that case, the error was Jamie's.

"He did." And so an association was begun, strictly business in the beginning, but deepening into friendship as time went on. Jamie had printed all the materials generated by Gage's small group of radical political writers—from publicly acknowledged articles to anonymous broadsheets and pamphlets filled with material incriminating enough to get the authors summarily jailed or hanged.

"We'd go to the tavern down the street and talk, after the printing was done. I met a few of Tom's friends, and finally Tom said I should write a small piece myself. I laughed and told him that with my hand, by the time I'd penned anything that could be read, we'd all be dead—of old age, not hanging.

"I was standing by the press as we were talking, setting the type wi' my left hand, not even thinking. He just stared at me, and then he started to laugh. He pointed at the tray, and at my hand, and went on laughing, 'til he had to sit down on the floor to stop."

He stretched out his arms in front of him, flexing his hands and studying them dispassionately. He curled one hand into a fist and bent it slowly up toward his face, making the muscles of his arm ripple and swell under the linen.

"I'm hale enough," he said. "And with luck, may be so for a good many years yet—but not forever, Sassenach. I ha' fought wi' sword and dirk many times, but to every warrior comes the day when his strength will fail him." He shook his head and stretched out a hand toward his coat, which lay on the floor.

"I took these, that day wi' Tom Gage, to remind me of it," he said.

He took my hand and put into it the things he had taken from his pocket. They were cool, and hard to the touch, small heavy oblongs of lead. I didn't need to feel the incised ends to know what the letters on the type slugs were.

"Q.E.D.," I said.

"The English took my sword and dirk away," he said softly. His finger touched the slugs that lay in my palm. "But Tom Gage put a weapon into my hands again, and I think I shall not lay it down."

* * *

We walked arm in arm down the cobbled slope of the Royal Mile at a quarter to five, suffused with a glow engendered by several bowls of well-peppered oyster stew and a bottle of wine, shared at intervals during our "private communications."

The city glowed all around us, as though sharing our happiness. Edinburgh lay under a haze that would soon thicken to rain again, but for now, the light of the setting sun hung gold and pink and red in the clouds, and shone in the wet patina of the cobbled street, so that the gray stones of the buildings softened and streamed with reflected light, echoing the glow that warmed my cheeks and shone in Jamie's eyes when he looked at me.

Drifting down the street in this state of softheaded self-absorption, it was several minutes before I noticed anything amiss. A man, impatient of our meandering progress, stepped briskly around us, and then came to a dead stop just in front of me, making me trip on the wet stones and throw a shoe.

He flung up his head and stared skyward for a moment, then hurried off down the street, not running, but walking as fast as he could go.

"What's the matter with him?" I said, stooping to retrieve my shoe. Suddenly I noticed that all around us, folk were stopping, staring up, and then starting to rush down the street.

"What do you think—?" I began, but when I turned to Jamie, he too was staring intently upward. I looked up, too, and it took only a moment to see that the red glow in the clouds above was a good deal deeper than the general color of the sunset sky, and seemed to flicker in an uneasy fashion most uncharacteristic of sunsets.

"Fire," he said. "God, I think it's in Leith Wynd!"

At the same moment, someone farther down the street raised the cry of "Fire!" and as though this official diagnosis had given them leave to run at last, the hurrying figures below broke loose and cascaded down the street like a herd of lemmings, anxious to fling themselves into the pyre.

A few saner souls ran upwards, past us, also shouting "Fire!" but presumably with the intent of alerting whatever passed for a fire department.

Jamie was already in motion, tugging me along as I hopped awkwardly on one foot. Rather than stop, I kicked the other shoe off, and followed him, slipping and stubbing my toes on the cold wet cobbles as I ran.

The fire was not in Leith Wynd, but next door, in Carfax Close. The mouth of the close was choked with excited onlookers, shoving and craning in an effort to see, shouting incoherent questions at one another. The smell of smoke struck hot and pungent through the damp evening air, and waves of crackling heat beat against my face as I ducked into the close.

Jamie didn't hesitate, but plunged into the crowd, making a path by main force. I pressed close behind him before the human waves could close again, and elbowed my way through, unable to see anything but Jamie's broad back ahead of me.

Then we popped out in the front of the crowd, and I could see all too well. Dense clouds of gray smoke rolled out of both the printshop's lower windows, and I could hear a whispering, crackling noise that rose above the noise of the spectators as though the fire were talking to itself.

"My press!" With a cry of anguish, Jamie darted up the front step and kicked in the door. A cloud of smoke rolled out of the open doorway and engulfed him like a hungry beast. I caught a brief glimpse of him, staggering from the impact of the smoke; then he dropped to his knees and crawled into the building.

Inspired by this example, several men from the crowd ran up the steps of the printshop, and likewise disappeared into the smoke-filled interior. The heat was so intense that I felt my skirts blow against my legs with the wind of it, and wondered how the men could stand it, there inside.

A fresh outbreak of shouting in the crowd behind me announced the arrival of the Town Guard, armed with buckets. Obviously accustomed to this task, the men flung off their wine-red uniform coats and began at once to attack the fire, smashing the windows and flinging pails of water through them with a fierce abandon. Meanwhile, the crowd swelled, its noise augmented by a constant cascade of pattering feet down the many staircases of the close, as families on the upper floors of the surrounding buildings hastily ushered hordes of excited children down to safety.

I couldn’t think that the efforts of the bucket brigade, valiant as they were, would have much effect on what was obviously a fire well underway. I was edging back and forth on the pavement, trying vainly to see anything moving within, when the lead man in the bucket line uttered a startled cry and leaped back, just in time to avoid being crowned by a tray of lead type that whizzed through the broken window and landed on the cobbles with a crash, scattering slugs in all directions.

Two or three urchins wriggled through the crowd and snatched at the slugs, only to be cuffed and driven off by indignant neighbors. One plump lady in a kertch and apron darted forward, risking life and limb, and took custody of the heavy type-tray, dragging it back to the curb, where she crouched protectively over it like a hen on a nest.

Before her companions could scoop up the fallen type, though, they were driven back by a hail of objects that rained from both windows: more type trays, roller bars, inking pads, and bottles of ink, which broke on the pavement, leaving big spidery blotches that ran into the puddles spilled by the fire fighters.

Encouraged by the draft from the open door and windows, the voice of the fire had grown from a whisper into a self-satisfied, chuckling roar. Prevented from flinging water through the windows by the rain of objects being thrown out of them, the leader of the Town Guard shouted to his men, and holding a soaked handkerchief over his nose, ducked and ran into the building, followed by a half-dozen of his fellows.

The line quickly re-formed, full buckets coming hand to hand round the corner from the nearest pump and up the stoop, excited lads snatching the empty buckets that bounced down the step, to race back with them to the pump for refilling. Edinburgh is a stone city, but with so many buildings crammed cheek by jowl, all equipped with multiple hearths and chimneys, fire must be still a frequent occurrence.

Evidently so, for a fresh commotion behind me betokened the belated arrival of the fire engine. The waves of people parted like the Red Sea, to allow passage of the engine, drawn by a team of men rather than horses, which could not have negotiated the tight quarters of the wynds.

The engine was a marvel of brass, glowing like a coal itself in the reflected flames. The heat was becoming more intense; I could feel my lungs dry and labor with each gulp of hot air, and was terrified for Jamie. How long could he breathe, in that hellish fog of smoke and heat, let alone the danger of the flames themselves?

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Ian, forcing his way through the crowd despite his wooden leg, had appeared suddenly by my elbow. He grabbed my arm to keep his balance as another rain of objects forced the people around us back again.

"Where's Jamie?" he shouted in my ear.

"In there!" I bellowed back, pointing.

There was a sudden bustle and commotion at the door of the printshop, with a confused shouting that rose even over the sound of the fire. Several sets of legs appeared, shuffling to and fro beneath the emergent plume of smoke that billowed from the door. Six men emerged, Jamie among them, staggering under the weight of a huge piece of bulky machinery—Jamie's precious printing press. They eased it down the step and pushed it well into the crowd, then turned back to the printshop.

Too late for any more rescue maneuvers; there was a crash from inside, a fresh blast of heat that sent the crowd scuttling backward, and suddenly the windows of the upper story were lit with dancing flames inside. A small stream of men issued from the building, coughing and choking, some of them crawling, blackened with soot and dampened with the sweat of their efforts. The engine crew pumped madly, but the thick stream of water from their hose made not the slightest impression on the fire.

Ian's hand clamped down on my arm like the jaws of a trap.

"Ian!" he shrieked, loud enough to be heard above the noises of crowd and fire alike.

I looked up in the direction of his gaze, and saw a wraithlike shape at the second-story window. It seemed to struggle briefly with the sash, and then to fall back or be enveloped in the smoke.

My heart leapt into my mouth. There was no telling whether the shape was indeed Young Ian, but it was certainly a human form. Ian had lost no time in gaping, but was stumping toward the door of the printshop with all the speed his leg would allow.

"Wait!" I shouted, running after him.

Jamie was leaning on the printing press, chest heaving as he tried to catch his breath and thank his assistants at the same time.

"Jamie!" I snatched at his sleeve, ruthlessly jerking him away from a red-faced barber, who kept excitedly wiping sooty hands on his apron, leaving long black streaks among the smears of dried soap and the spots of blood.

"Up there!" I shouted, pointing. "Young Ian's upstairs!"

Jamie stepped back, swiping a sleeve across his blackened face, and stared wildly at the upper windows. Nothing was to be seen but the roiling shimmer of the fire against the panes.

Ian was struggling in the hands of several neighbors who sought to prevent his entering the shop.

"No, man, ye canna go in!" the Guard captain cried, trying to grasp Ian's flailing hands. "The staircase has fallen, and the roof will go next!"

Despite his stringy build and the handicap of his leg, Ian was tall and vigorous, and the feeble grasp of his well-meaning Town Guard captors—mostly retired pensioners from the Highland regiments—was no match for his mountain-hardened strength, reinforced as it was by parental desperation. Slowly but surely, the whole confused mass jerked by inches up the steps of the printshop as Ian dragged his would-be rescuers with him toward the flames.

I felt Jamie draw breath, gulping air as deep as he could with his seared lungs, and then he was up the steps as well, and had Ian round the waist, dragging him back.

"Come down, man!" he shouted hoarsely. "Ye'll no manage—the stair is gone!" He glanced round, saw me, and thrust Ian bodily backward, off-balance and staggering, into my arms. "Hold him," he shouted, over the roar of the flames. "I'll fetch down the lad!"

With that, he turned and dashed up the steps of the adjoining building, pushing his way through the patrons of the ground-floor chocolate shop, who had emerged onto the pavement to gawk at the excitement, pewter cups still clutched in their hands.

Following Jamie's example, I locked my arms tight around Ian's waist and didn't let go. He made an abortive attempt to follow Jamie, but then stopped and stood rigid in my arms, his heart beating wildly just under my cheek.

"Don't worry," I said, pointlessly. "He'll do it; he'll get him out. He will. I know he will."

Ian didn't answer—might not have heard—but stood still and stiff as a statue in my grasp, breath coming harshly with a sound like a sob. When I released my hold on his waist, he didn't move or turn, but when I stood beside him, he snatched my hand and held it hard. My bones would have ground together, had I not been squeezing back just as hard.

It was no more than a minute before the window above the chocolate shop opened and Jamie's head and shoulders appeared, red hair glowing like a stray tongue of flame escaped from the main fire. He climbed out onto the sill, and cautiously turned, squatting, until he faced the building.

Rising to his stockinged feet, he grasped the gutter of the roof overhead and pulled, slowly raising himself by the strength of his arms, long toes scrabbling for a grip in the crevices between the mortared stones of the housefront. With a grunt audible even over the sound of fire and crowd, he eeled over the edge of the roof and disappeared behind the gable.

A shorter man could not have managed. Neither could Ian, with his wooden leg. I heard Ian say something under his breath; a prayer I thought, but when I glanced at him, his jaw was clenched, face set in lines of fear.

"What in hell is he going to do up there?" I thought, and was unaware that I had spoken aloud until the barber, shading his eyes next to me, replied.

"There's a trapdoor built in the roof o' the printshop, ma'am. Nay doubt Mr. Malcolm means to gain access to the upper story so. Is it his 'prentice up there, d'ye know?"

"No!" Ian snapped, hearing this. "It's my son!"

The barber shrank back before Ian's glare, murmuring "Oh, aye, just so, sir, just so!" and crossing himself. A shout from the crowd grew into a roar as two figures appeared on the roof of the chocolate shop, and Ian dropped my hand, springing forward.

Jamie had his arm round Young Ian, who was bent and reeling from the smoke he had swallowed. It was reasonably obvious that neither of them was going to be able to negotiate a return through the adjoining building in his present condition.

Just then, Jamie spotted Ian below. Cupping his hand around his mouth, he bellowed "Rope!"

Rope there was; the Town Guard had come equipped. Ian snatched the coil from an approaching Guardsman, leaving that worthy blinking in indignation, and turned to face the house.

I caught the gleam of Jamie's teeth as he grinned down at his brother-in-law, and the look of answering wryness on Ian's face. How many times had they thrown a rope between them, to raise hay to the barn loft, or bind a load to the wagon for carrying?

The crowd fell back from the whirl of Ian's arm, and the heavy coil flew up in a smooth parabola, unwinding as it went, landing on Jamie's outstretched arm with the precision of a bumblebee lighting on a flower. Jamie hauled in the dangling tail, and disappeared momentarily, to anchor the rope about the base of the building's chimney.

A few precarious moments' work, and the two smoke-blackened figures had come to a safe landing on the pavement below. Young Ian, rope slung under his arms and round his chest, stood upright for a moment, then, as the tension of the rope slackened, his knees buckled and he slid into a gangling heap on the cobbles.

"Are ye all right? *A bhalaich*, speak to me!" Ian fell to his knees beside his son, anxiously trying to unknot the rope round Young Ian's chest, while simultaneously trying to lift up the lad's lolling head.

Jamie was leaning against the railing of the chocolate shop, black in the face and coughing his lungs out, but otherwise apparently unharmed. I sat down on the boy's other side, and took his head on my lap.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry at the sight of him. When I had seen him in the morning, he had been an appealing-looking lad, if no great beauty, with something of his father's homely, good-natured looks. Now, at evening, the thick hair over one side of his forehead had been singed to a bleached red stubble, and his eyebrows and lashes had been burned off entirely. The skin beneath was the soot-smeared bright pink of a suckling pig just off the spit.

I felt for a pulse in the spindly neck and found it, reassuringly strong. His breathing was hoarse and irregular, and no wonder; I hoped the lining of his lungs had not been burned. He coughed, long and rackingly, and the thin body convulsed on my lap.

"Is he all right?" Ian's hands instinctively grabbed his son beneath the armpits and sat him up. His head wobbled to and fro, and he pitched forward into my arms.

"I think so; I can't tell for sure." The boy was still coughing, but not fully conscious; I held him against my shoulder like an enormous baby, patting his back futilely as he retched and gagged.

"Is he all right?" This time it was Jamie, squatting breathless alongside me. His voice was so hoarse I wouldn't have recognized it, roughened as it was by smoke.

"I think so. What about you? You look like Malcolm X," I said, peering at him over Young Ian's heaving shoulder.

"I do?" He put a hand to his face, looking startled, then grinned reassuringly. "Nay, I canna say how I look, but I'm no an ex-Malcolm yet; only a wee bit singed round the edges."

"Get back, get back!" The Guard captain was at my side, gray beard bristling with anxiety, plucking at my sleeve. "Move yourself, ma'am, the roof's going!"

Sure enough, as we scrambled to safety, the roof of the printshop fell in, and an awed sound rose from the watching crowd as an enormous fountain of sparks whirled skyward, brilliant against the darkening sky.

As though heaven resented this intrusion, the spume of fiery ash was answered by the first pattering of raindrops, plopping heavily on the cobbles all around us. The Edinburghians, who surely ought to have been accustomed to rain by now, made noises of consternation and began to scuttle back into the surrounding buildings like a herd of cockroaches, leaving nature to complete the fire engine's work.

A moment later, Ian and I were alone with Young Ian. Jamie, having dispensed money liberally to the Guard and other assistants, and having arranged for his press and its fittings to be housed in the barber's storeroom, trudged wearily toward us.

"How's the lad?" he asked, wiping a hand down his face. The rain had begun to come down more heavily, and the effect on his soot-blackened countenance was picturesque in the extreme. Ian looked at him, and for the first time, the anger, worry and fear faded somewhat from his countenance. He gave Jamie a lopsided smile.

"He doesna look a great deal better than ye do yourself, man—but I think he'll do now. Give us a hand, aye?"

Murmuring small Gaelic endearments suitable for babies, Ian bent over his son, who was by this time sitting up groggily on the curbstone, swaying to and fro like a heron in a high wind.

By the time we reached Madame Jeanne's establishment, Young Ian could walk, though still supported on either side by his father and uncle. Bruno, who opened the door, blinked incredulously at the sight, and then swung the door open, laughing so hard he could barely close it after us.

I had to admit that we were nothing much to look at, wet through and streaming with rain. Jamie and I were both barefoot, and Jamie's clothes were in rags, singed and torn and covered with streaks of soot. Ian's dark hair straggled in his eyes, making him look like a drowned rat with a wooden leg.

Young Ian, though, was the focus of attention, as multiple heads came popping out of the drawing room in response to the noise Bruno was making. With his singed hair, swollen red face, beaky nose, and lashless, blinking eyes, he strongly resembled the fledgling young of some exotic bird species—a newly hatched flamingo, perhaps. His face could scarcely grow redder, but the back of his neck flamed crimson, as the sound of feminine giggles followed us up the stairs.

Safely ensconced in the small upstairs sitting room, with the door closed, Ian turned to face his hapless offspring.

"Going to live, are ye, ye wee bugger?" he demanded.

"Aye, sir," Young Ian replied in a dismal croak, looking rather as though he wished the answer were "No."

"Good," his father said grimly. "D'ye want to explain yourself, or shall I just belt hell out of ye now and save us both time?"

"Ye canna thrash someone who's just had his eyebrows burnt off, Ian," Jamie protested hoarsely, pouring out a glass of porter from the decanter on the table. "It wouldna be humane." He grinned at his nephew and handed him the glass, which the boy clutched with alacrity.

"Aye, well. Perhaps not," Ian agreed, surveying his son. One corner of his mouth twitched. Young Ian was a pitiable sight; he was also an extremely funny one. "That doesna mean ye aren't going to get your arse blistered later, mind," he warned the boy, "and that's besides whatever your mother means to do to ye when she sees ye again. But for now, lad, take your ease."

Not noticeably reassured by the magnanimous tone of this last statement, Young Ian didn't answer, but sought refuge in the depths of his glass of porter.

I took my own glass with a good deal of pleasure. I had realized belatedly just why the citizens of Edinburgh reacted to rain with such repugnance; once one was wet through, it was the devil to get dry again in the damp confines of a stone house, with no change of clothes and no heat available but a small hearthfire.

I plucked the damp bodice away from my breasts, caught Young Ian's interested glance, and decided regretfully that I really couldn't take it off with the boy in the room. Jamie seemed to have been corrupting the lad to quite a sufficient extent already. I gulped the porter instead, feeling the rich flavor purl warmingly through my innards.

"D'ye feel well enough to talk a bit, lad?" Jamie sat down opposite his nephew, next to Ian on the hassock.

"Aye … I think so," Young Ian croaked cautiously. He cleared his throat like a bullfrog and repeated more firmly, "Aye, I can."

"Good. Well, then. First, how did ye come to be in the printshop, and then, how did it come to be on fire?"

Young Ian pondered that one for a minute, then took another gulp of his porter for courage and said, "I set it."

Jamie and Ian both sat up straight at that. I could see Jamie revising his opinion as to the advisability of thrashing people without eyebrows, but he mastered his temper with an obvious effort, and said merely, "Why?"

The boy took another gulp of porter, coughed, and drank again, apparently trying to decide what to say.

"Well," he began uncertainly, "there was a man," and came to a dead stop.

"A man," Jamie prompted patiently when his nephew showed signs of having become suddenly deaf and dumb. "What man?"

Young Ian clutched his glass in both hands, looking deeply unhappy.

"Answer your uncle this minute, clot," Ian said sharply. "Or I'll take ye across my knee and tan ye right here."

With a mixture of similar threats and promptings, the two men managed to extract a more or less coherent story from the boy.

Young Ian had been at the tavern at Kerse that morning, where he had been told to meet Wally, who would come down from the rendezvous with the wagons of brandy, there to load the punked casks and spoiled wine to be used as subterfuge.

"Told?" Ian asked sharply. "Who told ye?"

"I did," Jamie said, before Young Ian could speak. He waved a hand at his brother-in-law, urging silence. "Aye, I kent he was here. We'll talk about it later, Ian, if ye please. It's important we know what happened today."

Ian glared at Jamie and opened his mouth to disagree, then shut it with a snap. He nodded to his son to go on.

"I was hungry, ye see," Young Ian said.

"When are ye not?" his father and uncle said together, in perfect unison. They looked at each other, snorted with sudden laughter, and the strained atmosphere in the room eased slightly.

“So ye went into the tavern to have a bite,” Jamie said. “That’s all right, lad, no harm done. And what happened while ye were there?”

That, it transpired, was where he had seen the man. A small, ratty-looking fellow, with a seaman’s pigtail, and a blind eye, talking to the landlord.

“He was askin’ for you, Uncle Jamie,” Young Ian said, growing easier in his speech with repeated applications of porter. “By your own name.”

Jamie started, looking surprised. “Jamie Fraser, ye mean?” Young Ian nodded, sipping. “Aye. But he knew your other name as well—Jamie Roy, I mean.”

“Jamie Roy?” Ian turned a puzzled glance on his brother-in-law, who shrugged impatiently.

“It’s how I’m known on the docks. Christ, Ian, ye know what I do!”

“Aye, I do, but I didna ken the wee laddie was helpin’ ye to do it.” Ian’s thin lips pressed tight together, and he turned his attention back to his son. “Go on, lad. I willna interrupt ye again.”

The seaman had asked the tavernkeeper how best an old seadog, down on his luck and looking for employment, might find one Jamie Fraser, who was known to have a use for able men. The landlord pleading ignorance of that name, the seaman had leaned closer, pushed a coin across the table, and in a lowered voice asked whether the name “Jamie Roy” was more familiar.

The landlord remaining deaf as an adder, the seaman had soon left the tavern, with Young Ian right behind him.

“I thought as how maybe it would be good to know who he was, and what he meant,” the lad explained, blinking.

“Ye might have thought to leave word wi’ the publican for Wally,” Jamie said. “Still, that’s neither here nor there. Where did he go?”

Down the road at a brisk walk, but not so brisk that a healthy boy could not follow at a careful distance. An accomplished walker, the seaman had made his way into Edinburgh, a distance of some five miles, in less than an hour, and arrived at last at the Green Owl tavern, followed by Young Ian, near wilted with thirst from the walk.

I started at the name, but didn't say anything, not wanting to interrupt the story.

"It was terrible crowded," the lad reported. "Something happened in the morning, and everyone was talking of it—but they shut up whenever they saw me. Anyway, it was the same there." He paused to cough and clear his throat. "The seaman ordered drink—brandy—then asked the landlord was he acquainted wi' a supplier of brandy named Jamie Roy or Jamie Fraser."

"Did he, then?" Jamie murmured. His gaze was intent on his nephew, but I could see the thoughts working behind his high forehead, making a small crease between his thick brows.

The man had gone methodically from tavern to tavern, dogged by his faithful shadow, and in each establishment had ordered brandy and repeated his question.

"He must have a rare head, to be drinkin' that much brandy," Ian remarked.

Young Ian shook his head. "He didna drink it. He only smelt it."

His father clicked his tongue at such a scandalous waste of good spirit, but Jamie's red brows climbed still higher.

"Did he taste any of it?" he asked sharply.

"Aye. At the Dog and Gun, and again at the Blue Boar. He had nay more than a wee taste, though, and then left the glass untouched. He didna drink at all at the other places, and we went to five o' them, before …" He trailed off, and took another drink.

Jamie's face underwent an astonishing transformation. From an expression of frowning puzzlement, his face went completely blank, and then resolved itself into an expression of revelation.

"Is that so, now," he said softly to himself. "Indeed." His attention came back to his nephew. "And then what happened, lad?"

Young Ian was beginning to look unhappy again. He gulped, the tremor visible all the way down his skinny neck.

"Well, it was a terrible long way from Kerse to Edinburgh," he began, "and a terrible dry walk, too …"

His father and uncle exchanged jaundiced glances.

“Ye drank too much,” Jamie said, resigned.

“Well, I didna ken he was going to so many taverns, now, did I?” Young Ian cried in self-defense, going pink in the ears.

“No, of course not, lad,” Jamie said kindly, smothering the beginning of Ian’s more censorious remarks. “How long did ye last?”

Until midway down the Royal Mile, it turned out, where Young Ian, overcome by the cumulation of early rising, a five-mile walk, and the effects of something like two quarts of ale, had dozed off in a corner, waking an hour later to find his quarry long gone.

“So I came here,” he explained. “I thought as how Uncle Jamie should know about it. But he wasna here.” The boy glanced at me, and his ears grew still pinker.

“And just why did ye think he *should* be here?” Ian favored his offspring with a gimlet eye, which then swiveled to his brother-in-law. The simmering anger Ian had been holding in check since the morning suddenly erupted. “The filthy gall of ye, Jamie Fraser, takin’ my son to a bawdy house!”

“A fine one you are to talk, Da!” Young Ian was on his feet, swaying a bit, but with his big, bony hands clenched at his sides.

“Me? And what d’ye mean by that, ye wee gomerel?” Ian cried, his eyes going wide with outrage.

“I mean you’re a damned hypocrite!” his son shouted hoarsely. “Preachin’ to me and Michael about purity and keepin’ to one woman, and all the time ye’re slinkin’ about the city, sniffin’ after whores!”

“What?” Ian’s face had gone entirely purple. I looked in some alarm to Jamie, who appeared to be finding something funny in the present situation.

“You’re a … a … goddamned whited sepulchre!” Young Ian came up with the simile triumphantly, then paused as though trying to think of another to equal it. His mouth opened, though nothing emerged but a soft belch.

“That boy is rather drunk,” I said to Jamie.

He picked up the decanter of porter, eyed the level within, and set it down.

"You're right," he said. "I should ha' noticed sooner, but it's hard to tell, scorched as he is."

The elder Ian wasn't drunk, but his expression strongly resembled his offspring's, what with the suffused countenance, popping eyes, and straining neck cords.

"What the bloody, stinking hell d'ye mean by that, ye whelp?" he shouted. He moved menacingly toward Young Ian, who took an involuntary step backward and sat down quite suddenly as his calves met the edge of the sofa.

"Her," he said, startled into monosyllables. He pointed at me, to make it clear. "Her! You deceivin' my Mam wi' this filthy whore, that's what I mean!"

Ian fetched his son a clout over the ear that knocked him sprawling on the sofa.

"Ye great clot!" he said, scandalized. "A fine way to speak o' your auntie Claire, to say nothing o' me and your Mam!"

"Aunt?" Young Ian gawped at me from the cushions, looking so like a nestling begging for food that I burst out laughing despite myself.

"You left before I could introduce myself this morning," I said.

"But you're dead," he said stupidly.

"Not yet," I assured him. "Unless I've caught pneumonia from sitting here in a damp dress."

His eyes had grown perfectly round as he stared at me. Now a fugitive gleam of excitement came into them.

"Some o' the auld women at Lallybroch say ye were a wisewoman—a white lady, or maybe even a fairy. When Uncle Jamie came home from Culloden without ye, they said as how ye'd maybe gone back to the fairies, where ye maybe came from. Is that true? D'ye live in a dun?"

I exchanged a glance with Jamie, who rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"No," I said. "I … er, I …"

"She escaped to France after Culloden," Ian broke in suddenly, with great firmness. "She thought your uncle Jamie was killed in the battle, so she went to her kin in France. She'd been one of Prince

Tearlach's particular friends—she couldna come back to Scotland after the war without puttin' herself in sore danger. But then she heard of your uncle, and as soon as she kent that her husband wasna deid after all, she took ship at once and came to find him."

Young Ian's mouth hung open slightly. So did mine.

"Er, yes," I said, closing it. "That's what happened."

The lad turned large, shining eyes from me to his uncle.

"So ye've come back to him," he said happily. "God, that's romantic!"

The tension of the moment was broken. Ian hesitated, but his eyes softened as he looked from Jamie to me.

"Aye," he said, and smiled reluctantly. "Aye, I suppose it is."

* * *

"I didna expect to be doing this for him for a good two or three years yet," Jamie remarked, holding his nephew's head with an expert hand as Young Ian retched painfully into the spittoon I was holding.

"Aye, well, he's always been forward," Ian answered resignedly. "Learnt to walk before he could stand, and was forever tumblin' into the fire or the washpot or the pigpen or the cowbyre." He patted the skinny, heaving back. "There, lad, let it come."

A little more, and the lad was deposited in a wilted heap on the sofa, there to recover from the effects of smoke, emotion, and too much porter under the censoriously mingled gaze of uncle and father.

"Where's that damn tea I sent for?" Jamie reached impatiently for the bell, but I stopped him. The brothel's domestic arrangements were evidently still disarranged from the excitements of the morning.

"Don't bother," I said. "I'll go down and fetch it." I scooped up the spittoon and carried it out with me at arm's length, hearing Ian say behind me, in a reasonable tone of voice, "Look, fool—"

I found my way to the kitchen with no difficulty, and obtained the necessary supplies. I hoped Jamie and Ian would give the boy a few minutes' respite; not only for his own sake, but so that I would miss nothing of his story.

I had clearly missed *something*; when I returned to the small sitting room, an air of constraint hung over the room like a cloud, and Young Ian glanced up and then quickly away to avoid my eye. Jamie was his usual imperturbable self, but the elder Ian looked almost as flushed and uneasy as his son. He hurried forward to take the tray from me, murmuring thanks, but would not meet my eye.

I raised one eyebrow at Jamie, who gave me a slight smile and a shrug. I shrugged back and picked up one of the bowls on the tray.

"Bread and milk," I said, handing it to Young Ian, who at once looked happier.

"Hot tea," I said, handing the pot to his father.

"Whisky," I said, handing the bottle to Jamie, "and cold tea for the burns." I whisked the lid off the last bowl, in which a number of napkins were soaking in cold tea.

"Cold tea?" Jamie's ruddy brows lifted. "Did the cook have no butter?"

"You don't put butter on burns," I told him. "Aloe juice, or the juice of a plantain or plantago, but the cook didn't have any of that. Cold tea is the best we could manage."

I poulticed Young Ian's blistered hands and forearms and blotted his scarlet face gently with the tea-soaked napkins while Jamie and Ian did the honors with teapot and whisky bottle, after which we all sat down, somewhat restored, to hear the rest of Ian's story.

"Well," he began, "I walked about the city for a bit, tryin' to think what best to do. And finally my head cleared a bit, and I reasoned that if the man I'd been following was goin' from tavern to tavern down the High Street, if I went to the other end and started *up* the street, I could maybe find him that way."

"That was a bright thought," Jamie said, and Ian nodded approvingly, the frown lifting a bit from his face. "Did ye find him?"

Young Ian nodded, slurping a bit. "I did, then."

Running down the Royal Mile nearly to the Palace of Holyrood at the foot, he had toiled his way painstakingly up the street, stopping at each tavern to inquire for the man with the pigtail and one eye. There was no word of his quarry anywhere below the Canongate, and he was beginning to despair of his idea, when suddenly he had seen the man himself, sitting in the taproom of the Holyrood Brewery.

Presumably this stop was for respite, rather than information, for the seaman was sitting at his ease, drinking beer. Young Ian had darted behind a hogshead in the yard, and remained there, watching, until at length the man rose, paid his score, and made his leisurely way outside.

"He didna go to any more taverns," the boy reported, wiping a stray drop of milk off his chin. "He went straight to Carfax Close, to the printshop."

Jamie said something in Gaelic under his breath. "Did he? And what then?"

"Well, he found the shop shut up, of course. When he saw the door was locked, he looked careful like, up at the windows, as though he was maybe thinking of breaking in. But then I saw him look about, at all the folk coming and going—it was a busy time of day, wi' all the folk coming to the chocolate shop. So he stood on the stoop a moment, thinking, and then he set off back up the close—I had to duck into the tailor's shop on the corner so as not to be seen."

The man had paused at the entrance of the close, then, making up his mind, had turned to the right, gone down a few paces, and disappeared into a small alley.

"I kent as how the alley led up to the court at the back of the close," Young Ian explained. "So I saw at once what he meant to be doing."

"There's a wee court at the back of the close," Jamie explained, seeing my puzzled look. "It's for rubbish and deliveries and such—but there's a back door out of the printshop opens onto it."

Young Ian nodded, putting down his empty bowl. "Aye. I thought it must be that he meant to get into the place. And I thought of the new pamphlets."

"Jesus," Jamie said. He looked a little pale.

"Pamphlets?" Ian raised his brows at Jamie. "What kind of pamphlets?"

"The new printing for Mr. Gage," Young Ian explained.

Ian still looked as blank as I felt.

"Politics," Jamie said bluntly. "An argument for repeal of the last Stamp Act—with an exhortation to civil opposition—by violence, if necessary. Five thousand of them, fresh-printed, stacked in the back room. Gage was to come round and get them in the morning, tomorrow."

"Jesus," Ian said. He had gone even paler than Jamie, at whom he stared in a sort of mingled horror and awe. "Have ye gone straight out o' your mind?" he inquired. "You, wi' not an inch on your back unscarred? Wi' the ink scarce dry on your pardon for treason? You're mixed up wi' Tom Gage and his seditious society, and got my son involved as well?"

His voice had been rising throughout, and now he sprang to his feet, fists clenched.

"How could ye do such a thing, Jamie—how? Have we not suffered enough for your actions, Jenny and me? All through the war and after—Christ, I'd think you'd have your fill of prisons and blood and violence!"

"I have," Jamie said shortly. "I'm no part of Gage's group. But my business is printing, aye? He paid for those pamphlets."

Ian threw up his hands in a gesture of vast irritation. "Oh, aye! And that will mean a great deal when the Crown's agents arrest ye and take ye to London to be hangit! If those things were to be found on your premises—" Struck by a sudden thought, he stopped and turned to his son.

"Oh, that was it?" he asked. "Ye kent what those pamphlets were—that's why ye set them on fire?"

Young Ian nodded, solemn as a young owl.

"I couldna move them in time," he said. "Not five thousand. The man—the seaman—he'd broke out the back window, and he was reachin' in for the doorlatch."

Ian whirled back to face Jamie.

"Damn you!" he said violently. "Damn ye for a reckless, harebrained fool, Jamie Fraser! First the Jacobites, and now this!"

Jamie had flushed up at once at Ian's words, and his face grew darker at this.

"Am I to blame for Charles Stuart?" he said. His eyes flashed angrily and he set his teacup down with a thump that sloshed tea and whisky over the polished tabletop. "Did I not try all I could to stop the wee fool? Did I not give up everything in that fight—*everything*, Ian! My land, my freedom, my wife—to try to save us all?" He glanced at me briefly as he spoke, and I caught one very small quick glimpse of just what the last twenty years had cost him.

He turned back to Ian, his brows lowering as he went on, voice growing hard.

"And as for what I've cost your family—what have ye profited, Ian? Lallybroch belongs to wee James now, no? To *your* son, not mine!"

Ian flinched at that. "I never asked—" he began.

"No, ye didn't. I'm no accusing ye, for God's sake! But the fact's there—Lallybroch's no mine anymore, is it? My father left it to me, and I cared for it as best I could—took care o' the land and the tenants—and ye helped me, Ian." His voice softened a bit. "I couldna have managed without you and Jenny. I dinna begrudge deeding it to Young Jamie—it had to be done. But still …" He turned away for a moment, head bowed, broad shoulders knotted tight beneath the linen of his shirt.

I was afraid to move or speak, but I caught Young Ian's eye, filled with infinite distress. I put a hand on his skinny shoulder for mutual reassurance, and felt the steady pounding of the pulse in the tender flesh above his collarbone. He set his big, bony paw on my hand and held on tight.

Jamie turned back to his brother-in-law, struggling to keep his voice and temper under control. "I swear to ye, Ian, I didna let the lad be put in danger. I kept him out of the way so much as I possibly could—didna let the shoremen see him, or let him go out on the boats wi' Fergus, hard as he begged me." He glanced at Young Ian and his expression changed, to an odd mixture of affection and irritation.

"I didna ask him to come to me, Ian, and I told him he must go home again."

"Ye didna *make* him go, though, did you?" The angry color was fading from Ian's face, but his soft brown eyes were still narrow and bright with fury. "And ye didna send word, either. For God's sake, Jamie, Jenny hasna slept at night anytime this month!"

Jamie's lips pressed tight. "No," he said, letting the words escape one at a time. "No. I didn't. I—" He glanced at the boy again, and shrugged uncomfortably, as though his shirt had grown suddenly too tight.

"No," he said again. "I meant to take him home myself."

"He's old enough to travel by himself," Ian said shortly. "He got here alone, no?"

"Aye. It wasna that." Jamie turned aside restlessly, picking up a teacup and rolling it to and fro between his palms. "No, I meant to take him, so that I could ask your permission—yours and Jenny's—for the lad to come live wi' me for a time."

Ian uttered a short, sarcastic laugh. "Oh, aye! Give our permission for him to be hangit or transported alongside you, eh?"

The anger flashed across Jamie's features again as he looked up from the cup in his hands.

"Ye know I wouldna let any harm come to him," he said. "For Christ's sake, Ian, I care for the lad as though he were my own son, and well ye ken it, too!"

Ian's breath was coming fast; I could hear it from my place behind the sofa. "Oh, I ken it well enough," he said, staring hard into Jamie's face. "But he's not your son, aye? He's mine."

Jamie stared back for a long moment, then reached out and gently set the teacup back on the table. "Aye," he said quietly. "He is."

Ian stood for a moment, breathing hard, then wiped a hand carelessly across his forehead, pushing back the thick dark hair.

"Well, then," he said. He took one or two deep breaths, and turned to his son.

"Come along, then," he said. "I've a room at Halliday's."

Young Ian's bony fingers tightened on mine. His throat worked, but he didn't move to rise from his seat.

"No, Da," he said. His voice quivered, and he blinked hard, not to cry. "I'm no going wi' ye."

Ian's face went quite pale, with a deep red patch over the angular cheekbones, as though someone had slapped him hard on both cheeks.

"Is that so?" he said.

Young Ian nodded, swallowing. "I—I'll go wi' ye in the morning, Da; I'll go home wi' ye. But not now."

Ian looked at his son for a long moment without speaking. Then his shoulders slumped, and all the tension went out of his body.

"I see," he said quietly. "Well, then. Well."

Without another word, he turned and left, closing the door very carefully behind him. I could hear the awkward thump of his wooden leg on each step, as he made his way down the stair. There was a brief sound of shuffling as he reached the bottom, then Bruno's voice in farewell, and the thud of the main door shutting. And then there was no sound in the room but the hiss of the hearthfire behind me.

The boy's shoulder was shaking under my hand, and he was holding tighter than ever to my fingers, crying without making a sound.

Jamie came slowly to sit beside him, his face full of troubled helplessness.

"Ian, oh, wee Ian," he said. "Christ, laddie, ye shouldna have done that."

"I had to." Ian gasped and gave a sudden snuffle, and I realized that he had been holding his breath. He turned a scorched countenance on his uncle, raw features contorted in anguish.

"I didna want to hurt Da," he said. "I didn't!"

Jamie patted his knee absently. "I know, laddie," he said, "but to say such a thing to him—"

"I couldna tell him, though, and I had to tell you, Uncle Jamie!"

Jamie glanced up, suddenly alert at his nephew's tone.

"Tell me? Tell me what?"

"The man. The man wi' the pigtail."

"What about him?"

Young Ian licked his lips, steeling himself.

"I think I kilt him," he whispered.

Startled, Jamie glanced at me, then back at Young Ian.

"How?" he asked.

"Well … I lied a bit," Ian began, voice trembling. The tears were still welling in his eyes, but he brushed them aside. "When I went into the printshop—I had the key ye gave me—the man was already inside."

The seaman had been in the backmost room of the shop, where the stacks of newly printed orders were kept, along with the stocks of fresh ink, the blotting papers used to clean the press, and the small forge where worn slugs were melted down and recast into fresh type.

"He was taking some o' the pamphlets from the stack, and putting them inside his jacket," Ian said, gulping. "When I saw him, I screeched at him to put them back, and he whirled round at me wi' a pistol in his hand."

The pistol had discharged, scaring Young Ian badly, but the ball had gone wild. Little daunted, the seaman had rushed at the boy, raising the pistol to club him instead.

"There was no time to run, or to think," he said. He had let go my hand by now, and his fingers twisted together upon his knee. "I reached out for the first thing to hand and threw it."

The first thing to hand had been the lead-dipper, the long-handled copper ladle used to pour molten lead from the melting pot into the casting molds. The forge had been still alight, though well-banked, and while the melting pot held no more than a small puddle, the scalding drops of lead had flown from the dipper into the seaman's face.

"God, how he screamed!" A strong shudder ran through Young Ian's slender frame, and I came round the end of the sofa to sit next to him and take both his hands.

The seaman had reeled backward, clawing at his face, and upset the small forge, knocking live coals everywhere.

"That was what started the fire," the boy said. "I tried to beat it out, but it caught the edge of the fresh paper, and all of a sudden, something went *whoosh!* in my face, and it was as though the whole room was alight."

"The barrels of ink, I suppose," Jamie said, as though to himself. "The powder's dissolved in alcohol."

The sliding piles of flaming paper fell between Young Ian and the back door, a wall of flame that billowed black smoke and threatened to collapse upon him. The seaman, blinded and screaming like a banshee, had been on his hands and knees between the boy and the door into the front room of the printshop and safety.

"I—I couldna bear to touch him, to push him out o' the way," he said, shuddering again.

Losing his head completely, he had run up the stairs instead, but then found himself trapped as the flames, racing through the back room and drawing up the stair like a chimney, rapidly filled the upper room with blinding smoke.

"Did ye not think to climb out the trapdoor onto the roof?" Jamie asked.

Young Ian shook his head miserably. "I didna ken it was there."

"Why *was* it there?" I asked curiously.

Jamie gave me the flicker of a smile. "In case of need. It's a foolish fox has but one exit to his bolthole. Though I must say, it wasna fire I was thinking of when I had it made." He shook his head, ridding himself of the distraction.

"But ye think the man didna escape the fire?" he asked.

"I dinna see how he could," Young Ian answered, beginning to sniffle again. "And if he's dead, then I killed him. I couldna tell Da I was a m-mur—mur—" He was crying again, too hard to get the word out.

"You're no a murderer, Ian," Jamie said firmly. He patted his nephew's shaking shoulder. "Stop now, it's all right—ye havena done wrong, laddie. Ye haven't, d'ye hear?"

The boy gulped and nodded, but couldn't stop crying or shaking. At last I put my arms around him, turned him and pulled his head down onto my shoulder, patting his back and making the sort of small soothing noises one makes to little children.

He felt very odd in my arms; nearly as big as a full-grown man, but with fine, light bones, and so little flesh on them that it was like holding a skeleton. He was talking into the depths of my bosom, his voice so disjointed by emotion and muffled by fabric that it was difficult to make out the words.

" … mortal sin …" he seemed to be saying, " … damned to hell … couldna tell Da … afraid … canna go home ever …"

Jamie raised his brows at me, but I only shrugged helplessly, smoothing the thick, bushy hair on the back of the boy's head. At last Jamie leaned forward, took him firmly by the shoulders and sat him up.

"Look ye, Ian," he said. "No, look—look at me!"

By dint of supreme effort, the boy straightened his drooping neck and fixed brimming, red-rimmed eyes on his uncle's face.

"Now then." Jamie took hold of his nephew's hands and squeezed them lightly. "First—it's no a sin to kill a man that's trying to kill you. The Church allows ye to kill if ye must, in defense of yourself, your family, or your country. So ye havena committed mortal sin, and you're no damned."

"I'm not?" Young Ian sniffed mightily, and mopped at his face with a sleeve.

"No, you're not." Jamie let the hint of a smile show in his eyes. "We'll go together and call on Father Hayes in the morning, and ye'll make your confession and be absolved then, but he'll tell ye the same as I have."

"Oh." The syllable held profound relief, and Young Ian's scrawny shoulders rose perceptibly, as though a burden had rolled off of them.

Jamie patted his nephew's knee again. "For the second thing, ye needna fear telling your father."

"No?" Young Ian had accepted Jamie's word on the state of his soul without hesitation, but sounded profoundly dubious about this secular opinion.

"Well, I'll not say he'll no be upset," Jamie added fairly. "In fact, I expect it will turn the rest of his hair white on the spot. But he'll understand. He isna going to cast ye out or disown ye, if that's what you're scairt of."

"You think he'll understand?" Young Ian looked at Jamie with eyes in which hope battled with doubt. "I—I didna think he … has my Da ever killed a man?" he asked suddenly.

Jamie blinked, taken aback by the question. "Well," he said slowly, "I suppose—I mean, he's fought in battle, but I—to tell ye the truth, Ian, I dinna ken." He looked a little helplessly at his nephew.

"It's no the sort of thing men talk much about, aye? Except sometimes soldiers, when they're deep in drink."

Young Ian nodded, absorbing this, and sniffed again, with a horrid gurgling noise. Jamie, groping hastily in his sleeve for a handkerchief, looked up suddenly, struck by a thought.

"That's why ye said ye must tell me, but not your Da? Because ye knew I've killed men before?"

His nephew nodded, searching Jamie's face with troubled, trusting eyes. "Aye. I thought … I thought ye'd know what to do."

"Ah." Jamie drew a deep breath, and exchanged a glance with me. "Well …" His shoulders braced and broadened, and I could see him accept the burden Young Ian had laid down. He sighed.

"What ye do," he said, "is first to ask yourself if ye had a choice. You didn't, so put your mind at ease. Then ye go to confession, if ye can; if not, say a good Act of Contrition—that's good enough, when it's no a mortal sin. Ye harbor no fault, mind," he said earnestly, "but the contrition is because ye greatly regret the necessity that fell on ye. It does sometimes, and there's no preventing it.

"And then say a prayer for the soul of the one you've killed," he went on, "that he may find rest, and not haunt ye. Ye ken the prayer called Soul Peace? Use that one, if ye have leisure to think of it. In a battle, when there is no time, use Soul Leading—'Be this soul on Thine arm, O Christ, Thou King of the City of Heaven, Amen.' "

"Be this soul on Thine arm, O Christ, Thou King of the City of Heaven, Amen," Young Ian repeated under his breath. He nodded slowly. "Aye, all right. And then?"

Jamie reached out and touched his nephew’s cheek with great gentleness. “Then ye live with it, laddie,” he said softly. “That’s all.”

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28

VIRTUE'S GUARDIAN

"You think the man Young Ian followed has something to do with Sir Percival's warning?" I lifted a cover on the supper tray that had just been delivered and sniffed appreciatively; it seemed a very long time since Moubray's stew.

Jamie nodded, picking up a sort of hot stuffed roll.

"I should be surprised if he had not," he said dryly. "While there's likely more than one man willing to do me harm, I canna think it likely that gangs o' them are roaming about Edinburgh." He took a bite and chewed industriously, shaking his head.

"Nay, that's clear enough, and nothing to be greatly worrit over."

"It's not?" I took a small bite of my own roll, then a bigger one. "This is delicious. What is it?"

Jamie lowered the roll he had been about to take a bite of, and squinted at it. "Pigeon minced wi' truffles," he said, and stuffed it into his mouth whole.

"No," he said, and paused to swallow. "No," he said again, more clearly. "That's likely just a matter of a rival smuggler. There are two gangs that I've had a wee bit of difficulty with now and then." He waved a hand, scattering crumbs, and reached for another roll.

"The way the man behaved—smellin' the brandy, but seldom tasting it—he may be a *dégustateur de vin*; someone that can tell from a sniff where a wine was made, and from a taste, which year it was bottled. A verra valuable fellow," he added thoughtfully, "and a choice hound to set on my trail."

Wine had come along with the supper. I poured out a glass and passed it under my own nose.

"He could track you—you, personally—through the brandy?" I asked curiously.

"More or less. You'll remember my cousin Jared?"

"Of course I do. You mean he's still alive?" After the slaughter of Culloden and the erosions of its aftermath, it was wonderfully heartening to hear that Jared, a wealthy Scottish émigré with a prosperous wine business in Paris, was still among the quick, and not the dead.

"I expect they'll have to head him up in a cask and toss him into the Seine to get rid of him," Jamie said, teeth gleaming white in his soot-stained countenance. "Aye, he's not only alive, but enjoying it. Where d'ye think I get the French brandy I bring into Scotland?"

The obvious answer was "France," but I refrained from saying so. "Jared, I suppose?" I said instead.

Jamie nodded, mouth full of another roll. "Hey!" He leaned forward and snatched the plate out from under the tentative reach of Young Ian's skinny fingers. "You're no supposed to be eating rich stuff like that when your wame's curdled," he said, frowning and chewing. He swallowed and licked his lips. "I'll call for more bread and milk for ye."

"But Uncle," said Young Ian, looking longingly at the savory rolls. "I'm awfully hungry." Purged by confession, the boy had recovered his spirits considerably, and evidently, his appetite as well.

Jamie looked at his nephew and sighed. "Aye well. Ye swear you're no going to vomit on me?"

"No, Uncle," Young Ian said meekly.

"All right, then." Jamie shoved the plate in the boy's direction, and returned to his explanation.

"Jared sends me mostly the second-quality bottling from his own vineyards in the Moselle, keepin' the first quality for sale in France, where they can tell the difference."

"So the stuff you bring into Scotland is identifiable?"

He shrugged, reaching for the wine. "Only to a *nez*, a *dégustateur*, that is. But the fact is, that wee Ian here saw the man taste the wine at the Dog and Gun and at the Blue Boar, and those are the two taverns on the High Street that buy brandy from me exclusively. Several others buy from me, but from others as well.

"In any case, as I say, I'm none so concerned at havin' someone look for Jamie Roy at a tavern." He lifted his wineglass and passed it under his own nose by reflex, made a slight, unconscious face, and drank. "No," he said, lowering the glass, "what worries me is that the man should have found his way to the printshop. For I've taken considerable pains to make sure that the folk who see Jamie Roy on the docks at Burntisland are not the same ones who pass the time o' day in the High Street with Mr. Alec Malcolm, the printer."

I knitted my brows, trying to work it out.

"But Sir Percival called you Malcolm, and he knows you're a smuggler," I protested.

Jamie nodded patiently. "Half the men in the ports near Edinburgh are smugglers, Sassenach," he said. "Aye, Sir Percival kens fine I'm a smuggler, but he doesna ken I'm Jamie Roy—let alone James Fraser. He thinks I bring in bolts of undeclared silk and velvet from Holland—because that's what I pay him in." He smiled wryly. "I trade brandy for them, to the tailor on the corner. Sir Percival's an eye for fine cloth, and his lady even more. But he doesna ken I've to do wi' the liquor—let alone how much—or he'd be wanting a great deal more than the odd bit of lace and yardage, I'll tell ye."

"Could one of the tavern owners have told the seaman about you? Surely they've seen you."

He ruffled a hand through his hair, as he did when thinking, making a few short hairs on the crown stand up in a whorl of tiny spikes.

"Aye, they've seen me," he said slowly, "but only as a customer. Fergus handles the business dealings wi' the taverns—and Fergus is careful never to go near the printshop. He always meets me here, in private." He gave me a crooked grin. "No one questions a man's reasons for visiting a brothel, aye?"

"Could that be it?" I asked, struck by a sudden thought. "Any man can come here without question. Could the seaman Young Ian followed have seen you here—you and Fergus? Or heard your description from one of the girls? After all, you're not the most inconspicuous man I've ever seen." He wasn't, either. While there might be any number of redheaded men in Edinburgh, few of them towered to Jamie's height, and fewer still strode the streets with the unconscious arrogance of a disarmed warrior.

"That's a verra useful thought, Sassenach," he said, giving me a nod. "It will be easy enough to find out whether a pigtailed seaman with one eye has been here recently; I'll have Jeanne ask among her lassies."

He stood up, and stretched rackingly, his hands nearly touching the wooden rafters.

"And then, Sassenach, perhaps we'll go to bed, aye?" He lowered his arms and blinked at me with a smile. "What wi' one thing and another, it's been the bloody hell of a day, no?"

"It has, rather," I said, smiling back.

Jeanne, summoned for instructions, arrived together with Fergus, who opened the door for the madam with the easy familiarity of a brother or cousin. Little wonder if he felt at home, I supposed; he had been born in a Paris brothel, and spent the first ten years of his life there, sleeping in a cupboard beneath the stairs, when not making a living by picking pockets on the street.

"The brandy is gone," he reported to Jamie. "I have sold it to MacAlpine—at a small sacrifice in price, I regret, milord. I thought a quick sale the best."

"Better to have it off the premises," Jamie said, nodding. "What have ye done wi' the body?"

Fergus smiled briefly, his lean face and dark forelock lending him a distinctly piratical air.

"Our intruder also has gone to MacAlpine's tavern, milord—suitably disguised."

"As what?" I demanded.

The pirate's grin turned on me; Fergus had turned out a very handsome man, the disfigurement of his hook notwithstanding.

"As a cask of crème de menthe, milady," he said.

"I do not suppose anyone has drunk crème de menthe in Edinburgh any time in the last hundred years," observed Madame Jeanne. "The heathen Scots are not accustomed to the use of civilized liqueurs; I have never seen a customer here take anything beyond whisky, beer, or brandywine."

"Exactly, Madame," Fergus said, nodding. "We do not want Mr. MacAlpine's tapmen broaching the cask, do we?"

"Surely somebody's going to look in that cask sooner or later," I said. "Not to be indelicate, but—"

"Exactly, milady," Fergus said, with a respectful bow to me. "Though crème de menthe has a very high content of alcohol. The tavern's cellar is but a temporary resting place on our unknown friend's journey to his eternal rest. He goes to the docks tomorrow, and thence to somewhere quite far away. It is only that I did not want him cluttering up Madame Jeanne's premises in the meantime."

Jeanne addressed a remark in French to St. Agnes that I didn't quite catch, but then shrugged and turned to go.

"I will make inquiries of *les filles* concerning this seaman tomorrow, Monsieur, when they are at leisure. For now—"

"For now, speaking of leisure," Fergus interrupted, "might Mademoiselle Sophie find herself unemployed this evening?"

The madam favored him with a look of ironic amusement. "Since she saw you come in, *mon petit saucisse*, I expect that she has kept herself available." She glanced at Young Ian, slouched against the cushions like a scarecrow from which all the straw stuffing has been removed. "And will I find a place for the young gentleman to sleep?"

"Oh, aye." Jamie looked consideringly at his nephew. "I suppose ye can lay a pallet in my room."

"Oh, no!" Young Ian blurted. "You'll want to be alone wi' your wife, will ye not, Uncle?"

"What?" Jamie stared at him uncomprehendingly.

"Well, I mean …" Young Ian hesitated, glancing at me, and then hastily away. "I mean, nay doubt you'll be wanting to … er … mmphm?” A Highlander born, he managed to infuse this last noise with an amazing wealth of implied indelicacy.

Jamie rubbed his knuckles hard across his upper lip.

“Well, that’s verra thoughtful of ye, Ian,” he said. His voice quivered slightly with the effort of not laughing. “And I’m flattered that ye have such a high opinion of my virility as to think I’m capable of anything but sleeping in bed after a day like this. But I think perhaps I can forgo the satisfaction of my carnal desires for one night—fond as I am of your auntie,” he added, giving me a faint grin.

“But Bruno tells me the establishment is not busy tonight,” Fergus put in, glancing round in some bewilderment. “Why does the boy not—”

“Because he’s no but fourteen, for God’s sake!” Jamie said, scandalized.

“Almost fifteen!” Young Ian corrected, sitting up and looking interested.

“Well, that is certainly sufficient,” Fergus said, with a glance at Madame Jeanne for confirmation. “Your brothers were no older when I first brought them here, and they acquitted themselves honorably.”

“You *what*?” Jamie goggled at his protégé.

“Well, someone had to,” Fergus said, with slight impatience. “Normally, a boy’s father—but of course, le Monsieur is not—meaning no disrespect to your esteemed father, of course,” he added, with a nod to Young Ian, who nodded back like a mechanical toy, “but it is a matter for experienced judgment, you understand?”

“Now”—he turned to Madame Jeanne, with the air of a gourmand consulting the wine steward—“Dorcas, do you think, or Penelope?”

“No, no,” she said, shaking her head decidedly, “it should be the second Mary, absolutely. The small one.”

“Oh, with the yellow hair? Yes, I think you are right,” Fergus said approvingly. “Fetch her, then.”

Jeanne was off before Jamie could manage more than a strangled croak in protest.

“But—but—the lad canna—” he began.

“Yes, I can,” Young Ian said. “At least, I think I can.” It wasn’t possible for his face to grow any redder, but his ears were crimson with excitement, the traumatic events of the day completely forgotten.

“But it’s—that is to say—I canna be letting ye—” Jamie broke off and stood glaring at his nephew for a long moment. Finally, he threw his hands up in the air in exasperated defeat.

“And what am I to say to your mother?” he demanded, as the door opened behind him.

Framed in the door stood a very short young girl, plump and soft as a partridge in her blue silk chemise, her round sweet face beaming beneath a loose cloud of yellow hair. At the sight of her, Young Ian froze, scarcely breathing.

When at last he must draw breath or die, he drew it, and turned to Jamie. With a smile of surpassing sweetness, he said, “Well, Uncle Jamie, if I were you”—his voice soared up in a sudden alarming soprano, and he stopped, clearing his throat before resuming in a respectable baritone—“I wouldna tell her. Good night to ye, Auntie,” he said, and walked purposefully forward.

* * *

“I canna decide whether I must kill Fergus or thank him.” Jamie was sitting on the bed in our attic room, slowly unbuttoning his shirt.

I laid the damp dress over the stool and knelt down in front of him to unbuckle the knee buckles of his breeches.

“I suppose he was trying to do his best for Young Ian.”

“Aye—in his bloody immoral French way.” Jamie reached back to untie the lace that held his hair back. He had not plaited it again when we left Moubray’s, and it fell soft and loose on his shoulders, framing the broad cheekbones and long straight nose, so that he looked like one of the fiercer Italian angels of the Renaissance.

“Was it the Archangel Michael who drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden?” I asked, stripping off his stockings.

He gave a slight chuckle. “Do I strike ye so—as the guardian o’ virtue? And Fergus as the wicked serpent?” His hands came under my elbows as he bent to lift me up. “Get up, Sassenach; ye shouldna be on your knees, serving me.”

"You've had rather a time of it today yourself," I answered, making him stand up with me. "Even if you didn't have to kill anyone." There were large blisters on his hands, and while he had wiped away most of the soot, there was still a streak down the side of his jaw.

"Mm." My hands went around his waist to help with the waistband of his breeches, but he held them there, resting his cheek for a moment against the top of my head.

"I wasna quite honest wi' the lad, ye ken," he said.

"No? I thought you did wonderfully with him. He felt better after he talked to you, at least."

"Aye, I hope so. And may be the prayers and such will help—they canna hurt him, at least. But I didna tell him everything."

"What else is there?" I tilted up my face to his, touching his lips softly with my own. He smelled of smoke and sweat.

"What a man most often does, when he's soul-sick wi' killing, is to find a woman, Sassenach," he answered softly. "His own, if he can; another, if he must. For she can do what he cannot—and heal him."

My fingers found the lacing of his fly; it came loose with a tug.

"That's why you let him go with the second Mary?"

He shrugged, and stepping back a pace, pushed the breeches down and off. "I couldna stop him. And I think perhaps I was right to let him, young as he is." He smiled crookedly at me. "At least he'll not be fashing and fretting himself over that seaman tonight."

"I don't imagine so. And what about you?" I pulled the chemise off over my head.

"Me?" He stared down at me, eyebrows raised, the grimy linen shirt hanging loose upon his shoulders.

I glanced behind him at the bed.

"Yes. You haven't killed anyone, but do you want to … mmphm?" I met his gaze, raising my own brows in question.

The smile broadened across his face, and any resemblance to Michael, stern guardian of virtue, vanished. He lifted one shoulder, then the other, and let them fall, and the shirt slid down his arms to the floor.

"I expect I do," he said. "But you'll be gentle wi' me, aye?"

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CULLODEN'S LAST VICTIM

In the morning, I saw Jamie and Ian off on their pious errand, and then set off myself, stopping to purchase a large wicker basket from a vendor in the street. It was time I began to equip myself again, with whatever I could find in the way of medical supplies. After the events of the preceding day, I was beginning to fear I would have need of them before long.

Haugh's apothecary shop hadn't changed at all, through English occupation, Scottish Rising, and the Stuart's fall, and my heart rose in delight as I stepped through the door into the rich, familiar smells of hartshorn, peppermint, almond oil, and anise.

The man behind the counter was Haugh, but a much younger Haugh than the middle-aged man I had dealt with twenty years before, when I had patronized this shop for tidbits of military intelligence, as well as for nostrums and herbs.

The younger Haugh did not know me, of course, but went courteously about the business of finding the herbs I wanted, among the neatly ranged jars on his shelves. A good many were common—rosemary, tansy, marigold—but a few on my list made the young Haugh's ginger eyebrows rise, and his lips purse in thoughtfulness as he looked over the jars.

There was another customer in the shop, hovering near the counter, where tonics were dispensed and compounds ground to order. He strode back and forth, hands clasped behind his back, obviously impatient. After a moment, he came up to the counter.

"How long?" he snapped at Mr. Haugh's back.

"I canna just say, Reverend," the apothecary's voice was apologetic. "Louisa did say as 'twould need to be boiled."

The only reply to this was a snort, and the man, tall and narrow-shouldered in black, resumed his pacing, glancing from time to time at the doorway to the back room, where the invisible Louisa was presumably at work. The man looked slightly familiar, but I had no time to think where I had seen him before.

Mr. Haugh was squinting dubiously at the list I had given him. "Aconite, now," he muttered. "Aconite. And what might that be, I wonder?"

"Well, it's poison, for one thing," I said. Mr. Haugh's mouth dropped open momentarily.

"It's a medicine, too," I assured him. "But you have to be careful in the use of it. Externally, it's good for rheumatism, but a very tiny amount taken by mouth will lower the rate of the pulse. Good for some kinds of heart trouble."

"Really," Mr. Haugh said, blinking. He turned to his shelves, looking rather helpless. "Er, do ye ken what it smells like, maybe?"

Taking this for invitation, I came round the counter and began to sort through the jars. They were all carefully labeled, but the labels of some were clearly old, the ink faded, and the paper peeling at the edges.

"I'm afraid I'm none so canny wi' the medicines as my Da yet," young Mr. Haugh was saying at my elbow. "He'd taught me a good bit, but then he passed on a year ago, and there's things here as I dinna ken the use of, I'm afraid."

"Well, that one's good for cough," I said, taking down a jar of elecampane with a glance at the impatient Reverend, who had taken out a handkerchief and was wheezing asthmatically into it. "Particularly sticky-sounding coughs."

I frowned at the crowded shelves. Everything was dusted and immaculate, but evidently not filed according either to alphabetical or botanical order. Had old Mr. Haugh merely remembered where things were, or had he a system of some kind? I closed my eyes and tried to remember the last time I had been in the shop.

To my surprise, the image came back easily. I had come for foxglove then, to make the infusions for Alex Randall, younger brother of Black Jack Randall—and Frank's six-times great-grandfather. Poor boy, he had been dead now twenty years, though he had lived long enough to sire a son. I felt a twinge of curiosity at the thought of that son, and of his mother, who had been my friend, but I forced my mind away from them, back to the image of Mr. Haugh, standing on tiptoe to reach up to his shelves, over near the right-hand side …

"There." Sure enough, my hand rested near the jar labeled FOXGLOVE. To one side of it was a jar labeled HORSETAIL, to the other, LILY OF THE VALLEY ROOT. I hesitated, looking at them, running over in my mind the possible uses of those herbs. Cardiac herbs, all of them. If aconite was to be found, it would be close by, then.

It was. I found it quickly, in a jar labeled AULD WIVES HUID.

"Be careful with it." I handed the jar gingerly to Mr. Haugh. "Even a bit of it will make your skin go numb. Perhaps I'd better have a glass bottle for it." Most of the herbs I'd bought had been wrapped up in squares of gauze or twisted in screws of paper, but the young Mr. Haugh nodded and carried the jar of aconite into the back room, held at arm's length, as though he expected it to explode in his face.

"Ye'd seem to know a good deal more about the medicines than the lad," said a deep, hoarse voice behind me.

"Well, I've somewhat more experience than he has, likely." I turned to find the minister leaning on the counter, watching me under thick brows with pale blue eyes. I realized with a start where I had seen him; in Moubray's, the day before. He gave no sign of recognizing me; perhaps because my cloak covered Daphne's dress. I had noticed that many men took relatively little notice of the face of a woman *en décolletage*, though it seemed a regrettable habit in a clergyman. He cleared his throat.

"Mmphm. And d'ye ken what to do for a nervous complaint, then?"

"What sort of nervous complaint?"

He pursed his lips and frowned, as though unsure whether to trust me. The upper lip came to a slight point, like an owl's beak, but the lower was thick and pendulous.

"Well …'tis a complicated case. But to speak generally, now"—he eyed me carefully—"what would ye give for a sort of … fit?"

"Epileptic seizure? Where the person falls down and twitches?"

He shook his head, showing a reddened band about his neck, where the high white stock had chafed it.

"No, a different kind of fit. Screaming and staring."

"Screaming *and* staring?"

"Not at once, ye ken," he added hastily. "First the one, and then the other—or rather, roundabout. First she'll do naught but stare for days on end, not speaking, and then of a sudden, she'll scream fit to wake the deid."

"That sounds very trying." It did; if he had a wife so afflicted, it could easily explain the deep lines of strain that bracketed his mouth and eyes, and the blue circles of exhaustion beneath his eyes.

I tapped a finger on the counter, considering. "I don't know; I'd have to see the patient."

The minister's tongue touched his lower lip. "Perhaps … would ye be willing maybe, to come and see her? It isn't far," he added, rather stiffly. Pleading didn't come naturally to him, but the urgency of his request communicated itself despite the stiffness of his figure.

"I can't, just now," I told him. "I have to meet my husband. But perhaps this afternoon—"

"Two o'clock," he said promptly. "Henderson's, in Carrubber's Close. Campbell is the name, the Reverend Archibald Campbell."

Before I could say yes or no, the curtain between the front room and the back twitched aside, and Mr. Haugh appeared with two bottles, one of which he handed to each of us.

The Reverend eyed his with suspicion, as he groped in his pocket for a coin.

"Weel, and there's your price," he said ungraciously, slapping it on the counter. "And we'll hope as you've given me the right one, and no the lady's poison."

The curtain rustled again and a woman looked out after the departing form of the minister.

“Good riddance,” she remarked. “Happence for an hour’s work, and insult on the top of it! The Lord might ha’ chosen better, is all I can say!”

“Do you know him?” I asked, curious whether Louisa might have any helpful information about the afflicted wife.

“Not to say I ken him weel, no,” Louisa said, staring at me in frank curiosity. “He’s one o’ they Free Church meenisters, as is always rantin’ on the corner by the Market Cross, tellin’ folk as their behavior’s of nay consequence at all, and all that’s needful for salvation is that they shall ‘come to grips wi’ Jesus’—like as if Our Lord was to be a fair-day wrestler!” She sniffed disdainfully at this heretical viewpoint, crossing herself against contamination.

“I’m surprised the likes of the Reverend Campbell should come in our shop, hearin’ what he thinks o’ Papists by and large.” Her eyes sharpened at me.

“But you’ll maybe be Free Church yoursel’, ma’am; meanin’ no offense to ye, if so.”

“No, I’m a Catholic—er, a Papist, too,” I assured her. “I was only wondering whether you knew anything about the Reverend’s wife, and her condition.”

Louisa shook her head, turning to deal with a new customer.

“Nay, I’ve ne’er seen the lady. But whatever’s the matter with her,” she added, frowning after the departed Reverend, “I’m sure that livin’ wi’ *him* doesna improve it any!”

The weather was chill but clear, and only a faint hint of smoke lingered in the Rectory garden as a reminder of the fire. Jamie and I sat on a bench against the wall, absorbing the pale winter sunshine as we waited for Young Ian to finish his confession.

“Did you tell Ian that load of rubbish he gave Young Ian yesterday? About where I’d been all this time?”

“Oh, aye,” he said. “Ian’s a good deal too canny to believe it, but it’s a likely enough story, and he’s too good a friend to insist on the truth.”

“I suppose it will do, for general consumption,” I agreed. “But shouldn’t you have told it to Sir Percival, instead of letting him think we were newlyweds?”

He shook his head decidedly. “Och, no. For the one thing, Sir Percival has no notion of my real name, though I’ll lay a year’s takings he knows it isna Malcolm. I dinna want him to be thinking of me and Culloden together, by any means. And for another, a story like the one I gave Ian would cause the devil of a lot more talk than the news that the printer’s taken a wife.”

“ ‘Oh, what a tangled web we weave,’ ” I intoned, “ ‘when first we practice to deceive.’ ”

He gave me a quick blue glance, and the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

“It gets a bit easier with practice, Sassenach,” he said. “Try living wi’ me for a time, and ye’ll find yourself spinning silk out of your arse easy as sh—, er, easy as kiss-my-hand.”

I burst out laughing.

“I want to see you do that,” I said.

“You already have.” He stood up and craned his neck, trying to see over the wall into the Rectory garden.

“Young Ian’s being the devil of a time,” he remarked, sitting down again. “How can a lad not yet fifteen have that much to confess?”

“After the day and night he had yesterday? I suppose it depends how much detail Father Hayes wants to hear,” I said, with a vivid recollection of my breakfast with the prostitutes. “Has he been in there all this time?”

“Er, no.” The tips of Jamie’s ears grew slightly pinker in the morning light. “I, er, I had to go first. As an example, ye ken.”

“No wonder it took some time,” I said, teasing. “How long has it been since you’ve been to confession?”

“I told Father Hayes it was six months.”

“And was it?”

“No, but I supposed if he was going to shrive me for thieving, assault, and profane language, he might as well shrive me for lying, too.”

“What, no fornication or impure thoughts?”

"Certainly not," he said austerely. "Ye can think any manner of horrible things without sin, and it's to do wi' your wife. It's only if you're thinking it about other ladies, it's impure."

"I had no idea I was coming back to save your soul," I said primly, "but it's nice to be useful."

He laughed, bent and kissed me thoroughly.

"I wonder if that counts as an indulgence," he said, pausing for breath. "It ought to, no? It does a great deal more to keep a man from the fires of hell than saying the rosary does. Speaking of which," he added, digging into his pocket and coming out with a rather chewed-looking wooden rosary, "remind me that I must say my penance sometime today. I was about to start on it, when ye came up."

"How many Hail Marys are you supposed to say?" I asked, fingering the beads. The chewed appearance wasn't illusion; there were definite small toothmarks on most of the beads.

"I met a Jew last year," he said, ignoring the question. "A natural philosopher, who'd sailed round the world six times. He told me that in both the Musselman faith and the Jewish teachings, it was considered an act of virtue for a man and his wife to lie wi' each other.

"I wonder if that has anything to do wi' both Jews and Musselmen being circumcised?" he added thoughtfully. "I never thought to ask him that—though perhaps he would ha' found it indelicate to say."

"I shouldn't think a foreskin more or less would impair the virtue," I assured him.

"Oh, good," he said, and kissed me once more.

"What happened to your rosary?" I asked, picking up the string where it had fallen on the grass. "It looks like the rats have been at it."

"Not rats," he said. "Bairns."

"What bairns?"

"Oh, any that might be about." He shrugged, tucking the beads back in his pocket. "Young Jamie has three now, and Maggie and Kitty two each. Wee Michael's just married, but his wife's breeding." The sun was behind him, darkening his face, so that his teeth flashed suddenly white when he smiled. "Ye didna ken ye were a great-aunt seven times over, aye?"

"A great-aunt?" I said, staggered.

"Well, I'm a great-uncle," he said cheerfully, "and I havena found it a terrible trial, except for having my beads gnawed when the weans are cutting teeth—that, and bein' expected to answer to 'Nunkie' a lot."

Sometimes twenty years seemed like an instant, and sometimes it seemed like a very long time indeed.

"Er … there isn't a feminine equivalent of 'Nunkie,' I hope?"

"Oh, no," he assured me. "They'll all call ye Great-Auntie Claire, and treat ye wi' the utmost respect."

"Thanks a lot," I muttered, with visions of the hospital's geriatric wing fresh in my mind.

Jamie laughed, and with a lightness of heart no doubt engendered by being newly freed from sin, grasped me around the waist and lifted me onto his lap.

"I've never before seen a great-auntie wi' a lovely plump arse like that," he said with approval, bouncing me slightly on his knees. His breath tickled the back of my neck as he leaned forward. I let out a small shriek as his teeth closed lightly on my ear.

"Are ye all right, Auntie?" said Young Ian's voice just behind us, full of concern.

Jamie started convulsively, nearly unshipping me from his lap, then tightened his hold on my waist.

"Oh, aye," he said. "It's just your auntie saw a spider."

"Where?" said Young Ian, peering interestedly over the bench.

"Up there." Jamie rose, standing me on my feet, and pointed to the lime tree, where—sure enough—the web of an orb weaver stretched across the crook of two branches, sparkling with damp. The weaver herself sat in the center, round as a cherry, wearing a gaudy pattern of green and yellow on her back.

"I was telling your auntie," Jamie said, as Young Ian examined the web in lashless fascination, "about a Jew I met, a natural philosopher. He'd made a study of spiders, it seems; in fact, he was in Edinburgh to deliver a learned paper to the Royal Society, in spite of being a Jew."

"Really? Did he tell ye a lot about spiders?" Young Ian asked eagerly.

"A lot more than I cared to know," Jamie informed his nephew. "There are times and places for talkin' of spiders that lay eggs in caterpillars so the young hatch out and devour the poor beast while it's still alive, but during supper isna one of them. He did say one thing I thought verra interesting, though," he added, squinting at the web. He blew gently on it, and the spider scuttled briskly into hiding.

"He said that spiders spin two kinds of silk, and if ye have a lens—and can make the spider sit still for it, I suppose—ye can see the two places where the silk comes out; spinnerets, he called them. In any case, the one kind of silk is sticky, and if a wee bug touches it, he's done for. But the other kind is dry silk, like the sort ye'd embroider with, but finer."

The orb weaver was advancing cautiously toward the center of her web again.

"See where she walks?" Jamie pointed to the web, anchored by a number of spokes, supporting the intricate netlike whorl. "The spokes there, those are spun of the dry silk, so the spider can walk over it herself wi' no trouble. But the rest o' the web is the sticky kind of silk—or mostly so—and if ye watch a spider careful for quite a long time, you'll see that she goes only on the dry strands, for if she walked on the sticky stuff, she'd be stuck herself."

"Is that so?" Ian breathed reverently on the web, watching intently as the spider moved away along her nonskid road to safety.

"I suppose there's a moral there for web weavers," Jamie observed to me, sotto voce. "Be sure ye know which of your strands are sticky."

"I suppose it helps even more if you have the kind of luck that will conjure up a handy spider when you need one," I said dryly.

He laughed and took my arm.

"That's not luck, Sassenach," he told me. "It's watchfulness. Ian, are ye coming?"

“Oh, aye.” Young Ian abandoned the web with obvious reluctance and followed us to the kirkyard gate.

“Oh, Uncle Jamie, I meant to ask, can I borrow your rosary?” he said, as we emerged onto the cobbles of the Royal Mile. “The priest told me I must say five decades for my penance, and that’s too many to keep count of on my fingers.”

“Surely.” Jamie stopped and fished in his pocket for the rosary. “Be sure to give it back, though.”

Young Ian grinned. “Aye, I reckon you’ll be needing it yourself, Uncle Jamie. The priest told me he was verra wicked,” Young Ian confided to me, with a lashless wink, “and told me not to be like him.”

“Mmphm.” Jamie glanced up and down the road, gauging the speed of an approaching handcart, edging its way down the steep incline. Freshly shaved that morning, his cheeks had a rosy glow about them.

“How many decades of the rosary are you supposed to say as penance?” I asked curiously.

“Eighty-five,” he muttered. The rosiness of his freshly shaved cheeks deepened.

Young Ian’s mouth dropped open in awe.

“How long has it been since ye went to confession, Uncle?” he asked.

“A long time,” Jamie said tersely. “Come on!”

* * *

Jamie had an appointment after dinner to meet with a Mr. Harding, representative of the Hand in Hand Assurance Society, which had insured the premises of the printshop, to inspect the ashy remains with him and verify the loss.

“I willna need ye, laddie,” he said reassuringly to Young Ian, who looked less than enthusiastic about the notion of revisiting the scene of his adventures. “You go wi’ your auntie to see this madwoman.”

“I canna tell how ye do it,” he added to me, raising one brow. “You’re in the city less than two days, and all the afflicted folk for miles about are clutching at your hems.”

"Hardly all of them," I said dryly. "It's only one woman, after all, and I haven't even seen her yet."

"Aye, well. At least madness isna catching—I hope." He kissed me briefly, then turned to go, clapping Young Ian companionably on the shoulder. "Look after your auntie, Ian."

Young Ian paused for a moment, looking after the tall form of his departing uncle.

"Do you want to go with him, Ian?" I asked. "I can manage alone, if you—"

"Oh, no, Auntie!" He turned back to me, looking rather abashed. "I dinna want to go, at all. It's only—I was wondering—well, what if they … find anything? In the ashes?"

"A body, you mean," I said bluntly. I had realized, of course, that the distinct possibility that Jamie and Mr. Harding *would* find the body of the one-eyed seaman was the reason Jamie had told Ian to accompany me.

The boy nodded, looking ill at ease. His skin had faded to a sort of rosy tan, but was still too dark to show any paleness due to emotion.

"I don't know," I said. "If the fire was a very hot one, there may be nothing much left to find. But don't worry about it." I touched his arm in reassurance. "Your uncle will know what to do."

"Aye, that's so." His face brightened, full of faith in his uncle's ability to handle any situation whatever. I smiled when I saw his expression, then realized with a small start of surprise that I had that faith, too. Be it drunken Chinese, corrupt Customs agents, or Mr. Harding of the Hand in Hand Assurance Society, I hadn't any doubt that Jamie would manage.

"Come on, then," I said, as the bell in the Canongate Kirk began to ring. "It's just on two now."

Despite his visit to Father Hayes, Ian had retained a certain air of dreamy bliss, which returned to him now, and there was little conversation as we made our way up the slope of the Royal Mile to Henderson's lodging house, in Carrubber's Close.

It was a quiet hotel, but luxurious by Edinburgh standards, with a patterned carpet on the stairs and colored glass in the street window. It seemed rather rich surroundings for a Free Church minister, but then I knew little about Free Churchmen; perhaps they took no vow of poverty as the Catholic clergy did.

Showed up to the third floor by a young boy, we found the door opened to us at once by a heavyset woman wearing an apron and a worried expression. I thought she might be in her mid-twenties, though she had already lost several of her front teeth.

“You’ll be the lady as the Reverend said would call?” she asked. Her expression lightened a bit at my nod, and she swung the door wider.

“Mr. Campbell’s had to go oot the noo,” she said in a broad Lowland accent, “but he said as how he’d be most obliged to hae yer advice regardin’ his sister, mum.”

Sister, not wife. “Well, I’ll do my best,” I said. “May I see Miss Campbell?”

Leaving Ian to his memories in the sitting room, I accompanied the woman, who introduced herself as Nellie Cowden, to the back bedroom.

Miss Campbell was, as advertised, staring. Her pale blue eyes were wide open, but didn’t seem to be looking at anything—certainly not at me.

She sat in the sort of wide, low chair called a nursing chair, with her back to the fire. The room was dim, and the backlighting made her features indistinct, except for the unblinking eyes. Seen closer to, her features were still indistinct; she had a soft, round face, undistinguished by any apparent bone structure, and baby-fine brown hair, neatly brushed. Her nose was small and snub, her chin double, and her mouth hung pinkly open, so slack as to obscure its natural lines.

“Miss Campbell?” I said cautiously. There was no response from the plump figure in the chair. Her eyes did blink, I saw, though much less frequently than normal.

“She’ll nae answer ye, whilst she’s in this state,” Nellie Cowden said behind me. She shook her head, wiping her hands upon her apron. “Nay, not a word.”

“How long has she been like this?” I picked up a limp, pudgy hand and felt for the pulse. It was there, slow and quite strong.

"Oh, for twa days so far, this time." Becoming interested, Miss Cowden leaned forward, peering into her charge's face. "Usually she stays like that for a week or more—thirteen days is the longest she's done it."

Moving slowly—though Miss Campbell seemed unlikely to be alarmed—I began to examine the unresisting figure, meanwhile asking questions of her attendant. Miss Margaret Campbell was thirty-seven, Miss Cowden told me, the only relative of the Reverend Archibald Campbell, with whom she had lived for the past twenty years, since the death of their parents.

"What starts her doing this? Do you know?"

Miss Cowden shook her head. "No tellin', Mum. Nothin' seems to start it. One minute she'll be lookin' aboot, talkin' and laughin', eatin' her dinner like the sweet child she is, and the next—wheesht!" She snapped her fingers, then, for effect, leaned forward and snapped them again, deliberately, just under Miss Campbell's nose.

"See?" she said. "I could hae six men wi' trumpets pass through the room, and she'd pay it nay more mind."

I was reasonably sure that Miss Campbell's trouble was mental, not physical, but I made a complete examination, anyway—or as complete as could be managed without undressing that clumsy, inert form.

"It's when she comes oot of it that's the worst, though," Miss Cowden assured me, squatting next to me as I knelt on the floor to check Miss Campbell's plantar reflexes. Her feet, loosed from shoes and stockings, were damp and smelled musty.

I drew a fingernail firmly down the sole of each foot in turn, checking for a Babinski reflex that might indicate the presence of a brain lesion. Nothing, though; her toes curled under, in normal startlement.

"What happens then? Is that the screaming the Reverend mentioned?" I rose to my feet. "Will you bring me a lighted candle, please?"

"Oh, aye, the screamin'." Miss Cowden hastened to oblige, lighting a wax taper from the fire. "She do shriek somethin' awful then, on and on ’til she’s worn herself oot. Then she’ll fall asleep—sleep the clock around, she will—and wake as though nothin’ had happened.”

“And she’s quite all right when she wakes?” I asked. I moved the candle flame slowly back and forth, a few inches before the patient’s eyes. The pupils shrank in automatic response to the light, but the irises stayed fixed, not following the flame. My hand itched for the solid handle of an ophthalmoscope, to examine the retinas, but no such luck.

“Well, not to say all right,” Miss Cowden said slowly. I turned from the patient to look at her and she shrugged, massive shoulders powerful under the linen of her blouse.

“She’s saft in the heid, puir dear,” she said, matter-of-factly. “Has been for nigh on twenty year.”

“You haven’t been taking care of her all that time, surely?”

“Oh, no! Mr. Campbell had a woman as cared for her where they lived, in Burntisland, but the woman was none so young, and didna wish to leave her home. So when the Reverend made up his mind to take up the Missionary Society’s offer, and to take his sister wi’ him to the West Indies—why, he advertised for a strong woman o’ good character who wouldna mind travel to be an abigail for her … and here I am.” Miss Cowden gave me a gap-toothed smile in testimony to her own virtues.

“The West Indies? He’s planning to take Miss Campbell on a ship to the West Indies?” I was staggered; I knew just enough of sailing conditions to think that any such trip would be a major ordeal to a woman in good health. This woman—but then I reconsidered. All things concerned, Margaret Campbell might endure such a trip better than a normal woman—at least if she remained in her trance.

“He thought as the change of climate might be good for her,” Miss Cowden was explaining. “Get her away from Scotland, and all the dreadful memories. Ought to ha’ done it long since, is what I say.”

“What sort of dreadful memories?” I asked. I could see by the gleam in Miss Cowden’s eye that she was only too ready to tell me. I had finished the examination by this time, and concluded that there was little physically wrong with Miss Campbell save inactivity and poor diet, but there was the chance that something in her history might suggest some treatment.

"Weel," she began, sidling toward the table, where a decanter and several glasses stood on a tray, "it's only what Tilly Lawson told me, her as looked after Miss Campbell for sae long, but she did swear it was the truth, and her a godly woman. If ye'd care to take a drop of cordial, mum, for the sake o' the Reverend's hospitality?"

The chair Miss Campbell sat on was the only one in the room, so Miss Cowden and I perched inelegantly on the bed, side by side, and watched the silent figure before us, as we sipped our blackberry cordial, and she told me Margaret Campbell's story.

Margaret Campbell had been born in Burntisland, no more than five miles from Edinburgh, across the Firth of Forth. At the time of the '45, when Charles Stuart had marched into Edinburgh to reclaim his father's throne, she had been seventeen.

"Her father was a Royalist, o' course, and her brother in a government regiment, marching north to put down the wicked rebels," said Miss Cowden, taking a tiny sip of the cordial to make it last. "But not Miss Margaret. Nay, she was for the Bonnie Prince, and the Hielan' men that followed him."

One, in particular, though Miss Cowden did not know his name. But a fine man he must have been, for Miss Margaret stole away from her home to meet him, and told him all the bits of information that she gleaned from listening to her father and his friends, and from her brother's letters home.

But then had come Falkirk; a victory, but a costly one, followed by retreat. Rumor had attended the flight of the Prince's army to the north, and not a soul doubted but that their flight led to destruction. Miss Margaret, desperate at the rumors, left her home at dead of night in the cold March spring, and went to find the man she loved.

Now here the account had been uncertain—whether it was that she had found the man and he had spurned her, or that she had not found him in time, and been forced to turn back from Culloden Moor—but in any case, turn back she did, and the day after the battle, she had fallen into the hands of a band of English soldiers.

"Dreadful, what they did to her," Miss Cowden said, lowering her voice as though the figure in the chair could hear. "Dreadful!" The English soldiers, blind with the lust of the hunt and the kill, pursuing the fugitives of Culloden, had not stopped to ask her name or the sympathies of her family. They had known by her speech that she was a Scot, and that knowledge had been enough.

They had left her for dead in a ditch half full of freezing water, and only the fortuitous presence of a family of tinkers, hiding in the nearby brambles for fear of the soldiers, had saved her.

"I canna help but think it a pity they did save her, un-Christian thing it is to say," Miss Cowden whispered. "If not, the puir lamb might ha' slippit her earthly bonds and gone happy to God. But as it is—" She gestured clumsily at the silent figure, and drank down the last drops of her cordial.

Margaret had lived, but did not speak. Somewhat recovered, but silent, she traveled with the tinkers, moving south with them to avoid the pillaging of the Highlands that took place in the wake of Culloden. And then one day, sitting in the yard of a pothouse, holding the tin to collect coppers as the tinkers busked and sang, she had been found by her brother, who had stopped with his Campbell regiment to refresh themselves on the way back to their quarters at Edinburgh.

"She kent him, and him her, and the shock o' their meeting gave her back her voice, but not her mind, puir thing. He took her home, o' course, but she was always as though she was in the past—sometime before she met the Hielan' man. Her father was dead then, from the influenza, and Tilly Lawson said as the shock o' seeing her like that kilt her mother, but could be as that were the influenza, too, for there was a great deal of it about that year."

The whole affair had left Archibald Campbell deeply embittered against both Highland Scots and the English army, and he had resigned his commission. With his parents dead, he found himself middling well-to-do, but the sole support of his damaged sister.

"He couldna marry," Miss Cowden explained, "for what woman would have him, and she"—with a nod toward the fire—"was thrown into the bargain?"

In his difficulties, he had turned to God, and become a minister. Unable to leave his sister, or to bear the confinement of the family house at Burntisland with her, he had purchased a coach, hired a woman to look after Margaret, and begun to make brief journeys into the surrounding countryside to preach, often taking her with him.

In his preaching he had found success, and this year had been asked by the Society of Presbyterian Missionaries if he would undertake his longest journey yet, to the West Indies, there to organize churches and appoint elders on the colonies of Barbados and Jamaica. Prayer had given him his answer, and he had sold the family property in Burntisland and moved his sister to Edinburgh while he made preparations for the journey.

I glanced once more at the figure by the fire. The heated air from the hearth stirred the skirts about her feet, but beyond that small movement, she might have been a statue.

“Well,” I said with a sigh, “there’s not a great deal I can do for her, I’m afraid. But I’ll give you some prescriptions—receipts, I mean—to have made up at the apothecary’s before you go.”

If they didn’t help, they couldn’t hurt, I reflected, as I copied down the short lists of ingredients. Chamomile, hops, rue, tansy, and verbena, with a strong pinch of peppermint, for a soothing tonic. Tea of rose hips, to help correct the slight nutritional deficiency I had noted—spongy, bleeding gums, and a pale, bloated look about the face.

“Once you reach the Indies,” I said, handing Miss Cowden the paper, “you must see that she eats a great deal of fruit—oranges, grapefruit, and lemons, particularly. You should do the same,” I added, causing a look of profound suspicion to flit across the maid’s wide face. I doubted she ate any vegetable matter beyond the occasional onion or potato, save her daily parritch.

The Reverend Campbell had not returned, and I saw no real reason to wait for him. Bidding Miss Campbell adieu, I pulled open the door of the bedroom, to find Young Ian standing on the other side of it.

“Oh!” he said, startled. “I was just comin’ to find ye, Auntie. It’s nearly half-past three, and Uncle Jamie said—”

“Jamie?” The voice came from behind me, from the chair beside the fire.

Miss Cowden and I whirled to find Miss Campbell sitting bolt upright, eyes still wide but focused now. They were focused on the doorway, and as Young Ian stepped inside, Miss Campbell began to scream.

* * *

Rather unsettled by the encounter with Miss Campbell, Young Ian and I made our way thankfully back to the refuge of the brothel, where we were greeted matter-of-factly by Bruno and taken to the rear parlor. There we found Jamie and Fergus deep in conversation.

“True, we do not trust Sir Percival,” Fergus was saying, “but in this case, what point is there to his telling you of an ambush, save that such an ambush is in fact to occur?”

“Damned if I ken why,” Jamie said frankly, leaning back and stretching in his chair. “And that being so, we do, as ye say, conclude that there’s meant to be an ambush by the excisemen. Two days, he said. That would be Mullen’s Cove.” Then, catching sight of me and Ian, he half-rose, motioning us to take seats.

“Will it be the rocks below Balcarres, then?” Fergus asked.

Jamie frowned in thought, the two stiff fingers of his right hand drumming slowly on the tabletop.

“No,” he said at last. “Let it be Arbroath; the wee cove under the abbey there. Just to be sure, aye?”

“All right.” Fergus pushed back the half-empty plate of oatcakes from which he had been refreshing himself, and rose. “I shall spread the word, milord. Arbroath, in four days.” With a nod to me, he swirled his cloak about his shoulders and went out.

“Is it the smuggling, Uncle?” Young Ian asked eagerly. “Is there a French lugger coming?” He picked up an oatcake and bit into it, scattering crumbs over the table.

Jamie’s eyes were still abstracted, thinking, but they cleared as he glanced sharply at his nephew. “Aye, it is. And *you*, Young Ian, are having nothing to do with it.”

"But I could help!" the boy protested. "You'll need someone to hold the mules, at least!"

"After all your Da said to you and me yesterday, wee Ian?" Jamie raised his brows. "Christ, ye've a short memory, lad!"

Ian looked mildly abashed at this, and took another oatcake to cover his confusion. Seeing him momentarily silent, I took the opportunity to ask my own questions.

"You're going to Arbroath to meet a French ship that's bringing in smuggled liquor?" I asked. "You don't think that's dangerous, after Sir Percival's warning?"

Jamie glanced at me with one brow still raised, but answered patiently enough.

"No; Sir Percival was warning me that the rendezvous in two days' time is known. That was to take place at Mullen's Cove. I've an arrangement wi' Jared and his captains, though. If a rendezvous canna be kept for some reason, the lugger will stand offshore and come in again the next night—but to a different place. And there's a third fallback as well, should the second meeting not come off."

"But if Sir Percival knows the first rendezvous, won't he know the others, too?" I persisted.

Jamie shook his head and poured out a cup of wine. He quirked a brow at me to ask whether I wanted any, and upon my shaking my head, sipped it himself.

"No," he said. "The rendezvous points are arranged in sets of three, between me and Jared, sent by sealed letter inside a packet addressed to Jeanne, here. Once I've read the letter, I burn it. The men who'll help meet the lugger will all know the first point, of course—I suppose one o' them will have let something slip," he added, frowning into his cup. "But no one—not even Fergus—kens the other two points unless we need to make use of one. And when we do, all the men ken well enough to guard their tongues."

"But then it's bound to be safe, Uncle!" Young Ian burst out. "Please let me come! I'll keep well back out o' the way," he promised.

Jamie gave his nephew a slightly jaundiced look.

“Aye, ye will,” he said. “You’ll come wi’ me to Arbroath, but you and your auntie will stay at the inn on the road above the abbey until we’ve finished. I’ve got to take the laddie home to Lallybroch, Claire,” he explained, turning to me. “And mend things as best I can with his parents.” The elder Ian had left Halliday’s that morning before Jamie and Young Ian arrived, leaving no message, but presumably bound for home. “Ye willna mind the journey? I wouldna ask it, and you just over your travel from Inverness”—his eyes met mine with a small, conspiratorial smile—“but I must take him back as soon as may be.”

“I don’t mind at all,” I assured him. “It will be good to see Jenny and the rest of your family again.”

“But Uncle—” Young Ian blurted. “What about—”

“Be still!” Jamie snapped. “That will be all from you, laddie. Not another word, aye?”

Young Ian looked wounded, but took another oatcake and inserted it into his mouth in a marked manner, signifying his intention to remain completely silent.

Jamie relaxed then, and smiled at me.

“Well, and how was your visit to the madwoman?”

“Very interesting,” I said. “Jamie, do you know any people named Campbell?”

“Not above three or four hundred of them,” he said, a smile twitching his long mouth. “Had ye a particular Campbell in mind?”

“A couple of them.” I told him the story of Archibald Campbell and his sister, Margaret, as related to me by Nellie Cowden.

He shook his head at the tale, and sighed. For the first time, he looked truly older, his face tightened and lined by memory.

“It’s no the worst tale I’ve heard, of the things that happened after Culloden,” he said. “But I dinna think—wait.” He stopped, and looked at me, eyes narrowed in thought. “Margaret Campbell. Margaret. Would she be a bonny wee lass—perhaps the size o’ the second Mary? And wi’ soft brown hair like a wren’s feather, and a verra sweet face?”

“She probably was, twenty years ago,” I said, thinking of that still, plump figure sitting by the fire. “Why, do you know her after all?”

"Aye, I think I do." His brow was furrowed in thought, and he looked down at the table, drawing a random line through the spilled crumbs. "Aye, if I'm right, she was Ewan Cameron's sweetheart. You'll mind Ewan?"

"Of course." Ewan had been a tall, handsome joker of a man, who had worked with Jamie at Holyrood, gathering bits of intelligence that filtered through from England. "What's become of Ewan? Or should I not ask?" I said, seeing the shadow come over Jamie's face.

"The English shot him," he said quietly. "Two days after Culloden." He closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them and smiled tiredly at me.

"Well, then, may God bless the Reverend Archie Campbell. I'd heard of him, a time or two, during the Rising. He was a bold soldier, folk said, and a brave one—and I suppose he'll need to be now, poor man." He sat a moment longer, then stood up with decision.

"Aye, well, there's a great deal to be done before we leave Edinburgh. Ian, you'll find the list of the printshop customers upstairs on the table; fetch it down to me and I'll mark off for ye the ones with orders outstanding. Ye must go to see each one and offer back their money. Unless they choose to wait until I've found new premises and laid in new stock—that might take as much as two months, though, tell them."

He patted his coat, where something made a small jingling sound.

"Luckily the assurance money will pay back the customers, and have a bit left over. Speaking of which"—he turned and smiled at me—"your job, Sassenach, is to find a dressmaker who will manage ye a decent gown in two days' time. For I expect Daphne would like her dress back, and I canna take ye home to Lallybroch naked."

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RENDEZVOUS

The chief entertainment of the ride north to Arbroath was watching the conflict of wills between Jamie and Young Ian. I knew from long experience that stubbornness was one of the major components of a Fraser's character. Ian seemed not unduly handicapped in that respect, though only half a Fraser; either the Murrays were no slouches with regard to stubbornness, or the Fraser genes were strong ones.

Having had the opportunity to observe Brianna at close range for many years, I had my own opinion about that, but kept quiet, merely enjoying the spectacle of Jamie having for once met his match. By the time we passed Balfour, he was wearing a distinctly hunted look.

This contest between immovable object and irresistible force continued until early evening of the fourth day, when we reached Arbroath to find that the inn where Jamie had intended to leave Ian and myself no longer existed. No more than a tumbled-down stone wall and one or two charred roof-beams remained to mark the spot; otherwise, the road was deserted for miles in either direction.

Jamie looked at the heap of stones in silence for some time. It was reasonably obvious that he could not just leave us in the middle of a desolate, muddy road. Ian, wise enough not to press the advantage, kept also silent, though his skinny frame fairly vibrated with eagerness.

"All right, then," Jamie said at last, resigned. "Ye'll come. But only so far as the cliff's edge, Ian—d'ye hear? You'll take care of your auntie."

"I hear, Uncle Jamie," Young Ian replied, with deceptive meekness. I caught Jamie's wry glance, though, and understood that if Ian was to take care of auntie, auntie was also to take care of Ian. I hid a smile, nodding obediently.

The rest of the men were timely, arriving at the rendezvous point on the cliffside just after dark. A couple of the men seemed vaguely familiar, but most were just muffled shapes; it was two days past the dark of the moon, but the tiny sliver rising over the horizon made conditions here little more illuminating than those obtaining in the brothel's cellars. No introductions were made, the men greeting Jamie with unintelligible mutters and grunts.

There was one unmistakable figure, though. A large mule-drawn wagon appeared, rattling its way down the road, driven by Fergus and a diminutive object that could only be Mr. Willoughby, whom I had not seen since he had shot the mysterious man on the stairs of the brothel.

"He hasn't a pistol with him tonight, I hope," I murmured to Jamie.

"Who?" he said, squinting into the gathering gloom. "Oh, the Chinee? No, none of them have." Before I could ask why not, he had gone forward, to help back the wagon around, ready to make a getaway toward Edinburgh, so soon as the contraband should be loaded. Young Ian pressed his way forward, and I, mindful of my job as custodian, followed him.

Mr. Willoughby stood on tiptoe to reach into the back of the wagon, emerging with an odd-looking lantern, fitted with a pierced metal top and sliding metal sides.

"Is that a dark lantern?" I asked, fascinated.

"Aye, it is," said Young Ian, importantly. "Ye keep the slides shut until we see the signal out at sea." He reached for the lantern. "Here, give it me; I'll take it—I ken the signal."

Mr. Willoughby merely shook his head, pulling the lantern out of Young Ian's grasp. "Too tall, too young," he said. "Tsei-mi say so," he added, as though that settled the matter once and for all.

“What?” Young Ian was indignant. “What d’ye mean too tall and too young, ye wee—”

“He means,” said a level voice behind us, “that whoever’s holding the lantern is a bonny target, should we have visitors. Mr. Willoughby kindly takes the risk of it, because he’s the smallest man among us. You’re tall enough to see against the sky, wee Ian, and young enough to have nay sense yet. Stay out o’ the way, aye?”

Jamie gave his nephew a light cuff over the ear, and passed by to kneel on the rocks by Mr. Willoughby. He said something low-voiced in Chinese, and there was the ghost of a laugh from the Chinaman. Mr. Willoughby opened the side of the lantern, holding it conveniently to Jamie’s cupped hands. A sharp click, repeated twice, and I caught the flicker of sparks struck from a flint.

It was a wild piece of coast—not surprising, most of Scotland’s coast was wild and rocky—and I wondered how and where the French ship would anchor. There was no natural bay, only a curving of the coastline behind a jutting cliff that sheltered this spot from observation from the road.

Dark as it was, I could see the white lines of the surf purling in across the small half-moon beach. No smooth tourist beach this—small pockets of sand lay ruffled and churned between heaps of seaweed and pebbles and juts of rock. Not an easy footing for men carrying casks, but convenient to the crevices in the surrounding rocks, where the casks could be hidden.

Another black figure loomed up suddenly beside me.

“Everyone’s settled, sir,” it said softly. “Up in the rocks.”

“Good, Joey.” A sudden flare lit Jamie’s profile, intent on the newly caught wick. He held his breath as the flame steadied and grew, taking up oil from the lantern’s reservoir, then let it out with a sigh as he gently closed the metal slide.

“Fine, then,” he said, standing up. He glanced up at the cliff to the south, observing the stars over it, and said, “Nearly nine o’clock. They’ll be in soon. Mind ye, Joey—no one’s to move ’til I call out, aye?”

“Aye, sir.” The casual tone of the answer made it apparent that this was a customary exchange, and Joey was plainly surprised when Jamie gripped his arm.

"Be sure of it," Jamie said. "Tell them all again—no one moves 'til I give the word."

"Aye, sir," Joey said again, but this time with more respect. He faded back into the night, making no sound on the rocks.

"Is something wrong?" I asked, pitching my voice barely loud enough to be heard over the breakers. Though the beach and cliffs were evidently deserted, the dark setting and the secretive conduct of my companions compelled caution.

Jamie shook his head briefly; he'd been right about Young Ian, I thought—his own dark silhouette was clear against the paler black of the sky behind him.

"I dinna ken." He hesitated for a moment, then said, "Tell me, Sassenach—d'ye smell anything?"

Surprised, I obligingly took a deep sniff, held it for a moment, and let it out. I smelled any number of things, including rotted seaweed, the thick smell of burning oil from the dark lantern, and the pungent body odor of Young Ian, standing close beside me, sweating with a mix of excitement and fear.

"Nothing odd, I don't think," I said. "Do you?"

The silhouette's shoulders rose and dropped in a shrug. "Not now. A moment ago, I could ha' sworn I smelt gunpowder."

"I dinna smell anything," Young Ian said. His voice broke from excitement, and he hastily cleared his throat, embarrassed. "Willie MacLeod and Alec Hays searched the rocks. They didna find any sign of excisemen."

"Aye, well." Jamie's voice sounded uneasy. He turned to Young Ian, grasping him by the shoulder.

"Ian, you're to take charge of your auntie, now. The two of ye get back of the gorse bushes there. Keep well away from the wagon. If anything should happen—"

The beginnings of Young Ian's protest were cut off, apparently by a tightening of Jamie's hand, for the boy jerked back with a small grunt, rubbing his shoulder.

"*If* anything should happen," Jamie continued, with emphasis, "you're to take your auntie and go straight home to Lallybroch.

Dinna linger.”

“But—” I said.

“Uncle!” Young Ian said.

“Do it,” said Jamie, in tones of steel, and turned aside, the discussion concluded.

Young Ian was grim on the trip up the cliff trail, but did as he was told, dutifully escorting me some distance past the gorse bushes and finding a small promontory where we might see out some way over the water.

“We can see from here,” he whispered unnecessarily.

We could indeed. The rocks fell away in a shallow bowl beneath us, a broken cup filled with darkness, the light of the water spilling from the broken edge where the sea hissed in. Once I caught a tiny movement, as a metal buckle caught the faint light, but for the most part, the ten men below were completely invisible.

I squinted, trying to pick out the location of Mr. Willoughby with his lantern, but saw no sign of light, and concluded that he must be standing behind the lantern, shielding it from sight from the cliff.

Young Ian stiffened suddenly next to me.

“Someone’s coming!” he whispered. “Quick, get behind me!” Stepping courageously out in front of me, he plunged a hand under his shirt, into the band of his breeches, and withdrew a pistol; dark as it was, I could see the faint gleam of starlight along the barrel.

He braced himself, peering into the dark, slightly hunched over the gun with both hands clamped on the weapon.

“Don’t shoot, for God’s sake!” I hissed in his ear. I didn’t dare grab his arm for fear of setting off the pistol, but was terrified lest he make any noise that might attract attention to the men below.

“I’d be obliged if ye’d heed your auntie, Ian,” came Jamie’s soft, ironic tones from the blackness below the cliff edge. “I’d as soon not have ye blow my head off, aye?”

Ian lowered the pistol, shoulders slumping with what might have been a sigh either of relief or disappointment. The gorse bushes quivered, and then Jamie was before us, brushing gorse prickles from the sleeve of his coat.

"Did no one tell ye not to come armed?" Jamie's voice was mild, with no more than a note of academic interest. "It's a hanging offense to draw a weapon against an officer of the King's Customs," he explained, turning to me. "None o' the men are armed, even wi' so much as a fish knife, in case they're taken."

"Aye, well, Fergus said they wouldna hang me, because my beard's not grown yet," Ian said awkwardly. "I'd only be transported, he said."

There was a soft hiss as Jamie drew in his breath through his teeth in exasperation.

"Oh, aye, and I'm sure your mother will be verra pleased to hear ye've been shipped off to the Colonies, even if Fergus was right!" He put out his hand. "Give me that, fool.

"Where did ye get it, anyway?" he asked, turning the pistol over in his hand. "Already primed, too. I knew I smelt gunpowder. Lucky ye didna blow your cock off, carrying it in your breeches."

Before Young Ian could answer, I interrupted, pointing out to sea.

"Look!"

The French ship was little more than a blot on the face of the sea, but its sails shone pale in the glimmer of starlight. A two-masted ketch, it glided slowly past the cliff and stood off, silent as one of the scattered clouds behind it.

Jamie was not watching the ship, but looking downward, toward a point where the rock face broke in a tumble of boulders, just above the sand. Looking where he was looking, I could just make out a tiny prickle of light. Mr. Willoughby, with the lantern.

There was a brief flash of light that glistened across the wet rocks and was gone. Young Ian's hand was tense on my arm. We waited, breaths held, to the count of thirty. Ian's hand squeezed my arm, just as another flash lit the foam on the sand.

"What was that?" I said.

"What?" Jamie wasn't looking at me, but out at the ship.

"On the shore; when the light flashed, I thought I saw something half-buried in the sand. It looked like—"

The third flash came, and a moment later, an answering light shone from the ship—a blue lantern, an eerie dot that hung from the mast, doubling itself in reflection in the dark water below.

I forgot the glimpse of what appeared to be a rumpled heap of clothing, carelessly buried in the sand, in the excitement of watching the ship. Some movement was evident now, and a faint splash reached our ears as something was thrown over the side.

"The tide's coming in," Jamie muttered in my ear. "The ankers float; the current will carry them ashore in a few minutes."

That solved the problem of the ship's anchorage—it didn't need one. But how then was the payment made? I was about to ask when there was a sudden shout, and all hell broke loose below.

Jamie thrust his way at once through the gorse bushes, followed in short order by me and Young Ian. Little could be seen distinctly, but there was a considerable turmoil taking place on the sandy beach. Dark shapes were stumbling and rolling over the sand, to the accompaniment of shouting. I caught the words "Halt, in the King's name!" and my blood froze.

"Excisemen!" Young Ian had caught it, too.

Jamie said something crude in Gaelic, then threw back his head and shouted himself, his voice carrying easily across the beach below.

"Éirich 'illean!" he bellowed. *"Suas am bearrach is teich!"*

Then he turned to Young Ian and me. "Go!" he said.

The noise suddenly increased as the clatter of falling rocks joined the shouting. Suddenly a dark figure shot out of the gorse by my feet and made off through the dark at high speed. Another followed, a few feet away.

A high-pitched scream came from the dark below, high enough to be heard over the other noises.

"That's Willoughby!" Young Ian exclaimed. "They've got him!"

Ignoring Jamie's order to go, we both crowded forward to peer through the screen of gorse. The dark-lantern had fallen atilt and the slide had come open, shooting a beam of light like a spotlight over the beach, where the shallow graves in which the Customs men had buried themselves gaped in the sand. Black figures swayed and struggled and shouted through the wet heaps of seaweed. A dim glow of light around the lantern was sufficient to show two figures clasped together, the smaller kicking wildly as it was lifted off its feet.

"I'll get him!" Young Ian sprang forward, only to be pulled up with a jerk as Jamie caught him by the collar.

"Do as you're told and see my wife safe!"

Gasping for breath, Young Ian turned to me, but I wasn't going anywhere, and set my feet firmly in the dirt, resisting his tug on my arm.

Ignoring us both, Jamie turned and ran along the clifftop, stopping several yards away. I could see him clearly in silhouette against the sky, as he dropped to one knee and readied the pistol, bracing it on his forearm to sight downward.

The sound of the shot was no more than a small cracking noise, lost amid the tumult. The result of it, though, was spectacular. The lantern exploded in a shower of burning oil, abruptly darkening the beach and silencing the shouting.

The silence was broken within seconds by a howl of mingled pain and indignation. My eyes, momentarily blinded by the flash of the lantern, adapted quickly, and I saw another glow—the light of several small flames, which seemed to be moving erratically up and down. As my night vision cleared, I saw that the flames rose from the coat sleeve of a man, who was dancing up and down as he howled, beating ineffectually at the fire started by the burning oil that had splashed him.

The gorse bushes quivered violently as Jamie plunged over the cliffside and was lost to view below.

"Jamie!"

Roused by my cry, Young Ian yanked harder, pulling me half off my feet and forcibly dragging me away from the cliff.

"Come on, Auntie! They'll be up here, next thing!"

This was undeniably true; I could hear the shouts on the beach coming closer, as the men swarmed up the rocks. I picked up my skirts and went, following the boy as fast as we could go through the rough marrow-grass of the clifftop.

I didn't know where we were going, but Young Ian seemed to. He had taken off his coat and the white of his shirt was easily visible before me, floating like a ghost through the thickets of alder and birch that grew farther inland.

"Where are we?" I panted, coming up alongside him when he slowed at the bank of a tiny stream.

"The road to Arbroath's just ahead," he said. He was breathing heavily, and a dark smudge of mud showed down the side of his shirt. "It'll be easier going in a moment. Are ye all right, Auntie? Shall I carry ye across?"

I politely declined this gallant offer, privately noting that I undoubtedly weighed as much as he did. I took off my shoes and stockings, and splashed my way knee-deep across the streamlet, feeling icy mud well up between my toes.

I was shivering violently when I emerged, and did accept Ian's offer of his coat—excited as he was, and heated by the exercise, he was clearly in no need of it. I was chilled not only by the water and the cold November wind, but by fear of what might be happening behind us.

We emerged panting onto the road, the wind blowing cold in our faces. My nose and lips were numb in no time, and my hair blew loose behind me, heavy on my neck. It's an ill wind that blows nobody good, though; it carried the sound of voices to us, moments before we would have walked into them.

"Any signal from the cliff?" a deep male voice asked. Ian stopped so abruptly in his tracks that I bumped into him.

"Not yet," came the reply. "I thought I heard a bit of shouting that way, but then the wind turned."

"Well, get up that tree again then, heavy-arse," the first voice said impatiently. "If any o' the whoresons get past the beach, we'll nibble 'em here. Better us get the headmoney than the buggers on the beach."

"It's cold," grumbled the second voice. "Out in the open where the wind gnaws your bones. Wish we'd drawn the watch at the abbey—at least it would be warm there."

Young Ian's hand was clutching my upper arm tight enough to leave bruises. I pulled, trying to loosen his grip, but he paid no attention.

"Aye, but less chance o' catching the big fish," the first voice said. "Ah, and what I might do with fifty pound!"

"Awright," said the second voice, resigned. "Though how we're to see red hair in the dark, I've no notion."

"Just lay 'em by the heels, Oakie; we'll look at their heads later."

Young Ian was finally roused from his trance by my tugging, and stumbled after me off the road and into the bushes.

"What do they mean by the watch at the abbey?" I demanded, as soon as I thought we were out of earshot of the watchers on the road. "Do you know?"

Young Ian's dark thatch bobbed up and down. "I think so, Auntie. It must be Arbroath abbey. That's the meeting point, aye?"

"Meeting point?"

"If something should go wrong," he explained. "Then it's every man for himself, all to meet at the abbey as soon as they can."

"Well, it couldn't go more wrong," I observed. "What was it your uncle shouted when the Customs men popped up?"

Young Ian had half-turned to listen for pursuit from the road;now the pale oval of his face turned back to me. "Oh—he said, 'Up, lads! Over the cliff and run!' "

"Sound advice," I said dryly. "So if they followed it, most of the men may have gotten away."

"Except Uncle Jamie and Mr. Willoughby." Young Ian was running one hand nervously through his hair; it reminded me forcibly of Jamie, and I wished he would stop.

"Yes." I took a deep breath. "Well, there's nothing we can do about them just now. The other men, though—if they're headed for the abbey—"

"Aye," he broke in, "that's what I was tryin' to decide; ought I do as Uncle Jamie said, and take ye to Lallybroch, or had I best try to get to the abbey quick and warn the others as they come?"

"Get to the abbey," I said, "as fast as you can."

"Well, but—I shouldna like to leave ye out here by yourself, Auntie, and Uncle Jamie said—"

"There's a time to follow orders, Young Ian, and a time to think for yourself," I said firmly, tactfully ignoring the fact that I was in fact doing the thinking for him. “Does this road lead to the abbey?”

“Aye, it does. No more than a mile and a quarter.” Already he was shifting to and fro on the balls of his feet, eager to be gone.

“Good. You cut round the road and head for the abbey. I’ll walk straight along the road, and see if I can distract the excisemen until you’re safely past. I’ll meet you at the abbey. Oh, wait—you’d best take your coat.”

I surrendered the coat reluctantly; besides being loath to part with its warmth, it felt like giving up my last link with a friendly human presence. Once Young Ian was away, I would be completely alone in the cold dark of the Scottish night.

“Ian?” I held his arm, to keep him a moment longer.

“Aye?”

“Be careful, won’t you?” On impulse, I stood on tiptoe and kissed his cold cheek. I was near enough to see his brows arch in surprise. He smiled, and then he was gone, an alder branch snapping back into place behind him.

It was very cold. The only sounds were the *whish* of the wind through the bushes and the distant murmur of the surf. I pulled the woolen shawl tightly round my shoulders, shivering, and headed back toward the road.

Ought I to make a noise? I wondered. If not, I might be attacked without warning, since the waiting men might hear my footsteps but couldn’t see that I wasn’t an escaping smuggler. On the other hand, if I strolled through singing a jaunty tune to indicate that I was a harmless woman, they might just lie hidden in silence, not wanting to give away their presence—and giving away their presence was exactly what I had in mind. I bent and picked up a rock from the side of the road. Then, feeling even colder than before, I stepped out onto the road and walked straight on, without a word.

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SMUGGLERS' MOON

The wind was high enough to keep the trees and bushes in a constant stir, masking the sound of my footsteps on the road—and those of anyone who might be stalking me, too. Less than a fortnight past the feast of Samhain, it was the sort of wild night that made one easily believe that spirits and evil might well be abroad.

It wasn't a spirit that grabbed me suddenly from behind, hand clamped tight across my mouth. Had I not been prepared for just such an eventuality, I would have been startled senseless. As it was, my heart gave a great leap and I jerked convulsively in my captor's grasp.

He had grabbed me from the left, pinning my left arm tight against my side, his right hand over my mouth. *My* right arm was free, though. I drove the heel of my shoe into his kneecap, buckling his leg, and then, taking advantage of his momentary stagger, leaned forward and smashed backward at his head with the rock in my hand.

It was of necessity a glancing blow, but it struck hard enough that he grunted with surprise, and his grip loosened. I kicked and squirmed, and as his hand slipped across my mouth, I got my teeth onto a finger and bit down as hard as I could.

"The maxillary muscles run from the sagittal crest at the top of the skull to an insertion on the mandible," I thought, dimly recalling the description from *Grey's Anatomy*. "This gives the jaw and teeth considerable crushing power; in fact, the average human jaw is capable of exerting over three hundred pounds of force."

I didn't know whether I was bettering the average, but I was undeniably having an effect. My assailant was thrashing frantically to and fro in a futile effort to dislodge the death grip I had on his finger.

His hold on my arm had loosened in the struggle, and he was forced to lower me. As soon as my feet touched the dirt once more, I let go of his hand, whirled about, and gave him as hearty a root in the stones with my knee as I could manage, given my skirts.

Kicking men in the testicles is vastly overrated as a means of defense. That is to say, it does work—and spectacularly well—but it's a more difficult maneuver to carry out than one might think, particularly when one is wearing heavy skirts. Men are extremely careful of those particular appendages, and thoroughly wary of any attempt on them.

In this case, though, my attacker was off guard, his legs wide apart to keep his balance, and I caught him fairly. He made a hideous wheezing noise like a strangled rabbit and doubled up in the roadway.

"Is that you, Sassenach?" The words were hissed out of the darkness to my left. I leaped like a startled gazelle, and uttered an involuntary scream.

For the second time within as many minutes, a hand clapped itself over my mouth.

"For God's sake, Sassenach!" Jamie muttered in my ear. "It's me." I didn't bite him, though I was strongly tempted to.

"I know," I said, through my teeth, when he released me. "Who's the other fellow that grabbed me, though?"

"Fergus, I expect." The amorphous dark shape moved away a few feet and seemed to be prodding another shape that lay on the road, moaning faintly. "Is it you, Fergus?" he whispered. Receiving a sort of choked noise in response, he bent and hauled the second shape to its feet.

"Don't talk!" I urged them in a whisper. "There are excisemen just ahead!"

"Is that so?" said Jamie, in a normal voice. "They're no verra curious about the noise we're making, are they?"

He paused, as though waiting for an answer, but no sound came but the low keening of the wind through the alders. He laid a hand on my arm and shouted into the night.

“MacLeod! Raeburn!”

“Aye, Roy,” said a mildly testy voice in the shrubbery. “We’re here. Innes, too, and Meldrum, is it?”

“Aye, it’s me.”

Shuffling and talking in low voices, more shapes emerged from the bushes and trees.

“ … four, five, six,” Jamie counted. “Where are Hays and the Gordons?”

“I saw Hays go intae the water,” one of the shapes volunteered. “He’ll ha’ gone awa’ round the point. Likely the Gordons and Kennedy did, too. I didna hear anything as though they’d been taken.”

“Well enough,” Jamie said. “Now, then, Sassenach. What’s this about excisemen?”

Given the nonappearance of Oakie and his companion, I was beginning to feel rather foolish, but I recounted what Ian and I had heard.

“Aye?” Jamie sounded interested. “Can ye stand yet, Fergus? Ye can? Good lad. Well, then, perhaps we’ll have a look. Meldrum, have ye a flint about ye?”

A few moments later, a small torch struggling to stay alight in his hand, he strode down the road, and around the bend. The smugglers and I waited in tense silence, ready either to run or to rush to his assistance, but there were no noises of ambush. After what seemed like an eternity, Jamie’s voice floated back along the road.

“Come along, then,” he said, sounding calm and collected.

He was standing in the middle of the road, near a large alder. The torchlight fell round him in a flickering circle, and at first I saw nothing but Jamie. Then there was a gasp from the man beside me, and a choked sound of horror from another.

Another face appeared, dimly lit, hanging in the air just behind Jamie’s left shoulder. A horrible, congested face, black in the torchlight that robbed everything of color, with bulging eyes and tongue protruding. The hair, fair as dry straw, rose stirring in the wind. I felt a fresh scream rise in my throat, and choked it off.

"Ye were right, Sassenach," Jamie said. "There *was* an exciseman." He tossed something to the ground, where it landed with a small plop! "A warrant," he said, nodding toward the object. "His name was Thomas Oakie. Will any of ye ken him?"

"Not like he is now," a voice muttered behind me. "Christ, his mither wouldna ken him!" There was a general mutter of negation, with a nervous shuffling of feet. Clearly, everyone was as anxious to get away from the place as I was.

"All right, then." Jamie stopped the retreat with a jerk of his head. "The cargo's lost, so there'll be no shares, aye? Will anyone need money for the present?" He reached for his pocket. "I can provide enough to live on for a bit—for I doubt we'll be workin' the coast for a time."

One or two of the men reluctantly advanced within clear sight of the thing hanging from the tree to receive their money, but the rest of the smugglers melted quietly away into the night. Within a few minutes, only Fergus—still white, but standing on his own—Jamie, and I were left.

"Jesu!" Fergus whispered, looking up at the hanged man. "Who will have done it?"

"I did—or so I expect the tale will be told, aye?" Jamie gazed upward, his face harsh in the sputtering torchlight. "We'll no tarry longer, shall we?"

"What about Ian?" I said, suddenly remembering the boy. "He went to the abbey, to warn you!"

"He did?" Jamie's voice sharpened. "I came from that direction, and didna meet him. Which way did he go, Sassenach?"

"That way," I said, pointing.

Fergus made a small sound that might have been laughter.

"The abbey's the other way," Jamie said, sounding amused. "Come on, then; we'll catch him up when he realizes his mistake and comes back."

"Wait," said Fergus, holding up a hand. There was a cautious rustling in the shrubbery, and Young Ian's voice said, "Uncle

Jamie?"

"Aye, Ian," his uncle said dryly. "It's me."

The boy emerged from the bushes, leaves stuck in his hair, eyes wide with excitement.

"I saw the light, and thought I must come back to see that Auntie Claire was all right," he explained. "Uncle Jamie, ye mustna linger about wi' a torch—there are excisemen about!"

Jamie put an arm about his nephew's shoulders and turned him, before he should notice the thing hanging from the alder tree.

"Dinna trouble yourself, Ian," he said evenly. "They've gone."

Swinging the torch through the wet shrubbery, he extinguished it with a hiss.

"Let's go," he said, his voice calm in the dark. "Mr. Willoughby's down the road wi' the horses; we'll be in the Highlands by dawn."

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PART SEVEN

Home Again

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THE PRODIGAL'S RETURN

It was a four-day journey on horseback to Lallybroch from Arbroath, and there was little conversation for most of it. Both Young Ian and Jamie were preoccupied, presumably for different reasons. For myself, I was kept busy wondering, not only about the recent past, but about the immediate future.

Ian must have told Jamie's sister, Jenny, about me. How would she take my reappearance?

Jenny Murray had been the nearest thing I had ever had to a sister, and by far the closest woman friend of my life. Owing to circumstance, most of my close friends in the last fifteen years had been men; there were no other female doctors, and the natural gulf between nursing staff and medical staff prevented more than casual acquaintance with other women working at the hospital. As for the women in Frank's circle, the departmental secretaries and university wives …

More than any of that, though, was the knowledge that of all the people in the world, Jenny was the one who might love Jamie Fraser as much—if not more—than I did. I was eager to see Jenny again, but could not help wondering how she would take the story of my supposed escape to France, and my apparent desertion of her brother.

The horses had to follow each other in single file down the narrow track. My own bay slowed obligingly as Jamie's chestnut paused, then turned aside at his urging into a clearing, half-hidden by an overhang of alder branches.

A gray stone cliff rose up at the edge of the clearing, its cracks and bumps and ridges so furred with moss and lichen that it looked like the face of an ancient man, all spotted with whiskers and freckled with warts. Young Ian slid down from his pony with a sigh of relief; we had been in the saddle since dawn.

"Oof!" he said, frankly rubbing his backside. "I've gone all numb."

"So have I," I said, doing the same. "I suppose it's better than being saddlesore, though." Unaccustomed to riding for long stretches, both Young Ian and I had suffered considerably during the first two days of the journey; in fact, too stiff to dismount by myself the first night, I had had to be ignominiously hoisted off my horse and carried into the inn by Jamie, much to his amusement.

"How does Uncle Jamie do it?" Ian asked me. "His arse must be made of leather."

"Not to look at," I replied absently. "Where's he gone, though?" The chestnut, already hobbled, was nibbling at the grass under an oak to one side of the clearing, but of Jamie himself, there was no sign.

Young Ian and I looked blankly at each other; I shrugged, and went over to the cliff face, where a trickle of water ran down the rock. I cupped my hands beneath it and drank, grateful for the cold liquid sliding down my dry throat, in spite of the autumn air that reddened my cheeks and numbed my nose.

This tiny glen clearing, invisible from the road, was characteristic of most of the Highland scenery, I thought. Deceptively barren and severe, the crags and moors were full of secrets. If you didn't know where you were going, you could walk within inches of a deer, a grouse, or a hiding man, and never know it. Small wonder that many of those who had taken to the heather after Culloden had managed to escape, their knowledge of the hidden places making them invisible to the blind eyes and clumsy feet of the pursuing English.

Thirst slaked, I turned from the cliff face and nearly ran into Jamie, who had appeared as though sprung out of the earth by magic. He was putting his tinderbox back into the pocket of his coat, and the faint smell of smoke clung to his coat. He dropped a small burnt stick to the grass and ground it to dust with his foot.

"Where did you come from?" I said, blinking at this apparition. "And where have you been?"

"There's a wee cave just there," he explained, jerking a thumb behind him. "I only wanted to see whether anyone's been in it."

"Have they?" Looking closely, I could see the edge of the outcrop that concealed the cave's entrance. Blending as it did with the other deep cracks in the rock face, it wouldn't be visible unless you were deliberately looking for it.

"Aye, they have," he said. His brows were slightly furrowed, not in worry, but as though he were thinking about something. "There's charcoal mixed wi' the earth; someone's had a fire there."

"Who do you think it was?" I asked. I stuck my head around the outcrop, but saw nothing but a narrow bar of darkness, a small rift in the face of the mountain. It looked thoroughly uninviting.

I wondered whether any of his smuggling connections might have traced him all the way from the coast to Lallybroch. Was he worried about pursuit, or an ambush? Despite myself, I looked over my shoulder, but saw nothing but the alders, dry leaves rustling in the autumn breeze.

"I dinna ken," he said absently. "A hunter, I suppose; there are grouse bones scattered about, too."

Jamie didn't seem perturbed by the unknown person's possible identity, and I relaxed, the feeling of security engendered by the Highlands wrapping itself about me once more. Both Edinburgh and the smugglers' cove seemed a long way away.

Young Ian, fascinated by the revelation of the invisible cave, had disappeared through the crevice. Now he reappeared, brushing a cobweb out of his hair.

"Is this like Cluny's Cage, Uncle?" he asked, eyes bright.

"None so big, Ian," Jamie answered with a smile. "Poor Cluny would scarce fit through the entrance o' this one; he was a stout big fellow, forbye, near twice my girth." He touched his chest ruefully, where a button had been torn loose by squeezing through the narrow entrance.

"What's Cluny's Cage?" I asked, shaking the last drops of icy water from my hands and thrusting them under my armpits to thaw out.

"Oh—that's Cluny MacPherson," Jamie replied. He bent his head, and splashed the chilly water up into his face. Lifting his head, he blinked the sparkling drops from his lashes and smiled at me. "A verra ingenious man, Cluny. The English burnt his house, and pulled down the foundation, but Cluny himself escaped. He built himself a wee snuggery in a nearby cavern, and sealed over the entrance wi' willow branches all woven together and chinked wi' mud. Folk said ye could stand three feet away, and no notion that the cave was there, save the smell of the smoke from Cluny's pipe."

"Prince Charles stayed there too, for a bit, when he was hunted by the English," Young Ian informed me. "Cluny hid him for days. The English bastards hunted high and low, but never found His Highness—or Cluny, either!" he concluded, with considerable satisfaction.

"Come here and wash yourself, Ian," Jamie said, with a hint of sharpness that made Young Ian blink. "Ye canna face your parents covered wi' filth."

Ian sighed, but obediently bent his head over the trickle of water, sputtering and gasping as he splashed his face, which while not strictly speaking filthy, undeniably bore one or two small stains of travel.

I turned to Jamie, who stood watching his nephew's ablutions with an air of abstraction. Did he look ahead, I wondered, to what promised to be an awkward meeting at Lallybroch, or back to Edinburgh, with the smoldering remains of his printshop and the dead man in the basement of the brothel? Or back further still, to Charles Edward Stuart, and the days of the Rising?

"What do you tell your nieces and nephews about him?" I asked quietly, under the noise of Ian's snorting. "About Charles?"

Jamie's gaze sharpened and focused on me; I had been right, then. His eyes warmed slightly, and the hint of a smile acknowledged the success of my mind-reading, but then both warmth and smile disappeared.

“I never speak of him,” he said, just as quietly, and turned away to catch the horses.

* * *

Three hours later, we came through the last of the windswept passes, and out onto the final slope that led down to Lallybroch. Jamie, in the lead, drew up his horse and waited for me and Young Ian to come up beside him.

“There it is,” he said. He glanced at me, smiling, one eyebrow raised. “Much changed, is it?”

I shook my head, rapt. From this distance, the house seemed completely unchanged. Built of white harled stone, its three stories gleamed immaculately amid its cluster of shabby outbuildings and the spread of stone-dyked brown fields. On the small rise behind the house stood the remains of the ancient broch, the circular stone tower that gave the place its name.

On closer inspection, I could see that the outbuildings had changed a bit; Jamie had told me that the English soldiery had burned the dovecote and the chapel the year after Culloden, and I could see the gaps where they had been. A space where the wall of the kailyard had been broken through had been repaired with stone of a different color, and a new shed built of stone and scrap lumber was evidently serving as a dovecote, judging from the row of plump feathered bodies lined up on the rooftree, enjoying the late autumn sun.

The rose brier planted by Jamie’s mother, Ellen, had grown up into a great, sprawling tangle latticed to the wall of the house, only now losing the last of its leaves.

A plume of smoke rose from the western chimney, carrying away toward the south on a wind from the sea. I had a sudden vision of the fire in the hearth of the sitting room, its light rosy on Jenny’s clear-cut face in the evening as she sat in her chair, reading aloud from a novel or book of poems while Jamie and Ian sat absorbed in a game of chess, listening with half an ear. How many evenings had we spent that way, the children upstairs in their beds, and me sitting at the rosewood secretary, writing down receipts for medicines or doing some of the interminable domestic mending?

“Will we live here again, do you think?” I asked Jamie, careful to keep any trace of longing from my voice. More than any other place, the house at Lallybroch had been home to me, but that had been a long time ago—and any number of things had changed since then.

He paused for a long minute, considering. Finally he shook his head, gathering up the reins in his hand. “I canna say, Sassenach,” he said. “It would be pleasant, but—I dinna ken how things may be, aye?” There was a small frown on his face, as he looked down at the house.

“It’s all right. If we live in Edinburgh—or even in France—it’s all right, Jamie.” I looked up into his face and touched his hand in reassurance. “As long as we’re together.”

The faint look of worry lifted momentarily, lightening his features. He took my hand, raised it to his lips, and kissed it gently.

“I dinna mind much else myself, Sassenach, so long as ye’ll stay by me.”

We sat gazing into each other’s eyes, until a loud, self-conscious cough from behind alerted us to Young Ian’s presence. Scrupulously careful of our privacy, he had been embarrassingly circumspect on the trip from Edinburgh, crashing off through the heather to a great distance when we camped, and taking remarkable pains so as not inadvertently to surprise us in an indiscreet embrace.

Jamie grinned and squeezed my hand before letting it go and turning to his nephew.

“Almost there, Ian,” he said, as the boy negotiated his pony up beside us. “We’ll be there well before supper if it doesna rain,” he added, squinting under his hand to gauge the possibilities of the clouds drifting slowly over the Monadhliath Mountains.

“Mmphm.” Young Ian didn’t sound thrilled at the prospect, and I glanced at him sympathetically.

“ ‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in,’ ” I quoted.

Young Ian gave me a wry look. “Aye, that’s what I’m afraid of, Auntie.”

Jamie, hearing this exchange, glanced back at Young Ian, and blinked solemnly—his own version of an encouraging wink.

"Dinna be downhearted, Ian. Remember the story o' the Prodigal Son, aye? Your Mam will be glad to see ye safe back."

Young Ian cast him a glance of profound disillusion.

"If ye expect it's the fatted calf that's like to be kilt, Uncle Jamie, ye dinna ken my mother so well as ye think."

The lad sat gnawing his lower lip for a moment, then drew himself up in the saddle with a deep breath.

"Best get it over, aye?" he said.

"Will his parents really be hard on him?" I asked, watching Young Ian pick his way carefully down the rocky slope.

Jamie shrugged.

"Well, they'll forgive him, of course, but he's like to get a rare ballocking and his backside tanned before that. I'll be lucky to get off wi' the same," he added wryly. "Jenny and Ian are no going to be verra pleased wi' me, either, I'm afraid." He kicked up his mount, and started down the slope.

"Come along, Sassenach. Best get it over, aye?"

* * *

I wasn't sure what to expect in terms of a reception at Lallybroch, but in the event, it was reassuring. As on all previous arrivals, our presence was heralded by the barking of a miscellaneous swarm of dogs, who galloped out of hedge and field and kailyard, yapping first with alarm, and then with joy.

Young Ian dropped his reins and slid down into the furry sea of welcome, dropping into a crouch to greet the dogs who leapt on him and licked his face. He stood up smiling with a half-grown puppy in his arms, which he brought over to show me.

"This is Jocky," he said, holding up the squirming brown and white body. "He's mine; Da gave him to me."

"Nice doggie," I told Jocky, scratching his floppy ears. The dog barked and squirmed ecstatically, trying to lick me and Ian simultaneously.

"You're getting covered wi' dog hairs, Ian," said a clear, high voice, in tones of marked disapproval. Looking up from the dog, I saw a tall, slim girl of seventeen or so, rising from her seat by the side of the road.

"Well, you're covered wi' foxtails, so there!" Young Ian retorted, swinging about to address the speaker.

The girl tossed a headful of dark brown curls and bent to brush at her skirt, which did indeed sport a number of the bushy grass-heads, stuck to the homespun fabric.

"Da says ye dinna deserve to have a dog," she remarked. "Running off and leaving him like ye did."

Young Ian's face tightened defensively. "I did think o' taking him," he said, voice cracking slightly. "But I didna think he'd be safe in the city." He hugged the dog tighter, chin resting between the furry ears. "He's grown a bit; I suppose he's been eating all right?"

"Come to greet us, have ye, wee Janet? That's kind." Jamie's voice spoke pleasantly from behind me, but with a cynical note that made the girl glance up sharply and blush at the sight of him.

"Uncle Jamie! Oh, and …" Her gaze shifted to me, and she ducked her head, blushing more furiously.

"Aye, this is your auntie Claire." Jamie's hand was firm under my elbow as he nodded toward the girl. "Wee Janet wasna born yet, last ye were here, Sassenach. Your mother will be to home, I expect?" he said, addressing Janet.

The girl nodded, wide-eyed, not taking her fascinated gaze from my face. I leaned down from my horse and extended a hand, smiling.

"I'm pleased to meet you," I said.

She stared for a long moment, then suddenly remembered her manners, and dropped into a curtsy. She rose and took my hand gingerly, as though afraid it might come off in her grasp. I squeezed hers, and she looked faintly reassured at finding me merely flesh and blood.

"I'm … pleased, mum," she murmured.

"Are Mam and Da verra angry, Jen?" Young Ian gently put the puppy on the ground near her feet, breaking her trance. She glanced at her younger brother, her expression of impatience tinged with some sympathy.

"Well, and why wouldn't they be, clot-heid?" she said. "Mam thought ye'd maybe met a boar in the wood, or been taken by gypsies. She scarcely slept until they found out where ye'd gone," she added, frowning at her brother.

Ian pressed his lips tight together, looking down at the ground, but didn't answer.

She moved closer, and picked disapprovingly at the damp yellow leaves adhering to the sleeves of his coat. Tall as she was, he topped her by a good six inches, gangly and rawboned next to her trim competence, the resemblance between them limited to the rich darkness of their hair and a fugitive similarity of expression.

"You're a sight, Ian. Have ye been sleepin' in your clothes?"

"Well, of course I have," he said impatiently. "What d'ye think, I ran away wi' a nightshirt and changed into it every night on the moor?"

She gave a brief snort of laughter at this picture, and his expression of annoyance faded a bit.

"Oh, come on, then, gowk," she said, taking pity on him. "Come into the scullery wi' me, and we'll get ye brushed and combed before Mam and Da see ye."

He glared at her, then turned to look up at me, with an expression of mingled bewilderment and annoyance. "Why in the name o' heaven," he demanded, his voice cracking with strain, "does everyone think bein' *clean* will help?"

Jamie grinned at him, and dismounting, clapped him on the shoulder, raising a small cloud of dust.

"It canna hurt anything, Ian. Go along wi' ye; I think perhaps it's as well if your parents havena got so many things to deal with all at once—and they'll be wanting to see your auntie first of all."

"Mmphm." With a morose nod of assent, Young Ian moved reluctantly off toward the back of the house, towed by his determined sister.

"What have ye been eating?" I heard her say, squinting up at him as they went. "You've a great smudge of filth all round your mouth."

"It isna filth, it's whiskers!" he hissed furiously under his breath, with a quick backward glance to see whether Jamie and I had heard this exchange. His sister stopped dead, peering up at him.

"Whiskers?" she said loudly and incredulously. *"You?"*

"Come on!" Grabbing her by the elbow, he hustled her off through the kailyard gate, his shoulders hunched in self-consciousness.

Jamie lowered his head against my thigh, face buried in my skirts. To the casual observer, he might have been occupied in loosening the saddlebags, but the casual observer couldn't have seen his shoulders shaking or felt the vibration of his soundless laughter.

"It's all right, they're gone," I said, a moment later, gasping for breath myself from the strain of silent mirth.

Jamie raised his face, red and breathless, from my skirts, and used a fold of the cloth to dab his eyes.

"Whiskers? *You?*" he croaked in imitation of his niece, setting us both off again. He shook his head, gulping for air. "Christ, she's like her mother! That's just what Jenny said to me, in just that voice, when she caught me shavin' for the first time. I nearly cut my throat." He wiped his eyes again on the back of his hand, and rubbed a palm tenderly across the thick, soft stubble that coated his own jaws and throat with an auburn haze.

"Do you want to go and shave yourself before we meet Jenny and Ian?" I asked, but he shook his head.

"No," he said, smoothing back the hair that had escaped from its lacing. "Young Ian's right; bein' clean won't help."

* * *

They must have heard the dogs outside; both Ian and Jenny were in the sitting room when we came in, she on the sofa knitting woolen stockings, while he stood before the fire in plain brown coat and breeks, warming the backs of his legs. A tray of small cakes with a bottle of home-brewed ale was set out, plainly in readiness for our arrival.

It was a very cozy, welcoming scene, and I felt the tiredness of the journey drop away as we entered the room. Ian turned at once as we came in, self-conscious but smiling, but it was Jenny that I looked for.

She was looking for me, too. She sat still on the couch, her eyes wide, turned to the door. My first impression was that she was quite different, the second, that she had not changed at all. The black curls were still there, thick and lively, but blanched and streaked with a deep, rich silver. The bones, too, were the same—the broad, high cheekbones, strong jaw, and long nose that she shared with Jamie. It was the flickering firelight and the shadows of the gathering afternoon that gave the strange impression of change, one moment deepening the lines beside her eyes and mouth ’til she looked like a crone; the next erasing them with the ruddy glow of girlhood, like a 3-D picture in a box of Cracker Jack.

On our first meeting in the brothel, Ian had acted as if I were a ghost. Jenny did much the same now, blinking slightly, her mouth slightly open, but not otherwise changing expression as I crossed the room toward her.

Jamie was just behind me, his hand at my elbow. He squeezed it lightly as we reached the sofa, then let go. I felt rather as though I were being presented at Court, and resisted the impulse to curtsy.

“We’re home, Jenny,” he said. His hand rested reassuringly on my back.

She glanced quickly at her brother, then stared at me again.

“It’s you, then, Claire?” Her voice was soft and tentative, familiar, but not the strong voice of the woman I remembered.

“Yes, it’s me,” I said. I smiled and reached out my hands to her. “It’s good to see you, Jenny.”

She took my hands, lightly. Then her grip strengthened and she rose to her feet. “Christ, it *is* you!” she said, a little breathless, and suddenly the woman I had known was back, dark blue eyes alive and dancing, searching my face with curiosity.

“Well, of course it is,” Jamie said gruffly. “Surely Ian told ye; did ye think he was lying?”

“You’ll scarce have changed,” she said, ignoring her brother as she touched my face wonderingly. “Your hair’s a bit lighter, but my God, ye look the same!” Her fingers were cool; her hands smelled of herbs and red-currant jam, and the faint hint of ammonia and lanolin from the dyed wool she was knitting.

The long-forgotten smell of the wool brought everything back at once—so many memories of the place, and the happiness of the time I had lived here—and my eyes blurred with tears.

She saw it, and hugged me hard, her hair smooth and soft against my face. She was much shorter than I, fine-boned and delicate to look at, but still I had the feeling of being enveloped, warmly supported and strongly held, as though by someone larger than myself.

She released me after a moment, and stood back, half-laughing. "God, ye even smell the same!" she exclaimed, and I burst out laughing, too.

Ian had come up; he leaned down and embraced me gently, brushing his lips against my cheek. He smelled faintly of dried hay and cabbage leaves, with the ghost of peat smoke laid over his own deep, musky scent.

"It's good to see ye back again, Claire," he said. His soft brown eyes smiled at me, and the sense of homecoming deepened. He stood back a little awkwardly, smiling. "Will ye eat something, maybe?" He gestured toward the tray on the table.

I hesitated a moment, but Jamie moved toward it with alacrity.

"A drop wouldna come amiss, Ian, thank ye kindly," he said. "You'll have some, Claire?"

Glasses were filled, the biscuits passed, and small spoken pleasantries murmured through mouthfuls as we sat down around the fire. Despite the outward cordiality, I was strongly aware of an underlying tension, not all of it to do with my sudden reappearance.

Jamie, seated beside me on the oak settle, took no more than a sip of his ale, and the oatcake sat untasted on his knee. I knew he hadn't accepted the refreshments out of hunger, but in order to mask the fact that neither his sister nor his brother-in-law had offered him a welcoming embrace.

I caught a quick glance passing between Ian and Jenny; and a longer stare, unreadable, exchanged between Jenny and Jamie. A stranger here in more ways than one, I kept my own eyes cast down, observing under the shelter of my lashes. Jamie sat to my left; I could feel the tiny movement between us as the two stiff fingers of his right hand drummed their small tattoo against his thigh.

The conversation, what there was of it, petered out, and the room fell into an uncomfortable silence. Through the faint hissing of the peat fire, I could hear a few distant thumps in the direction of the kitchen, but nothing like the sounds I remembered in this house, of constant activity and bustling movement, feet always pounding on the stair, and the shouts of children and squalling of babies splitting the air in the nursery overhead.

"How are all of your children?" I asked Jenny, to break the silence. She started, and I realized that I had inadvertently asked the wrong question.

"Oh, they're well enough," she replied hesitantly. "All verra bonny. And the grandchildren, too," she added, breaking into a sudden smile at the thought of them.

"They've mostly gone to Young Jamie's house," Ian put in, answering my real question. "His wife's had a new babe just the week past, so the three girls have gone to help a bit. And Michael's up in Inverness just now, to fetch down some things come in from France."

Another glance flicked across the room, this one between Ian and Jamie. I felt the small tilt of Jamie's head, and saw Ian's not-quite-nod in response. And what in hell was *that* about? I wondered. There were so many invisible cross-currents of emotion in the room that I had a sudden impulse to stand up and call the meeting to order, just to break the tension.

Apparently Jamie felt the same. He cleared his throat, looking directly at Ian, and addressed the main point on the agenda, saying, "We've brought the lad home with us."

Ian took a deep breath, his long, homely face hardening slightly. "Have ye, then?" The thin layer of pleasantry spread over the occasion vanished suddenly, like morning dew.

I could feel Jamie beside me, tensing slightly as he prepared to defend his nephew as best he might.

"He's a good lad, Ian," he said.

"Is he, so?" It was Jenny who answered, her fine black brows drawn down in a frown. "Ye couldna tell, the way he acts at home. But perhaps he's different wi' you, Jamie." There was a strong note of accusation in her words, and I felt Jamie tense at my side.

"It's kind of ye to speak up for the lad, Jamie," Ian put in, with a cool nod in his brother-in-law's direction. "But I think we'd best hear from Young Ian himself, if ye please. Will he be upstairs?"

A muscle near Jamie's mouth twitched, but he answered noncommittally. "In the scullery, I expect; he wanted to tidy himself a bit before seein' ye." His right hand slid down and pressed against my leg in warning. He hadn't mentioned meeting Janet, and I understood; she had been sent away with her siblings, so that Jenny and Ian could deal with the matters of my appearance and their prodigal son in some privacy, but had crept back unbeknownst to her parents, wanting either to catch a glimpse of her notorious aunt Claire, or to offer succor to her brother.

I lowered my eyelids, indicating that I understood. No point in mentioning the girl's presence, in a situation already so fraught with tension.

The sound of feet and the regular thump of Ian's wooden leg sounded in the uncarpeted passage. Ian had left the room in the direction of the scullery; now he returned, grimly ushering Young Ian before him.

The prodigal was as presentable as soap, water, and razor could make him. His bony jaws were reddened with scraping and the hair on his neck was clotted in wet spikes, most of the dust beaten from his coat, and the round neck of his shirt neatly buttoned to the collarbone. There was little to be done about the singed half of his head, but the other side was neatly combed. He had no stock, and there was a large rip in the leg of his breeks, but all things considered, he looked as well as someone could who expects momentarily to be shot.

"Mam," he said, ducking his head awkwardly in his mother's direction.

"Ian," she said softly, and he looked up at her, clearly startled at the gentleness of her tone. A slight smile curved her lips as she saw his face. "I'm glad you're safe home, *mo chridhe,*" she said.

The boy's face cleared abruptly, as though he had just heard the reprieve read to the firing squad. Then he caught a glimpse of his father's face, and stiffened. He swallowed hard, and bent his head again, staring hard at the floorboards.

"Mmphm," Ian said. He sounded sternly Scotch; much more like the Reverend Campbell than the easygoing man I had known before. "Now then, I want to hear what ye've got to say for yourself, laddie."

"Oh. Well … I …" Young Ian trailed off miserably, then cleared his throat and had another try. "Well … nothing, really, Father," he murmured.

"Look at me!" Ian said sharply. His son reluctantly raised his head and looked at his father, but his gaze kept flicking away, as though afraid to rest very long on the stern countenance before him.

"D'ye ken what ye did to your mother?" Ian demanded. "Disappeared and left her thinkin' ye dead or hurt? Gone off without a word, and not a smell of ye for three days, until Joe Fraser brought down the letter ye left? Can ye even think what those three days were like for her?"

Either Ian's expression or his words seemed to have a strong effect on his errant offspring; Young Ian bowed his head again, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Aye, well, I thought Joe would bring the letter sooner," he muttered.

"Aye, that letter!" Ian's face was growing more flushed as he talked.

" 'Gone to Edinburgh,' it said, cool as dammit." He slapped a hand flat on the table, with a smack that made everyone jump. "Gone to Edinburgh! Not a 'by your leave,' not an 'I'll send word,' not a thing but 'Dear Mother, I have gone to Edinburgh. Ian'!"

Young Ian's head snapped up, eyes bright with anger.

"That's not true! I said 'Don't worry for me,' and I said '*Love*, Ian'! I did! Did I no, Mother?" For the first time, he looked at Jenny, appealing.

She had been still as a stone since her husband began to talk, her face smooth and blank. Now her eyes softened, and the hint of a curve touched her wide, full mouth again.

"Ye did, Ian," she said softly. "It was kind to say—but I did worry, aye?"

His eyes fell, and I could see the oversized Adam's apple bobble in his lean throat as he swallowed.

"I'm sorry, Mam," he said, so low I could scarcely hear him. "I—I didna mean …" his words trailed off, ending in a small shrug.

Jenny made an impulsive movement, as though to extend a hand to him, but Ian caught her eye, and she let the hand fall to her lap.

"The thing is," Ian said, speaking slowly and precisely, "it's no the first time, is it, Ian?"

The boy didn't answer, but made a small twitching movement that might have been assent. Ian took a step closer to his son. Close as they were in height, the differences between them were obvious. Ian was tall and lanky, but firmly muscled for all that, and a powerful man, wooden leg or no. By comparison, his son seemed almost frail, fledgling-boned and gawky.

"No, it's not as though ye had no idea what ye were doing; not like we'd never told ye the dangers, not like we'd no forbidden ye to go past Broch Mordha—not like ye didna ken we'd worry, aye? Ye kent all that—and ye did it anyway."

This merciless analysis of his behavior caused a sort of indefinite quiver, like an internal squirm, to go through Young Ian, but he kept up a stubborn silence.

"Look at me, laddie, when I'm speakin' to ye!" The boy's head rose slowly. He looked sullen now, but resigned; evidently he had been through scenes like this before, and knew where they were heading.

"I'm not even going to ask your uncle what ye've been doing," Ian said. "I can only hope ye weren't such a fool in Edinburgh as ye've been here. But ye've disobeyed me outright, and broken your mother's heart, whatever else ye've done."

Jenny moved again, as though to speak, but a brusque movement of Ian's hand stopped her.

"And what did I tell ye the last time, wee Ian? What did I say when I gave ye your whipping? You tell me that, Ian!"

The bones in Young Ian's face stood out, but he kept his mouth shut, sealed in a stubborn line.

"Tell me!" Ian roared, slamming his hand on the table again.

Young Ian blinked in reflex, and his shoulder blades drew together, then apart, as though he were trying to alter his size, and unsure whether to grow larger or try to be smaller. He swallowed hard, and blinked once more.

"Ye said—ye said ye'd skin me. Next time." His voice broke in a ridiculous squeak on the last word, and he clamped his mouth hard shut on it.

Ian shook his head in heavy disapproval. "Aye. And I thought ye'd have enough sense to see there was no next time, but I was wrong about that, hm?" He breathed in heavily and let it out with a snort.

"I'm fair disgusted wi' ye, Ian, and that's the truth." He jerked his head toward the doorway. "Go outside. I'll see ye by the gate, presently."

There was a tense silence in the sitting room, as the sound of the miscreant's dragging footsteps disappeared down the passage. I kept my own eyes carefully on my hands, folded in my lap. Beside me, Jamie drew a slow, deep breath and sat up straighter, steeling himself.

"Ian." Jamie spoke mildly to his brother-in-law. "I wish ye wouldna do that."

"What?" Ian's brow was still furrowed with anger as he turned toward Jamie. "Thrash the lad? And what have you to say about it, aye?"

Jamie's jaw tensed, but his voice stayed calm.

"I've nothing to say about it, Ian—he's your son; you'll do as ye like. But maybe you'll let me speak for the way he's acted?"

"How he's acted?" Jenny cried, starting suddenly to life. She might leave dealing with her son to Ian, but when it came to her brother, no one was likely to speak for her. "Sneakin' away in the night like a thief, ye mean? Or perhaps ye'll mean consorting wi' criminals, and risking his neck for a cask of brandy!"

Ian silenced her with a quick gesture. He hesitated, still frowning, but then nodded abruptly at Jamie, giving permission.

“Consorting wi’ criminals like me?” Jamie asked his sister, a definite edge to his voice. His eyes met hers straight on, matching slits of blue.

“D’ye ken where the money comes from, Jenny, that keeps you and your bairns and everyone here in food, and the roof from fallin’ in over your head? It’s not from me printing up copies o’ the Psalms in Edinburgh!”

“And did I think it was?” she flared at him. “Did I ask ye what ye did?”

“No, ye didn’t,” he flashed back. “I think ye’d rather not know—but ye do know, don’t you?”

“And will ye blame me for what ye do? It’s *my* fault that I’ve children, and that they must eat?” She didn’t flush red like Jamie did; when Jenny lost her temper, she went dead white with fury.

I could see him struggling to keep his own temper. “Blame ye? No, of course I dinna blame ye—but is it right for you to blame me, that Ian and I canna keep ye all just working the land?”

Jenny too was making an effort to subdue her rising temper. “No,” she said. “Ye do what ye must, Jamie. Ye ken verra well I didna mean you when I said ‘criminals,’ but—”

“So ye mean the men who work for me? I do the same things, Jenny. If they’re criminals, what am I, then?” He glared at her, eyes hot with resentment.

“You’re my brother,” she said shortly, “little pleased as I am to say so, sometimes. Damn your eyes, Jamie Fraser! Ye ken quite well I dinna mean to quarrel wi’ whatever ye see fit to do! If ye robbed folk on the highway, or kept a whorehouse in Edinburgh, ’twould be because there was no help for it. That doesna mean I want ye takin’ my son to be part of it!”

Jamie’s eyes tightened slightly at the corners at the mention of whorehouses in Edinburgh, and he darted a quick glance of accusation at Ian, who shook his head. He looked mildly stunned at his wife’s ferocity.

“I’ve said not a word,” he said briefly. “Ye ken how she is.”

Jamie took a deep breath and turned back to Jenny, obviously determined to be reasonable.

"Aye, I see that. But ye canna think I would take Young Ian into danger—God, Jenny, I care for him as though he were my own son!"

"Aye?" Her skepticism was pronounced. "So that's why ye encouraged him to run off from his home, and kept him with ye, wi' no word to ease our minds about where he was?"

Jamie had the grace to look abashed at this.

"Aye, well, I'm sorry for that," he muttered. "I meant to—" He broke off with an impatient gesture. "Well, it doesna matter what I meant; I should have sent word, and I didna. But as for encouraging him to run off—"

"No, I dinna suppose ye did," Ian interrupted. "Not directly, anyway." The anger had faded from his long face. He looked tired now, and a little sad. The bones in his face were more pronounced, leaving him hollow-cheeked in the waning afternoon light.

"It's only that the lad loves ye, Jamie," he said quietly. "I see him listen when ye visit, and talk of what ye do; I can see his face. He thinks it's all excitement and adventure, how ye live, and a good long way from shoveling goat-shit for his mother's garden." He smiled briefly, despite himself.

Jamie gave his brother-in-law a quick smile in return, and a lifted shoulder. "Well, but it's usual for a lad of that age to want a bit of adventure, no? You and I were the same."

"Whether he wants it or no, he shouldna be having the sort of adventures he'll get with you," Jenny interrupted sharply. She shook her head, the line between her brows growing deeper as she looked disapprovingly at her brother. "The good Lord kens as there's a charm on your life, Jamie, or ye'd ha' been dead a dozen times."

"Aye, well. I suppose He had something in mind to preserve me for." Jamie glanced at me with a brief smile, and his hand sought mine. Jenny darted a glance at me, too, her face unreadable, then returned to the subject at hand.

"Well, that's as may be," she said. "But I canna say as the same's true for Young Ian." Her expression softened slightly as she looked at Jamie.

"I dinna ken everything about the way ye live, Jamie—but I ken *you* well enough to say it's likely not the way a wee laddie should live."

"Mmphm." Jamie rubbed a hand over his stubbled jaw, and tried again. "Aye, well, that's what I mean about Young Ian. He's carried himself like a man this last week. I dinna think it right for ye to thrash him like a wee laddie, Ian."

Jenny's eyebrows rose, graceful wings of scorn.

"A man, now, is he? Why, he's but a baby, Jamie—he's not but fourteen!"

Despite his annoyance, one side of Jamie's mouth curled slightly.

"I was a man at fourteen, Jenny," he said softly.

She snorted, but a film of moisture shone suddenly over her eyes.

"Ye thought ye were." She stood and turned away abruptly, blinking. "Aye, I mind ye then," she said, face turned to the bookshelf. She reached out a hand as though to support herself, grasping the edge.

"Ye were a bonny lad, Jamie, riding off wi' Dougal to your first raid, and your dirk all bright on your thigh. I was sixteen, and I thought I'd never seen a sight so fair as you on your pony, so straight and tall. And I mind ye coming back, too, all covered in mud, and a scratch down the side of your face from falling in brambles, and Dougal boasting to Da how brawly ye'd done—driven off six kine by yourself, and had a dunt on the head from the flat of a broadsword, and not made a squeak about it." Her face once more under control, she turned back from her contemplation of the books to face her brother. "That's what a man is, aye?"

A hint of humor stole back into Jamie's face as he met her gaze.

"Aye, well, there's maybe a bit more to it than that," he said.

"Is there," she said, more dryly still. "And what will that be? To be able to bed a girl? Or to kill a man?"

I had always thought Janet Fraser had something of the Sight, particularly where her brother was concerned. Evidently the talent extended to her son, as well. The flush over Jamie's cheekbones deepened, but his expression didn't change.

She shook her head slowly, looking steadily at her brother. “Nay, Young Ian’s not a man yet—but you are, Jamie; and ye ken the difference verra well.”

Ian, who had been watching the fireworks between the two Frasers with the same fascination as I had, now coughed briefly.

“Be that as it may,” he said dryly. “Young Ian’s been waiting for his whipping for the last quarter-hour. Whether or not it’s suitable to beat him, to make him wait any longer for it is a bit cruel, aye?”

“Have ye really got to do it, Ian?” Jamie made one last effort, turning to appeal to his brother-in-law.

“Well,” said Ian slowly, “as I’ve told the lad he’s going to be thrashed, and he kens verra well he’s earned it, I canna just go back on my word. But as for me doing it—no, I dinna think I will.” A faint gleam of humor showed in the soft brown eyes. He reached into a drawer of the sideboard, drew out a thick leather strap, and thrust it into Jamie’s hand. “You do it.”

“Me?” Jamie was horror-struck. He made a futile attempt to shove the strap back into Ian’s hand, but his brother-in-law ignored it. “I canna thrash the lad!”

“Oh, I think ye can,” Ian said calmly, folding his arms. “Ye’ve said often enough ye care for him as though he were your son.” He tilted his head to one side, and while his expression stayed mild, the brown eyes were implacable. “Well, I’ll tell ye, Jamie—it’s no that easy to be his Da; best ye go and find that out now, aye?”

Jamie stared at Ian for a long moment, then looked to his sister. She raised one eyebrow, staring him down.

“You deserve it as much as he does, Jamie. Get ye gone.”

Jamie’s lips pressed tight together and his nostrils flared white. Then he whirled on his heel and was gone without speaking. Rapid steps sounded on the boards, and a muffled slam came from the far end of the passage.

Jenny cast a quick glance at Ian, a quicker one at me, and then turned to the window. Ian and I, both a good deal taller, came to stand behind her. The light outside was failing rapidly, but there was still enough to see the wilting figure of Young Ian, leaning dispiritedly against a wooden gate, some twenty yards from the house.

Looking around in trepidation at the sound of footsteps, he saw his uncle approaching and straightened up in surprise.

"Uncle Jamie!" His eye fell on the strap then, and he straightened a bit more. "Are … are *you* goin' to whip me?"

It was a still evening, and I could hear the sharp hiss of air through Jamie's teeth.

"I suppose I'll have to," he said frankly. "But first I must apologize to ye, Ian."

"To me?" Young Ian sounded mildly dazed. Clearly he wasn't used to having his elders think they owed him an apology, especially before beating him. "Ye dinna need to do that, Uncle Jamie."

The taller figure leaned against the gate, facing the smaller one, head bent.

"Aye, I do. It was wrong of me, Ian, to let ye stay in Edinburgh, and it was maybe wrong, too, to tell ye stories and make ye think of running away to start with. I took ye to places I shouldna, and might have put ye in danger, and I've caused more of a moil wi' your parents than maybe ye should be in by yourself. I'm sorry for it, Ian, and I'll ask ye to forgive me."

"Oh." The smaller figure rubbed a hand through his hair, plainly at a loss for words. "Well … aye. Of course I do, Uncle."

"Thank ye, Ian."

They stood in silence for a moment, then Young Ian heaved a sigh and straightened his drooping shoulders.

"I suppose we'd best do it, then?"

"I expect so." Jamie sounded at least as reluctant as his nephew, and I heard Ian, next to me, snort slightly, whether with indignation or amusement, I couldn't tell.

Resigned, Young Ian turned and faced the gate without hesitation. Jamie followed more slowly. The light was nearly gone and we could see no more than the outlines of figures at this distance, but we could hear clearly from our position at the window. Jamie was standing behind his nephew, shifting uncertainly, as though unsure what to do next.

“Mmphm. Ah, what does your father …”

“It’s usually ten, Uncle.” Young Ian had shed his coat, and tugged at his waist now, speaking over his shoulder. “Twelve if it’s pretty bad, and fifteen if it’s really awful.”

“Was this only bad, would ye say, or pretty bad?”

There was a brief, unwilling laugh from the boy.

“If Father’s makin’ *you* do it, Uncle Jamie, it’s really awful, but I’ll settle for pretty bad. Ye’d better give me twelve.”

There was another snort from Ian at my elbow. This time, it was definitely amusement. “Honest lad,” he murmured.

“All right, then.” Jamie drew in his breath and pulled his arm back, but was interrupted by Young Ian.

“Wait, Uncle, I’m no quite ready.”

“Och, ye’ve got to do that?” Jamie’s voice sounded a bit strangled.

“Aye. Father says only girls are whipped wi’ their skirts down,” Young Ian explained. “Men must take it bare-arsed.”

“He’s damn well right about *that* one,” Jamie muttered, his quarrel with Jenny obviously still rankling. “Ready now?”

The necessary adjustments made, the larger figure stepped back and swung. There was a loud crack, and Jenny winced in sympathy with her son. Beyond a sudden intake of breath, though, the lad was silent, and stayed so through the rest of the ordeal, though I blanched a bit myself.

Finally Jamie dropped his arm, and wiped his brow. He held out a hand to Ian, slumped over the fence. “All right, lad?” Young Ian straightened up, with a little difficulty this time, and pulled up his breeks. “Aye, Uncle. Thank ye.” The boy’s voice was a little thick, but calm and steady. He took Jamie’s outstretched hand. To my surprise, though, instead of leading the boy back to the house, Jamie thrust the strap into Ian’s other hand.

“Your turn,” he announced, striding over to the gate and bending over. Young Ian was as shocked as those of us in the house.

“What!” he said, stunned.

“I said it’s your turn,” his uncle said in a firm voice. “I punished you; now you’ve got to punish me.”

"I canna do that, Uncle!" Young Ian was as scandalized as though his uncle had suggested he commit some public indecency.

"Aye, ye can," said Jamie, straightening up to look his nephew in the eye. "Ye heard what I said when I apologized to ye, did ye no?" Ian nodded in a dazed fashion. "Weel, then. I've done wrong just as much as you, and I've to pay for it, too. I didna like whipping you, and ye're no goin' to like whipping me, but we're both goin' through wi' it. Understand?"

"A-Aye, Uncle," the boy stammered.

"All right, then." Jamie tugged down his breeches, tucked up his shirttail, and bent over once more, clutching the top rail. He waited a second, then spoke again, as Ian stood paralyzed, strap dangling from his nerveless hand.

"Go on." His voice was steel; the one he used with the whisky smugglers; not to obey was unthinkable. Ian moved timidly to do as he was ordered. Standing back, he took a halfhearted swing. There was a dull thwacking sound.

"That one didna count," Jamie said firmly. "Look, man, it was just as hard for me to do it to you. Make a proper job of it, now."

The thin figure squared its shoulders with sudden determination and the leather whistled through the air. It landed with a crack like lightning. There was a startled yelp from the figure on the fence, and a suppressed giggle, at least half shock, from Jenny.

Jamie cleared his throat. "Aye, that'll do. Finish it, then."

We could hear Young Ian counting carefully to himself under his breath between strokes of the leather, but aside from a smothered "Christ!" at number nine, there was no further sound from his uncle.

With a general sigh of relief from inside the house, Jamie rose off the fence after the last stroke, and tucked his shirt into his breeks. He inclined his head formally to his nephew. "Thank ye, Ian." Dropping the formality, he then rubbed his backside, saying in a tone of rueful admiration, "Christ, man, ye've an arm on ye!"

"So've you, Uncle," said Ian, matching his uncle's wry tones. The two figures, barely visible now, stood laughing and rubbing themselves for a moment. Jamie flung an arm about his nephew's shoulders and turned him toward the house. "If it's all the same to you, Ian, I dinna want to have to do that again, aye?" he said, confidentially.

"It's a bargain, Uncle Jamie."

A moment later, the door opened at the end of the passage, and with a look at each other, Jenny and Ian turned as one to greet the returning prodigals.

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33

BURIED TREASURE

"You look rather like a baboon," I observed.

"Oh, aye? And what's one of those?" In spite of the freezing November air pouring in through the half-open window, Jamie showed no signs of discomfort as he dropped his shirt onto the small pile of clothing.

He stretched luxuriously, completely naked. His joints made little popping noises as he arched his back and stretched upward, fists resting easily on the smoke-dark beams overhead.

"Oh, God, it feels good not to be on a horse!"

"Mm. To say nothing of having a real bed to sleep in, instead of wet heather." I rolled over, luxuriating in the warmth of the heavy quilts, and the relaxation of sore muscles into the ineffable softness of the goose-down mattress.

"D'ye mean to tell me what's a baboon, then?" Jamie inquired, "Or are ye just makin' observations for the pleasure of it?" He turned to pick up a frayed willow twig from the washstand, and began to clean his teeth. I smiled at the sight; if I had had no other impact during my earlier sojourn in the past, I had at least been instrumental in seeing that virtually all of the Frasers and Murrays of Lallybroch retained their teeth, unlike most Highlanders—unlike most Englishmen, for that matter.

"A baboon," I said, enjoying the sight of his muscular back flexing as he scrubbed, "is a sort of very large monkey with a red behind."

He snorted with laughter and choked on the willow twig. "Well," he said, removing it from his mouth, "I canna fault your observations, Sassenach." He grinned at me, showing brilliant white teeth, and tossed the twig aside. "It's been thirty years since anyone took a tawse to me," he added, passing his hands tenderly over the still-glowing surfaces of his rear. "I'd forgot how much it stings."

"And here Young Ian was speculating that your arse was tough as saddle leather," I said, amused. "Was it worth it, do you think?"

"Oh, aye," he said, matter-of-factly, sliding into bed beside me. His body was hard and cold as marble, and I squeaked but didn't protest as he gathered me firmly against his chest. "Christ, you're warm," he murmured. "Come closer, hm?" His legs insinuated themselves between mine, and he cupped my bottom, drawing me in.

He gave a sigh of pure content, and I relaxed against him, feeling our temperatures start to equalize through the thin cotton of the nightdress Jenny had lent me. The peat fire in the hearth had been lit, but hadn't been able to do much yet toward dispelling the chill. Body heat was much more effective.

"Oh, aye, it was worth it," he said. "I could have beaten Young Ian half-senseless—his father has, once or twice—and it would ha' done nothing but make him more determined to run off, once he got the chance. But he'll walk through hot coals before he risks havin' to do something like that again."

He spoke with certainty, and I thought he was undoubtedly right. Young Ian, looking bemused, had received absolution from his parents, in the form of a kiss from his mother and a swift hug from his father, and then retired to his bed with a handful of cakes, there no doubt to ponder the curious consequences of disobedience.

Jamie too had been absolved with kisses, and I suspected that this was more important to him than the effects of his performance on Young Ian.

"At least Jenny and Ian aren't angry with you any longer," I said.

"No. It's no really that they were angry so much, I think; it's only that they dinna ken what to do wi' the lad," he explained. "They've raised two sons already, and Young Jamie and Michael are fine lads both; but both of them are more like Ian—soft-spoke, and easy in their manner. Young Ian's quiet enough, but he's a great deal more like his mother—and me."

"Frasers are stubborn, eh?" I said, smiling. This bit of clan doctrine was one of the first things I had learned when I met Jamie, and nothing in my subsequent experience had suggested that it might be in error.

He chuckled, soft and deep in his chest.

"Aye, that's so. Young Ian may look like a Murray, but he's a Fraser born, all right. And it's no use to shout at a stubborn man, or beat him, either; it only makes him more set on having his way."

"I'll bear that in mind," I said dryly. One hand was stroking my thigh, gradually inching the cotton nightdress upward. Jamie's internal furnace had resumed its operations, and his bare legs were warm and hard against mine. One knee nudged gently, seeking an entrance between my thighs. I cupped his buttocks and squeezed gently.

"Dorcas told me that a number of gentlemen pay very well for the privilege of being smacked at the brothel. She says they find it … arousing."

Jamie snorted briefly, tensing his buttocks, then relaxing as I stroked them lightly.

"Do they, then? I suppose it's true, if Dorcas says so, but I canna see it, myself. There are a great many more pleasant ways to get a cockstand, if ye ask me. On the other hand," he added fairly, "perhaps it makes a difference if it's a bonny wee lassie in her shift on the other end o' the strap, and not your father—or your nephew, come to that."

"Perhaps it does. Shall I try sometime?" The hollow of his throat lay just by my face, sunburned and delicate, showing the faint white triangle of a scar just above the wide arch of his collarbone. I set my lips on the pulsebeat there, and he shivered, though neither of us was cold any longer.

"No," he said, a little breathless. His hand fumbled at the neck of my shift, pulling loose the ribbons. He rolled onto his back then, lifting me suddenly above him as though I weighed nothing at all. A flick of his finger brought the loosened chemise down over my shoulders, and my nipples rose at once as the cold air struck them.

His eyes were more slanted than usual as he smiled up at me, half-lidded as a drowsing cat, and the warmth of his palms encircled both breasts.

"I said I could think of more pleasant ways, aye?"

The candle had guttered and gone out, the fire on the hearth burned low, and a pale November starlight shone through the misted window. Dim as it was, my eyes were so adapted to the dark that I could pick out all the details of the room; the thick white porcelain jug and basin, its blue band black in the starlight, the small embroidered sampler on the wall, and the rumpled heap of Jamie's clothes on the stool by the bed.

Jamie was clearly visible, too; covers thrown back, chest gleaming faintly from exertion. I admired the long slope of his belly, where small whorls of dark auburn hair spiraled up across the pale, fresh skin. I couldn't keep my fingers from touching him, tracing the lines of the powerfully sprung ribs that shaped his torso.

"It's so good," I said dreamily. "So good to have a man's body to touch."

"D'ye like it still, then?" He sounded half-shy, half-pleased, as I fondled him. His own arm came around my shoulder, stroking my hair.

"Mm-hm." It wasn't a thing I had consciously missed, but having it now reminded me of the joy of it; that drowsy intimacy in which a man's body is as accessible to you as your own, the strange shapes and textures of it like a sudden extension of your own limbs.

I ran my hand down the flat slope of his belly, over the smooth jut of hipbone and the swell of muscled thigh. The remnants of firelight caught the red-gold fuzz on arms and legs, and glowed in the auburn thicket nested between his thighs.

"God, you are a wonderful hairy creature," I said. "Even there." I slid my hand down the smooth crease of his thigh and he spread his legs obligingly, letting me touch the thick, springy curls in the crease of his buttocks.

"Aye, well, no one's hunted me yet for my pelt," he said comfortably. His hand cupped my own rear firmly, and a large thumb passed gently over the rounded surface. He propped one arm behind his head, and looked lazily down the length of my body.

"You're even less worth the skinning than I am, Sassenach."

"I should hope so." I moved slightly to accommodate his touch as he extended his explorations, enjoying the warmth of his hand on my naked back.

"Ever seen a smooth branch that's been in still water a long time?" he asked. A finger passed lightly up my spine, raising a ripple of gooseflesh in its wake. "There are tiny wee bubbles on it, hundreds and thousands and millions of them, so it looks as though it's furred all about wi' a silver frost." His fingers brushed my ribs, my arms, my back, and the tiny down-hairs rose everywhere in the wake of his touch, tingling.

"That's what ye look like, my Sassenach," he said, almost whispering. "All smooth and naked, dipped in silver."

Then we lay quiet for a time, listening to the drip of rain outside. A cold autumn air drifted through the room, mingling with the fire's smoky warmth. He rolled onto his side, facing away from me, and drew the quilts up to cover us.

I curled up behind him, knees fitting neatly behind his own. The firelight shone dully from behind me now, gleaming over the smooth round of his shoulder and dimly illuminating his back. I could see the faint lines of the scars that webbed his shoulders, thin streaks of silver on his flesh. At one time, I had known those scars so intimately, I could have traced them with my fingers, blindfolded. Now there was a thin half-moon curve I didn't know; a diagonal slash that hadn't been there before, the remnants of a violent past I hadn't shared.

I touched the half-moon, tracing its length.

"No one's hunted you for your pelt," I said softly, "but they've hunted you, haven't they?"

His shoulder moved slightly, not quite a shrug. "Now and then," he said.

"Now?" I asked.

He breathed slowly for a moment or two before answering.

"Aye," he said. "I think so."

My fingers moved down to the diagonal slash. It had been a deep cut; old and well-healed as the damage was, the line was sharp and clear beneath my fingertips.

"Do you know who?"

"No." He was quiet for a moment; then his hand closed over my own, where it lay across his stomach. "But I maybe ken why."

The house was very quiet. With most of the children and grandchildren gone, there were only the far-off servants in their quarters behind the kitchen, Ian and Jenny in their room at the far end of the hall, and Young Ian somewhere upstairs—all asleep. We could have been alone at the end of the world; both Edinburgh and the smugglers' cove seemed very far away.

"Do ye recall, after the fall of Stirling, not so long before Culloden, when all of a sudden there was gossip from everywhere, about gold being sent from France?"

"From Louis? Yes—but he never sent it." Jamie's words summoned up those brief frantic days of Charles Stuart's reckless rise and precipitous fall, when rumor had been the common currency of conversation. "There was always gossip—about gold from France, ships from Spain, weapons from Holland—but nothing came of most of it."

"Oh, something came—though not from Louis—but no one kent it, then."

He told me then of his meeting with the dying Duncan Kerr, and the wanderer's whispered words, heard in the inn's attic under the watchful eye of an English officer.

"He was fevered, Duncan, but not crazed wi' it. He kent he was dying, and he kent me, too. It was his only chance to tell someone he thought he could trust—so he told me."

"White witches and seals?" I repeated. "I must say, it sounds like gibberish. But you understood it?"

"Well, not all of it," Jamie admitted. He rolled over to face me, frowning slightly. "I've no notion who the white witch might be. At the first, I thought he meant you, Sassenach, and my heart nearly stopped when he said it." He smiled ruefully, and his hand tightened on mine, clasped between us.

"I thought all at once that perhaps something had gone wrong—maybe ye'd not been able to go back to Frank and the place ye came from—maybe ye'd somehow ended in France, maybe ye were there right then—all kinds o' fancies went through my head."

"I wish it had been true," I whispered.

He gave me a lopsided smile, but shook his head.

"And me in prison? And Brianna would be what—just ten or so? No, dinna waste your time in regretting, Sassenach. You're here now, and ye'll never leave me again." He kissed me gently on the forehead, then resumed his tale.

"I didna have any idea where the gold had come from, but I kent his telling me where it was, and why it was there. It was Prince *Tearlach*'s, sent for him. And the bit about the silkies—" He raised his head a little and nodded toward the window, where the rose brier cast its shadows on the glass.

"Folk said when my mother ran away from Leoch that she'd gone to live wi' the silkies; only because the maid that saw my father when he took her said as he looked like a great silkie who'd shed his skin and come to walk on the land like a man. And he did." Jamie smiled and passed a hand through his own thick hair, remembering. "He had hair thick as mine, but a black like jet. It would shine in some lights, as though it was wet, and he moved quick and sleekit, like a seal through the water." He shrugged suddenly, shaking off the recollection of his father.

"Well, so. When Duncan Kerr said the name Ellen, I kent it was my mother he meant—as a sign that he knew my name and my family, kent who I was; that he wasna raving, no matter how it sounded. And knowin' that—" He shrugged again. "The Englishman had told me where they found Duncan, near the coast. There are hundreds of bittie isles and rocks all down that coast, but only one place where the silkies live, at the ends of the MacKenzie lands, off Coigach."

"So you went there?"

“Aye, I did.” He sighed deeply, his free hand drifting to the hollow of my waist. “I wouldna have done it—left the prison, I mean—had I not still thought it maybe had something to do wi’ you, Sassenach.”

Escape had been an enterprise of no great difficulty; prisoners were often taken outside in small gangs, to cut the peats that burned on the prison’s hearths, or to cut and haul stone for the ongoing work of repairing the walls.

For a man to whom the heather was home, disappearing had been easy. He had risen from his work and turned aside by a hummock of grass, unfastening his breeches as though to relieve himself. The guard had looked politely away, and looking back a moment later, beheld nothing but an empty moor, holding no trace of Jamie Fraser.

“See, it was little trouble to slip off, but men seldom did,” he explained. “None of us were from near Ardsmuir—and had we been, there was little left for most o’ the men to gang to.”

The Duke of Cumberland’s men had done their work well. As one contemporary had put it, evaluating the Duke’s achievement later, “He created a desert and called it peace.” This modern approach to diplomacy had left some parts of the Highlands all but deserted; the men killed, imprisoned, or transported, crops and houses burned, the women and children turned out to starve or seek refuge elsewhere as best they might. No, a prisoner escaping from Ardsmuir would have been truly alone, without kin or clan to turn to for succor.

Jamie had known there would be little time before the English commander realized where he must be heading and organized a party of pursuit. On the other hand, there were no real roads in this remote part of the kingdom, and a man who knew the country was at a greater advantage on foot than were the pursuing outlanders on horseback.

He had made his escape in midafternoon. Taking his bearings by the stars, he had walked through the night, arriving at the coast near dawn the next day.

"See, I kent the silkies' place; it's well known amongst the MacKenzies, and I'd been there once before, wi' Dougal."

The tide had been high, and the seals mostly out in the water, hunting crabs and fish among the fronds of floating kelp, but the dark streaks of their droppings and the indolent forms of a few idlers marked the seals' three islands, ranged in a line just inside the lip of a small bay, guarded by a clifflike headland.

By Jamie's interpretation of Duncan's instructions, the treasure lay on the third island, the farthest away from the shore. It was nearly a mile out, a long swim even for a strong man, and his own strength was sapped from the hard prison labor and the long walk without food. He had stood on the clifftop, wondering whether this was a wild-goose chase, and whether the treasure—if there was one—was worth the risk of his life.

"The rock was all split and broken there; when I came too close to the edge, chunks would fall awa' from my feet and plummet down the cliff. I didna see how I'd ever reach the water, let alone the seals' isle. But then I was minded what Duncan said about Ellen's tower," Jamie said. His eyes were open, fixed not on me, but on that distant shore where the crash of falling rock was lost in the smashing of the waves.

The "tower" was there; a small spike of granite that stuck up no more than five feet from the tip of the headland. But below that spike, hidden by the rocks, was a narrow crack, a small chimney that ran from top to bottom of the eighty-foot cliff, providing a possible passage, if not an easy one, for a determined man.

From the base of Ellen's tower to the third island was still over a quarter-mile of heaving green water. Undressing, he had crossed himself, and commending his soul to the keeping of his mother, he had dived naked into the waves.

He made his way slowly out from the cliff, floundering and choking as the waves broke over his head. No place in Scotland is that far from the sea, but Jamie had been raised inland, his experience of swimming limited to the placid depths of lochs and the pools of trout streams.

Blinded by salt and deafened by the roaring surf, he had fought the waves for what seemed hours, then thrust his head and shoulders free, gasping for breath, only to see the headland looming —not behind, as he had thought, but to his right.

"The tide was goin' out, and I was goin' with it," he said wryly. "I thought, well, that's it, then, I'm gone, for I knew I could never make my way back. I hadna eaten anything in two days, and hadn't much strength left."

He ceased swimming then, and simply spread himself on his back, giving himself to the embrace of the sea. Light-headed from hunger and effort, he had closed his eyes against the light and searched his mind for the words of the old Celtic prayer against drowning.

He paused for a moment then, and was quiet for so long that I wondered whether something was wrong. But at last he drew breath and said shyly, "I expect ye'll think I'm daft, Sassenach. I havena told anyone about it—not even Jenny. But—I heard my mother call me, then, right in the middle of praying." He shrugged, uncomfortable.

"It was maybe only that I'd been thinking of her when I left the shore," he said. "And yet—" He fell silent, until I touched his face.

"What did she say?" I asked quietly.

"She said, 'Come here to me, Jamie—come to me, laddie!' " He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I could hear her plain as day, but I couldna see anything; there was no one there, not even a silkie. I thought perhaps she was callin' me from Heaven—and I was so tired I really would not ha' minded dying then, but I rolled myself over and struck out toward where I'd heard her voice. I thought I would swim ten strokes and then stop again to rest—or to sink."

But on the eighth stroke, the current had taken him.

"It was just as though someone had picked me up," he said, sounding still surprised at the memory of it. "I could feel it under me and all around; the water was a bit warmer than it had been, and it carried me with it. I didna have to do anything but paddle a bit, to keep my head above water."

A strong, curling current, eddying between headland and islands, it had taken him to the edge of the third islet, where no more than a few strokes brought him within reach of its rocks.

It was a small lump of granite, fissured and creviced like all the ancient rocks of Scotland, and slimed with seaweed and seal droppings to boot, but he crawled on shore with all the thankfulness of a shipwrecked sailor for a land of palm trees and white-sand beaches. He fell down upon his face on the rocky shelf and lay there, grateful for breath, half-dozing with exhaustion.

"Then I felt something looming over me, and there was a terrible stink o' dead fish," he said. "I got up onto my knees at once, and there he was—a great bull seal, all sleek and wet, and his black eyes starin' at me, no more than a yard away."

Neither fisher nor seaman himself, Jamie had heard enough stories to know that bull seals were dangerous, particularly when threatened by intrusions upon their territory. Looking at the open mouth, with its fine display of sharp, peglike teeth, and the burly rolls of hard fat that girdled the enormous body, he was not disposed to doubt it.

"He weighed more than twenty stone, Sassenach," he said. "If he wasna inclined to rip the flesh off my bones, still he could ha' knocked me into the sea wi' one swipe, or dragged me under to drown."

"Obviously he didn't, though," I said dryly. "What happened?"

He laughed. "I think I was too mazed from tiredness to do anything sensible," he said. "I just looked at him for a moment, and then I said, 'It's all right; it's only me.' "

"And what did the seal do?"

Jamie shrugged slightly. "He looked me over for a bit longer—silkies dinna blink much, did ye know that? It's verra unnerving to have one look at ye for long—then he gave a sort of a grunt and slid off the rock into the water."

Left in sole possession of the tiny islet, Jamie had sat blankly for a time, recovering his strength, and then at last began a methodical search of the crevices. Small as the area was, it took little time to find a deep split in the rock that led down to a wide hollow space, a foot below the rocky surface. Floored with dry sand and located in the center of the island, the hollow would be safe from flooding in all but the worst storms.

"Well, don't keep me in suspense," I said, poking him in the stomach. "Was the French gold there?"

"Well, it was and it wasn't, Sassenach," he answered, neatly sucking in his stomach. "I'd been expecting gold bullion; that's what the rumor said that Louis would send. And thirty thousand pounds' worth of gold bullion would make a good-sized hoard. But all there was in the hollow was a box, less than a foot long, and a small leather pouch. The box did have gold in it, though—and silver, too."

Gold and silver indeed. The wooden box had contained two hundred and five coins, gold ones and silver ones, some as sharply cut as though new-minted, some with their markings worn nearly to blankness.

"Ancient coins, Sassenach."

"Ancient? What, you mean very old—"

"Greek, Sassenach, and Roman. Verra old indeed."

We lay staring at each other in the dim light for a moment, not speaking.

"That's incredible," I said at last. "It's treasure, all right, but not—"

"Not what Louis would send, to help feed an army, no," he finished for me. "No, whoever put this treasure there, it wasna Louis or any of his ministers."

"What about the bag?" I said, suddenly remembering. "What was in the pouch you found?"

"Stones, Sassenach. Gemstones. Diamonds and pearls and emeralds and sapphires. Not many, but nicely cut and big enough." He smiled, a little grimly. "Aye, big enough."

He had sat on a rock under the dim gray sky, turning the coins and the jewels over and over between his fingers, stunned into bewilderment. At last, roused by a sensation of being watched, he had looked up to find himself surrounded by a circle of curious seals. The tide was out, the females had come back from their fishing, and twenty pairs of round black eyes surveyed him cautiously.

The huge black male, emboldened by the presence of his harem, had come back too. He barked loudly, darting his head threateningly from side to side, and advanced on Jamie, sliding his three-hundred-pound bulk a few feet closer with each booming exclamation, propelling himself with his flippers across the slick rock.

"I thought I'd best leave, then," he said. "I'd found what I came to find, after all. So I put the box and the pouch back where I'd found them—I couldna carry them ashore, after all, and if I did—what then? So I put them back, and crawled down into the water, half-frozen wi' cold."

A few strokes from the island had taken him again into the current heading landward; it was a circular current, like most eddies, and the gyre had carried him to the foot of the headland within half an hour, where he crawled ashore, dressed, and fell asleep in a nest of marrow grass.

He paused then, and I could see that while his eyes were open and fixed on me, it wasn't me they saw.

"I woke at dawn," he said softly. "I have seen a great many dawns, Sassenach, but never one like that one.

"I could feel the earth turn beneath me, and my own breath coming wi' the breathing of the wind. It was as though I had no skin nor bone, but only the light of the rising sun inside me."

His eyes softened, as he left the moor and came back to me.

"So then the sun came up higher," he said, matter-of-factly. "And when it warmed me enough to stand, I got up and went inland toward the road, to meet the English."

"But why did you go back?" I demanded. "You were free! You had money! And—"

"And where would I spend such money as that, Sassenach?" he asked. "Walk into a cottar's hearth and offer him a gold denarius, or a wee emerald?" He smiled at my indignation and shook his head.

"Nay," he said gently, "I had to go back. Aye, I could ha' lived on the moor for a time—half-starved and naked, but I might have managed. But they were hunting me, Sassenach, and hunting hard, for thinking that I might know where the gold was hid. No cot near Ardsmuir would be safe from the English, so long as I was free, and might be thought to seek refuge there.

"I've seen the English hunting, ye ken," he added, a harder note creeping into his voice. "Ye'll have seen the panel in the entry hall?"

I had; one panel of the glowing oak that lined the hall below had been smashed in, perhaps by a heavy boot, and the crisscross scars of saber slashes marred the paneling from door to stairs.

"We keep it so to remember," he said. "To show to the weans, and tell them when they ask—this is what the English are."

The suppressed hate in his voice struck me low in the pit of the stomach. Knowing what I knew of what the English army had done in the Highlands, there was bloody little I could say in argument. I said nothing, and he continued after a moment.

"I wouldna expose the folk near Ardsmuir to that kind of attention, Sassenach." At the word "Sassenach," his hand squeezed mine and a small smile curved the corner of his mouth. Sassenach I might be to him, but not English.

"For that matter," he went on, "were I not taken, the hunt would likely come here again—to Lallybroch. If I would risk the folk near Ardsmuir, I would not risk my own. And even without that—" He stopped, seeming to struggle to find words.

"I had to go back," he said slowly. "For the sake of the men there, if for nothing else."

"The men in the prison?" I said, surprised. "Were some of the Lallybroch men arrested with you?"

He shook his head. The small vertical line that appeared between his brows when he thought hard was visible, even by starlight.

"No. There were men there from all over the Highlands—from every clan, almost. Only a few men from each clan—remnants and ragtag. But the more in need of a chief, for all that."

"And that's what you were to them?" I spoke gently, restraining the urge to smooth the line away with my fingers.

"For lack of any better," he said, with the flicker of a smile.

He had come from the bosom of family and tenants, from a strength that had sustained him for seven years, to find a lack of hope and a loneliness that would kill a man faster than the damp and the filth and the quaking ague of the prison.

And so, quite simply, he had taken the ragtag and remnants, the castoff survivors of the field of Culloden, and made them his own, that they and he might survive the stones of Ardsmuir as well. Reasoning, charming, and cajoling where he could, fighting where he must, he had forced them to band together, to face their captors as one, to put aside ancient clan rivalries and allegiances, and take him as their chieftain.

"They were mine," he said softly. "And the having of them kept me alive." But then they had been taken from him and from each other—wrenched apart and sent into indenture in a foreign land. And he had not been able to save them.

"You did your best for them. But it's over now," I said softly.

We lay in each other's arms in silence for a long time, letting the small noises of the house wash over us. Different from the comfortable commercial bustle of the brothel, the tiny creaks and sighing spoke of quiet, and home, and safety. For the first time, we were truly alone together, removed from danger and distraction.

There was time, now. Time to hear the rest of the story of the gold, to hear what he had done with it, to find out what had happened to the men of Ardsmuir, to speculate about the burning of the printshop, Young Ian's one-eyed seaman, the encounter with His Majesty's Customs on the shore by Arbroath, to decide what to do next. And since there was time, there was no need to speak of any of that, now.

The last peat broke and fell apart on the hearth, its glowing interior hissing red in the cold. I snuggled closer to Jamie, burying my face in the side of his neck. He tasted faintly of grass and sweat, with a whiff of brandy.

He shifted his body in response, bringing us together all down our naked lengths.

"What, again?" I murmured, amused. "Men your age aren't supposed to do it again so soon."

His teeth nibbled gently on my earlobe. “Well, you’re doing it too, Sassenach,” he pointed out. “And you’re older than I am.”

“That’s different,” I said, gasping a little as he moved suddenly over me, his shoulders blotting out the starlit window. “I’m a woman.”

“And if ye weren’t a woman, Sassenach,” he assured me, settling to his work, “I wouldna be doing it either. Hush, now.”

* * *

I woke just past dawn to the scratching of the rose brier against the window, and the muffled thump and clang of breakfast fixing in the kitchen below. Peering over Jamie’s sleeping form, I saw that the fire was dead out. I slid out of bed, quietly so as not to wake him. The floorboards were icy under my feet and I reached, shivering, for the first available garment.

Swathed in the folds of Jamie’s shirt, I knelt on the hearth and went about the laborious business of rekindling the fire, thinking rather wistfully that I might have included a box of safety matches in the short list of items I had thought worthwhile to bring. Striking sparks from a flint to catch kindling does work, but not usually on the first try. Or the second. Or …

Somewhere around the dozenth attempt, I was rewarded by a tiny black spot on the twist of tow I was using for kindling. It grew at once and blossomed into a tiny flame. I thrust it hastily but carefully beneath the little tent of twigs I had prepared, to shelter the blooming flame from the cold breeze.

I had left the window ajar the night before, to insure not being suffocated by the smoke—peat fires burned hot, but dully, with a lot of smoke, as the blackened beams overhead attested. Just now, though, I thought we could dispense with fresh air—at least until I got the fire thoroughly under way.

The pane was rimed at the bottom with a light frost; winter was not far off. The air was so crisp and fresh that I paused before shutting the window, breathing in great gulps of dead leaf, dried apples, cold earth, and damp, sweet grass. The scene outside was perfect in its still clarity, stone walls and dark pines drawn sharp as black quillstrokes against the gray overcast of the morning.

A movement drew my eye to the top of the hill, where the rough track led to the village of Broch Mordha, ten miles distant. One by one, three small Highland ponies came up over the rise, and started down the hill toward the farmhouse.

They were too far away for me to make out the faces, but I could see by the billowing skirts that all three riders were women. Perhaps it was the girls—Maggie, Kitty, and Janet—coming back from Young Jamie's house. My own Jamie would be glad to see them.

I pulled the shirt, redolent of Jamie, around me against the chill, deciding to take advantage of what privacy might remain to us this morning by thawing out in bed. I shut the window, and paused to lift several of the light peat bricks from the basket by the hearth and feed them carefully to my fledgling fire, before shedding the shirt and crawling under the covers, numb toes tingling with delight at the luxurious warmth.

Jamie felt the chill of my return, and rolled instinctively toward me, gathering me neatly in and curling round me spoon-fashion. He sleepily rubbed his face against my shoulder.

"Sleep well, Sassenach?" he muttered.

"Never better," I assured him, snuggling my cold bottom into the warm hollow of his thighs. "You?"

"Mmmmm." He responded with a blissful groan, wrapping his arms about me. "Dreamed like a fiend."

"What about?"

"Naked women, mostly," he said, and set his teeth gently in the flesh of my shoulder. "That, and food." His stomach rumbled softly. The scent of biscuits and fried bacon in the air was faint but unmistakable.

"So long as you don't confuse the two," I said, twitching my shoulder out of his reach.

"I can tell a hawk from a handsaw, when the wind sets north by nor'west," he assured me, "and a sweet, plump lassie from a salt-cured ham, too, appearances notwithstanding." He grabbed my buttocks with both hands and squeezed, making me yelp and kick him in the shins.

"Beast!"

“Oh, a beast, is it?” he said, laughing. “Well, then …” Growling deep in his throat, he dived under the quilt and proceeded to nip and nibble his way up the insides of my thighs, blithely ignoring my squeaks and the hail of kicks on his back and shoulders. Dislodged by our struggles, the quilt slid off onto the floor, revealing the tousled mass of his hair, flying wild over my thighs.

“Perhaps there’s less difference than I thought,” he said, his head popping up between my legs as he paused for breath. He pressed my thighs flat against the mattress and grinned up at me, spikes of red hair standing on end like a porcupine’s quills. “Ye do taste a bit salty, come to try it. What do ye—”

He was interrupted by a sudden bang as the door flew open and rebounded from the wall. Startled, we turned to look. In the doorway stood a young girl I had never seen before. She was perhaps fifteen or sixteen, with long flaxen hair and big blue eyes. The eyes were somewhat bigger than normal, and filled with an expression of horrified shock as she stared at me. Her gaze moved slowly from my tangled hair to my bare breasts, and down the slopes of my naked body, until it encountered Jamie, lying prone between my thighs, white-faced with a shock equal to hers.

“Daddy!” she said, in tones of total outrage. “*Who* is that woman?”

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DADDY

"Daddy?" I said blankly. *"Daddy?"*

Jamie had turned to stone when the door opened. Now he shot bolt upright, snatching at the fallen quilt. He shoved the disheveled hair out of his face, and glared at the girl.

"What in the name of bloody hell are you doing here?" he demanded. Red-bearded, naked, and hoarse with fury, he was a formidable sight, and the girl took a step backward, looking uncertain. Then her chin firmed and she glared back at him.

"I came with Mother!"

The effect on Jamie could not have been greater had she shot him through the heart. He jerked violently, and all the color went out of his face.

It came flooding back, as the sound of rapid footsteps sounded on the wooden staircase. He leapt out of bed, tossing the quilt hastily in my direction, and grabbed his breeks.

He had barely pulled them on when another female figure burst into the room, skidded to a halt, and stood staring, bug-eyed, at the bed.

"It's true!" She whirled toward Jamie, fists clenched against the cloak she still wore. "It's true! It's the Sassenach witch! How could ye do such a thing to me, Jamie Fraser?"

"Be still, Laoghaire!" he snapped. "I've done nothing to ye!"

I sat up against the wall, clutching the quilt to my bosom and staring. It was only when he spoke her name that I recognized her. Twenty-odd years ago, Laoghaire MacKenzie had been a slender sixteen-year-old, with rose-petal skin, moonbeam hair, and a violent—and unrequited—passion for Jamie Fraser. Evidently, a few things had changed.

She was nearing forty and no longer slender, having thickened considerably. The skin was still fair, but weathered, and stretched plumply over cheeks flushed with anger. Strands of ashy hair straggled out from under her respectable white kertch. The pale blue eyes were the same, though—they turned on me again, with the same expression of hatred I had seen in them long ago.

"He's mine!" she hissed. She stamped her foot. "Get ye back to the hell that ye came from, and leave him to me! Go, I say!"

As I made no move to obey, she glanced wildly about in search of a weapon. Catching sight of the blue-banded ewer, she seized it and drew back her arm to fling it at me. Jamie plucked it neatly from her hand, set it back on the bureau, and grasped her by the upper arm, hard enough to make her squeal.

He turned her and shoved her roughly toward the door. "Get ye downstairs," he ordered. "I'll speak wi' ye presently, Laoghaire."

"You'll speak wi' me? Speak wi' me, is it!" she cried. Face contorted, she swung her free hand at him, raking his face from eye to chin with her nails.

He grunted, grabbed her other wrist, and dragging her to the door, pushed her out into the passage and slammed the door to and turned the key.

By the time he turned around again, I was sitting on the edge of the bed, fumbling with shaking hands as I tried to pull my stockings on.

"I can explain it to ye, Claire," he said.

"I d-don't think so," I said. My lips were numb, along with the rest of me, and it was hard to form words. I kept my eyes fixed on my feet as I tried—and failed—to tie my garters.

"Listen to me!" he said violently, bringing his fist down on the table with a crash that made me jump. I jerked my head up, and caught a glimpse of him towering over me. With his red hair tumbled loose about his shoulders, his face unshaven, bare-chested, and the raw marks of Laoghaire's nails down his cheek, he looked like a Viking raider, bent on mayhem. I turned away to look for my shift.

It was lost in the bedclothes; I scrabbled about among the sheets. A considerable pounding had started up on the other side of the door, accompanied by shouts and shrieks, as the commotion attracted the other inhabitants of the house.

"You'd best go and explain things to your daughter," I said, pulling the crumpled cotton over my head.

"She's not my daughter!"

"No?" My head popped out of the neck of the shift, and I lifted my chin to stare up at him. "And I suppose you aren't married to Laoghaire, either?"

"I'm married to you, damn it!" he bellowed, striking his fist on the table again.

"I don't think so." I felt very cold. My stiff fingers couldn't manage the lacing of the stays; I threw them aside, and stood up to look for my gown, which was somewhere on the other side of the room—behind Jamie.

"I need my dress."

"You're no going anywhere, Sassenach. Not until—"

"Don't call me that!" I shrieked it, surprising both of us. He stared at me for a moment, then nodded.

"All right," he said quietly. He glanced at the door, now reverberating under the force of the pounding. He drew a deep breath and straightened, squaring his shoulders.

"I'll go and settle things. Then we'll talk, the two of us. Stay here, Sass—Claire." He picked up his shirt and yanked it over his head. Unlocking the door, he stepped out into the suddenly silent corridor and closed it behind him.

* * *

I managed to pick up the dress, then collapsed on the bed and sat shaking all over, the green wool crumpled across my knees.

I couldn't think in a straight line. My mind spun in small circles around the central fact; he was married. Married to Laoghaire! And he had a family. And yet he had wept for Brianna.

"Oh, Bree!" I said aloud. "Oh, God, Bree!" and began to cry—partly from shock, partly at the thought of Brianna. It wasn't logical, but this discovery seemed a betrayal of her, as much as of me—or of Laoghaire.

The thought of Laoghaire turned shock and sorrow to rage in a moment. I rubbed a fold of green wool savagely across my face, leaving the skin red and prickly.

Damn him! How dare he? If he had married again, thinking me dead, that was one thing. I had half-expected, half-feared it. But to marry that woman—that spiteful, sneaking little bitch who had tried to murder me at Castle Leoch … but he likely didn't know that, a small voice of reason in my head pointed out.

"Well, he *should* have known!" I said. "Damn him to hell, how could he take her, anyway?" The tears were rolling heedlessly down my face, hot spurts of loss and fury, and my nose was running. I groped for a handkerchief, found none, and in desperation, blew my nose at last on a corner of the sheet.

It smelled of Jamie. Worse, it smelled of the two of us, and the faint, musky lingerings of our pleasure. There was a small tingling spot on the inside of my thigh, where Jamie had nipped me, a few minutes before. I brought the flat of my hand down hard on the spot in a vicious slap, to kill the feeling.

"Liar!" I screamed. I grabbed the pitcher Laoghaire had tried to throw at me, and hurled it myself. It crashed against the door in an explosion of splinters.

I stood in the middle of the room, listening. It was quiet. There was no sound from below; no one was coming to see what had made the crash. I imagined they were all much too concerned with soothing Laoghaire to worry about me.

Did they live here, at Lallybroch? I recalled Jamie, taking Fergus aside, sending him ahead, ostensibly to tell Ian and Jenny we were coming. And, presumably, to warn them about me, and get Laoghaire out of the way before I arrived.

What in the name of God did Jenny and Ian think about this? Clearly they must know about Laoghaire—and yet they had received me last night, with no sign of it on their faces. But if Laoghaire had been sent away—why did she come back? Even trying to think about it made my temples throb.

The act of violence had drained enough rage for me to be able once more to control my shaking fingers. I kicked the stays into a corner and pulled the green gown over my head.

I had to get out of there. That was the only half-coherent thought in my head, and I clung to it. I had to leave. I couldn't stay, not with Laoghaire and her daughters in the house. They belonged there—I didn't.

I managed to tie up the garters this time, do up the laces of the dress, fasten the multiple hooks of the overskirt, and find my shoes. One was under the washstand, the other by the massive oak armoire, where I had kicked them the night before, dropping my clothes carelessly anywhere in my eagerness to crawl into the welcoming bed and nestle warmly in Jamie's arms.

I shivered. The fire had gone out again, and there was an icy draft from the window. I felt chilled to the bone, despite my clothes.

I wasted some time in searching for my cloak before realizing that it was downstairs; I had left it in the parlor the day before. I pushed my fingers through my hair, but was too upset to look for a comb. The strands crackled with electricity from having the woolen dress pulled over my head, and I slapped irritably at the floating hairs that stuck to my face.

Ready. Ready as I'd be, at least. I paused for one last look around, then heard footsteps coming up the stair.

Not fast and light, like the last ones. These were heavier, and slow, deliberate. I knew without seeing him that it was Jamie coming—and that he wasn't anxious to see me.

Fine. I didn't want to see him, either. Better just to leave at once, without speaking. What was there to say?

I backed away as the door opened, unaware that I was moving, until my legs hit the edge of the bed. I lost my balance and sat down. Jamie paused in the doorway, looking down at me.

He had shaved. That was the first thing I noticed. In echo of Young Ian the day before, he had hastily shaved, brushed his hair back and tidied himself before facing trouble. He seemed to know what I was thinking; the ghost of a smile passed over his face, as he rubbed his freshly scraped chin.

"D'ye think it will help?" he asked.

I swallowed, and licked dry lips, but didn't answer. He sighed, and answered himself.

"No, I suppose not." He stepped into the room and closed the door. He stood awkwardly for a moment, then moved toward the bed, one hand extended toward me. "Claire—"

"Don't touch me!" I leapt to my feet and backed away, circling toward the door. His hand fell to his side, but he stepped in front of me, blocking the way.

"Will ye no let me explain, Claire?"

"It seems to be a little late for that," I said, in what I meant to be a cold, disdainful tone. Unfortunately, my voice shook.

He pushed the door shut behind him.

"Ye never used to be unreasonable," he said quietly.

"And don't tell me what I used to be!" The tears were much too near the surface, and I bit my lip to hold them back.

"All right." His face was very pale; the scratches Laoghaire had given him showed as three red lines, livid down his cheek.

"I dinna live with her," he said. "She and the girls live at Balriggan, over near Broch Mordha." He watched me closely, but I said nothing. He shrugged a little, settling the shirt on his shoulders, and went on.

"It was a great mistake—the marriage between us."

"With two children? Took you a while to realize, didn't it?" I burst out. His lips pressed tight together.

"The lassies aren't mine; Laoghaire was a widow wi' the two bairns when I wed her."

"Oh." It didn't make any real difference, but still, I felt a small wave of something like relief, on Brianna's behalf. She was the sole child of Jamie's heart, at least, even if I—

"I've not lived wi' them for some time; I live in Edinburgh, and send money to them, but—"

"You don't need to tell me," I interrupted. "It doesn't make any difference. Let me by, please—I'm going."

The thick, ruddy brows drew sharply together.

"Going where?"

"Back. Away. I don't know—let me by!"

"You aren't going anywhere," he said definitely.

"You can't stop me!"

He reached out and grabbed me by both arms.

"Aye, I can," he said. He could; I jerked furiously, but couldn't budge the iron grip on my biceps.

"Let go of me this minute!"

"No, I won't!" He glared at me, eyes narrowed, and I suddenly realized that calm as he might seem outwardly, he was very nearly as upset as I was. I saw the muscles of his throat move as he swallowed, controlling himself enough to speak again.

"I willna let ye go until I've explained to ye, why …"

"What is there to explain?" I demanded furiously. "You married again! What else is there?"

The color was rising in his face; the tips of his ears were already red, a sure sign of impending fury.

"And have you lived a nun for twenty years?" he demanded, shaking me slightly. "Have ye?"

"No!" I flung the word at his face, and he flinched slightly. "No, I bloody haven't! And I don't think you've been a monk, either—I never did!"

"Then—" he began, but I was much too furious to listen anymore.

"You lied to me, damn you!"

"I never did!" The skin was stretched tight over his cheekbones, as it was when he was very angry indeed.

"You did, you bastard! You know you did! Let go!" I kicked him sharply in the shin, hard enough to numb my toes. He exclaimed in pain, but didn't let go. Instead, he squeezed harder, making me yelp.

"I never said a thing to ye—"

"No, you didn't! But you lied, anyway! You let me think you weren't married, that there wasn't anyone, that you—that you—" I was half-sobbing with rage, gasping between words. "You should have told me, the minute I came! Why in hell didn't you tell me?" His grip on my arms slackened, and I managed to wrench myself free. He took a step toward me, eyes glittering with fury. I wasn't afraid of him; I drew back my fist and hit him in the chest.

"Why?" I shrieked, hitting him again and again and again, the sound of the blows thudding against his chest. "Why, why, *why*!"

"Because I was afraid!" He got hold of my wrists and threw me backward, so I fell across the bed. He stood over me, fists clenched, breathing hard.

"I am a coward, damn you! I couldna tell ye, for fear ye would leave me, and unmanly thing that I am, I thought I couldna bear that!"

"Unmanly? With two wives? Ha!"

I really thought he would slap me; he raised his arm, but then his open palm clenched into a fist.

"Am I a man? To want you so badly that nothing else matters? To see you, and know I would sacrifice honor or family or life itself to lie wi' you, even though ye'd left me?"

"You have the filthy, unmitigated, bleeding gall to say such a thing to me?" My voice was so high, it came out as a thin and vicious whisper. "You'll blame *me?*"

He stopped then, chest heaving as he caught his breath.

"No. No, I canna blame you." He turned aside, blindly. "How could it have been your fault? Ye wanted to stay wi' me, to die with me."

"I did, the more fool I," I said. "*You* sent me back, you made me go! And now you want to blame me for going?"

He turned back to me, eyes dark with desperation.

"I had to send ye away! I had to, for the bairn's sake!" His eyes went involuntarily to the hook where his coat hung, the pictures of Brianna in its pocket. He took one deep, quivering breath, and calmed himself with a visible effort.

"No," he said, much more quietly. "I canna regret that, whatever the cost. I would have given my life, for her and for you. If it took my heart and soul, too …"

He drew a long, quivering breath, mastering the passion that shook him.

"I canna blame ye for going."

"You blame me for coming back, though."

He shook his head as though to clear it.

"No, God no!"

He grabbed my hands tight between his own, the strength of his grip grinding the bones together.

"Do ye know what it is to live twenty years without a heart? To live half a man, and accustom yourself to living in the bit that's left, filling in the cracks wi' what mortar comes handy?"

"Do I know?" I echoed. I struggled to loose myself, to little effect. "Yes, you bloody bastard, I know that! What did you think, I'd gone straight back to Frank and lived happy ever after?" I kicked at him as hard as I could. He flinched, but didn't let go.

"Sometimes I hoped ye did," he said, speaking through clenched teeth. "And then sometimes I could see it—him with you, day and night, lyin' with ye, taking your body, holding my child! And God, I could kill ye for it!"

Suddenly, he dropped my hands, whirled, and smashed his fist through the side of the oak armoire. It was an impressive blow; the armoire was a sturdy piece of furniture. It must have bruised his knuckles considerably, but without hesitation, he drove the other fist into the oak boards as well, as though the shining wood were Frank's face—or mine.

"Feel like that about it, do you?" I said coldly, as he stepped back, panting. "I don't even have to imagine you with Laoghaire—I've bloody *seen* her!"

"I dinna care a fig for Laoghaire, and never have!"

"Bastard!" I said again. "You'd marry a woman without wanting her, and then throw her aside the minute—"

"Shut up!" he roared. "Hold your tongue, ye wicked wee bitch!" He slammed a fist down on the washstand, glaring at me. "I'm damned the one way or the other, no? If I felt anything for her, I'm a faithless womanizer, and if I didn't, I'm a heartless beast."

"You should have told me!"

"And if I had?" He grabbed my hand and jerked me to my feet, holding me eye to eye with him. "You'd have turned on your heel and gone without a word. And having seen ye again—I tell ye, I would ha' done far worse than lie to keep you!"

He pressed me tight against his body and kissed me, long and hard. My knees turned to water, and I fought to keep my feet, buttressed by the vision of Laoghaire's angry eyes, and her voice, echoing shrill in my ears. *He's mine!*

"This is senseless," I said, pulling away. Fury had its own intoxication, but the hangover was setting in fast, a black dizzy vortex. My head swam so that I could hardly keep my balance. "I can't think straight. I'm leaving."

I lurched toward the door, but he caught me by the waist, yanking me back.

He whirled me toward himself and kissed me again, hard enough to leave a quicksilver taste of blood in my mouth. It was neither affection nor desire, but a blind passion, a determination to possess me. He was through talking.

So was I. I pulled my mouth away and slapped him hard across the face, fingers curved to rake his flesh.

He jerked back, cheek scraped raw, then twisted his fingers tight in my hair, bent and took my mouth again, deliberate and savage, ignoring the kicks and blows I rained on him.

He bit my lower lip, hard, and when I opened my lips, gasping, thrust his tongue into my mouth, stealing breath and words together.

He threw me bodily onto the bed where we had lain laughing an hour before, and pinned me there at once with the weight of his body.

He was most mightily roused.

So was I.

Mine, he said, without uttering a word. *Mine!*

I fought him with boundless fury and no little skill, and *Yours*, my body echoed back. *Yours, and may you be damned for it!*

I didn't feel him rip my gown, but I felt the heat of his body on my bare breasts, through the thin linen of his shirt, the long, hard muscle of his thigh straining against my own. He took his hand off my arm to tear at his breeches, and I clawed him from ear to breast, striping his skin with pale red.

We were doing our level best to kill each other, fueled by the rage of years apart—mine for his sending me away, his for my going, mine for Laoghaire, his for Frank.

"Bitch!" he panted. "Whore!"

"Damn you!" I got a hand in his own long hair, and yanked, pulling his face down to me again. We rolled off the bed and landed on the floor in a tangled heap, rolling to and fro in a welter of half-uttered curses and broken words.

I didn't hear the door open. I didn't hear anything, though she must have called out, more than once. Blind and deaf, I knew nothing but Jamie until the shower of cold water struck us, sudden as an electric shock. Jamie froze. All the color left his face, leaving the bones jutting stark beneath the skin.

I lay dazed, drops of water dripping from the ends of his hair onto my breasts. Just behind him, I could see Jenny, her face as white as his, holding an empty pan in her hands.

"Stop it!" she said. Her eyes were slanted with a horrified anger. "How could ye, Jamie? Rutting like a wild beast, and not carin' if all the house hears ye!"

He moved off me, slowly, clumsy as a bear. Jenny snatched a quilt from the bed and flung it over my body.

On all fours, he shook his head like a dog, sending droplets of water flying. Then, very slowly, he got to his feet, and pulled his ripped breeches back into place.

"Are ye no ashamed?" she cried, scandalized.

Jamie stood looking down at her as though he had never seen any creature quite like her, and was making up his mind what she might be. The wet ends of his hair dripped over his bare chest.

"Yes," he said at last, quite mildly. "I am."

He seemed dazed. He closed his eyes and a brief, deep shudder went over him. Without a word, he turned and went out.

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FLIGHT FROM EDEN

Jenny helped me to the bed, making small clucking noises; whether of shock or concern, I couldn't tell. I was vaguely conscious of hovering figures in the doorway—servants, I supposed—but wasn't disposed to pay much attention.

"I'll find ye something to put on," she murmured, fluffing a pillow and pushing me back onto it. "And perhaps a bit of a drink. You're all right?"

"Where's Jamie?"

She glanced at me quickly, sympathy mixed with a gleam of curiosity.

"Dinna be afraid; I'll no let him at ye again." She spoke firmly, then pressed her lips tight together, frowning as she tucked the quilt around me. "How he could do such a thing!"

"It wasn't his fault—not this." I ran a hand through my tangled hair, indicating my general dishevelment. "I mean—I did it, as much as he did. It was both of us. He—I—" I let my hand fall, helpless to explain. I was bruised and shaken, and my lips were swollen.

"I see," was all Jenny said, but she gave me a long, assessing look, and I thought it quite possible that she did see.

I didn't want to talk about the recent happenings, and she seemed to sense this, for she kept quiet for a bit, giving a soft-voiced order to someone in the hall, then moving about the room, straightening furniture and tidying things. I saw her pause for a moment as she saw the holes in the armoire, then she stooped to pick up the larger pieces of the shattered ewer.

As she dumped them into the basin, there was a faint thud from the house below; the slam of the big main door. She stepped to the window and pushed the curtain aside.

"It's Jamie," she said. She glanced at me, and let the curtain fall. "He'll be going up to the hill; he goes there, if he's troubled. That, or he gets drunk wi' Ian. The hill's better."

I gave a small snort.

"Yes, I expect he's troubled, all right."

There was a light step in the hallway, and the younger Janet appeared, carefully balancing a tray of biscuits, whisky, and water. She looked pale and scared.

"Are ye … well, Aunt?" she asked tentatively, setting down the tray.

"I'm fine," I assured her, pushing myself upright and reaching for the whisky decanter.

A sharp glance having assured Jenny of the same, she patted her daughter's arm and turned toward the door.

"Stay wi' your auntie," she ordered. "I'll go and find a dress." Janet nodded obediently, and sat down by the bed on a stool, watching me as I ate and drank.

I began to feel physically much stronger with a little food inside me. Internally, I felt quite numb; the recent events seemed at once dreamlike and yet completely clear in my mind. I could recall the smallest details; the blue calico bows on the dress of Laoghaire's daughter, the tiny broken veins in Laoghaire's cheeks, a rough-torn fingernail on Jamie's fourth finger.

"Do you know where Laoghaire is?" I asked Janet. The girl had her head down, apparently studying her own hands. At my question, she jerked upright, blinking.

"Oh!" she said. "Oh. Aye, she and Marsali and Joan went back to Balriggan, where they live. Uncle Jamie made them go."

"Did he," I said flatly.

Janet bit her lip, twisting her hands in her apron. Suddenly she looked up at me.

"Aunt—I'm so awfully sorry!" Her eyes were a warm brown, like her father's, but swimming now with tears.

"It's all right," I said, having no idea what she meant, but trying to be soothing.

"But it was me!" she burst out. She looked thoroughly miserable, but determined to confess. "I—I told Laoghaire ye were here. That's why she came."

"Oh." Well, that explained that, I supposed. I finished the whisky and set the glass carefully back on the tray.

"I didna think—I mean, I didna have it in mind to cause a kebbie-lebbie, truly not. I didna ken that you—that she—"

"It's all right," I said again. "One of us would have found out sooner or later." It made no difference, but I glanced at her with some curiosity. "Why did you tell her, though?"

The girl glanced cautiously over her shoulder, hearing steps start up from below. She leaned close to me.

"Mother told me to," she whispered. And with that, she rose and hastily left the room, brushing past her mother in the doorway.

I didn't ask. Jenny had found a dress for me—one of the elder girls'—and there was no conversation beyond the necessary as she helped me into it.

When I was dressed and shod, my hair combed and put up, I turned to her.

"I want to go," I said. "Now."

She didn't argue, but only looked me over, to see that I was strong enough. She nodded then, dark lashes covering the slanted blue eyes so like her brother's.

"I think that's best," she said quietly.

It was late morning when I left Lallybroch for what I knew would be the last time. I had a dagger at my waist, for protection, though it was unlikely I would need it. My horse's saddlebags held food and several bottles of ale; enough to see me back to the stone circle. I had thought of taking back the pictures of Brianna from Jamie's coat, but after a moment's hesitation, had left them. She belonged to him forever, even if I didn't.

It was a cold autumn day, the morning's gray promise fulfilled with a mourning drizzle. No one was in sight near the house, as

Jenny led the horse out of the stable, and held the bridle for me to mount.

I pulled the hood of my cloak farther forward, and nodded to her. Last time, we had parted with tears and embraces, as sisters. She let go the reins, and stood back, as I turned the horse's head toward the road.

"Godspeed!" I heard her call behind me. I didn't answer, nor did I look back.

I rode most of the day, without really noticing where I was going; taking heed only for the general direction, and letting the gelding pick his own way through the mountain passes.

I stopped when the light began to go; hobbled the horse to graze, lay down wrapped in my cloak, and dropped straight asleep, unwilling to stay awake for fear I might think, and remember. Numbness was my only refuge. I knew it would go, but I clung to its gray comfort so long as I might.

It was hunger that brought me unwillingly back to life the next day. I had not paused to eat through all the day before, nor when rising in the morning, but by noon my stomach had begun to register loud protests, and I stopped in a small glen beside a sparkling burn, and unwrapped the food that Jenny had slipped into my saddlebag.

There were oatcakes and ale, and several small loaves of fresh-baked bread, slit down the middle, stuffed with sheepmilk cheese and homemade pickle. Highland sandwiches, the hearty fare of shepherds and warriors, as characteristic of Lallybroch as peanut butter had been of Boston. Very suitable, that my quest should end with one of these.

I ate a sandwich, drank one of the stone bottles of ale, and swung back into the saddle, turning the horse's head to the northeast once more. Unfortunately, while the food had brought fresh strength to my body, it had given fresh life to my feelings as well. As we climbed higher and higher into the clouds, my spirits fell lower—and they hadn't been high to begin with.

The horse was willing enough, but I wasn't. Near midafternoon, I felt that I simply couldn't go on. Leading the horse far enough into a small thicket that it wouldn't be noticeable from the road, I hobbled it loosely, and walked farther under the trees myself, 'til I came to the trunk of a fallen aspen, smooth-skinned, stained green with moss.

I sat slumped over, elbows on my knees and head on my hands. I ached in every joint. Not really from the encounter of the day before, or from the rigors of riding; from grief.

Constraint and judgment had been a great deal of my life. I had learned at some pains the art of healing; to give and to care, but always stopping short of that danger point where too much was given to make me effective. I had learned detachment and disengagement, to my cost.

With Frank, too, I had learned the balancing act of civility; kindness and respect that did not pass those unseen boundaries into passion. And Brianna? Love for a child cannot be free; from the first signs of movement in the womb, a devotion springs up as powerful as it is mindless, irresistible as the process of birth itself. But powerful as it is, it is a love always of control; one is in charge, the protector, the watcher, the guardian—there is great passion in it, to be sure, but never abandon.

Always, always, I had had to balance compassion with wisdom, love with judgment, humanity with ruthlessness.

Only with Jamie had I given everything I had, risked it all. I had thrown away caution and judgment and wisdom, along with the comforts and constraints of a hard-won career. I had brought him nothing but myself, been nothing but myself with him, given him soul as well as body, let him see me naked, trusted him to see me whole and cherish my frailties—because he once had.

I had feared he couldn't, again. Or wouldn't. And then had known those few days of perfect joy, thinking that what had once been true was true once more; I was free to love him, with everything I had and was, and be loved with an honesty that matched my own.

The tears slid hot and wet between my fingers. I mourned for Jamie, and for what I had been, with him.

Do you know, his voice said, whispering, *what it means, to say again “I love you,” and to mean it?*

I knew. And with my head in my hands beneath the pine trees, I knew I would never mean it again.

* * *

Sunk as I was in miserable contemplation, I didn’t hear the footsteps until he was nearly upon me. Startled by the crack of a branch nearby, I rocketed off the fallen tree like a rising pheasant and whirled to face the attacker, heart in my mouth and dagger in hand.

“Christ!” My stalker shied back from the open blade, clearly as startled as I was.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded. I pressed my free hand to my chest. My heart was pounding like a kettledrum and I was sure I was as white as he was.

“Jesus, Auntie Claire! Where’d ye learn to pull a knife like that? Ye scairt hell out of me.” Young Ian passed a hand over his brow, Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed.

“The feeling is mutual,” I assured him. I tried to sheathe the dagger, but my hand was shaking too much with reaction to manage it. Knees wobbling, I sank back on the aspen trunk and laid the knife on my thigh.

“I repeat,” I said, trying to gain mastery of myself, “what are you doing here?” I had a bloody good idea what he was doing there, and I wasn’t having any. On the other hand, I needed a moment’s recovery from the fright before I could reliably stand up.

Young Ian bit his lip, glanced around, and at my nod of permission, sat down awkwardly on the trunk beside me.

“Uncle Jamie sent me—” he began. I didn’t pause to hear more, but got up at once, knees or no knees, thrusting the dagger into my belt as I turned away.

“Wait, Aunt! Please!” He grabbed at my arm, but I jerked loose, pulling away from him.

“I’m not interested,” I said, kicking the fronds of bracken aside. “Go home, wee Ian. I’ve places to go.” I hoped I had, at least.

“But it isn’t what you think!” Unable to stop me leaving the clearing, he was following me, arguing as he ducked low branches.

"He needs you, Aunt, really he does! Ye must come back wi' me!"

I didn't answer him; I had reached my horse, and bent to undo the hobbles.

"Auntie Claire! Will ye no listen to me?" He loomed up on the far side of the horse, gawky height peering at me over the saddle. He looked very much like his father, his good-natured, half-homely face creased with anxiety.

"No," I said briefly. I stuffed the hobbles into the saddlebag, and put my foot into the stirrup, swinging up with a satisfyingly majestic swish of skirts and petticoats. My dignified departure was hampered at this point by the fact that Young Ian had the horse's reins in a death grip.

"Let go," I said peremptorily.

"Not until ye hear me out," he said. He glared up at me, jaw clenched with stubbornness, soft brown eyes ablaze. I glared back at him. Gangling as he was, he had Ian's skinny muscularity; unless I was prepared to ride him down, there seemed little choice but to listen to him.

All right, I decided. Fat lot of good it would do, to him or his double-dealing uncle, but I'd listen.

"Talk," I said, mustering what patience I could.

He drew a deep breath, eyeing me warily to see whether I meant it. Deciding that I did, he blew his breath out, making the soft brown hair over his brow flutter, and squared his shoulders to begin.

"Well," he started, seeming suddenly unsure. "It … I … he …"

I made a low sound of exasperation in my throat. "Start at the beginning," I said. "But don't make a song and dance of it, hm?"

He nodded, teeth set in his upper lip as he concentrated.

"Well, there was the hell of a stramash broke out at the house, after ye left, when Uncle Jamie came back," he began.

"I'll just bet there was," I said. Despite myself, I was conscious of a small stirring of curiosity, but fought it down, assuming an expression of complete indifference.

"I've never seen Uncle Jamie sae furious," he said, watching my face carefully. "Nor Mother, either. They went at it hammer and tongs, the two o’ them. Father tried to quiet them, but it was like they didna even hear him. Uncle Jamie called Mother a meddling besom, and a *lang-nebbit* … and … and a lot of worse names,” he added, flushing.

“He shouldn’t have been angry with Jenny,” I said. “She was only trying to help—I think.” I felt sick with the knowledge that I had caused this rift, too. Jenny had been Jamie’s mainstay since the death of their mother when both were children. Was there no end to the damage I had caused by coming back?

To my surprise, Jenny’s son smiled briefly. “Well, it wasna all one-sided,” he said dryly. “My mother’s no the person to be taking abuse lying down, ye ken. Uncle Jamie had a few toothmarks on him before the end of it.” He swallowed, remembering.

“In fact, I thought they’d damage each other, surely; Mother went for Uncle Jamie wi’ an iron girdle, and he snatched it from her and threw it through the kitchen window. Scairt the chickens out o’ the yard,” he added, with a feeble grin.

“Less about chickens, Young Ian,” I said, looking down at him coldly. “Get on with it; I want to leave.”

“Well, then Uncle Jamie knocked over the bookshelf in the parlor—I dinna think he did it on purpose,” the lad added hastily, “he was just too fashed to see straight—and went out the door. Father stuck his head out the window and shouted at him where was he going, and he said he was going to find you.”

“Then why are you here, and not him?” I was leaning forward slightly, watching his hand on the reins; if his fingers showed signs of relaxation, perhaps I could twitch the rein out of his grasp.

Young Ian sighed. “Well, just as Uncle Jamie was setting out on his horse, Aunt … er … I mean his wi—” He blushed miserably. “Laoghaire. She … she came down the hill and into the dooryard.”

At this point, I gave up pretending indifference.

“And what happened then?”

He frowned. “There was an awful collieshangie, but I couldna hear much. Auntie … I mean Laoghaire—she doesna seem to know how to fight properly, like my Mam and Uncle Jamie. She just weeps and wails a lot. Mam says she snivels,” he added.

"Mmphm," I said. "And so?"

Laoghaire had slid off her own mount, clutched Jamie by the leg, and more or less dragged him off as well, according to Young Ian. She had then subsided into a puddle in the dooryard, clutching Jamie about the knees, weeping and wailing as was her usual habit.

Unable to escape, Jamie had at last hauled Laoghaire to her feet, flung her bodily over his shoulder, and carried her into the house and up the stairs, ignoring the fascinated gazes of his family and servants.

"Right," I said. I realized that I had been clenching my jaw, and consciously unclenched it. "So he sent you after me because he was too occupied with his *wife*. Bastard! The gall of him! He thinks he can just send someone to fetch me back, like a hired girl, because it doesn't suit his convenience to come himself? He thinks he can have his cake and eat it, does he? Bloody arrogant, selfish, overbearing … Scot!" Distracted as I was by the picture of Jamie carrying Laoghaire upstairs, "Scot" was the worst epithet I could come up with on short notice.

My knuckles were white where my hand clutched the edge of the saddle. Not caring about subtlety any more, I leaned down, snatching for the reins.

"Let go!"

"But Auntie Claire, it's not that!"

"What's not that?" Caught by his tone of desperation, I glanced up. His long, narrow face was tight with the anguished need to make me understand.

"Uncle Jamie didna stay to tend Laoghaire!"

"Then why did he send you?"

He took a deep breath, renewing his grip on my reins.

"She shot him. He sent me to find ye, because he's dying."

* * *

"If you're lying to me, Ian Murray," I said, for the dozenth time, "you'll regret it to the end of your life—which will be short!"

I had to raise my voice to be heard. The rising wind came whooshing past me, lifting my hair in streamers off my shoulders, whipping my skirts tight around my legs. The weather was suitably dramatic; great black clouds choked the mountain passes, boiling over the crags like seafoam, with a faint distant rumble of thunder, like far-off surf on packed sand.

Lacking breath, Young Ian merely shook his bowed head as he leaned into the wind. He was afoot, leading both ponies across a treacherously boggy stretch of ground near the edge of a tiny loch. I glanced instinctively at my wrist, missing my Rolex.

It was difficult to tell where the sun was, with the in-rolling storm filling half the western sky, but the upper edge of the dark-tinged clouds glowed a brilliant white that was almost gold. I had lost the knack of telling time by sun and sky, but thought it was no more than midafternoon.

Lallybroch lay several hours ahead; I doubted we would reach it by dark. Meaching my way reluctantly toward Craigh na Dun, I had taken nearly two days to reach the small wood where Young Ian had caught up with me. He had, he said, spent only one day in the pursuit; he had known roughly where I was headed, and he himself had shod the pony I rode; my tracks had been plain to him, where they showed in the mud-patches among the heather on the open moor.

Two days since I had left, and one—or more—on the journey back. Three days, then, since Jamie had been shot.

I could get few useful details from Young Ian; having succeeded in his mission, he wanted only to return to Lallybroch as fast as possible, and saw no point in further conversation. Jamie's gunshot wound was in the left arm, he said. That was good, so far as it went. The ball had penetrated into Jamie's side, as well. That wasn't good. Jamie was conscious when last seen—that was good—but was starting a fever. Not good at all. As to the possible effects of shock, the type or severity of the fever, or what treatment had so far been administered, Young Ian merely shrugged.

So perhaps Jamie was dying; perhaps he wasn't. It wasn't a chance I could take, as Jamie himself would know perfectly well. I wondered momentarily whether he might conceivably have shot himself, as a means of forcing me to return. Our last interview could have left him in little doubt as to my response had he come after me, or used force to make me return.

It was beginning to rain, in soft spatters that caught in my hair and lashes, blurring my sight like tears. Past the boggy spot, Young Ian had mounted again, leading the way upward to the final pass that led to Lallybroch.

Jamie was devious enough to have thought of such a plan, all right, and certainly courageous enough to have carried it out. On the other hand, I had never known him to be reckless. He had taken plenty of bold risks—marrying me being one of them, I thought ruefully—but never without an estimation of the cost, and a willingness to pay it. Would he have thought drawing me back to Lallybroch worth the chance of actually dying? That hardly seemed logical, and Jamie Fraser was a very logical man.

I pulled the hood of my cloak further over my head, to keep the increasing downpour out of my face. Young Ian's shoulders and thighs were dark with wet, and the rain dripped from the brim of his slouch hat, but he sat straight in the saddle, ignoring the weather with the stoic nonchalance of a trueborn Scot.

Very well. Given that Jamie likely hadn't shot himself, was he shot at all? He might have made up the story, and sent his nephew to tell it. On consideration, though, I thought it highly unlikely that Young Ian could have delivered the news so convincingly, were it false.

I shrugged, the movement sending a cold rivulet down inside the front of my cloak, and set myself to wait with what patience I could for the journey to be ended. Years in the practice of medicine had taught me not to anticipate; the reality of each case was bound to be unique, and so must be my response to it. My emotions, however, were much harder to control than my professional reactions.

Each time I had left Lallybroch, I had thought I would never return. Now here I was, going back once more. Twice now, I had left Jamie, knowing with certainty that I would never see him again. And yet here I was, going back to him like a bloody homing pigeon to its loft.

“I’ll tell you one thing, Jamie Fraser,” I muttered under my breath. “If you aren’t at death’s door when I get there, you’ll live to regret it!”

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PRACTICAL AND APPLIED WITCHCRAFT

It was several hours past dark when we arrived at last, soaked to the skin. The house was silent, and dark, save for two dimly lighted windows downstairs in the parlor. There was a single warning bark from one of the dogs, but Young Ian shushed the animal, and after a quick, curious nosing at my stirrup, the black-and-white shape faded back into the darkness of the dooryard.

The warning had been enough to alert someone; as Young Ian led me into the hall, the door to the parlor opened. Jenny poked her head out, her face drawn with worry.

At the sight of Young Ian, she popped out into the hallway, her expression transformed to one of joyous relief, at once superseded by the righteous anger of a mother confronted by an errant offspring.

“Ian, ye wee wretch!” she said. “Where have ye been all this time? Your Da and I ha’ been worrit sick for ye!” She paused long enough to look him over anxiously. “You’re all right?”

At his nod, her lips grew tight again. “Aye, well. You’re for it now, laddie, I’ll tell ye! And just where the devil *have* ye been, anyway?”

Gangling, knob-jointed, and dripping wet, Young Ian looked like nothing so much as a drowned scarecrow, but he was still large enough to block me from his mother’s view. He didn’t answer Jenny’s scolding, but shrugged awkwardly and stepped aside, exposing me to his mother’s startled gaze.

If my resurrection from the dead had disconcerted her, this second reappearance stunned her. Her deep blue eyes, normally as slanted as her brother's, opened so wide, they looked round. She stared at me for a long moment, without saying anything, then her gaze swiveled once more to her son.

"A cuckoo," she said, almost conversationally. "That's what ye are, laddie—a great cuckoo in the nest. God knows whose son ye were meant to be; it wasna mine."

Young Ian flushed hotly, dropping his eyes as the red burned in his cheeks. He pushed the feathery damp hair out of his eyes with the back of one hand.

"I—well, I just …" he began, eyes on his boots, "I couldna just …"

"Oh, never mind about it now!" his mother snapped. "Get ye upstairs to your bed; your Da will deal wi' ye in the morning."

Ian glanced helplessly at the parlor door, then at me. He shrugged once more, looked at the sodden hat in his hands as though wondering how it had got there, and shuffled slowly down the hall.

Jenny stood quite still, eyes fixed on me, until the padded door at the end of the hallway closed with a soft thump behind Young Ian. Her face showed lines of strain, and the shadows of sleeplessness smudged her eyes. Still fineboned and erect, for once she looked her age, and more.

"So you're back," she said flatly.

Seeing no point in answering the obvious, I nodded briefly. The house was quiet around us, and full of shadows, the hallway lighted only by a three-pronged candlestick set on the table.

"Never mind about it now," I said, softly, so as not to disturb the house's slumber. There was, after all, only one thing of importance at the moment. "Where's Jamie?"

After a small hesitation, she nodded as well, accepting my presence for the moment. "In there," she said, waving toward the parlor door.

I started toward the door, then paused. There was the one thing more. "Where's Laoghaire?" I asked.

"Gone," she said. Her eyes were flat and dark in the candlelight, unreadable.

I nodded in response, and stepped through the door, closing it gently but firmly behind me.

Too long to be laid on the sofa, Jamie lay on a camp bed set up before the fire. Asleep or unconscious, his profile rose dark and sharp-edged against the light of the glowing coals, unmoving.

Whatever he was, he wasn't dead—at least not yet. My eyes growing accustomed to the dim light of the fire, I could see the slow rise and fall of his chest beneath nightshirt and quilt. A flask of water and a brandy bottle sat on the small table by the bed. The padded chair by the fire had a shawl thrown over its back; Jenny had been sitting there, watching over her brother.

There seemed no need now for haste. I untied the strings at the neck of my cloak, and spread the soggy garment over the chairback, taking the shawl in substitute. My hands were cold; I put them under my arms, hugging myself, to bring them to something like a normal temperature before I touched him.

When I did venture to place a thawed hand on his forehead, I nearly jerked it back. He was hot as a just-fired pistol, and he twitched and moaned at my touch. Fever, indeed. I stood looking down at him for a moment, then carefully moved to the side of the bed and sat down in Jenny's chair. I didn't think he would sleep long, with a temperature like that, and it seemed a shame to wake him needlessly soon, merely to examine him.

The cloak behind me dripped water on the floor, a slow, arrhythmic patting. It reminded me unpleasantly of an old Highland superstition—the "death-drop." Just before a death occurs, the story goes, the sound of water dripping is heard in the house, by those sensitive to such things.

I wasn't, thank heaven, subject to noticing supernatural phenomena of that sort. No, I thought wryly, it takes something like a crack through time to get *your* attention. The thought made me smile, if only briefly, and dispelled the frisson I had felt at the thought of the death-drop.

As the rain chill left me, though, I still felt uneasy, and for obvious reasons. It wasn't that long ago that I had stood by another makeshift bed, deep in the night-watches, and contemplated death, and the waste of a marriage. The thoughts I had begun in the wood hadn't stopped on the hasty journey back to Lallybroch, and they continued now, without my conscious volition.

Honor had led Frank to his decision—to keep me as his wife, and raise Brianna as his own. Honor, and an unwillingness to decline a responsibility he felt was his. Well, here before me lay another honorable man.

Laoghaire and her daughters, Jenny and her family, the Scots prisoners, the smugglers, Mr. Willoughby and Geordie, Fergus and the tenants—how many other responsibilities had Jamie shouldered, through our years apart?

Frank's death had absolved me of one of my own obligations; Brianna herself of another. The Hospital Board, in their eternal wisdom, had severed the single great remaining tie that bound me to that life. I had had time, with Joe Abernathy's help, to relieve myself of the smaller responsibilities, to depute and delegate, divest and resolve.

Jamie had had neither warning nor choice about my reappearance in his life; no time to make decisions or resolve conflicts. And he was not one to abandon his responsibilities, even for the sake of love.

Yes, he'd lied to me. Hadn't trusted me to recognize his responsibilities, to stand by him—or to leave him—as his circumstances demanded. He'd been afraid. So had I; afraid that he wouldn't choose me, confronted with the struggle between a twenty-year-old love and a present-day family. So I'd run away.

"Who you jiving, L.J.?" I heard Joe Abernathy's voice say, derisive and affectionate. I had fled toward Craigh na Dun with all the speed and decision of a condemned felon approaching the steps of the gallows. Nothing had slowed my journey but the hope that Jamie would come after me.

True, the pangs of conscience and wounded pride had spurred me on, but the one moment when Young Ian had said, "He's dying," had shown those up for the flimsy things they were.

My marriage to Jamie had been for me like the turning of a great key, each small turn setting in play the intricate fall of tumblers within me. Bree had been able to turn that key as well, edging closer to the unlocking of the door of myself. But the final turn of the lock was frozen—until I had walked into the printshop in Edinburgh, and the mechanism had sprung free with a final, decisive click. The door now was ajar, the light of an unknown future shining through its crack. But it would take more strength than I had alone to push it open.

I watched the rise and fall of his breath, and the play of light and shadow on the strong, clean lines of his face, and knew that nothing truly mattered between us but the fact that we both still lived. So here I was. Again. And whatever the cost of it might be to him or me, here I stayed.

I didn't realize that his eyes had opened until he spoke.

"Ye came back, then," he said softly. "I knew ye would."

I opened my mouth to reply, but he was still talking, eyes fixed on my face, pupils dilated to pools of darkness.

"My love," he said, almost whispering. "God, ye do look so lovely, wi' your great eyes all gold, and your hair so soft round your face." He brushed his tongue across dry lips. "I knew ye must forgive me, Sassenach, once ye knew."

Once I knew? My brows shot up, but I didn't speak; he had more to say.

"I was so afraid to lose ye again, *mo chridhe*," he murmured. "So afraid. I havena loved anyone but you, my Sassenach, never since the day I saw ye—but I couldna … I couldna bear …" His voice drifted off in an unintelligible mumble, and his eyes closed again, lashes lying dark against the high curve of his cheek.

I sat still, wondering what I should do. As I watched, his eyes opened suddenly once again. Heavy and drowsy with fever, they sought my face.

"It willna be long, Sassenach," he said, as though reassuring me. One corner of his mouth twitched in an attempt at a smile. "Not long. Then I shall touch ye once more. I do long to touch you."

"Oh, Jamie," I said. Moved by tenderness, I reached out and laid my hand along his burning cheek.

His eyes snapped wide with shock, and he jerked bolt upright in bed, letting out a bloodcurdling yell of anguish as the movement jarred his wounded arm.

“Oh God, oh Christ, oh Jesus Lord God Almighty!” he said, bent half-breathless and clutching at his left arm. “You’re real! Bloody stinking filthy pig-swiving hell! Oh, Christ!”

“Are you all right?” I said, rather inanely. I could hear startled exclamations from the floor above, muffled by the thick planks, and the thump of feet as one after another of Lallybroch’s inhabitants leapt from their beds to investigate the uproar.

Jenny’s head, eyes even wider than before, poked through the parlor door. Jamie saw her, and somehow found sufficient breath to roar “Get *out!*” before doubling up again with an agonized groan.

“Je-sus,” he said between clenched teeth. “What in God’s holy name are ye doing here, Sassenach?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing here?” I said. “You sent for me. And what do you mean, I’m real?”

He unclenched his jaw and tentatively loosened his grip on his left arm. The resultant sensation proving unsatisfactory, he promptly grabbed it again and said several things in French involving the reproductive organs of assorted saints and animals.

“For God’s sake, lie down!” I said. I took him by the shoulders and eased him back onto the pillows, noting with some alarm how close his bones were to the surface of his heated skin.

“I thought ye were a fever dream, ’til you touched me,” he said, gasping. “What the hell d’ye mean, popping up by my bed and scarin’ me to death?” He grimaced in pain. “Christ, it feels like my damn arm’s come off at the shoulder. Och, bugger it!” he exclaimed, as I firmly detached the fingers of his right hand from his left arm.

“Didn’t you send Young Ian to tell me you were dying?” I said, deftly rolling back the sleeve of his nightshirt. The arm was wound in a huge bandage above the elbow, and I groped for the end of the linen strip.

“Me? No! Ow, that hurts!”

“It’ll hurt worse before I’m through with you,” I said, carefully unwrapping. “You mean the little bastard came after me on his own? You didn't *want* me to come back?"

"Want ye back? No! Want ye to come back to me for nothing but pity, the same as ye might show for a dog in a ditch? Bloody hell! No! I forbade the little bugger to go after ye!" He scowled furiously at me, ruddy brows knitting together.

"I'm a doctor," I said coldly, "not a veterinarian. And if you didn't want me back, what was all that you were saying before you realized I was real, hm? Bite the blanket or something; the end's stuck, and I'm going to pull it loose."

He bit his lip instead, and made no noise but a swift intake of air through his nose. It was impossible to judge his color in the firelight, but his eyes closed briefly, and small beads of sweat popped out on his forehead.

I turned away for a moment, groping in the drawer of Jenny's desk where the extra candles were kept. I needed more light before I did anything.

"I suppose Young Ian told me you were dying just to get me back here. He must have thought I wouldn't come otherwise." The candles were there; fine beeswax, from the Lallybroch hives.

"For what it's worth, I am dying." His voice came from behind me, dry and blunt, despite his breathlessness.

I turned back to him in some surprise. His eyes rested on my face quite calmly, now that the pain in his arm had lessened a bit, but his breath was still coming unevenly, and his eyes were heavy and bright with fever. I didn't respond at once, but lit the candles I had found, placing them in the big candelabra that usually decorated the sideboard, unused save for great occasions. The flames of five additional candles brightened the room as though in preparation for a party. I bent over the bed, noncommital.

"Let's have a look at it."

The wound itself was a ragged dark hole, scabbed at the edges and faintly blue-tinged. I pressed the flesh on either side of the wound; it was red and angry-looking, and there was a considerable seepage of pus. Jamie stirred uneasily as I drew my fingertips gently but firmly down the length of the muscle.

"You have the makings of a very fine little infection there, my lad," I said. "Young Ian said it went into your side; a second shot, or did it go through your arm?"

"It went through. Jenny dug the ball out of my side. That wasna so bad, though. Just an inch or so in." He spoke in brief spurts, lips tightening involuntarily between sentences.

"Let me see where it went through."

Moving very slowly, he turned his hand to the outside, letting the arm fall away from his side. I could see that even that small movement was intensely painful. The exit wound was just above the elbow joint, on the inside of the upper arm. Not directly opposite the entrance wound, though; the ball had been deflected in its passage.

"Hit the bone," I said, trying not to imagine what that must have felt like. "Do you know if the bone's broken? I don't want to poke you more than I need to."

"Thanks for small mercies," he said, with an attempt at a smile. The muscles of his face trembled, though, and went slack with exhaustion.

"No, I think it's not broken," he said. "I've broken my collarbone and my hand before, and it's not like that, though it hurts a bit."

"I expect it does." I felt my way carefully up the swell of his biceps, testing for tenderness. "How far up does the pain go?"

He glanced at his wounded arm, almost casually. "Feels like I've a hot poker in my arm, not a bone. But it's no just the arm pains me now; my whole side's gone stiff and sore." He swallowed, licking his lips again. "Will ye give me a taste of the brandy?" he asked. "It hurts to feel my heart beating," he added apologetically.

Without comment, I poured a cup of water from the flask on the table, and held it to his lips. He raised one brow, but drank thirstily, then let his head fall back against the pillow. He breathed deeply for a moment, eyes closed, then opened them and looked directly at me.

"I've had two fevers in my life that near killed me," he said. "I think this one likely will. I wouldna send for ye, but … I'm glad you're here." He swallowed once, then went on. "I … wanted to say to ye that I'm sorry. And to bid ye a proper farewell. I wouldna ask ye to stay ’til the end, but … would ye … would ye stay wi’ me—just for a bit?”

His right hand was pressed flat against the mattress, steadying him. I could see that he was fighting hard to keep any note of pleading from his voice or eyes, to make it a simple request, one that could be refused.

I sat down on the bed beside him, careful not to jar him. The firelight glowed on one side of his face, sparking the red-gold stubble of his beard, picking up the small flickers of silver here and there, leaving the other side masked in shadow. He met my eyes, not blinking. I hoped the yearning that showed in his face was not quite so apparent on my own.

I reached out and ran a hand gently down the side of his face, feeling the soft scratchiness of beard stubble.

“I’ll stay for a bit,” I said. “But you’re not going to die.”

He raised one eyebrow. “You brought me through one bad fever, using what I still think was witchcraft. And Jenny got me through the next, wi’ naught but plain stubbornness. I suppose wi’ the both of ye here, ye might just manage it, but I’m no at all sure I want to go through such an ordeal again. I think I’d rather just die and ha’ done with it, if it’s all the same to you.”

“Ingrate,” I said. “Coward.” Torn between exasperation and tenderness, I patted his cheek and stood up, groping in the deep pocket of my skirt. There was one item I had carried on my person at all times, not trusting it to the vagaries of travel.

I laid the small, flat case on the table and flipped the latch. “I’m not going to let you die this time either,” I informed him, “greatly as I may be tempted.” I carefully extracted the roll of gray flannel and laid it on the table with a soft clinking noise. I unrolled the flannel, displaying the gleaming row of syringes, and rummaged in the box for the small bottle of penicillin tablets.

“What in God’s name are those?” Jamie asked, eyeing the syringes with interest. “They look wicked sharp.”

I didn’t answer, occupied in dissolving the penicillin tablets in the vial of sterile water. I selected a glass barrel, fitted a needle, and pressed the tip through the rubber covering the mouth of the bottle.

Holding it up to the light, I pulled back slowly on the plunger, watching the thick white liquid fill the barrel, checking for bubbles. Then pulling the needle free, I depressed the plunger slightly until a drop of liquid pearled from the point and rolled slowly down the length of the spike.

"Roll onto your good side," I said, turning to Jamie, "and pull up your shirt."

He eyed the needle in my hand with keen suspicion, but reluctantly obeyed. I surveyed the terrain with approval.

"Your bottom hasn't changed a bit in twenty years," I remarked, admiring the muscular curves.

"Neither has yours," he replied courteously, "but I'm no insisting you expose it. Are ye suffering a sudden attack of lustfulness?"

"Not just at present," I said evenly, swabbing a patch of skin with a cloth soaked in brandy.

"That's a verra nice make of brandy," he said, peering back over his shoulder, "but I'm more accustomed to apply it at the other end."

"It's also the best source of alcohol available. Hold still now, and relax." I jabbed deftly and pressed the plunger slowly in.

"Ouch!" Jamie rubbed his posterior resentfully.

"It'll stop stinging in a minute." I poured an inch of brandy into the cup. "Now you can have a bit to drink—a very little bit."

He drained the cup without comment, watching me roll up the collection of syringes. Finally he said, "I thought ye stuck pins in ill-wish dolls when ye meant to witch someone; not in the people themselves."

"It's not a pin, it's a hypodermic syringe."

"I dinna care what ye call it; it felt like a bloody horseshoe nail. Would ye care to tell me why jabbing pins in my arse is going to help my arm?"

I took a deep breath. "Well, do you remember my once telling you about germs?"

He looked quite blank.

"Little beasts too small to see," I elaborated. "They can get into your body through bad food or water, or through open wounds, and if they do, they can make you ill."

He stared at his arm with interest. "I've germs in my arm, have I?"

"You very definitely have." I tapped a finger on the small flat box. "The medicine I just shot into your backside kills germs, though. You get another shot every four hours 'til this time tomorrow, and then we'll see how you're doing."

I paused. Jamie was staring at me, shaking his head.

"Do you understand?" I asked. He nodded slowly.

"Aye, I do. I should ha' let them burn ye, twenty years ago."

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WHAT’S IN A NAME

After giving him a shot and settling him comfortably, I sat watching until he fell asleep again, allowing him to hold my hand until his own grip relaxed in sleep and the big hand dropped slack by his side.

I sat by his bed for the rest of the night, dozing sometimes, and rousing myself by means of the internal clock all doctors have, geared to the rhythms of a hospital’s shift changes. Two more shots, the last at daybreak, and by then the fever had loosed its hold perceptibly. He was still very warm to the touch, but his flesh no longer burned, and he rested easier, falling asleep after the last shot with no more than a few grumbles and a faint moan as his arm twinged.

“Bloody eighteenth-century germs are no match for penicillin,” I told his sleeping form. “No resistance. Even if you had syphilis, I’d have it cleaned up in no time.”

And what then? I wondered, as I staggered off to the kitchen in search of hot tea and food. A strange woman, presumably the cook or the housemaid, was firing up the brick oven, ready to receive the daily loaves that lay rising in their pans on the table. She didn’t seem surprised to see me, but cleared away a small space for me to sit down, and brought me tea and fresh girdle-cakes with no more than a quick “Good mornin’ to ye, mum” before returning to her work.

Evidently, Jenny had informed the household of my presence. Did that mean she accepted it herself? I doubted it. Clearly, she had wanted me to go, and wasn't best pleased to have me back. If I was going to stay, there was plainly going to be a certain amount of explanation about Laoghaire, from both Jenny and Jamie. And I *was* going to stay.

"Thank you," I said politely to the cook, and taking a fresh cup of tea with me, went back to the parlor to wait until Jamie saw fit to wake up again.

People passed by the door during the morning, pausing now and then to peep through, but always went on hurriedly when I looked up. At last, Jamie showed signs of waking, just before noon; he stirred, sighed, groaned as the movement jarred his arm, and subsided once more.

I gave him a few moments to realize that I was there, but his eyes stayed shut. He wasn't asleep, though; the lines of his body were slightly tensed, not relaxed in slumber. I had watched him sleep all night; I knew the difference.

"All right," I said. I leaned back in the chair, settling myself comfortably, well out of his reach. "Let's hear it, then."

A small slit of blue showed under the long auburn lashes, then disappeared again.

"Mmmm?" he said, pretending to wake slowly. The lashes fluttered against his cheeks.

"Don't stall," I said crisply. "I know perfectly well you're awake. Open your eyes and tell me about Laoghaire."

The blue eyes opened and rested on me with an expression of some disfavor.

"You're no afraid of giving me a relapse?" he inquired. "I've always heard sick folk shouldna be troubled owermuch. It sets them back."

"You have a doctor right here," I assured him. "If you pass out from the strain, I'll know what to do about it."

"That's what I'm afraid of." His narrowed gaze flicked to the little case of drugs and hypodermics on the table, then back to me. "My arse feels like I've sat in a gorse bush wi' no breeks on."

"Good," I said pleasantly. "You'll get another one in an hour. Right now, you're going to talk."

His lips pressed tight together, but then relaxed as he sighed. He pushed himself laboriously upright against the pillows, one-handed. I didn't help him.

"All right," he said at last. He didn't look at me, but down at the quilt, where his finger traced the edge of the starred design.

"Well, it was when I'd come back from England."

He had come up from the Lake District and over the Carter's Bar, that great ridge of high ground that divides England from Scotland, on whose broad back the ancient courts and markets of the Borders had been held.

"There's a stone there to mark the border, maybe you'll know; it looks the sort of stone to last a while." He glanced at me, questioning, and I nodded. I did know it; a huge menhir, some ten feet tall. In my time, someone had carved on its one face ENGLAND, and on the other, SCOTLAND.

There he stopped to rest, as thousands of travelers had stopped over the years, his exiled past behind him, the future—and home—below and beyond, past the hazy green hollows of the Lowlands, up into the gray crags of the Highlands, hidden by fog.

His good hand ran back and forth through his hair, as it always did when he thought, leaving the cowlicks on top standing up in small, bright whorls.

"You'll not know how it is, to live among strangers for so long."

"Won't I?" I said, with some sharpness. He glanced up at me, startled, then smiled faintly, looking down at the coverlet.

"Aye, maybe ye will," he said. "Ye change, no? Much as ye want to keep the memories of home, and who ye are—you're changed. Not one of the strangers; ye could never be that, even if ye wanted to. But different from who ye were, too."

I thought of myself, standing silent beside Frank, a bit of flotsam in the eddies of university parties, pushing a pram through the chilly parks of Boston, playing bridge and talking with other wives and mothers, speaking the foreign language of middle-class domesticity. Strangers indeed.

"Yes," I said. "I know. Get on."

He sighed, rubbing his nose with a forefinger. "So I came back," he said. He looked up, a smile hidden in the corner of his mouth. "What is it ye told wee Ian? 'Home is the place where, when ye have to go there, they have to take ye in'?"

"That's it," I said. "It's a quotation from a poet called Frost. But what do you mean? Surely your family was glad to see you!"

He frowned, fingering the quilt. "Aye, they were," he said slowly. "It's not that—I dinna mean they made me feel unwelcome, not at all. But I had been away so long—Michael and wee Janet and Ian didna even remember me." He smiled ruefully. "They'd heard about me, though. When I came into the kitchen, they'd squash back against the walls and stare at me, wi' their eyes gone round."

He leaned forward a little, intent on making me understand.

"See, it was different, when I hid in the cave. I wasna in the house, and they seldom saw me, but I was always *here*, I was always part of them. I hunted for them; I kent when they were hungry, or cold, or when the goats were ill or the kail crop poor, or a new draft under the kitchen door.

"Then I went to prison," he said abruptly. "And to England. I wrote to them—and they to me—but it canna be the same, to see a few black words on the paper, telling things that happened months before.

"And when I came back—" He shrugged, wincing as the movement jarred his arm. "It was different. Ian would ask me what I thought of fencing in auld Kirby's pasture, but I'd know he'd already set Young Jamie to do it. I'd walk through the fields, and folk would squint at me, suspicious, thinking me a stranger. Then their eyes would go big as they'd seen a ghost, when they knew me."

He stopped, looking out at the window, where the brambles of his mother's rose beat against the glass as the wind changed. "I *was* a ghost, I think." He glanced at me shyly. "If ye ken what I mean."

"Maybe," I said. Rain was streaking the glass, with drops the same gray as the sky outside.

"You feel like your ties to the earth are broken," I said softly. "Floating through rooms without feeling your footsteps. Hearing people speak to you, and not making sense of it. I remember that—

before Bree was born." But I had had one tie then; I had her, to anchor me to life.

He nodded, not looking at me, and then was quiet for a minute. The peat fire hissed on the hearth behind me, smelling of the Highlands, and the rich scent of cock-a-leekie and baking bread spread through the house, warm and comforting as a blanket.

"I was here," he said softly, "but not home."

I could feel the pull of it around me—the house, the family, the place itself. I, who couldn't remember a childhood home, felt the urge to sit down here and stay forever, enmeshed in the thousand strands of daily life, bound securely to this bit of earth. What would it have meant to him, who had lived all his life in the strength of that bond, endured his exile in the hope of coming back to it, and then arrived to find himself still rootless?

"And I suppose I was lonely," he said quietly. He lay still on the pillow, eyes closed.

"I suppose you were," I said, careful to let no tone either of sympathy or condemnation show. I knew something of loneliness, too.

He opened his eyes then, and met my gaze with a naked honesty. "Aye, there was that too," he said. "Not the main thing, no—but aye, that too."

Jenny had tried, with varying degrees of gentleness and insistence, to persuade him to marry again. She had tried intermittently since the days after Culloden, presenting first one and then another personable young widow, this and that sweet-tempered virgin, all to no avail. Now, bereft of the feelings that had sustained him so far, desperately seeking some sense of connection—he had listened.

"Laoghaire was married to Hugh MacKenzie, one of Colum's tacksmen," he said, eyes closed once more. "Hugh was killed at Culloden, though, and two years later, Laoghaire married Simon MacKimmie of clan Fraser. The two lassies—Marsali and Joan—they're his. The English arrested him a few years later, and took him to prison in Edinburgh." He opened his eyes, looking up at the dark ceiling beams overhead. "He had a good house, and property worth seizing. That was enough to make a Highland man a traitor, then, whether he'd fought for the Stuarts openly or not." His voice was growing hoarse, and he stopped to clear his throat.

"Simon wasn't as lucky as I was. He died in prison, before they could bring him to trial. The Crown tried for some time to take the estate, but Ned Gowan went to Edinburgh, and spoke for Laoghaire, and he managed to save the main house and a little money, claiming it was her dower right."

"Ned Gowan?" I spoke with mingled surprise and pleasure. "He can't still be alive, surely?" It was Ned Gowan, a small and elderly solicitor who advised the MacKenzie clan on legal matters, who had saved me from being burned as a witch, twenty years before. I had thought him quite ancient then.

Jamie smiled, seeing my pleasure. "Oh, aye. I expect they'll have to knock him on the head wi' an ax to kill him. He looks just the same as he always did, though he must be past seventy now."

"Does he still live at Castle Leoch?"

He nodded, reaching to the table for the tumbler of water. He drank awkwardly, right-handed, and set it back.

"What's left of it. Aye, though he's traveled a great deal these last years, appealing treason cases and filing lawsuits to recover property." Jamie's smile had a bitter edge. "There's a saying, aye? 'After a war, first come the corbies to eat the flesh; and then the lawyers, to pick the bones.' "

His right hand went to his left shoulder, massaging it unconsciously.

"No, he's a good man, is Ned, in spite of his profession. He goes back and forth to Inverness, to Edinburgh—sometimes even to London or Paris. And he stops here from time to time, to break his journey."

It was Ned Gowan who had mentioned Laoghaire to Jenny, returning from Balriggan to Edinburgh. Pricking up her ears, Jenny had inquired for further details, and finding these satisfactory, had at once sent an invitation to Balriggan, for Laoghaire and her two daughters to come to Lallybroch for Hogmanay, which was near.

The house was bright that night, with candles lit in the windows, and bunches of holly and ivy fixed to the staircase and the doorposts. There were not so many pipers in the Highlands as there had been before Culloden, but one had been found, and a fiddler as well, and music floated up the stairwell, mixed with the heady scent of rum punch, plum cake, almond squirts, and Savoy biscuits.

Jamie had come down late and hesitant. Many people here he had not seen in nearly ten years, and he was not eager to see them now, feeling changed and distant as he did. But Jenny had made him a new shirt, brushed and mended his coat, and combed his hair smooth and plaited it for him before going downstairs to see to the cooking. He had no excuse to linger, and at last had come down, into the noise and swirl of the gathering.

"Mister Fraser!" Peggy Gibbons was the first to see him; she hurried across the room, face glowing, and threw her arms about him, quite unabashed. Taken by surprise, he hugged her back, and within moments was surrounded by a small crowd of women, exclaiming over him, holding up small children born since his departure, kissing his cheeks and patting his hands.

The men were shyer, greeting him with a gruff word of welcome or a slap on the back as he made his way slowly through the rooms, until, quite overwhelmed, he had escaped temporarily into the laird's study.

Once his father's room, and then his own, it now belonged to his brother-in-law, who had run Lallybroch through the years of his absence. The ledgers and stockbooks and accounts were all lined up neatly on the edge of the battered desk; he ran a finger along the leather spines, feeling a sense of comfort at the touch. It was all in here; the planting and the harvests, the careful purchases and acquisitions, the slow accumulations and dispersals that were the rhythm of life to the tenants of Lallybroch.

On the small bookshelf, he found his wooden snake. Along with everything else of value, he had left it behind when he went to prison. A small icon carved of cherrywood, it had been the gift of his elder brother, dead in childhood. He was sitting in the chair *behind the desk, stroking the snake's well-worn curves, when the door of the study opened.*

"Jamie?" she had said, hanging shyly back. He had not bothered to light a lamp in the study; she was silhouetted by the candles burning in the hall. She wore her pale hair loose, like a maid, and the light shone through it, haloing her unseen face.

"You'll remember me, maybe?" she had said, tentative, reluctant to come into the room without invitation.

"Aye," he said, after a pause. "Aye, of course I do."

"The music's starting," she said. It was; he could hear the whine of the fiddle and the stamp of feet from the front parlor, along with an occasional shout of merriment. It showed signs of being a good party already; most of the guests would be asleep on the floor come morning.

"Your sister says you're a bonny dancer," she said, still shy, but determined.

"It will ha' been some time since I tried," he said, feeling shy himself, and painfully awkward, though the fiddle music ached in his bones and his feet twitched at the sound of it.

"It's 'Tha mo Leabaidh 'san Fhraoch'—'In the Heather's my Bed'—you'll ken that one. Will ye come and try wi' me?" She had held out a hand to him, small and graceful in the half-dark. And he had risen, clasped her outstretched hand in his own, and taken his first steps in pursuit of himself.

"It was in here," he said, waving his good hand at the room where we sat. "Jenny had had the furniture cleared away, all but one table wi' the food and the whisky, and the fiddler stood by the window there, wi' a new moon over his shoulder." He nodded at the window, where the rose vine trembled. Something of the light of that Hogmanay feast lingered on his face, and I felt a small pang, seeing it.

"We danced all that night, sometimes wi' others, but mostly with each other. And at the dawn, when those still awake went to the end o' the house to see what omens the New Year might bring, the two of us went, too. The single women took it in turns to spin about, and walk through the door wi' their eyes closed, then spin again and open their eyes to see what the first thing they might see would be—for that tells them about the man they'll marry, ye ken."

There had been a lot of laughter, as the guests, heated by whisky and dancing, pushed and shoved at the door. Laoghaire had held back, flushed and laughing, saying it was a game for young girls, and not for a matron of thirty-four, but the others had insisted, and try she had. Spun three times clockwise and opened the door, stepped out into the cold dawnlight and spun again. And when she opened her eyes, they had rested on Jamie's face, wide with expectation.

"So … there she was, a widow wi' two bairns. She needed a man, that was plain enough. I needed … something." He gazed into the fire, where the low flame glimmered through the red mass of the peat; heat without much light. "I supposed that we might help each other."

They had married quietly at Balriggan, and he had moved his few possessions there. Less than a year later, he had moved out again, and gone to Edinburgh.

"What on earth happened?" I asked, more than curious.

He looked up at me, helpless.

"I canna say. It wasna that anything was wrong, exactly—only that nothing was right." He rubbed a hand tiredly between his brows. "It was me, I think; my fault. I always disappointed her somehow. We'd sit down to supper and all of a sudden the tears would well up in her eyes, and she'd leave the table sobbing, and me sitting there wi' not a notion what I'd done or said wrong."

His fist clenched on the coverlet, then relaxed. "God, I *never* knew what to do for her, or what to say! Anything I said just made it worse, and there would be days—nay, weeks!—when she'd not speak to me, but only turn away when I came near her, and stand staring out the window until I went away again."

His fingers went to the parallel scratches down the side of his neck. They were nearly healed now, but the marks of my nails still showed on his fair skin. He looked at me wryly.

"You never did that to me, Sassenach."

"Not my style," I agreed, smiling faintly. "If I'm mad at you, you'll bloody know why, at least."

He snorted briefly and lay back on his pillows. Neither of us spoke for a bit. Then he said, staring up at the ceiling, "I thought I didna want to hear anything about what it was like—wi' Frank, I mean. I was maybe wrong about that."

"I'll tell you anything you want to know," I said. "But not just now. It's still your turn."

He sighed and closed his eyes.

"She was afraid of me," he said softly, a minute later. "I tried to be gentle wi' her—God, I tried again and again, everything I knew to please a woman. But it was no use."

His head turned restlessly, making a hollow in the feather pillow.

"Maybe it was Hugh, or maybe Simon. I kent them both, and they were good men, but there's no telling what goes on in a marriage bed. Maybe it was bearing the children; not all women can stand it. But something hurt her, sometime, and I couldna heal it for all my trying. She shrank away when I touched her, and I could see the sickness and the fear in her eyes." There were lines of sorrow around his own closed eyes, and I reached impulsively for his hand.

He squeezed it gently and opened his eyes. "That's why I left, finally," he said softly. "I couldna bear it anymore."

I didn't say anything, but went on holding his hand, putting a finger on his pulse to check it. His heartbeat was reassuringly slow and steady.

He shifted slightly in the bed, moving his shoulders and making a grimace of discomfort as he did so.

"Arm hurt a lot?" I asked.

"A bit."

I bent over him, feeling his brow. He was very warm, but not feverish. There was a line between the thick ruddy brows, and I smoothed it with a knuckle.

"Head ache?"

"Yes."

"I'll go and make you some willow-bark tea." I made to rise, but his hand on my arm stopped me.

"I dinna need tea," he said. "It would ease me, though, if maybe I could lay my head in your lap, and have ye rub my temples a bit?" Blue eyes looked up at me, limpid as a spring sky.

"You don't fool me a bit, Jamie Fraser," I said. "I'm not going to forget about your next shot." Nonetheless, I was already moving the chair out of the way, and sitting down beside him on the bed.

He made a small grunting sound of content as I moved his head into my lap and began to stroke it, rubbing his temples, smoothing back the thick wavy mass of his hair. The back of his neck was damp; I lifted the hair away and blew softly on it, seeing the smooth fair skin prickle into gooseflesh at the nape of his neck.

"Oh, that feels good," he murmured. Despite my resolve not to touch him beyond the demands of caretaking until everything between us was resolved, I found my hands molding themselves to the clean, bold lines of his neck and shoulders, seeking the hard knobs of his vertebrae and the broad, flat planes of his shoulder blades.

He was firm and solid under my hands, his breath a warm caress on my thigh, and it was with some reluctance that I at last eased him back onto the pillow and reached for the ampule of penicillin.

"All right," I said, turning back the sheet and reaching for the hem of his shirt. "A quick stick, and you'll—" My hand brushed over the front of his nightshirt, and I broke off, startled.

"Jamie!" I said, amused. "You can't possibly!"

"I dinna suppose I can," he agreed comfortably. He curled up on his side like a shrimp, his lashes dark against his cheek. "But a man can dream, no?"

* * *

I didn't go upstairs to bed that night, either. We didn't talk much, just lay close together in the narrow bed, scarcely moving, so as not to jar his injured arm. The rest of the house was quiet, everyone safely in bed, and there was no sound but the hissing of the fire, the sigh of the wind, and the scratch of Ellen's rosebush at the window, insistent as the demands of love.

"Do ye know?" he said softly, somewhere in the black, small hours of the night. "Do ye know what it's like to be with someone that way? To try all ye can, and seem never to have the secret of them?"

"Yes," I said, thinking of Frank. "Yes, I do know."

"I thought perhaps ye did." He was quiet for a moment, and then his hand touched my hair lightly, a shadowy blur in the firelight.

"And then …" he whispered, "then to have it back again, that knowing. To be free in all ye say or do, and know that it is right."

"To say 'I love you,' and mean it with all your heart," I said softly to the dark.

"Aye," he answered, barely audible. "To say that."

His hand rested on my hair, and without knowing quite how it happened, I found myself curled against him, my head just fitting in the hollow of his shoulder.

"For so many years," he said, "for so long, I have been so many things, so many different men." I felt him swallow, and he shifted slightly, the linen of his nightshirt rustling with starch.

"I was Uncle to Jenny's children, and Brother to her and Ian. 'Milord' to Fergus, and 'Sir' to my tenants. 'Mac Dubh' to the men of Ardsmuir and 'MacKenzie' to the other servants at Helwater. 'Malcolm the printer,' then, and 'Jamie Roy' at the docks." The hand stroked my hair, slowly, with a whispering sound like the wind outside. "But here," he said, so softly I could barely hear him, "here in the dark, with you … I have no name."

I lifted my face toward his, and took the warm breath of him between my own lips.

"I love you," I said, and did not need to tell him how I meant it.

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I MEET A LAWYER

As I had predicted, eighteenth-century germs were no match for a modern antibiotic. Jamie's fever had virtually disappeared within twenty-four hours, and within the next two days the inflammation in his arm began to subside as well, leaving no more than a reddening about the wound itself and a very slight oozing of pus when pressed.

On the fourth day, after satisfying myself that he was mending nicely, I dressed the wound lightly with coneflower salve, bandaged it again, and left to dress and make my own toilet upstairs.

Ian, Janet, Young Ian, and the servants had all put their heads in at intervals over the last few days, to see how Jamie progressed. Jenny had been conspicuously absent from these inquiries, but I knew that she was still entirely aware of everything that happened in her house. I hadn't announced my intention of coming upstairs, yet when I opened the door to my bedroom, there was a large pitcher of hot water standing by the ewer, gently steaming, and a fresh cake of soap laid alongside it.

I picked it up and sniffed. Fine-milled French soap, perfumed with lily of the valley, it was a delicate comment on my status in the household—honored guest, to be sure; but not one of the family, who would all make do as a matter of course with the usual coarse soap made of tallow and lye.

"Right," I muttered. "Well, we'll see, won't we?" and lathered the cloth for washing.

As I was arranging my hair in the glass a half-hour later, I heard the sounds below of someone arriving. Several someones, in fact, from the sounds of it. I came down the stairs to find a small mob of children in residence, streaming in and out of the kitchen and front parlor, with here and there a strange adult visible in the midst of them, who stared curiously at me as I came down the stairs.

Entering the parlor, I found the camp bed put away and Jamie, shaved and in a fresh nightshirt, neatly propped up on the sofa under a quilt with his left arm in a sling, surrounded by four or five children. These were shepherded by Janet, Young Ian, and a smiling young man who was a Fraser of sorts by the shape of his nose, but otherwise bore only the faintest resemblances to the tiny boy I had seen last at Lallybroch twenty years before.

"There she is!" Jamie exclaimed with pleasure at my appearance, and the entire roomful of people turned to look at me, with expressions ranging from pleasant greeting to gape-mouthed awe.

"You'll remember Young Jamie?" the elder Jamie said, nodding to the tall, broad-shouldered young man with curly black hair and a squirming bundle in his arms.

"I remember the curls," I said, smiling. "The rest has changed a bit."

Young Jamie grinned down at me. "I remember ye well, Auntie," he said, in a deep-brown voice like well-aged ale. "Ye held me on your knee and played Ten Wee Piggies wi' my toes."

"I can't possibly have," I said, looking up at him in some dismay. While it seemed to be true that people really didn't change markedly in appearance between their twenties and their forties, they most assuredly did so between four and twenty-four.

"Perhaps ye can have a go wi' wee Benjamin here," Young Jamie suggested with a smile. "Maybe the knack of it will come back to ye." He bent and carefully laid his bundle in my arms.

A very round face looked up at me with that air of befuddlement so common to new babies. Benjamin appeared mildly confused at having me suddenly exchanged for his father, but didn't object. Instead, he opened his small pink mouth very wide, inserted his fist and began to gnaw on it in a thoughtful manner.

A small blond boy in homespun breeks leaned on Jamie's knee, staring up at me in wonder. "Who's that, Nunkie?" he asked in a loud whisper.

"That's your great-auntie Claire," Jamie said gravely. "Ye'll have heard about her, I expect?"

"Oh, aye," the little boy said, nodding madly. "Is she as old as Grannie?"

"Even older," Jamie said, nodding back solemnly. The lad gawked up at me for a moment, then turned back to Jamie, face screwed up in scorn.

"Get on wi' ye, Nunkie! She doesna look anything like as old as Grannie! Why, there's scarce a bit o' silver in her hair!"

"Thank you, child," I said, beaming at him.

"Are ye sure that's our great-auntie Claire?" the boy went on, looking doubtfully at me. "Mam says Great-Auntie Claire was maybe a witch, but this lady doesna look much like it. She hasna got a single wart on her nose that *I* can see!"

"Thanks," I said again, a little more dryly. "And what's your name?"

He turned suddenly shy at being thus directly addressed, and buried his head in Jamie's sleeve, refusing to speak.

"This is Angus Walter Edwin Murray Carmichael," Jamie answered for him, ruffling the silky blond hair. "Maggie's eldest son, and most commonly known as Wally."

"*We* call him Snot-rag," a small red-haired girl standing by my knee informed me. " 'Cause his neb is always clotted wi' gook."

Angus Walter jerked his face out of his uncle's shirt and glared at his female relation, his features beet-red with fury.

"Is *not*!" he shouted. "Take it back!" Not waiting to see whether she would or not, he flung himself at her, fists clenched, but was jerked off his feet by his great-uncle's hand, attached to his collar.

"Ye dinna hit girls," Jamie informed him firmly. "It's not manly."

"But she said I was snotty!" Angus Walter wailed. "I *must* hit her!"

"And it's no verra civil to pass remarks about someone's personal appearance, Mistress Abigail," Jamie said severely to the little girl. "Ye should apologize to your cousin."

"Well, but he *is*…" Abigail persisted, but then caught Jamie's stern eyes and dropped her own, flushing scarlet. "Sorry, Wally," she murmured.

Wally seemed at first indisposed to consider this adequate compensation for the insult he had suffered, but was at last prevailed upon to cease trying to hit his cousin by his uncle promising him a story.

"Tell the one about the kelpie and the horseman!" my red-haired acquaintance exclaimed, pushing forward to be in on it.

"No, the one about the Devil's chess game!" chimed in one of the other children. Jamie seemed to be a sort of magnet for them; two boys were plucking at his coverlet, while a tiny brown-haired girl had climbed up onto the sofa back by his head, and begun intently plaiting strands of his hair.

"Pretty, Nunkie," she murmured, taking no part in the hail of suggestions.

"It's Wally's story," Jamie said firmly, quelling the incipient riot with a gesture. "He can choose as he likes." He drew a clean handkerchief out from under the pillow and held it to Wally's nose, which was in fact rather unsightly.

"Blow," he said in an undertone, and then, louder, "and then tell me which you'll have, Wally."

Wally snuffled obligingly, then said, "St. Bride and the geese, please, Nunkie."

Jamie's eyes sought me, resting on my face with a thoughtful expression.

"All right," he said, after a pause. "Well, then. Ye'll ken that the greylag mate for life? If ye kill a grown goose, hunting, ye must always wait, for the mate will come to mourn. Then ye must try to kill the second, too, for otherwise it will grieve itself to death, calling through the skies for the lost one."

Little Benjamin shifted in his wrappings, squirming in my arms. Jamie smiled and shifted his attention back to Wally, hanging open-mouthed on his great-uncle's knee.

"So," he said, "it was a time, more hundreds of years past than you could ken or dream of, that Bride first set foot on the stone of the Highlands, along with Michael the Blessed …"

Benjamin let out a small squawk at this point, and began to rootle at the front of my dress. Young Jamie and his siblings seemed to have disappeared, and after a moment's patting and joggling had proved vain, I left the room in search of Benjamin's mother, leaving the story in progress behind me.

I found the lady in question in the kitchen, embedded in a large company of girls and women, and after turning Benjamin over to her, spent some time in introductions, greeting, and the sort of ritual by which women appraise each other, openly and otherwise.

The women were all very friendly; evidently everyone knew or had been told who I was, for while they introduced me from one to another, there was no apparent surprise at the return of Jamie's first wife—either from the dead or from France, depending on what they'd been told.

Still, there were very odd undercurrents passing through the gathering. They scrupulously avoided asking me questions; in another place, this might be mere politeness, but not in the Highlands, where any stranger's life history was customarily extracted in the course of a casual visit.

And while they treated me with great courtesy and kindness, there were small looks from the corner of the eye, the passing of glances exchanged behind my back, and casual remarks made quietly in Gaelic.

But strangest of all was Jenny's absence. She was the hearthfire of Lallybroch; I had never been in the house when it was not suffused with her presence, all the inhabitants in orbit about her like planets about the sun. I could think of nothing less like her than that she should leave her kitchen with such a mob of company in the house.

Her presence was as strong now as the perfume of the fresh pine boughs that lay in a large pile in the back pantry, their presence beginning to scent the house; but of Jenny herself, not a hair was to be seen.

She had avoided me since the night of my return with Young Ian—natural enough, I supposed, under the circumstances. Neither had

I sought an interview with her. Both of us knew there was a reckoning to be made, but neither of us would seek it then.

It was warm and cozy in the kitchen—too warm. The intermingled scents of drying cloth, hot starch, wet diapers, sweating bodies, oatcake frying in lard, and bread baking were becoming a bit too heady, and when Katherine mentioned the need of a pitcher of cream for the scones, I seized the opportunity to escape, volunteering to fetch it down from the dairy shed.

* * *

After the press of heated bodies in the kitchen, the cold, damp air outside was so refreshing that I stood still for a minute, shaking the kitchen smells out of my petticoats and hair before making my way to the dairy shed. This shed was some distance away from the main house, convenient to the milking shed, which in turn was built to adjoin the two small paddocks in which sheep and goats were kept. Cattle were kept in the Highlands, but normally for beef, rather than milk, cow's milk being thought suitable only for invalids.

To my surprise, as I came out of the dairy shed, I saw Fergus leaning on the paddock fence, staring moodily at the mass of milling wooly backs below. I had not expected to see him here, and wondered whether Jamie knew he had returned.

Jenny's prized Merino sheep—imported, hand-fed and a great deal more spoilt than any of her grandchildren—spotted me as I passed, and rushed en masse for the side of their pen, blatting frenziedly in hope of tidbits. Fergus looked up, startled at the racket, then waved halfheartedly. He called something, but it was impossible to hear him over the uproar.

There was a large bin of frost-blasted cabbage heads near the pen; I pulled out a large, limp green head, and doled out leaves to a dozen or so pairs of eagerly grasping lips, in hopes of shutting them up.

The ram, a huge wooly creature named Hughie, with testicles that hung nearly to the ground like wool-covered footballs, shouldered his massive way into the front rank with a loud and autocratic *Bahh!* Fergus, who had reached my side by this time, picked up a whole cabbage and hurled it at Hughie with considerable force and fair accuracy.

“Tais-toi!” he said irritably.

Hughie shied and let out an astonished, high-pitched *Beh!* as the cabbage bounced off his padded back. Then, shaking himself back into some semblance of dignity, he trotted off, testes swinging with offended majesty. His flock, sheeplike, trailed after him, uttering a low chorus of discontented *bahs* in his wake.

Fergus glowered malevolently after them.

“Useless, noisy, smelly beasts,” he said. Rather ungratefully, I thought, given that the scarf and stockings he was wearing had almost certainly been woven from their wool.

“Nice to see you again, Fergus,” I said, ignoring his mood. “Does Jamie know you’re back yet?” I wondered just how much Fergus knew of recent events, if he had just arrived at Lallybroch.

“No,” he said, rather listlessly. “I suppose I should tell him I am here.” In spite of this, he made no move toward the house, but continued staring into the churned mud of the paddock. Something was obviously eating at him; I hoped nothing had gone wrong with his errand.

“Did you find Mr. Gage all right?” I asked.

He looked blank for a moment, then a spark of animation came back into his lean face.

“Oh, yes. Milord was right; I went with Gage to warn the other members of the Society, and then we went together to the tavern where they were to meet. Sure enough, there was a nest of Customs men there waiting, disguised. And may they be waiting as long as their fellow in the cask, ha ha!”

The gleam of savage amusement died out of his eyes then, and he sighed.

“We cannot expect to be paid for the pamphlets, of course. And even though the press was saved, God knows how long it may be until milord’s business is reestablished.”

He spoke with such mournfulness that I was surprised.

“You don’t help with the printing business, do you?” I asked.

He raised one shoulder and let it fall. “Not to say help, milady. But milord was kind enough to allow me to invest a part of my share of the profits from the brandy in the printing business. In time, I should have become a full partner.”

“I see,” I said sympathetically. “Do you need money? Perhaps I can—”

He shot me a glance of surprise, and then a smile that displayed his perfect, square white teeth.

“Thank you, milady, but no. I myself need very little, and I have enough.” He patted the side pocket of his coat, which jingled reassuringly.

He paused, frowning, and thrust both wrists deep into the pockets of his coat.

“Noo …” he said slowly. “It is only—well, the printing business is most respectable, milady.”

“I suppose so,” I said, slightly puzzled. He caught my tone and smiled, rather grimly.

“The difficulty, milady, is that while a smuggler may be in possession of an income more than sufficient for the support of a wife, smuggling as a sole profession is not likely to appeal to the parents of a respectable young lady.”

“Oho,” I said, everything becoming clear. “You want to get married? To a respectable young lady?”

He nodded, a little shyly.

“Yes, Madame. But her mother does not favor me.”

I couldn’t say I blamed the young lady’s mother, all things considered. While Fergus was possessed of dark good looks and a dashing manner that might well win a young girl’s heart, he lacked a few of the things that might appeal somewhat more to conservative Scottish parents, such as property, income, a left hand, and a last name.

Likewise, while smuggling, cattle-lifting, and other forms of practical communism had a long and illustrious history in the Highlands, the French did not. And no matter how long Fergus himself had lived at Lallybroch, he remained as French as Notre Dame. He would, like me, always be an outlander.

“If I were a partner in a profitable printing firm, you see, perhaps the good lady might be induced to consider my suit,” he explained. “But as it is …” He shook his head disconsolately.

I patted his arm sympathetically. “Don’t worry about it,” I said. “We’ll think of something. Does Jamie know about this girl? I’m sure he’d be willing to speak to her mother for you.”

To my surprise, he looked quite alarmed.

“Oh, no, milady! Please, say nothing to him—he has a great many things of more importance to think of just now.”

On the whole, I thought this was probably true, but I was surprised at his vehemence. Still, I agreed to say nothing to Jamie. My feet were growing chilly from standing in the frozen mud, and I suggested that we go inside.

“Perhaps a little later, milady,” he said. “For now, I believe I am not suitable company even for sheep.” With a heavy sigh, he turned and trudged off toward the dovecote, shoulders slumped.

* * *

To my surprise, Jenny was in the parlor with Jamie. She had been outside; her cheeks and the end of her long, straight nose were pink with the cold, and the scent of winter mist lingered in her clothes.

“I’ve sent Young Ian to saddle Donas,” she said. She frowned at her brother. “Can ye stand to walk to the barn, Jamie, or had he best bring the beast round for ye?”

Jamie stared up at her, one eyebrow raised.

“I can walk wherever it’s needful to go, but I’m no going anywhere just now.”

“Did I not tell ye he’d be coming?” Jenny said impatiently. “Amyas Kettrick stopped by here late last night, and said he’d just come from Kinwallis. Hobart’s meaning to come today, he said.” She glanced at the pretty enameled clock on the mantel. “If he left after breakfast, he’ll be here within the hour.”

Jamie frowned at his sister, tilting his head back against the sofa.

“I told ye, Jenny, I’m no afraid of Hobart MacKenzie,” he said shortly. “Damned if I’ll run from him!”

Jenny’s brows rose as she looked coldly at her brother.

"Oh, aye?" she said. "Ye weren't afraid of Laoghaire, either, and look where that got ye!" She jerked her head at the sling on his arm.

Despite himself, Jamie's mouth curled up on one side.

"Aye, well, it's a point," he said. "On the other hand, Jenny, ye ken guns are scarcer than hen's teeth in the Highlands. I dinna think Hobart's going to come and ask to borrow my own pistol to shoot me with."

"I shouldna think he'd bother; he'll just walk in and spit ye through the gizzard like the silly gander ye are!" she snapped.

Jamie laughed, and she glared at him. I seized the moment to interrupt.

"Who," I inquired, "is Hobart MacKenzie, and why exactly does he want to spit you like a gander?"

Jamie turned his head to me, the light of amusement still in his eyes.

"Hobart is Laoghaire's brother, Sassenach," he explained. "As for spitting me or otherwise—"

"Laoghaire's sent for him from Kinwallis, where he lives," Jenny interrupted, "and told him about … all this." A slight, impatient gesture encompassed me, Jamie, and the awkward situation in general.

"The notion being that Hobart's meant to come round and expunge the slight upon his sister's honor by expunging me," Jamie explained. He seemed to find the idea entertaining. I wasn't so sure about it, and neither was Jenny.

"You're not worried about this Hobart?" I asked.

"Of course not," he said, a little irritably. He turned to his sister. "For God's sake, Jenny, ye ken Hobart MacKenzie! The man couldna stick a pig without cutting off his own foot!"

She looked him up and down, evidently gauging his ability to defend himself against an incompetent pigsticker, and reluctantly concluding that he might manage, even one-handed.

"Mmphm," she said. "Well, and what if he comes for ye and ye kill him, aye? What then?"

"Then he'll be dead, I expect," Jamie said dryly.

"And ye'll be hangit for murder," she shot back, "or on the run, wi' all the rest of Laoghaire's kin after ye. Want to start a blood feud, do ye?"

Jamie narrowed his eyes at his sister, emphasizing the already marked resemblance between them.

"What I want," he said, with exaggerated patience, "is my breakfast. D'ye mean to feed me, or d'ye mean to wait until I faint from hunger, and then hide me in the priest hole 'til Hobart leaves?"

Annoyance struggled with humor on Jenny's fine-boned face as she glared at her brother. As usual with both Frasers, humor won out.

"It's a thought," she said, teeth flashing in a brief, reluctant smile. "If I could drag your stubborn carcass that far, I'd club ye myself." She shook her head and sighed.

"All right, Jamie, ye'll have it your way. But ye'll try not to make a mess on my good Turkey carpet, aye?"

He looked up at her, long mouth curling up on one side.

"It's a promise, Jenny," he said. "Nay bloodshed in the parlor."

She snorted. "Clot," she said, but without rancor. "I'll send Janet wi' your parritch." And she was gone, in a swirl of skirts and petticoats.

"Did she say Donas?" I asked, looking after her in bemusement. "Surely it isn't the same horse you took from Leoch!"

"Och, no." Jamie tilted his head back, smiling up at me. "This is Donas's grandson—or one of them. We give the name to the sorrel colts in his honor."

I leaned over the back of the sofa, gently feeling down the length of the injured arm from the shoulder.

"Sore?" I asked, seeing him wince as I pressed a few inches above the wound. It was better; the day before, the area of soreness had started higher.

"Not bad," he said. He removed the sling and tried gingerly extending the arm, grimacing. "I dinna think I'll turn handsprings awhile yet, though."

I laughed.

“No, I don’t suppose so.” I hesitated. “Jamie—this Hobart. You really don’t think—”

“I don’t,” he said firmly. “And if I did, I’d still want my breakfast first. I dinna mean to be killed on an empty stomach.”

I laughed again, somewhat reassured.

“I’ll go and get it for you,” I promised.

As I stepped out into the hall, though, I caught sight of a flutter through one of the windows, and stopped to look. It was Jenny, cloaked and hooded against the cold, headed up the slope to the barn. Seized by a sudden impulse, I snatched a cloak from the hall tree and darted out after her. I had things to say to Jenny Murray, and this might be the best chance of catching her alone.

* * *

I caught up with her just outside the barn; she heard my step behind her and turned, startled. She glanced about quickly, but saw we were alone. Realizing that there was no way of putting off a confrontation, she squared her shoulders under the woolen cloak and lifted her head, meeting my eyes straight on.

“I thought I’d best tell Young Ian to unsaddle the horse,” she said. “Then I’m going to the root cellar to fetch up some onions for a tart. Will ye come with me?”

“I will.” Pulling my cloak tight around me against the winter wind, I followed her into the barn.

It was warm inside, at least by contrast with the chill outdoors, dark, and filled with the pleasant scent of horses, hay, and manure. I paused a moment to let my eyes adapt to the dimness, but Jenny walked directly down the central aisle, footsteps light on the stone floor.

Young Ian was sprawled at length on a pile of fresh straw; he sat up, blinking at the sound.

Jenny glanced from her son to the stall, where a soft-eyed sorrel was peacefully munching hay from its manger, unburdened by saddle or bridle.

“Did I not tell ye to ready Donas?” she asked the boy, her voice sharp.

Young Ian scratched his head, looking a little sheepish, and stood up.

"Aye, mam, ye did," he said. "But I didna think it worth the time to saddle him, only to have to unsaddle him again."

Jenny stared up at him.

"Oh, aye?" she said. "And what made ye so certain he wouldna be needed?"

Young Ian shrugged, and smiled down at her.

"Mam, ye ken as well as I do that Uncle Jamie wouldna run away from anything, let alone Uncle Hobart. Don't ye?" he added, gently.

Jenny looked up at her son and sighed. Then a reluctant smile lighted her face and she reached up, smoothing the thick, untidy hair away from his face.

"Aye, wee Ian. I do." Her hand lingered along his ruddy cheek, then dropped away.

"Go along to the house, then, and have second breakfast wi' your uncle," she said. "Your auntie and I are goin' to the root cellar. But ye come and fetch me smartly, if Mr. Hobart MacKenzie should come, aye?"

"Right away, Mam," he promised, and shot for the house, impelled by the thought of food.

Jenny watched him go, moving with the clumsy grace of a young whooping crane, and shook her head, the smile still on her lips.

"Sweet laddie," she murmured. Then, recalled to the present circumstances, she turned to me with decision.

"Come along, then," she said. "I expect ye want to talk to me, aye?"

* * *

Neither of us said anything until we reached the quiet sanctuary of the root cellar. It was a small room dug under the house, pungent with the scent of the long braided strings of onions and garlic that hung from the rafters, the sweet, spicy scent of dried apples, and the moist, earthy smell of potatoes, spread in lumpy brown blankets over the shelves that lined the cellar.

"D'ye remember telling me to plant potatoes?" Jenny asked, passing a hand lightly over the clustered tubers. "That was a lucky thing; ’twas the potato crop kept us alive, more than one winter after Culloden.”

I remembered, all right. I had told her as we stood together on a cold autumn night, about to part—she to return to a newborn baby, I to hunt for Jamie, an outlaw in the Highlands, under sentence of death. I had found him, and saved him—and Lallybroch, evidently. And she had tried to give them both to Laoghaire.

“Why?” I said softly, at last. I spoke to the top of her head, bent over her task. Her hand went out with the regularity of clockwork, pulling an onion from the long hanging braid, breaking the tough, withered stems from the plait and tossing it into the basket she carried.

“Why did you do it?” I said. I broke off an onion from another braid, but instead of putting it in the basket, held it in my hands, rolling it back and forth like a baseball, hearing the papery skin rustle between my palms.

“Why did I do what?” Her voice was perfectly controlled again; only someone who knew her well could have heard the note of strain in it. I knew her well—or had, at one time.

“Why did I make the match between my brother and Laoghaire, d’ye mean?” She glanced up quickly, smooth black brows raised in question, but then bent back to the braid of onions. “You’re right; he wouldna have done it, without I made him.”

“So you did make him do it,” I said. The wind rattled the door of the root cellar, sending a small sifting of dirt down upon the cut-stone steps.

“He was lonely,” she said, softly. “So lonely. I couldna bear to see him so. He was wretched for so long, ye ken, mourning for you.”

“I thought he was dead,” I said quietly, answering the unspoken accusation.

“He might as well have been,” she said, sharply, then raised her head and sighed, pushing back a lock of dark hair.

“Aye, maybe ye truly didna ken he’d lived; there were a great many who didn’t, after Culloden—and it’s sure he thought *you* were dead and gone then. But he was sair wounded, and not only his leg. And when he came home from England—” She shook her head, and reached for another onion. “He was whole enough to look at, but not—” She gave me a look, straight on, with those slanted blue eyes, so disturbingly like her brother’s. “He’s no the sort of man should sleep alone, aye?”

“Granted,” I said shortly. “But we did live, the both of us. Why did you send for Laoghaire when we came back with Young Ian?”

Jenny didn’t answer at first, but only went on reaching for onions, breaking, reaching, breaking, reaching.

“I liked you,” she said at last, so low I could barely hear her. “Loved ye, maybe, when ye lived here with Jamie, before.”

“I liked you, too,” I said, just as softly. “Then why?”

Her hands stilled at last and she looked up at me, fists balled at her sides.

“When Ian told me ye’d come back,” she said slowly, eyes fastened on the onions, “ye could have knocked me flat wi’ a down-feather. At first, I was excited, wanting to see ye—wanting to know where ye’d been—” she added, arching her brows slightly in inquiry. I didn’t answer, and she went on.

“But then I was afraid,” she said softly. Her eyes slid away, shadowed by their thick fringe of black lashes.

“I saw ye, ye ken,” she said, still looking off into some unseeable distance. “When he wed Laoghaire, and them standing by the altar—ye were there wi’ them, standing at his left hand, betwixt him and Laoghaire. And I kent that meant ye would take him back.”

The hair prickled slightly on the nape of my neck. She shook her head slowly, and I saw she had gone pale with the memory. She sat down on a barrel, the cloak spreading out around her like a flower.

“I’m not one of those born wi’ the Sight, nor one who has it regular. I’ve never had it before, and hope never to have it again. But I saw ye there, as clear as I see ye now, and it scairt me so that I had to leave the room, right in the midst o’ the vows.” She swallowed, looking at me directly.

“I dinna ken who ye are,” she said softly. “Or … or … what. We didna ken your people, or your place. I never asked ye, did I? Jamie chose ye, that was enough. But then ye were gone, and after so long

—I thought he might have forgot ye enough to wed again, and be happy."

"He wasn't, though," I said, hoping for confirmation from Jenny.

She gave it, shaking her head.

"No," she said quietly. "But Jamie's a faithful man, aye? No matter how it was between the two of them, him and Laoghaire, if he'd sworn to be her man, he wouldna leave her altogether. It didna matter that he spent most of his time in Edinburgh; I kent he'd always come back here—he'd be bound here, to the Highlands. But then you came back."

Her hands lay still in her lap, a rare sight. They were still finely shaped, long-fingered and deft, but the knuckles were red and rough with years of work, and the veins stood out blue beneath the thin white skin.

"D'ye ken," she said, looking into her lap, "I have never been further than ten miles from Lallybroch, in all my life?"

"No," I said, slightly startled. She shook her head slowly, then looked up at me.

"You have, though," she said. "You've traveled a great deal, I expect." Her gaze searched my face, looking for clues.

"I have."

She nodded, as though thinking to herself.

"You'll go again," she said, nearly whispering. "I kent ye would go again. You're not bound here, not like Laoghaire—not like me. And he would go with ye. And I should never see him again." She closed her eyes briefly, then opened them, looking at me under her fine dark brows.

"That's why," she said. "I thought if ye kent about Laoghaire, ye'd go again at once—you did—" she added, with a faint grimace, "and Jamie would stay. But ye came back." Her shoulders rose in a faint, helpless shrug. "And I see it's no good; he's bound to ye, for good or ill. It's you that's his wife. And if ye leave again, he will go with ye."

I searched helplessly for words to reassure her. "But I won't. I won't go again. I only want to stay here with him—always."

I laid a hand on her arm and she stiffened slightly. After a moment, she laid her own hand over mine. It was chilled, and the tip of her long, straight nose was red with cold.

"Folk say different things of the Sight, aye?" she said after a moment.

"Some say it's doomed; whatever ye see that way must come to pass. But others say nay, it's no but a warning; take heed and ye can change things. What d'ye think, yourself?" She looked sideways at me, curiously.

I took a deep breath, the smell of onions stinging the back of my nose. This was hitting home in no uncertain terms.

"I don't know," I said, and my voice shook slightly. "I'd always thought that of course you could change things if you knew about them. But now … I don't know," I ended softly, thinking of Culloden.

Jenny watched me, her eyes so deep a blue as almost to be black in the dim light. I wondered again just how much Jamie had told her—and how much she knew without the telling.

"But ye must try, even so," she said, with certainty. "Ye couldna just leave it, could ye?"

I didn't know whether she meant this personally, but I shook my head.

"No," I said. "You couldn't. You're right; you have to try."

We smiled at each other, a little shyly.

"You'll take good care of him?" Jenny said suddenly. "Even if ye go? Ye will, aye?"

I squeezed her cold fingers, feeling the bones of her hand light and fragile-seeming in my grasp.

"I will," I said.

"Then that's all right," she said softly, and squeezed back.

We sat for a moment, holding each other's hands, until the door of the root cellar swung open, admitting a blast of rain and wind down the stairs.

"Mam?" Young Ian's head poked in, eyes bright with excitement. "Hobart MacKenzie's come! Da says to come quick!"

Jenny sprang to her feet, barely remembering to snatch up the basket of onions.

“Has he come armed, then?” she asked anxiously. “Has he brought a pistol or a sword?”

Ian shook his head, his dark hair lifting wildly in the wind.

“Oh, no, Mam!” he said. “It’s worse. He’s brought a lawyer!”

* * *

Anything less resembling vengeance incarnate than Hobart MacKenzie could scarcely be imagined. A small, light-boned man of about thirty, he had pale blue, pale-lashed eyes with a tendency to water, and indeterminate features that began with a receding hairline and dwindled down into a similarly receding chin that seemed to be trying to escape into the folds of his stock.

He was smoothing his hair at the mirror in the hall when we came in the front door, a neatly curled bob wig sitting on the table beside him. He blinked at us in alarm, then snatched up the wig and crammed it on his head, bowing in the same motion.

“Mrs. Jenny,” he said. His small, rabbity eyes flicked in my direction, away, then back again, as though he hoped I really wasn’t there, but was very much afraid I was.

Jenny glanced from him to me, sighed deeply, and took the bull by the horns.

“Mr. MacKenzie,” she said, dropping him a formal curtsy. “Might I present my good-sister, Claire? Claire, Mr. Hobart MacKenzie of Kinwallis.”

His mouth dropped open and he simply gawked at me. I started to extend a hand to him, but thought better of it. I would have liked to know what Emily Post had to recommend in a situation like this, but as Miss Post wasn’t present, I was forced to improvise.

“How nice to meet you,” I said, smiling as cordially as possible.

“Ah …” he said. He bobbed his head tentatively at me. “Um … your … servant, ma’am.”

Fortunately, at this point in the proceedings, the door to the parlor opened. I looked at the small, neat figure framed in the doorway, and let out a cry of delighted recognition.

“Ned! Ned Gowan!”

It was indeed Ned Gowan, the elderly Edinburgh lawyer who had once saved me from burning as a witch. He was noticeably more elderly now, shrunken with age and so heavily wrinkled as to look like one of the dried apples I had seen in the root cellar.

The bright black eyes were the same, though, and they fastened on me at once with an expression of joy.

"My dear!" he exclaimed, hastening forward at a rapid hobble. He seized my hand, beaming, and pressed it to his withered lips in fervent gallantry.

"I had heard that you—"

"How did you come to be—"

"—so delightful to see you!"

"—so happy to see you again, but—"

A cough from Hobart MacKenzie interrupted this rapturous exchange, and Mr. Gowan looked up, startled, then nodded.

"Oh, aye, of course. Business first, my dear," he said, with a gallant bow to me, "and then if ye will, I should be most charmed to hear the tale of your adventures."

"Ah … I'll do my best," I said, wondering just how much he would insist on hearing.

"Splendid, splendid." He glanced about the hall, bright little eyes taking in Hobart and Jenny, who had hung up her cloak and was smoothing her hair. "Mr. Fraser and Mr. Murray are already in the parlor. Mr. MacKenzie, if you and the ladies would consent to join us, perhaps we can settle your affairs expeditiously, and proceed to more congenial matters. If you will allow me, my dear?" He crooked a bony arm to me invitingly.

* * *

Jamie was still on the sofa where I had left him, and in approximately the same condition—that is, alive. The children were gone, with the exception of one chubby youngster who was curled up on Jamie's lap, fast asleep. Jamie's hair now sported several small plaits on either side, with silk ribbons woven gaily through them, which gave him an incongruously festive air.

"You look like the Cowardly Lion of Oz," I told him in an undertone, sitting down on a hassock behind his sofa. I didn't think it likely that Hobart MacKenzie intended any outright mischief, but if anything happened, I meant to be in close reach of Jamie.

He looked startled, and put a hand to his head.

"I do?"

"Shh," I said, "I'll tell you later."

The other participants had now arranged themselves around the parlor, Jenny sitting down by Ian on the other love seat, and Hobart and Mr. Gowan taking two velvet chairs.

"We are assembled?" Mr. Gowan inquired, glancing around the room. "All interested parties are present? Excellent. Well, to begin with, I must declare my own interest. I am here in the capacity of solicitor to Mr. Hobart MacKenzie, representing the interests of Mrs. James Fraser"—he saw me start, and added, with precision—"that is, the *second* Mrs. James Fraser, née Laoghaire MacKenzie. That is understood?"

He glanced inquiringly at Jamie, who nodded.

"It is."

"Good." Mr. Gowan picked up a glass from the table next to him and took a tiny sip. "My clients, the MacKenzies, have accepted my proposal to seek a legal solution to the imbroglio which I understand has resulted from the sudden and unexpected—though of course altogether happy and fortuitous—" he added, with a bow to me, "return of the first Mrs. Fraser."

He shook his head reprovingly at Jamie.

"You, my dear young man, have contrived to entangle yourself in considerable legal difficulties, I am sorry to say."

Jamie raised one eyebrow and looked at his sister.

"Aye, well, I had help," he said dryly. "Just what difficulties are we speakin' of?"

"Well, to begin with," Ned Gowan said cheerily, his sparkling black eyes sinking into nets of wrinkles as he smiled at me, "the first Mrs. Fraser would be well within her rights to bring a civil suit against ye for adultery, and criminal fornication, forbye. Penalties for which include—"

Jamie glanced back at me, with a quick blue gleam.

"I think I'm no so worrit by that possibility," he told the lawyer. "What else?"

Ned Gowan nodded obligingly and held up one withered hand, folding down the fingers as he ticked off his points.

"With respect to the second Mrs. Fraser—née Laoghaire MacKenzie—ye could, of course, be charged wi' bigamous misconduct, intent to defraud, actual fraud committed—whether wi' intent or no, which is a separate question—felonious misrepresentation"—he happily folded down his fourth finger and drew breath for more—"and …"

Jamie had been listening patiently to this catalogue. Now he interrupted, leaning forward.

"Ned," he said gently, "what the hell does the bloody woman want?"

The small lawyer blinked behind his spectacles, lowered his hand, and cast up his eyes to the beams overhead.

"Weel, the lady's chief desire as stated," he said circumspectly, "is to see ye castrated and disemboweled in the market square at Broch Mordha, and your head mounted on a stake over her gate."

Jamie's shoulders vibrated briefly, and he winced as the movement jarred his arm.

"I see," he said, his mouth twitching.

A smile gathered up the wrinkles by Ned's ancient mouth.

"I was obliged to inform Mrs.—that is, the lady—" he amended, with a glance at me and a slight cough, "that her remedies under the law were somewhat more limited than would accommodate her desires."

"Quite," Jamie said dryly. "But I assume the general idea is that she doesna particularly want me back as a husband?"

"No," Hobart put in unexpectedly. "Crow's bait, maybe, but not a husband."

Ned cast a cold glance at his client.

"Ye willna compromise your case by admitting things in advance of settlement, aye?" he said reprovingly. "Or what are ye payin' me for?" He turned back to Jamie, professional dignity unimpaired.

"While Miss MacKenzie does not wish to resume a marital position wi' regard to you—an action which would be impossible in any case," he added fairly, "unless ye should wish to divorce the present Mrs. Fraser, and remarry—"

"No, I dinna want to do that," Jamie assured him hurriedly, with another glance at me.

"Well, in such case," Ned went on, unruffled, "I should advise my clients that it is more desirable where possible to avoid the cost—and the publicity—" he added, cocking an invisible eyebrow in admonition to Hobart, who nodded hastily, "of a suit at law, with a public trial and its consequent exposure of facts. That being the case—"

"How much?" Jamie interrupted.

"Mr. Fraser!" Ned Gowan looked shocked. "I havena mentioned anything in the nature of a pecuniary settlement as yet—"

"Only because ye're too busy enjoying yourself, ye wicked auld rascal," Jamie said. He was irritated—a red patch burned over each cheekbone—but amused, too. "Get to it, aye?"

Ned Gowan inclined his head ceremoniously.

"Weel, ye must understand," he began, "that a successful suit brought under the charges as described might result in Miss MacKenzie and her brother mulcting ye in substantial damages—verra substantial indeed," he added, with a faint lawyerly gloating at the prospect.

"After all, Miss MacKenzie has not only been subject to public humiliation and ridicule leading to acute distress of mind, but is also threatened with loss of her chief means of support—"

"She isna threatened wi' any such thing," Jamie interrupted heatedly. "I told her I should go on supporting her and the two lassies! What does she think I am?"

Ned exchanged a glance with Hobart, who shook his head.

"Ye dinna want to know what she thinks ye are," Hobart assured Jamie. "I wouldna have thought she kent such words, myself. But ye do mean to pay?"

Jamie nodded impatiently, rubbing his good hand through his hair.

"Aye, I will."

"Only until she's marrit again, though." Everyone's head turned in surprise toward Jenny, who nodded firmly to Ned Gowan.

"If Jamie's married to Claire, the marriage between him and Laoghaire wasna valid, aye?"

The lawyer bowed.

"That is true, Mrs. Murray."

"Well, then," Jenny said, in a decided manner. "She's free to marry again at once, is she no? And once she does, my brother shouldna be providing for her household."

"An excellent point, Mrs. Murray." Ned Gowan took up his quill and scratched industriously. "Well, we make progress," he declared, laying it down again and beaming at the company. "Now, the next point to be covered …"

An hour later, the decanter of whisky was empty, the sheets of foolscap on the table were filled with Ned Gowan's chicken-scratchings, and everyone lay limp and exhausted—except Ned himself, spry and bright-eyed as ever.

"Excellent, excellent," he declared again, gathering up the sheets and tapping them neatly into order. "So—the main provisions of the settlement are as follows: Mr. Fraser agrees to pay to Miss MacKenzie the sum of five hundred pounds in compensation for distress, inconvenience, and the loss of his conjugal services"—Jamie snorted slightly at this, but Ned affected not to hear him, continuing his synopsis—"and in addition, agrees to maintain her household at the rate of one hundred pounds per annum, until such time as the aforesaid Miss MacKenzie may marry again, at which time such payment shall cease. Mr. Fraser agrees also to provide a bride-portion for each of Miss MacKenzie's daughters, of an additional three hundred pounds, and as a final provision, agrees not to pursue a prosecution against Miss MacKenzie for assault with intent to commit murder. In return, Miss MacKenzie acquits Mr. Fraser of any and all other claims. This is in accordance with your understanding and consent, Mr. Fraser?" He quirked a brow at Jamie.

"Aye, it is," Jamie said. He was pale from sitting up too long, and there was a fine dew of sweat at his hairline, but he sat straight and tall, the child still asleep in his lap, thumb firmly embedded in her mouth.

"Excellent," Ned said again. He rose, beaming, and bowed to the company. "As our friend Dr. John Arbuthnot says, 'Law is a bottomless pit.' But not more so at the moment than my stomach. Is that delectable aroma indicative of a saddle of mutton in our vicinity, Mrs. Jenny?"

At table, I sat to one side of Jamie, Hobart MacKenzie to the other, now looking pink and relaxed. Mary MacNab brought in the joint, and by ancient custom, set it down in front of Jamie. Her gaze lingered on him a moment too long. He picked up the long, wicked carving knife with his good hand and offered it politely to Hobart.

"Will ye have a go at it, Hobart?" he said.

"Och, no," Hobart said, waving it away. "Better let your wife carve it. I'm no hand wi' a knife—likely cut my finger off instead. You know me, Jamie," he said comfortably.

Jamie gave his erstwhile brother-in-law a long look over the saltcellar.

"Once I would ha' thought, so, Hobart," he said. "Pass me the whisky, aye?"

"The thing to do is to get her married at once," Jenny declared. The children and grandchildren had all retired, and Ned and Hobart had departed for Kinwallis, leaving the four of us to take stock over brandy and cream cakes in the laird's study.

Jamie turned to his sister. "The matchmaking's more in your line, aye?" he said, with a noticeable edge to his voice. "I expect you can think of a suitable man or two for the job, if ye put your mind to it?"

"I expect I can," she said, matching his edge with one of her own. She was embroidering; the needle stabbed through the linen fabric, flashing in the lamplight. It had begun to sleet heavily outside, but the study was cozy, with a small fire on the hearth and the pool of lamplight spilling warmth over the battered desk and its burden of books and ledgers.

"There's the one thing about it," she said, eyes on her work. "Where d'ye mean to get twelve hundred pounds, Jamie?"

I had been wondering that myself. The insurance settlement on the printshop had fallen far short of that amount, and I doubted that Jamie's share of the smuggling proceeds amounted to anything near that magnitude. Certainly Lallybroch itself could not supply the money; survival in the Highlands was a chancy business, and even several good years in a row would provide only the barest surplus.

"Well, there's only the one place, isn't there?" Ian looked from his sister to his brother-in-law and back. After a short silence, Jamie nodded.

"I suppose so," he said reluctantly. He glanced at the window, where the rain was slashing across the glass in slanting streaks. "A vicious time of year for it, though."

Ian shrugged, and sat forward a bit in his chair. "The spring tide will be in a week."

Jamie frowned, looking troubled.

"Aye, that's so, but …"

"There's no one has a better right to it, Jamie," Ian said. He reached out and squeezed his friend's good arm, smiling. "It was meant for Prince Charles' followers, aye? And ye were one of those, whether ye wanted to be or no."

Jamie gave him back a rueful half-smile.

"Aye, I suppose that's true." He sighed. "In any case, it's the only thing I can see to do." He glanced back and forth between Ian and Jenny, evidently debating whether to add something else. His sister knew him even better than I did. She lifted her head from her work and looked at him sharply.

"What is it, Jamie?" she said.

He took a deep breath.

"I want to take Young Ian," he said.

"No," she said instantly. The needle had stopped, stuck halfway through a brilliant red bud in the pattern, the color of blood against the white smock.

"He's old enough, Jenny," Jamie said quietly.

"He's not!" she objected. "He's but barely fifteen; Michael and Jamie were both sixteen at least, and better grown."

"Aye, but wee Ian's a better swimmer than either of his brothers," Ian said judiciously. His forehead was furrowed with thought. "It will have to be one of the lads, after all," he pointed out to Jenny. He jerked his head toward Jamie, cradling his arm in its sling. "Jamie canna very well be swimming himself, in his present condition. Or Claire, for that matter," he added, with a smile at me.

"Swim?" I said, utterly bewildered. "Swim *where?*"

Ian looked taken aback for a moment; then he glanced at Jamie, brows lifted.

"Oh. Ye hadna told her?"

Jamie shook his head. "I had, but not all of it." He turned to me. "It's the treasure, Sassenach—the seals' gold."

Unable to take the treasure with him, he had concealed it in its place and returned to Ardsmuir.

"I didna ken what best to do about it," he explained. "Duncan Kerr gave the care of it to me, but I had no notion who it belonged to, or who put it there, or what I was to do with it. 'The white witch' was all Duncan said, and that meant nothing to me but you, Sassenach."

Reluctant to make use of the treasure himself, and yet feeling that someone should know about it, lest he die in prison, he had sent a carefully coded letter to Jenny and Ian at Lallybroch, giving the location of the cache, and the use for which it had—presumably—been meant.

Times had been hard for Jacobites then, sometimes even more so for those who had escaped to France—leaving lands and fortunes behind—than for those who remained to face English persecution in the Highlands. At about the same time, Lallybroch had experienced two bad crops in a row, and letters had reached them from France, asking for any help possible to succor erstwhile companions there, in danger of starvation.

"We had nothing to send; in fact, we were damn close to starving here," Ian explained. "I sent word to Jamie, and he said as he thought perhaps it wouldna be wrong to use a small bit of the treasure to help feed Prince *Tearlach*'s followers."

"It seemed likely it was put there by one of the Stuarts' supporters," Jamie chimed in. He cocked a ruddy brow at me, and his mouth quirked up at one corner. "I thought I wouldna send it to Prince Charles, though."

"Good thinking," I said dryly. Any money given to Charles Stuart would have been wasted, squandered within weeks, and anyone who had known Charles intimately, as Jamie had, would know that very well.

Ian had taken his eldest son, Jamie, and made his way across Scotland to the seals' cove near Coigach. Fearful of any word of the treasure getting out, they had not sought a fisherman's boat, but instead Young Jamie had swum to the seals' rock as his uncle had several years before. He had found the treasure in its place, abstracted two gold coins and three of the smaller gemstones, and secreting these in a bag tied securely round his neck, had replaced the rest of the treasure and made his way back through the surf, arriving exhausted.

They had made their way to Inverness then, and taken ship to France, where their cousin Jared Fraser, a successful expatriate wine merchant, had helped them to change the coins and jewels discreetly into cash, and taken the responsibility of distributing it among the Jacobites in need.

Three times since, Ian had made the laborious trip to the coast with one of his sons, each time to abstract a small part of the hidden fortune to supply a need. Twice the money had gone to friends in need in France; once it had been needed to purchase fresh planting-stock for Lallybroch and provide the food to see its tenants through a long winter when the potato crop failed.

Only Jenny, Ian, and the two elder boys, Jamie and Michael, knew of the treasure. Ian's wooden leg prevented his swimming to the seals' island, so one of his sons must always make the trip with him. I gathered that it had been something of a rite of passage for both Young Jamie and Michael, entrusted with such a great secret. Now it might be Young Ian's turn.

"No," Jenny said again, but I thought her heart wasn't in it. Ian was already nodding thoughtfully.

"Would ye take him with ye to France, too, Jamie?"

Jamie nodded.

"Aye, that's the thing. I shall have to leave Lallybroch, and stay away for a good bit, for Laoghaire's sake—I canna be living here with you, under her nose," he said apologetically to me, "at least not until she's suitably wed to someone else." He switched his attention back to Ian.

"I havena told ye everything that's happened in Edinburgh, Ian, but all things considered, I think it likely best I stay away from there for a time, too."

I sat quiet, trying to digest this news. I hadn't realized that Jamie meant to leave Lallybroch—leave Scotland altogether, it sounded like.

"So what d'ye mean to do, Jamie?" Jenny had given up any pretense of sewing, and sat with her hands in her lap.

He rubbed his nose, looking tired. This was the first day he had been up; I privately thought he should have been back in bed hours ago, but he had insisted upon staying up to preside over dinner and visit with everyone.

"Well," he said slowly, "Jared's offered more than once to take me into his firm. Perhaps I shall stay in France, at least for a year. I was thinking Young Ian could go with us, and be schooled in Paris."

Jenny and Ian exchanged a long look, one of those in which long-married couples are capable of carrying out complete conversations in the space of a few heartbeats. At last, Jenny tilted her head a bit to one side. Ian smiled and took her hand.

"It'll be all right, *mo nighean dubh*," he said to her in a low, tender voice. Then he turned to Jamie.

"Aye, take him. It'll be a great chance for the lad."

"You're sure?" Jamie hesitated, speaking to his sister, rather than Ian. Jenny nodded. Her blue eyes glistened in the lamplight, and the end of her nose was slightly red.

"I suppose it's best we give him his freedom while he still thinks it's ours to give," she said. She looked at Jamie, then at me, straight and steady. “But you’ll take good care of him, aye?”

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LOST, AND BY THE WIND GRIEVED

This part of Scotland was as unlike the leafy glens and lochs near Lallybroch as the North Yorkshire moors. Here there were virtually no trees; only long sweeps of rock-strewn heather, rising into crags that touched the lowering sky and disappeared abruptly into curtains of mist.

As we got nearer to the seacoast, the mist became heavier, setting in earlier in the afternoon, lingering longer in the morning, so that only for a couple of hours in the middle of the day did we have anything like clear riding. The going was consequently slow, but none of us minded greatly, except Young Ian, who was beside himself with excitement, impatient to arrive.

"How far is it from the shore to the seals' island?" he asked Jamie for the tenth time.

"A quarter mile, I make it," his uncle replied.

"I can swim that far," Young Ian repeated, for the tenth time. His hands were clenched tightly on the reins, and his bony jaw set with determination.

"Aye, I know ye can," Jamie assured him patiently. He glanced at me, the hint of a smile hidden in the corner of his mouth. "Ye willna need to, though; just swim straight for the island, and the current will carry ye."

The boy nodded, and lapsed into silence, but his eyes were bright with anticipation.

The headland above the cove was mist-shrouded and deserted. Our voices echoed oddly in the fog, and we soon stopped talking, out of an abiding sense of eeriness. I could hear the seals barking far below, the sound wavering and mixing with the crash of the surf, so that now and then it sounded like sailors hallooing to one another over the sound of the sea.

Jamie pointed out the rock chimney of Ellen's tower to Young Ian, and taking a coil of rope from his saddle, picked his way over the broken rock of the headland to the entrance.

"Keep your shirt on 'til you're down," he told the lad, shouting to be heard above the wave. "Else the rock will tear your back to shreds."

Ian nodded understanding, then, the rope tied securely round his middle, gave me a nervous grin, took two jerky steps, and disappeared into the earth.

Jamie had the other end of the rope wrapped round his own waist, paying out the length of it carefully with his sound hand as the boy descended. Crawling on hands and knees, I made my way over the short turf and pebbles to the crumbling edge of the cliff, where I could look over to the half-moon beach below.

It seemed a very long time, but finally I saw Ian emerge from the bottom of the chimney, a small, antlike figure. He untied his rope, peered around, spotted us at the top of the cliff, and waved enthusiastically. I waved back, but Jamie merely muttered, "All right, get on, then," under his breath.

I could feel him tense beside me as the boy stripped off to his breeks and scrambled down the rocks to the water, and I felt his flinch as the small figure dived headlong into the gray-blue waves.

"Brrr!" I said, watching. "The water must be freezing!"

"It is," Jamie said with feeling. "Ian's right; it's a vicious time of year to be swimming."

His face was pale and set. I didn't think it was the result of discomfort from his wounded arm, though the long ride and the exercise with the rope couldn't have done it any good. While he had shown nothing but encouraging confidence while Ian was making his descent, he wasn't making any effort to hide his worry now. The fact was that there was no way for us to reach Ian, should anything go wrong.

"Maybe we should have waited for the mist to lift," I said, more to distract him than because I thought so.

"If we had 'til next Easter, we might," he agreed ironically. "Though I'll grant ye, I've seen it clearer than this," he added, squinting into the swirling murk below.

The three islands were only intermittently visible from the cliff as the fog swept across them. I had been able to see the bobbing dot of Ian's head for the first twenty yards as he left the shore, but now he had disappeared into the mist.

"Do you think he's all right?" Jamie bent to help me scramble upright. The cloth of his coat was damp and rough under my fingers, soaked with mist and the fine droplets of ocean spray.

"Aye, he'll do. He's a bonny swimmer; and it's none so difficult a swim, either, once he's into the current." Still, he stared into the mist as though sheer effort could pierce its veils.

On Jamie's advice, Young Ian had timed his descent to begin when the tide began to go out, so as to have as much assistance as possible from the tide-race. Looking over the edge, I could see a floating mass of bladder wrack, half-stranded on the widening strip of beach.

"Perhaps two hours before he comes back." Jamie answered my unspoken question. He turned reluctantly from his vain perusal of the mist-hidden cove. "Damn, I wish I'd gone myself, arm or no arm."

"Both Young Jamie and Michael have done it," I reminded him. He gave me a rueful smile.

"Oh, aye. Ian will do fine. It's only that it's a good deal easier to do something that's a bit dangerous than it is to wait and worry while someone else does it."

"Ha," I told him. "So now you know what's it like being married to *you*."

He laughed.

"Oh, aye, I suppose so. Besides, it would be a shame to cheat Young Ian of his adventure. Come on, then, let's get out of the wind."

We moved inland a bit, away from the crumbling edge of the cliff, and sat down to wait, using the horses' bodies as shelter. Rough, shaggy Highland ponies, they appeared unmoved by the unpleasant weather, merely standing together, heads down, tails turned against the wind.

The wind was too high for easy conversation. We sat quietly, leaning together like the horses, with our backs to the windy shore.

"What's that?" Jamie raised his head, listening.

"What?"

"I thought I heard shouting."

"I expect it's the seals," I said, but before the words were out of my mouth, he was up and striding toward the cliff's edge.

The cove was still full of curling mist, but the wind had uncovered the seals' island, and it was clearly visible, at least for the moment. There were no seals on it now, though.

A small boat was drawn up on a sloping rock shelf at one side of the island. Not a fisherman's boat; this one was longer and more pointed at the prow, with one set of oars.

As I stared, a man appeared from the center of the island. He carried something under one arm, the size and shape of the box Jamie had described. I didn't have long to speculate as to the nature of this object, though, for just then a second man came up the far slope of the island and into sight.

This one was carrying Young Ian. He had the boy's half-naked body slung carelessly over one shoulder. It swung head down, arms dangling with a limpness that made it clear the boy was unconscious or dead.

"Ian!" Jamie's hand clamped over my mouth before I could shout again.

"Hush!" He dragged me to my knees to keep me out of sight. We watched, helpless, as the second man heaved Ian carelessly into the boat, then took hold of the gunwales to run it back into the water. There wasn't a chance of making the descent down the chimney and the swim to the island before they succeeded in making their escape. But escape to where?

"Where did they come from?" I gasped. Nothing else stirred in the cove below, save the mist and the shifting kelp-beds, turning in the tide.

"A ship. It's a ship's boat." Jamie added something low and heartfelt in Gaelic, and then was gone. I turned to see him fling himself on one of the horses and wrench its head around. Then he was off, riding hell-for-leather across the headland, away from the cove.

Rough as the footing across the headland was, the horses were shod for it better than I was. I hastily mounted and followed Jamie, a high-pitched whinny of protest from Ian's hobbled mount ringing in my ears.

It was less than a quarter of a mile to the ocean side of the headland, but it seemed to take forever to reach it. I saw Jamie ahead of me, his hair flying loose in the wind, and beyond him, the ship, lying to offshore.

The ground broke away in a tumble of rock that fell down to the ocean, not so steep as the cliffs of the cove, but much too rough to take a horse down. By the time I had reined up, Jamie was off his horse, and picking his way down the rubble toward the water.

To the left, I could see the longboat from the island, pulling round the curve of the headland. Someone on the ship must have been looking out for them, for I heard a faint hail from the direction of the ship, and saw small figures suddenly appear in the rigging.

One of these must also have seen us, for there was a sudden agitation aboard, with heads popping up above the rail and more yelling. The ship was blue, with a broad black band painted all around it. There was a line of gunports set in this band, and as I watched, the forward one opened, and the round black eye of the gun peeked out.

"Jamie!" I shrieked, as loudly as I could. He looked up from the rocks at his feet, saw where I was pointing, and hurled himself flat in the rubble as the gun went off.

The report wasn't terribly loud, but there was a sort of whistling noise past my head that made me duck instinctively. Several of the rocks around me exploded in puffs of flying rock chips, and it occurred to me, rather belatedly, that the horses and I were a great deal more visible there at the top of the headland than Jamie was on the cliff below.

The horses, having grasped this essential fact long before I did, were on their way back to where we had left their hobbled fellow well before the dust had settled. I flung myself bodily over the edge of the headland, slid several feet in a shower of gravel, and wedged myself into a deep crevice in the cliff.

There was another explosion somewhere above my head, and I pressed myself even closer into the rock. Evidently the people on board the ship were satisfied with the effect of their last shot, for relative silence now descended.

My heart was hammering against my ribs, and the air around my face was full of a fine gray dust that gave me an irresistible urge to cough. I risked a look over my shoulder, and was in time to see the longboat being hoisted aboard ship. Of Ian and his two captors, there was no sign.

The gunport closed silently as I watched, and the rope that held the anchor slithered up, streaming water. The ship turned slowly, seeking wind. The air was light and the sails barely puffed, but even that was enough. Slowly, then faster, she was moving toward the open sea. By the time Jamie had reached my roosting place, the ship had all but vanished in the thick cloudbank that obscured the horizon.

"Jesus" was all he said when he reached me, but he clutched me hard for a moment. "Jesus."

He let go then, and turned to look out over the sea. Nothing moved save a few tendrils of slow-floating mist. The whole world seemed stricken with silence; even the occasional cries of the murres and shearwaters had been cut off by the cannon's boom.

The gray rock near my foot showed a fresh patch of lighter gray, where shot had struck off a wide flake of stone. It was no more than three feet above the crevice where I had taken refuge.

"What shall we do?" I felt numbed, both by the shock of the afternoon, and by the sheer enormity of what had happened. Impossible to believe that in less than an hour, Ian had disappeared from us as completely as though he had been wiped off the face of the earth. The fogbank loomed thick and impenetrable, a little way off the coast before us, a barrier as impassible as the curtain between earth and the underworld.

My mind kept replaying images: the mist, drifting over the outlines of the silkies' island, the sudden appearance of the boat, the men coming over the rocks, Ian's lanky, teenaged body, white-skinned as the mist, skinny limbs dangling like a disjointed doll's. I had seen everything with that clarity that attends tragedy; every detail fixed in my mind's eye, to be shown again and again, always with that half-conscious feeling that this time, I should be able to alter it.

Jamie's face was set in rigid lines, the furrows cut deep from nose to mouth.

"I don't know," he said. "Damn me to hell, I don't *know* what to do!" His hands flexed suddenly into fists at his sides. He shut his eyes, breathing heavily.

I felt even more frightened at this admission. In the brief time I had been back with him, I had grown once more accustomed to having Jamie always know what to do, even in the direst circumstances. This confession seemed more upsetting than anything that had yet happened.

A sense of helplessness swirled round me like the mist. Every nerve cried out to do *something*. But what?

I saw the streak of blood on his cuff, then; he had gashed his hand, climbing down the rocks. That, I could help, and I felt a sense of thankfulness that there was, after all, one thing I could do, however small.

"You've cut yourself," I said. I touched his injured hand. "Let me see; I'll wrap it for you."

"No," he said. He turned away, face strained, still looking desperately out into the fog. When I reached for him again, he jerked away.

"No, I said! Leave it be!"

I swallowed hard and wrapped my arms about myself under my cloak. There was little wind now, even on the headland, but it was cold and clammy nonetheless.

He rubbed his hand carelessly against the front of his coat, leaving a rusty smear. He was still staring out to sea, toward the spot where the ship had vanished. He closed his eyes, and pressed his lips tight together. Then he opened them, made a small gesture of apology toward me, and turned toward the headland.

"I suppose we must catch the horses," he said quietly. "Come on."

We walked back across the thick, short turf and strewn rocks without speaking, silent with shock and grief. I could see the horses, small stick-legged figures in the distance, clustered together with their hobbled companion. It seemed to have taken hours to run from the headland to the outer shore; going back seemed much longer.

"I don't think he was dead," I said, after what seemed like a year. I laid a hand tentatively on Jamie's arm, meaning to be comforting, but he wouldn't have noticed if I had struck him with a blackjack. He walked on slowly, head down.

"No," he said, and I saw him swallow hard. "No, he wasn't dead, or they'd not have taken him."

"*Did* they take him aboard the ship?" I pressed. "Did you see them?" I thought it might be better for him if he would talk.

He nodded. "Aye, they passed him aboard; I saw it clear. I suppose that's some hope," he muttered, as though to himself. "If they didna knock him on the head at once, maybe they won't." Suddenly remembering that I was there, he turned and looked at me, eyes searching my face.

"You're all right, Sassenach?"

I was scraped raw in several places, covered with filth, and shaky-kneed with fright, but basically sound.

"I'm fine." I put my hand on his arm again. This time he let it stay.

"That's good," he said softly, after a moment. He tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow, and we went on.

"Have you any idea who they were?" I had to raise my voice slightly to be heard above the wash of the surf behind us, but I wanted to keep him talking if I could.

He shook his head, frowning. The effort of talking seemed to be bringing him slowly out of his own shock.

"I heard one of the sailors shout to the men in the boat, and he spoke in French. But that proves nothing—sailors come from everywhere. Still, I have seen enough of ships at the docks to think that this one didna have quite the look of a merchant—nor the look of an English ship at all," he added, "though I couldna say why, exactly. The way the sails were rigged, maybe."

"It was blue, with a black line painted round it," I said. "That was all I had time to see, before the guns started firing."

Was it possible to trace a ship? The germ of the idea gave me hope; perhaps the situation was not so hopeless as I had first thought. If Ian was not dead, and we could find out where the ship was going …

"Did you see a name on it?" I asked.

"A name?" He looked faintly surprised at the notion. "What, *on* the ship?"

"Do ships not usually have their names painted on the sides?" I asked.

"No, what for?" He sounded honestly puzzled.

"So you could bloody tell who they are!" I said, exasperated. Taken by surprise by my tone, he actually smiled a little.

"Aye, well, I should expect that perhaps they dinna much want anyone telling who they are, given their business," he said dryly.

We paced on together for a few moments, thinking. Then I said curiously, "Well, but how do legitimate ships tell who each other is, if they haven't got names painted on?"

He glanced at me, one eyebrow raised.

"I should know you from another woman," he pointed out, "and ye havena got your name stitched upon your bosom."

"Not so much as a letter 'A,' " I said, flippantly, but seeing his blank look, added, "You mean ships look different enough—and there are few enough of them—that you can tell one from another just by looking?"

"Not me," he said honestly. "I know a few; ships where I ken the captain, and have been aboard to do business, or a few like the packet boats, that go back and forth so often that I've seen them in port dozens of times. But a sailing man would ken a great deal more."

"Then it *might* be possible to find out what the ship that took Ian is called?"

He nodded, looking at me curiously. "Aye, I think so. I have been trying to call to mind everything about it as we walked, so as to tell Jared. He'll know a great many ships, and a great many more captains—and perhaps one of them will know a blue ship, wide in the beam, with three masts, twelve guns, and a scowling figurehead."

My heart bounded upward. "So you *do* have a plan!"

"I wouldna call it so much a plan," he said. "It's only I canna think of anything else to do." He shrugged, and wiped a hand over his face. Tiny droplets of moisture were condensing on us as we walked, glistening in the ruddy hairs of his eyebrows and coating his cheeks with a wetness like tears. He sighed.

"The passage is arranged from Inverness. The best I can see to do is to go; Jared will be expecting us in Le Havre. When we see him, perhaps he can help us to find out what the blue ship is called, and maybe where it's bound. Aye," he said dryly, anticipating my question, "ships have home ports, and if they dinna belong to the navy, they have runs they commonly make, and papers for the harbormaster, too, showing where they're bound."

I began to feel better than I had since Ian had descended Ellen's tower.

"If they're not pirates or privateers, that is," he added, with a warning look which put an immediate damper on my rising spirits.

"And if they are?"

"Then God knows, but I don't," he said briefly, and would not say any more until we reached the horses.

They were grazing on the headland near the tower where we had left Ian's mount, behaving as though nothing had happened, pretending to find the tough sea grass delicious.

"Tcha!" Jamie viewed them disapprovingly. "Silly beasts." He grabbed the coil of rope and wrapped it twice round a projecting stone. Handing me the end, with a terse instruction to hold it, he dropped the free end down the chimney, shed his coat and shoes, and disappeared down the rope himself without further remark.

Sometime later, he came back up, sweating profusely, with a small bundle tucked under his arm. Young Ian's shirt, coat, shoes and stockings, with his knife and the small leather pouch in which the lad kept such valuables as he had.

"Do you mean to take them home to Jenny?" I asked. I tried to imagine what Jenny might think, say, or do at the news, and succeeded all too well. I felt a little sick, knowing that the hollow, aching sense of loss I felt was as nothing to what hers would be.

Jamie's face was flushed from the climb, but at my words, the blood drained from his cheeks. His hands tightened on the bundle.

"Oh, aye," he said, very softly, with great bitterness. "Aye, I shall go home and tell my sister that I have lost her youngest son? She didna want him to come wi' me, but I insisted. I'll take care of him, I said. And now he is hurt and maybe dead—but here are his clothes, to remember him by?" His jaw clenched, and he swallowed convulsively.

"I'd rather be dead myself," he said.

He knelt on the ground then, shaking out the articles of clothing, folding them carefully, and laying them together in a pile. He folded the coat carefully around the other things, stood up, and stuffed the bundle into his saddlebag.

"Ian will be needing them, I expect, when we find him," I said, trying to sound convinced.

Jamie looked at me, but after a moment, he nodded.

"Aye," he said softly. "I expect he will."

It was too late in the day to begin the ride to Inverness. The sun was setting, announcing the fact with a dull reddish glow that barely penetrated the gathering mist. Without speaking, we began to make camp. There was cold food in the saddlebags, but neither of us had the heart to eat. Instead, we rolled ourselves up in cloaks and blankets and lay down to sleep, cradled in small hollows that Jamie had scooped in the earth.

I couldn't sleep. The ground was hard and stony beneath my hips and shoulders, and the thunder of the surf below would have been sufficient to keep me awake, even had my mind not been filled with thoughts of Ian.

Was he badly hurt? The limpness of his body had bespoken some damage, but I had seen no blood. Presumably, he had merely been hit on the head. If so, what would he feel when he woke, to find himself abducted, and being carried farther from home and family with each passing minute?

And how were we ever to find him? When Jamie had first mentioned Jared, I had felt hopeful, but the more I thought of it, the slimmer seemed the prospects of actually finding a single ship, which might now be sailing in any direction at all, to anyplace in the world. And would his captors bother to keep Ian, or would they, on second thoughts, conclude that he was a dangerous nuisance, and pitch him overboard?

I didn't think I slept, but I must have dozed, my dreams full of trouble. I woke shivering with cold, and edged out a hand, reaching for Jamie. He wasn't there. When I sat up, I found that he had spread his blanket over me while I dozed, but it was a poor substitute for the heat of his body.

He was sitting some distance away, with his back to me. The offshore wind had risen with the setting of the sun, and blown some of the mist away; a half-moon shed enough light through the clouds to show me his hunched figure clearly.

I got up and walked over to him, folding my cloak tight about me against the chill. My steps made a light crunching sound on the crumbled granite, but the sound was drowned in the sighing rumble of the sea below. Still, he must have heard me; he didn't turn around, but gave no sign of surprise when I sank down beside him.

He sat with his chin in his hands, his elbows on his knees, eyes wide and sightless as he gazed out into the dark water of the cove. If the seals were awake, they were quiet tonight.

"Are you all right?" I said quietly. "It's beastly cold." He was wearing nothing but his coat, and in the small, chilled hours of the night, in the wet, cold air above the sea, that was far from enough. I could feel the tiny, constant shiver that ran through him when I set my hand on his arm.

"Aye, I'm fine," he said, with a marked lack of conviction.

I merely snorted at this piece of prevarication, and sat down next to him on another chunk of granite.

"It wasn't your fault," I said, after we had sat in silence for some time, listening to the sea.

"Ye should go and sleep, Sassenach." His voice was even, but with an undertone of hopelessness that made me move closer to him, trying to embrace him. He was clearly reluctant to touch me, but I was shivering very obviously myself by this time.

"I'm not going anywhere."

He sighed deeply and pulled me closer, settling me upon his knee, so that his arms came inside my cloak, holding tight. Little by little, the shivering eased.

"What are you doing out here?" I asked at last.

"Praying," he said softly. "Or trying to."

"I shouldn't have interrupted you." I made as though to move away, but his hold on me tightened.

"No, stay," he said. We stayed clasped close; I could feel the warmth of his breathing in my ear. He drew in his breath as though about to speak, but then let it out without saying anything. I turned and touched his face.

"What is it, Jamie?"

"Is it wrong for me to have ye?" he whispered. His face was bone-white, his eyes no more than dark pits in the dim light. "I keep thinking—is it my fault? Have I sinned so greatly, wanting you so much, needing ye more than life itself?"

"Do you?" I took his face between my hands, feeling the wide bones cold under my palms. "And if you do—how can that be wrong? I'm your wife." In spite of everything, the simple word "wife" made my heart lighten.

He turned his face slightly, so his lips lay against my palm, and his hand came up, groping for mine. His fingers were cold, too, and hard as driftwood soaked in seawater.

"I tell myself so. God has given ye to me; how can I not love you? And yet—I keep thinking, and canna stop."

He looked down at me then, brow furrowed with trouble.

"The treasure—it was all right to use it when there was need, to feed the hungry, or to rescue folk from prison. But to try to buy my freedom from guilt—to use it only so that I might live free at Lallybroch with you, and not trouble myself over Laoghaire—I think maybe that was wrong to do."

I drew his hand down around my waist, and pulled him close. He came, eager for comfort, and laid his head on my shoulder.

"Hush," I said to him, though he hadn't spoken again. "Be still. Jamie, have you ever done something for yourself alone—not with any thought of anyone else?"

His hand rested gently on my back, tracing the seam of my bodice, and his breathing held the hint of a smile.

"Oh, many and many a time," he whispered. "When I saw you. When I took ye, not caring did ye want me or no, did ye have somewhere else to be, someone else to love."

"Bloody man," I whispered in his ear, rocking him as best I could. "You're an awful fool, Jamie Fraser. And what about Brianna? That wasn't wrong, was it?"

"No." He swallowed; I could hear the sound of it clearly, and feel the pulse beat in his neck where I held him. "But now I have taken ye back from her, as well. I love you—and I love Ian, like he was my own. And I am thinking maybe I cannot have ye both."

"Jamie Fraser," I said again, with as much conviction as I could put into my voice, "you're a terrible fool." I smoothed the hair back from his forehead and twisted my fist in the thick tail at his nape, pulling his head back to make him look at me.

I thought my face must look to him as his did to me; the bleached bones of a skull, with the lips and eyes dark as blood.

"You didn't force me to come to you, or snatch me away from Brianna. I came, because I wanted to—because I wanted *you,* as much as you did me—and my being here has nothing to do with what's happened. We're *married,* blast you, by any standard you care to name—before God, man, Neptune, or what-have-you."

“Neptune?” he said, sounding a little stunned.

“Be quiet,” I said. “We’re married, I say, and it isn’t wicked for you to want me, or to have me, and no God worth his salt would take your nephew away from you because you wanted to be happy. So there!

“Besides,” I added, pulling back and looking up at him a moment later, “I’m not bloody going back, so what could you do about it, anyway?”

The small vibration in his chest this time was laughter, not cold.

“Take ye and be damned for it, I expect,” he said. He kissed my forehead gently. “Loving you has put me through hell more than once, Sassenach; I’ll risk it again, if need be.”

“Bah,” I said. “And you think loving *you*’s been a bed of roses, do you?”

This time he laughed out loud.

“No,” he said, “but you’ll maybe keep doing it?”

“Maybe I will, at that.”

“You’re a verra stubborn woman,” he said, the smile clear in his voice.

“It bloody takes one to know one,” I said, and then we were both quiet for quite some time.

It was very late—perhaps four o’clock in the morning. The half-moon was low in the sky, seen only now and then through the moving clouds. The clouds themselves were moving faster; the wind was shifting and the mist breaking up, in the turning hour between dark and dawn. Somewhere below, one of the seals barked loudly, once.

“Do ye think perhaps ye could stand to go now?” Jamie said suddenly. “Not wait for the daylight? Once off the headland, the going’s none so bad that the horses canna manage in the dark.”

My whole body ached from weariness, and I was starving, but I stood up at once, and brushed the hair out of my face.

“Let’s go,” I said.

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PART EIGHT

On the Water

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I SHALL GO DOWN TO THE SEA

"It will have to be the *Artemis*." Jared flipped shut the cover of his portable writing desk and rubbed his brow, frowning. Jamie's cousin had been in his fifties when I knew him before, and was now well past seventy, but the snub-nosed hatchet face, the spare, narrow frame, and the tireless capacity for work were just the same. Only his hair marked his age, gone from lank darkness to a scanty, pure and gleaming white, jauntily tied with a red silk ribbon.

"She's no more than a midsized sloop, with a crew of forty or so," he remarked. "But it's late in the season, and we'll not likely do better—all of the Indiamen will have gone a month since. *Artemis* would have gone with the convoy to Jamaica, was she not laid up for repair."

"I'd sooner have a ship of yours—and one of your captains," Jamie assured him. "The size doesna matter."

Jared cocked a skeptical eyebrow at his cousin. "Oh? Well, and ye may find it matter more than ye think, out at sea. It's like to be squally, this late in the season, and a sloop will be bobbin' like a cork. Might I ask how ye weathered the Channel crossing in the packet boat, cousin?"

Jamie's face, already drawn and grim, grew somewhat grimmer at this question. The completest of landlubbers, he was not just prone to seasickness, but prostrated by it. He had been violently ill all the way from Inverness to Le Havre, though sea and weather had been quite calm. Now, some six hours later, safe ashore in Jared's warehouse by the quay, there was still a pale tinge to his lips and dark circles beneath his eyes.

"I'll manage," he said shortly.

Jared eyed him dubiously, well aware of his response to seagoing craft of any kind. Jamie could scarcely set foot on a ship at anchor without going green; the prospect of his crossing the Atlantic, sealed inescapably in a small and constantly tossing ship for two or three months, was enough to boggle the stoutest mind. It had been troubling mine for some time.

"Well, I suppose there's no help for it," Jared said with a sigh, echoing my thought. "And at least you'll have a physician to hand," he added, with a smile at me. "That is, I suppose you intend accompanying him, my dear?"

"Yes indeed," I assured him. "How long will it be before the ship is ready? I'd like to find a good apothecary's, to stock my medicine chest before the voyage."

Jared pursed his lips in concentration. "A week, God willing," he said. "*Artemis* is in Bilbao at the moment; she's to carry a cargo of tanned Spanish hides, with a load of copper from Italy—she'll ship that here, once she arrives, which should be day after tomorrow, with a fair wind. I've no captain signed on for the voyage yet, but a good man in mind; I may have to go to Paris to fetch him, though, and that will be two days there and two back. Add a day to complete stores, fill the water casks, add all the bits and pieces, and she should be ready to leave at dawn tomorrow week."

"How long to the West Indies?" Jamie asked. The tension in him showed in the lines of his body, little affected either by our journey or by the brief rest. He was strung taut as a bow, and likely to remain so until we had found Young Ian.

"Two months, in the season," Jared replied, the small frown still lining his forehead. "But you're a month past the season now; hit the winter gales and it could be three. Or more."

Or never, but Jared, ex-seaman that he was, was too superstitious—or too tactful—to voice this possibility. Still, I saw him touch the wood of his desk surreptitiously for luck.

Neither would he voice the other thought that occupied my mind; we had no positive proof that the blue ship was headed for the West Indies. We had only the records Jared had obtained for us from the Le Havre harbormaster, showing two visits by the ship—aptly named *Bruja*—within the last five years, each time giving her home port as Bridgetown, on the island of Barbados.

"Tell me about her again—the ship that took Young Ian," Jared said. "How did she ride? High in the water, or sunk low, as if she were loaded heavy for a voyage?"

Jamie closed his eyes for a moment, concentrating, then opened them with a nod. "Heavy-laden, I could swear it. Her gunports were no more than six feet from the water."

Jared nodded, satisfied. "Then she was leaving port, not coming in. I've messengers out to all the major ports in France, Portugal and Spain. With luck, they'll find the port she shipped from, and then we'll know her destination for sure from her papers." His thin lips quirked suddenly downward. "Unless she's turned pirate, and sailing under false papers, that is."

The old wine merchant carefully set aside the lap desk, its carved mahogany richly darkened by years of use, and rose to his feet, moving stiffly.

"Well, that's the most that can be done for the moment. Let's go to the house, now; Mathilde will have supper waiting. Tomorrow I'll take ye over the manifests and orders, and your wife can find her bits of herbs."

It was nearly five o'clock, and full dark at this time of year, but Jared had two linksmen waiting to escort us the short distance to his house, equipped with torches to light the way and armed with stout clubs. Le Havre was a thriving port city, and the quay district was no place to walk alone after dark, particularly if one was known as a prosperous wine merchant.

Despite the exhaustion of the Channel crossing, the oppressive clamminess and pervasive fish-smell of Le Havre, and a gnawing hunger, I felt my spirits rise as we followed the torches through the dark, narrow streets. Thanks to Jared, we had at least a chance of finding Young Ian.

Jared had concurred with Jamie's opinion that if the pirates of the *Bruja*—for so I thought of them—had not killed Young Ian on the spot, they were likely to keep him unharmed. A healthy young male of any race could be sold as a slave or indentured servant in the West Indies for upward of two hundred pounds; a respectable sum by current standards.

If they did intend so to dispose of Young Ian profitably, *and* if we knew the port to which they were sailing, it should be a reasonably easy matter to find and recover the boy. A gust of wind and a few chilly drops from the hovering clouds dampened my optimism slightly, reminding me that while it might be no great matter to find Ian once we had reached the West Indies, both the *Bruja* and the *Artemis* had to reach the islands first. And the winter storms were beginning.

* * *

The rain increased through the night, drumming insistently on the slate roof above our heads. I would normally have found the sound soothing and soporific; under the circumstances, the low thrum seemed threatening, not peaceful.

Despite Jared's substantial dinner and the excellent wines that accompanied it, I found myself unable to sleep, my mind summoning images of rain-soaked canvas and the swell of heavy seas. At least my morbid imaginings were keeping only myself awake; Jamie had not come up with me but had stayed to talk with Jared about the arrangements for the upcoming voyage.

Jared was willing to risk a ship and a captain to help in the search. In return, Jamie would sail as supercargo.

"As *what*?" I had said, hearing this proposal.

"The supercargo," Jared had explained patiently. "That's the man whose duty it is to oversee the loading, the unloading, and the sale and disposition of the cargo. The captain and the crew merely sail the ship; someone's got to look after the contents. In a case where the welfare of the cargo will be affected, the supercargo's orders may override even the captain's authority."

And so it was arranged. While Jared was more than willing to go to some risk in order to help a kinsman, he saw no reason not to profit from the arrangement. He had therefore made quick provision for a miscellaneous cargo to be loaded from Bilbao and Le Havre; we would sail to Jamaica to upload the bulk of it, and would arrange for the reloading of the *Artemis* with rum produced by the sugarcane plantation of Fraser et Cie on Jamaica, for the return trip.

The return trip, however, would not occur until good sailing weather returned, in late April or early May. For the time between arrival on Jamaica in February and return to Scotland in May, Jamie would have disposal of the *Artemis* and her crew, to travel to Barbados—or other places—in search of Young Ian. Three months. I hoped it would be enough.

It was a generous arrangement. Still, Jared, who had been an expatriate wine-seller for many years in France, was wealthy enough that the loss of a ship, while distressing, would not cripple him. The fact did not escape me that while Jared was risking a small portion of his fortune, we were risking our lives.

The wind seemed to be dying; it no longer howled down the chimney with quite such force. Sleep proving still elusive, I got out of bed, and with a quilt wrapped round my shoulders for warmth, went to the window.

The sky was a deep, mottled gray, the scudding rain clouds edged with brilliant light from the moon that hid behind them, and the glass was streaked with rain. Still, enough light seeped through the clouds for me to make out the masts of the ships moored at the quay, less than a quarter of a mile away. They swayed to and fro, their sails furled tight against the storm, rising and falling in uneasy rhythm as the waves rocked the boats at anchor. In a week's time, I would be on one.

I had not dared to think what life might be like once I had found Jamie, lest I not find him after all. Then I *had* found him, and in quick succession, had contemplated life as a printer's wife among the political and literary worlds of Edinburgh, a dangerous and fugitive existence as a smuggler's lady, and finally, the busy, settled life of a Highland farm, which I had known before and loved.

Now, in equally quick succession, all these possibilities had been jerked away, and I faced an unknown future once more.

Oddly enough, I was not so much distressed by this as excited by it. I had been settled for twenty years, rooted as a barnacle by my attachments to Brianna, to Frank, to my patients. Now fate—and my own actions—had ripped me loose from all those things, and I felt as though I were tumbling free in the surf, at the mercy of forces a great deal stronger than myself.

My breath had misted the glass. I traced a small heart in the cloudiness, as I had used to do for Brianna on cold mornings. Then, I would put her initials inside the heart—B.E.R., for Brianna Ellen Randall. Would she still call herself Randall? I wondered, or Fraser, now? I hesitated, then drew two letters inside the outline of the heart—a "J" and a "C."

I was still standing before the window when the door opened and Jamie came in.

"Are ye awake still?" he asked, rather unnecessarily.

"The rain kept me from sleeping." I went and embraced him, glad of his warm solidness to dispel the cold gloom of the night.

He hugged me, resting his cheek against my hair. He smelt faintly of seasickness, much more strongly of candlewax and ink.

"Have you been writing?" I asked.

He looked down at me in astonishment. "I have, but how did ye know that?"

"You smell of ink."

He smiled slightly, stepping back and running his hand through his hair. "You've a nose as keen as a truffle pig's, Sassenach."

"Why, thank you, what a graceful compliment," I said. "What were you writing?"

The smile disappeared from his face, leaving him looking strained and tired.

"A letter to Jenny," he said. He went to the table, where he shed his coat and began to unfasten his stock and jabot. "I didna want to write her until we'd seen Jared, and I could tell her what plans we had, and what the prospects were for bringing Ian home safe." He grimaced, and pulled the shirt over his head. "God knows what she'll do when she gets it—and thank God, I'll be at sea when she does," he added wryly, emerging from the folds of linen.

It couldn't have been an easy piece of composition, but I thought he seemed easier for the writing of it. He sat down to take off his shoes and stockings, and I came behind him to undo the clubbed queue of his hair.

"I'm glad the writing's over, at least," he said, echoing my thought. "I'd been dreading telling her, more than anything else."

"You told her the truth?"

He shrugged. "I always have."

Except about me. I didn't voice the thought, though, but began to rub his shoulders, kneading the knotted muscles.

"What did Jared do with Mr. Willoughby?" I asked, massage bringing the Chinese to mind. He had accompanied us on the Channel crossing, sticking to Jamie like a small blue-silk shadow. Jared, used to seeing everything on the docks, had taken Mr. Willoughby in stride, bowing gravely to him and addressing him with a few words of Mandarin, but his housekeeper had viewed this unusual guest with considerably more suspicion.

"I believe he's gone to sleep in the stable." Jamie yawned, and stretched himself luxuriously. "Mathilde said she wasna accustomed to have heathens in the house and didna mean to start now. She was sprinkling the kitchen wi' holy water after he ate supper there." Glancing up, he caught sight of the heart I had traced on the windowpane, black against the misted glass, and smiled.

"What's that?"

"Just silliness," I said.

He reached up and took my right hand, the ball of his thumb caressing the small scar at the base of my own thumb, the letter "J" he had made with the point of his knife, just before I left him, before Culloden.

"I didna ask," he said, "whether ye wished to come with me. I could leave ye here; Jared would have ye stay wi' him and welcome, here or in Paris. Or ye could go back to Lallybroch, if ye wished."

"No, you didn't ask," I said. "Because you knew bloody well what the answer would be."

We looked at each other and smiled. The lines of heartsickness and weariness had lifted from his face. The candlelight glowed softly on the burnished crown of his head as he bent and gently kissed the palm of my hand.

The wind still whistled in the chimney, and the rain ran down the glass like tears outside, but it no longer mattered. Now I could sleep.

* * *

The sky had cleared by morning. A brisk, cold breeze rattled the windowpanes of Jared's study, but couldn't penetrate to the cozy room inside. The house at Le Havre was much smaller than his lavish Paris residence, but still boasted three stories of solid, half-timbered comfort.

I pushed my feet farther toward the crackling fire, and dipped my quill into the inkwell. I was making up a list of all the things I thought might be needed in the medical way for a two-month voyage. Distilled alcohol was both the most important and the easiest to obtain; Jared had promised to get me a cask in Paris.

"We'd best label it something else, though," he'd told me. "Or the sailors will have drunk it before you've left port."

Purified lard, I wrote slowly, *St.-John's-wort; garlic, ten pounds; yarrow*. I wrote *borage*, then shook my head and crossed it out, replacing it with the older name by which it was more likely known now, *bugloss*.

It was slow work. At one time, I had known the medicinal uses of all the common herbs, and not a few uncommon ones. I had had to; they were all that was available.

At that, many of them were surprisingly effective. Despite the skepticism—and outspoken horror—of my supervisors and colleagues at the hospital in Boston, I had used them occasionally on my modern patients to good effect. ("Did you *see* what Dr. Randall did?" a shocked intern's cry echoed in memory, making me smile as I wrote. "She fed the stomach in 134B *boiled flowers!*")

The fact remained that one wouldn't use yarrow and comfrey on a wound if iodine were available, nor treat a systemic infection with bladderwort in preference to penicillin.

I had forgotten a lot, but as I wrote the names of the herbs, the look and the smell of each one began to come back to me—the dark, bituminous look and pleasant light smell of birch oil, the sharp tang of the mint family, the dusty sweet smell of chamomile and the astringency of bistort.

Across the table, Jamie was struggling with his own lists. A poor penman, he wrote laboriously with his crippled right hand, pausing now and then to rub the healing wound above his left elbow and mutter curses under his breath.

"Have ye lime juice on your list, Sassenach?" he inquired, looking up.

"No. Ought I to have?"

He brushed a strand of hair out of his face and frowned at the sheet of paper in front of him.

"It depends. Customarily, it would be the ship's surgeon who provides the lime juice, but in a ship the size of the *Artemis*, there generally isn't a surgeon, and the provision of foodstuffs falls to the purser. But there isn't a purser, either; there's no time to find a dependable man, so I shall fill that office, too."

"Well, if you'll be purser and supercargo, I expect I'll be the closest thing to a ship's surgeon," I said, smiling slightly. "I'll get the lime juice."

"All right." We returned to a companionable scratching, unbroken until the entrance of Josephine, the parlormaid, to announce the arrival of a person. Her long nose wrinkled in unconscious disapproval at the information.

"He waits upon the doorstep. The butler tried to send him away, but he insists that he has an appointment with you, Monsieur James?" The questioning tone of this last implied that nothing could seem more unlikely, but duty compelled her to relay the improbable suggestion.

Jamie's eyebrows rose. "A person? What sort of person?" Josephine's lips primmed together as though she really could not bring herself to say. I was becoming curious to see this person, and ventured over to the window. Sticking my head far out, I could see the top of a very dusty black slouch hat on the doorstep, and not much more.

"He looks like a peddler; he's got a bundle of some kind on his back," I reported, craning out still farther, hands on the sill. Jamie clutched me by the waist and drew me back, thrusting his own head out in turn.

"Och, it's the coin dealer Jared mentioned!" he exclaimed. "Bring him up, then."

With an eloquent expression on her narrow face, Josephine departed, returning in short order with a tall, gangling youth of perhaps twenty, dressed in a badly outmoded style of coat, wide unbuckled breeches that flapped limply about his skinny shanks, drooping stockings and the cheapest of wooden sabots.

The filthy black hat, courteously removed indoors, revealed a thin face with an intelligent expression, adorned with a vigorous, if scanty, brown beard. Since virtually no one in Le Havre other than a few seamen wore a beard, it hardly needed the small shiny black skullcap on the newcomer's head to tell me he was a Jew.

The boy bowed awkwardly to me, then to Jamie, struggling with the straps of his peddler's pack.

"Madame," he said, with a bob that made his curly sidelocks dance, "Monsieur. It is most good of you to receive me." He spoke French oddly, with a singsong intonation that made him hard to follow.

While I entirely understood Josephine's reservations about this … person, still, he had wide, guileless blue eyes that made me smile at him despite his generally unprepossessing appearance.

"It's we who should be grateful to you," Jamie was saying. "I had not expected you to come so promptly. My cousin tells me your name is Mayer?"

The coin dealer nodded, a shy smile breaking out amid the sprigs of his youthful beard.

"Yes, Mayer. It is no trouble; I was in the city already."

"Yet you come from Frankfort, no? A long way," Jamie said politely. He smiled as he looked over Mayer's costume, which looked as though he had retrieved it from a rubbish tip."And a dusty one, too, I expect," he added. "Will you take wine?"

Mayer looked flustered at this offer, but after opening and closing his mouth a few times, finally settled on a silent nod of acceptance.

His shyness vanished, though, once the pack was opened. Though from the outside the shapeless bundle looked as though it might contain, at best, a change of ragged linen and Mayer's midday meal, once opened it revealed several small wooden racks, cleverly fitted into a framework inside the pack, each rack packed carefully with tiny leather bags, cuddling together like eggs in a nest.

Mayer removed a folded square of fabric from beneath the racks, whipped it open, and spread it with something of a flourish on Jamie's desk. Then one by one, Mayer opened the bags and drew out the contents, placing each gleaming round reverently on the deep blue velvet of the cloth.

"An Aquilia Severa aureus," he said, touching one small coin that glowed with the deep mellowness of ancient gold from the velvet. "And here, a Sestercius of the Calpurnia family." His voice was soft and his hands sure, stroking the edge of a silver coin only slightly worn, or cradling one in his palm to demonstrate the weight of it.

He looked up from the coins, eyes bright with the reflections of the precious metal.

"Monsieur Fraser tells me that you desire to inspect as many of the Greek and Roman rarities as possible. I have not my whole stock with me, of course, but I have quite a few—and I could send to Frankfort for others, if you desire."

Jamie smiled, shaking his head. "I'm afraid we haven't time, Mr. Mayer. We—"

"Just Mayer, Monsieur Fraser," the young man interrupted, perfectly polite, but with a slight edge in his voice.

"Indeed." Jamie bowed slightly. "I hope my cousin shall not have misled you. I shall be most happy to pay the cost of your journey, and something for your time, but I am not wishful to purchase any of your stock myself … Mayer."

The young man's eyebrows rose in inquiry, along with one shoulder.

"What I wish," Jamie said slowly, leaning forward to look closely at the coins on display, "is to compare your stock with my recollection of several ancient coins I have seen, and then—should I see any that are similar—to inquire whether you—or your family, I should say, for I expect you are too young yourself—should be familiar with anyone who might have purchased such coins twenty years ago."

He glanced up at the young Jew, who was looking justifiably astonished, and smiled.

"That may be asking a bit much of you, I know. But my cousin tells me that your family is one of the few who deals in such matters, and is by far the most knowledgeable. If you can acquaint me likewise with any persons in the West Indies with interests in this area, I should be deeply obliged to you."

Mayer sat looking at him for a moment, then inclined his head, the sunlight winking from the border of small jet beads that adorned his skullcap. It was plain that he was intensely curious, but he merely touched his pack and said, "My father or my uncle would have sold such coins, not me; but I have here the catalogue and record of every coin that has passed through our hands in thirty years. I will tell you what I can."

He drew the velvet cloth toward Jamie and sat back.

"Do you see anything here like the coins you remember?"

Jamie studied the rows of coins with close attention, then gently nudged a silver piece, about the size of an American quarter. Three leaping porpoises circled its edge, surrounding a charioteer in the center.

"This one," he said. "There were several like it—small differences, but several with these porpoises." He looked again, picked out a worn gold disc with an indistinct profile, then a silver one, somewhat larger and in better condition, with a man's head shown both full-face and in profile.

"These," he said. "Fourteen of the gold ones, and ten of the ones with two heads."

"Ten!" Mayer's bright eyes popped wide with astonishment. "I should not have thought there were so many in Europe."

Jamie nodded. "I'm quite certain—I saw them closely; handled them, even."

"These are the twin heads of Alexander," Mayer said, touching the coin with reverence. "Very rare indeed. It is a tetradrachm, struck to commemorate the battle fought at Amphipolos, and the founding of a city on the site of the battlefield."

Jamie listened with attention, a slight smile on his lips. While he had no great interest in ancient money himself, he did have a great appreciation for a man with a passion.

A quarter of an hour more, another consultation of the catalogue, and the business was complete. Four Greek drachmas of a type Jamie recognized had been added to the collection, several small gold and silver coins, and a thing called a quintinarius, a Roman coin in heavy gold.

Mayer bent and reached into his pack once more, this time pulling out a sheaf of foolscap pages furled into a roll and tied with ribbon. Untied, they showed row upon row of what looked from a distance like bird tracks; on closer inspection, they proved to be Hebraic writing, inked small and precise.

He thumbed slowly through the pages, stopping here and there with a murmured "Um," then passing on. At last he laid the pages on his shabby knee and looked up at Jamie, head cocked to one side.

"Our transactions are naturally carried out in confidence, Monsieur," he said, "and so while I could tell you, for example, that certainly we had sold such and such a coin, in such and such a year, I should not be able to tell you the name of the purchaser." He paused, evidently thinking, then went on.

"We did in fact sell coins of your description—three drachmas, two each of the heads of Egalabalus and the double head of Alexander, and no fewer than six of the gold Calpurnian aurei in the year 1745." He hesitated.

"Normally, that is all I could tell you. However … in this case, Monsieur, I happen to know that the original buyer of these coins is dead—has been dead for some years, in fact. Really, I cannot see that under the circumstances …" He shrugged, making up his mind.

"The purchaser was an Englishman, Monsieur. His name was Clarence Marylebone, Duke of Sandringham."

"Sandringham!" I exclaimed, startled into speech.

Mayer looked curiously at me, then at Jamie, whose face betrayed nothing beyond polite interest.

"Yes, Madame," he said. "I know that the Duke is dead, for he possessed an extensive collection of ancient coins, which my uncle bought from his heirs in 1746—the transaction is listed here." He raised the catalogue slightly, and let it fall.

I knew the Duke of Sandringham was dead, too, and by more immediate experience. Jamie's godfather, Murtagh, had killed him, on a dark night in March 1746, soon before the battle of Culloden brought an end to the Jacobite rebellion. I swallowed briefly, recalling my last sight of the Duke's face, its blueberry eyes fixed in an expression of intense surprise.

Mayer's eyes went back and forth between us, then he added hesitantly, "I can tell you also this; when my uncle purchased the Duke's collection after his death, there were no tetradrachms in it."

"No," Jamie murmured, to himself. "There wouldn't have been." Then, recollecting himself, he stood and reached for the decanter that stood on the sideboard.

"I thank you, Mayer," he said formally. "And now, let us drink to you and your wee book, there."

A few minutes later, Mayer was kneeling on the floor, doing up the fastenings of his ragged pack. The small pouch filled with silver livres that Jamie had given him in payment was in his pocket. He rose and bowed in turn to Jamie and to me before straightening and putting on his disreputable hat.

"I bid you goodbye, Madame," he said.

"Goodbye to you, too, Mayer," I replied. Then I asked, somewhat hesitantly, "Is 'Mayer' really your only name?"

Something flickered in the wide blue eyes, but he answered politely, heaving the heavy sack onto his back, "Yes, Madame. The Jews of Frankfort are not allowed to use family names." He looked up and smiled lopsidedly. "For the sake of convenience, the neighbors call us after an old red shield that was painted on the front of our house, many years ago. But beyond that … no, Madame. We have no name."

Josephine came then to conduct our visitor to the kitchen, taking care to walk several paces in front of him, her nostrils pinched white as though smelling something foul. Mayer stumbled after her, his clumsy sabots clattering on the polished floor.

Jamie relaxed in his chair, eyes abstracted in deep thought.

I heard the door close downstairs a few minutes later, with what was almost a slam, and the click of sabots on the stone steps below. Jamie heard it too, and turned toward the window.

"Well, Godspeed to ye, Mayer Red-Shield," he said, smiling.

"Jamie," I said, suddenly thinking of something, "do you speak German?"

"Eh? Oh, aye," he said vaguely, his attention still fixed on the window and the noises outside.

"What is 'red shield' in German?" I asked.

He looked blank for a moment, then his eyes cleared as his brain made the proper connection.

"*Rothschild,* Sassenach," he said. "Why?"

"Just a thought," I said. I looked toward the window, where the clatter of wooden shoes was long since lost in the noises of the street. "I suppose everyone has to start somewhere."

* * *

"Fifteen men on a dead man's chest," I observed. "Yo-ho-ho, and a bottle of rum."

Jamie gave me a look.

"Oh, aye?" he said.

"The Duke being the dead man," I explained. "Do you think the seals' treasure was really his?"

"I couldna say for sure, but it seems at least likely." Jamie's two stiff fingers tapped briefly on the table in a meditative rhythm. "When Jared mentioned Mayer the coin dealer to me, I thought it worth inquiring—for surely the most likely person to have sent the *Bruja* to retrieve the treasure was the person who put it there."

"Good reasoning," I said, "but evidently it wasn't the same person, if it was the Duke who put it there. Do you think the whole treasure amounted to fifty thousand pounds?"

Jamie squinted at his reflection in the rounded side of the decanter, considering. Then he picked it up and refilled his glass, to assist thought.

"Not as metal, no. But did ye notice the prices that some of those coins in Mayer's catalogue have sold for?"

"I did."

"As much as a thousand pound—sterling!—for a moldy bit of metal!" he said, marveling.

"I don't think metal molds," I said, "but I take your point. Anyway," I said, dismissing the question with a wave of my hand, "the point here is this; do you suppose the seals' treasure could have been the fifty thousand pounds that the Duke had promised to the Stuarts?"

In the early days of 1744, when Charles Stuart had been in France, trying to persuade his royal cousin Louis to grant him some sort of support, he had received a ciphered offer from the Duke of Sandringham, of fifty thousand pounds—enough to hire a small army—on condition that he enter England to retake the throne of his ancestors.

Whether it had been this offer that finally convinced the vacillating Prince Charles to undertake his doomed excursion, we would never know. It might as easily have been a challenge from someone he was drinking with, or a slight—real or imagined—by his mistress, that had sent him to Scotland with nothing more than six companions, two thousand Dutch broadswords, and several casks of brandywine with which to charm the Highland chieftains.

In any case, the fifty thousand pounds had never been received, because the Duke had died before Charles reached England. Another of the speculations that troubled me on sleepless nights was the question of whether that money would have made a difference. If Charles Stuart had received it, would he have taken his ragged Highland army all the way to London, retaken the throne and regained his father's crown?

If he had—well, if he had, the Jacobite rebellion might have succeeded, Culloden might not have happened, I should never have gone back through the circle of stone … and I and Brianna would likely both have died in childbed and been dust these many years past. Surely twenty years should have been enough to teach me the futility of "if."

Jamie had been considering, meditatively rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"It might have been," he said at last. "Given a proper market for the coins and gems—ye ken such things take time to sell; if ye must dispose of them quickly, you'll get but a fraction of the price. But given long enough to search out good buyers—aye, it might reach fifty thousand."

"Duncan Kerr was a Jacobite, wasn't he?"

Jamie frowned, nodding. "He was. Aye, it could be—though God knows it's an awkward kind of fortune to be handing to the commander of an army to pay his troops!"

"Yes, but it's also small, portable, and easy to hide," I pointed out. "And if you were the Duke, and busy committing treason by dealing with the Stuarts, that might be important to you. Sending fifty thousand pounds in sterling, with strongboxes and carriages and guards, would attract the hell of a lot more attention than sending one man secretly across the Channel with a small wooden box."

Jamie nodded again. "Likewise, if ye had a collection of such rarities already, it would attract no attention to be acquiring more, and no one would likely notice what coins ye had. It would be a simple matter to take out the most valuable, replace them with cheap ones, and no one the wiser. No banker who might talk, were ye to shift money or land." He shook his head admiringly.

"It's a clever scheme, aye, whoever made it." He looked up inquiringly at me.

"But then, why did Duncan Kerr come, nearly ten years after Culloden? And what happened to him? Did he come to leave the fortune on the silkies' isle then, or to take it away?"

"And who sent the *Bruja* now?" I finished for him. I shook my head, too.

"Damned if I know. Perhaps the Duke had a confederate of some sort? But if he did, we don't know who it was."

Jamie sighed, and impatient with sitting for so long, stood up and stretched. He glanced out the window, estimating the height of the sun, his usual method of telling time, whether a clock was handy or not.

"Aye, well, we'll have time for speculation once we're at sea. It's near on noon, now, and the Paris coach leaves at three o'clock."

* * *

The apothecary's shop in the Rue de Varennes was gone. In its place were a thriving tavern, a pawnbroker's, and a small goldsmith's shop, crammed companionably cheek by jowl.

"Master Raymond?" The pawnbroker knitted grizzled brows. "I have heard of him, Madame"—he darted a wary glance at me, suggesting that whatever he had heard had not been very admirable—"but he has been gone for several years. If you are requiring a good apothecary, though, Krasner in the Place d'Aloes, or perhaps Madame Verrue, near the Tuileries …" He stared with interest at Mr. Willoughby, who accompanied me, then leaned over the counter to address me confidentially.

"Might you be interested in selling your Chinaman, Madame? I have a client with a marked taste for the Orient. I could get you a very good price—with no more than the usual commission, I assure you."

Mr. Willoughby, who did not speak French, was peering with marked contempt at a porcelain jar painted with pheasants, done in an Oriental style.

"Thank you," I said, "but I think not. I'll try Krasner."

Mr. Willoughby had attracted relatively little attention in Le Havre, a port city teeming with foreigners of every description. On the streets of Paris, wearing a padded jacket over his blue-silk pajamas, and with his queue wrapped several times around his head for convenience, he caused considerable comment. He did, however, prove surprisingly knowledgeable about herbs and medicinal substances.

"Bai jei ai," he told me, picking up a pinch of mustard seed from an open box in Krasner's emporium. "Good for *shen-yen*—kidneys."

"Yes, it is," I said, surprised. "How did you know?"

He allowed his head to roll slightly from side to side, as I had learned was his habit when pleased at being able to astonish someone.

"I know healers one time," was all he said, though, before turning to point at a basket containing what looked like balls of dried mud.

"Shan-yü," he said authoritatively. "Good—*very* good—cleanse blood, liver he work good, no dry skin, help see. You buy."

I stepped closer to examine the objects in question and found them to be a particularly homely sort of dried eel, rolled into balls and liberally coated with mud. The price was quite reasonable, though, so to please him, I added two of the nasty things to the basket over my arm.

The weather was mild for early December, and we walked back toward Jared's house in the Rue Tremoulins. The streets were bright with winter sunshine, and lively with vendors, beggars, prostitutes, shopgirls, and the other denizens of the poorer part of Paris, all taking advantage of the temporary thaw.

At the corner of the Rue du Nord and the Allée des Canards, though, I saw something quite out of the ordinary; a tall, slope-shouldered figure in black frock coat and a round black hat.

"Reverend Campbell!" I exclaimed.

He whirled about at being so addressed, then, recognizing me, bowed and removed his hat.

"Mistress Malcolm!" he said. "How most agreeable to see you again." His eye fell on Mr. Willoughby, and he blinked, features hardening in a stare of disapproval.

"Er … this is Mr. Willoughby," I introduced him. "He's an … associate of my husband's. Mr. Willoughby, the Reverend Archibald Campbell."

"Indeed." The Reverend Campbell normally looked quite austere, but contrived now to look as though he had breakfasted on barbed wire, and found it untasty.

"I thought that you were sailing from Edinburgh to the West Indies," I said, in hopes of taking his gelid eye off the Chinaman. It worked; his gaze shifted to me, and thawed slightly.

“I thank you for your kind inquiries, Madame,” he said. “I still harbor such intentions. However, I had urgent business to transact first in France. I shall be departing from Edinburgh on Thursday week.”

“And how is your sister?” I asked. He glanced at Mr. Willoughby with dislike, then taking a step to one side so as to be out of the Chinaman’s direct sight, lowered his voice.

“She is somewhat improved, I thank you. The draughts you prescribed have been most helpful. She is much calmer, and sleeps quite regularly now. I must thank you again for your kind attentions.”

“That’s quite all right,” I said. “I hope the voyage will agree with her.” We parted with the usual expressions of good will, and Mr. Willoughby and I walked down the Rue du Nord, back toward Jared’s house.

“Reverend meaning most holy fella, not true?” Mr. Willoughby said, after a short silence. He had the usual Oriental difficulty in pronouncing the letter “r,” which made the word “Reverend” more than slightly picturesque, but I gathered his meaning well enough.

“True,” I said, glancing down at him curiously. He pursed his lips and pushed them in and out, then grunted in a distinctly amused manner.

“Not so holy, *that* Reverend fella,” he said.

“What makes you say so?”

He gave me a bright-eyed glance, full of shrewdness.

“I see him one time, Madame Jeanne’s. Not loud talking then. Very quiet then, Reverend fella.”

“Oh, really?” I turned to look back, but the Reverend’s tall figure had disappeared into the crowd.

“Stinking whores,” Mr. Willoughby amplified, making an extremely rude gesture in the vicinity of his crotch in illustration.

“Yes, I gathered,” I said. “Well, I suppose the flesh is weak now and then, even for Scottish Free Church ministers.”

At dinner that night, I mentioned seeing the Reverend, though without adding Mr. Willoughby’s remarks about the Reverend’s extracurricular activities.

"I ought to have asked him where in the West Indies he was going," I said. "Not that he's a particularly scintillating companion, but it might be useful to know someone there."

Jared, who was consuming veal patties in a businesslike way, paused to swallow, then said, "Dinna trouble yourself about that, my dear. I've made up a list for you of useful acquaintances. I've written letters for ye to carry to several friends there, who will certainly lend ye assistance."

He cut another sizable chunk of veal, wiped it through a puddle of wine sauce, and chewed it, while looking thoughtfully at Jamie.

Having evidently come to a decision of some kind, he swallowed, took a sip of wine, and said in a conversational voice, "We met on the level, Cousin."

I stared at him in bewilderment, but Jamie, after a moment's pause, replied, "And we parted on the square."

Jared's narrow face broke into a wide smile.

"Ah, that's a help!" he said. "I wasna just sure, aye? but I thought it worth the trial. Where were ye made?"

"In prison," Jamie replied briefly. "It will be the Inverness lodge, though."

Jared nodded in satisfaction. "Aye, well enough. There are lodges on Jamaica and Barbados—I'll have letters for ye to the Masters there. But the largest lodge is on Trinidad—better than two thousand members there. If ye should need great help in finding the lad, that's where ye must ask. Word of everything that happens in the islands comes through that lodge, sooner or later."

"Would you care to tell me what you're talking about?" I interrupted.

Jamie glanced at me and smiled.

"Freemasons, Sassenach."

"You're a Mason?" I blurted. "You didn't tell me that!"

"He's not meant to," Jared said, a bit sharply. "The rites of Freemasonry are secret, known only to the members. I wouldna have been able to give Jamie an introduction to the Trinidad lodge, had he not been one of us already."

The conversation became general again, as Jamie and Jared fell to discussing the provisioning of the *Artemis,* but I was quiet, concentrating on my own veal. The incident, small as it was, had reminded me of all the things I didn't know about Jamie. At one time, I should have said I knew him as well as one person can know another.

Now, there would be moments, talking intimately together, falling asleep in the curve of his shoulder, holding him close in the act of love, when I felt I knew him still, his mind and heart as clear to me as the lead crystal of the wineglasses on Jared's table.

And others, like now, when I would stumble suddenly over some unsuspected bit of his past, or see him standing still, eyes shrouded with recollections I didn't share. I felt suddenly unsure and alone, hesitating on the brink of the gap between us.

Jamie's foot pressed against mine under the table, and he looked across at me with a smile hidden in his eyes. He raised his glass a little, in a silent toast, and I smiled back, feeling obscurely comforted. The gesture brought back a sudden memory of our wedding night, when we had sat beside each other sipping wine, strangers frightened of each other, with nothing between us but a marriage contract—and the promise of honesty.

There are things ye maybe canna tell me, he had said. *I willna ask ye, or force ye. But when ye do tell me something, let it be the truth. There is nothing between us now but respect, and respect has room for secrets, I think—but not for lies.*

I drank deeply from my own glass, feeling the strong bouquet of the wine billow up inside my head, and a warm flush heat my cheeks. Jamie's eyes were still fixed on me, ignoring Jared's soliloquy about ship's biscuit and candles. His foot nudged mine in silent inquiry, and I pressed back in answer.

"Aye, I'll see to it in the morning," he said, in reply to a question from Jared. "But for now, Cousin, I think I shall retire. It's been a long day." He pushed back his chair, stood up, and held out his arm to me.

"Will ye join me, Claire?"

I stood up, the wine rushing through my limbs, making me feel warm all over and slightly giddy. Our eyes met with a perfect understanding. There was more than respect between us now, and room for all our secrets to be known, in good time.

* * *

In the morning, Jamie and Mr. Willoughby went with Jared, to complete their errands. I had another errand of my own—one that I preferred to do alone. Twenty years ago, there had been two people in Paris whom I cared for deeply. Master Raymond was gone; dead or disappeared. The chances that the other might still be living were slim, but still, I had to see, before I left Europe for what might be the last time. With my heart beating erratically, I stepped into Jared's coach, and told the coachman to drive to the Hôpital des Anges.

* * *

The grave was set in the small cemetery reserved for the convent, under the buttresses of the nearby cathedral. Even though the air from the Seine was damp and cold, and the day cloudy, the walled cemetery held a soft light, reflected from the blocks of pale limestone that sheltered the small plot from wind. In the winter, there were no shrubs or flowers growing, but leafless aspens and larches spread a delicate tracery against the sky, and a deep green moss cradled the stones, thriving despite the cold.

It was a small stone, made of a soft white marble. A pair of cherub's wings spread out across the top, sheltering the single word that was the stone's only other decoration. "Faith," it read.

I stood looking down at it until my vision blurred. I had brought a flower; a pink tulip—not the easiest thing to find in Paris in December, but Jared kept a conservatory. I knelt down and laid it on the stone, stroking the soft curve of the petal with a finger, as though it were a baby's cheek.

"I thought I wouldn't cry," I said a little later.

I felt the weight of Mother Hildegarde's hand on my head.

"*Le Bon Dieu* orders things as He thinks best," she said softly. "But He seldom tells us why."

I took a deep breath and wiped my cheeks with a corner of my cloak. “It was a long time ago, though.” I rose slowly to my feet and turned to find Mother Hildegarde watching me with an expression of deep sympathy and interest.

“I have noticed,” she said slowly, “that time does not really exist for mothers, with regard to their children. It does not matter greatly how old the child is—in the blink of an eye, the mother can see the child again as it was when it was born, when it learned to walk, as it was at any age—at any time, even when the child is fully grown and a parent itself.”

“Especially when they’re asleep,” I said, looking down again at the little white stone. “You can always see the baby then.”

“Ah.” Mother nodded, satisfied. “I thought you had had more children; you have the look, somehow.”

“One more.” I glanced at her. “And how do you know so much about mothers and children?”

The small black eyes shone shrewdly under heavy brow ridges whose sparse hairs had gone quite white.

“The old require very little sleep,” she said, with a deprecatory shrug. “I walk the wards at night, sometimes. The patients talk to me.”

She had shrunk somewhat with advancing age, and the wide shoulders were slightly bowed, thin as a wire hanger beneath the black serge of her habit. Even so, she was still taller than I, and towered over most of the nuns, more scarecrow-like, but imposing as ever. She carried a walking stick but strode erect, firm of tread and with the same piercing eye, using the stick more frequently to prod idlers or direct underlings than to lean on.

I blew my nose and we turned back along the path to the convent. As we walked slowly back, I noticed other small stones set here and there among the larger ones.

“Are those all children?” I asked, a little surprised.

“The children of the nuns,” she said matter-of-factly. I gaped at her in astonishment, and she shrugged, elegant and wry as always.

“It happens,” she said. She walked a few steps farther, then added, “Not often, of course.” She gestured with her stick around the confines of the cemetery.

“This place is reserved for the sisters, a few benefactors of the Hôpital—and those they love.”

“The sisters or the benefactors?”

“The sisters. Here, you lump!”

Mother Hildegarde paused in her progress, spotting an orderly leaning idly against the church wall, smoking a pipe. As she berated him in the elegantly vicious Court French of her girlhood, I stood back, looking around the tiny cemetery.

Against the far wall, but still in consecrated ground, was a row of small stone tablets, each with a single name, “Bouton.” Below each name was a Roman numeral, I through XV. Mother Hildegarde’s beloved dogs. I glanced at her current companion, the sixteenth holder of that name. This one was coal-black, and curly as a Persian lamb. He sat bolt upright at her feet, round eyes fixed on the delinquent orderly, a silent echo of Mother Hildegarde’s outspoken disapproval.

The sisters, and those they love.

Mother Hildegarde came back, her fierce expression altering at once to the smile that transformed her strong gargoyle features into beauty.

“I am so pleased that you have come again, *ma chère,*” she said. “Come inside; I shall find things that may be useful to you on your journey.” Tucking the stick in the crook of her arm, she instead took my forearm for support, grasping it with a warm bony hand whose skin had grown paperthin. I had the odd feeling that it was not I who supported her, but the other way around.

As we turned into the small yew alley that led to the entrance to the Hôpital, I glanced up at her.

“I hope you won’t think me rude, Mother,” I said hesitantly, “but there is one question I wanted to ask you …”

“Eighty-three,” she replied promptly. She grinned broadly, showing her long yellow horse’s teeth. “Everyone wants to know,” she said complacently. She looked back over her shoulder toward the tiny graveyard, and lifted one shoulder in a dismissive Gallic shrug.

“Not yet,” she said confidently. “*Le Bon Dieu* knows how much work there is still to do.”

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41

WE SET SAIL

It was a cold, gray day—there is no other kind in Scotland in December—when the *Artemis* touched at Cape Wrath, on the northwest coast.

I peered out of the tavern window into a solid gray murk that hid the cliffs along the shore. The place was depressingly reminiscent of the landscape near the silkies' isle, with the smell of dead seaweed strong in the air, and the crashing of waves so loud as to inhibit conversation, even inside the small pothouse by the wharf. Young Ian had been taken nearly a month before. Now it was past Christmas, and here we were, still in Scotland, no more than a few miles from the seals' island.

Jamie was striding up and down the dock outside, in spite of the cold rain, too restless to stay indoors by the fire. The sea journey from France back to Scotland had been no better for him than the first Channel crossing, and I knew the prospect of two or three months aboard the *Artemis* filled him with dread. At the same time, his impatience to be in pursuit of the kidnappers was so acute that any delay filled him with frustration. More than once I had awakened in the middle of the night to find him gone, walking the streets of Le Havre alone.

Ironically, this final delay was of his own making. We had touched at Cape Wrath to retrieve Fergus, and with him, the small group of smugglers whom Jamie had sent him to fetch, before leaving ourselves for Le Havre.

"There's no telling what we shall find in the Indies, Sassenach," Jamie had explained to me. "I dinna mean to go up against a shipload of pirates singlehanded, nor yet to fight wi' men I dinna ken alongside me." The smugglers were all men of the shore, accustomed to boats and the ocean, if not to ships; they would be hired on as part of the *Artemis*'s crew, shorthanded in consequence of the late season in which we sailed.

Cape Wrath was a small port, with little traffic at this time of year. Besides the *Artemis*, only a few fishing boats and a ketch were tied up at the wooden wharf. There was a small pothouse, though, in which the crew of the *Artemis* cheerfully passed their time while waiting, the men who would not fit inside the house crouching under the eaves, swilling pots of ale passed through the windows by their comrades indoors. Jamie walked on the shore, coming in only for meals, when he would sit before the fire, the wisps of steam rising from his soggy garments symptomatic of his increasing aggravation of soul.

Fergus was late. No one seemed to mind the wait but Jamie and Jared's captain. Captain Raines, a small, plump, elderly man, spent most of his time on the deck of his ship, keeping one weather eye on the overcast sky, and the other on his barometer.

"That's verra strong-smelling stuff, Sassenach," Jamie observed, during one of his brief visits to the taproom. "What is it?"

"Fresh ginger," I answered, holding up the remains of the root I was grating. "It's the thing most of my herbals say is best for nausea."

"Oh, aye?" He picked up the bowl, sniffed at the contents, and sneezed explosively, to the vast amusement of the onlookers. I snatched back the bowl before he could spill it.

"You don't take it like snuff," I said. "You drink it in tea. And I hope to heaven it works, because if it doesn't, we'll be scooping you out of the bilges, if bilges are what I think they are."

"Oh, not to worry, missus," one of the older hands assured me, overhearing. "Lots o' green hands feel a bit queerlike the first day or two. But usually they comes round soon enough; by the third day, they’ve got used to the pitch and roll, and they’re up in the rigging, happy as larks.”

I glanced at Jamie, who was markedly unlarklike at the moment. Still, this comment seemed to give him some hope, for he brightened a bit, and waved to the harassed servingmaid for a glass of ale.

“It may be so,” he said. “Jared said the same; that seasickness doesna generally last more than a few days, provided the seas aren’t too heavy.” He took a small sip of his ale, and then, with growing confidence, a deeper swallow. “I can stand three days of it, I suppose.”

* * *

Late in the afternoon of the second day, six men appeared, winding their way along the stony shore on shaggy Highland ponies.

“There’s Raeburn in the lead,” Jamie said, shading his eyes and squinting to distinguish the identities of the six small dots. “Kennedy after him, then Innes—he’s missing the left arm, see?—and Meldrum, and that’ll be MacLeod with him, they always ride together like that. Is the last man Gordon, then, or Fergus?”

“It must be Gordon,” I said, peering over his shoulder at the approaching men, “because it’s much too fat to be Fergus.”

“Where the devil is Fergus, then?” Jamie asked Raeburn, once the smugglers had been greeted, introduced to their new shipmates, and sat down to a hot supper and a cheerful glass.

Raeburn bobbed his head in response, hastily swallowing the remains of his pasty.

“Weel, he said to me as how he’d some business to see to, and would I see to the hiring of the horses, and speak to Meldrum and MacLeod about coming, for they were out wi’ their own boat at the time, and not expected back for a day or twa more, and …”

“What business?” Jamie said sharply, but got no more than a shrug in reply. Jamie muttered something under his breath in Gaelic, but returned to his own supper without further comment.

The crew being now complete—save Fergus—preparations began in the morning for getting under way. The deck was a scene of organized confusion, with bodies darting to and fro, popping up through hatchways, and dropping suddenly out of the rigging like dead flies. Jamie stood near the wheel, keeping out of the way, but lending a hand whenever a matter requiring muscle rather than skill arose. For the most part, though, he simply stood, eyes fixed on the road along the shore.

"We shall have to sail by midafternoon, or miss the tide." Captain Raines spoke kindly, but firmly. "We'll have surly weather in twenty-four hours; the glass is falling, and I feel it in my neck." The Captain tenderly massaged the part in question, and nodded at the sky, which had gone from pewter to lead-gray since early morning. "I'll not set sail in a storm if I can help it, and if we mean to make the Indies as soon as possible—"

"Aye, I understand, Captain," Jamie interrupted him. "Of course; ye must do as seems best." He stood back to let a bustling seaman go past, and the Captain disappeared, issuing orders as he went.

As the day wore on, Jamie seemed composed as usual, but I noticed that the stiff fingers fluttered against his thigh more and more often, the only outward sign of worry. And worried he was. Fergus had been with him since the day twenty years before, when Jamie had found him in a Paris brothel, and hired him to steal Charles Stuart's letters.

More than that; Fergus had lived at Lallybroch since before Young Ian was born. The boy had been a younger brother to Fergus, and Jamie the closest thing to a father that Fergus had ever known. I could not imagine any business so urgent that it would have kept him from Jamie's side. Neither could Jamie, and his fingers beat a silent tattoo on the wood of the rail.

Then it was time, and Jamie turned reluctantly away, tearing his eyes from the empty shore. The hatches were battened, the lines coiled, and several seamen leapt ashore to cast free the mooring hawsers; there were six of them, each a rope as thick around as my wrist.

I put a hand on Jamie's arm in silent sympathy.

"You'd better come down below," I said. "I've got a spirit lamp. I'll brew you some hot ginger tea, and then you—"

The sound of a galloping horse echoed along the shore, the scrunch of hoofbeats on gravel echoing from the cliffside well in advance of its appearance.

"There he is, the wee fool," Jamie said, his relief evident in voice and body. He turned to Captain Raines, one brow raised in question. "There's enough of the tide left? Aye, then, let's go."

"Cast off!" the Captain bellowed, and the waiting hands sprang into action. The last of the lines tethering us to the piling was slipped free and neatly coiled, and all around us, lines tightened and sails snapped overhead, as the bosun ran up and down the deck, bawling orders in a voice like rusty iron.

"She moves! She stirs! 'She seems to feel / the thrill of life along her keel'!" I declaimed, delighted to feel the deck quiver beneath my feet as the ship came alive, the energy of all the crew poured into its inanimate hulk, transmuted by the power of the wind-catching sails.

"Oh, God," said Jamie hollowly, feeling the same thing. He grasped the rail, closed his eyes and swallowed.

"Mr. Willoughby says he has a cure for seasickness," I said, watching him sympathetically.

"Ha," he said, opening his eyes. "I ken what he means, and if he thinks I'll let him—what the bloody hell!"

I whirled to look, and saw what had caused him to break off. Fergus was on deck, reaching up to help down a girl perched awkwardly above him on the railing, her long blond hair whipping in the wind. Laoghaire's daughter—Marsali MacKimmie.

Before I could speak, Jamie was past me and striding toward the pair.

"What in the name of holy God d'ye mean by this, ye wee coofs?" he was demanding, by the time I made my way into earshot through the obstacle course of lines and seamen. He loomed menacingly over the pair, a foot taller than either of them.

"We are married," Fergus said, bravely moving in front of Marsali. He looked both scared and excited, his face pale beneath the shock of black hair.

"Married!" Jamie's hands clenched at his sides, and Fergus took an involuntary step backward, nearly treading on Marsali's toes.

"What d'ye mean, 'married'?"

I assumed this was a rhetorical question, but it wasn't; Jamie's appreciation of the situation had, as usual, outstripped mine by yards and seized at once upon the salient point.

"Have ye bedded her?" he demanded bluntly. Standing behind him, I couldn't see his face, but I knew what it must look like, if only because I could see the effect of his expression on Fergus. The Frenchman turned a couple of shades paler and licked his lips.

"Er … no, milord," he said, just as Marsali, eyes blazing, thrust her chin up and said defiantly, "Yes, he has!"

Jamie glanced briefly back and forth between the two of them, snorted loudly, and turned away.

"Mr. Warren!" he called down the deck to the ship's sailing master. "Put back to the shore, if ye please!"

Mr. Warren stopped, openmouthed, in the middle of an order addressed to the rigging, and stared, first at Jamie, then—quite elaborately—at the receding shoreline. In the few moments since the appearance of the putative newlyweds, the *Artemis* had moved more than a thousand yards from the shore, and the rocks of the cliffs were slipping by with increasing speed.

"I don't believe he can," I said. "I think we're already in the tide-race."

No sailor himself, Jamie had spent sufficient time in the company of seamen at least to understand the notion that time and tide wait for no one. He breathed through his teeth for a moment, then jerked his head toward the ladder that led belowdecks.

"Come down, then, the both of ye."

Fergus and Marsali sat together in the tiny cabin, huddled on one berth, hands clutched tight. Jamie waved me to a seat on the other berth, then turned to the pair, hands on his hips.

"Now, then," he said. "What's this nonsense of bein' married?"

"It is true, milord," Fergus said. He was quite pale, but his dark eyes were bright with excitement. His one hand tightened on Marsali's, his hook resting across his thigh.

"Aye?" Jamie said, with the maximum of skepticism. "And who married ye?"

The two glanced at each other, and Fergus licked his lips briefly before replying.

“We—we are handfast.”

“Before witnesses,” Marsali put in. In contrast to Fergus’s paleness, a high color burned in her cheeks. She had her mother’s roseleaf skin, but the stubborn set of her jaw had likely come from somewhere else. She put a hand to her bosom, where something crackled under the fabric. “I ha’ the contract, and the signatures, here.”

Jamie made a low growling noise in his throat. By the laws of Scotland, two people could in fact be legally married by clasping hands before witnesses—handfasting—and declaring themselves to be man and wife.

“Aye, well,” he said. “But ye’re no bedded, yet, and a contract’s not enough, in the eyes o’ the Church.” He glanced out of the stern casement, where the cliffs were just visible through the ragged mist, then nodded with decision.

“We’ll stop at Lewes for the last provisions. Marsali will go ashore there; I’ll send two seamen to see her home to her mother.”

“Ye’ll do no such thing!” Marsali cried. She sat up straight, glaring at her stepfather. “I’m going wi’ Fergus!”

“Oh, no, you’re not, my lassie!” Jamie snapped. “D’ye have no feeling for your mother? To run off, wi’ no word, and leave her to be worrit—”

“I left word.” Marsali’s square chin was high. “I sent a letter from Inverness, saying I’d married Fergus and was off to sail wi’ you.”

“Sweet bleeding Jesus! She’ll think I kent all about it!” Jamie looked horror-stricken.

“We—I—did ask the lady Laoghaire for the honor of her daughter’s hand, milord,” Fergus put in. “Last month, when I came to Lallybroch.”

“Aye. Well, ye needna tell me what she said,” Jamie said dryly, seeing the sudden flush on Fergus’s cheeks. “Since I gather the general answer was no.”

“She said he was a bastard!” Marsali burst out indignantly. “And a criminal, and—and—”

"He is a bastard and a criminal," Jamie pointed out. "And a cripple wi' no property, either, as I'm sure your mother noticed."

"I dinna care!" Marsali gripped Fergus's hand and looked at him with fierce affection. "I want him."

Taken aback, Jamie rubbed a finger across his lips. Then he took a deep breath and returned to the attack.

"Be that as it may," he said, "ye're too young to be married."

"I'm fifteen; that's plenty old enough!"

"Aye, and he's thirty!" Jamie snapped. He shook his head, "Nay, lassie, I'm sorry about it, but I canna let ye do it. If it were nothing else, the voyage is too dangerous—"

"You're taking *her*!" Marsali's chin jerked contemptuously in my direction.

"You'll leave Claire out of this," Jamie said evenly. "She's none of your concern, and—"

"Oh, she's not? You leave my mother for this English whore, and make her a laughingstock for the whole countryside, and it's no my concern, is it?" Marsali leapt up and stamped her foot on the deck. "And you ha' the hellish nerve to tell me what *I* shall do?"

"I have," Jamie said, keeping hold of his temper with some difficulty. "My private affairs are not your concern—"

"And mine aren't any of yours!"

Fergus, looking alarmed, was on his feet, trying to calm the girl.

"Marsali, *ma chère*, you must not speak to milord in such a way. He is only—"

"I'll speak to him any way I want!"

"No, you will not!" Surprised at the sudden harshness in Fergus's tone, Marsali blinked. Only an inch or two taller than his new wife, the Frenchman had a certain wiry authority that made him seem much bigger than he was.

"No," he said more softly. "Sit down, *ma p'tite*." He pressed her back down on the berth, and stood before her.

"Milord has been to me more than a father," he said gently to the girl. "I owe him my life a thousand times. He is also your stepfather. However your mother may regard him, he has without doubt supported and sheltered her and you and your sister. You owe him respect, at the least."

Marsali bit her lip, her eyes bright. Finally she ducked her head awkwardly at Jamie.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, and the air of tension in the cabin lessened slightly.

"It's all right, lassie," Jamie said gruffly. He looked at her and sighed. "But still, Marsali, we must send ye back to your mother."

"I won't go." The girl was calmer now, but the set of her pointed chin was the same. She glanced at Fergus, then at Jamie. "He says we havena bedded together, but we have. Or at any rate, I shall say we have. If ye send me home, I'll tell everyone that he's had me; so ye see—I shall either be married or ruined." Her tone was reasonable and determined. Jamie closed his eyes.

"May the Lord deliver me from women," he said between his teeth. He opened his eyes and glared at her.

"All right!" he said. "You're married. But you'll do it right, before a priest. We'll find one in the Indies, when we land. And until ye've been blessed, Fergus doesna touch you. Aye?" He turned a ferocious gaze on both of them.

"Yes, milord," said Fergus, his features suffused with joy. *"Merci beaucoup!"* Marsali narrowed her eyes at Jamie, but seeing that he wasn't to be moved, she bowed her head demurely, with a sidelong glance at me.

"Yes, Daddy," she said.

* * *

The question of Fergus's elopement had at least distracted Jamie's mind temporarily from the motion of the ship, but the palliative effect didn't last. He held on grimly nevertheless, turning greener by the moment, but refusing to leave the deck and go below, so long as the shore of Scotland was in sight.

"I may never see it again," he said gloomily, when I tried to persuade him to go below and lie down. He leaned heavily on the rail he had just been vomiting over, eyes resting longingly on the unprepossessingly bleak coast behind us.

"No, you'll see it," I said, with an unthinking surety. "You're coming back. I don't know when, but I know you'll come back."

He turned his head to look up at me, puzzled. Then the ghost of a smile crossed his face.

"You've seen my grave," he said softly. "Haven't ye?"

I hesitated, but he didn't seem upset, and I nodded.

"It's all right," he said. He closed his eyes, breathing heavily. "Don't … don't tell me when, though, if ye dinna mind."

"I can't," I said. "There weren't any dates on it. Just your name—and mine."

"Yours?" His eyes popped open.

I nodded again, feeling my throat tighten at the memory of that granite slab. It had been what they call a "marriage stone," a quarter-circle carved to fit with another in a complete arch. I had, of course, seen only the one half.

"It had all your names on it. That's how I knew it was you. And underneath, it said, 'Beloved husband of Claire.' At the time, I didn't see how—but now, of course, I do."

He nodded slowly, absorbing it. "Aye, I see. Aye well, I suppose if I shall be in Scotland, and still married to you—then maybe 'when' doesna matter so much." He gave me a shadow of his usual grin, and added wryly, "It also means we'll find Young Ian safe, for I'll tell ye, Sassenach, I willna set foot in Scotland again without him."

"We'll find him," I said, with an assurance I didn't altogether feel. I put a hand on his shoulder and stood beside him, watching Scotland slowly recede in the distance.

* * *

By the time evening set in, the rocks of Scotland had disappeared in the sea mists, and Jamie, chilled to the bone and pale as a sheet, suffered himself to be led below and put to bed. At this point, the unforeseen consequences of his ultimatum to Fergus became apparent.

There were only two small private cabins, besides the Captain's; if Fergus and Marsali were forbidden to share one until their union was formally blessed, then clearly Jamie and Fergus would have to take one, and Marsali and I the other. It seemed destined to be a rough voyage, in more ways than one.

I had hoped that the sickness might ease, if Jamie couldn't see the slow heave and fall of the horizon, but no such luck.

"Again?" said Fergus, sleepily rousing on one elbow in his berth, in the middle of the night. "How can he? He has eaten nothing all day!"

"Tell *him* that," I said, trying to breathe through my mouth as I sidled toward the door, a basin in my hands, making my way with difficulty through the tiny, cramped quarters. The deck rose and fell beneath my unaccustomed feet, making it hard to keep my balance.

"Here, milady, allow me." Fergus swung bare feet out of bed and stood up beside me, staggering and nearly bumping into me as he reached for the basin.

"You should go and sleep now, milady," he said, taking it from my hands. "I will see to him, be assured."

"Well …" The thought of my berth was undeniably tempting. It had been a long day.

"Go, Sassenach," Jamie said. His face was a ghastly white, sheened with sweat in the dim light of the small oil light that burned on the wall. "I'll be all right."

This was patently untrue; at the same time, it was unlikely that my presence would help particularly. Fergus could do the little that could be done; there was no known cure for seasickness, after all. One could only hope that Jared was right, and that it would ease of itself as the *Artemis* made its way out into the longer swells of the Atlantic.

"All right," I said, giving in. "Perhaps you'll feel better in the morning."

Jamie opened one eye for a moment, then groaned, and shivering, closed it again.

"Or perhaps I'll be dead," he suggested.

On that cheery note, I made my way out into the dark companionway, only to stumble over the prostrate form of Mr. Willoughby, curled up against the door of the cabin. He grunted in surprise, then, seeing that it was only me, rolled slowly onto all fours and crawled into the cabin, swaying with the rolling of the ship. Ignoring Fergus's exclamation of distate, he curled himself about the pedestal of the table, and fell promptly back asleep, an expression of beatific content on his small round face.

My own cabin was just across the companionway, but I paused for a moment, to breathe in the fresh air coming down from the deck above. There was an extraordinary variety of noises, from the creak and crack of timbers all around, to the snap of sails and the whine of rigging above, and the faint echo of a shout somewhere on deck.

Despite the racket and the cold air pouring in down the companionway, Marsali was sound asleep, a humped black shape in one of the two berths. Just as well; at least I needn't try to make awkward conversation with her.

Despite myself, I felt a pang of sympathy for her; this was likely not what she had expected of her wedding night. It was too cold to undress; fully clothed, I crawled into my small box-berth and lay listening to the sounds of the ship around me. I could hear the hissing of the water passing the hull, only a foot or two beyond my head. It was an oddly comforting sound. To the accompaniment of the song of the wind and the faint sound of retching across the corridor, I fell peacefully asleep.

The *Artemis* was a tidy ship, as ships go, but when you cram thirty-two men—and two women—into a space eighty feet long and twenty-five wide, together with six tons of rough-cured hides, forty-two barrels of sulfur, and enough sheets of copper and tin to sheathe the *Queen Mary*, basic hygiene is bound to suffer.

By the second day, I had already flushed a rat—a small rat, as Fergus pointed out, but still a rat—in the hold where I went to retrieve my large medicine box, packed away there by mistake during the loading. There was a soft shuffling noise in my cabin at night, which when the lantern was lit proved to be the footsteps of several dozen middling-size cockroaches, all fleeing frantically for the shelter of the shadows.

The heads, two small quarter-galleries on either side of the ship toward the bow, were nothing more than a pair of boards—with a strategic slot between them—suspended over the bounding waves eight feet below, so that the user was likely to get an unexpected dash of cold seawater at some highly inopportune moment. I suspected that this, coupled with a diet of salt pork and hardtack, likely caused constipation to be epidemic among seamen.

Mr. Warren, the ship's master, proudly informed me that the decks were swabbed regularly every morning, the brass polished, and everything generally made shipshape, which seemed a desirable state of affairs, given that we were in fact aboard a ship. Still, all the holystoning in the world could not disguise the fact that thirty-four human beings occupied this limited space, and only one of us bathed.

Given such circumstances, I was more than startled when I opened the door of the galley on the second morning, in search of boiling water.

I had expected the same dim and grubby conditions that obtained in the cabins and holds, and was dazzled by the glitter of sunlight through the overhead lattice on a rank of copper pans, so scrubbed that the metal of their bottoms shone pink. I blinked against the dazzle, my eyes adjusting, and saw that the walls of the galley were solid with built-in racks and cupboards, so constructed as to be proof against the roughest seas.

Blue and green glass bottles of spice, each tenderly jacketed in felt against injury, vibrated softly in their rack above the pots. Knives, cleavers, and skewers gleamed in deadly array, in a quantity sufficient to deal with a whale carcass, should one present itself. A rimmed double shelf hung from the bulkhead, thick with bulb glasses and shallow plates, on which a quantity of fresh-cut turnip tops were set to sprout for greens. An enormous pot bubbled softly over the stove, emitting a fragrant steam. And in the midst of all this spotless splendor stood the cook, surveying me with baleful eye.

"Out," he said.

"Good morning," I said, as cordially as possible. "My name is Claire Fraser."

"Out," he repeated, in the same graveled tones.

“I am Mrs. Fraser, the wife of the supercargo, and ship’s surgeon for this voyage,” I said, giving him eyeball for eyeball. “I require six gallons of boiling water, when convenient, for cleaning of the head.”

His small, bright blue eyes grew somewhat smaller and brighter, the black pupils of them training on me like gunbarrels.

“I am Aloysius O’Shaughnessy Murphy,” he said. “Ship’s cook. And I require ye to take yer feet off my fresh-washed deck. I do not allow women in my galley.” He glowered at me under the edge of the black cotton kerchief that swathed his head. He was several inches shorter than I, but made up for it by measuring about three feet more in circumference, with a wrestler’s shoulders and a head like a cannonball, set upon them without apparent benefit of an intervening neck. A wooden leg completed the ensemble.

I took one step back, with dignity, and spoke to him from the relative safety of the passageway.

“In that case,” I said, “you may send up the hot water by the messboy.”

“I may,” he agreed. “And then again, I may not.” He turned his broad back on me in dismissal, busying himself with a chopping block, a cleaver, and a joint of mutton.

I stood in the passageway for a moment, thinking. The thud of the cleaver sounded regularly against the wood. Mr. Murphy reached up to his spice rack, grasped a bottle without looking, and sprinkled a good quantity of the contents over the diced meat. The dusty scent of sage filled the air, superseded at once by the pungency of an onion, whacked in two with a casual swipe of the cleaver and tossed into the mixture.

Evidently the crew of the *Artemis* did not subsist entirely upon salt pork and hardtack, then. I began to understand the reasons for Captain Raines’s rather pear-shaped physique. I poked my head back through the door, taking care to stand outside.

“Cardamom,” I said firmly. “Nutmeg, whole. Dried this year. Fresh extract of anise. Ginger root, two large ones, with no blemishes.” I paused. Mr. Murphy had stopped chopping, cleaver poised motionless above the block.

“And,” I added, “half a dozen whole vanilla beans. From Ceylon.”

He turned slowly, wiping his hands upon his leather apron. Unlike his surroundings, neither the apron nor his other apparel was spotless.

He had a broad, florid face, edged with stiff sandy whiskers like a scrubbing brush, which quivered slightly as he looked at me, like the antennae of some large insect. His tongue darted out to lick pursed lips.

“Saffron?” he asked hoarsely.

“Half an ounce,” I said promptly, taking care to conceal any trace of triumph in my manner.

He breathed in deeply, lust gleaming bright in his small blue eyes.

“Ye’ll find a mat just outside, ma’am, should ye care to wipe yer boots and come in.”

One head sterilized within the limits of boiling water and Fergus’s tolerance, I made my way back to my cabin to clean up for luncheon. Marsali was not there; she was undoubtedly attending to Fergus, whose labors at my insistence had been little short of heroic.

I rinsed my own hands with alcohol, brushed my hair, and then went across the passage to see whether—by some wild chance—Jamie wanted anything to eat or drink. One glance disabused me of this notion.

Marsali and I had been given the largest cabin, which meant that each of us had approximately six square feet of space, not including the beds. These were box-berths, a sort of enclosed bed built into the wall, about five and a half feet long. Marsali fitted neatly into hers, but I was forced to adopt a slightly curled position, like a caper on toast, which caused me to wake up with pins and needles in my feet.

Jamie and Fergus had similar berths. Jamie was lying on his side, wedged into one of these like a snail into its shell; one of which beasts he strongly resembled at the moment, being a pale and viscid gray in color, with streaks of green and yellow that contrasted nastily with his red hair. He opened one eye when he heard me come in, regarded me dimly for a moment, and closed it again.

“Not so good, hm?” I said sympathetically.

The eye opened again, and he seemed to be preparing to say something. He opened his mouth, changed his mind, and closed it again.

"No," he said, and shut the eye once more.

I tentatively smoothed his hair, but he seemed too sunk in misery to notice.

"Captain Raines says it will likely be calmer by tomorrow," I offered. The sea wasn't terribly rough as it was, but there was a noticeable rise and fall.

"It doesna matter," he said, not opening his eyes. "I shall be dead by then—or at least I hope so."

"Afraid not," I said, shaking my head. "Nobody dies of seasickness; though I must say it seems a wonder that they don't, looking at you."

"Not that." He opened his eyes, and struggled up on one elbow, an effort that left him clammy with sweat and white to the lips.

"Claire. Be careful. I should have told ye before—but I didna want to worry ye, and I thought—" His face changed. Familiar as I was with expressions of bodily infirmity, I had the basin there just in time.

"Oh, God." He lay limp and exhausted, pale as the sheet.

"What should you have told me?" I asked, wrinkling my nose as I put the basin on the floor near the door. "Whatever it was, you should have told me before we sailed, but it's too late to think of that."

"I didna think it would be so bad," he murmured.

"You never do," I said, rather tartly. "What did you want to tell me, though?"

"Ask Fergus," he said. "Say I said he must tell ye. And tell him Innes is all right."

"What are you talking about?" I was mildly alarmed; delirium wasn't a common effect of seasickness.

His eyes opened, and fixed on mine with great effort. Beads of sweat stood out on his brow and upper lip.

"Innes," he said. "He canna be the one. He doesna mean to kill me."

A small shiver ran up my spine.

"Are you quite all right, Jamie?" I asked. I bent and wiped his face, and he gave me the ghost of an exhausted smile. He had no fever, and his eyes were clear.

"Who?" I said carefully, with a sudden feeling that there were eyes fixed on my back. "Who *does* mean to kill you?"

"I don't know." A passing spasm contorted his features, but he clamped his lips tight, and managed to subdue it.

"Ask Fergus," he whispered, when he could talk again. "In private. He'll tell ye."

I felt exceedingly helpless. I had no notion what he was talking about, but if there was any danger, I wasn't about to leave him alone.

"I'll wait until he comes down," I said.

One hand was curled near his nose. It straightened slowly and slid under the pillow, coming out with his dirk, which he clasped to his chest.

"I shall be all right," he said. "Go on, then, Sassenach. I shouldna think they'd try anything in daylight. If at all."

I didn't find this reassuring in the slightest, but there seemed nothing else to do. He lay quite still, the dirk held to his chest like a stone tomb-figure.

"Go," he murmured again, his lips barely moving.

Just outside the cabin door, something stirred in the shadows at the end of the passage. Peering sharply, I made out the crouched silk shape of Mr. Willoughby, chin resting on his knees. He spread his knees apart, and bowed his head politely between them.

"Not worry, honorable First Wife," he assured me in a sibilant whisper. "I watch."

"Good," I said, "keep doing it." And went, in considerable distress of mind, to find Fergus.

* * *

Fergus, found with Marsali on the after deck, peering into the ship's wake at several large white birds, was somewhat more reassuring.

"We are not sure that anyone intends actually to kill milord," he explained. "The casks in the warehouse might have been an accident

—I have seen such things happen more than once—and likewise the fire in the shed, but—"

"Wait one minute, young Fergus," I said, gripping him by the sleeve. "*What* casks, and *what* fire?"

"Oh," he said, looking surprised. "Milord did not tell you?"

"Milord is sick as a dog, and incapable of telling me anything more than that I should ask you."

Fergus shook his head, clicking his tongue in a censorious French way.

"He never thinks he will be so ill," he said. "He always is, and yet every time he must set foot on a ship, he insists that it is only a matter of will; his mind will be master, and he will not allow his stomach to be dictating his actions. Then within ten feet of the dock, he has turned green."

"He never told me that," I said, amused at this description. "Stubborn little fool."

Marsali had been hanging back behind Fergus with an air of haughty reserve, pretending that I wasn't there. At this unexpected description of Jamie, though, she was surprised into a brief snort of laughter. She caught my eye and turned hastily away, cheeks flaming, to stare out to sea.

Fergus smiled and shrugged. "You know what he is like, milady," he said, with tolerant affection. "He could be dying, and one would never know."

"You'd know if you went down and looked at him now," I said tartly. At the same time, I was conscious of surprise, accompanied by a faint feeling of warmth in the pit of my stomach. Fergus had been with Jamie almost daily for twenty years, and still Jamie would not admit to him the weakness that he would readily let me see. Were he dying, *I* would know about it, all right.

"Men," I said, shaking my head.

"Milady?"

"Never mind," I said. "You were telling me about casks and fires."

"Oh, indeed, yes." Fergus brushed back his thick shock of black hair with his hook. "It was the day before I met you again, milady, at Madame Jeanne's."

The day I had returned to Edinburgh, no more than a few hours before I had found Jamie at the printshop. He had been at the Burntisland docks with Fergus and a gang of six men during the night, taking advantage of the late dawn of winter to retrieve several casks of unbonded Madeira, smuggled in among a shipment of innocent flour.

"Madeira does not soak through the wood so quickly as some other wines do," Fergus explained. "You cannot bring in brandy under the noses of the Customs like that, for the dogs will smell it at once, even if their masters do not. But not Madeira, provided it has been freshly casked."

"Dogs?"

"Some of the Customs inspectors have dogs, milady, trained to smell out such contraband as tobacco and brandy." He waved away the interruption, squinting his eyes against the brisk sea wind.

"We had removed the Madeira safely, and brought it to the warehouse—one of those belonging apparently to Lord Dundas, but in fact it belongs jointly to milord and Madame Jeanne."

"Indeed," I said, again with that minor dip of the stomach I had felt when Jamie opened the door of the brothel on Queen Street. "Partners, are they?"

"Well, of a sort." Fergus sounded regretful. "Milord has only a five percent share, in return for his finding the place, and making the arrangements. Printing as an occupation is much less profitable than keeping a *hôtel de joie*." Marsali didn't look round, but I thought her shoulders stiffened further.

"I daresay," I said. Edinburgh and Madame Jeanne were a long way behind us, after all. "Get on with the story. Someone may cut Jamie's throat before I find out why."

"Of course, milady." Fergus bobbed his head apologetically.

The contraband had been safely hidden, awaiting disguise and sale, and the smugglers had paused to refresh themselves with a drink in lieu of breakfast, before making their way home in the brightening dawn. Two of the men had asked for their shares at once, needing the money to pay gaming debts and buy food for their families. Jamie agreeing to this, he had gone across to the warehouse office, where some gold was kept.

As the men relaxed over their whisky in a corner of the warehouse, their joking and laughter was interrupted by a sudden vibration that shook the floor beneath their feet.

"Come-down!" shouted MacLeod, an experienced warehouseman, and the men had dived for cover, even before they had seen the great rack of hogsheads near the office quiver and rumble, one two-ton cask rolling down the stack with ponderous grace, to smash in an aromatic lake of ale, followed within seconds by a cascade of its monstrous fellows.

"Milord was crossing in front of the rank," Fergus said, shaking his head. "It was only by the grace of the Blessed Virgin herself that he was not crushed." A bounding cask had missed him by inches, in fact, and he had escaped another only by diving headfirst out of its way and under an empty wine-rack that had deflected its course.

"As I say, such things happen often," Fergus said, shrugging. "A dozen men are killed each year in such accidents, in the warehouses near Edinburgh alone. But with the other things …"

The week before the incident of the casks, a small shed full of packing straw had burst into flames while Jamie was working in it. A lantern placed between him and the door had apparently fallen over, setting the straw alight and trapping Jamie in the windowless shed, behind a sudden wall of flame.

"The shed was fortunately of a most flimsy construction, and the boards half-rotted. It went up like matchwood, but milord was able to kick a hole in the back wall and crawl out, with no injury. We thought at first that the lantern had merely fallen of its own accord, and were most grateful for his escape. It was only later that milord told me he thought that he had heard a noise—perhaps a shot, perhaps only the cracking noises an old warehouse makes as its boards settle—and when he turned to see, found the flames shooting up before him."

Fergus sighed. He looked rather tired, and I wondered whether perhaps he had stayed awake to stand watch over Jamie during the night.

"So," he said, shrugging once more. "We do not know. Such incidents may have been no more than accident—they may not. But taking such occurrences together with what happened at Arbroath —"

"You may have a traitor among the smugglers," I said.

"Just so, milady." Fergus scratched his head. "But what is more disturbing to milord is the man whom the Chinaman shot at Madame Jeanne's."

"Because you think he was a Customs agent, who'd tracked Jamie from the docks to the brothel? Jamie said he couldn't be, because he had no warrant."

"Not proof," Fergus noted. "But worse, the booklet he had in his pocket."

"The New Testament?" I saw no particular relevance to that, and said so.

"Oh, but there is, milady—or might be, I should say," Fergus corrected himself. "You see, the booklet was one that milord himself had printed."

"I see," I said slowly, "or at least I'm beginning to."

Fergus nodded gravely. "To have the Customs trace brandy from the points of delivery to the brothel would be bad, of course, but not fatal—another hiding place could be found; in fact, milord has arrangements with the owners of two taverns that … but that is of no matter." He waved it away. "But to have the agents of the Crown connect the notorious smuggler Jamie Roy with the respectable Mr. Malcolm of Carfax Close …" He spread his hands wide. "You see?"

I did. Were the Customs to get too close to his smuggling operations, Jamie could merely disperse his assistants, cease frequenting his smugglers' haunts, and disappear for a time, retreating into his guise as a printer until it seemed safe to resume his illegal activities. But to have his two identities both detected and merged was not only to deprive him of both his sources of income, but to arouse such suspicion as might lead to discovery of his real name, his seditious activities, and thence to Lallybroch and his history as rebel and convicted traitor. They would have evidence to hang him a dozen times—and once was enough.

"I certainly do see. So Jamie wasn't only worried about Laoghaire and Hobart MacKenzie, when he told Ian he thought it would be as well for us to skip to France for a bit."

Paradoxically, I felt somewhat relieved by Fergus's revelations. At least I hadn't been single-handedly responsible for Jamie's exile. My reappearance might have precipitated the crisis with Laoghaire, but I had had nothing to do with any of this.

"Exactly, milady. And still, we do not know for certain that one of the men has betrayed us—or whether, even if there should be a traitor among them, he should wish to kill milord."

"That's a point." It was, but not a large one. If one of the smugglers had undertaken to betray Jamie for money, that was one thing. If it was for some motive of personal vengeance, though, the man might well feel compelled to take matters into his own hands, now that we were—temporarily, at least—out of reach of the King's Customs.

"If so," Fergus was continuing, "it will be one of six men—the six milord sent me to collect, to sail with us. These six were present both when the casks fell, and when the shed caught fire; all have been to the brothel." He paused. "And all of them were present on the road at Arbroath, when we were ambushed, and found the exciseman hanged."

"Do they all know about the printshop?"

"Oh, no, milady! Milord has always been most careful to let none of the smuggling men know of that—but it is always possible that one of them shall have seen him on the streets in Edinburgh, followed him to Carfax Close, and so learned of A. Malcolm." He smiled wryly. "Milord is not the most inconspicuous of men, milady."

"Very true," I said, matching his tone. "But now all of them know Jamie's real name—Captain Raines calls him Fraser."

"Yes," he said, with a faint, grim smile. "That is why we must discover whether we do indeed sail with a traitor—and who it is."

Looking at him, it occurred to me for the first time that Fergus was indeed a grown man now—and a dangerous one. I had known him as an eager, squirrel-toothed boy of ten, and to me, something of that boy would always remain in his face. But some time had passed since he had been a Paris street urchin.

Marsali had remained staring out to sea during most of this discussion, preferring to take no risk of having to converse with me. She had obviously been listening, though, and now I saw a shiver pass through her thin shoulders—whether of cold or apprehension, I couldn't tell. She likely hadn't planned on shipping with a potential murderer when she had agreed to elope with Fergus.

"You'd better take Marsali below," I said to Fergus. "She's going blue round the edges. Don't worry," I said to Marsali, in a cool voice, "I shan't be in the cabin for some time."

"Where are you going, milady?" Fergus was squinting at me, slightly suspicious. "Milord will not wish you to be—"

"I don't mean to," I assured him. "I'm going to the galley."

"The galley?" His fine black brows shot up.

"To see whether Aloysius O'Shaughnessy Murphy has anything to suggest for seasickness," I said. "If we don't get Jamie back on his feet, he isn't going to care whether anyone cuts his throat or not."

Murphy, sweetened by an ounce of dried orange peel and a bottle of Jared's best claret, was quite willing to oblige. In fact, he seemed to consider the problem of keeping food in Jamie's stomach something of a professional challenge, and spent hours in mystic contemplation of his spice rack and pantries—all to no avail.

We encountered no storms, but the winter winds drove a heavy swell before them, and the *Artemis* rose and fell ten feet at a time, laboring up and down the great glassy peaks of the waves. There were times, watching the hypnotic rise and lurch of the taffrail against the horizon, when I felt a few interior qualms of my own, and turned hastily away.

Jamie showed no signs of being about to fulfill Jared's heartening prophecy and spring to his feet, suddenly accustomed to the motion. He remained in his berth, the color of rancid custard, moving only to stagger to the head, and guarded in turns day and night by Mr. Willoughby and Fergus.

On the positive side of things, none of the six smugglers made any move that might be considered threatening. All expressed a sympathetic concern for Jamie's welfare, and—carefully watched—all had visited him briefly in his cabin, with no suspicious circumstances attending.

For my part, I spent the days in exploring the ship, attending to such small medical emergencies as arose from the daily business of sailing—a smashed finger, a cracked rib, bleeding gums and an abscessed tooth—and pounding herbs and making medicines in a corner of the galley, allowed to work there by Murphy's grace.

Marsali was absent from our shared cabin when I rose, already asleep when I returned to it, and silently hostile when the cramped confines of shipboard forced us to meet on deck or over meals. I assumed that the hostility was in part the result of her natural feelings for her mother, and in part the result of frustration over passing her night hours in my company, rather than Fergus's.

For that matter, if she remained untouched—and judging from her sullen demeanor, I was reasonably sure she did—it was owing entirely to Fergus's respect for Jamie's dictates. In terms of his role as guardian of his stepdaughter's virtue, Jamie himself was a negligible force at the moment.

"Wot, not the broth, too?" Murphy said. The cook's broad red face lowered menacingly. "Which I've had folk rise from their deathbeds after a sup of that broth!"

He took the pannikin of broth from Fergus, sniffed at it critically, and thrust it under my nose.

"Here, smell that, missus. Marrow bones, garlic, caraway seed, and a lump o' pork fat to flavor, all strained careful through muslin, same as some folks bein' poorly to their stomachs can't abide chunks, but chunks you'll not find there, not a one!"

The broth was in fact a clear golden brown, with an appetizing smell that made my own mouth water, despite the excellent breakfast I had made less than an hour before. Captain Raines had a delicate stomach, and in consequence had taken some pains both in the procurement of a cook and the provisioning of the galley, to the benefit of the officers' table.

Murphy, with a wooden leg and the general dimensions of a rum cask, looked the picture of a thoroughgoing pirate, but in fact had a reputation as the best sea-cook in Le Havre—as he had told me himself, without the least boastfulness. He considered cases of seasickness a challenge to his skill, and Jamie, still prostrate after four days, was a particular affront to him.

“I’m sure it’s wonderful broth,” I assured him. “It’s just that he can’t keep *anything* down.”

Murphy grunted dubiously, but turned and carefully poured the remains of the broth into one of the numerous kettles that steamed day and night over the galley fire.

Scowling horribly and running one hand through the wisps of his scanty blond hair, he opened a cupboard and closed it, then bent to rummage through a chest of provisions, muttering under his breath.

“A bit o’ hardtack, maybe?” he muttered. “Dry, that’s what’s wanted. Maybe a whiff o’ vinegar, though; tart pickle, say …”

I watched in fascination as the cook’s huge, sausage-fingered hands flicked deftly through the stock of provisions, plucking dainties and assembling them swiftly on a tray.

“ ’Ere, let’s try this, then,” he said, handing me the finished tray. “Let ’im suck on the pickled gherkins, but don’t let ’im bite ’em yet. Then follow on with a bite of the plain hardtack—there ain’t no weevils in it yet, I don’t think—but see as he don’t drink water with it. Then a bite of gherkin, well-chewed, to make the spittle flow, a bite of hardtack, and so to go on with. That much stayin’ down, then, we can proceed to the custard; which it’s fresh-made last evening for the Captain’s supper. Then if that sticks …” His voice followed me out of the galley, continuing the catalogue of available nourishment. “ … milk toast, which it’s made with goat’s milk, and fresh-milked, too …

“ … syllabub beat up well with whisky and a nice *egg*…” boomed down the passageway as I negotiated the narrow turn with the loaded tray, carefully stepping over Mr. Willoughby, who was as usual crouched in a corner of the passage by Jamie’s door like a small blue lapdog.

One step inside the cabin, though, I could see that the exercise of Murphy's culinary skill was going to be once again in vain. In the usual fashion of a man feeling unwell, Jamie had managed to arrange his surroundings to be as depressing and uncomfortable as possible. The tiny cabin was dank and squalid, the cramped berth covered with a cloth so as to exclude both light and air, and half-piled with a tangle of clammy blankets and unwashed clothes.

"Rise and shine," I said cheerfully. I set down the tray and pulled off the makeshift curtain, which appeared to be one of Fergus's shirts. What light there was came from a large prism embedded in the deck overhead. It struck the berth, illuminating a countenance of ghastly pallor and baleful mien.

He opened one eye an eighth of an inch.

"Go away," he said, and shut it again.

"I've brought you some breakfast," I said firmly.

The eye opened again, coldly blue and gelid.

"Dinna mention the word 'breakfast' to me," he said.

"Call it luncheon then," I said. "It's late enough." I pulled up a stool next to him, picked a gherkin from the tray, and held it invitingly under his nose. "You're supposed to suck on it," I told him.

Slowly, the other eye opened. He said nothing, but the pair of blue orbs swiveled around, resting on me with an expression of such ferocious eloquence that I hastily withdrew the pickle.

The eyelids drooped slowly shut once more.

I surveyed the wreckage, frowning. He lay on his back, his knees drawn up. While the built-in berth provided more stability for the sleeper than the crews' swinging hammocks, it was designed to accommodate the usual run of passengers, who—judging from the size of the berth—were assumed to be no more than a modest five feet three or so.

"You can't be at all comfortable in there," I said.

"I am not."

"Would you like to try a hammock instead? At least you could stretch—"

"I would not."

"The captain says he requires a list of the cargo from you—at your convenience."

He made a brief and unrepeatable suggestion as to what Captain Raines might do with his list, not bothering to open his eyes.

I sighed, and picked up his unresisting hand. It was cold and damp, and his pulse was fast.

"Well," I said after a pause. "Perhaps we could try something I used to do with surgical patients. It seemed to help sometimes."

He gave a low groan, but didn't object. I pulled up a stool and sat down, still holding his hand.

I had developed the habit of talking with the patients for a few minutes before they were taken to surgery. My presence seemed to reassure them, and I had found that if I could fix their attention on something beyond the impending ordeal, they seemed to do better—there was less bleeding, the postanesthetic nausea was less, and they seemed to heal better. I had seen it happen often enough to believe that it was not imagination; Jamie hadn't been altogether wrong when assuring Fergus that the power of mind over flesh was possible.

"Let's think of something pleasant," I said, pitching my voice to be as low and soothing as possible. "Think of Lallybroch, of the hillside above the house. Think of the pine trees there—can you smell the needles? Think of the smoke coming up from the kitchen chimney on a clear day, and an apple in your hand. Think about how it feels in your hand, all hard and smooth, and then—"

"Sassenach?" Both Jamie's eyes were open, and fixed on me in intense concentration. Sweat gleamed in the hollow of his temples.

"Yes?"

"Go away."

"What?"

"Go away," he repeated, very gently, "or I shall break your neck. Go away *now*."

I rose with dignity and went out.

Mr. Willoughby was leaning against an upright in the passage, peering thoughtfully into the cabin.

"Don't have those stone balls with you, do you?" I asked.

“Yes,” he answered, looking surprised. “Wanting healthy balls for Tseimi?” He began to fumble in his sleeve, but I stopped him with a gesture.

“What I want to do is bash him on the head with them, but I suppose Hippocrates would frown on that.”

Mr. Willoughby smiled uncertainly and bobbed his head several times in an effort to express appreciation of whatever I thought I meant.

“Never mind,” I said. I glared back over my shoulder at the heap of reeking bedclothes. It stirred slightly, and a groping hand emerged, patting gingerly around the floor until it found the basin that stood there. Grasping this, the hand disappeared into the murky depths of the berth, from which presently emerged the sound of dry retching.

“Bloody man!” I said, exasperation mingled with pity—and a slight feeling of alarm. The ten hours of a Channel crossing were one thing; what would his state be like after two months of this?

“Head of pig,” Mr. Willoughby agreed, with a lugubrious nod. “He is rat, you think, or maybe dragon?”

“He smells like a whole zoo,” I said. “Why dragon, though?”

“One is born in Year of Dragon, Year of Rat, Year of Sheep, Year of Horse,” Mr. Willoughby explained. “Being different, each year, different people. You are knowing is Tsei-mi rat, or dragon?”

“You mean which year was he born in?” I had vague memories of the menus in Chinese restaurants, decorated with the animals of the Chinese zodiac, with explanations of the supposed character traits of those born in each year. “It was 1721, but I don’t know offhand which animal that was the year of.”

“I am thinking rat,” said Mr. Willoughby, looking thoughtfully at the tangle of bedclothes, which were heaving in a mildly agitated manner. “Rat very clever, very lucky. But dragon, too, could be. He is most lusty in bed, Tsei-mi? Dragons most passionate people.”

“Not so as you would notice lately,” I said, watching the heap of bed-clothes out of the corner of my eye. It heaved upward and fell back, as though the contents had turned over suddenly.

"I have Chinese medicine," Mr. Willoughby said, observing this phenomenon thoughtfully. "Good for vomit, stomach, head, all making most peaceful and serene."

I looked at him with interest. "Really? I'd like to see that. Have you tried it on Jamie yet?"

The little Chinese shook his head regretfully.

"Not want," he replied. "Say damn-all, throwing overboard if I am come near."

Mr. Willoughby and I looked at each other with a perfect understanding.

"You know," I said, raising my voice a decibel or two, "prolonged dry retching is very bad for a person."

"Oh, most bad, yes." Mr. Willoughby had shaved the forward part of his skull that morning; the bald curve shone as he nodded vigorously.

"It erodes the stomach tissues, and irritates the esophagus."

"This is so?"

"Quite so. It raises the blood pressure and strains the abdominal muscles, too. Can even tear them, and cause a hernia."

"Ah."

"And," I continued, raising my voice just a trifle, "it can cause the testicles to become tangled round each other inside the scrotum, and cuts off the circulation there."

"Ooh!" Mr. Willoughby's eyes went round.

"If *that* happens," I said ominously, "the only thing to do, usually, is to amputate before gangrene sets in."

Mr. Willoughby made a hissing sound indicative of understanding and deep shock. The heap of bedclothes, which had been tossing to and fro in a restless manner during this conversation, was quite still.

I looked at Mr. Willoughby. He shrugged. I folded my arms and waited. After a minute, a long foot, elegantly bare, was extruded from the bedclothes. A moment later, its fellow joined it, resting on the floor.

"Damn the pair of ye," said a deep Scottish voice, in tones of extreme malevolence. "Come in, then."

Fergus and Marsali were leaning over the aft rail, cozily shoulder to shoulder, Fergus's arm about the girl's waist, her long fair hair fluttering in the wind.

Hearing approaching footsteps, Fergus glanced back over his shoulder. Then he gasped, whirled round, and crossed himself, eyes bulging.

"Not … one … word, if ye please," Jamie said between clenched teeth.

Fergus opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Marsali, turning to look too, emitted a shrill scream.

"Da! What's happened to ye?"

The obvious fright and concern in her face stopped Jamie from whatever acerbic remark he had been about to make. His face relaxed slightly, making the slender gold needles that protruded from behind his ears twitch like ant's feelers.

"It's all right," he said gruffly. "It's only some rubbish of the Chinee's, to cure the puking."

Wide-eyed, Marsali came up to him, gingerly extending a finger to touch the needles embedded in the flesh of his wrist below the palm. Three more flashed from the inside of his leg, a few inches above the ankle.

"Does—does it work?" she asked. "How does it feel?"

Jamie's mouth twitched, his normal sense of humor beginning to reassert itself.

"I feel like a bloody ill-wish doll that someone's been poking full o' pins," he said. "But then I havena vomited in the last quarter-hour, so I suppose it must work." He shot a quick glare at me and Mr. Willoughby, standing side by side near the rail.

"Mind ye," he said, "I dinna feel like sucking on gherkins just yet, but I could maybe go so far as to relish a glass of ale, if ye mind where some might be found, Fergus."

"Oh. Oh, yes, milord. If you will come with me?" Unable to refrain from staring, Fergus reached out a tentative hand to take Jamie's arm, but thinking better of it, turned in the direction of the after gangway.

“Shall I tell Murphy to start cooking your luncheon?” I called after Jamie as he turned to follow Fergus. He gave me a long, level look over one shoulder. The golden needles sprouted through his hair in twin bunches, gleaming in the morning light like a pair of devil’s horns.

“Dinna try me too high, Sassenach,” he said. “I’m no going to forget, ye ken. Tangled testicles—pah!”

Mr. Willoughby had been ignoring this exchange, squatting on his heels in the shadow of the aft-deck scuttlebutt, a large barrel filled with water for refreshment of the deck watch. He was counting on his fingers, evidently absorbed in some kind of calculation. As Jamie stalked away, he looked up.

“Not rat,” he said, shaking his head. “Not dragon, too. Tsei-mi born in Year of Ox.”

“Really?” I said, looking after the broad shoulders and red head, lowered stubbornly against the wind. “How appropriate.”

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THE MAN IN THE MOON

As his title suggested, Jamie’s job as supercargo was not onerous. Beyond checking the contents of the hold against the bills of lading to insure that the *Artemis* was in fact carrying the requisite quantities of hides, tin, and sulfur, there was nothing for him to do while at sea. His duties would begin once we reached Jamaica, when the cargo must be unloaded, rechecked, and sold, with the requisite taxes paid, commissions deducted, and paperwork filed.

In the meantime, there was little for him—or me—to do. While Mr. Picard, the bosun, eyed Jamie’s powerful frame covetously, it was obvious that he would never make a seaman. Quick and agile as any of the crew, his ignorance of ropes and sails made him useless for anything beyond the occasional situation where sheer strength was required. It was plain he was a soldier, not a sailor.

He did assist with enthusiasm at the gunnery practice that was held every other day, helping to run the four huge guns on their carriages in and out with a tremendous racket, and spending hours in rapt discussion of esoteric cannon lore with Tom Sturgis, the gunner. During these thunderous exercises, Marsali, Mr. Willoughby, and I sat safely out of the way under the care of Fergus, who was excluded from the fireworks because of his missing hand.

Somewhat to my surprise, I had been accepted as the ship’s surgeon with little question from the crew. It was Fergus who explained that in small merchant ships, even barber-surgeons were uncommon. It was commonly the gunner’s wife—if he had one—who dealt with the small injuries and illnesses of the crew.

I saw the normal run of crushed fingers, burnt hands, skin infections, abscessed teeth, and digestive ills, but in a crew of only thirty-two men, there was seldom enough work to keep me busy beyond the hour of sick call each morning.

In consequence, both Jamie and I had a great deal of free time. And, as the *Artemis* drew gradually south into the great gyre of the Atlantic, we began to spend most of this time with each other.

For the first time since my return to Edinburgh, there was time to talk; to relearn all the half-forgotten things we knew of each other, to find out the new facets that experience had polished, and simply to take pleasure in each other's presence, without the distractions of danger and daily life.

We strolled the deck constantly, up and down, marking off miles as we conversed of everything and nothing, pointing out to each other the phenomena of a sea voyage; the spectacular sunrises and sunsets, schools of strange green and silver fish, enormous islands of floating seaweed, harboring thousands of tiny crabs and jellyfish, the sleek dolphins that appeared for several days in a row, swimming parallel with the ship, leaping out of the water now and then, as though to get a look at the curious creatures above the water.

* * *

The moon rose huge and fast and golden, a great glowing disc that slid upward, out of the water and into the sky like a phoenix rising. The water was dark now, and the dolphins invisible, but I thought somehow that they were still there, keeping pace with the ship on her flight through the dark.

It was a scene breathtaking enough even for the sailors, who had seen it a thousand times, to stop and sigh with pleasure at the sight, as the huge orb rose to hang just over the edge of the world, seeming almost near enough to touch.

Jamie and I stood close together by the rail, admiring it. It seemed so close that we could make out with ease the dark spots and shadows on its surface.

"It seems so close ye could speak to the Man in the Moon," he said, smiling, and waved a hand in greeting to the dreaming golden face above.

" 'The weeping Pleiads wester / and the moon is under seas,' " I quoted. "And look, it is, down there, too." I pointed over the rail, to where the trail of moonlight deepened, glowing in the water as though a twin of the moon itself were sunken there.

"When I left," I said, "men were getting ready to fly to the moon. I wonder whether they'll make it."

"Do the flying machines go so high, then?" Jamie asked. He squinted at the moon. "I should say it's a great way, for all it looks so close just now. I read a book by an astronomer—he said it was perhaps three hundred leagues from the earth to the moon. Is he wrong, then, or is it only that the—airplanes, was it?—will fly so far?"

"It takes a special kind, called a rocket," I said. "Actually, it's a lot farther than that to the moon, and once you get far away from the earth, there's no air to breathe in space. They'll have to carry air with them on the voyage, like food and water. They put it in sort of canisters."

"Really?" He gazed up, face full of light and wonder. "What will it look like there, I wonder?"

"I know that," I said. "I've seen pictures. It's rocky, and barren, with no life at all—but very beautiful, with cliffs and mountains and craters—you can see the craters from here; the dark spots." I nodded toward the smiling moon, then smiled at Jamie myself. "It's not unlike Scotland—except that it isn't green."

He laughed, then evidently reminded by the word "pictures," reached into his coat and drew out the little packet of photographs. He was cautious about them, never taking them out where they might be seen by anyone, even Fergus, but we were alone back here, with little chance of interruption.

The moon was bright enough to see Brianna's face, glowing and mutable, as he thumbed slowly through the pictures. The edges were becoming frayed, I saw.

"Will she walk about on the moon, d'ye think?" he asked softly, pausing at a shot of Bree looking out a window, secretly dreaming, unaware of being photographed. He glanced up again at the orb above us, and I realized that for him, a voyage to the moon seemed very little more difficult or farfetched than the one in which we were engaged. The moon, after all, was only another distant, unknown place.

“I don’t know,” I said, smiling a bit.

He thumbed through the pictures slowly, absorbed as he always was by the sight of his daughter’s face, so like his own. I watched him quietly, sharing his silent joy at this promise of our immortality.

I thought briefly of that stone in Scotland, engraved with his name, and took comfort from its distance. Whenever our parting might come, chances were it would not be soon. And even when and where it did—Brianna would still be left of us.

More of Housman’s lines drifted through my head—*Halt by the headstone naming / The heart no longer stirred, / And say the lad that loved you / Was one that kept his word.*

I drew close to him, feeling the heat of his body through coat and shirt, and rested my head against his arm as he turned slowly through the small stack of photographs.

“She is beautiful,” he murmured, as he did every time he saw the pictures. “And clever, too, did ye not say?”

“Just like her father,” I told him, and felt him chuckle softly.

I felt him stiffen slightly as he turned one picture over, and lifted my head to see which one he was looking at. It was one taken at the beach, when Brianna was about sixteen. It showed her standing thigh-deep in the surf, hair in a sandy tangle, kicking water at her friend, a boy named Rodney, who was backing away, laughing too, hands held up against the spray of water.

Jamie frowned slightly, lips pursed.

“That—” he began. “Do they—” He paused and cleared his throat. “I wouldna venture to criticize, Claire,” he said, very carefully, “but do ye not think this is a wee bit … indecent?”

I suppressed an urge to laugh.

“No,” I said, composedly. “That’s really quite a modest bathing suit—for the time.” While the suit in question *was* a bikini, it was by no means skimpy, rising to at least an inch below Bree’s navel. “I chose this picture because I thought you'd want to er … see as much of her as possible."

He looked mildly scandalized at this thought, but his eyes returned to the picture, drawn irresistibly. His face softened as he looked at her.

"Aye, well," he said. "Aye, she's verra lovely, and I'm glad to know it." He lifted the picture, studying it carefully. "No, it's no the thing she's wearing I meant; most women who bathe outside do it naked, and their skins are no shame to them. It's only—this lad. Surely she shouldna be standing almost naked before a man?" He scowled at the hapless Rodney, and I bit my lip at the thought of the scrawny little boy, whom I knew very well, as a masculine threat to maidenly purity.

"Well," I said, drawing a deep breath. We were on slightly delicate ground here. "No. I mean, boys and girls do play together—like that. You know people dress differently then; I've told you. No one's really covered up a great deal except when the weather's cold."

"Mmphm," he said. "Aye, ye've told me." He managed to convey the distinct impression that on the basis of what I'd told him, he was not impressed with the moral conditions under which his daughter was living.

He scowled at the picture again, and I thought it was fortunate that neither Bree nor Rodney was present. I had seen Jamie as lover, husband, brother, uncle, laird, and warrior, but never before in his guise as a ferocious Scottish father. He was quite formidable.

For the first time, I thought that perhaps it was not altogether a bad thing that he wasn't able to oversee Bree's life personally; he would have frightened the living daylights out of any lad bold enough to try to court her.

Jamie blinked at the picture once or twice, then took a deep breath, and I could feel him brace himself to ask.

"D'ye think she is—a virgin?" The halt in his voice was barely perceptible, but I caught it.

"Of course she is," I said firmly. I thought it very likely, in fact, but this wasn't a situation in which to admit the possibility of doubt.

There were things I could explain to Jamie about my own time, but the idea of sexual freedom wasn't one of them.

"Oh." The relief in his voice was inexpressible, and I bit my lip to keep from laughing. "Aye, well, I was sure of it, only I—that is—" He stopped and swallowed.

"Bree's a very good girl," I said. I squeezed his arm lightly. "Frank and I may not have got on so well together, but we were both good parents to her, if I do say so."

"Aye, I know ye were. I didna mean to say otherwise." He had the grace to look abashed, and tucked the beach picture carefully back into the packet. He put the pictures back into his pocket, patting them to be sure they were safe.

He stood looking up at the moon, then, his brows drew together in a slight frown. The sea wind lifted strands of his hair, tugging them loose from the ribbon that bound it, and he brushed them back absentmindedly. Clearly there was still something on his mind.

"Do ye think," he began slowly, not looking at me. "Do ye think that it was quite wise to come to me now, Claire? Not that I dinna want ye," he added hastily, feeling me stiffen beside him. He caught my hand, preventing my turning away.

"No, I didna mean that at all! Christ, I do want ye!" He drew me closer, pressing my hand in his against his heart. "I want ye so badly that sometimes I think my heart will burst wi' the joy of having ye," he added more softly. "It's only—Brianna's alone now. Frank is gone, and you. She has no husband to protect her, no men of her family to see her safely wed. Will she not have need of ye awhile yet? Should ye no have waited a bit, I mean?"

I paused before answering, trying to get my own feelings under control.

"I don't know," I said at last; my voice quivered, in spite of my struggle to control it. "Look—things aren't the same then."

"I know that!"

"You don't!" I pulled my hand loose, and glared at him. "You don't know, Jamie, and there isn't any way for me to tell you, because you won't believe me. But Bree's a grown woman; she'll marry when and as she likes, not when someone arranges it for her.

She doesn't *need* to marry, for that matter. She's having a good education; she can earn her own living—women do that. She won't have to have a man to protect her—"

"And if there's no need for a man to protect a woman, and care for her, then I think it will be a verra poor time!" He glared back at me.

I drew a deep breath, trying to be calm.

"I didn't say there's no need for it." I placed a hand on his shoulder, and spoke in a softer tone. "I said, she can choose. She needn't take a man out of necessity; she can take one for love."

His face began to relax, just slightly.

"You took me from need," he said. "When we wed."

"And I came back for love," I said. "Do you think I needed you any less, only because I could feed myself?"

The lines of his face eased, and the shoulder under my hand relaxed a bit as he searched my face.

"No," he said softly. "I dinna think that."

He put his arm around me and drew me close. I put my arms around his waist and held him, feeling the small flat patch of Brianna's pictures in his pocket under my cheek.

"I did worry about leaving her," I whispered, a little later. "She made me go; we were afraid that if I waited longer, I might not be able to find you. But I did worry."

"I know. I shouldna ha' said anything." He brushed my curls away from his chin, smoothing them down.

"I left her a letter," I said. "It was all I could think to do—knowing I might … might not see her again." I pressed my lips tight together and swallowed hard.

His fingertips stroked my back, very softly.

"Aye? That was good, Sassenach. What did ye say to her?"

I laughed, a little shakily.

"Everything I could think of. Motherly advice and wisdom—what I had of it. All the practical things—where the deed to the house and the family papers were. And everything I knew or could think of, about how to live. I expect she'll ignore it all, and have a wonderful life—but at least she'll know I thought about her."

It had taken me nearly a week, going through the cupboards and desk drawers of the house in Boston, finding all of the business papers, the bankbooks and mortgage papers and the family things. There were a good many bits and pieces of Frank's family lying about; huge scrapbooks and dozens of genealogy charts, albums of photographs, cartons of saved letters. My side of the family was a good deal simpler to sum up.

I lifted down the box I kept on the shelf of my closet. It was a small box. Uncle Lambert was a saver, as all scholars are, but there had been little to save. The essential documents of a small family—birth certificates, mine and my parents', their marriage lines, the registration for the car that had killed them—what ironic whim had prompted Uncle Lamb to save that? More likely he had never opened the box, but only kept it, in a scholar's blind faith that information must never be destroyed, for who knew what use it might be, and to whom?

I had seen its contents before, of course. There had been a period in my teens when I opened it nightly to look at the few photos it contained. I remembered the bone-deep longing for the mother I didn't remember, and the vain effort to imagine her, to bring her back to life from the small dim images in the box.

The best of them was a close-up photograph of her, face turned toward the camera, warm eyes and a delicate mouth, smiling under the brim of a felt cloche hat. The photograph had been hand-tinted; the cheeks and lips were an unnatural rose-pink, the eyes soft brown. Uncle Lamb said that that was wrong; her eyes had been gold, he said, like mine.

I thought perhaps that time of deep need had passed for Brianna, but was not sure. I had had a studio portrait made of myself the week before; I placed it carefully in the box and closed it, and put the box in the center of my desk, where she would find it. Then I sat down to write.

* * *

My dear Bree—I wrote, and stopped. I couldn't. Couldn't possibly be contemplating abandoning my child. To see those three black words stark on the page brought the whole mad idea into a cold clarity that struck me to the bone.

My hand shook, and the tip of the pen made small wavering circles in the air above the paper. I put it down, and clasped my hands between my thighs, eyes closed.

"Get a grip on yourself, Beauchamp," I muttered. "Write the bloody thing and have done. If she doesn't need it, it will do no harm, and if she does, it will be there." I picked up the pen and began again.

> *I don't know if you will ever read this, but perhaps it's as well to set it down. This is what I know of your grandparents (your real ones), your great-grandparents, and your medical history …*

I wrote for some time, covering page after page. My mind grew calmer with the effort of recall, and the necessity of setting down the information clearly, and then I stopped, thinking.

What could I tell her, beyond those few bare bloodless facts? How to impart what sparse wisdom I had gained in forty-eight years of a fairly eventful life? My mouth twisted wryly in consideration of that. Did any daughter listen? Would I, had my mother been there to tell me?

It made no difference, though; I would just have to set it down, to be of use if it could.

But what was true, that would last forever, in spite of changing times and ways, what would stand her in good stead? Most of all, how could I tell her just how much I loved her?

The enormity of what I was about to do gaped before me, and my fingers clenched tight on the pen. I couldn't think—not and do this. I could only set the pen to the paper and hope.

Baby—I wrote, and stopped. Then swallowed hard, and started again.

> *You are my baby, and always will be. You won't know what that means until you have a child of your own, but I tell you now,*

anyway—you'll always be as much a part of me as when you shared my body and I felt you move inside. Always.

I can look at you, asleep, and think of all the nights I tucked you in, coming in the dark to listen to your breathing, lay my hand on you and feel your chest rise and fall, knowing that no matter what happens, everything is right with the world because you are alive.

All the names I've called you through the years—my chick, my pumpkin, precious dove, darling, sweetheart, dinky, smudge … I know why the Jews and Muslims have nine hundred names for God; one small word is not enough for love.

I blinked hard to clear my vision, and went on writing, fast; I didn't dare take time to choose my words, or I would never write them.

I remember everything about you, from the tiny line of golden down that zigged across your forehead when you were hours old to the bumpy toenail on the big toe you broke last year, when you had that fight with Jeremy and kicked the door of his pickup truck.

God, it breaks my heart to think it will stop now—that watching you, seeing all the tiny changes—I won't know when you stop biting your nails, if you ever do—seeing you grow suddenly taller than I, and your face take its shape. I always will remember, Bree, I always will.

There's probably no one else on earth, Bree, who knows what the back of your ears looked like when you were three years old. I used to sit beside you, reading "One Fish, Two Fish, Red Fish, Blue Fish," or "The Three Billy Goats Gruff," and see those ears turn pink with happiness. Your skin was so clear and fragile, I thought a touch would leave fingerprints on you.

You look like Jamie, I told you. You have something from me, too, though—look at the picture of my mother, in the box, and the little *black-and-white one of her mother and grandmother. You have that broad clear brow they have; so do I. I've seen a good many of the Frasers, too—I think you'll age well, if you take care of your skin.*

Take care of everything, Bree—oh, I wish—well, I have wished I could take care of you and protect you from everything all your life, but I can't, whether I stay or go. Take care of yourself, though—for me.

The tears were puckering the paper now; I had to stop to blot them, lest they smear the ink beyond reading. I wiped my face, and resumed, slower now.

You should know, Bree—I don't regret it. In spite of everything, I don't regret it. You'll know something now, of how lonely I was for so long, without Jamie. It doesn't matter. If the price of that separation was your life, neither Jamie nor I can regret it—I know he wouldn't mind my speaking for him.

Bree … you are my joy. You're perfect, and wonderful—and I hear you saying now, in that tone of exasperation, "But of course you think that—you're my mother!" Yes, that's how I know.

Bree, you are worth everything—and more. I've done a great many things in my life so far, but the most important of them all was to love your father and you.

I blew my nose and reached for another fresh sheet of paper. That was the most important thing; I could never say all I felt, but this was the best I could do. What might I add, to be of aid in living well, in growing up and growing old? What had I learned, that I might pass on to her?

Choose a man like your father, I wrote. *Either of them*. I shook my head over that—could there be two men more different?—but left it, thinking of Roger Wakefield. *Once you've chosen a man, don't try to change him*, I wrote, with more confidence. *It can't be done. More* *important—don't let him try to change you. He can't do it either, but men always try*.

I bit the end of the pen, tasting the bitter tang of India ink. And finally I put down the last and the best advice I knew, on growing older.

Stand up straight and try not to get fat.

With All My Love Always,

Mama

Jamie's shoulders shook as he leaned against the rail, whether with laughter or some other emotion, I couldn't tell. His linen glowed white with moonlight, and his head was dark against the moon. At last he turned and pulled me to him.

"I think she will do verra well," he whispered. "For no matter what poor gowk has fathered her, no lass has ever had a better mother. Kiss me, Sassenach, for believe me—I wouldna change ye for the world."

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PHANTOM LIMBS

Fergus, Mr. Willoughby, Jamie, and I had all kept careful watch upon the six Scottish smugglers since our departure from Scotland, but there was not the slightest hint of suspicious behavior from any of them, and after a time, I found myself relaxing my wariness around them. Still, I felt some reserve toward most of them, save Innes. I had finally realized why neither Fergus nor Jamie thought him a possible traitor; with but one arm, Innes was the only smuggler who could not have strung up the exciseman on the Arbroath road.

Innes was a quiet man. None of the Scots was what one might call garrulous, but even by their high standards of taciturnity, he was reserved. I was therefore not surprised to see him grimacing silently one morning, bent over behind a hatch cover, evidently engaged in some silent internal battle.

“Have you a pain, Innes?” I asked, stopping.

“Och!” He straightened, startled, but then fell back into his half-crouched position, his one arm locked across his belly. “Mmphm,” he muttered, his thin face flushing at being so discovered.

“Come along with me,” I said, taking him by the elbow. He looked frantically about for salvation, but I towed him, resisting but not audibly protesting, back to my cabin, where I forced him to sit upon the table and removed his shirt so that I could examine him.

I palpated his lean and hairy abdomen, feeling the firm, smooth mass of the liver on one side, and the mildly distended curve of the stomach on the other. The intermittent way in which the pains came on, causing him to writhe like a worm on a hook, then passing off, gave me a good idea that what troubled him was simple flatulence, but best to be thorough.

I probed for the gallbladder, just in case, wondering as I did so just what I would do, should it prove to be an acute attack of cholecystitis or an inflamed appendix. I could envision the cavity of the belly in my mind, as though it lay open in fact before me, my fingers translating the soft, lumpy shapes beneath the skin into vision—the intricate folds of the intestines, softly shielded by their yellow quilting of fat-padded membrane, the slick, smooth lobes of the liver, deep purple-red, so much darker than the vivid scarlet of the heart's pericardium above. Opening that cavity was a risky thing to do, even equipped with modern anesthetics and antibiotics. Sooner or later, I knew, I would be faced with the necessity of doing it, but I sincerely hoped it would be later.

"Breathe in," I said, hands on his chest, and saw in my mind the pink-flushed grainy surface of a healthy lung. "Breathe out, now," and felt the color fade to soft blue. No rales, no halting, a nice clear flow. I reached for one of the thick sheets of vellum paper I used for stethoscopes.

"When did you last move your bowels?" I inquired, rolling the paper into a tube. The Scot's thin face turned the color of fresh liver. Fixed with my gimlet eye, he mumbled something incoherent, in which the word "four" was just distinguishable.

"Four *days*?" I said, forestalling his attempts to escape by putting a hand on his chest and pinning him flat to the table. "Hold still, I'll just have a listen here, to be sure."

The heart sounds were reassuringly normal; I could hear the valves open and close with their soft, meaty clicks, all in the right places. I was quite sure of the diagnosis—had been virtually from the moment I had looked at him—but by now there was an audience of heads peering curiously round the doorway; Innes's mates, watching. For effect, I moved the end of my tubular stethoscope down farther, listening for belly sounds.

Just as I thought, the rumble of trapped gas was clearly audible in the upper curve of the large intestine. The lower sigmoid colon was blocked, though; no sound at all down there.

"You have belly gas," I said, "and constipation."

"Aye, I ken that fine," Innes muttered, looking frantically for his shirt.

I put my hand on the garment in question, preventing him from leaving while I catechized him about his diet of late. Not surprisingly, this consisted almost entirely of salt pork and hardtack.

"What about the dried peas and the oatmeal?" I asked, surprised. Having inquired as to the normal fare aboard ship, I had taken the precaution of stowing—along with my surgeon's cask of lime juice and the collection of medicinal herbs—three hundred pounds of dried peas and a similar quantity of oatmeal, intending that this should be used to supplement the seamen's normal diet.

Innes remained tongue-tied, but this inquiry unleashed a flood of revelation and grievance from the onlookers in the doorway.

Jamie, Fergus, Marsali, and I all dined daily with Captain Raines, feasting on Murphy's ambrosia, so I was unaware of the deficiencies of the crew's mess. Evidently the difficulty was Murphy himself, who, while holding the highest culinary standards for the captain's table, considered the crew's dinner to be a chore rather than a challenge. He had mastered the routine of producing the crew's meals quickly and competently, and was highly resistant to any suggestions for an improved menu that might require further time or trouble. He declined absolutely to trouble with such nuisances as soaking peas or boiling oatmeal.

Compounding the difficulty was Murphy's ingrained prejudice against oatmeal, a crude Scottish mess that offended his aesthetic sense. I knew what he thought about that, having heard him muttering things about "dog's vomit" over the trays of breakfast that included the bowls of parritch to which Jamie, Marsali, and Fergus were addicted.

"Mr. Murphy says as how salt pork and hardtack is good enough for every crew he's had to feed for thirty year—given figgy-dowdy or plum duff for pudding, and beef on Sundays, too—though if that's beef, I'm a Chinaman—and it's good enough for us," Gordon burst in.

Accustomed to polyglot crews of French, Italian, Spanish, and Norwegian sailors, Murphy was also accustomed to having his meals accepted and consumed with a voracious indifference that transcended nationalities. The Scots' stubborn insistence on oatmeal roused all his own Irish intransigence, and the matter, at first a small, simmering disagreement, was now beginning to rise to a boil.

"We knew as there was meant to be parritch," MacLeod explained, "for Fergus did say so, when he asked us to come. But it's been nothing but the meat and biscuit since we left Scotland, which is a wee bit griping to the belly if ye're not used to it."

"We didna like to trouble Jamie Roy ower such a thing," Raeburn put in. "Geordie's got his girdle, and we've been makin' our own oatcake ower the lamps in the crew quarters. But we've run through what corn we brought in our bags, and Mr. Murphy's got the keys to the pantry store." He glanced shyly at me under his sandy blond lashes. "We didna like to ask, knowin' what he thought of us."

"Ye wouldna ken what's meant by the term 'spalpeens,' would ye, Mistress Fraser?" MacRae asked, raising one bushy brow.

While listening to this outpouring of woe, I had been selecting assorted herbs from my box—anise and angelica, two large pinches of horehound, and a few sprigs of peppermint. Tying these into a square of gauze, I closed the box and handed Innes his shirt, into which he burrowed at once, in search of refuge.

"I'll speak to Mr. Murphy," I promised the Scots. "Meanwhile," I said to Innes, handing him the gauze bundle, "brew you a good pot of tea from that, and drink a cupful at every watch change. If we've had no results by tomorrow, we'll try stronger measures."

As if in answer to this, a high, squeaking fart emerged from under Innes, to an ironic cheer from his colleagues.

"Aye, that's right, Mistress Fraser; maybe ye can scare the shit out o' him," MacLeod said, a broad grin splitting his face.

Innes, scarlet as a ruptured artery, took the bundle, bobbed his head in inarticulate thanks, and fled precipitously, followed in more leisurely fashion by the other smugglers.

A rather acrimonious debate with Murphy followed, terminating without bloodshed, but with the compromise that *I* would be responsible for the preparation of the Scots' morning parritch, permitted to do so under provision that I confined myself to a single pot and spoon, did not sing while cooking, and was careful not to make a mess in the precincts of the sacred galley.

It was only that night, tossing restlessly in the cramped and chilly confines of my berth, that it occurred to me how odd the morning's incident had been. Were this Lallybroch, and the Scots Jamie's tenants, not only would they have had no hesitation in approaching him about the matter, they would have had no need to. He would have known already what was wrong, and taken steps to remedy the situation. Accustomed as I had always been to the intimacy and unquestioning loyalty of Jamie's own men, I found this distance troubling.

Jamie was not at the captain's table next morning, having gone out in the small boat with two of the sailors to catch whitebait, but I met him on his return at noon, sunburned, cheerful, and covered with scales and fish blood.

"What have ye done to Innes, Sassenach?" he said, grinning. "He's hiding in the starboard head, and says ye told him he mustna come out at all until he'd shit."

"I didn't tell him *that*, exactly," I explained. "I just said if he hadn't moved his bowels by tonight, I'd give him an enema of slippery elm."

Jamie glanced over his shoulder in the direction of the head.

"Well, I suppose we will hope that Innes's bowels cooperate, or I doubt but he'll spend the rest of the voyage in the head, wi' a threat like that hangin' ower him."

"Well, I shouldn't worry; now that he and the others have their parritch back, their bowels ought to take care of themselves without undue interference from me."

Jamie glanced down at me, surprised.

"Got their parritch back? Whatever d'ye mean, Sassenach?"

I explained the genesis of the Oatmeal War, and its outcome, as he fetched a basin of water to clean his hands. A small frown drew his brows close together as he pushed his sleeves up his arms.

"They ought to have come to me about it," he said.

"I expect they would have, sooner or later," I said. "I only happened to find out by accident, when I found Innes grunting behind a hatch cover."

"Mmphm." He set about scouring the bloodstains off his fingers, rubbing the clinging scales free with a small pumice stone.

"These men aren't like your tenants at Lallybroch, are they?" I said, voicing the thought I had had.

"No," he said quietly. He dipped his fingers in the basin, leaving tiny shimmering circles where the fish scales floated. "I'm no their laird; only the man who pays them."

"They like you, though," I protested, then remembered Fergus's story and amended this rather weakly to, "or at least five of them do."

I handed him the towel. He took it with a brief nod, and dried his hands. Looking down at the strip of cloth, he shook his head.

"Aye, MacLeod and the rest like me well enough—or five of them do," he repeated ironically. "And they'll stand by me if it's needful—five of them. But they dinna ken me much, nor me them, save Innes."

He tossed the dirty water over the side, and tucking the empty basin under his arm, turned to go below, offering me his arm.

"There was more died at Culloden than the Stuart cause, Sassenach," he said. "You'll be coming for your dinner now?"

* * *

I did not find out why Innes was different, until the next week. Perhaps emboldened by the success of the purgative I had given him, Innes came voluntarily to call upon me in my cabin a week later.

"I am wondering, mistress," he said politely, "whether there might be a medicine for something as isna there."

"What?" I must have looked puzzled at this description, for he lifted the empty sleeve of his shirt in illustration.

"My arm," he explained. "It's no there, as ye can plainly see. And yet it pains me something terrible sometimes." He blushed slightly.

"I did wonder for some years was I only a bit mad," he confided, in lowered tones. "But I spoke a bit wi' Mr. Murphy, and he tells me it's the same with his leg that got lost, and Fergus says he wakes sometimes, feeling his missing hand slide into someone's pocket." He smiled briefly, teeth a flash under his drooping mustache. "So I thought maybe if it was a common thing, to feel a limb that wasn't there, perhaps there was something that might be done about it."

"I see." I rubbed my chin, pondering. "Yes, it is common; it's called a phantom limb, when you still have feelings in a part that's been lost. As for what to do about it…." I frowned, trying to think whether I had ever heard of anything therapeutic for such a situation. To gain time, I asked, "How did you happen to lose the arm?"

"Oh, 'twas the blood poison," he said, casually. "I tore a small hole in my hand wi' a nail one day, and it festered."

I stared at the sleeve, empty from the shoulder.

"I suppose it did," I said faintly.

"Oh, aye. It was a lucky thing, though; it was that stopped me bein' transported wi' the rest."

"The rest of whom?"

He looked at me, surprised. "Why, the other prisoners from Ardsmuir. Did Mac Dubh not tell ye about that? When they stopped the fortress from being a prison, they sent off all of the Scottish prisoners to be indenture men in the Colonies—all but Mac Dubh, for he was a great man, and they didna want him out o' their sight, and me, for I'd lost the arm, and was no good for hard labor. So Mac Dubh was taken somewhere else, and I was let go—pardoned and set free. So ye see, it was a most fortunate accident, save only for the pain that comes on sometimes at night." He grimaced, and made as though to rub the nonexistent arm, stopping and shrugging at me in illustration of the problem.

"I see. So you were with Jamie in prison. I didn't know that." I was turning through the contents of my medicine chest, wondering whether a general pain reliever like willow-bark tea or horehound with fennel would work on a phantom pain.

"Oh, aye." Innes was losing his shyness, and beginning to speak more freely. "I should have been dead of starvation by now, had Mac Dubh not come to find me, when he was released himself."

"He went looking for you?" Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a flash of blue, and beckoned to Mr. Willoughby, who was passing by.

"Aye. When he was released from his parole, he came to inquire, to see whether he could trace any of the men who'd been taken to America—to see whether any might have returned." He shrugged, the missing arm exaggerating the gesture. "But there were none in Scotland, save me."

"I see. Mr. Willoughby, have you a notion what might be done about this?" Motioning to the Chinese to come and look, I explained the problem, and was pleased to hear that he did indeed have a notion. We stripped Innes of his shirt once again, and I watched, taking careful notes, as Mr. Willoughby pressed hard with his fingers at certain spots on the neck and torso, explaining as best he might what he was doing.

"Arm is in the ghost world," he explained. "Body not; here in upper world. Arm tries to come back, for it does not like to be away from body. This—*An-mo*—press-press—this stops pain. But also we tell arm not come back."

"And how d'ye do that?" Innes was becoming interested in the procedure. Most of the crew would not let Mr. Willoughby touch them, regarding him as heathen, unclean, and a pervert to boot, but Innes had known and worked with the Chinese for the last two years.

Mr. Willoughby shook his head, lacking words, and burrowed in my medicine box. He came up with the bottle of dried hot peppers, and shaking out a careful handful, put it into a small dish.

"Have fire?" he inquired. I had a flint and steel, and with these he succeeded in kindling a spark to ignite the dried herb. The pungent smell filled the cabin, and we all watched as a small plume of white rose up from the dish and formed a small, hovering cloud over the dish.

"Send smoke of *fan jiao* messenger to ghost world, speak arm," Mr. Willoughby explained. Inflating his lungs and puffing out his cheeks like a blowfish, he blew lustily at the cloud, dispersing it.

Then, without pausing, he turned and spat copiously on Innes's stump.

"Why, ye heathen bugger!" Innes cried, eyes bulging with fury. "D'ye dare spit on me?"

"Spit on ghost," Mr. Willoughby explained, taking three quick steps backward, toward the door. "Ghost afraid spittle. Not come back now right away."

I laid a restraining hand on Innes's remaining arm.

"Does your missing arm hurt now?" I asked.

The rage began to fade from his face as he thought about it.

"Well … no," he admitted. Then he scowled at Mr. Willoughby. "But that doesna mean I'll have ye spit on me whenever the fancy takes ye, ye wee poutworm!"

"Oh, no," Mr. Willoughby said, quite cool. "I not spit. You spit now. Scare you own ghost."

Innes scratched his head, not sure whether to be angry or amused.

"Well, I will be damned," he said finally. He shook his head, and picking up his shirt, pulled it on. "Still," he said, "I think perhaps next time, I'll try your tea, Mistress Fraser."

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44

FORCES OF NATURE

"I," said Jamie, "am a fool." He spoke broodingly, watching Fergus and Marsali, who were absorbed in close conversation by the rail on the opposite side of the ship.

"What makes you think so?" I asked, though I had a reasonably good idea. The fact that all four of the married persons aboard were living in unwilling celibacy had given rise to a certain air of suppressed amusement among the members of the crew, whose celibacy was involuntary.

"I have spent twenty years longing to have ye in my bed," he said, verifying my assumption, "and within a month of having ye back again, I've arranged matters so that I canna even kiss ye without sneakin' behind a hatch cover, and even then, half the time I look round to find Fergus looking cross-eyed down his nose at me, the little bastard! And no one to blame for it but my own foolishness. What did I think I was doing?" he demanded rhetorically, glaring at the pair across the way, who were nuzzling each other with open affection.

"Well, Marsali *is* only fifteen," I said mildly. "I expect you thought you were being fatherly—or stepfatherly."

"Aye, I did." He looked down at me with a grudging smile. "The reward for my tender concern being that I canna even touch my own wife!"

"Oh, you can touch me," I said. I took one of his hands, caressing the palm gently with my thumb. "You just can't engage in acts of unbridled carnality."

We had had a few abortive attempts along those lines, all frustrated by either the inopportune arrival of a crew member or the sheer uncongeniality of any nook aboard the *Artemis* sufficiently secluded as to be private. One late-night foray into the after hold had ended abruptly when a large rat had leapt from a stack of hides onto Jamie's bare shoulder, sending me into hysterics and depriving Jamie abruptly of any desire to continue what he was doing.

He glanced down at our linked hands, where my thumb continued to make secret love to his palm, and narrowed his eyes at me, but let me continue. He closed his fingers gently round my hand, his own thumb feather-light on my pulse. The simple fact was that we couldn't keep our hands off each other—no more than Fergus and Marsali could—despite the fact that we knew very well such behavior would lead only to greater frustration.

"Aye, well, in my own defense, I meant well," he said ruefully, smiling down into my eyes.

"Well, you know what they say about good intentions."

"What do they say?" His thumb was stroking gently up and down my wrist, sending small fluttering sensations through the pit of my stomach. I thought it must be true what Mr. Willoughby said, about sensations on one part of the body affecting another.

"They pave the road to Hell." I gave his hand a squeeze, and tried to take mine away, but he wouldn't let go.

"Mmphm." His eyes were on Fergus, who was teasing Marsali with an albatross's feather, holding her by one arm and tickling her beneath the chin as she struggled ineffectually to get away.

"Verra true," he said. "I meant to make sure the lass had a chance to think what she was about before the matter was too late for mending. The end result of my interference being that I lie awake half the night trying not to think about you, and listening to Fergus lust across the cabin, and come up in the morning to find the crew all grinning in their beards whenever they see me." He aimed a vicious glare at Maitland, who was passing by. The beardless cabin boy looked startled, and edged carefully away, glancing nervously back over his shoulder.

"How do you hear someone lust?" I asked, fascinated.

He glanced down at me, looking mildly flustered.

"Oh! Well … it's only …"

He paused for a moment, then rubbed the bridge of his nose, which was beginning to redden in the sharp breeze.

"Have ye any idea what men in a prison do, Sassenach, having no women for a verra long time?"

"I could guess," I said, thinking that perhaps I didn't really want to hear, firsthand. He hadn't spoken to me before about his time in Ardsmuir.

"I imagine ye could," he said dryly. "And ye'd be right, too. There's the three choices; use each other, go a bit mad, or deal with the matter by yourself, aye?"

He turned to look out to sea, and bent his head slightly to look down at me, a slight smile visible on his lips. "D'ye think me mad, Sassenach?"

"Not most of the time," I replied honestly, turning round beside him. He laughed and shook his head ruefully.

"No, I dinna seem able to manage it. I now and then wished I *could* go mad"—he said thoughtfully "—it seemed a great deal easier than having always to think what to do next—but it doesna seem to come natural to me. Nor does buggery," he added, with a wry twist of his mouth.

"No, I shouldn't think so." Men who might in the ordinary way recoil in horror from the thought of using another man could still bring themselves to the act, out of desperate need. Not Jamie. Knowing what I did of his experiences at the hands of Jack Randall, I suspected that he very likely *would* have gone mad before seeking such resort himself.

He shrugged slightly, and stood silent, looking out to sea. Then he glanced down at his hands, spread before him, clutching the rail.

"I fought them—the soldiers who took me. I'd promised Jenny I wouldn't—she thought they'd hurt me—but when the time came, I couldna seem to help it." He shrugged again, and slowly opened and closed his right hand. It was his crippled hand, the third finger marked by a thick scar that ran the length of the first two joints, the fourth finger's second joint fused into stiffness, so that the finger stuck out awkwardly, even when he made a fist.

"I broke this again then, against a dragoon's jaw," he said ruefully, waggling the finger slightly. "That was the third time; the second was at Culloden. I didna mind it much. But they put me in chains, and I minded that a great deal."

"I'd think you would." It was hard—not difficult, but surprisingly painful—to think of that lithe, powerful body subdued by metal, bound and humbled.

"There's nay privacy in prison," he said. "I minded that more than the fetters, I think. Day and night, always in sight of someone, wi' no guard for your thoughts but to feign sleep. As for the other …" He snorted briefly, and shoved the loose hair back behind his ear. "Well, ye wait for the light to go, for the only modesty there is, is darkness."

The cells were not large, and the men lay close together for warmth in the night. With no modesty save darkness, and no privacy save silence, it was impossible to remain unaware of the accommodation each man made to his own needs.

"I was in irons for more than a year, Sassenach," he said. He lifted his arms, spread them eighteen inches apart, and stopped abruptly, as though reaching some invisible limit. "I could move that far—and nay more," he said, staring at his immobile hands. "And I couldna move my hands at all without the chain makin' a sound."

Torn between shame and need, he would wait in the dark, breathing in the stale and brutish scent of the surrounding men, listening to the murmurous breath of his companions, until the stealthy sounds nearby told him that the telltale clinking of his irons would be ignored.

"If there's one thing I ken verra well, Sassenach," he said quietly, with a brief glance at Fergus, "it's the sound of a man makin' love to a woman who's not there."

He shrugged and jerked his hands suddenly, spreading them wide on the rail, bursting his invisible chains. He looked down at me then with a half-smile, and I saw the dark memories at the back of his eyes, under the mocking humor.

I saw too the terrible need there, the desire strong enough to have endured loneliness and degradation, squalor and separation.

We stood quite still, looking at each other, oblivious of the deck traffic passing by. He knew better than any man how to hide his thoughts, but he wasn't hiding them from me.

The hunger in him went bone-deep, and my own bones seemed to dissolve in recognition of it. His hand was an inch from mine, resting on the wooden rail, long-fingered and powerful. … If I touched him, I thought suddenly, he would turn and take me, here, on the deck boards.

As though hearing my thought, he took my hand suddenly, pressing it tight against the hard muscle of his thigh.

"How many times have we lain together, since ye came back to me?" he whispered. "Once, twice, in the brothel. Three times in the heather. And then at Lallybroch, again in Paris." His fingers tapped lightly against my wrist, one after the other, in time with my pulse.

"Each time, I left your bed as hungry as ever I came to it. It takes no more to ready me now than the scent of your hair brushing past my face, or the feel of your thigh against mine when we sit to eat. And to see ye stand on deck, wi' the wind pressing your gown tight to your body …"

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly as he looked at me. I could see the pulse beat strong in the hollow of his throat, his skin flushed with wind and desire.

"There are moments, Sassenach, when for one copper penny, I'd have ye on the spot, back against the mast and your skirts about your waist, and devil take the bloody crew!"

My fingers convulsed against his palm, and he tightened his grasp, nodding pleasantly in response to the greeting of the gunner, coming past on his way toward the quarter-gallery.

The bell for the Captain's dinner sounded beneath my feet, a sweet metallic vibration that traveled up through the soles of my feet and melted the marrow of my bones. Fergus and Marsali left their play and went below, and the crew began preparations for the changing of the watch, but we stayed standing by the rail, fixed in each other's eyes, burning.

"The Captain's compliments, Mr. Fraser, and will you be joining him for dinner?" It was Maitland, the cabin boy, keeping a cautious distance as he relayed this message.

Jamie took a deep breath, and pulled his eyes away from mine.

"Aye, Mr. Maitland, we'll be there directly." He took another breath, settled his coat on his shoulders, and offered me his arm.

"Shall we go below, Sassenach?"

"Just a minute." I drew my hand out of my pocket, having found what I was looking for. I took his hand and pressed the object into his palm.

He stared down at the image of King George III in his hand, then up at me.

"On account," I said. "Let's go and eat."

* * *

The next day found us on deck again; though the air was still chilly, the cold was far preferable to the stuffiness of the cabins. We took our usual path, down one side of the ship and up the other, but then Jamie stopped, pausing to lean against the rail as he told me some anecdote about the printing business.

A few feet away, Mr. Willoughby sat cross-legged in the protection of the mainmast, a small cake of wet black ink by the toe of his slipper and a large sheet of white paper on the deck before him. The tip of his brush touched the paper lightly as a butterfly, leaving surprising strong shapes behind.

As I watched, fascinated, he began again at the top of the page. He worked rapidly, with a sureness of stroke that was like watching a dancer or a fencer, sure of his ground.

One of the deckhands passed dangerously close to the edge of the paper, almost—but not quite—placing a large dirty foot on the snowy white. A few moments later, another man did the same thing, though there was plenty of room to pass by. Then the first man came back, this time careless enough to kick over the small cake of black ink as he passed.

"Tck!" the seaman exclaimed in annoyance. He scuffed at the black splotch on the otherwise immaculate deck. "Filthy heathen! Look 'ere, wot he's done!"

The second man, returning from his brief errand, paused in interest. “On the clean deck? Captain Raines won’t be pleased, will he?” He nodded at Mr. Willoughby, mock-jovial. “Best hurry and lick it up, little fella, before the Captain comes.”

“Aye, that’ll do; lick it up. Quick, now!” The first man moved a step nearer the seated figure, his shadow falling on the page like a blot. Mr. Willoughby’s lips tightened just a shade, but he didn’t look up. He completed the second column, righted the ink cake and dipped his brush without taking his eyes from the page, and began a third column, hand moving steadily.

“I *said,*” began the first seaman, loudly, but stopped in surprise as a large white handkerchief fluttered down on the deck in front of him, covering the inkblot.

“Your pardon, gentlemen,” said Jamie. “I seem to have dropped something.” With a cordial nod to the seamen, he bent down and swept up the handkerchief, leaving nothing but a faint smear on the decking. The seamen glanced at each other, uncertain, then at Jamie. One man caught sight of the blue eyes over the blandly smiling mouth, and blanched visibly. He turned hastily away, tugging at his mate’s arm.

“Norratall, sir,” he mumbled. “C’mon, Joe, we’re wanted aft.”

Jamie didn’t look either at the departing seamen or at Mr. Willoughby, but came toward me, tucking his handkerchief back in his sleeve.

“A verra pleasant day, is it not, Sassenach?” he said. He threw back his head, inhaling deeply. “Refreshing air, aye?”

“More so for some than for others, I expect,” I said, amused. The air at this particular spot on deck smelled rather strongly of the alum-tanned hides in the hold below.

“That was kind of you,” I said as he leaned back against the rail next to me. “Do you think I should offer Mr. Willoughby the use of my cabin to write?”

Jamie snorted briefly. “No. I’ve told him he can use my cabin, or the table in the mess between meals, but he’d rather be here—stubborn wee fool that he is.”

"Well, I suppose the light's better," I said dubiously, eyeing the small hunched figure, crouched doggedly against the mast. As I watched, a gust of wind lifted the edge of the paper; Mr. Willoughby pinned it at once, holding it still with one hand while continuing his short, sure brushstrokes with the other. "It doesn't look comfortable, though."

"It's not." Jamie ran his fingers through his hair in mild exasperation. "He does it on purpose, to provoke the crew."

"Well, if that's what he's after, he's doing a good job," I observed. "What on earth for, though?"

Jamie leaned back against the rail beside me, and snorted once more.

"Aye, well, that's complicated. Ever met a Chinaman before, have ye?"

"A few, but I suspect they're a bit different in my time," I said dryly. "They tend not to wear pigtails and silk pajamas, for one thing, nor do they have obsessions about ladies' feet—or if they did, they didn't tell me about it," I added, to be fair.

Jamie laughed and moved a few inches closer, so that his hand on the rail brushed mine.

"Well, it's to do wi' the feet," he said. "Or that's the start of it, anyway. See, Josie, who's one of the whores at Madame Jeanne's, told Gordon about it, and of course he's told everyone now."

"What on earth is it about the feet?" I demanded, curiosity becoming overwhelming. "What does he *do* to them?"

Jamie coughed, and a faint flush rose in his cheeks. "Well, it's a bit …"

"You couldn't possibly tell me anything that would shock me," I assured him. "I *have* seen quite a lot of things in my life, you know—and a good many of them with you, come to that."

"I suppose ye have, at that," he said, grinning. "Aye, well, it's no so much what he does, but—well, in China, the highborn ladies have their feet bound."

"I've heard of that," I said, wondering what all the fuss was about. "It's supposed to make their feet small and graceful."

Jamie snorted again. "Graceful, aye? D'ye know how it's done?" And proceeded to tell me.

"They take a tiny lassie—nay more than a year old, aye?—and turn under the toes of her feet until they touch her heel, then tie bandages about the foot to hold it so."

"Ouch!" I said involuntarily.

"Yes, indeed," he said dryly. "Her nanny will take the bandages off now and then to clean the foot, but puts them back directly. After some time, her wee toes rot and fall off. And by the time she's grown, the poor lassie's little more at the end of her legs than a crumple of bones and skin, smaller than the size o' my fist." His closed fist knocked softly against the wood of the rail in illustration. "But she's considered verra beautiful, then," he ended. "Graceful, as ye say."

"That's perfectly disgusting!" I said. "But what has that got to do with—" I glanced at Mr. Willoughby, but he gave no sign of hearing us; the wind was blowing from him toward us, carrying our words out to sea.

"Say this was a lassie's foot, Sassenach," he said, stretching his right hand out flat before him. "Curl the toes under to touch the heel, and what have ye in the middle?" He curled his fingers loosely into a fist in illustration.

"What?" I said, bewildered. Jamie extended the middle finger of his left hand, and thrust it abruptly through the center of his fist in an unmistakably graphic gesture.

"A hole," he said succinctly.

"You're kidding! *That's* why they do it?"

His forehead furrowed slightly, then relaxed. "Oh, am I jesting? By no means, Sassenach. He says"—he nodded delicately at Mr. Willoughby—"that it's a most remarkable sensation. To a man."

"Why, that perverted little beast!"

Jamie laughed at my indignation.

"Aye, well, that's about what the crew thinks, too. Of course, he canna get quite the same effect wi' a European woman, but I gather he … tries, now and then."

I began to understand the general feeling of hostility toward the little Chinese. Even a short acquaintance with the crew of the *Artemis* had taught me that seamen on the whole tended to be gallant creatures, with a strong romantic streak where women were concerned—no doubt because they did without female company for a good part of the year.

"Hm," I said, with a glance of suspicion at Mr. Willoughby. "Well, that explains them, all right, but what about him?"

"That's what's a wee bit complicated." Jamie's mouth curled upward in a wry smile. "See, to Mr. Yi Tien Cho, late of the Heavenly Kingdom of China, *we're* the barbarians."

"Is that so?" I glanced up at Brodie Cooper, coming down the ratlines above, the filthy, calloused soles of his feet all that was visible from below. I rather thought both sides had a point. "Even you?"

"Oh, aye. I'm a filthy, bad-smelling *gwao-fe*—that means a foreign devil, ye ken—wi' the stink of a weasel—I think that's what *huang-shu-lang* means—and a face like a gargoyle," he finished cheerfully.

"He *told* you all that?" It seemed an odd recompense for saving someone's life. Jamie glanced down at me, cocking one eyebrow.

"Have ye noticed, maybe, that verra small men will say *anything* to ye, when they've drink taken?" he asked. "I think brandy makes them forget their size; they think they're great hairy brutes, and swagger something fierce."

He nodded at Mr. Willoughby, industriously painting. "He's a bit more circumspect when he's sober, but it doesna change what he thinks. It fair galls him, aye? Especially knowing that if it wasna for me, someone would likely knock him on the head or put him through the window into the sea some quiet night."

He spoke with simple matter-of-factness, but I hadn't missed the sideways looks directed at us by the passing seamen, and had already realized just why Jamie was passing time in idle conversation by the rail with me. If anyone had been in doubt about Mr. Willoughby's being under Jamie's protection, they would be rapidly disabused of the notion.

"So you saved his life, gave him work, and keep him out of trouble, and he insults you and thinks you're an ignorant barbarian," I said dryly. "Sweet little fellow."

"Aye, well." The wind had shifted slightly, blowing a lock of Jamie's hair free across his face. He thumbed it back behind his ear and leaned farther toward me, our shoulders nearly touching. "Let him say what he likes; I'm the only one who understands him."

"Really?" I laid a hand over Jamie's where it rested on the rail.

"Well, maybe not to say understand him," he admitted. He looked down at the deck between his feet. "But I do remember," he said softly, "what it's like to have nothing but your pride—and a friend."

I remembered what Innes had said, and wondered whether it was the one-armed man who had been his friend in time of need. I knew what he meant; I had had Joe Abernathy, and knew what a difference it made.

"Yes, I had a friend at the hospital …" I began, but was interrupted by loud exclamations of disgust emanating from under my feet.

"Damn! Blazing Hades! That filth-eating son of a pig-fart!"

I looked down, startled, then realized, from the muffled Irish oaths proceeding from below, that we were standing directly over the galley. The shouting was loud enough to attract attention from the hands forward, and a small group of sailors gathered with us, watching in fascination as the cook's black-kerchiefed head poked out of the hatchway, glaring ferociously at the crowd.

"Burry-arsed swabs!" he shouted. "What're ye lookin' at? Two of yer idle barsteds tumble arse down here and toss this muck over the side! D'ye mean me to be climbin' ladders all day, and me with half a leg?" The head disappeared abruptly, and with a good-natured shrug, Picard motioned to one of the younger sailors to come along below.

Shortly there was a confusion of voices and a bumping of some large object down below, and a terrible smell assaulted my nostrils.

"Jesus Christ on a piece of toast!" I snatched a handkerchief from my pocket and clapped it to my nose; this wasn't the first smell I had encountered afloat, and I usually kept a linen square soaked in wintergreen in my pocket, as a precaution. “What’s that?”

“By the smell of it, dead horse. A verra old horse, at that, and a long time dead.” Jamie’s long, thin nose looked a trifle pinched around the nostrils, and all around, sailors were gagging, holding their noses, and generally commenting unfavorably on the smell.

Maitland and Grosman, faces averted from their burden, but slightly green nonetheless, manhandled a large cask through the hatchway and onto the deck. The top had been split, and I caught a brief glimpse of a yellowish-white mass in the opening, glistening faintly in the sun. It seemed to be moving. Maggots, in profusion.

“Eew!” The exclamation was jerked from me involuntarily. The two sailors said nothing, their lips being pressed tightly together, but both of them looked as though they agreed with me. Together, they manhandled the cask to the rail and heaved it up and over.

Such of the crew as were not otherwise employed gathered at the rail to watch the cask bobbing in the wake, and be entertained by Murphy’s outspokenly blasphemous opinion of the ship’s chandler who had sold it to him. Manzetti, a small Italian seaman with a thick russet pigtail, was standing by the rail, loading a musket.

“Shark,” he explained with a gleam of teeth beneath his mustache, seeing me watching him. “Very good to eat.”

“Ar,” said Sturgis approvingly.

Such of the crew as were not presently occupied gathered at the stern, watching. There were sharks, I knew; Maitland had pointed out to me two dark, flexible shapes hovering in the shadow of the hull the evening before, keeping pace with the ship with no apparent effort save a small and steady oscillation of sickled tails.

“There!” A shout went up from several throats as the cask jerked suddenly in the water. A pause, and Manzetti fixed his aim carefully in the vicinity of the floating cask. Another jerk, as though something had bumped it violently, and another.

The water was a muddy gray, but clear enough for me to catch a glimpse of something moving under the surface, fast. Another jerk, the cask heeled to one side, and suddenly the sharp edge of a fin creased the surface of the water, and a gray back showed briefly, tiny waves purling off it.

The musket discharged next to me with a small roar and a cloud of black-powder smoke that left my eyes stinging. There was a universal shout from the observers, and when the watering of my eyes subsided, I could see a small brownish stain spreading round the cask.

“Did he hit the shark, or the horsemeat?” I asked Jamie, in a low-voiced aside.

“The cask,” he said with a smile. “Still, it’s fine shooting.”

Several more shots went wild, while the cask began to dance an agitated jig, the frenzied sharks striking it repeatedly. Bits of white and brown flew from the broken cask, and a large circle of grease, rotten blood, and debris spread round the shark’s feast. As though by magic, seabirds began to appear, one and two at a time, diving for tidbits.

“No good,” said Manzetti at last, lowering the musket and wiping his face with his sleeve. “Too far.” He was sweating and stained from neck to hairline with black powder; the wiping left a streak of white across his eyes, like a raccoon’s mask.

“I could relish a slab of shark,” said the Captain’s voice near my ear. I turned to see him peering thoughtfully over the rail at the scene of carnage. “Perhaps we might lower a boat, Mr. Picard.”

The bosun turned with an obliging roar, and the *Artemis* hauled her wind, coming round in a small circle to draw near the remains of the floating cask. A small boat was launched, containing Manzetti, with musket, and three seamen armed with gaffs and rope.

By the time they reached the spot, there was nothing left of the cask but a few shattered bits of wood. There was still plenty of activity, though; the water roiled with the sharks’ thrashing beneath the surface, and the scene was nearly obscured by a raucous cloud of seabirds. As I watched, I saw a pointed snout rise suddenly from the water, mouth open, seize one of the birds and disappear beneath the waves, all in the flick of an eyelash.

"Did you see that?" I said, awed. I was aware, in a general way, that sharks were well-equipped with teeth, but this practical demonstration was more striking than any number of *National Geographic* photographs.

"Why, Grandmother dear, what big teeth ye have!" said Jamie, sounding suitably impressed.

"Oh, they do indeed," said a genial voice nearby. I glanced aside to find Murphy grinning at my elbow, broad face shining with a savage glee. "Little good it will do the buggers, with a ball blown clean through their fucking brains!" He pounded a hamlike fist on the rail, and shouted, "Get me one of them jagged buggers, Manzetti! There's a bottle o' cookin' brandy waitin' if ye do!"

"Is it a personal matter to ye, Mr. Murphy?" Jamie asked politely. "Or professional concern?"

"Both, Mr. Fraser, both," the cook replied, watching the hunt with a fierce attention. He kicked his wooden leg against the side, with a hollow clunk. "They've had a taste o' me," he said with grim relish, "but I've tasted a good many more o' them!"

The boat was barely visible through the flapping screen of birds, and their screams made it hard to hear anything other than Murphy's war cries.

"Shark steak with mustard!" Murphy was bellowing, eyes mere slits in an ecstasy of revenge. "Stewed liver wi' piccalilli! I'll make soup o' yer fins, and jelly yer eyeballs in sherry wine, ye wicked barsted!"

I saw Manzetti, kneeling in the bows, take aim with his musket, and the puff of black smoke as he fired. And then I saw Mr. Willoughby.

I hadn't seen him jump from the rail; no one had, with all eyes fixed on the hunt. But there he was, some distance away from the melee surrounding the boat, his shaven head glistening like a fishing float as he wrestled in the water with an enormous bird, its wings churning the water like an eggbeater.

Alerted by my cry, Jamie tore his eyes from the hunt, goggled for an instant, and before I could move or speak, was perched on the rail himself.

My shout of horror coincided with a surprised roar from Murphy, but Jamie was gone, too, lancing into the water near the Chinaman with barely a splash.

There were shouts and cries from the deck—and a shrill screech from Marsali—as everyone realized what had happened. Jamie's wet red head emerged next to Mr. Willoughby, and in seconds, he had an arm tight about the Chinaman's throat. Mr. Willoughby clung tightly to the bird, and I wasn't sure, just for the moment, whether Jamie intended rescue or throttling, but then he kicked strongly, and began to tow the struggling mass of bird and man back toward the ship.

Triumphant shouts from the boat, and a spreading circle of deep red in the water. There was a tremendous thrashing as one shark was gaffed and hauled behind the small boat by a rope about its tail. Then everything was confusion, as the men in the boat noticed what else was going on in the water nearby.

Lines were thrown over one side and then the other, and crewmen rushed back and forth in high excitement, undecided whether to help with rescue or shark, but at last Jamie and his burdens were hauled in to starboard, and dumped dripping on the deck, while the captured shark—several large bites taken out of its body by its hungry companions—was drawn in, still feebly snapping, to port.

"Je … sus … Christ," Jamie said, chest heaving. He lay flat on the deck, gasping like a landed fish.

"Are you all right?" I knelt beside him, and wiped the water off his face with the hem of my skirt. He gave me a lopsided smile and nodded, still gasping.

"Jesus," he said at last, sitting up. He shook his head and sneezed. "I thought I was eaten, sure. Those fools in the boat started toward us, and there were sharks all round them, under the water, bitin' at the gaffed one." He tenderly massaged his calves. "It's nay doubt oversensitive of me, Sassenach, but I've always dreaded the thought of losing a leg. It seems almost worse than bein' killed outright."

"I'd as soon you didn't do either," I said dryly. He was beginning to shiver; I pulled off my shawl and wrapped it around his shoulders, then looked about for Mr. Willoughby.

The little Chinese, still clinging stubbornly to his prize, a young pelican nearly as big as he was, ignored both Jamie and the considerable abuse flung in his direction. He squelched below, dripping, protected from physical castigation by the clacking bill of his captive, which discouraged anyone from getting too close to him.

A nasty chunking sound and a crow of triumph from the other side of the deck announced Murphy's use of an ax to dispatch his erstwhile nemesis. The seamen clustered round the corpse, knives drawn, to get pieces of the skin. Further enthusiastic chopping, and Murphy came strolling past, beaming, a choice section of tail under his arm, the huge yellow liver hanging from one hand in a bag of netting, and the bloody ax slung over his shoulder.

"Not drowned, are ye?" he said, ruffling Jamie's damp hair with his spare hand. "I can't see why ye'd bother wi' the little bugger, myself, but I'll say 'twas bravely done. I'll brew ye up a fine broth from the tail, to keep off the chill," he promised, and stumped off, planning menus aloud.

"Why did he do it?" I asked. "Mr. Willoughby, I mean."

Jamie shook his head and blew his nose on his shirttail.

"Damned if I know. He wanted the bird, I expect, but I couldna say why. To eat, maybe?"

Murphy overheard this and swung round at the head of the galley ladder, frowning.

"Ye can't eat pelicans," he said, shaking his head in disapproval. "Fishy-tasting, no matter how ye cook 'em. And God knows what one's doing out here anyway; they're shorebirds, pelicans. Blown out by a storm I suppose. Awkward buggers." His bald head disappeared into his realm, murmuring happily of dried parsley and cayenne.

Jamie laughed and stood up.

"Aye, well, perhaps it's only he wants the feathers to make quills of. Come along below, Sassenach. Ye can help me dry my back."

He had spoken jokingly, but as soon as the words were out of his mouth, his face went blank. He glanced quickly to port, where the crew was arguing and jostling over the remains of the shark, while

Fergus and Marsali cautiously examined the severed head, lying gape-jawed on the deck. Then his eyes met mine, with a perfect understanding.

Thirty seconds later, we were below in his cabin. Cold drops from his wet hair rained over my shoulders and slid down my bosom, but his mouth was hot and urgent. The hard curves of his back glowed warm through the soaked fabric of the shirt that stuck to them.

"Ifrinn!" he said breathlessly, breaking loose long enough to yank at his breeches. "Christ, they're stuck to me! I canna get them off!"

Snorting with laughter, he jerked at the laces, but the water had soaked them into a hopeless knot.

"A knife!" I said. "Where's a knife?" Snorting myself at the sight of him, struggling frantically to get his drenched shirttail out of his breeches, I began to rummage through the drawers of the desk, tossing out bits of paper, bottle of ink, a snuffbox—everything but a knife. The closest thing was an ivory letter opener, made in the shape of a hand with a pointing finger.

I seized upon this and grasped him by the waistband, trying to saw at the tangled laces.

He yelped in alarm and backed away.

"Christ, be careful wi' that, Sassenach! It's no going to do ye any good to get my breeks off, and ye geld me in the process!"

Half-crazed with lust as we were, that seemed funny enough to double us both up laughing.

"Here!" Rummaging in the chaos of his berth, he snatched up his dirk and brandished it triumphantly. An instant later, the laces were severed and the sopping breeks lay puddled on the floor.

He seized me, picked me up bodily, and laid me on the desk, heedless of crumpled papers and scattered quills. Tossing my skirts up past my waist, he grabbed my hips and half-lay on me, his hard thighs forcing my legs apart.

It was like grasping a salamander; a blaze of heat in a chilly shroud. I gasped as the tail of his sopping shirt touched my bare belly, then gasped again as I heard footsteps in the passage.

"Stop!" I hissed in his ear. "Someone's coming!"

"Too late," he said, with breathless certainty. "I must have ye, or die."

He took me, with one quick, ruthless thrust, and I bit his shoulder hard, tasting salt and wet linen, but he made no sound. Two strokes, three, and I had my legs locked tight around his buttocks, my cry muffled in his shirt, not caring either who else might be coming.

He had me, quickly and thoroughly, and thrust himself home, and home, and home again, with a deep sound of triumph in his throat, shuddering and shaking in my arms.

Two minutes later, the cabin door swung open. Innes looked slowly round the wreckage of the room. His soft brown gaze traveled from the ravaged desk to me, sitting damp and disheveled, but respectably clothed, upon the berth, and rested at last on Jamie, who sat collapsed on a stool, still clad in his wet shirt, chest heaving and the deep red color fading slowly from his face.

Innes's nostrils flared delicately, but he said nothing. He walked into the cabin, nodding at me, and bent to reach under Fergus's berth, whence he pulled out a bottle of brandywine.

"For the Chinee," he said to me. "So as he mightn't take a chill." He turned toward the door and paused, squinting thoughtfully at Jamie.

"Ye might should have Mr. Murphy make ye some broth on that same account, Mac Dubh. They do say as 'tis dangerous to get chilled after hard work, aye? Ye dinna want to take the ague." There was a faint twinkle in the mournful brown depths.

Jamie brushed back the salty tangle of his hair, a slow smile spreading across his face.

"Aye, well, and if it should come to that, Innes, at least I shall die a happy man."

* * *

We found out the next day what Mr. Willoughby wanted the pelican for. I found him on the afterdeck, the bird perched on a sail-chest beside him, its wings bound tight to its body by means of strips of cloth. It glared at me with round yellow eyes, and clacked its bill in warning.

Mr. Willoughby was pulling in a line, on the end of which was a small, wriggling purple squid. Detaching this, he held it up in front of the pelican and said something in Chinese. The bird regarded him with deep suspicion, but didn't move. Quickly, he seized the upper bill in his hand, pulled it up, and tossed the squid into the bird's pouch. The pelican, looking surprised, gulped convulsively and swallowed it.

"Hao-liao," Mr. Willoughby said approvingly, stroking the bird's head. He saw me watching, and beckoned me to come closer. Keeping a cautious eye on the wicked bill, I did so.

"Ping An," he said, indicating the pelican. "Peaceful one." The bird erected a small crest of white feathers, for all the world as though it were pricking up its ears at its name, and I laughed.

"Really? What are you going to do with him?"

"I teach him hunt for me," the little Chinese said matter-of-factly. "You watch."

I did. After several more squid and a couple of small fish had been caught and fed to the pelican, Mr. Willoughby removed another strip of soft cloth from the recesses of his costume, and wrapped this snugly round the bird's neck.

"Not want choke," he explained. "Not swallow fish." He then tied a length of light line tightly to this collar, motioned to me to stand back, and with a swift jerk, released the bindings that held the bird's wings.

Surprised at the sudden freedom, the pelican waddled back and forth on the locker, flapped its huge bony wings once or twice, and then shot into the sky in an explosion of feathers.

A pelican on the ground is a comical thing, all awkward angles, splayed feet, and gawky bill. A soaring pelican, circling over water, is a thing of wonder, graceful and primitive, startling as a pterodactyl among the sleeker forms of gulls and petrels.

Ping An, the peaceful one, soared to the limit of his line, struggled to go higher, then, as though resigned, began to circle. Mr. Willoughby, eyes squinted nearly shut against the sun, spun slowly round and round on the deck below, playing the pelican like a kite.

All the hands in the rigging and on deck nearby stopped what they were doing to watch in fascination.

Sudden as a bolt from a crossbow, the pelican folded its wings and dived, cleaving the water with scarcely a splash. As it popped to the surface, looking mildly surprised, Mr. Willoughby began to tow it in. Aboard once more, the pelican was persuaded with some difficulty to give up its catch, but at last suffered its captor to reach cautiously into the leathery subgular pouch and extract a fine, fat sea bream.

Mr. Willoughby smiled pleasantly at a gawking Picard, took out a small knife, and slit the still-living fish down the back. Pinioning the bird in one wiry arm, he loosened the collar with his other hand, and offered it a flapping piece of bream, which Ping An eagerly snatched from his fingers and gulped.

"His," Mr. Willoughby explained, wiping blood and scales carelessly on the leg of his trousers. "Mine," nodding toward the half-fish still sitting on the locker, now motionless.

Within a week, the pelican was entirely tame, able to fly free, collared, but without the tethering line, returning to his master to regurgitate a pouchful of shining fish at his feet. When not fishing, Ping An either took up a position on the crosstrees, much to the displeasure of the crewmen responsible for swabbing the deck beneath, or followed Mr. Willoughby around the deck, waddling absurdly from side to side, eight-foot wings half-spread for balance.

The crew, both impressed by the fishing and wary of Ping An's great snapping bill, steered clear of Mr. Willoughby, who made his words each day beside the mast, weather permitting, secure under the benign yellow eye of his new friend.

I paused one day to watch Mr. Willoughby at his work, staying out of sight behind the shelter of the mast. He sat for a moment, a look of quiet satisfaction on his face, contemplating the finished page. I couldn't read the characters, of course, but the shape of the whole thing was somehow very pleasing to look at.

Then he glanced quickly around, as though checking to see that no one was coming, picked up the brush, and with great care, added a final character, in the upper left corner of the page. Without asking, I knew it was his signature.

He sighed then, and lifted his face to look out over the rail. Not inscrutable, by any means, his expression was filled with a dreaming delight, and I knew that whatever he saw, it was neither the ship, nor the heaving ocean beyond.

At last, he sighed again and shook his head, as though to himself. He laid hands on the paper, and quickly, gently, folded it, once, and twice, and again. Then rising to his feet, he went to the rail, extended his hands over the water, and let the folded white shape fall.

It tumbled toward the water. Then the wind caught it and whirled it upward, a bit of white receding in the distance, looking much like the gulls and terns who squawked behind the ship in search of scraps.

Mr. Willoughby didn't stay to watch it, but turned away from the rail and went below, the dream still stamped on his small, round face.

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MR. WILLOUGHBY'S TALE

As we passed the center of the Atlantic gyre and headed south, the days and evenings became warm, and the off-duty crew began to congregate on the forecastle for a time after supper, to sing songs, dance to Brodie Cooper's fiddle, or listen to stories. With the same instinct that makes children camping in the wood tell ghost stories, the men seemed particularly fond of horrible tales of shipwreck and the perils of the sea.

As we passed farther south, and out the realm of Kraken and sea serpent, the mood for monsters passed, and the men began instead to tell stories of their homes.

It was after most of these had been exhausted that Maitland, the cabin boy, turned to Mr. Willoughby, crouched as usual against the foot of the mast, with his cup cradled to his chest.

"How was it that you came from China, Willoughby?" Maitland asked curiously. "I've not seen more than a handful of Chinese sailors, though folk do say as there's a great many people in China. Is it such a fine place that the inhabitants don't care to take leave of it, perhaps?"

At first demurring, the little Chinese seemed mildly flattered at the interest provoked by this question. With a bit more urging, he consented to tell of his departure from his homeland—requiring only that Jamie should translate for him, his own English being inadequate to the task. Jamie readily agreeing, he sat down beside Mr. Willoughby, and cocked his head to listen.

"I was a Mandarin," Mr. Willoughby began, in Jamie's voice, "a Mandarin of letters, one gifted in composition. I wore a silk gown, embroidered in very many colors, and over this, the scholar's blue silk gown, with the badge of my office embroidered upon breast and back—the figure of a *feng-huang*—a bird of fire."

"I think he means a phoenix," Jamie added, turning to me for a moment before directing his attention back to the patiently waiting Mr. Willoughby, who began speaking again at once.

"I was born in Pekin, the Imperial City of the Son of Heaven—"

"That is how they call their emperor," Fergus whispered to me. "Such presumption, to equate their king with the Lord Jesus!"

"Shh," hissed several people, turning indignant faces toward Fergus. He made a rude gesture at Maxwell Gordon, but fell silent, turning back to the small figure sitting crouched against the mast.

"I was found early to have some skill in composition, and while I was not at first adept in the use of brush and ink, I learned at last with great effort to make the representations of my brush resemble the ideas that danced like cranes within my mind. And so I came to the notice of Wu-Xien, a Mandarin of the Imperial Household, who took me to live with him, and oversaw my training.

"I rose rapidly in merit and eminence, so that before my twenty-sixth birthday, I had attained a globe of red coral upon my hat. And then came an evil wind, that blew the seeds of misfortune into my garden. It may be that I was cursed by an enemy, or perhaps that in my arrogance I had omitted to make proper sacrifice—for surely I was not lacking in reverence to my ancestors, being careful always to visit my family's tomb each year, and to have joss sticks always burning in the Hall of Ancestors—"

"If his compositions were always so long-winded, no doubt the Son of Heaven lost patience and tossed him in the river," Fergus muttered cynically.

"—but whatever the cause," Jamie's voice continued, "my poetry came before the eyes of Wan-Mei, the Emperor's Second Wife. Second Wife was a woman of great power, having borne no less than four sons, and when she asked that I might become part of her own household, the request was granted at once."

"And what was wrong wi' that?" demanded Gordon, leaning forward in interest. "A chance to get on in the world, surely?"

Mr. Willoughby evidently understood the question, for he nodded in Gordon's direction as he continued, and Jamie's voice took up the story.

"Oh, the honor was inestimable; I should have had a large house of my own within the walls of the palace, and a guard of soldiers to escort my palanquin, with a triple umbrella borne before me in symbol of my office, and perhaps even a peacock feather for my hat. My name would have been inscribed in letters of gold in the Book of Merit."

The little Chinaman paused, scratching at his scalp. The hair had begun to sprout from the shaved part, making him look rather like a tennis ball.

"However, there is a condition of service within the Imperial Household; all the servants of the royal wives must be eunuchs."

A gasp of horror greeted this, followed by a babble of agitated comment, in which the remarks "Bloody heathen!" and "Yellow bastards!" were heard to predominate.

"What is a eunuch?" Marsali asked, looking bewildered.

"Nothing you need ever concern yourself with, *chèrie*," Fergus assured her, slipping an arm about her shoulders. "So you ran, *mon ami*?" he addressed Mr. Willoughby in tones of deepest sympathy. "I should do the same, without doubt!"

A deep murmur of heartfelt approbation reinforced this sentiment. Mr. Willoughby seemed somewhat heartened by such evident approval; he bobbed his head once or twice at his listeners before resuming his story.

"It was most dishonorable of me to refuse the Emperor's gift. And yet—it is a grievous weakness—I had fallen in love with a woman."

There was a sympathetic sigh at this, most sailors being wildly romantic souls, but Mr. Willoughby stopped, jerking at Jamie's sleeve and saying something to him.

"Oh, I'm wrong," Jamie corrected himself. "He says it was not '*a* woman'—just 'Woman'—all women, or the idea of women in general, he means. That's it?" he asked, looking down at Mr. Willoughby.

The Chinaman nodded, satisfied, and sat back. The moon was full up by now, three-quarters full, and bright enough to show the little Mandarin's face as he talked.

"Yes," he said, through Jamie, "I thought much of women; their grace and beauty, blooming like lotus flowers, floating like milkweed on the wind. And the myriad sounds of them, sometimes like the chatter of ricebirds, or the song of nightingales; sometimes the cawing of crows," he added with a smile that creased his eyes to slits and brought his hearers to laughter, "but even then I loved them.

"I wrote all my poems to Woman—sometimes they were addressed to one lady or another, but most often to Woman alone. To the taste of breasts like apricots, the warm scent of a woman's navel when she wakens in the winter, the warmth of a mound that fills your hand like a peach, split with ripeness."

Fergus, scandalized, put his hands over Marsali's ears, but the rest of his hearers were most receptive.

"No wonder the wee fellow was an esteemed poet," Raeburn said with approval. "It's verra heathen, but I like it!"

"Worth a red knob on your hat, anyday," Maitland agreed.

"Almost worth learning a bit of Chinee for," the master's mate chimed in, eyeing Mr. Willoughby with fresh interest. "Does he have a lot of those poems?"

Jamie waved the audience—by now augmented by most of the off-duty hands—to silence and said, "Go on, then," to Mr. Willoughby.

"I fled on the Night of Lanterns," the Chinaman said. "A great festival, and one when people would be thronging the streets; there would be no danger of being noticed by the watchmen. Just after dark, as the processions were assembling throughout the city, I put on the garments of a traveler—"

"That's like a pilgrim," Jamie interjected, "they go to visit their ancestors' tombs far away, and wear white clothes—that's for mourning, ye ken?"

"—and I left my house. I made my way through the crowds without difficulty, carrying a small anonymous lantern I had bought—one without my name and place of residence painted on it. The watchmen were hammering upon their bamboo drums, the servants of the great households beating gongs, and from the roof of the palace, fireworks were being set off in great profusion."

The small round face was marked by nostalgia, as he remembered.

"It was in a way a most appropriate farewell for a poet," he said. "Fleeing nameless, to the sound of great applause. As I passed the soldiers' garrison at the city gate, I looked back, to see the many roofs of the Palace outlined by bursting flowers of red and gold. It looked like a magic garden—and a forbidden one, for me."

Yi Tien Cho had made his way without incident through the night, but had nearly been caught the next day.

"I had forgotten my fingernails," he said. He spread out a hand, small and short-fingered, the nails bitten to the quicks. "For a Mandarin has long nails, as symbol that he is not obliged to work with his hands, and my own were the length of one of my finger joints."

A servant at the house where he had stopped for refreshment next day saw them, and ran to tell the guard. Yi Tien Cho ran, too, and succeeded at last in eluding his pursuers by sliding into a wet ditch and lying hidden in the bushes.

"While lying there, I destroyed my nails, of course," he said. He waggled the little finger of his right hand. "I was obliged to tear that nail out, for it had a golden *da zi* inlaid in it, which I could not dislodge."

He had stolen a peasant's clothes from a bush where they had been hung to dry, leaving the torn-out nail with its golden character in exchange, and made his way slowly across country toward the coast. At first he paid for his food with the small store of money he had brought away, but outside Lulong he met with a band of robbers, who took his money but left him his life.

"And after that," he said simply, "I stole food when I could, and starved when I could not. And at last the wind of fortune changed a little, and I met with a group of traveling apothecaries, on their way to the physicians' fair near the coast. In return for my skill at drawing banners for their booth and composing labels extolling the virtues of their medicines, they carried me along with them."

Once reaching the coast, he had made his way to the waterfront, and tried there to pass himself off as a seaman, but failed utterly, as his fingers, so skillful with brush and ink, knew nothing of the art of knots and lines. There were several foreign ships in port; he had chosen the one whose sailors looked the most barbarous as being likely to carry him farthest away, and seizing his chance, had slipped past the deck guard and into the hold of the *Serafina,* bound for Edinburgh.

"You had always meant to leave the country altogether?" Fergus asked, interested. "It seems a desperate choice."

"Emperor's reach very long," Mr. Willoughby said softly in English, not waiting for translation. "I am exile, or I am dead."

His listeners gave a collective sigh at the awesome contemplation of such bloodthirsty power, and there was a moment of silence, with only the whine of the rigging overhead, while Mr. Willoughby picked up his neglected cup and drained the last drops of his grog.

He set it down, licking his lips, and laid his hand once more on Jamie's arm.

"It is strange," Mr. Willoughby said, and the air of reflection in his voice was echoed exactly by Jamie's, "but it was my joy of women that Second Wife saw and loved in my words. Yet by desiring to possess me—and my poems—she would have forever destroyed what she admired."

Mr. Willoughby uttered a small chuckle, whose irony was unmistakable.

"Nor is that the end of the contradiction my life has become. Because I could not bring myself to surrender my manhood, I have lost all else—honor, livelihood, country. By that, I mean not only the land itself, with the slopes of noble fir trees where I spent my summers in Tartary, and the great plains of the south, the flowing of rivers filled with fish, but also the loss of myself. My parents are dishonored, the tombs of my ancestors fall into ruin, and no joss burns before their images.

"All order, all beauty is lost. I am come to a place where the golden words of my poems are taken for the clucking of hens, and my brushstrokes for their scratchings. I am taken as less than the meanest beggar, who swallows serpents for the entertainment of the crowds, allowing passersby to draw the serpent from my mouth by its tail for the tiny payment that will let me live another day."

Mr. Willoughby glared round at his hearers, making his parallel evident.

"I am come to a country of women coarse and rank as bears." The Chinaman's voice rose passionately, though Jamie kept to an even tone, reciting the words, but stripping them of feeling. "They are creatures of no grace, no learning, ignorant, bad-smelling, their bodies gross with sprouting hair, like dogs! And these—these! disdain me as a yellow worm, so that even the lowest whores will not lie with me.

"For the love of Woman, I am come to a place where no woman is worthy of love!" At this point, seeing the dark looks on the seamen's faces, Jamie ceased translating, and instead tried to calm the Chinaman, laying a big hand on the blue-silk shoulder.

"Aye, man, I quite see. And I'm sure there's no a man present would have done otherwise, given the choice. Is that not so, lads?" he asked, glancing over his shoulder with eyebrows raised significantly.

His moral force was sufficient to extort a grudging murmur of agreement, but the crowd's sympathy with the tale of Mr. Willoughby's travails had been quite dissipated by his insulting conclusion. Pointed remarks were made about licentious, ungrateful heathen, and a great many extravagantly admiring compliments paid to Marsali and me, as the men dispersed aft.

Fergus and Marsali left then, too, Fergus pausing en route to inform Mr. Willoughby that any further remarks about European women would cause him, Fergus, to be obliged to wrap his, Willoughby's, queue about his neck and strangle him with it.

Mr. Willoughby ignored remarks and threats alike, merely staring straight ahead, his black eyes shining with memory and grog. Jamie at last stood up, too, and held out a hand to help me down from my cask.

It was as we were turning to leave that the Chinaman reached down between his legs. Completely without lewdness, he cupped his testicles, so that the rounded mass pressed against the silk. He rolled them slowly in the palm of his hand, staring at the bulge in deep meditation.

"Sometime," he said, as though to himself, "I think not worth it."

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46

WE MEET A PORPOISE

I had been conscious for some time that Marsali was trying to get up the nerve to speak to me. I had thought she would, sooner or later; whatever her feelings toward me, I was the only other woman aboard. I did my best to help, smiling kindly and saying "Good morning," but the first move would have to be hers.

She made it, finally, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, a month after we had left Scotland.

I was writing in our shared cabin, making surgical notes on a minor amputation—two smashed toes on one of the foredeck hands. I had just completed a drawing of the surgical site, when a shadow darkened the doorway of the cabin, and I looked up to see Marsali standing there, chin thrust out pugnaciously.

"I need to know something," she said firmly. "I dinna like ye, and I reckon ye ken that, but Da says you're a wisewoman, and I think you're maybe an honest woman, even if ye are a whore, so you'll maybe tell me."

There were any number of possible responses to this remarkable statement, but I refrained from making any of them.

"Maybe I will," I said, putting down the pen. "What is it you need to know?"

Seeing that I wasn't angry, she slid into the cabin and sat down on the stool, the only available spot.

"Weel, it's to do wi' bairns," she explained. "And how ye get them."

I raised one eyebrow. “Your mother didn’t tell you where babies come from?”

She snorted impatiently, her small blond brows knotted in fierce scorn. “O’ course I ken where they come from! Any fool knows that much. Ye let a man put his prick between your legs, and there’s the devil to pay, nine months later. What I want to know is how ye *don’t* get them.”

“I see.” I regarded her with considerable interest. “You don’t want a child? Er … once you’re properly married, I mean? Most young women seem to.”

“Well,” she said slowly, twisting a handful of her dress. “I think I maybe would like a babe sometime. For itself, I mean. If it maybe had dark hair, like Fergus.” A hint of dreaminess flitted across her face, but then her expression hardened once more.

“But I can’t,” she said.

“Why not?”

She pushed out her lips, thinking, then pulled them in again. “Well, because of Fergus. We havena lain together yet. We havena been able to do more than kiss each other now and again behind the hatch covers—thanks to Da and his bloody-minded notions,” she added bitterly.

“Amen,” I said, with some wryness.

“Eh?”

“Never mind.” I waved a hand, dismissing it. “What has that got to do with not wanting babies?”

“I want to like it,” she said matter-of-factly. “When we get to the prick part.”

I bit the inside of my lower lip.

“I … er … imagine that has something to do with Fergus, but I’m afraid I don’t quite see what it has to do with babies.”

Marsali eyed me warily. Without hostility for once, more as though she were estimating me in some fashion.

“Fergus likes ye,” she said.

“I’m fond of him, too,” I answered cautiously, not sure where the conversation was heading. “I’ve known him for quite a long time, ever since he was a boy.”

She relaxed suddenly, some of the tension going out of the slender shoulders.

"Oh. You'll know about it, then—where he was born?"

Suddenly I understood her wariness.

"The brothel in Paris? Yes, I know about that. He told you, then?"

She nodded. "Aye, he did. A long time ago, last Hogmanay." Well, I supposed a year was a long time to a fifteen-year-old.

"That's when I told him I loved him," she went on. Her eyes were fixed on her skirt, and a faint tinge of pink showed in her cheeks. "And he said he loved me, too, but my mother wasna going to ever agree to the match. And I said why not, there was nothing so awful about bein' French, not everybody could be Scots, and I didna think his hand mattered a bit either—after all, there was Mr. Murray wi' his wooden leg, and Mother liked *him* well enough—but then he said, no, it was none of those things, and then he told me—about Paris, I mean, and being born in a brothel and being a pickpocket until he met Da."

She raised her eyes, a look of incredulity in the light blue depths. "I think he thought I'd *mind*," she said, wonderingly. "He tried to go away, and said he wouldna see me anymore. Well—" she shrugged, tossing her fair hair out of the way, "I soon took care of that." She looked at me straight on, then, hands clasped in her lap.

"It's just I didna want to mention it, in case ye didn't know already. But since ye do … well, it's no Fergus I'm worried about. He says he knows what to do, and I'll like it fine, once we're past the first time or two. But that's not what my Mam told me."

"What *did* she tell you?" I asked, fascinated.

A small line showed between the light brows. "Well …" Marsali said slowly, "it wasna so much she said it—though she did say, when I told her about Fergus and me, that he'd do terrible things to me because of living wi' whores and having one for a mother—it was more she … she acted like it."

Her face was a rosy pink now, and she kept her eyes in her lap, where her fingers twisted themselves in the folds of her skirt. The wind seemed to be picking up; small strands of blond hair rose gently from her head, wafted by the breeze from the window.

"When I started to bleed the first time, she told me what to do, and about how it was part o' the curse of Eve, and I must just put up wi' it. And I said, what was the curse of Eve? And she read me from the Bible all about how St. Paul said women were terrible, filthy sinners because of what Eve did, but they could still be saved by suffering and bearing children."

"I never did think a lot of St. Paul," I observed, and she looked up, startled.

"But he's in the Bible!" she said, shocked.

"So are a lot of other things," I said dryly. "Heard that story about Gideon and his daughter, have you? Or the fellow who sent his lady out to be raped to death by a crowd of ruffians, so they wouldn't get *him*? God's chosen men, just like Paul. But go on, do."

She gaped at me for a minute, but then closed her mouth and nodded, a little stunned.

"Aye, well. Mother said as how it meant I was nearly old enough to be wed, and when I did marry, I must be sure to remember it was a woman's duty to do as her husband wanted, whether she liked it or no. And she looked so sad when she told me that … I thought whatever a woman's duty was, it must be awful, and from what St. Paul said about suffering and bearing children …"

She stopped and sighed. I sat quietly, waiting. When she resumed, it was haltingly, as though she had trouble choosing her words.

"I canna remember my father. I was only three when the English took him away. But I was old enough when my mother wed—wed Jamie—to see how it was between them." She bit her lip; she wasn't used to calling Jamie by his name.

"Da—Jamie, I mean—he's kind, I think; he always was to Joan and me. But I'd see, when he'd lay his hand on my mother's waist and try to draw her close—she'd shrink away from him." She gnawed her lip some more, then continued.

"I could see she was afraid; she didna like him to touch her. But I couldna see that he ever did anything to be afraid *of*, not where we could see—so I thought it must be something he did when they were in their bed, alone. Joan and I used to wonder what it could be; Mam never had marks on her face or her arms, and she didna limp when she walked—not like Magdalen Wallace, whose husband always beats her when he's drunk on market day—so we didna think Da hit her."

Marsali licked her lips, dried by the warm salt air, and I pushed the jug of water toward her. She nodded in thanks and poured a cupful.

"So I thought," she said, eyes fixed on the stream of water, "that it must be because Mam had had children—had us—and she knew it would be terrible again and so she didna want to go to bed with—with Jamie for fear of it."

She took a drink, then set down the cup and looked at me directly, firming her chin in challenge.

"I saw ye with my Da," she said. "Just that minute, before he saw me. I—I think ye liked what he was doing to you in the bed."

I opened my mouth, and closed it again.

"Well … yes," I said, a little weakly. "I did."

She grunted in satisfaction. "Mmphm. And ye like it when he touches ye; I've seen. Well, then. Ye havena got any children. And I'd heard there are ways not to have them, only nobody seems to know just how, but you must, bein' a wisewoman and all."

She tilted her head to one side, studying me.

"I'd like a babe," she admitted, "but if it's got to be a babe or liking Fergus, then it's Fergus. So it won't be a babe—if you'll tell me how."

I brushed the curls back behind my ear, wondering where on earth to start.

"Well," I said, drawing a deep breath, "to begin with, I have had children."

Her eyes sprang wide and round at this.

"Ye do? Does Da—does Jamie know?"

"Well, of course he does," I replied testily. "They were his."

"I never heard Da had any bairns at all." The pale eyes narrowed with suspicion.

"I don't imagine he thought it was any of your business," I said, perhaps a trifle more sharply than necessary. "And it's not, either," I added, but she just raised her brows and went on looking suspicious.

"The first baby died," I said, capitulating. "In France. She's buried there. My—our second daughter is grown now; she was born after Culloden."

"So he's never seen her? The grown one?" Marsali spoke slowly, frowning.

I shook my head, unable to speak for a moment. There seemed to be something stuck in my throat, and I reached for the water. Marsali pushed the jug absently in my direction, leaning against the swing of the ship.

"That's verra sad," she said softly, to herself. Then she glanced up at me, frowning once more in concentration as she tried to work it all out.

"So ye've had children, and it didna make a difference to you? Mmphm. But it's been a long while, then—did ye have other men whilst ye were away in France?" Her lower lip came up over the upper one, making her look very much like a small and stubborn bulldog.

"That," I said firmly, putting the cup down, "is definitely none of your business. As to whether childbirth makes a difference, possibly it does to some women, but not all of them. But whether it does or not, there are good reasons why you might not want to have a child right away."

She withdrew the pouting underlip and sat up straight, interested.

"So there is a way?"

"There are a lot of ways, and unfortunately most of them don't work," I told her, with a pang of regret for my prescription pad and the reliability of contraceptive pills. Still, I remembered well enough the advice of the *maîtresses sage-femme*, the experienced midwives of the Hôpital des Anges, where I had worked in Paris twenty years before.

"Hand me the small box in the cupboard over there," I said, pointing to the doors above her head. "Yes, that one.

"Some of the French midwives make a tea of bayberry and valerian," I said, rummaging in my medicine box. "But it's rather dangerous, and not all that dependable, I don't think."

"D'ye miss her?" Marsali asked abruptly. I glanced up, startled. "Your, daughter?" Her face was abnormally expressionless, and I suspected the question had more to do with Laoghaire than with me.

"Yes," I said simply. "But she's grown; she has her own life." The lump in my throat was back, and I bent my head over the medicine box, hiding my face. The chances of Laoghaire ever seeing Marsali again were just about as good as the chances that I would ever see Brianna; it wasn't a thought I wanted to dwell on.

"Here," I said, pulling out a large chunk of cleaned sponge. I took one of the thin surgical knives from the fitted slots in the lid of the box and carefully sliced off several thin pieces, about three inches square. I searched through the box again and found the small bottle of tansy oil, with which I carefully saturated one square under Marsali's fascinated gaze.

"All right," I said. "That's about how much oil to use. If you haven't any oil, you can dip the sponge in vinegar—even wine will work, in a pinch. You put the bit of sponge well up inside you before you go to bed with a man—mind you do it even the first time; you can get with child from even once."

Marsali nodded, her eyes wide, and touched the sponge gently with a forefinger. "Aye? And—and after? Do I take it out again, or —"

An urgent shout from above, coupled with a sudden heeling of the *Artemis* as she backed her mainsails, put an abrupt end to the conversation. Something was happening up above.

"I'll tell you later," I said, pushing the sponge and bottle toward her, and headed for the passage.

Jamie was standing with the Captain on the afterdeck, watching the approach of a large ship behind us. She was perhaps three times the size of the *Artemis*, three-masted, with a perfect forest of rigging and sail, through which small black figures hopped like fleas on a bedsheet. A puff of white smoke floated in her wake, token of a cannon recently fired.

"Is she firing on us?" I asked in amazement.

"No," Jamie said grimly. "A warning shot only. She means to board us."

"Can they?" I addressed the question to Captain Raines, who was looking even more glum than usual, the downturned corners of his mouth sunk in his beard.

"They can," he said. "We'll not outrun her in a stiff breeze like this, on the open sea."

"What is she?" Her ensign flew at the masthead, but seen against the sun at this distance, it looked completely black.

Jamie glanced down at me, expressionless. "A British man-o-war, Sassenach. Seventy-four guns. Perhaps ye'd best go below."

This was bad news. While Britain was no longer at war with France, relations between the two countries were by no means cordial. And while the *Artemis* was armed, she had only four twelve-pound guns; sufficient to deter small pirates, but no match for a man-of-war.

"What can they want of us?" Jamie asked the Captain. Raines shook his head, his soft, plump face set grimly.

"Likely pressing," he answered. "She's shorthanded; you can see by her rigging—and her foredeck all ahoo," he noted disapprovingly, eyes fixed on the man-of-war, now looming as she drew alongside. He glanced at Jamie. "They can press any of our hands who look to be British—which is something like half the crew. And yourself, Mr. Fraser—unless you wish to pass for French?"

"Damn," Jamie said softly. He glanced at me and frowned. "Did I not tell ye to get below?"

"You did," I said, not going. I drew closer to him, my eyes fixed on the man-of-war, where a small boat was now being lowered. One officer, in a gilded coat and laced hat, was climbing down the side.

"If they press the British hands," I asked Captain Raines, "what will happen to them?"

"They'll serve aboard the *Porpoise*—that's her," he nodded at the man-of-war, which sported a puff-lipped fish as the figurehead, "as members of the Royal Navy. She may release the pressed hands when she reaches port—or she may not."

"What? You mean they can just kidnap men and make them serve as sailors for as long as they please?" A thrill of fear shot through me, at the thought of Jamie's being abruptly taken away.

"They can," the Captain said shortly. "And if they do, we'll have a job of it to reach Jamaica ourselves, with half a crew." He turned abruptly and went forward, to greet the arriving boat.

Jamie gripped my elbow and squeezed.

"They'll not take Innes or Fergus," he said. "They'll help ye to hunt for Young Ian. If they take us"—I noted the "us" with a sharp pang—"you'll go on to Jared's place at Sugar Bay, and search from there." He looked down and gave me a brief smile. "I'll meet ye there," he said, and gave my elbow a reassuring squeeze. "I canna say how long it might be, but I'll come to ye there."

"But you could pass as a Frenchman!" I protested. "You know you could!"

He looked at me for a moment, and shook his head, smiling faintly.

"No," he said softly. "I canna let them take my men, and stay behind, hiding under a Frenchman's name."

"But—" I started to protest that the Scottish smugglers were *not* his men, had no claim on his loyalty, and then stopped, realizing that it was useless. The Scots might not be his tenants or his kin, and one of them might well be a traitor. But he had brought them here, and if they went, he would go with them.

"Dinna mind it, Sassenach," he said softly. "I shall be all right, one way or the other. But I think it is best if our name is Malcolm, for the moment."

He patted my hand, then released it and went forward, shoulders braced to meet whatever was coming. I followed, more slowly. As the gig pulled alongside, I saw Captain Raines's eyebrows rise in astonishment.

"God save us, what is this?" he murmured under his breath, as a head appeared above the *Artemis*'s rail.

It was a young man, evidently in his late twenties, but with his face drawn and shoulders slumping with fatigue. A uniform coat that was too big for him had been tugged on over a filthy shirt, and he staggered slightly as the deck of the *Artemis* rose beneath him.

"You are the captain of this ship?" The Englishman's eyes were red-rimmed from tiredness, but he picked Raines from the crowd of grim-faced hands at a glance. "I am acting captain Thomas Leonard, of His Majesty's ship *Porpoise*. For the love of God," he said, speaking hoarsely, "have you a surgeon aboard?"

* * *

Over a warily offered glass of port below, Captain Leonard explained that the *Porpoise* had suffered an outbreak of some infectious plague, beginning some four weeks before.

"Half the crew are down with it," he said, wiping a crimson drop from his stubbled chin. "We've lost thirty men so far, and look fair to lose a lot more."

"You lost your captain?" Raines asked.

Leonard's thin face flushed slightly. "The—the captain and the two senior lieutenants died last week, and the surgeon and the surgeon's mate, as well. I was third lieutenant." That explained both his surprising youth and his nervous state; to be landed suddenly in sole command of a large ship, a crew of six hundred men, and a rampant infection aboard, was enough to rattle anyone.

"If you have anyone aboard with some medical experience …" He looked hopefully from Captain Raines to Jamie, who stood by the desk, frowning slightly.

"I'm the *Artemis*'s surgeon, Captain Leonard," I said, from my place in the doorway. "What symptoms do your men have?"

"You?" The young captain's head swiveled to stare at me. His jaw hung slackly open, showing the furred tongue and stained teeth of a tobacco-chewer.

"My wife's a rare healer, Captain," Jamie said mildly. "If it's help ye came for, I'd advise ye to answer her questions, and do as she tells ye."

Leonard blinked once, but then took a deep breath and nodded. "Yes. Well, it seems to start with griping pains in the belly, and a terrible flux and vomiting. The afflicted men complain of headache, and they have considerable fever. They …"

“Do some of them have a rash on their bellies?” I interrupted.

He nodded eagerly. “They do. And some of them bleed from the arse as well. Oh, I beg pardon, ma’am,” he said, suddenly flustered. “I meant no offense, only that—”

“I think I know what that might be,” I interrupted his apologies. A feeling of excitement began to grow in me; the feeling of a diagnosis just under my hands, and the sure knowledge of how to proceed with it. The call of trumpets to a warhorse, I thought with wry amusement. “I’d need to look at them, to be sure, but—”

“My wife would be pleased to advise ye, Captain,” Jamie said firmly. “But I’m afraid she canna go aboard your ship.”

“Are you sure?” Captain Leonard looked from one to the other of us, eyes desperate with disappointment. “If she could only look at my crew …”

“No,” Jamie said, at the same moment I replied, “Yes, of course!”

There was an awkward silence for a moment. Then Jamie rose to his feet, said politely, “You’ll excuse us, Captain Leonard?” and dragged me bodily out of the cabin, down the passage to the afterhold.

“Are ye daft?” he hissed, still clutching me by one arm. “Ye canna be thinking of setting foot on a ship wi’ the plague! Risk your life and the crew and Young Ian, all for the sake of a pack of Englishmen?”

“It isn’t plague,” I said, struggling to get free. “And I wouldn’t be risking my life. Let go of my arm, you bloody Scot!”

He let go, but stood blocking the ladder, glowering at me.

“Listen,” I said, striving for patience. “It isn’t plague; I’m almost sure it’s typhoid fever—the rash sounds like it. I can’t catch that, I’ve been vaccinated for it.”

Momentary doubt flitted across his face. Despite my explanations, he was still inclined to consider germs and vaccines in the same league with black magic.

“Aye?” he said skeptically. “Well, perhaps that’s so, but still …”

“Look,” I said, groping for words. “I’m a doctor. They’re sick, and I can do something about it. I … it’s … well, I have to, that’s all!”

Judging from its effect, this statement appeared to lack something in eloquence. Jamie raised one eyebrow, inviting me to go on.

I took a deep breath. How should I explain it—the need to touch, the compulsion to heal? In his own way, Frank had understood. Surely there was a way to make it clear to Jamie.

"I took an oath," I said. "When I became a physician."

Both eyebrows went up. "An oath?" he echoed. "What sort of oath?"

I had said it aloud only the one time. Still, I had had a framed copy in my office; Frank had given it to me, a gift when I graduated from medical school. I swallowed a small thickening in my throat, closed my eyes, and read what I could remember from the scroll before my mind's eye.

"I swear by Apollo the physician, by Aesculapius, Hygeia, and Panacea, and I take to witness all the gods, all the goddesses, to keep according to my ability and my judgment the following Oath:

I will prescribe regimen for the good of my patients according to my ability and my judgment and never do harm to anyone. To please no one will I prescribe a deadly drug, nor give advice which may cause his death. But I will preserve the purity of my life and my art. In every house where I come I will enter only for the good of my patients, keeping myself far from all intentional ill-doing and all seduction, and especially from the pleasures of love with women or with men, be they free or slaves. All that may come to my knowledge in the exercise of my profession or outside of my profession or in daily commerce with men, which ought not to be spread abroad, I will keep secret and will never reveal. If I keep this oath faithfully, may I enjoy my life and practice my art, respected by all men and in all times; but if I swerve from it or violate it, may the reverse be my lot."

I opened my eyes, to find him looking down at me thoughtfully. "Er … parts of it are just for tradition," I explained.

The corner of his mouth twitched slightly. "I see," he said. "Well, the first part sounds a wee bit pagan, but I like the part about how ye willna seduce anyone."

"I thought you'd like that one," I said dryly. "Captain Leonard's virtue is safe with me."

He gave a small snort and leaned back against the ladder, running one hand slowly through his hair.

"Is that how it's done, then, in the company of physicians?" he asked. "Ye hold yourself bound to help whoever calls for it, even an enemy?"

"It doesn't make a great difference, you know, if they're ill or hurt." I looked up, searching his face for understanding.

"Aye, well," he said slowly. "I've taken an oath now and then, myself—and none of them lightly." He reached out and took my right hand, his fingers resting on my silver ring. "Some weigh heavier than others, though," he said, watching my face in turn.

He was very close to me, the sun from the hatchway overhead striping the linen of his sleeve, the skin of his hand a deep ruddy bronze where it cradled my own white fingers, and the glinting silver of my wedding ring.

"It does," I said softly, speaking to his thought. "You know it does." I laid my other hand against his chest, its gold ring glowing in a bar of sunlight. "But where one vow can be kept, without damage to another …?"

He sighed, deeply enough to move the hand on my chest, then bent and kissed me, very gently.

"Aye, well, I wouldna have ye be forsworn," he said, straightening up with a wry twist to his mouth. "You're sure of this vaccination of yours? It does work?"

"It works," I assured him.

"Perhaps I should go with ye," he said, frowning slightly.

"You can't—you haven't been vaccinated, and typhoid's awfully contagious."

"You're only thinking it's typhoid, from what Leonard says," he pointed out. "Ye dinna ken for sure that it's that."

"No," I admitted. "But there's only one way to find out."

* * *

I was assisted up onto the deck of the *Porpoise* by means of a bosun's chair, a terrorizing swing over empty air and frothing sea. I landed ignominiously in a sprawl on the deck. Once I regained my feet, I was astonished to find how solid the deck of the man-of-war felt, compared to the tiny, pitching quarterdeck of the *Artemis*, far below. It was like standing on the Rock of Gibraltar.

My hair had blown loose during the trip between the ships; I twisted it up and repinned it as best I could, then reached to take the medicine box I had brought from the midshipman who held it.

"You'd best show me where they are," I said. The wind was brisk, and I was aware that it was taking a certain amount of work on the part of both crews to keep the two ships close together, even as both drifted leeward.

It was dark in the tween-decks, the confined space lit by small oil lamps that hung from the ceiling, swaying gently with the rise and fall of the ship, so that the ranks of hammocked men lay in deep shadow, blotched with dim patches of light from above. They looked like pods of whales, or sleeping sea beasts, lying humped and black, side by side, swaying with the movement of the sea beneath.

The stench was overpowering. What air there was came down through crude ventilator shafts that reached the upper deck, but that wasn't a lot. Worse than unwashed seamen was the reek of vomitus and the ripe, throat-clogging smell of blood-streaked diarrhea, which liberally spattered the decking beneath the hammocks, where sufferers had been too ill to reach the few available chamber pots. My shoes stuck to the deck, coming away with a nasty sucking noise as I made my way cautiously into the area.

"Give me a better light," I said peremptorily to the apprehensive-looking young midshipman who had been told off to accompany me. He was holding a kerchief to his face and looked both scared and miserable, but he obeyed, holding up the lantern he carried so that I could peer into the nearest hammock.

The occupant groaned and turned away his face as the light struck him. He was flushed with fever, and his skin hot to the touch. I pulled his shirt up and felt his stomach; it too was hot, the skin distended and hard. As I prodded gently here and there, the man writhed like a worm on a hook, uttering piteous groans.

"It's all right," I said soothingly, urging him to flatten out again. "Yes, I'll help you; it will feel better soon. Let me look into your eyes, now. Yes, that's right."

I pulled back the eyelid; his pupil shrank in the light, leaving his eyes brown and red-rimmed with suffering.

"Christ, take away the light!" he gasped, jerking his head away. "It splits my head!" Fever, vomiting, abdominal cramps, headache.

"Do you have chills?" I asked, waving back the midshipman's lantern.

The answer was more a moan than a word, but in the affirmative. Even in the shadows, I could see that many of the men in the hammocks were wrapped in their blankets, though it was stifling hot here below.

If not for the headache, it could be simple gastroenteritis—but not with this many men stricken. Something very contagious indeed, and I was fairly sure what. Not malaria, coming *from* Europe to the Caribbean. Typhus was a possibility; spread by the common body louse, it was prone to rapid spread in close quarters like these, and the symptoms were similar to those I saw around me—with one distinctive difference.

That seaman didn't have the characteristic belly rash, nor the next, but the third one did. The light red rosettes were plain on the clammy white skin. I pressed firmly on one, and it disappeared, blinking back into existence a moment later, as the blood returned to the skin. I squeezed my way between the hammocks, the heavy, sweating bodies pressing in on me from either side, and made my way back to the companionway where Captain Leonard and two more of his midshipmen waited for me.

"It's typhoid," I told the Captain. I was as sure as I could be, lacking a microscope and blood culture.

"Oh?" His drawn face remained apprehensive. "Do you know what to do for it, Mrs. Malcolm?"

"Yes, but it won't be easy. The sick men need to be taken above, washed thoroughly, and laid where they can have fresh air to breathe. Beyond that, it's a matter of nursing; they'll need to have a liquid diet—and lots of water—*boiled* water, that's very important!—and sponging to bring down the fever. The most important thing is to avoid infecting any more of your crew, though. There are several things that need to be done—"

"Do them," he interrupted. "I shall give orders to have as many of the healthy men as can be spared to attend you; order them as you will."

"Well," I said, with a dubious glance at the surroundings. "I can make a start, and tell you how to be going on, but it's going to be a big job. Captain Raines and my husband will be anxious to be on our way."

"Mrs. Malcolm," the Captain said earnestly, "I shall be eternally grateful for any assistance you can render us. We are most urgently bound for Jamaica, and unless the remainder of my crew can be saved from this wicked illness, we will never reach that island." He spoke with profound seriousness, and I felt a twinge of pity for him.

"All right," I said with a sigh. "Send me a dozen healthy crewmen, for a start."

Climbing to the quarterdeck, I went to the rail and waved at Jamie, who was standing by the *Artemis*'s wheel, looking upward. I could see his face clearly, despite the distance; it was worried, but relaxed into a broad smile when he saw me.

"Are ye comin' down now?" he shouted, cupping his hands.

"Not yet!" I shouted back. "I need two hours!" Holding up two fingers to make my meaning clear in case he hadn't heard, I stepped back from the rail, but not before I saw the smile fade from his face. He'd heard.

I saw the sick men removed to the afterdeck, and a crew of hands set to strip them of their filthy clothes, and hose and sponge them with seawater from the pumps. I was in the galley, instructing the cook and galley crew in food-handling precautions, when I felt the movement of the deck under my feet.

The cook to whom I was talking snaked out a hand and snapped shut the latch of the cupboard behind him. With the utmost dispatch, he grabbed a loose pot that leapt off its shelf, thrust a large ham on a spit into the lower cupboard, and whirled to clap a lid on the boiling pot hung over the galley fire.

I stared at him in astonishment. I had seen Murphy perform this same odd ballet, whenever the *Artemis* cast off or changed course abruptly.

"What—" I said, but then abandoned the question, and headed for the quarterdeck, as fast as I could go. We were under way; big and solid as the *Porpoise* was, I could feel the vibration that ran through the keel as she took the wind.

I burst onto the deck to find a cloud of sails overhead, set and drawing, and the *Artemis* falling rapidly behind us. Captain Leonard was standing by the helmsman, looking back to the *Artemis*, as the master bawled commands to the men overhead.

"What are you doing?" I shouted. "You bloody little bastard, what's going on here?"

The Captain glanced at me, plainly embarrassed, but with his jaw set stubbornly.

"We must get to Jamaica with the utmost dispatch," he said. His cheeks were chapped red with the rushing sea wind, or he might have blushed. "I am sorry, Mrs. Malcolm—indeed I regret the necessity, but—"

"But nothing!" I said, furious. "Put about! Heave to! Drop the bloody anchor! You can't take me away like this!"

"I regret the necessity," he said again, doggedly. "But I believe that we require your continuing services most urgently, Mrs. Malcolm. Don't worry," he said, striving for a reassurance that he didn't achieve. He reached out as though to pat my shoulder, but then thought better of it. His hand dropped to his side.

"I have promised your husband that the navy will provide you accommodation in Jamaica until the *Artemis* arrives there."

He flinched backward at the look on my face, evidently afraid that I might attack him—and not without reason.

"What do you *mean* you promised my husband?" I said, through gritted teeth. "Do you mean that J—that Mr. Malcolm *permitted* you to abduct me?"

"Er … no. No, he didn't." The Captain appeared to be finding the interview a strain. He dragged a filthy handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow and the back of his neck. “He was most intransigent, I’m afraid.”

“Intransigent, eh? Well, so am I!” I stamped my foot on the deck, aiming for his toes, and missing only because he leapt agilely backward. “If you expect me to help you, you bloody kidnapper, just bloody think again!”

The Captain tucked his handkerchief away and set his jaw. “Mrs. Malcolm. You compel me to tell you what I told your husband. The *Artemis* sails under a French flag, and with French papers, but more than half her crew are Englishmen or Scots. I could have pressed these men to service here—and I badly need them. Instead, I have agreed to leave them unmolested, in return for the gift of your medical knowledge.”

“So you’ve decided to press me instead. And my husband *agreed* to this … this *bargain*?”

“No, he didn’t,” the young man said, rather dryly. “The captain of the *Artemis*, however, perceived the force of my argument.” He blinked down at me, his eyes swollen from days without sleep, the too-big jacket flapping around his slender torso. Despite his youth and his slovenly appearance, he had considerable dignity.

“I must beg your pardon for what must seem the height of ungentlemanly behavior, Mrs. Malcolm—but the truth is that I am desperate,” he said simply. “You may be our only chance. I must take it.”

I opened my mouth to reply, but then closed it. Despite my fury—and my profound unease about what Jamie was going to say when I saw him again—I felt some sympathy for his position. It was quite true that he stood in danger of losing most of his crew, without help. Even with my help, we would lose some—but that wasn’t a prospect I cared to dwell on.

“All right,” I said, through my teeth. “All … *right*!” I looked out over the rail, at the dwindling sails of the *Artemis*. I wasn’t prone to seasickness, but I felt a distinct hollowing in the pit of my stomach as the ship—and Jamie—fell far behind. “I wouldn’t appear to have a lot of choice in the matter. If you can spare as many men as possible to scrub down the tween-decks—oh, and have you any alcohol on board?”

He looked mildly surprised. “Alcohol? Well, there is the rum for the hands’ grog, and possibly some wine from the gun room locker. Will that do?”

“If that’s what you have, it will have to do.” I tried to push aside my own emotions, long enough to deal with the situation. “I suppose I must speak to the purser, then.”

“Yes, of course. Come with me.” Leonard started toward the companion-way that led belowdecks, then, flushing, stood back and gestured awkwardly to let me go first—lest my descent expose my lower limbs indelicately, I supposed. Biting my lip with a mixture of anger and amusement, I went.

I had just reached the bottom of the ladder when I heard a confusion of voices above.

“No, I tell ’ee, the captain’s not to be disturbed! Whatever you have to say will—”

“Leave go! I tell *you*, if you don’t let me speak to him now, it will be too late!”

And then Leonard’s voice, suddenly sharp as he turned to the interlopers. “Stevens? What is this? What’s the matter?”

“No matter, sir,” said the first voice, suddenly obsequious. “Only that Tompkins here is sure as he knows the cove what was on that ship—the big ’un, with the red hair. He says—”

“I haven’t time,” the captain said shortly. “Tell the mate, Tompkins, and I shall attend to it later.”

I was, naturally, halfway back up the ladder by the time these words were spoken, and listening for all I was worth.

The hatchway darkened as Leonard began the backward descent down the ladder. The young man glanced at me sharply, but I kept my face carefully blank, saying only, “Have you many food stores left, Captain? The sick men will need to be fed very carefully. I don’t suppose there would be any milk saboard, but—”

“Oh, there’s milk,” he said, suddenly more cheerful. “We have six milch goats, in fact. The gunner’s wife, Mrs. Johansen, does quite wonderfully with them. I’ll send her to talk with you, after we’ve seen the purser.”

Captain Leonard introduced me briefly to Mr. Overholt, the purser, and then left, with the injunction that I should be afforded every possible service. Mr. Overholt, a small, plump man with a bald and shining head, peered at me out of the deep collar of his coat like an undersized Humpty-Dumpty, murmuring unhappily about the scarcity of everything near the end of a cruise, and how unfortunate everything was, but I scarcely attended to him. I was much too agitated, thinking of what I had overheard.

Who was this Tompkins? The voice was entirely unfamiliar, and I was sure I had never heard the name before. More important, what did he know about Jamie? And what was Captain Leonard likely to do with the information? As it was, there was nothing I could do now, save contain my impatience, and with the half of my mind not busy with fruitless speculation, work out with Mr. Overholt what supplies were available for use in sickroom feeding.

Not a great deal, as it turned out.

“No, they certainly can’t eat salt beef,” I said firmly. “Nor yet hardtack, though if we soak the biscuit in boiled milk, perhaps we can manage that as they begin to recover. If you knock the weevils out first,” I added, as an afterthought.

“Fish,” Mr. Overholt suggested, in a hopeless sort of way. “We often encounter substantial schools of mackerel or even bonita, as we approach the Caribbean. Sometimes the crew will have luck with baited lines.”

“Maybe that would do,” I said, absently. “Boiled milk and water will be enough in the early stages, but as the men begin to recover, they should have something light and nourishing—soup, for instance. I suppose we could make a fish soup? Unless you have something else that might be suitable?”

“Well …” Mr. Overholt looked profoundly uneasy. “There *is* a small quantity of dried figs, ten pound of sugar, some coffee, a quantity of Naples biscuit, and a large cask of Madeira wine, but of course we cannot use that.”

“Why not?” I stared at him, and he shuffled his feet uneasily.

“Why, those supplies are intended for the use of our passenger,” he said.

“What sort of passenger?” I asked blankly.

Mr. Overholt looked surprised. “The Captain did not tell you? We are carrying the new governor for the island of Jamaica. That is the cause—well, *one* cause”—he corrected himself, dabbing nervously at his bald head with a handkerchief—“of our haste.”

“If he’s not sick, the Governor can eat salt beef,” I said firmly. “Be good for him, I shouldn’t wonder. Now, if you’ll have the wine taken to the galley, I’ve work to do.”

Aided by one of the remaining midshipmen, a short, stocky youth named Pound, I made a rapid tour of the ship, ruthlessly dragooning supplies and hands. Pound, trotting beside me like a small, ferocious bulldog, firmly informed surprised and resentful cooks, carpenters, sweepers, swabbers, sailmakers, and holdsmen that all my wishes—no matter how unreasonable—must be gratified instantly, by the captain’s orders.

Quarantine was the most important thing. As soon as the tween-decks had been scrubbed and aired, the patients would have to be carried down again, but the hammocks restrung with plenty of space between—the unaffected crew would have to sleep on deck—and provided with adequate toilet facilities. I had seen a pair of large kettles in the galley that I thought might do. I made a quick note on the mental list I was keeping, and hoped the chief cook was not as possessive of his receptacles as Murphy was.

I followed Pound’s round head, covered with close-clipped brown curls, down toward the hold in search of worn sails that might be used for cloths. Only half my mind was on my list; with the other half, I was contemplating the possible source of the typhoid outbreak. Caused by a bacillus of the *Salmonella* genus, it was normally spread by ingestion of the bacillus, carried on hands contaminated by urine or feces.

Given the sanitary habits of seamen, any one of the crew could be the carrier of the disease. The most likely culprit was one of the food handlers, though, given the widespread and sudden nature of the outbreak—the cook or one of his two mates, or possibly one of the stewards. I would have to find out how many of these there were, which messes they served, and whether anyone had changed duties four weeks ago—no, five, I corrected myself. The outbreak had begun four weeks ago, but there was an incubation period for the disease to be considered, too.

"Mr. Pound," I called, and a round face peered up at me from the foot of the ladder.

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Mr. Pound—what's your first name, by the way?" I asked.

"Elias, ma'am," he said, looking mildly bewildered.

"Do you mind if I call you so?" I dropped off the foot of the ladder and smiled at him. He smiled hesitantly back.

"Er … no, ma'am. The Captain might mind, though," he added cautiously. " 'Tisn't really naval, you know."

Elias Pound couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen; I doubted that Captain Leonard was more than five or six years older. Still, protocol was protocol.

"I'll be very naval in public," I assured him, suppressing a smile. "But if you're going to work with me, it will be easier to call you by name." I knew, as he didn't, what lay ahead—hours and days and possibly weeks of labor and exhaustion, when the senses would blur, and only bodily habit and blind instinct—and the leadership of a tireless chief—would keep those caring for the sick on their feet.

I was far from tireless, but the illusion would have to be kept up. This could be done with the help of two or three others, whom I could train; substitutes for my own hands and eyes, who could carry on when I must rest. Fate—and Captain Leonard—had designated Elias Pound as my new right hand; best to be on comfortable terms with him at once.

"How long have you been at sea, Elias?" I asked, stopping to peer after him as he ducked under a low platform that held enormous loops of a huge, evil-smelling chain, each link more than twice the size of my fist. The anchor chain? I wondered, touching it curiously. It looked strong enough to moor the *Queen Elizabeth*, which seemed a comforting thought.

"Since I was seven, ma'am," he said, working his way out backward, dragging a large chest. He stood up puffing slightly from the exertion, and wiped his round, ingenuous face. "My uncle's commander in *Triton*, so he was able to get me a berth in her. I come to join the *Porpoise* just this voyage, though, out of Edinburgh." He flipped open the chest, revealing an assortment of rust-smeared surgical implements—at least I hoped it was rust—and a jumbled collection of stoppered bottles and jugs. One of the jars had cracked, and a fine white dust like plaster of Paris lay over everything in the chest.

"This is what Mr. Hunter, the surgeon, had with him, ma'am," he said. "Will you have use for it?"

"God knows," I said, peering into the chest. "But I'll have a look. Have someone else fetch it up to the sickbay, though, Elias. I need you to come and speak firmly to the cook."

* * *

As I oversaw the scrubbing of the tween-decks with boiling seawater, my mind was occupied with several distinct trains of thought.

First, I was mentally charting the necessary steps to take in combating the disease. Two men, far gone from dehydration and malaise, had died during the removal from the tween-decks, and now lay at the far end of the after-deck, where the sailmaker was industriously stitching them into their hammocks for burial, a pair of round shot sewn in at their feet. Four more weren't going to make it through the night. The remaining forty-five had chances ranging from excellent to slim; with luck and skill, I might save most of them. But how many new cases were brewing, undetected, among the remaining crew?

Huge quantities of water were boiling in the galley at my order; hot seawater for cleansing, boiled fresh water for drinking. I made another tick on my mental list; I must see Mrs. Johansen, she of the milch goats, and arrange for the milk to be sterilized as well.

I must interview the galley hands about their duties; if a single source of infection could be found and isolated, it would do a lot to halt the spread of the disease. Tick.

All of the available alcohol on the ship was being gathered in the sickbay, to the profound horror of Mr. Overholt. It could be used in its present form, but it would be better to have purified alcohol. Could a means be found of distilling it? Check with the purser. Tick.

All the hammocks must be boiled and dried before the healthy hands slept in them. That would have to be done quickly, before the next watch went to its rest. Send Elias for a crew of swabbers and sweepers; laundry duty seemed most in their line. Tick.

Under the growing mental list of necessities were vague but continuing thoughts of the mysterious Tompkins and his unknown information. Whatever it was, it had not resulted in our changing course to return to the *Artemis*. Either Captain Leonard had not taken it seriously, or he was simply too eager to get to Jamaica to allow anything to hinder his progress.

I had paused for a moment by the rail, to organize my thoughts. I pushed back the hair from my forehead, and lifted my face to the cleansing wind, letting it blow away the stench of sickness. Puffs of ill-smelling steam rose from the nearby hatchway, from the hot-water cleansing going on below. It would be better down there when they had finished, but a long way from fresh air.

I looked out over the rail, hoping vainly for the glimpse of a sail, but the *Porpoise* was alone, the *Artemis*—and Jamie—left far behind.

I pushed away the sudden rush of loneliness and panic. I must speak soon with Captain Leonard. Answers to two, at least, of the problems that concerned me lay with him; the possible source of the typhoid outbreak—and the role of the unknown Mr. Tompkins in Jamie's affairs. But for the moment, there were more pressing matters.

"Elias!" I called, knowing he would be somewhere within reach of my voice. "Take me to Mrs. Johansen and the goats, please."

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PLAGUE SHIP

Two days later, I had still not found time to speak to Captain Leonard. Twice, I had gone to his cabin, but found the young Captain gone or unavailable—taking position, I was told, or consulting charts, or otherwise engaged in some bit of sailing arcana.

Mr. Overholt had taken to avoiding me and my insatiable demands, locking himself in his cabin with a pomander of dried sage and hyssop tied round his neck to ward off plague. The able-bodied crewmen assigned to the work of cleaning and shifting had been lethargic and dubious at first, but I had chivvied and scolded, glared and shouted, stamped my foot and shrieked, and got them gradually moving. I felt more like a sheepdog than a doctor—snapping and growling at their heels, and hoarse now with the effort.

It was working, though; there was a new feeling of hope and purpose among the crew—I could feel it. Four new deaths today, and ten new cases reporting, but the sounds of groaning distress from the tween-decks were much less, and the faces of the still-healthy showed the relief that comes of doing something—anything. I had so far failed to find the source of the contagion. If I could do that, and prevent any fresh outbreaks, I might—just possibly—halt the devastation within a week, while the *Porpoise* still had hands enough to sail her.

A quick canvass of the surviving crew had turned up two men pressed from a county gaol where they had been imprisoned for brewing illicit liquor. I had seized on these gratefully and put them to work building a still in which—to the horror of the crew—half the ship's store of rum was being distilled into pure alcohol for disinfection.

I had posted one of the surviving midshipmen by the entrance to the sickbay and another by the galley, each armed with a basin of pure alcohol and instructions to see that no one went in or came out without dipping their hands. Beside each midshipman stood a marine with his rifle, charged with the duty of seeing that no one should drink the grimy contents of the barrel into which the used alcohol was emptied when it became too filthy to be used any longer.

In Mrs. Johansen, the gunner's wife, I had found an unexpected ally. An intelligent woman in her thirties, she had understood—despite her having only a few words of broken English, and my having no Swedish at all—what I wanted done, and had done it.

If Elias was my right hand, Annekje Johansen was the left. She had single-handedly taken over the responsibility of scalding the goats' milk, patiently pounding hard biscuit—removing the weevils as she did so—to be mixed with it, and feeding the resulting mixture to those hands strong enough to digest it.

Her own husband, the chief gunner, was one of the victims of the typhoid, but he fortunately seemed one of the lighter cases, and I had every hope that he might recover—as much because of his wife's devoted nursing as because of his own hardy constitution.

"Ma'am, Ruthven says as somebody's been a-drinking of the pure alcohol again." Elias Pound popped up at my elbow, his round pink face looking drawn and wan, substantially thinned by the pressures of the last few days.

I said something extremely bad, and his brown eyes widened.

"Sorry," I said. I wiped the back of a hand across my brow, trying to get my hair out of my eyes. "Don't mean to offend your tender ears, Elias."

"Oh, I've heard it before, ma'am," Elias assured me. "Just not from a lady, like."

"I'm not a lady, Elias," I said tiredly. "I'm a doctor. Have someone go and search the ship for whoever it was; they'll likely be unconscious by now." He nodded and whirled on one foot.

"I'll look in the cable tier," he said. "That's where they usually hide when they're drunk."

This was the fourth in the last three days. Despite all guards set over the still and the purified alcohol, the hands, living on half their usual daily ration of grog, were so desperate for drink that they contrived somehow to get at the pure grain alcohol meant for sterilization.

"Goodness, Mrs. Malcolm," the purser had said, shaking his bald head when I complained about the problem. "Seamen will drink *anything*, ma'am! Spoilt plum brandy, peaches mashed inside a rubber boot and left to ferment—why, I've even known a hand caught stealing the old bandages from the surgeon's quarters and soaking them, in hopes of getting a whiff of alcohol. No, ma'am, telling them that drinking it will kill them certainly won't stop them."

Kill them it did. One of the four men who had drunk it had died; two more were in their own boarded-off section of the sickbay, deeply comatose. If they survived, they were likely to be permanently brain-damaged.

"Not that being on a bloody floating hellhole like this isn't likely to brain-damage anyone," I remarked bitterly to a tern who alighted on the rail nearby. "As if it isn't enough, trying to save half the miserable lot from typhoid, now the other half is trying to kill themselves with my alcohol! Damn the bloody lot of them!"

The tern cocked its head, decided I was not edible, and flew away. The ocean stretched empty all around—before us, where the unknown West Indies concealed Young Ian's fate, and behind, where Jamie and the *Artemis* had long since vanished. And me in the middle, with six hundred drink-mad English sailors and a hold full of inflamed bowels.

I stood fuming for a moment, then turned with decision toward the forward gangway. I didn't care if Captain Leonard was personally pumping the bilges, he was going to talk to me.

I stopped just inside the door of the cabin. It was not yet noon, but the Captain was asleep, head pillowed on his forearms, on top of an outspread book. The quill had fallen from his fingers, and the glass inkstand, cleverly held in its anchored bracket, swayed gently with the motion of the ship. His face was turned to the side, cheek pressed flat on his arm. Despite the heavy beard stubble, he looked absurdly young.

I turned, meaning to come back later, but in moving, brushed against the locker, where a stack of books was precariously balanced amid a rubble of papers, navigational instruments, and half-rolled charts. The top volume fell with a thump to the deck.

The sound was scarcely audible above the general sounds of creaking, flapping, whining rigging, and shouting that made up the background of life on shipboard, but it brought him awake, blinking and looking startled.

"Mrs. Fra—Mrs. Malcolm!" he said. He rubbed a hand over his face, and shook his head quickly, trying to wake himself. "What—that is—you required something?"

"I didn't mean to wake you," I said. "But I do need more alcohol—if necessary, I can use straight rum—and you really must speak to the hands, to see if there is some way of stopping them trying to drink the distilled alcohol. We've had another that's poisoned himself today. And if there's any way of bringing more fresh air down to the sickbay …" I stopped, seeing that I was overwhelming him.

He blinked and scratched, slowly pulling his thoughts into order. The buttons on his sleeve had left two round red imprints on his cheek, and his hair was flattened on that side.

"I see," he said, rather stupidly. Then, as he began to wake, his expression cleared. "Yes. Of course. I will give orders to have a windsail rigged, to bring more air below. As for the alcohol—I must beg leave to consult the purser, as I do not myself know our present capacities in that regard." He turned and took a breath, as though to shout, but then remembered that his steward was no longer within earshot, being now below in the sickbay. Just then, the *ting* of the ship's bell came faintly from above.

"I beg your pardon, Mrs. Malcolm," he said, politeness recovered. "It is nearly noon; I must go and take our position. I will send the purser to you, should you care to remain here for a moment."

"Thank you." I sat down in the chair he had just vacated. He turned to go, making an attempt to straighten the too-large braided coat over his shoulders.

"Captain Leonard?" I said, moved by a sudden impulse. He turned back, questioning.

"If you don't mind my asking—how old are you?"

He blinked and his face tightened, but he answered me.

"I am nineteen, ma'am. Your servant, ma'am." And with that, he vanished through the door. I could hear him in the companionway, calling out in a voice half-cracked with fatigue.

Nineteen! I sat quite still, paralyzed with shock. I had thought him very young, but not nearly that young. His face weathered from exposure and lined with strain and sleeplessness, he had looked to be at least in his mid-twenties. *My God!* I thought, appalled. *He's no more than a baby!*

Nineteen. Just Brianna's age. And to be suddenly thrust into command not only of a ship—and not just a ship, but an English man-of-war—and not merely a man-of-war, but one with a plague aboard that had deprived her suddenly of a quarter of her crew and virtually all her command—I felt the fright and fury that had bubbled inside me for the last few days begin to ebb, as I realized that the high-handedness that had led him to kidnap me was in fact not arrogance or ill-judgment, but the result of sheer desperation.

He had to have help, he had said. Well, he was right, and I was it. I took a deep breath, visualizing the mess I had left behind in the sickbay. That was mine, and mine alone, to do the best I could with.

Captain Leonard had left the logbook open on the desk, his entry half-complete. There was a small damp spot on the page; he had drooled slightly in his sleep. In a spasm of irritated pity, I flipped over the page, wishing to hide this further evidence of his vulnerability.

My eye caught a word on the new page, and I stopped, a chill snaking down from the nape of my neck as I remembered something. When I had wakened him unexpectedly, the captain had started up, seen me, and said, "Mrs. Fra—" before catching himself. And the name on the page before me, the word that had caught my attention, was "Fraser." He knew who I was—and who Jamie was.

I rose quickly and shut the door, dropping the bolt. At least I would have warning if anyone came. Then I sat down at the captain's desk, pressed flat the pages, and began to read.

I flipped back to find the record of the meeting with the *Artemis*, three days before. Captain Leonard's entries were distinct from those of his predecessor, and mostly quite brief—not surprising, considering how much he had had to deal with of late. Most entries contained only the usual navigational information, with a brief note of the names of those men who had died since the previous day. The meeting with the *Artemis* was noted, though, and my own presence.

> *3 February, 1767. Met near eight bells with Artemis, a small two-masted brig under French colors. Hailed her and requested the assistance of her surgeon, C. Malcolm, who was taken on board and remains with us to assist with the sick.*

C. Malcolm, eh? No mention of my being a woman; perhaps he thought it irrelevant, or wished to avoid any inquiries over the propriety of his actions. I went on to the next entry.

> *4 February 1767. I have rec'd information this day from Harry Tompkins, able seaman, that the supercargo of the brig Artemis is known to him as a criminal by the name of James Fraser, known also by the names of Jamie Roy and of Alexander Malcolm. This Fraser is a seditionist, and a notorious smuggler, for whose capture a substantial reward is offered by the King's Customs. Information was received from Tompkins after we had parted company with Artemis; I thought it not expeditious to pursue Artemis, as we are ordered with all possible dispatch for Jamaica, because of our passenger. However, as I have promised to return the Artemis's surgeon to them there, Fraser may be arrested at that time.*
>
> *Two men dead of the plague—which the Artemis's surgeon informs me is the Typhoide. Jno. Jaspers, able seaman, DD, Harty*

Kepple, cook's mate, DD.

That was all; the next day's entry was confined entirely to navigation and the recording of the death of six men, all with "DD" written beside their names. I wondered what it meant, but was too distracted to worry about it.

I heard steps coming down the passageway, and barely got the bolt lifted before the purser's knock sounded on the door. I scarcely heard Mr. Overholt's apologies; my mind was too busy trying to make sense of this new revelation.

Who in blinking, bloody hell was this man Tompkins? No one I had ever seen or heard about, I was sure, and yet he obviously knew a dangerous amount about Jamie's activities. Which led to two questions: How had an English seaman come by such information—and who else knew it?

" … cut the grog rations further, to give you an additional cask of rum," Mr. Overholt was saying dubiously. "The hands won't like it, but we might manage; we're only two weeks out of Jamaica now."

"Whether they like it or not, I need the alcohol more than they need grog," I answered brusquely. "If they complain too much, tell them if I don't have the rum, none of them may *make* it to Jamaica."

Mr. Overholt sighed, and wiped small beads of sweat from his shiny brow.

"I'll tell them, ma'am," he said, too beaten down to object.

"Fine. Oh, Mr. Overholt?" He turned back, questioning. "What does the legend 'DD' mean? I saw the Captain write it in his log."

A small flicker of humor lighted in the purser's deep-sunk eyes.

"It means 'Discharged, Dead,' ma'am," he replied. "The only sure way for most of us, of leaving His Majesty's Navy."

As I oversaw the bathing of bodies and the constant infusions of sweetened water and boiled milk, my mind continued to work on the problem of the unknown Tompkins.

I knew nothing of the man, save his voice. He might be one of the faceless horde overhead, the silhouettes that I saw in the rigging when I came up on deck for air, or one of the hurrying anonymous bodies, hurtling up and down the decks in a vain effort to do the work of three men.

I would meet him, of course, if he became infected; I knew the names of each patient in the sickbay. But I could hardly allow the matter to wait, in the rather ghoulish hope that Tompkins would contract typhoid. At last I made up my mind to ask; the man presumably knew who I was, anyway. Even if he found out that I had been asking about him, it was unlikely to do any harm.

Elias was the natural place to begin. I waited until the end of the day to ask, trusting to fatigue to dull his natural curiosity.

"Tompkins?" The boy's round face drew together in a brief frown, then cleared. "Oh, yes, ma'am. One o' the forecastle hands."

"Where did he come aboard, do you know?" There was no good way of accounting for this sudden interest in a man I had never met, but luckily, Elias was much too tired to wonder about it.

"Oh," he said vaguely, "at Spithead, I think. Or—no! I remember now, 'twas Edinburgh." He rubbed his knuckles under his nose to stifle a yawn. "That's it, Edinburgh. I wouldn' remember, only he was a pressed man, and a unholy fuss he made about it, claimin' as how they couldn' press him, he was protected, account of he worked for Sir Percival Turner, in the Customs." The yawn got the better of him and he gaped widely, then subsided. "But he didn' have no written protection from Sir Percival," he concluded, blinking, "so there wasn' nothing to be done."

"A Customs agent, was he?" *That* went quite some way toward explaining things, all right.

"Mm-hm. Yes, mum, I mean." Elias was trying manfully to stay awake, but his glazing eyes were fixed on the swaying lantern at the end of the sickbay, and he was swaying with it.

"You go on to bed, Elias," I said, taking pity on him. "I'll finish here."

He shook his head quickly, trying to shake off sleep.

"Oh, no, ma'am! I ain't sleepy, not a bit!" He reached clumsily for the cup and bottle I held. "You give me that, mum, and go to rest yourself." He would not be moved, but stubbornly insisted on helping to administer the last round of water before staggering off to his cot.

I was nearly as tired as Elias by the time we finished, but sleep would not come. I lay in the dead surgeon's cabin, staring up at the shadowy beam above my head, listening to the creak and rumble of the ship about me, wondering.

So Tompkins worked for Sir Percival. And Sir Percival assuredly knew that Jamie was a smuggler. But was there more to it than that? Tompkins knew Jamie by sight. How? And if Sir Percival had been willing to tolerate Jamie's clandestine activities in return for bribes, then—well, perhaps none of those bribes had made it to Tompkins's pockets. But in that case … and what about the ambush at Arbroath cove? Was there a traitor among the smugglers? And if so …

My thoughts were losing coherence, spinning in circles like the revolutions of a dying top. The powdered white face of Sir Percival faded into the purple mask of the hanged Customs agent on the Arbroath road, and the gold and red flames of an exploding lantern lit the crevices of my mind. I rolled onto my stomach, clutching the pillow to my chest, the last thought in my mind that I must find Tompkins.

As it was, Tompkins found me. For more than two days, the situation in the sickbay was too pressing for me to leave for more than the barest space of time. On the third day, though, matters seemed easier, and I retired to the surgeon's cabin, intending to wash myself and rest briefly before the midday drum beat for the noon meal.

I was lying on the cot, a cool cloth over my tired eyes, when I heard the sound of bumping and voices in the passage outside my door. A tentative knock sounded on my door, and an unfamiliar voice said, "Mrs. Malcolm? There's been a h'accident, if you please, ma'am."

I swung open the door to find two seamen supporting a third, who stood storklike on one leg, his face white with shock and pain.

It took no more than a single glance for me to know whom I was looking at. The man's face was ridged down one side with the livid scars of a bad burn, and the twisted eyelid on that side exposed the milky lens of a blind eye, had I needed any further confirmation that here stood the one-eyed seaman Young Ian had thought he'd killed, lank brown hair grew back from a balding brow to a scrawny pigtail that drooped over one shoulder, exposing a pair of large, transparent ears.

"Mr. Tompkins," I said with certainty, and his remaining eye widened in surprise. "Put him down over there, please."

The men deposited Tompkins on a stool by the wall, and went back to their work; the ship was too shorthanded to allow for distraction. Heart beating heavily, I knelt down to examine the wounded leg.

He knew who I was, all right; I had seen it in his face when I opened the door. There was a great deal of tension in the leg under my hand. The injury was gory, but not serious, given suitable care; a deep gash scored down the calf of the leg. It had bled substantially, but there were no deep arteries cut; it had been well-wrapped with a piece of someone's shirt, and the bleeding had nearly stopped when I unwound the homemade bandage.

"How did you do this, Mr. Tompkins?" I asked, standing up and reaching for the bottle of alcohol. He glanced up, his single eye alert and wary.

"Splinter wound, ma'am," he answered, in the nasal tones I had heard once before. "A spar broke as I was a-standing on it." The tip of his tongue stole out, furtively wetting his lower lip.

"I see." I turned and flipped open the lid of my empty medicine box, pretending to survey the available remedies. I studied him out of the corner of one eye, while I tried to think how best to approach him. He was on his guard; tricking him into revelations or winning his trust were clearly out of the question.

My eyes flicked over the tabletop, seeking inspiration. And found it. With a mental apology to the shade of Aesculapius the physician, I picked up the late surgeon's bone-saw, a wicked thing some eighteen inches long, a rust-flecked steel. I looked at this thoughtfully, turned, and laid the toothed edge of the instrument gently against the injured leg, just above the knee. I smiled charmingly into the seaman's terrified single eye.

"Mr. Tompkins," I said, "let us talk frankly."

An hour later, able-bodied seaman Tompkins had been restored to his hammock, stitched and bandaged, shaking in every limb, but able-bodied still. For my part, I felt a little shaky as well.

Tompkins was, as he had insisted to the press-gang in Edinburgh, an agent of Sir Percival Turner. In that capacity, he went about the docks and warehouses of all the shipping ports in the Firth of Forth, from Culross and Donibristle to Restalrig and Musselburgh, picking up gossip and keeping his beady eye sharp-peeled to catch any evidence of unlawful activity.

The attitude of Scots toward English tax laws being what it was, there was no lack of such activity to report. What was done with such reports, though, varied. Small smugglers, caught red-handed with a bottle or two of unbonded rum or whisky, might be summarily arrested, tried and convicted, and sentenced to anything from penal servitude to transportation, with forfeiture of all their property to the Crown.

The bigger fish, though, were reserved to Sir Percival's private judgment. In other words, allowed to pay substantial bribes for the privilege of continuing their operations under the blind eye (here Tompkins laughed sardonically, touching the ruined side of his face) of the King's agents.

"Sir Percival's got ambitions, see?" While not noticeably relaxed, Tompkins had at least unbent enough to lean forward, one eye narrowing as he gestured in explanation. "He's in with Dundas and all them. Everything goes right, and he might have a peerage, not just a knighthood, eh? But that'll take more than money."

One thing that could help was some spectacular demonstration of competence and service to the Crown.

"As in the sort of arrest that might make 'em sit up and take notice, eh? Ooh! That smarts, missus. You sure of what you're a-doing of, there?” Tompkins squinted dubiously downward, to where I was sponging the site of the injury with dilute alcohol.

“I’m sure,” I said. “Go on, then. I suppose a simple smuggler wouldn’t have been good enough, no matter how big?”

Evidently not. However, when word had reached Sir Percival that there might just possibly be a major political criminal within his grasp, the old gentleman had nearly blown a gasket with excitement.

“But sedition’s a harder thing to prove than smuggling, eh? You catch one of the little fish with the goods, and they’re saying not a thing will lead you further on. Idealists, them seditionists,” Tompkins said, shaking his head with disgust. “Never rat on each other, they don’t.”

“So you didn’t know who you were looking for?” I stood and took one of my cat-gut sutures from its jar, threading it through a needle. I caught Tompkins’s apprehensive look, but did nothing to allay his anxiety. I wanted him anxious—and voluble.

“No, we didn’t know who the big fish was—not until another of Sir Percival’s agents had the luck to tumble to one of Fraser’s associates, what gave ’em the tip he was Malcolm the printer, and told his real name. Then it all come clear, o’ course.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“Who was the associate?” I asked. The names and faces of the six smugglers darted through my mind—little fish. Not idealists, any of them. But to which of them was loyalty no bar?

“I don’t know. No, it’s true, missus, I swear! Ow!” he said frantically as I jabbed the needle under the skin.

“I’m not trying to hurt you,” I assured him, in as false a voice as I could muster. “I have to stitch the wound, though.”

“Oh! Ow! I don’t know, to be sure I don’t! I’d tell, if I did, as God’s my witness!”

“I’m sure you would,” I said, intent on my stitching.

“Oh! Please, missus! Stop! Just for a moment! All I know is it was an Englishman! That’s all!”

I stopped, and stared up at him. “An Englishman?” I said blankly.

"Yes, missus. That's what Sir Percival said." He looked down at me, tears trembling on the lashes of both his eyes. I took the final stitch, as gently as I could, and tied the suture knot. Without speaking, I got up, poured a small tot of brandy from my private bottle, and handed it to him.

He gulped it gratefully, and seemed much restored in consequence. Whether out of gratitude, or sheer relief for the end of the ordeal, he told me the rest of the story. In search of evidence to support a charge of sedition, he had gone to the printshop in Carfax Close.

"I know what happened there," I assured him. I turned his face toward the light, examining the burn scars. "Is it still painful?"

"No, Missus, but it hurt precious bad for some time," he said. Being incapacitated by his injuries, Tompkins had taken no part in the ambush at Arbroath cove, but he had heard—"not direct-like, but I heard, you know," he said, with a shrewd nod of the head—what had happened.

Sir Percival had given Jamie warning of an ambush, to lessen the chances of Jamie's thinking him involved in the affair, and possibly revealing the details of their financial arrangements in quarters where such revelations would be detrimental to Sir Percival's interests.

At the same time, Sir Percival had learned—from the associate, the mysterious Englishman—of the fallback arrangement with the French delivery vessel, and had arranged the grave-ambush on the beach at Arbroath.

"But what about the Customs officer who was killed on the road?" I asked sharply. I couldn't repress a small shudder, at memory of that dreadful face. "Who did that? There were only five men among the smugglers who could possibly have done it, and none of them are Englishmen!"

Tompkins rubbed a hand over his mouth; he seemed to be debating the wisdom of telling me or not. I picked up the brandy bottle and set it by his elbow.

"Why, I'm much obliged, Missus Fraser! You're a true Christian, missus, and so I shall tell anyone who asks!"

"Skip the testimonials," I said dryly. "Just tell me what you know about the Customs officer."

He filled the cup and drained it, sipping slowly. Then, with a sigh of satisfaction, he set it down and licked his lips.

"It wasn't none of the smugglers done him in, missus. It was his own mate."

"What!" I jerked back, startled, but he nodded, blinking his good eye in token of sincerity.

"That's right, missus. There was two of 'em, wasn't there? Well, the one of them had his instructions, didn't he?"

The instructions had been to wait until whatever smugglers escaped the ambush on the beach had reached the road, whereupon the Customs officer was to drop a noose over his partner's head in the dark and strangle him swiftly, then string him up and leave him, as evidence of the smugglers' murderous wrath.

"But why?" I said, bewildered and horrified. "What was the point of doing that?"

"Do you not see?" Tompkins looked surprised, as though the logic of the situation should be obvious. "We'd failed to get the evidence from the printshop that would have proved the case of sedition against Fraser, and with the shop burnt to the ground, no possibility of another chance. Nor had we ever caught Fraser red-handed with the goods himself, only some of the small fish who worked for him. One of the other agents thought he'd a clue where the stuff was kept, but something happened to him—perhaps Fraser caught him or bought him off, for he disappeared one day in November, and wasn't heard of again, nor the hiding place for the contraband, neither."

"I see." I swallowed, thinking of the man who had accosted me on the stairs of the brothel. What had become of that cask of crème de menthe? "But—"

"Well, I'm telling you, missus, just you wait." Tompkins raised a monitory hand. "So—here's Sir Percival, knowing as he's got a rare case, with a man's not only one of the biggest smugglers on the Firth, *and* the author of some of the most first-rate seditious material it's been my privilege to see, *but* is also a pardoned Jacobite traitor, whose name will make the trial a sensation from one end of the kingdom to the other. The only trouble being"—he shrugged—"as there's no evidence."

It began to make a hideous sort of sense, as Tompkins explained the plan. The murder of a Customs officer killed in pursuit of duty would not only make any smuggler arrested for the crime subject to a capital charge, but was the sort of heinous crime that would cause a major public outcry. The matter-of-fact acceptance that smugglers enjoyed from the populace would not protect them in a matter of such callous villainy.

"Your Sir Percival has got the makings of a really first-class son of a bitch," I observed. Tompkins nodded meditatively, blinking into his cup.

"Well, you've the right of it there, missus, I'll not say you're wrong."

"And the Customs officer who was killed—I suppose he was just a convenience?"

Tompkins sniggered, with a fine spray of brandy. His one eye seemed to be having some trouble focusing.

"Oh, very convenient, Missus, more ways than one. Don't you grieve none on his account. There was a good many folk glad enough to see Tom Oakie swing—and not the least of 'em, Sir Percival."

"I see." I finished fastening the bandage about his calf. It was getting late; I would have to get back to the sickbay soon.

"I'd better call someone to take you to your hammock," I said, taking the nearly empty bottle from his unresisting hand. "You should rest your leg for at least three days; tell your officer I said you can't go aloft until I've taken out the stitches."

"I'll do that, missus, and I thank you for your kindness to a poor unfortunate sailor." Tompkins made an abortive attempt to stand, looking surprised when he failed. I got a hand under his armpit and heaved, getting him on his feet, and—he declining my offer to summon him assistance—helped him to the door.

"You needn't worry about Harry Tompkins, missus," he said, weaving unsteadily into the corridor. He turned and gave me an exaggerated wink. “Old Harry always ends up all right, no matter what.” Looking at him, with his long nose, pink-tipped from liquor, his large, transparent ears, and his single sly brown eye, it came to me suddenly what he reminded me of.

“When were you born, Mr. Tompkins?” I asked.

He blinked for a moment, uncomprehending, but then said, “The Year of our Lord 1713, missus. Why?”

“No reason,” I said, and waved him off, watching as he caromed slowly down the corridor, dropping out of sight at the ladder like a bag of oats. I would have to check with Mr. Willoughby to be sure, but at the moment, I would have wagered my chemise that 1713 had been a Year of the Rat.

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MOMENT OF GRACE

Over the next few days, a routine set in, as it does in even the most desperate circumstances, provided that they continue long enough. The hours after a battle are urgent and chaotic, with men's lives hanging on a second's action. Here a doctor can be heroic, knowing for certain that the wound just stanched has saved a life, that the quick intervention will save a limb. But in an epidemic, there is none of that.

Then come the long days of constant watching and battles fought on the field of germs—and with no weapons suited to that field, it can be no more than a battle of delay, doing the small things that may not help but must be done, over and over and over again, fighting the invisible enemy of disease, in the tenuous hope that the body can be supported long enough to outlast its attacker.

To fight disease without medicine is to push against a shadow; a darkness that spreads as inexorably as night. I had been fighting for nine days, and forty-six more men were dead.

Still, I rose each day at dawn, splashed water into my grainy eyes, and went once more to the field of war, unarmed with anything save persistence—and a barrel of alcohol.

There were some victories, but even these left a bitter taste in my mouth. I found the likely source of infection—one of the messmates, a man named Howard. First serving on board as a member of one of the gun crews, Howard had been transferred to galley duty six weeks before, the result of an accident with a recoiling gun-carriage that had crushed several fingers.

Howard had served the gun room, and the first known case of the disease—taken from the incomplete records of the dead surgeon, Mr. Hunter—was one of the marines who messed there. Four more cases, all from the gun room, and then it had begun to spread, as infected but still ambulatory men left the deadly contamination smeared in the ship's heads, to be picked up there and passed to the crew at large.

Howard's admission that he had seen sickness like this before, on other ships where he had served, was enough to clinch the matter. However, the cook, shorthanded as everyone else aboard, had declined absolutely to part with a valuable hand, only because of "a goddamned female's silly notion!"

Elias could not persuade him, and I had been obliged to summon the captain himself, who—misunderstanding the nature of the disturbance, had arrived with several armed marines. There was a most unpleasant scene in the galley, and Howard was removed to the brig—the only place of certain quarantine—protesting in bewilderment, and demanding to know his crime.

As I came up from the galley, the sun was going down into the ocean in a blaze that paved the western sea with gold like the streets of Heaven. I stopped for a moment, just a moment, transfixed by the sight.

It had happened many times before, but it always took me by surprise. Always in the midst of great stress, wading waist-deep in trouble and sorrow, as doctors do, I would glance out a window, open a door, look into a face, and there it would be, unexpected and unmistakable. A moment of peace.

The light spread from the sky to the ship, and the great horizon was no longer a blank threat of emptiness, but the habitation of joy. For a moment, I lived in the center of the sun, warmed and cleansed, and the smell and sight of sickness fell away; the bitterness lifted from my heart.

I never looked for it, gave it no name; yet I knew it always, when the gift of peace came. I stood quite still for the moment that it lasted, thinking it strange and not strange that grace should find me here, too.

Then the light shifted slightly and the moment passed, leaving me as it always did, with the lasting echo of its presence. In a reflex of acknowledgment, I crossed myself and went below, my tarnished armor faintly gleaming.

Elias Pound died of the typhoid four days later. It was a virulent infection; he came to the sickbay heavy-eyed with fever and wincing at the light; six hours later he was delirious and unable to rise. The next dawn he pressed his cropped round head against my bosom, called me "Mother," and died in my arms.

I did what had to be done throughout the day, and stood by Captain Leonard at sunset, when he read the burial service. The body of Midshipman Pound was consigned to the sea, wrapped in his hammock.

I declined the Captain's invitation to dinner, and went instead to sit in a remote corner of the afterdeck, next to one of the great guns, where I could look out over the water, showing my face to no one. The sun went down in gold and glory, succeeded by a night of starred velvet, but there was no moment of grace, no peace in either sight for me.

As the darkness settled over the ship, all her movements began to slow. I leaned my head against the gun, the polished metal cool under my cheek. A seaman passed me at a fast walk, intent on his duties, and then I was alone.

I ached desperately; my head throbbed, my back was stiff and my feet swollen, but none of these was of any significance, compared to the deeper ache that knotted my heart.

Any doctor hates to lose a patient. Death is the enemy, and to lose someone in your care to the clutch of the dark angel is to be vanquished yourself, to feel the rage of betrayal and impotence, beyond the common, human grief of loss and the horror of death's finality. I had lost twenty-three men between dawn and sunset of this day. Elias was only the first.

Several had died as I sponged their bodies or held their hands; others, alone in their hammocks, had died uncomforted even by a touch, because I could not reach them in time. I thought I had resigned myself to the realities of this time, but knowing—even as I held the twitching body of an eighteen-year-old seaman as his bowels dissolved in blood and water—that penicillin would have saved most of them, and I had none, was galling as an ulcer, eating at my soul.

The box of syringes and ampules had been left behind on the *Artemis*, in the pocket of my spare skirt. If I had had it, I could not have used it. If I had used it, I could have saved no more than one or two. But even knowing that, I raged at the futility of it all, clenching my teeth until my jaw ached as I went from man to man, armed with nothing but boiled milk and biscuit, and my two empty hands.

My mind followed the same dizzying lines my feet had traveled earlier, seeing faces—faces contorted in anguish or smoothing slowly in the slackness of death, but all of them looking at me. At me. I lifted my futile hand and slammed it hard against the rail. I did it again, and again, scarcely feeling the sting of the blows, in a frenzy of furious rage and grief.

“Stop that!” a voice spoke behind me, and a hand seized my wrist, preventing me from slapping the rail yet again.

“Let go!” I struggled, but his grip was too strong.

“Stop,” he said again, firmly. His other arm came around my waist, and he pulled me back, away from the rail. “You mustn’t do that,” he said. “You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I don’t bloody care!” I wrenched against his grasp, but then slumped, defeated. What did it matter?

He let go of me then, and I turned to find myself facing a man I had never seen before. He wasn’t a sailor; while his clothes were crumpled and stale with long wear, they had originally been very fine; the dove-gray coat and waistcoat had been tailored to flatter his slender frame, and the wilted lace at his throat had come from Brussels.

“Who the hell are you?” I said in astonishment. I brushed at my wet cheeks, sniffed, and made an instinctive effort to smooth down my hair. I hoped the shadows hid my face.

He smiled slightly, and handed me a handkerchief, crumpled, but clean.

“My name is Grey,” he said, with a small, courtly bow. “I expect that you must be the famous Mrs. Malcolm, whose heroism Captain Leonard has been so strongly praising.” I grimaced at that, and he paused.

“I am sorry,” he said. “Have I said something amiss? My apologies, Madame, I had no notion of offering you offense.” He looked anxious at the thought, and I shook my head.

“It is not heroic to watch men die,” I said. My words were thick, and I stopped to blow my nose. “I’m just here, that’s all. Thank you for the handkerchief.” I hesitated, not wanting to hand the used handkerchief back to him, but not wanting simply to pocket it, either. He solved the dilemma with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Might I do anything else for you?” He hesitated, irresolute. “A cup of water? Some brandy, perhaps?” He fumbled in his coat, drawing out a small silver pocket flask engraved with a coat of arms, which he offered to me.

I took it, with a nod of thanks, and took a swallow deep enough to make me cough. It burned down the back of my throat, but I sipped again, more cautiously this time, and felt it warm me, easing and strengthening. I breathed deeply and drank again. It helped.

“Thank you,” I said, a little hoarsely, handing back the flask. That seemed somewhat abrupt, and I added, “I’d forgotten that brandy is good to drink; I’ve been using it to wash people in the sickbay.” The statement brought back the events of the day to me with crushing vividness, and I sagged back onto the powder box where I had been sitting.

“I take it the plague continues unabated?” he asked quietly. He stood in front of me, the glow of a nearby lantern shining on his dark blond hair.

“Not unabated, no.” I closed my eyes, feeling unutterably bleak. “There was only one new case today. There were four the day before, and six the day before that.”

“That sounds hopeful,” he observed. “As though you are defeating the disease.”

I shook my head slowly. It felt dense and heavy as one of the cannonballs piled in the shallow bins by the guns.

"No. All we're doing is to stop more men being infected. There isn't a bloody thing I can do for the ones who already have it."

"Indeed." He stooped and picked up one of my hands. Surprised, I let him have it. He ran a thumb lightly over the blister where I had burned myself scalding milk, and touched my knuckles, reddened and cracked from the constant immersion in alcohol.

"You would appear to have been very active, Madame, for someone who is doing nothing," he said dryly.

"Of course I'm doing something!" I snapped, yanking my hand back. "It doesn't do any good!"

"I'm sure—" he began.

"It doesn't!" I slammed my fist on the gun, the noiseless blow seeming to symbolize the pain-filled futility of the day. "Do you know how many men I lost today? Twenty-three! I've been on my feet since dawn, elbow-deep in filth and vomit and my clothes stuck to me, and none of it's been any good! I couldn't help! Do you hear me? I couldn't help!"

His face was turned away, in shadow, but his shoulders were stiff.

"I hear you," he said quietly. "You shame me, Madam. I had kept to my cabin at the Captain's orders, but I had no idea that the circumstances were such as you describe, or I assure you that I should have come to help, in spite of them."

"Why?" I said blankly. "It isn't your job."

"Is it yours?" He swung around to face me, and I saw that he was handsome, in his late thirties, perhaps, with sensitive, fine-cut features, and large blue eyes, open in astonishment.

"Yes," I said.

He studied my face for a moment, and his own expression changed, fading from surprise to thoughtfulness.

"I see."

"No, you don't, but it doesn't matter." I pressed my fingertips hard against my brow, in the spot Mr. Willoughby had shown me, to relieve headache. "If the Captain means you to keep to your cabin, then you likely should. There are enough hands to help in the sickbay; it's just that … nothing helps," I ended, dropping my hands.

He walked over to the rail, a few feet away from me, and stood looking out over the expanse of dark water, sparked here and there as a random wave caught the starlight.

"I do see," he repeated, as though talking to the waves. "I had thought your distress due only to a woman's natural compassion, but I see it is something quite different." He paused, hands gripping the rail, an indistinct figure in the starlight.

"I have been a soldier, an officer," he said. "I know what it is, to hold men's lives in your hand—and to lose them."

I was quiet, and so was he. The usual shipboard sounds went on in the distance, muted by night and the lack of men to make them. At last he sighed and turned toward me again.

"What it comes to, I think, is the knowledge that you are not God." He paused, then added, softly, "And the very real regret that you cannot be."

I sighed, feeling some of the tension drain out of me. The cool wind lifted the weight of my hair from my neck, and the curling ends drifted across my face, gentle as a touch.

"Yes," I said.

He hesitated a moment, as though not knowing what to say next, then bent, picked up my hand, and kissed it, very simply, without affectation.

"Good night, Mrs. Malcolm," he said, and turned away, the sound of his footsteps loud on the deck.

He was no more than a few yards past me when a seaman, hurrying by, spotted him and stopped with a cry. It was Jones, one of the stewards.

"My Lord! You shouldn't ought to be out of your cabin, sir! The night air's mortal, and the plague loose on board—and the Captain's orders—whatever is your servant a-thinking of, sir, to let you walk about like this?"

My acquaintance nodded apologetically.

"Yes, yes, I know. I shouldn't have come up; but I thought that if I stayed in the cabin a moment longer I should be stifled altogether."

"Better stifled than dead o' the bloody flux, sir, and you'll pardon of my saying so," Jones replied sternly. My acquaintance made no remonstrance to this, but merely murmured something and disappeared in the shadows of the afterdeck.

I reached out a hand and grasped Jones by the sleeve as he passed, causing him to start, with a wordless yelp of alarm.

"Oh! Mrs. Malcolm," he said, coming to earth, a bony hand splayed across his chest. "Christ, I did think you was a ghost, mum, begging your pardon."

"I beg yours," I said, politely. "I only wanted to ask—who was the man you were just talking to?"

"Oh, him?" Jones twisted about to look over his shoulder, but the aptly named Mr. Grey had long since vanished. "Why, that's Lord John Grey, mum, him as is the new governor of Jamaica." He frowned censoriously in the direction taken by my acquaintance. "He ain't supposed to be up here; the Captain's give strict orders he's to stay safe below, out o' harm's way. All we need's to come into port with a dead political aboard, and there'll be the devil to pay, mum, savin' your presence."

He shook his head disapprovingly, then turned to me with a bob of the head.

"You'll be retiring, mum? Shall I bring you down a nice cup of tea and maybe a bit o' biscuit?"

"No, thank you, Jones," I said. "I'll go and check the sickbay again before I go to bed. I don't need anything."

"Well, you do, mum, and you just say. Anytime. Good night to you, mum." He touched his forelock briefly and hurried off.

I stood at the rail alone for a moment before going below, drawing in deep breaths of the clean, fresh air. It would be a good many hours yet until dawn; the stars burned bright and clear over my head, and I realized, quite suddenly, that the moment of grace I had wordlessly prayed for had come, after all.

"You're right," I said at last, aloud, to the sea and sky. "A sunset wouldn't have been enough. Thank you," I added, and went below.

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LAND HO!

It's true, what the sailors say. You can smell land, a long time before you see it.

Despite the long voyage, the goat pen in the hold was a surprisingly pleasant place. By now, the fresh straw had been exhausted, and the goats' hooves clicked restlessly to and fro on bare boards. Still, the heaps of manure were swept up daily, and neatly piled in baskets to be heaved overboard, and Annekje Johansen brought dry armloads of hay to the manger each morning. There was a strong smell of goat, but it was a clean, animal scent, and quite pleasant by contrast with the stench of unwashed sailors.

"Komma, komma, komma, dyr get," she crooned, luring a yearling within reach with a twiddled handful of hay. The animal stretched out cautious lips, and was promptly seized by the neck and pulled forward, its head secured under Annekje's brawny arm.

"Ticks, is it?" I asked, coming forward to help. Annekje looked up and gave me her broad, gap-toothed smile.

"*Guten Morgen,* Mrs. Claire," she said. "*Ja,* tick. Here." She took the young goat's drooping ear in one hand and turned up the silky edge to show me the blueberry bulge of a blood-gorged tick, burrowed deep in the tender skin.

She clutched the goat to hold it still, and dug into the ear, pinching the tick viciously between her nails. She pulled it free with a twist, and the goat blatted and kicked, a tiny spot of blood welling from its ear where the tick had been detached.

“Wait,” I said, when she would have released the animal. She glanced at me, curious, but kept her hold and nodded. I took the bottle of alcohol I wore slung at my belt like a sidearm, and poured a few drops on the ear. It was soft and tender, the tiny veins clearly visible beneath the satin skin. The goat’s square-pupilled eyes bulged farther and its tongue stuck out in agitation as it bleated.

“No sore ear,” I said, in explanation, and Annekje nodded in approval.

Then the goatling was free, and went plunging back into the herd, to butt its head against its mother’s side in a frantic search for milky reassurance. Annekje looked about for the discarded tick and found it lying on the deck, tiny legs helpless to move its swollen body. She smashed it casually under the heel of her shoe, leaving a tiny dark blotch on the board.

“We come to land?” I asked, and she nodded, with a wide, happy smile. She waved expansively upward, where sunlight fell through the grating overhead.

“*Ja*. Smell?” she said, sniffing vigorously in illustration. She beamed. “Land, *ja*! Water, grass. Is goot, goot!”

“I need to go to land,” I said, watching her carefully. “Go quiet. Secret. Not tell.”

“Ah?” Annekje’s eyes widened, and she looked at me speculatively. “Not tell Captain, *ja*?”

“Not tell anyone,” I said, nodding hard. “You can help?”

She was quiet for a moment, thinking. A big, placid woman, she reminded me of her own goats, adapting cheerfully to the queer life of shipboard, enjoying the pleasures of hay and warm company, thriving despite the lurching deck and stuffy shadows of the hold.

With that same air of capable adaptation, she looked up at me and nodded calmly.

“*Ja*, I help.”

It was past midday when we anchored off what one of the midshipmen told me was Watlings Island.

I looked over the rail with considerable curiosity. This flat island, with its wide white beaches and lines of low palms, had once been called San Salvador. Renamed for the present in honor of a notorious buccaneer of the last century, this dot of land was presumably Christopher Columbus's first sight of the New World.

I had the substantial advantage over Columbus of having known for a fact that the land was here, but still I felt a faint echo of the joy and relief that the sailors of those tiny wooden caravels had felt at that first landfall.

Long enough on a rolling ship, and you forget what it is to walk on land. Getting sea legs, they call it. It's a metamorphosis, this leg-getting, like the change from tadpole to frog, a painless shift from one element to another. But the smell and sight of land makes you remember that you were born to the earth, and your feet ache suddenly for the touch of solid ground.

The problem at the moment was actually getting my feet *on* solid ground. Watlings Island was no more than a pause, to replenish our severely depleted water supply before the run through the Windward Isles down to Jamaica. It would be at least another week's sail, and the presence of so many invalids aboard requiring vast infusions of liquid had run the great water casks in the hold nearly dry.

San Salvador was a small island, but I had learned from careful questioning of my patients that there was a fair amount of shipping traffic through its main port in Cockburn Town. It might not be the ideal place to escape, but it looked as though there would be little other choice; I had no intention of enjoying the navy's "hospitality" on Jamaica, serving as the bait that would lure Jamie to arrest.

Starved as the crew was for the sight and feel of land, no one was allowed to go ashore save the watering party, now busy with their casks and sledges up Pigeon Creek, at whose foot we were anchored. One of the marines stood at the head of the gangway, blocking any attempt at leaving.

Such members of the crew as were not involved in watering or on watch stood by the rail, talking and joking or merely gazing at the island, the dream of hope fulfilled. Some way down the deck, I caught sight of a long, blond tail of hair, flying in the shore breeze. The Governor too had emerged from seclusion, pale face upturned to the tropic sun.

I would have gone to speak to him, but there was no time. Annekje had already gone below for the goat. I wiped my hands on my skirt, making my final estimations. It was no more than two hundred yards to the thick growth of palms and underbrush. If I could get down the gangway and into the jungle, I thought I had a good chance of getting away.

Anxious as he was to be on his way to Jamaica, Captain Leonard was unlikely to waste much time in trying to catch me. And if they did catch me—well, the Captain could hardly punish me for trying to leave the ship; I was neither a seaman nor a formal captive, after all.

The sun shone on Annekje's blond head as she made her way carefully up the ladder, a young goat cozily nestled against her wide bosom. A quick glance, to see that I was in place, and she headed for the gangway.

Annekje spoke to the sentry in her queer mixture of English and Swedish, pointing to the goat and then ashore, insisting that it must have fresh grass. The marine appeared to understand her, but stood firm.

"No, ma'am," he said, respectfully enough, "no one is to go ashore save the watering party; captain's orders."

Standing just out of sight, I watched as she went on arguing, thrusting her goatling urgently in his face, forcing him a step back, a step to the side, maneuvering him artfully just far enough that I could slip past behind him. No more than a moment, now; he was almost in place. When she had drawn him away from the head of the gangplank, she would drop the goat and cause sufficient confusion in the catching of it that I would have a minute or two to make my escape.

I shifted nervously from foot to foot. My feet were bare; it would be easier to run on the sandy beach. The sentry moved, his red-coated back fully turned to me. A foot more, I thought, just a foot more.

"Such a fine day, is it not, Mrs. Malcolm?"

I bit my tongue.

"Very fine, Captain Leonard," I said, with some difficulty. My heart seemed to have stopped dead when he spoke. It now resumed beating much faster than usual, to make up for lost time.

The Captain stepped up beside me and looked over the rail, his young face shining with Columbus's joy. Despite my strong desire to push him overboard, I felt myself smile grudgingly at the sight of him.

"This landfall is as much your victory as mine, Mrs. Malcolm," he said. "Without you, I doubt we should ever have brought the *Porpoise* to land." He very shyly touched my hand, and I smiled again, a little less grudgingly.

"I'm sure you would have managed, Captain," I said. "You seem to be a most competent sailor."

He laughed, and blushed. He had shaved in honor of the land, and his smooth cheeks glowed pink and raw.

"Well, it is mostly the hands, ma'am; I may say they have done nobly. And their efforts, of course, are due in turn to your skill as a physician." He looked at me, brown eyes shining earnestly.

"Indeed, Mrs. Malcolm—I cannot say what your skill and kindness have meant to us. I—I mean to say so, too, to the Governor and to Sir Greville—you know, the King's Commissioner on Antigua. I shall write a letter, a most sincere testimonial to you and to your efforts on our behalf. Perhaps—perhaps it will help." He dropped his eyes.

"Help with what, Captain?" My heart was still beating fast.

Captain Leonard bit his lip, then looked up.

"I had not meant to say anything to you, ma'am. But I—really I cannot in honor keep silence. Mrs. Fraser, I know your name, and I know what your husband is."

"Really?" I said, trying to keep control of my own emotions. "What is he?"

The boy looked surprised at that. "Why, ma'am, he is a criminal." He paled a little. "You mean—you did not know?"

"Yes, I knew that," I said dryly. "Why are you telling me, though?"

He licked his lips, but met my eyes bravely enough. "When I discovered your husband's identity, I wrote it in the ship's log. I regret that action now, but it is too late; the information is official. Once I reach Jamaica, I must report his name and destination to the authorities there, and likewise to the commander at the naval barracks on Antigua. He will be taken when the *Artemis* docks." He swallowed. "And if he is taken—"

"He'll be hanged," I said, finishing what he could not. The boy nodded, wordless. His mouth opened and closed, seeking words.

"I have seen men hanged," he said at last. "Mrs. Fraser, I just—I—" He stopped then, fighting for control, and found it. He drew himself up straight and looked at me straight on, the joy of his landing drowned in sudden misery.

"I am sorry," he said softly. "I cannot ask you to forgive me; I can only say that I am most terribly sorry."

He turned on his heel and walked away. Directly before him stood Annekje Johansen and her goat, still in heated conversation with the sentry.

"What is this?" Captain Leonard demanded angrily. "Remove this animal from the deck at once! Mr. Holford, what are you thinking of?"

Annekje's eyes flicked from the captain to my face, instantly divining what had gone wrong. She stood still, head bowed to the captain's scolding, then marched away toward the hatchway to the goats' hold, clutching her yearling. As she passed, one big blue eye winked solemnly. We would try again. But how?

* * *

Racked by guilt and bedeviled by contrary winds, Captain Leonard avoided me, seeking refuge on his quarterdeck as we made our cautious way past Acklin Island and Samana Cay. The weather aided him in this evasion; it stayed bright, but with odd, light breezes alternating with sudden gusts, so that constant adjustment of the sails was required—no easy task, in a ship so shorthanded.

It was four days later, as we shifted course to enter the Caicos Passage, that a sudden booming gust of wind struck the ship out of nowhere, catching her ill-rigged and unprepared.

I was on deck when the gust struck. There was a sudden *whoosh* that sent my skirts billowing and propelled me flying down the deck, followed by a sharp, loud *crack!* somewhere overhead. I crashed head-on into Ramsdell Hodges, one of the forecastle crew, and we whirled together in a mad pirouette before falling entangled to the deck.

There was confusion all around, with hands running and orders shouted. I sat up, trying to collect my scattered wits.

“What is it?” I demanded of Hodges, who staggered to his feet and reached down to lift me up. “What’s happened?”

“The fucking mainmast’s split,” he said succinctly. “Saving your presence, ma’am, but it has. And now there’ll be hell to pay.”

The *Porpoise* limped slowly south, not daring to risk the banks and shoals of the passage without a mainmast. Instead, Captain Leonard put in for repairs at the nearest convenient anchorage, Bottle Creek, on the shore of North Caicos Island.

This time, we were allowed ashore, but no great good did it do me. Tiny and dry, with few sources of fresh water, the Turks and Caicos provided little more than numerous tiny bays that might shelter passing ships caught in storms. And the idea of hiding on a foodless, waterless island, waiting for a convenient hurricane to blow me a ship, did not appeal.

To Annekje, though, our change of course suggested a new plan.

“I know these island,” she said, nodding wisely. “We go round now, Grand Turk, Mouchoir. Not Caicos.”

I looked askance, and she squatted, drawing with a blunt forefinger in the yellow sand of the beach.

“See—Caicos Passage,” she said, sketching a pair of lines. At the top, between the lines, she sketched the small triangle of a sail. “Go through,” she said, indicating the Caicos Passage, “but mast is gone. Now—” She quickly drew several irregular circles, to the right of the passage. “North Caicos, South Caicos, Caicos, Grand Turk,” she said, stabbing a finger at each circle in turn. Go round now—reefs. Mouchoir.” And she drew another pair of lines, indicating a passage to the southeast of Grand Turk Island.

“Mouchoir Passage?” I had heard the sailors mention it, but had no idea how it applied to my potential escape from the *Porpoise*.

Annekje nodded, beaming, then drew a long, wavy line, some way below her previous illustrations. She pointed at it proudly. “Hispaniola. St. Domingue. Big island, is there towns, lots ships.”

I raised my eyebrows, still baffled. She sighed, seeing that I didn’t understand. She thought a moment, then stood up, dusting her heavy thighs. We had been gathering whelks from the rocks in a shallow pan. She seized this, dumped out the whelks, and filled it with seawater. Then, laying it on the sand, she motioned to me to watch.

She stirred the water carefully, in a circular motion, then lifted her finger out, stained dark with the purple blood of the whelks. The water continued to move, swirling past the tin sides.

Annekje pulled a thread from the raveling hem of her skirt, bit off a short piece, and spat it into the water. It floated, following the swirl of the water in lazy circles round the pan.

“You,” she said, pointing at it. “Vater move you.” She pointed back to her drawing in the sand. A new triangle, in the Mouchoir Passage. A line, curving from the tiny sail down to the left, indicating the ship’s course. And now, the blue thread representing me, rescued from its immersion. She placed it by the tiny sail representing the *Porpoise*, then dragged it off, down the Passage toward the coast of Hispaniola.

“Jump,” she said simply.

“You’re crazy!” I said in horror.

She chuckled in deep satisfaction at my understanding. *“Ja,”* she said. “But it vork. Vater move you.” She pointed to the end of the Mouchoir Passage, to the coast of Hispaniola, and stirred the water in the pan once more. We stood side by side, watching the ripples of her manufactured current die away.

Annekje glanced thoughtfully sideways at me. “You try not drown, *ja*?”

I took a deep breath and brushed the hair out of my eyes.

“Ja,” I said. “I’ll try.”

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I MEET A PRIEST

The sea was remarkably warm, as seas go, and like a warm bath as compared to the icy surf off Scotland. On the other hand, it was extremely wet. After two or three hours of immersion, my feet were numb and my fingers chilled where they gripped the ropes of my makeshift life preserver, made of two empty casks.

The gunner's wife was as good as her word, though. The long, dim shape I had glimpsed from the *Porpoise* grew steadily nearer, its low hills dark as black velvet against a silver sky. Hispaniola—Haiti.

I had no way of telling time, and yet two months on shipboard, with its constant bells and watch-changes, had given me a rough feeling for the passage of the night hours. I thought it must have been near midnight when I left the *Porpoise*; now it was likely near 4:00 A.M., and still over a mile to the shore. Ocean currents are strong, but they take their time.

Worn out from work and worry, I twisted the rope awkwardly about one wrist to prevent my slipping out of the harness, laid my forehead on one cask, and drifted off to sleep with the scent of rum strong in my nostrils.

The brush of something solid beneath my feet woke me to an opal dawn, the sea and sky both glowing with the colors found inside a shell. With my feet planted in cold sand, I could feel the strength of the current flowing past me, tugging on the casks. I disentangled myself from the rope harness and with considerable relief, let the unwieldy things go bobbing toward the shore.

There were deep red indentations on my shoulders. The wrist I had twisted through the wet rope was rubbed raw; I was chilled, exhausted, and very thirsty, and my legs were rubbery as boiled squid.

On the other hand, the sea behind me was empty, the *Porpoise* nowhere in sight. I had escaped.

Now, all that remained to be done was to get ashore, find water, find some means of quick transport to Jamaica, and find Jamie and the *Artemis*, preferably before the Royal Navy did. I thought I could just about manage the first item on the agenda.

Such little as I knew of the Caribbean from postcards and tourist brochures had led me to think in terms of white-sand beaches and crystal lagoons. In fact, prevailing conditions ran more toward a lot of dense and ugly vegetation, embedded in extremely sticky dark-brown mud.

The thick bushlike plants must be mangroves. They stretched as far as I could see in either direction; there was no alternative but to clamber through them. Their roots rose out of the mud in big loops like croquet wickets, which I tripped over regularly, and the pale, smooth gray twigs grew in bunches like finger bones, snatching at my hair as I passed.

Squads of tiny purple crabs ran off in profound agitation at my approach. My feet sank into the mud to the ankles, and I thought better of putting on my shoes, wet as they were. I rolled them up in my wet skirt, kirtling it up above my knees and took out the fish knife Annekje had given me, just in case. I saw nothing threatening, but felt better with a weapon in my hand.

The rising sun on my shoulders at first was welcome, as it thawed my chilled flesh and dried my clothes. Within an hour, though, I wished that it would go behind a cloud. I was sweating heavily as the sun rose higher, caked to the knees with drying mud, and growing thirstier by the moment.

I tried to see how far the mangroves extended, but they rose above my head, and tossing waves of narrow, gray-green leaves were all I could see.

"The whole bloody island can't be mangroves," I muttered, slogging on. "There has to be solid land *someplace*." And water, I hoped.

A noise like a small cannon going off nearby startled me so that I dropped the fish knife. I groped frantically in the mud for it, then dived forward onto my face as something large whizzed past my head, missing me by inches.

There was a loud rattling of leaves, and then a sort of conversational-sounding *"Kwark?"*

"What?" I croaked. I sat up cautiously, knife in one hand, and wiped the wet, muddy curls out of my face with the other. Six feet away, a large black bird was sitting on a mangrove, regarding me with a critical eye.

He bent his head, delicately preening his sleek black feathers, as though to contrast his immaculate appearance with my own dishevelment.

"Well, la-di-dah," I said sarcastically. "You've got wings, mate."

The bird stopped preening and eyed me censoriously. Then he lifted his beak into the air, puffed his chest, and as though to further establish his sartorial superiority, suddenly inflated a large pouch of brilliant red skin that ran from the base of his neck halfway down his body.

"Bwoom!" he said, repeating the cannon-like noise that had startled me before. It startled me again, but not so much.

"Don't *do* that," I said irritably. Paying no attention, the bird slowly flapped its wings, settled back on its branch, and boomed again.

There was a sudden harsh cry from above, and with a loud flapping of wings, two more large black birds plopped down, landing in a mangrove a few feet away. Encouraged by the audience, the first bird went on booming at regular intervals, the skin of his pouch flaming with excitement. Within moments, three more black shapes had appeared overhead.

I was reasonably sure they weren't vultures, but I still wasn't inclined to stay. I had miles to go before I slept—or found Jamie.

The chances of finding him in time were something I preferred not to dwell on.

A half-hour later, I had made so little progress that I could still hear the intermittent booming of my fastidious acquaintance, now joined by a number of similarly vocal friends. Panting with exertion, I picked a thickish root and sat down to rest.

My lips were cracked and dry, and the thought of water was occupying my mind to the exclusion of virtually everything else, even Jamie. I had been struggling through the mangroves for what seemed like forever, yet I could still hear the sound of the ocean. In fact, the tide must have been following me, for as I sat, a thin sheet of foaming, dirty seawater came purling through the mangrove roots to touch my toes briefly before receding.

"Water, water everywhere," I said ruefully, watching it, "nor any drop to drink."

A small movement on the damp mud caught my eye. Bending down, I saw several small fishes, of a sort I had never seen before. So far from flopping about, gasping for breath, these fish were sitting upright, propped on their pectoral fins, looking as though the fact that they were out of water was of no concern at all.

Fascinated, I bent closer to inspect them. One or two shifted on their fins, but they seemed not to mind being looked at. They goggled solemnly back at me, eyes bulging. It was only as I looked closer that I realized that the goggling appearance was caused by the fact that each fish appeared to have four eyes, not two.

I stared at one for a long minute, feeling the sweat trickle down between my breasts.

"Either I'm hallucinating," I told it conversationally, "or *you* are."

The fish didn't answer, but hopped suddenly, landing on a branch several inches above the ground. Perhaps it sensed something, for a moment later, another wave washed through, this one splashing up to my ankles.

A sudden welcome coolness fell on me. The sun had obligingly gone behind a cloud, and with its vanishing, the whole feel of the mangrove forest changed.

The gray leaves rattled as a sudden wind came up, and all the tiny crabs and fish and sand fleas disappeared as though by magic. They obviously knew something I didn't, and I found their going rather sinister.

I glanced up at the cloud where the sun had vanished, and gasped. A huge purple mass of boiling cloud was coming up behind the hills, so fast that I could actually see the leading edge of the mass, blazing white with shielded sunlight, moving forward toward me.

The next wave came through, two inches higher than the last, and taking longer to recede. I was neither a fish nor a crab, but by this time I had tumbled to the fact that a storm was on its way, and moving with amazing speed.

I glanced around, but saw nothing more than the seemingly infinite stretch of mangroves before me. Nothing that could be used for shelter. Still, being caught out in a rainstorm was hardly the worst that could happen, under the circumstances. My tongue felt dry and sticky, and I licked my lips at the thought of cool, sweet rain falling on my face.

The swish of another wave halfway up my shins brought me to a sudden awareness that I was in danger of more than getting wet. A quick glance into the upper branches of the mangroves showed me dried tufts of seaweed tangled in the twigs and crotches—high-tide level—and well above my head.

I felt a moment's panic, and tried to calm myself. If I lost my bearings in this place, I was done for. "Hold on, Beauchamp," I muttered to myself. I remembered a bit of advice I'd learned as an intern—"The first thing to do in a cardiac arrest is take your own pulse." I smiled at the memory, feeling panic ebb at once. As a gesture, I did take my pulse; a little fast, but strong and steady.

All right, then, which way? Toward the mountain; it was the only thing I could see above the sea of mangroves. I pushed my way through the branches as fast as I could, ignoring the ripping of my skirts and the increasing pull of each wave on my legs. The wind was coming from the sea behind me, pushing the waves higher. It blew my hair constantly into my eyes and mouth, and I wiped it back again and again, cursing out loud for the comfort of hearing a voice, but my throat was soon so dry that it hurt to talk.

I squelched on. My skirt kept pulling loose from my belt, and somewhere I dropped my shoes, which disappeared at once in the boiling foam that now washed well above my knees. It didn't seem to matter.

The tide was midthigh when the rain hit. With a roar that drowned the rattle of the leaves, it fell in drenching sheets that soaked me to the skin in moments. At first I wasted time vainly tilting my head back, trying to direct the rivulets that ran down my face into my open mouth. Then sense reasserted itself; I took off the kerchief tucked around my shoulders, let the rain soak it and wrung it out several times, to remove the vestiges of salt. Then I let it soak in the rain once more, lifted the wadded fabric to my mouth, and sucked the water from it. It tasted of sweat and seaweed and coarse cotton. It was delicious.

I had kept going, but was still in the clutches of the mangroves. The incoming tide was nearly waist-deep, and the walking getting much harder. Thirst slaked momentarily, I put my head down and pushed forward as fast as I could.

Lightning flashed over the mountains, and a moment later came the growl of thunder. The wash of the tide was so strong now that I could move forward only as each wave came in, half-running as the water shoved me along, then clinging to the nearest mangrove stem as the wash sucked back, dragging my trailing legs.

I was beginning to think that I had been over-hasty in abandoning Captain Leonard and the *Porpoise*. The wind was rising still further, dashing rain into my face so that I could barely see. Sailors say every seventh wave is higher. I found myself counting, as I slogged forward. It was the ninth wave, in fact, that struck me between the shoulder blades and knocked me flat before I could grasp a branch.

I floundered, helpless and choking in a blur of sand and water, then found my feet and stood upright again. The wave had half-drowned me, but had also altered my direction. I was no longer facing the mountain. I was, however, facing a large tree, no more than twenty feet away.

Four more waves, four more surging rushes forward, four more grim clutchings as the tide-race sought to pull me back, and I was on the muddy bank of a small inlet, where a tiny stream ran through the mangroves and out to sea. I crawled up it, slipping and staggering as I clambered into the welcoming embrace of the tree.

From a perch twelve feet up, I could see the stretch of the mangrove swamp behind me, and beyond that, the open sea. I changed my mind once more about the wisdom of my leaving the *Porpoise*; no matter how awful things were on land, they were a good deal worse out there.

Lightning shattered over a surface of boiling water, as wind and tide-race fought for control of the waves. Farther out, in the Mouchoir Passage, the swell was so high, it looked like rolling hills. The wind was high enough now to make a thin, whistling scream as it passed by, chilling me to the skin in my wet clothes. Thunder cracked together with the lightning flashes now, as the storm moved over me.

The *Artemis* was slower than the man-of-war; slow enough, I hoped, to be still safe, far out in the Atlantic.

I saw one clump of mangroves struck, a hundred feet away; the water hissed back, boiled away, and the dry land showed for a moment, before the waves rolled back, drowning the black wire of the blasted stems. I wrapped my arms about the trunk of the tree, pressed my face against the bark, and prayed. For Jamie, and the *Artemis*. For the *Porpoise*, Annekje Johansen and Tom Leonard and the Governor. And for me.

* * *

It was full daylight when I woke, my leg wedged between two branches, and numb from the knee down. I half-climbed, half-fell from my perch, landing in the shallow water of the inlet. I scooped up a handful of the water, tasted it, and spat it out. Not salt, but too brackish to drink.

My clothes were damp, but I was parched. The storm was long gone; everything around me was peaceful and normal, with the exception of the blackened mangroves. In the distance, I could hear the booming of the big black birds.

Brackish water here promised fresher water farther up the inlet. I rubbed my leg, trying to work out the pins-and-needles, then limped up the bank.

The vegetation began to change from the gray-green mangroves to a lusher green, with a thick undergrowth of grass and mossy plants that obliged me to walk in the water. Tired and thirsty as I was, I could go only a short distance before having to sit down and rest. As I did so, several of the odd little fish hopped up onto the bank beside me, goggling as though in curiosity.

“Well, I think you look rather peculiar, too,” I told one.

“Are you English?” said the fish incredulously. The impression of Alice in Wonderland was so pronounced that I merely blinked stupidly at it for a moment. Then my head snapped up, and I stared into the face of the man who had spoken.

His face was weathered and sunburned to the color of mahogany, but the black hair that curled back from his brow was thick and ungrizzled. He stepped out from behind the mangrove, moving cautiously, as though afraid to startle me.

He was a bit above middle height and burly, thick through the shoulder, with a broad, boldly carved face, whose naturally friendly expression was tinged with wariness. He was dressed shabbily, with a heavy canvas bag slung across his shoulder—and a canteen made of goatskin hung from his belt.

“Vous êtes Anglaise?” he asked, repeating his original question in French. *“Comment ça va?”*

“Yes, I’m English,” I said, croaking. “May I have some water, please?”

His eyes popped wide open—they were a light hazel—but he didn’t say anything, just took the skin bag from his belt and handed it to me.

I laid the fish knife on my knee, close within reach, and drank deeply, scarcely able to gulp fast enough.

“Careful,” he said. “It’s dangerous to drink too fast.”

“I know,” I said, slightly breathless as I lowered the bag. “I’m a doctor.” I lifted the canteen and drank again, but forced myself to swallow more slowly this time.

My rescuer was regarding me quizzically—and little wonder, I supposed. Sea-soaked and sun-dried, mud-caked and sweat-stained, with my hair straggling down over my face, I looked like a beggar, and probably a demented one at that.

"A doctor?" he said in English, showing that his thoughts had been traveling in the direction I suspected. He eyed me closely, in a way strongly reminiscent of the big black bird I had met earlier. "A doctor of *what*, if I might ask?"

"Medicine," I said, pausing briefly between gulps.

He had strongly drawn black brows. These rose nearly to his hairline.

"Indeed," he said, after a noticeable pause.

"Indeed," I said in the same tone of voice, and he laughed.

He inclined his head toward me in a formal bow. "In that case, Madame Physician, allow me to introduce myself. Lawrence Stern, Doctor of Natural Philosophy, of the Gesellschaft von Naturwissenschaft Philosophieren, Munich."

I blinked at him.

"A naturalist," he elaborated, gesturing at the canvas bag over his shoulder. "I was making my way toward those frigate birds in hopes of observing their breeding display, when I happened to overhear you, er …"

"Talking to a fish," I finished. "Yes, well … have they really got four eyes?" I asked, in hopes of changing the subject.

"Yes—or so it seems." He glanced down at the fish, who appeared to be following the conversation with rapt attention. "They seem to employ their oddly shaped optics when submerged, so that the upper pair of eyes observes events above the surface of the water, and the lower pair similarly takes note of happenings below it."

He looked then at me, with a hint of a smile. "Might I perhaps have the honor of knowing your name, Madame Physician?"

I hesitated, unsure what to tell him. I pondered the assortment of available aliases and decided on the truth.

"Fraser," I said. "Claire Fraser. Mrs. James Fraser," I added for good measure, feeling vaguely that marital status might make me seem slightly more respectable, appearances notwithstanding. I fingered back the curl hanging in my left eye.

"Your servant, Madame," he said with a gracious bow. He rubbed the bridge of his nose thoughtfully, looking at me.

"You have been shipwrecked, perhaps?" he ventured. It seemed the most logical—if not the only—explanation of my presence, and I nodded.

"I need to find a way to get to Jamaica," I said. "Do you think you can help me?"

He stared at me, frowning slightly, as though I were a specimen he couldn't quite decide how to classify, but then he nodded. He had a broad mouth that looked made for smiling; one corner turned up, and he extended a hand to help me up.

"Yes," he said. "I can help. But I think maybe first we find you some food, and maybe clothes, eh? I have a friend, who lives not so far away. I will take you there, shall I?"

What with parching thirst and the general press of events, I had paid little attention to the demands of my stomach. At the mention of food, however, II' it came immediately and vociferously to life.

"That," I said loudly, in hopes of drowning it out, "would be very nice indeed." I brushed back the tangle of my hair as well as I could, and ducking under a branch, followed my rescuer into the trees.

As we emerged from a palmetto grove, the ground opened out into a meadow-like space, then rose up in a broad hill before us. At the top of the hill, I could see a house—or at least a ruin. Its yellow plaster walls were cracked and overrun by pink bougainvillaeas and straggling guavas, the tin roof sported several visible holes, and the whole place gave off an air of mournful dilapidation.

"Hacienda de la Fuente," my new acquaintance said, with a nod toward it. "Can you stand the walk up the hill, or—" He hesitated, eyeing me as though estimating my weight. "I could carry you, I suppose," he said, with a not altogether flattering tone of doubt in his voice.

"I can manage," I assured him. My feet were bruised and sore, and punctured by fallen palmetto fronds, but the path before us looked relatively smooth.

The hillside leading up to the house was crisscrossed with the faint lines of sheep trails. There were a number of these animals present, peacefully grazing under the hot Hispaniola sun. As we stepped out of the trees, one sheep spotted us and uttered a short bleat of surprise. Like clockwork, every sheep on the hillside lifted its head in unison and stared at us.

Feeling rather self-conscious under this unblinking phalanx of suspicious eyes, I picked up my muddy skirts and followed Dr. Stern toward the main path—trodden by more than sheep, to judge from its width—that led up and over the hill.

It was a fine, bright day, and flocks of orange and white butterflies flickered through the grass. They lighted on the scattered blooms with here and there a brilliant yellow butterfly shining like a tiny sun.

I breathed in deeply, a lovely smell of grass and flowers, with minor notes of sheep and sun-warmed dust. A brown speck lighted for a moment on my sleeve and clung, long enough for me to see the velvet scales on its wing, and the tiny curled hose of its proboscis. The slender abdomen pulsed, breathing to its wing-beats, and then it was gone.

It might have been the promise of help, the water, the butterflies, or all three, but the burden of fear and fatigue under which I had labored for so long began to lift. True, I still had to face the problem of finding transport to Jamaica, but with thirst assuaged, a friend at hand, and the possibility of lunch just ahead, that no longer appeared the impossible task it had seemed in the mangroves.

"There he is!" Lawrence stopped, waiting for me to come up alongside him on the path. He gestured upward, toward a slight, wiry figure, picking its way carefully down the hillside toward us. I squinted at the figure as it wandered through the sheep, who took no apparent notice of his passage.

"Jesus!" I said. "It's St. Francis of Assisi."

Lawrence glanced at me in surprise.

"No, neither one. I told you he's English." He raised an arm and shouted, "*¡Hola!* Señor Fogden!"

The gray-robed figure paused suspiciously, one hand twined protectively in the wool of a passing ewe.

"¿Quien es?"

"Stern!" called Lawrence. "Lawrence Stern! Come along," he said, and extended a hand to pull me up the steep hillside onto the sheep path above.

The ewe was making determined efforts to escape her protector, which distracted him from our approach. A slender man a bit taller than I, he had a lean face that might have been handsome if not disfigured by a reddish beard that straggled dust-mop-like round the edges of his chin. His long and straying hair had gone to gray in streaks and runnels, and fell forward into his eyes with some frequency. An orange butterfly took wing from his head as we reached him.

"Stern?" he said, brushing back the hair with his free hand and blinking owlishly in the sunlight. "I don't know any … oh, it's you!" His thin face brightened. "Why didn't you say it was the shitworm man; I should have known you at once!"

Stern looked mildly embarrassed at this, and glanced at me apologetically. "I … ah … collected several interesting parasites from the excrement of Mr. Fogden's sheep, upon the occasion of my last visit," he explained.

"Horrible great worms!" Father Fogden said, shuddering violently in recollection. "A foot long, some of them, at least!"

"No more than eight inches," Stern corrected, smiling. He glanced at the nearest sheep, his hand resting on his collecting bag as though in anticipation of further imminent contributions to science. "Was the remedy I suggested effective?"

Father Fogden looked vaguely doubtful, as though trying to remember quite what the remedy had been.

"The turpentine drench," the naturalist prompted.

"Oh, yes!" The sun broke out on the priest's lean countenance, and he beamed fondly upon us. "Of course, of course! Yes, it worked splendidly. A few of them died, but the rest were quite cured. Capital, entirely capital!"

Suddenly it seemed to dawn on Father Fogden that he was being less than hospitable.

"But you must come in!" he said. "I was just about to partake of the midday meal; I insist you must join me." The priest turned to me. "This will be Mrs. Stern, will it?"

Mention of eight-inch intestinal worms had momentarily suppressed my hunger pangs, but at the mention of food, they came gurgling back in full force.

"No, but we should be delighted to partake of your hospitality," Stern answered politely. "Pray allow me to introduce my companion—a Mrs. Fraser, a countrywoman of yours."

Fogden's eyes grew quite round at this. A pale blue, with a tendency to water in bright sun, they fixed wonderingly upon me.

"An Englishwoman?" he said, disbelieving. "Here?" The round eyes took in the mud and salt stains on my crumpled dress, and my general air of disarray. He blinked for a moment, then stepped forward, and with the utmost dignity, bowed low over my hand.

"Your most obedient servant, Madame," he said. He rose and gestured grandly at the ruin on the hill. *"Mi casa es su casa."* He whistled sharply, and a small King Charles cavalier spaniel poked its face inquiringly out of the weeds.

"We have a guest, Ludo," the priest said, beaming. "Isn't that nice?" Tucking my hand firmly under one elbow, he took the sheep by its topknot of wool and towed us both toward the Hacienda de la Fuente, leaving Stern to follow.

The reason for the name became clear as we entered the dilapidated courtyard; a tiny cloud of dragonflies hovered like blinking lights over an algae-filled pool in one corner; it looked like a natural spring that someone had curbed in when the house was built. At least a dozen jungle fowl sprang up from the shattered pavement and flapped madly past our feet, leaving a small cloud of dust and feathers behind them. From other evidences left behind, I deduced that the trees overhanging the patio were their customary roost, and had been for some time.

"And so I was fortunate enough to encounter Mrs. Fraser among the mangroves this morning," Stern concluded. "I thought that perhaps you might … oh, look at that beauty! A magnificent Odonata!”

A tone of amazed delight accompanied this last statement, and he pushed unceremoniously past us to peer up into the shadows of the palm-thatched patio roof, where an enormous dragonfly, at least four inches across, was darting to and fro, blue body catching fire when it crossed one of the errant rays of sunshine poking through the tattered roof.

“Oh, do you want it? Be my guest.” Our host waved a gracious hand at the dragonfly. “Here, Becky, trot in there and I’ll see to your hoof in a bit.” He shooed the ewe into the patio with a slap on the rump. It snorted and galloped off a few feet, then fell at once to browsing on the scattered fruit of a huge guava that overhung the ancient wall.

In fact, the trees around the patio had grown up to such an extent that the branches at many points interlaced. The whole of the courtyard seemed roofed with them, a sort of leafy tunnel, leading down the length of the patio into the gaping cavern of the house’s entrance.

Drifts of dust and the pink paper leaves of bougainvillaea lay heaped against the sill, but just beyond, the dark wood floor gleamed with polish, bare and immaculate. It was dark inside, after the brilliance of the sunlight, but my eyes quickly adapted to the surroundings, and I looked around curiously.

It was a very plain room, dark and cool, furnished with no more than a long table, a few stools and chairs, and a small sideboard, over which hung a hideous painting in the Spanish style—an emaciated Christ, goateed and pallid in the gloom, indicating with one skeletal hand the bleeding heart that throbbed in his chest.

This ghastly object so struck my eye that it was a moment before I realized there was someone else in the room. The shadows in one corner of the room coalesced, and a small round face emerged, wearing an expression of remarkable malignity. I blinked and took a step back. The woman—for so she was—took a step forward, black eyes fixed on me, unblinking as the sheep.

She was no more than four feet tall, and so thick through the body as to seem like a solid block, without joint or indentation. Her head was a small round knob atop her body, with the smaller knob of a sparse gray bun scraped tightly back behind it. She was a light mahogany color—whether from the sun or naturally, I couldn't tell—and looked like nothing so much as a carved wooden doll. An ill-wish doll.

"Mamacita," said the priest, speaking Spanish to the graven image, "what good fortune! We have guests who will eat with us. You remember Señor Stern?" he added, gesturing at Lawrence.

"Sí, claro," said the image, through invisible wooden lips. "The Christ-killer. And who is the *puta alba?*"

"And this is Señora Fraser," Father Fogden went on, beaming as though she had not spoken. "The poor lady has had the misfortune to be shipwrecked; we must assist her as much as we can."

Mamacita looked me over slowly from top to toe. She said nothing, but the wide nostrils flared with infinite contempt.

"Your food's ready," she said, and turned away.

"Splendid!" the priest said happily. "Mamacita welcomes you; she'll bring us some food. Won't you sit down?"

The table was already laid with a large cracked plate and a wooden spoon. The priest took two more plates and spoons from the sideboard, and distributed them haphazardly about the table, gesturing hospitably at us to be seated.

A large brown coconut sat on the chair at the head of the table. Fogden tenderly picked this up and set it alongside his plate. The fibrous husk was darkened with age, and the hair was worn off it in patches, showing an almost polished appearance; I thought he must have had it for some time.

"Hallo there," he said, patting it affectionately. "And how are you keeping this fine day, Coco?"

I glanced at Stern, but he was studying the portrait of Christ, a small frown between his thick black brows. I supposed it was up to me to open a conversation.

"You live alone here, Mr.—ah, Father Fogden?" I inquired of our host. "You, and—er, Mamacita?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. That's why I'm so pleased to see you. I haven't any real company but Ludo and Coco, you know," he explained, patting the hairy nut once more.

"Coco?" I said politely, thinking that on the evidence to hand so far, Coco wasn't the only nut among those present. I darted another glance at Stern, who looked mildly amused, but not alarmed.

"Spanish for bugbear—*coco*," the priest explained. "A hobgoblin. See him there, wee button nose and his dark little eyes?" Fogden jabbed two long, slender fingers suddenly into the depressions in the end of the coconut and jerked them back, chortling.

"Ah-ah!" he cried. "Mustn't stare, Coco, it's rude, you know!"

The pale blue eyes darted a piercing glance at me, and with some difficulty, I removed my teeth from my lower lip.

"Such a pretty lady," he said, as though to himself. "Not like my Ermenegilda, but very pretty nonetheless—isn't she, Ludo?"

The dog, thus addressed, ignored me, but bounded joyfully at its master, shoving its head under his hand and barking. He scratched its ears affectionately, then turned his attention back to me.

"Would one of Ermenegilda's dresses fit you, I wonder?"

I didn't know whether to answer this or not. Instead, I merely smiled politely, and hoped what I was thinking didn't show on my face. Fortunately, at this point Mamacita came back, carrying a steaming clay pot wrapped in towels. She slapped a ladleful of the contents on each plate, then went out, her feet—if she had any—moving invisibly beneath the shapeless skirt.

I stirred the mess on my plate, which appeared to be vegetable in nature. I took a cautious bite, and found it surprisingly good.

"Fried plantain, mixed with manioc and red beans," Lawrence explained, seeing my hesitation. He took a large spoonful of the steaming pulp himself and ate it without pausing for it to cool.

I had expected something of an inquisition about my presence, identity, and prospects. Instead, Father Fogden was singing softly under his breath, keeping time on the table with his spoon between bites.

I darted a glance at Lawrence, eyebrows up. He merely smiled, raised one shoulder in a slight shrug, and bent to his own food.

No real conversation occurred until the conclusion of the meal, when Mamacita—"unsmiling" seemed an understatement of her expression—removed the plates, replacing them with a platter of fruit, three cups, and a gigantic clay pitcher.

"Have you ever drunk sangria, Mrs. Fraser?"

I opened my mouth to say "Yes," thought better of it, and said, "No, what is it?" Sangria had been a popular drink in the 1960s, and I had had it many times at faculty parties and hospital social events. But for now, I was sure that it was unknown in England and Scotland; Mrs. Fraser of Edinburgh would never have heard of sangria.

"A mixture of red wine and the juices of orange and lemon," Lawrence Stern was explaining. "Mulled with spices, and served hot or cold, depending upon the weather. A most comforting and healthful beverage, is it not, Fogden?"

"Oh, yes. Oh, yes. Most comforting." Not waiting for me to find out for myself, the priest drained his cup, and reached for the pitcher before I had taken the first sip.

It was the same; the same sweet, throat-rasping taste, and I suffered the momentary illusion that I was back at the party where I had first tasted it, in company with a marijuana-smoking graduate student and a professor of botany.

This illusion was fostered by Stern's conversation, which dealt with his collections, and by Father Fogden's behavior. After several cups of sangria, he had risen, rummaged through the sideboard, and emerged with a large clay pipe. This he packed full of a strong-smelling herb shaken out of a paper twist, and proceeded to smoke.

"Hemp?" Stern asked, seeing this. "Tell me, do you find it settling to the digestive processes? I have heard it is so, but the herb is unobtainable in most European cities, and I have no firsthand observations of its effect."

"Oh, it is most genial and comforting to the stomach," Father Fogden assured him. He drew in a huge breath, held it, then exhaled long and dreamily, blowing a stream of soft white smoke that floated in streamers of haze near the room's low ceiling. "I shall send a packet home with you, dear fellow. Do say, now, what do you mean doing, you and this shipwrecked lady you have rescued?"

Stern explained his plan; after a night's rest, we intended to walk as far as the village of St. Luis du Nord, and from there see whether a fishing boat might carry us to Cap-Haïtien, thirty miles distant. If not, we would have to make our way overland to Le Cap, the nearest port of any size.

The priest's sketchy brows drew close together, frowning against the smoke.

"Mm? Well, I suppose there isn't much choice, is there? Still, you must go careful, particularly if you go overland to Le Cap. Maroons, you know."

"Maroons?" I glanced quizzically at Stern, who nodded, frowning.

"That's true. I did meet with two or three small bands as I came north through the valley of the Artibonite. They didn't molest me, though—I daresay I looked little better off than they, poor wretches. The Maroons are escaped slaves," he explained to me. "Having fled the cruelty of their masters, they take refuge in the remote hills, where the jungle hides them."

"They might not trouble you," Father Fogden said. He sucked deeply on his pipe, with a low, slurping noise, held his breath for a long count and then let it out reluctantly. His eyes were becoming markedly bloodshot. He closed one of them and examined me rather blearily with the other. "She doesn't look worth robbing, really."

Stern smiled broadly, looking at me, then quickly erased the smile, as though feeling he had been less than tactful. He coughed and took another cup of sangria. The priest's eyes gleamed over the pipe, red as a ferret's.

"I believe I need a little fresh air," I said, pushing back my chair. "And perhaps a little water, to wash with?"

"Oh, of course, of course!" Father Fogden cried. He rose, swaying unsteadily, and thumped the coals from his pipe carelessly out onto the sideboard. "Come with me."

The air in the patio seemed fresh and invigorating by comparison, despite its mugginess. I inhaled deeply, looking on with interest as Father Fogden fumbled with a bucket by the fountain in the corner.

"Where does the water come from?" I asked. "Is it a spring?" The stone trough was lined with soft tendrils of green algae, and I could see these moving lazily; evidently there was a current of some kind.

It was Stern who answered.

"Yes, there are hundreds of such springs. Some of them are said to have spirits living in them—but I do not suppose you subscribe to such superstition, sir?"

Father Fogden seemed to have to think about this. He set the half-filled bucket down on the coping and squinted into the water, trying to fix his gaze on one of the small silver fish that swam there.

"Ah?" he said vaguely. "Well, no. Spirits, no. Still—oh, yes, I had forgotten. I had something to show you." Going to a cupboard set into the wall, he pulled open the cracked wooden door and removed a small bundle of coarse unbleached muslin, which he put gingerly into Stern's hands.

"It came up in the spring one day last month," he said. "It died when the noon sun struck it, and I took it out. I'm afraid the other fish nibbled it a bit," he said apologetically, "but you can still see."

Lying in the center of the cloth was a small dried fish, much like those darting about in the spring, save that this one was pure white. It was also blind. On either side of the blunt head, there was a small swelling where an eye should have been, but that was all.

"Do you think it is a ghost fish?" the priest inquired. "I thought of it when you mentioned spirits. Still, I can't think what sort of sin a fish might have committed, so as to be doomed to roam about like that—eyeless, I mean. I mean"—he closed one eye again in his favorite expression—"one doesn't think of fish as having souls, and yet, if they don't, how can they become ghosts?"

"I shouldn't think they do, myself," I assured him. I peered more closely at the fish, which Stern was examining with the rapt joy of the born naturalist. The skin was very thin, and so transparent that the shadows of the internal organs and the knobbly line of the vertebrae were clearly visible, yet it did have scales, tiny and translucent, though dulled by dryness.

"It is a blind cave fish," Stern said, reverently stroking the tiny blunt head. "I have seen one only once before, in a pool deep inside a cave, at a place called Abandawe. And that one escaped before I could examine it closely. My dear fellow—" He turned to the priest, eyes shining with excitement. "Might I have it?"

"Of course, of course." The priest fluttered his fingers in offhand generosity. "No use to me. Too small to eat, you know, even if Mamacita would think of cooking it, which she wouldn't." He glanced around the patio, kicking absently at a passing hen. "Where *is* Mamacita?"

"Here, *cabrón*, where else?" I hadn't seen her come out of the house, but there she was, a dusty, sunbrowned little figure stooping to fill another bucket from the spring.

A faintly musty, unpleasant smell reached my nostrils, and they twitched uneasily. The priest must have noticed, for he said, "Oh, you mustn't mind, it's only poor Arabella."

"Arabella?"

"Yes, in here." The priest held aside a ragged curtain of burlap that screened off a corner of the patio, and I glanced behind it.

A ledge jutted out of the stone wall at waist-height. On it were ranged a long row of sheep's skulls, pure white and polished.

"I can't bear to part with them, you see." Father Fogden gently stroked the heavy curve of a skull. "This was Beatriz—so sweet and gentle. She died in lambing, poor thing." He indicated two much smaller skulls nearby, shaped and polished like the rest.

"Arabella is a—a sheep, too?" I asked. The smell was much stronger here, and I thought I really didn't want to know where it was coming from at all.

"A member of my flock, yes, certainly." The priest turned his oddly bright blue eyes on me, looking quite fierce. "She was murdered! Poor Arabella, such a gentle, trusting soul. How they can have had the wickedness to betray such innocence for the sake of carnal lusts!"

"Oh, dear," I said, rather inadequately. "I'm terribly sorry to hear that. Ah—who murdered her?"

"The sailors, the wicked heathen! Killed her on the beach and roasted her poor body over a gridiron, just like St. Lawrence the Martyr."

"Heavens," I said.

The priest sighed, and his spindly beard appeared to droop with mourning.

"Yes, I must not forget the hope of Heaven. For if Our Lord observes the fall of every sparrow, He can scarcely have failed to observe Arabella. She must have weighed near on ninety pounds, at least, such a good grazer as she was, poor child."

"Ah," I said, trying to infuse the remark with a suitable sympathy and horror. It then occurred to me what the priest had said.

"Sailors?" I asked. "When did you say this—this sad occurrence took place?" It couldn't be the *Porpoise*, I thought. Surely, Captain Leonard would not have thought me so important that he had risked bringing his ship in so close to the island, in order to pursue me? But my hands grew damp at the thought, and I wiped them unobtrusively on my robe.

"This morning," Father Fogden replied, setting back the lamb's skull he had picked up to fondle. "But," he added, his manner brightening a bit, "I must say they're making wonderful progress with her. It usually takes more than a week, and already you can quite see …"

He opened the cupboard again, revealing a large lump, covered with several layers of damp burlap. The smell was markedly stronger now, and a number of small brown beetles scuttled away from the light.

"Are those members of the Dermestidae you have there, Fogden?" Lawrence Stern, having tenderly committed the corpse of his cave fish to a jar of alcoholic spirits, had come to join us. He peered over my shoulder, sunburned features creased in interest.

Inside the cupboard, the white maggot larvae of dermestid beetles were hard at work, polishing the skull of Arabella the sheep. They had made a good start on the eyes. The manioc shifted heavily in my stomach.

"Is that what they are? I suppose so; dear voracious little fellows." The priest swayed alarmingly, catching himself on the edge of the cupboard. As he did so, he finally noticed the old woman, standing glaring at him, a bucket in either hand.

"Oh, I had quite forgotten! You will be needing a change of clothing, will you not, Mrs. Fraser?"

I looked down at myself. The dress and shift I was wearing were ripped in so many places that they were barely decent, and so soaked and sodden with water and swamp-mud that I was scarcely tolerable, even in such undemanding company as that of Father Fogden and Lawrence Stern.

Father Fogden turned to the graven image. "Have we not something this unfortunate lady might wear, Mamacita?" he asked in Spanish. He seemed to hesitate, swaying gently. "Perhaps, one of the dresses in—"

The woman bared her teeth at me. "They are much too small for such a cow," she said, also in Spanish. "Give her your old robe, if you must." She cast an eye of scorn on my tangled hair and mud-streaked face. "Come," she said in English, turning her back on me. "You wash."

She led me to a smaller patio at the back of the house, where she provided me with two buckets of cold, fresh water, a worn linen towel, and a small pot of soft soap, smelling strongly of lye. Adding a shabby gray robe with a rope belt, she bared her teeth at me again and left, remarking genially in Spanish, "Wash away the blood on your hands, Christ-killing whore."

I shut the patio gate after her with a considerable feeling of relief, stripped off my sticky, filthy clothes with even more relief, and made my toilet as well as might be managed with cold water and no comb.

Clad decently, if oddly, in Father Fogden's extra robe, I combed out my wet hair with my fingers, contemplating my peculiar host. I wasn't sure whether the priest's excursions into oddness were some form of dementia, or only the side effects of long-term alcoholism and cannabis intoxication, but he seemed a gentle, kindly soul, in spite of it. His servant—if that's what she was—was another question altogether.

Mamacita made me more than slightly nervous. Mr. Stern had announced his intention of going down to the seaside to bathe, and I was reluctant to go back into the house until he returned. There had been quite a lot of sangria left, and I suspected that Father Fogden—if he was still conscious—would be little protection by this time against that basilisk glare.

Still, I couldn't stay outside all afternoon; I was very tired, and wanted to sit down at least, though I would have preferred to find a bed and sleep for a week. There was a door opening into the house from my small patio; I pushed it open and stepped into the dark interior.

I was in a small bedroom. I looked around, amazed; it didn't seem part of the same house as the Spartan main room and the shabby patios. The bed was made up with feather pillows and a coverlet of soft red wool. Four huge patterned fans were spread like bright wings across the whitewashed walls, and wax candles in a branched brass candelabrum sat on the table.

The furniture was simply but carefully made, and polished with oil to a soft, deep gloss. A curtain of striped cotton hung across the end of the room. It was pushed partway back, and I could see a row of dresses hung on hooks behind it, in a rainbow of silken color.

These must be Ermenegilda's dresses, the ones that Father Fogden had mentioned. I walked forward to look at them, my bare feet quiet on the floor. The room was dustless and clean, but very quiet, without the scent or vibration of human occupancy. No one lived in this room anymore.

The dresses were beautiful; all of silk and velvet, moiré and satin, mousse-line and panne. Even hanging lifeless here from their hooks, they had the sheen and beauty of an animal's pelt, where some essence of life lingers in the fur.

I touched one bodice, purple velvet, heavy with embroidered silver pansies, centered with pearls. She had been small, this Ermenegilda, and slightly built—several of the dresses had ruffles and pads cleverly sewn inside the bodices, to add to the illusion of a bust. The room was comfortable, though not luxurious; the dresses were splendid—things that might have been worn at Court in Madrid.

Ermenegilda was gone, but the room still seemed inhabited. I touched a sleeve of peacock blue in farewell and tiptoed away, leaving the dresses to their dreams.

I found Lawrence Stern on the veranda at the back of the house, overlooking a precipitous slope of aloe and guava. In the distance, a small humped island sat cradled in a sea of glimmering turquoise. He rose in courtesy, giving me a small bow and a look of surprise.

"Mrs. Fraser! You are in greatly improved looks, I must say. The Father's robe suits you somewhat more than it does him." He smiled at me, hazel eyes creasing in a flattering expression of admiration.

"I expect the absence of dirt has more to do with it," I said, sitting down in the chair he offered me. "Is that something to drink?" There was a pitcher on the rickety wooden table between the chairs; moisture had condensed in a heavy dew on the sides and droplets ran enticingly down the sides. I had been thirsty so long that the sight of anything liquid automatically made my cheeks draw in with longing.

"More sangria," Stern said. He poured out a small cupful for each of us, and sipped his own, sighing with enjoyment. "I hope you will not think me intemperate, Mrs. Fraser, but after months of tramping country, drinking nothing but water and the slaves' crude rum—" He closed his eyes in bliss. "Ambrosia."

I was rather disposed to agree.

"Er … is Father Fogden …?" I hesitated, looking for some tactful way of inquiring after our host's state. I needn't have bothered.

"Drunk," Stern said frankly. "Limp as a worm, laid out on the table in the *sala*. He nearly always is, by the time the sun's gone down," he added.

"I see." I settled back in the chair, sipping my own sangria. "Have you known Father Fogden long?"

Stern rubbed a hand over his forehead, thinking. "Oh, for a few years." He glanced at me. "I was wondering—do you by chance know a James Fraser, from Edinburgh? I realize it is a common name, but—oh, you do?"

I hadn't spoken, but my face had given me away, as it always did, unless I was carefully prepared to lie.

"My husband's name is James Fraser," I said.

Stern's face lighted with interest. "Indeed!" he exclaimed. "And is he a very large fellow, with—"

"Red hair," I agreed. "Yes, that's Jamie." Something occurred to me. "He told me he'd met a natural philosopher in Edinburgh, and had a most interesting conversation about … various things." What I was wondering was where Stern had learned Jamie's real name. Most people in Edinburgh would have known him only as "Jamie Roy," the smuggler, or as Alexander Malcolm, the respectable printer of Carfax Close. Surely Dr. Stern, with his distinct German accent, couldn't be the "Englishman" Tompkins had spoken of?

"Spiders," Stern said promptly. "Yes, I recall perfectly. Spiders and caves. We met in a—a—" His face went blank for a moment. Then he coughed, masterfully covering the lapse. "In a, um, drinking establishment. One of the—ah—female employees happened to encounter a large specimen of *Arachmida* hanging from the ceiling in her—that is, from the ceiling as she was engaged in … ah, conversation with me. Being somewhat frightened in consequence, she burst into the passageway, shrieking incoherently." Stern took a large gulp of sangria as a restorative, evidently finding the memory stressful.

"I had just succeeded in capturing the animal and securing it in a specimen jar when Mr. Fraser burst into the room, pointed a species of firearm at me, and said—" Here Stern developed a prolonged coughing fit, pounding himself vigorously on the chest.

"Eheu! Do you not find this particular pitcher perhaps a trifle strong, Mrs. Fraser? I suspect that the old woman has added too many sliced lemons."

I suspected that Mamacita would have added cyanide, had she any to hand, but in fact the sangria was excellent.

"I hadn't noticed," I said, sipping. "But do go on. Jamie came in with a pistol and said—?"

"Oh. Well, in fact, I cannot say I recall precisely what was said. There appeared to have been a slight misapprehension, owing to his impression that the lady's outcry was occasioned by some inopportune motion or speech of my own, rather than by the arachnid. Fortunately, I was able to display the beast to him, whereupon the lady was induced to come so far as the door—we could not persuade her to enter the room again—and identify it as the cause of her distress."

"I see," I said. I could envision the scene very well indeed, save for one point of paramount interest. "Do you happen to recall what he was wearing? Jamie?"

Lawrence Stern looked blank. "Wearing? Why … no. My impression is that he was clad for the street, rather than in dishabille, but—"

"That's quite all right," I assured him. "I only wondered." "Clad," after all, was the operative word. "So he introduced himself to you?"

Stern frowned, running a hand through his thick black curls. "I don't believe he did. As I recall, the lady referred to him as Mr. Fraser; sometime later in the conversation—we availed ourselves of suitable refreshment and remained conversing nearly until the dawn, finding considerable interest in each other's company, you see. At some point, he invited me to address him by his given name." He raised one eyebrow sardonically. "I trust you do not think it overfamiliar of me to have done so, upon such brief acquaintance?"

"No, no. Of course not." Wanting to change the subject, I continued, "You said you talked about spiders and caves? Why caves?"

"By way of Robert the Bruce and the story—which your husband was inclined to think apocryphal—regarding his inspiration to persevere in his quest for the throne of Scotland. Presumably, the Bruce was in hiding in a cave, pursued by his enemies, and—"

"Yes, I know the story," I interrupted.

"It was James's opinion that spiders do not frequent caves in which humans dwell; an opinion with which I basically concurred, though pointing out that in the larger type of cave, such as occurs on this island—"

"There are caves here?" I was surprised, and then felt foolish. "But of course, there must be, if there are cave fish, like the one in the spring. I always thought Caribbean islands were made of coral, though. I shouldn't have thought you'd find caves in coral."

"Well, it is possible, though not highly likely," Stern said judiciously. "However, the island of Hispaniola is not a coral atoll but is basically volcanic in origin—with the addition of crystalline schists, fossiliferous sedimentary deposits of a considerable antiquity, and widespread deposits of limestone. The limestone is particularly karstic in spots."

"You don't say." I poured a fresh cup of spiced wine.

"Oh, yes." Lawrence leaned over to pick up his bag from the floor of the veranda. Pulling out a notebook, he tore a sheet of paper from it and crumpled it in his fist.

"There," he said, holding out his hand. The paper slowly unfolded itself, leaving a mazed topography of creases and crumpled peaks. "That is what this island is like—you remember what Father Fogden was saying about the Maroons? The runaway slaves who have taken refuge in these hills? It is not lack of pursuit on the part of their masters that allows them to vanish with such ease. There are many parts of this island where no man—white or black, I daresay—has yet set foot. And in the lost hills, there are caves still more lost, whose existence no one knows save perhaps the aboriginal inhabitants of this place—and they are long gone, Mrs. Fraser.

"I have seen one such cave," he added reflectively. "Abandawe, the Maroons call it. They consider it a most sinister and sacred spot, though I do not know why."

Encouraged by my close attention, he took another gulp of sangria and continued his natural history lecture.

"Now that small island"—he nodded at the floating island visible in the sea beyond—"that is the Ile de la Tortue—Tortuga. That one is in fact a coral atoll, its lagoon long since filled in by the actions of the coral animalculae. Did you know it was once the haunt of pirates?" he asked, apparently feeling that he ought to infuse his lecture with something of more general interest than karstic formations and crystalline schists.

"Real pirates? Buccaneers, you mean?" I viewed the little island with more interest. "That's rather romantic."

Stern laughed, and I glanced at him in surprise.

"I am not laughing at you, Mrs. Fraser," he assured me. A smile lingered on his lips as he gestured at the Ile de la Tortue. "It is merely that I had occasion once to talk with an elderly resident of Kingston, regarding the habits of the buccaneers who had at one point made their headquarters in the nearby village of Port Royal."

He pursed his lips, decided to speak, decided otherwise, then, with a sideways glance at me, decided to risk it. "You will pardon the indelicacy, Mrs. Fraser, but as you are a married woman, and as I understand, have some familiarity with the practice of medicine —" He paused, and might have stopped there, but he had drunk nearly two-thirds of the pitcher; the broad, pleasant face was deeply flushed.

"You have perhaps heard of the abominable practices of sodomy?" he asked, looking at me sideways.

"I have," I said. "Do you mean—"

"I assure you," he said, with a magisterial nod. "My informant was most discursive upon the habits of the buccaneers. Sodomites to a man," he said, shaking his head.

"What?"

"It was a matter of public knowledge," he said. "My informant told me that when Port Royal fell into the sea some sixty years ago, it was widely assumed to be an act of divine vengeance upon these wicked persons in retribution for their vile and unnatural usages."

"Gracious," I said. I wondered what the voluptuous Tessa of *The Impetuous Pirate* would have thought about this.

He nodded, solemn as an owl.

"They say you can hear the bells of the drowned churches of Port Royal when a storm is coming, ringing for the souls of the damned pirates."

I thought of inquiring further into the precise nature of the vile and unnatural usages, but at this point in the proceedings, Mamacita stumped out onto the veranda, said curtly, "Food," and disappeared again.

"I wonder which cave Father Fogden found *her* in," I said, shoving back my chair.

Stern glanced at me in surprise. “Found her? But I forgot,” he said, face clearing, “you don’t know.” He peered at the open door where the old woman had vanished, but the interior of the house was quiet and dark as a cave.

“He found her in Habana,” he said, and told me the rest of the story.

Father Fogden had been a priest for ten years, a missionary of the order of St. Anselm, when he had come to Cuba fifteen years before. Devoted to the needs of the poor, he had worked among the slums and stews of Habana for several years, thinking of nothing more than the relief of suffering and the love of God—until the day he met Ermenegilda Ruiz Alcantara y Meroz in the marketplace.

“I don’t suppose he knows, even now, how it happened,” Stern said. He wiped away a drop of wine that ran down the side of his cup, and drank again. “Perhaps she didn’t know, either, or perhaps she planned it from the moment she saw him.”

In any case, six months later the city of Habana was agog at the news that the young wife of Don Armando Alcantara had run away—with a priest.

“And her mother,” I said, under my breath, but he heard me, and smiled slightly.

“Ermenegilda would never leave Mamacita behind,” he said. “Nor her dog Ludo.”

They would never have succeeded in escaping—for the reach of Don Armando was long and powerful—save for the fact that the English conveniently chose the day of their elopement to invade the island of Cuba, and Don Armando had many things more important to worry him than the whereabouts of his runaway young wife.

The fugitives rode to Bayamo—much hampered by Ermenegilda’s dresses, with which she would not part—and there hired a fishing boat, which carried them to safety on Hispaniola.

“She died two years later,” Stern said abruptly. He set down his cup, and refilled it from the sweating pitcher. “He buried her himself, under the bougainvillaea.”

“And here they’ve stayed since,” I said. “The priest, and Ludo and Mamacita.”

“Oh, yes.” Stern closed his eyes, his profile dark against the setting sun. “Ermenegilda would not leave Mamacita, and Mamacita will never leave Ermenegilda.”

He tossed back the rest of his cup of sangria.

“No one comes here,” he said. “The villagers won’t set foot on the hill. They’re afraid of Ermenegilda’s ghost. A damned sinner, buried by a reprobate priest in unhallowed ground—of course she will not lie quiet.”

The sea breeze was cool on the back of my neck. Behind us, even the chickens in the patio had grown quiet with falling twilight. The Hacienda de la Fuente lay still.

“You come,” I said, and he smiled. The scent of oranges rose up from the empty cup in my hands, sweet as bridal flowers.

“Ah, well,” he said. “I am a scientist. I don’t believe in ghosts.” He extended a hand to me, somewhat unsteadily. “Shall we dine, Mrs. Fraser?”

* * *

After breakfast the next morning, Stern was ready to set off for St. Luis. Before leaving, though, I had a question or two about the ship the priest had mentioned; if it were the *Porpoise*, I wanted to steer clear of it.

“What sort of ship was it?” I asked, pouring a cup of goat’s milk to go with the breakfast of fried plantain.

Father Fogden, apparently little the worse for his excesses of the day before, was stroking his coconut, humming dreamily to himself.

“Ah?” he said, startled out of his reverie by Stern’s poking him in the ribs. I patiently repeated my query.

“Oh.” He squinted in deep thought, then his face relaxed. “A wooden one.”

Lawrence bent his broad face over his plate, hiding a smile. I took a breath and tried again.

“The sailors who killed Arabella—did you see them?”

His narrow brows rose.

“Well, of course I saw them. How else would I know they had done it?”

I seized on this evidence of logical thought.

“Naturally. And did you see what they were wearing? I mean”—I saw him opening his mouth to say “clothes,” and hastily forestalled him—“did they seem to be wearing any sort of uniform?” The crew of the *Porpoise* commonly wore “slops” when not performing any ceremonial duty, but even these rough clothes bore the semblance of a uniform, being mostly all of a dirty white and similar in cut.

Father Fogden laid down his cup, leaving a milky mustache across his upper lip. He brushed at this with the back of his hand, frowning and shaking his head.

“No, I think not. All I recall of them, though, is that the leader wore a hook—missing a hand, I mean.” He waggled his own long fingers at me in illustration.

I dropped my cup, which exploded on the tabletop. Stern sprang up with an exclamation, but the priest sat still, watching in surprise as a thin white stream ran across the table and into his lap.

“Whatever did you do that for?” he said reproachfully.

“I’m sorry,” I said. My hands were trembling so that I couldn’t even manage to pick up the shards of the shattered cup. I was afraid to ask the next question. “Father—has the ship sailed away?”

“Why no,” he said, looking up in surprise from his damp robe. “How could it? It’s on the beach.”

* * *

Father Fogden led the way, his skinny shanks a gleaming white as he kirtled his cassock about his thighs. I was obliged to do the same, for the hillside above the house was thick with grass and thorny shrubs that caught at the coarse wool skirts of my borrowed robe.

The hill was crisscrossed with sheep paths, but these were narrow and faint, losing themselves under the trees and disappearing abruptly in thick grass. The priest seemed confident about his destination, though, and scampered briskly through the vegetation, never looking back.

I was breathing hard by the time we reached the crest of the hill, even though Lawrence Stern had gallantly assisted me, pushing branches out of my way, and taking my arm to haul me up the steeper slopes.

“Do you think there really is a ship?” I said to him, low-voiced, as we approached the top of the hill. Given our host’s behavior so far, I wasn’t so sure he might not have imagined it, just to be sociable.

Stern shrugged, wiping a trickle of sweat that ran down his bronzed cheek.

“I suppose there will be *something* there,” he replied. “After all, there is a dead sheep.”

A qualm ran over me in memory of the late departed Arabella. Someone *had* killed the sheep, and I walked as quietly as I could, as we approached the top of the hill. It couldn’t be the *Porpoise*; none of her officers or men wore a hook. I tried to tell myself that it likely wasn’t the *Artemis*, either, but my heart beat still faster as we came to a stand of giant agave on the crest of the hill.

I could see the Caribbean glowing blue through the succulent’s branches, and a narrow strip of white beach. Father Fogden had come to a halt, beckoning us to his side.

“There they are, the wicked creatures,” he muttered. His blue eyes glittered bright with fury, and his scanty hair fairly bristled, like a moth-eaten porcupine. “Butchers!” he said, hushed but vehement, as though talking to himself. “Cannibals!”

I gave him a startled look, but then Lawrence Stern grasped my arm, drawing me to a wider opening between two trees.

“Oy! There *is* a ship,” he said.

There was. It was lying tilted on its side, drawn up on the beach, its masts unstepped, untidy piles of cargo, sails, rigging, and water casks scattered all about it. Men crawled over the beached carcass like ants. Shouts and hammer blows rang out like gunshots, and the smell of hot pitch was thick on the air. The unloaded cargo gleamed dully in the sun; copper and tin, slightly tarnished by the sea air. Tanned hides had been laid flat on the sand, brown stiff blotches drying in the sun.

“It *is* them! It’s the *Artemis*!” The matter was settled by the appearance near the hull of a squat, one-legged figure, head shaded from the sun by a gaudy kerchief of yellow silk.

“Murphy!” I shouted. “Fergus! *Jamie*!” I broke from Stern’s grasp and ran down the far side of the hill, his cry of caution disregarded in the excitement of seeing the *Artemis*.

Murphy whirled at my shout, but was unable to get out of my way. Carried by momentum and moving like a runaway freight, I crashed straight into him, knocking him flat.

"Murphy!" I said, and kissed him, caught up in the joy of the moment.

"Hoy!" he said, shocked. He wriggled madly, trying to get out from under me.

"Milady!" Fergus appeared at my side, crumpled and vivid, his beautiful smile dazzling in a sun-dark face. "Milady!" He helped me off the grunting Murphy, then grabbed me to him in a rib-cracking hug. Marsali appeared behind him, a broad smile on her face.

"Merci aux les saints!" he said in my ear. "I was afraid we would never see you again!" He kissed me heartily himself, on both cheeks and the mouth, then released me at last.

I glanced at the *Artemis*, lying on her side on the beach like a stranded beetle. "What on earth happened?"

Fergus and Marsali exchanged a glance. It was the sort of look in which questions are asked and answered, and it rather startled me to see the depths of intimacy between them. Fergus drew a deep breath and turned to me.

"Captain Raines is dead," he said.

The storm that had come upon me during my night in the mangrove swamp had also struck the *Artemis*. Carried far off her path by the howling wind, she had been forced over a reef, tearing a sizable hole in her bottom.

Still, she had remained afloat. The aft hold filling rapidly, she had limped toward the small inlet that opened so near, offering shelter.

"We were no more than three hundred yards from the shore when the accident happened," Fergus said, his face drawn by the memory. The ship had heeled suddenly over, as the contents of the aft hold had shifted, beginning to float. And just then, an enormous wave, coming from the sea, had struck the leaning ship, washing across the tilting quarterdeck, and carrying away Captain Raines, and four seamen with him.

"The shore was so near!" Marsali said, her face twisted with distress. "We were aground ten minutes later! If only—"

Fergus stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"We cannot guess God's ways," he said. "It would have been the same, if we had been a thousand miles at sea, save that we would not have been able to give them decent burial." He nodded toward the far edge of the beach, near the jungle, where five small mounds, topped with crude wooden crosses, marked the final resting places of the drowned men.

"I had some holy water that Da brought me from Notre Dame in Paris," Marsali said. Her lips were cracked, and she licked them. "In a little bottle. I said a prayer, and sprinkled it on the graves. D'ye—d'ye think they would have l-liked that?"

I caught the quaver in her voice, and realized that for all her self-possession, the last two days had been a terrifying ordeal for the girl. Her face was grimy, her hair coming down, and the sharpness was gone from her eyes, softened by tears.

"I'm sure they would," I said gently, patting her arm. I glanced at the faces crowding around, searching for Jamie's great height and fiery head, even as the realization dawned that he was not there.

"Where *is* Jamie?" I said. My face was flushed from the run down the hill. I felt the blood begin to drain from my cheeks, as a trickle of fear rose in my veins.

Fergus was staring at me, lean face mirroring mine.

"He is not with you?" he said.

"No. How could he be?" The sun was blinding, but my skin felt cold. I could feel the heat shimmer over me, but to no effect. My lips were so chilled, I could scarcely form the question.

"Where is he?"

Fergus shook his head slowly back and forth, like an ox stunned by the slaughterer's blow.

"I don't know."

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IN WHICH JAMIE SMELLS A RAT

Jamie Fraser lay in the shadows under the *Porpoise*'s jolly boat, chest heaving with effort. Getting aboard the man-of-war without being seen had been no small task; his right side was bruised from being slammed against the side of the ship as he hung from the boarding nets, struggling to pull himself up to the rail. His arms felt as though they had been jerked from their sockets and there was a large splinter in one hand. But he was here, and so far unseen.

He chewed delicately at his palm, groping for the end of the splinter with his teeth, as he got his bearings. Russo and Stone, *Artemis* hands who had served aboard men-of-war, had spent hours describing to him the structure of a large ship, the compartments and decks, and the probable location of the surgeon's quarters. Hearing something described and being able to find your way about in it were two different things, though. At least the miserable thing rocked less than the *Artemis*, though he could still feel the subtle, nauseating heave of the deck beneath him.

The end of the splinter worked free; nipping it between his teeth, he drew it slowly out and spat it on the deck. He sucked the tiny wound, tasting blood, and slid cautiously out from under the jolly boat, ears pricked to catch the sound of an approaching footstep.

The deck below this one, down the forward companionway. The officers' quarters would be there, and with luck, the surgeon's cabin as well. Not that she was likely to be in her quarters; not her. She'd cared enough to come tend the sick—she would be with them.

He had waited until dark to have Robbie MacRae row him out. Raines had told him that the *Porpoise* would likely weigh anchor with the evening tide, two hours from now. If he could find Claire and escape over the side before that—he could swim ashore with her, easily—the *Artemis* would be waiting for them, concealed in a small cove on the other side of Caicos Island. If he couldn't—well, he would deal with that when he came to it.

Fresh from the cramped small world of the *Artemis*, the belowdecks of the *Porpoise* seemed huge and sprawling; a shadowed warren. He stood still, nostrils flaring as he deliberately drew the fetid air deep into his lungs. There were all the nasty stenches associated with a ship at sea for a long time, overlaid with the faint floating stink of feces and vomit.

He turned to the left and began to walk softly, long nose twitching. Where the smell of sickness was the strongest; that was where he would find her.

Four hours later, in mounting desperation, he made his way aft for the third time. He had covered the entire ship—keeping out of sight with some difficulty—and Claire was nowhere to be found.

"Bloody woman!" he said under his breath. "Where have ye gone, ye fashious wee hidee?"

A small worm of fear gnawed at the base of his heart. She had said her vaccine would protect her from the sickness, but what if she had been wrong? He could see for himself that the man-of-war's crew had been badly diminished by the deadly sickness—knee-deep in it, the germs might have attacked her too, vaccine or not.

He thought of germs as small blind things, about the size of maggots, but equipped with vicious razor teeth, like tiny sharks. He could all too easily imagine a swarm of the things fastening onto her, killing her, draining her flesh of life. It was just such a vision that had made him pursue the *Porpoise*—that, and a murderous rage toward the English buggerer who had had the filth-eating insolence to steal away his wife beneath his very nose, with a vague promise to return her, once they'd made use of her.

Leave her to the Sassenachs, unprotected?

“Not bloody likely,” he muttered under his breath, dropping down into a dark cargo space. She wouldn’t be in such a place, of course, but he must think a moment, what to do. Was this the cable tier, the aft cargo hatch, the forward stinking God knew what? Christ, he hated boats!

He drew in a deep breath and stopped, surprised. There were animals here; goats. He could smell them plainly. There was also a light, dimly visible around the edge of a bulkhead, and the murmur of voices. Was one of them a woman’s voice?

He edged forward, listening. There were feet on the deck above, a patter and thump that he recognized; bodies dropping from the rigging. Had someone above seen him? Well, and if they had? It was no crime, so far as he knew, for a man to come seeking his wife.

The *Porpoise* was asail; he had felt the thrum of the sails, passing through the wood all the way to the keel as she took the wind. They had long since missed the rendezvous with the *Artemis*.

That being so, there was likely nothing to lose by appearing boldly before the captain and demanding to see Claire. But perhaps she was here—it *was* a woman’s voice.

It was a woman’s figure, too, silhouetted against the lantern’s light, but the woman wasn’t Claire. His heart leapt convulsively at the gleam of the light on her hair, but then fell at once as he saw the thick, square shape of the woman by the goat pen. There was a man with her; as Jamie watched, the man bent and picked up a basket. He turned and came toward Jamie.

He stepped into the narrow aisle between the bulkheads, blocking the seaman’s way.

“Here, what do you mean—” the man began, and then, raising his eyes to Jamie’s face, stopped, gasping. One eye was fixed on him in horrified recognition; the other showed only as a bluish-white crescent beneath the withered lid.

“God preserve us!” the seaman said. “What are *you* doing here?” The seaman’s face gleamed pale and jaundiced in the dim light.

“Ye ken me, do ye?” Jamie’s heart was hammering against his ribs, but he kept his voice level and low. “I have not the honor to know your own name, I think?”

“I should prefer to leave that particular circumstance unchanged, your honor, if you’ve no objection.” The one-eyed seaman began to edge backward, but was forestalled as Jamie gripped his arm, hard enough to elicit a small yelp.

“Not quite so fast, if ye please. Where is Mrs. Malcolm, the surgeon?”

It would have been difficult for the seaman to look more alarmed, but at this question, he managed it.

“I don’t know!” he said.

“You do,” Jamie said sharply. “And ye’ll tell me this minute, or I shall break your neck.”

“Well, now, I can’t be tellin’ you anything if you break my neck, can I?” the seaman pointed out, beginning to recover his nerve. He lifted his chin pugnaciously over his basket of manure. “Now, you leave go of me, or I’ll call—” The rest was lost in a squawk as a large hand fastened about his neck and began inexorably to squeeze. The basket fell to the deck, and balls of goat manure exploded out of it like shrapnel.

“Ak!” Harry Tompkins’s legs thrashed wildly, scattering goat dung in every direction. His face turned the color of a beetroot as he clawed ineffectually at Jamie’s arm. Judging the results clinically, Jamie let go as the man’s eye began to bulge. He wiped his hand on his breeches, disliking the greasy feel of the man’s sweat on his palm.

Tompkins lay on the deck in a sprawl of limbs, wheezing faintly.

“Ye’re quite right,” Jamie said. “On the other hand, if I break your arm, I expect you’ll still be able to speak to me, aye?” He bent, grasped the man by one skinny arm and jerked him to his feet, twisting the arm roughly behind his back.

“I’ll tell you, I’ll tell you!” The seaman wriggled madly, panicked. “Damn you, you’re as wicked cruel as she was!”

“Was? What do you mean, ‘was’?” Jamie’s heart squeezed tight in his chest, and he jerked the arm, more roughly than he had meant to do. Tompkins let out a screech of pain, and Jamie slackened the pressure slightly.

"Let go! I'll tell you, but for pity's sake, let go!" Jamie lessened his grasp, but didn't let go.

"Tell me where my wife is!" he said, in a tone that had made stronger men than Harry Tompkins fall over their feet to obey.

"She's lost!" the man blurted. "Gone overboard!"

"What!" He was so stunned that he let go his hold. Overboard. Gone overboard. Lost.

"When?" he demanded. "How? Damn you, tell me what happened!" He advanced on the seaman, fists clenched.

The seaman was backing away, rubbing his arm and panting, a look of furtive satisfaction in his one eye.

"Don't worry, your honor," he said, a queer, jeering tone in his voice. "You won't be lonesome long. You'll join her in hell in a few days—dancing from the yardarm over Kingston Harbor!"

Too late, Jamie heard the footfall on the boards behind him. He had no time even to turn his head before the blow fell.

He had been struck in the head frequently enough to know that the sensible thing was to lie still until the giddiness and the lights that pulsed behind your eyelids with each heartbeat stopped. Sit up too soon and the pain made you vomit.

The deck was rising and falling, rising and falling under him, in the horrible way of ships. He kept his eyes tight closed, concentrating on the knotted ache at the base of his skull in order not to think of his stomach.

Ship. He should be on a ship. Yes, but the surface under his cheek was wrong—hard wood, not the linen of his berth's bedding. And the smell, the smell was wrong, it was—

He shot bolt upright, memory shooting through him with a vividness that made the pain in his head pale by comparison. The darkness moved queasily around him, blinking with colored lights, and his stomach heaved. He closed his eyes and swallowed hard, trying to gather his scattered wits about the single appalling thought that had lanced through his brain like a spit through mutton.

Claire. Lost. Drowned. Dead.

He leaned to the side and threw up. He retched and coughed, as though his body was trying forcibly to expel the thought. It didn't work; when he finally stopped, leaning against the bulkhead in exhaustion, it was still with him. It hurt to breathe, and he clenched his fists on his thighs, trembling.

There was the sound of a door opening, and bright light struck him in the eyes with the force of a blow. He winced, closing his eyes against the glare of the lantern.

"Mr. Fraser," a soft, well-bred voice said. "I am—truly sorry. I wish you to know that, at least."

Through a cracked eyelid, he saw the drawn, harried face of young Leonard—the man who had taken Claire. The man wore a look of regret. Regret! Regret, for killing her.

Fury pulled him up against the weakness, and sent him lunging across the slanted deck in an instant. There was an outcry as he hit Leonard and bore him backward into the passage, and a good, juicy *thunk!* as the bugger's head hit the boards. People were shouting, and shadows leapt crazily all round him as the lanterns swayed, but he paid no attention.

He smashed Leonard's jaw with one great blow, his nose with the next. The weakness mattered nothing. He would spend all his strength and die here glad, but let him batter and maim now, feel the bones crack and the blood hot and slick on his fists. Blessed Michael, let him avenge her first!

There were hands on him, snatching and jerking, but they didn't matter. They would kill him now, he thought dimly, and that didn't matter, either. The body under him jerked and twitched between his legs, and lay still.

When the next blow came, he went willingly into the dark.

* * *

The light touch of fingers on his face awakened him. He reached drowsily up to take her hand, and his palm touched …

"Aaaah!"

With an instinctive revulsion, he was on his feet, clawing at his face. The big spider, nearly as frightened as he was, made off toward the shrubbery at high speed, long hairy legs no more than a blur.

There was an outburst of giggling behind him. He turned around, his heart pounding like a drum, and found six children, roosting in the branches of a big green tree, all grinning down at him with tobacco-stained teeth.

He bowed to them, feeling dizzy and rubber-legged, the start of fright that had got him up now dying in his blood.

"Mesdemoiselles, messieurs," he said, croaking, and in the half-awake recesses of his brain wondered what had made him speak to them in French? Had he half-heard them speaking, as he lay asleep?

French they were, for they answered him in that language, strongly laced with a gutteral sort of creole accent that he had never heard before.

"Vous êtes matelot?" the biggest boy asked, eyeing him with interest.

His knees gave way and he sat down on the ground, suddenly enough to make the children laugh again.

"Non," he replied, struggling to make his tongue work. *"Je suis guerrier."* His mouth was dry and his head ached like a fiend. Faint memories swam about in the parritch that filled his head, too vague to grasp.

"A soldier!" exclaimed one of the smaller children. His eyes were round and dark as sloes. "Where is your sword and *pistola*, eh?"

"Don't be silly," an older girl told him loftily. "How could he swim with a *pistola*? It would be ruined. Don't you know any better, guava-head?"

"Don't call me that!" the smaller boy shouted, face contorting in rage. "Shitface!"

"Frog-guts!"

"Caca-brains!"

The children were scrabbling through the branches like monkeys, screaming and chasing each other. Jamie rubbed a hand hard over his face, trying to think.

"Mademoiselle!" He caught the eye of the older girl and beckoned to her. She hesitated for a moment, then dropped from her branch like a ripe fruit, landing on the ground before him in a puff of yellow dust. She was barefoot, wearing nothing but a muslin shift and a colored kerchief round her dark, curly hair.

"Monsieur?"

"You seem a woman of some knowledge, Mademoiselle," he said. "Tell me, please, what is the name of this place?"

"Cap-Haïtien," she replied promptly. She eyed him with considerable curiosity. "You talk funny," she said.

"I am thirsty. Is there water nearby?" Cap-Haïtien. So he was on the island of Hispaniola. His mind was slowly beginning to function again; he had a vague memory of terrible effort, of swimming for his life in a frothing cauldron of heaving waves, and rain pelting his face so hard that it made little difference whether his head was above or below the surface. And what else?

"This way, this way!" The other children had dropped out of the tree, and a little girl was tugging his hand, urging him to follow.

He knelt by the little stream, splashing water over his head, gulping delicious cool handfuls, while the children scampered over the rocks, pelting each other with mud.

Now he remembered—the rat-faced seaman, and Leonard's surprised young face, the deep-red rage and the satisfying feel of flesh crushed against bone under his fist.

And Claire. The memory came back suddenly, with a sense of confused emotion—loss and terror, succeeded by relief. What had happened? He stopped what he was doing, not hearing the questions the children were flinging at him.

"Are you a deserter?" one of the boys asked again. "Have you been in a fight?" The boy's eyes rested curiously on his hands. His knuckles were cut and swollen, and his hands ached badly; the fourth finger felt as though he had cracked it again.

"Yes," he said absently, his mind occupied. Everything was coming back; the dark, stuffy confines of the brig where they had left him to wake, and the dreadful waking, to the thought that Claire was dead. He had huddled there on the bare boards, too shaken with grief to notice at first the increasing heave and roll of the ship, or the high-pitched whine of the rigging, loud enough to filter down even to his oubliette.

But after a time, the motion and noise were great enough to penetrate even the cloud of grief. He had heard the sounds of the growing storm, and the shouts and running overhead, and then was much too occupied to think of anything.

There was nothing in the small room with him, nothing to hold to. He had bounced from wall to wall like a dried pea in a wean's rattle, unable to tell up from down, right from left in the heaving dark, and not much caring, either, as waves of seasickness rolled through his body. He had thought then of nothing but death, and that with a fervor of longing.

He had been nearly unconscious, in fact, when the door to his prison had opened, and a strong smell of goat assailed his nostrils. He had no idea how the woman had got him up the ladder to the afterdeck, or why. He had only a confused memory of her babbling urgently to him in broken English as she pulled him along, half-supporting his weight as he stumbled and slid on the rain-wet decking.

He remembered the last thing she had said, though, as she pushed him toward the tilting taffrail.

"She is not dead," the woman had said. "She go there"—pointing at the rolling sea—"you go, too. Find her!" and then she had bent, got a hand in his crutch and a sturdy shoulder under his rump, and heaved him neatly over the rail and into the churning water.

"You are not an Englishman," the boy was saying. "It's an English ship, though, isn't it?"

He turned automatically, to look where the boy pointed, and saw the *Porpoise*, riding at anchor far out in the shallow bay. Other ships were scattered throughout the harbor, all clearly visible from this vantage point on a hill just outside the town.

"Yes," he said to the boy. "An English ship."

"One for me!" the boy exclaimed happily. He turned to shout to another lad. "Jacques! I was right! English! That's four for me, and only two for you this month!"

"Three!" Jacques corrected indignantly. "I get Spanish *and* Portuguese. *Bruja* was Portuguese, so I can count that, too!"

Jamie reached out and caught the older boy's arm.

"*Pardon,* Monsieur," he said. "Your friend said *Bruja*?"

"Yes, she was in last week," the boy answered. "Is *Bruja* a Portuguese name, though? We weren't sure whether to count it Spanish or Portuguese."

"Some of the sailors were in my *maman*'s taverna," one of the little girls chimed in. "They sounded like they were talking Spanish, but it wasn't like Uncle Geraldo talks."

"I think I should like to talk to your *maman, chèrie,*" he said to the little girl. "Do any of you know, perhaps, where this *Bruja* was going when she left?"

"Bridgetown," the oldest girl put in promptly, trying to regain his attention. "I heard the clerk at the garrison say so."

"The garrison?"

"The barracks are next door to my *maman*'s taverna," the smaller girl chimed in, tugging at his sleeve. "The ship captains all go there with their papers, while the sailors get drunk. Come, come! *Maman* will feed you if I tell her to."

"I think your *maman* will throw me out the door," he told her, rubbing a hand across the heavy stubble on his chin. "I look like a vagabond." He did. There were stains of blood and vomit on his clothes despite the swim, and he knew by the feel of his face that it was bruised and bloodshot.

"*Maman* has seen much worse than you," the little girl assured him. "Come on!"

He smiled and thanked her, and allowed them to lead him down the hill, staggering slightly, as his land legs had not yet returned. He found it odd but somehow comforting that the children should not be frightened of him, horrible as he no doubt looked.

Was this what the goat-woman had meant? That Claire had swum ashore on this island? He felt a welling of hope that was as refreshing to his heart as the water had been to his parched throat. Claire was stubborn, reckless, and had a great deal more courage than was safe for a woman, but she was by no means such a fool as to fall off a man-of-war by accident.

And the *Bruja*—and Ian—were nearby! He would find them both, then. The fact that he was barefoot, penniless, and a fugitive from the Royal Navy seemed of no consequence. He had his wits and his hands, and with dry land once more beneath his feet, all things seemed possible.

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A WEDDING TAKES PLACE

There was nothing to be done, but to repair the *Artemis* as quickly as possible, and make sail for Jamaica. I did my best to put aside my fear for Jamie, but I scarcely ate for the next two days, my appetite impeded by the large ball of ice that had taken up residence in my stomach.

For distraction, I took Marsali up to the house on the hill, where she succeeded in charming Father Fogden by recalling—and mixing for him—a Scottish receipt for a sheep-dip guaranteed to destroy ticks.

Stern helpfully pitched in with the labor of repair, delegating to me the guardianship of his specimen bag, and charging me with the task of searching the nearby jungle for any curious specimens of *Arachnida* that might come to hand as I looked for medicinal plants. While thinking privately that I would prefer to meet any of the larger specimens of *Arachnida* with a good stout boot, rather than my bare hands, I accepted the charge, peering into the internal water-filled cups of bromeliads in search of the bright-colored frogs and spiders who inhabited these tiny worlds.

I returned from one of these expeditions on the afternoon of the third day, with several large lily-roots, some shelf fungus of a vivid orange, and an unusual moss, together with a live tarantula—carefully trapped in one of the sailor's stocking caps and held at arm's length—large and hairy enough to send Lawrence into paroxysms of delight.

When I emerged from the jungle's edge, I saw that we had reached a new stage of progress; the *Artemis* was no longer canted on her side, but was slowly regaining an upright position on the sand, assisted by ropes, wedges, and a great deal of shouting.

"It's nearly finished, then?" I asked Fergus, who was standing near the stern, doing a good bit of the shouting as he instructed his crew in the placement of wedges. He turned to me, grinning and wiping the sweat from his forehead.

"Yes, milady! The caulking is complete. Mr. Warren gives it as his opinion that we may launch the ship near evening, when the day is grown cool, so the tar is hardened."

"That's marvelous!" I craned my neck back, looking up at the naked mast that towered high above. "Have we got sails?"

"Oh, yes," he assured me. "In fact, we have everything except—"

A shout of alarm from MacLeod interrupted whatever he had been about to say. I whirled to look toward the distant road out of the palmettos, where the sun winked off the glint of metal.

"Soldiers!" Fergus reacted faster than anyone, leaping from the scaffolding to land in a thudding spray of sand beside me. "Quick, milady! To the wood! Marsali!" he shouted, looking wildly about for the girl.

He licked sweat from his upper lip, eyes darting from the jungle to the approaching soldiers. "Marsali!" he shouted, once more.

Marsali appeared round the edge of the hull, pale and startled. Fergus grasped her by the arm and shoved her toward me. "Go with milady! Run!"

I snatched Marsali's hand and ran for the forest, sand spurting beneath our feet. There were shouts from the road behind us, and a shot cracked overhead, followed by another.

Ten steps, five, and then we were in the shadow of the trees. I collapsed behind the shelter of a thorny bush, gasping for breath against the stabbing pain of a stitch in my side. Marsali knelt on the earth beside me, her cheeks streaked with tears.

"What?" she gasped, struggling for breath. "Who are they? What—will they—do? To Fergus. What?"

“I don’t know.” Still breathing heavily, I grasped a cedar sapling and pulled myself to my knees. Peering through the underbrush on all fours, I could see that the soldiers had reached the ship.

It was cool and damp under the trees, but the lining of my mouth was dry as cotton. I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to encourage a little saliva to flow.

“I think it will be all right.” I patted Marsali’s shoulder, trying to be reassuring. “Look, there are only ten of them,” I whispered, counting as the last soldier trotted out of the palmetto grove. “They’re French; the *Artemis* has French papers. It may be all right.”

And then again, it might not. I was well aware that a ship aground and abandoned was legal salvage. It was a deserted beach. And all that stood between these soldiers and a rich prize were the lives of the *Artemis*’s crew.

A few of the seamen had pistols to hand; most had knives. But the soldiers were armed to the teeth, each man with musket, sword, and pistols. If it came to a fight, it would be a bloody one, but the odds were heavily on the mounted soldiers.

The men near the ship were silent, grouped close together behind Fergus, who stood out, straight-backed and grim, as the spokesman. I saw him push back his shock of hair with his hook, and plant his feet solidly in the sand, ready for whatever might come. The creak and jingle of harness seemed muted in the damp, hot air, and the horses moved slowly, hooves muffled in the sand.

The soldiers came to a halt ten feet away from the little knot of seamen. A big man who seemed to be in command raised one hand in an order to stay, and swung down from his horse.

I was watching Fergus, rather than the soldiers. I saw his face change, then freeze, white under his tan. I glanced quickly at the soldier coming toward him across the sand, and my own blood froze.

“Silence, mes amis,” said the big man, in a voice of pleasant command. *“Silence, et restez, s’il vous plaît.”* Silence, my friends, and do not move, if you please.

I would have fallen, were I not already on my knees. I closed my eyes in a wordless prayer of thanksgiving.

Next to me, Marsali gasped. I opened my eyes and clapped a hand over her open mouth.

The commander took off his hat, and shook out a thick mass of sweat-soaked auburn hair. He grinned at Fergus, teeth white and wolfish in a short, curly red beard.

“You are in charge here?” Jamie said in French. “You, come with me. The rest”—he nodded at the crew, several of whom were goggling at him in open amazement—“you stay where you are. Don’t talk,” he added, off-handedly.

Marsali jerked at my arm, and I realized how tightly I had been holding her.

“Sorry,” I whispered, letting go, but not taking my eyes from the beach.

“What is he doing?” Marsali hissed in my ear. Her face was pale with excitement, and the little freckles left by the sun stood out on her nose in contrast. “How did he get here?”

“I don’t know! Be quiet, for God’s sake!”

The crew of the *Artemis* exchanged glances, waggled their eyebrows, and nudged each other in the ribs, but fortunately also obeyed orders and didn’t speak. I hoped to heaven that their obvious excitement would be construed merely as consternation over their impending fate.

Jamie and Fergus had walked over toward the shore, conferring in low voices. Now they separated, Fergus coming back toward the hull with an expression of grim determination, Jamie calling the soldiers to dismount and gather round him.

I couldn’t tell what Jamie was saying to the soldiers, but Fergus was close enough for us to hear.

“These are soldiers from the garrison at Cap-Haïtien,” he announced to the crew members. “Their commander—Captain Alessandro—” he said, lifting his eyebrows and grimacing hideously to emphasize the name, “says that they will assist us in launching the *Artemis*.” This announcement was greeted with faint cheers from some of the men, and looks of bewilderment from others.

“But how did Mr. Fraser—” began Royce, a rather slow-witted seaman, his heavy brows drawn together in a puzzled frown. Fergus allowed no time for questions, but plunged into the midst of the crew, putting an arm about Royce's shoulders and dragging him toward the scaffolding, talking loudly to drown out any untoward remarks.

"Yes, is it not a most fortunate accident?" he said loudly. I could see that he was twisting Royce's ear with his sound hand. "Most fortunate indeed! Captain Alessandro says that a *habitant* on his way from his plantation saw the ship aground, and reported it to the garrison. With so much help, we will have the *Artemis* aswim in no time at all." He let go of Royce and clapped his hand sharply against his thigh.

"Come, come, let us set to work at once! Manzetti—up you go! MacLeod, MacGregor, seize your hammers! Maitland—" He spotted Maitland, standing on the sand gawking at Jamie. Fergus whirled and clapped the cabin boy on the back hard enough to make him stagger.

"Maitland, *mon enfant!* Give us a song to speed our efforts!" Looking rather dazed, Maitland began a tentative rendition of "The Nut-Brown Maid." A few of the seamen began to climb back onto the scaffolding, glancing suspiciously over their shoulders.

"Sing!" Fergus bellowed, glaring up at them. Murphy, who appeared to be finding something extremely funny, mopped his sweating red face and obligingly joined in the song, his wheezing bass reinforcing Maitland's pure tenor.

Fergus stalked up and down beside the hull, exhorting, directing, urging—and making such a spectacle of himself that few telltale glances went in Jamie's direction. The uncertain tap of hammers started up again.

Meanwhile, Jamie was giving careful directions to his soldiers. I saw more than one Frenchman glance at the *Artemis* as he talked, with a look of dimly concealed greed that suggested that a selfless desire to help their fellow beings was perhaps not the motive uppermost in the soldiers' minds, no matter what Fergus had announced.

Still, the soldiers went to work willingly enough, stripping off their leather jerkins and laying aside most of their arms. Three of the soldiers, I noticed, did not join the work party, but remained on guard, fully armed, eyes sharp on the sailors' every move. Jamie alone remained aloof, watching everything.

"Should we come out?" Marsali murmured in my ear. "It seems safe, now."

"No," I said. My eyes were fixed on Jamie. He stood in the shade of a tall palmetto, at ease, but erect. Behind the unfamiliar beard, his expression was unreadable, but I caught the faint movement at his side, as the two stiff fingers flickered once against his thigh.

"No," I said again. "It isn't over yet."

* * *

The work went on through the afternoon. The stack of wooden rollers mounted, cut ends scenting the air with the tang of fresh sap. Fergus's voice was hoarse, and his shirt clung wetly to his lean torso. The horses, hobbled, wandered slowly under the edge of the forest, browsing. The sailors had given up singing now, and had settled to work, with no more than an occasional glance toward the palmetto where Captain Alessandro stood in the shade, arms folded.

The sentry near the trees paced slowly up and down, musket carried at the ready, a wistful eye on the cool green shadows. He passed close enough on one circuit for me to see the dark, greasy curls dangling down his neck, and the pockmarks on his plump cheeks. He creaked and jingled as he walked. The rowel was missing from one of his spurs. He looked hot, and fairly cross.

It was a long wait, and the inquisitiveness of the forest midges made it longer still. After what seemed forever, though, I saw Jamie give a nod to one of the guards, and come from the beach toward the trees. I signed to Marsali to wait, and ducking under branches, ignoring the thick brush, I dodged madly toward the place where he had disappeared.

I popped breathlessly out from behind a bush, just as he was doing up the laces of his flies. His head jerked up at the sound, his eyes widened, and he let out a yell that would have summoned Arabella the sheep back from the dead, let alone the waiting sentry.

I dodged back into hiding, as crashing boots and shouts of inquiry headed in our direction.

“C’est bien!” Jamie shouted. He sounded a trifle shaken. *“Ce n’est qu’un serpent!”*

The sentry spoke an odd dialect of French, but appeared to be asking rather nervously whether the serpent was dangerous.

“Non, c’est innocent,” Jamie answered. He waved at the sentry, whose inquiring head I could just see, peering reluctantly over the bush. The sentry, who seemed unenthusiastic about snakes, however innocent, disappeared promptly back to his duty.

Without hesitation, Jamie plunged into the bush.

“Claire!” He crushed me tight against his chest. Then he grabbed me by the shoulders and shook me, hard.

“Damn you!” he said, in a piercing whisper. “I thought ye were dead for sure! How dare ye do something harebrained like jump off a ship in the middle of the night! Have ye no sense at all?”

“Let go!” I hissed. The shaking had made me bite my lip. “Let go, I say! What do you mean, how dare *I* do something harebrained? You idiot, what possessed you to follow me?”

His face was darkened by the sun; now a deep red began to darken it further, washing up from the edges of his new beard.

“What possessed me?” he repeated. “You’re my wife, for the Lord’s sake! Of course I would follow ye; why did ye not wait for me? Christ, if I had time, I’d—” The mention of time evidently reminded him that we hadn’t much, and with a noticeable effort, he choked back any further remarks, which was just as well, because I had a number of things to say in that vein myself. I swallowed them, with some difficulty.

“What in bloody hell are you doing here?” I asked instead.

The deep flush subsided slightly, succeeded by the merest hint of a smile amid the unfamiliar foliage.

“I’m the captain,” he said. “Did ye not notice?”

“Yes, I noticed! Captain Alessandro, my foot! What do you mean to do?”

Instead of answering, he gave me a final, gentle shake and divided a glare between me and Marsali, who had poked an inquiring head out.

"Stay here, the both of ye, and dinna stir a foot or I swear I'll beat ye senseless."

Without pausing for a response, he whirled and strode back through the trees, toward the beach.

Marsali and I exchanged stares, which were interrupted a second later, when Jamie, breathless, hurtled back into the small clearing. He grabbed me by both arms, and kissed me briefly but thoroughly.

"I forgot. I love you," he said, giving me another shake for emphasis. "And I'm glad you're no dead. Dinna do that again!" Letting go, he crashed back into the brush and disappeared.

I felt breathless, myself, and more than a little rattled, but undeniably happy.

Marsali's eyes were round as saucers.

"What shall we do?" she asked. "What's Da going to do?"

"I don't know," I said. My cheeks were flushed, and I could still feel the touch of his mouth on mine, and the unfamiliar tingling left by the brush of beard and mustache. My tongue touched the small stinging place where I had bitten my lip. "I don't know what he's going to do," I repeated. "I suppose we'll have to wait and see."

It was a long wait. I was dozing against the trunk of a huge tree, near dusk, when Marsali's hand on my shoulder brought me awake.

"They're launching the ship!" she said in an excited whisper.

They were; under the eyes of the sentries, the remaining soldiers and the crew of the *Artemis* were all manning the ropes and rollers that would move her down the beach into the waters of the inlet. Even Fergus, Innes, and Murphy joined in the labor, missing limbs notwithstanding.

The sun was going down; its disc shone huge and orange-gold, blinding above a sea gone the purple of whelks. The men were no more than black silhouettes against the light, anonymous as the slaves of an Egyptian wall-painting, tethered by ropes to their massive burden.

The monotonous "Heave!" of the bosun's shout was succeeded by a weak cheer as the hull slid the last few feet, drawn away from the shore by tow-ropes from the *Artemis*'s jolly boat and cutter.

I saw the flash of red hair as Jamie moved up the side and swung aboard, then the gleam of metal as one of the soldiers followed him. They stood guard together, red hair and black no more than dots at the head of the rope ladder, as the crew of the *Artemis* entered the jolly boat, rowed out and came up the ladder, interspersed with the rest of the French soldiers.

The last man disappeared up the ladder. The men in the boats sat on their oars, looking up, tense and alert. Nothing happened.

Next to me, I heard Marsali exhale noisily, and realized I had been holding my own breath much too long.

"What are they *doing*?" she said, in exasperation.

As though in answer to this, there was one loud, angry shout from the *Artemis*. The men in the boats jerked up, ready to lunge aboard. No other signal came, though. The *Artemis* floated serenely on the rising waters of the inlet, perfect as an oil painting.

"I've had enough," I said suddenly to Marsali. "Whatever those bloody men are doing, they've done it. Come on."

I drew in a fresh gulp of the cool evening air, and walked out of the trees, Marsali behind me. As we came down the beach, a slim black figure dropped over the ship's side and galloped through the shallows, gleaming gouts of green and purple seawater spouting from his footsteps.

"Mo chridhe chèrie!" Fergus ran dripping toward us, face beaming, and seizing Marsali, swung her off her feet with exuberance and whirled her round.

"Done!" he crowed. "Done without a shot fired! Trussed like geese and packed like salted herrings in the hold!" He kissed Marsali heartily, then set her down on the sand, and turning to me, bowed ceremoniously, with the elaborate flourish of an imaginary hat.

"Milady, the captain of the *Artemis* desires you will honor him with your company over supper."

* * *

The new captain of the *Artemis* was standing in the middle of his cabin, eyes closed and completely naked, blissfully scratching his testicles.

"Er," I said, confronted with this sight. His eyes popped open and his face lit with joy. The next moment, I was enfolded in his embrace, face pressed against the red-gold curls of his chest.

We didn't say anything for quite some time. I could hear the thrum of footsteps on the deck overhead, the shouts of the crew, ringing with joy at the imminence of escape, and the creak and flap of sails being rigged. The *Artemis* was coming back to life around us.

My face was warm, tingling from the rasp of his beard. I felt suddenly strange and shy holding him, he naked as a jay and myself as bare under the remnants of Father Fogden's tattered robe.

The body that pressed against my own with mounting urgency was the same from the neck down, but the face was a stranger's, a Viking marauder's. Besides the beard that transformed his face, he smelled unfamiliar, his own sweat overlaid with rancid cooking oil, spilled beer, and the reek of harsh perfume and unfamiliar spices.

I let go, and took a step back.

"Shouldn't you dress?" I asked. "Not that I don't enjoy the scenery," I added, blushing despite myself. "I—er … I think I like the beard. Maybe," I added doubtfully, scrutinizing him.

"I don't," he said frankly, scratching his jaw. "I'm crawling wi' lice, and it itches like a fiend."

"Eew!" While I was entirely familiar with *Pediculus humanus,* the common body louse, acquaintance had not endeared me. I rubbed a hand nervously through my own hair, already imagining the prickle of feet on my scalp, as tiny sestets gamboled through the thickets of my curls.

He grinned at me, white teeth startling in the auburn beard.

"Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach," he assured me. "I've already sent for a razor and hot water."

"Really? It seems rather a pity to shave it off right away." Despite the lice, I leaned forward to peer at his hirsute adornment. "It's like your hair, all different colors. Rather pretty, really."

I touched it, warily. The hairs were odd; thick and wiry, very curly, in contrast to the soft thick smoothness of the hair on his head. They sprang exuberantly from his skin in a profusion of colors; copper, gold, amber, cinnamon, a roan so deep as almost to be black. Most startling of all was a thick streak of silver that ran from his lower lip to the line of his jaw.

"That's funny," I said, tracing it. "You haven't any white hairs on your head, but you have right here."

"I have?" He put a hand to his jaw, looking startled, and I suddenly realized that he likely had no idea what he looked like. Then he smiled wryly, and bent to pick up the pile of discarded clothes from the floor.

"Aye, well, little wonder if I have; I wonder I've not gone white-haired altogether from the things I've been through this month." He paused, eyeing me over the wadded white breeches.

"And speaking of that, Sassenach, as I was saying to ye in the trees—"

"Yes, speaking of that," I interrupted. "What in the name of God did you *do*?"

"Oh, the soldiers, ye mean?" He scratched his chin meditatively. "Well, it was simple enough. I told the soldiers that as soon as the ship was launched, we'd gather everyone on deck, and at my signal, they were to fall on the crew and push them into the hold." A broad grin blossomed through the foliage. "Only Fergus had mentioned it to the crew, ye see; so when each soldier came aboard, two of the crewmen snatched him by the arms while a third gagged him, bound his arms, and took away his weapons. Then we pushed all of *them* into the hold. That's all." He shrugged, modestly nonchalant.

"Right," I said, exhaling. "And as for just how you happened to be here in the first place …"

At this juncture we were interrupted by a discreet knock on the cabin's door.

"Mr. Fraser? Er … Captain, I mean?" Maitland's angular young face peered round the jamb, cautious over a steaming bowl. "Mr. Murphy's got the galley fire going, and here's your hot water, with his compliments."

"Mr. Fraser will do," Jamie assured him, taking the tray with bowl and razor in one hand. "A less seaworthy captain doesna bear thinking of." He paused, listening to the thump of feet above our heads.

"Though since I *am* the captain," he said slowly, "I suppose that means I shall say when we sail and when we stop?"

"Yes, sir, that's one thing a captain does," Maitland said. He added helpfully, "The captain also says when the hands are to have extra rations of food and grog."

"I see." The upward curl of Jamie's mouth was still visible, beard notwithstanding. "Tell me, Maitland—how much d'ye think the hands can drink and still sail the ship?"

"Oh, quite a lot, sir," Maitland said earnestly. His brow wrinkled in thought. "Maybe—an extra double ration all round?"

Jamie lifted one eyebrow. "Of brandy?"

"Oh, no, sir!" Maitland looked shocked. "Grog. If it was to be brandy, only an extra half-ration, or they'd be rolling in the bilges."

"Double grog, then." Jamie bowed ceremoniously to Maitland, unhampered by the fact that he was still completely unclad. "Make it so, Mr. Maitland. And the ship will not lift anchor until I have finished my supper."

"Yes, sir!" Maitland bowed back; Jamie's manners were catching. "And shall I desire the Chinee to attend you directly after the anchor is weighed?"

"Somewhat before that, Mr. Maitland, thank ye kindly."

Maitland was turning to leave, with a last admiring glance at Jamie's scars, but I stopped him.

"One more thing, Maitland," I said.

"Oh, yes, mum?"

"Will you go down to the galley and ask Mr. Murphy to send up a bottle of his strongest vinegar? And then find where the men have put some of my medicines, and fetch them as well?"

His narrow forehead creased in puzzlement, but he nodded obligingly. "Oh, yes, mum. This directly minute."

"Just what d'ye mean to do wi' the vinegar Sassenach?" Jamie observed me narrowly, as Maitland vanished into the corridor.

"Souse you in it to kill the lice," I said. "I don't intend to sleep with a seething nest of vermin."

"Oh," he said. He scratched the side of his neck meditatively. "Ye mean to sleep with me, do you?" He glanced at the berth, an uninviting hole in the wall.

"I don't know where, precisely, but yes, I do," I said firmly. "And I wish you wouldn't shave your beard just yet," I added, as he bent to set down the tray he was holding.

"Why not?" He glanced curiously over his shoulder at me, and I felt the heat rising in my cheeks.

"Er … well. It's a bit … different."

"Oh, aye?" He stood up and took a step toward me. In the cramped confines of the cabin, he seemed even bigger—and a lot more naked—than he ever had on deck.

The dark blue eyes had slanted into triangles of amusement.

"How, different?" he asked.

"Well, it … um …" I brushed my fingers vaguely past my burning cheeks. "It feels different. When you kiss me. On my … skin."

His eyes locked on mine. He hadn't moved, but he seemed much closer.

"Ye have verra fine skin, Sassenach," he said softly. "Like pearls and opals." He reached out a finger and very gently traced the line of my jaw. And then my neck, and the wide flare of collarbone and back, and down, in a slow-moving serpentine that brushed the tops of my breasts, hidden in the deep cowl neck of the priest's robe. "Ye have a *lot* of verra fine skin, Sassenach," he added. One eyebrow quirked up. "If that's what ye were thinking?"

I swallowed and licked my lips, but didn't look away.

"That's more or less what I was thinking, yes."

He took his finger away and glanced at the bowl of steaming water.

"Aye, well. It seems a shame to waste the water. Shall I send it back to Murphy to make soup, or shall I drink it?"

I laughed, both tension and strangeness dissolving at once.

"You shall sit down," I said, "and wash with it. You smell like a brothel."

"I expect I do," he said, scratching. "There's one upstairs in the tavern where the soldiers go to drink and gamble." He took up the soap and dropped it in the hot water.

"Upstairs, eh?" I said.

"Well, the girls come down, betweentimes," he explained. "It wouldna be mannerly to stop them sitting on your lap, after all."

"And your mother brought you up to have nice manners, I expect," I said, very dryly.

"Upon second thoughts, I think perhaps we shall anchor here for the night," he said thoughtfully, looking at me.

"Shall we?"

"And sleep ashore, where there's room."

"Room for *what*?" I asked, regarding him with suspicion.

"Well, I have it planned, aye?" he said, sloshing water over his face with both hands.

"You have *what* planned?" I asked. He snorted and shook the excess water from his beard before replying.

"I have been thinking of this for months, now," he said, with keen anticipation. "Every night, folded up in that godforsaken nutshell of a berth, listening to Fergus grunt and fart across the cabin. I thought it all out, just what I would do, did I have ye naked and willing, no one in hearing, and room enough to serve ye suitably." He lathered the cake of soap vigorously between his palms, and applied it to his face.

"Well, I'm willing enough," I said, intrigued. "And there's room, certainly. As for naked …"

"I'll see to that," he assured me. "That's part o' the plan, aye? I shall take ye to a private spot, spread out a quilt to lie on, and commence by sitting down beside you."

"Well, that's a start, all right," I said. "What then?" I sat down next to him on the berth. He leaned close and bit my earlobe very delicately.

"As for what next, then I shall take ye on my knee and kiss ye." He paused to illustrate, holding my arms so I couldn't move. He let go a minute later, leaving my lips slightly swollen, tasting of ale, soap, and Jamie.

"So much for step one," I said, wiping soapsuds from my mouth. "What then?"

"Then I shall lay ye down upon the quilt, twist your hair up in my hand and taste your face and throat and ears and bosom wi' my lips," he said. "I thought I would do that until ye start to make squeaking noises."

"I don't make squeaking noises!"

"Aye, ye do," he said. "Here, hand me the towel, aye?"

"Then," he went on cheerfully, "I thought I would begin at the other end. I shall lift up your skirt and—" His face disappeared into the folds of the linen towel.

"And what?" I asked, thoroughly intrigued.

"And kiss the insides of your thighs, where the skin's so soft. The beard might help there, aye?" He stroked his jaw, considering.

"It might," I said, a little faintly. "What am I supposed to be doing while you do this?"

"Well, ye might moan a bit, if ye like, to encourage me, but otherwise, ye just lie still."

He didn't sound as though he needed any encouragement whatever. One of his hands was resting on my thigh as he used the other to swab his chest with the damp towel. As he finished, the hand slid behind me, and squeezed.

"My beloved's arm is under me," I quoted. "And his hand behind my head. Comfort me with apples, and stay me with flagons, For I am sick of love."

There was a flash of white teeth in his beard.

"More like grapefruit," he said, one hand cupping my behind. "Or possibly gourds. Grapefruit are too small."

"Gourds?" I said indignantly.

"Well, wild gourds get that big sometimes," he said. "But aye, that's next." He squeezed once more, then removed the hand in order to wash the armpit on that side. "I lie upon my back and have ye stretched at length upon me, so that I can get hold of your buttocks and fondle them properly." He stopped washing to give me a quick example of what he thought proper, and I let out an involuntary gasp.

"Now," he went on, resuming his ablutions, "should ye wish to kick your legs a bit, or make lewd motions wi' your hips and pant in my ear at that point in the proceedings, I should have no great objection."

"I do not pant!"

"Aye, ye do. Now, about your breasts—"

"Oh, I thought you'd forgotten those."

"Never in life," he assured me. "No," he went blithely on, "that's when I take off your gown, leaving ye in naught but your shift."

"I'm not wearing a shift."

"Oh? Well, no matter," he said, dismissing this. "I meant to suckle ye through the thin cotton, 'til your nipples stood up hard in my mouth, and then take it off, but it's no great concern; I'll manage without. So, allowing for the absence of your shift, I shall attend to your breasts until ye make that wee bleating noise—"

"I don't—"

"And then," he said, interrupting, "since ye will, according to the plan, be naked, and—provided I've done it right so far—possibly willing as well—"

"Oh, just possibly," I said. My lips were still tingling from step one.

"—then I shall spread open your thighs, take down my breeks, and—" He paused, waiting.

"And?" I said, obligingly.

The grin widened substantially.

"And we'll see what sort of noise it is ye don't make then, Sassenach."

There was a slight cough in the doorway behind me.

"Oh, your pardon, Mr. Willoughby," Jamie said apologetically. "I wasna expecting ye so soon. Perhaps ye'd care to go and have a bit of supper? And if ye would, take those things along and ask Murphy will he burn them in the galley fire." He tossed the remains of his uniform to Mr. Willoughby, and bent to rummage in a sealocker for fresh clothing.

"I never thought to meet Lawrence Stern again," he remarked, burrowing through the tangled linen. "How does he come to be here?"

"Oh, he *is* the Jewish natural philosopher you told me about?"

"He is. Though I shouldna think there are so many Jewish philosophers about as to cause great confusion."

I explained how I had come to meet Stern in the mangroves. “ … and then he brought me up to the priest’s house,” I said, and stopped, suddenly reminded. “Oh, I almost forgot! You owe the priest two pounds sterling, on account of Arabella.”

“I do?” Jamie glanced at me, startled, a shirt in his hand.

“You do. Maybe you’d best ask Lawrence if he’ll act as ambassador; the priest seems to get on with him.”

“All right. What’s happened to this Arabella, though? Has one of the crew debauched her?”

“I suppose you might say that.” I drew breath to explain further, but before I could speak, another knock sounded on the door.

“Can a man not dress in peace?” Jamie demanded irritably. “Come, then!”

The door swung open, revealing Marsali, who blinked at the sight of her nude stepfather. Jamie hastily swathed his midsection in the shirt he was holding, and nodded to her, sangfroid only slightly impaired.

“Marsali, lass. I’m glad to see ye unhurt. Did ye require something?”

The girl edged into the room, taking up a position between the table and a sea chest.

“Aye, I do,” she said. She was sunburned, and her nose was peeling, but I thought she seemed pale nonetheless. Her fists were clenched at her sides, and her chin lifted as for battle.

“I require ye to keep your promise,” she said.

“Aye?” Jamie looked wary.

“Your promise to let me and Fergus be married, so soon as we came to the Indies.” A small wrinkle appeared between her fair eyebrows. “Hispaniola *is* in the Indies, no? The Jew said so.”

Jamie scratched at his beard, looking reluctant.

“It is,” he said. “And aye, I suppose if I … well, aye. I did promise. But—you’re still sure of yourselves, the two of ye?” She lifted her chin higher, jaw set firmly.

“We are.”

Jamie lifted one eyebrow.

“Where’s Fergus?”

"Helping stow the cargo. I kent we'd be under way soon, so I thought I'd best come and ask now."

"Aye. Well." Jamie frowned, then sighed with resignation. "Aye, I said. But I did say as ye must be blessed by a priest, did I no? There's no priest closer than Bayamo, and that's three days' ride. But perhaps in Jamaica …"

"Nay, you're forgetting!" Marsali said triumphantly. "We've a priest right here. Father Fogden can marry us."

I felt my jaw drop, and hastily closed it. Jamie was scowling at her.

"We sail first thing in the morning!"

"It won't take long," she said. "It's only a few words, after all. We're already married, by law; it's only to be blessed by the Church, aye?" Her hand flattened on her abdomen where her marriage contract presumably resided beneath her stays.

"But your mother …" Jamie glanced helplessly at me for reinforcement. I shrugged, equally helpless. The task of trying either to explain Father Fogden to Jamie or to dissuade Marsali was well beyond me.

"He likely won't do it, though." Jamie came up with this objection with a palpable air of relief. "The crew have been trifling with one of his parishioners named Arabella. He willna want anything to do wi' us, I'm afraid."

"Yes, he will! He'll do it for me—he likes me!" Marsali was almost dancing on her toes with eagerness.

Jamie looked at her for a long moment, eyes fixed on hers, reading her face. She was very young.

"You're sure, then, lassie?" he said at last, very gently. "Ye want this?"

She took a deep breath, a glow spreading over her face.

"I am, Da. I truly am. I want Fergus! I love him!"

Jamie hesitated a moment, then rubbed a hand through his hair and nodded.

"Aye, then. Go and send Mr. Stern to me, then fetch Fergus and tell him to make ready."

“Oh, Da! Thank you, thank you!” Marsali flung herself at him and kissed him. He held her with one arm, clutching the shirt about his middle with the other. Then he kissed her on the forehead and pushed her gently away.

“Take care,” he said, smiling. “Ye dinna want to go to your bridal covered wi’ lice.”

“Oh!” This seemed to remind her of something. She glanced at me and blushed, putting up a hand to her own pale locks, which were matted with sweat and straggling down her neck from a careless knot.

“Mother Claire,” she said shyly, “I wonder—would ye—could ye lend me a bit of the special soap ye make wi’ the chamomile? I—if there’s time—” she added, with a hasty glance at Jamie, “I should like to wash my hair.”

“Of course,” I said, and smiled at her. “Come along and we’ll make you pretty for your wedding.” I looked her over appraisingly, from glowing round face to dirty bare feet. The crumpled muslin of her sea-shrunk gown stretched tight over her bosom, slight as it was, and the grubby hem hovered several inches above her sandy ankles.

A thought struck me, and I turned to Jamie. “She should have a nice dress to be married in,” I said.

“Sassenach,” he said, with obviously waning patience, “we havena—”

“No, but the priest does,” I interrupted. “Tell Lawrence to ask Father Fogden whether we might borrow one of his gowns; Ermenegilda’s, I mean. I think they’re almost the right size.”

Jamie’s face went blank with surprise above his beard.

“Ermenegilda?” he said. “Arabella? Gowns?” He narrowed his eyes at me. “What sort of priest *is* this man, Sassenach?”

I paused in the doorway, Marsali hovering impatiently in the passage beyond.

“Well,” I said, “he drinks a bit. And he’s rather fond of sheep. But he might remember the words to the wedding ceremony.”

* * *

It was one of the more unusual weddings I had attended. The sun had long since sunk into the sea by the time all arrangements were made. To the disgruntlement of Mr. Warren, the ship's master, Jamie had declared that we would not leave until the next day, so as to allow the newlyweds one night of privacy ashore.

"Damned if I'd care to consummate a marriage in one of those godforsaken pesthole berths," he told me privately. "If they got coupled in there to start wi', we'd never pry them out. And the thought of takin' a maidenhead in a hammock—"

"Quite," I said. I poured more vinegar on his head, smiling to myself. "Very thoughtful of you."

Now Jamie stood by me on the beach, smelling rather strongly of vinegar, but handsome and dignified in blue coat, clean stock and linen, and gray serge breeks, with his hair clubbed back and ribboned. The wild red beard was a bit incongruous above his otherwise sober garb, but it had been neatly trimmed and fine-combed with vinegar, and stockinged feet notwithstanding, he made a fine picture as father of the bride.

Murphy, as one chief witness, and Maitland, as the other, were somewhat less prepossessing, though Murphy had washed his hands and Maitland his face. Fergus would have preferred Lawrence Stern as a witness, and Marsali had asked for me, but both were dissuaded; first on grounds that Stern was not a Christian, let alone a Catholic, and then, by consideration that while I was religiously qualified, that fact was unlikely to weigh heavily with Laoghaire, once she found out about it.

"I've told Marsali she must write to her mother to say she's wed," Jamie murmured to me as we watched the preparations on the beach go forward. "But perhaps I shall suggest she doesna say much more about it than that."

I saw his point; Laoghaire was not going to be pleased at hearing that her eldest daughter had eloped with a one-handed ex-pickpocket twice her age. Her maternal feelings were unlikely to be assuaged by hearing that the marriage had been performed in the middle of the night on a West Indian beach by a disgraced—if not actually defrocked—priest, witnessed by twenty-five seamen, ten French horses, a small flock of sheep—all gaily beribboned in honor of the occasion—and a King Charles spaniel, who added to the generally festive feeling by attempting to copulate with Murphy's wooden leg at every opportunity. The only thing that could make things worse, in Laoghaire's view, would be to hear that I had participated in the ceremony.

Several torches were lit, bound to stakes pounded into the sand, and the flames streamed seaward in tails of red and orange, bright against the black velvet night. The brilliant stars of the Caribbean shone overhead like the lights of heaven. While it was not a church, few brides had had a more beautiful setting for their nuptials.

I didn't know what prodigies of persuasion had been required on Lawrence's part, but Father Fogden was there, frail and insubstantial as a ghost, the blue sparks of his eyes the only real signs of life. His skin was gray as his robe, and his hands trembled on the worn leather of his prayer book.

Jamie glanced sharply at him, and appeared to be about to say something, but then merely muttered under his breath in Gaelic and pressed his lips tightly together. The spicy scent of sangria wafted from Father Fogden's vicinity, but at least he had reached the beach under his own power. He stood swaying between two torches, laboriously trying to turn the pages of his book as the light offshore wind jerked them fluttering from his fingers.

At last he gave up, and dropped the book on the sand with a little *plop*!

"Um," he said, and belched. He looked about and gave us a small, saint-like smile. "Dearly beloved of God."

It was several moments before the throng of shuffling, murmuring spectators realized that the ceremony had started, and began to poke each other and straighten to attention.

"Wilt thou take this woman?" Father Fogden demanded, suddenly rounding ferociously on Murphy.

"No!" said the cook, startled. "I don't hold wi' women. Messy things."

"You don't?" Father Fogden closed one eye, the remaining orb bright and accusing. He looked at Maitland.

"Do *you* take this woman?"

“Not me, sir, no. Not that anyone wouldn’t be pleased,” he added hastily. “Him, please.” Maitland pointed at Fergus, who stood next to the cabin boy, glowering at the priest.

“Him? You’re sure? He hasn’t a hand,” Father Fogden said doubtfully. “Won’t she mind?”

“I will not!” Marsali, imperious in one of Ermenegilda’s gowns, blue silk encrusted with gold embroidery along the low, square neckline and puffed sleeves, stood beside Fergus. She looked lovely, with her hair clean and bright as fresh straw, brushed to a gloss and floating loose round her shoulders, as became a maiden. She also looked angry.

“Go on!” She stamped her foot, which made no noise on the sand, but seemed to startle the priest.

“Oh, yes,” he said nervously, taking one step back. “Well, I don’t suppose it’s an impt—impeddy—impediment, after all. Not as though he’d lost his cock, I mean. He hasn’t, has he?” the priest inquired anxiously, as the possibility occurred to him. “I can’t marry you if he has. It’s not allowed.”

Marsali’s face was already bathed in red by torchlight. The expression on it at this point reminded me strongly of how her mother had looked upon finding me at Lallybroch. A visible tremor ran through Fergus’s shoulders, whether of rage or laughter, I couldn’t tell.

Jamie quelled the incipient riot by striding firmly into the middle of the wedding and placing a hand on the shoulders of Fergus and Marsali.

“This man,” he said, with a nod toward Fergus, “and this woman,” with another toward Marsali. “Marry them, Father. Now. Please,” he added, as an obvious afterthought, and stood back a pace, restoring order among the audience by dint of dark glances from side to side.

“Oh, quite. Quite,” Father Fogden repeated, swaying gently. “Quite, quite.” A long pause followed, during which the priest squinted at Marsali.

“Name,” he said abruptly. “I have to have a name. Can’t get married without a name. Just like a cock. Can’t get married without a name; can’t get married without a c—”

"Marsali Jane MacKimmie Joyce!" Marsali spoke up loudly, drowning him out.

"Yes, yes," he said hurriedly. "Of course it is. Marsali. Mar-sa-lee. Just so. Well, then, do you Mar-sa-lee take this man—even though he's missing a hand and possibly other parts not visible—to be your lawful husband? To have and to hold, from this day forward, forsaking …" At this point he trailed off, his attention fixed on one of the sheep that had wandered into the light and was chewing industriously on a discarded stocking of striped wool.

"I do!"

Father Fogden blinked, brought back to attention. He made an unsuccessful attempt to stifle another belch, and transferred his bright blue gaze to Fergus.

"You have a name, too? *And* a cock?"

"Yes," said Fergus, wisely choosing not to be more specific. "Fergus."

The priest frowned slightly at this. "Fergus?" he said. "Fergus. Fergus. Yes, Fergus, got that. That's all? No more name? Need more names, surely."

"Fergus," Fergus repeated, with a note of strain in his voice. Fergus was the only name he had ever had—bar his original French name of Claudel. Jamie had given him the name Fergus in Paris, when they had met, twenty years before. But naturally a brothel-born bastard would have no last name to give a wife.

"Fraser," said a deep, sure voice beside me. Fergus and Marsali both glanced back in surprise, and Jamie nodded. His eyes met Fergus's, and he smiled faintly.

"Fergus Claudel Fraser," he said, slowly and clearly. One eyebrow lifted as he looked at Fergus.

Fergus himself looked transfixed. His mouth hung open, eyes wide black pools in the dim light. Then he nodded slightly, and a glow rose in his face, as though he contained a candle that had just been lit.

"Fraser," he said to the priest. His voice was husky, and he cleared his throat. "Fergus Claudel Fraser."

Father Fogden had his head tilted back, watching the sky, where a crescent of light floated over the trees, holding the black orb of the moon in its cup. He lowered his head to face Fergus, looking dreamy.

"Well, that's good," he said. "Isn't it?"

A small poke in the ribs from Maitland brought him back to an awareness of his responsibilities.

"Oh! Um. Well. Man and wife. Yes, I pronounce you man—no, that's not right, you haven't said whether you'd take her. She has both hands," he added helpfully.

"I will," Fergus said. He had been holding Marsali's hand; now he let go and dug hastily in his pocket, coming out with a small gold ring. He must have bought it in Scotland, I realized, and kept it ever since, not wanting to make the marriage official until it had been blessed. Not by a priest—by Jamie.

The beach was silent as he slid the ring on her finger, all eyes fixed on the small gold circle and the two heads bent close together over it, one bright, one dark.

So she had done it. One fifteen-year-old girl, with nothing but stubbornness as a weapon. "I want him," she had said. And kept saying it, through her mother's objections and Jamie's arguments, through Fergus's scruples and her own fears, through three thousand miles of homesickness, hardship, ocean storm, and shipwreck.

She raised her face, shining, and found her mirror in Fergus's eyes. I saw them look at each other, and felt the tears prickle behind my lids.

"I want him." I had not said that to Jamie at our marriage; I had not wanted him, then. But I had said it since, three times; in two moments of choice at Craigh na Dun, and once again at Lallybroch.

"I want him." I wanted him still, and nothing whatever could stand between us.

He was looking down at me; I could feel the weight of his gaze, dark blue and tender as the sea at dawn.

"What are ye thinking, *mo chridhe?*" he asked softly.

I blinked back the tears and smiled at him. His hands were large and warm on mine.

“What I tell you three times is true,” I said. And standing on tiptoe, I kissed him as the sailor’s cheer went up.

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PART NINE

Worlds Unknown

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BAT GUANO

Bat guano is a slimy blackish green when fresh, a powdery light brown when dried. In both states, it emits an eye-watering reek of musk, ammonia, and decay.

"*How* much of this stuff did you say we're taking?" I asked, through the cloth I had wrapped about my lower face.

"Ten tons," Jamie replied, his words similarly muffled. We were standing on the upper deck, watching as the slaves trundled barrowloads of the reeking stuff down the gangplank and over to the open hatchway of the after hold.

Tiny particles of the dried guano blew from the barrows and filled the air around us with a deceptively beautiful cloud of gold, that sparked and glimmered in the late afternoon sun. The men's bodies were coated with the stuff as well; the runnels of sweat carved dark channels in the dust on their bare torsos, and the constant tears ran down their faces and chests, so that they were striped in black and gold like exotic zebras.

Jamie dabbed at his own streaming eyes as the wind veered slightly toward us. "D'ye ken how to keelhaul someone, Sassenach?"

"No, but if it's Fergus you have in mind as a candidate, I'm with you. How far is it to Jamaica?" It was Fergus, making inquiries in the marketplace on King's Street in Bridgetown, who had gained the *Artemis* her first commission as a trading and hauling vessel; the shipment of ten cubic tons of bat guano from Barbados to Jamaica, for use as fertilizer on the sugar plantation of one Mr. Grey, planter.

Fergus himself was rather self-consciously overseeing the loading of the huge quarried blocks of dried guano, which were tipped from their barrows and handed down one by one into the hold. Marsali, never far from his side, had in this case moved as far as the forecastle, where she sat on a barrel filled with oranges, the lovely new shawl Fergus had bought her in the market wrapped over her face.

"We are meant to be traders, no?" Fergus had argued. "We have an empty hold to fill. Besides," he had added logically, clinching the argument, "Monsieur Grey will pay us more than adequately."

"How far, Sassenach?" Jamie squinted at the horizon, as though hoping to see land rising from the sparkling waves. Mr. Willoughby's magic needles rendered him seaworthy, but he submitted to the process with no real enthusiasm. "Three or four days' sail, Warren says," he admitted with a sigh, "and the weather holds fair."

"Maybe the smell will be better at sea," I said.

"Oh, yes, milady," Fergus assured me, overhearing as he passed. "The owner tells me that the stench dissipates itself significantly, once the dried material is removed from the caves where it accumulates." He leapt into the rigging and went up, climbing like a monkey despite his hook. Reaching the top rigging, Fergus tied the red kerchief that was the signal to hands on shore to come aboard, and slid down again, pausing to say something rude to Ping An, who was perched on the lowest crosstrees, keeping a bright yellow eye on the proceedings below.

"Fergus seems to be taking quite a proprietary interest in this cargo," I observed.

"Aye, well, he's a partner," Jamie said. "I told him if he'd a wife to support, he must think of how to do it. And as it may be some time before we're in the printing business again, he must turn his hand to what offers. He and Marsali have half the profit on this cargo—against the dowry I promised her," he added wryly, and I laughed.

"You know," I said, "I really would like to read the letter Marsali's sending to her mother. First Fergus, I mean, then Father Fogden and

Mamacita, and now a dowry of ten tons of bat shit."

"I shall never be able to set foot in Scotland again, once Laoghaire reads it," said Jamie, but he smiled nonetheless. "Have ye thought yet what to do wi' your new acquisition?"

"Don't remind me," I said, a little grimly. "Where is he?"

"Somewhere below," Jamie said, his attention distracted by a man coming down the wharf toward us. "Murphy's fed him, and Innes will find a place for him. Your pardon, Sassenach; I think this will be someone looking for me." He swung down from the rail and went down the gangplank, neatly skipping around a slave coming up with a barrowload of guano.

I watched with interest as he greeted the man, a tall colonial in the dress of a prosperous planter, with a weathered red face that spoke of long years in the islands. He extended a hand toward Jamie, who took it in a firm clasp. Jamie said something, and the man replied, his expression of wariness changing to an instant cordiality.

This must be the result of Jamie's visit to the Masonic lodge in Bridgetown, where he had gone immediately upon landing the day before, mindful of Jared's suggestion. He had identified himself as a member of the brotherhood, and spoken to the Master of the lodge, describing Young Ian and asking for any news of either the boy or the ship *Bruja*. The Master had promised to spread the word among such Freemasons as might have occasion to frequent the slave market and the shipping docks. With luck, this was the fruit of that promise.

I watched eagerly as the planter reached into his coat and withdrew a paper, which he unfolded and showed to Jamie, apparently explaining something. Jamie's face was intent, his ruddy brows drawn together with concentration, but showed neither exultation nor disappointment. Maybe it was not news of Ian at all. After our visit to the slave market the day before, I was half-inclined to hope not.

* * *

Lawrence, Fergus, Marsali, and I had gone to the slave market under the cranky chaperonage of Murphy, while Jamie called on the

Masonic Master. The slave market was near the docks, down a dusty road lined with sellers of fruit and coffee, dried fish and coconuts, yams and red cochineal bugs, sold for dye in small, corked glass bottles.

Murphy, with his passion for order and propriety, had insisted that Marsali and I must each have a parasol, and had forced Fergus to buy two from a roadside vendor.

“All the white women in Bridgetown carry parasols,” he said firmly, trying to hand me one.

“I don’t need a parasol,” I said, impatient at talk of something so inconsequential as my complexion, when we might be near to finding Ian at last. “The sun isn’t that hot. Let’s go!”

Murphy glowered at me, scandalized.

“Ye don’t want folk to think ye ain’t respectable, that ye don’t care enough to keep yer skin fine!”

“I wasn’t planning to take up residence here,” I said tartly. “I don’t care *what* they think.” Not pausing to argue further, I began walking down the road, toward a distant murmur of noise that I took to be the slave market.

“Yer face will … get … red!” Murphy said, huffing indignantly alongside me, attempting to open the parasol as he stumped along.

“Oh, a fate worse than death, I’m sure!” I snapped. My nerves were strung tight, in anticipation of what we might find. “All right, then, give me the bloody thing!” I snatched it from him, snapped it open, and set it over my shoulder with an irritable twirl.

As it was, within minutes I was grateful for Murphy’s intransigence. While the road was shaded by tall palms and cecropia trees, the slave market itself was held in a large, stone-paved space without the grace of any shade, save that provided by ramshackle open booths roofed with sheets of tin or palm fronds, in which the slave-dealers and auctioneers sought occasional refuge from the sun. The slaves themselves were mostly held in large pens at the side of the square, open to the elements.

The sun *was* fierce in the open, and the light bouncing off the pale stones was blinding after the green shade of the road. I blinked, eyes watering, and hastily adjusted my parasol over my head.

So shaded, I could see a bewildering array of bodies, naked or nearly so, gleaming in every shade from pale café au lait to a deep blue-black. Bouquets of color blossomed in front of the auction blocks, where the plantation owners and their servants gathered to inspect the wares, vivid amid the stark blacks and whites.

The stink of the place was staggering, even to one accustomed to the stenches of Edinburgh and the reeking tween-decks of the *Porpoise*. Heaps of wet human excrement lay in the corners of the slave pens, buzzing with flies, and a thick oily reek floated on the air, but the major component of the smell was the unpleasantly intimate scent of acres of hot bare flesh, baking in the sun.

"Jesu," Fergus muttered next to me. His dark eyes flicked right and left in shocked disapproval. "It's worse than the slums in Montmartre." Marsali didn't say a word, but drew closer to his side, her nostrils pinched.

Lawrence was more matter-of-fact; I supposed he must have seen slave markets before during his explorations of the islands.

"The whites are at that end," he said, gesturing toward the far side of the square. "Come; we'll ask for news of any young men sold recently." He placed a large square hand in the center of my back and urged me gently forward through the crowd.

Near the edge of the market, an old black woman squatted on the ground, feeding charcoal to a small brazier. As we drew near, a little group of people approached her: a planter, accompanied by two black men dressed in rough cotton shirts and trousers, evidently his servants. One of them was holding the arm of a newly purchased female slave; two other girls, naked but for small strips of cloth wrapped about their middles, were led by ropes around their necks.

The planter bent and handed the old woman a coin. She turned and drew several short brass rods from the ground behind her, holding them up for the man's inspection. He studied them for a moment, picked out two, and straightened up. He handed the branding irons to one of his servants, who thrust the ends into the old woman's brazier.

The other servant stepped behind the girl and pinioned her arms. The first man then pulled the irons from the fire and planted both together on the upper slope of her right breast. She shrieked, a high steam-whistle sound loud enough to turn a few heads nearby. The irons pulled away, leaving the letters HB in raw pink flesh.

I had stopped dead at the sight of this. Not realizing that I was no longer with them, the others had gone on. I turned round and round, looking vainly for any trace of Lawrence or Fergus. I never had any difficulty finding Jamie in crowds; his bright head was always visible above everyone else's. But Fergus was a small man, Murphy, no taller, and Lawrence, no more than middle height; even Marsali's yellow parasol was lost among the many others in the square.

I turned away from the brazier with a shudder, hearing screams and whimpers behind me, but not wanting to look back. I hurried past several auction blocks, eyes averted, but then was slowed and finally stopped by a thickening of the crowd around me.

The men and women blocking my way were listening to an auctioneer who was touting the virtues of a one-armed slave who stood naked on the block for inspection. He was a short man, but broadly built, with massive thighs and a strong chest. The missing arm had been crudely amputated above the elbow; sweat dripped from the end of the stump.

"No good for field work, that's true," the auctioneer was admitting. "But a sound investment for breeding. Look at those legs!" He carried a long rattan cane, which he flicked against the slave's calves, then grinned fatly at the crowd.

"Will you give a guarantee of virility?" the man standing behind me said, with a distinct tone of skepticism. "I had a buck three year past, big as a mule, and not a foal dropped on his account; couldn't do a thing, the juba-girls said."

The crowd tittered at that, and the auctioneer pretended to be offended.

"Guarantee?" he said. He wiped a hand theatrically over his jowls, gathering oily sweat on the palm. "See for yourselves, O ye of little faith!" Bending slightly, he grasped the slave's penis and began to massage it vigorously.

The man grunted in surprise and tried to draw back, but was prevented by the auctioneer's assistant, who clutched him firmly by his single arm. There was an outburst of laughter from the crowd, and a few scattered cheers as the soft black flesh hardened and began to swell.

Some small thing inside me suddenly snapped; I heard it, distinctly. Outraged by the market, the branding, the nakedness, the crude talk and casual indignity, outraged most of all by my own presence here, I could not even think what I was doing, but began to do it, all the same. I felt very oddly detached, as though I stood outside myself, watching.

"Stop it!" I said, very loudly, hardly recognizing my own voice. The auctioneer looked up, startled, and smiled ingratiatingly at me. He looked directly into my eyes, with a knowing leer.

"Sound breeding stock, ma'am," he said. "Guaranteed, as you see."

I folded my parasol, lowered it, and stabbed the pointed end of it as hard as I could into his fat stomach. He jerked back, eyes bulging in surprise. I yanked the parasol back and smashed it on his head, then dropped it and kicked him, hard.

Somewhere deep inside, I knew it would make no difference, would not help in any way, would do nothing but harm. And yet I could not stand here, consenting by silence. It was not for the branded girls, the man on the block, not for any of them that I did it; it was for myself.

There was a good deal of noise around me, and hands snatched at me, pulling me off the auctioneer. This worthy, recovered sufficiently from his initial shock, grinned nastily at me, took aim, and slapped the slave hard across the face.

I looked around for reinforcements, and caught a quick glimpse of Fergus, face contorted in rage, lunging through the crowd toward the auctioneer. There was a shout, and several men turned in his direction. People began to push and shove. Someone tripped me and I sat down hard on the stones.

Through a haze of dust, I saw Murphy, six feet away. With a resigned expression on his broad red face, he bent, detached his wooden leg, straightened up, and hopping gracefully forward, brought it down with great force on the auctioneer's head. The man tottered and fell, as the crowd surged back, trying to get out of the way.

Fergus, baffled of his prey, skidded to a halt by the fallen man and glared ferociously round. Lawrence, dark, grim, and bulky, came striding through the crowd from the other direction, hand on the cane-knife at his belt.

I sat on the ground, shaken. I no longer felt detached. I felt sick, and terrified, realizing that I had just committed an act of folly that was likely to result in Fergus, Lawrence, and Murphy being badly beaten, if nothing worse.

And then Jamie was there.

"Stand up, Sassenach," he said quietly, stooping over me and giving me his hands. I managed it, knees shaking. I saw Raeburn's long mustache twitching at one side, MacLeod behind him, and realized that his Scots were with him. Then my knees gave way, but Jamie's arms held me up.

"Do something," I said in a choked voice into his chest. "Please. Do something."

* * *

He had. With his usual presence of mind, he had done the only thing that would quell the riot and prevent harm. He had bought the one-armed man. And as the ironic result of my little outburst of sensibilities, I was now the appalled owner of a genuine male Guinea slave, one-armed, but in glowing health and of guaranteed virility.

I sighed, trying not to think of the man, presumably now somewhere under my feet, fed, and—I hoped—clad. The papers of ownership, which I had refused even to touch, said that he was a full-blooded Gold Coast Negro, a Yoruba, sold by a French planter from Barbuda, one-armed, bearing a brand on the left shoulder of a fleur-de-lys and the initial "A," and known by the name Temeraire. The Bold One. The papers did not suggest what in the name of God I was to do with him.

Jamie had finished looking at the papers his Masonic acquaintance had brought—they were very like the ones I had received for Temeraire, so far as I could see from the rail of the ship. He handed them back with a bow of thanks, a slight frown on his face. The men exchanged a few more words, and parted with another handshake.

"Is everyone aboard?" Jamie asked, stepping off the gangplank. There was a light breeze; it fluttered the dark blue ribbon that tied back the thick tail of his hair.

"Aye, sir," said Mr. Warren, with the casual jerk of the head that passed for a salute in a merchant ship. "Shall we make sail?"

"We shall, if ye please. Thank ye, Mr. Warren." With a small bow, Jamie passed him and came to stand beside me.

"No," he said quietly. His face was calm, but I could feel the depths of his disappointment. Interviews the day before with the two men who dealt in white indentured labor at the slave market had provided no useful information—the Masonic planter had been a beacon of last-minute hope.

There wasn't anything helpful to be said. I put my hand over his where it lay on the rail, and squeezed lightly. Jamie looked down and gave me a faint smile. He took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, shrugging to settle his coat over them.

"Aye, well. I've learned something, at least. That was a Mr. Villiers, who owns a large sugar plantation here. He bought six slaves from the captain of the ship *Bruja*, three days ago—but none of them Ian."

"Three days?" I was startled. "But—the *Bruja* left Hispaniola more than two weeks ago!"

He nodded, rubbing his cheek. He had shaved, a necessity before making public inquiries, and his skin glowed fresh and ruddy above the snowy linen of his stock.

"She did. And she arrived here on Wednesday—five days ago."

"So she'd been somewhere else, before coming to Barbados! Do we know where?"

He shook his head.

"Villiers didna ken. He said he had spoken some time wi' the captain of the *Bruja*, and the man seemed verra secretive about where he'd been and what he'd been doing. Villiers thought no great thing of it, knowin' as the *Bruja* has a reputation as a crook ship—and seein' as how the captain was willing to sell the slaves for a good price."

"Still"—he brightened slightly—"Villiers did show me the papers for the slaves he'd bought. Ye'll have seen those for your slave?"

"I wish you wouldn't call him that," I said. "But yes. Were the ones you saw the same?"

"Not quite. Three o' the papers gave no previous owner—though Villiers says they were none of them fresh from Africa; all of them have a few words of English, at least. One listed a previous owner, but the name had been scratched out; I couldna read it. The other two gave a Mrs. Abernathy of Rose Hall, Jamaica, as the previous owner."

"Jamaica? How far—"

"I dinna ken," he interrupted. "But Mr. Warren will know. It may be right. In any case, I think we must go to Jamaica next—if only to dispose of our cargo before we all die o' disgust." He wrinkled his long nose fastidiously and I laughed.

"You look like an anteater when you do that," I told him.

The attempt to distract him was successful; the wide mouth curved upward slightly.

"Oh, aye? There's a beastie eats ants, is there?" He did his best to respond to the teasing, turning his back on the Barbados docks. He leaned against the rail and smiled down at me. "I shouldna think they'd be verra filling."

"I suppose it must eat a lot of them. They can't be any worse than haggis, after all." I took a breath before going on, and let it out quickly, coughing. "God, what's that?"

The *Artemis* had by now slid free of the loading wharf and out into the harbor. As we came about into the wind, a deep, pungent smell struck the ship, a lower and more sinister note in the olfactory dockside symphony of dead barnacles, wet wood, fish, rotted seaweed, and the constant warm breath of the tropical vegetation on shore.

I pressed my handkerchief hard over my nose and mouth. "What is it?"

"We're passing the burning ground, mum, at the foot o' the slave market," Maitland explained, overhearing my question. He pointed toward the shore, where a plume of white smoke rose from behind a screen of bayberry bushes. "They burn the bodies of the slaves who don't survive their passage from Africa," he explained. "First they unload the living cargo, and then, as the ship is swabbed out, the bodies are removed and thrown onto the pyre here, to prevent sickness spreading into the town."

I looked at Jamie, and found the same fear in his face that showed in my own.

"How often do they burn bodies?" I asked. "Every day?"

"Don't know, mum, but I don't think so. Maybe once a week?" Maitland shrugged and went on about his duties.

"We have to look," I said. My voice sounded strange to my own ears, calm and clear. I didn't feel that way.

Jamie had gone very pale. He had turned round again, and his eyes were fixed on the plume of smoke, rising thick and white from behind the palm trees.

His lips pressed tight, then, and his jaw set hard.

"Aye," was all he said, and turned to tell Mr. Warren to put about.

* * *

The keeper of the flames, a wizened little creature of indistinguishable color and accent, was vociferously shocked at the notion that a lady should enter the burning ground, but Jamie elbowed him brusquely aside. He didn't try to prevent me following him, or turn to see that I did; he knew I would not leave him alone here.

It was a small hollow, set behind a screen of trees, convenient to a small wharf that extended into the river. Black-smeared pitch barrels and piles of dry wood stood in grim sticky clumps amid the brilliant greens of tree-ferns and dwarf poinciana. To the right, a huge pyre had been built, with a platform of wood, onto which the bodies had been thrown, dribbled with pitch.

This had been lit only a short time before; a good blaze had started at one side of the heap, but only small tongues of flame licked up from the rest. It was smoke that obscured the bodies, rolling up over the heap in a wavering thick veil that gave the outflung limbs a horrid illusion of movement.

Jamie had stopped, staring at the heap. Then he sprang onto the platform, heedless of smoke and scorching, and began jerking bodies loose, grimly pawing through the grisly remains.

A smaller heap of gray ashes and shards of pure white friable bone lay nearby. The curve of an occiput lay on top of the heap, fragile and perfect as an eggshell.

"Makee fine crop." The soot-smeared little creature who tended the fire was at my elbow, offering information in evident hopes of reward. He—or she—pointed at the ashes. "Put on crop; makee grow-grow."

"No, thank you," I said faintly. The smoke obscured Jamie's figure for a moment, and I had the terrible feeling that he had fallen, was burning in the pyre. The horrible, jolly smell of roasting meat rose on the air, and I thought I would be sick.

"Jamie!" I called. *"Jamie!"*

He didn't answer, but I heard a deep, racking cough from the heart of the fire. Several long minutes later, the veil of smoke parted, and he staggered out, choking.

He made his way down the platform and stood bent over, coughing his lungs out. He was covered with an oily soot, his hands and clothes smeared with pitch. He was blind with the smoke; tears poured down his cheeks, making runnels in the soot.

I threw several coins to the keeper of the pyre, and taking Jamie by the arm, led him, blind and choking, out of the valley of death. Under the palms, he sank to his knees and threw up.

"Don't touch me," he gasped, when I tried to help him. He retched over and over again, but finally stopped, swaying on his knees. Then he slowly staggered to his feet.

“Don’t touch me,” he said again. His voice, roughened by smoke and sickness, was that of a stranger.

He walked to the edge of the dock, removed his coat and shoes, and dived into the water, fully clothed. I waited for a moment, then stooped and picked up the coat and shoes, holding them gingerly at arm’s length. I could see in the inner pocket the faint rectangular bulge of Brianna’s pictures.

I waited until he came back and hoisted himself out of the water, dripping. The pitch smears were still there, but most of the soot and the smell of the fire were gone. He sat on the wharf, head on his knees, breathing hard. A row of curious faces edged the *Artemis*’s rail above us.

Not knowing what else to do, I leaned down and laid a hand on his shoulder. Without raising his head, he reached up a hand and grasped mine.

“He wasn’t there,” he said, in his muffled, rasping stranger’s voice.

The breeze was freshening; it stirred the tendrils of wet hair that lay across his shoulders. I looked back, to see that the plume of smoke rising from the little valley had changed to black. It flattened and began to drift out over the sea, the ashes of the dead slaves fleeing on the wind, back toward Africa.

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“THE IMPETUOUS PIRATE”

“I can’t own anyone, Jamie,” I said, looking in dismay at the papers spread out in the lamplight before me. “I just *can’t*. It isn’t right.”

“Well, I’m inclined to agree wi’ ye, Sassenach. But what are we to do with the fellow?” Jamie sat on the berth next to me, close enough to see the ownership documents over my shoulder. He rubbed a hand through his hair frowning.

“We could set him free—that would seem the right thing—and yet, if we do—what will happen to him then?” He hunched forward, squinting down his nose to read the papers. “He’s no more than a bit of French and English; no skills to speak of. If we were to set him free, or even give him a bit of money—can he manage to live, on his own?”

I nibbled thoughtfully on one of Murphy’s cheese rolls. It was good, but the smell of the burning oil in the lamp blended oddly with the aromatic cheese, underlaid—as everything was—with the insidious scent of bat guano that permeated the ship.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Lawrence told me there are a lot of free blacks on Hispaniola. Lots of Creoles and mixed-race people, and a good many who own their own businesses. Is it like that on Jamaica, too?”

He shook his head, and reached for a roll from the tray.

“I dinna think so. It’s true, there are some free blacks who earn a living for themselves, but those are the ones who have some skill—sempstresses and fishers and such. I spoke to this Temeraire a bit.

He was a cane-cutter until he lost his arm, and doesna ken how to do anything else much."

I laid the roll down, barely tasted, and frowned unhappily at the papers. The mere idea of owning a slave frightened and disgusted me, but it was beginning to dawn on me that it might not be so simple to divest myself of the responsibility.

The man had been taken from a barracoon on the Guinea coast, five years before. My original impulse, to return him to his home, was clearly impossible; even had it been possible to find a ship headed for Africa that would agree to take him as a passenger, the overwhelming likelihood was that he would be immediately enslaved again, either by the ship that accepted him, or by another slaver in the West African ports.

Traveling alone, one-armed and ignorant, he would have no protection at all. And even if he should by some miracle reach Africa safely and keep himself out of the hands of both European and African slavers, there was virtually no chance of his ever finding his way back to his village. Should he do so, Lawrence had kindly explained, he would likely be killed or driven away, as his own people would regard him now as a ghost, and a danger to them.

"I dinna suppose ye would consider selling him?" Jamie put the question delicately, raising one eyebrow. "To someone we could be sure would treat him kindly?"

I rubbed two fingers between my brows, trying to soothe the growing headache.

"I can't see that that's any better than owning him ourselves," I protested. "Worse, probably, because we couldn't be sure what the new owners would do with him."

Jamie sighed. He had spent most of the day climbing through the dark, reeking cargo holds with Fergus, making up inventories against our arrival in Jamaica, and he was tired.

"Aye, I see that," he said. "But it's no kindness to free him to starve, that I can see."

"No." I fought back the uncharitable wish that I had never seen the one-armed slave. It would have been a great deal easier for me if I had not—but possibly not for him.

Jamie rose from the berth and stretched himself, leaning on the desk and flexing his shoulders to ease them. He bent and kissed me on the forehead, between the brows.

“Dinna fash, Sassenach. I’ll speak to the manager at Jared’s plantation. Perhaps he can find the man some employment, or else—”

A warning shout from above interrupted him.

“Ship ahoy! Look alive, below! Off the port bow, ahoy!” The lookout’s cry was urgent, and there was a sudden rush and stir, as hands began to turn out. Then there was a lot more shouting, and a jerk and shudder as the *Artemis* backed her sails.

“What in the name of God—” Jamie began. A rending crash drowned his words, and he pitched sideways, eyes wide with alarm, as the cabin tilted. The stool I was on fell over, throwing me onto the floor. The oil lamp had shot from its bracket, luckily extinguishing itself before hitting the floor, and the place was in darkness.

“Sassenach! Are ye all right?” Jamie’s voice came out of the murk close at hand, sharp with anxiety.

“Yes,” I said, scrambling out from under the table. “Are you? What happened? Did someone hit us?”

Not pausing to answer any of these questions, Jamie had reached the door and opened it. A babel of shouts and thumps came down from the deck above, punctuated by the sudden popcorn-sound of small-arms fire.

“Pirates,” he said briefly. “We’ve been boarded.” My eyes were becoming accustomed to the dim light; I saw his shadow lunge for the desk, reaching for the pistol in the drawer. He paused to snatch the dirk from under the pillow of his berth, and made for the door, issuing instructions as he went.

“Take Marsali, Sassenach, and get below. Go aft as far as ye can get—the big hold where the guano blocks are. Get behind them, and stay there.” Then he was gone.

I spent a moment feeling my way through the cupboard over my berth, in search of the morocco box Mother Hildegarde had given me when I saw her in Paris. A scalpel might be little use against pirates, but I would feel better with a weapon of some kind in my hand, no matter how small.

"Mother Claire?" Marsali's voice came from the door, high and scared.

"I'm here," I said. I caught the gleam of pale cotton as she moved, and pressed the ivory letter-opener into her hand. "Here, take this, just in case. Come on; we're to go below."

With a long-handled amputation blade in one hand, and a cluster of scalpels in the other, I led the way through the ship to the after hold. Feet thundered on the deck overhead, and curses and shouts rang through the night, overlaid with a dreadful groaning, scraping noise that I thought must be caused by the rubbing of the *Artemis*'s timbers against those of the unknown ship that had rammed us.

The hold was black as pitch and thick with dusty fumes. We made our way slowly, coughing, toward the back of the hold.

"Who are they?" Marsali asked. Her voice had a strangely muffled sound, the echoes of the hold deadened by the blocks of guano stacked around us. "Pirates, d'ye think?"

"I expect they must be." Lawrence had told us that the Caribbean was a rich hunting ground for pirate luggers and unscrupulous craft of all kinds, but we had expected no trouble, as our cargo was not particularly valuable. "I suppose they must not have much sense of smell."

"Eh?"

"Never mind," I said. "Come sit down; there's nothing we can do but wait."

I knew from experience that waiting while men fought was one of the most difficult things in life to do, but in this case, there wasn't any sensible alternative.

Down here, the sounds of the battle were muted to a distant thumping, though the constant rending groan of the scraping timbers echoed through the whole ship.

"Oh, God, Fergus," Marsali whispered, listening, her voice filled with agony. "Blessed Mary, save him!"

I silently echoed the prayer, thinking of Jamie, somewhere in the chaos overhead. I crossed myself in the dark, touching the small spot between my brows that he had kissed a few minutes before, not wanting to think that it could so easily be the last touch of him I would ever know.

Suddenly, there was an explosion overhead, a roar that sent vibrations through the jutting timbers we were sitting on.

"They're blowing up the ship!" Marsali jumped to her feet, panicked.

"They'll sink us! We must get out! We'll drown down here!"

"Wait!" I called. "It's only the guns!" but she had not waited to hear. I could hear her, blundering about in a blind panic, whimpering among the blocks of guano.

"Marsali! Come back!" There was no light at all in the hold; I took a few steps through the smothering atmosphere, trying to locate her by sound, but the deadening effect of the crumbling blocks hid her movements from me. There was another booming explosion overhead, and a third close on its heels. The air was filled with dust loosed from the vibrations, and I choked, eyes watering.

I wiped at my eyes with a sleeve, and blinked. I was not imagining it; there was a light in the hold, a dim glow that limned the edge of the nearest block.

"Marsali?" I called. "Where are you?"

The answer was a terrified shriek, from the direction of the light. I dashed around the edge of the block, dodged between two others, and emerged into the space by the ladder, to find Marsali in the clutches of a large, half-naked man.

He was hugely obese, the rolling layers of his fat decorated with a stipple of tattoos, a jangling necklace of coins and buttons hung round his neck. Marsali slapped at him, shrieking, and he jerked his face away, impatient.

Then he caught sight of me, and his eyes widened. He had a wide, flat face, and a tarred topknot of black hair. He grinned nastily at me, showing a marked lack of teeth, and said something that sounded like slurred Spanish.

"Let her go!" I said loudly. *"Basta, cabrón!"* That was as much Spanish as I could summon; he seemed to think it funny, for he grinned more widely, let go of Marsali, and turned toward me. I threw one of my scalpels at him.

It bounced off his head, startling him, and he ducked wildly. Marsali dodged past him, and sprang for the ladder.

The pirate waffled for a moment, torn between us, but then turned to the ladder, leaping up several rungs with an agility that belied his weight. He caught Marsali by the foot as she dived through the hatch, and she screamed.

Cursing incoherently under my breath, I ran to the bottom of the ladder, and reaching up, swung the long-handled amputation knife at his foot, as hard as I could. There was a high-pitched screech from the pirate. Something flew past my head, and a spray of blood spattered across my cheek, wet-hot on my skin.

Startled, I dropped back, looking down by reflex to see what had fallen. It was a small brown toe, calloused and black-nailed, smudged with dirt.

The pirate hit the deck beside me with a thud that shivered the floorboards, and lunged. I ducked, but he caught a handful of my sleeve. I yanked away, ripping fabric, and jabbed at his face with the blade in my hand.

Jerking back in surprise, he slipped on his own blood and fell. I jumped for the ladder and climbed for my life, dropping the blade.

He was so close behind me that he succeeded in catching hold of the hem of my skirt, but I pulled it from his grasp and lunged upward, lungs burning from the dust of the choking hold. The man was shouting, a language I didn’t know. Some dim recess of my brain, not occupied with immediate survival, speculated that it might be Portuguese.

I burst out of the hold onto the deck, into the midst of a surging chaos. The air was thick with black-powder smoke, and small knots of men were pushing and shoving, cursing and stumbling all over the deck.

I couldn’t take time to look around; there was a hoarse bellow from the hatchway behind me, and I dived for the rail. I hesitated for a moment, balanced on the narrow wooden strip. The sea spun past in a dizzy churn of black below. I grasped the rigging and began to climb.

It was a mistake; I knew that almost at once. He was a sailor, I was not. Neither was he hampered by wearing a dress. The ropes danced and jerked in my hands, vibrating under the impact of his weight as he hit the lines below me.

He was coming up the underside of the lines, climbing like a gibbon, even as I made my slower way across the upper slope of the rigging. He drew even with me, and spat in my face. I kept climbing, propelled by desperation; there was nothing else to do. He kept pace with me, easily, hissing words through an evil, half-toothed grin. It didn't matter what language he was speaking; his meaning was perfectly clear. Hanging by one hand, he drew the cutlass from his sash, and swung it in a vicious cut that barely missed me.

I was too frightened even to scream. There was nowhere to go, nothing to do. I squeezed my eyes tight shut, and hoped it would be quick.

It was. There was a sort of thump, a sharp grunt, and a strong smell of fish.

I opened my eyes. The pirate was gone. Ping An was sitting on the crosstrees, three feet away, crest erect with irritation, wings half-spread to keep his balance.

"Gwa!" he said crossly. He turned a beady little yellow eye on me, and clacked his bill in warning. Ping An hated noise and commotion. Evidently, he didn't like Portuguese pirates, either.

There were spots before my eyes, and I felt light-headed. I clung tight to the rope, shaking, until I thought I could move again. The noise below had slackened now, and the tenor of the shouting had changed. Something had happened; I thought it was over.

There was a new noise, a sudden flap of sails, and a long, grinding sound, with a vibration that made the line I was holding sing in my hand. It *was* over; the pirate ship was moving away. On the far side of the *Artemis,* I saw the web of the pirate's mast and rigging begin to move, black against the silver Caribbean sky. Very, very slowly, I began the long trip back down.

The lanterns were still lit below. A haze of black-powder smoke lay over everything, and bodies lay here and there about the deck. My glance flickered over them as I lowered myself, searching for red hair. I found it, and my heart leapt.

Jamie was sitting on a cask near the wheel, with his head tilted back, eyes closed, a cloth pressed to his brow, and a cup of whisky in his hand. Mr. Willoughby was on his knees alongside, administering first aid—in the form of more whisky—to Willie MacLeod, who sat against the foremast, looking sick.

I was shaking all over from exertion and reaction. I felt giddy and slightly cold. Shock, I supposed, and no wonder. I could do with a bit of that whisky as well.

I grasped the smaller lines above the rail, and slid the rest of the way to the deck, not caring that my palms were skinned raw. I was sweating and cold at the same time, and the down-hairs on my face were prickling unpleasantly.

I landed clumsily, with a thump that made Jamie straighten up and open his eyes. The look of relief in them pulled me the few feet to him. I felt better, with the warm solid flesh of his shoulder under my hand.

“Are you all right?” I said, leaning over him to look.

“Aye, it’s no more than a wee dunt,” he said, smiling up at me. There was a small gash at his hairline, where something like a pistol butt had caught him, but the blood had clotted already. There were stains of dark, drying blood on the front of his shirt, but the sleeve of his shirt was also bloody. In fact, it was nearly soaked, with fresh bright red.

“Jamie!” I clutched at his shoulder, my vision going white at the edges. “You aren’t all right—look, you’re bleeding!”

My hands and feet were numb, and I only half-felt his hands grasp my arms as he rose from the cask in sudden alarm. The last thing I saw, amid flashes of light, was his face, gone white beneath the tan.

“My God!” said his frightened voice, out of the whirling blackness. “It’s no my blood, Sassenach, it’s yours!”

"I am not going to die," I said crossly, "unless it's from heat exhaustion. Take some of this bloody stuff off me!"

Marsali, who had been tearfully pleading with me not to expire, looked rather relieved at this outburst. She stopped crying and sniffed hopefully, but made no move to remove any of the cloaks, coats, blankets, and other impedimenta in which I was swaddled.

"Oh, I canna do that, Mother Claire!" she said. "Da says ye must be kept warm!"

"Warm? I'm being boiled alive!" I was in the captain's cabin, and even with the stern windows wide open, the atmosphere belowdecks was stifling, hot with sun and acrid with the fumes of the cargo.

I tried to struggle out from under my wrappings, but got no more than a few inches before a bolt of lightning struck me in the right arm. The world went dark, with small bright flashes zigging through my vision.

"Lie still," said a stern Scots voice, through a wave of giddy sickness. An arm was under my shoulders, a large hand cradling my head. "Aye, that's right, lie back on my arm. All right now, Sassenach?"

"No," I said, looking at the colored pinwheels inside my eyelids. "I'm going to be sick."

I was, and a most unpleasant process it was, too, with fiery knives being jabbed into my right arm with each spasm.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said at last, gasping.

"Finished, are ye?" Jamie lowered me carefully and eased my head back onto the pillow.

"If you mean am I dead, the answer is unfortunately no." I cracked one eyelid open. He was kneeling by my berth, looking no end piratical himself, with a bloodstained strip of cloth bound round his head, and still wearing his blood-soaked shirt.

He stayed still, and so did the cabin, so I cautiously opened the other eye. He smiled faintly at me.

"No, you're no dead; Fergus will be glad to hear it."

As though this had been a signal, the Frenchman's head poked anxiously into the cabin. Seeing me awake, his face broke into a dazzling smile and disappeared. I could hear his voice overhead, loudly informing the crew of my survival. To my profound embarrassment, the news was greeted with a rousing cheer from the upper deck.

"What happened?" I asked.

"What *happened*?" Jamie, pouring water into a cup, stopped and stared over the rim at me. He knelt down again beside me, snorting, and raised my head for a sip of water.

"What happened, she says! Aye, what indeed? I tell ye to stay all snug below wi' Marsali, and next thing I ken, ye've dropped out of the sky and landed at my feet, sopping wi' blood!"

He shoved his face into the berth and glared at me. Sufficiently impressive when clean-shaven and unhurt, he was considerably more ferocious when viewed, stubbled, bloodstained, and angry, at a distance of six inches. I promptly shut my eyes again.

"Look at me!" he said peremptorily, and I did, against my better judgment.

Blue eyes bored into mine, narrowed with fury.

"D'ye ken ye came damn close to dying?" he demanded. "Ye've a bone-deep slash down your arm from oxter to elbow, and had I not got a cloth round it in time, ye'd be feeding the sharks this minute!"

One big fist crashed down on the side of the berth next to me, making me start. The movement hurt my arm, but I didn't make a sound.

"Damn ye, woman! Will ye never do as you're told?"

"Probably not," I said meekly.

He turned a black scowl on me, but I could see the corner of his mouth twitching under the copper stubble.

"God," he said longingly. "What I wouldna give to have ye tied facedown over a gun, and me wi' a rope's end in my hand." He snorted again, and pulled his face out of the berth.

"Willoughby!" he bellowed. In short order, Mr. Willoughby trotted in, beaming, with a steaming pot of tea and a bottle of brandy on a tray.

"Tea!" I breathed, struggling to sit up. "Ambrosia." In spite of the stifling atmosphere of the cabin, the hot tea was just what I needed.

The delightful, brandy-laced stuff slid down my throat and glowed peacefully in the pit of my quivering stomach.

"Nobody makes tea better than the English," I said, inhaling the aroma, "except the Chinese."

Mr. Willoughby beamed in gratification and bowed ceremoniously. Jamie snorted again, bringing his total up to three for the afternoon.

"Aye? Well, enjoy it while ye can."

This sounded more or less sinister, and I stared at him over the rim of the cup. "And just what do you mean by that?" I demanded.

"I'm going to doctor your arm when you're finished," he informed me. He picked up the pot and peered into it.

"How much blood did ye tell me a person has in his body?" he asked.

"About eight quarts," I said, bewildered. "Why?"

He lowered the pot and glared at me.

"Because," he said precisely, "judging from the amount ye left on the deck, you've maybe four of them left. Here, have some more." He refilled the cup, set down the pot, and stalked out.

"I'm afraid Jamie's rather annoyed with me," I observed ruefully to Mr. Willoughby.

"Not angry," he said comfortingly. "Tsei-mi scared very bad." The little Chinaman laid a hand on my right shoulder, delicate as a resting butterfly.

"This hurts?"

I sighed. "To be perfectly honest," I said, "yes, it does."

Mr. Willoughby smiled and patted me gently. "I help," he said consolingly. "Later."

In spite of the throbbing in my arm, I was feeling sufficiently restored to inquire about the rest of the crew, whose injuries, as reported by Mr. Willoughby, were limited to cuts and bruises, plus one concussion and a minor arm fracture.

A clatter in the passage heralded Jamie's return, accompanied by Fergus, who carried my medicine box under one arm, and yet another bottle of brandy in his hand.

"All right," I said, resigned. "Let's have a look at it."

I was no stranger to horrible wounds, and this one—technically speaking—was not all that bad. On the other hand, it was my own personal flesh involved here, and I was not disposed to be technical.

"Ooh," I said rather faintly. While being a bit picturesque about the nature of the wound, Jamie had also been quite accurate. It was a long, clean-edged slash, running at a slight angle across the front of my biceps, from the shoulder to an inch or so above the elbow joint. And while I couldn't actually see the bone of my humerus, it was without doubt a very deep wound, gaping widely at the edges.

It was still bleeding, in spite of the cloth that had been wrapped tightly round it, but the seepage was slow; no major vessels seemed to have been severed.

Jamie had flipped open my medical box and was rootling meditatively through it with one large forefinger.

"You'll need sutures and a needle," I said, feeling a sudden jolt of alarm as it occurred to me that I was about to have thirty or forty stitches taken in my arm, with no anesthesia bar brandy.

"No laudanum?" Jamie asked, frowning into the box. Evidently, he had been thinking along the same lines.

"No. I used it all on the *Porpoise*." Controlling the shaking of my left hand, I poured a sizable tot of straight brandy into my empty teacup, and took a healthy mouthful.

"That was thoughtful of you, Fergus," I said, nodding at the fresh brandy bottle as I sipped, "but I don't think it's going to take *two* bottles." Given the potency of Jared's French brandy, it was unlikely to take more than a teacupful.

I was wondering whether it was more advisable to get dead drunk at once, or to stay at least half-sober in order to supervise operations; there wasn't a chance in hell that I could do the suturing myself, left-handed and shaking like a leaf. Neither could Fergus do it one-handed. True, Jamie's big hands could move with amazing lightness over some tasks, but …

Jamie interrupted my apprehensions, shaking his head and picking up the second bottle.

"This one's no for drinking, Sassenach, that's for washing out the wound."

"What!" In my state of shock, I had forgotten the necessity for disinfection. Lacking anything better, I normally washed out wounds with distilled grain alcohol, cut half and half with water, but I had used my supply of that as well, in our encounter with the man-of-war.

I felt my lips go slightly numb, and not just because the internal brandy was taking effect. Highlanders were among the most stoic and courageous of warriors, and seamen as a class weren't far behind. I had seen such men lie uncomplaining while I set broken bones, did minor surgery, sewed up terrible wounds, and put them through hell generally, but when it came to disinfection with alcohol, it was a different story—the screams could be heard for miles.

"Er … wait a minute," I said. "Maybe just a little boiled water.…"

Jamie was watching me, not without sympathy.

"It willna get easier wi' waiting, Sassenach," he said. "Fergus, take the bottle." And before I could protest, he had lifted me out of the berth and sat down with me on his lap, holding me tight about the body, pinning my left arm so I couldn't struggle, while he took my right wrist in a firm grip and held my wounded arm out to the side.

I believe it was bloody old Ernest Hemingway who said you're supposed to pass out from pain, but unfortunately you never do. All I can say in response to that is that either Ernest had a fine distinction for states of consciousness, or else no one ever poured brandy on several cubic inches of *his* raw flesh.

To be fair, I suppose I must not absolutely have lost consciousness myself, since when I began noticing things again, Fergus was saying, "Please, milady! You must not scream like that; it upsets the men."

Clearly it upset Fergus; his lean face was pale, and droplets of sweat ran down his jaw. He was right about the men, too—several faces were peering into the cabin from door and window, wearing expressions of horror and concern.

I summoned the presence of mind to nod weakly at them. Jamie's arm was still locked about my middle; I couldn't tell which of us was shaking; both, I thought.

I made it into the wide captain's chair, with considerable assistance, and lay back palpitating, the fire in my arm still sizzling. Jamie was holding one of my curved suture needles and a length of sterilized cat-gut, looking as dubious over the prospects as I felt.

It was Mr. Willoughby who intervened, quietly taking the needle from Jamie's hands.

"I can do this," he said, in tones of authority. "A moment." And he disappeared aft, presumably to fetch something.

Jamie didn't protest, and neither did I. We heaved twin sighs of relief, in fact, which made me laugh.

"And to think," I said, "I once told Bree that big men were kind and gentle, and the short ones tended to be nasty."

"Well, I suppose there's always the exception that proves the rule, no?" He mopped my streaming face with a wet cloth, quite gently.

"I dinna want to know how ye did this," he said, with a sigh, "but for God's sake, Sassenach, don't do it again!"

"Well, I didn't *intend* to do anything …" I began crossly, when I was interrupted by the return of Mr. Willoughby. He was carrying the little roll of green silk I had seen when he cured Jamie's seasickness.

"Oh, ye've got the wee stabbers?" Jamie peered interestedly at the small gold needles, then smiled at me. "Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach, they don't hurt … or not much, anyway," he added.

Mr. Willoughby's fingers probed the palm of my right hand, prodding here and there. Then he grasped each of my fingers, wiggled it, and pulled it gently, so that I felt the joints pop slightly. Then he laid two fingers at the base of my wrist, pressing down in the space between the radius and the ulna.

"This is the Inner Gate," he said softly. "Here is quiet. Here is peace." I sincerely hoped he was right. Picking up one of the tiny gold needles, he placed the point over the spot he had marked, and with a dexterous twirl of thumb and forefinger, pierced the skin.

The prick made me jump, but he kept a tight, warm hold on my hand, and I relaxed again.

He placed three needles in each wrist, and a rakish, porcupine-like spray on the crest of my right shoulder. I was getting interested, despite my guinea pig status. Beyond an initial prick at placement, the needles caused no discomfort. Mr. Willoughby was humming, in a low, soothing sort of way, tapping and pressing places on my neck and shoulder.

I couldn't honestly tell whether my right arm was numbed, or whether I was simply distracted by the goings-on, but it did feel somewhat less agonized—at least until he picked up the suture needle and began.

Jamie was sitting on a stool by my left side, holding my left hand as he watched my face. After a moment, he said, rather gruffly, "Let your breath out, Sassenach; it's no going to get any worse than that."

I let go of the breath I hadn't realized I was holding, and realized as well what he was telling me. It was dread of being hurt that had me rigid as a board in the chair. The actual pain of the stitches was unpleasant, all right, but nothing I couldn't stand.

I let my breath out cautiously, and gave him a rough approximation of a smile. Mr. Willoughby was singing under his breath in Chinese. Jamie had translated the words for me a week earlier; it was a pillow-song, in which a young man catalogued the physical charms of his partner, one by one. I hoped he would finish the stitching before he got to her feet.

"That's a verra wicked slash," Jamie said, eyes on Mr. Willoughby's work. I preferred not to look myself. "A parang, was it, or a cutlass, I wonder?"

"I think it was a cutlass," I said. "In fact, I know it was. He came after …"

"I wonder what led them to attack us," Jamie said, not paying any attention to me. His brows were drawn in speculation. "It canna ha' been the cargo, after all."

"I shouldn't think so," I said. "But maybe they didn't know what we were carrying?" This seemed grossly unlikely; any ship that came within a hundred yards of us would have known—the ammoniac reek of bat guano hovered round us like a miasma.

"Perhaps it's only they thought the ship small enough to take. The *Artemis* itself would bring a fair price, cargo or no."

I blinked as Mr. Willoughby paused in his song to tie a knot. I thought he was down to the navel by now, but wasn't paying close attention.

"Do we know the name of the pirate ship?" I asked. "Granted, there's likely a lot of pirates in these waters, but we do know that the *Bruja* was in this area three days ago, and—"

"That's what I'm wondering," he said. "I couldna see a great deal in the darkness, but she was the right size, wi' that wide Spanish beam."

"Well, the pirate that was after me spoke—" I started, but the sound of voices in the corridor made me stop.

Fergus edged in, shy of interrupting, but obviously bursting with excitement. He held something shiny and jingling in one hand.

"Milord," he said, "Maitland has found a dead pirate on the forward deck."

Jamie's red brows went up, and he looked from Fergus to me.

"Dead?"

"Very dead, milord," said Fergus, with a small shudder. Maitland was peeking over his shoulder, anxious to claim his share of the glory. "Oh, yes, sir," he assured Jamie earnestly. "Dead as a doornail; his poor head's bashed in something shocking!"

All three men turned and stared at me. I gave them a modest little smile.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face. His eyes were bloodshot, and a trickle of blood had dried in front of his ear.

"Sassenach," he began, in measured tones.

"I tried to tell you," I said virtuously. Between shock, brandy, acupuncture, and the dawning realization of survival, I was beginning to feel quite pleasantly light-headed. I scarcely noticed Mr. Willoughby's final efforts.

"He was wearing this, milord." Fergus stepped forward and laid the pirate's necklace on the table in front of us. It had the silver buttons from a military uniform, polished *kona* nuts, several large shark's teeth, pieces of polished abalone shell and chunks of mother of pearl, and a large number of jingling coins, all pierced for stringing on a leather thong.

“I thought you should see this at once, milord,” Fergus continued. He reached out a hand and lifted one of the shimmering coins. It was silver, untarnished, and through the gathering brandy haze, I could see on its face the twin heads of Alexander. A tetradrachm, of the fourth century B.C. Mint condition.

* * *

Thoroughly worn out by the events of the afternoon, I had fallen asleep at once, the pain in my arm dulled by brandy. Now it was full dark, and the brandy had worn off. My arm seemed to swell and throb with each beat of my heart, and any small movement sent tiny jabs of a sharper pain whipping through my arm, like warning flicks of a scorpion’s tail.

The moon was three-quarters full, a huge lopsided shape like a golden teardrop, hanging just above the horizon. The ship heeled slightly, and the moon slid slowly out of sight, the Man in the Moon leering rather unpleasantly as he went. I was hot, and possibly a trifle feverish.

There was a jug of water in the cupboard on the far side of the cabin. I felt weak and giddy as I swung my feet over the edge of the berth, and my arm registered a strong protest against being disturbed. I must have made some sound, for the darkness on the floor of the cabin stirred suddenly, and Jamie’s voice came drowsily from the region of my feet.

“Are ye hurting, Sassenach?”

“A little,” I said, not wanting to be dramatic about it. I set my lips and rose unsteadily to my feet, cradling my right elbow in my left hand.

“That’s good,” he said.

“That’s *good*?” I said, my voice rising indignantly.

There was a soft chuckle from the darkness, and he sat up, his head popping suddenly into sight as it rose above the shadows into the moonlight.

“Aye, it is,” he said. “When a wound begins to hurt ye, it means it’s healing. Ye didna feel it when it happened, did you?”

“No,” I admitted. I certainly felt it now. The air was a good deal cooler out on the open sea, and the salt wind coming through the window felt good on my face. I was damp and sticky with sweat, and the thin chemise clung to my breasts.

"I could see ye didn't. That's what frightened me. Ye never feel a fatal wound, Sassenach," he said softly.

I laughed shortly, but cut it off as the movement jarred my arm.

"And how do you know that?" I asked, fumbling left-handed to pour water into a cup. "Not the sort of thing you'd learn firsthand, I mean."

"Murtagh told me."

The water seemed to purl soundlessly into the cup, the sound of its pouring lost in the hiss of the bow-wave outside. I set down the jug and lifted the cup, the surface of the water black in the moonlight. Jamie had never mentioned Murtagh to me, in the months of our reunion. I had asked Fergus, who told me that the wiry little Scot had died at Culloden, but he knew no more than the bare fact.

"At Culloden." Jamie's voice was barely loud enough to be heard above the creak of timber and the whirring of the wind that bore us along. "Did ye ken they burnt the bodies there? I wondered, listening to them do it—what it would be like inside the fire when it came my turn." I could hear him swallow, above the creaking of the ship. "I found that out, this morning."

The moonlight robbed his face of depth and color; he looked like a skull, with the broad, clean planes of cheek and jawbone white and his eyes black empty pits.

"I went to Culloden meaning to die," he said, his voice scarcely more than a whisper. "Not the rest of them. I should have been happy to stop a musket ball at once, and yet I cut my way across the field and halfway back, while men on either side o' me were blown to bloody bits." He stood up, then, looking down at me.

"Why?" he said. "Why, Claire? Why am I alive, and they are not?"

"I don't know," I said softly. "For your sister, and your family, maybe? For me?"

"They had families," he said. "Wives, and sweethearts; children to mourn them. And yet they are gone. And I am still here."

"I don't know, Jamie," I said at last. I touched his cheek, already roughened by newly sprouting beard, irrepressible evidence of life. "You aren't ever going to know."

He sighed, his cheekbone pressed against my palm for a moment.

"Aye, I ken that well enough. But I canna help the asking, when I think of them—especially Murtagh." He turned restlessly away, his eyes empty shadows, and I knew he walked Drumossie Moor again, with the ghosts.

"We should have gone sooner; the men had been standing for hours, starved and half-frozen. But they waited for His Highness to give the order to charge."

And Charles Stuart, perched safely on a rock, well behind the line of battle, having seized personal command of his troops for the first time, had dithered and delayed. And the English cannon had had time to bear squarely on the lines of ragged Highlanders, and opened fire.

"It was a relief, I think," Jamie said softly. "Every man on the field knew the cause was lost, and we were dead. And still we stood there, watching the English guns come up, and the cannon mouths open black before us. No one spoke. I couldna hear anything but the wind, and the English soldiers shouting, on the other side of the field."

And then the guns had roared, and men had fallen, and those still standing, rallied by a late and ragged order, had seized their swords and charged the enemy, the sound of their Gaelic shrieking drowned by the guns, lost in the wind.

"The smoke was so thick, I couldna see more than a few feet before me. I kicked off my shoon and ran into it, shouting." The bloodless line of his lips turned up slightly.

"I was happy," he said, sounding a bit surprised. "Not scairt at all. I meant to die, after all; there was nothing to fear except that I might be wounded and not die at once. But I would die, and then it would be all over, and I would find ye again, and it would be all right."

I moved closer to him, and his hand rose up from the shadows to take mine.

"Men fell to either side of me, and I could hear the grapeshot and the musket balls hum past my head like bumblebees. But I wasna touched."

He had reached the British lines unscathed, one of very few Highlanders to have completed the charge across Culloden Moor. An English gun crew looked up, startled, at the tall Highlander who burst from the smoke like a demon, the blade of his broadsword gleaming with rain and then dull with blood.

"There was a small part of my mind that asked why I should be killin' them," he said reflectively. "For surely I knew that we were lost; there was no gain to it. But there is a lust to killing—you'll know that?" His fingers tightened on mine, questioning, and I squeezed back in affirmation.

"I couldna stop—or I would not." His voice was quiet, without bitterness or recrimination. "It's a verra old feeling, I think; the wish to take an enemy with ye to the grave. I could feel it there, a hot red thing in my chest and belly, and … I gave myself to it," he ended simply.

There were four men tending the cannon, none armed with more than a pistol and knife, none expecting attack at such close quarters. They stood helpless against the berserk strength of his despair, and he killed them all.

"The ground shook under my feet," he said, "and I was near deafened by the noise. I couldna think. And then it came to me that I was behind the English guns." A soft chuckle came from below. "A verra poor place to try to be killed, no?"

So he had started back across the moor, to join the Highland dead.

"He was sitting against a tussock near the middle of the field—Murtagh. He'd been struck a dozen times at least, and there was a dreadful wound in his head—I knew he was dead."

He hadn't been, though; when Jamie had fallen to his knees beside his godfather and taken the small body in his arms, Murtagh's eyes had opened. "He saw me. And he smiled." And then the older man's hand had touched his cheek briefly. "Dinna be afraid, *a bhalaich,*" Murtagh had said, using the endearment for a small, beloved boy. "It doesna hurt a bit to die."

I stood quietly for a long time, holding Jamie's hand. Then he sighed, and his other hand closed very, very gently about my wounded arm.

"Too many folk have died, Sassenach, because they knew me—or suffered for the knowing. I would give my own body to save ye a moment's pain—and yet I could wish to close my hand just now, that I might hear ye cry out and know for sure that I havena killed you, too."

I leaned forward, pressing a kiss on the skin of his chest. He slept naked in the heat.

"You haven't killed me. You didn't kill Murtagh. And we'll find Ian. Take me back to bed, Jamie."

Sometime later, as I drowsed on the edge of sleep, he spoke from the floor beside my bed.

"Ye know, I seldom wanted to go home to Laoghaire," he said contemplatively. "And yet, at least when I did, I'd find her where I'd left her."

I turned my head to the side, where his soft breathing came from the darkened floor. "Oh? And is that the kind of wife you want? The sort who stays put?"

He made a small sound between a chuckle and a cough, but didn't answer, and after a few moments, the sound of his breathing changed to a soft, rhythmic snore.

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ISHMAEL

I slept restlessly, and woke up late and feverish, with a throbbing headache just behind my eyes. I felt ill enough not to protest when Marsali insisted on bathing my forehead, but relaxed gratefully, eyes closed, enjoying the cool touch of the vinegar-soaked cloth on my pounding temples.

It was so soothing, in fact, that I drifted off to sleep again after she left. I was dreaming uneasily of dark mine shafts and the chalk of charred bones, when I was suddenly roused by a crash that brought me bolt upright and sent a shaft of pure white pain ripping through my head.

"What?" I exclaimed, clutching my head in both hands, as though this might prevent it falling off. "What is it?" The window had been covered to keep the light from disturbing me, and it took a moment for my stunned vision to adapt to the dimness.

On the opposite side of the cabin, a large figure was mimicking me, clutching its own head in apparent agony. Then it spoke, releasing a volley of very bad language, in a mixture of Chinese, French, and Gaelic.

"Damn!" it said, the exclamations tapering off into milder English. "Goddamn it to hell!" Jamie staggered to the window, still rubbing the head he had smashed on the edge of my cupboard. He shoved aside the covering and pushed the window open, bringing a welcome draft of fresh air in along with a dazzle of light.

"What in the name of bloody hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded, with considerable asperity. The light jabbed my tender eyeballs like needles, and the movement involved in clutching my head had done the stitches in my arm no good at all.

"I was looking for your medicine box," he replied, wincing as he felt the crown of his head. "Damn, I've caved in my skull. Look at that!" He thrust two fingers, slightly smeared with blood, under my nose. I dropped the vinegar-soaked cloth over the fingers and collapsed back on my pillow.

"Why do you need the medicine box, and why didn't you ask me in the first place, instead of bumping around like a bee in a bottle?" I said irritably.

"I didna want to wake ye from your sleep," he said, sheepishly enough that I laughed, despite the various throbbings going on in my anatomy.

"That's all right; I wasn't enjoying it," I assured him. "Why do you need the box? Is someone hurt?"

"Aye. I am," he said, dabbing gingerly at the top of his head with the cloth and scowling at the result. "Ye dinna want to look at my head?"

The answer to this was "Not especially," but I obligingly motioned to him to bend over, presenting the top of his head for inspection. There was a reasonably impressive lump under the thick hair, with a small cut from the edge of the shelf, but the damage seemed a bit short of concussion.

"It's not fractured," I assured him. "You have the thickest skull I've ever seen." Moved by an instinct as old as motherhood, I leaned forward and kissed the bump gently. He lifted his head, eyes wide with surprise.

"That's supposed to make it feel better," I explained. A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth.

"Oh. Well, then." He bent down and gently kissed the bandage on my wounded arm.

"Better?" he inquired, straightening up.

"Lots."

He laughed, and reaching for the decanter, poured out a tot of whisky, which he handed to me.

"I wanted that stuff ye use to wash out scrapes and such," he explained, pouring another for himself.

"Hawthorn lotion. I haven't got any ready-made, because it doesn't keep," I said, pushing myself upright. "If it's urgent, though, I can brew some; it doesn't take long." The thought of getting up and walking to the galley was daunting, but perhaps I'd feel better once I was moving.

"Not urgent," he assured me. "It's only there's a prisoner in the hold who's a bit bashed about."

I lowered my cup, blinking at him.

"A prisoner? Where did we get a prisoner?"

"From the pirate ship." He frowned at his whisky. "Though I dinna think he's a pirate."

"What is he?"

He tossed off the whisky neatly, in one gulp, and shook his head.

"Damned if I know. From the scars on his back, likely a runaway slave, but in that case, I canna think why he did what he did."

"What did he do?"

"Dived off the *Bruja* into the sea. MacGregor saw him go, and then after the *Bruja* made sail, he saw the man bobbing about in the waves and threw him a rope."

"Well, that is funny; why should he do that?" I asked. I was becoming interested, and the throbbing in my head seemed to be lessening as I sipped my whisky.

Jamie ran his fingers through his hair, and stopped, wincing.

"I dinna ken, Sassenach," he said, gingerly smoothing the hair on his crown flat. "It wouldna be likely for a crew like ours to try to board the pirate—any merchant would just fight them off; there's no reason to try to take them. But if he didna mean to escape from us—perhaps he meant to escape from them, aye?"

The last golden drops of the whisky ran down my throat. It was Jared's special blend, the next-to-last bottle, and thoroughly justified the name he had given it—*Ceò Gheasacach*. "Magic Mist." Feeling somewhat restored, I pushed myself upright.

"If he's hurt, perhaps I should take a look at him," I suggested, swinging my feet out of the berth.

Given Jamie's behavior of the day before, I fully expected him to press me flat and call for Marsali to come and sit on my chest. Instead, he looked at me thoughtfully, and nodded.

"Aye, well. If ye're sure ye can stand, Sassenach?"

I wasn't all that sure, but gave it a try. The room tilted when I stood up, and black and yellow spots danced before my eyes, but I stayed upright, clinging to Jamie's arm. After a moment, a small amount of blood reluctantly consented to reenter my head, and the spots went away, showing Jamie's face looking anxiously down at me.

"All right," I said, taking a deep breath. "Carry on."

The prisoner was below in what the crew called the orlop, a lower-deck space full of miscellaneous cargo. There was a small timbered area, walled off at the bow of the ship, that sometimes housed drunk or unruly seamen, and here he had been secured.

It was dark and airless down in the bowels of the ship, and I felt myself becoming dizzy again as I made my way slowly along the companionway behind Jamie and the glow of his lantern.

When he unlocked the door, at first I saw nothing at all in the makeshift brig. Then, as Jamie stooped to enter with his lantern, the shine of the man's eyes betrayed his presence. "Black as the ace of spades" was the first thought that popped into my slightly addled mind, as the edges of face and form took shape against the darkness of the timbers.

No wonder Jamie had thought him a runaway slave. The man looked African, not island-born. Besides the deep red-black of his skin, his demeanor wasn't that of a man raised as a slave. He was sitting on a cask, hands bound behind his back and feet tied together, but I saw his head rise and his shoulders straighten as Jamie ducked under the lintel of the tiny space. He was very thin, but very muscular, clad in nothing but a ragged pair of trousers. The lines of his body were clear; he was tensed for attack or defense, but not submission.

Jamie saw it, too, and motioned me to stay well back against the wall. He placed the lantern on a cask, and squatted down before the captive, at eye-level.

"Amiki," he said, spreading out his empty hands, palm up. *"Amiki. Bene-bene."* Friend. Is good. It was taki-taki, the all-purpose pidgin polyglot that the traders from Barbados to Trinidad spoke in the ports.

The man stared impassively at Jamie for a moment, eyes still as tide pools. Then one eyebrow flicked up and he extended his bound feet before him.

"Bene-bene, amiki?" he said, with an ironic intonation that couldn't be missed, whatever the language. Is good, friend?

Jamie snorted briefly, amused, and rubbed a finger under his nose.

"It's a point," he said in English.

"Does he speak English, or French?" I moved a little closer. The captive's eyes rested on me for a moment, then passed away, indifferent.

"If he does, he'll no admit it. Picard and Fergus tried talking to him last night. He willna say a word, just stares at them. What he just said is the first he's spoken since he came aboard. *¿Habla Español?*" he said suddenly to the prisoner. There was no response. The man didn't even look at Jamie; just went on staring impassively at the square of open doorway behind me.

"Er, *sprechen sie Deutsche*?" I said tentatively. He didn't answer, which was just as well, as the question had exhausted my own supply of German. "*Nicht* Hollander, either, I don't suppose."

Jamie shot me a sardonic look. "I canna tell much about him, Sassenach, but I'm fairly sure he's no a Dutchman."

"They have slaves on Eleuthera, don't they? That's a Dutch island," I said irritably. "Or St. Croix—that's Danish, isn't it?" Slowly as my mind was working this morning, it hadn't escaped me that the captive was our only clue to the pirates' whereabouts—and the only frail link to Ian. "Do you know enough taki-taki to ask him about Ian?"

Jamie shook his head, eyes intent on the prisoner. "No. Besides what I said to him already, I ken how to say '*not* good,' 'how much?' 'give it to me,' and 'drop that, ye bastard,' none of which seems a great deal to the point at present."

Stymied for the moment, we stared at the prisoner, who stared impassively back.

"To hell with it," Jamie said suddenly. He drew the dirk from his belt, went behind the cask, and sawed through the thongs around the prisoner's wrists.

He cut the ankle bindings as well, then sat back on his heels, the knife laid across his thigh.

"Friend," he said firmly in taki-taki. "Is good?"

The prisoner didn't say anything, but after a moment, he nodded slightly, his expression warily quizzical.

"There's a chamber pot in the corner," Jamie said in English, rising and sheathing his dirk. "Use it, and then my wife will tend your wounds."

A very faint flicker of amusement crossed the man's face. He nodded once more, this time in acceptance of defeat. He rose slowly from the cask and turned, stiff hands fumbling at his trousers. I looked askance at Jamie.

"It's one of the worst things about being bound that way," he explained matter-of-factly. "Ye canna take a piss by yourself."

"I see," I said, not wanting to think about how he knew that.

"That, and the pain in your shoulders," he said. "Be careful touching him, Sassenach." The note of warning in his voice was clear, and I nodded. It wasn't the man's shoulders he was concerned about.

I still felt light-headed, and the stuffiness of the surroundings had made my headache throb again, but I was less battered than the prisoner, who had indeed been "bashed about" at some stage of the proceedings.

Bashed though he was, his injuries seemed largely superficial. A swollen knot rose on the man's forehead, and a deep scrape had left a crusted reddish patch on one shoulder. He was undoubtedly bruised in a number of places, but given the remarkably deep shade of his skin and the darkness of the surroundings, I couldn't tell where.

There were deep bands of rawness on ankles and wrists, where he had pulled against the thongs. I hadn't made any of the hawthorn lotion, but I had brought the jar of gentian salve. I eased myself down on the deck next to him, but he took no more notice of me than of the deck beneath his feet, even when I began to spread the cool blue cream on his wounds.

What was more interesting than the fresh injuries, though, were the healed ones. At close range, I could see the faint white lines of three parallel slashes, running across the slope of each cheekbone, and a series of three short vertical lines on the high, narrow forehead, just between his brows. Tribal scars. African-born for sure, then; such scars were made during manhood rituals, or so Murphy had told me.

His flesh was warm and smooth under my fingers, slicked with sweat. I felt warm, too; sweaty and unwell. The deck rose gently beneath me, and I put my hand on his back to keep my balance. The thin, tough lines of healed whipstrokes webbed his shoulders, like the furrows of tiny worms beneath his skin. The feel of them was unexpected; so much like the feel of the marks on Jamie's own back. I swallowed, feeling queasy, but went on with my doctoring.

The man ignored me completely, even when I touched spots I knew must be painful. His eyes were fixed on Jamie, who was watching the prisoner with equal intentness.

The problem was plain. The man was almost certainly a runaway slave. He hadn't wanted to speak to us, for fear that his speech would give away his owner's island, and that we would then find out his original owner and return him to captivity.

Now we knew that he spoke—or at least understood—English, it was bound to increase his wariness. Even if we assured him that it was not our intention either to return him to an owner or to enslave him ourselves, he was unlikely to trust us. I couldn't say that I blamed him, under the circumstances.

On the other hand, this man was our best—and possibly the only—chance of finding out what had happened to Ian Murray aboard the *Bruja*.

When at length I had bandaged the man's wrists and ankles, Jamie gave me a hand to rise, then spoke to the prisoner.

"You'll be hungry, I expect," he said. "Come along to the cabin, and we'll eat." Not waiting for a response, he took my good arm and turned to the door. There was silence behind us as we moved into the corridor, but when I looked back, the slave was there, following a few feet behind.

Jamie led us to my cabin, disregarding the curious glances of the sailors we passed, only stopping by Fergus long enough to order food to be sent from the galley.

"Back to bed with ye, Sassenach," he said firmly, when we reached the cabin. I didn't argue. My arm hurt, my head hurt, and I could feel little waves of heat flickering behind my eyes. It looked as though I would have to break down and use a little of the precious penicillin on myself, after all. There was still a chance that my body could throw off the infection, but I couldn't afford to wait too long.

Jamie had poured out a glass of whisky for me, and another for our guest. Still wary, the man accepted it, and took a sip, eyes widening in surprise. I supposed Scotch whisky must be a novelty to him.

Jamie took a glass for himself and sat down, motioning the slave to the other seat, across the small table.

"My name is Fraser," he said. "I am captain here. My wife," he added, with a nod toward my berth.

The prisoner hesitated, but then set down his glass with an air of decision.

"They be callin' me Ishmael," he said, in a voice like honey poured over coal. "I ain't no pirate. I be a cook."

"Murphy's going to like that," I remarked, but Jamie ignored me. There was a faint line between the ruddy brows, as he felt his way into the conversation.

"A ship's cook?" he asked, taking care to make his voice sound casual. Only the tap of his two stiff fingers against his thigh betrayed him—and that, only to me.

"No, mon, I don't got nothin' to do with that ship!" Ishmael was vehement. "They taken me off the shore, say they kill me, I don' go long by them, be easy. I ain't no pirate!" he repeated, and it dawned on me belatedly that of course he wouldn't wish to be taken for a pirate—whether he was one or not. Piracy was punishable by hanging, and he could have no way of knowing that we were as eager as he to stay clear of the Royal Navy.

"Aye, I see." Jamie hit the right balance, between soothing and skeptical. He leaned back slightly in the big wheel-backed chair. "And how did the *Bruja* come to take ye prisoner, then? Not where," he added quickly, as a look of alarm flitted across the prisoner's face.

"Ye needna tell me where ye came from; that's of no concern to me. Only I should care to know how ye came to fall into their hands, and how long ye've been with them. Since, as ye say, ye werena one of them." The hint was broad enough to spread butter on. We didn't mean to return him to his owner; however, if he didn't oblige with information, we might just turn him over to the Crown as a pirate.

The prisoner's eyes darkened; no fool, he had grasped the point at once. His head twitched briefly sideways, and his eyes narrowed.

"I be catchin' fish by the river," he said. "Big ship, he come sailin' up the river slow, little boats be pullin' him. Men in the little boat, they see me, holler out. I drop the fish, be runnin', but they close by. They men jump out, kotch me by the cane field, figure they take me to sell. Tha's all, mon." He shrugged, signaling the conclusion of his story.

"Aye, I see." Jamie's eyes were intent on the prisoner. He hesitated, wanting to ask where the river was, but not quite daring to, for fear the man would clam up again. "While ye were on the ship—did ye see any boys among the crew, or as prisoners, too? Boys, young men?"

The man's eyes widened slightly; he hadn't been expecting that. He paused warily, but then nodded, with a faintly derisive glint in his eye.

"Yes, mon, they have boys. Why? You be wantin' one?" His glance flicked to me and then back to Jamie, one eyebrow raised.

Jamie's head jerked, and a slight flush rose on his cheekbones at the implication.

"I do," he said levelly. "I am looking for a young kinsman who was taken by pirates. I should feel myself greatly obliged to anyone who might assist me in finding him." He lifted one eyebrow significantly.

The prisoner grunted slightly, his nostrils flaring.

"That so? What you be doin' for me, I be helpin' you fin' this boy?"

"I should set you ashore at any port of your choosing, with a fair sum in gold," Jamie replied. "But of course I should require proof that ye did have knowledge of my nephew's whereabouts, aye?"

"Huh." The prisoner was still wary, but beginning to relax. "You tell me, mon—what this boy be like?"

Jamie hesitated for a moment, studying the prisoner, but then shook his head.

"No," he said thoughtfully. "I dinna think that will work. *You* describe to *me* such lads as ye saw on the pirate vessel."

The prisoner eyed Jamie for a moment, then broke out in a low, rich laugh.

"You no particular fool, mon," he said. "You know that?"

"I know that," Jamie said dryly. "So long as ye know it as well. Tell me, then."

Ishmael snorted briefly, but complied, pausing only to refresh himself from the tray of food Fergus had brought. Fergus himself lounged against the door, watching the prisoner through half-lidded eyes.

"They be twelve boys talkin' strange, like you."

Jamie's eyebrows shot up, and he exchanged a glance of astonishment with me. Twelve?

"Like me?" He said. "White boys, English? Or Scots, d'ye mean?"

Ishmael shook his head in incomprehension; "Scot" was not in his vocabulary.

"Talkin' like dogs fightin'," he explained. "Grrrr! Wuff!" He growled, shaking his head in illustration like a dog worrying a rat, and I saw Fergus's shoulders shake in suppressed hilarity.

"Scots for sure," I said, trying not to laugh. Jamie shot me a brief dirty look, then returned his attention to Ishmael.

“Verra well, then,” he said, exaggerating his natural soft burr. “Twelve Scottish lads. What did they look like?”

Ishmael squinted dubiously, chewing a piece of mango from the tray. He wiped the juice from the corner of his mouth and shook his head.

“I only see them once, mon. Tell you all I see, though.” He closed his eyes and frowned, the vertical lines on his forehead drawing close together.

“Four boys be yellow-haired, six brown, two with black hair. Two shorter than me, one maybe the size that *griffone* there”—he nodded toward Fergus, who stiffened in outrage at the insult—“one big, not so big as you …”

“Aye, and how will they have been dressed?” Slowly, carefully, Jamie drew him through the descriptions, asking for details, demanding comparisons—how tall? how fat? what color eyes?—carefully concealing the direction of his interest as he drew the man further into conversation.

My head had stopped spinning, but the fatigue was still there, weighting my senses. I let my eyes close, obscurely soothed by the deep, murmuring voices. Jamie *did* sound rather like a big, fierce dog, I thought, with his soft growling burr and the abrupt, clipped sound of his consonants.

“Wuff,” I murmured under my breath, and my belly muscles quivered slightly under my folded hands.

Ishmael’s voice was just as deep, but smooth and low, rich as hot chocolate made with cream. I began to drift, lulled by the sound of it.

He sounded like Joe Abernathy, I thought drowsily, dictating an autopsy report—unvarnished and unappetizing physical details, related in a voice like a deep golden lullaby.

I could see Joe’s hands in memory, dark on the pale skin of an accident victim, moving swiftly as he made his verbal notes to the tape recorder.

“Deceased is a tall man, approximately six feet in height, and slender in build.…”

A tall man, slender.

"—that one, he bein' tall, bein' thin …"

I came awake suddenly, heart pounding, hearing the echo of Joe's voice coming from the table a few feet away.

"No!" I said, quite suddenly, and all three men stopped and looked at me in surprise. I pushed back the weight of my damp hair and waved weakly at them.

"Don't mind me; I was dreaming, I think."

They returned to their conversation, and I lay still, eyes half-closed, but no longer sleepy.

There was no physical resemblance. Joe was stocky and bearlike; this Ishmael slender and lean, though the swell of muscle over the curve of his shoulder suggested considerable strength.

Joe's face was broad and amiable; this man's narrow and wary-eyed, with a high forehead that made his tribal scars the more striking. Joe's skin was the color of fresh coffee, Ishmael's the deep red-black of a burning ember, which Stern had told me was characteristic of slaves from the Guinea coast—not so highly prized as the blue-black Senegalese, but more valuable than the yellow-brown Yaga and Congolese.

But if I closed my eyes entirely, I could hear Joe's voice speaking, even allowing for the faint Caribbean lilt of slave-English. I cracked my eyelids and looked carefully, searching for any signs of resemblance. There were none, but I did see what I had seen before, and not noticed, among the other scars and marks on the man's battered torso. What I had thought merely a scrape was in fact a deep abrasion that overlay a wide, flat scar, cut in the form of a rough square just below the point of the shoulder. The mark was raw and pink, newly healed. I should have seen it at once, if not for the darkness of the orlop, and the scrape that obscured it.

I lay quite still, trying to remember. "No *slave* name," Joe had said derisively, referring to his son's self-christening. Clearly, Ishmael had cut away an owner's brand, to prevent identification, should he be recaptured. But whose? And surely the name Ishmael was no more than coincidence.

Maybe not so farfetched a one, though; "Ishmael" almost certainly wasn't the man's real name. "They be *callin'* me Ishmael," he had said. That, too, was a slave name, given him by one owner or another. And if young Lenny had been climbing his family tree, as it seemed, what more likely than that he should have chosen one of his ancestors' given names in symbol? If. But if he was …

I lay looking up at the claustrophobic ceiling of the berth, suppositions spinning through my head. Whether this man had any link with Joe or not, the possibility had reminded me of something.

Jamie was catechizing the man about the personnel and structure of the *Bruja*—for so the ship that had attacked us had been—but I was paying no attention. I sat up, cautiously, so as not to make the dizziness worse, and signaled to Fergus.

"I need air," I said. "Help me up on deck, will you?" Jamie glanced at me with a hint of worry, but I smiled reassuringly at him, and took Fergus's arm.

"Where are the papers for that slave we bought on Barbados?" I demanded, as soon as we were out of earshot of the cabin. "And where's the slave, for that matter?"

Fergus looked at me curiously, but obligingly rummaged in his coat.

"I have the papers here, milady," he said, handing them to me. "As for the slave, I believe he is in the crew's quarters. Why?" he added, unable to restrain his curiosity.

I ignored the question, fumbling through the grubby, repellent bits of paper.

"There it is," I said, finding the bit I remembered Jamie reading to me. "Abernathy! It *was* Abernathy! Branded on the left shoulder with a fleur-de-lys. Did you notice that mark, Fergus?"

He shook his head, looking mildly bewildered.

"No, milady."

"Then come with me," I said, turning toward the crew's quarters. "I want to see how big it is."

The mark was about three inches long and three wide; a flower, surmounting the initial "A," burned into the skin a few inches below the point of the shoulder. It was the right size, and in the right place, to match the scar on the man Ishmael. It wasn't, however, a fleur-de-lys; that had been the mistake of a careless transcriber. It was a sixteen-petaled rose—the Jacobite emblem of Charles Stuart. I blinked at it in amazement; what patriotic exile had chosen this bizarre method of maintaining allegiance to the vanquished Stuarts?

"Milady, I think you should return to your bed," Fergus said. He was frowning at me as I stooped over Temeraire, who bore this inspection as stolidly as everything else. "You are the color of goose turds, and milord will not like it at all if I allow you to fall down on the deck."

"I won't fall down," I assured him. "And I don't care what color I am. I think we've just had a stroke of luck. Listen, Fergus, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything, milady," he said, grabbing me by the elbow as a shift in the wind sent me staggering across the suddenly tilting deck. "But not," he added firmly, "until you are safely back in your bed."

I allowed him to lead me back to the cabin, for I really didn't feel at all well, but not before giving him my instructions. As we entered the cabin, Jamie stood up from the table to greet us.

"There ye are, Sassenach! Are ye all right?" he asked, frowning down at me. "Ye've gone a nasty color, like a spoilt custard."

"I am perfectly fine," I said, through my teeth, easing myself down on the bunk to avoid jarring my arm. "Have you and Mr. Ishmael finished your conversation?"

Jamie glanced at the prisoner, and I saw the flat black gaze that locked with his. The atmosphere between them was not hostile, but it was charged in some way. Jamie nodded in dismissal.

"We've finished—for the moment," he said. He turned to Fergus. "See our guest below, will ye, Fergus, and see to it that he's fed and clothed?" He remained standing until Ishmael had left under Fergus's wing. Then he sat down beside my berth and squinted into the darkness at me.

"Ye look awful," he said. "Had I best fetch your kit and be feeding ye a wee tonic or somesuch?"

"No," I said. "Jamie, listen—I think I know where our friend Ishmael came from."

He lifted one brow.

"You do?"

I explained about the scar on Ishmael, and the almost matching brand on the slave Temeraire, without mentioning what had given me the idea in the first place.

"Five will get you ten that they came from the same place—from this Mrs. Abernathy's, on Jamaica." I said.

"Five will …? Och," he said, waving away my confusing reference in the interests of continuing the discussion. "Well, ye could be right, Sassenach, and I hope so. The wily black bastard wouldna say where he was from. Not that I can blame him," he added fairly. "God, if I'd got away from such a life, there's no power on earth would take me back!" He spoke with a surprising vehemence.

"No, I wouldn't blame him either," I said. "But what did he tell you, about the boys? Has he seen Young Ian?"

The frowning lines of his face relaxed.

"Aye, I'm almost sure he has." One fist curled on his knee in anticipation. "Two of the lads he described could be Ian. And knowin' it was the *Bruja,* I canna think otherwise. And if you're right about where he's come from, Sassenach, we might have him—we may find him at last!" Ishmael, while refusing to give any clue as to where the *Bruja* had picked him up, had gone so far as to say that the twelve boys—all prisoners—had been taken off the ship together, soon after his own capture.

"Twelve lads," Jamie repeated, his momentary look of excitement fading back into a frown. "What in the name of God would someone be wanting, to kidnap twelve lads from Scotland?"

"Perhaps he's a collector," I said, feeling more light-headed by the moment. "Coins, and gems, and Scottish boys."

"Ye think whoever's got Ian has the treasure as well?" He glanced curiously at me.

"I don't know," I said, feeling suddenly very tired. I yawned rackingly. "We may know for sure about Ishmael, though. I told Fergus to see that Temeraire gets a look at him. If they are from the same place …" I yawned again, my body seeking the oxygen that loss of blood had deprived me of.

"That's verra sensible of ye, Sassenach," Jamie said, sounding faintly surprised that I was capable of sense. For that matter, I was a little surprised myself; my thoughts were becoming more fragmented by the moment, and it was an effort to keep talking logically.

Jamie saw it; he patted my hand and stood up.

"Ye dinna trouble yourself about it now, Sassenach. Rest, and I'll send Marsali down wi' some tea."

"Whisky," I said, and he laughed.

"All right, then, whisky," he agreed. He smoothed my hair back, and leaning into the berth, kissed my hot forehead.

"Better?" he asked, smiling.

"Lots." I smiled back and closed my eyes.

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TURTLE SOUP

When I woke again, in the late afternoon, I ached all over. I had thrown off the covers in my sleep, and lay sprawled in my shift, my skin hot and dry in the soft air. My arm ached abominably, and I could feel each of Mr. Willoughby's forty-three elegant stitches like red-hot safety pins stuck through my flesh.

No help for it; I was going to have to use the penicillin. I might be proof against smallpox, typhoid, and the common cold in its eighteenth-century incarnation, but I wasn't immortal, and God only knew what insanitary substances the Portuguese had been employing his cutlass on before applying it to me.

The short trip across the room to the cupboard where my clothes hung left me sweating and shivering, and I had to sit down quite suddenly, the skirt clutched to my bosom, in order to avoid falling.

"Sassenach! Are ye all right?" Jamie poked his head through the low doorway, looking worried.

"No," I said. "Come here a minute, will you? I need you to do something."

"Wine? A biscuit? Murphy's made a wee broth for ye, special." He was beside me in a moment, the back of his hand cool against my flushed cheek. "God, you're burning!"

"Yes, I know," I said. "Don't worry, though; I have medicine for it."

I fumbled one-handed in the pocket of the skirt, and pulled out the case containing the syringes and ampules. My right arm was sore enough that any movement made me clench my teeth.

"Your turn," I said wryly, shoving the case across the table toward Jamie. "Here's your chance for revenge, if you want it."

He looked blankly at the case, then at me.

"What?" he said. "Ye want me to stab ye with one of these spikes?"

"I wish you wouldn't put it quite that way, but yes," I said.

"In the bum?" His lips twitched.

"Yes, damn you!"

He looked at me for a moment, one corner of his mouth curling slightly upward. Then he bowed his head over the case, red hair glowing in the shaft of sun from the window.

"Tell me what to do, then," he said.

I directed him carefully, guiding him through the preparation and filling of the syringe, and then took it myself, checking for air bubbles, clumsily left-handed. By the time I had given it back to him and arranged myself on the berth, he had ceased to find anything faintly funny about the situation.

"Are ye sure ye want me to do it?" he said doubtfully. "I'm no verra good with my hands."

That made me laugh, in spite of my throbbing arm. I had seen him do everything with those hands, from delivering foals and building walls, to skinning deer and setting type, all with the same light and dextrous touch.

"Well, aye," he said, when I said as much. "But it's no quite the same, is it? The closest thing I've done to this is to dirk a man in the wame, and it feels a bit strange to think of doin' such a thing to you, Sassenach."

I glanced back over my shoulder, to find him gnawing dubiously on his lower lip, the brandy-soaked pad in one hand, the syringe held gingerly in the other.

"Look," I said. "I did it to you; you *know* what it feels like. It wasn't that bad, was it?" He was beginning to make me rather nervous.

"Mmphm." Pressing his lips together, he knelt down by the bed and gently wiped a spot on my backside with the cool, wet pad. "Is this all right?"

"That's fine. Press the point in at a bit of an angle, not straight in—you see how the point of the needle's cut at an angle? Push it in about a quarter-inch—don't be afraid to jab a bit, skin's tougher than you think to get through—and then push down the plunger very slowly, you don't want to do it too fast."

I closed my eyes and waited. After a moment, I opened them and looked back. He was pale, and a faint sheen of sweat glimmered over his cheekbones.

"Never mind." I heaved myself upright, bracing against the wave of dizziness. "Here, give me that." I snatched the pad from his hand and swiped a patch across the top of my thigh. My hand trembled slightly from the fever.

"But—"

"Shut up!" I took the syringe and aimed it as well as I could, left-handed, then plunged it into the muscle. It hurt. It hurt more when I pressed down on the plunger, and my thumb slipped off.

Then Jamie's hands were there, one steadying my leg, the other on the needle, slowly pressing down until the last of the white liquid had vanished from the tube. I took one quick, deep breath when he pulled it out.

"Thanks," I said, after a moment.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, a minute later. His hand came behind my back, easing me down.

"It's all right." My eyes were closed, and there were little colored patterns on the inside of my eyelids. They reminded me of the lining of a doll's suitcase I had had as a child; tiny pink and silver stars on a dark background. "I'd forgotten; it's hard to do it the first few times. I suppose sticking a dirk in someone *is* easier," I added. "You aren't worried about hurting them, after all."

He didn't say anything, but exhaled rather strongly through his nose. I could hear him moving about the room, putting the case of syringes away and hanging up my skirt. The site of the injection felt like a knot under my skin.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean it that way."

"Well, ye should," he said evenly. "It *is* easier to kill someone to save your own life than it is to hurt someone to save theirs. Ye're a deal braver than I am, and I dinna mind your saying so."

I opened my eyes and looked at him.

"The hell you don't."

He stared down at me, blue eyes narrowed. The corner of his mouth turned up.

"The hell I don't," he agreed.

I laughed, but it hurt my arm.

"I'm not, and you aren't, and I didn't mean it that way, anyway," I said, and closed my eyes again.

"Mmphm."

I could hear the thump of feet on the deck above, and Mr. Warren's voice, raised in organized impatience. We had passed Great Abaco and Eleuthera in the night, and were now headed south toward Jamaica, with the wind behind us.

"*I* wouldn't risk being shot and hacked at, and arrested and hanged, if there were any choice about it," I said.

"Neither would I," he said dryly.

"But you—" I began, and then stopped. I looked at him curiously. "You really think that," I said slowly. "That you don't have a choice about it. Don't you?"

He was turned slightly away from me, eyes fixed on the port. The sun shone on the bridge of his long, straight nose and he rubbed a finger slowly up and down it. The broad shoulders rose slightly, and fell.

"I'm a man, Sassenach," he said, very softly. "If I thought there was a choice … then I maybe couldna do it. Ye dinna need to be so brave about things if ye ken ye canna help it, aye?" He looked at me then, with a faint smile. "Like a woman in childbirth, aye? Ye must do it, and it makes no difference if you're afraid—ye'll do it. It's only when ye ken ye can say no that it takes courage."

I lay quiet for a bit, watching him. He had closed his eyes and leaned back in the chair, auburn lashes long and absurdly childish against his cheeks. They contrasted strangely with the smudges beneath his eyes and the deeper lines at the corners. He was tired; he'd barely slept since the sighting of the pirate vessel.

"I haven't told you about Graham Menzies, have I?" I said at last. The blue eyes opened at once.

"No. Who was he?"

"A patient. At the hospital in Boston."

Graham had been in his late sixties when I knew him; a Scottish immigrant who hadn't lost his burr, despite nearly forty years in Boston. He was a fisherman, or had been; when I knew him he owned several lobster boats, and let others do the fishing for him.

He was a lot like the Scottish soldiers I had known at Prestonpans and Falkirk; stoic and humorous at once, willing to joke about anything that was too painful to suffer in silence.

"You'll be careful, now, lassie," was the last thing he said to me as I watched the anesthetist set up the intravenous drip that would maintain him while I amputated his cancerous left leg. "Be sure ye're takin' off the right one, now."

"Don't worry," I assured him, patting the weathered hand that lay on the sheet. "I'll get the right one."

"Ye will?" His eyes widened in simulated horror. "I thought 'twas the *left* one was bad!" He was still chuckling asthmatically as the gas mask came down over his face.

The amputation had gone well, and Graham had recovered and gone home, but I was not really surprised to see him back again, six months later. The lab report on the original tumor had been dubious, and the doubts were now substantiated; metastasis to the lymph nodes in the groin.

I removed the cancerous nodes. Radiation treatment was applied. Cobalt. I removed the spleen, to which the disease had spread, knowing that the surgery was entirely in vain, but not willing to give up.

"It's a lot easier not to give up, when it isn't you that's sick," I said, staring up at the timbers overhead.

"Did he give up, then?" Jamie asked.

"I don't think I'd call it that, exactly."

"I have been thinking," Graham announced. The sound of his voice echoed tinnily through the earpieces of my stethoscope.

"Have you?" I said. "Well, don't do it out loud 'til I've finished here, that's a good lad."

He gave a brief snort of laughter, but lay quietly as I auscultated his chest, moving the disc of the stethoscope swiftly from ribs to sternum.

"All right," I said at last, slipping the tubes out of my ears and letting them fall over my shoulders. "What have you been thinking about?"

"Killing myself."

His eyes met mine straight on, with just a hint of challenge. I glanced behind me, to be sure that the nurse had left, then pulled up the blue plastic visitor's chair and sat down next to him.

"Pain getting bad?" I asked. "There are things we can do, you know. You only need to ask." I hesitated before adding the last; he never had asked. Even when it was obvious that he needed medication, he never mentioned his discomfort. To mention it myself seemed an invasion of his privacy; I saw the small tightening at the corners of his mouth.

"I've a daughter," he said. "And two grandsons; bonny lads. But I'm forgetting; you'll have seen them last week, aye?"

I had. They came at least twice a week to see him, bringing scribbled school papers and autographed baseballs to show their grandpa.

"And there's my mother, living up to the rest home on Canterbury," he said thoughtfully. "It costs dearly, that place, but it's clean, and the food's good enough she enjoys complainin' about it while she eats."

He glanced dispassionately at the flat bedsheet, and lifted his stump.

"A month, d'ye think? Four? Three?"

"Maybe three," I said. "With luck," I added idiotically.

He snorted at me, and jerked his head at the IV drip above him.

"Tcha! And worse luck I wouldna wish on a beggar." He looked around at all the paraphernalia; the automatic respirator, the blinking cardiac monitor, the litter of medical technology. "Nearly a hundred dollars a day it's costing, to keep me here," he said. "Three

months, that would be—great heavens, ten thousand dollars!" He shook his head, frowning.

"A bad bargain, I call that. Not worth it." His pale gray eyes twinkled suddenly up at me. "I'm Scots, ye know. Born thrifty, and not likely to get over it now."

"So I did it for him," I said, still staring upward. "Or rather, we did it together. He was prescribed morphia for the pain—that's like laudanum, only much stronger. I drew off half of each ampule and replaced the missing bit with water. It meant he didn't get the relief of a full dose for nearly twenty-four hours, but that was the safest way to get a big dose with no risk of being found out.

"We talked about using one of the botanical medicines I was studying; I knew enough to make up something fatal, but I wasn't sure of it being painless, and he didn't want to risk me being accused, if anyone got suspicious and did a forensic examination." I saw Jamie's eyebrow lift, and flapped a hand. "It doesn't matter; it's a way of finding out how someone died."

"Ah. Like a coroner's court?"

"A bit. Anyway, he'd be supposed to have morphia in his blood; that wouldn't prove anything. So that's what we did."

I drew a deep breath.

"There would have been no trouble, if I'd given him the injection, and left. That's what he'd asked me to do."

Jamie was quiet, eyes fixed intently on me.

"I couldn't do it, though." I looked at my left hand, seeing not my own smooth flesh, but the big, swollen knuckles of a commercial fisherman, and the fat green veins that crossed his wrist.

"I got the needle in," I said. I rubbed a finger over the spot on the wrist, where a large vein crosses the distal head of the radius. "But I couldn't press down the plunger."

In memory, I saw Graham Menzies's other hand rise from his side, trailing tubes, and close over my own. He hadn't much strength, then, but enough.

"I sat there until he was gone, holding his hand." I felt it still, the steady beat of the wrist-pulse under my thumb, growing slower, and slower still, as I held his hand, and then waiting for a beat that did not come.

I looked up at Jamie, shaking off the memory.

"And then a nurse came in." It had been one of the younger nurses—an excitable girl, with no discretion. She wasn't very experienced, but knew enough to tell a dead man when she saw one. And me just sitting there, doing nothing—most undoctorlike conduct. And the empty morphia syringe, lying on the table beside me.

"She talked, of course," I said.

"I expect she would."

"I had the presence of mind to drop the syringe into the incinerator chute after she left, though. It was her word against mine, and the whole matter was just dismissed."

My mouth twisted wryly. "Except that the next week, they offered me a job as head of the whole department. Very important. A lovely office on the sixth floor of the hospital—safely away from the patients, where I couldn't murder anyone else."

My finger was still rubbing absently across my wrist. Jamie reached out and stopped it by laying his own hand over mine.

"When was this, Sassenach?" he asked, his voice very gentle.

"Just before I took Bree and went to Scotland. That's why I went, in fact; they gave me an extended leave—said I'd been working too hard, and deserved a nice vacation." I didn't try to keep the irony out of my voice.

"I see." His hand was warm on mine, despite the heat of my fever. "If it hadna been for that, for losing your work—would ye have come, Sassenach? Not just to Scotland. To me?"

I looked up at him and squeezed his hand, taking a deep breath.

"I don't know," I said. "I really don't. If I hadn't come to Scotland, met Roger Wakefield, found out that you—" I stopped and swallowed, overwhelmed. "It was Graham who sent me to Scotland," I said at last, feeling slightly choked. "He asked me to go someday—and say hello to Aberdeen for him." I glanced up at Jamie suddenly.

"I didn't! I never did go to Aberdeen."

"Dinna trouble yourself, Sassenach." Jamie squeezed my hand. "I'll take ye there myself—when we go back. Not," he added practically, "that there's anything to see there."

It was growing stuffy in the cabin. He rose and went to open one of the stern windows.

"Jamie," I said, watching his back, "what do you want?"

He glanced around, frowning slightly in thought.

"Oh—an orange would be good," he said. "There's some in the desk, aye?" Without waiting for a reply, he rolled back the lid of the desk, revealing a small bowl of oranges, bright among the litter of quills and papers. "D'ye want one, too?"

"All right," I said, smiling. "That wasn't really what I meant, though. I meant—what do you want to do, once we've found Ian?"

"Oh." He sat down by the berth, an orange in his hands, and stared at it for a moment.

"D'ye know," he said at last, "I dinna think anyone has ever asked me that—what it was I wanted to do." He sounded mildly surprised.

"Not as though you very often had a choice about it, is it?" I said dryly. "Now you do, though."

"Aye, that's true." He rolled the orange between his palms, head bent over the dimpled sphere. "I suppose it's come to ye that we likely canna go back to Scotland—at least for a time?" he said. I had told him of Tompkins's revelations about Sir Percival and his machinations, of course, but we had had little time to discuss the matter—or its implications.

"It has," I said. "That's why I asked."

I was quiet then, letting him come to terms with it. He had lived as an outlaw for a good many years, hiding first physically, and then by means of secrecy and aliases, eluding the law by slipping from one identity to another. But now all these were known; there was no way for him to resume any of his former activities—or even to appear in public in Scotland.

His final refuge had always been Lallybroch. But even that avenue of retreat was lost to him now. Lallybroch would always be his home, but it was no longer his; there was a new laird now. I knew he would not begrudge the fact that Jenny's family possessed the estate—but he must, if he were human, regret the loss of his heritage.

I could hear his faint snort, and thought he had probably reached the same point in his thinking that I had in mine.

"Not Jamaica or the English-owned islands, either," he observed ruefully. "Tom Leonard and the Royal Navy may think us both dead for the moment, but they'll be quick enough to notice otherwise if we stay for any length of time."

"Have you thought of America?" I asked this delicately. "The Colonies, I mean."

He rubbed his nose doubtfully.

"Well, no. I hadna really thought of it. It's true we'd likely be safe from the Crown there, but …" He trailed off, frowning. He picked up his dirk and scored the orange, quickly and neatly, then began to peel it.

"No one would be hunting you there," I pointed out. "Sir Percival hasn't got any interest in you, unless you're in Scotland, where arresting you would do him some good. The British Navy can't very well follow you ashore, and the West Indian governors haven't anything to say about what goes on in the Colonies, either."

"That's true," he said slowly. "But the Colonies …" He took the peeled orange in one hand, and began to toss it lightly, a few inches in the air. "It's verra primitive, Sassenach," he said. "A wilderness, aye? I shouldna like to take ye into danger."

That made me laugh, and he glanced sharply at me, then, catching my thought, relaxed into a half-rueful smile.

"Aye, well, I suppose draggin' ye off to sea and letting ye be kidnapped and locked up in a plague ship is dangerous enough. But at least I havena let ye be eaten by cannibals, yet."

I wanted to laugh again, but there was a bitter note to his voice that made me bite my lip instead.

"There aren't any cannibals in America," I said.

"There are!" he said heatedly. "I printed a book for a society of Catholic missionaries, that told all about the heathen Iroquois in the north. They tie up their captives and chop bits off of them, and then rip out their hearts and eat them before their eyes!"

"Eat the hearts first and then the eyes, do they?" I said, laughing in spite of myself. "All right," I said, seeing his scowl, "I'm sorry. But for one thing, you can't believe everything you read, and for another —"

I didn't get to finish. He leaned forward and grasped my good arm, tight enough to make me squeak with surprise.

"Damn you, listen to me!" he said. "It's no light matter!"

"Well … no, I suppose not," I said, tentatively. "I didn't mean to make fun of you—but, Jamie, I *did* live in Boston for nearly twenty years. You've never set foot in America!"

"That's true," he said evenly. "And d'ye think the place ye lived in is anything like what it's like now, Sassenach?"

"Well—" I began, then paused. While I had seen any number of historic buildings near Boston Common, sporting little brass plaques attesting to their antiquity, the majority of them had been built later than 1770; many a lot later. And beyond a few buildings …

"Well, no," I admitted. "It's not; I know it's not. But I don't think it's a complete wilderness. There *are* cities and towns now; I know that much."

He let go of my arm and sat back. He still held the orange in his other hand.

"I suppose that's so," he said slowly. "Ye dinna hear so much of the towns—only that it's such a wild savage place, though verra beautiful. But I'm no a fool, Sassenach." His voice sharpened slightly, and he dug his thumb savagely into the orange, splitting it in half.

"I dinna believe something only because someone's set words down in a book—for God's sake, I print the damn things! I ken verra well just what charlatans and fools some writers are—I see them! And surely I ken the difference between a romance and a fact set down in cold blood!"

"All right," I said. "Though I'm not sure it's all that easy to tell the difference between romance and fact in print. But even if it's dead true about the Iroquois, the whole continent isn't swarming with bloodthirsty savages. I *do* know that much. It's a very big place, you know," I added, gently.

"Mmphm," he said, plainly unconvinced. Still, he bent his attention to the orange, and began to divide it into segments.

"This is very funny," I said ruefully. "When I made up my mind to come back, I read everything I could find about England and Scotland and France about this time, so I'd know as much as I could about what to expect. And here we end up in a place I know nothing about, because it never dawned on me we'd cross the ocean, with you being so seasick."

That made him laugh, a little grudgingly.

"Aye, well, ye never ken what ye can do 'til ye have to. Believe me, Sassenach, once I've got Ian safely back, I shall never set foot on a filthy, godforsaken floating plank in my life again—except to go home to Scotland, when it's safe," he added, as an afterthought. He offered me an orange segment and I took it, token of a peace offering.

"Speaking of Scotland, you still have your printing press there, safe in Edinburgh," I said. "We could have it sent over, maybe—if we settled in one of the larger American cities."

He looked up at that, startled.

"D'ye think it would be possible to earn a living, printing? There are that many people? It takes a fair-sized city, ye ken, to need a printer or bookseller."

"I'm sure you could. Boston, Philadelphia … not New York yet, I don't think. Williamsburg, maybe? I don't know which ones, but there are several places big enough to need printing—the shipping ports, certainly." I remembered the flapping posters, advertising dates of embarkation and arrival, sales of goods and recruitment of seamen, that decorated the walls of every seaside tavern in Le Havre.

"Mmphm." This one was a thoughtful noise. "Aye, well, if we might do that …"

He poked a piece of fruit into his mouth and ate it slowly.

"What about you?" he said abruptly.

I glanced at him, startled.

"What about me?"

His eyes were fixed intently on me, reading my face.

"Would it suit ye to go to such a place?" He looked down then, carefully separating the other half of the fruit. "I mean—you've your work to do as well, aye?" He looked up and smiled, wryly.

"I learned in Paris that I couldna stop ye doing it. And ye said yourself, ye might not have come, had Menzies's death not stopped you, where ye were. Can ye be a healer in the Colonies, d'ye think?"

"I expect I can," I said slowly. "There are people sick and injured, almost anywhere you go, after all." I looked at him, curious.

"You're a very odd man, Jamie Fraser."

He laughed at that, and swallowed the rest of his orange.

"Oh, I am, aye? And what d'ye mean by that?"

"Frank loved me," I said slowly. "But there were … pieces of me, that he didn't know what to do with. Things about me that he didn't understand, or maybe that frightened him." I glanced at Jamie. "Not you."

His head was bent over a second orange, hands moving swiftly as he scored it with his dirk, but I could see the faint smile in the corner of his mouth.

"No, Sassenach, ye dinna frighten me. Or rather ye do, but only when I think ye may kill yourself from carelessness."

I snorted briefly.

"You scare me, for the same reason, but I don't suppose there's anything I can do about it."

His chuckle was deep and easy.

"And ye think I canna do anything about it, either, so I shouldna be worrit?"

"I didn't say you shouldn't worry—do you think I don't worry? But no, you probably can't do anything about me."

I saw him opening his mouth to disagree. Then he changed his mind, and laughed again. He reached out and popped an orange segment into my mouth.

"Well, maybe no, Sassenach, and maybe so. But I've lived a long enough time now to think it maybe doesna matter so much—so long as I can love you."

Speechless with orange juice, I stared at him in surprise.

"And I do," he said softly. He leaned into the berth and kissed me, his mouth warm and sweet. Then he drew back, and gently touched my cheek.

"Rest now," he said firmly. "I'll bring ye some broth, in a bit."

* * *

I slept for several hours, and woke up still feverish, but hungry. Jamie brought me some of Murphy's broth—a rich green concoction, swimming in butter and reeking with sherry—and insisted, despite my protests, on feeding it to me with a spoon.

"I have a perfectly good hand," I said crossly.

"Aye, and I've seen ye use it, too," he replied, deftly gagging me with the spoon. "If ye're clumsy with a spoon as wi' that needle, you'll have this all spilt down your bosom and wasted, and Murphy will brain me wi' the ladle. Here, open up."

I did, my resentment gradually melting into a sort of warm and glowing stupor as I ate. I hadn't taken anything for the pain in my arm, but as my empty stomach expanded in grateful relief, I more or less quit noticing it.

"Will ye have another bowl?" Jamie asked, as I swallowed the last spoonful. "Ye'll need your strength kept up." Not waiting for an answer, he uncovered the small tureen Murphy had sent, and refilled the bowl.

"Where's Ishmael?" I asked, during the brief hiatus.

"On the after deck. He didna seem comfortable belowdecks—and I canna say I blame him, having seen the slavers at Bridgetown. I had Maitland sling him a hammock."

"Do you think it's safe to leave him loose like that? What kind of soup is this?" The last spoonful had left a delightful, lingering taste on my tongue; the next revived the full flavor.

"Turtle; Stern took a big hawksbill last night. He sent word he's saving ye the shell to make combs of, for your hair." Jamie frowned slightly, whether at the thought of Lawrence Stern's gallantry or Ishmael's presence, I couldn't tell. "As for the black, he's not loose—Fergus is watching him."

"Fergus is on his honeymoon," I protested. "You shouldn't make him do it. Is this really turtle soup? I've never had it before. It's marvelous."

Jamie was unmoved by contemplation of Fergus's tender state.

"Aye, well, he'll be wed a long time," he said callously. "Do him no harm to keep his breeches on for one night. And they do say that abstinence makes the heart grow firmer, no?"

"Absence," I said, dodging the spoon for a moment. "And fonder. If anything's growing firmer from abstinence, it wouldn't be his heart."

"That's verra bawdy talk for a respectable marrit woman," Jamie said reprovingly, sticking the spoon in my mouth. "And inconsiderate, forbye."

I swallowed. "Inconsiderate?"

"I'm a wee bit firm myself at the moment," he replied evenly, dipping and spooning. "What wi' you sitting there wi' your hair loose and your nipples starin' me in the eye, the size of cherries."

I glanced down involuntarily, and the next spoonful bumped my nose. Jamie clicked his tongue, and picking up a cloth, briskly blotted my bosom with it. It was quite true that my shift was made of thin cotton, and even when dry, reasonably easy to see through.

"It's not as though you haven't seen them before," I said, amused.

He laid down the cloth and raised his brows.

"I have drunk water every day since I was weaned," he pointed out. "It doesna mean I canna be thirsty, still." He picked up the spoon. "You'll have a wee bit more?"

"No, thanks," I said, dodging the oncoming spoon. "I want to hear more about this firmness of yours."

"No, ye don't; you're ill."

"I feel much better," I assured him. "Shall I have a look at it?" He was wearing the loose petticoat breeches the sailors wore, in which he could easily have concealed three or four dead mullet, let alone a fugitive firmness.

"You shall not," he said, looking slightly shocked. "Someone might come in. And I canna think your looking at it would help a bit."

"Well, you can't tell that until I *have* looked at it, can you?" I said. "Besides, you can bolt the door."

"Bolt the door? What d'ye think I'm going to do? Do I look the sort of man would take advantage of a woman who's not only wounded and boiling wi' fever, but drunk as well?" he demanded. He stood up, nonetheless.

"I am not drunk," I said indignantly. "You can't get drunk on turtle soup!" Nonetheless, I was conscious that the glowing warmth in my stomach seemed to have migrated somewhat lower, taking up residence between my thighs, and there was undeniably a slight lightness of head not strictly attributable to fever.

"You can if ye've been drinking turtle soup as made by Aloysius O'Shaughnessy Murphy," he said. "By the smell of it, he's put at least a full bottle o' the sherry in it. A verra intemperate race, the Irish."

"Well, I'm still not drunk." I straightened up against the pillows as best I could. "You told me once that if you could still stand up, you weren't drunk."

"You aren't standing up," he pointed out.

"You are. And I could if I wanted to. Stop trying to change the subject. We were talking about your firmness."

"Well, ye can just stop talking about it, because—" He broke off with a small yelp, as I made a fortunate grab with my left hand.

"Clumsy, am I?" I said, with considerable satisfaction. "Oh, my. Heavens, you *do* have a problem, don't you?"

"Will ye leave go of me?" he hissed, looking frantically over his shoulder at the door. "Someone could come in any moment!"

"I told you you should have bolted the door," I said, not letting go. Far from being a dead mullet, the object in my hand was exhibiting considerable liveliness.

He eyed me narrowly, breathing through his nose.

"I wouldna use force on a sick woman," he said through his teeth, "but you've a damn healthy grip for someone with a fever, Sassenach. If you—"

"I told you I felt better," I interrupted, "but I'll make you a bargain; you bolt the door and I'll prove I'm not drunk." I rather regretfully let go, to indicate good faith. He stood staring at me for a moment, absentmindedly rubbing the site of my recent assault on his virtue. Then he lifted one ruddy eyebrow, turned, and went to bolt the door.

By the time he turned back, I had made it out of the berth and was standing—a trifle shakily, but still upright—against the frame. He eyed me critically.

"It's no going to work, Sassenach," he said, shaking his head. He looked rather regretful, himself. "We'll never stay upright, wi' a swell like there is underfoot tonight, and ye know I'll not fit in that berth by myself, let alone wi' you."

There was a considerable swell; the lantern on its swivel-bracket hung steady and level, but the shelf above it tilted visibly back and forth as the *Artemis* rode the waves. I could feel the faint shudder of the boards under my bare feet, and knew Jamie was right. At least he was too absorbed in the discussion to be seasick.

"There's always the floor," I suggested hopefully. He glanced down at the limited floor space and frowned. "Aye, well. There is, but we'd have to do it like snakes, Sassenach, all twined round each other amongst the table legs."

"I don't mind."

"No," he said, shaking his head, "it would hurt your arm." He rubbed a knuckle across his lower lip, thinking. His eyes passed absently across my body at about hip level, returned, fixed, and lost their focus. I thought the bloody shift must be more transparent than I realized.

Deciding to take matters into my own hands, I let go my hold on the frame of the berth and lurched the two paces necessary to reach him. The roll of the ship threw me into his arms, and he barely managed to keep his own balance, clutching me tightly round the waist.

"Jesus!" he said, staggered, and then, as much from reflex as from desire, bent his head and kissed me.

It was startling. I was accustomed to be surrounded by the warmth of his embrace; now it was I who was hot to the touch and he who was cool. From his reaction, he was enjoying the novelty as much as I was.

Light-headed, and reckless with it, I nipped the side of his neck with my teeth, feeling the waves of heat from my face pulsate against the column of his throat. He felt it, too.

"God, you're like holding a hot coal!" His hands dropped lower and pressed me hard against him.

"Firm is it? Ha," I said, getting my mouth free for a moment. "Take those baggy things off." I slid down his length and onto my knees in front of him, fumbling mazily at his flies. He freed the laces with a quick jerk, and the petticoat breeches ballooned to the floor with a whiff of wind.

I didn't wait for him to remove his shirt; just lifted it and took him. He made a strangled sound and his hands came down on my head as though he wanted to restrain me, but hadn't the strength.

"Oh, Lord!" he said. His hands tightened in my hair, but he wasn't trying to push me away. "This must be what it's like to make love in Hell," he whispered. "With a burning she-devil."

I laughed, which was extremely difficult under the circumstances. I choked, and pulled back a moment, breathless.

"Is this what a succubus does, do you think?"

"I wouldna doubt it for a moment," he assured me. His hands were still in my hair, urging me back.

A knock sounded on the door, and he froze. Confident that the door was indeed bolted, I didn't.

"Aye? What is it?" he said, with a calmness rather remarkable for a man in his position.

"Fraser?" Lawrence Stern's voice came through the door. "The Frenchman says the black is asleep, and may he have leave to go to bed now?"

"No," said Jamie shortly. "Tell him to stay where he is; I'll come along and relieve him in a bit."

"Oh." Stern's voice sounded a little hesitant. "Surely. His … um, his wife seems … eager for him to come now."

Jamie inhaled sharply.

“Tell her,” he said, a small note of strain becoming evident in his voice, “that he’ll be there … presently.”

“I will say so.” Stern sounded dubious about Marsali’s reception of this news, but then his voice brightened. “Ah … is Mrs. Fraser feeling somewhat improved?”

“Verra much,” said Jamie, with feeling.

“She enjoyed the turtle soup?”

“Greatly. I thank ye.” His hands on my head were trembling.

“Did you tell her that I’ve put aside the shell for her? It was a fine hawksbill turtle; a most elegant beast.”

“Aye. Aye, I did.” With an audible gasp, Jamie pulled away and reaching down, lifted me to my feet.

“Good night, Mr. Stern!” he called. He pulled me toward the berth; we struggled four-legged to keep from crashing into tables and chairs as the floor rose and fell beneath us.

“Oh.” Lawrence sounded faintly disappointed. “I suppose Mrs. Fraser is asleep, then?”

“Laugh, and I’ll throttle ye,” Jamie whispered fiercely in my ear. “She is, Mr. Stern,” he called through the door. “I shall give her your respects in the morning, aye?”

“I trust she will rest well. There seems to be a certain roughness to the sea this evening.”

“I … have noticed, Mr. Stern.” Pushing me to my knees in front of the berth, he knelt behind me, groping for the hem of my shift. A cool breeze from the open stern window blew over my naked buttocks, and a shiver ran down the backs of my thighs.

“Should you or Mrs. Fraser find yourselves discommoded by the motion, I have a most capital remedy to hand—a compound of mugwort, bat dung, and the fruit of the mangrove. You have only to ask, you know.”

Jamie didn’t answer for a moment.

“Oh, Christ!” he whispered. I took a sizable bite of the bedclothes.

“Mr. Fraser?”

“I said, ‘Thank you’!” Jamie replied, raising his voice.

“Well, I shall bid you a good evening, then.”

Jamie let out his breath in a long shudder that was not quite a moan.

"Mr. Fraser?"

"Good evening, Mr. Stern!" Jamie bellowed.

"Oh! Er … good evening."

Stern's footsteps receded down the companionway, lost in the sound of the waves that were now crashing loudly against the hull. I spit out the mouthful of quilt.

"Oh … my … God!"

His hands were large and hard and cool on my heated flesh.

"You've the roundest arse I've ever seen!"

A lurch by the *Artemis* here aiding his efforts to an untoward degree, I uttered a loud shriek.

"Shh!" He clasped a hand over my mouth, bending over me so that he lay over my back, the billowing linen of his shirt falling around me and the weight of him pressing me to the bed. My skin, crazed with fever, was sensitive to the slightest touch, and I shook in his arms, the heat inside me rushing outward as he moved within me.

His hands were under me then, clutching my breasts, the only anchor as I lost my boundaries and dissolved, conscious thought a displaced element in the chaos of sensations—the warm damp of tangled quilts beneath me, the cold sea wind and misty spray that wafted over us from the rough sea outside, the gasp and brush of Jamie's warm breath on the back of my neck, and the sudden prickle and flood of cold and heat, as my fever broke in a dew of satisfied desire.

Jamie's weight rested on my back, his thighs behind mine. It was warm, and comforting. After a long time, his breathing eased, and he rose off me. The thin cotton of my shift was damp, and the wind plucked it away from my skin, making me shiver.

Jamie closed the window with a snap, then bent and picked me up like a rag doll. He lowered me into the berth, and pulled the quilt up over me.

"How is your arm?" he said.

“What arm?” I murmured drowsily. I felt as though I had been melted and poured into a mold to set.

“Good,” he said, a smile in his voice. “Can ye stand up?”

“Not for all the tea in China.”

“I’ll tell Murphy ye liked the soup.” His hand rested for a moment on my cool forehead, passed down the curve of my cheek in a light caress, and then was gone. I didn’t hear him leave.

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PROMISED LAND

“It’s persecution!” Jamie said indignantly. He stood behind me, looking over the rail of the *Artemis*. Kingston Harbor stretched to our left, glowing like liquid sapphires in the morning light, the town above half-sunk in jungle green, cubes of yellowed ivory and pink rose-quartz in a lush setting of emerald and malachite. And on the cerulean bosom of the water below floated the majestic sight of a great three-masted ship, furled canvas white as gull wings, gun decks proud and brass gleaming in the sun. His Majesty’s man-of-war *Porpoise*.

“The filthy boat’s pursuing me,” he said, glaring at it as we sailed past at a discreet distance, well outside the harbor mouth. “Everywhere I go, there it is again!”

I laughed, though in truth, the sight of the *Porpoise* made me slightly nervous, too.

“I don’t suppose it’s personal,” I told him. “Captain Leonard did say they were bound for Jamaica.”

“Aye, but why would they no head straight to Antigua, where the naval barracks and the navy shipyards are, and them in such straits as ye left them?” He shaded his eyes, peering at the *Porpoise*. Even at this distance, small figures were visible in the rigging, making repairs.

“They had to come here first,” I explained. “They were carrying a new governor for the colony.” I felt an absurd urge to duck below the rail, though I knew that even Jamie’s red hair would be indistinguishable at this distance.

"Aye? I wonder who's that?" Jamie spoke absently; we were no more than an hour away from arrival at Jared's plantation on Sugar Bay, and I knew his mind was busy with plans for finding Young Ian.

"A chap named Grey," I said, turning away from the rail. "Nice man; I met him on the ship, just briefly."

"Grey?" Startled, Jamie looked down at me. "Not Lord John Grey, by chance?"

"Yes, that was his name? Why?" I glanced up at him, curious. He was staring at the *Porpoise* with renewed interest.

"Why?" He heard me when I repeated the question a second time, and glanced down at me, smiling. "Oh. It's only that I ken Lord John; he's a friend of mine."

"Really?" I was no more than mildly surprised. Jamie's friends had once included the French minister of finance and Charles Stuart, as well as Scottish beggars and French pickpockets. I supposed it was not remarkable that he should now count English aristocrats among his acquaintance, as well as Highland smugglers and Irish seacooks.

"Well, that's luck," I said. "Or at least I suppose it is. Where do you know Lord John from?"

"He was the Governor of Ardsmuir prison," he replied, surprising me after all. His eyes were still fixed on the *Porpoise,* narrowed in speculation.

"And he's a *friend* of yours?" I shook my head. "I'll never understand men."

He turned and smiled at me, taking his attention at last from the English ship.

"Well, friends are where ye find them, Sassenach," he said. He squinted toward the shore, shading his eyes with his hand. "Let us hope this Mrs. Abernathy proves to be one."

As we rounded the tip of the headland, a lithe black figure materialized next to the rail. Now clothed in spare seaman's clothes, with his scars hidden, Ishmael looked less like a slave and a good deal more like a pirate. Not for the first time, I wondered just how much of what he had told us was the truth.

"I be leavin' now," he announced abruptly.

Jamie lifted one eyebrow and glanced over the rail, into the soft blue depths.

"Dinna let me prevent ye," he said politely. "But would ye not rather have a boat?"

Something that might have been humor flickered briefly in the black man's eyes, but didn't disturb the severe outlines of his face.

"You say you put me ashore where I want, I be tellin' you 'bout those boys," he said. He nodded toward the island, where a riotous growth of jungle spilled down the slope of a hill to meet its own green shadow in the shallow water. "That be where I want."

Jamie looked thoughtfully from the uninhabited shore to Ishmael, and then nodded.

"I'll have a boat lowered." He turned to go to the cabin. "I promised ye gold as well, no?"

"Don't be wantin' gold, mon." Ishmael's tone, as well as his words, stopped Jamie in his tracks. He looked at the black man with interest, mingled with a certain reserve.

"Ye'll have something else in mind?"

Ishmael jerked his head in a short nod. He didn't seem outwardly nervous, but I noticed the faint gleam of sweat on his temples, despite the mild noon breeze.

"I be wantin' that one-arm nigger." He stared boldly at Jamie as he spoke, but there was a diffidence under the confident facade.

"Temeraire?" I blurted out in astonishment. "Why?"

Ishmael flicked a glance at me, but addressed his words to Jamie, half-bold, half-cajoling.

"He ain't no good to you, mon; can't be doin' field work or ship work neither, ain't got but one arm."

Jamie didn't reply directly, but stared at Ishmael for a moment. Then he turned and called for Fergus to bring up the one-armed slave.

Temeraire, brought up on deck, stood expressionless as a block of wood, barely blinking in the sun. He too had been provided with seaman's clothes, but he lacked Ishmael's raffish elegance in them. He looked like a stump upon which someone had spread out washing to dry.

"This man wants you to go with him, to the island there," Jamie said to Temeraire, in slow, careful French. "Do you want to do this thing?"

Temeraire did blink at that, and a brief look of startlement widened his eyes. I supposed that no one had asked him what he wanted in many years—if ever. He glanced warily from Jamie to Ishmael and back again, but didn't say anything.

Jamie tried again.

"You do not have to go with this man," he assured the slave. "You may come with us, and we will take care of you. No one will hurt you. But you can go with him, if you like."

Still the slave hesitated, eyes flicking right and left, clearly startled and disturbed by the unexpected choice. It was Ishmael who decided the matter. He said something, in a strange tongue full of liquid vowels and syllables that repeated like a drumbeat.

Temeraire let out a gasp, fell to his knees, and pressed his forehead to the deck at Ishmael's feet. Everyone on deck stared at him, then looked at Ishmael, who stood with arms folded with a sort of wary defiance.

"He be goin' with me," he said.

And so it was. Picard rowed the two blacks ashore in the dinghy, and left them on the rocks at the edge of the jungle, supplied with a small bag of provisions, each equipped with a knife.

"Why there?" I wondered aloud, watching the two small figures make their way slowly up the wooded slope. "There aren't any towns nearby, are there? Or any plantations?" To the eye, the shore presented an unbroken expanse of jungle.

"Oh, there are plantations," Lawrence assured me. "Far up in the hills; that's where they grow the coffee and indigo—the sugarcane grows better near the coast." He squinted toward the shore, where the two dark figures had disappeared. "It is more likely that they have gone to join a band of Maroons, though," he said.

"There are Maroons on Jamaica as well as on Hispaniola?" Fergus asked, interested.

Lawrence smiled, a little grimly.

"There are Maroons wherever there are slaves, my friend," he said. "There are always men who prefer to take the chance of dying like animals, rather than live as captives."

Jamie turned his head sharply to look at Lawrence, but said nothing.

* * *

Jared's plantation at Sugar Bay was called Blue Mountain House, presumably for the sake of the low, hazy peak that rose inland a mile behind it, blue with pines and distance. The house itself was set near the shore, in the shallow curve of the bay. In fact, the veranda that ran along one side of the house overhung a small lagoon, the building set on sturdy silvered-wood pilings that rose from the water, crusted with a spongy growth of tunicates and mussels and the fine green seaweed called mermaid's hair.

We were expected; Jared had sent a letter by a ship that left Le Havre a week before the *Artemis*. Owing to our delay on Hispaniola, the letter had arrived nearly a month in advance of ourselves, and the overseer and his wife—a portly, comfortable Scottish couple named MacIvers—were relieved to see us.

"I thought surely the winter storms had got ye," Kenneth MacIver said for the fourth time, shaking his head. He was bald, the top of his head scaly and freckled from long years' exposure to the tropic sun. His wife was a plump, genial, grandmotherly soul—who, I realized to my shock, was roughly five years younger than myself. She herded Marsali and me off for a quick wash, brush, and nap before supper, while Fergus and Jamie went with Mr. MacIver to direct the partial unloading of the *Artemis*'s cargo and the disposition of her crew.

I was more than willing to go; while my arm had healed sufficiently to need no more than a light bandage, it had prevented me from bathing in the sea as was my usual habit. After a week aboard the *Artemis*, unbathed, I looked forward to fresh water and clean sheets with a longing that was almost hunger.

I had no landlegs yet; the worn wooden floorboards of the plantation house gave the disconcerting illusion of seeming to rise and fall beneath my feet, and I staggered down the hallway after Mrs. MacIver, bumping into walls.

The house had an actual bathtub in a small porch; wooden, but filled—*mirabile dictu!*—with hot water, by the good offices of two black slave women who heated kettles over a fire in the yard and carried them in. I should have felt much too guilty at this exploitation to enjoy my bath, but I didn't. I wallowed luxuriously, scrubbing the salt and grime from my skin with a loofah sponge and lathering my hair with a shampoo made from chamomile, geranium oil, fat-soap shavings, and the yolk of an egg, graciously supplied by Mrs. MacIver.

Smelling sweet, shiny-haired, and languid with warmth, I collapsed gratefully into the bed I was given. I had time only to think how delightful it was to stretch out at full length, before I fell asleep.

When I woke, the shadows of dusk were gathering on the veranda outside the open French doors of my bedroom, and Jamie lay naked beside me, hands folded on his belly, breathing deep and slow.

He felt me stir, and opened his eyes. He smiled sleepily and reaching up a hand, pulled me down to his mouth. He had had a bath, too; he smelled of soap and cedar needles. I kissed him at length, slowly and thoroughly, running my tongue across the wide curve of his lip, finding his tongue with mine in a soft, dark joust of greeting and invitation.

I broke loose, finally, and came up for air. The room was filled with a wavering green light, reflections from the lagoon outside, as though the room itself were underwater. The air was at once warm and fresh, smelling of sea and rain, with tiny currents of breeze that caressed the skin.

"Ye smell sweet, Sassenach," he murmured, voice husky with sleep. He smiled, reaching up to twine his fingers into my hair. "Come here to me, curly-wig."

Freed from pins and freshly washed, my hair was clouding over my shoulders in a perfect explosion of Medusa-like curls. I reached up to smooth it back, but he tugged gently, bending me forward so the veil of brown and gold and silver fell loose over his face.

I kissed him, half-smothered in clouds of hair, and lowered myself to lie on top of him, letting the fullness of my breasts squash gently against his chest. He moved slightly, rubbing, and sighed with pleasure.

His hands cupped my buttocks, trying to move me upward enough to enter me.

“Not bloody yet,” I whispered. I pressed my hips down, rolling them, enjoying the feel of the silky stiffness trapped beneath my belly. He made a small breathless sound.

“We haven’t had room or time to make love properly in months,” I told him. “So we’re taking our time about it now, right?”

“Ye take me at something of a disadvantage, Sassenach,” he murmured into my hair. He squirmed under me, pressing upward urgently. “Ye dinna think we could take our time next time?”

“No, we couldn’t,” I said firmly. “Now. Slow. Don’t move.”

He made a sort of rumbling noise in his throat, but sighed and relaxed, letting his hands fall away to the sides. I squirmed lower on his body, making him inhale sharply, and set my mouth on his nipple.

I ran my tongue delicately round the tiny nub, making it stand up stiff, enjoying the coarse feel of the curly auburn hairs that surrounded it. I felt him tense under me, and put my hands on his upper arms to hold him still while I went on with it, biting gently, sucking and flicking with my tongue.

A few minutes later, I raised my head, brushed my hair back with one hand, and asked, “What’s that you’re saying?”

He opened one eye.

“The rosary,” he informed me. “It’s the only way I’m going to stand it.” He closed his eyes and resumed murmuring in Latin. *“Ave Maria, gratia plena …”*

I snorted and went to work on the other one.

“You’re losing your place,” I said, next time I came up for air. “You’ve said the Lord’s Prayer three times in a row.”

"I'm surprised to hear I'm still makin' any sense at all." His eyes were closed, and a dew of moisture gleamed on his cheekbones. He moved his hips with increasing restiveness. "Now?"

"Not yet." I dipped my head lower and seized by impulse, went *Pffft!* into his navel. He convulsed, and taken by surprise, emitted a noise that could only be described as a giggle.

"Don't do that!" he said.

"Will if I want to," I said, and did it again. "You sound just like Bree," I told him. "I used to do that to her when she was a baby; she loved it."

"Well, I'm no a wee bairn, if ye hadna noticed the difference," he said a little testily. "If ye must do that, at least try it a bit lower, aye?"

I did.

"You don't have any hair at all at the tops of your thighs," I said, admiring the smooth white skin there. "Why is that, do you think?"

"The cow licked it all off last time she milked me," he said between his teeth. "For God's sake, Sassenach!"

I laughed, and returned to my work. At last I stopped and raised myself on my elbows.

"I think you've had enough," I said, brushing hair out of my eyes. "You haven't said anything but 'Jesus Christ' over and over again for the last few minutes."

Given the cue, he surged upward, and flipped me onto my back, pinning me with the solid weight of his body.

"You're going to live to regret this, Sassenach," he said with a grim satisfaction.

I grinned at him, unrepentant.

"Am I?"

He looked down at me, eyes narrowed. "Take my time, was it? You'll beg for it, before I've done wi' ye."

I tugged experimentally at my wrists, held tight in his grasp, and wriggled slightly under him with anticipation.

"Ooh, mercy," I said. "You beast."

He snorted briefly, and bent his head to the curve of my breast, white as pearl in the dim green water-light.

I closed my eyes and lay back against the pillows.

"Pater noster, qui es in coelis …" I whispered.

We were very late to supper.

Jamie lost no time over supper in asking about Mrs. Abernathy of Rose Hall.

"Abernathy?" MacIver frowned, tapping his knife on the table to assist thought. "Aye, seems I've heard the name, though I canna just charge my memory."

"Och, ye ken Abernathy's fine," his wife interrupted, pausing in her instructions to a servant for the preparation of the hot pudding. "It's that place up the Yallahs River, in the mountains. Cane, mostly, but a wee bit of coffee, too."

"Oh, aye, to be sure!" her husband exclaimed. "What a memory ye've got, Rosie!" He beamed fondly at his wife.

"Well, I might not ha' brought it to mind mysel'," she said modestly, "only as how that minister over to New Grace kirk last week was askin' after Mrs. Abernathy, too."

"What minister is this, ma'am?" Jamie asked, taking a split roast chicken from the huge platter presented to him by a black servant.

"Such a fine braw appetite as ye have, Mr. Fraser!" Mrs. MacIver exclaimed admiringly, seeing his loaded plate. "It's the island air does it, I expect."

The tips of Jamie's ears turned pink.

"I expect it is," he said, carefully not looking at me. "This minister …?"

"Och, aye. Campbell, his name was, Archie Campbell." I started, and she glanced quizzically at me. "You'll know him?"

I shook my head, swallowing a pickled mushroom. "I've met him once, in Edinburgh."

"Oh. Well, he's come to be a missionary, and bring the heathen blacks to the salvation of Our Lord Jesus." She spoke with admiration, and glared at her husband when he snorted. "Now, ye'll no be makin' your Papist remarks, Kenny! The Reverend Campbell's a fine holy man, and a great scholar, forbye. I'm Free Church myself," she said, leaning toward me confidingly. "My parents disowned me when I wed Kenny, but I told them I was sure he'd come to see the light sooner or later."

"A lot later," her husband remarked, spooning jam onto his plate. He grinned at his wife, who sniffed and returned to her story.

"So, 'twas on account of the Reverend's bein' a great scholar that Mrs. Abernathy had written him, whilst he was still in Edinburgh, to ask him questions. And now that he's come here, he had it in mind to go and see her. Though after all Myra Dalrymple and the Reverend Davis telt him, I should be surprised he'd set foot on her place," she added primly.

Kenny MacIver grunted, motioning to a servant in the doorway with another huge platter.

"I wouldna put a great deal of stock in anything the Reverend Davis says, myself," he said. "The man's too godly to shit. But Myra Dalrymple's a sensible woman. Ouch!" He snatched back the fingers his wife had just cracked with a spoon, and sucked them.

"What did Miss Dalrymple have to say of Mrs. Abernathy?" Jamie inquired, hastily intervening before full-scale marital warfare could break out.

Mrs. MacIver's color was high, but she smoothed the frown from her brow as she turned to answer him.

"Well, a great deal of it was no more than ill-natured gossip," she admitted. "The sorts of things folk will always say about a woman as lives alone. That she's owerfond of the company of her men-slaves, aye?"

"But there was the talk when her husband died," Kenny interrupted. He slid several small, rainbow-striped fish off the platter the stooping servant held for him. "I mind it well, now I come to think on the name."

Barnabas Abernathy had come from Scotland, and had purchased Rose Hall five years before. He had run the place decently, turning a small profit in sugar and coffee, causing no comment among his neighbors. Then, two years ago, he had married a woman no one knew, bringing her home from a trip to Guadeloupe.

"And six months later, he was dead," Mrs. MacIver concluded with grim relish.

"And the talk is that Mrs. Abernathy had something to do with it?" Having some idea of the plethora of tropical parasites and diseases that attacked Europeans in the West Indies, I was inclined to doubt it, myself. Barnabas Abernathy could easily have died of anything from malaria to elephantiasis, but Rosie MacIver was right—folk were partial to ill-natured gossip.

"Poison," Rosie said, low-voiced, with a quick glance at the door to the kitchen. "The doctor who saw him said so. Mind, it could ha' been the slave-women. There was talk about Barnabas and his female slaves, and it's more common than folk like to say for a plantation cook-girl to be slipping something into the stew, but—" She broke off as another servant came in, carrying a cut-glass relish pot. Everyone was silent as the woman placed it on the table and left, curtsying to her mistress.

"You needn't worry," Mrs. MacIver said reassuringly, seeing me look after the woman. "We've a boy who tastes everything, before it's served. It's all quite safe."

I swallowed the mouthful of fish I had taken, with some difficulty.

"Did the Reverend Campbell go to see Mrs. Abernathy, then?" Jamie put in.

Rosie took the distraction gratefully. She shook her head, agitating the lace ruffles on her cap.

"No, I'm sure not, for 'twas the very next day there was the stramash about his sister."

In the excitement of tracking Ian and the *Bruja*, I had nearly forgotten Margaret Jane Campbell.

"What happened to his sister?" I asked, curious.

"Why, she's disappeared!" Mrs. MacIver's blue eyes went wide with importance. Blue Mountain House was remote, some ten miles out of Kingston by land, and our presence provided an unparalleled opportunity for gossip.

"What?" Fergus had been addressing himself to his plate with singleminded devotion, but now looked up, blinking. "Disappeared? Where?"

"The whole island's talking of it," Kenny put in, snatching the conversational ball from his wife. "Seems the Reverend had a woman engaged as abigail to his sister, but the woman died of a fever on the voyage."

"Oh, that's too bad!" I felt a real pang for Nellie Cowden, with her broad, pleasant face.

"Aye." Kenny nodded offhandedly. "Well, and so the Reverend found a place for his sister to lodge. Feebleminded, I understand?" He lifted a brow at me.

"Something like that."

"Aye, well, the lass seemed quiet and biddable, and Mrs. Forrest, who had the house where she lodged, would take her to sit on the veranda in the cool part of the day. So Tuesday last, a boy comes to say as Mrs. Forrest is wanted quicklike to come to her sister, who's having a child. And Mrs. Forrest got flustered and went straight off, forgetting Miss Campbell on the veranda. And when she thought of it, and sent someone back to see—why Miss Campbell was gone. And not a smell of her since, in spite of the Reverend raising heaven and earth, ye might say." MacIver rocked back on his chair, puffing out his sun-mottled cheeks.

Mrs. MacIver wagged her head, *tsk*ing mournfully.

"Myra Dalrymple told the Reverend as how he should go to the Governor for help to find her," she said. "But the Governor's scarce settled, and not yet ready to receive anyone. He's having a great reception this coming Thursday, for to meet all the important folk o' the island. Myra said as the Reverend must go, and speak to the Governor there, but he's no of a mind to do that, it bein' such a worldly occasion, aye?"

"A reception?" Jamie set down his spoon, looking at Mrs. MacIver with interest. "Is it by invitation, d'ye know?"

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "Anyone may come as likes to, or so I've heard."

"Is that so?" Jamie glanced at me, smiling. "What d'ye think, Sassenach—would ye care to step out wi' me at the Governor's Residence?"

I stared at him in astonishment. I should have thought that the last thing he would wish to do was show himself in public. I was also surprised that he would let anything at all stop his visiting Rose Hall at the earliest opportunity.

"It's a good opportunity to ask about Ian, no?" he explained. "After all, he might not be at Rose Hall, but someplace else on the island."

"Well, aside from the fact that I've nothing to wear …" I temporized, trying to figure out what he was really up to.

"Och, that's no trouble," Rosie MacIver assured me. "I've one of the cleverest sempstresses on the island; she'll have ye tricked out in no time."

Jamie was nodding thoughtfully. He smiled, eyes slanting as he looked at me over the candle flame.

"Violet silk, I think," he said. He plucked the bones delicately from his fish and set them aside. "And as for the other—dinna fash, Sassenach. I've something in mind. You'll see."

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MASQUE OF THE RED DEATH

"Oh who is that young sinner with the handcuffs on his wrists?
And what has he been after that they groan and shake their fists?
And wherefore is he wearing such a conscience-stricken air?
Oh they're taking him to prison for the colour of his hair."

Jamie put down the wig in his hand and raised one eyebrow at me in the mirror. I grinned at him and went on, declaiming with gestures:

" 'Tis a shame to human nature, such a head of hair as his;
In the good old time 'twas hanging for the colour that it is;
Though hanging isn't bad enough and flaying would be fair
For the nameless and abominable colour of his hair!"

"Did ye not tell me ye'd studied for a doctor, Sassenach?" he inquired. "Or was it a poet, after all?"

"Not me," I assured him, coming to straighten his stock. "Those sentiments are by one A. E. Housman."

"Surely one of him is sufficient," Jamie said dryly. "Given the quality of his opinions." He picked up the wig and fitted it carefully on his head, raising little puffs of scented powder as he poked it here and there. "Is Mr. Housman an acquaintance of yours, then?"

"You might say so." I sat down on the bed to watch. "It's only that the doctors' lounge at the hospital I worked at had a copy of Housman's collected works that someone had left there. There isn't time between calls to read most novels, but poems are ideal. I expect I know most of Housman by heart, now."

He looked warily at me, as though expecting another outburst of poetry, but I merely smiled at him, and he returned to his work. I watched the transformation in fascination.

Red-heeled shoes and silk stockings clocked in black. Gray satin breeches with silver knee buckles. Snowy linen, with Brussels lace six inches deep at cuff and jabot. The coat, a masterpiece in heavy gray with blue satin cuffs and crested silver buttons, hung behind the door, awaiting its turn.

He finished the careful powdering of his face, and licking the end of one finger, picked up a false beauty mark, dabbed it in gum arabic, and affixed it neatly near the corner of his mouth.

"There," he said, swinging about on the dressing stool to face me. "Do I look like a red-heided Scottish smuggler?"

I inspected him carefully, from full-bottomed wig to morocco-heeled shoes.

"You look like a gargoyle," I said. His face flowered in a wide grin. Outlined in white powder, his lips seemed abnormally red, his mouth even wider and more expressive than it usually was.

"Non!" said Fergus indignantly, coming in in time to hear this. "He looks like a Frenchman."

"Much the same thing," Jamie said, and sneezed. Wiping his nose on a handkerchief, he assured the young man, "Begging your pardon, Fergus."

He stood up and reached for the coat, shrugging it over his shoulders and settling the edges. In three-inch heels, he towered to a height of six feet seven; his head nearly brushed the plastered ceiling.

"I don't know," I said, looking up at him dubiously. "I've never seen a Frenchman that size."

Jamie shrugged, his coat rustling like autumn leaves. "Aye, well, there's no hiding my height. But so long as my hair is hidden, I think it will be all right. Besides," he added, gazing with approval at me, "folk willna be looking at me. Stand up and let me see, aye?"

I obliged, rotating slowly to show off the deep flare of the violet silk skirt. Cut low in the front, the décolletage was filled with a froth of lace that rippled down the front of the bodice in a series of V's. Matching lace cascaded from the elbow-length sleeves in graceful white falls that left my wrists bare.

"Rather a pity I don't have your mother's pearls," I remarked. I didn't regret their lack; I had left them for Brianna, in the box with the photographs and family documents. Still, with the deep décolletage and my hair twisted up in a knot, the mirror showed a long expanse of bare neck and bosom, rising whitely out of the violet silk.

"I thought of that." With the air of a conjuror, Jamie produced a small box from his inside pocket and presented it to me, making a leg in his best Versailles fashion.

Inside was a small, gleaming fish, carved in a dense black material, the edges of its scales touched with gold.

"It's a pin," he explained. "Ye could maybe wear it fastened to a white ribbon round your neck?"

"It's beautiful!" I said, delighted. "What's it made of? Ebony?"

"Black coral," he said. "I got it yesterday, when Fergus and I were in Montego Bay." He and Fergus had taken the *Artemis* round the island, disposing at last of the cargo of bat guano, delivered to its purchaser.

I found a length of white satin ribbon, and Jamie obligingly tied it about my neck, bending to peer over my shoulder at the reflection in the mirror.

"No, they won't be looking at me," he said. "Half o' them will be lookin' at you, Sassenach, and the other half at Mr. Willoughby."

"Mr. Willoughby? Is that safe? I mean—" I stole a look at the little Chinese, sitting patiently cross-legged on a stool, gleaming in clean blue silk, and lowered my voice. "I mean, they'll have wine, won't they?"

Jamie nodded. "And whisky, and cambric, and claret cup, and port, and champagne punch—and a wee cask of the finest French brandy—contributed by the courtesy of Monsieur Etienne Marcel de Provac Alexandre." He put a hand on his chest and bowed again, in an exaggerated pantomime that made me laugh. “Nay worry,” he said, straightening up. “He’ll behave, or I’ll have his coral globe back—will I no, ye wee heathen?” he added with a grin to Mr. Willoughby.

The Chinese scholar nodded with considerable dignity. The embroidered black silk of his round cap was decorated with a small carved knob of red coral—the badge of his calling, restored to him by the chance encounter with a coral trader on the docks at Montego, and Jamie’s good nature.

“You’re quite sure we have to go?” The palpitations I was experiencing were due in part to the tightness of the stays I was wearing, but in greater degree to recurring visions of Jamie’s wig falling off and the reception coming to a complete stop as the entire assemblage paused to stare at his hair before calling en masse for the Royal Navy.

“Aye, we do.” He smiled at me reassuringly. “Dinna worry, Sassenach; if anyone’s there from the *Porpoise,* it’s not likely they’ll recognize me—not like this.”

“I hope not. Do you think anyone from the ship *will* be there tonight?”

“I doubt it.” He scratched viciously at the wig above his left ear. “Where did ye get this thing, Fergus? I believe it’s got lice.”

“Oh, no, milord,” Fergus assured him. “The wigmaker from whom I rented it assured me that it had been well dusted with hyssop and horse nettle to prevent any such infestations.” Fergus himself was wearing his own hair, thickly powdered, and was handsome—if less startling than Jamie—in a new suit of dark blue velvet.

There was a tentative knock at the door, and Marsali stepped in. She too had had her wardrobe refurbished, and glowed in a dress of soft pink, with a deep rose sash.

She glowed somewhat more than I thought the dress accounted for, in fact, and as we made our way down the narrow corridor to the carriage, pulling in our skirts to keep them from brushing the walls, I managed to lean forward and murmur in her ear.

“Are you using the tansy oil?”

“Mm?” she said absently, her eyes on Fergus as he bowed and held open the carriage door for her. “What did ye say?”

“Never mind,” I said, resigned. That was the least of our worries at the moment.

* * *

The Governor’s mansion was ablaze with lights. Lanterns were perched along the low wall of the veranda, and hung from the trees along the paths of the ornamental garden. Gaily dressed people were emerging from their carriages on the crushed-shell drive, passing into the house through a pair of huge French doors.

We dismissed our own—or, rather, Jared’s—carriage, but stood for a moment on the drive, waiting for a brief lull in the arrivals. Jamie seemed mildly nervous—for him; his fingers twitched now and then against the gray satin, but his manner was outwardly as calm as ever.

There was a short reception line in the foyer; several of the minor dignitaries of the island had been invited to assist the new governor in welcoming his guests. I passed ahead of Jamie down the line, smiling and nodding to the Mayor of Kingston and his wife. I quailed a bit at the sight of a fully decorated admiral next in line, resplendent in gilded coat and epaulettes, but no sign of anything beyond a mild amazement crossed his features as he shook hands with the gigantic Frenchman and the tiny Chinese who accompanied me.

There was my acquaintance from the *Porpoise;* Lord John’s blond hair was hidden under a formal wig tonight, but I recognized the fine, clear features and slight, muscular body at once. He stood a little apart from the other dignitaries, alone. Rumor had it that his wife had refused to leave England to accompany him to this posting.

He turned to greet me, his face fixed in an expression of formal politeness. He looked, blinked, and then broke into a smile of extraordinary warmth and pleasure.

“Mrs. Malcolm!” he exclaimed, seizing my hands. “I am vastly pleased to see you!”

“The feeling is entirely mutual,” I said, smiling back at him. “I didn’t know you were the Governor, last time we met. I’m afraid I was a bit informal."

He laughed, his face glowing with the light of the candles in the wall sconces. Seen clearly in the light for the first time, I realized what a remarkably handsome man he was.

"You might be thought to have had an excellent excuse," he said. He looked me over carefully. "May I say that you are in remarkable fine looks this evening? Clearly the island air must agree with you somewhat more than the miasmas of shipboard. I had hoped to meet you again before leaving the *Porpoise,* but when I inquired for you, I was told by Mr. Leonard that you were unwell. I trust you are entirely recovered?"

"Oh, entirely," I told him, amused. Unwell, eh? Evidently Tom Leonard was not about to admit to losing me overboard. I wondered whether he had put my disappearance in the log.

"May I introduce my husband?" I turned to wave at Jamie, who had been detained in animated conversation with the admiral, but who was now advancing toward us, accompanied by Mr. Willoughby.

I turned back to find the Governor gone green as a gooseberry. He stared from Jamie to me, and back again, pale as though confronted by twin specters.

Jamie came to a stop beside me, and inclined his head graciously toward the Governor.

"John," he said softly. "It's good to see ye, man."

The Governor's mouth opened and shut without making a sound.

"Let us make an opportunity to speak, a bit later," Jamie murmured. "But for now—my name is Etienne Alexandre." He took my arm, and bowed formally. "And may I have the pleasure to present to you my wife, Claire?" he said aloud, shifting effortlessly into French.

"Claire?" The Governor looked wildly at me. "*Claire?*"

"Er, yes," I said, hoping he wasn't going to faint. He looked very much as though he might, though I had no idea why the revelation of my Christian name ought to affect him so strongly.

The next arrivals were waiting impatiently for us to move out of the way. I bowed, fluttering my fan, and we walked into the main salon of the Residence. I glanced back over my shoulder to see the Governor, shaking hands mechanically with the new arrival, staring after us with a face like white paper.

The salon was a huge room, low-ceilinged and filled with people, noisy and bright as a cageful of parrots. I felt some relief at the sight. Among this crowd, Jamie wouldn't be terribly conspicuous, despite his size.

A small orchestra played at one side of the room, near a pair of doors thrown open to the terrace outside. I saw a number of people strolling there, evidently seeking either a breath of air, or sufficient quiet to hold a private conversation. At the other side of the room, yet another pair of doors opened into a short hallway, where the retiring rooms were.

We knew no one, and had no social sponsor to make introductions. However, due to Jamie's foresight, we had no need of one. Within moments of our arrival, women had begun to cluster around us, fascinated by Mr. Willoughby.

"My acquaintance, Mr. Yi Tien Cho," Jamie introduced him to a stout young woman in tight yellow satin. "Late of the Celestial Kingdom of China, Madame."

"Ooh!" The young lady fluttered her fan before her face, impressed. "Really from China? But what an unthinkable distance you must have come! Do let me welcome you to our small island, Mr.—Mr. Cho?" She extended a hand to him, clearly expecting it to be kissed.

Mr. Willoughby bowed deeply, hands in his sleeves, and obligingly said something in Chinese. The young woman looked thrilled. Jamie looked momentarily startled, and then the mask of urbanity dropped back over his face. I saw Mr. Willoughby's shining black eyes fix on the tips of the lady's shoes, protruding from under the hem of her dress, and wondered just what he had said to her.

Jamie seized the opportunity—and the lady's hand—bowing over it with extreme politeness.

"Your servant, Madame," he said in thickly accented English. "Etienne Alexandre. And might I present to you my wife, Claire?"

“Oh, yes, so pleased to meet you!” The young woman, flushed with excitement, took my hand and squeezed it. “I’m Marcelline Williams; perhaps you’ll be acquainted with my brother, Judah? He owns Twelvetrees—you know, the large coffee plantation? I’ve come to stay with him for the season, and I’m having ever so marvelous a time!”

“No, I’m afraid we don’t know anyone here,” I said apologetically. “We’ve only just arrived ourselves—from Martinique, where my husband’s sugar business is.”

“Oh,” Miss Williams cried, her eyes flying wide open. “But you must allow me to make you acquainted with my particular friends, the Stephenses! I believe they once visited Martinique, and Georgina Stephens is such a charming person—you will like her at once, I promise!”

And that was all there was to it. Within an hour, I had been introduced to dozens of people, and was being carried slowly round the room, eddying from one group to the next, passed hand to hand by the current of introductions launched by Miss Williams.

Across the room, I could see Jamie, standing head and shoulders above his companions, the picture of aristocratic dignity. He was conversing cordially with a group of men, all eager to make the acquaintance of a prosperous businessman who might offer useful contacts with the French sugar trade. I caught his eye once, in passing, and he gave me a brilliant smile and a gallant French bow. I still wondered what in the name of God he thought he was up to, but shrugged mentally. He would tell me when he was ready.

Fergus and Marsali, as usual needing no one’s company but each other’s, were dancing at one end of the floor, her glowing pink face smiling into his. For the sake of the occasion, Fergus had forgone his useful hook, replacing it with a black leather glove filled with bran, pinned to the sleeve of his coat. This rested against the back of Marsali’s gown, a trifle stiff-looking, but not so unnatural as to provoke comment.

I danced past them, revolving sedately in the arms of a short, tubby English planter named Carstairs, who wheezed pleasantries into my bosom, red face streaming sweat.

As for Mr. Willoughby, he was enjoying an unparalleled social triumph, the center of attention of a cluster of ladies who vied with each other in pressing dainties and refreshments on him. His eyes were bright, and a faint flush shone on his sallow cheeks.

Mr. Carstairs deposited me among a group of ladies at the end of the dance, and gallantly went to fetch a cup of claret. I at once returned to the business of the evening, asking the ladies whether they might be familiar with people to whose acquaintance I had been recommended, named Abernathy.

“Abernathy?” Mrs. Hall, a youngish matron, fluttered her fan and looked blank. “No, I cannot say I am acquainted with them. Do they take a great part in society, do you know?”

“Oh, no, Joan!” Her friend, Mrs. Yoakum, looked shocked, with the particular kind of enjoyable shock that precedes some juicy revelation. “You’ve heard of the Abernathys! You remember, the man who bought Rose Hall, up on the Yallahs River?”

“Oh, yes!” Mrs. Hall’s blue eyes widened. “The one who died so soon after buying it?”

“Yes, that’s the one,” another lady chimed in, overhearing. “Malaria, they *said* it was, but *I* spoke to the doctor who attended him—he had come to dress Mama’s bad leg, you know she is such a martyr to the dropsy—and *he* told me—in strictest confidence, of course …”

The tongues wagged merrily. Rosie MacIver had been a faithful reporter; all the stories she had conveyed were here, and more. I caught hold of the conversational thread and gave it a jerk in the desired direction.

“Does Mrs. Abernathy have indentured labor, as well as slaves?”

Here opinion was more confused. Some thought that she had several indentured servants, some thought only one or two—no one present had actually set foot in Rose Hall, but of course people *said*…

A few minutes later, the gossip had turned to fresh meat, and the *incredible* behavior of the new curate, Mr. Jones, with the widowed Mrs. Mina Alcott, but then, what could be expected of a woman with *her* reputation, and surely it was not entirely the young man’s fault, and she so much older, though of course, one in Holy Orders might be expected to be held to a higher standard … I made an excuse and slipped away to the ladies' retiring room, my ears ringing.

I saw Jamie as I went, standing near the refreshment table. He was talking to a tall, red-haired girl in embroidered cotton, a trace of unguarded tenderness lingering in his eyes as he looked at her. She was smiling eagerly up at him, flattered by his attention. I smiled at the sight, wondering what the young lady would think, did she realize that he was not really looking at her at all, but imagining her as the daughter he had never seen.

I stood in front of the looking glass in the outer retiring room, tucking in stray curls loosened by the exertion of dancing, and took pleasure in the temporary silence. The retiring room was luxuriously appointed, being in fact three separate chambers, with the privy facilities and a room for the storage of hats, shawls, and extraneous clothing opening off the main room, where I stood. This had not only a long pier-glass and a fully appointed dressing table, but also a chaise longue, covered in red velvet. I eyed it with some wistfulness—the slippers I was wearing were pinching my feet badly—but duty called.

So far, I had learned nothing beyond what we already knew about the Abernathy plantation, though I had compiled a useful list of several other plantations near Kingston that employed indentured labor. I wondered whether Jamie intended to call upon his friend the Governor to help in the search for Ian—that might possibly justify risking an appearance here tonight.

But Lord John's response to the revelation of my identity was both puzzling and disturbing; you would think the man had seen a ghost. I squinted at my violet reflection, admiring the glitter of the black-and-gold fish at my throat, but failed to see anything unsettling in my appearance. My hair was tucked up with pins decorated with seed pearls and brilliants, and discreet use of Mrs. MacIver's cosmetics had darkened my lids and blushed my cheeks quite becomingly, if I did say so myself.

I shrugged, fluttered my lashes seductively at my image, then patted my hair and returned to the salon.

I made my way toward the long tables of refreshments, where a huge array of cakes, pastries, savories, fruits, candies, stuffed rolls, and a number of objects I couldn't put a name to but presumed edible were displayed. As I turned absentmindedly from the refreshment table with a plate of fruit, I collided headlong with a dark-hued waistcoat. Apologizing to its owner in confusion, I found myself looking up into the dour face of the Reverend Archibald Campbell.

"Mrs. Malcolm!" he exclaimed in astonishment.

"Er … Reverend Campbell," I replied, rather weakly. "What a surprise." I dabbed tentatively at a smear of mango on his abdomen, but he took a marked step backward, and I desisted.

He looked rather coldly at my décolletage.

"I trust I find you well, Mrs. Malcolm?" he said.

"Yes, thank you," I said. I wished he would stop calling me Mrs. Malcolm before someone to whom I had been introduced as Madame Alexandre heard him.

"I was so sorry to hear about your sister," I said, hoping to distract him. "Have you any word of her yet?"

He bent his head stiffly, accepting my sympathy.

"No. My own attempts at instigating a search have of course been limited," he said. "It was at the suggestion of one of my parishioners that I accompanied him and his wife here tonight, with the intention of putting my case before the Governor, and begging his assistance in locating my sister. I assure you, Mrs. Malcolm, no less weighty a consideration would have impelled my attendance at a function such as this."

He cast a glance of profound dislike at a laughing group nearby, where three young men were competing with each other in the composition of witty toasts to a group of young ladies, who received these attentions with much giggling and energetic fan-fluttering.

"I'm truly sorry for your misfortune, Reverend," I said, edging aside. "Miss Cowden told me a bit about your sister's tragedy. If I should be able to be of help …"

“No one can help,” he interrupted. His eyes were bleak. “It was the fault of the Papist Stuarts, with their wicked attempt upon the throne, and the licentious Highlanders who followed them. No, no one can help, save God. He has destroyed the house of Stuart; he will destroy the man Fraser as well, and on that day, my sister will be healed.”

“Fraser?” The trend of the conversation was making me distinctly uneasy. I glanced quickly across the room, but luckily Jamie was nowhere in sight.

“That is the name of the man who seduced Margaret from her family and her proper loyalties. His may not have been the hand that struck her down, but it was on his account that she had left her home and safety, and placed herself in danger. Aye, God will requite James Fraser fairly,” he said with a sort of grim satisfaction at the thought.

“Yes, I’m sure he will,” I murmured. “If you will excuse me, I believe I see a friend …” I tried to escape, but a passing procession of footmen bearing dishes of meat blocked my way.

“God will not suffer lewdness to endure forever,” the Reverend went on, evidently feeling that the Almighty’s opinions coincided largely with his own. His small gray eyes rested with icy disapproval on a group nearby, where several ladies fluttered around Mr. Willoughby like bright moths about a Chinese lantern.

Mr. Willoughby was brightly lit, too, in more than one sense of the word. His high-pitched giggle rose above the laughter of the ladies, and I saw him lurch heavily against a passing servant, nearly upsetting a tray of sorbet cups.

“Let the women learn with all sobriety,” the Reverend was intoning, “avoiding all gaudiness of clothing and broided hair.” He seemed to be hitting his stride; no doubt Sodom and Gomorrah would be up next. “A woman who has no husband should devote herself to the service of the Lord, not be disporting herself with abandon in public places. Do you see Mrs. Alcott? And she a widow, who should be engaged in pious works!”

I followed the direction of his frown and saw that he was looking at a chubby, jolly-looking woman in her thirties, with light brown hair done in gathered ringlets, who was giggling at Mr. Willoughby. I looked at her with interest. So this was the infamous merry widow of Kingston!

The little Chinese had now got down upon his hands and knees and was crawling around on the floor, pretending to look for a lost earring, while Mrs. Alcott squeaked in mock alarm at his forays toward her feet. I thought perhaps I had better find Fergus without delay, and have him detach Mr. Willoughby from his new acquaintance before matters went too far.

Evidently offended beyond bearing by the sight, the Reverend abruptly put down the cup of lemon squash he had been holding, turned and made his way through the crowd toward the terrace, vigorously elbowing people out of his way.

I breathed a sigh of relief; conversation with the Reverend Campbell was a lot like exchanging frivolities with the public hangman—though, in fact, the only hangman with whom I had been personally acquainted was much better company than the Reverend.

Suddenly I saw Jamie's tall figure, heading for a door on the far side of the room, where I assumed the Governor's private quarters to be. He must be going to talk to Lord John now. Moved by curiosity, I decided to join him.

The floor was by now so crowded that it was difficult to make my way across it. By the time I reached the door through which Jamie had gone, he had long since disappeared, but I pushed my way through.

I was in a long hallway, dimly lighted by candles in sconces, and pierced at intervals by long casement windows, through which red light from the torches on the terrace outside flickered, picking up the gleam of metal from the decorations on the walls. These were largely military, consisting of ornamental sprays of pistols, knives, shields and swords. Lord John's personal souvenirs? I wondered, or had they come with the house?

Away from the clamor of the salon, it was remarkably quiet. I walked down the hallway, my steps muffled by the long Turkey carpet that covered the parquet.

There was an indistinguishable murmur of male voices ahead. I turned a corner into a shorter corridor and saw a door ahead from which light spilled—that must be the Governor's private office. Inside, I heard Jamie's voice.

"Oh, God, John!" he said.

I stopped dead, halted much more by the tone of that voice than by the words—it was broken with an emotion I had seldom heard from him.

Walking very quietly, I drew closer. Framed in the half-open door was Jamie, head bowed as he pressed Lord John Grey tight in a fervent embrace.

I stood still, completely incapable of movement or speech. As I watched, they broke apart. Jamie's back was turned to me, but Lord John faced the hallway; he could have seen me easily, had he looked. He wasn't looking toward the hallway, though. He was staring at Jamie, and on his face was a look of such naked hunger that the blood rushed to my own cheeks when I saw it.

I dropped my fan. I saw the Governor's head turn, startled at the sound. Then I was running down the hall, back toward the salon, my heartbeat drumming in my ears.

I shot through the door into the salon and came to a halt behind a potted palm, heart pounding. The wrought-iron chandeliers were thick with beeswax candles, and pine torches burned brightly on the walls, but even so, the corners of the room were dark. I stood in the shadows, trembling.

My hands were cold, and I felt slightly sick. What in the name of God was going on?

The Governor's shock at learning that I was Jamie's wife was now at least partially explained; that one glimpse of unguarded, painful yearning had told me exactly how matters stood on his side. Jamie was another question altogether.

He was the Governor of Ardsmuir prison, he had said, casually. And less casually, on another occasion, *D'ye ken what men in prison do?*

I did know, but I would have sworn on Brianna's head that Jamie didn't; hadn't, couldn't, under any circumstances whatever. At least

I would have sworn that before tonight. I closed my eyes, chest heaving, and tried not to think of what I had seen.

I couldn't, of course. And yet, the more I thought of it, the more impossible it seemed. The memories of Jack Randall might have faded with the physical scars he had left, but I could not believe that they would ever fade sufficiently for Jamie to tolerate the physical attentions of another man, let alone to welcome them.

But if he knew Grey so intimately as to make what I had witnessed plausible in the name of friendship alone, then why had he not told me of him before? Why go to such lengths to see the man, as soon as he learned that Grey was in Jamaica? My stomach dropped once more, and the feeling of sickness returned. I wanted badly to sit down.

As I leaned against the wall, trembling in the shadows, the door to the Governor's quarters opened, and the Governor came out, returning to his party. His face was flushed and his eyes shone. I could at that moment easily have murdered him, had I anything more lethal than a hairpin to hand.

The door opened again a few minutes later, and Jamie emerged, no more than six feet away. His mask of cool reserve was in place, but I knew him well enough to see the marks of a strong emotion under it. But while I could see it, I couldn't interpret it. Excitement? Apprehension? Fear and joy mingled? Something else? I had simply never seen him look that way before.

He didn't seek conversation or refreshments, but instead began to stroll about the room, obviously looking for someone. For me.

I swallowed heavily. I couldn't face him—not in front of a crowd. I stayed where I was, watching him, until he finally went out onto the terrace. Then I left my hiding place, and crossed the room as quickly as I could, heading for the refuge of the retiring room. At least there I would be able to sit down for a moment.

I pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside, relaxing at once as the warm, comforting scents of women's perfume and powder surrounded me. Then the other smell struck me. It too was a familiar scent—one of the smells of my profession. But not expected here.

The retiring room was still quiet; the loud rumble from the salon had dropped abruptly to a faint murmur, like a far-off thunderstorm. It was, however, no longer a place of refuge.

Mina Alcott lay sprawled across the red velvet chaise, her head hanging backward over the edge, her skirts in disarray about her neck. Her eyes were open, fixed in upside-down surprise. The blood from her severed throat had turned the velvet black beneath her, and dripped down into a large pool beneath her head. Her light brown hair had come loose from its dressing, the matted ends of her ringlets dangling in the puddle.

I stood frozen, too paralyzed even to call for help. Then I heard the sound of gay voices in the hallway outside, and the door pushed open. There was a moment's silence as the women behind me saw it too.

Light from the corridor spilled through the door and across the floor, and in the moment before the screaming began, I saw the footprints leading toward the window—the small neat prints of a felt-soled foot, outlined in blood.

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IN WHICH MUCH IS REVEALED

They had taken Jamie somewhere. I, shaking and incoherent, had been put—with a certain amount of irony—in the Governor's private office with Marsali, who insisted on trying to bathe my face with a damp towel, in spite of my resistance.

"They canna think Da had anything to do with it!" she said, for the fifth time.

"They don't." I finally pulled myself together enough to talk to her. "But they think Mr. Willoughby did—and Jamie brought him here."

She stared at me, wide-eyed with horror.

"Mr. Willoughby? But he couldn't!"

"I wouldn't have thought so." I felt as though someone had been beating me with a club; everything ached. I sat slumped on a small velvet love seat, aimlessly twirling a glass of brandy between my hands, unable to drink it.

I couldn't even decide what I *ought* to feel, let alone sort out the conflicting events and emotions of the evening. My mind kept jumping between the grisly scene in the retiring room, and the tableau I had seen a half-hour earlier, in this very room.

I sat looking at the Governor's big desk. I could still see the two of them, Jamie and Lord John, as though they had been painted on the wall before me.

"I just don't believe it," I said out loud, and felt slightly better for the saying.

“Neither do I,” said Marsali. She was pacing the floor, her footsteps changing from the click of heels on parquet to a muffled thump as she hit the flowered carpet. “He can’t have! I ken he’s a heathen, but we’ve lived wi’ the man! We *know* him!”

Did we? Did I know Jamie? I would have sworn I did, and yet … I kept remembering what he had said to me at the brothel, during our first night together. *Will ye take me, and risk the man that I am, for the sake of the man ye knew?* I had thought then—and since—that there was not so much difference between them. But if I were wrong?

“I’m not wrong!” I muttered, clutching my glass fiercely. “I’m not!” If Jamie could take Lord John Grey as a lover, and hide it from me, he wasn’t remotely the man I thought he was. There had to be some other explanation.

He didn’t tell you about Laoghaire, said an insidious little voice inside my head.

“That’s different,” I said to it stoutly.

“What’s different?” Marsali was looking at me in surprise.

“I don’t know; don’t mind me.” I brushed a hand across my face, trying to wipe away confusion and weariness. “It’s taking them a long time.”

The walnut case-clock had struck two o’clock in the morning before the door of the office opened and Fergus came in, accompanied by a grim-looking militiaman.

Fergus was somewhat the worse for wear; most of the powder had gone from his hair, shaken onto the shoulders of his dark blue coat like dandruff. What was left gave his hair a grayish cast, as though he had aged twenty years overnight. No surprise; I felt as though I had.

“We can go now, *chèrie*,” he said quietly to Marsali. He turned to me. “Will you come with us, milady, or wait for milord?”

“I’ll wait,” I said. I wasn’t going to bed until I had seen Jamie, no matter how long it took.

“I will have the carriage return for you, then,” he said, and put a hand on Marsali’s back to usher her out.

The militiaman said something under his breath as they passed him. I didn’t catch it, but evidently Fergus did. He stiffened, eyes narrowing, and turned back toward the man. The militiaman rocked up onto the balls of his feet, smiling evilly and looking expectant. Clearly he would like nothing better than an excuse to hit Fergus.

To his surprise, Fergus smiled charmingly at him, square white teeth gleaming.

"My thanks, *mon ami*," he said, "for your assistance in this most trying situation." He thrust out a black-gloved hand, which the militiaman accepted in surprise.

Then Fergus jerked his arm suddenly backward. There was a brief rip, and a pattering sound, as a small stream of bran struck the parquet floor.

"Keep it," he told the militiaman graciously. "A small token of my appreciation." And then they were gone, leaving the man slack-jawed, staring down in horror at the apparently severed hand in his grasp.

It was another hour before the door opened again, this time to admit the Governor. He was still handsome and neat as a white camellia, but definitely beginning to turn brown round the edges. I set the untouched glass of brandy down and got to my feet to face him.

"Where is Jamie?"

"Still being questioned by Captain Jacobs, the militia commander." He sank into his chair, looking bemused. "I had no notion he spoke French so remarkably well."

"I don't suppose you know him all that well," I said, deliberately baiting. What I wanted badly to know was just how well he *did* know Jamie. He didn't rise to it, though; merely took off his formal wig and laid it aside, running a hand through his damp blond hair with relief.

"Can he keep up such an impersonation, do you think?" he asked, frowning, and I realized that he was so occupied with thoughts of the murder and of Jamie that he was paying little, if any, attention to me.

"Yes," I said shortly. "Where do they have him?" I got up, heading for the door.

"In the formal parlor," he said. "But I don't think you should—"

Not pausing to listen, I yanked open the door and poked my head into the hall, then hastily drew it back and slammed the door.

Coming down the hall was the Admiral I had met in the receiving line, face set in lines of gravity suitable to the situation. Admirals I could deal with. However, he was accompanied by a flotilla of junior officers, and among the entourage I had spotted a face I knew, though he was now wearing the uniform of a first lieutenant, instead of an oversized captain's coat.

He was shaved and rested, but his face was puffy and discolored; someone had beaten him up in the not too distant past. Despite the differences in his appearance, I had not the slightest difficulty in recognizing Thomas Leonard. I had the distinct feeling that he wouldn't have any trouble recognizing me, either, violet silk notwithstanding.

I looked frantically about the office for someplace to hide, but short of crawling into the kneehole of the desk, there was no place at all. The Governor was watching me, fair brows raised in astonishment.

"What—" he began, but I rounded on him, finger to my lips.

"Don't give me away, if you value Jamie's life!" I hissed melodramatically, and so saying, flung myself onto the velvet love seat, snatched up the damp towel and dropped it on my face, and—with a superhuman effort of will—forced all my limbs to go limp.

I heard the door open, and the Admiral's high, querulous voice.

"Lord John—" he began, and then evidently noticed my supine form, for he broke off and resumed in a slightly lower voice, "Oh! I collect you are engaged?"

"Not precisely engaged, Admiral, no." Grey had fast reflexes, I would say that for him; he sounded perfectly self-possessed, as though he were quite used to being found in custody of unconscious females. "The lady was overcome by the shock of discovering the body."

"Oh!" said the Admiral again, this time dripping with sympathy. "I quite see that. Beastly shock for a lady, to be sure." He hesitated, then dropping his voice to a sort of hoarse whisper, said, "D'you think she's asleep?"

"I should think so," the Governor assured him. "She's had enough brandy to fell a horse." My fingers twitched, but I managed to lie still.

"Oh, quite. Best thing for shock, brandy." The Admiral went on whispering, sounding like a rusted hinge. "Meant to tell you I have sent to Antigua for additional troops—quite at your disposal—guards, search the town—if the militia don't find the fellow first," he added.

"I hope they may not," said a viciously determined voice among the officers. "I'd like to catch the yellow bugger myself. There wouldn't be enough of him left to hang, believe me!"

A deep murmur of approval at this sentiment went through the men, to be sternly quelled by the Admiral.

"Your sentiments do you credit, gentlemen," he said, "but the law will be observed in all respects. You will make that clear to the troops in your command; when the miscreant is taken, he is to be brought to the Governor, and justice will be properly executed, I assure you." I didn't like the way he emphasized the word "executed," but he got a grudging chorus of assent from his officers.

The Admiral, having delivered this order in his ordinary voice, dropped back into a whisper to take his leave.

"I shall be staying in the town, at MacAdams' Hotel," he croaked. "Do not hesitate to send to me for any assistance, Your Excellency."

There was a general shuffle and murmur as the naval officers took their leave, observing discretion for the sake of my slumbers. Then came the sound of a single pair of footsteps, and then the *whoosh* and creak of someone settling heavily into a chair. There was silence for a moment.

Then Lord John said "You can get up now, if you wish. I am supposing that you are not in fact prostrate with shock," he added, ironically. "Somehow I suspect that a mere murder would not be sufficient to discompose a woman who could deal single-handedly with a typhoid epidemic."

I removed the towel from my face and swung my feet off the chaise, sitting up to face him. He was leaning on his desk, chin in his hands, staring at me.

"There are shocks," I said precisely, smoothing back my damp curls and giving him an eyeball, "and then there are shocks. If you know what I mean."

He looked surprised; then a flicker of understanding came into his expression. He reached into the drawer of his desk, and pulled out my fan, white silk embroidered with violets.

"This is yours, I suppose? I found it in the corridor." His mouth twisted wryly as he looked at me. "I see. I suppose, then, you will have some notion of how your appearance earlier this evening affected *me*."

"I doubt it very much," I said. My fingers were still icy, and I felt as though I had swallowed some large, cold object that pressed uncomfortably under my breastbone. I breathed deeply, trying to force it down, to no avail. "You didn't know that Jamie was married?"

He blinked, but not in time to keep me from seeing a small grimace of pain, as though someone had struck him suddenly across the face.

"I knew he *had* been married," he corrected. He dropped his hands, fiddling aimlessly with the small objects that littered his desk. "He told me—or gave me to understand, at least—that you were dead."

Grey picked up a small silver paperweight, and turned it over and over in his hands, eyes fixed on the gleaming surface. A large sapphire was set in it, winking blue in the candlelight.

"Has he never mentioned me?" he asked softly. I wasn't sure whether the undertone in his voice was pain or anger. Despite myself, I felt some small sense of pity for him.

"Yes, he did," I said. "He said you were his friend." He glanced up, the fine-cut face lightening a bit.

"Did he?"

"You have to understand," I said. "He—I—we were separated by the war, the Rising. Each of us thought the other was dead. I found him again only—my God, was it only four months ago?" I felt staggered, and not only by the events of the evening. I felt as though I had lived several lifetimes since the day I had opened the door of the printshop in Edinburgh, to find A. Malcolm bending over his press.

The lines of stress in Grey's face eased a little.

"I see," he said slowly. "So—you have not seen him since—my God, that's twenty years!" He stared at me, dumbfounded. "And four months? Why—how—" He shook his head, brushing away the questions.

"Well, that's of no consequence just now. But he did not tell you—that is—has he not told you about Willie?"

I stared at him blankly.

"Who's Willie?"

Instead of explaining, he bent and opened the drawer of his desk. He pulled out a small object and laid it on the desk, motioning me to come closer.

It was a portrait, an oval miniature, set in a carved frame of some fine-grained dark wood. I looked at the face, and sat down abruptly, my knees gone to water. I was only dimly aware of Grey's face, floating above the desk like a cloud on the horizon, as I picked up the miniature to look at it more closely.

He might have been Bree's brother, was my first thought. The second, coming with the force of a blow to the solar plexus, was "My God in heaven, he *is* Bree's brother!"

There couldn't be much doubt about it. The boy in the portrait was perhaps nine or ten, with a childish tenderness still lingering about his face, and his hair was a soft chestnut brown, not red. But the slanted blue eyes looked out boldly over a straight nose a fraction of an inch too long, and the high Viking cheekbones pressed tight against smooth skin. The tilt of the head held the same confident carriage as that of the man who had given him that face.

My hands trembled so violently that I nearly dropped it. I set it back on the desk, but kept my hand over it, as though it might leap up and bite me. Grey was watching me, not without sympathy.

"You didn't know?" he said.

"Who—" My voice was hoarse with shock, and I had to stop and clear my throat. "Who is his mother?"

Grey hesitated, eyeing me closely, then shrugged slightly.

"Was. She's dead."

"Who was she?" The ripples of shock were still spreading from an epicenter in my stomach, making the crown of my head tingle and my toes go numb, but at least my vocal cords were coming back under my control. I could hear Jenny saying, *He's no the sort of man should sleep alone, aye?* Evidently he wasn't.

"Her name was Geneva Dunsany," Grey said. "My wife's sister."

My mind was reeling, in an effort to make sense of all this, and I suppose I was less than tactful.

"Your *wife?*" I said, goggling at him. He flushed deeply and looked away. If I had been in any doubt about the nature of the look I had seen him give Jamie, I wasn't any longer.

"I think you had better bloody well explain to me just what you have to do with Jamie, and this Geneva, and this boy," I said, picking up the portrait once more.

He raised one brow, cool and reserved; he had been shocked, too, but the shock was wearing off.

"I cannot see that I am under any particular obligation to do so," he said.

I fought back the urge to rake my nails down his face, but the impulse must have shown on my face, for he pushed back his chair and got his feet under him, ready to move quickly. He eyed me warily across the expanse of dark wood.

I took several deep breaths, unclenched my fists, and spoke as calmly as I could.

"Right. You're not. But I would appreciate it very much if you did. And why did you show me the picture if you didn't mean me to know?" I added. "Since I know that much, I'll certainly find out the rest from Jamie. You might as well tell me your side of it now." I glanced at the window; the slice of sky that showed between the half-open shutters was still a velvet black, with no sign of dawn. "There's time."

He breathed deeply, and laid down the paperweight. “I suppose there is.” He jerked his head abruptly at the decanter. “Will you have brandy?”

“I will,” I said promptly, “and I strongly suggest you have some, too. I expect you need it as much as I do.”

A slight smile showed briefly at the corner of his mouth.

“Is that a medical opinion, Mrs. Malcolm?” he asked dryly.

“Absolutely,” I said.

This small truce established, he sat back, rolling his beaker of brandy slowly between his hands.

“You said Jamie mentioned me to you,” he said. I must have flinched slightly at his use of Jamie’s name, for he frowned at me. “Would you prefer that I referred to him by his surname?” he said, coldly. “I should scarcely know which to use, under the circumstances.”

“No.” I waved it away, and took a sip of brandy. “Yes, he mentioned you. He said you had been the Governor of the prison at Ardsmuir, and that you were a friend—and that he could trust you,” I added reluctantly. Possibly Jamie felt he could trust Lord John Grey, but I was not so sanguine.

The smile this time was not quite so brief.

“I am glad to hear that,” Grey said softly. He looked down into the amber liquid in his cup, swirling it gently to release its heady bouquet. He took a sip, then set the cup down with decision.

“I met him at Ardsmuir, as he said,” he began. “And when the prison was shut down and the other prisoners sold to indenture in America, I arranged that Jamie should be paroled instead to a place in England, called Helwater, owned by friends of my family.” He looked at me, hesitating, then added simply, “I could not bear the thought of never seeing him again, you see.”

In a few brief words, he acquainted me with the bare facts of Geneva’s death and Willie’s birth.

“Was he in love with her?” I asked. The brandy was doing its bit to warm my hands and feet, but it didn’t touch the large cold object in my stomach.

"He has never spoken to me of Geneva," Grey said. He gulped the last of his brandy, coughed, and reached to pour another cup. It was only when he finished this operation that he looked at me again, and added, "But I doubt it, having known her." His mouth twisted wryly.

"He never told me about Willie, either, but there was a certain amount of gossip about Geneva and old Lord Ellesmere, and by the time the boy was four or five, the resemblance made it quite clear who his father was—to anyone who cared to look." He took another deep swallow of brandy. "I suspect that my mother-in-law knows, but of course she would never breathe a word."

"She wouldn't?"

He stared at me over the rim of his cup.

"No, would you? If it were a choice of your only grandchild being either the ninth Earl of Ellesmere, and heir to one of the wealthiest estates in England, or the penniless bastard of a Scottish criminal?"

"I see." I drank some more of my own brandy, trying to imagine Jamie with a young English girl named Geneva—and succeeding all too well.

"Quite," Grey said dryly. "Jamie saw, too. And very wisely arranged to leave Helwater before it became obvious to everyone."

"And that's where you come back into the story, is it?" I asked.

He nodded, eyes closed. The Residence was quiet, though there was a certain distant stir that made me aware that people were still about.

"That's right," he said. "Jamie gave the boy to me."

The stable at Ellesmere was well-built; cozy in the winter, it was a cool haven in summer. The big bay stallion flicked its ears lazily at a passing fly, but stood stolidly content, enjoying the attentions of his groom.

"Isobel is most displeased with you," Grey said.

"Is she?" Jamie's voice was indifferent. There was no need any longer to worry about displeasing any of the Dunsanys.

"She said you had told Willie you were leaving, which upset him dreadfully. He's been howling all day."

Jamie's face was turned away, but Grey saw the faint tightening at the side of his throat. He rocked backward, leaning against the stable wall as he watched the curry comb come down and down and down in hard, even strokes that left dark trails across the shimmering coat.

"Surely it would have been easier to say nothing to the boy?" Grey said quietly.

"I suppose it would—for Lady Isobel." Fraser turned to put up the curry comb, and slapped a hand on the stallion's rump in dismissal. Grey thought there was an air of finality in the gesture; tomorrow Jamie would be gone. He felt a slight thickening in his own throat, but swallowed it. He rose and followed Fraser toward the door of the stall.

"Jamie—" he said, putting his hand on Fraser's shoulder. The Scot swung round, his features hastily readjusting themselves, but not fast enough to hide the misery in his eyes. He stood still, looking down at the Englishman.

"You're right to go," Grey said. Alarm flared in Fraser's eyes, quickly supplanted by wariness.

"Am I?" he said.

"Anyone with half an eye could see it," Grey said dryly. "If anyone ever actually looked at a groom, someone would have noticed long before now." He glanced back at the bay stallion, and cocked one brow. "Some sires stamp their get. I have the distinct impression that any offspring of yours would be unmistakable."

Jamie said nothing, but Grey fancied that he had grown a shade paler than usual.

"Surely you can see—well, no, perhaps not," he corrected himself, "I don't suppose you have a looking glass, have you?"

Jamie shook his head mechanically. "No," he said absently. "I shave in the reflection from the trough." He drew in a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"Aye, well," he said. He glanced toward the house, where the French doors were standing open onto the lawn. Willie was accustomed to play there after lunch on fine days.

Fraser turned to him with sudden decision. "Will ye walk with me?" he said.

Not pausing for an answer, he set off past the stable, turning down the lane that led from the paddock to the lower pasture. It was nearly a quarter-mile before he came to a halt, in a sunny clearing by a clump of willows, near the edge of the mere.

Grey found himself puffing slightly from the quick pace—too much soft living in London, he chided himself. Fraser, of course, was not even sweating, despite the warmth of the day.

Without preamble, turning to face Grey, he said, "I wish to ask a favor of ye." The slanted blue eyes were direct as the man himself.

"If you think I would tell anyone …" Grey began, then shook his head. "Surely you don't think I could do such a thing. After all, I have known—or at least suspected—for some time."

"No." A faint smile lifted Jamie's mouth. "No, I dinna think ye would. But I would ask ye …"

"Yes," Grey said promptly. The corner of Jamie's mouth twitched.

"Ye dinna wish to know what it is first?"

"I should imagine that I know; you wish me to look out for Willie; perhaps to send you word of his welfare."

Jamie nodded.

"Aye, that's it." He glanced up the slope, to where the house lay half-hidden in its nest of fiery maples. "It's an imposition, maybe, to ask ye to come all the way from London to see him now and then."

"Not at all," Grey interrupted. "I came this afternoon to give you some news of my own; I am to be married."

"Married?" The shock was plain on Fraser's face. "To a woman?"

"I think there are not many alternatives," Grey replied dryly. "But yes, since you ask, to a woman. To the Lady Isobel."

"Christ, man! Ye canna do that!"

"I can," Grey assured him. He grimaced. "I made trial of my capacity in London; be assured that I shall make her an adequate husband. You needn't necessarily enjoy the act in order to perform it—or perhaps you were aware of that?"

There was a small reflexive twitch at the corner of Jamie's eye; not quite a flinch, but enough for Grey to notice. Jamie opened his *mouth, then closed it again and shook his head, obviously thinking better of what he had been about to say.*

"Dunsany is growing too old to take a hand in the running of the estate," Grey pointed out. "Gordon is dead, and Isobel and her mother cannot manage the place alone. Our families have known each other for decades. It is an entirely suitable match."

"Is it, then?" The sardonic skepticism in Jamie's voice was clear. Grey turned to him, fair skin flushing as he answered sharply.

"It is. There is more to a marriage than carnal love. A great deal more."

Fraser swung sharply away. He strode to the edge of the mere, and stood, boots sunk in the reedy mud, looking over the ruffled waves for some time. Grey waited patiently, taking the time to unribbon his hair and reorder the thick blond mass.

At long last, Fraser came back, walking slowly, head down as though still thinking. Face-to-face with Grey he looked up again.

"You are right," he said quietly. "I have no right to think ill of you, if ye mean no dishonor to the lady."

"Certainly not," Grey said. "Besides," he added more cheerfully, "it means I will be here permanently, to see to Willie."

"You mean to resign your commission, then?" One copper eyebrow flicked upward.

"Yes," Grey said. He smiled, a little ruefully. "It will be a relief, in a way. I was not meant for army life, I think."

Fraser seemed to be thinking. "I should be … grateful, then," he said, "if you would stand as stepfather to—to my son." He had likely never spoken the word aloud before, and the sound of it seemed to shock him. "I … would be obliged to you." Jamie sounded as though his collar were too tight, though in fact his shirt was open at the throat. Grey looked curiously at him, and saw that his countenance was slowly turning a dark and painful red.

"In return … If you want … I mean, I would be willing to … that is …"

Grey suppressed the sudden desire to laugh. He laid a light hand on the big Scot's arm, and saw Jamie brace himself not to flinch at the touch.

"My dear Jamie," he said, torn between laughter and exasperation. "Are you actually offering me your body in payment for my promise to look after Willie?"

Fraser's face was red to the roots of his hair.

"Aye, I am," he snapped, tight-lipped. "D'ye want it, or no?"

At this, Grey did laugh, in long gasping whoops, finally having to sit down on the grassy bank in order to recover himself.

"Oh, dear God," he said at last, wiping his eyes. "That I should live to hear an offer like that!"

Fraser stood above him, looking down, the morning light silhouetting him, lighting his hair in flames against the pale blue sky. Grey thought he could see a slight twitch of the wide mouth in the darkened face—humor, tempered with a profound relief.

"Ye dinna want me, then?"

Grey got to his feet, dusting the seat of his breeches. "I shall probably want you to the day I die," he said matter-of-factly. "But tempted as I am—" He shook his head, brushing wet grass from his hands.

"Do you really think that I would demand—or accept—any payment for such a service?" he asked. "Really, I should feel my honor most grossly insulted by that offer, save that I know the depth of feeling which prompted it."

"Aye, well," Jamie muttered. "I didna mean to insult ye."

Grey was not sure at this point whether to laugh or cry. Instead, he reached a hand up and gently touched Jamie's cheek, fading now to its normal pale bronze. More quietly, he said, "Besides, you cannot give me what you do not have."

Grey felt, rather than saw, the slight relaxation of tension in the tall body facing him.

"You shall have my friendship," Jamie said softly, "if that has any value to ye."

"A very great value indeed." The two men stood silent together for a moment, then Grey sighed and turned to look up at the sun. "It's getting late. I suppose you will have a great many things to do today?"

Jamie cleared his throat. "Aye, I have. I suppose I should be about my business."

"Yes, I suppose so."

Grey tugged down the points of his waistcoat, ready to go. But Jamie lingered awkwardly a moment, and then, as though suddenly making up his mind to it, stepped forward and bending down, cupped Grey's face between his hands.

Grey felt the big hands warm on the skin of his face, light and strong as the brush of an eagle's feather, and then Jamie Fraser's soft wide mouth touched his own. There was a fleeting impression of tenderness and strength held in check, the faint taste of ale and fresh-baked bread. Then it was gone, and John Grey stood blinking in the brilliant sun.

"Oh," he said.

Jamie gave him a shy, crooked smile.

"Aye, well," he said. "I suppose I'm maybe not poisoned." He turned then, and disappeared into the screen of willows, leaving Lord John Grey alone by the mere.

The Governor was quiet for a moment. Then he looked up with a bleak smile.

"That was the first time that he ever touched me willingly," he said quietly. "And the last—until this evening, when I gave him the other copy of that miniature."

I sat completely motionless, the brandy glass unregarded in my hands. I wasn't sure *what* I felt; shock, fury, horror, jealousy, and pity all washed through me in successive waves, mingling in eddies of confused emotion.

A woman had been violently done to death nearby, within the last few hours. And yet the scene in the retiring room seemed unreal by comparison with that miniature; a small and unimportant picture, painted in tones of red. For the moment, neither Lord John nor I was concerned with crime or justice—or with anything beyond what lay between us.

The Governor was examining my face, with considerable absorption.

"I suppose I should have recognized you on the ship," he said. "But of course, at the time, I had thought you long dead."

"Well, it was dark," I said, rather stupidly. I shoved a hand through my curls, feeling dizzy from brandy and sleeplessness. Then I realized what he had said.

"Recognized me? But you'd never met me!"

He hesitated, then nodded.

"Do you recall a dark wood, near Carryarrick in the Scottish Highlands, twenty years ago? And a young boy with a broken arm? You set it for me." He lifted one arm in demonstration.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ." I picked up the brandy and took a swallow that made me cough and gasp. I blinked at him, eyes watering. Knowing now who he was, I could make out the fine, light bones and see the slighter, softer outline of the boy he had been.

"Yours were the first woman's breasts I had ever seen," he said wryly. "It was a considerable shock."

"From which you appear to have recovered," I said, rather coldly. "You seem to have forgiven Jamie for breaking your arm and threatening to shoot you, at least."

He flushed slightly, and set down his beaker.

"I—well—yes," he said, abruptly.

We sat there for quite some time, neither of us having any idea what to say. He took a breath once or twice, as though about to say something, but then abandoned it. At last, he closed his eyes as though commending his soul to God, opened them and looked at me.

"Do you know—" he began, then stopped. He looked down at his clenched hands, then, not at me. A blue stone winked on one knuckle, bright as a teardrop.

"Do you know," he said again, softly, addressing his hands, "what it is to love someone, and never—never!—be able to give them peace, or joy, or happiness?"

He looked up then, eyes filled with pain. "To know that you cannot give them happiness, not through any fault of yours or theirs, but only because you were not born the right person for them?"

I sat quiet, seeing not his, but another handsome face; dark, not fair. Not feeling the warm breath of the tropical night, but the icy hand of a Boston winter. Seeing the pulse of light like heart's blood, spilling across the cold snow of hospital linens.

… *only because you were not born the right person for them*.

"I know," I whispered, hands clenched in my lap. I had told Frank—Leave me. But he could not, no more than I could love him rightly, having found my match elsewhere.

Oh, Frank, I said, silently. Forgive me.

"I suppose I am asking whether you believe in fate," Lord John went on. The ghost of a smile wavered on his face. "You, of all people, would seem best suited to say."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" I said bleakly. "But I don't know, any more than you."

He shook his head, then reached out and picked up the miniature.

"I have been more fortunate than most, I suppose," he said quietly. "There was the one thing he would take from me." His expression softened as he looked down into the face of the boy in the palm of his hand. "And he has given me something most precious in return."

Without thinking, my hand spread out across my belly. Jamie had given me that same precious gift—and at the same great cost to himself.

The sound of footsteps came down the hall, muffled by the carpet. There was a sharp rap at the door, and a militiaman stuck his head into the office.

"Is the lady recovered yet?" he asked. "Captain Jacobs has finished his questions, and Monsieur Alexandre's carriage has returned."

I got hastily to my feet.

"Yes, I'm fine." I turned to the Governor, not knowing what to say to him. "I—thank you for—that is—"

He bowed formally to me, coming around the desk to see me out.

"I regret extremely that you should have been subjected to such a shocking experience, ma'am," he said, with no trace of anything but diplomatic regret in his voice. He had resumed his official manner, smooth and polished as his parquet floors.

I followed the militiaman, but at the door I turned impulsively.

“When we met, that night aboard the *Porpoise*—I’m glad you didn’t know who I was. I … liked you. Then.”

He stood for a second, polite, remote. Then the mask dropped away.

“I liked you, too,” he said quietly. “Then.”

* * *

I felt as though I were riding next to a stranger. The light was beginning to gray toward dawn, and even in the dimness of the coach, I could see Jamie sitting opposite me, his face drawn with weariness. He had taken off the ridiculous wig as soon as we drove away from Government House, discarding the facade of the polished Frenchman to let the disheveled Scot beneath show through. His unbound hair lay in waves over his shoulders, dark in that predawn light that robs everything of color.

“Do you think he did it?” I asked at last, only for something to say.

His eyes were closed. At this, they opened and he shrugged slightly.

“I don’t know,” he said. He sounded exhausted. “I have asked myself that a thousand times tonight—and been asked it even more.” He rubbed his knuckles hard over his forehead.

“I canna imagine a man I know to do such a thing. And yet … well, ye ken he’ll do anything when he’s drink taken. And he’s killed before, drunk—you’ll mind the Customs man at the brothel?” I nodded, and he leaned forward, elbows on his knees, sinking his head into his hands.

“This is different, though,” he said. “I canna think—but maybe so. Ye ken what he said about women on the ship. And if this Mrs. Alcott was to have toyed wi’ him—”

“She did,” I said. “I saw her.”

He nodded without looking up. “So did any number of other people. But if she led him to think she meant more than she maybe did, and then perhaps she put him off, maybe laughed at him … and him fu' as a puggie wi' drink, and knives to hand on every wall of the place …" He sighed and sat up.

"God knows," he said bleakly. "I don't." He ran a hand backward through his hair, smoothing it.

"There's something else about it. I had to tell them that I scarcely knew Willoughby—that we'd met him on the packet boat from Martinique, and thought it kindly to introduce him about, but didna ken a thing of where he came from, or the sort of fellow he truly was."

"Did they believe it?"

He glanced at me wryly.

"So far. But the packet boat comes in again in six days—at which point, they'll question the captain and discover that he's never laid eyes on Monsieur Etienne Alexandre and his wife, let alone a wee yellow murdering fiend."

"That might be a trifle awkward," I observed, thinking of Fergus and the militiaman. "We're already rather unpopular on Mr. Willoughby's account."

"Nothing to what we will be, if six days pass and they havena found him," he assured me. "Six days is also maybe as long as it will take for gossip to spread from Blue Mountain House to Kingston about the MacIvers' visitors—for ye ken the servants there all know who we are."

"Damn."

He smiled briefly at that, and my heart turned over to see it.

"You've a nice way wi' words, Sassenach. Aye, well, all it means is that we must find Ian within six days. I shall go to Rose Hall at once, but I think I must just have a wee rest before setting out." He yawned widely behind his hand and shook his head, blinking.

We didn't speak again until after we had arrived at Blue Mountain House and made our way on tiptoe through the slumbering house to our room.

I changed in the dressing room, dropping the heavy stays on the floor with relief, and taking out the pins to let my hair fall free. Wearing only a silk chemise, I came into the bedroom, to see Jamie standing by the French door in his shirt, looking out over the lagoon.

He turned when he heard me, and beckoned, putting a finger to his lips.

“Come see,” he whispered.

There was a small herd of manatees in the lagoon, big gray bodies gliding under the dark crystal water, rising gleaming like smooth, wet rocks. Birds were beginning to call in the trees near the house; besides this, the only sound was the frequent *whoosh* of the manatees’ breath as they rose for air, and now and then an eerie sound like a hollow, distant wail, as they called to each other.

We watched them in silence, side by side. The lagoon began to turn green as the first rays of sun touched its surface. In that state of extreme fatigue where every sense is preternaturally heightened, I was as aware of Jamie as though I were touching him.

John Grey’s revelations had relieved me of most of my fears and doubts—and yet there remained the fact that Jamie had not told me about his son. Of course he had reasons—and good ones—for his secrecy, but did he not think he could trust me to keep his secret? It occurred to me suddenly that perhaps he had kept quiet because of the boy’s mother. Perhaps he had loved her, in spite of Grey’s impressions.

She was dead; could it matter if he had? The answer was that it did. I had thought Jamie dead for twenty years, and it had made no difference at all in what I felt for him. What if he had loved this young English girl in such a way? I swallowed a small lump in my throat, trying to find the courage to ask him.

His face was abstracted, a small frown creasing his forehead, despite the dawning beauty of the lagoon.

“What are you thinking?” I asked at last, unable to ask for reassurance, fearing to ask for the truth.

“It’s only that I had a thought,” he answered, still staring out at the manatees. “About Willoughby, aye?”

The events of the night seemed far away and unimportant. Yet murder had been done.

“What was that?”

"Well, I couldna think at first that Willoughby could do such a thing—how could any man?" He paused, drawing a finger through the light mist of condensation that formed on the windowpanes as the sun rose. "And yet …" He turned to face me.

"Perhaps I can see." His face was troubled. "He was alone—verra much alone."

"A stranger, in a strange land," I said quietly, remembering the poems, painted in the open secrecy of bold black ink, sent flying toward a long-lost home, committed to the sea on wings of white paper.

"Aye, that's it." He stopped to think, rubbing a hand slowly through his hair, gleaming copper in the new daylight. "And when a man is alone that way—well, it's maybe no decent to say it, but making love to a woman is maybe the only thing will make him forget it for a time."

He looked down, turning his hands over, stroking the length of his scarred middle finger with the index finger of his left hand.

"That's what made me wed Laoghaire," he said quietly. "Not Jenny's nagging. Not pity for her or the wee lassies. Not even a pair of aching balls." His mouth turned up briefly at one corner, then relaxed. "Only needing to forget I was alone," he finished softly.

He turned restlessly, back to the window.

"So I am thinking that if the Chinee came to her, wanting that—needing that—and she wouldna take him …" He shrugged, staring out across the cool green of the lagoon. "Aye, maybe he could have done it," he said.

I stood beside him. Out in the center of the lagoon, a single manatee drifted lazily to the surface, turning on her back to hold the infant on her chest toward the sunlight.

He was silent for several minutes, and I was as well, not knowing how to take the conversation back to what I had seen and heard at Government House.

I felt rather than saw him swallow, and he turned from the window to face me. There were lines of tiredness in his face, but his expression was filled with a sort of determination—the sort of look he wore facing battle.

"Claire," he said, and at once I stiffened. He called me by my name only when he was most serious. "Claire, I must tell ye something."

"What?" I had been trying to think how to ask, but suddenly I didn't want to hear. I took half a step back, away from him, but he grabbed my arm.

He had something hidden in his fist. He took my unresisting hand and put the object into it. Without looking, I knew what it was; I could feel the carving of the delicate oval frame and the slight roughness of the painted surface.

"Claire." I could see the slight tremor at the side of his throat as he swallowed. "Claire—I must tell ye. I have a son."

I didn't say anything, but opened my hand. There it was; the same face I had seen in Grey's office, a childish, cocky version of the man before me.

"I should ha' told ye before." He was searching my face for some clue to my feelings, but for once, my giveaway countenance must have been perfectly blank. "I would have—only—" He took a deep breath for strength to go on.

"I havena ever told anyone about him," he said. "Not even Jenny."

That startled me enough to speak.

"Jenny doesn't know?"

He shook his head, and turned away to watch the manatees. Alarmed by our voices, they had retreated a short distance, but then had settled down again, feeding on the water weed at the edge of the lagoon.

"It was in England. It's—he's—I couldna say he was mine. He's a bastard, aye?" It might have been the rising sun that flushed his cheeks. He bit his lip and went on.

"I havena seen him since he was a wee lad. I never will see him again—except it might be in a wee painting like this." He took the small picture from me, cradling it in the palm of his hand like a baby's head. He blinked, head bent over it.

"I was afraid to tell ye," he said, low-voiced. "For fear ye would think that perhaps I'd gone about spawning a dozen bastards … for fear ye'd think that I wouldna care for Brianna so much, if ye kent I had another child. But I do care, Claire—a great deal more than I can tell ye." He lifted his head and looked directly at me.

"Will ye forgive me?"

"Did you—" The words almost choked me, but I had to say them. "Did you love her?"

An extraordinary expression of sadness crossed his face, but he didn't look away.

"No," he said softly. "She … wanted me. I should have found a way—should have stopped her, but I could not. She wished me to lie wi' her. And I did, and … she died of it." He did look down then, long lashes hiding his eyes. "I am guilty of her death, before God; perhaps the more guilty—because I did not love her."

I didn't say anything, but put up a hand to touch his cheek. He pressed his own hand over it, hard, and closed his eyes. There was a gecko on the wall beside us, nearly the same color as the yellow plaster behind it, beginning to glow in the gathering daylight.

"What is he like?" I asked softly. "Your son?"

He smiled slightly, without opening his eyes.

"He's spoilt and stubborn," he said softly. "Ill-mannered. Loud. Wi' a wicked temper." He swallowed. "And braw and bonny and canty and strong," he said, so softly I could barely hear him.

"And yours," I said. His hand tightened on mine, holding it against the soft stubble of his cheek.

"And mine," he said. He took a deep breath, and I could see the glitter of tears under his closed lids.

"You should have trusted me," I said at last. He nodded, slowly, then opened his eyes, still holding my hand.

"Perhaps I should," he said quietly. "And yet I kept thinking—how should I tell ye everything, about Geneva, and Willie, and John—will ye know about John?" He frowned slightly, then relaxed as I nodded.

"He told me. About everything." His brows rose, but he went on.

"Especially after ye found out about Laoghaire. How could I tell ye, and expect ye to know the difference?"

"What difference?"

"Geneva—Willie's mother—she wanted my body," he said softly, watching the gecko's pulsing sides. "Laoghaire needed my name, and the work of my hands to keep her and her bairns." He turned his head then, dark blue eyes fixed on mine. "John—well." He lifted his shoulders and let them drop. "I couldna give him what he wanted—and he is friend enough not to ask it.

"But how shall I tell ye all these things," he said, the line of his mouth twisting. "And then say to you—it is only you I have ever loved? How should you believe me?"

The question hung in the air between us, shimmering like the reflection from the water below.

"If you say it," I said, "I'll believe you."

"You will?" He sounded faintly astonished. "Why?"

"Because you're an honest man, Jamie Fraser," I said, smiling so that I wouldn't cry. "And may the Lord have mercy on you for it."

"Only you," he said, so softly I could barely hear him. "To worship ye with my body, give ye all the service of my hands. To give ye my name, and all my heart and soul with it. Only you. Because ye will not let me lie—and yet ye love me."

I did touch him then.

"Jamie," I said softly, and laid my hand on his arm. "You aren't alone anymore."

He turned then and took me by the arms, searching my face.

"I swore to you," I said. "When we married. I didn't mean it then, but I swore—and now I mean it." I turned his hand over in both mine, feeling the thin, smooth skin at the base of his wrist, where the pulse beat under my fingers, where the blade of his dirk had cut his flesh once, and spilled his blood to mingle with mine forever.

I pressed my own wrist against his, pulse to pulse, heartbeat to heartbeat.

"Blood of my blood …" I whispered.

"Bone of my bone." His whisper was deep and husky. He knelt quite suddenly before me, and put his folded hands in mine; the gesture a Highlander makes when swearing loyalty to his chieftain.

"I give ye my spirit," he said, head bent over our hands.

" 'Til our life shall be done," I said softly. "But it isn't done yet, Jamie, is it?"

Then he rose and took the shift from me, and I lay back on the narrow bed naked, pulled him down to me through the soft yellow light, and took him home, and home, and home again, and we were neither one of us alone.

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THE SCENT OF GEMSTONES

Rose Hall was ten miles out of Kingston, up a steep and winding road of reddish dust that led into blue mountains. The road was overgrown, so narrow that we must ride in single file most of the way. I followed Jamie through the dark, sweet-scented caverns of cedar boughs, under trees nearly a hundred feet high. Huge ferns grew in the shade below, the fiddleheads nearly the size of real violin necks.

Everything was quiet, save for the calling of birds in the shrubbery—and even that fell silent as we passed. Jamie's horse stopped dead, once, and backed up, snorting; we waited as a tiny green snake wriggled across the path and into the undergrowth. I looked after it, but could see no farther than ten feet from the edge of the road; everything beyond was cool green shadow. I half-hoped that Mr. Willoughby had come this way—no one would ever find him, in a place like this.

The Chinaman had not been found in spite of an intensive search of the town by the island militia. The special detachment of marines from the barracks on Antigua was expected to arrive tomorrow. In the meantime, every house in Kingston was shut up like a bank vault, the owners armed to the teeth.

The mood of the town was thoroughly dangerous. Like the naval officers; it was the militia colonel's opinion that if the Chinaman were found, he would be lucky to survive long enough to be hanged.

"Be torn to pieces, I expect," Colonel Jacobs had said as he escorted us from the Residence on the night of the murder. "Have his balls ripped off and thrust down his stinking throat, I daresay," he added, with obvious grim satisfaction at the thought.

"I daresay," Jamie had murmured in French, assisting me into the carriage. I knew that the question of Mr. Willoughby was still troubling him; he had been quiet and thoughtful on the ride through the mountains. And yet there was nothing we could do. If the little Chinese was innocent, we could not save him; if he was guilty, we could not give him up. The best we might hope for was that he would not be found.

And in the meantime, we had five days to find Young Ian. If he were indeed at Rose Hall, all might be well. If he were not …

* * *

A fence and small gate marked the division of the plantation from the surrounding forest. Inside, the ground had been cleared, and planted in sugarcane and coffee. Some distance from the house, on a separate rise, a large, plain, mud-daub building stood, roofed with palm thatch. Dark-skinned people were going in and out, and the faint, cloying scent of burnt sugar hung over the place.

Below the refinery—or so I assumed the building to be—stood a large sugar press. A primitive-looking affair, this consisted of a pair of huge timbers crossed in the shape of an X, set on an enormous spindle, surmounting the boxlike body of the press. Two or three men were clambering over the press, but it was not working at present; the oxen who drove it were hobbled some distance away, grazing.

"How do they ever get the sugar down from here?" I asked curiously, thinking of the narrow trail we had come up. "On mules?" I brushed cedar needles off the shoulders of my coat, making myself presentable.

"No," Jamie answered absently. "They send it down the river on barges. The river's just over there, down the wee pass ye can see beyond the house." He pointed with his chin, reining up with one hand, and using the other to beat the dust of travel from the skirts of his coat.

"Ready, Sassenach?"

"As I'll ever be."

Rose Hall was a two-storied house; long and graciously proportioned, with a roof laid in expensive slates, rather than in the sheets of tin that covered most of the planters' residences. A long veranda ran all along one side of the house, with long windows and French doors opening on to it.

A great yellow rosebush grew by the front door, climbing on a trellis and spilling over the edge of the roof. The scent of its perfume was so heady that it made breathing difficult; or perhaps it was only excitement that made my breath come short and stick in my throat. I glanced around as we waited for the door to be answered, trying to catch a glimpse of any white-skinned figure near the sugar refinery above.

"Yes, sah?" A middle-aged slave woman opened the door, looking out curiously at us. She was wide-bodied, dressed in a white cotton smock, with a red turban wrapped round her head, and her skin was the deep, rich gold in the heart of the flowers on the trellis.

"Mr. and Mrs. Malcolm, to call upon Mrs. Abernathy, if ye please," Jamie said politely. The woman looked rather taken aback, as though callers were not a common occurrence, but after a moment's indecision, she nodded and stepped back, swinging the door wide.

"You be waitin' in the salon, please, sah," she said, in a soft lilt that made it "*sall*ong." "I be askin' the mistress will she see you."

It was a large room, long and graciously proportioned, lit by huge casement windows all down one side. At the far end of the room was the fireplace, an enormous structure with a stone overmantel and a hearth of polished slates that occupied nearly the whole wall. You could have roasted an ox in it without the slightest difficulty, and the presence of a large spit suggested that the owner of the house did so on occasion.

The slave had shown us to a wicker sofa and invited us to be seated. I sat, looking about, but Jamie strolled restlessly about the room, peering through the windows that gave a view of the cane fields below the house.

It was an odd room; comfortably furnished with wicker and rattan furniture, well-equipped with fat, soft cushions, but ornamented with small, uncommon curios. On one window ledge sat a row of silver handbells, graduated from small to large. Several squat figures of stone and terra-cotta sat together on the table by my elbow; some sort of primitive fetishes or idols.

All of them were in the shape of women, hugely pregnant, or with enormous, rounded breasts and exaggerated hips, and all with a vivid and mildly disturbing sexuality about them. It was not a prudish age, by any means, but I wouldn't have expected to find such objects in a drawing room in any age.

Somewhat more orthodox were the Jacobite relics. A silver snuffbox, a glass flagon, a decorated fan, a large serving platter—even the large woven rug on the floor; all decorated with the square white rose of the Stuarts. That wasn't so odd—a great many Jacobites who had fled Scotland after Culloden had come to the West Indies to seek the repair of their fortunes. I found the sight encouraging. A householder with Jacobite sympathies might be welcoming to a fellow Scot, and willing to oblige in the matter of Ian. *If he's here,* a small voice in my head warned.

Steps sounded in the inner part of the house, and there was a flutter at the door by the hearth. Jamie made a small grunting sound, as though someone had hit him, and I looked up, to see the mistress of the house step into the room.

I rose to my feet, and the small silver cup I had picked up fell to the floor with a clank.

"Kept your girlish figure, I see, Claire." Her head was tilted to one side, green eyes gleaming with amusement.

I was too paralyzed with surprise to respond aloud, but the thought drifted through my stunned mind that I couldn't say the same for her.

Geillis Duncan had always had a voluptuous abundance of creamy bosom and a generous swell of rounded hip. While still creamy-skinned, she was considerably more abundant and generous, in every dimension visible. She wore a loose muslin gown, under which the soft, thick flesh wobbled and swayed as she moved. The delicate bones of her face had long since been submerged in swelling plumpness, but the brilliant green eyes were the same, filled with malice and humor.

I took a deep breath, and got my voice back.

"I trust you won't take this the wrong way," I said, sinking slowly back onto the wicker sofa, "but why aren't you dead?"

She laughed, the silver in her voice as clear as a young girl's.

"Think I should have been, do you? Well, you're no the first—and I daresay you'll not be the last to think so, either."

Eyes creased to bright green triangles by amusement, she sank into her own chair, nodded casually to Jamie, and clapped her hands sharply to summon a servant. "Shall we have a dish of tea?" she asked me. "Do, and I'll read the leaves in your cup for ye, after. I've a reputation as a reader, after all; a fine teller o' the future, to be sure—and why not?" She laughed again, plump cheeks pinkening with mirth. If she had been as shocked by my appearance as I was at hers, she disguised it masterfully.

"Tea," she said, to the black maidservant who appeared in response to the summons. "The special kind in the blue tin, aye? And the bittie cakes wi' the nuts in, too."

"You'll take a bite?" she asked, turning back to me. " 'Tis something of an occasion, after all. I did wonder," she said, tilting her head to one side, like a gull judging the chances of snatching a fish, "whether our paths might cross again, after that day at Cranesmuir."

My heart was beginning to slow, the shock overcome in a great wave of curiosity. I could feel the questions bubbling up by the dozens, and picked one off the top at random.

"Did you know me?" I asked. "When you met me in Cranesmuir?"

She shook her head, the strands of cream-white hair coming loose from their pins and sliding down her neck. She poked haphazardly at her knot, still surveying me with interest.

"Not at the first, no. Though sure and I thought there was a great strangeness about ye—not that I was the only one to think that. Ye didna come through the stones prepared, did ye? Not on purpose, I mean?"

I bit back the words, “Not that time,” and said instead, “No, it was an accident. You came on purpose, though—from 1967?”

She nodded, studying me intently. The thickened flesh between her brows was creased, and the crease deepened slightly as she looked at me.

“Aye—to help Prince *Tearlach*.” Her mouth twisted to one side, as though she tasted something bad, and quite suddenly, she turned her head and spat. The globule of saliva hit the polished wooden floor with an audible *plop*.

“An gealtaire salach Atailteach!” she said. “Filthy Italian coward!” Her eyes darkened and shone with no pleasant light. “Had I known, I should have made my way to Rome and killed him, while there was time. His brother Henry might ha’ been no better, though—a ballock-less, sniveling priest, that one. Not that it made a difference. After Culloden, any Stuart would be as useless as another.”

She sighed, and shifted her bulk, the rattan of the chair creaking beneath her. She waved a hand impatiently, dismissing the Stuarts.

“Still, that’s done with for now. Ye came by accident—walked through the stones near the date of a Fire Feast, did ye? That’s how it usually happens.”

“Yes,” I said, startled. “I came through on Beltane. But what do you mean, ‘usually happens’? Have you met a great many others—like … us?” I ended hesitantly.

She shook her head rather absently. “Not many.” She seemed to be pondering something, though perhaps it was only the absence of her refreshments; she picked up the silver bell and rang it violently.

“Damn that Clotilda! Like us?” she said, returning to the question at hand. “No, I haven’t. Only one besides you, that I ken. Ye could ha’ knocked me over wi’ a feather, when I saw the wee scar on your arm, and kent ye for one like myself.” She touched the great swell of her own upper arm, where the small vaccination scar lay hidden beneath the puff of white muslin. She tilted her head in that bird-like way again, surveying me with one bright green eye.

“No, when I said that’s how it usually happens, I meant, judging from the stories. Folk who disappear in fairy rings and the stone circles, I mean. They usually walk through near Beltane or Samhain;

a few near the Sun Feasts—Midsummer's Day or the winter solstice."

"That's what the list was!" I said suddenly, reminded of the gray notebook I had left with Roger Wakefield. "You had a list of dates and initials—nearly two hundred of them. I didn't know what they were, but I saw that the dates were mostly in late April or early May, or near the end of October."

"Aye, that's right." She nodded, eyes still fixed on me in speculation. "So ye found my wee book? Is that how ye knew to come and look for me on Craigh na Dun? It *was* you, no? That shouted my name, just before I stepped through the stones?"

"Gillian," I said, and saw her pupils widen at the name that had once been hers, though her face stayed smooth. "Gillian Edgars. Yes, it was me. I didn't know if you saw me in the dark." I could see in memory the night-black circle of stones—and in the center, the blazing bonfire, and the figure of a slim girl standing by it, pale hair flying in the heat of the fire.

"I didn't see ye," she said. " 'Twas only later, when I heard ye call out at the witch trial and thought I'd heard your voice before. And then, when I saw the mark on your arm …" She shrugged massively, the muslin tight across her shoulders as she settled back. "Who was with ye, that night?" she asked curiously. "There were two I saw—a bonnie dark lad, and a girl."

She closed her eyes, concentrating, then opened them again to stare at me.

"Later on, I thought I kent her—but I couldna put a name to her, though I could swear I'd seen the face. Who was she?"

"Mistress Duncan? Or is it Mistress Abernathy, now?" Jamie interrupted, stepping forward and bowing to her formally. The first shock of her appearance was fading, but he was still pale, his cheekbones prominent under the stretched skin of his face.

She glanced at him, then looked again, as though noticing him for the first time.

"Well, and if it's no the wee fox cub!" she said, looking amused. She looked him carefully up and down, noting every detail of his appearance with interest.

"Grown to a bonny man, have ye no?" she said. She leaned back in the chair, which creaked loudly under her weight, and squinted appraisingly at him. "You've the look of the MacKenzies about ye, laddie. Ye always did, but now you're older, you've the look of both your uncles in your face."

"I am sure both Dougal and Colum would be pleased ye'd remember them so well." Jamie's eyes were fixed on her as intently as hers on him. He had never liked her—and was unlikely to change his opinion now—but he could not afford to antagonize her; not if she had Ian here somewhere.

The arrival of the tea interrupted whatever reply she might have made. Jamie moved to my side, and sat with me on the sofa, while Geilie carefully poured the tea and handed us each a cup, behaving exactly like a conventional hostess at a tea party. As though wishing to preserve this illusion, she offered the sugar bowl and milk jug, and sat back to make light conversation.

"If ye dinna mind my asking, Mrs. Abernathy," Jamie said, "how did ye come to this place?" Politely left unspoken was the larger question—*How did you escape being burned as a witch?*

She laughed, lowering her long lashes coquettishly over her eyes.

"Well, and ye'll maybe recall I was wi' child, back at Cranesmuir?"

"I seem to recall something of the sort." Jamie took a sip of his tea, the tips of his ears turning slightly pink. He had cause to remember that, all right; she had torn off her clothes in the midst of the witch trial, disclosing the secret bulge that would save her life—at least temporarily.

A small pink tongue poked out and delicately skimmed the tea droplets from her upper lip.

"Have ye had children yourself?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"I have."

"Terrible chore, isn't it? Dragging about like a mud-caked sow, and then being ripped apart for the sake of something looks like a drowned rat." She shook her head, making a low noise of disgust in her throat. "The beauty o' motherhood, is it? Still, I should not complain, I suppose-the wee ratling saved my life for me. And wretched as childbirth is, it's better than being burnt at the stake."

"I'd suppose so," I said, "though not having tried the latter, I couldn't say for sure."

Geillis choked in her tea, spraying brown droplets over the front of her dress. She mopped at them carelessly, eyeing me with amusement.

"Well, I've not done it either, but I've seen them burn, poppet. And I think perhaps even lyin' in a muddy hole watching your belly grow is better than that."

"They kept you in the thieves' hole all the time?" The silver spoon was cool in my hand, but my palm grew sweaty at the memory of the thieves' hole in Cranesmuir. I had spent three days there with Geillis Duncan, accused as a witch. How long had she stayed there?

"Three months," she said, staring meditatively into her tea. "Three mortal months of frozen feet and crawling vermin, stinking scraps of food and the grave-smell clinging to my skin day and night."

She looked up then, mouth twisting in bitter amusement. "But I bore the child in style, at the end. When my pains began, they took me from the hole—little chance I'd run then, aye?—and the babe was born in my own old bedroom; in the fiscal's house."

Her eyes were slightly clouded, and I wondered whether the liquid in her glass was entirely tea.

"I had diamond-paned windows, do ye recall? All in shades of purple and green and white—the finest house in the village." She smiled reminiscently. "They gave me the bairn to hold, and the green light fell over his face. He looked as though he was drowned indeed. I thought he should be cold to the touch, like a corpse, but he wasn't; he was warm. Warm as his father's balls." She laughed suddenly, an ugly sound.

"Why are men such fools? Ye can lead them anywhere by the cock—for a while. Then give them a son and ye have them by the balls again. But it's all ye are to them, whether they're coming in or going out—a cunt."

She was leaning back in her chair. At this, she spread her thighs wide, and hoisted her glass in ironic toast above her pubic bone, squinting down across the swelling bulge of belly.

"Well, here's to it, I say! Most powerful thing in the world. The niggers know that, at least." She took a deep, careless swig of her drink. "They carve wee idols, all belly and cunt and breasts. Same as men do where we came from—you and I." She squinted at me, teeth bared in amusement. "Seen the dirty mags men buy under the counters then, aye?"

The bloodshot green eyes swiveled to Jamie. "And you'll know the pictures and the books the men pass about among themselves in Paris now, won't ye, fox? It's all the same." She waved a hand and drank again, deeply. "The only difference is the niggers have the decency to worship it."

"Verra perceptive of them," Jamie said calmly. He was sitting back in his chair, long legs stretched out in apparent relaxation, but I could see the tension in the fingers of the hand that gripped his own cup. "And how d'ye ken the pictures men look at in Paris, Mistress—Abernathy, is it now?"

She might be tipsy, but was by no means fuddled. She looked up sharply at the tone of his voice, and gave him a twisted smile.

"Oh, Mistress Abernathy will do well enough. When I lived in Paris, I had another name—Madame Melisande Robicheaux. Like that one? I thought it a bit grand, but your uncle Dougal gave it me, so I kept it—out of sentiment."

My free hand curled into a fist, out of sight in the folds of my skirt. I had heard of Madame Melisande, when we lived in Paris. Not a part of society, she had had some fame as a seer of the future; ladies of the court consulted her in deepest secrecy, for advice on their love lives, their investments, and their pregnancies.

"I imagine you could have told the ladies some interesting things," I said dryly.

Her laugh this time was truly amused. "Oh, I could, indeed! Seldom did, though. Folk don't usually pay for the truth, ye know. Sometimes, though—did ye ken that Jean-Paul Marat's mother meant to name her bairn Rudolphe? I told her I thought Rudolphe was ill-omened. I wondered now and then about that—would he grow up a revolutionary with a name like Rudolphe, or would he take it all out in writing poems, instead? Ever think that, fox—that a name might make a difference?” Her eyes were fixed on Jamie, green glass.

“Often,” he said, and set down his cup. “It was Dougal got ye away from Cranesmuir, then?”

She nodded, stifling a small belch. “Aye. He came to take the babe—alone, for fear someone would find out he was the father, aye? I wouldna let it go, though. And when he came near to wrest it from me—why, I snatched the dirk from his belt and pressed it to the child’s throat.” A small smile of satisfaction at the memory curved her lovely lips.

“Told him I’d kill it, sure, unless he swore on his brother’s life and his own soul to get me safe away.”

“And he believed you?” I felt mildly ill at the thought of any mother holding a knife to the throat of her newborn child, even in pretense.

Her gaze swiveled back to me. “Oh, yes,” she said softly, and the smile widened. “He knew me, did Dougal.”

Sweating, even in the chill of December, and unable to take his eyes off the tiny face of his sleeping son, Dougal had agreed.

“When he leaned over me to take the child, I thought of plunging the dirk into his own throat instead,” she said, reminiscently. “But it would have been a good deal harder to get away by myself, so I didn’t.”

Jamie’s expression didn’t change, but he picked up his tea and took a deep swallow.

Dougal had summoned the locksman, John MacRae, and the church sexton, and by means of discreet bribery, insured that the hooded figure dragged on a hurdle to the pitch barrel next morning would not be that of Geillis Duncan.

“I thought they’d use straw, maybe,” she said, “but he was a cleverer man than that. Auld Grannie Joan MacKenzie had died three days before, and was meant to be burying that same afternoon. A few rocks in the coffin and the lid nailed down tight, and Bob's your uncle, eh? A real body, fine for burning." She laughed, and gulped the last swallow of her drink.

"Not everyone's seen their own funeral; fewer still ha' seen their own execution, aye?"

It had been the dead of winter, and the small grove of rowan trees outside the village stood bare, drifted with their own dead leaves, the dried red berries showing here and there on the ground like spots of blood.

It was a cloudy day, with the promise of sleet or snow, but the whole village turned out nonetheless; a witch-burning was not an event to be missed. The village priest, Father Bain, had died himself three months before, of fever brought on by a festering sore, but a new priest had been imported for the occasion from a village nearby. Perfuming his way with a censer held before him, the priest had come down the path to the grove, chanting the service for the dead. Behind him came the locksman and his two assistants, dragging the hurdle and its black-robed burden.

"I expect Grannie Joan would have been pleased," Geilie said, white teeth gleaming at the vision. "She couldna have expected more nor four or five people to her burying—as it was, she had the whole village, and the incense and special prayers to boot!"

MacRae had untied the body and carried it, lolling, to the barrel of pitch ready waiting.

"The court granted me the mercy to be weirrit before the burning," Geillis explained ironically. "So they expected the body to be dead—no difficulty there, if I was strangled already. The only thing anyone might ha' seen was that Grannie Joan weighed half what I did, newly delivered as I was, but no one seemed to notice she was light in MacRae's arms."

"You were *there?*" I said.

She nodded smugly. "Oh, aye. Well muffled in a cloak—everyone was, because o' the weather—but I wouldna have missed it."

As the priest finished his last prayer against the evils of enchantment, MacRae had taken the pine torch from his assistant and stepped forward.

"God, omit not this woman from Thy covenant, and the many evils that she in the body committed," he had said, and flung the fire into the pitch.

"It was faster than I thought it would be," Geillis said, sounding mildly surprised. "A great *whoosh!* of fire—there was a blast of hot air and a cheer from the crowd, and naught to be seen but the flames, shooting up high enough to singe the rowan branches overhead."

The fire had subsided within a minute, though, and the dark figure within was clear enough to be seen through the pale daylight flames. The hood and the hair had burned away with the first scorching rush, and the face itself was burned beyond recognition. A few moments more, and the clean dark shapes of the bones emerged from the melted flesh, an airy superstructure rising above the charring barrel.

"Only great empty holes where her eyes had been," she said. The moss-green eyes turned toward me, clouded by memory. "I thought perhaps she was looking at me. But then the skull exploded, and it was all over, and folk began to come away—all except a few who stayed in hopes of picking up a bit of bone as a keepsake."

She rose and went unsteadily to the small table near the window. She picked up the silver bell and rang it, hard.

"Aye," she said, her back turned to us. "Childbirth is maybe easier."

"So Dougal got ye away to France," Jamie said. The fingers of his right hand twitched slightly. "How came ye here to the West Indies?"

"Oh, that was later," she said carelessly. "After Culloden." She turned then, and smiled from Jamie to me.

"And what might bring the two of ye here to this place? Surely not the pleasure of my company?"

I glanced at Jamie, seeing the slight tensing of his back as he sat up straighter. His face stayed calm, though, only his eyes bright with wariness.

"We've come to seek a young kinsman of mine," he said. "My nephew, Ian Murray. We've some reason to think he is indentured here."

Geilie's pale brows rose high, making soft ridges in her forehead.

"Ian Murray?" she said, and shook her head in puzzlement. "I've no indentured whites at all, here. No whites, come to that. The only free man on the place is the overseer, and he's what they call a *griffone;* one-quarter black."

Unlike me, Geillis Duncan was a very good liar. Impossible to tell, from her expression of mild interest, whether she had ever heard the name Ian Murray before. But lying she was, and I knew it.

Jamie knew it, too; the expression that flashed through his eyes was not disappointment, but fury, quickly suppressed.

"Indeed?" he said politely. "And are ye not fearful, then, alone wi' your slaves here, so far from town?"

"Oh, no. Not at all."

She smiled broadly at him, then lifted her double chin and waggled it gently in the direction of the terrace behind him. I turned my head, and saw that the French door was filled from jamb to doorpost with an immense black man, several inches taller than Jamie, from whose rolled-up shirt sleeves protruded arms like tree trunks, knotted with muscle.

"Meet Hercules," Geilie said, with a tiny laugh. "He has a twin brother, too."

"Named Atlas, by chance?" I asked, with an edge to my voice.

"You guessed! Is she no the clever one, eh, fox?" She winked conspiratorially at Jamie, the rounded flesh of her cheek wobbling with the movement. The light caught her from the side as she turned her head, and I saw the red spiderwebs of tiny broken capillaries that netted her jowls.

Hercule took no note of this, or of anything else. His broad face was slack and dull, and there was no life in the deep-sunk eyes beneath the bony brow ridge. It gave me a very uneasy feeling to look at him, and not only because of his threatening size; looking at him was like passing by a haunted house, where something lurks behind blind windows.

"That will do, Hercule; ye can go back to work now." Geilie picked up the silver bell and tinkled it gently, once. Without a word, the giant turned and lumbered off the veranda. “I have no fear o’ the slaves,” she explained. “They’re afraid o’ me, for they think I’m a witch. Verra funny, considering, is it not?” Her eyes twinkled behind little pouches of fat.

“Geilie—that man.” I hesitated, feeling ridiculous in asking such a question. “He’s not a—a zombie?”

She laughed delightedly at that, clapping her hands together.

“Christ, a zombie? Jesus, Claire!” She chortled with glee, a bright pink rising from throat to hair roots.

“Well, I’ll tell ye, he’s no verra bright,” she said at last, still gasping and wheezing. “But he’s no dead, either!” and went off into further gales of laughter.

Jamie stared at me, puzzled.

“Zombie?”

“Never mind,” I said, my face nearly as pink as Geilie’s. “How many slaves have you got here?” I asked, wanting to change the subject.

“Hee hee,” she said, winding down into giggles. “Oh, a hundred or so. It’s no such a big place. Only three hundred acres in cane, and a wee bit of coffee on the upper slopes.”

She pulled a lace-trimmed handkerchief from her pocket and patted her damp face, sniffing a bit as she regained her composure. I could feel, rather than see, Jamie’s tension. I was sure he was as convinced as I that Geilie knew something about Ian Murray—if nothing else, she had betrayed no surprise whatever at our appearance. Someone had told her about us, and that someone could only be Ian.

The thought of threatening a woman to extract information wasn’t one that would come naturally to Jamie, but it would to me. Unfortunately, the presence of the twin pillars of Hercules had put a stop to that line of thought. The next best idea seemed to be to search the house and grounds for any trace of the boy. Three hundred acres was a fair piece of ground, but if he was on the property, he would likely be in or near the buildings—the house, the sugar refinery, or the slave quarters.

I came out of my thoughts to realize that Geilie had asked me a question.

"What's that?"

"I said," she repeated patiently, "that ye had a great deal of talent for the healing when I knew ye in Scotland; you'll maybe know more now?"

"I expect I might." I looked her over cautiously. Did she want my skill for herself? She wasn't healthy; a glance at her mottled complexion and the dark circles beneath her eyes was enough to show that. But was she actively ill?

"Not for me," she said, seeing my look. "Not just now, anyway. I've two slaves gone sick. Maybe ye'd be so kind as to look at them?"

I glanced at Jamie, who gave me the shadow of a nod. It was a chance to get into the slave quarters and look for Ian.

"I saw when we came in as ye had a bit of trouble wi' your sugar press," he said, rising abruptly. He gave Geilie a cool nod. "Perhaps I shall have a look at it, whilst you and my wife tend the sick." Without waiting for an answer, he took off his coat and hung it on the peg by the door. He went out by the veranda, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, sunlight glinting on his hair.

"A handy sort, is he?" Geilie looked after him, amused. "My husband Barnabas was that sort—couldna keep his hands off any kind of machine. Or off the slave girls, either," she added. "Come along, the sick ones are back o' the kitchen."

The kitchen was in a separate small building of its own, connected to the house by a breezeway covered with blooming jasmine. Walking through it was like floating through a cloud of perfume, surrounded by a hum of bees loud enough to be felt on the skin, like the low drone of a bagpipe.

"Ever been stung?" Geillis swiped casually at a low-flying furry body, batting it out of the air.

"Now and then."

"So have I," she said. "Any number of times, and nothing worse than a red welt on my skin to show for it. One of these wee buggers stung one o' the kitchen slaves last spring, though, and the wench swelled up like a toad and died, right before my eyes!" She glanced at me, eyes wide and mocking. "Did wonders for my reputation, I can tell ye. The rest o' the slaves put it about I'd witched the lass; put a spell on her to kill her for burning the sponge cake. I havena had so much as a scorched pot, since." Shaking her head, she waved away another bee.

While appalled at her callousness, I was somewhat relieved by the story. Perhaps the other gossip I had heard at the Governor's ball had as little foundation in fact.

I paused, looking out through the jasmine's lacy leaves at the cane fields below. Jamie was in the clearing by the sugar press, looking up at the gigantic crossbars of the machine while a man I assumed to be the overseer pointed and explained. As I watched, he said something, gesturing, and the overseer nodded emphatically, waving his hands in voluble reply. If I didn't find any trace of Ian in the kitchen quarters, perhaps Jamie would learn something from the overseer. Despite Geilie's denials, every instinct I had insisted that the boy was here—somewhere.

There was no sign of him in the kitchen itself; only three or four women, kneading bread and snapping peas, who looked up curiously as we came through. I caught the eye of one young woman, and nodded and smiled at her; perhaps I would have a chance to come back and talk, later. Her eyes widened in surprise, and she bent her head at once, eyes on the bowl of peapods in her lap. I saw her steal a quick glance at me as we crossed the long room, and noticed that she balanced the bowl in front of the small bulge of an early pregnancy.

The first sick slave was in a small pantry off the kitchen itself, lying on a pallet laid under shelves stacked high with gauze-wrapped cheeses. The patient, a young man in his twenties, sat up blinking at the sudden ray of light when I opened the door.

"What's the trouble with him?" I knelt down beside the man and touched his skin. Warm, damp, no apparent fever. He didn't seem in any particular distress, merely blinking sleepily as I examined him.

"He has a worm."

I glanced at Geilie in surprise. From what I had seen and heard so far in the islands, I thought it likely that at least three-quarters of the black population—and not a few of the whites—suffered from internal parasites. Nasty and debilitating as these could be, though, most were actively threatening only to the very young and the very old.

"Probably a lot more than one," I said. I pushed the slave gently onto his back and began to palpate his stomach. The spleen was tender and slightly enlarged—also a common finding here—but I felt no suspicious masses in the abdomen that might indicate a major intestinal infestation. "He seems moderately healthy; why have you got him in here in the dark?"

As though in answer to my question, the slave suddenly wrenched himself away from my hand, let out a piercing scream, and rolled up into a ball. Rolling and unrolling himself like a yo-yo, he reached the wall and began to bang his head against it, still screaming. Then, as suddenly as the fit had come on, it passed off, and the young man sank back onto the pallet, panting heavily and soaked with sweat.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said. "What was *that*?"

"A *loa-loa* worm," Geilie said, looking amused at my reaction. "They live in the eyeballs, just under the lining. They cross back and forth, from one eye to the other, and when they go across the bridge o' the nose, I'm told it's rather painful." She nodded at the slave, still quivering slightly on his pallet.

"The dark keeps them from moving so much," she explained. "The fellow from Andros who told me about them says ye must catch them when they've just come in one eye, for they're right near the surface, and ye can lift them out with a big darning needle. If ye wait, they go deeper, and ye canna get them." She turned back to the kitchen and shouted for a light.

"Here, I brought the needle, just in case." She groped in the bag at her waist and drew out a square of felt, with a three-inch steel needle thrust through it, which she extended helpfully to me.

"Are you out of your mind?" I stared at her, appalled.

"No. Did ye not say ye were a good healer?" she asked reasonably.

"I am, but—" I glanced at the slave, hesitated, then took the candle one of the kitchenmaids was holding out to me.

"Bring me some brandy, and a small sharp knife," I said. "Dip the knife—and the needle—in the brandy, then hold the tip in a flame for a moment. Let it cool, but don't touch it." As I spoke, I was gently pulling up one eyelid. The man's eye looked up at me, an oddly irregular, blotched brown iris in a bloodshot sclera the yellow of heavy cream. I searched carefully, bringing the candle flame close enough to shrink the pupil, then drawing it away, but saw nothing there.

I tried the other eye, and nearly dropped the candle. Sure enough, there was a small, transparent filament, *moving* under the conjunctiva. I gagged slightly at the sight, but controlled myself, and reached for the freshly sterilized knife, still holding back the eyelid.

"Take him by the shoulders," I said to Geilie. "Don't let him move, or I may blind him."

The surgery itself was horrifying to contemplate, but surprisingly simple to perform. I made one quick, small incision along the inside corner of the conjunctiva, lifted it slightly with the tip of the needle, and as the worm undulated lazily across the open field, I slipped the tip of the needle under the body and drew it out, neat as a loop of yarn.

Repressing a shudder of distaste, I flicked the worm away. It hit the wall with a tiny wet splat! and vanished in the shadows under the cheese.

There was no blood; after a brief debate with myself, I decided to leave it to the man's own tear ducts to irrigate the incision. That would have to be left to heal by itself; I had no fine sutures, and the wound was small enough not to need more than a stitch or two in any case.

I tied a clean pad of cloth over the closed eye with a bandage round the head, and sat back, reasonably pleased with my first foray into tropical medicine.

"Fine," I said, pushing back my hair. "Where's the other one?"

The next patient was in a shed outside the kitchen, dead. I squatted next to the body, that of a middle-aged man with grizzled hair, feeling both pity and outrage.

The cause of death was more than obvious: a strangulated hernia. The loop of twisted, gangrenous bowel protruded from one side of the belly, the stretched skin over it already tinged with green, though the body itself was still nearly as warm as life. An expression of agony was fixed on the broad features, and the limbs were still contorted, giving an unfortunately accurate witness to just what sort of death it had been.

"Why did you wait?" I stood up, glaring at Geilie. "For God's sake, you kept me drinking tea and chatting, while *this* was going on? He's been dead less than an hour, but he must have been in trouble a long time since—days! Why didn't you bring me out here at once?"

"He seemed pretty far gone this morning," she said, not at all disturbed by my agitation. She shrugged. "I've seen them so before; I didna think you could do anything much. It didna seem worth hurrying."

I choked back further recrimination. She was right; I could have operated, had I come sooner, but the chances of it doing any good were slim to nonexistent. The hernia repair was something I might have managed, even with such difficult conditions; after all, that was nothing more than pushing back the bowel protrusion and pulling the ruptured layers of abdominal muscle back together with sutures; infection was the only real danger. But once the loop of escaped intestine had twisted, so that the blood supply was cut off and the contents began to putrefy, the man was doomed.

But to allow the man to die here in this stuffy shed, alone … well, perhaps he would not have found the presence of one white woman more or less a comfort, in any case. Still, I felt an obscure sense of failure; the same I always felt in the presence of death. I wiped my hands slowly on a brandy-soaked cloth, mastering my feelings.

One to the good, one to the bad—and Ian still to be found.

"Since I'm here now, perhaps I'd best have a look at the rest of your slaves," I suggested. "An ounce of prevention, you know."

"Oh, they're well enough." Geilie waved a careless hand. "Still, if ye want to take the time, you're welcome. Later, though; I've a visitor coming this afternoon, and I want to talk more with ye, first. Come back to the house, now—someone will take care o' this." A brief nod disposed of "this," the slave's contorted body. She linked her arm in mine, urging me out of the shed and back toward the kitchen with soft thrustings of her weight.

In the kitchen, I detached myself, motioning toward the pregnant slave, now on her hands and knees, scrubbing the hearthstones.

"You go along; I want to have a quick look at this girl. She looks a bit toxic to me—you don't want her to miscarry."

Geilie gave me a curious glance, but then shrugged.

"She's foaled twice with no trouble, but you're the doctor. Aye, if that's your notion of fun, go ahead. Don't take too long, though; that parson said he'd come at four o'clock."

I made some pretense of examining the bewildered woman, until Geilie's draperies had disappeared into the breezeway.

"Look," I said. "I'm looking for a young white boy named Ian; I'm his aunt. Do you know where he might be?"

The girl—she couldn't be more than seventeen or eighteen—looked startled. She blinked, and darted a glance at one of the older women, who had quit her own work and come across the room to see what was going on.

"No, ma'am," the older woman said, shaking her head. "No white boys here. None at all."

"No, ma'am," the girl obediently echoed. "We don' know nothin' 'bout your boy." But she hadn't said that at first, and her eyes wouldn't meet mine.

The older woman had been joined now by the other two kitchenmaids, coming to buttress her. I was surrounded by an impenetrable wall of bland ignorance, and no way to break through it. At the same time, I was aware of a current running among the women—a feeling of mutual warning; of wariness and secrecy. It might be only the natural reaction to the sudden appearance of a white stranger in their domain—or it might be something more.

I couldn't take longer; Geilie would be coming back to look for me. I fumbled quickly in my pocket, and pulled out a silver florin, which I pressed into the girl's hand.

"If you should see Ian, tell him that his uncle is here to find him." Not waiting for an answer, I turned and hurried out of the kitchen.

I glanced down toward the sugar mill as I passed through the breezeway. The sugar press stood abandoned, the oxen grazing placidly in the long grass at the edge of the clearing. There was no sign of Jamie or the overseer; had he come back to the house?

I came through the French windows into the salon, and stopped short. Geilie sat in her wicker chair, Jamie's coat across the arm, and the photographs of Brianna spread over her lap. She heard my step and looked up, one pale brow arched over an acid smile.

"What a pretty lassie, to be sure. What's her name?"

"Brianna." My lips felt stiff. I walked slowly toward her, fighting the urge to snatch the pictures from her hands and run.

"Looks a great deal like her father, doesn't she? I thought she seemed familiar, that tall red-haired lass I saw that night on Craigh na Dun. He *is* her father, no?" She inclined her head toward the door where Jamie had vanished.

"Yes. Give them to me." It made no difference; she had seen the pictures already. Still, I couldn't stand to see her thick white fingers cupping Brianna's face.

Her mouth twitched as though she meant to refuse, but she tapped them neatly into a square and handed them to me without demur. I held them against my chest for a moment, not knowing what to do with them, then thrust them back into the pocket of my skirt.

"Sit ye down, Claire. The coffee's come." She nodded toward the small table, and the chair alongside. Her eyes followed me as I moved to it, alive with calculation.

She gestured for me to pour the coffee for both of us, and took her own cup without words. We sipped silently for a few moments. The cup trembled in my hands, spilling hot liquid across my wrist. I put it down, wiping my hand on my skirt, wondering in some dim recess of my mind why I should be afraid.

"Twice," she said suddenly. She looked at me with something akin to awe. "Sweet Christ Jesus, ye went through *twice*! Or no—*three* times, it must have been, for here ye are now." She shook her head, marveling, never taking her bright green eyes from my face.

"How?" she asked. "How could ye do it so many times, and live?"

"I don't know." I saw the look of hard skepticism flash across her face, and answered it, defensively. "I don't! I just—went."

"Was it not the same for you?" The green eyes had narrowed into slits of concentration. "What was it like, there between? Did ye not feel the terror? And the noise, fit to split your skull and spill your brains?"

"Yes, it was like that." I didn't want to talk to about it; didn't even like to think of the time-passage. I had blocked it deliberately from my mind, the roar of death and dissolution and the voices of chaos that urged me to join them.

"Did ye have blood to protect you, or stones? I wouldna think ye'd the nerve for blood—but maybe I'm wrong. For surely ye're stronger than I thought, to have done it three times, and lived through it."

"Blood?" I shook my head, confused. "No. Nothing. I told you—I … went. That's all." Then I remembered the night she had gone through the stones in 1968; the blaze of fire on Craigh na Dun, and the twisted, blackened shape in the center of that fire. "Greg Edgars," I said. The name of her first husband. "You didn't just kill him because he found you and tried to stop you, did you? He was—"

"The blood, aye." She was watching me, intent. "I didna think it could be done at all, the crossing—not without the blood." She sounded faintly amazed. "The auld ones—they always used the blood. That and the fire. They built great wicker cages, filled wi' their captives, and set them alight in the circles. I thought that was how they opened the passage."

My hands and my lips felt cold, and I picked up the cup to warm them. Where in the name of God was Jamie?

"And ye didna use stones, either?"

I shook my head. "What stones?"

She looked at me for a moment, debating whether to tell me. Her little pink tongue flicked over her lip, and then she nodded, deciding. With a small grunt, she heaved herself up from the chair and went toward the great hearth at the far end of the room, beckoning me to follow.

She knelt, with surprising grace for one of her figure, and pressed a greenish stone set into the mantelpiece, a foot or so above the hearth. It moved slightly, and there was a soft *click!* as one of the hearth slates rose smoothly out of its mortared setting.

"Spring mechanism," Geilie explained, lifting the slate carefully and setting it aside. "A Danish fellow named Leiven from St. Croix made it for me."

She reached into the cavity beneath and drew out a wooden box, about a foot long. There were pale brown stains on the smooth wood, and it looked swollen and split, as though it had been immersed in seawater at some time. I bit my lip hard at its appearance, and hoped my face didn't give anything away. If I had had any doubts about Ian being here, they had vanished—for here, unless I was very much mistaken, was the silkies' treasure. Fortunately, Geilie wasn't looking at me, but at the box.

"I learned about the stones from an Indian—not a red Indian, a Hindoo from Calcutta," she explained. "He came to me, looking for thornapple, and he told me about how to make medicines from the gemstones."

I looked over my shoulder for Jamie, but there was no sign of him. Where the hell was he? Had he found Ian, somewhere on the plantation?

"Ye can get the powdered stones from a London apothecary," she was saying, frowning slightly as she pushed at the sliding lid. "But they're mostly poor quality, and the *bhasmas* doesn't work so well. Best to have a stone at least of the second quality—what they call a *nagina* stone. That's a goodish-sized stone that's been polished. A stone of the first quality is faceted, and unflawed for preference, but most folk canna afford to burn those to ash. The ashes of the stone are the *bhasmas*," she explained, turning to look up at me. "That's what ye use in the medicines. Here, can ye pry this damn thing loose? It's been spoilt in seawater, and the locking bit swells whenever the weather's damp—which it is all the time, this season of the year," she added, making a face over her shoulder at the clouds rolling in over the bay, far below.

She thrust the box into my hands and rose heavily to her feet, grunting with the effort.

It was a Chinese puzzle-box, I saw; a fairly simple one, with a small sliding panel that unlocked the main lid. The problem was that the smaller panel had swollen, sticking in its slot.

"It's bad luck to break one," Geilie observed, watching my attempts. "Else I'd just smash the thing and be done with it. Here, maybe this will help." She produced a small mother-of-pearl penknife from the recesses of her gown and handed it to me, then went to the window ledge and rang another of her silver bells.

I pried gently upward with the blade of the knife. I felt it catch in the wood, and wiggled it gingerly. Little by little, the small rectangle of wood edged out of its place, until I could get hold of it between thumb and forefinger and pull it all the way loose.

"There you go," I said, handing her back the box with some reluctance. It felt heavy, and there was an unmistakable metallic chinking as I tilted it.

"Thanks." As she took it, the black servingmaid came in through the far door. Geilie turned to order the girl to bring a tray of fresh tarts, and I saw that she had slipped the box between the folds of her skirts, hiding it.

"Nosy creatures," she said, frowning toward the departing maid's back as the girl passed through the door. "One of the difficulties wi' slaves; it's hard to have secrets." She put the box on the table, and pushed at the top; with a small, sharp *skreek!* of protest, the lid slid back.

She reached into the box and drew out her closed hand. She smiled mischievously at me, saying, "Little Jackie Horner sat in the corner, eating her Christmas pie. She put in her thumb, and pulled out a plum"—she opened her hand with a flourish—"and said 'What a good girl am I!' "

I had been expecting them, of course, but had no difficulty in looking impressed anyway. The reality of a gem is both more immediate and more startling than its description. Six or seven of them flashed and glimmered in her palm, flaming fire and frozen ice, the gleam of blue water in the sun, and a great gold stone like the eye of a lurking tiger.

Without meaning to, I drew near enough to look down into the well of her hand, staring with fascination. "Big enough," Jamie had described them as being, with a characteristic Scottish talent for understatement. Well, smaller than a breadbox, I supposed.

"I got them for the money, to start," Geilie was saying, prodding the stones with satisfaction. "Because they were easier to carry than a great weight of gold or silver, I mean; I didna think then what other use they might have."

"What, as *bhasmas*?" The idea of burning any of those glowing things to ash seemed a sacrilege.

"Oh, no, not these." Her hand closed on the stones, dipped into her pocket, and back into the box for more. A small shower of liquid fire dropped into her pocket, and she patted it affectionately. "No, I've a lot o' the smaller stones for that. These are for something else."

She eyed me speculatively, then jerked her head toward the door at the end of the room.

"Come along up to my workroom," she said. "I've a few things there you'll maybe be interested to see."

"Interested" was putting it mildly, I thought.

It was a long, light-filled room, with a counter down one side. Bunches of drying herbs hung from hooks overhead and lay on gauze-covered drying racks along the inner wall. Drawered cabinets and cupboards covered the rest of the wall space, and there was a small glass-fronted bookcase at the end of the room.

The room gave me a mild sense of déjà-vu; after a moment, I realized that it was because it strongly resembled Geilie's workroom in the village of Cranesmuir, in the house of her first husband—no, second, I corrected myself, remember the flaming body of Greg Edgars.

"How many times have you been married?" I asked curiously. She had begun building her fortune with her second husband, procurator fiscal of the district where they lived, forging his signature in order to divert money to her own use, and then murdering him. Successful with this modus operandi, I imagined she had tried it again; she was a creature of habit, was Geilie Duncan.

She paused a moment to count up. "Oh, five, I think. Since I came here," she added casually.

"Five?" I said, a little faintly. Not just a habit, it seemed; a positive addiction.

"A verra unhealthy atmosphere for Englishmen it is in the tropics," she said, and smiled slyly at me. "Fevers, ulcers, festering stomachs; any little thing will carry them off." She had evidently been mindful of her oral hygiene; her teeth were still very good.

She reached out and lightly caressed a small bottle that stood on the lowest shelf. It wasn't labeled, but I had seen crude white arsenic before. On the whole, I was glad I hadn't taken any food.

"Oh, you'll be interested in this," she said, spying a jar on an upper shelf. Grunting slightly as she stood on tiptoe, she reached it down and handed it to me.

It contained a very coarse powder, evidently a mixture of several substances, brown, yellow, and black, flecked with shreds of a semitranslucent material.

"What's this?"

"Zombie poison," she said, and laughed. "I thought ye'd like to see."

"Oh?" I said coldly. "I thought you told me there was no such thing."

"No," she corrected, still smiling. "I told ye Hercule wasn't dead; and he's not." She took the jar from me and replaced it on the shelf. "But there's no denying that he's a good bit more manageable if he's had a dose of this stuff once a week, mixed with his grain."

"What the hell is it?"

She shrugged, offhanded. “A bit of this and a bit of that. The main thing seems to be a kind of fish—a little square thing wi’ spots; verra funny-looking. Ye take the skin and dry it, and the liver as well. But there are a few other things ye put in with it—I wish I kent what,” she added.

“You don’t know what’s in it?” I stared at her. “Didn’t you make it?”

“No. I had a cook,” Geilie said, “or at least they sold him to me as a cook, but damned if I’d feel safe eating a thing he turned out of the kitchen, the sly black devil. He was a *houngan,* though.”

“A what?”

“*Houngan* is what the blacks call one of their medicine-priests; though to be quite right about it, I believe Ishmael said his sort of black called him an *oniseegun,* or somesuch.”

“Ishmael, hm?” I licked my dry lips. “Did he come with that name?”

“Oh, no. He had some heathen name wi’ six syllables, and the man who sold him called him ‘Jimmy’—the auctioneers call all the bucks Jimmy. I named him Ishmael, because of the story the seller told me about him.”

Ishmael had been taken from a barracoon on the Gold Coast of Africa, one of a shipment of six hundred slaves from the villages of Nigeria and Ghana, stowed between decks of the slave ship *Persephone*, bound for Antigua. Coming through the Caicos Passage, the *Persephone* had run into a sudden squall, and been run aground on Hogsty Reef, off the island of Great Inagua. The ship had broken up, with barely time for the crew to escape in the ship’s boats.

The slaves, chained and helpless betweendecks, had all drowned. All but one man who had earlier been taken from the hold to assist as a galley mate, both messboys having died of the pox en route from Africa. This man, left behind by the ship’s crew, had nonetheless survived the wreck by clinging to a cask of spirits, which floated ashore on Great Inagua two days later.

The fishermen who discovered the castaway were more interested in his means of salvation than in the slave himself. Breaking open the cask, however, they were shocked and appalled to find inside the body of a man, somewhat imperfectly preserved by the spirits in which he had been soaking.

"I wonder if they drank the crème de menthe anyway," I murmured, having observed for myself that Mr. Overholt's assessment of the alcoholic affinities of sailors was largely correct.

"I daresay," said Geilie, mildly annoyed at having her story interrupted. "In any case, when I heard of it, I named him Ishmael straight off. Because of the floating coffin, aye?"

"Very clever," I congratulated her. "Er … did they find out who the man in the cask was?"

"I don't think so." She shrugged carelessly. "They gave him to the Governor of Jamaica, who had him put in a glass case, wi' fresh spirits, as a curiosity."

"*What*?" I said incredulously.

"Well, not so much the man himself, but some odd fungi that were growing on him," Geilie explained. "The Governor's got a passion for such things. The old Governor, I mean; I hear there's a new one, now."

"Quite," I said, feeling a bit queasy. I thought the ex-governor was more likely to qualify as a curiosity than the dead man, on the whole.

Her back was turned, as she pulled out drawers and rummaged through them. I took a deep breath, hoping to keep my voice casual.

"This Ishmael sounds an interesting sort; do you still have him?"

"No," she said indifferently. "The black bastard ran off. He's the one who made the zombie poison for me, though. Wouldn't tell me how, no matter what I did to him," she added, with a short, humorless laugh, and I had a sudden vivid memory of the weals across Ishmael's back. "He said it wasn't proper for women to make medicine, only men could do it. Or the verra auld women, once they'd quit bleeding. Hmph!"

She snorted, and reached into her pocket, pulling out a handful of stones.

"Anyway, that's not what I brought ye up to show ye."

Carefully, she laid five of the stones in a rough circle on the countertop. Then she took down from a shelf a thick book, bound in worn leather.

"Can ye read German?" she asked, opening it carefully.

"Not much, no," I said. I moved closer, to look over her shoulder. *Hexenhammer*, it said, in a fine, handwritten script.

"Witches' Hammer?" I asked. I raised one eyebrow. "Spells? Magic?"

The skepticism in my voice must have been obvious, for she glared at me over one shoulder.

"Look, fool," she said. "Who are ye? Or what, rather?"

"What am I?" I said, startled.

"That's right." She turned and leaned against the counter, studying me through narrowed eyes. "What are ye? Or me, come to that? What are we?"

I opened my mouth to reply, then closed it again.

"That's right," she said softly, watching. "It's not everyone can go through the stones, is it? Why us?"

"I don't know," I said. "And neither do you, I'll be bound. It doesn't mean we're witches, surely!"

"Doesn't it?" She lifted one brow, and turned several pages of the book.

"Some people can leave their bodies and travel miles away," she said, staring meditatively at the page. "Other people see them out wandering, and recognize them, and ye can bloody *prove* they were really tucked up safe in bed at the time. I've seen the records, all the eyewitness testimony. Some people have stigmata ye can see and touch—I've seen one. But not everybody. Only certain people."

She turned another page. "If everyone can do it, it's science. If only a few can, then it's witchcraft, or superstition, or whatever you like to call it," she said. "But it's real." She looked up at me, green eyes bright as a snake's over the crumbling book. "*We're* real, Claire—you and me. And special. Have ye never asked yourself why?"

I had. Any number of times. I had never gotten a reasonable answer to the question, though. Evidently, Geilie thought she had one.

She turned back to the stones she had laid on the counter, and pointed at them each in turn. "Stones of protection; amethyst, emerald, turquoise, lapis lazuli, and a male ruby."

"A *male* ruby?"

"Pliny says rubies have a sex to them; who am I to argue?" she said impatiently. "The male stones are what ye use, though; the female ones don't work."

I suppressed the urge to ask precisely how one distinguished the sex of rubies, in favor of asking, "Work for *what*?"

"For the travel," she said, glancing curiously at me. "Through the stones. They protect ye from the … whatever it is, out there." Her eyes grew slightly shadowed at the thought of the time-passage, and I realized that she was deathly afraid of it. Little wonder; so was I.

"When did ye come? The first time?" Her eyes were intent on mine.

"From 1945," I said slowly. "I came to 1743, if that's what you mean." I was reluctant to tell her too much; still, my own curiosity was overwhelming. She was right about one thing; she and I were different. I might never again have the chance to talk to another person who knew what she did. For that matter, the longer I could keep her talking, the longer Jamie would have to look for Ian.

"Hm." She grunted in a satisfied manner. "Near enough. It's two hundred year, in the Highland tales—when folk fall asleep on fairy duns and end up dancing all night wi' the Auld Folk; it's usually two hundred year later when they come back to their own place."

"You didn't, though. You came from 1968, but you'd been in Cranesmuir several years before I came there."

"Five years, aye." She nodded, abstracted. "Aye, well, that was the blood."

"Blood?"

"The sacrifice," she said, suddenly impatient. "It gives ye a greater range. And at least a bit of control, so ye have some notion how far ye're going. How did ye get to and fro three times, without blood?" she demanded.

"I … just came." The need to find out as much as I could made me add the little else I knew. "I think—I think it has something to do with being able to fix your mind on a certain person who's in the time you go to."

Her eyes were nearly round with interest.

"Really," she said softly. "Think o' that, now." She shook her head slowly, thinking. "Hm. That might be so. Still, the stones should work as well; there's patterns ye make, wi' the different gems, ye ken."

She pulled another fistful of shining stones from her pocket and spread them on the wooden surface, pawing through them.

"The protection stones are the points of the pentacle," she explained, intent on her rummaging, "but inside that, ye lay the pattern wi' different stones, depending which way ye mean to go, and how far. And ye lay a line of quicksilver between them, and fire it when ye speak the spells. And of course ye draw the pentacle wi' diamond dust."

"Of course," I murmured, fascinated.

"Smell it?" she asked, looking up for a moment and sniffing. "Ye wouldna think stones had a scent, aye? But they do, when ye grind them to powder."

I inhaled deeply, and did seem to find a faint, unfamiliar scent among the smell of dried herbs. It was a dry scent, pleasant but indescribable—the scent of gemstones.

She held up one stone with a small cry of triumph.

"This one! This is the one I needed; couldna find one anywhere in the islands, and finally I thought o' the box I'd left in Scotland." The stone she held was a black crystal of some kind; the light from the window passed through it, and yet it glittered like a piece of jet between her white fingers.

"What is it?"

"An adamant; a black diamond. The auld alchemists used them. The books say that to wear an adamant brings ye the knowledge of the joy in all things." She laughed, a short, sharp sound, devoid of her usual girlish charm. "If anything can bring knowledge o' joy in that passage through the stones, I want one!"

Something was beginning to dawn on me, rather belatedly. In defense of my slowness, I can only argue that I was simultaneously listening to Geilie and keeping an ear out for any sign of Jamie returning below.

"You mean to go back, then?" I asked, as casually as I could.

"I might." A small smile played around the corners of her mouth. "Now that I've got the things I need. I tell ye, Claire, I wouldna risk it, without." She stared at me, shaking her head. "Three times, wi' no blood," she murmured. "So it can be done.

"Well, best we go down now," she said, suddenly brisk, sweeping the stones up and dumping them back into her pocket. "The fox will be back—Fraser is his name, is it no? I thought Clotilda said something else, but the stupid bitch likely got it wrong."

As we made our way down the long workroom, something small and brown darted across the floor in front of me. Geilie was quick, despite her size; her small foot stamped on the centipede before I could react.

She watched the half-crushed beast wriggling on the floor for a moment, then stooped and slid a sheet of paper under it. Scooping it up, she decanted the thing thriftily into a glass jar.

"Ye dinna want to believe in witches and zombies and things that go bump in the night?" she said, with a small, sly smile at me. She nodded at the centipede, struggling round and round in frenzied, lopsided circles. "Well, legends are many-legged beasties, aye? But they generally have at least one foot on the truth."

She took down a clear brown-glass jug and poured the liquid into the centipede's bottle. The pungent scent of alcohol rose in the air. The centipede, washed up by the wave, kicked frantically for a moment, then sank to the bottom of the bottle, legs moving spasmodically. She corked the bottle neatly, and turned to go.

"You asked me why I thought we can pass through the stones," I said to her back. "Do you know why, Geilie?" She glanced over her shoulder at me.

"Why, to change things," she said, sounding surprised. "Why else? Come along; I hear your man down there."

* * *

Whatever Jamie had been doing, it had been hard work; his shirt was dampened with sweat, and clung to his shoulders. He swung around as we entered the room, and I saw that he had been looking at the wooden puzzle-box that Geilie had left on the table. It was obvious from his expression that I had been correct in my surmise—it was the box he had found on the silkies' isle.

"I believe I have succeeded in mending your sugar press, mistress," he said, bowing politely to Geilie. "A matter of a cracked cylinder, which your overseer and I contrived to stuff with wedges. Still, I fear ye may be needing another soon."

Geilie quirked her eyebrows, amused.

"Well, and I'm obliged to ye, Mr. Fraser. Can I not offer ye some refreshment after your labor?" Her hand hovered over the row of bells, but Jamie shook his head, picking up his coat from the sofa.

"I thank ye, mistress, but I fear we must take our leave. It's quite some way back to Kingston, and we must be on our way, if we mean to reach it before dark." His face went suddenly blank, and I knew he must have felt the pocket of his coat and realized that the photographs were missing.

He glanced quickly at me, and I gave him a brief nod, touching the side of my skirt where they lay.

"Thank you for your hospitality," I said, snatching up my hat, and moving toward the door with alacrity. Now that Jamie was back, I wanted nothing so much as to get quickly away from Rose Hall and its owner. Jamie hung back a moment, though.

"I wondered, Mistress Abernathy—since ye mentioned having lived in Paris for a time—whether ye might have been acquainted there wi' a gentleman of my own acquaintance. Did ye by chance ken the Duke of Sandringham?"

She cocked her cream-blond head at him inquisitively, but as he said no more, she nodded.

"Aye, I kent him. Why?"

Jamie gave her his most charming smile. "No particular reason, mistress; only a curiosity, ye might say."

The sky was completely overcast by the time we passed the gate, and it was clear that we weren't going to make it back to Kingston without getting soaked. Under the circumstances, I didn't care.

"Ye've got Brianna's pictures?" was the first thing Jamie asked, reining up for a moment.

"Right here." I patted my pocket. "Did you find any sign of Ian?"

He glanced back over his shoulder, as though fearing we might be pursued.

"I couldna get anything out of the overseer or any o' the slaves—they're bone-scairt of that woman, and I canna say I blame them a bit. But I know where he is." He spoke with considerable satisfaction.

"Where? Can we sneak back and get him?" I rose slightly in my saddle, looking back; the slates of Rose Hall were all that was visible through the treetops. I would have been most reluctant to set foot on the place again for any reason—except for Ian.

"Not now." Jamie caught at my bridle, turning the horse's head back to the trail. "I'll need help."

Under the pretext of finding material to repair the damaged sugar press, Jamie had managed to see most of the plantation within a quarter-mile of the house, including a cluster of slave huts, the stables, a disused drying shed for tobacco, and the building that housed the sugar refinery. Everyplace he went, he suffered no interference beyond curious or hostile glances—except near the refinery.

"That big black bugger who came up onto the porch was sitting on the ground outside," he said. "When I got too close to him, it made the overseer verra nervous indeed; he kept calling me away, warning me not to get too close to the fellow."

"That sounds like a really excellent idea," I said, shuddering slightly. "Not getting close to him, I mean. But you think he has something to do with Ian?"

"He was sitting in front of a wee door fixed into the ground, Sassenach." Jamie guided his horse adroitly around a fallen log in the path. "It must lead to a cellar beneath the refinery." The man had not moved an inch, in all the time that Jamie contrived to spend around the refinery. "If Ian's there, that's where he is."

"I'm fairly sure he's there, all right." I told him quickly the details of my visit, including my brief conversation with the kitchenmaids. "But what are we going to do?" I concluded. "We can't just leave him there! After all, we don't know what Geillis wants with him, but it can't be innocent, if she wouldn't admit he was there, can it?"

“Not innocent at all,” he agreed, grim-faced. “The overseer wouldna speak to me of Ian, but he told me other things that would curl your hair, if it wasna already curled up like sheep’s wool.” He glanced at me, and a half-smile lit his face, in spite of his obvious perturbation.

“Judging by the state of your hair, Sassenach, I should say that it’s going to rain verra soon now.”

“How observant of you,” I said sarcastically, vainly trying to tuck in the curls and tendrils that were escaping from under my hat. “The fact that the sky’s black as pitch and the air smells like lightning wouldn’t have a thing to do with your conclusions, of course.”

The leaves of the trees all round us were fluttering like tethered butterflies, as the edge of the storm rose toward us up the slope of the mountain. From the small rise where we stood, I could see the storm clouds sweep in across the bay below, with a dark curtain of rain hanging beneath it like a veil.

Jamie rose in his saddle, looking over the terrain. To my unpracticed eye, our surroundings looked like solid, impenetrable jungle, but other possibilities were visible to a man who had lived in the heather for seven years.

“We’d best find a bit of shelter while we can, Sassenach,” he said. “Follow me.”

On foot, leading the horses, we left the narrow path and pressed into the forest, following what Jamie said was a wild pigs’ trail. Within a few moments, he had found what he was looking for; a small stream that cut deep through the forest floor, with a steep bank, overgrown with ferns and dark, glossy bushes, interspersed with stands of slender saplings.

He set me to gathering ferns, each frond the length of my arm, and by the time I had returned with as many as I could carry, he had the framework of a tidy snug, formed by the arch of the bent saplings, tied to a fallen log, and covered over with branches cut from the nearby bushes. Hastily roofed with the spread ferns, it was not quite waterproof, but a great deal better than being caught in the open. Ten minutes later, we were safe inside.

There was a moment of absolute quiet as the wind on the edge of the storm passed by us. No birds chattered, no insects sang; they were as well equipped as we were to predict the rain. A few large drops fell, splattering on the foliage with an explosive sound like snapping twigs. Then the storm broke.

Caribbean rainstorms are abrupt and vigorous. None of the misty mousing about of an Edinburgh drizzle. The heavens blacken and split, dropping gallons of water within a minute. For as long as the rain lasts, speech is impossible, and a light fog rises from the ground like steam, vapor raised by the force of the raindrops striking the ground.

The rain pelted the ferns above us, and a faint mist filled the green shadows of our shelter. Between the clatter of the rain and the constant thunder that boomed among the hills, it was impossible to talk.

It wasn't cold, but there was a leak overhead, which dripped steadily on my neck. There was no room to move away; Jamie took off his coat and wrapped it around me, then put his arm around me to wait out the storm. In spite of the terrible racket outside, I felt suddenly safe, and peaceful, relieved of the strain of the last few hours, the last few days. Ian was as good as found, and nothing could touch us, here.

I squeezed his free hand; he smiled at me, then bent and kissed me gently. He smelled fresh and earthy, scented with the sap of the branches he had cut and the smell of his own healthy sweat.

It was nearly over, I thought. We had found Ian, and God willing, would get him back safely, very soon. And then what? We would have to leave Jamaica, but there were other places, and the world was wide. There were the French colonies of Martinique and Grenada, the Dutch-held island of Eleuthera; perhaps we would even venture as far as the continent—cannibals notwithstanding. So long as I had Jamie, I was not afraid of anything.

The rain ceased as abruptly as it had started. Drops fell singly from the shrubs and trees, with a pit-a-pat drip that echoed the ringing left in my ears by the storm's roar. A soft, fresh breeze came up the stream bed, carrying away humidity, lifting the damp curls from my neck with delicious coolness. The birds and the insects began again, quietly, and then in full voice, and the air itself seemed to dance with green life.

I stirred and sighed, pushing myself upright and shrugging off Jamie's coat.

"You know, Geilie showed me a special stone, a black diamond called an adamant," I said. "She said it's a stone the alchemists used; it gives a knowledge of the joy in all things. I think there might be one under this spot."

Jamie smiled at me.

"I shouldna be surprised at all, Sassenach," he said. "Here, ye've water all down your face."

He reached into his coat for a handkerchief, then stopped.

"Brianna's pictures," he said suddenly.

"Oh, I forgot." I dug in my pocket, and handed him back the pictures. He took them and thumbed rapidly through them, stopped, then went through them again, more slowly.

"What's wrong?" I asked, suddenly alarmed.

"One of them's gone," he said quietly. I felt an inexpressible feeling of dread begin to grow in the pit of my stomach, and the joy of a moment before began to ebb away.

"Are you sure?"

"I know them as well as I know your face, Sassenach," he said. "Aye, I'm sure. It's the one of her by the fire."

I remembered the picture in question well; it showed Brianna as an adult, sitting on a rock, outdoors by a campfire. Her knees were drawn up, her elbows resting on them, and she was looking directly into the camera, but with no knowledge of its presence, her face filled with firelit dreams, her hair blown back away from her face.

"Geilie must have taken it. She found the pictures in your coat while I was in the kitchen, and I took them away from her. She must have stolen it then."

"Damn the woman!" Jamie turned sharply to look toward the road, eyes dark with anger. His hand was tight on the remaining photographs. "What does she want with it?"

"Perhaps it's only curiosity," I said, but the feeling of dread would not go away. "What *could* she do with it, after all? She isn't likely to show it to anyone—who would come here?"

As though in answer to this question, Jamie's head lifted suddenly, and he grasped my arm in adjuration to be still. Some distance below, a loop of the road was visible through the overgrowth, a thin ribbon of yellowish mud. Along this ribbon came a plodding figure on horseback, a man dressed in black, small and dark as an ant at this distance.

Then I remembered what Geilie had said. *I'm expecting a visitor*. And later, *That parson said he'd come at four o'clock*.

"It's a parson, a minister of some kind," I said. "She said she was expecting him."

"It's Archie Campbell, is who it is," Jamie said, with some grimness. "What the devil—or perhaps I shouldna use that particular expression, wi' respect to Mistress Duncan."

"Perhaps he's come to exorcise her," I suggested, with a nervous laugh.

"He's his work cut out for him, if so." The angular figure disappeared into the trees, but it was several minutes before Jamie deemed him safely past us.

"What do you plan to do about Ian?" I asked, once we had made our way back to the path.

"I'll need help," he answered briskly. "I mean to come up the river with Innes and MacLeod and the rest. There's a landing there, no great distance from the refinery. We'll leave the boat there, go ashore and deal wi' Hercules—and Atlas, too, if he's a mind to be troublesome—break open the cellar, snatch Ian, and make off again. The dark o' the moon's in two days—I wish it could be sooner, but it will likely take that long to get a suitable boat and what arms we'll need."

"Using what for money?" I inquired bluntly. The expenditure for new clothes and shoes had taken a substantial portion of Jamie's share of profit from the bat guano. What was left would feed us for several weeks, and possibly be sufficient to rent a boat for a day or two, but it wouldn't stretch to buying large quantities of weapons.

Neither pistols nor swords were manufactured on the island; all weapons were imported from Europe and were in consequence expensive. Jamie himself had Captain Raines's two pistols; the Scots had nothing but their fish knives and the odd cutlass—insufficient for an armed raid.

He grimaced slightly, then glanced at me sidelong.

"I must ask John for help," he said simply. "Must I not?"

I rode silently for a moment, then nodded in acquiescence.

"I suppose you'll have to." I didn't like it, but it wasn't a question of my liking; it was Ian's life. "One thing, though, Jamie—"

"Aye, I know," he said, resigned. "Ye mean to come with me, no?"

"Yes," I said, smiling. "After all, what if Ian's hurt, or sick, or—"

"Aye, ye can come!" he said, rather testily. "Only do me the one wee favor, Sassenach. Try verra hard not to be killed or cut to pieces, aye? It's hard on a man's sensibilities."

"I'll try," I said, circumspectly. And nudging my horse closer to his, rode side by side down toward Kingston, through the dripping trees.

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THE CROCODILE'S FIRE

There was a surprising amount of traffic on the river at night. Lawrence Stern, who had insisted on accompanying the expedition, told me that most of the plantations up in the hills used the river as their main linkage with Kingston and the harbor; roads were either atrocious or nonexistent, swallowed by lush growth with each new rainy season.

I had expected the river to be deserted, but we passed two small craft and a barge headed downstream as we tacked laboriously up the broad waterway, under sail. The barge, an immense dark shape stacked high with casks and bales, passed us like a black iceberg, huge, humped, and threatening. The low voices of the slaves poling it carried across the water, talking softly in a foreign tongue.

"It was kind of ye to come, Lawrence," Jamie said. We had a small, single-masted open boat, which barely held Jamie, myself, the six Scottish smugglers, and Stern. Despite the crowded quarters, I too was grateful for Stern's company; he had a stolid, phlegmatic quality about him that was very comforting under the circumstances.

"Well, I confess to some curiosity," Stern said, flapping the front of his shirt to cool his sweating body. In the dark, all I could see of him was a moving blotch of white. "I have met the lady before, you see."

"Mrs. Abernathy?" I paused, then asked delicately, "Er … what did you think of her?"

"Oh … she was a very pleasant lady; most … gracious."

Dark as it was, I couldn't see his face, but his voice held an odd note, half-pleased, half-embarrassed, that told me he had found the widow Abernathy quite attractive indeed. From which I concluded that Geilie had wanted something from the naturalist; I had never known her treat a man with any regard, save for her own ends.

"Where did you meet her? At her own house?" According to the attendees at the Governor's ball, Mrs. Abernathy seldom or never left her plantation.

"Yes, at Rose Hall. I had stopped to ask permission to collect a rare type of beetle—one of the Cucurlionidae—that I had found near a spring on the plantation. She invited me in, and … made me most welcome." This time there was a definite note of self-satisfaction in his voice. Jamie, handling the tiller next to me, heard it and snorted briefly.

"What did she want of ye?" he asked, no doubt having formed conclusions similar to mine about Geilie's motives and behavior.

"Oh, she was most gratifyingly interested in the specimens of flora and fauna I had collected on the island; she asked me about the locations and virtues of several different herbs. Ah, and about the other places I had been. She was particularly interested in my stories of Hispaniola." He sighed, momentarily regretful. "It is difficult to believe that such a lovely woman might engage in such reprehensible behavior as you describe, James."

"Lovely, aye?" Jamie's voice was dryly amused. "A bit smitten, were ye, Lawrence?"

Lawrence's voice echoed Jamie's smile. "There is a sort of carnivorous fly I have observed, friend James. The male fly, choosing a female to court, takes pains to bring her a bit of meat or other prey, tidily wrapped in a small silk package. While the female is engaged in unwrapping her tidbit, he leaps upon her, performs his copulatory duties, and hastens away. For if she should finish her meal before he has finished his own activities, or should he be so careless as not to bring her a tasty present—she eats him." There was a soft laugh in the darkness. "No, it was an interesting experience, but I think I shall not call upon Mrs. Abernathy again."

"Not if we're lucky about it, no," Jamie agreed.

The men left me by the riverbank to mind the boat, and melted into the darkness, with instructions from Jamie to stay put. I had a primed pistol, given to me with the stern injunction not to shoot myself in the foot. The weight of it was comforting, but as the minutes dragged by in black silence, I found the dark and the solitude more and more oppressive.

From where I stood, I could see the house, a dark oblong with only the lower three windows lighted; that would be the salon, I thought, and wondered why there was no sign of any activity by the slaves. As I watched, though, I saw a shadow cross one of the lighted windows, and my heart jumped into my throat.

It wasn't Geilie's shadow, by any conceivable stretch of the imagination. It was tall, thin, and gawkily angular.

I looked wildly around, wanting to call out; but it was too late. The men were all out of earshot, headed for the refinery. I hesitated for a moment, but there was really nothing else to do. I kilted up my skirts and stepped into the dark.

By the time I stepped onto the veranda, I was damp with perspiration, and my heart was beating loudly enough to drown out all other sounds. I edged silently next to the nearest window, trying to peer in without being seen from within.

Everything was quiet and orderly within. There was a small fire on the hearth, and the glow of the flames gleamed on the polished floor. Geilie's rosewood secretary was unfolded, the desk shelf covered with piles of handwritten papers and what looked like very old books. I couldn't see anyone inside, but I couldn't see the whole room, either.

My skin prickled with imagination, thinking of the dead-eyed Hercules, silently stalking me in the dark. I edged farther down the veranda, looking over my shoulder with every other step.

There was an odd sense of desertion about the place this evening. There were none of the subdued voices of slaves that had attended my earlier visit, muttering to one another as they went about their tasks. But that might mean nothing, I told myself. Most of the slaves would stop work and go to their own quarters at sundown. Still, ought there not to be house servants, to tend the fire and fetch food from the kitchen?

The front door stood open. Spilled petals from the yellow rose lay across the doorstep, glowing like ancient gold coins in the faint light from the entryway.

I paused, listening. I thought I heard a faint rustle from inside the salon, as of someone turning the pages of a book, but I couldn't be sure. Taking my courage in both hands, I stepped across the threshold.

The feeling of desertion was more pronounced in here. There were unmistakable signs of neglect visible; a vase of wilted flowers on the polished surface of a chest, a teacup and saucer left to sit on an occasional table, the dregs dried to a brown stain in the bottom of the cup. Where the hell was everybody?

I stopped at the door into the salon and listened again. I heard the quiet crackle of the fire, and again, that soft rustle, as of turning pages. By poking my head around the jamb, I could just see that there was someone seated in front of the secretary now. Someone undeniably male, tall and thin-shouldered, dark head bent over something before him.

"Ian!" I hissed, as loudly as I dared. "Ian!"

The figure started, pushed back the chair, and stood up quickly, blinking toward the shadows.

"Jesus!" I said.

"Mrs. Malcolm?" said the Reverend Archibald Campbell, astonished.

I swallowed, trying to force my heart down out of my throat. The Reverend looked nearly as startled as I, but it lasted only a moment. Then his features hardened, and he took a step toward the door.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"I'm looking for my husband's nephew," I said; there was no point in lying, and perhaps he knew where Ian was. I glanced quickly round the room, but it was empty, save for the Reverend, and the one small lighted lamp he had been using. "Where's Mrs. Abernathy?"

"I have no idea," he said, frowning. "She appears to have left. What do you mean, your husband's nephew?"

"Left?" I blinked at him. "Where has she gone?"

"I don't know." He scowled, his pointed upper lip clamped beaklike over the lower one. "She was gone when I rose this morning—and all of the servants with her, apparently. A fine way to treat an invited guest!"

I relaxed slightly, despite my alarm. At least I was in no danger of running into Geilie. I thought I could deal with the Reverend Campbell.

"Oh," I said. "Well, that does seem a bit inhospitable, I admit. I suppose you haven't seen a boy of about fifteen, very tall and thin, with thick dark brown hair? No, I didn't think you had. In that case, I expect I should be go—"

"Stop!" He grabbed me by the upper arm, and I stopped, surprised and unsettled by the strength of his grip.

"What is your husband's true name?" he demanded.

"Why—Alexander Malcolm," I said, tugging at my captive arm. "You know that."

"Indeed. And how is it, then, that when I described you and your husband to Mrs. Abernathy, she told me that your family name is Fraser—that your husband in fact is James Fraser?"

"Oh." I took a deep breath, trying to think of something plausible, but failed. I never had been good at lying on short notice.

"Where is your husband, woman?" he demanded.

"Look," I said, trying to extract myself from his grasp, "you're quite wrong about Jamie. He had nothing to do with your sister, he told me. He—"

"You've spoken to him about Margaret?" His grip tightened. I gave a small grunt of discomfort and yanked a bit harder.

"Yes. He says that it wasn't him—he wasn't the man she went to Culloden to see. It was a friend of his, Ewan Cameron."

"Ye're lying," he said flatly. "Or he is. It makes little difference. Where is he?" He gave me a small shake, and I jerked hard, managing to detach my arm from his grip.

"I tell you, he had nothing to do with what happened to your sister!" I was backing away, wondering how to get away from him without setting him loose to blunder about the grounds in search of Jamie, making noise and drawing unwelcome attention to the rescue effort. Eight men were enough to overcome the pillars of Hercules, but not enough to withstand a hundred roused slaves.

"Where?" The Reverend was advancing on me, eyes boring into mine.

"He's in Kingston!" I said. I glanced to one side; I was near a pair of French doors opening onto the veranda. I thought I could get out without his catching me, but then what? Having him chase me through the grounds would be worse than keeping him talking in here.

I looked back at the Reverend, who was scowling at me in disbelief, and then what I had seen on the terrace registered in my mind's eye, and I jerked my head back around, staring.

I *had* seen it. There was a large white pelican perched on the veranda railing, head turned back, beak buried comfortably in its feathers. Ping An's plumage glinted silver against the night in the dim light from the doorway.

"What is it?" Reverend Campbell demanded. "Who is it? Who's out there?"

"Just a bird," I said, turning back to him. My heart was beating in a jerky rhythm. Mr. Willoughby must surely be nearby. Pelicans were common, near the mouths of rivers, near the shore, but I had never seen one so far inland. But if Mr. Willoughby was in fact lurking nearby, what ought I to do about it?

"I doubt very much that your husband is in Kingston," the Reverend was saying, narrowed eyes fixed on me with suspicion. "However, if he is, he will presumably be coming here, to retrieve you."

"Oh, no!" I said.

"No," I repeated, with as much assurance as I could manage. "Jamie isn't coming here. I came by myself, to visit Geillis—Mrs. Abernathy. My husband isn't expecting me back until next month."

He didn't believe me, but there was nothing he could do about it, either. His mouth pursed up in a tiny rosette, then unpuckered enough to ask, "So you are staying here?"

"Yes," I said, pleased that I knew enough about the geography of the place to pretend to be a guest. If the servants were gone, there was no one to say I wasn't, after all.

He stood still, regarding me narrowly for a long moment. Then his jaw tightened and he nodded grudgingly.

"Indeed. Then I suppose ye'll have some notion as to where our hostess has taken herself, and when she proposes to return?"

I was beginning to have a rather unsettling notion of where—if not exactly *when*—Geillis Abernathy might have gone, but the Reverend Campbell didn't seem the proper person with whom to share it.

"No, I'm afraid not," I said. "I … ah, I've been out visiting since yesterday, at the neighboring plantation. Just came back this minute."

The Reverend eyed me closely, but I was in fact wearing a riding habit—because it was the only decent set of clothes I owned, besides the violet ball dress and two wash-muslin gowns—and my story passed unchallenged.

"I see," he said. "Mmphm. Well, then." He fidgeted restlessly, his big bony hands clenching and unclenching themselves, as though he were not certain what to do with them.

"Don't let me disturb you," I said, with a charming smile and a nod at the desk. "I'm sure you must have important work to do."

He pursed his lips again, in that objectionable way that made him look like an owl contemplating a juicy mouse. "The work has been completed. I was only preparing copies of some documents that Mrs. Abernathy had requested."

"How interesting," I said automatically, thinking that with luck, after a few moments' small talk, I could escape under the pretext of retiring to my theoretical room—all the first-floor rooms opened onto the veranda, and it would be a simple matter to slip off into the night to meet Jamie.

"Perhaps you share our hostess's—and my own—interest in Scottish history and scholarship?" His gaze had sharpened, and with a sinking heart I recognized the fanatical gleam of the passionate researcher in his eyes. I knew it well.

"Well, it's very interesting, I'm sure," I said, edging toward the door, "but I must say, I really don't know very much about—" I caught sight of the top sheet on his pile of documents, and stopped dead.

It was a genealogy chart. I had seen plenty of those, living with Frank, but I recognized this particular one. It was a chart of the Fraser family—the bloody thing was even *headed* "Fraser of Lovat"—beginning somewhere around the 1400s, so far as I could see, and running down to the present. I could see Simon, the late—and not so lamented, in some quarters—Jacobite lord, who had been executed for his part in Charles Stuart's Rising, and his descendants, whose names I recognized. And down in one corner, with the sort of notation indicating illegitimacy, was Brian Fraser—Jamie's father. And beneath him, written in a precise black hand, *James A. Fraser*.

I felt a chill ripple up my back. The Reverend had noticed my reaction, and was watching with a sort of dry amusement.

"Yes, it is interesting that it should be the Frasers, isn't it?"

"That … *what* should be the Frasers?" I said. Despite myself, I moved slowly toward the desk.

"The subject of the prophecy, of course," he said, looking faintly surprised. "Do ye not know of it? But perhaps, your husband being an illegitimate descendant …"

"I don't know of it, no."

"Ah." The Reverend was beginning to enjoy himself, seizing the opportunity to inform me. "I thought perhaps Mrs. Abernathy had spoken of it to you; she being so interested as to have written to me in Edinburgh regarding the matter." He thumbed through the stack, extracting one paper that appeared to be written in Gaelic.

"This is the original language of the prophecy," he said, shoving Exhibit A under my nose. "By the Brahan Seer; you'll have heard of the Brahan Seer, surely?" His tone held out little hope, but in fact, I had heard of the Brahan Seer, a sixteenth-century prophet along the lines of a Scottish Nostradamus.

"I have. It's a prophecy concerning the Frasers?"

"The Frasers of Lovat, aye. The language is poetic, as I pointed out to Mistress Abernathy, but the meaning is clear enough." He was gathering enthusiasm as he went along, notwithstanding his suspicions of me. "The prophecy states that a new ruler of Scotland will spring from Lovat's lineage. This is to come to pass following the eclipse of 'the kings of the white rose'—a clear reference to the Papist Stuarts, of course." He nodded at the white roses woven into the carpet. "There are somewhat more cryptic references included in the prophecy, of course; the time in which this ruler will appear, and whether it is to be a king or a queen—there is some difficulty in interpretation, owing to mishandling of the original …"

He went on, but I wasn't listening. If I had had any doubt about where Geilie had gone, it was fast disappearing. Obsessed with the rulers of Scotland, she had spent the better part of ten years in working for the restoration of a Stuart Throne. That attempt had failed most definitively at Culloden, and she had then expressed nothing but contempt for all extant Stuarts. And little wonder, if she thought she knew what was coming next.

But where would she go? Back to Scotland, perhaps, to involve herself with Lovat's heir? No, she was thinking of making the leap through time again; that much was clear from her conversation with me. She was preparing herself, gathering her resources—retrieving the treasure from the silkies' isle—and completing her researches.

I stared at the paper in a kind of fascinated horror. The genealogy, of course, was only recorded to the present. Did Geilie know who Lovat's descendants would be, in the future?

I looked up to ask the Reverend Campbell a question, but the words froze on my lips. Standing in the door to the veranda was Mr. Willoughby.

The little Chinese had evidently been having a rough time; his silk pajamas were torn and stained, and his round face was beginning to show the hollows of hunger and fatigue. His eyes passed over me with only a remote flicker of acknowledgment; all his attention was for the Reverend Campbell.

“Most holy fella,” he said, and his voice held a tone I had never heard in him before; an ugly taunting note.

The Reverend whirled, so quickly that his elbow knocked against a vase; water and yellow roses cascaded over the rosewood desk, soaking the papers. The Reverend gave a cry of rage, and snatched the papers from the flood, shaking them frantically to remove the water before the ink should run.

“See what ye’ve done, ye wicked, murdering heathen!”

Mr. Willoughby laughed. Not his usual high giggle, but a low chuckle. It didn’t sound at all amused.

“I murdering?” He shook his head slowly back and forth, eyes fixed on the Reverend. “Not me, holy fella. Is you, murderer.”

“Begone, fellow,” Campbell said coldly. “You should know better than to enter a lady’s house.”

“I know you.” The Chinaman’s voice was low and even, his gaze unwavering. “I see you. See you in red room, with the woman who laughs. See you too with stinking whores, in Scotland.” Very slowly, he lifted his hand to his throat and drew it across, precise as a blade. “You kill pretty often, holy fella, I think.”

The Reverend Campbell had gone pale, whether from shock or rage, I couldn’t tell. I was pale, too—from fear. I wet my dry lips and forced myself to speak.

“Mr. Willoughby—”

“Not Willoughby.” He didn’t look at me; the correction was almost indifferent. “I am Yi Tien Cho.”

Seeking escape from the present situation, my mind wondered absurdly whether the proper form of address would be Mr. Yi, or Mr. Cho?

“Get out at once!” The Reverend’s paleness came from rage. He advanced on the little Chinese, massive fists clenched. Mr. Willoughby didn’t move, seemingly indifferent to the looming minister.

“Better you leave, First Wife,” he said, softly. “Holy fella liking women—not with cock. With knife.”

I wasn't wearing a corset, but felt as though I were. I couldn't get enough breath to form words.

"Nonsense!" the Reverend said sharply. "I tell you again—get out! Or I shall—"

"Just stand still, please, Reverend Campbell," I said. Hands shaking, I drew the pistol Jamie had given me out of the pocket of my habit and pointed it at him. Rather to my surprise, he did stand still, staring at me as though I had just grown two heads.

I had never held anyone at gunpoint before; the sensation was quite oddly intoxicating, in spite of the way the pistol's barrel wavered. At the same time, I had no real idea what to do.

"Mr.—" I gave up, and used all his names. "Yi Tien Cho. Did you see the Reverend at the Governor's ball with Mrs. Alcott?"

"I see him kill her," Yi Tien Cho said flatly. "Better shoot, First Wife."

"Don't be ridiculous! My dear Mrs. Fraser, surely you cannot believe the word of a savage, who is himself—" The Reverend turned toward me, trying for a superior expression, which was rather impaired by the small beads of sweat that had formed at the edge of his receding hairline.

"But I think I do," I said. "You were there. I saw you. And you were in Edinburgh when the last prostitute was killed there. Nellie Cowden said you'd lived in Edinburgh for two years; that's how long the Fiend was killing girls there." The trigger was slippery under my forefinger.

"That's how long *he* had lived there, too!" The Reverend's face was losing its paleness, becoming more flushed by the moment. He jerked his head toward the Chinese.

"Will you take the word of the man who betrayed your husband?"

"Who?"

"Him!" The Reverend's exasperation roughened his voice. "It is this wicked creature who betrayed Fraser to Sir Percival Turner. Sir Percival told me!"

I nearly dropped the gun. Things were happening a lot too fast for me. I hoped desperately that Jamie and his men had found Ian and returned to the river—surely they would come to the house, if I was not at the rendezvous.

I lifted the pistol a little, meaning to tell the Reverend to go down the breezeway to the kitchen; locking him in one of the storage pantries was the best thing I could think of to do.

"I think you'd better—" I began, and then he lunged at me.

My finger squeezed the trigger in reflex. Simultaneously, there was a loud report, the weapon kicked in my hand, and a small cloud of black-powder smoke rolled past my face, making my eyes water.

I hadn't hit him. The explosion had startled him, but now his face settled into new lines of satisfaction. Without speaking, he reached into his coat and drew out a chased-metal case, six inches long. From one end of this protruded a handle of white staghorn.

With the horrible clarity that attends crisis of all kinds, I noted everything, from the nick in the edge of the blade as he drew it from the case, to the scent of the rose he crushed beneath one foot as he came toward me.

There was nowhere to run. I braced myself to fight, knowing fight was useless. The fresh scar of the cutlass slash burned on my arm, a reminder of what was coming that made my flesh shrink. There was a flash of blue in the corner of my vision, and a juicy *thunk*! as though someone had dropped a melon from some height. The Reverend turned very slowly on one shoe, eyes wide open and quite, quite blank. For that one moment, he looked like Margaret. Then he fell.

He fell all of a piece, not putting out a hand to save himself. One of the satinwood tables went flying, scattering potpourri and polished stones. The Reverend's head hit the floor at my feet, bounced slightly and lay still. I took one convulsive step back and stood trapped, back against the wall.

There was a dreadful contused depression in his temple. As I watched, his face changed color, fading before my eyes from the red of choler to a pasty white. His chest rose, fell, paused, rose again. His eyes were open; so was his mouth.

"Tsei-mi is here, First Wife?" The Chinese was putting the bag that held the stone balls back into his sleeve.

“Yes, he’s here—out there.” I waved vaguely toward the veranda. “What—he—did you really—?” I felt the waves of shock creeping over me and fought them back, closing my eyes and drawing in a breath as deep as I could manage.

“Was it you?” I said, my eyes still closed. If he was going to cave in my head as well, I didn’t want to watch. “Did he tell the truth? Was it you who gave away the meeting place at Arbroath to Sir Percival? Who told him about Malcolm, and the printshop?”

There was neither answer nor movement, and after a moment, I opened my eyes. He was standing there, watching the Reverend Campbell.

Archibald Campbell lay still as death, but was not yet dead. The dark angel was coming, though; his skin had taken on the faint green tinge I had seen before in dying men. Still, his lungs moved, taking air with a high wheezing sound.

“It wasn’t an Englishman, then,” I said. My hands were wet, and I wiped them on my skirt. “An English *name*. Willoughby.”

“Not Willoughby,” he said sharply. “I am Yi Tien Cho!”

“Why!” I said, almost shouting. “Look at me, damn you! *Why?*”

He did look at me then. His eyes were black and round as marbles, but they had lost their shine.

“In China,” he said, “there are … stories. Prophecy. That one day the ghosts will come. Everyone fear ghost.” He nodded once, twice, then glanced again at the figure on the floor.

“I leave China to save my life. Waking up long time—I see ghosts. All round me, ghosts,” he said softly.

“A big ghost comes—horrible white face, most horrible, hair on fire. I think he will eat my soul.” His eyes had been fixed on the Reverend; now they rose to my face, remote and still as standing water.

“I am right,” he said simply, and nodded again. He had not shaved his head recently, but the scalp beneath the black fuzz gleamed in the light from the window.

“He eat my soul, Tsei-mi. I am no more, Yi Tien Cho.”

“He saved your life,” I said. He nodded once more.

“I know. Better I die. Better die than be Willoughby. Willoughby! Ptah!” He turned his head and spat. His face contorted, suddenly angry.

“He talks my words, Tsei-mi! He eats my soul!” The fit of anger seemed to pass as quickly as it had come on. He was sweating, though the room was not terribly warm. He passed a trembling hand over his face, wiping away the moisture.

“There is a man I see in tavern. Ask for Mac-Doo. I am drunk,” he said dispassionately. “Wanting woman, no woman come with me—laugh, saying yellow worm, point …” He waved a hand vaguely toward the front of his trousers. He shook his head, his queue rustling softly against the silk.

“No matter what *gwao-fei* do; all same to me. I am drunk,” he said again. “Ghost-man wants Mac-Doo, ask I am knowing. Say yes, I know MacDoo.” He shrugged. “It is not important what I say.”

He was staring at the minister again. I saw the narrow black chest rise slowly, fall … rise once more, fall … and remain still. There was no sound in the room; the wheezing had stopped.

“It is a debt,” Yi Tien Cho said. He nodded toward the still body. “I am dishonored. I am stranger. But I pay. Your life for mine, First Wife. You tell Tsei-mi.”

He nodded once more, and turned toward the door. There was a faint rustling of feathers from the dark veranda. On the threshold he turned back.

“When I wake on dock, I am thinking ghosts have come, are all around me,” Yi Tien Cho said softly. His eyes were dark and flat, with no depth to them. “But I am wrong. It is me; I am the ghost.”

There was a stir of breeze at the French windows, and he was gone. The quick soft sound of felt-shod feet passed down the veranda, followed by the rustle of spread wings, and a soft, plaintive *Gwaaa!* that faded into the night-sounds of the plantation.

I made it to the sofa before my knees gave way. I bent down and laid my head on my knees, praying that I would not faint. The blood hammered in my ears. I thought I heard a wheezing breath, and jerked up my head in panic, but the Reverend Campbell lay quite still.

I could not stay in the same room with him. I got up, circling as far around the body as I could get, but before I reached the veranda door, I had changed my mind. All the events of the evening were colliding in my head like the bits of glass in a kaleidoscope.

I could not stop now to think, to make sense of it all. But I remembered the Reverend's words, before Yi Tien Cho had come. If there was any clue here to where Geillis Abernathy had gone, it would be upstairs. I took a candle from the table, lighted it, and made my way through the dark house to the staircase, resisting the urge to look behind me. I felt very cold.

* * *

The workroom was dark, but a faint, eerie violet glow hovered over the far end of the counter. There was an odd burnt smell in the room, that stung the back of my nose and made me sneeze. The faint metallic aftertaste in the back of my throat reminded me of a long-ago chemistry class.

Quicksilver. Burning mercury. The vapor it gave off was not only eerily beautiful, but highly toxic as well. I snatched out a handkerchief and plastered it over my nose and mouth as I went toward the site of the violet glow.

The lines of the pentacle had been charred into the wood of the counter. If she had used stones to mark a pattern, she had taken them with her, but she had left something else behind.

The photograph was heavily singed at the edges, but the center was untouched. My heart gave a thump of shock. I seized the picture, clutching Brianna's face to my chest with a mingled feeling of fury and panic.

What did she mean by this—this desecration? It couldn't have been meant as a gesture toward me or Jamie, for she could not have expected either of us ever to have seen it.

It must be magic—or Geilie's version of it. I tried frantically to recall our conversation in this room; what had she said? She had been curious about how I had traveled through the stones—that was the main thing. And what had I said? Only something vague, about fixing my attention on a person—yes, that was it—I said I had fixed my attention on a specific person inhabiting the time to which I was drawn.

I drew a deep breath, and discovered that I was trembling, both with delayed reaction from the scene in the salon, and from a dreadful, growing apprehension. It might be only that Geilie had decided to try my technique—if one could dignify it with such a word—as well as her own, and use the image of Brianna as a point of fixation for her travel. Or—I thought of the Reverend's piles of neat, handwritten papers, the carefully drawn genealogies, and thought I might just faint.

"One of the Brahan Seer's prophecies," he had said. "Concerning the Frasers of Lovat. Scotland's ruler will come from that lineage." But thanks to Roger Wakefield's researches, I knew—what Geilie almost certainly knew as well, obsessed as she was with Scottish history—that Lovat's direct line had failed in the 1800s. To all visible intents and purposes, that is. There was in fact one survivor of that line living in 1968—Brianna.

It took a moment for me to realize that the low, growling sound I heard was coming from my own throat, and a moment more of conscious effort to unclench my jaws.

I stuffed the mutilated photograph into the pocket of my skirt and whirled, running for the door as though the workroom were inhabited by demons. I had to find Jamie—now.

* * *

They were not there. The boat floated silently, empty in the shadows of the big cecropia where we had left it, but of Jamie and the rest, there was no sign at all.

One of the cane fields lay a short distance to my right, between me and the looming rectangle of the refinery beyond. The faint caramel smell of burnt sugar lingered over the field. Then the wind changed, and I smelled the clean, damp scent of moss and wet rocks from the stream, with all the tiny pungencies of the water plants intermingled.

The stream bank rose sharply here, going up in a mounded ridge that ended at the edge of the cane field. I scrambled up the slope, my palm slipping in soft sticky mud. I shook it off with a muffled exclamation of disgust and wiped my hand on my skirt. A thrill of anxiety ran through me. Bloody *hell*, where was Jamie? He should have been back long since.

Two torches burned by the front gate of Rose Hall, small dots of flickering light at this distance. There was a closer light as well; a glow from the left of the refinery. Had Jamie and his men met trouble there? I could hear a faint singing from that direction, and see a deeper glow that bespoke a large open fire. It seemed peaceful, but something about the night—or the place—made me very uneasy.

Suddenly I became aware of another scent, above the tang of watercress and burnt sugar—a strong putrid-sweet smell that I recognized at once as the smell of rotten meat. I took a cautious step, and all hell promptly broke loose underfoot.

It was as though a piece of the night had suddenly detached itself from the rest and sprung into action at about the level of my knees. A very large object exploded into movement close to me, and there was a stunning blow across my lower legs that knocked me off my feet.

My involuntary shriek coincided with a truly awful sound—a sort of loud, grunting hiss that confirmed my impression that I was in close juxtaposition to something large, alive, and reeking of carrion. I didn't know what it was, but I wanted no part of it.

I had landed very hard on my bottom. I didn't pause to see what was happening, but flipped over and made off through the mud and leaves on all fours, followed by a repetition of the grunting hiss, only louder, and a scrabbling, sliding sort of rush. Something hit my foot a glancing blow, and I stumbled to my feet, running.

I was so panicked that I didn't realize that I suddenly could see, until the man loomed up before me. I crashed into him, and the torch he was carrying dropped to the ground, hissing as it struck the wet leaves.

Hands grabbed my shoulders, and there were shouts behind me. My face was pressed against a hairless chest with a strong musky smell about it. I regained my balance, gasping, and leaned back to look into the face of a tall black slave, who was gaping down at me in perplexed dismay.

"Missus, what you be doin' here?" he said. Before I could answer, though, his attention was distracted from me to what was going on behind me. His grip on my shoulders relaxed, and I turned to see.

Six men surrounded the beast. Two carried torches, which they held aloft to light the other four, dressed only in loin cloths, who cautiously circled, holding sharpened wooden poles at the ready.

My legs were still stinging and wobbly from the blow they had taken; when I saw what had struck me, they nearly gave way again. The thing was nearly twelve feet long, with an armored body the size of a rum cask. The great tail whipped suddenly to one side; the man nearest leapt aside, shouting in alarm, and the saurian's head turned, jaws opening slightly to emit another hiss.

The jaws clicked shut with an audible snap, and I saw the telltale carnassial tooth, jutting up from the lower jaw in an expression of grim and spurious pleasantry.

"Never smile at a crocodile," I said stupidly.

"No, ma'am, I surely won't," the slave said, leaving me and edging cautiously toward the scene of action.

The men with the poles were poking at the beast, evidently trying to irritate it. In this endeavor, they appeared to be succeeding. The fat, splayed limbs dug hard into the ground, and the crocodile charged, roaring. It lunged with astonishing speed; the man before it yelped and jumped back, lost his footing on the slippery mud and fell.

The man who had collided with me launched himself through the air and landed on the crocodile's back. The men with the torches danced back and forth, yelling encouragement, and one of the pole men, bolder than the others, dashed forward and whacked his pole across the broad, plated head to distract it, while the fallen slave scrabbled backward, bare heels scooping trenches in the black mud.

The man on the crocodile's back was groping—with what seemed to me suicidal mania—for the beast's mouth. Getting a hold with one arm about the thick neck, he managed to grab the end of the snout with one hand, and holding the mouth shut, screamed something to his companions.

Suddenly a figure I hadn't noticed before stepped out of the shadow of the cane. It went down on one knee before the struggling pair, and without hesitation, slipped a rope noose around the lizard's jaws. The shouting rose in a yell of triumph, cut off by a sharp word from the kneeling figure.

He rose and motioned violently, shouting commands. He wasn't speaking English, but his concern was obvious; the great tail was still free, lashing from side to side with a force that would have felled any man who came within range of it. Seeing the power of that stroke, I could only marvel that my own legs were merely bruised, and not broken.

The pole men dashed in closer, in response to the commands of their leader. I could feel the half-pleasant numbness of shock stealing over me, and in that state of unreality, it somehow seemed no surprise to see that the leader was the man called Ishmael.

"Huwe!" he said, making violent upward gestures with his palms that made his meaning obvious. Two of the pole men had gotten their poles shoved under the belly; a third now managed a lucky strike past the tossing head, and lodged his pole under the chest.

"Huwe!" Ishmael said again, and all three threw themselves hard upon their poles. With a sucking *splat*! the reptile flipped over and landed thrashing on its back, its underside a sudden gleaming white in the torchlight.

The torchbearers were shouting again; the noise rang in my ears. Then Ishmael stopped them with a word, his hand thrown out in demand, palm up. I couldn't tell what the word was, but it could as easily have been "Scalpel!" The intonation—and the result—were the same.

One of the torchbearers hastily tugged the cane-knife from his loincloth, and slapped it into his leader's hand. Ishmael turned on his heel and in the same movement, drove the point of the knife deep into the crocodile's throat, just where the scales of the jaw joined those of the neck.

The blood welled black in the torchlight. All the men stepped back then, and stood at a safe distance, watching the dying frenzy of the great reptile with a respect mingled with deep satisfaction. Ishmael straightened, shirt a pale blur against the dark canes; unlike the other men, he was fully dressed, save for bare feet, and a number of small leather bags swung at his belt.

Owing to some freak of the nervous system, I had kept standing all this time. The increasingly urgent messages from my legs made it through to my brain at this point, and I sat down quite suddenly, my skirts billowing on the muddy ground.

The movement attracted Ishmael's notice; the narrow head turned in my direction, and his eyes widened. The other men, seeing him, turned also, and a certain amount of incredulous comment in several languages followed.

I wasn't paying much attention. The crocodile was still breathing, in stertorous, bubbling gasps. So was I. My eyes were fixed on the long scaled head, its eye with a slit pupil glowing the greenish gold of tourmaline, its oddly indifferent gaze seeming fixed in turn on me. The crocodile's grin was upside down, but still in place.

The mud was cool and smooth beneath my cheek, black as the thick stream that flowed between the lizard's scales. The tone of the questions and comments had changed to concern, but I was no longer listening.

* * *

I hadn't actually lost consciousness; I had a vague impression of jostling bodies and flickering light, and then I was lifted into the air, clutched tight in someone's arms. They were talking excitedly, but I caught only a word now and then. I dimly thought I should tell them to lay me down and cover me with something, but my tongue wasn't working.

Leaves brushed my face as my escort ruthlessly shouldered the canes aside; it was like pushing through a cornfield that had no ears, all stalks and rustling leaves. There was no conversation among the men now; the susurrus of our passage drowned even the sound of footsteps.

By the time we entered the clearing by the slave huts, both sight and wits had returned to me. Bar scrapes and bruises, I wasn't hurt, but I saw no point in advertising the fact. I kept my eyes closed and stayed limp as I was carried into one of the huts, fighting back panic, and hoping to come up with some sensible plan before I was obliged to wake up officially.

Where in bloody hell were Jamie and the others? If all went well —or worse, if it didn't—what were they going to do when they arrived at the landing place and found me gone, with traces—traces? the place was a bloody wallow!—of a struggle where I had been?

And what about friend Ishmael? What in the name of all merciful God was *he* doing here? I knew one thing—he wasn't bloody well cooking.

There was a good deal of festive noise outside the open door of the hut, and the scent of something alcoholic—not rum, something raw and pungent—floated in, a high note in the fuggy air of the hut, redolent of sweat and boiled yams. I cracked an eye and saw the reflected glimmer of firelight on the beaten earth. Shadows moved back and forth in front of the open door; I couldn't leave without being seen.

There was a general shout of triumph, and all the figures disappeared abruptly, in what I assumed was the direction of the fire. Presumably they were doing something to the crocodile, who had arrived when I did, swinging upside-down from the hunters' poles.

I rolled cautiously up onto my knees. Could I steal away while they were occupied with whatever they were doing? If I could make it to the nearest cane field, I was fairly sure they couldn't find me, but I was by no means so sure that I could find the river again, alone in the pitch-dark.

Ought I to make for the main house, instead, in hopes of running into Jamie and his rescue party? I shuddered slightly at the thought of the house, and the long, silent black form on the floor of the salon. But if I didn't go to either house or boat, how was I to find them, on a moonless night black as the Devil's armpit?

My planning was interrupted by a shadow in the doorway that momentarily blocked the light. I risked a peek, then sat bolt upright and screamed.

The figure came swiftly in and knelt by my pallet.

"Don' you be makin' that noise, woman," Ishmael said. "It ain't but me."

"Right," I said. Cold sweat prickled on my jaws and I could feel my heart pounding like a triphammer. "Knew it all the time."

They had cut off the crocodile's head and sliced out the tongue and the floor of the mouth. He wore the huge, cold-eyed thing like a hat, his eyes no more than a gleam in the depths beneath the portcullised teeth. The empty lower jaw sagged, fat-jowled and grimly jovial, hiding the lower half of his face.

"The *egungun*, he didn't hurt you none?" he asked.

"No," I said. "Thanks to the men. Er … you wouldn't consider taking that off, would you?"

He ignored the request and sat back on his heels, evidently considering me. I couldn't see his face, but every line of his body expressed the most profound indecision.

"Why you bein' here?" he asked at last.

For lack of any better idea, I told him. He didn't mean to bash me on the head, or he would have done it already, when I collapsed below the cane field.

"Ah," he said, when I had finished. The reptile's snout dipped slightly toward me as he thought. A drop of moisture fell from the valved nostril onto my bare hand, and I wiped it quickly on my skirt, shuddering.

"The missus not here tonight," he said, at last, as though wondering whether it was safe to trust me with the information.

"Yes, I know," I said. I gathered my feet under me, preparing to rise. "Can you—or one of the men—take me back to the big tree by the river? My husband will be looking for me," I added pointedly.

"Likely she be takin' the boy with her," Ishmael went on, ignoring me.

My heart had lifted when he had verified that Geilie was gone; now it fell, with a distinct thud in my chest.

"She's taken Ian? Why?"

I couldn't see his face, but the eyes inside the crocodile mask shone with a gleam of something that was partly amusement—but only partly.

"Missus likes boys," he said, the malicious tone making his meaning quite clear.

"Does she," I said flatly. "Do you know when she'll be coming back?"

The long, toothy snout turned suddenly up, but before he could reply, I sensed someone standing behind me, and swung around on the pallet.

"I know you," she said, a small frown puckering the wide, smooth forehead as she looked down at me. "Do I not?"

"We've met," I said, trying to swallow the heart that had leapt into my mouth in startlement. "How—how do you do, Miss Campbell?"

Better than when last seen, evidently, in spite of the fact that her neat wool challis gown had been replaced with a loose smock of coarse white cotton, sashed with a broad, raggedly torn strip of the same, stained dark blue with indigo. Both face and figure had grown more slender, though, and she had lost the pasty, sagging look of too many months spent indoors.

"I am well, I thank ye, ma'am," she said politely. The pale blue eyes had still that distant, unfocused look to them, and despite the new sun-glow on her skin, it was clear that Miss Margaret Campbell was still not altogether in the here and now.

This impression was borne out by the fact that she appeared not to have noticed Ishmael's unconventional attire. Or to have noticed Ishmael himself, for that matter. She went on looking at me, a vague interest passing across her snub features.

"It is most civil in ye to call upon me, ma'am," she said. "Might I offer ye refreshment of some kind? A dish of tea, perhaps? We keep no claret, for my brother holds that strong spirits are a temptation to the lusts of the flesh."

"I daresay they are," I said, feeling that I could do with a brisk spot of temptation at the moment.

Ishmael had risen, and now bowed deeply to Miss Campbell, the great head slipping precariously.

"You ready, *bébé*?" he asked softly. "The fire is waiting."

"Fire," she said. "Yes, of course," and turned to me.

"Will ye not join me, Mrs. Malcolm?" she asked graciously. "Tea will be served shortly. I do so enjoy looking into a nice fire," she confided, taking my arm as I rose. "Do you not find yourself sometimes imagining that you see things in the flames?"

"Now and again," I said. I glanced at Ishmael, who was standing in the doorway. His indecision was apparent in his stance, but as Miss Campbell moved inexorably toward him, towing me after her, he shrugged very slightly, and stepped aside.

Outside, a small bonfire burned brightly in the center of the clearing before the row of huts. The crocodile had already been skinned; the raw hide was stretched on a frame near one of the huts, throwing a headless shadow on the wooden wall. Several sharpened sticks were thrust into the ground around the fire, each strung with chunks of meat, sizzling with an appetizing smell that nonetheless made my stomach clench.

Perhaps three dozen people, men, women and children, were gathered near the fire, laughing and talking. One man was still singing softly, curled over a battered guitar.

As we appeared, one man caught sight of us, and turned sharply, saying something that sounded like "Hau!" At once, the talk and laughter stopped, and a respectful silence fell upon the crowd.

Ishmael walked slowly toward them, the crocodile's head grinning in apparent delight. The firelight shone off faces and bodies like polished jet and melted caramel, all with deep black eyes that watched us come.

There was a small bench near the fire, set on a sort of dais made of stacked planks. This was evidently the seat of honor, for Miss Campbell made for it directly, and gestured politely for me to sit down next to her.

I could feel the weight of eyes upon me, with expressions ranging from hostility to guarded curiosity, but most of the attention was for Miss Campbell. Glancing covertly around the circle of faces, I was struck by their strangeness. These were the faces of Africa, and alien to me; not faces like Joe's, that bore only the faint stamp of his ancestors, diluted by centuries of European blood. Black or not, Joe Abernathy was a great deal more like me than like these people—different to the marrow of their bones.

The man with the guitar had put it aside, and drawn out a small drum that he set between his knees. The sides were covered with the hide of some spotted animal; goat, perhaps. He began to tap it softly with the palms of his hands, in a half-halting rhythm like the beating of a heart.

I glanced at Miss Campbell, sitting tranquil beside me, hands carefully folded in her lap. She was gazing straight ahead, into the leaping flames, with a small, dreaming smile on her lips.

The swaying crowd of slaves parted, and two little girls came out, carrying a large basket between them. The handle of the basket was twined with white roses, and the lid jerked up and down, agitated by the movements of something inside.

The girls set the basket at Ishmael's feet, casting awed glances up at his grotesque headdress. He rested a hand on each of their heads, murmured a few words, and then dismissed them, his upraised palms a startling flash of yellow-pink, like butterflies rising from the girls' knotted hair.

The attitude of the spectators had so far been quiet and respectful. It continued so, but now they crowded closer, necks craning to see what would happen next, and the drum began to beat faster, still softly. One of the women was holding a stone bottle, she took one step forward, handed it to Ishmael, and melted back into the crowd.

Ishmael took up the bottle of liquor and poured a small amount on the ground, moving carefully in a circle around the basket. The basket, momentarily quiescent, heaved to and fro, evidently disturbed by the movement or the pungent scent of alcohol.

A man holding a stick wrapped in rags stepped forward, and held the stick in the bonfire until the rags blazed up, bright red. At a word from Ishmael, he dipped his torch to the ground where the liquor had been poured. There was a collective "Ah!" from the watchers as a ring of flame sprang up, burned blue and died away at once, as quickly as it came. From the basket came a loud “Cock-a-doodle-dooo!”

Miss Campbell stirred beside me, eyeing the basket with suspicion.

As though the crowing had been a signal—perhaps it was—a flute began to play, and the humming of the crowd rose to a higher pitch.

Ishmael came toward the makeshift dais where we sat, holding a red headrag between his hands. This he tied about Margaret’s wrist, placing her hand gently back in her lap when he had finished.

“Oh, there is my handkerchief!” she exclaimed, and quite unselfconsciously raised her wrist and wiped her nose.

No one but me seemed to notice. The attention was on Ishmael, who was standing before the crowd, speaking in a language I didn’t recognize. The cock in the basket crowed again, and the white roses on the handle quivered violently with its struggles.

“I do wish it wouldn’t do that,” said Margaret Campbell, rather petulantly. “If it does again, it will be three times, and that’s bad luck, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” Ishmael was now pouring the rest of the liquor in a circle round the dais. I hoped the flame wouldn’t startle her.

“Oh, yes, Archie says so. ‘Before the cock crows thrice, thou wilt betray me.’ Archie says women are always betrayers. Is that so, do you think?”

“Depends on your point of view, I suppose,” I murmured, watching the proceedings. Miss Campbell seemed oblivious to the swaying, humming slaves, the music, the twitching basket, and Ishmael, who was collecting small objects handed to him out of the crowd.

“I’m hungry,” she said. “I do hope the tea will be ready soon.”

Ishmael heard this. To my amazement, he reached into one of the bags at his waist and unwrapped a small bundle, which proved to hold a cup of chipped and battered porcelain, the remnants of gold leaf still visible on the rim. This he placed ceremoniously on her lap.

“Oh, goody,” Margaret said happily, clapping her hands together. “Perhaps there’ll be biscuits.”

I rather thought not. Ishmael had placed the objects given him by the crowd along the edge of the dais. A few small bones, with lines carved across them, a spray of jasmine, and two or three crude little figures made of wood, each one wrapped in a scrap of cloth, with little shocks of hair glued to the head-nubbins with clay.

Ishmael spoke again, the torch dipped, and a sudden whiff of blue flame shot up around the dais. As it died away, leaving the scent of scorched earth and burnt brandy heavy in the cool night air, he opened the basket and brought out the cock.

It was a large, healthy bird, black feathers glistening in the torchlight. It struggled madly, uttering piercing squawks, but it was firmly trussed, its feet wrapped in cloth to prevent scratching. Ishmael bowed low, saying something, and handed the bird to Margaret.

"Oh, thank you," she said graciously.

The cock stretched out its neck, wattles bright red with agitation, and crowed piercingly. Margaret shook it.

"Naughty bird!" she said crossly, and raising it to her mouth, bit it just behind the head.

I heard the soft crack of the neck bones and the little grunt of effort as she flung her head up, wrenching off the head of the hapless cock.

She clutched the gurgling, struggling trussed carcass tight against her bosom, crooning, "Now, then, now, then, it's all right, darling," as the blood spurted and sprayed into the teacup and all over her dress.

The crowd had cried out at first, but now was quite still, watching. The flute, too, had fallen silent, but the drum beat on, sounding much louder than before.

Margaret dropped the drained carcass carelessly to one side, where a boy darted out of the crowd to retrieve it. She brushed absently at the blood on her skirt, picking up the teacup with her red-swathed hand.

"Guests first," she said politely. "Will you have one lump, Mrs. Malcolm, or two?"

I was fortunately saved from answering by Ishmael, who thrust a crude horn cup into my hands, indicating that I should drink from it. Considering the alternative, I raised it to my mouth without hesitation.

It was fresh-distilled rum, sharp and raw enough to strip the throat, and I choked, wheezing. The tang of some herb rose up the back of my throat and into my nose; something had been mixed with the liquor, or soaked in it. It was faintly tart, but not unpleasant.

Other cups like mine were making their way from hand to hand through the crowd. Ishmael made a sharp gesture, indicating that I should drink more. I obediently raised the cup to my lips, but let the fiery liquid lap against my mouth without swallowing. Whatever was happening here, I thought I might need such wits as I had.

Beside me, Miss Campbell was drinking from her teetotal cup with genteel sips. The feeling of expectancy among the crowd was rising; they were swaying now, and a woman had begun to sing, low and husky, her voice an offbeat counterpoint to the thump of the drum.

The shadow of Ishmael's headdress fell across my face, and I looked up. He too was swaying slowly, back and forth. The collarless white shirt he wore was speckled over the shoulders with black dots of blood, and stuck to his breast with sweat. I thought suddenly that the raw crocodile's head must weigh thirty pounds at least, a terrible weight to support; the muscles of his neck and shoulders were taut with effort.

He raised his hands and began to sing as well. I felt a shiver run down my back and coil at the base of my spine, where my tail would have been. With his face masked, the voice could have been Joe's; deep and honeyed, with a power that commanded attention. If I closed my eyes, it *was* Joe, with the light glinting off his spectacles, and catching the gold tooth far back as he smiled.

Then I opened my eyes again, half-shocked to see instead the crocodile's sinister yawn, and the fire gold-green in the cold, cruel eyes. My mouth was dry and there was a faint buzzing in my ears, weaving around the strong, sweet words.

He was getting attention, all right; the night by the fire was full of eyes, black-wide and shiny, and small moans and shouts marked the pauses in the song.

I closed my eyes and shook my head hard. I grabbed the edge of the wooden bench, clinging to its rough reality. I wasn't drunk, I knew; whatever herb had been mixed with the rum was potent. I could feel it creeping snakelike through my blood, and kept my eyes tight closed, fighting its progress.

I couldn't block my ears, though, or the sound of that voice, rising and falling.

I didn't know how much time had passed. I came back to myself with a start, suddenly aware that the drum and the singing had stopped.

There was an absolute silence around the fire. I could hear the small rush of flame, and the rustle of cane leaves in the night wind; the quick darting scuttle of a rat in the palm-frond roof of the hut behind me.

The drug was still in my bloodstream, but the effects were dying; I could feel clarity coming back to my thoughts. Not so for the crowd; the eyes were fixed in a single, unblinking stare, like a wall of mirrors, and I thought suddenly of the voodoo legends of my time—of zombies and the *houngans* who made them. What had Geilie said? *Every legend has one foot on the truth.*

Ishmael spoke. He had taken off the crocodile's head. It lay on the ground at our feet, eyes gone dark in the shadow.

"Ils sont arrivées," Ishmael said quietly. *They have come.* He lifted his wet face, lined with exhaustion, and turned to the crowd.

"Who asks?"

As though in response, a young woman in a turban moved out of the crowd, still swaying, half-dazed, and sank down on the ground before the dais. She put her hand on one of the carved images, a crude wooden icon in the shape of a pregnant woman.

Her eyes looked up with hope, and while I didn't recognize the words she spoke, it was clear what she asked.

"Aya, gado." The voice spoke from beside me, but it wasn't Margaret Campbell's. It was the voice of an old woman, cracked and

high, but confident, answering in the affirmative.

The young woman gasped with joy, and prostrated herself on the ground. Ishmael nudged her gently with a foot; she got up quickly and backed into the crowd, clutching the small image and bobbing her head, murmuring *"Mana, mana,"* over and over.

Next was a young man, by his face the brother of the first young woman, who squatted respectfully upon his haunches, touching his head before he spoke.

"Grandmère," he began, in high, nasal French. Grandmother? I thought.

He asked his question looking shyly down at the ground. "Does the woman I love return my love?" His was the jasmine spray; he held it so that it brushed the top of a bare, dusty foot.

The woman beside me laughed, her ancient voice ironic but not unkind. *"Certainement,"* she answered. "She returns it; and that of three other men, besides. Find another; less generous, but more worthy."

The young man retired, crestfallen, to be replaced by an older man. This one spoke in an African language I did not know, a tone of bitterness in his voice as he touched one of the clay figures.

"Setato hoye," said—who? The voice had changed. The voice of a man this time, full-grown but not elderly, answering in the same language with an angry tone.

I stole a look to the side, and despite the heat of the fire, felt the chill ripple up my forearms. It was Margaret's face no longer. The outlines were the same, but the eyes were bright, alert and focused on the petitioner, the mouth set in grim command, and the pale throat swelled like a frog's with the effort of strong speech as whoever-it-was argued with the man.

"They are here," Ishmael had said. "They," indeed. He stood to one side, silent but watchful, and I saw his eyes rest on me for a second before coming back to Margaret. Or whatever had been Margaret.

"They." One by one the people came forward, to kneel and ask. Some spoke in English, some French, or the slave patois, some in the African speech of their vanished homes. I couldn't understand all that was said, but when the questions were in French or English, they were often prefaced by a respectful “Grandfather,” or “Grandmother,” once by “Aunt.”

Both the face and the voice of the oracle beside me changed, as “they” came to answer their call; male and female, mostly middle-aged or old, their shadows dancing on her face with the flicker of the fire.

Do you not sometimes imagine that you see things in the fire? The echo of her own small voice came back to me, thin and childish.

Listening, I felt the hair rise on the back of my neck, and understood for the first time what had brought Ishmael back to this place, risking recapture and renewed slavery. Not friendship, not love, nor any loyalty to his fellow slaves, but power.

What price is there for the power to tell the future? Any price, was the answer I saw, looking out at the rapt faces of the congregation. He had come back for Margaret.

It went on for some time. I didn’t know how long the drug would last, but I saw people here and there sink down to the ground, and nod to sleep; others melted silently back to the darkness of the huts, and after a time, we were almost alone. Only a few remained around the fire, all men.

They were all husky and confident, and from their attitude, accustomed to command some respect, among slaves at least. They had hung back, together as a group, watching the proceedings, until at last one, clearly the leader, stepped forward.

“They be done, mon,” he said to Ishmael, with a jerk of his head toward the sleeping forms around the fire. “Now you ask.”

Ishmael’s face showed nothing but a slight smile, yet he seemed suddenly nervous. Perhaps it was the closing in of the other men. There was nothing overtly menacing about them, but they seemed both serious and intent—not upon Margaret, for a change, but upon Ishmael.

At last he nodded, and turned to face Margaret. During the hiatus, her face had gone blank; no one at home.

“Bouassa,” he said to her. “Come you, Bouassa.”

I shrank involuntarily away, as far as I could get on the bench without falling into the fire. Whoever Bouassa was, he had come promptly.

"I be hearin'." It was a voice as deep as Ishmael's, and should have been as pleasant. It wasn't. One of the men took an involuntary step backward.

Ishmael stood alone; the other men seemed to shrink away from him, as though he suffered some contamination.

"Tell me what I want to know, you Bouassa," he said.

Margaret's head tilted slightly, a light of amusement in the pale blue eyes.

"What you want to know?" the deep voice said, with mild scorn. "For why, mon? You be goin', I tell you anything or not."

The small smile on Ishmael's face echoed that on Bouassa's.

"You say true," he said softly. "But these—" He jerked his head toward his companions, not taking his eyes from the face. "They be goin' with me?"

"Might as well," the deep voice said. It chuckled, rather unpleasantly. "The Maggot dies in three days. Won't be nothin' for them here. That all you be wantin' with me?" Not waiting for an answer, Bouassa yawned widely, and a loud belch erupted from Margaret's dainty mouth.

Her mouth closed, and her eyes resumed their vacant stare, but the men weren't noticing. An excited chatter erupted from them, to be hushed by Ishmael, with a significant glance at me. Abruptly quiet, they moved away, still muttering, glancing at me as they went.

Ishmael closed his eyes as the last man left the clearing, and his shoulders sagged. I felt a trifle drained myself.

"What—" I began, and then stopped. Across the fire, a man had stepped from the shelter of the sugarcane. Jamie, tall as the cane itself, with the dying fire staining shirt and face as red as his hair.

He raised a finger to his lips, and I nodded. I gathered my feet cautiously beneath me, picking up my stained skirt in one hand. I could be up, past the fire, and into the cane with him before Ishmael could reach me. But Margaret?

I hesitated, turned to look at her, and saw that her face had come alive once again. It was lifted, eager, lips parted and shining eyes narrowed so that they seemed slightly slanted, as she stared across the fire.

"Daddy?" said Brianna's voice beside me.

The hairs rippled softly erect on my forearms. It was Brianna's voice, Brianna's face, blue eyes dark and slanting with eagerness.

"Bree?" I whispered, and the face turned to me.

"Mama," said my daughter's voice, from the throat of the oracle.

"Brianna," said Jamie, and she turned her head sharply to look at him.

"Daddy," she said, with great certainty. "I knew it was you. I've been dreaming about you."

Jamie's face was white with shock. I saw his lips form the word "Jesus," without sound, and his hand moved instinctively to cross himself.

"Don't let Mama go alone," said the voice with great certainty. "You go with her. I'll keep you safe."

There was no sound save the crackling of the fire. Ishmael stood transfixed, staring at the woman beside me. Then she spoke again, in Brianna's soft, husky tones.

"I love you, Daddy. You too, Mama." She leaned toward me, and I smelled the fresh blood. Then her lips touched mine, and I screamed.

I was not conscious of leaping to my feet, or of crossing the clearing. All I knew was that I was clinging to Jamie, my face buried in the cloth of his coat, shaking.

His heart was pounding under my cheek, and I thought that he was shaking, too. I felt his hand trace the sign of the cross upon my back, and his arm lock tight about my shoulders.

"It's all right," he said, and I could feel his ribs swell and brace with the effort of keeping his voice steady. "She's gone."

I didn't want to look, but forced myself to turn my head toward the fire.

It was a peaceful scene. Margaret Campbell sat quietly on her bench, humming to herself, twiddling a long black tailfeather upon her knee. Ishmael stood behind her, one hand smoothing her hair in what looked like tenderness. He murmured something to her in a low, liquid tongue—a question—and she smiled placidly.

"Oh, I'm not a scrap tired!" she assured him, turning to look fondly up into the scarred face that hovered in the darkness above her. "Such a nice party, wasn't it?"

"Yes, *bébé*," he said gently. "But you rest now, eh?" He turned and clicked his tongue loudly. Suddenly two of the turbaned women materialized out of the night; they must have been waiting, just within call. Ishmael said something to them, and they came at once to tend Margaret, lifting her to her feet and leading her away between them, murmuring soft endearments in African and French.

Ishmael remained, watching us across the fire. He was still as one of Geilie's idols, carved out of night.

"I did not come alone," Jamie said. He gestured casually over his shoulder toward the cane field behind him, implying armed regiments.

"Oh, you be alone, mon," Ishmael said, with a slight smile. "No matter. The *loa* speak to you; you be safe from me." He glanced back and forth between us, appraising.

"Huh," he said, in a tone of interest. "Never did hear a *loa* speak to *buckra*." He shook his head then, dismissing the matter.

"You be going now," he said, quietly but with considerable authority.

"Not yet." Jamie's arm dropped from my shoulder, and he straightened up beside me. "I have come for the boy Ian; I will not go without him."

Ishmael's brows went up, compressing the three vertical scars between them.

"Huh," he said again. "You forget that boy; he be gone."

"Gone where?" Jamie asked sharply.

The narrow head tilted to one side, as Ishmael looked him over carefully.

"Gone with the Maggot, mon," he said. "And where she go, you don' be going. That boy gone, mon," he said again, with finality. "You leave too, you a wise man." He paused, listening. A drum was talking, somewhere far away, the pulse of it little more than a disturbance of the night air.

"The rest be comin' soon," he remarked. "You safe from me, mon, not from them."

"Who are the rest?" I asked. The terror of the encounter with the *loa* was ebbing, and I was able to talk once more, though my spine still rippled with fear of the dark cane field at my back.

"Maroons, I expect," Jamie said. He raised a brow at Ishmael. "Or ye will be?"

The priest nodded, one formal bob of the head.

"That be true," he said. "You hear Bouassa speak? His *loa* bless us, we go." He gestured toward the huts and the dark hills behind them. "The drum callin' them down from the hills, those strong enough to go."

He turned away, the conversation obviously at an end.

"Wait!" Jamie said. "Tell us where she has gone—Mrs. Abernathy and the boy!"

Ishmael turned back, shoulders mantled in the crocodile's blood.

"To Abandawe," he said.

"And where's that?" Jamie demanded impatiently. I put a hand on his arm.

"I know where it is," I said, and Ishmael's eyes widened in astonishment. "At least—I know it's on Hispaniola. Lawrence told me. That was what Geilie wanted from him—to find out where it was."

"*What* is it? A town, a village? Where?" I could feel Jamie's arm tense under my hand, vibrating with the urgency to be gone.

"It's a cave," I said, feeling cold in spite of the balmy air and the nearness of the fire. "An old cave."

"Abandawe a magic place," Ishmael put in, deep voice soft, as though he feared to speak of it out loud. He looked at me hard, reassessing. "Clotilda say the Maggot take you to the room upstairs. You maybe be knowin' what she do there?"

“A little.” My mouth felt dry. I remembered Geilie’s hands, soft and plump and white, laying out the gems in their patterns, talking lightly of blood.

As though he caught the echo of this thought, Ishmael took a sudden step toward me.

“I ask you, woman—you still bleed?”

Jamie jerked under my hand, but I squeezed his arm to be still.

“Yes,” I said. “Why? What has that to do with it?”

The *oniseegun* was plainly uneasy; he glanced from me back toward the huts. A stir was perceptible in the dark behind him; many bodies were moving to and fro, with a mutter of voices like the whisper of the cane fields. They were getting ready to go.

“A woman bleeds, she kill magic. You bleed, got your woman-power, the magic don’t work for you. It the old women do magic; witch someone, call the *loas*, make sick, make well.” He gave me a long, appraising look, and shook his head.

“You ain’ gone do the magic, what the Maggot do. That magic kill her, sure, but it kill you, too.” He gestured behind him, toward the empty bench. “You hear Bouassa speak? He say the Maggot die, three days. She taken the boy, he die. You go follow them, mon, you die, too, sure.”

He stared at Jamie, and raised his hands in front of him, wrists crossed as though bound together. “I tell you, *amiki,*” he said. He let his hands fall, jerking them apart, breaking the invisible bond. He turned abruptly, and vanished into the darkness, where the shuffle of feet was growing louder, punctuated with bumps as heavy objects were shifted.

“Holy Michael defend us,” muttered Jamie. He ran a hand hard through his hair, making fiery wisps stand out in the flickering light. The fire was dying fast, with no one left to tend it.

“D’ye ken this place, Sassenach? Where Geillis has gone wi’ Ian?”

“No, all I know is that it’s somewhere up in the far hills on Hispaniola, and that a stream runs through it.”

“Then we must take Stern,” he said with decision. “Come on; the lads are by the river wi’ the boat.”

I turned to follow him, but paused on the edge of the cane field to look back.

"Jamie! Look!" Behind us lay the embers of the *egungun*'s fire, and the shadowy ring of slave huts. Farther away, the bulk of Rose Hall made a light patch against the hillside. But farther still, beyond the shoulder of the hill, the sky glowed faintly red.

"That will be Howe's place, burning," he said. He sounded oddly calm, without emotion. He pointed to the left, toward the flank of the mountain, where a small orange dot glowed, no more at this distance than a pinprick of light. "And that will be Twelvetrees, I expect."

The drum-voice whispered through the night, up and down the river. What had Ishmael said? *The drum callin' them down from the hills—those strong enough to go*.

A small line of slaves was coming down from the huts, women carrying babies and bundles, cooking pots slung over their shoulders, heads turbaned in white. Next to one young woman, who held her arm with careful respect, walked Margaret Campbell, likewise turbaned.

Jamie saw her, and stepped forward.

"Miss Campbell!" he said sharply. "Margaret!"

Margaret and her attendant stopped; the young woman moved as though to step between her charge and Jamie, but he held up both hands as he came, to show he meant no harm, and she reluctantly stepped back.

"Margaret," he said. "Margaret, do ye not know me?"

She stared vacantly at him. Very slowly, he touched her, holding her face between his hands.

"Margaret," he said to her, low-voiced, urgent. "Margaret, hear me! D'ye ken me, Margaret?"

She blinked once, then twice, and the smooth round face melted and thawed into life. It was not like the sudden possession of the *loas*; this was a slow, tentative coming, of something shy and fearful.

"Aye, I ken ye, Jamie," she said at last. Her voice was rich and pure, a young girl's voice. Her lips curled up, and her eyes came alive once more, her face still held in the hollow of his hands.

"It's been lang since I saw ye, Jamie," she said, looking up into his eyes. "Will ye have word of Ewan, then? Is he well?"

He stood very still for a minute, his face that careful blank mask that hid strong feeling.

"He is well," he whispered at last. "Verra well, Margaret. He gave me this, to keep until I saw ye." He bent his head and kissed her gently.

Several of the women had stopped, standing silently by to watch. At this, they moved and began to murmur, glancing uneasily at each other. When he released Margaret Campbell and stepped back, they closed in around her, protective and wary, nodding him back.

Margaret seemed oblivious; her eyes were still on Jamie's face, the smile on her lips.

"I thank ye, Jamie!" she called, as her attendant took her arm and began to urge her away. "Tell Ewan I'll be with him soon!" The little band of white-clothed women moved away, disappearing like ghosts into the darkness by the cane field.

Jamie made an impulsive move in their direction, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Let her go," I whispered, mindful of what lay on the floor in the salon of the plantation house. "Jamie, let her go. You can't stop her; she's better with them."

He closed his eyes briefly, then nodded.

"Aye, you're right." He turned, then stopped suddenly, and I whirled about to see what he had seen. There were lights in Rose Hall now. Torchlight, flickering behind the windows, upstairs and down. As we watched, a surly glow began to swell in the windows of the secret workroom on the second floor.

"It's past time to go," Jamie said. He seized my hand and we went quickly, diving into the dark rustle of the canes, fleeing through air suddenly thick with the smell of burning sugar.

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ABANDAWE

"You can take the Governor's pinnace; that's small, but it's seaworthy." Grey fumbled through the drawer of his desk. "I'll write an order for the dockers to hand it over to you."

"Aye, we'll need the boat—I canna risk the *Artemis*; as she's Jared's—but I think we'd best steal it, John." Jamie's brows were drawn together in a frown. "I wouldna have ye be involved wi' me in any visible way, aye? You'll be having trouble enough with things, without that."

Grey smiled unhappily. "Trouble? Yes, you might call it trouble, with four plantation houses burnt, and over two hundred slaves gone—God knows where! But I vastly doubt that anyone will take notice of my social acquaintance, under the circumstances. Between fear of the Maroons and fear of the Chinaman, the whole island is in such a panic that a mere smuggler is the most negligible of trivialities."

"It's a great relief to me to be thought trivial," Jamie said, very dryly. "Still, we'll steal the boat. And if we're taken, ye've never heard my name or seen my face, aye?"

Grey stared at him, a welter of emotions fighting for mastery of his features, amusement, fear, and anger among them.

"Is that right?" he said at last. "Let you be taken, watch them hang you, and keep quiet about it—for fear of smirching my reputation? For God's sake, Jamie, what do you take me for?"

Jamie's mouth twitched slightly.

"For a friend, John," he said. "And if I'll take your friendship—and your damned boat!—then you'll take mine, and keep quiet. Aye?"

The Governor glared at him for a moment, lips pressed tight, but then his shoulders sagged in defeat.

"I will," he said shortly. "But I should regard it as a great personal favor if you would endeavor not to be captured."

Jamie rubbed a knuckle across his mouth, hiding a smile.

"I'll try verra hard, John."

The Governor sat down, wearily. There were deep circles under his eyes, and his impeccable linen was wilted; obviously he had not changed his clothes from the day before.

"All right. I don't know where you're going, and it's likely better I don't. But if you can, keep out of the sealanes north of Antigua. I sent a boat this morning, to ask for as many men as the barracks there can supply, marines and sailors both. They'll be heading this way by the day after tomorrow at the latest, to guard the town and harbor against the escaped Maroons in case of an outright rebellion."

I caught Jamie's eye, and raised one brow in question, but he shook his head, almost imperceptibly. We had told the Governor of the uprising on the Yallahs River, and the escape of the slaves—something he had heard about from other sources, anyway. We had not told him what we had seen later that night, lying to under cover of a tiny cove, sails taken down to hide their whiteness.

The river was dark as onyx, but with a fugitive gleam from the broad expanse of water. We had heard them coming, and had time to hide before the ship came down upon us; the beating of drums and a savage exultation of many voices echoing through the river valley as the *Bruja* sailed past us, carried by the downward current. The bodies of the pirates no doubt lay somewhere upriver, left to rot peacefully among the frangipani and cedar.

The escaped slaves of the Yallahs River had not gone into the mountains of Jamaica, but out to sea, presumably to join Bouassa's followers on Hispaniola. The townsfolk of Kingston had nothing to fear from the escaped slaves—but it was a good deal better that the

Royal Navy should concentrate their attention here than on Hispaniola, where we were bound.

Jamie rose to take our leave, but Grey stopped him.

"Wait. Will you not require a safe place for your—for Mrs. Fraser?" He didn't look at me, but at Jamie, eyes steady. "I should be honored if you would entrust her to my protection. She could stay here, in the Residence, until you return. No one would trouble her—or even need to know she was here."

Jamie hesitated, but there was no gentle way to phrase it.

"She must go with me, John," he said. "There is no choice about it; she must."

Grey's glance flickered to me, then away, but not before I had seen the look of jealousy in his eyes. I felt sorry for him, but there was nothing I could say; no way to tell him the truth.

"Yes," he said, and swallowed noticeably. "I see. Quite."

Jamie held out a hand to him. He hesitated for a moment, but then took it.

"Good luck, Jamie," he said, voice a little husky. "God go with you."

* * *

Fergus had been somewhat more difficult to deal with. He had insisted absolutely on accompanying us, offering argument after argument, and arguing the more vehemently when he found that the Scottish smugglers would sail with us.

"You take them, but you will go without *me*?" Fergus's face was alive with indignation.

"I will," Jamie said firmly. "The smugglers are widowers or bachelors, all, but you're a marrit man." He glanced pointedly at Marsali, who stood watching the discussion, her face drawn with anxiety. "I thought she was oweryoung to be wed, and I was wrong; but I *know* she's oweryoung to be widowed. You'll stay." And he turned aside, the matter settled.

* * *

It was full dark when we set sail in Grey's pinnace, a thirty-foot, single-decked sloop, leaving two docksmen bound and gagged in the boathouse behind us. It was a small, single-masted ship, bigger than the fishing boat in which we had traveled up the Yallahs River, but barely large enough to qualify for the designation "ship."

Nonetheless, she seemed seaworthy enough, and we were soon out of Kingston Harbor, heeling over in a brisk evening breeze, on our way toward Hispaniola.

The smugglers handled the sailing among them, leaving Jamie, Lawrence and I to sit on one of the long benches along the rail. We chatted desultorily of this and that, but after a time, fell silent, absorbed in our own thoughts.

Jamie yawned repeatedly, and finally, at my urging, consented to lie down upon the bench, his head resting in my lap. I was myself strung too tightly to want to sleep.

Lawrence too was wakeful, staring upward into the sky, hands folded behind his head.

"There is moisture in the air tonight," he said, nodding upward toward the silver sliver of the crescent moon. "See the haze about the moon? It may rain before dawn; unusual for this time of year."

Talk about the weather seemed sufficiently boring to soothe my jangled nerves. I stroked Jamie's hair, thick and soft under my hand.

"Is that so?" I said. "You and Jamie both seem able to read the weather from the sky. All I know is the old bit about 'Red sky at night, sailor's delight; red sky at morning, sailor take warning.' I didn't notice what color the sky was tonight, did you?"

Lawrence laughed comfortably. "Rather a light purple," he said. "I cannot say whether it will be red in the morning, but it is surprising how frequently such signs are reliable. But of course there is a scientific principle involved—the refraction of light from the moisture in the air, just as I observed presently of the moon."

I lifted my chin, enjoying the breeze that lifted the heavy hair that fell on my neck.

"But what about odd phenomena? Supernatural things?" I asked him. "What about things where the rules of science seem not to apply?" *I am a scientist*, I heard him say in memory, his slight accent seeming only to reinforce his matter-of-factness. *I don't believe in ghosts.*

"Such as what, these phenomena?"

"Well—" I groped for a moment, then fell back on Geilie's own examples. "People who have bleeding stigmata, for example? Astral travel? Visions, supernatural manifestations … odd things, that can't be explained rationally."

Lawrence grunted, and settled his bulk more comfortably on the bench beside me.

"Well, I say it is the place of science only to observe," he said. "To seek cause where it may be found, but to realize that there are many things in the world for which no cause shall *be* found; not because it does not exist, but because we know too little to find it. It is not the place of science to insist on explanation—but only to observe, in hopes that the explanation will manifest itself."

"That may be science, but it isn't human nature," I objected. "People go on wanting explanations."

"They do." He was becoming interested in the discussion; he leaned back, folding his hands across his slight paunch, in a lecturer's attitude. "It is for this reason that a scientist constructs hypotheses—suggestions for the cause of an observation. But a hypothesis must never be confused with an explanation—with proof.

"I have seen a great many things which might be described as peculiar. Fish-falls, for instance, where a great many fish—all of the same species, mind you, all the same size—fall suddenly from a clear sky, over dry land. There would appear to be no rational cause for this—and yet, is it therefore suitable to attribute the phenomenon to supernatural interference? On the face of it, does it seem more likely that some celestial intelligence should amuse itself by flinging shoals of fish at us from the sky, or that there is some meteorological phenomenon—a waterspout, a tornado, something of the kind?—that while not visible to us, is still in operation? And yet"—his voice became more pensive—"why—and how!—might a natural phenomenon such as a waterspout remove the heads—and only the heads—of all the fish?"

"Have you seen such a thing yourself?" I asked, interested, and he laughed.

“There speaks a scientific mind!” he said, chuckling. “The first thing a scientist asks—how do you know? Who has seen it? Can I see it myself? Yes, I have seen such a thing—three times, in fact, though in one case the precipitation was of frogs, rather than fish.

“Were you near a seashore or a lake?”

“Once near a shore, once near a lake—that was the frogs—but the third time, it took place far inland; some twenty miles from the nearest body of water. And yet the fish were of a kind I have seen only in the deep ocean. In none of the cases did I see any sort of disturbance of the upper air—no clouds, no great wind, none of the fabled spouts of water that rise from the sea into the sky, assuredly. And yet the fish fell; so much is a fact, for I have seen them.”

“And it isn’t a fact if you haven’t seen it?” I asked dryly.

He laughed in delight, and Jamie stirred, murmuring against my thigh. I smoothed his hair, and he relaxed into sleep again.

“It may be so; it may not. But a scientist could not say, could he? What is it the Christian Bible says—‘Blest are they who have not seen, but have believed’?”

“That’s what it says, yes.”

“Some things must be accepted as fact without provable cause.” He laughed again, this time without much humor. “As a scientist who is also a Jew, I have perhaps a different perspective on such phenomena as stigmata—and the idea of resurrection of the dead, which a very great proportion of the civilized world accepts as fact beyond question. And yet, this skeptical view is not one I could even breathe, to anyone save yourself, without grave danger of personal harm.”

“Doubting Thomas was a Jew, after all,” I said, smiling. “To begin with.”

“Yes; and only when he ceased to doubt, did he become a Christian—and a martyr. One could argue that it was surety that killed him, no?” His voice was heavy with irony. “There is a great difference between those phenomena which are accepted on faith, and those which are proved by objective determination, though the cause of both may be equally ‘rational’ once known. And the chief difference is this: that people will treat with disdain such phenomena as are proved by the evidence of the senses, and commonly experienced—while they will defend to the death the reality of a phenomenon which they have neither seen nor experienced.

“Faith is as powerful a force as science,” he concluded, voice soft in the darkness, “—but far more dangerous.”

We sat quietly for a time, looking over the bow of the tiny ship, toward the thin slice of darkness that divided the night, darker than the purple glow of the sky, or the silver-gray sea. The black island of Hispaniola, drawing inexorably closer.

“Where did you see the headless fish?” I asked suddenly, and was not surprised to see the faint inclination of his head toward the bow.

“There,” he said. “I have seen a good many odd things among these islands—but perhaps more there than anywhere else. Some places are like that.”

I didn’t speak for several minutes, pondering what might lie ahead—and hoping that Ishmael had been right in saying that it was Ian whom Geillis had taken with her to Abandawe. A thought occurred to me—one that had been lost or pushed aside during the events of the last twenty-four hours.

“Lawrence—the other Scottish boys. Ishmael told us he saw twelve of them, including Ian. When you were searching the plantation … did you find any trace of the others?”

He drew in his breath sharply, but did not answer at once. I could feel him, turning over words in his mind, trying to decide how to say what the chill in my bones had already told me.

The answer, when it came, was not from Lawrence, but from Jamie.

“We found them,” he said softly, from the darkness. His hand rested on my knee, and squeezed gently. “Dinna ask more, Sassenach—for I willna tell ye.”

I understood. Ishmael had to have been right; it must be Ian with Geilie, for Jamie could bear no other possibility. I laid a hand on his head, and he stirred slightly, turning so that his breath touched my hand.

"Blest are they who have not seen," I whispered under my breath, *"but have believed."*

* * *

We dropped anchor near dawn, in a small, nameless bay on the northern coast of Hispaniola. There was a narrow beach, faced with cliffs, and through a split in the rock, a narrow, sandy trail was visible, leading into the interior of the island.

Jamie carried me the few steps to shore, set me down, and then turned to Innes, who had splashed ashore with one of the parcels of food.

"I thank ye, *a charaid,*" he said formally. "We shall part here; with the Virgin's blessing, we will meet here again in four days' time."

Innes's narrow face contracted in surprised disappointment; then resignation settled on his features.

"Aye," he said. "I'll mind the boatie then, 'til ye all come back."

Jamie saw the expression, and shook his head, smiling.

"Not just you, man; did I need a strong arm, it would be yours I should call on first. No, all of ye shall stay, save my wife and the Jew."

Resignation was replaced by sheer surprise.

"Stay here? All of us? But will ye not have need of us, Mac Dubh?" He squinted anxiously at the cliffs, with their burden of flowering vines. "It looks a fearsome place to venture into, without friends."

"I shall count it the act of greatest friendship for ye to wait here, as I say, Duncan," Jamie said, and I realized with a slight shock that I had never known Innes's given name.

Innes glanced again at the cliffs, his lean face troubled, then bent his head in acquiescence.

"Well, it's you as shall say, Mac Dubh. But ye ken we are willing—all of us."

Jamie nodded, his face turned away.

"Aye, I ken that fine, Duncan," he said softly. Then he turned back, held out an arm, and Innes embraced him, his one arm awkwardly thumping Jamie's back.

"If a ship should come," Jamie said, letting go, "then I wish ye to take heed for yourselves. The Royal Navy will be looking for that pinnace, aye? I doubt they shall come here, looking, but if they should—or if anything else at all should threaten ye—then leave. Sail away at once."

"And leave ye here? Nay, ye can order me to do a great many things, Mac Dubh, and do them I shall—but not that."

Jamie frowned and shook his head; the rising sun struck sparks from his hair and the stubble of his beard, wreathing his head in fire.

"It will do me and my wife no good to have ye killed, Duncan. Mind what I say. If a ship comes—go." He turned aside then, and went to take leave of the other Scots.

Innes sighed deeply, his face etched with disapproval, but he made no further protest.

* * *

It was hot and damp in the jungle, and there was little talk among the three of us as we made our way inland. There was nothing to say, after all; Jamie and I could not speak of Brianna before Lawrence, and there were no plans to be made until we reached Abandawe, and saw what was there. I dozed fitfully at night, waking several times to see Jamie, back against a tree near me, eyes fixed sightless on the fire.

At noon of the second day, we reached the place. A steep and rocky hillside of gray limestone rose before us, sprouted over with spiky aloes and a ruffle of coarse grass. And on the crest of the hill, I could see them. Great standing stones, megaliths, in a rough circle about the crown of the hill.

"You didn't say there was a stone circle," I said. I felt faint, and not only from the heat and damp.

"Are you quite well, Mrs. Fraser?" Lawrence peered at me in some alarm, his genial face flushed beneath its tan.

"Yes," I said, but my face must as usual have given me away, for Jamie was there in a moment, taking my arm and steadying me with a hand about my waist.

"For God's sake, be careful, Sassenach!" he muttered. "Dinna go near those things!"

"We have to know if Geilie's there, with Ian," I said. "Come on." I forced my reluctant feet into motion, and he came with me, still muttering under his breath in Gaelic—I thought it was a prayer.

"They were put up a very long time ago," Lawrence said, as we came up onto the crest of the hill, within a few feet of the stones. "Not by slaves—by the aboriginal inhabitants of the islands."

The circle was empty, and innocent-looking. No more than a staggered circle of large stones, set on end, motionless under the sun. Jamie was watching my face anxiously.

"Can ye hear them, Claire?" he said. Lawrence looked startled, but said nothing as I advanced carefully toward the nearest stone.

"I don't know," I said. "It isn't one of the proper days—not a Sun Feast, or a Fire Feast, I mean. It may not be open now; I don't know."

Holding tightly to Jamie's hand, I edged forward, listening. There seemed a faint hum in the air, but it might be no more than the usual sound of the jungle insects. Very gently, I laid the palm of my hand against the nearest stone.

I was dimly conscious of Jamie calling my name. Somewhere, my mind was struggling on a physical level, making the conscious effort to lift and lower my diaphragm, to squeeze and release the chambers of my heart. My ears were filled with a pulsating hum, a vibration too deep for sound, that throbbed in the marrow of my bones. And in some small, still place in the center of the chaos was Geilie Duncan, green eyes smiling into mine.

"Claire!"

I was lying on the ground, Jamie and Lawrence bending over me, faces dark and anxious against the sky. There was dampness on my cheeks, and a trickle of water ran down my neck. I blinked, cautiously moving my extremities, to be sure I still possessed them.

Jamie put down the handkerchief with which he had been bathing my face, and lifted me to a sitting position.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"Yes," I said, still mildly confused. "Jamie—she's here!"

“Who? Mrs. Abernathy?” Lawrence’s heavy eyebrows shot up, and he glanced hastily behind him, as though expecting her to materialize on the spot.

“I heard her—saw her—whatever.” My wits were coming slowly back. “She’s here. Not in the circle; close by.”

“Can ye tell where?” Jamie’s hand was resting on his dirk, as he darted quick glances all around us.

I shook my head, and closed my eyes, trying—reluctantly—to recapture that moment of seeing. There was an impression of darkness, of damp coolness, and the flicker of red torchlight.

“I think she’s in a cave,” I said, amazed. “Is it close by, Lawrence?”

“It is,” he said, watching my face with intense curiosity. “The entrance is not far from here.”

“Take us there.” Jamie was on his feet, lifting me to mine.

“Jamie.” I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Aye?”

“Jamie—she knows I’m here, too.”

That stopped him, all right. He paused, and I saw him swallow. Then his jaw tightened, and he nodded.

“A Mhìcheal bheannaichte, dìon sinn bho dheamhainnean,” he said softly, and turned toward the edge of the hill. Blessed Michael, defend us from demons.

The blackness was absolute. I brought my hand to my face; felt my palm brush my nose; but saw nothing. It wasn’t an empty blackness, though. The floor of the passage was uneven, with small sharp particles that crunched underfoot, and the walls in some places grew so close together that I wondered how Geilie had ever managed to squeeze through.

Even in the places where the passage grew wider, and the stone walls were too far away for my outstretched hands to brush against, I could feel them. It was like being in a dark room with another person—someone who kept quite silent, but whose presence I could feel, never more than an arm’s length away.

Jamie's hand was tight on my shoulder, and I could feel his presence behind me, a warm disturbance in the cool void of the cave.

"Are we headed right?" he asked, when I stopped for a moment to catch my breath. "There are passages to the sides; I feel them as we pass. How can ye tell where we're going?"

"I can hear. Hear them. It. Don't you hear?" It was a struggle to speak, to form coherent thoughts. The call here was different; not the beehive sound of Craigh na Dun, but a hum like the vibration of the air following the striking of a great bell. I could feel it ringing in the long bones of my arms, echoing through pectoral girdle and spine.

Jamie gripped my arm hard.

"Stay with me!" he said. "Sassenach—don't let it take ye; stay!"

I reached blindly out and he caught me tight against his chest. The thump of his heart against my temple was louder than the hum.

"Jamie. Jamie, hold on to me." I had never been more frightened. "Don't let me go. If it takes me—Jamie, I can't come back again. It's worse every time. It will kill me, Jamie!"

His arms tightened round me 'til I felt my ribs crack, and gasped for breath. After a moment, he let go, and putting me gently aside, moved past me into the passage, taking care to keep his hand always on me.

"I'll go first," he said. "Put your hand in my belt, and dinna let go for anything."

Linked together, we moved slowly down, farther into the dark. Lawrence had wanted to come, but Jamie would not let him. We had left him at the mouth of the cave, waiting. If we should not return, he was to go back to the beach, to keep the rendezvous with Innes and the other Scots.

If we should not return …

He must have felt my grip tighten, for he stopped, and drew me alongside him.

"Claire," he said softly. "I must say something."

I knew already, and groped for his mouth to stop him, but my hand brushed by his face in the dark. He gripped my wrist, and held tight.

"If it will be a choice between her and one of us—then it must be me. Ye know that, aye?"

I knew that. If Geilie should be there, still, and one of us might be killed in stopping her, it must be Jamie to take the risk. For with Jamie dead, I would be left—and I could follow her through the stone, which he could not.

"I know," I whispered at last. I knew also what he did not say, and what he knew as well; that should Geilie have gone through already, then I must go as well.

"Then kiss me, Claire," he whispered. "And know that you are more to me than life, and I have no regret."

I couldn't answer, but kissed him, first his hand, its crooked fingers warm and firm, and the brawny wrist of a sword-wielder, and then his mouth, haven and promise and anguish all mingled, and the salt of tears in the taste of him.

Then I let go, and turned toward the left-hand tunnel.

"This way," I said. Within ten paces, I saw the light.

It was no more than a faint glow on the rocks of the passage, but it was enough to restore the gift of sight. Suddenly, I could see my hands and feet, though dimly. My breath came out in something like a sob, of relief and fear. I felt like a ghost taking shape as I walked toward the light and the soft bell-hum before me.

The light was stronger, now, then dimmed again as Jamie slid in front of me, and his back blocked my view. Then he bent and stepped through a low archway. I followed, and stood up in light.

It was a good-sized chamber, the walls farthest from the torch still cold and black with the slumber of the cave. The wall before us had wakened, though. It flickered and gleamed, particles of embedded mineral reflecting the flames of a pine torch, fixed in a crevice.

"So ye came, did you?" Geillis was on her knees, eyes fixed on a glittering stream of white powder that fell from her folded fist, drawing a line on the dark floor.

I heard a small sound from Jamie, half relief, half horror, as he saw Ian. The boy lay in the middle of the pentacle on his side, hands bound behind him, gagged with a strip of white cloth. Next to him lay an ax. It was made of a shiny dark stone, like obsidian, with a sharp, chipped edge. The handle was covered with gaudy beadwork, in an African pattern of stripes and zigzags.

"Don't come any closer, fox." Geilie sat back on her heels, showing her teeth to Jamie in an expression that was not a smile. She held a pistol in one hand; its fellow, charged and cocked, was thrust through the leather belt she wore about her waist.

Eyes fixed on Jamie, she reached into the pouch suspended from the belt and withdrew another handful of diamond dust. I could see beads of sweat standing on her broad white brow; the bell-hum from the time-passage must be reaching her as it reached me. I felt sick, and the sweat ran down my body in trickles under my clothes.

The pattern was almost finished. With the pistol carefully trained, she dribbled out the thin, shining stream until she had completed the pentagram. The stones were already laid inside it—they glinted from the floor in sparks of color, connected by a gleaming line of poured quicksilver.

"There, then." She sat back on her heels with a sigh of relief, and wiped the thick, creamy hair back with one hand. "Safe. The diamond dust keeps out the noise," she explained to me. "Nasty, isn't it?"

She patted Ian, who lay bound and gagged on the ground in front of her, his eyes wide with fear above the white cloth of the gag. "There, there, *mo chridhe*. Dinna fret, it will be soon over."

"Take your hand off him, ye wicked bitch!" Jamie took an impulsive step forward, hand on his dirk, then stopped, as she lifted the barrel of the pistol an inch.

"Ye mind me o' your uncle Dougal, *a sionnach,*" she said, tilting her head to one side coquettishly. "He was older when I met him than you are now, but you've the look of him about ye, aye? Like ye'd take what ye pleased and damn anyone who stands in your way."

Jamie looked at Ian, curled on the floor, then up at Geilie.

"I'll take what's mine," he said softly.

"But ye can't, now, can ye?" she said, pleasantly. "One more step, and I kill ye dead. I spare ye now, only because Claire seems fond of ye.” Her eyes shifted to me, standing in the shadows behind Jamie. She nodded to me.

“A life for a life, sweet Claire. Ye tried to save me once, on Craigh na Dun; I saved you from the witch-trial at Cranesmuir. We’re quits now, aye?”

Geilie picked up a small bottle, uncorked it, and poured the contents carefully over Ian’s clothes. The smell of brandy rose up, strong and heady, and the torch flared brighter as the fumes of alcohol reached it. Ian bucked and kicked, making a strained noise of protest, and she kicked him sharply in the ribs.

“Be still!” she said.

“Don’t do it, Geilie,” I said, knowing that words would do no good.

“I have to,” she said calmly. “I’m meant to. I’m sorry I shall have to take the girl, but I’ll leave ye the man.”

“What girl?” Jamie’s fists were clenched tight at his side, knuckles white even in the dim torchlight.

“Brianna? That’s the name, isn’t it?” She shook back her heavy hair, smoothing it out of her face. “The last of Lovat’s line.” She smiled at me. “What luck ye should have come to see me, aye? I’d never ha’ kent it, otherwise. I thought they’d all died out before 1900.”

A thrill of horror shot through me. I could feel the same tremor run through Jamie as his muscles tightened.

It must have shown on his face. Geilie cried out sharply and leapt back. She fired as he lunged at her. His head snapped back, and his body twisted, hands still reaching for her throat. Then he fell, his body limp across the edge of the glittering pentagram. There was a strangled moan from Ian.

I felt rather than heard a sound rise in my throat. I didn’t know what I had said, but Geilie turned her face in my direction, startled.

When Brianna was two, a car had carelessly sideswiped mine, hitting the back door next to where she was sitting. I slowed to a stop, checked briefly to see that she was unhurt, and then bounded out, headed for the other car, which had pulled over a little way ahead.

The other driver was a man in his thirties, quite large, and probably entirely self-assured in his dealings with the world. He looked over his shoulder, saw me coming, and hastily rolled up his window, shrinking back in his seat.

I had no consciousness of rage or any other emotion; I simply *knew*, with no shadow of doubt, that I could—and would—shatter the window with my hand, and drag the man out through it. He knew it, too.

I thought no further than that, and didn't have to; the arrival of a police car had recalled me to my normal state of mind, and then I started to shake. But the memory of the look on that man's face stayed with me.

Fire is a poor illuminator, but it would have taken total darkness to conceal that look on Geilie's face; the sudden realization of what was coming toward her.

She jerked the other pistol from her belt and swung it to bear on me; I saw the round hole of the muzzle clearly—and didn't care. The roar of the discharge caromed through the cave, the echoes sending down showers of rocks and dirt, but by then I had seized the ax from the floor.

I noted quite clearly the leather binding, ornamented with a beaded pattern. It was red, with yellow zigzags and black dots. The dots echoed the shiny obsidian of the blade, and the red and yellow picked up the hues of the flaming torch behind her.

I heard a noise behind me, but didn't turn. Reflections of the fire burned red in the pupils of her eyes. *The red thing,* Jamie had called it. *I gave myself to it*, he had said.

I didn't need to give myself; it had taken me.

There was no fear, no rage, no doubt. Only the stroke of the swinging ax.

The shock of it echoed up my arm, and I let go, my fingers numbed. I stood quite still, not even moving when she staggered toward me.

Blood in firelight is black, not red.

She took one blind step forward and fell, all her muscles gone limp, making no attempt to save herself. The last I saw of her face was her eyes; set wide, beautiful as gemstones, a green water-clear and faceted with the knowledge of death.

Someone was speaking, but the words made no sense. The cleft in the rock buzzed loudly, filling my ears. The torch flickered, flaring sudden yellow in a draft; the beating of the dark angel's wings, I thought.

The sound came again, behind me.

I turned and saw Jamie. He had risen to his knees, swaying. Blood was pouring from his scalp, dyeing one side of his face red-black. The other side was white as a harlequin's mask.

Stop the bleeding, said some remnant of instinct in my brain, and I fumbled for a handkerchief. But by then he had crawled to where Ian lay, and was groping at the boy's bonds, jerking loose the leather straps, drops of his blood pattering on the lad's shirt. Ian squirmed to his feet, his face ghastly pale, and put out a hand to help his uncle.

Then Jamie's hand was on my arm. I looked up, numbly offering the cloth. He took it and wiped it roughly over his face, then jerked at my arm, pulling me toward the tunnel mouth. I stumbled and nearly fell, caught myself, and came back to the present.

"Come!" he was saying. "Can ye not hear the wind? There is a storm coming, above."

Wind? I thought. In a cave? But he was right; the draft had not been my imagination; the faint exhalation from the crack near the entrance had changed to a steady, whining wind, almost a keening that rang in the narrow passage.

I turned to look over my shoulder, but Jamie grasped my arm hard and pushed me forward. My last sight of the cave was a blurred impression of jet and rubies, with a still white shape in the middle of the floor. Then the draft came in with a roar, and the torch went out.

"Jesus!" It was Young Ian's voice, filled with terror, somewhere close by. "Uncle Jamie!"

"Here." Jamie's voice came out of the darkness just in front of me, surprisingly calm, raised to be heard above the noise. "Here, lad. Come here to me, Ian. Dinna be afraid; it's only the cave breathing."

It was the wrong thing to say. When he said it, I could *feel* the cold breath of the rock touch my neck, and the hairs there rose up prickling. The image of the cave as a living thing, breathing all around us, blind and malevolent, struck me cold with horror.

Apparently the notion was as terrifying to Ian as it was to me, for I heard a faint gasp, and then his groping hand struck me and clung for dear life to my arm.

I clutched his hand with one of mine and probed the dark ahead with the other, finding Jamie's reassuringly large shape almost at once.

"I've got Ian," I said. "For God's sake, let's get out of here!"

He gripped my hand in answer, and linked together, we began to make our way back down the winding tunnel, stumbling through the pitch dark and stepping on each other's heels. And all the time, that ghostly wind whined at our backs.

I could see nothing; no hint of Jamie's shirt in front of my face, snowy white as I knew it to be, not even a flicker of the movement of my own light-colored skirts, though I heard them swish about my feet as I walked, the sound blending with that of the wind.

The thin rush of air rose and fell in pitch, whispering and wailing. I tried to force my mind away from the memory of what lay behind us, away from the morbid fancy that the wind held sighing voices, whispering secrets just past hearing.

"I can hear her," Ian said suddenly behind me. His voice rose, cracking with panic. "I can hear her! God, oh God, she's coming!"

I froze in my tracks, a scream wedged in my throat. The cool observer in my head knew quite well it was not so—only the wind and Ian's fright—but that made no difference to the spurt of sheer terror that rose from the pit of my stomach and turned my bowels to water. I knew she was coming, too, and screamed out loud.

Then Jamie had me, and Ian too, gripped tight against him, one in each arm, our ears muffled against his chest. He smelled of pine smoke and sweat and brandy, and I nearly sobbed in relief at the closeness of him.

"Hush!" he said fiercely. "Hush, the both of ye! I willna let her touch ye. Never!" He pressed us to him, hard; I felt his heart beating fast beneath my cheek and Ian's bony shoulder, squeezed against mine, and then the pressure relaxed.

"Come along now," Jamie said, more quietly. "It's but wind. Caves blow through their cracks when the weather changes aboveground. I've heard it before. There is a storm coming, outside. Come, now."

* * *

The storm was a brief one. By the time we had stumbled to the surface, blinking against the shock of sunlight, the rain had passed, leaving the world reborn in its wake.

Lawrence was sheltering under a dripping palm near the cave's entrance. When he saw us, he sprang to his feet, a look of relief relaxing the creases of his face.

"It is all right?" he said, looking from me to a blood-stained Jamie.

Jamie gave him half a smile, nodding.

"It is all right," he said. He turned and motioned to Ian. "May I present my nephew, Ian Murray? Ian, this is Dr. Stern, who's been of great assistance to us in looking for ye."

"I'm much obliged to ye, Doctor," Ian said, with a bob of his head. He wiped a sleeve across his streaked face, and glanced at Jamie.

"I knew ye'd come, Uncle Jamie," he said, with a tremulous smile, "but ye left it a bit late, aye?" The smile widened, then broke, and he began to tremble. He blinked hard, fighting back tears.

"I did then, and I'm sorry, Ian. Come here, *a bhalaich*." Jamie reached out and took him in a close embrace, patting his back and murmuring to him in Gaelic.

I watched for a moment, before I realized that Lawrence was speaking to me.

"Are you quite well, Mrs. Fraser?" he was asking. Without waiting for an answer, he took my arm.

"I don't quite know." I felt completely empty. Exhausted as though by childbirth, but without the exultation of spirit. Nothing seemed quite real; Jamie, Ian, Lawrence, all seemed like toy figures that moved and talked at a distance, making noises that I had to strain to understand.

"I think perhaps we should leave this place," Lawrence said, with a glance at the cave mouth from which we had just emerged. He looked slightly uneasy. He didn't ask about Mrs. Abernathy.

"I think you are right." The picture of the cave we had left was vivid in my mind—but just as unreal as the vivid green jungle and gray stones around us. Not waiting for the men to follow, I turned and walked away.

The feeling of remoteness increased as we walked. I felt like an automaton, built around an iron core, walking by clockwork. I followed Jamie's broad back through branches and clearings, shadow and sun, not noticing where we were going. Sweat ran down my sides and into my eyes, but I barely stirred to wipe it away. At length, toward sunset, we stopped in a small clearing near a stream, and made our primitive camp.

I had already discovered that Lawrence was a most useful person to have along on a camping trip. He was not only as good at finding or building shelter as was Jamie, but was sufficiently familiar with the flora and fauna of the area to be able to plunge into the jungle and return within half an hour bearing handfuls of edible roots, fungi, and fruit with which to augment the Spartan rations in our packs.

Ian was set to gather firewood while Lawrence foraged, and I sat Jamie down with a pan of water, to tend the damage to his head. I washed away the blood from face and hair, to find to my surprise that the ball had in fact not plowed a furrow through his scalp as I had thought. Instead, it had pierced the skin just above his hairline and—evidently—vanished into his head. There was no sign of an exit wound. Unnerved by this, I prodded his scalp with increasing agitation, until a sudden cry from the patient announced that I had discovered the bullet.

There was a large, tender lump on the back of his head. The pistol ball had traveled under the skin, skimming the curve of his skull, and come to rest just over his occiput.

"Jesus H. Christ!" I exclaimed. I felt it again, unbelieving, but there it was. "You always said your head was solid bone, and I'll be damned if you weren't right. She shot you point-blank, and the bloody ball bounced off your skull!"

Jamie, supporting his head in his hands as I examined him, made a sound somewhere between a snort and a groan.

"Aye, well," he said, his voice somewhat muffled in his hands, "I'll no say I'm not thick-heided, but if Mistress Abernathy had used a full charge of powder, it wouldna have been nearly thick enough."

"Does it hurt a lot?"

"Not the wound, no, though it's sore. I've a terrible headache, though."

"I shouldn't wonder. Hold on a bit; I'm going to take the ball out."

Not knowing in what condition we might find Ian, I had brought the smallest of my medical boxes, which fortunately contained a bottle of alcohol and a small scalpel. I shaved away a little of Jamie's abundant mane, just below the swelling, and soused the area with alcohol for disinfection. My fingers were chilled from the alcohol, but his head was warm and comfortingly live to the touch.

"Three deep breaths and hold on tight," I murmured. "I'm going to cut you, but it will be fast."

"All right." The back of his neck looked a little pale, but the pulse was steady. He obligingly drew in his breath deeply, and exhaled, sighing. I held the area of scalp taut between the index and third fingers of my left hand. On the third breath, I said, "Right now," and drew the blade hard and quick across the scalp. He grunted slightly, but didn't cry out. I pressed gently with my right thumb against the swelling, slightly harder—and the ball popped out of the incision I had made, falling into my left hand like a grape.

"Got it," I said, and only then realized that I had been holding my breath. I dropped the little pellet—somewhat flattened by its contact with his skull—into his hand, and smiled, a little shakily. "Souvenir," I said. I pressed a pad of cloth against the small wound, wound a strip of cloth round his head to hold it, and then quite suddenly, with no warning whatever, began to cry.

I could feel the tears rolling down my face, and my shoulders shaking, but I felt still detached; somehow outside my body. I was conscious mostly of a mild amazement.

“Sassenach? Are ye all right?” Jamie was peering up at me, eyes worried under the rakish bandage.

“Yes,” I said, stuttering from the force of my crying. “I d-don’t k-know why I’m c-crying. I d-don’t know!”

“Come here.” He took my hand and drew me down onto his knee. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, resting his cheek on the top of my head.

“It will be all right,” he whispered. “It’s fine now, *mo chridhe*, it’s fine.” He rocked me gently, one hand stroking my hair and neck, and murmured small unimportant things in my ear. Just as suddenly as I had been detached, I was back inside my body, warm and shaking, feeling the iron core dissolve in my tears.

Gradually I stopped weeping, and lay still against his chest, hiccuping now and then, feeling nothing but peace and the comfort of his presence.

I was dimly aware that Lawrence and Ian had returned, but paid no attention to them. At one point, I heard Ian say, with more curiosity than alarm, “You’re bleeding all down the back of your neck, Uncle Jamie.”

“Perhaps you’ll fix me a new bandage, then, Ian,” Jamie said. His voice was soft and unconcerned. “I must just hold your auntie now.” And sometime later I went to sleep, still held tight in the circle of his arms.

* * *

I woke up later, curled on a blanket next to Jamie. He was leaning against a tree, one hand resting on my shoulder. He felt me wake, and squeezed gently. It was dark, and I could hear a rhythmic snoring somewhere close at hand. It must be Lawrence, I thought drowsily, for I could hear Young Ian’s voice, on the other side of Jamie.

“No,” he was saying slowly, “it wasna really so bad, on the ship. We were all kept together, so there was company from the other lads, and they fed us decently, and let us out two at a time to walk about the deck. Of course, we were all scairt, for we’d no notion why we’d been taken—and none of the sailors would tell us anything—but we were not mistreated.”

The *Bruja* had sailed up the Yallahs River, and delivered her human cargo directly to Rose Hall. Here the bewildered boys had been warmly welcomed by Mrs. Abernathy, and promptly popped into a new prison.

The basement beneath the sugar mill had been fitted up comfortably enough, with beds and chamber pots, and aside from the noise of the sugar-making above during the days, it was comfortable enough. Still, none of the boys could think why they were there, though any number of suggestions were made, each more improbable than the last.

"And every now and then, a great black fellow would come down into the place with Mrs. Abernathy. We always begged to know what it was we were there for, and would she not be letting us go, for mercy's sake? but she only smiled and patted us and said we would see, in good time. Then she would choose a lad, and the black fellow would clamp onto the lad's arm and take him awa' wi' them." Ian's voice sounded distressed, and little wonder.

"Did the lads come back again?" Jamie asked. His hand patted me softly, and I reached up and pressed it.

"No—or not usually. And that scairt us all something dreadful."

Ian's turn had come eight weeks after his arrival. Three lads had gone and not returned by then, and when Mistress Abernathy's bright green eyes rested on him, he was not disposed to cooperate.

"I kicked the black fellow, and hit him—I even bit his hand," Ian said ruefully, "and verra nasty he tasted, too—all over some kind of grease, he was. But it made nay difference; he only clouted me over the head, hard enough to make my ears ring, then picked me up and carried me off in his arms, as though I was no more than a wee bairn."

Ian had been taken into the kitchen, where he was stripped, bathed, dressed in a clean shirt—but nothing else—and taken to the main house.

"It was just at night," he said wistfully, "and all the windows lighted. It looked verra much like Lallybroch, when ye come down from the hills just at dark, and Mam's just lit the lamps—it almost broke my heart to see it, and think of home."

He had had little opportunity to feel homesick, though. Hercules—or Atlas—had marched him up the stairs into what was obviously Mistress Abernathy's bedroom. Mrs. Abernathy was waiting for him, dressed in a soft, loose sort of gown with odd-looking figures embroidered round the hem of it in red and silver thread.

She had been cordial and welcoming, and had offered him a drink. It smelled strange, but not nasty, and as he had little choice in the matter, he had drunk it.

There were two comfortable chairs in the room, on either side of a long, low table, and a great bed at one side, swagged and canopied like a king's. He had sat in one chair, Mrs. Abernathy in the other, and she had asked him questions.

"What sorts of questions?" Jamie asked, prompting as Ian seemed hesitant.

"Well, all about my home, and my family—she asked the names of all my sisters and brothers, and my aunts and uncles"—I jerked a bit. So that *was* why Geilie had betrayed no surprise at our appearance!—"and all sorts of things, Uncle. Then she—she asked me had I—had I ever lain wi' a lassie. Just as though she were asking did I have parritch to my breakfast!" Ian sounded shocked at the memory.

"I didna want to answer her, but I couldna seem to help myself. I felt verra warm, like I was fevered, and I couldna seem to move easy. But I answered all her questions, and her just sitting there, pleasant as might be, watching me close wi' those big green eyes."

"So ye told her the truth?"

"Aye. Aye, I did." Ian spoke slowly, reliving the scene. "I said I had, and I told her about—about Edinburgh, and the printshop, and the seaman, and the brothel, and Mary, and—everything."

For the first time, Geilie had seemed displeased with one of his answers. Her face had grown hard and her eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Ian was seriously afraid. He would have run, then, but for the heaviness in his limbs, and the presence of the giant who stood against the door, unmoving.

"She got up and stamped about a bit, and said I was ruined, then, as I wasna a virgin, and what business did a bittie wee lad like me have, to be goin' wi' the lassies and spoiling myself?"

Then she had stopped her ranting, poured a glass of wine and drank it off, and her temper had seemed to cool.

"She laughed then, and looked at me careful, and said as how I might not be such a loss, after all. If I was no good for what she had in mind, perhaps I might have other uses." Ian's voice sounded faintly constricted, as though his collar were too tight. Jamie made a soothing interrogatory sound, though, and he took a deep breath, determined to go on.

"Well, she—she took my hand and made me stand up. Then she took off the shirt I was wearing, and she—I swear it's true, Uncle!—she knelt on the floor in front of me, and took my cock into her mouth!"

Jamie's hand tightened on my shoulder, but his voice betrayed no more than a mild interest.

"Aye, I believe ye, Ian. She made love to ye, then?"

"Love?" Ian sounded dazed. "No—I mean, I dinna ken. It—she—well, she got my cock to stand up, and then she made me come to the bed and lie down and she did things. But it wasna at all like it was with wee Mary!"

"No, I shouldna suppose it was," his uncle said dryly.

"God, it felt queer!" I could sense Ian's shudder from the tone of his voice. "I looked up in the middle, and there was the black man, standing right by the bed, holding a candlestick. She told him to lift it higher, so that she could see better." He paused, and I heard a small glugging noise as he drank from one of the bottles. He let out a long, quivering breath.

"Uncle. Have ye ever—lain wi' a woman, when ye didna want to do it?"

Jamie hesitated a moment, his hand tight on my shoulder, but then he said quietly, "Aye, Ian. I have."

"Oh." The boy was quiet, and I heard him scratch his head. "D'ye ken how it can be, Uncle? How ye can do it, and not want to a bit, and hate doing it, and—and still it—it feels good?"

Jamie gave a small, dry laugh.

"Well, what it comes to, Ian, is that your cock hasna got a conscience, and you have." His hand left my shoulder as he turned toward his nephew. "Dinna trouble yourself, Ian," he said. "Ye couldna help it, and it's likely that it saved your life for ye. The other lads—the ones who didna come back to the cellar—d'ye ken if they were virgins?"

"Well—a few I know were for sure—for we had a great deal of time to talk, aye? and after a time we kent a lot about one another. Some o' the lads boasted of havin' gone wi' a lassie, but I thought—from what they said about it, ye ken—that they hadna done it, really." He paused for a moment, as though reluctant to ask what he knew he must.

"Uncle—d'ye ken what happened to them? The rest of the lads with me?"

"No, Ian," Jamie said, evenly. "I've no notion." He leaned back against the tree, sighing deeply. "D'ye think ye can sleep, wee Ian? If ye can, ye should, for it will be a weary walk to the shore tomorrow."

"Oh, I can sleep, Uncle," Ian assured him. "But should I not keep watch? It's you should be resting, after bein' shot and all that." He paused and then added, rather shyly, "I didna say thank ye, Uncle Jamie."

Jamie laughed, freely this time.

"You're verra welcome, Ian," he said, the smile still in his voice. "Lay your head and sleep, laddie. I'll wake ye if there's need."

Ian obligingly curled up and within moments, was breathing heavily. Jamie sighed and leaned back against the tree.

"Do you want to sleep too, Jamie?" I pushed myself up to sit beside him. "I'm awake; I can keep an eye out."

His eyes were closed, the dying firelight dancing on the lids. He smiled without opening them and groped for my hand.

"No. If ye dinna mind sitting with me for a bit, though, you can watch. The headache's better if I close my eyes."

We sat in contented silence for some time, hand in hand. An occasional odd noise or far-off scream from some jungle animal came from the dark, but nothing seemed threatening now.

“Will we go back to Jamaica?” I asked at last. “For Fergus and Marsali?”

Jamie started to shake his head, then stopped, with a stifled groan.

“No,” he said, “I think we shall sail for Eleuthera. That’s Dutch-owned, and neutral. We can send Innes back wi’ John’s boatie, and he can take a message to Fergus to come and join us. I would as soon not set foot on Jamaica again, all things considered.”

“No, I suppose not.” I was quiet for a moment, then said, “I wonder how Mr. Willoughby—Yi Tien Cho, I mean—will manage. I don’t suppose anyone will find him, if he stays in the mountains, but—”

“Oh, he may manage brawly,” Jamie interrupted. “He’s the pelican to fish for him, after all.” One side of his mouth turned up in a smile. “For that matter, if he’s canny, he’ll find a way south, to Martinique. There’s a small colony there of Chinese traders. I’d told him of it; said I’d take him there, once our business on Jamaica was finished.”

“You aren’t angry at him now?” I looked at him curiously, but his face was smooth and peaceful, almost unlined in the firelight.

This time he was careful not to move his head, but lifted one shoulder in a shrug, and grimaced.

“Och, no.” He sighed and settled himself more comfortably. “I dinna suppose he had much thought for what he did, or understood at all what might be the end of it. And it would be foolish to hate a man for not giving ye something he hasna got in the first place.” He opened his eyes then, with a faint smile, and I knew he was thinking of John Grey.

Ian twitched in his sleep, snorted loudly, and rolled over onto his back, arms flung wide. Jamie glanced at his nephew, and the smile grew wider.

“Thank God,” he said. “*He* goes back to his mother by the first ship headed for Scotland.”

“I don’t know,” I said, smiling. “He might not want to go back to Lallybroch, after all this adventure.”

"I dinna care whether he wants to or not," Jamie said firmly. "He's going, if I must pack him up in a crate. Are ye looking for something, Sassenach?" he added, seeing me groping in the dark.

"I've got it," I said, pulling the flat hypodermic case out of my pocket. I flipped it open to check the contents, squinting to see by the waning light. "Oh, good; there's enough left for one whopping dose."

Jamie sat up a little straighter.

"I'm not fevered a bit," he said, eyeing me warily. "And if ye have it in mind to shove that filthy spike into my head, ye can just think again, Sassenach!"

"Not you," I said. "Ian. Unless you mean to send him home to Jenny riddled with syphilis and other interesting forms of the clap."

Jamie's eyebrows rose toward his hairline, and he winced at the resultant sensation.

"Ow. Syphilis? Ye think so?"

"I shouldn't be a bit surprised. Pronounced dementia is one of the symptoms of the advanced disease—though I must say it would be hard to tell in her case. Still, better safe than sorry, hm?"

Jamie snorted briefly with amusement.

"Well, that may teach Young Ian the price o' dalliance. I'd best distract Stern while ye take the lad behind a bush for his penance, though; Lawrence is a bonny man for a Jew, but he's curious. I dinna want ye burnt at the stake in Kingston, after all."

"I expect that would be awkward for the Governor," I said dryly. "Much as he might enjoy it, personally."

"I shouldna think he would, Sassenach." His dryness matched my own. "Is my coat within reach?"

"Yes." I found the garment folded on the ground near me, and handed it to him. "Are you cold?"

"No." He leaned back, the coat laid across his knees. "It's only that I wanted to feel the bairns all close to me while I sleep." He smiled at me, folded his hands gently atop the coat and its pictures, and closed his eyes again. "Good night, Sassenach."

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OUT OF THE DEPTHS

In the morning, buoyed by rest and a breakfast of biscuit and plantain, we pressed on toward the shore in good heart—even Ian, who ceased to limp ostentatiously after the first quarter-mile. As we came down the defile that led onto the beach, though, a remarkable sight met our eyes.

"Jesus God, it's them!" Ian blurted. "The pirates!" He turned, ready to flee back into the hills, but Jamie grasped him by the arm.

"Not pirates," he said. "It's the slaves. Look!"

Unskilled in the seamanship of large vessels, the escaped slaves of the Yallahs River plantations had evidently made a slow and blundering passage toward Hispaniola, and having somehow arrived at that island, had promptly run the ship aground. The *Bruja* lay canted on her side in the shallows, her keel sunk deep in the sandy mud. A very agitated group of slaves surrounded her, some rushing up and down the beach shouting, others dashing off toward the refuge of the jungle, a few remaining to help the last of their number off the beached hulk.

A quick glance out to sea showed the cause of their agitation. A patch of white showed on the horizon, growing in size even as we watched.

"A man-of-war," Lawrence said, sounding interested.

Jamie said something under his breath in Gaelic, and Ian glanced at him, shocked.

"Out of here," Jamie said tersely. He pulled Ian about and gave him a shove up the defile, then grabbed my hand.

"Wait!" said Lawrence, shading his eyes. "There's another ship coming. A little one."

The Governor of Jamaica's private pinnace, to be exact, leaning at a perilous angle as she shot round the curve of the bay, her canvas bellied by the wind on her quarter.

Jamie stood for a split second, weighing the possibilities, then grabbed my hand again.

"Let's go!" he said.

By the time we reached the edge of the beach, the pinnace's small boat was plowing through the shallows, Raeburn and MacLeod pulling hard at the oars. I was wheezing and gulping air, my knees rubbery from the run. Jamie snatched me up bodily into his arms and ran into the surf, followed by Lawrence and Ian, gasping like whales.

I saw Gordon, a hundred yards out in the pinnace's bow, aim a gun at the shore, and knew we were followed. The musket discharged with a puff of smoke, and Meldrum, behind him, promptly raised his own weapon and fired. Taking it in turns, the two of them covered our splashing advance, until friendly hands could pull us over the side and raise the boat.

"Come about!" Innes, manning the wheel, barked the order, and the boom swung across, the sails filling at once. Jamie hauled me to my feet and deposited me on a bench, then flung himself down beside me, panting.

"Holy God," he wheezed. "Did I no—tell ye to—stay away—Duncan?"

"Save your breath, Mac Dubh," Innes said, a wide grin spreading under his mustache. "Ye havena enough to be wasting it." He shouted something to MacLeod, who nodded and did something to the lines. The pinnace heeled over, changed her course, and came about, headed straight out of the tiny cove—and straight toward the man-of-war, now close enough for me to see the fat-lipped porpoise grinning beneath its bowsprit.

MacLeod bellowed something in Gaelic, accompanied by a gesture that left the meaning of what he had said in no doubt. To a triumphant yodel from Innes, we shot past the *Porpoise*, directly under her bow and close enough to see surprised-looking heads poking out from the rail above.

I looked back as we left the cove, to see the *Porpoise* still heading in, massive under her three great masts. The pinnace could never outrace her on the open sea, but in close quarters, the little sloop was light and maneuverable as a feather by comparison to the leviathan man-of-war.

"It's the slave ship they'll be after," Meldrum said, turning to look alongside me. "We saw the man-o'-war pick her up, three miles off the island. We thought whilst they were otherwise occupied, we might as well nip in and pick ye all off the beach."

"Good enough," Jamie said with a smile. His chest was still heaving, but he had recovered his breath. "I hope the *Porpoise* will be sufficiently occupied for the time being."

A warning shout from Raeburn indicated that this was not to be, however. Looking back, I could see the gleam of brass on the *Porpoise*'s deck as the pair of long guns called stern chasers were uncovered and began their process of aiming.

Now it was us at gunpoint, and I found the sensation very objectionable. Still, we were moving, and fast, at that. Innes put the wheel hard over, then hard again, tacking a zigzag path past the headland.

The stern chasers boomed together. There was a splash off the port bow, twenty yards away, but a good deal too close for comfort, given the fact that a twenty-four pound ball through the floor of the pinnace would sink us like a rock.

Innes cursed and hunched his shoulders over the wheel, his missing arm giving him an odd, lopsided appearance. Our course became still more erratic, and the next three tries came nowhere near. Then came a louder boom, and I looked back to see the side of the canted *Bruja* erupt in splinters, as the *Porpoise* came in range and trained her forward guns on the grounded ship.

A rain of grapeshot hit the beach, striking dead in the center of a group of fleeing slaves. Bodies—and parts of bodies—flew into the air like black stick-figures and fell to the sand, staining it with red blotches. Severed limbs were scattered over the beach like driftwood.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God." Ian, white to the lips, crossed himself, staring in horror at the beach as the shelling went on. Two more shots struck the *Bruja*, opening up a great hole in her side. Several landed harmlessly in the sand, and two more found their mark among the fleeing people. Then we were round the edge of the headland, and heading into the open sea, the beach and its carnage lost to view.

"Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death." Ian finished his prayer in a whisper, and crossed himself again.

There was little conversation in the boat, beyond Jamie's giving Innes instructions for Eleuthera, and a conference between Innes and MacLeod as to the proper heading. The rest of us were too appalled by what we had just seen—and too relieved at our own escape—to want to talk.

The weather was fair, with a bright, brisk breeze, and we made good way. By sundown, the island of Hispaniola had dropped below the horizon, and Grand Turk Island was rising to the left.

I ate my small share of the available biscuit, drank a cup of water, and curled myself in the bottom of the boat, lying down between Ian and Jamie to sleep. Innes, yawning, took his own rest in the bow, while MacLeod and Meldrum took it in turns to man the helm through the night.

A shout woke me in the morning. I rose on one elbow, blinking with sleep and stiff from a night spent on bare, damp boards. Jamie was standing by me, his hair blowing back in the morning breeze.

"What?" I asked Jamie. "What is it?"

"I dinna believe it," he said, staring aft over the rail. "It's that bloody boat again!"

I scrambled to my feet, to find that it was true; far astern were tiny white sails.

"Are you sure?" I said, squinting. "Can you tell at this distance?"

"I can't, no," Jamie said frankly, "but Innes and MacLeod can, and they say it's the bloodsucking English, right enough. They'll have guessed our heading, maybe, and come after us, as soon as they'd dealt with those poor black buggers on Hispaniola." He turned away from the rail, shrugging.

"Damned little to be done about it, save to hope we stay ahead of them. Innes says there's a hope of giving them the slip off Cat Island, if we reach there by dark."

As the day wore on, we kept just out of firing distance, but Innes looked more and more worried.

* * *

The sea between Cat Island and Eleuthera was shallow, and filled with coral heads. A man-of-war could never follow us into the maze—but neither could we move swiftly enough through it to avoid being sunk by the *Porpoise*'s long guns. Once in those treacherous shoals and channels, we would be sitting ducks.

At last, reluctantly, the decision was made to head east, out to sea; we could not risk slowing, and there was a slight chance of giving the man-of-war the slip in the dark.

When dawn came, all sight of land had disappeared. The *Porpoise*, unfortunately, had not. She was no closer, but as the wind rose along with the sun, she shook out more sail, and began to gain. With every scrap of sail already hoisted, and nowhere to hide, there was nothing we could do but run—and wait.

All through the long hours of the morning, the *Porpoise* grew steadily larger astern. The sky had begun to cloud over, and the wind had risen considerably, but this helped the *Porpoise*, with her huge spread of canvas, a great deal more than it did us.

By ten o'clock, she was close enough to risk a shot. It fell far astern, but was frightening, nonetheless. Innes squinted back over his shoulder, judging the distance, then shook his head and settled grimly to his course. There was nothing to be gained by tacking now; we must head straight on, as long as we could, taking evasive action only when it was too late for anything else.

By eleven, the *Porpoise* had drawn within a quarter-mile, and the monotonous boom of her forward guns had begun to sound every ten minutes, as her gunner tried the range. If I closed my eyes, I could imagine Erik Johansen, bent sweating and powder-stained over his gun, the smoking slow-match in his hand. I hoped that Annekje had been left on Antigua with her goats.

By eleven-thirty, it had begun to rain, and a heavy sea was running. A sudden gust of wind struck us sideways, and the boat heeled over far enough to bring the port rail within a foot of the water. Dumped onto the deck by the motion, we disentangled ourselves as Innes and MacLeod skillfully righted the pinnace. I glanced back, as I did every few minutes, despite myself, and saw the seamen scampering aloft in the *Porpoise*, reefing the topsails.

"That's luck!" MacGregor shouted in my ear, nodding where I was looking. "That'll slow them."

By twelve-thirty, the sky had gone a peculiar purple-green, and the wind had risen to an eerie whine. The *Porpoise* had taken in yet more canvas, and in spite of the action, had had a staysail carried away, the scrap of canvas jerked from the mast and whipped away, flapping like an albatross. She had long since stopped firing on us, unable to aim at such a small target in the heavy swell.

With the sun gone from sight, I could no longer estimate time. The storm caught us squarely, perhaps an hour later. There was no possibility of hearing anything; by sign language and grimaces, Innes made the men lower the sails; to keep canvas flying, or even reefed, was to risk having the mast ripped from the floorboards.

I clung tight to the rail with one hand, to Ian's hand with the other. Jamie crouched behind us, arms spread to give us the shelter of his back. The rain lashed past, hard enough to sting the skin, driven almost horizontal by the wind, and so thick that I barely saw the faint shape on the horizon that I thought was Eleuthera.

The sea had risen to terrifying heights, with swells rolling forty feet high. The pinnace rode them lightly, carried up and up and up to dizzy heights, then dropped abruptly into a trough. Jamie's face was dead white in the storm-light, his sodden hair pasted against his scalp.

It was near dark that it happened. The sky was nearly black, but there was an eerie green glow all across the horizon that silhouetted the skeletal shape of the *Porpoise* behind us. Another of the rain squalls slammed us sideways, lurching and swaying atop a huge wave.

As we picked ourselves up from yet another bruising spill, Jamie grabbed my arm, and pointed behind us. The *Porpoise*'s foremast was oddly bent, the top of it leaning far to one side. Before I had time to realize what was happening, the top fifteen feet of the mast had split off and pitched into the sea, carrying with it rigging and spars.

The man-of-war swung heavily round this impromptu anchor, and came sliding sideways down the face of a wave. The wall of water towered over the ship, and came crashing down, catching her broadside. The *Porpoise* heeled, spun around once. The next wave rose, and took her stern first, pulling the high aft deck below the water, whipping the masts through the air like snapping twigs.

It took three more waves to sink her; no time for escape for her hapless crew, but plenty for those of us watching to share their terror. There was a great bubbling flurry in the trough of a wave, and the man-of-war was gone.

Jamie's arm was rigid as iron beneath my hand. All the men stared back, faces gone empty with horror. All save Innes, who crouched doggedly over the wheel, meeting each wave as it came.

A new wave rose up beside the rail and seemed to hover there, looming above me. The great wall of water was glassy clear; I could see suspended in it the debris and the men of the wrecked *Porpoise*, limbs outflung in grotesque ballet. The body of Thomas Leonard hung no more than ten feet from me, drowned mouth open in surprise, his long soft hair aswirl above the gilded collar of his coat.

Then the wave struck. I was snatched off the deck, and at once engulfed in chaos. Blind and deaf, unable to breathe, I was tumbled through space, my arms and legs wrenched awry by the force of the water.

Everything was dark; there was nothing but sensation, and all of that intense but indistinguishable. Pressure and noise and overwhelming cold. I couldn't feel the pull of my clothing, or the jerk of the rope—if it was still there—around my waist. A sudden faint warmth swathed my legs, distinct in the surrounding cold as a cloud in a clear sky. Urine, I thought, but didn't know whether it was my own, or the last touch of another human body, swallowed as I was in the belly of the wave.

My head hit something with a sickening crack, and suddenly I was coughing my lungs out on the deck of the pinnace, still miraculously afloat. I sat up slowly, choking and wheezing. My rope was still in place, yanked so tight about my waist that I was sure my lower ribs were broken. I jerked feebly at it, trying to breathe, and then Jamie was there, one arm around me, the other groping at his belt for a knife.

"Are ye all right?" he bellowed, his voice barely audible above the shrieking wind.

"No!" I tried to shout back, but it came out as no more than a wheeze. I shook my head, fumbling at my waist.

The sky was a queer purple-green, a color I had never seen before. Jamie sawed at the rope, his bent head spray-soaked and the color of mahogany, hair whipped across his face by the fury of the wind.

The rope popped and I gulped in air, ignoring a stabbing pain in my side and the stinging of raw skin about my waist. The ship was pitching wildly, the deck swinging up and down like a lawn glider. Jamie fell down on the deck, pulling me with him, and began to work his way on hands and knees toward the mast, some six feet away, dragging me.

My garments had been drenched through, plastered to me from my immersion in the wave. Now the blast of the wind was so great that it plucked my skirts away from my legs and flung them up, half-dried, to beat about my face like goose wings.

Jamie's arm was tight as an iron bar across my chest. I clung to him, trying to aid our progress by shoving with my feet on the slippery deckboards. Smaller waves washed over the rail, sousing us intermittently, but no more huge monsters followed them.

Reaching hands grasped us and hauled us the last few feet, into the nominal shelter of the mast. Innes had tied the wheel over long since; as I looked forward, I saw lightning strike the sea ahead, making the spokes of the wheel spring out black, leaving an image like a spider's web printed on my retina.

Speech was impossible—and unnecessary. Raeburn, Ian, Meldrum, and Lawrence were huddled against the mast, all tied; frightful as it was on deck, no one wanted to go below, to be tossed to and fro in bruising darkness, with no notion of what was happening overhead.

I was sitting on the deck, legs splayed, with the mast at my back and the line passed across my chest. The sky had gone lead-gray on one side, a deep, lucent green on the other, and lightning was striking at random over the surface of the sea, bright jags of brilliance across the dark. The wind was so loud that even the thunderclaps reached us only now and then, as muffled booms, like ships' guns firing at a distance.

Then a bolt crashed down beside the ship, lightning and thunder together, close enough to hear the hiss of boiling water in the ringing aftermath of the thunderclap. The sharp reek of ozone flooded the air. Innes turned from the light, his tall, thin figure so sharply cut against the flash that he looked momentarily like a skeleton, black bones against the sky.

The momentary dazzle and his movement made it seem for an instant that he stood whole once more, two arms swinging, as though his missing limb had emerged from the ghost world to join him, here on the brink of eternity.

Oh, de headbone connected to de … neckbone. Joe Abernathy's voice sang softly in memory. *And de neckbone connected to de … backbone …* I had a sudden hideous vision of the scattered limbs I had seen on the beach by the corpse of the *Bruja*, animated by the lightning, squirming and wriggling to reunite.

> *Dem bones, dem bones, are gonna walk around.*
> *Now, hear de word of de Lawd!*

Another clap of thunder and I screamed, not at the sound, but at the lightning bolt of memory. A skull in my hands, with empty eyes that had once been the green of the hurricane sky.

Jamie shouted something in my ear, but I couldn't hear him. I could only shake my head in speechless shock, my skin rippling with horror.

My hair, like my skirts, was drying in the wind; the strands of it danced on my head, pulling at the roots. As it dried, I felt the crackle of static electricity where my hair brushed my cheek. There was a sudden movement among the sailors around me and I looked up, to see the spars and rigging above coated in the blue phosphorescence of St. Elmo's fire.

A fireball dropped to the deck and rolled toward us, streaming phosphorescence. Jamie struck at it and it hopped delicately into the air and rolled away along the rail, leaving a scent of burning in its wake.

I looked up at Jamie to see if he was all right, and saw the loose ends of his hair standing out from his head, coated with fire and streaming backward like a demon's. Streaks of vivid blue outlined the fingers of his hand when he brushed the hair from his face. Then he looked down, saw me, and grasped my hand. A jolt of electricity shot through us both with the touch, but he didn't let go.

I couldn't say how long it lasted; hours or days. Our mouths dried from the wind, and grew sticky with thirst. The sky went from gray to black, but there was no telling whether it was night, or only the coming of rain.

The rain, when it did come, was welcome. It came with the drenching roar of a tropical shower, a drumming audible even above the wind. Better yet, it was hail, not rain; the hailstones hit my skull like pebbles, but I didn't care. I gathered the icy globules in both hands, and swallowed them half-melted, a cool benison to my tortured throat.

Meldrum and MacLeod crawled about the deck on hands and knees, scooping the hailstones into buckets and pots, anything that would hold water.

I slept intermittently, head lolling on Jamie's shoulder, and woke to find the wind still screaming. Numb to terror now, I only waited. Whether we lived or died seemed of little consequence, if only the dreadful noise would stop.

There was no telling day from night, no way to keep time, while the sun hid its face. The darkness seemed a little lighter now and then, but whether it was by virtue of daylight or moonlight, I couldn't tell. I slept, and woke, and slept again.

Then I woke, to find the wind a little quieter. The seas still heaved, and the tiny boat pitched like a cockleshell, throwing us up and dropping us with stomach-churning regularity. But the noise was less; I could hear, when MacGregor shouted to Ian to pass a cup of water. The men's faces were chapped and raw, their lips cracked to bleeding by the whistling wind, but they were smiling.

"It's gone by." Jamie's voice was low and husky in my ear, rusted by weather. "The storm's past."

It was; there were breaks in the lead-gray sky, and small flashes of a pale, fresh blue. I thought it must be early morning, sometime just past dawn, but couldn't tell for sure.

While the hurricane had ceased to blow, there was still a strong wind, and the storm surge carried us at an amazing speed. Meldrum took the wheel from Innes, and bending to check the compass, gave a cry of surprise. The fireball that had come aboard during the storm had harmed no one, but the compass was now a melted mass of silver metal, the wooden casing around it untouched.

"Amazing!" said Lawrence, touching it reverently with one finger.

"Aye, and inconvenient, forbye," said Innes dryly. He looked upward, toward the ragged remnants of the dashing clouds. "Much of a hand at celestial navigation, are ye, Mr. Stern?"

After much squinting at the rising sun and the remnants of the morning stars, Jamie, Innes, and Stern determined that our heading was roughly northeast.

"We must turn to the west," Stern said, leaning over the crude chart with Jamie and Innes. "We do not know where we are, but any land must surely be to the west."

Innes nodded, peering soberly at the chart, which showed a sprinkle of islands like coarse-ground pepper, floating on the waters of the Caribbean.

"Aye, that's so," he said. "We've been headed out to sea for God knows how long. The hull's in one piece, but that's all I'd say for it. As for the mast and sails—well, they'll maybe hold for a time." He sounded dubious in the extreme. “God knows where we may fetch up, though.”

Jamie grinned at him, dabbing at a trickle of blood from his cracked lip.

“So long as it’s land, Duncan, I’m no verra choosy about where.”

Innes quirked an eyebrow at him, a slight smile on his lips.

“Aye? And here I thought ye’d settled for sure on a sailor’s life, Mac Dubh; ye’re sae canty on deck. Why, ye havena puked once in the last twa days!”

“That’s because I havena eaten anything in the last twa days,” Jamie said wryly. “I dinna much care if the island we find first is English, French, Spanish, or Dutch, but I should be obliged if ye’d find one with food, Duncan.”

Innes wiped a hand across his mouth and swallowed painfully; the mention of food made everyone salivate, despite dry mouths.

“I’ll do my best, Mac Dubh,” he promised.

* * *

“Land! It’s land!” The call came at last, five days later, in a voice rendered so hoarse by wind and thirst that it was no more than a faint croak, but full of joy, nonetheless. I dashed up on deck to see, my feet slipping on the ladder rungs. Everyone was hanging over the rail, looking at the humped black shape on the horizon. It was far off, but undeniably land, solid and distinct.

“Where do you think we are?” I tried to say, but my voice was so hoarse, the words came out in a tiny whisper, and no one heard. It didn’t matter; if we were headed straight for the naval barracks at Antigua, I didn’t care.

The waves were running in huge, smooth swells, like the backs of whales. The wind was gusting now, and Innes called for the helmsman to bring the bow another point nearer the wind.

I could see a line of large birds flying, a stately procession skimming down the distant shoreline. Pelicans, searching the shallows for fish, with the sun gleaming on their wings.

I tugged at Jamie’s sleeve and pointed at them.

“Look—” I began, but got no further. There was a sharp *crack!* and the world exploded in black and fire. I came to in the water.

Dazed and half-choked, I floundered and fought in a world of dark green. Something was wrapped about my legs, dragging me down.

I flailed wildly, kicking to free my leg of the deadly grip. Something floated past my head, and I grabbed for it. Wood, blessed wood, something to hold onto in the surging waves.

A dark shape sleeked by like a seal beneath the water, and a red head bobbed up six feet away, gasping.

"Hold on!" Jamie said. He reached me with two strokes, and ducking under the piece of wood I held, dived down. I felt a tugging at my leg, a sharp pain, and then the dragging tension eased. Jamie's head popped up again, across the spar. He grasped my wrists and hung there, gulping air, as the rolling swell carried us, up and down.

I couldn't see the ship anywhere; had it sunk? A wave broke over my head, and Jamie disappeared temporarily. I shook my head, blinking, and he was there again. He smiled at me, a savage grin of effort, and his grip on my wrists tightened harder.

"Hold on!" he rasped again, and I did. The wood was harsh and splintery under my hands, but I clung for all I was worth. We drifted, half-blinded by spray, spinning like a bit of flotsam, so that sometimes I saw the distant shore, sometimes nothing but the open sea from which we had come. And when the waves washed over us, I saw nothing but water.

There was something wrong with my leg; a strange numbness, punctuated with flashes of sharp pain. The vision of Murphy's peg and the razor-grin of an openmouthed shark drifted through my mind; had my leg been taken by some toothy beast? I thought of my tiny hoard of warm blood, streaming from the stump of a bitten limb, draining away into the cold vastness of the sea, and I panicked, trying to snatch my hand from Jamie's grasp in order to reach down and see for myself.

He snarled something unintelligible at me and held on to my wrists like grim death. After a moment of frenzied thrashing, reason returned, and I calmed myself, thinking that if my leg were indeed gone, I would have lost consciousness by now.

At that, I *was* beginning to lose consciousness. My vision was growing gray at the edges, and floating bright spots covered Jamie's face. Was I really bleeding to death, or was it only cold and shock? It hardly seemed to matter, I thought muzzily; the effect was the same.

A sense of lassitude and utter peace stole gradually over me. I couldn't feel my feet or legs, and only Jamie's crushing grip on my hands reminded me of their existence. My head went under water, and I had to remind myself to hold my breath.

The wave subsided and the wood rose slightly, bringing my nose above water. I breathed, and my vision cleared slightly. A foot away was the face of Jamie Fraser, hair plastered to his head, wet features contorted against the spray.

"Hold on!" he roared. "Hold on, God damn you!"

I smiled gently, barely hearing him. The sense of great peace was lifting me, carrying me beyond the noise and chaos. There was no more pain. Nothing mattered. Another wave washed over me, and this time I forgot to hold my breath.

The choking sensation roused me briefly, long enough to see the flash of terror in Jamie's eyes. Then my vision went dark again.

"Damn you, Sassenach!" his voice said, from a very great distance. His voice was choked with passion. "Damn you! I swear if ye die on me, I'll *kill* you!"

I was dead. Everything around me was a blinding white, and there was a soft, rushing noise like the wings of angels. I felt peaceful and bodiless, free of terror, free of rage, filled with quiet happiness. Then I coughed.

I wasn't bodiless, after all. My leg hurt. It hurt a lot. I became gradually aware that a good many other things hurt, too, but my left shin took precedence in no uncertain terms. I had the distinct impression that the bone had been removed and replaced with a red-hot poker.

At least the leg was demonstrably there. When I cracked my eyes open to look, the haze of pain that floated over my leg seemed almost visible, though perhaps that was only a product of the general fuzziness in my head. Whether mental or physical in origin, the general effect was of a sort of whirling whiteness, shot with flickers of a brighter light. Watching it hurt my eyes, so I shut them again.

"Thank God, you're awake!" said a relieved-sounding Scottish voice near my ear.

"No I'm not," I said. My own voice emerged as a salt-crusted croak, rusty with swallowed seawater. I could feel seawater in my sinuses, too, which gave my head an unpleasant gurgling feel. I coughed again, and my nose began to run profusely. Then I sneezed.

"Eugh!" I said, in complete revulsion at the resultant cascade of slime over my upper lip. My hand seemed far off and insubstantial, but I made the effort to raise it, swiping clumsily at my face.

"Be still, Sassenach; I'll take care of ye." There was a definite note of amusement in the voice, which irritated me enough to open my eyes again. I caught a brief glimpse of Jamie's face, intent on mine, before vision vanished once again in the folds of an immense white handkerchief.

He wiped my face thoroughly, ignoring my strangled noises of protest and impending suffocation, then held the cloth to my nose.

"Blow," he said.

I did as he said. Rather to my surprise, it helped quite a lot. I could think more or less coherently, now that my head was unclogged.

Jamie smiled down at me. His hair was rumpled and stiff with dried salt, and there was a wide abrasion on his temple, an angry dark red against the bronzed skin. He seemed not to be wearing a shirt, but had a blanket of some kind draped about his shoulders.

"Do ye feel verra bad?" he asked.

"Horrible," I croaked in reply. I was also beginning to be annoyed at being alive, after all, and being required to take notice of things again. Hearing the rasp in my voice, Jamie reached for a jug of water on the table by my bed.

I blinked in confusion, but it really was a bed, not a berth or a hammock. The linen sheets contributed to the overwhelming impression of whiteness that had first engulfed me. This was reinforced by the whitewashed walls and ceiling, and the long white muslin draperies that bellied in like sails, rustling in the breeze from the open windows.

The flickering light came from reflections that shimmered over the ceiling; apparently there was water close by outside, and sun shining on it. It seemed altogether cozier than Davy Jones's locker. Still, I felt a brief moment of intense regret for the sense of infinite peace. I had experienced in the heart of the wave—a regret made more keen by the slight movement that sent a bolt of white agony up my leg.

"I think your leg is broken, Sassenach," Jamie told me unnecessarily. "Ye likely shouldna move it much."

"Thanks for the advice," I said, through gritted teeth. "Where in bloody hell are we?"

He shrugged briefly. "I dinna ken. It's a fair-sized house, is all I could say. I wasna taking much note when they brought us in. One man said the place is called Les Perles." He held the cup to my lips and I swallowed gratefully.

"What happened?" So long as I was careful not to move, the pain in my leg was bearable. Automatically, I placed my fingers under the angle of my jaw to check my pulse; reassuringly strong. I wasn't in shock; my leg couldn't be badly fractured, much as it hurt.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face. He looked very tired, and I noticed that his hand trembled with fatigue. There was a large bruise on his cheek, and a line of dried blood where something had scratched the side of his neck.

"The topmast snapped, I think. One of the spars fell and knocked ye overboard. When ye hit the water, ye sank like a stone, and I dived in after you. I got hold of you—and the spar, too, thank God. Ye had a bit of rigging tangled round your leg, dragging ye down, but I managed to get that off." He heaved a deep sigh, and rubbed his head.

"I just held to ye; and after a time, I felt sand under my feet. I carried ye ashore, and a bit later, some men found us and brought us here. That's all." He shrugged.

I felt cold, despite the warm breeze coming in through the windows.

“What happened to the ship? And the men? Ian? Lawrence?”

“Safe, I think. They couldna reach us, with the mast broken—by the time they’d rigged a makeshift sail, we were long gone.” He coughed roughly, and rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. “But they’re safe; the men who found us said they’d seen a small ketch go aground on a mud flat a quarter-mile south of here; they’ve gone down to salvage and bring back the men.”

He took a swallow of water, swished it about his mouth, and going to the window, spat it out.

“I’ve sand in my teeth,” he said, grimacing, as he returned. “And my ears. And my nose, and the crack of my arse, too, I shouldna wonder.”

I reached out and took his hand again. His palm was heavily calloused, but still showed the tender swelling of rising blisters, with shreds of ragged skin and raw flesh, where earlier blisters had burst and bled.

“How long were we in the water?” I asked, gently tracing the lines of his swollen palm. The tiny “C” at the base of his thumb was faded almost to invisibility, but I could still feel it under my finger. “Just how long did you hold on?”

“Long enough,” he said simply.

He smiled a little, and held my hand more tightly, despite the soreness of his own. It dawned on me suddenly that I wasn’t wearing anything; the linen sheets were smooth and cool on my bare skin, and I could see the swell of my nipples, rising under the thin fabric.

“What happened to my clothes?”

“I couldna hold ye up against the drag of your skirts, so I ripped them off,” he explained. “What was left didna seem worth saving.”

“I don’t suppose so,” I said slowly, “but Jamie—what about you? Where’s your coat?”

He shrugged, then let his shoulders drop, and smiled ruefully.

“At the bottom of the sea with my shoon, I expect,” he said. And the pictures of Willie and Brianna there, too.

"Oh, Jamie. I'm so sorry." I reached for his hand and held it tightly. He looked away, and blinked once or twice.

"Aye, well," he said softly. "I expect I will remember them." He shrugged again, with a lopsided smile. "And if not, I can look in the glass, no?" I gave a laugh that was half a sob; he swallowed painfully, but went on smiling.

He glanced down at his tattered breeches then, and seeming to think of something, leaned back and worked a hand into the pocket.

"I didna come away completely empty-handed," he said, pulling a wry face. "Though I would as soon it had been the pictures I kept, and lost these."

He opened his hand, and I saw the gleam and glitter in his ruined palm. Stones of the first quality, cut and faceted, suitable for magic. An emerald, a ruby—male, I supposed—a great fiery opal, a turquoise blue as the sky I could see out the window, a golden stone like sun trapped in honey, and the strange crystal purity of Geilie's black diamond.

"You have the adamant," I said, touching it gently. It was still cool to the touch, in spite of being worn so close to his body.

"I have," he said, but he was looking at me, not at the stone, a slight smile on his face. "What is it an adamant gives ye? The knowledge of joy in all things?"

"So I was told." I lifted my hand to his face and stroked it lightly, feeling hard bone and lively flesh, warm to the touch, and joyful to behold above all things.

"We have Ian," I said softly. "And each other."

"Aye, that's true." The smile reached his eyes then. He dropped the stones in a glittering heap on the table and leaned back in his chair, cradling my hand between his.

I relaxed, feeling a warm peace begin to steal over me, in spite of the aches and scrapes and the pain in my leg. We were alive, safe and together, and very little else mattered; surely not clothes, nor a fractured tibia. Everything would be managed in time—but not now. For now, it was enough only to breathe, and look at Jamie.

We sat in a peaceful silence for some time, watching the sunlit curtains and the open sky. It might have been ten minutes later, or as much as an hour, when I heard the sound of light footsteps outside, and a delicate rap at the door.

“Come in,” Jamie said. He sat up straighter, but didn’t let go of my hand.

The door opened, and a woman stepped in, her pleasant face lit by welcome, tinged with curiosity.

“Good morning,” she said, a little shyly. “I must beg your pardon, not to have waited upon you before; I was in the town, and learned of your—arrival”—she smiled at the word—“only when I returned, just now.”

“We must thank ye, Madame, most sincerely, for the kind treatment afforded to us,” Jamie said. He rose and bowed formally to her, but kept hold of my hand. “Your servant, ma’am. Have ye word of our companions?”

She blushed slightly, and bobbed a curtsy in reply to his bow. She was young, only in her twenties, and seemed unsure quite how to conduct herself under the circumstances. She had light brown hair, pulled back in a knot, fair pink skin, and what I thought was a faint West Country accent.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “My servants brought them back from the ship; they’re in the kitchen now, being fed.”

“Thank you,” I said, meaning it. “That’s terribly kind of you.”

She blushed rosily with embarrassment.

“Not at all,” she murmured, then glanced shyly at me. “I must beg your pardon for my lack of manners, ma’am,” she said. “I am remiss in not introducing myself. I am Patsy Olivier—Mrs. Joseph Olivier, that is.” She looked expectantly from me to Jamie, clearly expecting reciprocation.

Jamie and I exchanged a glance. Where, exactly, were we? Mrs. Olivier was English, that was clear enough. Her husband’s name was French. The bay outside gave no clue; this could be any of the Windward Isles—Barbados, the Bahamas, the Exumas, Andros—even the Virgin Islands. Or—the thought struck me—we might have been blown south by the hurricane, and not north; in which case, this might even be Antigua—in the lap of the British Navy!—or Martinique, or the Grenadines … I looked at Jamie and shrugged.

Our hostess was still waiting, glancing expectantly from one to the other of us. Jamie tightened his hold on my hand and drew a deep breath.

"I trust ye willna think this an odd question, Mistress Olivier—but could ye tell me where we are?"

Mrs. Olivier's brows rose to the edge of her widow's peak, and she blinked in astonishment.

"Well … yes," she said. "We call it Les Perles."

"Thank you," I put in, seeing Jamie taking breath to try again, "but what we mean is—what island is this?"

A broad smile of understanding broke out on her round pink face.

"Oh, I see!" she said. "Of course, you were cast away by the storm. My husband was saying last night that he'd never seen such a dreadful blow at this time of year. What a mercy it is that you were saved! But you came from the islands to the south, then?"

The south. This couldn't be Cuba. Might we have come as far as St. Thomas, or even Florida? We exchanged a quick glance, and I squeezed Jamie's hand. I could feel the pulse beating in his wrist.

Mrs. Olivier smiled indulgently. "You are not on an island at all. You are on the mainland; in the Colony of Georgia."

"Georgia," Jamie said. "America?" He sounded slightly stunned, and no wonder. We had been blown at least six hundred miles by the storm.

"America," I said softly. "The New World." The pulse beneath my fingers had quickened, echoing my own. A new world. Refuge. Freedom.

"Yes," said Mrs. Olivier, plainly having no idea what the news meant to us, but still smiling kindly from one to the other. "It is America."

Jamie straightened his shoulders and smiled back at her. The clean bright air stirred his hair like kindling flames.

"In that case, ma'am," he said, "my name is Jamie Fraser." He looked then at me, eyes blue and brilliant as the sky behind him, and his heart beat strong in the palm of my hand.

"And this is Claire," he said. "My wife."

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To my children,
Laura Juliet,
Samuel Gordon,
and Jennifer Rose,
Who gave me the heart, the blood, and the bones of this book.

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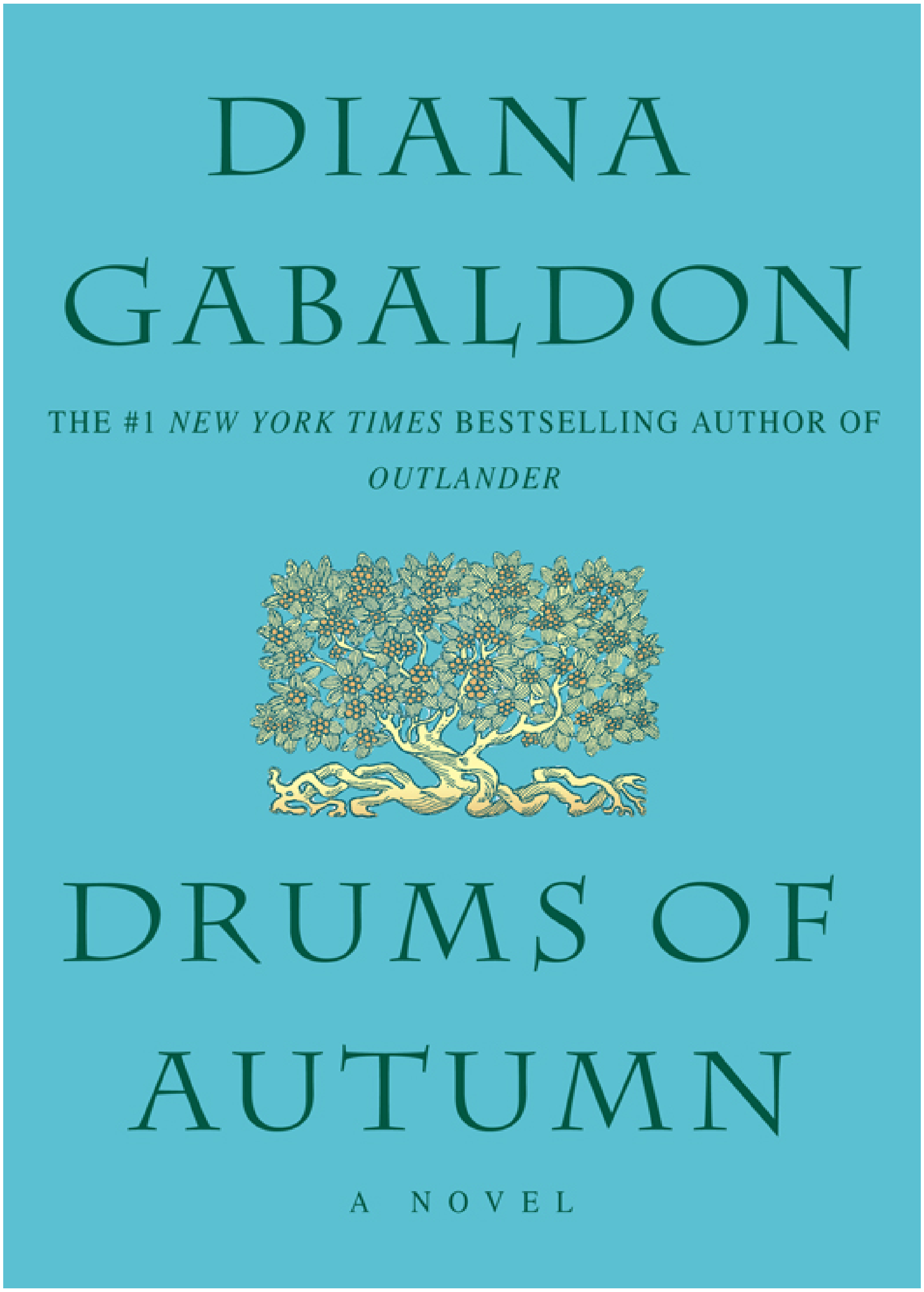

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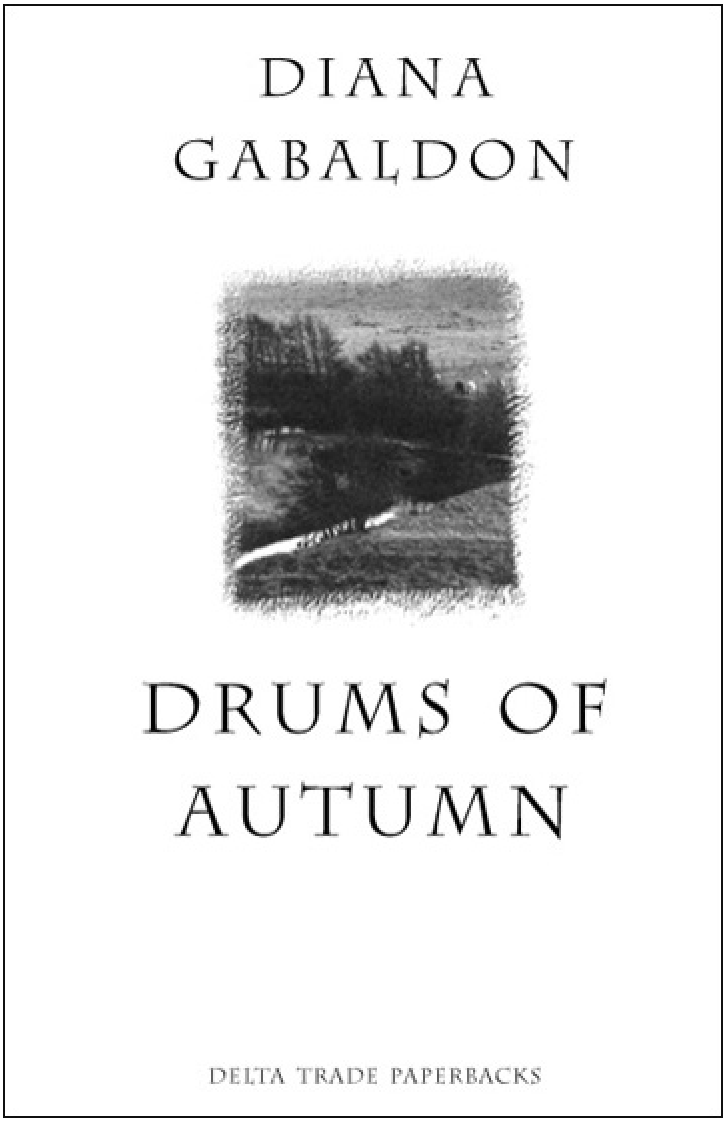

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DRUMS OF AUTUMN

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PROLOGUE

I've never been afraid of ghosts. I live with them daily, after all. When I look in a mirror, my mother's eyes look back at me; my mouth curls with the smile that lured my great-grandfather to the fate that was me.

No, how should I fear the touch of those vanished hands, laid on me in love unknowing? How could I be afraid of those that molded my flesh, leaving their remnants to live long past the grave?

Still less could I be afraid of those ghosts who touch my thoughts in passing. Any library is filled with them. I can take a book from dusty shelves, and be haunted by the thoughts of one long dead, still lively as ever in their winding sheet of words.

Of course it isn't these homely and accustomed ghosts that trouble sleep and curdle wakefulness. Look back, hold a torch to light the recesses of the dark. Listen to the footsteps that echo behind, when you walk alone.

All the time the ghosts flit past and through us, hiding in the future. We look in the mirror and see the shades of other faces looking back through the years; we see the shape of memory, standing solid in an empty doorway. By blood and by choice, we make our ghosts; we haunt ourselves.

Each ghost comes unbidden from the misty grounds of dream and silence.

Our rational minds say, "No, it isn't."

But another part, an older part, echoes always softly in the dark, "Yes, but it *could* be."

We come and go from mystery and, in between, we try to forget. But a breeze passing in a still room stirs my hair now and then in soft affection. I think it is my mother.

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PART ONE

O Brave New World

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1

A HANGING IN EDEN

Charleston, June 1767

I heard the drums long before they came in sight. The beating echoed in the pit of my stomach, as though I too were hollow. The sound traveled through the crowd, a harsh military rhythm meant to be heard over speech or gunfire. I saw heads turn as the people fell silent, looking up the stretch of East Bay Street, where it ran from the half-built skeleton of the new Customs House toward White Point Gardens.

It was a hot day, even for Charleston in June. The best places were on the seawall, where the air moved; here below, it was like being roasted alive. My shift was soaked through, and the cotton bodice clung between my breasts. I wiped my face for the tenth time in as many minutes and lifted the heavy coil of my hair, hoping vainly for a cooling breeze upon my neck.

I was morbidly aware of necks at the moment. Unobtrusively, I put my hand up to the base of my throat, letting my fingers circle it. I could feel the pulse beat in my carotid arteries, along with the drums, and when I breathed, the hot wet air clogged my throat as though I were choking.

I quickly took my hand down, and drew in a breath as deep as I could manage. That was a mistake. The man in front of me hadn't bathed in a month or more; the edge of the stock about his thick neck was dark with grime and his clothes smelled sour and musty, pungent even amid the sweaty reek of the crowd. The smell of hot bread and frying pig fat from the food vendors' stalls lay heavy over a musk of rotting seagrass from the marsh, only slightly relieved by a whiff of salt-breeze from the harbor.

There were several children in front of me, craning and gawking, running out from under the oaks and palmettos to look up the street, being called back by anxious parents. The girl nearest me had a neck like the white part of a grass stalk, slender and succulent.

There was a ripple of excitement through the crowd; the gallows procession was in sight at the far end of the street. The drums grew louder.

"Where is he?" Fergus muttered beside me, craning his own neck to see. "I knew I should have gone with him!"

"He'll be here." I wanted to stand on tiptoe, but didn't, feeling that this would be undignified. I did glance around, though, searching. I could always spot Jamie in a crowd; he stood head and shoulders above most men, and his hair caught the light in a blaze of reddish gold. There was no sign of him yet, only a bobbing sea of bonnets and tricornes, sheltering from the heat those citizens come too late to find a place in the shade.

The flags came first, fluttering above the heads of the excited crowd, the banners of Great Britain and of the Royal Colony of South Carolina. And another, bearing the family arms of the Lord Governor of the colony.

Then came the drummers, walking two by two in step, their sticks an alternate beat and blur. It was a slow march, grimly inexorable. A dead march, I thought they called that particular cadence; very suitable under the circumstances. All other noises were drowned by the rattle of the drums.

Then came the platoon of red-coated soldiers and in their midst, the prisoners.

There were three of them, hands bound before them, linked together by a chain that ran through rings on the iron collars about their necks. The first man was small and elderly, ragged and disreputable, a shambling wreck who lurched and staggered so that the dark-suited clergyman who walked beside the prisoners was obliged to grasp his arm to keep him from falling.

“Is that Gavin Hayes? He looks sick,” I murmured to Fergus.

“He’s drunk.” The soft voice came from behind me, and I whirled, to find Jamie standing at my shoulder, eyes fixed on the pitiful procession.

The small man’s disequilibrium was disrupting the progress of the parade, as his stumbling forced the two men chained to him to zig and zag abruptly in order to keep their feet. The general impression was of three inebriates rolling home from the local tavern; grossly at odds with the solemnity of the occasion. I could hear the rustle of laughter over the drums, and shouts and jeers from the crowds on the wrought-iron balconies of the houses on East Bay Street.

“Your doing?” I spoke quietly, so as not to attract notice, but I could have shouted and waved my arms; no one had eyes for anything but the scene before us.

I felt rather than saw Jamie’s shrug, as he moved forward to stand beside me.

“It was what he asked of me,” he said. “And the best I could manage for him.”

“Brandy or whisky?” asked Fergus, evaluating Hayes’ appearance with a practiced eye.

“The man’s a Scot, wee Fergus.” Jamie’s voice was as calm as his face, but I heard the small note of strain in it. “Whisky’s what he wanted.”

“A wise choice. With luck, he won’t even notice when they hang him,” Fergus muttered. The small man had slipped from the preacher’s grasp and fallen flat on his face in the sandy road, pulling one of his companions to his knees; the last prisoner, a tall young man, stayed on his feet but swayed wildly from side to side, trying desperately to keep his balance. The crowd on the point roared with glee.

The captain of the guard glowed crimson between the white of his wig and the metal of his gorget, flushed with fury as much as with sun. He barked an order as the drums continued their somber roll, and a soldier scrambled hastily to remove the chain that bound the prisoners together. Hayes was jerked unceremoniously to his feet, a soldier grasping each arm, and the procession resumed, in better order.

There was no laughter by the time they reached the gallows—a mule-drawn cart placed beneath the limbs of a huge live oak. I could feel the drums beating through the soles of my feet. I felt slightly sick from the sun and the smells. The drums stopped abruptly, and my ears rang in the silence.

“Ye dinna need to watch it, Sassenach,” Jamie whispered to me. “Go back to the wagon.” His own eyes were fixed unblinkingly on Hayes, who swayed and mumbled in the soldiers’ grasp, looking blearily around.

The last thing I wanted was to watch. But neither could I leave Jamie to see it through alone. He had come for Gavin Hayes; I had come for him. I touched his hand.

“I’ll stay.”

Jamie drew himself straighter, squaring his shoulders. He moved a pace forward, making sure that he was visible in the crowd. If Hayes was still sober enough to see anything, the last thing he saw on earth would be the face of a friend.

He could see; Hayes glared to and fro as they lifted him into the cart, twisting his neck, desperately looking.

“Gabhainn! A charaid!” Jamie shouted suddenly. Hayes’ eyes found him at once, and he ceased struggling.

The little man stood swaying slightly as the charge was read: theft in the amount of six pounds, ten shillings. He was covered in reddish dust, and pearls of sweat clung trembling to the gray stubble of his beard. The preacher was leaning close, murmuring urgently in his ear.

Then the drums began again, in a steady roll. The hangman guided the noose over the balding head and fixed it tight, knot positioned precisely, just under the ear. The captain of the guard stood poised, saber raised.

Suddenly, the condemned man drew himself up straight. Eyes on Jamie, he opened his mouth, as though to speak.

The saber flashed in the morning sun, and the drums stopped, with a final *thunk*!

I looked at Jamie; he was white to the lips, eyes fixed wide. From the corner of my eye, I could see the twitching rope, and the faint, reflexive jerk of the dangling sack of clothes. A sharp stink of urine and feces struck through the thick air.

On my other side, Fergus watched dispassionately.

“I suppose he noticed, after all,” he murmured, with regret.

The body swung slightly, a dead weight oscillating like a plumb-bob on its string. There was a sigh from the crowd, of awe and release. Terns squawked from the burning sky, and the harbor sounds came faint and smothered through the heavy air, but the point was wrapped in silence. From where I stood, I could hear the small *plit … plat … plit* of the drops that fell from the toe of the corpse’s dangling shoe.

I hadn’t known Gavin Hayes, and felt no personal grief for his death, but I was glad it had been quick. I stole a glance at him, with an odd feeling of intrusion. It was a most public way of accomplishing a most private act, and I felt vaguely embarrassed to be looking.

The hangman had known his business; there had been no undignified struggle, no staring eyes, no protruding tongue; Gavin’s small round head tilted sharply to the side, neck grotesquely stretched but cleanly broken.

It was a clean break in more ways than one. The captain of the guard, satisfied that Hayes was dead, motioned with his saber for the next man to be brought to the gibbet. I saw his eyes travel down the red-clad file, and then widen in outrage.

At the same moment, there was a cry from the crowd, and a ripple of excitement that quickly spread. Heads turned and people pushed each against his neighbor, striving to see where there was nothing to be seen.

“He’s gone!”

“There he goes!”

“Stop him!”

It was the third prisoner, the tall young man, who had seized the moment of Gavin's death to run for his life, sliding past the guard who should have been watching him, but who had been unable to resist the gallows' fascination.

I saw a flicker of movement behind a vendor's stall, a flash of dirty blond hair. Some of the soldiers saw it, too, and ran in that direction, but many more were rushing in other directions, and among the collisions and confusion, nothing was accomplished.

The captain of the guard was shouting, face purple, his voice barely audible over the uproar. The remaining prisoner, looking stunned, was seized and hustled back in the direction of the Court of Guard as the redcoats began hastily to sort themselves back into order under the lash of their captain's voice.

Jamie snaked an arm around my waist and dragged me out of the way of an oncoming wave of humanity. The crowd fell back before the advance of squads of soldiers, who formed up and marched briskly off to quarter the area, under the grim and furious direction of their sergeant.

"We'd best find Ian," Jamie said, fending off a group of excited apprentices. He glanced at Fergus, and jerked his head toward the gibbet and its melancholy burden. "Claim the body, aye? We'll meet at the Willow Tree later."

"Do you think they'll catch him?" I asked, as we pushed through the ebbing crowd, threading our way down a cobbled lane toward the merchants' wharves.

"I expect so. Where can he go?" He spoke abstractedly, a narrow line visible between his brows. Plainly the dead man was still on his mind, and he had little attention to spare for the living.

"Did Hayes have any family?" I asked. He shook his head.

"I asked him that, when I brought him the whisky. He thought he might have a brother left alive, but no notion where. The brother was transported soon after the Rising—to Virginia, Hayes thought, but he'd heard nothing since."

Not surprising if he hadn't; an indentured laborer would have had no facilities for communicating with kin left behind in Scotland, unless the bondsman's employer was kind enough to send a letter on his behalf. And kind or not, it was unlikely that a letter would have found Gavin Hayes, who had spent ten years in Ardsmuir prison before being transported in his turn.

"Duncan!" Jamie called out, and a tall, thin man turned and raised a hand in acknowledgment. He made his way through the crowd in a corkscrew fashion, his single arm swinging in a wide arc that fended off the passersby.

"Mac Dubh," he said, bobbing his head in greeting to Jamie. "Mrs. Claire." His long, narrow face was furrowed with sadness. He too had once been a prisoner at Ardsmuir, with Hayes and with Jamie. Only the loss of his arm to a blood infection had prevented his being transported with the others. Unfit to be sold for labor, he had instead been pardoned and set free to starve—until Jamie had found him.

"God rest poor Gavin," Duncan said, shaking his head dolorously.

Jamie muttered something in response in Gaelic, and crossed himself. Then he straightened, casting off the oppression of the day with a visible effort.

"Aye, well. I must go to the docks and arrange about Ian's passage, and then we'll think of burying Gavin. But I must have the lad settled first."

We struggled through the crowd toward the docks, squeezing our way between knots of excited gossipers, eluding the drays and barrows that came and went through the press with the ponderous indifference of trade.

A file of red-coated soldiers came at the quick-march from the other end of the quay, splitting the crowd like vinegar dropped on mayonnaise. The sun glittered hot on the line of bayonet points and the rhythm of their tramping beat through the noise of the crowd like a muffled drum. Even the rumbling sledges and handcarts stopped abruptly to let them pass by.

"Mind your pocket, Sassenach," Jamie murmured in my ear, ushering me through a narrow space between a turban-clad slave clutching two small children and a street preacher perched on a box. He was shouting sin and repentance, but with only one word in three audible through the noise.

"I sewed it shut," I assured him, nonetheless reaching to touch the small weight that swung against my thigh. "What about yours?"

He grinned and tilted his hat forward, dark blue eyes narrowing against the bright sunlight.

"It's where my sporran would be, did I have one. So long as I dinna meet with a quick-fingered harlot, I'm safe."

I glanced at the slightly bulging front of his breeches, and then up at him. Broad-shouldered and tall, with bold, clean features and a Highlander's proud carriage, he drew the glance of every woman he passed, even with his bright hair covered by a sober blue tricorne. The breeches, which were borrowed, were substantially too tight, and did nothing whatever to detract from the general effect—an effect enhanced by the fact that he himself was totally ignorant of it.

"You're a walking inducement to harlots," I said. "Stick by me; I'll protect you."

He laughed and took my arm as we emerged into a small clear space.

"Ian!" he shouted, catching sight of his nephew over the heads of the crowd. A moment later, a tall, stringy gawk of a boy popped out of the crowd, pushing a thatch of brown hair out of his eyes and grinning widely.

"I thought I should never find ye, Uncle!" he exclaimed. "Christ, there are more folk here than at the Lawnmarket in Edinburgh!" He wiped a coat sleeve across his long, half-homely face, leaving a streak of grime down one cheek.

Jamie eyed his nephew askance.

"Ye're lookin' indecently cheerful, Ian, for having just seen a man go to his death."

Ian hastily altered his expression into an attempt at decent solemnity.

"Oh, no, Uncle Jamie," he said. "I didna see the hanging." Duncan raised one brow and Ian blushed slightly. "I—I wasna afraid to see; it was only I had … something else I wanted to do."

Jamie smiled slightly and patted his nephew on the back.

"Don't trouble yourself, Ian; I'd as soon not have seen it myself, only that Gavin was a friend."

"I know, Uncle. I'm sorry for it." A flash of sympathy showed in the boy's large brown eyes, the only feature of his face with any claim to beauty. He glanced at me. "Was it awful, Auntie?"

"Yes," I said. "It's over, though." I pulled the damp handkerchief out of my bosom and stood on tiptoe to rub away the smudge on his cheek.

Duncan Innes shook his head sorrowfully. "Aye, poor Gavin. Still, it's a quicker death than starving, and there was little left for him but that."

"Let's go," Jamie interrupted, unwilling to spend time in useless lamenting. "The *Bonnie Mary* should be near the far end of the quay." I saw Ian glance at Jamie and draw himself up as though about to speak, but Jamie had already turned toward the harbor and was shoving his way through the crowd. Ian glanced at me, shrugged, and offered me an arm.

We followed Jamie behind the warehouses that lined the docks, side-stepping sailors, loaders, slaves, passengers, customers and merchants of all sorts. Charleston was a major shipping port, and business was booming, with as many as a hundred ships a month coming and going from Europe in the season.

The *Bonnie Mary* belonged to a friend of Jamie's cousin Jared Fraser, who had gone to France to make his fortune in the wine business and succeeded brilliantly. With luck, the *Bonnie Mary*'s captain might be persuaded for Jared's sake to take Ian with him back to Edinburgh, allowing the boy to work his passage as a cabin lad.

Ian was not enthused at the prospect, but Jamie was determined to ship his errant nephew back to Scotland at the earliest opportunity. It was—among other concerns—news of the *Bonnie Mary*'s presence in Charleston that had brought us here from Georgia, where we had first set foot in America—by accident—two months before.

As we passed a tavern, a slatternly barmaid came out with a bowl of slops. She caught sight of Jamie and stood, bowl braced against her hip, giving him a slanted brow and a pouting smile. He passed without a glance, intent on his goal. She tossed her head, flung the slops to the pig who slept by the step, and flounced back inside.

He paused, shading his eyes to look down the row of towering ships' masts, and I came up beside him. He twitched unconsciously at the front of his breeches, easing the fit, and I took his arm.

"Family jewels still safe, are they?" I murmured.

"Uncomfortable, but safe," he assured me. He plucked at the lacing of his flies, grimacing. "I would ha' done better to hide them up my bum, I think."

"Better you than me, mate," I said, smiling. "I'd rather risk robbery, myself."

The family jewels were just that. We had been driven ashore on the coast of Georgia by a hurricane, arriving soaked, ragged, and destitute—save for a handful of large and valuable gemstones.

I hoped the captain of the *Bonnie Mary* thought highly enough of Jared Fraser to accept Ian as a cabin boy, because if not, we were going to have a spot of difficulty about the passage.

In theory, Jamie's pouch and my pocket contained a sizable fortune. In practice, the stones might have been beach pebbles so far as the good they were to us. While gems were an easy, compact way of transporting wealth, the problem was changing them back into money.

Most trade in the southern colonies was conducted by means of barter—what wasn't, was handled by the exchange of scrip or bills written on a wealthy merchant or banker. And wealthy bankers were thin on the ground in Georgia; those willing to tie up their available capital in gemstones rarer still. The prosperous rice farmer with whom we had stayed in Savannah had assured us that he himself could scarcely lay his hand on two pounds sterling in cash—indeed, there was likely not ten pounds in gold and silver to be had in the whole colony.

Nor was there any chance of selling one of the stones in the endless stretches of salt marsh and pine forest through which we had passed on our journey north. Charleston was the first city we had reached of sufficient size to harbor merchants and bankers who might help to liquidate a portion of our frozen assets.

Not that anything was likely to stay frozen long in Charleston in summer, I reflected. Rivulets of sweat were running down my neck and the linen shift under my bodice was soaked and crumpled against my skin. Even so close to the harbor, there was no wind at this time of day, and the smells of hot tar, dead fish, and sweating laborers were nearly overwhelming.

Despite their protestations, Jamie had insisted on giving one of our gemstones to Mr. and Mrs. Olivier, the kindly people who had taken us in when we were shipwrecked virtually on their doorstep, as some token of thanks for their hospitality. In return, they had provided us with a wagon, two horses, fresh clothes for traveling, food for the journey north, and a small amount of money.

Of this, six shillings and threepence remained in my pocket, constituting the entirety of our disposable fortune.

"This way, Uncle Jamie," Ian said, turning and beckoning his uncle eagerly. "I've got something to show ye."

"What is it?" Jamie asked, threading his way through a throng of sweating slaves, who were loading dusty bricks of dried indigo into an anchored cargo ship. "And how did ye get whatever it is? Ye havena got any money, have you?"

"No, I won it, dicing." Ian's voice floated back, his body invisible as he skipped around a cartload of corn.

"Dicing! Ian, for God's sake, ye canna be gambling when ye've not a penny to bless yourself with!" Holding my arm, Jamie shoved a way through the crowd to catch up to his nephew.

"You do it all the time, Uncle Jamie," the boy pointed out, pausing to wait for us. "Ye've been doing it in every tavern and inn where we've stayed."

"My God, Ian, that's cards, not dice! And I know what I'm doing!"

"So do I," said Ian, looking smug. "I won, no?"

Jamie rolled his eyes toward heaven, imploring patience.

"Jesus, Ian, but I'm glad you're going home before ye get your head beaten in. Promise me ye willna be gambling wi' the sailors, aye? Ye canna get away from them on a ship."

Ian was paying no attention; he had come to a half-crumbled piling, around which was tied a stout rope. Here he stopped and turned to face us, gesturing at an object by his feet.

"See? It's a dog," Ian said proudly.

I took a quick half-step behind Jamie, grabbing his arm.

"Ian," I said, "that is not a dog. It's a wolf. It's a bloody *big* wolf, and I think you ought to get away from it before it takes a bite out of your arse."

The wolf twitched one ear negligently in my direction, dismissed me, and twitched it back. It continued to sit, panting with the heat, its big yellow eyes fixed on Ian with an intensity that might have been taken for devotion by someone who hadn't met a wolf before. I had.

"Those things are dangerous," I said. "They'd bite you as soon as look at you."

Disregarding this, Jamie stooped to inspect the beast.

"It's not quite a wolf, is it?" Sounding interested, he held out a loose fist to the so-called dog, inviting it to smell his knuckles. I closed my eyes, expecting the imminent amputation of his hand. Hearing no shrieks, I opened them again to find him squatting on the ground, peering up the animal's nostrils.

"He's a handsome creature, Ian," he said, scratching the thing familiarly under the chin. The yellow eyes narrowed slightly, either in pleasure at the attention or—more likely, I thought—in anticipation of biting off Jamie's nose. "Bigger than a wolf, though; it's broader through the head and chest, and a deal longer in the leg."

"His mother was an Irish wolfhound," Ian was hunkered down by Jamie, eagerly explaining as he stroked the enormous gray-brown back. "She got out in heat, into the woods, and when she came back in whelp—"

"Oh, aye, I see." Now Jamie was crooning in Gaelic to the monster while he picked up its huge foot and fondled its hairy toes. The curved black claws were a good two inches long. The thing half closed its eyes, the faint breeze ruffling the thick fur at its neck.

I glanced at Duncan, who arched his eyebrows at me, shrugged slightly, and sighed. Duncan didn't care for dogs.

"Jamie—" I said.

“Balach Boidheach,” Jamie said to the wolf. “Are ye no the bonny laddie, then?”

“What would he eat?” I asked, somewhat more loudly than necessary.

Jamie stopped caressing the beast.

“Oh,” he said. He looked at the yellow-eyed thing with some regret. “Well.” He rose to his feet, shaking his head reluctantly.

“I’m afraid your auntie’s right, Ian. How are we to feed him?”

“Oh, that’s no trouble, Uncle Jamie,” Ian assured him. “He hunts for himself.”

“Here?” I glanced around at the warehouses, and the stuccoed row of shops beyond. “What does he hunt, small children?”

Ian looked mildly hurt.

“Of course not, Auntie. Fish.”

Seeing three skeptical faces surrounding him, Ian dropped to his knees and grabbed the beast’s muzzle in both hands, prying his mouth open.

“He does! I swear, Uncle Jamie! Here, just smell his breath!”

Jamie cast a dubious glance at the double row of impressively gleaming fangs on display, and rubbed his chin.

“I—ah, I shall take your word for it, Ian. But even so—for Christ’s sake, be careful of your fingers, lad!” Ian’s grip had loosened, and the massive jaws clashed shut, spraying droplets of saliva over the stone quay.

“I’m all right, Uncle,” Ian said cheerfully, wiping his hand on his breeks. “He wouldn’t bite me, I’m sure. His name is Rollo.”

Jamie rubbed his knuckles across his upper lip.

“Mmphm. Well, whatever his name is, and whatever he eats, I dinna think the captain of the *Bonnie Mary* will take kindly to his presence in the crew’s quarters.”

Ian didn’t say anything, but the look of happiness on his face didn’t diminish. In fact, it grew. Jamie glanced at him, caught sight of his glowing face, and stiffened.

“No,” he said, in horror. “Oh, no.”

“Yes,” said Ian. A wide smile of delight split his bony face. “She sailed three days ago, Uncle. We’re too late.”

Jamie said something in Gaelic that I didn't understand. Duncan looked scandalized.

"Damn!" Jamie said, reverting to English. "Bloody damn!" Jamie took off his hat and rubbed a hand over his face, hard. He looked hot, disheveled, and thoroughly disgruntled. He opened his mouth, thought better of whatever he had been going to say, closed it, and ran his fingers roughly through his hair, jerking loose the ribbon that tied it back.

Ian looked abashed.

"I'm sorry, Uncle. I'll try not to be a worry to ye, truly I will. And I can work; I'll earn enough for my food."

Jamie's face softened as he looked at his nephew. He sighed deeply, and patted Ian's shoulder.

"It's not that I dinna want ye, Ian. You know I should like nothing better than to keep ye with me. But what in hell will your mother say?"

The glow returned to Ian's face.

"I dinna ken, Uncle," he said, "but she'll be saying it in Scotland, won't she? And we're here." He put his arms around Rollo and hugged him. The wolf seemed mildly taken aback by the gesture, but after a moment, put out a long pink tongue and daintily licked Ian's ear. Testing him for flavor, I thought cynically.

"Besides," the boy added, "she kens well enough that I'm safe; you wrote from Georgia to say I was with you."

Jamie summoned a wry smile.

"I canna say that that particular bit of knowledge will be ower-comforting to her, Ian. She's known me a long time, aye?"

He sighed and clapped the hat back on his head, and turned to me.

"I badly need a drink, Sassenach," he said. "Let's find that tavern."

The Willow Tree was dark, and might have been cool, had there been fewer people in it. As it was, the benches and tables were crowded with sightseers from the hanging and sailors from the docks, and the atmosphere was like a sweatbath. I inhaled as I stepped into the taproom, then let my breath out, fast. It was like breathing through a wad of soiled laundry, soaked in beer.

Rollo at once proved his worth, parting the crowd like the Red Sea as he stalked through the taproom, lips drawn back from his teeth in a constant, inaudible growl. He was evidently no stranger to taverns. Having satisfactorily cleared out a corner bench, he curled up under the table and appeared to go to sleep.

Out of the sun, with a large pewter mug of dark ale foaming gently in front of him, Jamie quickly regained his normal self-possession.

"We've the two choices," he said, brushing back the sweat-soaked hair from his temples. "We can stay in Charleston long enough to maybe find a buyer for one of the stones, and perhaps book passage for Ian to Scotland on another ship. Or we can make our way north to Cape Fear, and maybe find a ship for him out of Wilmington or New Bern."

"I say north," Duncan said, without hesitation. "Ye've kin in Cape Fear, no? I mislike the thought of staying ower-long among strangers. And your kinsman would see we were not cheated nor robbed. Here—" He lifted one shoulder in eloquent indication of the un-Scottish—and thus patently dishonest—persons surrounding us.

"Oh, do let's go north, Uncle!" Ian said quickly, before Jamie could reply to this. He wiped away a small mustache of ale foam with his sleeve. "The journey might be dangerous; you'll need an extra man along for protection, aye?"

Jamie buried his expression in his own cup, but I was seated close enough to feel a subterranean quiver go through him. Jamie was indeed very fond of his nephew. The fact remained that Ian was the sort of person to whom things happened. Usually through no fault of his own, but still, they happened.

The boy had been kidnapped by pirates the year before, and it was the necessity of rescuing him that had brought us by circuitous and often dangerous means to America. Nothing had happened recently, but I knew Jamie was anxious to get his fifteen-year-old nephew back to Scotland and his mother before something did.

"Ah … to be sure, Ian," Jamie said, lowering his cup. He carefully avoided meeting my gaze, but I could see the corner of his mouth twitching. "Ye'd be a great help, I'm sure, but …"

"We might meet with Red Indians!" Ian said, eyes wide. His face, already a rosy brown from the sun, glowed with a flush of pleasurable anticipation. "Or wild beasts! Dr. Stern told me that the wilderness of Carolina is alive wi' fierce creatures—bears and wildcats and wicked panthers—and a great foul thing the Indians call a skunk!"

I choked on my ale.

"Are ye all right, Auntie?" Ian leaned anxiously across the table.

"Fine," I wheezed, wiping my streaming face with my kerchief. I blotted the drops of spilled ale off my bosom, pulling the fabric of my bodice discreetly away from my flesh in hopes of admitting a little air.

Then I caught a glimpse of Jamie's face, on which the expression of suppressed amusement had given way to a small frown of concern.

"Skunks aren't dangerous," I murmured, laying a hand on his knee. A skilled and fearless hunter in his native Highlands, Jamie was inclined to regard the unfamiliar fauna of the New World with caution.

"Mmphm." The frown eased, but a narrow line remained between his brows. "Maybe so, but what of the other things? I canna say I wish to be meeting a bear or a pack o' savages, wi' only this to hand." He touched the large sheathed knife that hung from his belt.

Our lack of weapons had worried Jamie considerably on the trip from Georgia, and Ian's remarks about Indians and wild animals had brought the concern to the forefront of his mind once more. Besides Jamie's knife, Fergus bore a smaller blade, suitable for cutting rope and trimming twigs for kindling. That was the full extent of our armory—the Oliviers had had neither guns nor swords to spare.

On the journey from Georgia to Charleston, we had had the company of a group of rice and indigo farmers—all bristling with knives, pistols, and muskets—bringing their produce to the port to be shipped north to Pennsylvania and New York. If we left for Cape Fear now, we would be alone, unarmed, and essentially defenseless against anything that might emerge from the thick forests.

At the same time, there were pressing reasons to travel north, our lack of available capital being one. Cape Fear was the largest settlement of Scottish Highlanders in the American Colonies, boasting several towns whose inhabitants had emigrated from Scotland during the last twenty years, following the upheaval after Culloden. And among these emigrants were Jamie's kin, who I knew would willingly offer us refuge: a roof, a bed, and time to establish ourselves in this new world.

Jamie took another drink and nodded at Duncan.

"I must say I'm of your mind, Duncan." He leaned back against the wall of the tavern, glancing casually around the crowded room. "D'ye no feel the eyes on your back?"

A chill ran down my own back, despite the trickle of sweat doing likewise. Duncan's eyes widened fractionally, then narrowed, but he didn't turn around.

"Ah," he said.

"*Whose* eyes?" I asked, looking rather nervously around. I didn't see anyone taking particular notice of us, though anyone might be watching surreptitiously; the tavern was seething with alcohol-soaked humanity, and the babble of voices was loud enough to drown out all but the closest conversation.

"Anyone's, Sassenach," Jamie answered. He glanced sideways at me, and smiled. "Dinna look so scairt about it, aye? We're in no danger. Not here."

"Not yet," Innes said. He leaned forward to pour another cup of ale. "*Mac Dubh* called out to Gavin on the gallows, d'ye see? There will be those who took notice—*Mac Dubh* bein' the bittie wee fellow he is," he added dryly.

"And the farmers who came with us from Georgia will have sold their stores by now, and be takin' their ease in places like this," Jamie said, evidently absorbed in studying the pattern of his cup. "All of them are honest men—but they'll talk, Sassenach. It makes a good story, no? The folk cast away by the hurricane? And what are the chances that at least one of them kens a bit about what we carry?"

"I see," I murmured, and did. We had attracted public interest by our association with a criminal, and could no longer pass as inconspicuous travelers. If finding a buyer took some time, as was likely, we risked inviting robbery from unscrupulous persons, or scrutiny from the English authorities. Neither prospect was appealing.

Jamie lifted his cup and drank deeply, then set it down with a sigh.

"No. I think it's perhaps not wise to linger in the city. We'll see Gavin buried decently, and then we'll find a safe spot in the woods outside the town to sleep. Tomorrow we can decide whether to stay or go."

The thought of spending several more nights in the woods—with or without skunks—was not appealing. I hadn't taken my dress off in eight days, merely rinsing the outlying portions of my anatomy whenever we paused in the vicinity of a stream.

I had been looking forward to a real bed, even if flea-infested, and a chance to scrub off the grime of the last week's travel. Still, he had a point. I sighed, ruefully eyeing the hem of my sleeve, gray and grubby with wear.

The tavern door flung suddenly open at this point, distracting me from my contemplation, and four red-coated soldiers shoved their way into the crowded room. They wore full uniform, held muskets with bayonets fixed, and were obviously not in pursuit of ale or dice.

Two of the soldiers made a rapid circuit of the room, glancing under tables, while another disappeared into the kitchen beyond. The fourth remained on watch by the door, pale eyes flicking over the crowd. His gaze lighted on our table, and rested on us for a moment, full of speculation, but then passed on, restlessly seeking.

Jamie was outwardly tranquil, sipping his ale in apparent obliviousness, but I saw the hand in his lap clench slowly into a fist. Duncan, less able to control his feelings, bent his head to hide his expression. Neither man would ever feel at ease in the presence of a red coat, and for good reason.

No one else appeared much perturbed by the soldiers' presence. The little knot of singers in the chimney corner went on with an interminable version of "Fill Every Glass," and a loud argument broke out between the barmaid and a pair of apprentices.

The soldier returned from the kitchen, having evidently found nothing. Stepping rudely through a dice game on the hearth, he rejoined his fellows by the door. As the soldiers shoved their way out of the tavern, Fergus's slight figure squeezed in, pressing against the doorjamb to avoid swinging elbows and musket butts.

I saw one soldier's eyes catch the glint of metal and fasten with interest on the hook Fergus wore in replacement of his missing left hand. He glanced sharply at Fergus, but then shouldered his musket and hurried after his companions.

Fergus shoved through the crowd and plopped down on the bench beside Ian. He looked hot and irritated.

"Blood-sucking *salaud,*" he said, without preamble.

Jamie's brows went up.

"The priest," Fergus elaborated. He took the mug Ian pushed in his direction and drained it, lean throat glugging until the cup was empty. He lowered it, exhaled heavily, and sat blinking, looking noticeably happier. He sighed and wiped his mouth.

"He wants ten shillings to bury the man in the churchyard," he said. "An Anglican church, of course; there are no Catholic churches here. Wretched usurer! He knows we have no choice about it. The body will scarcely keep till sunset, as it is." He ran a finger inside his stock, pulling the sweat-wilted cotton away from his neck, then banged his fist several times on the table to attract the attention of the serving maid, who was being run off her feet by the press of patrons.

"I told the super-fatted son of a pig that you would decide whether to pay or not. We could just bury him in the wood, after all. Though we should have to purchase a shovel," he added, frowning. "These grasping townsfolk know we are strangers; they'll take our last coin if they can."

Last coin was perilously close to the truth. I had enough to pay for a decent meal here and to buy food for the journey north; perhaps enough to pay for a couple of nights' lodging. That was all. I saw Jamie's eyes flick round the room, assessing the possibilities of picking up a little money at hazard or loo.

Soldiers and sailors were the best prospects for gambling, but there were few of either in the taproom—likely most of the garrison was still searching the town for the fugitive. In one corner, a small group of men was being loudly convivial over several pitchers of brandywine; two of them were singing, or trying to, their attempts causing great hilarity among their comrades. Jamie gave an almost imperceptible nod at sight of them, and turned back to Fergus.

"What have ye done with Gavin for the time being?" Jamie asked. Fergus hunched one shoulder.

"Put him in the wagon. I traded the clothes he was wearing to a ragwoman for a shroud, and she agreed to wash the body as part of the bargain." He gave Jamie a faint smile. "Don't worry, milord; he's seemly. For now," he added, lifting the fresh mug of ale to his lips.

"Poor Gavin." Duncan Innes lifted his own mug in a half salute to his fallen comrade.

"Slàinte," Jamie replied, and lifted his own mug in reply. He set it down and sighed.

"He wouldna like being buried in the wood," he said.

"Why not?" I asked, curious. "I shouldn't think it would matter to him one way or the other."

"Oh, no, we couldna do that, Mrs. Claire." Duncan was shaking his head emphatically. Duncan was normally a most reserved man, and I was surprised at so much apparent feeling.

"He was afraid of the dark," Jamie said softly. I turned to stare at him, and he gave me a lopsided smile. "I lived wi' Gavin Hayes nearly as long as I've lived with you, Sassenach—and in much closer quarters. I kent him well."

"Aye, he was afraid of being alone in the dark," Duncan chimed in. "He was most mortally scairt of *tannagach*—of spirits, aye?"

His long, mournful face bore an inward look, and I knew he was seeing in memory the prison cell that he and Jamie had shared with

Gavin Hayes—and with forty other men—for three long years. "D'ye recall, *Mac Dubh,* how he told us one night of the *tannasq* he met?"

"I do, Duncan, and could wish I did not." Jamie shuddered despite the heat. "I kept awake myself half the night after he told us that one."

"What was it, Uncle?" Ian was leaning over his cup of ale, round-eyed. His cheeks were flushed and streaming, and his stock crumpled with sweat.

Jamie rubbed a hand across his mouth, thinking.

"Ah. Well, it was a time in the late, cold autumn in the Highlands, just when the season turns, and the feel of the air tells ye the ground will be shivered wi' frost come dawn," he said. He settled himself in his seat and sat back, alecup in hand. He smiled wryly, plucking at his own throat. "Not like now, aye?

"Well, Gavin's son brought back the kine that night, but there was one beast missing—the lad had hunted up the hills and down the corries, but couldna find it anywhere. So Gavin set the lad to milk the two others, and set out himself to look for the lost cow."

He rolled the pewter cup slowly between his hands, staring down into the dark ale as though seeing in it the bulk of the night-black Scottish peaks and the mist that floats in the autumn glens.

"He went some distance, and the cot behind him disappeared. When he looked back, he couldna see the light from the window anymore, and there was no sound but the keening of the wind. It was cold, but he went on, tramping through the mud and the heather, hearing the crackle of ice under his boots.

"He saw a small grove through the mist, and thinking the cow might have taken shelter beneath the trees, he went toward it. He said the trees were birches, standing there all leafless, but with their branches grown together so he must bend his head to squeeze beneath the boughs.

"He came into the grove and saw it was not a grove at all, but a circle of trees. There were great tall trees, spaced verra evenly, all around him, and smaller ones, saplings, grown up between to make a wall of branches. And in the center of the circle stood a cairn."

Hot as it was in the tavern, I felt as though a sliver of ice had slid melting down my spine. I had seen ancient cairns in the Highlands myself, and found them eerie enough in the broad light of day.

Jamie took a sip of ale, and wiped away a trickle of sweat that ran down his temple.

"He felt quite queer, did Gavin. For he kent the place—everyone did, and kept well away from it. It was a strange place. And it seemed even worse in the dark and the cold, from what it did in the light of day. It was an auld cairn, the kind laid wi' slabs of rock, all heaped round with stones, and he could see before him the black opening of the tomb.

"He knew it was a place no man should come, and he without a powerful charm. Gavin had naught but a wooden cross about his neck. So he crossed himself with it and turned to go."

Jamie paused to sip his ale.

"But as Gavin went from the grove," he said softly, "he heard footsteps behind him."

I saw the Adam's apple bob in Ian's throat as he swallowed. He reached mechanically for his own cup, eyes fixed on his uncle.

"He didna turn to see," Jamie went on, "but kept walking. And the steps kept pace wi' him, step by step, always following. And he came through the peat where the water seeps up, and it was crusted with ice, the weather bein' so cold. He could hear the peat crackle under his feet, and behind him the crack! crack! of breaking ice.

"He walked and he walked, through the cold, dark night, watching ahead for the light of his own window, where his wife had set the candle. But the light never showed, and he began to fear he had lost his way among the heather and the dark hills. And all the time, the steps kept pace with him, loud in his ears.

"At last he could bear it no more, and seizing hold of the crucifix he wore round his neck, he swung about wi' a great cry to face whatever followed."

"What did he see?" Ian's pupils were dilated, dark with drink and wonder. Jamie glanced at the boy, and then at Duncan, nodding at him to take up the story.

"He said it was a figure like a man, but with no body," Duncan said quietly. "All white, like as it might have been made of the mist. But wi' great holes where its eyes should be, and empty black, fit to draw the soul from his body with dread."

"But Gavin held up his cross before his face, and he prayed aloud to the Blessed Virgin." Jamie took up the story, leaning forward intently, the dim firelight outlining his profile in gold. "And the thing came no nearer, but stayed there, watching him.

"And so he began to walk backward, not daring to face round again. He walked backward, stumbling and slipping, fearing every moment as he might tumble into a burn or down a cliff and break his neck, but fearing worse to turn his back on the cold thing.

"He couldna tell how long he'd walked, only that his legs were trembling wi' weariness, when at last he caught a glimpse of light through the mist, and there was his own cottage, wi' the candle in the window. He cried out in joy, and turned to his door, but the cold thing was quick, and slippit past him, to stand betwixt him and the door.

"His wife had been watching out for him, and when she heard him cry out, she came at once to the door. Gavin shouted to her not to come out, but for God's sake to fetch a charm to drive away the *tannasq*. Quick as thought, she snatched the pot from beneath her bed, and a twig of myrtle bound wi' red thread and black, that she'd made to bless the cows. She dashed the water against the doorposts, and the cold thing leapt upward, astride the lintel. Gavin rushed in beneath and barred the door, and stayed inside in his wife's arms until the dawn. They let the candle burn all the night, and Gavin Hayes never again left his house past sunset—until he went to fight for Prince *Tearlach*."

Even Duncan, who knew the tale, sighed as Jamie finished speaking. Ian crossed himself, then looked about self-consciously, but no one seemed to have noticed.

"So, now Gavin has gone into the dark," Jamie said softly. "But we willna let him lie in unconsecrated ground."

"Did they find the cow?" Fergus asked, with his usual practicality. Jamie quirked one eyebrow at Duncan, who answered.

"Oh, aye, they did. The next morning they found the poor beast, wi' her hooves all clogged wi' mud and stones, staring mad and lathered about the muzzle, and her sides heavin' fit to burst." He glanced from me to Ian and back to Fergus. "Gavin did say," he said precisely, "that she looked as though she'd been ridden to Hell and back."

"Jesus." Ian took a deep gulp of his ale, and I did the same. In the corner, the drinking society was making attempts on a round of "Captain Thunder," breaking down each time in helpless laughter.

Ian put down his cup on the table.

"What happened to them?" he asked, his face troubled. "To Gavin's wife, and his son?"

Jamie's eyes met mine, and his hand touched my thigh. I knew, without being told, what had happened to the Hayes family. Without Jamie's own courage and intransigence, the same thing would likely have happened to me and to our daughter Brianna.

"Gavin never knew," Jamie said quietly. "He never heard aught of his wife—she will have been starved, maybe, or driven out to die of the cold. His son took the field beside him at Culloden. Whenever a man who had fought there came into our cell, Gavin would ask—'Have ye maybe seen a bold lad named Archie Hayes, about so tall?' He measured automatically, five feet from the floor, capturing Hayes' gesture. " 'A lad about fourteen,' he'd say, 'wi' a green plaidie and a small gilt brooch.' But no one ever came who had seen him for sure—either seen him fall or seen him run away safe."

Jamie took a sip of the ale, his eyes fixed on a pair of British officers who had come in and settled in the corner. It had grown dark outside, and they were plainly off duty. Their leather stocks were unfastened on account of the heat, and they wore only sidearms, glinting under their coats; nearly black in the dim light save where the firelight touched them with red.

"Sometimes he hoped the lad might have been captured and transported," he said. "Like his brother."

"Surely that would be somewhere in the records?" I said. "Did they—do they—keep lists?"

"They did," Jamie said, still watching the soldiers. A small, bitter smile touched the corner of his mouth. "It was such a list that saved me, after Culloden, when they asked my name before shooting me, so as to add it to their roll. But a man like Gavin would have no way to see the English deadlists. And if he could have found out, I think he would not." He glanced at me. "Would you choose to know for sure, and it was your child?"

I shook my head, and he gave me a faint smile and squeezed my hand. Our child was safe, after all. He picked up his cup and drained it, then beckoned to the serving maid.

The girl brought the food, skirting the table widely in order to avoid Rollo. The beast lay motionless under the table, his head protruding into the room and his great hairy tail lying heavily across my feet, but his yellow eyes were wide open, watching everything. They followed the girl intently, and she backed nervously away, keeping an eye on him until she was safely out of biting distance.

Seeing this, Jamie cast a dubious look at the so-called dog.

"Is he hungry? Must I ask for a fish for him?"

"Oh, no, Uncle," Ian reassured him. "Rollo catches his own fish."

Jamie's eyebrows shot up, but he only nodded, and with a wary glance at Rollo, took a platter of roasted oysters from the tray.

"Ah, the pity of it." Duncan Innes was quite drunk by now. He sat slumped against the wall, his armless shoulder riding higher than the other, giving him a strange, hunchbacked appearance. "That a dear man like Gavin should come to such an end!" He shook his head lugubriously, swinging it back and forth over his alecup like the clapper of a funeral bell.

"No family left to mourn him, cast alone into a savage land—hanged as a felon, and to be buried in an unconsecrated grave. Not even a proper lament to be sung for him!" He picked up the cup, and with some difficulty, found his mouth with it. He drank deep and set it down with a muffled clang.

"Well, he *shall* have a *caithris*!" He glared belligerently from Jamie to Fergus to Ian. "Why not?"

Jamie wasn't drunk, but he wasn't completely sober either. He grinned at Duncan and lifted his own cup in salute.

"Why not, indeed?" he said. "Only it will have to be you singin' it, Duncan. None of the rest knew Gavin, and I'm no singer. I'll shout along wi' ye, though."

Duncan nodded magisterially, bloodshot eyes surveying us. Without warning, he flung back his head and emitted a terrible howl. I jumped in my seat, spilling half a cup of ale into my lap. Ian and Fergus, who had evidently heard Gaelic laments before, didn't turn a hair.

All over the room, benches were shoved back, as men leapt to their feet in alarm, reaching for their pistols. The barmaid leaned out of the serving hatch, eyes big. Rollo came awake with an explosive *"Woof!"* and glared round wildly, teeth bared.

"Tha sinn cruinn a chaoidh ar caraid, Gabhainn Hayes," Duncan thundered, in a ragged baritone. I had just about enough Gaelic to translate this as "We are met to weep and cry out to heaven for the loss of our friend, Gavin Hayes!"

"Èisd ris!" Jamie chimed in.

"Rugadh e do Sheumas Immanuel Hayes agus Louisa N'ic a Liallainn an am baile Chill-Mhartainn, ann an sgire Dhun Domhnuill, anns a bhliadhnaseachd ceud deug agus a haon!" He was born of Seaumais Emmanuel Hayes and of Louisa Maclellan, in the village of Kilmartin in the parish of Dodanil, in the year of our Lord seventeen hundred and one!

"Èisd ris!" This time Fergus and Ian joined in on the chorus, which I translated roughly as "Hear him!"

Rollo appeared not to care for either verse or refrain; his ears lay flat against his skull, and his yellow eyes narrowed to slits. Ian scratched his head in reassurance, and he lay down again, muttering wolf curses under his breath.

The audience, having caught on to it that no actual violence threatened, and no doubt bored with the inferior vocal efforts of the drinking society in the corner, settled down to enjoy the show. By the time Duncan had worked his way into an accounting of the names of the sheep Gavin Hayes had owned before leaving his croft to follow his laird to Culloden, many of those at the surrounding tables were joining enthusiastically in the chorus, shouting *"Èisd ris!"* and banging their mugs on the tables, in perfect ignorance of what was being said, and a good thing too.

Duncan, drunker than ever, fixed the soldiers at the next table with a baleful glare, sweat pouring down his face.

"A Shasunnaich na galladh's olc a thig e dhuibh fanaid air bàs gasgaich. Gun toireadh an diabhul fhein leis anns a bhàs sibh, direach do Fhirinn!!" Wicked Sassenach dogs, eaters of dead flesh! Ill does it become you to laugh and rejoice at the death of a gallant man! May the devil himself seize upon you in the hour of your death and take you straight to hell!

Ian blanched slightly at this, and Jamie cast Duncan a narrow look, but they stoutly shouted *"Èisd ris!"* along with the rest of the crowd.

Fergus, seized by inspiration, got up and passed his hat among the crowd, who, carried away by ale and excitement, happily flung coppers into it for the privilege of joining in their own denunciation.

I had as good a head for drink as most men, but a much smaller bladder. Head spinning from the noise and fumes as much as from alcohol, I got up and edged my way out from behind the table, through the mob, and into the fresh air of the early evening.

It was still hot and sultry, though the sun was long since down. Still, there was a lot more air out here, and a lot fewer people sharing it.

Having relieved the internal pressure, I sat down on the tavern's chopping block with my pewter mug, breathing deeply. The night was clear, with a bright half-moon peeping silver over the harbor's edge. Our wagon stood nearby, no more than its outline visible in the light from the tavern windows. Presumably, Gavin Hayes' decently shrouded body lay within. I trusted he had enjoyed his *caithris*.

Inside, Duncan's chanting had come to an end. A clear tenor voice, wobbly with drink, but sweet nonetheless, was singing a familiar tune, audible over the babble of talk.

"To Anacreon in heav'n, where he sat in full glee,
A few sons of harmony sent a petition,
That he their inspirer and patron would be!
When this answer arrived from the jolly old Grecian:
'Voice, fiddle, and flute,
No longer be mute!
I'll lend you my name and inspire you to boot.' "

The singer's voice cracked painfully on "voice, fiddle, and flute," but he sang stoutly on, despite the laughter from his audience. I smiled wryly to myself as he hit the final couplet,

" 'And, besides, I'll instruct you like me to entwine,
The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus's vine!' "

I lifted my cup in salute to the wheeled coffin, softly echoing the melody of the singer's last lines.

"Oh, say, does that star-spangled banner yet wave
O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

I drained my cup and sat still, waiting for the men to come out.

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2

IN WHICH WE MEET A GHOST

Ten, eleven, twelve … and two, and six … one pound, eight shillings, sixpence, two farthings!” Fergus dropped the last coin ceremoniously into the cloth pocket, pulled tight the drawstrings, and handed it to Jamie. “And three buttons,” he added, “but I have kept those,” and patted the side of his coat.

“Ye’ve settled with the landlord for our meal?” Jamie asked me, weighing the little bag.

“Yes,” I assured him. “I have four shillings and sixpence left, plus what Fergus collected.”

Fergus smiled modestly, square white teeth gleaming in the faint light from the tavern’s window.

“We have the necessary money for the burial, then,” he said. “Will we take Monsieur Hayes to the priest now, or wait till morning?”

Jamie frowned at the wagon, standing silent at the edge of the inn yard.

“I shouldna think the priest will be awake at this hour,” he said, with a glance at the rising moon. “Still—”

“I’d just as soon not take him with us,” I said. “Not to be rude,” I added apologetically to the wagon. “But if we’re going to sleep out in the woods, the … er … scent …” It wasn’t overpowering, but once away from the smoky reek of the tavern, a distinct odor was noticeable in the vicinity of the wagon. It hadn’t been a gentle death, and it *had* been a hot day.

“Auntie Claire is right,” Ian said, brushing his knuckles inconspicuously under his nose. “We dinna want to be attracting wild animals.”

“We canna be leaving Gavin here, surely!” Duncan protested, scandalized at the thought. “What, leave him lying on the step o’ the inn in his shroud, like a foundling wrapped in swaddling clothes?” He swayed alarmingly, his alcoholic intake affecting his always precarious balance.

I saw Jamie’s wide mouth twitch with amusement, the moon shining white on the knife-edged bridge of his nose.

“No,” he said. “We willna be leaving him here.” He tossed the little bag from hand to hand with a faint chinking sound, then, making his decision, thrust it into his coat.

“We’ll bury him ourselves,” he said. “Fergus, will ye be stepping into the stable yonder and see can ye buy a spade verra cheap?”

The short journey to the church through the quiet streets of Charleston was somewhat less dignified than the usual funeral cortege, marked as it was by Duncan’s insistence on repeating the more interesting portions of his lament as a processional.

Jamie drove slowly, shouting occasional encouragement to the horses; Duncan staggered beside the team, chanting hoarsely and clutching one animal by its headstall, while Ian held the other to prevent bolting. Fergus and I brought up the rear in staid respectability, Fergus holding his newly purchased shovel at port-arms, and muttering dire predictions as to the likelihood of us all spending the night in gaol for disturbing the peace of Charleston.

As it was, the church stood by itself in a quiet street, some distance from the nearest house. This was all to the good, in terms of avoiding notice, but it did mean that the churchyard was dauntingly dark, with no glow of torch or candle to pierce the blackness.

Great magnolia trees overhung the gate, leathery leaves drooping in the heat, and a border of pines, meant to provide shade and respite in the day, served at night to block all traces of moon and starlight, leaving the churchyard itself black as a … well, as a crypt.

Walking through the air felt like pushing aside curtains of black velvet, perfumed with an incense of turpentine from the sun-heated pines; endless layers of soft, pungent smothering. Nothing could have been farther from the cold purity of the Highlands than this stifling southern atmosphere. Still, faint patches of mist hung under the dark brick walls, and I could have wished not to recall Jamie's story of the *tannasq* quite so vividly.

"We'll find a place. Do you stay and hold the horses, Duncan." Jamie slid down from the wagon's seat and took me by the arm.

"We'll find a nice wee spot by the wall, perhaps," he said, guiding me toward the gate. "Ian and I will dig while you hold the light, and Fergus can stand guard."

"What about Duncan?" I asked, with a backward glance. "Will he be all right?" The Scotsman was invisible, his tall, lanky form having faded into the larger blot comprising horses and wagon, but he was still clearly audible.

"He'll be chief mourner," Jamie said, with a hint of a smile in his voice. "Mind your head, Sassenach." I ducked automatically beneath a low magnolia branch; I didn't know whether Jamie could actually see in total darkness, or merely felt things by instinct, but I had never seen him stumble, no matter how dark the surroundings.

"Don't you think someone's going to notice a fresh grave?" It was not completely black in the churchyard, after all; once out from under the magnolias, I could make out the dim forms of gravestones, looking insubstantial but sinister in the dark, a faint mist rising from the thick grass about their feet.

The soles of my own feet tingled as we picked a ginger way through the stones. I seemed to feel silent waves of reproach at this unseemly intrusion wafting up from below. I barked my shin on a tombstone and bit my lip, stifling an urge to apologize to its owner.

"I expect they might." Jamie let go of my arm to rummage in his coat. "But if the priest wanted money to bury Gavin, I shouldna think he'd trouble to dig him up again for nothing, aye?"

Young Ian materialized out of the darkness at my elbow, startling me.

“There’s open space by the north wall, Uncle Jamie,” he said, speaking softly in spite of the obvious fact that there was no one to hear. He paused, and drew slightly closer to me.

“It’s verra dark in here, no?” The boy sounded uneasy. He had had nearly as much to drink as Jamie or Fergus, but while the alcohol had imbued the older men with grim humor, it had clearly had a more depressing effect on Ian’s spirits.

“It is, aye. I’ve the bit of a candle I took from the tavern, though; wait a bit.” Faint rustlings announced Jamie’s search for flint and tinderbox.

The encompassing dark made me feel disembodied, like a ghost myself. I looked upward and saw stars, so faintly visible through the thick air that they shed no light upon the ground, but only gave a feeling of immense distance and infinite remoteness.

“It’s like the vigil of Easter.” Jamie’s voice came softly, accompanied by the small scratching sounds of a striking flint. “I saw the service once, at Notre Dame in Paris. Watch yourself, Ian, there’s a stone just there!” A thud and a stifled grunt announced that Ian had belatedly discovered the stone for himself.

“The church was all dark,” Jamie continued, “but the folk coming for the service would buy small tapers from the crones at the doors. It was something like this”—I felt, rather than saw, his motion at the sky above—“a great space above, all ringing wi’ the silence, and folk packed in on every side.” Hot as it was, I gave an involuntary shiver at these words, which conjured up a vision of the dead around us, crowding silently side by side, in anticipation of an imminent resurrection.

“And then, just when I thought I couldna bear the silence and the crowd, there came the priest’s voice from the door. *‘Lumen Christi!’* he called out, and the acolytes lit the great candle that he carried. Then from it they took the flame to their own tapers, and scampered up and down the aisles, passing the fire to the candles o’ the faithful.”

I could see his hands, lit faintly by the tiny sparks from his flint.

“Then the church came alive wi’ a thousand small flames, but it was that first candle that broke the dark.”

The scratching sounds ceased, and he took away the cupped hand that had shielded the newborn flame. The flame strengthened and lit his face from below, gilding the planes of high cheekbones and forehead, and shadowing the deep-set orbits of his eyes.

He lifted the candle, surveying the looming grave markers, eerie as a circle of standing stones.

"Lumen Christi," he said softly, inclining his head toward a granite pillar surmounted with a cross, *"et reguiescat in pace, amice."* The half-mocking note had left his voice; he spoke with complete seriousness, and I felt at once oddly comforted, as though some watchful presence had withdrawn.

He smiled at me then, and handed me the candle.

"See can ye find a bit of wood for a torch, Sassenach," he said. "Ian and I will take it in turns to dig."

I was no longer nervous, but still felt like a grave robber, standing under a pine tree with my torch, watching Young Ian and Jamie take their turns in the deepening pit, their naked backs gleaming with sweat in the torchlight.

"Medical students used to pay men to steal fresh bodies from churchyards," I said, handing my soiled kerchief to Jamie as he hauled himself out of the hole, grunting with effort. "That was the only way they could practice dissection."

"Did they?" Jamie said. He wiped the sweat from his face and gave me a quick, wry glance. "Or do they?"

Luckily, it was too dark for Ian to notice my flush, despite the torchlight. It wasn't the first slip I had made, nor was it likely to be the last, but most such inadvertencies resulted in nothing more than a quizzical glance, were they noticed at all. The truth simply was not a possibility that would occur to anyone.

"I imagine they do it now," I admitted. I shivered slightly at the thought of confronting a freshly exhumed and unpreserved body, still smeared with the dirt of its desecrated grave. Cadavers embalmed and laid on a stainless steel surface were not particularly pleasant either, but the formality of their presentation served to keep the corruptive realities of death at some small distance.

I exhaled strongly through my nose, trying to rid myself of odors, imagined and remembered. When I breathed in, my nostrils were filled with the smell of damp earth and hot pitch from my pine torch, and the fainter, cooler echo of live scent from the pines overhead.

"They take paupers and criminals from the prisons, too." Young Ian, who had evidently heard the exchange, if not understood it, took the opportunity to stop for a moment, wiping his brow as he leaned on the shovel.

"Da told me about one time he was arrested, when they took him to Edinburgh, and kept him in the Tolbooth. He was in a cell wi' three other men, and one of them a fellow with the consumption, who coughed something dreadful, keeping the rest awake all night and all day. Then one night the coughing stopped, and they kent he was dead. But Da said they were so tired, they couldna do more than say a Pater Noster for his soul, and fall asleep."

The boy paused and rubbed an itching nose.

"Da said he woke quite sudden wi' someone clutching his legs and another someone takin' him by the arms, liftin' him up. He kicked and cried out, and the one who had his arms screeched and dropped him, so that he cracked his head on the stones. He sat up rubbin' his pate and found himself staring at a doctor from the hospital and two fellows he'd brought along to carry awa' the corpse to the dissecting room."

Ian grinned broadly at the recollection, wiping his sweat-soaked hair out of his face.

"Da said he wasna sure who was most horrified, him or the fellows who'd got the wrong body. He did say as the doctor seemed regretful, though—said Da would have made a more interesting specimen, what wi' his leg stump and all."

Jamie laughed, stretching his arms to ease his shoulders. With face and torso streaked with red dirt, and his hair bound back with a kerchief round his forehead, he looked disreputable as any grave robber.

“Aye, I mind that story,” he said. “Ian did say after that as all doctors were ghouls, and wouldna have a thing to do with them.” He grinned at me; I had been a doctor—a surgeon—in my own time, but here I passed as nothing more than a wisewoman, skilled in the use of herbs.

“Fortunately, I’m no afraid of wee ghoulies, myself,” he said, and leaned down to kiss me briefly. His lips were warm, tasting of ale. I could see droplets of sweat caught in the curly hairs of his chest, and his nipples, dark buds in the dim light. A tremor that had nothing to do either with cold or with the eeriness of our surroundings ran down my spine. He saw it and his eyes met mine. He took a deep breath, and all at once I was conscious of the close fit of my bodice, and the weight of my breasts in the sweat-soaked fabric.

Jamie shifted himself slightly, plucking to ease the fit of his breeches.

“Damn,” he said softly. He lowered his eyes and turned away, mouth barely touched by a rueful smile.

I hadn’t expected it, but I recognized it, all right. A sudden surge of lust was a common, if peculiar, response to the presence of death. Soldiers feel it in the lull after battle; so do healers who deal in blood and struggle. Perhaps Ian had been more right than I thought about the ghoulishness of doctors.

Jamie’s hand touched my back and I started, showering sparks from the blazing torch. He took it from me and nodded toward a nearby gravestone.

“Sit down, Sassenach,” he said. “Ye shouldna be standing so long.” I had cracked the tibia of my left leg in the shipwreck, and while it had healed quickly, the leg still ached sometimes.

“I’m all right.” Still, I moved toward the stone, brushing against him as I passed. He radiated heat, but his naked flesh was cool to the touch, the sweat evaporating on his skin. I could smell him.

I glanced at him, and saw goose bumps rise on the fair flesh where I’d touched him. I swallowed, fighting back a sudden vision of tumbling in the dark, to a fierce blind coupling amid crushed grass and raw earth.

His hand lingered on my elbow as he helped me to a seat on the stone. Rollo was lying by its side, drops of saliva gleaming in the torchlight as he panted. The slanted yellow eyes narrowed at me.

"Don't even think about it," I said, narrowing my own eyes back at him. "Bite me, and I'll cram my shoe down your throat so far you'll choke."

"Wuff!" Rollo said, quite softly. He laid his muzzle on his paws, but the hairy ears were pricked, turned to catch the slightest sound.

The spade chunked softly into the earth at Ian's feet, and he straightened up, slicking sweat off his face with a palm swipe that left black smears along his jaw. He blew out a deep breath and glanced up at Jamie, miming exhaustion, tongue lolling from the corner of his mouth.

"Aye, I expect it's deep enough." Jamie answered the wordless plea with a nod. "I'll fetch Gavin along, then."

Fergus frowned uneasily, his features sharp in the torchlight.

"Will you not need help to carry the corpse?" His reluctance was evident; still, he had offered. Jamie gave him a faint, wry smile.

"I'll manage well enough," he said. "Gavin was a wee man. Still, ye might bring the torch to see by."

"I'll come too, Uncle!" Young Ian scrambled hastily out of the pit, skinny shoulders gleaming with sweat. "Just in case you need help," he added breathlessly.

"Afraid to be left in the dark?" Fergus asked sarcastically. I thought that the surroundings must be making him uneasy; though he occasionally teased Ian, whom he regarded as a younger brother, he was seldom cruel about it.

"Aye, I am," Ian said simply. "Aren't you?"

Fergus opened his mouth, brows arched skyward, then shut it again and turned without a word toward the black opening of the lych-gate, whence Jamie had disappeared.

"D'ye not think this is a terrible place, Auntie?" Ian murmured uneasily at my elbow, sticking close as we made our way through the looming stones, following the flicker of Fergus's torch. "I keep thinking of that story Uncle Jamie told. And thinking now Gavin's dead, maybe the cold thing … I mean, do you think would it maybe … come for him?” There was an audible swallow punctuating this question, and I felt an icy finger touch me, just at the base of my spine.

“No,” I said, a little too loudly. I grabbed Ian’s arm, less for support than for the reassurance of his solidity. “Certainly not.”

His skin was clammy with evaporating sweat, but the skinny muscularity of the arm under my hand was comforting. His half-visible presence reminded me faintly of Jamie; he was nearly as tall as his uncle, and very nearly as strong, though still lean and gangling with adolescence.

We emerged with gratitude into the little pool of light thrown by Fergus’s torch. The flickering light shone through the wagon wheels, throwing shadows that lay like spiderwebs in the dust. It was as hot in the road as it was in the churchyard, but the air seemed somehow freer, easier to breathe, out from under the suffocating trees.

Rather to my surprise, Duncan was still awake, perched drooping on the wagon’s seat like a sleepy owl, shoulders hunched about his ears. He was crooning under his breath, but stopped when he saw us. The long wait seemed to have sobered him a bit; he got down from the seat steadily enough and came round to the rear of the wagon to help Jamie.

I smothered a yawn. I would be glad to be done with this melancholy duty and on our way to rest, even if the only bed to look forward to was one of piled leaves.

“Ifrinn an Diabhuil! A Dhia, thoir cobhair!”

“Sacrée Vierge!”

My head snapped up. Everyone was shouting, and the horses, startled, were neighing and jerking frantically against their hobbles, making the wagon hop and lurch like a drunken beetle.

“Wuff!” Rollo said next to me.

“Jesus!” said Ian, goggling at the wagon. “Jesus *Christ*!”

I swung in the direction he was looking, and screamed. A pale figure loomed out of the wagon bed, swaying with the wagon’s jerking. I had no time to see more before all hell broke loose.

Rollo bunched his hindquarters and launched himself through the dark with a roar, to the accompaniment of shouts from Jamie and

Ian, and a terrible scream from the ghost. Behind me, I could hear the sound of French cursing as Fergus ran back into the churchyard, stumbling and crashing over tombstones in the dark.

Jamie had dropped the torch; it flickered and hissed on the dusty road, threatening to go out. I fell to my knees and grabbed it, blowing on it, desperate to keep it alight.

The chorus of shouts and growling grew to a crescendo, and I rose up, torch in hand, to find Ian struggling with Rollo, trying to keep him away from the dim figures wrestling together in a cloud of dust.

"Arrêtes espèce de cochon!" Fergus galloped out of the dark, brandishing the spade he had gone to fetch. Finding his injunction disregarded, he stepped forward and brought it down one-handed on the intruder's head with a dull *clong*! Then he swung toward Ian and Rollo.

"You be quiet, too!" Fergus said to the dog, threatening him with the shovel. "Shut up this minute, foul beast, or I brain you!"

Rollo snarled, with a show of impressive teeth that I interpreted roughly to mean "You and who else?" but was prevented from mayhem by Ian, who wrapped his arm about the dog's throat and choked off any further remarks.

"Where did *he* come from?" Ian asked in amazement. He craned his neck, trying to get a look at the fallen figure without letting go of Rollo.

"From hell," Fergus said briefly. "And I invite him to go back there at once." He was trembling with shock and exertion; the light gleamed dully from his hook as he brushed a thick lock of black hair out of his eyes.

"Not from hell; from the gallows. Do ye not know him?"

Jamie rose slowly to his feet, dusting his breeches. He was breathing heavily, and smeared with dirt, but seemed unhurt. He picked up his fallen kerchief and glanced about, wiping his face. "Where's Duncan?"

"Here, *Mac Dubh,*" said a gruff voice from the front of the wagon. "The beasts werena likin' Gavin much to start with, and they're proper upset to think he was a-resurrectin'. Not," he added fairly, "but what I was a wee bit startled myself." He eyed the figure on the ground with disfavor, and patted one skittish horse firmly on the neck. “Ah, it’s no but a silly bugger, *luaidh,* hush your noise now, aye?”

I had handed Ian the torch and knelt to inspect the damage to our visitor. This seemed to be slight; the man was already stirring. Jamie was right; it was the man who had escaped hanging earlier in the day. He was young, about thirty, muscular and powerfully built, his fair hair matted with sweat and stiff with filth. He reeked of prison, and the musky-sharp smell of prolonged fear. Little wonder.

I got a hand under his arm and helped him to sit up. He grunted and put his hand to his head, squinting in the torchlight.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“Thankin’ ye kindly, ma’am, I will have been better.” He had a faint Irish accent and a soft, deep voice.

Rollo, upper lip lifted just enough to show a menacing eyetooth, shoved his nose into the visitor’s armpit, sniffed, then jerked back his head and sneezed explosively. A small tremor of laughter ran round the circle, and the tension relaxed momentarily.

“How long have ye been in the wagon?” Duncan demanded.

“Since midafternoon.” The man rose awkwardly onto his knees, swaying a bit from the effects of the blow. He touched his head again and winced. “Oh, Jaysus! I crawled in there just after the Frenchie loaded up poor old Gavin.”

“Where were you before that?” Ian asked.

“Hidin’ under the gallows cart. It was the only place I thought they wouldn’t be looking.” He rose laboriously to his feet, closed his eyes to get his balance, then opened them. They were a pale green in the torchlight, the color of shallow seas. I saw them flick from face to face, then settle on Jamie. The man bowed, careful of his head.

“Stephen Bonnet. Your servant, sir.” He made no move to extend a hand in greeting, nor did Jamie.

“Mr. Bonnet.” Jamie nodded back, face carefully blank. I didn’t know quite how he contrived to look commanding, wearing nothing but a pair of damp and dirt-stained breeks, but he managed it. He looked the visitor over, taking in every detail of his appearance.

Bonnet was what country people called “well set up,” with a tall, powerful frame and a barrel chest, his features heavy-boned but coarsely handsome. A few inches shorter than Jamie, he stood easy, balanced on the balls of his feet, fists half closed in readiness.

No stranger to a fight, judging by the slight crookedness of his nose and a small scar by the corner of his mouth. The small imperfections did nothing to mar the overall impression of animal magnetism; he was the sort of man who attracted women easily. Some women, I amended, as he cast a speculative glance at me.

“For what crime were ye condemned, Mr. Bonnet?” Jamie asked. He himself stood easy, but with a look of watchfulness that reminded me forcibly of Bonnet himself. It was the ears-back look male dogs give each other before deciding whether to fight.

“Smuggling,” Bonnet said.

Jamie didn’t reply, but tilted his head slightly. One brow rose in inquiry.

“And piracy.” A muscle twitched near Bonnet’s mouth; a poor attempt at a smile, or an involuntary quiver of fear?

“And will ye have killed anyone in the commission of your crimes, Mr. Bonnet?” Jamie’s face was blank, save for the watchful eyes. *Think twice,* his eyes said plainly. *Or maybe three times*.

“None that were not tryin’ to kill me first,” Bonnet replied. The words were easy, the tone almost flippant, but belied by the hand that closed tight into a fist by his side.

It dawned on me that Bonnet must feel he was facing judge and jury, as surely as he had faced them once before. He had no way of knowing that we were nearly as reluctant to go near the garrison soldiers as he was.

Jamie looked at Bonnet for a long moment, peering closely at him in the flickering torchlight, then nodded and took a half step back.

“Go, then,” he said quietly. “We will not hinder ye.”

Bonnet took an audible breath; I could see the big frame relax, shoulders slumping under the cheap linen shirt.

“Thank you,” he said. He wiped a hand across his face, and took another deep breath. The green eyes darted from me to Fergus to Duncan. “But will ye help me, maybe?”

Duncan, who had relaxed at Jamie's words, gave a grunt of surprise.

"Help you? A thief?"

Bonnet's head swiveled in Duncan's direction. The iron collar was a dark line about his neck, giving the eerie impression that his severed head floated several inches above his shoulders.

"Help me," he repeated. "There will be soldiers on the roads tonight—huntin' me." He gestured toward the wagon. "You could take me safely past them—if ye will." He turned back to Jamie, and straightened his back, shoulders stiff. "I am begging for your help, sir, in the name of Gavin Hayes, who was my friend as well as yours—and a thief, as I am."

The men studied him in silence for a moment, digesting this. Fergus glanced inquiringly at Jamie; the decision was his.

But Jamie, after a long, considering look at Bonnet, turned to Duncan.

"What say ye, Duncan?" Duncan gave Bonnet the same kind of look that Jamie himself had used, and finally nodded.

"For Gavin's sake," he said, and turned away toward the lych-gate.

"All right, then," Jamie said. He sighed and pushed a loose lock of hair behind his ear.

"Help us to bury Gavin," he said to our new guest, "and then we'll go."

An hour later, Gavin's grave was a blank rectangle of fresh-turned earth, stark among the gray hues of the surrounding grass.

"He must have his name to mark him by," Jamie said. Painstakingly, he scratched the letters of Gavin's name and his dates upon a piece of smooth beach-stone, using the point of his knife. I rubbed soot from the torch into the incised letters, making a crude but readable grave marker, and Ian set this solidly into a small cairn of gathered pebbles. Atop the tiny monument, Jamie gently set the stub of candle that he had taken from the tavern.

Everyone stood awkwardly about the grave for a moment, not knowing how to take farewell. Jamie and Duncan stood close together, looking down. They would have taken final leave of many such comrades since Culloden, if often with less ceremony.

Finally Jamie nodded to Fergus, who took a dry pine twig, and lighting it from my torch, bent and touched it to the candle's wick.

"Requiem aeternam dona ei, et lux perpetua luceat ei.…" Jamie said quietly.

"Eternal rest grant unto him, O God—and let perpetual light shine upon him." Young Ian echoed it softly, his face solemn in the torchlight.

Without a word, we turned and left the churchyard. Behind us, the candle burned without a flicker in the still, heavy air, like the sanctuary lamp in an empty church.

* * *

The moon was high in the sky by the time we reached the military checkpoint outside the city walls. It was only a half-moon, but shed enough light for us to see the trampled dirt track of the wagon road that ran before us, wide enough for two wagons to travel abreast.

We had encountered several such points on the road between Savannah and Charleston, mostly manned by bored soldiers who waved us through without bothering to check the passes we had obtained in Georgia. The checkpoints were mostly concerned with the interception of smuggled goods, and with the capture of the odd bondservant or slave, escaped from his master.

Even filthy and unkempt, we passed notice for the most part; few travelers were in better case. Fergus and Duncan could not be indentured men, maimed as they were, and Jamie's presence transcended his clothes; shabby coat or not, no man would take him for a servant.

Tonight was different, though. There were eight soldiers at the checkpoint, not the usual two, and all were armed and alert. Musket barrels flashed in the moonlight as the shout of "Halt! Your name and your business!” came from the dark. A lantern was hoisted up six inches from my face, blinding me for a moment.

“James Fraser, bound for Wilmington, with my family and servants.” Jamie’s voice was calm, and his hands were steady as he handed me the reins before reaching for the passes in his coat.

I kept my head down, trying to look tired and indifferent. I was tired, all right—I could have lain down in the road and slept—but far from indifferent. What did they do to you for aiding the escape of a fugitive from the gallows? I wondered. A single drop of sweat snaked its way down the back of my neck.

“Have you seen anyone along the road as you passed, sir?” The “sir” came a little reluctantly; the dilapidation of Jamie’s coat and my gown were obvious in the pool of yellow lantern light.

“A carriage that passed us from the town; I suppose you will have seen that yourselves,” Jamie answered. The sergeant replied with a grunt, checking the passes carefully, then squinting into the dark to count and see that the attendant bodies matched.

“What goods do you carry?” He handed back the passes, motioning to one of his subordinates to search the wagon. I twitched the reins inadvertently, and the horses snorted and shook their heads. Jamie’s foot nudged mine, but he didn’t look at me.

“Small household goods,” he answered, still calm. “A half of venison and a bag of salt, for provision. And a body.”

The soldier who had been reaching for the wagon covering stopped abruptly. The sergeant looked up sharply.

“A what?”

Jamie took the reins from me and wrapped them casually about his wrist. From the corner of my eye, I saw Duncan edge toward the darkness of the wood; Fergus, with his pickpocket’s skill, had already faded from view.

“The corpse of the man who was hanged this afternoon. He was known to me; I asked permission of Colonel Franklin to take him to his kinsmen in the north. That is why we travel by night,” he added delicately.

“I see.” The sergeant motioned a lantern bearer closer. He gave Jamie a long thoughtful look, eyes narrowed, and nodded. “I remember you," he said. "You called out to him at the last. A friend, was he?"

"I knew him once. Some years ago," he added. The sergeant nodded to his subordinate, not taking his eyes off Jamie.

"Have a look, Griswold."

Griswold, who was perhaps fourteen, betrayed a notable lack of enthusiasm for the order, but dutifully lifted the canvas cover and raised his lantern to peer into the wagon bed. With an effort, I kept myself from turning to look.

The near horse snorted and tossed its head. If we did have to bolt, it would take several seconds for the horses to get the wagon moving. I heard Ian shift behind me, getting his hand on the club of hickory wood stowed behind the seat.

"Yes, sir, it's a body," Griswold reported. "In a shroud." He dropped the canvas with an air of relief, and exhaled strongly through his nostrils.

"Fix your bayonet and give it a jab," the sergeant said, eyes still on Jamie. I must have made a small noise, for the sergeant's glance shifted to me.

"You'll soil my wagon," Jamie objected. "The man's fair ripe, after a day in the sun, aye?"

The sergeant snorted impatiently. "Jab it in the leg, then. Get on, Griswold!"

With a marked air of reluctance, Griswold affixed his bayonet, and standing on tiptoe, began to poke gingerly about in the wagon bed. Behind me, Ian had begun to whistle softly. A Gaelic tune whose title translated to "In the Morn We Die," which I thought very tasteless of him.

"No, sir, he's dead all right." Griswold dropped back on his heels, sounding relieved. "I poked right hard, but not a twitch."

"All right, then." Dismissing the young soldier with a jerk of his hand, the sergeant nodded to Jamie. "Drive on then, Mr. Fraser. But I'd advise you to choose your friends more carefully in future."

I saw Jamie's knuckles whiten on the reins, but he only drew himself up straight and settled his hat more firmly on his head. He clicked his tongue and the horses set off sharply, leaving puffs of pale dust floating in the lantern light.

The darkness seemed engulfing after the light; despite the moon, I could see almost nothing. The night enfolded us. I felt the relief of a hunted animal that finds safe refuge, and in spite of the oppressive heat, I breathed more freely.

We covered a distance of nearly a quarter mile before anyone spoke.

“Are ye wounded, Mr. Bonnet?” Ian spoke in a loud whisper, just audible over the rattle of the wagon.

“Yes, he’s pinked me in the thigh, damn the puppy.” Bonnet’s voice was low, but calm. “Thank Christ he left off before the blood soaked through the shroud. Dead men don’t bleed.”

“Are you hurt badly? Shall I come back and have a look at it?” I twisted around. Bonnet had pushed back the canvas cover and was sitting up, a vague pale shape in the darkness.

“No, I thank ye, ma’am. I’ve my stocking wound round it and ’twill serve well enough, I expect.” My night vision was returning; I could see the gleam of fair hair as he bent his head to his task.

“Can ye walk, do ye think?” Jamie slowed the horses to a walk, and twisted round to inspect our guest. While his tone was not inhospitable, it was clear that he would prefer to be rid of our dangerous cargo as soon as possible.

“Not easily, no. I’m that sorry, sir.” Bonnet was aware of Jamie’s eagerness to be rid of him, too. With some difficulty, he hoisted himself up in the wagon bed, rising onto his good knee behind the seat. His lower half was invisible in darkness, but I could smell the blood on him, a sharper scent than the lingering faint reek of Gavin’s shroud.

“A suggestion, Mr. Fraser. In three miles, we’ll come to the Ferry Trail road. A mile past the crossroads, another road leads toward the coast. It’s little more than a pair of ruts, but passable. That will take us to the edge of a creek with an outlet to the sea. Some associates of mine will be puttin’ in to anchor there within the week; if ye would grant me some small stock of provisions, I can await them in reasonable safety, and you can be on your way, free o' the taint of my company."

"Associates? Ye mean pirates?" Ian's voice held a certain amount of wariness. Having been abducted from Scotland by pirates, he invested such persons with none of the romanticism normal to a fifteen-year-old.

"That would depend upon your perspective, lad." Bonnet sounded amused. "Certainly the governors of the Carolinas would call them so; the merchants of Wilmington and Charleston perhaps regard them otherwise."

Jamie gave a brief snort. "Smugglers, aye? And what might these associates of yours be dealing in, then?"

"Whatever will fetch a price to make it worth the risk of carrying." The amusement had not left Bonnet's voice, but was now tinged with cynicism. "Will you be wanting some reward for your assistance? That can be managed."

"I do not." Jamie's voice was cold. "I saved you for Gavin Hayes' sake, and for my own. I wouldna seek reward for such service."

"I meant no offense to ye, sir." Bonnet's head inclined slightly toward us.

"None taken," Jamie answered shortly. He shook out the reins and wrapped them afresh, changing hands.

Conversation lapsed after this small clash, though Bonnet continued to ride kneeling behind us, peering over my shoulder at the dark road ahead. There were no more soldiers, though; nothing moved, not even a breath of wind in the leaves. Nothing disturbed the silence of the summer night save the occasional thin *zeek* of a passing night bird, or the hooting of an owl.

The soft rhythmic thump of the horses' hooves in the dust and the squeak and rattle of the wagon began to lull me to sleep. I tried to keep upright, watching the black shadows of the trees along the road, but found myself gradually inclining toward Jamie, my eyes falling shut despite my best efforts.

Jamie transferred the reins to his left hand, and putting his right arm around me, drew me down to rest against his shoulder. As always, I felt safe when I touched him. I went limp, cheek pressed against the dusty serge of his coat, and fell at once into that uneasy doze that is the consequence of a combination of utter exhaustion and the inability to lie down.

I opened my eyes once to see the tall, lean figure of Duncan Innes, pacing alongside the wagon with his tireless hillman's stride, head bowed as though in deep thought. Then I closed them again, and drifted into a doze in which memories of the day mingled with inchoate fragments of dreams. I dreamt of a giant skunk sleeping under a tavern's table, waking to join in a chorus of "The Star-Spangled Banner," and then of a swinging corpse that raised its lolling head and grinned with empty eyes … I came awake to find Jamie gently shaking me.

"Ye'd best crawl into the back and lie down, Sassenach," he said. "You're craicklin' in your sleep. You'll be slippin' into the road, next thing."

Blearily assenting, I clambered awkwardly over the seat back, changing places with Bonnet, and found a place in the wagonbed next to the slumbering form of Young Ian.

It smelt musty—and worse—in the wagon bed. Ian had his head pillowed on a packet of roughly butchered venison, wrapped in the untanned skin of the deer. Rollo had done somewhat better, his hairy muzzle resting comfortably on Ian's stomach. For myself, I took the leathern bag of salt. The smooth leather was hard under my cheek, but odorless.

The jolting boards of the wagon bed couldn't by any stretch of the imagination be called comfortable, but the relief of being able to stretch out at full length was so overwhelming that I scarcely noticed the bumps and jolts. I rolled onto my back and looked up into the hazy immensity of the southern sky, studded thick with blazing stars. *Lumen Christi,* I thought, and comforted by the thought of Gavin Hayes finding his way safe home by the lights of heaven, fell once more fast asleep.

I could not tell how long I slept, wrapped in a drugged blanket of heat and exhaustion. I woke when the pace of the wagon changed, swimming toward the surface of consciousness, drenched with sweat.

Bonnet and Jamie were talking, in the low, easy tones of men who had found their way past the early awkwardness of first acquaintance.

"You said that ye saved me for Gavin Hayes' sake—and for your own," Bonnet was saying. His voice was soft, barely audible above the rumble of the wheels. "What did ye mean by that, sir, and ye'll pardon my asking—?"

Jamie didn't answer at once; I nearly fell asleep again before he spoke, but at last his answer came, floating disembodied in the warm, dark air.

"Ye wilna have slept much last night, I think? Knowing what was to come to ye with the day?"

There was a low laugh from Bonnet, not entirely amused.

"Too right," he said. "I doubt I shall forget it in a hurry."

"Nor will I." Jamie said something soft in Gaelic to the horses, and they slowed in response. "I once lived through such a night, knowing I would hang, come morning. And yet I lived, through the grace of one who risked much to save me."

"I see," Bonnet said softly. "So you are an *asgina ageli,* are you?"

"Aye? And what will that be?"

There was a sound of scraping and brushing leaves against the side of the wagon, and the spicy sap-scent of the trees grew suddenly stronger. Something light touched my face—leaves, falling from above. The horses slowed, and the rhythm of the wagon changed markedly, the wheels finding an uneven surface. We had turned into the small road that led to Bonnet's creek.

"*Asgina ageli* is a term that the red savages employ—the Cherokee of the mountains; I heard it from one I had as guide one time. It means 'half-ghost,' one who should have died by right, but yet remains on the earth; a woman who survives a mortal illness, a man fallen into his enemies' hands who escapes. They say an *asgina ageli* has one foot on the earth and the other in the spirit world. He can talk to the spirits, and see the Nunnahee—the Little People."

"Little People? Will that be like the faeries?" Jamie sounded surprised.

“Something of the kind.” Bonnet shifted his weight and the seat creaked as he stretched. “The Indians do say that the Nunnahee live inside the rocks of the mountains, and come out to help their people in time of war or other evil.”

“Is that so? It will be something like the tales they tell in the Highlands of Scotland, then—of the Auld Folk.”

“Indeed.” Bonnet sounded amused. “Well, from what I have heard of the Scotch Highlanders, there is little to choose between them and the red men for barbarous conduct.”

“Nonsense,” said Jamie, sounding not the least offended. “The red savages eat the hearts of their enemies, or so I have heard. I prefer a good dish of oatmeal parritch, myself.”

Bonnet made a noise, hastily stifled.

“You are a Highlander? Well, I will say that for a barbarian, I have found ye passing civil, sir,” he assured Jamie, the laughter quivering in his voice.

“I am exceedingly obliged for your kind opinion, sir,” Jamie replied, with equal politeness.

Their voices faded into the rhythmic squeaking of the wheels, and I was asleep again before I could hear more.

The moon hung low over the trees by the time we came to a halt. I was roused by the movements of Young Ian, clambering sleepily over the wagon’s edge to help Jamie tend to the horses. I poked my head up to see a broad stretch of water flowing past shelving banks of clay and silt, the stream a shiny black glittering with silver where riffles purled on the rocks near shore. Bonnet, with customary New World understatement, might call it a creek, but it would pass for a decent river among most boatmen, I thought.

The men moved to and fro in the shadows, carrying out their tasks with no more than an occasional muttered word. They moved with unaccustomed slowness, seeming to fade into the night, made insubstantial by fatigue.

"Do ye go and find a place to sleep, Sassenach," Jamie said, pausing to steady me as I dropped down from the wagon. "I must just see our guest provisioned and set on his way, and the beasts wiped down and put to grass."

The temperature had dropped scarcely at all since nightfall, but the air seemed fresher here near the water, and I found myself reviving somewhat.

"I can't sleep until I've bathed," I said, pulling the soaked bodice of my gown away from my breasts. "I feel terrible." My hair was pasted to my temples with sweat, and my flesh felt grimed and itchy. The dark water looked cool and inviting. Jamie cast a longing look at it, plucking at his crumpled stock.

"I canna say I blame ye. Go careful, though; Bonnet says the channel in midstream is deep enough to float a ketch, and it's a tide-creek; there'll be a strong current."

"I'll stay near the shore." I pointed downstream, where a small point of land marked a bend in the river, its willows shining dusky silver in the moonlight. "See that little point? There should be an eddy pool there."

"Aye. Go careful, then," he said again, and squeezed my elbow in farewell. As I turned to go, a large pale shape loomed up before me; our erstwhile guest, one leg of his breeches stained dark with dried blood.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said, making me a creditable bow, despite the injured leg. "Do I bid you now adieu?" He was standing a bit closer to me than I quite liked, and I repressed the urge to step backward.

"You do," I said, and nodded to him, brushing back a dangling lock of hair. "Good luck, Mr. Bonnet."

"I thank ye for your kind wishes, ma'am," he answered softly. "But I have found that a man most often makes his own luck. Good night to ye, ma'am." He bowed once more and turned away, limping heavily, like the ghost of a crippled bear.

The creek's rushing masked most of the ordinary night sounds. I saw a bat blink through a patch of moonlight over the water, in pursuit of insects too small to see, and vanish into the night. If anything else lurked in the dark, it was quiet.

Jamie grunted softly to himself.

"Well, I've my doubts of the man," he said, as though answering a question I hadn't asked. "I must hope I've only been softhearted, and not softheaded, by helpin' him."

"You couldn't leave him to hang, after all," I said.

"Oh, aye, I could," he said, surprising me. He saw me look up at him, and smiled, the wry twist of his mouth barely visible in the dark.

"The Crown doesna *always* pick the wrong man to hang, Sassenach," he said. "More often than not, the man on the end of a rope deserves to be there. And I shouldna like to think I've helped a villain to go free." He shrugged, and shoved his hair back out of his face.

"Aye, well, it's done. Go and have your bath, Sassenach; I'll come to ye so soon as I may."

I stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and felt him smile as I did so. My tongue touched his mouth in delicate invitation, and he bit my lower lip gently, in answer.

"Can ye stay awake a wee bit longer, Sassenach?"

"As long as it takes," I assured him. "But do hurry, won't you?"

There was a patch of thick grass edging the point below the willows. I undressed slowly, enjoying the feel of the water-borne breeze through the damp cloth of shift and stockings, and the final freedom as the last bits of clothing fell to the ground, leaving me naked to the night.

I stepped gingerly into the water. It was surprisingly cool—cold, by contrast to the hot night air. The bottom under my feet was mostly silt, but it yielded to fine sand within a yard of shore.

Though it was a tidal creek, we were far enough upstream that the water was fresh and sweet. I drank and splashed my face, washing away the dust in throat and nose.

I waded in up to mid-thigh, mindful of Jamie's cautions about channels and currents. After the staggering heat of the day and the smothering embrace of the night, the sensation of coolness on bare skin was an overwhelming relief. I cupped handfuls of cold water and splashed them on my face and breasts; the droplets ran down my stomach and tickled coldly between my legs.

I could feel the slight push of the tide coming in, shoving gently against my calves, urging me toward shore. I wasn't ready to come in yet, though. I had no soap, but knelt and rinsed my hair over and over in the clear dark water, and scrubbed my body with handfuls of fine sand, until my skin felt thin and glowing.

Finally, I climbed out onto a rocky shelf and lay languid as a mermaid in the moonlight, the heat of the air and the sun-warmed stone now a comfort to my chilled body. I combed out my thick curly hair with my fingers, scattering drops of water. The wet stone smelled like rain, dusty and tingling.

I felt very tired, but at the same time, very much alive, in that state of half consciousness where thought is slowed and small physical sensations magnified. I moved my bare foot slowly over the sandstone rock, enjoying the slight friction, and ran a hand lightly down the inside of my thigh, a ripple of goose bumps rising in the wake of my touch.

My breasts rose in the moonlight, cool white domes spangled with clear droplets. I brushed one nipple and watched it slowly stiffen by itself, rising as if by magic.

Quite a magical place at that, I thought. The night was quiet and still, but with a languid atmosphere that was like floating in a warm sea. So near the coast, the sky was clear, and the stars shone overhead like diamonds, burning with a fierce, bright light.

A faint splash made me look toward the stream. Nothing moved on the surface but faint coruscations of starlight, caught like fireflies in a spider's web.

As I watched, a great head broke water in the middle of the stream, water purling back from the pointed snout. There was a fish struggling in Rollo's jaws; the flap and gleam of its scales showed briefly as he shook his head violently to break its back. The huge dog swam slowly to the shore, shook his coat briefly, and stalked away, his evening meal dangling limp and shimmering from his jaws.

He paused for a moment on the far edge of the creek, looking at me, the ruff of his hackles a dark shadow framing yellow eyes and gleaming fish. Like a primitive painting, I thought; something from Rousseau, with its contrast of utter wildness and complete stillness.

Then the dog was gone, and there was nothing on the far shore but the trees, hiding whatever might lie behind them. And what did? I wondered. More trees, answered the logical part of my mind.

“A *lot* more,” I murmured, looking into the mysterious dark. Civilization—even of the primitive kind I had grown used to—was no more than a thin crescent on the edge of the continent. Two hundred miles from the coast, you were beyond the ken of city and farm. And, past that point lay three thousand miles … of what? Wilderness, surely, and danger. Adventure, too—and freedom.

It was a new world, after all, free of fear and filled with joy, for now Jamie and I were together, for all of our lives before us. Parting and sorrow lay behind us. Even the thought of Brianna caused no dreadful regret—I missed her greatly, and thought of her constantly, but I knew she was safe in her own time, and that knowledge made her absence easier to bear.

I lay back on the rock, the trapped heat of the day radiating from its surface into my body, happy only to be alive. The drops of water were drying on my breasts as I watched, vanishing to a film of moistness and then disappearing altogether.

Small clouds of gnats hovered over the water; I couldn’t see them, but I knew they were there by the occasional splash of leaping fish, rising to snatch them from the air.

The bugs had been a ubiquitous plague. I inspected Jamie’s skin minutely every morning, picking voracious ticks and wood fleas from his crevices, and anointed all of the men liberally with the juice of crushed pennyroyal and tobacco leaves. This kept them from being devoured alive by the clouds of mosquitoes, gnats, and carnivorous midges that hung in the sun-tinged shadows of the woods, but it didn’t prevent the hordes of inquisitive bugs from driving them mad with a constant tickling inquiry into ears, eyes, noses, and mouths.

Oddly enough, the majority of insects left me strictly alone. Ian joked that the strong scent of herbs that hung about me must repel them, but I thought it went further than that—even when I was freshly bathed, the insects showed no desire to bother me.

I thought it might be a manifestation of the evolutionary oddity that—I surmised—protected me from colds and minor illness here. Bloodthirsty bugs, like microbes, evolved very closely with humans, and were sensitive to the subtle chemical signals of their hosts. Coming from another time, I no longer had precisely the same signals, and consequently the bugs no longer perceived me as prey.

“Or maybe Ian’s right, and I just smell awful,” I said aloud. I dipped my fingers in the water and flicked a spray of drops at a dragonfly resting on my rock, no more than a transparent shadow, its colors drained by darkness.

I hoped Jamie would hurry. Riding for days on the wagon seat next to him, watching the subtle shifts of his body as he drove, seeing the changing light on the angles of his face as he talked and smiled, was enough to make my palms tingle with the urge to touch him. We had not made love in several days, owing to our hurry to reach Charleston, and my inhibitions about intimacy within earshot of a dozen men.

A breath of warm breeze slipped past me, and all the tiny down hairs on my body prickled with its passing. No hurry now, and no one to hear. I drew a hand down the soft curve of my belly and the softer skin inside my thighs, where the blood pulsed slowly to the beat of my heart. I cupped my hand, feeling the swollen moist ache of urgent desire.

I closed my eyes, rubbing lightly, enjoying the feeling of increasing urgency.

“And where the hell are *you,* Jamie Fraser?” I murmured.

“Here,” came a husky answer.

Startled, my eyes popped open. He was standing in the stream, six feet away, thigh-deep in the water, his genitals stiff and dark against the pallid glow of his body. His hair lay loose around his shoulders, framing a face white as bone, eyes unblinking and intent as those of the wolf-dog. Utter wildness, utter stillness.

Then he stirred and came toward me, still intent, but still no longer. His thighs were cold as water when he touched me, but within seconds he warmed and grew hot. Sweat sprang up at once where his hands touched my skin, and a flush of hot moisture dampened my breasts once more, making them round and slick against the hardness of his chest.

Then his mouth moved to mine and I melted—almost literally—into him. I didn't care how hot it was, or whether the dampness on my skin was my sweat or his. Even the clouds of insects faded into insignificance. I raised my hips and he slid home, slick and solid, the last faint coolness of him quenched by my heat, like the cold metal of a sword, slaked in hot blood.

My hands glided on a film of moisture over the curves of his back, and my breasts wobbled against his chest, a rivulet trickling between them to oil the friction of belly and thigh.

"Christ, your mouth is slick and salty as your quim," he muttered, and his tongue darted out to taste the tiny beads of salt on my face, butterfly wings on temple and eyelids.

I was vaguely conscious of the hard rock under me. The stored heat of the day rose up and through me, and the rough surface scraped my back and buttocks, but I didn't care.

"I can't wait," he said in my ear, breathless.

"Don't," I said, and wrapped my legs tight around his hips, flesh bonded to flesh in the brief madness of dissolution.

"I have heard of melting with passion," I said, gasping slightly, "but this is ridiculous."

He lifted his head from my breast with a faint sticky sound as his cheek came away. He laughed and slid slowly sideways.

"God, it's hot!" he said. He pushed back the sweat-soaked hair from his forehead and blew out his breath, chest still heaving from exertion. "How do folk do that when it's like this?"

"The same way we just did," I pointed out. I was breathing heavily myself.

"They can't," he said with certainty. "Not all the time; they'd die."

“Well, maybe they do it slower,” I said. “Or underwater. Or wait until the autumn.”

“Autumn?” he said. “Perhaps I dinna want to live in the south, after all. Is it hot in Boston?”

“It is at this time of year,” I assured him. “And beastly cold in the winter. I’m sure you’ll get used to the heat. And the bugs.”

He brushed a questing mosquito off his shoulder and glanced from me to the nearby creek.

“Maybe so,” he said, “and maybe no, but for now …” He wrapped his arms firmly around me, and rolled. With the ponderous grace of a rolling log, we fell off the edge of the rocky shelf, and into the water.

* * *

We lay damp and cool on the rock, barely touching, the last drops of water evaporating on our skins. Across the creek, the willows trailed their leaves in the water, crowns ruffled black against the setting moon. Beyond the willows lay acre upon acre and mile upon mile of the virgin forest, civilization for now no more than a foothold on the edge of the continent.

Jamie saw the direction of my glance and divined my thought.

“It will be a good bit different now than when ye last kent it, I expect?” He nodded toward the leafy dark.

“Oh, a bit.” I linked my hand with his, my thumb idly caressing his big, bony knuckles. “The roads will be paved then; not cobbled, covered with a hard, smooth stuff—invented by a Scotsman called MacAdam, in fact.”

He grunted slightly with amusement.

“So there will be Scots in America, then? That’s good.”

I ignored him and went on, staring into the wavering shadows as though I could conjure the burgeoning cities that would one day rise there.

“There will be a lot of everyone in America, then. All the land will be settled, from here to the far west coast, to a place called California. But for now”—I shivered slightly, in spite of the warm, humid air—"it's three thousand miles of wilderness. There's nothing there at all."

"Aye, well, nothing save thousands of bloodthirsty savages," he said practically. "And the odd vicious beast, to be sure."

"Well, yes," I agreed. "I suppose they are." The thought was unsettling; I had of course known, in a vague, academic way, that the woods were inhabited by Indians, bears, and other forest denizens, but this general notion had suddenly been replaced by a particular and most acute awareness that we might easily—and unexpectedly—meet any one of these denizens, face-to-face.

"What happens to them? To the wild Indians?" Jamie asked curiously, peering into the dark as I was, as though trying to divine the future among the shifting shadows. "They'll be defeated and driven back, will they?"

Another small shiver passed over me, and my toes curled.

"Yes, they will," I said. "Killed, a lot of them. A good many taken prisoner, locked up."

"Well, that's good."

"I expect that depends a lot on your point of view," I said, rather dryly. "I don't suppose the Indians will think so."

"I daresay," he said. "But when a bloody fiend's tryin' his best to chop off the top of my head, I'm no so much concerned with his point of view, Sassenach."

"Well, you can't really blame them," I protested.

"I most certainly can," he assured me. "If one of the brutes scalps ye, I shall blame him a great deal."

"Ah … hmm," I said. I cleared my throat and had another stab at it. "Well, what if a bunch of strangers came round and tried to kill you and shove you off the land you'd always lived on?"

"They have," he said, very dryly indeed. "If they hadna, I should still be in Scotland, aye?"

"Well …" I said, floundering. "But all I mean is—you'd fight, too, under those circumstances, wouldn't you?"

He drew a deep breath and exhaled strongly through his nose.

"If an English dragoon came round to my house and began to worry me," he said precisely, "I should certainly fight him. I would also have not the slightest hesitation in killing him. I would *not* cut off his hair and wave it about, and I wouldna be eating his private parts, either. I am not a savage, Sassenach."

"I didn't say you were," I protested. "All I said was—"

"Besides," he added with inexorable logic, "I dinna mean to be killing any Indians. If they keep to themselves, I shallna be worrying them a bit."

"I'm sure they'll be relieved to know that," I murmured, giving up for the present.

We lay cradled close together in the hollow of the rock, lightly glued with sweat, watching the stars. I felt at once shatteringly happy and mildly apprehensive. Could this state of exaltation possibly last? Once I had taken "forever" for granted between us, but I was younger, then.

Soon, God willing, we would settle; find a place to make a home and a life. I wanted nothing more, and yet at the same time, I worried. We had known each other only a few months since my return. Each touch, each word was still at once tinged with memory and new with rediscovery. What would happen when we were thoroughly accustomed to each other, living day by day in a routine of mundane tasks?

"Will ye grow tired of me, do ye think?" he murmured. "Once we're settled?"

"I was just wondering the same thing about you."

"No," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "That I willna, Sassenach."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I didn't," he pointed out. "Before. We were wed three years, and I wanted ye as much on the last day as the first. More, maybe," he added softly, thinking, as I was, of the last time we had made love before he sent me through the stones.

I leaned down and kissed him. He tasted clean and fresh, faintly scented with the pungency of sex.

"I did, too."

"Then dinna trouble yourself about it, Sassenach, and neither will I." He stroked my hair, smoothing damp curls off my forehead. "I could know ye all my life, I think, and always love you. And often as I've lain wi' you, ye still surprise me mightily sometimes, like ye did tonight."

"I do? Why, what have I done?" I stared down at him, surprised myself.

"Oh … well. I didna mean … that is—"

He sounded suddenly shy, and there was an unaccustomed stiffness in his body.

"Mm?" I kissed the tip of his ear.

"Ah … when I came upon you … what ye were doing … I mean—were ye doing what I thought?"

I smiled against his shoulder in the darkness.

"I suppose that depends what you thought, doesn't it?"

He lifted up on one elbow, his skin coming away from mine with a small sucking noise. The damp spot where he had adhered was suddenly cool. He rolled onto his side and grinned at me.

"Ye ken verra well what I thought, Sassenach."

I touched his chin, shadowed with sprouting whiskers.

"I do. And you know perfectly well what I was doing, too, so why are you asking?"

"Well, I—I didna think women did that, is all."

The moon was bright enough for me to see his half-cocked eyebrow.

"Well, men do," I pointed out. "Or you do, at least. You told me so—when you were in prison, you said you—"

"That was different!" I could see his mouth twist as he tried to decide what to say. "I—that is to say, there wasna any help for it then. After all, I couldna be—"

"Haven't you done it other times?" I sat up and fluffed out my damp hair, glancing sidelong at him over my shoulder. A blush didn't show in the moonlight, but I thought he had gone pink.

"Aye, well," he muttered. "I suppose I have, yes." A sudden thought struck him and his eyes widened, looking at me. "Do you—have ye done that—often?" The last word emerged in a croak, and he was obliged to stop and clear his throat.

"I suppose it depends on what you mean by 'often,' " I said, allowing a bit of acerbity to creep into my tone. "I was widowed for two years, you know."

He rubbed a knuckle over his lips, eyeing me with interest.

"Aye, that's so. It's only—well, I hadna thought of women doing such a thing, is all." Growing fascination was overcoming his surprise. "You can—finish? Without a man, I mean?"

That made me laugh out loud, and soft reverberations sounded from the trees around us, echoed by the stream.

"Yes, but it's much nicer with a man," I assured him. I reached out and touched his chest. I could see the goose bumps ripple over his chest and shoulders, and he shivered slightly as I drew a fingertip in a gentle circle round one nipple. "Much," I said softly.

"Oh," he said, sounding happy. "Well, that's good, aye?"

He was hot—even hotter than the liquid air—and my first instinct was to draw back, but I didn't follow it. Sweat sprang up at once where his hands rested on my skin, and trickles of sweat ran down my neck.

"I've never made love to ye before like this," he said. "Like eels, aye? Wi' your body sliding through my hands, all slippery as seaweed." Both hands passed slowly down my back, his thumbs pressing the groove of my spine, making the tiny hairs at the base of my neck prickle with pleasure.

"Mm. That's because it's too cold in Scotland to sweat like pigs," I said. "Though come to that, do pigs really sweat? I've always wondered."

"I couldna say; I've never made love to a pig." His head ducked down and his tongue touched my breast. "But ye do taste a bit like a trout, Sassenach."

"I taste like a *what*?"

"Fresh and sweet, wi' a bit of salt," he explained, lifting his head for a moment. He put it back down, and resumed his downward course.

"That tickles," I said, quivering under his tongue, but making no effort to escape.

“Well, I mean it to,” he answered, lifting his wet face for a breath before returning to his work. “I shouldna like to think ye could do without me entirely.”

“I can’t,” I assured him. “Oh!”

“Ah?” came a thick interrogative. I lay back on the rock, my back arching as the stars spun dizzily overhead.

“I said … ‘oh,’ ” I said faintly. And then didn’t say anything coherent for some time, until he lay panting, chin resting lightly on my pubic bone. I reached down and stroked the sweat-drenched hair away from his face, and he turned his head to kiss my palm.

“I feel like Eve,” I said softly, watching the moon set behind him, over the dark of the forest. “Just on the edge of the Garden of Eden.”

There was a small snort of laughter from the vicinity of my navel.

“Aye, and I suppose I’m Adam,” Jamie said. “In the gateway to Paradise.” He turned his head to look wistfully across the creek toward the vast unknown, resting his cheek on the slope of my belly. “I only wish I knew was I coming in, or going out?”

I laughed myself, startling him. I took him by both ears then, urging him gently up across the slippery expanse of my naked flesh.

“In,” I said. “I don’t see an angel with a fiery sword, after all.”

He lowered himself upon me, his own flesh heated as with fever, and I shivered under him.

“No?” he murmured. “Aye, well, you’ll no be looking close enough, I suppose.”

Then the fiery sword severed me from consciousness and set fire to my body. We blazed up together, bright as stars in the summer night, and then sank back burnt and limbless, ashes dissolved in a primordial sea of warm salt, stirring with the nascent throbbings of life.

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PART TWO

Past Imperfect

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3

THE MINISTER'S CAT

Boston, Massachusetts, June 1969

"Brianna?"

"Ha?" She sat bolt upright, heart pounding, the sound of her name ringing in her ear. "Who—wha'?"

"You were asleep. Damn, I knew I'd got the time wrong! Sorry, shall I ring off?"

It was the faint hint of a burr in his voice that belatedly made the scrambled connections of her nervous system fall into place. Phone. Ringing phone. She'd snatched it by reflex, deep in her dream.

"Roger!" The rush of adrenaline from being startled awake was fading, but her heart was still beating fast. "No, don't hang up! It's all right, I'm awake." She scrubbed a hand over her face, trying at once to disentangle the phone cord and straighten the rumpled bedclothes.

"Aye? You're sure? What time is it there?"

"I don't know; it's too dark to see the clock," she said, still sleep-addled. A reluctant deep chuckle answered her.

"I *am* sorry; I tried to calculate the time difference, but must've got it backward. Didn't mean to wake you."

"That's okay, I had to wake up to answer the phone anyway," she assured him, and laughed.

"Aye. Well …" She could hear the answering smile in his voice, and eased herself back against the pillows, shoving tangles of hair out of her eyes, slowly adjusting to the here and now. The feel of her dream was still with her, more real than the dark-shrouded shapes of her bedroom.

"It's good to hear your voice, Roger," she said softly. She was surprised at just *how* good it was. His voice was far away and yet seemed much more immediate than the far-off whines of sirens, and the *whish!* of tires on wet pavement outside.

"Yours, too." He sounded a little shy. "Look—I've got the chance of a conference next month, in Boston. I thought of coming, if—damn, there's no good way to say this. Do you want to see me?"

Her hand squeezed tight on the receiver, and her heart jumped.

"I'm sorry," he said at once, before she could reply. "That's putting you on the spot, isn't it? I—look—just say straight out if you'd rather not."

"I do. Of course I want to see you!"

"Ah. You don't mind, then? Only … you didn't answer my letter. I thought maybe I'd done something—"

"No, you didn't. I'm sorry. It was just—"

"It's fine, I didn't mean—"

Their sentences collided, and they both stopped, stricken with shyness.

"I didn't want to push—"

"I didn't mean to be—"

It happened again, and this time he laughed, a low sound of Scottish amusement coming over the vast distance of space and time, comforting as though he'd touched her.

"It's all right, then," he said firmly. "I do understand, aye?"

She didn't answer, but closed her eyes, an indefinable sensation of relief sweeping over her. Roger Wakefield was likely the only person in the world who *could* understand; what she hadn't fully realized before was how important that understanding might be.

"I was dreaming," she said. "When the phone rang."

"Mmphm?"

"About my father." Her throat tightened, just a little, whenever she spoke the word. The same thing happened when she said "mother," too. She could still smell the sun-warmed pines of her dream, and feel the crunch of pine needles under her boots.

"I couldn't see his face. I was walking with him, in the woods somewhere. I was following him up a trail, and he was talking to me, but I couldn't hear what he was saying—I kept hurrying, trying to catch up, so I could hear, but I couldn't quite manage."

"But you knew the man was your father?"

"Yes—but maybe I only thought so because of hiking in the mountains. I used to do that with Dad."

"Did you? I used to do that with my dad, as well. If you come back to Scotland ever, I'll take ye Munro bagging."

"You'll take me *what?*"

He laughed, and she had a sudden memory of him, brushing back the thick black hair that he didn't cut often enough, moss-green eyes creased half-shut by his smile. She found she was rubbing the tip of her thumb slowly across her lower lip, and stopped herself. He'd kissed her when they parted.

"A Munro is any Scottish peak more than three thousand feet. There are so many of them, it's a sport to see how many you can climb. Folk collect them, like stamps, or matchbooks."

"Where are you now—Scotland or England?" she said, then interrupted before he could answer. "No, let me see if I can guess. It's … Scotland. You're in Inverness."

"That's right." The surprise was evident in his voice. "How did you know that?"

She stretched, scissoring her long legs slowly under the sheets.

"You roll your r's when you've been talking to other Scots," she said. "You don't when you talk to English people. I noticed when we—went to London." There was no more than a faint catch in her voice; it was getting easier, she thought.

"And herrrrre I was beginning to think ye were psychic," he said, and laughed.

"I wish you were here now," she said impulsively.

"You do?" He sounded surprised, and suddenly shy. "Oh. Well … that's good, isn't it?"

"Roger—why I didn't write—"

"You're not to trouble about it," he said quickly. "I'll be there in a month; we can talk, then. Bree, I—"

"Yes?"

She heard him draw breath, and had a vivid memory of the feel of his chest rising and falling as he breathed, warm and solid under her hand.

"I'm glad you said yes."

* * *

She couldn't go back to sleep after hanging up; restless, she swung her feet out of bed and padded out to the kitchen of the small apartment for a glass of milk. It was only after several minutes of staring blankly into the recesses of the refrigerator that she realized she wasn't seeing ranks of ketchup bottles and half-used cans. She was seeing standing stones, black against a pale dawn sky.

She straightened up with a small exclamation of impatience, and shut the door with a slam. She shivered slightly, and rubbed her arms, chilled by the draft of the air conditioner. Impulsively, she reached up and clicked it off, then went to the window and raised the sash, letting in the warm mugginess of the rainy summer night.

She should have written. In fact, she *had* written—several times, all half-finished attempts thrown away in frustration.

She knew why, or thought she did. Explaining it coherently to Roger was something else.

Part of it was the simple instinct of a wounded animal; the urge to run away and hide from hurt. What had happened the year before was in no way Roger's fault, but he was inextricably wrapped up in it.

He'd been so tender, and so kind afterward, treating her like one freshly bereaved—which she was. But such a strange bereavement! Her mother gone for good, but certainly—she hoped—not dead. And yet it was in some ways just as it had been when her father died; like believing in a blessed afterlife, ardently hoping that your loved one was safe and happy—and being forced to suffer the pangs of loss and loneliness nonetheless.

An ambulance went by, across the park, red light pulsing in the dark, its siren muted by distance.

She crossed herself from habit, and murmured *"Miserere nobis"* under her breath. Sister Marie Romaine had told the fifth grade that the dead and dying needed their prayers; so strongly had she inculcated the notion in her class that none of the children had ever been able to pass the scene of an emergency without sending a small silent prayer upward, to succor the souls of the imminently heaven-bound.

She prayed for them every day, her mother and her father—her fathers. That was the other part of it. Uncle Joe knew the truth of her paternity, too, but only Roger could truly understand what had happened; only Roger could hear the stones, too.

No one could pass through an experience like that and not be marked by it. Not him, not her. He'd wanted her to stay, after Claire had gone, but she couldn't.

There were things to do here, she'd told him, things to be attended to, her schooling to finish. That was true. More importantly, she'd had to get away—get clear away from Scotland and stone circles, back to a place where she might heal, might begin to rebuild her life.

If she'd stayed with Roger, there was no way to forget what had happened, even for a moment. And that was the last part of it, the final piece in her three-sided puzzle.

He had protected her, had cherished her. Her mother had confided her into his care, and he'd kept that trust well. But had he done it to keep his promise to Claire—or because he truly cared? Either way, it wasn't any basis for a shared future, with the crushing weight of obligation on both sides.

If there might be a future for them … and that was what she couldn't write to him, because how could she say it without sounding both presumptuous and idiotic?

"Go away, so you can come back and do it right," she murmured, and made a face at the words. The rain was still pattering down, cooling the air enough to breathe comfortably. It was just before dawn, she thought, but the air was still warm enough that moisture condensed on the cool skin of her face; small beads of water formed and slid tickling down her neck one by one, dampening the cotton T-shirt she slept in.

She'd wanted to put the events of last November well behind them; make a clean break. Then, when enough time had passed, perhaps they could come to each other again. Not as supporting players in the drama of her parents' life, but this time as the actors in a play of their own choosing.

No, if anything was to happen between her and Roger Wakefield, it would definitely be by choice. It looked as though she was going to get the chance to choose now, and the prospect gave her a small, excited flutter in the pit of her stomach.

She wiped a hand over her face, slicking off the rain-wet, wiping it casually through her hair to tame the floating strands. If she wasn't going to sleep, she might as well work.

She left the window open, careless of the rain puddling on the floor. She felt too restless to be sealed in, chilled by artificial air.

Clicking on the lamp on the desk, she pulled out her calculus book and opened it. One small and unexpected bonus of her change of study was her belated discovery of the soothing effects of mathematics.

When she had come back to Boston, alone, and back to school, engineering had seemed a much safer choice than history; solid, fact-bound, reassuringly immutable. Above all, controllable. She picked up a pencil, sharpened it slowly, enjoying the preparation, then bent her head and read the first problem.

Slowly, as it always did, the calm inexorable logic of the figures built its web inside her head, trapping all the random thoughts, wrapping the distracting emotions up in silken threads like so many flies. Round the central axis of the problem, logic spun her web, orderly and beautiful as an orb-weaver's jeweled confection. Only the one small thought stayed free of its strands, hovering in her mind like a bright, tiny butterfly.

I'm glad you said yes, he'd said. So was she.

July 1969

"Does he talk like the Beatles? Oh, I'll just die if he sounds like John Lennon! You know how he says, 'It's me grandfather?' That just knocks me out!"

"He doesn't sound anything like John Lennon, for God's sake!" Brianna hissed. She peered cautiously around a concrete pillar, but the International Arrivals gate was still empty. "Can't you tell the difference between a Liverpudlian and a Scot?"

"No," her friend Gayle said blithely, fluffing out her blond hair. "All Englishmen sound the same to me. I could listen to them forever!"

"He's not an Englishman! I told you, he's a Scot!"

Gayle gave Brianna a look, clearly suggesting that her friend was crazed.

"Scotland's part of England; I looked on the map."

"Scotland's part of Great Britain, not England."

"What's the difference?" Gayle stuck her head out and craned around the pillar. "Why are we standing back here? He'll never see us."

Brianna ran a hand over her hair to smooth it. They were standing behind a pillar because she wasn't sure she *wanted* him to see them. Not much help for it, though; disheveled passengers were beginning to trickle through the double doors, burdened with luggage.

She let Gayle tow her out into the main reception area, still babbling. Her friend's tongue led a double life; though Gayle was capable of cool and reasoned discourse in class, her chief social skill was babbling on cue. That was why Bree had asked Gayle to come with her to the airport to pick up Roger; no chance of any awkward pauses in the conversation.

"Have you done it with him already?"

She jerked toward Gayle, startled.

"Have I done *what*?"

Gayle rolled her eyes.

"Played tiddlywinks. Honestly, Bree!"

"No. Of course not." She felt the blood rising in her cheeks.

"Well, are you *going* to?"

“Gayle!”

“Well, I mean, you have your own apartment and everything, and nobody’s going to—”

At this awkward moment, Roger Wakefield appeared. He wore a white shirt and scruffy jeans, and Brianna must have stiffened at the sight of him. Gayle’s head whipped round to see where Brianna was looking.

“Ooh,” she said in delight. “Is that him? He looks like a *pirate*!”

He did, and Brianna felt the bottom of her stomach drop another inch or two. Roger was what her mother called a Black Celt, with clear olive skin and black hair, and “eyes put in with a sooty thumb”—thick black lashes round eyes you expected to be blue but that were instead a surprising deep green. With his hair worn long enough to brush his collar, disheveled and beard-stubbled, he looked not only rakish but mildly dangerous.

Alarm tingled up her spine at the sight of him, and she wiped sweating palms on the sides of her embroidered jeans. She shouldn’t have let him come.

Then he saw her, and his face lit like a candle. In spite of herself, she felt a huge, idiotic smile break out on her own face in answer, and without stopping to think of misgivings, she ran across the room, dodging stray children and luggage carts.

He met her halfway and swept her almost off her feet, hugging her hard enough to crack her ribs. He kissed her, stopped, and kissed her again, the stubble of his beard scraping her face. He smelled of soap and sweat and he tasted like Scotch whisky and she didn’t want him to stop.

Then he did and let go, both of them half breathless.

“A-hem,” said a loud voice near Brianna’s elbow. She swung away from Roger, revealing Gayle, who smiled angelically up at him under blond bangs, and waved like a child going bye-bye.

“Hell-ooo,” she said. “You must be Roger, because if you’re not, Roger’s sure in for a shock when he shows up, isn’t he?”

She looked him up and down with obvious approval.

“All that, and you play the guitar, too?”

Brianna hadn't even noticed the case he had dropped. He stooped and picked it up, swinging it over his shoulder.

"Well, that's my bread and butter, this trip," he said, with a smile at Gayle, who clutched a hand to her heart in simulated ecstasy.

"Ooh, say that again!" she begged.

"Say what?" Roger looked puzzled.

"Bread and butter," Brianna told him, hoisting one of his bags onto her shoulder. "She wants to hear you roll the r's again. Gayle has a thing about British accents. Oh—that's Gayle." She gestured at her friend in resignation.

"Yes, I gathered. Er …" He cleared his throat, fixed Gayle with a piercing stare, and dropped his voice an octave. "Arround the rrruggged rrrock, the rrragged rrrascals rran. That do you for a bit?"

"Would you stop that?" Brianna looked crossly at her friend, who had swooned dramatically into one of the plastic seats. "Ignore her," she advised Roger, turning toward the door. With a cautious glance at Gayle, he took her advice, and picking up a large box tied with string, followed her into the concourse.

"What did you mean about your bread and butter?" she asked, looking for some way to return the conversation to a sane footing.

He laughed, a little self-consciously.

"Well, the historical conference is paying the airfare, but they couldn't manage expenses. So I called round, and wangled a bit of a job to take care of that end."

"A job playing the guitar?"

"By day, mild-mannered historian Roger Wakefield is a harmless Oxford academic. But at night, he dons his secret tartan rrregalia and becomes the dashing—Roger MacKenzie!"

"Who?"

He smiled at her surprise. "Well, I do a bit of Scottish folk-singing, for festivals and *ceilidhs*—High Games and the like. I'm on to do a turn at a Celtic festival up in the mountains at the end of the week, is all."

"Scottish singing? Do you wear a kilt when you sing?" Gayle had popped up on Roger's other side.

"I do indeed. How else would they know I was a Scotsman?"

"I just love fuzzy knees," Gayle said dreamily. "Now, tell me, is it true about what a Scotsman—"

"Go get the car," Brianna ordered, hastily thrusting her keys at Gayle.

* * *

Gayle perched her chin on the windowsill of the car, watching Roger make his way into the hotel. "Gee, I hope he doesn't shave before he meets us for dinner. I just love the way men look when they haven't shaved for a while. What do you think's in that big box?"

"His bodhran. I asked."

"His *what*?"

"It's a Celtic war drum. He plays it with some of his songs."

Gayle's lips formed a small circle of speculation.

"I don't suppose you want me to drive him to this festival thing, do you? I mean, you must have lots of things to do, and—"

"Ha ha. You think I'd let you anywhere around him in a kilt?"

Gayle sighed wistfully, and pulled her head in as Brianna started the car.

"Well, maybe there'd be other men there in kilts."

"I think that's pretty likely."

"I bet they don't have Celtic war drums, though."

"Maybe not."

Gayle leaned back in her seat, and glanced at her friend.

"So, are you going to do it?"

"How should I know?" But the blood bloomed under her skin, and her clothes felt too tight.

"Well, if you don't," Gayle said positively, "you're crazy."

* * *

"The Minister's cat is an … androgynous cat."

"The Minister's cat is an … alagruous cat."

Bree gave him a lifted brow, taking her eyes briefly off the road.

"Scots again?"

"It's a Scottish game," Roger said. "Alagruous—'grim or woebegone.' Your turn. Letter 'B.' "

She squinted through the windshield at the narrow mountain road. The morning sun was toward them, filling the car with light.

"The Minister's cat is a brindled cat."

"The Minister's cat is a bonnie cat."

"Well, that's a soft pitch for both of us. Draw. Okay, the Minister's cat is a …" He could see the wheels turning in her mind, then the gleam in her narrowed blue eyes as inspiration struck. "… coccygodynious cat."

Roger narrowed his own eyes, trying to work that one out.

"A cat with a wide backside?"

She laughed, braking slightly as the car hit a switchback curve.

"A cat that's a pain in the ass."

"That's a real word, is it?"

"Uh-huh." She accelerated neatly out of the turn. "One of Mama's medical terms. Coccygodynia is a pain in the region of the tailbone. She used to call the hospital administration coccygodynians, all the time."

"And here I thought it was one of your engineering terms. All right, then … the Minister's cat is a camstairy cat." He grinned at her lifted eyebrow. "Quarrelsome. Coccygodynians are camstairy by nature."

"Okay, I'll call that one a draw. The Minister's cat is …"

"Wait," Roger interrupted, pointing. "There's the turn."

Slowing, she pulled off the narrow highway and onto a still narrower road, indicated by a small red-and-white-arrowed sign that read CELTIC FESTIVAL.

"You're a love to bring to me all the way up here," Roger said. "I didn't realize how far it was, or I'd never have asked."

She gave him a brief glance of amusement.

"It's not that far."

"It's a hundred and fifty miles!"

She smiled, but with a wry edge to it.

"My father always said that was the difference between an American and an Englishman. An Englishman thinks a hundred miles is a long way; an American thinks a hundred years is a long time."

Roger laughed, taken by surprise.

"Too right. You'll be an American, then, I suppose?"

"I suppose." But her smile had faded.

So had the conversation; they drove in silence for a few minutes, with no sound but the rush of tires and wind. It was a beautiful hot summer's day, the mugginess of Boston left far below as they snaked their way upward, into the clearer air of the mountains.

"The Minister's cat is a distant cat," Roger said at last, softly. "Have I said something wrong?"

She flashed him a quick blue glance, and a half-curled mouth.

"The Minister's cat is a daydreaming cat. No, it's not you." Her lips compressed as she slowed behind another car, then relaxed. "No, that's not right—it *is* you, but it's not your fault."

Roger shifted, turning in his seat to face her.

"The Minister's cat is an enigmatic cat."

"The Minister's cat is an embarrassed cat—I shouldn't have said anything, sorry."

Roger was wise enough not to press her. Instead, he leaned forward and dug under the seat for the thermos of hot tea with lemon.

"Want some?" He offered her the cup, but she made a small face and shook her head.

"No thanks. I hate tea."

"Definitely not an Englishwoman, then," he said, and wished he hadn't; her hands squeezed tight on the wheel. She didn't say anything, though, and he drank the tea in silence, watching her.

She didn't look English, her parentage and coloring notwithstanding. He couldn't tell whether the difference was more than a matter of clothes, but he thought so. Americans seemed so much more … what? Vibrant? Intense? Bigger? Just *more*. Brianna Randall was definitely more.

The traffic grew thicker, slowing to a crawling line of cars as they reached the entrance to the resort where the festival was being held.

"Look," Brianna said abruptly. She didn't turn toward him, but stared out through the windshield at the New Jersey license plate of the car in front of them. "I have to explain."

"Not to me."

She flicked one red eyebrow in brief irritation.

"To who else?" She pressed her lips together and sighed. "Yeah, all right, me too. But I do."

Roger could taste the acid from the tea, bitter in the back of his throat. Was this where she told him it had been a mistake for him to come? He'd thought so himself, all the way across the Atlantic, twitching and cramped in the tiny airline seat. Then he'd seen her across the airport lobby, and all doubt had vanished on the instant.

It hadn't come back during the intervening week, either; he'd seen her at least briefly every day—even managed a baseball game with her at Fenway Park on Thursday afternoon. He'd found the game itself baffling, but Brianna's enthusiasm for it enchanting. He found himself counting the hours left before he'd have to leave, and looking forward nonetheless to this—the only whole day they'd have together.

That didn't mean she felt the same. He glanced quickly over the line of cars; the gate was visible, but still a quarter-mile off. He had maybe three minutes to convince her.

"In Scotland," she was saying, "when all—that—happened with my mother. You were great, Roger—really wonderful." She didn't look at him, but he could see a shimmer of moisture just above the thick auburn lashes.

"It was no great thing to do," he said. He curled his hands into fists to keep from touching her. "I was interested."

She laughed shortly.

"Yeah, I bet you were." She slowed, and turned her head to look at him, full-on. Even wide open, her eyes had a faint catlike slant to them.

"Have you been back to the stone circle? To Craigh na Dun?"

"No," he said shortly. Then coughed and added, as if casually, "I don't go up to Inverness all that often; it's been term time at College."

“It isn’t that the Minister’s cat is a fraidycat?” she asked, but she smiled slightly when she said it.

“The Minister’s cat is scared stiff of that place,” he said frankly. “He wouldn’t set foot up there if it were knee-deep in sardines.” She laughed outright, and the tension between them eased noticeably.

“Me too,” she said, and took a deep breath. “But I remember. All the trouble you went to, to help—and then, when it—when she—when Mama went through—” Her teeth clamped savagely on her lower lip, and she hit the brake, harder than necessary.

“Do you see?” she said, in a small voice. “I can’t be around you more than half an hour, and it all comes back. I haven’t talked about my parents in more than six months, and no sooner do we start playing that silly game than I’ve mentioned both of them in less than a minute. It’s been happening all week.”

She thumbed a loose strand of red hair off her shoulder. She went a lovely pink when she was excited or upset, and the color was burning high in her cheeks.

“I thought it might be something like that—when you didn’t answer my letter.”

“It wasn’t only that.” She caught her lower lip between her teeth, as though to bite back the words, but it was too late. A brilliant tide of red washed up out of the V of her white T-shirt, turning her the color of the tomato sauce she insisted on eating with chips.

He reached across the seat and gently brushed the veil of hair back from her face.

“I had a terrible crush on you,” she blurted, staring straight ahead through the windshield. “But I didn’t know whether you were just being nice to me because Mama asked you to, or whether—”

“Whether,” he interrupted, and smiled as she risked a tiny look at him. “Definitely whether.”

“Oh.” She relaxed fractionally, loosening her stranglehold on the wheel. “Well. Good.”

He wanted to take her hand, but didn’t want to pry it off the wheel and cause an accident. Instead, he laid his arm across the back of the seat, letting his fingers brush her shoulder.

"Anyway. I didn't think—I thought—well, it was either throw myself into your arms or get the hell out of Dodge. So I did, but I couldn't figure out how to explain without looking like an idiot, and then when you wrote, it was worse—well, see, I *do* look like an idiot!"

Roger flipped open the catch of his seat belt.

"Will you drive into that car in front of us if I kiss you?"

"No."

"Good." He slid across the seat, took her chin in one hand, and kissed her, fast. They bumped sedately over the dirt road and into the parking lot.

She was breathing easier, and her color had receded a little. She pulled neatly into a parking slot, killed the motor, and sat for a moment, looking straight ahead. Then she opened her seat belt and turned to him.

It wasn't until they got out of the car several minutes later that it occurred to Roger that she had mentioned her parents more than once—but the real problem had likely more to do with the parent she so carefully *hadn't* mentioned.

Great, he thought, absently admiring her backside as she bent to open the trunk. *She's trying not to think of Jamie Fraser, and where the hell do* you *bring her?* He glanced at the entrance to the resort, where the Union Jack and the Saltire of Scotland snapped in the summer breeze. From the mountainside beyond came the mournful sound of bagpipes playing.

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4

A BLAST FROM THE PAST

Used as he was to changing in the back of someone's horse van or in the Gents' facilities of a pub, the small backstage cubicle allotted to Roger's personal use seemed remarkably luxurious. It was clean, it had hooks for his street clothes, and there were no drunken patrons snoring on the threshold. Of course, this was America, he reflected, unbuttoning his jeans and dropping them on the floor. Different standards, at least with regard to material comforts.

He yanked the bell-sleeved shirt over his head, wondering just what level of comfort Brianna was accustomed to. He was no judge of women's clothing—how expensive could blue jeans possibly be?—but he knew a bit about cars. Hers was a brand-new blue Mustang that made him itch to take the wheel.

Plainly her parents had left her enough to live on; he could trust Claire Randall to have seen to that. He only hoped it wasn't so much that she might think him interested on that account. Reminded of her parents, he glanced at the brown envelope; should he give it to her, after all?

The Minister's cat had nearly jumped out of her skin when they'd walked through the performers' entrance and come face-to-face with the 78th Fraser Highlanders' pipe-band from Canada, practicing at full blast behind the dressing rooms. She'd actually gone pale when he'd introduced her to the pipe major, an old acquaintance. Not that Bill Livingstone was intimidating on his own; it was the Fraser clan badge on his chest that had done it.

Je suis prest, it said. *I am ready*. Not nearly ready enough, Roger thought, and wanted to kick himself for bringing her.

Still, she had assured him she'd be all right exploring on her own while he dressed and got himself up for his turn.

And he'd best turn his mind to that, too, he thought, snugging the buckles of his kilt at waist and hip, and reaching for the long woolen stockings. He was on in the early afternoon, for forty-five minutes, then a shorter solo turn at the evening *ceilidh*. He had a rough lineup of songs in mind, but you always had to take the crowd into account. Lots of women, the ballads went well; more men, more of the martial—"Killiecrankie" and "Montrose," "Guns and Drums." The bawdy songs did best when the audience was well warmed up—preferably after a bit of beer.

He turned the stocking tops down neatly, and slid the antler-handled *sgian dhu* inside, tight against his right calf. He laced the buskins quickly, hurrying a little. He wanted to find Brianna again, have a little time to walk round with her, get her something to eat, see she had a good seat for the performances.

He flung the plaid over one shoulder, fastened his brooch, belted on dirk and sporran, and was ready. Or not quite. He halted, halfway to the door.

The ancient olive-drab drawers were military issue, circa World War II—one of Roger's few mementos of his father. He didn't bother with pants much in the normal course, but included these with his kilt sometimes as a defensive measure against the amazing boldness of some female spectators. He'd been warned by other performers, but wouldn't have believed it, had he not experienced it firsthand. German ladies were the worst, but he'd known a few American women run them a close second for taking liberties in close quarters.

He didn't think he'd need such measures here; the crowd sounded civil, and he'd seen that the stage was safely out of reach. Besides, offstage he'd have Brianna with him, and if she should choose to take any liberties of her own … He dropped the pants back in his bag, on top of the brown envelope.

"Wish me luck, Dad," he whispered, and went to find her.

"Wow!" She walked round him in a circle, goggling. "Roger, you are *gorgeous*!" She smiled, a trifle lopsided. "My mother always said men in kilts were irresistible. I guess she was right."

He saw her swallow hard, and wanted to hug her for her bravery, but she had already turned away, gesturing toward the main food area.

"Are you hungry? I had a look while you were changing. We've got our choice between octopus-on-a-stick, Baja fish tacos, Polish dogs—"

He took her arm and pulled her round to face him.

"Hey," he said softly. "I'm sorry; I wouldn't have brought you if I'd known it would be a shock."

"It's all right." Her smile was better this time. "It's—I'm glad you brought me."

"Truly?"

"Yeah. Really. It's—" She waved helplessly at the tartan swirl of noise and color all around them. "It's so—Scottish."

He wanted to laugh at that; nothing could be less like Scotland than this mix of tourist claptrap and the bald-faced selling of half-faked traditions. At the same time, she was right, it *was* uniquely Scottish; an example of the Scots' age-old talent for survival—the ability to adapt to anything, and make a profit from it.

He did hug her, then. Her hair smelled clean, like fresh grass, and he could feel her heart beating through the white T-shirt she wore.

"You're Scots, too, you know," he said in her ear, and let go. Her eyes were still bright, but with a different emotion now, he thought.

"I guess you're right," she said, and smiled again, a good one. "That doesn't mean I have to eat haggis, does it? I saw some over there, and I think I'd even rather try the octopus-on-a-stick."

He'd thought she was joking, but she wasn't. The resort's sole business, it seemed, was "ethnic fairs," as one of the food vendors explained.

"Polacks dancin' polkas, Swiss yodelers—Jeez, they musta had ten million cuckoo clocks here! Spanish, Italian, Japanese cherry blossom festivals—you wouldn’t believe all the cameras them Japs have, you just wouldn’t believe it.” He shook his head in bemusement, sliding across two paper plates filled with hamburgers and french fries.

“Anyways, it’s something different, every two weeks. Never a dull moment. But us food vendors, we just stay in business, no matter what kinda food it is.” The man eyed Roger’s kilt with some interest.

“So, you Scotch, or you just like wearing a skirt?”

Having heard several dozen variations of that pleasantry, Roger gave the man a bland look.

“Well, as my auld grand-da used to say,” he said, thickening his accent atrociously, “when ye put on yer kilt, laddie, ye ken for sure yer a man!”

The man doubled up appreciatively, and Brianna rolled her eyes.

“Kilt jokes,” she muttered. “God, if you start telling kilt jokes, I’ll drive off and leave you, I swear I will.”

Roger grinned at her.

“Och, now, ye wouldna do that, would ye, lass? Go off and leave a man, only because he’ll tell ye what’s worn under the kilt, if ye like?”

Her eyes narrowed into blue triangles.

“Oh, I’d bet nothing at all’s worn under *that* kilt,” she said, with a nod at Roger’s sporran. “Why, I’ll bet everything under there is in pairrrrrrfect operrrating condition, no?”

Roger choked on a french fry.

“You’re s’posed to say ‘Give us your hand, lassie, and I’ll show you,’ ” the food vendor prompted. “Boy, if I’ve heard that one once, I’ve heard it a hunderd times this week.”

“If he says it now,” Brianna put in darkly, “I’ll drive off and leave him marooned on this mountain. He can stay here and eat octopus, for all I care.”

Roger took a gulp of Coca-Cola and wisely kept quiet.

* * *

There was time for a wander up and down the aisles of the vendors’ stalls, selling everything from tartan ties to penny whistles, silver jewelry, clan maps of Scotland, butterscotch and shortbread, letter openers in the shape of claymores, lead Highlander figures, books, records, and every imaginable small item on which a clan badge or motto could be imprinted.

Roger attracted no more than a brief glance of curiosity; while of better quality than most, his costume was no oddity here. Still, most of the crowd were tourists, dressed in shorts and jeans, but breaking out here and there in bits of tartan, like a rash.

"Why MacKenzie?" Brianna asked, pausing by one display of clan-marked keychains. She fingered one of the silver disks that read *Luceo non uro,* the Latin motto curved around a depiction of what looked like a volcano. "Didn't Wakefield sound Scottish enough? Or did you think the people at Oxford wouldn't like you doing—this?" She waved at the venue around them.

Roger shrugged.

"Partly that. But it's my family name, as well. Both my parents were killed during the war, and my great-uncle adopted me. He gave me his own name—but I was christened Roger Jeremiah MacKenzie."

"Jeremiah?" She didn't laugh out loud, but the end of her nose pinkened as though she was trying not to. "Like the Old Testament prophet?"

"Don't laugh," he said, taking her arm. "I was named for my father—they called him Jerry. My Mum called me Jemmy when I was small. Old family name. It could have been worse, after all; I might have been christened Ambrose or Conan."

The laughter fizzed out of her like Coke bubbles.

"Conan?"

"Perfectly good Celtic name, before the fantasists got hold of it. Anyway, Jeremiah seems to have been the pick of the lot for good cause."

"Why's that?"

They turned and headed slowly back toward the stage, where a gang of solemnly starched little girls were doing the Highland fling in perfect unison, every pleat and bow in place.

"Oh, it's one of the stories Dad—the Reverend, I always called him Dad—used to tell me, going down my family tree and pointing out the folk on it."

Ambrose MacKenzie, that's your great-grandfather, Rog. He'll have been a boatwright in Dingwall. And there's Mary Oliphant—I knew your great-grandma Oliphant, did I tell you? Lived to be ninety-seven, and sharp as a tack to her last breath; wonderful woman.

She was married six times—all died of natural causes, too, she assured me—but I've only put Jeremiah MacKenzie here, since he was your ancestor. The only one she had children by, I did wonder about that.

I asked her, and she closed one eye and nodded at me, and said, "Is fhearr an giomach na 'bhi gun fear tighe." *It's an old Gaelic proverb—"Better a lobster than no husband." She said some would do for marrying, but Jeremiah was the only lad bonny enough to take to her bed every night.*

"I wonder what she told the others," Brianna said, meditatively.

"Well, she didn't say she didn't sleep with them now and then," Roger pointed out. "Just not every night."

"Once is enough to get pregnant," Brianna said. "Or so my mother assured my high school health class. She'd draw pictures of sperm on the blackboard, all racing toward this huge egg with leers on their faces." She'd gone pink again, but evidently from amusement rather than distressed memory.

Arm in arm, he could feel the heat of her through the thin T-shirt, and a stirring under his kilt that made him think leaving the pants off had been a mistake.

"Putting aside the question of whether sperm have faces, what has that particular subject got to do with health?"

"Health is an American euphemism for anything to do with sex," she explained. "They teach girls and boys separately; the girls' class is The Mysteries of Life, and Ten Ways to Say No to a Boy."

"And the boys' class?"

"Well, I don't know for sure, because I didn't have any brothers to tell me. Some of my friends had brothers, though—one of them said they learned eighteen different synonyms for penile erection."

“Really useful, that,” Roger said, wondering why anyone required more than one. Luckily, a sporran covered a multitude of sins.

“I suppose it might keep the conversation going—under certain circumstances.”

Her cheeks were red. He could feel the heat creeping up his own throat, and imagined that they were beginning to attract curious glances from passersby. He hadn’t let a girl embarrass him in public since he was seventeen, but she was doing nicely. She’d started it, though—let her finish it, then.

“Mmphm. I hadn’t noticed much conversation, under those particular circumstances.”

“I imagine you’d know.” It wasn’t quite a question. Rather late, he realized what she was up to. He tightened his arm, pulling her closer.

“If you mean have I, yes. If you mean am I, no.”

“Are you, what?” Her lips were quivering slightly, holding back the urge to laugh.

“You’re asking if I’ve got a girl in England, right?”

“Am I?”

“I don’t. Or rather I do, but nothing serious.” They were outside the door to the dressing rooms; nearly time to fetch his instruments. He stopped and turned to look at her. “Have you? Got a bloke, I mean.”

She was tall enough to look him in the eye, and close enough that her breasts grazed his forearm when she turned to face him.

“What was it your great-grandmother said? ‘*Is fhearr an giomach.…’?*”

“ ‘… na ’bhi gun fear tighe.’ ”

“Uh-huh. Well, better a lobster than no boyfriend.” She lifted a hand and touched his brooch. “So yes, there are people I go out with. But I don’t have a bonny lad—yet.”

He caught her fingers and brought them to his mouth.

“Give it time, lass,” he said, and kissed them.

The audience was amazingly quiet; not at all like a rock concert. Of course, they couldn't be noisy, she thought; there weren't any electric guitars or amplifiers, only a small microphone on a stand. But then, some things didn't need amplifying. Her heart, for one, hammering in her ears.

"Here," he'd said, appearing abruptly out of the dressing room with guitar and drum. He'd handed her a small brown envelope. "I found these, going through my dad's old bumf in Inverness. I thought you'd maybe want them."

She could tell it was photographs, but she hadn't looked at them right away. She'd sat with them burning a hole on her knee, listening to Roger's set.

He was good—even distracted, she could tell he was good. He had a surprisingly rich deep baritone voice, and he knew what to do with it. Not just in terms of tone and melody; he had the true performer's ability to pull aside the curtain between singer and audience, to look out into the crowd, meet someone's eyes, and let them see what lay behind both words and music.

He'd got them going with "The Road to the Isles," a quick and lively clap-along song with a rousing chorus, and when they'd subsided from that, kept them going with "The Gallowa' Hills," and a sweet slide into "The Lewis Bridal Song," with a lovely, lilting chorus in Gaelic.

He let the last note die away on "Vhair Me Oh," and smiled, directly at her, she thought.

"And here's one from the '45," he said. "This one is from the famous battle of Prestonpans, at which the Highland Army of Charles Stuart routed a much greater English force, under the command of General Jonathan Cope."

There was an appreciative murmur from the crowd, for many of whom the song was plainly an old favorite, quickly shushed as Roger's fingers plucked out the marching line.

"Cope sent a challenge from Dunbar
Sayin' 'Charlie, meet me, and ye daur

An' I'll learn ye the art o' war
If ye'll meet me in the mornin'.' "

He bent his head over the strings, nodding to the crowd to join in the jeering chorus.

"Hey, Johnnie Cope, are ye walkin' yet?
And are your drums a-beatin' yet?
If ye were walkin', I would wait
Tae gang tae the coals in the mornin'!"

Brianna felt a sudden prickle at the roots of her hair that had nothing to do with singer or crowd, but with the song itself.

"When Charlie looked the letter upon,
He drew his sword the scabbard from,
Come, follow me, my merry men,
And we'll meet Johnnie Cope in the morning!"

"No," she whispered, her fingers cold on the smooth brown envelope. *Come follow me, my merry men* … They'd been there—both her parents. It was her father who had charged the field at Preston, his broadsword and his targe in his hands.

"… For it will be a bluidie morning!"
"Hey, Johnnie Cope, are ye walkin' yet?
And are your drums a-beatin' yet?…"

The voices rose around her in a roar of approbation as they joined in the chorus. She had a moment of rising panic, when she would have fled away like Johnnie Cope, but it passed, leaving her buffeted by emotion as much as by the music.

"In faith, quo Johnnie, I got sic flegs,
Wi' their claymores an' philabegs,
Gin I face them again, de'il brak my legs,
So I wish you a' good morning!

Hey, Johnnie Cope, are ye walkin' yet?…"

Yes, he was. And he would be, as long as that song lasted. Some people tried to preserve the past; others, to escape it. And that was by far the greatest gulf between herself and Roger. Why hadn't she seen it before?

She didn't know whether Roger had seen her momentary distress, but he abandoned the dangerous territory of the Jacobites and went into "MacPherson's Lament," sung with no more than an occasional touch of the strings. The woman next to Brianna let out a long sigh and looked doe-eyed at the stage.

"Sae rantingly, sae wantonly, sae dauntingly gaed he,
He played a tune and he danced it roond … alow the gallows tree!"

She picked up the envelope, weighing it on her fingers. She ought to wait, maybe, until she got home. But curiosity was warring with reluctance. Roger hadn't been sure he should give it to her; she'd seen that in his eyes.

"… a bodhran," Roger was saying. The drum was no more than a wooden hoop, a few inches wide, with a skin head stretched over it, some eighteen inches across. He held the drum balanced on the fingers of one hand, a small double-headed stick in the other. "One of the oldest known instruments, this is the drum with which the Celtic tribes scared the bejesus out of Julius Caesar's troops in 52 BC." The audience tittered, and he touched the wide drumhead with the stick, back and forth in a soft, quick rhythm like a heartbeat.

"And here's 'The Sheriffmuir Fight,' from the first Jacobite Rising, in 1715."

The drumhead shifted and the beat dropped in pitch, became martial in tone, a thundering behind the words. The audience was still well-behaved, but now sat up and leaned forward, hanging on the chant that described the battle of Sheriffmuir, and all the clans who had fought in it.

"… then on they rushed, and blood out-gushed, and many a puke did fall, man …
They hacked and hashed, while broadswords clashed …"

As the song ended she put her fingers inside the envelope and pulled out a set of photographs. Old snapshots, black-and-white faded to tones of brown. Her parents. Frank and Claire Randall, both looking absurdly young—and terribly happy.

They were in a garden somewhere; there were lawn chairs, and a table with drinks in a background dappled with the scattered light of tree leaves. The faces showed clearly, though—laughing, faces alight with youth, eyes only for each other.

Posing formally, arm in arm, mocking their own formality. Laughing, Claire half bent over with hilarity at something Frank had said, holding down a wide skirt flying in the wind, her curly hair suffering no such restraint. Frank handing Claire a cup, she looking up into his face as she took it, with such a look of hope and trust that Brianna's heart squeezed tight to see it.

Then she looked at the last of the pictures, and realized what she was looking at. The two of them stood by the table, hands together on a knife, laughing as they cut into an obviously homemade cake. A wedding cake.

"And for the last, an old favorite that you'll know. This song is said to have been sent by a Jacobite prisoner, on his way to London to be hanged, to his wife in the Highlands …"

She spread her hands out flat on top of the pictures, as though to keep anyone from seeing them. An icy shock went through her. Wedding pictures. Snapshots of their wedding day. Of course; they'd been married in Scotland. The Reverend Wakefield wouldn't have done the ceremony, not being a Catholic priest, but he was one of her father's oldest friends; the reception must have been held at the manse.

Yes. Peeking through her fingers, she could make out familiar bits of the old house in the background. Then, reluctantly sliding her hand aside, she looked again at her mother's young face.

Eighteen. Claire had married Frank Randall at eighteen—perhaps that explained it. How could anyone know their mind so young?

"By yon bonnie banks, and by yon bonnie braes,
Where the sun shines bright on Loch Lomond,
Where me and my true love were ever wont to gae …"

But Claire had been sure—or she'd thought so. The broad clear brow and delicate mouth admitted of no doubt; the big, luminous eyes were fixed on her new husband with no sign of reservation or misgiving. And yet—

"But me and my true love will never meet again
On the bonnie, bonnie banks of Loch Lomond."

Oblivious of the toes she stepped on, Brianna blundered out of the row and fled, before anyone should see the tears.

* * *

"I can stay with you through part of the calling of the clans," Roger said, "but I've a bit to do at the end of it, so I'll have to leave you. Will you be all right?"

"Yes, of course," she said firmly. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

He looked at her a little anxiously, but let it pass. Neither of them had mentioned her precipitous departure earlier; by the time he had made his way through the congratulatory well-wishers and gone to find her, she had had time to find a Ladies' and get herself under control with cold water.

They had spent the rest of the afternoon strolling through the festival, shopping a bit, going outside to watch the pipe-bands' competition, coming in half deafened to see a young man dance between two swords crossed on the ground. The photographs stayed safely out of sight in her handbag.

It was nearly dark now; people were leaving the eating area and heading for the open stands outside, at the foot of the mountain.

She had thought the families with young children would leave, and some did, but there were small bodies and sleepy heads drooping among the older people in the stands. A tiny girl lay limp, sound asleep on her father's shoulder as they made their way into one of the upper rows of the stands. There was a clear, flat space in front of the bleachers, in which a huge heap of wood had been piled.

"What's the calling of the clans?" she heard a woman ask her companion in the row ahead. The companion shrugged, and Brianna looked at Roger for enlightenment, but he only smiled.

"You'll see," he said.

It was full dark, and the moon not risen; the bulk of the mountainside rose up as a darker black against the star-flecked sky. There was an exclamation from somewhere in the crowd, a scattering of more, and then the notes of a single bagpipe came faintly through the air, silencing everything else.

A pinpoint of light appeared near the top of the mountain. As they watched, it moved down, and another sprang up behind it. The music grew stronger, and another light came over the top of the mountain. For nearly ten minutes, the anticipation grew, as the music grew louder, and the string of lights grew longer, a blazing chain down the mountainside.

Near the bottom of the slope, a trail came out from the trees above; she had seen it during her earlier exploration. Now a man stepped out of the trees into sight, holding a blazing torch above his head. Behind him was the piper, and the sound now was strong enough to drown even the oohs and ahhs of the crowd.

As the two moved down the trail and toward the cleared space in front of the bleachers, Brianna could see that there were more men behind them; a long line of men, each with a torch, all dressed in the finery of the Highland chieftains. They were barbarous and splendid, decked in grouse feathers, the silver of swords and dirks gleaming red by the torchlight, picked out amid the folds of tartan cloth.

The pipes stopped abruptly, and the first of the men strode into the clearing and stopped before the stands. He raised his torch above his head and shouted, "The Camerons are here!"

Loud whoops of delight rang out from the stands, and he threw the torch into the kerosene-soaked wood, which went up with a roar, in a pillar of fire ten feet high.

Against the blinding sheet of flame, another man stepped out, and called, “The MacDonalds are here!”

Screams and yelps from those in the crowd that claimed kinship with clan MacDonald, and then—

“The MacLachlans are here!”

“The MacGillivrays are here!”

She was so entranced by the spectacle that she was only dimly aware of Roger. Then another man stepped out and cried, “The MacKenzies are here!”

“Tulach Ard!” bellowed Roger, making her jump.

“What was *that?*” she asked.

“That,” he said, grinning, “is the war cry of clan MacKenzie.”

“Sounded like it.”

“The Campbells are here!” There must have been a lot of Campbells; the response shook the bleachers. As though that was the signal he had been waiting for, Roger stood up and flung his plaid over his shoulder.

“I’ll meet you afterward by the dressing rooms, all right?” She nodded, and he bent suddenly and kissed her.

“Just in case,” he said. “The Frasers’ cry is *Caisteal Dhuni*!”

She watched him go, climbing down the bleachers like a mountain goat. The smell of woodsmoke filled the night air, mixing with the smaller fragrance of tobacco from cigarettes in the crowd.

“The MacKays are here!”

“The MacLeods are here!”

“The Farquarsons are here!”

Her chest felt tight, from the smoke and from emotion. The clans had died at Culloden—or had they? Yes, they had; this was no more than memory, than the calling up of ghosts; none of the people shouting so enthusiastically owed kinship to each other, none of them lived any longer by the claims of laird and land, but …

“The Frasers are here!”

Sheer panic gripped her, and her hand closed tight on the clasp of her bag.

No, she thought. *Oh, no. I’m not.*

Then the moment passed, and she could breathe again, but jolts of adrenaline still thrilled through her blood.

"The Grahams are here!"

"The Inneses are here!"

The Ogilvys, the Lindsays, the Gordons … and then finally, the echoes of the last shout died. Brianna held the bag on her lap, gripped tight, as though to keep its contents from escaping like the jinn from a lamp.

How could she? she thought, and then, seeing Roger come into the light, fire on his head and his bodhran in his hand, thought again, *How could she help it?*

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5

TWO HUNDRED YEARS FROM YESTERDAY

"You didn't wear your kilt!" Gayle's mouth turned down in disappointment.

"Wrong century," Roger said, smiling down at her. "Drafty for a moonwalk."

"You have to teach me to do that." She bounced on her toes, leaning toward him.

"Do what?"

"Roll your r's like that." She puckered her brows and made an earnest attempt, sounding like a motorboat in low gear.

"Verra nice," he said, trying not to laugh. "Keep it up. Prractice makes perfect."

"Well, did you bring your guitar, at least?" She stood on tiptoes, trying to look behind him. "Or that groovy drum?"

"It's in the car," Brianna said, putting away her keys as she came up beside Roger. "We're going to the airport from here."

"Oh, too bad; I thought we could hang around and have a hootenanny afterward, to celebrate. Do you know 'This Land Is Your Land,' Roger? Or are you more into protest songs? But I guess you wouldn't be, since you're English—oops, I mean Scotch. You guys don't have anything to protest about, do you?"

Brianna gave her friend a look of mild exasperation. "Where's Uncle Joe?"

"In the living room, kicking the TV," Gayle said. "Shall I entertain Roger while you find him?" She linked one arm cosily through Roger's, batting her eyelashes.

"We got half the doggone MIT College of Engineering here, and nobody who can fix a doggone *television?*" Dr. Joseph Abernathy glared accusingly at the clusters of young people scattered around his living room.

"That's *electrical* engineering, Pop," his son told him loftily. "We're all mechanical engineers. Ask a mechanical engineer to fix your color TV, that's like asking an Ob-Gyn to look at the sore on your di—ow!"

"Oh, sorry," said his father, peering blandly over gold-rimmed glasses. "That your foot, Lenny?"

Lenny hopped storklike around the room to general laughter, clutching one large sneaker-clad foot in exaggerated agony.

"Bree, honey!" The doctor spotted her and abandoned the television, beaming. He hugged her enthusiastically, disregarding the fact that she topped him by four inches or so, then let go and looked at Roger, his features rearranged in a look of wary cordiality.

"This the boyfriend?"

"This is Roger Wakefield," Brianna said, narrowing her eyes slightly at the doctor. "Roger, Joe Abernathy."

"Dr. Abernathy."

"Call me Joe."

They shook hands in mutual assessment. The doctor looked him over with quick brown eyes, no less shrewd for their warmth.

"Bree, honey, you want to go lay hands on that piece of junk, see can you bring it back to life?" He jerked a thumb at the twenty-four-inch RCA sitting in mute defiance on its wire stand. "It was working fine last night, then today … pffft!"

Brianna looked dubiously at the big color TV, and groped in the pocket of her jeans, coming out with a Swiss Army knife.

"Well, I can check the connections, I guess." She flicked out the screwdriver blade. "How much time do we have?"

"Half hour, maybe," called a crew-cut student from the kitchen doorway. He glanced at the crowd clustered around the small black-and-white set on the table. "We're still with Mission Control in Houston—ETA thirty-four minutes." The muted excitement of the

TV commentator came in bursts through the more vivid excitement of the spectators.

"Good, good," said Dr. Abernathy. He laid a hand on Roger's shoulder. "Plenty of time for a drink, then. You a Scotch man, Mr. Wakefield?"

"Call me Roger."

Abernathy poured a generous measure of amber nectar and handed it over.

"Don't imagine you take water, do you, Roger?"

"No." It was Lagavulin; astonishing to find it in Boston. He sipped appreciatively, and the doctor smiled.

"Claire gave it to me—Bree's mama. Now, there was a woman with a taste for fine whisky." He shook his head nostalgically, and raised his glass in tribute.

"Slàinte," Roger said quietly, and tipped his own glass before drinking.

Abernathy closed his eyes in silent appreciation—whether of the whisky or the woman, Roger couldn't tell.

"Water of life, huh? I do believe that particular stuff could raise the dead." He set the bottle back in the liquor cabinet with reverent hands.

How much had Claire told Abernathy? Enough, Roger supposed. The doctor picked up his tumbler and gave him a long look of assessment.

"Since Bree's daddy is dead, I guess I get to do the honors. Reckon we got time for the third degree before they land, or shall we keep it short?"

Roger raised one eyebrow.

"Your intentions," the doctor elaborated.

"Oh. Strictly honorable."

"Yeah? I called Bree last night, to see if she was coming tonight. No answer."

"We'd gone to a Celtic festival, up in the mountains."

"Uh-huh. I called again, eleven p.m. And midnight. No answer." The doctor's eyes were still shrewd, but a good deal less warm. He set his glass down with a small click.

"Bree's alone," he said. "And she's lonely. And she's lovely. I wouldn't like to see anybody take advantage of that, Mr. Wakefield."

"Neither would I—Dr. Abernathy." Roger drained his glass and set it down hard. Warmth burned in his cheeks, and it wasn't due to the Lagavulin. "If you think that I—"

"THIS IS HOUSTON," boomed the television. "TRANQUILITY BASE, WE HAVE TOUCH-DOWN IN TWENTY MINUTES."

The inhabitants of the kitchen came pouring out, waving Coke bottles and cheering. Brianna, flushed with her labors, was laughing and brushing off their congratulations as she put away her knife. Abernathy put a hand on Roger's arm, to keep him.

"Mind me, Mr. Wakefield," Abernathy said, his voice low enough not to be heard over the crowd. "I don't want to hear that you've made that girl unhappy. Ever."

Roger carefully released his arm from the other's grip.

"D'ye think she looks unhappy?" he asked, as politely as he could.

"No-oo," said Abernathy, rocking back on his heels and squinting hard at him. "On the contrary. It's the way she looks tonight that makes me think I should maybe punch you in the nose, on her daddy's behalf."

Roger couldn't help turning to look at her himself; it was true. She had dark circles under her eyes, wisps of hair were coming down from her ponytail, and her skin was glowing like the wax of a lighted candle. She looked like a woman who'd had a long night—and enjoyed it.

As though by radar, her head turned and her eyes fixed on him, over Gayle's head. She went on talking to Gayle, but her eyes spoke straight to him.

The doctor cleared his throat loudly. Roger jerked his attention away from her, to find Abernathy looking up at him, his expression thoughtful.

"Oh," the doctor said, in a changed tone. "Like that, is it?"

Roger's collar was unbuttoned, but he felt as though he were wearing a tie tied too tight. He met the doctor's eyes straight on.

"Yeah," he said. "Like that."

Dr. Abernathy reached for the bottle of Lagavulin, and filled both glasses.

"Claire did say she liked you," he said in resignation. He lifted one glass. "Okay. *Slàinte*."

* * *

"Turn it the other way—Walter Cronkite's orange!" Lenny Abernathy obligingly twirled the knob, turning the commentator green. Unaffected by his sudden change of complexion, Cronkite went on talking.

"In approximately two minutes, Commander Neil Armstrong and the crew of the Apollo 11 will make history in the first manned landing on the moon …"

The living room was darkened and packed with people, everyone's attention riveted on the big TV as the footage shifted to a replay of the Apollo's launch.

"I'm impressed," Roger said in Brianna's ear. "How did you fix it?" He leaned against the end of a bookshelf, and pulled her snug against him, his hands on the swell of her hips, his chin on her shoulder.

Her eyes were on the television, but he felt her cheek move against his own.

"Somebody kicked the plug out of the wall," she said. "I just plugged it back in."

He laughed and kissed the side of her neck. It was hot in the room, even with the air conditioner humming, and her skin tasted moist and salty.

"You've got the roundest arse in the world," he whispered. She didn't answer, but deliberately nestled her bottom against him.

A buzz of voices from the screen and pictures of the flag the astronauts would plant on the moon.

He glanced across the room, but Joe Abernathy was as hypnotized as any of them, face rapt in the glow of the television screen. Safe in the darkness, he wrapped his arms around Brianna, and felt the soft weight of her breasts on his forearm. She sighed deeply and relaxed against him, putting her hand over his and squeezing tight.

They would both be less bold if there were any danger to it. But he was leaving in two hours; there was no chance of it going further. The night before, they had known they were playing with dynamite, and been more cautious. He wondered if Abernathy would actually have punched him, had he admitted that Brianna had spent the night in his bed?

He had driven them down the mountain, torn between trying to stay on the right side of the road, and the excitement of Brianna's soft weight, pressed against him. They'd stopped for coffee, talked long past midnight, touching constantly, hands, thighs, heads close together. Driven on to Boston in the wee hours, the conversation dying, Brianna's head heavy on his shoulder.

Unable to keep awake long enough to find his way through the maze of unfamiliar streets to her apartment, he had driven to his hotel, smuggled her upstairs, and laid her on his bed, where she had fallen asleep in seconds.

He had himself spent the rest of the night on the chaste hardness of the floor, Brianna's woolly cardigan across his shoulders for warmth. With the dawn, he'd got up and sat in the chair, wrapped in her scent, silently watching the light spread across her sleeping face.

Yeah, it was like that.

"Tranquility Base … the Eagle has landed." The silence in the room was broken by a deep collective sigh, and Roger felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.

"One … small … step for man," said the tinny voice, *"one giant leap … for mankind."* The picture was fuzzy, but not through any fault of the television. Heads strained forward, avid to see the bulky figure making its ginger way down the ladder, setting foot for the first time on the lunar soil. Tears gleamed on one girl's cheeks, silver in the glow.

Even Brianna had forgotten everything else; her hand had fallen from his arm and she was leaning forward, caught up in the moment.

It was a fine day to be an American.

He had a momentary qualm, seeing them all so fiercely intent, so fervently proud, and she so much a part of it. It *was* a different century, two hundred years from yesterday.

Might there be common ground for them, a historian and an engineer? He facing backward to the mysteries of the past, she to the future and its dazzling gleam?

Then the room relaxed in cheers and babbling, and she turned in his arms to kiss him hard and cling to him, and he thought perhaps it didn't matter that they faced in opposite directions—so long as they faced each other.

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PART THREE

Pirates

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6

I ENCOUNTER A HERNIA

June 1767

“I hate boats,” Jamie said through clenched teeth. “I loathe boats. I view boats with the most profound abhorrence.”

Jamie’s uncle, Hector Cameron, lived on a plantation called River Run, just above Cross Creek. Cross Creek in turn lay some way upriver from Wilmington; some two hundred miles, in fact. At this time of year, we were told, the trip might take four days to a week by boat, depending on wind. If we chose rather to travel overland, the journey could take two weeks or more, depending on such things as washed-out roads, mud, and broken axles.

“Rivers do not have waves,” I said. “And I view the notion of trudging on foot for two hundred miles through the mud with a lot more than abhorrrrence.” Ian grinned broadly, but quickly exchanged the grin for an expression of bland detachment as Jamie’s glare moved in his direction.

“Besides,” I said to Jamie, “if you get seasick, I still have my needles.” I patted the pocket where my tiny set of gold acupuncture needles rested in their ivory case.

Jamie exhaled strongly through his nose, but said no more. That little matter settled, the major problem remaining was to manage the boat-fare.

We were not rich, but did have a little money, as the result of a spot of good fortune on the road. Gypsying our way north from Charleston, and camping well off the road at night, we had discovered an abandoned homestead in the wood, its clearing nearly obliterated by new growth.

Cottonwood saplings shot like spears through the beams of the fallen roof, and a hollybush sprouted through a large crack in the hearthstone. The walls were half collapsed, black with rot and furred with green moss and rusty fungus. There was no telling how long the place had been abandoned, but it was clear that both cabin and clearing would be swallowed by the wilderness within a few years, nothing left to mark its existence save a tumbled cairn of chimney stones.

However, flourishing incongruously among the invading trees were the remains of a small peach orchard, the fruit of it burstingly ripe and swarming with bees. We had eaten as much as we could, slept in the shelter of the ruins, then risen before dawn and loaded the wagon with heaping mounds of smooth gold fruit, all juice and velvet.

We had sold it as we went, and consequently had arrived in Wilmington with sticky hands, a bag of coins—mostly pennies—and a pervasive scent of fermentation that clung to hair, clothes, and skin, as though we had all been dipped in peach brandy.

“You take this,” Jamie advised me, handing me the small leather sack containing our fortune. “Buy what ye can for provisions—dinna buy any peaches, aye?—and perhaps a few bits and pieces so we dinna look *quite* such beggars when we come to my kinsman. A needle and thread, maybe?” He raised a brow and nodded at the large rent in Fergus’s coat, incurred while falling out of a peach tree.

“Duncan and I will go about and see can we sell the wagon and horses, and inquire for a boat. And if there’s such a thing as a goldsmith here, I’ll maybe see what he’d offer for one of the stones.”

“Be careful, Uncle,” Ian advised, frowning at the motley crew of humanity coming and going from the harbor nearby. “Ye dinna want to be taken advantage of, nor yet be robbed in the street.”

Jamie, gravely straight-faced, assured his nephew that he would take due precaution.

“Take Rollo,” Ian urged him. “He’ll protect ye.”

Jamie glanced down at Rollo, who was surveying the passing crowds with a look of panting alertness that suggested not so much social interest as barely restrained appetite.

"Oh, aye," he said. "Come along then, wee dog." He glanced at me as he turned to go. "Perhaps ye'd best buy a few dried fish, as well."

* * *

Wilmington was a small town, but because of its fortuitous situation as a seaport at the mouth of a navigable river, it boasted not only a farmer's market and a shipping dock, but several shops that stocked imported luxuries from Europe, as well as the homegrown necessities of daily life.

"Beans, all right," Fergus said. "I like beans, even in large quantities." He shifted the burlap sack on his shoulder, balancing its unwieldy weight. "And bread, of course we must have bread—and flour and salt and lard. Salt beef, dried cherries, fresh apples, all well and good. Fish, to be sure. Needles and thread I see also are certainly necessary. Even the hairbrush," he added, with a sidelong glance at my hair, which, inspired by the humidity, was making mad efforts to escape the confinement of my broad-brimmed hat. "And the medicines from the apothecary, naturally. But *lace?*"

"Lace," I said firmly. I tucked the small paper packet containing three yards of Brussels lace into the large basket he was carrying. "Likewise ribbons. One yard each of wide silk ribbon," I told the perspiring young girl behind the counter. "Red—that's yours, Fergus, so don't complain—green for Ian, yellow for Duncan, and the very dark blue for Jamie. And no, it isn't an extravagance; Jamie doesn't want us to look like ragamuffins when we meet his uncle and aunt."

"What about you, Auntie?" Ian said, grinning. "Surely ye willna let us men be dandies, and you go plain as a sparrow?"

Fergus blew air between his lips, in mingled exasperation and amusement.

"That one," he said, pointing to a wide roll of dark pink.

“That’s a color for a young girl,” I protested.

“Women are never too old to wear pink,” Fergus replied firmly. “I have heard *les mesdames* say so, many times.” I had heard *les mesdames’* opinions before; Fergus’s early life had been spent in a brothel, and judging from his reminiscences, not a little of his later life, too. I rather hoped that he could overcome the habit now that he was married to Jamie’s stepdaughter, but with Marsali still in Jamaica awaiting the birth of their first child, I had my doubts. Fergus was a Frenchman born, after all.

“I suppose the Madams would know,” I said. “All right, the pink, too.”

Burdened with baskets and bags of provisions, we made our way out into the street. It was hot and thickly humid, but there was a breeze from the river, and after the stifling confines of the shop, the air seemed sweet and refreshing. I glanced toward the harbor, where the masts of several small ships poked up, swaying gently to the rocking of the current, and saw Jamie’s tall figure stride out between two buildings, Rollo pacing close behind.

Ian hallooed and waved, and Rollo came bounding down the street, tail wagging madly at sight of his master. There were few people out at this time of day; those with business in the narrow street prudently flattened themselves against the nearest wall to avoid the rapturous reunion.

“My Gawd,” said a drawling voice somewhere above me. “That’ll be the biggest dawg I believe I’ve *ever* seen.” I turned to see a gentleman detach himself from the front of a tavern, and lift his hat politely to me. “Your servant, ma’am. He ain’t partial to human flesh, I do sincerely hope?”

I looked up at the man addressing me—and up. I refrained from expressing the opinion that he, of all people, could scarcely find Rollo a threat.

My interlocutor was one of the tallest men I’d ever seen; taller by several inches even than Jamie. Lanky and rawboned with it, his huge hands dangled at the level of my elbows, and the ornately beaded leather belt about his midriff came to my chest. I could have pressed my nose into his navel, had the urge struck me, which fortunately it didn't.

"No, he eats fish," I assured my new acquaintance. Seeing me craning my neck, he courteously dropped to his haunches, his knee joints popping like rifle shots as he did so. His face thus coming into view, I found his features still obscured by a bushy black beard. An incongruous snub nose poked out of the undergrowth, surmounted by a pair of wide and gentle hazel eyes.

"Well, I'm surely obliged to hear that. Wouldn't care to have a chunk taken out my leg, so early in the day." He removed a disreputable slouch hat with a ragged turkey feather thrust through the brim, and bowed to me, loose snaky black locks falling forward on his shoulders. "John Quincy Myers, your servant, ma'am."

"Claire Fraser," I said, offering him a hand in fascination. He squinted at it a moment, brought my fingers to his nose and sniffed them, then looked up and broke into a broad smile, nonetheless charming for missing half its teeth.

"Why, you'll maybe be a yarb-woman, won't you?"

"I will?"

He turned my hand gently over, tracing the chlorophyll stains around my cuticles.

"A green-fingered lady might just be tendin' her roses, but a lady whose hands smell of sassafras root and Jesuit bark is like to know more than how to make flowers bloom. Don't you reckon that's so?" he asked, turning a friendly gaze on Ian, who was viewing Mr. Myers with unconcealed interest.

"Oh, aye," Ian assured him. "Auntie Claire's a famous healer. A wise-woman!" He glanced proudly at me.

"That so, boy? Well, now." Mr. Myers's eyes went round with interest, and swiveled back to focus on me. "Smite me if this ain't Lucifer's own luck! And me thinkin' I'd have to wait till I come to the mountains and find me a *shaman* to take care of it."

"Are you ill, Mr. Myers?" I asked. He didn't look it, but it was hard to tell, what with the beard, the hair, and a thin layer of greasy brown dirt that seemed to cover everything not concealed by his ragged buckskins. The sole exception was his forehead; normally protected from the sun by the black felt hat, it was now exposed to view, a wide flat slab of purest white.

"Not to say ill, I don't reckon," he replied. He suddenly stood up, and began to fumble up the tail of his buckskin shirt. "It ain't the clap or the French pox, anyhow, 'cause I seen those before." What I had thought were trousers were in fact long buckskin leggings, surmounted by a breechclout. Still talking, Mr. Myers had hold of the leather thong holding up this latter garment, and was fumbling with the knot.

"Damnedest thing, though; all of a sudden this great big swelling come up just along behind of my balls. Purely inconvenient, as you may imagine, though it don't hurt me none to speak of, save on horseback. Might be you could take a peep and tell me what I best do for it, hm?"

"Ah.…" I said, with a frantic glance at Fergus, who merely shifted his sack of beans and looked amused, blast him.

"Would I have the pleasure to make the acquaintance of Mr. John Myers?" said a polite Scottish voice over my shoulder.

Mr. Myers ceased fumbling with his breechclout and glanced up inquiringly.

"Can't say whether it's a pleasure to you or not, sir," he replied courteously. "But be you lookin' for Myers, you've found him."

Jamie stepped up beside me, tactfully inserting his body between me and Mr. Myers's breechclout. He bowed formally, hat under his arm.

"James Fraser, your servant, sir. I was told to offer the name of Mr. Hector Cameron by way of introduction."

Mr. Myers looked at Jamie's red hair with interest.

"Scotch, are you? Be you one of them Highlander fellows?"

"I am a Scotsman, aye, and a Highlander."

"Be you kin to Old Hector Cameron?"

"He is my uncle by marriage, sir, though I have not met him myself. I was told that he was well known to you, and that you might consent to guide my party to his plantation."

The two men were frankly sizing each other up, eyes flicking head to toe as they talked, appraising bearing, dress, and armament.

Jamie's eyes rested approvingly on the long sheath-knife at the woodsman's belt, while Mr. Myers's nostrils flared wide with interest.

"Comme deux chiens," Fergus remarked softly behind me. Like two dogs. *"… aux culs."* Next thing you know, they will be smelling each other's backside.

Mr. Myers darted a glance at Fergus, and I saw a quick flash of amusement in the hazel depths before he returned to his assessment of Jamie. Uncultured the woodsman might be, but he plainly had some working knowledge of French.

Given Mr. Myers's olfactory inclinations and lack of self-consciousness, I might not have been surprised to see him drop to all fours and perform in the manner Fergus had suggested. As it was, he contented himself with a careful inspection that took in not only Jamie but Ian, Fergus, myself, and Rollo.

"Nice dawg," he said casually, holding out a set of massive knuckles to the latter. Rollo, thus invited, instituted his own inspection, sniffing industriously from moccasins to breechclout as the conversation went on.

"Your uncle, eh? Does he know you're coming?"

Jamie shook his head.

"I canna say. I sent a letter from Georgia, a month ago, but I've no way to tell whether he's had it yet."

"I shouldn't think so," Myers said thoughtfully. His eyes lingered on Jamie's face, then passed swiftly over the rest of us.

"I've met your wife. This'll be your son?" He nodded at Ian.

"My nephew, Ian. My foster son, Fergus." Jamie made the introductions with a wave of his hand. "And a friend, Duncan Innes, who'll be along presently."

Myers grunted, nodding, and made up his mind.

"Well, I should reckon I can get you to Cameron's all right. Wanted to be sure you was kin, but you got the look of the widder Cameron, in the face. The boy some, too."

Jamie's head jerked up sharply.

"The *widow* Cameron?"

A sly smile flitted through the thicket of beard.

"Old Hector caught the morbid sore throat, up and died late last winter. Don't figure they get much mail, wherever he is now."

Abandoning the Camerons for matters of more immediate personal interest, Myers resumed his interrupted excavations.

"Big purple thing," he explained to me, fumbling his loosened thong. "Almost as big as one o' my balls. You don't think it might could be as I've decided sudden-like to grow an extry, do you?"

"Well, no," I said, biting my lip. "I really doubt it." He moved very slowly, but had almost got the knot in his thong undone; people in the street were beginning to pause, staring.

"Please don't trouble yourself," I said. "I do believe I know what that is—it's an inguinal hernia."

The wide hazel eyes got wider.

"It is?" He seemed impressed, and not at all displeased by the news.

"I'd have to look—somewhere indoors, that is," I added hastily "—to be sure, but it sounds like it. It's quite easy to repair surgically, but …" I hesitated, looking up at the Colossus. "I really couldn't—I mean, you'd need to be asleep. Unconscious," I amplified. "I'd have to cut you, and sew you up again, you see. Perhaps a truss—a brace—might be better, though."

Myers scratched slowly at his jaw, meditating.

"No, I done tried that, 'twon't do. Cuttin', though … You folks be staying here in the town for a spell before you head up to Cameron's?"

"Not long," Jamie interrupted firmly. "We shall be sailing upriver to my aunt's estate, as soon as passage can be arranged."

"Oh." The giant pondered this for a moment, then nodded, beaming.

"I know the very man for you, sir. I'll go this minute and fetch Josh Freeman out the Sailor's Rest. Sun's still high, he'll be not too drunk to do business yet." He swept me a bow, battered hat to his middle. "And then could be your wife might have the kindness to meet me in yonder tavern—it's a mite more genteel than the Sailor's—and have a look at this … this …" I saw his lips try to form themselves around "inguinal hernia," then give up the effort and relax. "This yere obstruction."

He clapped the hat back on his head, and with a nod to Jamie, was off.

Jamie watched the mountain man's stiff-legged retreat down the street, slowed by cordial greetings to all he passed.

"What is it about ye, Sassenach, I wonder?" he said conversationally, eyes still fixed on Myers.

"What is *what* about me?"

He turned then, and gave me a narrow eye.

"What it is that makes every man ye meet want to take off his breeks within five minutes of meetin' ye."

Fergus choked slightly, and Ian went pink. I looked as demure as possible.

"Well, if you don't know, my dear," I said, "no one does. *I* seem to have found us a boat. And what have *you* been up to this morning?"

* * *

Industrious as always, Jamie had found us a potential gem-buyer. And not only a buyer, but an invitation to dinner with the Governor.

"Governor Tryon's in the town just now," he explained. "Staying at the house of a Mr. Lillington. I talked this morning wi' a merchant named MacEachern, who put me on to a man named MacLeod, who—"

"Who introduced you to MacNeil, who took you to drink with MacGregor, who told you all about his nephew Bethune, who's the second cousin half removed of the boy who cleans the Governor's boots," I suggested, familiar by this time with the Byzantine pathways of Scottish business dealings.

Put two Highland Scots in a room together, and within ten minutes they would know each other's family histories for the last two hundred years, and have discovered a helpful number of mutual relatives and acquaintances.

Jamie grinned.

"It was the Governor's wife's secretary," he corrected, "and his name's Murray. That'll be your Da's cousin Maggie's eldest boy from Loch Linnhe," he added, to Ian. "His father emigrated after the Rising." Ian nodded casually, doubtless docketing the information in his own version of the genetic encyclopedia, stored against the day it would prove useful.

Edwin Murray, the Governor's wife's secretary, had welcomed Jamie warmly as a kinsman—if only by marriage—and had obtained an invitation for us to dine at Lillington's that night, there ostensibly to acquaint the Governor with matters of trade in the Indies. In reality, we were intending to acquaint ourselves with Baron Penzler—a well-to-do German nobleman who would be dining there as well. The Baron was a man not only of wealth but of taste, with a reputation as a collector of fine objects.

"Well, it sounds a good idea," I said dubiously. "But I think you'd better go alone. I can't be dining with governors looking like *this*."

"Ah, ye look f—" His voice faded as he actually looked at me. His eye roamed slowly over me, taking in my grimy, bedraggled gown, wild hair and ragged bonnet.

He frowned at me. "No, I want ye there, Sassenach; I may need a distraction."

"Speaking of distraction, how many pints did it take you to wangle an invitation to dinner?" I asked, mindful of our dwindling finances. Jamie didn't blink, but took my arm, turning me toward the row of shops.

"Six, but he paid half. Come along, Sassenach; dinner's at seven, and we must find ye something decent to wear."

"But we can't afford—"

"It's an investment," he said firmly. "And besides, Cousin Edwin has advanced me a bit against the sale of a stone."

* * *

The gown was two years out of fashion by the cosmopolitan standards of Jamaica but it was clean, which was the main thing so far as I was concerned.

"You're dripping, madame." The sempstress's voice was cold. A small, spare woman of middle age, she was the preeminent dressmaker in Wilmington and—I gathered—accustomed to having her fashion dictates obeyed without question. My rejection of a frilled cap in favor of freshly washed hair had been received with bad grace and predictions of pleurisy, and the pins she held in her mouth bristled like porcupine quills at my insistence on replacing the normal heavy corsetry with light boning, scalloped at the top to lift the breasts without pinching them.

"Sorry." I tucked up the offending wet lock inside the linen towel that wrapped my head.

The guest quarters of Mr. Lillington's great house being fully occupied by the Governor's party, I had been relegated to Cousin Edwin's tiny attic over the stable block, and the fitting of my gown was being accomplished to the accompaniment of muffled stampings and chewings from below, punctuated by the monotonous strains of the groom's whistling as he mucked out the stalls.

Still, I was not inclined to complain; Mr. Lillington's stables were a deal cleaner than the inn where Jamie and I had left our companions, and Mrs. Lillington had very graciously seen me provided with a large basin of hot water and a ball of lavender-scented soap—a consideration more important even than the fresh dress. I hoped never to see another peach.

I rose slightly on my toes, trying to see out of the window in case Jamie should be coming, but desisted at a grunt of protest from the sempstress, who was trying to adjust the hem of my skirt.

The gown itself was not at all bad; it was of cream silk, half-sleeved and very simple, but with panniers of wine-striped silk over the hips, and a ruching of claret-colored silk piping that ran in two rows from waist to bosom. With the Brussels lace I had purchased sewn around the sleeves, I thought it would do, even if the cloth was not quite of the first quality.

I had at first been surprised at the price, which was remarkably low, but now observed that the fabric of the dress was coarser than usual, with occasional slubs of thickened thread that caught the light in shimmers. Curious, I rubbed it between my fingers. I was no great judge of silk, but a Chinese acquaintance had spent most of one idle afternoon on board a ship explaining to me the lore of silkworms, and the subtle variation of their output.

“Where does this silk come from?” I asked. “It isn’t China silk; is it French?”

The sempstress looked up, her crossness temporarily relieved by interest.

“No, indeed it’s not. That’s made in South Carolina, that is. There’s a lady, Mrs. Pinckney by name, has gone and put half her land to mulberry trees, and went to raising silkworms on ’em. The cloth’s maybe not quite so fine as the China,” she acknowledged reluctantly, “but ’tisn’t but half the cost, either.”

She squinted up at me, nodding slowly.

“It’ll do for fit, and the bit o’ piping’s good; brings out the color in your cheeks. But begging your pardon, madame, you do need something above the neck, not to look too bare. If you won’t have a cap nor a wig, might be you’d have a ribbon?”

“Oh, ribbon!” I said, remembering. “Yes, what a good idea. Do look in my basket over there, and you’ll find a length that might just do.”

Between us we managed to get my hair piled up, loosely bound with the length of dark pink ribbon, damp curly tendrils coming down—I couldn’t stop them—around my ears and brow.

“Not too much mutton dressed as lamb, is it?” I asked, suddenly worried. I smoothed a hand down the front of the bodice, but it fit snugly—and trimly—around my waist.

“Oh, no, madame,” the sempstress assured me. “Quite appropriate, and I say it myself.” She frowned at me, calculating. “Only it is a bit *bare* over the bosom, still. You haven’t any jewelry, at all?”

“Just this.” We turned in surprise as Jamie ducked his head to come in the door; neither of us had heard him coming.

He had somewhere managed to have a bath and procure a clean shirt and neckcloth; beyond that, someone had combed and plaited his hair into a smooth queue, bound with the new blue silk ribbon. His serviceable coat had not only been brushed, but improved by the application of a set of silver-gilt buttons, each delicately engraved with a small flower in the center.

“Very nice,” I said, touching one.

“Rented from the goldsmith,” he said. “But they’ll do. So will this, I think.” He drew out a filthy handkerchief from his pocket, from the folds of which he produced a slender gold chain.

“He hadna time for any but the simplest mount,” he said, frowning in concentration as he fastened the chain around my neck. “But I think that’s best, don’t you?”

The ruby hung glinting just above the hollow of my breasts, casting a pale rosy glow against my white skin.

“I’m glad you picked that one,” I said, touching the stone gently. It was warm from his body. “Goes much better with the dress than the sapphire or the emerald would.” The sempstress’s jaw hung slightly open. She glanced from me to Jamie, her impression of our social position evidently going up by leaps and bounds.

Jamie had finally taken time to notice the rest of my costume. His eyes traveled slowly over me from head to hem, and a smile spread across his face.

“Ye make a verra ornamental jewel box, Sassenach,” he said. “A fine distraction, aye?”

He glanced out the window, where a pale peach color stained a hazy evening sky, then turned to me, bowed and made a leg. “Might I claim the pleasure of your company for dinner, madame?”

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7

GREAT PROSPECTS FRAUGHT WITH PERIL

While I was familiar with the eighteenth-century willingness to eat anything that could be physically overpowered and dragged to the table, I did not subscribe to the mania for presenting wild dishes as though they had not in fact undergone the intermediary processes of being killed and cooked before making their appearance at dinner.

I thus viewed the large sturgeon with which I sat eyeball-to-eyeball with a marked lack of appetite. Complete not only with eyes but with scales, fins, and tail, the three-foot fish rode majestically on waves of roe in aspic, decorated with a vast quantity of tiny spiced crabs, which had been boiled whole and scattered artistically over the platter.

I took another large sip of wine and turned to my dinner companion, trying to keep my eyes off the bulging glare of the sturgeon by my elbow.

"… the most impertinent fellow!" Mr. Stanhope was saying, by way of describing a gentleman he had encountered in a post-house whilst on his way to Wilmington from his property near New Bern.

"Why, in the very midst of our refreshment, he began to speak of his piles, and what torment they caused him with the coach's continual bouncing. And then damme if the crude fellow did not pull his kerchief out of his pocket, all spotted with blood, to show the company by way of evidence! Quite destroyed my appetite, ma'am, I assure you," he assured me, forking up a substantial mouthful of chicken fricassee. He chewed it slowly, regarding me with pale, bulging eyes that reminded me uncomfortably of the sturgeon's.

Across the table, Phillip Wylie's long mouth twitched with amusement.

"Take care your conversation doesn't incur a similar effect, Stanhope," he said, with a nod at my untouched plate. "Though a certain crudeness of company is one of the perils of public transport, I do admit."

Stanhope sniffed, brushing crumbs from the folds of his neckcloth.

"Needn't put on airs, Wylie. It's not everyone can afford to keep a coachman, 'specially not with all these fresh taxes. New one stuck on every time one turns around, I do declare!" He waved his fork indignantly. "Tobacco, wine, brandy, all very well, but a tax upon *newspapers,* have you heard the like? Why, my sister's oldest boy was awarded a degree from Yale University a year past"—he puffed his chest unconsciously, speaking just slightly louder than usual—"and damned if she was not required to pay half a shilling, merely to have his diploma officially stamped!"

"But that is no longer the case at present," Cousin Edwin said patiently. "Since the repeal of the Stamp Act—"

Stanhope plucked one of the tiny crabs from the platter and brandished it at Edwin in accusation.

"Get rid of one tax, and another pops up in its place directly. Just like mushrooms!" He popped the crab into his mouth and was heard to mumble something indistinctly about taxing the air next, he shouldn't wonder.

"You are come but recently from the Indies, I understand, Madame Fraser?" Baron Penzler, on my other side, seized the momentary opportunity to interrupt. "I doubt you will be familiar with such provincial matters—or interested in them," he added, with a nod of benevolent dismissal at Stanhope.

"Oh, surely everyone is interested in taxes," I said, turning slightly sideways so as to display my bosom to best effect. "Or don't you believe that taxes are what we pay for a civilized society? Though having heard Mr. Stanhope's story"—I nodded to my other side

—"perhaps he would agree that the level of civilization isn't quite equal to the level of taxation?"

"Ha ha!" Stanhope choked on his bread, spewing crumbs. "Oh, very good! Not equal to—ha ha, no, certainly not!"

Phillip Wylie gave me a look of sardonic acknowledgment.

"You must try not to be so amusing, Mrs. Fraser," he said. "It may be the death of poor Stanhope."

"Er … what is the current rate of taxation, do you think?" I asked, tactfully drawing attention away from Stanhope's spluttering.

Wylie pursed his lips, considering. A dandy, he wore the latest in modish wigs, and a small patch in the shape of a star beside his mouth. Under the powder, though, I thought I detected both a good-looking face and a very shrewd brain.

"Oh, considering all incidentals, I should say it can amount to as much as two per centum of all income, if one was to include the taxes on slaves. Add taxes on lands and crops, and it amounts to a bit more, perhaps."

"Two percent!" Stanhope choked, pounding himself on the chest. "Iniquitous! Simply iniquitous!"

With vivid memories of the last IRS form I had signed, I agreed sympathetically that a two percent tax rate was a positive outrage, wondering to myself just what had become of the fiery spirit of American taxpayers over the intervening two hundred years.

"But perhaps we should change the subject," I said, seeing that heads were beginning to turn in our direction from the upper end of the table. "After all, speaking of taxes at the Governor's table is rather like talking of rope in the house of the hanged, isn't it?"

At this, Mr. Stanhope swallowed a crab whole, and choked in good earnest.

His partner on the other side pounded him helpfully on the back, and the small black boy who had been occupied in swatting flies near the open windows was sent hastily to fetch water. I marked out a sharp, slender knife by the fish platter, just in case, though I hoped I shouldn't be compelled to perform a tracheotomy on the spot; it wasn't the kind of attention I was hoping to attract.

Luckily such drastic measures weren't required; the crab was disgorged by a fortunate slap, leaving the victim empurpled and gasping, but otherwise unharmed.

"Someone had mentioned newspapers," I said, once Mr. Stanhope had been thus rescued from his excesses. "We've been here so short a time that I haven't seen any; is there a regular paper printed in Wilmington?"

I had ulterior motives for asking this, beyond a desire to allow Mr. Stanhope time to recover himself. Among the few worldly goods Jamie possessed was a printing press, presently in storage in Edinburgh.

Wilmington, it appeared, had two printers in residence, but only one of these gentlemen—a Mr. Jonathan Gillette—produced a regular newspaper.

"And it may soon cease to be so regular," Stanhope said darkly. "I hear that Mr. Gillette has received a warning from the Committee of Safety, that—ah!" He gave a brief exclamation, his plump face creased in pained surprise.

"Have you a particular interest, Mrs. Fraser?" Wylie inquired politely, darting a look under his brows at his friend. "I had heard that your husband had some connection with the printing trade in Edinburgh."

"Why, yes," I said, rather surprised that he should know so much about us. "Jamie owned a printing establishment there, though he didn't issue a newspaper—books and pamphlets and plays and the like."

Wylie's finely arched brow twitched up.

"No political leanings, then, your husband? So often printers find their skills suborned by those whose passions seek outlet in print—but then, such passions are not necessarily shared by the printer."

That rang numerous alarm bells; did Wylie actually know anything about Jamie's political connections in Edinburgh—most of whom had been thoroughly seditious—or was this only normal dinner table conversation? Judging from Stanhope's remarks, newspapers and politics were evidently connected in people's minds—and little wonder, given the times.

Jamie, at the far end of the table, had caught his name and now turned his head slightly to smile at me, before returning to an earnest conversation with the Governor, at whose right hand he sat. I wasn't sure whether this placement was the work of Mr. Lillington, who sat on the Governor's left, following the conversation with the intelligent, slightly mournful expression of a basset hound, or of Cousin Edwin, consigned to the seat opposite me, between Phillip Wylie and Wylie's sister, Judith.

"Oh, a tradesman," this lady now remarked, in a meaningful tone of voice. She smiled at me, careful not to expose her teeth. Likely decayed, I thought. "And is this"—she gave a vague wave at her head, comparing my ribbon to the towering confection of her wig—"the style in Edinburgh, Mrs. Fraser? How … charming."

Her brother gave her a narrowed eye.

"I believe I have also heard that Mr. Fraser is the nephew of Mrs. Cameron of River Run," he said pleasantly. "Have I been correctly informed, Mrs. Fraser?"

Cousin Edwin, who had undoubtedly been the source of this information, buttered his roll with sedulous concentration. Cousin Edwin looked very little like a secretary, being a tall and prepossessing young man with a pair of lively brown eyes—one of which now gave me the merest suggestion of a wink.

The Baron, as bored with newspapers as with taxes, perked up a bit at hearing the name Cameron.

"River Run?" he said. "You have relations with Mrs. Jocasta Cameron?"

"She's my husband's aunt," I replied. "Do you know her?"

"Oh, indeed! A charming woman, most charming!" A broad smile lifted the Baron's pendulous cheeks. "Since many years, I am the dear friend of Mrs. Cameron and her husband, unfortunately dead."

The Baron launched into an enthusiastic recounting of the delights of River Run, and I took advantage of the lull to accept a small wedge of fish pie, full not only of fish, but of oysters and shrimps in a creamy sauce. Mr. Lillington had certainly spared no effort to impress the Governor.

As I leaned back for the footman to ladle more sauce onto my plate, I caught Judith Wylie's eyes on me, narrowed in a look of dislike that she didn't trouble to disguise. I smiled pleasantly at her, displaying my own excellent teeth, and turned back to the Baron, newly confident.

There had been no looking glass in Edwin's quarters, and while Jamie had assured me that I looked all right, his standards were rather different from those of fashion. I had received any number of admiring compliments from the gentlemen at table, true, but this might be no more than customary politeness; extravagant gallantry was common among upper-class men.

But Miss Wylie was twenty-five years my junior, fashionably gowned and jeweled, and if no great beauty, not plain, either. Her jealousy was a better reflection of my appearance, I thought, than any looking glass.

"Such a beautiful stone, Mrs. Fraser—you will permit me to look more closely?" The Baron bent toward me, pudgy fingers delicately poised above my cleavage.

"Oh, certainly," I said with alacrity, and quickly unclasped the chain, dropping the ruby into his broad, moist palm. The Baron looked slightly disappointed not to have been allowed to examine the stone *in situ,* but lifted his hand, squinting at the glinting droplet with the air of a connoisseur—which he evidently was, for he reached into his watch pocket and withdrew a small gadget that proved to be a combination of optical lenses, including both a magnifying glass and a jeweler's loupe.

I relaxed, seeing this, and accepted a helping of something hot and savory-smelling from a glass dish being passed by the butler. What possessed people to serve hot food when the temperature in the room must be at least in the nineties?

"Beautiful," murmured the Baron, rolling the stone gently in his palm. *"Sehr schön."*

There were not many things about which I would have trusted Geillis Duncan, but I was sure of her taste in jewels. "It must be a stone of the first class," she had said to me, explaining her theory of time travel via gems. "Large, and completely flawless."

The ruby was large, all right; nearly the size of the pickled quail's eggs surrounding the fully plumed pheasant on the sideboard. As to its flawlessness, I felt no doubt. Geilie had trusted this stone to carry her into the future; I thought it would probably get us as far as Cross Creek. I took a bite of the food on my plate; some sort of ragout, I thought, very tender and flavorful.

"How delicious this is," I said to Mr. Stanhope, lifting another forkful. "What is this dish, do you know?"

"Oh, it is one of my particular favorites, ma'am," he said, inhaling beatifically over his own plate. "Soused hog's face. Delectable, is it not?"

* * *

I shut the door of Cousin Edwin's room behind me and leaned against it, letting my jaw hang open in sheer relief at no longer being required to smile. Now I could take off the clinging dress, undo the tight corset, slip off the sweaty shoes.

Peace, solitude, nakedness, and silence. I couldn't think of anything else required to make my life complete for the moment, save a little fresh air. I stripped off, and attired in nothing but my shift, went to open the window.

The air outside was so thick, I thought I could have stepped out and floated down through it, like a pebble dropped in a jar of molasses. The bugs came at once to the flame of my candle, light-crazed and blood-hungry. I blew it out and sat on the window seat in the dark, letting the soft, warm air move over me.

The ruby still hung at my neck, black as a blood drop against my skin. I touched it, set it swinging gently between my breasts; the stone was warm as my own blood, too.

Outside, the guests were beginning to depart; a line of waiting carriages was drawn up on the drive. The sounds of goodbyes, conversations, and soft laughter drifted up to me in snatches.

"… quite clever, I thought," came up in Phillip Wylie's cultured drawl.

"Oh, *clever,* certainly it was *clever*!" His sister's higher-pitched tones made it quite clear what she thought of cleverness as a social attribute.

"Well, cleverness in a woman can be tolerated, my dear, so long as she is also pleasant to look upon. By the same token, a woman who has beauty may perhaps dispense with wit, so long as she has sense enough to conceal the lack by keeping her mouth shut."

Miss Wylie might not be accused of cleverness, but had certainly adequate sensibility to perceive the barb in this. She gave a rather unladylike snort.

"She is a thousand years old, at least," she replied. "Pleasant to look at, indeed. Though I will say it was a handsome trinket about her neck," she added grudgingly.

"Oh, quite," said a deeper voice that I recognized as Lloyd Stanhope's. "Though in my own opinion, it was the setting rather than the jewel that was striking."

"Setting?" Miss Wylie sounded blank. "There was no setting; the jewel merely rested upon her bosom."

"Really?" Stanhope said blandly. "I hadn't noticed." Wylie burst out laughing, breaking off abruptly as the door opened to release more guests.

"Well, if you didn't, old man, there were others who did," he said with sly intonation. "Come, here's the carriage."

I touched the ruby again, watching the Wylies' handsome grays drive off. Yes, others had noticed. I could still feel the Baron's eyes on my bosom, knowingly avaricious. I rather thought he was a connoisseur of more than gems.

The stone was warm in my hand; it felt warmer even than my skin, though that must be illusion. I did not normally wear jewelry beyond my wedding rings; had never cared much for it. It would be a relief to be rid of at least part of our dangerous treasure. And still I sat there holding the stone, cradling it in my hand, till I almost thought I could feel it beating like a small separate heart, in time with my blood.

There was only one carriage left, its driver standing by the horses' heads. Some twenty minutes later, the occupant came out, adding to his goodbyes a good-humored *"Gute Nacht"* as he stepped into his coach. The Baron. He had waited till last, and was leaving in a good mood; that seemed a good sign.

One of the footmen, stripped of his livery coat, was extinguishing the torches at the foot of the drive. I could see the pale blur of his shirt as he walked back to the house through the dark, and the sudden flare of light onto the terrace as a door opened to admit him below. Then that too was gone, and a night silence settled on the grounds.

I had expected Jamie to come up at once, but the minutes dragged on with no sound of his step. I glanced at the bed, but felt no desire to lie down.

At last I stood up and slipped the dress back on, not bothering with shoes or stockings. I left the room, walking quietly down the hallway in my bare feet, down the stair, through the breezeway to the main house, and in through the side entrance from the garden. It was dark, save the pale squares of moonlight that came through the casements; most of the servants must have retired, along with household and guests. There was light glowing through the stairwell's banister, though; the sconces were still alight in the dining room beyond.

I could hear the murmur of masculine voices as I tiptoed past the polished stair, Jamie's deep soft Scots alternating with the Governor's English tones, in the intimate cadences of a tête-à-tête.

The candles had burnt low in their sconces. The air was sweet with melted beeswax, and low clouds of fragrant cigar smoke hung heavy outside the dining room doors.

Moving quietly, I stopped just short of the door. From this vantage point I could see the Governor, back to me, neck stretched forward as he lit a fresh cigar from the candlestick on the table.

If Jamie saw me, he gave no hint of it. His face bore its usual expression of calm good humor, but the recent lines of strain around eyes and mouth had eased, and I could tell from the slope of his shoulders that he was relaxed and at peace. My heart lightened at once; he had been successful then.

"A place called River Run," he was saying to the Governor. "Well up in the hills past Cross Creek."

"I know the place," Governor Tryon remarked, a little surprised. "My wife and I passed several days in Cross Creek last year; we made a tour of the colony, upon the occasion of my taking office. River Run is well up in the foothills, though, not in the town—why, it is halfway to the mountains, I believe."

Jamie smiled and sipped his brandy.

"Aye, well," he said, "my family are Highlanders, sir; the mountains will be home to us."

"Indeed." A small puff of smoke rose over the Governor's shoulder. Then he took the cigar from his mouth and leaned confidentially toward Jamie.

"Since we are alone, Mr. Fraser, there is another matter I wished to put before you. A glass with you, sir?" He picked up the decanter without waiting for an answer, and poured more brandy.

"I thank ye, sir."

The Governor puffed fiercely for a moment, sending up blue clouds, then having got his weed well alight, sat back, cigar fuming negligently in one hand.

"You are very newly come to the Colonies, young Edwin tells me. Are you familiar with conditions here?"

Jamie shrugged slightly.

"I have made it my business to learn what I could, sir," he replied. "To which conditions might ye refer?"

"North Carolina is a land of considerable richness," the Governor answered, "and yet it has not reached the same level of prosperity as have its neighbors—owing mostly to a lack of laborers to take advantage of its opportunities. We have no great harbor for a seaport, you see; thus slaves must be brought overland at great cost from South Carolina or Virginia—and we cannot hope to compete with Boston and Philadelphia for indentured labor.

"It has long been the policy both of the Crown and of myself, Mr. Fraser, to encourage the settlement of land in the Colony of North Carolina by intelligent, industrious and godly families, to the furtherance of the prosperity and security of all." He lifted his cigar, took a deep lungful and exhaled slowly, pausing to cough.

"To this end, sir, there is established a system of land grants whereby a large acreage may be given to a gentleman of means, who will undertake to persuade a number of emigrants to come and settle upon a part of it under his sponsorship. This policy has been blessed with success over the last thirty years; a good many Highlanders and families from the Isles of Scotland have been induced to come and take up residence here. Why, when I arrived, I was astonished to find the banks of the Cape Fear River quite thick with MacNeills, Buchanans, Grahams, and Campbells!"

The Governor tasted his cigar again, but this time the barest nip; he was anxious to make his point.

"Yet there remains a great deal of desirable land to be settled, further inland toward the mountains. It is somewhat remote, and yet, as you say, for men accustomed to the far reaches of the Scottish Highlands—"

"I did hear mention of such grants, sir," Jamie interrupted. "Yet is not the wording that persons holding such grants shall be white males, Protestant, and above thirty years of age? And this statement holds the force of law?"

"That is the official wording of the Act, yes." Mr. Tryon turned so that I saw him now in profile, tapping the ash from his cigar into a small porcelain bowl. The corner of his mouth was turned up in anticipation; the face of a fisherman who feels the first twitch on his line.

"The offer is one of considerable interest," Jamie said formally. "I must point out, however, that I am not a Protestant, nor are most of my kinsmen."

The Governor pursed his lips in deprecation, lifting one brow.

"You are neither a Jew nor a Negro. I may speak as one gentleman to another, may I not? In all frankness, Mr. Fraser, there is the law, and then there is what is done." He raised his glass with a small smile, setting the hook. "And I am convinced that you understand that as well as I do."

"Possibly better," Jamie murmured, with a polite smile.

The Governor shot him a sharp look, but then uttered a quick bark of laughter. He raised his brandy glass in acknowledgment, and took a sip.

"We understand each other, Mr. Fraser," he said, nodding with satisfaction. Jamie inclined his head a fraction of an inch.

"There would be no difficulties raised, then, regarding the personal qualifications of those who might be persuaded to take up your offer?"

"None at all," said the Governor, setting down his glass with a small thump. "Provided only that they are able-bodied men, capable of working the land, I ask nothing more. And what is not asked need not be told, eh?" One thin brow flicked up in query.

Jamie turned the glass in his hands, as though admiring the deep color of the liquid.

"Not all who passed through the Stuart Rising were so fortunate as myself, Your Excellency," he said. "My foster son suffered the loss of his hand; another of my companions has but one arm. Yet they are men of good character and industry. I could not in conscience partake of a proposal which did not offer them some part."

The Governor dismissed this with an expansive wave of the hand.

"Provided that they are able to earn their bread and will not prove a burden upon the community, they are welcome." Then, as though fearing he had been incautious in his generosity, he sat up straight, leaving the cigar to burn, propped on the edge of the bowl.

"Since you mention Jacobites—these men will be required to swear an oath of loyalty to the Crown, if they have not already done so. If I might presume to ask, sir, as you imply you are Papist … you, yourself …"

Jamie's eyes might have narrowed only against the sting of the smoke, but I didn't think so. Neither did Governor Tryon, who was only in his thirties but no mean judge of men. He swiveled to face the table again, so that I saw only his back, but I could tell that he was gazing intently at Jamie, eyes tracing the swift movements of the trout beneath the water.

"I do not seek to remind you of past indignity," he said quietly. "Nor yet to offend present honor. Still, you will understand that it is my duty to ask.”

Jamie smiled, quite without humor.

“And mine to answer, I expect,” he said. “Yes, I am a pardoned Jacobite. And aye, I have sworn the oath—like the others who paid that price for their lives.”

Quite abruptly, he set down his still-full glass and pushed back the heavy chair. He stood and bowed to the Governor.

“It grows late, Your Excellency. I must beg to take my leave.”

The Governor sat back in his chair, and lifted the cigar slowly to his lips. He drew heavily on it, making the tip glow bright, as he gazed up at Jamie. Then, he nodded, letting a thin plume of smoke drift from his pursed lips.

“Good night, Mr. Fraser. Do consider my offer, will you not?”

I didn’t wait to hear the answer—I didn’t need to. I skimmed down the hall in a rustle of skirts, startling a footman dozing in a dark corner.

I made it back to our borrowed room in the stable block without meeting anyone else, and collapsed. My heart was pounding; not only from the dash up the stairs but from what I had heard.

Jamie would consider the Governor’s offer, all right. And what an offer! To regain in one swoop all that he had lost in Scotland—and more.

Jamie had not been born a laird, but the death of his elder brother had left him heir to Lallybroch, and from the age of eight he had been raised to take responsibility for an estate, to see to the welfare of land and tenants, to place that welfare above his own. Then had come Charles Stuart, and his mad march to glory; a fiery cross leading his followers to shambles and destruction.

Jamie had never spoken bitterly of the Stuarts; had never spoken of Charles Stuart at all. Nor had he often spoken of what that venture had cost him personally.

But now … to have that back. New lands, cultivable and rich with game, and settled by families under his sponsorship and protection. It was rather like the Book of Job, I thought—all those sons and daughters and camels and houses, destroyed so casually, and then replaced with such extravagant largesse.

I had always viewed that bit of the Bible with some doubt, myself. One camel was much like another, but children seemed a different proposition. And while Job might have regarded the replacement of his children as simple justice, I couldn't help thinking that the dead children's mother might possibly have been of another mind about it.

Unable to sit, I went again to the window, gazing out unseeingly at the dark garden.

It wasn't simply excitement that was making my heart beat fast and my hands perspire; it was fear. With matters as they were in Scotland—as they had been since the Rising—it would be no difficult matter to find willing emigrants.

I had seen ships come into port in the Indies and in Georgia, disgorging their cargos of emigrants, so emaciated and worn by their passage that they reminded me of nothing so much as concentration camp victims—skeletal as living corpses, white as maggots from two months in the darkness below-decks.

Despite the expense and difficulty of the journey, despite the pain of parting from friends and family and homeland forever, the immigrants poured in, in hundreds and in thousands, carrying their children—those who survived the voyage—and their possessions in small, ragged bundles; fleeing poverty and hopelessness, seeking not fortune but only a small foothold on life. Only a chance.

I had spent only a short time at Lallybroch the winter before, but I knew there were tenants there who survived only by the goodwill of Ian and Young Jamie, their crofts not yielding enough to live on. While such goodwill was invariably given, it was not inexhaustible; I knew that the estate's slender resources were often stretched to the maximum.

Beyond Lallybroch, there were the smugglers Jamie had known in Edinburgh, and the illegal distillers of Highland whisky—any number of men, in fact, who had been forced to turn to lawlessness to feed their families. No, finding willing emigrants would be no problem at all for Jamie.

The problem was that in order to recruit suitable men for the purpose, he would have to go to Scotland. And in my mind was the sight of a granite gravestone in a Scottish kirkyard, on a hill high above the moors and sea.

JAMES ALEXANDER MALCOLM MACKENZIE FRASER, it read, and below that, my own name was carved—*Beloved husband of Claire*.

I would bury him in Scotland. But there had been no date on the stone when I saw it, two hundred years hence; no notion when the blow would fall.

"Not yet," I whispered, clenching my fists in the silk of my petticoat. "I've only had him for a little while—oh, God, please, not yet!"

As though in answer, the door swung open, and James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser came in, carrying a candle.

He smiled at me, loosening his stock.

"You're verra light on your feet, Sassenach. I see I must teach ye to hunt one day, and you such a fine stalker."

I made no apology for eavesdropping, but came to help him with his waistcoat buttons. In spite of the late hour and the brandy, he was clear-eyed and alert, his body tautly alive when I touched him.

"You'd best put out the candle," I said. "The bugs will eat you alive." I pinched a mosquito off his neck by way of illustration, the fragile body crushed to a smear of blood between my fingers.

Among the scents of brandy and cigar smoke, I could smell the night on him, and the faint musky spice of nicotiana; he had been walking, then, amid the flowers in the garden. He did that when he was either distressed or excited—and he didn't seem distressed.

He sighed and flexed his shoulders as I took his coat; his shirt was damp with sweat underneath, and he plucked it away from his skin with a mild grunt of distaste.

"I canna tell how folk live in such heat, dressed like this. It makes the savages look quite sensible, to be goin' about in loincloths and aprons."

"It would be a lot cheaper," I agreed, "if less aesthetically appealing. Imagine Baron Penzler in a loincloth, I mean." The Baron weighed perhaps eighteen stone, with a pasty complexion.

He laughed, the sound muffled in his shirt as he pulled it over his head.

"You, on the other hand …" I sat down on the window seat, admiring the view as he stripped off his breeches, standing on one leg to roll down his stocking.

With the candle extinguished, it was dark in the room, but with my eyes adapted, I could still make him out, long limbs pale against the velvet night.

"And speaking of the Baron—" I prodded.

"Three hundred pounds sterling," he replied, in tones of extreme satisfaction. He straightened up and tossed the rolled stockings onto a stool, then bent and kissed me. "Which is in large part due to you, Sassenach."

"For my value as an ornamental setting, you mean?" I asked dryly, recalling the Wylies' conversation.

"No," he said, rather shortly. "For keeping Wylie and his friends occupied at dinner, while I talked wi' the Governor. Ornamental setting … tcha! Stanhope nearly dropped his eyeballs into your bosom, the filthy lecher; I'd a mind to call him out for it, but—"

"Discretion is the better part of valor," I said, standing up and kissing him back. "Not that I've ever met a Scot who seemed to think so."

"Aye, well, there was my grandsire, Old Simon. I suppose ye could say it was discretion that did for him, in the end." I could hear both the smile and the edge in his voice. If he seldom spoke of the Jacobites and the events of the Rising, it didn't mean he had forgotten; his conversation with the Governor had obviously brought them close to the surface of his mind tonight.

"I'd say that discretion and deceit are not necessarily the same things. And your grandfather had been asking for it for fifty years, at least," I replied tartly. Simon Fraser, Lord Lovat, had died by beheading on Tower Hill—at the age of seventy-eight, after a lifetime of unparalleled chicanery, both personal and political. For all of that, I quite regretted the old rogue's passing.

"Mmphm." Jamie didn't argue with me, but moved to stand beside me at the window. He breathed in deeply, as though smelling the thick perfume of the night.

I could see his face quite clearly in the dim glow of starlight. It was calm and smooth, but with an inward look, as though his eyes didn't see what was before them, but something else entirely. The past? I wondered. Or the future?

"What did it say?" I asked suddenly. "The oath you swore."

I felt rather than saw the movement of his shoulders, not quite a shrug.

" 'I, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser, do swear, and as I shall answer to God at the great day of judgment, I have not, nor shall have, in my possession any gun, sword, pistol, or arm whatsoever, and never use tartan, plaid, or any part of the Highland garb; and if I do so, may I be cursed in my undertakings, family, and property.' " He took a deep breath, and went on, speaking precisely.

" 'May I never see my wife and children, father, mother or relations. May I be killed in battle as a coward, and lie without Christian burial, in a strange land, far from the graves of my forefathers and kindred; may all this come across me if I break my oath.' "

"And did you mind a lot?" I said, after a moment.

"No," he said softly, still looking out at the night. "Not then. There are things worth dying or starving for—but not words."

"Maybe not those words."

He turned to look at me, features dim in starlight, but the hint of a smile visible on his mouth.

"Ye know of words that are?"

The gravestone had his name, but no date. I could stop him going back to Scotland, I thought. If I would.

I turned to face him, leaning back against the window frame.

"What about—'I love you'?"

He reached out a hand and touched my face. A breath of air stirred past us, and I saw the small hairs rise along his arm.

"Aye," he whispered. "That'll do."

There was a bird calling somewhere close at hand. A few clear notes, succeeded by an answer; a brief twitter, and then silence. The sky outside was still thick black, but the stars were less brilliant than before.

I turned over restlessly; I was naked, covered only by a linen sheet, but even in the small hours of the night, the air was warm and smothering, and the small depression in which I lay was damp.

I had tried to sleep, and could not. Even lovemaking, which normally could relax me into a bonelessly contented stupor, had this time left me only restless and sticky. At once excited and worried by the possibilities of the future—and unable to confide my disturbed feelings—I had felt separate from Jamie; estranged and detached, despite the closeness of our bodies.

I turned again, this time toward Jamie. He lay in his usual position, on his back, the sheet crumpled about his hips, hands gently folded over a flat stomach. His head was turned slightly on the pillow, his face relaxed in sleep. With the wide mouth gentled by slumber and the dark lashes long on his cheeks, in this dim light he looked about fourteen.

I wanted to touch him, though I wasn't sure whether I meant to caress or to poke him. While he had given me physical release, he had taken my peace of mind, and I was irrationally envious of his effortless repose.

I did neither, though, and merely turned onto my back, where I lay with my eyes shut, grimly counting sheep—who disobliged me by being Scottish sheep, cantering merrily through a kirkyard, leaping the gravestones with gay abandon.

"Is something troubling ye, Sassenach?" said a sleepy voice at my shoulder.

My eyes popped open.

"No," I said, trying to sound equally drowsy. "I'm fine."

There was a faint snort and a rustling of the chaff-filled mattress as he turned over.

"You're a terrible liar, Sassenach. Ye're thinking so loudly, I can hear ye from here."

"You can't hear people think!"

"Aye, I can. You, at least." He chuckled and reached out a hand, which rested lazily on my thigh. "What is it—has the spiced crab given ye flatulence?"

"It has not!" I tried to twitch my leg away, but his hand clung like a limpet.

"Oh, good. What is it, then—ye've finally thought of a witty riposte to Mr. Wylie's remarks about oysters?"

"No," I said irritably. "If you must know, I was thinking about the offer Governor Tryon made you. Will you let go of my leg?"

"Ah," he said, not letting go but sounding less sleepy. "Well, come to that, I was thinking on the matter a bit myself."

"What *do* you think about it?" I gave up trying to detach his hand and rolled onto my elbow, facing him. The window was still dark, but the stars had dimmed visibly, faded by the distant approach of day.

"I wonder why he made it, for the one thing."

"Really? But I thought he told you why."

He gave a brief grunt.

"Well, he's no offering me land for the sake of my bonny blue eyes, I'll tell ye that." He opened the eyes in question and cocked one brow at me. "Before I make a bargain, Sassenach, I want to know what's on both sides of it, aye?"

"You don't think he's telling the truth? About Crown grants to help settle the land? But he said it's been going on for thirty years," I protested. "He couldn't lie about something like that, surely."

"No, that's the truth," he agreed. "So far as it goes. But bees that hae honey in their mouths hae stings in their tails, aye?" He scratched at his head and smoothed the loose hair out of his face, sighing.

"Ask yourself this, Sassenach," he said. "Why me?"

"Well—because he wants a gentleman of substance and authority," I said slowly. "He needs a good leader, which Cousin Edwin has obviously told him you are, and a fairly wealthy man—"

"Which I am not."

"He doesn't know that, though," I protested.

"Doesn't he?" he said cynically. "Cousin Edwin will ha' told him as much as he knows—and the Governor kens well I was a Jacobite. True, there are a few who mended their fortunes in the Indies after the Rising, and I might be one o' those—but he has nae reason to think so."

"He knows you have *some* money," I pointed out.

"Because of Penzler? Aye," he said thoughtfully. "What else does he know about me?"

"Only what you told him at dinner, so far as I know. And he can't have heard much about you from anyone else; after all, you've been in town less than a—what, you mean that's it?" My voice rose in incredulity, and he smiled, a little grimly. The light was still far off, but moving closer, and his features were clearcut in the dimness.

"Aye, that's it. I've connections to the Camerons, who are not only wealthy but well respected in the colony. But at the same time, I'm an incomer, wi' few ties and no known loyalties here."

"Except, perhaps, to the Governor who's offering you a large tract of land," I said slowly.

He didn't reply at once, but rolled onto his back, still keeping a grip on my leg. His eyes were fastened on the dim whiteness of the plaster ceiling above, with its clouded garlands and ghostly cupids.

"I've known a German or two in my time, Sassenach," he said, musing. His thumb began to move slowly, back and forth upon the tender flesh of my inner thigh. "I havena found them careless wi' their money, be they Jew or Gentile. And while ye looked bonny as a white rose this evening, I canna think it was entirely your charms that made the gentleman offer me a hundred pounds more than the goldsmith did."

He glanced at me. "Tryon is a soldier. He'll ken me for one, too. And there was that wee bit of trouble with the Regulators two year past."

My mind was so diverted by the possibilities intrinsic in this speech, that I was nearly unconscious of the increasing familiarity of the hand between my thighs.

"Who?"

"Oh, I forgot; ye wouldna have heard that part of the conversation—bein' otherwise occupied with your host of admirers."

I let that one pass in favor of finding out about the Regulators. These, it appeared, were a loose association of men, mostly from the rough backcountry of the colony, who had taken offense at what they perceived as capricious and inequitable—and now and then downright illegal—behavior on the part of the Crown's appointed officials, the sheriffs, justices, tax collectors, and so on.

Feeling that their complaints were not sufficiently addressed by the Governor and Assembly, they had taken matters into their own hands. Sheriff's deputies had been assaulted, justices of the peace marched from their houses by mobs and forced to resign.

A committee of Regulators had written to the Governor, imploring him to address the iniquities under which they suffered, and Tryon—a man of action and diplomacy—had replied soothingly, going so far as to replace one or two of the most corrupt sheriffs, and issue an official letter to the court officers, regarding seizure of effects.

"Stanhope said something about a Committee of Safety," I said, interested. "But it sounded quite recent."

"The trouble is damped down but not settled," Jamie said, shrugging. "And damp powder may smolder for a long time, Sassenach, but once it catches, it goes off with an almighty bang."

Would Tryon think it worth the investment, to buy the loyalty and obligation of an experienced soldier, himself in turn commanding the loyalty and service of the men under his sponsorship, all settled in a remote and troublesome area of the colony?

I would myself have called the prospect cheap, at the cost of a hundred pounds and a few measly acres of the King's land. His Majesty had quite a lot of it, after all.

"So you're thinking about it." We were by this time facing each other, and my hand lay over his, not in restraint, but in acknowledgment.

He smiled lazily.

"I havena lived so long by believing everything I'm told, Sassenach. So perhaps I'll take up the Governor's kind offer, and perhaps I will not—but I want to know the hell of a lot more about it before I say, one way or the other."

"Yes, it does seem a little odd—his making you such an offer on short acquaintance."

"I should be surprised to hear I am the only gentleman he's so approached," Jamie said. "And it's no great risk, now, is it? Ye overheard me telling him I am a Catholic? It was no surprise to him to hear it."

"Yes. He didn't seem to think that was a problem, though."

"Oh, I daresay it wouldna be—unless the Governor chose to make it one."

"My goodness." My evaluation of Governor Tryon was rapidly changing, though I wasn't sure whether for the better or not. "So if things didn't work out as he liked, all he would have to do is let it be known that you're a Catholic, and a court would take back the land on those grounds. Whereas if he chooses to keep quiet—"

"And if I choose to do as he likes, aye."

"He's much sneakier than I thought," I said, not without admiration. "Practically Scottish."

He laughed at that, and brushed the loose hair out of his face.

The long curtains at the window, hitherto hanging limp, suddenly puffed inward, letting in a breath of air that smelt of sandy mud, river water, and the far-off hint of fresh pines. Dawn was coming, borne on the wind.

As though this had been a signal, Jamie's hand cupped itself, and a slight shiver communicated itself from him to me, as the coolness struck his bare back.

"I didna really do myself credit earlier," he said softly. "But if you're sure there's nothing troubling your mind just now …"

"Nothing," I said, watching the glow from the window touch the line of his head and neck with gold. His mouth was still wide and gentle, but he didn't look fourteen any longer.

"Not a thing, just now."

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8

MAN OF WORTH

"God, I hate boats!"

With this heart-felt valediction ringing in my ears, we swung slowly out into the waters of Wilmington harbor.

Two days of purchases and preparations found us now bound for Cross Creek. With money from the sale of the ruby in hand, there had been no need to sell the horses; Duncan had been sent with the wagon and the heavier goods, with Myers aboard to guide him, the rest of us to take a quicker, more comfortable passage with Captain Freeman, aboard the *Sally Ann*.

A craft of singular and indescribable type, the *Sally Ann* was square-beamed, long, low-sided, and blunt-prowed. She boasted a tiny cabin that measured roughly six feet square, leaving a scant two feet on either side for passage, and a somewhat greater area of deck fore and aft, this now partially obscured by bundles, bags, and barrels.

With a single sail mounted on a mast and boom above the cabin, the *Sally Ann* looked from a distance like a crab on a shingle, waving a flag of truce. The peaty brown waters of the Cape Fear lapped a scant four inches below the rail, and the boards of the bottom were perpetually damp with slow leakage.

Still, I was happy. Cramped conditions or no, it was good to be on the water, away—if only temporarily—from the Governor's siren song.

Jamie wasn't happy. He did indeed hate boats, with a profound and undying passion, and suffered from a seasickness so acute that watching the swirl of water in a glass could turn him green.

"It's dead calm," I observed. "Maybe you won't be sick."

Jamie squinted suspiciously at the chocolate-brown water around us, then clamped his eyes shut as the wake from another boat struck the *Sally Ann* broadside, rocking her violently.

"Maybe not," he said, in tones indicating that while the suggestion was a hopeful one, he also thought the possibility remote.

"Do you want the needles? It's better if I put them in before you vomit." Resigned, I groped in the pocket of my skirt, where I had placed the small box containing the Chinese acupuncture needles that had saved his life on our Atlantic crossing.

He shuddered briefly and opened his eyes.

"No," he said. "I'll maybe do. Talk to me, Sassenach—take my mind off my stomach, aye?"

"All right," I said obligingly. "What is your Aunt Jocasta like?"

"I havena seen her since I was two years old, so my impressions are a bit lacking," he replied absently, eyes fixed on a large raft coming down the river, set on an apparent collision course with us. "D'ye think that Negro can manage? Perhaps I ought to give him a bit of help."

"Perhaps you shouldn't," I said, eyeing the oncoming raft warily. "He seems to know what he's doing." Besides the captain—a disreputable old wreck who reeked of tobacco—the*Sally Ann* had a single hand, an elderly black freedman who was dealing alone with the steerage of our craft, by means of a large pole.

The man's lean muscles flexed and bulged in easy rhythm. Grizzled head bowed in effort, he took no apparent notice of the oncoming barge, but plunged and lifted in a liquid motion that made the long pole seem like a third limb.

"Let him alone. I suppose you don't know much about your aunt, then?" I added, in hopes of distracting him. The raft was moving ponderously and inexorably toward us.

Some forty feet from end to end, it rode low in the water, weighed down with barrels and stacks of hides, tied down under netting. A pungent wave of odor preceded it, of musk and blood and rancid fat, strong enough to overpower temporarily all the other smells of the river.

"No; she wed the Cameron of Erracht and left Leoch the year before my mother married my father." He spoke abstractedly, not looking at me; his attention was all on the oncoming barge. His knuckles whitened; I could feel his urge to leap forward, snatch the pole away from the deckhand, and stave off the raft. I laid a restraining hand on his arm.

"And she never came to visit at Lallybroch?"

I could see the gleam of sun on dull iron, where it struck cleats along the edge of the raft, and the half-naked forms of the three deckhands, sweating even in the early morning. One of them waved his hat and grinned, shouting something that sounded like, "Hah, *you*!" as they came on.

"Well, John Cameron died of a flux, and she wed his cousin, Black Hugh Cameron of Aberfeldy, and then—" He shut his eyes reflexively as the raft shot past, its hull no more than six inches from our own, amid a hail of good-natured jeers and shouts from its crew. Rollo, front paws perched on the low cabin roof, barked madly, until Ian cuffed him and told him to stop.

Jamie opened one eye, then seeing that the danger was past, opened the other and relaxed, letting go his grip on the roof.

"Aye, well, Black Hugh—they called him so for a great black wen on his knee—he was killed hunting, and so then she wed Hector Mor Cameron, of Loch Eilean—"

"She seems to have had quite a taste for Camerons," I said, fascinated. "Is there something special about them as a clan—beyond being accident-prone, I mean?"

"They've a way wi' words, I suppose," he said, with a sudden wry grin. "The Camerons are poets—and jesters. Sometimes both. Ye'll remember Lochiel, aye?"

I smiled, sharing his bittersweet recollection of Donald Cameron of Lochiel, one of the chiefs of clan Cameron at the time of the Rising. A handsome man with a soulful gaze, Lochiel's gentle-eyed demeanor and elegant manners hid a truly great talent for the creation of vulgar doggerel, with which, *sotto voce,* he had not infrequently entertained me at balls in Edinburgh, during the brief heyday of Charles Stuart's coup.

Jamie was leaning on the roof of the boat's tiny cabin, watching the river traffic with a wary eye. We had not yet cleared Wilmington's harbor, and small pirettas and sculls darted past like water bugs, whipping in and out between the larger, slower-moving craft. He was pale, but not green yet.

I leaned my elbows on the cabin roof as well, and stretched my back. Hot as it was, the heavy sunshine was comforting to the sore muscles caused by impromptu sleeping arrangements; I had spent the last night curled up on a hard oak settle in the taproom of a riverside tavern, sleeping with my head on Jamie's knee as he completed the arrangements for our passage.

I groaned and stretched.

"Was Hector Cameron a poet, or a joker?"

"Neither one at the moment," Jamie replied, automatically gripping the back of my neck and massaging it with one hand. "He's dead, aye?"

"That's wonderful," I said, groaning with ecstasy as his thumb sank into a particularly tender spot. "What you're doing, I mean, not that your uncle's dead. Ooh, don't stop. How did he get to North Carolina?"

Jamie snorted with amusement, and moved behind me so he could use both hands on my neck and shoulders. I nestled my bottom against him and sighed in bliss.

"You're a verra noisy woman, Sassenach," he said, leaning forward to whisper in my ear. "Ye make the same kind of sounds when I rub your neck as ye do when I—" He thrust his pelvis against me in a discreet but explicit motion that made it quite clear what he meant. "Mm?"

"Mmmm," I replied, and kicked him—discreetly—in the shin. "Fine. If anyone hears me behind closed doors, they'll assume you're rubbing my neck—which is about all you're likely to do until we get off this floating plank. Now, what about your late uncle?"

"Oh, him." His fingers dug in on either side of my backbone, rubbing slowly up and down as he unraveled yet another strand in the tangled web of his family history. At least it was keeping his mind off his stomach.

Luckier—and either more perceptive or more cynical—than his famous kinsman, Hector Mor Cameron had cannily prepared himself against the eventuality of a Stuart disaster. He had escaped Culloden unwounded and made for home, where he had promptly loaded wife, servant, and portable assets into a coach, in which they fled to Edinburgh and thence by ship to North Carolina, narrowly escaping the Crown's pursuit.

Once arrived in the New World, Hector had purchased a large tract of land, cleared the forest, built a house and a sawmill, bought slaves to work the place, planted his land in tobacco and indigo, and —no doubt worn out by so much industry—succumbed to the morbid sore throat at the ripe old age of seventy-three.

Having evidently decided that three times was enough, Jocasta MacKenzie Cameron Cameron Cameron had—so far as Myers knew —declined to wed again, but stayed on alone as mistress of River Run.

"Do you think the messenger with your letter will get there before we do?"

"He'd get there before we do if he crawled on his hands and knees," Young Ian said, appearing suddenly beside us. He glanced in mild disgust at the patient deckhand, plunging and lifting his dripping pole. "It will be *weeks* before we get there, at this rate. I told ye it would have been best to ride, Uncle Jamie."

"Dinna fret yourself, Ian," his uncle assured him, letting go of my neck. He grinned at his nephew. "You'll have a turn at the pole yourself before long—and I expect ye'll have us in Cross Creek before nightfall, aye?"

Ian gave his uncle a dirty look and wandered off to pester Captain Freeman with questions about Red Indians and wild animals.

"I hope the Captain doesn't put Ian overboard," I said, observing Freeman's scrawny shoulders draw defensively toward his ears as Ian approached. My own neck and shoulders glowed from the attention; so did portions further south. "Thanks for the rub," I said, lifting one eyebrow at him.

"I'll let ye return the favor, Sassenach—after dark." He made an unsuccessful attempt at a leer. Unable to close one eye at a time, his ability to wink lewdly was substantially impaired, but he managed to convey his meaning nonetheless.

"Indeed," I said. I fluttered my lashes at him. "And just what is it you'd like rubbed after dark?"

"After dark?" Ian asked, popping up again like a jack-in-the-box before his uncle could answer. "What happens after dark?"

"That's when I drown ye and cut ye up for fish bait," his uncle informed him. "God's sake, can ye not settle, Ian? Ye're bumpin' about like a bumblebee in a bottle. Go and sleep in the sun, like your beast—there's a sensible dog." He nodded at Rollo, sprawled like a rug on the cabin roof with his eyes half-closed, twitching an occasional ear against the flies.

"Sleep?" Ian looked at his uncle in amazement. *"Sleep?"*

"It's what normal people do when they're tired," I told him, stifling a yawn. The growing heat and the boat's slow movement were highly soporific, after the short night—we had been up before dawn. Unfortunately, the narrow benches and rough deck planks of the *Sally Ann* didn't look any more inviting than the tavern's settle had been.

"Oh, I'm not a scrap tired, Auntie!" Ian assured me. "I dinna think I'll sleep for days!"

Jamie eyed his nephew.

"We'll see if ye still think so, after a turn at the pole. In the meantime, perhaps I can find something to occupy your mind. Wait a bit—" He broke off, and ducked into the low cabin, where I heard him rootling through the baggage.

"God, it's hot!" said Ian, fanning himself. "What's Uncle Jamie after, then?"

"God knows," I said. Jamie had brought aboard a large crate, about the contents of which he had been most evasive. He had been playing cards when I had fallen asleep the night before, and my best guess was that he had acquired some embarrassing object in the course of gambling, which he was reluctant to expose to Ian's teasing.

Ian was right; it *was* hot. I could only hope that there would be a breeze later; for the moment, the sail above hung limp as a dishcloth, and the fabric of my shift clung damp against my legs. With a murmured word to Ian, I edged past and sidled toward the bow, where the water barrel stood.

Fergus was standing in the prow, arms crossed, giving a splendid impression of a noble figurehead, with his sternly handsome profile pointed upriver, thick, dark hair flowing back from his brow.

"Ah, milady!" He greeted me with a sudden dazzle of white teeth. "Is this not a splendid country?"

What I could see at the moment was not particularly splendid, the landscape consisting of an extensive mudflat, reeking in the sun, and a large collection of gulls and seabirds, all raucously excited about something smelly they had found near the water's edge.

"Milord tells me that any man may enter a claim for fifty acres of land, so long as he builds a house upon it, and promises to work it for a period of ten years. Imagine—fifty acres!" He rolled the words around in his mouth, savoring them with a kind of awe. A French peasant might think himself well blessed with five.

"Well, yes," I said, a little doubtfully. "I think you ought to pick your fifty acres carefully, though. Some parts of this place aren't much good for farming." I didn't hazard a guess as to how difficult Fergus might find it to carve a farm and homestead out of a howling wilderness with one hand, no matter how fertile the ground.

He wasn't paying attention in any case, his eyes shiny with dreams.

"I might perhaps have a small house built by Hogmanay," he murmured to himself. "Then I could send for Marsali and the child in the spring." His hand went automatically to the vacant spot on his chest, where the greenish medal of St. Dismas had hung since his childhood.

He had come to join us in Georgia, leaving his young and pregnant wife behind in Jamaica, under the care of friends. He assured me that he had no fear for her safety, however, for he had left her also under the protection of his patron saint, with strict instructions not to remove the battered medal from around her neck until she was safely delivered.

I wouldn't myself have thought that mothers and babies fell into the sphere of influence of the patron saint of thieves, but Fergus had lived as a pickpocket for all his early life, and his trust in Dismas was absolute.

"Will you call the baby Dismas, if it's a boy?" I asked, joking.

"No," he said in all seriousness. "I shall call him Germaine. Germaine James Ian Aloysius Fraser—James Ian for Milord and Monsieur," he explained, for so he always referred to Jamie and his brother-in-law, Ian Murray.

"Marsali liked Aloysius," he added dismissively, making it clear that he had had nothing to do with the choice of so undistinguished a name.

"And what if it's a girl?" I asked, with a sudden vivid memory. Twenty-odd years before, Jamie had sent me back through the stones, pregnant. And the last thing he had said to me, convinced the child I carried was a boy, was, "Name him Brian, for my father."

"Oh." Fergus had clearly not considered this possibility, either, for he looked vaguely disconcerted. Then his features cleared.

"Genevieve," he said firmly. "For Madame," by this meaning Jenny Murray, Jamie's sister. "Genevieve Claire, I think," he added, with another dazzling smile.

"Oh," I said, flustered and oddly flattered. "Well. Thank you. Are you sure that you ought not to go back to Jamaica to be with Marsali, Fergus?" I asked, changing the subject.

He shook his head decidedly.

"Milord may have need of me," he said. "And I am of more use here than I should be there. Babies are women's work, and who knows what dangers we may encounter in this strange place?"

As though in answer to this rhetorical question, the gulls rose in a squawking cloud, wheeling out over the river and mudflats, revealing the object of their appetite.

A stout pine stake had been driven into the mud of the bank, the top of it a foot below the dark, weedy line that marked the upper reaches of the incoming tide. The tide was still low; it had reached no higher than halfway up the stake. Above the lapping waves of silty water hung the figure of a man, fastened to the stake by a chain around his chest. Or what had once been his chest.

I couldn't tell how long he had been there, but quite long enough, from the looks of him. A narrow gash of white showed the curve of skull where skin and hair had been stripped off. Impossible to say what he had looked like; the birds had been busy.

Beside me, Fergus said something very obscene in French, softly under his breath.

"Pirate," said Captain Freeman laconically, coming up beside me and pausing long enough to spit a brown stream of tobacco juice into the river. "If they ain't taken to Charleston for hangin', sometimes they stake 'em out at low tide and let the river have 'em."

"Are—are there a lot of them?" Ian had seen it, too; he was much too old to reach for my hand, but he stood close beside me, his face pale under its tan.

"Not so much, no more. The Navy does a good job keepin' 'em down. But go back a few years, why, you could see four or five pirates out here at a time. Folk would pay to come out by boat, to sit and watch 'em drown. Real pretty out here when the tide comes in at sunset," he said, jaws moving in a slow, nostalgic rhythm. "Turns the water red."

"Look!" Ian, forgetting his dignity, clutched me by the arm. There was a movement near the riverbank, and we saw what had startled the birds away.

It slid into the water, a long, scaly form some five or six feet long, carving a deep groove in the soft mud of the bank. On the far side of the boat, the deckhand muttered something under his breath, but didn't stop his poling.

"It is a crocodile," Fergus said, and made the sign of the horns in distaste.

"No, I dinna think so." Jamie spoke behind me, and I swung around to see him peering over the cabin roof, at the still figure in the water and the V-shaped wake moving toward it. He held a book in his hand, thumb between the pages to hold his place, and now bent his head to consult the volume.

"I believe it is an alligator. They dine upon carrion, it says here, and willna eat fresh meat. When they take a man or a sheep, they pull the victim beneath the water to drown it, but then drag it to their den below ground and leave it there until it has rotted enough to suit their fancy. Of course," he added, with a bleak glance at the bank, "they're sometimes fortunate enough to find a meal prepared."

The figure on the stake seemed to tremble briefly, as something bumped it from below, and Ian made a small choking noise beside me.

"Where did you get that book?" I asked, not taking my eyes off the stake. The top of the wooden pole was vibrating, as though something under the waves was worrying at it. Then the pole was still, and the V-shaped wake could be seen again, traveling back toward the riverbank. I turned away before it could emerge.

Jamie handed me the book, his eyes still fixed on the black mudflat and its cloud of screeching birds.

"The Governor gave it to me. He said he thought it might be of interest on our journey."

I glanced down at the book. Bound in plain buckram, the title was stamped on the spine in gold leaf—*The Natural History of North Carolina*.

"Eeugh!" said Ian beside me, watching the scene on shore in horror. "That's the most awful thing I've ever—"

"Of interest," I echoed, eyes fixed firmly on the book. "Yes, I expect it will be."

Fergus, impervious to squeamishness of any kind, was watching the reptile's progress up the mudbank with interest.

"An alligator, you say. Still, it is much the same thing as a crocodile, is it not?"

"Yes," I said, shuddering despite the heat. I turned my back on the shore. I had met a crocodile at close range in the Indies, and wasn't anxious to improve my acquaintance with any of its relatives.

Fergus wiped sweat from his upper lip, dark eyes intent on the gruesome thing.

"Dr. Stern once told Milord and myself about the travels of a Frenchman named Sonnini, who visited Egypt and wrote much of the sights he had witnessed and the customs he was told of. He said that in that country, the crocodiles copulate upon the muddy banks of the rivers, the female being laid upon her back, and in that position, incapable of rising without the assistance of the male."

"Oh, aye?" Ian was all ears.

"Indeed. He said that some men there, hurried on by the impulses of depravity, would take advantage of this forced situation of the female, and hunt away the male, whereupon they would take his place and enjoy the inhuman embrace of the reptile, which is said to be a most powerful charm for the procurement of rank and riches."

Ian's mouth sagged open.

"You're no serious, man?" he demanded of Fergus, incredulous. He turned to Jamie. "Uncle?"

Jamie shrugged, amused.

"I should rather live poor but virtuous, myself." He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Besides, I think your auntie wouldna like it much if I was to forsake her embraces for a reptile's."

The black man, listening to this from his position in the bow, shook his head and spoke without looking round.

"Any man what gone frig with an alligator to get rich, he's done earnt it, you ask me."

"I rather think you're right," I said, with a vivid memory of the Governor's charming, toothy smile. I glanced at Jamie, but he was no longer paying attention. His eyes were fixed upriver, intent on possibility, both book and alligator forgotten for the moment. At least he'd forgotten to be sick.

* * *

The tidal surge caught us a mile above Wilmington, allaying Ian's fears for our speed. The Cape Fear was a tidal river, whose daily surge carried up two-thirds of its length, nearly as far as Cross Creek.

I felt the river quicken under us, the boat rising an inch or two, then beginning slowly to pick up speed as the power of the incoming tide was funneled up the harbor and into the river's narrow channel. The slave sighed with relief and hoisted the dripping pole free of the water.

There would be no need for poling until the surge ran out, in five or six hours. Then we would either anchor for the night and catch the fresh surge of the next incoming tide, or use the sail for further progress, wind allowing. Poling, I was given to understand, was necessary only in case of sandbars or windless days.

A sense of peaceful somnolence settled over the craft. Fergus and Ian curled up in the bow to sleep, while Rollo kept guard on the roof above, tongue dripping as he panted, eyes half closed against the sun. The Captain and his hand—commonly addressed as "you, Troklus," but whose name was actually Eutroclus—disappeared into the tiny cabin, from which I could hear the musical sound of liquid being poured.

Jamie was in the cabin, too, having gone to fetch something from his mysterious crate. I hoped it was drinkable; even sitting still on the stern transom with my feet dangling in the water, and with the small breeze of movement stirring the hair on my neck, I could feel sweat forming wherever skin touched skin.

There were indistinct murmurs in the cabin, and laughter. Jamie came out and turned toward the stern, stepping delicately through the piles of goods like a Clydesdale stallion in a field of frogs, a large wooden box held in his arms.

He set this gently on my lap, shucked off his shoes and stockings, and sat down beside me, putting his feet in the water with a sigh of pleasure at the coolness.

"What's this?" I ran my hand curiously over the box.

"Oh, only a wee present." He didn't look at me, but the tips of his ears were pink. "Open it, hm?"

It was a heavy box, both wide and deep. Carved of a dense, fine-grained dark wood, it bore the marks of heavy use—nicks and dents that had seasoned but not impaired its polished beauty. It was hasped for a lock, but there was none; the lid rose easily on oiled brass hinges, and a whiff of camphor floated out, vaporous as a jinn.

The instruments gleamed under the smoky sun, bright despite a hazing of disuse. Each had its own pocket, carefully fitted and lined in green velvet.

A small, heavy-toothed saw; scissors, three scalpels—round-bladed, straight-bladed, scoop-bladed; the silver blade of a tongue depressor, a tenaculum …

"Jamie!" Delighted, I lifted out a short ebony rod, to the end of which was affixed a ball of worsted, wrapped in rather moth-eaten velvet. I'd seen one before, at Versailles; the eighteenth-century version of a reflex hammer. "Oh, Jamie! How wonderful!"

He wiggled his feet, pleased.

"Oh, ye like it?"

"I love it! Oh, look—there's more in the lid, under this flap—" I stared for a moment at the disjointed tubes, screws, platforms and mirrors, until my mind's eye shuffled them and presented me with the neatly assembled vision. "A microscope!" I touched it reverently. "My God, a microscope."

"There's more," he pointed out, eager to show me. "The front opens and there are wee drawers inside."

There were—containing, among other things, a miniature balance and set of brass weights, a tile for rolling pills, and a stained marble mortar, its pestle wrapped in cloth to prevent its being cracked in transit. Inside the front, above the drawers, were row upon row of small, corked bottles made of stone or glass.

"Oh, they're beautiful!" I said, handling the small scalpel with reverence. The polished wood of the handle fit my hand as though it had been made for me, the blade weighted to an exquisite balance. "Oh, Jamie, thank you!"

"Ye like them, then?" His ears had gone bright red with pleasure. "I thought they'd maybe do. I've no notion what they're meant for, but I could see they were finely made."

I had no notion what some of the pieces were meant for, but all of them were beautiful in themselves; made by or for a man who loved his tools and what they did.

"Who did they belong to, I wonder?" I breathed heavily on the rounded surface of a lenticular and brought it to a soft gleam with a fold of my skirt.

"The woman who sold it to me didna ken; he left behind his doctor's book, though, and I took that, as well—perhaps it will give his name."

Lifting the top tray of instruments, he revealed another, shallower tray, from which he drew out a fat square-bound book, some eight inches wide, covered in scuffed black leather.

"I thought ye might be wanting a book, too, like the one ye kept in France," he explained. "The one where ye kept the pictures and the notes of the people ye saw at L'Hôpital. He's written a bit in this one, but there's a deal of blank pages left at the back."

Perhaps a quarter of the book had been used; the pages were covered with a closely written, fine black script, interspersed with drawings that took my eye with their clinical familiarity: an ulcerated toe, a shattered kneecap, the skin neatly peeled aside; the grotesque swelling of advanced goiter, and a dissection of the calf muscles, each neatly labeled.

I turned back to the inside cover; sure enough, his name was written on the first page, adorned with a small, gentlemanly flourish: *Dr. Daniel Rawlings, Esq*.

"What happened to Dr. Rawlings, I wonder? Did the woman who had the box say?"

Jamie nodded, his brow slightly creased.

"The Doctor lodged with her for a night. He said he'd come from Virginia, where his home was, bound upon some errand, and his case with him. He was looking for a man named Garver—she thought that was the name, at least. But that night after supper he went out—and never came back."

I stared at him.

"Never came back? Did she find out what happened to him?"

Jamie shook his head, batting away a small cloud of midges. The sun was sinking, painting the surface of the water gold and orange, and bugs were beginning to gather as the afternoon cooled into evening.

"No. She went to the sheriff, and to the justice, and the constable searched high and low—but there was nay sign of the man. They looked for a week, and then gave up. He had never told his landlady which town it was in Virginia, so they couldna trace him further."

"How very odd." I wiped a droplet of moisture off my chin. "When did the Doctor disappear?"

"A year past, she said." He looked at me, a little anxious. "Ye dinna mind? Using his things, I mean?"

"No." I closed the lid and stroked it gently, the dark wood warm and smooth under my fingers. "If it were me—I'd want someone to use them."

I remembered vividly the feel of my own doctor's bag—cordovan leather, with my initials stamped in gilt on the handle. Originally stamped in gilt on the handle, that is; they had long since worn off, the leather gone smooth and shiny, rich with handling. Frank had given me the bag when I graduated from medical school; I had given it to my friend Joe Abernathy, wanting it to be used by someone who would treasure it as I had.

He saw the shadow drift across my face—I saw the reflection of it darken his—but I took his hand and smiled as I squeezed it.

"It's a wonderful gift. However did you find it?"

He smiled then, in return. The sun blazed low, a brilliant orange ball glimpsed briefly through dark treetops.

"I'd seen the box when I went to the goldsmith's shop—it was the goldsmith's wife who'd kept it. Then I went back yesterday, meaning to buy ye a bit of jewelry—maybe a brooch—and whilst the goodwife was showing me the gauds, we happened to speak of this and that, and she told me of the Doctor, and—" He shrugged.

"Why did you want to buy me jewelry?" I looked at him, puzzled. The sale of the ruby had left us with a bit of money, but extravagance was not at all like him, and under the circumstances—

"Oh! To make up for sending all that money to Laoghaire? I didn't mind; I said I didn't."

He had—with some reluctance—arranged to send the bulk of the proceeds from the sale of the stone to Scotland, in payment of a promise made to Laoghaire MacKenzie—damn her eyes—Fraser, whom he had married at his sister's persuasion while under the rather logical impression that if I was not dead, I was at least not coming back. My apparent resurrection from the dead had caused any amount of complications, Laoghaire not least among them.

"Aye, ye said so," he said, openly cynical.

"I meant it—more or less," I said, and laughed. "You couldn't very well let the beastly woman starve to death, appealing as the idea is."

He smiled, faintly.

"No. I shouldna like to have that on my conscience; there's enough without. But that's not why I wished to buy ye a present."

"Why, then?" The box was heavy; a gracious, substantial, satisfying weight across my legs, its wood a delight under my hands. He turned his head to look full at me, then, his hair fire-struck with the setting sun, face dark in silhouette.

"Twenty-four years ago today, I married ye, Sassenach," he said softly. "I hope ye willna have cause yet to regret it."

The river's edge was settled, rimmed with plantations from Wilmington to Cross Creek. Still, the banks were thickly forested, with only the occasional glimpse of fields where a break in the trees showed plantings, or every so often, a wooden dock, half-hidden in the foliage.

We proceeded slowly upriver, following the tidal surge so long as it lasted, tying up for the night when it ran out. We ate dinner by a small fire on shore, but slept on the boat, Eutroclus having casually mentioned the prevalence of water moccasins, who—he said—inhabited dens beneath the riverbank but were much inclined to come and warm their cold blood next to the bodies of unwary sleepers.

I awoke soon before dawn, stiff and sore from sleeping on boards, hearing the soft rush of a vessel passing on the river nearby, feeling the push of its wake against our hull. Jamie stirred in his sleep when he felt me move, turned over, and clasped me to his bosom.

I could feel his body curled behind mine, in its paradoxical morning state of sleep and arousal. He made a drowsy noise and moved against me in inquiry, his hand fumbling at the hem of my rumpled shift.

"Stop," I said under my breath, batting his hand away. "Remember where we are, for God's sake!"

I could hear the shouts and barking of Ian and Rollo, galumphing to and fro on the shore, and small stirrings in the cabin, featuring hawking and spitting noises, indicating the imminent emergence of Captain Freeman.

"Oh," said Jamie, coming to the surface of consciousness. "Oh, aye. A pity, that." He reached up, squeezed my breasts with both hands, and stretched his body with voluptuous slowness against me, giving me a detailed idea of what I was missing.

"Ah, well," he said, relaxing reluctantly, but not yet letting go. "*Foeda est in coitu,* um?"

"It what?"

" 'Foeda est in coitu et breois voluptas' " he recited obligingly. " '*Et taedat Veneiis statim peractae*. Doing, a filthy pleasure is—and short. And done, we straight repent us of the sport.' "

I glanced down at the stained boards under us. "Well, perhaps 'filthy' isn't altogether the wrong word," I began, "but—"

"It's not the filthiness that troubles me, Sassenach," he interrupted, scowling at Ian, who was hanging over the side of the boat, shouting encouragement to Rollo as he swam. "It's the short."

He glanced at me, scowl changing to a look of approval as he took in my state of dishevelment. "I mean to take my time about it, aye?"

This classical start to the day seemed to have had some lasting influence on Jamie's mind. I could hear them at it as I sat in the afternoon sun, thumbing through Daniel Rawlings's casebook—at once entertained, enlightened, and appalled at the things recorded there.

I could hear Jamie's voice in the ordered rise and fall of ancient Greek. I had heard that bit before—a passage from the *Odyssey*. He paused, with an expectant rise.

"Ah …" said Ian.

"What comes next, Ian?"

"Er …"

"Once more," said Jamie, with a slight edge to his voice. "Pay attention, man. I'm no talkin' for the pleasure of hearin' myself, aye?" He began again, the elegant, formal verse warming to life as he spoke.

He might not take pleasure in hearing himself, but I did. I had no Greek myself, but the rise and fall of syllables in that soft, deep voice was as soothing as the lap of water against the hull.

Reluctantly accepting his nephew's continued presence, Jamie took his guardianship of Ian with due seriousness, and had been tutoring the lad as we traveled, seizing odd moments of leisure to teach—or attempt to teach—the lad the rudiments of Greek and Latin grammar, and to improve his mathematics and conversational French.

Fortunately, Ian had the same quick grasp of mathematical principles as his uncle; the side of the small cabin beside me was covered with elegant Euclidean proofs, carried out in burnt stick. When the subject turned to languages, though, they found less common ground.

Jamie was a natural polygogue; he acquired languages and dialects with no visible effort, picking up idioms as a dog picks up foxtails in a romp through the fields. In addition, he had been schooled in the Classics at the *Université* in Paris, and—while disagreeing now and then with some of the Roman philosophers—regarded both Homer and Virgil as personal friends.

Ian spoke the Gaelic and English with which he had been raised, and a sort of low French patois acquired from Fergus, and felt this quite sufficient to his needs. True, he had an impressive repertoire of swear words in six or seven other languages—acquired from exposure to a number of disreputable influences in the recent past, not least of these being his uncle—but he had no more than a vague apprehension of the mysteries of Latin conjugation.

Still less did he have an appreciation for the necessity of learning languages that to him were not only dead, but—he clearly thought—long decayed beyond any possibility of usefulness. Homer couldn't compete with the excitement of this new country, adventure reaching out from both shores with beckoning green hands.

Jamie finished his Greek passage, and with a sigh clearly audible to me where I sat, directed Ian to take out the Latin book he had borrowed from Governor Tryon's library. With no recitation to distract me, I returned to my perusal of Dr. Rawlings's casebook.

Like myself, the Doctor had plainly had some Latin, but preferred English for the bulk of his notes, dropping into Latin only for an occasional formal entry.

Bled Mr. Beddoes of a pt. Note distinct lessening of the bilious humor, his complexion much improved of the yellowness and pustules which have afflicted him. Administered black draught to assist purifying of the blood.

"Ass," I muttered—not for the first time. "Can't you see the man's got liver disease?" Probably a mild cirrhosis; Rawlings had noted a slight enlargement and hardening of the liver—though he attributed this to excessive production of bile. Most likely alcohol poisoning; the pustules on face and chest were characteristic of a nutritional deficiency that I saw commonly associated with excessive alcohol consumption—and God knew, *that* was epidemic.

Beddoes, if he were still alive—a prospect I considered doubtful—was likely drinking anything up to a quart of mixed spirit daily and hadn't so much as smelled a green vegetable in months. The pustules on whose disappearance Rawlings was congratulating himself had likely diminished because he had used turnip leaves as a coloring agent in his special receipt for "black draught."

Absorbed in my reading, I half heard Ian's stumbling rendition of Plautus's *Vertue* from the other side of the cabin, interrupted in every other line by Jamie's deeper voice, prompting and correcting.

" 'Virtus praemium est optimus …' "

"Optimum."

" '… est optimum. Virtus omnibus rebus' and … ah … and …"

"Anteit."

"Thank ye, Uncle. *'Virtus omnibus rebus anteit … profectus'*?"

"Profecto."

"Oh, aye, *profecto*. Um … *'Virtus'*?"

"Libertas. 'Libertas salus vita res et parentes, patria et prognati …' d'ye recall what is meant by *'vita,'* Ian?"

"Life," came Ian's voice, seizing gratefully on this buoyant object in a flounderous sea.

"Aye, that's good, but it's more than life. In Latin, it means not only being alive but it's also a man's substance, what he's made of. See, then it goes on, *'… libertas salus vita res et parentes, patria et prognati tutantur, servantur; virtus omnia in sese habet, omnia adsunt bona quem penest virtus.'* Now, what is he sayin' there, d'ye think?"

"Ah … virtue is a good thing?" Ian ventured.

There was a momentary silence, during which I could almost hear Jamie's blood pressure rising. A hiss of indrawn breath, then, as he thought better of whatever he had been about to say, a long-suffering exhalation.

"Mmphm. Look ye, Ian. *'Tutantur, servantur.'* What does he mean by using those two together, instead of putting it as …" My attention faded, drawn back to the book, wherein Dr. Rawlings now gave account of a duel and its consequences.

May 15. Was called from my bed at dawn to attend a gentleman staying at the Red Dog. Found him in sad case, with a wound to his hand, occasioned by the misfire of a pistol, the thumb and index fingers of the hand being blown off altogether by the explosion, the middle finger badly mangled and two-thirds of the hand so lacerated that it was scarce recognizable as a human appendage.

Determining that only prompt amputation would serve, I sent for the landlord and requested a pannikin of brandy, linen for bandages, and the help of two strong men. These being rapidly provided and the patient *suitably restrained, I proceeded to take the hand—it was the right, to the misfortune of the patient—off just above the wrist. Successfully ligated two arteries, but the anterior interosseus escaped me, being retracted into the flesh after I sawed through the bones. Was forced to loosen the tourniquet in order to find it, so bleeding was considerable—a fortunate accident, as the copious outpouring of blood rendered the patient insensible and thus put an end for the moment to his agony, as well as to his struggles, which were greatly hampering my work.*

The amputation being successfully concluded, the gentleman was put to bed, but I stayed near at hand, lest he regain consciousness abruptly and in random movement do hurt to my stitching.

This fascinating narrative was interrupted by a sudden outburst from Jamie, who had evidently reached the end of his patience.

"Ian, your Latin would disgrace a dog! And as for the rest, ye havena got enough understanding of Greek to tell the difference between water and wine!"

"If they're drinkin' it, it's not water," Ian muttered, sounding rebellious.

I closed the book and got hastily to my feet. It sounded rather as though the services of a referee might shortly be called for. Ian was making small Scottish noises of discontent as I rounded the cabin.

"Aye, mphm, but I dinna care so much—"

"Aye, ye don't care! That's the true pity of it—that ye havena the grace even to feel shame for your ignorance!"

There was a charged silence after this, broken only by the soft splash of Troklus's pole in the bow. I peeked around the corner, to see Jamie glaring at his nephew, who looked abashed. Ian glanced at me, coughed and cleared his throat.

"Well, I'll tell ye, Uncle Jamie, if I thought shame would help, I wouldna scruple to blush."

He looked so apologetically hangdog that I couldn't help laughing. Jamie turned, hearing me, and his scowl faded slightly.

"Ye're not a bit of help, Sassenach," he said. "You've the Latin, have ye not? Being a physician, ye must. Perhaps I should leave his

Latin schooling to you, aye?"

I shook my head. While it was more or less true that I could read Latin—badly and laboriously—I didn't fancy trying to cram the ragbag remnants of my education into Ian's head.

"All I remember is *Arma virumque cano*." I glanced at Ian and translated, grinning. "My arm got bit off by a dog."

Ian burst into giggles, and Jamie gave me a look of profound disillusion.

He sighed and ran a hand through his hair. While Jamie and Ian didn't resemble each other in any physical respect beyond height, both had thick hair and the habit of running a hand through it when agitated or thoughtful. It looked to have been a stressful lesson—both of them looked as though they'd been pulled backward through a hedgerow.

Jamie smiled wryly at me, then turned back to Ian, shaking his head.

"Ah, well. I'm sorry to bark at ye, Ian, truly. But ye've a fine mind, and I shouldna like to see ye waste it. God, man, at your age, I was in Paris, already starting in to study at the *Université*!"

Ian stood looking down into the water that swirled past the side of the ship in smooth brown riffles. His hands rested on the rail; big hands, broad-backed and browned by the sun.

"Aye," he said. "And at my age, my own father was in France, too. Fighting."

I was a bit startled to hear this. I had known that the elder Ian had soldiered in France for a time, but not that he had gone so early for a soldier—nor stayed so long. Young Ian was just fifteen. The elder Ian had served as a foreign mercenary from that age, then, until the age of twenty-two; when a cannon blast had left him with a leg so badly shattered by grapeshot that it had been amputated just below the knee—and he had come home for good.

Jamie looked at his nephew for a moment, frowning slightly. Then he came to stand beside Ian, leaning backward, hands on the rail to balance himself.

"I ken that, aye?" Jamie said quietly. "For I followed him, four years later, when I was outlawed."

Ian looked up at that, startled.

"Ye were together there in France?"

There was a slight breeze caused by our movement, but it was still a hot day. Perhaps the temperature decided him that it was better to let the subject of higher learning drop for a moment, for Jamie nodded, lifting the thick tail of his hair to cool his neck.

"In Flanders. For more than a year, before Ian was wounded and sent home. We fought wi' a regiment of Scots mercenaries then—under Fergus mac Leodhas."

Ian's eyes were alight with interest.

"Is that where Fergus—our Fergus—got his name, then?"

His uncle smiled.

"Aye, I named him for mac Leodhas; a bonny man, and a great soldier, forbye. He thought weel o' Ian. Did your Da never speak to you of him?"

Ian shook his head, his brow slightly clouded.

"He's never said a thing to me. I—I kent he'd lost his leg fighting in France—Mam told me that, when I asked—but he wouldna say a word about it, himself."

With Dr. Rawlings's description of amputation vivid in my mind, I thought it likely that the elder Ian hadn't wanted to recall the occasion.

Jamie shrugged, plucking the sweat-damp shirt away from his chest.

"Aye, well. I suppose he meant to put that time behind him, once he'd come home and settled at Lallybroch. And then …" He hesitated, but Ian was insistent.

"And then what, Uncle Jamie?"

Jamie glanced at his nephew, and one side of his mouth curled up.

"Well, I think he didna want to tell too many tales of war and fighting, lest you lads get thinking on it and set yourselves to go for soldiers, too. He and your mother will ha' wanted better for you, aye?"

I thought the elder Ian had been wise; it was clear from the look on his face that the younger Ian couldn't think of a much more exciting prospect than war and fighting.

"That will ha' been my Mam's doing," Ian said, with an air of disgust. "She'd have me wrapped in wool and tied to her apron strings, did I let her."

Jamie grinned.

"Oh, let her, is it? And d'ye think she'd wrap ye in wool and smother ye wi' kisses if ye were home this minute?"

Ian dropped the pose of disdain.

"Well, no," he admitted. "I think she'd skelp me raw."

Jamie laughed.

"Ye know a bit about women, Ian, if not so much as ye think."

Ian glanced skeptically from his uncle to me, and back.

"And you'll ken all about them, I suppose, Uncle?"

I raised one eyebrow, inviting an answer to this, but Jamie merely laughed.

"It's a wise man who kens the limits of his knowledge, Ian." He bent and kissed my damp forehead, then turned back to his nephew, adding, "Though I could wish your own limits went a bit further."

Ian shrugged, looking bored.

"I dinna mean to set up for a gentleman," he said. "After all, Young Jamie and Michael dinna read Greek; they do well enough!"

Jamie rubbed his nose, considering his nephew thoughtfully.

"Young Jamie has Lallybroch. And wee Michael does well wi' Jared in Paris. They'll be settled. We did as best we might for the two o' them, but there was precious little money to pay for travel or schooling when they came to manhood. There wasna much choice for them, aye?"

He pushed himself off the rail and stood upright.

"But your parents dinna want that for you, Ian, if better might be managed. They'd have ye grow to be a man of learning and influence; *duine uasal,* perhaps." It was a Gaelic expression I had heard before, literally "a man of worth." It was the term for tacksmen and lairds, the men of property and followers who ranked only below chieftains in the Highland clans.

Such a man as Jamie himself had been, before the Rising. But not now.

"Mmphm. And did ye do as your parents wanted for ye, then, Uncle Jamie?" Ian looked blandly at his uncle, with only a wary twitch of the eye to show he knew he was treading on shaky ground. Jamie had been meant to be *duine uasal,* indeed; Lallybroch had been his by right. It was only in an effort to save the property from confiscation by the Crown that he had made it over legally to Young Jamie, instead.

Jamie stared at him for a moment, then rubbed a knuckle across his upper lip before replying.

"I did say ye'd a fine mind, no?" he answered dryly. "Though since ye ask … I was raised to do two things, Ian. To mind my land and people, and to care for my family. I've done those two things, as best I might—and I shall go on doing them as best I can."

Young Ian had the grace to look abashed at this.

"Aye, well, I didna mean …" he mumbled, looking at his feet.

"Dinna fash, laddie," Jamie interrupted, clapping him on the shoulder. He grinned wryly at his nephew. "Ye'll amount to something for your mother's sake—if it kills us both. And now I think it will be my turn at the pole."

He glanced forward, to where Troklus's shoulders gleamed like oily copper, snake-muscled with long labor. Jamie untied his breeches—unlike the other men, he would not take off his shirt for poling, but stripped his breeks for coolness and worked with his shirt knotted between his thighs, in the Highland style—and nodded to Ian.

"You think about it, laddie. Youngest son or no, your life's not meant to be wasted."

He smiled at me then, with a sudden heart-stopping brilliance, and handed me his shed breeks. Then, still holding my hand in his, he stood upright and, hand over heart, declaimed,

"Amo, amas, I love a lass,
As cedar tall and slender;
Sweet cowslip's grace
Is her nominative case,
And she's o' the feminine gender."

He nodded graciously to Ian, who had dissolved in giggles, and lifted my hand to his lips, blue eyes aslant with mischief.

> *“Can I decline a nymph so divine?*
> *Her voice like a flute is dulcis;*
> *Her oculus bright, her manus white*
> *And soft, when I tacto, her pulse is.*
> *O bow belle, my puella*
> *I’ll kiss in secula seculorum;*
> *If I’ve luck, sir, she’s my uxor,*
> *O dies benedictorum.”*

He made a courtly leg to me, blinked solemnly in his version of a wink, and strode off in his shirt.

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9

TWO-THIRDS OF A GHOST

The surface of the river gleamed like oil, the water moving gently past without a ripple. There was a single lantern hung from the starboard bow; sitting on a low stool perched on the forward deck, I could see the light below, not so much reflected in the water as trapped under it, moving slowly side by side with the boat.

The moon was a faint sickle, making its feeble sweep through the treetops. Beyond the thick trees that lined the river, the ground fell away in broad sweeps of darkness, over the rice plantations and tobacco fields. The heat of the day was sucked down into the earth, glowing with unseen energy beneath the surface of the soil, the rich, fertile flatlands simmering in black heat behind the screen of pines and sweetgum trees, working the alchemy of water and trapped sun.

To move at all was to break a sweat. The air was tangible, each tiny ripple of warmth a caress against my face and arms.

There was a soft rustle in the dark behind me, and I reached up a hand, not turning to look. Jamie's big hand closed gently over mine, squeezed and let go. Even that brief touch left my fingers damp with perspiration.

He eased himself down next to me with a sigh, plucking at the collar of his shirt.

"I dinna think I've breathed air since we left Georgia," he said. "Every time I take a breath, I think I'll maybe drown."

I laughed, feeling a trickle of sweat snake down between my breasts.

“It will be cooler in Cross Creek; everyone says so.” I took a deep breath myself, just to prove I could. “Doesn’t it smell wonderful, though?” The darkness released all the pungent green scents of the trees and plants along the water’s edge, mingling with the damp mud of the riverbank and the scent of sun-warmed wood from the deck of the boat.

“Ye’d have made a good dog, Sassenach.” He leaned back against the wall of the cabin with a sigh. “It’s no wonder yon beast admires ye so.”

The click of toenails on deckboards announced the arrival of Rollo, who advanced cautiously toward the rail, stopped a careful foot short of it, and lowered himself gingerly to the deck. He laid his nose on his paws and sighed deeply. Rollo disapproved almost as strongly of boats as Jamie did.

“Hullo there,” I said. I extended a hand for him to sniff, and he politely condescended to let me scratch his ears. “And where’s your master, eh?”

“In the cabin, bein’ taught new ways to cheat at cards,” Jamie said wryly. “God kens best what will happen to the lad; if he’s not shot or knocked on the head in some tavern, he’ll likely come home wi’ an ostrich he’s won at faro next.”

“Surely they haven’t either ostriches or faro games up in the mountains? If there aren’t any towns to speak of, surely there aren’t many taverns, either.”

“Well, I shouldna think so,” he admitted. “But if a man’s bound to go to the devil, he’ll find a way to do it, no matter where ye set him down.”

“I’m sure Ian isn’t going to the devil,” I replied soothingly. “He’s a fine boy.”

“He’s a man,” Jamie corrected. He cocked an ear toward the cabin, where I could hear muffled laughter and the occasional comfortable obscenity. “A damn young one, though, and fat-heided with it.” He looked at me, a rueful smile visible in the lantern light.

“If he were a wee lad yet, I could keep some rein on him. As it is —” He shrugged. “He’s old enough to mind his own business, and he’ll not thank me for sticking my nose in.”

"He always listens to you," I protested.

"Mmphm. Wait till I tell him something he doesna want to hear." He leaned his head against the wall, closing his eyes. Sweat gleamed across the high cheekbones, and a small trickle ran down the side of his neck.

I put out a finger and delicately flicked the tiny drop away, before it further dampened his shirt.

"You've been telling him for two months that he has to go home to Scotland; he doesn't want to hear that, I don't think."

Jamie opened one eye and surveyed me cynically.

"Is he in Scotland?"

"Well …"

"Mmphm," he said, and closed the eye again.

I sat quietly for a bit, blotting the perspiration off my face with a fold of my skirt. The river had narrowed here; the near bank was no more than ten feet away. I caught a rustle of movement among the shrubs, and a pair of eyes gleamed briefly red with reflected light from our lantern.

Rollo lifted his head with a sudden low *Woof,* ears pricked to attention. Jamie opened his eyes and glanced at the bank, then sat up abruptly.

"Christ! That's the biggest rat I've ever seen!"

I laughed.

"It's not a rat; it's a possum. See the babies on her back?"

Jamie and Rollo regarded the possum with identical looks of calculation, assessing its plumpness and possible speed. Four small possums stared solemnly back, pointed noses twitching over their mother's humped, indifferent back. Obviously thinking the boat no threat, the mother possum finished lapping water, turned, and trundled slowly into the brush, the tip of her naked thick pink tail disappearing as the lantern light faded.

The two hunters let out identical sighs, and relaxed again.

"Myers did say as they're fine eating," Jamie remarked wistfully. With a small sigh of my own, I groped in the pocket of my gown and handed him a cloth bag.

“What’s this?” He peered interestedly into the bag, then poured the small, lumpy brown objects out into the palm of his hand.

“Roasted peanuts,” I said. “They grow underground hereabouts. I found a farmer selling them for hogfood, and had the inn-wife roast some for me. You take off the shells before you eat them.” I grinned at him, enjoying the novel sensation of for once knowing more about our surroundings than he did.

He gave me a mildly dirty look, and crushed a shell between thumb and forefinger, yielding three nuts.

“I’m ignorant, Sassenach,” he said. “Not a fool. There’s a difference, aye?” He put a peanut in his mouth and bit down gingerly. His skeptical look changed to one of pleased surprise, and he chewed with increasing enthusiasm, tossing the other nuts into his mouth.

“Like them?” I smiled, enjoying his pleasure. “I’ll make you peanut butter for your bread, once we’re settled and I have my new mortar unpacked.”

He smiled back and swallowed before cracking another nut.

“I will say that if it’s a swampish place, at least it’s fine soil. I’ve never seen so many things grow so easily.”

He tossed another nut into his mouth.

“I have been thinking, Sassenach,” he said, looking down into the palm of his hand. “What would ye think of maybe settling here?”

The question wasn’t entirely unexpected. I had seen him eyeing the black fields and lush crops with a farmer’s glittering eye, and caught his wistful expression when he admired the Governor’s horses.

We couldn’t go back to Scotland immediately, in any case. Young Ian, yes, but not Jamie or me, owing to certain complications—not the least of these being a complication by the name of Laoghaire MacKenzie.

“I don’t know,” I said slowly. “Indians and wild animals quite aside—”

“Och, well,” he interrupted, mildly embarrassed. “Myers told me they were no difficulty at all, and ye keep clear of the mountains.”

I forbore from pointing out that the Governor's offer would take us into the precincts of precisely those mountains.

"Yes, but you do remember what I told you, don't you? About the Revolution? This is 1767, and you heard the conversation at the Governor's table. Nine years, Jamie, and all hell breaks loose." We had both lived through war, and neither of us took the thought lightly. I laid a hand on his arm, forcing him to look at me.

"I was right, you know—before." I had known what would happen at Culloden; had told him the fate of Charles Stuart and his men. And neither my knowing nor his had been enough to save us. Twenty aching years of separation, and the ghost of a daughter he would never see lay behind that knowing.

He nodded slowly, and lifted a hand to touch my cheek. The soft glow of the small lantern overhead attracted clouds of tiny gnats; they swirled suddenly, disturbed by his movement.

"Aye, ye were," he said softly. "But then—we thought we must change things. Or try, at the least. But here—" He turned, waving an arm at the vast land that lay unseen beyond the trees. "I shouldna think it my business," he said simply. "Either to help or to hinder much."

I waved the gnats away from my face.

"It might *be* our business, if we lived here."

He rubbed a finger below his lower lip, thinking. His beard was sprouting, a glimmer of red stubble sparked with silver in the lantern light. He was a big man, handsome and strong in the prime of his life, but no longer a young one, and I realized that with sudden gratitude.

Highland men were bred to fight; Highland boys became men when they could lift their swords and go to battle. Jamie had never been reckless, but he had been a warrior and a soldier most of his life. As a young man in his twenties, nothing could have kept him from a fight, whether it was his own or not. Now, in his forties, sense might temper passion—or at least I hoped so.

And it was true; beyond this aunt whom he didn't know, he had no family here, no ties that might compel involvement. Perhaps, knowing what was coming, we might contrive to stay clear of the worst?

"It's a verra big place, Sassenach." He looked out over the prow of the boat, into the vast black sweep of invisible land. "Only since we left Georgia, we have traveled farther than the whole length of Scotland and England both."

"That's true," I admitted. In Scotland, even among the high crags of the Highlands, there had been no way to escape the ravages of war. Not so here; should we seek our place carefully, we might indeed escape the roving eye of Mars.

He tilted his head to one side, smiling up at me.

"I could see ye as a planter's lady, Sassenach. If the Governor will find me a buyer for the other stones, then I shall have enough, I think, to send Laoghaire all the money I promised her, and still have enough over to buy a good place—one where we might prosper."

He took my right hand in his, his thumb gently stroking my silver wedding ring.

"Perhaps one day I shall deck ye in laces and jewels," he said softly. "I havena been able to give ye much, ever, save a wee silver ring, and my mother's pearls."

"You've given me a lot more than that," I said. I wrapped my fingers around his thumb and squeezed. "Brianna, for one."

He smiled faintly, looking down at the deck.

"Aye, that's true. She's maybe the real reason—for staying, I mean."

I pulled him toward me, and he rested his head against my knee.

"This is her place, no?" he said quietly. He lifted a hand, gesturing toward the river, the trees and the sky. "She will be born here, she'll live here."

"That's right," I said softly. I stroked his hair, smoothing the thick strands that were so much like Brianna's. "This will be her country." Hers, in a way it could never be mine or his, no matter how long we might live here.

He nodded, beard rasping gently against my skirt.

"I dinna wish to fight, or have ye ever in danger, Sassenach, but if there is a bit I can do … to build, maybe, to make it safe, and a good land for her …" He shrugged. "It would please me," he finished softly.

We sat silently for a bit, close together, watching the dull shine of the water and the slow progress of the sunken lantern.

"I left the pearls for her," I said at last. "That seemed right; they were an heirloom, after all." I drew my ringed hand, curved, across his lips. "And the ring is all I need."

He took both my hands in his, then, and kissed them—the left, which still bore the gold ring of my marriage to Frank, and then the right, with his own silver ring.

"Da mi basia mille," he whispered, smiling. Give me a thousand kisses. It was the inscription inside my ring, a brief quotation from a love song by Catullus. I bent and gave him one back.

"Dein mille altera," I said. Then a thousand more.

It was near midnight when we tied up near a brushy grove to rest. The weather had changed; still hot and muggy, now the air held the hint of thunder, and the undergrowth stirred with small movements—random air currents, or the scurryings of tiny night things hastening for home before the storm.

We were nearly at the end of the tidal surge; from here it would be a matter of sail and pole, and Captain Freeman had hopes of catching a good breeze on the wings of a storm. It would pay us to rest while we could. I curled into our nest on the stern, but was unable to fall asleep at once, late as it was.

By the Captain's estimation, we might make Cross Creek by evening tomorrow—certainly by the day after. I was surprised to realize how eagerly I was looking forward to our arrival; two months of living hand-to-mouth on the road had given me an urgent longing for some haven, no matter how temporary.

Familiar as I was with Highland notions of hospitality and kinship, I had no fears regarding our welcome. Jamie plainly did not consider the fact that he hadn't met this particular aunt in forty-odd years to be any bar to our cordial reception, and I was quite sure he was right. At the same time, I couldn't help entertaining considerable curiosity about Jocasta Cameron.

There had been five MacKenzie siblings, the children of old Red Jacob, who had built Castle Leoch. Jamie's mother, Ellen, had been the eldest, Jocasta the youngest. Janet, the other sister, had died, like Ellen, well before I met Jamie, but I had known the two brothers, Colum and Dougal, quite well indeed, and from that knowledge, couldn't help speculating as to what this last MacKenzie of Leoch might be like.

Tall, I thought, with a glance at Jamie, curled up peacefully on the deck beside me. Tall, and maybe red-haired. They were all tall—even Colum, victim of a crippling degenerative disease, had been tall to begin with—fair skinned Vikings, the lot of them, with a ruddy blaze to their coloring that shimmered from Jamie's fiery red through his uncle Dougal's deep russet. Only Colum had been truly dark.

Remembering Colum and Dougal, I felt a sudden stir of unease. Colum had died before Culloden, killed by his disease. Dougal had died on the eve of the battle—killed by Jamie. It had been a matter of self-defense—*my* self, in fact—and only one of so many deaths in that bloody April. Still, I did wonder whether Jamie had given any thought as to what he might say, when the greetings were past at River Run, and the casual family chat got round to "Oh, and when did you last see So-and-so?"

Jamie sighed and stretched in his sleep. He could—and did—sleep well on any surface, accustomed as he had been to sleeping in conditions that ranged from wet heather to musty caves to the cold stone floors of prison cells. I supposed the wooden decking under us must be thoroughly comfortable by contrast.

I was neither so elastic nor so hardened, myself, but gradually weariness overwhelmed me, and even the prick of curiosity about the future was unable to keep me awake.

I woke to confusion. It was still dark, and there was noise all around, shouting and barking, and the deck beneath me trembled with the vibration of stamping feet. I jerked upright, half thinking myself aboard a sailing ship, convinced that we had been boarded by pirates.

Then my mind cleared, along with my foggy vision, and I discovered that we *had* been boarded by pirates. Strange voices shouted oaths and orders, and booted feet were heavy on the deck. Jamie was gone.

I scrabbled onto my hands and feet, taking no heed for clothes or anything else. It was near dawn; the sky was dark, but light enough that the cabin showed as a darker blotch against it. As I struggled upright, clinging to the cabin roof for support, I was nearly knocked flat by flying bodies hurling themselves across it.

There was a confused blur of fur and white faces, a shout and a shot and a terrible thud, and Ian was crouching ashen on the deck, over Rollo's heaving form. A strange man, hatless and disheveled, pushed himself to his feet.

"Damn! He nearly got me!" Unhinged by the near miss, the robber's hand trembled as he fumbled with the spare pistol at his belt. He pointed it at the dog, face drawing down in an ugly squint.

"Take that, arse-bite!"

A taller man appeared from nowhere, his hand knocking down the pistol before the flint could strike.

"Don't waste the shot, fool." He gestured to Troklus and Captain Freeman—the latter volubly incensed—being herded toward me. "How d'you mean to hold them with an empty gun?"

The shorter man cast an evil look at Rollo, but swung his pistol to bear on Freeman's midriff instead.

Rollo was making an odd noise, a low growling mixed with whimpers of pain, and I could see a wet, dark stain on the boards under his twitching body. Ian bent low over him, hands stroking his head helplessly. He looked up, and tears shone wet on his cheeks.

"Help me, Auntie," he said. "Please help!"

I moved impulsively, and the tall man stepped forward, thrusting out an arm to stop me.

"I want to help the dog," I said.

"What?" said the short robber, in tones of outrage.

The tall man was masked—they all were, I realized, my eyes adjusting to the growing half-light. How many were there? It was impossible to tell under the mask, but I had the distinct impression that the tall man was smiling. He didn't answer, but gave a short jerk of his pistol, giving me leave.

"Hullo, old boy," I said under my breath, dropping to my knees next to the dog. "Don't bite, there's a good doggie. Where is he hurt, Ian, do you know?"

Ian shook his head, sniffing back the tears.

"It's under him; I can't get him to turn over."

I wasn't about to try to heave the dog's huge carcass over either. I felt quickly for a pulse in the neck, but my fingers sank into Rollo's thick ruff, prodding uselessly. Seized by inspiration, I instead picked up a front leg and felt up its length, getting my fingers into the hollow where the leg met the body.

Sure enough, there it was; a steady pulse, throbbing reassuringly under my fingers. I began by habit to count, but quickly abandoned the effort, as I had no idea what a dog's normal pulse rate should be. It *was* steady, though; no fluttering, no arrhythmia, no weakness. That was a very good sign.

Another was that Rollo hadn't lost consciousness; the great leg I held tucked under my elbow had the tension of coiled spring, not the limp dangle of shock. The dog made a long, high-pitched noise, halfway between a whine and a howl, and began to scrabble with his claws, pulling his leg out of my grasp in an effort to right himself.

"I don't think it's very bad, Ian," I said in relief. "Look, he's turning over."

Rollo stood up, swaying. He shook his head violently, shaggy coat twitching from head to tail, and a shower of blood drops flew over the deck with a sound like pattering rain. The big yellow eyes fixed on the short man with a look that was clear to the meanest intelligence.

"Here! You stop him, or I swear I'll shoot him dead!" Panic and sincerity rang out in the robber's voice, as the muzzle of the pistol drifted uncertainly between the little group of prisoners and Rollo's lip-curled snarl.

Ian, who had been frantically undoing his shirt, whipped the garment off and over Rollo's head, temporarily blinding the dog, who shook his head madly, making growling noises inside the restraint. Blood stained the yellow linen—I could see now, though, that it came from a shallow gash in the dog's shoulder; evidently, the bullet had only grazed him.

Ian hung on grimly, forcing Rollo back on his haunches, muttering orders to the dog's swaddled head.

"How many aboard?" The taller man's sharp eyes flicked toward Captain Freeman, whose mouth was pressed so tightly together, it looked no more than a purse seam in the gray fur of his face, then toward me.

I knew him; knew the voice. The knowledge must have shown in my face, for he paused for a moment, then jerked his head and let the masking kerchief fall from his face.

"How many?" Stephen Bonnet asked again.

"Six," I said. There was no reason not to answer; I could see Fergus on the shore, hands raised as a third pirate herded him at gunpoint toward the boat; Jamie had materialized out of the darkness beside me, looking grim.

"Mr. Fraser," Bonnet said pleasantly, at sight of him. "A pleasure to be renewing our acquaintance. But did ye not have another companion, sir? The one-armed gentleman?"

"Not here," Jamie replied shortly.

"I'll have a look," the short robber muttered, turning, but Bonnet stopped him with a gesture.

"Ah, now, and would ye be doubting the word of a gentleman like Mr. Fraser? No, you'll be after guarding these fine folk here, Roberts; I'll be having the look around." With a nod to his companion, he vanished.

Looking after Rollo had distracted me momentarily from the commotion going on elsewhere on the boat. Sounds of breakage came from inside the cabin, and I leapt to my feet, reminded of my medicine box.

"Here! Where you going? Stop! I'll shoot!" The robber's voice held a desperate note, but an uncertain one, as well. I didn't stop to look at him, but dived into the cabin, cannoning into a fourth robber, who was indeed rummaging through my medicine chest.

I staggered back from the collision, then clutched his arm, with a cry of outrage. He had been carelessly opening boxes and bottles, shaking out the contents, and tossing them on the floor; a litter of bottles, many of them broken, lay amid the scattered remnants of Dr. Rawlings's selection of medicines.

"Don't you *dare* touch those!" I said, and snatching the nearest vial from the chest, I popped out the cork and flung the contents in his face.

Like most of Rawlings's mixtures, it contained a high proportion of alcohol. He gasped as the liquid hit, and reeled backward, eyes streaming.

I pressed my advantage by seizing a stone ale bottle from the wreckage and hitting him on the head with it. It hit with a satisfying *thunk!* but I hadn't hit him quite hard enough; he staggered but stayed upright, lurching as he grabbed at me.

I drew back my arm for another swing, but my wrist was seized from behind by a grip like iron.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mrs. Fraser dear," said a polite, familiar Irish voice. "But I really cannot allow ye to crack his head. It's not very ornamental, sure, but he needs it to hold up his hat."

"Frigging bitch! She *hit* me!" The man I had hit was clutching his head, his features screwed up in pain.

Bonnet hauled me out onto the deck, my arm twisted painfully behind my back. It was nearly light by now; the river glowed like flat silver. I stared hard at our assailants; I meant to know them again, if I saw them, masks or no masks.

Unfortunately, the improved light allowed the robbers better vision as well. The man I had hit, who seemed to be bearing a distinct grudge, seized my hand and wrenched at my ring.

"Here, let's have that!"

I yanked my hand away and made to slap him, but was stopped by a meaningful cough from Bonnet, who had stepped close to Ian and was holding his pistol an inch from the boy's left ear.

"Best hand them over, Mrs. Fraser," he said politely. "I fear Mr. Roberts requires some compensation for the damage ye've caused him."

I twisted my gold ring off, hands trembling both with fear and rage. The silver one was harder; it stuck on my knuckle as though reluctant to part from me. Both rings were damp and slippery with sweat, the metal warmer than my suddenly chilled fingers.

"Give 'em up." The man poked me roughly in the shoulder, then turned up a broad, grubby palm for the rings. I reached toward him, reluctantly, rings cupped in my hand—and then, with an impulse I didn't stop to examine, clapped my hand to my mouth instead.

My head hit the cabin wall with a thud as the man knocked me backward. His callused fingers jabbed my cheeks and poked into my mouth, probing roughly in search of the rings. I twisted and gulped hard, mouth filling with saliva and a silver taste that might have been either metal or blood.

I bit down and he jerked back with a cry; one ring must have flown out of my mouth, for I heard a faint, metallic *ping* somewhere, and then I gagged and choked, the second ring sliding into my gullet, hard and round.

"Bitch! I'll slit your friggin' throat! You'll go to hell without your rings, you cheating whore!" I saw the man's face, contorted in rage, and the sudden glitter of a knife blade drawn. Then something hit me hard and knocked me over, and I found myself crushed to the deck, flattened under Jamie's body.

I was too stunned to move, though I couldn't have moved in any case; Jamie's chest was pressing on the back of my head, squashing my face into the deck. There was a lot of shouting and confusion, muffled by the folds of damp linen around my head. There was a soft *thunk!* and I felt Jamie jerk and grunt.

Oh, God, they've stabbed him! I thought, in an agony of terror. Another *thump* and a louder grunt, though, indicated only a kick in the ribs. Jamie didn't move; just pressed himself harder against the deck, flattening me like the filling of a sandwich.

"Leave off! Roberts! I said leave him!" Bonnet's voice rang out in tones of authority, sharp enough to penetrate the muffling cloth.

"But she—" Roberts began, but his querulous whine was stopped abruptly with a sharp, meaty smack.

"Raise yourself, Mr. Fraser. Your wife is safe—not that she deserves to be." Bonnet's husky baritone held mingled tones of amusement and irritation.

Jamie's weight lifted slowly off me, and I sat up, feeling dizzy and mildly sick from the blow on the head. Stephen Bonnet stood looking down at me, examining me with faint distaste, as though I were a mangy deerhide he'd been offered for sale. Next to him, Roberts glared malevolently, dabbing at a smear of blood at his hairline.

Bonnet blinked finally, and switched his gaze to Jamie, who had regained his feet.

"A foolish woman," Bonnet said dispassionately, "but I suppose you don't mind that." He nodded, a faint smile showing. "I am obliged for the opportunity to repay my debt to ye, sir. A life for a life, as the Good Book says."

"Repay us?" Ian said angrily. "After what we've done for ye, ye'll rob and spoil us, lay violent hands upon my aunt and my dog, and then ye'll ha' the gall to speak of repayment?"

Bonnet's pale eyes fixed on Ian's face; they were green, the color of peeled grapes. He had a deep dimple in one cheek, as though God had pressed a thumb there in his making, but the eyes were cold as river water at dawn.

"Why, were ye never after learning your Scripture, lad?" Bonnet shook his head reprovingly, with a click of the tongue. "A virtuous woman is prized above rubies; her price is greater than pearls."

He opened his hand, still smiling, and the lantern light glittered off three gems: emerald, sapphire, and the dark fire of a black diamond.

"I'm sure Mr. Fraser would agree, would ye not, sir?" He slipped the hand into his coat, then brought it out empty.

"And after all," he said, cold eyes swiveling once more toward Ian, "there are repayments of different kinds." He smiled, not very pleasantly. “Though I should not suppose you can be old enough to know that yet. Be glad I’ve no mind to give ye a lesson.”

He turned away, beckoning to his comrades.

“We have what we came for,” he said abruptly. “Come.” He stepped up onto the rail and jumped, landing with a grunt on the muddy riverbank. His henchmen followed, Roberts casting an evil look at me before splashing awkwardly into the shallows and ashore.

The four men disappeared at once into the brush, and I heard the high-pitched greeting whinny of a horse, somewhere in the darkness. Aboard, all was silence.

The sky was the color of charcoal, and thunder grumbled faintly in the distance, sheet lightning flickering just above the far horizon.

“Bastards.”

Captain Freeman spat in valediction over the side, and turned to his mate.

“Fetch the poles, you, Troklus,” he said, and shambled toward the tiller, hitching his breeks upward as he went.

Slowly, the others stirred and came to life. Fergus, with a glance at Jamie, lit the lantern and then disappeared into the cabin, where I heard him beginning to set things to rights. Ian sat huddled on the deck, his dark head bent over Rollo as he dabbed at the dog’s neck with his wadded shirt.

I didn’t want to look at Jamie. I rolled onto my hands and knees and crawled slowly over to Young Ian. Rollo watched me, yellow eyes wary, but made no objection to my presence.

“How is he?” I said, rather hoarsely. I could feel the ring in my throat, an uncomfortable obstruction, and swallowed heavily several times.

Young Ian looked up at once; his face was white and set, but his eyes were alert.

“He’s all right, I think,” he said softly. “Auntie—are ye all right? Ye’re no hurt, are ye?”

“No,” I said, and tried to smile reassuringly. “I’m fine.” There was a sore spot on the back of my skull and my ears still rang slightly; the yellow halo of light around the lantern seemed to oscillate, to swell and shrink in rhythm with the beating of my heart. One cheek was scraped, I had a bruised elbow and a large splinter in one hand, but I seemed to be fundamentally sound, physically. Otherwise, I had my doubts.

I didn't look around at Jamie, some six feet behind me, but I could feel his presence, ominous as a thundercloud. Ian, who plainly *could* see him over my shoulder, looked faintly apprehensive.

There was a slight creaking of the deck, and Ian's expression eased. I heard Jamie's voice inside the cabin, outwardly casual as he asked Fergus a question, then it faded, lost in the sounds of bumping and shuffling as the men righted furniture and repiled the scattered goods. I let my breath out slowly.

"Dinna fash, Auntie," Ian said, in an attempt at comfort. "Uncle Jamie's no the sort to lay hands on ye, I dinna think."

I wasn't at all sure of that, given the vibrations coming from Jamie's direction, but I hoped he was right.

"Is he terribly angry, do you think?" I asked in a low voice.

Ian shrugged uneasily.

"Well, last time I saw him look at *me* that way, he took me back o' the house and knocked me flat. He wouldna serve you that way, though, I'm sure," he added hastily.

"I don't suppose so," I said, a little bleakly. I wasn't sure I wouldn't prefer it if he did.

"It's no verra nice to get the rough side o' Uncle Jamie's tongue, either," Ian said, shaking his head sympathetically. "I'd rather a thrashing, myself."

I gave Ian a quelling look and leaned over the dog.

"Sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. Has the bleeding stopped?"

It had; disregarding the blood-matted fur, there was surprisingly little damage; no more than a deep nick in the skin and muscle near the shoulder. Rollo flattened his ears and showed his teeth as I examined him, but made no audible protest.

"Good dog," I murmured. Had I any way to numb the skin, I would have stitched the wound, but we would have to do without such niceties. “He should have a little ointment there, to keep the flies out.”

“I’ll get it, Auntie; I ken where your wee box is.” Ian gently edged Rollo’s nose off his knee and got to his feet. “It’ll be the green stuff ye put on Fergus’s toe?” At my nod, he disappeared into the cabin, leaving me to deal with my quivering stomach, sore head, and congested throat. I swallowed several times, but with no great result. I touched my throat gingerly, wondering which ring I still had.

Eutroclus came round the corner of the cabin, carrying a long thick pole of white wood, deeply stained at one end, the marks testifying to the frequent necessity of its use. Stabbing the pole firmly down off the side, he leaned his weight against it, heaving with a long, sustained effort.

I jumped, as Jamie came out of the shadows, a similar pole in his hand. I hadn’t heard him, above the miscellaneous thumpings and shouts. He didn’t look at me, but shed his shirt, and at the deckhand’s indication, stabbed down his pole.

On the fourth try, I felt the vibration of the hull, a small judder as something shifted. Encouraged, Jamie and the hand shoved harder, and all of sudden, the hull slid free, with a muted *bwong!* of resonant wood that made Rollo lift his head with a startled *Wuff!*

Eutroclus nodded to Jamie, face beaming under a shiny layer of sweat, and took the pole from him. Jamie nodded back, smiling, and picking up his shirt from the deck, turned toward me.

I stiffened, and Rollo twitched his ears to full alert, but Jamie showed no immediate disposition either to berate me or to toss me overboard. Instead, he leaned down, frowning as he peered at me in the wavering lantern light.

“How d’ye feel, Sassenach? I canna tell if you’re really green, or is it only the light.”

“I’m all right. A bit shaky, perhaps.” More than a bit; my hands were still clammy, and I knew my trembling knees wouldn’t hold me if I tried to stand. I swallowed hard, coughed, and thumped myself on the chest.

"It's probably my imagination, but it feels like the ring is caught in my throat."

He squinted thoughtfully at me, then turned to Fergus, who had appeared from the cabin and was hovering nearby.

"Ask the captain might I see his pipe for a moment, Fergus." He turned away, pulling his shirt over his head, and disappeared aft himself, returning moments later with a cup of water.

I reached gratefully for it, but he held it out of my reach.

"Not just yet, Sassenach," he said. "Got it? Aye, thanks, Fergus. Fetch an empty bucket, now, will ye?" Taking the filthy pipe from a puzzled Fergus, he inserted his thumb into the stained bowl and began to scrape at the burnt, gummy residue that lined it.

Turning the pipe upside down, he tapped it over the cup of water, causing a small shower of brown crusts and moist crumbs of half-burnt tobacco, which he stirred into the water with his blackened thumb. Finished with these preparations, he looked up at me over the rim of the cup in a distinctly sinister fashion.

"No," I said. "Oh, no."

"Oh, yes," he said. "Come along, Sassenach; it'll cure what ails ye."

"I'll just … wait," I said. I folded my arms across my chest. "Thanks anyway."

Fergus had by this time reappeared with the bucket, eyebrows raised high. Jamie took it from him and plunked it on the deck next to me.

"I've done it that way, Sassenach," he informed me, "and it's a good deal messier than ye might think. It's also not a pleasant thing to do on a boat, in close company, aye?" He put a hand on the back of my head and pressed the cup against my lower lip. "This will be quick. Come on, now; a wee sip is all."

I pressed my lips tightly together; the smell from the cup was enough to make my stomach turn over, combining as it did the stale reek of tobacco, the sight of the noisome brown surface of the liquid, crusts swimming below the surface, and the memory of Captain Freeman's blobs of brown-tinged spittle sliding down the deck.

Jamie didn't bother with argument or persuasion. He simply let go of my head, pinched my nose shut, and when I opened my mouth to breathe, tipped in the foul-smelling contents of the cup.

"Mmmfff!"

"Swallow," he said, clapping a hand tightly across my mouth and ignoring both my frenzied squirming and the muffled sounds of protest I was making. He was a lot stronger than I was, and he didn't mean to let go. It was swallow or strangle.

I swallowed.

"Good as new." Jamie finished polishing the silver ring on his shirttail and held it up, admiring it in the glow of the lantern.

"That is somewhat better than can be said of me," I replied coldly. I lay in a crumpled heap on the deck, which in spite of the placid current, seemed still to be heaving very slightly under me. "You are a grade-A, double-dyed, sadistic fucking bastard, Jamie Fraser!"

He bent over me and smoothed the damp hair off my face.

"I expect so. If ye feel well enough to call me names, Sassenach, you'll do. Rest a bit, aye?" He kissed me gently on the forehead and sat back.

Excitement over and order restored to the ravaged decks, the other men had gone back to the cabin to restore themselves with the aid of a bottle of applejack that Captain Freeman had contrived to save from the pirates by dropping it into the water barrel. A small cup of this beverage rested on the deck near my head; I was still too queasy to countenance swallowing anything, but the warm, fruity smell was mildly comforting.

We were under sail; everyone was eager to get away, as though some danger still lingered over the place of the attack. We were moving faster, now; the usual small cloud of insects that hovered near the lanterns had dispersed, reduced to no more than a few lacewings resting on the beam above, their delicate green bodies casting tiny streaks of shadow. Inside the cabin, there was a small burst of laughter, and an answering growl from Rollo on the side deck—things were returning to normal.

A small, welcome breeze played across the deck, evaporating the clammy sweat on my face and lifting the ends of Jamie's hair, drifting them across his face. I could see the small vertical line between his brows and the tilt of his head that indicated deep thought.

Little wonder if he was thinking. In one stroke, we had gone from riches—potential riches, at least—to rags, our well-equipped expedition reduced to a sack of beans and a used medicine chest. So much for his desire not to appear as beggars at Jocasta Cameron's door—we were little more than that now.

My throat ached for him, pity replacing irritation. Beyond the question of his immediate pride, there was now a terrifying void in that unknown territory marked "The Future." The future had been well open to question before, but the sharp edges of all such questions had been buffered by the comforting knowledge that we would have money to help accomplish our aims—whatever those turned out to be.

Even our penurious trip north had felt like an adventure, with the certain knowledge that we possessed a fortune, whether it was spendable or not. I had never before considered myself a person who placed much value on money, but having the certainty of security ripped away in this violent fashion had given me a sudden and quite unexpected attack of vertigo, as though I were falling down a long, dark well, powerless to stop.

What had it done to Jamie, who felt not only his danger and mine but the crushing responsibility of so many other lives? Ian, Fergus, Marsali, Duncan, the inhabitants of Lallybroch—even that bloody nuisance Laoghaire. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry, thinking of the money Jamie had sent her; the vengeful creature was a good deal better off at present than we were.

At the thought of vengeance, I felt a new stab that displaced all lesser fears. While Jamie was not markedly vengeful—for a Scot—no Highlander would suffer a loss such as this with silent resignation; a loss not only of fortune but of honor. What might he feel compelled to do about it?

Jamie stared fixedly into the dark water, his mouth set; was he seeing once again the graveyard where, swayed by Duncan's intoxicated sentimentality, he had agreed to help Bonnet escape?

It belatedly occurred to me that the financial aspects of the disaster likely had not yet entered Jamie's mind—he was occupied in more bitter reflection; it was he who had helped Bonnet escape the hangman's rope, and set him free to prey on the innocent. How many besides us would suffer because of that?

"You're not to blame," I said, touching his knee.

"Who else?" he said quietly, not looking at me. "I kent the man for what he was. I could have left him to the fate he'd earned—but I did not. I was a fool."

"You were kind. It's not the same thing."

"Near enough."

He breathed in deeply; the air was freshening with the scent of ozone; the rain was near. He reached for the cup of applejack and drank, then looked at me for the first time, holding up the cup inquiringly.

"Yes, thanks." I struggled to sit up, but Jamie took me by the shoulders and lifted me to lean against him. He held the cup for me to drink, the blood-warm liquid sliding soft across my tongue, then taking fire as it slid down my throat, burning away the traces of sickness and tobacco, leaving in their place rum's lingering taste of burning sugarcane.

"Better?"

I nodded, and held up my right hand. He slid the ring onto my finger, the metal warm from his hand. Then, folding down my fingers, he squeezed my fist hard in his own and held it, tight.

"Had he been following us since Charleston?" I wondered aloud.

Jamie shook his head. His hair was still loose, heavy waves falling forward to hide his face.

"I dinna think so. If he'd kent we had the jewels, he would have set upon us on the road before we reached Wilmington. No, I expect he learned it from one of Lillington's servants. I thought we'd be safe enough, for we'd be away to Cross Creek before anyone heard of the gems. Someone talked, though—a footman; perhaps the sempstress who sewed your gown."

His face was outwardly calm, but it always was, when he was hiding strong emotions. A sudden gust of hot wind shot sideways across the deck; the rain was getting closer. It whipped the loose ends of his hair across his cheek, and he wiped them back, running his fingers through the thick mass.

"I'm sorry for your other ring," he said, after a moment.

"Oh. It's—" I started to say "It's all right," but the words stuck in my throat, choked by the sudden realization of loss.

I had worn that gold ring for nearly thirty years; token of vows taken, forsaken, renewed, and at last absolved. A token of marriage, of family; of a large part of my life. And the last trace of Frank—whom, in spite of everything, I had loved.

Jamie didn't say anything, but he took my left hand in his own and held it, lightly stroking my knuckles with his thumb. I didn't speak either. I sighed deeply and turned my face toward the stern; the trees along the shore were shivering in a rising wind of anticipation, leaves rustling loudly enough to drown the sound of the vessel's passage.

A small drop struck my cheek, but I didn't move. My hand lay limp and white in his, looking unaccustomedly frail; it was something of a shock to see it that way.

I was used to paying a great deal of attention to my hands, one way and another. They were my tools, my channel of touch, mingling the delicacy and strength by which I healed. They had a certain beauty, which I admired in a detached sort of way, but it was the beauty of strength and competence, the assurance of power that made its form admirable.

It was the same hand now, pale and long-fingered, the knuckles slightly bony—oddly bare without my ring, but recognizably my hand. Yet it lay in a hand so much larger and rougher that it seemed small, and fragile by comparison.

His other hand squeezed tighter, pressing the metal of the silver ring into my flesh, reminding me of what remained. I lifted his fist and pressed it hard against my heart in answer. The rain began to fall, in large, wet drops, but neither of us moved.

It came in a rush, dropping a veil over boat and shore, pattering noisily on leaves and deck and water, lending a temporary illusion of concealment. It washed cool and soft across my skin, momentary balm on the wounds of fear and loss.

I felt at once horribly vulnerable and yet completely safe. But then—I had always felt that way with Jamie Fraser.

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PART FOUR

River Run

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10

JOCASTA

Cross Creek, North Carolina, June 1767

River Run stood by the edge of the Cape Fear, just above the confluence that gave Cross Creek its name. Cross Creek itself was good-sized, with a busy public wharf and several large warehouses lining the water's edge. As the *Sally Ann* made her way slowly through the shipping lane, a strong, resinous smell hung over town and river, trapped by the hot, sticky air.

"Jesus, it's like breathin' turpentine," Ian wheezed as a fresh wave of the stultifying reek washed over us.

"You *is* breathin' turpentine, man." Eutroclus's rare smile flashed white and disappeared. He nodded toward a barge tethered to a piling by one of the wharfs. It was stacked with barrels, some of which showed a thick black ooze through split seams. Other, larger barrels bore the brandmarks of their owners, with a large "T" burned into the pinewood below.

" 'At's right," Captain Freeman agreed. He squinted in the bright sunlight, waving one hand slowly in front of his nose, as though this might dispel the stink. "This time o' year's when the pitch-bilers come down from the backcountry. Pitch, turpentine, tar—bring it all down by barge t' Wilmington, then send it on south to the shipyards at Charleston."

"I shouldna think it's *all* turpentine," Jamie said. He mopped the back of his neck with a handkerchief and nodded toward the largest of the warehouses, its door flanked by red-coated soldiers. "Smell it, Sassenach?"

I inhaled, cautiously. There *was* something else in the air here; a hot, familiar scent.

"Rum?" I said.

"And brandywine. And a bit of port, as well." Jamie's long nose twitched, sensitive as a mongoose's. I looked at him in amusement.

"You haven't lost it, have you?" Twenty years before, he had managed his cousin Jared's wine business in Paris, and his nose and palate had been the awe of the winery tasting rooms.

He grinned.

"Oh, I expect I could still tell Moselle from horse piss, if ye held it right under my nose. But telling rum from turpentine is no great feat, is it?"

Ian drew a huge lungful of air and let it out, coughing.

"It all smells the same to me," he said, shaking his head.

"Good," said Jamie, "I'll give ye turpentine next time I stand ye a drink. It'll be a good deal cheaper."

"Turpentine's just about what I could afford now," he added under cover of the laughter this remark caused. He straightened, brushing down the skirts of his coat. "We'll be there soon. Do I look a terrible beggar, Sassenach?"

Seen with the sun glowing on his neatly ribboned hair, his darkened profile coin-stamped against the light, I privately thought he looked dazzling, but I had caught the faint tone of anxiety in his voice, and knew well enough what he meant. Penniless he might be, but he didn't mean to look it.

I was well aware that the notion of appearing at his aunt's door as a poor relation come a-begging stung his pride considerably. The fact that he had been forced into precisely that role didn't make it any easier to bear.

I looked him over carefully. The coat and waistcoat were not spectacular, but quite acceptable, courtesy of Cousin Edwin; a quiet gray broadcloth with a good hand and an excellent fit, buttons not silver, but not of wood or bone either—a sober pewter, like a prosperous Quaker.

Not that the rest of him bore the slightest resemblance to a Quaker, I thought. The linen shirt was rather grubby, but as long as he kept his coat on, no one would notice, and the missing button on the waistcoat was hidden by the graceful fall of his lace jabot, the sole extravagance he had permitted himself in the way of wardrobe.

The stockings were all right; pale blue silk, no visible holes. The white linen breeches were tight, but not—not quite—indecent, and reasonably clean.

The shoes were the only real flaw in his ensemble; there had been no time to have any made. His were sound, and I had done my best to hide the scuff-marks with a mixture of soot and dripping, but they were clearly a farmer's footwear, not a gentleman's; thick-soled, made of rough leather, and with buckles of lowly horn. Still, I doubted that his aunt Jocasta would be looking at his feet first thing.

I stood on tiptoe to straighten his jabot, and brushed a floating down-feather off his shoulder.

"It will be all right," I whispered back, smiling up at him. "You're beautiful."

He looked startled; then the expression of grim aloofness relaxed into a smile.

"*You're* beautiful, Sassenach." He leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. "You're flushed as a wee apple; verra bonny." He straightened up, glanced at Ian, and sighed.

"As for Ian, perhaps I can pass him off as a bondsman I've taken on to be swineherd."

Ian was one of those people whose clothes, no matter what their original quality, immediately look as though they had been salvaged from a rubbish tip. Half his hair had escaped from its green ribbon, and one bony elbow protruded from a rip in his new shirt, whose cuffs were already noticeably gray round the wrists.

"Captain Freeman says we'll be there in no time!" he exclaimed, eyes shining with excitement as he leaned over the side, peering upriver in order to be first to sight our destination. "What d'ye think we'll get for supper?"

Jamie surveyed his nephew with a marked lack of favor.

"I expect you'll get table scraps, wi' the dogs. Do ye not own a coat, Ian? Or a comb?"

"Oh, aye," Ian said, glancing round vaguely, as though expecting one of these objects to materialize in front of him. "I've a coat here. Somewhere. I think."

The coat was finally located under one of the benches, and extracted with some difficulty from the possession of Rollo, who had made a comfortable bed of it. After a quick brush to remove at least some of the dog hairs from the garment, Ian was forcibly inserted into it, and sat firmly down to have his hair combed and plaited while Jamie gave him a quick refresher course in manners, this consisting solely of the advice to keep his mouth shut as much as possible.

Ian nodded amiably.

"Will ye tell Great-auntie Jocasta about the pirates yourself, then?" he inquired.

Jamie glanced briefly at Captain Freeman's scrawny back. It was futile to expect that such a story would not be told in every tavern in Cross Creek, as soon as they had left us. It would be a matter of days—hours perhaps—before it spread to River Run plantation.

"Aye, I'll tell her," he said. "But not just on the instant, Ian. Let her get accustomed to us, first."

* * *

The mooring for River Run was some distance above Cross Creek, separated from the noise and reek of the town by several miles of tranquil tree-thick river. Having seen Jamie, Ian, and Fergus all rendered as handsome as water, comb, and ribbons could make them, I retired to the cabin, changed out of my grubby muslin, sponged myself hastily, and slipped into the cream silk I had worn to dinner with the Governor.

The soft fabric was light and cool against my skin. Perhaps a bit more formal than was usual for afternoon, but it was important to Jamie that we must look decent—especially now, after our encounter with the pirates—and my only alternatives were the filthy muslin or a clean but threadbare camlet gown that had traveled with me from Georgia.

There wasn't a great deal to be done with my hair; I gave it a cursory stab with a comb, then tied it back off my neck, letting the ends curl up as they would. I needn't trouble about jewelry, I thought ruefully, and rubbed my silver wedding ring to make it shine. I still avoided looking at my left hand, so nakedly bare; if I didn't look, I could still feel the imaginary weight of the gold upon it.

By the time I emerged from the cabin, the mooring was in sight. By contrast to the rickety fittings of most plantation moorings we had passed, River Run boasted a substantial and well-built wooden dock. A small black boy was sitting on the end of it, swinging bare legs in boredom. When he saw the *Sally Ann's* approach, he leapt to his feet and tore off, presumably to announce our arrival.

Our homely craft bumped to a stop against the dock. From the screen of trees near the river, a brick walk swept up through a broad array of formal lawns and gardens, splitting in two to circle paired marble statues that stood in their own beds of flowers, then joining again and fanning out in a broad piazza in front of an imposing two-storied house, colonnaded and multichimneyed. At one side of the flower beds stood a miniature building, made of white marble—a mausoleum of some kind, I thought. I revised my opinions as to the suitability of the cream silk dress, and touched nervously at my hair.

I found her at once, among the people hurrying out of the house and down the walk. I would have known her for a MacKenzie, even if I hadn't known who she was. She had the bold bones, the broad Viking cheekbones and high, smooth brow of her brothers, Colum and Dougal. And like her nephew, like her great-niece, she had the extraordinary height that marked them all as descendants of one blood.

A head higher than the bevy of black servants who surrounded her, she floated down the path from the house, hand on the arm of her butler, though a woman less in need of support I had seldom seen.

She was tall and she was quick, with a firm step at odds with the white of her hair. She might once have been as red as Jamie; her hair still held a tinge of ruddiness, having gone that rich soft white that redheads do, with the buttery patina of an old gold spoon.

There was a cry from one of the little boys in the vanguard, and two of them broke loose, galloping down the path toward the mooring, where they circled us, yapping like puppies. At first I couldn't make out a word—it was only as Ian replied jocularly to them that I realized they were shouting in Gaelic.

I didn't know whether Jamie had thought what to say or to do upon this first meeting, but in the event, he simply stepped forward, went up to Jocasta MacKenzie, and embraced her, saying, "Aunt—it's Jamie."

It was only as he released her and stepped back that I saw his face, with an expression I had never seen before; something between eagerness, joy, and awe. It occurred to me, with a small jolt of shock, that Jocasta MacKenzie must look very much like her elder sister—Jamie's mother.

I thought she might have his deep blue eyes, though I couldn't tell; they were blurred as she laughed through her tears, holding him by the sleeve, reaching up to touch his cheek, to smooth nonexistent strands of hair from his face.

"Jamie!" she said, over and over. "Jamie, wee Jamie! Oh, I'm glad ye've come, lad!" She reached up once more, and touched his hair, a look of amazement on her face.

"Blessed Bride, but he's a giant! You'll be as tall as my brother Dougal was, at least!"

The expression of happiness on his face faded slightly at that, but he kept his smile, turning her with him so she faced me.

"Auntie, may I present my wife? This is Claire."

She put out a hand at once, beaming, and I took it between my own, feeling a small pang of recognition at the long, strong fingers; though her knuckles were slightly knobbed with age, her skin was soft and the feel of her grip was unnervingly like Brianna's.

"I am so glad to meet ye, my dear," she said, and drew me close to kiss my cheek. The scent of mint and verbena wafted strongly from her dress, and I felt oddly moved, as though I had suddenly come under the protection of some beneficent deity.

"So beautiful!" she said admiringly, long fingers stroking the sleeve of my dress.

"Thank you," I said, but Ian and Fergus were coming up to be introduced in their turn. She greeted them both with embraces and endearments, laughing as Fergus kissed her hand in his best French manner.

"Come," she said, breaking away at last, and wiping at her wet cheeks with the back of a hand. "Do come in, my dearies, and take a dish of tea, and some food. Ye'll be famished, no doubt, after such a journey. Ulysses!" She turned, seeking, and her butler stepped forward, bowing low.

"Madame," he said to me, and "Sir," to Jamie. "Everything is ready, Miss Jo," he said softly to his mistress, and offered her his arm.

As they started up the brick walk, Fergus turned to Ian and bowed, mimicking the butler's courtly manner, then offered an arm in mockery. Ian kicked him neatly in the backside, and walked up the path, head turning from side to side to take in everything. His green ribbon had come undone, and was dangling halfway down his back.

Jamie snorted at the horseplay, but smiled nonetheless.

"Madame?" He put out an arm to me, and I took it, sweeping rather grandly up the path to the doors of River Run, flung wide to greet us.

The house was spacious and airy inside, with high ceilings and wide French doors in all the downstairs rooms. I caught a glimpse of silver and crystal as we passed a large formal dining room, and thought that on the evidence, Hector Cameron must have been a very successful planter indeed.

Jocasta led us to her private parlor, a smaller, more intimate room no less well furnished than the larger rooms, but which sported homely touches among the gleam of polished furniture and the glitter of ornaments. A large knitting basket full of yarn balls sat on a small table of polished wood, beside a glass vase spilling summer flowers and a small, ornate silver bell; a spinning wheel turned slowly by itself in the breeze from the open French doors.

The butler escorted us into the room, saw his mistress seated, then turned to a sideboard that held a collection of jugs and bottles.

"Ye'll have a dram to celebrate your coming, Jamie?" Jocasta waved a long, slim hand in the direction of the sideboard. "I shouldna think ye'll have tasted decent whisky since ye left Scotland, aye?"

Jamie laughed, sitting down opposite her.

"Indeed not, Aunt. And how d'ye come by it here?"

She shrugged and smiled, looking complacent.

"Your uncle had the luck to lay down a good stock, some years agone. He took half a shipload of wine and liquor in trade for a warehouse of tobacco, meaning to sell it—but then the Parliament passed an Act making it illegal for any but the Crown to sell any liquor stronger than ale in the Colonies, and so we ended with two hundred bottles o' the stuff in the wine cellar!"

She stretched out her hand toward the table by her chair, not bothering to look. She didn't need to; the butler set down a crystal tumbler softly, just where her fingers would touch it. Her hand closed around it, and she lifted it, passing it under her nose and sniffing, eyes closed in sensual delight.

"There's a good bit left of it yet. A great deal more than I can guzzle by myself, I'll tell ye!" She opened her eyes and smiled, lifting the tumbler toward us. "To you, nephew, and your dear wife—may ye find this house home! *Slàinte!*"

"Slàinte mbar!" Jamie answered, and we all drank.

It *was* good whisky; smooth as buttered silk and heartening as sunshine. I could feel it hit the pit of my stomach, take root, and spread up my backbone.

It seemed to have a similar effect on Jamie; I could see the slight frown between his brows ease, as his face relaxed.

"I shall have Ulysses write this night, to tell your sister that ye've come safe here," Jocasta was saying. "She'll have been sair worrit for her wee laddie, I'm sure, thinking of all the misfortunes that might have beset ye along the way."

Jamie set down his glass and cleared his throat, steeling himself for the ordeal of confession.

"As to misfortune, Aunt, I am afraid I must tell ye …"

I looked away, not wanting to increase his discomfort by watching as he explained concisely the dismal state of our fortunes. Jocasta listened with close attention, uttering small noises of dismay at his account of our meeting with the pirates. "Wicked, ah, wicked!" she exclaimed. "To repay your kindness in such fashion! The man should be hangit!"

"Well, there's none to blame save myself, Aunt," Jamie said ruefully. "He would have *been* hangit, if not for me. And since I did ken the man for a villain to start, I canna be much surprised to see him commit villainy at the end."

"Mmphm." Jocasta drew herself up taller in her seat, looking a bit over Jamie's left shoulder as she spoke.

"Be that as it may, nephew. I said ye must consider River Run as your home; I did mean it. You and yours are welcome here. And I am sure we shall contrive a way to mend your fortunes."

"I thank ye, Aunt," Jamie murmured, but he didn't want to meet her eyes, either. He looked down at the floor, and I could see the hand around his whisky glass clenched tight enough to leave the knuckles white.

The conversation fortunately moved on to talk of Jenny and her family at Lallybroch, and Jamie's embarrassment eased a bit. Dinner had been ordered; I could smell brief tantalizing whiffs of roasting meat from the cookhouse, borne on the evening breeze that wafted across the lawns and flower beds.

Fergus got up and tactfully excused himself, while Ian wandered around the room, picking things up and putting them down. Rollo, bored with the indoors, sniffed his way industriously along the doorsill, watched with open dislike by the fastidious butler.

The house and all its furnishings were simple but well crafted, beautiful, and arranged with something more than just taste. I realized what lay behind the elegant proportions and graceful arrangements, when Ian stopped abruptly by a large painting on the wall.

“Auntie Jocasta!” he exclaimed, turning eagerly to face her. “Did you paint this? It’s got your name on it.”

I thought a sudden shadow crossed her face, but then she smiled again.

“The view o’ the mountains? Aye, I always loved the sight of them. I’d go with Hector, when he went up into the backcountry to trade for hides. We’d camp in the mountains, and set up a great blaze of a bonfire, wi’ the servants keeping it going day and night, as a signal. And within a few days, the red savages would come down through the forest, and sit by the fire to talk and to drink whisky and trade—and I, I would sit by the hour wi’ my sketchbook and my charcoals, drawing everything I could see.”

She turned, nodding toward the far end of the room.

“Go and look at that one in the corner, laddie. See can ye find the Indian I put in it, hiding in the trees.”

Jocasta finished her whisky and set down her glass. The butler offered to refill it, but she waved him away without looking at him. He set down the decanter and vanished quietly into the hall.

“Aye, I loved the sight o’ the mountains,” Jocasta said again, softly. “They’re none so black and barren as Scotland, but the sun on the rocks and the mist in the trees did remind me of Leoch, now and then.”

She shook her head then, and smiled a bit too brightly at Jamie.

“But this has been home for a long time now, nephew—and I hope ye will consider it yours as well.”

We had little other choice, but Jamie bobbed his head, murmuring something dutifully appreciative in reply. He was interrupted, though, by Rollo, who raised his head with a startled *Wuff!*

“What is it, dog?” said Ian, coming to stand by the big wolf-dog. “D’ye smell something?” Rollo was whining, staring out into the shadowy flower border and twitching his thick ruff with unease.

Jocasta turned her head toward the open door and sniffed audibly, fine nostrils flaring.

"It's a skunk," she said.

"A skunk!" Ian whirled to stare at her, appalled. "They come so close to the house?"

Jamie had got up in a hurry, and gone to peer out into the evening.

"I dinna see it yet," he said. His hand groped automatically at his belt, but of course he wasn't wearing a dirk with his good suit. He turned to Jocasta. "Have ye any weapons in the house, Aunt?"

Jocasta's mouth hung open.

"Aye," she said. "Plenty. But—"

"Jamie," I said. "A skunk isn't—"

Before either of us could finish, there was a sudden disturbance among the snapdragons in the herbaceous border, the tall stalks waving back and forth. Rollo snarled, and the hackles stood up on his neck.

"Rollo!" Ian glanced round for a makeshift weapon, seized the poker from the fireplace, and brandishing it above his head, made for the door.

"Wait, Ian!" Jamie grabbed his nephew's upraised arm. "Look." A wide grin spread across his face, and he pointed to the border. The snapdragons parted, and a fine, fat skunk strolled into view, handsomely striped in black and white, and obviously feeling that all was right with his personal world.

"*That's* a skunk?" Ian asked incredulously. "Why, that's no but a bittie wee stinkard like a polecat!" He wrinkled his nose, with a expression between amusement and disgust. "Phew! And here I thought it was a dangerous huge beastie!"

The skunk's satisfied insouciance was too much for Rollo, who pounced forward, uttering a short, sharp bark. He feinted to and fro on the terrace, growling and making short lunges at the skunk, who looked annoyed at the racket.

"Ian," I said, taking refuge behind Jamie. "Call off your dog. Skunks *are* dangerous."

“They are?” Jamie turned a look of puzzlement on me. “But what—”

“Polecats only stink,” I explained. “Skunks—Ian, no! Let it alone, and come inside!” Ian, curious, had reached out and prodded the skunk with his poker. The skunk, offended at this unwarranted intimacy, stamped its feet and elevated its tail.

I heard the noise of a chair sliding back, and glanced behind me. Jocasta had stood up and was looking alarmed, but made no move to come to the door.

“What is it?” she said. “What are they doing?” To my surprise, she was staring into the room, turning her head from one side to the other, as though trying to locate someone in the dark.

Suddenly, the truth dawned on me: her hand on the butler’s arm, her touching Jamie’s face in greeting, the glass put ready for her grasp, and the shadow on her face when Ian talked of her painting. Jocasta Cameron was blind.

A strangled cry and a piercing yelp jerked me back to more pressing issues on the terrace. A tidal wave of acrid scent cascaded into the room, hit the floor, and boiled up around me like a mushroom cloud.

Choking and gasping, eyes watering from the reek, I groped blindly for Jamie, who was making breathless remarks in Gaelic. Above the cacophony of groaning and piteous yowling outside, I barely heard the small *ting!* of Jocasta’s bell behind me.

“Ulysses?” she said, sounding resigned. “Ye’d best tell Cook the dinner will be late.”

* * *

“It was luck that it’s summer, at least,” Jocasta said at breakfast next day. “Think if it had been winter and we had to keep the doors closed!” She laughed, showing teeth in surprisingly good condition for her age.

“Oh, aye,” Ian murmured. “Please, may I have more toast, ma’am?”

He and Rollo had been first soused in the river, then rubbed with tomatoes from the burgeoning vines that overgrew the necessary house out back. The odor-reducing properties of these fruits worked as well on skunk oil as on the lesser stinks of human waste, but in neither case was the neutralizing effect complete. Ian sat by himself at one end of the long table, next to an open French door, but I saw the maid who brought his toast to him wrinkle her nose unobtrusively as she set the plate before him.

Perhaps inspired by Ian's proximity and a desire for open air, Jocasta suggested that we might ride out to the turpentine works in the forest above River Run.

"It's a day's journey there and back, but I think the weather will keep fine." She turned toward the open French window, where bees hummed over a herbaceous border of goldenrod and phlox. "Hear them?" she said, turning her slightly off-kilter smile toward Jamie. "The bees do say it will be hot and fair."

"You have keen ears, Madame Cameron," Fergus said politely. "If I may be permitted to borrow a horse from your stable, though, I should prefer to go into the town, myself." I knew he was dying to send word to Marsali in Jamaica; I had helped him to write a long letter the night before, describing our adventures and safe arrival. Rather than wait for a slave to take it with the week's mail, he would much rather post it with his own hands.

"Indeed and ye may, Mr. Fergus," Jocasta said graciously. She smiled round the table generally. "As I said, ye must all consider River Run as ye would your own home."

Jocasta plainly meant to accompany us on the ride; she came down dressed in a habit of dark green muslin, the girl named Phaedre coming behind, carrying a hat trimmed to match with velvet ribbon. She paused in the hall, but instead of putting on the hat at once, she stood while Phaedre tied a strip of white linen firmly round her head, covering her eyes.

"I can see nothing but light," she explained. "I canna make out objects at all. Still, the light of the sun causes me pain, so I must shield my eyes when venturing out. Are you ready, my dears?"

That answered some of my speculations concerning her blindness, though didn't entirely assuage them. Retinitis pigmentosum? I wondered with interest, as I followed her down the wide front hall. Or perhaps macular degeneration, though glaucoma was perhaps the most likely possibility. Not for the first time—or the last, I was sure—my fingers curved around the handle of an invisible ophthalmoscope, itching to see what could not be seen with eyes alone.

To my surprise, when we went out to the stable block, a mare was standing ready saddled for Jocasta, rather than the carriage I had expected. The gift of charming horses ran strong in the MacKenzie line; the mare lifted her head and whickered at sight of her mistress, and Jocasta went to the horse at once, her face alight with pleasure.

"Ciamar a tha tu?" she said, stroking the soft Roman nose. "This will be my sweet Corinna. Is she not a dear lassie?" Reaching in her pocket, she pulled out a small green apple, which the horse accepted with delicate pleasure.

"And have they seen to your knee, *mo chridhe?*" Stooping, Jocasta ran a hand down the horse's shoulder and leg to just inside the knee, finding and exploring a healing scar with expert fingers. "What say ye, nephew? Is she sound? Can she stand a day's ride?"

Jamie clicked his tongue, and Corinna obligingly took a step toward him, clearly recognizing someone who spoke her language. He took a look at her leg, took her bridle in hand and with a word or two in soft Gaelic, urged her to walk. Then he pulled her to a halt, swung into the saddle, and trotted gently twice round the stableyard, coming to a stop by the waiting Jocasta.

"Aye," he said, stepping down. "She's canty enough, Aunt. What did her the injury?"

"Happen as it was a snake, sir," said the groom, a young black man who had stood back, intently watching Jamie with the horse.

"Not a snakebite, surely?" I said, surprised. "It looks like a tear—as though she'd caught her leg on something."

He looked at me with raised brows, but nodded with respect.

"Aye, mum, that it was. 'Twas a month past, I heard the lass let out a rare skelloch, and such a kebbie-lebbie o' bangin' and crashin', as ye'd think the whole stable was comin' doon aboot my head. When I rushed to see the trouble, I found the bloody corpse of a great poison snake lyin' crushed in the straw beneath the manger. The manger was dashit all to pieces, and the wee lassie quiverin' in the corner, the blood streamin' doon her leg from a splinter where she'd caught herself." He glanced at the horse with obvious pride. "Och, such a brave wee creature as ye are, lass!"

"The 'great poison snake' was perhaps a foot long," Jocasta said to me in an dry undertone. "And a simple green gardensnake, forbye. But the foolish thing's got a morbid dread o' snakes. Let her see one, and she loses her head entirely." She cocked her head in the direction of the young groom and smiled. "Wee Josh is none so fond o' them, either, is he?"

The groom grinned in answer.

"No, ma'am," he said. "I canna thole the creatures, nay more than my lassie."

Ian, who had been listening to this exchange, couldn't hold back his curiosity any longer.

"Where d'ye come from, man?" he asked the groom, peering at the young man in fascination.

Josh wrinkled his brow.

"Come from? I dinna come—oh, aye, I tak' your meaning now. I was born upriver, on Mr. George Burnett's place. Miss Jo bought me twa year past, at Eastertide."

"And I think we may assume that Mr. Burnett himself was conceived within crow's flight of Aberdeen," Jamie said softly to me. "Aye?"

River Run took in quite a large territory, including not only its prime riverfront acreage but a substantial chunk of the longleaf pine forest that covered a third of the colony. In addition, Hector Cameron had cannily acquired land containing a wide creek, one of many that flowed into Cape Fear.

Thus provided not only with the valuable commodities of timber, pitch, and turpentine but with a convenient means of getting them to market, it was little wonder that River Run had prospered, even though it produced only modest quantities of tobacco and indigo—

though the fragrant fields of green tobacco through which we rode looked more than modest to me.

“There’s a wee mill,” Jocasta was explaining, as we rode. “Just above the joining of the creek and the river. The sawing and shaping are done there, and then the boards and barrels are sent downriver by barge to Wilmington. It’s no great distance from the house to the mill by water, if ye choose to row upstream, but I thought to show ye a bit of the country instead.” She breathed the pine-scented air with pleasure. “It’s been a time since I was out, myself.”

It *was* pleasant country. Once in the pine forest, it was much cooler, the sun blocked out by the clustered needles overhead. Far overhead the trunks of the trees soared upward for twenty or thirty feet before branching out—no great surprise to hear that the largest part of the mill’s output was masts and spars, made for the Royal Navy.

River Run did a great deal of business with the navy, it seemed, judging from Jocasta’s conversation; masts, spars, laths, timbers, pitch, turpentine, and tar. Jamie rode close by her side, listening intently as she explained everything in detail, leaving me and Ian to trail behind. Evidently, she had worked closely with her husband in building River Run; I wondered how she managed the place by herself, now that he was gone.

“Look!” Ian said, pointing. “What’s that?”

I pulled up and walked my horse, along with his, to the tree he had pointed out. A great slab of bark had been taken off, exposing the inner wood for a stretch of four feet or more on one side. Within this area, the yellow-white wood was crosshatched in a sort of herringbone pattern, as though it had been slashed back and forth with a knife.

“We’re near,” Jocasta said. Jamie had seen us stop, and they had ridden back to join us. “That will be a turpentine tree you’re seeing; I smell it.”

We all could; the scent of cut wood and pungent resin was so strong that even *I* could have found the tree blindfolded. Now that we had stopped, I could hear noises in the distance; the rumblings and thumps of men at work, the chunk of an ax and voices calling back and forth. Breathing in, I also caught a whiff of something burning.

Jocasta edged Corinna close to the cut tree.

"Here," she said, touching the bottom of the cut, where a rough hollow had been chiseled out of the wood. "We call it the box; that's where the sap and the raw turpentine drip down and collect. This one is nearly full; there'll be a slave along soon to dip it out."

No sooner had she spoken than a man appeared through the trees; a slave dressed in no more than a loincloth, leading a large white mule with a broad strap slung across its back, a barrel suspended on either side. The mule stopped dead when he saw us, flung back his head, and brayed hysterically.

"That will be Clarence," Jocasta said, loudly enough to be heard above the noise. "He likes to see folk. And who is that with him? Is it you, Pompey?"

"Yah'm. S'me." The slave gripped the mule by the upper lip and gave it a vicious twist. "Lea'f, vassar!" As I made the mental translation of this expression into "Leave off, you bastard!" the man turned toward us, and I saw that his slurred speech was caused by the fact that the lower left half of his jaw was gone; his face below the cheekbone simply fell away into a deep depression filled with white scar tissue.

Jocasta must have heard my gasp of shock—or only have expected such a response—for she turned her blindfold toward me.

"It was a pitch explosion—fortunate he was not killed. Come, we're near the works." Without waiting for her groom, she turned her horse's head expertly, and made off through the trees, toward the scent of burning.

The contrast of the turpentine works with the quiet of the forest was amazing; a large clearing full of people, all in a hum of activity. Most were slaves, dressed in the minimum of clothing, limbs and bodies smudged with charcoal.

"Is anyone at the sheds?" Jocasta turned her head toward me.

I rose in my stirrups to look; at the far side of the clearing, near a row of ramshackle sheds, I caught a flash of color; three men in the uniform of the British Navy, and another in a bottle-green coat.

"That will be my particular friend," Jocasta said, smiling in satisfaction at my description. "Mr. Farquard Campbell. Come, Nephew; I should like ye to meet him."

Seen up close, Campbell proved to be a man of sixty or so, no more than middle height, but with that particular brand of leathery toughness that some Scotsmen exhibit as they age—not so much a weathering as a tanning process that results in a surface like a leather targe, capable of turning the sharpest blade.

Campbell greeted Jocasta with pleasure, bowed courteously to me, acknowledged Ian with the flick of a brow, then turned the full force of his shrewd gray eyes on Jamie.

"It's verra pleased I am that you're here, Mr. Fraser," he said, extending his hand. "Verra pleased, indeed. I've heard a deal about ye, ever since your aunt learned of your intentions to visit River Run."

He appeared sincerely delighted to meet Jamie, which struck me as odd. Not that most people weren't happy to meet Jamie—he was quite a prepossessing man, if I did say so—but there was an air almost of relief in Campbell's effusive greeting, which seemed unusual for someone whose outward appearance was entirely one of reserve and taciturnity.

If Jamie noticed anything odd, he hid his puzzlement behind a facade of courtesy.

"I'm flattered that ye should have spared a moment's thought to me, Mr. Campbell." Jamie smiled pleasantly, and bowed toward the naval officers. "Gentlemen? I am pleased to make your acquaintance, as well."

Thus given an opening, a chubby, frowning little person named Lieutenant Wolff and his two ensigns made their introductions, and after perfunctory bows, dismissed me and Jocasta from mind and conversation, turning their attention at once to a discussion of board feet and gallons.

Jamie lifted one eyebrow at me, with a slight nod toward Jocasta, suggesting in marital shorthand that I take his aunt and bugger off while business was conducted.

Jocasta, however, showed not the slightest inclination to remove herself.

"Do go on, my dear," she urged me. "Josh will show ye everything. I'll just wait in the shade whilst the gentlemen conduct their business; the heat's a bit much for me, I'm afraid."

The men had sat down to discuss business inside an open-fronted shed that boasted a crude table with a number of stools; presumably this was where the slaves took their meals, suffering the blackflies for the sake of air. Another shed served for storage; the third, which was enclosed, I deduced must be the sleeping quarters.

Beyond the sheds, toward the center of the clearing, were two or three large fires, over which huge kettles steamed in the sunshine, suspended from tripods.

"They'll be cookin' doon the turpentine, a-boilin' it intae pitch," Josh explained, taking me within eyeshot of one of the kettles. "Some is put intae the barrels as is"—he nodded toward the sheds, where a wagon was parked, piled high with barrels—"but the rest is made intae pitch. The naval gentlemen will be sayin' how much they'll be needin', so as we'll know."

A small boy of seven or eight was perched on a high, rickety stool, stirring the pot with a long stick; a taller youth stood by with an enormous ladle, with which he removed the lighter layer of purified turpentine at the top of the kettle, depositing this in a barrel to one side.

As I watched them, a slave came out of the forest, leading a mule, and headed for the kettle. Another man came to help, and together they unloaded the barrels—plainly heavy—from the mule, and upended them into the kettle, one at a time, with a great whoosh of pungent yellowish pinesap.

"Och, ye'll want to stand back a bit, mum," Josh said, taking my arm to draw me away from the fire. "The stuff does splash a bit, and happen it should take fire, ye wouldna want to be burnt."

Having seen the man in the forest, I most certainly didn't want to be burned. I drew away, and glanced back at the sheds. Jamie, Mr. Campbell, and the naval men were sitting on stools around a table inside one hut, sharing something from a bottle and poking at a sheaf of papers on the table.

Standing pressed against the shed wall, out of sight of the men within, was Jocasta Cameron. Having abandoned her pretense of exhaustion, she was plainly listening for all she was worth.

Josh caught the expression of surprise on my face, and turned to see what I was looking at.

“Miss Jo does hate not to have the charge o’ things,” he murmured regretfully. “I havena haird her myself, but yon lass Phaedre did say as how Mistress takes on when she canna manage something—a’rantin’ dreadful, she says, and stampin’ something fierce.”

“That must be quite a remarkable spectacle,” I murmured. “What is she not able to manage, though?” From all appearances, Jocasta Cameron had her house, fields, and people well in hand, blind or not.

Now it was his turn to look surprised.

“Och, it’s the bluidy Navy. Did she not say why we came today?”

Before I could go into the fascinating question of why Jocasta Cameron should wish to manage the British Navy, today or any other day, we were interrupted by a cry of alarm from the far side of the clearing. I turned to look, and was nearly trampled by several half-naked men running in panic toward the sheds.

At the far side of the clearing a peculiar sort of mound rose up out of the ground; I had noticed it earlier but had had no chance to ask about it yet. While the floor of the clearing was mostly dirt, the mound was covered with grass—but grass of a peculiar, patchy sort; part was green, part gone yellow, and here and there was an oblong of grass that was stark, dead brown.

Just as I realized that this effect was the result of the mound’s being covered in cut turves, the whole thing blew up. There was no sound of explosion, just a sort of muffled noise like a huge sneeze, and a faint wave of concussion in the air that brushed my cheek.

If it didn’t sound like an explosion, it certainly looked like one; pieces of turf and bits of burnt wood began to rain down all over the clearing. There was a lot of shouting, and Jamie and his companions came rocketing out of the shed like a flock of startled pheasants.

“Are ye all right, Sassenach?” He grasped my arm, looking anxious.

“Yes, fine,” I said, rather confused. “What on earth just happened?”

“Damned if I ken,” he said briefly, already looking round the clearing. “Where’s Ian?”

“I don’t know. You don’t think he had anything to do with this, do you?” I brushed at several floating specks of charcoal that had landed on my bosom. With black streaks ornamenting my décolletage, I followed Jamie into the small knot of slaves, all babbling in a confusing mixture of Gaelic, English, and bits of various African tongues.

We found Ian with one of the young naval ensigns. They were peering interestedly into the blackened pit that now occupied the spot where the mound had stood.

“It happens often, I understand,” the ensign was saying as we arrived. “I hadn’t seen it before, though—amazing powerful blast, wasn’t it?”

“*What* happens often?” I asked, peering around Ian. The pit was filled with a crisscross jumble of blackened pine logs, all tossed higgledy-piggledy by the force of the explosion. The base of the mound was still there, rising up around the pit like the rim of a pie shell.

“A pitch explosion,” the ensign explained, turning to me. He was small and ruddy-cheeked, about Ian’s age. “They lay a charcoal fire, d’ye see, ma’am, below a great pot of pitch, and cover it all over with earth and cut turves, to keep in the heat, but allow enough air through the cracks to keep the fire burning. The pitch boils down, and flows out through a hollowed log into the tar barrel—see?” He pointed. A split log dangled over the remains of a shattered barrel oozing sticky black. The reek of burnt wood and thick tar filled the air, and I tried to breathe only through my mouth.

“The difficulty lies in regulating the flow of air,” the little ensign went on, preening himself a bit on his knowledge. “Too little air, and the fire goes out; too much, and it burns with such energy that it cannot be contained, and is like to ignite the fumes from the pitch and burst its bonds. As you see, ma'am." He gestured importantly toward a nearby tree, where one of the turves had been thrown with such force as to wrap itself around the trunk like some shaggy yellow fungus.

"It is a matter of the nicest adjustment," he said, and stood on tiptoe, looking around with interest. "Where is the slave whose task it is to manage the fire? I do hope the poor fellow has not been killed."

He hadn't. I had been checking carefully through the crowd as we talked, looking for any injuries, but everyone seemed to have escaped intact—this time.

"Aunt!" Jamie exclaimed, suddenly recalling Jocasta. He whirled toward the sheds, but then stopped, relaxing. She was there, clearly visible in her green dress, standing rigid by the shed.

Rigid with fury, as we discovered when we reached her. Forgotten by everyone in the flurry of the explosion, she had been unable to move, sightless as she was, and was thus left to stand helpless, hearing the turmoil but unable to do anything.

I recalled what Josh had said about Jocasta's temper, but she was too much the lady to stamp and rant in public, however angry she might be. Josh himself apologized in profuse Aberdonian for not having been by her side to aid her, but she dismissed this with kind, if brusque, impatience.

"Clapper your tongue, lad; ye did as I bade ye." She turned her head restlessly from side to side, as though trying to see through her blindfold.

"Farquard, where are you?"

Mr. Campbell moved to her and put her hand through his arm, patting it briefly.

"There's no great harm done, my dear," he assured her. "No one hurt, and only the one barrel of tar destroyed."

"Good," she said, the tension in her tall figure relaxing slightly. "But where is Byrnes?" she inquired. "I do not hear his voice."

"The overseer?" Lieutenant Wolff mopped several smuts from his sweating face with a large linen kerchief. "I had wondered that myself. We found no one here to greet us this morning. Fortunately, Mr. Campbell arrived soon thereafter."

Farquard Campbell made a small noise in his throat, deprecating his own involvement.

"Byrnes will be at the mill, I expect," he said. "One of the slaves here told me there had been some trouble wi' the main blade of the saw. Doubtless he will be attending to that."

Wolff looked puff-faced, as though he considered defective saw blades a poor excuse for not having been appropriately received. From the tight line of Jocasta's lips, so did she.

Jamie coughed, reached over and plucked a small clump of grass out of my hair.

"I do believe that I saw a basket of luncheon packed, did I not, Aunt? Perhaps ye might help the Lieutenant to a wee bit of refreshment, whilst I tidy up matters here?"

It was the right suggestion. Jocasta's lips eased a bit, and Wolff looked distinctly happier at the mention of lunch.

"Indeed, Nephew." She drew herself upright, her air of command restored, and nodded in the general direction of Wolff's voice. "Lieutenant, will ye be so kind as to join me?"

Over lunch, I gathered that the Lieutenant's visit to the turpentine works was a quarterly affair, during which a contract was drawn up for the purchase and delivery of assorted naval stores. It was the Lieutenant's business to make and review similar arrangements with plantation owners from Cross Creek to the Virginia border, and Lieutenant Wolff made it plain which end of the colony he preferred.

"If there is one area of endeavor at which I will admit the Scotch excel," the Lieutenant proclaimed rather pompously, taking a good-sized swallow of his third cup of whisky, "it is in the production of drink."

Farquard Campbell, who had been taking appreciative sips from his own pewter cup, gave a small, dry smile and said nothing. Jocasta sat beside him on a rickety bench. Her fingers rested lightly on his arm, sensitive as a seismograph, feeling for subterranean clues.

Wolff made an unsuccessful attempt to stifle a belch, and belatedly turned what he appeared to consider his charm on me.

"In most other respects," he went on, leaning toward me confidentially, "they are as a race both lazy and stubborn, a pair of traits which renders them unfit for—" At this point, the youngest ensign, red with embarrassment, knocked over a bowl of apples, creating enough of a diversion to prevent the completion of the Lieutenant's thought—though not, unfortunately, sufficient to deflect its train altogether.

The Lieutenant dabbed at the sweat leaking from under his wig, and peered at me through bloodshot eyes.

"But I collect that you are not Scotch, ma'am? Your voice is most melodious and well-bred, and I may say so. You have no trace of a barbarous accent, in spite of your associations."

"Ah … thank you," I murmured, wondering what trick of administrative incompetence had sent the Lieutenant to conduct the Navy's business in the Cape Fear River Valley, possibly the single largest collection of Scottish Highlanders to be found in the New World. I began to see what Josh had meant by "Och, the bluidy Navy!"

Jocasta's smile might have been stitched on. Mr. Campbell, beside her, gave me the barest flick of gray eyebrow, and looked austere. Evidently, stabbing the Lieutenant through the heart with a fruit knife wasn't on—at least not until he had signed the requisition order—so I did the next best thing I could think of; I picked up the whisky bottle and refilled his cup to the brim.

"It's terribly good, isn't it? Won't you have a bit more, Lieutenant?"

It *was* good; smooth and warm. Also very expensive. I turned to the youngest ensign, smiled warmly at him, and left the Lieutenant to find his own way to the bottom of the bottle.

Conversation proceeded jerkily but without further incident, though the two ensigns kept a wary eye on the Drunkard's Progress going on across the table. No wonder; it would be their responsibility to get the Lieutenant on a horse and back to Cross Creek in one piece. I began to see why there were two of them.

"Mr. Fraser seems to be managing most creditably," the older ensign murmured, nodding outside in a feeble attempt to restart the stalled conversation. "Do you not think, sir?"

"Oh? Ah. No doubt." Wolff had lost interest in anything much beyond the bottom of his cup, but it was true enough. While the rest of us sat over our lunch, Jamie—with Ian's aid—had managed to restore order to the clearing, set the pitch boilers and sap gatherers back to work, and collect the debris of the explosion. At present he was on the far side of the clearing, stripped to shirt and breeches, helping to heave half-burned logs back into the tar pit. I rather envied him; it looked to be much more pleasant work than lunching with Lieutenant Wolff.

"Aye, he's done well." Farquard Campbell's quick eyes flicked over the clearing, then returned to the table. He assessed the Lieutenant's condition, and gave Jocasta's hand a brief squeeze. Without turning her head, she spoke to Josh, who had been lurking quietly in the corner.

"Do ye put that second bottle into the Lieutenant's saddlebag, laddie," she said. "I should not want it to be going to waste." She gave the Lieutenant a charming smile, rendered the more convincing as he couldn't see her eyes.

Mr. Campbell cleared his throat.

"Since ye will so soon be leaving us, sir, perhaps we might settle the matter of your requisitions now?"

Wolff seemed vaguely surprised to hear that he had been about to leave, but his ensigns sprang to their feet with alacrity, and began to gather up papers and saddlebags. One snatched out a traveling inkwell and a sharpened quill and set them down in front of the Lieutenant; Mr. Campbell whipped out a folded quire of paper from his coat and laid it down, ready for signature.

Wolff frowned at the paper, and swayed a little.

“Just there, sir,” murmured the elder ensign, putting the quill into his senior’s slack hand and pointing at the paper.

Wolff picked up his cup, tilted back his head, and drained the last drops. Setting the cup down with a bang, he smiled vacantly around, his eyes unfocused. The youngest ensign closed his eyes in resignation.

“Oh, why not?” the Lieutenant said recklessly, and dipped his quill.

“Will ye not wish to wash and change your clothes at once, Nephew?” Jocasta’s nostrils flared delicately. “Ye stink most dreadfully of tar and charcoal.”

I thought it just as well she couldn’t see him. It went a long way beyond stinking; his hands were black, his new shirt reduced to a filthy rag, and his face so begrimed that he looked as though he had been cleaning chimneys. Such portions of him as weren’t black, were red. He had left off his hat while working in the midday sun, and the bridge of his nose was the color of cooked lobster. I didn’t think the color was due entirely to the sun, though.

“My ablutions can wait,” he said. “First, I wish to know the meaning of yon wee charade.” He fixed Mr. Campbell with a dark blue look.

“I am lured to the forest upon the pretext of smelling turpentine, and before I ken where I am, I’m sitting wi’ the British Navy, saying aye and nay to matters I ken nothing of, wi’ yon wee mannie kickin’ my shins under the table like a trained monkey!”

Jocasta smiled at that.

Campbell sighed. In spite of the exertions of the day, his neat coat showed no signs of dust, and his old-fashioned peruke sat squarely on his head.

“You have my apologies, Mr. Fraser, for what must seem a monstrous imposition upon your good nature. As it is, your arrival was fortuitous in the extreme, but did not allow sufficient time for communications to be made. I was in Averasboro until last evening, and by the time I received word of your arrival, it was much too late for me to ride here to acquaint you with the circumstances."

"Indeed? Well, as I perceive we have a bit of time at present, I invite ye to do so now," Jamie said, with a slight click as his teeth closed on the "now."

"Will ye not sit down first, Nephew?" Jocasta put in, with a graceful wave of her hand. "It will take a bit of talk to explain, and ye've had a tiring day of it, no?" Ulysses had materialized out of the ether with a linen sheet over his arm; he spread this over a chair with a flourish, and gestured to Jamie to sit down.

Jamie eyed the butler narrowly, but it *had* been a tiring day; I could see blisters amid the soot on his hands, and sweat had made clear runnels in the filth on face and neck. He sank slowly into the proffered chair, and allowed a silver cup to be put into his hand.

A similar cup appeared as if by magic in my own hand, and I smiled in gratitude at the butler; I hadn't been hoiking logs about, but the long, hot ride had worn *me* out. I took a deep, appreciative sip; a lovely cool rough cider, that bit the tongue and slaked the thirst at once.

Jamie took a deep draught, and looked a little calmer.

"Well, then, Mr. Campbell?"

"It is a matter of the Navy," Campbell began, and Jocasta snorted.

"A matter of Lieutenant Wolff, ye mean," she corrected.

"For your purposes the same, Jo, and well ye know it," Mr. Campbell said, a little sharply. He turned back to Jamie to explain.

The majority of River Run's revenues were, as Jocasta had told us, derived from the sale of its timber and turpentine products, the largest and most profitable customer being the British Navy.

"But the Navy's not what it was," Mr. Campbell said, shaking his head regretfully. "During the war wi' the French, they could scarce keep the fleet supplied, and any man with a working sawmill was rich. But for the last ten years, it's been peaceful, and the ships left to rot—the Admiralty's not laid a new keel in five years." He sighed at the unfortunate economic consequences of peace.

The Navy did still require such stores as pitch and turpentine and spars—with a leaky fleet to keep afloat, tar would always find a market. However, the market had shrunk severely, and the Navy now could pick and choose those landowners with whom they did business.

The Navy requiring dependability above all things, their covetable contracts were renewed quarterly, upon inspection and approval by a senior naval officer—in this case, Wolff. Always difficult to deal with, Wolff had nonetheless been adroitly managed by Hector Cameron, until the latter's death.

"Hector drank with him," Jocasta put in bluntly. "And when he left, there'd be a bottle in his saddlebag, and a bit besides." The death of Hector Cameron, though, had severely affected the business of the estate.

"And not only because there's less for bribes," Campbell said, with a sidelong glance at Jocasta. He cleared his throat primly.

Lieutenant Wolff, it seemed, had come to give his condolences to the widow Cameron upon the death of her husband, properly uniformed, attended by his ensigns. He had come back again the next day, alone—with a proposal of marriage.

Jamie, caught mid-swallow, choked on his drink.

"It wasna my person the man was interested in," Jocasta said, sharply, hearing this. "It was my land."

Jamie wisely decided not to comment, merely eyeing his aunt with new interest.

Having heard the background, I thought she was likely right—Wolff's interest was in acquiring a profitable plantation, which could be rendered still more profitable by means of the naval contracts his influence could assure. At the same time, the person of Jocasta Cameron was no small added inducement.

Blind or not, she was a striking woman. Beyond the simple beauty of flesh and bone, though, she exuded a sensual vitality that caused even such a dry stick as Farquard Campbell to ignite when she was near.

"I suppose that explains the Lieutenant's offensive behavior at lunch," I said, interested. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned, but the blokes don't like it, either."

Jocasta turned her head toward me, startled—I think she had forgotten I was there—but Farquard Campbell laughed.

"Indeed they don't, Mrs. Fraser," he assured me, eyes twinkling. "We're fragile things, we poor men; ye trifle with our affections at your peril."

Jocasta gave an unladylike snort at this.

"Affections, forbye!" she said. "The man has nay affection for anything that doesna come in a bottle."

Jamie was eyeing Mr. Campbell with a certain amount of interest.

"Since ye raise the matter of affections, Aunt," he said, with a small edge, "might I inquire as to the interests of your particular friend?"

Mr. Campbell returned the stare.

"I've a wife at home, sir," he said dryly, "and eight weans, the eldest of whom is perhaps a few years older than yourself. But I kent Hector Cameron for more than thirty years, and I'll do my best by his wife for the sake of his friendship—and hers."

Jocasta laid a hand on his arm, and turned her head toward him. If she could no longer use her eyes for impression, she still knew the effect of downswept lashes.

"Farquard has been a great help to me, Jamie," she said, with a touch of reproof. "I couldna have managed, without his assistance, after poor Hector died."

"Oh, aye," Jamie said, with no more than a hint of skepticism. "And I'm sure I must be as grateful to ye as is my aunt, sir. But I am still wondering just a bit where I come into this tale?"

Campbell coughed discreetly and went on with his story.

Jocasta had put off the Lieutenant, feigning collapse from the stress of bereavement and had herself carried to her bedroom, from which she did not emerge until he had concluded his business in Cross Creek and left for Wilmington.

"Byrnes managed the contracts that time, and a fine mess he made of them," Jocasta put in.

"Ah, Mr. Byrnes, the invisible overseer. And where was he this morning?"

A maid had appeared with a bowl of warm perfumed water, and a towel. Without asking, she knelt by Jamie's chair, took one of his hands, and began gently to wash the soot away. Jamie looked slightly taken aback by this attention, but was too occupied by the conversation to send her away.

A slight wry smile crossed Campbell's face.

"I'm afraid Mr. Byrnes, though usually a competent overseer, shares one small weakness wi' the Lieutenant. I sent to the sawmill for him, first thing, but the slave came back and told me Byrnes was insensible in his quarters, reekin' of drink, and could not be roused."

Jocasta made another unladylike noise, which caused Campbell to glance at her with affection before turning back to Jamie.

"Your aunt is more than capable of managing the business of the estate with Ulysses to assist her in the documentary aspects. However, as ye will have seen yourself"—he gestured delicately at the bowl of water, which now resembled a bowl of ink—"there are physical concerns to the running of it, as well."

"That was the point that Lieutenant Wolff put to me," Jocasta said, lips thinning at the memory. "That I could not expect to manage my property alone, and me not only a woman, but sightless as well. I could not, he said, depend upon Byrnes, unable as I am to go to the forest and the mill to see what the man is doing. Or not doing." Her mouth shut firmly on the thought.

"Which is true enough," Campbell put in ruefully. "It is a proverb amongst us—'Happiness is a son old enough to be factor.' For when it's a matter of money or slaves, ye cannot trust anyone save your kin."

I drew a deep breath and glanced at Jamie, who nodded. At last we'd got to it.

"And that," I said, "is where Jamie comes in. Am I right?"

Jocasta had already enlisted Farquard Campbell to deal with Lieutenant Wolff upon his next visit, intending that Campbell should keep Byrnes from committing folly with the contracts. When we had so opportunely arrived, though, Jocasta had hit upon a better plan.

"I sent word to Farquard that he should inform the Lieutenant that my nephew had come to take up the management of River Run.

That would cause him to go cautiously," she explained. "For he would not dare to press me, with a kinsman who had an interest standing by."

"I see." Despite himself, Jamie was beginning to look amused. "So the Lieutenant would think his attempt at a good down-setting here was usurped by my arrival. No wonder the man seemed to take such a mislike to me. I thought it was perhaps a general disgust of Scotsmen that he had, from what he said."

"I should imagine that he has—now," Campbell said, dabbing his lips circumspectly with his napkin.

Jocasta reached across the table, groping, and Jamie put out his hand instinctively to hers.

"You will forgive me, Nephew?" she said. With his hand to guide her, she could look toward his face; one would not have known her blind, by the expression of pleading in her beautiful blue eyes.

"I knew nothing of your character, d'ye see, before ye came. I could not risk that you would refuse a part in the deception, did I tell ye of it first. Do say that ye hold no grudge toward me, Jamie, if only for sweet Ellen's sake."

Jamie squeezed her hand gently, assuring her that he held no grudge. Indeed, he was pleased to have come in time to help, and his aunt might count upon his assistance, in any way she chose to call upon him.

Mr. Campbell beamed and rang the bell; Ulysses brought in the special whisky, with a tray of crystal goblets and a plate of savories, and we drank confusion to the British Navy.

Looking at that fine-boned face, so full of blind eloquence, though, I couldn't help recalling the brief synopsis Jamie had once given me of the outstanding characteristics of the members of his family.

"Frasers are stubborn as rocks," he'd said. "And MacKenzies are charming as larks in the field—but sly as foxes, with it."

"And where have *you* been?" Jamie asked, giving Fergus a hard up-and-down. "I didna think ye'd money enough for what it looks as though ye've been doing."

Fergus smoothed his disheveled hair, and sat down, radiating offended dignity.

"I met with a pair of French fur-traders in the town. They speaking little English, and myself being fluent, I could not but agree to assist them in their transactions. If they should then choose to invite me to share a small supper at their inn …" He lifted one shoulder in Gallic dismissal of the matter, and turned to more immediate concerns, reaching inside his shirt for a letter.

"This had arrived in Cross Creek for you," he said, handing it to Jamie. "The postmaster asked me to bring it."

It was a thick packet of paper, with a battered seal, and looked in little better condition than did Fergus. Jamie's face lighted when he saw it, though he opened it with some trepidation. Three letters fell out; one in what I recognized as his sister's writing, the other two plainly addressed by someone else.

Jamie picked up the letter from his sister, eyed it as though it might contain something explosive, and set it gently down by the fruit bowl on the table.

"I'll start wi' Ian," he said, picking up the second letter with a grin. "I'm not sure I want to be reading Jenny's without a glass of whisky in my hand."

He prised off the seal with the tip of the silver fruit knife, and opened the letter, scanning the first page. "I wonder if he …" His voice faded off as he began to read.

Curious, I got up and stood behind his chair, looking over his shoulder. Ian Murray wrote a clear, large hand, and it was easy to read, even at a distance.

Dear Brother—

All here are well, and give thanks to God for the news of your safe arrival in the Colonies. I send this missive in care of Jocasta Cameron; should it find you in her company, Jenny bids you to give her kindest regards to her Aunt.

You will see from the enclosed that you are restored to my wife's good graces; she has quite ceased to talk of you in the same breath with Auld Scratch, and I have heard no recent references to Emasculation, which may relieve your mind.

To put aside jesting—her Heart is much lightened by news of Young Ian's safety, as is my own. You will know the depth of our gratitude at his Deliverance, I think; therefore I will not Weary you with Repetitions, though in all truth, I could write a Novel upon that theme.

We manage to keep all here fed, though the barley suffered much from hail, and there is a flux abroad in the village which has claimed two children this month, to their parents' sorrow. It will be Annie Fraser and Alasdair Kirby we have lost, may God have mercy on their innocence.

On a happier note, we have had word from Michael in Paris; he continues to prosper in the wine business, and thinks of marrying soon.

I take joy in acquainting you with news of the birth of my newest grandson, Anthony Brian Montgomery Lyle. I shall content myself with this announcement, leaving a fuller description to Jenny; she is besotted of him, as are we all, he is a Dear Lad. His father, Paul—Maggie's husband—is a soldier, so Maggie and wee Anthony bide here at Lallybroch. Paul is in France at present; we pray nightly he may be left there, in relative peace, and not sent to the dangers of the Colonies nor the wilds of Canada.

We have had visitors this week; Simon, Lord Lovat, and his companions. He has come a-gathering again, seeking recruits for the Highland regiment he commands. You will perhaps hear of them in the Colonies, where I understand they have established some small reputation. Simon tells great tales of their bravery against the Indians and the wicked French, some of which are doubtless true.

Jamie grinned at this, and turned the page over.

He quite enthralled Henry and Matthew by his stories, and the girls as well. Josephine ("Kitty's eldest," Jamie observed in an aside to me) was so inspired, indeed, as to engineer a raid upon the chicken-coop, wherefrom she and her Cousins all emerged bedecked with feathers, mud from the kail-yard being employed in lieu of war-paint.

As all wished to play Savage, Young Jamie, Kitty's husband Geordie and myself were pressed into service as the Highland regiment, and obliged to suffer attack by Tomahawk (kitchen spoons and ladles) and other forms of enthusiastic assault, we essaying meanwhile a valiant defense with our broadswords (pieces of lath and willow twigs).

I put a stop to the Suggestion that the thatch of the dove-cote be set afire with flaming arrows, but was obliged in the end to submit to being Scalped. I flatter myself that I survived this Operation in better case than did the chickens.

The letter continued in this vein, giving more news of family, but dealing more often with the business of the farm, and reports of events in the district. Emigration, Ian wrote, was "become epidemic," with virtually all of the inhabitants of the village of Shewglie having decided upon this expedient.

Jamie finished the letter and put it down. He was smiling, his eyes faintly dreamy, as though he saw the cool mists and stones of Lallybroch rather than the humid, vivid jungle that surrounded us.

The second letter was also addressed in Ian's hand, but marked *Private* below the blue wax seal.

"And what will this be, I wonder?" Jamie murmured, breaking the seal and unfolding it. It began without salutation, obviously meant as continuation to the larger letter.

Now, Brother, I have a matter of some concern to put to you, upon which I write separately, so that you might share my larger letter with Ian, without disclosing this matter.

Your last letter spoke of putting Ian aboard ship in Charleston. Should this have occurred, we will of course welcome his coming with joy. However, if by chance he has not yet quitted your company, it is our wish that he remain with you, should this obligation be not unpleasing to you and to Claire.

“Not unpleasing to me,” Jamie muttered, nostrils flaring slightly as he glanced from the page to the window. Ian and Rollo were wrestling on the grass with two young slaves, rolling over and over in a giggling tangle of limbs and cloth and wagging tail. “Mmphm.” He turned his back to the window and resumed reading.

I mentioned Simon Fraser to you, and the cause of his presence here. The regimental levies have been a matter of concern to us for some time, though the matter has not often been pressing, our location being fortunately remote and difficult of travel.

Lovat finds little trouble in inducing lads to take the King’s shilling; what is there for them here? Poverty and want, with no hope of betterment. Why should they remain here, where they have nothing to inherit, where they are forbidden the plaid or the right to carry a man’s weapons? Why should they not seize the chance of reclaiming the notion of manhood—even should it mean they wear the tartan and carry a sword in the service of a German usurper?

I think sometimes this is the worst of it; not only that murder and injustice have been loosed unchecked upon us, without hope of cure or recourse—but that our young men, our hope and future, should be thus piped away, squandered for the profit of the conqueror, and paid in the small coin of their pride.

Jamie looked up at me, one brow raised.

“Ye wouldna think to look at him that Ian had such poesy in him, aye?”

There was a break in the text here. When it resumed, toward the bottom of the page, the writing, which had sprawled above into an angry scrawl with frequent blots and scratches, was once more controlled and tidy.

I must beg pardon for the passion of my words. I had not meant to say so much, but the temptation to open my heart to you as I always have is overwhelming. These are things I would not say to Jenny, though I imagine she knows them.

To the point, then; I grow garrulous. Young Jamie and Michael are well enough for the present—at least we have no fear that either of them will be tempted by a soldier's life.

The same is not true of Ian; you know the lad, and his spirit of adventure, so similar to your own. There is no real work for him here, yet he has not the mind of a scholar or a head for business. How shall he fare, in a world where he must choose between beggary and the profession of war? For there is little else.

We would have him stay with you, if you will have him. It may be that there is a greater opportunity in the New World for him than might be found here. Even if this should not be so, his mother will at least be spared the sight of her son marching away with his regiment.

I could ask no better Guardian or example for him than Yourself. I know I ask a great Favour of you in this Matter. Still, I hope the situation will not be entirely without benefit to you, beyond the presumed Great Pleasure of Ian's company.

"Not only a poet, but an ironist, too," Jamie observed, with another glance at the boys on the lawn.

Here there was another break in the text, before the writing resumed, this time with a freshly sharpened quill, the words written carefully, reflecting the thought behind them.

I had left off writing, Brother, wishing my thoughts to be clear and unmazed by weariness before addressing this concern. I have in fact taken up my pen and put it down a dozen times, unsure whether to speak *at all—I fear to offend you, in the same breath I ask your favour. And yet I must speak.*

I wrote of Simon Fraser, earlier. He is a man of honour, though his father's son—but he is a bloody man. I have known him since all of us were lads (sometimes that seems but yesterday; and then again, a gulf of years), and there is a hardness in him now, a glimpse of steel at the back of his eyes, that was not there before Culloden.

What troubles me—and the knowledge you bear of my love toward you is all that emboldens me to say this—is that I have seen that steel in your own eyes, Brother.

I know too well the sights that freeze a man's heart, to harden his eyes in that fashion. I trust that you will forgive my frankness, but I have feared for your soul, many times since Culloden.

I have not spoken of the matter to Jenny, but she has seen it, too. She is a woman, forbye, and will know you in ways I cannot. It will be that fear, I think, that caused her to throw Laoghaire at your head. I did think the match ill-made, but (here a large, deliberate blotch obscured several lines). You are fortunate in Claire.

"Mmphm," Jamie said at this, giving me an eye. I squeezed his shoulder, and leaned forward to read the rest.

It is late, and I ramble. I spoke of Simon—care for his men is now his sole link with humanity. He has neither wife nor child, he lives without root or hearth, his patrimony hostage to the conqueror he serves. There is a burning fire in such a man, but no heart. I hope never to say the same of you—or of Young Ian.

Thus I give you to each other, and may God's blessing—and mine—be with you both.

Write as soon as you may. We hunger for News of you, and for your accounts of the exotic precincts in which you now Abide.

Your Most Affectionate Brother,
Ian Murray

Jamie carefully folded the letter, and put it into his coat.

"Mmphm," he said.

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11

THE LAW OF BLOODSHED

July 1767

I became gradually accustomed to the rhythm of life at River Run. The presence of the slaves disturbed me, but there was little I could do about that, save to call upon their services as little as I could, fetching and carrying for myself whenever possible.

River Run boasted a “simples” room, essentially a small closet in which dried herbs and medicines were kept. There was not much there—no more than a few jars of dandelion root and willow bark, and a few patent poultices, dusty from disuse. Jocasta professed herself delighted that I should want to use the space—she had herself no talent for medicinals, she said with a shrug, nor had any of the slaves.

“There is a new woman who may show some skill in that direction,” she said, long fingers drawing out the line of wool from the spindle as the spinning wheel whirred round.

“She is not a house slave, though; she was fresh come from Africa only a few months past, and has neither speech nor manners. I had thought to train her, perhaps, but since you are here … ah, now the thread’s grown too thin, d’ye see?”

While I spent some time each day chatting with Jocasta and attempting to learn from her the art of spinning wool, Jamie spent an hour or two with the butler, Ulysses, who in addition to serving as Jocasta’s eyes and as major domo of the house, had evidently also been managing the accounts of the plantation since Hector Cameron’s death.

“And doing a fair job of it, too,” Jamie told me privately, after one such session. “If he were a white man, my aunt would have no difficulty in handling her affairs. As it is, though—” He shrugged.

“As it is, it’s lucky for her that you’re here,” I said, leaning close to sniff at him. He had spent the day in Cross Creek, arranging a complicated exchange involving indigo blocks, lumber, three pairs of mules, five tons of rice, and a warehouse receipt for a gilded clock, and as a result, a fascinating variety of scents clung to his coat and hair.

“It’s the least I can do,” he said, his eyes on the boots he was brushing. His lips tightened briefly. “Not as though I were otherwise occupied, is it?”

“A dinner party,” Jocasta declared, a few days later. “I must have a proper festival, to introduce the two of ye to the folk of the county.”

“There’s no need of it, Aunt,” Jamie said mildly, looking up from his book. “I think I shall have met most of the county at the stock-buying last week. Or the masculine part of it, at least,” he added, smiling at me. “Come to think on it, though, perhaps it would suit Claire to be acquainted wi’ the ladies of the district.”

“I wouldn’t mind knowing a few more people,” I admitted. “Not that I don’t find ample occupation here,” I assured Jocasta, “but—”

“But not of a sort that interests you,” she answered, though with enough of a smile to take the sting out of the remark. “Ye’ve no great fondness for needlework, I think.” Her hand went to the big basket of colored wools and plucked out a ball of green, to be attached to the shawl she was knitting.

The balls of wool were carefully arranged each morning by one of the maids, in a spiral spectrum, so that by counting, Jocasta could pick up a ball of the right color.

“Aye, well, not *that* sort of needlework,” Jamie put in, closing his book and smiling at me. “It’s more the stitching of severed flesh that appeals to Claire. I expect she'll be getting restless these days, wi' no more than a cracked head or a case of piles to be dealing with."

"Ha ha," I said tartly, but in fact he was quite right. While I was pleased to find that the inhabitants of River Run were on the whole healthy and well nourished, there was not a great deal of scope for a physician. While I certainly wished no ill to anyone, there was no denying that I *was* getting restless. So was Jamie, but I thought that was a matter better left unremarked for the moment.

"I do hope Marsali's quite well," I said, changing the subject. Convinced at last that Jamie would not require his aid for a little while, Fergus had left the day before, bound downriver for Wilmington, thence to take ship for Jamaica. If all went well, he would return in the springtime with Marsali and—God willing—their new child.

"So do I," said Jamie. "I told Fergus that—"

Jocasta turned her head sharply toward the door.

"What is it, Ulysses?"

Absorbed by the conversation, I hadn't noticed footsteps in the hallway. Not for the first time, I was struck by the acuteness of Jocasta's hearing.

"Mr. Farquard Campbell," the butler said quietly, and stood back against the wall.

It was an indication of Farquard Campbell's familiarity with the household, I thought, that he should not have waited for Ulysses to return with an invitation for him to enter. He came into the drawing room on the butler's heels, hat carelessly thrust beneath one arm.

"Jo, Mrs. Fraser," he said with a quick bow to Jocasta and me, and "Your servant, sir," to Jamie. Mr. Campbell had been riding, and riding hard; the skirts of his coat were thick with dust, and sweat streamed down his face beneath a wig crammed on askew.

"What is it, Farquard? Has something happened?" Jocasta sat forward on the edge of her chair, her face reflecting his obvious anxiety.

"Yes," he said abruptly. "An accident at the sawmill. I've come to ask Mrs. Fraser—"

"Yes, of course. Let me get my box. Ulysses, will you have someone fetch a horse?" I rose hastily, searching for the slippers I had kicked off. I wasn't dressed for riding, but from Campbell's look, there wasn't time to change. "Is it serious?"

He put out a hand to stop me, as I stooped to pull my slippers on.

"Aye, bad enough. But you needn't come, Mrs. Fraser. If your husband might fetch along some of your medicines and such, though—"

"Of course I'll come," I said.

"No!" He spoke abruptly, and we all stared at him. His eyes sought Jamie's, and he grimaced, lips tight.

"It's not a matter for the ladies," he said. "But I should be most grateful for your company, Mr. Fraser."

Jocasta was on her feet before I could protest, gripping Campbell's arm.

"What is it?" she said sharply. "Is it one of my Negroes? Has Byrnes done something?"

She was taller than he by an inch or two; he had to look up to answer her. I could see the lines of strain in his face, and she plainly sensed it as well; her fingers tightened on the gray serge of his coat sleeve.

He glanced at Ulysses, then back at Jocasta. As though he had received a direct order, the butler turned and left the room, soft-footed as ever.

"It is a matter of bloodshed, Jo," he said to her quietly. "I do not know who, nor how, nor even how bad the injury may be. MacNeill's boy came for me. But for the other—" He hesitated, then shrugged. "It is the law."

"And you're a judge!" she burst out. "For God's sake, can you not do something?" Her head moved jerkily, blind eyes trying to fix him, bend him to her will.

"No!" he said sharply, and then, more gently, repeated, "No." He lifted her hand from his sleeve and held it tightly.

"You know I cannot," he said. "If I could …"

"If you could, you would not," she said bitterly. She pulled her hand out of his grasp and stood back, fists clenched at her sides. "Go on, then. They've called ye to be judge; go and give them their judgment." She whirled on her heel and left the room, her skirts rustling with angry futility.

He stared after her, then, as the sound of a slammed door came from down the passage, blew out his breath with a wry grimace and turned to Jamie.

"I hesitate to request such a favor of you, Mr. Fraser, upon such short acquaintance as we have had. But I would greatly appreciate your accompanying me upon my errand. Since Mrs. Cameron herself cannot be present, to have you there as her representative in the matter—"

"What *is* this matter, Mr. Campbell?" Jamie interrupted.

Campbell glanced at me, plainly wishing me to leave. Since I made no move to do so, he shrugged, and pulling a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face.

"It is the law of this colony, sir, that if a Negro shall assault a white person and in so doing, cause blood to be shed, then he shall die for his crime." He paused, reluctant. "Such occurrences are most thankfully rare. But when they occur—"

He stopped, lips pressed together. Then he sighed, and with a final pat of his flushed cheeks, put the handkerchief away.

"I must go. Will you come, Mr. Fraser?"

Jamie stood for a moment longer, his eyes searching Campbell's face.

"I will," he said abruptly. He went to the sideboard and pulled open the upper drawer, where the late Hector Cameron's dueling pistols were kept.

Seeing this, I turned to Campbell.

"Is there some danger?"

"I cannot say, Mrs. Fraser." Campbell hunched his shoulders, "Donald MacNeill told me only that there had been an altercation of some kind at the sawmill, and that it was a matter of the law of bloodshed. He asked me to come at once to render judgment and oversee the execution, and then left to summon the other estate owners before I could obtain any particulars."

He looked unhappy, but resigned.

“Execution? Do you mean to say you intend to execute a man without even knowing what he’s done?” In my agitation, I had knocked Jocasta’s basket of yarn over. Little balls of colored wool ran everywhere, bouncing on the carpet.

“I do know what he’s done, Mrs. Fraser!” Campbell lifted his chin, his color high, but with an obvious effort, swallowed his impatience.

“Your pardon, ma’am. I know you are newly come here; you will find some of our ways difficult and even barbarous, but—”

“Too right I find them barbarous! What kind of law is it that condemns a man—”

“A slave—”

“A man! Condemns him without a trial, without even an investigation? What sort of law is that?”

“A bad one, madame!” he snapped. “But it is still the law, and I am charged with its fulfillment. Mr. Fraser, are you ready?” He clapped the hat on his head, and turned to Jamie.

“I am.” Jamie finished stowing the pistols and ammunition in the deep pockets of his coat, and straightened, smoothing the skirts down across his thighs. “Sassenach, will ye go and—”

I had crossed to him and grabbed him by the arm before he could finish.

“Jamie, please! Don’t go; you can’t be part of this!”

“Hush.” He laid his hand on mine and squeezed hard. His eyes held mine, and kept me from speaking.

“I am already part of it,” he said quietly. “It is my aunt’s property, her men involved. Mr. Campbell is right; I am her kinsman. It will be my duty to go—to see, at least. To be there.” He hesitated then, as though he might say more, but instead merely squeezed my hand again and let me go.

“Then I’m going with you.” I spoke quite calmly, with that eerie sense of detachment that comes with awareness of impending disaster.

His wide mouth twitched briefly.

“I did expect ye would, Sassenach. Go and fetch your wee box, aye? I’ll have the horses brought round.”

I didn't wait to hear Mr. Campbell's expostulations, but fled toward the stillroom, my slippers pattering on the tiles like the beat of an anxious heart.

We met Andrew MacNeill on the road, resting his horse in the shade of a chestnut tree. He had been waiting for us; he stepped out of the shadows at the sound of our hoofbeats. He nodded to Campbell as we halted by him, but his eyes were on me, frowning.

"Did you not tell him, Campbell?" he said, and turned the frown on Jamie. "It will be no affair for a woman, Mr. Fraser."

"Ye called it a matter of bloodshed, did ye no?" Jamie said, a marked edge in his voice. "My wife is *ban-lighiche*; she has seen war wi' me, and more. If ye wish me there, she will go with me."

MacNeill's lips pressed tight together, but he didn't argue further. He turned abruptly and swung into his saddle.

"Acquaint us, MacNeill, with the history of this unfortunate affair." Campbell urged his mare's nose past the withers of Jamie's horse, skillfully edging between MacNeill and Jamie. "Mr. Fraser is newly come, as you know, and your lad said only to me that it was bloodshed. I have no particulars."

MacNeill's burly shoulders rose slightly, shrugging toward the iron-gray pigtail that bisected his collar. His hat was jammed down on his head, set square with the shoulders, as though he had used a carpenter's level to even it. A square, blunt man, MacNeill, in words as well as appearance.

Told in brief bursts as we trotted, it was a simple story. The sawmill's overseer, Byrnes, had had an altercation with one of the turpentine slaves. This man, being armed with the large slash-knife appropriate to his occupation, had attempted to settle the matter by removing Byrnes' head. Missing his aim, he had succeeded only in depriving the overseer of an ear.

"Barked him like a pine tree," MacNeill said, a certain grim satisfaction apparent in his voice. "Took his lug and a wee bit o' the side of his face, as well. Not that it will ha' impaired his beauty ower-much, the ugly wee pusbag."

I glanced toward Jamie, who lifted one eyebrow in response. Evidently Byrnes was no favorite with the local planters.

The overseer had shrieked for help, and with the assistance of two customers and several of their slaves, had succeeded in subduing his assailant. The wound stanched and the slave locked in a shed, young Donald MacNeill—who had come to have a saw blade set and found himself unexpectedly in the midst of drama—had been dispatched at once to spread the word to the plantation owners nearby.

"You'll not know," Campbell explained, twisting in his saddle to speak to Jamie. "When a slave must be executed, the slaves from those plantations nearby are brought to watch; a deterrent, aye? against future ill-considered action."

"Indeed," Jamie said politely. "I believe that was the Crown's notion in executing my grandsire on Tower Hill after the Rising. Verra effective, too; all my relations have been quite well behaved since."

I had lived long enough among Scots to appreciate the effects of that little jab. Jamie might have come at Campbell's request, but the grandson of the Old Fox did no man's bidding lightly—nor necessarily held English law in high regard.

MacNeill had got the message, all right; the back of his neck flushed turkey-red, but Farquard Campbell looked amused. He uttered a short, dry laugh before turning round.

"Which slave is it, d'ye know?" he asked the older man. MacNeill shook his head.

"Young Donald didna say. But ye ken as well as I do; it'll be that bugger Rufus."

Campbell's shoulders slumped in acknowledgment.

"Jo will be sore pained to hear it," he murmured, shaking his head regretfully.

"It's her ain fault," MacNeill said, brutally thwacking a horsefly that had settled on his leg above the boot. "Yon Byrnes isna fit to mind pigs, let alone run Negroes. I've told her often enough; so've you."

"Aye, but Hector hired the man, not Jo," Campbell protested mildly. "And she couldna well dismiss him out of hand. What's she to do, then, come and manage the place herself?"

The answer was a grunt as MacNeill shifted his broad buttocks in the saddle. I glanced at Jamie, and found him poker-faced, eyes hidden in the shadow under the brim of his hat.

"There's little worse than a willful woman," MacNeill said, a trifle louder than strictly necessary. "They've none to blame save themselves if harm comes to them."

"Whereas," I chipped in, leaning forward and raising my own voice enough to be heard over the clop and creak of the horses, "if harm comes to them because of some man, the satisfaction of blaming him will be adequate compensation?"

Jamie snorted briefly with amusement; Campbell cackled out loud and poked MacNeill in the ribs with his crop.

"Got ye there, Andrew!" he said.

MacNeill did not reply, but his neck grew even redder. We rode in silence after that, MacNeill's shoulders hunched just under his ears.

While mildly satisfying, this exchange did nothing to settle my nerves; my stomach was knotted in dread of what might happen when we reached the mill. Despite their dislike of Byrnes and the obvious assumption that whatever had happened had likely been the overseer's fault, there wasn't the slightest suggestion that this would alter the slave's fate in any way.

"A bad law," Campbell had called it—but the law nonetheless. Still, it was neither outrage nor horror at the thought of judicial atrocity that made my hands tremble and the leather reins slick with sweat; it was wondering what Jamie would do.

I could tell nothing from his face. He rode relaxed, left hand on the reins, the right curled loosely on his thigh, near the bulge of the pistol in his coat.

I was not even sure whether I could take comfort in the fact that he had allowed me to come with him. That might mean that he didn't expect to commit violence—but in that case, did it mean he would stand by and let the execution happen?

And if he did …? My mouth was dry, my nose and throat choked with the soft brown dust that rose in clouds from the horses' hooves.

I am already part of it. Part of what, though? Of clan and family, yes—but of *this?* Highlanders would fight to the death for any cause that touched their honor or stirred their blood, but they were for the most part indifferent to outside matters. Centuries of isolation in their mountain fastnesses had left them disinclined to meddle in the affairs of others—but woe to any who meddled in theirs!

Plainly Campbell and MacNeill saw this as Jamie's affair—but did he? Jamie was not an isolated Highlander, I assured myself. He was well traveled, well educated, a cultured man. And he knew damn well what *I* thought of present matters. I had the terrible feeling, though, that my opinion would count for very little in the reckoning of this day.

It was a hot and windless afternoon, with cicadas buzzing loudly in the weeds along the road, but my fingers were cold, and stiff on the reins. We had passed one or two other parties; small groups of slaves, moving on foot in the direction of the sawmill. They didn't look up as we passed, but melted aside into the bushes, making room as we cantered past.

Jamie's hat flew off, knocked by a low branch; he caught it deftly and clapped it back on his head, but not before I had caught a glimpse of his face, unguarded for a moment, the lines of it tense with anxiety. With a small shock, it occurred to me that *he* didn't know what he was going to do either. And that frightened me more than anything else so far.

We were suddenly in the pine forest; the yellow-green flicker of hickory and alder leaves gave way abruptly to the darker light of cool deep green, like moving from the surface of the ocean into the calmer depths.

I reached back to touch the wooden case strapped on behind my saddle, trying to avoid thinking of what might lie ahead, by making mental preparations for the only role I might reasonably play in this incipient disaster. I likely could not prevent damage; but I could try to repair what had happened already. Disinfection and cleansing—I had a bottle of distilled alcohol, and a wash made from pressed garlic juice and mint. Then dress the wound—yes, I had linen bandages—but surely it would need stitching first?

In the midst of wondering what had been done with Byrnes' detached ear, I stopped. The buzzing in my own ears was not from cicadas. Campbell, in the lead, reined up sharply, listening, and the rest of us halted behind him.

Voices in the distance, lots of voices, in a deep, angry buzz, like a hive of bees turned upside down and shaken. Then there was the faint sound of shouts and screams, and the sudden loud report of a shot.

We galloped down the last slope, dodging trees, and thundered into the sawmill's clearing. The open ground was filled with people; slaves and bondsmen, women and children, milling in panic through the stacks of sawn lumber, like termites exposed by the swing of an ax.

Then I lost all consciousness of the crowd. All my attention was fixed at the side of the mill, where a crane hoist was rigged, with a huge curved hook for raising logs to the level of the saw bed.

Impaled on the hook was the body of a black man, twisting in horrid imitation of a worm. The smell of blood struck sweet and hot through the air; there was a pool of it on the platform below the hoist.

My horse stopped, fidgeting, obstructed by the crowd. The shouts had died away into moans and small, disconnected screams from women in the crowd. I saw Jamie slide off in front of me, and force his way through the press of bodies toward the platform. Campbell and MacNeill were with him, shoving grimly through the mob. MacNeill's hat fell off, unregarded, to be trampled underfoot.

I sat frozen in my saddle, unable to move. There were other men on the platform near the hoist; a small man whose head was wound grotesquely round with bandages, splotched with blood all down one side; several other men, white and mulatto, armed with clubs and muskets, making occasional threatening jabs at the crowd.

Not that there seemed any urge to rush the platform; to the contrary, there seemed a general urge to get away. The faces around me were stamped with expressions ranging from fear to shocked dismay, with only here and there a flash of anger—or satisfaction.

Farquard Campbell emerged from the press, boosted onto the platform by MacNeill's sturdy shoulder, and advanced at once on the men with clubs, waving his arms and shouting something I couldn't hear, though the screams and moans around me were dying away into the silence of shock. Jamie seized the edge of the platform and lifted himself up after Campbell, pausing to give a hand to MacNeill.

Campbell was face-to-face with Byrnes, his lean cheeks convulsed with fury.

"… unspeakable brutality!" he was shouting. His words came unevenly, half swallowed in the shuffle and murmur around me, but I saw him jab a finger emphatically at the hoist and its grisly burden. The slave had stopped struggling; he hung inert.

The overseer's face was invisible, but his body was stiff with outrage and defiance. One or two of his friends moved slowly toward him, plainly meaning to offer support.

I saw Jamie stand for a moment, assessing events. He drew both pistols from his coat, and coolly checked the priming. Then he stepped forward, and clapped one to Byrnes' bandaged head. The overseer went rigid with surprise.

"Bring him down," Jamie said to the nearest thug, loudly enough to be audible over the dying grumbles of the crowd. "Or I blow off what's left o' your friend's face. And then—" He raised the second pistol and aimed it squarely at the man's chest. The expression on Jamie's own face made further threats unnecessary.

The man moved reluctantly, narrowed eyes fixed on the pistol. He took hold of the brake-handle of the winch that controlled the hoist, and pulled it back. The hook descended slowly, its cable taut with the strain of its burden. There was a massive sigh from the spectators as the limp body touched the earth.

I had managed to urge my horse forward through the crowd, till I was within a foot or two of the end of the platform. The horse shied and stamped, tossing his head and snorting at the strong smell of blood, but was well trained enough not to bolt. I slid off, ordering a man nearby to bring my box.

The boards of the platform felt strange underfoot, heaving like the dry land does when one steps off a ship. It was no more than a few steps to where the slave lay; by the time I reached him, that cold clarity of mind that is the surgeon's chief resource had come upon me. I paid no heed to the heated arguments behind me, or to the presence of the remaining spectators.

He was alive; his chest moved in small, jerky gasps. The hook had pierced the stomach, passing through the lower rib cage, emerging from the back at about the level of the kidneys. The man's skin was an unearthly shade of dark blue-gray, his lips blanched to the color of clay.

"Hush," I said softly, though there was no sound from the slave save the small hiss of his breath. His eyes were pools of incomprehension, pupils dilated, swamped with darkness.

There was no blood from his mouth; the lungs were not punctured. The breathing was shallow, but rhythmic; the diaphragm had not been pierced. My hands moved gently over him, my mind trying to follow the path of the damage. Blood oozed from both wounds, flowed in a black slick over the ridged muscles of back and stomach, shone red as rubies on the polished steel. No spurting; they had somehow missed both abdominal aorta and the renal artery.

Behind me, a heated argument had broken out; some small, detached portion of my mind noted that Byrnes' companions were his fellow overseers from two neighboring plantations, presently being rebuked with vigor by Farquard Campbell.

"… blatant disregard of the law! You shall answer for it in court, gentlemen, be assured that you shall!"

"What does it matter?" came a sullen rumble from someone. "It's bloodshed—and mutilation! Byrnes has his rights!"

"Rights no for the likes of you to decide." MacNeill's deep growl joined in. "Rabble, that's what ye are, no better than the—"

"And where d'you get off, old man, stickin' your long Scotch nose in where it's not wanted, eh?"

"What will ye need, Sassenach?"

I hadn't heard him come up beside me, but he was there. Jamie crouched next to me, my box open on the boards beside him. He held a loaded pistol still in one hand, his attention mostly on the group behind me.

"I don't know," I said. I could hear the argument going on in the background, but the words blurred into meaninglessness. The only reality was under my hands.

It was slowly dawning on me that the man I touched was possibly not fatally wounded, in spite of his horrible injury. From everything I could sense and feel, I thought that the curve of the hook had gone upward through the liver. Likely the right kidney was damaged, and the jejunum or gallbladder might be nicked—but none of those would kill him immediately.

It was shock that might do for him, if he was to die quickly. But I could see a pulse throbbing in the sweat-slick abdomen, just above the piercing steel. It was fast, but steady as a drumbeat; I could feel it echo in the tips of my fingers when I placed a hand on it. He had lost blood—the scent of it was thick, overpowering the smell of sweat and fear—but not so much as to doom him.

An unsettling thought came to me—I might be able to keep this man alive. Likely not; in the wake of the thought came a flood of all the things that could go wrong—hemorrhage when I removed the hook being only the most immediate. Internal bleeding, delayed shock, perforated intestine, peritonitis—and yet.

At Prestonpans, I had seen a man pierced through the body with a sword, the location of the wound very much like this. He had received no treatment beyond a bandage wrapped around his body—and yet he had recovered.

"Lawlessness!" Campbell was saying, his voice rising over the babble of argument. "It cannot be tolerated, no matter the provocation. I shall have you all taken in charge, be sure of it!"

No one was paying any attention to the true object of the discussion. Only seconds had passed—but I had only seconds more to act. I placed a hand on Jamie's arm, pulling his attention away from the debate.

"If I save him, will they let him live?" I asked him, under my breath.

His eyes flicked from one to another of the men behind me, weighing the possibilities.

"No," he said softly. His eyes met mine, dark with understanding. His shoulders straightened slightly, and he laid the pistol across his thigh. I could not help him make his choice; he could not help with mine—but he would defend me, whichever choice I made.

"Give me the third bottle from the left, top row," I said, with a nod at the lid of the box, where three rows of clear glass bottles, firmly corked, held a variety of medicines.

I had two bottles of pure alcohol, another of brandy. I poured a good dose of the brownish powdered root into the brandy, and shook it briskly, then crawled to the man's head and pressed it to his lips.

His eyes were glazed; I tried to look into them, to make him see me. Why? I wondered, even as I leaned close and called his name. I couldn't ask if this would be his choice—I had made it for him. And having made it, could not ask for either approval or forgiveness.

He swallowed. Once. Twice. The muscles near his blanched mouth quivered; drops of brandy ran across his skin. Once more a deep convulsive gulp, and then his straining neck relaxed, his head heavy on my arm.

I sat with my eyes closed, supporting his head, my fingers on the pulse under his ear. It jumped; skipped a beat and resumed. A shiver ran over his body, the blotched skin twitching as though a thousand ants ran over it.

The textbook description ran through my mind:

Numbness. Tingling. A sensation of the skin crawling, as though affected by insects. Nausea, epigastric pain. Labored breathing, skin cold and clammy, features bloodless. Pulse feeble and irregular, yet the mind remains clear.

None of the visible symptoms were discernible from those he already showed. Epigastric pain, forsooth.

One-fiftieth grain will kill a sparrow in a few seconds. One-tenth grain, a rabbit in five minutes. Aconite was said to be the poison in the cup Medea prepared for Theseus.

I tried to hear nothing, feel nothing, know nothing but the jerky beat beneath my fingers. I tried with all my might to shut out the voices overhead, the murmur nearby, the heat and dust and stink of blood, to forget where I was, and what I was doing.

Yet the mind remains clear.

Oh, God, I thought. It did.

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12

THE RETURN OF JOHN QUINCY MYERS

Deeply shaken by the events at the sawmill, Jocasta nonetheless declared her intention of carrying on with the party she had planned.

"It will distract our minds from the sadness," she said firmly. She turned to me, and reaching out, critically fingered the muslin cloth of my sleeve.

"I'll call Phaedre to begin a new gown for ye," she said. "The girl's a fine sempstress."

I rather thought it would take more than a new gown and a dinner party to distract *my* mind, but I caught a warning glance from Jamie and shut my mouth hard to keep the words inside.

In the event, given the shortness of time and a lack of suitable fabric, Jocasta decided to have one of her gowns remade for me.

"How does it look, Phaedre?" Jocasta frowned in my direction, as though she could summon vision by pure will. "Will it do?"

"Do fine," the maid answered around a mouthful of pins. She thrust in three in quick succession, squinted at me, pinched up a fold of fabric at the waistline and stabbed in two more.

"Be just fine," she elaborated, mouth now clear. "She shorter than you, Miss Jo, and a bit thinner in the waist. Some bigger in the bosom, though," Phadre added in an undertone, grinning at me.

"Yes, I know that." Jocasta spoke tartly, having caught the whisper. "Slash the bodice; we can fill it with Valenciennes lace over a field of green silk—take a scrap from that old dressing gown of my husband's; it will be the right color to complement this." She touched the sleeve, with its brilliant green striping. "Band the slash with the green silk, too; it will show off her bosom." The long pale fingers indicated the line of alteration, drifting across the tops of my breasts almost absentmindedly. The touch was cool, impersonal and barely felt, but I narrowly prevented myself jerking back.

"You have a most remarkable memory for color," I said, surprised and slightly unnerved.

"Oh, I remember this dress very well," she said. She touched the full sleeve lightly. "A gentleman once told me I reminded him of Persephone in it; springtime incarnate, he said." A faint smile of memory lit her face, then was erased as she lifted her head toward me.

"What color is your hair, my dear? I hadna thought to ask. You sound a bit blond, somehow, but I've no notion whether that may be actually the case. Pray, do not tell me ye're black-haired and sallow!" She smiled, but the joke sounded somehow like a command.

"It's more or less brown," I said, touching my hair self-consciously. "Faded a bit, though; it's gone light in streaks."

She frowned at this, seeming to consider whether brown was quite suitable. Unable to settle the question for herself, she turned to the maid.

"How does she look, Phaedre?"

The woman took a step back and squinted at me. I realized that she must—as the other house servants were—be in the habit of giving careful descriptions to her mistress. The dark eyes passed swiftly over me, pausing on my face for a long moment of assessment. She took two pins from her mouth before replying.

"Just fine, Miss Jo," Phaedre said. She nodded once, slowly. "Just fine," she said again. "She got white skin, white as skim milk; looks real fine with that bright green."

"Mm. But the underskirt is ivory; if she is too fair, will she not look washed out?"

I disliked being discussed as though I were an objet d'art—and a possibly defective one, at that—but swallowed my objections.

Phaedre was shaking her head, definitely.

"Oh, no, ma'am," she said. "She ain't washed out. She got them bones as makes shadows. And brown eyes, but don't be thinkin' they's mud-color. You recall that book you got, the one with the pictures of all them strange animals?"

"If you mean *Accounts of an Exploration of the Indian Subcontinent,*" Jocasta said, "yes, I recall it. Ulysses read it to me only last month. You mean that Mrs. Fraser reminds you of one of the illustrations?" She laughed, amused.

"Mm-hm." Phaedre hadn't taken her eyes off me. "She look like that big cat," she said softly, staring at me. "Like that there tiger, a-lookin' out from the leaves."

An expression of startlement showed briefly on Jocasta's face.

"Indeed," she said, and laughed. But she didn't touch me again.

I stood in the lower hall, smoothing the green-striped silk over my bosom. Phaedre's reputation as a sempstress was well founded; the dress fit like a glove, and the bold bands of emerald satin glowed against the paler shades of ivory and leaf.

Proud of her own thick hair, Jocasta did not wear wigs, so there was fortunately no suggestion that I adopt one. Phaedre had tried to powder my hair with rice flour instead, an attempt I had firmly resisted. Inadequately concealing her opinion of my lack of fashionable instinct, she had settled for snaring the mass of curls in a white silk ribbon and pinning them high to the back of my head.

I wasn't sure quite why I had resisted the array of baubles with which she had tried to further bedizen me; perhaps it was mere dislike of fussiness. Or perhaps it was a more subtle objection to being made an object, to be adorned and displayed to Jocasta's purpose. At any rate, I had refused. I wore no ornament save my wedding ring, a small pair of pearl earbobs, and a green velvet ribbon round the stalk of my neck.

Ulysses came down the stairs above me, impeccable in his livery. I moved, and he turned his head, catching the flicker of my skirts.

His eyes widened in a look of frank appreciation as he saw me, and I looked down, smiling a bit, as one does when being admired. Then I heard him gasp and jerked my head up to see his eyes still wide, but now with fear; his hand so tight on the banister that the knuckles shone.

"Your pardon, madame," he said, sounding strangled, and rushed down the stairs and past me, head down, leaving the door to the cookhouse breezeway swinging in his wake.

"What on earth …?" I said aloud, and then I remembered where—and when—we were.

Alone for so long, in a house with a blind mistress and no master, he had grown careless. He had momentarily forgotten that most basic and essential protection—the only true protection a slave had: the blank, bland face that hid all thoughts.

No wonder he had been terrorized when he realized what he had done. If it had been any woman other than myself to have intercepted that unguarded look … my hands grew cold and sweaty, and I swallowed, the remembered scent of blood and turpentine sharp in my throat.

But it had been me, I reminded myself, and no one else had seen. The butler might be afraid, but he was safe. I would behave as though nothing had happened—nothing *had*—and things would be … well, things would be what they were. The sound of footsteps on the gallery above interrupted my thoughts. I glanced upward, and gasped, all other thoughts driven at once from my mind.

A Highlander in full regalia is an impressive sight—any Highlander, no matter how old, ill-favored, or crabbed in appearance. A tall, straight-bodied, and by no means ill-favored Highlander in the prime of his life is breathtaking.

He hadn't worn the kilt since Culloden, but his body had not forgotten the way of it.

"Oh!" I said.

He saw me then, and white teeth flashed as he made me a leg, silver shoe-buckles gleaming. He straightened and turned on his heel to set his plaid swinging, then came down slowly, eyes fixed on my face.

For a moment, I saw him as he had looked the morning I married him. The sett of his tartan was nearly the same now as then; black check on a crimson ground, plaid caught at his shoulder with a silver brooch, dipping to the calf of a neat, stockinged leg.

His linen was finer now, as was his coat; the dirk he wore at his waist had bands of gold across the haft. *Duine uasal* was what he looked, a man of worth.

But the bold face above the lace was the same, older now, but wiser with it—yet the tilt of his shining head and the set of the wide, firm mouth, the slanted clear cat-eyes that looked into my own, were just the same. Here was a man who had always known his worth.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said. And then burst into a face-splitting smile as he descended the last few stairs.

"You look wonderful," I said, hardly able to swallow the lump in my throat.

"It's none so bad," he agreed, with no trace of false modesty. He arranged a fold over his shoulder with care. "Of course, that's the advantage of a plaid—there's no trouble about the fit of it."

"It's Hector Cameron's?" I felt ridiculously shy of touching him, garbed so splendidly. Instead, I touched the hilt of the dirk; it was topped with a small knurl of gold, roughly shaped like a bird in flight.

Jamie drew a deep breath.

"It's mine, now. Ulysses brought it to me—with my aunt's compliments." I caught an odd undertone in his voice, and glanced up at him. Despite his obvious deep pleasure at wearing the kilt again, something was troubling him. I touched his hand.

"What's wrong?"

He gave me half a smile, but his brows were drawn together in concern.

"I wouldna say anything's wrong, exactly. It's only—"

The sound of feet on the stairs interrupted him, and he drew me to one side, out of the way of a hurrying slave with a pile of linens. The house was humming with last-minute preparations; even now, I could hear the sound of wheels on the gravel at the back of the house, and savory smells floated through the air as platters were brought in at a gallop from the kitchen.

"We canna talk here," he muttered. "Sassenach, will ye stand ready at dinner? If I should signal to ye"—and he tugged at his earlobe—"will ye make a diversion, right then? It doesna matter what—spill wine, swoon away, stab your dinner partner with a fork—" He grinned at me, and I took heart from that; whatever was worrying him wasn't a matter of life and death, then.

"I can do that," I assured him. "But what—"

A door opened onto the gallery above, and Jocasta's voice floated down, giving last-minute orders to Phaedre. Hearing it, Jamie stooped quickly and kissed me, then whirled away in a swirl of crimson plaid and silver shoebuckles, disappearing neatly between two slaves bringing trays of crystal goblets toward the drawing room. I stared after him in astonishment, barely getting out of the way in time to avoid being trampled by the servants.

"Is that you, sweet Claire?" Jocasta paused on the bottom step, head turned toward me, eyes trained just over my shoulder. She was quite uncanny.

"It is," I said, and touched her arm to let her know more precisely where I was.

"I smelt the camphor from the dress," she said in answer to my unspoken question, tucking her hand in the crook of my elbow. "I thought I heard Jamie's voice; is he nearby?"

"No," I said, quite truthfully, "I believe he's gone out to greet the guests."

"Ah." Her hand tightened on my arm, and she sighed, somewhere between satisfaction and impatience. "I am not one to lament what cannot be mended, but I swear I should give one of my eyes, could the sight of the other be restored long enough to see the lad in his plaidie this night!"

She shook her head, dismissing it, and the diamonds in her ears flared with light. She wore dark blue silk, a foil to her shining white hair. The cloth was embroidered with dragonflies that seemed to dart among the folds as she moved under the lights of the wall sconces and candle-heavy chandeliers.

"Ah, well. Where is Ulysses?"

"Here, madame." He had come back so quietly that I hadn't heard him, appearing on her other side.

"Come then," she said, and took his arm. I didn't know if the order applied to him or me, but followed obediently in her shimmering wake, dodging to avoid two kitchen boys bearing in the centerpiece—a whole roasted boar, tusked head intact and fiercely glaring, succulent backside gleaming fatly, ready for the knife. It smelled divine.

I smoothed my hair and prepared to meet Jocasta's guests, feeling rather as though I, too, were being presented on a silver platter, with an apple in my mouth.

* * *

The guest list would have read like the *Who's Who* of Cape Fear River gentry, had there been such a thing. Campbell, Maxwell, Buchanan, MacNeill, MacEachern … names from the Highlands, names from the Isles. MacNeill of Barra Meadows, MacLeod of Islay … many of the plantation names carried the flavor of their owners' origins, as did their speech; the high plastered ceiling echoed with the lilt of spoken Gaelic.

Several of the men came kilted, or with plaids wrapped over their coats and silk breeches, but I saw none as striking as Jamie—who was conspicuous by his absence. I heard Jocasta murmur something to Ulysses; he summoned a small serving girl with a clap of his hands and sent her zooming off into the lanterned half-dark of the gardens, presumably in search of him.

Nearly as conspicuous were the few guests who were not Scots; a broad-shouldered, gently smiling Quaker by the picturesque name of Hermon Husband, a tall, rawboned gentleman named Hunter, and—much to my surprise—Phillip Wylie, immaculately suited, wigged and powdered.

"So we meet again, Mrs. Fraser," he remarked, holding on to my hand much longer than was socially correct. "I confess that I am ravished with enchantment to behold you again!"

“What are you doing here?” I said, rather rudely.

He grinned impudently.

“I was brought by mine host, the noble and puissant Mr. MacNeill of Barra Meadows, from whom I have just purchased an excellent pair of grays. Speaking of which, wild horses would have proved insufficient to restrain me from attendance this evening, upon my hearing that this occasion is held in your honor.” His eyes wandered slowly over me, with the detached air of a connoisseur appreciating some rare work of art.

“May I observe, ma’am, how most becoming is that shade of green?”

“I don’t suppose I can stop you.”

“To say nothing of the effect of candlelight upon your skin. ‘Thy neck is as a tower of ivory,’ ” he quoted, drawing a thumb insinuatingly over my palm, “ ‘thine eyes like the fishpools in Heshbon.’ ”

“ ‘Thy nose is as the tower of Lebanon, which looketh toward Damascus,’ ” I said, with a pointed look at his aristocratically pronounced proboscis.

He burst out laughing, but didn’t let go. I stole a glance at Jocasta, who stood only a few feet away; she seemed engrossed in conversation with a new arrival, but experience had taught me just how sharp her ears were.

“How old are you?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at him and trying to retrieve my hand without unseemly struggle.

“Five-and-twenty, ma’am,” he answered, rather surprised. He patted at the star-shaped patch near his mouth with a finger of his free hand. “Am I looking indecently haggard?”

“No. I merely wished to be sure I was telling you the truth in informing you that I am old enough to be your mother!”

This news appeared not to distress him in the slightest. Instead he raised my hand to his lips and pressed them fervently upon it.

“I am enchanted,” he breathed. “May I call you *Maman*?”

Ulysses stood behind Jocasta, dark eyes intent on the guests coming up the lighted walk from the river—he leaned forward now and then to whisper in her ear. I removed my hand from Wylie's grasp by main force, and used it to tap the butler on the shoulder.

"Ulysses," I said, smiling charmingly at Wylie, "would you be so kind as to ensure that Mr. Wylie is seated near me at dinner?"

"Indeed, madame; I will attend to it," he assured me, and returned at once to his surveillance.

Mr. Wylie bowed extravagantly, professing undying gratitude, and allowed himself to be propelled into the house by one of the footmen. I waved pleasantly after him, thinking how much I should enjoy sticking a fork into him, when the time came.

* * *

I couldn't tell whether it was the luck of the draw, or considerate planning, but I found myself between Mr. Wylie and the Quaker, Mr. Husband, with Mr. Hunter—the other non-Gaelic speaker—across the table from me. We formed a small island of English in the midst of a sea of swirling Scots.

Jamie had appeared at the last moment, and was now seated at the head of the table, with Jocasta at his right hand. For the dozenth time, I wondered what was going on. I kept a sharp eye on him, a clean fork by my plate, ready for action, but we had reached the third course with no untoward occurrence.

"I am surprised to find a gentleman of your persuasion in attendance at such an occasion, Mr. Husband. Does not such frivolity offend you?" Having failed to divert my attention to himself during the first two courses, Wylie now resorted to leaning across me, the action bringing his thigh casually into contact with mine.

Hermon Husband smiled. "Even Quakers must eat, Friend Wylie. And I have had the honor to enjoy Mrs. Cameron's hospitality on many occasions; I should not think to refuse it now, only because she extends it to others." He switched his attention back to me, resuming our interrupted conversation.

"Thou asked of the Regulators, Mrs. Fraser?" He nodded across the table. "I should recommend thy questions to Mr. Hunter, for if the Regulators might be said to enjoy the benefits of leadership, it is to this gentleman that they look."

Mr. Hunter bowed at the compliment. A tall, lantern-jawed individual, he was more plainly dressed than most of those in attendance, though not a Quaker. He and Mr. Husband were traveling together, both returning from Wilmington to their homes in the backcountry. With Governor Tryon's offer in mind, I wanted to find out whatever I could about matters in that area.

"We are but a loose assembly," he said modestly, putting down his wineglass. "In truth, I should be reluctant to claim any title whatever; it is only that I am fortunate enough to have a homestead so situated that it is a convenient meeting place."

"One hears that the Regulators are mere rabble." Wylie dabbed at his lips, careful not to dislodge his patch. "Lawless, and inclined to violence against the duly authorized deputies of the Crown."

"Indeed we are not," Mr. Husband put in, still mildly. I was surprised to hear him claim association with the Regulators; perhaps the movement wasn't quite so violent and lawless as Wylie implied. "We seek only justice, and that is not a quantity that can be obtained by means of violence, for where violence enters in, justice must surely flee."

Wylie laughed, a surprisingly deep and masculine sound, given his foppery.

"Justice apparently *should* flee! That is certainly the impression I was given by Mr. Justice Dodgson when I spoke with him last week. Or perhaps he was mistaken, sir, in his identification of the ruffians who invaded his chambers, knocked him down, and dragged him by the heels into the street?" He smiled engagingly at Hunter, who flushed dark red beneath his weathered tan. His fingers tightened about the stem of his wineglass. I glanced hopefully at Jamie. No sign of a signal.

"Mr. Justice Dodgson," Hunter said precisely, "is a userer, a thief, a disgrace to the profession of law, and—"

I had for some little time been hearing noises outside, but had put these down to some crisis in the cookhouse, which was separated from the main house by a breezeway. The noises became clearer now, though, and I caught a familiar voice that quite distracted me from Mr. Hunter's denunciations.

"Duncan!" I half rose from my seat, and heads nearby turned inquiringly.

There was a sudden confusion of movement out on the terrace, with shadows jerking past the open French windows, and voices calling, arguing and exhorting.

Conversation in the dining room fell silent, and everyone looked to see what was happening. I saw Jamie push back his chair, but before he could rise, an apparition appeared in the doorway.

It was John Quincy Myers, the mountain man, who filled the open double door from top to bottom and side to side, resplendent in the same costume in which I had first met him. He leaned heavily upon the doorframe, surveying the assemblage through bloodshot eyes. His face was flushed, his breathing stertorous, and in one hand he held a long glass bottle.

His eyes lit upon me, and his face contorted into a fearful grimace of gratification.

"THERE ye are," he said, in tones of the deepest satisfaction. "Said sho. Duncan wudd'n havit. Said yesh, Mishess Claire said gotter be drunk afore she cuts me. Sho I'm drunk. Drunk—" He paused, swaying dangerously, and raised his bottle high. "As a SKUNK!" he ended triumphantly. He took a step into the room, fell flat on his face, and didn't move.

Duncan appeared in the doorway, looking a good deal the worse for wear himself. His shirt was ripped, his coat hung off his shoulder, and he had the beginnings of what looked like a black eye.

He glanced down at the prostrate form at his feet, then looked apologetically at Jamie.

"I did try to stop him, *Mac Dubh.*"

I extricated myself from my seat, and reached the body at the same time as Jamie, followed by a tidal wave of curious guests. Jamie glanced at me, eyebrows raised.

"Well, ye did say he must be unconscious," he observed. He bent over the mountain man and thumbed back an eyelid, showing a slice of blank white eyeball. “I’d say he’s made a good job of it, myself.”

“Yes, but I didn’t mean dead drunk!” I squatted by the insensible form, and put a ginger two fingers over the carotid pulse. Nice and strong. Still …

“Alcohol isn’t a good anesthetic at all,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s a poison. It depresses the central nervous system. Put the shock of operating on top of alcohol intoxication, and it could kill him, easily.”

“No great loss,” said someone among the guests, but this caustic opinion was drowned in a flood of reproachful shushing.

“Shame to waste so much brandy,” someone else said, to general laughter. It was Phillip Wylie; I saw his powdered face loom over Jamie’s shoulder, smiling wickedly.

“We’ve heard a great deal of your skill, Mistress Fraser. Now’s your chance of proving yourself—before witnesses!” He waved a graceful hand at the crowd clustered round us.

“Oh, bugger off,” I said crossly.

“Ooh, hear her!” Someone murmured behind me, not without admiration. Wylie blinked, taken aback, but then grinned more broadly than ever.

“Your wish is my command, ma’am,” he murmured, and bowed himself back into the crowd.

I stood up, racked with doubt. It might work. It was a technically simple operation, and shouldn’t take more than a few minutes—if I encountered no complications. It was a small incision—but it did involve going into the peritoneum, with all the attendant risk of infection *that* implied.

Still, I was unlikely to encounter better conditions than I had here—plenty of alcohol for disinfection, plenty of willing assistants. There was no other means of anesthesia available, and I could under no circumstances do it with a conscious patient. Above all, Myers had asked me to do it.

I sought Jamie’s face, wanting advice. He was there, standing beside me, and saw the question in my eyes. Well, he’d wanted a diversion, damn it.

"Best do it, Sassenach." Jamie eyed the prostrate form. "He may ne'er have either the courage or the money to get that drunk again." I stooped and checked his pulse again—strong and steady as a carthorse.

Jocasta's stately head appeared among the curious faces looming over MacNeill's shoulder.

"Bring him into the salon," she said briefly. Her head withdrew, and the decision was made for me.

I had operated under odd conditions before, I thought, rinsing my hands hastily in vinegar brought from the kitchen, but none odder than this.

Relieved of his nether garb, Myers lay tastefully displayed on the mahogany table, boneless as a roasted pheasant, and nearly as ornamental. In lieu of platter, he lay upon a stable blanket, a gaudy centerpiece in his quilled shirt and bear's-claw necklace, surrounded by a garnish of bottles, rags, and bandages.

There was no time to change my own clothes; a leather butchering apron was fetched from the smoke shed to cover my dress, and Phaedre pinned up my long, frilled sleeves to leave my forearms bare.

Extra candles had been brought to give me light; candelabra blazed from sideboard and chandelier in a reckless expenditure of fragrant beeswax. Not nearly as fragrant as Myers, though; without hesitation, I took the decanter from the sideboard, and sloshed several shillings' worth of fine brandy over the curly dark-haired crotch.

"Expensive way to kill lice," someone remarked critically behind me, observing the hasty exodus of miscellaneous small forms of life in the wake of the flood.

"Ah, but they'll die happy," said a voice I recognized as Ian's. "I brought your wee box, Auntie." He set the surgical chest by my elbow, and opened it for me.

I snatched out my precious blue bottle of distilled alcohol, and the straight-edged scalpel. Holding the blade over a bowl, I poured alcohol over it, meanwhile scanning the crowd for appropriate assistants. There wouldn't be any shortage of volunteers; the spectators were boiling with suppressed laughter and murmured comment, interrupted dinner forgotten in a rush of anticipation.

Two sturdy carriage drivers were summoned from the kitchen to hold the patient's legs, Andrew MacNeill and Farquard Campbell volunteering to hold the arms, and Young Ian was set in place by my side, holding a large candlestick to cast additional light. Jamie took up his position as chief anesthetist by the patient's head, a glass full of whisky poised near the slack and snoring mouth.

I checked that my supplies and suture needles were ready, took a deep breath, and nodded to my troops.

"Let's go."

Myers's penis, embarrassed by the attention, had already retreated, peeping shyly out of the bushes. With the patient's long legs raised and spread, Ulysses himself delicately cupping the baggy scrotum away, the hernia was clearly revealed, a smooth swelling the size of a hen's egg, its curve a deep purple where it pressed against the taut inguinal skin.

"Jesus, Lord!" said one of the drivers, eyes bulging at the sight. "It's true—he's got three balls!"

A collective gasp and giggle ensued from the spectators, but I was too busy to correct misapprehensions. I swabbed the perineum thoroughly with pure alcohol, dipped my scalpel in the liquid, passed the blade back and forth through the flame of a candle by way of final sterilization, and made a swift cut.

Not large, not deep. Just enough to open the skin, and see the loop of gleaming pinkish-gray intestine bulging down through the tear in the muscle layer. Blood welled, a thin, dark line, then dribbled down staining the blanket.

I extended the incision, swished my fingers thoroughly in the disinfecting bowl, then put two fingers on the loop and pushed it gently upward. Myers moved in a sudden convulsion, nearly dislodging me, and just as suddenly relaxed. He tightened again, buttocks rising, and my assistants nearly lost their grip on his legs.

"He's waking up!" I shouted to Jamie, above the various cries of alarm. "Give him more, quick!" All my doubts about the use of alcohol as an anesthetic were being borne out, but it was too late to change my mind now.

Jamie grasped the mountain man's jaw, and squeezing open his mouth, dribbled whisky into it. Myers choked and spluttered and made noises like a drowning buffalo, but enough of the alcohol made it down his throat—the huge body relaxed. The mountain man subsided into mumbling immobility and then into long, wet, snuffling snores.

I had managed to keep my fingers in place; there was more bleeding than I would have liked, but his struggles had not brought the herniated loop back down. I snatched a clean cloth soaked in brandy and blotted the site; yes, I could see the edge of the muscle layer; scrawny as Myers was, a thin layer of yellow fat lay under the skin, separating it from the dark red fibers below.

I could feel the movement of his intestines as he breathed, the dark wet warmth of his body surrounding my gloveless fingers in that strange one-sided intimacy that is the surgeon's realm. I closed my eyes and let all sense of urgency, all consciousness of the watching crowd drop away.

I breathed in slowly, matched my rhythm to the audible snores. Above the reek of brandy and the faintly nauseating aromas of food, I could smell the earthy odors of his body; stale sweat, grimed skin, a small tang of urine and the copper scent of blood. To another, they would have been offensive, but not to me, not now.

This body *was*. No good, no bad, it simply was. I knew it, now; it was mine.

They were all mine; the unconscious body in my hands, its secrets open to me; the men who held it, their eyes on me. It didn't always happen, but when it did, the sensation was unforgettable; a synthesis of minds into a single organism. And as I took control of this organism, I became part of it, and lost myself.

Time stopped. I was acutely aware of each movement, each breath, the tug and pull of the catgut sutures as I tightened the inguinal ring, but my hands did not belong to me. My voice was high and clear, giving directions instantly obeyed, and somewhere far away, a small watcher in my brain observed the progress of the operation with a remote sense of interest.

Then it was done, and time began again. I took a step back, breaking the link, and feeling slightly dizzy at the unaccustomed solitude.

“Done,” I said, and the hum from the spectators erupted into loud applause. Still feeling intoxicated—had I caught drunkenness by osmosis from Myers?—I turned on one heel and sank into an extravagant low curtsy, facing the dinner guests.

An hour later, I was drunk on my own merits, the victim of a dozen toasts in my honor. I managed to escape briefly, on the excuse of checking on my patient, and staggered upstairs to the guest room where he lay.

I paused on the gallery, clinging to the banister while I steadied myself. There was a loud hum of conversation and laughter from below; the party was still going strong, but had dissolved into small groups scattered over the parquet of the foyer and salon. From this perspective, it looked like a honey-comb, fuzzy wigged heads and gauze-winged dresses bobbing to and fro across the six-sided tiles, buzzing busily over glasses filled with the nectar of brandywine and porter.

If Jamie had wanted a diversion, I thought muzzily, he couldn’t have asked for better. Whatever had been going to happen had been effectively forestalled. But what was it—and for how long could it be prevented? I shook my head to clear it—with indifferent results—and went in to see my patient.

Myers was still blissfully and deeply asleep, breathing in long, slow exhalations that made the cotton bed-drapes quiver. The slave Betty nodded at me, smiling.

“He’s fine, Mrs. Claire,” she whispered. “Couldn’t wake that man with a gun, I don’t think.”

I didn’t need to check his heart; his head was turned, and I could see the huge vein that ran down the side of his neck, throbbing with a pulse slow and heavy as a hammer blow. I touched him, feeling his skin cool and damp. No fever, no signs of shock. The whole of his enormous person radiated peace and well-being.

"How is he?" Had I been less drunk, I would have been startled. As it was, I merely swayed round on my axis, to find Jamie standing behind me.

"He's fine," I said. "You couldn't kill him with a cannon. Like you," I said, and found myself leaning against him, arms around his waist, my flushed face buried in the cool folds of his linen. "Indestructible."

He kissed the top of my head, smoothing back a few curls that had escaped from their dressing during the operation.

"Ye did well, Sassenach," he whispered. "Verra well, bonnie lassie."

He smelt of wine and candlewax, of herbs and Highland wool. I slid my hands lower, feeling the curves of his buttocks, smooth and free under his kilt. He moved slightly, the length of his thigh pressing briefly against mine.

"Ye need a bit of air, Sassenach—and we must talk. Can ye leave him for a time?"

I glanced at the bed and its stertorous occupant.

"Yes. As long as Betty will keep sitting with him to be sure he doesn't vomit in his sleep and choke?" I glanced at the slave, who looked surprised that I should ask, but nodded willingly.

"Meet me by the herb garden—and take care not to fall down the stairs and break your neck, aye?" Lifting my chin, he kissed me quick and deep, and left me dizzy, feeling at once more sober and more drunk than before.

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13

AN EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

Something dark landed on the path in front of us with a soft *plop!* and I stopped abruptly, clutching his arm.

"Frog," Jamie said, unperturbed. "D'ye hear them singing?"

"Singing" wasn't the word that would have struck me about the chorus of croaks and grunts from the reedbeds near the river. On the other hand, Jamie was tone deaf, and made no bones about it.

He extended the toe of his shoe and gently prodded the squat dark shape.

" 'Brekekekex, ko-ax, ko-ax,' " he quoted. " 'Brekekekex, ko-ax!' " The shape hopped away and disappeared into the moist plants by the path.

"I always knew you had a gift for tongues," I said, amused. "Didn't know you spoke frog, though."

"Well, I'm no ways fluent," he said modestly. "Though I've a fine accent, and I say it myself."

I laughed, and he squeezed my hand and let it go. The brief spark of the joke faded, failing to kindle conversation, and we walked on, physically together but miles apart in thought.

I should have been exhausted, but adrenaline was still coursing through my veins. I felt the exultation that comes with the completion of a successful bit of surgery, to say nothing of a little standard alcoholic intoxication. The effect of it all was to make me slightly wobbly on my pins, but with an acute and vivid awareness of everything around me.

There was an ornamental seat under the trees near the dock, and it was to this that Jamie led me, into the shadows. He sank onto the marble bench with a deep sigh, reminding me that I wasn't the only one for whom it had been an eventful evening.

I looked around with exaggerated attention, then sat down beside him.

"We're alone and unobserved," I said. "Do you want to tell me what the hell is going on now?"

"Oh, aye." He straightened, stretching his back. "I should have said something to ye sooner, only I didna quite expect she would do such a thing." He reached out and found my hand in the dark.

"It's not anything wrong, exactly, as I told ye. It's only that when Ulysses brought me the plaid and dirk and the brooch, he told me that Jocasta meant to make an announcement at the dinner tonight—to tell everyone that she meant to make me heir to … this."

His gesture took in the house and fields behind us—and everything else: the river mooring, the orchard, the gardens, the stables, the endless acres of resinous pines, the sawmill and the turpentine camp—and the forty slaves who worked them.

I could see the whole thing unfolding as Jocasta had no doubt envisioned it; Jamie sitting at the head of the table, dressed in Hector Cameron's tartan, wearing his blade and his brooch—that brooch with the Camerons' unsubtle clan adjuration "Unite!"—surrounded by Hector's old colleagues and comrades, all eager to welcome their friend's younger kinsman into his place.

Let her make such an announcement, in that company of loyal Scots, well lubricated with the late Hector's fine whisky, and they would have acclaimed him on the spot as the master of River Run, anointed him with boar's fat and crowned him with beeswax candles.

It had been a thoroughly MacKenzie-like plan, I thought; audacious, dramatic—and taking no account of the wishes of the persons involved.

"And if she had," he said, echoing my thoughts with uncanny precision, "I should have found it verra awkward to decline the honor."

"Yes, very."

He sprang suddenly to his feet, too restless to stay still. Without speaking, he held out a hand to me; I rose beside him and we turned back into the orchard path, circling the formal gardens. The lanterns lit for the party had been removed, their candles thriftily snuffed for later use.

"Why did Ulysses tell you?" I wondered aloud.

"Ask yourself, Sassenach," he said. "Who is master now, at River Run?"

"Oh?" I said, and then, "Oh!"

"Oh, indeed," he said dryly. "My aunt is blind; who has the keeping of the accounts, the running of the household? She may decide what things should be done—but who is to say whether they *are* done? Who is always at her hand to tell her aught that happens, whose words are in her ear, whose judgment does she trust above all others?"

"I see." I stared down at the ground, thinking. "You don't suppose he's been fiddling the accounts or anything sordid like that?" I hoped not; I liked Jocasta's butler very much, and had thought there was both fondness and respect between them; I didn't like to think of his cold-bloodedly cheating her.

Jamie shook his head.

"He is not. I've been over the ledgers and accounts, and everything is in order—verra good order indeed. I'm sure he is an honest man and a faithful servant—but he wouldna be human, to welcome giving up his place to a stranger."

He snorted briefly.

"My aunt may be blind, but yon black man sees clear enough. He didna say a word to prevent me, or persuade me of anything: only told me what my aunt meant to do, and then left it to me what *I* should do. Or not."

"You think he knew that you wouldn't—" I stopped there, because I wasn't sure myself that he wouldn't. Pride, caution, or both might have caused him to want to thwart Jocasta's plan, but that didn't mean he meant to reject her offer, either.

He didn't reply, and a small cold chill ran through me. I shivered, in spite of the warm summer air, and took his arm as we walked, seeking reassurance in the solid feel of his flesh beneath my fingers.

It was late July, and the scent of ripening fruit from the orchard was sweet, so heavy on the air that I could almost taste the clean, crisp tang of new apples. I thought of temptation—and the worm that lay hidden beneath a shining skin.

Temptation not only for him, but for me. For him, the chance to be what he was made for by nature, what fate had denied him. He was born and bred to this: the stewardship of a large estate, the care of the people on it, a place of respect among men of substance, his peers. More importantly, the restoration of clan and family. *I am already part of it,* he'd said.

He cared nothing for wealth, of itself; I knew that. Neither did I think he wanted power; if he did, knowing what I knew about the future's shape, he would have chosen to go north, to seek a place among the founders of a nation.

But he had been a laird once. He had told me very little of his time in prison, but one thing he had said rang in my memory. Of the men who shared his confinement, he said—*They were mine. And the having of them kept me alive*. And I remembered what Ian had said of Simon Fraser: *"Care for his men is now his only link with humanity."*

Yes, Jamie needed men. Men to lead, to care for, to defend and to fight with. But not to own.

Past the orchard, still in silence, and down the long walk of herbaceous borders, with the scents of lily and lavender, anemone and roses, so pungent and heady that simply to walk through the hot, heavy air was like throwing oneself headlong onto a bed of fragrant petals.

Oh, River Run was a garden of earthly delight, all right … but I had called a black man friend, and left my daughter in his care.

Thinking of Joe Abernathy, and Brianna, gave me a strange sense of dislocated double vision, of existing in two places at once. I could see their faces in my mind, hear their voices in my inner ear. And yet reality was the man beside me, kilt swinging with his stride, head bent in anxious thought.

And that was my temptation: Jamie. Not the inconsequentials of soft beds or gracious rooms, silk gowns or social deference. Jamie.

If he did not take Jocasta's offer, he must do something else. And "something else" was most likely William Tryon's dangerous lure of land and men. Better than Jocasta's generous offer, in its way; what he built would be his own, the legacy he wanted to leave for Brianna. If he lived to build it.

I was still living on two planes. In this one, I could hear the whisper of his kilt where it brushed my skirt, feel the humid warmth of his body, warmer even than the heated air. I could smell the musky scent of him that made me want to pull him from his thoughts into the border, unbelt him and let the plaid fall from his shoulders, pull down my bodice and press my breasts against him, take him down half-naked and wholly roused among the damp green plants, and force him from his thoughts to mine.

But on the plane of memory, I smelled yew trees and the wind from the sea, and under my fingers was no warm man, but the cold, smooth granite of a tombstone with his name.

I didn't speak. Neither did he.

We had made a complete circle by now, and come back to the river's edge, where gray stone steps led down and disappeared under a lapping sheen of water; even so far upstream, the faint echoes of the tide could be felt.

There was a boat moored there; a small rowboat, fit for solitary fishing or a leisurely excursion.

"Will ye come for a row?"

"Yes, why not?" I thought he must feel the same desire I had—to get away from the house and Jocasta, to get enough distance in which to think clearly, without danger of interruption.

I came down, putting my hand on his arm for balance. Before I could step into the boat, though, he turned toward me. Pulling me to him, he kissed me, gently, once, then held me against his body, his chin resting on my head.

"I don't know," he said quietly, in answer to my unspoken questions. He stepped into the boat and offered me a hand.

He was silent while we made our way out onto the river. It was a dark, moonless night, but the reflections of starlight from the surface of the river gave enough light to see, once my eyes had adapted to the shifting glimmer of water and tree-shadow.

“Ye dinna mean to say anything?” he asked abruptly, at last.

“It’s not my choice to make,” I said, feeling a tightness in my chest that had nothing to do with stays.

“No?”

“She’s your aunt. It’s your life. It has to be your choice.”

“And you’ll be a spectator, will you?” He grunted as he spoke, digging with the oars as he pulled upstream. “Is it not *your* life? Or do ye not mean to stay with me, after all?”

“What do you mean, not stay?” I sat up, startled.

“Perhaps it will be too much for you.” His head was bent over the oars; I couldn’t see his face.

“If you mean what happened at the sawmill—”

“No, not that.” He heaved back on the oars, shoulders broadening under his linen, and gave me a crooked smile. “Death and disaster wouldna trouble ye ower-much, Sassenach. But the small things, day by day … I see ye flinch, when the black maid combs your hair, or when the boy takes your shoes away to clean. And the slaves who work in the turpentine camp. That troubles ye, no?”

“Yes. It does. I’m—I can’t own slaves. I’ve told you—”

“Aye, ye have.” He rested on the oars for a moment, brushing a lock of hair out of his face. His eyes met mine squarely.

“And if I chose to do this, Sassenach … could ye stay by me, and watch, and do nothing—for there is nothing that could be done, until my aunt should die. Perhaps not even then.”

“What do you mean?”

“She will not free her slaves—how should she? I could not, while she lived.”

“But once you had inherited the place …” I hesitated. Beyond the ghoulish aspects of discussing Jocasta’s death, there was the more concrete consideration that that event was unlikely to occur for some time; Jocasta was little more than sixty, and aside from her blindness, in vigorous health.

I suddenly saw what he meant; could I bring myself to live, day after day, month after month, year after year, as an owner of slaves? I could not pretend otherwise, could take no refuge in the notion that I was only a guest, an outsider.

I bit my lip, in order not to cry out instant denial.

“Even then,” he said, answering my partial argument. “Did ye not know that a slave owner cannot free his slaves without the written permission of the Assembly?”

“He what?” I stared blankly at him. “Whyever not?”

“The plantation owners go in fear of an armed insurrection of Negroes,” he said. “And d’ye blame them?” he added sardonically.

“Slaves are forbidden to carry weapons, save tools such as tree knives, and there are the bloodshed laws to prevent their use.” He shook his head. “Nay, the last thing the Assembly would allow is a large group of free blacks let loose upon the countryside. Even if a man wishes to manumit one of his slaves, and is given permission to do so, the freed slave is required to leave the colony within a short time—or he may be captured and enslaved by anyone who chooses to take him.”

“You’ve thought about it,” I said slowly.

“Haven’t you?”

I didn’t answer. I trailed my hand in the water, a little wave purling up my wrist. No, I hadn’t thought about the prospect. Not consciously, because I hadn’t wanted to face the choice that was now being laid before me.

“I suppose it would be a great chance,” I said, my voice sounding strained and unnatural to my ears. “You’d be in charge of everything …”

“My aunt is not a fool,” he interrupted, with a slight edge to his voice. “She would make me heir, but not owner in her place. She would use me to do those things she cannot—but I would be no more than her cat’s-paw. True, she would ask my opinion, listen to my advice; but nothing would be done, and she didna wish it so.”

He shook his head.

"Her husband is dead. Whether she was fond of him or no, she is mistress here now, with none to answer to. And she enjoys the taste of power too well to spit it out."

He was plainly correct in this assessment of Jocasta Cameron's character, and therein lay the key to her plan. She needed a man; someone to go into those places she could not go, to deal with the Navy, to handle the chores of a large estate that she could not manage because of her blindness.

At the same time, she patently did *not* want a husband; someone who would usurp her power and dictate to her. Had he not been a slave, Ulysses could have acted for her—but while he could be her eyes and ears, he could not be her hands.

No, Jamie was the perfect choice; a strong, competent man, able to command respect among peers, compel obedience in subordinates. One knowledgeable in the management of land and men. Furthermore, a man bound to her by kinship and obligation, there to do her bidding—but essentially powerless. He would be held in thrall by dependence upon her bounty, and by the rich bribe of River Run itself; a debt that need not be paid until the matter was no longer of any earthly concern to Jocasta Cameron.

There was an increasing lump in my throat as I sought for words. I couldn't, I thought. I couldn't manage it. But I couldn't face the alternative, either; I couldn't urge him to reject Jocasta's offer, knowing it would send him to Scotland, to meet an unknown death.

"I can't say what you should do," I finally said, my voice barely audible above the regular lap of the oars.

There was an eddy pool, where a large tree had fallen into the water, its branches forming a trap for all the debris that drifted downstream. Jamie made for this, backing the rowboat neatly into quiet water. He let down the oars, and wiped a sleeve across his forehead, breathing heavily from exertion.

The night was quiet around us, with little sound but the lapping of water, and the occasional scrape of submerged tree branches against the hull. At last he reached out and touched my chin.

"Your face is my heart, Sassenach," he said softly, "and love of you is my soul. But you're right; ye canna be my conscience."

In spite of everything, I felt a lightening of spirit, as though some indefinable burden had dropped away.

"Oh, I'm glad," I said, adding impulsively, "it would be a terrible strain."

"Oh, aye?" He looked mildly startled. "Ye think me verra wicked, then?"

"You're the best man I've ever met," I said. "I only meant … it's such a strain, to try to live for two people. To try to make them fit your ideas of what's right … you do it for a child, of course, you have to, but even then, it's dreadfully hard work. I couldn't do it for you—it would be wrong even to try."

I'd taken him back more than a little. He sat for some moments, his face half turned away.

"Do ye really think me a good man?" he said at last. There was a queer note in his voice, that I couldn't quite decipher.

"Yes," I said, with no hesitation. Then added, half jokingly, "Don't you?"

After a long pause, he said, quite seriously, "No, I shouldna think so."

I looked at him, speechless, no doubt with my mouth hanging open.

"I am a violent man, and I ken it well," he said quietly. He spread his hands out on his knees; big hands, which could wield sword and dagger with ease, or choke the life from a man. "So do you—or ye should."

"You've never done anything you weren't forced to do!"

"No?"

"I don't think so," I said, but even as I spoke, a shadow of doubt clouded my words. Even when done from the most urgent necessity, did such things not leave a mark on the soul?

"Ye wouldna hold me in the same estimation as, say, a man like Stephen Bonnet? He might well say he acted from necessity."

"If you think you have the slightest thing in common with Stephen Bonnet, you're dead wrong," I said firmly.

He shrugged, half impatient, and shifted restlessly on the narrow bench.

"There's nay much to choose between Bonnet and me, save that I have a sense of honor that he lacks. What else keeps me from turning thief?" he demanded. "From plundering those whom I might? It is in me to do it—my one grandsire built Leoch on the gold of those he robbed in the Highland passes; the other built his fortune on the bodies of women whom he forced for their wealth and titles."

He stretched himself, powerful shoulders rising dark against the shimmer of the water behind him. Then he suddenly took hold of the oars across his knees and flung them into the bottom of the boat, with a crash that made me jump.

"I am more than five-and-forty!" he said. "A man should be settled at that age, no? He should have a house, and some land to grow his food, and a bit of money put away to see him through his auld age, at the least."

He took a deep breath; I could see the white bosom of his shirt rise with his swelling chest.

"Well, I dinna have a house. Or land. Or money. Not a croft, not a tattie-plot, not a cow or a sheep or a pig or a goat! I havena got a rooftree or a bedstead, or a pot to piss in!"

He slammed his fist down on the thwart, making the wooden seat vibrate under me.

"I dinna own the clothes I stand up in!"

There was a long silence, broken only by the thin song of crickets.

"You have me," I said, in a small voice. It didn't seem a lot.

He made a small sound in his throat that might have been either a laugh or a sob.

"Aye, I have," he said. His voice was quivering a bit, though whether with passion or amusement, I couldn't tell. "That's the hell of it, aye?"

"It is?"

He threw up his hand in a gesture of profound impatience.

"If it was only me, what would it matter? I could live like Myers; go to the woods, hunt and fish for my living, and when I was too old, lie down under a peaceful tree and die, and let the foxes gnaw my bones. Who would care?"

He shrugged his shoulders with irritable violence, as though his shirt was too tight.

"But it's *not* only me," he said. "It's you, and it's Ian and it's Duncan and it's Fergus and it's Marsali—God help me, there's even Laoghaire to think of!"

"Oh, let's don't," I said.

"Do ye not understand?" he said, in near desperation. "I would lay the world at your feet, Claire—and I have nothing to give ye!"

He honestly thought it mattered.

I sat looking at him, searching for words. He was half turned away, shoulders slumped in despair.

Within an hour, I had gone from anguish at the thought of losing him in Scotland, to a strong desire to bed him in the herbaceous borders, and from that to a pronounced urge to hit him on the head with an oar. Now I was back to tenderness.

At last I took one big, callused hand and slid forward so I knelt on the boards between his knees. I laid my head against his chest, and felt his breath stir my hair. I had no words, but I had made my choice.

" 'Whither thou goest,' " I said, " 'I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.' " Be it Scottish hill or southern forest. "You do what you have to; I'll be there."

* * *

The water ran fast and shallow near the middle of the creek; I could see the boulders black just beneath the glinting surface. Jamie saw them, too, and pulled strongly for the far side, bringing us to rest against a shelving gravel bank, in a pool formed by the roots of a weeping willow. I leaned out and caught a branch of the willow, and wrapped the painter round it.

I had thought we would return to River Run, but evidently this expedition had some point beyond respite. We had continued upriver instead, Jamie pulling strongly against the slow current.

Left alone with my thoughts, I could only listen to the faint hiss of his breath, and wonder what he would do. If he chose to stay … well, it might not be as difficult as he thought. I didn't underrate Jocasta Cameron, but neither did I underestimate Jamie Fraser. Both Colum and Dougal MacKenzie had tried to bend him to their will—and both had failed.

I had a moment's qualm at the memory of my last sight of Dougal MacKenzie, mouthing soundless curses as he drowned in his own blood, Jamie's dirk socketed at the base of his throat. *I am a violent man,* he'd said, *you know it.*

But he was still wrong; there was a difference between this man and Stephen Bonnet, I thought, watching the flex of his body on the oars, the grace and power of the sweep of his arms. He had several things beyond the honor that he claimed: kindness, courage … and a conscience.

I realized where we were going, as he backed with one oar, steering across the current toward the mouth of a wide creek, overhung with aspens. I had never approached by water before, but Jocasta had said it was not far.

I should not have been surprised; if he had come out tonight to confront his demons, it was a most appropriate place.

A little way above the creek mouth, the mill loomed dark and silent. There was a dim glow behind its bulk; light from the slave shanties near the woods. We were surrounded by the usual night noises, but the place seemed strangely quiet, in spite of the racket made by trees and frogs and water. Though it was night, the huge building seemed to cast a shadow—though this was plainly no more than my imagination.

"Places that are very busy in the daytime always seem particularly spooky at night," I said, in an effort to break the mill's silence.

"Do they?" Jamie sounded abstracted. "I didna much like that one in the daylight."

I shuddered at the memory.

"Neither did I. I only meant—"

"Byrnes is dead." He didn't look at me; his face was turned toward the mill, half-hidden by the willow's shadow.

I dropped the end of the tie rope.

"The overseer? When?" I said, shocked more by the abruptness than the revelation. "And how?"

"This afternoon. Campbell's youngest lad brought the news just before sunset."

"How?" I asked again. I gripped my knees, a double handful of ivory silk twisted in my fingers.

"It was the lockjaw." His voice was casual, unemphatic. "A verra nasty way to die."

He was right about that. I had never actually seen anyone die of tetanus myself, but I knew the symptoms well enough: restlessness and difficulty swallowing, developing into a progressive stiffening as the muscles of arms and legs and neck began to spasm. The spasms increased in severity and duration until the patient's body was hard as wood, arched in an agony that came on and receded, came on again, went off, and at last came on in an endless tetany that could not be relaxed by anything save death.

"He died grinnin', Ronnie Campbell said. But I shouldna think it was a happy death, forbye." It was a grim joke, but there was little humor in his voice.

I sat up quite straight, feeling cold all down my spine in spite of the warmth of the night.

"It isn't a quick death, either," I said. Suspicion spread cold tentacles through my mind. "It takes days to die of tetanus."

"It took Davie Byrnes five days, first to last." If there had been any trace of humor in his voice to start with, it was gone now.

"You saw him," I said, a small flicker of anger beginning to thaw the internal chill. "You saw him! And you didn't tell me?"

I had dressed Byrnes's injury—hideous, but not life-threatening—and had been told that he would be kept somewhere "safe" until the disturbance over the lynching had died down. Heartsick as I was over the matter, I had made no effort to inquire further after the overseer's whereabouts or welfare; it was my own guilt at this neglect that made me angry, and I knew it—but the knowledge didn't help.

"Could ye have done anything? I thought ye told me that the lockjaw was one of the things that couldna be helped, even in your time." He wasn't looking at me; I could see his profile turned toward the mill, head stamped in darker black against the lighter shadow of pale leaves.

I forced myself to let go of my skirt. I smoothed the crumpled patches over my knee, thinking dimly that Phaedre would have a terrible time ironing it.

"No," I said, with a little effort. "No, I couldn't have saved him. But I should have seen him; I might have eased him a little."

Now he did look at me; I saw his head turn, and felt the shifting of his weight in the boat.

"You might," he said evenly.

"And you wouldn't let me—" I stopped, remembering his absences this past week, and his evasive replies when I had asked him where he'd been. I could imagine the scene all too well; the tiny, stifling attic room in Farquard Campbell's house where I had dressed Byrnes's injury. The racked figure on the bed, dying by inches under the cold eyes of those the law had made his unwilling allies, knowing that he died despised. The sense of cold came back, raising gooseflesh on my arms.

"No, I wouldna let Campbell send for you," he said softly. "There's the law, Sassenach—and there is justice. I ken the difference well enough."

"There's such a thing as mercy, too." And had anyone asked, I would have called Jamie Fraser a merciful man. He had been, once. But the years between now and then had been hard ones—and compassion was a soft emotion, easily eroded by circumstance. I had thought he still had his kindness, though; and felt a queer pain at the thought of its loss. *I shouldna think so, no*. Had that been no more than honesty?

The boat had drifted halfway round, so that the drooping branch hung now between us. There was a small snort from the darkness behind the leaves.

"Blessed are the merciful," he said, "for they shall find mercy. Byrnes wasn't, and he didn't. And as for me, once God had made his opinion of the man known, I didna think it right to interfere."

"You think *God* gave him tetanus?"

"I canna think anyone else would have the imagination for it. Besides," he went on, logically, "where else would ye look for justice?"

I searched for words, and failed to find any. Giving up, I returned to the only possible point of argument. I felt a little sick.

"You ought to have told me. Even if you didn't think I could help, it wasn't your business to decide—"

"I didna want ye to go." His voice was still quiet, but there was a note of steel in it now.

"I know you didn't! But it doesn't matter whether you thought Byrnes deserved to suffer or—"

"Not for him!" The boat rocked suddenly as he moved, and I grasped the sides to keep my balance. He spoke violently.

"I didna care a fig whether Byrnes died easy or hard, but I'm no a monster of cruelty! I didna keep you from him to make him suffer; I kept ye away to protect you."

I was relieved to hear this, but increasingly angry as the truth of what he'd done dawned on me.

"It wasn't your business to decide that. If I'm not your conscience, it isn't up to you to be mine!" I brushed angrily at the screen of willow fronds between us, trying to see him.

Suddenly a hand shot through the leaves and grabbed my wrist.

"It's up to me to keep ye safe!"

I tried to jerk away, but he had a tight grip on me, and he wasn't letting go.

"I am not a young girl who needs protection, nor yet an idiot! If there's some reason for me not to do something, then tell me and I'll listen. But you can't decide what I'm to do and where I'm to go without even consulting me—I won't stand for that, and you bloody well know it!"

The boat lurched, and with a huge rustling of leaves, he popped his head through the willow, glaring.

“I am not trying to say where ye’ll go!”

“You decided where I *mustn’t* go, and that’s just as bad!” The willow leaves slid back over his shoulders as the boat moved, jarred by his violence, and we revolved slowly, coming out of the tree’s shadow.

He loomed in front of me, massive as the mill, his head and shoulders blotting out a good bit of the scenery behind him. The long, straight nose was an inch from mine, and his eyes had gone narrow. They were a dark enough blue to be black in this light, and looking into them at close range was most unnerving.

I blinked. He didn’t.

He had let go of my wrist when he came through the leaves. Now he took hold of my upper arms. I could feel the heat of his grip through the cloth. His hands were very big and very hard, making me suddenly aware of the fragility of my own bones in contrast. *I am a violent man.*

He’d shaken me a time or two before, and I hadn’t liked it. In case he had something of the sort in mind just now, I inserted a foot between his legs, and prepared to give him a swift knee where it would do most good.

“I was wrong,” he said.

Tensed for violence, I had actually started to jerk my foot up, when I heard what he had said. Before I could stop, he had clamped his legs tight together, trapping my knee between his thighs.

“I *said* I was wrong, Sassenach,” he repeated, a touch of impatience in his voice. “D’ye mind?”

“Ah … no,” I said, feeling a trifle sheepish. I wiggled my knee tentatively, but he kept his thighs squeezed tight together.

“You wouldn’t consider letting go of me, would you?” I said politely. My heart was still pounding.

“No, I wouldn’t. Are ye going to listen to me now?”

“I suppose so,” I said, still polite. “It doesn’t look as though I’m very busy at the moment.”

I was close enough to see his mouth twitch. His thighs squeezed tighter for a moment, then relaxed.

"This is a verra foolish quarrel, and you know that as well as I do."

"No, I don't." My anger had faded somewhat, but I wasn't about to let him dismiss it altogether. "It's maybe not important to you, but it is to me. It isn't foolish. And you know it, or you wouldn't be admitting you're wrong."

The twitch was more pronounced this time. He took a deep breath, and dropped his hands from my shoulders.

"Well, then. I should maybe have told ye about Byrnes; I admit it. But if I had, ye would have gone to him, even if I'd said it was the lockjaw—and I kent it was, I've seen it before. Even if there was nothing ye could do, you'd still go? No?"

"Yes. Even if—yes, I would have gone."

In fact, there was nothing I could have done for Byrnes. Myers's anesthetic wouldn't have helped a case of tetanus. Nothing short of injectable curare would ease those spasms. I could have given him nothing more than the comfort of my presence, and it was doubtful that he would have appreciated that—or even noticed it. Still, I would have felt bound to offer it.

"I would have had to go," I said, more gently. "I'm a doctor. Don't you see?"

"Of course I do," he said gruffly. "D'ye think I dinna ken ye at all, Sassenach?"

Without waiting for an answer, he went on.

"There was talk about what happened at the mill—there would be, aye? But with the man dying under your hands as he did—well, no one's said straight out that ye might have killed him on purpose … but it's easy to see folk thinkin' it. Not thinkin' that ye killed him, even—but only that ye might have thought to let him die on purpose, so as to save him from the rope."

I stared at my hands, spread out on my knees, nearly as pale as the ivory satin under them.

"I did think of it."

"I ken that fine, aye?" he said dryly. "I saw your face, Sassenach."

I drew a deep breath, if only to assure myself that the air was no longer thick with the smell of blood. There was nothing but the turpentine scent of the pine forest, clean and astringent in my nostrils. I had a sudden vivid memory of the hospital, of the smell of pine-scented disinfectant that hung in the air, that overlaid but could not banish the underlying smell of sickness.

I took another cleansing breath, and raised my head to look at Jamie.

"And did *you* wonder if I'd killed him?"

He looked faintly surprised.

"Ye would have done as ye thought best." He dismissed the minor question of whether I'd killed a man, in favor of the point at issue.

"But it didna seem wise for ye to preside over both deaths, if ye take my meaning."

I did, and not for the first time I was aware of the subtle networks of which he was a part, in a way I could never be. This place in its way was as strange to him as it was to me; and yet he knew not only what people were saying—anyone could find that out, who cared to haunt tavern and market—but what they were thinking.

What was more irritating was that he knew what *I* was thinking.

"So ye see," he said, watching me. "I kent Byrnes was sure to die, and ye couldna help. Yet if ye knew his trouble, ye'd surely go to him. And then he would die, and folk would maybe not say how strange it was, that both men had died under your hand, so to speak—but—"

"But they'd be thinking it," I finished for him.

The twitch grew into a crooked smile.

"Folk notice you, Sassenach."

I bit my lip. For good or for ill, they did, and the noticing had come close to killing me more than once.

He rose, and taking hold of a branch for balance, stepped out on the gravel and pulled the plaid up over his shoulder.

"I told Mrs. Byrnes I would fetch away her husband's things from the mill," he said. "Ye needna come, if ye dinna wish."

The mill loomed against the star-spattered sky. It couldn't have looked more sinister if it had tried. *Whither thou goest, I will go*.

I thought I knew now what he was doing. He had wanted to see it all, before making up his mind; see it with the knowledge that it might be his. Walking through the gardens and orchards, rowing past the acres of thick pines, visiting the mill—he was surveying the domain he was offered, weighing and evaluating, deciding what complications must be dealt with, and whether he could or would accept the challenge.

After all, I thought sourly, the Devil had insisted on showing Jesus everything He was passing up, taking Him up to the top of the Temple to gaze on the cities of the world. The only difficulty was that if Jamie decided to fling himself off, there wasn't a legion of angels standing by to stop him dashing his foot—and everything else—against a slab of Scottish granite.

Only me.

"Wait," I said, clambering out of the boat. "I'm coming, too."

The lumber was still stacked in the millyard; no one had moved any of it since the last time I had been here. The dark took away all sense of perspective; the stacks of fresh timber were pale rectangles that seemed to float above an invisible ground, first distant, then suddenly looming close enough to brush my skirts. The air smelt of pinesap and sawdust.

I couldn't see the ground under my own feet, for that matter, obscured as it was both by darkness and by my billowing ivory skirt. Jamie held my arm to keep me from stumbling. He never stumbled, of course. Perhaps living all his life without even the thought of light outside after sunset had given him some sort of radar, I thought; like a bat.

There was a fire burning, somewhere among the slave huts. It was very late; most would be sleeping. In the Indies, there would have been the nightlong sound of drums and keening; the slaves would have made lamentations for a fellow's death, a festival of mourning to last the week. Here, there was nothing. No sound save the pine trees' soughing, no flicker of movement save the faint light at the forest's edge.

“They are afraid,” Jamie said softly, pausing to listen to the silence, as I did.

“Little wonder,” I said, half under my breath. “So am I.”

He made a small huffing sound that might have been amusement.

“So am I,” he muttered, “but not of ghosts.” He took my arm and pushed open the small man-door at the side of the mill before I could ask what he *was* afraid of.

The silence inside had a body to it. At first I thought it like the eerie quiet of dead battlefields, but then I realized the difference. This silence was alive. And whatever lived in the silence here, it wasn’t lying quiet. I thought I could still smell the blood, thick on the air.

Then I breathed deeply and thought again, cold horror rippling up my spine. I *could* smell blood. Fresh blood.

I gripped Jamie’s arm, but he had smelled it himself; his arm had gone hard under my hand, muscles tensed in wariness. Without a word, he detached himself from my grip, and vanished.

For a moment, I thought he truly *had* vanished, and nearly panicked, groping for him, my hand closing on the empty air where he’d stood. Then I realized that he had merely flung the dark plaid over his head, instantly hiding the paleness of face and linen shirt. I heard his step, quick and light on the dirt floor, and then that was gone too.

The air was hot and still, and thick with blood. A rank, sweet smell, with a metal taste on the back of the tongue. Exactly the same as it had been a week ago, conjuring hallucination. Still in the grip of a cold grue, I swung around and strained my eyes toward the far side of the cavernous room, half expecting to see the scene engraved on my memory materialize again out of darkness. The rope stretched tight from the lumber crane, the huge hook swaying with its groaning burden …

A groan rent the air, and I nearly bit my lip in two. My throat swelled with a swallowed scream; only the fear of drawing something to me kept me silent.

Where was Jamie? I longed to call out for him, but didn’t dare. My eyes had grown enough accustomed to the dark to make out the shadow of the saw blade, an amorphous blob ten feet away, but the far side of the room was a wall of blackness. I strained my eyes to see, realizing belatedly that in my pale dress, I was undoubtedly visible to anyone in the room with me.

The groan came again, and I started convulsively. My palms were sweating. *It's not!* I told myself fiercely. *It isn't, it can't be!*

I was paralyzed with fear, and it took some moments for me to realize what my ears had told me. The sound hadn't come from the blackness across the room, where the crane stood with its hook. It had come from somewhere behind me.

I whirled. The door we had come through was still open, a pale rectangle in the pitch-black. Nothing showed, nothing moved between me and the door. I took a quick step toward it and stopped. Every muscle in my legs strained to run like hell—but I couldn't leave Jamie.

Again the sound, that same sobbing gasp of physical anguish; pain past the point of crying out. With it, a new thought popped into my mind; what if it was Jamie making the sound?

Shocked out of caution, I turned toward the sound and shouted his name, raising echoes from the roof high above.

"Jamie!" I cried again. "Where *are* you?"

"Here, Sassenach." Jamie's muffled voice came from somewhere to my left, calm but somehow urgent. "Come to me, will ye?"

It wasn't him. Nearly shaking with relief at the sound of his voice, I blundered through the dark, not caring now what had made the sound, as long as it wasn't Jamie.

My hand struck a wooden wall, groped blindly, and finally found a door, standing open. He was inside the overseer's quarters.

I stepped through the door, and felt the change at once. The air was even closer, and much hotter, than that in the mill proper. The floor here was of wood, but there was no echo to my step; the air was dead still, suffocating. And the smell of blood was even stronger.

"Where are you?" I called again, low-voiced this time.

"Here," came the reply, startlingly near at hand. "By the bed. Come and help me; it's a lass."

He was in the tiny bedroom. The small room was windowless, and lightless too. I found them by feel, Jamie kneeling on the wooden floor beside a narrow bed, and in the bed, a body.

It was a female, as he'd said; touch told me that at once. Touch told me also that she was exsanguinating. The cheek I brushed was cool and clammy. Everything else I touched was warm and wet; her clothing, the bedclothes, the mattress beneath her. I could feel wetness soaking through my skirt where I knelt on the floor.

I felt for a pulse in the throat and couldn't find it. The chest moved slightly under my hand, the only sign of life beyond the faint sigh that went with it.

"It's all right now," I heard myself saying, and my voice was soothing, all trace of panic gone, though in truth there was more reason for it now. "We're here, you're not alone. What's happened to you, can you tell me?"

All the time my hands were darting over head and throat and chest and stomach, pushing sodden clothes aside, searching blindly, frantically, for a wound to stanch. Nothing, no spurt of artery, no raw gash. And all the time, there was a faint but steady *pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat,* like the sound of tiny feet running.

"Tell …" It was not so much a word as the articulation of a sigh. Then a catch, a sobbing breath indrawn.

"Who has done this to ye, lass?" Jamie's disembodied voice came low and urgent. "Tell me, who?"

"Tell …"

I touched all the places where the great vessels lie close beneath the skin and found them whole. Seized her by an unresisting arm and lifted, thrust a hand beneath to feel her back. All the heat of her body was there; the bodice was damp with sweat, but not blood-soaked.

"It will be all right," I said again. "You're not alone. Jamie, hold her hand." Hopelessness came down on me; I knew what it must be.

"I already have it," he said to me, and "Dinna trouble, lass," to her. "It will be all right, d'ye hear me?" *Pit-a-pat, pit-a-pat.* The tiny feet were slowing.

"Tell …"

I could not help, but nonetheless slid my hand beneath her skirt again, this time letting my fingers curve between the limp splayed thighs. She was still warm here, very warm. Blood flowed gently over my hand and through my fingers, hot and wet as the air around us, unstoppable as the water that flowed down the mill's sluice.

"I … die …"

"I think ye are murdered, lass," Jamie said to her, very gently. "Will ye not say who has killed you?"

Her breath came louder now, a soft rattle in her throat. *Pit. Pat. Pit. Pat.* The feet were tiptoeing softly now.

"Ser … geant. Tell … him …"

I drew my hand out from between her thighs and took her other hand in mine, heedless of the blood. It scarcely mattered now, after all.

"… *tell* …" came with sudden intensity, and then silence. A long silence, and then, another long, sighing breath. A silence, even longer. And a breath.

"I will," said Jamie. His voice was no more than a whisper in the dark. "I will do it. I promise ye."

Pit.

Pat.

They called it the "death drop," in the Highlands; the sound of dripping water, heard in a house when one of the inhabitants was about to die. Not water dripping here, but a sure sign, nonetheless.

There was no more sound from the darkness. I couldn't see Jamie, but felt the slight movement of the bed against my thighs as he leaned forward.

"God will forgive ye," he whispered to the silence. "Go in peace."

* * *

I could hear the buzzing the moment we stepped into the overseer's quarters the next morning. In the huge, dusty silence of the mill, everything had been muffled in space and sawdust. But in this small, partitioned area the walls caught every sound and threw it back; our footsteps echoed from wooden floor to wooden ceiling. I felt like a fly sealed inside a snare drum, and suffered a moment's claustrophobia, trapped as I was in the narrow passage between the two men.

There were only two rooms, separated by a short passage that led from the outdoors into the mill proper. On our right lay the larger room that had served the Byrneses for living and cooking, and on the left, the smaller bedroom, from which the noise was coming. Jamie took a deep breath, clasped his plaid to his face, and pulled open the bedroom door.

It looked like a blanket covering the bed, a blanket of gunmetal blue sparked with green. Then Jamie took a step into the room and the flies rose buzzing from their clotted meal in a swarm of gluttonous protest.

I bit back a cry of abhorrence and ducked, flailing at them. Bloated, slow-moving bodies hit my face and arms and bounced away, circling lazily through the thick air. Farquard Campbell made a Scottish noise of overpowering disgust that sounded like "Heuch!" then lowered his head and pushed past me, eyes slitted and lips pressed tight together, nostrils pinched to whiteness.

The tiny bedroom was hardly bigger than the coffin it had become. There were no windows, only cracks between the boards that let in a dim uncertain light. The atmosphere was hot and humid as a tropical greenhouse, thick with the rotting-sweet smell of death. I could feel the sweat snaking down my sides, ticklish as flies' feet, and tried to breathe only through my mouth.

She had not been large; her body made only the slightest mound beneath the blanket we had laid over her the night before, for decency's sake. Her head seemed big by contrast to the shrunken body, like a child's stick figure with a round ball stuck on toothpick limbs.

Brushing away several flies too glutted to move, Jamie pulled back the blanket. The blanket, like everything else, was blotched and crusted, sodden at the foot. The human body, on average, contains eight pints of blood, but it seems a lot more when you spread it around.

I had seen her face briefly the night before, dead features lent an artificial glow by the light of the pine splinter Jamie held above her. Now she lay pallid and dank as a mushroom, blunt features emerging from a web of fine brown hair. It was impossible to tell her age, save that she was not old. Neither could I tell whether she had been attractive; there was no beauty of bone, but animation might have flushed the round cheeks and lent her deepset eyes a sparkle men might have found pretty. One man had, I thought. Pretty enough, anyway.

The men were murmuring together, bent over the still form. Mr. Campbell turned now to me, wearing a slight frown beneath his formal wig.

"You are reasonably sure, Mrs. Fraser, of the cause of death?"

"Yes." Trying not to breathe the fetid air, I picked up the edge of the blanket, and turned it back, exposing the corpse's legs. The feet were faintly blue and beginning to swell.

"I drew her skirt down, but I left everything else as it was," I explained, pulling it up again.

My stomach muscles tightened automatically as I touched her. I had seen dead bodies before, and this was far from the most gruesome, but the hot climate and closed atmosphere had prevented the body from cooling much; the flesh of her thigh was as warm as mine, but unpleasantly flaccid.

I had left it where we found it, in the bed between her legs. A kitchen skewer, more than a foot long. It was covered in dried blood as well, but clearly visible.

"I … um … found no wound on the body," I said, putting it as delicately as possible.

"Aye, I see." Mr. Campbell's frown seemed to lessen slightly. "Ah, well, at least 'tis likely not a case of deliberate murder, then."

I opened my mouth to reply, but caught a warning look from Jamie. Not noticing, Mr. Campbell went on.

"The question remains whether the poor woman will have done it herself, or met her death by the agency of another. What think ye, Mistress Fraser?"

Jamie narrowed his eyes at me over Campbell's shoulder, but the warning was unnecessary; we had discussed the matter last night, and come to our own conclusions—also to the conclusion that our opinions need not be shared with the forces of law and order in Cross Creek; not just yet. I pinched my nose slightly under pretext of the smell, in order to disguise any telltale alteration of my expression. I was a very bad liar.

"I'm sure she did it by herself," I said firmly. "It takes very little time to bleed to death in this manner, and as Jamie told you, she was still alive when we found her. We were outside the mill, talking, for some time before we came in; no one would have been able to leave without our seeing them."

On the other hand, a person might quite easily have hidden in the other room, and crept out quietly in the dark while we were occupied in comforting the dying woman. If this possibility did not occur to Mr. Campbell, I saw no reason to draw it to his attention.

Jamie had rearranged his features into an expression of gravity suitable to the occasion by the time Mr. Campbell turned back to him. The older man shook his head in regret.

"Ah, poor unfortunate lass! I suppose we can but be relieved that no one else has shared her sin."

"What about the man who fathered the child she was trying to get rid of?" I said, with a certain amount of acidity. Mr. Campbell looked startled, but pulled himself quickly back together.

"Um … quite so," he said, and coughed. "Though we do not know whether she were married—"

"So ye do not know the woman yourself, sir?" Jamie butted in before I could make any further injudicious remarks.

Campbell shook his head.

"She is not the servant of Mr. Buchanan or the MacNeills, I am sure. Nor Judge Alderdyce. Those are the only plantations near enough from which she might have walked. Though it does occur to me to wonder why she should have come to this particular place to perform such a desperate act …"

It had occurred to Jamie and me, too. To prevent Mr. Campbell's taking the next step in this line of inquiry, Jamie intervened again.

"She said verra little, but she did mention a 'Sergeant.' 'Tell the Sergeant' were her words. Do ye perhaps have a thought whom she might mean by that, sir?"

"I think there is an army sergeant in charge of the guard on the royal warehouse. Yes, I am sure of it." Mr. Campbell brightened slightly. "Ah! Nay doubt the woman was attached in some way to the military establishment. Depend upon it, that is the explanation. Though I still wonder why she—"

"Mr. Campbell, do pardon me—I'm afraid I'm feeling a bit faint," I interrupted, laying a hand on his sleeve. This was no lie; I hadn't slept or eaten. I felt light-headed from the heat and the smell, and I knew I must look pale.

"Will ye see my wife outside, sir?" Jamie said. He gestured toward the bed and its pathetic burden. "I'll bring the poor lass along as I may."

"Pray do not trouble yourself, Mr. Fraser," Campbell protested, already turning to usher me out. "My servant can fetch out the body."

"It is my aunt's mill, sir, and thus my concern." Jamie spoke politely, but firmly. "I shall attend to it."

Phaedre was waiting outside, by the wagon.

"I told you that place got haints," she said, surveying me with an air of grim satisfaction. "You white as ary sheet, ma'am." She handed me a flask of spiced wine, wrinkling her nose delicately in my direction.

"You smellin' worse than what you was last night, and you look like you come from a pig-killin' then. Sit you down in the shade here and drink that up; fix you up peart." She glanced over my shoulder. I looked back as well, and saw that Campbell had reached the shade of the sycamores by the creek bank, and was deep in conversation with his servant.

"Found her," Phaedre said at once, dropping her voice. Her eyes cut sideways, toward the small cluster of slave huts, barely visible from this side of the mill.

"You're sure? You didn't have much time." I took a mouthful of wine and held it, glad of the sharp bouquet that rose up the back of my throat, cleansing my palate of the taste of death.

Phaedre nodded, her glance moving to the men under the trees.

"Didn't need much. Walked down by them houses, saw one door hangin' open, little bits of trash scattered round like somebody done left in a hurry. I find a picanin' and ask him who livin' there, he tell me Pollyanne live there, but she gone now, he don't know where. Ask him when she leave, he say she there for supper last night, this morning she gone, nobody see her." Her eyes met mine, dark with questions. "Now you know, what you mean to do?"

A bloody good question, and one for which I had no answer at all. I swallowed the wine, and along with it, a rising sense of panic.

"All the slaves here must know she's gone; how long before anyone else finds out? Whose business will it be to know such things, now that Byrnes is dead?"

Phaedre raised one shoulder in a graceful shrug.

"Anybody come askin' find out right quick. But whose business it be to ask—" She nodded toward the mill. We had left the small door to the living quarters open; Jamie was coming out, a blanket-wrapped burden cradled in his arms.

"Reckon it's his," she said.

I am already part of it. He had known, even before the interrupted dinner party. With no formal announcement, with neither invitation nor acceptance of the role, he fit the place, the part, like a piece slipping into a jigsaw puzzle. Already he was the master of River Run—if he wanted to be.

Campbell's servant had come to help with the body; Jamie sank to one knee by the edge of the mill flume, surrendering his burden gently to the earth. I gave Phaedre back the flask, with a nod of thanks.

"Will you fetch the things from the wagon?"

Without a word, Phaedre went to get the things I had brought—a blanket, a bucket, clean rags, and a jar of herbs—while I went to join Jamie.

He was kneeling by the creek, washing his hands, a little way upstream from where the body lay. It was foolish to wash in preparation for what I was about to do, but habit was strong; I knelt beside him and dipped my hands as well, letting the cold fresh rush of water carry away the touch of clammy flesh.

“I was right,” I said to him, low-voiced. “It was a woman called Pollyanne; she’s run away in the night.”

He grimaced, rubbing his palms briskly together, and glanced over his shoulder. Campbell was standing over the corpse now, a slight frown of distaste still on his face.

Jamie scowled in concentration, gaze returning to his hands. “Well, that’ll put a cocked hat on it, aye?” He bent and splashed his face, then shook his head violently, flinging drops like a wet dog. Then he gave me a nod, and stood up, wiping his face with the end of his stained plaid.

“See to the lassie, aye, Sassenach?” He stalked purposefully toward Mr. Campbell, plaid swinging.

There was no use saving any of her clothes; I cut them off. Undressed, she looked to be in her twenties. Undernourished; ribs countable, arms and legs slender and pale as stripped branches. For all that, she was still surprisingly heavy, and the remnants of rigor mortis made her hard to handle. Phaedre and I were both sweating heavily before we finished, and strands of hair were escaping from the knot at my neck and pasting themselves to my flushed cheeks.

At least the heavy labor kept conversation to a minimum, leaving me in peace with my thoughts. Not that my thoughts were particularly peaceful.

A woman seeking to “slip a bairn,” as Jamie put it, would do it in her own room, her own bed, if she were doing it alone. The only reason for the stranger to have come to a remote place such as this was to meet the person who would do the office for her—a person who could not come to her.

We must look for a slave in the mill quarters, I had told him, one maybe with the reputation of a midwife, someone women would talk about among themselves, would recommend in whispers.

The fact that I had apparently been proved right gave me no satisfaction. The abortionist had fled, fearing that the woman would have told us who had done the deed. If she had stayed put and said nothing, Farquard Campbell might have taken my word for it that the woman must have done it herself—he could hardly prove otherwise. If anyone else found that the slave Pollyanne had run, though—and of course they would find out!—and she were caught and questioned, the whole matter would no doubt come out at once. And then what?

I shuddered, despite the heat. Did the law of bloodshed apply in this case? It certainly ought, I thought, grimly sluicing yet another bucket of water over the splayed white limbs, if quantity counted for anything.

Damn the woman, I thought, using irritation to cover a useless pity. I could do nothing for her now save try to tidy up the mess she had left—in every sense of the word. And perhaps try to save the other player in this tragedy; the hapless woman who had done murder unmeaning, in the guise of help, and who stood now to pay for that mistake with her own life.

Jamie had gotten the wine flask, I saw; he was passing it back and forth with Farquard Campbell, the two talking intently, occasionally turning to gesture at the mill or back toward the river or the town.

“You got anything I can comb her out with, ma’am?”

Phaedre’s question pulled my attention back to the job at hand. She was squatting by the body, fingering the tangled hair critically.

“Wouldn’t like to put her in the ground lookin’ like this, poor child,” she said, shaking her head.

I thought Phaedre was likely not much older than the dead woman—and in any case, it scarcely mattered that the corpse should go to its grave well-groomed. Still, I groped in my pocket and came up with a small ivory comb, with which Phaedre set to work, humming under her breath.

Mr. Campbell was taking his leave. I heard the creak of his team's harness, and their small stamping of anticipation as the groom settled himself. Mr. Campbell saw me and bowed deeply, hat held low. I sketched him a curtsy in return, and watched with relief as he drove away.

Phaedre, too, had stopped her work and was gazing after the departing carriage.

She said something under her breath, and spat in the dust. It was done without apparent malice; a charm against evil that I'd seen before. She looked up at me.

"Mister Jamie best find that Pollyanne afore sunset. Be wild animals in the piney wood, and Mister Ulysses say that woman worth two hundred pound when Miss Jocasta buy her. She don't know the woods, that Pollyanne; she be come straight from Africa, no more'n a year agone."

Without further comment, she bent her head over her task, fingers moving dark and quick as a spider among the fine silk of our corpse's hair.

I bent to my work as well, realizing with something of a shock that the web of circumstance that enmeshed Jamie had touched me, too. I did not stand outside, as I had thought, and could not if I wanted to.

Phaedre had helped me to find Pollyanne not because she trusted or liked me—but because I was the master's wife. Pollyanne must be found and hidden. And Jamie, she thought, would of course find Pollyanne and hide her—she was his property; or Jocasta's, which in Phaedre's eyes would amount to the same thing.

At last, the stranger lay clean, on the worn linen sheet I had brought for a shroud. Phaedre had combed her hair and braided it; I took up the big stone jar of herbs. I had brought them as much from habit as from reason, but now was glad of them; not so much for aid against the progress of decomposition, but as the sole—and necessary—touch of ceremony.

It was difficult to reconcile this clumsy, reeking lump of clay with the small, cold hand that had grasped mine; with the anguished whisper that had breathed "Tell …" in the smothering dark. And yet there was the memory of her, of the last of her living blood spilling hot in my hand, more vivid in my mind than this sight of her empty flesh, naked in the hands of strangers.

There was no minister nearer than Halifax; she would be buried without rites—and yet, what need had she of rites? Funeral rituals are for the comfort of the bereaved. It was unlikely that she had left anyone behind to grieve, I thought; for if she had had anyone so close to her—family, husband, or even lover—I thought she would not now be dead.

I had not known her, would not miss her—but I grieved her; her and her child. And so for myself, rather than for her, I knelt by her body and scattered herbs: fragrant and bitter, leaves of rue and hyssop flowers, rosemary, thyme and lavender. A bouquet from the living to the dead—small token of remembrance.

Phaedre watched in silence, kneeling. Then she reached out and with gentle fingers, laid the shroud across the girl's dead face. Jamie had come to watch. Without a word, he stooped and picked her up, and bore her to the wagon.

He didn't speak until I had climbed up and settled myself on the seat beside him. He snapped the reins on the horses' backs, and clicked his tongue.

"Let us go and find the Sergeant," he said.

* * *

There were, of course, a few things to be attended to first. We returned to River Run to leave Phaedre, and Jamie disappeared to find Duncan and change his stained clothing, while I went to check on my patient and to acquaint Jocasta with the morning's events.

I needn't have troubled on either account; Farquard Campbell was sitting in the morning room sipping tea with Jocasta. John Myers, his loins swathed in a Cameron plaid, was lounging at full length upon the green velvet chaise, cheerfully munching scones. Judging from the unaccustomed cleanliness of the bare legs and feet extending from the tartan, someone had taken advantage of his temporary state of unconsciousness the night before to administer a bath.

"My dear." Jocasta's head turned at my step, and she smiled, though I saw the twin lines of concern etched between her brows. "Sit you down, child, and take some nourishment; ye will have had no rest last night—and a dreadful morning, it seems."

I might ordinarily have found it either amusing or insulting to be called "child;" under the circumstances, it was oddly comforting. I sank gratefully into an armchair, and let Ulysses pour me a cup of tea, wondering meanwhile just how much Farquard had told Jocasta—and how much he knew.

"How are you this morning?" I asked my patient. He appeared to be in amazingly good condition, considering his alcoholic intake of the night before. His color was good, and so was his appetite, judging from the quantity of crumbs on the plate by his side.

He nodded cordially at me, jaws champing, and swallowed with some effort.

"Astounding fine, ma'am, I thank ye kindly. A mite sore round the privates"—he tenderly patted the area in question—"but a sweeter job of stitchin' I've not been privileged to see. Mr. Ulysses was kind enough to fetch me a lookin' glass," he explained. He shook his head in some awe. "Never seen my own behind before; as much hair as I got back there, ye'd think my daddy'd been a bear!"

He laughed heartily at this, and Farquard Campbell buried a smile in his teacup. Ulysses turned away with the tray, but I saw the corner of his mouth twitch.

Jocasta laughed out loud, blind eyes crinkling in amusement.

"They do say it's a wise bairn that kens its father, John Quincy. But I kent your mother weel, and I'll say I think it unlikely."

Myers shook his head, but his eyes twinkled over the thick growth of beard.

"Well, my mama did admire a hairy man. Said it was a rare comfort on a cold winter's night." He peered down the open neck of his shirt, viewing the underbrush on display with some satisfaction. "Might be so, at that. The Indian lassies seem to like it—though it's maybe only the novelty, come to think on it. Their own men scarcely got fuzz on their balls, let alone their backsides."

Mr. Campbell inhaled a fragment of scone, and coughed heavily into his napkin. I smiled to myself and took a deep swallow of tea. It was a strong and fragrant Indian blend, and despite the oppressive heat of the morning, more than welcome. A light dew of sweat broke out on my face as I drank, but the warmth settled comfortingly into my uneasy stomach, the perfume of the tea driving the stench of blood and excreta from my nose, even as the cheerful conversation banished the morbid scenes of the morning from my mind.

I eyed the hearth rug wistfully. I felt as though I could lie down there peacefully and sleep for a week. No rest for the weary, though.

Jamie came in, freshly shaved and combed, dressed in sober coat and clean linen. He nodded to Farquard Campbell with no apparent surprise; he must have heard his voice from the hallway.

"Auntie." He bent and kissed Jocasta's cheek in greeting, then smiled at Myers.

"How is it, *a charaid*? Or shall I say, how are they?"

"Right as rain," Myers assured him. He cupped a hand consideringly between his legs. "Think I might wait a day or two before I climb back on a horse, though."

"I would," Jamie assured him. He turned back to Jocasta. "Have ye maybe seen Duncan this morning, Auntie?"

"Oh, aye. He's gone a small errand for me, he and the laddie." She smiled and reached for him; I saw her fingers wrap tight around his wrist. "Such a dear man, Mr. Innes. So helpful. And such a quick, canny man; a real pleasure to talk to. Do ye not find him so, Nephew?"

Jamie glanced at her curiously, then his gaze flicked to Farquard Campbell. The older man avoided his eye, sipping at his tea as he affected to study the large painting that hung above the mantel.

"Indeed," Jamie said dryly. "A useful man, is Duncan. And Young Ian's gone with him?"

"To fetch a bittie package for me," his aunt said placidly. "Did ye need Duncan directly?"

“No,” Jamie said slowly, staring down at her. “It can wait.”

Her fingers slipped free of his sleeve, and she reached for her teacup. The delicate handle was angled precisely toward her, ready for her hand.

“That’s good,” she said. “Ye’ll have a bite of breakfast, then? And Farquard—another scone?”

“Ah, no, *Cha ghabh mi ’n còrr, tapa leibh*. I’ve business in the town, and best I be about it.” Campbell set down his cup and got to his feet, bowing to me and to Jocasta in turn. “Your servant, ladies. Mr. Fraser,” he added, with a lift of one brow, and bowing, he followed Ulysses out.

Jamie sat down, his own brows raised, and reached for a piece of toast.

“Your errand, Aunt—Duncan’s gone to find the slave woman?”

“He has.” Jocasta turned her blind eyes toward him, frowning. “You’ll not mind, Jamie? I ken Duncan’s your man, but it seemed an urgent matter; and I couldna be sure when you’d come.”

“What did Campbell tell ye?” I could tell what Jamie was thinking; it seemed out of character for the upright and rigid Mr. Campbell, justice of the district, who would not stir a hand to prevent a gruesome lynching, to conspire for the protection of a female slave, and an abortionist to boot. And yet—perhaps he meant it as compensation for what he had not been able to prevent before.

The handsome shoulders moved in the slightest of shrugs, and a muscle dipped near the corner of her mouth.

“I’ve kent Farquard Campbell these twenty years, *a mhic mo pheathar*. I hear what he doesna say better than what he does.”

Myers had been following this exchange with interest.

“Couldn’t say as my own ears are that good,” he observed mildly. “All I heard him say was how some poor woman kilt herself by accident, up to the mill, tryin’ to rid herself of a burden. He said he didn’t know her, himself.” He smiled blandly at me.

“And that alone tells me the lass is a stranger,” Jocasta observed. “Farquard knows the folk on the river and in the town as well as I ken my own folk. She is no one’s daughter, no one’s servant.”

She set down her cup and leaned back in her chair with a sigh.

"It will be all right," she said. "Eat up your food, lad; ye must be starving."

Jamie stared at her for a moment, the piece of toast uneaten in his hand. He leaned forward and dropped it back on the plate.

"I canna say I've much appetite just now, Auntie. Dead lassies curdle my wame a bit." He stood up, brushing down the skirts of his coat.

"She's maybe no one's daughter or servant—but she's lyin' in the yard just now, drawing flies. I'd have a name for her before I bury her." He turned on his heel and stalked out.

I drained the last of my tea and set the cup back with a faint chime of bone china.

"Sorry," I said apologetically. "I don't believe I'm hungry, either."

Jocasta neither moved nor changed expression. As I left the room I saw Myers lean over from his chaise and neatly snag the last of the scones.

* * *

It was nearly noon before we reached the Crown's warehouse at the end of Hay Street. It stood on the north side of the river, with its own pier for loading, a little way above the town itself. There seemed little necessity for a guard at the moment; nothing moved in the vicinity of the building save a few sulphur butterflies who, unaffected by the smothering heat, were diligently laboring among the flowering bushes that grew thick along the shore.

"What do they keep here?" I asked Jamie, looking curiously up at the massive structure. The huge double doors were shut and bolted, the single red-coated sentry motionless as a tin soldier in front of them. A smaller building beside the warehouse sported an English flag, drooping limply in the heat; presumably this was the lair of the sergeant we were seeking.

Jamie shrugged and brushed a questing fly away from his eyebrow. We had been attracting more and more of them as the heat of the day increased, despite the movement of the wagon. I sniffed discreetly, but could smell only a faint hint of thyme.

"Whatever the Crown thinks valuable. Furs from the backcountry, naval stores—pitch and turpentine. But the guard is because of the liquor."

While every inn brewed its own beer, and every household had its receipts for applejack and cherry-wine, the more potent spirits were the province of the Crown: brandy, whisky, and rum were imported to the colony in small quantities under heavy guard, and sold at great cost under the Crown's seal.

"I should say they haven't got much in stock right now," I said, nodding at the single guard.

"No, the shipments of liquor come upstream from Wilmington once a month. Campbell says they choose a different day each time, so as to run less risk of robbery."

He spoke abstractedly, a small frown lingering between his eyebrows.

"Did Campbell believe us, do you think? About her doing it herself?" Without really meaning to, I cast a half glance into the wagon behind me.

Jamie made a derisory Scottish noise in the back of his throat.

"Of course not, Sassenach; the man's no a fool. But he's a good friend to my aunt; he'll not make trouble if he doesn't have to. Let's hope the woman had no one who'll make a fuss."

"Rather a cold-blooded hope," I said quietly. "I thought you felt differently, in your aunt's drawing room. You're probably right, though; if she'd had someone, she wouldn't be dead now."

He heard the bitterness in my voice, and looked down at me.

"I dinna mean to be callous, Sassenach," he said gently. "But the poor lassie *is* dead. I canna do more for her than see her decently into the ground; it's the living I must take heed for, aye?"

I heaved a sigh and squeezed his arm briefly. My feelings were a good deal too complex to try to explain; I had known the girl no more than minutes before her death, and could in no way have prevented it—but she had died under my hands, and I felt the physician's futile rage in such circumstances; the feeling that somehow I had failed, had been outwitted by the Dark Angel. And beyond rage and pity, was an echo of unspoken guilt; the girl was near Brianna's age—Brianna, who in like circumstances would also have no one.

"I know. It's only … I suppose I feel responsible for her, in a way."

"So do I," he said. "Never fear, Sassenach; we'll see she's done rightly by." He reined the horses in under a chestnut tree, and swung down, offering me a hand.

There were no barracks; Campbell had told Jamie that the warehouse guard's ten men were quartered in various houses in the town. Upon inquiry of the clerk laboring in the office, we were directed across the street to the sign of the Golden Goose, wherein the Sergeant might presently be found at his luncheon.

I saw the Sergeant in question at once as I entered the tavern; he was sitting at a table by the window, his white leather stock undone and his tunic unbuttoned, looking thoroughly relaxed over a mug of ale and the remains of a Cornish pasty. Jamie came in behind me, his shadow momentarily blocking the light from the open door, and the Sergeant looked up.

Dim as it was in the taproom, I could see the man's face go blank with shock. Jamie came to an abrupt halt behind me. He said something in Gaelic under his breath that I recognized as a vicious obscenity, but then he was moving forward past me, with no sign of hesitation in his manner.

"Sergeant Murchison," he said, in tones of mild surprise, as one might greet a casual acquaintance. "I hadna thought to lay eyes on you again—not in this world, at least."

The Sergeant's expression strongly suggested that the feeling had been mutual. Also that any meeting this side of heaven was too soon. Blood flooded his beefy, pockmarked cheeks with red, and he shoved back his bench with a screech of wood on the sanded floor.

"You!" he said.

Jamie took off his hat and inclined his head politely.

"Your servant, sir," he said. I could see his face now, outwardly pleasant, but with a wariness that creased the corners of his eyes. He showed it a good deal less, but the Sergeant wasn't the only one to be taken aback.

Murchison was regaining his self-possession; the look of shock was replaced by a faint sneer.

"Fraser. Oh, beg pardon, *Mr*. Fraser, it will be now, won't it?"

"It will." Jamie kept his voice neutral, despite the insulting tone of this. Whatever past conflict lay between them, the last thing he wanted now was trouble. Not with what lay in the wagon outside. I wiped my sweaty palms surreptitiously on my skirt.

The Sergeant had begun to do up his tunic buttons, slowly, not taking his eyes off Jamie.

"I had heard there was a man called Fraser, come to leech off Mistress Cameron at River Run," he said, with an unpleasant twist of thick lips. "That'll be you, will it?"

The wariness in Jamie's eyes froze into a blue as cold as glacier ice, though his lips stayed curved in a pleasant smile.

"Mistress Cameron will be my kinswoman. It is on her behalf that I have come now."

The Sergeant tilted back his head and scratched voluptuously at his throat. There was a deep, hard-edged red crease across the expanse of fat pale flesh, as though someone had tried unsuccessfully to garrote the man.

"Your kinswoman. Well, easy to say so, ain't it? The lady's blind as a bat, I hear. No husband, no sons; fair prey for any sharpster comes a-calling, claiming family." The sergeant lowered his head and smirked at me, his self-possession fully restored.

"And this'll be your doxy, will it?" It was gratuitous malice, a shot at random; the man had scarcely glanced at me.

"This will be my wife, Mistress Fraser."

I could see the two stiff fingers of Jamie's right hand twitch once against the skirt of his coat, the only outward sign of his feelings. He tilted his head back an inch and raised his brows, considering the Sergeant with an air of dispassionate interest.

"And which one are you, sir? I beg pardon for my imperfect recollection, but I confess that I cannot tell you from your brother."

The Sergeant stopped as though he had been shot, frozen in the act of fastening his stock.

"Damn you!" he said, choking on the words. His face had gone an unhealthy shade of plum, and I thought that he ought really to mind his blood pressure. I didn't say so, though.

At this point, the Sergeant seemed to notice that everyone in the taproom was staring at him with great interest. He glared ferociously around him, snatched up his hat, and stamped toward the door, pushing past me as he went, so that I staggered back a pace.

Jamie grabbed my arm to steady me, then ducked beneath the lintel himself. I followed, in time to see him call after the Sergeant.

"Murchison! A word with you!"

The soldier whirled on his heel, hands fisted against the skirts of his scarlet coat. He was a good-sized man, thick through torso and shoulder, and the uniform became him. His eyes glittered with menace, but he had gained possession of himself again.

"A word, is it?" he said. "And what might you have to say to me, *Mister* Fraser?"

"A word in your professional capacity, Sergeant," Jamie said coolly. He nodded toward the wagon, which we had left beneath a nearby tree. "We've brought ye a corpse."

For the second time, the Sergeant's face went blank. He glanced at the wagon; flies and gnats had begun to gather in small clouds, circling lazily over the open bed.

"Indeed." He *was* a professional; while the hostility of his manner was undiminished, the hot blood faded from his face, and the clenched fists relaxed.

"A corpse? Whose?"

"I have no idea, sir. It was my hope that you might be able to tell us. Will ye look?" He nodded toward the wagon, and after a moment's hesitation, the Sergeant nodded briefly back, and strode toward the wagon.

I hurried after Jamie, and was in time to see the Sergeant's face as he drew back the corner of the makeshift shroud. He had no skill at all in hiding his feelings—perhaps in his profession it wasn't necessary. Shock flickered over his face like summer lightning.

Jamie, could see the Sergeant's face as well as I.

"Ye'll know her, then?" he said.

"I—she—that is … yes, I know her." The Sergeant's mouth snapped shut abruptly, as though he was afraid to let any more words out. He continued to stare at the girl's dead face, his own tightening, freezing out all feeling.

A few men had followed us out of the tavern. While they stayed at a discreet distance, two or three were craning their necks with curiosity. It wasn't going to be long before the whole district knew what had happened at the mill. I hoped Duncan and Ian were well on their way.

"What has happened to her?" the Sergeant asked, staring down at the fixed white face. His own was nearly as pale.

Jamie was watching him intently, and making no pretense otherwise.

"You'll know her, then?" he said again.

"She is—she was—a laundress. Lissa—Lissa Garver is her name." The Sergeant spoke mechanically, still looking down into the wagon as though unable to tear his eyes away. His face was expressionless but his lips were white, and his hands were clenched into fists at his sides. "What happened?"

"Has she people in the town? A husband, maybe?"

It was a reasonable question, but Murchison's head jerked up as though Jamie had stabbed him with it.

"None of your concern, is it?" he said. He stared at Jamie, a thin rim of white visible around the iris of his eye. He bared his teeth in what might have been politeness, but wasn't. "Tell me what happened to her."

Jamie's eyes met the Sergeant's without blinking.

"She meant to slip a bairn, and it went wrong," he said quietly. "If she has a husband, he must be told. If not—if she has no people—I will see her decently buried."

Murchison turned his head to look down into the wagon once more.

"She has someone," he said shortly. "You need not trouble yourself." He turned away, and rubbed a hand over his face, scrubbing violently as though to wipe away all feeling. "Go to my office," he said, voice half muffled. "You must make a statement—see the clerk. Go!"

* * *

The office was empty, the clerk no doubt gone in search of his own luncheon. I sat down to wait, but Jamie prowled restlessly around the small room, eyes flitting from the regimental banners on the wall to the drawered cabinet in the corner behind the desk.

"Damn the luck," he said, half to himself. "It would have to be Murchison."

"I take it you know the Sergeant well?"

He glanced at me with a wry quirk of the lips.

"Well enough. He was in the garrison at Ardsmuir prison."

"I see." No love lost between them, then. It was close in the little office; I blotted a trickle of sweat that ran down between my breasts. "What do you suppose he's doing here?"

"That much I ken; he was sent in charge of the prisoners when they were transported to be sold. I imagine the Crown saw no good reason to bring him back to England, when there was need of soldiers here—that would have been during the war wi' the French, aye?"

"What was that business about his brother?"

He snorted, a brief, humorless sound.

"There were two o' them—twins. Wee Billy and Wee Bobby, we called them. Alike as peas, and not only in looks."

He paused, marshaling memories. He didn't often speak of his time in Ardsmuir, and I could see the shadows of it pass across his face.

"Ye'll maybe know the sort of man is decent enough on his own, but get him wi' others like him, and they might as well be wolves?"

"Bit hard on the wolves," I said, smiling. "Think of Rollo. But yes, I know what you mean."

"Pigs, then. But beasts, when they're together. There's no lack of such men in any army; it's why armies work—men will do terrible things in a mob, that they wouldna dream of on their own."

"And the Murchisons were never on their own?" I asked slowly.

He gave me a slight nod of acknowledgment.

"Aye, that's it. There were the two of them, always. And what one might scruple at, the other would not. And of course, when it came to trouble—why, there was no saying which was to blame, was there?"

He was still prowling, restless as a caged panther. He paused by the window, looking out.

"I—the prisoners—we might complain of ill-treatment, but the officers couldna discipline both for the sins of one, and a man seldom knew which Murchison it was that had him on the ground wi' a boot in the ribs, or which it was that hung him from a hook by his fetters and left him so until he'd soil himself for the amusement of the garrison."

His eyes were fixed on something outside, his expression unguarded. He'd spoken of beasts; I could see that the memories had roused one. His eyes caught the light from the window, gem-blue and unblinking.

"Are both of them here?" I asked, as much to break that unnerving stare as because I wanted to know.

It worked; he turned abruptly from the window.

"No," he said, shortly. "This is Billy. Wee Bobby died at Ardsmuir." His two stiff fingers twitched against the fabric of his kilt.

It had occurred to me briefly to wonder why he had worn his kilt this morning, instead of changing to breeks; the crimson tartan might be quite literally a red flag to a bull, flaunted thus before an English soldier. Now I knew.

They'd taken it from him once before, thinking to take with it pride and manhood. They had failed in that attempt, and he meant to underscore that failure, whether it was sense to do so or not. Sense had little to do with the sort of stubborn pride that could survive years of such insult—and while he had more than his share of both, I could see that pride was well in the ascendancy at present.

"From the Sergeant's reactions, I suppose we may assume it wasn't natural causes?" I asked.

"No," he said. He sighed and shrugged his shoulders slightly, easing them inside the tight coat.

"They marched us out to the stone quarry each morning, and back again at twilight, wi' two or three guards to each wagon. One day, Wee Bobby Murchison was the sergeant in charge. He came out wi' us in the morning—but he didna come back with us at night." He glanced once more at the window. "There was a verra deep pool at the bottom of the quarry."

His matter-of-fact tone was nearly as chilling as the content of this bald account. I felt a small shiver pass up my spine, in spite of the stifling heat.

"Did you—" I began, but he put a finger to his lips, jerking his head toward the door. A moment later, I heard the footsteps that his keener ears had picked up.

It was the Sergeant, not his clerk. He had been perspiring heavily; streaks of sweat ran down his face beneath his wig, and his whole countenance was the unhealthy color of fresh beef liver.

He glanced at the vacant desk, and made a small, vicious noise in his throat. I felt a qualm on behalf of the absent clerk. The Sergeant shoved aside the clutter on the desk with a sweep of his arm that sent paper cascading onto the floor.

He snatched a pewter inkwell and a sheet of foolscap from the rubble, and banged them down on the desk.

"Write it down," he ordered. "Where you found her, what happened." He thrust a spattered goose-quill at Jamie. "Sign it, date it."

Jamie stared at him, eyes narrowed, but made no move to take the quill. I felt a sudden sinking in my belly.

Jamie was left-handed but had been taught forcibly to write with his right hand, and then had that right hand crippled. Writing, for him, was a slow, laborious business that left the pages blotted, sweat-stained, and crumpled, and the writer himself in no better case. There was no power on earth that would make him humiliate himself in that fashion before the Sergeant.

"Write. It. Down." The Sergeant bit off the words between his teeth.

Jamie's eyes narrowed further, but before he could speak, I reached out and snatched the pen from the Sergeant's grasp.

"I was there; let me do it."

Jamie's hand closed on mine before I could dip the quill in the inkwell. He plucked the pen from my fingers and dropped it in the center of the desk.

"Your clerk can wait upon me later, at my aunt's house," he said briefly to Murchison. "Come with me, Claire."

Not waiting for an answer from the Sergeant, he grasped my elbow and all but pulled me to my feet. We were outside before I knew what had happened. The wagon still stood under the tree, but now it was empty.

"Well, she's safe for the moment, *Mac Dubh,* but what in hell shall we do with the woman?" Duncan scratched at the stubble on his chin; he and Ian had spent three days in the forest, searching, before finding the slave Pollyanne.

"She'll no be easy to move," Ian put in, snaring a piece of bacon off the breakfast table. He broke it in half, and handed one piece to Rollo. "The poor lady near died of terror when Rollo sniffed her out, and we had God's own time gettin' her on her feet. We couldna get her on a horse at all; I had to walk with my arm around her, to keep her from fallin' down."

"We must get her clear away, somehow." Jocasta frowned, blank eyes half hooded in thought. "Yon Murchison was at the mill again yesterday morning, making a nuisance of himself, and last night, Farquard Campbell sent to tell me that the man has declared it was murder, and he's called for men to search the district for the slave who did it. Farquard's sae hot under his collar, I thought his head would burst into flame."

"Do ye think she *could* have done it?" Chewing, Ian looked from Jamie to me. "By accident, I mean?"

In spite of the hot morning, I shuddered, feeling in memory the unyielding stiffness of the metal skewer in my hand.

"You have three possibilities: accident, murder, or suicide," I said. "There are *lots* easier ways of committing suicide, believe me. And no motive for murder, that we know of."

"Be that as it may," Jamie said, neatly fielding the conversation, "if Murchison takes the slave woman, he'll have her hanged or flogged to death within a day. He's no need of trial. No, we must take her clear out of the district. I've arranged it with our friend Myers."

"You've arranged *what* with Myers?" Jocasta asked sharply, her voice cutting through the babble of exclamations and questions that greeted this announcement.

Jamie finished buttering the piece of toast that he held, and handed it to Duncan before speaking.

"We shall take the woman into the mountains," he said. "Myers says she'll be welcome among the Indians; he kens a good place for her, he says. And she'll be safe there from Wee Billy Murchison."

"We?" I asked politely. "And who's *we*?"

He grinned at me in reply.

"Myers and myself, Sassenach. I need to go to the backcountry to have a look before the cold weather comes, and this will be a good chance. Myers is the best guide I could have."

He carefully refrained from noting that it might be as well for *him* to be temporarily out of Sergeant Murchison's sphere of influence, but the implication was not lost on me.

"Ye'll take me, will ye not, Uncle?" Ian brushed the matted hair out of his face, looking eager. "Ye'll need help wi' that woman, believe me—she's the size of a molasses barrel."

Jamie smiled at his nephew.

"Aye, Ian. I expect we can use another man along."

"Ahem," I said, giving him an evil stare.

"To keep an eye on your auntie, if nothing else," Jamie continued, giving the stare back to me. "We leave in three days, Sassenach—if Myers can sit a horse by then."

Three days didn't allow much time, but with the assistance of Myers and Phaedre, my preparations were completed with hours to spare. I had a small traveling box of medicines and tools, and the saddlebags were packed with food, blankets, and cooking implements. The only small matter remaining was that of attire.

I recrossed the ends of the long silk strip across my chest, tied the ends in a jaunty knot between my breasts, and examined the results in the looking glass.

Not bad. I extended my arms and jiggled my torso from side to side, testing. Yes, that would do. Though perhaps if I took one more turn around my chest before crossing the ends …

"What, exactly, are ye doing, Sassenach? And what in the name of God are ye wearing?" Jamie, arms crossed, was leaning against the door, watching me with both brows raised.

"I am improvising a brassiere," I said with dignity. "I don't mean to ride sidesaddle through the mountains wearing a dress, and if I'm not wearing stays, I don't mean my breasts to be joggling all the way, either. Most uncomfortable, joggling."

"I daresay." He edged into the room and circled me at a cautious distance, eyeing my nether limbs with interest. "And what are *those*?"

"Like them?" I put my hands on my hips, modeling the drawstring leather trousers that Phaedre had constructed for me—laughing hysterically as she did so—from soft buckskin provided by one of Myers's friends in Cross Creek.

"No," he said bluntly. "Ye canna be going about in—in—" He waved at them, speechless.

"Trousers," I said. "And of course I can. I wore trousers all the time, back in Boston. They're very practical."

He looked at me in silence for a moment. Then, very slowly, he walked around me. At last, his voice came from behind me.

"Ye wore them outside?" he said, in tones of incredulity. "Where folk could see ye?"

"I did," I said crossly. "So did most other women. Why not?"

“Why *not*?” he said, scandalized. “I can see the whole shape of your buttocks, for God’s sake, and the cleft between!”

“I can see yours, too,” I pointed out, turning around to face him. “I’ve been looking at your backside in breeks every day for months, but only occasionally does the sight move me to make indecent advances on your person.”

His mouth twitched, undecided whether to laugh or not. Taking advantage of the indecision, I took a step forward and put my arms around his waist, firmly cupping his backside.

“Actually, it’s your kilt that makes me want to fling you to the floor and commit ravishment,” I told him. “But you don’t look at all bad in your breeks.”

He did laugh then, and bending, kissed me thoroughly, his hands carefully exploring the outlines of my rear, snugly confined in buckskin. He squeezed gently, making me squirm against him.

“Take them off,” he said, pausing for air.

“But I—”

“Take them off,” he repeated firmly. He stepped back and tugged loose the lacing of his flies. “Ye can put them back on again after, Sassenach, but if there’s flinging and ravishing to be done, it’ll be me that does it, aye?”

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PART FIVE

Strawberry Fields Forever

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14

FLEE FROM WRATH TO COME

August 1767

They had hidden the woman in a tobacco shed on the edge of Farquard Campbell's furthest fields. There was little chance of anyone noticing—other than Campbell's slaves, who already knew—but we took care to arrive just after dark, when the lavender sky had faded nearly to gray, barely outlining the dark bulk of the drying shed.

The woman slid out like a ghost, cloaked and hooded, and was hoisted onto the extra horse, bundled hastily aboard like the package of contraband she was. She drew up her legs and clung to the saddle with both hands, doubled up in a ball of panic; evidently she'd never been on a horse before.

Myers tried to hand her the reins, but she paid no attention, only clung tight and moaned in a sort of melodic agony of terror. The men were becoming restive, glancing over their shoulders into the empty fields, as though expecting the imminent arrival of Sergeant Murchison and his minions.

"Let her ride with me," I suggested. "Maybe she'll feel safer that way."

The woman was detached from her mount with some difficulty and set down on the horse's rump behind my saddle. She smelt strongly of fresh tobacco leaves, pungently narcotic, and something else, a little muskier. She at once flung her arms around my waist, holding on for dear life. I patted one of the hands clutched about my middle, and she squeezed tighter, but made no other move or sound.

Little wonder if she was terrified, I thought, turning my horse's head to follow Myers's. She might not know about the hullabaloo Murchison was raising in the district, but she could have no illusions about what might happen if she was caught; she had certainly been among the crowd at the sawmill two weeks earlier.

As an alternative to certain death, flight into the arms of red savages might be slightly preferable, but not by much, to judge from her trembling; the weather was far from cold, but she shook as though with chill.

She nearly squeezed the stuffings out of me when Rollo appeared, stalking out of the bushes like some demon of the forest. My horse didn't like the look of him, either, and backed up, snorting and stamping, trying to jerk the reins away from me.

I had to admit that Rollo was reasonably fearsome, even when he was in an amiable mood, which he was, at the moment—Rollo loved expeditions. Still, he undoubtedly presented a sinister aspect; all his teeth were showing in a grin of delight, his slitted eyes half closed as he whiffed the air. Add to that the way the grays and blacks of his coat faded into the shadows, and one was left with the queer and unsettling illusion that he had materialized out of the substance of the night, Appetite incarnate.

He trotted directly past us, no more than a foot away, and the woman gasped, her breath hot on my neck. I patted her hand again, and spoke to her, but she made no answer. Duncan had said she was Africa-born and spoke little English, but surely she must understand a few words.

"It will be all right," I said again. "Don't be afraid."

Occupied with horse and passenger, I hadn't noticed Jamie, until he appeared suddenly by my stirrup, light-footed as Rollo.

"All right, Sassenach?" he asked softly, putting a hand on my thigh.

"I think so," I said. I nodded at the death-grip round my middle. "If I don't die of suffocation."

He looked, and smiled.

“Well, she’s in no danger of fallin’ off, at least.”

“I wish I knew something to say to her; poor thing, she’s so afraid. Do you suppose she even knows where we’re taking her?”

“I shouldna think so—*I* dinna ken where we’re going.” He wore breeks for riding, but had his plaid belted over them, the free end slung across the shoulder of his coat. The dark tartan blended into the shadows of the forest as well as it had the shades of the Scottish heather; all I could see of him was a white blotch of shirt-front and the pale oval of his face.

“Do you know any useful *taki-taki* to say to her?” I asked. “Of course, she might not know that, either, if she wasn’t brought through the Indies.”

He turned his head and looked up at my passenger, considering.

“Ah,” he said. “Well, there’s the one thing they’ll all know, no matter where they’ve come.” He reached out and squeezed the woman’s foot firmly.

“Freedom,” he said, and paused. “*Saorasa*. D’yke ken what I say?”

She didn’t loosen her grip, but her breath went out in a shuddering sigh, and I thought I felt her nod.

The horses followed each other in single file, Myers in the lead. The rough track was not even a wagon trail, only a sort of flattening of undergrowth, but it did at least provide clear passage through the trees.

I doubted that Sergeant Murchison’s vengeance would pursue us so far—if he pursued us at all—but the sense of escape was too strong to ignore. We shared an unspoken but pervasive sense of urgency, and with no particular discussion, agreed to ride on as far as possible.

My passenger was either losing her fear or simply becoming too tired to care anymore; after a midnight stop for refreshment she allowed Ian and Myers to boost her back on the horse without protest, and while she never released her hold on my waist, she did seem to doze now and then, her forehead pressed against my shoulder.

The fatigue of long riding crept over me, too, aided by the hypnotic soft thudding of the horses' feet, and the unending susurrus of the pines overhead. We were still in the longleaf forest, and the tall, straight trunks surrounded us like the masts of long-sunk ships.

Lines of an ancient Scottish song drifted through my mind—*"How many strawberries grow in the salt sea; how many ships sail in the forest?"*—and I wondered muzzily whether the composer had walked through a place like this, unearthly in half-moon and starlight, so dreamlike that the borders between the elements were lost; we might as well be afloat as earthbound, the heave and fall beneath me the rise of planking, and the sound of the pines the wind in our sails.

We stopped at dawn, unsaddled the horses, hobbled them, and left them to feed in the long grass of a small meadow. I found Jamie, and curled up at once into a nest of grass beside him, the horses' peaceful champing the last thing I heard.

We slept heavily through the heat of the day, and awoke near sunset, stiff, thirsty, and covered with ticks. I was profoundly thankful that the ticks seemed to share the mosquitoes' general distaste for my flesh, but I had learned on our trip north to check Jamie and the others every time we slept; there were always outriders.

"Ick," I said, examining a particularly juicy specimen, the size of a grape, nestling amid the soft cinnamon hair of Jamie's underarm. "Damn, I'm afraid to pull that one; it's so full it'll likely burst."

He shrugged, busy exploring his scalp with the other hand, in search of further intruders.

"Leave it while ye deal with the rest," he suggested. "Perhaps it will fall of its own accord."

"I suppose I'd better," I agreed reluctantly. I hadn't any objection to the tick's bursting, but not while its jaws were still embedded in Jamie's flesh. I'd seen infections caused by forcibly interrupted ticks, and they weren't anything I wanted to deal with in the middle of a forest. I had only a rudimentary medical kit with me—though this luckily included a very fine pair of small tweezer-pointed forceps from Dr. Rawlings's box.

Myers and Ian seemed to be managing all right; both stripped to the waist, Myers was crouched over the boy like a huge black baboon, fingers busy in Ian's hair.

"Here's a wee one," Jamie said, bending over and pushing his own hair aside so I could reach the small dark bleb behind his ear. I was engaged in gently maneuvering the creature out, when I became aware of a presence near my elbow.

I had been too tired to take much notice of our fugitive when we made camp, rightly assuming that she wasn't going to wander off into the wilderness by herself. She had wandered as far as a nearby stream, though, returning with a bucket of water.

She set this on the ground, dipped up a handful of water and funneled it into her mouth. She chewed vigorously for a moment, cheeks puffed out. Then she motioned me aside and, lifting a surprised Jamie's arm, spat forcefully and profusely into his armpit.

She reached into the dripping hollow, and with delicate fingers appeared to tickle the parasite. She certainly tickled Jamie, who was very sensitive in that particular region. He turned pink in the face and flinched at her touch, all the muscles in his torso quivering.

She held tight to his wrist, though, and within seconds, the bulging tick dropped off into the palm of her hand. She flicked it disdainfully away, and turned to me, with a small air of satisfaction.

I had thought she resembled a ball, muffled in her cloak. Seen without it, she still did. She was very short, no more than four feet, and nearly as wide, with a close-cropped head like a cannonball, her cheeks so round that her eyes were slanted above them.

She looked like nothing so much as one of the carved African fertility images I had seen in the Indies; massive of bosom, heavy of haunch, and the rich, burnt-coffee color of a Congolese, with skin so flawless that it looked like polished stone under its thin layer of sweat. She held out her hand to me, showing me a few small objects in her palm, the general size and shape of dried lima beans.

"Paw-paw," she said, in a voice so deep that even Myers turned his head toward her, startled. It was a huge, rich voice, reverberant as a drum. Seeing my reaction to it, she smiled a little shyly, and said something I didn't quite understand, though I knew it was Gaelic.

"She says ye must not swallow the seeds, for they're poison," Jamie translated, eyeing her rather warily as he wiped his armpit with the end of his plaid.

"Hau," Pollyanne agreed, nodding vigorously. "Poi-zin." She stooped over the bucket for another handful of water, washed it round her mouth, and spat it at a rock with a noise like a gunshot.

"You could be dangerous with that," I told her. I didn't know whether she understood me, but she gathered from my smile that I meant to be cordial; she smiled back, popped two more of the paw-paw seeds into her mouth, and beckoned to Myers, already chewing, the seeds making little crunching pops as she pulverized them between her teeth.

By the time we had eaten supper and were ready to leave, she was nervously willing to try riding alone. Jamie coaxed her to the horse, and showed her how to let the beast smell her. She trembled as the big nose nudged her, but then the horse snorted; she jumped, giggled in a voice like honey poured out of a jug, and allowed Jamie and Ian between them to boost her aboard.

Pollyanne remained shy of the men, but she soon gained enough confidence to talk to me, in a polyglot mixture of Gaelic, English, and her own language. I couldn't have translated it, but both her face and body were so expressive that I could often gather the sense of what she was saying, even though I understood only one word in ten. I could only regret that I was not equally fluent in body language; she didn't understand most of my questions and remarks, so I had to wait until we made camp, when I could prevail on Jamie or Ian to help me with bits of Gaelic.

Freed—at least temporarily—from the constraint of terror, and becoming cautiously secure in our company, a naturally effervescent personality emerged, and she talked with abandon as we rode side by side, regardless of my comprehension, laughing now and then with a low hooting noise like wind blowing across the mouth of a cave.

She became subdued only once: when we passed through a large clearing where the grass rose in strange undulant mounds, as though a great serpent lay buried underneath. Pollyanne went silent when she saw them, and in an effort to hurry her horse, instead succeeded only in pulling on the reins and stopping it dead. I rode back to help her.

"Droch àite," she murmured, glancing out of the corner of her eye at the silent mounds. A bad place. *"Djudju."* She scowled, and made a small, quick gesture with her hand, some sign against evil, I thought.

"Is it a graveyard?" I asked Myers, who had circled back to see why we had stopped. The mounds were not evenly spaced, but were distributed around the edge of the clearing in a pattern that didn't look like any natural formation. The mounds seemed too large to be graves, though—unless they were cairns, such as the ancient Scots built, or mass graves, I thought, uneasy at the memory of Culloden.

"Not to say graveyard," he replied, pushing his hat back on his head. " 'Twas a village once. Tuscarora, I expect. Those rises there"—he waved a hand—"those are houses, fallen down. The big 'un to the side, that will have been the chief's longhouse. It be taken no time atall, the grasses come over it. From the looks, though, this 'un will have been buried a time back."

"What happened to it?" Ian and Jamie had stopped, too, and come back to look over the small clearing.

Myers scratched thoughtfully at his beard.

"I couldn't be sayin', not for certain sure. Might be as sickness drove 'em out, might be as they were put to rout by the Cherokee or the Creek, though we be a mite north of the Cherokee land. Most likely as it happened during the war, though." He dug fiercely into his beard, twisted, and flicked away the remnants of a lingering tick. "Can't say as it's a place I'd tarry by choice."

Pollyanne being plainly of the same mind, we rode on. By evening, we had passed entirely out of the pines and scrubby oakland of the foothills. We were climbing in good earnest now, and the trees began to change; small groves of chestnut trees, large patches of oak and hickory, with scattered dogwood and persimmon, chinkapin and poplar, surrounded us in waves of feathery green.

The smell and feel of the air changed, too, as we rose. The overwhelming hot resins of the pine trees gave way to lighter, more varied scents, tree leaves mingled with whiffs of the shrubs and flowers that grew from every crevice of the craggy rocks. It was still damp and humid, but not so hot; the air no longer seemed a smothering blanket, but something we might breathe—and breathe with pleasure, filled as it was with the perfumes of leaf mold, sun-warmed leaves, and damp moss.

By sunset of the sixth day, we were well into the mountains, and the air was full of the sound of running water. Streams crisscrossed the valleys, spilling off ridges and trickling down the steep rock faces, trailing mist and moss like a delicate green fringe. When we rounded the side of one steep hill, I stopped in amazement; from the side of a distant mountain, a waterfall leapt into the air, arching a good eighty feet in its fall to the gorge far below.

“Will ye look at that, now?” Ian was openmouthed with awe.

“ ’Tis right pretty,” Myers allowed, with the smug complacence of a proprietor. “Ain’t the biggest falls I’ve seen, but it’s nice enough.”

Ian turned his head, eyes wide.

“There are bigger ones?”

Myers laughed, a mountain man’s quiet laugh, no more than a breath of sound.

“Boy, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

We camped for the night in a hollow near a good-sized creek—one big enough for trout. Jamie and Ian waded into this with enthusiasm, harrying the finny denizens with whippy rods cut from black willow. I hoped they would have some luck; our fresh provisions were running low, though we still had plenty of cornmeal left.

Pollyanne came scrambling up the bank, bringing a bucket of water with which to make a new batch of corn dodgers. These were small oblongs of rough cornmeal biscuit made for traveling; tasty when fresh and hot, and at least edible the next day. They became steadily less appetizing with time, resembling nothing so much as small chunks of cement by the fourth day. Still, they were portable, and not prone to mold, and thus were popular traveling fare, along with dried beef and salt pork.

Pollyanne's natural ebullience seemed a trifle subdued, her round face shadowed. Her eyebrows were so sketchy as to be almost nonexistent, which had the paradoxical effect of increasing the expressiveness of her face in motion, and wiping all expression from it in repose. She could be as impassive as a ball bearing when she wanted to; a useful skill for a slave.

I supposed that her preoccupation was at least in part because this was the last night on which we would all be together. We had reached the backcountry, the limits of the King's land; tomorrow, Myers would turn to the north, taking her across the spine of the mountains into the Indian lands, to find what safety and what life she might there.

Her round dark head was bent over the wooden bowl, stubby fingers mixing cornmeal with water and lard. I crouched across from her, feeding small sticks to the infant fire, the black iron girdle standing ready-greased beside it. Myers had gone off to smoke a pipe; I could hear Jamie call to Ian somewhere downstream, and a faint answering laugh.

It was deep twilight by now; our hollow was ringed by brooding mountains, and darkness seemed to fill the shallow bowl, creeping up the trunks of the trees around us. I had no notion of the place she had come from, whether it might be forest or jungle, seashore or desert, but I thought it unlikely to be much like this.

What could she be thinking? She had survived the journey from Africa, and slavery; I supposed whatever lay ahead couldn't be much worse. It was an unknown future, though—going into a wilderness so vast and absolute that I felt every moment as though I might vanish into it, consumed without a trace. Our fire seemed the merest spark against the vastness of the night.

Rollo strolled into the light of the fire and shook himself, spraying water in all directions, making the fire hiss and spit. He had joined in the fishing, I saw.

“Go away, horrible dog,” I said. He didn’t, of course; simply came up and nosed me rudely, to be sure I was still who he thought I was, then turned to give Pollyanne the same treatment.

With no particular expression, she turned her head and spat in his eye. He yelped, backed up, and stood shaking his head, looking thoroughly surprised. She looked up at me and grinned, her teeth very white in her face.

I laughed, and decided not to worry too much; anyone capable of spitting in a wolf’s eye would likely cope with Indians, wilderness, and anything else that came along.

The bowl was nearly empty, a neat row of corn dodgers laid on the girdle. Pollyanne wiped her fingers on a handful of grass, watching the yellow cornmeal begin to sizzle and turn brown as the lard melted. A warm, comforting smell rose from the fire, mingled with the scent of burning wood, and my belly rumbled softly in anticipation. The fire seemed more substantial now, the scent of cooking food spreading its warmth in a wider circle, keeping the night at bay.

Had it been this way where she came from? Had fires and food held back a jungle darkness, kept away leopards instead of bears? Had light and company given comfort, and the illusion of safety? For illusion it had surely been—fire was no protection against men, or the darkness that had overtaken her. I had no words to ask.

“I have never seen such fishing, never,” Jamie repeated for the fourth time, a look of dreamy bliss on his face as he broke open a steaming trout fried in cornmeal. “They were *swarming* in the water, were they not, Ian?”

Ian nodded, a similar look of reverence on his own homely features.

“My Da would give his other leg to ha’ seen it,” he said. “They jumped on the hook, Auntie, truly!”

“The Indians don’t generally bother with hook and line,” Myers put in, neatly spearing his own share of fish with his knife. “They build snares and fish traps, or sometimes they’ll put some sticks and rubbish crost the creek to prevent the fish, then stand above with a sharp stick, just spearin’ them from the water.”

That was enough for Ian; any mention of Indians and their ways provoked a rash of eager questions. Having exhausted the methods of fish-catching, he asked again about the abandoned village we had seen earlier in our journey.

“Ye said it might have happened in the war,” Ian said, lifting the bones from a steaming trout, then shaking his fingers to cool them. He passed a section of the boneless flesh to Rollo, who swallowed it in a single gulp, temperature notwithstanding. “Will that ha’ been the war wi’ the French, then? I didna ken there was any fighting so far south.”

Myers shook his head, chewing and swallowing before he answered.

“Oh, no. It’ll be the Tuscarora War I was meanin’; that’s how they call it on the white side, at least.”

The Tuscarora War, he explained, had been a short-lived but brutal conflict some forty years before, brought on by an attack upon some backcountry settlers. The then governor of the colony had sent troops into the Tuscarora villages in retaliation, and the upshot was a series of pitched battles that the colonists, much better armed, had won handily—to the devastation of the Tuscarora nation.

Myers nodded toward the darkness.

“Ain’t no more than seven villages o’ the Tuscarora left, now—and not above fifty or a hundred souls in any but the biggest one.” So sadly diminished, the Tuscarora would quickly have fallen prey to surrounding tribes and disappeared altogether, had they not been formally adopted by the Mohawk, and thus become part of the powerful Iroquois League.

Jamie came back to the fire with a bottle from his saddlebag. It was Scotch whisky, a parting present from Jocasta. He poured out a small cupful, then offered the half-full bottle to Myers.

“Is the Mohawk country not a verra great distance to the north?” he asked. “How can they offer protection to their fellows here, and they with hostile tribes all round?”

Myers took a gulp of whisky and washed it pleasurably around his mouth before answering.

“Mmm. That’s fine stuff, friend James. Oh, the Mohawk are a good ways off, aye. But the Nations of the Iroquois are a name to reckon with—and of all the Six Nations, the Mohawk are the fiercest. Ain’t no one—red *or* white—goin’ to mess with the Mohawk ’thout good cause, nossir.”

I was fascinated by this. I was also pleased to hear that the Mohawk territory was a good long way away from us.

“Why did the Mohawk want to adopt the Tuscarora, then?” Jamie asked, lifting one brow. “It doesna seem they’d be needing allies, and they so fierce as ye say.”

Myers’s hazel eyes had gone to dreamy half-slits under the influence of good whisky.

“Oh, they’re fierce, all right—but they’re mortal,” he said, “Indians are men o’ blood, and none more than the Mohawk. They’re men of honor, mind”—he raised a thick finger in admonition—“but there’s a sight of things they’ll kill for, some reasonable, some not. They raid, d’ye see, amongst themselves, and they’ll kill for revenge—ain’t nothin’ will stop a Mohawk bent on revenge, save you kill him. And even then, his brother or his son or his nephew will come after you.”

He licked his lips in slow meditation, savoring the slick of whisky on his skin.

“Sometimes Indians don’t kill for any reason a man would say mattered; specially when liquor’s involved.”

“Sounds very much like the Scots,” I murmured to Jamie, who gave me a cold look in return.

Myers picked up the whisky bottle and rolled it slowly between his palms.

“Any man might take a drop too much and be the worse in his actions for it, but with the Indians, the first drop’s too much. I’ve heard of more than one massacre that might not have been, save for the men bein' mad with drink."

He shook his head, recalling himself to his subject.

"Be so as it may, it's a hard life, and a bloody one. Some tribes are wiped out altogether, and none have men to spare. So they adopt folk into the tribe, to replace those as are killed or die of sickness. They take prisoners, sometimes—take 'em into a family, treat 'em as their own. That's what they'll do with Mrs. Polly, there." He nodded at Pollyanne, who sat quietly by the fire, paying no attention to his speech.

"So happen back fifty years, the Mohawk took and adopted the whole tribe of the Tuscarora. Don't many tribes speak exactly the same language," Myers explained. "But some are closer than others. Tuscarora's more like the Mohawk than 'tis like the Creek or the Cherokee."

"Can ye speak Mohawk yourself, Mr. Myers?" Ian's ears had been flapping all through the explanation. Fascinated by every rock, tree, and bird on our journey, Ian was still more fascinated by any mention of Indians.

"Oh, a good bit." Myers shrugged modestly. "Any trader picks up a few words here and there. Shoo, dawg." Rollo, who had inched his nose within sniffing distance of Myers's last trout, twitched his ears at the admonition but didn't withdraw the nose.

"Will it be the Tuscarora ye mean to take Mistress Polly to?" Jamie asked, crumbling a corn dodger into edible chunks.

Myers nodded, chewing carefully; with as few natural teeth as he had left, even fresh corn dodgers were a hazardous undertaking.

"Aye. Be four, five days ride still," he explained. He turned to me and gave me a reassuring smile. "I'll see her settled fine, Mrs. Claire, you'll not be worried for her."

"What will the Indians think of her, I wonder?" Ian asked. He glanced at Pollyanne, interested. "Will they have seen a black woman before?"

Myers laughed at that.

"Lad, there's a many of the Tuscarora ain't seen a *white* person before. Mrs. Polly won't come as any more a shock than your auntie might.” Myers took a vast swig of water and swished it around his mouth, eyeing Pollyanne thoughtfully. She felt his eyes on her, and returned his stare, unblinking.

“I should say they’d find her handsome, though; they do like a woman as is sweetly plump.” It was moderately obvious that Myers shared this admiration; his eyes drifted over Pollyanne with an appreciation touched with innocent lasciviousness.

She saw it, and an extraordinary change came over her. She seemed scarcely to move, and yet all at once, her whole person was focused on Myers. No white showed around her eyes; they were black and fathomless, shining in the firelight. She was still short and heavy, but with only the slightest change of posture, depth of bosom and width of hip were emphasized, suddenly curved in a promise of lewd abundance.

Myers swallowed, audibly.

I glanced away from this little byplay to see Jamie watching, too, with an expression somewhere between amusement and concern. I poked him unobtrusively, and squinted hard, in an expression that said as explicitly as I could manage—“Do something!”

He narrowed one eye.

I widened both mine and gave him a good stare, which translated to, “I don’t know, but do something!”

“Mmphm.”

Jamie cleared his throat, leaned forward, and laid a hand on Myers’s arm, jarring the mountain man out of his momentary trance.

“I shouldna like to think the woman will be misused in any way,” he said, politely, but with an edge of Scottish innuendo on “misused” that implied the possibility of unlimited impropriety. He squeezed a little. “Will ye undertake to guarantee her safety, Mr. Myers?”

Myers shot him a look of incomprehension, which slowly cleared, cognizance coming into the bloodshot hazel eyes. The mountain man slowly pulled his arm free, then picked up his cup, gulped the last mouthful of whisky, coughed and wiped his mouth. He might have been blushing, but it was impossible to tell behind the beard.

“Oh, yes. That is, I mean to say, oh, no. No, indeed. The Mohawk and the Tuscarora both, their women choose who they bed with, even who they marry. No such thing as rape among ’em. Oh, no. No, sir; she won’t be misused, I can promise that.”

“Well, and I’m glad to hear it.” Jamie sat back, at ease, and gave me an I-trust-you’re-satisfied glare out of the corner of his eye. I smiled demurely.

Ian might be not quite sixteen, but he was far too observant to have missed all these exchanges. He coughed, in a meaningful Scottish manner.

“Uncle, Mr. Myers has been kind enough to invite me to go with him and Mrs. Polly, to see the Indian village. I shall be sure to see that she finds good treatment there.”

“You—” Jamie started, then broke off. He gave his nephew a long, hard look across the fire. I could see the thoughts racing through his mind.

Ian hadn’t asked permission to go; he’d announced he was going. If Jamie forbade him, he must give grounds—and he could scarcely say that it was too dangerous, as this would mean admitting both that he was willing to send the slave woman into danger and that he didn’t trust Myers and his relations with the local Indians. Jamie was trapped, and very neatly too.

He breathed in strongly through his nose. Ian grinned.

I looked back across the fire. Pollyanne was still sitting as she had been, not moving. Her eyes were still fixed on Myers, but a slight smile curved her lips in invitation. One hand rose slowly, cupping a massive breast, almost absently.

Myers was staring back, dazed as a deer with a hunter’s light in its eyes.

And would I do differently? I thought later, listening to the discreet rustling noises and small groans from the direction of Myers’s blankets. If I knew that my life depended on a man? Would I not do anything I could to ensure he would protect me, in the face of unknown danger?

There was a snapping and crackling in the bushes, not far away. It was loud, and I stiffened. So did Jamie. He slid his hand out from under my shirt, reaching for his dirk, then relaxing, as the reassuring scent of skunk reached our nostrils.

He put his hand back under my shirt, squeezed my breast and fell back asleep, his breath warm on my neck.

No great difference at all, perhaps. Was my future any more certain than hers? And did I not depend for my life upon a man bound to me—at least in part—by desire of my body?

A faint wind breathed through the trees, and I hitched the blanket higher on my shoulder. The fire had burned to embers, and so high in the mountains, it was cool at night. The moon had set, but it was very clear; the stars blazed close, a net of light cast over the mountains' peaks.

No, there were differences. However unknown my future, it would be shared, and the bond between my man and me went much deeper than the flesh. Beyond all this was the one great difference, though—I had chosen to be there.

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NOBLE SAVAGES

We took our leave of the others in the morning, Jamie and Myers taking pains over the arrangement for a rendezvous in ten days time. Looking around me at the bewildering immensity of forest and mountain, I couldn't imagine how anyone could be sure of finding a specific place again; I could only trust in Jamie's sense of navigation.

They turned to the north, we to the southwest, making our way along the course of the stream we had camped by. It seemed very quiet at first, and strangely lonely, with only the two of us. Within a short time, though, I had grown accustomed to the solitude and began to relax, taking a keen interest in our surroundings. This might, after all, be our home.

The thought was a rather daunting one; it was a place of amazing beauty and richness, but so wild, it hardly seemed that people could live in it. I didn't voice this thought, however; only followed Jamie's horse as he led us deeper and deeper into the mountains, stopping finally in the late afternoon to make a small camp and catch fish for dinner.

The light faded slowly, retreating through the trees. The thick mossy trunks grew dense with shadow, edges still rimmed with a fugitive light that hid among the leaves, green shadows shifting with the sunset breeze.

A tiny glow lit suddenly in the grass a few feet away, cool and bright. I saw another, and another, and then the edge of the wood was full of them, lazily falling, then blinking out, cold sparks drifting in the growing dark.

"You know, I never saw fireflies until I came to live in Boston," I said, filled with pleasure at sight of them, glowing emerald and topaz in the grass. "They don't have fireflies in Scotland, do they?"

Jamie shook his head, reclining lazily on the grass, one arm hooked behind his head.

"Bonny wee things," he observed, and sighed with content. "This is my favorite time of the day, I think. When I lived in the cave, after Culloden, I would come out near evening, and sit on a stone, waiting for the dark."

His eyes were half closed, watching the fireflies. The shadows faded upward as night rose from the earth to the sky. A moment before, light through the oak leaves had mottled him like a fawn; now the brightness had faded, so he lay in a sort of dim green glow, the lines of his body at once solid and insubstantial.

"All the wee bugs come out just now—the moths and the midges; all the bittie things that hang about in clouds over the water. Ye see the swallows come for them, and then the bats, swooping down. And the salmon, rising to the evening hatch and making rings on the water."

His eyes were open now, fixed on the waving sea of grass on the hillside, but I knew he saw instead the surface of the tiny loch near Lallybroch, alive with fleeting ripples.

"It's only a moment, but ye feel as though it will last forever. Strange, is it no?" he said thoughtfully. "Ye can almost see the light go as ye watch—and yet there's no time ye can look and say 'Now! Now it's night.' " He gestured at the opening between the oak trees, and the valley below, its hollows filling with dark.

"No." I lay back in the grass beside him, feeling the warm damp of the grass mold the buckskin to my body. The air was thick and cool under the trees, like the air in a church, dim and fragrant with remembered incense.

"Do you remember Father Anselm at the abbey?" I looked up; the color was going from the oak leaves overhead, leaving the soft silver undersides gray as mouse fur. "He said there was always an hour in the day when time seems to stop—but that it was different for everyone. He thought it might be the hour when one was born."

I turned my head to look at him.

"Do you know when you were born?" I asked. "The time of day, I mean?"

He glanced at me and smiled, rolling over to face me.

"Aye, I do. Perhaps he was right, then, for I was born at suppertime—just at twilight on the first of May." He brushed away a floating firefly and grinned at me.

"Have I never told ye that story? How my mother had put on a pot of brose to cook, and then her pains came on so fast she'd no time to think of it, and no one else remembered either until they smelled the burning, and it ruined the supper and the pot as well? There was nothing else in the house to eat save a great gooseberry pie. So they all ate that, but there was a new kitchenmaid and the gooseberries were green, and all of them—except my mother and me, of course—spent the night writhing wi' the indigestion."

He shook his head, still smiling. "My father said it was months before he could look at me without feeling his bowels cramp."

I laughed, and he reached to pick a last-year's leaf from my hair.

"And what hour were you born, Sassenach?"

"I don't know," I said, with the usual pang of faint regret for my vanished family. "It wasn't on my birth certificate, and if Uncle Lamb knew, he never told me. I know when Brianna was born, though," I added, more cheerfully. "She was born at three minutes past three in the morning. There was a huge clock on the wall of the delivery room, and I saw it."

Dim as the light was, I could see his look of surprise clearly.

"You were awake? I thought ye told me women are drugged then, so as not to feel the pain."

"They mostly were, then. I wouldn't let them give me anything, though." I stared upward. The shadows were thick around us now, but the sky was still clear and light above, a soft, brilliant blue.

"Why the hell not?" he demanded, incredulous. "I've never seen a woman give birth, but I've *heard* it more than once, I'll tell ye. And damned if I can see why a woman in her right mind would do it, and there was any choice about it."

"Well …" I paused, not wanting to seem melodramatic. It was the truth, though. "Well," I said, rather defiantly, "I thought I was going to die, and I didn't want to die in my sleep."

He wasn't shocked. He only raised one brow, and snorted faintly with amusement.

"Would ye no?"

"No, would you?" I twisted my head to look at him. He rubbed the bridge of his nose, still amused at the question.

"Aye, well, perhaps. I've come close to death by hanging, and I didna like the waiting a bit. I've nearly been killed in battle a few times; I canna say I was much concerned about the dying then, though, bein' too busy to think of it. And then I've nearly died of wounds and fever, and that was misery enough that I was looking forward verra keenly to being dead. But on the whole, given my choice about it, I think perhaps I wouldna mind dying in my sleep, no."

He leaned over and kissed me lightly. "Preferably in bed, next to you. At a verra advanced age, mind." He touched his tongue delicately to my lips, then rose to his feet, brushing dried oak leaves from his breeks.

"Best make a fire while there's light enough to strike a flint," he said. "Ye'll fetch the wee fish?"

I left him to deal with flints and kindling while I went down the little hill to the stream, where we had left the fresh-caught trout dangling from stringers in the icy current. As I came back up the hill it had grown dark enough that I could see him only in outline, crouched over a tiny pile of smoldering kindling. A wisp of smoke rose up like incense, pale between his hands.

I set the gutted fish down in the long grass and sat back on my heels beside him, watching as he laid fresh sticks on the fire, building it patiently, a barricade against the coming night.

"What do you think it will be like?" I asked suddenly. "To die."

He stared into the fire, thinking. A burning twig snapped with heat, spurting sparks into the air, which drifted down, blinking out before they touched the ground.

“ ‘Man is like the grass that withers and is thrown into the fire; he is like the sparks that fly upward … and his place will know him no more,’ ” I quoted softly. “Is there nothing after, do you think?”

He shook his head, looking into the fire. I saw his eyes shift beyond it, to where the cool bright sparks of the fireflies blinked in and out among the dark stems.

“I canna say,” he said at last, softly. His shoulder touched mine and I leaned my head toward him. “There’s what the Church says, but—” His eyes were still fixed on the fireflies, winking through the grass stems, their light unquenchable. “No, I canna say. But I think it will maybe be all right.”

He tilted his head, pressing his cheek against my hair for a moment, then stood up, reaching for his dirk.

“The fire’s well started now.”

The heavy air of the afternoon had lifted with the coming of twilight, and a soft evening breeze blew the damp tendrils of hair off my face. I sat with my face lifted, eyes closed, enjoying the coolness after the sweaty heat of the day.

I could hear Jamie rustling around the fire, and the quick, soft *whisht* of his knife as he skinned green oak twigs for broiling the fish.

I think it will maybe be all right. I thought so, too. There was no telling what lay on the other side of life, but I had sat many times through an hour where time stops, empty of thought, soothed of soul, looking into … what? Into something that had neither name nor face, but which seemed good to me, and full of peace. If death lay there …

Jamie’s hand touched my shoulder lightly in passing, and I smiled, not opening my eyes.

“Ouch!” he muttered, on the other side of the fire. “Nicked myself, clumsy clot.”

I opened my eyes. He was a good eight feet away, head bent as he sucked a small cut on the knuckle of his thumb. A ripple of gooseflesh rose straight up my back.

"Jamie," I said. My voice sounded peculiar, even to me. I felt a small round cold spot, centered like a target on the back of my neck.

"Aye?"

"Is there—" I swallowed, feeling the hair rise on my forearms. "Jamie, is there … someone … behind me?"

His eyes shifted to the shadows over my shoulder, and sprang wide. I didn't wait to look round, but flung myself flat on the ground, an action that likely saved my life.

There was a loud *whuff!* and a sudden strong smell of ammonia and fish. Something struck me in the back with an impact that knocked the breath out of me, and then stepped heavily on my head, driving my face into the ground.

I jerked up, gasping for breath, shaking leaf mold out of my eyes. A large black bear, squalling like a cat, was lurching round the clearing, its feet scattering burning sticks.

For a moment, half blinded by dirt, I couldn't see Jamie at all. Then I spotted him. He was under the bear, one arm locked around its neck, his head tucked into the joint of the shoulder just under the drooling jaws.

One foot shot out from under the bear, kicking frantically, stabbing at the ground for traction. He had taken his boots and stockings off when we made camp; I gasped as one bare foot slewed through the remnants of the fire, raising showers of sparks.

His forearm was ridged with effort, half buried in thick fur. His free arm thrust and jabbed; he had kept hold of his dirk, at least. At the same time, he hauled with all his strength on the bear's neck, pulling it down.

The bear was lunging, batting with one paw, trying to shake off the clinging weight around its neck. It seemed to lose its balance, and fell heavily forward, with a loud squall of rage. I heard a muffled *whoof!* that didn't seem to come from the bear, and looked frantically around for something to use as a weapon.

The bear struggled back to its feet, shaking itself violently.

I caught a brief glimpse of Jamie's face, contorted with effort. One bulging eye widened at sight of me, and he shook his mouth clear of the bristling fur.

“Run!” he shouted. Then the bear fell on him again, and he disappeared under three hundred pounds of hair and muscle.

With vague thoughts of Mowgli and the Red Flower, I scrabbled madly over the damp earth in the clearing, finding nothing but small pieces of charred stick and glowing embers that blistered my fingers but were too small to grip.

I had always thought that bears roared when annoyed. This one was making a lot of noise, but it sounded more like a very large pig, with piercing squeals and blatting noises interspersed with hair-raising growls. Jamie was making a lot of noise, too, which was reassuring under the circumstances.

My hand fell on something cold and clammy; the fish, tossed aside at the edge of the fire clearing.

“To hell with the Red Flower,” I muttered. I seized one of the trout by the tail, ran forward, and belted the bear across the nose with it as hard as I could.

The bear shut its mouth and looked surprised. Then its head slewed toward me and it lunged, moving faster than I would have thought possible. I fell backward, landing on my bottom, and essayed a final, valiant blow with my fish before the bear charged me, Jamie still clinging to its neck like grim death.

It was like being caught in a meat grinder; a brief moment of total chaos, punctuated by random hard blows to the body and the sensation of being suffocated in a large, reeking hairy blanket. Then it was gone, leaving me lying bruised in the grass on my back, smelling strongly of bear piss and blinking up at the evening star, which was shining serenely overhead.

Things were a good deal less serene on the ground. I rolled onto all fours, shouting “Jamie!” at the trees, where a large, amorphous mass rolled to and fro, smashing down the oak saplings and emitting a cacophony of growls and Gaelic screeches.

It was full dark on the ground by now, but there was enough light from the sky for me to make things out. The bear had fallen over again, but instead of rising and lunging, this time was rolling on its back, hind feet churning in an effort to gain a ripping purchase. One front paw landed in a heavy, rending slap and there was an explosive grunt that didn't sound like the bear's. The smell of blood was heavy on the air.

"Jamie!" I shrieked.

There was no answer, but the writhing pile rolled and tilted slowly sideways into the deeper black shadows under the trees. The mingled noises subsided to heavy grunts and gasps, punctuated by small whimpering moans.

"JAMIE!"

The thrashing and branch-cracking died away into softer rustlings. Something was moving under the branches, swaying heavily from side to side, on all fours.

Very slowly, breathing in gasps with a catch and a groan, Jamie crawled out into the clearing.

Disregarding my own bruises, I ran to him, and dropped to my knees beside him.

"God, Jamie! Are you all right?"

"No," he said shortly, and collapsed on the ground, wheezing gently.

His face was no more than a pale blotch in the starlight; the rest of his body was so dark as to be nearly invisible. I found out why as I ran my hands swiftly over him. His clothes were so soaked with blood that they stuck to his body, his hunting shirt coming away from his chest with a nasty little sucking sound as I pulled at it.

"You smell like a slaughterhouse," I said, feeling under his chin for a pulse. It was fast—no great surprise—but strong, and a wave of relief washed over me. "Is that your blood, or the bear's?"

"If it was mine, Sassenach, I'd be dead," he said testily, opening his eyes. "No credit to you that I'm not, mind." He rolled painfully onto his side and slowly got to his hands and knees, groaning. "What possessed ye, woman, to hit me in the heid wi' a fish whilst I was fighting for my life?"

"Hold still, for heaven's sake!" He couldn't be too badly hurt if he was trying to get away. I clutched him by the hips to stop him, and kneeling behind him, felt my way gingerly up his sides. "Broken ribs?" I said.

“No. But if ye tickle me, Sassenach, I willna like it a bit,” he said, gasping between words.

“I won’t,” I assured him. I ran my hands gently over the arch of his ribs, pressing lightly. No splintered ends protruding through the skin, no sinister depressions or soft spots; cracked maybe, but he was right, nothing broken. He yelped and twitched under my hand. “Bad spot there?”

“It is,” he said between his teeth. He was beginning to shiver, and I hurried to fetch his plaid, which I wrapped about his shoulders.

“I’m fine, Sassenach,” he said, waving away my attempts to help him to a seat. “Go see to the horses; they’ll be upset.” They were. We had hobbled the horses a little way from the clearing; they had made it a good deal farther under the impetus of terror, judging from the muffled stamping and whinnying I could hear in the distance.

There were still small wheezing groans coming from the deep shadows under the trees; the sound was so human that the hair prickled on the back of my neck. Carefully skirting the sounds, I went and found the horses, cowering in a birch grove a few hundred yards away. They whickered when they scented me, delighted to see me, bear piss and all.

By the time I had soothed the horses and coaxed them back in the direction of the clearing, the pitiful noises from the shadows had ceased. There was a small glow in the clearing; Jamie had managed to get the fire started again.

He was crouched next to the tiny blaze, still shivering under his plaid. I fed in enough sticks to make sure it wouldn’t go out, then turned my attention to him once more.

“You’re really not badly damaged?” I asked, still worried.

He gave me a lopsided smile.

“I’ll do. It caught me a good one across the back, but I dinna think it’s verra bad. Have a look?” He straightened up, wincing, and felt his side gingerly as I crossed behind him.

“What made it do that, I wonder?” he said, twisting his head toward where the bear’s carcass lay. “Myers said the black bears dinna often attack ye, without ye provoke them some way.”

"Maybe somebody else provoked it," I suggested. "And then had the sense to get out of the way." I lifted the plaid, and whistled under my breath.

The back of his shirt hung in shreds, smeared with dirt and ash, splotched with blood. His blood this time, not the bear's, but luckily not much. I gently pulled the tattered pieces of the shirt apart, exposing the long bow of his back. Four long claw-marks ran from shoulder blade to armpit; deep, wicked gouges that tapered to superficial red welts.

"Ooh!" I said, in sympathy.

"Well, it's no as though my back was much to look at, anyway," he joked feebly. "Really, is it bad?" He twisted around, trying to see, then stopped, grunting as the movement strained his bruised ribs.

"No. Dirty, though; I'll need to wash it out." The blood had already begun to clot; the wounds would need to be cleansed at once. I put the plaid back and set on a pan of water to boil, thinking what else I might use.

"I saw some arrowhead plant down near the stream," I said. "I think I can find it again from memory." I handed him the bottle of ale I'd brought from the saddlebags, and took his dirk.

"Will you be all right?" I paused and looked at him; he was very pale, and still shivering. The fire glimmered red on his brows, throwing the lines of his face into strong relief.

"Aye, I will." He mustered a faint grin. "Dinna worry, Sassenach; the thought of dyin' asleep in my bed seems even better to me now than it did an hour ago."

A sickle-moon was rising, bright over the trees, and I had little trouble finding the place I remembered. The stream ran cold and silver in the moonlight, chilling my hands and feet as I stood calf-deep in the water, groping for tubers of the arrowhead plant.

Small frogs sang all around me, and the stiff leaves of cattails rustled softly in the evening breeze. It was very, very peaceful, and all of a sudden I found myself shaking so hard that I had to sit down on the stream bank.

Anytime. It could happen anytime, and just this fast. I wasn't sure which seemed most unreal; the bear's attack, or this, the soft summer night, alive with promise.

I rested my head on my knees, letting the sickness, the residue of shock, drain away. It didn't matter, I told myself. Not only anytime, but anywhere. Disease, car wreck, random bullet. There was no true refuge for anyone, but like most people, I managed not to think of that most of the time.

I shuddered, thinking of the claw marks on Jamie's back. Had he been slower to react, not as strong … had the wounds been slightly deeper … for that matter, infection was still a major threat. But at least against that danger, I could fight.

The thought brought me back to myself, the squashed leaves and roots cool and wet in my hand. I splashed cold water over my face, and started up the hill toward the campfire, feeling somewhat better.

I could see Jamie through the thin scrim of saplings, sitting upright, outlined against the fire. Sitting bolt upright, in a way that must surely have been painful, considering his wounds.

I stopped, suddenly wary, just as he spoke.

"Claire?" He didn't turn around, and his voice was calm. He didn't wait for me to answer, but went on, voice cool and steady.

"Walk up behind me, Sassenach, and put your knife into my left hand. Then stay behind me."

Heart hammering, I took the three steps that brought me high enough to see over his shoulder. On the far side of the clearing, just within the light of the fire, stood three Indians, heavily armed. Evidently the bear *had* been provoked.

The Indians looked us over with a lively interest that was more than returned. There were three of them; an older man, whose feathered topknot was liberally streaked with gray, and two younger, perhaps in their twenties. Father and sons, I thought—there was a certain similarity among them, more of body than of face; all three were fairly short, broad-shouldered and bow-legged, with long, powerful arms.

I eyed their weapons covertly. The older man cradled a gun in the curve of his arm; it was an ancient French wheelock, the hexagonal barrel rimed with rust. It looked as though it would explode in his face if he fired it, but I hoped he wouldn't try.

One of the younger men carried a bow to hand, arrow casually nocked. All three had sinister-looking tomahawks and skinning knives slung in their belts. Long as it was, Jamie's dirk seemed rather inadequate by comparison.

Evidently coming to the same conclusion, he leaned forward and placed the dirk carefully on the ground at his feet. Sitting back, he spread his empty hands and shrugged.

The Indians giggled. It was such an unwarlike noise that I found myself half smiling in response, even though my stomach, less easily disarmed, stayed knotted with tension.

I saw Jamie's shoulders relax their rigid line, and felt slightly reassured.

"Bonsoir, messieurs," he said. *"Parlez-vous français?"*

The Indians giggled again, glancing at each other shyly. The older man took a tentative step forward and ducked his head at us, setting the beads in his hair swinging.

"No … Fransh," he said.

"English?" I said hopefully. He glanced at me with interest, but shook his head. He said something over one shoulder to one of his sons, who replied in the same unintelligible tongue. The older man turned back to Jamie and asked something, raising his brows in question.

Jamie shook his head in incomprehension, and one of the young men stepped into the firelight. Bending his knees and letting his shoulders slump, he thrust his head forward and swayed from side to side, peering nearsightedly in such perfect imitation of a bear that Jamie laughed out loud. The other Indians grinned.

The young man straightened up and pointed at the blood-soaked sleeve of Jamie's shirt, with an interrogatory noise.

"Oh, aye, it's over there," Jamie said, gesturing toward the darkness under the trees.

Without further ado, all three men disappeared into the dark, from which excited exclamations and murmurings soon emerged.

"It's all right, Sassenach," Jamie said. "They willna harm us. They're only hunters." He closed his eyes briefly, and I saw the faint sheen of sweat on his face. "And a good thing, too, because I think I'm maybe going to swoon."

"Don't even think about it. Don't you *dare* faint and leave me alone with them!" No matter what the savages' possible intentions, the thought of facing them alone over Jamie's unconscious body was enough to reknot my intestines with panic. I put my hand on the back of his neck and forced his head down between his knees.

"Breathe," I said, squeezing cold water from my handkerchief down the back of his neck. "You can faint later."

"Can I puke?" he asked, his voice muffled in his kilt. I recognized the note of wry jest in it, and let my own breath out with relief.

"No," I said. "Sit up; they're coming back."

They were, dragging the bear's carcass with them. Jamie sat up and mopped his face with the wet handkerchief. Warm as the night was, he was shivering slightly from shock, but he sat steadily enough.

The older man came over to us, and pointed with raised brows; first to the knife that lay at Jamie's feet, then to the dead bear. Jamie nodded modestly.

"It wasna easy, mind," he said.

The Indian's brows rose higher. Then he ducked his head, hands spread in a gesture of respect. He beckoned to one of the younger men, who came over, untying a pouch from his belt.

Shoving me unceremoniously to one side, the younger man ripped open the throat of Jamie's shirt, pulled it off his shoulder, and squinted at the injury. He poured a handful of a lumpy, half-powdery substance into his hand, spat copiously into it, stirred it into a foul-smelling paste, and smeared it liberally over the wounds.

"Now I really am going to puke," Jamie murmured, wincing under the ungentle ministrations. "What is that stuff?"

"At a guess, it's dried trillium mixed with very rancid bear grease," I said, trying not to inhale the pungent fumes. "I don't suppose it will kill you; at least I hope not."

"That's two of us, then," he said under his breath. "No, I'll do now, thank ye kindly." He waved away further ministrations, smiling politely at his would-be doctor.

Joking or not, his lips were white, even in the dimness of the firelight. I put a hand on his good shoulder, and felt the muscles clenched tight with strain.

"Get the whisky, Sassenach. I need it badly."

One of the Indians made a grab at the bottle as I pulled it from the bag, but I pushed him rudely away. He grunted with surprise, but didn't follow me. Instead, he picked up the bag and began rooting through it like a hog hunting truffles. I didn't try to stop him, but hurried back to Jamie with the whisky.

He took a small sip, then a larger one, shuddered once, and opened his eyes. He breathed deeply once or twice, drank again, then wiped his mouth and held out the bottle in invitation to the older man.

"Do you think that's wise?" I muttered, recalling Myers's lurid stories about massacres, and the effects of firewater on Indians.

"I can give it to them or let them take it, Sassenach," he said, a little testily. "There are three of them, aye?"

The older man passed the mouth of the bottle under his nose, nostrils flaring as though in appreciation of a rare bouquet. I could smell the liquor from where I stood, and was surprised that it didn't sear the lining of his nose.

A smile of beatific content spread across the man's craggy face. He said something to his sons that sounded like *"Haroo!"* and the one who had been rifling our bag came at once to join his brother, a couple of corn dodgers clutched in his fist.

The older man stood up with the bottle in his hand, but instead of drinking, took it over to where the bear's carcass lay, black as an inkblot on the ground. With great deliberation, he poured a small amount of whisky into the palm of his hand, bent, and dribbled the liquid into the bear's half-open mouth. Then he turned slowly in a circle, shaking drops of whisky ceremoniously from his fingers. The drops flew gold and amber where they caught the light, hitting the fire with tiny, sizzling pops.

Jamie sat up straight, dizziness forgotten in his interest.

"Will ye look at that, now?" he said.

"At what?" I said, but he didn't answer, absorbed by the Indians' behavior.

One of the younger men had taken out a small beaded pouch that held tobacco. Carefully packing the bowl of a small stone pipe, he lit it with a dry twig dipped into the flames of our fire, and drew strongly on the barrel. The tobacco leaf sparked and fumed, spreading its rich aroma over the clearing.

Jamie was leaning against me, his back against my thighs. I had my hand on his unwounded shoulder again, and could feel the shiver in his flesh start to ease as the warmth of the whisky began to spread in his belly. He wasn't badly hurt, but the strain of the fight and the continued effort to stay alert were taking their toll on him.

The older man took the pipe and drew several deep, leisurely mouthfuls, which he exhaled with evident pleasure. Then he knelt, and taking another deep lungful of smoke, carefully blew it up the nostrils of the dead bear. He repeated this process several times, muttering something under his breath as he exhaled.

Then he rose, with no sign of stiffness, and extended the pipe to Jamie.

Jamie smoked as the Indians had done—one or two long, ceremonious mouthfuls—and then lifted the pipe, turning to hand it to me.

I lifted the pipe and drew cautiously. Burning smoke filled my eyes and nose at once, and my throat constricted with an overwhelming urge to cough. I choked it back, and hastily gave Jamie the pipe, feeling my face turn red as the smoke curled lazily through my chest, tickling and burning as it searched its way through the channels of my lungs.

"Ye dinna *breathe* it, Sassenach," he murmured. "Just let it rise up the back of your nose."

"Now … you … tell me," I said, trying not to strangle.

The Indians watched me in round-eyed interest. The older man put his head on one side, frowning as though trying to puzzle something out. He popped up onto his feet and came round the fire, crouching to peer curiously at me, close enough for me to catch the odd, smoky scent of his skin. He wore nothing but a breechclout and a sort of short leather apron, though his chest was covered by a large, ornate necklace featuring seashells, stones, and the teeth of some large animal.

With no warning, he suddenly reached out and squeezed my breast. There was nothing even faintly lascivious about the gesture, but I jumped. So did Jamie, hand darting for his knife.

The Indian sat back calmly on his heels, waving his hand in dismissal. He clapped his hand flat on his breast, then made a cupping motion and pointed at me. He had meant nothing; he had only wanted to assure himself that I was indeed female. He pointed from me to Jamie, and raised one brow.

"Aye, she's mine." Jamie nodded and lowered his dirk, but kept a hold on it, frowning at the Indian. "Mind your manners, eh?"

Uninterested in this byplay, one of the younger Indians said something, and gestured impatiently at the carcass on the ground. The older man, who had paid no attention to Jamie's annoyance, replied, drawing his skinning knife from his belt as he turned.

"Here—that's mine to do."

The Indians turned in surprise as Jamie rose to his feet. He gestured with his dirk to the bear, and then pointed the tip firmly at his own chest.

Not waiting for any response, he knelt on the ground beside the carcass, crossed himself, and said something in Gaelic, knife raised above the still body. I didn't know all the words, but I had seen him do it once before, when he had killed a deer on the road from Georgia.

It was the gralloch prayer he had been taught as a boy, learning to hunt in the Highlands of Scotland. It was old, he had told me; so old that some of the words were no longer in common use, so it sounded unfamiliar. But it must be said for any animal slain that was larger than a hare, before the throat was cut or the bellyskin split.

Without hesitation, he made a shallow slash across the chest—no need to bleed the carcass; the heart was long since still—and ripped the skin between the legs, so the pale swell of the intestines bulged up from the narrow, black-furred slit, gleaming in the light.

It took both strength and considerable skill to split and peel back the heavy skin without penetrating the mesenteric membrane that held the visceral sac enclosed. I, who had opened softer human bodies, recognized surgical competence when I saw it. So did the Indians, who were watching the proceedings with critical interest.

Jamie's skill at skinning wasn't what had fixed their attention, though—that was surely a common enough ability here. No, it was the gralloch prayer—I had seen the older man's eyes widen, and his glance at his sons as Jamie knelt over the carcass. They might not know what he was saying, but it was plain from their expressions that they knew exactly what he was doing—and were both surprised, and favorably impressed.

A small trickle of sweat ran down behind Jamie's ear, clear red in the firelight. Skinning a large animal is heavy work, and small spots of fresh blood were showing through the grimy cloth of his shirt.

Before I could offer to take the knife, though, he sat back on his heels and offered the dirk hilt-first to one of the younger Indians.

"Go ahead," he said, gesturing at the bear's half-butchered bulk in invitation. "Ye dinna think I'm going to eat it all myself, I hope."

The man took the knife without hesitation, and kneeling, took over the skinning. The two others glanced at Jamie, and seeing his nod, joined in the work.

He let me sit him on the log once more and covertly clean and dress his shoulder, while he watched the Indians make quick work of the skinning and butchering.

"What was it he did with the whisky?" I asked quietly. "Do you know?"

He nodded, eyes fixed absently on the bloody work by the fire.

"It's a charm. Ye scatter holy water to the four airs of the earth, to preserve yourself from evil. And I suppose whisky is a verra reasonable substitute for holy water, in the circumstances."

I glanced at the Indians, stained to the elbows with the bear's blood, talking casually among themselves. One of them was building a small platform near the fire, a crude layer of sticks laid across rocks set in a square. Another was cutting chunks of meat and stringing them on a peeled green stick for cooking.

"From evil? Do you mean they're afraid of *us*?"

He smiled.

"I shouldna think we're so fearsome, Sassenach; no, from spirits."

Frightened as I had been by the Indians' appearance, it would never have occurred to me that they might have been similarly unnerved by ours. But glancing up at Jamie now, I thought they might pardonably have been excused for nervousness.

Used to him as I was, I was seldom aware anymore of how he appeared to others. But even tired and wounded, he was formidable; straight-backed and wide-shouldered, with slanted eyes that caught the fire in a glitter as blue as the flame's heart.

He sat easily now, relaxed, big hands loose between his thighs. But it was the stillness of a great cat, eyes always watchful behind the calm. Beyond size and quickness, there was undeniably an air of savagery about him; he was as much at home in these woods as the bear had been.

The English had always thought the Scottish Highlanders barbarians; I had never before considered the possibility that others might feel likewise. But these men had seen a ferocious savage, and approached him with due caution, arms at the ready. And Jamie, horrified beforehand at the thought of savage Red Indians, had seen their rituals—so like his own—and known them at once for fellow hunters; civilized men.

Even now, he was speaking to them quite naturally, explaining with broad gestures how the bear had come upon us and how he had killed it. They followed him with avid attention, exclaiming in appreciation in all the right places. When he picked up the remains of the mangled fish and demonstrated my role in the proceedings, they all looked at me and giggled hilariously.

I glared at all four of them.

“Dinner,” I said loudly, “is served.”

We shared a meal of half-roasted meat, corn dodgers, and whisky, watched throughout by the head of the bear, which perched ceremonially on its platform, dead eyes gone dull and gummy.

Feeling mildly glazed, I leaned against the fallen log, listening with half an ear to the conversation. Not that I understood much that was actually said. One of the sons, an accomplished mimic, was giving a spirited rendition of Great Hunts of the Past, alternately playing the parts of hunter and prey, and doing it well enough that even I had no difficulty in telling a deer from a panther.

We had got so far in our acquaintance as an exchange of names. Mine came out in their tongue as “Klah,” which they seemed to find very funny. “Klah,” they said, pointing at me, “Klah-Klah-Klah-Klah-Klah!” Then they all laughed uproariously, their humor fueled by whisky. I might have been tempted to reply in kind, save that I wasn’t sure I could pronounce “Nacognaweto” once, let alone repeatedly.

They were—or so Jamie informed me—Tuscarora. With his gift of tongues, he was already pointing at objects and essaying the Indian names for them. No doubt by dawn he would be exchanging improper stories with them, I thought blearily; they were already telling him jokes.

“Here,” I said, tugging on the edge of Jamie’s plaid. “Are you all right? Because I can’t stay awake to look after you. Are you going to faint and fall headfirst into the fire?”

Jamie patted me absently on the head.

“I’ll be fine now, Sassenach,” he said. Restored by food and whisky, he seemed to be suffering no lingering ill effects from his battle with the bear. What he’d feel like in the morning was another question, I thought.

I was beyond worrying about that, or anything else, though; my head was spinning from the effects of adrenaline, whisky and tobacco, and I crawled off to fetch my blanket. Curled up by Jamie’s feet, I drifted drowsily off to sleep, surrounded by the sacred fumes of smoke and liquor, and watched by the dull, sticky eyes of the bear.

“Know just how you feel,” I told it, and then was gone.

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THE FIRST LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

I was awakened abruptly just after dawn by a tiny stinging sensation on top of my head. I blinked and put up a hand to investigate. The movement startled a large gray jay who had been pulling hairs out of my head, and he shot up into a nearby pine tree, screeching hysterically.

"Serve you right, mate," I muttered, rubbing the top of my head, but couldn't help smiling. I had been told often enough that my hair looked like a bird's nest first thing in the morning; perhaps there was something to it, after all.

The Indians were gone. Luckily, the bear's head had gone with them. I felt my own head with ginger fingers, but aside from the small sting of the jay's depredations, it seemed intact. Either it had been remarkably good whisky, or my sense of intoxication had been due more to the effects of adrenaline and tobacco than to alcohol.

My comb was in the small deerskin pouch where I kept personal necessities and those few medicines I thought might be useful on the trail. I sat up carefully, so as not to wake Jamie. He lay a short distance away on his back, hands crossed, peaceful as the carved effigy on a sarcophagus.

A lot more colorful, though. He lay in the shade, a creeping patch of sunshine sneaking up on him, barely touching the ends of his hair. In the fresh, cool light, he looked like Adam, newly touched by his Creator's hand.

Rather a battered Adam, though; on closer inspection, this was a snap taken well after the Fall. Not the fragile perfection of a child born of clay, nor yet the unused beauty of the youth God loved. No, this one was a man full-formed and powerful; each line of face and body marked with strength and struggle, made to take hold of the world he would wake to, and subdue it.

I moved very quietly, reaching for my pouch. I didn't want to wake him; the opportunity to watch him sleep came rarely. He slept like a cat, ready to spring up at any intimation of threat, and he normally rose from his bed at first light, while I was still floating on the surface of my dreams. Either he had drunk more than I thought last night, or he was in the deep sleep of healing, letting his body mend itself as he lay still.

The horn comb slid soothingly through my hair. For once, I wasn't in a hurry. There was no baby to feed, no child to rouse and dress for school, no work waiting. No patients to see, no paperwork to do.

Nothing could be farther from the sterile confines of a hospital than this place, I thought. Early birds in search of worms were making a cheerful racket in the forest, and a cool, soft breeze blew through the clearing. I smelt a faint whiff of dried blood, and the stale ashes from last night's fire.

Perhaps it was the scent of blood that had made me remember the hospital. From the moment I first walked into one, I had known it to be my sphere, my natural place. And yet I was not out of place, here in the wild-wood. I thought that odd.

The ends of my hair brushed my naked shoulder blades with a pleasant, tickling feel, and the air was cool enough that the small breeze made my skin ripple with gooseflesh, my nipples standing up in tiny puckers. So I hadn't imagined it, I thought, with an inward smile. I certainly hadn't taken my own clothes off before retiring.

I pushed back the thick linen blanket, and saw the flecks of dried blood, smears on my thighs and belly. I felt dampness ooze between my legs, and drew a finger between them. Milky, with a musky scent not my own.

That was enough to bring back the shadow of the dream—or what I had thought must be one; the great bulk of the bear looming over me, darker than the night and reeking of blood, a rush of terror that kept my dream—heavy limbs from moving. My lying limp, pretending death, as he nudged and nuzzled, breath hot on my skin, fur soft on my breasts, gentleness amazing for a beast.

Then that one sharp moment of consciousness; of cold, then hot, as bare skin, not bearskin, touched my own, and then the dizzy slide back into drunken dreaming, the slow and forceful coupling, climax fading into sleep … with a soft Scottish growling in my ear.

I looked down and saw the strawberry crescent of a bite mark on my shoulder.

"No *wonder* you're still asleep," I said in accusation. The sun had touched the curve of his cheek, lighting the eyebrow on that side like a match touched to kindling. He didn't open his eyes, but a slow, sweet smile spread across his face in answer.

* * *

The Indians had left us a portion of the bear meat, tidily wrapped in oiled skin and hung from the branches of a nearby tree to discourage the attentions of skunks and raccoons. After breakfast and a hasty bath in the creek, Jamie took his bearings by sun and mountain.

"That way," he said, nodding toward a distant blue peak. "See where it makes a notch wi' the shorter one? On the other side, it's the Indians' land; the new Treaty Line follows that ridge."

"Someone actually *surveyed* through there?" I peered unbelievingly at the vista of saw-toothed mountain ranges rising from valleys filled with morning mist. The mountains rose ahead of us like an endless series of floating mirages, fading from black-green to blue to purple, the farthest peaks etched black and needle-sharp against a crystal sky.

"Oh, aye." He swung up into his saddle, turning his horse's head so the sun fell over his shoulder. "They had to, to say for sure which land could be taken for settling. I made sure of the boundary before we left Wilmington, and Myers said the same—this side of the highest ridge. I did think to ask the fellows who dined with us last night, though, only to be sure *they* thought so, too." He grinned down at me. "Ready, Sassenach?"

“As I’ll ever be,” I assured him, and turned my horse to follow.

He had rinsed out his shirt—or what was left of it—in the stream. The stained rag of linen was spread out to dry behind his saddle, leaving him half-naked in leather riding breeks, his plaid wrapped carelessly round his waist. The long scratches left by the bear’s attack were black across his fair skin, but there was no visible inflammation, and from the ease with which he moved in the saddle, the wounds seemed not to trouble him.

Neither did anything else, so far as I could see. The tinge of wariness he always bore was still with him; it had been part of him since boyhood—but some weight had lifted in the night. I thought perhaps it was our meeting with the three hunters; this first encounter with savages had been vastly reassuring to us both, and seemed substantially to have eased Jamie’s visions of tomahawk-wielding cannibals behind every tree.

Or it might be the trees themselves—or the mountains. His spirits had grown lighter with every foot upward from the coastal plain. I couldn’t help sharing his apparent joy—but at the same time, felt a growing dread of what that joy might lead to.

By midmorning the slopes had grown too thickly forested to ride any farther. Looking up a nearly vertical rock face into a dizzying tangle of dark branches, sparked with gold and green and brown, I was inclined to think the horses were lucky to be stopping at the bottom. We hobbled them near a stream, thick with grass along its edge, and plunged in on foot, onward and upward, ever deeper into the bloody Forest Primeval.

Towering pines and hemlocks, was it? I thought, clambering over the burled knots of a fallen tree. The monstrous trunks rose so high that the lowest limbs started twenty feet above my head. Longfellow had no idea.

The air was damp, cool but fecund, and my moccasins sank soundlessly into centuries-thick black leaf mold. My own footprint in the soft mud of a stream bank seemed strange and sudden as a dinosaur’s track.

We reached the top of a ridge, only to find another before us, and another beyond. I did not know what we might be looking for, or how we would know if we found it. Jamie covered miles with his tireless hill-walker's stride, taking in everything. I tagged behind, enjoying the scenery, pausing now and then to gather some fascinating plant or root, stowing my treasures in the bag at my belt.

We made our way along the back of one ridge, only to find our way blocked by a great heath bald: a patch of mountain laurel that looked from a distance like a shiny bare patch among the dark conifers, but closer to, proved to be an impenetrable thicket, its springy branches interwoven like a basket.

We backtracked, and turned downward, out from under the huge fragrant firs, across slopes of wild timothy and muhly grass that had gone bright yellow in the sun, and at last back into the soothing green of oak and hickory, on a wooded bluff that overlooked a small and nameless river.

It was cool under the trees' sudden shade, and I sighed in relief, lifting the hair off my neck to admit a breath of air. Jamie heard me and turned, smiling, holding back a limber branch so that I could follow him.

We didn't talk much; aside from the breath required for climbing, the mountain itself seemed to inhibit speech; full of secret green places, it was a vivid offspring of the ancient Scottish mountains, thick with forest, and twice the height of those barren black parental crags. Still, its air held the same injunction to silence, the same promise of enchantment.

The ground here was covered in a foot-deep layer of fallen leaves, soft and spongy underfoot, and the spaces between the trees seemed illusionary, as though to pass between those huge, lichened trunks might transport one suddenly to another dimension of reality.

Jamie's hair sparked in the occasional shafts of sunlight, a torch to follow through the shadows of the wood. It had darkened somewhat over the years, to a deep, rich auburn, but the long days of riding and walking in the sun had bleached his crown to copper fire. He had lost the thong that bound his hair; he paused, and brushed the thick damp locks back from his face, so that I saw the startling streak of white just above one temple. Normally hidden among the darker red, it showed rarely—a legacy of the bullet wound received in the cave of Abandawe.

Despite the warmth of the day, I shivered slightly in recollection. I would greatly have preferred to forget Haiti and its savage mysteries altogether, but there was little hope of that. Sometimes, on the verge of sleep, I would hear the voice of the cave-wind, and the nagging echo of the thought that came in its wake: *Where else?*

We climbed a granite ledge, thick with moss and lichen, wet with the omnipresent flow of water, then followed the path of a descending freshet, brushing aside long grass that pulled at our legs, dodging the drooping branches of mountain laurel and the thick-leaved rhododendrons.

Wonders sprang up by my feet, small orchids and brilliant fungi, trembling and shiny as jellies, shimmering red and black on fallen tree trunks. Dragonflies hung over the water, jewels immobile in the air, vanishing in mist.

I felt dazed with abundance, ravished by beauty. Jamie's face bore the dream-stunned look of a man who knows himself sleeping, but does not wish to wake. Paradoxically, the better I felt, the worse I felt, too; desperately happy—and desperately afraid. This was his place, and surely he felt it as well as I.

In early afternoon we stopped to rest and drink from a small spring at the edge of a natural clearing. The ground beneath the maple trees was covered with a thick carpet of dark green leaves, among which I caught a sudden telltale flash of red.

"Wild strawberries!" I said with delight.

The berries were dark red and tiny, about the size of my thumb joint. By the standards of modern horticulture, they would have been too tart, nearly bitter, but eaten with a meal consisting of half-cooked cold bear meat and rock-hard corn dodgers, they were delicious—fresh explosions of flavor in my mouth; pinpricks of sweetness on my tongue.

I gathered handfuls in my cloak, not caring for stains—what was a little strawberry juice among the stains of pine pitch, soot, leaf smudges and simple dirt? By the time I had finished, my fingers were sticky and pungent with juice, my stomach was comfortably full, and the inside of my mouth felt as though it had been sandpapered, from the tartly acid taste of the berries. Still, I couldn't resist reaching for just one more.

Jamie leaned his back against a sycamore, eyelids half lowered against the dazzle of afternoon sun. The little clearing held light like a cup, still and limpid.

"What d'ye think of this place, Sassenach?" he asked.

"I think it's beautiful. Don't you?"

He nodded, looking down between the trees, where a gentle slope full of wild hay and timothy fell away and rose again in a line of willows that fringed the distant river.

"I am thinking," Jamie said, a little awkwardly. "There is the spring here in the wood. That meadow below—" He waved a hand toward the scrim of alders that screened the ridge from the grassy slope. "It would do for a few beasts at first, and then the land nearer the river might be cleared and put in crops. The rise of the land here is good for drainage. And here, see …" Caught by visions, he rose to his feet, pointing.

I looked carefully; to me, the place seemed little different from any of the steep wooded slopes and grassy coves through which we had wandered for the last couple of days. But to Jamie, with his farmer's eye, houses and stock pens and fields sprang up like fairy mushrooms in the shadows of the trees.

Happiness was sticking out all over him, like porcupine quills. My heart felt like lead in my chest.

"You're thinking we might settle here, then? Take the Governor's offer?"

He looked at me, stopping abruptly in his speculations.

"We might," he said. "If—"

He broke off and looked sideways at me. Sun-reddened as he was, I couldn't tell whether he was flushed with sun or shyness.

"D'ye believe in signs at all, Sassenach?"

"What sorts of signs?" I asked guardedly.

In answer, he bent, plucked a sprig from the ground, and dropped it into my hand—the dark green leaves like small round Chinese fans, a pure white flower on a slender stem, and on another a half-ripe berry, its shoulders pale with shade, blushing crimson at the tip.

"This. It's ours, d'ye see?" he said.

"Ours?"

"The Frasers', I mean," he explained. One large, blunt finger gently prodded the berry. "Strawberries ha' always been the emblem of the clan—it's what the name meant, to start with, when a Monsieur Fréselière came across from France wi' King William that was—and took hold of land in the Scottish mountains for his trouble."

King William that was. William the Conqueror, that was. Perhaps not the oldest of the Highland clans, the Frasers had still a distinguished heritage.

"Warriors from the start, were you?"

"And farmers, too." The doubt in his eyes was fading into a smile.

I didn't say what I was thinking, but I knew well enough that the thought must lie in his mind as well. There was no more of clan Fraser save scattered fragments, those who had survived by flight, by stratagem or luck. The clans had been smashed at Culloden, their chieftains slaughtered in battle or murdered by law.

Yet here he stood, tall and straight in his plaid, the dark steel of a Highland dirk by his side. Warrior and farmer both. And if the soil beneath his feet was not that of Scotland, it was free air that he breathed—and a mountain wind that stirred his hair, lifting copper strands to the summer sun.

I smiled up at him, fighting back my growing dismay.

"Fréselière, eh? Mr. Strawberry? He grew them, did he, or was he only fond of eating them?"

"Either or both," he said dryly, "or it was maybe only that he was redheided, aye?"

I laughed, and he hunkered down beside me, unpinning his plaid.

"It's a rare plant," he said, touching the sprig in my open hand. "Flowers, fruit and leaves all together at the one time. The white flowers are for honor, and red fruit for courage—and the green leaves are for constancy."

My throat felt tight as I looked at him.

“They got that one right,” I said.

He caught my hand in his own, squeezing my fingers around the tiny stem.

“And the fruit is the shape of a heart,” he said softly, and bent to kiss me.

The tears were near the surface; at least I had a good excuse for the one that oozed free. He dabbed it away, then stood up and pulled his belt loose, letting the plaid fall in folds around his feet. Then he stripped off shirt and breeks and smiled down at me, naked.

“There’s no one here,” he said. “No one but us.”

I would have said this seemed no reason, but I felt what it was he meant. We had been for days surrounded by vastness and threat, the wilderness no farther away than the pale circle of our fire. Yet here, we were alone together, part and parcel of the place, with no need in broad daylight to hold the wilderness at bay.

“In the old days, men would do this, to give fertility to the fields,” he said, giving me a hand to rise.

“I don’t see any fields.” And wasn’t sure whether to hope I never would. Nonetheless, I skimmed off my buckskin shirt, and pulled loose the knot of my makeshift brassiere. He eyed me with appreciation.

“Well, no doubt I shall have to cut down a few trees first, but that can wait, aye?”

We made a bed of plaid and cloaks, and lay down upon it naked, skin to skin among the yellow grasses and the scent of balsam and wild strawberries.

We touched each other for what might have been a very long time or no time at all, together in the garden of earthly delight. I forced away the thoughts that had plagued me up the mountain, determined only to share his joy for as long as it lasted. I grasped him tight and he breathed in deep and pressed himself hard into my hand.

“And what would Eden be without a serpent?” I murmured, fingers stroking.

His eyes creased into blue triangles, so close I could see the black of his pupils.

“And will ye eat wi’ me, then, *mo chridhe*? Of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil?”

I put out the tip of my tongue and drew it along his lower lip in answer. He shivered under my fingers, though the air was warm and sweet.

“Je suis prest,” I said. *“Monsieur Fréselière.”*

His head bent and his mouth fastened on my nipple, swollen as one of the tiny ripe berries.

“Madame Fréselière,” he whispered back. *“Je suis à votre service.”*

And then we shared the fruit and flowers, and the green leaves covering all.

We lay tangled in drowsiness, stirring only to bat away inquisitive insects, until the first shadows touched our feet. Jamie rose quietly, and covered me with a cloak, thinking me asleep. I heard the stealthy rustle as he dressed himself, and then the soft swish of his passage through the grass.

I rolled over, and saw him a little distance away, standing at the edge of the wood, looking out over the fall of land toward the river.

He wore nothing but his plaid, crumpled and blood-stained, belted round his waist. With his hair unbound and tangled round his shoulders, he looked the wild Highlander he was. What I had thought a trap for him—his family, his clan—was his strength. And what I had thought my strength—my solitude, my lack of ties—was my weakness.

Having known closeness, both its good and its bad, he had the strength to leave it, to step away from all notions of safety and venture out alone. And I—so proud of self-sufficiency at one time—could not bear the thought of loneliness again.

I had resolved to say nothing, to live in the moment, to accept whatever came. But the moment was here, and I could not accept it. I saw his head lift in decision, and at the same moment, saw his name carved in cold stone. Terror and despair washed over me.

As though he had heard the echo of my unspoken cry, he turned his head toward me. Whatever he saw in my face brought him swiftly to my side.

"What is it, Sassenach?"

There was no point in lying; not when he could see me.

"I'm afraid," I blurted out.

He glanced quickly round for danger, one hand reaching for his knife, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Not that. Jamie—hold me. Please."

He gathered me close against him, wrapping the cloak around me. I was shivering, though the air was still warm.

"It's all right, *a nighean donn,*" he murmured. "I'm here. What's frightened ye, then?"

"You," I said, and clung tight. His heart thumped just under my ear, strong and steady. "Here. It makes me afraid to think of you here, of us coming here—"

"Afraid?" he asked. "Of what, Sassenach?" His arms tightened around me. "I did say when we were wed that I would always see ye fed, no?" He pulled me closer, tucking my head into the curve of his shoulder.

"I gave ye three things that day," he said softly. "My name, my family, and the protection of my body. You'll have those things always, Sassenach—so long as we both shall live. No matter where we may be. I willna let ye go hungry or cold; I'll let nothing harm ye, ever."

"I'm not afraid of any of that," I blurted. "I'm afraid you'll die, and I can't stand it if you do, Jamie, I really can't!"

He jerked back a little, surprised, and looked down into my face.

"Well, I'll do my best to oblige ye, Sassenach," he said, "but ye ken I may not have all the say in the matter." His face was serious, but one corner of his mouth curled up irrepressibly.

The sight did me in utterly.

"Don't you laugh!" I said furiously. "Don't you *dare* laugh!"

"Oh, I'm not," he assured me, trying to straighten his face.

"You are!" I punched him in the chest. Now he *was* laughing. I punched him again, harder, and before I knew it, was hammering him in earnest, my fists making small dull thumps against his plaid. He grabbed for my hand, but I ducked my head and bit him on the thumb. He let out a cry and jerked his hand away.

He examined the toothmarks for a moment, then looked at me, one eyebrow raised. The humor lingered in his eyes, but at least he'd stopped laughing, the bastard.

"Sassenach, ye've seen me damn near dead a dozen times, and not turned a hair. Whyever are ye takin' on so now, and me not even ill?"

"Never turned a hair?" I gawked at him in furious amazement. "You think I wasn't *upset*?"

He rubbed a knuckle across his upper lip, eyeing me in some amusement.

"Oh. Well, I did think ye cared, of course. But I never thought of it in just that way, I admit."

"Of course you didn't! And if you had, it wouldn't make any difference. You—you—Scot!" It was the worst thing I could think of to call him. Finding no more words, I turned and stomped away.

Unfortunately, stomping has relatively little effect when executed in bare feet on a grassy meadow. I stepped on something sharp, uttered a small cry, and limped a few more steps before having to stop.

I had stepped on some sort of cocklebur; half a dozen vicious caltrops were stuck in my bare sole, blood drops welling from the tiny punctures. Precariously balanced on one foot, I tried to pick them out, cursing under my breath.

I wobbled and nearly fell. A strong hand caught me under the elbow and steadied me. I set my teeth and finished jerking out the spiny burs. I pulled my elbow out of his grasp and turning on my heel, walked—with a good deal more care—back to where I had left my clothing.

Dropping the cloak on the ground, I proceeded to dress, with what dignity was possible. Jamie stood, arms folded, watching me without comment.

"When God threw Adam out of Paradise, at least Eve went with him," I said, talking to my fingers as I fastened the drawstring of my trousers.

"Aye, that's true," he agreed, after a cautious pause. He gave me a sidelong glance, to see whether I was about to hit him again.

"Ah—ye havena been eating any o' the plants ye picked this morning, have ye, Sassenach? No, I didna think so," he added hastily, seeing my expression. "I only wondered. Myers says some things here give ye the nightmare something fierce."

"I am not having nightmares," I said, with more force than strictly necessary had I been telling the truth. I *was* having waking nightmares, though ingestion of hallucinogenic plant substances had nothing to do with it.

He sighed.

"D'ye mean to tell me straight out what ye're talkin' about, Sassenach, or do ye mean me to suffer a bit first?"

I glared at him, caught as usual between the urge to laugh and the urge to hit him with a blunt object. Then a wave of despair overcame both laughter and anger. My shoulders slumped in surrender.

"I'm talking about you," I said.

"Me? Why?"

"Because you're a bloody Highlander, and you're all about honor and courage and constancy, and I know you can't help it, and I wouldn't want you to, only—only damn it, it's going to take you to Scotland and get you killed, and there's nothing I can do about it!"

He gave me a look of incredulity.

"Scotland?" he said, as though I'd said something completely mad.

"Scotland! Where your bloody grave is!"

He rubbed a hand slowly through his hair, looking down the bridge of his nose at me.

"Oh," he said at last. "I see, then. Ye think if I go to Scotland, I must die there, since that's where I'll be buried. Is that it?"

I nodded, too upset to speak.

"Mmphm. And just why is it ye think I'm going to Scotland?" he asked carefully.

I glared at him in exasperation, and waved an arm at the expanse of wilderness around us.

“Where the hell else are you going to get settlers for this land? Of course you’re going to Scotland!”

He looked at me, exasperated in turn.

“How in the name of God d’ye think I should do that, Sassenach? I might have, when I had the gems, but now? I’ve maybe ten pound to my name, and that’s borrowed. Shall I fly to Scotland like a bird, then? And lead folk back behind me, walkin’ on the water?”

“You’ll think of something,” I said miserably. “You always do.”

He gave me a queer look, then looked away and paused for several moments before answering.

“I hadna realized ye thought I was God Almighty, Sassenach,” he said at last.

“I don’t,” I said. “Moses, maybe.” The words were facetious, but neither one of us was joking.

He walked away a bit, hands clasped behind his back.

“Watch out for the burs,” I called after him, seeing him heading for the location of my recent mishap. He altered his path in response, but said nothing. He walked to and fro across the clearing, head bent in thought. At last he came back, to stand in front of me.

“I canna do it alone,” he said quietly. “You’re right about that. But I dinna think I need go to Scotland for my settlers.”

“What else?”

“My men—the men who were wi’ me in Ardsmuir,” he said. “They’re here already.”

“But you haven’t any idea where they are,” I protested. “And besides, they were transported years ago! They’ll be settled; they won’t want to pull up stakes and come to the ends of the bloody earth with you!”

He smiled, a little wryly.

“You did, Sassenach.”

I took a deep breath. The nagging weight of fear that had burdened my heart for the last weeks had eased. With that concern lifted, though, there was now room in my mind to contemplate the staggering difficulty of the task he was setting himself. Track down men scattered over three colonies, persuade them to come with him, and simultaneously find sufficient capital to finance the clearing of land and planting of crops. To say nothing of the sheer enormity of labor involved in carving some small foothold out of this virgin wilderness.

"I'll think of something," he said, smiling slightly as he watched doubts and uncertainties flit across my face. "I always do, aye?"

All of my breath went out in a long sigh.

"You do," I said. "Jamie—are you sure? Your aunt Jocasta—"

He dismissed that possibility with a flick of his hand.

"No," he said. "Never."

I still hesitated, feeling guilty.

"You wouldn't—it's not just because of me? What I said about keeping slaves?"

"No," he said. He paused, and I saw the two twisted fingers of his right hand twitch. He saw it, too, and stopped the movement abruptly.

"I have lived as a slave, Claire," he said quietly, head bent. "And I couldna live, knowing there was a man on earth who felt toward me as I have felt toward those who thought they owned me."

I reached out and covered his crippled hand with my own. Tears ran down my cheeks, warm and soothing as summer rain.

"You won't leave me?" I asked at last. "You won't die?"

He shook his head, and squeezed my hand tight.

"You are my courage, as I am your conscience," he whispered. "You are my heart—and I your compassion. We are neither of us whole, alone. Do ye not know that, Sassenach?"

"I do know that," I said, and my voice shook. "That's why I'm so afraid. I don't want to be half a person again, I can't bear it."

He thumbed a lock of hair off my wet cheek, and pulled me into his arms, so close that I could feel the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed. He was so solid, so alive, ruddy hair curling gold against bare skin. And yet I had held him so before—and lost him.

His hand touched my cheek, warm despite the dampness of my skin.

"But do ye not see how verra small a thing is the notion of death, between us two, Claire?" he whispered.

My hands curled into fists against his chest. No, I didn't think it a small thing at all.

"All the time after ye left me, after Culloden—I was dead then, was I not?"

"I thought you were. That's why I—oh." I took a deep, tremulous breath, and he nodded.

"Two hundred years from now, I shall most certainly *be* dead, Sassenach," he said. He smiled crookedly. "Be it Indians, wild beasts, a plague, the hangman's rope, or only the blessing of auld age—I will be dead."

"Yes."

"And while ye were there—in your own time—I *was* dead, no?"

I nodded, wordless. Even now, I could look back and see the abyss of despair into which that parting had dropped me, and from which I had climbed, one painful inch at a time.

Now I stood with him again upon the summit of life, and could not contemplate descent. He reached down and plucked a stalk of grass, spreading the soft green beards between his fingers.

" 'Man is like the grass of the field,' " he quoted softly, brushing the slender stem over my knuckles, where they rested against his chest. " 'Today it blooms; tomorrow it withers and is cast into the oven.' "

He lifted the silky green tuft to his lips and kissed it, then touched it gently to my mouth.

"I was dead, my Sassenach—and yet all that time, I loved you."

I closed my eyes, feeling the tickle of the grass on my lips, light as the touch of sun and air.

"I loved you, too," I whispered. "I always will."

The grass fell away. Eyes still closed, I felt him lean toward me, and his mouth on mine, warm as sun, light as air.

"So long as my body lives, and yours—we are one flesh," he whispered. His fingers touched me, hair and chin and neck and breast, and I breathed his breath and felt him solid under my hand.

Then I lay with my head on his shoulder, the strength of him supporting me, the words deep and soft in his chest.

"And when my body shall cease, my soul will still be yours. Claire—I swear by my hope of heaven, I will not be parted from you."

The wind stirred the leaves of the chestnut trees nearby, and the scents of late summer rose up rich around us; pine and grass and strawberries, sunwarmed stone and cool water, and the sharp, musky smell of his body next to mine.

"Nothing is lost, Sassenach; only changed."

"That's the first law of thermodynamics," I said, wiping my nose.

"No," he said. "That's faith."

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PART SIX

Je T’Aime

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17

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

Inverness, Scotland, December 23, 1969

He checked the train schedule for the dozenth time, then prowled around the manse's living room, too restless to settle. An hour yet to wait.

The room was half dismantled, with piles of cartons lying higgledy-piggledy on every surface. He'd promised to have the place cleared out by the New Year, except for the pieces Fiona wanted to keep.

He wandered down the hall and into the kitchen, stood staring into the ancient refrigerator for a moment, decided he wasn't hungry and closed the door.

He wished that Mrs. Graham and the Reverend could have met Brianna, and she them. He smiled at the empty kitchen table, remembering an adolescent conversation with the two elderly people, when he, in the grip of a mad—and unrequited—lust for the tobacconist's daughter, had asked how to know if one was truly in love.

"If ye have to ask yourself if you're in love, laddie—then ye aren't," Mrs. Graham had assured him, tapping her spoon on the edge of her mixing bowl for emphasis. "And keep your paws off wee Mavis MacDowell, or her Da will murder ye."

"When you're in love, Rog, you'll know it with no telling," the Reverend had chimed in, dipping a finger in the cake batter. He ducked in mock alarm as Mrs. Graham raised a threatening spoon, and laughed. “And do mind yourself with young Mavis, lad; I’m not old enough to be a grandfather.”

Well, they’d been right. He knew, with no telling—had known since he’d met Brianna Randall. What he didn’t know for sure was whether Brianna felt the same.

He couldn’t wait any longer. He slapped his pocket to be sure of his keys, ran down the stairs and out into the winter rain that had begun to pelt down just after breakfast. They did say a cold shower was the thing. Hadn’t worked with Mavis, though.

December 24, 1969

“Now, the plum pudding’s in the warming oven, and the hard sauce in the wee pan to the back,” Fiona instructed him, pulling on her fuzzy woolen hat. It was red, Fiona was short, and in it she looked like a garden gnome.

“Don’t turn up the flame too high, mind. And dinna turn it out altogether, either, or you’ll never get it lit again. And here, I’ve the directions for the birds for tomorrow all written out, they’re stuffed in their pan, and I’ve left the veg already chopped to go along in the big yellow bowl in the fridge, and …” She fumbled in the pocket of her jeans and withdrew a handwritten slip of paper, which she thrust into his hand.

He patted her on the head.

“Don’t worry, Fiona,” he assured her. “We won’t burn the place down. Nor starve, either.”

She frowned dubiously, hesitating at the door. Her fiancé, sitting in his car outside, revved his engine in an impatient sort of way.

“Aye, well. You’re sure the two of ye won’t come with us? Ernie’s Mam wouldna mind it a bit, and I’m sure she’d not think it right, just the two of ye left here by yourselves to keep Christmas …”

“Don’t worry, Fiona,” he said, edging her gently backward out the door. “We’ll manage fine. You have a nice holiday with Ernie, and don’t bother about us.”

She sighed, giving in reluctantly. “Aye, I suppose you’ll do.” A short, irritable *beep!* from behind made her turn and glare at the car.

“Well, I’m *coming* then, aren’t I?” she demanded. Turning back, she beamed suddenly at Roger, threw her arms about him, and standing on tiptoe, kissed him firmly on the lips.

She drew back and winked conspiratorially, screwing up her small, round face. “*That’ll* sort our Ernie out,” she whispered. “Happy Christmas, Rog!” she said loudly, and with a gay wave, hopped off the porch and strolled in leisurely fashion toward the car, hips swinging just a bit.

Its engine roaring in protest, the car shot off with a squeal of tires before the door had quite shut behind Fiona. Roger stood on the porch waving, pleased that Ernie wasn’t an especially massive bloke.

The door opened behind him and Brianna poked her head out.

“What are you doing out here with no coat on?” she inquired. “It’s freezing!”

He hesitated, tempted to tell her. After all, it had evidently worked on Ernie. But it was Christmas Eve, he reminded himself. In spite of the lowering sky and plummeting temperature, he felt warm and tingling all over. He smiled at her.

“Just seeing Fiona off,” he said, pulling back the door. “Shall we see if we can make lunch without blowing up the kitchen?”

They managed sandwiches without incident, and returned after lunch to the study. The room was nearly empty now; only a few shelves of books remained to be sorted and packed.

On the one hand, Roger felt immense relief that the job was nearly done. On the other, it was sad to see the warm, cluttered study reduced to such a shell of its former self.

The Reverend’s big desk had been emptied and removed to the garage for storage, the floor-to-ceiling shelves denuded of their huge burden of books, the cork-lined wall stripped of its many layers of fluttering papers. This process reminded Roger uncomfortably of chicken-plucking, the result being a stark and pathetic bareness that made him want to avert his eyes.

There was one square of paper still pinned to the cork. He'd take that down last.

"What about these?" Brianna waved a feather duster inquiringly at a small stack of books that sat on the table before her. An array of boxes gaped on the floor at her feet, half filled with books destined for various fates: libraries, antiquarian societies, friends of the Reverend's, Roger's personal use.

"They're autographed, but not inscribed to anybody," she said, handing him the top one. "You've got the set he inscribed to your father, but do you want these, too? They're first editions."

Roger turned the book over in his hands. It was one of Frank Randall's, a lovely book, beautifully typeset and bound to match the elegance of its scholarly content.

"You should have them, shouldn't you?" he said. Without waiting for an answer, he set the book gently into a small box that rested on the seat of an armchair. "Your dad's work, after all."

"I've got some," she protested. "Tons. Boxes and boxes."

"Not autographed, though?"

"Well, no." She picked up another of the books and flipped it open to the flyleaf, where *Tempora mutantur nos et mutamur in illis—F. W. Randall* was written in a strong, slanting hand. She rubbed a finger gently over the signature, and her wide mouth softened.

"*The times are changing, and we with them*. You're sure you don't want them, Roger?"

"Sure," he said, and smiled. He waved a wry hand at their book-strewn surroundings. "Don't worry, you won't leave me short."

She laughed and put the books in her own box, then went back to her work, dusting and wiping the stacked and sorted books before packing them. Most hadn't been cleaned in forty years, and she was liberally smudged herself by this time, long fingers grimy and the cuffs of her white shirt nearly black with filth.

"Won't you miss this place?" she asked. She wiped a strand of hair out of her eyes and gestured at the spacious room. "You grew up here, didn't you?"

"Yes, and yes," he answered, heaving another full carton onto the pile to be shipped to the university library. "Not much choice, though."

"I guess you couldn't live here," she agreed regretfully. "Since you have to be in Oxford most of the time. But do you have to sell it?"

"I *can't* sell it. It's not mine." He stooped to get a grip on an extra-large carton, and rose slowly to his feet, grunting with effort. He staggered across the room and dropped it onto the stack, with a thud that raised small puffs of dust from the boxes beneath it.

"Whew!" He blew out his breath, grinning at her. "God help the antiquarians when they pick that one up."

"What do you mean, it's not yours?"

"What I said," he replied matter-of-factly. "It isn't mine. The house and land belong to the church; Dad lived here for near fifty years, but he didn't own it. It belongs to the Parish Council. The new minister doesn't want it—he's got money of his own, and a wife who likes mod cons—so the Council's putting it to let. Fiona and her Ernie are taking it, heaven help them."

"Just the two of them?"

"It's cheap. For good reason," he added wryly. "She wants lots of kids, though—be room for an army of them here, I can tell you." Designed in Victorian times for ministers with numerous families, the manse had twelve rooms—not counting one unmodernized and highly inconvenient bath.

"The wedding's in February, so that's why I've got to finish the clearing up over Christmas, to give time for the cleaners and painters to come in. Shame to make you work on your holiday, though. Maybe we'll drive down to Fort William Monday?"

Brianna picked up another book, but didn't put it in the box right away.

"So your home's gone for good," she said, slowly. "It doesn't seem right—though I'm glad Fiona will have it."

Roger shrugged.

"Not as though I meant to settle in Inverness," he said. "And it's not as though it were an ancestral seat or anything." He waved at the cracked linoleum, the grubby enamel paint, and the ancient glass-bowl light fixture overhead. “Can’t put it on the National Trust and charge people two quid each to tour the place.”

She smiled at that, and returned to her sorting. She seemed pensive, though, a small frown visible between her thick red brows. Finally she put the last book in the box, stretched and sighed.

“The Reverend had nearly as many books as my parents,” she said. “Between Mama’s medical books and Daddy’s historical stuff, they left enough to supply a whole library. It’ll probably take six months to sort it all out, when I get ho—when I go back.” She bit her lip lightly, and turned to pick up a roll of packing tape, picking at it with a fingernail. “I told the real estate agent she could list the house for sale by summer.”

“That’s what’s been bothering you?” he said slowly, realization dawning as he watched her face. “Thinking about taking apart the house you grew up in—having your home gone for good?”

One shoulder lifted slightly, her eyes still fixed on the recalcitrant tape.

“If you can stand it, I guess I can. Besides,” she went on, “it’s not that bad. Mama took care of almost everything—she found a tenant and had the house leased for a year, so I could have time to decide what to do, without worrying about it just sitting there vacant. But it’s silly to keep it; it’s way too big for me to live in alone.”

“You might get married.” He blurted it out without thinking.

“Guess I might,” she said. She glanced at him sidelong, and the corner of her mouth twitched in what might have been amusement. “Someday. But what if my husband didn’t want to live in Boston?”

It occurred to him quite suddenly that her concern over his losing the manse might—just possibly—have been that she envisioned herself living in it.

“D’you want kids?” he asked abruptly. He hadn’t thought to ask before, but hoped like hell she did.

She looked momentarily startled, but then laughed.

“Only children usually want big families, don’t they?”

“Couldn’t say,” he said. “But I do.” He leaned across the boxes and kissed her suddenly.

“Me too,” she said. Her eyes went slanted when she smiled. She didn’t look away, but a faint blush made her look like a spring-ripe apricot.

He wanted kids, all right; just at the moment, he wanted to do what led to kids a lot more.

“But maybe we should finish clearing up, first?”

“What?” The sense of her words penetrated only vaguely. “Oh. Yeah. Right, guess we should.”

He bent his head and kissed her again, slowly this time. She had the most wonderful mouth; wide and full-lipped, almost too big for her face—but not quite.

He had her round the waist, his other hand tangled in silky hair. The nape of her neck was smooth and warm under his hand; he gripped it and she shivered slightly, mouth opening in a small sign of submission that made him want to lean her backward over his arm, carry her down to the hearth rug, and …

A brisk rapping made him jerk his head up, startled out of the embrace.

“Who’s *that*?” Brianna exclaimed, hand to her heart.

The study was lined on one side by floor-to-ceiling windows—the Reverend had been a painter—and a square, whiskered face was pressed against one of these, nose nearly flattened with interest.

“That,” said Roger through his teeth, “is the postman, MacBeth. What the hell is the old bugger doing out there?”

As though hearing this inquiry, Mr. MacBeth stepped back a pace, drew a letter out of his bag and brandished it jovially at the occupants of the study.

“A letter,” he mouthed elaborately, looking at Brianna. He cut his eyes toward Roger and beetled his brows in a knowing leer.

By the time Roger reached the front door, Mr. MacBeth was standing on the porch, holding the letter.

“Why did you not put it in the letter slot, for God’s sake?” Roger demanded. “Give it here, then.”

Mr. MacBeth held the letter out of reach and assumed an air of injured dignity, somewhat impaired by his attempts to see Brianna over Roger’s shoulder.

"Thought it might be important, didn't I? From the States, i'nt it? And it's for the young lady, not you, lad." Screwing up his face into a massive and indelicate wink, he oiled past Roger, arm extended toward Brianna.

"Ma'am," he said, simpering through his whiskers. "With the compliments of Her Majesty's Mail."

"Thank you." Brianna was still rosily flushed, but she'd smoothed her hair, and smiled at MacBeth with every evidence of self-possession. She took the letter and glanced at it, but made no move to open it. The envelope was handwritten, Roger saw, with red postal-forwarding marks, but the distance was too far to make out the return address.

"Visiting, are ye, ma'am?" MacBeth asked heartily. "Just the two of ye here, all on your ownie-o?" He was giving Brianna a rolling eye, looking her up and down with frank interest.

"Oh, no," Brianna said, straight-faced. She folded the letter in half and stuffed it into the back pocket of her jeans. "Uncle Angus is staying with us; he's asleep upstairs."

Roger bit the inside of his cheek. Uncle Angus was a moth-eaten stuffed Scottie, a remnant of his own youth, unearthed during the cleaning of the house. Brianna, charmed with him, had dusted off his plaid bonnet and placed him on her own bed in the guest room.

The postman's heavy brows rose.

"Oh," he said, rather blankly. "Aye, I see. He'll be an American, too, then, your uncle Angus?"

"No, he's from Aberdeen." Other than a slight pinkening at the end of her nose, Brianna's face showed nothing but the most open guilelessness.

Mr. MacBeth was enchanted.

"Oh, you've a wee bit of Scots in your family, then! Well, and I should have known it, now, you wi' that hair. A bonnie, bonnie lass, and no mistake." He shook his head in admiration, lechery replaced by a pseudoavuncular air that Roger found only slightly less objectionable.

"Yes, well." Roger cleared his throat meaningfully. "I'm sure we don't want to keep you from your work, MacBeth."

“Oh, it’s no trouble, no trouble at all,” the postman assured him, craning to catch a last glimpse of Brianna as he turned to go. “Nay rest for the weary, is there, my dear?”

“That’s ‘no rest for the *wicked,’* ” Roger said, with some emphasis, opening the door. “Good day to you, MacBeth.”

MacBeth glanced at him, the shadow of a leer back on his face.

“A good day to *you,* Mr. Wakefield.” He leaned close, dug Roger in the ribs with an elbow, and whispered hoarsely, “And a better night, if her uncle sleeps sound!”

“Here, going to read your letter?” He plucked it from the table where she had dropped it, and held it out to her.

She flushed slightly and took it from him.

“It’s not important. I’ll look at it later.”

“I’ll go to the kitchen, if it’s private.”

The flush deepened.

“It’s not. It’s nothing.”

He raised one eyebrow. She shrugged impatiently, and ripped open the flap, pulling out a single sheet of paper.

“See for yourself, then. I told you, it’s nothing important.”

Oh, isn’t it? he thought, but didn’t say anything aloud. He took the proffered sheet and glanced at it.

It was in fact nothing much; a notification forwarded from the library at her university, to the effect that a specific reference she had requested was unfortunately not obtainable via interlibrary loan, but could be viewed in the private collection of the Stuart Papers, held in the Royal Annexe of Edinburgh University.

She was watching him when he looked up, arms folded, her eyes shiny and lips tight, daring him to say something.

“You should have told me you were looking for him,” he said quietly. “I could have helped.”

She shrugged slightly, and he saw her throat move as she swallowed.

"I know how to do historical research. I used to help my fa—" She broke off, lower lip caught between her teeth.

"Yeah, I see," he said, and did. He took her by the arm and steered her down the hall to the kitchen, where he plunked her in a chair at the battered old table.

"I'll put the kettle on."

"I don't like tea," she protested.

"You *need* tea," Roger said firmly, and lit the gas with a fiery *whoosh*. He turned to the cupboard and took down cups and saucers, and—as an after-thought—the bottle of whisky from the top shelf.

"And I *really* don't like whisky," Brianna said, eyeing it. She started to push herself away from the table, but Roger stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"I like whisky," he said. "But I hate to drink alone. You'll keep me company, aye?" He smiled at her, willing her to smile back. At last she did, grudgingly, and relaxed in her seat.

He sat down opposite her, and filled his cup halfway with the pungent amber liquid. He breathed in the fumes with pleasure, and sipped slowly, letting the fine strong stuff roll down his throat.

"Ah," he breathed. "Glen Morangie. Sure you won't join me? A wee splash in your tea, maybe?"

She shook her head silently, but when the kettle began to whistle, she got up to take it off the fire and pour the hot water into the waiting pot. Roger got up and came behind her, slipping his arms around her waist.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of," he said softly. "You've a right to know, if you can. Jamie Fraser was your father, after all."

"But he wasn't—not really." Her head was bent; he could see the neat whorl of a cowlick at her crown, an echo of the one in the center of her forehead, that lifted her hair in a soft wave off her face.

"I *had* a father," she said, sounding a little choked. "Daddy—Frank Randall—he *was* my father, and I love—loved him. It doesn't seem right to—to go looking for something else, like he wasn't enough, like—"

"That's not it, then, and you know it." He turned her round and lifted her chin with a finger.

"It's nothing to do with Frank Randall or how you feel about him—aye, he *was* your father, and there's not a thing will ever change that. But it's natural to be curious, to want to know."

"Did *you* ever want to know?" Her hand came up and brushed his away—but she clung to his fingers, holding on.

He took a deep breath, finding comfort in the whisky.

"Yeah. Yes, I did. You need to, I think." His fingers tightened around hers, drawing her toward the table. "Come sit down; I'll tell you."

He knew what missing a father felt like, especially an unknown father. For a time, just after he'd started school, he'd pored obsessively over his father's medals, carried the little velvet case about in his pocket, boasted to his friends about his father's heroism.

"Told stories about him, all made up," he said, looking down into the aromatic depths of his teacup. "Got bashed for being a nuisance, got smacked at school for lying." He looked up at her, and smiled, a little painfully.

"I had to make him real, see?"

She nodded, eyes dark with understanding.

He took another deep gulp of the whisky, not bothering to savor it.

"Luckily Dad—the Reverend—he seemed to know the trouble. He began to tell me stories about my father; the real ones. Nothing special, nothing heroic—he was a hero, all right, Jerry MacKenzie, got shot down and all, but the stories Dad told were all about what he was like as a kid—how he made a martin house, but made the hole too big and a cuckoo got in; what he liked to eat when he'd come here on holiday and they'd go into town for a treat; how he filled his pockets with winkles off the rocks and forgot about them and ruined his trousers with the stink—" He broke off, and smiled at her, his throat still tight at the memory.

"He made my father real to me. And I missed him more than ever, because then I knew a bit about what I *was* missing—but I had to know."

"Some people would say you can't miss what you never had—that it's better not to know at all." Brianna lifted her cup, blue eyes steady over the rim.

"Some people are fools. Or cowards."

He poured another tot of whisky into his cup, tilted the bottle toward her with a lifted brow. She held out her cup without comment, and he splashed whisky into it. She drank from it, and set it down.

"What about your mother?" she asked.

"I had a few real memories of her; I was nearly five when she died. And there are the boxes in the garage—" He tilted his head toward the window. "All her things, her letters. It's like Dad said, 'Everybody needs a history.' Mine was out there; I knew if I ever needed to, I could find out more."

He studied her for a long moment.

"You miss her a lot?" he said. "Claire?"

She glanced at him, nodded briefly, and drank, then held out her empty cup for more.

"I'm—I was—afraid to look," she said, eyes fixed on the stream of whisky.

"It's not just him—it's her, too. I mean, I know his stories, Jamie Fraser's; she told me a lot about him. A lot more than I'll ever find in historical records," she added with a feeble attempt at a smile. She took a deep breath.

"But Mama—at first I tried to pretend she was only gone, like on a trip. And then when I couldn't do that anymore, I tried to believe she was dead." Her nose was running, from emotion, whisky, or the heat of the tea. Roger reached for the tea towel hanging by the stove and shoved it across the table to her.

"She *isn't,* though." She picked up the towel and wiped angrily at her nose. "That's the trouble! I have to miss her all the time, and know that I'll never see her again, but she isn't even *dead!* How can I mourn for her, when I think—when I hope—she's happy where she is, when I *made* her go?"

She gulped the rest of her cup, choked slightly, and got her breath. She fixed Roger with a dark blue glare, as though he were to blame for the situation.

“So I want to find out, all right? I want to find her—find them. See if she’s all right. But I keep thinking maybe I *don’t* want to find out, because what if I find out she’s not all right, what if I find out something horrible? What if I find out she’s dead, or he is—well, that wouldn’t matter so much, maybe, because he already is dead anyway, or he was, or—but I *have* to, I know I have to!”

She banged her cup down on the table in front of him.

“More.”

He opened his mouth to say that she’d had a good bit more than she needed already, but a glance at her face changed his mind. He shut his mouth and poured.

She didn’t wait for him to add tea, but raised the cup to her mouth and took a large swallow, and another. She coughed, sputtered, and set the cup down, eyes watering.

“So I’m looking. Or I was. When I saw Daddy’s books, and his handwriting, though … it all seemed wrong, then. Do you think I’m wrong?” she asked, peering woefully at him through tear-clogged lashes.

“No, hen,” he said gently. “It’s not wrong. You’re right, you’ve got to know. I’ll help you.” He stood up and, taking her under the arms, hoisted her to her feet. “But right now, I think you should maybe have a bit of a lie-down, hm?”

He got her up the stairs and halfway down the hall, when she suddenly broke free and darted into the bathroom. He leaned against the wall outside, waiting patiently until she staggered out again, her face the color of the aged plaster above the wainscoting.

“Waste of Glen Morangie, that,” he said, taking her by the shoulders and steering her into the bedroom. “If I’d known I was dealing with a sot, I’d have given you the cheap stuff.”

She collapsed on the bed, and allowed him to take off her shoes and socks. She rolled onto her stomach, Uncle Angus cradled in the crook of her arm.

"I *told* you I didn't like tea," she mumbled, and was asleep in seconds.

* * *

Roger worked for an hour or two by himself, sorting books and tying cartons. It was a quiet, dark afternoon, with no sound but a soft patter of rain and the occasional *whoosh* of a car's tires on the street outside. When the light began to fail, he turned on the lamps and went down the hall to the kitchen, to wash the book grime from his hands.

A huge pot of milky cock-a-leekie soup was burbling on the back of the cooker. What had Fiona said to do about that? Turn it up? Turn it off? Throw things into it? He peered dubiously into the pot and decided to leave well enough alone.

He tidied up the remains of their impromptu tea—rinsed the cups and dried them, hung them carefully from their hooks in the cupboard. They were remnants of the old willow pattern set the Reverend had had for as long as Roger could remember, the blue-and-white Chinese trees and pagodas augmented by odd bits of ill-assorted crockery acquired from jumble sales.

Fiona would have all new, of course. She'd forced them to look at magazine pictures of china and crystal and flatware. Brianna had made suitable admiring noises; Roger's eyes had gone glassy from boredom. He supposed the old stuff would all end up at the jumble sale—at least it might still be useful to someone.

On impulse, he took down the two cups he'd washed, wrapped them in a clean tea towel, and took them to the study, where he tucked them into the box he'd set aside for himself. He felt thoroughly foolish, but at the same time, somewhat better.

He looked around the echoing study, quite bare now save for the single sheet of paper on the cork-lined wall.

So your home's gone for good. Well, he'd left home some time ago, hadn't he?

Yeah, it bothered him. A lot more than he'd let on to Brianna, in fact. That was why it had taken so bloody long to finish clearing out the manse, if he was honest about it. True, it was a monster task, true, he had his own job to do at Oxford, and true, the thousands of books had had to be sorted with care—but he could have done it faster. If he'd wanted.

With the house standing vacant, he might never have got the job finished. But with the impetus of Fiona behind, and the lure of Brianna before … he smiled at the thought of the two of them: little dark, curly-headed wren, and tall fire-haired Viking. Likely it took women to get men to do anything much.

Time to finish up, though.

With a sense of somber ceremony, he unpinned the corners of the yellowed sheet of paper and took it down from the cork. It was his family tree, a genealogical chart made out in the Reverend's neat round hand.

MacKenzies and more MacKenzies, generations of them. He'd thought lately of taking back the name permanently, not just for the singing. After all, with Dad gone he didn't mean to come back much more to Inverness, where folk would know him as Wakefield. That had been the point of the genealogy, after all; that Roger shouldn't forget who he was.

Dad had known a few individual stories, but no more than the names for most of the people on the list. And he hadn't known even that, for the most important one—the woman whose green eyes Roger saw each morning in the mirror. *She* was nowhere on this list, for good reason.

Roger's finger stopped near the top of the chart. There he was, the changeling—William Buccleigh MacKenzie. Given to foster parents to raise, the illegitimate offspring of the war chieftain of clan MacKenzie, and of a witch condemned to burning. Dougal MacKenzie and the witch Geillis Duncan.

Not a witch at all, of course, but something just as dangerous. He had her eyes—or so Claire said. Had he inherited something more from her as well? Was the terrifying ability to travel through the stones passed down unsuspected through generations of respectable boatwrights and herdsmen?

He thought of it each time he saw the chart now—and for that reason, tried not to look. He appreciated Brianna's ambivalence; he understood all too well the razor's edge between fear and curiosity, the pull between the need to know and the fear of finding out.

Well, he could help Brianna find out. And for himself …

Roger slipped the chart into a folder, and put it in the box. He closed the top of the carton, and added an "X" of sticky tape across the flap for good measure.

"That's that, then," he said aloud, and left the empty room.

He stopped at the head of the stairs, taken by surprise.

Brianna had been bathing, braving the ancient geyser with its cracked enamel and rumbling flame. Now she stepped into the hall, wearing nothing but a towel.

She turned down the hall, not seeing him. Roger stood very still, listening to the thud of his heart, feeling his palm slick on the polished banister.

She was modestly covered; he had seen more of her in the halters and shorts she had worn in the summer. It was the fragility of her covering that roused him; the knowledge that he could undress her with one quick tug. That, and the knowledge that they were quite alone in the house.

Dynamite.

He took a step after her, and stopped. She had heard him; she stopped, too, but it was a long moment before she turned around. Her feet were bare, high-arched and long-toed; the slender curves of her wet footprints were dark on the worn runner that covered the floor of the hallway.

She didn't say anything. Just looked at him straight-on, her eyes dark and slanting. She stood against the tall window at the end of the hall, her swaddled figure black against the pale gray light of the rainy day outside.

If he should touch her, he knew how she would feel. Her skin would be still hot from the bath, damp in the crevices of knee and thigh and elbow. He could smell her, the minglings of shampoo and soap and powder, the smell of her flesh masked by the ghosts of flowers.

Her footprints on the runner stretched before him, a fragile chain of footsteps linking them. He kicked off his sandals and planted a bare foot on one of the prints she had left; it was cool on his skin.

There were drops of water on her shoulders, matching the droplets on the windowpane behind her, as though she had stepped through it out of the rain. She lifted her head as he came toward her, and with a shake, let the towel wrapped round her head fall off.

The bronze snakes of her hair fell gleaming, brushed his cheek with wet. Not a Gorgon's beauty, but a water spirit's, changing shape from serpent-maned horse to magic woman.

"Kelpie," he whispered against the flushed curve of her cheek. "You look like you've come straight out of a Highland burn." She put her arms around his neck, let go of the towel; only the pressure of their bodies held it between them.

Her back was bare. Cold air from the window raised the hair on his forearm, even as her skin warmed his palm. He wanted at once to pull the towel about her, shelter her, cover her from the cold; at the same time, to strip both her and himself, take her heat to himself and give her his own, right there in the damp and drafty hallway.

"Steam," he whispered. "God, you're steaming."

Her mouth curved against his.

"That makes two of us, and you haven't had a bath. Roger—" Her hand was on the back of his neck, fingers cool. She opened her mouth to say something more, but he kissed her, feeling hot damp seep through the fabric of his shirt.

Her breasts rose against him and her mouth opened under his. The muffling terry cloth hid the outlines of her breasts from his hands but not his imagination; he could see them in his mind's eye, round and smooth, with that faint, enchanting wobble of full flesh.

His hand drifted lower, grasping the swell of bare buttock. She shied, lost her balance, and the two of them collapsed awkwardly, grappling with each other in an effort to stay upright.

Roger's knees hit the floor, and he dragged her down with him. She tilted and sprawled, landing laughing on her back.

"Hey!" She grabbed for her towel, then abandoned it as he lunged over her, kissing her again.

He'd been right about her breasts. The one under his hand was bare now, full and soft, the nipple hard in the center of his palm.

Dynamite, and the fuse was lit.

His other hand rested at the top of her thigh under the towel, close enough that he could feel the damp curls brush his finger. God, what color was it? Deep auburn, as he'd imagined? Copper and bronze, like the hair of her head?

Despite himself, his hand slid farther, dying to cup the soft slippery fullness he could sense, so close. With an effort that made him dizzy, he stopped.

Her hand was on his arm, pulling him back down.

"Please," she whispered. "Please, I want you to."

He felt hollow as a bell; his heartbeat echoed in head and chest and painfully hard between his legs. He closed his eyes, breathing, pressing his hands against the rough fiber of the rug, trying to erase the feel of her skin, lest he grab at her again.

"No," he said, and his voice sounded queer, hoarse to his own ear. "No, not here, not like this."

She was sitting up, rising out of the dark blue towel that puddled around her hips, like a mermaid from the waves. She had cooled; her flesh was pale as marble in the gray light, but goose bumps stippled the smoothness of arms and breasts and shoulders.

He touched her, rough skin and smooth, and drew his fingers over her lips, her broad mouth. The taste of her was still on his lips, clean skin and toothpaste—and a sweet, soft tongue.

"Better," he whispered. "I want it to be better … the first time."

They knelt staring at each other, the air between them crackling with unsaid things. The fuse was still burning, but a slow match now. Roger felt rooted to the spot; perhaps it was the Gorgon, after all.

Then the smell of scorching milk rose up the stair, and both of them started up at once.

"Something's burning!" Brianna said, and made a dart toward the stair, her towel clumsily back in place.

He caught her by the arm as she passed him. She was cold to the touch, chilled by the drafty hallway.

"I'll do it," he said. "You go and get dressed."

She shot him a quick blue glance and turned, disappearing into the spare bedroom. The door clicked shut behind her and he dashed down the hall, clattering down the stair toward the smell of disaster, feeling his palm burn where he had touched her.

* * *

Downstairs, Roger dealt with the spilled and scalded soup, berating himself. Where did he get off, lunging at her like a crazed salmon en route to the spawning grounds? Ripping off her towel and grappling her to the floor—Christ, she must think him next door to a rapist!

At the same time, the hot feeling that suffused his chest wasn't due either to shame or to heat from the cooker. It was the latent heat from her skin, still warming him. *I want you to,* she'd said, and she'd meant it.

He was familiar enough with the language of the body to know desire and surrender when he touched them. But what he'd felt in that brief moment when her body came alive to his went a great deal farther. The universe had shifted, with a small, decisive click; he could still hear its echo in his bones.

He wanted her. He wanted all of her; not just bed, not just body. Everything, always. Suddenly the biblical injunction, *one flesh,* seemed something immediate, and very real. They'd nearly been just that, on the floor of the hallway, and stopping as he had made him feel suddenly and peculiarly vulnerable—he wasn't a whole person any longer, but only half of something not yet made.

He dumped the ruined remains of the soup into the sink. No matter; they'd have supper at the pub. Best to get out of the house and away from temptation.

Supper, casual chat, and maybe a walk by the river. She'd wanted to go to the Christmas Eve services. After that …

After that, he would ask her, make it formal. She would say yes, he knew. And then …

Why, then, they would come home, to a house dark and private. With themselves alone, on a night of sacrament and secret, with love newly come into the world. And he would lift her in his arms and carry her upstairs, on a night when virginity's sacrifice was no loss of purity, but rather the birth of everlasting joy.

Roger switched out the light and left the kitchen. Behind him, forgotten, the gas flame burned blue and yellow in the dark, ardent and steady as the fires of love.

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18

UNSEEMLY LUST

The Reverend Wakefield had been a kindly and ecumenical man, tolerant of all shades of religious opinion, and willing to entertain doctrines his flock would have found outrageous, if not downright blasphemous.

Still, a lifetime of exposure to the stern face of Scottish Presbyterianism and its abiding suspicion of anything “Romish” had left Roger with a certain residual uneasiness upon entering a Catholic church—as though he might be seized at the door and forcibly baptized by outlandishly dressed minions of the True Cross.

No such violence offered as he followed Brianna into the small stone building. There was a boy in a long white robe visible at the far end of the nave, but he was peaceably engaged in lighting two pairs of tall white candles that decorated the altar. A faint, unfamiliar scent hung in the air. Roger inhaled, trying to be unobtrusive about it. Incense?

Beside him, Brianna stopped, rummaging in her purse. She took out a small circle of black lacy stuff, and bobby-pinned it to the top of her head.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“I don’t know what you call it,” she said. “It’s what you wear in church if you don’t want to wear a hat or a veil. You don’t really *have* to do it anymore, but I grew up doing it—it used to be that women couldn’t go into a Catholic church with their heads uncovered, you know.”

“No, I didn’t,” he said, interested. “Why not?”

“Saint Paul, probably,” she said, whipping a comb from her purse to tidy the ends of her hair. “He thought women ought to keep their hair covered all the time, so as not to be objects of unseemly lust. Cranky old crab,” she added, stuffing the comb back into the purse. “Mama always said he was afraid of women. Thought they were dangerous,” she said, with a wide grin.

“They are.” Impulsively, he leaned forward and kissed her, ignoring the stares of the people nearby.

She looked surprised, but then rocked forward on her toes and kissed him back, soft and quick. Roger heard a faint “Mmphm” of disapproval somewhere nearby, but paid no attention.

“In *kirk,* and on Christmas Eve, too!” came a hoarse whisper from behind.

“Well, it’s no the kirk exactly, Annie, it’s only the vestibule, aye?”

“And him the meenister’s lad and all!”

“Well, ye ken the saying, Annie, as the cobbler’s bairns go barefoot. I daresay it’s a’ the same wi’ a preacher’s lad that’s gone to the deil. Come along in, now.”

The voices receded into the church, to the prim tap of Cuban heels and a man’s softer shuffle accompanying. Brianna pulled back a little and looked up at him, mouth quivering with laughter.

“Have you gone to the devil?”

He smiled down at her, and touched her glowing face. She wore her grandmother’s necklace, in honor of Christmas, and her skin reflected the luster of the freshwater pearls.

“If the devil will have me.”

Before she could answer, they were interrupted by a gust of foggy air as the church door opened.

“Mr. Wakefield, is it yourself?” He turned, to meet two pairs of bright, inquisitive eyes beaming up at him. A pair of elderly women, each about four foot six, stood arm in arm in their winter coats, gray hair puffed out under small felt hats, looking like a matched set of doorstops.

“Mrs. McMurdo, Mrs. Hayes! Happy Christmas to you!” He nodded to them, smiling. Mrs. McMurdo lived two doors down from the manse, and walked to church every Sunday with her friend Mrs. Hayes. Roger had known them all his life.

"Come over to Rome then, have ye, Mr. Wakefield?" Chrissie McMurdo asked. Jessie Hayes giggled at her friend's wit, the red cherries bouncing on her hat.

"Maybe not just yet awhile," Roger said, still smiling. "I'm only seeing a friend to the services, aye? You'll know Miss Randall?" He brought Brianna forward and made the introductions, grinning inwardly as the two little old ladies looked her over with a frankly avid curiosity.

To Mrs. McMurdo and Mrs. Hayes, his presence here was as overt a declaration of his intentions as if he'd taken out a full-page ad in the evening newspaper. Too bad Brianna was unaware of it.

Or was she? She glanced at him with a half-hidden smile, and he felt the pressure of her fingers on his arm, just for a moment.

"Och, there's the wee laddie comin' wi' the censer!" cried Mrs. Hayes, spotting another white-robed boy emerging from the sanctuary. "Best get in quick, Chrissie, or we'll never have a seat!"

"Such a pleasure to meet ye, my dear," Mrs. McMurdo told Brianna, head tilted back so far that her hat was in danger of falling off. "My, such a bonny tall lass!" She glanced at Roger, twinkling. "Lucky to have found a lad to match ye, eh?"

"Chrissie!"

"Just coming, Jessie, just coming. Dinna fash, there's time." Straightening her hat, trimmed with a small bunch of grouse's feathers, Mrs. McMurdo turned in leisurely fashion to join her friend.

The bell above began to clang again, and Roger took Brianna's arm. Just in front of them, he saw Jessie Hayes glance back, eyes bright with speculation, her smile half sly with knowing.

Brianna dipped her fingers in a small stone basin set in the wall by the door, and crossed herself. Roger found the gesture suddenly and oddly familiar, despite its Romanness.

Years ago, hill-walking with the Reverend, they had come upon a saint's pool, hidden in a grove. There was a flat stone standing on end beside the tiny spring, the remnants of carving on it worn nearly to smoothness, no more than the shadow of a human figure.

A sense of mystery hung about the small, dark pool; he and the Reverend had stood there for some time, not speaking. Then the Reverend had bent, scooped up a handful of water, and poured it out at the foot of the stone in silent ceremony, scooped up another and splashed it over his face. Only then had they knelt by the spring to drink the cold, sweet water.

Above the Reverend's bowed back, Roger had seen the tattered knots of fabric tied to tree branches above the spring. Pledges; reminders of prayer, left by whoever still visited the ancient shrine.

For how many thousands of years had men thus blessed themselves with water before seeking their heart's desire? Roger dabbed his fingers in the water and awkwardly touched both head and heart, with something that might have been a prayer.

They found seats in the east transept, crowded shoulder to shoulder with a murmuring family, busily engaged in settling belongings and sleepy children, passing coats and handbags and baby bottles to and fro, while a small, wheezy organ played "O Little Town of Bethlehem" somewhere just out of sight.

Then the music stopped. There was a silence of expectation, and then it burst out once more, in a loud rendition of "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

Roger rose with the congregation as the procession came down the center aisle. There were several of the white-robed acolytes, one with a swinging censer that sent puffs of fragrant smoke into the crowd. Another bore a book, and a third a tall crucifix, the gruesome figure on it blatant, daubed with red paint whose bloody echoes shimmered in the priest's vestment of gold and crimson.

Despite himself, Roger felt a slight sense of shocked distaste; the mixture of barbaric pageantry and the undulations of sung Latin were quite foreign to what he subconsciously felt was proper in church.

Still, as the Mass went on, things seemed more normal; there were Bible readings, quite familiar, and then the accustomed descent into the vaguely pleasant boredom of a sermon, in which the inevitable

Christmas annunciations of “peace,” “goodwill,” and “love” rose to the surface of his mind, tranquil as white lilies floating on a pond of words.

By the time the congregation rose again, Roger had lost all sense of strangeness. Surrounded by a warm, familiar church fug composed of floor polish, damp wool, naphtha fumes, and a faint whiff of the whisky with which some worshipers had fortified themselves for the long service, he scarcely noticed the sweet, musky scent of frankincense. Breathing deeply, he thought he caught the hint of fresh grass from Brianna’s hair.

It shone in the dim light of the transept, thick and soft against the dark violet of her jumper. Its copper sparks muted by the dimness, it was the deep rufous color of a red deer’s pelt, and it gave him the same sense of helpless yearning he had felt when surprised by a deer on a Highland path—the strong urge to touch it, stroke the wild thing and keep it somehow with him, coupled with the sure knowledge that a finger’s move would send it flying.

Whatever one thought of Saint Paul, he thought, the man had known what he was on about with respect to women’s hair. Unseemly lust, was it? He had a sudden memory of the bare hallway and the steam rising from Brianna’s body, the wet snakes of her hair cold on his skin. He looked away, trying to concentrate on the goings-on at the altar, where the priest was raising a large flat disk of bread, while a small boy madly shook a chime of bells.

He watched her when she went up to take Communion, and became aware with a slight start that he was praying wordlessly.

He relaxed just a bit when he realized the content of his prayer; it wasn’t the ignoble “Let me have her” he might have expected. It was the more humble—and acceptable, he hoped—“Let me be worthy of her, let me love her rightly; let me take care of her.” He nodded toward the altar, then caught the curious eye of the man next to him, and straightened up, clearing his throat, embarrassed as though he had been surprised in private conversation.

She came back, eyes wide-open and fixed on something deep inside, a small dreaming smile on her wide sweet mouth. She knelt, and he beside her.

She had a tender look at the moment, but it was not a gentle face. Straight-nosed and severe, with thick red brows redeemed from heaviness only by the grace of their arch. The cleanness of jaw and cheek might have been cut from white marble; it was the mouth that could change in a moment, from soft generosity to the mouth of a medieval abbess, lips sealed in cool stone celibacy.

The thick Glaswegian voice beside him bawling “We Three Kings” brought him to with a start, in time to see the priest sweep down the aisle, surrounded by his acolytes, in clouds of triumphant smoke.

“ ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are,’ ” Brianna sang quietly as they made their way down River Walk, ‘Going to smoke a rubber cigar … It was loaded, and explo-oo-ded’—you *did* turn out the gas, didn’t you?”

“Yes,” he assured her. “Not to worry; between the cooker and the bathroom geyser, if the manse hasn’t gone up in flames yet, it must be proof of divine protection.”

She laughed.

“Do Presbyterians believe in guardian angels?”

“Certainly not. Popish superstition, aye?”

“Well, I hope I haven’t damned you to perdition by making you go to Mass with me. Or do Presbyterians believe in hell?”

“Oh, that we do,” he assured her. “As much as heaven, if not more.”

It was even foggier, here by the river. Roger was glad they hadn’t driven; you couldn’t see more than five feet or so in the thick white murk.

They walked arm in arm beside the River Ness, footsteps muffled. Swaddled by the fog, the unseen city around them might not have existed. They had left the other churchgoers behind; they were alone.

Roger felt strangely exposed, chilled and vulnerable, stripped of the warmth and assurance he had felt in the church. Only nerves, he thought, and took a firmer grip of Brianna's arm. It was time. He took a deep breath, cool fog filling his chest.

"Brianna." He had her by the arm, turned to face him before she had stopped walking, so her hair swung heavy through the dim arc from the streetlamp overhead.

Water droplets gleamed in a fine mist on her skin, glowed like pearls and diamonds in her hair, and through the padding of her jacket, he felt in memory her bare skin, cool as fog to his fingers, flesh-hot in his hand.

Her eyes were wide and dark as a loch, with secrets moving, half seen, half sensed, under rippling water. A kelpie for sure. *Each urisge,* a water horse, mane flowing, skin glowing. And the man who touches such a creature is lost, bound to it forever, taken down and drowned in the loch that gives it home.

He felt suddenly afraid, not for himself but for her; as though something might materialize from that water world to snatch her back, away from him. He grasped her by the hand, as if to prevent her. Her fingers were cold and damp, a shock against the warmth of his palm.

"I want you, Brianna," he said softly. "I cannot be saying it plainer than that. I love you. Will you marry me?"

She didn't say anything, but her face changed, like water when a stone is thrown into it. He could see it plainly as his own reflection in the bleakness of a tarn.

"You didn't want me to say that." The fog had settled in his chest; he was breathing ice, crystal needles piercing heart and lungs. "You didn't want to hear it, did you?"

She shook her head, wordless.

"Aye. Well." With an effort, he let go her hand. "That's all right," he said, surprised at the calmness in his voice. "You'll not be worried about it, aye?"

He was turning to walk on when she stopped him, hand on his sleeve.

"Roger."

It was a great effort to turn and face her; he had no wish for empty comfort, no desire to hear a feeble offer to "be friends." He didn't think he could bear even to look at her, so crushing was his sense of loss. But he turned nonetheless and then she was against him, her hands cold on his ears as she gripped his head and pushed her mouth hard onto his, not so much a kiss as blind frenzy, awkward with desperation.

He gripped her hands and pulled them down, pushing her away.

"What in God's name are you playing at?" Anger was better than emptiness, and he shouted at her in the empty street.

"I'm not playing! You said you wanted me." She gulped air. "I want you, too, don't you know that? Didn't I say so in the hall this afternoon?"

"I thought you did." He stared at her. "What in hell do you mean?"

"I mean—I mean I want to go to bed with you," she blurted.

"But you don't want to marry me?"

She shook her head, white as a sheet. Something between sickness and fury stirred in his gut, and then erupted.

"So you'll not marry me, but you'll fuck me? How can ye say such a thing?"

"Don't use that sort of language to me!"

"Language? You can suggest such a thing, but I must not say the word? I have never been so offended, never!"

She was trembling, strands of hair sticking to her face with the damp.

"I didn't mean to insult you. I thought you wanted to—to—"

He grabbed her arms and jerked her toward him.

"If all I wanted was to fuck you, I would have had ye on your back a dozen times last summer!"

"Like hell you would!" She wrenched loose one arm and slapped him hard across the jaw, surprising him.

He grabbed her hand, pulled her toward him and kissed her, a good deal harder and a good deal longer than he ever had before. She was tall and strong and angry—but he was taller, stronger, and much angrier. She kicked and struggled, and he kissed her until he was good and ready to stop.

"The hell I would," he said, gasping for air as he let her go. He wiped his mouth and stood back, shaking. There was blood on his hand; she'd bitten him and he hadn't felt a thing.

She was shaking, too. Her face was white, lips pressed so tight together that nothing showed in her face but dark eyes, blazing.

"But I didn't," he said, breathing slower. "That wasn't what I wanted; it's not what I want now." He wiped his bloody hand against his shirt. "But if you don't care enough to marry me, then I don't care enough to have ye in my bed!"

"I do care!"

"Like hell."

"I care too damn much to marry you, you bastard!"

"You *what*?"

"Because when I marry you—when I marry anybody—it's going to last, do you hear me? If I make a vow like that, I'll keep it, no matter what it costs me!"

Tears were running down her face. He groped in his pocket for a handkerchief and gave it to her.

"Blow your nose, wipe your face, and then tell me what the bloody hell ye think you're talking about, aye?"

She did as he said, sniffing and brushing back her damp hair with one hand. Her foolish little veil had fallen off; it was hanging by its bobby pin. He plucked it off, crumpling it in his hand.

"Your Scottish accent comes out when you get upset," she said, with a feeble attempt at a smile as she handed back the wadded hanky.

"I shouldn't wonder," Roger said in exasperation. "Now tell me what you mean, and do it plainly, before ye drive me all the way to the Gaelic."

"You can speak Gaelic?" She was gradually getting possession of herself.

"I can," he said, "and if you don't want to learn a good many coarse expressions right swiftly … talk. What d'ye mean by making me such an offer—and you a nice Catholic girl, straight out of Mass! I thought ye were a virgin."

"I am! What does that have to do with it?"

Before he could answer this piece of outrageousness, she followed it up with another.

"Don't you tell me you haven't had girls, I know you have!"

"Aye, I have! I didn't want to marry them, and they didn't want to marry me. I didn't love them, they didn't love me. I do love you, damn it!"

She leaned against the lamppost, hands behind her, and met his eyes directly. "I think I love you, too."

He didn't realize he had been holding his breath until he let it out.

"Ah. You do." The water had condensed in his hair, and icy trickles were running down his neck. "Mmphm. Aye, and is the operative word there 'think,' then, or is it 'love'?"

She relaxed, just a little, and swallowed.

"Both."

She held up a hand as he started to speak.

"I do—I think. But—but I can't help thinking what happened to my mother. I don't want that to happen to me."

"Your mother?" Simple astonishment was succeeded by a fresh burst of outrage. "What? You're thinking of bloody Jamie Fraser? Ye think ye cannot be satisfied with a boring historian—ye must have a—a—great passion, as she did for him, and you think I'll maybe not measure up?"

"No! I'm not thinking of Jamie Fraser! I'm thinking of my father!" She shoved her hands deep in the pockets of her jacket, and swallowed hard. She'd stopped crying, but there were tears on her lashes, clotting them in spikes.

"She meant it when she married him—I could see it, in those pictures you gave me. She said 'better or worse, richer, poorer'—and she *meant* it. And then … and then she met Jamie Fraser, and she didn't mean it anymore."

Her mouth worked silently for a moment, looking for words.

"I—I don't blame her, not really, not after I thought about it. She couldn't help it, and I—when she talked about him, I could see how much she loved him—but don't you see, Roger? She loved my father, too—but then something happened. She didn't expect it, and it wasn't her fault—but it made her break her word. I won't do that, not for anything."

She wiped a hand under her nose, and he gave her back the handkerchief, silently. She blinked back the tears and looked at him, straight.

"It's more than a year before we can be together. You can't leave Oxford; I can't leave Boston, not till I've got my degree."

He wanted to say that he'd resign, that she should quit her schooling—but kept quiet. She was right; neither of them would be happy with such a solution.

"So what if I say yes now, and something happens? What if—if I met somebody else, or you did?" Tears welled again, and one ran down her cheek. "I won't take the chance of hurting you. I won't."

"But you love me now?" He touched a finger gently to her cheek. "Bree, do ye love me?"

She took a step forward, and without speaking, reached to undo the fastenings of her coat.

"What the hell are you doing?" Blank astonishment was added to the mix of other emotions, succeeded by something else as her long pale fingers grasped the zip of his jacket and pulled it down.

The sudden whiff of cold was obliterated by the warmth of her body, pressed against his from throat to knees.

His arms went around her padded back by reflex; she was holding him tight, arms locked round him under his jacket. Her hair smelled cold and sweet, with the last traces of incense trapped in the heavy strands, blending with the fragrance of grass and jasmine flowers. He caught the gleam of a hairpin, bronze metal in the copper loops of her hair.

She didn't say a thing, nor did he. He could feel her body through the thin layers of cloth between them, and a jolt of desire shot up the backs of his legs, as though he were standing on an electric grid. He tilted up her chin, and set his mouth on hers.

"… see that Jackie Martin, and her with a new fur collar to her coat?"

"Och, and where's she found the money for such a thing, wi' her husband oot o' his work this six month past? I tell ye, Jessie, yon woman … ooh!”

The click of French-heeled shoes on the pavement halted, to be succeeded by the sound of a throat being cleared with sufficient resonance to wake the dead.

Roger tightened his grip on Brianna, and didn’t move. She tightened her arms around him in response, and he felt the curve of her mouth under his.

“MMPHM!”

“Ah, now, Chrissie,” came a hissed whisper from behind him. “Let them be, aye? Can ye not see they’re getting engaged?”

“Mmphm” came again, but in a lower tone. “Hmp. They’ll be getting something else, and they go on wi’ that much longer. Still …” A long sigh, tinged with nostalgia. “Ah, weel, it’s nice to be young, isn’t it?”

The twin tap of heels came on, much slower, passed them, and faded inaudibly into the fog.

He stood for a minute, willing himself to let go of her. But once a man has touched the mane of a water horse, it’s no simple matter to let go. An old kelpie-rhyme ran through his head,

And sit weel, Janetie
And ride weel, Davie.
And your first stop will be
The bottom of Loch Cavie.

“I’ll wait,” he said, and let her go. He held her hands and looked into her eyes, now soft and clear as rain pools.

“Hear me, though,” he said softly. “I will have you all—or not at all.”

Let me love her rightly, he had said in wordless prayer. And hadn’t he been told often enough by Mrs. Graham—“Be careful what ye ask for, laddie, for ye just might get it?”

He cupped her breast, soft through her jumper.

“It’s not only your body that I want—though God knows, I want it badly. But I’ll have you as my wife … or I will not have you. Your choice.”

She reached up and touched him, brushed the hair off his brow with fingers so cold, they burned like dry ice.

"I understand," she whispered.

The wind off the river was cold, and he reached to do up the zip of her jacket. In doing so, his hand brushed his own pocket, and he felt the small package lying there. He'd meant to give it to her over supper.

"Here," he said, handing it to her. "Happy Christmas."

"I bought it last summer," he said, watching her cold fingers fumble at the holly-printed paper. "Looks like prescience, now, doesn't it?"

She held a silver circle, a bracelet, a flat silver band, with words etched round it. He took it from her and slipped it over her hand, onto her wrist. She turned it slowly, reading the words.

"Je t'aime … un peu … beaucoup … passionnément … pas du tout. I love you … a little … a lot … passionately … not at all."

He gave the band a quarter turn more, completing the circle.

"Je t'aime," he said, and then with a twist of fingers, sent it spinning on her wrist. She laid a hand on it, stopping it.

"Moi aussi," she said softly, looking not at the band but at him. *"Joyeux Noël."*

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PART SEVEN

On the Mountain

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19

HEARTH BLESSING

September 1767

Sleeping under the moon and stars in the arms of a naked lover, the two of you cradled by furs and soft leaves, lulled by the gentle murmur of the chestnut trees and the far-off rumble of a waterfall, is terribly romantic. Sleeping under a crude lean-to, squashed into a soggy mass between a large, wet husband and an equally large, equally wet nephew, listening to rain thrump on the branches overhead while fending off the advances of a immense and thoroughly saturated dog, is slightly less so.

"Air," I said, struggling feebly into a sitting position and brushing Rollo's tail out of my face for the hundredth time. "I can't breathe." The smell of confined male animals was overpowering; a sort of musky, rancid smell, garnished with the scent of wet wool and fish.

I rolled onto my hands and knees and made my way out, trying not to step on anyone. Jamie grunted in his sleep, compensating for the loss of my body heat by curling himself neatly into a plaid-wrapped ball. Ian and Rollo were inextricably entangled in a mass of fur and cloth, their mingled exhalations forming a faint fog around them in the predawn chill.

It *was* chilly outside, but the air was fresh; so fresh I nearly coughed when I took a good lungful of it. The rain had stopped, but the trees were still dripping, and the air was composed of equal parts water vapor and pure oxygen, spiced with pungent green scents from every plant on the mountainside.

I had been sleeping in Jamie's spare shirt, my buckskins put away in a saddlebag to avoid soaking. I was dappled with gooseflesh and shivering by the time I pulled them on, but the stiff leather warmed enough to shape itself to my body within a few minutes.

Barefooted and cold-toed, I made my way carefully down to the stream to wash, kettle under my arm. It wasn't yet dawn, and the forest was filled with mist and gray-blue light; crepuscle, the mysterious half-light that comes at both ends of the day, when the small secret things come out to feed.

There was an occasional tentative chirp from the canopy overhead, but nothing like the usual raucous chorus. The birds were late in starting today because of the rain; the sky was still lowering, with clouds that ranged from black in the west to a pale slate-blue in the dawning east. I felt a small rush of pleasure at the thought that I knew already the normal hour when the birds should sing, and had noticed the difference.

Jamie had been right, I thought, when he had suggested that we stay on the mountain, instead of returning to Cross Creek. It was the beginning of September; by Myers's estimation, we would have two months of good weather—relatively good weather, I amended, looking up at the clouds—before the cold made shelter imperative. Time enough—maybe—to build a small cabin, to hunt for meat, to supply ourselves for the winter ahead.

"It will be gey hard work," Jamie had said. I stood between his knees as he sat perched high on a large rock, looking over the valley below. "And some danger to it; we may fail if the snow is early, or if I canna hunt meat enough. I willna do it, if ye say nay, Sassenach. Would ye be afraid?"

Afraid was putting it mildly. The thought made the bottom of my stomach drop alarmingly. When I had agreed to settle on the ridge, I had thought we would return to Cross Creek to spend the winter.

We could have gathered both supplies and settlers in a leisurely manner, and returned in the spring in caravan, to clear land and raise houses communally. Instead, we would be completely alone, several days travel from the nearest tiny settlement of Europeans. Alone in a wilderness, alone through the winter.

We had virtually nothing with us in the way of tools or supplies, save a felling ax, a couple of knives, a camp kettle and girdle, and my smaller medicine box. What if something happened, if Ian or Jamie fell ill or was hurt in an accident? If we starved or froze? And while Jamie was sure that our Indian acquaintances had no objection to our intent, I wasn't so sanguine about any others who might happen along.

Yes, I bloody well *would* be afraid. On the other hand, I'd lived long enough to realize that fear wasn't usually fatal—at least not by itself. Add in the odd bear or savage, and I wasn't saying, mind.

For the first time, I looked back with some longing at River Run, at hot water and warm beds and regular food, at order, cleanliness … and safety.

I could see well enough why Jamie didn't want to go back; living on Jocasta's bounty for several months more would sink him that much further in obligation, make it that much harder to reject her blandishments.

He also knew—even better than I—that Jocasta Cameron was born a MacKenzie. I had seen enough of her brothers, Dougal and Colum, to have a decent wariness of that heritage; the MacKenzies of Leoch didn't give up a purpose lightly, and were certainly not above plotting and manipulation to achieve their ends. And a blind spider might weave her webs that much more surely, for depending solely on a sense of touch.

There were also really excellent reasons for staying the hell away from the vicinity of Sergeant Murchison, who seemed definitely the type to bear a grudge. And then there was Farquard Campbell and the whole waiting web of planters and Regulators, slaves and politics … No, I could see quite well why Jamie mightn't want to go back to such entanglement and complication, to say nothing of the looming fact of the coming war. At the same time, I was fairly sure that none of those reasons accounted for his decision.

"It's not just that you don't want to go back to River Run, is it?" I leaned back against him, feeling his warmth as a contrast to the coolness of the evening breeze. The season had not yet turned; it was still late summer, and the air was rich with the sun-roused scents of leaf and berry, but so high in the mountains, the nights turned cold.

I felt the small rumble of a laugh in his chest, and warm breath brushed my ear.

"Is it so plain, then?"

"Plain enough." I turned in his arms, and rested my forehead against his, so our eyes were inches apart. His were a very deep blue, the same color as the evening sky in the notch of the mountains.

"Owl," I said.

He laughed, startled, and blinked as he pulled back, long auburn lashes sweeping briefly down.

"What?"

"You lose," I explained. "It's a game called 'owl.' First person to blink loses."

"Oh." He took hold of my ears by the lobes and drew me gently back, forehead to forehead. "Owl, then. Ye do have eyes like an owl, have ye noticed?"

"No," I said. "Can't say I have."

"All clear and gold—and verra wise."

I didn't blink.

"Tell me then—why we're staying."

He didn't blink either, but I felt his chest rise under my hand, as he took a deep breath.

"How shall I tell ye what it is, to feel the need of a place?" he said softly. "The need of snow beneath my shoon. The breath of the mountains, breathing their own breath in my nostrils as God gave breath to Adam. The scrape of rock under my hand, climbing, and the sight of the lichens on it, enduring in the sun and the wind."

His breath was gone and he breathed again, taking mine. His hands were linked behind my head, holding me, face-to-face.

"If I am to live as a man, I must have a mountain," he said simply. His eyes were open wide, searching mine for understanding.

"Will ye trust me, Sassenach?" he said. His nose pressed against mine, but his eyes didn't blink. Neither did mine.

"With my life," I said.

I felt his lips smile, an inch from mine.

"And with your heart?"

"Always," I whispered, closed my eyes, and kissed him.

* * *

And so it was arranged. Myers would go back to Cross Creek, deliver Jamie's instructions to Duncan, assure Jocasta of our welfare, and procure as much in the way of stores as the remnants of our money would finance. If there was time before the first snowfall, he would return with supplies; if not, in the spring. Ian would stay; his help would be needed to build the cabin, and to help with the hunting.

Give us this day our daily bread, I thought, pushing through the wet bushes that edged the creek, *and deliver us not into temptation.*

We were reasonably safe from temptation, though; for good or ill, we wouldn't see River Run again for at least a year. As for the daily bread, that had been coming through as dependably as manna, so far; at this time of year, there was an abundance of ripe nuts, fruits and berries, which I collected as industriously as any squirrel. In two months, though, when the trees grew bare and the streams froze, I hoped God might still hear us, above the howl of the winter wind.

The stream was noticeably swelled by the rain, the water maybe a foot higher than it had been yesterday. I knelt, groaning slightly as my back unkinked; sleeping on the ground exaggerated all the normal small morning stiffnesses. I splashed cold water on my face, swished it through my mouth, drank from cupped hands, and splashed again, blood tingling through my cheeks and fingers.

When I looked up, face dripping, I saw two deer drinking from a pool on the other side, a little way upstream from me. I stayed very still, not to disturb them, but they showed no alarm at my presence. In the shadow of the birches, they were the same soft blue as the rocks and trees, little more than shadows themselves, but each line of their bodies etched in perfect delicacy, like a Japanese painting done in ink.

Then all of a sudden, they were gone. I blinked, and blinked again. I hadn't seen them turn or run—and in spite of their ethereal beauty, I was sure I hadn't been imagining them; I could see the dark imprints of their hooves in the mud of the far bank. But they were gone.

I didn't see or hear a thing, but the hair rose suddenly on my body, instinct rippling up arms and neck like electric current. I froze, nothing moving but my eyes. Where was it, what was it?

The sun was up; the tops of the trees were visibly green, and the rocks began to glow as their colors warmed to life. But the birds were silent; nothing moved, save the water.

It was no more than six feet away from me, half visible behind a bush. The sound of its lapping was lost in the noise of the stream. Then the broad head lifted, and a tufted ear swiveled toward me, though I had made no noise. Could it hear me breathing?

The sun had reached it, lit it into tawny life, glowed in gold eyes that stared into mine with a preternatural calm. The breeze had shifted; I could smell it now; a faint acrid cat-tang, and the stronger scent of blood. Ignoring me, it lifted a dark-blotched paw and licked fastidiously, eyes slitted in hygienic preoccupation.

It rubbed the paw several times over its ear, then stretched luxuriously in the patch of new sun—my God, it must be six feet long!—and sauntered off, full belly swaying.

I hadn't consciously been afraid; pure instinct had frozen me in place, and sheer amazement—at the cat's beauty, as well as its nearness—had kept me that way. With its going, though, my central nervous system thawed out at once, and promptly went to pieces. I didn't gibber, but did shake considerably; it was several minutes before I managed to get off my knees and stand up.

My hands shook so that I dropped the kettle three times in filling it. Trust him, he'd said, did I trust him? Yes, I did—and a fat lot of good that would do, unless he happened to be standing directly in front of me next time.

But for this time—I was alive. I stood still, eyes closed, breathing in the pure morning air. I could feel every single atom of my body, blood racing to carry round the sweet fresh stuff to every cell and muscle fiber. The sun touched my face, and warmed the cold skin to a lovely glow.

I opened my eyes to a dazzle of green and yellow and blue; day had broken. All the birds were singing now.

I went up the path toward the clearing, resisting the impulse to look behind me.

* * *

Jamie and Ian had felled several tall, slender pines the day before, cut them into twelve-foot lengths, and rolled and wrestled and tumbled the logs downhill. Now they lay stacked at the edge of the small clearing, rough bark glistening black with wet.

Jamie was pacing out a line, stamping down the wet grass, when I came back with the kettle filled with water. Ian had a fire started on the top of a large flat stone—he having learned from Jamie the canny trick of keeping a handful of dry kindling always in one's sporran, along with flint and steel.

"This will be a wee shed," Jamie was saying, frowning at the ground in concentration. "We'll build this first, for we can sleep in it, if it should rain again, but it needna be so well built as the cabin—it'll give us something to practice on, eh, Ian?"

"What is it for—beyond practice?" I asked. He looked up and smiled at me.

"Good morning, Sassenach. Did ye sleep well?"

"Of course not," I said. "What's the shed for?"

"Meat," he said. "We'll dig a shallow pit at the back, and fill it wi' embers, to smoke what we can for keeping. And make a rack for drying—Ian's seen the Indians do it, to make what they call jerky. We must have a safe place where beasts canna get at our food."

This seemed a sound idea; particularly in view of the sort of beasts in the area. My only doubts were regarding the smoking. I'd seen it done in Scotland, and knew that smoking meat required a certain amount of attention; someone had to be at hand to keep the fire from burning too high or going out altogether, had to turn the meat regularly, and baste it with fat to avoid scorching and drying.

I had no difficulty in seeing who was going to be nominated for this task. The only trouble was that if I didn't manage to do it right, we'd all die of ptomaine poisoning.

"Right," I said, without enthusiasm. Jamie caught my tone and grinned at me.

"That's the first shed, Sassenach," he said. "The second one's yours."

"Mine?" I perked up a bit at that.

"For your wee herbs and bits of plants. They do take up a bit of room, as I recall." He pointed across the clearing, the light of builder's mania in his eye. "And just there—that's where the cabin will be; where we'll live through the winter."

Rather to my surprise, they had the walls of the first shed erected by the end of the second day, crudely roofed with cut branches until time should permit the cutting of shingles for a proper roof. The walls were made of slender notched logs, still with the bark on, and with noticeable chinks and gaps between them. Still, it was large enough to sleep the three of us and Rollo comfortably, and with a fire burning in a stone-lined pit at one end, it was quite cozy inside.

Enough branches had been removed from the roof to leave a smoke hole; I could see the evening stars, as I cuddled against Jamie and listened to him criticize his workmanship.

"Look at that," he said crossly, lifting his chin at the far corner. "I've gone and laid in a crooked pole, and it's put the whole of that line off the straight."

"I don't imagine the deer carcasses will care," I murmured. "Here, let's see that hand."

"And the rooftree's a good six inches lower at the one end than the other," he went on, ignoring me, but letting me have his left hand. Both hands were smoothly callused, but I could feel the new roughnesses of scrapes and cuts, and so many small splinters that his palm was prickly to the touch.

"You feel like a porcupine," I said, brushing my hand over his fingers. "Here, move closer to the fire, so I can see to pull them out."

He moved obligingly, crawling around Ian, who—freshly desplintered himself—had fallen asleep with his head pillowed on Rollo's furry side. Unfortunately, the change of position exposed new weaknesses of construction to Jamie's critical eye.

"You've never built a shed out of logs before, have you?" I interrupted his denunciation of the doorway, neatly tweaking a large splinter out of his thumb with my tweezers.

"Ow! No, but—"

"And you built the bloody thing in two days, with nothing but a felling ax and a knife, for God's sake! There's not a nail in it! Why ought you to expect it to look like Buckingham Palace?"

"I've never seen Buckingham Palace," he said, rather mildly. He paused. "I do take your point, though, Sassenach."

"Good." I bent closely over his palm, squinting to make out the small dark streaks of splinters, trapped beneath the skin.

"I suppose it willna fall down, at least," he said, after a longer pause.

"Shouldn't think so." I dabbed a cloth to the neck of the brandy bottle, swabbed his hand with it, then turned my attention to his right hand.

He didn't speak for a time. The fire crackled softly to itself, flaring up now and then as a draft reached in between the logs to tickle it.

"The house is going to be on the high ridge," he said suddenly. "Where the strawberries grow."

"Will it?" I murmured. "The cabin, you mean? I thought that was going to be at the side of the clearing." I'd taken out as many splinters as I could; those that were left were so deeply embedded that I would have to wait for them to work their way nearer the surface.

"No, not the cabin. A fine house," he said softly. He leaned back against the rough logs, looking across the fire, out through the chinks to the darkness beyond. "Wi' a staircase, and glass windows."

"That will be grand." I laid the tweezers back in their slot, and closed the box.

"Wi' high ceilings, and a doorway high enough I shall never bump my heid going in."

“That will be lovely.” I leaned back beside him, and rested my head on his shoulder. Somewhere in the far distance, a wolf howled. Rollo lifted his head with a soft *wuff!,* listened for a moment, then lay down again with a sigh.

“With a stillroom for you, and a study for me, lined with shelves for my books.”

“Mmmm.” At the moment, he possessed one book—*The Natural History of North Carolina,* published 1733, brought along as guide and reference.

The fire was burning low again, but neither of us moved to add more wood. The embers would warm us through the night, to be rekindled with the dawn.

Jamie put an arm around my shoulders, and tilting sideways, took me with him to lie curled together on the thick layer of fallen leaves that was our couch.

“And a bed,” I said. “You could build a bed, I expect?”

“As fine as any in Buckingham Palace,” he said.

Myers, bless his kindly heart and faithful nature, did return within the month—bringing not only three pack-mules laden with tools, small furnishings, and necessities such as salt, but also Duncan Innes.

“Here?” Innes looked interestedly over the tiny homestead that had begun to take shape on the strawberry-covered ridge. We had two sturdy sheds now, plus a split-railed penfold in which to keep the horses and any other stock we might acquire.

At the moment, our total stock consisted of a small white piglet, which Jamie had obtained from a Moravian settlement thirty miles away, exchanging for it a bag of sweet yams I had gathered and a bundle of willow-twig brooms I had made. Rather too small for the penfold, it had so far been living in the shed with us, where it had become fast friends with Rollo. I wasn’t quite so fond of it myself.

“Aye. It’s decent land, with plenty of water; there are springs in the wood, and the creek all through.”

Jamie guided Duncan to a spot from which the western slopes below the ridge were visible; there were natural breaks, or "coves" in the forest, now overgrown with tangles of wild grass, but ultimately suitable for cultivation.

"D'ye see?" He gestured over the slope, which ran down gently from the ridge to a small bluff, where a line of sycamores marked the distant river's edge. "There's room there for at least thirty homesteads, to start. We'd need to clear a deal of forest, but there's space enough to begin. Any crofter worth his salt could feed his family from a garden plot, the soil's so rich."

Duncan had been a fisherman, not a farmer, but he nodded obediently, eyes fixed on the vista as Jamie peopled it with future houses.

"I've paced it out," Jamie was saying, "though it will have to be surveyed properly as soon as may be. But I've the description of it in my head—did ye by chance bring ink and paper?"

"Aye, we did. And a few other things, as well." Duncan smiled at me, his long, rather melancholy face transformed by the expression. "Miss Jo's sent a feather bed, which she thought might not come amiss."

"A feather bed? Really? How wonderful!" I immediately dismissed any ungenerous thoughts I had ever harbored about Jocasta Cameron. While Jamie had built us an excellent, sturdy bedstead framed in oakwood, with the bottom ingeniously made of laced rope, I had had nothing to lay on it save cedar branches, which were fragrant but unpleasantly lumpy.

My thoughts of luxuriant wallowing were interrupted by the emergence from the woods of Ian and Myers, the latter with a brace of squirrels hung from his belt. Ian proudly presented me with an enormous black object, which on closer inspection proved to be a turkey, fat from gorging on the autumn grains.

"Boy's got a nice eye, Mrs. Claire," said Myers, nodding approvingly. "Those be wily birds, turkeys. Even the Indians don't take 'em easy."

It was early for Thanksgiving, but I was delighted with the bird, which would be the first substantial item in our larder. So was

Jamie, though his pleasure lay more in the thing's tail feathers, which would provide him with a good supply of quills.

"I must write to the Governor," he explained over dinner, "to say that I shall be taking up his offer, and to give the particulars of the land." He picked up a chunk of cake and bit into it absently.

"Do watch out for nutshells," I said, a little nervously. "You don't want to break a tooth."

Dinner consisted of trout grilled over the fire, yams baked in it, wild plums, and a very crude cake made of flour from hickory nuts, ground up in my mortar. We had been living mostly on fish and what edible vegetation I could scrounge, Ian and Jamie having been too busy with the building to take time to hunt. I rather hoped that Myers would see fit to stay for a bit—long enough to bag a deer or some other nice large source of protein. A winter of dried fish seemed a little daunting.

"Dinna fash, Sassenach," Jamie murmured through a mouthful of cake, and smiled at me. "It's good." He turned his attention to Duncan.

"When we've done with eating, Duncan, you'll maybe walk wi' me to the river, and choose your place?"

Innes's face went blank, then flushed with a mixture of pleasure and dismay.

"My place? Land, ye mean, *Mac Dubh?*" Involuntarily, he hunched the shoulder on the side with the missing arm.

"Aye, land." Jamie speared a hot yam with a sharpened stick, and began to peel it carefully with his fingers, not looking at Innes. "I shall be needing you to act as my agent, Duncan—if ye will. It's only right ye should be paid. Now, what I am thinking—if ye should find it fair, mind—is that I shall make the claim for a homestead in your name, but as ye willna be here to work it, Ian and I will see to putting a bit of your land to corn, and to building a wee croft there. Then come time, you shall have a place to settle, if ye like, and a bit of corn put by. Will that suit ye, do ye think?"

Duncan's face had been going through an array of emotions as Jamie spoke, from dismay to amazement to a cautious sort of excitement. The last thing that would ever have occurred to him was that he might own land. Penniless, and unable to work with his hands, in Scotland he would have lived as a beggar—if he had lived at all.

"Why—" he began, then stopped and swallowed, knobbly Adam's apple bobbing. "Aye, *Mac Dubh*. That will suit fine." A small, incredulous smile had formed on his face as Jamie spoke, and stayed there, as though Duncan were unaware of it.

"Agent." He swallowed again, and reached for one of the bottles of ale he had brought. "What will ye have me to do for ye, *Mac Dubh*?"

"The two things, Duncan, and ye will. First is to find me settlers." Jamie waved a hand at the beginnings of our new cabin, which so far consisted entirely of a fieldstone foundation, the framing of the floor, and a wide slab of dark slate selected for the hearthstone, presently leaning against the foundation.

"I canna be leaving here just at present, myself. What I want ye to do is to find as many as ye can of the men who were transported from Ardsmuir. They'll have been scattered, but they came through Wilmington; a many of them will be in North or South Carolina. Find as many as ye can, tell them what I'm about here—and bring as many as are willing here in the spring."

Duncan was nodding slowly, lips pursed beneath his drooping mustache. Few men wore such facial adornment, but it suited him, making him look like a thin but benevolent walrus.

"Verra well," he said. "And the second?"

Jamie glanced at me, then at Duncan.

"My aunt," he said. "Will ye undertake to help her, Duncan? She's great need of an honest man, who can deal wi' the naval bastards and speak for her in business."

Duncan had showed no hesitation in agreeing to comb several hundred miles of colony in search of settlers for our enterprise, but the notion of dealing with naval bastards struck him with profound uneasiness.

"Business? But I dinna ken aught of—"

"Dinna fash," Jamie said, smiling at his friend, and the adjuration worked on Duncan as well as it did on me; I could see the mounting uneasiness in Duncan's eyes begin to recede. For roughly the ten-thousandth time, I wondered how he did it.

"It'll be little trouble to ye," Jamie said soothingly. "My aunt kens well enough what's to be done; she can tell ye what to say and what to do—it's only she needs a man for the saying and doing of it. I shall write a letter to her, for ye to take back, explaining that ye'll be pleased to act for her."

During the latter part of this conversation, Ian had been digging about in the packs that had been unloaded from the mules. Now he withdrew a flat piece of metal, and squinted at it curiously.

"What's this?" he asked, of no one in particular. He held it out for us to see; a flat piece of dark metal, pointed at one end like a knife, with rudimentary crosspieces. It looked like a small dirk that had been run over by a steamroller.

"Iron for your hearth." Duncan reached for the piece, and handed it, handle-first, to Jamie. "It was Miss Jo's thought."

"Was it? That was kind." Jamie's face was weathered to deep bronze by long days in the open, but I saw the faint flush of pink on the side of his neck. His thumb stroked the smooth surface of the iron, and then he handed it to me.

"Keep it safe, Sassenach," he said. "We'll bless our hearth before Duncan leaves."

I could see that he was deeply touched by the gift, but didn't understand entirely why, until Ian had explained to me that one buries iron beneath a new hearth, to ensure blessing and prosperity on the house.

It was Jocasta's blessing on our venture; her acceptance of Jamie's decision—and forgiveness for what must have seemed his abandonment. It was more than generosity, and I folded the small piece of iron carefully into my handkerchief, and put it in my pocket for safekeeping.

* * *

We blessed the hearth two days later, standing in the wall-less cabin. Myers had removed his hat, from respect, and Ian had washed his face. Rollo was present, too, as was the small white pig, who was required to attend as the personification of our "flocks," despite her objections; the pig saw no point in being removed from her meal of acorns to participate in a ritual so notably lacking in food.

Ignoring piercing pig-screams of annoyance, Jamie held the small iron knife upright by its tip, so that it formed a cross, and said quietly,

"God, bless the world and all that is therein.
God, bless my spouse and my children,
God, bless the eye that is in my head,
And bless, God, the handling of my hand,
What time I rise in the morning early,
What time I lie down late in bed,
  Bless my rising in the morning early,
  And my lying down late in bed."

He reached out and touched first me, then Ian—and with a grin, Rollo and the pig—with the iron, before going on:

"God, protect the house, and the household,
God, consecrate the children of the motherhood,
God, encompass the flocks and the young,
Be Thou after them and tending them,
What time the flocks ascend hill and wold,
What time I lie down to sleep.
What time the flocks ascend hill and wold,
What time I lie down in peace to sleep.

"Let the fire of thy blessing burn forever upon us, O God."

He knelt then by the hearth and placed the iron into the small hole dug for it, covered it over, and tamped the dirt flat. Then he and I took the ends of the big hearthstone, and laid it carefully into place.

I should have felt quite ridiculous, standing in a house with no walls, attended by a wolf and a pig, surrounded by wilderness and mocked by mockingbirds, engaged in a ritual more than half pagan. I didn't.

Jamie stood in front of the new hearth, stretched out a hand to me, and drew me to stand by the hearthstone beside him. Looking down at the slate before us, I suddenly thought of the abandoned homestead we had found on our journey north; the fallen timbers of the roof, and the cracked hearthstone, from which a hollybush had sprouted. Had the unknown founders of that place thought to bless their hearth—and failed anyway? Jamie's hand tightened on mine, in unconscious reassurance.

On a flat rock outside the cabin, Duncan kindled a small fire, Myers holding the steel for him to strike. Once begun, the fire was coaxed into brightness, and a brand taken from it. Duncan held this in his one hand, and walked sunwise around the cabin's foundation, chanting in loud Gaelic. Jamie translated for me as he sang:

"The safeguard of Fionn mac Cumhall be yours,
The safeguard of Cormac the shapely be yours,
The safeguard of Conn and Cumhall be yours,
From wolf and from bird-flock
From wolf and from bird-flock."

He paused in his chanting as he came to each point of the compass, and bowing to the "four airts," swept his brand in a blazing arc before him. Rollo, plainly disapproving of these pyromaniac goings-on, growled deep in his throat, but was firmly shushed by Ian.

"The shield of the King of Fiann be yours,
The shield of the king of the sun be yours,
The shield of the king of the stars be yours,
In jeopardy and distress
In jeopardy and distress."

There were a good many verses; Duncan circled the house three times. It was only as he reached the final point, next to the freshly laid hearthstone, that I realized Jamie had laid out the cabin so that the hearth lay to the north; the morning sun fell warm on my left shoulder and threw our mingled shadows to the west.

"The sheltering of the king of kings be yours,
The sheltering of Jesus Christ be yours,
The sheltering of the spirit of Healing be yours,
From evil deed and quarrel,
From evil dog and red dog."

With a look down his nose at Rollo, Duncan stopped by the hearth, and gave the brand to Jamie, who stooped in turn and set alight the waiting pile of kindling. Ian gave a Gaelic whoop as the flame blazed up, and there was general applause.

* * *

Later, we saw Duncan and Myers off. They were bound not for Cross Creek but, rather, for Mount Helicon, where the Scots of the region held a yearly Gathering in the autumn, to give thanks for successful harvests, to exchange news and transact business, to celebrate marriages and christenings, to keep the far-flung elements of clan and family in touch.

Jocasta and her household would be there; so would Farquard Campbell and Andrew MacNeill. It was the best place for Duncan to begin his task of finding the scattered men of Ardsmuir; Mount Helicon was the largest of the Gatherings; Scots would come there from as far away as South Carolina and Virginia.

"I shall be here come spring, *Mac Dubh,*" Duncan promised Jamie as he mounted. "With as many men as I can fetch to ye. And I shall hand on your letters without fail." He patted the pouch by his saddle, and tugged his hat down to shade his eyes from the rich September sun. "Will ye have a word for your aunt?"

Jamie paused for a moment, thinking. He had written to Jocasta already; was there anything to add?

“Tell my aunt I shall not see her at the Gathering this year, or perhaps at the next. But the one after that, I shall be there without fail—and my people with me. Godspeed, Duncan!”

He slapped Duncan’s horse on the rump, and stood by me waving as the two horses dropped over the edge of the ridge and out of sight. The parting gave me an odd feeling of desolation; Duncan was our last and only link with civilization. Now we were truly alone.

Well, not quite alone, I amended. We had Ian. To say nothing of Rollo, the pig, three horses, and two mules that Duncan had left us, to manage the spring plowing. Quite a little establishment, in fact. My spirits rose in contemplation; within the month, the cabin would be finished, and we would have a solid roof over our heads. And then—

“Bad news, Auntie,” said Ian’s voice in my ear. “The pig’s eaten the rest of your nutmeal.”

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THE WHITE RAVEN

October 1767

“ ‘Body, soul, and mind,’ ” Jamie said, translating as he bent to seize the end of another trimmed log. “ ‘The body for sensation, the soul for the springs of action, the mind for principles. Yet the capacity for sensation belongs also to the stalled ox; there is no wild beast or degenerate but obeys the twitchings of impulse; and even men who deny the gods, or betray their country, or’—careful, man!”

Ian, thus warned, stepped neatly backward over the ax handle, and turned to the left, steering his end of the burden carefully round the corner of the half-built log wall.

“ ‘—or perpetrate all manner of villainy behind locked doors, have minds to guide them to the clear path of duty,’ ” Jamie resumed Marcus Aurelius’s *Meditations*. “ ‘Seeing then’—step up. Aye, good, that’s got it—‘seeing then that all else is in common heritage of such types, the good man’s only singularity lies in his approving welcome to every experience the looms of fate may weave for him, his refusal to soil the divinity seated in his breast or perturb it with disorderly impressions …’ All right now, one, and two, and … *ergh*!”

His face went scarlet with effort as they reached the proper position and, in concert, hoisted the squared log to shoulder height. Too occupied to go on with the meditations of Marcus Aurelius, Jamie directed his nephew’s movements with jerks of the head and breathless one-word commands, as they maneuvered the unwieldy chunk of wood into the notches of the cross-pieces below it.

“Och, the twitchings of impulse, is it?” Ian shouldered a lock of hair out of his sweating face. “I feel a wee twitch in the direction of my wame. Is that degenerate, then?”

“I believe that would be an acceptable bodily sensation at this time o’ day,” Jamie allowed, grunting slightly as they maneuvered the log the last inch into place. “A bit to the left, Ian.”

The log dropped into its notches, and both men stepped back with a shared sigh of relieved accomplishment. Ian grinned at his uncle.

“Meanin’ ye’re hungry yourself, aye?”

Jamie grinned back, but before he could reply, Rollo lifted his head, ears perking, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. Seeing this, Ian turned his head to look, and stopped in the act of mopping his face with his shirttail.

“Here’s company, Uncle,” he said, nodding toward the forest. Jamie stiffened. Before he could turn or reach for a weapon, though, I had made out what Rollo and Ian had seen among the shifting leaf-light.

“Not to worry,” I said, amused. “It’s your erstwhile drinking companion—dressed for visiting. A little something the looms of fate have woven for your approving welcome, I expect.”

Nacognaweto waited politely in the shade of the chestnut grove until he was sure we had seen him. Then he advanced slowly out of the forest, followed this time not by his sons but by three women, two of them carrying large bundles on their backs.

One was a young girl, no more than thirteen or so, and the second, in her thirties, plainly the girl’s mother. The third woman who accompanied them was much older—not the grandmother, I thought, seeing her bent form and white hair—perhaps the great-grandmother.

They had indeed come dressed for visiting; Nacognaweto was bare-legged, with leather buskins on his feet, but he wore muslin breeches, loose at the knee, and a shirt of dyed pink linen over them, belted splendidly with a girdle studded with porcupine quills and bits of white and lavender shell. Over it all he had a leather vest with beaded trim, and a sort of loose turban in blue calico over his unbound hair, with two crow's feathers dangling down beside one ear. Jewelry of shell and silver—an earring, several necklaces, a belt buckle and small ornaments tied to his hair—completed the picture.

The women were somewhat less gorgeously arrayed, but still plainly in their Sunday best, in long loose dresses that reached their knees, soft boots and leather leggings showing beneath. They were girdled with deer-leather aprons decorated with painted patterns, and the two younger women wore ornamental vests as well. They advanced in single file, halfway across the clearing, then stopped.

"My God," Jamie murmured, "it's an ambassage." He wiped a sleeve across his face, and nudged Ian in the ribs. "Make my curtsies, Ian; I'll be back."

Ian, looking a trifle bewildered, advanced to meet the Indians, waving a large hand in a ceremonial gesture of welcome. Jamie grabbed me by the arm and hustled me round the corner, into the half-built house.

"What—" I began, bewildered.

"Get dressed," he interrupted, shoving the clothes box in my direction. "Put on your gaudiest things, aye? It wouldna be respectful, else."

"Gaudy" was going a bit far in the description of any item of my current wardrobe, but I did my best, hastily tying a yellow linen skirt around my waist and replacing my plain white kerchief with one Jocasta had sent me, embroidered with cherries. I thought that would do—after all, it was obviously the males of the species who were on display here.

Jamie, having flung off his breeks and belted his crimson plaid in record time, fastened it with a small bronze brooch, snatched a bottle out from under the bedframe, and was out through the open side of the house before I had finished tidying my hair. Giving up that attempt as a lost cause, I hurried out after him.

The women watched me with the same fascination I had for them, but they hung back as Jamie and Nacognaweto conducted the necessary greetings involving the ceremonial pouring and sharing of the brandy, Ian being included in this ritual. Only then did the second woman come forward at Nacognaweto's gesture, ducking her head in shy acknowledgment.

"Bonjour, messieurs, madame," she said softly, looking from one to another of us. Her eyes rested on me with frank curiosity, taking in every detail of my appearance, so I felt no compunction in staring at her, likewise. Mixed blood, I thought, perhaps French?

"Je suis sa femme," she said, with a graceful inclination of her head toward Nacognaweto, the words verifying my guess as to her heritage. *"Je m'appelle Gabrielle."*

"Um … *je m'appelle Claire,*" I said, with a slightly less graceful gesture at myself. "*S'il vous plaît* …" I waved at the pile of waiting logs, inviting them to sit down, while mentally wondering whether there was enough of the squirrel stew to go round.

Jamie, meanwhile, was eyeing Nacognaweto with a mixture of amusement and irritation.

"Oh, 'no Franch,' is it?" he said. "Not a word, I dinna suppose!" The Indian gave him a look of profound blandness, and nodded to his wife to continue with the introductions.

The elder lady was Nayawenne, not Gabrielle's grandmother as I had thought but, rather Nacognaweto's. This lady was light-boned, thin, and bent with rheumatism, but bright-eyed as the sparrow she so strongly resembled. She wore a small leather bag tied round her neck, ornamented with a rough green stone pierced through for stringing, and the spotted tail feathers of a woodpecker. She had a larger bag, this one of cloth, tied at her waist. She saw me looking at the green stains on the rough cloth, and smiled, showing two prominent yellow front teeth.

The girl was, as I had surmised, Gabrielle's daughter—but not, I thought, Nacognaweto's; she had no resemblance to him, and behaved shyly toward him. Her rather incongruous name was Berthe, and the effects of mixed blood were even more apparent in her than in her mother; her hair was dark and silky, but a deep brown rather than ebony, and her round face was ruddy, with the fresh complexion of a European, though her eyes had the Indian's epicanthic fold.

Once the official introductions were over, Nacognaweto motioned to Berthe, who obediently brought out the large bundle she had carried, and opened it at my feet, displaying a large basket of orange and green-striped squash, a string of dried fish, a smaller basket of yams, and a huge pile of Indian corn, shucked and dried on the cob.

"My God," I murmured. "The return of Squanto!"

Everyone gave me a blank look, and I hastened to smile and make exclamations—thoroughly heartfelt—of joy and pleasure over the gifts. It might not get us through the whole winter, but it was enough to augment our diet for a good two months.

Nacognaweto explained through Gabrielle that this was a small and insignificant return for Jamie's gift of the bear, which had been received with delight by his village, where Jamie's courageous exploit (here the women cut their eyes at me and tittered, having evidently heard all about the episode of the fish) had been the subject of great talk and admiration.

Jamie, thoroughly accustomed to this sort of diplomatic exchange, modestly disclaimed any pretention to prowess, dismissing the encounter as the merest accident.

While Gabrielle was employed in translation, the old lady ignored the mutual compliments, and sidled crabwise over to me. Without the least sense of offense, she patted me familiarly all over, fingering my clothes and lifting the hem of my dress to examine my shoes, keeping up a running commentary to herself in a soft, hoarse murmur.

The murmur grew louder and took on a tone of astonishment when she got to my hair. I obligingly took out the pins and shook it down over my shoulders. She pulled out a curl, drew it taut, then let it spring back, and laughed like a drain.

The men glanced in our direction, but by this time Jamie had moved on to showing Nacognaweto the construction of the house. The chimney was complete, built of fieldstone like the foundation, and the floor had been laid, but the walls, built of solid squared logs each some eight inches in diameter, rose only shoulder-high. Jamie was urging Ian to a demonstration of the debarking of logs, in which he chopped his way steadily backward as he walked along the top of the log, narrowly missing his toes with each stroke.

This form of male conversation requiring no translation, Gabrielle was left free to come and chat with me; though her French was peculiarly accented and full of strange idioms, we had no trouble understanding each other.

In fairly short order, I discovered that Gabrielle was the daughter of a French fur trader and a Huron woman, and the second wife of Nacognaweto, who in turn was her second husband—the first, Berthe's father, had been a Frenchman, killed in the French and Indian War ten years before.

They lived in a village called Anna Ooka (I bit the inside of my cheek to keep a straight face; no doubt "New Bern" would have sounded peculiar to them), some two days travel to the northwest—Gabrielle indicated the direction with a graceful inclination of her head.

While I talked with Gabrielle and Berthe, augmenting the conversation by means of hand-waving, I slowly became conscious that another sort of communication was taking place, with the old lady.

She said nothing to me directly—though she murmured now and then to Berthe, plainly demanding to know what I had said—but her bright dark eyes stayed fixed on me, and I was peculiarly aware of her regard. I had the odd feeling that she was talking to me—and I to her—without the exchange of a single spoken word.

I saw Jamie, across the clearing, offering Nacognaweto the rest of the bottle of brandy; clearly it was time to offer gifts in return. I gave Gabrielle the embroidered kerchief, and Berthe, a hairpin ornamented with paste brilliants, over which gifts they exclaimed in pleasure. For Nayawenne, though, I had something different.

I had been fortunate enough to find four large ginseng roots the week before. I fetched all four from my medicine chest and pressed them into her hands, smiling. She looked back at me, then grinned, and untying the cloth bag from her belt, thrust it at me. I didn't have to open it; I could feel the four long, lumpy shapes through the cloth.

I laughed in return; yes, we definitely spoke the same language!

Moved by curiosity, and by an impulse that I couldn't describe, I asked Gabrielle about the old lady's amulet, hoping that this wasn't an insufferable breach of good manners.

"Grandmère est …" She hesitated, looking for the right French word, but I already knew.

"Pas docteur," I said, *"et pas sorcière, magicienne. Elle est …"* I hesitated too; there really wasn't a suitable word for it in French, after all.

"We say she is a singer," Berthe put in shyly, in French. "We call it *shaman;* her name, it means 'It may be; it will happen.' "

The old lady said something, nodding at me, and the two younger women looked startled. Nayawenne bent her head, slipped the thong off her neck, and placed the little bag in my hand.

It was so heavy that my wrist sagged, and I nearly dropped it. Astonished, I closed my hand over it. The worn leather was warm from her body, the rounded contours fitting smoothly into my palm. For just a moment, I had the remarkable impression that something in the bag was alive.

My face must have shown my startlement, for the old lady doubled up laughing. She held out her hand and I gave her back the amulet, with a fair amount of haste. Gabrielle conveyed politely that her husband's grandmother would be pleased to show me the useful plants that grew nearby, if I would like to walk with her?

I accepted this invitation with alacrity, and the old lady set off up the path with a sure-footed spryness that belied her years. I watched her feet, tiny in soft leather boots, and hoped that when I was her age, I might be capable of walking for two days through the woods, and then wanting to go exploring.

We wandered along the stream for some way, followed at a respectful distance by Gabrielle and Berthe, who came up beside us only if summoned to interpret.

"Each of the plants holds the cure to a sickness," the old lady explained through Gabrielle. She plucked a twig from a bush by the path and handed it to me with a wry look. "If we only knew what they all were!"

For the most part, we managed fairly well by means of gesture, but when we reached the big pool where Jamie and Ian fished trout, Nayawenne stopped and waved, bringing Gabrielle to us again. She said something to the woman, who turned to me, a faint look of surprise on her face.

"My husband's grandmother says that she had a dream about you, on the night of the full moon, two moons ago."

"About me?"

Gabrielle nodded. Nayawenne put a hand on my arm and looked up intently into my face, as though to see the impact of Gabrielle's words.

"She told us about the dream; that she had seen a woman with—" Her lips twitched, then hastily straightened themselves, and she delicately touched the ends of her own long, straight hair. "Three days later, my husband and his sons returned, to tell of meeting you and the Bear Killer in the forest."

Berthe was watching me with frank interest, too, twining a lock of her own dark-brown hair around the end of an index finger.

"She who heals said at once that she must see you, and so when we heard that you were here …"

That gave me a small start; I had had no sensation of being watched, and yet plainly someone had taken note of our presence on the mountain, and conveyed the news to Nacognaweto.

Impatient with these irrelevancies, Nayawenne poked her granddaughter-in-law and said something, then pointed firmly at the water by our feet.

"My husband's grandmother says that when she dreamed of you, it was here." Gabrielle gestured over the pool, and looked back at me with great seriousness.

"She met you here, at night. The moon was in the water. You became a white raven; you flew over the water and swallowed the moon."

"Oh?" I hoped this wasn't a sinister thing for me to have done.

"The white raven flew back, and laid an egg in the palm of her hand. The egg split open, and there was a shining stone inside. My husband's grandmother knew this was great magic, that the stone could heal sickness."

Nayawenne nodded her head several times, and taking the amulet bag from her neck, reached into it.

"On the day after the dream, my husband's grandmother went to dig *kinnea* root, and on the way, she saw something blue, sticking in the clay of the riverbank."

Nayawenne drew out a small, lumpy object, and dropped it into my hand. It was a pebble; rough, but undeniably a gemstone. Bits of stony matrix clung to it, but the heart of the rock was a deep, soft blue.

"My goodness—it's a sapphire, isn't it?"

"Sapphire?" Gabrielle turned the word over in her mouth, tasting it. "We call it …" She hesitated, looking for the proper French translation. *"… pierre sans peur."*

"Pierre sans peur?" A fearless stone?

Nayawenne nodded, talking again. Berthe butted in with the translation, before her mother could speak.

"My father's grandmother says a stone like this, it keeps people from being afraid, and so it makes their spirit strong, so they will be healed more easily. Already, this stone has healed two people of fever, and cured a soreness of the eyes that my younger brother had."

"My husband's grandmother wishes to thank you for this gift." Gabrielle neatly took back the conversation.

"Ah … do tell her she's quite welcome." I nodded cordially at the old lady, and gave her back the blue stone. She popped it into the bag and drew the string tight about its neck. Then she peered closely at me, and reaching out, drew down a curl of my hair, talking as she rubbed the lock between her fingers.

"My husband's grandmother says that you have medicine now, but you will have more. When your hair is white like hers, that is when you will find your full power."

The old lady dropped the lock of hair, and looked into my eyes for a moment. I thought I saw an expression of great sadness in the faded depths, and reached involuntarily to touch her.

She stepped back and said something else. Gabrielle looked at me queerly.

“She says you must not be troubled; sickness is sent from the gods. It won’t be your fault.”

I looked at Nayawenne, startled, but she had already turned away.

“What won’t be my fault?” I asked, but the old lady refused to say more.

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NIGHT ON A SNOWY MOUNTAIN

December 1767

The winter held off for some time, but snow began to fall in the night on November 28, and we woke to find the world transformed. Every needle on the great blue spruce behind the cabin was frosted, and ragged fringes of ice dripped from the tangle of wild raspberry canes.

The snow wasn't deep, but its coming changed the shape of daily life. I no longer foraged during the day, save for short trips to the stream for water, and for lingering bits of green cress salvaged from the icy slush along the banks. Jamie and Ian ceased their work of log felling and field clearing, and turned to roof shingling. The winter drew in on us, and we in turn withdrew from the cold, turning inward.

We had no candles; only grease lamps and rushlights, and the light of the fire that burned constantly on the hearth, blackening the roof beams. We therefore rose at first light, and lay down after supper, in the same rhythm as the creatures of the forest around us.

We had no sheep yet, and thus no wool to card or spin, no cloth to weave or dye. We had no beehives yet, and thus no wax to boil, no candles to dip. There was no stock to care for, save the horses and mules and the piglet, who had grown considerably in both size and irascibility, and in consequence been exiled to a private compartment in the corner of the crude stable Jamie had built—this itself no more than a large open-fronted shelter with a branch-covered roof.

Myers had brought a small but useful selection of tools, the iron parts clanking in a bag, to be supplied with wooden handles from the forest close at hand: a barking ax and another felling ax, a plowshare for the spring planting, augers, planes and chisels, a small grass scythe, two hammers and a handsaw, a peculiar thing called a "twibil" that Jamie said was for cutting mortises, a "drawknife"—a curved blade with handles at either end, used to smooth and taper wood—two small sharp knives, a hatchet-adze, something that looked like a medieval torture device but was really a nail-header, and a froe for splitting shingles.

Between them, Jamie and Ian had succeeded in getting a roof on the cabin before snow fell, but the sheds were less important. A block of wood sat constantly by the fire, the froe stuck through it, ready for anyone with an idle moment to strike off a few more shingles. That corner of the hearth was in fact devoted to wood carving; Ian had made a rough but serviceable stool, which sat under one of the windows for good light, and the shavings could all be tossed thriftily into the fire, which burned day and night.

Myers had brought a few woman's tools for me, as well: a huge sewing basket, well supplied with needles, pins, scissors, and balls of thread, and lengths of linen, muslin, and woven wool. While sewing was not my favorite occupation, I was nonetheless delighted to see these, since owing to Jamie and Ian's constantly lurching through thickets and crawling about on the roofs, the knees, elbows, and shoulders of all their garments were in constant disrepair.

"Another one!" Jamie sat bolt upright in bed beside me.

"Another what?" I asked sleepily, opening one eye. It was very dark in the cabin, the fire burnt to coals on the hearth.

"Another bloody leak! It hit me in the ear, damn it!" He sprang out of bed, went to the fire and thrust in a stick of wood. Once it was alight, he brought it back and stood on the bedstead, thrusting his torch upward as he glowered at the roof in search of the fiendish leak.

"Urmg?" Ian, who slept on a low trundle bed, rolled over and groaned inquiringly. Rollo, who insisted on sharing it with him, emitted a brief *"uff,"* relapsed into a heap of gray fur, and resumed his loud snoring.

"A leak," I told Ian, keeping a narrow eye on Jamie's torch. I wasn't having my precious feather bed set alight by stray sparks.

"Oh." Ian lay with an arm across his face. "Has it snowed again?"

"It must have." The windows were covered with squares of oiled deerhide, tacked down, and there was no sound from outside, but the air had the peculiar muffled quality that came with snow.

Snow came silently, and mounded on the roof, then, beginning to melt from the warmth of the shingles underneath, would drip down the slope of the roof, to leave a gleaming portcullis of icicles along the eaves. Now and then, though, the roaming water found a split in a shingle, or a join where the overlapping edges had warped, and drips poked their icy fingers through the roof.

Jamie regarded all such intrusions as a personal affront, and brooked no delay in dealing with them.

"Look!" he exclaimed. "There it is. See it?"

I shifted my glassy gaze from the hairy ankles in front of my nose, to the roof overhead. Sure enough, the torchlight revealed the black line of a split in one shingle, with a spreading dark patch of dampness on the underside. As I watched, a clear drop formed, glistening red in the torchlight, and fell with a plop onto the pillow beside me.

"We could shift the bed a bit," I suggested, though with no particular hope. I had been through this before. All suggestions that repair work could wait till daylight were met with astonished refusal; no proper man, I was given to understand, would countenance such a thing.

Jamie stepped down off the bedstead and prodded Ian in the ribs with his foot.

"Get up and knock at the spot where the split is, Ian. I'll deal with it on the outside." Seizing a fresh shingle, a hammer, a hatchet, and a bag of nails, he headed for the door.

"Don't you go up on the roof in that!" I exclaimed, sitting up abruptly. "That's your good woolen shirt!"

He halted by the door, glared briefly at me, then, with the rebuking expression of an early Christian martyr, laid down his tools, stripped off the shirt, dropped it on the floor, picked up the tools, and strode majestically out to deal with the leak, buttocks clenched with determined zeal.

I rubbed a hand over my sleep-puffed face and moaned softly to myself.

"He'll be all right, Auntie," Ian assured me. He yawned widely, not bothering to cover his mouth, and reluctantly rolled out of his own warm bed.

Thumps on the roof that were definitely not the feet of eight tiny reindeer announced that Jamie was in place. I rolled out of the way and got up, resigned, as Ian mounted the bedstead and jabbed a stick of firewood upward into the damp patch, jarring the shingles enough for Jamie to locate the leak on the outside.

A short period of rending and banging followed, as the defective shingle was yanked loose and replaced, and the leak was summarily extinguished, leaving no more evidence of its existence than the small heap of snow that had fallen in through the hole left by the removed shingle.

Back in bed, Jamie curled his freezing body around me, clasped me to his icy bosom, and fell promptly asleep, full of the righteous satisfaction of a man who has defended hearth and home against all threat.

* * *

It was a fragile and tenuous foothold that we had upon the mountain—but a foothold, for all that. We had not much meat—there had been little time for hunting, beyond squirrel and rabbit, and those useful rodents had gone to their winter rest by now—but a fair amount of dried vegetables, from yams to squash to wild onions and garlic, plus a bushel or two of nuts, and the small stock of herbs I had managed to gather and dry. It made for a sparse diet, but with careful management, we could survive till spring.

With few chores to do outside, there was time to talk, to tell stories, and to dream. Between the useful objects like spoons and bowls, Jamie took time to carve the pieces of a wooden chess set, and spent a good deal of his time trying to inveigle me or Ian into playing with him.

Ian and Rollo, who both suffered badly from cabin fever, took to visiting Anna Ooka frequently, sometimes going on extended hunting trips with young men from the village, who were pleased to have the benefit of his and Rollo's company.

"The lad speaks the Indian tongue a great deal better than he does Greek or Latin," Jamie observed with some dourness, watching Ian exchanging cordial insults with an Indian companion as they left on one such excursion.

"Well, if Marcus Aurelius had written about tracking porcupines, I expect he'd have found a more eager audience," I replied soothingly.

Dearly as I loved Ian, I was myself not displeased by his frequent absence. There were definitely times when three was a crowd.

There is nothing more delightful in life than a feather bed and an open fire—except a feather bed with a warm and tender lover in it. When Ian was gone, we would not trouble with rushlights but would go to bed with the dark, and lie curled together in shared warmth, talking late into the night, laughing and telling stories, sharing our pasts, planning our future, and somewhere in the midst of the talking, pausing to enjoy the wordless pleasures of the present.

"Tell me about Brianna." These were Jamie's favorite stories; the tales of Brianna as a child. What she had said and worn and done; how she had looked, all her accomplishments and her tastes.

"Did I tell you about the time I was invited to her school, to talk about being a doctor?"

"No." He shifted to make himself more comfortable, rolling onto his side and fitting himself to my shape behind. "Why should you do that?"

"It was what they called Career Day; the schoolteachers invited a lot of people with different jobs to come and explain what they did, so the children would have some idea of what a lawyer does, for instance, or a firefighter—"

"I should think that one would be fairly obvious."

"Hush. Or a veterinarian—that's a doctor who treats animals—or a dentist, that's a special doctor who deals only with teeth—"

"With *teeth*? What can ye do to a tooth, besides pull it?"

"You'd be surprised." I brushed the hair out of my face and up off my neck. "Anyway, they'd always ask me to come, because it wasn't at all common for a woman to be a doctor then."

"Ye think it's common *now*?" He laughed, and I kicked him lightly in the shin.

"Well, it got more common rather soon after that. But at the time, it wasn't. And when I'd got done speaking and asked if there were any questions, an obnoxious little boy piped up and said that *his* mother said women who worked were no better than prostitutes, and they ought to be home minding their families, instead of taking jobs away from men."

"I shouldna think his mother can have met many prostitutes."

"No, I don't imagine. Nor all that many women with jobs, either. But when he said that, Brianna stood up and said in a very loud voice, 'Well, you'd better be glad my mama's a doctor, because you're going to *need* one!' Then she hit him on the head with her arithmetic book, and when he lost his balance and fell down, she jumped on his stomach and punched him in the mouth."

I could feel his chest and stomach quivering against my back.

"Oh, braw lassie! Did the schoolmaster not tawse her for it, though?"

"They don't beat children in school. She had to write a letter of apology to the little beast, but then, he had to write one to *mem,* and she thought that was a fair exchange. The more embarrassing part was that it turned out his father was a doctor too; one of my colleagues at the hospital."

"I wouldna suppose you'd taken a job he'd wanted?"

"How did you guess?"

"Mmm." His breath was warm and ticklish on the back of my neck. I reached back and stroked the length of a long, hairy thigh, enjoying the hollow and swell of the muscle.

"Ye said she was at a university, and studying history, like Frank Randall. Did she never want to be a doctor, like you?" A large hand cupped my bottom and began to knead it gently.

"Oh, she did when she was little—I used to take her to the hospital now and then, and she was fascinated by all the equipment; she loved to play with my stethoscope and the otoscope—a thing you look in ears with—but then she changed her mind. She changed it a dozen times, at least; most children do."

"They do?" This was a novel thought to him. Most children of the time would simply adopt the professions of their parents—or perhaps be apprenticed to learn one chosen for them.

"Oh, yes. Let me see … she wanted to be a ballerina for a while, like most little girls. That's a dancer who dances on her toes," I explained, and he laughed in surprise. "Then she wanted to be a garbageman—that was after our garbageman gave her a ride in his truck—and then a deep-sea diver, and a mailman, and—"

"What in God's name is a deep-sea diver? Let alone a garbageman?"

By the time I had finished a brief catalog of twentieth-century occupations, we were facing each other, our legs twined comfortably together, and I was admiring the way his nipple stiffened to a tiny bump under the ball of my thumb.

"I never was sure whether she really wanted to read history, or whether she did it mostly to please Frank. She loved him so much—and he was so proud of her." I paused, thinking, as his hand played down the length of my back.

"She started taking history classes at the university when she was still in high school—I told you how the school system works? And then when Frank died … I rather think she went ahead with history because she thought he would have wanted it."

"That's loyal."

"Yes." I ran my hand up through his hair, feeling the solid, rounded bones of his skull, and his scalp under my fingers. "Can't think where she got that particular trait from."

He snorted briefly and gathered me closer.

“Can’t you?” Without waiting for an answer, he went on, “If she goes on wi’ the history—d’ye think she’ll find us? Written down somewhere, I mean.”

The thought had honestly not occurred to me, and for a moment I lay quite still. Then I stretched a bit, and laid my head on his shoulder with a small laugh, not altogether humorous.

“I shouldn’t think so. Not unless we were to do something newsworthy.” I gestured vaguely toward the cabin wall, and the endless wilderness outside. “Not much chance of that here, I don’t imagine. And she’d have to be deliberately looking, in any case.”

“Would she?”

I was silent for a moment, breathing the musky, deep scent of him.

“I hope not,” I said quietly, at last. “She should have her own life—not spend her time looking back.”

He didn’t respond directly to this, but took my hand and eased it between us, sighing as I took hold of him.

“Ye’re a verra intelligent woman, Sassenach, but shortsighted, forbye. Though perhaps it’s only modesty.”

“And what makes you say that?” I asked, mildly piqued.

“The lassie’s loyal, ye said. She’ll have loved her father enough to shape her life to do as he would have wanted, even after he’s dead. D’ye think she loved you less?”

I turned my head, and let the piled hair fall down over my face.

“No,” I said at last, voice muffled in the pillow.

“Well, then.” He took me by the hips and turned me, rolling slowly on top of me. We didn’t speak anymore, then, as the melting boundaries of our bodies disappeared.

It was slow, dreamy and peaceful, his body and mine as much as mine was his, so that I curled my foot round his leg and felt both smooth sole and hairy shin, felt callused palm and tender flesh, was knife and sheath together, the rhythm of our movement that of one heart beating.

The fire crackled softly to itself, casting red and yellow highlights on the wooden walls of our snug refuge, and we lay in quiet peace, not bothering to sort out whose limbs were whose. On the very verge of sleep, I felt Jamie's breath, warm on my neck.

"She'll look," he said, with certainty.

* * *

There was a brief thaw two days later, and Jamie—suffering slightly from cabin fever himself—decided to take advantage of it to go hunting. There was still snow on the ground, but it was thin and patchy; the going would be easy enough on the slopes, he thought.

I wasn't so sure as I scooped snow into a basket for melting, later in the morning. The snow under the bushes still lay thick, though it had indeed melted on the exposed ground. I hoped he was right, though—our food supplies were low, and we had had no meat at all for more than a week; even the snares Jamie kept set had been buried under the snow.

I took my snow inside and tipped it into the large cauldron, feeling, as I always did, rather like a witch.

" 'Double, double, toil and trouble' " I muttered, watching the white clumps hiss and fade into the roiling liquid.

I had one large cauldron, filled with water, which bubbled constantly on the fire. This was not only the basic supply for washing but the means of cooking everything that could not be grilled, fried, or roasted. Stews and things to be boiled were put into hollow gourds or stoneware jars, sealed, and lowered on strings into the bubbling depths, to be hauled out at intervals for checking. By this means, I could cook an entire meal in the one pot, and have hot water for washing afterward.

I dumped a second basket of snow into a wooden bowl and left it to melt more slowly; drinking water for the day. Then, with nothing of great urgency to do, I sat down to read Daniel Rawlings's casebook and mend stockings, my toes comfortably toasting by the fire.

At first, I didn't worry when Jamie didn't come back. That is, I did worry—I always worried when he was gone for long—but in a small and secret way that I succeeded for the most part in hiding from myself. When the shadows on the snow turned violet with the sinking sun, though, I began to listen for him with an increasing intensity.

I went about my work in constant expectation of the crunch of his footsteps, listening for a shout, ready to run out and lend a hand if he had brought back a turkey for plucking or some more or less edible thing in need of cleaning. I fed and watered the mules and horses, looking always up the mountain. As the afternoon light died around me, though, the expectation faded into hope.

It was growing chilly in the cabin, and I went out for more wood. It couldn't be much past four o'clock, I thought, and yet the shadows under the huckleberry bushes were already cold and blue. Another hour, and it would be dusk; it would be full dark in two.

The woodpile was dusted with snow, the outer logs damp. By pulling a chunk of hickory from the side, though, I could reach inside and extract dry splits—being always mindful of snakes, skunks, and anything else that might have sought shelter in the hollow thus provided.

I sniffed, then bent and peered cautiously inside, and as a final precaution poked a long stick inside and stirred it briefly round. Hearing no scuffles, slitherings, or other sounds of alarm, I reached inside with confidence, and groped until my fingers encountered the deep-ridged grain of a chunk of fat pine. I wanted a hot, quick-burning fire tonight; after a full day spent hunting in snow, Jamie would be chilled through.

Fat pine for the heart of the fire, then, and three small chunks of slower-burning hickory from the wet outer layer of the woodpile. I could stack those inside the hearth to dry, while I finished the supper making; then when we went to bed, I'd smoor the fire with the damp hickory, which would burn more slowly, smoldering till morning.

The shadows went to indigo and faded into the gray winter dusk. The sky was lavender with thick cloud; snow clouds. I could breathe the cold wetness in the air; when the temperature fell after dark, so would the snow.

"Bloody man," I said aloud. "What have you done, shot a moose?" My voice sounded small in the muffled air, but the thought made me feel better. If he had in fact bagged something large near the end of the day, he might well have chosen to camp by the carcass; butchering a large animal was exhausting, lengthy work, and meat was too hard come by to leave it to the mercies of predators.

My vegetable stew was bubbling, and the cabin was filled with the savory scent of onions and wild garlic, but I had no appetite. I pushed the kettle on its hook to the back of the hearth—easy enough to heat again when he came. A tiny flash of green caught my eye, and I stooped to look. A tiny salamander, frightened out of its winter refuge in a crack of the wood.

It was green and black, vivid as a tiny jewel; I scooped him up before he could panic and run into the fire, and carried the damp little thing outside, wriggling madly against my palm. I put him back in the woodpile, safely near the bottom.

"Watch out," I said to him, "you might not be so lucky next time!"

I paused before going back inside. It had gone dark now, but I could still make out the trunks of the trees around the clearing, chalk and gray against the looming black bulk of the mountain beyond. Nothing stirred among the trees, but a few fat wet flakes of snow began to fall from the soft pink sky, melting at once on the bare ground of the dooryard.

I barred the door, ate some supper without tasting it, smoored the fire with damp hickory, and lay down to sleep. He might have met some men from Anna Ooka and be camped with them.

The scent of hickory smoke floated in the air, wisps of white curling up over the hearth. The beams above were already black with soot, though fires had burned here for no more than two months now. Fresh resin still oozed from the timber by my head, in small gold droplets that glowed like honey and smelled of turpentine, sharp and clean. The ax strokes in the wood showed in the firelight, and I had a sudden, vivid memory of Jamie's broad back, sheened with sweat as he swung the ax, over and over in strokes like clockwork, the ax blade coming down in a flash of metal inches from his foot as he worked his way along the squared rough timber.

It was awfully easy to misjudge the stroke of an ax or hatchet. He might have cut wood for his fire and missed his stroke, caught an arm or leg. My imagination, always eager to help out, promptly supplied a crystal-clear vision of arterial blood spurting onto white snow in a crimson spray.

I flounced over onto my side. He knew how to live outdoors. He'd spent seven years in a cave, for heaven's sake!

In Scotland, said my imagination, cynically. Where the biggest carnivore is a wildcat the size of a house cat. Where the biggest human threat was English soldiers.

"Fiddlesticks!" I said, and rolled onto my back. "He's a grown man and he's armed to the teeth and he certainly knows what to do if it's snowing!"

What *would* he do? I wondered. Find or make shelter, I supposed. I recalled the crude lean-to he'd built for us when we first camped on the ridge, and felt a little reassured. If he hadn't hurt himself, he probably wouldn't freeze to death.

If he hadn't hurt himself. If something else hadn't hurt him. The bears were presumably fat and fast asleep, but the wolves still hunted in winter, and the catamounts; I recalled the one I had met by the stream, and shivered in spite of the feather bed.

I rolled onto my stomach, the quilts drawn up around my shoulders. It was warm in the cabin, warmer in the bed, but my hands and feet were still icy. I longed for Jamie, in a visceral way that had nothing to do with thought or reason. To be alone with Jamie was bliss, adventure, and absorption. To be alone without him was … to be alone.

I could hear the whisper of snow against the oiled hide that covered the window near my head. If it kept up, his tracks would be covered by morning. And if anything *had* happened to him …

I flung back the quilts and got up. I dressed quickly, without thinking too much about what I was doing; I'd thought too much already. I put on my woolen cutty sark for insulation beneath my buckskins, and two pairs of stockings. I thanked God that my boots were freshly greased with otter fat; they smelt very fishy, but would keep the damp out for a good while.

He had taken the hatchet; I had to split another piece of fat pine with a mallet and wedge, cursing my slowness as I did so. Having now decided on action, every small delay seemed an unbearable irritation. The long-grained wood split easily, though; I had five decent faggots, four of which I bound with a leather strap. I thrust the end of the fifth deep into the smoky embers of the fire, and waited till the end was well caught.

Then I tied a small medicine bag about my waist, checked to be sure I had the pouch of flints and kindling, put on my cloak, took up my bundle and my torch, and set out into the falling snow.

It was not as cold as I had feared; once I began moving, I was quite warm inside my wrappings. It was very quiet; there was no wind, and the whisper of the snowfall drowned all the usual noises of the night.

He had meant to walk his trapline, that much I knew. If he came across promising sign en route, though, he would have followed it. The previous snow lay thin and patchy on the ground, but the earth was soaked, and Jamie was a big man; I was fairly sure I could follow his track, if I came across it. And if I came across *him,* denned up for the night near his kill, so much the better. Two slept much better than one in the cold.

Past the bare chestnuts that ringed our clearing to the west, I turned uphill. I had no great sense of direction, but could certainly tell up from down. Jamie had also carefully taught me to navigate using large, immutable landmarks. I glanced toward the falls, their white cascade no more than a blur in the distance. I couldn't hear them; what wind there was must be away from me.

"When you're hunting, ye want the wind toward ye," Jamie had explained. "So the stag or the hare wilna scent ye."

I wondered uncomfortably what might be out in the dark, scenting *me* on the snowborne air. I wasn't armed, save for my torch. The light glittered red on the crust of packed snow, and shattered from the ice that coated every twig. If I got within a quarter-mile of him, he'd see me.

The first snare was set in a small dell no more than two hundred yards uphill from the cabin, amid a grove of spruce and hemlock. I had been with him when he set it, but that had been in daylight; even with the torch, everything looked strange and unfamiliar by night.

I cast to and fro, bending close to bring my light near the ground. It took several journeys back and forth across the little dell before I finally spotted what I was looking for—the dark indentation of a foot in a patch of snow between two spruce trees. A little more looking and I found the snare, still set. Either it had caught nothing, or he had removed the catch and reset it.

The footprints led out of the clearing and upward again, then disappeared in a bare patch of matted dead leaves. A moment's panic as I crisscrossed the patch, looking for a scuffled place that might be a footprint. Nothing showed; the leaves must be a foot thick here, spongy and resilient. But there! Yes, there was a log overturned; I could see the dark, wet furrow where it had lain, and the scuffed moss on its side. Ian had told me that squirrels and chipmunks sometimes hibernated in the cavities under logs.

Very slowly, constantly losing the trail and having to circle and backtrack to find it again, I followed him from one snare to another. The snow was falling thicker and faster, and I felt some uneasiness. If it covered his tracks before I found him, how would I find my way back to the cabin?

I looked back, but could see nothing behind me but a long, treacherous slope of unbroken snow that fell to the dark line of an unfamiliar brook below, its rocks poking up like teeth. No sign of the cheerful plume of smoke and sparks from our chimney. I turned slowly round in a circle, but I could no longer see the falls, either.

"Fine," I muttered to myself. "You're lost. *Now* what?" I sternly quelled an incipient attack of panic, and stood still to think. I wasn't totally lost. I didn't know where I was, but that wasn't quite the same thing. I still had Jamie's trail to guide me—or would have, until the snow covered it. And if I could find him, he presumably could find the cabin.

My torch was burning dangerously low; I could feel the heat of it, blistering on my hand. I extracted another of the dry faggots from under my cloak, and lit it from the stub of the first, dropping the ember just before it burned my fingers.

Was I going farther from the cabin, I wondered, or walking parallel to it? I knew that the trapline described a rough circle, but had no idea precisely how many snares there were. I had found three so far, all empty and waiting.

The fourth one wasn't empty. My torch caught the glitter of ice crystals, fringing the fur of a large hare, stretched out under a frozen bush. I touched it, picked it up and disentangled the noose from its neck. It was stiff, whether from cold or rigor mortis. Been dead a while, then—and what did that tell me about Jamie's whereabouts?

I tried to think logically, ignoring the increasing cold seeping through my boots and the growing numbness of face and fingers. The hare lay in snow; I could see the indentations of its pawprints, and the flurry of its death struggle. I couldn't see any of Jamie's footprints, though. All right; he hadn't visited this snare, then.

I stood still, my breath forming small white clouds around my head. I could feel ice forming inside my nostrils; it was getting colder. Somewhere between the last snare and this one, he had left his path, then. Where? And where had he gone?

Urgently, I backtracked, looking for the last footprint I was sure of. It took a long time to find; the snow had nearly covered all the bare ground with a thin dusting of glitter. My second torch was half burned through before I found it again. There it was, a featureless blur in the mud on the edge of a stream. I had found the snare with the rabbit only by going in the direction I thought this footprint pointed—but evidently it didn't. He had stepped out of the mud, and gone … where?

"Jamie!" I shouted. I called several times, but the snow seemed to swallow my voice. I listened, but heard nothing save the gurgle of the ice-rimmed water by my feet.

He wasn't behind me, he wasn't in front of me. Left, then, or right?

“Eeny, meeny, miney, mo,” I muttered, and turned downhill because the walking was easier, shouting now and then.

I stopped to listen. Was there an answering shout? I called again, but couldn’t make out a reply. The wind was coming up, rattling the tree limbs overhead.

I took another step, landed on an icy rock, and my foot slid out from under me. I slipped and skidded, floundering down a short, muddy slope, hit a screen of dog-hobble, burst through and clutched a handful of icy twigs, heart pounding.

At my feet was the edge of a rocky outcrop, ending in thin air. Clinging to the bush to keep from slipping, I edged my way closer, and looked over.

It was not a cliff, as I’d thought; the drop was no more than five feet. It was not this that made my heart leap into my throat, though, but rather the sight that met my eyes in the leaf-filled hollow below.

There was a flurry of tossed and scuffled leaves, reminding me unpleasantly of the death marks left by the limp rabbit that hung at my belt. Something large had struggled on the ground here—and then been dragged away. A wide furrow plowed through the leaves, disappearing into the darkness beyond.

Heedless of my footing, I scrabbled my way down the side of the outcrop and rushed toward the furrow, following it under the overhanging low branches of hemlock and balsam. In the uncertain light of my flickering torch, I followed its path around a pile of rocks, through a clump of wintergreen, and …

He was lying near the foot of a large split boulder, half covered in leaves, as though something had tried to bury him. He wasn’t curled for warmth, but lay flat on his face, and deathly still. The snow lay thick on the folds of his cloak, dusted the heels of his muddy boots.

I dropped my torch and flung myself on his body with a cry of horror.

* * *

He let out a bloodcurdling groan and convulsed under me. I jerked back, torn between relief and terror. He wasn’t dead, but he *was* hurt. Where, how badly?

"Where?" I demanded, wrenching at his cloak, which was tangled round his body. "Where are you hurt? Are you bleeding, have you broken something?"

I couldn't see any large patches of blood, but I had dropped my torch, which had promptly extinguished itself in the wet leaves that covered him. The pink sky and falling snow shed a luminous glow over everything, but the light was much too dim to make out details.

He was frighteningly cold; his flesh felt chilly even to my snow-numbed hands, and he stirred sluggishly, subsiding into small moans and grunts. I thought I heard him mumble, "Back," though, and once I got his cloak out of the way, I tore at his shirt, yanking it ruthlessly out of his breeks.

This made him groan loudly, and I thrust my hands under the cloth in a panic, looking for the bullet hole. He must have been shot in the back; the entrance wound wouldn't bleed much, but where had it come out? Had the ball gone clean through? A small piece of my mind found leisure to wonder who'd shot him, and whether they were still nearby.

Nothing. I found nothing; my groping hands encountered nothing but bare, clean flesh; cold as a slab of marble and webbed with old scars, but completely unperforated. I tried again, forcing myself to slow down, feeling with mind as well as fingers, running my palms slowly over his back from nape to small. Nothing.

Lower? There were dark smudges on the seat of his breeks; I'd thought them mud. I thrust a hand under him and groped for his laces, jerked them loose and yanked down his breeches.

It *was* mud; his buttocks glowed before me, white, firm, and perfect in their roundness, unmarred beneath a silver fuzz. I clutched a handful of his flesh, unbelieving.

"Is that you, Sassenach?" he asked, rather drowsily.

"Yes, it's me! What happened to you?" I demanded, frenzy giving way to indignation. "You said you'd been shot in the back!"

"No, I didn't. I couldna, for I haven't been," he pointed out logically. He sounded calm and still rather sleepy, his speech slightly slurred. “There’s a verra cold wind whistlin’ up my backside, Sassenach; d’ye think ye could maybe cover me?”

I jerked up his breeches, making him grunt again.

“What the hell is the matter with you?” I said.

He was waking up a bit; he twisted his head to look round at me, moving laboriously.

“Aye, well. No real matter. It’s only that I canna move much.”

I stared at him.

“Why not? Have you twisted your foot? Broken your leg?”

“Ah … no.” He sounded a trifle sheepish. “I … ah … I’ve put my back out of joint.”

“You *what*?”

“I’ve done it once before,” he assured me. “It doesna last more than a day or two.”

“I suppose it didn’t occur to you that *you* wouldn’t last more than a day or two, lying out here on the ground, covered with snow?”

“It did,” he said, still drowsy, “but there didna seem much I could do about it.”

It was rapidly dawning on me that there might not be that much *I* could do about it, either. He outweighed me by a good sixty pounds; I couldn’t carry him. I couldn’t even drag him very far over slopes and rocks and gullies. It was too steep for a horse; I might possibly persuade one of the mules to come up here—if I could first find my way back to the cabin in the dark, and then find my way back up the mountain, also in the dark—and in the middle of what looked like becoming a blizzard. Or perhaps I could build a toboggan of tree branches, I thought wildly, and career down the snowy slopes astride his body.

“Oh, do get a grip, Beauchamp,” I said aloud. I wiped at my running nose with a fold of cloak, and tried to think what to do next.

It was a sheltered spot, I realized; looking upward, I could see the snowflakes whirling past the top of the big rock at whose foot we crouched, but there was no wind where we sat, and only a few heavy flakes floated down onto my upturned face.

Jamie's hair and shoulders were lightly dusted with snow, and flakes were settling on the exposed backs of his legs. I pulled the hem of his cloak down, then brushed the snow away from his face. His cheek was nearly the same color as the big wet flakes, and his flesh felt stiff when I touched it.

Fresh alarm surged through me as I realized that he might be a lot closer to freezing already than I had thought. His eyes were half closed, and cold as it was, he didn't seem to be shivering much. That was *bloody* dangerous; with no movement, his muscles were generating no heat, and what warmth he had was leaching slowly from his body. His cloak was already heavy with damp; if I allowed his clothes to become soaked through, he might very well die of hypothermia right in front of me.

"Wake up!" I said, shaking him urgently by the shoulder. He opened his eyes and smiled drowsily at me.

"Move!" I said. "Jamie, you've got to move!"

"I can't," he said calmly. "I told ye that." He shut his eyes again.

I grabbed him by the ear and dug my fingernails into the tender lobe. He grunted and jerked his head away.

"Wake up," I said peremptorily. "Do you hear me? Wake up this moment! Move, damn you! Give me your hand."

I didn't wait for him to comply, but dug under the cloak and seized his hand, which I chafed madly between my own. He opened his eyes again and frowned at me.

"I'm all right," he said. "But I'm gey tired, aye?"

"Move your arms," I ordered, flinging the hand at him. "Flap them, up and down. Can you move your legs at all?"

He sighed wearily, as though dragging himself out of a sticky bog, and muttered something under his breath in Gaelic, but very slowly he began to move his arms back and forth. With more prodding, he succeeded in flexing his ankles—though any further movement caused instant spasms in his back—and with great reluctance, began to waggle his feet.

He looked rather like a frog trying to fly, but I wasn't in any mood to laugh. I didn't know whether he was actually in danger of freezing or not, but I wasn't taking any chances. By dint of constant exhortation, aided by judicious pokings, I kept him at this exercise until I had got him altogether awake and shivering. In a thoroughly bad temper, too, but I didn't mind that.

"Keep moving," I advised him. I got up with some difficulty, having grown quite stiff from crouching over him so long. "Move, I say!" I added sharply, as he showed symptoms of flagging. "Stop and I'll step square on your back, I swear I will!"

I glanced around, a little blearily. The snow was still falling, and it was difficult to see more than a few feet. We needed shelter—more than the rock alone could provide.

"Hemlock," he said between his teeth. I glanced down at him, and he jerked his head toward a clump of trees nearby. "Take the hatchet. Big … branches. Six feet. C-cut four." He was breathing heavily, and there was a tinge of color visible in his face, despite the dim light. He'd stopped moving in spite of my threats, but his teeth were clenched because they were chattering; a sign I rejoiced to see.

I stooped and groped beneath his cloak again, this time searching for the hatchet belted round his waist. I couldn't resist sliding a hand under him, inside the neck of his fringed woolen hunting shirt. Warm! Thank God, he was still warm; his chest felt superficially chilled from its contact with the wet ground, but it was still warmer than my fingers.

"Right," I said, taking my hand away and standing up with the hatchet. "Hemlock. Six-foot branches, do you mean?"

He nodded, shivering violently, and I set off at once for the trees he indicated.

Inside the silent grove, the fragrance of hemlock and cedar enfolded me at once in a mist of resins and turpenes, the odor cold and sharp, clean and invigorating. Many of the trees were enormous, with the lower branches well above my head, but there were smaller ones scattered here and there. I saw at once the virtues of this particular tree—no snow fell under them; the fanlike boughs caught the falling snow like umbrellas.

I hacked at the lower branches, torn between the need for haste and the very real fear of chopping off a few fingers by accident; my hands were numb and awkward with the cold.

The wood was green and elastic and it took forever to chop through the tough, springy fibers. At last, though, I had four good-sized branches, sporting multiple fans of dense needles. They looked soft and black against the new snow, like big fans of feathers; it was almost a surprise to touch them and feel the hard, cold prick of the needles.

I dragged them back to the rock, and found that Jamie had managed to scoop more leaves together; he was almost invisible, submerged in a huge drift of black and gray against the foot of the rock.

Under his terse direction I leaned the hemlock branches fan-up against the face of the rock, the chopped butt ends stuck into the earth at an angle, so as to form a small triangular refuge underneath. Then I took the hatchet again and chopped small pine and spruce branches, pulled up big clumps of dried grass, and piled it all against and over the hemlock screen. Then at last, panting with exertion, I crawled into the shelter beside him.

I nestled down in the leaves between his body and the rock, wrapped my cloak around both of us, put my arms around his body, and held on hard. Then I found the leisure to shake a bit. Not from cold—not yet—but from a mixture of relief and fear.

He felt me shivering, and reached awkwardly back to pat me in reassurance.

“It will be all right, Sassenach,” he said. “With the two of us, it will be all right.”

“I know,” I said, and put my forehead against his shoulder blade. It was a long time before I stopped shaking, though.

“How long have you been out here?” I asked finally. “On the ground, I mean?”

He started to shrug, then stopped abruptly, groaning.

“A good time. It was just past noon when I jumped off a wee crop of rock. It wasna more than a few feet high, but when I landed on one foot, my back went click! and next I knew, I was on my face in the dirt, feelin’ as though someone had stabbed me in the spine wi’ a dirk.”

It wasn't warm in our snug, by any means; the damp from the leaves was seeping in and the rock at my back seemed to radiate coldness, like some sort of reverse furnace. Still, it was noticeably less cold than it was outside. I began shivering again, for purely physical reasons.

Jamie felt me, and groped at his throat.

"Can ye get my cloak unfastened, Sassenach? Put it over ye."

It took some maneuvering, and the cost of a few muffled oaths from Jamie as he tried to shift his weight, but I got it loose at last, and spread it over the two of us. I reached down and laid a cautious hand on his back, gently rucking up his shirt to put my hand on cool, bare flesh.

"Tell me where it hurts," I said. I hoped to hell he hadn't slipped a disc; hideous thoughts of his being permanently crippled raced through my mind, along with pragmatic considerations of how I was to get him off the mountain, even if he wasn't. Would I have to leave him here, and fetch food up to him daily until he recovered?

"Right there," he said, with a hiss of indrawn breath. "Aye, that's it. A wicked stab just there, and if I move, it runs straight down the back o' my leg, like a red-hot wire."

I felt very carefully, with both hands now, probing and pressing, urging him to try to lift one leg, right, now the other knee … no?

"No," he assured me. "Dinna be worrit, though, Sassenach. It's the same as before. It gets better."

"Yes, you said it happened before. When was that?"

He stirred briefly and settled, pressing back against my palms with a small groan.

"Och! Damn, that hurts. At the prison."

"Pain in the same place?"

"Aye."

I could feel a hard knot in the muscle on his right side, just below the kidney, and a bunching in the erector spinae, the long muscles near the spine. From his description of the prior occurrence, I was fairly sure it was only severe muscle spasm. For which the proper prescription was warmth, rest, and anti-inflammatory medication.

Couldn't get much further away from those conditions, I thought with some grimness.

"I suppose I could try acupuncture," I said, thinking aloud. "I've got Mr. Willoughby's needles in my pouch, and—"

"Sassenach," he said, in measured tones. "I can stand fine bein' hurt, cold, and hungry. I wilna put up wi' being stabbed in the back by my own wife. Can ye not offer a bit of sympathy and comfort instead?"

I laughed, and slid an arm around him, pressing close against his back. I let my hand slide down and rest in delicate suggestion, well below his navel.

"Er … what sort of comfort did you have in mind?"

He hastily grasped my hand, to prevent further intrusions.

"Not that," he said.

"Might take your mind off the pain." I wiggled my fingers invitingly, and he tightened his grip.

"I daresay," he said dryly. "Well, I'll tell ye, Sassenach; once we've got home, and I've a warm bed to lie in and a hot supper in my belly, that notion might have a good bit of appeal. As it is, the thought of—for Christ's sake, have ye not the slightest idea how cold your hands are, woman?"

I laid my cheek against his back and laughed. I could feel the quiver of his own mirth, though he couldn't laugh aloud without hurting his back.

At last we lay silent, listening to the whisper of falling snow. It was dark under the hemlock boughs, but my eyes were adapted enough to be able to see patches of the oddly glowing snow-light through the screen of needles overhead. Tiny flakes came through the open patches; I could see it in some places, as a thin cloud of white mist, and I could feel the cold tingle as it struck my face.

Jamie himself was no more than a humped dark shape in front of me, though as my eyes became accustomed to the murk, I could see the paler stalk where his neck emerged between his shirt and his queued hair. The queue itself lay cool and smooth against my face; by turning my head only a bit, I could brush it with my lips.

"What time do you think it is?" I asked. I had no idea, myself; I had left the house well after dark, and spent what seemed an eternity looking for him on the mountain.

"Late," he said. "It will be a long time before the dawn, though," he added, answering my real question. "It's just past the solstice, aye? It's one of the longest nights of the year."

"Oh, lovely," I said, in dismay. I wasn't warm, by any means—I still couldn't feel my toes—but I had stopped shivering. A dreadful lethargy was stealing over me, my muscles yielding to fatigue and cold. I had visions of the two of us freezing peacefully together, curled up like hedgehogs in the leaves. They did say it was a comfortable death, but that didn't make the prospect any more appealing.

Jamie's breathing was getting slower and deeper.

"Don't go to sleep!" I said urgently, poking him in the armpit.

"Agh!" He pressed his arm tight to his side, recoiling. "Why not?"

"We mustn't sleep; we'll freeze to death."

"No, we won't," he said crossly. "It's snowing outside; we'll be covered over soon."

"I know that," I said, rather cross in my turn. "What's that got to do with it?"

He tried to turn his head to look at me, but couldn't, quite.

"Snow's cold if ye touch it," he explained, striving for patience, "but it keeps the cold out, aye? Like a blanket. It's a great deal warmer in a house that's covered wi' snow than one that's standing clean in the wind. How d'ye think bears manage? They sleep in the winter, and they dinna freeze."

"They have layers of fat," I protested. "I thought that kept them warm."

"Ha ha," he said, and reaching back with some effort, grabbed me firmly by the bottom. "Well, then, ye needna worry a bit, eh?"

With great deliberation I pulled down his collar, stretched my head up, and licked the back of his neck, in a lingering swipe from nape to hairline.

"Aaah!" He shuddered violently, making a sprinkle of snow fall from the branches above us. He let go of my bottom to scrub at the back of his neck.

"That was a *terrible* thing to do!" he said, reproachful. "And me lyin' here helpless as a log!"

"Bah, humbug," I said. I nestled closer, feeling somewhat reassured. "You're sure we aren't going to freeze to death, then?"

"No," he said. "But I shouldna think it likely."

"Hm," I said, feeling somewhat less reassured. "Well, perhaps we'd better stay awake for a bit, then, just in case?"

"I wilna wave my arms about anymore," he said definitely. "There's no room. And if ye stick your icy wee paws in my breeks, I swear I'll throttle ye, bad back or no."

"All right, all right," I said. "What if I tell you a story, instead?"

Highlanders loved stories, and Jamie was no exception.

"Oh, aye," he said, sounding much happier. "What sort of story is it?"

"A Christmas story," I said, settling myself along the curve of his body. "About a miser named Ebenezer Scrooge."

"An Englishman, I daresay?"

"Yes," I said. "Be quiet and listen."

I could see my own breath as I talked, white in the dim, cold air. The snow was falling heavily outside our shelter; when I paused in the story, I could hear the whisper of flakes against the hemlock branches, and the far-off whine of wind in the trees.

I knew the story very well; it had been part of our Christmas ritual, Frank's and Brianna's and mine. From the time Bree was five or six, we had read *A Christmas Carol* every year, starting a week or two before Christmas, Frank and I taking it in turns to read to her each night before bed.

"And the specter said, 'I am the Ghost of Christmas Past …' "

I might not be freezing to death, but the cold had a strange, hypnotic effect nonetheless. I had gone past the phase of acute discomfort and felt now slightly disembodied. I knew my hands and feet were icy, and my body chilled half through, but it didn't seem to matter anymore. I floated in a peaceful white mist, seeing the words swirl round my head like snowflakes as I spoke them.

"… and there was dear old Fezziwig, among the lights and music …"

I couldn't tell whether I was gradually thawing or becoming colder. I was conscious of an overall feeling of relaxation, and an altogether peculiar sense of déjà vu, as though I had once before been entombed, insulated in snow, snug despite desolation outside.

As Bob Cratchit bought his meager bird, I remembered. I went on talking automatically, the flow of the story coming from somewhere well below the level of consciousness, but my memory was in the front seat of a stalled 1956 Oldsmobile, its windscreen caked with snow.

We had been on our way to visit an elderly relative of Frank's, somewhere in upstate New York. The snow came on hard, halfway there, howling down across the icy roads with gusts of wind. Before we knew where we were, we had skidded off the road and halfway into a ditch, the windscreen wipers slashing futilely at the pelting snow.

There was nothing to be done but wait for morning, and rescue. We had had a picnic hamper and some old blankets; we brought Brianna up into the front seat between us, and huddled all together under coats and blankets, sipping lukewarm cocoa from the thermos and making jokes to keep her from being frightened.

As it grew later, and colder, we huddled closer, and to distract Brianna, Frank began to tell her Dickens's story from memory, counting on me to supply the missing bits. Neither of us could have done it alone, but between us, we managed well. By the time the sinister Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come had made his appearance, Brianna was snuggled sound asleep under the coats, a warm, boneless weight against my side.

There was no need to finish the story, but we did, talking to each other below the words, hands touching below the layers of blankets. I remembered Frank's hands, warm and strong on mine, thumb stroking my palm, outlining my fingers. Frank had always loved my hands.

The car had filled with the mist of our breathing, and drops of water ran down inside the white-choked windows. Frank's head had been a dark cameo, dim against the white. He had leaned toward me at the last, nose and cheeks chilled, lips warm on mine as he whispered the last words of the story.

" 'God bless us, every one,' " I ended, and lay silent, a small needle of grief like an ice splinter through my heart. It was quiet inside the shelter, and seemed darker; snow had covered over all the openings.

Jamie reached back and touched my leg.

"Put your hands inside my shirt, Sassenach," he said softly. I slid one hand up under his shirt in front, to rest against his chest, the other up his back. The faded whip marks felt like threads under his skin.

He laid his hand against mine, pressing it tight against his chest. He was very warm, and his heart beat slow and strong under my fingers.

"Sleep, *a nighean donn,*" he said. "I wilna let ye freeze."

I woke abruptly from a chilly doze, with Jamie's hand squeezing my thigh.

"Hush," he said softly. Our tiny shelter was still dim, but the quality of the light had changed. It was morning; we were covered over with a thick blanket of snow that blocked the daylight, but the faint otherworldly quality of the night's darkness had vanished.

The silence had vanished, too. Sounds from outside were muffled, but audible. I heard what Jamie had heard—a faint echo of voices—and jerked up in excitement.

"Hush!" he said again, in a fierce whisper, and squeezed my leg harder.

The voices were drawing closer, and it became almost possible to pick out words. Almost. Strain as I might, I could make no sense of what was being said. Then I realized that it was because they were not speaking any language I recognized.

Indians. It was an Indian tongue. But I thought the language was not Tuscarora, even though I couldn't yet make out words; the rise and fall was similar, but the rhythm was somehow different. I brushed the hair out of my eyes, feeling torn in two directions.

Here was the help we so badly needed—by the sound of it, there were several men in the party, enough to move Jamie safely. On the other hand, did we really want to attract the attention of a band of unfamiliar Indians who might be raiders?

Rather plainly we didn't, judging from Jamie's attitude. He had managed to lift himself on one elbow, and he had his knife drawn, ready in his right hand. He scratched his stubbled chin absently with the point as he tilted his head to listen more intently to the approaching voices.

A clump of snow fell from the framework of our cage, landing on my head with a little *plop!* and making me start. The movement loosened more snow, which poured inward in a glittering cascade, dusting Jamie's head and shoulders with fine white powder.

His fingers were gripping my leg hard enough to leave bruises, but I didn't move or make a sound. A patch of snow had fallen from the latticework of hemlock branches, leaving numerous small spaces through which I could see out between the needles, peering over Jamie's shoulder.

The ground sloped a little away from us, falling a few feet to the level of the grove where I had cut branches the night before. Everything was thick with snow; a good four inches must have fallen during the night. It was just past dawn, and the rising sun painted the black trees with coruscations of red and gold, striking white glare from the icy sweep of snow below. The wind had come up in the wake of the storm; loose snow blew off the branches in drifting clouds, like smoke.

The Indians were on the other side of the grove; I could hear the voices plainly now; arguing about something, from the sound of it. A sudden thought raised gooseflesh on my arms; if they came through the grove, they might see the hacked branches where I had chopped limbs from the hemlocks. I hadn't been neat; there would be needles and bits of bark scattered all over the ground. Would enough snow have trickled through the branches to cover my awkward spoor?

A flash of movement showed in the trees, then another, and suddenly they were there, materializing out of the hemlock grove like dragon's teeth sprung from the snow.

They were dressed for winter travel, in fur and leather, some with cloaks or cloth coats atop their leggings and soft boots. They all carried bundles of blankets and provisions, had headpieces made of fur, and most had snowshoes slung across their shoulders; evidently the snow here was not deep enough to render them necessary.

They were armed; I could see a few muskets, and tomahawks or war clubs hung at every belt. Six, seven, eight … I counted silently as they came out of the trees in single file, each man treading in the prints of the one before him. One near the back called out something, half laughing, and a man near the front replied over his shoulder, his words lost in the blowing veil of snow and wind.

I drew a deep breath. I could smell Jamie's scent, a sharp tinge of fresh sweat above his normal musky sleep-smell. I was sweating, too, in spite of the cold. Did they have dogs? Could they sniff us out, hidden as we were beneath the sharp reek of spruce and hemlock?

Then I realized that the wind must be toward us, carrying the sound of their voices. No, even dogs wouldn't scent us. But would they see the branches that framed our den? Even as I wondered this, a large patch of snow slid off with a rush, landing with a soft *flump!* outside.

Jamie drew in his breath sharply, and I leaned over his shoulder, staring. The last man had come out of the gap in the trees, an arm across his face to shield it from the blowing snow.

He was a Jesuit. He wore a short cape of bearskin over his habit, leather leggings and moccasins under it—but he had black skirts, kilted up for walking in the snow, and a wide, flat black priest's hat, held on with one hand against the wind. His face, when he showed it, was blond-bearded, and so fair-skinned that I could see the redness of his cheeks and nose even at such a distance.

"Call them!" I whispered, leaning close to Jamie's ear. "They're Christians, they must be, to have a priest with them. They won't hurt us."

He shook his head slowly, not taking his eyes off the file of men, now vanishing from our view behind a snow-topped outcropping.

"No," he said, half under his breath. "No. Christians they may be, but …" He shook his head again, more decidedly. "No."

There was no use arguing with him. I rolled my eyes in mingled frustration and resignation.

"How's your back?"

He stretched gingerly, and halted abruptly in mid-motion, with a strangled cry as though he'd been skewered.

"Not so good, hm?" I said, sympathy well laced with sarcasm. He gave me a dirty look, eased himself very slowly back into his bed of crushed leaves, and shut his eyes with a sigh.

"You have of course thought of some ingenious way of getting down the mountain, I imagine?" I said politely.

He opened one eye.

"No," he said, and shut it again. He breathed quietly, his chest rising and falling gently under his fringed hunting shirt, giving a brilliant impression of a man with nothing on his mind but his hair.

It was a cold day, but a bright one, and the sun was jabbing brilliant fingers of light into our erstwhile sanctum, making little blobs of snow drop like falling sugarplums around us. I scooped up one of these and gently decanted it into the neck of his shirt.

He drew in his breath through his teeth with a sharp hiss, opened his eyes, and regarded me coldly.

"I was thinking," he informed me.

"Oh. Sorry to interrupt, then." I eased myself down beside him, pulling the tangled cloaks up over us. The wind was beginning to lace through the holes in our shelter, and it occurred to me that he'd been quite right about the sheltering effects of snow. Only there wasn't going to be any snow falling tonight, I didn't think.

Then there was the little matter of food to be considered. My stomach had been making subdued protests for some time, and Jamie's now voiced its much louder objections. He squinted censoriously down his long, straight nose at the offender.

"Hush," he said reprovingly in Gaelic, and cast his eyes upward. At last he sighed and looked at me.

“Well, then,” he said. “Ye’d best wait a bit, to be sure yon savages are well away. Then ye’ll go down to the cabin—”

“I don’t know where it is.”

He made a small noise of exasperation.

“How did ye find me?”

“Tracked you,” I said, with a certain amount of pride. I glanced through the needles at the blowing wilderness outside. “I don’t suppose I can do it in reverse, though.”

“Oh.” He looked mildly impressed. “Well, that was verra resourceful of ye, Sassenach. Dinna worry, though; I can tell ye how to go, to find your way back.”

“Right. And then what?”

He shrugged one shoulder. The bit of snow had melted, running down his chest, dampening his shirt and leaving a tiny pool of clear water standing in the hollow of his throat.

“Bring me back a bit of food, and a blanket. I should be able to move in a few days.”

“Leave you *here*?” I glared at him, my turn to be exasperated.

“I’ll be all right,” he said mildly.

“You’ll be eaten by wolves!”

“Oh, I shouldna think so,” he said casually. “They’ll be busy with the elk, most likely.”

“What elk?”

He nodded toward the hemlock grove.

“The one I shot yesterday. I took it in the neck, but the shot didna quite kill it at once. It ran through there. I was following it, when I hurt myself.” He rubbed a hand over the copper and silver bristles on his chin.

“I canna think it went far. I suppose the snow must have covered the carcass, else our wee friends would have seen it, coming from that direction.”

“So you’ve shot an elk, which is going to draw wolves like flies, and you propose to lie here in the freezing cold waiting for them? I suppose you think by the time they get round to the second course, you’ll be so numb you won’t notice when they start gnawing on your feet?”

"Don't shout," he said. "The savages might not be so far away, yet."

I was drawing breath for further remarks on the subject, when he stopped me, putting his hand up to caress my cheek.

"Claire," he said gently. "Ye canna move me. There's nothing else to do."

"There is," I said, repressing a quaver in my voice. "I'll stay with you. I'll bring you blankets and food, but I'm not leaving you up here alone. I'll bring wood, and we'll make a fire."

"There's no need. I can manage," he insisted.

"*I* can't," I said, between my teeth. I remembered all too well what it had been like in the cabin, during those empty, suffocating hours of waiting. Freezing my arse off in the snow for several days wasn't at all an appealing prospect, but it was better than the alternative.

He saw I meant it, and smiled.

"Well, then. Ye might bring some whisky, too, if there's any left."

"There's half a bottle," I said, feeling happier. "I'll bring it."

He got an arm around me, and pulled me into the curve of his shoulder. In spite of the howling wind outside, it was actually reasonably cozy under the cloaks, snuggled tight against him. His skin smelled warm and slightly salty, and I couldn't resist raising my head and putting my lips to the damp hollow of his throat.

"Aah," he said, shivering. "Don't *do* that!"

"You don't like it?"

"No, I dinna like it! How could I? It makes my skin crawl!"

"Well, *I* like it," I protested.

He looked at me in amazement.

"You do?"

"Oh, yes," I assured him. "I dearly love to have you nibble on my neck."

He narrowed one eye and squinted dubiously at me. Then he reached up, took me delicately by the ear, and drew my head down, turning my face to the side. He flicked his tongue gently at the base of my throat, then lifted his head and set his teeth very softly in the tender flesh at the side of my neck.

"Eeeee," I said, and shivered uncontrollably.

He let go, looking at me in astonishment.

"I will be damned," he said. "Ye *do* like it; ye've gone all gooseflesh and your nipples are hard as spring cherries." He passed a hand lightly over my breast; I hadn't bothered with my makeshift brassiere when I dressed for my impromptu expedition.

"Told you," I said, blushing slightly. "I suppose one of my ancestresses was bitten by a vampire or something."

"A what?" He looked quite blank.

There was time to kill, so I gave him a thumbnail sketch of the life and times of Count Dracula. He looked bemused and appalled, but his hand carried on with its machinations, having now moved under my buckskin shirt and found its way beneath the cutty sark as well. His fingers were chilly, but I didn't mind.

"Some people find the notion terribly erotic," I ended.

"That's the most disgusting thing I've ever heard!"

"I don't care," I said, stretching out at full length beside him and putting my head back, throat invitingly exposed. "Do it some more."

He muttered something under his breath in Gaelic, but managed to get onto one elbow and roll toward me.

His mouth was warm and soft, and whether he approved of what he was doing or not, he did it awfully well.

"Ooooh," I said, and shuddered ecstatically as his teeth sank delicately into my earlobe.

"Oh, well, if it's like *that,*" he said in resignation, and taking my hand, pressed it firmly between his thighs.

"Gracious," I said. "And here I thought the cold …"

"It'll be warm enough soon," he assured me. "Get them off, aye?"

It was rather awkward, given the cramped quarters, the difficulty of staying covered in order not to suffer frostbite in any exposed portions, and the fact that Jamie was able to lend only the most basic assistance, but we managed quite satisfactorily nonetheless.

What with one thing and another, I was rather preoccupied, though, and it was only during a temporary lull in the activities that I became aware of an uneasy sensation, as though I was being watched. I lifted myself on my hands and glanced out through the screen of hemlock, but saw nothing beyond the grove and the snow-covered slope below.

Jamie gave a low groan.

"Don't stop," he murmured, eyes half closed. "What is it?"

"I thought I heard something," I said, lowering myself onto his chest again.

At this, I *did* hear something; a laugh, low but distinct, directly above my head.

I rolled off in a tangle of cloaks and discarded buckskins, while Jamie cursed and snatched for his pistol.

He flung aside the branches with a swoosh, pointing the pistol upward.

From the top of the rock above, several heads peered over, all grinning. Ian, and four companions from Anna Ooka. The Indians murmured and snickered among themselves, seeming to find something immoderately funny.

Jamie laid the pistol down, scowling up at his nephew.

"And what the devil are you doin' here, Ian?"

"Why, I was on my way home to keep Christmas with ye, Uncle," Ian said, grinning hugely.

Jamie eyed his nephew with marked disfavor.

"Christmas," he said. "Bah, humbug."

The elk carcass had frozen in the night. The sight of ice crystals frosting its blank eyes made me shudder—not at the sight of death; that was quite beautiful, with the great dark body so still, crusted with snow—but at the thought that had I not yielded to my sense of uneasiness and gone out into the night searching for Jamie, the stark still life before my eyes might well have been entitled "Dead Scotsman in Snow" rather than "Frozen Elk with Arguing Indians."

The discussion at last concluded to their satisfaction, Ian informed me that they had decided to return to Anna Ooka, but would see us safely home, in return for a share of the elk meat.

The carcass had not frozen solidly through; they eviscerated it, leaving the cooling entrails in a heap of blue-gray coils, splotched with black blood. After chopping off the head to further lessen the weight, two of the men slung the body upside down from a pole, its legs tied together. Jamie eyed them darkly, obviously suspecting that they meant to give him the same treatment, but Ian assured him that they could manage a *travois*; the men were afoot, but they had brought one sturdy pack mule to carry any skins they took.

The weather had improved; the snow had melted altogether from the exposed ground, and while the air was still crisp and cold, the sky was a blinding blue, and the forest coldly pungent with the scents of spruce and balsam fir.

It was the smell of hemlock, as we passed through one grove, that reminded me of the beginning of this hegira, and the mysterious band of Indians we had seen.

"Ian," I said, catching up to him. "Just before you and your friends found us on the mountainside, we saw a band of Indians, with a Jesuit priest. They weren't from Anna Ooka, I don't think—do you have any idea who they might have been?"

"Oh, aye, Auntie. I ken all about them." He wiped a mittened hand under his red-tipped nose. "We were following them, when we found you."

The strange Indians, he said, were Mohawk, come from far north. The Tuscarora had been adopted by the Iroquois League some fifty years before, and there was a close association with the Mohawk, with frequent exchanges of visits between the two, both formal and informal.

The present visit held elements of both—it was a party of young Mohawk men, in search of wives. Their own village having a shortage of marriageable young women, they had determined to come south, to see if suitable mates might be found among the Tuscarora.

"See, a woman must belong to the proper clan," Ian explained. "If she is the wrong clan, they canna be marrit."

"Like MacDonalds and Campbells, aye?" Jamie chimed in, interested.

“Aye, a bit,” Ian said, grinning. “But that’s why they brought the priest wi’ them—if they found women, they could be married at once, and not have to sleep in a cold bed all the way home.”

“They’re Christians, then?”

Ian shrugged.

“Some of them. The Jesuits have been among them for some time, and a good many of the Huron are converts. Not so many among the Mohawk, though.”

“So they’d been to Anna Ooka?” I asked, curious. “Why were you and your friends following them?”

Ian snorted, and tightened the muffler of squirrel skins around his neck.

“They may be allies, Auntie, but it doesna mean Nacognaweto and his braves trust them. Even the other Nations of the Iroquois League are afraid of the Mohawk—Christian or no.”

It was near sunset when we came in sight of the cabin. I was cold and tired, but my heart lifted inexpressibly at the sight of the tiny homestead. One of the mules in the penfold, a light gray creature named Clarence, saw us and brayed enthusiastically in welcome, making the rest of the horses crowd up next to the rails, eager for food.

“The horses look fine.” Jamie, with a stockman’s eye, looked first to the animals’ welfare. I was rather more concerned with our own; getting inside, getting warm, and getting fed, as soon as possible.

We invited Ian’s friends to stay, but they declined, unloading Jamie in the dooryard and vanishing quickly to resume their vigilance over the departing Mohawk.

“They dinna like to stay in a white person’s house, Auntie,” Ian explained. “They think we smell bad.”

“Oh, really?” I said in pique, thinking of a certain elderly gentleman I had met in Anna Ooka, who appeared to have smeared himself with bear grease and then had himself sewn into his clothes for the winter. The pot calling the kettle black, if you asked me.

Much later, Christmas properly kept with a dram—or two—of whisky all round, we lay at last in our own bed, watching the flames of the newly kindled fire, and listening to Ian's peaceful snores.

"It's good to be home again," I said softly.

"It is." Jamie sighed and pulled me closer, my head tucked into the curve of his shoulder. "I did have the strangest dreams, sleeping in the cold."

"You did?" I stretched, luxuriating in the soft yielding of the feather-stuffed mattress. "What did you dream about?"

"All kinds of things." He sounded a bit shy. "I dreamt of Brianna, now and again."

"Really?" That was a little startling; I too had dreamt of Brianna in our icy shelter—something I seldom did.

"I did wonder …" Jamie hesitated for a moment. "Has she a birthmark, Sassenach? And if so, did ye tell me of it?"

"She does," I said slowly, thinking. "I don't *think* I ever told you about it, though; it isn't visible most of the time, so it's been years since I noticed it, myself. It's a—"

His hand tightening on my shoulder stopped me.

"It's a wee brown mark, shaped like a diamond," he said. "Just behind her left ear. Isn't it?"

"Yes, it is." It was warm and cozy in bed, but a small coolness on the back of my neck made me shiver suddenly. "Did you see that in your dream?"

"I kissed her there," he said softly.

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SPARK OF AN ANCIENT FLAME

Oxford, September 1970

“Oh, Jesus.” Roger stared at the page in front of him until the letters lost their meaning and became no more than curlicues. No such trick would erase the meaning of the words themselves; those were already carved into his mind.

“Oh, God, no!” he said out loud. The girl in the next carrel jerked in irritation at the noise, scraping the legs of her chair against the floor.

He leaned over the book, covering it with his forearms, eyes closed. He felt sick, and the palms of his hands were cold and sweaty.

He sat that way for several minutes, fighting the truth. It wasn’t going to go away, though. Christ, it had already happened, hadn’t it? A long time ago. And you couldn’t change the past.

Finally he swallowed the taste of bile in the back of his throat and looked again. It was still there. A small notice from a newspaper, printed on February 13, 1776, in the American Colony of North Carolina, in the town of Wilmington.

It is with grief that the news is received of the deaths by fire of James MacKenzie Fraser and his wife, Claire Fraser, in a conflagration that destroyed their house in the settlement of Fraser’s Ridge, on the night of January 21 last. Mr. Fraser, a nephew of the late Hector Cameron of River Run plantation, was born at Broch Tuarach in Scotland. He was *widely known in the colony and deeply respected; he leaves no surviving children.*

Except that he did.

Roger grasped for a moment at the dim hope that it wasn't them; there were, after all, any number of James Frasers, it was a fairly common name. But not James *MacKenzie* Fraser, not with a wife named Claire. Not born in Broch Tuarach, Scotland.

No, it was them; the sick certainty filled his chest and squeezed his throat with grief. His eyes stung and the ornate eighteenth-century typeface blurred again.

So she had found him, Claire. Found her gallant Highlander, and enjoyed at least a few years with him. He hoped they had been good years. He had liked Claire Randall very much—no, that was to damn her with faint praise. If he were truthful, he had loved her, and for her own sake as well as her daughter's.

More than that. He had wanted badly for her to find her Jamie Fraser, to live happily ever after with him. The knowledge—or more accurately, the hope—that she had done so had been a small talisman to him; a witness that enduring love was possible, a love strong enough to withstand separation and hardship, strong enough to outlast time. And yet all flesh was mortal; no love could outlast that fact.

He gripped the edge of the table, trying to get himself under control. Foolish, he told himself. Thoroughly foolish. And yet he felt as bereft as he had when the Reverend had died; as though he were himself newly orphaned.

Realization came as a fresh blow. He couldn't show this to Bree, he couldn't. She'd known the risk, of course, but—no. She wouldn't have imagined anything like this.

It was the purest chance that had led him to find it. He had been looking for the lyrics of old ballads to add to his repertoire, thumbing through a book of country songs. An illustration had shown the original newspaper page on which one ballad had first been published, and Roger, idly browsing, had glanced at the archaic notices posted on the same newspaper page, his eye caught by the name "Fraser."

The shock was beginning to wear off a little, though grief had settled in the pit of his stomach, nagging as the pain of an ulcer. He was a scholar and the son of a scholar; he had grown up surrounded by books, imbued since childhood with the sanctity of the printed word. He felt like a murderer as he groped for his penknife and stealthily opened it, glancing around to be sure he was unobserved.

It was instinct more than reason; the instinct that leads a man to want to clear up the remains of an accident, to lay a decent covering over the bodies, to obliterate the visible traces of disaster, even though the tragedy itself remains.

With the folded page lying hidden in his pocket like a severed thumb, he left the library, to walk the rainy streets of Oxford.

The walking calmed him, made it possible to think rationally again, to force his own feelings back long enough to plan what he must do, how to protect Brianna from a grief that would be more profound and longer felt than his own.

He had checked the bibliographic information in the front of the book; published in 1906 by a small British press. It wouldn't be widely available, then; but still something Brianna might stumble over in her own researches.

It wasn't a logical place to look for information of the sort she was seeking, but the book was titled *Songs and Ballads of the Eighteenth Century*. He knew well enough that historian's curiosity that led to impulsive pokings in unlikely places; she would know enough to do that too. Still more, he knew the child's hunger for knowledge—any knowledge—that might lead her to look at anything dealing with the period, in an effort to imagine her parents' surroundings, to build a vision of lives she could neither see nor share.

Long odds, but not long enough. Someone jostled him in passing, and he realized that he had been leaning on the bridge railing for several minutes, watching raindrops patter on the surface of the river without seeing them. Slowly, he turned down the street, oblivious of the shops and the mushroom herds of umbrellas.

There was no way to ensure that she would never see a copy of that book; this might be the only copy, or there might be hundreds, lying like time bombs in libraries all over the U.S.

The ache in his guts was getting worse. He was soaked through by now, and freezing. Inside, he felt a deeper cold spreading from a new thought: What might Brianna do, if she found out?

She would be devastated, grief-stricken. But then? He was himself convinced that the past could not be changed; the things Claire had told him had made him sure of it. She and Jamie Fraser had tried to avert the slaughter at Culloden, to no avail. She had tried to save her future husband, Frank, by saving his ancestor, Jack Randall—and failed, only to find that Jack had never been Frank's ancestor after all, but had married his younger brother's pregnant lover in order to legitimize the child when the brother died.

No, the past might twist on itself like a writhing snake, but it could not be changed. He wasn't at all sure that Brianna shared his conviction, though.

How do you mourn a time-traveler? she'd asked him. If he showed her the notice, she could mourn truly; she would know. The knowledge would wound her terribly, but she would heal, and could put the past behind her. If.

If it wasn't for the stones on Craigh na Dun. The stone circle and its dreadful promise of possibility.

Claire had gone through the stones of Craigh na Dun on the ancient fire feast of Samhain, on the first day of November, nearly two years before.

Roger shivered, and not from the cold. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck whenever he thought of it. It had been a clear, mild fall morning, that dawn of the Feast of All Saints, with nothing to disturb the grassy peace of the hill where the circle of stones stood sentinel: Nothing until Claire had touched the great cleft stone, and vanished into the past.

Then the earth had seemed to dissolve under his own feet, and the air had ripped away with a roar that echoed inside his head like cannon fire. He had gone blind in a blast of light and dark; only his memories of the last time had kept him from utter panic.

He'd had hold of Brianna's hand. Reflex closed his grip, even as all senses disappeared. It was like being dropped from a thousand feet into ice-cold water; terrible vertigo and a shock so intense, he could feel no sensation but the shock itself. Blind and deaf, bereft of sense and senses, he had been conscious of two last thoughts, the remnants of his consciousness flicking out like a candleflame in a hurricane. *I'm dying,* he had thought, with great calmness. And then, *Don't let go*.

The dawning sun had fallen in a bright path through the cleft stone; Claire had walked along it. When Roger stirred at last and raised his head, the sun of late afternoon glowed gold and lavender behind the great stone, leaving it black against the sky.

He was lying on Brianna, sheltering her with his body. She was unconscious but breathing, her face desperately pale against the dark red of her hair. Weak as he was, there was no question of his being able to carry her down the steep hillside to the car below; her father's daughter, she was nearly six feet tall, only a few inches shorter than Roger himself.

He had huddled over her, holding her head in his lap, stroking her face and shivering, until just before sunset. She had opened her eyes then, as dark a blue as the fading sky, and whispered, "She's gone?"

"It's all right," Roger had whispered back. He bent and kissed her cold forehead. "It's all right; I'll take care of you."

He'd meant it. But how?

It was getting dark by the time he returned to his rooms. He could hear a clatter from the dining hall as he passed, and he smelled boiled ham and baked beans, but supper was the farthest thing from his mind.

He squelched up to his rooms and dropped his wet things in a heap on the floor. He dried himself, then sat naked on the bed, towel forgotten in his hand, staring at the desk and at the wooden box that held Brianna's letters.

He would do anything to save her from grief. He would do much more to save her from the threat of the stones.

Claire had gone back—he hoped—from 1968 to 1766. And then died in 1776. Now it was 1970. A person going back now would—might—end in 1768. There would be time. That was the hell of it; there would be time.

Even if Brianna thought as he did—or if he could convince her—that the past could not be changed, could she live through the next seven years, knowing that the window of opportunity was closing, that her only chance ever to know her father, see her mother again, was disappearing day by day? It was one thing to let them go, not knowing where they were or what had happened to them; it was another to know explicitly, and to do nothing.

He had known Brianna for more than two years, yet been with her for only a few months of that time. And yet, they knew each other very well in some respects. How could they not, having shared such an experience? Then there had been the letters—dozens, two or three or four each week—and the rare brief holidays, spent between enchantment and frustration, that left him aching with need of her.

Yes, he knew her. She was quiet, but possessed of a fierce determination that he thought would not submit to grief without a fight. And while she was cautious, once her mind was made up, she acted with hair-raising dispatch. If she decided to risk the passage, he couldn't stop her.

His hands closed tight on the wadded towel, and his stomach dropped, remembering the chasm of the circle and the void that had nearly swallowed them. The only thing more terrifying was the thought of losing Brianna before he had ever truly had her.

He'd never lied to her. But the impact of shock and grief was slowly receding as the rudiments of a plan formed in his mind. He stood up and wrapped the towel around his waist.

One letter wouldn't do it. It would have to be slow, a process of suggestion, of gentle discouragement. He thought it wouldn't be difficult; he had found almost nothing in a year of searching in Scotland, beyond the report of the burning of Fraser's print shop in

Edinburgh—he shuddered involuntarily at the thought of flames. Now he knew why, of course; they must have emigrated soon after, though he had found no trace of them on the ship's rolls he had searched.

Time to give up, he would suggest. Let the past rest—and the dead bury the dead. To keep on looking, in the face of no evidence, would border on obsession. He would suggest, very subtly, that it was unhealthy, this looking back—now it was time to look forward, lest she waste her life in futile searching. Neither of her parents would have wanted that.

The room was chilly, but he barely noticed.

I'll take care of you, he'd said, and meant it. Was suppressing a dangerous truth the same as lying? Well, if it was, then he'd lie. To give consent to do wrong was a sin, he'd heard that from his early days. That was all right, he'd risk his soul for her, and willingly.

He rummaged in the drawer for a pen. Then he stopped, bent, and reached two fingers into the pocket of his sopping jeans. The paper was frayed and soggy, half disintegrating already. With steady fingers, he tore it into tiny pieces, disregarding the cold sweat that ran in trickles from his face.

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23

THE SKULL BENEATH THE SKIN

I had told Jamie that I didn't mind being far from civilization; wherever there were people, there would be work for a healer.

Duncan had been good as his word, returning in the spring of 1768 with eight former Ardsmuir men and their families, ready to take up homesteading on Fraser's Ridge, as the place was now known. With some thirty souls to hand, there was an immediate call on my mildly rusty services, to stitch up wounds and treat fevers, to lance abscessed boils and scrape infected gums. Two of the women were pregnant, and it was my joy to deliver healthy children, a boy and a girl, both born in early spring.

My fame—if that's the word—as a healer soon spread outside our tiny settlement, and I found myself called farther and farther afield, to tend the ills of folk on isolated hill farms scattered over thirty miles of wild mountain terrain. In addition, I made rare visits with Ian to Anna Ooka to see Nayawenne, returning with baskets and jars of useful herbs.

At first, Jamie had insisted that he or Ian must go with me to the farther places, but it was soon apparent that neither of them could be spared; it was time for the first planting, with ground to break and harrow, corn and barley to be planted, to say nothing of the usual chores required to keep a small farm running. In addition to the horses and mules, we had acquired a small flock of chickens, a depraved-looking black boar to meet the social needs of the pig, and —luxury of luxuries—a milch goat, all of whom required to be fed and watered and generally kept from killing themselves or being eaten by bears or panthers.

So more and more often I went alone when some stranger appeared suddenly in the dooryard, asking for healer or midwife. Daniel Rawlings's casebook began to acquire new entries, and the larder was enriched by the gifts of hams and venison haunches, bags of grain and bushels of apples, with which my patients repaid my attentions. I never asked for payment, but something was always offered—and poor as we were, anything at all was welcome.

My backcountry patients came from many places, and many spoke neither English nor French; there were German Lutherans, Quakers, Scots and Scotch-Irish, and a large settlement of Moravian brethren at Salem, who spoke a peculiar dialect of what I *thought* was Czechoslovakian. I usually managed, though; in most cases, someone could interpret for me, and at the worst, I could fall back on the language of hand and body—"Where does it hurt?" is easy to understand in any tongue.

August 1768

I was chilled to the bone. Despite my best efforts to keep the cloak wrapped tightly round me, the wind ripped it from my body, and sent it billowing like sail canvas. It beat round the head of the boy walking next to me, and jerked me sideways in my saddle with the force of the gale. The rain drove in beneath the flapping folds like frozen needles, and I was soaked through gown and petticoats before we reached Mueller's Creek.

The creek itself was boiling past, uprooted saplings, rocks and drowned branches bubbling briefly to the surface.

Tommy Mueller peered at the torrent, shoulders hunched nearly to the brim of the slouch hat he wore pulled down over his ears. I could see doubt etched in every line of his body, and bent close to shout in his ear.

“Stay here!” I bellowed, pitching my voice below the shriek of the wind.

He shook his head, mouthing something at me, but I couldn’t hear. I shook my own head vigorously, and pointed up the bank; the muddy soil was crumbly here; I could see small chunks of the black dirt melt away even as I watched.

“Get back!” I shouted.

He pointed emphatically himself—back in the direction of the farmhouse—and reached for my reins. Clearly he thought it was too dangerous; he wanted me to come back to the house, to wait out the storm.

He definitely had a point. On the other hand, I could see the stream widening, even as I watched, the ravenous water eating away the soft bank in gobbets and chunks. Wait much longer, and no one could cross—neither would it be safe for days after; floods like this kept the water high for as long as a week, as the rains from higher up the mountain trickled down to feed the torrents.

The thought of being cooped up in a four-room house for a week with all ten Muellers was enough to spur me to recklessness. Pulling the reins from Tommy’s grasp, I wheeled about, the horse tossing its head against the rain, stepping carefully on the slick mud.

We reached the upper slopes of the bank, where a layer of thick dead leaves gave better footing. I turned the horse, motioned Tommy back out of the way, and leaned forward like a steeplechaser, elbows digging into the bag of barley bound over the saddle in front of me—my payment for services rendered.

The shift of my weight was enough; the horse was no more anxious to hang about here than I was. I felt the sudden thrust as the hindquarters dropped and bunched, and then we were flying down the slope like a runaway toboggan. A jolt and a moment of giddy freefall, then a resounding splash, and I was up past my thighs in freezing water.

My hands were so cold, they might as well have been welded to the reins, but I had nothing useful to offer in terms of guidance. I let my arms go slack, giving the horse his head. I could feel huge muscles moving rhythmically under my legs as it swam, and the even more powerful shove of the water rushing past us. It dragged at my skirts, threatening to pull me off into the surge.

Then came the jar and scrabble of hooves against the stream bottom, and we were out, pouring water like a colander. I turned in the saddle, to see Tommy Mueller on the other side, his jaw hanging open under his hat. I couldn't let go of the reins to wave, but bowed toward him ceremoniously, then nudged the horse with my heels and turned toward home.

The hood of my cloak had fallen back when we jumped, but it made no great difference; I couldn't get much wetter. I knuckled a wet strand of hair out of my eyes and turned the horse's head toward the upland trail, relieved to be headed home, rain or no.

I had been at the Muellers' cabin for three days, seeing eighteen-year-old Petronella through her first labor. It would be her last, too, according to Petronella. Her seventeen-year-old husband, peeking tentatively into the room in the middle of the second day, had received a burst of German invective from Petronella that sent him stumping back to the men's refuge in the barn, ears bright red with mortification.

Still, a few hours later, I had seen Freddy—looking much younger than seventeen—kneel tentatively by his wife's bedside, face whiter than her shift as he reached a hesitant, scrubbed finger to push aside the blanket covering his daughter.

He stared dumbly at the round head, furred with soft black, then looked at his wife, as though in need of prompting.

"Ist sie nicht wunderschön?" Petronella said softly.

He nodded, slowly, then laid his head on her lap and began to cry. The women had all smiled kindly, and gone back to fixing dinner.

It had been a good dinner, too; the food was one of the benefits of house calls to the Muellers. Even now, my stomach was comfortably distended with dumplings and fried *Blutwurst,* and the lingering taste of buttered eggs in my mouth provided some small distraction from the general discomfort of my present situation.

I hoped that Jamie and Ian had managed something adequate to eat in my absence. This being the end of summer but not yet harvest time, the pantry shelves were nowhere near the height of what I hoped would be their autumn bounty, but still there were cheeses on the shelf, a huge stoneware crock of salted fish on the floor, and sacks of flour, corn, rice, beans, barley, and oatmeal.

Jamie *could* in fact cook—at least so far as dressing game and roasting it over a fire—and I had done my best to initiate Ian into the mysteries of making oatmeal parritch, but, they being men, I suspected that they hadn't bothered, choosing instead to survive on raw onions and dried meat.

I couldn't tell whether it was simply that after a day spent in the manly pursuits of chopping down trees, plowing fields, and carrying deer carcasses over mountains, they honestly were too exhausted to think of assembling a proper meal, or whether they did it on purpose, so that I would feel necessary.

The wind had dropped, now that I was in the shelter of the ridge, but the rain was still pelting down, and the footing was treacherous, as the mud of the trail had liquified, leaving a layer of fallen leaves floating on top, deceptive as quicksand. I could feel the horse's discomfort as its hooves slipped with each step.

"Good boy," I said soothingly. "Keep it up, that's a good fellow." The horse's ears pricked slightly, but he kept his head down, stepping carefully.

"Slewfoot?" I said. "How's that?"

The horse had no name at the moment—or rather he did, but I didn't know what it was. The man from whom Jamie had bought him had called him by a German word that Jamie said was not at all suitable for a lady's horse. When I had asked him to translate the word, he had merely compressed his lips and looked Scottish, from which I deduced that it must be pretty bad. I had meant to ask old Mrs. Mueller what it meant, but had forgotten, in the haste of leaving.

In any case, Jamie's theory was that the horse would reveal his true—or at least speakable—name in the course of time, and so we were all watching the animal, in hopes of discerning its character. On the basis of a trial ride, Ian had suggested Coney, but Jamie had merely shaken his head and said, no, that wasn't it.

"Twinkletoes?" I suggested. "Lightfoot? Damn!"

The horse had come to a full stop, for obvious reasons. A small freshet gurgled merrily down the hill, bounding from rock to rock with gay abandon. It was beautiful, the rushing water clear as crystal over dark rock and green leaves. Unfortunately, it was also bounding over the remains of the trail, which, unequal to the force of events, had slithered off the face of the hill into the valley below.

I sat still, dripping. There wasn't any way around. The hill rose nearly perpendicularly on my right, shrubs and saplings poking out of a cracked rock face, and declined so precipitously to the left that going down would have amounted to suicide. Swearing under my breath, I backed the nameless horse and turned around.

If it hadn't been for the flooded creek, I would have gone back to the Muellers and let Jamie and Ian fend for themselves a bit longer. As it was, I had no choice; it was find another way home or stay here and drown.

Wearily, we retraced our slogging steps. Less than a quarter-mile from the washout, though, I found a spot where the hillside fell away into a small saddle, a depression between two "horns" of granite. Such formations were common; there was a big one on a nearby mountain, which had gained it the name of Devil's Peak. If I could cross the saddle to the other side of the hill, and pick my way along it, I would in time come back to the trail where it crossed the ridge to the south.

From the saddle I had a momentary clear view of the foothills, and the blue hollow of the valley beyond. On the other side, though, clouds hid the tops of the mountains, black with rain, suffused with an occasional flicker of hidden lightning.

The wind had dropped, now that the leading edge of the storm had passed. The rain was coming down even more heavily, if such a thing was possible, and I stopped long enough to pry my cold fingers off the reins and put up the hood of my cloak.

The footing on this side of the hill was fair, the ground being rocky but not too steep. We picked our way through small groves of red-berried mountain ash and larger stands of oak. I noted the location of a huge blackberry bramble for future reference, but didn't stop. I would be lucky to get home by dark as it was.

To distract myself from the cold trickles running down my neck, I began an mental inventory of the pantry. What could I make for dinner, once I arrived?

Something quick, I thought, shivering, and something hot. Stew would take too long; so would soup. If there was squirrel or rabbit, we might have it fried, rolled in egg and cornmeal batter. Or if not that, perhaps brose with a little bacon for flavoring, and a couple of scrambled eggs with green onions.

I ducked, wincing. Despite the hood and the thickness of my hair, the raindrops were beating on my scalp like hail pellets.

Then I realized that they *were* hail pellets. Tiny white spheres pinged off the horse's back, and rattled through the oak leaves. Within seconds, the pellets were bigger, the size of marbles, and the hail had grown heavy enough that its popping sounded like machine-gun fire on the wet mats of leaves in the clearings.

The horse flung up its head, shaking its mane vigorously in an effort to escape the stinging pellets. Hastily, I reined in and guided it into the semi-shelter of a huge chestnut tree. Underneath, it was noisy, but the hail slid off the thick canopy of leaves, leaving us protected.

"Right," I said. With some difficulty, I pried one hand off the reins and gave the horse a reassuring pat. "Easy, then. We'll be all right, as long as we don't get struck by lightning."

Evidently this statement had jogged someone's memory; a silent fork of dazzling light split the black sky beyond Roan Mountain. A few moments later, the dull rumble of thunder came booming up the hollow, drowning out the rasp of hail on the leaves overhead.

Sheet lightning shimmered far away, across the mountains. Then more bolts, sizzling across the sky, each succeeded by a louder roll of thunder. The hailstorm passed, and the rain resumed, pelting down as hard as ever. The valley below disappeared in cloud and mist, but the lightning lit the stark mountain ridges like bones on an X ray.

“One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus, three hippopotamus, four hippopot—” BWOOOM! The horse jerked its head and stamped nervously.

“I know just how you feel,” I told it, peering down the valley. “Steady, though, steady.” There it went again, a flash that lit the dark ridge and left the silhouette of the horse’s pricked ears imprinted on my retinas.

“One hippopotamus, two hippo—” I could have sworn the ground shook. The horse let out a high-pitched scream and reared against my pull on the reins, hooves thrashing in the leaves. The air reeked of ozone.

Flash.

“One,” I said through my teeth. “Damn you, whoa! One hip—”

Flash.

“One—”

Flash.

“Whoa! WHOA!”

I wasn’t conscious of the fall at all; nor even the landing. One moment I was sawing at the reins, a thousand pounds of panicked horse going to pieces under me, shying in all directions. The next, I was lying on my back, blinking up at a spinning black sky, trying to will my diaphragm to work.

Echoes of the shock of impact wavered through my flesh, and I tried frantically to fit myself back into my body. Then I drew breath, a painful gasp, and found myself shaking, the shock turning to the first intimations of damage.

I lay still, eyes closed, concentrating on breathing, conducting an inventory. The rain was still pounding down onto my face, puddling in my eye sockets and running down into my ears. My face and hands were numb. My arms moved. I could breathe a little easier now.

My legs. The left one hurt, but not in any threatening way; only a bruised knee. I rolled heavily onto my side, impeded by my wet, bulky garments. Still, it was the heavy clothing that had saved me from serious damage.

Above me came an uncertain whinny, audible amid the booming thunder. I looked up, dizzy, and saw the horse's head, protruding from a thicket of buckbrush some thirty feet overhead. Below the thicket, a steep, rocky slope fell away; a long scrape mark toward the bottom showed where I had struck and rolled before ending up in my present position.

We had been standing virtually on the edge of this small precipice without my seeing it, screened as it was by the heavy growth of shrubs. The horse's panic had sent it to the edge, but evidently it had sensed the danger and caught itself before going over—not before letting me slide off into space, though.

"You bloody bugger!" I said. And wondered whether the unknown German name meant something similar. "I could have broken my neck!" I wiped the mud from my face with a hand that still shook, and looked about me for a way back up.

There wasn't one. Behind me, the rocky cliff face continued, merging into one of the granite horns. Before me, it ended abruptly, in a plunge straight downward into a small hollow. The slope I stood on declined into this hollow as well, rolling down through clumps of yellow-wood and sumac to the banks of a small creek some sixty feet below.

I stood quite still, trying to think. No one knew where I was. *I* didn't know exactly where I was, come to that. Worse, no one would be looking for me for some time. Jamie would think I was still at Muellers' because of the rain. The Muellers would of course have no reason to think I hadn't made it safely home; even if they had doubts, they couldn't follow me, because of the flooded creek. And by the time anyone found the washed-out trail, any traces of my passage would long since have been obliterated by the rain.

I was uninjured, that was something. I was also afoot, alone, without food, moderately lost, and thoroughly wet. About the only certainty was that I wasn't going to die of thirst.

The lightning was still glancing to and fro like dueling pitchforks in the sky above, though the thunder had faded to a dull rumble in the distance. I had no particular fear of being struck by lightning now—not with so many better candidates standing about, in the form of gigantic trees—but finding shelter seemed a very good idea nonetheless.

It was still raining; drops rolled off the end of my nose with monotonous regularity. Limping on my bruised knee and swearing quite a bit, I made my way down the slippery slope to the edge of the stream.

This creek, too, was swollen by the rain; I could see the tops of drowned bushes sticking out of the water, leaves trailing limply in the rushing current. There was no bank to speak of; I fought my way through the grasping claws of holly and red-cedar toward the rocky cliff-face to the south; perhaps there would be a cave or hollow there that would offer shelter of a sort.

I found nothing but tumbled rocks, black with wet and hard to navigate. Some distance beyond, though, I saw something else that offered a small possibility of shelter.

A huge red cedar tree had fallen across the stream, its roots undermined as the water ate away the soil in which it stood. It had fallen away from me and struck the cliff, so that the thick crown sprawled into the water and over the rocks, the trunk canted across the stream at a shallow angle; on my side, I could see the huge mat of its exposed roots, a bulwark of cracked earth and small bushes heaved up about them. The cavity under them might not be complete shelter, but it looked better than standing in the open or crouching in the bushes.

I hadn't even paused to think that the shelter might have attracted bears, catamounts, or other unfriendly fauna. Fortunately, it hadn't.

It was a space about five feet long and five wide, dank, dark, and clammy. The ceiling was composed of the tree's great gnarled roots, packed with sandy earth, like the roof of a badger's sett. But it was a solid ceiling, for all that; the floor of churned earth was damp but not muddy, and for the first time in hours rain was not drumming on my skull.

Exhausted, I crawled into the farthest corner, set my wet shoes beside me, and went to sleep. The cold of my wet clothes made me dream vividly, in jumbled visions of blood and childbirth, trees and rocks and rain, and I woke frequently, in that half-conscious way of utter tiredness, falling asleep again in seconds.

I dreamt that I was giving birth. I felt no pain, but saw the emerging head as though I stood between my own thighs, midwife and mother both together. I took the naked child in my arms, still smeared with the blood that came from both of us, and gave her to her father. I gave her to Frank, but it was Jamie who took the caul from her face and said, “She’s beautiful.”

Then I woke and slept, finding my way among boulders and waterfalls, urgently seeking something I had lost. Woke and slept, pursued through woods by something fearsome and unknown. Woke and slept, a knife in my hand, red with blood—but whose, I did not know.

I woke all the way to the smell of burning, and sat bolt upright. The rain had stopped; it was the silence that wakened me, I thought. The smell of smoke was still strong in my nostrils, though—it wasn’t part of the dream.

I poked my head out of my burrow like a snail cautiously emerging from its shell. The sky was a pale purple-gray, shot with streaks of orange over the mountains. The woods around me were still, and dripping. It was nearly sundown, and darkness was gathering in the hollows.

I crawled out all the way, and looked around. The creek at my back rushed past in full spate, its gurgling the only sound. The ground rose in front of me to a small ridge. At the top of this stood a large balsam poplar tree, the source of the smoke. The tree had been struck by lightning; half of it still bore green leaves, the canopy bushy against the pale sky. The other half was blackened and charred all down one side of the massive trunk. Wisps of white smoke rose from it like ghosts escaping an enchanter’s bondage, and red lines of fire showed fleetingly, glowing beneath the blackened shell.

I looked about for my shoes, but couldn’t find them in the shadows. Not bothering, I made my way up the ridge toward the blasted tree, panting with effort. All my muscles were stiffened with sleep and cold; I felt like a tree come awkwardly to life myself, stumping uphill on gnarled and clumsy roots.

It was warm near the tree. Blissfully, wonderfully warm. The air smelled of ash and burnt soot, but it was warm. I stood as close as I dared, spreading my cloak out wide, and stood still, steaming.

For some time I didn't even try to think; just stood there, feeling my chilled flesh thaw and soften again into something resembling humanity. But as my blood began to flow again, my bruises began to ache, and I felt the deeper ache of hunger as well; it had been a long time since breakfast.

Likely to be a lot longer time till supper, I thought grimly. The dark was creeping up from the hollow, and I was still lost. I glanced across to the opposite ridge; not a sign of the bloody horse.

"Traitor," I muttered. "Probably gone off to join a herd of elk or something."

I chafed my hands together; my clothes were halfway dry, but the temperature was dropping; it would be a chilly night. Would it be better to spend the night here, in the open, near the blasted tree, or ought I to return to my burrow while I could still see to do so?

A snapping in the brush behind me decided me. The tree had cooled now; though the charred wood was still hot to the touch, the fire had burned out. It would be no deterrent to prowling night hunters. Lacking fire or weapons, my only defense was that of the hunted; lie hidden through the dark hours, like the mice and rabbits. Well, I had to go back to fetch my shoes anyway.

Reluctantly leaving the last vestiges of warmth, I made my way back down to the fallen tree. Crawling in, I saw a pale blur against the darker earth in the corner. I set my hand on it, and found not the softness of my buckskin moccasins, but something hard and smooth.

My instincts had grasped the reality of the object before my brain could retrieve the word, and I snatched my hand away. I sat for a moment, my heart pounding. Then curiosity overcame atavistic fear, and I began to scoop away the sandy loam around it.

It was indeed a skull, complete with lower jaw, though the mandible was attached only by the remnants of dried ligament. A fragment of broken vertebra rattled in the foramen magnum.

“ ‘How long will a man lie i’ the earth ere he rot?’ ” I murmured, turning the skull over in my hands. The bone was cold and damp, slightly roughened by exposure to the damp. The light was too dim to see details, but I could feel the heavy ridges over the brows, and the slickness of smooth enamel on the canines. Likely a man, and not an old one; most of the teeth were present, and not unduly worn—at least insofar as I could tell with a groping thumb.

How long? Eight or nine year, the grave-digger said to Hamlet. I had no notion whether Shakespeare knew anything about forensics, but it seemed a reasonable estimate to me. Longer than nine years, then.

How had he come here? By violence, my instincts answered, though my brain was not far behind. An explorer might die of disease, hunger or exposure—I firmly suppressed that line of thought, trying to ignore my growling stomach and damp clothes—but he wouldn’t end up buried under a tree.

The Cherokee and Tuscarora buried their dead, all right, but not like this, alone in a hollow. And not in fragments, either. It was that broken bit of vertebra that had told me the story at once; the edges were compressed, the broken face sheared clean, not shattered.

“Somebody took a real dislike to you, didn’t they?” I said. “Didn’t stop with a scalp; they took your whole head.”

Which made me wonder—was the rest of him here, too? I rubbed a hand across my face, thinking, but after all, I had nothing better to do; I wasn’t going anywhere before daylight, and the likelihood of sleep had grown remote with the discovery of my companion. I set the skull carefully to one side, and began to dig.

It was fully night by now, but even the darkest of nights outdoors is seldom completely without light. The sky was still covered with cloud, which reflected considerable light, even in my shallow burrow.

The sandy earth was soft, and easy to dig in, but after a few minutes of scratching, my knuckles and fingertips were rubbed raw, and I crawled outside, long enough to find a stick to dig with. A little more probing yielded me something hard; not bone, I thought, and not metal, either. Stone, I decided, fingering the dark oval. Just a river stone? I thought not; the surface was very smooth, but with something incised in it; a glyph of some kind, though my touch was not sufficiently sensitive to tell me what it was.

More digging yielded nothing. Either the rest of Yorick wasn't here, or it was buried so far down that I had no chance of discovering it. I put the stone in my pocket, sat back on my heels, and rubbed my sandy hands on my skirts. At least the exercise had warmed me again.

I sat down again and picked up the skull, holding it in my lap. Gruesome as it was, it was the semblance of company, some distraction from my own plight. And I was quite aware that all my actions of the last hour or so had been distractions; designed to fight off the panic that I could feel submerged below the surface of my mind, waiting to erupt like the sharp end of a drowned tree branch. It was going to be a long night.

"Right," I said aloud to the skull. "Read any good books lately? No, I suppose you don't get round much anymore. Poetry, maybe?" I cleared my throat and started in on Keats, warming up with "Written in Disgust of Vulgar Superstition" and going on with "Ode on a Grecian Urn."

" '… Forever wilt thou love, and she be fair!' " I declaimed. "There's more of that one, but I forget. Not too bad, though, was it? Want to try a little Shelley? 'Ode to the West Wind' is good—you'd like that one, I think."

It occurred to me to wonder why I thought so; I had no particular reason to think Yorick was an Indian rather than a European, but I realized that I did think so—perhaps it was the stone I had found with him. Shrugging, I set in again, trusting that the repellent effect of great English poetry would be the equal of a campfire, so far as the bears and panthers were concerned.

"Make me thy lyre, even as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling like its own!
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep, autumnal tone,

Sweet though in sadness. Be thou, Spirit fierce,
My spirit! Be thou me, impetuous one!
“Drive my dead thoughts over the universe
Like wither’d leaves to quicken a new birth;
And, by the incantation of this verse,

“Scatter, as from an unextinguish’d hearth
Ashes and sparks, my words among mankind!
Be through my lips to unawaken’d earth

“The trumpet of a prophecy! O Wind …”

The final stanza faded on my lips. There was a light on the ridge. A small spark, growing to a flame. At first I thought it was the lightning-blasted tree, some smoldering ember come to life—but then it moved. It glided slowly down the hill toward me, floating just above the bushes.

I sprang to my feet, realizing only then that I had no shoes on. Frantically, I groped about the floor, covering the small space again and again. But it was no use. My shoes were gone.

I seized the skull and stood barefoot, turning to face the light.

I watched the light come nearer, drifting down the hill like a milkweed puff. One thought floated in my paralyzed mind—a random line of Shelley’s: *Fiend, I defy thee! with a calm, fixed mind*. Somewhere in the dimmer recesses of my consciousness, something observed that Shelley had had much better nerves than I. I clutched the skull closer. It wasn’t much of a weapon—but somehow I didn’t think that whatever was coming would be deterred by knives or pistols, either.

It wasn’t only that the wet surroundings made it seem grossly improbable that anyone was strolling through the woods with a blazing torch. The light didn’t burn like a pine torch or oil lantern. It didn’t flicker, but burned with a soft, steady glow.

It floated a few feet above the ground, just about where someone would hold a torch they carried before them. It drew slowly nearer, at the pace of a man walking. I could see it bob slightly, moving to the rhythm of a steady stride.

I cowered in my burrow, half hidden by the bank of earth and severed roots. I was freezing cold, but sweat ran down my sides and I could smell the reek of my own fear. My numb toes curled in the dirt, wanting to run.

I had seen St. Elmo's fire before, at sea. Eerie as that was, its liquid blue crackle didn't resemble at all the pale light approaching. This had neither spark nor color; only a spectral glow. Marsh gas, people in Cross Creek said when the mountain lights were mentioned.

Ha, I said to myself, though soundlessly. Marsh gas my left foot!

The light moved through a small thicket of alders, and out into the clearing before me. It wasn't marsh gas.

He was tall, and he was naked. Beyond a breechclout, he wore nothing but paint; long stripes of red down arms and legs and torso, and his face was solid black, from chin to forehead. His hair was greased and dressed in a crest, from which two turkey feathers stiffly pointed.

I was invisible, completely hidden in the darkness of my refuge, while the torch he held washed him in soft light, gleaming off his hairless chest and shoulders, shadowing the orbits of his eyes. But he knew I was there.

I didn't dare to move. My breath sounded painfully loud in my ears. He simply stood there, perhaps a dozen feet away, and looked straight into the dark where I was, as though it were the broadest day. And the light of his torch burned steady and soundless, pallid as a corpse candle, the wood of it not consumed.

I don't know how long I had been standing there before it occurred to me that I was no longer afraid. I was still cold, but my heart had slowed to its normal pace, and my bare toes had uncurled.

"Whatever do you want?" I said, and only then realized that we had been in some sort of communication for some time. Whatever this was, it had no words. Nothing coherent passed between us—but something passed, nonetheless.

The clouds had lifted, shredding away before a light wind, and dark streaks of starlit sky showed through rents in the racing cirrus. The wood was quiet, but in the usual way of a drenched night-wood; the creaks and sighs of tall trees moving, the rustle of shrubs brushed by the wind's restless edge, and in the background the constant rush of invisible water, echoing the turbulence of the air above.

I breathed deeply, feeling suddenly very much alive. The air was thick and sweet with the breath of green plants, the tang of herbs and musk of dead leaves, overlaid and interlaced with the scents of the storm—wet rock, damp earth, and rising mist, and a sharp hint of ozone, sudden as the lightning that had struck the tree.

Earth and air, I thought suddenly, and fire and water too. And here I stood with all the elements; in their midst and at their mercy.

"What do you want?" I said again, feeling helpless. "I can't do anything for you. I know you're there; I can see you. But that's all."

Nothing moved, no words were spoken. But quite clearly the thought formed in my mind, in a voice that was not my own.

That's enough, it said.

Without haste, he turned and walked away. By the time he had gone two dozen paces, the light of his torch disappeared, fading into nonexistence like the final glow of twilight into night.

"Oh," I said, a little blankly. "Goodness." My legs were trembling, and I sat down, the skull—which I had almost forgotten—cradled in my lap.

I sat there for a long time, watching and listening, but nothing further happened. The mountains surrounded me, dark and impenetrable. Perhaps in the morning, I could find my way back to the trail, but for now, wandering about in darkness could lead to nothing but disaster.

I was no longer afraid; my fear had left me during my encounter with—whatever it was. I was still cold, though, and very, very hungry. I put down the skull and curled myself up beside it, pulling my damp cloak around me. It took a long time to fall asleep, and I lay in my chilly burrow watching the evening stars wheel overhead through rifts in the cloud.

I tried to make sense of the last half hour, but there was really nothing to make sense *of*; nothing, really, had happened. And yet it had; he had been there. The sense of him remained with me, somehow vaguely comforting, and at last I fell asleep, cheek pillowed on a clump of dead leaves.

I dreamt uneasily, because of cold and hunger; a procession of disjoint images. Lightning-blasted trees, blazing like torches. Trees uprooted from the earth, walking on their roots with a dreadful lurching gait.

Lying in the rain with my throat cut, warm blood pulsing down across my chest, a queer comfort to my chilling flesh. My fingers numb, unable to move. The rain striking my skin like hail, each cold drop a hammer blow, and then the rain itself seemed warm, and soft upon my face. Buried alive, black soil showering down into open eyes.

I woke, heart pounding. Lay silent. It was deep night now; the sky stretched clear and endless overhead, and I lay in a bowl of darkness. After a time, I slept again, pursued by dreams.

Wolves howling in the distance. Fleeing panicked through a forest of white aspen that stood in snow, the trees' red sap glowing like bloody jewels on white-paper trunks. A man standing in the bleeding trees with his head plucked bald, save a standing crest of black, greased hair. He had deep eyes and a shattered smile, and the blood on his breast was brighter than the tree sap.

Wolves, much closer. Howling and barking and the scent of blood hot in my own nose, running with the pack, running from the pack. Running. Harefooted, white-toothed, and the ghost of blood a taste in my mouth, a tingle in my nose. Hunger. Chase and catch and kill and blood. Heart hammering, blood racing, sheer panic of the hunted.

I felt my armbone crack with a noise like a dry branch snapping, and tasted marrow warm and salty, slippery on my tongue.

Something brushed my face and I opened my eyes. Great yellow eyes stared into mine, from the dark ruff of a white-toothed wolf. I screamed and struck at it and the beast started back with a startled *"Woof!"*

I floundered to my knees and crouched there, gibbering. It had just gone daybreak. The dawning light was new and tender, and showed me plainly the huge black outline of … Rollo.

"Oh, Jesus God, what the bloody *hell* are you doing here, frigging bloody horrible … filthy beast!" I might eventually have gotten a grip on myself, but Jamie got one first.

Big hands pulled me up and out of my hiding place, held me tight and patted me anxiously, checking for damage. The wool of his plaid was soft against my face; it smelt of wet and lye soap and his own male scent and I breathed it in like oxygen.

"Are ye all right? For God's sake, Sassenach, are ye all right?"

"No," I said. "Yes," I said, and started to cry.

It didn't last long; it was no more than the shock of relief. I tried to say as much, but Jamie wasn't listening. He scooped me up in his arms, filthy as I was, and began to carry me toward the small stream.

"Hush, then," he said, squeezing me tightly against him. "Hush, *mo chridhe*. It's all right now; you're safe."

I was still fuddled with cold and dreams. Alone so long with no voice but my own, his sounded odd, unreal and hard to understand. The warm solidness of his grasp was real, though.

"Wait," I said, tugging feebly at his shirt. "Wait, I forgot. I have to —"

"Jesus, Uncle Jamie, look at this!"

Jamie turned, holding me. Young Ian was standing in the mouth of my refuge, framed in dangling roots, holding up the skull.

I felt Jamie's muscles tighten as he saw it.

"Holy God, Sassenach, what's that?"

"Who, you mean," I said. "I don't know. Nice chap, though. Don't let Rollo at him; he wouldn't like it." Rollo was sniffing the skull with intense concentration, wet black nostrils flaring with interest.

Jamie peered down into my face, frowning slightly.

"Are ye sure you're quite all right, Sassenach?"

"No," I said, though in fact my wits were coming back as I woke up all the way. "I'm cold and I'm starving. You didn't happen to bring any breakfast, did you?" I asked longingly. "I could murder a plateful of eggs."

"No," he said, setting me down while he groped in his sporran. "I hadna time to trouble for food, but I've got some brandywine. Here, Sassenach; it'll do you good. And then," he added, raising one eyebrow, "you can tell me how the devil ye came to be out in the middle of nowhere, aye?"

I collapsed on a rock and sipped the brandywine gratefully. The flask trembled in my hands, but the shivering began to ease as the dark amber stuff made its way directly through the walls of my empty stomach and into my bloodstream.

Jamie stood behind me, his hand on my shoulder.

"How long have ye been here, Sassenach?" he asked, his voice gentle.

"All night," I said, shivering again. "Since just before noon yesterday, when the bloody horse—I think his name's Judas—dropped me off that ledge up there."

I nodded at the ledge. The middle of nowhere was a good description of the place, I thought. It could have been any of a thousand anonymous hollows in these hills. A thought struck me—one that should have occurred to me long before, had I not been so chilled and groggy.

"How the hell did you find me?" I asked. "Did one of the Muellers follow me, or—don't tell me the bloody horse led you to me, like Lassie?"

"It's a gelding, Auntie," Ian put in reprovingly. "No a lassie. But we havena seen your horse at all. No, Rollo led us to ye." He beamed proudly at the dog, who contrived to look blandly dignified, as though he did this sort of thing all the time.

"But if you haven't seen the horse," I began, bewildered, "how did you even know I'd left Muellers'? And how could Rollo—" I broke off, seeing the two men eyeing each other.

Ian shrugged slightly and nodded, yielding to Jamie. Jamie hunkered down on the ground beside me, and lifting the hem of my dress, took my bare feet into his big, warm hands.

"Your feet are frozen, Sassenach," he said quietly. "Where did ye lose your shoes?"

"Back there," I said, with a nod toward the uprooted tree. "They must still be there. I took them off to cross a stream, then put them down and couldn't find them in the dark."

"They're not there, Auntie," said Ian. He sounded so queer that I looked up at him in surprise. He was still holding the skull, turning it gingerly over in his hands.

"No, they're not." Jamie's head was bent as he chafed my feet, and I could see the early light glint copper off his hair, which lay tumbled loose over his shoulders, disheveled as though he had just risen from his bed.

"I was in bed, asleep," he said, echoing my thought. "When yon beast suddenly went mad." He jerked his chin at Rollo, without looking up. "Barking and howling and flingin' his carcass at the door as though the Devil was outside."

"I shouted at him, and tried to get hold of his scruff and shake him quiet," Ian put in, "but he wouldna stop, no matter what I did."

"Aye, he carried on so that the spittle flew from his jaws and I was sure he'd gone truly mad. I thought he'd do us an injury, so I bade Ian unbolt the door and let him be gone." Jamie sat back on his heels and frowned at my foot, then picked a dead leaf off my instep.

"Well, and *was* the Devil outside?" I asked flippantly.

Jamie shook his head.

"We searched the clearing, from the penfold to the spring, and didna find a thing—except these." He reached into his sporran and drew out my shoes. He looked up into my face, his own quite expressionless.

"They were sitting on the doorstep, side by side."

Every hair on my body rose. I lifted the flask and drained the last of the brandywine.

"Rollo tore off, bayin' like a hound," Ian said, eagerly taking up the story. "But then he came back a moment later, and began to sniff at your shoes and whinge and cry."

“I felt rather like doing that myself, aye?” Jamie’s mouth lifted slightly at one corner, but I could see the fear still dark in his eyes.

I swallowed, but my mouth was too dry to talk, despite the brandywine.

Jamie slipped one shoe onto my foot, and then the other. They were damp, but faintly warm from his body.

“I did think ye were maybe dead, Cinderella,” he said softly, head bent to hide his face.

Ian didn’t notice, caught up in the enthusiasm of the story.

“My clever wee dog was for dashing off, the same as when he’s smelt a rabbit, so we caught up our plaids and came away after him, only stopping to snatch a brand from the hearth and smoor the fire. He led us a good chase, too, did ye no, laddie?” He rubbed Rollo’s ears with affectionate pride. “And here ye were!”

The brandywine was buzzing in my ears, swaddling my wits in a warm, sweet blanket, but I had enough sense left to tell me that for Rollo to have followed a trail back to me … someone had walked all that way in my shoes.

I had recovered some remnants of my voice by this time, and managed to talk with only a little hoarseness.

“Did you—see anything—along the way?” I asked.

“No, Auntie,” Ian said, suddenly sober. “Did you?”

Jamie lifted his head, and I could see how worry and exhaustion had hollowed his face, leaving the broad cheekbones sharp beneath his skin. I wasn’t the only one who had had a long, hard night.

“Yes,” I said, “but I’ll tell you later. Right now, I believe I’ve turned into a pumpkin. Let’s go home.”

* * *

Jamie had brought horses, but there was no way to get them down into the hollow; we were forced to make our way down the banks of the flooded stream, splashing through the shallows, then to clamber laboriously up a rocky slope to the ledge above, where the animals were tethered. Rubber-legged and flimsy after my ordeal, I wasn’t a great deal of help in this endeavor, but Jamie and Ian coped matter-of-factly, boosting me over obstructions and handing me back and forth like a large, unwieldy package.

"You really aren't supposed to give alcohol to people suffering from hypothermia," I said feebly as Jamie put the flask to my lips again during one pause for rest.

"I dinna care what you're suffering from, you'll feel it less with the drink in your belly," he said. It was still chilly from the rain, but his face was flushed from the climb. "Besides," he added, mopping his brow with a fold of his plaid, "if ye pass out, you'll be less trouble to hoik about. Christ, it's like hauling a newborn calf out of a bog."

"Sorry," I said. I lay flat on the ground and closed my eyes, hoping I wouldn't throw up. The sky was spinning in one direction, my stomach in the other.

"Away, dog!" Ian said.

I opened one eye to see what was going on, and saw Ian firmly shooing Rollo away from the skull, which I had insisted he bring with us.

Seen in daylight, it was hardly a prepossessing object. Stained and discolored by the soil in which it had been buried, from a distance it resembled a smooth stone, scooped and gouged by wind and weather. Several of the teeth had been chipped or broken, though the skull showed no other damage.

"Just what do ye mean to do wi' Prince Charming there?" Jamie asked, eyeing my acquisition rather critically. His color had faded, and he had got his breath back. He glanced down at me, reached over and smoothed the hair out of my eyes, smiling.

"All right, Sassenach?"

"Better," I assured him, sitting up. The countryside had not quite stopped moving round me, but the brandy sloshing through my veins now gave the movement a rather pleasant quality, like the soothing rush of trees past the window of a railway carriage.

"I suppose we ought to take him home and give him Christian burial, at least?" Ian eyed the skull dubiously.

“I shouldn’t think he’d appreciate it; I don’t believe he was a Christian.” I fought back a vivid recollection of the man I had seen in the hollow. While it was true that some Indians had been converted by missionaries, this particular naked gentleman, with his black-painted face and feathered hair, had given me the impression that he was about as pagan as they come.

I fumbled in the pocket of my skirt, my fingers numb and stiff.

“This was buried with him.”

I drew out the flat stone I had unearthed. It was dirty brown in color, an irregular oval half the size of my palm. It was flattened on one side, rounded on the other, and smooth as though it had come from a streambed. I turned it over on my palm and gasped.

The flattened face was indeed incised with a carving, as I had thought. It was a glyph in the shape of a spiral, coiling in on itself. But it wasn’t the carving that brought both Jamie and Ian to peer into my hand, heads nearly touching.

Where the smooth surface had been chipped away, the rock within glowed with a lambent fire, little flames of green and orange and red all fighting fiercely for the light.

“My God, what is it?” Ian asked, sounding awed.

“It’s an opal—and a damned big one, at that,” Jamie said. He poked the stone with a large, blunt forefinger, as though checking to ensure that it was real. It was.

He rubbed a hand through his hair, thinking, then glanced at me.

“They do say that opals are unlucky stones, Sassenach.” I thought he was joking, but he looked uneasy. A widely traveled, well-educated man, still he had been born a Highlander, and I knew he had a deeply superstitious streak, though it didn’t often show.

Ha, I thought to myself. You’ve spent the night with a ghost and you think *he’s* superstitious?

“Nonsense,” I said, with rather more conviction than I felt. “It’s only a rock.”

“Well, it’s no so much they’re unlucky, Uncle Jamie,” Ian put in. “My Mam has a wee opal ring her mother left her—though it’s nothing like this!” Ian touched the stone reverently. “She did say as how an opal takes on something of its owner, though—so if ye had an opal that belonged to a good person before ye, then all was well, and you'd have good luck of it. But if not—" He shrugged.

"Aye, well," Jamie said dryly. He jerked his head toward the skull, pointing with his chin. "If it belonged to this fellow, it doesna seem as if it was ower-lucky for him."

"At least we know nobody killed him for it," I pointed out.

"Perhaps they didna want it because they kent it was bad luck," Ian suggested. He was frowning at the stone, a worried line between his eyes. "Maybe we should put it back, Auntie."

I rubbed my nose and looked at Jamie.

"It's probably rather valuable," I said.

"Ah." The two of them stood in contemplation for a moment, torn between superstition and pragmatism.

"Aye well," Jamie said finally, "I suppose it will do no harm to keep it for a bit." One side of his mouth lifted in a smile. "Let me carry it, Sassenach; if I'm struck by lightning on the way home, ye can put it back."

I got awkwardly to my feet, holding on to Jamie's arm to keep my balance. I blinked and swayed, but stayed upright. Jamie took the stone from my hand and slipped it back into his sporran.

"I'll show it to Nayawenne," I said. "She might know what the carving means, at least."

"A good thought, Sassenach," Jamie approved. "And if Prince Charming should be her kinsman, she can have him, with my blessing." He nodded toward a small stand of maple trees a hundred yards away, their green barely tinged with yellow.

"The horses are tied just yonder. Can ye walk, Sassenach?"

I looked down at my feet, considering. They seemed a lot farther away than I was used to.

"I'm not sure," I said, "I think I'm really rather drunk."

"Och, no, Auntie," Ian assured me kindly. "My Da says you're never drunk, so long as ye can hold on to the floor."

Jamie laughed at this, and threw the end of his plaid over his shoulder.

"*My* Da used to say ye werena drunk, so long as ye could find your arse with both hands." He eyed my backside with a lifted brow, but wisely thought better of whatever else he might have been going to say.

Ian choked on a giggle and coughed, recovering himself.

"Aye, well. It's no much farther, Auntie. Are ye sure ye canna walk?"

"Well, I'm no going to pick her up again, I'll tell ye," Jamie said, not waiting for my answer. "I dinna want to rupture my back." He took the skull from Ian, holding it between the tips of his fingers, and placed it delicately in my lap. "Wait here wi' your wee friend, Sassenach," he said. "Ian and I will fetch the horses."

* * *

By the time we reached Fraser's Ridge, it was early afternoon. I had been cold, wet, and without food for nearly two days, and was feeling distinctly light-headed; a feeling exaggerated both by more infusions of brandywine and by my efforts to explain the events of the night before to Ian and Jamie. Viewed in the light of day, the entire night seemed unreal.

But then, almost everything seemed unreal, viewed through a haze of exhaustion, hunger, and mild drunkenness. Consequently, when we turned into the clearing, I thought at first that the smoke from the chimney was a hallucination—until the tang of burning hickory wood struck my nose.

"I thought you said you smoored the fire," I said to Jamie. "Lucky you didn't burn down the house." Such accidents were common; I had heard of more than one wooden cabin burned to the ground as the result of a poorly tended hearth.

"I did smoor it," he said briefly, swinging down from the saddle. "Someone's here. D'ye ken the horse, Ian?"

Ian stood in his stirrups to look down into the penfold.

"Why, it's Auntie's wicked beast!" he said in surprise. "And a big dapple with him!"

Sure enough, the newly named Judas was standing in the penfold, unsaddled, companionably switching flies head to tail with a thick-barreled gray gelding.

"Do you know who owns him?" I asked. I hadn't got down yet; small waves of dizziness had been washing over me every few minutes, forcing me to cling to the saddle. The ground under the horse seemed to be heaving gently up and down, like ocean billows.

"No, but it's a friend," Jamie said. "He's fed my beasts for me, and milked the goat." He nodded from the horses' hay-filled manger to the door, where a pail of milk stood on the bench, neatly covered with a square of cloth to prevent flies falling in.

"Come along, Sassenach." He reached up and took me by the waist. "We'll tuck ye in bed and brew ye a dish of tea."

Our arrival had been heard; the door of the cabin opened, and Duncan Innes looked out.

"Ah, you're there, *Mac Dubh,*" he said. "What's amiss, then? Your goat was carryin' on fit to wake the dead, wi' her bag like to burst, when I came up the trail this morning." Then he saw me, and his long, mournful face went blank with surprise.

"Mrs. Claire!" he said, taking in my mud-stained and battered appearance. "Ye'll have had an accident, then? I was a bit worrit when I found the horse loose on the mountainside as I came up, and your wee box on the saddle. I looked about and called for ye, but I couldna find any sign of ye, so I brought the beast along to the house."

"Yes, I had an accident," I said, trying to stand upright by myself and not succeeding very well. "I'm all right, though." I wasn't altogether sure about that. My head felt three times its normal size.

"Bed," Jamie said firmly, grabbing me by the arms before I could fall over. "Now."

"Bath," I said. "First."

He glanced in the direction of the creek.

"You'll freeze or drown. Or both. For God's sake, Sassenach, eat and go to bed; ye can wash tomorrow."

"Now. Hot water. Kettle." I hadn't the energy to waste on prolonged argument, but I was determined. I wasn't going to bed dirty, and I wasn't going to wash filthy sheets later.

Jamie looked at me in exasperation, then rolled his eyes in surrender.

"Hot water, kettle, now, then," he said. "Ian, fetch some wood, and then take Duncan and see to the pigs. I'm going to scrub your auntie."

"I can scrub myself!"

"The hell ye can."

He was right; my fingers were so stiff, they couldn't undo the hooks of my bodice. He undressed me as though I were a small child, tossing the ripped skirt and mud-caked petticoats carelessly into the corner, and stripping off the chemise and stays, worn so long that the cloth folds had made deep red ridges in my flesh. I groaned with a voluptuous combination of pain and pleasure, rubbing the red marks as blood coursed back through my constricted torso.

"Sit," he said, pushing a stool under me as I collapsed. He wrapped a quilt around my shoulders, put a plate containing one and a half stale bannocks in front of me, and went to rootle in the cupboard after soap, washcloth, and linen towels.

"Find the green bottle, please," I said, nibbling at the dry oatcake. "I'll need to wash my hair."

"Mmphm." More clinking, and he emerged at last with his hands full of things, including a towel and the bottle full of the shampoo I had made—not wishing to wash my hair with lye soap—from soaproot, lupin oil, walnut leaves and calendula flowers. He set these on the table, along with my largest mixing bowl, and carefully filled it with hot water from the cauldron.

Leaving this to cool a bit, Jamie dipped a rag into the water, and knelt down to wash my feet.

The feeling of warmth on my sore, half-frozen feet was as close to ecstasy as I expected to get this side of heaven. Tired and half-drunk as I was, I felt as though I were dissolving from the feet up, as he gently but thoroughly washed me from toe to head.

"Where did ye get this, Sassenach?" Recalled from a state as close to sleep as to waking, I glanced down muzzily at my left knee. It was swollen, and the inner side had gone the deep purplish-blue of a gentian.

"Oh … that happened when I fell off the horse."

"That was verra careless," he said sharply. "Have I not told ye time and again to be careful, especially with a new horse? Ye canna trust them at all until ye've known them a good while. And you're not strong enough to deal with one that's headstrong or skittish."

"It wasn't a matter of trusting him," I said. I rather dimly admired the broad spread of his bent shoulders, flexing smoothly under his linen shirt as he sponged my bruised knee. "The lightning scared him, and I fell off a thirty-foot ledge."

"Ye could have broken your neck!"

"Thought I had, for a bit." I closed my eyes, swaying slightly.

"Ye should have taken better thought, Sassenach; ye should never have been on that side of the ridge to begin with, let alone—"

"I couldn't help it," I said, opening my eyes. "The trail was washed out; I had to go around."

He was glaring at me, slanted eyes narrowed into dark blue slits.

"Ye ought not to have left the Muellers' in the first place, and it raining like that! Did ye not have sense enough to know what the ground would be like?"

I straightened up with some effort, holding the quilt against my breasts. It occurred to me, with a faint sense of surprise, that he was more than slightly annoyed.

"Well … no," I said, trying to marshal what wits I had. "How could I know something like that? Besides—"

He interrupted me by slapping the washrag into the bowl, spattering water all over the table.

"Be quiet!" he said. "I dinna mean to argue with you!"

I stared up at him.

"What the hell *do* you mean to do? And where do you get off shouting at me? I haven't done anything wrong!"

He inhaled strongly through his nose. Then he stood up, picked the rag from the bowl, and carefully wrung it out. He let out his breath, knelt down in front of me, and deftly swabbed my face clean.

"No. Ye haven't," he agreed. One corner of his long mouth quirked wryly. "But ye scairt hell out of me, Sassenach, and it makes me want to give ye a terrible scolding, whether ye deserve it or no."

“Oh,” I said. I wanted at first to laugh, but felt a stab of remorse as I saw how drawn his face was. His shirt sleeve was daubed with mud, and there were burrs and foxtails in his stockings, left from a night of searching for me through the dark mountains, not knowing where I was; if I were alive or dead. I *had* scared hell out of him, whether I meant to or not.

I groped for some means of apology, finding my tongue nearly as thick as my wits. Finally I reached out and picked a fuzzy yellow catkin from his hair.

“Why don’t you scold me in Gaelic?” I said. “It will ease your feelings just as much, and I’ll only understand half of what you say.”

He made a Scottish noise of derision, and shoved my head into the bowl with a firm hand on my neck. When I reemerged, dripping, though, he dropped a towel on my head and started in, rubbing my hair with large, firm hands and speaking in the formally menacing tones of a minister denouncing sin from the pulpit.

“Silly woman,” he said in Gaelic. “You have not the brain of a fly!” I caught the words for “foolish,” and “clumsy,” in the subsequent remarks, but quickly stopped listening. I closed my eyes and lost myself instead in the dreamy pleasure of having my hair rubbed dry and then combed out.

He had a sure and gentle touch, probably gained from handling horses’ tails. I had seen him talk to horses while he groomed them, much as he was talking to me now, the Gaelic a soothing descant to the whisk of curry comb or brush. I imagined he was more complimentary to the horses, though.

His hands touched my neck, my bare back, and shoulders as he worked; fleeting touches that brought my newly thawed flesh to life. I shivered, but let the quilt fall to my lap. The fire was still burning high, flames dancing on the side of the kettle, and the room had grown quite warm.

He was now describing, in a pleasantly conversational tone, various things he would have liked to do to me, beginning with beating me black and blue with a stick, and going on from there. Gaelic is a rich language, and Jamie was far from unimaginative in matters of either violence or sex. Whether he meant it or not, I thought it was probably a good thing that I didn't understand everything he said.

I could feel the heat of the fire on my breasts; Jamie's warmth against my back. The loose fabric of his shirt brushed my skin as he leaned across to reach a bottle on the shelf, and I shivered again. He noticed this, and interrupted his tirade for a moment.

"Cold?"

"No."

"Good." The sharp smell of camphor stung my nose, and before I could move, one large hand had seized my shoulder, holding me in place, while the other rubbed slippery oil firmly into my chest.

"Stop! That tickles! Stop, I say!"

He didn't stop. I squirmed madly, trying to escape, but he was a lot bigger than I was.

"Be still," he said, inexorable fingers rubbing deep between my ticklish ribs, under my collarbone, around and under my tender breasts, greasing me as thoroughly as a suckling pig bound for the spit.

"You *bastard*!" I said when he let me go, breathless from struggling and giggling. I reeked of peppermint and camphor, and my skin glowed with heat from chin to belly.

He grinned at me, revenged and thoroughly unrepentant.

"You do it to *me* when I've got an ague," he pointed out, wiping his hands on the towel. "Grease for the gander is grease for the goose, aye?"

"I have not got an ague! Not even a sniffle!"

"I expect ye will have, out all night and sleepin' in wet clothes." He clicked his tongue disapprovingly, like a Scottish housewife.

"And you've never done that, have you? How many times have *you* caught cold from sleeping rough?" I demanded. "Good heavens, you lived in a *cave* for seven years!"

"And spent three of them sneezing. Besides, I'm a man," he added, with total illogic. "Had ye not better put on your night rail, Sassenach? Ye havena got a stitch on."

"I noticed. Wet clothes and being cold do not cause sickness," I informed him, hunting about under the table for the fallen quilt.

He raised both eyebrows.

"Oh, they don't?"

"No, they don't." I backed out from under the table, clutching the quilt. "I've told you before, it's germs that cause sickness. If I haven't been exposed to any germs, I won't get sick."

"Ah, gerrrrms," he said, rolling it like a marble in his mouth. "God, ye've got a fine, fat arse! Why do folk have more illness in the winter than the springtime, then? The germs breed in the cold, I expect?"

"Not exactly." Feeling absurdly self-conscious, I spread the quilt, meaning to fold it around my shoulders again. Before I could wrap myself in it, though, he had grabbed me by the arm and pulled me toward him.

"Come here," he said, unnecessarily. Before I could say anything, he had smacked my bare backside smartly, turned me around and kissed me, hard.

He let go, and I almost fell down. I flung my arms around him, and he grabbed my waist, steadying me.

"I dinna care whether it's the germs or the night air or Billy-be-damned," he said, looking sternly down his nose. "I willna have ye fallin' ill, and that's all about it. Now, hop yourself directly into your gown, and to bed with ye!"

He felt awfully good in my arms. The smooth linen of his shirtfront was cool against the heated glow of my greased breasts, and while the wool of his kilt was much scratchier against my naked thighs and belly, the sensation was by no means unpleasant. I rubbed myself slowly against him, like a cat against a post.

"Bed," he said again, sounding a trifle less stern.

"Mmmm," I said, making it reasonably obvious that I didn't mean to go there alone.

"No," he said, squirming slightly. I supposed that he meant to get away, but since I didn't let go, the movement merely exacerbated the situation between us.

"Mm-hmm," I said, holding on tight. Intoxicated as I was, it hadn't escaped me that Duncan would undoubtedly be spending the night on the hearth rug, Ian on the trundle. And while I was feeling somewhat uninhibited at the moment, the feeling didn't extend quite *that* far.

"My father told me never to take advantage of a woman who was the worse for drink," he said. He had stopped squirming, but now started again, slower, as though he couldn't help himself.

"I'm not worse, I'm better," I assured him. "Besides—" I executed a slow, sinuous squirm of my own. "I thought he said you weren't drunk if you could find your arse with both hands."

He eyed me appraisingly.

"I hate to tell ye, Sassenach, but it's not your arse ye've got hold of—it's mine."

"That's all right," I assured him. "We're married. Share and share alike. One flesh; the priest said so."

"Perhaps it was a mistake to put that grease on ye," he muttered, half to himself. "It never does this to *me*!"

"Well, you're a man."

He had one last gallant try.

"Should ye not eat a bit more, lass? You must be starving."

"Mm-hm," I said. I buried my face in his shirt and bit him, lightly. "Ravenous."

* * *

There is a story told of the Earl of Montrose—that after one battle, he was found lying on the field, half dead of cold and starvation, by a young woman. The young woman whipped off her shoe, mixed barley with cold water in it, and fed the resulting mess to the prostrate earl, thus saving his life.

The cup now thrust under my nose appeared to contain a portion of this same life-giving substance, with the minor difference that mine was warm.

"What is this?" I asked, eyeing the pale grains floating belly-up on the surface of a watery liquid. It looked like a cup full of drowned maggots.

"Barley crowdie," Ian said, gazing proudly at the cup as though it were his firstborn child. "I made it myself, from the bag ye brought from Muellers'."

"Thank you," I said, and took a cautious sip. I didn't *think* he had mixed it in his shoe, despite the musty aroma. "Very good," I said. "How kind of you, Ian."

He went pink with gratification.

"Och, it was nothing," he said. "There's plenty more, Auntie. Or shall I fetch ye a bit of cheese? I could cut the green bits off for ye."

"No, no—this will be fine," I said hastily. "Ah … why don't you take your gun out, Ian, and see if you can bag a squirrel or a rabbit? I'm sure I'll be well enough to cook supper."

He beamed, the smile transforming his long, bony face.

"I'm glad to hear it, Auntie," he said. "Ye should *see* what Uncle Jamie and I have been eatin' while ye've been gone!"

He left me lying on my pillows, wondering what to do with the cup of crowdie. I didn't want to drink it, but I felt like a puddle of warm butter—soft and creamy, nearly liquid—and the idea of getting up seemed unthinkably energetic.

Jamie, making no further protests, had taken me to bed, where he had completed the business of thawing me out with thoroughness and dispatch. I thought it was a good thing he wasn't going hunting with Ian. He reeked of camphor as much as I did; the animals would scent him a mile away.

Tucking me tenderly under the quilts, he had left me to sleep while he went to greet Duncan more formally and offer him the hospitality of the house. I could hear the deep murmur of their voices outside now; they were sitting on the bench beside the door, enjoying the last of the afternoon sunshine—long, pale beams slanted through the window, lighting a warm glow of pewter and wood within.

The sun touched the skull, too. This stood on my writing table across the room, composing a cozily domestic still life with a clay jug filled with flowers and my casebook.

It was sight of the casebook that roused me from torpor. The birth I had attended at the Muellers' farm now seemed vague and insubstantial in my mind; I thought I had better record the details while I still recalled them at all.

Thus prompted by the stirrings of professional duty, I stretched, groaned, and sat up. I still felt mildly dizzy and my ears rang from the aftereffects of brandywine. I was also faintly sore almost everywhere—more in some spots than others—but generally speaking, I was in decent working order. Beginning to be hungry, though.

I did hope Ian would come back with meat for the pot; I knew better than to gorge my shriveled stomach on cheese and salt fish, but a nice, strengthening squirrel broth, flavored with spring onions and dried mushrooms, would be just what the doctor ordered.

Speaking of broth—I slid reluctantly out of bed and stumbled across the floor to the hearth, where I poured the cold barley soup back into the pot. Ian had made enough for a regiment—always supposing the regiment to be composed of Scots. Living in a country normally barren of much that was edible, they were capable of relishing glutinous masses of cereal, untouched by any redeeming hint of spice or flavor. From a feebler race myself, I didn't feel quite up to it.

The opened bag of barley stood beside the hearth, the burlap sack still visibly damp. I would have to spread the grain to dry, or it would rot. My bruised knee protesting a bit, I went and got a large flat tray-basket made of plaited reeds, and knelt to spread the damp grain in a thin layer over it.

"Will he have a soft mouth, then, Duncan?" Jamie's voice came clearly through the window; the hide covering was rolled up, to let in air, and I caught the faint tang of tobacco from Duncan's pipe. "He's a big, strong brute, but he's got a kind eye."

"Oh, he's a bonny wee fellow," Duncan said, the note of pride in his voice unmistakable. "And a nice soft mouth, aye. Miss Jo had her stableman pick him from the market in Wilmington; said he must find a horse could be managed well wi' one hand."

"Mmphm. Aye, well, he's a lovely creature." The wooden bench creaked as one of the men shifted his weight. I understood the equivocation behind Jamie's compliment, and wondered whether Duncan did, as well.

Part of it was simple condescension; Jamie had been raised on horseback, and as a born horseman, would scorn the notion that hands were necessary at all; I had seen him maneuver a horse by the shifting pressure of knees and thighs alone, or set his mount at a gallop across a crowded field, the reins knotted on the horse's neck, to leave Jamie's hands free for sword and pistol.

But Duncan was neither a horseman nor a soldier; he had lived as a fisherman near Ardrossan, until the Rising had plucked him, like so many others, from his nets and his boat, and sent him to Culloden and disaster.

Jamie wouldn't be so untactful as to point up an inexperience of which Duncan was more than aware already; he *would,* though, mean to point up something else. Had Duncan caught it?

"It's you she means to help, *Mac Dubh,* and well ye ken it, too." Duncan's tones were very dry; he'd taken Jamie's point, all right.

"I havena said otherwise, Duncan." Jamie's voice was even.

"Mmphm."

I smiled, despite the air of edginess between them. Duncan was every bit as good as Jamie at the Highland art of inarticulate eloquence. This particular noise captured both mild insult at Jamie's implication that it was improper for Duncan to be accepting the gift of a horse from Jocasta, and a willingness to accept the likewise implied apology for the insult.

"Have ye thought, then?" The bench creaked as Duncan abruptly changed the subject. "Will it be Sinclair, or Geordie Chisholm?"

Without giving Jamie time to reply, he went on, but in a way that made it clear that he had said all this before. I wondered whether he was trying to convince Jamie, or himself—or only assist them both in coming to a decision by repeating the facts of the matter.

"It's true Sinclair's a cooper, but Geordie's a good fellow; a thrifty worker, and he's the two wee sons, besides. Sinclair isna marrit, so he wouldna need so much in the way of setting up, but—"

"He'd need lathes and tools, and iron and seasoned wood," Jamie broke in. "He could sleep in his shop, aye, but he'll need the shop to sleep in. And it will cost verra dear, I think, to buy all that's needed for a cooperage. Geordie would need a bit of food for his family, but we can provide that from the place here; beyond that, he'll need no more to begin than a few wee tools—he'll have an ax, aye?"

"Aye, he'll have that from his indenture, but it's the planting season *now, Mac Dubh*. With the clearing—"

"I ken that weel enough," Jamie said, a bit testily. "It's me that put five acres in corn a month ago. *And* cleared them, first." While Duncan had been taking his ease at River Run, chatting in taverns and breaking in his new horse. I heard it, and so did Duncan; there was a distinct silence that spoke as loud as words.

A creak from the bench, and then Duncan spoke again, mildly.

"Your auntie Jo's sent a wee gift for ye."

"Oh, has she?" The edge in his voice was even more perceptible. I hoped Duncan had sense enough to heed it.

"A bottle of whisky." There was a smile in Duncan's voice, answered by a reluctant laugh from Jamie.

"Oh, has she?" he said again, in quite a different tone. "That's verra kind."

"She means to be." There was a substantial creak and shuffle as Duncan got to his feet. "Come wi' me and fetch it, then, *Mac Dubh*. A wee drink wouldna do your temper any harm."

"No, it wouldn't." Jamie sounded rueful. "I've not slept the night, and I'm cranky as a rutting boar. Ye'll forgive my manners, Duncan."

"Och, dinna speak of it." There was a soft sound, as of a hand clapping a shoulder, and I heard them walk off across the yard together. I moved to the window and watched them, Jamie's hair gleaming dark bronze in the setting sun, as he tilted his head to listen to something Duncan was telling him, the shorter man gesturing in explanation. The movements of Duncan's single arm threw off the rhythm of his stride, so he walked with jerky movements, like a large puppet.

What would have become of him, I wondered, had Jamie not found him—and found a place for him? There was no place in Scotland for a one-armed fisherman. There would have been nothing for him but beggary, surely. Starvation, perhaps. Or theft to live, and death at the end of a rope, like Gavin Hayes.

But this was the New World, and if life was chancy here, well, it meant a chance at life, at least. No wonder that Jamie should worry over who should have the best chance. Sinclair the cooper, or Chisholm the farmer?

A cooper would be valuable to have at hand; it would save the men on the ridge the long trip into Cross Creek or Averasboro to fetch the barrels needed for pitch and turpentine, for salted meat and cider. But it would be expensive to set up a cooper's shop, even with the bare rudiments the trade required. And then there was the unknown Chisholm's wife and small children to be considered—how were they living now, and what might become of them without help?

Duncan had so far located thirty of the men of Ardsmuir; Gavin Hayes was the first, and we had done for him all that could be done; seen him safe into heaven's keeping. Two more were known dead, one of fever, one of drowning. Three had completed their terms of indenture, and—armed only with the ax and suit of clothes that were a bondsman's final pay—had managed to find a foothold for themselves, claiming backcountry land and carving out small homesteads there.

Of the remainder, we had brought twenty so far to settle on good land near the river, under Jamie's sponsorship. Another was feebleminded but worked for one of the others as a hired man, and so earned his keep. It had taken all of our resources to do it, using all our small quantity of cash, notes against the value of as yet nonexistent crops—and one hair-raising trip into Cross Creek.

Jamie had called upon all his acquaintance there, borrowing small amounts from each, and had then taken this money to the riverside taverns, where in three sleepless nights of play, he had managed to quadruple his stake—narrowly avoiding being knifed in the process, as I learned much later.

I was speechless, looking at the long, jagged rent in the bosom of his coat.

"What—?" I croaked at last.

He shrugged briefly, looking suddenly very tired.

"It doesna matter," he said. "It's over."

He had then shaved, washed, and gone round to all the plantation owners again, returning each man's money with thanks and a small payment of interest, leaving us with enough to manage seed corn for planting, an extra mule for plowing, a goat and some pigs.

I didn't ask him anything else; only mended the coat, and saw him safely into bed when he came back from repaying the money lent. I sat by him for a long time, though, watching the lines of exhaustion in his face ease a little as he slept.

Only a little. I had lifted his hand, limp and heavy with sleep, and traced the deep lines of his smooth, callused palm, over and over. The lines of head and heart and life ran long and deep. How many lives lay in those creases now?

My own. His settlers. Fergus and Marsali, who had just arrived from Jamaica, in the custody of Germaine, a chubby blond charmer who had his besotted father in the palm of *his* fat little hand.

I glanced involuntarily through the window at the thought. Ian and Jamie had helped to build them a small cabin only a mile from our own, and sometimes Marsali would walk over in the evenings to visit, bringing the baby. I could do with seeing him, I thought wistfully. Lonely as I sometimes was for Bree, little Germaine was a substitute for the grandchild I would never hold.

I sighed, and shrugged away the thought.

Jamie and Duncan had come back with the whisky; I could hear them talking by the paddock, their voices relaxed, all tension between them eased—for the moment.

I finished spreading out a thin layer of the wet barley and set it in the corner of the hearth to dry, then went to the writing table, uncapped the inkwell, and opened my casebook. It didn't take long to record the details of the newest Mueller's arrival into the world; it had been a long labor but otherwise quite normal. The birth itself had presented no complications; the only unusual feature had been the child's caul …

I stopped writing and shook my head. Still distracted by thoughts of Jamie, I had let my attention wander. Petronella's child had not been born with a caul. I had a clear memory of the top of the skull crowning, the pudendum a shiny red ring stretched tight around a small patch of black hair. I had touched it, felt the tiny pulse throbbing there, just under the skin. I remembered vividly the sensation of the wet down against my fingers, like the damp skin of a new-hatched chick.

It was the dream, I thought. I had dreamed in my burrow, mingling the events of the two births together—this one, and Brianna's. It was Brianna who had been born with a caul.

A "silly hoo," the Scots called it; a lucky hood. A fortunate portent, a caul offered—they said—protection from drowning in later life. And some children born with a caul were blessed with second sight—though having met one or two of those who saw with the third eye, I took leave to doubt that such a blessing was unmixed.

Whether lucky or not, Brianna had never showed any signs of that strange Celtic "knowing," and I thought it just as well. I knew enough of my own peculiar form of second sight—the certain knowledge of things to come—not to wish its complications on anyone else.

I looked at the page before me. Only half noticing, I had sketched the rough outline of a girl's head. A curving thick line of swirling hair, the bare suggestion of a long, straight nose. Beyond that, she was faceless.

I was no artist. I had learned to make clean clinical drawings, accurate pictures of limbs and bodies, but I lacked Brianna's gift of bringing lines to life. The sketch as it stood was no more than an aide-mémoire; I could look at it and paint her face in memory. To try to do more—to conjure flesh out of the paper—would be to ruin that, and risk losing the image I held of her in my heart.

And would I conjure her in the flesh, if I could do it? No. That I would not; I would a thousand times rather think of her in the safety and comfort of her own time than wish her here amid the harshness and dangers of this one. But it didn't mean that I didn't miss her.

For the first time, I felt some small sympathy for Jocasta Cameron and her desire for an heir; someone to remain behind, to take her place; testimony that her life had not been lived in vain.

Twilight was rising beyond the window, from field and wood and river. People spoke of night falling, but it didn’t, really. Darkness rose, filling first the hollows, then shadowing the slopes, creeping imperceptibly up tree trunks and fenceposts as night swallowed the ground and rose up to join the greater dark of the star-spread sky above.

I sat staring out the window, watching the light change on the horses in the paddock; not so much fading as altering, so that everything—arched necks, round rumps, even single blades of grass—stood stark and clean, reality freed for one brief moment from the day’s illusions of sun and shadow.

Unseeing, I traced the line of the drawing with my finger, over and over, as the dark rose up around me and the realities of my heart stood clear in the dusky light. No, I would not wish Brianna here. But that didn’t mean I didn’t miss her.

I finished my notes eventually, and sat quietly for a moment. I should go and begin making supper, I knew, but the weariness of my ordeal still dragged at me, making me unwilling to move. All my muscles ached, and the bruise on my knee throbbed. All I really wanted to do was to crawl back into bed.

Instead, I picked up the skull, which I had set down next to my casebook on the table. I ran my finger gently over the rounded cranium. It was a thoroughly macabre desk ornament, I would admit that, but I felt rather attached to it, nonetheless. I had always found bones beautiful, of man or beast; stark and graceful remnants of life reduced to its foundations.

I thought suddenly of something I had not remembered in many years; a small dark closet of a room in Paris, hidden behind an apothecary’s shop. The walls covered with a honeycomb of shelves, each cell holding a polished skull. Animals of many kinds, from shrews to wolves, mice to bears.

And with my hand on the head of my unknown friend, I heard Master Raymond’s voice, as clear in memory as though he stood beside me.

"Sympathy?" he had said as I touched the high curve of a polished elk's skull. "It is an unusual emotion to feel for a bone, madonna."

But he had known what I meant. I knew he did, for when I asked him why he kept these skulls, he had smiled and said, "They are company, of a sort."

I knew what he meant, too; for surely the gentleman whose skull I kept had been company for me, in a very dark and lonely place. Not for the first time, I wondered whether he had in fact had anything to do with the apparition I had seen on the mountain; the Indian with his face painted black.

The ghost—if that is what he was—had not smiled or spoken aloud. I hadn't seen his teeth, which would be my only point of comparison with the skull I held—for I found that I was holding it, rubbing a thumb over the jagged edge of a cracked incisor. I lifted the skull to the light, examining it closely by the soft sunset light.

The teeth on the one side had been shattered; cracked and splintered as though he had been struck violently in the mouth, perhaps by a rock or a club—the stock of a gun? On the other side they were whole; in very good condition, actually. I was no expert but thought the skull was that of a mature man; one in his late thirties or early forties. A man of that age should show a good bit of wear to his teeth, given the Indians' diet of ground corn, which—owing to the manner of preparation, pounded between flat stones—contained quite a bit of ground stone as well.

The incisors and canine on the good side were scarcely worn at all, though. I turned the skull over, to judge the abrasion of the molars, and stopped cold.

Very cold, in spite of the fire at my back. As cold as I had been in the lost, fireless dark, alone on the mountain with a dead man's head. For the late sun now struck sparks from my hands: from the silver band of my wedding ring—and from the silver fillings in my late companion's mouth.

I sat staring for a moment, then turned the skull over and set it gently down on the desk, careful as though it were made of glass.

“My God,” I said, all tiredness forgotten. “My God,” I said, to the empty eyes and the lopsided grin. “Who *were* you?”

“Who do ye think he can have been?” Jamie touched the skull gingerly. We had no more than moments; Duncan had gone to the privy, Ian to feed the pig. I couldn’t bring myself to wait, though—I had had to tell someone at once.

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Except, of course, that he has to have been someone … like me.” A violent shiver ran over me. Jamie glanced at me, and frowned.

“Ye havena take a chill, have ye, Sassenach?”

“No.” I smiled weakly up at him. “Goose walking on my grave, I expect.”

He plucked my shawl from the hook by the door and swung it around me. His hands stayed on my shoulders, warm and comforting.

“It means the one thing else, doesn’t it?” he asked quietly. “It means there is another … place. Perhaps nearby.”

Another stone circle—or something like it. I had thought of that, too, and the notion made me shudder once again. Jamie looked thoughtfully at the skull, then drew the handkerchief from his sleeve and draped it gently over the empty eyes.

“I’ll bury him after supper,” he said.

“Oh, supper.” I pushed my hair behind my ear, trying to get my scattered thoughts to focus on food. “Yes, I’ll see if I can find some eggs. That will be quick.”

“Dinna trouble yourself, Sassenach.” Jamie peered into the pot on the hearth. “We can eat this.”

This time, the shudder was purely one of fastidiousness.

“Ugh,” I said. Jamie grinned at me.

“Nothing wrong wi’ good barley crowdie, is there?”

“Assuming there is such a thing,” I replied, looking into the pot with distaste. “This smells more like distiller’s mash.” Made with wet grain, insufficiently cooked and left standing, the cold, scummy soup was already giving off a yeasty whiff of fermentation.

"Speaking of which," I said, giving the opened sack of damp barley a poke with my toe, "this needs to be spread to dry, before it starts to mold, if it hasn't already."

Jamie was staring at the disgusting soup, brows furrowed in thought.

"Aye?" he said absently, then, coming to consciousness, "Oh, aye. I'll do it." He twisted shut the top of the bag, and heaved it onto his shoulder. On the way out the door, he paused, looking at the shrouded skull.

"You said ye didna think him Christian," he said, and glanced curiously at me. "Why was that, Sassenach?"

I hesitated, but there was no time to tell him about my dream—if that's what it had been. I could hear Duncan and Ian in conversation, coming toward the house.

"No particular reason," I said, with a shrug.

"Aye, well," he said. "We'll give him the benefit o' the doubt."

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LETTER-WRITING: THE GREAT ART O' LOVE

Oxford, March 1971

Roger supposed that it must rain as much in Inverness as it did in Oxford, but somehow he had never minded the northern rain. The cold Scottish wind sweeping in off the Moray Firth was exhilarating and the drenching rain both stimulation and refreshment to the spirit.

But that had been Scotland, when Brianna was with him. Now she was in America, he in England, and Oxford was cold and dull, all its streets and buildings gray as the ash of dead fires. Rain pattered on the shoulders of his scholar's gown as he dashed across the quad, shielding an armload of papers under the poplin folds. Once in the shelter of the porter's lodge, he stopped to shake himself, doglike, flinging droplets over the stone passage.

"Any letters?" he asked.

"Think so, Mr. Wakefield. Just a sec." Martin disappeared into his inner sanctum, leaving Roger to read the names of the College's war dead, carved on the stone tablet inside the entry.

George Vanlandingham, Esq. The Honorable Phillip Menzies. Joseph William Roscoe. Not for the first time, Roger found himself wondering about those dead heroes and what they had been like. Since meeting Brianna and her mother, he'd found that the past too often wore a disturbingly human face.

“Here you are, Mr. Wakefield.” Martin leaned beaming across the counter, holding out a thin sheaf of letters. “One from the States today,” he added, with a broad wink.

Roger felt an answering grin break out on his face, and a warm glow spread at once from his chest through his limbs, dispelling the chill of the rainy day.

“Will we be seeing your young woman up soon, Mr. Wakefield?” Martin craned his neck, peering frankly at the letter with its U.S. stamps. The porter had met Brianna when she had come down with Roger just before Christmas, and had fallen under her spell.

“I hope so. Perhaps in the summer. Thanks!”

He turned toward his staircase, tucking the letters carefully into the sleeve of his gown while he groped for his key. He felt a mingled sense of elation and dismay at thought of the summer. She’d said she’d come in July—but July was still four months away. In some moods, he didn’t think he’d last four days.

Roger folded the letter again and tucked it into his inside pocket, next to his heart. She wrote every few days, from brief notes to long screeds, and each of her letters left him with a small warm glow that lasted usually until the next arrived.

At the same time, her letters were faintly unsatisfactory these days. Still warmly affectionate, always signed “Love,” always saying she missed him and wanted him with her. No longer the sort of thing that burned the page, though.

Perhaps it was natural; a normal progression as they knew each other longer; no one could go on writing passionate missives day after day, not with any honesty.

No doubt it was only his imagination that Brianna seemed to hold back a bit in her letters. He could do without the excesses of one friend’s girl, who had clipped bits of her pubic hair and included them in a letter—though he rather admired the sentiment behind the gesture.

He took a bite of his sandwich and chewed absentmindedly, thinking of the latest article Fiona had showed him. Now married, Fiona considered herself an expert on matters matrimonial, and took a sisterly interest in the bumpy course of Roger's love affair.

She was constantly clipping helpful tips from women's magazines and mailing them to him. The latest had been a piece from *My Weekly,* entitled "How to Intrigue a Man." *Sauce for the gander,* Fiona had written pointedly in the margin.

"Share his interests," one tip advised. "If you think football's a loss, but he's dead keen, sit down beside him and ask about Arsenal's chances the week. If football's boring, *he* isn't."

Roger smiled a little grimly. He'd been sharing Brianna's interests, all right, if tracking her bloody parents through their hair-raising history counted as a pastime. Damn little of that he could share with her, though.

"Be coy," said another of the magazine's tips. "Nothing piques a man's interest more than an air of reserve. Don't let him get too close, too soon."

It occurred to Roger to wonder whether Brianna had been reading similar advice in American magazines, but he dismissed the thought. She wasn't above reading fashion magazines—he had seen her do it on occasion—but Brianna Randall was as incapable of playing that sort of silly game as he was himself.

No, she wouldn't put him off just to raise his interest in her; what would be the point? Surely she knew just how much he cared about her.

Did she, though? With a qualm of uneasiness, Roger recalled another of *My Weekly*'s tips to the lovelorn.

"Don't assume he can read your mind," the article said. "Give him a hint of how you feel."

Roger took a random bite of the sandwich and chewed, oblivious to its contents. Well, he'd hinted, all right. Come out and bared his bloody soul. And she'd promptly leapt into a plane and buggered off to Boston.

"Don't be too aggressive," he murmured, quoting Tip #14, and snorted. The woman don next to him edged slightly away.

Roger sighed and deposited the bitten sandwich distastefully on the plastic tray. He picked up the cup of what the dining hall was pleased to call coffee, but didn't drink it, merely sat with it between his hands, absorbing its meager warmth.

The trouble was that while he thought he had succeeded in deflecting Brianna's attention from the past, he had been unable to ignore it himself. Claire and that bloody Highlander of hers obsessed him; they might as well have been his own family, for the fascination they held.

"Always be honest." Tip #3. If he had been, if he'd helped her to find out everything, perhaps the ghost of Jamie Fraser would be laid now—and so would Roger.

"Oh, bugger!" he muttered to himself.

The woman next to him crashed her coffee cup onto her tray and stood up suddenly.

"Go bugger *yourself*!" she said crisply, and walked off.

Roger stared after her for a moment.

"No fear," he said. "I think maybe I already have."

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ENTER A SERPENT

October 1768

In principle, I had no objection to snakes. They ate rats, which was laudable of them, some were ornamental, and most of them were wise enough to keep out of my way. Live and let live was my basic attitude.

On the other hand, that was theory. In practice, I had any number of objections to the huge snake curled up on the seat of the privy. Beyond the fact that he was gravely discommoding me at present, he wasn't usefully eating rats and he wasn't aesthetically pleasing, either, being a sort of drab gray with darker splotches.

My major objection to him, though, was the fact that he was a rattlesnake. I supposed that in a way it was fortunate that he was; it was only the heartstopping buzz of his rattles that had prevented me sitting on him in the dawn's early light.

The first sound froze me in place, just inside the tiny privy. I extended one foot behind me, groping gingerly for the doorsill. The snake didn't like that; I froze again as the warning buzz increased in volume. I could see the vibrating tip of his tail, sticking up like a thick yellow finger, rudely pointing from the heap of coils.

My mouth had gone dry as paper; I bit the inside of my cheek, trying to summon a little saliva.

How long was he? I seemed to recall Brianna's telling me—from her Girl Scout handbook—that rattlesnakes were capable of striking at a distance up to one-third their own body length. No more than two feet separated my nightgown-covered thighs from the nasty flat head with its lidless eyes.

Was he six feet long? It was impossible to tell, but the squirm of coils looked unpleasantly massive, the rounded body thick with scaled muscle. He was a bloody big snake, and the fear of being ignominiously bitten in the crotch if I moved was enough to make me stand still.

I couldn't stand still forever, though. Other considerations aside, the shock of seeing the snake hadn't decreased the urgency of my bodily functions in the slightest.

I had some vague notion that snakes were deaf; perhaps I could shout for help. But what if they weren't? There was that Sherlock Holmes story about the snake who responded to a whistle. Perhaps the snake would find whistling inoffensive, at least. Cautiously, I pursed my lips and blew. Nothing came out but a thin stream of air.

"Claire?" said a puzzled voice behind me. "What the hell are ye doing?"

I jumped at the sound, and so did the snake—or at least it moved suddenly, flexing its coils in what appeared to be imminent attack.

I froze to the doorframe and the snake quit moving, except for the chronic whirr of its rattles, like the annoying buzz of an alarm clock that wouldn't shut off.

"There's a fucking snake in here," I said through my teeth, trying not to move even my lips.

"Well, why are ye standing there? Move aside and I'll pitch it out." I could hear Jamie's footsteps, coming close.

The snake heard him too—obviously it *wasn't* deaf—and revved up its rattling.

"Ah," Jamie said, in a different tone of voice. I heard a rustle as he stooped behind me. "Stand still, Sassenach."

I hadn't time to respond to this piece of gratuitous advice before a heavy stone whizzed past my hip and struck the snake amidships. It sprang into something resembling a Gordian knot, squirmed, writhed—and fell into the privy, where it landed with a nasty sort of hollow *thwuck*!

I didn't wait to congratulate the victorious warrior, but instead turned and ran for the nearest patch of woods, the dew-wet hem of my nightgown slapping round my ankles.

Returning a few minutes later in a more settled frame of mind, I found Jamie and Young Ian squeezed into the privy together—a tight fit, considering their sizes—the latter squatting on the bench with a pine-knot torch as the former bent over the hole, peering into the depths beneath.

"Can they swim?" Ian was asking, trying to see past Jamie's head without setting his uncle's hair on fire.

"I dinna ken," Jamie replied dubiously. "I think maybe so. What I want to know is, can they jump?"

Ian jerked back, then laughed a little nervously, not altogether sure that Jamie was joking.

"Here, I canna see a thing; hand me the light." Jamie reached up to take the splinter of pine from Ian, and lowered it gingerly into the hole.

"If the stink doesna put the flame out, belike we'll burn down the privy," he muttered, bending low. "Now, then, where the devil—"

"There it is! I see it!" Ian cried.

Both heads jerked, and cracked together with the sound of splitting melons. Jamie dropped the torch, which fell into the hole and was promptly extinguished. A thin wisp of smoke drifted up from the rim of the hole, like incense.

Jamie staggered out of the privy, hands clutching his forehead, eyes squeezed shut with pain. Young Ian leaned against the inside wall, hands pressed tightly over the crown of his head, making abrupt and breathless remarks in Gaelic.

"Is it still alive?" I asked anxiously, peering toward the privy.

Jamie opened one eye and regarded me under the clutching fingers.

"Oh, my head's fine, thanks," he said. "I expect my ears will ha' quit ringing by next week, sometime."

"Now, now," I said soothingly. "It would take a sledgehammer to dent your skull. Let me look, though." I pushed his fingers aside and pulled his head down, feeling gently through the thick hair. There was a small bruised spot just above the hairline, but no blood.

I kissed the spot perfunctorily and patted him on the head.

“You won’t die,” I said. “Not from that, anyway.”

“Oh, good,” he said dryly. “I’d much rather die of snakebite next time I sit down to my business.”

“It’s a poisonous serpent, is it?” Ian asked, letting go of his head and coming out of the privy. He inhaled deeply, filling his thin chest with fresh air.

“Venemous,” Jamie corrected him. “If it bites you and makes ye sick, it’s venemous; if you bite *it* and it makes ye sick, it’s poisonous.”

“Oh, aye,” Ian said, dismissing this pedantry. “It’s a wicked snake, though?”

“Very wicked,” I said, with a slight shudder. “What are you going to do about it?” I asked, turning to Jamie.

He raised one eyebrow.

“Me? Why ought I to do anything about it?” he asked.

“You can’t just let him stay in there!”

“Why not?” he said, raising the other brow.

Ian scratched his head absently, winced as he encountered the lump left by his collision with Jamie, and stopped.

“Well, I dinna ken, Uncle Jamie,” he said dubiously. “If ye want to let your balls hang over a pit wi’ a deadly viper in it, that’s your concern, but the notion makes my flesh creep a bit. How big’s the thing?”

“Fair-sized, I’ll admit.” Jamie flexed his wrist, showing his forearm by way of comparison.

“Eeugh!” said Ian.

“You don’t *know* they don’t jump,” I put in helpfully.

“Aye, I do.” Jamie eyed me cynically. “Still, I grant ye, the thought’s enough to make one a bit costive. How d’ye mean to get him out, though?”

“I could shoot him wi’ your pistol,” Ian offered, brightening at the thought of getting his hands on Jamie’s treasured pistols. “We needn’t get him out if we can kill him.”

"Is he … ah … visible?" I put in delicately.

Jamie rubbed his chin dubiously. He hadn't shaved yet, and the dark red bristles rasped under his thumb.

"Not very. There's no more than a few inches o' filth in the pit, but I shouldna think ye could see him well enough to aim, and I hate to waste the shot."

"We could invite all of the Hansens for dinner, serve beer, and drown him," I suggested facetiously, naming a nearby—and very numerous—Quaker family.

Ian erupted in giggles. Jamie gave me an austere sort of look, and turned toward the woods.

"I'll think of something," he said. "After my breakfast."

* * *

Breakfast was luckily no great problem, as the hens had helpfully provided me with nine eggs and the bread had risen satisfactorily. The butter was still immured in the back of the pantry, under the baleful guard of the newly-farrowed sow, but Ian had managed to lean in and snatch a pot of jam from the shelf as I stood by with the broom, jabbing it into the sow's gnashing jaws as she made little darting charges at Ian's legs.

"I'll have to have a new broom," I remarked, eyeing the tattered remains as I dished up the eggs. "Perhaps I'll go up to the willow grove by the stream this morning."

"Mmphm." Jamie reached out a hand and patted absently around on the table, searching for the bread plate. His attention was wholly focused on the book he was reading, Bricknell's *Natural History of North Carolina*.

"Here it is," he said. "I knew I'd seen a bit about rattlesnakes." Locating the bread by feel, he took a piece and used it to scoop a healthy portion of egg into his mouth. Having engulfed this, he read aloud, holding the book in one hand while groping over the tabletop with the other.

" 'The Indians frequently pull out the snakes' Teeth, so that they never afterwards can do any Mischief by biting; this may be easily done, by tying a bit of red Wollen Cloth to the upper end of a long hollow Cane, and so provoking the Rattle-Snake to bite, and suddenly pulling it away from him, by which means the Teeth stick fast in the Cloath, which are plainly to be seen by those present.' "

"Have we any red cloth, Auntie?" Ian asked, washing down his own share of the eggs with chicory coffee.

I shook my head, and speared the last of the sausages before Jamie's groping hand reached it.

"Blue, green, yellow, drab, white, and brown. No red."

"That's a fine wee book, Uncle Jamie," Ian said, with approval. "Does it say more about the snakes?" He looked hungrily over the expanse of table, in search of more food. Without comment, I reached into the hutch and brought out a plate of spoonbread, which I set before him. He sighed happily and waded in, as Jamie turned the page.

"Well, here's a bit about how the rattlesnakes charm squirrels and rabbits." Jamie touched his plate, but encountered nothing save bare surface. I pushed the muffins toward him.

" 'It is surprizing to observe how these Snakes will allure and charm Squirrels, Hedge-Conneys, Partridges and many other small Beasts and Birds to them, which they quickly devour. The Sympathy is so strong between these, that you shall see the Squirrel or Partridge (as they have espied this Snake) leap or fly from Bough to Bough, until at last they run or leap directly into its Mouth, not having power to avoid their Enemy, who never stirs out of the Posture or Quoil until he obtains his Prey.' "

His hand, blindly groping after sustenance, encountered the muffins. He picked one up and glanced up at me. "Damned if I've ever seen that, myself. D'ye think it likely?"

"No," I said, pushing the curls back off my forehead. "Does that book have any helpful suggestions for dealing with vicious pigs?"

He waved absently at me with the remnants of his muffin.

"Dinna fash," he murmured. "I'll manage the pig." He took his eyes off the book long enough to glance over the table at the empty dishes. "Are there no more eggs?"

"There are, but I'm taking them up to our guest at the corncrib." I added two slices of bread to the small basket I was packing, and took up the bottle of infusion I had left steeping overnight. The brew of goldenrod, bee-balm, and wild bergamot was a blackish green, and smelled like burnt fields, but it might help. It couldn't hurt. On impulse, I picked up the tied-feather amulet old Nayawenne had given me; perhaps it would reassure the sick man. Like the medicine, it couldn't hurt.

Our impromptu guest was a stranger; a Tuscarora from a northern village. He had come to the farm several days before, as part of a hunting party from Anna Ooka, on the trail of bear.

We had offered food and drink—several of the hunters were Ian's friends—but in the course of the meal I had noticed this man gazing glassy-eyed into his cup. Close examination had showed him to be suffering from what I was convinced was measles, an alarming disease in these days.

He had insisted on leaving with his companions, but two of them had brought him back a few hours later, stumbling and delirious.

He was plainly—and alarmingly—contagious. I had made him a comfortable bed in the newly built and so-far empty corncrib, and forced his companions to go and wash in the creek, a proceeding which they plainly found senseless, but in which they humored me before departing, leaving their comrade in my hands.

The Indian was lying on his side, curled under his blanket. He didn't turn to look at me, though he must have heard my footsteps on the path. I could hear him, all right; no need for my makeshift stethoscope—the rales in his lungs were clearly audible at six paces.

"Comment ça va?" I said, kneeling down by him. He didn't answer; it was unnecessary, in any case. I didn't need anything beyond the rattling wheeze to diagnose pneumonia, and the look of him merely confirmed it—eyes sunken and dull, the flesh of his face fallen away, consumed to the bone by the fierce blaze of fever.

I tried to persuade him to eat—he desperately needed nourishment—but he would not even bother to turn away his face. The water bottle by his side was empty; I had brought more but didn't give it to him right away, thinking he might swallow the infusion from sheer thirst.

He did take a few mouthfuls, but then stopped swallowing, merely allowing the greenish-black liquid to run out of the corners of his mouth. I tried coaxing in French, but he was having none of it; he didn't even acknowledge my presence, just stared past my shoulder at the morning sky.

His thin body sagged with despair; plainly he thought himself abandoned, left to die in the hands of strangers. I felt a gnawing anxiety that he might be right—surely he *would* die if he would take nothing.

He would take water, at least. He drank thirstily, draining the bottle, and I went to the stream to fill it again. When I came back, I drew the amulet from my basket and held it up in front of his face. I thought I saw a flicker of surprise behind the half-closed lids—nothing so strong as to be called hope, but he did at least take conscious notice of me for the first time.

Seized by inspiration, I sank slowly down onto my knees. I had no notion at all of the proper ceremony to employ, but I had been a doctor long enough to know that while the power of suggestion was no substitute for antibiotics, it was certainly better than nothing.

I held up the raven's-feather amulet, turned my face skyward; and solemnly intoned the most sonorous thing I could remember, which happened to be Dr. Rawlings's receipt for the treatment of syphilis, rendered in Latin.

I poured a small bit of lavender oil into my hand, dipped the feather in it, and anointed his temples and throat, while singing "Blow the Man Down," in a low, sinister voice. It might help the headache. His eyes were following the feather's movements; I felt rather like a rattlesnake charming away in its "Quoil," waiting for a squirrel to run down my throat.

I picked up his hand, laid the oil-drabbled amulet across his palm, and closed his fingers round it. Then I took the jar of mentholated bear grease and painted mystic patterns on his chest, being careful to rub it well in with the balls of my thumbs. The reek cleared *my* sinuses; I could only hope it would help the patient's thick congestion.

I completed my ritual by solemnly blessing the bottle of infusion with *"In nomine Patri, et Filii, et Spiritu Sancti, Amen."* and presenting it to my patient's lips. Looking mildly hypnotized, he opened his mouth and obediently drank the rest.

I drew the blanket up around his shoulders, put the food I had brought down beside him, and left him, with mixed feelings of hope and fraudulence.

* * *

I walked slowly beside the stream, eyes alert as always for anything useful. It was too early in the year for most medicinals; for medicine, the older and tougher the plant, the better; several seasons of fighting off insects ensured a higher concentration of the active principles in their roots and stems.

Also, with many plants, it was the flower, fruit, or seed that yielded a useful substance, and while I'd spotted clumps of turtlehead and lobelia sprouting in the mud along the path, those had long since gone to seed. I marked the locations carefully in my mind for future reference, and went on hunting.

Watercress was abundant; patches of it floated among the rocks all along the margin of the stream, and a huge mat of the spicy dark green leaves lay temptingly just ahead. A nice patch of scouring rushes, too! I had come down barefoot, knowing I'd be wading before long; I tucked up my skirts and ventured cautiously out into the stream, cutting knife in hand and basket over my arm, breath sucked in against the freezing chill.

My feet lost all feeling within moments—but I didn't care. I quite forgot the snake in the privy, the pig in the pantry, and the Indian in the corncrib, absorbed in the rush of water past my legs, the wet, cold touch of stems and the breath of aromatic leaves.

Dragonflies hung in the patches of sunshine on the shallows, and minnows darted past, snatching gnats too small for me to see. A kingfisher called in a loud, dry rattle from somewhere upstream, but he was after larger prey. The minnows scattered at my intrusion but then swarmed back, gray and silver, green and gold, black marked with white, all insubstantial as the shadows from last year's leaves, floating on the water. Brownian motion, I thought, seeing puffs of silt float up and swirl around my ankles, obscuring the fish.

Everything moving, all of the time, down to the smallest molecule—but in its movement, giving the paradoxical impression of stillness, small local chaos giving way to the illusion of a greater order overall.

I moved, too, taking my part in the stream's bright dance, feeling light and shadow change across my shoulders, toes searching for footholds among the slippery, half-seen rocks. My hands and feet were numb from the water; I felt as though I were half made of wood, yet intensely alive, like the silver birch that glowed above me, or the willows that trailed wet leaves in the pool below.

Perhaps the legends of green men and the myths of transformed nymphs began this way, I thought: not with trees come alive and walking, nor yet with women turned to wood—but with submersion of warm human flesh into the colder sensations of the plants, chilled to slow awareness.

I could feel my heart beat slowly, and the half-painful throb of blood in my fingers. Sap rising. I moved with the rhythms of water and of wind, without haste or conscious thought, part of the slow and perfect order of the universe.

I had forgotten the bit about small local chaos.

Just as I came to the willows' bend, there was a loud shriek from beyond the trees. I'd heard similar noises from a variety of animals, from catamounts to hunting eagles, but I knew a human voice when I heard one.

Blundering out of the stream, I shoved my way through the tangled branches, and burst through into the clear space beyond. A boy was dancing on the bank above me, slapping madly at his legs and howling as he hopped and fro.

"What—?" I began, and he glanced up at me, blue eyes wide with startlement at my sudden appearance.

He wasn't nearly as startled as I was. He was eleven or twelve; tall and thin as a pine sapling, with a mad tangle of thick russet hair. Slanted blue eyes stared at me from either side of a knife-bridged nose, familiar to me as the back of my own hand, though I knew I had never seen this child before.

My heart was somewhere in the vicinity of my tonsils, and the chill had shot up from my feet into the pit of my stomach. Trained to react in spite of shock, I managed to take in the rest of his appearance—shirt and breeches of good quality, though splashed with water, and long pale shins blobbed with black clots like bits of mud.

"Leeches," I said, professional calm descending by habit over personal tumult. *It couldn't be,* I was telling myself, at the same time that I knew it damn well *was*. "It's only leeches. They won't hurt you."

"I know what they are!" he said. "Get them off me!" He swatted at his calf, shuddering with dislike. "They're vile!"

"Oh, not so terribly vile," I said, beginning to get a grip on myself. "They have their uses."

"I don't care what use they are!" he bellowed, stamping in frustration. "I hate them, get them off me!"

"Well, stop whacking at them," I said sharply. "Sit you down and I'll take care of it."

He hesitated, glaring at me suspiciously, but reluctantly sat down on a rock, thrusting his leech-spattered legs out in front of him.

"Get them off *now*!" he demanded.

"In good time," I said. "Where did you come from?"

He stared blankly at me.

"You don't live near here," I said, with complete certainty. "Where did you come from?"

He made an obvious effort to collect himself.

"Ah … we slept in a place called Salem, three nights past. That was the last town I saw." He wiggled his legs hard. "Get them off, I say!"

There were assorted methods of getting leeches off, most of them somewhat more damaging than the leeches themselves. I had a look;

he'd picked up four on one leg, three on the other. One of the fat little beasts was already near bloat, gone plump and shiny with stretching. I edged a thumbnail under its head and it popped off into my hand, round as a pebble and heavy with blood.

The boy stared it, pale under his tan, and shuddered.

"Don't want to waste it," I said casually, and went to retrieve the basket I had dropped under the branches as I pushed my way through the trees.

Nearby, I saw his coat on the ground, discarded shoes and stockings with it. Simple buckles on the shoes, but silver, not pewter. Good broadcloth, not showy but cut with a deal more style than one saw anywhere north of Charleston. I hadn't really needed confirmation, but there it was.

I scooped up a handful of mud, pressed the leech gently into it and wrapped the gooey blob in wet leaves, only then noticing that my hands were trembling. The idiot! The deceitful, wicked, conniving … what in *hell* had made him come here? And God, what would Jamie do?

I came back to the boy, who was bent double, peering at the remaining leeches with a look of disgusted loathing. One more was close to dropping; as I knelt in front of him, it fell off, bouncing slightly on the damp ground.

"Augh!" he said.

"Where's your stepfather?" I asked abruptly. Few things could have taken his attention off his legs, but that did. His head jerked up and he stared at me in astonishment.

It was a cool day, but a light dew of sweat shone on his face. It was narrower through cheek and temple, I thought, and the mouth was quite unlike; perhaps the resemblance was not really so pronounced as I thought.

"How do you know me?" he asked, drawing himself up with an air of hauteur that would have been extremely funny under other circumstances.

"All I know about you is that your given name is William. Am I right?" My hands curled at my sides, and I hoped I was wrong. If he *was* William, that wasn't quite all I knew about him, but it was plenty to be going on with.

A hot flush rose into his cheeks, and his eyes raked over me, his attention temporarily distracted from the leeches by being so familiarly addressed by what—I suddenly realized—appeared to be a disheveled beldame with her skirts round her thighs. Either he had good manners, or the disparity between my voice and my appearance made him cautious, because he swallowed the instant retort that came to his lips.

"Yes, it is," he said shortly, instead. "William, Viscount Ashness, ninth Earl of Ellesmere."

"All that?" I said politely. "Gracious." I took hold of one leech between thumb and forefinger and pulled gently. The thing stretched out like a thick rubber band, but declined to let go. The boy's pale flesh pulled out, too, and he made a small choking sound.

"Let go!" he said. "It'll break, you'll break it!"

"Could do," I admitted. I got to my feet and shook down my skirts, putting myself in better order.

"Come along," I said, offering him a hand. "I'll take you to the house. If I sprinkle a bit of salt on them, they'll drop off at once."

He refused the hand, but got to his feet, a little shakily. He glanced around, as though looking for someone.

"Papa," he explained, seeing my expression. "We missed the way, and he told me to wait by the stream while he made sure of our direction. I shouldn't like him to take alarm if I am not here when he returns."

"I shouldn't worry," I said. "I imagine he'll have found the house himself by this time; it isn't far." A fair guess, as it was the only house in some distance, and at the end of a well-marked trail. Lord John had plainly left the boy while he went ahead, to find Jamie—and warn him. Very thoughtful. My lips tightened involuntarily.

"Will that be Frasers'?" the boy asked. He took a ginger step, spraddling so as not to allow his legs to rub together. "We had come to see a James Fraser."

"I'm Mrs. Fraser," I said, and smiled at him. *Your stepmother,* I might have added—but didn't. "Come along."

He followed me through the scrim of trees toward the house, almost treading on my heels in his haste. I kept tripping over tree roots and half-buried stones, not watching where I was going, fighting the overwhelming urge to turn around and stare at him. If William, Viscount Ashness, ninth Earl of Ellesmere, was not the very last person I had ever expected to see in the backwoods of North Carolina, he was certainly next to the last—King George was a trifle less likely to turn up on the doorstep, I supposed.

What had possessed that … that … I groped about, trying to choose among several discreditable epithets to apply to Lord John Grey, and gave up the struggle, in favor of trying to think what in heaven's name to do. I gave that up, too; there wasn't a thing I *could* do.

William, Viscount Ashness, ninth Earl of Ellesmere. Or he thought he was. *And just what do you propose to do,* I thought silently and savagely toward Lord John Grey, *when he finds out that he's really the bastard son of a pardoned Scottish criminal? And more important—what's the Scottish criminal going to do? or feel?*

I stopped, causing the boy to stumble as he tried to avoid crashing into me.

"Sorry," I murmured. "Thought I saw a snake," and went on, the thought that had stopped me in my tracks still knotting my midsection like a dose of bitter apples. Could Lord John have brought the boy on purpose to reveal his parentage? Did he mean to leave him here, with Jamie—with us?

Alarming as I found the notion, I couldn't reconcile it with the man I had met in Jamaica. I might have sound reasons for disliking John Grey—always difficult to feel a warm sense of goodwill toward a man with a professed homosexual passion for one's husband, after all—but I had to admit that I had seen no trace of either recklessness or cruelty in his character. On the contrary, he had struck me as a sensitive, kindly, and honorable man—or at least he had, before I'd found out about his predilections toward Jamie.

Could something have happened? Some threat to the boy that made Lord John fear for his safety? Surely no one could have found out the truth about William—no one knew, save Lord John and Jamie. And me, of course, I added as an afterthought. Without the evidence of the resemblance—again I repressed the urge to turn round and stare at him—there was no reason for anyone ever to suspect.

But see them side by side, and—well, I shortly *would* see them side by side. The thought gave me a queer hollowness beneath the breastbone, half fright and half anticipation. Was it really as strong as I thought, that resemblance?

I took a deliberate quick detour, through a clump of low-hanging dogwood, making an excuse to turn and wait for him. He came through after me, ducking awkwardly to retrieve the silver-buckled shoe he had dropped.

No, I thought, watching covertly as he straightened up, face flushed from bending. It wasn't as strong as I'd thought at first. He had the promise of Jamie's bones, but it wasn't all there yet—he had the outlines, but not yet the substance. He would be very tall—that was obvious—but now he was about my height, gawky and slender, his limbs very long, and thin enough to seem almost delicate.

He was much darker than Jamie, too; while his hair glinted red in the shafts of sunlight that came through the branches, it was a deep chestnut, nothing like Jamie's bright red-gold, and his skin had turned a soft golden brown in the sun, not at all like Jamie's half-burnt bronze.

He had the Frasers' slanted cat-eyes, though, and there was something about the set of his head, the cock of the slender shoulders, that made me think of—

Bree. It hit me with a small shock, like a spark of electricity. He did look quite a bit like Jamie, but it was my memories of Brianna that had caused that jolt of instant recognition when I saw him. Only ten years her junior, the childish outlines of his face were much more similar to hers than to Jamie's.

He had paused to disentangle a long strand of hair from a grappling dogwood branch; now he came up with me, one brow raised inquiringly.

“Is it far?” he asked. The color had come back to his face with the exertion of walking, but he still looked a trifle sick, and kept his eyes averted from his legs.

“No,” I said. I motioned toward the chestnut grove. “Just there. Look; you can see the smoke from the chimney.”

He didn’t wait to be led, but set off with dogged speed, anxious to be rid of the leeches.

I followed him quickly, not wanting him to reach the cabin ahead of me. I was prey to a mixture of the most disquieting sensations; uppermost was anxiety for Jamie, a little lower, anger at John Grey. Below that, an intense curiosity. And at the bottom, far enough down that I could almost pretend it wasn’t there, was a pang of sharp longing for my daughter, whose face I had never thought to see again.

Jamie and Lord John were sitting on the bench by the door; at the sound of our steps, Jamie rose and looked toward the wood. He’d had time to prepare himself; his glance passed casually over the boy as he turned to me.

“Oh, Claire. Ye’ve found the other of our visitors, then. I’d sent Ian down to find ye. Ye’ll recall Lord John, I expect?”

“How could I forget?” I said, giving his lordship a particularly bright smile. His mouth twitched slightly, but he kept a straight face as he bowed deeply in my direction. How did a man stay so impeccably groomed after several days on horseback, sleeping in the woods?

“Your servant, Mrs. Fraser.” He glanced at the boy, frowning slightly at his state of undress. “May I present my stepson, Lord Ellesmere? And William, as I see you have made the acquaintance of our gracious hostess, will you also make your compliments to our host, Captain Fraser?”

The boy was shifting from foot to foot, nearly dancing on his toes. At this prompting, though, he jerked a quick bow in Jamie’s direction.

“Your servant, Captain,” he said, then cast an agonized glance at me, plainly conscious of nothing but the fact that more of his blood was being sucked out by the second.

"You'll excuse us?" I said politely, and taking the boy by the arm, led him into the cabin and shut the door firmly in the astonished faces of the men. William sat immediately on the stool I pointed out, and thrust out his legs, trembling.

"Hurry!" he said. "Oh, please, do hurry!"

There was no salt ground; I took my digging knife and chipped a piece from the block with reckless haste, dropped it into my mortar, and smashed it into granules with a few quick jabs of the pestle. Crumbling the grains between my fingers, I scattered the salt thickly on each leech.

"Rather hard on the poor old leeches," I said, seeing the first draw itself slowly up into a ball. "Still, it does the trick." The leech let go its grip and tumbled off William's leg, followed in similar fashion by its fellows, who writhed in slow-motion agony on the floor.

I scooped up the tiny bodies and flung them into the fire, then knelt in front of him, tactfully keeping my head bent while he got control of his face.

"Here, let me take care of the bites." Tiny streams of blood ran down his legs; I dabbed them with a clean cloth, then washed the small wounds with vinegar and St.-John's-wort to stop the bleeding.

He let out a deep and tremulous sigh of relief as I dried his shins. "It's not that I'm afraid of—of blood," he said, in a tone of bravado that made it apparent that that was precisely what he was afraid of. "It's only they're such filthy creatures."

"Nasty little things," I agreed. I stood up, took a clean cloth, dipped it in water, and matter-of-factly wiped his smudged face. Then, without asking, I picked up my hairbrush and began to comb out the snarls of his hair.

He looked utterly startled at this familiarity, but beyond an initial stiffening of his spine, made no protest, and as I began to order his hair, he let out another small sigh, and let his shoulders slump a little.

His skin had a pleasant animal heat, and my fingers, still chilly from the stream, warmed comfortably as I ordered the soft strands of silky chestnut hair. It was very thick, and slightly wavy. On the crown of his head was a cowlick, a delicate whorl that gave me mild vertigo to see; Jamie had the same cowlick, in the same place.

"I've lost my ribbon," he said, looking vaguely round, as though one might materialize from bread hutch or inkwell.

"That's all right; I'll lend you one." I finished plaiting his hair and tied it with a scrap of yellow ribbon, feeling as I did so an odd sense of protectiveness.

I had learned of his existence only a few years earlier, and if I had thought of him in the meantime at all, had felt no more than a minor sense of curiosity tinged with resentment. But now something—be it his resemblance to my own child, his resemblance to Jamie, or simply the fact that I had taken care of him in some small way—had given me a strange feeling of almost proprietary concern for him.

I could hear the rumble of voices outside; the sound of a sudden laugh, and my annoyance at John Grey came back with a rush. How dare he risk both Jamie and William—and for what? Why was the bloody man *here,* in a wilderness as blatantly unsuited to someone of his sort as a—

The door opened, and Jamie poked his head in.

"Will ye be all right?" he asked. His eyes rested on the boy, an expression of polite concern on his face, but I saw his hand, curled tight as it rested on the door frame, and the line of tension that ran through leg and shoulder. He was strung like a harp; if I had touched him, he would have given off a low twanging noise.

"Quite all right," I said pleasantly. "Would Lord John care for some refreshment, do you think?"

I put the kettle on to boil for tea, and—with an inner sigh—took out the last loaf of bread, which I had meant to use for my next round of penicillin experiments. Feeling that the emergency justified it, I brought out the last bottle of brandy as well. Then I put the jampot on the table, explaining that the butter was unfortunately in the custody of the pig at the moment.

"Pig?" said William, looking confused.

"In the pantry," I said, with a nod at the closed door.

"Why do you keep—" he started, then sat up sharply and closed his mouth, having obviously been kicked under the table by his stepfather, who was smiling pleasantly over his cup.

"It is very kind of you to receive us, Mrs. Fraser," Lord John interjected, giving his stepson a warning eye. "I do apologize for our unexpected arrival; I hope we do not discommode you too greatly."

"Not at all," I said, wondering just where we were going to put them to sleep. William could go to the shed with Ian, I supposed; it was no worse than sleeping rough, as he had been doing. But the thought of sharing a bed with Jamie, with Lord John on the trundle an arm's-length away …

Ian, with his usual instinct for mealtimes, appeared at this delicate point in the proceedings, and was introduced all round, with such a confusion of explanations and reciprocal bowing in cramped quarters that the teapot was knocked over.

Using this minor disaster as an excuse, I sent Ian off to show William the attractions of wood and stream, with a packet of jam sandwiches and a bottle of cider to share between them. Then, free of their inhibiting presences, I filled the cups with brandy, sat down again, and fixed John Grey with a narrow eye.

"What are you doing here?" I said, without preamble.

He opened his light blue eyes very wide, then lowered his very long lashes and batted them deliberately at me.

"I did not come with the intention of seducing your husband, I assure you," he said.

"John!" Jamie's fist struck the table with a force that rattled the teacups. His cheekbones were flushed dark red, and he was scowling with embarrassed fury.

"Sorry." Grey, by contrast, had gone white, though he remained otherwise visibly unruffled. It occurred to me for the first time that he might possibly be as unnerved as Jamie by this meeting.

"My apologies, ma'am," he said, with a curt nod in my direction. "That was unforgivable. I would point out, however, that you have been looking at me since we met as though you had encountered me lying in the gutter outside some notorious mollyhouse." A light flush burned over his face now, too.

"Sorry," I breathed. "Give me a bit more notice next time, and I'll take care to adjust my features."

He stood up suddenly and went to the window, where he stood with his back to the room, hands braced on the sill. There was an exceedingly awkward silence. I didn't want to look at Jamie; instead I affected great interest in a bottle of fennel seeds that stood on the table.

"My wife has died," he said abruptly. "On the ship between England and Jamaica. She was coming to join me there."

"I am sorry to hear of it," Jamie said quietly. "The lad will have been with her?"

"Yes." Lord John turned back, leaning against the sill, so that the spring sunlight silhouetted his neat head and gave him a gleaming halo. "Willie was—very close to Isobel. She was the only mother he'd known since his birth."

Willie's true mother, Geneva Dunsany, had died in giving birth to him; his presumed father, the Earl of Ellesmere, had died the same day, in an accident. So much, Jamie had already told me. Likewise, that Geneva's sister, Isobel, had taken care of the orphaned boy, and that John Grey had married Isobel when Willie was six or so—at the time Jamie had left the Dunsanys' employ.

"I'm very sorry," I said, sincerely, and didn't mean only the death of his wife.

Grey glanced at me, and gave me the shadow of a nod in acknowledgment.

"My appointment as governor was nearly at an end; I had intended perhaps to take up residence on the island, should the climate suit my family. As it was …" He shrugged.

"Willie was grief-stricken by the loss of his mother; it seemed advisable to seek to distract his mind by whatever means I could. An opportunity presented itself almost at once; my wife's estate includes a large property in Virginia, which she had bequeathed to William. Upon her death, I received inquiries from the factor of the plantation, asking for instruction."

He moved away from the window, coming slowly back toward the table where we sat.

“I could not well decide what to do with the property without seeing it, and evaluating the conditions that obtain here. So I determined that we should sail to Charleston, and from there, travel overland to Virginia. I trusted to the novelty of the experience to divert William from his grief—which I am pleased to observe, it seems to have done. He has been much more cheerful these past weeks.”

I opened my mouth to say that Fraser’s Ridge seemed a bit out of his way, regardless, but then thought better of it.

He appeared to guess what I was thinking, for he gave me a brief wry smile. I really would have to do something about my face, I thought. Having Jamie read my thoughts was one thing, and not at all unpleasant, on the whole. Having total strangers walk in and out of my mind at will was something else.

“Where is the plantation?” Jamie asked, with somewhat more tact but the same implication.

“The nearest town of any sort is called Lynchburg—on the James River.” Lord John looked at me, still wry, but apparent good humor restored. “It is in fact no more than a few days deviation in our journey to come here, in spite of the remoteness of your aerie.”

He switched his attention to Jamie, frowning slightly.

“I told Willie that you are an old acquaintance of mine, from my soldiering days—I trust you do not object to the deception?”

Jamie shook his head, one side of his mouth turning up a bit. “Deception, is it? I shouldna think I could well mind what ye called me, under the circumstances. And so far as that bit goes, it’s true enough.”

“You don’t think he’ll remember you?” I asked Jamie. He had been a groom on Willie’s home estate; a prisoner of war following the Jacobite Rising.

He hesitated, but then shook his head.

“I dinna think so. He was barely six when I left Helwater; that will be half a lifetime ago, to a lad—and a world away. And there’s no reason he should think to recall a groom named MacKenzie, let alone connect the name wi’ me.”

Willie hadn't recognized Jamie on sight, certainly, but then he had been too concerned with the leeches to take much notice of anyone. A thought struck me, and I turned to Lord John, who was fiddling with a snuffbox he had taken from his pocket.

"Tell me," I said, moved by a sudden impulse. "I don't mean to distress you—but … do you know how your wife died?"

"How?" He looked startled at the question, but collected himself at once. "She died of a bloody flux, so her maid said." His mouth twisted slightly. "It was … not a pleasant death, I believe." Bloody flux, eh? That was the standard description for anything from amebic dysentery to cholera.

"Was there a doctor? Someone on board who took care of her?"

"There was," he said, a little sharply. "What do you imply, ma'am?"

"Nothing," I said. "It's only that I wondered whether perhaps that was where Willie saw leeches used."

A flicker of understanding crossed his face.

"Oh, I see. I hadn't thought—"

At this point, I noticed Ian, who was hovering in the doorway, obviously reluctant to interrupt but with a marked look of urgency on his face.

"Did you want something, Ian?" I asked, interrupting Lord John.

He shook his head, brown hair flying.

"No, I thank ye, Auntie. It's only—" He cast a helpless glance at Jamie. "Well, I'm sorry, Uncle, I ken I shouldna ha' let him do it, but —"

"What?" Alarmed by Ian's tone of voice, Jamie was already on his feet. "What have ye done?"

The lad twisted his big hands together, cracking his knuckles in embarrassment.

"Well, ye see, his Lordship asked for the privy, and so I told him about the snake, and that he'd best go into the wood instead. So he did, but then he wanted to see the snake, and … and …"

"He's not bitten?" Jamie asked anxiously. Lord John, who had obviously been about to ask the same thing, gave him a glance.

"Oh, no!" Ian looked surprised. "We couldna see it to start with, because it was too dark below. So we lifted off the benchtop to get more light. We could see the serpent fine, then, and we poked at it a bit wi' a long branch, so it was lashin' to and fro like the wee book said, but it didna seem inclined to bite itself. And—and—" He darted a glance at Lord John, and swallowed audibly.

"It was my fault," he said, nobly squaring his shoulders, the better to accept blame. "I said as how I'd thought to shoot it earlier, but we didna want to waste the powder. And so his Lordship said as how he would fetch his papa's pistol from the saddlebag and deal with the thing at once. And so—"

"Ian," said Jamie between his teeth. "Stop blethering this instant and tell me straight what ye've done wi' the lad. Ye've not shot him by mistake, I hope?"

Ian looked offended at this slur upon his marksmanship.

"Of course not!" he said.

Lord John coughed politely, forestalling further recriminations.

"Perhaps you would be good enough to tell me the whereabouts of my son at this moment?"

Ian took a deep breath and visibly commended his soul to God.

"He's in the bottom of the privy," he said. "Have ye got a bit o' rope, Uncle Jamie?"

With an admirable economy of both words and motion, Jamie reached the door in two strides and disappeared, closely followed by Lord John.

"Is he in there *with* the snake?" I asked, hastily scrabbling through the washbasket for something to use as a tourniquet, just in case.

"Oh, no, Auntie," Ian assured me. "Ye dinna think I'd have left him, and the serpent was still there? Maybe I'd best go help," he added, and disappeared as well.

I hurried after him, to find Jamie and Lord John standing shoulder to shoulder in the doorway of the privy, conversing with the depths. Standing on tiptoe to peer over Lord John's shoulder, I saw the torn butt end of a long, slender hickory branch protruding a few inches above the edge of the oblong hole. I held my breath;

Lord Ellesmere's struggles had stirred up the contents of the privy, and the reek was enough to sear the cilia off my nasal membranes.

"He says he's not hurt," Jamie assured me, turning away from the hole and unlimbering a coil of rope from his shoulder.

"Good," I said. "Where's the snake, though?" I peeked nervously into the outhouse, but couldn't see anything beyond the silvery cedar boards and the dark recesses of the pit.

"It went that way," Ian said, gesturing vaguely down the path by which I had come. "The laddie couldna quite get a clear shot, so I gave the thing a wee snoove wi' the stick, and damned if the bugger didna turn and come at me, right up the branch! It scairt me so I let out a skelloch and let go, and I bumped the lad, and—well, that's how it happened," he ended lamely.

Trying to avoid Jamie's eye, he sidled toward the pit and, leaning over, yelled awkwardly, "Hey! I'm glad ye didna break your neck!"

Jamie gave him a look that said rather plainly that if necks were to be broken … but forbore further remarks in the interests of extracting William promptly from his oubliette. This procedure was carried out without further incident, and the would-be marksman was lifted out, clinging to the rope like a caterpillar on a string.

There had luckily been enough sewage in the bottom of the pit to break his fall. From appearances, the ninth Earl of Ellesmere had landed facedown. Lord John stood for a moment on the path, wiping his hands on his breeches and surveying the encrusted object before him. He rubbed the back of a hand over his mouth, trying either to hide a smile or to stifle his sense of smell.

Then his shoulders started to shake.

"What news from the Underworld, Persephone?" he said, unable to keep the quaver of laughter out of his voice.

A pair of slanted eyes looked blue murder out of the mask of filth obscuring his Lordship's features. It was a thoroughly Fraser expression, and I felt a qualm go through me at the sight. By my side, Ian gave a sudden start. He glanced quickly from the Earl to Jamie and back, then he caught my eye and his own face went perfectly and unnaturally blank.

Jamie was saying something in Greek, to which Lord John replied in the same language, whereupon both men laughed like loons. Trying to ignore Ian, I bent an eye in Jamie's direction. Shoulders still shaking with suppressed mirth, he saw fit to enlighten me.

"Epicharmus," he explained. "At the Oracle of Delphi, seekers after enlightenment would throw down a dead python into the pit, and then hang about, breathing in the fumes as it decayed."

Lord John declaimed, gesturing grandly. " 'The spirit toward the heavens, the body to the earth.' "

William exhaled strongly through his nose, precisely as Jamie did when tried beyond bearing. Ian twitched beside me. Good grief, I thought, freshly unnerved. Does the boy have nothing from his mother?

"And have you attained any spiritual insights as a result of your recent m-mystical experience, William?" Lord John asked, making a poor attempt at self-control. He and Jamie were both flushed, with a laughter that I thought due as much to the release of nervous tension as to brandy or hilarity.

His Lordship, glowering, pulled off his neckcloth and flung it on the path with a soggy splat. Now Ian was giggling nervously, too, unable to help himself. My own belly muscles were quivering under the strain, but I could see that the patches of exposed flesh above William's collar were the color of the ripe tomatoes by the privy. Knowing all too well what usually happened to a Fraser who reached that particular level of incandescence, I thought the time had come to break up the party.

"Er-hem," I said, clearing my throat. "If you will allow me, gentlemen? Unlearned as I am in Greek philosophy, there is one small epigram I know by heart."

I handed William the jar of lye soap I had brought in lieu of a tourniquet.

"Pindar," I said. " 'Water is best.' "

A small flash of what might have been gratitude showed through the muck. His Lordship bowed to me, with utmost correctness, then turned, gave Ian a fishy stare, and stomped off through the grass toward the creek, dripping. He seemed to have lost his shoes.

“Puir clarty bugger,” Ian said, shaking his head mournfully. “It’ll be days before he gets the stink off.”

“No doubt.” Lord John’s lips were still twitching, but the urge to declaim Greek poetry seemed to have left him, replaced by less elevated concerns. “Do you know what has become of my pistol, by the way? The one William was using before his unfortunate accident?”

“Oh.” Ian looked uncomfortable. He lifted his chin in the direction of the privy. “I … ah … well, I’m verra much afraid—”

“I see.” Lord John rubbed his own immaculately barbered chin.

Jamie fixed Ian with a long stare.

“Ah …” said Ian, backing up a pace or two.

“Get it,” said Jamie, in a tone that brooked no contradiction.

“But—” said Ian.

“Now,” said his uncle, and dropped the slimy rope at his feet.

Ian’s Adam’s apple bobbed, once. He looked at me, wide-eyed as a rabbit.

“Take your clothes off first,” I said helpfully. “We don’t want to have to burn them, do we?”

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26

PLAGUE AND PESTILENCE

I left the house just before sunset, to check on my patient in the corncrib. He was no better, but neither was he visibly worse; the same labored breathing and burning fever. This time, though, the sunken eyes met mine when I entered the shed, and stayed on my face as I examined him.

He still had the raven's-feather amulet, clutched in his hand. I touched it and smiled at him, then gave him a drink. He still would take no food but had a little milk, and swallowed without protest another dose of my febrifuge. He lay motionless through examination and feeding, but as I was wringing out a hot cloth to poultice his chest, he suddenly reached out a hand and grabbed my arm.

He thumped his chest with his other hand, and made an odd humming noise. This puzzled me for a moment, until I realized that he *was* humming.

"Really?" I said. I reached for the packet of poulticing herbs and folded them into the cloth. "Well, all right then. Let me think."

I settled on "Onward, Christian Soldiers," which he appeared to like—I was obliged to sing it through three times before he seemed satisfied and sank back on his blanket with a small spate of coughing, wrapped in camphor fumes.

I paused outside the house, cleansing my hands carefully with the bottle of alcohol I carried. I was sure I was safe from contagion—I had had measles as a child—but wanted to take no chance of infecting anyone else.

"There was talk of an outbreak of the red measle in Cross Creek," Lord John remarked, upon my reporting to Jamie the condition of our guest. "Is it true, Mrs. Fraser, that the savage is congenitally less able to withstand infection than are Europeans, while African slaves are yet more hardy than their masters?"

"Depends on the infection," I said, peering into the cauldron and giving the stew bottle a cautious poke. "The Indians are a lot more resistant to the parasitic diseases—malaria, say—caused by organisms here, and the Africans deal better with things like dengue fever—which came with them from Africa, after all. But the Indians haven't much resistance to European plagues like smallpox and syphilis, no."

Lord John looked a bit taken aback, which gave me a small sense of satisfaction; evidently he had only asked out of courtesy—he hadn't actually expected me to know anything.

"How fascinating," he said, though, sounding truly interested. "You refer to organisms? Do you then subscribe to Mister Evan Hunter's theory of miasmatical creatures?"

Now it was my turn to be taken aback.

"Er … not precisely, no," I said, and changed the subject.

We passed a pleasant enough evening, Jamie and Lord John exchanging anecdotes of hunting and fishing, with remarks on the amazing abundance of the countryside, while I darned stockings.

Willie and Ian had a game of chess, which the latter won, to his evident satisfaction. His Lordship yawned hugely, then catching his father's minatory eye, made a belated attempt to cover his mouth. He relaxed into a sleepy smile of contentment, brought on by repletion; he and Ian between them had demolished an entire currant cake, following their huge supper.

Jamie saw it, and cocked a brow at Ian, who obligingly rose and towed his Lordship away to share his pallet in the herb shed. Two down, I thought, keeping my eyes resolutely away from the bed—and three to go.

In the event, the delicate problem of bedtime was solved by my retiring, cloaked in modesty—or at least in my nightgown—while

Jamie and Lord John took over the chess table, drinking the last of the brandy by firelight.

Lord John was a much better chess player than I—or so I deduced from the fact that the game took them a good hour. Jamie could normally beat me in twenty minutes flat. The play was mostly silent, though with brief spurts of conversation.

At last Lord John made a move, sat back and stretched, as though concluding something.

"I collect you will not see much disturbance in the political way, here in your mountain refuge?" he said casually. He squinted at the board, considering.

"I do envy you, Jamie, removed from such petty difficulties as afflict the merchants and gentry of the lowlands. If your life has its hardships—as cannot help but be the case—you have the not inconsiderable consolation of knowing your struggles to be significant and heroic."

Jamie snorted briefly.

"Oh, aye. Verra heroic, to be sure. At the moment, my most heroic struggle is like to be with the pig in my pantry." He nodded toward the board, one eyebrow raised. "Ye really mean to make that move?"

Grey narrowed his eyes at Jamie, then looked down, studying the board with pursed lips.

"Yes, I do," he answered firmly.

"Damn," said Jamie, and with a grin, reached out and tipped over his king in resignation.

Grey laughed, and reached for the brandy bottle.

"Damn!" he said in turn, finding it empty. Jamie laughed, and rising, went to the cupboard.

"Try a bit of this," he said, and I heard the musical glug of liquid into a cup.

Grey lifted the cup to his nose, inhaled and sneezed explosively, scattering droplets over the table.

"It's not wine, John," Jamie observed mildly. "Ye're meant to drink it, aye? not savor the bouquet."

"So I noticed. Christ, what is it?" Grey sniffed again, more cautiously, and essayed a trial sip. He choked, but swallowed gamely.

"Christ," he said again. His voice was hoarse. He coughed, cleared his throat, and set the cup gingerly on the table, eyeing it as though it might explode.

"Don't tell me," he said. "Let me guess. It's meant to be Scotch whisky?"

"In ten years or so, it might be," Jamie answered, pouring a small cupful for himself. He took a small sip, rolled it around his mouth and swallowed, shaking his head. "At the moment, it's alcohol, and that's as much as I'd say for it."

"Yes, it's that," Grey agreed, taking another very small sip. "Where did you get it?"

"I made it," said Jamie, with the modest pride of a master brewer. "I've twelve barrels of the stuff."

Grey's fair brows shot up at that.

"Assuming that you don't mean to clean your boots with it, may I ask what you intend doing with twelve barrels of *this*?"

Jamie laughed.

"Trade it," he said. "Sell it, when I can. Customs tax and a license to brew spirits being one of the petty political concerns wi' which I am not afflicted, owing to our remoteness," he added ironically.

Lord John grunted, tried another sip, and set the cup down.

"Well, you may well escape the Customs, I'll grant you—the nearest agent is in Cross Creek. But I cannot say I think it a safe practice on that account. To whom, may I ask, are you selling this remarkable concoction? Not to the savages, I trust?"

Jamie shrugged.

"Only verra small amounts—a flask or two at a time, as a gift or in trade. Never more than would make one man drunk."

"Very wise. You'll have heard the stories, I expect. I spoke with one man who'd survived the massacre at Michilimackinac, during the war with the French. That was caused—in part, at least—by a great quantity of drink falling into the hands of a large gathering of Indians at the fort."

"I've heard about it, too," Jamie assured him dryly. "But we are on good terms wi' the Indians nearby, and there are none so many of them as all that. And I'm careful, as I say."

"Mm." He essayed another sip, and grimaced. "I expect you risk more by poisoning one of them than by intoxicating a mob." He set the glass down and changed the subject.

"I have heard talk in Wilmington of an unruly group of men called Regulators, who terrorize the backcountry and cause disruption by means of riot. Have you encountered anything of such nature here?"

Jamie snorted briefly.

"Terrorize what? Squirrels? There is the backcountry, John, and then there is the wilderness. Surely ye will have remarked the lack of human habitation on your journey here."

"I did notice something of the kind," Lord John agreed. "And yet I had heard certain rumors regarding your presence here—that it was in part meant as a quelling influence upon the growth of lawlessness."

Jamie laughed.

"I think it will be some time before there is much lawlessness for me to quell. Though I did go so far as to knock down an old German farmer who was abusing a young woman at the grain mill on the river. He had it in mind she had given him short weight—which she had not—and I couldna convince him otherwise. But that is my only attempt so far at maintaining public order."

Grey laughed, and picked up the fallen king.

"I am relieved to hear it. Will you redeem your honor with another game? I cannot expect the same trick to work twice, after all."

I rolled onto my side, facing the wall, and stared sleeplessly at the timbers. The firelight glimmered on the wing-shaped marks of the ax, running along the length of each log, regular as sand ripples on a beach.

I tried to ignore the conversation going on behind me, to lose myself instead in the memory of Jamie hewing bark and squaring logs, of sleeping in his arms under the shelter of a half-built wall, feeling the house rise up around me, enclosing me in warmth and safety, the permanent embodiment of his embrace. I always felt safe and soothed by this vision, even when I was alone on the mountain, knowing I was protected by the house he had built for me. Tonight, though, it wasn't working.

I lay still, wondering exactly what was the matter with me. Or rather, not what, but *why*. I knew by now what it was, all right; it was jealousy.

I was indeed jealous; an emotion I hadn't felt for some years, and was appalled to feel now. I rolled onto my back and closed my eyes, trying to shut out the murmur of conversation.

Lord John had been nothing but courtesy itself to me. More than that, he had been intelligent, thoughtful—thoroughly charming, in fact. And listening to him making intelligent, thoughtful, charming conversation with Jamie knotted my insides and made me clench my hands under cover of the quilt.

You are an idiot, I told myself savagely. *What is the matter with you*? I tried to relax, breathing deeply through my nose, eyes closed.

Part of it was Willie, of course. Jamie was very careful, but I had seen his expression when he looked at the boy in unguarded moments. His whole body was suffused with shy joy, pride mingled with diffidence; and it smote me to the heart to see it.

He would never look at Brianna, his firstborn, that way. Would never see her at all. That was hardly his fault—and yet it seemed so unfair. At the same time, I could scarcely begrudge him his joy in his son—and didn't, I told myself firmly. The fact that it gave me a terrible pang of longing to look at the boy, with that bold, handsome face that mirrored his sister's, was simply my problem. Nothing to do with Jamie, or with Willie. Or with John Grey, who'd brought the boy here.

What for? That was what I'd been thinking ever since I had recovered from the first shock of their appearance, and that was still what I was thinking. What in *hell* was the man up to?

The story about the estate in Virginia might be true—or only an excuse. Even if it was true, it was a considerable detour to come to Fraser's Ridge. Why had he taken so much trouble to bring the boy here? And so much risk; Willie was clearly oblivious to the resemblance that even Ian had noticed, but what if he hadn't been? Had it been so important to Grey, to restate his claim on Jamie's obligation to him?

I rolled onto my other side and cracked an eyelid, watching them over the chessboard, redhead and fair head, bent together in absorption. Grey moved a knight and sat back, rubbing the back of his neck, smiling to himself at the effect of his move. He was a good-looking man; slight and fine-boned, but with a strong, clear-cut face and a beautiful, sensitive mouth that many a woman had no doubt envied.

Grey was even better at guarding his face than Jamie was; I hadn't yet seen an incriminating look from him. I'd seen one once, though, in Jamaica, and wasn't in any doubt about the nature of his feelings for Jamie.

On the other hand, I wasn't in any doubt about Jamie's feelings in that regard, either. The knot under my heart eased a bit, and I took a deeper breath. No matter how late they sat up over the board, drinking and talking, it would be *my* bed Jamie came to.

I unclenched my fists, and it was then, as I rubbed my palms covertly against my thighs, that I realized with a shock just why Lord John affected me so strongly.

My fingernails had dug small crescents in my palms, a small line of throbbing half-moons. For years, I had rubbed away those crescents after every dinner party, every late night when Frank had "worked at the office." For years, I had lain intermittently alone in a double bed, wide-awake in the darkness, nails digging into my hands, waiting for him to come back.

And he had. To his credit, he always did return before dawn. Sometimes to a back curled against him in cold reproach, sometimes to the furious challenge of a body thrust against him in demand, urging him wordlessly to deny it, to prove his innocence with his body—trial by combat. More often than not, he accepted the challenge. But it didn't help.

Yet neither of us spoke of such things in the daylight. I could not; I had no right. Frank did not; he had revenge.

Sometimes it would be months—even a year or more—between episodes, and we would live in peace together. But then it would happen again; the silent phone calls, the too-excused absences, the late nights. Never anything so overt as another woman's perfume, or lipstick on his collar—he had discretion. But I always felt the ghost of the other woman, whoever she was; some faceless, indistinguishable She.

I knew it didn't matter who it was—there were several of them. The only important thing was that She was not me. And I would lie awake and clench my fists, the marks of my nails a small crucifixion.

The murmur of conversation by the fire had mostly ceased; the only sound the small click of the chessmen as they moved.

"Do you feel yourself content?" Lord John asked suddenly.

Jamie paused for a moment.

"I have all that man could want," he said quietly. "A place, and honorable work. My wife at my side. The knowledge that my son is safe and well cared for." He looked up then, at Grey. "And a good friend." He reached over, clasped Lord John's hand, and let it go. "I want no more."

I shut my eyes resolutely, and began to count sheep.

I was awakened just before dawn by Ian, crouching by my bedside.

"Auntie," he said softly, a hand on my shoulder. "Best ye come; the man in the corncrib's verra poorly."

I was on my feet by reflex, wrapped in my cloak and moving barefooted after Ian before my mind had even begun to function consciously. Not that any great diagnostic skill was needed; I could hear the deep, rattling respirations from ten feet away.

The Earl hovered by the doorway, his thin face pale and scared in the gray light.

"Go away," I told him sharply. "You mustn't be near him; nor you, Ian—the two of you go to the house, fetch me hot water from the cauldron, my box, and clean rags."

Willie moved at once, eager to be away from the frightening sounds coming from the shed. Ian lingered, though, his face troubled.

"I dinna think ye can help him, Auntie," he said quietly. His eyes met mine straight on, with an adult depth of understanding.

"Very likely not," I said, answering him in the same terms. "But I can't do nothing."

He took a deep breath, nodded.

"Aye. But I think …" He hesitated, then went on as I nodded, "I think ye shouldna torment him wi' medicine. He's fixed to die, Auntie; we heard an owl in the night—he will have heard it, too. It is a sign of death to them."

I glanced at the dark oblong of the door, biting my lip. The breaths were shallow and wheezing, with alarmingly long pauses between them. I looked back at Ian.

"What do the Indians do, when someone is dying? Do you know?"

"Sing," he said promptly. "The *shaman* puts paint upon her face, and sings the soul away to safety, so the demons dinna take it."

I hesitated, my instincts to do *something* at war with my conviction that action would be futile. Had I any right to deprive this man of peace in his dying? Worse, to alarm him into fear that his soul would be lost by my interference?

Ian hadn't waited for the results of my dithering. He stooped and scraped up a small clot of earth, spat in it and stirred it to mud. Without comment, he dipped his forefinger into the puddle, and drew a line from my forehead down the bridge of my nose.

"Ian!"

"Shh," he murmured, frowning in concentration. "Like this, I think." He added two lines across each cheekbone, and a rough zigzag down the left side of my jawbone. "That's as near as I remember the proper way of it. I've only seen it the once, and from a distance."

"Ian, this isn't—"

"Shhh," he said again, laying a hand on my arm to quell protest. "Go to him, Auntie. Ye willna frighten him; he's accustomed to ye, no?"

I rubbed away a drip from the end of my nose, feeling thoroughly idiotic. There was no time to argue, though. Ian gave me a small push, and I turned to the door. I stepped into the darkness of the corncrib, bent and laid a hand on the man. His skin was hot and dry, his hand limp as worn leather.

"Ian, can you talk to him? Say his name, tell him it's all right?"

"Ye must not say his name, Auntie; it will call demons."

Ian cleared his throat, and said a few words in soft clicking gutterals. The hand in mine twitched slightly. My eyes had adjusted now, I could see the man's face, marked with a faint look of surprise as he saw my mud paint.

"Sing, Auntie," Ian urged, low-voiced. "*Tantum ergo,* maybe; it sounded a wee bit like that."

There was nothing else I could do, after all. Rather helplessly, I began.

"Tantum ergo, sacramentum …"

Within a few seconds, my voice steadied, and I sat back on my bare heels, singing slowly, holding his hand. The heavy brows relaxed, and a look of what I thought might be calm came into the sunken eyes.

I had been present at a good many deaths, from accident, warfare, illness, or natural causes, and had seen men meet death in many ways, from philosophical acceptance to violent protest. But I had never seen one die quite this way.

He simply waited, eyes on mine, until I had come to the end of the song. Then he turned his face toward the door, and as the rising sun struck him, he left his body, without the twitch of a muscle or the drawing of a final breath.

I sat quite still, holding the limp hand, until it occurred to me that I was holding my breath, too.

The air around me seemed queerly still, as though time had stopped for a moment. But of course it had, I thought, and forced myself to draw breath. It had stopped for him, forever.

* * *

"What are we to do with him?"

There was nothing further to be done *for* our guest; the only question at the moment was how we might best deal with his mortal remains.

I had had a quiet word with Lord John, and he had taken Willie to gather late strawberries on the ridge. While the Indian's death had had nothing even faintly gruesome about it, I could wish Willie hadn't seen it; it wasn't a sight for a child who had seen his mother die no more than a few months before. Lord John had seemed upset himself—perhaps a little sunshine and fresh air would help both of them.

Jamie frowned and rubbed a hand over his face. He hadn't shaved yet, and the stubble made a rasping sound.

"We must give him decent burial, surely?"

"Well, I don't suppose we can leave him lying about in the corncrib, but would his people mind if we buried him here? Do you know anything about how they treat their dead, Ian?"

Ian was still a little pale, but surprisingly self-possessed. He shook his head, and took a drink of milk.

"I dinna ken a great deal, Auntie. But I have seen one man die, as I told ye. They wrapped him in a deerskin and had a procession round the village, singing, then took the body a ways into the wood and put it up on a platform, above the ground, and left it there to dry."

Jamie seemed less than enthralled at the prospect of having mummified bodies perched in the trees near the farm. "I should think it best maybe to wrap the body decently and carry it to the village, then, so his own folk can deal with him properly."

"No, you can't do that." I slid the pan of newly baked muffins out of the Dutch oven, plucked a broomtwig and stuck it into one plump brown cake. It came out clean, so I set the pan on the table, then sat down myself. I frowned abstractedly at the jug of honey, glowing gold in the late morning sun.

"The trouble is that the body is almost certainly still infectious. You didn't touch him at all, did you, Ian?" I glanced at Ian, who shook his head, looking sober.

"No, Auntie. Not after he fell sick here; before that, I dinna recall. We were all together, hunting."

"And you haven't had measles. Drat." I rubbed a hand through my hair. "Have you?" I asked Jamie. To my relief, he nodded.

"Aye, when I was five or so. And you say a person canna have the same sickness twice. So it willna injure me to touch the body?"

"No, nor me either; I've had them too. The thing is, we can't take him to the village. I don't know at all how long the measles virus—that's a sort of germ—can live on clothes or in a body, but how could we explain to his people that they mustn't touch him or go near him? And we can't risk letting them be infected."

"What troubles me," Ian put in unexpectedly, "is that he isna a man from Anna Ooka—he's from a village further north. If we bury him here in the usual way, his folk may hear of it and think we had done him to death in some fashion, then buried him to hide it."

That was a sinister possibility that hadn't occurred to me, and I felt as though a cold hand had been laid on the back of my neck.

"You don't think they would, surely?"

Ian shrugged, broke open a hot muffin, and drizzled honey over the steaming insides.

"Nacognaweto's folk trust us, but Myers did say there were plenty who would not. They've reason to be suspicious, aye?"

Considering that the bulk of the Tuscarora had been exterminated in a vicious war with the North Carolina settlers no more than fifty years before, I rather thought they had a point. It didn't help with the present problem, though.

Jamie swallowed the last of his muffin and sat back with a sigh.

"Well, then. I think best we wrap the poor man in a shroud of sorts, and put him in the wee cave in the hill above the house. I've set the posts for a stable across the opening already; those will keep the beasts off. Then Ian or I should go to Anna Ooka and explain matters to Nacognaweto. Perhaps he will send someone back who can look at the body and assure the man's people that he met with no violence from us—and then we can bury him."

Before I could reply to this suggestion, I heard footsteps, running across the dooryard. I had left the door ajar, to let in light and air.

As I turned toward it, Willie's face appeared in the opening, pale and distraught.

"Mrs. Fraser! Please, will you come? Papa's ill."

* * *

"Has he got it from the Indian?" Jamie frowned at Lord John, whom we had stripped to his shirt and put to bed. His face was by turns flushed and pale—the symptoms I had put down earlier to emotional distress.

"No, he can't have. The incubation period is one to two weeks. Where were you—" I turned to Willie, then shrugged, dismissing the question. They had been traveling; there was no conceivable way of telling where or when Grey had encountered the virus. Travelers normally slept several to a bed in inns, and the blankets were seldom changed; it would be easy to lie down in one and get up in the morning with the germs of anything from measles to hepatitis.

"You did say there was an epidemic of measles in Cross Creek?" I put a hand on Grey's forehead. Adept as I was at reading fevers by touch, I would have put his near a hundred and three; quite high enough.

"Yes," he said hoarsely, and coughed. "Have I got the measles? You must keep Willie away."

"Ian—take Willie outside, will you, please?" I wrung out a cloth wetted with elderflower water, and wiped Grey's face and neck. There was no rash yet on his face, but when I made him open his mouth, the small whitish Koplik's spots on the lining were clear enough.

"Yes, you have got the measles," I said. "How long have you been feeling ill?"

"I felt somewhat light-headed when I retired last night," he said, and coughed again. "I woke with a bad headache, sometime in the night, but I thought it only the result of Jamie's so-called whisky." He smiled faintly at Jamie. "Then this morning …" He sneezed, and I hastily groped for a fresh handkerchief.

"Yes, quite. Well, try to rest a bit. I've put some willow bark to steep; that will help the headache." I stood up and raised a brow at Jamie, who followed me outside.

"We can't let Willie be near him," I said, low-voiced so as not to be overheard; Willie and Ian were by the penfold, forking hay into the horses' manger. "Or Ian. He's very infectious."

Jamie frowned.

"Aye. What ye said, though, about incubation—"

"Yes. Ian might have been exposed through the dead man, Willie might have been exposed to the same source as Lord John. Either one of them might have it now, but show no sign yet." I turned to look at the two boys, both of them outwardly as healthy as the horses they were feeding.

"I think," I said, hesitating as I formed a vague plan, "that perhaps you had better camp outside with the boys tonight—you could sleep in the herb shed, or camp in the grove. Wait a day or so; if Willie's infected—if he got it from the same source as Lord John—he'll likely be showing signs by then. If not, then he's likely all right. If he *is* all right, then you and he could go to Anna Ooka to tell Nacognaweto about the dead man. That would keep Willie safely out of danger."

"And Ian could stay here to take care of you?" He frowned, considering, then nodded. "Aye, I expect that will do."

He turned to glance at Willie. Impassive as he could be when he wanted to, I knew him well enough to detect the flicker of emotion across his face.

There was worry in the tilt of his brows—concern for John Grey, and perhaps for me or Ian. But beyond that was something quite different—interest tinged with apprehension, I thought, at the prospect of spending several days alone with the boy.

"If he hasn't noticed it yet, he isn't going to," I said softly, putting my hand on his arm.

"No," he muttered, turning his back on the boy. "I suppose it's safe enough."

"They do say it's an ill wind that blows nobody good," I said. "You'll be able to talk to him without it seeming odd." I paused.

“There’s just the one thing, before you go.”

He put his hand over mine where it lay on his arm, and smiled down at me.

“Aye, and what’s that?”

“Do get that pig out of the pantry, please.”

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TROUT FISHING IN AMERICA

The journey began inauspiciously. It was raining, for one thing. For another, he disliked leaving Claire, especially in such difficult circumstances. For a third, he was badly worried for John; he hadn't liked the look of the man at all when he took leave of him, barely half conscious and wheezing like a grampus, his features so blotched with rash as to be unrecognizable.

And for a fourth, the ninth Earl of Ellesmere had just punched him in the jaw. He took a firm hold on the youngster's scruff and shook him, hard enough to make his teeth clack painfully together.

"Now, then," he said, letting go. The boy staggered, and sat down suddenly as he lost his balance. He glared down at the lad, sitting in the mud by the penfold. They had been having this argument, on and off, for the last twenty-four hours, and he had had enough of it.

"I ken well enough what ye said. But what *I* said is that ye're coming with me. I've told ye why, and that's all about it."

The boy's face drew down in a ferocious scowl. He wasn't easily cowed, but then Jamie supposed that earls weren't used to folk trying, either.

"I am *not* leaving!" the boy repeated. "You can't make me!" He got to his feet, jaw clenched, and turned back toward the cabin.

Jamie snaked out an arm, grabbed the lad's collar, and hauled him back. Seeing the boy draw back his foot for a kick, he closed his fist and punched the boy neatly in the pit of the stomach. William's eyes bulged and he doubled over, holding his middle.

"Don't kick," Jamie said mildly. "It's ill-mannered. And as for makin' you, of course I can."

The Earl's face was bright red and his mouth was opening and closing like a startled goldfish's. His hat had fallen off, and the rain was pasting strands of dark hair to his head.

"It's verra loyal of ye to want to stay by your stepfather," Jamie went on, wiping the water out of his own face, "but ye canna help him, and you may do yourself damage by staying. So ye're not." From the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of movement as the oiled hide over the cabin's window moved aside, then fell. Claire, no doubt wondering why they were not already long gone.

Jamie took the Earl by an unresisting arm, and led him to one of the saddled horses.

"Up," he said, and had the satisfaction of seeing the boy stick a reluctant foot in the stirrup and swing aboard. Jamie tossed the boy's hat up to him, donned his own, and mounted himself. As a precaution, though, he kept hold of both sets of reins as they set off.

"You, sir," said a breathless, enraged voice behind him, "are a lout!"

He was torn between irritation and an urge to laugh, but gave way to neither. He cast a look back over his shoulder, to see William also turned, and leaning perilously to the side, half off his saddle.

"Don't try it," he advised the boy, who straightened up abruptly and glared at him. "I wouldna like to tie your feet in your stirrups, but I'll do it, make no mistake."

The boy's eyes narrowed into bright blue triangles, but he evidently took Jamie at his word. His jaw stayed clenched, but his shoulders slumped a little in temporary defeat.

They rode in silence for most of the morning, rain drizzling down their necks and weighting the shoulders of their cloaks. Willie might have accepted defeat, but not graciously. He was still sullen when they dismounted to eat, but did at least fetch water without protest, and pack up the remains of their meal while Jamie watered the horses.

Jamie eyed him covertly, but there was no sign of measles. The Earl's face was frowning but rashless, and while the tip of his nose was dripping, this appeared to be due solely to the effects of the weather.

"How far is it?" It was midafternoon before William's curiosity overcame his stubbornness. Jamie had long since relinquished the boy's reins to him—there was no danger of the lad's trying to make his way back alone now.

"Two days, perhaps." In such mountainous terrain as lay between the Ridge and Anna Ooka, they would make little better speed on horseback than on foot. Having horses, though, allowed them to bring a few small conveniences, such as a kettle, extra food, and a pair of carved fishing rods. And a number of small gifts for the Indians, including a keg of home-brewed whisky to help cushion the bad news they bore.

There was no reason to hurry, and some to delay—Claire had told him firmly not to bring Willie back for at least six days. By then, John would no longer be infectious. He would be well on the way to recovery—or dead.

Claire had been outwardly confident, assuring Willie that his stepfather would be quite all right, but he'd seen the mist of worry in her eyes. It gave him a feeling of hollowness just below the ribs. It was perhaps as well that he was leaving; he could be of no help, and sickness always left him with a helpless feeling that made him at once afraid and angry.

"These Indians—they *are* friendly?" He could hear the tone of doubt in Willie's voice.

"Yes." He felt Willie waiting for him to add "my lord," and took a small, perverse satisfaction in not doing it. He guided his horse's head to the side and slowed his pace, an invitation for Willie to ride up next to him. He smiled at the boy as he did so.

"We have known them more than a year, and been guests in their long-houses—aye, the people of Anna Ooka are more courteous and hospitable than most folk I've met in England."

"You have lived in England?" The boy shot him a surprised look, and he cursed his carelessness, but luckily the lad was a great deal more interested in Red Indians than in the personal history of James Fraser, and the question passed with no more than a vague reply.

He was glad to see the boy abandon his sullen preoccupation and begin to take some interest in their surroundings. He did his best to encourage it, telling stories of the Indians and pointing out animal sign as they went, and he was glad to see the boy thaw into civility, if nothing more, as they rode.

He welcomed the distraction of conversation himself; his mind was a good deal too busy to make silence comfortable. If the worst should happen—if John should die—what then became of Willie? He would doubtless return to England and his grandmother—and Jamie would hear no more of him.

John was the only other person, besides Claire, who knew the truth of Willie's paternity without doubt. It was possible that Willie's grandmother at least suspected the truth, but she would never, under any circumstances, admit that her grandson might be the bastard of a Jacobite traitor rather than the legitimate issue of the late Earl.

He said a small prayer to Saint Bride for the welfare of John Grey, and tried to dismiss the nagging worry from his mind. In spite of his apprehensions, he was beginning to enjoy the trip. The rain had lessened to no more than a light spattering, and the forest was fragrant with the scents of wet, fresh leaves and fecund dark leaf mold.

"D'ye see those scratches down the trunk of that tree?" He pointed with his chin at a large hickory whose bark hung in shreds, showing a number of long, parallel white slashes, some six feet from the ground.

"Yes." Willie took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh to knock the water off, then leaned forward to look more closely. "An animal did that?"

"A bear," Jamie said. "Fresh, too—see the sap's not dried yet in the cuts."

"Is it nearby?" Willie glanced around, seeming more curious than alarmed.

"Not close," Jamie said, "or the horses would be carryin' on. But near enough, aye. Keep an eye out; we'll likely see its dung or its prints."

No, if John died, his tenuous link with William would be broken. He had long since resigned himself to the situation, and accepted the necessity without complaint—but he would feel bereft indeed if the measles robbed him not only of his closest friend but of all connection with his son.

It had stopped raining. As they rounded the flank of a mountain and came out above a valley, Willie gave a small exclamation of surprised delight, and sat up straight in his saddle. Against a backdrop of rain-dark clouds, a rainbow arced from the slope of a distant mountain, falling in a perfect shimmer of light to the floor of the valley far below.

“Oh, it’s glorious!” Willie said. He turned a wide smile on Jamie, their differences forgotten. “Have you ever seen such a thing before, sir?”

“Never,” said Jamie, smiling back. It occurred to him, with a small shock, that these few days in the wilderness might conceivably be the last he would see or hear of William. He hoped that he wouldn’t have to hit the boy again.

He always slept lightly in the wood, and the sound woke him at once. He lay quite still for a moment, unsure what it was. Then he heard the small, choked noise, and recognized the sound of stifled weeping.

He checked his instant urge to turn and lay a hand on the boy in comfort. The lad was making every effort not to be heard; he deserved to keep his pride. He lay still, looking up into the sweep of the vast night sky above, and listening.

Not fright; William had shown no fear of sleeping in dark woods, and had there been a large animal nearby, the boy would not be keeping quiet about it. Was the lad unwell? The sounds were little more than thickened breathing, caught in the throat—perhaps the boy was in pain and too proud to say. It was that fear that decided him to speak; if the measles had caught them up, there was no time to waste; he must carry the boy back to Claire at once.

“My lord?” he said softly.

The sobbing ceased abruptly. He heard the audible sound of a swallow and the rasp of cloth on skin as the lad wiped a sleeve across his face.

“Yes?” the Earl said, with a creditable attempt at coolness, marred only by the thickness in his voice.

“Are ye unwell, my lord?” He could tell already that it wasn’t that, but it would do for a pretext. “Have ye maybe taken a touch of the cramp? Sometimes dried apples take a man amiss.”

A deep breath came from the far side of the fire, and a snuffle as an attempt was made to clear a running nose unobtrusively. The fire had burned down to nothing more than embers; still, he could see the dark shape that squirmed into a sitting position, crouched on the far side of the fire.

“I—ah—yes, I think perhaps I have got … something of the sort.”

Jamie sat up himself, the plaid falling away from his shoulders.

“It’s no great matter,” he said, soothingly. “I’ve a potion that will cure all manner of ills of the stomach. Do ye rest easy for a moment, my lord; I’ll fetch water.”

He got to his feet and went away, careful not to look at the boy. By the time he came back from the stream with the kettle filled, Willie had got his nose blown and his face wiped, and was sitting with his knees drawn up, his head resting on them.

He couldn’t keep himself from touching the boy’s head as he passed. Familiarity be damned. The dark hair was soft to his touch, warm and slightly damp with sweat.

“A griping in your guts, is it?” he said pleasantly, kneeling and putting the kettle to boil.

“Mm-hm.” Willie’s voice was muffled in the blanket over his knees.

“That passes soon enough,” he said. He reached for his sporran, and sorted through the proliferation of small items in it, coming up eventually with the small cloth bag that held the dried mixture of leaves and flowers Claire had given him. He didn’t know how she’d known it would be needed, but he was long past the point of questioning anything she did in the way of healing—whether of heart or of body.

He felt a moment's passionate gratitude to her. He'd seen her look at the boy, and knew how she must feel. She'd known about the lad, of course, but seeing the flesh-and-blood proof that her husband had shared another woman's bed wasn't something a wife should be asked to put up with. Little wonder if she was inclined to stick pins in John, him pushing the lad under her nose as he had.

"It willna take more than a moment to brew up," he assured the boy, rubbing the fragrant mixture between his hands into a wooden cup, as he'd seen Claire do.

She'd not reproached him. Not with *that* at least, he thought, suddenly remembering how she'd acted when she'd found out about Laoghaire. She'd gone for him like a fiend, then, and yet when later she'd learned about Geneva Dunsany … perhaps it was only that the boy's mother was dead?

The realization went through him like a sword thrust. The boy's mother was dead. Not just his real mother, who'd died the same day he was born—but the woman he'd called mother all his life since. And now his father—or the man he called father, Jamie thought with an unconscious twist of his mouth—was lying sick of an illness that had killed another man before the lad's eyes no more than days before.

No, it wasn't fright that made the lad greet by himself in the dark. It was grief, and Jamie Fraser, who'd lost a mother in childhood himself, ought to have known that from the beginning.

It wasn't stubbornness, nor even loyalty, that had made Willie insist on staying at the Ridge. It was love of John Grey, and fear of his loss. And it was the same love that made the boy weep in the night, desperate with worry for his father.

An unaccustomed weed of jealousy sprang up in Jamie's heart, stinging like nettles. He stamped firmly on it; he was fortunate indeed to know that his son enjoyed a loving relationship with his stepfather. There, that was the weed stamped out. The stamping, though, seemed to have left a small bruised spot on his heart; he could feel it when he breathed.

The water was beginning to rumble in the kettle. He poured it carefully over the herb mixture, and a sweet fragrance rose up in the steam. Valerian, she'd said, and catmint. The root of a passionflower, soaked in honey and finely ground. And the sweet, half-musky smell of lavender, coming as an afterscent.

"Don't drink it yourself," she'd said, casual in giving it to him. "There's lavender in it."

In fact, it didn't trouble him, if he was warned of it. It was only that now and then a whiff of lavender took him unawares, and sent a sudden surge of sickness through his wame. Claire had seen the effects on him once too often to be unwary of it.

"Here." He leaned forward and handed the cup to the boy, wondering whether forever after, the lad too would feel troubled by the scent of lavender, or if he would find in it a memory of comfort. That, he supposed, might well depend on whether John Grey lived or died.

The respite had given Willie back his outward composure, but his face was still marked with grief. Jamie smiled at the boy, hiding his own concern. Knowing both John and Claire as he did, he was less fearful than the boy—but the dread was still there, persistent as a thorn in the sole of his foot.

"That will ease ye," he said, nodding at the cup. "My wife made it; she's a verra fine healer."

"Is she?" The boy took a deep, trembling breath of the steam, and touched a cautious tongue to the hot liquid. "I saw her—do things. With the Indian who died." The accusation there was clear; she'd done things, and the man had died anyway.

Neither Claire nor Ian had spoken much of that, nor had he been able to ask her what had happened—she had given him a lifted brow and a brief gold look, to say that he should not speak of it before Willie, who had come back with her from the corncrib, white-faced and clammy.

"Aye?" he said curiously. "What sort of—things?"

What the hell had she done? he wondered. Nothing to cause the man's death, surely; he would have seen that in her at once. Nor did she feel herself at fault, or helpless—he had held her in his arms more than once, comforting her as she wept for those she could not save. This time she had been quiet, subdued—as had Ian—but not deeply upset. She had seemed vaguely puzzled.

"She had mud on her face. And she sang to him. I think she was singing a Papist song; it was in Latin, and it had something to do with sacraments."

"Indeed?" Jamie suppressed his own astonishment at this description. "Aye, well. Perhaps she meant only to give the man a bit of comfort, if she saw she couldna save him. The Indians are much more sensible of the effects of measles, ye ken; an infection that will kill one of them wouldna cause a white man to blink twice. I've had the measle myself, as a wee lad, and took no harm from it at all." He smiled and stretched, demonstrating his evident health.

The tense lines of the boy's face relaxed a little, and he took a cautious sip of the hot tea.

"That's what Mrs. Fraser said. She said Papa would be all right. She—she gave me her word upon it."

"Then ye may depend upon it that he will," Jamie said firmly. "Mrs. Fraser is an honorable woman." He coughed, and hitched the plaid up around his shoulders; it wasn't a cold night, but there was a breeze coming down the hill. "Is the drink helping a bit?"

Willie looked blank, then looked down at the cup in his hand.

"Oh! Yes. Yes, thank you; it's very good. I feel very much improved. Perhaps it was not the dried apples, after all."

"Perhaps not," Jamie agreed, bending his head to hide a smile. "Still, I think we'll manage better for our supper tomorrow; if luck is with us, we'll have trout."

This attempt at distraction was successful; Willie's head popped up from his cup, an expression of deep interest on his face.

"Trout? We can fish?"

"Have ye done much fishing in England? I canna think that the trout streams would compare with these, but I know there is good fishing to be had in the Lake District—or so your father tells me."

He held his breath. What in God's name had made him ask that? He had himself taken a five-year-old William fishing for char on the lake near Ellesmere, when he had served his indenture there. Did he *want* the boy to remember?

"Oh … yes. It's pleasant on the lakes, surely—but nothing like *this*." Willie waved in the vague direction of the creek. The lines in the boy's face had smoothed themselves, and a small flicker of life had come back into his eyes. "I have never seen such a place. It's not at all like England!"

"That it is not," Jamie agreed, amused. "Will ye not miss England, though?"

Willie thought about it for a moment, as he slurped the rest of his tea.

"I don't think so," he said, with a decided shake of his head. "I miss Grandmamma sometimes, and my horses, but nothing else. It was all tutors and dancing lessons and Latin and Greek—ugh!" He wrinkled his nose, and Jamie laughed.

"Ye dinna care for the dancing, then?"

"No. You have to do it with girls." He shot Jamie a look under his fine, dark brows. "Do you care for music, Mr. Fraser?"

"No," Jamie said, smiling. "I like the girls fine, though." The girls were going to like this wee laddie just fine, too, he thought, covertly noting the youngster's breadth of shoulder and long shanks, and the long, dark lashes that hid his bonny blue eyes.

"Yes. Well, Mrs. Fraser is very pretty," the Earl said politely. His mouth curled suddenly up on one side. "Though she did look funny, with the mud on her face."

"I daresay. Will ye have another cup, my lord?"

Claire had said the mixture was for calming; it seemed to be working. As they talked desultorily of the Indians and their strange beliefs, William's eyelids began to droop, and he yawned more than once. At last, Jamie reached over and took the empty cup from his unresisting hand.

"The night is cold, my lord," he said. "Will ye choose to lie next to me, that we may share our coverings?"

The night was chilly, but a long way from cold. He had guessed right, though; Willie seized the excuse with alacrity. He could not take a lord in his arms to comfort him, nor could a young earl admit to wanting such comfort. Two men could lie close together without shame, though, for the sake of warmth.

Willie fell asleep at once, nestled close against his side. Jamie lay awake for a long time, one arm laid lightly across the sleeping body of his son.

* * *

"Now the wee speckled one. Just on top, and hold it with your finger, aye?" He wrapped the thread tightly around the tiny roll of white wool, just missing Willie's finger but catching the end of the woodpecker's down feather, so the fluffy barbs rose up pertly, quivering in the light air.

"You see? It looks like a wee bug taking flight."

Willie nodded, intent on the fly. Two tiny yellow tail feathers lay smooth under the down feather, simulating the spread wing casings of a beetle.

"I see. Is it the color that matters, or the shape?"

"Both, but more the shape, I think." Jamie smiled at the boy. "What matters most is how hungry the fish are. Choose your time right, and they'll strike anything—even a bare hook. Choose it wrong, and ye might as well be fishing wi' lint from your navel. Dinna tell that to a fly fisherman, though; they'll be taking all the credit, and none left to the fish."

Willie didn't laugh—the boy didn't laugh much—but he smiled and took the willow pole with its newly tied fly.

"Is it the right time, now, do you think, Mr. Fraser?" He shaded his eyes and looked out over the water. They stood in the cool shadow of a grove of black willow, but the sun was still above the horizon, and the water of the stream glittered like metal.

"Aye, trout feed at sunset. D'ye see the prickles on the water? This pool's waking."

The surface of the pool was restless; the water itself lay calm, but dozens of tiny ripples spread and overlapped, rings of light and shadow spreading and breaking in endless profusion.

"The rings? Yes. Is that fish?"

"Not yet. It's the hatching; midges and gnats hatch from their cases and burst through the surface to the air—the trout will see them and come to feed."

Without warning, a silver streak shot into the air and fell back with a splash. Willie gasped.

"That's a fish," Jamie said, unnecessarily. He quickly threaded his line through the carved guides, tied a fly to his line, and stepped forward. "Watch now."

He drew back his arm and rocked his wrist, back and forth, feeding more line with each circle of his forearm, until with a snap of the wrist, he sent the line sailing out in a great lazy loop, the fly floating down like a circling gnat. He felt the boy's eyes on him, and was glad the cast had been good.

He let the fly float for a moment, watching—it was hard to see, in the sparkling brightness—then began slowly to pull the line in. Quick as thought, the fly went under. The ring of its disappearance had not even begun to spread before he had jerked the line hard and felt the answering savage tug in reply.

"You've got one! You've got one!" He could hear Willie, dancing on the bank behind him with excitement, but had no attention to spare for anything save the fish.

He had no reel; only the twig that held his spare line. He pulled the tip of the rod far back, let it fall forward and gathered in the loose line with a snatch of the hand. Once more, line in, and then a desperate rush that took out all the line gained, and more.

He could see nothing amid the flashing sparks of light, but the tug and pull through his arms was as good as sight; a quiver as live as the trout itself, as though he held the thing in his hands, squirming and wriggling, fighting …

Free. The line went limp, and he stood for a moment, the vibrations of struggle dying away along the muscles of his arms, breathing in the air he had forgotten to take in the heat of battle.

"He got away! Oh, bad luck, sir!" Willie scampered down the bank, pole in hand, face open in sympathy.

"Good luck for the fish." Still exhilarated from the fight, Jamie grinned and wiped a wet hand over his face. "Will ye try, lad?" Too late, he remembered that he must call the boy “lord,” but Willie was too eager to have noticed the omission.

Face fixed in a scowl of determination, Willie drew back his arm, squinted at the water, and snapped his wrist with a mighty jerk. The rod sailed from his fingers and flew gracefully into the pond.

The boy gaped after it, then turned an expression of utter dismay on Jamie, who made no effort at all to keep back his laughter. The young lord looked thoroughly taken aback, and not very pleased, but after a moment, one corner of his wide mouth curved up in wry acknowledgment. He gestured at the rod, floating some ten feet from the bank.

“Will it not frighten all the fish, if I go in after it?”

“It will. Take mine; I’ll fetch that one back later.”

Willie licked his lips and set his jaw in concentration, taking a firm grip on the new rod, testing it with little whips and jerks. Turning to the pool, he rocked his arm back and forth, then snapped his wrist hard. He froze, the tip of the rod extended in a perfect line with his arm. The loose line wrapped itself around the rod and draped over Willie’s head.

“A verra pretty cast, my lord,” Jamie said, rubbing a knuckle hard over his mouth. “But I think we must put on a new fly first, aye?”

“Oh.” Slowly, Willie relaxed his rigid posture, and looked sheepishly at Jamie. “I didn’t think of that.”

Slightly chastened by these misadventures, the Earl allowed Jamie to fasten a fresh fly in place, and then to take him by the wrist to demonstrate the proper way of casting.

Standing behind the boy, he took Willie’s right wrist in his own, marveling both at the slenderness of the arm and at the knobby wristbones that gave promise of both size and strength to come. The boy’s skin was cool with perspiration, and the feel of his arm much like the tingle of the trout on the line, live and muscular, vivid to his touch. Then Willie twisted free, and he felt a moment’s confusion, and a peculiar sense of loss at the breaking of their brief contact.

“That’s not right,” Willie was saying, turning to look up at him. “You cast with the left hand. I saw you.”

“Aye, but I’m cack-handed, my lord. Most men would cast with the right.”

“Cack-handed?” Willie’s mouth curved up again.

“I find my left hand more convenient to most purposes than is the right, my lord.”

“That’s what I thought it meant. I’m the same.” Willie looked at once rather pleased and mildly shamefaced at this statement. “My—my mother said it wasn’t proper, and that I must learn to use the other, as a gentleman ought. But Papa said no, and made them let me write with my left hand. He said it didn’t matter so much if I should look awkward with a quill; when it came to fighting with a sword, I should be at an advantage.”

“Your father is a wise man.” His heart twisted, with something between jealousy and gratitude—but gratitude was far the uppermost.

“Papa was a soldier.” Willie drew himself up a little, straightening his shoulders with unconscious pride. “He fought in Scotland, in the Ris—oh.” He coughed, and his face went a dull red as he caught sight of Jamie’s kilt and realized that he was quite possibly talking to a defeated warrior of that particular fight. He fiddled with the rod, not knowing where to look.

“Aye, I know. That’s where I met him, first.” Jamie was careful to keep any hint of amusement from his voice. He was tempted to tell the boy the circumstances of that first meeting, but that would be poor repayment to John for his priceless gift, these precious few days with his son.

“He was a verra gallant soldier, indeed,” Jamie agreed, straight-faced. “And right about the hands, as well. Have ye begun your schooling with the sword, then?”

“Just a little.” Willie was forgetting his embarrassment in enthusiasm for the new topic. “I’ve had a little whinger since I was eight, and learnt feint and parry. Papa says I shall have a proper sword when we reach Virginia, now I am tall enough for the reach of tierce and longé.”

“Ah. Well, then, if ye’ve been handling a sword in your left hand, I think ye’ll have nay great trouble in mastering a rod that way.

Here, let us try again, or we'll have no supper."

On the third try, the fly settled sweetly, to float for no more than a second before a small but hungry trout roared to the surface and engulfed it. Willie let out a shriek of excitement, and yanked the rod so hard that the astounded trout flew through the air and past his head, to land with a splat on the bank beyond.

"I did it! I did it! I caught a fish!" Willie waved his rod and ran around in little circles whooping, forgetting the dignity of both age and title.

"Indeed ye did." Jamie picked up the trout, which measured perhaps six inches from nose to tail, and clapped the capering Earl on the back in congratulations. "Well done, lad! It looks as though they're biting well the e'en; let's have another cast or two, aye?"

The trout were indeed biting well. By the time the sun had sunk below the rim of the distant black mountains, and the silver water faded to dull pewter, they had each a respectable string of fish. They were also both wet to the eyebrows, exhausted, half blind from the glare, and thoroughly happy.

"I have never tasted anything half so delicious," Willie said dreamily. "Never." He was naked, wrapped in a blanket, his shirt, breeches and stockings draped on a tree limb to dry. He lay back with a contented sigh, and belched slightly.

Jamie rearranged his damp plaid on a bush and laid another chunk of wood on the fire. The weather was fine, God be thanked, but it was chilly with the sun down, the night wind rising, and a wet sark on his back. He stood close to the edge of the fire and let the heated air rise up under his shirt. The warmth of it ran up his thighs and touched his chest and belly, comforting as Claire's hands on the chilly flesh between his legs.

He stood quietly for a time, watching the boy without seeming to look at him. Putting vanity aside and judging fairly, he thought William a handsome child. Thinner than he should be; every rib showed—but with a wiry muscularity of limb and well formed in all his parts.

The boy had turned his head, gazing into the fire, and he could look more openly. Sap in the pinewood cracked and popped, flooding Willie's face for a moment with golden light.

Jamie stood quite still, feeling his heart beat, watching. It was one of those strange moments that came to him rarely, but never left. A moment that stamped itself on heart and brain, instantly recallable in every detail, for all of his life.

There was no telling what made these moments different from any other, though he knew them when they came. He had seen sights more gruesome and more beautiful by far, and been left with no more than a fleeting muddle of their memory. But these—the still moments, as he called them to himself—they came with no warning, to print a random image of the most common things inside his brain, indelible. They were like the photographs that Claire had brought him, save that the moments carried with them more than vision.

He had one of his father, smeared and muddy, sitting on the wall of a cow byre, a cold Scottish wind lifting his dark hair. He could call that one up and smell the dry hay and the scent of manure, feel his own fingers chilled by the wind, and his heart warmed by the light in his father's eyes.

He had such glimpses of Claire, of his sister, of Ian … small moments clipped out of time and perfectly preserved by some odd alchemy of memory, fixed in his mind like an insect in amber. And now he had another.

For so long as he lived, he could recall this moment. He could feel the cold wind on his face, and the crackling feel of the hair on his thighs, half singed by the fire. He could smell the rich odor of trout fried in cornmeal, and feel the tiny prick of a swallowed bone, hair-thin in his throat.

He could hear the dark quiet of the forest behind, and the soft rush of the stream nearby. And forever now he would remember the firelight golden on the sweet bold face of his son.

"Deo gratias," he murmured, and realized that he had spoken aloud only when the boy turned toward him, startled.

"What?"

"Nothing." To cover the moment, he turned away and took down his half-dry plaid from the bush. Even soaking wet, Highland wool would keep in a man's heat, and shelter him from cold.

"Ye should sleep, my lord," he said, sitting down and arranging the damp folds of plaid around himself. "It will be a long day tomorrow."

"I'm not sleepy." As though to prove it, Willie sat up and scrubbed his hands vigorously through his hair, making the thick russet mass stand out like a mane round his head.

Jamie felt a stab of alarm; he recognized the gesture only too well as one of his. In fact, he had been just about to do precisely the same thing, and it was with an effort that he kept his hands still.

He swallowed the heart that had risen into his throat, and reached for his sporran. No. Surely the lad would never think—a boy of that age paid little heed to anything his elders said or did, let alone thought to look at them closely. Still, it had been the hell of a risk for all of them to take; the look on Claire's face had been enough to tell him just how striking the resemblance was.

He took a deep breath, and began to take out the small cloth bundles that contained his fly-tying materials. They had used all his made flies, and if he meant to fish for their breakfast, a few more should be got ready.

"Can I help?" Willie didn't wait for permission, but scooted around the fire, to sit beside him. Without comment, he pushed the small wooden box of birds' feathers toward the boy, and picked a fishhook from the piece of cork that held them.

They worked in silence for a time, stopping only to admire a completed Silver Doctor or Broom-eye, or for Jamie to lend a word of advice or help in tying. Willie soon tired of the exacting work, though, and laid down his half-done Green Whisker, asking numerous questions about fishing, hunting, the forest, the Red Indians they were going to see.

"No," Jamie said in answer to one such. "I've never seen a scalp in the village. They're verra kindly folk, for the most part. Do one some injury, mind, and they'll not be slow to take revenge for it." He smiled wryly. "They do remind me a bit of Highlanders in that regard."

“Grandmamma says the Scots breed I—” The casually begun statement choked off abruptly. Jamie looked up to see Willie concentrating fiercely on the half-made fly between his fingers, his face redder than the firelight accounted for.

“Like rabbits?” Jamie let both irony and smile show in his voice. Willie flicked a cautious sideways glance in his direction.

“Scottish families are sometimes large, aye.” Jamie plucked a wren’s down feather from the small box and laid it delicately against the shank of his hook. “We think children a blessing.”

The bright color was fading from Willie’s cheeks. He sat up a little straighter.

“I see. Have you got a lot of children yourself, Mr. Fraser?”

Jamie dropped the down feather.

“No, not a great many,” he said, eyes fixed on the mottled leaves.

“I’m sorry—I didn’t think—that is …” Jamie glanced up to see Willie gone red again, one hand crushing the half-tied fly.

“Think what?” he said, puzzled.

Willie took a deep breath.

“Well—the … the … sickness; the measles. I didn’t see any children, but I didn’t think when I said that … I mean … that maybe you had some, but they …”

“Och, no.” Jamie smiled at him reassuringly. “My daughter’s grown; she’ll be living far away in Boston this long while.”

“Oh.” Willie let out his breath, tremendously relieved. “That’s all?”

The fallen down-feather moved in a breath of wind, betraying its presence in the shadows. Jamie pinched it between thumb and forefinger and lifted it gently from the ground.

“No, I’ve a son, too,” he said, eyes on the hook that had somehow embedded its barb in his thumb. A tiny drop of blood welled up around the shining metal. “A bonny lad, and I love him weel, though he’s away from home just now.”

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HEATED CONVERSATION

By evening, Ian was glassy-eyed and hot to the touch. He sat up on his pallet to greet me, but swayed alarmingly, his eyes unfocused. I didn't have the slightest doubt, but looked in his mouth for confirmation; sure enough, the small diagnostic Koplik's spots showed white against the dark pink mucous membrane. Though the skin of his neck was still fair and childlike under his hair, it showed a harmless-looking stipple of small pink spots.

"Right," I said, resigned. "You've got it. You'd best come up to the house so I can take care of you more easily."

"I've got the measle? Am I going to die, then?" he asked. He seemed only mildly interested, his attention concentrated on some interior vision.

"No," I said matter-of-factly, trusting that I was right. "Feeling pretty bad, though, are you?"

"My head hurts a bit," he said. I could see that it did; his brows were drawn together, and he squinted at even so dim a light as that provided by my candle.

Still, he could walk, and a good thing, too, I thought as I watched him make his unsteady way down the ladder from the loft. Scrawny and storklike as he looked, he was a good eight inches taller than I, and outweighed me by at least thirty pounds.

It was no more than twenty yards to the cabin, but Ian was trembling from exertion by the time I got him inside. Lord John sat up as we came in, and made to get out of bed, but I waved him back.

“Stay there,” I said, depositing Ian heavily on a stool. “I can manage.”

I had been sleeping on the trundle bed; it was already made up with sheets, quilt, and pillow. I peeled Ian out of his breeks and stockings, and tucked him up at once. He was flushed and clammy-cheeked, and looked much sicker than he had done in the dimness of his loft.

The willow-bark brew I had left steeping was dark and aromatic; ready to drink. I poured it off carefully into a cup, glancing as I did so at Lord John.

“I’d meant this for you,” I said. “But if you could stand to wait …”

“By all means give it to the lad,” he said, with a dismissive wave. “I can wait easily. Can I not assist you, though?”

I thought of suggesting that if he really wanted to be helpful, he could walk to the privy rather than use the chamber pot—which I would have to empty—but I could see that he wasn’t yet in any condition to be wandering round outside at night by himself. I didn’t want to be explaining to young William that I had allowed his remaining parent—or what he thought was his remaining parent—to be eaten by bears, let alone take pneumonia.

So I merely shook my head politely, and knelt by the trundle to administer the brew to Ian. He felt well enough to make faces and complain about the taste, which I found reassuring. Still, the headache was obviously very bad; the line between his brows was fixed and sharp as though it had been carved there with a knife.

I sat on the trundle and took his head onto my lap, gently rubbing his temples. Then I put my thumbs just into the sockets of his eyes, pressing firmly upward on the ridge of his brows. He made a low sound of discomfort, but then relaxed, his head heavy on my thigh.

“Just breathe,” I said. “Don’t worry if it’s a bit tender at first, it means I’ve got the right spot.”

“ ’S all right,” he murmured, his words a little slurred. His hand drifted up and closed on my wrist, big and very warm. “That’s the Chinaman’s way, no?”

“That’s right. He means Yi Tien Cho—Mr. Willoughby,” I explained to Lord John, who was watching the proceedings with a puzzled frown. “It’s a way of relieving pain by putting pressure on some points of the body. This one is good for headache. The Chinaman taught me to do it.”

I felt some reluctance to mention the little Chinese to Lord John, seeing that the last time we had met, on Jamaica, Lord John had had some four hundred soldiers and sailors combing the island in pursuit of Mr. Willoughby, then suspected of a particularly atrocious murder.

“He didn’t do it, you know,” I felt compelled to add. Lord John raised one eyebrow at me.

“That’s as well,” he said dryly, “since we never caught him.”

“Oh, I’m glad.” I looked down at Ian, and moved my thumbs a quarter of an inch outward, pressing again. His face was still tight with pain, but I thought the whiteness at the corners of his mouth was lessening a bit.

“I … ah … don’t suppose you know who *did* kill Mrs. Alcott?” Lord John’s voice was casual. I glanced up at him, but his face betrayed nothing beyond simple curiosity and a large number of spots.

“I do, yes,” I said hesitantly, “but—”

“You do? A murder? Who was it? What happened, Auntie? Ooch!” Ian’s eyelids popped open under my fingers, wide with interest, then snapped shut in a grimace of pain as the firelight struck them.

“You be still,” I said, and dug my thumbs into the muscles in front of his ears. “You’re ill.”

“Argk!” he said, but subsided obediently into limpness, the corn-shuck mattress rustling loudly under his thin body. “All right, Auntie, but who? Ye canna be telling wee bits o’ things like that, and expect me to sleep without knowing the rest of it. Can she, then?” He opened one eye in a slitted appeal toward Lord John, who smiled in reply.

“I bear no further responsibility in the matter,” Lord John assured me. “However”—he spoke more firmly to Ian—“you might stop to think that perhaps the story incriminates someone your aunt prefers to shield. It would be discourteous to insist upon details, in that case.”

"Och, no, it's never that," Ian assured him, eyes tight closed. "Uncle Jamie wouldna murder anybody, save he had good reason."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Lord John jerk, slightly startled. Plainly, it had never occurred to him that it *could* have been Jamie.

"No," I assured him, seeing the fair brows draw together. "It wasn't."

"Well, and it wasna me, either," Ian said smugly. "And who else would Auntie be protecting?"

"You flatter yourself, Ian," I said dryly. "But since you insist …"

My hesitancy had in fact been in the interests of protecting Young Ian. No one else could be harmed by the story—the murderer was dead and, for all I knew, Mr. Willoughby, too, perished in the hidden jungles of the Jamaican hills, though I sincerely hoped not.

But the story involved someone else, as well; the woman I had first known as Geillis Duncan and known later as Geillis Abernathy, at whose behest Ian had been kidnapped from Scotland, imprisoned on Jamaica, and had suffered things that he had only lately begun to tell us.

Still, there seemed no way out of it now—Ian was fractious as a child insisting on a bedtime story, and Lord John was sitting up in bed like a chipmunk waiting for nuts, eyes bright with interest.

And so, with the macabre urge to begin with "Once upon a time …" I leaned back against the wall, and with Ian's head still in my lap, began the story of Rose Hall and its mistress, the witch Geillis Duncan; of the Reverend Archibald Campbell and his strange sister, Margaret, of the Edinburgh Fiend and the Fraser prophecy; and of a night of fire and crocodile's blood, when the slaves of six plantations along the Yallahs River had risen and slain their masters, roused by the *houngan* Ishmael.

Of later events in the cave of Abandawe on Haiti, I said nothing. Ian, after all, had been there. And those happenings had nothing to do with the murder of Mina Alcott.

"A crocodile," Ian murmured. His eyes were closed, and his face had grown more relaxed under my fingers, despite the gruesome nature of my story. "Ye really saw it, Auntie?"

“I not only saw it, I stepped on it,” I assured him. “Or rather, I stepped on it, and *then* I saw it. If I’d seen it first, I’d have bloody run the other way.”

There was a low laugh from the bed. Lord John scratched at his arm, smiling.

“You must find life here rather dull, Mrs. Fraser, after your adventures in the Indies.”

“I could do with a spot of dullness now and then,” I said, rather wistfully.

Involuntarily, I glanced at the bolted door, where I had propped Ian’s musket, brought back from the storehouse when I had fetched him. Jamie had taken his own gun, but his pistols lay on the sideboard, loaded and primed as he had left them for me, bullet case and powder horn neatly arranged beside them.

It was cozy in the cabin, with the fire flickering gold and red on the rough-barked walls, and the air filled with the warm, lingering scents of squirrel stew and pumpkin bread, spiced with the bitter tang of willow tea. I brushed my fingers over Ian’s jaw. No rash yet, but the skin was tight and hot—very hot still, in spite of the willow bark.

Talking about Jamaica had at least distracted me a bit from my worry over Ian. Headache was not an unusual symptom for someone with measles; severe and prolonged headache was. Meningitis and encephalitis were dangerous—and all too possible—complications of the disease.

“How’s the head?” I asked.

“A bit better,” he said. He coughed, eyes squinching shut as the spasms jarred his head. He stopped and opened them slightly, dark slits that glowed with fever. “I’m awfully hot, Auntie.”

I slid off the trundle and went to wring out a cloth in cool water. Ian stirred slightly as I wiped his face, his eyes closed once more.

“Mrs. Abernathy gave me amethysts to drink for the headache,” he murmured drowsily.

“Amethysts?” I was startled, but kept my voice low and soothing. “You drank amethysts?”

“Ground up in vinegar,” he said. “And pearls in sweet wine, but that was for the bedding, she said.” His face looked red and swollen, and he turned his cheek against the cool pillow, seeking relief. “She was a great one for the stones, yon woman. She burned powdered emeralds in the flame of a black candle, and she rubbed my cock wi’ a diamond—to keep it hard, she said.”

There was a faint sound from the bed, and I looked up to see Lord John, raised up on one elbow, eyes wide.

“And did the amethysts work?” I wiped Ian’s face gently with the cloth.

“The diamond did.” He made a feeble attempt at an adolescent’s bawdy laugh, but it faded into a harsh, rasping cough.

“No amethysts here, I’m afraid,” I said. “But there’s wine, if you want it.” He did, and I helped him to drink it—well diluted with water—then eased him back on the pillow, flushed and heavy-eyed.

Lord John had lain down, too, and lay watching, his thick blond hair unbound, spread out on the pillow behind him.

“That’s what she wanted wi’ the lads, ye ken,” Ian said. His eyes were shut tight against the light, but he could clearly see *something,* if only in the mists of memory. He licked his lips; they were beginning to dry and crack, and his nose was beginning to run.

“She said the stone grew in a lad’s innards—the one she wanted. She said it must be a laddie who’d never gone wi’ a lass, though, that was important. If he had, the stone wouldna be right, somehow. If he h-huh-had one.” He paused to cough, and ended breathless, nose dripping. I held a handkerchief for him to blow.

“What did she want the stone for?” Lord John’s face bore a look of sympathy—he knew only too well what Ian felt like at the moment—but curiosity compelled the question. I didn’t object; I wanted to know too.

Ian started to shake his head, then stopped with a groan.

“Ah! Oh, God, my head will split surely! I dinna ken, man. She didna say. Only that it was needful; she must have it to be s-sure.” He barely got out the last word before dissolving into a coughing attack that was the worst yet; he sounded like a barking dog.

"You'd better stop talk—" I began, but was interrupted by a soft thump at the door.

Instantly I froze, wet cloth still in my hand. Lord John leaned swiftly from the bed and took a pistol from inside one of his high cavalry boots on the floor. A finger to his lips to enjoin silence, he nodded toward Jamie's pistols. I moved silently to the sideboard and grasped one, reassured by the smooth, solid heft of it in my hand.

"Who is there?" Lord John called, in a surprisingly strong voice.

There was no answer save a sort of scratching, and a faint whine. I sighed and laid the pistol down, torn between irritation, relief and amusement.

"It's your blasted dog, Ian."

"Are you sure?" Lord John spoke in a low voice, pistol still aimed unwaveringly at the door. "It might be an Indian trick."

Ian rolled over with an effort, facing the door.

"Rollo!" he shouted, his voice hoarse and cracking.

Hoarse or not, Rollo knew his master's voice; there was a deep, joyful "WARF!" from outside, succeeding by frantic scratching, at a height some four feet from the ground.

"Beastly dog," I said, hurrying to open the door. "Stop that, or I'll make you into a rug, or a coat, or something!"

Giving this threat the attention it deserved, Rollo bounded past me into the room. Exuberant with joy, he launched his hundred and fifty pounds from the middle of the floor and landed directly on the trundle bed, making it sway dangerously, joints screeching in protest. Ignoring a strangled cry from the bed's occupant, he proceeded to lick Ian madly about the face and forearms—the latter being flung up as a wholly inadequate defense to the slobbering onslaught.

"Bad dog," Ian said, making ineffectual efforts to push Rollo off his chest, giggling helplessly in spite of his discomfort. "Bad dog, I say—down, sir!"

"Down, sir!" Lord John echoed sternly. Rollo, interrupted in his demonstrations of affection, rounded on Lord John, his ears laid back. He curled his lip, and gave his lordship a good look at the condition of his back teeth. Lord John started, and raised his pistol convulsively.

“Down, *a dhiobhuil*!” Ian said, prodding Rollo in the hindquarters. “Take your hairy arse out o’ my face, ye wicked beast!”

Rollo instantly dismissed Lord John from consideration, and padded around on top of the trundle, turning three times and kneading the bedding with his paws before collapsing next to his master’s body. He licked Ian’s ear, and with a deep sigh, laid his nose between his large muddy paws on the pillow.

“Would you like me to get him off, Ian?” I offered, eyeing the paws. I wasn’t quite sure how I might move a dog of Rollo’s size and temperament, bar shooting him with Jamie’s pistol and dragging his carcass off the bed, so was rather relieved when Ian shook his head.

“No, let him stay, Auntie,” he said, croaking slightly. “He’s a good fellow. Are ye no, *a charaid*?” He laid a hand on the dog’s neck, and turned his head so his cheek lay pillowed against Rollo’s thick ruff.

“All right, then.” Moving slowly, with a wary glance at the unblinking yellow eyes, I approached the bed and smoothed Ian’s hair. His forehead was still hot, but I thought the fever was a bit lower. If it broke in the night, as it well might, it was likely to be succeeded by a fit of violent shivering—when Ian might well find Rollo’s warm hairy bulk a comfort.

“Sleep well.”

“Oidhche mhath.” He was half asleep already, drifting into the vivid dreams of fever, and his “good-night” was barely more than a murmur.

I moved quietly about the room, tidying away the results of the day’s labors; a basket of fresh-gathered peanuts to be washed, dried and stored; a pan of dried reeds laid flat and covered with a layer of bacon grease to make rushlights. A trip to the pantry, where I stirred the beer mash fermenting in its tub, squeezed out the curds of the soft cheese a-making, and punched down the slow-rising salt bread, ready to be made into loaves and baked in the morning, when the small Dutch oven built into the side of the hearth would be heated through by the night’s low fire.

Ian was sound asleep when I came back into the main room; Rollo's eyes were closed as well, though one yellow slit cracked open at my entrance. I glanced at Lord John; he was awake, but did not look round.

I sat down on the settle by the fire, and brought out the big wool basket with its green and black Indian pattern—Sun-eater, Gabrielle had called the design.

Two days since Jamie and Willie had left. Two days to the Tuscarora village. Two days back. If nothing happened to stop them.

"Nonsense," I muttered, under my breath. Nothing would stop them. They would be home soon.

The basket was full of dyed skeins of wool and linen thread. Some I had been given by Jocasta, some I had spun myself. The difference was obvious, but even the lumpy, awkward-looking strands I produced could be used for something. Not stockings or jerseys; perhaps I could knit a tea cozy—that seemed sufficiently shapeless to disguise all my deficiencies.

Jamie had been simultaneously shocked and amused to find that I didn't know how to knit. The question had never arisen at Lallybroch, where Jenny and the female servants kept everyone in knitted goods. I had taken on the chores of stillroom and garden, and never dealt with needlework beyond the simplest mending.

"Ye canna clickit at all?" he said incredulously. "And what did ye do for your winter stockings in Boston, then?"

"Bought them," I said.

He had looked elaborately around the clearing where we had been sitting, admiring the half-finished cabin.

"Since I dinna see any shops about, I suppose ye'd best learn, aye?"

"I suppose so." I dubiously eyed the knitting basket Jocasta had given me. It was well equipped, with three long circular wire needles in different sizes, and a sinister-looking set of four double-ended ivory ones, slender as stilettos, which I knew were used in some mysterious fashion to turn the heels of stockings.

"I'll ask Jocasta to show me, next time we go down to River Run. Next year perhaps."

Jamie snorted briefly and picked up a needle and a ball of yarn.

"It's no verra difficult, Sassenach. Look—this is how ye cast up your row." Drawing the thread out through his closed fist, he made a loop round his thumb, slipped it onto the needle, and with a quick economy of motion, cast on a long row of stitches in a matter of seconds. Then he handed me the other needle and another ball of yarn. "There—you try."

I looked at him in complete amazement.

"*You* can knit?"

"Well, of course I can," he said, staring at me in puzzlement. "I've known how to clickit wi' needles since I was seven years old. Do they not teach bairns *anything* in your time?"

"Well," I said, feeling mildly foolish, "they sometimes teach little girls to do needlework, but not boys."

"They didna teach you, did they? Besides, it's no fine needlework, Sassenach, it's only plain knitting. Here, take your thumb and dip it, so …"

And so he and Ian—who, it turned out, could also knit and was prostrated by mirth at my lack of knowledge—had taught me the simple basics of knit and purl, explaining, between snorts of derision over my efforts, that in the Highlands all boys were routinely taught to knit, that being a useful occupation well suited to the long idle hours of herding sheep or cattle on the shielings.

"Once a man's grown and has a wife to do for him, and a lad of his own to mind the sheep, he maybe doesna make his own stockings anymore," Ian had said, deftly executing the turn of a heel before handing me back the stocking, "but even wee laddies ken how, Auntie."

I cast an eye at my current project, some ten inches of a wooly shawl, which lay in a small crumpled heap at the bottom of the basket. I had learned the basics, but knitting for me was still a pitched battle with knotted thread and slippery needles, not the soothing, dreamy exercise that Jamie and Ian made of it, needles clicketing away in their big hands by the fire, comforting as the sound of crickets on the hearth.

Not tonight, I thought. I wasn't up to it. Something mindless, like winding up the balls of yarn. That I could do. I laid aside a half-finished pair of stockings Jamie was making for himself—striped, the show-off—and pulled out a heavy skein of fresh-dyed blue wool, still redolent with the heavy scents of its dyeing.

Normally I liked the smell of fresh yarn, with its faint oily whiff of sheep, the earthy smell of indigo, and the sharp tang of the vinegar used to set the dye. Tonight it seemed smothering, added as it was to woodsmoke and candle wax, to the close, acrid smells of male bodies and the reek of illness—a mingled scent of sweaty sheets and used chamber pots—all trapped together in the room's stale air.

I let the skein lie on my lap, and closed my eyes for a moment. I wanted nothing so much as to undress and sponge myself with cool water, then slip naked between the clean linen sheets of my bed and lie still, letting the fresh cool air blow through the open window across my face while I floated into oblivion.

But there was a sweating Englishman in one of my beds, and a filthy dog in the other, to say nothing of a teenage boy who was obviously in for a hard night. The sheets had not been washed in days, and when they were, it would be a backbreaking business of boiling, lifting and wringing. My bed for the night—assuming that I got to sleep in it—would be a pallet made of a folded quilt, with my pillow a sack of carded wool. I would breathe sheep all night.

Nursing is hard work, and all of a sudden I was bloody tired of it. For a moment of intense longing, I wanted them all just to go away. I opened my eyes, looking at Lord John with resentment. My little burst of self-pity faded, though, as I looked at him. He lay on his back, one arm behind his head, gazing somberly up at the ceiling. It might have been only a trick of the fire, but his face seemed marked by anxiety and grief, eyes shadowed with dark loss.

At once I felt ashamed of my ill temper. Granted, I hadn't wanted him here. I was annoyed at his intrusion into my life and the burden of obligation his illness had placed upon me. His very presence made me uneasy—to say nothing of William's. But they would go, soon. Jamie would be home, Ian would recover, and I would have back my peace, my happiness, and my clean sheets. What had happened to him was permanent.

John Grey had lost a wife—however he might have regarded her. It had taken courage of more than one kind to bring William here, and to send him off with Jamie. And I didn't suppose the bloody man could help having caught the measles.

I laid the wool aside for the moment and got up to put the kettle on. A nice cup of tea all round seemed called for. As I straightened up from the hearth, I saw Lord John turn his head, my movement drawing his attention from his inward thoughts.

"Tea," I said, embarrassed to meet his eyes after my uncharitable thoughts. I made a small, awkward gesture of interrogation toward the kettle.

He smiled faintly and nodded.

"I thank you, Mrs. Fraser."

I took down the tea box from the cupboard, and laid out two cups and spoons, adding the sugar bowl as an afterthought; no molasses tonight.

When I had got the tea made, I sat down near the bed to drink it. We sipped in silence for a few moments, an odd air of shyness hovering between us.

At last, I set down my cup and cleared my throat.

"I'm sorry; I had meant to offer you my condolences on the loss of your wife," I said, rather formally.

He looked surprised for a moment, then bowed his head in acknowledgment, matching my formality.

"It is a coincidence that you should say so at the moment," he said. "I had just been thinking of her."

Used as I was to having other people take one look at my face and discern instantly what I was thinking, it was oddly gratifying to be able to do it to someone else.

"Do you miss her greatly—your wife?" I felt a bit hesitant about asking, but he didn't seem to find the question intrusive. I might almost have thought that he had been asking it himself, for he answered readily, if thoughtfully.

"I don't really know," he said. He glanced at me, one eyebrow raised. "Does that sound unfeeling?"

"I couldn't say," I said, a little tartly. "Surely you'd know better than I whether you had feelings for her or not."

"I did, yes." He let his head fall back on the pillow, his thick fair hair loose about his shoulders. "Or I do, perhaps. That's why I came, do you see?"

"No, I can't say that I do."

I heard Ian cough, and rose to look, but he had only turned over in his sleep; he lay on his stomach, one long arm drooping from the trundle bed. I picked up his hand—it was still hot, but not dangerously so—and put it on the pillow near his face. His hair had fallen in his eyes; I brushed it gently back.

"You are very good with him; have you children of your own?"

Startled, I looked up to see Lord John watching me, chin propped on his fist.

"I—we—have a daughter," I said.

His eyes widened.

"We?" he said sharply. "The girl is Jamie's?"

"Don't call her 'the girl,' " I said, unreasonably irritated. "Her name is Brianna, and yes, she's Jamie's."

"My apologies," he said, rather stiffly.

"I meant no offense," he added a moment later, in a softer tone. "I was surprised."

I looked at him directly. I was too tired to be tactful.

"And a bit jealous, perhaps?"

He had a diplomat's face; almost anything could have been going on behind that facade of handsome amiability. I went on staring at him, though, and he let the mask drop—a flash of knowledge lit the light blue eyes, tinged with grudging humor.

"So. One more thing that we have in common." I was startled by his acuity, though I shouldn't have been. It's always discomfiting to find that feelings you thought safely hidden are in fact sitting out in the open for anyone to look at.

"Don't tell me you didn't think of that when you decided to come here." The tea was finished; I set the cup aside and took up my skein of wool again.

He studied me for a moment, eyes narrowed.

"I thought of it, yes," he said finally. He let his head fall back on the pillow, eyes fixed on the low beamed ceiling. "Still, if I was human enough—or petty enough—to consider that I might offend you by bringing William here, I would ask you to believe that such offense was not my motive in coming."

I laid the finished ball of yarn in the basket and took up another skein, stretching it across the back of a split-willow chair.

"I believe you," I said, my eyes fixed on the skein. "If only because it seems rather a lot of trouble to go to. What *was* your motive, though?"

I sensed the movement as he shrugged, rustling the sheets.

"The obvious—to allow Jamie to see the boy."

"And the other obvious—to allow you to see Jamie."

There was a marked silence from the bed. I kept my eyes on the yarn, turning the ball as I wrapped the strand, over and under, back and forth, an intricate crisscross that would in the end yield a perfect sphere.

"You are a rather remarkable woman," he said at last, in a level tone.

"Indeed," I said, not looking up. "In what way?"

He leaned back; I heard the rustle of his bedding.

"You are neither circumspect nor circuitous. In fact, I don't believe I have ever met anyone more devastatingly straightforward—male *or* female."

"Well, it's not by choice," I said. I came to the end of the thread and tucked it neatly into the ball. "I was born that way."

"So was I," he said, very softly.

I didn't answer; I didn't think he had spoken to be heard.

I rose and went to the cupboard. I took down three jars: catmint, valerian, and wild ginger. I took down the marble mortar and tipped the dried leaves and root chunks into it. A drop of water fell from the kettle, hissing into steam.

"What are you doing?" Lord John asked.

“Making an infusion for Ian,” I said, with a nod toward the trundle. “The same I gave you four days ago.”

“Ah. We heard of you as we traveled from Wilmington,” Grey said. His voice was casual now, making conversation. “You are well known in the countryside for your skills, it would appear.”

“Mm.” I pounded and ground, and the deep, musky smell of wild ginger filled the room.

“They say you are a conjure-woman. What is that, do you know?”

“Anything from a midwife to a physician to a caster of spells or a fortune-teller,” I said. “Depending on who’s talking.”

He made a sound that might have been a laugh, and then was silent for a bit.

“You think they will be safe.” It was a statement, but he was asking.

“Yes. Jamie wouldn’t have taken the boy if he thought there’d be any danger. Surely you know that, if you know him at all?” I added, glancing at him.

“I know him,” he said.

“Do you indeed,” I said.

He was quiet for a moment, bar the sound of scratching.

“I know him well enough—or think I do—to risk sending William away with him, alone. And to be sure he will not tell William the truth.”

I poured the green and yellow powder into a small square of cotton gauze and tied it neatly into a tiny bag.

“No, he won’t, you’re right about that.”

“Will you?”

I looked up, startled.

“You really think I would?” He studied my face carefully for a moment, then smiled.

“No,” he said quietly. “Thank you.”

I snorted briefly and dropped the medicine bag into the teapot. I put back the jars of herbs, and sat down with my blasted wool again.

“It was generous of you—to let Willie go with Jamie. Rather brave,” I added, somewhat grudgingly. I looked up; he was staring at the dark oblong of the hide-covered window, as though he could look beyond it to see the two figures, side by side in the forest.

"Jamie has held my life in his hands for a good many years now," he answered softly. "I will trust him with William's."

"And what if Willie remembers a groom named MacKenzie better than you think? Or happens to take a good look at his own face and Jamie's?"

"Twelve-year-old boys are not remarkable for their acute perception," Grey said dryly. "And I think that if a boy has lived all his life in the secure belief that he is the ninth Earl of Ellesmere, the notion that he might actually be the illegitimate offspring of a Scottish groom is not one that would enter his head—or be long entertained there, if it did."

I wound wool in silence, listening to the crackle of the fire. Ian was coughing again, but didn't wake. The dog had moved, and was now curled up by his legs, a dark heap of fur.

I finished the second ball of yarn and began another. One more, and the infusion would have finished steeping. If Ian didn't need me yet, I would lie down then.

Grey had been silent for so long that I was surprised when he started to speak again. When I glanced at him, he wasn't looking at me, but was staring upward, seeking visions once again among the smoke-stained beams.

"I told you I had feelings for my wife," he said softly. "I did. Affection. Familiarity. Loyalty. We had known each other all her life; our fathers had been friends; I had known her brother. She might well have been my sister."

"And was she satisfied with that—to be your sister?"

He gave me a glance somewhere between anger and interest.

"You cannot be at all a comfortable woman to live with." He shut his mouth, but couldn't leave it there. He shrugged impatiently. "Yes, I believe she was satisfied with the life she led. She never said that she was not."

I didn't reply to this, though I exhaled rather strongly through my nose. He shrugged uncomfortably, and scratched his collarbone.

"I was an adequate husband to her," he said defensively. "That we had no children of our own—that was not my—"

"I really don't want to hear about it!"

"Oh, don't you?" His voice was still low, not to wake Ian, but it had lost the smooth modulations of diplomacy; the anger was rough in it.

"You asked me why I came; you questioned my motives; you accused me of jealousy. Perhaps you *don't* want to know, because if you did, you could not keep thinking of me as you choose to."

"And how the hell do you know what I choose to think of you?"

His mouth twisted in an expression that might have been a sneer on a less handsome face.

"Don't I?"

I looked him full in the face for a minute, not troubling to hide anything at all.

"You did mention jealousy," he said quietly, after a moment.

"So I did. So did you."

He turned his head away, but continued after a moment.

"When I heard that Isobel was dead … it meant nothing to me. We had lived together for years, though we had not seen each other for nearly two years. We shared a bed; we shared a life, I thought. I should have cared. But I didn't."

He took a deep breath; I saw the bedclothes stir as he settled himself.

"You mentioned generosity. It wasn't that. I came to see … whether I can still feel," he said. His head was still turned away, staring at the hide-covered window, grown dark with the night. "Whether it is my own feelings that have died, or only Isobel."

"*Only* Isobel?" I echoed.

He lay quite still for a moment, facing away.

"I can still feel shame, at least," he said, very softly.

I could tell by the feel of the night that it was very late; the fire had burned low, and the aching of my muscles told me that it was well past my bedtime.

Ian was getting restless; he stirred in his sleep, moaning, and Rollo got up and nuzzled him, making small whimpering noises. I went to him and wiped his face again, plumped his pillow and straightened his sheets, making comforting murmurs. He was no more than half awake; I held his head and fed him a cup of the warm infusion, sip by sip.

"You'll feel better in the morning." There were spots visible in the open neck of his shirt—only a few as yet—but the fever was less, and the line between his brows had eased.

I wiped his face once more and eased him back on his pillow, where he turned a cheek to the cool linen and fell asleep again at once.

There was plenty of the infusion left. I poured another cup and held it out to Lord John. Surprised, he sat upright and took it from me.

"And now that you've come, and seen him—do you still have feelings?" I said.

He stared at me for a moment, eyes unblinking in the candlelight.

"I do, yes." Hand steady as a rock, he picked up the cup and drank. "God help me," he added, so casual as almost to sound offhand.

Ian passed a bad night but dropped off into a fitful doze near dawn. I seized the chance of a little rest myself, and managed a few hours of delectable sleep on the floor before being roused by the the loud braying of Clarence the mule.

A sociable creature, Clarence was utterly delighted by the approach of anything he regarded as a friend—this category embracing virtually anything on four legs. He gave tongue to his joy in a voice that rang off the mountainside. Rollo, affronted at being thus upstaged in the watchdog department, leapt off Ian's bed, soared over me, and out through the open window, baying like a werewolf.

Thus startled out of slumber, I staggered to my feet. Lord John, who was sitting in his shirt at the table, looked startled too, though whether at the racket or at my appearance, I couldn't tell. I went outside, running my fingers hastily through my disheveled locks, heart beating faster in the hope that it might be Jamie returning.

My heart fell as I saw that it wasn't Jamie and Willie, but my disappointment was quickly replaced by astonishment when I saw who the visitor was—Pastor Gottfried, leader of the Lutheran church in Salem. I had met the Pastor now and then, in the homes of parishioners where I had been paying medical calls, but I was more than surprised to find him so far afield.

It was nearly two days ride from Salem to the Ridge, and the nearest German Lutheran farm was at least fifteen miles away, over rough country. The Pastor was no natural horseman—I could see the mud and dust of repeated falls splashed over his black coat—and I thought that it must be a dire emergency indeed that brought him so far up the mountain.

"Down, wicked dog!" I said sharply to Rollo, who was baring his teeth and growling at the new arrival, much to the displeasure of the Pastor's horse. "Be quiet, I say!"

Rollo gave me a yellow-eyed look and subsided with an air of offended dignity, as though to suggest that if I wished to welcome obvious malefactors onto the premises, *he* wouldn't answer for the consequences.

The Pastor was a tubby little man with a huge, curly gray beard that surrounded his face like a storm cloud, through which his normally beaming face peered like the breaking sun. He wasn't beaming this morning, though; his round cheeks were the color of suet, puffy lips pale, and his eyes red-rimmed with fatigue.

"Meine Dame," he greeted me, doffing his broad-brimmed hat and bowing deeply from the waist. *"Ist Euer Mann hier?"*

I spoke no more than a few words of crude German, but could easily make out that he was looking for Jamie. I shook my head, gesturing vaguely toward the woods, to indicate Jamie's absence.

The Pastor looked even more dismayed than before, nearly wringing his hands in his distress. He said several urgent things in

German, then seeing that I didn't understand him, repeated himself, speaking slower and louder, his stubby body straining for expression, trying by sheer force of will to make me understand.

I was still shaking my head helplessly when a voice spoke sharply from behind me.

"Was ist los?" demanded Lord John, emerging into the dooryard. *"Was habt Ihr gesagt?"* He had put on his breeches, I was glad to see, though he was still barefoot, with his fair hair streaming loose on his shoulders.

The Pastor gave me a scandalized look, plainly thinking The Worst, but this expression was wiped off his face at once by a further machine-gun rattle of German from Lord John. The Pastor bobbed in apology to me, then turned eagerly to the Englishman, waving his arms and stammering in his haste to tell his story.

"What?" I said, having failed to pluck more than a word or two from the Teutonic flood. "What on earth is he saying?"

Grey turned a grim face toward me.

"Do you know a family named Mueller?"

"Yes," I said, immediate alarm flaring at the name. "I delivered a child to Petronella Mueller, three weeks ago."

"Ah." Grey licked dry lips and glanced at the ground; he didn't want to tell me. "The—the child is dead, I am afraid. So is the mother."

"Oh, no." I sank down on the bench by the door, swept by a feeling of absolute denial. "No. They can't be."

Grey rubbed a hand over his mouth, nodding as the Pastor went on, waving his small, fat hands in agitation.

"He says it was *Masern;* I think that would be what we call the measle. *Flecken, so ähnlich wie diese?*" he demanded of the Pastor, pointing at the remnants of rash still visible on his face.

The Pastor nodded emphatically, repeating *"Flecken, Masern, ja!"* and patting his own cheeks.

"But what does he want Jamie for?" I asked, bewilderment added to distress.

"Apparently he believes Jamie might be able to reason with the man—with Herr Mueller. Are they friends?"

“Not exactly, no. Jamie hit Gerhard Mueller in the mouth and knocked him down in front of the mill last spring.”

A muscle twitched in Lord John’s scabbed cheek.

“I see. I suppose he’s using the term ‘reason with’ rather loosely, then.”

“Mueller can’t be reasoned with by any means more sophisticated than an ax handle,” I said. “But what is he being unreasonable about?”

Grey frowned—he didn’t recognize my use of “sophisticated,” I realized, though he understood what I meant. He hesitated, then turned back to the small minister and asked something else, listening intently to the resulting torrent of *Deutsch*.

Little by little, with constant interruptions and much gesticulation, the story emerged in translation.

There was, as Lord John had told us earlier, an epidemic of measles in Cross Creek. This had evidently spread into the backcountry; several households in Salem were afflicted, but the Muellers, isolated as they were, had not suffered infection until recently.

However, the day before the first sign of measles appeared, a small band of Indians had stopped at the Mueller farm asking for food and drink. Mueller, with whose opinions of Indians I was thoroughly well acquainted, had driven them off with considerable abuse. The Indians, offended, had made—said Mueller—mysterious signs toward his house as they left.

When measles broke out among the family the next day, Mueller was positive that the disease had been brought upon them by means of a hex, placed on his house by the Indians he had rebuffed. He had at once painted antihexing symbols upon his walls, and summoned the Pastor from Salem to perform an exorcism … “I think that is what he said,” Lord John added doubtfully. “Though I am not sure whether he means by that …”

“Never mind,” I said impatiently. “Go on!”

None of these precautions availed Mueller, though, and when Petronella and the new baby succumbed to the disease, the old man had lost what little mind he had. Vowing revenge upon the savages who had brought such devastation to his household, he had forced his sons and sons-in-law to accompany him, and ridden off into the woods.

From this expedition they had returned three days ago, the sons whitefaced and silent, the old man burning with cold satisfaction.

"Ich war dort. Ich habe ihn geschen," said Herr Gottfried, sweat trickling down his cheeks at the recollection. I was there. I saw.

Summoned by a hysterical message from the women, the Pastor had ridden into the stableyard, to find two long tails of dark hair hanging from the barn door, stirring gently in the wind above the crudely painted legend *Rache*.

"That means 'revenge,' " Lord John translated for me.

"I know," I said, my mouth so dry I could barely speak. "I've read Sherlock Holmes. You mean he …"

"Evidently so."

The Pastor was still speaking; he seized me by the arm and shook it, trying to communicate his urgency. Grey's look sharpened at whatever the minister was saying, and he broke in with an abrupt question, answered by frenzied noddings.

"He's coming here. Mueller." Grey swung round to me, his face set in alarm.

Terribly upset by the scalps, the Pastor had gone in search of Herr Mueller, only to find that the patriarch had nailed his grisly trophies to the barn and then left the farm, bound—he had said—for Fraser's Ridge, to see me.

If I hadn't been sitting down already, I might have collapsed at this. I could feel the blood draining from my cheeks, and was sure I looked as pale as Pastor Gottfried.

"Why?" I said. "Is he—he couldn't! He couldn't think I had done anything to Petronella or the baby. Could he?" I turned in appeal toward the Pastor, who pushed a pudgy, trembling hand through his gray-streaked hair, disordering its carefully larded strands.

"The clerical gentleman doesn't know what Mueller thinks, or what his purpose is in coming here," said Lord John. He cast an interested eye over the pastor's unprepossessing form. "Much to his credit, he set off alone, hell-for-leather after Mueller, and found him two hours later—insensible by the side of the road."

The huge old farmer had evidently gone for days without food on his hunt for revenge. Intemperance was not a common failing among the Lutherans, but under the stimulus of fatigue and emotion, Mueller had drunk deeply upon his return, and the enormous draughts of beer he had consumed had been too much for him. Overcome, he had contrived to hobble his mule, but then had wrapped himself in his coat and fallen asleep among the trailing arbutus by the road.

The Pastor had made no attempt to rouse Mueller, being well acquainted with the man's temper and feeling it would not be improved by drink. Instead, Gottfried had mounted his own horse and ridden as quickly as he could, trusting to Providence to bring him here in time to warn us.

He had had no doubt that my *Mann* would be competent to deal with Mueller, no matter what his state or intentions, but with Jamie gone …

Pastor Gottfried looked helplessly from me to Lord John, and back again.

"Vielleicht solten Sie gehen?" he suggested, making his meaning clear with a jerk of his head toward the paddock.

"I can't leave," I said, and gestured toward the house. "*Mein*—Christ, what's nephew?—*Mein junger Mann ist nicht gut."*

"Ihr Neffe ist krank" Lord John corrected briskly. *"Haben Sie jemals Masern gehabt?"*

The Pastor shook his head, distress altering to alarm.

"He hasn't had the measles," Lord John said, turning to me. "He mustn't stay here, then, or he will put himself in danger of contracting the disease, is that so?"

"Yes." The shock was beginning to recede slightly, and I was starting to pull myself together. "Yes, he should go at once. It's safe for him to be near you, you aren't contagious any longer. Ian is, though." I made a vain attempt at smoothing my hair, which was standing on end—little wonder if it was, I thought. Then I thought of the scalps on Mueller's barn door and my hair actually *did* stand on end, my own scalp rippling with horror.

Lord John was speaking authoritatively to the little Pastor, urging him toward his horse by means of a grip on his sleeve. Gottfried was making protests, but increasingly weak ones. He glanced back at me, round face full of trouble.

I tried to smile reassuringly at him, though I felt as distressed as he did.

"Danke," I said. "Tell him it will be all right, will you?" I said to Lord John. "He won't go, otherwise." He nodded briefly.

"I have. I told him I am a soldier; that I will not let any harm come to you."

The Pastor stood for a moment, hand on his horse's bridle, talking earnestly to Lord John. Then he dropped the bridle, turned with decision and crossed the dooryard to me. Reaching up, he laid a hand gently on my tousled head.

"Seid gesegnet," he said. *"Benedicite."*

"He said—" began Lord John.

"I understand."

We stood silently in the dooryard, watching Gottfried make his way through the chestnut grove. It seemed incongruously peaceful out here, with a soft autumn sun warm on my shoulders, and birds going about their business overhead. I heard the far-off knocking of a woodpecker, and the liquid duet of the mockingbirds that lived in the big blue spruce. No owls, but naturally there would be no owls now; it was midmorning.

Who? I wondered, as another aspect of the tragedy belatedly occurred to me. Who had been the target of Mueller's blind revenge? The Mueller farm was several days ride from the mountain line that separated Indian territory from the settlements, but he could have reached several Tuscarora or Cherokee villages, depending on his direction.

Had he entered a village? If so, what carnage had he and his sons left behind? Worse, what carnage might ensue?

I shuddered, cold in spite of the sun. Mueller was not the only man who believed in revenge. The family, the clan, the village of whomever he had murdered—they would seek vengeance for their slain, as well; and they might not stop with the Muellers—if they even knew the identity of the killers.

And if they did not, but only knew the murderers to be white … I shuddered again. I had heard enough massacre stories to realize that the victims very seldom did anything to provoke their fate; they only had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Fraser's Ridge lay directly between Mueller's farm and the Indian villages—which at the moment seemed distinctly the wrong place to be.

"Oh, God, I wish Jamie were here." I wasn't aware that I had spoken aloud, until Lord John replied.

"So do I," he said. "Though I begin to think that William may be far safer with him than the boy might be here—and not only by reason of the illness."

I glanced at him, realizing suddenly how weak he still was; this was the first time he had been out of bed in a week. He was white-faced under the remnants of his rash, and he was gripping the doorjamb for support, to keep from falling down.

"You shouldn't even be up!" I exclaimed, and grasped him by the arm. "Go in and lie down at once."

"I am quite all right," he said irritably, but he didn't jerk away, or protest when I insisted he get back into bed.

I knelt to check Ian, who was tossing restlessly on the trundle, blazing with fever. His eyes were shut, his features swollen and disfigured with the emergent rash, the glands in his neck round and hard as eggs.

Rollo poked an inquiring nose under my elbow, nudged his master gently and whined.

"He'll be all right," I said firmly. "Why don't you go outside and keep an eye out for visitors, hm?"

Rollo ignored this advice, though, and instead sat patiently watching as I wrung out a rag in cool water and bathed Ian. I nudged him half awake, brushed his hair, gave him the chamber pot, and coaxed bee-balm syrup into him—all the time listening for the sound of hooves, and Clarence's joyful announcement that company was coming.

* * *

It was a long day. After several hours of starting at every sound and looking over my shoulder at every step, I finally settled into the day's work. I nursed Ian, who was feverish and miserable, fed the stock, weeded the garden, picked tender young cucumbers for pickling, and set Lord John, who was disposed to be helpful, to work shelling beans.

I looked into the woods with longing, on my way from privy to goat-pen. I would have given a lot simply to walk away into those cool green depths. It wouldn't have been the first time I'd had such an impulse. But the autumn sun beat down on the Ridge, and the hours wore on in tranquil peace, without a sign of Gerhard Mueller.

"Tell me about this Mueller," Lord John said. His appetite was coming back; he'd finished his helping of fried mush, though he pushed aside the salad of dandelion greens and pokeweed.

I plucked a tender stalk of pokeweed from the bowl and nibbled it myself, enjoying the sharp taste.

"He's the head of a large family; German Lutherans, as you no doubt gathered. They live about fifteen miles from here, down in the river valley."

"Yes?"

"Gerhard is big, and he's stubborn, as you no doubt gathered. Speaks a few words of English, but not much. He's old, but my God, he's strong!" I could still see the old man, shoulders corded with stringy muscle, tossing fifty-pound sacks of flour into his wagon like so many sacks of feathers.

"This fight he had with Jamie—did he appear the sort to hold a grudge?"

"He's very definitely the sort to hold a grudge, but not about that. It wasn't really a fight. It—" I shook my head, searching for a way to describe it. "Do you know anything about mules?"

His fair brows lifted and he smiled.

"A bit, yes."

"Well, Gerhard Mueller is a mule. He's not really bad-tempered, and he isn't precisely stupid—but he doesn't pay a great deal of attention to anything other than what's in his head, and it takes a good deal of force to switch his attention to anything else."

I had not been present at the altercation in the mill, but had had it described to me by Ian. The old man had got it firmly stuck into his head that Felicia Woolam, one of the mill owner's three daughters, had given him short weight and owed him another sack of flour.

In vain, Felicia protested that he had brought her five bags of wheat; she had ground them, and filled four bags with the resulting flour. The difference, she insisted, was due to the chaff and hulls removed from the grain. Five bags of wheat equalled four bags of flour.

"Fünf!" Mueller had said, waving his open hand in her face. *"Es gibt fünf!"* He would not be persuaded otherwise, and began to curse volubly in German, glowering and backing the girl into a corner.

Ian, having tried without success to distract the old man's attention, had dashed outside to fetch Jamie from his conversation with Mr. Woolam. Both men had come hurriedly inside, but had no more success than Ian in changing Mueller's conviction that he had been cheated.

Ignoring their exhortations, he had advanced on Felicia, clearly intent on taking by force an extra bag of flour from the stack behind her.

"At that point, Jamie gave up trying to reason with him, and hit him," I said.

He had at first been reluctant to do so, Mueller being nearly seventy, but rapidly changed his mind when his first blow bounced off Mueller's jaw as though it had been made of seasoned oakwood.

The old man had turned on him like a cornered boar, whereupon Jamie had struck him first in the stomach, and then in the mouth as hard as possible, knocking Mueller down and splitting his own knuckles on the old man's teeth.

With a word to Woolam—who was a Quaker and thus opposed to violence—he had then seized Mueller by the legs and dragged the dazed farmer outside, where one of the Mueller sons was waiting patiently in the wagon. Hauling the old man up by the collar, Jamie had pinned him against the wagon and held him there, talking pleasantly in German, until Mr. Woolam—having hastily rebagged the flour—came out and loaded *five* sacks into the wagon, under the gimlet eye of the old man.

Mueller had counted them twice, carefully, then turned to Jamie, and said with dignity, *“Danke, mein Herr.”* He had then climbed into the wagon beside his bemused son, and driven away.

Grey scratched at the remnants of his rash, smiling.

“I see. So he appeared to hold no ill will?”

I shook my head, chewing, then swallowed.

“Not at all. He was kindness itself to me, when I went to the farm to help with Petronella’s baby.” My throat closed suddenly on the renewed realization that they were gone, and I choked on the bitter taste of the dandelion leaves, bile rising in my throat.

“Here.” Grey pushed the pot of ale across the table toward me.

I drank deeply, the cool sourness soothing for a moment the deeper bitterness of spirit. I set the pot down and sat for a moment, eyes closed. There was a fresh-smelling breeze from the window, but the sun was warm on the tabletop under my hands. All the tiny joys of physical existence were still mine, and I was the more acutely aware of them, for the knowledge that they had been so abruptly taken from others—from those who had barely tasted them.

“Thank you,” I said, opening my eyes.

Grey was watching me, with an expression of deep sympathy.

“You’d think it wouldn’t be such a shock,” I said, needing suddenly to try to explain. “They die here so easily. The young ones, especially. It isn’t as though I haven’t seen it before. And there’s so seldom anything I can do.”

I felt something warm on my cheek, and was surprised to find it was a tear. He reached into his sleeve, pulled out a handkerchief and handed it to me. It wasn’t especially clean, but I didn’t mind.

"I did sometimes wonder what he saw in you," he said, his tone deliberately light. "Jamie."

"Oh, you did? How flattering." I sniffed, and blew my nose.

"When he began to speak of you, both of us thought you dead," he pointed out. "And while you are undoubtedly a handsome woman, it was never of your looks that he spoke."

To my surprise, he picked up my hand and held it lightly.

"You have his courage," he said.

That made me laugh, if only halfheartedly.

"If you only knew," I said.

He didn't reply to that, but smiled faintly. His thumb ran lightly over the knuckles of my hand, his touch light and warm.

"He doesn't hold back for fear of skinned knuckles," he said. "Neither do you, I think."

"I can't." I took a deep breath and wiped my nose; the tears had stopped. "I'm a doctor."

"So you are," he said quietly, and paused. "I have not thanked you for my life."

"It wasn't me. There isn't really anything much I can do, for something like a disease. All I can do is to … be there."

"A little more than that," he said dryly, and released my hand. "Will you have more ale?"

I was beginning to see quite clearly what Jamie saw in John Grey.

The afternoon passed quietly. Ian tossed and moaned, but by late afternoon, the rash was fully developed, and his fever seemed to drop a little. He wouldn't be wanting food, but perhaps I could induce him to take a little milk broth. The thought reminded me that it was nearly milking time, and I stood up, with a murmured word to Lord John, and put aside my mending.

I opened the cabin door and stepped out, directly in front of Gerhard Mueller, who was standing in the dooryard.

Mueller's eyes were a reddish brown, and seemed always to be burning with an inner intensity. They burned more brightly now, for the bruised frailty of the flesh surrounding them. The deep-set eyes fixed on me, and he nodded, once, and then again.

Mueller had shrunk since I had last seen him. All his flesh had fallen away; still a huge man, he was more bone than muscle now, cadaverous and ancient. His eyes were fixed on mine, the only spark of life in a face like crumpled paper.

“Herr Mueller,” I said. My voice sounded calm to my own ears; I hoped it sounded the same to him. *“Wie geht es Euch?”*

The old man stood swaying in front of me, as though the evening breeze might knock him down. I didn’t know if he had lost his mount, or left it down below the ridge, but there was no sign of horse or mule.

He took a step toward me, and I took one back, involuntarily.

“Frau Klara,” he said, and there was a note of pleading in his voice.

I stopped, wanting to call out to Lord John, but hesitant. He wouldn’t call me by my first name if he meant to do me harm.

“They are dead,” he said. *“Mein Mädchen. Mein Kind.”* Tears welled suddenly in the bloodshot eyes, and ran slowly down the weather-beaten grooves of his face. The misery in his eyes was so acute that I reached out and took his huge, work-scarred old hand in mine.

“I know,” I said. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded again, his old mouth working. He let me lead him to the bench by the door, where he sat down quite suddenly, as though all the strength had gone out of his legs.

The door opened, and John Grey came out. He had his pistol in his hand, but when I shook my head at him, he slid it at once into his shirt. The old man had not let go of my hand; he pulled, forcing me to sit down beside him.

“Gnädige Frau,” he said, and suddenly turned and embraced me, hugging me tight against his filthy coat. He shook with soundless crying, and even knowing what he had done, I put my own arms around him.

He smelled dreadful, sour and reeking with old age and sorrow, with beer and sweat and filth, and somewhere under all the other odors was the fetor of dried blood. I shuddered, caught in a web of pity, horror, and revulsion, but could not pull away.

He let go, finally, and seemed suddenly to see John Grey, who was hovering nearby, not sure whether to intervene or not. The old man started at sight of him.

"Mein Gott!" he exclaimed, in tones of horror. *"Er hat Masern!"* The sun was sinking fast, bathing the dooryard in bloody light. It struck Grey full in the face, highlighting the darkened spots on his face, flushing his skin with red.

Mueller turned to me, and frantically seized my face between his huge, horny paws. His thumbs scraped across my cheeks, and an expression of relief came into his sunken eyes, as he saw that my skin was still clear.

"Gott sei dank'," he said, and letting go of my face, began to rummage in his coat, saying something in German so urgent and so mumbled that I could make out no more than the occasional word.

"He says he was afraid he would be too late, and is glad that he was not," Grey said, seeing my bewilderment. He eyed the old farmer with suspicious dislike. "He says he's brought you something—a charm of some kind. It will ward off the curse, and keep you safe from the illness."

The old man withdrew an object wrapped in cloth from the recesses of his coat, and laid it in my lap, still babbling in German.

"He thanks you for all your help to his family—he thinks you are a fine woman, as dear to him as one of his daughters-in-law—he says that …" Mueller unfolded the cloth with shaking hands, and the words died in Grey's throat.

I opened my mouth, but made no sound. I must have made some involuntary movement, for the cloth slipped suddenly to the ground, spilling out the sheaf of white-streaked hair to which a small silver ornament still clung. With it was the leather pouch, the woodpecker's feathers draggled with blood.

Mueller was still speaking, and Grey was trying to, but I was only dimly aware of their words. Inside my ears echoed the words I had heard a year before, down by the stream, in Gabrielle's soft voice, translating for Nayawenne.

Her name meant. "It may be; it will happen." Now it had, and all that was left me for consolation was her words: "She says you must not be troubled; sickness is sent from the gods. It won’t be your fault.”

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CHARNEL HOUSES

Jamie smelled the smoke long before the village came in sight. Willie saw him stiffen, and tensed in his own saddle, glancing warily around them.

"What?" the boy whispered. "What is it?"

"I dinna ken." He kept his own voice low, though there was no evidence that anyone was near enough to hear them. He swung down from his horse and handed the reins to Willie, nodding toward a vine-covered cliff face whose foot was shrouded in brush.

"Take the horses behind the cliff, lad," he said. "There's a deer path there, that leads up to a spruce grove. Get well in among the trees, and wait there for me." He hesitated, not wanting to scare the boy, but there was no help for it.

"If I should not come back by dark," he said, "leave at once. Dinna wait for the morning; go back to the wee stream we just crossed, turn to your left, and follow it to a place where there's a waterfall—you'll hear it, even in the dark. Behind the falls there's a wee cave; the Indians use it when they're hunting."

A small rim of white showed all the way around the lad's blue irises. Jamie took a firm grip of the boy's leg, just above the knee, to impress the directions upon him, and felt a quiver run through the long muscle of the thigh.

"Stay there till the morning," he said, "and if I havena caught ye up by then—go home. Keep the sun on your left in the morning, on your right after noon, and in two days give your horse his head; you'll be near enough home for him to find the way, I think."

He took a deep breath, wondering what else to say, but there was nothing.

“God go with ye, lad.” He gave Willie as reassuring a smile as he could muster, clapped the horse on the rump to start it, and turned toward the scent of burning.

* * *

It wasn’t the normal smell of village fires; not even of the big ceremonial fires that Ian had told him of, when they burned whole trees in the firepit in the center of the village. Those were the size of Beltane fires, Ian said, and he knew the crackle and size of such a blaze. This was much bigger.

With great caution he made a wide circle, at last coming to a small hill from which he knew that he could gain a view of the village. As soon as he emerged from the forest’s shelter, though, he saw it. Rolling plumes of gray smoke were rising from the smoldering remnants of every longhouse in the village.

A thick brownish pall of smoke hung over the forest as far as he could see. He took a quick breath, coughed, and hastily drew a fold of his plaid across his nose and mouth, crossing himself with his free hand. He had smelled burning flesh before, and a sudden cold sweat bathed him at the memory of the funeral pyres of Culloden.

His soul misgave him at the sight of the desolation below, but he searched carefully, squinting through the eye-stinging haze for any sign of life among the ruins. Nothing moved save the wavering smoke, its wraiths gliding silent, wind-driven through the blackened houses. Had it been the Cherokee or the Creek, raiding up from the south? Or one of the remnant Algonkian tribes to the north, the Nanticokes or the Tuteloes?

A gust of wind smote him full in the face with the stink of charred flesh. He bent and vomited, trying to rid himself of his bone-deep knowledge of burnt crofts and murdered families. As he straightened up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he heard a dog bark in the distance.

He turned and went quickly downhill toward the sound, his heart beating faster. Raiders would not bring dogs. If there were survivors of the massacre, the dogs would be with them.

Still, he went as silently as possible, not daring to call out. That fire had been burning for less than a day; half the walls were still standing. Whoever had set it was still nearby, without a doubt.

It was a dog that met him; a big yellow mongrel, one that he recognized as belonging to Ian's friend Onakara. Off its normal territory, the dog neither barked nor rushed him, but stood its ground in the shadow of a pine tree, ears laid back and growling softly. He walked toward it slowly, holding out his closed fist.

"Balach math," he murmured to it. "Hold. Where are your people, then?"

The dog extended its muzzle, still growling, and sniffed at the proffered hand. Its nostrils twitched, and it relaxed a little, nosing closer in recognition.

He felt rather than saw a human presence, and looked up into the face of the dog's owner. Onakara's face was painted, with white streaks that ran from hair to chin, and behind the pale bars of paint, his eyes were dead.

"What enemy has done this?" Jamie asked, in his halting Tuscaroran. "Does your uncle still live?"

Onakara didn't answer, but turned and went back into the forest, followed by his dog. Jamie came after them, and within a half-hour's walk emerged into a small clearing where the survivors had made a temporary camp.

As he passed through the camp, he saw faces he knew. Some of them registered awareness of his presence; others stared sightlessly into a distance he knew too well—the infinite prospect of sorrow and despair. All too many were missing.

He had seen this before, and the ghosts of war and murder dragged at his footsteps as he passed. He had seen a young woman in the Highlands, sitting on the doorstep of her smoking house with her husband's body at her feet; she had worn the same stunned look as the young Indian woman by the sycamore tree.

Slowly, though, he became aware that something was different here. Wigwam shelters dotted the clearing; bundles lay piled near the edges of the clearing, and horses and ponies were tethered among the trees. This was no hasty exodus of people plundered and fleeing for their lives—it was an orderly retreat, with most of their worldly goods neatly packed and brought along. What in God's name had happened in Anna Ooka this day?

Nacognaweto was in a wigwam at the far side of the clearing. Onakara lifted the flap and silently nodded Jamie in.

A sudden spark leapt in the older man's eyes as he entered, but then died at once as Nacognaweto saw his face, with the shadow of reflected grief on it. The chieftain closed his eyes for a moment, and reopened them, composed.

"You have not met with her who heals, nor with the woman whose longhouse I dwelt in?"

Used to the Indian notion that it was rude to speak a person's name aloud save for the sake of ceremony, Jamie knew he must refer to Gabrielle and old Nayawenne. He shook his head, knowing that that gesture must destroy the last flicker of hope the other had held. It was no consolation, but he took the flask of brandy from his belt, and offered that in mute apology for his failure to bring good news.

Nacognaweto accepted it, and with a tilt of his head, summoned a woman, who dug about in one of the bundles by the hide wall and produced a gourd cup. The Indian poured a quantity of spirit that would flatten a Scotsman, and drank deeply before handing the gourd to Jamie.

He took a small sip for the sake of politeness, and handed back the gourd. It wasn't polite to come to the point of a visit at once, but he had no time for palaver and he could see that the other had no heart for it.

"What has happened?" he asked bluntly.

"Sickness," Nacognaweto answered softly. His eyes shone wetly, watering from the fumes of brandy. "We are cursed."

Haltingly, the story emerged, between the swallows of brandy. Measles had broken out in the village and swept through it like fire.

Within the first week, a quarter of the people lay dead; now, at the end, there were no more than a quarter left alive.

When the sickness had begun, Nayawenne had sung over the victims. When more fell sick, she had gone out into the forest in search of … Jamie's grasp of Tuscarora was not sufficient to interpret the words. A charm, he thought it was—some plant? Or perhaps she looked for a vision that would tell them what to do, how to make amends for whatever evil had brought the sickness on them, or the name of the enemy who had cursed them. Gabrielle and Berthe had gone with her, because she was old and should not go alone—and none of the three had come back.

Nacognaweto was swaying very slightly as he sat, the gourd cup clasped in his hands. The woman bent over him, trying to take it away, but he shrugged her aside, and she let him be.

They had searched for the women, but there was no sign. Perhaps they had been taken by raiders, perhaps they too had fallen ill, and died in the forest. But the village had no *shaman* to speak for them, and the gods had not listened.

"We are cursed."

Nacognaweto's words were slurred, and the cup tilted dangerously in his hands. The woman knelt behind him and put her hands on his shoulders, to steady him.

"We left the dead in the houses, and set fire to them," she said to Jamie. Her eyes were black with sadness, too, but some life still lurked within them. "Now we will go north, to Oglanethaka." Her hands tightened on Nacognaweto's shoulders, and she nodded to Jamie. "You go now."

He went, the grief of the place clinging to him like the smoke that permeated clothes and hair. And within his charred heart as he left the camp sprang a small green shoot of selfishness, relief that the grief was—for this time—not his own. His woman still lived. His children were safe.

He looked up at the sky and saw the dull glow of the sinking sun reflected in the pall of smoke. He lengthened his stride to a hill-walker's lope that ate the miles. There was not much time; night was coming fast.

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PART EIGHT

Beaucoup

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INTO THIN AIR

Oxford, April 1971

"No," he said positively. Roger swung round to peer out the window at the soggy sky, holding the phone to his ear. "Not a chance. I'm off to Scotland next week, I've told you."

"Oh, now, Rog," coaxed the Dean's voice. "It's just your sort of thing. And it wouldn't put you off your schedule by a lot; you could be in the Hielands a-chasin' the deer this time a month—and you told me yourself your girrrl's not due till July."

Roger gritted his teeth at the Dean's put-on Scots accent, and opened his mouth to say no again, but wasn't quite fast enough.

"It's Americans, too, Rog," she said. "You're so *good* with Americans. Speaking of girrls," she added, with a brief chortle.

"Now, look, Edwina," he said, summoning patience, "I've things to do this holiday. And they don't include herding American tourists round the museums in London."

"No, no," she assured him. "We've paid minders to do the touristy bits; all you'd need to be concerned with is the conference itself."

"Yes, but—"

"Money, Rog," she purred down the phone, pulling out her secret weapon. "It's Americans, I said. You know what *that* means." She paused pregnantly, to allow him to contemplate the fee for running a week-long conference for a gang of visiting American scholars whose official minder had fallen ill. By comparison to his normal salary, it was an astronomical sum.

"Ah …" He could feel himself weakening.

"I hear you're thinking of getting married one of these days, Rog. Buy an extra haggis for the wedding, wouldn't it?"

"Anyone ever tell you how subtle you are, Edwina?" he demanded.

"Never." She chortled again briefly, then snapped into executive mode. "Right, then, see you Monday week for the plans meeting," and hung up.

He resisted the futile impulse to slam the receiver down, and dropped it on the hook instead.

Maybe it wasn't a bad thing after all, he thought bleakly. He didn't care about the money, in all truth, but having a conference to run might keep his mind off things. He picked up the much crumpled letter that lay next to the phone, and smoothed it out, his eye traveling over the paragraphs of apology without really reading them.

So sorry, she'd said. Special invitation to engineering conference in Sri Lanka (God, did all Americans go to conferences in the summer?) valuable contacts, job interviews (*job* interviews? Christ, he knew it, she was never coming back!)—couldn't pass it up. Desperately sorry. See you in September. I'll write. Love.

"Yeah, right," he said. "Love."

He balled up the sheet again and threw it at the dresser. It bounced off the edge of the silver picture frame and fell to the carpet.

"You could have told me straight," he said aloud. "So you did find someone else; you were right then, weren't you? You were wise, and me the fool. But could you not be honest, ye lying wee bitch?"

He was trying to work up a good rage; anything to fill the emptiness in the pit of his stomach. It wasn't helping.

He took the picture in its silver frame, wanting to break it to bits, wanting to clutch it to his heart. In the end, he only stood looking at it for a long time, then put it down gently, on its face.

"So sorry," he said. "Yeah, so am I."

May 1971

The boxes were waiting for him at the porter's lodge when he returned to college on the last day of the conference, hot, tired, and thoroughly fed up with Americans. There were five of them, large wooden crates plastered with the bright stickers of international shipping.

"What's this?" Roger juggled the clipboard the deliveryman handed him, groping in his pocket with the other hand for a tip.

"Well, I dunno, do I?" The man, truculent and sweating from the trip through the courtyard to the porter's lodge, dropped the last crate on top of the others with a bang. "All yours, mate."

Roger gave the top box an experimental shove. If it wasn't books, it was lead. The push had shown him the edge of an envelope taped securely to the box below, though. With some difficulty, he pried it loose and ripped it open.

You told me once that your father said that everyone needs a history, the note inside read. *This is mine. Will you keep it with yours?* There was neither salutation nor closing; only the single letter "B," written in bold angular strokes.

He stared at it for a moment, then folded the note and put it in his shirt pocket. Squatting carefully, he got hold of the top crate and lifted it in his arms. Christ, it must weigh sixty pounds at least!

Sweating, Roger dropped the crate on the floor of his sitting room and went through to the tiny bedroom, where he scrabbled through a drawer. Armed with a screwdriver and a bottle of beer, he came back to deal with the box. He tried to damp down his rising feelings of excitement, but couldn't. *Will you keep it with yours?* Did a girl send half her belongings to a bloke she meant to break off with?

"History, eh?" he muttered. "Museum quality, by the way you packed it." The contents had been double-boxed, with a layer of excelsior between, and the inner box, once opened, revealed a mysterious array of lumpy, newspaper-wrapped bundles and smaller boxes.

He picked up a sturdy shoe box and peeked inside. Photographs; old ones with scalloped edges, and newer ones, glossy and colored. The edge of a large studio portrait showed, and he pulled it out.

It was Claire Randall, much as he had last seen her; amber eyes warm and startling under a tumble of brown-silk curls, a slight smile on the lush, delicate mouth. He shoved it back in the box, feeling like a murderer.

What emerged from the layers of newsprint was a very aptly named Raggedy Ann doll, its painted face so faded that only the shoe-button eyes remained, fixed in a blank and challenging stare. Its dress was torn but had been carefully mended, the soft cloth body stained but clean.

The next bundle yielded a tattered Mickey Mouse hat, with a tiny pink foam-rubber bow still fixed between its perky ears. A cheap music box, that played "Over the Rainbow" when he opened it. A stuffed dog, synthetic fur worn away in patches. A faded red sweatshirt, a man's size Medium. It might have fit Brianna, but somehow Roger knew it had been Frank's. A ragged dressing gown in quilted maroon silk. On an impulse, he pressed it to his nose. Claire. Her scent brought her vividly to life, a faint smell of musk and green things, and he dropped the garment, shaken.

Under the layer of trivia there was more substantial treasure. The weight of the crate was caused mostly by three large flat chests at the bottom, each containing a silver dinner service, carefully wrapped in gray antitarnishing cloth. Each chest had a typewritten note tucked inside, giving the provenance and history of the silver.

A French silver-gilt service, with rope-knot borders, maker's mark DG. Acquired by William S. Randall, 1842. A George III Old English pattern, acquired 1776 Edward K. Randall, Esq. Husk Shell pattern, by Charles Boyton, acquired 1903 by Quentin Lambert Beauchamp, given as a wedding present to Franklin Randall and Claire Beauchamp. The family silver.

With a growing puzzlement, Roger went on, laying each item carefully on the floor beside him, the objects of vertu and objects of use that comprised Brianna Randall's history. History. Jesus, why had she called it that?

Alarm pricked the puzzlement as another thought occurred to him, and he grabbed the lid, checking the address label. Oxford. Yes, she *had* sent them here. Why here, when she'd known—or thought—that he meant to be in Scotland all summer? He would have been, if not for the last-minute conference—and he hadn't told her about that.

Tucked in the last corner was a jewelry box, a small but substantial container. Inside were several rings, brooches, and sets of earrings. The cairngorm brooch he had given her for her birthday was there. Necklaces and chains. Two things weren't.

The silver bracelet he had given her—and her grandmother's pearls.

"Jesus bloody Christ." He looked again, just to be sure, dumping out the glittering junk and spreading it on his counterpane. No pearls. Certainly no string of baroque Scottish pearls, spaced with antique gold roundels.

She couldn't be wearing them, not to an engineering conference in Sri Lanka. The pearls were an heirloom to her, not an ornament. She seldom wore them. They were her link with—

"You didn't," he said aloud. "God, tell me you didn't do it!"

He dropped the jewel box on the bed, and thundered down the stairs to the telephone room.

It took forever to get the international operator on the line, and a longer time yet of vague electronic poppings and buzzings, before he heard the click of connection, followed by a faint ringing. One ring, two, then a click, and his heart leapt. She was home!

"We're sorry," said a woman's pleasant, impersonal voice, *"that number has been disconnected, or is no longer in service."*

* * *

God, she *couldn't* have! Could she? Yes, she bloody could, the reckless wee coof! Where in *hell* was she?

He drummed his fingers restlessly against his thigh, fuming, as the transatlantic phone line clicked and hummed, while connections were made, while he dealt with the endless delays and stupidities of hospital switchboards and secretaries. But at last he heard a familiar voice in his ear, deep and resonant.

"Joseph Abernathy."

"Dr. Abernathy? This will be Roger Wakefield here. Do you know where Brianna is?" he demanded without preliminary.

The deep voice rose slightly in surprise.

"With you. Isn't she?"

A cold chill washed over Roger, and he gripped the receiver harder, as though he could force it to give him the answer he wanted.

"She is not," he made himself say, as calmly as he could. "She meant to come in the fall, after she took her degree and went to some conference."

"No. No, that's not right. She finished her coursework the end of April—I took her to dinner to celebrate—and she said she was going straight out to Scotland, without waiting for commencement. Wait, let me think … yeah, that's right; my son Lenny drove her to the airport … when? Yeah, Tuesday … the 27th. You mean to say she didn't get there?" Dr. Abernathy's voice rose in agitation.

"I don't know whether she got here or not." Roger's free hand was clenched into a fist. "She didn't tell me she was coming." He forced himself to take a deep breath. "Where was she flying to—which city, do you know? London? Edinburgh?" She *might* have meant to surprise him with a sudden, unexpected arrival. He'd been surprised, all right, but he doubted that was her intention.

Visions of kidnapping, assault, IRA bombings, drifted through his mind. Almost anything might have happened to a girl traveling alone in a large city—and almost anything that could have happened would be preferable to what his gut was telling him *had* happened. *Damn* the woman!

"Inverness," Dr. Abernathy's voice was saying in his ear. "Boston to Edinburgh, then the train to Inverness."

"Oh, Jesus." It was both a curse and a prayer. If she had left Boston on Tuesday, she would likely have made Inverness sometime on the Thursday. And Friday was the thirtieth day of April—the eve of Beltane, the ancient fire feast, when the hilltops of old Scotland had blazed with the flames of purification and fertility. When—perhaps—the door to the fairies' hill of Craigh na Dun lay widest open.

Abernathy's voice quacked in his ear, urgently demanding. He forced his attention to focus on it.

"No," he said, with some difficulty. "No, she didn't. I'm still in Oxford. I had no idea."

The empty air between them vibrated, the silence filled with dread. He had to ask. He took another breath—he seemed to be taking them one at a time, each one a conscious effort—and changed his grip on the receiver, wiping his cramped and sweaty palm on the leg of his trousers.

"Dr. Abernathy," he said carefully. "It's just possible that Brianna's gone to her mother—to Claire. Tell me—do you know where she is?"

The silence this time was charged with wariness.

"Ah … no." Abernathy's voice came slowly, reluctant with caution. "No, afraid I don't. Not exactly."

Not exactly. Great way to put it. Roger rubbed a hand over his face, feeling the stubble rasp under his palm.

"Let me ask you this," Roger said carefully. "Have you ever heard the name Jamie Fraser?"

The line was utterly silent in his hand. Then there came a deep sigh in his ear.

"Oh, Jesus Christ on a piece of toast," Dr. Abernathy said. "She did it."

* * *

Wouldn't you?

That was what Joe Abernathy had said to him, at the conclusion of their lengthy conversation, and the question lingered in his mind as he drove north, barely noticing the road signs that whizzed past, blurred by the rain.

Wouldn't you?

"I would," Abernathy had said. "If you didn't know your dad, never *had* known him—and all of a sudden, you found out where he was? Wouldn't you want to meet him, find out what he was really like? I'd be kind of curious, myself."

"You don't understand," Roger had said, rubbing a hand across his forehead in frustration. "It's not like someone who's adopted, finding out her real father's name and then just popping up on his doorstep."

"Seems to me that's just what it's like." The deep voice was cool. "Bree *was* adopted, right? I think she'd have gone before, if she hadn't felt it was disloyal to Frank."

Roger shook his head, disregarding the fact that Abernathy couldn't see him.

"It's not that—it's the popping-up-on-the-doorstep part. That—the way through—how she went—look, did Claire tell you—?"

"Yeah, she did," Abernathy broke in. His tone was bemused. "Yeah, she did say it wasn't quite like walking through a revolving door."

"To put it mildly." The mere thought of the standing stone circle on Craigh na Dun gave Roger a cold grue.

"To put it mildly—you *know* what it's like?" The far-off voice sharpened with interest.

"Yes, damn it, I do!" He took a long, deep breath. "Sorry. Look, it's not—I can't explain it, I don't think anyone could. Those stones … not everyone hears them, obviously. But Claire did. Bree does, and—and I do. And for us …"

Claire had gone through the stones of Craigh na Dun on the ancient fire feast of Samhain, on the first day of November, two and a half years before. Roger shivered, and not from cold. The hairs stood up on the back of his neck whenever he thought of it.

"So not everybody can go through—but you can." Abernathy's voice was filled with curiosity—and what sounded vaguely like envy.

"I don't know." Roger rubbed a hand through his hair. His eyes were burning, as though he'd sat up all night. "I might."

"The thing is …" He spoke slowly, trying to control his voice, and with it, his fear. "The thing is—even if she *has* gone through, there's no way of telling whether, or where, she came out again."

"I see." The deep American voice had lost its jauntiness. "And you don't know about Claire either, then. Whether she made it?"

He shook his head, his vision of Joe Abernathy so clear that he forgot again that the man couldn't see him. Dr. Abernathy was no more than average size, a thickset black man in gold-rimmed spectacles, but with such an air of authority that his simple presence gave one confidence and compelled calm. Roger was surprised to find that this presence transferred itself over the phone lines—but he was more than grateful for it.

"No," he said aloud. Leave it at that, for now. He wasn't about to go into everything now, on the phone with a near stranger. "She's a woman; there wasn't that much public notice of what individual women were doing, then—not unless they did something spectacular, like get burned for witchcraft, or hanged for murder. Or *be* murdered."

"Ha ha," said Abernathy, but he wasn't laughing. "She did make it, though, at least once. She went—and she came back."

"Aye, she did." Roger had been trying to take comfort in that fact himself, but there were too many other possibilities forcing themselves upon his consciousness. "But we don't know that Brianna went back as far—or farther. And even if she did survive the stones and come out in the right time … have you any idea how dangerous a place the eighteenth century *was?*"

"No," Abernathy said dryly. "Though I gather you do. But Claire seemed to manage all right there."

"She survived," Roger agreed. "Not much of a sell for a vacation spot, is it, though—'If your luck's in, you'll come back alive?' " Once, at least.

Abernathy did laugh at that, though with a nervous undertone. He coughed then, and cleared his throat.

"Yeah. Well. The point is—Bree's gone *someplace*. And I think you're probably right about where. I mean, if it was me, I'd have gone. Wouldn't you?"

Wouldn't you? He pulled to the left, passed a lorry with its headlights on, plodding its way through the gathering fog.

I would. Abernathy's confident voice rang in his ear.

INVERNESS, 30, read the sign, and he swung the tiny Morris abruptly to the right, skidding on wet pavement. The rain was drumming down on the tarmac, hard enough to raise a mist above the grass on the verge.

Wouldn't you? He touched the breast pocket of his shirt, where the squarish shape of Brianna's photo lay stiff over his heart. His fingers touched the small round hardness of his mother's locket, snatched at the last moment, brought along for luck.

"Yeah, maybe I would," he muttered, squinting through the rain streaming over the windscreen. "But I would have told you I was going to do it. In the name of God, woman—why did you not tell *me?*"

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RETURN TO INVERNESS

The fumes of furniture polish, floor wax, fresh paint, and air freshener hung in throat-clutching clouds in the hallway. Not even these olfactory evidences of Fiona's domestic zeal were able to compete with the delectable aromas floating out of the kitchen, though.

"Eat your heart out, Tom Wolfe," Roger murmured, inhaling deeply as he set down his bag in the hall. Granted, the old manse was definitely under new management, but even its transformation from manse to bed-and-breakfast had been unable to alter its basic character.

Welcomed with enthusiasm by Fiona—and somewhat less by Ernie—he settled into his old room at the top of the stairs, and embarked at once on his job of detection. It wasn't that difficult; beyond the normal Highland inquisitiveness about strangers, a six-feet-tall woman with waist-length red hair tended to attract notice.

She'd come to Inverness from Edinburgh. He knew that much for a fact; she'd been seen at the station. Also for a fact he knew that a tall red-haired woman had hired a car and told the driver to take her out into the country. The driver had no real notion where they had gone; just that all of a sudden, the woman had said, "Here, this is the place, let me off here."

"Said she meant to meet her friends for a walking tour across the moors," the driver had said, shrugging. "She had a haversack with her, and she was dressed for walking, sure enough. A damn wet day for a walk on the moors, but ye know what loons these American tourists are."

Well, he knew what kind of a loon *that* one was, at least. Curse her thick head and fiendish stubbornness, if she thought she had to do it, why in *hell* hadn't she told him? Because she didn't want you to know, sport, he thought grimly. And he didn't want to think about why not.

So far he had gotten. And only one way of following her any farther.

Claire had speculated that the whatever-it-was stood widest open on the ancient sun feasts and fire feasts. It seemed to work—she had herself gone through the first time on Beltane, May 1, the second time on Samhain, the first of November. And now Brianna had evidently followed in her mother's footsteps, going on Beltane.

Well, he wasn't going to wait till November—God only knew what could happen to her in five months! Beltane and Samhain were fire feasts, though; there was a sunfeast between.

Midsummer's Eve, the summer solstice; that would be next. June 20, four weeks away. He ground his teeth at the thought of waiting—his impulse was to go *now* and damn the danger—but it wouldn't help Brianna if his impulse to rush chivalrously after her killed him. He was under no illusions about the nature of the stone circle, not after what he'd seen and heard so far.

Very quietly, he began to make what preparations he could. And in the evenings, when the fog rolled in off the river, he sought distraction from his thoughts, playing draughts with Fiona, going to the pub with Ernie, and—as a last resort—having another bash at the dozens of boxes that still crammed the old garage.

The garage had an air of sinister miracle about it; the boxes seemed to multiply like the loaves and fishes—every time he opened the door, there were more of them. He'd probably finish the job of sorting his late father's effects just before being carried out feetfirst himself, he thought. Still, for the moment, the boring work was a godsend, dulling his mind enough to keep him from fretting himself to pieces in the waiting. Some nights, he even slept.

“You’ve got a picture on your desk.” Fiona didn’t look at him, but kept her attention riveted on the dishes she was clearing.

“Lots of them.” Roger took a cautious mouthful of tea; hot and fresh, but not scalding. How did she do that? “Is there one you want? I know there are a few snaps of your grannie—you’re more than welcome, though I’d like one to keep.”

She did look up at that, mildly startled.

“Oh. Of Grannie? Aye, our Da’ll like to see those. But it’s the big one I meant.”

“Big one?” Roger tried to think which photo she could mean; most of them were black-and-white snapshots taken with the Reverend’s ancient Brownie, but there were a couple of the larger cabinet photos—one of his parents, another of the Reverend’s grandmother, looking like a pterodactyl in black bombazine, taken on the occasion of that lady’s hundredth birthday. Fiona couldn’t possibly mean those.

“Of her that kilt her husband and went away.” Fiona’s mouth compressed.

“Her that—oh.” Roger took a deep gulp of tea. “You mean Gillian Edgars.”

“Her,” Fiona repeated stubbornly. “Why’ve you got a photo of her?”

Roger set the cup down and picked up the morning paper, affecting casualness as he wondered what to say.

“Oh—someone gave it to me.”

“Who?”

Fiona was normally persistent, but seldom so direct. What was troubling her?

“Mrs. Randall—Dr. Randall, I mean. Why?”

Fiona didn’t reply, but pressed her lips tight shut.

Roger had by now abandoned all interest in the paper. He laid it down carefully.

“Did you know her?” he said. “Gillian Edgars?”

Fiona didn’t answer directly, but turned aside, fiddling with the tea cozy.

"You've been up to the standing stones on Craigh na Dun; Joycie said her Albert saw ye comin' down when he was drivin' to Drumnadrochit Thursday."

"I have, yes. No crime in that, is there?" He tried to make a joke of it, but Fiona wasn't having any.

"Ye know it's a queer place, all circles are. And don't be tellin' me ye went up there to admire the view."

"I wouldn't tell you that."

He sat back in his chair, looking up at her. Her curly dark hair was standing on end; she rumpled her hands through it when she was agitated, and agitated she surely was.

"You *do* know her. That's right; Claire said you'd met her." The small flicker of curiosity he had felt at the mention of Gillian Edgars was growing into a clear flame of excitement.

"I canna be knowing her, now, can I? She's dead." Fiona scooped up the empty egg cup, eyes fixed on the discarded fragments of shell. "Isn't she?"

Roger reached out and stopped her with a hand on her arm.

"Is she?"

"It's what everyone thinks. The police havena found a trace of her." The word came out "polis" in her soft Highland accent.

"Perhaps they're not looking in the right place."

All the blood drained out of her flushed, fair face. Roger tightened his grip, though she wasn't trying to pull away. She knew, dammit, she knew! But *what* did she know?

"Tell me, Fiona," he said. "Please—tell me. What do you know about Gillian Edgars—and the stones?"

She did pull away from him then, but didn't leave, just stood there, turning the egg cup over and over in her hands, as if it were a miniature hourglass. Roger stood up, and she shied back, glancing fearfully up at him.

"A bargain, then," he said, trying to keep his voice calm, so as not to frighten her further. "Tell me what you know, and I'll tell you why Dr. Randall gave me that picture—and why I was up on Craigh na Dun."

"I've got to think." Swiftly she bent and snatched up the tray of dirty crockery. She was out the door before he could speak a word to stop her.

Slowly he sat down again. It had been a good breakfast—all Fiona's meals were delicious—but it lay in his stomach like a bag of marbles, heavy and indigestible.

He shouldn't be so eager, he told himself. It was courting disappointment. What could Fiona know, after all? Still, any mention of the woman who had called herself Gillian—and later Geillis—was enough to rivet his attention.

He picked up his neglected teacup and swallowed, not tasting it. What if he kept the bargain, and told her everything? Not only about Claire Randall and Gillian, but about himself—and Brianna.

The thought of Bree was like a rock dropped into the pool of his heart, sending ripples of fear in all directions. *She's dead.* Fiona had said of Gillian. *Isn't she?*

Is she? he had answered, the picture of a woman vivid in his mind, green eyes wide and fair hair flying in the hot wind of a fire, poised to flee through the doors of time. No, she hadn't died.

Not then, at least, because Claire had met her—would meet her? Earlier? Later? She hadn't died, but was she dead? She must be now, mustn't she, and yet—damn this twistiness! How could he even think about it coherently?

Too unsettled to stay in one place, he got up and walked down the hall. He paused in the doorway of the kitchen. Fiona was standing at the sink, staring out of the window. She heard him and turned around, an unused dishcloth clutched in her hand.

Her face was red, but determined.

"I'm not to tell, but I will, I've got to." She took a deep breath and squared her chin, looking like a Pekingese facing up to a lion.

"Bree's Mam—that nice Dr. Randall—she asked me about my grannie. She kent Grannie'd been a—a—dancer."

"Dancer? What, you mean in the stones?" Roger felt faintly startled. Claire had told him, when he'd first met her, but he had never quite believed it—not that the staid Mrs. Graham performed arcane ceremonies on green hilltops in the May dawn.

Fiona let out a long breath.

"So ye do know. I thought so."

"No, I don't know. All I know is what Claire—Dr. Randall—told me. She and her husband saw women dancing in the stone circle one Beltane dawn, and your grannie was one of them."

Fiona shook her head.

"Not just one o' them, no. Grannie was the caller."

Roger moved into the kitchen and took the dishcloth from her unresisting hand.

"Come and sit down," he said, leading her to the table. "And tell me, what's a caller?"

"The one who calls down the sun." She sat, unresisting. She had made up her mind, he saw; she was going to tell him.

"It's one of the auld tongues, the sun-song; some of the words are a bit like the Gaelic, but not all of it. First we dance, in the circle, then the caller stops and faces the split stone, and—it's no singing, really, but it's no quite talking, either; more like the minister at kirk. You've to begin at just the right moment, when the light first shows over the sea, so just as ye finish, the sun comes through the stone."

"Do you remember any of the words?" The scholar in Roger stirred briefly, curiosity rearing its head through his confusion.

Fiona didn't much resemble her grandmother, but she gave him a look that reminded him suddenly of Mrs. Graham in its directness.

"I know them all," she said. "I'm the caller now."

He realized that his mouth was hanging open, and closed it. She reached for the biscuit tin and plunked it in front of him.

"That's no what ye need to know, though," she said matter-of-factly, "and so I won't tell ye. You want to know about Mrs. Edgars."

Fiona had met Gillian Edgars, all right; Gillian had been one of the dancers, though quite a new one. Gillian had asked questions of the older women, eager to learn all she could. She'd wanted to learn the sun-song, too, but that was secret; only the caller and her successor had that. Some of the older women would know some of it—those who had heard the chant every year for a long time—but not all of it, and not the secrets of when to begin and how to time the song to coincide with the rising of the sun.

Fiona paused, looking down at her folded hands.

"It's women; only women. The men havena got a part in it, and we do not tell them. Not ever."

He laid a hand over hers.

"You're right to tell me, Fiona," he said, very softly. "Tell me the rest, please. I've got to know."

She drew a deep, quivering breath and pulled her hand out from under his. She looked directly at him. "D'ye know where she's gone? Brianna?"

"I think so. She's gone where Gillian went, hasn't she?"

Fiona didn't reply, but went on looking at him. The unreality of the situation swept over him all of a sudden. He couldn't be sitting here, in the comfortable, shabby kitchen he'd known since boyhood, sipping tea from a mug with the Queen's face painted on the side, discussing sacred stones and time-flight with Fiona. Not *Fiona,* for God's sake, whose interests were confined to Ernie and the domestic economy of her kitchen!

Or so he'd thought. He picked up the mug, drained it, and set it down with a soft thump.

"I have to go after her, Fiona—if I can. Can I?"

She shook her head, clearly afraid.

"I canna say. It's only women I know about; maybe it's only women who can."

Roger's hand clenched round the saltshaker. That's what he was afraid of—or one of the things he was afraid of.

"Only one way to find out, isn't there?" he said, outwardly casual. In the back of his mind, unbidden, a tall cleft stone rose up black, stark as a threat against a soft dawn sky.

"I have her wee book," Fiona blurted.

"What—whose? Gillian's? She wrote something?"

"Aye, she did. There's a place—" She darted a look at him, and licked her lips. "We keep our things there, ready beforehand. She'd put the book there, and—and—I took it, after." After Gillian's husband had been found murdered in the circle, Roger thought she meant.

“I kent the polis should maybe have it,” Fiona went on, “but it—well, I didna like to give it to them, and yet I was thinkin’ what if it’s to do with the killing? And I couldna keep it back if it was to be important, and yet—” She looked up at Roger in a plea for understanding. “It was her own book, ye see, her writing. And if she’d left it in that place …”

“It was secret.” Roger nodded.

Fiona nodded, and drew a deep breath.

“So I read it.”

“And that’s how you know where she’s gone,” Roger said softly.

Fiona let out a shuddering sigh and gave him a wan smile.

“Well, the book’s no going to help the polis, that’s for sure.”

“Could it help me?”

“I hope so,” she said simply, and turning to the sideboard, pulled open a drawer and withdrew a small book, bound in green cloth.

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GRIMOIRE

This is the grimoire of the witch, Geillis. It is a witch's name, and I take it for my own; what I was born does not matter, only what I will make of myself, only what I will become.

And what is that? I cannot yet say, for only in the making will I find what I have made. Mine is the path of power.

Absolute power corrupts absolutely, yes—and how? Why, in the assumption that power can be absolute, for it never can. For we are mortal, you and I. Watch the flesh shrink and wither on your bones, feel the lines of your skull, pushing through the skin, your teeth behind soft lips a grin of grim acknowledgment.

And yet within the bounds of flesh, many things are possible. Whether such things are possible beyond those bounds—that is the realm of others, not mine. And that is the difference between them and me, those others who have gone before to explore the Black Realm, those who seek power in magic and the summoning of demons.

I go in the body, not the soul. And by denying my soul, I give no power to any force but those I control. I do not seek favor from devil or god; I deny them. For if there is no soul, no death to contemplate, then neither god nor devil rules—their battle is of no consequence, to one who lives in the flesh alone.

We rule for a moment, and yet for all time. A fragile web woven to snare both earth and space. Only one life is given to us—and yet its years may be spent in many times—how many times?

If you will wield power, you must choose both your time and your place, for only when the shadow of the stone falls at your feet is the door of destiny truly open.

"A nutcase for sure," Roger murmured. "Horrible prose style, too." The kitchen was empty; he was talking to reassure himself. It wasn't helping.

He turned the pages carefully, skimming down the lines of clear, round writing.

After the first bit, there was a section titled "Sun Feasts and Fire Feasts," with a listing after—Imbolc, Alban Eilir, Beltane, Litha, Lughnassadh, Alban Elfed, Samhain, Alban Arthuan—with a paragraph of notes following each name, and a series of small crosses inscribed alongside. What the hell was that for?

Samhain caught his eye, with six crosses by it.

This is the first of the feasts of the dead. Long before Christ and his Resurrection, on the night of Samhain, the souls of heroes rose from their graves. They are rare, these heroes. Who is born when the stars are right? Not all who are born to it have the courage to take hold of the power that is their right.

Even in what was plainly raving madness, she had method and organization—a queer admixture of cool observation and poetic flight. The center section of the book was labeled "Case Studies," and if the first section had raised the hair on Roger's neck, the second was enough to freeze the blood in his veins.

It was a careful listing, by date and by place, of bodies found in the vicinity of stone circles. The appearance of each was noted, and below each description were a few words of speculation.

August 14, 1931. Sur-le-Meine, Brittany. Body of a male, unidentified. Age, mid-40s. Found near north end of standing stone circle. No evident cause of death, but deep burns on arms and legs. Clothing described only as "rags." No photograph.

Possible cause of failure: (1) male, (2) wrong date—23 days from nearest sun feast.

April 2, 1650. Castlerigg, Scotland. Body of female, unidentified. Age, about 15. Found outside circle. Substantial mutilation noted, may have been dragged from circle by wolves. Clothing not described.

Possible cause of failure: (1) wrong date—28 days prior to fire feast. (2) lack of preparation.

February 5, 1953. Callanish, Isle of Lewis. Body of male identified as John MacLeod, lobsterman, age 26. Cause of death diagnosed as massive cerebral hemorrhage, coroner's inquest held owing to appearance of body—second-degree burns on skin of face and extremities, and scorched look of clothing. Coroner's verdict, death by lightning—possible, but not likely. Possible cause of failure: (1) male. (2) very close to Imbolc, but perhaps not close enough? (3) improper preparation—N.B. newspaper photograph shows victim, shirt open; there is a burnt spot on the chest which appears to be in shape of Bridhe's Cross, but too indistinct to say for sure.

May 1, 1963. Tomnahurich, Scotland. Body of female, identified as Mary Walker Willis. Coroner's inquest, substantial scorching of body and clothing, death due to heart failure—rupture of aorta. Inquest notes Miss Walker dressed in "odd" clothing, details unspecified.

Failure—this one knew what she was doing, but didn't make it. Failure likely due to omission of proper sacrifice.

The list went on chilling Roger more with each name. She had found twenty-two, altogether, reported over a period from the mid-1600s to the mid-1900s, from sites scattered over Scotland, northern

England, and Brittany, all sites showing some evidence of prehistoric building. Some had been obvious accidents, he thought—people who'd walked into a circle all unsuspecting and had no notion what had hit them.

A few—only two or three—seemed to have known; they'd made some preparation of clothing. Perhaps they had passed through before, and tried again—but this time it hadn't worked. His stomach curled into a small, cold snail. Claire had been right; it wasn't like stepping through a revolving door.

Then there were the disappearances … these were in a separate section, neatly docketed by date, sex, and age, with as much noted of the circumstances as was recorded. Ah—that was the meaning of the crosses; how many people had disappeared near each feast. There were more of the disappeared than of the dead, but there was of necessity less data. Most bore question marks—Roger supposed because there was no telling whether disappearance in the vicinity of a circle was necessarily connected with it.

He turned over a page, and stopped, feeling as though he'd been punched in the stomach.

May 1, 1945. Craigh na Dun, Inverness-shire, Scotland. Claire Randall, age 27, housewife. Seen last in early morning, having declared intention to visit the circle in search of unusual plant specimens, did not return by dark. Car found parked at foot of hill. No traces in circle, no signs of foul play.

He turned the page gingerly, as though expecting it to blow up in his hand. So Claire had inadvertently given Gillian Edgars part of the evidence that had led to her own experiment. Had Geilie found the reports of Claire's return, three years later?

No, evidently not, he concluded, after flipping back and forth through those pages—or if she had, she hadn't recorded it here.

Fiona had brought him more tea and a plate of fresh ginger nut biscuits, which had sat untouched since he had begun reading. A sense of obligation rather than hunger made him pick up a biscuit and take a bite, but the sharp-flavored crumbs caught in his throat and made him cough.

The last section of the book bore the heading “Techniques and Preparations.” It began,

Something lies here, older than man, and the stones keep its power. The old spells speak of “the lines of the earth,” and the power that flows through them. The purpose of the stones is to do with those lines, I am sure. But do the stones warp the lines of power, or are they only markers?

The bite of biscuit seemed permanently stuck in his throat, no matter how much tea he drank. He found himself reading faster, skimming, skipping pages, and finally sat back and shut the book. He would read the rest later—and more than once. But for now, he had to get out, into the fresh air. No wonder the book had upset Fiona.

He walked fast down the street, heading for the river, oblivious of the light rain falling. It was late; there was a churchbell ringing for evensong, and the evening foot traffic to the pubs was picking up across the bridges. But above bell and voice and footstep, he heard the last words he had read, chiming in his ear as though she had been speaking directly to him.

Shall I kiss you, child, shall I kiss you, man? Feel the teeth behind my lips when I do. I could kill you, as easily as I embrace you. The taste of power is the taste of blood—iron in my mouth, iron in my hand.

Sacrifice is required.

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MIDSUMMER’S EVE

June 20, 1971

On Midsummer’s Eve in Scotland, the sun hangs in the sky with the moon. Summer solstice, the feast of Litha, Alban Eilir. Nearly midnight, and the light was dim and milky white, but light nonetheless.

He could feel the stones long before he saw them. Claire and Geillis had both been right, he thought; the date mattered. They had been eerie on his earlier visits, but silent. Now he could hear them; not with his ears but with his skin—a low buzzing hum like the drone of bagpipes.

They came over the crest of the hill and paused, thirty feet from the circle. Below was dark glen, a mystery under the rising moon. He heard a small intake of breath at his elbow, and it occurred to him that Fiona was seriously afraid.

“Look, you don’t need to be here,” he told her. “If you’re afraid, you should go on down; I’ll be all right.”

“It’s not me I’m scairt for, fool,” she muttered, thrusting her balled fists deeper into her pockets. She turned away, lowering her head like a little bull as she faced up the path. “Come on, then.”

The alder bushes rustled near his shoulder and he shivered suddenly, feeling a cold qualm go over him, warmly as he was dressed. His dress seemed suddenly ridiculous; the long-skirted coat and the weskit in thick wool, the matching breeches and knitted stockings. A play at the college, he had told the tailor who made the costume.

“Fool is right,” he muttered to himself.

Fiona went first into the circle; she would not let him come with her or watch. Obediently, he turned his back, letting her do whatever she intended. She had a plastic shopping bag, presumably containing items for her ceremonial. He had asked what was in it, and she had tersely told him to mind his own business. She was nearly as nervous as he was, he thought.

The humming noise disturbed him. It wasn’t in his ears but in his body—under his skin, in his bones. It made the long bones of his arms and legs thrum like plucked strings, and itched in his blood, making him want constantly to scratch. Fiona couldn’t hear it; he’d asked, to be sure she was safe before letting her help him.

He hoped to God he was right; that only those who heard the stones could pass through them. He’d never forgive himself if anything happened to Fiona—though as she’d pointed out, she’d been in this circle any number of times on the fire feasts, with no ill effect. He sneaked a look over one shoulder, saw a tiny flame burning at the base of the big cleft stone, and jerked his head back around.

She was singing, in a soft, high voice. He couldn’t make out the words. All the other travelers he knew of were women; would it truly work for him?

It might, he thought. If the ability to pass through the stones was genetic—something like the ability to roll one’s tongue into a cylinder or color-blindness—then why not? Claire had traveled, so had Brianna. Brianna was Claire’s daughter. And he was a descendant of the only other time-traveler he knew of—Geillis the witch.

He stamped both feet and shook himself like a horse with flies, trying to rid himself of the humming. God, it was like being eaten by ants! Was Fiona’s chanting making it worse, or was it only his imagination?

He rubbed violently at his chest, trying to ease the irritation, and felt the small round weight of his mother’s locket, taken for luck and for its garnets. He had his doubts about Geillis's speculations—he wasn't about to try blood, though Fiona seemed to be supplying fire—but after all, the gems could do no harm, and if they helped … Christ, would Fiona not hurry? He twisted and strained inside his clothes, trying to get out of not only his clothing but his skin.

Seeking distraction, he patted his breast pocket again, feeling the locket. If it worked … if he could … it was a notion that had come to him only lately, as the possibility posed by the stones had matured into actual planning. But if it *were* possible … he fingered the small, round shape, seeing the face of Jerry MacKenzie on the dark surface of his mind.

Brianna had gone to find her father. Could he do the same? Jesus, Fiona! She *was* making it worse; the roots of his teeth ached, and his skin was burning. He shook his head violently, then stopped, feeling dizzy; the seams of his skull felt as though they were beginning to separate.

Then she was there, a small figure grasping his hand, saying something anxious as she led him into the circle. He couldn't hear her—the noise was much worse inside; now it was in his ears, in his head, blackening his sight, driving wedges of pain between the joints of his spine.

Gritting his teeth, he blinked back the buzzing darkness, long enough to fix his eyes on Fiona's round and fearful face.

Swiftly he bent and kissed her, full on the mouth.

"Don't tell Ernie," he said. He turned away from her and walked through the stone.

* * *

A faint scent came to him on the summer wind; the smell of burning. He turned his head, nostrils flared to catch it. There. A flame flared and bloomed on a nearby hilltop, a rose of Midsummer's fire.

There were faint stars overhead, half shadowed by a drifting cloud. He had no urge to move, nor to think. He felt bodiless, embraced by the sky, his mind turning free, reflecting starlit images like the glass bubble of a fisher's float, adrift in the surf. There was a soft and musical hum around him—the far-off song of siren stars, and the smell of coffee.

A vague feeling of wrongness intruded on his sense of peace. Sensation prodded at his mind, rousing tiny, painful sparks of confusion. He fought back feeling, wanting only to stay afloat in starlight, but the act of resistance woke him. All of a sudden, he had a body again, and it hurt.

"ROGER!" The star's voice blared in his ear, and he jerked. Searing pain shot through his chest, and he clapped a hand to the wound. Something seized his wrist and pulled it away, but not before he had felt wetness, and the silky roughness of ash on his breast. Was he bleeding?

"Oh, ye're wakin', thank God! Aye, there, that's a good lad. Easy, aye?" It was the cloud talking, not the star. He blinked, confused, and the cloud resolved itself into the curly silhouette of Fiona's head, dark against the sky. He jerked upright, more a convulsion than a conscious movement.

His body had come back with a vengeance. He felt desperately ill, and there was a horrible smell of coffee and burnt flesh in his nostrils. He rolled onto all fours, retching, then collapsed onto the grass. It was wet, and the coolness felt good on his scorched face.

Fiona's hands were on him, soothing, wiping his face and mouth.

"Are ye all right?" she said, for what he knew must be the hundredth time. This time, he summoned enough strength to answer.

"Aye," he whispered. "All right. Why—?"

Her head moved back and forth, wiping out half a sky of stars.

"I don't know. Ye went—ye were gone—and then there was a burst o' fire, and ye were lyin' in the circle, wi' your coat ablaze. I had to put ye out with the thermos bottle."

That accounted for the coffee, then, and the soggy feeling over his chest. He lifted a hand, groping, and this time she let him. There was a burnt patch on the wet cloth of his coat, maybe three inches across. The flesh of his chest was seared; he could feel the queer cushioned numbness of blisters through the hole in the cloth, and the nagging pain of a burn spread through his breast. His mother's locket was gone entirely.

"What happened, Rog?" Fiona was crouching by him, her face dim but visible; he could see the shiny tracks of tears on her face. What he had thought a Midsummer's Eve fire was the flame of her candle, burned down now to the last half inch. God, how long had he been out?

"I—" He had begun to say that he didn't know, but broke off. "Let me think a bit, aye?" He put his head on his knees, breathing in the smell of wet grass and scorched cloth.

He concentrated on breathing, let it come back. He had no real need to think—it was all there, distinct in his mind. But how did one describe such things? There was no sight—and yet he had the image of his father. No sound, no touch—and yet he had both heard and felt. The body seemed to make its own sense of things, translating the numinous phenomena of time into concretions.

He raised his head from his knees, and breathed deep, settling himself slowly back in his body.

"I was thinking of my father," he said. "When I stepped through the rock, I had just thought, if it works, could I go back and find him? And I … did."

"You did? Your dad? Was he a ghost, d'ye mean?" He felt, more than saw, the flicker of her hand as she made the horns against evil.

"No. Not exactly. I—I can't explain, Fiona. But I met him; I knew him." The feeling of peace had not left him altogether; it hovered there, fluttering gently in the back of his mind. "Then there was—sort of an explosion, is all I can describe it as. Something hit me, here." His fingers touched the burnt place on his chest. "The force of it pushed me … out, and that's all I knew till I woke." He touched her face gently. "Thanks, Fee; you saved me burning."

"Och, get on wi' ye." She made an impatient gesture, dismissing him. She sat back on her heels, rubbing her chin as she thought.

"I'm thinking, Rog—what it said in her book, about there maybe being some protection, if ye had a gemstone with ye. There were the wee jewels in your Mam's locket, no?" He could hear her swallow.

"Maybe—if ye hadn't had that—ye might not have lived. She told about the folk who didn't. They were burned—and your burn's where the locket was."

"Yes. It could be." Roger was beginning to feel more like himself. He glanced curiously at Fiona.

"You always say 'her.' Why do you never say her name?"

Fiona's curls lifted in the dawn wind as she turned to look at him. It was light enough now to see her face clearly, with its expression of disconcerting directness.

"Ye dinna call something unless ye want it to come," she said. "Surely ye know that, and your father a minister?"

The hairs on his forearms prickled, despite the covering of shirt and coat.

"Now that you mention it," he said, trying for a joking tone, and failing utterly. "I wasn't quite calling my father's name, but perhaps … Dr. Randall said she thought of her husband, when she came back."

Fiona nodded, frowning. He could see her face clearly, and realized with a start that the light was growing. It was near dawn; the sky to the east was the shimmered color of a salmon's scales.

"Christ, it's almost morning! I've got to go!"

"Go?" Fiona's eyes went round with horror. "You're no going to try it *again?"*

"I am. I've got to." The lining of his mouth was cotton-dry, and he regretted that Fiona had used all the coffee extinguishing him. He fought down the hollow-bellied feeling and made it to his feet. His knees were wobbly, but he could walk.

"Are you mad, Rog? It'll kill ye, sure!"

He shook his head, eyes fixed on the tall cleft stone.

"No," he said, and hoped to hell he was right. "No, I know what went wrong. It won't happen again."

"You can't know, not for sure!"

"Aye, I do." He took her hand from his sleeve and held it between his own; it was small and cold. He smiled at her, though his face felt strangely numb. "I hope Ernie's not come home; he'll have the police looking for you. You'd best hurry back."

She shrugged, impatient.

“Och, he’s at the fishin’ with his cousin Neil; he’ll no be back till Tuesday. What d’ye mean, it won’t happen again—why won’t it?”

This was the thing that was harder to explain than the rest of it. He owed it to her to try, though.

“When I said I was thinking of my father, I was thinking of him from what I knew of him—the pictures of him in his airman’s kit, or with my mother. The thing is … I was born by that time. Do you see?” He searched her small, round face, and saw her blink slowly, comprehending. Her breath left her in a small sigh, of fear and wonder mingled.

“Ye didna only meet your Da, then, did ye?” she asked quietly.

He shook his head, wordless. No sight, no sound or smell or touch. There were no images at all to convey what it had been like to meet himself.

“I have to go,” he repeated softly. He squeezed her hand. “Fiona, I cannot say enough to thank you.”

She stared at him for a moment, her soft bottom lip thrust out, eyes glistening. Then she pulled loose, and twisting off her engagement ring, put it into his hand.

“It’s a wee stone, but it’s a real diamond,” she said. “It’ll maybe help.”

“I can’t take this!” He reached to give it back, but she took a step backward, and put her hands behind her back.

“Dinna worry, it’s insured,” she said. “Ernie’s a great one for the insurance.” She tried to smile at him, though the tears were running down her face now. “So am I.”

There was nothing more to say. He put the ring in the side pocket of his coat, and glanced at the great cleft stone, its black sides starting to glimmer as bits of mica and threads of quartz picked up the dawning light. He could hear the hum, still, though now it felt more like the pulsing of his blood; something inside him.

No words, and no need. He touched her face once lightly in farewell, and walked toward the stone, staggering slightly. He stepped into the cleft.

Fiona heard nothing, but the still, clear air of Midsummer's Day shimmered with an echoed name.

She waited for a long time, until the sun rested on top of the stone.

"Slan leat, a charaid chòir," she said, softly. "Luck to you, dear friend." She went slowly down the hill, and didn't look back.

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LALLYBROCH

Scotland, June 1769

The sorrel horse's name was Brutus, but luckily it didn't seem indicative of character so far. More plodder than plotter, he was strong and faithful—or if not faithful, at least resigned. He had carried her through the summer-green glens and rock-lined gorges without a slip, taking her higher and higher along the good roads made by the English general Wade fifty years before, and the bad roads beyond the General's reach, splashing through brushy burns and climbing up to the places where the roads dwindled away to nothing more than a red deer's track across the moor.

Brianna let the reins lie on Brutus's neck, letting him rest after the last climb, and sat still, surveying the small valley below. The big white-harled farmhouse sat serenely in the middle of pale green fields of oats and barley, its windows and chimneys edged in gray stone, the walled kailyard and the numerous outbuildings clustering around it like chicks round a big white hen.

She had never seen it before, but she was sure. She had heard her mother's descriptions of Lallybroch often enough. And besides, it was the only substantial house for miles; she had seen nothing else in the last three days but the tiny stone-walled crofters' cottages, many deserted and tumbled down, some no more than fire-black ruins.

Smoke was rising from a chimney below; someone was home. It was nearly midday; perhaps everyone was inside, eating dinner.

She swallowed, dry-mouthed with excitement and apprehension. Who would it be? Whom would she see first? Ian? Jenny? And how would they take her appearance, and her declaration?

She had decided simply to tell the truth, as far as who she was, and what she was doing there. Her mother had said how much she looked like her father; she would have to count on that resemblance to convince them. The Highlanders she had met so far were wary of her looks and strange speech; perhaps the Murrays wouldn't believe her. Then she remembered and touched the pocket of her coat; no, they'd believe her; she had proof, after all.

A sudden thought hollowed her breastbone. Could they possibly be here now? Jamie Fraser and her mother? The thought hadn't occurred to her before. She had been so convinced that they were in America—but that wasn't necessarily so. She only knew they *would* be in America in 1776; there was no telling where they were right now.

Brutus flung up his head and whinnied loudly. An answering neigh came from behind them, and Brianna drew up the reins as Brutus swung around. He lifted his head and nickered, nostrils flaring with interest as a handsome bay horse came round the bend of the road, carrying a tall man in brown.

The man pulled up his horse for a moment when he saw them, then twitched a heel against the bay's side and came on, slowly. He was young, she saw, and deeply tanned despite his hat; he must spend a good deal of time outdoors. The skirt of his coat was rumpled and his stockings were covered with dust and foxtails.

He came up to her warily, nodding as he came within speaking distance. Then she saw him stiffen in surprise, and smiled to herself.

He had just noticed that she was a woman. The men's clothes she wore would fool no one up close; "boyish" was the last word one would use to describe her figure. They served their purpose well enough, though—they were comfortable for riding and, given her height, made her look like a man on horseback at a distance.

The man swept off his hat and bowed to her, surprise plain on his face. He wasn't strictly good-looking, but had a pleasant, strong sort of face, with feathery brows—presently raised high—and soft brown eyes under a thick cap of curly hair, black and glossy with good health.

"Madame," he said. "Might I assist ye?"

She took off her own hat and smiled at him.

"I hope so," she said. "Is this place Lallybroch?"

He nodded, wariness now added to his surprise as he heard her odd accent.

"It is, so. Will ye be having some business here?"

"Yes," she said firmly. "I will." She drew herself up straight in the saddle and took a deep breath. "I'm Brianna … Fraser." It felt odd to say it aloud; she had never used the name before. It seemed strangely right, though.

The wariness on his face diminished, but the puzzlement didn't. He nodded cautiously.

"Your servant, ma'am. Jamie Fraser Murray," he added formally, bowing, "of Broch Tuarach."

"Young Jamie!" she exclaimed, startling him with her eagerness. "You're Young Jamie!"

"My family calls me so," he said stiffly, managing to give her the impression that he objected to having the name used wantonly by strange women in unsuitable clothes.

"Pleased to meet you," she said, undaunted. She extended a hand to him, leaning from her saddle. "I'm your cousin."

The brows, which had come down during the introductions, popped back up. He looked at her extended hand, then, incredulously, at her face.

"Jamie Fraser is my father," she said.

His jaw dropped, and he simply goggled at her for a moment. He looked her over minutely, head to toe, peered closely at her face, and then a wide, slow smile spread across his own.

"Damned if he isn't!" he said. He seized her hand and squeezed it tight enough to grind the bones together. "Christ, you've the look of him!"

He laughed, humor transforming his face.

"Jesus!" he said. "My mother will have kittens!"

The great rose brier that overhung the door was newly in leaf, hundreds of tiny green buds just forming. Brianna looked up at it as she followed Young Jamie, and caught sight of the lintel over the door.

Fraser, 1716 was carved into the weathered wood. She felt a small thrill at the sight, and stood staring up at the name for a moment, the sunwarm wood of the jamb solid under her hand.

"All right, Cousin?" Young Jamie had turned to look back at her inquiringly.

"Fine." She hurried into the house after him, automatically ducking her head, though there was no need.

"We're mostly tall, save my Mam and wee Kitty," Young Jamie said with a smile, seeing her duck. "My grandsire—your grandsire, too—built this house for his wife, who was a verra tall woman herself. It's the only house in the Highlands where ye can go through a doorway without ducking or bashing your head, I expect."

… *Your grandsire, too*. The casual words made her feel suddenly warm, in spite of the cool dimness of the entry hall.

Frank Randall had been an only child, as had her mother; such relatives as she had were not close—only a couple of elderly great-aunts in England, and some long-distant second cousins in Australia. She had set out thinking only to find her father; she hadn't realized that she might discover a whole new family in the process.

A *lot* of family. As she entered the hallway, with its scarred paneling, a door opened and four small children ran out, closely pursued by a tall young woman with brown curly hair.

"Ah, run for it, run for it, wee fishies!" she cried, rushing forward with outstretched hands snapping like pincers. "The wicked crab will have ye eaten up, snap, snap!"

The children fled down the hall in a gale of giggles and shrieks, looking back over their shoulders in terrified delight. One of them, a little boy of four or so, saw Brianna and Young Jamie standing in the entry and instantly reversed his direction, charging down the hallway like a runaway locomotive, shouting, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!”

The boy flung himself recklessly at Young Jamie’s midriff. The latter caught him expertly, and hoisted the beaming little boy in his arms.

“Now, then, wee Matthew,” he said sternly. “What sort of manners is this your auntie Janet’s teachin’ you? What will your new cousin be thinkin’, to see ye dashin’ about wi’ no more sense than a chicken after corn?”

The little boy giggled louder, not at all put off by the scolding. He peeked at Brianna, caught her eye, and promptly buried his face in his father’s shoulder. Slowly he raised his head and peeked again, blue eyes wide.

“Da!” he said. “Is that a lady?”

“Of course she is, I’ve told ye, she’s your cousin.”

“But she’s got on breeks!” Matthew stared at her in shock. “Ladies dinna wear breeks!”

The young woman looked rather as though she subscribed to this opinion as well, but she interrupted firmly, moving to take the little boy from his father.

“Well, and I’m sure she’s a fine reason for it, but it isna proper to be makin’ remarks before people’s faces. You go and get yourself washed, aye?” She set him down and turned him toward the door at the end of the hallway, giving him a gentle push. He didn’t move, but turned back around to stare at Brianna.

“Where’s Grannie, Matt?” his father asked.

“In the back parlor wi’ Grandda and a lady and a man,” Matthew replied promptly. “They’ve had two pots of coffee, a tray of scones, and a whole Dundee cake, but Mama says they’re hangin’ on in hopes of bein’ fed dinner, too, and good luck to them because it’s only brose and a bit o’ hough today, and damned—oop!”—he pressed a hand over his mouth, glancing guiltily at his father—“and drat if she’ll gie them any of the gooseberry tart, no matter how long they stay.”

Young Jamie gave his son a narrow look, then glanced quizzically at his sister. “A lady and a man?”

Janet made a faint moue of distaste.

“The Grizzler and her brother,” she said.

Young Jamie grunted, with a glance at Brianna.

“I imagine Mam will be pleased for an excuse to get away from them, then.” He nodded at Matthew. “Go and fetch your Grannie, lad. Tell her I’ve brought a visitor she’ll like to see. And watch your language, aye?” He turned Matthew toward the back of the house and slapped him gently on the rump in dismissal.

The little boy went, but slowly, casting glances of intense fascination over his shoulder at Brianna as he went.

Young Jamie turned back to Brianna, smiling.

“That’ll be my eldest,” he said. “And this”—gesturing to the young woman, “is my sister, Janet Murray. Janet—Mistress Brianna Fraser.”

Brianna didn’t know whether to offer to shake hands or not, and instead contented herself with a nod and a smile. “I’m very pleased to meet you,” she said warmly.

Janet’s eyes sprang wide with amazement, whether at what Brianna had said or at the accent with which she’d spoken, Brianna couldn’t tell.

Young Jamie grinned at his sister’s surprise.

“You’ll never guess who she is, Jen,” he said. “Never in a thousand years!”

Janet lifted one eyebrow, then narrowed her eyes at Brianna.

“Cousin,” she murmured, looking their guest frankly up and down. “She’s the look o’ the MacKenzies, surely. But she’s a Fraser, ye say …” Her eyes sprang suddenly wide.

“Oh, ye can’t be,” she said to Brianna. A wide smile began to spread across her face, pointing up the family resemblance to her brother. “You *can’t* be!”

Her brother’s chortle was interrupted by the swish of a swinging door and the sound of light footsteps on the boards of the hallway.

“Aye, Jamie? Mattie says we’ve a guest—” The soft, brisk voice died suddenly, and Brianna looked up, her heart suddenly in her throat.

Jenny Murray was very small—no more than five feet tall—and delicately boned as a sparrow. She stood staring at Brianna, mouth slightly open. Her eyes were the deep blue of gentians, made the more striking by a face gone white as paper.

"Oh, my," she said softly. "Oh, my." Brianna smiled tentatively, nodding to her aunt—her mother's friend, her father's beloved only sister. *Oh, please!* she thought, suddenly suffused with a longing as intense as it was unexpected. *Please like me, please be happy I'm here!*

Young Jamie bowed elaborately to his mother, beaming.

"Mam, might I have the honor to present to ye—"

"Jamie Fraser! I kent he was back—I told ye, Jenny Murray!"

The voice rang out from the back of the hallway in tones of highpitched accusation. Glancing up in startlement, Brianna saw a woman emerging from the shadows, rustling with indignation.

"Amyas Kettrick *told* me he'd seen your brother riding near Balriggan! But no, ye wouldna have it, would ye, Jenny—telling me I'm a fool, telling me Amyas is blind, and Jamie in America! Liars the both of ye, you and Ian, trying to protect that wicked coward! Hobart!" she shouted, turning toward the back of the house, "Hobart! Come out here this minute!"

"Be quiet!" said Jenny impatiently. "Ye *are* a fool, Laoghaire!" She jerked at the woman's sleeve, urging her around. "And as for who's blind, look at her! Are ye too far past it to tell the difference between a grown man and a lass in breeks, for heaven's sake?" Her own eyes stayed fixed on Brianna, bright with speculation.

"A *lass?*"

The other woman turned, frowning nearsightedly at Brianna. Then she blinked once, anger erased as her round face went slack with surprise. She gasped, crossing herself.

"Mary, Margaret and Bride! Who in the name of God are *you?*"

Brianna took a deep breath, looking from one woman to the other as she answered, trying to keep her voice from shaking.

"My name is Brianna. I'm Jamie Fraser's daughter."

Both women's eyes popped wide. The woman called Laoghaire grew slowly red and seemed to swell, opening and closing her mouth in a futile search for words.

Jenny stepped forward, though, and seized Brianna's hands, looking up into her face. A soft pink bloomed in her cheeks, making her look suddenly young.

"Jamie's? You're truly Jamie's lassie?" She squeezed Brianna's hands hard between her own.

"My mother says so."

Brianna felt the answering smile on her own face. Jenny's hands were cool, but Brianna felt a rush of warmth nonetheless, which spread through her hands and up into her chest. She caught the faint, spicy scent of baking in the folds of Jenny's gown, and something else, more earthy and pungent, that she thought must be the smell of sheep's wool.

"Does she, so?" Laoghaire had recovered both her voice and her self-possession. She stepped forward, eyes narrowed. "Jamie Fraser's your father, aye? And just who might your mother be?"

Brianna stiffened.

"His wife," she said. "Who else?"

Laoghaire put back her head and laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh.

"Who else?" she said, mimicking. "Who else indeed, lassie! And just which wife would that be, now?"

Brianna felt the blood drain from her own face, and her hands grow stiff in Jenny's as the flood of realization washed over her. You idiot, she thought. You stupid idiot. It was twenty years! Of course he would have married again. Of course. No matter how much he loved Mama.

On the heels of this thought was another, more terrible. *Did she find him? Oh, God, did she find him with a new wife, and he sent her away? Oh, God, where is she?*

She turned blindly, wanting to run, not knowing where to go, what to do, only feeling that she must get out of here at once, and find her mother.

"You'll be wanting to sit down, I expect, Cousin. Come into the parlor, aye?" Young Jamie's voice was firm in her ear, and his arm was around her, turning her, urging her down the hall and through one of the doors that opened off it.

She scarcely heard the babble of voices around her, the confusion of explanations and accusations that popped around her ears like strings of firecrackers. She glimpsed a small, neat man with a face like the White Rabbit, looking vastly surprised, and another man, much taller, who rose as she came into the parlor and came toward her, his weathered, homely face creased in concern.

It was the tall man who calmed the racket and brought everyone to order, extracting from the confused muddle of voices an explanation of her presence.

"Jamie's daughter?" He glanced at her with interest, but looked much less surprised than anyone else so far. "What's your name, *a leannan*?"

"Brianna." She was too upset to smile at him, but he didn't seem to mind.

"Brianna." He eased himself down on a hassock, motioning her to a seat opposite, and she saw that he had a wooden leg that protruded stiffly to one side. He took her hand and smiled at her, the warm light in his soft brown eyes making her feel momentarily safer.

"I'm your uncle Ian, lass. Welcome to ye." Her own hand tightened on his involuntarily, clinging to the refuge he seemed to offer. He didn't flinch or draw back, just looked her over carefully, seeming amused by the way she was dressed.

"Been sleeping in the heather, have ye?" he said, seeing the dirt and plant stains on her clothes. "You'll have come some way to find us, niece."

"She *says* she's your niece," Laoghaire said. Recovered from her shock, she peered over Ian's shoulder, her round face pinched with dislike. "Belike she's only come to see what she can get."

"I shouldna be callin' the kettle black, Laoghaire," Ian said mildly. He twisted round to face her. "Or was it not you and Hobart a half-hour past, tryin' to squeeze five hundred pounds from me?"

Her lips pressed tight together, deepening the lines that bracketed her mouth.

"That money's mine," she snapped, "and well ye know it! It was agreed to; you witnessed the paper."

Ian sighed; evidently this wasn't the first he had heard of the matter today.

"I did," he said patiently. "And ye'll have your money—so soon as Jamie's able to send it. He's promised, and he's an honorable man. But—"

"Honorable, is it?" Laoghaire produced an unladylike snort. "Is it honorable to commit bigamy, then? Desert his wife and children? Steal away my daughter and ruin her? Honorable!" She looked at Brianna, eyes bright and hard as fresh-rolled steel.

"I'll ask again, lass—what's your mother's name?"

Brianna simply stared at her, overwhelmed. The stock around her throat was choking her, and her hands felt icy, despite Ian's grasp.

"Your mother," Laoghaire repeated, impatient. "Who was she?"

"It doesna matter who—" Jenny began, but Laoghaire rounded on her, face flushed with fury.

"Oh, it matters! If he got her on some army whore, or some slut of a maidservant when he was in England—that's one thing. But if she's—"

"Laoghaire!"

"Sister!"

"Ye foul-tongued besom!"

Brianna put a stop to the outcry simply by standing up. She was as tall as any of the men, and towered over the women. Laoghaire took one quick step back. Every face in the room was turned to her, marked with hostility, sympathy, or merely curiosity.

With a coolness that she didn't feel, Brianna reached for the inner pocket of her coat, the secret pocket she had sewed into the seam only a week before. It seemed like a century.

"My mother's name is Claire," she said, and dropped the necklace on the table.

There was utter silence in the room, save for the soft hissing of the peat fire, burning low on the hearth. The pearl necklace lay gleaming, the spring sun from the window picking out the gold pierced-work roundels like sparks.

It was Jenny who spoke first. Moving like a sleepwalker, she reached out a slender finger and touched one of the pearls.

Freshwater pearls, the kind called baroque because of their singular, irregular, unmistakable shapes.

"Oh, my," Jenny said softly. She lifted her head and looked Brianna in the face, the slanted blue eyes shimmering with what looked like tears. "I am so very glad to see ye—Niece."

* * *

"Where is my mother? Do you know?" Brianna glanced from face to face, her heart beating heavily in her ears. Laoghaire was not looking at her; her gaze was fastened to the pearls, face gone cold and frozen.

Jenny and Ian exchanged a quick glance, then Ian stood up, moving awkwardly to bring his leg under him.

"She's with your Da," he said quietly, touching Brianna's arm. "Dinna fash yourself, lassie; they're both safe."

Brianna resisted the impulse to collapse with relief. Instead, she let out her breath very carefully, feeling the knot of anxiety loosen slowly in her belly.

"Thank you," she said. She tried to smile at Ian, but her face felt slack and rubbery. *Safe. And together. Oh, thank you!* she thought, in wordless gratitude.

"Those are mine, by rights." Laoghaire nodded at the pearls. She wasn't angry now, but coldly self-possessed. Without the distortions of fury, Brianna could see that she had once been very pretty, and was still a handsome woman—tall for a Scot, and graceful in her movements. She had the kind of delicate fair coloring that fades quickly, and had thickened through the middle, but her figure was still erect and firm, and her face still showed the pride of a woman who has known herself beautiful.

"That they're not!" said Jenny, with a quick flash of temper. "They were my mother's jewels, that my father gave to Jamie for his wife, and—"

"And his wife I am," Laoghaire interrupted. She looked at Brianna then, a cold, gauging look.

“I am his wife,” she repeated. “I married him in good faith, and he promised me payment for the wrong he did me.” She turned her cold gaze on Jenny. “It’s been more than a year since I’ve seen a penny. Am I to sell my shoes to feed my daughter—the one he’s left to me?”

She lifted her chin and looked at Brianna.

“If you’re his daughter, then his debts are yours as well. Tell her, Hobart!”

Hobart looked mildly embarrassed.

“Ah, now, Sister,” he said, putting a hand on her arm in an attempt to be soothing. “I dinna think—”

“No, ye don’t, and haven’t since ye were born!” She shook him off in irritation, and stretched out a hand toward the pearls. “They’re mine!”

It was pure reflex; the pearls were clutched tight in Brianna’s hand before she had made the decision to snatch them. The gold roundels were cool against her skin, but the pearls were warm—the sign of a genuine pearl, her mother had told her.

“You wait just one minute here.” The strength and coldness of her own voice surprised her. “I don’t know who you are, and I don’t know what happened between you and my father, but—”

“I am Laoghaire MacKenzie, and your bastard of a father married me four years ago—under false pretenses, I might add.” Laoghaire’s anger had not disappeared but seemed to have submerged; her face had a tight, stretched look, but she was not shouting, and the red had faded from her soft, plump cheeks.

Brianna took a deep breath, striving for calmness.

“Yes? But if my mother is with my father now—”

“He left me.”

The words were spoken without heat, but they fell with the weight of stones in still water, spreading endless ripples of pain and betrayal. Young Jamie had been opening his mouth to speak; he shut it again, watching Laoghaire.

“He said that he could not bear it longer—to dwell in the same house with me, to share my bed.” She spoke calmly, as though reciting a piece she had learned by heart, her eyes still fixed on the empty spot where the pearls had rested.

"So he left. And then he came back—with the witch. Flaunted her in my face; bedded her under my nose." Slowly, she raised her eyes to Brianna's, studying her with quiet intensity, searching out the mysteries of her face. Slowly, she nodded.

"It was she," she said, with a certainty that was faintly eerie in its calmness. "She cast her spells on him from the day she came to Leoch—and on me. She made me invisible. From the day she came, he could not see me."

Brianna felt a small shiver run up her spine, despite the hissing peat fire on the hearth.

"And then she was gone. Dead, they said. Killed in the Rising. And him come home again from England, free at long last." She shook her head very slightly; her eyes still rested on Brianna's face, but Brianna knew Laoghaire didn't see her any longer.

"But she wasna dead at all," Laoghaire said softly. "And he was not free. I knew that; I always knew that. Ye canna kill a witch with steel—they must burn." Laoghaire's pale blue eyes turned to Jenny.

"You saw her—at my wedding. Her fetch standing there, between me and him. Ye saw her, but ye didna say. I only heard it later, when ye told Maisri the seer. You should ha' told me, then." It was a not so much an accusation as a statement of fact.

Jenny's face had gone pale again, the slanted blue eyes dark with something—perhaps fear. She licked her lips and started to reply, but Laoghaire's attention had shifted to Ian.

"Ye'd best be wary, Ian Murray," she said, her tone now matter-of-fact. She nodded toward Brianna. "Look at her weel, man. Is a right woman made so? Taller than most men, dressed as a man, wi' hands as broad as a dinner plate, fit to choke the life from one o' your weans, should she choose."

Ian didn't answer, though his long, homely face looked troubled. Young Jamie's fists clenched, though, and his jaw set tight. Laoghaire saw it, and a small smile touched the corners of her mouth.

"She is a witch's child," she said. "And ye know it, all of you!" She glanced around the room, challenging each uncomfortable face. "They should have burned her mother in Cranesmuir, save for the lovespell she'd put on Jamie Fraser. Aye, I say be wary of what ye've brought into your house!"

Brianna brought the flat of her hand down on the table with a thump, startling everyone.

"Hogwash," she said loudly. She could feel the blood rushing to her face, and didn't care. All the faces were gawking, mouths open, but she had no attention to spare for anyone but Laoghaire MacKenzie.

"Hogwash," she said again, and pointed a finger at the woman. "If they ought to be wary of anybody, it's you, you fucking murderess!"

Laoghaire's mouth was open wider than anyone's, but no sound came out.

"You didn't tell them *all* about Cranesmuir, did you? My mother should have, but she didn't. She thought you were too young to know what you were doing. You weren't, though, were you?"

"What …?" said Jenny, in a faint voice.

Young Jamie looked wildly at his father, who stood as though poleaxed, staring at Brianna.

"She tried to kill my mother." Brianna was having trouble controlling her voice; it cracked and trembled, but she got the words out. "You did, didn't you? You told her Geillis Duncan was ill and calling for her—you knew she'd go, she always went to anybody sick, she's a doctor! You knew they were going to arrest Geilie Duncan for witchcraft, and if my mother was there, they'd take her, too! You thought they'd burn her, and then you could have him—have Jamie Fraser."

Laoghaire was white to the lips, her face set like stone. Even her eyes had no life; they were blank and dull as marbles.

"I could feel her hand on him," she whispered. "In our bed. Lying there between us, wi' her hand on him, so he would stiffen and cry out to her in his sleep. She *was* a witch. I always knew."

The room was silent, save for the hissing of the fire, and the tender singing of a small bird outside the window. Hobart

MacKenzie stirred at last, coming forward to take his sister by the arm.

“Come away, *a leannan,*” he said quietly. “I’ll see ye safe home now.” He nodded to Ian, who returned the nod, with a small gesture that somehow conveyed both sympathy and regret.

Laoghaire allowed her brother to lead her away, unresisting, but at the door she stopped and turned back. Brianna stood still; she didn’t think she could move if she tried.

“If you’re Jamie Fraser’s daughter,” Laoghaire said, in a cold clear voice, “and ye may be, given your looks—know this. Your father is a liar and a whoremaster, a cheat and a pander. I wish ye well of each other.” She gave in then to Hobart’s tugging at her sleeve, and the door swung to behind her.

The rage that had filled her drained suddenly away, and Brianna leaned forward, resting her weight on the palms of her hands, the necklace hard and lumpy under her hand. Her hair had come loose, and a thick strand fell over her face.

Her eyes were closed against the dizziness that threatened to engulf her; she felt, rather than saw, the hand that touched her and tenderly smoothed the locks back from her face.

“He went on loving her,” she whispered, as much to herself as to anyone else. “He didn’t forget her.”

“Of course he didna forget her.” She opened her eyes to see Ian’s long face and kind brown eyes six inches away. A broad work-worn hand rested on hers, warm and hard, a hand even larger than her own.

“Neither did we,” he said.

* * *

“Will ye no have a bit more, Cousin Brianna?” Joan, Young Jamie’s wife, smiled across the table, serving spoon poised invitingly above the crumbled remains of a gigantic gooseberry tart.

“Thank you, no. I couldn’t eat another bite,” Brianna said, smiling back. “I’m stuffed!”

This made Matthew and his little brother Henry giggle loudly, but a gimlet gleam from their grandmother's eye shut them up sharply. Looking round the table, though, Brianna could see suppressed laughter blooming on all the faces; from grown-ups to toddlers, they all seemed to find her slightest remark endlessly entertaining.

It was neither her unorthodox costume nor the sheer novelty of seeing a stranger, she thought—even one stranger than most. There was something else; some current of joy that ran among the members of the family, unseen but lively as electricity.

She realized only slowly what it was; a remark from Ian brought it into focus.

"We didna think that Jamie would ever have a bairn of his own." Ian's smile across the table was warm enough to melt ice. "You'll never have seen him, though?"

She shook her head, swallowing the remains of the last bite, smiling back in spite of her full mouth. That was it, she thought; they were delighted with her not so much for her sake, but for Jamie's. They loved him, and they were happy not for themselves but for him.

That realization brought tears to her eyes. Laoghaire's accusations had shaken her, wild as they were, and it was a great comfort to realize that to all of these people who knew him well, Jamie Fraser was neither a liar nor a wicked man; he was indeed the man her mother thought him.

Mistaking her emotion for choking, Young Jamie pounded her helpfully on the back, making her choke in good earnest.

"Will ye have written Uncle Jamie, then, to say as ye were coming to us?" he asked, ignoring her coughing and red-faced spluttering.

"No," she said hoarsely. "I don't know where he is."

Jenny's gull-winged brows went up.

"Aye, ye said that; I'd forgotten."

"Do you know where he is now? He and my mother?" Brianna bent forward anxiously, brushing pastry crumbs from her jabot.

Jenny smiled and rose from the table.

"Aye, I do—more or less. If ye've eaten your fill, d'ye come with me, lassie. I'll fetch his last letter for ye."

Brianna rose to follow Jenny, but stopped abruptly near the door. She had vaguely noticed some paintings on the walls of the parlor earlier, but hadn't really looked at them, in the rush of emotion and event. She looked at this one, though.

Two little boys with red-gold hair, stiffly solemn in kilts and jackets, white shirts with frills showing bright against the dark coat of a huge dog that sat beside them, tongue lolling in patient boredom.

The older boy was tall and fine-featured; he sat straight and proud, chin lifted, one hand resting on the dog's head, the other protectively on the shoulder of the small brother who stood between his knees.

It was the younger boy Brianna stared at, though. His face was round and snub-nosed, cheeks translucent and ruddy as apples. Wide blue eyes, slightly slanted, looked out under a bell of bright hair combed into an unnatural tidiness. The pose was formal, done in classic eighteenth-century style, but there was something in the robust, stocky little figure that made her smile and reach a finger to touch his face.

"Aren't you a sweetie," she said softly.

"Jamie was a sweet laddie, but a stubborn wee fiend, forbye." Jenny's voice by her ear startled her. "Beat him or coax him, it made no difference; if he'd made up his mind, it stayed made up. Come wi' me; there's another picture you'll like to see, I think."

The second portrait hung on the landing of the stairs, looking thoroughly out of place. From below she could see the ornate gilded frame, its heavy carving quite at odds with the solid, battered comfort of the house's other furnishings. It reminded her of pictures in museums; this homely setting seemed incongruous.

As she followed Jenny onto the landing the glare of light from the window disappeared, leaving the painting's surface flat and clear before her.

She gasped, and felt the hair rise on her forearms, under the linen of her shirt.

"It's remarkable, aye?" Jenny looked from the painting to Brianna and back again, her own features marked with something between pride and awe.

“Remarkable!” Brianna agreed, swallowing.

“Ye see why we kent ye at once,” her aunt went on, laying a loving hand against the carved frame.

“Yes. Yes, I can see that.”

“It will be my mother, aye? Your grandmother, Ellen MacKenzie.”

“Yes,” Brianna said. “I know.” Dust motes stirred up by their footsteps whirled lazily through the afternoon light from the window. Brianna felt rather as though she was whirling with them, no longer anchored to reality.

Two hundred years from now, she had—I *will*? she thought wildly—stood in front of this portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, furiously denying the truth that it showed.

Ellen MacKenzie looked out at her now as she had then; long-necked and regal, slanted eyes showing a humor that did not quite touch the tender mouth. It wasn’t a mirror image, by any means; Ellen’s forehead was high, narrower than Brianna’s, and the chin was round, not pointed, her whole face somewhat softer and less bold in its features.

But the resemblance was there, and pronounced enough to be startling; the wide cheekbones and lush red hair were the same. And around her neck was the string of pearls, gold roundels bright in the soft spring sun.

“Who painted it?” Brianna said at last, though she didn’t need to hear the answer. The tag by the painting in the museum had given the artist as “Unknown.” But having seen the portrait of the two little boys below, Brianna knew, all right. This picture was less skilled, an earlier effort—but the same hand had painted that hair and skin.

“My mother herself,” Jenny was saying, her voice filled with a wistful pride. “She’d a great hand for drawing and painting. I often wished I had the gift.”

Brianna felt her fingers curl unconsciously, the illusion of the brush between them momentarily so vivid she could have sworn she felt smooth wood.

That's where, she thought, with a small shiver, and heard an almost audible *click!* of recognition as a tiny piece of her past dropped into place. *That's where I got it.*

Frank Randall had joked that he couldn't draw a straight line; Claire that she drew nothing else. But Brianna had the gift of line and curve, of light and shadow—and now she had the source of the gift, as well.

What else? she thought suddenly. What else did she have that had once belonged to the woman in the picture, to the boy with the stubborn tilt to his head?

"Ned Gowan brought me this from Leoch," Jenny said, touching the frame with a certain reverence. "He saved it, when the English battered down the castle, after the Rising." She smiled faintly. "He's a great one for family, Ned is. He's a Lowlander from Edinburgh, wi' no kin of his own, but he's taken the MacKenzies for his clan—even now the clan's no more."

"No more?" Brianna blurted. "They're all dead?" The horror in her voice made Jenny glance at her, surprised.

"Och, no. I didna mean that, lass. But Leoch's gone," she added, in a softer tone. "And the last chiefs with it—Colum and his brother Dougal … they died for the Stuarts."

She had known that, of course; Claire had told her. What was surprising was the sudden rush of an unexpected grief; regret for these strangers of her newfound blood. With an effort, she swallowed the thickening in her throat and turned to follow Jenny up the stairs.

"Was Leoch a great castle?" she asked. Her aunt paused, hand on the banister.

"I dinna ken," she said. Jenny glanced back at Ellen's picture, something like regret in her eyes.

"I never saw it—and now it's gone."

* * *

Entering the bedroom on the second floor was like entering an undersea cavern. The room was small, as all the rooms were, with low beams smoked black from years of peat fires, but the walls were fresh and white, and the room itself was filled with a greenish, wavering light that spilled through two large windows, filtered by the leaves of the swaying rose brier.

Here and there some bright thing blinked or glowed like a reef fish in the soft gloom; a painted doll that lay on the hearthrug, abandoned by a grandchild, a Chinese basket with a pierced coin tied to its lid by way of ornament. A brass candlestick on the table, a small painting on the wall, rich colors deep against the whitewash.

Jenny went at once to the big armoire that stood at the side of the room, and stood on tiptoe to bring down a large morocco-covered box, its corners worn with age. As she put back the lid, Brianna caught the glint of metal and a small sharp flash, as of sunlight on jewels.

"Here it is." Jenny brought out a thick, folded wad of grimy paper, much traveled and much read by the looks of it, and put it into Brianna's hand. It had been sealed; a smudge of greasy wax still clung to the end of one sheet.

"They're in the Colony of North Carolina, but they dinna live near any town," Jenny explained. "Jamie writes a bit in the evenings when he can, and keeps the bits all by him, till either he or Fergus takes the journey down to Cross Creek, or a traveler passes by who will carry the letter. That suits him; he doesna write easy—especially since he broke his hand that time ago."

Brianna started at the casual reference, but her aunt's calm face showed no special awareness.

"Sit ye down, lassie." She waved a hand, giving Brianna the choice of stool or bed.

"Thank you," Brianna murmured, taking the stool. So perhaps Jenny didn't know everything about Jamie and Black Jack Randall? The notion that she might know things about this unseen man that not even his beloved sister knew was in a way unsettling. To dismiss the thought, she hurriedly opened the letter.

The scrawled words sprang out at her, black and vivid. She had seen this writing before—its cramped, difficult letters, with the big, looping tails, but that had been on a document two hundred years old, its ink brown and faded, its writing constrained by careful thought and formality. Here he had felt free—the writing rolled across the page in a bold broken scrawl, the lines tilting drunkenly up at the ends. It was untidy, but readable for all that.

Fraser's Ridge, Monday 19 September

My dearest Jenny,

All here are in Good Health and Spirits, and trust that this letter will find all in your Household likewise Content.

Your son sends his Most Affectionate Regards, and begs to be Remembered to his Father, Brothers and Sisters. He bids you tell Matthew and Henry that he sends them the Encloased Object, which is the preserved Skull of an animal called Porpentine by Reason of its Prodigious Spines (though it is not at all like the small Hedge-creepie which you will know by that name, being much Greater in Size and Dwelling in the Treetops, where it Feasts upon the tender shoots). Tell Matthew and Henry that I do not know why the Teeth are orange. No Doubt the animal finds it Decorative.

Also enclosed you will find a small Present for yourself; the Patterning is contrived by use of the Quills of this same Porpentine, which the Indians dye with the juices of several Plants, before weaving them in the Ingenious Manner you see before you.

Claire has been recently much Interested by Conversation—if the term can be used for a Communication limited mostly to Gesticulations and the Making of Faces (she insists I note here that she does not Make Faces, to which I reply that I am in Better Case to judge of the matter, being able to see the Face in question, which she is not)—in Conversation with an old woman of the Indians, much Esteemed in this area as a Healer, who has Given her many such plants. In consequence, her fingers are Purple at present, which I find Most Decorative.

Tuesday, 20 Sept.

I have been much Occupied today in repair and strengthening of the penfold in which we keep our few cows, pigs, etc. at night, to protect them from the depredations of Bears, which are plentiful. In walking to the privy this morning, I espied a great Pawprint in the mud, which Measured quite the length of my own Foot. The stock appeared Nervous and disturbed, for which Condition I can scarce Blame them.

Do not, I pray you, suffer any Alarm on our account. The Black Bears of this country are wary of Humans, and Loath to approach even a Single Man. Also, our house is strongly built, and I have forbidden Ian to go Abroad after dark, save he is Well-armed.

In the matter of Armament, our situation is much Improved. Fergus has brought back from High Point both a fine Rifle of the new kind, and several excellent Knives.

Also a large boiling kettle, whose Acquisition we have Celebrated with a great quantity of tasty Stew, made with Venison, wild Onions from the wood, dried beans, and likewise some Tomatoe-fruits, dried from the Summer. None of us Died or suffered Ill-effects from Eating of this stew, so Claire is likely right, Tomatoes are not Poison.

Wednesday, 21 Sept.

The Bear has come again. I found large Prints and Scrapings on the newturned ground of Claire's Garden today. The beast will be fattening for its Winter slumbers, and no doubt seeks to Digg for grubs in the fresh Earth.

I have Removed the Sow to our Pantry, since she is near Farrowing. Neither Claire nor the Sow was greatly pleased by this arrangement, but the Animal is valuable, having cost me three pound from Mr. Quillan.

Four Indians came today. They are of the kind called Tuscarora. I have met these men on several Occasions, and found them most Amiable.

The Savages having expressed a determination to hunt our particular Bear, I made them a Gift of some tobacco and a Knife, with which they seemed Pleasd.

They sat under the eaves of the House most of the morning, Smoking and talking among themselves, but then near midday made to Depart upon their Hunt. I inquired whether, the Bear seeming Fond of our Society, it would not be best for the Hunters to lie hidden nearby, in Hopes that the animal will return here.

I was Informed—with the Kindest Condescension possible through word and sign—that the appearance of the Animal's droppings indicated beyond any Doubt that it had Quitted the area, and was Bound upon some errand to the west.

Being of no Mind to take issue with such Expert practitioners, I wished them luck and bade them a cordial Farewell. I could not accompany them, having urgent Labors still to perform here, but Ian and Rollo have gone with them, as they have done before.

I have loaded my new Rifle and left it ready to Hand, lest our friends' apprehension as to the Bear's intent be Mistaken.

Thursday, 22 Sept.

I was roused from Sleep last night by a Hideous Noise. This was a great Scraping, which reverberated thru the wooden logs of the wall, accompanied by such Thumps and loud Wails that I bolted from my Bed, convinced that the house was like to Fall about our Ears.

The Sow, observing the nearness of an Enemy, burst through the door of the Pantry (which I will say was flimsily made) and took Refuge beneath our Bed, squealing in a Manner to deafen us. Perceiving that the Bear was at Hand, I seiz'd my new Rifle and ran outside.

It was a moonlit Night, though hazy, and I could plainly see my Adversary, a great black shape, which stretched upon its hind feet *appeared near as Tall as Myself, and (to my anxious eyes) roughly three times as Wide, being at no Great Distance from me.*

I fired at it, whereon it Dropped to all fours and Ran with amazing Speed toward the shelter of the nearby Wood, disappearing before I could make Shift to shoot any more.

Come Daylight, I searched the ground for sign of Blood and found none, so cannot say did my Shot find its Target. The side of the House is decorated with several long Scrapes, as might be made with a sharpened Adze or Chizl, showing white in the Wood.

We have since been at some Pains to persuade the Sow (she is a White Sow, of Prodigious Size, a most Stubborn Temper, and not lacking in Teeth) to quit our bed and repair to her Sanctuary in the pantry. She was Reluctant, but was at length persuaded by the Combination of a trail of shattered corn laid before her, and myself at her Rear, Armed with a Stout Broom.

Monday, 26th Sept.

Ian and his Red Companions have returned, their Prey having eluded them in the wood. I shrewd them the Scratches upon the Side of the House, whereon they became Excited and talked among themselves at such a Rate I could not Follow their Words.

One man then detached a large tooth from his necklace of such items and presented it to me with great Ceremony, saying that it would serve to Identify me to the Bear-spirit, and thus protect me from Harm. I accepted this Token with all due Solemnity, and was then oblig'd to present him with a piece of Honeycomb in Exchange, thus the proprieties were observ'd.

Claire was called to provide the Honeycomb, and with her usual eye for such Matters, perceived that one of our guests was Unwell, being heavy-eyed, coughing, and distracted in Appearance. Claire says he is also Flushed with fever, though this is not obvious to look at him. He being *too ill to continue with his Companions, we have laid him on a pallet in the corncrib.*

The sow has Most Incontinently farrowed in the pantry. There are a dozen piglets, all healthy and of a Vigorous Appetite, for which God be thanked. Our own Appetites bid fair to be impoverished for the present, as the Sow viciously Attacks anyone who opens the door of the Pantry, roaring and gnashing her Teeth in Rage. I was given one egg to my supper, and informed that I shall get no more until I have Contriv'd a solution to this Difficulty.

Saturday, 1 October

A great Surprise today. Two Guests have come …

"It will be a wild place."

Brianna looked up, startled. Jenny nodded at the letter, her eyes fixed on Brianna.

"Savages and bears and porpentines and such. It's no much more than a wee cot, where they live, Jamie told me. And all alone, up in the high mountains. Verra wild, it will be." She looked at Brianna a little anxiously. "But ye'll still wish to go?"

Brianna realized suddenly that Jenny was afraid she would not; that she would be frightened by the thought of the long journey and the savage place at the end of it. A savage place rendered suddenly real by the scrawled black words on the sheet she held—but not nearly as real as the man who had written them.

"I'm going," she assured her aunt. "As soon as I can."

Jenny's face relaxed.

"Oh, good," she said. She held out her hand, showing Brianna a small leather pouch decorated with a panel made of porcupine's quills, stained in shades of red and black, with here and there a few quills left in their natural grayish color for contrast.

"This is the present he sent me."

Brianna took it, admiring the intricacy of the pattern, and the softness of the pale deer's hide.

"It's beautiful."

"Aye, it is." Jenny turned away, busying herself with unnecessary tidying of the small ornaments that stood on the bookshelf. Brianna had just turned her attention back to the letter when Jenny spoke abruptly.

"Will ye stay a bit?"

Brianna looked up, startled.

"Stay?"

"Only for a day or two." Jenny turned around, the light from the window halo-bright behind her, shadowing her face.

"I ken ye'll wish to be gone," she said. "I should wish so much to talk wi' ye for a bit, though."

Brianna looked at her, puzzled, but could read nothing in the pale, even features and the slanted eyes so like her own.

"Yes," she said slowly. "Of course I'll stay."

A smile touched the corner of Jenny's mouth. Her hair was deep black, streaked with white like a magpie.

"That's good," she said softly. The smile spread slowly as she looked at her niece.

"Dear Lord, you're like my brother!"

* * *

Left alone, Brianna returned to the letter, rereading the beginning slowly, letting the quiet room around her fade, disappearing as Jamie Fraser came to life in her hands, his voice so vivid in her inner ear that he might have stood before her, the sun from the window glinting on his red hair.

Saturday, 1 October

A great Surprise today. Two Guests have come from Cross Creek. You will recall, I think, my Telling you of Lord John Grey, whom I knew in Ardsmuir. I have not said that I had seen him since, in Jamaica, where he was Governor for the Crown.

He is perhaps the last Person one should expect to find in this Remote Place, so far Removed from all Traces of Civilization, let alone those Luxurious Offices and Trappings of Pomp to which he is Accustomed.

Surely we were Most Astonish'd by his appearing at our door, though we at once made him Welcome.

It is a melancholy Event that has led him here, I am Sorry to say. His wife, embarked from England with her son, contracted a Fever on the voyage, and Died of it while on the Ocean. Fearing lest the Miasmas of the Tropics prove as Fatal to the Boy as to his Mother, Lord John determined that the lad must go to Virginia, where Lord John's family has Substantial Property, and Determined to escort him there himself, seeing that the Lad was greatly Desolated by loss of his Mother.

I Expressed Amazement, as well as Gratification, that they should chuse to make such Alteration in their Journey as required to visit this Distant Spot, but his Lordship dismisses this, saying that he would have the Boy see something of the different Colonies, so as to appreciate the Richness and Variety of this Land. The lad is most Desirous of encountering Red Indians—reminding me in this Respect of Ian, not so long ago.

He is a comely lad, tall and Well-form'd for his Years, which I believe are near Twelve. He is somewhat subject still to Melancholy from his Mother's death, but is most Pleasant in Conversation, and Mannerly, for all he is an Earl (Lord John is his stepfather, I believe; his father having been Earl of Ellesmere). His name is William.

Brianna turned the page over, expecting continuation, but the passage stopped on that abrupt note. There was a break of several days before the letter resumed, on the 4th of October.

Tuesday, 4 October

The Indian in the corncrib died early this morning, in spite of Claire's best efforts to save him. His face, body and limbs were entirely suffused with a dreadful Rash, giving him a most Grewsome and Mottled look.

Claire thinks he suffered from the Measle, and is much Concerned, this being a Vicious Disease, plaguish and quick to Spread. She would not suffer anyone to go near the Body save only herself—she says she is Safe *from it, by means of some charm—but we did all Assemble near Midday, whereat I read some Scripture suitable to the Occasion, and we said a Prayer for the Repose of his soul—for I trust that even unbaptised Savages may find rest in God's Mercy.*

We are in some doubt how this poor soul's Earthly Remains shall be Disposed. I would in common course send Ian to summon his Friends, that they might give him such Burial as is common among the Indians.

Claire says we must not do this, however, for the Corpse itself may Spread the Disease among the man's own People, a Disaster which he would not Chuse to bring upon his Friends. She advocates burying or Burning the Corpse ourselves, and yet I am reluctant to undertake such Action, which might be easily Misunderstood by the man's Companions —they thinking that we Sought by this means to hide some Complicity in his Death.

I have said nothing of this Concern to our Guests. If Danger seems Imminent, I must send them away. Still, I am loathe to Part with their society, so isolated is our situation. For now, we have Laid the Body in a small Dry Cave in the hill above the House, wherein I had thought to build a Stable or Storehouse.

I ask your forgiveness for thus Unburdening my Mind at the cost of your own Peace. I think all will be Well in the end, but for the Moment, I confess to some Worry. Should Danger—either from Indians or Disease —seem to threaten, I will send this Letter at once in the care of our Guests, that it may be Certain of reaching you.

If all is Well, I will write quickly to tell you.

Your Most Loving Brother,
Jamie Fraser

Brianna's mouth felt dry and she swallowed, forcing saliva. There were two sheets yet to the letter; they clung together for a moment, stubbornly resisting her efforts to separate them, and then gave way.

Postscriptum, 20 October

We are all Safe, though the Manner of our Deliverance is most Melancholy; I will tell you of it later, having no great Heart for the matter at present.

Ian has been Sick of the Measle, as has Lord John, but they are both Recovered, and Claire bids me say that Ian does Exceeding well, you shall have no Fear for him. He writes in his own Hand, that you may know it is the Truth.

—J.

On the last sheet was writing in a different hand, this one neat and carefully schooled to an even slant, though here and there a blot defaced the page, perhaps the result either of the writer's illness or a defective pen.

Dear Mam—

I have been Sick, but am all Right agayne. I had a Fever, with most Peculiar Dreams, full of odd things. There was a great Wolf that came and spoke to me in the Voice of a man, but Auntie Claire says this must have been Rollo, who Stayed by me all the time I was Ill, he is a very Good Dog and does not bite very often.

The Measles came out in small Bumps beneath my Skin, and itched like Fury. I should have thought I had sat down on an Anthill, or wandered into a Hornet's nest. My head felt twice its usual Size, and I sneezed quite Ferocious.

I had three Eggs to my Breakfast today, and porridge, and have Walked to the privy alone twice, so I am quite Well, though I thought at first the Sickness had left me Blind—I could see nothing but a great Dazzle of Light when I went outside, but Auntie said this would soon be remedied, and it was.

I will write more later—Fergus is waiting to take the Letter away.

Your most Obedient and Devoted Son,
Ian Murray

P.S. The Porpentine skull is for Henry and Mattie, I hope they will like it.

Brianna sat on the stool for some time, the whitewashed wall cool at her back, smoothing the pages of the letter and staring absently at the bookcase, with its neat row of cloth and leather bindings. *Robinson Crusoe* popped out at her, the title picked out in gold on the spine.

A savage place, Jenny had said. A dangerous place, too, where life could shift within a heartbeat from the humorous difficulty of a hog in the pantry to the instant threat of death by violence.

"And I thought *this* was primitive," she murmured, with a glance at the peat fire on the hearth.

* * *

Not so primitive after all, she thought as she followed Ian through the barnyard and out past the outbuildings. Everything was well kept and tidy; the drystone walls and buildings all in good repair, if a little shabby. The chickens were carefully confined to their own yard, and a hovering cloud of flies behind the barn announced the presence of a discreet manure pit, well away from the house.

The only real difference between this farmyard and modern ones she had seen was the absence of rusting farm equipment; there was a shovel resting against the barn, and two or three battered plowshares in a shed that they passed, but no ramshackle tractor; no tangles of wire and scattered metal scraps.

The animals were healthy, too, if somewhat smaller than their modern counterparts. A loud "Baaah!" announced the presence of a small herd of fat sheep in a paddock on the hillside, who trotted eagerly up to the fence as they passed, woolly backs wobbling and yellow eyes agleam in anticipation.

"Spoilt bastards," Ian said, but with a smile. "Think anyone's come up here has come to feed ye, don't you? My wife's," he added, turning to Brianna. "She gives them all the cast-off truck from the kailyard, till ye'd think they'd burst."

The ram, a majestic creature with great coiled horns, extended his head over the fence and emitted an imperious *"Beheheh!"* that was immediately echoed by his faithful flock.

"Bugger off, Hughie," said Ian, with tolerant scorn. "You're no mutton yet, but the day'll come, aye?" He waved dismissively at the ram and turned up the hill, kilt swinging.

Brianna hung back a step, watching his stride in fascination. Ian wore his kilt with an air quite unlike anything she was used to; not a costume nor a uniform—with a conscious bearing, but more as though it were part of his body than an article of clothing.

In spite of that, she knew it wasn't usual for him to wear it; Jenny's eyes had opened wide when he had come down to breakfast; then she had bent her head, burying a smile in her cup. Young Jamie had flicked a dark brow at his father, got back a bland look, and settled to his sausage with a faint shrug, and one of those small subterranean noises common to Scottish males.

The plaid cloth was old—she could see the fading along the creases and the wornness at the hem—but carefully kept. It would have been hidden away after Culloden, along with the pistols and the swords, with the pipes and their pibrochs—all the symbols of pride conquered.

No, not quite conquered, she thought, with a queer small tug at her heart. She remembered Roger Wakefield, squatting beside her under a gray sky on the battlefield at Culloden, his face lean and dark, eyes shadowed with knowledge of the dead nearby.

"Scots have long memories," he'd said, "and they're not the most forgiving of people. There's a clan stone out there with the name of MacKenzie carved on it, and a good many of my relatives under it." He had smiled then, but not in jest. "I don't feel quite so personal about it as some, but I haven't forgotten either."

No, not conquered. Not through a thousand years of strife and treachery, and not now. Defeated, scattered, but still surviving. Like

Ian, maimed but upright. Like her father, exiled but still a Highlander.

With an effort she put Roger from her mind, and hurried to keep up with Ian's long, limping stride.

* * *

His lean face had lighted with pleasure when she had asked him to show her Lallybroch. It had been arranged that Young Jamie would take her to Inverness in a week's time, to see her safely aboard a ship to the Colonies, and she meant to use her time here to good advantage.

They walked—at a good pace, despite Ian's leg—over the fields toward the small foothills that rimmed the valley to the north, rising toward the pass through the black crags. It was a beautiful place, she thought. The pale green fields of oats and barley rippled with shifting light, cloud-shadows scudding through the spring sunshine, driven by the breeze that bent the stems of budding grass.

One field lay in long, dark ridges, the dirt humped and bare. At the side of the field stood a large heap of rough stones, neatly stacked.

"Is that a cairn?" she asked Ian, voice lowered in respect. Cairns were the memorials of the dead, her mother had told her—sometimes the very long dead—new rocks added to the heap by each passing visitor.

He glanced at her in surprise, caught the direction of her gaze, and grinned.

"Ah, no, lass. Those are the stones we turned up wi' the plow in the spring. Every year we take them out, and every year there come new ones. Damned if I ken where they come from," he added, shaking his head in resignation. "Stone fairies come and sow them in the night, I expect."

She didn't know whether this was a joke or not. Uncertain whether to laugh, she asked a question instead.

"What will you plant here?"

"Oh, it's planted already." Ian shaded his eyes, squinting across the long field with pride. "This is the tattie field. The new vines will be up by the end of the month."

"Tattie—oh, potatoes!" She looked at the field with new interest. "Mama told me about that."

"Aye, it was Claire's notion—and a good one, too. There's more than once the tatties have kept us from starving." He smiled briefly but said nothing more, and moved off, heading for the wild hills beyond the fields.

It was a long walk. The day was breezy, but warm, and Brianna was sweating by the time they paused at last, halfway up a rough track through the heather. The narrow path seemed to perch precariously between a steep hillside and an even steeper fall down a sheer rock face into a small, splashing burn.

Ian stopped, wiping his brow with his sleeve, and motioned her to a seat amid the heaps of granite boulders. From this vantage point, the valley lay below them, the farmhouse seeming small and incongruous, its fields a feeble intrusion of civilization on the surrounding wilderness of crag and heather.

He brought out a stone bottle from the sack he carried, and drew the cork with his teeth.

"That'll be your mother's doing, too," he said with a grin, handing her the bottle. "That I've kept my teeth, I mean." He passed the tip of his tongue meditatively over his front teeth, shaking his head.

"A great one for eatin' weeds, your mother, but who's to argue, eh? Half the men my age are eatin' naught but porridge now."

"She was always telling me to eat up my vegetables, when I was little. And brush after every meal." Brianna took the bottle from him and tilted it into her mouth; the ale was strong and bitter, but welcomely cool after the long walk.

"When ye were little, eh?" Amused, Ian cast an eye over her length. "I've seldom seen a lass sae braw. I'd say your mother kent her business, aye?"

She smiled back and gave him back the bottle.

"She knew enough to marry a tall man, at least," she said wryly.

Ian laughed and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth. He gazed affectionately at her, brown eyes warm.

"Ah, it's fine to see ye, lassie. You're verra much like him, it's true. Christ, what I wouldna give to be there when Jamie sees you!"

She looked down at the ground, biting her lip. The ground was thick with bracken, and their path up the hill showed plain, where the green fronds that had overgrown the track had been crushed and knocked aside.

"I don't know whether he knows or not," she blurted. "About me." She glanced up at him. "He didn't tell you."

Ian rocked back a little, frowning.

"No, that's true," he said slowly. "But I am thinking he maybe hadna time to say, even if he knew. He'll not have been here long, that last time he came, with Claire. And then, it was such a moil, wi' all that happened—" He stopped, pursing his lips, and glanced at her.

"Your auntie's been troubled about that," he said. "Thinking that ye might blame her."

"Blame her for what?" She stared at him, puzzled.

"For Laoghaire." The brown eyes held hers, intent.

A faint chill came over Brianna at the memory of those pale eyes, cold as marbles, and the woman's hateful words. She had dismissed them as simple malice, but the echoes of "whoremaster" and "cheat" lingered unpleasantly in her ear.

"What did Aunt Jenny have to do with Laoghaire?"

Ian sighed, brushing back a thick lock of brown hair that fell down across his face.

"It was her doing that Jamie married the woman. She meant it well, mind," he said warningly. "We did think Claire was dead these many years."

His tone held a question, but Brianna merely nodded, looking down and smoothing the fabric across her knee. This was dangerous ground; better to say nothing, if she could. After a moment, Ian went on.

"It was after he'd come home from England—he was a prisoner there for some years after the Rising—"

"I know."

Ian's brows shot up in surprise, but he said nothing; simply shook his head.

"Aye, well. When he came back, he was—different. Well, he would be, aye?" He smiled briefly, then dropped his eyes, pleating the fabric of his kilt between his fingers.

"It was like talking to a ghost," he said quietly. "He would look at me, and smile, and answer—but he wasna really there." He took a deep breath, and she could see the lines between his brows, carved deep in concentration.

"Before—after Culloden—it was different, then. He was sair wounded—and he'd lost Claire—" He glanced briefly at her, but she kept still, and he went on.

"But it was a desperate time then. A great many folk died; of the fighting, of sickness or of starving. There were English soldiers in the country, burning, killing. When it's like that, ye canna even think of dying, only because the struggle to live and keep your family takes all your time."

A small smile touched Ian's lips, the rue of memory oddly lightened with a private amusement.

"Jamie hid," he said, with an abrupt gesture toward the hillside above them. "There. There's a wee cave behind that big gorse bush, halfway up. It's what I brought ye here to show ye."

She looked where he pointed, up the tangled slope of rock and heather, the hillside a riot of tiny flowers. There was no sign of a cave, but the gorse bush stood out in a blaze of yellow blossom, brilliant as a torch.

"I came up to bring him food once, when he was sick of the ague. I told him he must come down to the house wi' me; that Jenny was scairt he'd die up here, all alone. He opened one eye, all bright with the fever, and his voice was sae hoarse I could scarcely hear him. He said Jenny needna be worrit; even though everything in the world seemed set on killin' him, he didna mean to make it easy for them. Then he closed his eye and went to sleep."

Ian gave her a wry glance. "I wasna so sure he had that much to say about whether he was going to die or no, so I stayed with him through the night. But he was right, after all; he's verra stubborn, ye ken?" His tone held a note of a mild apology.

Brianna nodded, but her throat felt too tight to speak. Instead she stood up abruptly, and headed up the hill. Ian made no protest, but stayed on his rock, watching her.

It was a steep climb, and small thorny plants caught at her stockings. Near the cave, she had to scramble upward on all fours, to keep her balance on the steep granite slope.

The cave mouth was little more than a crack in the rock, the opening widening into a small triangle at the bottom. She knelt down and thrust her head and shoulders inside.

The chill was immediate; she could feel dampness condense on her cheeks. It took a moment for her sight to adapt to the dark, but enough light trickled into the cave past her shoulders for her to see.

It was perhaps eight feet long and six feet wide, a dim, dirt-floored cavity, with a ceiling so low that one could stand upright only near the entrance. To stay inside for any length of time would be like being entombed.

She pulled her head out quickly, breathing in deep gulps of the fresh spring air. Her heart was beating heavily.

Seven years! Seven years to have lived here, in cold grime and gnawing hunger. *I wouldn't last seven days,* she thought.

Wouldn't you? said another part of her mind. And then it came again, that tiny click of recognition that she had felt when she had looked at Ellen's portrait, and felt her fingers close on an invisible brush.

She turned around slowly and sat down, the cave behind her. It was very quiet here on the mountainside, but quiet in the way of hills and forests, a quiet that was not silent at all, but composed of constant tiny sounds.

There were small buzzings in the gorse bush nearby, of bees working the yellow flowers, dusty with pollen. Far below was the rushing of the burn, a low note echoing the rush of the wind above, stirring leaves and rattling twigs, sighing past the jutting boulders.

She sat still, and listened, and thought she knew what Jamie Fraser had found here.

Not loneliness, but solitude. Not suffering, but endurance, the discovery of grim kinship with the rocks and sky. And the finding here of a harsh peace that would transcend bodily discomfort, a healing instead of the wounds of the soul.

He had perhaps found the cave not a tomb, but a refuge; drawn strength from its rocks, like Antaeus thrown to earth. For this place was part of him, who had been born here, as it was part of her, who had never seen it before.

Ian was still sitting patiently below; hands clasped about his knees, looking out over the valley. She reached up and carefully broke off a bit of the gorse-bush, mindful of its spines. She laid it at the entrance of the cave, weighted with a small stone, then stood and made her way precariously down the hill.

Ian must have heard her approach, but didn't turn around. She sat down beside him.

"It's safe for you to wear that, now?" she said abruptly, with a nod at his kilt.

"Oh, aye," he said. He glanced down, his fingers rubbing the soft, worn wool. "It's been some years now since the soldiers last came. After all, what's left?" He gestured over the valley below.

"They carried away all they could find of value. Ruined what they couldna carry. There's no much left, save the land, is there? And I think they hadna much interest in that." She could see he was disturbed in some way; his wasn't a face that hid its owner's feelings.

She watched him for a moment, then said quietly, "You're still here. You and Jenny."

His hand stilled, and lay against the plaid. His eyelids were closed, his homely, weathered face raised to the sun.

"Aye, that's true," he said at last. He opened his eyes again, and turned to look at her. "And so are you. We talked a bit last night, your auntie and I. When ye see Jamie, and all's well between ye—then ask him, if ye will, what would he have us do."

"Do? About what?"

"About Lallybroch." He waved, taking in the valley and the house below. He turned to her, eyes troubled.

"You'll maybe know—maybe not—that your father made a deed of sassine before Culloden, to give over the place to Young Jamie, should it all come to smash and he be killed or condemned as a traitor. But that would be before you were born; before he kent that he'd have a bairn of his own."

"Yes, I did know that." She had a sudden awareness of what he was leading up to, and put her hand on his arm, startling him with the touch.

"I didn't come for that, Uncle," she said softly. "Lallybroch isn't mine—and I don't want it. All I want is to see my father—and my mother."

Ian's long face relaxed, and he put his hand over hers where it lay on his arm. He didn't say anything for a moment; then squeezed her hand gently and let it go.

"Aye, well. You'll tell him, nonetheless; if he wishes it—"

"He won't," she interrupted firmly.

Ian looked at her, a faint smile at the back of his eyes.

"Ye ken a lot about what he'll do, for a lass that's never met him."

She smiled at him, the spring sun warm on her shoulders.

"Maybe I do."

The smile broke through to Ian's face.

"Aye, your mother will ha' told ye, I suppose. And she did know him, for all she was a Sassenach. But then, she was always … special, your mother."

"Yes." She hesitated for a moment, wanting to hear more about the topic of Laoghaire, but unsure how to ask. Before she could think of something, he stood, brushed down his kilt, and started down the track, forcing her to rise and follow.

"What's a fetch, Uncle Ian?" she asked the back of his head. Preoccupied with the difficulties of descent, he didn't turn, but she saw him lurch slightly, wooden leg sinking into the loose earth. At the bottom of the hill he waited for her, leaning on his stick.

"You'll be thinking of what Laoghaire said?" he asked. Without waiting for her nod, he turned and began making his way along the bottom of the hill, toward the small stream that flowed down through the rocks.

“A fetch is the sight of a person, when the person himself is far awa’,” he said. “Sometimes it will be a person that’s died, far from home. It’s ill luck to see one, but worse luck to meet your own—for if you do, ye die.”

It was the absolute matter-of-factness of his tone that made a shiver run down her spine.

“I hope I don’t,” she said. “But she said—Laoghaire—” She stumbled on the name.

“L’heery,” Ian corrected. “Aye, well. It was at her wedding to Jamie that Jenny saw your mother’s fetch, that’s true. She kent then that it was a bad match, but it was too late to be undone.”

He knelt awkwardly on his good knee, and splashed water from the burn over his face. Brianna did likewise, and gulped several handfuls of the cold, peaty-tasting water. Having no towel, she pulled her long shirttail from her breeks and wiped her face. She caught Ian’s scandalized look at the glimpse of her bare stomach thus afforded, and dropped the shirttail abruptly, her cheeks flushing.

“You were going to tell me why my father married her,” she said, to hide her embarrassment.

Ian’s cheeks had gone a dull red, and he turned hastily away, talking to cover his confusion.

“Aye. It was as I told ye—when Jamie came from England, it was like the spark had gone out o’ him, and there was nothing here to kindle it again. I dinna ken what it was that happened in England, but something did, sure as I’m born.”

He shrugged, the back of his neck fading to its normal sunburnt brown.

“After Culloden, he was bad hurt, but there was fighting still to do, of a kind, and that kept him alive. When he came home from England—there wasna anything here for him, really.” He spoke quietly, eyes cast down, watching his footing on the rocky ground.

“So Jenny made the match for him, with Laoghaire.” He glanced at her, eyes bright and shrewd.

“You’ll maybe be old enough to know, for all you’re unwed yet. What a woman can do for a man—or he for her, I suppose. To heal him, I mean. Fill his emptiness.” He touched his maimed leg absently. “Jamie wed Laoghaire from pity, I think—and if she had truly needed him—aye, well.” He shrugged again, and smiled at her.

“It’s no use to say what might have been or should be, is it? But he had left Laoghaire’s house some time before your mother came back, you should know that.”

Brianna felt a small surge of relief.

“Oh. I’m glad to know that. And my mother—when she came back—”

“He was verra glad to see her,” Ian said simply. This time the smile lighted his whole face, like sunshine. “So was I.”

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BON VOYAGE

It reminded her uncomfortably of Boston's city dog pound. A large, halfdark space whose rafters rang with yelping, and an atmosphere dense with animal smells. The big building on the market square in Inverness sheltered a great many enterprises—food vendors, cattle and swine brokers, assurance agents, ship-chandlers and Royal Navy recruiters, but it was the group of men, women and children bunched in one corner that lent most force to the illusion.

Here and there a man or a woman stood upright amid the group, chin out and shoulders set in a show of good health and spirit, putting themselves forward. But for the most part, the people who offered themselves for sale eyed the passersby warily, in darting glances whose expressions were fixed between hope and fear—much too reminiscent of the dogs in the animal shelter where her father had now and then taken her to adopt a pet.

There were several families, too, with children clinging to their mothers, or standing blank-faced beside their parents. She tried not to look at them; it was always the puppies that had broken her heart.

Young Jamie was sidling slowly around the group, hat held against his chest to save it being crushed by the crowd, eyes half closed as he considered the prospects on offer. Her uncle Ian had gone to the shipping office to arrange her passage to America, leaving her cousin Jamie to choose a servant to accompany her on the journey. In vain had she protested that she didn't need a servant; after all, she had—so far as they knew—traveled from France to Scotland by herself, in perfect safety.

The men had nodded and smiled and listened with every evidence of polite attention—and here she was, obediently following Young Jamie through the crowd like one of her aunt Jenny's sheep. She was beginning to understand exactly what her mother had meant by describing the Frasers as "stubborn as rocks."

Despite the hubbub around her and her annoyance at her male relatives, her heart gave a small, excited bounce at thought of her mother. It was only now, when she knew for sure that Claire was safe, that she could admit to herself how sorely she had missed her. And her father—that unknown Highlander who had come so suddenly and vividly to life for her as she read his letters. The minor fact of an intervening ocean seemed no more than a small inconvenience.

Her cousin Jamie interrupted these rosy thoughts by taking her arm and leaning close to shout in her ear.

"Yon fellow wi' the cast in one eye," he said in a subdued bellow, indicating the gentleman in question by pointing with his chin. "What d'ye say to him, Brianna?"

"I'd say he looks like the Boston Strangler," she muttered, then louder, shouting into her cousin's ear, "He looks like an ox! No!"

"He's strong, and he looks honest!"

Brianna thought the gentleman in question looked too stupid to be *dis*honest, but refrained from saying so, merely shaking her head emphatically.

Young Jamie shrugged philosophically and resumed his scrutiny of the would-be bondsmen, walking around those who took his particular interest and peering at them closely, in a way she might have thought exceedingly rude had a number of other potential employers not been doing likewise.

"Bridies! Hot bridies!" A high-pitched screech cut through the rumble and racket of the hall, and Brianna turned to see an old woman elbowing her way robustly through the crowd, a steaming tray hung round her neck and a wooden spatula in hand.

The heavenly scent of fresh hot dough and spiced meat cut through the other pungencies in the hall, noticeable as the old woman's calling. It had been a long time since breakfast, and Brianna dug in her pocket, feeling saliva fill her mouth.

Ian had taken her purse to pay for her passage, but she had two or three loose coins; she held one up and waved it to and fro. The bridie seller spotted the flash of silver and at once altered course, tacking through the chattering mob. She hove to in front of Brianna and reached up to snatch the coin.

"Mary save us, a giantess!" she said, showing strong yellow teeth in a grin as she tilted her head back to look up at Brianna. "Ye'd best take twa, my dearie. One will never do a great lass like you!"

Heads turned, and faces grinned up at her. She stood half a head higher than most of the men nearby. Mildly embarrassed by the attention, Brianna gave the nearest offender a cold look. This seemed to entertain the young man quite a lot; he staggered back against his friend, clutching his breast and pretending to be overcome.

"My God!" he said. "She looked at me! I'm heartstruck!"

"Och, awa' wi' ye," his friend scoffed, shoving him upright. " 'Twas me she was looking at; who'd look at *you* if they'd a choice?"

"Nothing of the sort," his friend protested stoutly. "It was me—wasn't it, darlin'?" He languished, making calf's eyes at Brianna and looking so ridiculous that she laughed, along with the crowd around her.

"And what would ye be doing with her, if ye got her, eh? She'd make two of ye. Now, off wi' ye, spawn," the bridie seller said, casually smacking the young man across the buttocks with her wooden spatula. "I've business, if you haven't. And the young woman will starve if ye dinna leave off playin' the fool and let her buy her dinner, aye?"

"She looks in fine flesh to me, grannie." Brianna's admirer, ignoring both assault and admonition, ogled her shamelessly. "And as for the rest—fetch me a ladder, Bobby, I'm no afraid of heights!"

Amid gales of laughter, the young man was dragged away by his friends, making loud kissing noises over his shoulder as he moved reluctantly off. Brianna took her change in coppers and retired into a corner to eat two of the hot beef pasties, her face still warm with laughter and self-consciousness.

She hadn't been so aware of her height since she had been a gawky seventh-grader, towering over all her classmates. Among her tall cousins, she had felt at home, but it was true; here she stuck out like a sore thumb, despite her having abided by Jenny's insistence and changed from her men's clothes to a dress of her cousin Janet's, hastily altered and let out in the seams.

Her sense of self-consciousness was not helped by the fact that no underclothes went with the dress, beyond a shift. No one seemed to find any lack in this state of affairs, but she was intensely conscious of the unaccustomed feeling of airiness about her nether parts, and the odd feeling of her naked thighs sliding past each other as she walked, her silk stockings gartered just above the knee.

Both self-consciousness and drafts were forgotten as she bit into the first hot pastry. A bridie was a plump hot pie in a half-moon shape, filled with minced steak and suet and spiced with onion. A rush of hot, rich juice and flaky pastry filled her mouth, and she closed her eyes in bliss.

"The food was either terribly bad or terribly good," Claire had said, describing her adventures in the past. "That's because there's no way of keeping things; anything you eat has either been salted or preserved in lard, if it isn't half rancid—or else it's fresh off the hoof or out of the garden, in which case it can be bloody marvelous."

The bridie was bloody marvelous, Brianna decided, even if it did keep dropping crumbs down the top of her bodice. She brushed at her bosom, trying to be unobtrusive, but the crowd's attention had turned—no one was looking at her now.

Or almost no one. A slight, fair man in a shabby coat had materialized by her elbow, making small nervous movements as though he wanted to pluck her sleeve but hadn't quite got up the nerve. Not sure whether he was a beggar or another importunate suitor, she looked suspiciously down her nose at him.

"Yes?"

"You—you are requiring a servant, ma'am?"

She dropped her aloofness, realizing that he must be one of the crowd of indentures.

"Oh. Well, I wouldn't say I require one, exactly, but it looks as though I'm going to get one anyway." She glanced at Young Jamie, who was now interrogating a squat, beetle-browed individual with shoulders like the Village Blacksmith. Young Jamie's notion of the ideal servant seemed to be limited to muscle. She looked back at the small man in front of her; he wasn't much by Young Jamie's standards, but by hers …

"Are you interested?" she asked.

The expression of haggard nervousness didn't leave his face, but a fugitive gleam of hope showed in his eyes.

"It—I—that is—not me, no. But will you think—perhaps consider—will you take my daughter?" he said abruptly. "Please!"

"Your daughter?" Brianna looked down at him, startled, her half-eaten bridie forgotten.

"I beg you, ma'am!" To her surprise, tears stood in the man's eyes. "Ye cannot think how urgently I pray you, or what gratitude I must bear ye!"

"But—ah—" Brianna brushed crumbs from the corner of her mouth, feeling desperately awkward.

"She is a strong girl in spite of her appearance, and most willing! She will be content to do any service whatever for ye, ma'am, and ye'll buy her contract!"

"But why should—look, what's the trouble?" she said, moved past awkwardness by curiosity and pity for his obvious distress. She took him by the arm and drew him into the shelter of a corner, where the racket was slightly diminished.

"Now, why are you so anxious that I should hire your daughter?"

She could see the muscles move in his throat as he swallowed convulsively.

"There is a man. He—he desires her. Not as a servant. As a—as a—concubine." The words came out in a hoarse whisper, and a flood of ugly crimson stained his face.

"Mmphm," said Brianna, discovering all at once the utility of this ambiguous expression. "I see. But you needn't let your daughter go to him, surely?"

"I have no choice." His agony was patent. "Her contract has been bought by Mr. Ransom—the broker." He jerked his head backward, indicating a tough-looking gentleman in a tie-wig, who was talking to Young Jamie. "He can dispose of it to whom he will—and he will sell her without a moment's hesitation to this … this …" He choked, overcome by despair.

"Here, take this." She hastily untucked the wide kerchief from her bodice, took it off her neck, and handed it to him. It left her slightly less than modest, but this seemed like an emergency.

Clearly it was, to him. He swabbed blindly at his face, then dropped the cloth and seized her free hand in both of his.

"He is a drover; he has gone to the cattle market to sell his beasts. When he has done so, he will return with the money for her contract, and take her away to his house in Aberdeen. When I heard him say so to Ransom, I was thrown into the most violent despair. I prayed most urgently to the Lord for her deliverance. And then—" He gulped.

"I saw you—so proud and noble and kind-seeming—and it did come to me as my prayers were answered. Oh, ma'am, I pray ye, do not disdain a father's plea. Take her!"

"But I'm going to America! You'd never—" She bit her lip. "I mean, you wouldn't see her—for a very long time."

The desperate father went quite white at this. He closed his eyes, and seemed to sway slightly, giving at the knees.

"The Colonies?" he whispered. Then he opened his eyes once more and set his jaw.

"Better she should be gone from me forever to a wild place, than to meet dishonor before my eyes."

Brianna had no idea what to say to this. She glanced helplessly over the man's head at the sea of bobbing heads.

"Er … your daughter … which one …?"

The flicker of hope in his eyes sprang into sudden flame, shocking in its intensity.

"Bless ye, lady! I will fetch her to ye directly!"

He pressed her hand fervently, then darted away into the crowd, leaving her staring after him. After a moment, she shrugged helplessly, and bent to pick up her fallen kerchief. How had *this* happened? And what in the name of goodness would her uncle and her cousin say, if she—

"This is Elizabeth," a voice announced breathlessly. "Do your duty to the lady, Lizzie."

Brianna looked down and found the decision made for her.

"Oh, dear," she murmured, seeing the neat white parting down the middle of the small head that bent in a deep curtsy before her. "A puppy."

The head bobbed upright, presenting her with a thin, starved-looking face, in which scared gray eyes occupied most of the available space.

"Your servant, mum," said the small, white-lipped mouth. Or at least that's what it looked like it said; the girl spoke so softly, she couldn't be heard above the surrounding racket.

"She will serve ye well, ma'am, aye, indeed she will!" The father's anxious voice was more audible. She glanced at him; there was a strong resemblance between father and daughter, both with the same flyaway fair hair, the same thin, anxious faces. They were nearly the same height, though the girl was so frail, she seemed like her father's shadow.

"Er … hello." She smiled at the girl, trying to seem reassuring. The girl's head tilted fearfully back, looking up. She swallowed visibly, and licked her lips.

"Ah … how old are you, Lizzie? May I call you Lizzie?"

The small head bobbed on a neck that looked like a wild mushroom's stalk; long, colorless, and infinitely fragile. The girl whispered something that Brianna didn't catch; she looked at the father, who answered eagerly.

"Fourteen, ma'am. But she's a rare hand with cooking and sewing, clean in her person and ye'll never find a soul more biddable and willing!"

He stood behind his daughter, hands on her shoulders, gripped tight enough to show his knuckles white. His eyes met Brianna's.

They were pale blue, pleading. His lips moved—without sound, but she heard him clearly.

"Please," he said.

Beyond him, Brianna could see her uncle, who had come into the hall. He was talking to Young Jamie, smooth head and curly bent together in close conversation. In a moment they would be looking for her.

She took a deep breath and drew herself up to her full height. Well, and if you came right down to it, she thought, she was as much a Fraser as her cousin. Let them find out just how stubborn a rock could be.

She smiled at the girl and held out a hand, offering the second, uneaten bridie.

"It's a bargain, Lizzie. Will you have a bite to seal it?"

* * *

"She's eaten my food," Brianna said, with as much assurance as she could conjure up. "She's mine."

Rather to her surprise, this statement finally put a stop to the argument. Her cousin looked as though he meant to go on remonstrating, but her uncle put a hand on Young Jamie's arm to silence him. The look of surprise on Ian's face turned to a sort of amused respect.

"Has she, now?" He looked at Lizzie, cowering behind Brianna, and his lips twitched. "Mmphm. Well, then, not much more to be said, is there?"

Young Jamie evidently didn't share his father's assessment of this point; he could think of quite a lot more to be said.

"But a wee lassie like that—she's useless!" He waved a dismissive hand at Lizzie, frowning. "Why, she isna big enough even to carry baggage, let alone—"

"I'm big enough to carry my own bags, thanks," Brianna put in. She lowered her brows and gave her cousin back scowl for scowl, straightening up to emphasize her height.

He lifted an eyebrow in acknowledgment, but didn't give up.

"A woman shouldna be traveling alone—"

"I won't be alone, I'll have Lizzie."

"—and certainly not to a place like America! Why, it's—"

"You'd think it was the ends of the earth to hear you talk, and you haven't even seen it!" Brianna said in exasperation. "I was *born* in America, for heaven's sake!"

Uncle and cousin gaped at her, identical expressions of shock on their faces. She seized the opportunity to press her advantage.

"It's my money, and my servant, and my journey. I've given my word, and I'll keep it!"

Ian rubbed a knuckle across his upper lip, suppressing a grin. He shook his head.

"They say it's a wise bairn that kens its father, but I dinna think there's much doubt who yours is, lass. Ye might have had the lang nebbit and red locks from anyone, but ye didna get the stubbornness from any man but Jamie Fraser."

A self-conscious flush rose to her cheeks, but Brianna felt an odd flutter of something like pleasure.

His feathers ruffled from the argument, Young Jamie made one last attempt.

"It's verra unseemly for a woman to be givin' her opinions sae free, and her with menfolk to look after her," he said stiffly.

"You don't think women ought to have opinions?" Brianna asked sweetly.

"No, I don't!"

Ian gave his son a long look.

"And you'll have been marrit what, eight years?" He shook his head. "Aye, well, your Joan's a tactful woman." Ignoring Young Jamie's black look, he turned back to Lizzie.

"Verra well, then. Go and take farewell of your father, lassie. I'll see to the papers." He watched Lizzie scurry away, thin shoulders hunched against the crowd. He shook his head a little doubtfully, and turned back to Brianna.

"Well, she'll maybe be better company for ye than a manservant, lass, but your cousin's right about the one thing—she'll be no protection. It'll be you lookin' out for her, likely."

Brianna straightened her shoulders and thrust out her chin, summoning up as much self-confidence as she could, in spite of the sudden hollow feeling that assailed her.

"I can manage," she said.

* * *

She kept her hand curled tight, holding on to the stone in her palm. It was something to cling to, as the Moray Firth widened into the sea, and the cradling shore of Scotland fell away to either side.

Why ought she to feel so strongly for a place she hardly knew? Lizzie, born and raised in Scotland, had spared no glance for the receding land but had gone below at once, to lay claim to their space and arrange the few belongings they had brought aboard.

Brianna had never thought of herself as Scottish—had not *known* she was Scottish until quite recently—yet she had scarcely felt more bereft by her mother's leaving or her father's death than by this parting from people and places she had known for so short a time.

Perhaps it was only the contagious emotion of the other passengers. Many of them were standing at the rail as she was, several weeping openly. Or fear of the long journey ahead. But she knew quite well it was none of those things.

"That's that, I expect." It was Lizzie, appearing at her elbow after all, to see the last sight of the land fade away. Her small pale face was expressionless, but Brianna didn't mistake lack of expression for lack of feeling.

"Yes, we're on our way." Moved by impulse, Brianna put out a hand and drew the girl to stand in front of her at the rail, sheltered alike from freshening wind and from jostling passengers and seamen. Lizzie was a good foot shorter than Brianna, and fine-boned as the delicate sooty terns that circled the masts, squawking overhead.

The sun did not really set at this time of year but hung low above the dark hills, and the air had grown quite cold in the Firth. The girl was thinly dressed; she shivered, and pressed quite unselfconsciously against Brianna for warmth. Brianna had a blue woolen *arisaid* provided by Jenny; she wrapped her arms and the shawl ends around the younger girl, finding as much comfort in the embrace as she gave.

"It will be all right," she said, to herself as much as to Lizzie.

The pale blond head bobbed briefly under her chin; she couldn't tell whether it was a nod, or only Lizzie's attempt to get the wind-whipped strands of hair out of her eyes. Elf-locks snatched from her own thick plait fluttered in the stiff salt breeze, echoing the pull of the huge sails above. Despite her misgivings, she felt her spirits start to rise with the wind. She had survived a good many partings so far; she would survive this. That was what made this leaving hard, she thought. She had already lost father, mother, lover, home, and friends. She was alone by necessity, and also by choice. But then to find both home and family again so unexpectedly at Lallybroch had caught her unaware. She would have given almost anything to stay—just a little longer.

But there were promises to keep, losses to be made good. Then she could come back. To Scotland. And to Roger.

She shifted her arm, feeling his thin silver band warm on her wrist under the shawl, the metal heated by her own flesh. *Un peu … beaucoup …* Her other hand gripped the cloth together, exposed to the wind and damp with sea spray. If it hadn't been so cold, she might not have noticed the sudden warmth of the drop that fell on the back of her hand.

Lizzie stood stiff as a stick, her arms hugged tight around herself. Her ears were large and transparent, her hair fine and thin, sleek to her skull. Her ears poked out like a mouse's, tender and fragile in the soft deep light of the low night sun.

Brianna reached up and wiped away the tears by touch. Her own eyes were dry, and her mouth set firm as she looked out at the land over Lizzie's head, but the cold face and quivering lips against her hand might as well have been her own.

They stood for some time silently, until the last of the land was gone.

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36

YOU CAN'T GO HOME AGAIN

Inverness, July 1769

Roger walked slowly through the town, looking around him with a mixture of fascination and delight. Inverness had changed a bit in two hundred-odd years, no doubt of it, and yet it was recognizably the same town; a good deal smaller, to be sure, with half its muddy streets unpaved, and yet he *knew* this street he was walking down, had walked down it a hundred times before.

It was Huntly Street, and while most of the small shops and buildings were unfamiliar, across the river stood the Old High Church—not so Old, now—its stubby steeple blunt as ever. Surely if he went inside, Mrs. Dunvegan, the minister's wife, would be setting out flowers in the chancel, ready for the Sunday service. But she wouldn't—Mrs. Dunvegan hadn't happened yet, with her thick wool sweaters and the terrible pot pies with which she tormented the sick of her husband's parish. Yet the small stone kirk stood solid and familiar, in the charge of a stranger.

His father's own church wasn't here; it had been—would be?—built in 1837. Likewise the manse, which had always seemed so elderly and decrepit, had not been built until the early 1900s. He had passed the site on his way; there was nothing there now save a tangle of cinquefoil and sweet broom, and a single small rowan sapling that sprouted from the underbrush, leaves fluttering in the light wind.

There was the same damp coolness to the air, tingling with freshness—but the overlying stink of motor exhaust was gone, replaced by a distant reek of sewage. The most striking absence was the churches; where both banks of the river would one day sport a noble profusion of steeples and spires, now there was nothing save a scatter of small buildings.

There was only the one stone footbridge, but the River Ness itself was naturally much the same. The river was low and the same gulls sat in the riffles, squawking companionably to one another as they picked small fish from among the stones just under the water's surface.

"Luck to you, mate," he said to a fat gull who sat on the bridge, and crossed the river into the town.

Here and there, a gracious residence sat comfortably insulated by its wide grounds, a grand lady spreading her skirts, ignoring the presence of the hoi polloi nearby. There was Mountgerald in the distance, the big house looking precisely as he had always known it, save that the great copper beeches that would in future surround the house had not yet been planted; instead, a row of spindly Italian cypresses leaned dismally against the garden wall, looking homesick for their sunny birthplace.

For all its elegance, Mountgerald was reputed to have been built in the oldest of the old ways—with the foundation laid over the body of a human sacrifice. By report, a workman had been lured into the hole of the cellar, and a great stone dropped onto him from the top of the newly built wall, crushing him to death. He had—so local history said—been buried there in the cellar, his blood a propitiation to the hungry spirits of the earth, who thus satisfied, had allowed the edifice to stand prosperous and untroubled through the years.

The house could be no more than twenty or thirty years old now, Roger thought. There might easily be people in the town who had worked on its building; who knew exactly what had happened in that cellar, to whom, and why.

But he had other things to do; Mountgerald and its ghost would have to keep their secrets. With a mild pang of regret, he left the big house behind, and turned his scholar's nose into the road that led to the docks downriver.

With a feeling of what could only be called déjà vu, he pushed open the door of a pub. The half-timbered entry, with its stone flags, was as he had seen it a week before—and two hundred years hence—and the familiar smell of hops and yeast in the air was a comfort to his spirit. The name had changed, but not the smell of beer.

Roger took a deep gulp from his wooden cup and nearly choked. "All right, man?" The barman paused, a bucket of sand in his hand, to peer at Roger.

"Fine," Roger said hoarsely. "Just fine."

The barman nodded and went back to scattering sand, but kept a practiced eye on Roger in case he looked like vomiting on the freshly swept and sanded floor.

Roger coughed and cleared his throat, then essayed a further cautious sip. The flavor was fine; very good, in fact. It was the alcohol content that was unexpected; this stuff packed a wallop far greater than any modern beer Roger had ever encountered. Claire had said that alcoholism was endemic to the time, and Roger could easily see why. Still, if drunkenness were the greatest hazard he faced, he could deal with that.

He sat quietly by the hearth and drank, savoring the dark, bitter brew as he watched and listened.

It was a port pub, and a busy one. So near the docks on the Moray Firth, it hosted sea captains and merchants, as well as sailors from the ships in port and longshoremen and laborers from the nearby warehouses. A great deal of business of one kind and another was being transacted over the beer-stained surfaces of its many small tables.

With half an ear Roger could hear a contract being arranged for the shipping of three hundred bolts of cheap drugget cloth from Aberdeen, bound for the Colonies, with an exchange to be made for a cargo of rice and indigo from the Carolinas. A hundred head of Galloway cattle, six hundred-weight of rolled copper, casks of sulfur, molasses, and wine. Quantities and prices, delivery dates and conditions floated through the babble and beer fumes of the pub like the thick blue clouds of tobacco smoke that floated near the low ceiling-beams.

Not only goods were being bargained for. In one corner sat a ship's captain, marked by the cut of his long, full-skirted coat and the fine black tricorne that lay on the table by his elbow. He was attended by a clerk, a ledger and a money box on the table before him, interviewing a steady stream of people, emigrants seeking passage to the Colonies for themselves and their families.

Roger watched the proceedings covertly. The ship was bound for Virginia, and after listening for some time he deduced that the cost of passage for a male passenger—for a gentleman, that is—was ten pounds, eight shillings. Those willing to travel in the steerage, packed like casks and cattle in the lower holds, might ship aboard for four pounds, two shillings each, bringing their own food for a six-weeks voyage. Fresh water, he gathered, was provided.

For those desiring passage but lacking funds, there were other means available.

"Indenturement for yourself, your wife, and your two elder sons?" The captain tilted his head appraisingly, looking over the family that stood before him. A small, wiry man, who might be in his early thirties but looked much older, shabby and bowed with labor. His wife, perhaps a little younger, standing behind her husband, eyes glued to the floor, tightly grasping the hands of two little girls. One of the girls held on to her baby brother, a lad of three or four. The elder boys stood by their father, trying to look manly. Roger thought they might be ten and twelve, allowing for the puny stature caused by malnutrition.

"Yourself and the boys, aye, that'll do," the captain said. He frowned at the woman, who didn't look up. "No one will buy a woman with so many young ones—she might keep one, perhaps. You'll have to sell the girls, though."

The man glanced back at his family. His wife kept her head down, unmoving, not looking at anything. One of the girls twitched and jerked, though, complaining in an undertone that her hand was being crushed. The man turned back.

“All right,” he said, low-voiced. “Can they—might they—go together?”

The captain rubbed a hand across his mouth, and nodded indifferently.

“Likely enough.”

Roger didn’t wait to witness the details of the transaction. He got up abruptly and left the pub; the dark beer had lost its taste.

He paused in the street outside, fingering the coins in his pocket. It was all he had been able to collect of suitable money, in the time he’d had. He had thought that it would be enough, though; he was good-sized and had a fair amount of confidence in his own abilities. Still, the little scene he had witnessed in the pub had shaken him.

He had grown up with the history of the Highlands. He knew well enough the sorts of things that drove families to such a pitch of desperation that they would accept permanent separation and semislavery as the price of survival.

He knew all about the sale of lands that forced small crofters off the lands their families had tended for hundreds of years, all about the dreadful conditions of penury and starvation in the cities, the simple insupportableness of life in Scotland in these days. And not all his years of reading and study had prepared him for the look of that woman’s face, her eyes fixed on the fresh-sanded floor, her daughters’ hands clutched hard in her own.

Ten pounds, eight shillings. Or four pounds, two. Plus whatever it might cost for food. He had exactly fourteen shillings, threepence in his pocket, together with a handful of copper doits and a couple of farthings.

He walked slowly down the lane that led along the seaside, glancing at the collection of ships that lay moored by the wooden docks. Fishing ketches, for the most part, small galleys and brigs that plied their trade up and down the Firth, or at most ran across the Channel, carrying cargo and passengers to France. Only three large ships lay at anchor in the Firth, those of a size to brave the winds of the Atlantic crossing.

He could cross to France, of course, and take ship from there. Or travel overland to Edinburgh, a much larger port than Inverness. But it would be late in the year then, for sailing. Brianna was six weeks before him already; he could waste no time in finding her—God knew what could happen to a woman alone here.

Four pounds, two shillings. Well, he could work, certainly. With neither children nor wife to support, he could save most of his earnings. But given that the average clerk earned something like twelve pounds per year, and that he was much more likely to find work shoveling stables than keeping accounts, the chances of his saving up passage money in any reasonable time were fairly slim.

"First things first," he muttered. "Be sure where she's gone, before you trouble about getting there yourself."

Taking his hand out of his pocket, he turned right between two warehouses, and into a narrow lane. His high spirits of the morning had largely evaporated, but they lifted slightly, nonetheless, when he saw that he had been right in his guess; the harbormaster's office was where he had known it must be—in the same squat stone building where it still would be, two hundred years hence. Roger smiled with wry humor; Scots were not inclined to make changes purely for the sake of change.

It was crowded and busy inside, with four harried clerks behind a battered wooden counter, scribbling and stamping, carrying bundles of paper to and fro, taking money and conveying it carefully into an inner office, from which they issued moments later, bearing receipts on japanned tin trays.

A crush of impatient men pressed against the counter, each endeavoring to signal by means of voice and posture that his business was much more urgent than that of the fellow standing next him. Once Roger had succeeded in capturing the attention of one of the clerks, though, there turned out to be no great difficulty in seeing the registers of the ships that had sailed from Inverness within the last few months.

"Here, wait," he said to the young man who pushed a large, leather-bound book across the counter to him.

"Aye?" The clerk was flushed with hurry, and had a smut of ink on his nose, but paused politely, arrested in flight.

"How much d'ye get paid for working here?" Roger asked.

The clerk's fair eyebrows lifted, but he was in too much hurry either to ask questions or to take offense at the inquiry.

"Six shillings the week," he said briefly, and promptly disappeared in response to an irritable shout of "Munro!" from the office beyond the counter.

"Mmphm." Roger pushed back through the crowd and took the book of registers away to a small table by the window, out of the main stream of traffic.

Having seen the conditions under which the clerks worked, Roger was impressed at the legibility of the handwritten registers. He was well accustomed to archaic spelling and eccentric punctuation, though those he was used to seeing were always yellowed and fragile, on the verge of disintegration. It gave him an odd little historian's thrill to see the page before him fresh and white, and just beyond, the clerk who sat at a high table, copying as fast as quill could write, shoulders hunched against the hubbub in the room.

You're shilly-shallying, said a cold little voice in the middle of his brain. *She's here or she's not; being afraid to look won't change it. Get on!*

Roger took a deep breath and flipped open the big ledger book. The ships' names were neatly lettered at the tops of pages, followed by the names of their masters and mates, their main cargoes and dates of sailing. *Arianna. Polyphemus. Merry Widow. Tiburon.* Despite his apprehensions, he couldn't help admiring the names of the ships as he thumbed through the pages.

Half an hour later, he had ceased to marvel over both poetry and picturesqueness, barely noting each ship's name as he ran his finger down the pages in increasing desperation. Not here, she wasn't here!

But she had to be, he argued with himself. She *had* to have taken a ship to the Colonies, where else could she bloody be? Unless she hadn't found the notice, after all … but the sick feeling under his ribs assured him that she had; nothing else would have made her risk the stones.

He took a deep breath and closed his eyes, which were starting to feel the strain of the handwritten pages. Then he opened his eyes, turned back to the first relevant register, and began to read again, doggedly muttering each name beneath his breath, to be sure of not missing one out.

Mr. Phineas Forbes, gentleman.
Mrs. Wilhelmina Forbes.
Master Joshua Forbes.
Mrs. Josephine Forbes.
Mrs. Eglantine Forbes.
Mrs. Charlotte Forbes …

He smiled to himself at the thought of Mr. Phineas Forbes, surrounded by his womenfolk. Even knowing that “Mrs.” here was sometimes merely the abbreviated form of “Mistress,” and thus used for both married and unmarried women—rather than the “Miss” for little girls—he found himself with an irresistible mental picture of Phineas marching stoutly aboard at the head of a train of four wives, Master Joshua no doubt bringing up the rear.

Mr. William Talbot, merchant.
Mr. Peter Talbot, merchant.
Mr. Jonathan Bicknell, physician.
Mr. Robert MacLeod, farmer.
Mr. Gordon MacLeod, farmer.
Mr. Martin MacLeod …

No Randalls this time through, either. Not for the *Persephone,* the *Queen’s Revenge,* or the *Phoebe*. He rubbed his aching eyes, and began on the register of the *Phillip Alonzo*. A Spanish name, but it was listed under Scottish registry. Sailing from Inverness, under the command of Captain Patrick O’Brian.

He hadn’t given up, but had already begun to think what to do next, if she should not be listed in the registers. Lallybroch, of course. He had been there once, in his own time, to the abandoned remains of the estate; could he find it now, without the guidance of roads and signposts?

His thoughts stopped with a jolt as his gliding finger came to a halt, near the bottom of a page. Not Brianna Randall, not the name he'd been looking for, but a name that rang bells of recognition in his mind. *Fraser,* read the slanted, crisp black writing. *Mr. Brian Fraser*. No, not Brian. And not Mr., either. He bent closer, squinting at the cramped black lettering.

He closed his eyes, feeling his heart thump hard in his chest, and relief flowed through him, intoxicating as the pub's special dark beer. *Mrs.,* not Mr. And what had first seemed merely an exuberant tail on the "n" of Brian was on closer inspection almost surely instead a careless "a."

Her, it was her, it had to be! It was an unusual first name—he had seen no other Briannas or Brianas anywhere in the massive register. And even Fraser made sense, of a sort; embarked on a quixotic quest to find her father, she had taken his name, the name she was entitled to by right of birth.

He slammed the register closed, as though to keep her from escaping from the pages, and sat for a moment, breathing. Got her! He saw the fairhaired clerk eyeing him curiously from the counter and, flushing, opened the book again.

The *Phillip Alonzo*. Sailed from Inverness on the fourth of July, Anno Domini 1769. For Charleston, South Carolina.

He frowned at the name, suddenly uncertain. South Carolina. Was that her real destination, or only as close as she could get? A quick glance at the rest of the registers showed no ships in July for North Carolina. Perhaps she had simply taken the first ship for the southern colonies, intending to journey overland.

Or maybe he was wrong. A chill gripped him that had nothing to do with the river wind seeping through the cracks of the window next to him. He looked at the page again, and was reassured. No, there was no profession given, as there was for all the men. It was certainly "Mrs." and therefore it must be "Briana" as well. And if "Briana" it was, then Brianna it was, too, he knew it.

He rose and handed the book across the counter to his fair-haired acquaintance.

“Thanks, man,” he said, relaxing into his own soft accent. “Can ye be tellin’ me, is there a ship in port bound for the American Colonies soon, now?”

“Oh, aye,” the clerk said, deftly stowing the register with one hand and accepting a bill of lading from a customer with the other. “Happen it will be *Gloriana;* she sails day after tomorrow for the Carolinas.” He looked Roger up and down. “Emigrant or seaman?” he asked.

“Seaman,” Roger said promptly. Ignoring the other’s raised eyebrow, he waved toward the forest of masts visible through the paned windows. “Where do I go to sign on?”

Both eyebrows high, the clerk nodded in the direction of the door.

“Her master works from the Friars when he’s in port. Likely he’ll be there now—Captain Bonnet.” He forbore adding what was obvious from his skeptical expression; if Roger was a seaman, he, the clerk, was an African parrot.

“Right, *mo ghille*. Thanks.” Sketching a salute, Roger turned away, but turned back at the door to find the clerk still watching him, ignoring the press of impatient customers.

“Wish me luck!” Roger called, with a grin.

The clerk’s answering grin was tinged with something that might have been either admiration or wistfulness.

“Luck to ye, man!” he called, and waved in farewell. By the time the door swung shut, he was deep in conversation with the next customer, quill pen poised in readiness.

* * *

He found Captain Bonnet in the pub, as advertised, settled in a corner under a thick blue haze of smoke, to which the Captain’s own cigar was adding.

“Your name?”

“MacKenzie,” Roger said on sudden impulse. If Brianna could do it, so could he.

“MacKenzie. Any experience, Mr. MacKenzie?”

A bar of sunlight cut across the Captain's face, making him squint. Bonnet drew back into the shadow of the settle, and the lines around his eyes relaxed, leaving Roger exposed to a gaze of uncomfortable penetration.

"It is myself has fished the herring now and then, in the Minch."

It was no lie, at that; he'd had several teenage summers as hand on a herring boat captained by an acquaintance of the Reverend's. The experience had left him with a useful layer of muscle, an ear for the singsong cadence of the Isles, and a fixed dislike of herring. But he knew the feel of a rope in his hands, at least.

"Ah, ye're a good-sized lad. But a fisherman will not be the same as a sailor, sure." The man's soft Irish lilt left it open whether this was question, statement—or provocation.

"I shouldna have thought it an occupation requiring great skill." For no reason he could name, Captain Bonnet raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

The green eyes sharpened.

"Perhaps more than ye think—but sure it's nothing a willing man can't learn. But what would it be, now, that makes a fellow of your sort crave the sea of a sudden?"

The eyes flickered in the tavern's shadows, taking him in. *Of your sort.* What was it? Roger wondered. Not his speech—he had taken care to suppress any hint of the Oxford scholar, by taking on the "teuchter" cant of the Isles. Was he too well dressed for a would-be sailor? Or was it the singed collar and the burn mark on the breast of his coat?

"That will be none of your business, I am thinking," he answered evenly. With a minor effort, he kept his hands relaxed at his sides.

The pale green eyes studied him dispassionately, unblinking. Like a leopard watching a passing wildebeest, Roger thought, wondering whether it would be worth the chase.

The heavy lids dropped; not worth it—for the moment.

"You'll be aboard by sundown," Bonnet said. "Five shillings the month, meat three days in the week, plum duff on Sundays. You'll have a hammock, but find your own clothes. You will be free to leave the ship once the cargo is unloaded, not until that time. We are agreed, sir?"

"It is agreed," Roger said, suddenly dry-mouthed. He would have given a lot for a pint, but not now, not here, under that pale green gaze.

"Ask for Mr. Dixon when yez come aboard. He's paymaster." Bonnet leaned back, took a small leather-bound book from his pocket and flipped it open. Audience concluded.

Roger turned smartly and went out, without a backward glance. There was a small cold spot at the base of his skull. If he looked back, he knew, he would see that lucent green gaze fixed unwaveringly over the edge of the unread book, taking note of every weakness.

The cold spot, he thought, was where the teeth would meet.

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GLORIANA

Before shipping with the *Gloriana,* Roger had assumed himself to be in reasonably good condition. In fact, compared to most of the obviously malnourished and wizened specimens of humanity who constituted the rest of the crew, he considered himself well endowed, indeed. It took precisely fourteen hours—the length of one day's work—to disabuse him of this notion.

Blisters he had bargained for, and sore muscles; heaving crates, lifting spars, and hauling ropes was familiar labor, though he hadn't done it for some time.

What he had forgotten was the bone-deep fatigue that sprang as much from the constant chill of damp clothes as from the work. He welcomed the heavy labor in the cargo hold, because it warmed him temporarily, even though he knew the warmth would be succeeded by a fine, constant shiver as soon as he emerged on deck, where the wind could resume its icy probe of his sweat-soaked clothes.

Hands roughened and scraped by wet hemp were painful, but expected; by the end of his first day, his palms were black with tar, and the skin of his fingers cracked and bled at the joints, scraped raw. But the gnawing ache of hunger had been something of a surprise. He hadn't thought it possible to be as hungry as he was.

The knobbled lump of humanity working beside him—one Duff by name—was similarly damp, but seemed unfazed by the condition. The long, pointed nose that quested, ferret-like, from the upturned collar of a ragged jacket was blue at the tip and dripped regularly as a stalactite, but the pale eyes were sharp and the mouth beneath grinned wide, displaying teeth the color of the water in the Firth.

"Take hairt, man. Grub in twa bells." Duff gave him a companionable elbow in the ribs and disappeared nimbly down a hatchway, from whose cavernous recesses echoed blasphemous shouts and loud bangings.

Roger resumed his unloading of the cargo net, heartened indeed at the prospect of supper.

The after hold had already been half filled. The water casks were loaded; tier upon tier of wooden hogsheads, squatting in the shadowy gloom, each hundred-gallon cask weighing more than seven hundred pounds. But the forward hold still gaped empty, and a constant procession of loaders and quaymen streamed like ants across the dock, piling up such a heap of boxes and barrels, rolls and bundles, that it seemed inconceivable that the mass should ever be condensed sufficiently to fit within the ship.

* * *

It took two days to finish the loading: barrels of salt, bolts of cloth, huge crates of ironmongery that had to be lowered with rope slings because of their weight. It was here that Roger's size proved of benefit. At the end of a rope belayed round the capstan, he leaned back against the weight of a crate suspended at the other end and, muscles popping with the strain, lowered it slowly enough that the two men below could catch and guide it into place in the increasingly crowded hold.

The passengers came aboard in the late afternoon, a straggling line of emigrants, burdened with bags, bundles, caged chickens, and children. These were the cargo of the steerage—a space created by erection of a bulk-head across the forward hold—and as profitable in their way as the harder goods aft.

"Bondsmen and redemptioners," Duff had told him, looking over the incomers with a practiced eye. "Worth fifteen pund each on the hoof in the plantations, weans three or four. Bairns at the teat go free wi' their mithers."

The seaman coughed, a deep, rattling noise like an ancient motor starting up, and hawked a glob of phlegm, narrowly missing the side rail as he spat. He shook his head as he looked the shuffling line over.

"Happen some can pay their way, but no many in this lot. They'll have had a job to come up wi' twa pund a family for their feed on the voyage."

"The Captain doesn't feed them, then?"

"Oh, aye." Duff rumbled in his chest again, coughed and spat. "For a price." He grinned at Roger, wiped his mouth, and jerked his head toward the gangplank. "Go and lend a hand, laddie. We wouldna want the Captain's profit to be fallin' intae the water, now, would we?"

Surprised by the padded feel of a little girl as he swung her aboard, Roger looked closer and saw that the stout build of many of the women was illusion, occasioned by their wearing several layers of clothes; all they owned in the world, apparently, beyond small bundles of personal possessions, boxes of food put by for the journey—and the scrawny children for whose sake they took this desperate step.

Roger squatted, smiling at a reluctant toddler who clung to his mother's skirts. He was no more than two, still in smocks, with a riot of soft blond curls, his fat little mouth drawn down in fearful disapproval of everything around him.

"Come on, man," Roger said softly, putting out a hand in invitation. It was no longer an effort to control his accent; his usual clipped Oxbridge had elided to the gentler Highland speech with which he had grown up, and he used it now without conscious thought. "Your Mam can't be pickin' ye up now; you come with me."

Grossly mistrustful, the boy snuffled and glowered at him, but suffered him to peel the grubby little fingers away from his mother's skirts. Roger carried the little boy across the deck, the woman following him silently. She looked up at him as he handed her down the ladder, her eyes fixed on his; her face disappeared in the darkness like a white rock dropped down a well, and he turned away with a feeling of unease, as though he had abandoned someone to drowning.

As he turned back to his work, he saw a young woman, just coming down above the quay. She was the sort of girl called "bonny"—not beautiful, but lively and nicely made, with something about her that took the eye.

Perhaps it was only her posture; straight as a lily stem among the hunched and drooping backs around her. Or her face, which showed apprehension and uncertainty, but had still about it the brightness of curiosity. A darer, that one, he thought, and his heart—oppressed by so many downcast faces among the emigrants—lightened at the sight of her.

She hesitated at sight of the ship and the crowd around it. A tall fair-haired young man was with her, a baby in his arms. He touched her shoulder in reassurance, and she glanced up at him, an answering smile lighting her face like the striking of a match. Watching them, Roger felt a mild pang of something that might have been envy.

"You, MacKenzie!" The bosun's shout pulled him from his contemplation. The bosun jerked his head aft. "There's cargo a-waitin'—it's no goin' to walk aboard by itself!"

* * *

Once embarked and under sail, the voyage went smoothly for some weeks. The stormy weather that accompanied their exodus from Scotland quickly diminished into good winds and rolling seas, and while the immediate effect of this on the passengers was to make the majority of them seasick, this ailment also faded in time. The smell of vomit from the steerage subsided, becoming only a minor note in the symphony of stinks aboard the *Gloriana*.

Roger had been born with an acute sense of smell, an attribute he was finding a marked liability in close quarters. Still, even the keenest nose grew accustomed in time, and within a day or so he had ceased to note any but the most novel stenches.

He was fortunately not subject to seasickness himself, though his experiences with the herring fishers had been enough to give him a keen appreciation of the weather, with the sailor's unsettling knowledge that his life might depend on whether the sun was shining that day.

His new shipmates were not friendly, but neither were they hostile. Whether it was his "teuchter" accent from the Isles—for most of the *Gloriana*'s hands were English-speakers from Dingwall or Peterhead—the occasional odd things that he said, or simply his size, they regarded him with a certain watchful distance. No overt antagonism—his size prevented that—but distance nonetheless.

Roger wasn't disturbed by the coolness. He was pleased enough to be left to his thoughts, his mind ranging free while his body dealt with the daily round of shipboard duties. There was plenty to think about.

He had taken no heed to the reputation of the *Gloriana* or her captain before signing on; he would have sailed with Captain Ahab, provided only that that gentleman was bound for North Carolina. Still, from the talk he heard among the crew, he gathered that Stephen Bonnet was known as a good captain; hard but fair, and a man whose voyages always turned a profit. To the seamen, many of whom sailed on shares rather than wages, this latter quality plainly more than compensated for any small defects of character or address.

Not that Roger had seen open evidence of such defects. But he did see that Bonnet stood always as though an invisible circle had been drawn around him, a circle that few were bold enough to enter. Only the first mate and the bosun spoke directly to the Captain; the crewmen kept their heads down as he passed. Roger remembered the cool green leopard-eyes that had looked him over; little wonder that no one wanted to attract their notice.

He was more interested in the passengers, though, than in either crew or captain. Little was seen of them normally, but they were allowed on deck briefly twice each day, to take a bit of air, to empty their slop jars over the side—for the ship's heads were woefully inadequate for so many—and to carry down again the small amounts of water carefully rationed to each family. Roger looked forward to these brief appearances, and tried to see to it that he was employed as often as possible near the end of the deck where they took their fleeting exercise.

His interest was both professional and personal; his historian's instincts were roused by their presence, and his loneliness soothed by the homeliness of their talk. Here were the seeds of the new country, the legacy of the old. What these poor emigrants knew and valued, was what would endure to be passed on.

If one were handpicking the repository of Scottish culture, he thought, it might not contain such things as the recipe for warts about which an elderly woman was berating her long-suffering daughter-in-law ("I did tell ye, Katie Mac, and why ye chose tae leave my nice dried toadie behind, when ye could find room to bring all yon rubbish that we be squattin' on and pickin' oot from under our hurdies day and night …"), but that would last too, right along with the folksongs and prayers, with the woven wool and the Celtic patterns of their art.

He glanced at his own hand; he vividly remembered Mrs. Graham rubbing a large wart on his third finger with what she *said* was a dried toad. He grinned, rubbing a thumb across the spot. Must have worked; he'd never had another.

"Sir," said a small voice by his side. "Sir, may we go and touch the iron?"

He glanced down and smiled at the tiny girl, holding two tinier brothers by their hands.

"Aye, *a leannan,*" he said. "Get on; yourself will be minding the men, though."

She nodded and the three of them pattered off, looking anxiously up and down to be sure they were not in the way, before scrambling up to touch the horseshoe nailed to the mast for luck. Iron was protection and healing; the mothers often sent the little ones who were ailing to touch it.

They could have used iron to better effect internally, Roger thought, seeing the rash on the pasty white faces, and hearing the high-pitched complaints of itching boils, of loose teeth and fever. He resumed his job, measuring out water by the dipperful into the buckets and dishes the emigrants held out to him. They were living on oatmeal, the lot of them—that, with dried peas now and then and a bit of hard biscuit, was the sum total of the "provisions" supplied them for the voyage.

At that, he'd heard no complaint; the water was clean, the biscuit was not moldy, and if the allowance of "corn" was not generous, neither was it niggardly. The crew was fed better, but still on meat and starch, with only the occasional onion for relief. He ran his tongue round his teeth, testing, as he did every few days. The faint taste of iron was nearly always in his mouth now; his gums were beginning to bleed from the lack of fresh vegetables.

Still, his teeth were strongly rooted, and he had no sign of the swollen joints or bruised nails that several of the other crewmen showed. He'd looked it up, during his weeks of waiting; a normal adult male in good health should be able to endure from three to six months of prolonged vitamin deficiency before suffering any real symptoms. If the good weather held, they'd be across in only two.

"It will be good weather tomorrow, aye?" His attention recalled by this apparent reading of his thoughts, he looked down to find that it was the bonny brown-haired girl he'd admired on the quay in Inverness. Morag, her friends called her.

"I am hoping it may be," he said, taking her bucket with an answering smile. "Why do ye say so?"

She nodded, pointing over his shoulder with a small sharp chin. "There's the new moon in the arms o' the old; if that means fine weather on the land, I should think it is the same on the sea, no?"

He glanced back to see the pale clean curve of a silver moon, holding a glowing orb in its cup. It rode high and perfect in an endless evening sky of pale violet, its reflection swallowed by the indigo sea.

"Dinna be wasting time chattering, lass—go on and ask him!" He turned back in time to hear this hissed over Morag's shoulder by the middle-aged woman behind her. Morag glared back.

"Will ye hush?" she hissed back. "I'll not, I said I won't!"

“Ye’re a stubborn lass, Morag,” the older woman declared, stepping boldly forward, “and if ye willna be asking for yourself, I shall do it for ye!”

The good-lady laid a broad hand on Roger’s arm and gave him a charming smile.

“And what might your name be, lad?”

“MacKenzie, ma’am,” Roger said respectfully, holding back a smile.

“Ah, MacKenzie, is it! Well, there, ye see, Morag, and belike he’ll be some kinsman of your man’s, and happy to do ye a service, at that!” The woman turned triumphantly to the girl, then swung back to let Roger have the full force of her personality.

“She’s suckling a wean, and dyin’ o’ thirst in the doin’ of it. A woman needs to drink when she’s giving suck, or her milk dries; everyone kens that weel enough. But the silly lass cannae bring herself to ask ye for a bittie more water. There’s nane here grudge it to her—is there?” she demanded rhetorically, turning round to glare at the other women in line. Not surprisingly, all the heads shook back and forth like clockwork toys.

It was getting dark, but Morag’s face was visibly pink. Lips pressed tight together, she accepted the brimming bucket of water with a brief bob of her head.

“I thank ye, Mr. MacKenzie,” she murmured. She didn’t look up until she had reached the hatchway—but then she stopped, and looked back over her shoulder at him, with a smile of such gratitude that he felt himself grow warm, in spite of the sharp evening wind that blew through his shirt and jacket.

He was sorry to see the water line finish and the emigrants go below, the hatch battened down over them for the night watches. He knew they told stories and sang songs to pass the time, and would have given much to hear them. Not only from curiosity, but from longing—what moved him was neither pity for their poverty nor thought of their uncertain future; it was envy of the sense of connection among them.

But the Captain, the crew, the passengers, even the all-important weather, occupied no more than a fragment of Roger’s thoughts.

What he thought about, day and night, wet or dry, hungry or fed, was Brianna.

He went down to the mess when the signal came for supper, and ate without much noticing the contents of his trencher. His was the second watch; he went to his hammock after eating, choosing solitude and rest over the possibility of companionship on the forecastle.

Solitude was an illusion, of course. Swinging gently in his hammock, he could feel each twitch and turn of the man next to him, the sweating heat of sleeping flesh clammy against his own through the thick cotton mesh. Each man had eighteen inches of sleeping space to call his own, and Roger was uncomfortably aware that when he lay upon his back, his shoulders exceeded that allowance by a good two inches on either side.

After two nights of sleep interrupted by the bumps and muttered insults of his shipmates, he had swapped places and ended in the space next the bulkhead, where he would have only one companion to discommode. He learned to lie on one side, his face an inch or two from the wooden partition, back turned to his companions, and tune his ears to the sounds of the ship, blocking out the noises of the men around him.

A very musical thing was a ship—lines and hawsers singing in the wind, the timber knees creaking with each rise and fall, the faint thumps and murmurs on the far side of the bulkhead, in the dark recesses of the passengers' hold in the steerage. He stared at the dark wood, lit by the shadows of the swinging lantern overhead, and began to re-create her, the lines of face and hair and body all vivid in the dark. Too vivid.

He could conjure her face without difficulty. What lay behind it was a good deal harder.

Rest was also an illusion. When she had gone through the stones, she had taken with her all peace of mind. He lived in a mixture of fear and anger, spiced with the hurt of betrayal, rubbed like pepper into the wounds. The same questions ran round and round inside his mind without answers, a snake chasing its tail.

Why had she gone?

What was she doing?

Why didn't she tell him?

It was the effort to come up with an answer to the first of these that kept him going over and over it, as though the answer might afford him the key to the whole mystery of Brianna.

Yeah, he'd been lonely. Knew bloody well what it felt like to have no one in the world who belonged to you, or you to them. But surely that was one reason why they had reached out to each other—he and Brianna.

Claire knew, too, he thought suddenly. She'd been orphaned, lost her uncle—of course, she'd been married then. But she'd been separated from her husband during the war … yes, she knew a lot about being alone. And that was why she'd taken care not to leave Bree alone, to assure herself that her daughter was loved.

Well, he'd tried to love her properly—was still trying, he thought grimly, twisting uncomfortably in his hammock. During the day, the demands of work suppressed the growing needs of his body. At night, though … she was a deal too vivid, the Brianna of his memory.

He hadn't hesitated; he'd known from the first moment of realization that he must follow her. Sometimes, though, he was not sure whether he had come to save her or to savage her—anything, so long as it was settled once and for all between them. He'd said he'd wait—but he'd waited long enough.

The worst of it was not the loneliness, he thought, flinging restlessly over again, but the doubt. Doubt of her feelings, and of his. Panic that he did not truly know her.

For the first time since his passage through the stones, he realized what she had meant in refusing him, and knew her hesitance for wisdom. But *was* it wisdom, and not only fear?

If she had not gone through the stones—would she have turned to him at last, wholeheartedly? Or turned away, always looking for something else?

It was a leap of faith—to throw one's heart across a gulf, and trust another to catch it. His own was still in flight across the void, with no certainty of landing. But still in flight.

The sounds on the other side of the bulkhead had faded to silence, but now they started up again, in a stealthy, rhythmic fashion with which he was thoroughly familiar. They were at it again, whoever they were.

They did it almost every night, when the others had gone to sleep. At first the sounds had made him feel only his isolation, alone with the burning ghost of Brianna. There seemed no possibility of true human warmth, no joining of heart or mind, no more than the animal consolation of a body to cling to in the dark. Was there really any more for a man than this?

But then he began to hear something else in the sounds, half-caught words of tenderness, small furtive sounds of affirmation, that made him in some way not a voyeur, but a participant in their joining.

He couldn't tell, of course. It might have been any of the couples, or a random pairing of lust—and yet he put faces to them, this unknown pair; in his mind, he saw the tall, fair-haired young man, the brown-haired lass with the open face, saw them look at each other as they had on the quay, and would have sold his soul to know such certainty.

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FOR THOSE IN PERIL ON THE SEA

A sudden hard squall kept the passengers belowdecks for three days, and the sailors at their posts with no more than scant minutes snatched for rest or food. At the end of it, when the *Gloriana* rode high on the dying storm-swell and the dawn sky was filled with racing mare's-tails, Roger staggered down to his hammock, too exhausted even to shuck his wet clothes.

Crumpled, damp, crusted with salt and feeling fit for nothing but a hot bath and another week's sleep, he answered the bosun's whistle for the afternoon watch after four hours rest, and staggered through his duties.

He was so tired by sunset that his muscles quivered as he helped to heave up a fresh water barrel from the hold. He caved in the top with a hatchet, thinking that he might just manage the exertion of ladling out water rations without falling headfirst into the barrel. Then again, he might not. He splashed a cool handful of the fresh water into his face, in hopes of soothing his burning eyes, and gulped down a whole dipperful, ignoring for once the strictures imposed by that constant contradiction of the sea—always both too much water, and too little.

The folk bringing up their jars and buckets to be filled looked as though they felt even worse than he did; green-gilled as mushrooms, bruised from being pitched to and fro in the hold like billiard balls, reeking of renewed seasickness and overflowing chamber pots.

In marked contrast to the general air of pallid malaise, one of his old acquaintances was skipping in rings around him, singing in a monotonous chant that grated on his ears.

“Seven herrings are a salmon’s fill,
Seven salmon are a seal’s fill,
Seven seals are a whale’s fill,
And seven whales the fill of a Cirein Croin!”

Bubbling with the freedom of release from the hold, the little girl hopped around like a demented chickadee, making Roger smile in spite of his tiredness. She hopped to the rail, then stood on tiptoe, and peeked cautiously over.

“D’ye think ’twas a Cirein Croin caused the storming, Mr. MacKenzie? Grandda says it was, like enough. They lash their great huge tails about, ye ken,” she informed him. “That’s what makes the waves go sae big.”

“I shouldna be thinking such a thing, myself. Where’s your brothers, then, *a leannan*?”

“Fevered,” the girl answered, indifferently. It was nothing out of the way; half the emigrants in line were coughing and sneezing, three days in darkness and damp clothes having done nothing for their precarious state of health.

“Have ye seen a Cirein Croin, then?” she asked, leaning far over the rail, a hand shading her eyes. “Are they really big enough to swallow the boat?”

“Myself has not seen one.” Roger dropped his dipper and grabbed her by the apron sash, pulling her firmly off the rail. “Have a care, aye? It would take no more than a spratling to swallow *you,* lassie!”

“Look!” she shrieked, leaning farther over in spite of his grasp. “Look, it is, it *is*!”

Drawn as much by the terror in her voice as what she said, Roger leaned over the rail involuntarily. A dark shape hovered just below the surface, smooth and black, graceful as a bullet—and half the length of the ship. It kept pace for a few moments with the racing vessel, then was outdistanced and left behind.

“Shark,” Roger said, shaken in spite of himself. He gave the girl a small shake, to stop her steam-whistle screeches. “It’s no but a shark, hear? Ye ken what's a shark, do ye not? We ate one, only last week!"

She had quit shrieking, but was still white-faced and wide-eyed, tender mouth quivering.

"You're sure?" she said. "It—it wasna a Cirein Croin?"

"No," Roger said gently, and gave her a dipper of water to drink, by herself. "Only a shark." The biggest shark he had ever seen, with an air of blind ferocity that raised the hair on his forearms to see—but only a shark. They hung about the ship whenever her speed slowed, eager for the garbage and slops tossed overboard.

"Isobeàil!" An indignant cry summoned his erstwhile companion to come and lend a hand with the family chores. With dragging step and out-thrust lip, Isobeàil slouched off to help her mother with the water buckets, leaving Roger to finish his job without further distraction.

No further distraction than his thoughts, at least. For the most part, he succeeded in forgetting that the *Gloriana* had nothing below her save leagues of empty water; that the ship was not, in fact, the small and solid island that it seemed, but instead no more than a fragile shell, at the mercy of forces that could crush her in moments—and everyone aboard.

Had the *Phillip Alonzo* reached port in safety? he wondered. Ships did sink, and fairly often; he'd read enough accounts of it. Having lived through the last three days, he could only be amazed that more of them *didn't* sink. Well, and there was precisely nothing he could do about that prospect, except pray.

For those in peril on the deep, Lord, have mercy.

With sudden vividness, he understood exactly what the maker of that line had meant.

Finished, he dropped the dipper into the barrel and reached for a board to cover the open top; rats tended to fall in and drown otherwise. One of the women clutched him by the arm as he turned away. She gestured at the little boy she held, fussing against his mother's neck.

"Mr. MacKenzie, might the Captain gie us a wee rub wi' his ring? Our Gibbie has a touch o' sore eyes from bein' in the dark sae long."

Roger hesitated, but then ridiculed himself. He, like the rest of the crew, tended to steer clear of Bonnet, but there was no reason to refuse the woman's request; the Captain had obliged before with a rub of his gold ring, this being a popular remedy for sore eyes and inflammations.

"Yeah, sure," he said, forgetting himself for a moment. "Come on." The woman blinked in surprise, but followed him obediently. The Captain was on his quarterdeck, engaged in close conversation with the mate; Roger motioned to the woman to wait for a bit, and she nodded, shrinking modestly behind him.

The Captain looked as tired as any of them, the lines of dissipation carved deeper in his face. Lucifer after a week of running Hell, and finding it no picnic, Roger thought, sourly amused.

"… damage to the tea chests?" Bonnet was saying to the mate.

"Only two, and not soaked through," Dixon replied. "We can salvage a bit; maybe get rid of it upriver in Cross Creek."

"Aye, they're more particular in Edenton and New Bern. We'll get the best prices there, though; we'll get rid of what we can before we go to Wilmington."

Bonnet turned slightly and caught sight of Roger. His expression hardened, but relaxed again when he heard the request. Without comment, he reached down and rubbed the gold ring he wore on his little finger gently over little Gilbert's closed eyes. A plain wide band, Roger saw; it almost looked like a wedding ring, though smaller—a woman's ring, maybe. The formidable Bonnet with a love token? Could be, Roger supposed; some women might find the Captain's air of subdued violence attractive.

"The wean's ailing," Dixon remarked. He pointed, there was a prickle of red bumps behind the boy's ears, and his pale cheeks bloomed with fever.

"No but milk fever," the woman said, pulling her child defensively against her bosom. "He's a new tooth coming, likely."

The Captain nodded indifferently and turned away. Roger escorted the woman to the galley to beg a bit of hard biscuit for the child to gnaw on, then sent her back to the forward hold with the others.

He had little thought for Gilbert's gums, though; as he climbed the ladderway to the deck, his mind was occupied by the conversation he had overheard.

Stops in New Bern and Edenton, before Wilmington. And plainly Bonnet was in no rush; he'd be looking for good prices for his cargo, and taking the time to broker the indentures of his passengers—Christ, it could be weeks before they made Wilmington!

It wouldn't do, Roger thought. God knew where Brianna could get to—or what sort of thing happen to her. The *Gloriana* had made swift passage, in spite of the squall—God willing, they'd make North Carolina in only eight weeks, if the winds held. He didn't want to sacrifice the valuable time so gained to lallygagging in the northern Carolina ports, mooching their way south.

He'd be off the *Gloriana* in the first port they touched, he resolved, and make his way south as best he could. True, he'd given his word to stay with the ship until the cargo was disposed of, but then, he wouldn't be taking his wages, either, so the exchange seemed fair enough.

The fresh cold air above decks did a little bit to rouse him. His head still felt stuffed with damp cotton wool, though, and the back of his throat was raspy with salt. Three hours more to go on his watch; he made his way forward for another dipper of water, hoping it would help him stay on his feet.

Dixon had left the Captain, and was strolling through the clusters of passengers, nodding to the men, stopping to say something to a woman with children. Odd, Roger thought. The mate wasn't a sociable man with the crew, let alone with the passengers, whom he regarded as nothing more than an unusually inconvenient form of cargo.

Something stirred in his mind at the mention of cargo, something uncomfortable, but he couldn't bring it to the forefront of recognition. It hung in the shadows of exhaustion, just out of sight, nearly close enough to smell. Yes, that was it, it had to do with a smell. But what—

"MacKenzie!" One of the seamen was calling from the afterdeck, waving for him to come and help with the mending of sails torn by the storm; huge stacks of folded canvas lay like dirty snowdrifts on the boards, their upper layers billowing in the wind.

Roger groaned, and stretched his aching muscles. No matter what happened in North Carolina, he would be very glad to get off this ship.

* * *

Two nights later, Roger was deep in dreams when the shouting roused him. His feet hit the deck and he was running for the companionway, heart pumping at full bore, before his mind had grasped the fact that he was awake. He sprang for the ladder, only to be knocked sprawling by a blow to his chest.

"Stay where ye are, fool!" Dixon's voice growled from the rungs above. He could see the mate's head, outlined against the starry square of the hatchway overhead.

"What is it? What's happening?" He shook off the confusion of his dreams, to find no less confusion in the waking.

There were others in the dark near him, he could feel bodies stumble over him as he struggled to his feet. All the noise was up above, though; a thunder of feet on the deck and a shouting and shrieking like nothing he had ever heard.

"Murderers!" A woman's voice cut through the racket, shrill as a fife. "Wicked *mur*—" The voice cut off abruptly, with a heavy thump on the deck above.

"What is it?" On his feet again, Roger shoved his way through the men by the ladder, shouting up to Dixon, "What? Are we boarded?" His words were drowned by the shouting above; the steam-whistle shrieks of women and children, cutting through men's bellowing and curses.

Red light flickered somewhere above. Was the ship afire? He shoved through the press of men and grabbed the ladder, reached up and seized Dixon's foot.

"Gerrof!" The foot jerked free, aimed a kick at his head. "Stay down there! Christ, man, ye want to catch pox?"

"Pox? What the *hell* is going on up there?" Eyes accustomed to the dark by now, Roger grabbed the stabbing foot and gave it a vicious twist, jerked downward. Unprepared for assault, Dixon lost his grip on the ladder and fell heavily, sliding over Roger's head and into the men below.

Roger ignored the cries of rage and surprise behind him and clambered out onto the deck. There was a group of men clustered thick about the forward hatchway. Lanterns hung above in the rigging, shooting beams of red and white and yellow light that caught the gleam of blades.

He looked quickly for another ship, but the ocean was black and empty on all sides. No boarders, no pirates; all the struggle was taking place near the hatchway, where half the crew was gathered in a knot, armed with knives and clubs.

Mutiny? he thought, and dismissed it, even as he pushed forward; Bonnet's head showed above the crowd, hatless, fair hair gleaming in the flash of lantern light. Roger shoved his way into the mob, ruthlessly shouldering smaller seamen aside.

Shrieks and shouts echoed from the hold, and a flicker of light showed below. A bundle of rags was handed up, passed rapidly from hand to hand, disappeared behind the shifting mass of limbs and clubs. There was a heavy splash to port, and then another.

"What is it, what's happening?" He bellowed in the ear of the bosun, who stood near the hatchway, holding a lantern. The man jerked round and glared at him.

"You've not had pox, have you? Get below!" Hutchinson's attention had already gone back to the open hatchway.

"Yes, I have! What's that got to—"

The bosun swung back, surprised.

"You've had pox? You're not marked. Ach, let it go—get you down, then, we need all hands!"

"For what?" Roger leaned forward, to make himself heard above the noise from below.

"Smallpox!" the bosun bellowed back. He gestured at the open hatchway, as one of the seamen appeared at the top of the ladder, a child under one arm, feebly kicking. Hands clawed and beat at the man's hunched back, and a woman's voice rose high above the other noises, shrill with terror.

She got a grip on the seaman's blouse, and as Roger watched, she began to climb the man's body, dragging him backward as she struggled to reach the child, screaming as she clawed the man's back, digging handfuls of cloth and flesh.

The man roared and swatted at her, trying to dislodge her. The ladder was fixed, but the seaman, one-handed and pulled off balance, swayed wildly, his look of rage turning to alarm as his feet slipped on the rung.

Reflex alone made Roger lunge forward, grabbing the child like a rugger ball as the seaman threw his arms out in a last effort to save himself. Entangled like lovers, man and woman fell backward together into the open maw of the hatchway. There was a crash and more screams from below, then the sudden, momentary silence of shock. Then the outcries began again, below, and a muttering babble around him.

Roger righted the child, trying to stop its whimpering with awkward pats. It seemed curiously loose-jointed in his arms, and it felt hot, even through its layers of clothes. Light flashed over Roger as the bosun lifted his lantern high, looking at the child with distaste.

"Hope you *have* had the pox, MacKenzie," he said.

It was wee Gilbert, the lad with sore eyes—but two days had made such a change that Roger scarcely recognized him. The boy was thin as a wraith, the round face gone so thin that the skullbones showed. The fair, dirt-smudged skin had gone, too, submerged under a mass of suppurating pustules so thick that the eyes were mere slits in the lolling head.

He had barely time to register the sight before hands plucked the small, burning body from him. Before he could grasp the sudden emptiness in his arms, there was another splash to port.

He swung toward the rail in vain reflex, hands curled in fists of shock, but then turned back as a new roar came from the hatchway behind.

The passengers had recovered from the surprise of the attack. A rush of men boiled up the ladder, armed with anything they could seize, and fell upon the seamen at the top, bearing them down with sheer frenzy.

Someone cannoned into Roger and he fell, rolling to the side as a stool leg thudded into the deck near his head. He got to his hands and knees, was kicked in the ribs, shied and was pushed, heaved back against obstruction, and with a moment's opportunity, threw himself blindly at a pair of legs, having no idea whether he fought crew or passengers, fighting only for room to stand up and breathe.

The stink of sickness rolled out of the hold, a sweet, rotting smell that overlaid the usual harsh reek of ripe bodies and sewage. The lanterns swung with the wind, and light and shadow cut the scene to pieces, so that here showed a face, wild-eyed and shouting, there an arm upraised, here a naked foot, only to vanish in the darkness and be replaced at once by elbows and knives and thrusting knees, so the deck seemed awash in dismembered bodies.

So strong was the confusion that Roger felt dismembered himself; he glanced down, feeling numbness in his left arm, half expecting to find the limb struck off. It was there, though, and he raised it by reflex, fending off an unseen blow that jarred through bone.

Someone grasped his hair; he jerked free and swung round, elbowed someone hard in the ribs and swung again, hitting air. He found himself momentarily standing clear of the fight, gasping for breath. Two figures crouched before him, in the shadow of the rail; as he shook his head to clear it, the taller stood up and launched itself at him.

He reeled backward under the impact, clutching his attacker. They struck the foremast and fell together, then rolled over and over, hammering each other in blind earnest. Caught in the web of noise and blows, he paid no mind to the disjointed words that panted in his ear.

Then a boot struck him, and another, and as he loosed his hold on his opponent, two crewmen kicked them apart. Someone seized the other man and pulled him upright, and Roger saw the flash of the bosun's lantern held high, revealing the face of the tall fair-haired passenger—Morag MacKenzie's husband, green eyes dark and wild with fury.

MacKenzie was the worse for wear—so was Roger, as he discovered when he passed a hand across his face and felt his split lip—but his skin was clear of pustules.

"Good enough," said Hutchinson briefly, and the man was thrust unceremoniously toward the hatchway.

His comrades gave Roger a rough hand up, and then left him swaying, dazed and ignored, as they finished their work. The resistance had been short-lived; though armed with the fury of despair, the passengers were weakened by six weeks under hatches, by sickness and scanty food. The stronger had been clubbed into submission, the weaker forced back, and those sick of pox—

Roger looked out at the rail and the path of the moon's aisle, serene on the water. He grabbed the rail and vomited, retching till no more than bile came up, burning the back of nose and throat. The water below was black, and empty.

Drained and shaking from exertion, he made his way slowly across the deck. Those seamen he passed were silent, but from the battened forward hatchway, a single thin wail rose up, and up, an endless keen that drew no breath and knew no respite.

He nearly fell down the companionway into the crew's quarters, went to his hammock, ignoring all questions, and wrapped his blanket over his head, trying to shut out the sound of the wailing—to shut out everything.

But there was no oblivion to be found in the suffocating woolen folds, and he jerked the blanket off, heart pounding, with a sensation of drowning so strong in his chest that he gulped air, again and again until he felt dizzy, and still breathed deep, as though he must breathe for those who could not.

"It's for the best, lad," Hutchinson had said to him with gruff sympathy, passing by as he puked his guts out over the rail. "Pox spreads like wildfire; none in that hold would live to make landfall, did we not take out the sick."

And was this better than the slower death of scabs and fever? Not for those left behind; the wail went on and on, lancing the silence, piercing wood and heart alike.

Maimed pictures flashed in his mind, truncated scenes caught by the popping of invisible flashbulbs: the sailor's contorted face as he fell into the hold; the little boy's half-open mouth, the inside scabbed with pustules. Bonnet standing above the fray, with his face of a fallen angel, watching. And the dark hungry water, empty under the moon.

Something bumped softly, sliding past the hull, and he rolled into a shivering ball, oblivious alike to the sweltering heat in the hold, and the sleepy complaint of the man next to him. No, not empty. He had heard the seamen say that sharks never sleep.

"Oh, God," he said aloud. "Oh, God!" He should have been praying for the dead, but could not.

He rolled again, squirming, trying to escape, and in the echo of the futile prayer found memory—the misplaced hearing of those few frantic words, panted in his ear during those moments of unthinking frenzy.

For the love of God, man, the fair-haired man had said. *For the love of God, let her go!*

He straightened and lay stiff, bathed in cold sweat.

Two figures in the shadow. And the open hatchway to the stores hold some twenty feet away.

"Oh, God," he said again, but this time, it *was* a prayer.

It was the middle of the dogwatch next day before Roger found an opportunity to go down to the hold. He made no effort to avoid being seen; watching his shipmates had taught him quickly that in close quarters, nothing drew attention faster than furtiveness.

If anyone asked, he had heard a bumping noise, and thought perhaps the load had shifted. Close enough to the truth, at that.

He hung from the edge of the hatch by his hands; less chance of being followed if he didn't put down the ladder. He dropped into the dark and landed hard, jarring his bones. Anyone down here would have heard that—and by the same token, if anyone followed him, he would be warned.

He took a moment to recover from the shock of landing, then began to move cautiously through the looming dim bulks of the stacked cargo. Everything seemed blurred round the edges. It wasn't only the faint light, he thought; everything in the hold was vibrating very slightly, thrumming to the shiver of the hull beneath. He could hear it, if he listened closely; the lowest note in the ship's song.

Through the narrow aisles between the ranks of crates, past the huge bellies of the serried water casks. He breathed in; the air was full of the smell of wet wood, overlaid by the faint perfume of tea. There were rustlings and creakings, plenty of odd noises—but no sign of any human presence. Still, he was sure that someone was here.

And why are you *here, mate?* he thought. What if one of the steerage passengers *had* taken refuge here? If someone lay hidden here, chances were good that they had the pox; Roger could do nothing for them—why bother to look?

Because he couldn't not look, was the answer. He didn't reproach himself for failing to save the pox-stricken passengers; nothing could have helped them in any case, and perhaps a quick death by drowning was not in fact more terrible than the slow agony of the disease. He'd like to believe that.

But he hadn't slept; the events of the night filled him with such a sense of horror and sick futility that he could find no rest. Whether he could do anything now, or not, he must do *something*. He had to look.

Something small moved in the deep shadows of the hold. *Rat,* he thought, and turned reflexively to stamp on it. The movement saved him; a heavy object whizzed past his head and landed with a splash in the bilges below.

He put his head down and lunged in the direction of the movement, shoulders hunched against an expected blow. There was nowhere to run, and not much place to hide. He saw it again, lunged, and grabbed cloth. Jerked hard, and got flesh. A quick scuffle in the dark, and a cry of alarm, and he found himself pressing a body hard against a bulkhead, clutching the skinny wrist of Morag MacKenzie.

"What the *hell?*" She kicked at him, and tried to bite, but he ignored this. He got a good grip on the scruff of her neck and hauled her out of the shadows, into the dim brown light of the hold. "What are you doing here?"

"Nothing! Let go! Let me go, please! Please, I beg ye, sir—" Force not availing to free herself—she weighed perhaps half what he did—she turned to pleading, words pouring out in a half-whispered stream of desperation. "For the sake of your own mother, sir! Ye canna do it, please ye cannot let them kill him *please*!"

"I'm not going to kill anyone. For God's sake, hush yourself!" he said, and gave her a small shake.

From the blackest shadows behind the anchor chain came the high, thin wail of a fretful baby.

She gave a small gasp and looked up at him, frantic.

"They'll hear him! God, man, let me go to him!" Such was her desperation that she succeeded in wrenching herself free, and fled toward the sound, clambering over the great rusted links of the anchor chain, heedless of filth.

He followed, more slowly; she couldn't get away—there was nowhere for her to go. He found them in the darkest spot, crouched against one of the ship's knees, the huge angled timbers that framed the hull. There was barely a foot of clearance between the rough wood of the hull and the piled mass of the anchor chain; she was no more than a darker blot on the stygian blackness.

"I will not hurt you," he said softly. The shadow seemed to shrink away from him, but she didn't answer.

His eyes were slowly growing accustomed to the dark; even back here, a faint light seeped through from the distant hatch. A patch of white—her breast was bared, giving suck to the child. He could hear the small wet noises as it fed.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he asked, though he knew well enough. His stomach clenched tight, and not just because of the foul smell of the bilges. He squatted next to her, barely able to fit in the tiny space.

"I'm hiding!" she said fiercely. "Surely to goodness ye see that?"

"Is the child sick?"

"No!" She hunched herself over the baby, squirming as far away from him as she could get.

"Then—"

"It's no but a wee rash! All bairns get them, my mither said so!" He could hear the fear in her voice, underneath the furious denial.

"Are you sure?" he said, as gently as he could. He reached a tentative hand toward the dark blotch she held.

She struck at him, awkwardly one-handed, and he jerked back with a hiss of pain.

"Jesus! Ye stabbed me!"

"Stay back! I've my husband's dirk," she warned. "I won't let ye take him, I'll kill ye first, I swear I will!"

He believed her. Hand to his mouth, he could taste his own blood, sweet and salt on his tongue. It was no more than a scratch, but he believed her. She'd kill him—or die herself, which was a great deal more likely if one of the crew found her.

But no, he thought. She was worth money. Bonnet wouldn't kill her—only have her dragged on deck and forced to watch as her child was torn out of her arms and thrown into the sea. He remembered the dark shadows that dogged the ship, and shuddered with a cold that had nothing to do with the dank surroundings.

"I won't take him. But if it's the pox—"

"It's not! I swear to Bride, it's not!" A small hand shot out of the shadows and gripped him by the sleeve. "It's as I tell ye, it's no but a milk rash, I've seen it, man—a hundred times before! I'm the eldest o' nine, I ken weel enough when a bairn's sick and when he's but teething!"

He hesitated, then made up his mind abruptly. If she was wrong, and the child had smallpox, she was likely already infected; to return her to the hold would be only to spread the disease. And if she was right—he knew as well as she that it didn't matter; any rash would condemn the child on sight.

He could feel her quivering, on the brink of hysteria. He wanted to touch her in reassurance, but thought better of it. She wouldn't trust him, and no wonder.

"I won't give you away," he whispered.

He was met by suspicious silence.

"You need food, don't you? And fresh water. You'll have no milk soon, without it, and then what of the bairn?"

He could hear her breathing, ragged and phlegmy. She was ill, but it needn't be pox; all the hold passengers coughed and wheezed—the damp had got into their lungs early on.

"Show him to me."

"No!" Her eyes shone in the dark, fearful as a cornered rat's, and the edge of her lip lifted over small white teeth.

"I swear I will not take him from you. I need to see, though."

"What will ye swear on?"

He groped his memory for a suitable Celtic oath, then gave up and said what was in his mind.

"On my own woman's life," he said, "and on the heads of my unborn sons."

He could feel doubt, and then a small easing of the tension in her; the round knee pressed against his leg moved slightly as she relaxed. There was a stealthy rustling in the chains nearby. Real rats this time.

"I canna leave him here alone while I steal food." He saw the faint tilt of her head toward the noise. "They'll eat him alive; they've bitten me in my sleep already, the filthy vermin."

He reached out his hands, conscious all the time of the sounds from the deck above. It wasn't likely that anyone would come down here, but how long before he was missed above?

She still hesitated, but at last reached a finger toward her breast, and freed the child's mouth with a tiny *pop!* It made a small sound of protest, and wriggled slightly as he took it.

He hadn't held babies very often; the feel of the dirty little bundle was startling—inert but lively, soft yet firm.

"Mind his head!"

"I've got it." Cradling the warm round skull in one careful palm, he duck-walked backward a step or two, bringing the child's face into dim light.

The cheeks were splotched with reddish pustules, topped with white—they looked for all the world like pox to Roger, and he felt a tremor of revulsion in the palms of his hands. Immunity or not, it took courage to touch contagion and not flinch.

He squinted at the child, then carefully undid its wrappings, ignoring the mother's hissed protest. He slid a hand under its dress, feeling first the soggy clout that hung between its chubby legs, and then the smooth, silky skin of chest and stomach.

The child didn't really seem so sick; his eyes were clear, not gummy. And while the tiny boy seemed feverish, it wasn't the searing heat he had felt the night before. The baby whined and squirmed, true, but he kicked with a fretful strength in the tiny limbs, not the weak spasms of a dying child.

The very young go quickly, Claire had said. *You have no notion how fast disease moves, when there's nothing to fight it with*. He had some notion, after last night.

"All right," he whispered at last. "I think you're maybe right." He felt, rather than saw, the easing of her arm—she had held her dagger ready.

He gingerly handed back the child, with a mingled sense of relief and reluctance. And the terrifying realization of the responsibility he had accepted.

Morag was cooing to the boy, cuddling him against her breast as she hastily rewrapped him.

"Sweet Jemmy, aye, that's a good laddie. Hush, bittie, hush now, it'll be all right, Mammy's here for ye."

"How long?" Roger whispered, laying a hand on her arm. "How long will the rash last, if it's milk rash?"

"Maybe four days, maybe five," she whispered back. "But it's no but maybe twa more, and the rash will be different—less. Anyone can see then that it's not the pox. I can come out, then."

Two days. If it was pox, the child would be dead in two days. But if not—he might just manage. And so might she.

"Can you keep awake that long? The rats—"

"Aye, I can," she said fiercely. "I can do what I must. Will ye help me, then?"

He drew a deep breath, ignoring the stench.

"Aye, I will." He stood up, and gave her his hand. After a moment's hesitation, she took it, and stood too. She was small, she barely reached his shoulder, and her hand in his was the size of a child's—in the shadows, she looked like a young girl cradling her doll.

"How old are you?" he asked suddenly.

He caught the gleam of her eyes, surprised, and then the flash of teeth.

"Yesterday I was two-and-twenty," she said dryly. "Today, I'm maybe a hundred."

The small damp hand pulled free of his, and she melted back into the darkness.

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A GAMBLING MAN

The fog gathered through the night. By dawn the ship rode in a cloud so thick that the sea below could not be seen from the rail, and only the susurrus of the hull’s passage indicated that the *Gloriana* still floated on water, not air.

There was no sun, and little wind; the sails hung limp, shuddering now and then with a passing air. Oppressed by the dimness, men walked the decks like ghosts, appearing out of the murk with a suddenness that startled one another.

This obscurity served Roger well; he was able to pass almost unseen through the ship, and slip unobserved into the hold, the small store of food he had kept back from his own meals concealed in his shirt.

The fog had gotten into the hold as well; clammy white tendrils touched his face, drifting out between the looming water casks, and hovered near his feet. It was darker than ever here below, gone from dusty-gold dimness to the black-brown of cold, wet wood.

The child was asleep; Roger saw no more than the curve of its cheek, still spattered with red pustules. They looked angry and inflamed. Morag saw his look of doubt and said nothing, but took his hand in her own and pressed it to the baby’s neck.

The tiny pulse went bump-bump-bump under his finger, and the soft creased skin was warm but damp. Reassured, he smiled at Morag, and she gave him back a tiny glimmer.

A month in steerage had left her thin and grimy; the last two days had stamped her face with permanent lines of fear. Her hair straggled lank around her face, caked with grease and thick with lice. Her eyes were bruised with tiredness, and she smelled of feces and urine, sour milk and stale sweat. Her lips were tight and pale as the rest of her face. Roger took her very gently by the shoulders, bent, and kissed her mouth.

At the top of the ladder, he looked back. She was still standing there looking up at him, the child in her arms.

The deck was quiet save for the murmur of helmsman and bosun, invisible at the wheel. Roger eased the hatch cover back in place, his heart beginning to slow again, the touch of her still warming his hands. Two days. Maybe three. Perhaps they would make it; Roger at least was convinced she was right, the child did not have pox.

There should be no occasion for anyone to go into the hold soon—a fresh water-cask had been brought up only the day before. He could contrive to feed her—if only she could stay awake long enough … the sharp *ting* of the ship's bell pierced the fog, a reminder of time that no longer seemed to exist, its passage unmarked by any change of light or dark.

It was as Roger crossed toward the stern that he heard it; a sudden loud *whoosh* in the mist off the rail, very near at hand. The next instant, the ship trembled slightly underfoot, her boards brushed by something huge.

"Whale!" came a cry from aloft. He could see two men near the main-mast, dimly outlined in the fog. At the cry, they froze, and he realized that he, too, was standing rigid, listening.

There was another *whoosh* nearby, another farther off. The crew of the *Gloriana* stood silent, each man charting in his head the great exhalations, marking an invisible map on which the ship drifted through moving shoals, mountains of silent, intelligent flesh.

How big were they? Roger wondered. Big enough to damage the ship? He strained his eyes, vainly trying to see anything at all through the fog.

It came again, a thump hard enough to jar the rail under his hands, followed by a long, grating rasp that shuddered through the boards. There were muffled cries of fear from below; to those in the steerage, it would be right next to them, no more than the planks of the hull between them and rupture—a sudden smash and the frightful inrush of the sea. Three-inch oak planks seemed no more substantial than tissue paper against the great beasts that floated nearby, breathing unseen in the fog.

"Barnacles," said a soft Irish voice from the mist behind him. Despite himself, Roger jumped, and a low chuckle materialized into Bonnet's shadowed bulk. The Captain held a cheroot between his teeth, a spill from the galley fire illumining the lines and planes of his face, dissolute in red light. The rasping shudder came again through the boards.

"They scratch themselves to rid their skins of parasites," Bonnet said casually. "We are no more to them than a floating stone." He drew heavily to start the flame, blew fragrant smoke, and tossed the burning paper overboard. It vanished in the mist like a falling star.

Roger let out a breath only slightly less noisy than the whales'. How close had Bonnet been? Had the Captain seen him coming out of the hold?

"They will not damage the ship, then?" he said, matching the Captain's casual tone.

Bonnet smoked for a moment in silence, concentrating on the draw of his cigar. Without the illumination of the open flame, he was once more a shadow, marked only by the glowing coal of the tip.

"Who knows?" he said at last, small spurts of smoke puffing out between his teeth as he spoke. "Any one of the beasts might sink us, should he have a mind in him for mischief. I saw a ship once—or what was left of it—battered to pieces by an angry whale. Three feet of board, and a bit of spar left floating—sunk with all hands, two hundred souls."

"You don't seem troubled by the possibility."

There was a long sound of exhalation, a faint echo of the whales' sighing, as Bonnet blew smoke between pursed lips.

" 'Twould be a waste of strength to worry myself. A wise man leaves those things beyond his power to the gods—and prays that Danu will be with him." The edge of the Captain's hat turned toward him. "Ye'll know of Danu, will ye, MacKenzie?"

"Danu?" Roger said stupidly, and then the penny dropped, an old chant coming back to him from the mists of childhood—something Mrs. Graham had taught him to say. "Come to me, Danu, change my luck. Make me bold. Give me wealth—and love to hold."

There was an amused grunt behind the coal.

"Ah, and you not even an Irishman. But sure I knew you from the first for a man of learning, MacKenzie."

"I know Danu the Luck-Giver," Roger said, hoping against hope that that particular Celtic goddess was both a good sailor and on his side. He took a step backward, meaning to go, but a hand descended on his wrist, holding tight.

"A man of learning," Bonnet repeated softly, all levity gone from his voice, "but no wisdom. And are you a praying man at all, MacKenzie?"

He tensed, but felt the force of Bonnet's grip and did not pull away. Strength gathered in his limbs, his body knowing before he did that the fight had come.

"I said a wise man does not trouble himself with things beyond his power—but on this ship, MacKenzie, everything is in my power." The grip on his wrist tightened. "And everyone."

Roger jerked his wrist sideways, breaking the grip. He stood alone, knowing there was neither help nor escape. There was no world beyond the ship, and within it, Bonnet was right—all were in the Captain's power. If he died, it would not help Morag—but that choice was made already.

"Why?" said Bonnet, sounding only mildly interested. "The woman's no looker, sure. And a man of such learning, too; would you risk my ship and my venture, then, only for the sake of a warm body?"

"No risk." The words came out hoarse, forced through a tight throat. *Come at me,* he thought, and his hands curled at his sides. *Come at me, and give me a chance to take you with me*. "The child doesn't have pox—a harmless rash."

"You will forgive my putting my ignorant opinion above your own, Mr. MacKenzie, but I am Captain here." The voice was still soft, but the venom was clear.

"It is a child, for God's sake!"

"It is—and of no value."

"No value to you, perhaps!"

There was a moment's silence, broken only by a distant *whoosh* in the empty white.

"And what value to you?" the voice asked, implacable. "Why?"

For the sake of a warm body. Yes, for that. For the touch of humanity, the memory of tenderness, for the feeling of life stubborn in the face of death.

"For pity," he said. "She is poor; there was no one to help her."

The rich perfume of tobacco reached him, narcotic, enchanting. He breathed it in, taking strength from it.

Bonnet moved, and he moved, too, settling himself in preparation. But there was no blow forthcoming; the shadow dug in a pocket, held out a ghostly hand in which he caught a magpie glitter from the diffuse lantern light—coins and bits of rubbish and what might have been a jewel's quick gleam. Then the Captain plucked out a silver shilling, and thrust the rest back into his pocket.

"Ah, pity," he said. "And did yez say you were a gambling man at all, MacKenzie?"

He held out the shilling, dropped it. Roger caught it, only by reflex.

"For the suckling's life, then," Bonnet said, and the tone of light amusement was back. "A gentleman's wager, shall we call it? Heads it lives, and tails it dies."

The coin was warm and solid in his palm, an alien thing in this world of drifting chill. His hands were slick with sweat, and yet his mind had gone cold and sharp, focused to an ice pick's point.

Heads he lives, and tails he dies, he thought quite calmly, and did not mean the child below. He marked throat and crotch on the other man; grip and lunge, a blow and heave—the rail was no more than a foot away, the empty realm of the whales beyond.

There was no room beyond his calculations for any sense of fear. He saw the coin spin up as though it were thrown by another hand, then fall to the deck. His muscles bunched themselves, slowly.

"It seems Danu is with ye the night, sir." Bonnet's soft Irish voice seemed to come to him from a great way off, as the Captain bent and picked up the coin.

Realization was only beginning to bloom in his chest, when the Captain gripped his shoulder, turning him down the deck.

"You'll walk with me awhile, MacKenzie."

Something had happened to his knees; he felt as though he would sink down with every step, and yet somehow stayed upright, keeping pace with the shadow. The ship was silent, the deck under his feet a mile away; but the sea beyond was a live thing, breathing. He felt the breath in his own lungs rise and fall with the shifting deck, and felt as though there were no boundaries to his body. It might have been wood under his feet, or water, for all he could feel.

It was some time before he made sense of Bonnet's words, and realized, with a vague sense of amazement, that the man seemed to be recounting the story of his life, in a quiet, matter-of-fact sort of way.

Orphaned in Sligo at an early age, he had learned quickly to fend for himself, he said, working as a cabin boy aboard trading ships. But one winter, with ships scarce, he had found work ashore in Inverness, digging the foundation for a grand house that was building near the town.

"I was just seventeen," he said. "The youngest of the crew of workmen. I could not say why it was they hated me. Mayhap it was my manner, for that was rough enough—or jealousy for my size and strength; they were an unchancy, whey-faced lot. Or maybe that the lasses smiled on me. Or maybe 'twas only that I was a stranger.

"Still, I knew well enough I was unpopular with them—little did I know quite *how* unpopular, though, until the day the cellar was finished and the foundation ready to be laid."

Bonnet paused to draw on his cigar, lest it go out. He let out puffs of smoke from the corners of his mouth, white wisps that curled past his head into the greater white of the fog.

"The trenches were dug," he went on, the cigar clenched between his teeth, "and the walls started; the great block of the cornerstone standin' ready. I had gone to my supper, and was just walkin' back to the place where I slept, when to my surprise I was caught up by a pair of the lads with whom I worked.

"They'd a bottle; they sat down on a wall and urged me to drink with them. I should've known better, for they were friendly, which they'd never been before. But I did drink, and drink again, and in no time at all I was reelin' drunk, for I'd no head for liquor, havin' never the money to buy strong drink. I was well fuddled by the time 'twas full dark, and scarcely thought to pull away when they took me by the arms and hastened me down the lane. Then they seized me, tossed me over a half-built wall, and to my surprise, I found myself lyin' in the damp dirt of the cellar I'd helped dig.

"All of them were there, the workmen. Another man was with them, too; one o' them had a lantern, and when he held it up, I could see the man was Daft Joey. Daft Joey was a beggarman that lived beneath the bridge—he had nay teeth, and he ate rotten fish and floating dung from the river, and he stank worse than a blackbirder's hold.

"I was so dazed with the whisky and the fall that I lay where I was, only half hearin' them as they talked—or argued, rather, for the chief o' the gang was angry that the two had brought me. The daftie would do, he said; a mercy to him, at that. But them that brought me said no, better me. Someone might miss the beggarman, they said. Then someone laughed and said aye, and they would not have to pay me my last week's wages, and 'twas then I began to know they meant to kill me.

"They'd talked before, while we worked. A sacrifice, they said, for the foundation, lest the earth tremble and the walls collapse. But I had not listened—and if I had, would not have guessed that they meant any more than to chop the head off a cockerel and bury it, as was usual."

He had not looked at Roger through this recital, his eyes instead fixed on the mist, as though the events he described were happening again, somewhere just beyond the white curtain of fog.

Roger's clothing hung on him, clinging, wringing wet with mist and cold sweat. His stomach clenched, and the cesspool smell of the steerage might have been the stink of Daft Joey in the cellar.

"So they palavered for a bit," Bonnet went on, "and the beggarman began to make noise, for he wanted more drink. And at last the chief said it was not worth so much talk, he would throw for the choice. Then he took a coin from his pocket and he said to me, laughin', 'Will ye take heads or tails, then, man?'

"I was too sick to say a word; the sky was black and whirling round and bits of light kept flickering at the edges of my eyes, like fallin' stars. So he said it for me; by Geordie's head should I live, and by his arse I should die, and he threw the shilling up in the air. It came down in the dirt by my head, but I had nay strength to turn and look.

"He bent to see and gave a grunt, then he stood up and took nay more notice of me."

They had reached the stern in their quiet pacing. Bonnet stopped there, hands on the rail, smoking silently. Then he took the cigar from his mouth.

"They pulled the daftie to the wall that was built, and made him sit down on the ground at its foot. I do remember his foolish face," he said softly. "He took a drink and he laughed wi' them, and his mouth was open—slack and wet as a old whore's cunt. The next moment, the stone came down from the top of the wall, and crushed his head."

Drops of moisture had gathered on the spikes of hair at the back of Roger's neck; he could feel them run down, one at a time, trickling cold down the crease of his back.

"They rolled me on my face and hit me," Bonnet continued matter-of-factly. "When I came to myself again, I was in the bottom of a fishing boat. The fisherman left me on the shore near Peterhead and said he would advise me to find a new ship—he could see, he said, I was not meant for the land."

He held up the cigar and tapped it gently with a finger to loosen the ash.

"At that," he said, "they did give me my wages; when I came to look, the shilling was in my pocket. Ah, they were honest men, sure."

Roger leaned against the rail, gripping its wood as the single solid thing in a world gone soft and nebulous.

"And did you go back to the land?" he asked, and heard his own voice, preternaturally calm, as though it belonged to someone else.

"Did I find them, ye mean." Bonnet turned and leaned back against the rail, half facing Roger. "Oh, yes. Years later. One at a time. But I found them all." He opened the hand that held the coin, and held it cupped thoughtfully before him, tilting it back and forth so the silver gleamed in the lantern light.

"Heads you live, and tails you die. A fair chance, would yez say, MacKenzie?"

"For them?"

"For you."

The soft Irish voice was as unemphatic as it might be were it making observations of the weather.

As in a dream, Roger felt the weight of the shilling drop once more into his hands. He heard the suck and hiss of the water on the hull, the blowing of the whales—and the suck and hiss of Bonnet's breath as he drew on his cigar. *Seven whales the fill of a Cirein Croin.*

"A fair chance," Bonnet said. "Luck was with you before, MacKenzie. See will Danu come for you again—or will it be the Soul-Eater this time?"

The fog had closed over the deck. There was nothing visible save the glowing coal of Bonnet's cigar, a burning cyclops in the mist. The man might be a devil indeed, one eye closed to human misery, one eye open to the dark. And here Roger stood quite literally between the devil and the deep blue sea, with his fate shining silver in the palm of his hand.

"It is my life; I'll make the call," he said, and was surprised to hear his voice calm and steady. "Tails—tails is mine." He threw, and caught, clapped his one hand hard against the back of the other, trapped the coin and its unknown sentence.

He closed his eyes and thought just once of Brianna. *I'm sorry,* he said silently to her, and lifted his hand.

A warm breath passed over his skin, and then he felt a spot of coolness on the back of his hand as the coin was picked up, but he didn’t move, didn’t open his eyes.

It was some time before he realized that he stood alone.

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PART NINE

Passionnément

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VIRGIN SACRIFICE

Wilmington, the Colony of North Carolina, September 1, 1769

This was the third attack, of whatever Lizzie's sickness was. She had seemed to recover after the first bad fever, and after a day spent regaining her strength, had insisted she was able to travel. They had got no more than a day's ride north of Charleston, though, before the fever struck again.

Brianna had hobbled the horses, and made a hasty camp near a small creek, then made trip after trip through the night, scrabbling up and down a muddy bank in the dark, carrying water in a small canteen to dribble down Lizzie's throat and over her steaming body. She wasn't afraid of dark woods or lurking animals, but the thought of Lizzie dying in the wilderness, miles from any sort of help, was terrifying enough to make her want to head straight back to Charleston as soon as Lizzie could sit a horse.

By morning, however, the fever had broken, and though Lizzie was weak and pale, she had been able to ride. Brianna had hesitated, but finally decided to press on toward Wilmington, rather than turn back. The urge that had driven her all this way now had a sharper spur; she *had* to find her mother, for Lizzie's sake as well as her own.

Brianna hadn't appreciated her size for most of a life spent looming in the back row of class pictures, but she had begun to feel the advantages of height and strength as she grew older. And the longer she spent in this miserable place, the more advantageous they seemed.

She braced one arm against the bed frame as she eased the chamber pot out from under Lizzie's frail white buttocks with the other hand. Lizzie was scrawny but surprisingly heavy, and no more than half conscious; she moaned and twitched restlessly, the twitch suddenly springing into the full-fledged convulsion of a chill.

The shivering was beginning to ease a little now, though Lizzie's teeth were still clenched hard enough to make the sharp bones of her jaws stand out like struts beneath her skin.

Malaria, Brianna thought, for the dozenth time. It must be, to keep coming back like this. A number of small pink welts showed on Lizzie's neck, reminders of the mosquitoes that had plagued them ever since the *Phillip Alonzo* drew within sight of land. They had made landfall too far south, and wasted three weeks in meandering through the shallow coastal waters to Charleston, gnawed incessantly by bloodsucking bugs.

"There now. Feeling a little better?"

Lizzie nodded feebly, and tried to smile, succeeding only in looking like a white mouse that had taken poisoned bait.

"Water, honey. Try a little, just a sip." Brianna held the cup to Lizzie's mouth, coaxing. She felt a strange sense of déjà vu and realized that her voice was the echo of her mother's, both in words and tone. The realization was oddly comforting, as though her mother somehow stood behind her, speaking through her.

If it were her mother speaking, though, next would have come the orange-flavored St. Joseph's aspirin, a tiny pill to be sucked and savored, as much treat as medicine, the aches and fever seeming to subside as quickly as the sweet tart pill dissolved on her tongue. Brianna cast a bleak glance at her saddlebags, bulging in the corner. No aspirin there; Jenny had sent a small bundle of what she called "simples," but the chamomile and peppermint tea had only made Lizzie vomit.

Quinine was what you gave people for malaria; that's what she needed. But she had no idea whether it was even *called* quinine here, or how it was administered. Malaria was an old disease, though, and quinine came from plants—surely a doctor would have some, whatever it was called?

Only the hope of finding medical help had kept her going through Lizzie's second bout. Afraid to stop on the road again, she had taken Lizzie up in front of her, cradling the girl's body against her as they rode, leading Lizzie's horse. Lizzie had alternately blazed with heat and shaken with chill, and both of them had arrived in Wilmington limp with exhaustion.

But here they were, in the midst of Wilmington, and as far from real help as they had ever been. Bree glanced at the bedside table, lips tight. A wadded cloth lay there, dabbled with blood.

The landlady had taken one look at Lizzie and sent for an apothecary. Despite what her mother had said about the primitive state of medicine and its practitioners here, Brianna had felt a sudden instinctive surge of relief at sight of the man.

The apothecary was a decently dressed young man with a kindly air and reasonably clean hands. No matter what his state of medical knowledge, he was likely to know as much about fevers as she herself did. More important, she could feel that she wasn't alone in caring for Lizzie.

Modesty prompted her to step outside when the apothecary drew down the linen sheet to make his examination, and it was not until she heard a small cry of distress that she flung open the door, to find the young apothecary, fleam in hand, and Lizzie, her face white as chalk, red blood streaming from a cut in the crook of her elbow.

"But it is to draw the humors, miss!" the apothecary had pleaded, trying to shield both himself and the body of his patient. "Do you not understand? You must draw the humors! If it is not done, hot bile will toxify within her organs and fill her body entirely, to her certain detriment!"

"It will be to *your* certain detriment if you don't leave," Brianna had informed him, through clenched teeth. "Get out of here this minute!"

Medical zeal disappearing in favor of self-preservation, the young man had picked up his case and left with what dignity he could, pausing at the foot of the stairs to shout dire warnings up at her.

The warnings kept echoing in her ears, between trips downstairs to fill the basin from the kitchen copper. Most of the apothecary's words were simple ignorance—ranting about humors and bad blood—but there were some that came back with uncomfortable force.

"If you will not take heedful advice, miss, you may well condemn your maid to death!" he had called, indignant face upturned in the darkness of the stairwell. "You do not know how to care for her yourself!"

She didn't. She didn't even know for sure what Lizzie's sickness was; the apothecary had called it an "ague," and the landlady had talked of "seasoning." It was quite common for new immigrants to fall ill repeatedly, exposed as they were to an unfamiliar array of new germs. From the landlady's unguarded remarks, it seemed apparent that it was also quite common for such immigrants not to survive this seasoning process.

The basin tilted, slopping hot water over her wrists. Water was the only thing she had. God knew whether the well behind the inn was sanitary or not; better to use the boiling water from the copper and let it cool, even if it took longer. There was cool water in the pitcher; she dribbled a little between Lizzie's dry, cracked lips, then eased the girl down on the bed. She washed Lizzie's face and neck, pulled back the quilt and soaked the linen nightdress again, the tiny nipples showing as dark pink points beneath.

Lizzie managed a small smile, eyelids drooping, then sank back with a tiny sigh and fell asleep, loose joints relaxing like a rag doll's.

Brianna felt as though her own stuffing had been removed as well. She dragged the single stool over to the window and collapsed on it, leaning on the sill in a vain effort to get a breath of fresh air. The atmosphere had lain on them like a thick blanket all the way from Charleston—little wonder that poor Lizzie had crumpled under its weight.

She scratched uneasily at a bite on her own thigh; the bugs were not nearly as fond of her as they were of Lizzie, but she had suffered a few bites. Malaria wasn't a danger; she had had the shots for that, as well as for typhoid, cholera, and anything else she could think of. But there was no vaccine for things like dengue fever, or any of a dozen other diseases that haunted the thick air like malevolent spirits. How many of those were spread by biting insects?

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wooden frame, blotting trickles of sweat from her breastbone with the folds of her shirt. She could smell herself; how long had she been wearing these clothes? It didn't matter; she had been awake for most of two days and two nights, and was too tired to undress, let alone make the effort to wash.

Lizzie's fever seemed to have broken—but for how long? If it kept coming back, it was sure to kill the little maidservant; she had already lost all the weight she had gained on the voyage, and her fair skin was beginning to show a yellow tinge in sunlight.

There was no help to be found in Wilmington. Brianna sat up straight, stretching and feeling the bones of her back pop into place. Tired or not, there was only one thing to do. She had to find her mother, and as quickly as possible.

She would sell the horses and find a boat to take them up the river. Even if the fever came back, she could take care of Lizzie as well on a boat as she could in this hot, smelly little room—and they would still be traveling toward their goal.

She got up and splashed a little water on her face, twisting her sweat-soaked hair up out of the way. She loosened the crumpled breeches and stepped out of them, making plans in a dreamy, disconnected sort of way.

A boat, on the river. Surely it would be cooler on the river. No more riding; her thigh muscles ached from four days in the saddle. They would sail to Cross Creek, find Jocasta MacKenzie.

"Aunt," she murmured, swaying slightly as she reached for the oil-dip lamp. "Great-aunt Jocasta." She imagined a kindly white-haired old lady who would greet her with the same joy she had found at Lallybroch. Family. It would be so good to have family again. Roger drifted into her thoughts, as he did so often. She resolutely pushed him out again; time enough to think of him when her mission was accomplished.

A tiny cloud of gnats hovered over the flame, and the wall nearby was spattered with the arrowed shapes of moths and lacewings, taking respite from their quest. She pinched out the flame, scarcely hotter than the air in the room, and pulled the shirt off over her head in darkness.

Jocasta would know exactly where Jamie Fraser and her mother were—would help her get to them. For the first time since stepping through the stones, she thought of Jamie Fraser with neither curiosity nor trepidation. Nothing mattered but finding her mother. Her mother would know what to do for Lizzie; her mother would know how to take care of everything.

She spread a folded quilt on the floor and lay down naked on it. She was asleep in moments, dreaming of the mountains, and clean white snow.

* * *

By the next evening, things looked better. The fever *had* broken, just as before, leaving Lizzie spent and weak, but clearheaded, and as cool as the climate allowed. Restored by a night's rest, Brianna had washed her hair and sponge-bathed in the basin, then had paid the landlady to keep an eye on Lizzie while she, dressed in breeches and coat, went about her business.

It had taken most of the day—and the suffering of a good many widened eyes and gaping mouths as men realized her sex—to sell the horses at what she hoped was an honest price. She had heard of a man named Viorst, who took passengers between Wilmington and Cross Creek in his canoe for a price. She hadn't found Viorst before dark, though—and wasn't about to hang around the docks at night, breeches or no breeches. Morning would be time enough.

Still more heartening, Lizzie had been downstairs when she returned to the inn toward sunset, being cosseted by the landlady and fed morsels of corn pudding and chicken fricassee.

"You're better!" Brianna exclaimed. Lizzie nodded, beaming, and gulped her mouthful.

"I am, so," she said. "I feel quite myself again, and Mrs. Smoots has been so kind as to let me wash all of our things. Oh, it's so nice to feel clean again!” she said fervently, laying a pale hand on her kerchief, which looked freshly ironed.

“You shouldn’t be washing and ironing,” Brianna scolded, sliding into the bench beside her maid. “You’ll wear yourself out, and get sick again.”

Lizzie looked down her thin nose, a prim smile perched at the corners of her mouth.

“Well, I didna think ye’d be wanting to meet your Da in clothes all spotted wi’ filth. Not but what even a clarty gown would be better than what ye’ve got on.” The little maid’s eyes passed reprovingly over Brianna’s breeches; she didn’t approve at all of her mistress’s penchant for male costume.

“Meet my Da? What do you—Lizzie, have you heard something?” A flare of hope shot up inside her, a sudden bright puff like the lighting of a gas stove.

Lizzie looked smug.

“I have that. And ’twas all because of the washin’, too—my Da did always say as how virtue brings its reward.”

“I’m sure it does,” Brianna said dryly. “What did you find out, and how?”

“Well, I was just after hanging out your petticoat—the nice one, aye, wi’ the lace about the hem—”

Brianna picked up a small jug of milk, and held it menacingly over her maid’s head. Lizzie squeaked and ducked away, giggling.

“All right! I’m telling! I’m telling!”

In the middle of her washing, one of the tavern’s patrons had come out into the yard to smoke a pipe, the day being fine. He had admired Lizzie’s domestic skills and taken up a pleasant conversation, in the course of which it was revealed that this gentleman—one Andrew MacNeill by name—had not only heard of James Fraser but was well acquainted with him.

“He is? What did he say? Is this MacNeill still here?”

Lizzie put out a hand and made small quelling motions.

“I’m sayin’ it as quick as I can. No, he’s not here; I did try to make him stay, but he was bound for New Bern by the packet boat, and couldna bide." She was nearly as excited as Brianna; her cheeks were still pale and sallow, but the tip of her nose had gone pink.

"Mr. MacNeill knows your Da, and your great-auntie Cameron as well—she's a great lady, he says, verra rich, with a tremendous great house, and lots of slaves, and—"

"Never mind about that now, what did he say about my father? Did he mention my mother?"

"Claire," Lizzie said triumphantly. "Ye did say that was your Mam's name? I asked, and he said yes, Mrs. Fraser's name was Claire. And he said she was a most amazing healer—did ye not say as your mother was a fine physician? He said as he had seen her do a desperate operation on a man, laid him smack in the middle of the dinner table and cut off his ballocks and then stitched them back on, right there on the spot, wi' all the dinner party lookin' on!"

"That's my mother, all right." There were tears of what might have been laughter in the corners of her eyes. "Are they well? Had he seen them lately?"

"Och, that's the best of it!" Lizzie leaned forward, eyes big with the importance of her news. "He's in Cross Creek—your Da, Mr. Fraser! A man he knows is on trial there for assault, and your Da's come down to be witness for him." She patted her handkerchief against her temple, mopping up tiny beads of sweat.

"Mr. MacNeill says the court willna sit again till Monday week because the judge fell ill, and another is coming from Edenton, and the trial canna go on until he arrives."

Brianna brushed back a lock of hair and blew out her breath, hardly daring to believe their luck.

"A week from Monday … and it's Saturday now. God, I wonder how long it will take to get upriver?"

Lizzie crossed herself hastily in atonement for her mistress's casual blasphemy, but shared in her excitement.

"I dinna ken, but Mrs. Smoots did say as her son's made the trip once before—we could ask him."

Brianna swung round on her bench, looking over the room. Men and boys had begun coming in as darkness fell, stopping for a drink or a supper on their way from work to bed, and now there were fifteen or twenty people crammed into the small space.

"Which one is Junior Smoots?" Brianna asked, craning her neck to see through the press of bodies.

"Yonder—the laddie wi' the sweet brown eyes. I'll fetch him to ye, shall I?" Emboldened by excitement, Lizzie slipped out of her seat and pushed her way into the throng.

Brianna was still holding the jug of milk, but made no move to pour it into her cup. Her throat was too choked with excitement to swallow. Little more than a week!

Wilmington was a small town, Roger thought. How many places could she be? If she was here at all. He thought there was a good chance of it; inquiries in the dockside taverns in New Bern had given him the valuable information that the *Phillip Alonzo* had reached Charleston safely—and only ten days before the *Gloriana* had docked in Edenton.

It might have taken Brianna anything from two days to two weeks to make her way from Charleston to Wilmington—assuming that she was indeed headed there.

"She's here," he muttered. "Damn it, I *know* she's here!" Whether this conviction was the result of deduction, intuition, hope, or merely stubbornness, he clung to it like a drowning sailor to a spar.

He had managed the journey from Edenton to Wilmington with a fair amount of ease, himself. Put to work unloading cargo from the *Gloriana*'s hold, he had carried a chest of tea into a warehouse, set it down, walked back to the door, and busied himself in retying the sweat-soaked kerchief round his head. As soon as the next man had passed him, he stepped out onto the dock, turned right instead of left, and within seconds was headed up the narrow cobbled lane that led from docks to town. By the next morning he'd found a berth as loader on a small cargo boat, transporting naval stores from Edenton to the main depot at Wilmington, there to be transferred to a larger ship for transport to England.

He jumped ship again in Wilmington, without a moment's compunction. He hadn't time to waste; there was Brianna to be found.

He knew she was here. Fraser's Ridge was in the mountains; she'd need a guide, and Wilmington was the most likely port in which to find one. And if she was here, someone would have noticed her; he'd bet money on that. He could only hope the wrong sort of person hadn't noticed her already.

A quick reconnoiter of the main street and the harbor gave him a count of twenty-three taverns. Christ, these people drank like fish! There was the chance she'd taken a room in a private house, but the taverns were the place to start.

By evening he'd covered ten of the taverns, slowed by the necessity of avoiding any of his erstwhile shipmates. Being in the presence of so much drink, and he without an extra penny to spend, had given him a raging thirst. He hadn't eaten all day, either, which didn't help matters.

At the same time, he scarcely noticed the physical discomfort. A man in the fifth tavern had seen her, so had a woman in the seventh. "A tall *man* wi' red hair," the man had said, but "A great huge girl, dressed in men's breeches," the woman had said, clicking her tongue in shock. "Walkin' down the street, plain as you please, with her coat over her arm and her backside in view of everyone!"

Let Roger get that particular backside in *his* view, he thought with some grimness, and he'd know what to do with it. He begged a cup of water from a kindhearted landlady, and set off with renewed determination.

By the time it was full dark, he had covered another five taverns. The taprooms were full now, and he discovered that the tall redheaded girl in men's clothing had been causing public comment for nearly a week. The quality of some of this comment caused the blood to throb in his cheeks with outrage, and only the fear of being arrested kept him from outright assault.

As it was, he left the fifteenth tavern after an ugly exchange of words with two drunkards, boiling with fury. Christ, had the woman no sense at all? Did she have no notion what men were capable of?

He stopped in the street and wiped a sleeve across his sweating face. He breathed heavily, wondering what to do next. Keep on, he supposed, though if he didn't find something to eat soon, he was going to fall flat on his face in the road.

The Blue Bull, he decided. He'd glanced into the shed there as he passed earlier, and seen a good pile of clean straw. He'd spend a penny or two for dinner, and perhaps the owner would let him sleep in the stable for the sake of Christian kindness.

Turning, his eye caught sight of a sign on the house across the road.

WILMINGTON GAZETTEER, JNO. GILLETTE. PROP., it read. Wilmington's newspaper; one of the few in the Colony of North Carolina. One too many, if you asked Roger. He fought the urge to pick up a rock and hurl it through Jno. Gillette's window. Instead, he yanked the sodden band off his head and, making an effort to tidy himself into some semblance of decency, turned toward the river and the Blue Bull.

She was there.

She was sitting by the hearth, her tailed hair sparking in the firelight, engaged in conversation with a young man whose smile Roger wanted to wipe off forcibly. Instead, he slammed the door behind him with a crash and started toward her. She turned, startled, and stared blankly at the bearded stranger. Recognition flashed in her eyes, then joy, and a huge smile spread across her face.

"Oh," she said. "It's you." Then her eyes changed, as realization flared up like a brushfire. She screamed. It was a good full-bodied scream, and every head in the tavern snapped round at the sound of it.

"Damn you!" He lunged across the table, and got her by the arm. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Her face had gone dead white, her eyes round and dark with shock. She jerked away, trying to free herself.

"Let go!"

"That I won't! You'll come with me, and ye'll do it this moment!"

Sidling round the table, he got hold of her other arm, jerked her up, whirled her around and pushed her in front of him toward the door.

"MacKenzie!" Damn, it was one of the seamen from the cargo boat. Roger glowered at the man, willing him to keep out of it. Luckily the man was both smaller and older than Roger; he hesitated, but then took courage from the company and lifted his chin pugnaciously.

"What you doing to the lass, MacKenzie? Leave her be!" There was a stir among the crowd, men turning from their drinks, attracted by the uproar. He had to get out of here *now,* or he wouldn't get out at all.

"Tell them it's all right, tell them you know me!" he whispered into Brianna's ear.

"It's all right." Brianna spoke, voice husky with shock, but loud enough to be heard over the growing hubbub. "It's all right. I—I know him." The seaman dropped back a little, still dubious. A scrawny young girl in the inglenook had gotten to her feet; she looked frightened to death, but bravely clutched a stone ale bottle in one fist, evidently intending to hit Roger with it, if necessary. Her high-pitched voice rang out above the suspicious grumble of voices.

"Miss Bree! Ye'll not go wi' yon black villain, surely?"

Brianna made a sound that might have been laughter, choked by hysteria. Reaching up, she dug her nails hard into the back of his hand. Startled by the pain, he loosened his grip and she yanked her arm out of his grasp.

"It's all right," she repeated, more firmly to the room at large. "I know him." She made a small shooing gesture at the girl. "Lizzie, go on up to bed. I'll—I'll be back later." She whirled on her bootheel and headed for the door, walking fast. Roger gave the taproom a menacing glare, to discourage anyone who thought of interfering, and followed her.

She was waiting right outside the door; her fingers sank into his arm with a fierceness that might have been gratifying were it prompted solely by joy at seeing him. He doubted it.

"What are you *doing* here?" she asked.

He detached her fingers and gripped them firmly.

"Not here," he snapped. He took her arm and dragged her a little way down the road, to the shelter of a big horse-chestnut tree. The sky still glowed with the remnants of twilight, but the drooping branches reached nearly to the ground, and it was dark enough underneath to hide them from any curious souls who thought of venturing after them.

She whirled on him the instant they reached its shadows.

"What are you doing here, for God's sake?"

"Looking for you, ye wee fool! And what in the name of all holy are *you* doing here? And dressed like *that,* God damn you!" He'd had the briefest look at her in her breeches and shirt, but it was enough.

In her own time, the clothes would have been so baggy as to be sexless. After months of seeing women in long skirts and *arisaids,* though, the blatant division of her legs, the sheer bloody length of thigh and curve of calf, seemed so outrageous that he wanted to wrap a sheet around her.

"Bloody woman! You might as well walk down the street naked!"

"Don't be an idiot! What are you doing here?"

"I told you—looking for you."

He took her by the shoulders, then, and kissed her, hard. Fear, anger, and the sheer relief of finding her were fused at once into a solid bolt of desire, and he found he was shaking with it. So was she. She was clinging to him, shaking in his arms.

"It's all right," he whispered to her. He buried his mouth in her hair. "It's all right, I'm here. I'll take care of you."

She jerked upright, out of his arms.

"All *right?*" she cried. "How can you say that? For God's sake, you're *here*!"

There was no mistaking the horror in her voice. He grabbed her by the arm.

"And where the hell else should I be, with you tearing off into fucking nowhere and risking your bloody neck, and—why the hell did you do it?!"

"I'm looking for my parents. What *else* would I be doing here?"

"I know that, for God's sake! I mean why in *hell* did you not tell me what you meant to do?"

She jerked her arm out of his grasp and gave him a healthy shove in the chest that all but sent him staggering.

"Because you wouldn't have let me go, that's why! You'd have tried to stop me, and—"

"Damn right I would! God, I'd have locked you in a room, or tied you hand and foot! Of all the flea-brained notions—"

She hit him, a full-palmed slap that caught him hard across the cheekbone.

"Shut up!"

"Bloody woman! D'ye expect me to let you go off into—into *nothing,* and I sit at home twiddling my thumbs while you're having your womb paraded on a pike in the marketplace? What sort of man d'ye think I am?"

He felt her movement rather than saw it, and grabbed her wrist before she could slap him again.

"I'm in no mood for that, girl! Hit me once more, and by Christ, I will do you violence!"

She folded her other hand into a fist and punched him in the belly, quick as a striking snake.

He wanted to hit her back. Instead, he grabbed her, and with a handful of her hair wrapped round his fist, kissed her as hard as he could.

She squirmed and struggled against him, making strangled noises, but he didn't stop. Then she was kissing him back, and they sank to their knees together. Her arms came round his neck as he bore her down beneath him to the leaf-matted ground beneath the tree. Then she was crying in his arms, choking and gasping, tears running down her face as she clutched him.

"Why?" she sobbed. "Why did you have to follow me? Didn't you realize? Now what are we going to do!"

"Do? Do about what?" He couldn't tell whether she was crying from anger or fear—both, he thought.

She stared up at him through strands of tangled hair.

"Getting back! You have to have somebody to go to—somebody you care for. You're the only person I love at that end—or you were! How am I going to get back, if you're *here*? And how will you get back, if *I'm* here?"

He stopped dead, fear and anger both forgotten, and his hands clamped tight on her wrists to stop her hitting him again.

"That's why? That's why you wouldn't tell me? Because you *love* me? Jesus Christ!"

He let go of her wrists and lay on top of her instead. He grabbed her face with both hands and tried to kiss her again. She gave a sudden snap of her hips, swung her legs up on either side, and scissored him neatly across the back, crushing his ribs.

He rolled, breaking the hold, and brought her with him, ending on his back, with her on top. He got a hand in her hair and drew her face down to his panting.

"Stop," he said. "Christ, what is this, a wrestling match?"

"Let go of my hair." She shook her head, trying to dislodge his grip. "I *hate* having my hair pulled."

He let go of her hair, and slid his hand up the length of her neck, fingers curled round the slender nape, a thumb resting on the pulse in her throat. It was going like a trip-hammer; so was his.

"Right, how are ye on being choked?"

"Don't like it."

"Neither do I. Get your arm off my neck, aye?"

Very slowly, her weight eased back. He still felt short of breath, but not from being choked. He didn't want to let go of her neck. Not from fear of her cutting loose again, but because he couldn't bear to lose the feel of her. It had been too long.

She reached up and took hold of his wrist, but didn't pull his hand away. He felt her swallow.

"Right," he whispered. "Say it. I want to hear it."

"I … love … you," she said, between her teeth. "Got it?"

"Aye, I've got it." He took her face between his hands, very gently, and drew her down. She came, arms trembling and giving way beneath her.

"You're sure?" he said.

“Yes. What are we going to *do*?” she said, and began to cry.

“We.” She’d said *we*. She’d said she was sure.

Roger lay in the dust of the road, bruised, filthy, and starving, with a woman trembling and weeping against his chest, now and then giving him a small thump with her fist. He had never felt happier in his life.

“Hush,” he whispered, half rocking her. “It’s all right; there’s another way. We’ll get back; I know how. Don’t worry, I’ll take care of you.”

Finally, she wore herself out, and lay still in the crook of his arm, sniffling and hiccuping. There was a large wet spot on the front of his shirt. The crickets in the tree, startled into silence by the uproar, cautiously resumed their songs overhead.

She freed herself and sat up, fumbling in the dark.

“I have to blow my dose,” she said thickly. “Do you have a hadky?”

He gave her the damp rag he used to tie back his hair. She made whooshing noises, and he smiled in the dark.

“You sound like a can of shaving cream.”

“And when was the last time you saw one of those?” She lay down on him again, head tucked into the curve of his shoulder, and reached up to touch his jaw. He’d shaved two days ago; there had been neither time nor opportunity since.

Her hair still smelled faintly of grass, though no longer of artificial flowers. It must be her natural scent.

She sighed deeply, tightened her arm around him.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I didn’t want you to come after me. But … Roger, I’m awfully glad you’re here!”

He kissed her temple; she was damp and salty with sweat and tears.

“So am I,” he said, and for the moment all the trials and dangers of the past two months seemed insignificant. All but one.

"How long have you been planning this?" he asked. He thought he could have told her, to the day. Since her letters had begun to change.

"Oh … about six months," she said, confirming his guess. "It was when I went to Jamaica during last Easter vacation."

"Aye?" To Jamaica, instead of to Scotland. She'd asked him to join her, and he'd refused, foolishly hurt that she hadn't planned to come to him automatically.

She took a deep breath and let it out, blotting the neck of her shirt against her skin.

"I kept dreaming," she said. "About my father. Fathers. Both of them."

The dreams were little more than fragments; vivid glimpses of Frank Randall's face, longer stretches now and then, in which she saw her mother. And now and then a tall, red-haired man whom she knew to be the father she had never seen.

"There was one dream in particular …" It had been night in the dream, somewhere tropical, with fields of tall green plants that might have been sugarcane, and fires burning in the distance.

"There were drums beating, and I knew something was hiding, waiting in the canes; something horrible," she said. "My mother was there, drinking tea with a crocodile." Roger grunted, and her voice grew sharper. "It was a dream, all right?

"Then he stepped out of the canes. I couldn't see his face very well, because it was dark, but I could see that he had red hair; there were copper glints when he turned his head."

"Was he the dreadful thing in the canes?" Roger asked.

"No." He could hear the susurrus of her hair as she shook her head. It had gone quite dark by now, and she was little more than a comforting weight on his chest, a soft voice beside him, speaking from the shadows.

"He was standing between my mother and the awful thing. I couldn't see it, but I knew it was there, waiting." She gave a small, involuntary shudder and Roger tightened his hold on her.

"Then I knew my mother was going to stand up and walk right toward it. I tried to stop her, but I couldn't make her hear me or see me. So I turned to him, and I called to him to go with her—to save her from whatever it was. And he saw me!" The hand on his arm squeezed tight. "He did, he saw me, and he heard me. And then I woke up."

"Aye?" Roger said skeptically. "And this made you go to Jamaica, and—"

"It made me think," she said sharply. "You'd looked; you couldn't find them anywhere in Scotland after 1766, and you couldn't find them on any of the emigration rolls to the Colonies. That was when you said you thought we should give up; that there wasn't any more we could find out."

Roger was glad of the darkness that hid his guilt. He kissed the top of her head, quickly.

"But I wondered; the place I saw them in the dream was in the tropics. What if they were in the Indies?"

"I looked," Roger said. "I checked the passenger rolls of every ship that left Edinburgh or London in the late 1760s and '70s—headed for anyplace. I did tell you," he added, an edge in his voice.

"I know that," she said, with a matching edge. "But what if they weren't passengers? Why did people *go* to the Indies then—now, I mean?" She caught herself, voice cracking a little in realization.

"For trade, mostly."

"Right. So what if they went on a cargo ship? They wouldn't show up on the passenger rolls."

"Okay," he said slowly. "Right, they wouldn't. But then how would you look for them?"

"Warehouse registers, plantation account books, port manifests. I spent the whole vacation in libraries and museums. And—and I found them," she said, with a small catch in her voice.

Christ, she'd seen the notice.

"Aye?" he said, striving for calmness.

She laughed, a little tremulously.

"A Captain James Fraser, of a ship named *Artemis,* sold five tons of bat guano to a planter in Montego Bay on April 2, 1767."

Roger couldn't help a grunt of amusement, but at the same time, couldn't help objecting.

"Aye, but a ship's captain? After all your mother said about the man's seasickness? And not to be discouraging, but there must be literally hundreds of James Frasers; how could you possibly know —"

"There might; but on April the first, a woman named Claire Fraser bought a slave from the slave market in Kingston."

"She *what*?"

"I don't know why," Brianna said firmly, "but I'm sure she had a good reason."

"Well, sure, but—"

"The papers gave the slave's name as 'Temeraire,' and described him as having one arm. Makes him stand out, doesn't it? Anyway, I started looking through collections of old newspapers; not just from the Indies, from all the southern colonies, looking for that name—my mother wouldn't keep a slave; if she bought him, she'd free him somehow, and the notices of manumission were sometimes printed in the local papers. I thought I could maybe find where the slave was freed."

"And did you?"

"No." She was quiet for a minute. "I—I found something else. A notice of their … deaths. My parents."

Even knowing that she must have found it, to hear it from her lips was still a shock. He pulled her tight against him, wrapping his arms around her.

"Where?" he said softly. "How?"

He should have known better. He wasn't listening to her half-choked explanation; he was too busy cursing himself. He should have known she was too stubborn to be dissuaded. All he'd done with his fatheaded interference was to drive her into secrecy. And it had been he who'd paid for that—in months of worry.

"But we're in time," she said. "It said 1776; we've got time to find them." She sighed hugely. "I'm so glad you're here. I was so worried you'd find out before I could get back and I didn't know what you'd do."

"What I *did* do.… You know," he said conversationally, "I have a friend with a two-year-old child. He says that he'd never in life condone child abuse—but by God, he understands what makes people do it. I feel very much the same about wife beating just now."

There was a small quiver of laughter from the heavy weight on his chest.

"What do you mean by that?"

He slid a hand down her back and got a firm grip on one round buttock. She wore no underclothes beneath the loose breeches.

"I mean that were I a man of this time, instead of my own, nothing would give me greater pleasure than to lay my belt across your arse a dozen times or so."

She didn't seem to consider this a serious threat. In fact, he thought she was laughing.

"So since you're not from this time, you wouldn't do it? Or you would, but you wouldn't enjoy it?"

"Oh, I'd enjoy it," he assured her. "There's nothing I'd like better than to take a stick to you."

She *was* laughing.

Suddenly furious, he shoved her off and sat up.

"What's the matter with you?"

"I thought you'd found someone else! Your letters, the last few months … and then that last one. I was sure of it. It's that I want to beat you for—not for lying to me or going off without telling me—for making me think I'd lost you!"

She was silent for a moment. Her hand came out of darkness and touched his face, very softly.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "I never meant for you to think that. I only wanted to keep you from finding out, until it was too late." Her head turned toward him, silhouetted by the faint light from the road outside their refuge. "How *did* you find out?"

"Your boxes. They came to the college."

"What? But I told them not to send those until the end of May, when you'd be in Scotland!"

"I would have been; only for a last-minute conference that kept me in Oxford. They came the day before I left."

There was a sudden spill of light and noise as the door of the tavern opened, disgorging a knot of patrons into the road. Voices and footsteps passed by their refuge, startlingly close. Neither of them spoke until the sounds had disappeared. In the renewed silence, he heard the sound of a conker falling through the leaves, to bounce on the leaves nearby.

Brianna's voice was oddly husky.

"You thought I'd found somebody else … and you still came after me?"

He sighed, anger gone as suddenly as it had come, and wiped the damp hair off his face.

"I'd have come if you were married to the King of Siam. Bloody woman."

She was no more than a pale blur in the darkness; he saw the brief movement as she leaned to pick up the fallen conker, and sat toying with it. Finally, she drew a very deep breath and let it out slowly.

"You said *wife* beating."

He paused. The crickets had stopped again.

"You said you were sure. Did you mean it?"

There was a silence, long enough to fill a heartbeat, long enough to fill forever.

"Yes," she said softly.

"In Inverness, I said—"

"You said you'd have me all—or not at all. And I said I understood. I'm sure."

Her shirt had pulled free of her breeches in their struggle, and billowed loose around her in the faint hot breeze. He reached under the floating hem and touched bare skin, which rippled into gooseflesh at his touch. He pulled her close, ran his hands over bare back and bare shoulders under the cloth, buried his face in her hair, her neck, exploring, asking with his hands—did she mean it?

She gripped his shoulders and leaned back, urging him. Yes, she did. He answered, wordless, opening the front of her shirt, spreading it apart. Her breasts were white and soft.

"Please," she said. Her hand was at the back of his head, pulling him toward her. "Please!"

"If I take you now, it's for always," he whispered.

She scarcely breathed, but stood stock-still, letting his hands go where they would.

"Yes," she said.

The tavern door opened again, startling them apart. He let her go and stood up, reaching down a hand to help her, then stood with her hand in his, waiting while the voices receded into distance.

"Come on," he said, and ducked under the drooping branches.

* * *

The shed was some distance from the tavern, dark and quiet. They stopped outside, waiting, but there was no sound from the back of the inn; all the windows on the upper floor were dark.

"I hope Lizzie's gone to bed."

He wondered dimly who Lizzie was, but didn't care. At this distance he could see her face clearly, though the night washed all color from her skin. She looked like a harlequin, he thought; white cheek planes slashed by leaf shadows, framed by the dark of her hair, her eyes black triangles set above a dash of vivid mouth.

He took her hand in his, palm to palm.

"D'ye know what handfasting is?"

"Not exactly. Sort of a temporary marriage?"

"A bit. In the Isles and the remoter parts of the Highlands, where folk were a long way from the nearest minister, a man and a woman now would be handfast; vowed to each other for a year and a day. At the end of it, they find a minister and wed more permanently—or they go their own ways."

Her hand tightened in his.

"I don't want anything temporary."

"Neither do I. But I don't think we'll find a minister easily. There are no churches here yet; the nearest minister is likely in New Bern." He lifted their linked hands. "I did say I wanted it all, and if ye did not care enough to wed me …"

Her hand tightened, hard.

"I do."

"All right."

He took a deep breath and began.

"I, Roger Jeremiah, do take thee, Brianna Ellen, to be my lawful wedded wife. With my goods I thee endow, with my body I thee worship …" Her hand twitched in his, and his balls tightened. Whoever had worded this vow had understood, all right.

"… in sickness and in health, in richness and in poverty, so long as we both shall live."

If I make a vow like that, I'll keep it—no matter what it costs me. Was she thinking of that now?

She brought their linked hands down together, and spoke with great deliberation.

"I, Brianna Ellen, take thee, Roger Jeremiah …" Her voice was scarcely louder than the beating of his own heart, but he heard every word. A breeze came through the tree, rattling the leaves, lifting her hair.

"… as long as we both shall live."

The phrase meant a good bit more to each of them now, he thought, than it would have even a few months before. The passage through the stones was enough to impress anyone with the fragility of life.

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the rustle of leaves overhead and a distant murmur of voices from the tavern's taproom. He raised her hand to his mouth and kissed it, on the knuckle of her fourth finger, where one day—God willing—her ring would be.

* * *

It was more of a large shed than a barn, though some beast—a horse or mule—stirred in its stall at one end. There was a strong, clean tang of hops in the air, enough to overpower the milder scents of hay and manure; the Blue Bull brewed its own ale. Roger felt drunk, but not from alcohol.

The shed was very dark, and undressing her was both frustration and delight.

"And I thought it took blind people years to develop a keen sense of touch," he murmured.

The warm breath of her laugh brushed his neck, making the tiny hairs at his nape stir and prickle.

"You're sure it's not like the poem about the five blind men and the elephant?" she said. Her own hand groped, found the opening of his shirt, and slid inside.

" 'No, the beast is like a wall,' " she quoted. Her fingers curved and flattened, curiously exploring the sensitive flesh around his nipple. "A wall with hair. Goodness, a wall with goose bumps, too."

She laughed again, and he bent his head, finding her mouth on the first try, sightless and unerring as a bat snatching a moth from the air.

"Amphora," he murmured against the wide, sweet curve of her lips. His hands slid over the wide, sweet curve of her hips, cupping smoothness cool and solid, timeless and graceful as the swell of ancient pottery, promising abundance. "Like a Grecian vase. God, you've got the most beautiful arse!"

"Jug-butt, huh?"

She vibrated against him, the quiver of laughter passing from her lips to his and into his bloodstream like infection. Her hand slid down his own hip, and up, long fingers fumbling loose the flap of his breeches, groping hesitantly and then more surely, gradually rucking his shirt up to disentangle him from the layers of fabric.

" 'No, the beast is like a rope' … oops …"

"Stop laughing, damn you."

"… like a snake … no … well, maybe a cobra … gosh, what would you call *that*?"

"I had a friend once who called it 'Mr. Happy,' " Roger said, feeling light-headed, "but that's a bit whimsical for my tastes." He grabbed her by the arms and kissed her again, long enough to put a stop to any further comparisons.

She was still quivering, but he didn't *think* it was laughter. He slid his arms around her and pulled her closely against him, amazed as always by the sheer size of her—a good deal more amazed now that she was naked, those complex planes of bone and muscle transformed to immediate sensation in his arms.

He paused for breath. He wasn't sure whether the sensation was more akin to drowning or to mountain climbing, but whatever it was, there wasn't much oxygen left between them.

"I've never been able to kiss a girl without stooping before," he said, making conversation in hopes of getting his breath back.

"Oh, good; we wouldn't want you to have a stiff *neck*." The quiver was back in her voice, and it definitely was laughter, though he thought it stemmed as much from nervousness as humor.

"Ha ha," he said, and grabbed her again, oxygen be damned. Her breasts were high and round, pressed against his chest with that unique mixture of softness and firmness that so intrigued him whenever he touched her. One of her hands slid hesitantly between them, groping, then withdrew.

He couldn't bring himself to stop kissing her long enough to finish undressing, but arched his back to let her push the breeches down over his hips. They were loose enough to fall in a puddle around his feet, and he stepped free of them, still holding her, only making a small noise in his throat when her hand came back between them.

She had eaten onions with her dinner. Blindness sharpened not only touch, but taste and smell as well. He tasted roast meat, and sour ale, and bread. And a faint sweet taste that he couldn't identify, that reminded him somehow of green meadows full of waving grass. Did he taste it, or smell it in her hair? He couldn't tell; he seemed to be losing track of his senses as he lost the boundaries between them, breathing her breath, feeling her heart beat as though it lay in his own chest.

She was grasping him a trifle too tightly for comfort, and he broke the kiss at last, breathing heavily.

"Would you consider letting go for a moment? I grant you, it's an effective handle, but it's got better uses."

Instead of letting go, she dropped to her knees.

Roger made a slight move back, startled.

"Christ, are you sure you want to do that?" He wasn't sure whether he hoped she did or not. Her hair tickled against his thighs, and his cock was quivering, desperate for engulfment. At the same time, he didn't want to frighten or repulse her.

"Don't you want me to?" Her hands moved up the backs of his thighs, tentative and ticklish. He could feel every hair on his body spring erect, from knees to waist. It made him feel like a satyr, goat-legged and reeking.

"Well … yes. But I haven't bathed in days," he said, rather awkwardly trying to detach himself.

Deliberately, she brushed her nose over his stomach and down, inhaling deeply. His skin pebbled with gooseflesh, the shiver having nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

"You smell good," she whispered. "Like some kind of big male animal."

He grasped her head hard, fingers twisted in the thick, silky hair.

"Too right about that," he whispered. Her hand rested on his wrist, light and warm—God, she was warm.

Without his actually intending it, his grip loosened; he felt the fall of her hair brush his thighs and then stopped thinking anything coherent, as all of the blood left his brain, heading south at a high rate of speed.

"Mi oing i' i'?"

"What?" He came out of his daze a few moments later as she drew back, brushing the hair away from her face.

"I said, am I doing it right?"

"Oh. Ah … I think so."

"You *think* so? You don't know for sure?" Brianna seemed to have been regaining her composure as fast as Roger had been losing his; he could hear the suppressed laughter in her voice.

"Well … no," he said. "I mean, I haven't … that is, no one's … yeah, I think so." He had hold of her head again, urging her gently forward.

He thought she was making a low humming noise, somewhere deep in her throat. It might be his own blood, though, thrumming through distended veins, purling in violent eddies like the trapped water of the ocean, seething through the rocks. Another minute, and he was going off like a waterspout.

He pulled away and before she could protest, lifted her to her feet, then urged her down, onto the heap of straw where he had thrown her clothes.

His eyes had adjusted to the dark, but the starlight from the window was still so faint that he could see no more of her than shapes and outlines, white as marble. Not cold, though; not cold at all.

He approached his own duty with mingled excitement and caution; he had tried this exactly once, only to be met with a faceful of a feminine hygiene product that smelled like the flowers in his father's church on Sunday—an off-putting idea if ever there was one.

Brianna was not hygienic. The scent of her was enough to make him want to dispense with any preliminaries and throw himself on her in a pure abandonment of lust.

Instead, he breathed deeply, and kissed her just above the dark smudge of curls.

"Damn," he said.

"What is it?" She sounded faintly alarmed. "Do I smell terrible?"

He closed his eyes and breathed. His head was spinning slightly, and he felt giddy with a combination of lust and laughter.

"No. It's only that I've been wondering for more than a year what color your hair is here." He tugged gently on the curls. "Now here I am face-to-face with it, and I still can't tell."

She giggled, the vibration making her belly shake gently under his hand.

"Do you want me to tell you?"

"No, let me be surprised in the morning." He bent his head to his work, surprised now by the amazing variety of textures, all in such a small space—a smoothness like glass, tickling roughness, a yielding rubberiness, and that sudden slippery slickness, musk and tang and salt together.

After a few moments, he felt her hands come to rest gently on his head, as though in benediction. He hoped the stubble of his beard wasn’t hurting her, but she didn’t seem to mind. A subterranean quiver ran through the warm flesh of her thighs and she made a small sound that made a similar quiver dart through his belly.

“Am I doing it right?” he inquired half jokingly, lifting his head.

“Oh, yeah,” she said softly. “You sure are.” Her hands tightened in his hair.

He had started to lower his head again, but jerked it up at this, staring up across the dim white reaches of her body toward the pale oval of her face.

“And just how the hell do you know *that*?” he asked. His only answer was a deep, gurgling laugh. Then he was beside her, with no real notion how he’d got there, his mouth on her mouth, the length of his body pressed to hers, aware only of the heat of her, burning like fever.

She tasted of him, and he of her, and God help him, he wasn’t going to be able to go slowly.

He did, though. She was eager, but awkward, trying to lift her hips to him, touching him too quickly, too lightly. He took her hands, one at a time, and placed them flat against his chest. Her palms were hot, and his nipples tightened.

“Feel my heart,” he said. His voice sounded thick to his own ears. “Tell me if it stops.”

He hadn’t actually meant to be funny, and was faintly surprised when she gave a nervous laugh. The laugh disappeared as he touched her. Her hands tightened on his chest; then he felt her relax, opening her legs to him.

“I love you,” he murmured. “Oh, Bree, I do love you.”

She didn’t answer, but a hand floated up from the dark and lay along his cheek, gentle as a tendril of seaweed. She kept it there while he took her, laid open in trust, while her other hand held his beating heart.

He felt more drunk than before. Not groggy or sleepy, though; alive to everything. He could smell his own sweat; he could smell hers, smell the faint tang of fear that tinged her desire.

He closed his eyes and breathed. Tightened his grip on her shoulders. Pressed slowly. Slid in. Felt her tear and bit his own lip, hard enough to draw blood.

Her fingernails dug into his chest.

"Go on!" she whispered.

One sharp hard thrust, and he possessed her.

He stayed that way, eyes closed, breathing. Balanced on an edge of pleasure sharp enough to cause him pain. Dimly he wondered if the pain he felt was hers.

"Roger?"

"Ah?"

"Are you … really big, do you think?" Her voice was slightly tremulous.

"Ah …" He groped for remnants of coherence. "About the usual." A flash of concern penetrated the feelings of drunkenness. "Am I hurting you a lot?"

"N-no, not exactly. Just … can you not move for a minute?"

"A minute, an hour. All my life, if you want." He thought it would kill him not to move, and would have died gladly.

Her hands moved slowly down his back, touching his buttocks. He shivered and ducked his head, eyes closed, painting her face before his mind's eye with a dozen small and mindless kisses.

"Okay." She whispered in his ear, and like an automaton he began to move, as slowly as he could, restrained as he went by the pressure of her hand on his back.

She stiffened very slightly and relaxed, stiffened and relaxed, he knew he was hurting her, did it again, he ought to stop, she lifted up against him, taking him, and there was a deep and bestial noise that he must have made, now, it had to be now, he had to …

Shaking and gasping like a landed fish, he jerked free of her body and lay on her, feeling her breasts crushed against him as he jerked and moaned.

Then he lay still, no longer drunk but wrapped in guilty peace, and felt her arms around him and the warm breath of the whisper in his ear.

"I love you," she said, her voice husky in the hop-scented air. "Stay with me."

"All my life," he said, and wrapped his arms around her.

They lay peacefully together, welded with the sweat of their efforts, listening to each other breathe. Roger stirred at last, lifting his face from her hair, his limbs at once weightless and heavy as lead.

"All right, love?" he whispered. "Have I hurt you?"

"Yes, but I didn't mind." Her hand passed lightly down the length of his back, making him shiver despite the heat. "Was it all right? Did I do it right?" She sounded faintly anxious.

"Oh, God!" He bent his head and kissed her, long and lingering. She tensed a little, but then her mouth relaxed under his.

"It was all right, then?"

"Oh, Jesus!"

"You certainly swear a lot, for a minister's son," she said, with a faint note of accusation. "Maybe those old ladies in Inverness were right; you *have* gone to the devil."

"Not blasphemy," he said. He put his forehead against her shoulder, breathing in the deep, ripe scent of her, of them. "Prayers of thanksgiving."

That made her laugh.

"Oh, it *was* all right, then," she said, with an unmistakable note of relief.

He lifted his head.

"Christ, yes," he said, making her laugh again. "How could you possibly think otherwise?"

"Well, you didn't say anything. You just lay there like somebody'd hit you over the head; I thought maybe you were disappointed."

Now it was his turn to laugh, his face half buried in the smooth damps of her neck.

"No," he said finally, coming up for air. "Behaving as though your spinal column's been removed is a fair indication of male satisfaction. No very gentleman-like, maybe, but honest."

"Oh, okay." She seemed satisfied with that. "The book didn't say anything about that, but then it wouldn't; it didn't bother with what happens afterward."

“What book is this?” He moved cautiously, their skins separating with a noise like two strips of flypaper being parted. “Sorry about the mess.” He groped for his wadded shirt and handed it to her.

“The Sensuous Man.” She took the shirt and dabbed fastidiously. “There was a lot of stuff about ice cubes and whipped cream that I thought was pretty extreme, but it was good about how to do things like fellatio, and—”

“You learned that from a *book*?” Roger felt as scandalized as one of the ladies of his father’s congregation.

“Well, you don’t think I go around doing that with people I go out with!” She sounded truly shocked in turn.

“They write books telling young women how to—that’s terrible!”

“What’s terrible about it?” she said, rather huffy. “How else would I know what to do?”

Roger rubbed a hand over his face, at a loss for words. If asked an hour before, he would have stoutly claimed to be in favor of sexual equality. Under the veneer of modernity, though, there was apparently enough of the Presbyterian minister’s son left to feel that a nice young woman really ought to be an ignoramus on her wedding night.

Manfully suppressing this Victorian notion, Roger brought a hand up over the smooth white curves of hip and flank, and cupped a soft full breast.

“Not a thing,” he said. “Only,” he said, and dipped his head to touch his lips to hers, “there’s a bit more to it,” and lightly nipped her lower lip, “than ye read in books, aye?”

She moved suddenly, turning to bring all that long white heat against his bare skin, and he shuddered at the shock of it.

“Show me,” she whispered, and bit the lobe of his ear.

A rooster crowed, somewhere nearby. Brianna woke from a light doze, berating herself for sleeping. She felt disoriented, tired enough from emotion and exertion to feel light-headed, as though she were floating a foot or two off the ground. At the same time, she didn’t want to miss a moment.

Roger stirred by her side, feeling her move. He groped, put an arm around her, and rolled her over, curving himself to fit behind her, knees to knees, belly to buttocks. He brushed the tangles of her hair away from his face, making little *pfft!* noises that made her want to laugh.

He'd made love to her three times. She was very sore, and very happy. She'd imagined it a thousand times, and been wrong every time. There wasn't any way to imagine the sheer terrifying immediacy of being taken like that—stretched suddenly beyond the limits of flesh, penetrated, rent, *entered*. Nor was there any way she could have imagined the sense of power in it.

She had expected to be helpless, the object of desire. Instead, she had held him, felt him quiver with need, all his strength leashed for fear of hurting her—hers to unleash as she would. Hers, to touch and rouse, to call to her, to command.

Nor had she ever thought such tenderness existed as when he cried out and shuddered in her arms, pressing his forehead hard against her own, trusting her with that moment when his strength turned so suddenly to helplessness.

"I'm sorry," he said softly in her ear.

"For what?" She reached back, stroked his thigh. She could do that, now. She could touch him anywhere, delighting in the textures and tastes of his body. She couldn't wait for the daylight, to see him naked.

"For this." He made a small movement with his hand, encompassing the dark around them, the hard straw under them. "I should have waited. I wanted it to be … good for you."

"It was very good for me," she said softly. There was a shallow groove down the side of his thigh, where the muscle was indented.

He laughed, a little ruefully.

"I wanted you to have a proper wedding night. Soft bed, clean sheets … it should have been better, for your first time."

"I've had soft beds and clean sheets," she said. "But not this." She turned in his arms, reached down and cupped him, that fascinating mass of changeability between his legs. He stiffened for a second in surprise, then relaxed, letting her handle him as she liked. "It couldn't have been better," she said softly, and kissed him.

He kissed her back, slow and lazy, exploring all the depths and hollows of her mouth, letting her have his. He moaned a little, far back in his throat, and reached down to take her hand away.

"Oh, God, you're going to kill me, Bree."

"I'm sorry," she said, anxious. "Did I squeeze too hard? I didn't mean to hurt you."

He laughed at that.

"Not that. But give the poor thing a wee rest, hm?" With a firm hand, he turned her over again, nuzzling her shoulder.

"Roger?"

"Mm?"

"I don't think I've ever been so happy."

"Aye? Well, that's good, then." He sounded drowsy.

"Even if—if we don't get back, as long as we're together, I don't mind."

"We'll get back." His hand cupped her breast, gentle as seaweed coming to rest round a rock. "I told you, there's another way."

"There is?"

"I think so." He told her about the grimoire, the mixture of careful notes and crazed rambling—and about his own passage through the stones of Craigh na Dun.

"The second time, I thought of you," he said softly, and traced her features with a finger in the dark. "I lived. And I did come to the right time. But the diamond Fiona gave me was no more than a smear of lampblack in my pocket."

"So it might be possible to—to steer, somehow?" Brianna couldn't keep a hint of hope from her voice.

"There might be." He hesitated. "There was a—I suppose it must have been a poem, or maybe meant to be a spell—in the book." His hand fell away as he recited it.

"I raise my athame to the North
   Where is the home of my power,
To the West

Where is the hearth of my soul,
To the South
Where is the seat of friendship and refuge,
To the East
From whence rises the Sun.

"Then lay I my blade on the altar I have made.
I sit down amid three flames.

"Three points define a plane, and I am fixed.
Four points box the earth and mine is the fullness thereof.
Five is the number of protection; let no demon hinder me.
My left hand is wreathed in gold
And holds the power of the sun.
My right hand is sheathed in silver
And the moon reigns serene.
"I begin.
Garnets rest in love about my neck.
I will be faithful."

Brianna sat up, arms wrapped around her knees. She was silent for moment.

"That's *nuts,*" she said, finally.

"Being certifiably insane is unfortunately no guarantee that someone is likewise wrong," Roger said dryly. He stretched, groaning, and sat up crosslegged on the straw.

"Part of it is traditional ritual, I think—given that the tradition is ancient Celt. The bits about the directions; those are the 'four airts,' which you'll find running through Celtic legend for some way back. As for the blade, the altar, and the flames, it's straight witchcraft."

"She stabbed her husband through the heart and set him on fire." She still remembered as well as he did the stink of petrol and burning flesh in the circle of Craigh na Dun, and shivered, though it was warm in the shed.

"I hope we won't be forced to find someone for a human sacrifice," Roger said, trying and failing to make a joke of it. "The metal, though, and the gems … were you wearing any jewelry when you came through, Bree?”

She nodded in reply.

“Your bracelet,” she said softly. “And I had my grandmother’s pearl necklace in my pocket. The pearls weren’t hurt, though; they came through fine.”

“Pearls aren’t gemstones,” he reminded her. “They’re organic—like people.” He rubbed a hand across his face; it had been a long day, and his head was starting to throb. “Silver and gold, though; you had the silver bracelet, and the necklace has gold, as well as the pearls. Ah—and your mother; she wore both silver and gold, too, didn’t she? Her wedding rings.”

“Uh-huh. But ‘three points define a plane, Four points box the earth, five is the number of protection …’ ” Brianna murmured under her breath. “Could she mean that you need gemstones to—to do whatever she was trying to do? Are those the ‘points’?”

“Could be. She had drawings of triangles and pentagrams, and lists of different gemstones, with the supposed ‘magickal’ properties listed alongside. She wasn’t laying out her theories in any great detail—didn’t need to, since she was talking to herself—but the general notion seemed to be that there are lines of force—‘ley lines,’ she called them—running through the earth. Every now and again, the lines run close to each other, and sort of curl up into knots; and wherever you get such a knot, you’ve got a place where time essentially doesn’t exist.”

“So if you step into one, you might step out again … anytime.”

“Same place, different time. And if you believe that gemstones have a force of their own, which might warp the lines a bit …”

“Would any gemstone do?”

“God knows,” Roger said. “But it’s the best chance we have, aye?”

“Yes,” Brianna agreed, after a pause. “But where are we going to find any?” She waved an arm toward the town and its harbor. “I haven’t seen anything like that anywhere—in Inverness or here. I think you’d need to go to a large city—London, or maybe Boston or Philadelphia. And then—how much money do you have, Roger? I managed to get twenty pounds, and I still have most of it, but that wouldn't be nearly enough for—"

"That's the point," he interrupted. "I was thinking of that, while you were sleeping. I know—I think I know—where I might lay hands on one stone, at least. The thing is—" He hesitated. "I'll have to go at once, to find it. The man who has it is in New Bern right now, but he won't be there for long. If I take a bit of your money, I can get a boat in the morning and be in New Bern by the next day. I think it's best you stay here, though. Then—"

"I can't stay here!"

"Why not?" He reached for her, groping in the dark. "I don't want you with me. Or rather I do," he corrected himself, "but I think it's a lot safer for you here."

"I don't mean I want to come with you; I mean I can't stay here," she repeated, though she grasped his groping hand. She had nearly forgotten, but now all the excitement of discovery flooded back again. "Roger, I found him—I found Jamie Fraser!"

"Fraser? Where? Here?" He turned toward the door, startled.

"No, he's in Cross Creek, and I know where he'll be on Monday. I have to go, Roger. Don't you understand? He's so close—and I've come so far." She wanted suddenly and irrationally to weep, with the thought of seeing her mother again.

"Aye, I see." Roger sounded faintly anxious. "But could you not wait a few days? It's only a day or so by sea to New Bern, the same back—and I think I can manage what I have to do within a day or two."

"No," she said. "I can't. There's Lizzie."

"Who's Lizzie?"

"My maid—you saw her. She was going to hit you with a bottle." Brianna grinned at the memory. "Lizzie's very brave."

"Aye, I daresay," Roger said dryly. "Be that as it may—"

"But she's sick," Brianna interrupted him. "Didn't you see how pale she is? I think it's malaria; she has horrible fevers and chills that last for a day or so and then stop—and then a few days later, they're back again. I have to find my mother as soon as I can. I *have* to."

She could feel him struggling, choking back arguments. She reached out in the darkness and stroked his face.

"I have to," she repeated softly, and felt him surrender.

"All right," he said. "All right! I'll come to join you, as soon as may be. Do me the one favor, though, aye? Wear a bloody dress!"

"You don't like my breeches?" Laughter fizzed up like the bubbles in carbonated soda—then stopped abruptly, as something occurred to her.

"Roger," she said. "What you're going to do—are you going to steal this stone?"

"Yes," he said simply.

She was quiet for a minute, her long thumb rubbing slowly over the palm of his hand.

"Don't," she said at last, very quietly. "Don't do it; Roger."

"Don't trouble yourself over the man who's got it." Roger reached for her, trying to reassure her. "It's odds-on he stole it from someone else."

"It's not him I'm worried about—it's you!"

"Oh, I'll be all right," he assured her, with casual bravado.

"Roger, they *hang* people in this time for stealing!"

"I won't be caught." His hand sought hers in the darkness, found it, and squeezed. "I'll be with you before ye know it."

"But it isn't—"

"It will be all right," he said firmly. "I said I would take care of you, aye? I will."

"But—"

He rose up on one elbow and silenced her with his mouth. Very slowly, he brought her hand toward him, pressed it between his legs.

She swallowed, the hairs on her arms rising suddenly with anticipation.

"Mm?" he murmured, against her mouth, and without waiting for an answer, pulled her down on the straw, and rolled onto her, nudging her legs apart with his knee.

She gasped and bit his shoulder when he took her, but he made no sound.

"D'ye know," Roger said sleepily, some time later, "I think I've just married my great-aunt six times removed? I've only just thought."

"You *what*?"

"Don't worry, it's nowhere close enough to be incest," he assured her.

"Oh, good," she said, with a certain amount of sarcasm. "I was really worried about that. How can I be your great-aunt, for heaven's sake?"

"Well, as I said, I just thought; I hadn't realized it before. But your father's uncle was Dougal MacKenzie—and it was him that caused all the trouble by getting a child on Geilie Duncan, aye?"

It was the unsatisfactory method of contraception he had been forced to adopt that had caused him to think of it, in fact, but he thought it more tactful not to mention that. Neither shirt was fit to be worn by now. All things considered, he supposed it was just as well that Dougal MacKenzie hadn't had his sense of conscientiousness, since that would effectively have prevented Roger's own existence.

"Well, I don't think it was all *his* fault." Brianna sounded pleasantly drowsy as well. It couldn't be much off dawn; birds were already making noises outside, and the air had changed, growing fresher as the wind came in off the harbor.

"So if Dougal is my great-uncle, and your six-times great-grandfather … no, you're wrong. I'm about your sixth or seventh cousin, not your aunt."

"No, that would be right if we were in the same generation of descent, but we're not; you're up about five—on your father's side, at least."

Brianna was silent, trying to work this out in her head. Then giving up, she rolled over with a faint groan, nestling her bottom snugly into the hollow of his thighs.

"The hell with it," she said. "As long as you're sure it's not incest."

He clasped her to his bosom, but his sleepy brain had grasped the point and wouldn't let it go.

"I really hadn't thought of it," he marveled. "You know what it means, though? I'm related to your father, too—in fact, I suppose he's my *only* living relation, besides you!" Roger felt thoroughly nonplussed by this discovery, and rather moved. He had long since reconciled himself to having no close family at all—not that a seven-times great-uncle was all that close, but—

"No, he isn't," Brianna mumbled.

"What?"

"Not the only one. Jenny, too. And her kids. And grandkids. My aunt Jenny's your—hm, maybe you're right, after all. 'Cause if she's my aunt, she's your umpty-great aunt, so maybe *I'm* your … gahh." She let her head loll back against Roger's shoulder, the spill of her hair soft against his chest. "Who'd you tell them you were?"

"Who?"

"Jenny and Ian." She shifted, stretching. "When you went to Lallybroch."

"Never been there." He shifted, too, fitting his body to hers. His hand settled in the dip of her waist, and he sank back into drowsiness, giving up the abstract complexities of genealogical calculation for more immediate sensations.

"No? But then …" her voice died away. Fogged with sleep and the exhaustions of pleasure, Roger paid no attention, only snuggling closer with a luxurious moan. A moment later, her voice sliced through his personal fog like a knife through butter.

"How did you know where I was?" she said.

"Hm?"

She twisted suddenly, leaving him with empty arms, and a pair of dark eyes a few inches from his own, slanted with suspicion.

"How did you know where I was?" she repeated slowly, each word a splinter of ice. "How did you know I'd gone to the Colonies?"

"Ah … I … why …" Much too late, he woke to the realization of his danger.

"You didn't have any way of knowing I'd left Scotland," she said, "unless you went to Lallybroch, and they told you where I was going. But you've never been to Lallybroch."

"I …" He groped frantically for an explanation—any explanation—but there was none, other than the truth. And from the stiffening of her body, she had deduced that too.

"You knew," she said. Her voice wasn't much above a whisper, but the effect was as great as if she'd shouted in his ear. "You *knew,* didn't you?"

She was sitting up now, looming over him like one of the Erinyes.

"You *saw* that death notice! You already knew, you knew all the time, didn't you?"

"No," he said, trying to gather his scattered wits. "I mean yes, but—"

"How long have you known? Why didn't you *tell* me?" she cried. She stood up and snatched at the pile of clothes under them.

"Wait," he pleaded. "Bree—let me explain—"

"Yeah, explain! I want to hear you explain!" Her voice was ragged with fury, but she did stop her rummaging for a moment, waiting to hear.

"Look." He was up himself by now. "I did find it. Last spring. But I—" He took a deep breath, searching desperately for words that might make her understand.

"I knew it would hurt you. I didn't want to show it to you because I knew there was nothing you could do—there was no point in you breaking your heart for the sake of—"

"What do you mean there's nothing I could do?" She jerked a shirt over her head, and glared toward him, fists clenched.

"You can't change things, Bree! Don't you know that? Your parents tried—they knew about Culloden, and they did everything they possibly could have, to stop Charles Stuart—but they couldn't, could they? They failed! Geillis Duncan tried to make Stuart a king. She failed! They all failed!" He risked a hand on her arm; she was stiff as a statue.

"You can't help them, Bree," he said, more quietly. "It's part of history, it's part of the past—you're not from this time; you can't change what's going to happen."

"You don't know that." She was still rigid, but he thought he heard a hint of doubt in her voice.

"I do!" He wiped a bead of sweat from his jaw. "Listen—if I'd thought there was the slightest chance—but I didn't. I—God, Bree, I couldn't stand the thought of you being hurt!"

She stood still, breathing heavily through her nose. If she'd had the choice, he was sure it would have been fire and brimstone rather than air.

"It wasn't your business to make up my mind for me," she said, speaking through clenched teeth. "No matter what you thought. And about something so important—Roger, how could you *do* something like that!?"

The tone of betrayal in her voice was too much.

"Damn it, I was afraid if I told you, ye'd do just what you did!" he burst out. "You'd leave me! You'd try to go through the stones by yourself. And now look what you've done—here's the both of us in this godforsaken—"

"You're trying to blame *me* for you being here? When I did everything I possibly could to keep you from being such an idiot as to follow me?"

Months of toil and terror, days of worry and fruitless searching caught up with Roger in a scorching blast.

"An idiot? That's the thanks I get for killing myself to find you? For risking my fucking *life* to try to protect you?" He rose from the straw, meaning to get hold of her, not sure if he meant to shake her or bed her again. He had the chance to do neither; a hard shove caught him off balance, square in the chest, and he went sprawling into the hay.

She was hopping on one foot, cursing incoherently as she struggled into her breeches.

"You—bloody—arrogant—damn you, Roger!—*damn* you!" She jerked up the breeches and, leaning down, snatched up her shoes and stockings.

"Go!" she said. "Damn you, go! Go and get hanged if you want to! I'm going to find my parents! And I'm going to save them, too!"

She whirled away, reached the door and jerked it open before he could reach her. She stood for a moment, silhouetted in the paler square of the doorway, dark strands of hair afloat in the wind, live as the strands of Medusa's mane.

"I'm going. Come, or don't come, I don't care. Go back to Scotland—go back through the stones by yourself, for all I care! But by God, you can't stop me!"

And then she was gone.

* * *

Lizzie's eyes shot wide as the door banged open against the wall. She hadn't been asleep—how could she sleep?—but had been lying with her eyes closed. She struggled up out of the bedclothes and fumbled for the tinderbox.

"Are ye all right, Miss Bree?"

It didn't sound like it; Brianna was stamping to and fro, hissing through her teeth like a snake, stopping to kick the wardrobe with a resounding thud. There were two more thuds in succession; by the wavering light of the newly lit candle, Lizzie could see that these were caused by Brianna's shoes, which had hit the wall and fallen to the floor.

"Are ye all right?" she repeated, uncertainly.

"Fine!" said Brianna.

From the black air beyond the window a voice roared, "Brianna! I shall come for you! Do ye hear me! I *will come*!"

Her mistress made no answer, but strode to the window, seized the shutters and crashed them shut with a bang that made the room echo. Then she turned like a panther striking, and dashed the candlestick to the floor, plunging the room in suffocating dark.

Lizzie eased herself back into bed and lay frozen, afraid to move or speak. She could hear Brianna tearing off her clothes in silent frenzy, the hiss of indrawn breath punctuating the rustle of cloth and the stamp of bare feet on the wooden floor. Through the shutter, she heard outside the muffled sound of cursing, then nothing.

She had seen Brianna's face for a moment in the light; white as paper and hard as bone, with the eyes black holes. Her gentle, kindly mistress had vanished like smoke, taken over by a *deamhan,* a she-devil. Lizzie was a town lass, born long after Culloden. She had never seen the wild clansmen of the glens, or a Highlander in the grip of blood fury—but she'd heard the auld stories, and now she knew them true. A person who looked like that might do anything at all.

She tried to breathe as though she were sleeping, but the air came through her mouth in strangled gasps. Brianna seemed not to notice, though; she walked about the room in quick, hard steps, poured water in the bowl and splashed it on her face, then slid between the quilts and lay flat, rigid as a board.

Summoning all her courage, she turned her head toward her mistress.

"Are ye … all right, *a bann-sielbheadair*?" she asked, in a voice so low that her mistress could pretend not to have heard it if she wanted.

For a moment she thought that Brianna meant to ignore her. Then, "Yes" came the answer, in a voice so flat and expressionless, it didn't sound like Brianna's at all. "Go to sleep."

She didn't, of course. A body didn't sleep, lying next to someone who might turn into a *ursiq* next thing. Her eyes had adjusted to the dark again, but she was afraid to look, in case the red hair lying on the pillow next to her should suddenly be a mane, and the delicate straight nose changed to a curved, soft muzzle, over teeth that would rend and devour.

It was a few moments before Lizzie realized that her mistress was trembling. Not weeping; there was no sound—but shaking hard enough to make the bedclothes rustle.

Fool, she scolded herself. *It's no but your friend and your lady, with something terrible that's happened to her—and you lyin' here sniveling over fancies!*

On impulse she rolled toward Brianna, reaching for the other girl's hand.

"Bree," she said softly. "Can I be helpin' ye at all, then?"

Brianna's hand curled round hers and squeezed, quick and hard, then let go.

“No,” Brianna said, very softly. “Go to sleep, Lizzie; everything will be all right.”

Lizzie took leave to doubt that, but said no more, lying back down and breathing quietly. It was a very long time, but at last Brianna’s long body shuddered gently and relaxed into sleep. Lizzie couldn’t sleep—with the fever gone again, she was alert and restless. The single quilt lay heavy and damp on her, and with the shutters closed, the air in the tiny room was like breathing hot molasses.

Finally, unable to stand it any longer, Lizzie slid quietly out of bed. Keeping an ear out for any sound from the bed, she crept to the window and eased open the shutters.

The air was still hot and muggy outside, but it had begun to move a little; the dawn breeze was coming, with the turn of the air from sea to land. It was still dark, but the sky had begun to lighten as well; she could make out the line of the road below, blessedly empty.

Not knowing what else to do, she did what she always did when troubled or confused; set about to make things tidy. Moving quietly about the room, she picked up the clothes Brianna had so violently discarded, and shook them out.

They were filthy; covered with streaks of leaf stain and dirt, riddled with bits of straw; she could see it even in the dim light from the window. What had Brianna been doing, rolling about on the ground? The instant the thought came into her head, she saw it in her mind, so plain that the notion froze her with shock—Brianna pinned to the ground, struggling with the black devil who had taken her away.

Her mistress was a fine big woman, but yon MacKenzie was a great tall brute of a man; he could have—she stopped herself abruptly, not wanting to imagine. She couldn’t help it, though; her mind had gone too far already.

With great reluctance, she brought the shirt to her nose and sniffed. Yes, there it was, the reek of a man, strong and sour as the smell of a rutting goat. The thought of the wicked creature with his body pressed to Brianna’s, rubbing against her, leaving his scent on her like a dog who marks his ground—she shuddered in revulsion.

Trembling, she snatched up the breeches and stockings, and bore all the clothes to the basin. She would wash them out, rinse away the reminder of MacKenzie with the dirt and the grass stains. And if the clothes were too wet for her mistress to wear in the morning … well, so much the better for that.

She still had the pot of soft yellow lye soap the landlady had given her for laundering; that would take care of it. She plunged the breeks into the water, added a finger's dollop of the soap, and began to work it into a scummy lather, pressing it through and through the fabric.

The window's square was lightening. She cast a stealthy glance over her shoulder at her mistress, but Brianna's breath came slow and steady; good, she wouldn't wake for a time yet.

She looked back to her work, and froze, feeling a chill colder than those that came with her fevers. The thin suds that covered her hands were dark, and small black eddies spread through the water like the ink stains of a cuttlefish.

She didn't want to look, but it was too late to pretend she hadn't seen. She turned back the wet fabric carefully, and there it was; a large, dark blotch, discoloring the cloth just where the seams crossed in the crotch of the breeks.

The rising sun oozed a sullen red through the hazy sky, turning the water in the basin, the air in the room, the whole spinning world, the color of fresh blood.

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JOURNEY'S END

Brianna thought she might scream. Instead, she patted Lizzie's back and spoke softly.

"Don't worry, it'll be all right. Mr. Viorst says he'll wait for us. As soon as you feel better, we'll leave. But for now, don't worry about anything, just rest."

Lizzie nodded, but couldn't answer; her teeth were chattering too hard, in spite of the three blankets over her and the hot brick at her feet.

"I'll go and get your drink, honey. Just rest," Brianna repeated, and with a final pat, rose and left the room.

It wasn't Lizzie's fault, of course, Brianna thought, but she could scarcely have picked a worse moment to have another attack of fever. Brianna had slept late and restlessly after the dreadful scene with Roger, waking to find her clothes washed and hung to dry, her shoes polished, her stockings folded, the room ruthlessly swept and tidied—and Lizzie collapsed in a shivering heap on the empty hearth.

For the thousandth time, she counted the days. Eight days until Monday. If Lizzie's attack followed its usual pattern, she might be able to travel the day after tomorrow. Six days. And according to Junior Smoots and Hans Viorst, five to six days to make the trip upriver at this time of year.

She couldn't miss Jamie Fraser, she couldn't! She had to be in Cross Creek by Monday, come hell or high water. Who knew how long the trial might take, or whether he would leave as soon as it was over? She would have given anything to be able to go at once.

The burning ache to move, to go, was so intense it obliterated all the other aches and burnings of her body—even the deep heart-burning of Roger's betrayal—but there was nothing to be done. She could go nowhere until Lizzie was better.

The taproom was full; two new ships had come into the harbor during the day, and now at evening the benches were full of seamen, with a game of cards loud and lively at the table in the corner. Brianna edged through the blue clouds of tobacco smoke, ignoring the whistles and ribald remarks. Roger had wanted her to wear a dress, had he? Damn him. Her breeches normally kept men at a safe distance, but Lizzie had washed them, and they were still too damp to wear.

She gave one man who reached for her buttocks a glare fit to sear his eyebrows. He stopped in mid-grab, startled, and she slid by him, through the door to the kitchen breezeway.

On the way back, with the jug of steaming catmint tea wrapped in a cloth to keep from burning her, she made a detour around the edge of the room to avoid her would-be assailant. If he touched her, she would pour boiling water in his lap. And while that would be no more than he deserved, and some palliative to her own volcanic feelings, it would waste the tea, which Lizzie badly needed.

She stepped carefully sideways, squeezing between the raucous cardplayers and the wall. The table was scattered with coins and other small valuables: silver and gilt and pewter buttons, a snuffbox, a silver penknife, and scribbled scraps of paper—IOUs, she supposed, or the eighteenth-century equivalent. Then one of the men moved, and beyond his shoulder she caught the gleam of gold.

She glanced down, looked away, then looked back, startled. It was a ring, a plain gold band, but wider than most. It wasn't the gold alone that had caught her eye, though. The ring was no more than a foot away, and while the light in the taproom was more than dim, a candlestick sat on the cardplayers' table, shedding its light in the inner curve of the golden band.

She couldn't quite read the letters engraved there, but she knew the pattern so well that the legend sprang into her mind, unbidden.

She laid a hand on the shoulder of the man who had the ring, interrupting him in mid-jest. He turned, half frowning, the frown clearing as he saw who had touched him.

"Aye, sweetheart, and have ye come to change my luck, then?" He was a big man, with a heavy-boned, handsome face, a broad mouth and a broken nose, and a pair of light green eyes that moved over her with quick appraisal.

She forced her lips to smile at him.

"I hope so," she said. "Shall I give your ring a rub for luck?" Without waiting for permission, she snatched the ring from the table and gave it a brisk rub on her sleeve. Then holding it up to admire the shine, she could see plainly the words written inside.

From F. to C. with love. Always.

Her hand was trembling as she gave it back.

"It's very pretty," she said. "Where did you get it?"

He looked startled, then wary, and she hastened to add, "It's too small for you—won't your wife be angry if you lose her ring?" *How?* she thought wildly. *How did he get it? And what's happened to my mother?*

The full lips curved in a charming smile.

"And if I had a wife, sweetheart, sure I'd leave her for you." He looked her over more closely, long lashes dropping to hide his gaze. He touched her waist in a casual gesture of invitation.

"I'm busy just now, sweetheart, but later … eh?"

The jug was burning through the cloth, but her fingers felt cold. Her heart had congealed into a small lump of terror.

"Tomorrow," she said. "In the daylight."

He looked at her, startled, then threw his head back and laughed.

"Well, I've heard men say I'm not a one to be met in the dark, poppet, but the women seem to prefer it." He ran a thick finger down her forearm in play; the red-gold hairs rose at his touch.

"In the daylight, then, if ye like. Come to my ship—*Gloriana,* near the naval yard."

“Gracious, you vill not how long haf eaten?” Miss Viorst peered at Brianna’s empty bowl with good-willed incredulity. About the same age as Brianna herself, she was a broad-built, placid-tempered Dutchwoman whose motherly manner made her seem a good deal older.

“Day before yesterday, I think.” Brianna gratefully accepted a second helping of dumplings and broth, and yet another thick slab of salt-rising bread slathered with curls of fresh white butter. “Oh, thank you!” The food did something to fill the hollow space that yawned inside her, a small warm comfort around which to center herself.

Lizzie’s fever had come on again, two days upriver. This time the attack was longer and more severe, and Brianna had been seriously afraid that Lizzie would die, right there in the middle of the Cape Fear River.

She had sat in mid-canoe for all of a day and a night, while Viorst and his partner paddled like maniacs, she alternately pouring handfuls of water over Lizzie’s head and wrapping her in all the coats and blankets available, all the time praying to see the girl’s small bosom rise with the next breath.

“If I die, will ye tell my father?” Lizzie had whispered to her in the rushing dark.

“I will, but you won’t, so dinna fash yourself,” Brianna said firmly. It was successful; Lizzie’s frail back quivered with laughter at Brianna’s attempted Scots, and a small bony hand reached up to hers, holding on until sleep loosened its grip and the fleshless fingers slipped free.

Viorst, alarmed at Lizzie’s state, had taken them to the house he shared with his sister a little way below Cross Creek, carrying Lizzie’s blanket-wrapped body up the dusty trail from the river to a small framed cottage. The girl’s stubborn spirit had brought her through once more, but Brianna thought that the fragile flesh might not be equal to many more such demands.

She cut a dumpling in half and ate it slowly, savoring the rich warm juices of chicken and onion. She was grubby, travel-worn, starved, and exhausted, every bone in her body aching. They had made it, though. They were in Cross Creek, and tomorrow was Monday. Somewhere nearby was Jamie Fraser—and God willing, Claire as well.

She touched the leg of her breeches, and the secret pocket sewn into the seam. It was still there, the small round hardness of the talisman. Her mother was still alive. That was all that mattered.

After eating, she went once more to check on Lizzie. Hanneke Viorst was sitting by the bed darning socks. She nodded to Brianna, smiling.

"She is *gut*."

Looking down at the wasted, sleeping face, Brianna wouldn't have said that much. Still, the fever was gone; a hand on Lizzie's brow came away cool and damp, and a half-empty bowl on the table nearby showed that she had managed a little nourishment.

"You vill rest, too?" Hanneke half rose, gesturing toward the trundle bed pulled out in readiness.

Brianna cast a glance of longing at the clean quilts and puffy bolster, but shook her head.

"Not yet, thank you. What I'd really like is to borrow your mule, if I might."

There was no telling where Jamie Fraser was now. Viorst had told her that River Run was a good distance from the town; he might be there, or he might be staying somewhere in Cross Creek, for convenience. She couldn't leave Lizzie long enough to ride all the way to River Run, but she did want to go into town and find the courthouse where the trial would be held tomorrow. She was taking no chance of missing him by not knowing where to go.

The mule was large and elderly, but not averse to ambling along the riverbank road. He walked somewhat slower than she could have done herself, but that didn't matter; she was in no hurry, now.

Despite her tiredness, she began to feel better as she rode, her bruised, stiff body relaxing into the easy rhythm of the mule's slow gait. It was a hot, humid day, but the sky was clear and blue, and great elms and hickory trees overhung the road, cool leaves filtering the sun.

Torn between Lizzie’s illness and her own painful memories, she had noticed nothing of the second half of their voyage, taken no notice of change in the countryside they passed. Now it was like being magically transported during sleep, waking up in a different place. She put everything else aside, determined to forget the last few days and everything in them. She was going to find Jamie Fraser.

The sandy roads, scrub-pine forests, and marshy swamps of the coast were gone, replaced by thickets of cool green, by tall, thick-trunked, canopied trees, and a soft orange dirt that darkened to black mold where the dead leaves lay matted at the edge of the road. The shrieks of gulls and terns were gone, replaced by the muted chatter of a jay, and the soft liquid song of a whippoorwill, far back in the forest.

How would it be? she wondered. She had wondered the same thing a hundred times, and a hundred times imagined different scenes: what she would say, what he would say—would he be glad to see her? She hoped so; and yet he would be a stranger. Likely he would bear no resemblance at all to the man of her imagination. With some difficulty, she fought back the memory of Laoghaire’s voice: *A liar and a cheat* … Her mother hadn’t thought so.

“ ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof,’ ” she murmured to herself. She had come into the town of Cross Creek itself; the scattered houses thickened, and the dirt track widened into a cobbled street, lined with shops and larger houses. There were people about, but it was the hottest part of the afternoon, when the air lay still and heavy on the town. Those who could be, were inside in the shade.

The road curved out, following the riverbank. A small sawmill stood by itself on a point of land, and near it, a tavern. She’d ask there, she decided. Hot as it was, she could use something to drink.

She patted the pocket of her coat, to be sure she had money. She felt instead the prickly outline of a horse chestnut’s hull, and pulled her hand away as though she’d been burned.

She felt hollow again, in spite of the food she’d eaten. Lips pressed tight together, she tethered the mule and ducked into the dark refuge of the tavern.

The room was empty save for the landlord, perched in somnolence on his stool. He roused himself at her step, and after the usual goggle of surprise at her appearance, served her beer and gave her courteous directions to the courthouse.

"Thank you." She wiped the sweat from her forehead with a coat sleeve—even inside, the heat was stifling.

"You'll have come for the trial, then?" the landlord ventured, still looking at her curiously.

"Yes—well, not really. Whose trial is it?" she asked, belatedly realizing that she had no idea.

"Oh, it'll be Fergus Fraser," the man said, as though assuming that naturally everyone knew who Fergus Fraser was. "Assault on an officer of the Crown is the charge. He'll be acquitted, though," the landlord went on matter-of-factly. "Jamie Fraser's come down from the mountain for him."

Brianna choked on her beer.

"You *know* Jamie Fraser?" she asked breathlessly, swabbing at the spilled foam on her sleeve.

The landlord's brows went up.

"Wait but a moment and you'll know him, too." He nodded at a pewter tankard full of beer, sitting on the nearby table. She hadn't noticed it when she came in. "He went out the back, just as you came in. He—hey!" He fell back with a cry of surprise as she dropped her own tankard on the floor, and shot out the back door like a bat out of hell.

The light outside was dazzling after the taproom's gloom. Brianna blinked, eyes tearing at the shafts of sun that stabbed through the shifting greens of a screen of maples. Then a movement caught her eye, below the flickering leaves.

He stood in the shade of the maples, half turned away from her, head bent in absorption. A tall man, long-legged, lean and graceful, with his shoulders broad under a white shirt. He wore a faded kilt in pale greens and browns, casually rucked up in front as he urinated against a tree.

He finished and, letting the kilt fall, turned toward the post house. He saw her then, standing there staring at him, and tensed slightly, hands half curling. Then he saw past her men's clothes, and the look of wary suspicion changed at once to surprise as he realized that she was a woman.

There was no doubt in her mind, from the first glimpse. She was at once surprised and not surprised at all; he was not quite what she had imagined—he seemed smaller, only man-sized—but his face had the lines of her own; the long, straight nose and stubborn jaw, and the slanted cat-eyes, set in a frame of solid bone.

He moved toward her out of the maples' shadow, and the sun struck his hair with a spray of copper sparks. Half consciously she raised a hand and pushed a strand of hair back from her face, seeing from the corner of her eye the matching gleam of thick red-gold.

"What d'ye want here, lassie?" he asked. Sharp, but not unkind. His voice was deeper than she had imagined; the Highland burr slight but distinct.

"You," she blurted. Her heart seemed to have wedged itself in her throat; she had trouble forcing any words past it.

He was close enough that she caught the faint whiff of his sweat and the fresh smell of sawn wood; there was a golden scatter of sawdust caught in the rolled sleeves of his linen shirt. His eyes narrowed with amusement as he looked her up and down, taking in her costume. One reddish eyebrow rose, and he shook his head.

"Sorry, lass," he said, with a half-smile. "I'm a marrit man."

He made to pass by, and she made a small incoherent sound, putting out a hand to stop him, but not quite daring to touch his sleeve. He stopped and looked at her more closely.

"No, I meant it; I've a wife at home, and home's not far," he said, evidently wishing to be courteous. "But—" He stopped, close enough now to take in the grubbiness of her clothes, the hole in the sleeve of her coat and the tattered ends of her stock.

"Och," he said in a different tone, and reached for the small leather purse he wore tied at his waist. "Will ye be starved, then, lass? I've money, if you must eat."

She could scarcely breathe. His eyes were dark blue, soft with kindness. Her eyes fixed on the open collar of his shirt, where the curly hairs showed, bleached gold against his sunburnt skin.

"Are you—you're Jamie Fraser, aren't you?"

He glanced sharply at her face.

"I am," he said. The wariness had returned to his face; his eyes narrowed against the sun. He glanced quickly behind him, toward the tavern, but nothing stirred in the open doorway. He took a step closer to her.

"Who asks?" he said softly. "Have you a message for me, lass?"

She felt an absurd desire to laugh welling up in her throat. Did she have a message?

"My name is Brianna," she said. He frowned, uncertain, and something flickered in his eyes. He knew it! He'd heard the name and it meant something to him. She swallowed hard, feeling her cheeks blaze as though they'd been seared by a candle flame.

"I'm your daughter," she said, her voice sounding choked to her own ears. "Brianna."

He stood stock-still, not changing expression in the slightest. He had heard her, though; he went pale, and then a deep, painful red washed up his throat and into his face, sudden as a brushfire, matching her own vivid color.

She felt a deep flash of joy at the sight, a rush through her midsection that echoed that blaze of blood, recognition of their fair-skinned kinship. Did it trouble him to blush so strongly? she wondered suddenly. Had he schooled his face to immobility, as she had learned to do, to mask that telltale surge?

Her own face felt stiff, but she gave him a tentative smile.

He blinked, and his eyes moved at last from her face, slowly taking in her appearance, and—with what seemed to her a new and horrified awareness—her height.

"My God," he croaked. "You're *huge*."

Her own blush had subsided, but now came back with a vengeance.

"And whose fault is *that,* do you think?" she snapped. She drew herself up straight and squared her shoulders, glaring. So close, at her full height, she could look him right in the eye, and did.

He jerked back, and his face did change then, mask shattering in surprise. Without it, he looked younger; underneath were shock, surprise, and a dawning expression of half-painful eagerness.

"Och, no, lassie!" he exclaimed. "I didna mean it that way, at all! It's only—" He broke off, staring at her in fascination. His hand lifted, as though despite himself, and traced the air, outlining her cheek, her jaw and neck and shoulder, afraid to touch her directly.

"It's true?" he whispered. "It is you, Brianna?" He spoke her name with a queer accent—*Bree*anah—and she shivered at the sound.

"It's me," she said, a little huskily. She made another attempt at a smile. "Can't you tell?"

His mouth was wide and full-lipped, but not like hers; wider, a bolder shape, that seemed to hide a smile in the corners of it, even in repose. It was twitching now, not certain what to do.

"Aye," he said. "Aye, I can."

He did touch her then, his fingers drawing lightly down her face, brushing back the waves of ruddy hair from temple and ear, tracing the delicate line of her jaw. She shivered again, though his touch was noticeably warm; she could feel the heat of his palm against her cheek.

"I hadna thought of you as grown," he said, letting his hand fall reluctantly away. "I saw the pictures, but still—I had ye in my mind somehow as a wee bairn always—as my babe. I never expected …" His voice trailed off as he stared at her, the eyes like her own, deep blue and thick-lashed, wide in fascination.

"Pictures," she said, feeling breathless with happiness. "You've seen pictures of me? Mama found you, didn't she? When you said you had a wife at home—"

"Claire," he interrupted. The wide mouth had made its decision; it split into a smile that lit his eyes like the sun in the dancing tree leaves. He grabbed her arms, tight enough to startle her.

"You'll not have seen her, then? Christ, she'll be mad wi' joy!"

The thought of her mother was overwhelming. Her face cracked, and the tears she had been holding back for days spilled down her cheeks in a flood of relief, half choking her as she laughed and cried together.

"Here, lassie, dinna weep!" he exclaimed in alarm. He let go of her arm and snatched a large, crumpled handkerchief from his sleeve. He patted tentatively at her cheeks, looking worried.

"Dinna weep, *a leannan,* dinna be troubled," he murmured. "It's all right, *m' annsachd*; it's all right."

"I'm all right; everything's all right. I'm just—happy," she said. She took the handkerchief, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. "What does that mean—*a leannan*? And the other thing you said?"

"You'll not have the Gaelic, then?" he asked, and shook his head. "No, of course she wouldna have been taught," he murmured, as though to himself.

"I'll learn," she said firmly, giving her nose a last wipe. *"A leannan?"*

A slight smile reappeared on his face as he looked at her.

"It means 'darling,' " he said softly. "*M' annsachd*—my blessing."

The words hung in the air between them, shimmering like the leaves. They stood still, both stricken suddenly with shyness by the endearment, unable to look away from each other, unable to find more words.

"Fa—" Brianna started to speak, then stopped, suddenly seized with doubt. What should she call him? Not Daddy. Frank Randall had been Daddy to her all her life; it would be a betrayal to use that name to another man—any other man. Jamie? No, she couldn't possibly; rattled as he was by her appearance, he had still a formidable dignity that forbade such casual use. "Father" seemed remote and stern—and whatever Jamie Fraser might be, he wasn't that; not to her.

He saw her hesitate and flush, and recognized her trouble.

"You can … call me Da," he said. His voice was husky; he stopped and cleared his throat. "If—if ye want to, I mean," he added diffidently.

"Da," she said, and felt the smile bloom easily this time, unmarred by tears. "Da. Is that Gaelic?"

He smiled back, the corners of his mouth trembling slightly.

“No. It’s only … simple.”

And suddenly it was all simple. He held out his arms to her. She stepped into them and found that she had been wrong; he *was* as big as she’d imagined—and his arms were as strong about her as she had ever dared to hope.

Everything after that seemed to happen in a daze. Overcome by emotion and fatigue, Brianna was conscious of events more as a series of images, sharp as stop-frame photos, than as a moving flow of life.

Lizzie, gray eyes blinking in the sudden light, tiny and pale in the arms of a sturdy black groom with an improbable Scottish accent. A wagon piled with glass and fragrant wood. The polished rumps of horses, and the jolt and creak of wooden wheels. Her father’s voice, deep and warm in her ear, describing a house to be built, high on a mountain ridge, explaining that the windows were a surprise for her mother.

“But no such a surprise as you, lassie!” And a laugh of deep joy that seemed to echo in her bones.

A long ride down dusty roads, and sleeping with her head on her father’s shoulder, his free arm around her as he drove, breathing the unfamiliar scent of his skin, his strange long hair brushing her face when he turned his head.

Then the cool luxury of the big, breezy house, filled with the scent of beeswax and flowers. A tall woman with white hair and Brianna’s face, and a blue-eyed gaze that looked disconcertingly beyond her. Long cool hands that touched her face and stroked her hair with abstract curiosity.

“Lizzie,” she said, and a pretty woman bent over Lizzie, murmuring, “Jesuit bark,” her black hands beautiful against the yellow porcelain of Lizzie’s face.

Hands—so many hands. Everything was done as if by magic, with soft murmurs as they passed her from hand to hand. She was stripped and bathed before she could protest, scented water poured over her, firm, gentle fingers that massaged her scalp as lavender soap was sluiced from her hair. Linen towels and a small black girl who dried her feet and sprinkled them with rice powder.

A fresh cotton gown and floating barefoot over polished floors, to see her father's eyes light at sight of her. Food—cakes and trifles and jellies and scones—and hot, sweet tea that seemed to replace the blood in her veins.

A pretty blond girl with a frown on her face, who seemed peculiarly familiar; her father called her Marsali. Lizzie, washed and wrapped in a blanket, both frail hands round a mug of pungent liquid, looking like a steppedon flower newly watered.

Talk, and people coming, and more talk, with only the occasional phrase penetrating through her growing fog.

"… Farquard Campbell has more sense …"

"Fergus, Da, did ye see him? Is he all right?"

Da? she thought, half puzzled, faintly indignant that someone else should call him that, because … because …

Her aunt's voice, coming from a great distance, saying, "The poor child is asleep where she sits; I can hear her snoring. Ulysses, take her up to bed."

And then strong arms that lifted her with no sense of strain, but not the candlewax smell of the black butler; the sawdust and linen scent of her father. She gave up the struggle and fell asleep, her head on his chest.

* * *

Fergus Fraser might sound like a Scottish clansman; he looked like a French noble. A French noble on his way to the guillotine, Brianna silently amended her first impression.

Handsomely dark, slightly built, and not very tall, he sauntered into the dock, and turned to face the room, long nose lifted an inch above the usual. The shabby clothes, the unshaven jaw, and the large purple bruise over one eye subtracted nothing from his air of aristocratic disdain. Even the curved metal hook that he wore in replacement of a missing hand only added to his impression of disreputable glamour.

Marsali gave a small sigh at sight of him, and her lips grew tight. She leaned across to Brianna to whisper to Jamie.

“What have they done to him, the bastards?”

“Nothing that matters.” He made a small motion, gesturing her back, and she subsided into her seat, glowering at bailiff and sheriff in turn.

They had been lucky to procure seats; every space in the small building was filled, and people were jostling and muttering at the back of the room, kept in order only by the presence of the red-coated soldiers who guarded the doors. Two more soldiers stood to attention at the front of the room, beside the Justice’s bench, an officer of some sort lurking in the corner behind them.

Brianna saw the officer catch Jamie Fraser’s eye, and a look of malign satisfaction crept over the man’s broad features, a look almost of gloating. It made the small hairs rise on the back of her neck, but her father met the man’s gaze squarely, then turned away, indifferent.

The Justice arrived and took his place, and the ceremonies of justice being duly performed, the trial began. Evidently, it was not intended to be a trial by jury, since no such body was present; only the Justice and his minions.

Brianna had made out little from the conversation the evening before, though over breakfast she had managed to disentangle the confusion of persons. The young black woman’s name was Phaedre, one of Jocasta’s slaves, and the tall homely boy with the charming smile was Jamie’s nephew, Ian—her cousin, she thought, with the same small thrill of discovered kinship she had felt at Lallybroch. The lovely blond Marsali was Fergus’s wife, and Fergus, of course, was the French orphan whom Jamie had informally adopted in Paris, before the Stuart Rising.

Mr. Justice Conant, a tidy gentleman of middle age, settled his wig, arranged his coat, and called for the charges to be read. These were, to wit, that one Fergus Claudel Fraser, resident of Rowan County, had on August 4 of this year of our Lord 1769, feloniously assaulted the person of one Hugh Berowne, a deputy sheriff of said county, and stolen from him Crown property, then lawfully in the deputy's custody.

The said Hugh, being called to the stand, proved to be a gangling fellow of some thirty years and a nervous disposition. He twitched and stammered through his testimony, averring that he had encountered the defendant on the Buffalo Trail Road, while he, Berowne, was in pursuit of his lawful duties. He had been roughly abused by the defendant in the French tongue, and upon his endeavoring to leave, had been pursued by the defendant, who had apprehended him, struck him in the face, and taken away the property of the Crown in Berowne's custody, to wit, one horse, with bridle and saddle.

Upon the invitation of the court, the witness here pulled back the right side of his mouth in a grimace, disclosing a broken tooth, suffered in the assault.

Mr. Justice Conant peered interestedly at the shattered remains of the tooth, and turned to the prisoner.

"Indeed. And now, Mr. Fraser, might we hear your account of this unfortunate event?"

Fergus lowered his nose half an inch, awarding the justice the same regard he might have bestowed on a cockroach.

"This loathsome wad of dung," he began in measured tones, "had —"

"The prisoner will refrain from insult," Justice Conant said coldly.

"The deputy," Fergus resumed, without turning a hair, "had come upon my wife as she returned from the flour mill, with my infant son upon her saddle. This—the deputy—hailed her, and without ceremony dragged her from the saddle, informed her that he was taking the horse and its equipment in payment of tax, and left her and the child on foot, five miles from my home, in the blazing sun!" He glared ferociously at Berowne, who narrowed his own gaze in reply. Next to Brianna, Marsali exhaled strongly through her nose.

"What tax did the deputy claim was owed?"

A dark flush had mantled Fergus's cheeks.

"I owe nothing! It was his claim that my land is subject to an annual rent of three shillings, but it is not! My land is exempt from this tax, by virtue of the terms of a land grant made to James Fraser by Governor Tryon. I told the stinking *salaud* as much, when he visited my home to try to collect the money."

"I heard nothing of such a grant," Berowne said sulkily. "These folks will tell you any tale at all, to put off paying. Lallygags and cheats, the lot of them."

"Oreilles en feuille de chou!"

A small ripple of laughter ran through the room, nearly drowning out the Justice's rebuke. Brianna's high-school French was just about adequate to translate this as "Cauliflower ears!" and she joined in the general smile.

The Justice lifted his head and peered into the courtroom.

"Is James Fraser present?"

Jamie rose and bowed respectfully.

"Here, milord."

"Swear the witness, Bailiff."

Jamie, having been duly sworn, attested to the facts that he was in fact the proprietor of a grant of land, that said grant had been made and its terms agreed to by Governor Tryon, that said terms did include a quitment of land rent to the Crown for a period of ten years, such period to expire some nine years hence, and finally, that Fergus Fraser did maintain a house upon and farm crops within the boundaries of the granted territory, under license from himself, James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser.

Brianna's attention had at first been fixed upon her father; she could scarcely get enough of looking at him. He was the tallest man in the courtroom, and by far the most striking, attired in snowy linen and a coat of deep blue that set off his slanted eyes and fiery hair.

A movement in the corner attracted her eye, though, and she looked to see the officer she had noticed before. He was no longer looking at her father, but had fixed Hugh Berowne with a penetrating stare. Berowne gave the shadow of a nod, and sat back to await the end of Fraser's testimony.

"It would appear that Mr. Fraser's claim of exemption holds true, Mr. Berowne," the Justice said mildly. "I must therefore hold him acquitted of the charge of—"

"He cannot prove it!" Berowne blurted out. He glanced at the officer, as though for moral support, and stiffened his long chin. "There is no documentary proof; only James Fraser's word."

Another stir went through the courtroom; this one uglier in tone. Brianna had no trouble hearing the shock and outrage that her father's word had been called in question, and felt an unexpected pride.

Her father showed no anger, though; he rose again, and bowed to the Justice.

"And your Lordship will permit me." He reached into his coat and removed a folded sheet of parchment, with a blob of red sealing wax affixed.

"Your Lordship will be familiar with the Governor's seal, I am sure," he said, laying it on the table before Mr. Conant. The Justice raised one eyebrow, but looked carefully at the seal, then broke it open, examined the document within, and laid it down.

"This is a duly witnessed copy of the original grant of land," he announced, "signed by His Excellency, William Tryon."

"How did you get that?" Berowne blurted. "There wasn't time to get to New Bern and back!" Then all the blood drained from his face. Brianna looked at the officer; his pudgy face seemed to have acquired all the blood Berowne had lost.

The Justice cast him a sharp glance, but merely said, "Given that documentary proof *is* now entered in evidence, we find that the defendant is plainly not guilty of the charge of theft, since the property in question was his own. On the matter of assault, however—" At this point he noticed that Jamie had not sat down, but was still standing in front of the bench.

"Yes, Mr. Fraser? Had you something else to tell the court?" Justice Conant dabbed at a trickle of sweat that ran down from under his wig; with so many bodies packed into the small room, it was like a sweatbath.

"I beg the court might gratify my curiosity, your Lordship. Does Mr. Berowne's original charge describe more fully the attack upon him?"

The Justice raised both eyebrows, but shuffled quickly through the papers on the table before him, then handed one to the bailiff, pointing to a spot on the page.

"Complainant stated that one Fergus Fraser struck him in the face with his fist, causing complainant to fall stunned upon the ground, whereat the defendant seized the bridle of the horse, leapt upon it, and rode away, calling out remarks of an abusive nature in the French tongue. Complainant—"

A loud cough from the dock pulled all eyes to the defendant, who smiled charmingly at Mr. Justice Conant, plucked a handkerchief from his pocket and elaborately wiped his face—using the hook at the end of his left arm.

"Oh!" said the Justice, and swiveled cold eyes toward the witness chair, where Berowne squirmed in hot-faced agony.

"And would you care to explain, sir, how you have sustained injury upon the right side of your face, when struck by the left fist of a man who does not have one?"

"Yes, *crottin,*" Fergus said cheerfully. "Explain that one."

Perhaps feeling that Berowne's attempts at explanation were best conducted in privacy, Justice Conant mopped his neck and put a summary end to the trial, dismissing Fergus Fraser with no stain upon his character.

* * *

"It was me," Marsali said proudly, clinging to the arm of her husband at the celebratory feast that followed the trial.

"You?" Jamie gave her an amused glance. "That fisted yon deputy in the face, ye mean?"

"Not my fist, my foot," she corrected. "When the wicked *salaud* tried to drag me off the horse, I kicked him in the jaw. He'd never ha' got me down," she added, glowering at the memory, "save he snatched Germaine from me, so of course I had to go and get him."

She petted the sleek blond head of the toddler who clung to her skirts, a piece of biscuit clutched in one grubby fist.

"I don't quite understand," Brianna said. "Did Mr. Berowne not want to admit that a woman hit him?"

"Ah, no," Jamie said, pouring another cup of ale and handing it to her. "It was only Sergeant Murchison making a nuisance of himself."

"Sergeant Murchison? That would be the army officer who was at the trial?" she asked. She took a small sip of the ale, for politeness' sake. "The one who looks like a half-roasted pig?"

Her father grinned at this characterization.

"Aye, that'll be the man. He's a mislike of me," he explained. "This wilna be the first time—or the last—that he's tried such a trick to cripple me."

"He could not hope to succeed with such a ridiculous charge," Jocasta chimed in, leaning forward and reaching out a hand. Ulysses, standing by, moved the plate of bannocks the necessary inch. She took one, unerringly, and turned her disconcerting blind eyes toward Jamie.

"Was it really necessary for you to subvert Farquard Campbell?" she asked, disapproving.

"Aye, it was," Jamie answered. Seeing Brianna's confusion, he explained.

"Farquard Campbell is the usual justice of this district. If he hadna fallen ill so conveniently"—and here he grinned again, mischief dancing in his eyes—"the trial would have been held last week. That was their plan, aye? Murchison and Berowne. They meant to bring the charge, arrest Fergus, and force me down from the mountain in the midst of the harvest—and they succeeded in that much, damn them," he added ruefully.

"But they counted on my not being able to obtain a copy of the grant from New Bern before the trial—as indeed I could not, had it been last week." He gave Ian a smile, and the boy, who had ridden hellbent to New Bern to procure the document, blushed pink and buried his face in a bowl of punch.

"Farquard Campbell is a friend, Auntie," Jamie said to Jocasta, "but ye ken as well as I that he's a man of the law; it wouldna make a bit of difference that he knows the terms of my grant as well as I do; if I couldna produce the proof in court, he would feel himself forced to rule against me.

"And if he had," he went on, returning to Brianna, "I should have been forced to appeal the verdict, which would mean Fergus being taken to prison in New Bern, and a new trial scheduled there. The end of it would have been the same—but it would have taken both Fergus and myself off the land for most of the harvest season, and cost me more in fees than the harvest will bring."

He looked at Brianna over the rim of his cup, blue eyes suddenly serious.

"You'll no be thinking me rich, I hope?" he asked.

"I hadn't thought of it at all," she replied, startled, and he smiled.

"That's as well," he said, "for while I've a good bit of land, there's little of it under cultivation as yet; we've enough—barely—to seed the fields and feed ourselves, wi' a bit left over for the cattle. And capable as your mother is"—the smile widened—"she canna bring in thirty acres of corn and barley by herself." He set down his empty cup and stood up.

"Ian, will ye see to the supplies and drive up the wagon with Fergus and Marsali? The lass and I will go ahead, I think." He glanced down at Brianna questioningly.

"Jocasta will care for your wee maid here. Ye dinna mind going so soon?"

"No," she said, putting down her cup and standing up too. "Can we go today?"

* * *

I took down the bottles from the cupboard, one by one, uncorking one now and then to sniff at the contents. If not thoroughly dry before storage, fleshy-leaved herbs would rot in the bottle; seeds would grow exotic molds.

The thought of molds made me think once more of my penicillin plantation. Or what I hoped might one day be one, were I lucky enough, and observant enough to know my luck. Of the hundreds of molds that grew easily on stale, damp bread, *Penicillium* was only one. What were the odds of a stray spore of that one precious mold taking root on the slices of bread I laid out weekly? What were the odds of an exposed slice of bread surviving long enough for *any* spores to find it? And lastly, what were the odds that I would recognize it if I saw it?

I had been trying for more than a year, with no success so far.

Even with the marigolds and yarrow I scattered for repellency, it was impossible to keep the vermin away. Mice and rats, ants and cockroaches; one day I had even found a party of burglarious squirrels in the pantry, holding riot over scattered corn and the gnawed ruins of half my seed potatoes.

The only recourse was to lock all edibles in the big hutch Jamie had built—that, or keep them in thick wooden casks or lidded jars, resistent to the efforts of tooth and claw. But to seal food away from four-footed thieves was also to seal it away from the air—and the air was the only messenger that might one day bring me a real weapon against disease.

Each of the plants carries an antidote to some illness—if we only knew what it was. I felt a renewed pang of loss when I thought of Nayawenne; not only for herself but for her knowledge. She had taught me only a fraction of the things she knew, and I regretted that most bitterly—though not as bitterly as the loss of my friend.

Still, I knew one thing she had not—the manifold virtues of that smallest of plants, the lowly bread mold. To find it would be difficult, to recognize it, and to use it, even more so. But I never doubted it was worth the search.

To leave bread exposed in the house was to draw the mice and rats inside. I had tried setting it on the sideboard—Ian had absentmindedly consumed half of my budding antibiotic incubator, and mice and ants made short work of the rest while I was away from the house.

It was simply impossible, in summer, spring, or autumn, either to leave bread exposed and unguarded or to stay inside to look after it. There were too many urgent chores to be done outside, too many calls to attend births or illness, too much opportunity for foraging.

In the winter, of course, the vermin went away, to lay their eggs against the spring, and hibernate under a blanket of dead leaves, secure from the cold. But the air was cold, too; too cold to bring me living spores. The bread I laid out either curled and dried, or went soggy, depending on its distance from the fire; in either case, sporting nothing but the occasional orange or pink crust: the molds that lived in the crevices of the human body.

I would try again in the spring, I thought, sniffing at a bottle of dried marjoram. It was good; musky as incense, smelling of dreams. The new house on the ridge was already rising, foundation laid and rooms marked out. I could see the skeletal framework from the cabin door, black against the clear September sky on the ridge.

By the spring, it would be finished. I would have plastered walls and laid oak floors, glass windows with stout frames that kept out mice and ants—and a nice snug, sunny surgery in which to conduct my medical practice.

My glowing visions were interrupted by a raucous bellow from the penfold; Clarence announcing an arrival. I could hear voices in the distance, in between Clarence's shrieks of ecstasy, and I hastily began to tidy away the scatter of corks and bottles. It must be Jamie returning with Fergus and Marsali—or at least I hoped so.

Jamie had been confident of the trial's outcome, but I worried nonetheless. Raised to believe that British law in the abstract was one of the great achievements of civilization, I had seen a good deal too many of its concrete applications to have much faith in its avatars. On the other hand, I had quite a bit of faith in Jamie.

Clarence's vocalizations had dropped to the wheezing gargle he used for intimate converse, but the voices had stopped. That was odd. Perhaps things had gone wrong after all?

I thrust the last of the bottles back into the cupboard and went to the door. The dooryard was empty. Clarence hee-hawed enthusiastically at my appearance, but nothing else moved. Someone had come, though—the chickens had scattered, fleeing into the bushes.

A brisk chill ran up my spine and I whirled, trying to look in front of me and over my shoulder at the same time. Nothing. The chestnut trees behind the house sighed in the breeze, a shimmer of sun filtered through their yellowing leaves.

I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that I wasn't alone. Damn, and I'd left my knife on the table inside!

"Sassenach." My heart nearly stopped at the sound of Jamie's voice. I spun toward it, relief being rapidly overcome by annoyance. What did he think he—

For a split second, I thought I was seeing double. They were sitting on the bench outside the door, side by side, the afternoon sun igniting their hair like matchheads.

My eyes focused on Jamie's face, alight with joy—then shifted right.

"Mama." It was the same expression; eagerness and joy and longing all together. I had no time even to think before she was in my arms, and I was in the air, knocked off my feet both literally and figuratively.

"Mama!"

I hadn't any breath; what hadn't been taken away by shock was being squeezed out by a rib-crushing hug.

"Bree!" I managed to gasp, and she put me down, though she didn't let go. I looked disbelievingly up, but she was real. I looked for Jamie, and found him standing beside her. He said nothing, but gave me an face-splitting grin, his ears bright pink with delight.

"I, ah, I wasn't expecting—" I said idiotically.

Brianna gave me a grin to match her father's, eyes bright as stars and damp with happiness.

"Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!"

"What?" said Jamie blankly.

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PART TEN

Impaired Relations

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MOONLIGHT

September 1769

She woke from a dreamless sleep, a hand on her shoulder. She jerked and started up on one elbow, blinking. Jamie's face was barely distinguishable above her in the gloom; the fire had burned down to nothing more than a glow, and it was nearly pitch-black in the cabin.

"I shall be hunting up the mountain, lass; will ye come wi' me?" he whispered.

She rubbed her eyes, trying to reassemble her sleep-scattered thoughts, and nodded.

"Good. Wear your breeks." He rose silently and went out, letting in a breath of piercing-sweet cold air as the door opened.

By the time she had pulled on breeks and stockings, he was back, moving just as silently, despite the armload of firewood he carried. He nodded to her and knelt to rekindle the fire; she thrust her arms into her coat and went out herself, in search of the privy.

The world outside was black and dreamlike; if not for the chill, she might have thought herself still asleep. Stars burned coldly bright, but seemed to hang low, as though they might fall from the sky any minute and be extinguished, sizzling, in the mist-damp trees on the ridges beyond.

What time was it? she wondered, shivering at the touch of damp wood on her sleep-warmed thighs. Somewhere in the small hours; surely it was a long time until dawn. Everything was hushed; no insects hummed yet in her mother's garden, and there were no rustlings, even from the dry corn-stooks propped in the field.

When she pushed open the door of the cabin, the air inside seemed almost solid; a block of stale smoke, fried food, and the smell of sleeping bodies. By contrast, the air outside was sweet but thin—she kept taking large gulps, to get enough.

He was ready; a leather bag was tied at his belt with ax and powder horn, a bigger canvas sack slung over his shoulder. She didn't come in, but stood in the doorway watching as he bent quickly and kissed her mother in the bed.

He knew she was there, of course—and it was no more than a light kiss on the forehead—but she felt like an intruder, a voyeur. The more so when Claire's long, pale hand floated up from the quilts and touched his face with a tenderness that squeezed her heart. Claire murmured something, but Brianna didn't hear it.

She turned away quickly, face hot in spite of the chilly air, and was standing by the edge of the clearing when he came out. He shut the door behind him, waiting for the *clunk* within as it was barred. He had a gun, a long-barreled thing that seemed nearly as tall as she was.

He didn't speak, but smiled at her and cocked his head toward the wood. She followed, keeping up easily as he took a faint trail that led through groves of spruce and chestnut. His feet knocked the dew from clumps of grass, and left a dark trail through tussocks of shimmering silver.

The trail wound to and fro, nearly level for a long time, but then began to head uphill. She felt the shift, rather than saw it. It was still very dark, but suddenly the silence was gone. In the next breath, a bird began to call from the wood nearby.

Then the whole mountainside was alive with birdsong, screeches and trills and whirrs. Under the calling was a sense of movement, of fluttering and scratching just below the threshold of hearing. He stopped, listening.

She stopped, too, looking at him. The light had changed so slowly that she was scarcely aware of it; her eyes adapted to the dark, she could see easily by the starlight, and knew the change to daylight only when she glanced from the ground and saw the vivid color of her father's hair.

He had food in his bag; they sat on a log and shared apples and bread. Then she drank from a trickle that dropped from a ledge, filling her hands with cold crystal. Looking back, she could no longer see any trace of the small settlement; houses and fields were gone, as though the mountain had silently drawn her forests together, swallowing them up.

She wiped her hands on the skirts of her coat, feeling the prickly shape of the conker in her pocket. No horse chestnuts on these wooded slopes; that was an English tree, planted by some expatriate in the hope of creating a memory of home; a living link to another life. She curled her hand around it briefly, wondering whether her own links had been severed for good, then let it go, and turned to follow her father uphill.

At first her heart had pounded and her thigh muscles strained at the unaccustomed labor of climbing, but then her body had found the rhythm of the ground. With the coming of light, she no long stumbled. By the time they emerged at the top of a steep slope, her feet trod so lightly on the spongy leaves that she felt she might float off into the sky that seemed so near, cut free of the earth.

For a single moment, she wished that she could. But the links still held in the chain that bound her to the earth—her mother, her father, Lizzie … and Roger. The morning sun was rising, a great ball of flame above the mountains. She had to shut her eyes for a moment, not to be blinded.

* * *

Here it was; the place he had meant to bring her. At the foot of a towering escarpment, part of the rock had fallen into a loose tumble, overgrown by moss and lichen, small saplings jutting drunkenly from cracks in the rock. He tilted his head, gesturing her to follow him. There was a way through the huge boulders, hard to see, but there. He felt her hesitate behind him, and looked back.

She smiled and waved a hand at the rock. A huge piece of limestone had fallen and split in two; he stood between the pieces.

“It’s all right,” she said softly. “It just reminded me.”

That reminded *him,* and raised the hairs on his forearms. He had to stop and watch as she stepped through, only to be sure. But it was fine; she stepped through carefully, and joined him. He felt the need to touch her, though, only to be sure; he held out a hand, and felt reassured by the solid clasp of his fingers around hers.

He had judged it right; the sun was just coming over the farthest ridge as they came out into the open space at the top of the slope. Below them spread ridges and valleys, so full of mist that it looked like smoke boiling through the hollows. From the mountain opposite, the waterfall arched out and down in a thin white plume, falling into the mist.

“Here,” he said, stopping at a place where the rocks lay scattered, surrounded by thick grass. “Let’s rest for a bit.” Chilly as the early mornings were, the climb had heated him; he sat on a flat rock, legs stretched out to let the air come under his kilt, and pushed the plaid off his shoulders.

“It feels so different here,” she said, brushing back a lock of the soft red hair whose flames warmed him more than the sun. She glanced back at him, smiling. “Do you know what I mean? I rode from Inverness to Lallybroch, through the Great Glen, and that was wild enough”—she shivered slightly at the recollection—“but it wasn’t like this at all.”

“No,” he said. He knew exactly what she meant; the wildness of the glens and the moors was inhabited, in a way that this place of forests and rushing waters was not.

“I think—” he began, then stopped. Would she think him daft? But she was looking up at him, wanting him to say. “The spirits that live there,” he said, a little awkwardly. “They are auld, and they’ve seen men for thousands on thousands of years; they ken us weel, and they’re none so wary of showing themselves. What lives here”—he laid a hand on the trunk of a chestnut tree that rose a hundred feet above them, whose girth measured more than thirty feet around—“they havena seen our like before.”

She nodded, seeming not at all taken back.

"They're curious, though, aren't they," she said, "some of them?" and tipped back her head to look up into the dizzy spiral of the branches overhead. "Don't you feel them watching, now and then?"

"Now and then."

He sat on the rock beside her and watched the light spread, spilling over the edge of the mountain, lighting the distant falls the way kindling catches from a spark, filling the mist with a glow like pearls, then burning it away altogether. Together they saw the slope of the mountain come to the light of day, and he said a quiet word to the spirit of this place, in thanks. If it had no Gaelic, still it might catch his meaning.

She stretched her long legs, breathing in the scent of the morning.

"You didn't really mind, did you?" Her voice was soft, and she kept her eyes on the valley below, careful not to look at him. "Living in the cave near Broch Mhorda."

"No," he said. The sun was warm on his breast and face, and filled him with a sense of peace. "No, I didna mind it."

"Only hearing about it—I thought it must have been terrible. Cold and dirty and lonely, I mean." She did look at him then, and the morning sky lived in her eyes.

"It was," he said, and smiled a little.

"Ian—Uncle Ian—took me there to show me."

"Did he, then? It's none so bleak, in the summertime, when the yellow's on the broom."

"No. But even when it was—" She hesitated.

"No, I didna mind it." He closed his eyes and let the sun heat his eyelids.

At first he had thought the loneliness would kill him, but once he had learned it would not, he came to value the solitude of the mountainside. He could see the sun clear, though his eyes were closed; a great red ball, flaming round the edges. Was that how Jocasta saw it behind her blind eyes?

She was silent for a long time, and so was he, content to listen. There were wee birds working in the spruce nearby, hanging upside down from the branches, hunting the bugs that they ate and talking to themselves about what they found.

"Roger—" she said suddenly, and his heart was struck by a dart of jealousy, the more painful for being unexpected. Was he not to have her to himself, even for so short a time? He opened his eyes and did his best to look interested.

"I tried to tell him, once, about being alone. That I thought it maybe wasn't a bad thing." She sighed, the heavy brows drawn down. "I don't think he understood."

He made a noncommittal sound in his throat.

"I thought—" She hesitated, glanced at him, then away. "I thought maybe that was why it's—why you and Mama …" Her skin was so clear, he could see the blood bloom under it. She took a deep breath, hands braced on the rock.

"She's like that too. She doesn't mind being alone."

He glanced at her, wanting badly to know what made her say so. What had Claire's life been in their years apart to give her that knowledge? It was so; Claire knew the flavor of solitude. It was cold as spring water, and not all could drink it; for some it was not refreshment, but mortal chill. But she had lived daily with a husband; how had she drunk deep enough of loneliness to know?

Brianna could maybe tell him, but he wouldn't ask; the last name he wished to hear spoken in this place was Frank Randall's.

He coughed instead.

"Well, it's maybe true," he agreed cautiously. "I've seen women—and men too, sometimes—as canna bear the sound of their own thoughts, and they maybe dinna make such good matches with those who can."

"No," she said, brooding. "Maybe they don't."

The small pang of jealousy eased. So she had doubts about this Wakefield, did she? She'd told him and Claire everything, about her search, the death notice, the journey from Scotland, the visit to Lallybroch—damn Laoghaire!—and about the man Wakefield, who'd come after her. She wasn't telling everything there, he thought, but that was as well; he didn't want to hear it. He was less bothered at the prospect of a distant death by fire than by the more imminent interruption of his idyll with his long-lost daughter.

He drew up his knees and sat quiet. Much as he wanted to recapture his sense of tranquility, he could not free his mind from the thought of Randall.

He had won. Claire was his; so was this glorious child—this young woman, he corrected himself, looking at her. But Randall had had the keeping of them for twenty years; there was no doubt he had set his mark on them. But what mark had it been?

"Look." Brianna's hand squeezed his arm as she breathed the word.

He followed her gaze and saw them; two does, standing just under the shadow of the trees, not twenty feet away. He didn't move, but breathed quietly. He could feel Brianna beside him, enchanted into stillness too.

The deer saw them; delicate heads upraised, dark, moist nostrils flaring for scent. After a moment, though, one doe stepped out, dainty, nervous footsteps leaving streaks in the dew-wet grass. The other followed, cautious, and they grazed along the grassy strips between the rocks, turning now and then to lift their head and cast tranquil eyes on the strange but harmless creatures on the ledge.

He couldn't have come within a mile of a Scottish red deer that had his scent. The red stags kent weel what a man was.

He watched the deer graze, with the innocence of perfect wildness, and felt the sun's benediction on his head. This was a new place, and he was content to be alone here with his daughter.

* * *

"What are we hunting, Da?" He was standing still, eyes squinted as he scanned the horizon, but she was reasonably sure he wasn't looking at an animal; she could speak without scaring the game.

They'd seen a good many animals in the course of the day; the two deer at dawn, a red fox that sat watching on a rock, licking dainty black paws until they came too close, then vanishing like a blown-out flame. Squirrels—dozens of them—chattering through the treetops, playing hide-and-seek past the tree boles. Even a flock of wild turkey, with two males strutting, chests puffed and tail fans spread for the edification of a gobbling harem.

None of these were the chosen prey, for which she was glad. She had no objection to killing for food, but would have been sorry to have the beauty of the day soiled by blood.

"Bees," he said.

"*Bees?* How do you hunt bees?"

He picked up his gun and smiled at her, nodding downhill toward a brilliant patch of yellow.

"Look for flowers."

There were certainly bees in the flowers; close enough, and she could hear the hum. There were several different kinds: huge black bumblebees, a smaller kind, striped with black and yellow fuzz, and the smooth lethal shapes of wasps, bellies pointed as daggers.

"What ye want to do," her father told her, slowly circling the patch, "is to watch and see which direction the honeybees go. And not get stung."

A dozen times, they lost sight of the tiny messengers they followed, lost in the broken light over a stream, disappearing into brush too thick to follow. Each time, Jamie cast to and fro, finding another patch of flowers.

"There's some!" she cried, pointing to a flash of brilliant red in the distance.

He squinted at them and smiled, shaking his head.

"Nay, not red," he said. "The wee hummingbirds like the red ones, but bees like yellow and white—yellow's best." He plucked a small white daisy from the grass near her feet and handed it to her—the petals were streaked with pollen, fallen from the delicate stamens in the round yellow center of the bloom. Looking closer, she saw a tiny beetle the size of a pinhead crawl out of the center, its shiny black armor dusted with gold.

"The hummingbirds drink from the long-throated flowers," he explained. "But the bees canna get all the way inside. They like the broad, flat flowers like this, and the ones that grow in heavy bunches. They light on them and wallow, till they're covered over wi' the yellow."

They hunted up and down the mountainside, laughing as they dodged the bomber assaults of enraged bumblebees, hunting telltale patches of yellow and white. The bees liked the mountain laurel, but too many of those patches were too high to see over, too dense to pass through.

It was late afternoon before they found what they were looking for. A snag, the remnants of a good-sized tree, its branches reduced to stumps, bark worn away to show weathered silver wood beneath—and a wide split in the wood, through which the bees were crowding, hanging in a veil around it.

"Oh, good," Jamie said, with satisfaction at the sight. "Sometimes they hive in the rocks, and then there's little ye can do." He unslung the ax at his belt, and his bags, and gestured to Brianna to sit down on a nearby rock.

"It's best to wait till dark," he explained. "For then all the swarm will be inside the hive. Meanwhile, will ye have a bite to eat?"

They shared the rest of the food, and talked sporadically, watching the light fade from the nearby mountains. He let her fire the long musket when she asked, showing her how to load a new round: swab the barrel, patch the ball, ram home ball, patch, and wadding with a charge of powder from the cartridge; pour the rest of the powder into the priming pan of the flintlock.

"You're no a bad shot at all, lass," he said, surprised. He bent and picked up a small chunk of wood, setting it on top of a large boulder as a target. "Try again."

She did, and again, and again, growing used to the awkward weight of the weapon, finding the lovely balancing point of its length and its natural seat in the curve of her shoulder. It kicked less than she'd expected; black powder hadn't the force of modern cartridges. Twice chips flew from the boulder; the third time the chunk of wood disappeared in a shower of fragments.

"Verra nice," he said, one eyebrow raised. "And where in God's name did ye learn to shoot?"

“My father was a target shooter.” She lowered the gun, cheeks flushed with pleasure. “He taught me to shoot with a pistol or a rifle. A shotgun, too.” Then her cheeks flushed a deeper hue, remembering. “Um. You wouldn’t have seen a shotgun.”

“No, I dinna suppose I have,” was all he said, his face a careful blank.

“How will you move the hive?” she asked, wanting to cover the awkward moment. He shrugged.

“Oh, once the bees have gone to their rest, I shall blow a bit o’ smoke into the hive, to keep them stunned. Then chop free the part of the trunk that’s got the combs in it, slide a bit of flat wood beneath it, and wrap it in my plaid. Once at the house, I’ll nail a bit of wood top and bottom, to make a bee gum.” He smiled at her. “Come morning, the bees will come out, look around, and venture out for the nearest flowers.”

“Won’t they realize they aren’t in their proper place?”

He shrugged again.

“And what will they do about it, if they do? They’ve no means to find their way back, and they’ll have no home left here to come to. Nay, they’ll be content in the new place.” He reached for the gun. “Here, let me clean it; the light’s too bad for shooting.”

Conversation died, and they sat in silence for half an hour or so, watching darkness fill the hollows below, an invisible tide that crept higher by the minute, engulfing the trunks of the trees so that the green canopies seemed to float on a lake of darkness.

At last she cleared her throat, feeling that she must say *something*.

“Won’t Mama be worried about us, coming back so late?”

He shook his head, but didn’t answer; only sat, a grass blade drooping idle in his hand. The moon was edging its way above the trees, big and golden, lopsided as a smudged teardrop.

“Your mother did tell me once that men meant to fly to the moon,” he said abruptly. “They hadna done it yet, that she knew, but they meant to. Will ye know about that?”

She nodded, eyes fixed on the rising moon.

“They did. They will, I mean. She smiled faintly. “*Apollo,* they called it—the rocket ship that took them.”

She could see his smile in answer; the moon was high enough to shed its radiance on the clearing. He tilted his face up, considering.

"Aye? And what did they say of it, the men who went?"

"They didn't need to say anything—they sent back pictures. I told you about the television?"

He looked a little startled, and she knew that like most things she had told him from her time, he had no real grasp of the reality of moving, talking pictures, let alone the notion that such things could be sent through thin air.

"Aye?" he said, a little unsurely. "You've seen these pictures, then?"

"Yes." She rocked back a little, hands clasped around her knees, looking up at the misshapen globe above them. There was a faint nimbus of light around it, and farther out in the starlit sky, a perfect, hazy ring, as though it were a big yellow stone dropped into a black pond, frozen in place as the first ripple formed.

"Fair weather tomorrow," he said, looking up at it.

"Will it be?" She could see everything around them, almost as clearly as in the daylight, but the color had fled now; everything was black and gray—like the pictures she described.

"It took hours, waiting. No one could say exactly how long it would take them to land and get out in their space suits—you know there isn't any air on the moon?" She raised a questioning brow, and he nodded, attentive as a schoolboy.

"Claire told me so," he murmured.

"The camera—the thing that made the pictures—was looking out of the side of the ship, so we could see the foot of the ship itself, settled in the dust, and the dust rising up over it like a horse's hoof when it puts its foot down.

"It was flat where the ship came down; covered with a soft, powdery kind of dust, with little rocks scattered on it here and there. Then the camera moved—or maybe another one started sending pictures—and you could see that there were rocky cliffs off in the distance. It's barren—no plants, no water, no air—but sort of beautiful, in an eerie kind of way."

“It sounds like Scotland,” he said. She laughed at the joke, but thought she heard under the humor his longing for those barren mountains.

Wanting to distract him, she waved upward at the stars, beginning to burn brighter in the velvet sky.

“The stars are really suns, like ours. It’s only that they’re so far away from us, they look tiny. They’re so far away that it may take years and years for their light to reach us; in fact, sometimes a star has died and we still see its light.”

“Claire told me that, long ago,” he said softly. He sat a moment, then got up with an air of decision.

“Come then,” he said. “Let’s take the hive, and be off home.”

The night was warm enough that we had left the hide window-covering unpinned and rolled aside. Occasional moths and June bugs blundered in to drown themselves in the cauldron or commit fiery suicide on the hearth, but the cool leaf-scented air that washed over us was worth it.

On the first night, Ian had gallantly given Brianna the trundle bed and gone off to sleep with Rollo on a pallet in the herb shed, assuring her that he liked the privacy. Leaving, his quilt over one arm, he had clapped Jamie solidly on the back and squeezed his shoulder in a surprisingly adult gesture of congratulation that made me smile.

Jamie had smiled, too; in fact, he had scarcely stopped smiling in several days. He wasn’t smiling now, though his face bore a tender, inward look. There was a half-full moon riding the sky, and enough light came through the window for me to see him clearly as he lay on his back beside me.

I was surprised that he wasn’t asleep yet. He had risen well before dawn and spent the day with Brianna on the mountain, returning long after dark with a plaid full of smoke-stunned bees, who were likely to be more than irritated when they woke in the morning and discovered the trick perpetrated on them. I made a mental note to keep away from the end of the garden where the row of bee gums sat; newly moved bees were inclined to sting first and ask questions afterward.

Jamie gave a massive sigh, and I rolled toward him, curving myself to fit against him. The night wasn't cold, but he wore a shirt to bed, in deference to Brianna's modesty.

"Can't sleep?" I asked softly. "Does the moonlight bother you?"

"No." He was looking out at the moon, though; it rode high above the ridge, not yet full, but a luminous white that flooded the sky.

"If it's not the moon, it's something." I rubbed his stomach lightly, and let my fingers curve around the wide arch of his ribs.

He sighed again, and squeezed my hand.

"Och, it's no more than a foolish regret, Sassenach." He turned his head toward the trundle bed, where the dark spill of Brianna's hair fell in a moon-polished mass across the pillow. "I am only sorry that we must lose her."

"Mm." I let my hand rest flat on his chest. I had known it would come—both the realization and the parting itself—but I hadn't wanted to speak of it, and break the temporary spell that had bound the three of us so closely.

"You can't really lose a child," I said softly, one finger tracing the small, smooth hollow in the center of his chest.

"She must go back, Sassenach—ye know it as well as I do." He stirred impatiently but didn't move away. "Look at her. She's like Louis's camel, no?"

Despite my own regrets, I smiled at the thought. Louis of France kept a fine menagerie at Versailles, and on good days the keepers would exercise certain of the animals, leading them through the spreading gardens, to the edification of startled passersby.

We had been walking in the gardens one day, and turned a corner to find the Bactrian camel advancing toward us down the path, splendid and stately in its gold and silver harness, towering in calm disdain above a crowd of gawking spectators—strikingly exotic, and utterly out of place among the formalized white statues.

"Yes," I said, though with a reluctance that squeezed my heart. "Yes, of course she'll have to go back. She belongs there."

"I ken that well enough." He put his own hand over mine, but kept his face turned away, looking at Brianna. "I shouldna grieve for it—but I do."

"So do I." I put my forehead against his shoulder, breathing in the clean male scent of him. "It's true, though—what I said. You can't truly lose a child. Do you—do you remember Faith?"

My voice trembled slightly as I asked it; we had not spoken in years of our first daughter, stillborn in France.

His arm curled around me, pulling me against him.

"Of course I do," he said softly. "D'ye think I would ever forget?"

"No." The tears were flowing down my face, but I was not truly weeping; it was no more than the overflow of feeling. "That's what I mean. I never told you—when we were in Paris, to see Jared—I went to the Hôpital des Anges; I saw her grave there. I—I brought her a pink tulip."

He was quiet for a moment.

"I took her violets," he said, so softly I almost didn't hear him.

I was quite still for a moment, tears forgotten.

"You didn't tell me."

"Neither did you." His fingers traced the bumps of my spine, brushing softly up and down the line of my back.

"I was afraid you'd feel …" My voice trailed off. I had been afraid he would feel guilty, worry that I blamed him—I once had—for the loss. We were newly reunited, then; I had no wish to jeopardize the tender link between us.

"So was I."

"I'm sorry that you never saw her," I said at last, and felt him sigh. He turned toward me and put his arms around me, his lips brushing my forehead.

"It doesna matter, does it? Aye, it's true, what ye say, Sassenach. She was—and we will have her, always. And Brianna. If—when she goes—she will still be with us."

"Yes. It doesn't matter what happens; no matter where a child goes—how far or how long. Even if it's forever. You never lose them. You can't."

He didn’t answer, but his arms tightened round me, and he sighed once more. The breeze stirred the air above us with the sound of angels’ wings, and we fell slowly asleep together, as the moonlight bathed us in its ageless peace.

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WHISKY IN THE JAR

I didn’t like Ronnie Sinclair. I never *had* liked him. I didn’t like his half-handsome face, his foxy smile, or the way his eyes met mine: so direct, so openly honest, that you *knew* he was hiding something even when he wasn’t. I particularly didn’t like the way he was looking at my daughter.

I cleared my throat loudly, making him jump. He turned a sharp-toothed smile on me, idly turning a truss ring in his hands.

“Jamie says he’ll need a dozen more of the small whisky casks by the end of the month, and I’ll need a large barrel of hickory wood for the smoked meat, as soon as you can manage.”

He nodded and made a number of cryptic marks on a slab of pine that hung on the wall. Oddly for a Scot, Sinclair couldn’t write but had some sort of private shorthand that enabled him to keep track of orders and accounts.

“Right, Missus Fraser. Anything else?”

I paused, trying to reckon up all the possible necessities for cooperage that might spring up before snowfall. There would be fish and meat to salt down, but those did better in stoneware jars; wooden casks left them tasting of turpentine. I had a good seasoned barrel for apples and another for squash already; the potatoes would be stored on shelves to keep from rotting.

“No,” I decided. “That will be all.”

“Aye, missus.” He hesitated, twirling the cask band faster. “Will Himself be coming down before the casks are ready?”

"No; he has the barley to get in, and the slaughtering to do, as well as the distilling. Everything's late, because of the trial." I raised an eyebrow at him. "Why, though? Do you have a message for him?"

Sited at the foot of the cove nearest the wagon road, the cooper's shop was the first building most visitors encountered, and thus a reception point for most gossip that came from outside Fraser's Ridge.

Sinclair tilted his gingerly head, considering.

"Och, likely it's nothing. Only that I've heard of a stranger in the district, asking questions about Jamie Fraser."

From the corner of my eye, I saw Brianna's head snap round, distracted at once from her inspection of the spokeshavers, mallets, saws, and axes on the wall. She turned, skirt rustling in the wood shavings that littered the shop, ankle-deep.

"Do you know the stranger's name?" she asked anxiously. "Or what he looks like?"

Sinclair shot her a look of surprise. He was oddly proportioned, with slender shoulders but muscular arms, and hands so huge that they might have belonged to a man twice his height. He looked at her, and his broad thumb unconsciously stroked the metal of the ring, slowly, over and over again.

"Why, I couldna speak to his appearance, mistress," he said, politely enough, but with a hungry look in his eyes that made me want to take the truss ring away from him and wrap it around his neck. "He gave his name as Hodgepile, though."

Brianna's face lost its look of hope, though the muscle at the edge of her mouth curved slightly at the name.

"I don't suppose *that* could be Roger," she murmured to me.

"Likely not," I agreed. "He wouldn't have any reason to use a false name, anyway." I turned back to Sinclair.

"You won't have heard of a man called Wakefield, will you? Roger Wakefield?"

Sinclair shook his head decisively.

"No, missus. Himself has put word about that if such a one should come, he's to be taken to the Ridge at once. If yon Wakefield sets foot within the county, you'll hear of it as soon as I do."

Brianna sighed, and I heard her swallow her disappointment. It was mid-October, and while she said nothing, she was clearly growing more anxious by the day. She wasn't the only one, either; she had told us what Roger was trying to do, and the thought of the variety of disasters that might have befallen him in the attempt was enough to keep me wakeful at night.

"—about the whisky," Sinclair was saying, jerking my attention back to him.

"The whisky? Hodgepile was asking about Jamie and whisky?"

Sinclair nodded, and set down the truss ring.

"In Cross Creek. No one would say a word to him, o' course. But the one who told me did say as the one who spoke to the man thought him a soldier." He grimaced briefly. "Hard for a lobsterback to wash the flour from his hair."

"He wasn't dressed as a soldier, surely?" Foot soldiers wore their hair in a tight folded queue, wrapped round a core of lamb's wool and powdered with rice flour—which, in this climate, rapidly turned to paste as the flour mixed with sweat. Still, I imagined Sinclair meant the man's attitude rather than his appearance.

"Och, no; he did claim to be a fur trader—but he walked wi' a ramrod up his arse, and ye could hear the leather creak when he talked. So Geordie McClintock said."

"Likely one of Murchison's men. I'll tell Jamie—thank you."

I left the cooper's shop with Brianna, wondering just how much trouble this Hodgepile might prove to be. Likely not much; the sheer distance from civilization and the inaccessibility of the Ridge was protection against most intrusions; one of Jamie's purposes in choosing it. The multiple inconveniences of remoteness would be outweighed by its benefits, when it came to war. No battle would be fought on Fraser's Ridge, I was sure of that.

And no matter how virulent Murchison's grudge might be, or how good his spies, I couldn't see his superiors allowing him to mount an armed expedition more than a hundred miles into the mountains, for the sole purpose of extirpating an illegal distillery whose total output was less than a hundred gallons a year.

Lizzie and Ian were waiting for us outside, occupied in gathering kindling from Sinclair's rubbish heap. A cooper's work generated immense quantities of shavings, splinters, and discarded chunks of wood and bark, and it was worth the labor of picking them up, to save splitting kindling by hand at home.

"Can you and Ian load the barrels, honey?" I asked Brianna. "I want a look at Lizzie in the sunlight."

Brianna nodded, still looking abstracted, and went to help Ian heave the half-dozen small kegs outside the shop into the wagon. They were small, but heavy.

It was the skill that went into these particular barrels that had earned Ronnie Sinclair his land and shop, in spite of his less than prepossessing personality; not every cooper knew the trick of charring the inside of an oak barrel so as to lend a beautiful amber color and deep smoky flavor to the whisky aging gently inside.

"Come here, sweetie. Let me see your eyes." Lizzie obediently widened her eyes, and let me pull down the lower lid to see the white sclera of the eyeball.

The girl was still shockingly thin, but the nasty yellow tinge of jaundice was fading from her skin, and her eyes were nearly white again. I cupped my fingers gently under her jaw; lymph glands only slightly swollen—that was better, too.

"Feeling all right?" I asked. She smiled shyly, and nodded. It was the first time she had been outside the cabin since her arrival with Ian three weeks before; she was still wobbly as a new calf. Frequent infusions of Jesuit bark had helped, though; she had had no fresh attacks of fever in the last week, and I had hopes of clearing up the liver involvement in short order.

"Mrs. Fraser?" she said, and I jumped, startled to hear her talk. She was so shy that she could seldom bring herself to say anything to me or to Jamie directly; she murmured her needs to Brianna, who conveyed them to me.

"Yes, dear?"

"I—I couldna help hearing what yon cooper said—about how Mr. Fraser's asked word of Miss Brianna's man. I did wonder—" Her words trailed off in a spasm of shyness, and a faint rose-pink blush showed in her transparent cheeks.

"Yes?"

"Could he ask for my father, do ye think?" The words came out in a rush, and she blushed still harder.

"Oh, Lizzie! I'm sorry." Brianna, finished with the barrels, came and hugged her little maid. "I hadn't forgotten, but I hadn't thought, either. Just a minute, I'll go and tell Mr. Sinclair." With a whiff of skirts, she vanished into the cool dimness of the cooper's shop.

"Your father?" I asked. "Have you lost him?"

The girl nodded, pressing her lips together to prevent their quivering.

"He'll ha' gone as a bondsman, but I dinna ken where; only it would be to the southern colonies."

Well, that limited the search to several hundred thousand square miles, I thought. Still, it could do no harm to ask Ronnie Sinclair to put out word. Newspapers and other printed matter were scarce in the South; most real news still passed by word of mouth, handed on in shops and taverns, or carried by slaves and servants between far-flung plantations.

The thought of newspapers gave me a small nasty jolt of remembrance. Still, seven years seemed comfortingly far away—and Brianna must be right; whether the house was doomed to burn on January 21 or not, surely it would be possible for us not to be in it on that date?

Brianna appeared, rather red in the face, swung aboard the wagon, and picked up the reins, waiting impatiently for the rest of us.

Ian, seeing her flushed face, frowned and glanced toward the cooper's shop.

"What is it, Coz? Did yon wee mannie say aught amiss to ye?" He flexed his hands, nearly as large as Sinclair's.

"No," she said tersely. "Not a word. Are we ready to go?"

Ian picked Lizzie up and swung her into the wagon bed, then put out a hand and helped me up on the seat by Brianna. He glanced at the reins in Brianna's hands; he had taught her to drive the mules, and took professional pride in her skill.

"Watch the bugger on the gee side," he advised her. "He'll no be pullin' his share o' the load, unless ye touch him up now and again wi' a slap across the rump."

He subsided into the wagon bed with Lizzie as we set off up the road. I could hear him telling her outlandish stories, and her faint giggle in reply. The baby of his own family, Ian was charmed by Lizzie and treated her like a younger sister, by turns nuisance and pet.

I glanced over my shoulder at the receding cooper's shop, then at Brianna.

"What did he do?" I asked, quietly.

"Nothing. I interrupted him." The flush across her wide cheekbones grew deeper.

"What on earth was he doing?"

"Drawing pictures on a piece of wood," she said, and bit the inside of her cheek. "Of naked women."

I laughed, as much from shock as from amusement.

"Well, he hasn't got a wife, and not likely to get one soon; women are very scarce in the colony generally, and even more so up here. I suppose one can't blame him."

I felt an unexpected pang of sympathy for Ronnie Sinclair. He'd been alone for a very long time, after all. His wife had died in the terrible days after Culloden, and he himself had spent more than ten years in prison before being transported to the Colonies. If he had made connections here, they had not endured; he was a solitary man, and suddenly I saw his avid questing for gossip, his stealthy watching—even his use of Brianna for artistic inspiration—in a different light. I knew what it was like to be lonely.

Brianna's embarrassment had faded, and she was whistling softly under her breath, hunched casually over the reins—a Beatles' tune, I thought, though I never could keep pop groups straight.

The idle thought floated insidiously through my mind; if Roger didn't come, she wouldn't be left alone for long, either here or when she returned to the future. But that was ridiculous. He *would* come. And if not …

A thought I had been trying to keep at bay sneaked past my defenses and appeared in my mind, full-blown. *What if he had chosen not to come?* I knew they had had some sort of argument, though Brianna had been tight-lipped about it. Had he been so infuriated that he would go back without her?

I rather thought the possibility had occurred to her, too; she had stopped speaking much of Roger, but I saw the anxious light spring up in her eyes whenever Clarence announced a visitor, and saw it die each time the visitor proved to be one of Jamie's tenants, or some of Ian's Tuscaroran friends.

"Hurry up, you blighter," I muttered under my breath. Brianna caught it, and smartly snapped the reins over the left mule's rump.

"Gee up!" she shouted, and the wagon rattled faster, jolting over the narrow track toward home.

* * *

"It's a far cry from the still-cellar at Leoch," Jamie said, ruefully poking at the makeshift pot still at the edge of the small clearing. "It does make whisky, though—of a sort."

In spite of his diffidence, Brianna could see that he was proud of his infant distillery. It was nearly two miles from the cabin, located—as he explained—close to Fergus's place, so that Marsali could come up several times a day to keep an eye on the operation. In return for this service, she and Fergus had a slightly larger share in the resulting whisky than did the other farmers on the Ridge, who supplied the raw barley and helped in the distribution of the liquor.

"No, darlin', ye dinna want to be eating that nasty wee thing," Marsali said firmly. She grasped her son's wrist and began prying open his fingers, one by one, in an effort to free the large and madly wriggling insect that—in open contradiction of his mother's adjuration—he very obviously *did* want to be eating.

"Feh!" Marsali dropped the cockroach on the ground and stamped on it.

Germaine, a stoic, stubby child, didn't cry at the loss of his treat, but glowered balefully under his blond fringe. The cockroach, nothing daunted by rough treatment, rose out of the leaf mold and walked off, staggering only slightly.

"Oh, I shouldna think it would do him harm," Ian said, amused. "I've eaten them, now and again, wi' the Indians. The locusts are better, though—especially the smoked ones."

Marsali and Brianna both made gagging noises, causing Ian to grin even wider. He picked up another bag of barley and poured a thick layer into a flat rush basket. Two more roaches, suddenly exposed to the light of day, skittered madly over the side of the basket, fell to the ground and dashed away, disappearing under the edge of the crudely built malting floor.

"No, I said!" Marsali kept a tight hold on Germaine's collar, preventing his determined attempts to follow them. "Stay, ye wee fiend, d'ye want to be smoked, too?" Small wisps of transparent smoke rose up through the cracks of the wooden platform, permeating the small clearing with the breakfast-like scent of roasting grain. Brianna felt her stomach gurgle; it was nearly suppertime.

"Maybe you should leave them in," she suggested, joking. "Smoked roaches might add a nice flavor to the whisky."

"I doubt they'd harm it any," her father agreed, coming up beside her. He wiped his face with a handkerchief, looked at it, and made a slight face at the sooty smudges on it before tucking it back up his sleeve. "All right, Ian?"

"Aye, it'll do. It's only the one bag that's spoilt all through, Uncle Jamie." Ian rose with his tray of raw barley, and kicked negligently at a split bag, where the soft green of mold and black tinge of rot showed the ill effects of seeping damp. Two more opened bags, with the spoiled top layer scooped off, sat by the edge of the malting floor.

"Let's finish, then," Jamie said. "I'm starved." He and Ian each seized a burlap bag and scattered the fresh barley in a thick layer over the clear space on the platform, using a flat wooden spade to flatten and turn the grain.

"How long does it all take?" Brianna poked her nose over the edge of the mash tub, where Marsali was stirring the fermenting grain of the last smoking. The mash had only begun to work; there was no more than a faint whiff of alcohol in the air.

"Oh, it will depend on the weather, a bit." Marsali cast an experienced eye skyward. It was late afternoon, and the sky had begun to darken into a clear deep blue, with no more than streaks of white cloud floating over the horizon. "Clear as it is, I should say—Germaine!" Germaine's bottom was the only part of him visible, the top half having disappeared under a log.

"I'll get him." Brianna took three quick strides across the clearing, and scooped him up. Germaine made a deep sound of protest at this unwarranted interference, and began to kick, hammering his sturdy heels against her legs.

"Ow!" Brianna set him on the ground, rubbing her thigh with one hand.

Marsali made a sound of exasperation and dropped her ladle. "*Now* what have ye got, ye wicked thing?" Germaine, having learned from experience, popped his latest acquisition into his mouth and swallowed convulsively. He immediately turned purple and began to choke.

With a cry of alarm, Marsali dropped to her knees and tried to pry his mouth open. Germaine gagged, wheezed, and staggered backward, shaking his head. His blue eyes bulged, and a thin line of drool snaked down his chin.

"Here!" Brianna grabbed the little boy by the arm, pulled his back against her, and with both hands fisted into his stomach, jerked them sharply back.

Germaine made a loud whooping noise, and something small and round shot out of his mouth. He gurgled, gasped for air, got a good lungful and started to howl, his face going from dusky purple to a healthy red within seconds.

"Is he all right?" Jamie peered anxiously at the little boy, who was crying in his mother's arms, then, satisfied, glanced at Brianna. "That was verra quick, lass. A good job."

"Thanks. I—thanks. I'm glad it worked."

Brianna felt a little shaky. Seconds. It hadn't taken more than a few seconds. Life to death and back again, in nothing flat. Jamie touched her arm, giving her a brief squeeze, and she felt a little better.

"Best take the laddie down to the house," he told Marsali. "Give him his supper and put him to bed. We'll finish here."

Marsali nodded, looking shaken herself. She brushed a strand of pale hair out of her eyes, and gave Brianna a poor attempt at a smile.

"I thank ye, good-sister."

Brianna felt a surprising small glow of pleasure at the title. She gave Marsali back the smile.

"I'm glad he's all right."

Marsali picked up her bag from the ground, and with a nod to Jamie, turned and made her way carefully down the steep path, toddler in her arms, Germaine's chubby fists twined tightly in her hair.

"That was pretty work, Coz." Ian had finished the spreading, and jumped down from the platform to congratulate her. "Where did ye learn a thing like that?"

"From my mother."

Ian nodded, looking impressed. Jamie bent over, searching the ground nearby.

"What is it the laddie swallowed, I wonder?"

"This." Brianna spotted the object, half buried under fallen leaves, and plucked it out. "It looks like a button." The object was a lopsided circle, crudely carved from wood, but indisputably a button, with a long shank and holes bored for thread.

"Let me see." Jamie held out a hand, and she dropped the button into it.

"You'll no be missing any buttons, will ye, Ian?" he asked, frowning at the small object in his palm.

Ian peered over Jamie's shoulder, and shook his head. "Maybe Fergus?" he suggested.

"Maybe, but I dinna think so. Our Fergus is too much the dandy to be wearin' something like this. All the buttons on his coat are made of polished horn." He shook his head slowly, still frowning, then shrugged. Picking up his sporran, he put the button into it before fastening it about his waist.

"Ah, well. I'll ask about. Will ye finish here, Ian? There's no much left to do." He smiled at Brianna and cocked his head toward the path. "Come then, lass; we'll ask at Lindseys', on our way home."

In the event, Kenny Lindsey was not at home.

"Duncan Innes came to fetch him, not an hour since," Mrs. Lindsey said, shading her eyes against the late sun as she stood in the doorway of her house. "I make nay doubt they'll be to your house the noo. Will ye and your lassie no step in, *Mac Dubh,* and have a taste of something?"

"Ah, no, I thank ye, Mrs. Kenny. My wife will be having the supper ready for us. But perhaps ye could be tellin' me whether this wee bawbee is from Kenny's coat?"

Mrs. Lindsey peered at the button in his hand, then shook her head.

"No, indeed. Have I not just finished sewing on a whole fresh set of buttons for him, that's he's carved from the bone of a deer? The bonniest things ye ever saw, too," she declared, with pride in her husband's craftsmanship. "Each one has got a wee face on it, grinnin' like an imp, and each one different!"

Her eye ran speculatively over Brianna.

"There's Kenny's brother, now," she said. "With a fine wee place near Cross Creek—twenty acres in tobacco, and a good creek through it. He'll be at the Gathering at Mount Helicon; perhaps you'll be going, *Mac Dubh?*"

Jamie shook his head, smiling at the bald hint. There were few available women in the colony, and even though Jamie had given it out that Brianna was promised elsewhere, this had not by any means put a stop to the matchmaking attempts.

"I fear not this year, Mrs. Kenny. Perhaps the next, but I canna spare the time just now."

They took their leave politely, and turned toward home, the sinking sun at their backs casting long shadows on the path ahead of them.

"Do you think the button's important?" Brianna asked curiously.

Jamie shrugged slightly. A light breeze lifted the hair on the crown of his head, and tugged at the leather thong that held it back.

"I canna say. It could be nothing—but it could be something, too. Your mother told me what Ronnie Sinclair said, about the man in Cross Creek, asking about the whisky."

"Hodgepile?" Brianna couldn't help smiling at the name. Jamie returned the smile briefly, then became serious again.

"Aye. If the button belongs to someone on the Ridge—they ken well enough where the still is, and they might stop to look and no harm done. But if it was to be a stranger …" He glanced at her and shrugged again.

"It's none so easy for a man to pass unnoticed here—unless he should be hiding a-purpose. A man come for any innocent reason would stop at a house for a bit of food and drink, and I'd hear of it the same day. But there's been nothing of the sort. Nor would it be an Indian; they dinna use such things in their clothing."

A gust of wind whirred across the path in a swirl of brown and yellow leaves, and they turned uphill, toward the cabin. They walked in near silence, affected by the growing quiet of the woods; the birds were still singing twilight songs, but the shadows were lengthening under the trees. The northern slope of the mountain across the valley had already gone dark and silent, as the sun edged behind it.

The cabin's clearing was still filled with sunlight, though, filtered through a yellow blaze of chestnut trees. Claire was in the palisaded garden, a basin on one hip, snapping beans from poled vines. Her slender figure was silhouetted dark against the sun, her hair a great aureole of curly gold.

"Innisfree," Brianna said involuntarily, stopping dead at the sight.

"Innisfree?" Jamie glanced at her, bewildered.

She hesitated, but there was no way out of explaining.

"It's a poem, or part of one. Daddy always used to say it, when he'd come home and find Mama puttering in her garden—he said she'd live out there if she could. He used to joke that she—that she'd leave us someday, and go find a place where she could live by herself, with nothing but her plants."

"Ah." Jamie's face was calm, its broad planes ruddy in the dying light. "How does the poem go, then?"

She was conscious of a small tightness round her heart as she said it.

"I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee.
And live alone in the bee-loud glade."

The thick red brows drew together slightly, sparking in the sun.

"A poem, is it? And where is Innisfree?"

"Ireland, maybe. He was Irish," Brianna said in explanation. "The poet." The row of bee gums stood squat on their stones at the edge of the wood.

"Oh."

Tiny motes of gold and black drifted past them through honeyed air—bees homing from the fields. Her father made no move to go forward, but stood silent by her side, watching her mother pick beans, black and gold among the leaves.

Not alone, after all, she thought. But the small tightness stayed in her chest, not quite an ache.

* * *

Kenny Lindsey took a sip of whisky, closed his eyes, and rolled the liquor round his tongue like a professional wine taster. He paused, frowning in concentration, then swallowed with a convulsive gulp.

"Hoo!" He drew breath, shuddering all over.

"Christ," he said hoarsely. "That'll strip your tripes!"

Jamie grinned at the compliment, and poured another small measure, shoving it toward Duncan.

"Aye, it's better than the last," he agreed, with a cautious sniff before essaying his own drink. "This one doesna take the hide off your tongue—quite."

Lindsay wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, nodding in agreement.

"Weel, it'll find a good home. Woolam wants a cask—that'll last him a year, the way yon Quakers dole it out."

"Ye've agreed a price?"

Lindsay nodded, sniffing appreciatively at the platter of bannocks and savories that Lizzie set in front of him.

"A hundredweight of barley for the cask; another, if ye'll go halves wi' him in the whisky from it."

"That's fair." Jamie took a bannock and chewed absently for a moment. Then he raised one brow at Duncan, seated across the table.

"Will ye ask MacLeod on Naylor's Creek will he make us the same bargain? You'll pass that way going home, aye?"

Duncan nodded, chewing, and Jamie lifted his cup to me in a silent toast of celebration—Woolam's offer made a total of eight hundred pounds of barley, scraped together by barter and promise. More than the surplus output of every field on the Ridge; the raw material for next year's whisky.

"A cask each to the houses on the Ridge, two to Fergus—" Jamie pulled absently at his earlobe, calculating. "Two, maybe, to Nacognaweto, one kept back to age—aye, we can spare maybe a dozen casks for the Gathering, Duncan."

Duncan's coming was opportune. While Jamie had managed to barter the first year's crop of raw whisky to the Moravians in Salem for the tools, cloth, and other things we so urgently needed, there was no doubt that the wealthy Scottish planters of the Cape Fear would make a better market.

We couldn't possibly spare time away from the homestead for long enough to make the week-long journey to Mount Helicon, but if Duncan could take the whisky down and sell it … I was already making lists in my head. Everyone brought things to sell, at a Gathering. Wool, cloth, tools, food, animals … I urgently needed a small copper kettle, and six lengths of fresh muslin for shifts, and …

"Do you think you should give alcohol to the Indians?" Brianna's question pulled me from my greedy reverie.

"Why not?" Lindsey asked, a little disapproving of her intrusion. "After all, we're no going to *give* it to them, lass. They've little silver, but they pay in hides—and they pay well."

Brianna glanced at me for support, then at Jamie.

"But Indians don't—I mean I've heard that they can't handle alcohol."

All three men looked at her uncomprehendingly, and Duncan looked at his cup, turning it round in his hand.

"Handle it?"

The corner of her mouth quirked inward.

"They get drunk easily, I mean."

Lindsey peered into his cup, then looked at her, rubbing a hand over the balding crown of his head.

"Ye've a point, lass?" he said, more or less politely.

Brianna's full mouth compressed itself, then relaxed.

"I *mean,*" she said, "it seems wrong to encourage people to drink, who can't stop drinking if they start." She looked at me, a little helplessly. I shook my head.

" 'Alcoholic' isn't a noun yet," I said. "It's not a disease now—just weak character."

Jamie glanced up at her quizzically.

"Well, I'll tell ye, lass," he said, "I've seen many a drunkard in my day, but I've yet to see a bottle leap off a table and pour itself down anyone's throat."

There were general grunts of agreement with this, and another small round to accompany the change of subject.

"Hodgepile? No, I've not seen the man, though I do believe I've heard the name." Duncan swilled the rest of his drink and set down his cup, wheezing gently. "You'll want me to ask at the Gathering?"

Jamie nodded, and took another bannock. "Aye, if ye will, Duncan."

Lizzie was bent over the fire, stirring the stew for supper. I saw her shoulders tighten, but she was too shy to speak before so many men. Brianna suffered no such inhibitions.

"I have someone to ask after, too, Mr. Innes." She leaned over the table toward him, eyes fixed on him in earnest entreaty. "Will you ask for a man named Roger Wakefield? Please?”

“Och, indeed. Indeed I will.” Duncan went pink at the proximity of Brianna’s bosom, and in confusion drank down the rest of Kenny’s whisky. “Is there aught else I can do?”

“Yes,” I said, putting down a fresh cup in front of the disgruntled Lindsey. “While you’re asking after Hodgepile and Bree’s young man, would you also ask for a man named Joseph Wemyss? He’ll be a bondsman.” From the corner of my eye, I saw Lizzie’s thin shoulders slump in relief.

Duncan nodded, his composure restored as Brianna disappeared into the pantry to fetch butter. Kenny Lindsey looked after her, interested.

“Bree? Is that the name ye call your daughter?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Why?”

A smile showed briefly on Lindsey’s face. Then he glanced at Jamie, coughed, and buried the smile in his cup.

“It’s a Scots word, Sassenach,” Jamie said, a rather wry smile appearing on his own face. “A *bree* is a great disturbance.”

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THREE-CORNERED CONVERSATION

October 1769

The shock of impact juddered through his arms. With a rhythm born of long practice, Jamie jerked the axhead free, swung it back and brought it down in a *tchunk!* of splintered bark and yellow wood chips. He shifted his foot on the log and struck again, the ax blow judged to a nicety, sharp metal embedded in the wood a scant two inches from his toes.

He could have told Ian off to do the chopping, and gone himself to fetch the flour from the tiny mill at Woolam's Point, but the lad deserved the treat of a visit with the three unmarried Woolam daughters who worked with their father in the mill. They were Quaker girls, dressed drab as sparrows, but lively of wit and fair of face, and they made a pet of Ian, vying with each other to offer him small beer and meat pies when he came.

A good deal better the lad should spend his time flirting with virtuous Quakers than with the bold-eyed Indian lassies over the ridge, he thought, with a little grimness. He hadn't forgotten what Myers had said about Indian women taking men to their beds as they liked.

He had sent the wee bondmaid with Ian as well, thinking the brisk fall air might bring a bit of color to the lassie's face. The wean was white-skinned as Claire, but with the sickly blue-white cast of skimmed milk, not Claire's pale glow, rich and grainless as the silk-white heartwood of a poplar tree.

The log was nearly split; one more blow, and a twist of the ax, and two good chunks lay ready for the hearth, smelling clean and sharp with resin. He stacked them neatly on the growing woodpile next to the pantry, and rolled another half log into place beneath his foot.

The truth of it was that he liked chopping wood. Quite different from the damp, backbreaking, foot-freezing job of cutting peats, but with that same feeling of soul-deep satisfaction at seeing a good stock of fuel laid by, which only those who have spent winters shivering in thin clothes can know. The woodpile reached nearly to the eaves of the house by now, dry split chunks of pine and oak, hickory and maple, the sight of them warming his heart as much as the wood itself would warm his flesh.

Speak of warmth; it was a warm day for late October, and his shirt was clinging to his shoulders already. He wiped a sleeve across his face and examined the damp patch critically.

If he got wringing, Brianna would insist on washing it again, protest as he might that sweat was clean enough. “Phew,” she would say, with a disapproving nostril-flare, wrinkling her long nose up like a possum. He had laughed out loud when he first saw her do it; as much from surprise as from amusement.

His mother had died long ago, in his childhood, and while the odd memory of her came now and then in dreams, he had mostly replaced her presence with static pictures, frozen images in his mind. But she had said “Phew!” to him when he came in mucky, and wrinkled up her long nose in just that way—it had come back with a flash when he saw Brianna do it.

What a mystery blood was—how did a tiny gesture, a tone of voice, endure through generations like the harder verities of flesh? He had seen it again and again, watching his nieces and nephews grow, and accepted without thought the echoes of parent and grandparent that appeared for brief moments, the shadow of a face looking back through the years—that vanished again into the face that was now.

Yet now that he saw it in Brianna … he could watch her for hours, he thought, and was reminded of his sister, bending close over each of her newborn bairns in fascination. Perhaps that was why parents watched their weans in such enchantment, he thought; finding out all the tiny links between them, that bound the chains of life, one generation to the next.

He shrugged, and pulled the shirt off. It was his own place, after all; there was no one to see the marks on his back, and no one whose business it would be to care if they did. The air was chill and sudden on his damp skin, but a few swings of the ax brought the warm blood pulsing back again.

He loved all Jenny's children deeply—especially Ian, the wee gowk whose mixture of foolishness and pigheaded courage reminded him so much of himself at that age. They were his blood, after all. But Brianna …

Brianna was his blood, and his flesh as well. An unspoken promise kept to his own parents; his gift to Claire, and hers to him.

Not for the first time, he found himself wondering about Frank Randall. And what had Randall thought, holding the child of another man—and a man he had no cause to love?

Perhaps Randall had been the better man, come to that—to harbor a child for her mother's sake, and not his own; to search her face with joy only in its beauty, and not because he saw himself reflected there. He felt vaguely ashamed, and struck down with greater force to exorcise the feeling.

His mind was concerned entirely with its thoughts, and not at all with his actions. While he used it, though, the ax was as much a part of his body as the arms that swung it. Just as a twinge in wrist or elbow would have warned him instantly of damage, some faint vibration, some subtle shift in weight arrested him in midswing, so that the loosened axhead flew harmlessly across the clearing, rather than slamming into his vulnerable foot.

"Deo gratias," he muttered, with rather less thankfulness than the words indicated. He crossed himself perfunctorily and went to pick up the slab of metal. Damn the dry weather; it hadn't rained in nearly a month, and the shrunken haft of his ax was less worrying than the drooping heads of the plants in Claire's garden near the house.

He cast a glance at the half-dug well, shrugging in irritation. Another thing that must be done, which there wasn't time to do. It would have to wait a bit; they could haul water from the creek or melt snow, but without wood to burn they would starve or freeze, or both.

The door opened and Claire came out, cloak on against the chill of autumn shadows, her basket over her arm. Brianna was behind her, and at sight of them he forgot his annoyance.

"What have you done?" Claire said at once, seeing him with the axhead in one hand. Her eyes flicked over him quickly, looking for blood.

"Nay, I'm whole," he assured her. "It's only I've got to mend the handle. You'll be foraging?" He nodded at Claire's basket.

"I thought we'd try up the stream, for wood ears."

"Ah? Dinna go too far, aye? There are Indians hunting the far mountain. I smelt them on the ridge this morning."

"You smelled them?" Brianna asked.

One red brow went up in inquiry. He saw Claire glance from Brianna to him and smile slightly, to herself; it was one of his own gestures, then. He lifted one brow, looking at Claire, and saw her smile grow wider.

"It's autumn, and they're dryin' venison," he explained to Brianna. "Ye can smell the smoking fires a great ways away, if the wind sets right."

"We won't go far," Claire assured him. "Just above the trout pool."

"Aye, well. I daresay it's safe enough." He felt some reluctance at letting the women go, but he could scarcely keep them mewed up in the house only because there were savages nearby—the Indians were no doubt peacefully employed as he was himself, in making winter preparations.

If he knew for sure it was Nacognaweto's folk, he wouldn't worry, but as it was, the hunting parties often roamed far afield and it could as easily be Cherokee, or the odd small tribe that called themselves the Dog People. There was only one village of them left, and they were deeply suspicious of white strangers—not without reason.

Brianna's eyes rested on his bare chest for a moment, at the tiny knot of puckered scar tissue, but she showed no sign of disgust or curiosity—nor did she when she laid her hand briefly on his shoulder, kissing his cheek in goodbye, though he knew she must feel the healed welts beneath her fingers.

Claire would have told her, he supposed—all about Jack Randall, and the days before the Rising. Or perhaps not quite all. A small shiver that had nothing to do with cold ran up the crease of his spine, and he stepped back, away from her touch, though he still smiled at her.

"There's bread in the hutch, and a little stew left in the kettle for you and Ian and Lizzie." Claire reached up and flicked a stray wood chip from his hair. "Don't eat the pudding in the pantry; that's for supper."

He caught her fingers in his and kissed her knuckles lightly. She looked surprised, and then a faint warm glow came up under her skin. She came up a-tiptoe and kissed his mouth, then hurried after Brianna, already at the edge of the clearing.

"Be careful!" he called after them. They waved, and disappeared into the woods, leaving him with their kisses soft on his face.

"Deo gratias," he murmured again, watching them, and this time spoke with heartfelt gratitude. He waited until the last flicker of Brianna's cloak had vanished, before returning to his work.

He sat on the chopping block, a handful of square-headed nails on the ground beside him, carefully driving them one at a time into the end of the ax handle with a small mallet. The dry wood split and spread, but held by the iron enclosure of the axhead, could not splinter.

He twisted the head, then finding it firm, stood up and brought the ax down in a mighty blow on the chopping block, by way of test. It held.

He was chilled now, from sitting, and pulled his shirt back on. He was hungry, too, but he would wait a bit for the young ones. Not but what they had likely stuffed themselves already, he thought cynically. He could almost smell the meat pies Sarah Woolam made, the rich scent twining in his memory through the actual autumn smells of dead leaves and damp earth.

The thought of meat pies lingered in his mind as he went on with his work, along with the thought of winter. The Indians said it would be hard, this winter, not like the last. How would it be, hunting in deep snow? It snowed in Scotland, of course, but often enough it lay light on the ground, and the trodden paths of the red deer showed black on the steep, bare mountainsides.

Last winter had been like that. But this wilderness was given to extremes. He had heard stories of snowfalls that lay six feet deep, valleys where a man might sink to his oxters, and ice that froze so thick on the creeks that a bear could walk across. He smiled a little grimly, thinking of bears. Well, and that would be eating for the whole winter if he could kill another, and the skin would not come amiss, either.

His thoughts drifted slowly into the rhythm of his work, one part of his mind dimly occupied with the words to “Daddy’s Gone A-Hunting,” while the other was taken up with a intriguingly vivid picture of Claire’s white skin, pale and intoxicant as Rhenish wine against the glossy black of a bearskin.

“Daddy’s gone to fetch a skin / To wrap his baby bunting in,” he murmured tunelessly under his breath.

He wondered just how much Claire *had* told Brianna. It was odd, though pleasant, their three-cornered way of talking; he and the lassie were a bit shy yet with each other—inclined to say personal things to Claire instead, confident that she would pass on their essence; their interpreter in this new and awkward language of the heart.

Thankful though he was for the miracle of his daughter, he wanted to make love to his wife in his bed again. It was getting overchilly to be having at it in the herb shed or the forest—though he would admit that floundering naked in the huge drifts of yellow chestnut leaves had a certain charm, even if it lacked dignity.

"Aye, well," he muttered, smiling slightly to himself. "And when did a man ever worry for his dignity, doin' *that?*"

He glanced thoughtfully at the pile of long, straight pine logs that lay at the side of the clearing, then at the sun. If Ian was quick enough returning, they might shape and notch a dozen or so before sunset.

Setting down the ax for a moment, he crossed to the house and began to pace out the dimensions of the new room he planned, to make do while the big house was a-building. She was a grown woman, Brianna—she should have a wee place of her own, to be private in, she and the maid. And if that restored his own privacy with Claire, well, so much the better, aye?

He heard the small crackling noises among the dried leaves in the yard, but didn't turn round. There was a tiny cough behind him, like a squirrel sneezing.

"Mrs. Lizzie," he said, eyes still on the ground. "And did ye enjoy your ride? I trust ye found all the Woolams well." Where was Ian and the wagon? he wondered. He hadn't heard it on the road below.

She didn't speak, but made an inarticulate noise that made him swing round in surprise to look at her.

She was pale and pinch-faced and looked like a scared white mouse. This was not unusual; he knew he frightened her with his size and deep voice, and so he spoke gently to her, slowly, as he would have done to a mistreated dog.

"Have ye had an accident, lass? Has something come amiss wi' the wagon or the horses?"

She shook her head, still wordless. Her eyes were nearly round, gray as the hem of her washed-out gown, and the tip of her nose had gone bright pink.

"Is Ian all right?" He didn't want to upset her further, but she was beginning to alarm him. *Something* had happened, that was sure.

"I'm fine, Uncle. So are the horses." Quiet as an Indian, Ian appeared round the corner of the cabin. He moved to Lizzie's side, offering her the support of his presence, and she took his arm as though by reflex.

He glanced from one to the other; Ian was outwardly calm, but his inner agitation was plain to see.

"What's happened?" he asked, more sharply than he'd intended. The lassie flinched.

"Ye'd better tell him," Ian said. "There might not be much time." He touched her shoulder in encouragement, and she seemed to take strength from his hand; she stood up straighter and bobbed her head.

"I—there was—I saw a man. At the mill, sir."

She tried to speak further, but her nerve had dried up; the tip of her tongue protruded between her teeth with effort, but no words came out.

"She kent him, Uncle," Ian said. He looked disturbed, but not afraid; excited, rather, in an unfamiliar way. "She'd seen him before—with Brianna."

"Aye?" He tried to speak encouragingly, but the hair on the back of his neck was rising with premonition.

"At Wilmington," Lizzie got out. "MacKenzie was his name; I heard a sailor call him so."

Jamie glanced quickly at Ian, who shook his head.

"He didna give his place, but I dinna ken any from Leoch like him. I saw him and heard him speak; he's maybe a Highlander, but schooled in the south, I'd say—an educated man."

"And did this Mr. MacKenzie seem to know my daughter?" he asked. Lizzie nodded, frowning in concentration.

"Oh, aye, sir! And she kent him, too—she was afraid of him."

"Afraid? Why?" He spoke sharply, and she blanched, but she was well started now, and the words came out, tripping and stumbling, but still coming.

"I dinna ken, sir. But she turned white when she saw him, sir, and let out a wee skelloch. Then she went red and white and red again—oh, she was fair upset, anyone could see it!"

"What did he do?"

"Why—why—nothing, then. He came close to her, and held her by the arms, and said to her that she must come awa' with him. Everyone in the taproom was looking. She pulled herself away, white as my shift, but she said to me as it was all right, I was to wait, and she would come back. And—and then she went out with him."

Lizzie drew in a quick breath and wiped the end of her nose, which had begun to drip.

"And ye let her go?"

The little bondmaid shrank back, cowering.

"Ooh, I should have gone after her, I ken weel I should, sir!" she cried, face twisted with misery. "But I was afraid, sir, and may God forgive me!"

With an effort, Jamie smoothed the frown from his face and spoke as patiently as he might.

"Aye, well. And what happened, then?"

"Oh, I went upstairs as she told me, and I lay in the bed, sir, prayin' for all I was worth!"

"Well, that was verra helpful, I'm sure!"

"Uncle—" Ian's voice was soft but not at all tentative, and his brown eyes were steady on Jamie's. "She's no but a wee lassie, Uncle; she did her best."

Jamie rubbed his hand hard over his scalp.

"Aye," he said. "Aye, I'm sorry, lass; I didna mean to bite your head off. But will ye no get on wi' it?"

A hot pink spot had begun to burn on each of Lizzie's cheeks.

"She—she didna come back till nearly dawn. And—and—"

Jamie had very little patience left, and no doubt it showed on his face.

"I could smell him on her," she whispered, voice dropping almost to inaudibility. "His … seed."

The surge of rage took him unaware, like a white-hot bolt of lightning through chest and belly. He felt half choked with it, but clamped it down tight, hoarding it like coals in a hearth.

"He bedded her, then; you're sure of that?"

Thoroughly mortified at this bluntness, the little bondmaid could do no more than nod.

Lizzie was twisting her hands in the stuff of her gown, leaving her skirt all bunched and crumpled. Her paleness was replaced with a hot flush; she looked like one of Claire's tomatoes. She couldn't look at him, but hung her head, staring at the ground.

"Oh, sir. She's wi' child, can ye not see? It must be him—she was virgin when he took her. He's come after her—and she's afraid of him."

Quite suddenly, he *could* see it, and felt the hairs rise all up his arms and shoulders. The autumn breeze struck cold through shirt and skin, and the rage turned to sickness. All the small things he had half seen and half thought, not allowing them to rise to the surface of his mind, came together at once in a logical pattern.

The look of her, and the way she acted; one moment lively and another lost in troubled thought. And the glow in her face that was not all from the sun. He knew the look of a woman breeding well enough; if he had known her before, he would have seen the change; but as it was …

Claire. Claire knew. The thought came to him, cold in its certainty. She knew her daughter, and she was a physician. She must know—and hadn't told him.

"Are ye sure of this?" The coldness froze his rage. He could feel it stuck in his chest—a dangerous, jagged object that seemed to point in every direction.

Lizzie nodded, wordless, and blushed deeper, if such a thing were possible.

"I am her maid, sir," she whispered, eyes on the ground.

"She means Brianna hasna had her courses in two months," Ian provided matter-of-factly. The youngest of a family containing several older sisters, he was not constrained by Lizzie's delicacy. "She's sure."

"I—I wouldna have said anything at all, sir," the girl went on wretchedly. "Only, when I saw the man …"

"D'ye think he's come to claim her, Uncle?" Ian interrupted. "We must stop him, aye?" The look of angry excitement was clear now, flushing the lad's lean cheeks with feeling.

Jamie took a deep breath, only then realizing that he had been holding it.

"I dinna ken," he said, surprised at the calmness of his own tone. He had barely had time to take in the news, let alone to draw conclusions, but the lad was right, there was a danger to be dealt with.

If this MacKenzie wished it, he might claim Brianna as his wife by right of common law, with the coming bairn as evidence of his claim. A court of law would not necessarily force a woman to wed a rapist, but any magistrate would uphold the right of a man to his wife and child—regardless of the wife's feelings in the matter.

His own parents had wed by such device: fleeing and hiding among the Highland crags until his mother was well with child, so that her brothers were forced to accept the unwelcome marriage. A child was a permanent, undeniable bond between man and woman, and he had cause to know it.

He glanced toward the path that came up through the lower wood.

"Will he not be here on your heels? The Woolams will have told him the way."

"Nooo," said Ian thoughtfully. "I shouldna think so. We took his horse, aye?" He grinned suddenly at Lizzie, who giggled faintly in reply.

"Aye? And what's to stop him taking the wagon, or one of the wagon mules?"

The grin widened substantially on Ian's face.

"I left Rollo in the wagon bed," he said. "I think he'll walk it, Uncle Jamie."

Jamie was forced to a grudging smile in return.

"That was quick of ye, Ian."

Ian shrugged modestly.

"Well, I didna want the bastard to take us unawares. And though I've not heard Cousin Brianna talk about her laddie lately—yon Wakefield, aye?" He paused delicately. "I didna think she'd want to see this MacKenzie. Especially if—"

“I should say Mr. Wakefield has left his coming ower-long,” Jamie said. “Especially if.” It was no wonder she had stopped looking forward to Wakefield’s coming—once she’d realized. After all, how would a woman explain a swelling belly to a man who’d left her virgin?

He slowly and consciously unclenched his fists. There would be time enough for all that later. For the moment, there was the one thing to be dealt with.

“Fetch my pistols from the house,” he said, turning to Ian. “And you, lassie—” He gave Lizzie something intended for a smile, and reached for the coat he’d hung on the edge of the woodpile.

“Bide ye here, and wait for your mistress. Tell my wife—tell her I’ve gone to give Fergus a hand with his chimney. And dinna speak a word about this to my wife or daughter—or I’ll have your guts for garters.” This last threat was spoken half in jest, but the girl went white as though he’d meant it literally.

Lizzie sank down on the chopping block, her knees wabbling beneath her. She fumbled for the tiny medallion at her neck, seeking reassurance from the cold metal. She watched Mr. Fraser stride down the path, menacing as a great red wolf. His shadow stretched out black before him, and the late autumn sun touched him with fire.

The medal in her hand was cold as ice.

“O dear Mother,” she murmured, over and over. “O Blessed Mother, what have I done?”

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FIFTY-FIFTY

The oak leaves were dry and crackling underfoot. There was a constant fall of leaves from the chestnut trees that towered overhead, a slow yellow rain that mocked the dryness of the ground.

"Is it true that Indians can move through the woods without making a sound, or is that just something they tell you in Girl Scouts?" Brianna kicked at a small drift of oak leaves, sending them flying. Dressed in wide skirts and petticoats that caught at leaves and twigs, we sounded like a herd of elephants ourselves.

"Well, they can't do it in dry weather like this, unless they swing through the trees like chimpanzees. In a wet spring, it's another story—even *I* could walk through here quietly then; the ground is like a sponge."

I drew in my skirts to keep them away from a big elderberry bush, and stooped to look at the fruit. It was dark red, but not yet showing the blackish tinge of true ripeness.

"Two more days," I said. "If we were going to use them for medicine, we'd pick them now. I want them for wine, though, and to dry like raisins—and for that, you want them to have a lot of sugar, so you wait until they're nearly ready to drop from their stems."

"Right. What landmark is it?" Brianna glanced around, and smiled. "No, don't tell me—it's that big rock that looks like an Easter Island head."

"Very good," I said approvingly. "Right, because it won't change with the seasons."

Reaching the edge of a small stream, we separated, working our way slowly down the banks. I had set Brianna to collect cress, while I poked about the trees in search of wood ears and other edible fungi.

I watched her covertly as I hunted, one eye on the ground, one on her. She was knee-deep in the stream with her skirts kilted up, showing an amazing stretch of long, muscular thigh as she waded slowly, eyes on the rippling water.

There was something wrong; had been for days. At first I had assumed her air of tension was due to the obvious stresses of the new situation in which she found herself. But over the past weeks she and Jamie had settled into a relationship that, while still marked by shyness on both sides, was increasingly warm. They delighted each other—and I was delighted to see them together.

Still, there was something troubling her. It had been three years since I had left her—four since she had left me, to live on her own, and she had changed; had grown entirely into a woman now. I could no longer read her as easily as I once had. She had Jamie's trick of hiding strong feeling behind a mask of calmness—I knew it well in both of them.

In part, I had arranged this foraging expedition as an excuse to talk to her alone; with Jamie, Ian, and Lizzie in the house, and the constant traffic of tenants and visitors come to see Jamie, private conversation there was impossible. And if what I suspected was true, this wasn't a conversation I wished to have where anyone could hear.

By the time I had my basket half filled with thick, fleshy orange wood ears, Brianna had emerged dripping from the stream, her own basket overflowing with clumps of wet green cress and bunches of jointed horsetail reeds to make into tapers.

She wiped her feet on the hem of her petticoat, and came to join me under one of the huge chestnut trees. I handed her the canteen of cider, and waited till she had had a drink.

"Is it Roger?" I said then, without preliminary.

She glanced at me, a flash of startlement visible in her eyes, and then I saw the tense line of her shoulder ease.

"I wondered whether you could still do that," she said.

"Do what?"

"Read my mind. I sort of hoped you could." Her wide mouth quirked awkwardly, trying to smile.

"I expect I'm a bit out of practice," I said. "But give me a moment." I reached up and smoothed the hair off her face. She looked at me, but beyond me, too shy to meet my eyes. A whippoorwill called in the far green shadows.

"It's all right, baby," I said quietly. "How far gone are you?"

The breath left her in a huge sigh. Her face went slack with relief.

"Two months."

Now she met my eyes, and I felt a small shock of difference, the kind I had been getting since her arrival. Once, her relief would have been a child's; a fear confided, and half eased already by the knowledge that I would somehow deal with it. But now it was only the relief of sharing an unbearable secret; she was not expecting me to remedy things. The knowledge that I *couldn't* do anything in any case didn't stop my irrational feeling of loss.

She squeezed my hand, as though reassuring *me,* and then sat down with her back against a tree trunk, stretching out her legs in front of her, long feet bare.

"Did you know already?"

I sat down next to her, less gracefully.

"I expect so; but I didn't know I knew, if that makes sense." Looking at her now, it was plain to see; the faint pallor of her skin and tiny alterations in her color, the fleeting look of inwardness. I had noticed, but had put the changes down to unfamiliarity and strain—to the flurry of emotions over finding me, meeting Jamie, to worry over Lizzie's sickness, worry over Roger.

That particular worry now took on a sudden new dimension.

"Oh, Jesus. Roger!"

She nodded, pale in the filtered yellow shade of the chestnut leaves overhead. She looked jaundiced, and no wonder.

"It's been nearly two months. He should have been here—unless something happened."

My mind was busy calculating.

“Two months, and now it’s nearly November.” The leaves under us lay thick and soft, yellow and brown, fresh-fallen from the hickory and chestnut trees. My heart dropped suddenly in my chest. “Bree—you’ve got to go back.”

“What?” Her head jerked up. “Go back where?”

“To the stones.” I waved a hand in agitation. “To Scotland, and right away!”

She stared at me, thick brows drawn down.

“*Now?* What for?”

I took a deep breath, feeling a dozen different emotions collide. Concern for Bree, fear for Roger, a terrible sorrow for Jamie, who would have to give her up again, so soon. And for myself.

“You can go through, pregnant. We know that much, because I did it, with you. But honey—you can’t take a baby through that … that … you can’t,” I ended, helpless. “You know what it’s like.” It had been three years since I came through the stones, but I recalled the experience vividly.

Her eyes went black as the little blood remaining in her face drained away.

“You can’t take a child through,” I repeated, trying to get myself under control, think logically. “It would be like jumping off Niagara Falls with the baby in your arms. You’ll have to go back before it’s born, or—” I broke off, making calculations.

“It’s almost November. Ships won’t make the passage between late November and March. And you can’t wait till March—that would mean making a two-month trip across the Atlantic, six or seven months pregnant. If you didn’t deliver on the ship—which would likely kill you or the baby or both—you’d still have to ride thirty miles to the circle, and then make the passage, find your way to help on the other side … Brianna, you can’t do it! You have to go now, as soon as we can manage.”

“And if I do go now—how will I make sure I end up in the right time?”

She spoke quietly, but her fingers were pleating the fabric of her skirt.

"You—I think—well, *I* did," I said, my initial panic beginning to subside into rational thought.

"You had Daddy at the other end." She glanced up at me sharply. "Whether you wanted to go to him or not, you had strong feelings for him—he would have pulled you. Or me. But he isn't there anymore." Her face tightened, then relaxed.

"Roger knew—knows—how," she corrected herself. "Geillis Duncan's book said you could use gems to travel—for protection and navigation."

"But you and Roger are both only guessing!" I argued. "And so was bloody Geilie Duncan! You might not need either gemstones *or* a strong attachment. In the old fairy tales, when people go inside a fairy's dun and then return, it's always two hundred years. If that's the usual pattern, then—"

"Would you risk finding out it's not? And it's not—Geilie Duncan went *far-ther* than two hundred years."

It occurred to me, a little belatedly, that she had thought all this out herself. Nothing I was saying came as any surprise. And that meant she had also reached her own conclusion—which did not involve taking ship back to Scotland.

I rubbed a hand between my brows, making an effort to match her calmness. The mention of Geillis had called to mind another memory—though one I had tried to forget.

"There's another way," I said, fighting for calm. "Another passage, I mean. It's on Haiti—they call it Hispaniola now. In the jungle, there are standing stones on a hill, but the crack, the passage, is underneath, in a cave."

The forest air was cool, but it wasn't the shadows that made my skin ripple into gooseflesh. I rubbed my forearms, trying to erase the chill. I would willingly have erased all memory of the cave of Abandawe as well—I'd tried—but it wasn't a place easily forgotten.

"You've been there?" She leaned forward, intent.

"Yes. It's a horrible place. But the Indies are a good deal closer than Scotland is, and ships sail between Charleston and Jamaica nearly all year." I took a deep breath, feeling a little better. "It wouldn't be easy to go through the jungle—but it would give you a little longer—long enough for us to find Roger." If he could still be found, I thought, but didn't say so. That particular fear could be dealt with later.

One of the chestnut leaves spiraled down onto Brianna's lap, vivid yellow against the soft brown homespun, and she picked it off, smoothing the waxy surface absently with her thumb. She looked at me, blue eyes intent.

"Does this place work like the other one?"

"I don't know how any of them work! It sounded different, a bell sound instead of a buzzing noise. But it was a passage, all right."

"You've been there," she said slowly, looking at me under her brows.

"Why? Did you want to go back? After you'd found—him?" There was still a slight hesitation in her voice; she couldn't quite bring herself to refer to Jamie as "my father."

"No. It was to do with Geillis Duncan. She found it."

Brianna's eyes sprang wide.

"She's *here?*"

"No. She's dead."

I took a deep breath, feeling the remembered shock and tingle of an ax blow run up my arm. Sometimes I thought of her, of Geillis, when I was alone in the forest. Sometimes I thought I heard her voice behind me, and turned around swiftly, but saw no more than the hemlock branches, soughing in the wind. But now and then I felt her eyes on me, green and bright as the springtime wood.

"Quite dead," I said firmly, and changed the subject. "How did this happen, anyway?"

There wasn't any pretence of not knowing what I was talking about. She gave me a straight look, one eyebrow raised.

"You're the doctor. How many ways *are* there?"

I gave her back the look, with interest.

"Didn't you even think of taking any precautions?"

She glowered, thick brows drawn down.

"I wasn't *planning* to have sex here!"

I clutched my head, digging my fingers into my scalp in exasperation.

"You think people *plan* it? Good God, how many times did I come to that school of yours and give talks about—"

"All the time! Every year! My mother the sex encyclopedia! Do you have any idea how mortifying it is to have your own mother standing up in front of everybody, drawing pictures of *penises?*"

Her face went the color of the scarlet maples, flushed with the memory.

"I must not have done it all that well," I said tartly, "since you seem not to have recognized one when you saw it."

Her face jerked toward me, blood in her eye, but then relaxed when she saw that I was joking—or trying to.

"Right," she said. "Well, they look different in 3-D."

Taken unawares, I laughed. After a moment's hesitation, she joined me, a hesitant giggle.

"You know what I mean. I gave you that prescription before I left."

She looked down her long, straight nose at me.

"Yes, and I was never so shocked in my life! You thought I'd run right out and have sex with everybody in sight the minute you left?"

"You're implying that it was only my presence stopping you?" The corner of her wide mouth twitched.

"Well, not *only* that," she conceded. "But you had something to do with it, you and Daddy. I mean, I—I wouldn't have wanted to disappoint you." The twitch had turned to a quiver in an instant, and I hugged her hard, her smooth bright hair against my cheek.

"You couldn't, baby," I murmured, rocking her slightly. "We'd never be disappointed in you, never."

I felt both tension and worry ebb as I held her. Finally, she took a deep breath and let go of me.

"Maybe not you or Daddy," she said. "But what about—?" She tilted her head toward the now invisible house.

"He won't—" I began, but then stopped. The truth was that I didn't know *what* Jamie would do. On the one hand, he was strongly inclined to think that Brianna hung the moon. On the other hand, he had opinions regarding sexual honor that could only be described—

for obvious reasons—as old-fashioned, and no inhibitions at all about expressing them.

He was worldly, well educated, tolerant, and compassionate. This did not in any way, shape, or form mean that he shared or understood modern sensibilities; I knew quite well he didn't. And I couldn't think that his attitude toward Roger would be tolerant in the slightest.

"Well," I said dubiously, "I shouldn't wonder if he didn't want to punch Roger in the nose or something. But don't worry," I added, seeing her look of alarm. "He loves you," I said, and smoothed the tumbled hair off her flushed face. "He won't stop."

I got up, brushing yellow leaves from my skirt.

"We'll have a bit of time, then, but none to waste. Jamie can send word downriver, to keep an eye out for Roger. Speaking of Roger …" I hesitated, picking a bit of dried fern from my sleeve. "I don't suppose he knows about this, does he?"

Brianna took a deep breath, and her fist closed tight on the leaf in her hand, crushing it.

"Well, see, there's a problem about that," she said. She looked up at me, and suddenly she was my little girl again. "It isn't Roger's."

"What?" I said stupidly.

"It. Isn't. Roger's. Baby," she said, between clenched teeth.

I sank down beside her once more. Her worry over Roger suddenly took on new dimensions.

"Who?" I said. "Here, or there?" Even as I spoke, I was calculating—it had to be someone here, in the past. If it had been a man in her own time, she'd be farther along than two months. Not only in the past, then, but here, in the Colonies.

I wasn't planning to have sex, she'd said. No, of course not. She hadn't told Roger, for fear he would follow her—he was her anchor, her key to the future. But in that case—

"Here," she said, confirming my calculations. She dug in the pocket of her skirt, and came out with something. She reached toward me, and I held out my hand automatically.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ." The worn gold wedding band sparked in the sun, and my hand closed reflexively over it. It was warm from being carried next to her skin, but I felt a deep coldness seep into my fingers.

"Bonnet?" I said. "Stephen *Bonnet?*"

Her throat moved convulsively, and she swallowed, head jerking in a brief nod.

"I wasn't going to tell you—I couldn't; not after Ian told me about what happened on the river. At first I didn't know what Da would do; I was afraid he'd blame me. And then when I knew him a little better—I knew he'd try to find Bonnet—that's what Daddy would have done. I couldn't let him do that. You met that man, you know what he's like." She was sitting in the sun, but a shudder passed over her, and she rubbed her arms as though she was cold.

"I do," I said. My lips were stiff. Her words were ringing in my ears.

I wasn't planning to have sex. I couldn't tell … I was afraid he'd blame me.

"What did he do to you?" I asked, and was surprised that my voice sounded calm. "Did he hurt you, baby?"

She grimaced, and pulled her knees up to her chest, hugging them against herself.

"Don't call me that, okay? Not right now."

I reached to touch her, but she huddled closer into herself, and I dropped my hand.

"Do you want to tell me?" I didn't want to know; I wanted to pretend it hadn't happened, too.

She looked up at me, lips tightened to a straight white line.

"No," she said. "No, I don't want to. But I think I'd better."

* * *

She had stepped aboard the *Gloriana* in broad daylight, cautious, but feeling safe by reason of the number of people around; loaders, seamen, merchants, servants—the docks bustled with life. She had told a seaman on the deck what she wanted; he had vanished into the recesses of the ship, and a moment later, Stephen Bonnet had appeared.

He had on the same clothes as the night before; in the daylight, she could see that they were of fine quality, but stained and badly crumpled. Greasy candle wax had dripped on the silk cuff of his coat, and his jabot had crumbs in it.

Bonnet himself showed fewer marks of wear than did his clothes; he was fresh-shaven, and his green eyes were pale and alert. They passed over her quickly, lighting with interest.

"I did think ye comely last night by candlelight," he said, taking her hand and raising it to his lips. "But a-many seem so when the drink is flowin'. It's a good deal more rare to find a woman fairer in the sun than she is by the moon."

Brianna tried to extract her hand from his grasp, giving him a polite smile.

"Thank you. Do you still have the ring?" Her heart beat fast in her throat. He could still tell her about the ring—about her mother—even if he had lost it gambling. But she wanted very badly to have it in her hands. She suppressed the fear that had haunted her all night; that the ring might be all that was left of her mother. It couldn't be, not if the newspaper clipping was right, but—

"Oh, indeed. The luck of Danu herself was with me the night—and still is, by the looks of it." He gave her a charming smile, still keeping hold of her hand.

"I—ah, I wondered if you would sell it to me." She had brought nearly all the money she had with her, but had no idea what the cost of a gold ring might be.

"Why?" The blunt question took her unawares, and she fumbled for an answer.

"It—it looks like one my mother had," she answered, unable to invent an answer better than the truth. "Where did you get it?"

Something moved behind his eyes, though he still smiled at her. He gestured toward the dark companionway, and tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow. He was taller than she, a big man. She pulled, cautiously, but he held her hand fast.

"So ye want the ring? Come down to my cabin, my dear, and we shall see if an accommodation might be reached."

Below, he poured her brandy; she took the barest sip, but he drank deeply, draining one glass and pouring another.

"Where?" he said carelessly, in answer to her persistent questions. "Ah—well, a gentlemen should not be tellin' tales of his ladies, should he?" He winked at her. "A love token," he whispered.

The smile on her own face felt stiff, and the sip of brandy she had taken burned in her stomach.

"The lady who—gave it to you," she said. "Is she in good health?"

He gaped at her, lower jaw fallen slightly open.

"Luck," she said hastily. "It's bad luck to wear jewelry that belongs to someone who's—who's dead."

"Is it?" The smile returned. "I cannot say I have noticed that effect myself." He set down the glass and gave a slight, pleasurable belch.

"Still, I can assure ye, the lady from whom I had that ring was both alive and well when I left her."

The burning sensation in her stomach eased slightly.

"Oh. I'm glad to hear that. Will you sell it to me, then?"

He rocked back in his chair, eyeing her, a small smile on his lips.

"Sell it. And what will ye offer me, sweetheart?"

"Fifteen pounds sterling." Her heart began to beat faster again, as he stood up. He was going to agree! Where did he keep it?

He stood up, took her hand, and pulled her up out of her chair.

"I've enough money, sweetheart," he said. "What color's the hair between your legs?"

She jerked her hand out of his grasp, and backed up as quickly as she could, slamming into the wall of the cabin within a few steps.

"You've mistaken me," she said. "I didn't mean—"

"Maybe not," he said, and the edges of his teeth showed in his smile. "But I do. And I do think perhaps you've mistaken *me,* sweetheart."

He took a step toward her. She snatched the brandy bottle from the table, and swung it at his head. He ducked adroitly, plucked the bottle from her hand, and slapped her hard across the face.

She staggered, half blinded by the sudden pain. He grasped her by the shoulders, and forced her to her knees. His fingers twisted tight in her hair, close to the scalp, and jerked her head, hard. He held her, head canted at an awkward angle, while he fumbled with the other hand at the front of his breeches. He grunted slightly with satisfaction and took a half step closer, thrusting his hips forward.

"Meet Leroi," he said.

Leroi was both uncircumcised and unwashed, and gave off a powerful smell of stale urine. She felt a bolus of vomit rise in her throat, and tried to turn her head away. The answer to that was a vicious yank on her hair that brought her back, stifling a cry of pain.

"Put out that little pink tongue and give us a kiss, sweetheart." Bonnet sounded cheerful and unconcerned, his grip on her hair tight as ever. She lifted her hands toward him in unspoken protest; he saw it and tightened his grip, making tears start in her eyes. She put out her tongue.

"Not bad, not bad," he said, judiciously. "All right, open your mouth." He let go of her hair quite suddenly and her head snapped back. Before she could jerk away, he had seized her by one ear, twisting slightly.

"Bite me, sweetheart, and I'll mash your nose flat. Eh?" He brushed his closed fist lightly under her nose, nudging the tip with a massive knuckle. Then he took a firm grip on her other ear, holding her head immobile between his big hands.

She concentrated on the taste of the blood from her cut lip, the taste and the pain of it. With her eyes closed, she could see the taste, salt and metal, a burnished copper, shining pure in the dark inside her eyes.

If she vomited, she would choke. She would choke, and he would not notice. She would strangle and die, and he wouldn't stop. She put her hands on his thighs to brace herself, and dug her fingers into the heavy muscle, pushing back as hard as she could, to resist the battering. He was humming, deep in his throat. *From Ushant to Scilly is thirty-five leagues*. Wiry hairs brushed her lips.

Then Leroi was gone. He let go of her ears and stepped back; unbalanced, she fell forward on hands and knees, gagging and coughing, the strings of saliva from her mouth tinged pink with blood. She coughed and spat, and spat again, trying to clear her mouth of foulness. Her lips were swollen, and throbbing with her heartbeat.

He lifted her effortlessly, hands under her arms, and kissed her, tongue thrusting, one palm cupping the back of her head to keep her from pulling away. He tasted overpoweringly of brandy, with a faint nastiness of decaying teeth. The other hand, at her waist, roamed slowly downward, kneading her buttocks.

"Mmm," he said, sighing pleasurably. "Bedtime, eh, sweetheart?"

She lowered her head and butted him in the face. Her forehead struck hard against bone, and he uttered a sharp cry of surprise and loosened his grip. She wrenched free and ran. Her flying skirt caught on the doorlatch and tore, disregarded as she hurled herself out into the dark companionway.

The sailors were at supper; twenty men sat at a long table in the mess at the end of the companionway, twenty faces turned toward her in expressions ranging from startlement to lascivious interest. It was the cook who tripped her, sticking out a foot as she dashed past the galley. Her knees hit the deck with numbing force.

"Like games, do you, sweetheart?" It was Bonnet's voice in her ear, jovial as ever, as a pair of hands scooped her up with disconcerting ease. He whirled her to face him, and smiled. She had hit him in the nose; a thick trickle of blood flowed down from one nostril. It ran over his upper lip, and followed the grooves of his smile, thin lines of red showing between his teeth, and dark drops dripping slowly from his chin.

His grip on her arms tightened, but the merry glint shone as ever in his light green eyes.

"That's all right, sweetheart," he said. "Leroi likes games. Don't you, Leroi?" He glanced down, and she followed his gaze. He had shed his breeches in the cabin, and stood half naked, Leroi brushing against her skirts, quivering with eagerness.

He took her by one elbow, and bowing gallantly, gestured toward the cabin. Numbly, she stepped forward, and he took his place beside her, arm in arm, nonchalantly exposing the white cheeks of his buttocks to the stares of his gaping crew.

* * *

“After that … it wasn’t so bad.” She could hear her own voice, unnaturally calm, as though it belonged to someone else. “I didn’t—didn’t fight him anymore.”

* * *

He hadn’t bothered to make her undress, merely untucked her kerchief. Her dress was made in the usual fashion, with a low, square neckline, and her breasts were high and round; it took no more than a casual downward yank to bare them, popping them up over the edge of the bodice like a pair of apples.

He mauled them idly for a moment, pinching her nipples between a large thumb and forefinger to make them stand up, then pushed her toward his tumbled bed.

The sheets were stained with spilled liquor and stank of perfume and wine, and overwhelmingly of the rank, heavy odor of Bonnet himself. He shoved up her skirt and arranged her legs to suit him, humming all the while beneath his breath. *Farewell to you all, ye fine Spanish ladies …*

In her mind’s eye, she could see herself thrusting him away, flinging herself off the bed and running for the door, skimming light as a gull down the dark companionway and bursting up through the grated deck to freedom. She could feel the wooden boards under her bare feet, and the glare of the hot summer sun in her dark-blind eyes. Almost. She lay in the dim cabin, wooden as a figurehead, tasting blood in her mouth.

There was a blind, insistent prodding between her thighs and she convulsed in panic, scissoring her legs. Still humming, he thrust a muscular leg between her own, brutally nudging her thighs apart. Naked from the waist downward, he still wore his shirt and stock. The long tails drooped around Leroi’s pale stalk as he rose up on his knees above her.

He stopped humming long enough to spit copiously into his palm. Rubbing roughly and thoroughly, he eased the path and then set to business. With one hand clutched firmly on her breast, he guided himself with the other to an inescapable berth, making a jovial remark about the snugness of the accommodation, and then loosed Leroi on his mindless—and mercifully brief—gallop to pleasure.

Two minutes, maybe three. And then it was over, and Bonnet lay heavily collapsed upon her, sweat crumpling his linen stock, one hand still crushing her breast. His lank fair hair fell soft against her cheek and his exhalations purled hot and damp on her neck. At least he'd stopped humming.

She lay frozen for endless long minutes, staring up at the ceiling, where the reflections from the water danced across the polished beams. He sighed at last, and rolled slowly off her onto his side. He smiled at her, dreamily scratching one bared and hairy hip.

"Not bad, sweetheart, though I've had livelier rides. Move your arse more next time, hm?" He sat up, yawned, and began to straighten his attire. She edged toward the side of the bed, then, sure that he didn't mean to restrain her, rolled abruptly off and onto her feet. She felt light-headed and desperately short of air, as though his bulk still pressed upon her.

Moving in a daze, she went to the door. It was bolted. As she struggled to lift the bolt, her hands shaking, she heard him say something behind her, and swung around in amazement.

"*What* did you say?"

"I said the ring's on the desk," he said, straightening up from retrieving his stockings. He sat down on the bed and began to pull them on, waving casually at the desk that stood against the wall. "There's money, too. Take what you want."

The top of the desk was a magpie's nest, littered with inkpots, trinkets, bits of jewelry, bills of lading, tattered quills, silver buttons, ragged bits of paper and crumpled clothing, and a scatter of coins in silver and bronze, copper and gold, currency of several colonies, several countries.

"You're offering me *money*?"

He looked up quizzically, fair brows arched.

“I pay for my pleasures,” he said. “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

Everything in the cabin seemed unnaturally vivid, detailed and individual as the objects in a dream, which would vanish with waking.

“I didn’t think anything,” she said, her voice sounding very clear, but distant, someone speaking from far away. Her kerchief lay on the floor where he had thrown it, by the desk. She walked there, carefully, trying not to think of the warm slipperiness that streaked down her thighs.

“I’m an honest man—for a pirate,” he said behind her, and laughed. He stamped once on the deck to settle his foot in its shoe, then brushed past her and lifted the bolt easily with one hand.

“Help yourself, sweetheart,” he said, with another casual wave toward the desk as he went out. “You were worth it.”

She heard his footsteps going away down the companionway, a burst of laughter and a muffled remark as he met someone, then a shift of his voice, suddenly clear and harsh, shouting orders to someone above, and the tramp and scurry of feet overhead, rushing to obey. Back to business.

It was sitting in a bowl made of cowhorn, jumbled with a collection of bone buttons, string, and other bits of rubbish. Like him, she thought, with a cold clarity. Acquisition for its own sake; a reckless and savage delight in the taking, with no knowledge at all of the value of what he stole.

Her hand was shaking; she saw it with a vague sense of surprise. She tried to grasp the ring, failed, gave up. She scooped up the bowl and emptied its contents into her pocket. She walked down the dark companionway, her fist wrapped tight around the pocket, holding it like a talisman. There were seamen all around, too busy about their tasks to spare her more than a glance of lewd speculation. Her shoes were perched on the end of the mess table, bows perky in a shaft of light from the grating overhead.

She put them on, and with an even tread walked up the ladder, across the deck and gangplank, onto the dock. Tasting blood.

“I thought at first I could just pretend it didn’t happen.” She took a deep breath, and looked at me. Her hands folded over her stomach, as though to hide it. “But I guess that won’t work, will it?”

I was silent for a moment, thinking. It was no time for delicacy.

“When?” I said. “How long after … um, after Roger?”

“Two days.”

My eyebrows lifted at that.

“Why are you so sure it isn’t Roger’s, then? You weren’t using pills, obviously, and I’ll bet my life Roger didn’t use what passes for condoms in these times.”

She half smiled at that, and a small flush rose in her cheeks.

“No. He … um … he … ah …”

“Oh, coitus interruptus?”

She nodded.

I took a deep breath and blew it out through pursed lips.

“There is a word,” I said, “for people who depend on that particular method of birth control.”

“What’s that?” she asked, looking wary.

“Parents,” I said.

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46

COMES A STRANGER

Roger bent his head and drank from cupped hands. A piece of luck, that flash of green, pointed out by a finger of sunlight stabbing down through the trees. Without it, he would never have seen the spring, so far off the trail as it was.

A clear trickle bubbled through a crack in the rock, cooling his hands and face. The rock itself was a smooth blackish green, and the ground all round was boggy, rumpled by tree roots and furred with a moss that grew brilliant as emeralds in the fleeting patch of sun.

The knowledge that he would see Brianna shortly—perhaps within the hour—soothed his annoyance as effectively as the cool water eased his dry throat. If he'd had to have his horse stolen, it was some consolation that he'd been close enough to reach his destination on foot.

The horse itself had been an ancient nag, barely worth stealing. At least he'd had the sense to keep his valuables on his person, not in the saddlebags. He clapped a hand against the side seam of his breeches, reassured to feel the small hardness snuggled against his thigh.

Beyond the horse itself, he hadn't lost much more than a pistol—nearly as ancient as the horse and not half so reliable—a bit of food, and a leather water flask. The loss of the flask had troubled him for the last few miles of hot, dusty walking, but now that minor inconvenience was remedied.

His feet sank into the damp ground as he stood up, leaving dark streaks in the emerald moss. He stepped back and wiped the mud from his shoe soles on the carpet of dry leaves and crusted needles. Then he dusted down the skirts of his coat as well as he could, and straightened the grimy stock at his throat. His knuckles rasped the stubble on his jaw; his razor had been in the saddlebag.

He looked a right villain, he thought ruefully. No way to meet your in-laws. In truth, though, he wasn't much concerned with what Claire and Jamie Fraser might think of him. His thoughts were all on Brianna.

She'd found her parents now; he could only hope that the reunion had been so satisfactory that she'd be in a mood to forgive his betrayal. Christ, he'd been stupid!

He made his way back toward the path, feet sinking in the soft leaf-layer. Stupid in underestimating her stubbornness, stupid not to have been honest with her, he amended. Stupid to have bullied her into secrecy. Trying to keep her safely in the future—no, that hadn't been stupid at all, he thought, with a grimace at the things he'd seen and heard in the last few months.

He pushed aside an overhanging limb of loblolly pine, then ducked with an exclamation of alarm, as something black shot past his head.

A hoarse *craawk!* announced that his assailant was a raven. Similar cries gave notice of the arrival of reinforcements in the trees nearby, and within seconds, another black missile whizzed past, within inches of his ear.

"Hey, bugger off!" he exclaimed, ducking away from yet another croaking buzz bomb. He was plainly near a nest, and the ravens didn't like it.

The first raven sailed back for another try. This pass knocked his hat into the dirt. The mobbing was unnerving, the sense of hostility out of all proportion to the size of his adversaries. Another came in, zooming low, and struck him a glancing blow as its claws ripped at the shoulder of his coat. Roger snatched up his hat and ran.

A hundred yards up the trail, he slowed to a walk and looked round. The birds were nowhere in sight; he'd passed their nesting place, then.

“And where’s Alfred Hitchcock when you need him?” he muttered to himself, trying to shake off the sense of danger.

His voice was damped at once by the thick vegetation; it was like talking into a pillow. He was breathing heavily, and his face felt flushed. All at once, it seemed very quiet in the forest. With the ceasing of the ravens’ racket, all the other birds seemed to have stopped as well. It was no wonder the old Scots thought ravens birds of bad omen; spend much longer here, and all the old ways that had been no more than curiosities would be flourishing away in his mind.

Dangerous, dirty, and uncomfortable as it was, he had to admit the fascination of being here—of experiencing at firsthand things he’d read about, seeing objects he knew as museum artifacts being casually used in daily life. If it wasn’t for Brianna, he might not regret the adventure, in spite of Stephen Bonnet and the things he had seen aboard the *Gloriana*.

Once more his hand went to his thigh. He had been luckier than he’d dared hope; Bonnet had had not one gemstone, but two. Would they really work? He ducked again, having to walk half crouched for several steps before the branches opened up again. Hard to believe that people lived up here, save that someone had cut this trail, and it must lead somewhere.

“You can’t miss it,” the girl at the mill had assured him, and he could see why. There wasn’t anyplace else to go.

He shaded his eyes, looking up the trail, but the drooping branches of pine and maple hid everything, presenting only a shadowy, mysterious tunnel through the trees. No telling how far it might be to the top of the ridge.

“You’ll make it by sundown, easy,” the girl had told him, and it was late midafternoon now. But that had been when he had a horse. Not wanting to be caught on the mountainside in the dark, he picked up his pace, straining his eyes for sunlight ahead that would show him the openness of the ridge at the end of the trail.

As he walked, his thoughts ran inevitably ahead of him, quick with speculation.

And how had it gone, Brianna's reunion with her parents? What had she thought of Jamie Fraser? Was he the man she'd been imagining for the last year, or only a pale reflection of the image she had built up from her mother's stories?

At least she had a father to know, he thought, with a queer little pang at the memory of Midsummer's Eve, and that burst of light in the passage through the stones.

There it was! A lightening of the dense green shadow ahead; a brightening as tongues of sun struck autumn leaves in a flare of orange and yellow.

The sun dazzled him for a moment as he came out of the tunnel of greenery. He blinked once, and found himself not on the ridge, as he had expected, but in a small natural clearing, edged with scarlet maples and yellow scrub oak. It held the sunlight like a cup, dark forest spreading beyond on all sides.

As he turned about, searching for the continuation of the trail, he heard a horse's whicker and whirled to find his own elderly mount, jerking its head against the pull of a rein tied to a tree at the edge of the clearing.

"Well, I'll be buggered!" he exclaimed in astonishment. "How the hell did you get up here?"

"The same way you did," a voice answered him. A tall young man emerged from the wood beside the horse, and stood pointing a pistol at Roger; his own, he saw, with a sense of outrage as well as apprehension. He took a deep breath and choked down his fear.

"You've got my horse and my gun," Roger said coolly. "What else d'you want? My hat?" He held out the battered tricorne in invitation. The robber couldn't possibly know what else he carried; he hadn't shown them to anyone.

The young man—couldn't be more than in his teens, in spite of his size, Roger thought—didn't smile.

"A bit more than that, I expect." For the first time, the young man took his eyes off Roger, shifting his glance to one side. Following the direction of his gaze, Roger felt a jolt like an electric shock.

He hadn't seen the man at the edge of the clearing, though he must have been there all the time, standing motionless. He wore a faded hunting kilt whose browns and greens blended into the grass and brush, as his flaming hair blended with the brilliant leaves. He looked as if he'd grown out of the forest.

Beyond the sheer unexpectedness of his appearance, it was his looks that stunned Roger into speechlessness. It was one thing to have been told that Jamie Fraser resembled his daughter. It was another to see Brianna's bold features transmuted into power by the stamp of years, and fronting a personality not only thoroughly masculine, but fierce in aspect.

It was like lifting his hand from the fur of a handsome ginger cat, only to find himself staring into the unblinking gaze of a tiger. Roger barely kept himself from taking an involuntary step backward, thinking as he did so that Claire had not exaggerated a single thing in her descriptions of Jamie Fraser.

"You'll be Mr. MacKenzie," the man said. It wasn't a question. The voice was deep but not loud, barely lifted above the sound of the rustling leaves, but Roger had no difficulty hearing him.

"I am," he said, taking a step forward. "And you'll be … ah … Jamie Fraser?" He stretched out a hand, but quickly let it drop. Two pairs of eyes rested coldly on him.

"I am," said the red-haired man. "You'll know me?" The tone of the question was distinctly unfriendly.

Roger took a deep breath, cursing his own dishevelment. He didn't know how Brianna might have described him to her father, but Fraser had evidently expected something a good deal more prepossessing.

"Well, you—look quite a bit like your daughter."

The young man gave a loud snort, but Fraser didn't look around.

"And what business have ye wi' my daughter?" Fraser moved for the first time, stepping out from the shadow of the trees. No, Claire hadn't exaggerated. He *was* big, even an inch or two taller than Roger himself.

Roger felt a stab of alarm, mingled with his confusion. What the hell had Brianna told him? Surely she couldn't have been so angry that—well, he'd sort that out when he saw her.

"I've come to claim my wife," he said boldly.

Something changed in Fraser's eyes. Roger didn't know what it was, but it made him drop his hat, and half raise his hands in reflex.

"Oh, no, ye're not." It was the boy who had spoken, in an odd tone of satisfaction.

Roger glanced at him, and was still more alarmed to see the lad's big, bony knuckles white on the pistol's grip.

"Here be careful! You don't want that to go off by accident," he said.

The young man's lip lifted in a sneer.

"If it goes off, it'll be no accident."

"Ian." Fraser's voice stayed level, but the pistol lowered, reluctantly. The big man took another step forward. His eyes were fixed on Roger's, deep blue and slanted; unnervingly like Brianna's.

"I'll ask only the once, and I mean to hear the truth," he said, quite mildly. "Have ye taken my daughter's maidenheid?"

Roger felt his face grow hot as a flood of warmth washed up from chest to hairline. Christ, what had she told her father? And for God's sake, *why*? The last thing he had expected to meet was an infuriated father, bent on avenging his daughter's virtue.

"It's … ah … well, it's not what you think," he blurted. "I mean, we … that is … we meant to …"

"Did ye or no?" Fraser's face was no more than a foot away, completely expressionless, save for whatever it was that burned, far back in his eyes.

"Look—I—damn it, yes! She wanted to—"

Fraser hit him, just under the ribs.

Roger doubled and staggered back, gasping from the blow. It didn't hurt—yet—but he'd felt the force of it all the way to his spine. His principal feeling was one of amazement, tinged with anger.

"Stop," he said, trying to get enough breath to talk. "Stop! For God's sake, I said I—"

Fraser hit him again, this time on the side of the jaw. That one hurt, a glancing blow that scraped the skin and left his jawbone throbbing. Roger jerked back, fear turning rapidly to fury. The bloody sod was trying to kill him!

Fraser swung at him again, but missed as Roger ducked and whirled. Well, to fuck with good family relations, then!

He took a giant step backward, shrugging out of his coat. To his surprise, Fraser didn't come after him, but stood there, fists at his sides, waiting.

The blood was drumming in Roger's ears, and he had no eyes for anyone but Fraser. If it was a fight the bugger wanted, that's what he'd get, then.

Roger crouched, hands up and ready. He'd been taken by surprise, but he wouldn't be caught that way again. No brawler, still he'd been in his share of pub fights. They were well matched for height and reach, and he had more than fifteen years' advantage on the man.

He saw Fraser's right, ducked and countered, felt his fist brush linen as it passed Fraser's side and then the left he hadn't seen took him in the eye. Bloody stars and streaks of light exploded through the side of his head, and tears ran down his cheek as he launched himself at Fraser, roaring.

He hit the man; he could feel his fists strike flesh, but it seemed to make no difference. Through his one sound eye, he could see that broad-boned face, set in eerie calm, like a Viking berserker. He swung, and it disappeared, bobbed up again; he swung, grazing an ear. A blow struck him in the shoulder; he swung half around with it, recovered, and launched himself headfirst.

"She's … mine," Roger gritted between clenched teeth. He had his arms wrapped around Fraser's body, felt the deep-sprung ribs give as he squeezed. He'd crack the bastard like a nut. "Mine … hear?"

Fraser rabbit-punched him in the back of the neck, a glancing blow, but hard enough to numb his left arm and shoulder. He let go his grip, hunched and drove his right shoulder hard into Fraser's chest, trying to drive the older man off his feet.

Fraser took a short step back and hooked him hard, but the blow struck his ribs, not the soft flesh below. Still, it was hard enough to make him grunt and jerk back, crouching to protect himself.

Fraser lowered his head and butted him, straight on; he flew backward and landed hard. Blood from his nose ran down his mouth and chin; with a sense of remoteness, he watched the spatter of dark red drops grow and run together into a splotch on his shirt.

He rolled to one side to avoid the kick he saw coming, but not far enough. As he rolled frantically the other way, it occurred to him, in a detached sort of way, that while he might be fifteen years younger than his opponent, Jamie Fraser had likely spent every one of those fifteen years engaged in physical combat.

He had got momentarily out of range. Gulping air, he rolled up onto his hands and knees. Blood gurgled through smashed cartilage with each breath; he could taste it in the back of his throat, a taste like sheared metal.

"Nuff," he panted. "No. 'Nuff!"

A hand grabbed his hair and jerked back his head. Blue eyes glittered six inches away, and he felt the man's breath hot on his face.

"Not nearly enough," Fraser said, and kneed him in the mouth. He fell over and rolled once, then struggled to his feet. The clearing blurred in a throb of orange and yellow; only instinct got him up and moving.

He was fighting for his life, and knew it. He hurled himself blindly at the weaving figure, got a grip of Fraser's shirt and drove a punch at the man's belly, as hard as he could. Fabric tore and his fist struck bone. Fraser shifted like a snake and shot a hand down between them. He grabbed Roger's testicles and squeezed with all his strength.

Roger stood stock-still, then dropped as though his spinal cord had been severed. There was a split second, before the pain hit, when Roger was conscious of one last thought, cold and clear as a shard of ice. *My God,* he thought, *I'm going to die before I've been born.*

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A FATHER'S SONG

It was well after dark before Jamie came in, and my nerves were thoroughly on edge from the waiting; I could only imagine Brianna's. We had eaten supper—or I should say, supper had been served. None of us had any appetite, either for food or conversation; even Lizzie's normal voracity was noticeably impaired. I hoped the girl wasn't ill; pale and silent, she had pled a headache and gone to bed in the herb shed. Still, it was fortunate in the circumstances; it saved me having to invent an excuse to get rid of her once Jamie did arrive.

The candles had been lit for over an hour when I finally heard the goats bleat in greeting at his step on the path. Brianna looked up at once at the sound, her face pale in the yellow light.

"It'll be all right," I said. She heard the confidence in my voice and nodded, slightly reassured. The confidence was authentic, but not unalloyed. I thought everything *would* be all right eventually—but God knew, it wasn't going to be a jolly family evening. Well as I knew Jamie, there were still a good many circumstances in which I had no idea how he would react—and hearing that his daughter was pregnant by a rapist was certainly one of them.

In the hours since Brianna had made my suspicions a certainty, I had envisioned virtually every possible response he *might* make, several of them involving shouting or the putting of his fists through solid objects, behavior which I always found upsetting. So might Bree, and I knew rather better what *she* might do when upset.

She was under a tight control for the moment, but I knew how precarious her calm demeanor was. Let him say a bruising word to her, and she would flare like a striking match. Beyond red hair and arresting height, she had from Jamie both a passionate nature and a perfect readiness to speak her mind.

So unfamiliar and so anxious to please each other, they had both so far stepped delicately—but there seemed no delicate way of handling this. Unsure whether I should prepare myself to be advocate, interpreter, or referee, it was with rather a hollow feeling that I lifted the latch to let him in.

He had washed at the creek; his hair was damp at the temples, and he had wiped his face on his shirttail, judging by the moist patches on it.

"You're very late; where were you?" I asked, standing on tiptoe to give him a kiss. "And where's Ian?"

"Fergus came and asked could we give him a hand wi' his chimney stones, as he couldna manage verra well by himself. Ian's stayed ower, to help finish the job." He dropped an absent kiss on top of my head, and patted my bottom. He'd been working hard, I thought; he was warm to my touch and smelled pungently of sweat, though the skin of his face was cool and fresh from washing.

"Did Marsali feed you supper?" I peered at him in the gloom. Something seemed different about him, though I couldn't think what.

"No. I dropped a stone and I've maybe broken my blasted finger again; I thought I'd best come home and have ye tend to it." That was it, I thought; he'd patted me with his left hand instead of his right.

"Come into the light and let me see." I drew him to the fire, and made him sit down on one of the oak settles. Brianna was on the other, her sewing spread around her. She got up and came to look over my shoulder.

"Your poor hands, Da!" she said, seeing the swollen knuckles and scraped skin.

"Och, it's no great matter," he said, glancing dismissively at them. "Save for the bloody finger. Ow!"

I felt my way gently over the fourth finger of his right hand, from base to nail, disregarding his small grunt of pain. It was reddened and slightly swollen, but not visibly dislocated.

It always troubled me slightly to examine this hand. I had set a number of broken bones in it long ago, before I knew anything of formal surgery, and working under far from ideal conditions. I had managed; I had saved the hand from amputation, and he had good use of it, but there were small awkwardnesses; slight twistings and thickenings that I was aware of whenever I felt it closely. Still, at the moment, I blessed the opportunity for delay.

I closed my eyes, feeling the fire's warm flicker on my lids as I concentrated. The fourth finger was always stiff; the middle joint had been crushed, and healed frozen. I could see the bone in my mind; not the polished dry surface of a laboratory specimen, but the faintly luminous matte glow of living bone, all the tiny osteoblasts busily laying down their crystal matrix, and the hidden pulse of the blood that fed them.

Once more, I drew my own finger down the length of his, then took it gently between my thumb and index finger, just below the distal joint. I could feel the crack in my mind, a thin dark line of pain.

"There?" I asked, opening my eyes.

He nodded, a faint smile on his lips as he looked at me.

"Just there. I like the way ye look when ye do that, Sassenach."

"What way is that?" I asked, a bit startled to hear that I looked any way in particular.

"I canna describe it, exactly," he said, head tilted to one side as he examined me. "It's maybe like—"

"Madame Lazonga with her crystal ball," Brianna said, sounding amused.

I glanced up, taken aback to find Brianna gazing down at me, head cocked at the same angle, with the same appraising look. She switched her gaze to Jamie. "A fortune-teller, I mean. A seer."

He laughed.

"Aye, I think you're maybe right, *a nighean*. Though it was a priest I was thinking of; the way they look saying Mass, when they look past the bread and see the flesh of Christ instead. Not that I should think to compare my measly finger wi' the Body of Our Lord, mind," he added, with a modest nod toward the offending digit.

Brianna laughed, and a smile curved his mouth on one side, as he looked up at her, his eyes soft despite the lines of tiredness round them. He'd had a long day, I thought. And likely to be a lot longer. I would have given anything to hold that fleeting moment of connection between them, but it had passed already.

"*I* think you are both ridiculous," I said. I touched his finger lightly at the spot I'd held. "The bone is cracked, just there below the joint. It's not bad, though; no more than a hairline fracture. I'll splint it, just in case."

I got up and went to rummage through my medical chest for a linen bandage and one of the long, flat wood chips I used as tongue depressors. I glanced covertly over the raised lid, watching him. Something was definitely odd about him this evening, though I still couldn't put my finger on it.

I had sensed it from the first, even through my own agitation, and sensed it even more strongly when I held his hand to examine it; a sort of energy pulsed through him, as though he were excited or upset, though he gave no outward sign of it. He was bloody good at hiding things when he wanted to; what the hell had happened at Fergus's house?

Brianna said something to Jamie, too low for me to catch, and then turned away without waiting for an answer, and came to join me by the open chest.

"Do you have some ointment, for his hands?" she asked. Then, leaning close on pretext of looking into the chest, said in a low voice, "Should I tell him tonight? He's tired and he's hurt. Hadn't I better let him rest?"

I glanced at Jamie. He was leaning back against the settle, eyes wide open as he watched the flames, hands resting flat on his thighs. He wasn't relaxed, though; whatever strange current was flowing through him, it had him strung like a telegraph wire.

"He might rest better not knowing, but you won't," I said, equally low-voiced. "Go ahead and tell him. You might let him eat first, though," I added practically. I was a strong believer in meeting bad news on a full stomach.

I splinted Jamie's finger while Brianna sat down beside him and dabbed gentian ointment onto the abraded knuckles of his other hand. Her face was quite calm; no one would ever guess what was going on behind it.

"You've torn your shirt," I said, finishing off the last bandage with a small square knot. "Give it to me after supper and I'll mend it. How's that, then?"

"Verra nice, Madame Lazonga," he said, gingerly wiggling his freshly splinted finger. "I shall be getting quite spoilt, wi' so much attention paid me."

"When I start to chew your food for you, you can worry," I said tartly.

He laughed, and gave the splinted hand to Bree for anointing.

I went to the cupboard to fetch a plate for him. As I turned back toward the hearth, I saw him watching her intently. She kept her head bent, eyes on the large, callused hand she held between her own. I could imagine her search for words with which to begin, and my heart ached for her. Perhaps I should have told him privately myself, I thought; not let him near her until the first rush of feeling was safely past and he had himself in hand again.

"Ciamar a tha tu, mo chridhe?" he said suddenly. It was his customary greeting to her, the beginning of their evening Gaelic lesson, but his voice was different tonight; soft, and very gentle. *How are you, darling?* His hand turned and covered hers, cradling her long fingers.

"Tha mi gle mhath, athair," she replied, looking a bit surprised. *I am well, Father*. Normally he began the lesson after dinner.

Slowly he reached out with his other hand and rested it gently on her stomach.

"An e 'n fhirinn a th'agad?" he asked. *Do you tell me true?* I closed my eyes and let out a breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. No need to break *all* the news, after all. And now I knew the reason for his taut-strung strangeness; he knew, and whatever the knowledge cost him to hold, hold it he would, and treat her gently.

She didn't know enough Gaelic yet to tell what he'd asked, but she knew well enough what he meant. She stared at him for a moment, frozen, then lifted his sound hand to her cheek and bent her head over it, the loose hair hiding her face.

"Oh, Da," she said, very quietly. "I'm sorry."

She sat quite still, holding to his hand as though it were a lifeline.

"Ah, now, *m' annsachd,*" he said softly, "it will be all right."

"No, it won't," she said, her voice small but clear. "It can't ever be right. You know that."

He glanced at me out of habit, but only briefly. I couldn't tell him what to do, now. He drew a deep breath, took her by the shoulder and gave her a gentle shake.

"All I know," he said softly, "is that I'm here by ye, and your mother, too. We willna see ye shamed or hurt. Not ever. D'ye hear me?"

She didn't answer or look up, but kept her eyes on her lap, her face hidden by the rich fall of her hair. A maiden's hair, thick and unbound. His hand traced the shining curve of her head, then his fingers trailed along her jaw and lifted her chin so her eyes looked into his.

"Lizzie's right?" he asked gently. "It was rape?"

She pulled her chin away and looked down at her knotted hands, the gesture as much an admission as her nod.

"I didn't think she knew. I didn't tell her."

"She guessed. But it's no your fault, and dinna ever think so," he said firmly. "Come here to me, *a leannan.*" He reached for her, and gathered her awkwardly onto his knee.

The oakwood creaked alarmingly under their combined weight, but Jamie had built it after his usual sturdy fashion; it could have held six of him. Tall as Brianna was, she looked almost small cradled in his arms, her head tucked into the curve of his shoulder. He stroked her hair gently, and murmured small things to her, half in Gaelic.

"I'll see ye safe marrit, and your bairn wi' a good father," he murmured to her. "I swear it to ye, *a nighean.*"

"I can't marry anybody," she said, sounding choked. "It wouldn't be right. I can't take somebody else when I love Roger. And Roger won't want me now. When he finds out—"

"It'll make no difference to him," Jamie said, grasping her harder, almost fiercely, as though he could make things right by pure force of will. "If he's a decent man, it'll make no difference. And if it does—well, then he doesna deserve ye, and I shall beat him into pulp and stamp on the pieces, and then go and find ye a better man."

She gave a small laugh that turned into a sob, and buried her head in the cloth of his shoulder. He patted her, rocking and murmuring as though she were a tiny girl with a skinned knee, and his eyes met mine over her head.

I hadn't wept when she had told me; mothers are strong. But now she couldn't see me, and Jamie had taken the burden of strength from my shoulders for the moment.

She hadn't cried when she told me, either. But now she clung to him and wept, as much from relief, I thought, as from grief. He simply held her and let her cry, stroking her hair again and again, his eyes on my face.

I blotted my eyes on my sleeve, and he smiled at me, faintly. Brianna had subsided into long, sighing breaths, and he patted her gently on the back.

"I'm hungry, Sassenach," he said. "And I should imagine a wee drop wouldna come amiss for any of us, aye?"

"Right," I said, and cleared my throat. "I'll go and fetch some milk from the shed."

"That's no what I meant by drink!" he called after me in mock outrage.

Ignoring both this and Brianna's choked laugh, I pushed open the door.

The night outside was cold and bright, the autumn stars bright sparks overhead. I wasn't dressed to be outdoors—my face and hands were already beginning to tingle—but I stood quite still nonetheless, letting the cold wind sweep past me, taking with it the tension of the last quarter hour.

Everything was quiet; the crickets and cicadas had long since died or gone underground with the rustling mice, the skunks and possums who left off their endless search for food and went to dream their winter dreams, the rich fat of their efforts wrapped warm about their bones. Only wolves hunted in the cold, starry nights of late autumn, and they went silent, fur-footed on the frozen ground.

"What are we going to do?" I said softly, addressing the question to the overwhelming depths of the vast dark sky overhead.

I heard no sound but the rush of wind in the pine trees; no answer, save the form of my own question—the faint echo of "we" that rang in my ears. That much was true at least; whatever happened, none of us need face things alone. And I supposed that was after all as much answer as I needed, for now.

They were still on the settle when I came back in, red heads close together, haloed by the fire. The smell of gentian ointment mingled with the pungent scent of burning pine and the mouth-watering aroma of the venison stew—quite suddenly, I was hungry.

I let the door close quietly behind me, and slid to the heavy bolt. I went to poke the fire and lay a new supper, fetching down a fresh loaf of bread from the shelf, then went to get sweet butter from the crock in the pantry. I stayed a moment there, glancing over the loaded shelves.

"Put your trust in God, and pray for guidance. And when in doubt, eat." A Franciscan monk had once given me that advice, and on the whole, I had found it useful. I picked out a jar of black currant jam, a small round goat cheese, and a bottle of elderflower wine, to go with the meal.

Jamie was talking quietly when I came back. I finished my preparations, letting the deep lilt of his voice soothe me, as well as Brianna.

"I used to think of you, when ye were small," Jamie was saying to Bree, his voice very soft. "When I lived in the cave; I would imagine that I held ye in my arms, a wee babe. I would hold ye so, against my heart, and sing to ye there, watching the stars go by overhead."

"What would you sing?" Brianna's voice was low, too, barely audible above the crackle of the fire. I could see her hand, resting on his shoulder. Her index finger touched a long, bright strand of his hair, tentatively stroking its softness.

"Old songs. Lullabies I could remember, that my mother sang to me, the same that my sister Jenny would sing to her bairns."

She sighed, a long, slow sound.

"Sing to me now, please, Da."

He hesitated, but then tilted his head toward hers and began to chant softly, an odd tuneless song in Gaelic. Jamie was tone-deaf; the song wavered oddly up and down, bearing no resemblance to music, but the rhythm of the words was a comfort to the ear.

I caught most of the words; a fisher's song, naming the fish of loch and sea, telling the child what he would bring home to her for food. A hunter's song, naming birds and beasts of prey, feathers for beauty and furs for warmth, meat to last the winter. It was a father's song—a soft litany of providence and protection.

I moved quietly around the room, taking down the pewter plates and wooden bowls for supper, coming back to cut bread and spread it with butter.

"Do you know something, Da?" Bree asked softly.

"What's that?" he said, momentarily suspending his song.

"You can't sing."

There was a soft exhalation of laughter and the rustle of cloth as he shifted to make them both more comfortable.

"Aye, that's true. Shall I stop, then?"

"No." She snuggled closer, tucking her head into the curve of his shoulder.

He resumed his tuneless crooning, only to interrupt himself a few moments later.

"D'ye ken something yourself, *a leannan*?"

Her eyes were closed, her lashes casting deep shadows on her cheeks, but I saw her lips curve in a smile.

"What's that, Da?"

"Ye weigh as much as a full-grown deer."

"Shall I get off, then?" she asked, not moving.

"Of course not."

She reached up and touched his cheek.

"Mi gradhaich a thu, athair," she whispered. *My love to you, Father*.

He gathered her tightly against him, bent his head and kissed her forehead. The fire struck a knot of pitch and blazed up suddenly behind the settle, limning their faces in gold and black. His features were harsh-cut and bold; hers, a more delicate echo of his heavy, clean-edged bones. Both stubborn, both strong. And both, thank God, mine.

* * *

Brianna fell asleep after supper, worn out from emotion. I was feeling rather limp, myself, but not yet in any mood to sleep. I was at once exhausted and jittery, with that horrible battlefield feeling, of being in the midst of events beyond my ability to control, but which must be dealt with anyway.

I didn't want to deal with anything. What I wanted was to push away all thought of both present and future, and go back to the peace of the night before.

I wanted to crawl into bed with Jamie, and lie warm against him, the two of us sealed safe beneath the quilts against the growing chill of the room. Watch the embers fade as we talked softly, colloquy changing from the gossip and small jokes of the day to the language of the night. Let our talk go from words to touch, from breath to the small movements of the body that were in themselves question and answer; the completion of our conversation come at last to silence in the unity of sleep.

But trouble lay on the house tonight, and there was no peace between us.

He roamed the house like a caged wolf, picking things up and putting them down. I tidied away the things from dinner, watching him from the corners of my eyes. I wanted nothing more than to talk to him—and at the same time, dreaded it. I had promised Bree not to tell him about Bonnet. But I was a bad enough liar at any time—and he knew my face so well.

I filled a bucket of hot water from the big cauldron, and took the pewter plates outside to rinse clean.

I came back to find Jamie standing by the small shelf where he kept his inkhorn, quills and paper. He had not undressed for bed, but he made no move to take them down and begin the usual evening's work. But of course—he couldn't write, with his damaged hand.

"Do you want me to write something for you?" I asked, seeing him pick up a quill and put it down again.

He turned away with a restless gesture.

"No. I must write to Jenny, of course—and there are other things that must be done—but I canna bear to sit down and think just now."

"I know how you feel," I said sympathetically. He looked at me, a trifle startled.

"I canna tell quite how I feel myself, Sassenach," he said, with a queer laugh. "If ye think ye know, tell me."

"Tired," I said, and laid a hand on his arm. "Angry. Worried." I glanced at Brianna asleep in the trundle. "Heartbroken, maybe," I added softly.

"All of that," he said. "And a good bit more." He wore no stock, but plucked at the collar of his shirt, as though it choked him.

"I canna stay in here," he said. He glanced at me; I was still dressed in my day clothes; skirt, shift, and bodice. "Will ye come out and walk wi' me a bit?"

I went at once to fetch my cloak. It was dark outside; he wouldn't be able to watch my face.

We paced slowly together, across the dooryard and past the sheds, down to the penfold and the field beyond. I held his arm, feeling it tense and stiff under my fingers.

I had no notion how to begin, what to say. Perhaps I should simply keep quiet, I thought. Both of us were still upset, though we had done our best to be calm for Brianna.

I could feel the rage boiling just under his skin. Very understandable, but anger is as volatile as kerosene—bottled under pressure, with no target on which to unleash it. An unwary word of mine might be enough to trigger an explosion. And if he exploded at me, I might either cry or go for his throat—my own mood was far from certain.

We walked for quite a long time, through the trees to the dead cornfield, all round the edge and back, moving all the time soft-footed through a minefield of silence.

"Jamie," I said at last, as we reached the edge of the field, "what have you been doing with your hands?"

"What?" He swung toward me, startled.

"Your hands." I caught one of them, held it between my own. "You didn't do that kind of damage stacking chimney stones."

"Ah." He stood still, letting me touch the swollen knuckles of his hand.

"Brianna," he said. "She—she didna tell ye anything about the man? Did she tell ye his name?"

I hesitated—and was lost. He knew me very well.

"She did tell ye, no?" His voice was thick with danger.

"She made me promise not to tell you," I blurted. "I told her you'd know I was keeping something from you; but Jamie, I did promise—don't make me tell you, please!"

He snorted again, in half-amused disgust.

"Aye, I ken ye well, Sassenach; ye couldna keep a secret from anyone who knows ye in the slightest. Even wee Ian can read ye like a book."

He flapped a hand in dismissal.

"Dinna trouble your conscience. Let her tell me herself, when she will. I can wait." His bruised hand curled slowly against his kilt, and a small shiver ran up my back.

"Your hands," I said again.

He took a deep breath and held them out before him, backs up. He flexed them, slowly.

"D'ye recall, Sassenach, once when we were first acquent? Dougal deviled me to where I thought I must pound him, and yet I couldna do it, then. You told me, 'Hit something, you'll feel better.' " He gave me a wry, lopsided smile. "And I hit a tree. It hurt, but you were right, no? I did feel better, at least for a bit."

“Oh.” I let out my breath, relieved that he didn’t mean to press the matter. Let him wait, then; I doubted that he quite realized yet that his daughter could be as stubborn as he was himself.

“Did she—did she tell ye what happened?” I couldn’t see his face, but the hesitation in his speech was noticeable. “I mean—” He drew in his breath with a deep hiss. “Did the man hurt her?”

“No, not physically.”

I hesitated myself, imagining that I could feel the weight of the ring in my pocket, though of course I couldn’t. Brianna had not asked me to keep anything to myself, other than Bonnet’s name, but I would not tell Jamie any of the details she had told me, unless he asked. And I did not think he would ask; it was the last thing he would want to know.

He didn’t ask; only muttered something under his breath in Gaelic and walked on, head bent.

The silence once broken, I found that I could not bear it any longer. Better to explode than suffocate. I took my hand from his arm.

“What are you thinking?”

“I am wondering—if it is as terrible to be—to be violated … if it is—is not … if there is not … damage.” He shifted his shoulders restlessly, half shrugging as though his coat were too tight.

I knew very well what was in his mind. Wentworth prison, and the faint scars that webbed his back, a net of dreadful memory.

“Bad enough, I suppose,” I said. “Though I expect you’re right, it would be easier to stand if there were no physical reminder of it. But then, there *is* a physical reminder of it,” I felt obliged to add. “And a bloody noticeable one, come to that!” His left hand curled at his side, clenching involuntarily.

“Aye, that’s so,” he muttered. He glanced uncertainly at me, the half-moon’s light gilding the planes of his face. “But still—he didna hurt her, that’s something. If he had … killing would be too good for him,” he finished abruptly.

“There is the very minor detail that you don’t precisely ‘recover’ from pregnancy,” I said with a marked edge to my voice. “If he’d broken her bones or shed her blood, she'd heal. As it is—she isn't ever going to forget it, you know."

"I know!"

I flinched slightly, and he saw it. He made a sketchy gesture of apology.

"I didna mean to shout."

I gave him back a brief nod of acknowledgment, and we walked on, side by side, but not touching.

"It—" he began, and then broke off, glancing at me. He grimaced, impatient with himself.

"I do know," he said, more quietly. "Ye'll forgive me, Sassenach, but I ken the hell of a lot more about the matter than you do."

"I wasn't arguing with you. But you haven't borne a child; you can't know what that's like. It's—"

"You *are* arguing wi' me, Sassenach. Don't." He squeezed my arm, hard, and let it go. There was a touch of humor in his voice, but he was dead serious overall.

"I am trying to tell ye what *I* know." He stood still for a minute, gathering himself.

"I havena put myself in mind of Jack Randall for some good time," he said at last. "I dinna want to do it now. But there it is." He shrugged again, and rubbed a hand hard down one cheek.

"There is body, and there is soul, Sassenach," he said, speaking slowly, ordering his ideas with his words. "You're a physician; ye'll ken the one well. But the other is more important."

I opened my mouth to say that I knew that as well as he did, if not better—but then shut it without saying anything. He didn't notice; he wasn't seeing the dark cornfield, or the maple wood with its leaves gone silver with moonlight. His eyes were fixed on a small room with thick stone walls, furnished with a table and stools and a lamp. And a bed.

"Randall," he said, and his voice was meditative. "The most of what he did to me—I could have stood it." He spread out the fingers of his right hand; the dressing on the cracked finger shone white.

"I would have been afraid, been hurt; I would have meant to kill him for doing it. But I could have lived, after, and not felt his touch always on my skin, felt filthy in myself—were it not that he wasna satisfied with my body. He wanted my soul—and he had it.” The white bandage vanished as his fist folded.

“Aye, well—ye ken all that.” He turned away abruptly and began to walk. I had to scurry to catch him up.

“What I am saying, I suppose, is—was this man a stranger to her, who only took her for a moment’s pleasure? If it was only her body that he wanted … then I think she will heal.”

He took a deep breath and let it out again; I saw the faint white mist surround his head for a moment, the steam of his anger made visible.

“But if he knew her—was close enough to want *her,* and not just any woman—then perhaps it might be that he could touch her soul, and do real damage—”

“You don’t think he did real damage?” My voice rose, despite myself. “Whether he knew her or not—”

“It is different, I tell ye!”

“No, it’s not. I know what you mean—”

“You don’t!”

“I do! But why—”

“Because it is not your body that matters when I take you,” he said. “And ye ken that well enough, Sassenach!”

He turned and kissed me fiercely, taking me completely by surprise. He crushed my lips against my teeth, then took my whole mouth with his, half biting, demanding.

I knew what he wanted of me; the same thing I wanted so desperately of him—reassurance. But neither of us had it to give, tonight.

His fingers dug into my shoulders, slid upward and grasped my neck. The hairs rose up on my arms as he pressed me to him—and then he stopped.

“I can’t,” he said. He squeezed my neck hard, and then let go. His breath came raggedly. “I can’t.”

He stepped back and turned away from me, groping for the fence rail before him as though blind. He grasped the wood hard with both hands, and stood there, eyes closed.

I was shaking, my legs gone watery. I wrapped my arms around myself under my cloak and sat down at his feet. And waited, my heart beating painfully loud in my ears. The night wind moved through the trees on the ridge, murmuring through the pines. Somewhere, far away in the dark hills, a panther screamed, sounding like a woman.

"It's not that I dinna want ye," he said at last, and I caught the faint rustle of his coat as he turned toward me. He stood for a moment, head bowed, his bound hair gleaming in the moonlight, face hidden by the darkness, with the moon behind him. At last he leaned down and took my hand in his bruised one, lifting me to my feet.

"I want ye maybe more than I ever have," he said quietly. "And Christ! I do need ye, Claire. But I canna bear even to think of myself as a man just now. I cannot touch you, and think of what he—I can't."

I touched his arm.

"I do understand," I said, and did. I was glad that he hadn't asked for the details; I wished I didn't know them. How would it be, to make love with him, envisioning all the time an act identical in its motions, but utterly different in its essence?

"I understand, Jamie," I said again.

He opened his eyes and looked at me.

"Aye, ye do, don't you? And that's what I mean." He took my arm and drew me close to him.

"You could tear me limb from limb, Claire, without touching me," he whispered, "for ye know me." His fingers touched the side of my face. They were cold, and stiff. "And I could do the same to you."

"You could," I said, feeling a little faint. "But I really wish you wouldn't."

He smiled a little at that, bent and kissed me, very gently. We stood together, barely touching save our lips, breathing each other's breath.

Yes, we said silently to each other. *Yes, I am still here*. It was not rescue, but at least a tiny lifeline, stretched across the gulf that lay between us. I did know what he meant, about the difference between damage to body or soul; what I couldn't explain to him was the link between the two that centered in the womb. At last I stepped back, looking up at him.

"Bree's a very strong person," I said quietly. "Like you."

"Like me?" He gave a small snort. "God help her, then."

He sighed, then turned and began to walk slowly along the line of the fence. I followed, hurrying a little to catch up.

"This man, this Roger she speaks of. Will he stand by her?" he asked abruptly.

I took a deep breath and let it out slowly, not knowing how to answer. I'd known Roger only a few months. I liked him; was very fond of him, in fact. From everything I knew of him, he was a thoroughly decent, honorable young man—but how could I even pretend to know what he might think, do, or feel, upon finding that Brianna had been raped? Even worse, that she might well carry the rapist's child?

The best of men might not be able to deal with such a situation; in my years as a doctor, I had seen even well-established marriages shatter under the strain of smaller things. And those that did not shatter, but were crippled by mistrust … involuntarily, I pressed a hand against my leg, feeling the tiny hardness of the gold circle in my pocket. *From F. to C. with love. Always*.

"Would you do it?" I said at last. "If it were me?"

He glanced at me sharply, and opened his mouth as though to speak. Then he closed it and looked at me, searching my face, his brows knotted with troubled thought.

"I meant to say 'Aye, of course!' " he said slowly, at last. "But I did promise ye honesty once, did I not?"

"You did," I said, and felt my heart sink beneath its guilty burden. How could I force him to honesty when I couldn't give it him back? And yet he had asked.

He struck the fencepost a light blow with his fist.

"*Ifrinn!* Yes, damn it—I would. You would be mine, even if the child was not. And if you—yes. I would," he repeated firmly. "I should take you, and the child with ye, and damn the whole world!"

“And never think about it afterward?” I asked. “Never let it come into your mind when you came to my bed? Never see the father when you looked at the child? Never throw it back at me or let it make a difference between us?”

He opened his mouth to reply, but closed it without speaking. Then I saw a change come over his features, a sudden shock of sick realization.

“Oh, Christ,” he said. “Frank. Not me. It’s Frank ye mean.”

I nodded, and he gripped my shoulders.

“What did he do to ye?” he demanded. “What? Tell me, Claire!”

“He stood by me,” I said, sounding choked even to my own ears. “I tried to make him go, but he wouldn’t. And when the baby—when Brianna came—he loved her, Jamie. He wasn’t sure, he didn’t think he could—neither did I—but he truly did. I’m sorry,” I added.

He took a deep breath and let go of my shoulders.

“Dinna be sorry for that, Sassenach,” he said gruffly. “Never.” He rubbed a hand across his face, and I could hear the faint rasp of his evening stubble.

“And what about you, Sassenach?” he said. “What ye said—when he came to your bed. Did he think—” He broke off abruptly, leaving all the questions hanging in the air between us, unstated, but asked nonetheless.

“It might have been me—my fault, I mean,” I said at last, into the silence. “I couldn’t forget, you see. If I could … it might have been different.” I should have stopped there, but I couldn’t; the words that had been dammed up all evening rushed out in a flood.

“It might have been easier—better—for him if it *had* been rape. That’s what they told him, you know—the doctors; that I had been raped and abused, and was having delusions. That’s what everyone believed, but I kept saying to him, no it wasn’t that way, I insisted on telling him the truth. And after a time—he believed me, at least halfway. And that was the trouble; not that I’d had another man’s child—but that I’d loved you. And I wouldn’t stop. I couldn’t,” I added, in a softer tone. “He was better than me, Frank was. He could put the past away, at least for Bree’s sake. But for me—” The words caught in my throat and I stopped.

He turned then, and looked at me for a long time, his face quite expressionless, eyes hidden by the shadows of his brows.

"And so ye lived twenty years with a man who couldna forgive ye for what was never your fault? I did that to ye, no?" he said. "I am sorry, too, Sassenach."

A small breath escaped me, not quite a sob.

"You said you could tear me limb from limb without touching me," I said. "You were right, damn you."

"I am sorry," he whispered again, but this time he reached for me, and held me tight against him.

"That I loved you? Don't be sorry for that," I said, my voice half muffled in his shirt. "Not ever."

He didn't answer, but bent his head and pressed his cheek against my hair. It was quiet; I could hear his heart beating, over and under the wind in the trees. My skin was cold; the tears on my cheeks chilled instantly.

At last I let my arms drop from around him and stepped back.

"We'd better go back to the house," I said, trying for a normal tone. "It's getting awfully late."

"Aye, I suppose so." He offered me his arm, and I took it. We passed in an easier silence down the path to the edge of the gorge above the stream. It was cold enough that tiny ice crystals glinted among the rocks where the starlight struck them, but the creek was far from frozen. Its gurgle and rush filled the air, and kept us from being too quiet.

"Aye, well," he said, as we turned up the path past the pigsty. "I hope Roger Wakefield is a better man than the two of us—Frank and I." He glanced at me. "Mind ye, if he's not, I shall beat him to a pudding."

Despite myself I laughed.

"That will be a *great* help to the situation, I'm sure."

He snorted briefly and walked on. At the bottom of the hill, we turned without speaking, and came back in the direction of the house. Just short of the path that led to the door, I stopped him.

"Jamie," I said hesitantly. "Do you believe I love you?"

He turned his head and looked down at me for a long moment before replying. The moon shone on his face, picking out his features as though they had been chiseled in marble.

"Well, if ye don't, Sassenach," he said at last, "ye've picked a verra poor time to tell me so."

I let out my breath in the ghost of a laugh.

"No, it's not that," I assured him. "But—" My throat tightened, and I swallowed hastily, needing to get the words out.

"I—I don't say it often. Perhaps it's only that I wasn't raised to say such things; I lived with my uncle, and he was affectionate, but not—well, I didn't know how married people—"

He put his hand lightly over my mouth, a faint smile touching his lips. After a moment, he took it away.

I took a deep breath, steadying my voice.

"Look, what I mean to say is—if I don't say it, how do you *know* I love you?"

He stood still, looking at me, then nodded in acknowledgment.

"I know because ye're here, Sassenach," he said quietly. "And that's what ye mean, aye? That he came after her—this Roger. And so perhaps he will love her enough?"

"It's not a thing you'd do, just for friendship's sake."

He nodded again, but I hesitated, wanting to tell him more, to impress him with the significance of it.

"I haven't told you a great deal about it, because—there aren't words for it. But one thing about it I could tell you. Jamie—" I shivered involuntarily, and not from the cold. "Not everyone who goes through the stones comes out again."

His look sharpened.

"How d'ye ken that, Sassenach?"

"I can—I could—hear them. Screaming."

I was shaking outright by this time, from a mixture of cold and memory, and he caught my hands between his own and drew me close. The autumn wind rattled the branches of the willows by the stream, a sound like dry, bare bones. He held me until the shivering stopped, then let me go.

“It’s cold, Sassenach. Come inside.” He turned toward the house, but laid my hand on his shoulder to stop him again.

“Jamie?”

“Aye?”

“Should I—would you—do you need me to say it?”

He turned around and looked down at me. With the light behind him, he was haloed in moonlight, but his features were once more dark.

“I dinna need it, no.” His voice was soft. “But I wouldna mind if ye wanted to say it. Now and again. Not too often, mind; I wouldna want to lose the novelty of it.” I could hear the smile in his voice, and couldn’t help smiling in return, whether he could see it or not.

“Once in a while wouldn’t hurt, though?”

“No.”

I stepped close to him and put my hands on his shoulders.

“I love you.”

He looked down at me for a long moment.

“I’m glad of it, Claire,” he said quietly, and touched my face. “Verra glad. Come to bed now; I’ll warm ye.”

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AWAY IN A MANGER

The tiny stable was in a shallow cave under a rocky overhang, walled in along the front with a stockade of unpeeled cedar logs, sunk two feet deep in packed earth, stout enough to deter the most resolute bear. Light spilled out through the open upper half of the stable door, and ruddy, light-filled smoke shimmered up the face of the cliff above, rippling like bright water over the stone.

“Why a double door?” she had asked. It seemed excessive labor; an unnecessary refinement for such a crude structure.

“Ye must give the beasts a place to look out,” her father had explained, showing her where to smooth the leather strap hinges tight around the curve of the wood. He picked up the hammer to tack down the leather and smiled at her, kneeling over the half-made gate. “Keeps them happy, aye?”

She didn’t know if the animals were happy in the stable, but *she* was; cool and shadowy, smelling pungently of cut straw and the droppings of grass-fed animals, it was a peaceful refuge during the day, when its inhabitants were out grazing in the meadow. In bad weather or at night, the little stockade was a pocket of coziness; once she had passed near enough after dark to see the soft, misty exhalations of the animals drifting through the gap between wood and rock, as though the earth itself were breathing through pursed lips, warmly asleep in the autumn cold.

It was cold tonight, the stars sharp as needle points in the hard, clear air. It was only five minutes’ walk from the house, but Brianna was shivering under her cloak by the time she reached the stable.

The light spilling out came not only from a hanging lantern, she saw, but also from a small makeshift brazier in the corner, providing heat and light for the vigil within.

Her father lay curled up on a bed of straw, his plaid drawn over him, within arm's reach of the small brindled cow. The heifer lay on her chest, feet tucked to the side, grunting now and then, a look of mild concentration on her broad white face.

His head lifted abruptly at the sound of her step on the gravel, and his hand went by reflex to his belt, under his plaid.

"It's me," she said, and saw him relax as she came into the light. He swung his feet to the side and sat up, rubbing a hand over his face as she came in, carefully latching the lower gate behind her.

"Your mother's not back yet?" She was clearly alone, but he glanced briefly over her shoulder as though hoping to see Claire materialize out of the darkness.

Brianna shook her head. Claire had gone with Lizzie as escort to attend a birth at one of the farms at the far side of the cove; if the child hadn't arrived before sunset, they would stay the night at the Lachlans'.

"No. She said if she wasn't back, I was to bring you up some supper, though." She knelt and began to unpack the small basket she had brought, laying out small loaves of bread stuffed with cheese and tomato-pickle, a dried-apple tart, and two stone bottles—one of hot vegetable broth, the other of cider.

"That's kind, lassie." He smiled at her and picked up one of the bottles. "Will ye have eaten yet, yourself?"

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "Plenty." She *had* eaten, but couldn't resist a quick look of longing at the fresh rolls; the early faint sense of malaise had left her, replaced by an appetite mildly alarming in its intensity.

He saw her glance, and with a smile, drew his dirk and sliced one of the rolls in half, handing her the bigger piece.

They munched companionably for a few moments, sitting side by side on the straw, the silence broken only by soft snuffles and grunts from the stable's other inhabitants. The far end of the stable was fenced off to provide a pen for the gigantic sow and her new brood of piglets; Brianna could just make them out in the gloom—a row of plump bodies packed in the straw, prophetically sausage-shaped.

The rest of the small space was divided into three rough stalls. One belonged to the red cow, Magdalen, who lay in the straw peacefully chewing her cud, her month-old calf curled in sleep against her massive chest. The second stall was empty, filled with fresh straw, ready for the brindled cow and her tardy calf. The third stall held Ian's mare, sides glossy and bulging with the weight of an impending foal.

"It looks like a maternity ward in here," Brianna said, nodding toward Magdalen as she brushed crumbs off her skirt. Jamie smiled and raised a brow, as he always did when she said something he didn't understand.

"Oh, aye?"

"That's a special part of a hospital, where they put the new mothers and their babies," she explained. "Mama would take me to work with her sometimes, and let me go look at the nursery while she did her rounds."

She had a sudden memory of the smell of the hospital corridor, faintly acrid with the scent of disinfectant and floor polish, the babies lying bundled, plump as piglets in their bassinets, their blankets coded pink and blue. She always spent a long time going up and down the row, trying to pick which one she would take home with her, if she could keep one.

Pink or blue? For the first time, she wondered what the one she *would* now keep might wear. The thought of "it" as male or female was strangely upsetting, and she pushed the thought away with words.

"They put the babies all behind a glass wall, so you could look at them, but not breathe germs on them," she said, with a glance at Magdalen, contentedly oblivious to the strings of green saliva that dripped from her placidly moving jaws onto the head of her calf.

"Germs," he said thoughtfully. "Aye, I've heard about the germs. Dangerous wee beasties, are they not?"

"They can be." She had a vivid memory of her mother checking her box of medical supplies for the visit to Lachlans', carefully refilling the large glass bottle of distilled alcohol from the barrel in the pantry. And a more distant but equally vivid memory, of her mother explaining the past to Roger Wakefield.

“Childbirth was the most dangerous thing a woman could do,” Claire had said, frowning in memory of the sights she had seen. “Infection, ruptured placenta, abnormal presentation, miscarriage, hemorrhage, puerperal fever—in most places, surviving birth was roughly a fifty-fifty proposition.”

Brianna’s fingers felt cold, in spite of the hissing pine chunks in the brazier, and her ravenous appetite seemed suddenly to have deserted her. She set the rest of her roll down on the straw, swallowing hard, feeling as though a bite of the thick bread had wedged itself in her throat.

Her father’s broad hand touched her knee, warm even through the wool of her skirt.

“Your mother willna let ye come to harm,” he said gruffly. “She’s fought the germs before; I’ve seen her. She didna let them have the better of me, and she willna let them trouble you, either. She’s a verra stubborn person, aye?”

She laughed, and the choking feeling eased.

“She’d say it takes one to know one.”

“I expect she’s right about that.” He rose and walked around the brindled heifer, squatting down and squinting at her tail. He stood up, shaking his head, and came to sit down again. He settled comfortably back and picked up the discarded part of Brianna’s roll.

“Is she doing all right?” Brianna bent and scooped up a twist of straw, holding it invitingly under the heifer’s nose. The cow breathed heavily on her knuckles, but otherwise ignored the attention, the long-lashed brown eyes rolling restlessly to and fro. Now and then the bulging brindled sides rippled, the cow’s thick winter coat rough but shining in the light of the hanging lantern.

Jamie frowned slightly.

“Aye, I think she’ll maybe do all right. It’s her first calf, though, and she’s small for it. She’s no much more than a yearling herself; she shouldna have been bred so early, but …” He shrugged, and took another bite of roll.

Brianna wiped the sticky moisture from her hand with a fold of her skirt. Feeling suddenly restless, she stood up and walked over to the pigpen.

The vast curve of the sow's belly rose up out of the hay like a swollen balloon, pink flesh visible beneath the soft, sparse white hair. The sow lay in stuporous dignity, breathing slow and deep, ignoring the squirms and squeaks of the hungry brood that scrabbled at her underside. One piglet was nudged too roughly by a fellow and momentarily lost his hold; there was a high-pitched shriek of protest, and a jet of milk spurted from the suddenly released nipple, hissing softly into the hay.

Brianna felt a slight tingle in her own breasts; they seemed suddenly heavier than usual, resting on her folded forearms as she leaned on the fence.

It wasn't a particularly aesthetic picture of motherhood—not exactly Madonna and Child—but there was something vaguely reassuring about the sow's nonchalant maternal torpor, nonetheless—a sort of careless confidence, a blind trust in natural processes.

Jamie had another look at the brindled cow, and came to stand beside Brianna by the pigpen.

"That's a good wee lass," he said approvingly, with a nod at the sow. As though in reply, the sow released a long, rumbling fart, and shifted a bit, stretching out in the straw with a voluptuous sigh.

"Well, she does look as though she knows what she's doing," Brianna agreed, biting her lip.

"That she does. She's a wicked temper, but she's an able mother, forbye. This will be her fourth litter, and not one lost or a runt weaned yet." He nodded approvingly at the sow, then glanced at the brindled heifer. "I could hope that one does half so well."

She took a deep breath.

"What if she doesn't?"

He didn't answer at once, but stood leaning on the fence, looking down at the gently squirming litter. Then his shoulders rose slightly.

"If she canna bring forth the calf alone, and I canna pull it for her, then I shall have to slaughter her," he said, matter-of-factly. "If I can save the calf, I can maybe foster it on Magdalen."

Her insides clenched tight, making lumps and knots of the food she'd eaten. She'd seen the dirk at his belt, of course, but it was so much a part of his normal costume, she hadn't thought to question its presence in this pastoral setting. The small round presence in her belly lay still and heavy, like a time bomb waiting.

He crouched beside the brindled heifer, and ran a light hand over the bulging flank. Evidently satisfied for the moment, he scratched the cow between the ears, muttering in Gaelic.

How could he murmur endearments to it, she thought, knowing that within hours he might be slicing into its living flesh? It seemed cold-blooded; did a butcher whisper "Sweet lass" to his victims? A small icy doubt dropped into her stomach, to join the other cold weights that lay there, like a collection of ball bearings.

He stood up and stretched himself, groaning as his spine crackled. He shifted his shoulders, settled, blinked, and smiled at her.

"Will I walk ye to the house, lassie? It will be some time before aught happens here."

She looked up at him, hesitating, but then made up her mind.

"No, I'll wait with you a little while. If you don't mind?"

Now, she decided on impulse. She would ask now. She had been waiting for days for the right time, but when could a time possibly *be* right for something like this? At least they would be alone now, with no chance of disturbance.

"As ye like. I shall be glad of the company."

Not for long, she thought, as he turned away to rummage in the basket she had brought. She would much have preferred darkness. It would have been a lot easier to ask what she needed to know, on the dark trail to the house. But words wouldn't be enough; she had to see his face.

Her mouth was dry; she accepted gratefully when he offered her a cup of cider. It was strong and rich, and the slight buzz of alcohol seemed to lighten the weight in her belly a little.

She gave him the cup but didn't wait for him to drink, afraid the momentary heartening effect of the cider would desert her before she could get the words out.

"Da—"

"Aye, lass?" He was pouring more cider, his eyes fixed on the cloudy golden stream.

"I need to ask you something."

"Mm?"

She took a deep breath and got it out in a rush.

"Did you kill Jack Randall?"

He froze for a moment, the jug still tilted over the cup. Then he turned the jug carefully upright, and set it down on the floor.

"And where will ye have heard that name?" he asked. He looked at her straight on, his voice as level as his eyes. "From your father, maybe? From Frank Randall?"

"Mother told me about him."

A muscle twitched near the corner of his mouth, the only outward indication of shock.

"Did she."

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway.

"She told me what—what happened. What he d-did to you. At Wentworth."

Her small spurt of courage was exhausted, but it didn't matter; she was in too deep to go back now. He simply sat and looked at her, the gourd cup forgotten in his hand. She longed to take it and drain it herself, but didn't dare.

It occurred to her, much too late, that he might think it a betrayal that Claire had told anyone, let alone her. She rushed ahead, babbling in her nervousness.

"It wasn't now; it was before—I didn't know you—she thought I'd never meet you. I mean—I don't think—I know she didn't mean to—" He raised one eyebrow at her.

"Be still, aye?"

She was only too glad to stop talking. She couldn't look at him, but sat staring down at her lap, her fingers pleating the russet cloth of her skirt. The silence lengthened, broken only by the shiftings and muffled squeals of the piglets, and an occasional digestive rumbling from Magdalen.

Why hadn't she found some other way? she wondered, in an agony of embarrassment. *Thou shalt not uncover they father's* *nakedness*. To invoke Jack Randall's name was to invoke the images of what he had done—and that was not something she could bear even to think about. She should have asked her mother, let Claire ask him … but no. There hadn't been any choice, not really. She had to find out from him …

Her racing thoughts were interrupted by his words, calmly spoken.

"Why are ye asking, lass?"

She jerked her head up, to find him watching her over his undrunk cider. He didn't look upset, and the jelly in her backbone stiffened a little. She clenched her fists on her knees to steady herself, and met his eyes, straight on.

"I need to know whether it will help. I want to kill … him. The man who—" She made a vague gesture at her belly, and swallowed hard. "But if I do, and it doesn't help—" She couldn't go on.

He didn't seem shocked; abstracted, rather. He raised the cup to his mouth and took a sip, slowly.

"Mmphm. And will ye have killed a man before?" He phrased it as a question, but she knew it wasn't. The muscle quivered near his mouth again—with amusement, she thought, not shock—and she felt a quick spurt of anger.

"You think I can't, don't you? I can. You'd better believe me, I can!" Her hands spread out, gripping her knees, broad and capable. She thought she could do it; though her image of how it might happen wavered. In cold blood, shooting seemed the best, perhaps the only certain way. But trying to imagine this, she had realized vividly the truth of the old saying "Shooting's too good for him."

It might be too good for Bonnet; it wouldn't be nearly good enough for *her*. In the night when she flung off her blankets, unable to bear even this slight weight and its reminder of restraint, she didn't just want him dead—she wanted to *kill* him, purely and passionately—kill him with her hands, taking back by the flesh what had been taken from her by that means.

And yet … what good would it be to murder him, if he would still haunt her? There was no way to know—unless her father could tell her.

"Will you tell me?" she blurted. "Did you kill him, finally—and did it help?"

He seemed to be thinking it over, his eyes traveling slowly over her, narrowed in assessment.

"And what would be helped by your doing murder?" he asked. "It willna take the child from your belly—or give ye back your maidenheid."

"I know that!" She felt her face flush hot, and turned away, irritated both with him and herself. They spoke of rape and murder, and she was embarrassed to have him mention her lost virginity? She forced herself to look back at him.

"Mama said you tried to kill Jack Randall in Paris, in a duel. What did *you* think you'd get back?"

He rubbed his chin hard, then drew in his breath through his nose and let it out slowly, eyes fixed on the stained rock of the ceiling.

"I meant to take back my manhood," he said softly. "My honor."

"You think my honor isn't worth taking back? Or do you figure it's the same thing as my *maidenheid*?" She mocked his accent nastily.

Sharp blue eyes swung back to hers.

"Is it the same thing to *you*?"

"No, it is not," she said, through clenched teeth.

"Good," he said, shortly.

"Then answer me, damn it!" She struck a fist on the straw, finding no satisfaction in the soundless blow. "Did killing him give you back your honor? Did it help? Tell me the truth!"

She stopped, breathing heavily. She glared at him, and he met her eyes with a cold stare. Then he raised the cup abruptly to his mouth, swallowed the cider in one gulp, and set the cup down on the hay beside him.

"The truth? The truth is that I dinna ken whether I killed him or no."

Her mouth dropped open in surprise.

"You don't *know* whether you killed him?"

"I said so." A slight jerk of the shoulders betrayed his impatience. He stood up abruptly, as if unable to sit any longer.

"He died at Culloden, and I was there. I woke on the moor after the battle, with Randall's corpse on top of me. I ken that much—and not much more." He paused as though thinking, then, mind made up, he thrust one knee forward, pulled up his kilt and nodded downward. "Look."

It was an old scar, but no less impressive for its age. It ran up the inner side of his thigh, nearly a foot in length, its lower end starred and knotted like the head of a mace, the rest of it a cleaner line, though thick and twisted.

"A bayonet, I expect," he said, looking at it dispassionately. He dropped the kilt, hiding the scar once more.

"I remember the feel of the blade strikin' bone, and no more. Not what came after—or before."

He took a deep, audible breath, and for the first time she realized that his apparent calmness was taking a good deal of effort to maintain.

"I thought it a blessing—that I couldna remember," he said at last. He wasn't looking at her, but into the shadows at the end of the stable. "There were gallant men who died there; men I loved well. If I didna know their deaths; if I couldna recall them or see them in my mind—then I didna have to think of them as dead. Maybe that was cowardice, maybe not. Perhaps I chose not to remember that day; perhaps I cannot if I would." He looked down at her, his eyes gone softer, but then turned away, plaid swinging, not waiting for an answer.

"Afterward—aye, well. Vengeance didna seem important, then. There were a thousand dead men on that field, and I thought I should be one of them in hours. Jack Randall …" He made an odd, impatient gesture, brushing aside the thought of Jack Randall as he might a biting deerfly. "He *was* one of them. I thought I could leave him to God. Then."

She took a deep breath, trying to keep her feelings under control. Curiosity and sympathy struggled with an overwhelming feeling of frustration.

"You're … all right, though. I mean—in spite of what he—did to you?"

He gave her a look of exasperation, understanding mingled with half-angry amusement.

"Not many die of it, lass. Not me. And not you."

"Not *yet.*" Involuntarily, she put a hand over her belly. She stared up at him. "I guess we'll see in six months if I die of it."

That rattled him; she could see it. He blew out his breath and scowled at her.

"Ye'll do fine," he said curtly. "Ye're wider through the hip than yon wee heifer."

"Like your mother? Everybody says how much I'm like her. I guess she was wide through the hip, too, but it didn't save *her,* did it?"

He flinched. Quick and sharp as though she'd slapped him across the face with a stinging nettle. Perversely, seeing it filled her with panic, rather than the satisfaction she'd expected.

She understood then that his promise of protection was in good part illusion. He would kill for her, yes. Or willingly die himself, she had no doubt. He would—if she let him—avenge her honor, destroy her enemies. But he could not defend her from her own child; he was as powerless to save her from that threat as if she had never found him.

"I'll die," she said, cold certainty filling her belly like frozen mercury. "I know I will."

"Ye won't!" He rounded on her fiercely, and she felt his hands bite into her upper arms. "I will not let you!"

She would have given anything to believe him. Her lips were numb and stiff, rage giving way to a cold despair.

"You can't help," she said. "You can't do anything!"

"Your mother can," he said, but sounded only half convinced. His grip slackened, and she wrenched herself free.

"No, she can't—not without a hospital, without drugs and things. If it—if it goes wrong, all she can do is try to save the b-baby." Despite herself, her gaze flickered to his dirk, blade gleaming cold against the straw where he had left it.

Her knees felt watery, and she sat down suddenly. He snatched up the jug and slopped cider into a cup, pushing it under her nose.

“Drink it,” he said. “Drink up, lass, you’re pale as my sark.” His hand was on the back of her head, urging her. She took a sip, but choked and drew back, waving him off. She drew a sleeve across her wet chin, wiping off the spilled cider.

“You know what’s the worst? You said it wasn’t my fault, but it is.”

“It is not!”

She flapped a hand at him, bidding him be quiet.

“You talked about cowardice; you know what it is. Well, I was a coward. I should have fought, I shouldn’t have let him … but I was scared of him. If I’d been brave enough, this wouldn’t have happened, but I wasn’t, I was scared! And now I’m even more scared,” she said, voice breaking. She took a deep breath to steady herself, bracing her hands on the straw.

“You can’t help, and neither can Mama, and I can’t do anything either. And Roger—” Her voice did crack then, and she bit her lip hard, forcing back tears.

“Brianna—*a leannan* …” He made a move to comfort her, but she drew back, arms folded tight across her stomach.

“I keep thinking—if I kill him, that’s something I can do. It’s the *only* thing I can do. If I—if I have to die, at least I’ll take him with me, and if I don’t—then maybe I can forget, if he’s dead.”

“Ye willna forget.” The words were blunt and uncompromising as a blow to the stomach. He was still holding the cup of cider. Now he tilted back his head and drank, quite deliberately.

“It doesna matter, though,” he said, setting down the cup with an air of businesslike finality. “We shall find you a husband, and once the babe’s born, ye willna have much time to fret.”

“What?” She gaped at him. “What do you mean, find me a husband?”

“You’ll need one, aye?” he said, in tones of mild surprise. “The bairn must have a father. And if ye willna tell me the name of the man who’s given ye a swollen belly, so that I might make him do his duty by ye—”

“You think I’d *marry* the man who did this?” Her voice cracked again, this time with astonishment.

His voice sharpened slightly.

"Well, I'm thinkin'—are ye maybe playin' wi' the truth a bit, lass? Perhaps it wasna rape at all; perhaps it was that ye took a mislike to the man, and ran—and made up the story later. Ye were not marked, after all. Hard to think a man could force a lass of your size, if ye were unwilling altogether."

"You think I'm *lying*?"

He raised one brow in cynicism. Furious, she swung a hand at him, but he caught her by the wrist.

"Ah, now," he said, reprovingly. "Ye're no the first lass to make a slip and try to hide it, but—" He caught the other wrist as she struck at him, and pulled them both up sharply.

"Ye dinna need to make such a fuss," he said. "Or is it that ye wanted the man and he threw ye over? Is that it?"

She swiveled in his grip, used her weight to swing aside, brought her knee up hard. He turned only slightly, and her knee collided with his thigh, not the vulnerable flesh between his legs she had been aiming for.

The blow must have bruised him, but didn't lessen his grip on her wrists in the least. She twisted, kicking, cursing her skirts. She hit his shin dead-on at least twice, but he only chuckled, as though finding her struggles funny.

"Is that all ye can do, lassie?" He broke his grip then, but only to shift both her wrists to one hand. The other prodded her playfully in the ribs.

"There was a man
In Muir of Skene,
He had dirks
And I had none;
But I fell on him
With my thumbs,
And wot you how,
I dirkit him,
Dirkit him,
Dirkit him?"

With each repetition, he dug a thumb hard between her ribs.

"You fucking *bastard*!" she screamed. She braced her feet and yanked down on his arm as hard as she could, bringing it into biting range. She lunged at his wrist, but before she could sink her teeth in his flesh, she found herself jerked off her feet and whirled through the air.

She ended hard on her knees, one arm twisted up behind her back so tightly that her shoulder joint cracked. The strain on her elbow hurt; she writhed, trying to turn into the hold, but couldn't budge. An arm like an iron bar clamped across her shoulders, forcing her head down. And farther down.

Her chin drove into her chest; she couldn't breathe. And still he forced her head down. Her knees slid apart, her thighs forced wide by the downward pressure.

"Stop!" she grunted. It hurt to force sound through her constricted windpipe. "Gd's sk, stp!"

The relentless pressure paused, but did not ease. She could feel him there behind her, an inexorable, inexplicable force. She reached back with her free hand, groping for something to claw, something to hit or bend, but there was nothing.

"I could break your neck," he said, very quietly. The weight of his arm left her shoulders, though the twisted arm still held her bent forward, hair loose and tumbled, nearly touching the floor. A hand settled on her neck. She could feel thumb and index fingers on either side, pressing lightly on her arteries. He squeezed, and black spots danced before her eyes.

"I could kill you, so."

The hand left her neck, and touched her, deliberately, knee and shoulder, cheek and chin, emphasizing her helplessness. She jerked her head away, not letting him touch the wetness, not wanting him to feel her tears of rage. Then the hand pressed sudden and brutal on the small of her back. She made a small, choked sound and arched her back to keep her arm from breaking, thrusting out her hips backward, legs spread to keep her balance.

"I could use ye as I would," he said, and there was a coldness in his voice. "Could you stop me, Brianna?"

She felt as though she would suffocate with rage and shame.

"Answer me." The hand took her by the neck again, and squeezed.

"No!"

She was free. So suddenly released, she pitched forward onto her face, barely getting one hand down in time to save herself.

She lay on the straw, panting and sobbing. There was a loud whuffle near her head—Magdalen, roused by the noise, leaning out of her stall to investigate. Slowly, painfully, she raised herself to a sitting position.

He was standing over her, arms folded.

"Damn you!" she gasped. She slammed a hand down in the hay. "God, I want to kill you!"

He stood quite still, looking down at her.

"Aye," he said quietly. "But ye can't, can you?"

She stared up at him, not understanding. His eyes were intent on hers, not angry, not mocking. Waiting.

"You *can't,*" he repeated, with emphasis.

And then realization came, flooding down her aching arms to her bruised fists.

"Oh, God," she said. "No. I can't. I couldn't. Even if I'd fought him … I *couldn't.*"

Quite suddenly she began to cry, the knots inside her slipping loose, the weights shifting, lifting, as a blessed relief spread through her body. It hadn't been her fault. If she had fought with all her strength—as she had fought just now—

"Couldn't," she said, and swallowed hard, gasping for air. "I couldn't have stopped him. I kept thinking, if only I'd fought harder … but it wouldn't have mattered. I couldn't have stopped him."

A hand touched her face, big and very gentle.

"You're a fine, braw lassie," he whispered. "But a lassie, nonetheless. Would ye fret your heart out and think yourself a coward because ye couldna fight off a lion wi' your bare hands? It's the same. Dinna be daft, now."

She wiped the back of her hand under her nose, and sniffed deeply.

He put a hand under her elbow and helped her up, his strength no longer either threat or mockery, but unutterable comfort. Her knees stung, where she had scraped them on the ground. Her legs wobbled, but she made it to the haypile, where he let her sit down.

"You could just have *told* me, you know," she said. "That it wasn't my fault."

He smiled faintly.

"I did. Ye couldna believe me, though, unless ye knew for yourself."

"No. I guess not." A profound but peaceful weariness had settled on her like a blanket. This time she had no urge to tear it off.

She watched, feeling too limp to move, as he wetted a cloth from the trough and wiped her face, straightened her twisted skirts, and poured out a drink for her.

When he handed her the freshly filled cup of cider, though, she laid a hand on his arm. Bone and muscle were solid, warm under her hand.

"You could have fought back. But you didn't."

He laid a big hand over hers, squeezed and let it go.

"No, I didna fight," he said quietly. "I gave my word—for your mother's life." His eyes met hers squarely, neither ice nor sapphire now, but clear as water. "I dinna regret it."

He took her by the shoulders, and eased her down onto the piled hay.

"Do ye rest a bit, *a leannan*."

She lay down, but reached up to touch him as he knelt by her.

"Is it true—that I won't forget?"

He paused for a moment, hand on her hair.

"Aye, that's true," he said softly. "But it's true, too, that it willna matter after a time."

"Won't it?" She was too tired even to wonder what he might mean by this. She felt almost weightless; strangely remote, as though she no longer inhabited her troublesome body. "Even if I'm not strong enough to kill him?"

A clear cold draft from the open door cut through the warm fog of smoke, making all the animals stir. The brindled cow shifted her weight in sudden irritation and let out a low-throated *mwaaah,* not of distress so much as of querulous complaint.

She felt her father glance at the cow before turning back to her.

"You're a verra strong woman, *a bheanachd,*" he said at last, very softly.

"I'm not strong. You just proved I'm not—"

His hand on her shoulder stopped her.

"That's not what I mean." He stopped, thinking, his hand smoothing her hair, over and over.

"She was ten when our mother died, Jenny was," he said at last. "It was the day after the funeral when I came into the kitchen and found her kneeling on a stool, to be tall enough to stir the bowl on the table.

"She was wearing my mother's apron," he said softly, "folded up under the arms, and the strings wrapped twice about her waist. I could see she'd been weepin', like I had, for her face was all stained and her eyes red. But she just went on stirring, staring down into the bowl, and she said to me, 'Go and wash, Jamie; I'll have supper for you and Da directly.' "

His eyes closed altogether, and he swallowed once. Then he opened them, and looked down at her again.

"Aye, I ken fine how strong women are," he said quietly. "And you're strong enough for what must be done, *m' annsachd*—believe me."

He stood up then, and went to the cow. It had risen to its feet and was moving restlessly in a small circle, swaying and shuffling on its tether. He caught it by the tether rope, gentled it with hands and words, made his way behind the heifer, frowning in concentration. She saw him turn his head and look, to check his dirk, then turn back, murmuring.

Not a loving butcher, no. A surgeon in his way, like her mother. From this odd plateau of remoteness, she could see how much her parents—so wildly different in temperament and manner—were alike in this one respect; that odd ability to mingle compassion with sheer ruthlessness.

But they were different even in that, she thought; Claire could hold life and death together in her hands, and yet preserve herself, hold aloof; a doctor must go on living, for the sake of her patients, if not for her own sake. Jamie would be ruthless toward himself, as much as—or more than—he would be to anyone else.

He had thrown off his plaid; now he unfastened his shirt, with no haste but neither with any wasted motion. He pulled the pale linen over his head and laid it neatly aside, returning to his watching post at the heifer's tail, ready to assist.

A long ripple ran down the cow's rounded side, and the torchlight glimmered white on the tiny knot of a scar over his heart. Uncover his nakedness? He would strip himself to the bone, if he thought it necessary. And—a much less comforting thought—if he thought it necessary, he would do the same to her, without a moment's hesitation.

He had a hand at the base of the cow's tail, speaking to it in Gaelic, soothing, encouraging. She felt as though she could almost grasp the sense of his words—but not quite.

All might be well, or it might not. But whatever happened, Jamie Fraser would be there, fighting. It was a comfort.

* * *

Jamie paused by the upper fence of the cowpen, on the rise above the house. It was late, and he was more than tired, but his mind kept him wakeful. The calving completed, he had carried Brianna down to the cabin—she sleeping sound as a babe in his arms—and then gone out again, to seek relief in the solitude of the night.

His shins ached where she had kicked him, and there were deep bruises on his thighs; she was amazingly powerful for a woman. None of that troubled him in the least; in fact, he felt an odd and unexpected pride in this evidence of her strength. *She will be all right,* he thought. Surely she will.

There was more hope than confidence behind this thought. Yet it was on his own account that he was wakeful, and he felt at once troubled and foolish at the knowledge. He had thought himself thoroughly healed, old hurts so far behind him that they could safely be dismissed from mind. He had been wrong about that, and it unsettled him to find just how close to the surface the buried memories lay.

If he were to find rest tonight, they would have to be exhumed; the ghosts raised in order to lay them. Well, he had told the lass it took strength. He stopped, gripping the fence.

The rustle of night sounds faded slowly from his mind as he waited, listening for the voice. He had not heard it for years, had thought never to hear it again—but he had already heard its echo once tonight; seen the blaze of anger's phantom in his daughter's eyes, and felt its flames singe his own heart.

Better to call it forth and face it boldly than let it lie in ambush. If he could not face his own demons, he could not conquer hers. He touched a bruise on his thigh, finding an odd comfort in the soreness.

No one dies of it, he'd said. *Not you; not me.*

The voice did not come at first; for a moment he hoped it would not—perhaps it *had* been long enough … but then it was there again, whispering in his ear as though it had never left, its insinuations a caress that burned his memory as once they had burned his skin.

"Gently at first," it breathed. "Softly. Tender as though you were my infant son. Gently, but for so long you will forget there was a time I did not own your body."

The night stood still around him, paused as time had paused so long before, poised on the edge of a gulf of dread, waiting. Waiting for the next words, known beforehand and expected, but nonetheless …

"And then," the voice said, loving, "then I'll hurt you very badly. And you will thank me, and ask for more."

He stood quite still, face turned upward to the stars. Fought back the surge of fury as it murmured in his ear, the pulse of memory in his blood. Then made himself surrender, let it come. He trembled with remembered helplessness, and clenched his teeth in rage—but stared unblinking at the brightness of heaven overhead, invoking the names of the stars as the words of a prayer, abandoning himself to the vastness overhead as he sought to lose himself below.

Betelgeuse. Sirius. Orion. Antares. The sky is very large, and you are very small. Let the words wash through him, the voice and its memories pass over him, shivering his skin like the touch of a ghost, vanishing into darkness.

The Pleiades. Cassiopeia. Taurus. Heaven is wide, and you are very small. Dead, but none the less powerful for being dead. He spread his hands wide, gripping the fence—those were powerful, too. Enough to beat a man to death, enough to choke out a life. But even death was not enough to loose the bands of rage.

With great effort, he let go. Turned his hands palm upward, in gesture of surrender. He reached beyond the stars, searching. The words formed themselves quietly in his mind, by habit, so quietly he was not aware of them until he found them echoed in a whisper on his lips.

" '… Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' "

He breathed slowly, deeply. Seeking, struggling; struggling to let go. *" 'Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.' "*

Waited, in emptiness, in faith. And then grace came; the necessary vision; the memory of Jack Randall's face in Edinburgh, stricken to bare bone by the knowledge of his brother's death. And he felt once more the gift of pity, calm in its descent as the landing of a dove.

He closed his eyes, feeling the wounds bleed clean again as the succubus drew its claws from his heart.

He sighed, and turned his hands over, the rough wood of the fence comforting and solid under his palms. The demon was gone. He had been a man, Jack Randall; nothing more. And in the recognition of that common frail humanity, all power of past fear and pain vanished like smoke.

His shoulders slumped, relieved of their burden.

"Go in peace," he whispered, to the dead man and himself. "You are forgiven."

The night sounds had returned; the cry of a hunting cat rose sharp on the air, and rotting leaves crunched soft underfoot as he made his way back toward the house. The oiled hide that covered the window glowed golden in the dark, with the flame of the candle he had left burning in the hope of Claire's return. His sanctuary.

He thought that he should perhaps have told Brianna all this, too—but no. She couldn't understand what he *had* told her; he had had to show her, instead. How to tell her in words, then, what he had learned himself by pain and grace? That only by forgiveness could she forget—and that forgiveness was not a single act, but a matter of constant practice.

Perhaps she would find such grace herself; perhaps this unknown Roger Wakefield could be her sanctuary, as Claire had been his. He found his natural jealousy of the man dissolved in a passionate wish that Wakefield could indeed give her what he himself could not. Pray God he would come soon; pray God he would prove a decent man.

In the meantime, there were other matters to be dealt with. He walked slowly down the hill, oblivious to the wind that blew the kilt about his knees and billowed through his shirt and plaid. Things must be done here; winter was coming, and he could not leave his women here alone with only Ian to hunt for them and defend them. He couldn't leave to search for Wakefield.

But if Wakefield did not come? Well, there were other ways; he would see Brianna and the child protected, one way or another. And at least his daughter was safe from the man who had harmed her. Permanently safe. He rubbed a hand across his face, smelling blood still on his skin from the calving.

Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. Yes, but what of those who trespass against the ones we love? He could not forgive on another's behalf—and would not, if he could. But if not … how should he expect forgiveness in return?

Educated in the universities of Paris, confidant of kings and friend to philosophers, still he was a Highlander, born to blood and honor. The body of a warrior and the mind of a gentleman—and the soul of a barbarian, he thought wryly, to whom neither God's nor mortal law stood more sacred than the ties of blood.

Yes, there was forgiveness; she must find a way to forgive the man, for her own sake. But he was a different matter.

“ ‘Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.’ ” He whispered it to himself. Then he looked up, away from the safe small glow of hearth and home, to the flaming glory of the stars above.

“The hell it is,” he said, aloud, shamed but defiant. It was ungrateful, he knew. And wrong, forbye. But there it was, and no use to lie either to God or to himself about it.

“The hell it is,” he repeated, louder. “And if I am damned for what I’ve done—then let it be! She is my daughter.”

He stood still for a moment, looking up, but there was no answer from the stars. He nodded once, as though in reply, and went on down the hill, the wind cold behind him.

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CHOICES

November 1769

I opened Daniel Rawlings’s box, and stared at the rows of bottles filled with the soft greens and browns of powdered root and leaf, the clear gold of distillations. There was nothing among the bottles to help. Very slowly, I lifted the covering that lay over the top compartment, over the blades.

I lifted out the scalpel with the curved edge, tasting cold metal in the back of my throat. It was a beautiful tool, sharp and sturdy, well balanced, part of my hand when I chose it to be. I balanced it on the end of my finger, letting it tilt gently back and forth.

I set it down, and picked up the long, thick root that lay on the table. Part of the stem was still attached, the remnants of leaves hanging limp and yellow. Only one. I had searched the woods for nearly two weeks, but it was so late in the year that the leaves of the smaller herbs had yellowed and fallen; it was impossible to recognize plants that were no more than brown sticks. I had found this one in a sheltered spot, a few of the distinctive fruits still clinging to its stalk. Blue cohosh, I was sure. But only one. It wasn’t enough.

I had none of the European herbs, no hellebore, no wormwood. I could perhaps get wormwood, though with some difficulty; it was used to flavor absinthe.

“And who makes absinthe in the backwoods of North Carolina?” I said aloud, picking up the scalpel again.

“No one that I know of.”

I jumped, and the blade jabbed deep into the side of my thumb. Blood spattered across the tabletop, and I snatched the corner of my apron, wadding the cloth hard against the wound in reflex.

“Christ, Sassenach! Are ye all right? I didna mean to startle ye.”

It didn’t hurt a great deal yet, but the shock of sudden injury made me bite my lower lip. Looking worried, Jamie took my wrist and lifted the edge of the wadded cloth. Blood promptly welled from the cut and ran down my hand, and he clamped the cloth back in place, squeezing tight.

“It’s all right; just a cut. Where did you come from? I thought you were up at the still.” I felt surprisingly shaky, perhaps from the shock.

“I was. The mash isna ready for distilling yet. You’re bleeding like a pig, Sassenach. Are ye sure you’re all right?” I *was* bleeding badly; besides the splashes of blood across the table, the corner of my apron was soaked with dark red.

“Yes. I probably severed a tiny vein. It’s not an artery, though; it will stop. Hold my hand up, will you?” I fumbled one-handed with the strings of my apron, seeking to free it. Jamie undid it with a quick yank, wrapped the apron round my hand, and held the whole clumsy bundle up over my head.

“What were ye doing with your wee knife?” he asked, eyeing the dropped scalpel, where it lay alongside the twisted cohosh root.

“Ah … I was going to slice up that root,” I said, waving weakly at it.

He gave me a sharp look, glanced across to the sideboard, where my paring knife lay in plain sight, then looked back at me with raised brows.

“Aye? I’ve never seen ye use one of these”—he nodded at the open array of scalpels and surgical blades—“save on people.”

My hand twitched slightly in his, and he tightened his grip on my thumb, squeezing hard enough to make me catch my breath in pain. He loosened his grip, then looked intently into my face, frowning.

“What in heaven’s name are ye about, Sassenach? Ye look as though I’d surprised ye about to commit murder.”

My lips felt stiff and bloodless. I pulled my thumb out of his grasp and sat down, holding the wounded digit against my bosom with my other hand.

“I was … deciding,” I said, with great reluctance. It was no good to lie; he would have to know, sooner or later, if Bree—

“Deciding what?”

“About Bree. What was the best way to do it.”

“To do it?” His eyebrows shot up. He glanced at the open medicine case, then at the scalpel, and a look of sudden shocked comprehension washed over his face.

“You mean to—”

“If she wants me to.” I touched the knife, its small blade stained with my own blood. “There are herbs—or this. There are awful risks to using herbs—convulsions, brain damage, hemorrhage—but it doesn’t matter; I don’t have enough of the right kind.”

“Claire—have you done it before?”

I looked up, to see him looking down at me with something I had never seen in his eyes before—horror. I pressed my hands flat on the table, to stop them trembling. I didn’t do as well with my voice.

“Would it make a difference to you if I had?”

He stared at me for a moment, then eased himself down on the bench opposite, slowly, as though afraid he might break something.

“Ye havena done it,” he said softly. “I know it.”

“No,” I said. I stared down at his hand, covering mine. “No, I haven’t.”

I could feel the tension go out of his hand; it relaxed, curling over mine, enfolding it. But my own lay limp in his grasp.

“I knew ye couldna do murder,” he said.

“I could. I have.” I didn’t look up at him, but spoke to the tabletop. “I killed a man, a patient in my care. I told you about Graham Menzies.”

He was silent for a moment, but held on to my hand, squeezing slightly.

“I think it isna the same,” he said at last. “To ease a doomed man to a death he wishes … it seems to me that that is mercy, not murder. And duty, too, perhaps.”

"Duty?" That did make me look at him, startled. The look of shock had faded from his eyes, though he was still solemn.

"Do ye not recall Falkirk Hill, and the night Rupert died in the chapel there?"

I nodded. It wasn't something easily forgotten—the cold dark of the tiny church, the eerie sounds of pipes and battle far outside. Inside the black air thick with the sweat of frightened men, and Rupert dying slowly on the floor at my feet, choking on his blood. He had asked Dougal MacKenzie, as his friend and his chief, to hasten him … and Dougal had.

"It will be a doctor's duty, too, I think," Jamie said gently. "If you are sworn to heal—but cannot—and to save men pain—and can?"

"Yes." I took a deep breath and curled my hand around the scalpel. "I *am* sworn—and by more than a doctor's oath. Jamie, she's my daughter. I would rather do anything in the world but this—anything." I looked up at him and blinked, holding back tears.

"Don't you think I haven't thought about it? That I don't know what the risks are? Jamie, I could kill her!" I pulled the cloth off my wounded thumb; the cut was still oozing.

"Look—it shouldn't bleed like that, it's a deep cut but not a bad one. But it does! I hit a vein. I could do the same to Bree and never know it, until she began to bleed—and if so … Jamie, I couldn't stop it! She'd bleed to death under my hand, and there isn't a thing I could do about it, not a thing!"

He looked at me, eyes dark with shock.

"How could ye think of doing such a thing, knowing that?" His voice was soft with disbelief.

I drew a deep, trembling breath, and felt despair wash over me. There was no way to make him understand, no way.

"Because I know other things," I said at last, very softly, not looking at him. "I know what it is to bear a child. I know what it is to have your body and your mind and your soul taken from you and changed without your will. I know what it is to be ripped out of the place you thought was yours, to have choice taken from you. *I know what it is,* do you hear me? and it isn't something anyone should do without being willing.” I looked up at him, and my fist clenched hard on my wounded thumb.

“And you—for God’s sake—*you* know what I don’t; what it’s like to live with the knowledge of violation. Do you mean to tell me that if I could have cut that from you after Wentworth, that you wouldn’t have had me do it, no matter what the risks? Jamie, that may be a rapist’s child!”

“Aye, I know,” he began, and had to stop, too choked to finish. “I *know,*” he began again, and his jaw muscles bulged as he forced the words. “But I know the one thing else—if I dinna ken his father, I ken his grandsire well enough. Claire, that is a child of my blood!”

“*Your* blood?” I echoed. I stared at him, the truth dawning on me. “You want a grandchild badly enough to sacrifice your daughter?”

“Sacrifice? It isna me that’s meaning to commit slaughter in cold blood!”

“You didn’t mind the angel-makers at the Hôpital des Anges; you had pity for the women they helped, you said so.”

“Those women had nay choice!” Too agitated to sit, he got up and paced restlessly back and forth in front of me. “They had no one to protect them, no way to feed a child—what else could they do, poor creatures? But it isna so, for Brianna! I will never let her be hungry or cold, never let aught harm her or the bairn, never!”

“That isn’t all there is to it!”

He stared at me, brows drawn down in stubborn incomprehension.

“If she bears a child here, she won’t leave,” I said unsteadily. “She can’t—not without tearing herself apart.”

“So *you* mean to tear her apart?” I flinched, as though he’d struck me.

“You want her to stay,” I said, striking back. “You don’t care that she has a life somewhere else, that she *wants* to go back. If she’ll stay—and better yet, if she’ll give you a grandchild—then you bloody don’t care what it does to her, do you?”

It was his turn to flinch, but he turned on me squarely.

“Aye, I care! That doesna mean I think it right for you to force her into—”

"What do you mean, force her?" The blood was burning hot in my cheeks. "For God's sake, you think I want to do this? No! But, by God, she'll have the choice if she wants it!"

I had to press my hands together to stop them shaking. The apron had fallen to the floor, stained with blood, reminding me much too vividly of operating theaters and battlefields—and of the terrible limits of my own skill.

I could feel his eyes on me, narrowed and burning. I knew that he was as torn in the matter as I was. He did indeed care desperately for Bree—but now I had spoken the truth, we both recognized it; deprived of his own children, living for so long as an exile, there was nothing he wanted more in life than a child of his blood.

But he couldn't stop me, and he knew it. He wasn't used to feeling helpless, and he didn't like it. He turned abruptly and went to the sideboard, where he stood, fists resting on top of it.

I had never felt so desolate, so in need of his understanding. Did he not realize how horrible the prospect was for me, as well as him? Worse, because it was my hand that must do the damage.

I came up behind him, and laid a hand on his back. He stood unmoving, and I stroked him lightly, taking some comfort from the simple fact of his presence, of the solid strength of him.

"Jamie." My thumb left a slight smear of red on the linen of his shirt. "It will be all right. I'm sure it will." I was talking to convince myself, as much as him. He didn't move, and I ventured to put my arm around his waist, laying my cheek against the curve of his back. I wanted him to turn and take me in his arms, to assure me that it would indeed somehow be all right—or at the least, that he would not blame me for whatever happened.

He moved abruptly, dislodging my hand.

"Ye've a high opinion of your power, have ye no?" He spoke coldly, turning to face me.

"What do you mean by that?"

He grasped my wrist in one hand, pinning it to the wall above my head. I could feel the tickle of blood down my wrist, flowing from my wounded thumb. His fingers wrapped around my hand, squeezing tight.

"Ye think it's yours alone to say? That life and death is yours?" I could feel the small bones of my hand grind together, and I stiffened, trying to pull free.

"It's not mine to say! But if *she* says—then yes, it's my power. And yes, I'll use it. Just like you would—like you *have,* when you've had to." I shut my eyes, fighting down fear. He wouldn't hurt me … surely? It occurred to me with a small shock that he could indeed stop me. If he broke my hand …

Very slowly, he bent his head and rested his forehead against mine.

"Look at me, Claire," he said, very quietly.

Slowly, I opened my eyes and looked. His eyes were no more than an inch away; I could see the tiny gold flecks near the center of his iris, the black ring surrounding it. My fingers in his were slippery with blood.

He let go of my hand, and touched my breast lightly, cupping it for a moment.

"Please," he whispered, and then was gone.

I stood quite still against the wall, and then slowly slid to the floor in a bloom of skirts, the cut on my thumb throbbing with my heartbeat.

* * *

I was so shaken by the quarrel with Jamie that I couldn't settle to anything. At last, I put on my cloak and went out, walking up the ridge. I avoided the path that led across the Ridge toward Fergus's cabin, and down toward the road. I didn't want to risk meeting anyone at all.

It was cold and cloudy, with a light rain sputtering intermittently among the leaf-bare branches. The air was heavy with cold moisture; let the temperature drop a few degrees more, and it would snow. If not tonight, tomorrow—or next week. Within a month at the most, the Ridge would be cut off from the lowlands.

Ought I to take Brianna to Cross Creek? Whether she decided to bear the child or not, might she be safer there?

I shuffled through layers of wet, yellow leaves. No. My impulse was to think that civilization must offer some advantage, but not in this case. There was nothing Cross Creek could offer that would truly be of help in case of any obstetrical emergency; in fact, she might well be in active danger from the medical practitioners of the time.

No, whatever she decided, she was better off here, with me. I wrapped my arms about myself under my cloak, and flexed my fingers, trying to work some warmth and suppleness into them, to feel some sense of surety in touch.

Please, he'd said. Please what? Please don't ask her, please don't do it if she asks? But I had to. *I swear by Apollo the physician … not to cut for the stone, nor to procure abortion* … Well, and Hippocrates was neither a surgeon, a woman … nor a mother. As I'd told Jamie, I'd sworn by something a lot older than Apollo the physician—and that oath was in blood.

I never had done an abortion though I had had some experience as a resident, in the post-care of miscarriage. On the rare occasions a patient had asked it of me, I had referred them to a colleague. I had no absolute objection; I had seen too many women killed in body or spirit by untimely children. If it was killing—and it was—then I thought it not murder, but a justifiable homicide, undertaken in desperate self-defense.

At the same time, I could not bring myself to do it. The surgeon's sense that gave me knowledge of the flesh under my hands gave me also an acute awareness for the living contents of the womb. I could touch a pregnant woman's belly, and feel in my fingertips the second beating heart; could trace unseeing the curve of limb and head, and the snakelike curl of the umbilicus with its rush of blood, all red and blue.

I could not bring myself to destroy it. Not until now; when it was a matter of killing my own flesh and blood.

How? It would have to be surgical. Dr. Rawlings had evidently not done such procedures; he had no uterine "spoon" for scraping the womb, nor any of the slender rods for dilation of the cervix. I could manage, though. One of the ivory knitting needles, its point blunted; the scalpel, bent to a shallow curve, its deadly edge sanded down for the delicate—but no less deadly—job of scraping.

When? Now. She was already three months gone; if it was to be done, it must be as soon as possible. Neither could I bear to be in the same room with Jamie while the matter was unresolved, feeling his anguish added to my own.

Brianna had taken Lizzie to Fergus's house. Lizzie was to stay and help Marsali, who had her hands full with the distillery, little Germaine, and the farm work that Fergus couldn't manage single-handed. It was a terrible load for an eighteen-year-old girl to be carrying, but she managed, with tenacity and style. Lizzie could at least help with the household chores, and mind the little fiend long enough to let his mother rest now and then.

Brianna would come back before suppertime. Ian was away, hunting with Rollo. Jamie … without being told, I knew that Jamie would not be back for some time. We would have a little while alone.

Would it be a suitable moment to ask her such a question, though—fresh from seeing Germaine's cherubic face? Though on reflection, exposure to a two-year-old boy was probably the best possible object lesson in the dangers of motherhood, I thought wryly.

Vaguely lightened by the faint whiff of humor, I turned back, drawing my cloak around me against the increasing wind. As I came down the hill I saw Brianna's horse in the penfold; she was home. My stomach clenched in dread, I went to lay the choice before her.

* * *

"I thought of it," she said, with a deep breath. "As soon as I realized. I wondered if you could do—something like that, here."

"It wouldn't be easy. It would be dangerous—and it would hurt. I don't even have any laudanum; only whisky. But yes, I can do it—if you want me to." I forced myself to sit still, watching her pace slowly back and forth before the hearth, hands folded behind her in thought.

“It would have to be surgical,” I said, unable to keep quiet. “I don’t have the right herbs—and they aren’t always reliable, in any case. At least surgery is … certain.” I laid the scalpel on the table; she should not be under any illusions as to what I was suggesting. She nodded at my words, but didn’t stop her pacing. Like Jamie, she always thought better while moving.

A trickle of sweat ran down my back, and I shivered. The fire was warm enough, but my fingers were still cold as ice. Christ, if she wanted it, would I even be able to do it? My hands had begun to tremble, with the strain of waiting.

She turned at last to look at me, eyes clear and appraising under thick, ruddy brows.

“Would you have done it? If you could?”

“If I could—?”

“You said once that you hated me, when you were pregnant. If you could have not been—”

“God, not you!” I blurted, horror-stricken. “Not you, ever. It—” I knotted my hands together, to still their trembling. “No,” I said, as positively as I could. “Never.”

“You did say so,” she said, looking at me intently. “When you told me about Da.”

I rubbed a hand across my face, trying to focus my thoughts. Yes, I *had* told her that. Idiot.

“It was a horrible time. Terrible. We were starving, it was war—the world was coming apart at the seams.” Wasn’t hers? “At the time, it seemed as though there was no hope; I had to leave Jamie, and the thought drove almost everything else out of my mind. But there was one other thing,” I said.

“What was that?”

“It wasn’t rape,” I said softly, meeting her eyes. “I loved your father.”

She nodded, her face a little pale.

“Yes. But it *might* be Roger’s. You did say that, didn’t you?”

“Yes. It might. Is the possibility enough for you?”

She laid a hand over her stomach, long fingers gently curved.

"Yeah. Well. It isn't an it, to me. I don't know who it is, but—" She stopped suddenly and glanced at me, looking suddenly shy.

"I don't know if this sounds—well …" She shrugged abruptly, dismissing doubt. "I had this sharp pain that woke me up in the middle of the night, a few days … after. Quick, like somebody had stabbed me with a hatpin, but deep." Her fingers curled inward, her fist pressing just above her pubic bone, on the right side.

"Implantation," I said softly. "When the zygote takes root in the womb." When that first, eternal link is formed between mother and child. When the small blind entity, unique in its union of egg and sperm, comes to anchor from the perilous voyage of beginning, home from its brief, free-floating existence in the body, and settles to its busy work of division, drawing sustenance from the flesh in which it embeds itself, in a connection that belongs to neither side, but to both. That link, which cannot be severed, either by birth or by death.

She nodded. "It was the strangest feeling. I was still half asleep, but I … well, I just knew all of a sudden that I wasn't alone." Her lips curved in a faint smile, reminiscent of wonder. "And I said to … it …" Her eyes rested on mine, still lit by the smile, "I said, 'Oh, it's you.' And then I went back to sleep."

Her other hand crossed the first, a barricade across her belly.

"I thought it was a dream. That was a long time before I knew. But I remember. It *wasn't* a dream. I remember."

I remembered, too.

I looked down and saw beneath my hands not the wooden tabletop nor gleaming blade, but the opal skin and perfect sleeping face of my first child, Faith, with slanted eyes that never opened on the light of earth.

Looked up into the same eyes, open now and filled with knowledge. I saw that baby, too, my second daughter, filled with bloody life, pink and crumpled, flushed with fury at the indignities of birth, so different from the calm stillness of the first—and just as magnificent in her perfection.

Two miracles I had been given, carried beneath my heart, born of my body, held in my arms, separated from me and part of me forever. I knew much too well that neither death nor time nor distance ever altered such a bond—because I had been altered by it, once and forever changed by that mysterious connection.

“Yes, I understand,” I said. And then said, “Oh, but Bree!” as the knowledge of what her decision would mean to her flooded in on me anew.

She was watching me, brows drawn down, lines of trouble in her face, and it occurred to me belatedly that she might take my exhortations as the expression of my own regrets.

Appalled at the thought that she might think I had not wanted her, or had ever wished she had not been, I dropped the blade and reached out across the table to her.

“Bree,” I said, seized with panic at the thought. “Brianna. I love you. Do you believe I love you?”

She nodded without speaking, and stretched out a hand toward me. I grasped it like a lifeline, like the cord that had once joined us.

She closed her eyes, and for the first time I saw the glitter of tears that clung to the delicate, thick curve of her lashes.

“I’ve always known that, Mama,” she whispered. Her fingers tightened around mine; I saw her other hand press flat against her stomach. “From the beginning.”

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IN WHICH ALL IS REVEALED

By late November, the days as well as the nights were cold, and the rain clouds began to hang lower on the slopes above us. The weather unfortunately had no dampening effect on people's tempers; everyone was increasingly edgy, and for obvious reason: There was still no word of Roger Wakefield.

Brianna was still silent about the cause of their argument; in fact, she almost never referred to Roger anymore. She had made her decision; there was nothing to do but to wait, and let Roger make his—if he hadn't already. Still, I could see fear warring with anger when she left her face unguarded—and doubt hung over everyone like the clouds over the mountains.

Where was he? And what would happen when—or if—he finally appeared?

I took some respite from the prevailing mood of edginess by taking stock of the pantry. Winter was nearly here; the foraging was over, the garden harvested, the preserving done. The pantry shelves bulged with sacks of nuts, heaps of squash, rows of potatoes, jars of dried tomatoes, peaches, and apricots, bowls of dried mushrooms, wheels of cheese, and baskets of apples. Braids of onions and garlic and strings of dried fish hung from the ceiling; bags of flour and beans, barrels of salt beef and salt fish, and stone jars of sauerkraut stood on the floor.

I counted over my hoard like a squirrel reckoning nuts, and felt soothed by our abundance. No matter what else happened, we would neither starve nor go hungry.

Emerging from the pantry with a wedge of cheese in one hand and a bowl of dry beans in the other, I heard a tap on the door. Before I could call out, it opened and Ian's head poked in, cautiously surveying the room.

"Brianna's no here?" he asked. As she clearly wasn't, he didn't wait for an answer but stepped in, trying to smooth back his hair.

"Have ye a bit o' looking glass, Auntie?" he asked. "And maybe a comb?"

"Yes, of course," I said. I set down the food, got my small mirror and the tortoiseshell comb from the drawer of the sideboy and handed them to him, peering upward at his gangling form.

His face seemed abnormally shiny, his lean cheeks blotched with red, as though he had not only shaved but had scrubbed the skin to the point of rawness. His hair, normally a thick, stubborn sheaf of soft brown, was now slicked straight back on the sides of his head with some kind of grease. Liberally pomaded with the same substance, it erupted in an untidy quiff over his forehead, making him look like a deranged porcupine.

"What have you got on your hair, Ian?" I asked. I sniffed at him and recoiled slightly at the result.

"Bear fat," he said. "But it stank a bit, so I mixed in a wee scoop of incense soap to make it smell better." He peered critically at himself in the mirror and made small jabs at his coiffure with the comb, which seemed pitifully inadequate to the task.

He was wearing his good coat, with a clean shirt and—unheard of touch for a workday—a clean, starched stock wrapped about his throat, looking tight enough to strangle him.

"You look very nice, Ian," I said, biting the inside of my cheek. "Um … are you going somewhere special?"

"Aye, well," he said awkwardly. "It's just if I'm meant to be courting, like, I thought I must try to look decent."

Courting? I wondered at his haste. While he was certainly interested in girls—and there were a few girls in the district who made no secret of returning his interest—he was barely seventeen. Men did marry that young, of course, and Ian had both his own land

and a share in the whisky making, but I hadn't thought his affections so strongly engaged yet.

"I see," I said. "Ah … is the young lady anyone I know?" He rubbed at his jaw, raising a red flush along the bone.

"Aye, well. It's—it's Brianna." He wouldn't meet my eyes, but the flush rose slowly over his face.

"What?" I said incredulously. I set down the slice of bread I was holding and stared at him. "Did you say *Brianna?*"

His eyes were fixed on the floor, but his jaw was set stubbornly.

"Brianna," he repeated. "I've come to make her a proposal of marriage."

"Ian, you can't possibly mean that."

"I do," he said, sticking out his long, square chin in a determined manner. He glanced toward the window, and shuffled his feet. "Will she—is she comin' in soon, d'ye think?"

The sharp scent of nervous perspiration reached me, mingled with soap and bear fat, and I saw that his hands were clenched in fists, tight enough to make the knobby knuckles stand out white against his tanned skin.

"Ian," I said, torn between exasperation and tenderness, "are you doing this because of Brianna's baby?"

The whites of his eyes flashed as he glanced at me, startled. He nodded, shifting his shoulders uncomfortably inside the stiff coat.

"Aye, of course," he said, as though surprised that I should ask.

"Then you're not in love with her?" I knew the answer quite well, but thought we had better have it all out.

"Well … no," he said, the painful blush renewing itself. "But I'm no promised to anyone else," he hastened to add. "So that's all right."

"It is not all right," I said firmly. "Ian, that's a very, very kind notion of yours, but—"

"Oh, it's not mine," he interrupted, looking surprised. "Uncle Jamie thought of it."

"He *what?*" A loud, incredulous voice spoke behind me, and I whirled to find Brianna standing in the doorway, staring at Ian. She advanced slowly into the room, hands fisted at her sides. Just as slowly, Ian retreated, fetching up with a bump against the table.

"Cousin," he said, with a bob of his head that dislodged a spike of greased hair. He brushed at it, but it stuck out, hanging disreputably over one eye. "I … ah … I …" He saw the look on Brianna's face and promptly shut his eyes.

"I-have-come-to-express-my-desire-to-ask-for-your-hand-in-the-blessed-sacrament-of-matrimony," he said in one breath. He took in another, with an audible gasp. "I—"

"Shut up!"

Ian, his mouth opened to continue, immediately shut it. He opened one eye in a cautious slit, like one viewing a bomb momentarily expected to go off.

Bree glared from Ian to me. Even in the dim room, I could see the tight look of her mouth and the crimson rising in her cheeks. The tip of her nose was red, whether from the nippy air outside or from annoyance, I couldn't tell.

"Did you know about this?" she demanded of me.

"Of course not!" I said. "For heaven's sake, Bree—" Before I could finish, she had whirled on her heel and run out of the door. I could see the quick flash of her rusty skirts as she hurried up the slope leading to the stable.

I pulled off my apron and flung it hastily over the chair. "I'd better go after her."

"I'll go, too," Ian offered, and I didn't stop him. Reinforcements might be needed.

"What do you think she'll do?" he asked, panting in my wake as I hastened up the steep slope.

"God knows," I said. "But I'm afraid we're going to find out." I was entirely too familiar with the look of a Fraser roused to fury. Neither Bree nor Jamie lost their temper easily, but when they did, they lost it thoroughly.

"I'm glad she didna strike me," Ian said thankfully. "I thought for a moment she was going to." He pulled even with me, his long legs outstripping mine, hurrying though I was. I could hear uplifted voices from the open half-door of the stable.

"Why on earth would you put poor little Ian up to such a thing?" Brianna was saying, her voice high with indignation. "I've never heard of such a high-handed, arrogant—"

"Poor little Ian?" Ian said, vastly affronted. "What does she—"

"Oh, high-handed, am I?" Jamie's voice interrupted. He sounded both impatient and irritable, though not yet angry. Perhaps I was in time to avert full-scale hostilities. I peeked through the stable door, to see them face-to-face, glaring at each other over a large pile of half-dried manure.

"And what better choice could I make, will ye tell me that?" he demanded. "Let me tell ye, lassie, I thought of every bachelor in fifty miles before I settled on Ian. I wouldna have ye wed to a cruel man or a drunkard, nor yet a poor man—nor one auld enough to be your grandsire, either."

He shoved a hand through his hair, sure sign of mental agitation, but made a masterful effort to calm himself. He lowered his voice a bit, trying to be conciliatory.

"Why, I even put aside Tammas McDonald, for while he's a fine stretch of land and a good temper, and he's an age for you, he's a bittie wee fellow forbye, and I thought ye wouldna care to stand up side by side with him before a priest. Believe me, Brianna, I've done my best to see ye well wed."

Bree wasn't having any; her own hair had come loose during her dash up the hill, and was floating round her face like the flames of a vengeful archangel.

"And what makes you think I want to be married to anybody at all?"

His mouth dropped open.

"Want?" he said incredulously. "And what has *want* to do with it?"

"Everything!" She stamped her foot.

"Now there you're wrong, lassie," he advised her, turning to pick up his fork. He eyed her stomach with a nod. "You've a bairn coming, who needs a name. Your time to be choosy is long since past, aye?"

He dug his fork into the pile of manure and heaved the load into the waiting barrow, then dug again, with a smooth economy of motion born of years of labor.

"Now, Ian's a sweet-tempered lad, and a hard worker," he said, eyes on his task. "He's got his own land; he'll have mine, too, in time, and that will—"

"I am not going to marry anybody!" Brianna drew herself up to her full height, fists balled at her sides, and spoke in a voice loud enough to disturb the bats in the corners of the ceiling. One small dark form detached itself from the shadows and flittered out into the gathering dusk, ignored by the combatants underneath.

"Well, then, make your own choice," Jamie said shortly. "And I wish ye well of it!"

"You … are … not … listening!" Brianna said, grinding each word between her teeth. "I've made my choice. I said I won't … marry … *anyone*!" She punctuated this with another stamp of her foot.

Jamie thrust the fork into the pile with a thump. He straightened up and eyed Brianna, rubbing his fist across his jaw.

"Aye, well. I seem to recall hearin' a verra similar opinion expressed by your mother—the night before our wedding. I havena asked her lately does she regret bein' forced to wed me or not, but I flatter myself she's maybe not been miserable altogether. Perhaps ye should go and have a word wi' her?"

"It's not the same thing at all!" Brianna snapped.

"No, it's not," Jamie agreed, keeping a firm grip on his temper. The sun was low behind the hills, flooding the stable with a golden light in which the creeping tide of red in his skin was nonetheless quite visible. Still, he was making every attempt to be reasonable.

"Your mother wed me to save her life—and mine. It was a brave thing she did, and generous, too. I'll grant it's no a matter of life or death, but—have ye no idea what it is to live branded as a wanton—or as a fatherless bastard, come to that?"

Seeing her expression falter slightly at this, he pressed his advantage, stretching out a hand to her and speaking kindly.

"Come, lassie. Can ye not bring yourself to do it for the bairn's sake?"

Her face tightened again and she stepped back.

"No," she said, sounding strangled. "No. I can't."

He dropped his hand. I could see them both, despite the fading light, and saw the danger signs all too clearly, in the narrowing of his eyes and the set of his shoulders, squared for battle. "Is that how Frank Randall raised ye, lass, to have no regard for what's right or wrong?"

Brianna was trembling all over, like a horse that's run too far.

"My father always did what was right for me! And he would never have tried to pull something like this!" she said. "Never! *He* cared about me!"

At this, Jamie finally lost his temper, which went off with a bang.

"And I don't?" he said. "I am not trying my best to do what's right for ye? In spite of your being—"

"Jamie—" I turned toward him, saw his eyes gone black with anger, and turned toward her. "Bree—I know he didn't—you have to understand—"

"Of all the reckless, thoughtless, selfish ways in which to behave!"

"You self-righteous, insensitive bastard!"

"Bastard! Ye'll call *me* a bastard, and your belly swellin' like a pumpkin with a child that ye mean to doom to finger-pointing and calumny for all its days, and—"

"Anybody points a finger at my child, and I'll break it off and stuff it down their throat!"

"Ye senseless wee besom! Have ye no the faintest notion o' how things are? Ye'll be a scandal and a hissing! Folk will call ye whore to your face!"

"Let them try it!"

"Oh, let them try it? And ye mean me to stand by and listen, I suppose?"

"It's not your job to defend me!"

He was so furious that his face went white as fresh-bleached muslin.

"Not my job to defend you? For Christ's sake, woman, who *else* is meant to do it?"

Ian tugged gently on my arm, drawing me back.

"Ye've only the twa choices now, Auntie," he murmured in my ear. "Douse them both wi' a pan o' cold water, or come away with me and leave them to it. I've seen Uncle Jamie and my Mam go at it before. Believe me, ye dinna want to step between two Frasers wi' their dander up. My Da said he's tried once or twice, and got the scars to prove it."

I took a final glance at the situation and gave up. He was right; they were nose to nose, red hair bristling and eyes slitted like a couple of bobcats, circling, spitting and snarling. I could have set the hay on fire, and neither one would have spared an instant's notice.

It seemed remarkably quiet and peaceful outside. A whippoorwill sang in the aspen grove, and the wind was in the east, carrying the faint sounds of the waterfall to us. By the time we reached the dooryard, we couldn't hear the shouting anymore.

"Dinna be worrit, Auntie," Ian said comfortingly. "They'll get hungry, sooner or later."

* * *

In the event, it was unnecessary to starve them out; Jamie stamped down the hill a few minutes later and without a word, fetched his horse from the paddock, bridled him, mounted, and rode bareback at a gallop down the track toward Fergus's cabin. As I watched his departing form, Brianna stalked out of the stable, puffing like a steam engine, and made for the house.

"What does *nighean na galladh* mean?" she demanded, seeing me at the door.

"I don't know," I said. I did, but thought it much more prudent not to say. "I'm sure he didn't mean it," I added. "Er … whatever it means."

"Ha," she said, and with an angry snort, stomped into the house, reappearing moments later with the egg basket over her arm.

Without a word, she disappeared into the bushes, making a rustling noise like a hurricane.

I took several deep breaths and went in to start supper, cursing Roger Wakefield.

Physical exertion seemed to have dissipated at least some of the negative energy in the household. Brianna spent an hour in the bushes, and returned with sixteen eggs and a calmer face. There were leaves and stickers in her hair, and from the look of her shoes, she had been kicking trees.

I didn't know what Jamie had been doing, but he returned at suppertime, sweaty and windblown but outwardly calm. They pointedly ignored each other, a reasonably difficult feat for two large persons confined in a twenty-foot-square log cabin. I glanced at Ian, who rolled his eyes skyward and came to help carry the big serving bowl to the table.

Conversation over supper was limited to requests to pass the salt, and afterward, Brianna cleared the dishes, then went to sit at the spinning wheel, working the foot treadle with unnecessary emphasis.

Jamie gave her back a glare, then jerked his head at me and went out. He was waiting on the path to the privy when I followed him a moment later.

"What am I to do?" he demanded, without preamble.

"Apologize," I said.

"Apologize?" His hair seemed to be standing on end, though it was likely only the effects of the wind. "But I havena done anything wrong!"

"Well, what difference does that make?" I said, exasperated. "You asked me what you should do, and I told you."

He exhaled strongly through his nose, hesitated a moment, then turned and stalked back into the house, shoulders set for martyrdom or battle.

"I apologize," he said, looming up in front of her.

Surprised, she nearly dropped the yarn, but caught it adeptly.

"Oh," she said, and flushed. She took her foot off the treadle, and the great wheel creaked and slowed.

"I was wrong," he said, with a quick look at me. I nodded encouragingly, and he cleared his throat. "I shouldna have—"

"It's all right." She spoke quickly, eager to meet him. "You didn't—I mean, you were only trying to help." She looked down at the thread, slowing as it ran through her fingers. "I'm sorry too—I shouldn't have been mad at you."

He closed his eyes briefly and sighed, then opened them and lifted one eyebrow at me. I smiled faintly and turned back to my work, pounding fennel seeds in the mortar.

He pulled up a stool and sat down beside her, and she turned toward him, putting one hand on the wheel to stop it.

"I know you meant well," she said. "You and Ian both. But don't you see, Da? I have to wait for Roger."

"But if something has happened to the man—if he's met with an accident of some kind …"

"He isn't dead. I *know* he isn't." She spoke with the fervency of someone who means to bend reality to her will. "He'll come back. And how would it be if he did, and found me married to Ian?"

Ian looked up, hearing his name. He sat on the floor by the fire, Rollo's great head resting on his knee, his yellow wolf-eyes mere slits of pleasure as Ian methodically combed through the thick pelt, pulling out ticks and burs as he found them.

Jamie ran his fingers through his hair in a gesture of frustration.

"I have had word out since ye told me of him, *a nighean*. I sent Ian to Cross Creek to leave word at River Run, and with Captain Freeman to pass to the other rivermen. I've sent Duncan wi' word, all through the Cape Fear valley and as far north as Edenton and New Bern, and wi' the packet boats that run from Virginia to Charleston."

He looked at me, pleading for understanding. "What more can I do? The man is nowhere to be found. If I thought there were the slightest chance—" He stopped, teeth set in his lip.

Brianna dropped her gaze to the yarn in her hand, and with a quick, sharp gesture, snapped it. Leaving the loose end to flap from the spindle, she got up and crossed the room, sitting down at the table with her back to us.

"I'm sorry, lass," Jamie said, more quietly. He reached out and laid a hand on her shoulder, gingerly, as though she might bite him.

She stiffened slightly, but didn't pull away. After a moment, she reached up and took his hand, squeezing it lightly, then putting it aside.

"I see," she said. "Thank you, Da." She sat, eyes fixed on the flames, her face and figure utterly still, but managing to radiate complete desolation. I put my hands on her shoulders, rubbing gently, but she felt like a wax manikin under my fingers—not resisting but not acknowledging the touch.

Jamie studied her for a moment, frowning, and glanced at me. Then, with an air of decision, he got up, reached to the shelf, brought down his inkhorn and quill jar, and set them on the table with a clank.

"Here's a thought," he said firmly. "Let us draw up a broadsheet, here, and I will take it to Gillette in Wilmington. He can print it up, and Ian and the Lindsey lads will take the copies up and down the coast, from Charleston to Jamestown. It may be that someone's not kent Wakefield, not hearing his name, but they'll maybe know him by his looks."

He shook ink powder made of iron and oak gall into the stained half-gourd he used as a well, and poured a little water from the pitcher, using the shaft of a quill to stir the ink. He smiled at Brianna, and took a sheet of paper from the drawer.

"Now, then, lass, how is this man of yours to look at?"

The suggestion of action had brought a spark of life back to Brianna's face. She sat up straighter, and a current of energy flowed up her spine, into my fingers.

"Tall," she said. "Nearly as tall as you, Da. People *would* notice; they always look at you. He has black hair, and green eyes—bright green; it's one of the first things you notice about him, isn't it, Mama?"

Ian gave a small start, and looked up from his grooming.

"Yes," I said, sitting down on the bench next to Brianna. "But you can maybe do better than just the written description. Bree's a good hand with a likeness," I explained to Jamie. "Can you draw Roger from memory, do you think, Bree?"

"Yes!" She reached for the quill, eager to try. "Yes, I'm sure I can—I've drawn him before."

Jamie surrendered the quill and paper, the vertical lines between his brows showing in a slight frown.

"Can the printer work from an ink sketch?" I asked, seeing it.

"Oh—aye, I expect so. It's no great matter to make a woodblock, if the lines are clear." He spoke abstractedly, eyes fixed on the paper in front of Brianna.

Ian pushed Rollo's head off his knee and came to stand by the table, looking over Bree's shoulder in what seemed a rather exaggerated curiosity.

Lower lip fixed between her teeth, she drew clean and swiftly. High forehead, with a thick lock of black hair that rose from an invisible cowlick, then dipped almost to the strongly marked black brows. She drew him in profile; a bold nose, not quite beaky, a clean-lined, sensitive mouth and a wide, slanted jaw. Thick-lashed eyes, deepset, with lines of good humor marking a strong, appealing face. She added a neat, flat ear, then turned her attention to the elegant curve of the skull, drawing thick, wavy dark hair pulled back in a short tail.

Ian made a small, strangled noise in his throat.

"Are you all right, Ian?" I looked up at him, but he wasn't looking at the drawing—he was looking across the table, at Jamie. He was wearing a glazed sort of expression, like a pig on a spit.

I turned, to find precisely the same expression on Jamie's face.

"What on earth is the matter?" I asked.

"Oh … nothing." The muscles of his throat moved in a convulsive swallow. The corner of his mouth twitched, and twitched again, as though he couldn't control it.

"Like hell it is!" Alarmed, I leaned across the table, seizing his wrist and groping for his pulse. "Jamie, what is it? Are you having chest pains? Do you feel ill?"

"*I* do." Ian was leaning over the table, looking as though he might be going to throw up any minute. "Coz—d'ye mean honestly to tell me that … *this*”—he gestured feebly at the sketch—“is Roger Wakefield?”

“Yes,” she said, looking up at him in puzzlement. “Ian, are you all right? Did you eat something funny?”

He didn’t answer, but dropped heavily onto the bench beside her, put his head in his hands, and groaned.

Jamie gently detached his hand from my grip. Even in the red of the firelight, I could see that he was white and strained. The hand on the table curled around the quill jar, as though seeking support.

“Mr. Wakefield,” he said carefully to Brianna. “Has he by any chance … another name?”

“Yes,” Brianna and I said in unison. I stopped and let her explain as I rose and went hurriedly to fetch a bottle of brandy from the pantry. I didn’t know what was going on, but had the horrible feeling that it was about to be called for.

“—adopted. MacKenzie was his own family name,” she was saying as I emerged with the bottle in hand. She glanced from father to cousin, frowning. “Why? You haven’t heard of a Roger MacKenzie, have you?”

Jamie and Ian exchanged an appalled glance. Ian cleared his throat. So did Jamie.

“What?” Brianna demanded, leaning forward, glancing anxiously from one to the other. “What is it? Have you seen him? Where?”

I saw Jamie’s jaw tighten as he summoned up words.

“Aye,” he said carefully. “We have. On the mountain.”

“What—here? On *this* mountain?” She stood up, pushing back the bench. Alarm and excitement played over her face like flames. “Where is he? What happened?”

“Well,” Ian said defensively, “he *did* say as he’d taken your maidenheid, after all.”

“He WHAT?” Brianna’s eyes sprang open so far that a rim of white showed all around the iris.

“Well, your Da asked him, just to be sure, and he admitted that he’d—”

“You *what?*” Brianna rounded on Jamie, clenched fists on the table.

"Aye, well. It—was a mistake," Jamie said. He looked utterly wretched.

"You bet it was! What in the name of—what have you done?" Her own cheeks had blanched, and blue sparks glinted in her eyes, hot as the heart of a flame.

Jamie took a deep breath. He looked up, straight into her face, and set his jaw.

"The wee lassie," he said. "Lizzie. She told me that ye were with child, and that the man who'd got it on ye was a wicked brute called MacKenzie."

Brianna's mouth opened and shut, but no words came out. Jamie looked at her steadily.

"Ye did say to me that ye'd been violated, did ye no?"

She nodded, jerky as a badly sprung puppet.

"So, then. Ian and the lassie were at the mill, when MacKenzie came askin' for ye. They rode to fetch me, and Ian and I met him in the clearing just above the green spring."

Brianna had got her voice working, though only barely.

"What did you do to him?" she asked hoarsely. "What?"

"It was a fair fight," Ian said, still defensive. "I wanted to shoot him on sight, but Uncle Jamie said no, he meant to have his hands on the—the man."

"You *hit* him?"

"Aye, I did!" Jamie said, stung at last. "For God's sake, woman, what would ye have me do to the man who'd used ye that way? It was you wanting to do murder, aye?"

"Besides, he hit Uncle Jamie, too," Ian put in helpfully. "It was a fair fight. I said."

"Be quiet, Ian, there's a good lad," I said. I poured two fingers, neat, and pushed the cup in front of Jamie.

"But it was—he *wasn't*—" Brianna was sputtering, like a firecracker with a short fuse lit. Then she caught fire, and slammed one fist on the table, going off like a rocket.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HIM?" she screamed.

Jamie blinked and Ian flinched. They exchanged haunted glances.

I put a hand on Jamie's arm, squeezing tight. I couldn't keep the quaver out of my own voice as I asked the necessary question.

"Jamie—did you kill him?"

He glanced at me, and the tension in his face relaxed, if only marginally.

"Ah … no," he said. "I gave him to the Iroquois."

* * *

"Och, now, Coz, it could have been worse." Ian patted Brianna tentatively on the back. "We didna kill him, after all."

Brianna made a small choking sound, and pulled her head up off her knees. Her face was white and damp as the inside of an oyster shell, her hair in a tangle round it. She hadn't vomited or fainted, but looked as though she still might do either.

"We did mean to," Ian went on, looking at her a little nervously. "I'd my pistol pressed behind his ear, but then I thought it was really Uncle Jamie's right to blow his brains out, but then he—"

Brianna choked again, and I hastily placed an ashet on the table in front of her, just in case.

"Ian, I really think she doesn't need to hear this just now," I said, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Yes, I do." Brianna pushed herself upright, hands gripping the edge of the table. "I have to hear it all, I have to." She turned her head slowly, as though her neck was stiff, toward Jamie.

"Why?" she said. "WHY?"

He was as white and ill-looking as she was. He had pushed away from the table and gone to the chimney corner, as though trying to get as far away as possible from the drawing, with its damning likeness of Roger MacKenzie Wakefield.

He looked as though he would have done anything rather than answer, but answer he did, his eyes steady on hers.

"I meant to kill him. I stopped Ian because shooting the prick seemed too easy a death—too quick for what he'd done." He took a deep breath, and I could see that the hand gripping his writing shelf was clenched so tight that the knuckles stood out white against his skin.

“I stopped to think, how it should be; what I must do. I left Ian with him, and I walked away.” He swallowed; I could see the muscles move in his throat, but he didn’t look away.

“I walked into the forest a wee way, and leaned my back against a tree to let my heart slow. It seemed best he should be awake, to know—but I didna think I could bear to hear him speak again. He’d said too much already. But then I began to hear it, over again, what he’d said.”

“What? What did he say?” Even her lips were white.

So were Jamie’s.

“He said … that ye’d asked him to your bed. That you—” He stopped and bit his lip, savagely.

“He said ye wanted him; that ye’d asked him to take your maidenheid,” Ian said. He spoke coolly, his eyes on Brianna.

She drew in breath with a ragged sound, like paper being torn.

“I did.”

I glanced involuntarily at Jamie. His eyes were closed, his teeth fixed in his lip.

Ian made a shocked sound, and Brianna drew back a hand like lightning and slapped him across the face.

He jerked back, lost his balance, and half fell off the bench. He grabbed the edge of the table and staggered to his feet.

“How?” he shouted, his face contorted in sudden anger. “How could ye do such a thing? I told Uncle Jamie that ye’d never play the whore, never! But it’s true, isn’t it?”

She was on her feet like a leopard, her cheeks gone from white to blazing fury in a second.

“Well, damn you for a self-righteous prig, Ian! Who gave you the right to call me a whore?”

“Right?” He sputtered for a moment, at a loss for words. “I—you—he—”

Before I could intervene, she drew back a fist and punched him hard in the pit of the stomach. With a look of intense surprise, he sat down hard on the floor, mouth open like a suckling pig.

I moved, but Jamie was faster. In less than a second he was beside her, gripping her arm. She whirled, meaning to hit him, too, I think, but then froze. Her mouth was working soundlessly, tears of shock and fury running down her cheeks.

"Be still," he said, and his voice was very cold. I saw his fingers dig into her flesh, and I made a small sound of protest. He paid no attention, too intent on Brianna.

"I didna want to believe it," he said, in a voice like ice. "I told myself he was only saying so to save himself, it wasna true. But if it was—" He seemed to become aware at last that he was hurting her. He let go of her arm.

"I couldna take the man's life, without being sure," he said, and paused, his eyes searching her face. For regret? I wondered. Or remorse? Whatever he might be looking for, all he found was a smoldering rage. Her face was the echo of his own, her blue eyes hot as his.

His own face changed, and he looked away.

"I did regret it," he said, very quietly. "When I came that night, and saw ye, I was sorry then that I hadna killed him. I held ye in my arms—and I felt my heart go sma' wi' shame, that I should doubt my daughter's virtue." He looked down, and I could see the mark where he had bitten his lip.

"Now my heart is shrunk altogether. Not only that ye should be impure but that ye should lie to me."

"Lie to you?" Her voice was no more than whisper. "*Lie* to you?"

"Aye, lie to me!" With sudden violence, he turned back to her. "That ye should bed a man from lust, and cry rape when ye find ye're with child! Do ye not realize that it's only chance I have not the sin of murder on my soul, and you the cause of it?"

She was too furious to speak; I saw her throat swell with words, and knew I had to do something, at once, before either of them had the opportunity to say more.

I couldn't speak, either. Blindly, I fumbled in the pocket of my gown, feeling for the ring. I found it, pulled it out, and dropped it on the table. It chimed against the wood; spun, and rattled to a stop, the gold of the tiny circlet gleaming red in the firelight.

From F. to C. with love. Always.

Jamie looked at it, his face gone completely blank. Brianna drew in her breath with a sob.

“That’s your ring, Auntie,” Ian said. He sounded dazed, and bent close to look, as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Your gold ring. The one that Bonnet took from ye, on the river.”

“Yes,” I said. My knees felt weak. I sat down at the table, and laid my hand over the telltale ring as though to take it back, deny its presence.

Jamie took my wrist and lifted it. Like a man handling a dangerous insect, he picked the ring up gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

“Where did ye get this?” he asked, his voice almost casual. He looked at me, and a bolt of terror shot through me at the look in his eyes.

“I brought it to her.” Brianna’s tears had dried, evaporated by the heat of her fury. She stood behind me and gripped me by the shoulders. “Don’t you look at her that way, don’t you dare!”

He shifted the look to her, but she didn’t flinch; only held on to me harder, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“Where did ye get it?” he asked again, his voice no more than a whisper. “Where?”

“From him. From Stephen Bonnet.” Her voice was shaking, but from rage, not fear. “When … he … raped … me.”

Jamie’s face cracked suddenly, as though some explosion had burst him from within. I made an incoherent sound of distress, and reached out for him, but he whirled away and stood rigid, back turned to us, in the middle of the room.

I felt Brianna draw herself upright, heard Ian say, rather stupidly, *“Bonnet?”* I heard the ticking of the clock on the sideboard, felt the draft from the door. I was dimly aware of all these things, but had no eyes for anything but Jamie.

I pushed back the bench, stumbled to my feet. He stood as though rooted into the floor, fists clenched into his belly like a man gut-shot, trying to hold back the inevitable fatal spill of his insides.

I should be able to do something, to say something. I should be able to help them, to take care of them. But I could do nothing. I could not help one without betraying the other—had already betrayed them both. I had sold Jamie's honor to keep him safe, and the doing of it had taken Roger and destroyed Bree's happiness.

I could go to neither of them now. All I could do was to stand there, feeling my heart crumble into small, jagged chunks.

Bree left me, and walked quietly around the table, across the room, around Jamie. She stood in front of him, looking up into his face, her own set like marble, cold as a saint's.

"Damn you," she said, scarcely audible. "Damn you very much, you bastard. I'm sorry I ever saw you."

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PART ELEVEN

Pas du Tout

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51

BETRAYAL

October 1769

Roger opened his eyes and threw up. Or rather, down. It didn't matter; The burning rush of bile through his nose and the trickle of vomitus that ran into his hair were unimportant by comparison with the agony in head and groin.

A thumping swerve of movement jarred him, shooting kaleidoscopic colors from crotch to brain. A damp smell of canvas filled his nose. Then a voice spoke somewhere near, and formless panic took sudden, jagged shape among the colors.

Gloriana! They'd got him! He lurched in reflex, brought up short by a searing jolt through his temples—but brought up a split-second earlier by something round his wrists. Tied, he was tied up in the hold.

The shape of panic blew up bold and black against his mind. Bonnet. They'd caught him, taken back the stones. And now they'd kill him.

He jerked convulsively, yanking at his wrists, teeth clenched against the pain. The deck dropped beneath him with a startled snort, and he slammed down hard.

He vomited again, but his stomach was empty. He retched, ribs grating with each spasm against the canvas-wrapped bundles he lay across. Not sails; not a hold. Not the *Gloriana,* not a ship at all. A horse. He was tied hand and foot, belly down across a fucking horse!

The horse jolted on a few more steps, then stopped. Voices muttered, hands fumbled at him, then he was pulled off roughly and dropped on his feet. He fell down at once, unable either to stand or to break his fall.

He lay half doubled on the ground, concentrating on breathing. Without the jouncing, it was easier. Nobody troubled him, and gradually he began to be aware of his surroundings.

Awareness didn't help much. There were damp leaves under his cheek, cool and smelling of sweet rot. He cracked a cautious eye. Sky above, an impossible deep color, between blue and purple. The sound of trees, the rush of nearby water.

Everything seemed to be revolving slowly around him, painfully vivid. He closed his eyes and pressed his hands flat against the ground.

Jesus, where am I? The voices were talking casually, words half lost in the stamping and whickering of nearby horses. He listened intently but couldn't make out the words. He felt a moment's panic at the inability; he couldn't even put a name to the language.

There was a large, tender lump behind one ear, another on the back of his head, and a pain that made his temples throb; he'd been hit hard—but when? Had the blows ruptured vessels in his brain, deprived him of language? He opened his eyes all the way, and—with infinite caution—rolled onto his back.

A square brown face glanced down at him, with no particular expression of interest, then looked back to the horse the man was tending.

Indians. The shock was so great that he forgot momentarily about his pain, and sat up abruptly. He gasped and put his face on his knees, eyes closed as he fought to keep from passing out again, blood pounding through a splitting head.

Where was he? He bit his knee, grinding the cloth savagely between his teeth, fighting for memory. Fragments of images came back to him, in mocking bits that stubbornly refused to fit together into sense.

The creak of boards and the smell of bilges. Blinding sun through panes of glass. Bonnet's face, and the breathing of whales in the mist, and a little boy named … named …

Hands clasped in dark and the tang of hops. *I thee wed, with my body I thee worship …*

Bree. Brianna. Cold sweat rolled down his cheek and his jaw muscles ached with clenching. The images hopped around in his mind like fleas. Her face, her face, he must not let it go!

Not gentle, not a gentle face. A nose dead straight and cold blue eyes … no, not cold …

A hand on his shoulder yanked him from the tortured pursuit of memory into the all too immediate present. It was an Indian, knife in hand. Numb with confusion, Roger simply looked at the man.

The Indian, a middle-aged man with a bone in his roached hair, and an air of no-nonsense about him, took Roger by his own hair and tilted his head back and forth with a critical air. Confusion evaporated, as it occurred to Roger that he was about to be scalped as he sat there.

He flung himself backward and lashed out with his feet, catching the Indian in the knees. The man went down with a cry of surprise, and Roger rolled, lurching and stumbling to his feet, running for his life.

He ran like a drunken spider, spraddle-legged, staggering toward the trees. Shadows, refuge. There were shouts behind him, and the sound of quick feet scattering leaves. Then something jerked his feet from under him and he fell headlong with a bone-shaking thud.

They had him on his feet before he had his breath back. No good to struggle; there were four of them, including the one Roger had knocked down. That one came toward them, limping, still holding the knife.

“Not hurt you!” he said crossly. He slapped Roger briskly across the face, then leaned over and sawed through the leather thong that bound Roger’s wrists. With a loud snort, he turned on his heel and went back to the horses.

The two men holding Roger promptly let go of him and walked off, too, leaving him swaying like a sapling in a high wind.

Great, he thought blankly, *I’m not dead. What the bloody hell?*

No answer to this presenting itself, he rubbed a hand gingerly over his face, discovering several bruises he'd missed earlier, and looked around.

He stood in a small clearing, surrounded by huge oaks and half-shed hickory trees; the ground was thick with brown and yellow leaves, and the squirrels had left heaps of acorn caps and nut hulls scattered over the ground. He stood on a mountain; the slope of the ground told him that, as the chill air and jewel-deep sky told him the time was near sunset.

The Indians—there were four, all men—ignored him completely, going about the business of camp-building without a glance in Roger's direction. He licked dry lips and took a cautious step toward the small stream that burbled over algae-furred rocks a few yards away.

He drank his fill, though the cold water made his teeth ache; nearly all the teeth were loose on one side of his mouth, and the lining of his cheek was badly cut. He rinsed his face gingerly, with a feeling of déjà vu. Sometime earlier, he had washed and drunk like this, cold water running over emerald rocks …

Fraser's Ridge. He sat back on his heels, memory dropping back in place, in large, ugly chunks.

Brianna, and Claire … and Jamie Fraser. Suddenly the confusing image he had sought so desperately came back unbidden; Brianna's face, with its broad, clean bones, blue eyes set slantwise above a long, straight nose. But Brianna's face grown older, weathered to bronze, rough-cut and toughened by masculinity and experience, blue eyes gone black with a murderous rage. Jamie Fraser.

"You bloody sod," Roger said softly. "You bloody, fucking *sod*. You tried to kill me."

His initial feeling was one of astonishment—but anger wasn't far behind.

He remembered everything now; the meeting in the clearing, the autumn leaves like fire and honey and the blazing man among them; the brown-haired youth—and who the hell was *he?* The fight—he touched a sore spot under his ribs with a grimace—and the end of it, lying flat in the leaves, sure that he was about to be killed.

Well, he hadn't been. He had a dim memory of hearing the man and the boy arguing somewhere over him—one of them had been for killing him on the spot, the other said no—but damned if he knew which one. Then one of them had hit him again, and he remembered nothing more until now.

And now—he glanced around. The Indians had a fire going, and a clay pot sitting by it. None of them paid him the least attention, though he was sure they were all aware of him.

Perhaps they had taken him from Fraser and the boy—why, though? More likely, Fraser had given him to the Indians. The man with the knife had said they didn't mean to hurt him. What *did* they mean to do with him?

He looked around. It would be night, soon; already, the distant shadows under the oaks had thickened.

So what, sport? If you slope off after dark, where're you going to? The only direction you know is down. The Indians were apparently ignoring him because they were confident that he wasn't going anywhere.

Dismissing the uncomfortable truth of this observation, he stood up. First things first. It was the last thing he wanted to do at the moment, but his bladder was bursting. His fingers were slow and clumsy, congested with blood, but he managed to fumble loose the lacing of his breeches.

His first feeling was one of relief; it wasn't as bad as it felt. Very sore, but ginger prodding seemed to indicate that he was basically intact and unruptured.

It was only as he turned back toward the fire that simple relief was succeeded by a burst of rage so pure and blinding as to burn away both pain and fear. On his right wrist was a smudged black oval—a thumbprint, clear and mocking as a signature.

"Christ," he said, very softly. Fury burned hot and thick in the pit of his belly. He could taste it, sour in his mouth. He looked down the mountain-side behind him, not knowing whether he faced Fraser's Ridge or not.

"Wait for me, bugger," he said, under his breath. "*Both* of you—wait for me. I'm coming back."

Not right away, though. The Indians allowed him to share the food —a sort of stew, which they scooped up with their hands in spite of its near-boiling temperature—but were otherwise indifferent to him. He tried them in English, French—even the small bits of German that he knew, but got no response.

They did tie him when they lay down to sleep; his ankles were bound and a noose put round his neck, tied to the wrist of one of his captors. Whether from indifference or because there wasn't one, they didn't give him a blanket, and he spent the night shivering, huddled as close to the dwindling fire as he could get without choking himself.

He hadn't thought he could sleep, but did, exhausted with pain. It was a restless sleep, though, filled with violent, fragmentary dreams and broken by the constant illusion of being strangled.

In the morning, they set off again. No question of riding this time; he walked, and as fast as he could; the noose was left around his neck, hanging loose, but a short length of rope bound his wrists to the harness leathers of one of the horses. He stumbled and fell several times, but managed to scramble to his feet, in spite of bruises and aching muscles. He had the distinct impression that they would allow him to be dragged without compunction if he didn't.

They were heading roughly north; he could tell as much by the sun. Not that that helped a lot, since he had no notion where they had started from. Still, they could be no great distance from Fraser's Ridge; he couldn't have been unconscious for more than a few hours. He looked at the churning hooves of the horse beside him, trying to estimate its speed. No more than two or three miles per hour; he was managing to keep up without great strain.

Landmarks. There was no telling where they meant to take him—or why—but if he was ever to get back, he had to memorize the shape of the terrain through which they passed.

A cliff, forty feet high and overgrown with shaggy plants, a twisted persimmon tree protruding from a crack in the rock like a jack-in-the-box popping out, covered in bright orange bobbles.

They emerged onto the crest of a ridge, to a breathtaking view of distant mountains; three sharp peaks, clustered together against a blazing sky, the left one higher than the other two. He could remember that. A stream—a river?—that fell through a small gorge; they drove the horses through a shallow ford, soaking Roger to the waist in icy water.

The routine of travel lasted for days, moving ever northward. His captors did not talk to him, and by the fourth day he realized that he was beginning to lose track of time, falling into a dreamlike trance, overcome by fatigue and the silence of the mountains. He pulled a long thread from the hem of his coat and began to knot it, one knot for each day, both as some small hold on reality, and as a crude method of estimating the distance traveled.

He was going back. Whatever it took, he was going back to Fraser's Ridge.

* * *

It was on the eighth day that he found his chance. They were high in the mountains by now. They had crossed through one pass the day before, and come down a steep slope, the ponies grunting, slowing to brace each careful step as the loads on their saddles creaked and shifted.

Now they were headed up again, and the ponies slowed their pace still further as the ground sloped sharply upward. Roger was able to gain a little ground, to pull even with the pony's side and cling to the harness leather, letting the tough little beast pull him along.

The Indians had dismounted, walking and leading the ponies. He kept a narrow eye on the long black scalp lock hanging down the back of the brave leading the pony he clung to. He held on with one hand; the other was busy under cover of a hanging flap of canvas, picking at the knot that bound him to the harness.

Strand by strand, the hemp came free, until no more than a single thread of rope held him to the pony. He waited, sweat streaming down his ribs from fear and the effort of the climb, rejecting one opportunity after another, worrying from moment to moment that he had left it too late, that they would stop to make camp, that the brave who led his pony would turn and see him, would think to check.

But they didn't stop, and the brave didn't turn. *There,* he thought, and his heart beat fast, seeing the first pony in the string step out along a narrow deer trail cut into the hillside. The ground fell away sharply below the trail, then leveled out about six feet down. Below was a thickly wooded slope, ideal for concealment.

One pony, then another, negotiated the narrow stretch of trail, putting down their feet with finicking care. A third, and then it was Roger's turn. He squeezed in close to the pony's side, smelling the sweet, pungent foam of its sweat. One step, then another, and they were on the narrow trail.

He jerked the rope loose and jumped. He hit with a jolt and sank halfway to his knees, sprang up and ran downhill. His shoes came off and he left them behind. He splashed across a tiny creek, scrabbled up its bank on hands and knees, and clambered to his feet, running before he'd got upright.

He heard calls behind him, then silence, but knew he was pursued. He had no breath to waste; neither would they.

The landscape slid past in a blur of leaves and rocks as he swung his head from side to side, looking for which way to go, someplace to hide. He chose a grove of birch, burst through and into a sloping meadow, careened down across the slippery grass, bare feet stubbing on roots and rocks. At the far side, he took a second to glance back. Two of them; he saw the round dark heads among the leaves.

On into another copse, out again, zigzagging madly through a field of broken rocks, breath coming hard in his throat. One thing the bloody past had done for him, he thought grimly; improved his wind. Then there was no room for any thought—nothing but the blind instincts of flight.

And down again, a scrambling drop down the wet, cracked face of a twenty-foot cliff, grabbing at the plants as he half fell past them, roots ripping, hands sinking into pockets of mud, blunting his fingers on unseen rocks. He landed hard at the bottom, bent over, gasping.

One of them was right behind him, coming backward down the cliff. He snatched off the noose still around his neck, and whipped it hard at the Indian's hands. The man's hold slipped; he let go and slithered down, landing askew. Roger flung the noose over the man's head, gave it a vicious yank, and fled, leaving the man on his knees, choking and clawing at the rope round his neck.

Trees. He needed cover. He vaulted a fallen log, stumbled and rolled, was up again running. Up, a spruce thicket up a little way. Heart laboring, he jabbed his feet down hard, bounding up the slope.

He flung himself into the spruces, fighting through the pricks of a million needles, blind, eyes shut against the lashing twigs. Then the ground gave way underneath him and he fell in a blur of sky and branches.

He hit, half curled, his breath knocked out; had barely sense to curl up further and keep on rolling, bashing off rocks and saplings, setting off showers of dirt and fallen needles, bouncing and smashing his way to the bottom.

He fetched up with a crash amid a tangle of woody stems, hung a moment, then slid down, to end with a thud. Dazed and bleeding, he lay still for a moment, then rolled painfully onto his side, wiping dirt and blood from his face.

He looked up, searching. There they were. The two of them, at the top of the slope, coming carefully down beside the ledge he had fallen from.

On hands and knees, he dived between the woody stems, and crawled for his life. Twigs bent, sharp ends jabbed him, and cascades of dust, dead leaves and insects fell from the higher branches above as he heaved his way forward, forcing a passage through the close-grown stems, twisting and turning, following such openings as he found.

Hell was his first coherent thought. Then he realized that it was as much description as curse. He was in a rhododendron hell. With that belated realization, he slowed his flight—if crawling at roughly ten feet per hour could be called "flight."

The tunnel-like opening in which he found himself was too narrow to allow him to turn around, but he managed to see behind him by thrusting his head to one side and craning his neck. There was nothing there; nothing but damp and musty darkness, illumined by a faint scatter of light, swirling with dust motes. Nothing was visible but the stems and limber branches of the rhododendron thicket.

His shaking limbs gave way, and he collapsed. He lay for a moment, curled up between the stems, breathing the musk of rotting leaves and damp earth.

"You wanted cover, mate," he murmured to himself. Things were beginning to hurt. He was ripped and bleeding in a dozen places. Even in the dim light, the ends of his fingers looked like raw meat.

He took a slow inventory of the damage, listening all the while for sounds of pursuit. Not surprisingly, there were none. He had heard talk about rhododendron hells in the taverns in Cross Creek; half-boasting stories of hunting dogs who had chased a squirrel into one of the huge tangles and become hopelessly lost, never to be seen again.

Roger hoped there was a fair amount of exaggeration to these stories, though a good look around wasn't reassuring. What light there was had no direction. Any way he looked, looked the same. Drooping clusters of cool, leathery leaves, thick stems and slender branches laced together in a nearly impenetrable snarl.

With a slight feeling of panic, he realized that he had no idea from which direction he had come.

He put his head on his knees and breathed deeply, trying to think. All right, first things first. His right foot was bleeding from a deep gash on the edge of the sole. He took off his tattered stockings and used one to bind his foot. Nothing else seemed bad enough to need a bandage, save the shallow gouge in his scalp; that was still seeping blood, wet and sticky to his touch.

His hands were shaking; it was hard to tie the stocking round his head. Still, the small action made him feel better. Now, then. He'd climbed countless Munros in Scotland, those endless craggy peaks, and more than once had helped to find day-trippers lost among the rocks and heather.

If you were lost in the wilderness, the usual caution was to stay put; wait for someone to find you. That would seem not to apply, he thought, if the only people looking for you were ones you didn’t want to be found by.

He looked upward, through the snarl of branches. He could see small patches of sky, but the rhododendrons rose nearly twelve feet over his head. There was no way to stand up; he could barely sit upright under the interlacing branches.

There was no way of telling how big this particular hell was; on their journey through the mountains, he had seen entire slopes covered with heath balds, valleys filled with the deep green of rhododendron, only a few ambitious trees protruding above the waving sea of leaves. Then again, they had detoured round small tangles of the stuff, no more than a hundred feet square. He knew he was fairly close to one edge of the thing, but that knowledge was useless, with no idea in which direction the edge lay.

He became aware that he was very cold, his hands still shaking. *Shock,* he thought dimly. What did you do for shock? Hot liquids, blankets. Brandy. Yeah, right. Elevate the feet. That much, he could do.

He scooped a shallow, awkward little depression and eased himself into it, scraping the clammy, half-rotted leaves over his chest and shoulders. He propped his heels in the fork of a stem and closed his eyes, shivering.

They wouldn’t come in after him. Why should they? A lot better to wait, if they were in no hurry. He’d have to come out eventually—if he still could.

Any movement here below would shake the leaves above, and pinpoint his movements to the watchers. That was a cold thought; they undoubtedly knew where he was now, and were simply waiting for his next move. The patches of sky were the deep blue of sapphires; it was still afternoon. He would wait till dark before he moved, then.

Hands clasped together on his chest, he willed himself to rest, to think of something beyond his present situation. Brianna. Let him think of her. Without the rage or bewilderment, now; there was no time for that.

Let him pretend that all was still between them as it had been on that night, their night. Warm against him in the dark. Her hands, so frank and curious, eager on his body. The generosity of her nakedness, freely given. And his momentary, mistaken conviction that all was forever right with the world. Gradually, the shivering eased, and he slept.

He woke sometime after moonrise; he could see brightness suffusing the sky, though not the moon itself. He was stiff and cold, and very sore. Hungry, too, and with a desperate thirst. Well, if he got himself out of this bloody tangle, at least he could find water; streams were everywhere in these mountains. Feeling awkward as a turtle on its back, he turned slowly over.

One direction was as good as another. On hands and knees, he started off, pushing through crevices, breaking branches, trying his best to go in a straight line. One fear haunted him more than thought of the Indians; he could so easily lose his bearings, moving blindly through this maze. He could end by going in endless circles, trapped forever. The stories of the hunting dogs had lost any element of exaggeration.

Some small animal ran over his hand and he jerked, hitting his head on the branches overhead. He gritted his teeth and kept on, a few inches at a time. Crickets chirped all around him, and countless small rustlings let him know that the inhabitants of this particular hell didn't appreciate his intrusion. He couldn't see anything at all; it was almost pitch-black here below. There was the one good thing, though: The constant effort heated him; sweat stung the gouge in his scalp and dripped from his chin.

Whenever he had to stop for breath, he listened for some clue—to either his location or his pursuers'—but he heard nothing beyond the occasional night bird's call and the rustle of the leaves all around. He wiped his sweating face on his sleeve and pushed on.

He didn't know how long he had been going when he found the rock. Or not so much found it as ran headfirst into it. He reeled back, clutching his head and gritting his teeth to keep from crying out.

Blinking from the pain, he put out a hand and found what he had struck. Not a boulder; a flat-faced rock. A tall one, too; the hard surface extended up as high as he could reach.

He groped to the side, and made his way around the rock. There was a thick stem growing near it; his shoulders stuck in the narrow space between. He wrenched and heaved, squirming, and finally shot forward, losing his balance and landing on his face.

Doggedly, he rose up onto his hands again—and realized that he could *see* his hands. He looked up, and around, in complete amazement.

His head and shoulders protruded into a clear space. Not merely clear, but *empty*. Eagerly, he wriggled forward, out of the claustrophobic grip of the rhododendrons.

He was standing in an open space, facing a cliff wall that rose on the far side of a small clearing. It really was a clearing, too; nothing at all grew in the soft dirt beneath his feet. Astonished, he turned slowly round, gulping great lungfuls of cold, sharp air.

"My God in heaven," he said softly, aloud. The clearing was roughly oval in shape, ringed by standing stones, with one end of the oval closed by the cliff face. The stones were evenly spaced around the ring, a few of them fallen, a couple more dislodged from their places by the press of roots and stems behind them. He could see the dense black mass of the rhododendrons, showing between and above the stones—but not one plant grew within the perimeter of the ring.

Feeling gooseflesh ripple over his body, he walked softly toward the center of the ring. It couldn't be—but it was. And why not, after all? If Geillis Duncan had been right … he turned and saw in the moonlight the scratchings on the cliff face.

He walked closer to look at them. There were several petroglyphs, some the size of his hand, others nearly as tall as he was; spiral shapes, and what might be a bent man, dancing—or dying. A nearly closed circle, that looked like a snake chasing its tail. Warning signs.

He shuddered again, and his hand went to the seam of his breeches. They were still there: the two gems he had risked his life to get, tiny passports to safety—he hoped—for him and for Brianna.

He could hear nothing; no humming, no buzzing. The autumn air was cold, a light wind stirring the rhododendron leaves. Damn, what was the date? He didn't know, had lost track long since. He thought it had been near the beginning of September, though, when he left Brianna in Wilmington. It had taken much longer than he'd thought, to track Bonnet and find an opportunity to steal the gems. It must be nearly the end of October now—the feast of Samhain, the Eve of All Hallows, was nearly come, or only recently past.

Would this ring follow the same dates, though? He supposed that it would; if the Earth's lines of force shifted with its revolution around the sun, then all the passages should stand open or closed with the shift.

He stepped closer to the cliff and saw it; an opening near the base of the cliff, a split in the rock, perhaps a cave. A chill ran over him that had nothing to do with the cold night wind. His fingers closed tightly over the small round hardness of the gems. He heard nothing; was it open? If so …

Escape. It would be that. Escape to when, though? And how? The words of Geilie's spell chanted in his mind. *Garnets rest in love about my neck; I will be faithful.*

Faithful. To try that avenue of escape was to abandon Brianna. *And hasn't she abandoned you?*

"No, I'm damned if she has!" he whispered to himself. There was some reason for what she'd done, he knew it.

She's found her parents; she'll be safe enough. "And for this reason, a woman shall leave her parents, and cleave to her husband." Safety wasn't what mattered; love was. If he'd cared for safety, he wouldn't have crossed that desperate void to begin with.

His hands were sweating; he could feel the damp grain of the rough cloth under his fingers, and his torn fingertips burned and throbbed. He took one more step toward the split in the cliff face, his eyes fixed on the pitch-black inside. If he didn't step inside … there were only two things to do. Go back to the suffocating grip of the rhododendrons, or try to scale the cliff before him.

He tilted his head back to gauge its height. A face was looking down at him, featureless in the dark, silhouetted against the moon-bright sky. He hadn't time to move or think before the rope noose settled gently over his head and tightened, pressing his arms against his body.

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DESERTION

River Run, December 1769

It had been raining, and soon would be again. Drops of water hung trembling under the petals of the marble Jacobite roses on Hector Cameron's tomb, and the brick walk was dark with wet.

Semper Fidelis, it said, beneath his name and dates. Semper Fi. She had dated a Marine cadet once; he'd had it carved on the ring he had tried to give her. Always faithful. And who had Hector Cameron been faithful to? His wife? His prince?

She hadn't spoken to Jamie Fraser since that night. Nor he to her. Not since the final moment, when in a fury of fear and outrage, she had screamed at him, "My father would never have said such a thing!"

She could still see what his face had looked like when she spoke her final words to him; she wished she could forget. He had turned without a word and left the cabin. Ian had risen, and quietly gone after him; neither of them had come back that night.

Her mother had stayed with her, comforting, petting, stroking her head and murmuring small soothing things as she alternately raged and sobbed. But even as her mother held Brianna's head in her lap and wiped her face with cool cloths, Bree could feel a part of her yearning toward that man, wanting to follow him, wanting to comfort *him*. And she blamed him for that as well.

Her head throbbed with the effort of staying stone-faced. She didn't dare relax the muscles of eyes and jaw until she was sure they had left; it would be too easy to break down.

She hadn't; not since that night. Once she had pulled herself together, she had assured her mother that she was all right, insisted that Claire go to bed. She had herself sat up till dawn, eyes burning from rage and woodsmoke, with the drawing of Roger on the table before her.

He had come back at dawn, called her mother to him, not looking at Brianna. Murmured a bit in the dooryard, and sent her mother back, face hollow-eyed with worry, to pack her things.

He had brought her here, down the mountain to River Run. She had wanted to go with them, had wanted to go at once to find Roger, without a moment's delay. But he had been obdurate, and so had her mother.

It was late December, and the winter snows lay thick on the mountainside. She was nearly four months gone; the taut curve of her belly was tightly rounded now. There was no telling how long the journey might take, and she was reluctantly compelled to admit that she didn't want to give birth on a raw mountainside. She might have overridden her mother's opinion, but not when it was buttressed by *his* stubbornness.

She leaned her forehead against the cool marble of the mausoleum; it was a cold day, spitting rain, but her face felt hot and swollen, as though she were coming down with a fever.

She couldn't stop hearing him, seeing him. His face, congested with rage, sharp-edged as a devil's mask. His voice, rough with fury and contempt, reproaching her—reproaching *her*!—for the loss of his bloody honor!

"*Your* honor?" she had said incredulously. "Your *honor?* Your fucking notion of honor is what's caused all the trouble in the first place!"

"Ye willna use that sort of language to me! Though if it's fucking we're speaking of—"

"I'll fucking well say anything I want!" she bellowed, and slammed a fist on the table, rattling the dishes.

She had, too. So had he. Her mother had tried once or twice to stop them—Brianna flinched at the belated memory of the distress in Claire's deep golden eyes—but neither of them had paid a moment's notice, too intent on the savagery of their mutual betrayal.

Her mother had told her once that she had a Scottish temper—slow-fused, but long-burning. Now she knew where it came from, but the knowing didn't help.

She put her folded arms against the tomb and rested her face on them, breathing in the faint sheep-smell of the wool. It reminded her of the hand-knit sweaters her father—her *real* father, she thought, with a fresh burst of desolation—had liked to wear.

"Why did you have to die?" she whispered to the hollow of damp wool. "Oh, why?" If Frank Randall hadn't died, none of this would have happened. He and Claire would still be there, in the house in Boston, her family and her life would be intact.

But her father was gone, replaced by a violent stranger; a man who had her face, but could not understand her heart, a man who had taken both family and home from her, and not satisfied with that, had taken love and safety, too, leaving her bereft in this strange, harsh land.

She pulled the shawl closer around her shoulders, shivering at the wind that cut through the loose weave. She should have brought a cloak. She had kissed her white-lipped mother goodbye and then left, running through the dead garden, not looking at him. She'd wait here until she was sure they were gone, no matter if she froze.

She heard a step on the brick path above her and stiffened, though she didn't turn around. Perhaps it was a servant, or Jocasta come to persuade her inside.

But it was a stride too long and a footfall too strong for any but one man. She blinked hard, and gritted her teeth. She wouldn't turn around, she wouldn't.

"Brianna," he said quietly behind her. She didn't answer, didn't move.

He made a small snorting noise—anger, impatience?

"I have a thing to say to ye."

"Say it," she said, and the words hurt her throat, as though she'd swallowed some jagged object.

It was beginning to rain again; fresh spatters slicked the marble in front of her, and she could feel the icy *pat*! of drops that struck through her hair.

"I will bring him home to you," Jamie Fraser said, still quiet, "or I will not come back myself."

She couldn't bring herself to turn around. There was a small sound, a click on the pavement behind her, and then the sound of his footsteps, going away. Before her tear-blurred eyes, the drops on the marble roses gathered weight and began to fall.

When at last she turned around, the brick-lined walk was empty. At her feet was a folded paper, damp with rain, weighted with a stone. She picked it up, and held it crumpled in her hand, afraid to open it.

February 1770

In spite of worry and anger, she found herself easily absorbed into the flow of daily life at River Run. Her great-aunt, delighted at her company, encouraged her to find distraction; finding that she had some skill in drawing, Jocasta had brought out her own painting equipment, urging Brianna to make use of it.

By comparison with the cabin on the ridge, life at River Run was so luxurious as to be almost decadent. Still, Brianna woke at dawn, out of habit. She stretched langourously, wallowing in the physical delight of a feather bed that embraced and yielded to her every move—a definite contrast to lumpy quilts spread over a chilly straw tick.

There was a fire burning on the hearth, and a large copper can on the washstand, its burnished sides glowing. Hot water for washing; she could see the tiny shimmers of heat wavering over the metal. There was still a chill in the room, and the light outside was winter-blue with cold; the servant who had come and gone in silence must have risen in the black predawn and broken ice to get the water.

She ought to feel guilty at being waited on by slaves, she thought drowsily. She must remember to, later. There were a lot of things she didn’t mean to think about until later; one more wouldn’t hurt.

For now, she was warm. Far away, she could hear small noises in the house; a comforting scuffle of domesticity. The room itself was wrapped in silence, the occasional pop of kindling from the fire the only sound.

She rolled onto her back and, mind still half afloat in sleep, began to reacquaint herself with her body. This was a morning ritual; something she had begun to do half consciously as a teenager, and found necessary to do on purpose now—to find and make peace with the small changes of the night, lest she look suddenly during the day and find herself a stranger in her own body.

One stranger in her body was enough, she thought. She pushed the bedclothes down, running her hands slowly over the dormant swell of her stomach. A tiny ripple ran across her flesh as the inhabitant stretched, turning slowly as she had turned in the bed a few minutes before, enclosed and embraced.

“Hi, there,” she said softly. The bulge flexed briefly against her hand and then fell still, the occupant returned to its mysterious dreams.

Slowly, she ruffled up the nightgown—it was Jocasta’s, warm soft flannel—registering the smooth long muscle at the top of each thigh, the soft hollow curving in at the top. Then up and down and over, bare skin to bare skin, palms to legs and belly and breasts. Smooth and soft, round and hard; muscle and bone … but now not all *her* muscle and bone.

Her skin felt different in the morning, like a snake’s skin, newly shed, all tender and light-lucent. Later, when she rose, when the air got at it, it would be harder, a duller but more serviceable envelope.

She lay back against the pillow, watching the light fill the room. The house was awake beyond her. She could hear the myriad faint noises of people at work, and felt soothed. When she was small, she would wake on summer mornings to hear the chatter of her father’s lawnmower underneath her window; his voice calling out in greeting to a neighbor. She had felt safe, protected, knowing he was there.

More recently, she had waked at dawn and heard Jamie Fraser's voice, speaking in soft Gaelic to his horses outside, and had felt that same feeling return with a rush. No more, though.

It had been true, what her mother said. She was removed, changed, altered without consent or knowledge, learning only after the fact. She threw aside the quilts and got up. She couldn't lie in bed mourning what was lost; it was no longer anyone's job to protect her. The job of protector was hers, now.

The baby was a constant presence—and, oddly enough, a constant reassurance. For the first time she felt blessing in it, and an odd reconciliation; her body had known this long before her mind. So that was true, too—her mother had said it often—"Listen to your body."

She leaned against the window frame, looking out on the patchy snow that lay on the kitchen garden. A slave, muffled in cloak and scarf, was kneeling on the path, digging overwintered carrots from one of the beds. Tall elms bordered the walled garden; somewhere beyond those stark bare branches lay the mountains.

She stayed still, listening to the rhythms of her body. The intruder in her flesh stirred a little, the tides of its movement merging with the pulsing of her blood—their blood. In the beating of her heart, she thought she heard the echo of that other, smaller heart, and in the sound found at last the courage to think clearly, with the assurance that if the worst happened—she pressed hard against the window frame, and felt it creak under the force of her urgency—if the worst happened, still she would not be totally alone.

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BLAME

Jamie spoke barely a word to anyone, between our departure from Fraser's Ridge, and our arrival at the Tuscaroran village of Tennago. I rode in a state of misery, torn between guilt at leaving Brianna, fear for Roger, and pain at Jamie's silence. He was short with Ian, and had said no more than absolutely necessary to Jocasta at Cross Creek. To me, he said nothing.

Plainly, he blamed me for not telling him at once about Stephen Bonnet. In retrospect, I blamed myself bitterly, seeing what had come of it. He had kept the gold ring I had thrown at him; I had no idea what he had done with it.

The weather was intermittently bad, the clouds hanging so low to the mountains that on the higher ridges, we traveled for days on end through a thick, cold fog, water droplets condensing on the horses' coats, so that a constant rain dripped from their manes and moisture shone on their flanks. We slept at night in whatever shelter we could find, each rolled in a damp cocoon of blankets, lying separately around a smoldering fire.

Some of the Indians who had known us at Anna Ooka made us welcome when we reached Tennago. I saw several men eye the casks of whisky as we unloaded our pack mules, but no one made any move to molest them. There were two mule-loads of whisky; a dozen small casks, all of the Fraser share of the year's distilling—most of our income for the year. A king's ransom, in terms of trade. Enough to ransom one young Scotsman, I hoped.

It was the best—and the only—thing we had to trade with, but it was also a dangerous one. Jamie presented one cask to the *sachem* of the village, and he and Ian disappeared into one of the longhouses to confer. Ian had given Roger to some of his friends among the Tuscarora, but did not know where they had taken him. I hoped against hope that it was Tennago. If so, we could be back at River Run within a month.

This was a faint hope, though. In the midst of the bitter quarrel with Brianna, Jamie had admitted telling Ian to make sure that Roger didn't come back again. Tennago was about ten days journey from the Ridge; much too close for the purposes of an enraged father.

I wanted to ask the women who entertained me about Roger, but no one in the house had any French or English, and I had only enough words of Tuscaroran to allow for basic politeness. Better to let Ian and Jamie handle the diplomatic negotiations. Jamie, with his gift for languages, was competent in Tuscaroran; Ian, who spent half his time hunting with the Indians, was thoroughly fluent.

One of the women offered me a platter containing steaming mounds of grain cooked with fish. I leaned to scoop up a bit with the flat piece of wood provided for the purpose, and felt the amulet swing forward under my shirt, its small weight both a reminder of grief and a comfort to it.

I had brought both Nayawenne's amulet, and the carved opal I had found under the red cedar tree. I had brought the former, intending to give it back—to whom, I had no idea. The latter might augment the whisky, if additional bargaining power was needed. For the same reason, Jamie had brought every small valuable he possessed—not many—with the exception of his father's ruby ring, which Brianna had brought to him from Scotland.

We had left the ruby with Brianna, just in case we did not return—the possibility had to be faced. There was no telling whether Geillis Duncan had been right or wrong in her theories regarding the use of gemstones, but at least Brianna would have one.

She had hugged me fiercely and kissed me when we left River Run. I hadn't wanted to go. Nor had I wanted to stay. I was torn between them once more; between the necessity to stay and look after Brianna, and the equally urgent necessity to go with Jamie.

"You have to go," Brianna had said firmly. "I'll be fine; you said yourself I'm healthy as a horse. You'll be back a long time before I need you."

She had glanced at her father's back; he stood in the stableyard, supervising the loading of the horses and mules. She turned back to me, expressionless.

"You have to go, Mama. I trust you to find Roger." There was an uncomfortable emphasis on the *you,* and I hoped very much that Jamie couldn't hear her.

"Surely you don't think Jamie would—"

"I don't know," she interrupted. "I don't know what he'd do." Her jaw was set in a way I recognized all too well. Argument was futile, but I tried anyway.

"Well, *I* know," I said firmly. "He'd do anything for you, Brianna. Anything. And even if it weren't you, he'd do everything he possibly could to get Roger back. His sense of honor—" Her face shut up like a trap, and I realized my mistake.

"His honor," she said flatly. "That's what matters. I guess it's all right, though; as long as it makes him get Roger back." She turned away, bending her head against the wind.

"Brianna!" I said, but she only hunched her shoulders, pulling the shawl tight around them.

"Auntie Claire? We're ready now." Ian had appeared nearby, glancing from me to Brianna, his face troubled. I looked from him to Brianna, hesitating, not wanting to leave her like this.

"Bree?" I said again.

Then she had turned back in a flurry of wool and embraced me, her cheek cold against mine.

"Come back!" she whispered. "Oh, Mama—come back safe!"

"I can't leave you, Bree, I can't!" I held her tight, all strong bone and tender flesh, the child I had left, the child I had regained—and the woman who now put my arms away from her and stood straight, alone.

“You have to go,” she whispered. The mask of indifference had fallen and her cheeks were wet. She glanced over my shoulder at the archway to the stableyard. “Bring him back. You’re the only one who can bring him back.”

She kissed me quickly, turned and ran, the sound of her steps ringing on the brick path.

Jamie came through the stable arch and saw her, flying through the stormy light like a banshee. He stood still, looking after her, his face expressionless.

“You can’t leave her like this,” I said. I wiped my own wet cheeks with the corner of my shawl. “Jamie, go after her. Please, go and say goodbye, at least.”

He stood still for a moment, and I thought he was going to pretend he hadn’t heard me. But then he turned and walked slowly down the path. The first drops of rain were beginning to fall, splatting on the dusty brick, and the wind belled his cloak as he went.

“Auntie?” Ian’s hand was under my arm, gently urging. I went with him, and let him give me a hand under my foot to mount. Within a few minutes Jamie was back. He had mounted, not looking at me, and, with a signal to Ian, ridden out of the stableyard without looking back. *I* had looked back, but there was no sign of Brianna.

Night had long since fallen, and Jamie was still in the longhouse with Nacognaweto and the *sachem* of the village. I looked up whenever anyone came into the house, but it was never him. At length, though, the hide flap over the doorway lifted, and Ian came in, a small, round figure behind him.

“I’ve a surprise for ye, Auntie,” he said, beaming, and stepped aside to show me the smiling round face of the slavewoman Pollyanne.

Or rather, the ex-slave. For here, of course, she was free. She sat down beside me, grinning like a jack-o’-lantern, and turned back the deerskin mantle she wore to show me the little boy in the crook of her arm, his face as round and beaming as her own.

With Ian as interpreter, her own bits of English and Gaelic, and the odd bit of female sign language, we were soon deep in conversation. She had, as Myers surmised, been welcomed by the Tuscarorans and adopted into the tribe, where her skills at healing were valued. She had taken as husband a man who had been widowed in the measles epidemic, and had presented him with this new addition to the family a few months before.

I was delighted that she had found both freedom and happiness, and congratulated her warmly. I was reassured, too; if the Tuscarorans had treated her so kindly, perhaps Roger had not fared as badly as I feared.

A thought struck me, and I pulled Nayawenne's amulet from the neck of my buckskin shirt.

"Ian—will you ask if she knows who I should give this to?"

He spoke to her in Tuscaroran, and she leaned forward, fingering the amulet curiously as he spoke. At last she shook her head and sat back, replying in her curious deep voice.

"She says they will not want it, Auntie," Ian translated. "It is the medicine bundle of a *shaman,* and it is dangerous. It should have been buried with the person to whom it belonged; no one here will touch it, for fear of attracting the *shaman*'s ghost."

I hesitated, holding the leather pouch in my hand. The strange sense of holding something alive had not recurred since Nayawenne's death. Surely it was no more than imagination that seemed to stir against my palm.

"Ask her—what if the *shaman* wasn't buried? If the body couldn't be found?"

Pollyanne's round face was solemn, listening. She shook her head when Ian had finished and replied.

"She says that in that case the ghost walks with you, Auntie. She says you should not show it to anyone here—they will be frightened."

"She isn't frightened, is she?" Pollyanne caught that on her own; she shook her head, and touched her massive bosom.

"Indian now," she said simply. "Not always." She turned to Ian, and explained through him that her own people revered the spirits of the dead; in fact, it was not unusual for a man to keep by him the head or some other part of his grandfather or other ancestor, for protection or advice. No, the thought of a ghost walking with me did not trouble her.

Nor did the notion trouble me. In fact, I found the thought of Nayawenne walking with me to be rather a comfort, under the circumstances. I put the amulet back in my shirt. It brushed soft and warm against my skin, like the touch of a friend.

We talked for some time, until long after the others in the longhouse had gone to their separate cubicles, and the sound of snoring filled the smoky air. We were surprised, in fact, by Jamie's arrival, which let in a draft of cold air.

It was as Pollyanne made her farewells that she hesitated, trying to decide whether to tell me something. She glanced at Jamie, then shrugged her massive shoulders and made up her mind. She leaned close to Ian, murmured something that sounded like honey trickling over rocks, putting both hands to her face, fingertips against the skin. She then embraced me quickly and left.

Ian stared after her in astonishment.

"What did she say, Ian?"

He turned back to me, his sketchy brows drawn together in concern.

"She says I should tell Uncle Jamie, that the night the woman died in the sawmill, she saw a man."

"What man?"

He shook his head, still frowning.

"She didna ken him. Only that he was a white man, heavy and square, not so tall as Uncle or I. She saw him come out of the mill, and walk fast into the forest. She was sitting in the door to her hut, in the dark, so she thinks he didna see her—but he passed close enough to the fire that she saw his face. She says he was pockmarked"—here he put his fingertips against his face, as she had—"with a face like a pig."

"Murchison?" My heart skipped a beat.

“Did the man wear a uniform?” Jamie asked, frowning.

“No. But she was curious to know what he had been doing there; he wasna one of the plantation owners, nor yet a hand or an overseer. So she crept to the mill to see, but when she put her head inside, she knew something evil had happened. She said she smelt blood, and then she heard voices, so she didna go in.”

So it had been murder, and Jamie and I had missed preventing it by a matter of moments. It was warm in the longhouse, but I felt cold at the memory of the thick, bloody air in the sawmill, and the hardness of a kitchen skewer in my hand.

Jamie’s hand settled on my shoulder. Without thinking, I reached up and took it. It felt very good in mine, and I realized that we had not purposely touched each other in nearly a month.

“The dead lass was an army laundress,” he said quietly. “Murchison has a wife in England; I suppose he might have found a pregnant mistress to be an encumbrance.”

“No wonder he was making such a fuss of hunting for whoever was responsible—and then seizin’ on yon poor woman who couldna even speak for herself.” Ian’s face was flushed with indignation. “If he could have got her hanged for it, he’d ha’ thought himself safe, I daresay, the wicked wee scut.”

“Perhaps I will pay a call on the Sergeant, when we return,” Jamie said. “Privately.”

The thought made my blood run cold. His voice was soft and even, and his face calm when I turned to look, but I seemed to see the surface of a dark Scottish pool reflected in his eyes, the water ruffled as though something heavy had just sunk below.

“Don’t you think you’ve enough vengeance to keep you occupied for the moment?”

I spoke more sharply than I intended, and his hand slipped abruptly out of mine.

“I expect so,” he said, both face and voice without expression. He turned to Ian.

“Wakefield—or MacKenzie, or whatever the man’s name is—is a good way to the north. They sold him to the Mohawk; a small village below the river. Your friend Onakara has agreed to guide us; we'll leave at first light."

He rose and walked away, toward the far end of the house. Everyone else had already retired for the night. Five hearths burned, down the length of the house, each with its own smokehole, and the far wall was divided into cubicles, one for each couple or family, with a low, wide shelf for sleeping and space beneath for storage.

Jamie stopped at the cubicle assigned for our use, where I had left our cloaks and bundles. He slipped off his boots, unbelted the plaid he wore over breeches and shirt, and disappeared into the darkness of the sleeping space without a backward glance.

I scrambled to my feet, meaning to follow him, but Ian stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"Auntie," he said hesitantly. "Will ye not forgive him?"

"Forgive *him?*" I stared at him. "For what? For Roger?"

He grimaced.

"No. It was a grievous mistake, but we would do the same again, thinking matters as we did. No—for Bonnet."

"For Stephen Bonnet? How can he possibly think I blame him for that? I've never said such a thing to him!" And I had been too busy thinking that he blamed *me,* to even consider it.

Ian scratched a hand through his hair.

"Well … do ye not see, Auntie? He blames himself for it. He has, ever since the man robbed us on the river; and now wi' what he's done to my cousin …" He shrugged, looking mildly embarrassed. "He's fair eaten up with it, and knowing that you're angry wi' him —"

"But I'm not angry with him! I thought he was angry with me, because I didn't tell him Bonnet's name right away."

"Och." Ian looked as though he didn't know whether to laugh or look distressed. "Well, I daresay it would ha' saved us a bit of trouble if ye had, but no, I'm sure it's not that, Auntie. After all, by the time Cousin Brianna told ye, we'd already met yon MacKenzie on the mountainside and done him a bit of no good."

I took in a deep breath and blew it out again.

"But you think he thinks I'm angry at him?"

“Oh, anyone could see ye are, Auntie,” he assured me earnestly. “Ye dinna look at him or speak to him save for what ye must—and,” he said, clearing his throat delicately, “I havena seen ye go to his bed, anytime this month past.”

“Well, he hasn’t come to mine, either!” I said hotly, before reflecting that this was scarcely a suitable conversation to be having with a seventeen year-old boy.

Ian hunched his shoulders and gave me an owlish look.

“Well, he’s his pride, hasn’t he?”

“God knows he has,” I said, rubbing a hand over my face. “I—look, Ian, thank you for saying something to me.”

He gave me one of the rare sweet smiles that transformed his long, homely face.

“Well, I do hate to see him suffer. I’m fond of Uncle Jamie, aye?”

“So am I,” I said, and swallowed the small lump in my throat. “Good night, Ian.”

I walked softly down the length of the house, past cubicles in which whole families slept together, the sound of their mingled breathing a peaceful descant to the anxious beating of my heart. It was raining outside; water dripped from the smokeholes, sizzling in the embers.

Why had I not seen what Ian had? That was easy to answer; it wasn’t anger, but my own sense of guilt that had blinded me. I had kept back my knowledge of Bonnet’s involvement as much because of the gold wedding ring as because Brianna had asked me to; I could have persuaded her to tell Jamie, had I tried.

She was right; he would undoubtedly go after Stephen Bonnet sooner or later. I had somewhat more confidence in Jamie’s success than she did, though. No, it had been the ring that had made me keep silence.

And why should I feel guilty over that? There was no sensible answer; it had been instinct, not conscious thought, to hide the ring. I had not wanted to show it to Jamie, to put it back on my finger in front of him. And yet I had wanted—needed—to keep it.

My heart squeezed small, thinking of the past few weeks, of Jamie, going grimly about the necessities of reparation in loneliness and guilt. That was why I had come with him, after all—because I was afraid that if he went alone, he might not come back. Spurred by guilt and courage, he might go to reckless lengths; with me to consider, I knew he would be careful. And all the time he had thought himself not only alone but bitterly reproached by the one person who could—and should—have offered him comfort.

"Eaten up with it" indeed.

I paused by the cubicle. The shelf was some eight feet wide, and he lay well back; I could see little more of him than a humped shape under a blanket made of rabbit skins. He lay very still, but I knew he wasn't asleep.

I climbed onto the platform, and once safe within the shadows of the cubicle, slipped out of my clothes. It was fairly warm in the longhouse, but my bare skin prickled and my nipples tightened. My eyes had grown accustomed to the dimness; I could see that he lay on his side facing me. I caught the shine of his eyes in the dark, open and watching me.

I knelt down and slid under the blanket, the fur soft against my skin. Without stopping to think too much, I rolled to face him, pressing my nakedness against him, face buried in his shoulder.

"Jamie," I whispered to him. "I'm cold. Come and warm me. Please?"

He turned to me, wordless, with a quiet ferocity that I might have thought the hunger of desire long stifled—but knew now for simple desperation. I sought no pleasure for myself; I wanted only to give him comfort. But opening to him, urging him, some deep wellspring opened too, and I cleaved to him in a sudden need as blind and desperate as his own.

We clung tight together, shuddering, heads buried in each other's hair, unable to look at each other, unable to let go. Slowly, as the spasms died away, I became aware of things outside our own small mortal coil, and realized that we lay in the midst of strangers, naked and helpless, shielded only by darkness.

And yet we were alone, completely. We had the privacy of Babel; there was a conversation going on at the far end of the longhouse, but its words held no meaning. It might as well have been the hum of bees.

Smoke from the banked fire wavered up outside the sanctuary of our bed, fragrant and insubstantial as incense. It was dark as a confessional inside the cubicle; I could see no more of Jamie than the faint curve of light that rimmed his shoulder, a transient gleam in the locks of his hair.

"Jamie, I'm sorry," I said softly. "It wasn't your fault."

"Who else?" he said, with some bleakness.

"Everyone. No one. Stephen Bonnet, himself. But not you."

"Bonnet?" His voice was blank with surprise. "What has he to do with it?"

"Well … everything," I said, taken aback. "Er … doesn't he?"

He rolled halfway off me, brushing hair out of his face.

"Stephen Bonnet is a wicked creature," he said precisely, "and I shall kill him at the first opportunity I have. But I dinna see how I can blame him for my own failings as a man."

"What on earth are you talking about? What failings?"

He didn't answer right away, but bent his head, a humped shadow in the dark. His legs were still entangled with mine; I could feel the tension of his body, knotted in his joints, rigid in the hollows of his thighs.

"I hadna thought ever to be so jealous of a dead man," he whispered at last. "I shouldna have thought it possible."

"Of a dead man?" My own voice rose slightly, with astonishment, as it finally dawned on me. "Of *Frank?*"

He lay still, half on top of me. His hand touched the bones of my face, hesitant.

"Who else? I have been worm-eaten wi' it, all these days of riding. I see his face in my mind, waking and sleeping. Ye did say he looked like Jack Randall, no?"

I gathered him tight against myself, pressing his head down so that his ear was near my mouth. Thank God I hadn't mentioned the ring to him—but had my face, my traitorous, transparent face, somehow given away that I thought of it?

"How?" I whispered to him, squeezing hard. "How could you think of such a thing?"

He broke loose, rising on one elbow, his hair falling down over my face in a mass of flaming shadows, the firelight sparking gold and crimson through it.

"How could I not?" he demanded. "Ye heard her, Claire; ye ken well what she said to me!"

"Brianna?"

"She said she would gladly see me in hell, and sell her own soul to have her father back—her real father." He swallowed; I heard the sound of it, above the murmur of distant voices.

"I keep thinking he would not have made such a mistake. He would have trusted her; he would have known that she … I keep thinking that Frank Randall was a better man than I am. She thinks so." His hand faltered, then settled on my shoulder, squeezing tight. "I thought … perhaps ye felt the same, Sassenach."

"Fool," I whispered, and didn't mean him. I ran my hands down the long slope of his back, digging my fingers into the firmness of his buttocks. "Wee idiot. Come here."

He dropped his head, and made a small sound against my shoulder that might have been a laugh.

"Aye, I am. Ye dinna mind it so much, though?"

"No." His hair smelt of smoke and pinesap. There were still bits of needles caught in it; one pricked smooth and sharp against my lips.

"She didn't mean it," I said.

"Aye, she did," he said, and I felt him swallow the thickness in his throat. "I heard her."

"I heard you both." I rubbed slowly between his shoulder blades, feeling the faint traces of the old scars, the thicker, more recent welts left by the bear's claws. "She's just like you; she'll say things in a temper she'd never say in cold blood. You didn't mean all the things you said to her, did you?"

"No." I could feel the tightness in him lessening, the joints of his body loosening, yielding reluctantly to the persuasion of my fingers. "No, I didna mean it. Not all of it."

"Neither did she."

I waited a moment, stroking him as I had stroked Brianna, when she was small, and afraid.

"You can believe me," I whispered. "I love you both."

He sighed, deeply, and was quiet for a moment.

"If I can find the man and bring him back to her. If I do—d'ye think she'll forgive me one day?"

"Yes," I said. "I know it."

On the other side of the partition, I heard the small sounds of lovemaking begin; the shift and sigh, the murmured words that have no language.

"You have to go." Brianna had said to me. *"You're the only one who can bring him back."*

It occurred to me for the first time that perhaps she hadn't been speaking of Roger.

* * *

It was a long trek through the mountains, made longer by the winter weather. There were days when it was impossible to travel; when we crouched all day under rocky overhangs or in the shelter of a grove of trees, huddled against the wind.

Once we were through the mountains, the traveling was somewhat easier, though the temperatures grew colder as we headed north. Some nights we ate cold food, unable to keep a fire alight in snow and wind. But each night I lay with Jamie, closely huddled together within a single cocoon of furs and blankets, sharing our warmth.

I kept close count of the days, marking them by means of a length of knotted twine. We had left River Run in early January; it was mid-February before Onakara pointed out to us the smoke rising in the distance that marked the Mohawk village where he and his companions had taken Roger Wakefield. “Snake-town,” he said it was called.

Six weeks, and Brianna would be nearly six months gone. If we could get Roger back quickly—and if he was capable of travel, I added grimly to myself—we should be back well before the child was due. If Roger wasn’t here, though—if the Mohawk had sold him elsewhere … or if he was dead—said a small cold voice inside my head, we would return without delay.

Onakara declined to accompany us into the village, which did absolutely nothing to increase my confidence in our prospects. Jamie thanked him and saw him off, with one of the horses, a good knife, and a flask of whisky in payment for his services.

We buried the rest of the whisky, hiding it carefully some distance outside the village.

“Will they understand what we want?” I asked, as we remounted. “Is Tuscarora close enough to Mohawk for us to talk to them?”

“It’s no quite the same, Auntie, but close,” Ian said. It was snowing lightly, and the flakes clung melting to his eyelashes. “Like the differences between Italian and Spanish, maybe. But Onakara says that the *sachem* and a few others have a bit of English, though they mostly dinna choose to use it. But the Mohawk fought with the English against the French; there will be some who ken it.”

“Well, then.” Jamie smiled at us and laid his musket across the saddle in front of him. “Let’s go and try our luck.”

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CAPTIVITY I

February 1770

He had been in the Mohawk village nearly three months, by the reckoning of his knotted string. At first he had not known who they were; only that they were a different kind of Indian than his captors—and that his captors were afraid of them.

He had stood numb with exhaustion while the men who had brought him talked and pointed. The new Indians were different; they were dressed for the cold, in fur and leather, and many of the men's faces were tattooed.

One of them prodded him with the point of a knife, and made him undress. He was forced to stand naked in the middle of a long wooden house while several men—and women—poked and jeered at him. His right foot was badly swollen; the deep cut had become infected. He could still walk, but each step sent jabs of pain through his leg, and he burned intermittently with fever.

They shoved him, pushing him to the door of the house. There was a lot of noise outside. He recognized the gauntlet; a double row of shouting savages, all armed with sticks and clubs. Someone behind poked him in the buttock with the point of a knife, and he felt a warm trickle of blood run down his leg. *"Cours!"* they said. Run.

The ground was trampled, snow packed into grimy ice. It burned his feet as a shove in his back sent him staggering into pandemonium.

He stayed upright most of the way, lurching one way, then another, as the clubs struck him to and fro and sticks lashed at his legs and back. There was no way to avoid the blows. All he could do was keep going, as fast as possible.

Close to the end, a club swung straight and took him hard across the belly; he doubled over and another swatted him behind the ear. He rolled bonelessly into the snow, barely feeling the cold on his broken skin.

A switch stung his legs, then lashed him hard just under the balls. He jerked his legs up in reflex, rolled again, and found himself on hands and knees, still somehow going, the blood from his nose and mouth mixing with the frozen mud.

He reached the end, and with the last blows still stinging on his back, grasped the poles of a longhouse and pulled himself slowly to his feet. He turned to face them, holding on to the poles to keep from falling. They liked that; they were laughing, with high-pitched yips that made them sound like a pack of dogs. He bowed low, and straightened up, head whirling. They laughed harder. He'd always known how to please a crowd.

They took him inside then, gave him water to wash with, some food. They gave him back his ragged shirt and filthy breeches, but not his coat or shoes. It was warm in the house; there were several fires burning at intervals down the length of the long structure, each with its own open smokehole above. He crawled into a corner and fell asleep, his hand on the lumpy seam of his breeches.

After this reception, the Mohawk treated him with general indifference but no great cruelty. He was the slave of the longhouse, at the use of anyone who lived there. If he did not understand an order, they would show him—once. If he refused or pretended not to understand, they beat him, and he refused no more. Still, he shared equally in their food and was given a decent place to sleep, at the end of the house.

As it was winter, the main work was in gathering wood and fetching water, though now and then a hunting party would take him along to help in butchering and carrying meat. The Indians made no great effort to communicate with him, but by careful listening he acquired a little of the language.

He began, with great caution, to try a few words. He chose a young girl to begin with, feeling her less dangerous. She stared at him, then laughed, delighted as if she had heard a crow talk. She called a friend to come and hear, and another, and the three of them crouched in front of him, laughing softly behind their hands and looking sideways at him from the corners of their eyes. He said all the words he knew, pointing at the objects—fire, pot, blanket, corn—then pointed at a string of dried fish overhead and raised his eyebrows.

"Yona'kensyonk," said his new friend promptly, and giggled when he repeated it. Over the next days and weeks, the girls taught him a great deal; it was from them that he finally learned where he was. Or not where, precisely, but in whose hands.

They were *Kahnyen'kehaka,* they told him proudly, with looks of surprise that he did not know that. Mohawk. Keepers of the Eastern Gate of the Iroquois League. He, on the other hand, was *Kakonhoaerhas*. It took a certain amount of discussion to determine the exact meaning of this term; he finally discovered, when one of the girls dragged in a mongrel in illustration, that it meant "dogface."

"Thanks," he said, fingering the thick growth of his beard. He bared his teeth at them and growled, and they shrieked with laughter.

One of the girls' mothers became interested; seeing that his foot was still swollen, she brought ointment and bathed it, bandaging it for him with lichen and corn husks. The women began to speak to him when he brought them wood or water.

He made no attempt at escape; not yet. Winter kept its grip on the village, with frequent snows and bitter wind. He wouldn't get far, unarmed, lame, and with no protection from the weather. He bided his time. And he dreamed at night of lost worlds, waking often in the dawn to the smell of fresh grass, with the ache of his need spilled warm on his belly.

The edges of the river were still frozen when the Jesuit came.

Roger had the run of the village; he was outside when the dogs began to bark and yelps from the sentries signaled the arrival of visitors. People began to gather, and he went with them, curious.

The new arrivals were a large group of Mohawk, men and women both, all on foot, burdened with the usual bundles of traveling gear. That seemed odd; such visitors as had come to the village before were small hunting parties. What was odder was that the visitors had with them a white man—the pale winter sun gleamed on the man's fair hair.

Roger moved closer, eager to see, but was shoved back by some of the villagers. Not before seeing that the man was a priest, though; the tattered remnants of a long black robe showed beneath a bearskin cape, over leather leggings and moccasins.

The priest didn't act like a prisoner, nor was he bound. And yet Roger had the feeling that he traveled under compulsion; there were lines of strain in an otherwise young face. The priest and several of his companions disappeared into the longhouse where the *sachem* held council; Roger had never been inside, but had heard the women talk.

One of the older women from his own longhouse saw him loitering in the crowd, and ordered him sharply to fetch more wood. He went, and didn't see the priest again, though the faces of the new arrivals showed in the village, scattered among the longhouses to share the hospitality of their hearths.

Something was happening in the village; he could feel the currents of it eddying around him but did not understand them. The men sat later by the fires in the evenings, talking, and the women murmured to each other as they worked, but the discussion was far beyond the grasp of Roger's rudimentary comprehension. He asked one of the little girls about the new visitors; she could tell him only that they came from a village to the north—why they had come, she did not know, save it had to do with the Black Robe, the *Kahontsi'yatawi*.

It was more than a week later that Roger went out with a hunting party. The weather was cold but clear, and they traveled far, eventually finding and killing a moose. Roger was stunned, not only by the size of the thing but by its stupidity. He could understand the attitude of the hunters: There was no honor in killing such a thing; it was only meat.

It was a *lot* of meat. He was burdened like a pack mule, and the extra weight bore hard on his lame foot; by the time they returned to the village, he was limping so badly that he couldn't keep up with the hunting party, but lagged far behind, desperately trying to keep them in view lest he be lost in the forest.

To his surprise, several men were waiting for him when he finally limped into view of the village palisades. They grabbed him, relieved him of the burden of meat, and hustled him into the village. They didn't take him to his own longhouse, but to a small hut that stood at the far end of the central clearing.

He hadn't enough Mohawk to ask questions, and didn't think they would be answered in any case. They shoved him inside the hut, and left him.

There was a small fire burning, but the interior was so dark after the brightness of the day outside that he was momentarily blinded.

"Who are you?" said a startled voice in French.

Roger blinked several times, and made out a slight figure rising from its seat beside the fire. The priest.

"Roger MacKenzie," he said. *"Et vous"* He experienced a sudden and unexpected flood of happiness at the simple speaking of his name. The Indians didn't care what his name was; they called him dogface when they wanted him.

"Alexandre." The priest came forward, looking both pleased and incredulous. "Père Alexandre Ferigault. *Vous êtes anglais?*"

"Scots," said Roger, and sat down suddenly, his lame leg giving way.

"A Scotsman? How do you come here? You are a soldier?"

"A prisoner."

The priest squatted by him, looking him over curiously. He *was* fairly young—in his late twenties or early thirties, though his fair skin was chapped and weathered by the cold.

“You will eat with me?” He gestured to a small collection of clay pots and baskets that held food and water.

Speaking in his own language seemed to be as much a relief for the priest as speaking freely was for Roger. By the time the meal was concluded, they had gleaned a cautious knowledge of each other’s basic past—if no explanation as yet for their present situation.

“Why have they put me here with you?” Roger asked, wiping grease from his mouth. He didn’t think it was to provide the priest with company. Thoughtfulness was not an outstanding Mohawk characteristic, so far as he’d noticed.

“I cannot say. I was in fact astonished to see another white man.”

Roger glanced at the door of the hut. It moved slightly; there was someone outside.

“Are you a prisoner?” he asked, in some surprise. The priest hesitated, then shrugged, with a small smile.

“I cannot say that, either. With the Mohawk, one is *Kahnyen’kehaka* or one is—other. And if one is other, the line between guest and prisoner can alter in a moment. Leave it that I have lived among them for several years—but I have not been adopted into the tribe. I am still ‘other.’ ” He coughed and changed the subject. “How did you come to be taken captive?”

Roger hesitated, not really knowing how to answer.

“I was betrayed,” he said at last. “Sold.”

The priest nodded sympathetically.

“Is there anyone who might ransom you? They will take care to keep you alive if they have some hope of ransom.”

Roger shook his head, feeling hollow as a drum.

“There’s no one.”

* * *

Conversation ceased as the light from the smokehole dimmed into dusk, leaving them in darkness below. There was a firepit, but no wood; the fire died out. The hut seemed to have been abandoned; there was a bed frame built of poles, but nothing else in the hut save a couple of tattered deerskins and a small heap of domestic debris in one corner.

“Have you been here—in this hut—long?” Roger asked at last, breaking the silence. He could barely see the other man, though the last remnants of twilight were visible through the smokehole.

“No. They brought me here today—shortly before you came.” The priest coughed, shifting uneasily on the packed dirt floor.

That seemed sinister, but Roger thought it more tactful—and less frightening—not to mention it. It was no doubt as obvious to the priest as to himself that the line between “guest” and “prisoner” had been crossed. What had the man done?

“You are a Christian?” Alexandre broke the silence abruptly.

“Yes. My father was a minister.”

“Ah. May I ask—if they take me away, will you pray for me?”

Roger felt a sudden chill that had nothing to do with the cheerless surroundings.

“Yes,” he said awkwardly. “Of course. If you like.”

The priest rose and began to walk restlessly about the confines of the hut, unable to keep still.

“It may be all right,” he said, but it was the voice of a man trying to convince himself. “They are still deciding.”

“Deciding what?”

He felt rather than saw the priest’s shrug.

“Whether I live.”

There seemed no good response to that, and they fell once more into silence. Roger sat huddled by the cold firepit, resting his lame foot, while the priest paced to and fro, finally settling beside him. Without comment, the two moved close together, pooling their warmth; it was going to be a cold night.

Roger had dozed off, one of the deerskins pulled over him, when there was a sudden noise at the door. He sat up, blinking, to a blaze of fire.

There were four Mohawk warriors in the hut; one dumped a load of wood into the firepit and thrust the brand he held into the pile.

Ignoring Roger, the others pulled Père Ferigault to his feet and roughly stripped him of his clothes.

Roger moved instinctively, half rising, and was knocked flat. The priest gave him a quick, open-eyed look that begged him not to interfere.

One of the warriors held his own brand close to Père Ferigault's face. He said something that sounded like a question, then, receiving no answer, passed his brand downward, so close to the priest's body that the white skin glowed red.

Sweat stood out on Alexandre's face as the fire hovered near his genitals, but his face remained carefully blank. The warrior with the brand poked it suddenly at the priest, who could not keep from flinching. The Indians laughed, and did it again. This time he was prepared; Roger smelled singed hair, but the priest didn't move.

Tiring of this sport, two of the warriors seized the priest by the arms, and dragged him out of the hut.

If they take me away—pray for me. Roger sat up slowly, the hairs on his body prickling with dread. He could hear the voices of the Indians, talking among themselves, receding in the distance; no sound from the priest.

Alexandre's discarded clothes were flung around the hut; Roger picked them up, carefully beating the dust from them and folding them. His hands were shaking.

He tried to pray, but found it hard to focus his mind upon devotion. Over and around the words of his prayer, he could hear a small, cold voice, saying, *And when they come to take me away—who will pray for me?*

* * *

They had left him a fire; he tried to believe that meant that they did not mean to kill him right away. The granting of comforts to a condemned prisoner was not the Mohawk way, either. After a time he lay down under the deerskins, curled on his side, and watched the flames until he fell asleep, worn out by terror.

He was roused from uneasy sleep by the shuffle of feet and many voices. He sprang awake, rolled away from the fire and crouched, looking frantically for some means of defense.

The door flap lifted, and the naked body of the priest fell into the hut. The noises outside moved away.

Alexandre stirred and moaned. Roger came quickly and knelt by him. He could smell fresh blood, a hot-copper smell he recognized from the slaughtering of the moose.

“Are you hurt? What have they done?”

The answer to that was quick in coming. He turned the half-conscious priest over, to see blood streaming over face and neck in a shiny red glaze. He snatched the priest’s discarded robe to stanch the wound, pushed back the matted blond hair, and found that the priest’s right ear was missing. Something sharp had taken a patch of skin some three inches square from just behind the jaw, removing both ear and a section of scalp.

Roger clenched his stomach muscles and pressed the cloth tight against the raw wound. Holding it in place, he dragged the limp body to the fire, and piled the remnants of clothes and both deerskins on top of Père Ferigault.

The man was moaning now. Roger washed his face, made him drink a little water.

“It’s all right,” he muttered, over and over, though he was uncertain whether the other could hear him. “It’s all right, they didn’t kill you.” He couldn’t help wondering whether it might have been better if they had; did they mean this only as a warning to the priest, or was it only the preliminary to greater tortures?

The fire had burned itself to coals; in the reddish light, the seeping blood was black.

Father Alexandre moved constantly in small jerks, the restlessness of his body at once caused and constrained by the pain of his wound. He could not by any means settle to sleep, and consequently neither could Roger, nearly as aware as the priest of each interminably passing minute.

Roger cursed himself for helplessness; he would have given anything to assuage the other man’s pain, even for a moment. It wasn't merely sympathy, and he knew it; Father Alexandre's small, breathless sounds kept the knowledge of the mutilation fresh in Roger's mind, and terror alive in his blood. If the priest could only sleep, the sounds would stop—and perhaps in the darkness, the horror would recede a bit.

For the first time, he thought he understood what it was that made Claire Randall tick; made her walk onto battlefields, to lay her hands on wounded men. To ease pain and death in another was to soothe the fear of it in oneself—and to soothe his own fear, he would do almost anything.

At last, unable to bear the whispered prayers and stifled whimpering any longer, he lay down beside the priest, and took Alexandre in his arms.

"Hush," he said, his lips close to Père Alexandre's head. He hoped he had the side with the ear. "Be still now. *Reposez-vous*."

The priest's lean body quivered against his own, the muscles knotted with cold and agony. Roger rubbed the man's back briskly, chafed his palms over the chilled limbs, and pulled both tattered deerskins over them.

"You'll be all right." Roger spoke in English, aware that it didn't matter what he said, only that he said something. "Here now, it's all right. Yes, go on, then." He talked as much to distract himself as the other man; the feel of Alexandre's naked body was vaguely shocking—as much because it didn't feel unnatural as because it did.

The priest clung to him, head pressed into his shoulder. He said nothing, but Roger could feel the wetness of tears against his skin. He made himself hug the priest tightly, rubbing up and down the spine with its small lumps of knobby bone, forcing himself to think only of stopping the terrible shaking.

"You could be a dog," Roger said. "A mistreated stray of some kind. I'd do it if you were a dog, of course I would. No, I wouldn't," he muttered to himself. "Call the ruddy RSPCA, I expect."

He patted Alexandre's head, careful where his fingers went, cold with gooseflesh at the thought of touching that raw, bloody patch by inadvertence. The hair at the priest's nape was lank with sweat, though the flesh of his neck and shoulders was like ice. His lower body was warmer, but not by much.

"Nobody'd treat a dog like this," he muttered. "Fucking savages. Set the police onto them. Put their bloody pictures in the *Times*. Complain to my MP."

A small ripple of something too frightened to be called laughter went through him. He gripped the priest fiercely, and rocked him to and fro in darkness.

"Reposez-vous, mon ami. C'est bien, là, c'est bien."

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CAPTIVITY II

River Run, March 1770

Brianna rolled the wet brush along the edge of the palette, squeezing out the excess turps to form a good point. She touched the point briefly to the viridian-cobalt mix and added a fine line of shadow to the river's edge.

There were footsteps on the path behind her, coming from the house. She recognized the arrythmic double step; it was the Deadly Duo. She tensed slightly, fighting the urge to snatch the wet canvas and put it out of sight behind Hector Cameron's mausoleum. She didn't mind Jocasta, who often came to sit with her while she painted in the mornings, to discuss techniques of painting, grinding pigments, and the like. In fact, she welcomed her great-aunt's company and treasured the older woman's stories of her girlhood in Scotland, of Brianna's grandmother, and of the other MacKenzies of Leoch. But when Jocasta brought her faithful Seeing-eye Dog along, it was a different matter.

"Good morning, Niece! Is it not too cold for you the morn?"

Jocasta halted, her own cloak drawn around her, and smiled at Brianna. If she hadn't known better, she wouldn't have realized her aunt's blindness.

"No, it's fine here; the … er … tomb blocks the wind. I'm finished for now, though." She wasn't, but stabbed her brush into the turpentine jar and began to scrape the palette. Damned if she'd paint with Ulysses describing her every brushstroke out loud.

"Ah? Well, leave your things, then; Ulysses will take them up for you."

Reluctantly abandoning her easel, Brianna picked up her private sketchbook and tucked it under one arm, giving her other to Jocasta. She wasn't leaving *that* for Mr. Sees-all, Tells-all to flip through.

"We have company today," Jocasta said, turning back toward the house. "Judge Alderdyce, from Cross Creek, and his mother. I thought perhaps ye'd wish time to change, before luncheon." Brianna bit the inside of her cheek, to prevent any rejoinder to this less than subtle hint. More visitors.

Under the circumstances, she could scarcely refuse to meet her aunt's guests—or even to change clothes for them—but she could have wished that Jocasta were a good deal less sociable. There was a constant stream of visitors; for luncheon, for tea, for supper, overnight, for breakfast, come to buy horses, sell cows, trade lumber, borrow books, bring gifts, play music. They came from neighboring plantations, from Cross Creek, and from as far away as Edenton and New Bern.

The array of Jocasta's acquaintance was staggering. Still, Brianna had noticed an increasing tendency of late for the callers to be men. Single men.

Phaedre verified Brianna's suspicions, voiced as the maid dug in the wardrobe for a fresh morning gown.

"There ain't a lot of single women in the colony," Phaedre observed, when Brianna mentioned the peculiar coincidence that most of the recent visitors appeared to be bachelors. Phaedre cast an eye at Brianna's midsection, which was bulging noticeably under the loose muslin shift. " 'Specially not young ones. To say nothing of women who's got River Run a-coming to them."

"Who's got *what?*" Brianna said. She stopped, hair half pinned, and stared at the maid.

Phaedre laid one graceful hand across her mouth, eyes wide above it.

"Your auntie ain't told you yet? Thought sure you knew, or I'd not've said."

"Well, now you've said that much, go on saying. What do you mean?" Phaedre, a born gossip, took little coaxing.

"Your daddy and them hadn't been gone but a week, before Miss Jo sent for Lawyer Forbes and had her will changed. When Miss Jo dies, they's some little bits of money goes to your daddy, and some personal things to Mr. Farquard and some of her other friends—but everything else, that's yours. The plantation, the timber, the sawmill …"

"But I don't want it!"

Phaedre's elegantly lifted eyebrow expressed profound doubt, then dropped, dismissing it.

"Well, it ain't what you want, I reckon. Miss Jo is kind of inclined to get what *she* wants."

Brianna laid the hairbrush down, slowly.

"And just what *does* she want?" she asked. "Do you happen to know that, too?"

"Ain't any big secret. She wants River Run to last longer than she does—and to belong to somebody from her blood. Seems sense to me; she got no children, no grandchildren. Who else is there to carry on after her?"

"Well … there's my father."

Phaedre laid the fresh dress across the bed and frowned at it appraisingly, glancing back at Brianna's middle.

"This one going to last no more than another couple weeks, the way that belly's growing. Oh, yes, there's your daddy. She done tried to make him her heir, but the way I hears it, he wasn't havin' none of it." She pursed her lips in amusement.

"Now there's a stubborn man for you. Go off into the mountains and live like a red man, just to keep from doing what Miss Jo want him to do. But Mr. Ulysses reckons your daddy had the right of it, at that. Be him and Miss Jo buttin' heads day and night, if he'd a-stayed."

Brianna slowly twisted up the other side of her hair, but the hairpin slipped out again, letting it fall.

"Here, you be lettin' me do that, Miss Bree." Phaedre slid behind her, pulled out the slipshod pinning, and began deftly to braid the sides of her hair.

"And all these visitors—these men—"

"Miss Jo out to pick you a good one," Phaedre assured her. "You can't run the place alone, no more than Miss Jo can. That Mr. Duncan, he's a godsend; don't know what she'd do without him."

Sheer astonishment was giving way to outrage.

"She's trying to pick a husband for me? She's showing me off like—like some prize heifer?"

"Uh-huh." Phaedre appeared to see nothing wrong with this. She frowned, drawing a straying lock skillfully into the main braid.

"But she knows about Roger—about Mr. Wakefield! How can she be trying to marry me off to—"

Phaedre sighed, not without sympathy.

"I don't reckon she thinks they're going to find the man, tell you true. Miss Jo, she knows a bit about the Indians; we've all heard Mr. Myers tell about the Iroquois."

It was chilly in the room, but prickles of sweat broke out along Brianna's hairline and jaw.

"Besides," Phaedre went on, weaving a blue silk ribbon into the braid, "Miss Jo don't know this Wakefield. Might be he'd not be a good manager. Better—she thinks—to get you married to a man she knows will take good care of her place; add it to his own, maybe, make a truly grand place for you."

"I don't *want* a grand place! I don't want *this* place!" Outrage in turn was giving way to panic.

Phaedre tied the end of the ribbon with a small flourish.

"Well, like I say—it ain't so much what you want. It's what Miss Jo wants. Now, let's try this dress."

* * *

There was a sound in the hallway, and Brianna hastily flipped the page of her sketchbook over, to a half-finished charcoal drawing of the river and its trees. The steps went by, though, and she relaxed, turning back the page.

She wasn't working; the drawing was complete. She only wanted to look at it.

She'd drawn him in three-quarter profile, head turned to listen as he tuned his guitar strings. It was no more than a sketch, but it caught the line of head and body with a rightness that memory confirmed. She could look at this and conjure him, bring him close enough almost to touch.

There were others; some botched messes, some that came close. A few that were good drawings in themselves, but that failed to capture the man behind the lines. One or two, like this one, that she could use to comfort herself in the late gray afternoons, when the light began to fail and the fires burned low.

The light was fading over the river now, the water dimming from bright silver to the gentler glow of pewter.

There were others; sketches of Jamie Fraser, of her mother, of Ian. She had begun to draw them out of loneliness, and looked at them now with fear, hoping against hope that these fragments of paper were not the only remnants of the family she had known so briefly.

Tell you true, I don't reckon Miss Jo thinks they going to find the man … Miss Jo knows about Indians.

Her hands were damp; the charcoal smeared at the corner of a page. A soft step sounded just outside the parlor door, and she closed her book at once.

Ulysses came in, a lighted taper in his hand, and began to light the branches of the great candelabrum.

"You don't need to light all those for me." Brianna spoke as much from a desire not to disturb the quiet melancholy of the room as from modesty. "I don't mind the dark."

The butler smiled gently and went on with his work. He touched each wick precisely, and the tiny flames sprang up at once, jinni called up by a magician's wand.

"Miss Jo will be down soon," he said. "She can see the lights—and the fire—so she knows where she is in the room."

He finished and blew out the taper, then moved about the room in his usual soft-footed way, tidying the small disorder left by the afternoon guests, adding wood to the fire, puffing it into crackling life with the bellows.

She watched him; the small, precise movements of the well-kept hands, his complete absorption in the correct placement of the whisky decanter and its glasses. How many times had he straightened this room? Put back each piece of furniture, each tiny ornament precisely in its place, so that its mistress's hand would fall upon it without groping?

A whole life devoted to the needs of someone else. Ulysses could read and write both French and English; could reckon numbers, could sing and play the harpsichord. All that skill and learning—used only for the entertainment of an autocratic old lady.

To say to one, "Come," and he cometh, to say to another "Go," and he goeth. Yes, that was Jocasta's way.

And if Jocasta had her way … she would own this man.

The thought was unconscionable. Worse, it was ridiculous! She shifted impatiently in her seat, trying to push it away. He caught the slight movement, and turned inquiringly, to see if anything was wanted.

"Ulysses," she blurted. "Do you want to be free?"

The moment the words were out, she bit her tongue, and felt her cheeks go red with mortification.

"I'm sorry," she said at once, and looked down at her hands, twisted in her lap. "That was a terribly rude question. Please forgive me."

The tall butler didn't say anything, but regarded her quizzically for a moment. Then he touched his wig lightly, as though to settle it in place, and turned back to his work, picking up the scattered sketches on the table and tapping them neatly into a stack.

"I was born free," he said at last, so quietly that she wasn't sure she'd heard him. His head was bent, eyes on the long black fingers that plucked the ivory counters from the game table and placed each one neatly in its box.

"My father had a tiny farm, not too far from here. But he died of a snake's bite, when I was six or so. My mother could not manage to keep us—she was not strong enough for farming—and so she sold herself, putting the money with a carpenter for my apprenticeship once I should come of age, that I might learn a useful trade."

He set the ivory box in its slot in the game table, and wiped away a crumb of tea cake that had fallen on the cribbage board.

"But then she died," he went on matter-of-factly. "And the carpenter, instead of taking me as an apprentice, claimed that as I was the child of a slave, I was by law a slave myself. And so he sold me."

"But that's not right!"

He looked at her in patient amusement, but didn't speak. And what had right ever had to do with it? his dark eyes said.

"I was fortunate," he said. "I was sold—cheaply, for I was very small and puny—to a schoolmaster, whom several plantation owners on the Cape Fear had hired to teach their children. He would ride from one house to another, staying in each for a week or a month, and I would go with him, perched behind him on the horse's rump, tending the horse when we stopped, and doing such small services as he required.

"And because the journeys were long and tedious, he would talk to me as we rode. He sang—he loved to sing, that man, and he had a most delightful voice—" To Brianna's surprise, Ulysses looked faintly nostalgic, but then he shook his head, recalling himself, and took out a cloth from his pocket, with which he wiped the sideboard.

"It was the schoolmaster who gave me the name Ulysses," he said, back turned to her. "He knew some Greek, and some Latin as well, and for his own amusement, he taught me to read, on the nights when darkness befell us and we were forced to encamp on the road."

The straight, lean shoulders rose in the faintest of shrugs.

"When the schoolmaster died as well, I was a young man of twenty or so. Hector Cameron bought me, and discovered my talents. Not all masters would value such endowments in a slave, but Mr. Cameron was not a common man." Ulysses smiled faintly.

"He taught me to play chess, and would wager upon my success, playing against his friends. He had me taught to sing, and to play the harpsichord, that I might provide entertainment for his guests. And when Miss Jocasta began to lose her sight, he gave me to her, to be her eyes."

"What was your name? Your real name?"

He paused, thinking, then gave her a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"I am not sure that I remember," he said politely, and went out.

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CONFESSIONS OF THE FLESH

He woke a little before dawn. It was still black dark, but the air had changed; the embers had burned to staleness and the forest's breath moved past his face.

Alexandre was gone. He lay alone under the tattered deerskin, very cold.

"Alexandre?" he whispered hoarsely. "Père Ferigault?"

"I am here." The young priest's voice was soft, somehow remote, though he sat no more than a yard away.

Roger rose up on one elbow, squinting. Once the sleep had left his eyes, he could see dimly. Alexandre was sitting cross-legged, his back very straight, his face turned up to the square of the smokehole overhead.

"Are you all right?" One side of the priest's neck was stained dark with blood, though his face—what Roger could see of it—seemed serene.

"They will kill me soon. Perhaps today."

Roger sat up, clutching the deerskin to his chest. He was already cold; the calm tone of this froze him.

"No," he said, and had to cough to clear his throat of soot. "No, they won't."

Alexandre didn't bother contradicting him. Didn't move. He sat naked, oblivious of the cold morning air, looking up. At last he lowered his gaze, and turned his head toward Roger.

"Will you hear my confession?"

“I’m not a priest.” Roger scrambled to his knees and scuffled across the floor, the skin held awkwardly before him. “Here, you’ll freeze. Get under this.”

“It does not matter.”

Roger wasn’t sure whether he meant being cold didn’t matter, or whether Roger’s not being a priest didn’t matter. He laid a hand on Alexandre’s bare shoulder. Whether it mattered or not, the man was cold as ice.

Roger sat down next to Alexandre, as close as could be managed, and spread the skin over them both. Roger could feel his own skin ripple into gooseflesh where the other man’s icy skin touched him, but it didn’t trouble him; he leaned closer, wanting urgently to give Alexandre some of his own warmth.

“Your father,” Alexandre said. He had turned his head; his breath touched Roger’s face, and his eyes were dark holes in his face. “You told me he was a priest.”

“A minister. Yes, but I’m not.”

He sensed, rather than saw, the other’s small gesture of dismissal.

“In time of need, any man may do the office of a priest,” Alexandre said. Cold fingers touched Roger’s thigh, briefly. “Will you hear my confession?”

“If that’s—yes, if you like.” He felt awkward, but it couldn’t hurt, and if it helped the other at all … The hut, and the village outside, were quiet around them. There was no sound but the wind in the pine trees.

He cleared his throat. Did Alexandre mean to begin, or was he to say something first?

As though the sound had been a signal, the Frenchman turned to face him, bowing his head so the soft light smoothed the gold hair of his crown.

“Bless me, brother, for I have sinned,” Alexandre said in a low voice. And with his head bowed, hands folded in his lap, he made confession.

Sent out from Detroit with an escort of Hurons, he had ventured down the river as far as the settlement of Ste. Berthe de Ronvalle, to relieve the elderly priest in charge of the mission, whose health had broken down.

"I was happy there," Alexandre said, in the half-dreaming voice that men use for events that have taken place decades ago. "It was a wild place, but I was very young, and ardent in my faith. I welcomed hardship."

Young? The priest couldn't be much older than himself.

Alexandre shrugged, dismissing the past.

"I spent two years with the Huron, and converted many. Then I went with a group of them to Ft. Stanwix, where there was a great gathering of the tribes of the region. There I met Kennyanisi-t'ago, a war chief of the Mohawk. He heard me preach, and being moved of the Holy Spirit, invited me to return with him to his village."

The Mohawk were notoriously wary of conversion; it had seemed a heaven-sent chance. So Père Ferigault had traveled down the river by canoe, in company with Kennyanisi-t'ago and his warriors.

"That was my first sin," he said quietly. "Pride." He lifted one finger to Roger, as though suggesting that he keep count. "Still, God was with me." The Mohawk had sided with the English during the recent French and Indian War, and were more than suspicious of the young French priest. He had persevered, learning the Mohawk language, that he might preach to them in their own tongue.

He had succeeded in converting a number of the village, though by no means all. However, among his converts was the war chief, so he was protected from interference. Unfortunately, the *sachem* of the village opposed his influence, and there was continued uneasiness between Christian and non-Christian in the village.

The priest licked dry lips, then picked up the water jar and drank.

"And then," he said, taking a deep breath, "then I committed my second sin."

He had fallen in love with one of his own converts.

"Had you had women, before—?" Roger choked off the question, but Alexandre answered quite simply, without hesitation.

"No, never." There was a breath there, not quite a laugh, of bitter self-mockery. "I had thought I was immune to *that* temptation. But man is frail in the face of Satan's fleshly lures."

He had lived in the girl's longhouse for some months. Then, one morning, he had risen early, and going to the stream to wash, had seen his own reflection in the water.

"There was a sudden disturbance in the water, and the surface broke. A huge and gaping mouth rose through the surface, shattering the reflection of my face."

It had been no more than a rising trout, leaping for a dragonfly, but the priest, shaken by the experience, had seen it as a sign from God that his soul was in danger of being swallowed by the mouth of Hell. He had gone at once to the longhouse and removed his things, going to live alone in a small shelter outside the village. However, he had left his lover pregnant.

"Was that what caused the trouble that brought you here?" Roger asked.

"No, not in itself. They do not see matters of marriage and morality as we do," Alexandre explained. "Women take men as they will, and marriage is an agreement that endures so long as the partners are in amity; if they should fall out, then the woman may expel the man from her house—or he may leave. The children, if there are children, stay with the mother."

"But then—"

"The difficulty was that I had always, as a priest, refused to baptize infants unless both parents were Christian and in a state of grace. This is necessary, you understand, if the child is to be raised in faith—for the Indians are inclined otherwise to view the sacrament of baptism as no more than one of their pagan rituals."

Alexandre drew a deep breath.

"And of course I could not baptize this child. This offended and horrified Kennyanisi-t'ago, who insisted that I must do so. Upon my refusing, he ordered me to be tortured. My—the girl—interceded for me, and was abetted in this by her mother and several other influential persons."

Consequently the village had been torn by controversy and schism, and at last the *sachem* had decreed that they must take Père Alexandre to Onyarekenata, where an impartial council might judge what must be done to restore the harmony amongst them.

Roger scratched at his beard;perhaps the Indian dislike of hairy Europeans was the association with lice.

"I am afraid I don't quite understand," he said carefully. "You refused to baptize your own child because the mother was not a good Christian?"

Alexandre looked surprised.

"Ah, *non*! She retains her faith—though she would have every excuse if she did not," he added ruefully. He sighed. "No. I cannot baptize the child, not because of its mother—but because its father is not in a state of grace."

Roger rubbed his forehead, hoping his face didn't betray his astonishment.

"Ah. Is this why you wished to make confession to me? That you might be restored to a state of grace, and thus able to—"

The priest stopped him with a small gesture. He sat quietly for a moment, slender shoulders slumped. He must have brushed his wound accidentally; the clotted mass had cracked, and blood was once more seeping slowly down his neck.

"Forgive me," Alexandre said. "I should not have asked you; it was only that I was so grateful to be able to speak in my own language; I could not resist the temptation to ease my soul by telling you. But it is no good; there can be no absolution for me."

The man's despair was so plain, Roger laid a hand on the priest's forearm, wanting urgently to assuage it.

"Are you sure? You said that in time of need—"

"It is not that." He laid his hand on top of Roger's, squeezing tight, as though he might draw strength from the other's grip.

Roger said nothing. After a moment, Alexandre's head rose and the priest looked him in the face. The light outside had changed; there was a faint glow, a brightness in the air just short of light. His own breath rose white from his mouth, like smoke rising toward the hole above.

"Even though I confess, I will not be forgiven. There must be true repentance in order to obtain absolution; I must reject my sin. And that I cannot do."

He fell silent. Roger didn't know whether to speak, or what to say. A priest, he supposed, would have said something like "Yes, my son?" but he couldn't. Instead, he took Alexandre's other hand in his, and held it tightly.

"My sin was to love her," Alexandre said, very softly, "and that I cannot stop."

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A SHATTERED SMILE

Two Spears is agreeable. The matter must be spoken of before the Council, and accepted, but I think it will be done." Jamie slouched against a pine tree, slumping a little in exhaustion. We had been in the village for a week; he had been with the *sachem* of the village for the greater part of the last three days. I had barely seen him or Ian, but had been entertained by the women, who were polite but distant. I kept my amulet carefully out of sight.

"Then they do have him?" I asked, and felt the knot of anxiety that had traveled with me for so long begin to loosen. "Roger's really here?" So far, the Mohawks had been unwilling to admit either to Roger's continued existence—or the alternative.

"Aye, well, as to that, the auld bugger's no admitting it—for fear I should try to steal him away, I suppose—but either he's here or he's not far off. If the Council approves the bargain, we'll exchange the whisky for the man in three days time—and be off." He glanced at the heavy-laden clouds that hid the distant mountains. "God, I hope that's rain coming, and not snow."

"Do you think there's any chance the Council won't agree?"

He sighed deeply and ran a hand through his hair. It was unbound and fell rumpled over his shoulders; evidently the negotiations had been difficult.

"Aye, there's a chance. They want the whisky, but they're wary of it. Some of the older men will be against the bargain, for fear of the damage liquor might do to the folk; the younger men are all for it.

Some in the middle say aye, take it; they can use the liquor in trade if they're fearful of using it."

"Wakatihsnore told you all that?" I was surprised. The *sachem,* Acts Fast, seemed much too cool and wily a customer for such openness.

"Not him: wee Ian." Jamie smiled briefly. "The lad shows great promise as a spy, I will say. He's eaten at every hearth in the village, and he's found a lassie who's taken a great liking to him. She tells Ian what the Council of Mothers is thinking."

I hunched my shoulders and pulled my cloak tight around them; our perch on the rocks outside the village made us safe from interruption, but the price of visibility was exposure to the bitter wind.

"And what does the Council of Mothers say?" A week spent in a longhouse had given me some idea of the importance of the women's opinions in the scheme of things; though they didn't make direct decisions about general affairs, very little would be done without their approval.

"They could wish I offered some ransom other than whisky, and they're none so sure about giving up the man; more than one lady has a small fancy for him. They wouldna mind adopting him into the tribe." Jamie's mouth twisted at that, and I laughed despite my worry.

"Roger's a nice-looking lad," I said.

"I've seen him," Jamie said shortly. "Most of the men think he's an ugly, hairy bastard. Of course, they think that of me, too." One side of his mouth lifted reluctantly, as he brushed a hand over his jaw; knowing the Indians' dislike of facial hair, he was careful to shave every morning.

"As it is, that may be what makes the difference."

"What, Roger's looks? Or yours?"

"The fact that more than one lady wants the bugger. Ian says his lassie says her aunt thinks it will make trouble to keep him; she's thinking better to give him back to us than to have ill-feeling amongst the women over him."

I rubbed my cold-reddened knuckles over my lips, trying to keep from laughing.

"Has the men's Council any idea that some of the women are interested in Roger?"

"I dinna ken. Why?"

"Because if they knew, they'd give him to you for free."

Jamie snorted at that, but gave me a reluctant lift of one eyebrow.

"Aye, maybe. I'll have Ian mention the matter among the young men. It canna hurt."

"You said the women wished you would offer something instead of whisky. Did you mention the opal to Acts Fast?"

He sat up straight at that, interested.

"Aye, I did. They couldna have been taken more aback had I pulled a snake from my sporran. They got verra excited—angry and fearful both, and I think they might well have done me harm, save I'd already mentioned the whisky."

He reached into the breast of his coat and drew out the opal, dropping it into my hand.

"Best you take it, Sassenach. But I think you'll maybe not want to show it to anyone."

"How odd." I looked down at the stone, its spiral petroglyph shimmering with color. "So it did mean something to them."

"Oh, that it did," he assured me. "I couldna say what, but whatever it was, they didna like it a bit. The war chief demanded to know where I'd got it, and I told them ye'd found it. That made them back off a bit, but they were like a kettle on the boil over it."

"Why are you wanting me to take it?" The stone was warm from his body, and felt smooth and comfortable in my hand. Instinctively, my thumb ran round and round the spiraled carving.

"They were shocked when they saw it, as I said—and then angry. One or two of them made as though to strike me, but they held back. I watched for a bit, wi' the stone in my hand, and I realized that they were afraid of it; they wouldna touch me while I held it."

He reached out and closed my fist around the stone.

"Keep it by ye. If there should be danger, bring it out."

"You're more likely to be in danger than I am," I protested, trying to hand it back.

He shook his head, though, the ends of his hair lifting in the wind.

"No, not now they ken about the whisky. They'd not harm me until they've heard where it is."

"But why should I be in any danger?" The thought was disquieting; the women had been cautious but not hostile, and the men of the village had largely ignored me.

He frowned, and looked down toward the village. From here, little was visible save the outer palisades, with trails of smoke drifting above them from the unseen longhouses beyond.

"I canna say, Sassenach. Only that I have been a hunter—and I have been hunted. Ye ken how when something strange is near, the birds stop singing, and there is a stillness in the wood?"

He nodded toward the village, eyes fixed on the swirl of smoke as though some shape might emerge from it.

"There is a stillness there. Something is happening that I canna see. I dinna think it is to do with us—and yet … I am uneasy," he said abruptly. "And I have lived too long to dismiss such a feeling."

* * *

Ian, who joined us shortly at the rendezvous, seconded this opinion.

"Aye, it's like holding the edge of a fishing net that's underwater," he said, frowning. "Ye can feel the wriggling through your hands, and ye ken there's fish there—but ye canna see where." The wind ruffled his thick brown hair; as usual, it was half plaited, with strands coming loose. He thumbed one absently behind an ear.

"There's something happening among the people; some disagreement, I think. And *something* happened last night, in the Council house. Emily willna answer me when I ask about it; she only looks away and tells me it's naught to do with us. But I think it is, somehow."

"Emily?" Jamie lifted one eyebrow, and Ian grinned.

"It's what I call her for short," he said. "Her own name's Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa; it means Works with Her Hands. She's a rare carver, is wee Emily. See what she's made for me?" He reached into his pouch and proudly displayed a tiny otter carved in white soapstone. The animal stood alert, head up and ready for mischief; just to look at it made me smile.

"Verra nice." Jamie examined the carving with approval, stroking the sinuous curve of the body. "The lassie must like ye fine, Ian."

"Aye, well, I like her too, Uncle." Ian was very casual, but his lean cheeks were slightly redder than the cold wind could account for. He coughed and changed the subject slightly.

"She said to me that she thinks the Council might be swayed a bit in our favor, if ye were to give some of them a taste of the whisky, Uncle Jamie. If it's all right wi' you, I'll fetch up a cask and we'll have a wee *ceilidh* tonight. Emily will manage it."

Jamie lifted both eyebrows at that, but nodded after a moment.

"I'll trust your judgment, Ian," he said. "In the Council House?"

Ian shook his head.

"Nay. Emily says it will be better if it's done at the longhouse of her aunt—auld Tewaktenyonh is the Pretty Woman."

"Is what?" I asked, startled.

"The Pretty Woman," he explained, wiping his running nose on his sleeve. "One woman of influence in the village has it in her power to decide what's done wi' captives; they call her the Pretty Woman, no matter what she looks like. So ye ken, it's to our advantage if Tewaktenyonh can be convinced the bargain we offer is a good one."

"I suppose to a captive that's been freed, the woman would seem beautiful, regardless," Jamie said wryly. "Aye, I see. Go ahead then; can ye fetch the whisky by yourself?"

Ian nodded and turned to go.

"Wait a minute, Ian," I said, and held out the opal as he turned back to me. "Could you ask Emily if she knows anything about this?"

"Aye, Auntie Claire, I'll mention it. Rollo!" He whistled sharply through his teeth, and Rollo, who had been nosing suspiciously under a rock shelf, left off and bounded after his master. Jamie watched them go, a slight frown between his eyebrows.

"D'ye ken where Ian's spending his nights, Sassenach?"

"If you mean in which longhouse, yes. If you mean in whose bed, no. I could guess, though."

"Mmphm." He stretched and shook his hair back. "Come on, Sassenach, I'll see ye back to the village."

* * *

Ian's *ceilidh* got underway soon after dark; the invited guests included the most prominent members of the Council, who came one at a time to Tewaktenyonh's longhouse, paying their respects to the *sachem,* Two Spears, who sat at the main hearth with Jamie and Ian flanking him. A slight, pretty girl, who I assumed must be Ian's Emily, sat quietly behind him, on the keg of whisky.

With the exception of Emily, women were not involved in the whisky-tasting. I had come along, though, to watch, and sat at one of the smaller hearths, keeping an eye on the proceedings while helping two of the women to braid onions, exchanging occasional politenesses in a halting mixture of Tuscarora, English, and French.

The woman at whose hearth I sat offered me a gourd of spruce beer and some kind of cornmeal mush as refreshment. I did my best to accept with cordiality, but my stomach was knotted too tightly to make more than a token attempt at eating.

Too much depended on this impromptu party. Roger was here; somewhere in the village, I knew it. He was alive; I could only hope he was well—well enough to travel, at least. I glanced at the far end of the longhouse, at the largest hearth. I could see no more of Tewaktenyonh than the curve of a white-streaked head; a queer jolt went through me at the sight, and I touched the small lump of Nayawenne's amulet, where it hung beneath my shirt.

Once the guests were assembled, a rough circle was formed around the hearth, and the opened keg of whisky brought into the center of it. To my surprise, the girl also came into the circle, and took a place beside the keg, a dipping gourd in her hand.

After some words from Two Spears, the festivities commenced, with the girl measuring out portions of the whisky. She did this not by pouring the whisky into the cups, but by taking mouthfuls from the gourd, carefully spitting three mouthfuls into each cup before passing it to one of the men in the circle. I glanced at Jamie, who looked momentarily taken aback, but who politely accepted his cup and drank without hesitation.

I rather wondered just how much whisky the girl was absorbing through the lining of her mouth. Not nearly as much as the men, though I thought it might take quite a bit to lubricate Two Spears, who was a taciturn old bastard with a face like a dyspeptic prune. Before the party had got well underway, though, I was distracted by the arrival of a young boy, the offspring of one of my companions. He came in silently and sat down by his mother, leaning heavily against her. She looked sharply at him, then set down her onions and rose with an exclamation of concern.

The firelight fell on the boy, and I could see at once the peculiar hunched way he sat. I rose hastily to my knees, pushing aside the basket of onions. I knelt forward and took him by the other arm, turning him toward me. His left shoulder had been slightly dislocated; he was sweating, his lips pressed tightly together in pain.

I gestured to his mother, who hesitated, frowning at me. The boy made a small, whimpering noise, and she pulled him away, holding him tight. With sudden inspiration, I pulled Nayawenne's amulet from my shirt; she wouldn't know whose it was but might recognize *what* it was. She did; her eyes widened at the sight of the tiny leather bag.

The boy made no more noise, but I could see the sweat run down his hairless chest, clear in the firelight. I fumbled at the thong that held the pouch shut, digging inside for the rough blue stone. *Pierre sans peur,* Gabrielle had called it. The fearless stone. I took the boy's good hand and pressed the stone firmly into his palm, folding his fingers around it.

"Je suis une sorciere," I said softly. *"C'est medecine, la."* Trust me, I thought. Don't be afraid. I smiled at him.

The boy stared round-eyed at me; the two women at the hearth exchanged a look, then as one, looked toward the distant hearth where the old woman sat.

There was talk from the *ceilidh;* someone was telling an old story —I recognized the rise and fall of the formal rhythms. I had heard Highlanders tell their stories and legends in Gaelic, in just that way; it sounded much the same.

The mother nodded; her sister went quickly down the length of the house. I didn't turn, but felt the stir of interest behind me as she passed the other hearths; heads were turning, looking toward us. I kept my eyes on the boy's face, smiling, holding his hand tightly in my own.

The sister's footsteps came softly behind me. The boy's mother reluctantly released her hold on him, leaving him to me. Permission had been received.

It was a simple matter to put back the joint; he was a small boy and the injury was minor. His bones were light under my hand. I smiled at him as I felt the joint, assessing damage. Then a quick bending of the arm, rotation of the elbow, whipping the arm upward—and it was done.

The boy looked intensely surprised. It was a most satisfactory operation, in that pain was relieved almost instantly. He felt his shoulder, then smiled shyly back at me. Very slowly, he opened his hand and held out the stone to me.

The minor sensation created by this occupied my attention for some time, with the women crowding close, touching the boy and peering at him, summoning their friends to stare at the murky sapphire. By the time I had attention to spare for the whisky party at the far hearth, the festivities were well advanced. Ian was singing in Gaelic, very off-key, accompanied in a haphazard way by one or two of the other men, who chimed in with the weird, high-pitched *Haihai!* that I had heard now and then among Nayawenne's people.

As though my thought had conjured her, I felt eyes on my back, and turned, to see Tewaktenyonh watching me steadily from her own hearth at the end of the longhouse. I met her eyes and nodded to her. She leaned across to say something to one of the young women at her hearth, who rose and came toward me, stepping carefully around a couple of toddlers playing under their family bed-cubicle.

"My grandmother asks if you will come to her." The young woman squatted beside me, speaking quietly in English. I was surprised, though not astonished, to hear it. Onakara had been right, some of the Mohawk had some English. They would not use it, though, except from necessity, preferring their own language.

I rose and accompanied her to Tewaktenyonh's hearth, wondering what necessity impelled the Pretty Woman. I had my own necessities; the thought of Roger, and of Brianna.

The old woman nodded to me, inviting me to sit down, and spoke to the girl, not taking her eyes off me.

"My grandmother asks if she may see your medicine."

"Of course." I could see the old lady's eyes on my amulet, watching curiously as I took out the sapphire. I had added to Nayawenne's woodpecker feather two of my own; a raven's stiff black wing quills.

"You are the wife of Bear Killer?"

"Yes. The Tuscarora call me White Raven," I said, and the girl jerked, startled. She translated quickly for her grandmother. The old lady's eyes flew wide and she glanced at me in consternation. Evidently this was not the most auspicious name she'd ever heard. I smiled at her, keeping my mouth closed; the Indians usually bared their teeth only when laughing.

The old lady handed me back the stone, very gingerly. She studied me narrowly, then spoke to her granddaughter, not taking her eyes off me.

"My grandmother has heard that your man bears a bright stone also," the girl said, interpreting. "She would hear more of this; what it is like, and how you came to have it."

"She's welcome to see it." The girl's eyes widened in surprise as I reached into the pouch at my waist and drew out the stone. I held out the opal to the old woman; she bent and peered closely at it, but made no move to take it from me.

Tewaktenyonh's arms were brown and hairless, wrinkled and smooth as weathered satinwood to the eye. But as I watched I saw the prick of goose-flesh rising, raising vanished hairs in vain defense. *She's seen it,* I thought. *Or at least she knows what it is*.

I didn't need the interpreter's words; her eyes met mine directly and I heard the question clearly, for all that the words were strange.

"How did this come to you?" she said, and the girl echoed it faithfully.

I let my hand lie open; the opal fit snugly in my palm, its weight belied by its colors, glimmering like a soap bubble in my hand.

"It came to me in a dream," I said at last, not knowing how else to explain.

The old woman's breath went out in a sigh. The fear didn't quite leave her eyes, but was overlaid with something else—curiosity, perhaps? She said something, and one of the women at the hearth rose, digging in a basket under the bed frame at her back. She came back and bent by the old lady, handing her something.

The old lady began to sing, quietly, in a voice cracked with age, but still strong. She rubbed her hands together over the fire, and a shower of small brown particles rained down, only to rise up again at once as smoke, thick with the scent of tobacco.

It was a quiet night; I could hear the rise and fall of voices and loud laughter from the far hearth, where the men were drinking. I could pick out the odd word in Jamie's voice—he was speaking French. Was Roger perhaps close enough to hear it too?

I took a deep breath. The smoke rose straight up from the fire in a thin white pillar, and the strong sweet scent of tobacco mingled with the smell of cold air, triggering incongruous memories of Brianna's high school football games; cozy scents of wool blankets and thermoses of cocoa, wisps of cigarette smoke drifting from the crowd. Farther back were other, harsher memories, of young men in uniform, in the shattered light of airfields, crushing out glowing fag ends and running to their battles, leaving no more of themselves behind than the smell of smoke on winter air.

Tewaktenyonh spoke, her eyes still on me, and the girl's soft voice chimed in.

"Tell me this dream."

Was it truly a dream I would tell her, or a memory like these, brought to life on the wings of smoke from a burning tree? It didn't matter; here, all my memories were dreams.

I told her what I could. The memory—of the storm and my refuge among the red cedar's roots, the skull buried with the stone—and the dream; the light on the mountain and the man with his face painted black—making no distinction between them.

The old lady leaned forward, the astonishment on her features mirroring that of her granddaughter.

"You have seen the Fire-Carrier?" the girl blurted. "You have seen his *face?*" She shrank away from me, as though I might be dangerous.

The old lady said something peremptory; her startlement had faded into a piercing gaze of interest. She poked the girl, and repeated her question impatiently.

"My grandmother says, can you say what he looked like; what did he wear?"

"Nothing. A breech-clout, I mean. And he was painted."

"Painted. How?" the girl asked, in response to her grandmother's sharp question.

I described the body paint of the man I had seen, as carefully as I could. This wasn't difficult; if I closed my eyes, I could see him, as clearly as he had appeared to me on the mountainside.

"And his face was black, from forehead to chin," I ended, opening my eyes.

When I described the man, the interpreter became visibly upset; her lips trembled, and she glanced fearfully from me to her grandmother. The old woman listened intently, though, her eyes searching, straining to discern meaning from my face before the slower words could reach her ears.

When I finished, she sat silent, dark eyes still fastened on my own. At last she nodded, reached up a wrinkled hand and took hold of the purple wampum strings that lay across her shoulder. Myers had told me enough so that I recognized the gesture. The wampum was her family record, badge of her office; speech made while holding it was tantamount to testimony made upon the Bible.

"At the feast of Green Corn, this many years ago"—the interpreter's fingers flashed four times—"a man came among us from the north. His speech was strange, but we could understand him; he spoke like Canienga, or maybe Onondaga, but he would not tell us his tribe or village—only his clan, which was the Turtle.

"He was a wild man, but a brave one. He was a good hunter, and a warrior. Oh, a fine man; all the women liked to look at him, but we were afraid to come too close." Tewaktenyonh paused a moment, a far-off look in her eye that made me count back; she would have been a full-grown woman then, but perhaps young enough still to have been impressed by the frightening, intriguing stranger.

"The men were not so careful; men aren't." She gave a brief, sardonic glance at the *ceilidh,* growing louder by the minute. "So they would sit and smoke with him, and drink spruce beer and listen. He would talk from midday till the dark, and then again in the night by the fires. His face was always fierce, because he talked of war."

She sighed, fingers curling over the purple shell strands.

"Always war. Not against the frog-eaters of the next village, or the ones who eat moose dung. No, we must lift our tomahawks against the *O'seronni*. Kill them all, he said, from the oldest to the youngest, from the Treaty Line to the big water. Go to the Cayuga, send messengers to the Seneca, let the League of the Iroquois go forth as one. Go before it is too late, he said."

One frail shoulder lifted, fell.

" 'Too late for what?' the men asked. 'And why shall we make war for no cause? We need nothing this season; there is no war treaty'—this was before the Time of the French, you understand.

" 'It is our last chance,' he said to them. 'Already it may be too late. They seduce us with their metal, bring us close to them in the hope of knives and guns, and destroy us for the sake of cooking pots. Turn back, brothers! You have left the ways of years too great to count. Go back, I say—or you will be no more. Your stories will be forgotten. Kill them now or they will eat you.'

"And my brother—he was *sachem* then, and my other brother war chief—said that this was foolishness. Destroy us with tools? Eat us? The whites do not consume the hearts of their enemies, even in battle.

"The young men listened; they listen to anyone with a loud voice. But the older ones looked at the stranger with a narrow eye, and said nothing.

"He knew," she said, and the old lady nodded emphatically, speaking almost faster than her granddaughter could translate. "He knew what would happen—that the British and the French would fight with each other, and would seek our help, each against the other. He said that that would be the time; when they fought each other, then we must rise up against them both and cast them out.

"Tawineonawira—Otter-Tooth—that was his name—said to me, 'You live in the moment. You know the past, but you don't look to the future. Your men say, "We need nothing this season," and so they will not move. Your women think it is easier to cook in a iron kettle than to make clay pots. You don't see what will happen because of your laziness, your greed.'

" 'It's not true,' I said to him. 'We are not lazy. We scrape hides, we dry the meat and the corn, we press the oil from sunflowers and put it in jars; we take heed for the next season—always. If we didn't, we would die. And what have pots and kettles to do with it?'

"He laughed at that, but his eyes were sad. He was not always fierce with me, you see." The young woman's eyes slid toward her grandmother at this, but then she looked away, eyes once more on her lap.

" 'A woman's heed,' he said, and shook his head. 'You think of things to eat, what to wear. None of this matters. Men can't think of such things.'

" 'You can be *Hodeenosaunee* and think this?' I said. 'Where do you come from that you don't take heed of what the women think?'

"He shook his head again and said, 'You cannot see far enough.' I asked him how far then did *he* see, but he would not answer me."

I knew the answer to that, and my skin prickled with gooseflesh, too, in spite of the fire. I knew too bloody well how far he'd seen—and how dangerous the view was from that particular precipice.

"But nothing I said was any use," the old lady continued, "nor what my brothers said. Otter-Tooth grew more angry. One day he came out and danced the war dance. He was painted—his arms and legs were striped with red—and he sang and shouted through the village. Everyone came out to watch, to see who would follow him, and when he drove his tomahawk into the war tree and shouted that he went to gain horses and plunder from the Shawnee, a number of the young men followed him.

"They were gone for the rising and setting of a moon, and came back with horses, and with scalps. White scalps, and my brothers were angry. It would bring soldiers from the fort, they said—or revenge parties from the Treaty Line settlements, where they had taken the scalps.

"Otter-Tooth answered boldly that he hoped this was so; then we would be forced to fight. And he said plainly that he would lead such raids again—again and again, until the whole land was roused and we saw that it was as he said; that we must kill the *O'seronni* or die ourselves.

"No one could stop him doing what he said, and there were a few of the young men whose blood was hot; they would follow him, no matter what anyone said. My brother the *sachem* made his medicine tent, and called the Great Turtle to counsel with him. He stayed in the tent for a day and a night. The tent shook and heaved, and voices came out of it, and the people were afraid.

"When my brother came out of the tent, he said that Otter-Tooth must leave the village. He would do what he would do, but we would not let him bring destruction to us. He caused disharmony among the people; he must go.

"Otter-Tooth became more angry then than we had ever seen him. He stood up in the center of the village and he shouted until the veins stood out in his neck and his eyes were red with rage." The girl's voice dropped. "He shouted terrible things.

"Then he became very quiet, and we were afraid. He said things that took the hearts from our bodies. Even those who had followed him were afraid of him, then.

"He didn't sleep or eat. For all of a day, and all of a night, and all of the next day, he went on talking, walking round and round the village, stopping at the doors of the houses and talking, until the people in the house drove him away. And then he left.

“But he came back again. And again. He would go away, and hide in the forest, but then he would be back again, by the fires at night, thin and hungry, with his eyes glowing like a fox’s, always talking. His voice filled the village at night, and no one could sleep.

“We began to know that he had an evil spirit in him; perhaps it was Atatarho, from whose head Hiawatha combed the snakes; perhaps the snakes had come to this man, looking for a home. Finally, my brother the war chief said that it must stop; he must leave or we would kill him.”

Tewaktenyonh paused. Her fingers, which had stroked the wampum continuously, as though she drew strength from it for her story, were now still.

“He was a stranger,” she said softly. “But he didn’t know he was a stranger. I think he never understood.”

At the other end of the longhouse the drinking party was growing riotous; all the men were laughing, rocking to and fro with mirth. I could hear the girl Emily’s voice, higher, laughing with them. Tewaktenyonh glanced that way, frowning slightly.

Mice were creeping briskly up and down my spine. A stranger. An Indian, by his face, by his speech; his slightly strange speech. An Indian—with silver fillings in his teeth. No, he hadn’t understood. He had thought they were his people, after all. Knowing what their future held, he had come to try to save them. How could he believe that they meant to do him harm?

But they *had* meant it. They stripped him, said Tewaktenyonh, her face remote. They tied him to a pole in the center of the village, and painted his face with an ink made from soot and oak galls.

“Black is for death; prisoners who are to be killed are always painted so,” the girl said. One eyebrow lifted slightly. “You knew this when you met the man on the mountain?”

I shook my head, mute. The opal had grown warm in my palm, slick with sweat.

They had tortured him for a time; prodding his naked body with sharpened sticks, and then with hot embers, so that blisters rose up and burst, and his skin hung in tatters. He stood this well, not crying out, and this pleased them. He seemed still strong, so they left him overnight, still tied to the pole.

"In the morning, he was gone." The old woman's face was smooth with secrets. If she had been pleased, or relieved, or distressed by the escape, no one would ever have known.

"I said that they should not follow him, but my brother said it was no good; he would only come back again, if we did not finish the matter."

So a party of warriors left the village, on Otter-Tooth's track. Bloody as he was, it was not difficult to follow.

"They chased him to the south. They thought to catch him, time after time, but he was strong. He ran on. For four days, they followed him, and finally they caught him, in a grove of aspens, leafless in the snow and their branches white as finger bones."

She saw the question in my eyes at this, and nodded.

"My brother the war chief was there. He told me, afterward.

"He was alone, and unarmed. He had no chance, and knew it. But he faced them nonetheless—and he talked. Even after one of the men had struck him in the mouth with a war club, he talked through the blood, spitting out words with his broken teeth.

"He was a brave man," she said, reflectively. "He didn't beg. He told them the same things he had said before, but my brother said this time it was different. Before, he had been hot as fire; dying, he was cold as snow—and because they were so cold, his words terrified the warriors.

"Even when the stranger lay dead in the snow, his words seemed to go on ringing in the warriors' ears. They lay down to sleep, but his voice talked to them in their dreams, and kept them from sleeping. *You will be forgotten,* he said. *The Nations of the Iroquois will be no more. No one will tell your stories. Everything you are and have been will be lost.*

"They turned toward home, but his voice followed them. At night, they could not sleep for the evil words in their ears. In the day, they heard cries and whispers from the trees along their trail. Some of them said it was only ravens calling, but others said no, they heard him plainly.

"At last, my brother said it was clear this man was a sorcerer."

The old lady glanced sharply at me. *Je suis une sorciere,* I'd said. I swallowed, and my hand went to the amulet at my neck.

"The thing to do, my brother said, was to cut off his head, and then he would talk no more. So they went back, and they cut off his head, and tied it in the branches of a spruce. But when they slept that night, they still heard his voice, and they woke with shriveled hearts. The ravens had picked out his eyes, but the head still spoke.

"One man, very brave, said he would take the head, and bury it far away." She smiled briefly. "This brave man was my husband. He wrapped the head in a piece of deerskin, and he ran with it, far to the south, and the head still talking under his arm all the time, so he had to put plugs of beeswax in his ears. At last he saw a very big red cedar tree, and he knew this was the place, because the red cedar has a strong spirit for healing.

"So he buried the head under the tree's roots, and when he took the beeswax from his ears, he could hear nothing but the wind and water. So he came home, and no one has spoken the name of Otter-Tooth in this village, from that day until this one."

The girl finished this, eyes on her grandmother. Evidently this was true; she had never heard this story.

I swallowed, and tried to get a clear breath. The smoke had ceased to rise as she talked; it had gathered instead in a low cloud overhead, and the air was thick with narcotic perfume.

The hilarity from the drinking circle had lessened. One of the men got up and, stumbling, went outside. Two more lay on their sides by the fire, half asleep.

"And this?" I said, holding out the opal. "You've seen it? It was his?"

Tewaktenyonh reached out as though to touch the stone, but then drew back.

"There is a legend," the girl said softly, not taking her eyes from the opal. "Magic snakes carry stones in their heads. If you kill such a snake and take the stone, it will give you great power." She shifted uneasily, and I had no trouble imagining with her the size of the snake that might have carried a stone like this.

The old lady spoke suddenly, nodding at the stone. The girl jumped, but repeated the words obediently.

"It was his," she said. "He called it his *tika-ba*."

I looked at the interpreter, but she shook her head. "*Tika-ba,*" she said, enunciating clearly. "This is not an English word?"

I shook my head.

Her story finished, the old woman sat back in her furs, watching me with deep speculation. Her eyes rested on the amulet around my neck.

"Why did he speak to you? Why has he given you that?" She nodded at my hand, and my fingers closed over the opal's curve in reflex.

"I don't know," I said—but she had taken me unaware; I had had no time to prepare my face.

She fixed me with a piercing look. She knew I was lying, all right—and yet how could I tell her the truth? Tell her what Otter-Tooth—whatever his real name—had been? Much less that his prophecies were true.

"I think perhaps he was a part of my … family," I said at last, thinking of what Pollyanne had told me about the ghosts of one's ancestors. There was no telling from where—or when—he had come; he must, I supposed, be an ancestor or a descendant. If not of me, then of someone like me.

Tewaktenyonh sat up very straight at that, and looked at me in astonishment. Slowly the look faded, and she nodded.

"He has sent you to me to hear this. He was wrong," she declared, with confidence. "My brother said that we must not speak of him; we must let him be forgotten. But a man is not forgotten, as long as there are two people left under the sky. One, to tell the story; the other, to hear it. So."

She reached out and touched my hand, careful not to touch the stone. The glitter of moisture in her black eyes might have been from the tobacco smoke.

"I am one. You are the other. He is not forgotten."

She motioned to the girl, who rose silently and brought us food and drink.

When I rose finally to go back to the longhouse where we were lodged, I glanced toward the drinking party. The ground was littered with snoring bodies, and the keg lay empty on its side. Two Spears lay peacefully on his back, a beatific smile creasing the wrinkles of his face. The girl, Ian, and Jamie were gone.

Jamie was outside, waiting for me. His breath rose white in the night air, and the scents of whisky and tobacco wafted from his plaid.

"You seemed to be having fun," I said, taking his arm. "Any progress, do you think?"

"I think so." We walked side by side across the big central clearing to the longhouse where we were lodged. "It went well. Ian was right, bless him; now they've seen this wee *ceilidh* did no harm, I think they'll maybe be disposed to make the bargain."

I glanced at the row of longhouses with their floating clouds of smoke, and the glow of firelight from smokeholes and doorways. Was Roger in one of them now? I counted automatically, as I did every day—seven months. The ground was thawing; if we traveled partway by river, we could perhaps make the trip in a month—six weeks at the most. Yes, if we left soon, we would be in time.

"And you, Sassenach? Ye seemed to be having a most earnest discussion wi' the auld lady. Did she ken aught of that stone?"

"Yes. Come inside and I'll tell you about it."

He lifted the skin over the doorway, and I walked inside, the opal a solid weight in my hand. They hadn't known what he had called it, but I did. The man called Otter-Tooth, who had come to raise a war, to save a nation—with silver fillings in his teeth. Yes, I knew what it was, the *tika-ba*.

His unused ticket back. My legacy.

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LORD JOHN RETURNS

River Run, March 1770

Phaedre had brought a dress, one of Jocasta’s, yellow silk, very full in the skirt.

“We got better company tonight than ol’ Mr. Cooper or Lawyer Forbes,” Phaedre said with satisfaction. “We got us a real live *lord,* how ’bout *that?*”

She let down a huge armload of fabric on the bed and began to pull bits and pieces from the frothing billows, issuing instructions like a drill sergeant.

“Here, you strip off and put on these yere stays. You need somethin’ strong, keep that belly pushed down. Ain’t nobody but backcountry trash goes ’thout stays. Your auntie wasn’t blind as a bat, she’d ’a had you fitted out proper long since—*long* since. Then put on the stockins and garters—ain’t those pretty? I always did like that pair with the little bitty leaves on ’em—then we’ll tie on the petticoats, and then—”

“What lord?” Brianna took the proferred stays and frowned at them. “My God, what’s this made of, whalebones?”

“Uh-huh. Ain’t no cheap tin or iron for Miss Jo, surely not.” Phaedre burrowed like a terrier, frowning and muttering to herself. “Where that garter gone to?”

“I don’t need these. And what lord is it that’s coming?”

Phaedre straightened up, staring at Brianna over the folds of yellow silk.

“Don’t need ’em?” she said censoriously. “And you with a six-month belly? What you thinking of, girl, come into dinner all pooched out, and a lordship sittin’ by the soup a-gogglin’ at you through his eyeglass?”

Brianna couldn’t help smiling at this description, but replied with considerable dryness nonetheless.

“What difference would it make? The whole county knows by now that I’m having a baby. I wouldn’t be surprised if that circuit rider—Mr. Urmstone, is it? didn’t preach a sermon about me up on the Buttes.”

Phaedre uttered a short laugh.

“He did,” she said. “Two Sundays back. Mickey and Drusus was there—they thought it was right funny, but your auntie didn’t. She set Lawyer Forbes on to law him for the slander, but ol’ Reverend Urmstone, he said ’twasn’t slander if it was the truth.”

Brianna stared back at the maid.

“And just what did he say about me?”

Phaedre shook her head and resumed her rummaging.

“You don’ want to know,” she said darkly. “But be that as it might, whether the county knows ain’t the same thing as you flauntin’ your belly through the dining room and leavin’ his lordship in no doubt, so you put on them stays.”

Her authoritative tone left no room for argument. Brianna struggled resentfully into the stiff garment, and suffered Phaedre to lace it tight. Her waist was still slender, and the remaining bulge in front would be easily disguised by the full skirt and petticoats.

She stared at herself in the mirror, Phaedre’s dark head bobbing near her thighs as the maid adjusted the green silk stockings to her own satisfaction. She couldn’t breathe, and being squeezed like that *couldn’t* be good for the baby. The stays laced in front; as soon as Phaedre left, she’d undo them. The hell with his Lordship, whoever he was.

“And who *is* this lord we’re having for dinner?” she asked for the third time, stepping obediently into the billow of starched white linen the maid held for her.

“This be Lord John William Grey, of Mount Josiah plantation in Virginia.” Phaedre rolled out the syllables with great ceremony, though seeming rather disappointed by the unfortunately brief and simple names of the lord. She would, Brianna knew, have preferred a Lord FitzGerald Vanlandingham Walthamstead if she could have got one.

“He a friend of your daddy’s, or so Miss Jo says,” the maid added, more prosaically. “There, that’s good. Lucky you got nice bosoms, this dress is made for ’em.”

Brianna hoped this didn’t mean the dress wasn’t going to cover her breasts; the stays ended just beneath, pushing them up so that they swelled startlingly high, like something bubbling over the rim of a pot. Her nipples stared at her in the mirror, gone a rich dark color, like raspberry wine.

It wasn’t worry over which bulges she was exposing that made her oblivious to the rest of Phaedre’s brisk ministrations, though; it was the maid’s casual *He a friend of your daddy’s*.

It was not a crowd; Jocasta seldom had crowds. Dependent on her ears for the nuances of social byplay, she would not risk commotion. Still, there were more people here in the drawing room than was usual; Lawyer Forbes, of course, with his spinster sister; Mr. MacNeill and his son, Judge Alderdyce and his mother, a couple of Farquard Campbell’s unmarried sons. No one, though, resembling Phaedre’s lordship.

Brianna smiled sourly to herself. “Let ’em look, then,” she murmured, straightening her back so that her bulge swelled proudly before her, glistening under the silk. She gave it an encouraging pat. “Come on, Osbert, let’s be social.”

Her entrance was greeted by a general outcry of cordiality that made her mildly ashamed of her cynicism. They were kind men and women, including Jocasta; and the situation, after all, was none of *their* doing.

Still, she did enjoy the expression of mild shock that the Judge tried to hide, and the too-sweet smile on his mother's face, as her beady little parrot eyes registered the blatant fact of Osbert's unbound presence. Jocasta might propose, but the Judge's mother would dispose, no doubt of that. Brianna met Mrs. Alderdyce's eye with a sweet smile of her own.

Mr. MacNeill's weatherbeaten face twitched slightly with amusement, but he bowed gravely and asked after her health with no sign of embarrassment. As for Lawyer Forbes, if he noticed anything amiss in her appearance, he drew the veil of his professional discretion over it and greeted her with his customary suavity.

"Ah, Miss Fraser!" he said. "Precisely whom we were wanting. Mrs. Alderdyce and myself have just been engaged in amiable dispute concerning a question of aesthetics. You, with your instinct for loveliness, would have a most valuable opinion, should you be willing to oblige me by giving it." Taking her arm, he drew her smoothly to his side—away from MacNeill, who twitched a bushy brow at her but made no move to interfere.

He led her to the hearthside, where four small wooden boxes sat on the table. Ceremoniously removing the lids of these, the lawyer displayed in turn four jewels, each the size of a marrow-fat pea, each nestled in a pad of dark blue velvet, the better to set off its brilliance.

"I think of purchasing one of these stones," Forbes explained. "To have made into a ring. I had them sent from Boston." He smirked at Brianna, plainly feeling that he had stolen a march on the competition—and judging from the faint glower on MacNeill's face, he had.

"Tell me, my dear—which do you prefer? The sapphire, the emerald, the topaz or the diamond?" He rocked back on his heels, waistcoat swelling with his own cleverness.

For the first time in her pregnancy, Brianna felt a sudden qualm of nausea. Her head felt light and giddy, and her fingertips tingled with numbness.

Sapphire, emerald, topaz, diamond. And her father’s ring held a ruby. Five stones of power, the points of a traveler’s pentagram, the guarantors of safe passage. For how many? Without thinking, she spread a hand protectively over her belly.

She realized the trap Forbes thought he was luring her toward. Let her make a choice and he would present her with the unmounted stone on the spot, a public proposal that would—he thought—force her either to accept him at once, or cause an unpleasant scene by rejecting him outright. Gerald Forbes really knew nothing about women, she thought.

“I—ah—I should not like to venture my own opinion without first hearing Mrs. Alderdyce’s choice,” she said, forcing a cordial smile and a nod toward the Judge’s mother, who looked both surprised and gratified by being so deferred to.

Brianna’s stomach clenched, and she surreptitiously wiped sweaty hands on her skirt. There they were, all together and in one place—the four stones she had thought it would take a lifetime to find.

Mrs. Alderdyce was jabbing an arthritic finger at the emerald, explaining the virtues of her choice, but Brianna paid no attention to what the woman said. She glanced at Lawyer Forbes, his round face still reflecting smugness. A sudden wild impulse filled her.

If she said yes, now, tonight, while he still had all four stones … could she bring herself to that? Inveigle him, kiss him, lull him into complacency—and then steal the stones?

Yes, she could—and then what? Run off into the mountains with them? Leave Jocasta disgraced and the county in an uproar, run and hide like a common thief? And how would she get to the Indies before the baby came? She counted in her head, knowing it was insanity, but still—it could be done.

The stones glittered and winked, temptation and salvation. Everyone had come to look, heads bent over the table, murmuring their admiration, herself temporarily overlooked.

She could hide, she thought, the steps of the plan unfolding inevitably before her mind’s eye, quite without her willing it. Steal a horse, head up the Yadkin valley into the backcountry. Despite the nearness of the fire, she shivered, feeling cold at the thought of flight through the winter snows. But her mind ran on.

She could hide in the mountains, at her parents' cabin, and wait for them to come back with Roger. If they came back. If Roger was with them. Yes, and what if the baby came first, and she was there on the mountain, all alone with no one at hand, and nothing to help but a handful of stolen brightness?

Or should she ride at once for Wilmington and find a ship to the Indies? If Jocasta was right, Roger was never coming back. Was she sacrificing her only chance at return to wait for a man who was dead—or who, if not dead, might reject her and her child?

"Miss Fraser?"

Lawyer Forbes was waiting, swollen with expectation.

She took a deep breath, feeling sweat trickle down between her breasts, beneath the loosened stays.

"They're all very lovely," she said, surprised at how coolly she was able to speak. "I could not possibly choose among them—but then, I have no particular liking for gems. I have very simple tastes, I'm afraid."

She caught the flicker of a smile on Mr. MacNeill's face, and the deep flush of Forbes's round cheeks, but turned her back on the stones with a polite word.

"I think we will not wait dinner," Jocasta murmured in her ear. "If his Lordship should be delayed …"

On cue, Ulysses appeared in the doorway, elegant in full livery, to announce dinner. Instead, in a mellifluous voice that carried easily over the chatter, he said, "Lord John Grey, ma'am," and stepped aside.

Jocasta breathed a sigh of satisfaction, and urged Brianna forward, toward the slight figure that stood in the doorway.

"Good. You shall be his partner at dinner, my dear."

Brianna glanced back at the table by the hearth, but the stones were gone.

Lord John Grey was a surprise. She had heard her mother speak of John Grey—soldier, diplomat, nobleman—and expected someone tall and imposing. Instead, he was six inches shorter than she was, fine-boned and slight, with large, beautiful eyes, and a fair-skinned handsomeness that was saved from girlishness only by the firm set of mouth and jaw.

He had looked startled upon seeing her; many people did, taken aback by her size—but then had set himself to exercise his considerable charm, telling her amusing anecdotes of his travel, admiring the two paintings that Jocasta had hung upon the wall, and regaling the table at large with news of the political situation in Virginia.

What he did not mention was her father, and for that she was grateful.

Brianna listened to Miss Forbes's descriptions of her brother's importance with an absent smile. She felt more and more as though she were drowning in a sea of kind intentions. Could they not leave her alone? Could Jocasta not even have the decency to wait a few months?

"… and then there's the wee sawmill he's just bought, up to Averasboro. Heavens, how the man manages, I couldna tell you!"

No, they couldn't, she thought, with a kind of despair. They couldn't leave her alone. They were Scots, kindly but practical, and with an iron conviction of their own rightness—the same conviction that had got half of them killed or exiled after Culloden.

Jocasta was fond of her, but clearly had made up her mind that it would be foolish to wait. Why sacrifice the chance of a good, solid, respectable marriage, to a will-o'-the-wisp hope of love?

The horrible thing was that she knew herself it was foolish to wait. Of all the things she had been trying not to think of for weeks, this was the worst—and here it was, rising up in her mind like the shadow of a dead tree, stark against snow.

If. If they came back—if, if, *IF*. If her parents came back at all, Roger would not be with them. She knew it. They wouldn't find the Indians who had taken him—how could they, in a trackless wilderness of snow and mud? Or they would find the Indians, only to learn that Roger was dead—of injuries, disease, torture.

Or he would be found, alive, and refuse to come back, not wanting to see her ever again. Or he would come back, with that maddening sense of Scottish honor, determined to take her, but hating her for it. Or he would come back, see the baby, and …

Or none of them would come back at all. *I will bring him home to you—or I will not come home myself*. And she would live here alone forever, drowned in the waves of her own guilt, her body bobbing in the swirl of good intentions, anchored by a rotting umbilical cord to the child whose dead weight had pulled her under.

“Miss Fraser! Miss Fraser, are ye quite weel, then?”

“Not very, no,” she said. “I think I’m going to faint.” And did, shaking the table with a crash as she fell forward into a whirling sea of china and white linen.

The tide had turned again, she thought. She was buoyed up on a flood of kindness as people bustled to and fro, fetching warm drinks and a brick to her feet, seeing her tucked up warmly on the sofa in the little parlor, with a pillow to her head and salts to her nose, a thick shawl round her knees.

At last they were gone. She could be alone. And now that the truth was out in her own mind, she could cry for all her losses—for father and lover, family and mother, for the loss of time and place and all that she should have been and would never be.

Except that she couldn’t.

She tried. She tried to summon up the sense of terror she had felt in the drawing room, alone among the crowd. But now that she truly *was* alone, paradoxically she wasn’t afraid anymore. One of the house slaves popped a head in, but she waved a hand, sending the girl away again.

Well, she was Scottish, too—“Well, half,” she muttered, cupping a hand over her belly—and entitled to her own stubbornness. They *were* coming back. All of them; mother, father, Roger. If it felt as though that conviction were made of feathers rather than iron … still it was hers. And she was hanging on to it like a raft, until they pried her fingers off and let her sink.

The door to the small parlor opened, silhouetting the tall, spare figure of Jocasta against the lighted hall.

“Brianna?” The pale oval face turned unerringly toward the sofa; did she only guess where they had put her, or could she hear Brianna breathing?

“I’m here, Aunt.”

Jocasta came into the room, followed by Lord John, with Ulysses bringing up the rear with a tea tray.

“How are you, child? Had I best send for Dr. Fentiman?” She frowned, laying a long hand across Brianna’s forehead.

“No!” Brianna had met Dr. Fentiman, a small, damp-handed golliwog of a man with a strong faith in lye and leeches; the sight of him made her shudder. “Er … no. Thank you, but I’m quite all right; I was just taken queer for a moment.”

“Ah, good.” Jocasta turned blind eyes toward Lord John. “His Lordship will be going on to Wilmington in the morning; he wished to pay you his regards, if you are well enough.”

“Yes, of course.” She sat up, swinging her feet to the floor. So the lord wasn’t going to linger; that would be a disappointment to Jocasta, if not to her. Still, she could be polite for a little while.

Ulysses set down the tray, and soft-footed out the door behind her aunt, leaving them alone.

He drew up an embroidered footstool and sat down, not waiting for invitation.

“Are you truly well, Miss Fraser? I have no desire to see you prostrate among the teacups.” A smile pulled at the corner of his mouth, and she flushed.

“I’m fine,” she said shortly. “Did you have something to say to me?”

He wasn’t taken aback by her abruptness.

“Yes, but I thought perhaps you would prefer that I not mention it in the midst of the company. I understand that you are interested in the whereabouts of a man named Roger Wakefield?”

She had been feeling fine; at this, the wave of faintness threatened to return.

"Yes. How do you—do you know where he is?"

"No." He saw her face change, and took her hand between his. "No, I am sorry. Your father had written to me, some three months ago, asking me to assist him in finding this man. It had occurred to him that if Mr. Wakefield was anywhere in the ports, he might have been taken up by a press-gang, and thus be now at sea in one of His Majesty's ships. He asked if I would make use of my acquaintance in naval circles to determine whether such a fate had in fact befallen Mr. Wakefield."

Another wave of faintness passed over her, this one tinged with remorse, as she realized the lengths her father had gone to, in attempting to find Roger for her.

"He isn't on a ship."

He looked surprised at her tone of certainty.

"I have found no evidence that he was impressed anywhere between Jamestown and Charleston. Still, there is the possibility that he was taken up on the eve of sailing, in which case his presence on the crew would not be registered until the ship reached port. That is why I travel tomorrow to Wilmington, to make inquiries—"

"You don't need to. I know where he is." In as few words as possible, she acquainted him with the basic facts.

"Jamie—your father—that is, your parents—have gone to rescue this man from the Iroquois?" Looking shaken, he turned and poured two cups of tea, handing her one without asking if she wanted it.

She held it between her hands, finding a small comfort in the warmth; a greater comfort in being able to speak frankly to Lord John.

"Yes. I wanted to go with them, but—"

"Yes, I see." He glanced at her bulge and coughed. "I collect there is some urgency in finding Mr. Wakefield?"

She laughed, unhappily.

"I can wait. Can you tell me something, Lord John? Have you ever heard of handfasting?"

His fair brows drew together momentarily.

"Yes," he said slowly. "A Scottish custom of temporary marriage, is it not?"

"Yes. What I want to know is, is it legal here?"

He rubbed his jaw, thinking. Either he'd shaved recently or he had a light beard; late as it was, he showed no sign of stubble.

"I don't know," he said finally. "I have never seen the question addressed in law. Still, any couple who dwells together as man and wife are considered married, by common law. I should think handfasting would fall into that class, would it not?"

"It might, except that we're rather obviously not dwelling together," Brianna said. She sighed. "*I* think I'm married—but my aunt doesn't. She keeps insisting that Roger won't come back, or that if he does, I'm still not legally bound to him. Even by the Scots custom, I'm not bound beyond a year and a day. She wants to pick a husband for me—and God, she's trying! I thought you were the newest candidate, when you showed up."

Lord John looked amused at the idea.

"Oh. That would explain the oddly assorted company at dinner. I did notice that the rather florid gentleman—Alderdyce? A judge?—seemed inclined to pay you attention beyond the normal limits of gallantry."

"Much good it will do him." Brianna snorted briefly. "You should have seen the looks Mrs. Alderdyce kept giving me, all through dinner. She's not going to have her ewe lamb—God, he must be forty, if he's a day—marry the local whore of Babylon. I'd be surprised if she ever lets him set foot over the doorstep again." She patted her small bulge. "I think I've seen to that."

One brow rose, and Grey smiled wryly at her. He set down his teacup and reached for the sherry decanter and a glass.

"Ah? Well, while I admire the boldness of your strategy, Miss Fraser—may I call you 'my dear'?—I regret to inform you that your tactics do not suit the terrain upon which you've chosen to employ them."

"What do you mean by that?"

He leaned back in his chair, glass in hand, surveying her kindly.

"Mrs. Alderdyce. Not being blind—though by no means as astute as your aunt—I did indeed observe her observing you. But you mistake the nature of her observations, I'm afraid." He shook his head, looking at her over the rim of his glass as he sipped.

"Not the look of outraged respectability, by any means. It's granny lust."

Brianna sat up straight.

"It's *what*?"

"Granny lust," he repeated. He sat up himself and topped his glass, pouring the golden liquid carefully. "You know; an elderly woman's urgent desire for grandchildren to dandle upon her knee, spoil with sweetmeats, and generally corrupt." He raised his glass to his nose and reverently breathed in the vapors. "Oh, ambrosia. I haven't had a decent sherry in two years, at least."

"What—you mean Mrs. Alderdyce thinks that I—I mean, because I've shown I'm—that I can have children, then she's sure to get grandchildren out of me later on? That's ridiculous! The Judge could pick any healthy girl—of good character," she added bitterly, "and be fairly sure of having children by her."

He took a drink, let it drift across his tongue, and swallowed, relishing the final ghost of the taste before answering. "Well. No. I rather think that she realizes he could not. Or would not; it makes no difference." He looked at her directly, pale blue eyes unblinking.

"You said it yourself—he is forty and unmarried."

"You mean he—but he's a judge!" The moment her horrified exclamation came out, she realized the idiocy of it, and clapped a hand over her mouth, blushing furiously. Lord John laughed, though with a wry edge to it.

"The more certainty therefore," he said. "You are quite right; he could have his choice of any girl in the county. If he has not so chosen …" He paused delicately, then lifted his glass to her in ironic toast. "I rather think that Mrs. Alderdyce has realized that her son's marriage to you is her best—possibly her only—expectation of having the grandchild she so ardently desires."

"Damn!" She couldn't make a move right, she thought with despair. "It doesn't matter what I do. I'm doomed. They'll have me married off to *somebody,* no matter what I do!"

"You must give me leave to doubt that," he said. His smile quirked sideways, a little painfully. "From what I have seen of you, you have your mother's bluntness and your father's sense of honor. Either would be sufficient to preserve you from such entrapment."

"Don't talk to me about my father's honor," she said sharply. "He's who got me into this mess!"

His eyes dropped to her waistline, frankly ironical.

"You shock me," he said politely, seeming not shocked at all.

She felt the blood surge up in her face once more, hotter than before.

"You know perfectly well that's not what I mean!"

He hid a smile in his sherry cup, eyes crinkling at her.

"My apologies, Miss Fraser. What did you mean, then?"

She took a deep sip of tea to cover her confusion, and felt the comforting heat run down her throat and into her chest.

"I mean," she said through her teeth, "*this* particular mess; being put on show like a piece of bloodstock with doubtful lines. Being held up by the scruff of the neck like an orphaned kitten, in hopes somebody will take me in! Being—being left alone here in the first place," she ended, her voice trembling unexpectedly.

"Why are you alone here?" Lord John asked, quite gently. "I should have thought that your mother might have—"

"She wanted to. I wouldn't let her. Because she had to—that is, he—oh, it's all such a fucking *mess*!" She dropped her head into her hands and stared wretchedly at the tabletop; not crying, but not far from it, either.

"I can see that." Lord John leaned forward and put his empty glass back on the tray. "It's very late, my dear, and if you will pardon my observing it, you are in need of rest." He stood up and laid a hand lightly on her shoulder; oddly, it seemed only friendly, and not condescending, as another man's might.

"As it seems my journey to Wilmington is unnecessary, I think I will accept your aunt's kind invitation to remain here for a little. We will speak again, and see whether perhaps there is at least some palliative for your situation."

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BLACKMAIL

The commode was magnificent, a beautiful piece of smooth carved walnut that mingled appeal with convenience. Particularly convenient on a rainy, cold night like this. She fumbled sleepily with the lid in the dark, lit by lightning flashes from the window, then sat down, sighing with relief as the pressure on her bladder eased.

Evidently pleased with the additional internal space thus provided, Osbert performed a series of lazy somersaults, making her belly undulate in ghostly waves beneath her white flannel nightgown. She stood up slowly—she did almost everything slowly these days—feeling pleasantly drugged with sleep.

She paused by the rumpled bed, looking out at the stark beauty of the hills and the rain-lashed trees. The glass of the window was icy to the touch, and the clouds rolled down from the mountains, black-bellied and growling with thunder. It wasn't snowing, but it was a nasty night and no mistake.

And what was it like in the high mountains now? Had they reached a village that would shelter them? Had they found Roger? She shivered involuntarily, though the embers still glowed red in the hearth and the room was warm. She felt the irresistible pull of her bed, promising warmth and, even more, the lure of dreams in which she might escape the chronic nag of fear and guilt.

She turned to the door, though, and pulled her cloak from the peg behind it. The urgency of pregnancy might necessitate her using the commode in her room, but she was resolved that no slave would ever carry a chamber pot for her—not as long as she could walk. She wrapped the cloak tightly around her, took the lidded pewter receptacle from its cabinet, and stepped quietly into the corridor.

It was very late; all the candles had been put out, and the stale smell of dead fires lay in the stairwell, but she could see clearly enough by the flicker of the lightning as she made her way downstairs. The kitchen door was unbolted, a piece of carelessness for which she blessed the cook; no need to make noise struggling one-handed with the heavy bolt.

Freezing rain struck her face and whooshed up beneath the hem of her nightgown, making her gasp. Once past the first shock of cold, though, she enjoyed it; the violence of it was exhilarating, the wind strong enough to lift her cloak in billowing surges that made her feel light on her feet for the first time in months.

She swept in a flurry to the necessary house, rinsed out the pot in the drench of rain that poured from its gutters, then stood in the paved yard, letting the fresh wind sweep into her face and slash her cheeks with rain. She wasn't sure if this was expiation or exultation—a need to share the discomfort her parents might be facing, or some more pagan rite—a need to lose herself by joining in the ferocity of the elements. Either or both, it didn't matter; she stepped deliberately under the spout of the gutter, letting the water pound against her scalp and soak her hair and shoulders.

Gasping and shaking water from her hair like a dog, she stepped back—and stopped, her eye caught by a sudden flash of light. Not lightning; a steady beam that shone for a moment, then vanished.

A door in the slave quarters opened for a moment, then closed. Was someone coming? Someone was; she could hear footsteps on the gravel, and took another step back into the shadows—the last thing she wanted was to explain what she was doing out here.

The lightning showed him clearly as he passed, and she felt a jar of recognition. Lord John Grey, hurrying shirt sleeved and bareheaded, his fair hair unbound and blowing in the wind, evidently oblivious to the cold and rain. He passed without seeing her, and vanished under the overhang of the kitchen porch.

Realizing that she was in danger of being locked out, she ran after him, awkward but still fast. He was just closing the door when she hit it with her shoulder. She burst into the kitchen and stood dripping, Lord John goggling at her in disbelief.

"Nice night for a walk," she said, half breathless. "Isn't it?" She wiped back her wet hair, and with a cordial nod slipped past him, out, and up the stairs, her bare feet leaving wet half-moon prints on the dark, polished wood. She listened, but heard no steps behind her as she reached her room.

She left cloak and gown spread out before the fire to dry, and having toweled her hair and face, climbed naked into bed. She was shivering, but the feel of the cotton sheets on her bare skin was wonderful. She stretched, wiggling her toes, then rolled on her side, curling tightly around her center of gravity, letting the constant heat from within tendril outward, gradually reaching her skin, forming a small cocoon of warmth around her.

She replayed the scene on the footpath once more in memory, and very gradually, the shadowy thoughts that had been rattling around in her mind for days fell together into a rational shape.

Lord John treated her always with attention and respect—often with amusement or admiration—but there was something missing. She had not been able to identify it—for some time had not even been aware of it—but now she knew what it was, without doubt.

She was accustomed, as are most striking women, to the open admiration of men, and this she had from Lord John as well. But below such admiration was usually a deeper awareness, more subtle than glance or gesture, a vibration like the distant chime of a bell, a visceral acknowledgment of herself as female. She had thought she felt it from Lord John when they met—but it had been gone on subsequent meetings, and she had concluded that she had mistaken it at first.

She should have guessed before, she thought; she'd encountered that inner indifference once before, in the roommate of a casual boyfriend. But then, Lord John hid it very well; she might never have guessed, were it not for that chance encounter in the yard. No, he didn't chime for her. But when he came out of the servants' quarters, he had been ringing like a firebell.

She wondered briefly if her father knew, but dismissed the possibility. After his experiences in Wentworth Prison, he couldn't possibly hold a man with that preference in such warm regard as she knew he felt for Lord John.

She rolled onto her back. The polished cotton of the sheet slid across the bare skin of breasts and thighs, caressing. She half noticed the feeling, and as her nipple hardened she raised a hand to cup her breast in reflex, felt Roger's large warm hand in memory, and a sudden surge of wanting. Then in memory she felt the sudden grasp of rougher hands, pinching and mauling, and wanting changed at once to sickened fury. She flipped onto her stomach, arms crossed beneath her breasts and face buried in her pillow, legs clenched and teeth gritted in futile defense.

The baby was a large, uncomfortable lump; impossible to lie that way now. With a small half-spoken curse, she rolled over and jerked out of bed, out from under the betraying, seductive sheets.

She walked naked through the half-lit room, and stood again by the window, looking out at the pounding rain. Her hair hung damp down her back, and cold was coming through the glass, pebbling the white flesh of arms and thighs and belly. She made no move either to cover herself or to go back to bed, but only stood there, one hand on the gently squirming bulge, looking out.

It would be too late soon. She had known when they left that it was already too late—so had her mother. Neither of them had wanted to admit it to the other, though; they had both pretended that Roger would come back in time, that he and she would sail to Hispaniola, and find their way back through the stones—together.

She laid her other hand against the glass; at once, a mist of condensation sprang up, outlining her fingers. It was early March; maybe three months left, maybe less. It would take a week, maybe two, to travel to the coast. No ship would risk the treacherous Outer Banks in March, though. Early April, at the soonest, before a journey could be undertaken. How long to the West Indies? Two weeks, three?

The end of April, then. And a few days to make their way inland, find the cave; it would be slow, fighting through the jungle, more than eight months pregnant. And dangerous, though that didn't matter much, considering.

That would be if Roger were here now. But he wasn't. He might never come, though that was a possibility she fought hard against envisioning. If she didn't think about all the ways he could die, then he wouldn't die; it was one article of her stubborn faith; the others were that he wasn't dead yet, and that her mother would come back before the child was born. As to her father—rage boiled up again, as it did whenever she thought of him—him or Bonnet—so she tried to think of either of them as little as possible.

She prayed, of course, as hard as she could, but she wasn't constituted for praying and waiting; she was made for action. If only she could have gone with them, to find Roger!

She hadn't had a choice about that, though. Her jaw tightened, and her hand splayed flat against her belly. She hadn't had a choice about a lot of things. But she had made one choice—to keep her child—and now she'd have to live with the consequences of it.

She was beginning to shiver. Abruptly she turned away from the storm, and went to the fire. A small tongue of flame played along the blackened back of a red-crackled log, the heart of the embers glowing gold and white.

She sank down on the hearth rug, closing her eyes as the heat of the fire sent waves of comfort over her cold skin, caressing as the stroke of a hand. This time she kept all thought of Bonnet at bay, refusing him entrance to her mind, concentrating fiercely instead on the few precious memories she had of Roger.

… put your hand on my heart. Tell me if it stops … She could hear him, half breathless, half choked between laughter and passion.

How the hell do you know that? The rough feel of curly hairs under her palms, the smooth hard curves of his shoulders, the throb of the pulse in the side of his throat when she'd pulled him down to her and put her mouth on him, wanting in her urgency to bite him, to taste him, to breathe the salt and dust of his skin.

The dark and secret places of him, that she knew only by feel, recalled as soft weight, rolling and vulnerable in her palm, a complexity of curve and depth that yielded reluctantly to her probing fingertips *(Oh, God, don't stop, but careful, aye? Oh!),* the strange wrinkled silk that grew taut and smooth, filled her hand rising, silent and incredible as the stalk of a night-blooming flower that opens as you watch.

His gentleness as he touched her *(Christ, I wish I could see your face, to know how it is for you, am I doing well by ye. Is it good, just here? Tell me, Bree, talk to me …),* as she explored him, and then the moment when she had pushed him too far, her mouth on his nipple. She felt again the sudden amazing surge of power in him, as he lost all sense of restraint and seized her, lifting her as though she weighed nothing, rolled her back against the straw and took her, half hesitating as he remembered her freshly riven flesh, then answering the demand of her nails in his back to come to her fiercely, forcing her past the fear of impalement, into acceptance, and welcome, and finally into a frenzy that matched his own, rupturing the last membrane of reticence between them, joining them forever in a flood of sweat and musk and blood and semen.

She moaned out loud, shuddered and lay still, too weak even to move her hand away. Her heart was thumping, very slowly. Her belly was tight as a drum, the last of the spasms slowly relaxing its grip on her swollen womb. One half of her body blazed with heat, the other was cool and dark.

After a moment she rolled onto her hands and knees, and crawled away from the fire. She hauled herself onto the bed like a wounded beast, and lay half stunned, ignoring the currents of heat and cold that played over her.

At last she stirred, pulled a single quilt over her, and lay staring at the wall, hands crossed in protection above her baby. Yes, it was too late. Sensation and yearning must be put aside, along with love and anger. She must resist the mindless pull of both body and emotion. There were decisions to be made.

It took three days to convince herself of the virtue of her plan, to overcome her own scruples, and, at last, to find a suitable time and place in which to catch him alone. But she was thorough and she was patient; she had all the time in the world—nearly three months of it.

On Tuesday, her opportunity came at last. Jocasta was closeted in her study with Duncan Innes and the account books, Ulysses—with a brief, inscrutable look at the closed door of the study—had gone to the kitchen to superintend the preparations for yet another lavish dinner in his Lordship's honor, and she had gotten rid of Phaedre by sending her on horseback to Barra Meadows to fetch a book Jenny Ban Campbell had promised her.

With a fresh blue camlet gown that matched her eyes, and a heart beating in her chest like a trip-hammer, she set out to stalk her victim. She found him in the library, reading the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius by the French windows, the morning sun streaming over his shoulder making his smooth fair hair gleam like buttered toffee.

He looked up from his book when she came in—a hippopotamus could have made a more graceful entrance, she thought crossly, catching her skirt on the corner of a bric-a-brac table in her nervousness—then graciously laid it aside, springing to his feet to bow over her hand.

"No, I don't want to sit down, thank you." She shook her head at the seat he was offering her. "I wondered—that is, I thought I'd go for a walk. Would you like to come with me?"

There was frost on the lower panes of the French door, a stiff breeze whining past the house, and soft chairs, brandy, and blazing fire within. But Lord John was a gentleman.

"There is nothing I should like better," he gallantly assured her, and abandoned Marcus Aurelius without a backward glance.

It was a bright day, but very cold. Muffled in thick cloaks, they turned into the kitchen garden, where the high walls gave them some shelter from the wind. They exchanged small, breathless comments on the brightness of the day, assured each other that they were not cold at all, and came through a small archway into the brick-walled herbary. Brianna glanced around them; they were quite alone, and she would be able to see anyone coming along the walk. Best not waste time, then.

"I have a proposal to make to you," she said.

"I am sure any notion of yours must necessarily be delightful, my dear," he said, smiling slightly.

"Well, I don't know about that," she said, and took a deep breath. "But here goes. I want you to marry me."

He kept smiling, evidently waiting for the punch line.

"I mean it," she said.

The smile didn't altogether go away, but it altered. She wasn't sure whether he was dismayed at her gaucherie or just trying not to laugh, but she suspected the latter.

"I don't want any of your money," she assured him. "I'll sign a paper saying so. And you don't need to live with me, either, though it's probably a good idea for me to go to Virginia with you, at least for a little while. As for what I could do for you …" She hesitated, knowing that hers was the weaker side of the bargain. "I'm strong, but that doesn't mean much to you, since you have servants. I'm a good manager, though—I can keep accounts, and I think I know how to run a farm. I *do* know how to build things. I could manage your property in Virginia while you were in England. And … you have a young son, don't you? I'll look after him; I'd be a good mother to him."

Lord John had stopped dead in the path during this speech. Now he leaned slowly back against the brick wall, casting his eyes up in a silent prayer for understanding.

"Dear God in heaven," he said. "That I should live to hear an offer like that!" Then he lowered his head and gave her a direct and piercing look.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"No," she said, with an attempt at keeping her own composure. "It's a perfectly reasonable suggestion."

"I have heard," he said, rather cautiously, with an eye to her belly, "that women in an expectant condition are somewhat … excitable, in consequence of their state. I confess, though, that my experience is distressingly limited with respect to … that is—perhaps I should send for Dr. Fentiman?"

She drew herself up to her full height, put a hand on the wall and leaned toward him, deliberately looking down on him, menacing him with her size.

"No, you should not," she said, in measured tones. "Listen to me, Lord John. I'm not crazy, I'm not frivolous, and I don't mean it to be an inconvenience to you in any way—but I'm dead serious."

The cold had reddened his fair skin, and there was a drop of moisture glistening on the tip of his nose. He wiped it on a fold of his cloak, eyeing her with something between interest and horror. At least he'd stopped laughing.

She felt mildly sick, but she'd have to do it. She'd hoped it could be avoided, but there seemed no other way.

"If you don't agree to marry me," she said, "I'll expose you."

"You'll do what?" His usual mask of urbanity had disappeared, leaving puzzlement and the beginnings of wariness in its stead.

She was wearing woolen mittens, but her fingers felt frozen. So did everything else, except the warm lump of her slumbering child.

"I know what you were doing—the other night, at the slave quarters. I'll tell everyone; my aunt, Mr. Campbell, the sheriff. I'll write letters," she said, her lips feeling numb even as she uttered the ridiculous threat. "To the Governor, and the Governor of Virginia. They put p-pederasts in the pillory here; Mr. Campbell told me so."

A frown drew his brows together; they were so fair that they scarcely showed against his skin when he stood in strong light. They reminded her of Lizzie's.

"Stop looming over me, if you please."

He took hold of her wrist and pulled it down with a force that surprised her. He was small but much stronger than she had supposed, and for the first time, she was slightly afraid of what she was doing.

He took her firmly by the elbow and propelled her into motion, away from the house. The thought struck her that perhaps he meant to take her down to the river, out of sight, and try to drown her. She thought it unlikely, but still resisted the direction of his urging, and turned back into the square-laid paths of the kitchen garden instead.

He made no demur, but went with her, though it meant walking head-on into the wind. He didn't speak until they had turned once more, and reached a sheltered corner by the onion bed.

"I am halfway tempted to submit to your outrageous proposal," he said at last, the corner of his mouth twitching—whether with fury or amusement, she couldn't tell.

"It would certainly please your aunt. It would outrage your mother. And it would teach *you* to play with fire, I do assure you." She caught a gleam in his eye that gave her a sudden surge of doubt about her conclusions as to his preferences. She drew back from him a bit.

"Oh. I hadn't thought of that—that you might … men and women both, I mean."

"I *was* married," he pointed out, with some sarcasm.

"Yes, but I thought that was probably the same kind of thing I'm suggesting now—just a formal arrangement, I mean. That's what made me think of it in the first place, once I realized that you—" She broke off with an impatient gesture. "Are you telling me that you *do* like to go to bed with women?"

He raised one eyebrow.

"Would that make a substantial difference to your plans?"

"Well …" she said uncertainly. "Yes. Yes, it would. If I'd known that, I wouldn't have suggested it."

" 'Suggested,' she says," he muttered. "Public denunciation? The pillory? *Suggested?*"

The blood burned so hotly in her cheeks, she was surprised not to see the cold air turn to steam around her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I wouldn't have done it. You have to believe me, I really wouldn't have said a word to anybody. It's only when you laughed, I thought—anyway, it doesn't matter. If you did want to sleep with me, I couldn't marry you—it wouldn't be right."

He closed his eyes very tight and held them squinched shut for a minute. Then he opened one light blue eye and looked at her.

"Why not?" he asked.

“Because of Roger,” she said, and was infuriated to hear her voice break on the name. Still more infuriated to feel a hot tear escape to run down her cheek.

“Damn it!” she said. “Damn it to hell! I wasn’t even going to *think* about him!”

She swiped the tear angrily away, and clenched her teeth.

“Maybe you’re right,” she said. “Maybe it is being pregnant. I cry all the time, over nothing.”

“I rather doubt it is nothing,” he said dryly.

She took a deep breath, the cold air hollowing her chest. There was one last card to play, then.

“If you do like women … I couldn’t—I mean, I don’t want to sleep with you regularly. And I wouldn’t mind your sleeping with anybody else—male or female—”

“Thank you for that,” he muttered, but she ignored him, bent only on the need to get it all out.

“But I can see that you might want a child of your own. It wouldn’t be right for me to keep you from having one. I can give you that, I think.” She glanced down at herself, arms clasped across the round of her belly. “Everyone says I’m made for childbearing,” she went on steadily, eyes on her feet. “I’d—just until I got pregnant again, though. You’d have to put that in the contract, too—Mr. Campbell could draw it up.”

Lord John massaged his forehead, evidently suffering the onslaught of a massive headache. Then he dropped his hand and took her by the arm.

“Come and sit down, child,” he said quietly. “You’d best tell me what the devil you’re up to.”

She took a deep, savage breath to steady her voice.

“I am not a child,” she said. He glanced up at her and seemed to change his mind about something.

“No, you’re not—God help us both. But before you startle Farquard Campbell into an apoplexy with your notion of a suitable marriage contract, I beg you to sit with me for a moment and share the processes of your most remarkable brain.” He motioned her through the archway into the ornamental garden, where they would be invisible from the house.

The garden was bleak, but orderly; all the dead stalks of the year before had been pulled out, the dry stems chopped and scattered as mulch over the beds. Only in the circular bed around the dry fountain were there signs of life; green crocus spikes poked up like tiny battering rams, vivid and intransigent.

They sat, but she couldn't sit. Not and face him. He got up with her, and walked beside her, not touching her but keeping pace, the wind whipping strands of blond hair across his face, not saying a word, but listening, listening as she told him almost everything.

"So I've been thinking, and thinking," she ended wretchedly. "And I never get anywhere. Do you see? Mother and—and Da, they're out there somewhere—" She waved an arm toward the distant mountains. "Anything could happen to them—anything might have happened to Roger already. And here I sit, getting bigger and bigger, and there's nothing I can *do*!"

She glanced down at him and drew the back of a mittened hand under her dripping nose.

"I'm not crying," she assured him, though she was.

"Of course not," he said. He took her hand and drew it through his arm.

"Round and round," he murmured, eyes on the path of crazy paving as they circled the fountain.

"Yes, round and round the mulberry bush," she agreed. "And it'll be Pop! goes the weasel in three months or so. I have to do *something,*" she ended, miserably.

"Believe it or not, in your case waiting *is* doing something, though I admit it may not seem so," he answered dryly. "Why is it that you will not wait to see whether your father's quest is successful? Is it that your sense of honor will not allow you to bear a fatherless child? Or—"

"It's not my honor," she said. "It's his. Roger's. He's—he followed me. He gave up—everything—and came after me, when I came here to find my father. I knew he would, and he did.

“When he finds out about this—” She grimaced, cupping a hand to the swell of her stomach. “He’ll marry me; he’ll feel as though he has to. And I can’t let him do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I love him. I don’t want him to marry me out of obligation. And I—” She clamped her lips tight on the rest of it. “I won’t,” she ended firmly. “I’ve made up my mind, and I won’t.”

Lord John pulled his cloak tighter as a fresh blast of wind came rocketing in off the river. It smelled of ice and dead leaves, but there was a hint of freshness in it; spring was coming.

“I see,” he said. “Well, I quite agree with your aunt that you require a husband. Why me, though?” He raised one pale brow. “Is it my title or my wealth?”

“Neither one. It was because I was sure that you didn’t like women,” she said, giving him one of those candid blue looks.

“I do like women,” he said, exasperated. “I admire and honor them, and for several of the sex I feel considerable affection—your mother among them, though I doubt the sentiment is reciprocated. I do not, however, seek pleasure in their beds. Do I speak plainly enough?”

“Yes,” she said, the small lines between her eyes vanishing like magic. “That’s what I thought. See, it wouldn’t be right for me to marry Mr. MacNeill or Barton McLachlan or any of those men, because I’d be promising something I couldn’t give them. But you don’t want that anyway, so there isn’t any reason why I can’t marry you.”

He repressed a strong urge to bang his head against the wall.

“There most assuredly is.”

“What?”

“To name only the most obvious, your father would undoubtedly break my neck!”

“What for?” she demanded, frowning. “He likes you; he says you’re one of his best friends.”

“I am honored to be the recipient of his esteem,” he said shortly. “However, that esteem would very shortly cease to exist, upon

Jamie Fraser's discovering that his daughter was serving as consort and brood mare to a degenerate sodomite."

"And how would he discover that?" she demanded. "*I* wouldn't tell him." Then she flushed and, meeting his outraged eye, suddenly dissolved into laughter, in which he helplessly joined.

"Well, I'm sorry, but *you* said it," she gasped at last, sitting up and wiping her streaming eyes with the hem of her cloak.

"Oh, Christ. Yes, I did." Distracted, he thumbed a strand of hair out of his mouth, and wiped his running nose on his sleeve again. "Damn, why haven't I a handkerchief? I said it because it's true. As for your father finding out, he's well aware of the fact."

"He is?" She seemed disproportionately surprised. "But I thought he'd never—"

A flash of yellow apron interrupted her; one of the kitchen maids was in the adjoining garden. Without comment, Lord John stood up and gave her a hand; she got ponderously to her feet and they sailed out onto the dry brown scurf of the dead lawn, cloaks billowing like sails around them.

The stone bench under the willow tree was devoid of its usual charm at this time of year, but it was at least sheltered from the icy blasts off the river. Lord John saw her seated, sat down himself, and sneezed explosively. She opened her cloak and dug in the bosom of her dress, finally coming out with a crumpled handkerchief, which she handed to him with apologies.

It was warm and smelled of her—a disconcerting odor of girl-flesh, spiced with cloves and lavender.

"What you said about teaching me to play with fire," she said. "Just what did you mean by that?"

"Nothing," he said, but now it was his turn to flush.

"Nothing, hm?" she said, and gave him the ghost of an ironic smile. "That was a threat if I ever heard one."

He sighed, and wiped his face once more with her handkerchief.

"You have been frank with me," he said. "To the point of embarrassment and well beyond. So yes, I suppose I—no, it *was* a threat." He made a small gesture of surrender. "You look like your father, don't you see?"

She frowned at him, his words obviously meaning nothing. Then realization flickered, sprang to full life. She sat bolt upright, staring down at him.

"Not you—not Da! He wouldn't!"

"No," Lord John said, very dryly. "He wouldn't. Though your shock is scarcely flattering. And for what the statement is worth, I would under no circumstances take advantage of your likeness to him—that was as much an idle threat as was your menacing me with exposure."

"Where did you … meet my father?" she asked carefully, her own troubles superseded for the moment by curiosity.

"In prison. You knew he was imprisoned, after the Rising?"

She nodded, frowning slightly.

"Yes. Well. Leave it as said that I harbor feelings of particular affection for Jamie Fraser, and have for some years." He shook his head, sighing.

"And here you come offering me your innocent body, with its echoes of his flesh—and add to that the promise of giving me a child who would mingle my blood with his—and all this, because your honor will not let you wed a man you love, or love a man you wed." He broke off and sank his head in his hands.

"Child, you would make an angel weep, and God knows I am no angel!"

"My mother thinks you are."

He glanced up at her, startled.

"She thinks *what?*"

"Maybe she wouldn't go quite *that* far," she amended, still frowning. "She says you're a good man, though. I think she likes you, but she doesn't want to. Of course, I understand that now; I suppose she must know—how you … er … feel about …" She coughed, hiding her blushes in a fold of her cloak.

"Hell," he muttered. "Oh, hell and thundering damnation. I ought never to have come out with you. Yes, she does. Though in all truth, I am not sure why she regards me with suspicion. It cannot be jealousy, surely."

Brianna shook her head, chewing thoughtfully on her lower lip.

"I think it's because she's afraid you'll hurt him, somehow. She's afraid for him, you know."

He glanced up at her, startled.

"Hurt him? How? Does she think I will overpower him and commit depraved indignities upon his person?"

He spoke lightly, but a flicker in her eyes froze the words in his throat. He tightened his grip on her arm. She bit her lip, then gently detached his hand, laying it on his knee.

"Have you ever seen my father with his shirt off?"

"Do you mean the scars on his back?"

She nodded.

He drummed his fingers restlessly on his knees, soundless on the fine broadcloth.

"Yes, I've seen them. I did that."

Her head jerked back, eyes wide. The end of her nose was cherry-red, but the rest of her skin so pale that her hair and eyebrows seemed to have leached all the life from it.

"Not all of it," he said, staring off into a bed of dead hollyhocks. "He'd been flogged before, which made it all the worse—that he knew what he was doing, when he did it."

"Did … what?" she asked. Slowly, she rearranged herself on the bench, not so much turning toward him as flowing in her garments, like a cloud changing shape in the wind.

"I was the commander at Ardsmuir prison; did he tell you? No, I thought not." He made an impatient gesture, brushing back the strands of fair hair that whipped across his face.

"He was an officer, a gentleman. The only officer there. He spoke for the Jacobite prisoners. We dined together, in my quarters. We played chess, we spoke of books. We had interests in common. We … became friends. And then … we were not."

He stopped speaking.

She drew away from him a bit, distaste in her eyes.

"You mean—you had him flogged because he wouldn't—"

"No, damn it, I did not!" He snatched the handkerchief and scrubbed angrily at his nose. He flung it down on the seat between them and glared at her. "How dare you suggest such a thing!"

"But you said yourself you did it!"

"*He* did it."

"You can't flog yourself!"

He started to reply, then snorted. He raised one brow at her, still angry, but with his feelings coming back under control.

"The hell you can't. You've been doing it for months, according to what you've told me."

"We aren't talking about me."

"Of course we are!"

"No, we're not!" She leaned toward him, heavy brows drawn down. "What the hell do you mean, he did it?"

The wind was blowing from behind her, into his face. It made his eyes sting and water, and he looked away.

"What am I doing here?" he muttered to himself. "I must be mad to be talking with you in this manner!"

"I don't care if you're mad or not," she said, and gripped him by the sleeve. "You tell me what happened!"

He pressed his lips tight together, and for a moment, she thought he wouldn't. But he had already said too much to stop, and he knew it. His shoulders rose under his cloak and dropped, slumping in surrender.

"We were friends. Then … he discovered my feeling for him. We were no longer friends, by his choice. But that was not enough for him; he wished a final severance. And so he deliberately brought about an occasion so drastic that it must alter our relation irrevocably and prevent any chance of friendship between us. So he lied. During a search of the prisoners' quarters, he claimed a piece of tartan publicly as his own. Possession was against the law, then—it still is, in Scotland."

He drew a deep breath and let it out. He wouldn't look at her, but kept his eyes focused on the ragged fringe of bare trees across the river, raw against the pale spring sky.

"I was the governor, charged with execution of the law. I was obliged to have him flogged. As he damn well knew I would be."

He tilted his head back, resting it against the carved stone back of the bench. His eyes were closed against the wind.

"I could forgive his not wanting me," he said, with quiet bitterness. "But I couldn't forgive him for making me use him in that fashion. Not forcing me merely to hurt him, but to degrade him. He could not merely refuse to acknowledge my feeling; he must destroy it. It was too much."

Bits of debris boiled past on the flood; storm-cracked twigs and branches, a broken board from the hull of a boat, wrecked somewhere upstream. Her hand covered his where it rested on his knee. It was slightly larger than his own, and warm from sheltering in her cloak.

"There was a reason. It wasn't you. But it's for him to tell you, if he wants to. You did forgive him, though," she said quietly. "Why?"

He sat up then, and shrugged, but didn't put away her hand.

"I had to." He glanced at her, eyes straight and level. "I hated him for as long as I could. But then I realized that loving him … that was part of me, and one of the best parts. It didn't matter that he couldn't love me, that had nothing to do with it. But if I could not forgive him, then I could not love him, and that part of me was gone. And I found eventually that I wanted it back." He smiled, faintly. "So you see, it was really entirely selfish."

He squeezed her hand then, stood up, and pulled her to her feet.

"Come, my dear. We shall both freeze solid if we sit here any longer."

They walked back toward the house, not talking, but walking close together, arm in arm. As they came back through the gardens he spoke abruptly.

"You're right, I think. To live with someone you love, knowing that they tolerate the relation only for the sake of obligation—no, I wouldn't do it, either. Were it only a matter of convenience and respect on both sides, then yes; such a marriage is one of honor. As long as both parties are honest—" His mouth twisted briefly as he glanced in the direction of the servants' quarters. "There is no need for shame on either side."

She looked down at him, brushing a strand of windblown copper hair out of her eyes with her free hand.

“Then you’ll accept my proposal?” The hollow feeling in her chest didn’t feel like the relief she had expected.

“No,” he said bluntly. “I may have forgiven Jamie Fraser for what he did in the past—but he would never forgive *me* for marrying you.” He smiled at her, and patted the hand he held tucked in the curve of his arm.

“I can give you some respite from both your suitors and your aunt, though.” He glanced at the house, whose curtains hung unstirring against the glass.

“Do you suppose anyone’s watching?”

“I’d say you can bet on it,” she said, a little grimly.

“Good.” Pulling off the sapphire ring he wore, he turned to face her and took her hand. He pulled off her mitten and ceremoniously slid the ring onto her little finger—the only one it would fit. Then he rose smoothly on his toes and kissed her on the lips. Leaving her no time to recover from surprise, he clasped her hand in his, and turned once more toward the house, his expression bland.

“Come along, my dear,” he said. “Let us announce our engagement.”

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TRIAL BY FIRE

They were left alone all day. The fire was dead, and there was no food left. It didn't matter; neither man could eat, and no fire would have reached Roger's soul-deep chill.

The Indians came back in late afternoon. Several warriors, escorting an elderly man, dressed in a flowing lace shirt and a woven mantle, his face painted with red and ocher—the *sachem,* bearing a small clay pot in his hand, filled with black liquid.

Alexandre had put on his clothes; he stood when the *sachem* approached him, but neither spoke nor moved. The *sachem* began to sing in a cracked old voice, and as he sang, dipped a rabbit's foot into the pot and painted the priest's face in black, from forehead to chin.

The Indians left, and the priest sat down on the ground, his eyes closed. Roger tried to speak to him, to offer him water, or at least the knowledge of company, but Alexandre made no response, sitting as though he had been carved of stone.

In the last of the twilight, he spoke, finally.

"There is not much time," he said softly. "I asked you once before to pray for me. I did not know then what I would have you pray for —for the preservation of my life, or my soul. Now I know that neither is possible."

Roger moved to speak, but the priest twitched a hand, stopping him.

"There is only the only thing I can ask for. Pray for me, brother— that I might die well. Pray that I may die in silence." He looked at

Roger for the first time, then, his eyes glinting with moisture. “I would not shame her by crying out.”

It was some time after dark that the drums began. Roger had not heard them in his time in the village. Impossible to say how many there were; the sound seemed to come from everywhere. He felt it in the marrow of his bones and the soles of his feet.

The Mohawks returned. When they came in, the priest stood up at once. He undressed himself, and walked out, naked, without a backward glance.

Roger sat staring at the hide-covered doorway, praying—and listening. He knew what a drum could do; had done it himself—evoked awe and fury with the beating of a stretched hide, calling to the deep and hidden instincts of the listener. Knowing what was happening, though, didn’t make it any less frightening.

He could not have said how long he sat there listening to the drums, hearing other sounds—voices, footsteps, the noises of a large assembly—trying not to listen for Alexandre’s voice.

Suddenly the drumming stopped. It started again, no more than a few tentative thumps, and then quit altogether. There were shouts, and then a sudden cacophany of yells. Roger started up, and hobbled toward the door. The guard was still there, though; he thrust his head through the flap and gestured menacingly, one hand on his war club.

Roger stopped, but couldn’t return to the fire. He stood in the half-dark, sweat rolling down his ribs, listening to the sounds outside.

It sounded like all the devils in hell had been let loose. What in God’s name was going on out there? A terrific fight, obviously. But who, and why?

After the first salvo of shrieks, the vocal part of it had lessened, but there were still individual high-pitched yelps and ululations from every part of the central clearing. There were thuds, too; moans, and other noises indicative of violent combat. Something struck the wall of the longhouse; the wall shivered and a bark panel cracked down the middle.

Roger glanced at the door flap; no, the guard wasn't looking. He dashed across to the panel and tore at it with his fingers. No good; the wood fibers shredded away beneath his nails and wouldn't give him purchase. In desperation, he pressed his eye to the hole he had made, trying to see what was happening outside.

No more than a narrow slice of the central clearing was visible. He could see the longhouse opposite, a strip of churned earth between, and over everything, the flickering light of an enormous fire. Red and yellow shadows fought with black ones, peopling the air with fiery demons.

Some of the demons were real; two dark figures reeled past and out of sight, locked in violent embrace. More figures streaked across his line of sight, running toward the fire.

Then he stiffened, pressing his face against the wood. Among the incomprehensible Mohawk yells, he could have sworn he had heard someone bellowing in *Gaelic*.

He had.

"Caisteal Dhuni!" somebody shouted nearby, followed by a hair-raising screech. Scots—white men! He had to get to them! Roger smashed his fists on the shattered wood in a frenzy, trying to batter his way through the panel by main force. The Gaelic voice broke loose again.

"Caisteal Dhuni!" No, wait—God, it was *another* voice! And the first one, answering. *"Do mi! Do mi!"* To me! To me! And then a fresh wave of Mohawk shrieks rose up and drowned the voices—women, it was women screaming now, their voices even louder than the men's.

Roger flung himself at the panel, shoulder first; it cracked and splintered further, but would not give way. He tried again, and a third time, with no result. There was nothing in the longhouse that could be used as a weapon, nothing. In desperation he seized the lashings of one of the bed cubicles and tore at it with hands and teeth, ripping until he had loosened part of the frame.

He grabbed the wood, heaved; shook it and heaved again, until with a rending crack it came free in his hands, leaving him panting, holding a six-foot pole with a shattered, sharpened end. He tucked the butt end under his arm and charged the doorway, pointed end aimed like a spear at the hide flap.

He shot out into dark and flame, cold air and smoke, into noise that singed his blood. He saw a figure ahead of him, and charged it. The man danced aside, and raised a war club. Roger couldn't stop, couldn't turn, but threw himself flat, and the club smashed down inches from his head.

He rolled to the side and swung his pole wildly. It crashed against the Indian's head, and the man stumbled and went down, falling over Roger.

Whisky. The man reeked of whisky. Not stopping to wonder, Roger wriggled out from under the squirming body, staggering to his feet, pole still in his hand.

A scream came from behind him and he whirled, stabbing with all his strength as he pivoted on the ball of his foot. The shock of impact shuddered up his arms and through his chest. The man he had struck was clawing at the pole; it jerked and quivered, then was wrenched from his grasp as the man fell over.

He staggered, caught himself, then whirled toward the fire. It was an immense pyre; flames billowing in a wall of pure and ardent scarlet, vivid against the night. Through the bobbing heads of the watchers, he saw the black figure in the heart of the flame, arms spread in a gesture of benediction, lashed to the pole from which he hung. Long hair fluttered up, strands catching fire with a burst of flame, surrounding the head with a halo of gold, like Christ in a missal. Then something crashed down on Roger's head, and he dropped like a rock.

He didn't quite lose consciousness. He couldn't see or move, but he could still hear, dimly. There were voices near him. The yelling was still there, but fainter, almost a background noise, like the roar of the ocean.

He felt himself rise in the air, and the crackle of the flames got louder, it matched the roar in his ears … Christ, they were going to throw him into the fire! His head spun with effort and light blazed behind his shut lids, but his stubborn body wouldn't move.

The roar diminished, but paradoxically he felt warm air brush his face. He struck the ground, half bounced, and rolled, ending up on his face, his arms flung out. Cool earth was under his fingers.

He breathed. Mechanically, one breath at a time. Very slowly, the spinning sensation began to ebb.

There was noise, a long way away, but he couldn't hear anything near him but his own loud breathing. Very slowly, he opened one eye. Firelight flickered on poles and bark panels, a dim echo of the brilliance outside. Longhouse. He was inside again.

His breathing was loud and ragged in his ears. He tried to hold his breath, but couldn't. Then he realized that he *was* holding his breath; the gasping noise was coming from someone else.

It was behind him. With immense effort, he got his hands under him, and rose onto hands and knees, swaying, eyes squinted against the pain in his head.

"Jesus Christ," he muttered to himself. He rubbed a hand hard over his face and blinked, but the man was still there, six feet away.

Jamie Fraser. He was lying on his side in a huddle of limbs, a crimson plaid tangled round his body. Half his face was obscured with blood, but there wasn't any mistaking him.

For a moment, Roger just looked at him blankly. For months the greater part of his waking moments had been devoted to imagining a meeting with this man. Now it had happened, and it seemed simply impossible. There was room for no feeling beyond a sort of dull amazement.

He rubbed his face again, harder, forcing aside the fog of fear and adrenaline. What … *what* was Fraser doing here?

When thought and feeling connected again, his first recognizable feeling was neither fury nor alarm, but an absurd burst of joyful relief.

"She didn't," he muttered, and the words sounded queer and hoarse to his ears, after so long without spoken English. "Oh, God, she didn't do it!"

Jamie Fraser could be here for only one reason—to rescue him. And if that was so, it was because Brianna had made her father come. Whether it was misunderstanding or malevolence that had put him through the hell of the last few months, it had not been hers.

"Didn't," he said again. "She didn't." He shuddered, both with nausea from the blow and with relief.

He had thought he would be hollow forever, but suddenly there was something there; something small, but very solid. Something he could hold in the cup of his heart. *Brianna*. He had her back.

There was another set of high-pitched screams from just outside; ululations that went on and on, sticking into his flesh like a thousand pins. He jerked, and shuddered again, all other feelings subsumed in renewed realization.

Dying with the reassurance that Brianna loved him was better than dying without it—but he hadn't wanted to die in the first place. He remembered what he had seen outside, felt his gorge rise, and choked it down.

With a trembling hand he began the unfamiliar sign of the Cross. "In the name of the Father," he whispered, and then the words failed him. "Please," he whispered instead. "Please, don't let him have been right."

He crawled shakily to Fraser's body, hoping that the man was still alive. He was; blood was flowing from a gash on Fraser's temple, and when he thrust his fingers under the man's jaw, he could feel the steady bump of a pulse.

There was water in one of the pots under the shattered bed frame; luckily it hadn't spilled. He dipped the end of the plaid in water and used it to mop Fraser's face. After a few minutes of this ministration, the man's eyelids began to flutter.

Fraser coughed, gagged heavily, turned his head to one side, and threw up. Then his eyes shot open, and before Roger could speak or move, Fraser had rolled up onto one knee, his hand on the *sgian dhu* in his stocking.

Blue eyes glared at him, and Roger raised an arm in instinctive defense. Then Fraser blinked, shook his head, groaned, and sat down heavily on the earthen floor.

"Oh, it's you," he said. He closed his eyes and groaned again. Then his head snapped up, eyes blue and piercing, but this time with alarm rather than fury.

"Claire!" he exclaimed. "My wife, where is she?"

Roger felt his jaw drop.

"Claire? You brought her *here?* You brought a woman into *this?*"

Fraser gave him a glance of extreme dislike, but wasted no words. Palming the knife from his stocking, he glanced at the doorway. The flap was down; no one was visible. The noise outside had died down, though the rumble of voices was still audible. Now and then one stood out, shouting or raised in exhortation.

"There's a guard," Roger said.

Fraser glanced at him and rose to his feet, smooth as a panther. Blood was still running down the side of his face, but it didn't seem to trouble him. Silently, he flattened himself along the wall, glided to the edge of the door flap, and eased the flap aside with the tip of the tiny dagger.

Fraser grimaced at whatever he saw. Letting the flap swing back in place, he returned and sat down, putting the knife away in his stocking.

"A good dozen of them just outside. Is that water?" He put out a hand, and Roger silently scooped a gourdful of water and handed it to him. He drank deeply, splashed water in his face, then poured the rest of it over his head.

Fraser wiped a hand over his battered face, then opened bloodshot eyes and looked at Roger.

"Wakefield, is it?"

"I go by my own name, these days. MacKenzie."

Fraser gave a brief, humorless snort.

"So I've heard." He had a wide, expressive mouth—like Bree's. His lips compressed briefly, then relaxed.

"I've done wrong to ye, MacKenzie, as ye'll know. I've come to put it right, so far as may be, but it may be as I'll not have the chance." He gestured briefly toward the door. "For now, you've my apology. For what satisfaction ye may want of me later—I'll bide your will. But I'd ask ye to let it wait until we're safe out of this."

Roger stared at him for a moment. Satisfaction for the last months of torment and uncertainty seemed as farfetched a notion as the thought of safety. He nodded.

"Done," he said.

They sat in silence for several moments. The fire in the hut was burning low, but the wood to feed it was outside; the guards kept charge of anything that might be used as a weapon.

"What happened?" Roger asked at last. He nodded toward the door. "Out there?"

Fraser took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. For the first time, Roger noticed that he held the elbow of his right arm cradled in his left palm, the arm itself held close to the body.

"I will be damned if I know," he said.

"They did burn the priest? He's dead?" There could be no doubt of it after what he'd seen, but still Roger felt compelled to ask.

"He was a priest?" Thick reddish brows rose in surprise, then fell. "Aye, he's dead. And not only him." An involuntary shudder went over the Highlander's big frame.

Fraser hadn't known what they meant to do when the drums began to sound, and everyone went out to gather by the great fire. There was plenty of talk, but his knowledge of the Mohawk tongue was insufficient to make out what was happening, and his nephew, who spoke the tongue, was nowhere to be found.

The whites had not been invited, but no one made any move to keep them away. And so it was that he and Claire had come to be standing on the edge of the crowd, curious onlookers, when the *sachem* and the Council came out and the old man began to speak. Another man had spoken, too, very angrily.

"Then they brought the man out, naked as a tadpole, bound him to a stake, and started in upon him." He paused, eyes shadowed, and glanced at Roger.

"I'll tell ye, man, I've seen French executioners keep a man alive who wished he weren't. It wasna worse than that—but no a great deal better." Fraser drank again, thirstily, and lowered the cup.

"I tried to take Claire away—I didna ken but what they meant to attack us next." The crowd was pressed so tight around them, though, that movement was impossible; there was no choice but to go on watching.

Roger's mouth felt dry, and he reached for the cup. He didn't want to ask, but he felt a perverse need to know—whether for Alexandre's sake or for his own.

"Did he—cry out at all?"

Fraser gave him another glance of surprise, then something like understanding crossed his face.

"No," he said slowly. "He died verra well—by their lights. Ye will have been knowing the man?"

Roger nodded, wordless. It was difficult to believe Alexandre was gone, even hearing this. And *where* had he gone? Surely he could not have been right. *I will not be forgiven*. Surely not. No just God—

Roger shook his head hard, pushing the thought away. It was plain that Fraser had no more than half his mind on his story, horrific as it was. He kept glancing at the door, a look of anxious expectation on his face. Was he expecting rescue?

"How many men did you bring with you?"

The blue eyes flashed, surprised.

"My nephew Ian."

"That's all?" Roger tried to keep the stunned disbelief out of his voice, but patently failed.

"Ye were expecting the 78th Hieland regiment?" Fraser asked sarcastically. He got to his feet, swaying slightly, arm pressed to his side. "I brought whisky."

"Whisky? Did that have anything to do with the fighting?" Remembering the reek of the man who had fallen over him, Roger nodded toward the wall of the longhouse.

"It may have."

Fraser went to the wall with the cracked panel, and pressed an eye against the opening, staring out at the clearing for some time before returning to the dwindling fire. Things had gone quiet outside.

The big Highlander was looking more than unwell. His face was white and sheened with sweat under the streaks of dried blood. Roger silently poured more water; it was as silently accepted. He knew well enough what was wrong with Fraser, and it wasn't the effects of injury.

"When you last saw her—"

"When the fighting broke out." Unable to stay seated, Fraser set down the cup and got to his feet again, prowling the confines of the longhouse like a restless bear. He paused, glancing at Roger.

"Will ye maybe ken a bit what happened there?"

"I could guess." He acquainted Fraser with the priest's story, finding some small respite from worry in the telling.

"They wouldn't have harmed her," he said, trying to reassure himself as much as Fraser. "She'd nothing to do with it."

Fraser gave a derisory snort.

"Aye, she did." Without warning, he smashed a fist against the ground, in a muffled thump of fury. "Damn the woman!"

"She'll be all right," Roger repeated stubbornly. He couldn't bear to think otherwise, but he knew what Fraser plainly knew as well—if Claire Fraser was alive, unhurt, and free, nothing could have kept her from her husband's side. And as for the unknown nephew …

"I heard your nephew—in the fight. I heard him call out to you. He sounded all right." Even as he offered this bit of information, he knew how feeble it was as reassurance. Fraser nodded, though, head bent on his knees.

"He's a good lad, Ian," he murmured. "And he has friends among the Mohawk. God send they will protect him."

Roger's curiosity was coming back, as the shock of the evening began to fade.

"Your wife," he said. "What did she do? How could she possibly have been involved in this?"

Fraser sighed. He scrubbed his good hand over his face and through his hair, rubbing until the loose red locks stood up in knots and snarls.

"I shouldna have said so," he said. "It wasna her fault in the least. It's only—she'll not be killed, but God, if they've harmed her …"

"They won't," Roger said firmly. "What happened?"

Fraser shrugged and closed his eyes. Head tilted back, he described the scene as though he could still see it, engraved on the inside of his eyelids. Perhaps he could.

"I didna take heed of the girl, in such a crowd. I couldna even say what she looked like. It was only at the last that I saw her."

Claire had been by his side, white-faced and rigid in the press of shouting, swaying bodies. When the Indians had nearly finished with the priest, they untied him from the stake and fastened his hands instead to a long pole, held above his head, from which to suspend him in the flames.

Fraser glanced at him, wiping the back of a hand across his lips.

"I've seen a man's heart pulled beating from his chest before," he said. "But I hadna seen it eaten before his eyes." He spoke almost shyly, as though apologizing for his squeamishness. Shocked, he had looked to Claire. It was then that he had seen the Indian girl standing on Claire's other side, with a cradleboard in her arms.

With great calmness, the girl had handed the board to Claire, then turned and slipped through the crowd.

"She didna look to left or right, but walked straight into the fire."

"What?" Roger's throat closed with shock, the exclamation emerging in a strangled croak.

The flames had embraced the girl in moments. A head taller than the folk near him, Jamie had seen everything clearly.

"Her clothes caught, and then her hair. By the time she reached him, she was burning like a torch." Still, he had seen the dark silhouette of her arms, raised to embrace the empty body of the priest. Within moments, it was no longer possible to distinguish man or woman; there was only the one figure, black amid the towering flames.

"It was then everything went mad." Fraser's wide shoulders slumped a little, and he touched the gash in his temple. "All I ken is one woman set up a howl, and then there was the hell of a screech, and of a sudden, everyone was either fleeing or fighting."

He had himself tried to do both, shielding Claire and her burden while fighting his way out of the thrashing press of bodies. There were too many of them, though. Unable to escape, he had pushed Claire against the wall of a longhouse, seized a stick of wood with which to defend them, and shouted for Ian, while wielding his makeshift club on anyone reckless enough to come near.

"Then a wee fiend leapt out o' the smoke, and struck me with his club." He shrugged, one-shouldered. "I turned to fight him off, and then there were three of them on me." Something had caught him in the temple, and he had known no more till waking in the longhouse with Roger.

"I havena seen Claire since. Nor Ian."

* * *

The fire had burned itself to coals, and it was growing cold in the longhouse. Jamie unfastened his brooch and pulled the plaid around his shoulders as well as he could, one-handed, and leaned gingerly back against the wall.

His right arm might be broken; he'd taken a blow from one of the war clubs just below the shoulder, and the stricken spot went from numbness to blinding pain with no warning. That was of no moment, though, compared with his worry for Claire and wee Ian.

It was very late. If Claire hadn't been hurt in the fighting, she was likely safe enough, he told himself. The old woman wouldn't countenance harm done to her. As for Ian, though—he felt a moment's pride in the lad, in spite of his fear. Ian was a bonny fighter, and a credit to the uncle who'd taught him.

If he should have been overcome, though … there had been so many of the savages, and with the fighting so hot …

He shifted restlessly, trying not to think of facing his sister with ill news of her youngest boy. Christ, he'd rather have his own heart torn from his breast and eaten before his eyes; it would feel much the same.

Seeking distraction—any distraction—from his fears, he shifted again, taking random stock of the shadowy insides of the house. Bare as a Skyeman's cupboard, for the most part. A jug of water, a broken bed frame, and one or two tattered skins for bedding lying crumpled on the earthen floor.

MacKenzie was sitting hunched across the fire, heedless of the growing chill. His arms were wrapped about his knees, head bent in thought. He was half turned away, unaware of Jamie's eye on him.

He grudged to admit it, but the man was decently made. Long shanks and a good breadth through the shoulders; he'd have a fair reach with a sword. He was tall as the MacKenzies of Leoch—and why not? he thought suddenly. The man was Dougal's get, if a few generations onward.

He found that notion both disturbing and oddly comforting. He'd killed men when he must, and mostly their ghosts let him sleep at night with no great rattling of bones. Dougal's death, though, was one that he had lived through more than once, and woke from sweating, with the sound of those last silent words of Dougal's ringing in his ears; words mouthed in blood.

There'd been not the slightest choice; it was kill or be killed, and a near thing either way. And yet … Dougal MacKenzie had been his foster father, and if he was honest, a part of him had loved the man.

Yes, it was some comfort to know that a small part of Dougal was left. The other part of this MacKenzie's heritage was a wee bit more troubling. He'd seen the man's eyes first thing when he woke, bright green and intent, and for one second his wame had shriveled up into a ball, thinking of Geillis Duncan.

Did he much want his daughter linked with a witch's spawn? He eyed the man covertly. Perhaps it was as well if Brianna's child was not of this man's blood.

"Brianna," MacKenzie said, lifting his head suddenly from his knees. "Where is she?"

Jamie jerked, and a hot knife-blade seared his arm, leaving him sweating.

"Where?" he said. "At River Run, with her aunt. She's safe." His heart was thundering in his ears. Christ, was the man able to read thoughts? Or had he the Sight?

The green eyes were steady, dark in the dim light.

“Why did you bring Claire, and not Brianna? Why did she not come with you?”

Jamie returned the man’s cool look. They’d see if it was a matter of mind reading or not. If not, the last thing he meant to tell MacKenzie now was the truth; time enough for that when—if—they were safely away.

“I should have left Claire as well, if I thought I could. She’s a stubborn wee besom. Short of tying her hand and foot, I couldna prevent her coming.”

Something dark flickered in MacKenzie’s eyes—doubt, or pain?

“I should not have thought Brianna the kind of lass to mind her father’s word overmuch,” he said. His voice had an edge to it—yes, pain, and a sort of jealousy.

Jamie relaxed slightly. No mind reading.

“Did ye no? Well, and perhaps ye dinna ken her so well as all that,” he said. Pleasantly enough, but with a jeering undertone that would make one sort of man go for his throat.

MacKenzie wasn’t that sort. He sat up straight, and drew a deep breath.

“I know her well,” he said levelly. “She is my wife.”

Jamie sat up straight in turn, and clenched his teeth on a hiss of pain.

“The hell she is.”

MacKenzie’s black brows drew down at that.

“We are handfast, she and I. Did she not tell you that?”

She hadn’t—but he hadn’t given her much chance to tell him, either. Too furious at the thought of her willing to bed a man, stung at thinking she’d made a fool of him, proud as Lucifer and suffering the Devil’s pains for it, in wishing her perfect and finding her only as human as himself.

“When?” Jamie asked.

“Early September, in Wilmington. When I—just before I left her.” The admission came unwillingly, and through the black veil of his own guilt he saw a reflection of it on MacKenzie’s face. As well deserved as his own, he thought viciously. If the coward had not left her …

“She didna tell me.”

He saw the doubt and the pain in MacKenzie’s eyes quite clearly now. The man worried that Brianna did not want him—for if she did, she would have come. He knew well enough that no power on earth or below it would keep Claire from *his* side if she thought him in danger—and felt a jolt of fear renewed at that thought; for where was she?

“I suppose she thought you wouldn’t see handfasting as a legal form of marriage,” MacKenzie said quietly.

“Or perhaps she didna see it so herself,” Jamie suggested cruelly. He could relieve the man’s mind by telling him a part of the truth—that Brianna had not come because she was with child—but he was in no charitable mood.

It was getting quite dark, but even so he could see MacKenzie’s face flush at that, and his hands clench on the ragged deerskin.

“I saw it so,” was all he said.

Jamie closed his eyes, and said no more. The last coals in the fire died slowly, leaving them in darkness.

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THE OFFICE OF A PRIEST

The smell of burnt things hung in the air. We passed close by the pit and I couldn't help seeing from the corner of my eye the heap of charred fragments, shattered ends frosted white with ash. I hoped it was wood. I was afraid to look directly.

I stumbled on the frozen ground, and my escort caught me by the arm. Pulled me up without comment and pushed me toward a longhouse where two men stood on guard, huddled against a cold wind that filled the air with drifting ashes.

I had not slept and had not eaten, though food was offered. My feet and my fingers were cold. There was keening from a longhouse at the far end of the village, and over it the louder formal chant of a death song. Was it for the girl that they sang, or someone else? I shivered.

The guards glanced at me and stood aside. I lifted the hide flap at the door and went in.

It was dark; the fire inside as dead as the one outside. Gray light from the smokehole gave me enough illumination to see an untidy heap of skins and cloth on the floor, though. A patch of red tartan showed amid the jumble, and I felt a surge of relief.

"Jamie!"

The pile heaved and came apart. Jamie's rumpled head popped up, alert but looking a good deal the worse for wear. Next to him was a dark, bearded man who seemed oddly familiar. Then he moved into the light, and I caught the flash of green eyes above the shrubbery.

"Roger!" I exclaimed.

Without a word he rose out of the blankets and clasped me in his arms. He held so tight, I could hardly breathe.

He was terribly thin; I could feel every one of his ribs. Not starved, though; he stank, but with the normal scents of dirt and stale sweat, not the yeasty effluvium of starvation.

"Roger, are you all right?" He let go, and I looked him up and down, searching for any signs of injury.

"Yes," he said. His voice was husky, from sleep and emotion. "Bree? She's all right?"

"She's fine," I assured him. "What's happened to your foot?" He wore nothing but a tattered shirt and a stained rag wrapped around one foot.

"A cut. Nothing. Where is she?" He clutched my arm, anxious.

"At a place called River Run, with her great-aunt. Didn't Jamie tell you? She's—"

I was interrupted by Jamie clutching my other arm.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"Yes, of course I—my God, what happened to you?" My attention was momentarily distracted from Roger by the sight of Jamie. It wasn't the nasty contusion on his temple or the dried blood on his shirt that struck my notice, so much as the unnatural way he held his right arm.

"My arm's maybe broken," he said. "Hurts like a bugger. Will ye come and tend to it?"

Without waiting for an answer he turned and walked away, sitting down heavily near the broken bed frame. I gave Roger a brief pat and went after him, wondering what the hell. Jamie wouldn't admit to being in pain in front of Roger Wakefield, if splintered raw bone were sticking out of his flesh.

"What are you up to?" I muttered, kneeling beside him. I felt the arm gingerly through his shirt—no compound fractures. I rolled it carefully up for a better look.

"I havena told him about Brianna," he said, very softly. "And I think it better you do not."

I stared at him.

"We can't do that! He has to know."

"Keep your voice down. Aye, he maybe should know about the bairn—but not the other, not Bonnet."

I bit my lip, feeling gingerly down the swell of his biceps. He had one of the worst bruises I had ever seen; a huge mottled splotch of purple-blue—but I was fairly sure the arm wasn't broken.

I wasn't so sure about his suggestion.

He could see the doubt on my face; he squeezed my hand hard.

"Not yet; not here. Let it wait, at least until we're safe away."

I thought for a moment, as I ripped the sleeve of his shirt and used it to make a rough sling. Learning that Brianna was pregnant was going to be a shock by itself. Perhaps Jamie was right; there was no telling how Roger would react to the news of the rape, and we were a long way from being home free yet. Better he should have his head clear. At last I nodded, reluctantly.

"All right," I said aloud, getting up. "I don't think it's broken, but the sling will help."

I left Jamie sitting on the ground and went to Roger, feeling like a Ping-Pong ball.

"How's the foot?" I knelt to unwrap the unsanitary-looking rag around it, but he stopped me with an urgent hand on my shoulder.

"Brianna. I know there's something wrong. Is she—"

"She's pregnant."

Whatever possibilities he had been turning over in his mind, that hadn't been among them. It isn't possible to mistake sheer amazement. He blinked, looking as though I'd hit him on the head with an ax.

"Are you sure?"

"She'll be seven months gone by now; it's noticeable." Jamie had come up so quietly that neither of us had heard him. He spoke coldly, and looked even colder, but Roger was well beyond noticing subtleties.

Excitement brightened his eyes, and his shocked face came alive beneath the black whiskers.

"Pregnant. My God, but how?"

Jamie made a derisive noise in the back of his throat. Roger glanced at him, then quickly away.

“That is, I never thought—”

“*How?* Aye, ye didna think, and it’s my daughter left to pay the price of your pleasure!”

Roger’s head snapped round at that, and he glared at Jamie.

“She is not left, in any way! I told you she is my wife!”

“She is?” I said, startled in the midst of my unwrapping.

“They’re handfast,” Jamie said, very grudgingly. “Why could the lass not have told us, though?”

I thought I could answer that one—in more than one way. The second answer wasn’t one I could suggest in front of Roger, though.

She hadn’t said, because she was with child, and thought it was Bonnet’s. Believing that, she might have thought it better not to reveal their handfasting, so as to leave Roger an escape—if he wanted it.

“Most likely because she thought you wouldn’t see that as a true marriage,” I said. “I’d told her about our wedding; about the contract and how you insisted on marrying me in church, with a priest. She wouldn’t want to tell you anything she thought you might not approve of—she wanted so badly to please you.”

Jamie had the grace to look abashed at this, but Roger ignored the argument.

“Is she well?” he asked, leaning forward and grasping my arm.

“Yes, she’s fine,” I assured him, hoping it was still true. “She wanted to come with us, but of course we couldn’t let her do that.”

“She wanted to come?” His face lighted up, joy and relief plain to see, even through the hair and filth. “Then she didn’t—” He stopped abruptly, and glanced from me to Jamie and back. “When I met … Mr. Fraser on the mountainside, he seemed to think that she—er—had said—”

“A terrible misunderstanding,” I put in hastily. “She hadn’t told us about the handfasting, so when she turned up pregnant, we, er … assumed …” Jamie was brooding, looking at Roger with no particular favor, but jerked into awareness when I nudged him sharply.

"Oh, aye," he said, a little grudgingly. "A mistake. I've given Mr. Wakefield my apologies and told him I shall do my best to see it right. But we've other things to think of now. Have ye seen Ian, Sassenach?"

"No." I became aware for the first time that Ian was not with them, and felt a small lurch of fear in the pit of my stomach. Jamie looked grim.

"Where have ye been all night, Sassenach?"

"I was with—oh, Jesus!"

I ignored his question for a moment, caught up in the sight of Roger's foot. The flesh was swollen and reddened over half his foot, with a severe ulceration on the outer margin of the sole. I pressed firmly, a little way in, and felt the nasty give of small pockets of pus under the skin.

"What happened here?"

"I cut it, trying to get away. They bound it and put things on it, but it's been infected on and off. It gets better, and then it gets worse." He shrugged; his attention wasn't on his foot, ugly as it was. He looked up at Jamie, evidently having come to a decision.

"Brianna didn't send you to meet me, then? She didn't ask you to—get rid of me?"

"No," Jamie said, taken by surprise. He smiled briefly, his features suffused with sudden charm. "That was my own notion."

Roger drew a deep breath and closed his eyes briefly.

"Thank God," he said, and opened them. "I thought perhaps she'd—we'd had a terrible argument, just before I left her, and I thought maybe that was why she hadn't told you about the handfasting; that she'd decided she didn't want to be married to me." There was sweat on his forehead, either from the news or from my handling of his foot. He smiled, a little painfully. "Having me beaten to death or sold into slavery seemed a trifle extreme, though, even for a woman with her temper."

"Mmphm." Jamie was slightly flushed. "I did say I was sorry for it."

"I know." Roger looked at him for a minute, evidently making up his mind about something. He took a deep breath, then bent down and put my hand gently away from his foot. He straightened up and met Jamie's eyes, dead-on.

"I've something to tell you. What we fought over. Has she told you what brought her here—to find you?"

"The death notice? Aye, she's told us. Ye dinna think I'd allow Claire to come with me otherwise?"

"What?" Puzzled wariness showed in Roger's eyes.

"Ye canna have it both ways. If she and I are to die at Fraser's Ridge six years from now, we canna very well be killed by the Iroquois any time before that, now can we?"

I stared at him; that particular implication had escaped me. Rather staggering; practical immortality—for a time. But that was assuming—

"That's assuming that you can't change the past—that *we* can't, I mean. Do you believe that?" Roger leaned forward a little, intent.

"I will be damned if I know. Do *you* think so?"

"Yes," Roger said flatly. "I do think the past can't be changed. That's why I did it."

"Did what?"

He licked his lips, but went doggedly on.

"I found that death notice long before Brianna did. I thought, though, that it would be useless to try to change things. So I—I kept it from her." He looked from me to Jamie. "So now you know. I didn't want her to come; I did everything I could to keep her away from you. I thought it was too dangerous. And—I was afraid of losing her," he ended simply.

To my surprise, Jamie was looking at Roger with sudden approval.

"Ye tried to keep her safe, then? To protect her?"

Roger nodded, a certain relief lessening the tension in his shoulders.

"So you understand?"

"Aye, I do. That's the first thing I've heard that gives me a good opinion of ye, sir."

It wasn't an opinion I shared at the moment.

"You found that thing—and didn't tell her?" I could feel the blood climbing into my cheeks.

Roger saw the look on my face, and looked away.

"No. She … um … she saw it your way, I'm afraid. She thought—well, she said I'd betrayed her, and—"

"And you did! Her and us both! Of all the—Roger, how could you *do* such a thing?"

"He did right," Jamie said. "After all—" I turned on him fiercely, interrupting.

"He did *not*! He deliberately kept it from her, and tried to keep her from—don't you realize, if he'd succeeded, you'd never have seen her?"

"Aye, I do. And what's happened to her would not have happened." His eyes were deep blue, steady on mine. "I would it had been so."

I swallowed down my grief and anger, until I thought I could speak again without choking.

"I don't think *she* would have had it so," I said softly. "And it was hers to say."

Roger jumped in, before Jamie could reply.

"You said what's happened to her wouldn't have—you mean, being pregnant?" He didn't wait for a reply; he had plainly recovered from the shock of the news sufficiently to begin thinking, and was rapidly reaching the same unpleasant conclusions Brianna had come to, some months earlier. He swung his head toward me, eyes wide with shock.

"She's seven months along, you said. Jesus! She can't go back!"

"Not *now,*" I said, with bitter emphasis. "She might have, when we first found out. I tried to make her go back to Scotland, or at least to the Indies—there's another … opening, there. But she wouldn't do it. She wouldn't go without finding out what happened to you."

"What happened to me," he repeated, and glanced at Jamie. Jamie's shoulders tensed, and he set his jaw.

"Aye," he said. "It's my fault, and no remedy for it. She's trapped here. And I can do nothing for her—save bring ye back to her." And that, I realized, was why he had not wanted to tell Roger anything; for fear that when he realized Brianna was trapped in the past, Roger would refuse to come back with us. Following her into the past was one thing; staying there forever with her was something else again. Neither was it guilt over Bonnet alone that had eaten Jamie up on our journey here; the Spartan boy with the fox gnawing at his vitals would have recognized a kindred soul on the spot, I thought, looking at him with exasperated tenderness.

Roger gazed at him, completely at a loss for words.

Before he could find any, a noise of shuffling footsteps approached the door of the hut. The flap lifted, and a large number of Mohawks came in, one after the other.

We looked at them in astonishment; there were about fifteen of them, men and women and children, all dressed for traveling, in leggings and furs. One of the older women held a cradleboard, and without hesitation she walked up to Roger and pressed it into his arms, saying something in Mohawk.

He frowned at her, not understanding. Jamie, suddenly alert, leaned toward her and said a few halting words. She repeated what she had said, impatiently, then looked behind her and motioned to a young man.

“You are … priest,” he said haltingly to Roger. He pointed at the cradleboard. “Water.”

“I’m not a priest.” Roger tried to give the board back to the woman, but she refused to take it.

“Prees,” she said definitely. “Babtize.” She motioned to one of the younger women, who stepped forward, holding a small bowl made of horn, filled with water.

“Father Alexandre—he say you priest, son of priest,” said the young man. I saw Roger’s face go pale beneath the beard.

Jamie had stepped aside, murmuring in French patois to a man he recognized among the crowd. Now he pushed his way back to us.

“These are what is left of the priest’s flock,” he said softly. “The council has told them to leave. They mean to travel to the Huron mission at Ste. Berthe, but they would have the child baptized, lest it die on the journey." He glanced at Roger. "They think ye are a priest?"

"Evidently." Roger looked down at the child in his arms.

Jamie hesitated, glancing at the waiting Indians. They stood patiently, their faces calm. I could only guess what lay behind them. Fire and death, exile—what else? There were marks of sorrow on the face of the old woman who brought the baby; she would be its grandmother, I thought.

"In case of need," Jamie said quietly to Roger, "any man may do the office of a priest."

I wouldn't have thought it was possible for Roger to go any whiter, but he did. He swayed briefly, and the old lady, alarmed, reached out a hand to steady the cradleboard.

He caught himself, though, and nodded to the young woman with the water, to come closer.

"Parlez-vous français?" he asked, and heads nodded, some with certainty, some with less.

"C'est bien," he said, and taking a deep breath, lifted the cradleboard, showing the child to the congregation. The baby, a round-faced charmer with soft brown curls and a golden skin, blinked sleepily at the change of perspective.

"Hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ," he said clearly in French. "Obeying the word of our Lord Jesus, and sure of his presence with us, we baptize those whom he has called to be his own."

Of course, I thought, watching him. He *was* the son of a priest, so to speak; he would often enough have seen the Reverend administer the sacrament of baptism. If he didn't recall the entire service, he seemed to know the general form of it.

He had the baby passed from hand to hand among the congregation—for so his agreement had made them—following and asking questions of each person there, in a low voice.

"Qui est votre Seigneur, votre Sauveur?" Who is your Lord and Savior?

"Voulez-vous placer votre foi en Lui?" Do you have faith in Him?

“Do you promise to tell this child the good news of the gospel, and all that Christ commands, and by your fellowship, to strength his family ties with the household of God?”

Head after head bobbed in reply.

“Oui, certainement. Je le promets. Nous le ferons.” Yes, of course. I promise. We will.

At last Roger turned and gave the child to Jamie.

“Who is your Lord and Savior?”

“Jesus Christ,” he answered without hesitation, and the baby was handed on to me.

“Do you trust in him?”

I looked down into the face of innocence, and answered for it. “I do.”

He took the cradleboard, gave it to the grandmother, then dipping a sprig of juniper into the bowl of water, sprinkled water on the baby’s head.

“I baptize you—” he began, and stopped, with a sudden panicked glance at me.

“It’s a girl,” I murmured, and he nodded, lifting the sprig of juniper again.

“I baptize you, Alexandra, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.”

* * *

After the small band of Christians had left, there were no more visitors. A warrior brought us wood for the fire, and some food, but he ignored Jamie’s questions and left, saying nothing.

“Do you think they’ll kill us?” Roger asked suddenly, after a period of silence. His mouth twitched in an attempted smile. “Kill me, I suppose I mean. Presumably the two of you are safe.”

He didn’t sound worried. Looking at the deep shadows and lines in his face, I thought that he was simply too exhausted to be afraid anymore.

“They won’t kill us,” I said, and pushed a hand through the tangle of my hair. I dimly realized that I, too, was exhausted; I had been without sleep for more than thirty-six hours.

"I started out to tell you. I spent last night in Tewaktenyonh's house. The Council of Mothers met there."

They hadn't told me everything; they never would. But at the end of the long hours of ceremony and discussion, the girl who spoke English had told me as much as they wanted me to know, before they sent me back to Jamie.

"Some of the young men found the whisky cache," I said. "They brought it back to the village yesterday, and started to drink. The women thought they didn't mean anything dishonest, that they thought the bargain was already made. But then some argument started among them, just before they lit the fire to—to execute the priest. A fight broke out, and some of the men ran into the crowd, and—one thing led to another." I rubbed a hand hard over my face, trying to keep my thoughts clear enough to speak.

"A man was killed in the fighting." I glanced at Roger. "They think you killed him; did you?"

He shook his head, shoulders slumping with tiredness.

"I don't know. I—probably. What will they do about it?"

"Well, it took them a long time to decide, and it isn't settled yet; they've sent word to the main Council, but the *sachem* hasn't made a decision yet." I took a deep breath.

"They won't kill you, because the whisky was taken, and that was offered as the price of your life. But since they've decided not to kill us in revenge for their dead, what they usually do instead is to adopt an enemy into the tribe, in replacement of the dead man."

That shook Roger out of his numbness.

"Adopt me? They want to keep me?"

"One of us. One of you. I don't suppose I'd be a suitable replacement, since I'm not a man." I tried to smile, but failed completely. All the muscles of my face had gone numb.

"Then it must be me," Jamie said quietly.

Roger's head jerked up, startled.

"You've said yourself; if the past canna be changed, then nothing will happen to me. Leave me, and as soon as it can be managed, I will escape and come home."

He laid a hand on my arm before I could protest.

"You and Ian will take MacKenzie back to Brianna." He looked at Roger, his face inscrutable. "After all," he said quietly, "it's the two of you she needs."

Roger started in at once to argue, but I butted in.

"May the Lord deliver me from stubborn Scotsmen!" I said. I glared at the two of them. "They haven't decided yet. That's only what the Council of Mothers says. So there's no sense in arguing about it until we know for sure. And speaking of knowing things for sure," I said, in hopes of distracting them, "where's Ian?"

Jamie stared at me.

"I don't know," he said, and I saw his throat ripple as he swallowed. "But I hope to God he's safe in that girl's bed."

No one came. The night passed quietly, though none of us slept well. I dozed fitfully, through sheer exhaustion, waking every time there was a sound outside, my dreams a vivid crazy-quilt of blood and fire and water.

It was midday before we heard the sound of voices approaching. My heart leapt as I recognized one of them, and Jamie was on his feet before the door flap lifted.

"Ian? Is that you?"

"Aye, Uncle. It's me."

His voice sounded odd; breathless and uncertain. He stepped into the light from the smokehole and I gasped, feeling as though I had been punched in the stomach.

The hair had been plucked from the sides of his skull; what was left stood up in a thick crest from his scalp, a long tail hanging down his back. One ear had been freshly pierced and sported a silver earring.

His face had been tattooed. Double crescent lines of small dark spots, most still scabbed with dried blood, ran across each cheekbone, to meet at the bridge of his nose.

"I—canna stay long, Uncle," Ian said. He looked pale, under the lines of tattooing, but stood erect. "I said they must let me come to say goodbye."

Jamie had gone white to the lips.

"Jesus, Ian," he whispered.

"The naming ceremony is tonight," Ian said, trying not to look at us. "They say that after that I will be Indian, and I must not speak any tongue but the *Kahnyen'kehaka;* I canna speak again in English, or the Gaelic." He smiled painfully. "And I ken ye didna have much Mohawk."

"Ian, ye canna be doing this!"

"I've done it, Uncle Jamie," Ian said softly. He looked at me then.

"Auntie. Will ye say to my mother that I willna forget her? My Da will know, I think."

"Oh, Ian!" I hugged him hard, and his arms went gently around me.

"Ye can leave in the morning," he said to Jamie. "They willna prevent ye."

I let him go, and he crossed the hut to where Roger stood, looking stunned. Ian offered him a hand.

"I am sorry for what we did to ye," he said quietly. "Ye'll take good care of my cousin and the bairn?"

Roger took his hand and shook it. He cleared his throat and found his voice.

"I will," he said. "I promise."

Then Ian turned to Jamie.

"No, Ian," he said. "God, no, lad. Let it be me!"

Ian smiled, though his eyes were full of tears. "Ye said to me once, that my life wasna meant to be wasted," he said. "It won't be." He held out his arms. "I willna forget you, either, Uncle Jamie."

* * *

They took Ian to the bank of the river, just before sunset. He stripped and waded into the freezing water, accompanied by three women, who ducked and pummeled him, laughing and scrubbing him with handfuls of sand. Rollo ran up and down the bank, barking madly, then plunged into the river and joined in what he plainly saw as fun and games, coming close to drowning Ian in the process.

All of the spectators who lined the bank found it hilarious—save the three whites.

Once the white blood had been thus ceremonially scrubbed from Ian's body, more women dried him, dressed him in fresh clothing, and took him to the Council longhouse for the naming ceremony.

Everyone crowded inside; all of the village was there. Jamie, Roger, and I stood silently in a corner, watching as the *sachem* sang and spoke over him, as the drums beat, as the pipe was lit and passed from hand to hand. The girl he called Emily stood near him, eyes shining as she looked at him. I saw him look back at her, and the light that sprang up in his own eyes did a little to ease the soreness of my heart.

They called him Wolf's Brother. His brother wolf sat panting at Jamie's feet, viewing the proceedings with interest.

At the end of the ceremony a small hush fell on the crowd, and at that moment Jamie stepped out of the corner. All heads turned as he crossed to Ian, and I saw more than one warrior tense in disapproval.

He unpinned the brooch from his plaid, unbelted it, and laid the length of bloodstained crimson tartan across his nephew's shoulder.

"Cuimhnich," he said softly, and stepped back. *Remember*.

All of us were quiet as we made our way down the narrow trail that led away from the village next morning. Ian had taken a formal, white-faced farewell of us as he stood with his new family. I hadn't been so stalwart, though, and seeing my tears made Ian bite his lip to hold back his own emotion. Jamie had embraced him, kissed his mouth and left him, without speaking a word.

Jamie went about the business of setting camp that night with his usual efficiency, but I could tell that his mind was somewhere else. And no wonder if it was; my own was divided in worry between Ian behind us and Brianna ahead of us, with very little attention to spare for present circumstances.

Roger dumped an armload of wood beside the fire and sat down next to me.

"I've been thinking," he said quietly. "About Brianna."

"Have you? So have I." I was so tired, I thought I might tumble headfirst into the flames before I got the water boiling.

"You said there was another circle—opening, whatever it is—in the Indies?"

"Yes." I thought briefly of telling him all about Geilie Duncan and the cave at Abandawe, and dismissed it. I hadn't the energy. Another time. Then I jerked out of my mental fog, catching what he was saying.

"Another one? Here?" I looked wildly around, as though expecting to see a menhir standing menacingly at my back.

"Not *here,*" he said. "Somewhere between here and Fraser's Ridge, though."

"Oh." I tried to gather my scattered thoughts. "Yes, I know there is, but—" Then it penetrated, and I grabbed his arm. "You mean you *know* where it is?"

"You knew about it?" He stared at me in astonishment.

"Yes, I—here, look …" I scrabbled in my pouch and came up with the opal. He grabbed it from me before I could explain.

"Look! It's the same; this same symbol—it's carved on the rock in the circle. Where the hell did you get this?"

"It's a long story," I said. "I'll tell you later. But for now—do you know where this circle is? You've actually seen it?"

Jamie, attracted by our excitement, had come to see what was going on.

"A circle?"

"A time-circle, an opening, a—a—"

"I've been there," Roger said, interrupting my stuttering explanations. "I found it by accident while I was trying to escape."

"Could you find it again? How far is it from River Run?" My mind was making frantic calculations. A little more than seven months. If it took six weeks to return, Brianna would be eight and a half months gone. Could we possibly take her into the mountains in time? And if we could—what would be the greater risk, to travel through a time-passage on the verge of delivery, or to stay in the past permanently?

Roger dug in the waistband of his ragged breeches and brought out a strand of thread, grimy and knotted. "Here," he said, grasping a double knot. "It was eight days past the day that they took me. Eight days from Fraser's Ridge."

"And a week, at least, from River Run to the Ridge." I let myself breathe again, not sure whether I felt disappointment or relief. "We'd never make it."

"But the weather is turning," Jamie said. He nodded toward a big blue spruce, its needles wet and dripping. "When we came, that tree was cased in ice." He looked at me. "The traveling may be easier; we may make better time—or not."

"Or not." I shook my head reluctantly. "You know as well as I do that spring means mud. And mud is worse to travel in than snow." I felt my heart begin to slow down, accepting it. "No, it's too late, too risky. She'll have to stay."

Jamie was gazing at Roger, over the fire.

"He doesn't," he said.

Roger looked at him, startled.

"I—" he began, then firmed his jaw and started over. "I do. You don't think I'd leave her? And my child?"

I opened my mouth, and felt Jamie stiffen beside me in warning.

"No," I said sharply. "No. We have to tell him. Brianna will. Better he should know now. If it makes a difference to him, then it's better he knows before he sees her."

Jamie's lips pressed tight together, but he nodded.

"Aye," he said. "Tell him, then."

"Tell me what?" Roger's dark hair was loose, rising around his head in the evening wind. He looked more alive than he had since we had found him, alarmed and excited at once. I bit the bullet.

"It may not be your child," I said.

His expression didn't change for a moment; then the words fell into place. He grabbed me by the arms, so suddenly that I yelped with alarm.

"What do you mean? What's happened?"

Jamie moved like a striking snake. He caught Roger a short, sharp blow under the chin that loosened his grip and sent him sprawling backward on the ground.

"She means that when ye left my daughter to her own devices, she was raped," he said roughly. "Two days past the time ye lay with her. So maybe the wean's yours, and maybe it's not."

He glared down at Roger.

"So. D'ye mean to stand by her, or no?"

Roger shook his head, trying to clear it, and got slowly back to his feet.

"Raped. Who? Where?"

"In Wilmington. A man named Stephen Bonnet. He—"

"Bonnet?" It was only too clear from Roger's expression that the name was familiar. He stared wildly from me to Jamie and back. "Brianna was raped by Stephen Bonnet?"

"So I said." Suddenly all the rage Jamie had been holding since our exit from the village broke loose. He seized Roger by the throat and slammed him into a tree trunk.

"And where were you when it was done, ye coward? She was angry with ye, and so ye ran away and left her! If ye thought ye must go, why did ye not see her safe into my keeping first?"

I grabbed Jamie's arm and yanked.

"Let go of him!"

He did, and whirled away, breathing hard. Roger, shaken and almost as furious as Jamie, shook down his ruffled clothing.

"I didn't leave because we argued! I left to find this!" He snatched a handful of his loose breeches, and ripped at the cloth. A spark of green brightness glowed in the palm of his hand.

"I risked my life to get that, to see her safe back through the stones! Do you know where I went to get it, who I got it from? Stephen Bonnet! That's why it took me so long to come to Fraser's Ridge; he wasn't where I expected him to be; I had to ride up and down the coast to find him."

Jamie was frozen, staring at the gemstone. So was I.

“I shipped with Stephen Bonnet, from Scotland.” Roger was growing a little calmer. “He is a—a—”

“I ken what he is.” Jamie stirred, breaking his trance. “But what he also may be, is the father of my daughter’s child.” He gave Roger a long, cold look. “So I’m askin’ ye, MacKenzie; can ye go back to her, and live with her, knowing that it’s likely Bonnet’s child she bears? For if ye canna do it—then say so now, for I swear, if ye come to her and treat her badly … I will kill ye without a second thought.”

“For God’s sake!” I burst out. “Give him a moment to think, Jamie! Can’t you see that he hasn’t had a chance even to take it in, yet?”

Roger’s fist closed tight over the jewel, then opened. I could hear him breathing, harsh and ragged.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know!”

Jamie stooped and picked up the stone, where Roger had dropped it. He flung it hard between Roger’s feet.

“Then go!” he said. “Take yon cursed stone and find your wicked circle. Get ye gone—for my daughter doesna need a coward!”

He had not yet unsaddled the horses; he seized his saddlebags and heaved them across the horse’s back. He untied both his horse and mine, and mounted in one fluid motion.

“Come,” he said to me. I looked helplessly at Roger. He was staring up at Jamie, green eyes glinting with firelight, bright as the emerald in his hand.

“Go,” he said softly to me, not taking his eyes off Jamie. “If I can—then I’ll come.”

My hands and feet seemed not to belong to me; they moved smoothly, without my direction. I walked to my horse, put my foot in the stirrup, and was up.

When I looked back, even the light of the fire had disappeared. There was nothing behind us but the dark.

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THREE-THIRDS OF A GHOST

River Run, April 1770

“They have captured Stephen Bonnet.”

Brianna dropped the game box on the floor. Ivory counters exploded in every direction, and rolled off under the furniture. Speechless, she stood staring at Lord John, who set down his glass of brandy and came hastily to her side.

“Are you all right? Do you require to sit down? I apologize most profoundly. I should not have—”

“Yes, you should. No, not the sofa, I’ll never get out of it.” She waved away his offered hand, and made her way slowly toward a plain wooden chair near the windows. Once solidly on it, she gave him a long, level look.

“Where?” she said. “How?”

He didn’t trouble asking whether he ought to send for wine or burnt feathers; she plainly wasn’t going to swoon.

He drew up a stool beside her, but then thought better, and went to the parlor door. He glanced out into the dark hallway; sure enough, one of the maids was dozing on a stool in the curve of the staircase, available in case they should want anything. The woman’s head snapped up at his step, eyes showing white in the dimness.

“Go to bed,” he said. “We shall not require anything further this evening.”

The slave nodded and shuffled off, relief in the droop of her shoulders; she would have been awake since dawn, and it was near midnight now. He was desperately tired himself, after the long ride from Edenton, but it wasn't news that could wait. He had arrived in the early evening, but this had been his first opportunity to make an excuse to see Brianna alone.

He closed the double doors and placed a footstool in front of them, to prevent any interruptions.

"He was taken here, in Cross Creek," he said without preamble, sitting down beside her. "As to how, I could not say. The charge brought was smuggling. Once they discovered his identity, of course, there were others added."

"Smuggling what?"

"Tea and brandy. At least this time." He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to relieve the stiffness caused by hours in the saddle. "I heard of it in Edenton; evidently the man is notorious. His reputation extends from Charleston to Jamestown."

He looked closely at her; she was pale, but not ghastly.

"He is condemned," he said quietly. "He will hang next week, in Wilmington. I thought you would wish to know."

She took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, but said nothing. He stole a closer look at her, not wanting to stare, but amazed at the sheer size of her. By God, she was immense! In the two months since their engagement, she had doubled in size, at least.

One side of her enormous abdomen bulged suddenly out, startling him. He was having second thoughts about the wisdom of having told her; if the shock of his news brought on her confinement prematurely, he would never forgive himself. Jamie wouldn't forgive him, either.

She was staring off into space, her brow wrinkled in concentration. He'd seen broodmares in foal look that way; thoroughly absorbed in inward matters. It had been a mistake to send the slave away. He got his feet under him, meaning to go and fetch assistance, but the movement brought her out of her trance.

"Thank you," she said. The frown was still there, but her eyes had lost that distant look; they were fixed on him with a disconcerting blue directness—the more disconcerting for being so familiar.

“When will they hang him?” She leaned forward a little, hand pressed against her side. Another swell rippled across her belly in apparent response to the pressure.

He sat back, eyeing her stomach uneasily.

“Friday week.”

“Is he in Wilmington now?”

Slightly reassured by her calm demeanor, he reached for his abandoned glass. He took a sip and shook his head, feeling the comfort of the warm liquor spread through his chest.

“No. He is still here; there was no need for trial, as he had been previously convicted.”

“So they’ll move him to Wilmington for the execution? When?”

“I have no idea.” The distant look was back; with deep misgiving, he recognized it this time—not motherly abstraction; calculation.

“I want to see him.”

Very deliberately, he swallowed the rest of the brandy.

“No,” he said definitely, setting down the glass. “Even if your state allowed of travel to Wilmington—which it assuredly does not,” he added, glancing sidelong at her dangerous-looking abdomen—“attendance at an execution could not but have the worst effects upon your child. Now, I am in complete sympathy with your feelings, my dear, but—”

“No you aren’t. You don’t know what my feelings are.” She spoke without heat, but with complete conviction. He stared at her for a moment, then got up and went to fetch the decanter.

She watched the amber liquid purl up in the glass and waited for him to pick it up before she went on.

“I don’t want to watch him die,” she said.

“Thank God for that,” he muttered, and took a mouthful of brandy.

“I want to talk to him.”

The mouthful went down the wrong way and he choked, spluttering brandy over the frills of his shirt.

“Maybe you should sit down,” she said, squinting at him. “You don’t look so good.”

"I can't think why." Nonetheless, he sat down, and groped for a kerchief to wipe his face.

"Now, I know what you're going to say," she said firmly, "so don't bother. Can you arrange for me to see him, before they take him to Wilmington? And before you say no, certainly not, ask yourself what I'll do if you *do* say that."

Having opened his mouth to say "No, certainly not," Lord John shut it and contemplated her in silence for a moment.

"I don't suppose you are intending to threaten me again, are you?" he asked conversationally. "Because if you are …"

"Of course not." She had the grace to blush slightly at that.

"Well, then, I confess I do not see quite what you—"

"I'll tell my aunt that Stephen Bonnet fathered my baby. And I'll tell Farquard Campbell. And Gerald Forbes. And Judge Alderdyce. And then I'll go down to the garrison headquarters—that must be where he is—and I'll tell Sergeant Murchison. If he won't let me in, I'll go to Mr. Campbell for a writ to make him admit me. I have a right to see him."

He looked at her narrowly, but he could see it was no idle threat. She sat there, solid and immobile as a piece of marble statuary, and just as susceptible of persuasion.

"You do not shrink from creating a monstrous scandal?" It was a rhetorical question; he sought only to buy himself a moment to think.

"No," she said calmly. "What have I got to lose?" She lifted one eyebrow in a half-humorous quirk.

"I suppose you'd have to break our engagement. But if the whole county knows who the baby's father is, I think that would have the same effect as the engagement, in terms of keeping men from wanting to marry me."

"Your reputation—" he began, knowing it was hopeless.

"Is not real hot to start with. Though come to that, why should it be worse for me to be pregnant because I was raped by a pirate than because I was wanton, as my father so charmingly put it?" There was a small note of bitterness in her voice that stopped him from saying any more.

"Anyway, Aunt Jocasta isn't likely to throw me out, just because I'm scandalous. I won't starve; neither will the baby. And I can't say I care whether the Misses MacNeill call on me or not."

He took up his glass and drank again, carefully this time, with an eye on her to prevent further shocks. He was curious to know what had passed between her and her father—but not reckless enough to ask. Instead he put down the glass and asked, "Why?"

"Why?"

"Why do you feel you must speak with Bonnet? You say I do not know your feelings, which is undeniably true." He allowed a tinge of wryness to creep into his voice. "Whatever they are, though, they must be exigent, to cause you to contemplate such drastic expedients."

A slow smile grew on her lips, spreading into her eyes.

"I really like the way you talk," she said.

"I am exceeding flattered. However, if you would contemplate answering my question …"

She sighed, deeply enough to make the flame of the candle flicker. She stood up, moving ponderously, and groped in the seam of her gown. She had evidently had a pocket sewn into it, for she extracted a small piece of paper, folded and worn with much handling.

"Read that," she said, handing it to him. She turned away, and went to the far end of the room, where her paints and easel stood in a corner by the hearth.

The black letters struck him with a small jolt of familiarity. He had seen Jamie Fraser's hand only once before, but once was enough; it was a distinctive scrawl.

Daughter—

I cannot say if I shall see you again. My fervent hope is that it shall be so, and that all may be mended between us, but that event must rest in the Hand of God. I write now in the event that He may will otherwise.

You asked me once whether it was right to kill in revenge of the great Wrong done you. I tell you that you must not. For the sake of your Soul, for the sake of your own Life, you must find the grace of forgiveness. Freedom is hardwon, but it is not the fruit of Murder.

Do not Fear that he will escape Vengeance. Such a man carries with him the seeds of his own Destruction. If he does not Die at my Hand, it will be by another. But it must not be your Hand that strikes him down.

Hear me, for the sake of the Love I bear you.

Below the text of the letter, he had written *Your most affectionate and loving Father, James Fraser*. This was scratched out, and below it was written simply, *Da*.

"I never said goodbye to him."

Lord John looked up, startled. Her back was turned to him; she was staring at the half-finished landscape on the easel as though it were a window.

He crossed the carpet to stand beside her. The fire had burned down in the hearth, and it was growing cold in the room. She turned to face him, clutching her elbows against the chill.

"I want to be free," she said quietly. "Whether Roger comes back or not. Whatever happens."

The child was restless; he could see it kicking and squirming below her crossed arms, like a cat in a sack. He drew a deep breath, feeling chilled and apprehensive.

"You are sure you must see Bonnet?"

She gave him another of those long blue looks.

"I have to find a way to forgive him, Da says. I've been trying, ever since they left, but I can't do it. Maybe if I see him, I can. I have to try."

"All right." He let his breath out in a long sigh, shoulders slumping in capitulation.

A small light—relief?—showed in her eyes, and he tried to smile back.

"You'll do it?"

“Yes. God knows how, but I’ll do it.”

He put out all the candles save one, keeping that to light their way to bed. He gave her his arm and they walked in silence through the empty hall, the unpeopled quiet wrapping them in peace. At the foot of the stair, he paused, letting her go ahead of him.

“Brianna.”

She turned, questioning, on the stair above him. He stood hesitant, not knowing how to ask for what he suddenly wanted so badly. He reached out a hand, lightly poised.

“May I—?”

Without speaking, she took his hand and pressed it against her belly. It was warm and very firm. They stood quite still for a moment, her hand locked over his. Then it came, a small hard push against his hand, which sent a thrill through his heart.

“My God,” he said, in soft delight. “He’s real.”

Her eyes met his in rueful amusement.

“Yes,” she said. “I know.”

It was well past dark when they drove up beside the garrison headquarters. It was a small, unprepossessing little building, dwarfed by the loom of the warehouse behind it, and Brianna eyed it askance.

“They have him in there?” Her hands felt cold, in spite of being muffled under her cloak.

“No.” Lord John glanced around, as he got down to tie the horses. A light burned in the window, but the small dirt yard was empty, the narrow street silent and deserted. There were no houses or shops nearby, and the warehousemen had long since gone home to their suppers and their beds.

He reached up both hands to help her down; alighting from a wagon was easier than getting out of a carriage, but still no small task.

“He’s in the cellar below the warehouse,” he told her, his voice pitched low. “I’ve bribed the soldier on duty to admit us.”

“Not *us,*” she said, her voice pitched as low as his, but no less firm for that. “Me. I’ll see him alone.”

She saw his lips compress tightly for a moment, then relax as he nodded.

“Private Hodgepile assures me he is in chains, or I would not countenance such a suggestion. As it is …” He shrugged, half irritably, and took her arm to guide her over the rutted ground.

“Hodgepile?”

“Private Arvin Hodgepile. Why? Are you acquainted?”

She shook her head, holding her skirts out of the way with her free hand.

“No. I’ve heard the name, but—”

The door of the building opened, spilling light into the yard.

“That’ll be you, will it, my lord?” A soldier looked out warily. Hodgepile was slight and narrow-faced, tight-jointed as a marionette. He jerked, startled, as he saw her.

“Oh! I didn’t realize—”

“You needn’t.” Lord John’s voice was cool. “Show us the way, if you please.”

With an apprehensive glance at Brianna’s looming bulk, the private brought out a lantern, and led them to a small side door into the warehouse.

Hodgepile was short as well as slight, but held himself more erect than usual in compensation. *He walks with a ramrod up his arse.* Yes, she thought, watching him with interest as he marched ahead of them. It had to be the man Ronnie Sinclair had described to her mother. How many Hodgepiles could there be, after all? Perhaps she could talk to him when she’d finished with—her thoughts stopped abruptly as Hodgepile unlocked the warehouse door.

The April night was cool and fresh, but the air inside was thick with the reek of pitch and turpentine. Brianna felt suffocated. She could almost feel the tiny molecules of resin floating in the air, sticking to her skin. The sudden illusion of being trapped in a block of solidifying amber was so oppressive that she moved suddenly forward, almost dragging Lord John with her.

The warehouse was nearly full, its vast space crowded with bulky shapes. Kegs of pitch bled sticky black in the farthest shadows, while wooden racks near the huge double doors at the front held piles of barrels; brandy and rum, ready to roll down the ramps and out onto the dock, to barges waiting in the river below.

Private Hodgepile's shadow stretched and shrank by turns as he passed between the towering ranks of casks and boxes, his steps muffled by the thick layer of sawdust on the floor.

"… must be careful of fire …" His high, thin voice floated back to her, and she saw his puppet shadow wave an etiolated hand. "You will be careful where you set the lantern, won't you? Though there should be no danger, no danger at all down below …"

The warehouse was built out over the river, to facilitate loading, and the front part of the floor was wood; the back half of the building was brick-floored. Brianna heard the echo of their footsteps change as they crossed the boundary. Hodgepile paused by a trapdoor set into the bricks.

"You won't be long, my lord?"

"No longer than we can help," Lord John replied tersely. He took the lantern and waited in silence as Hodgepile heaved up the door and propped it. Brianna's heart was beating heavily; she could feel each separate thump, like a blow to the chest.

A flight of redbrick stairs ran down into darkness. Hodgepile took out his ring of keys and counted them over in the pool of lantern light, making sure of the right one before descending. He squinted dubiously at Brianna, then motioned them to follow him.

"It's a good thing they made the stairs wide enough for rum casks," she murmured to Lord John, holding on to his arm as she edged herself down, one step at a time.

She could see at once why Private Hodgepile wasn't worried about fire down here; the air was so damp, she wouldn't have been surprised to see mushrooms sprouting from the walls. There was a sound of dripping water somewhere, and the light of the lantern shone off wet brick. Cockroaches scattered in panic from the light, and the air smelled of mold and mildew.

She thought briefly of her mother’s penicillin farm, less briefly of her mother, and her throat closed tight. Then they were there, and she could no longer distract herself from the realization of what she was doing.

Hodgepile struggled with the key, and the panic she had been suppressing all day swept over her. She had no idea what to say, what to do. What was she *doing* here?

Lord John squeezed her arm in encouragement. She took a deep breath of the dank wet air, ducked her head, and stepped inside.

He sat on a bench at the far side of the cell, eyes fixed on the door. He’d clearly been expecting someone—he’d heard the footsteps outside—but it wasn’t her. He jerked in startlement, and his eyes flashed briefly green as the light swept over him.

She heard a faint metallic clink; of course, they’d said he was in chains. The thought gave her a little courage. She took the lantern from Hodgepile, and shut the door behind her.

She leaned against the wooden door, studying him in silence. He seemed smaller than she remembered. Perhaps it was only that she was now so much bigger.

“Do you know who I am?” It was a tiny cell, low-ceilinged, with no echo. Her voice sounded small, but clear.

He cocked his head to one side, considering. His eyes traveled slowly over her.

“I don’t think ye were after tellin’ me your name, sweetheart.”

“Don’t call me that!” The spurt of rage took her by surprise, and she choked it back, clenching her fists behind her. If she had come here to administer forgiveness, it wasn’t a good start.

He shrugged, good-natured but cool.

“As ye will. No, I don’t know who you are. I’ll know your face—and a few other things”—his teeth gleamed briefly in the blond stubble of his beard—“but not your name. I suppose you’ll mean to tell me, though?”

“You do recognize me?”

He drew in air and blew it out through pursed lips, looking her over carefully. He was a good bit the worse for wear, but it hadn’t impaired his assurance.

"Oh, indeed I do." He seemed amused, and she wanted to cross the room and slap him, hard. Instead, she took a deep breath. That was a mistake—she could smell him.

Without warning, her gorge rose suddenly and violently. She hadn't been sick before, but the stench of him brought up everything in her. She had barely time to turn away before the flood of bile and half-digested food came hurtling up, splattering the damp brick floor.

She leaned her forehead against the wall, waves of hot and cold running over her. Finally, she wiped her mouth and turned around.

He was still sitting there, watching her. She'd set the lantern on the floor. It threw a yellow flicker upward, carving his face from the shadows behind him. He might have a been a beast, chained in its den; only wariness showed in the pale green eyes.

"My name is Brianna Fraser."

He nodded, repeating it.

"Brianna Fraser. A lovely name, sure." He smiled briefly, lips together. "And?"

"My parents are James and Claire Fraser. They saved your life, and you robbed them."

"Yes."

He said it with complete matter-of-factness, and she stared at him. He stared back.

She felt a wild urge to laugh, as unexpected as the surge of nausea had been. What had she expected? Remorse? Excuses? From a man who took things because he wanted them?

"If ye've come in the hopes of getting back the jewels, I'm afraid you've left it too late," he said pleasantly. "I sold the first to buy a ship, and the other two were stolen from me. Perhaps you'll find that justice; I should think it cold comfort, myself."

She swallowed, tasting bile.

"Stolen. When?"

Don't trouble yourself over the man who's got it, Roger had said. *It's odds-on he stole it from someone else*.

Bonnet shifted on the wooden bench and shrugged.

"Some four months gone. Why?"

“No reason.” So Roger had made it; had got them—the gems that might have been safe transport for them both. Cold comfort.

“I recall there was a trinket, too—a ring, was it? But you got that back.” He smiled, showing his teeth this time.

“I paid for it.” One hand went unthinking to her belly, gone round and tight as a basketball under her cloak.

His gaze stayed on her face, mildly curious.

“Have we business still to do then, darlin’?”

She took a deep breath—through her mouth, this time.

“They told me you’re going to hang.”

“They told me the same thing.” He shifted again on the hard wooden bench. He stretched his head to one side, to ease the muscles of his neck, and peered up sidelong at her. “You’ll not have come from pity, though, I shouldn’t think.”

“No,” she said, watching him thoughtfully. “To be honest, I’ll rest a lot easier once you’re dead.”

He stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing. He laughed hard enough that tears came to his eyes; he wiped them carelessly, bending his head to swipe his face against a shrugged shoulder, then straightened up, the marks of his laughter still on his face.

“What is it you want from me, then?”

She opened her mouth to reply, and quite suddenly, the link between them dissolved. She had not moved, but felt as though she had taken one step across an impassable abyss. She stood now safe on the other side, alone. Blessedly alone. He could no longer touch her.

“Nothing,” she said, her voice clear in her own ears. “I don’t want anything at all from you. I came to give you something.”

She opened her cloak, and ran her hands over the swell of her abdomen. The small inhabitant stretched and rolled, its touch a blind caress of hand and womb, both intimate and abstract.

“Yours,” she said.

He looked at the bulge, and then at her.

“I’ve had whores try to foist their spawn on me before,” he said. But he spoke without viciousness, and she thought there was a new stillness behind the wary eyes.

"Do you think I'm a whore?" She didn't care if he did or not, though she doubted he did. "I've no reason to lie. I already told you, I don't want anything from you."

She drew the cloak back together, covering herself. She drew herself up then, feeling the ache in her back ease with the movement. It was done. She was ready to go.

"You're going to die," she said to him, and she who had not come for pity's sake was surprised to find she had some. "If it makes the dying easier for you, to know there's something of you left on earth—then you're welcome to the knowledge. But I've finished with you, now."

She turned to pick up the lantern, and was surprised to see the door half cracked ajar. She had no time to feel anger at Lord John for eavesdropping, when the door swung fully open.

"Well, 'twas a gracious speech, ma'am," Sergeant Murchison said judiciously. He smiled broadly then, and brought the butt of his musket up even with her belly. "But I can't say I've finished, quite, with you."

She took a quick step back, and swung the lantern at his head in a reflex of defense. He ducked with a yelp of alarm, and a grip of iron seized her wrist before she could dash the lamp at him again.

"Christ, that was close! You're fast, girl, if not quite so fast as the good Sergeant." Bonnet took the lantern from her and released her wrist.

"You're not chained after all," she said stupidly, staring at him. Then her wits caught up with the situation, and she whirled, plunging for the door. Murchison shoved his musket in front of her, blocking her way, but not before she had seen the darkened corridor through the doorway—and the dim form sprawled facedown on the bricks outside.

"You've killed him," she whispered. Her lips were numb with shock, and a dread deeper than nausea sickened her to the bone. "Oh, God, you've killed him."

"Killed who?" Bonnet held the lantern up, peering at the spill of butter-yellow hair, blotched with blood. "Who the hell is that?"

"A busybody," Murchison snapped. "Hurry, man! There's no time to waste. I've taken care of Hodgepile and the fuses are lit."

"Wait!" Bonnet glanced from the Sergeant to Brianna, frowning.

"There's no time, I said." The Sergeant brought up his gun and checked the priming. "Don't worry; no one will find them."

Brianna could smell the brimstone scent of the gunpowder in the priming pan. The Sergeant swung the stock of the gun to his shoulder, and turned toward her, but the quarters were too cramped; with her belly in the way, there was no room to raise the long muzzle.

The Sergeant grunted with irritation, reversed the gun, and raised it high, to club her with the butt.

Her hand was clenched around the barrel before she knew she had reached for it. Everything seemed to be moving very slowly, Murchison and Bonnet both standing frozen. She herself felt quite detached, as though she stood to one side, watching.

She plucked the musket from Murchison's grip as though it were a broomstraw, swung it high, and smashed it down. The jolt of it vibrated up her arms, into her body, her whole body charged as though someone had thrown a switch and sent a white-hot current pulsing through her.

She saw so clearly the man's face hanging drop-jawed in the air before her, eyes passing from astonishment through horror to the dullness of unconsciousness, so slowly that she saw the change. Had time to see the vivid colors in his face. A plum lip caught on a yellow tooth, half lifted in a sneer. Slow tiny blossoms of brilliant red unfolding in a graceful curve across his temple, Japanese water flowers blooming on a field of fresh-bruised blue.

She was entirely calm, no more than a conduit for the ancient savagery that men call motherhood, who mistake its tenderness for weakness. She saw her own hands, knuckles stark and tendons etched, felt the surge of power up her legs and back, through wrists and arms and shoulders, swung again, so slowly, it seemed so slowly, and yet the man was still falling, had not quite reached the floor when the gun butt struck again.

A voice was calling her name. Dimly, it penetrated through the crystal hum around her.

"Stop, for God's sake! Woman—Brianna—stop!"

There were hands on her shoulders, dragging, shaking. She pulled free of the grip and turned, the gun still in hand.

"Don't touch me," she said, and he took a quick step back, his eyes filled with surprise and wariness—perhaps a touch of fear. Afraid of her? Why would anyone be afraid of her? she thought dimly. He was talking; she saw his mouth moving, but she couldn't catch the words, it was just noise. The current in her was dying, making her dizzy.

Then time readjusted itself, began to move normally again. Her muscles quivered, all their fibers turned to jelly. She set the stained butt of the gun against the floor to balance herself.

"What did you say?"

Impatience flickered across his face.

"I said, it's no time we have to be wasting! Did ye not hear your man sayin' that the fuses are lit?"

"What fuses? Why?" She saw his eyes flick toward the door behind her. Before he could move, she stepped back into the doorway, bringing up the muzzle of the gun. He backed away from her instinctively, hitting the bench with the backs of his legs. He fell back, and struck the chains fastened to the wall; empty manacles chimed against the brick.

Shock was beginning to steal over her, but the memory of the white-hot current still burned through her spine, keeping her upright.

"You do not mean to kill me, surely?" He tried to smile, and failed; couldn't keep the panic from his eyes. She *had* said she would rest easier with him dead.

Freedom is hard-won, but is not the fruit of Murder. She had her hard-won freedom now, and would not give it back to him.

"No," she said, and took a firmer hold on the gun, the butt snugged solid into her shoulder. "But I will by God shoot you through the knees and leave you here, if you don't tell me right this minute what the *hell* is going on!"

He shifted his weight, big body hovering, pale eyes on her, judging. She blocked the door entirely, her bulk filling it from side to side. She saw the doubt in his posture, the shift of his shoulders as he thought to rush her, and cocked the gun with a single loud *click*!

He stood six feet from the muzzle's end; too far to lunge and grab it from her. One move, one pull of her trigger finger. She couldn't miss, and he knew it.

His shoulders slumped.

"The warehouse above is laid with gunpowder and fuses," he said, speaking quick and sharp, anxious to get it done. "I can't say how long, but it's goin' up with an almighty bang. For God's sake, let me out of here!"

"Why?" Her hands were sweating, but solid on the gun. The baby stirred, a reminder that she had no time to waste, either. She would risk one minute to know, though. She had to know, with John Grey's body limp on the floor behind her. "You've killed a good man here, and I want to know *why*!"

He made a gesture of frustration.

"The smuggling!" he said. "We were partners, the Sergeant and I. I'd bring him in cheap contraband, he'd stamp it with the Crown's mark. He'd steal the licensed stuff, I'd sell it for a good price and split with him."

"Keep talking."

He was nearly dancing with impatience.

"A soldier—Hodgepile—he was on to it, asking questions. Murchison couldn't say if he'd told anyone, but it wasn't wise to wait and see, not once I was taken. The Sergeant moved the last of the liquor from the warehouse, substituted barrels of turpentine, and laid the fuses. It all goes up, no one can say it wasn't brandy burning—no evidence of theft. That's it, that's all. Now let me go!"

"All right." She lowered the musket a few inches, but didn't yet uncock it. "What about him?" She nodded toward the fallen Sergeant, who was beginning to snort and mumble.

He stared at her blankly.

"What about him?"

“Aren’t you going to take him with you?”

“No.” He sidled to one side, looking for a way past her. “For Christ’s sweet sake, woman, let me go, and leave yourself! There’s twelve hundred-weight of pitch and turpentine overhead. It’ll go off like a bomb!”

“But he’s still alive! We can’t leave him here!”

Bonnet gave her a look of sheer exasperation, then crossed the room in two strides. He bent, jerked the dagger from the Sergeant’s belt, and drew it hard across the fat throat, just above the leather stock. A thick spray of blood soaked Bonnet’s shirt, and whipped against the wall.

“There,” he said, straightening up. “He’s not alive. Leave him.”

He dropped the dagger, pushed her aside, and lunged out into the corridor. She could hear his footsteps going away, quick and ringing on the brick.

Trembling all over with the shock of action and reaction, she stood still for a second, staring down at John Grey’s body. Grief ripped through her, and her womb clenched hard. There was no pain, but every fiber had contracted; her stomach bulged as though she’d swallowed a basketball. She felt breathless, unable to move.

No, she thought quite clearly, to the child inside. *I am* not *in labor, I absolutely, positively am not. I won’t have it. Stay put. I haven’t got time right now*.

She took two steps down the black corridor, then stopped. No, she had to check, at least, make sure. She turned back, and knelt by John Grey’s body. He had looked dead when she first saw him lying there, and still did; he hadn’t moved or even twitched since she had first seen his body.

She leaned forward but couldn’t reach easily over the bulge of her belly. She grasped his arm instead, and pulled at him, trying to turn him over. A small, fine-boned man, he was still heavy. His body tilted up, rolled boneless toward her, head lolling, and her heart sank anew, seeing his half-closed eyes and slack mouth. But she reached beneath the angle of his jaw, feeling frantically for a pulse point.

Where the hell was it? She'd seen her mother do it in emergencies; faster to find than a wrist pulse, she'd said. She couldn't find one. How long had it been, how long were the fuses set to burn?

She wiped a fold of her cloak across her clammy face, trying to think. She looked back, judging the distance to the stairs. Jesus, could she risk it, even alone? The thought of popping out into the warehouse above, just as everything went off—She cast one look upward, then bent to her work and tried again, pushing his head far back. There! She could see the damn vein under his skin—that's where the pulse should be, shouldn't it?

For a moment, she wasn't sure she felt it; it might be only the hammering of her own heart, beating in her fingertips. But no, it was—a different rhythm, faint and fluttering. He might be close to dead, but not quite.

"Close," she muttered, "but no cigar." She felt too frightened to be greatly relieved; now she'd have to get him out, too. She scrambled to her feet, and reached down to get hold of his arms, to drag him. But then she stopped, a memory of what she had seen a moment before penetrating her panic.

She turned and lumbered hastily back into the cell. Averting her eyes from the sodden red mound on the floor, she snatched up the lantern and brought it back to the corridor. She held it high, casting light on the low brick ceiling. Yes, she'd been right!

The bricks curved up from the floor in groynes, making arches all along both sides of the corridors. Storage alcoves and cells. Above the groynes, though, ran sturdy beams made of eight-inch pine. Over that, thick planking—and above the planks, the layer of bricks that formed the floor of the warehouse.

Going up like a bomb, Bonnet had said—but was he right? Turpentine burned, so did pitch; yes, they'd likely explode if they burned under pressure, but not like a bomb, no. Fuses. Fuses, in the plural. Long fuses, plainly, and likely running to small caches of gunpowder; that was the only true explosive Murchison would have; there were no high explosives now.

So the gunpowder would explode in several places, and ignite the barrels nearby. But the barrels would burn slowly; she'd seen Sinclair make barrels like those; the staves were half an inch thick, watertight. She remembered the reek as they walked through the warehouse; yes, Murchison would likely have opened the bungs of a few barrels, let the turpentine flow out, to help the fire along.

So the barrels would burn, but likely they wouldn't explode—or if they did, not all at once. Her breathing eased a little, making calculations. Not a bomb; a string of firecrackers, maybe.

So. She took a deep breath—as deep a breath as she could manage, with Osbert in the way. She put her hands across her stomach, feeling her racing heart begin to slow.

Even if some of the barrels did explode, the force of the explosion would be out, and up, through the thin plank walls and the roof. Very little force would be deflected down. And what was—she reached up a hand and pushed against a beam, reassuring herself of its strength.

She sat down quite suddenly on the floor, skirts puffed out around her.

"I think it'll be all right," she whispered, not sure if she was talking to John, to the baby, or to herself.

She sat huddled for a moment, shaking with relief, then rolled awkwardly onto her knees again, and began with fumbling fingers to administer first aid.

She was still struggling to tear a strip from the hem of her petticoat when she heard the footsteps. Coming fast, almost running. She turned sharply toward the stairs, but no—the footsteps came from the other way, behind her.

She whirled around, to see the form of Stephen Bonnet looming out of the darkness.

"Run!" he shouted at her. "For Christ's sweet sake, why have ye not gone?"

"Because it's safe here," she said. She had laid the musket down on the floor beside Grey's body; she stooped and picked it up, lifted it to her shoulder. "Go away."

He stared at her, mouth half open in the gloom.

"Safe? Woman, you're an eedjit! Did ye not hear—"

"I heard, but you're wrong. It's not going to explode. And if it did, it would still be safe down here."

"The hell it is! Sweet bleeding Jesus! Even if the cellar doesn't go, what happens when the fire burns through the floor?"

"It can't, it's brick." She jerked her chin upward, not taking her eyes off him.

"Back here it is—up front, by the river, it's wood, like the wharf. It'll burn through, then collapse. And what happens back here then, eh? Do ye no good for the ceiling to hold, when the smoke comes rolling back to smother ye!"

She felt a wave of sickness roil up from her depths.

"It's open? The cellar isn't sealed? The other end of the corridor's open?" Knowing even as she spoke that of course it was—he had run that way, heading for the river, not for the stairs.

"Yes! Now come!" He lunged forward, reaching for her arm, but she jerked away, back against the wall, the muzzle of the gun trained on him.

"I'm not going without him." She licked dry lips, nodding at the floor.

"The man's dead!"

"He's not! Pick him up!"

An extraordinary mixture of emotions crossed Bonnet's face; fury and astonishment preeminent among them.

"Pick him up!" she repeated fiercely. He stood still, staring at her. Then, very slowly, he squatted, and gathering John Grey's limp form into his arms, got the point of his shoulder into Grey's abdomen and heaved him up.

"Come on, then," he said, and without another glance at her started off into the dark. She hesitated for a second, then seized the lantern and followed him.

Within fifty feet, she smelled smoke. The brick corridor wasn't straight; it branched and turned, encompassing the many partitions of the cellar. But all the time it slanted down, heading toward the riverbank. As they descended through the multiple turnings, the scent of smoke thickened; a layer of acrid haze swirled lazily around them, visible in the lantern light.

Brianna held her breath, trying not to breathe. Bonnet was moving fast, despite Grey's weight. She could barely keep up, burdened with gun and lantern, but she didn't mean to give up either one, just yet. Her belly tightened again, another of those breathless moments.

"Not *yet,* I said!" she muttered through gritted teeth.

She had had to stop for a moment; Bonnet had disappeared into the haze ahead. Evidently he'd noticed the fading of the lantern light, though—she heard him bellow, from somewhere up ahead.

"Woman! Brianna!"

"I'm coming!" she called, and hurried as fast as she could, waddling, discarding any pretense of grace. The smoke was much thicker, and she could hear a faint crackle, somewhere in the distance—overhead? Before them?

She was breathing heavily, in spite of the smoke. She drew in a ragged gulp of air, and smelled water. Damp and mud, dead leaves and fresh air, slicing through the smoky murk like a knife.

A faint glow shone through the smoke and grew as they hurried toward it, dwarfing the light of her lantern. Then a dark square loomed ahead. Bonnet turned and seized her arm, dragging her out into the air.

They were under the wharf, she realized; dark water lapped ahead of them, brightness dancing on it. Reflection; the brightness came from up above, and so did the crackle of flame. Bonnet didn't stop or let go of her arm; he pulled her to one side, into the long, dank grass and mud of the bank. He let go within a few steps, but she followed, gasping for breath, slipping and sliding, tripping on the soggy edges of her skirts.

At last he stopped, in the shadow of the trees. He bent, and let Grey's body slide to the ground. He stayed bent for a moment, chest heaving, trying to get his breath back.

Brianna realized that she could see both men plainly; could see every bud on the twigs of the tree. She turned and looked back, to see the warehouse lighted like a jack-o'-lantern, flames licking through cracks in the wooden walls. The huge double doors had been left ajar; as she watched, the blast of hot air forced one open, and small tongues of fire began to creep across the dock, deceptively small and playful-looking.

She felt a hand on her shoulder, and whirled, looking up into Bonnet's face.

"I've a ship waiting," he said. "A little way upriver. Will you come with me, then?"

She shook her head. She still held the gun, but didn't need it now. He was no threat to her.

Still he didn't go, but lingered, staring down at her, a small frown between his brows. His face was gaunt, hollowed and shadowed by the distant fire. The surface of the river was aflame now, small tongues of fire flickering from the dark water as a slick of turpentine spread across it.

"Is it true?" he asked abruptly. He asked no permission, but set his hands on her belly. It tightened at his touch, rounding in another of those breathless, painless squeezes, and a look of astonishment crossed his face.

She jerked away from his touch, pulling her cloak together, and nodded, unable to speak.

He seized her chin in his hand and peered into her face—assessing her truthfulness, perhaps? Then he let go, and stuck a finger into his mouth, groping in the recesses of his cheek.

He took her hand, and put something wet and hard in her palm.

"For his maintenance, then," he said, and grinned at her. "Take care of him, sweetheart!"

And then he was gone, bounding long-legged up the riverbank, silhouetted like a demon in the flickering light. The turpentine flowing into the water had caught fire, and roiling billows of scarlet light shot upward, floating pillars of fire that lit the riverbank bright as day.

She half raised the musket, finger on the trigger. He was no more than twenty yards away, a perfect shot. *Not by your hand.* She lowered the gun, and let him go.

The warehouse was fully ablaze by now; the heat from it beat against her cheeks and blew the hair back from her face.

“I have a ship upriver,” he’d said. She squinted into the glare. The fire had nearly filled the river, a great floating slick that bloomed from bank to bank in a fiery garden of unfolding flames. Nothing could come through that blinding wall of light.

Her other fist was still closed around the object he had given her. She opened her hand and looked down at the wet black diamond that gleamed in her palm, the fire glowing red and bloody in its facets.

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PART TWELVE

Je T’Aime

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FORGIVENESS

River Run, May 1770

“That is the most stubborn woman I have ever met!” Brianna huffed into the room like a ship in full sail, and subsided onto the love seat by the bed, billowing.

Lord John Grey opened one eye, bloodshot under his turban of bandages.

“Your aunt?”

“Who else?”

“You have a looking glass in your room, do you not?” His mouth curved, and after a reluctant moment, so did hers.

“It’s her bloody will. I *told* her I don’t want River Run, I can’t own slaves—but she won’t change it! She just smiles as though I were a six-year-old having a tantrum and says by the time it happens, I’ll be glad of it. Glad of it!” She snorted and flounced into a more comfortable position. “What am I going to do?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” She turned the force of her displeasure on him. “How can I do nothing?”

“To begin with, I should be extremely surprised if your aunt were not immortal, several of that particular race of Scots seem to be. However”—he waved a hand in dismissal—“should this prove untrue, and should she persist in her delusions that you would prove a good mistress to River Run—”

“What makes you think I wouldn’t?” she said, pride stung.

"You cannot run a plantation of this size without slaves, and you decline to own them for reasons of conscience, or so I was given to understand. Though a less likely Quaker I have never seen." He narrowed his open eye, indicating the immense tent of purple-striped muslin in which she was swathed. "Returning to the point at issue—or one of them—should you find yourself the unwilling recipient of a number of slaves, arrangements can undoubtedly be made to free them."

"Not in North Carolina. The Assembly—"

"No, not in North Carolina," he agreed patiently. "If the occasion should arise, and you find yourself in possession of slaves, you will simply sell them to me."

"But that's—"

"And I will take them to Virginia, where manumission is much less stringently controlled. Once they are freed, you will return my money. At this point, you will be totally destitute and lacking in property, which appears to be your chief desire, second only to preventing any possibility of personal happiness by ensuring that you cannot marry the man you love."

She pleated a handful of muslin between her fingers, frowning at the big sapphire that shone on her hand.

"I promised I'd listen to him first." She cast a narrow eye at Lord John. "Though I still say it's emotional blackmail."

"So much more effective than any other kind," he agreed. "Almost worth a cracked pate, to finally hold the whip hand on a Fraser."

She ignored this.

"And I only said I'd listen. I still think when he knows everything, he'll—he can't." She put a hand on her enormous belly. "You couldn't, could you? Care—really care, I mean—for a child that wasn't yours?"

He moved higher on the pillow, grimacing slightly.

"For the sake of its parent? I expect I could." He opened both eyes and looked at her, smiling. "Indeed, I was under the impression that I had been doing so for some time."

She looked momentarily blank, before a tide of pink flowed up from the scooped neck of her bodice. She was charming when she blushed.

“You mean me? Well, yes, but—I mean—I’m not a baby, and you’re not having to claim me as your own.” She gave him a direct blue look, at odds with the lingering pinkness of her cheeks. “And I did hope it wasn’t *all* for my father’s sake.”

He was quiet for a moment, then reached out and squeezed her hand.

“No, it wasn’t,” he said gruffly. He let go, and lay back with a small groan.

“Are you feeling worse?” she asked anxiously. “Shall I get you something? Some tea? A poultice?”

“No, it’s only the blasted headache,” he said. “The light makes it throb.” He shut his eyes again.

“Tell me,” he said without opening them, “why is it that you seem so convinced that a man could not care for a child unless it were the fruit of his loins? As it is, my dear, I did *not* mean to refer to you when I said I had been doing such a thing myself. My son—my stepson—is in fact the son of my late wife’s sister. By tragic accident, both of his parents died within a day of each other, and my wife Isobel and her parents raised him from babyhood. I married Isobel when Willie was six or so. So you see, there is no blood between us at all—and yet were any man to impugn my affection for him, or to say he is not my son, I would call him out on the instant for it.”

“I see,” she said, after a moment. “I didn’t know that.” He cracked an eyelid; she was still twisting her ring, looking pensive.

“I think …” she began, and glanced at him. “I think I’m not so worried about Roger and the baby. If I’m honest—”

“Heaven forfend you should be otherwise,” he murmured.

“If I’m honest,” she went on, glowering at him, “I think I’m worried more about how it would be between us—between Roger and me.” She hesitated, then took the plunge.

“I didn’t know Jamie Fraser was my father,” she said. “Not all the time I was growing up. After the Rising, my parents were separated; they each thought the other was dead. And so my mother married again. I thought Frank Randall was my father. I didn't find out otherwise until after he died."

"Ah." He viewed her with increased interest. "And was this Randall cruel to you?"

"No! He was … wonderful." Her voice broke slightly, and she cleared her throat, embarrassed. "No. He was the best father I could have had. It's just that I thought my parents had a good marriage. They cared for each other, they respected each other, they—well, I thought everything was fine."

Lord John scratched at his bandages. The doctor had shaved his head, a condition which, in addition to affronting his vanity, itched abominably.

"I fail to see the difficulty, as applied to your present situation."

She heaved a huge sigh.

"Then my father died, and … we found out that Jamie Fraser was still alive. My mother went to join him, and then I came. And—it was different. I saw how they looked at each other. I never saw her look at Frank Randall that way—or him at her."

"Ah, yes." A small gust of bleakness swept through him. He'd seen that look once or twice; the first time, he had wanted desperately to put a knife through Claire Randall's heart.

"Do you know how rare such a thing is?" he asked quietly. "That peculiar sort of mutual passion?" The one-sided kind was common enough.

"Yes." She had half turned, her arm along the back of the love seat, and was looking out through the French doors, over the burgeoning spread of the spring flower beds below.

"The thing is—I think I had it," she said, even more quietly. "For a little while. A very little while." She turned her head and looked at him, with eyes that let him see clear through her.

"If I've lost it—then I have. I can live with that—or without it. But I won't live with an imitation of it. I couldn't stand that."

* * *

"It looks like you may get me by default." Brianna put the breakfast tray over his lap and collapsed heavily into the love seat, making the joints groan.

“Don’t riddle with a sick man,” he said, picking up a piece of toast. “What do you mean?”

“Drusus just came racing into the cookhouse, saying he saw two riders coming down through Campbell’s fields. He said he was sure one of them was my father—he said it was a big man with red hair; God knows there aren’t that many like him.”

“Not many, no.” He smiled briefly, his eyes traveling over her. “So, two riders?”

“It must be Da and my mother. So they haven’t found Roger. Or they did, and he—didn’t want to come back.” She twisted the big sapphire on her finger. “Good thing I have a fallback, isn’t it?”

Lord John blinked, and made haste to swallow his mouthful of toast.

“If by that extraordinary metaphor, you mean that you intend to marry me after all, I assure you—”

“No.” She gave him a halfhearted smile. “Just teasing.”

“Oh, good.” He took a gulp of tea, closing his eyes to enjoy the fragrant steam. “Two riders. Did your cousin not go with them?”

“Yes, he did,” she said slowly. “God, I hope nothing’s happened to Ian.”

“It might be that they experienced any variety of disasters on the journey, which obliged your cousin and your mother to travel behind your father and Mr. MacKenzie. Or your cousin and MacKenzie behind your parents.” He waved a hand, indicating innumerable possibilities.

“I guess you’re right.” She still looked peaked, and Lord John suspected she had cause. Comforting possibilities were all very well for the short term, but the colder probabilities were inclined to triumph over the longer course—and whoever accompanied Jamie Fraser, they would be arriving shortly, with the answers to all questions.

He pushed back the unfinished breakfast and leaned back against his pillows.

"Tell me—how far does your remorse extend for having nearly gotten me killed?"

She colored and looked uncomfortable.

"What do you mean?"

"If I ask you to do something you do not wish to, will your sense of guilt and obligation compel you to do it nonetheless?"

"Oh, more blackmail. What is it?" she asked warily.

"Forgive your father. Whatever has happened."

Pregnancy had made her complexion more delicate; all her emotions ebbed and flowed just under the surface of that apricot skin. A touch would bruise her.

He reached out and laid a hand very gently along her cheek.

"For your sake, as well as his," he said.

"I already have." Her lashes covered her eyes as she looked down; her hands lay still in her lap, the blue fire of his sapphire glowing on her finger.

The sound of hooves came clearly through the open French doors, rattling on the gravel drive.

"Then I think you had better go down and tell him so, my dear."

She pursed her lips, and nodded. Without a word, she stood up and floated out the door, disappearing like a storm cloud over the horizon.

"When we heard that there were two riders coming, and one of them Jamie, we feared lest something had happened to your nephew, or MacKenzie. Somehow, it occurred to neither of us to think that anything had happened to *you*."

"I'm immortal," she murmured, peering alternately into his eyes. "Didn't you know?" The pressure of her thumbs lifted from his eyelids and he blinked, still feeling her touch.

"You have a slight enlargement of one pupil, but very small. Grip my fingers and squeeze as hard as you can." She held out her index fingers and he obliged, annoyed to feel the weakness of his grip.

"Did you find MacKenzie?" He was further annoyed not to be able to control his curiosity.

She gave him a quick, wary glance from those sherry-colored eyes, and returned her gaze to his hands.

"Yes. He'll be coming along. A little later."

"Will he?" She caught the tone of his question and hesitated, then looked at him directly.

"How much do you know?"

"Everything," he said, and had the momentary satisfaction of seeing her startled. Then one side of her mouth curved up.

"Everything?"

"Enough," he amended sardonically. "Enough to ask whether your statement of Mr. MacKenzie's return is knowledge on your part or wishful thinking."

"Call it faith." Without so much as a by-your-leave, she tugged loose the strings of his nightshirt and spread it open, exposing his chest. Rolling a sheet of parchment deftly into a tube, she applied one end of it to his breast, putting her ear to the other end.

"I beg your pardon, madame!"

"Hush, I can't hear," she said, making small shushing motions with one hand. She proceeded to move her tube to different parts of his chest, pausing now and then to thump experimentally or prod him in the liver.

"Have you moved your bowels yet today?" she inquired, poking him familiarly in the abdomen.

"I decline to say," he said, pulling his nightshirt back together with dignity.

She looked more outrageous even than usual. The woman must be forty at least, yet she showed no more sign of age than a fine webbing of lines at the corners of her eyes, and threadings of silver in that ridiculous mass of hair.

She was thinner than he remembered, though it was hard to judge of her figure, dressed as she was in a barbaric leather shirt and trouserings. She'd plainly been in the sun and weather for some time; her face and hands had baked a delicate soft brown, that made the big golden eyes that much more startling when they turned full on one—which they now did.

“Brianna says that Dr. Fentiman trephined your skull.”

He shifted uncomfortably under the sheets.

“I am told that he did. I am afraid I was not aware of it at the time.”

Her mouth quirked slightly.

“Just as well. Would you mind if I look at it? It’s only curiosity,” she went on, with unaccustomed delicacy. “Not medical necessity. It’s only that I’ve never seen a trepanation.”

He closed his eyes, giving up.

“Beyond the state of my bowels, I have no secrets from you, madame.”

He tilted his head, indicating the location of the hole in his head, and felt her cool fingers slide under the bandage, lifting the gauze and allowing a breath of air to soothe his hot head.

“Brianna is with her father?” he asked, eyes still closed.

“Yes.” Her voice was softer. “She told me—us—a little of what you’d done for her. Thank you.”

The fingers left his skin and he opened his eyes.

“It was my pleasure to be of service to her. Perforated skull and all.”

She smiled faintly.

“Jamie will be up to see you in a bit. He’s … talking to Brianna in the garden.”

He felt a small stab of anxiety.

“Are they—in accord?”

“See for yourself.” She put an arm behind him, and with amazing strength for a woman with such fine bones, levered him upright. Just beyond the balustrade he could see the two figures at the bottom of the garden, heads close together. As he watched, they embraced, then broke apart, laughing at the awkwardness caused by Brianna’s shape.

“I think we got here just in time,” Claire murmured, looking at her daughter with a practiced eye. “It isn’t going to be much longer.”

“I confess to some gratitude at your prompt arrival,” he said, letting her ease him back onto the pillows and smooth his bedding. “I have barely survived the experience of being your daughter’s nursemaid; I fear serving as her midwife would finish me completely.”

“Oh, I nearly forgot.” Claire reached into a nasty-looking leather pouch around her neck. “Brianna said to give this back to you—she won’t need it anymore.”

He held out his hand, and a tiny spark of brilliant blue fell into his palm.

“Jilted, by God!” he said, and grinned.

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BOTTOM OF THE NINTH

"It's like baseball," I assured her. "Long stretches of boredom, punctuated by short periods of intense activity."

She laughed, then stopped abruptly, grimacing.

"Ugh. Intense, yeah. Whew." She smiled, a little lopsidedly. "At least at baseball games you get to drink beer and eat hot dogs in the boring parts."

Jamie, grasping at the only part of this conversation that made sense, leaned forward.

"There's a crock of small beer, cool in the pantry," he said, peering anxiously at Brianna. "Will I fetch it in?"

"No," I said. "Not unless you want some; alcohol wouldn't be good for the baby."

"Ah. What about the hot dog?" He stood up and flexed his hands, obviously preparing to dash out and shoot one.

"It's a sort of sausage in a roll," I said, rubbing my upper lip in an effort not to laugh. I glanced at Brianna. "I don't think she wants one." Small beads of sweat had popped out quite suddenly on her wide brow, and she was looking white around the eye sockets.

"Oh, barf," she said faintly.

Correctly interpreting this remark from the look on her face, Jamie hastily applied the damp cloth to her face and neck.

"Put your head between your knees, lass."

She glared at him ferociously.

"I can't get … my head … *near* my knees!" she said, teeth clenched. Then the spasm relaxed and she took a deep breath, the color coming back into her face.

Jamie glanced from her to me, frowning worriedly. He took a hesitant step toward the door.

"I expect I'd best go, then, if you—"

"Don't leave me!"

"But it's—I mean, you've your mother, and—"

"Don't leave me!" she repeated. Agitated, she leaned over and grabbed his arm, shaking it for emphasis. "You can't!"

"You said I wouldn't die." She was staring intently into his face. "If you stay, it will be all right. I won't die." She spoke with such intensity that I felt a sudden spasm of fear clutch my own innards, hard as the pain of labor.

She was a big girl, strong and healthy. She should have no great trouble delivering. But I was large enough, healthy as well—and twenty-five years before, I had lost a stillborn child at six months, and nearly died myself. I might be able to protect her from childbed fever, but there was no defense against a sudden hemorrhage; the best I could do under such circumstances would be to try to save her child via Caesarian section. I resolutely kept my eyes off the chest in which the sterile blade lay ready, just in case.

"You're not going to die, Bree," I said. I spoke as soothingly as I could, and put a hand on her shoulder, but she must have felt the fear under my professional facade. Her face twisted, and she grabbed my hand, clinging so tightly the bones rubbed together. She closed her eyes and breathed through her nose, but didn't cry out.

She opened her eyes and looked straight at me, her pupils dilated so that she seemed to be looking past me, into a future that only she could see.

"If I do …" she said, putting a hand to her swollen belly. Her mouth worked, but whatever she'd been meaning to say couldn't force its way out.

She struggled to her feet, then, and leaned heavily on Jamie, her face muffled in his shoulder, repeating, "Da, don't leave me, don't."

"I willna leave ye, *a leannan*. Dinna be afraid, I'll stay wi' ye." He put an arm around her, looking helplessly over her head at me.

“Walk her,” I said to Jamie, seeing her restlessness. “Like a horse with colic,” I added, as he looked blank.

That made her laugh. With the ginger air of a man approaching an armed bomb, he put an arm around her waist and towed her slowly around the room. Given their respective sizes, it sounded a lot like someone leading a horse, too.

“All right?” I heard him ask anxiously, on one circuit.

“I’ll tell you when I’m not,” she assured him.

It was warm for mid-May; I opened the windows wide, and the scents of phlox and columbine flowed in, mixed with cool, damp air from the river.

The house was filled with an air of expectation: eagerness, with a hint of fear beneath. Jocasta walked up and down the terrace below, too nervous to stay put. Betty put her head in every few minutes to ask if anything was needed; Phaedre came up from the pantry with a jug of fresh buttermilk, just in case. Brianna, her eyes focused inwardly, merely shook her head at it; I sipped a glass myself, mentally checking off the preparations.

The fact was that there wasn’t a hell of a lot you needed to do for a normal birth, and not the hell of a lot you *could* do if it wasn’t. The bed was stripped and old quilts laid to protect the mattress; there was a stack of clean cloths to hand, and a can of hot water, renewed every half hour or so from the kitchen copper. Cool water for sipping and brow-mopping, a small vial of oil for rubbing, my suture kit to hand, just in case—and beyond that, everything was up to Brianna.

After nearly an hour’s walking, she stopped dead in the middle of the floor, gripping Jamie’s arm and breathing through her nose like a horse at the end of a twenty-furlong race.

“I want to lie down,” she said.

Phaedre and I got her gown off, and got her safely onto the bed in her shift. I laid my hands on the huge mound of her belly, marveling at the sheer impossibility of what had happened already, and what was about to happen next.

The rigidity of the contraction passed off, and I could clearly feel the curves of the child below the thin rubbery covering of skin and muscle. It was large, I could tell that, but it seemed to be lying well, head down and fully engaged.

Normally, babies about to be born were fairly quiet, intimidated by the upheaval of their surroundings. This one was stirring; I felt a small, distinct surge against my hand as an elbow poked out.

"Daddy!" Brianna reached out blindly, flailing as a contraction took her unaware. Jamie lunged forward and caught her hand, squeezing tight.

"I'm here, *a bheanachd,* I'm here."

She breathed heavily, face bright red, then relaxed, and swallowed.

"How long?" she asked. She was facing me but not looking at me; she wasn't looking at anything outside.

"I don't know. Not an awfully long time, I don't think." The contractions were roughly five minutes apart, but I knew they could continue like that for a long time, or speed up abruptly; there was simply no telling.

There was a light breeze from the window, but she was sweating. I wiped her face and neck again, and rubbed her shoulders.

"You're doing fine, lovey," I murmured to her. "Just fine." I glanced up at Jamie, and smiled. "So are you."

He made a game try at returning the smile; he was sweating, too, but his face was white, not red.

"Talk to me, Da," she said suddenly.

"Och?" He looked at me, frantic. "What shall I say?"

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Tell her stories; anything to take her mind off things."

"Oh. Ah … will ye have heard the one about … Habetrot the spinstress?"

Brianna grunted in reply. Jamie looked apprehensive, but started in nonetheless.

"Aye, well. It happened that in an old farmhouse that stood by the river, there lived a fair maid called Maisie. She'd red hair and blue een, and was the bonniest maid in all the valley. But she had no husband, because …" He stopped, appalled. I glared at him.

He coughed and went on, plainly not knowing what else to do. "Ah … because in those days men were sensible, and instead of looking for lovely lasses to be their brides, they looked out for girls who could cook and spin, who might make notable housewives. But Maisie …"

Brianna made a deep inhuman noise. Jamie clenched his teeth for a moment, but went on, holding tight to both her hands.

"But Maisie loved the light in the fields and the birds of the glen …"

The light faded gradually from the room, and the smell of sun-warmed flowers was replaced by the damp green smell of the willows by the river, and the faint scent of woodsmoke from the cookhouse.

Brianna's shift was wet through, and stuck to her skin. I dug my thumbs into her back, just above the hips, and she squirmed hard against me, trying to ease the ache. Jamie sat with his head down, clinging doggedly to her hands, still talking soothingly, telling stories of silkies and seal catchers, of pipers and elves, of the great giants of Fingal's Cave, and the Devil's black horse that passes through the air faster than the thought between a man and a maid.

The pains were very close together. I motioned to Phaedre, who ran away and came back with a lighted taper, to light the candles in the sconces.

It was cool and dim in the room, the walls lit with flickering shadows. Jamie's voice was hoarse; Brianna's was nearly gone.

Suddenly she let go of him and sat up, grabbing at her knees, face dark red with effort, pushing.

"Now, then," I said. I stacked pillows quickly behind her, made her lean back against the bedstead, called Phaedre to hold the candlestick for me.

I oiled my fingers, reached under her shift, and touched flesh I had not touched since she was a baby herself. I rubbed slowly, gently, talking to her, knowing it made no great difference what I said.

I felt the strain, the sudden change under my fingers. A relaxation, then once more. There was a sudden gush of amniotic fluid, that splashed across the bed and dripped on the floor, filling the room with the scent of fecund rivers. I rubbed and eased, praying that it would not come too fast, not tear her.

The ring of flesh opened suddenly, and my fingers touched something wet and hard. Relaxation, and it moved back, away, leaving the ends of my fingers tingling with the knowledge that I had touched someone entirely new. Once more the great pressure, the stretching came, and once more eased slowly back. I pushed back the edge of the shift, and with the next push the ring stretched to impossible size, and a head like a Chinese gargoyle popped out, with a flood of amniotic fluid and blood.

I found myself nose to nose with a waxy-white head with a face like a fist, that grimaced at me in utter fury.

“What is it? Is it a boy?” Jamie’s hoarse question cut through my startlement.

“I hope so,” I said, hastily thumbing mucus from nose and mouth. “It’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen; God help it if it’s a girl.”

Brianna made a noise that might have started as a laugh, and turned into an enormous grunt of effort. I barely had time to get my fingers in and turn the wide shoulders slightly to help. There was an audible *pop,* and a long, wet form slithered out onto the soggy quilt, wriggling like a landed trout.

I seized a clean linen towel and wrapped him—it was him, the scrotal sac swelled up round and purple between fat thighs—checking quickly for his Apgar signs: breathing, color, activity … all good. He was making thin, angry noises, short explosions of breath, not really crying, and punching the air with clenched tiny fists.

I laid him on the bed, one hand on the bundle as I checked Brianna. Her thighs were smeared with blood, but there was no sign of hemorrhage. The cord was still pulsing, a thick wet snake of connection between them.

She was panting, lying back on the crushed pillows, hair plastered wetly to her temples, an enormous smile of relief and triumph on her face. I laid a hand on her belly, suddenly flaccid. Deep inside, I felt the placenta give way, as her body surrendered its last physical link with her son.

"Once more, honey," I said softly to her. The last contraction shivered over her belly, and the afterbirth slid out. I tied off the cord and cut it, and placed the solid little bundle of her child in her arms.

"He's beautiful," I whispered.

I left him to her, and turned my attention to immediate matters, kneading her belly firmly with my fists, to encourage the uterus to contract and stop the bleeding. I could hear the babble of excitement spreading through the house as Phaedre rushed downstairs to spread the news. I glanced upward once, to see Brianna glowing, still smiling from ear to ear. Jamie was behind her, also smiling, his cheeks wet with tears. He said something to her in husky Gaelic, and brushing the hair away from her neck, leaned forward and kissed her gently, just behind the ear.

"Is he hungry?" Brianna's voice was deep and cracked, and she tried to clear her throat. "Shall I feed him?"

"Try him and see. Sometimes they're sleepy right afterward, but sometimes they want to nurse."

She fumbled at the neck of her shift and pulled loose the ribbon, baring one high, full breast. The bundle made small *growf* noises as she turned it awkwardly toward her, and her eyes sprang open in surprise as the mouth fastened on her nipple with sudden ferocity.

"Strong, isn't he?" I said, and realized that I was crying only when I tasted the salt of my tears running into the corners of my smile.

Sometime later, with mother and child cleaned up and made comfortable, food and drink brought for Brianna, and a last check assuring that all was well, I walked out into the deep shadows of the upper gallery. I felt pleasantly detached from reality, as though I were walking a foot or so off the ground.

Jamie had gone down to tell John; he was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs. He drew me into his arms without a word and kissed me; as he let me go I saw the deep red crescents of Brianna's nailmarks on his hands, not yet faded.

"Ye did brawly too," he whispered to me. Then the joy in his eyes bloomed bright and flowered in a face-splitting grin. "Grannie!"

"Is he dark or fair?" Jamie asked suddenly, rising on one elbow beside me in bed. "I counted his fingers, and I didna even think to look."

"You can't really tell yet," I said drowsily. I'd counted his toes, and I'd thought of it. "He's sort of reddish-purple, and he's still got the vernix—the white stuff—all over him. It will probably be a day or two before his skin fades into a natural color. He's got just a bit of dark hair, but it's the sort that rubs off soon after birth." I stretched, enjoying the pleasant ache in legs and back; labor was hard work, even for the midwife. "It wouldn't prove anything, even if he were fair, since Brianna is; he could be, either way."

"Aye … but if he were dark, we'd know for sure."

"Maybe not. Your father was dark; so was mine. He could have recessive genes and come out dark even if—"

"He could have *what?*"

I tried without success to think whether Gregor Mendel had yet started messing about with his pea plants, but gave up the effort, too sleepy to concentrate. Whether he had or not, Jamie evidently hadn't heard of him.

"He could be any color, and we wouldn't know for sure," I said. I yawned widely. "We won't know until he gets old enough to start resembling … somebody. And even then …" I trailed off. Did it matter a great deal who his father had been, if he wasn't going to have one?

Jamie rolled toward me and scooped me into a spooned embrace. We slept naked, and the hair on his body brushed against my skin. He kissed me softly on the back of the neck and sighed, his breath warm and tickling on my ear.

I hovered on the edge of sleep, too happy to fall completely over into dreams. Somewhere nearby, I heard a small stifled squawk, and the murmur of voices.

"Aye, well," Jamie's voice roused me, some moments later. He sounded defiant. "If I dinna ken his father, at least I'm sure who his grandsire is."

I reached back and patted his leg.

“So am I—Grandpa. Hush up and go to sleep. ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.’ ”

He snorted, but his arms relaxed around me, hand curved on my breast, and in moments, he was asleep.

I lay wide-eyed, watching stars through the open window. Why had I said that? It was Frank’s favorite quotation, one he always used to soothe Brianna or me when we worried over things: *Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof*.

The air in the room was live; a light breeze stirred the curtains, and coolness touched my cheek.

“Do you know?” I whispered, soundless. “Do you know she has a son?”

There was no answer, but peace came gradually over me in the quiet of the night, and I fell at last over the edge of dreams.

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RETURN TO FRASER'S RIDGE

Jocasta was loath to part with her newest relative, but the spring planting was already very late, and the homestead sadly neglected; we needed to return to the Ridge without delay, and Brianna would not hear of staying behind. Which was a good thing, as it would have taken dynamite to separate Jamie from his grandson.

Lord John was well enough to travel; he came with us as far as the Great Buffalo Trail Road, where he kissed Brianna and the baby, embraced Jamie and—to my shock—me, before turning north toward Virginia and Willie.

"I'll trust you to take care of them," he said quietly to me, with a nod toward the wagon, where two bright heads bent together in mutual absorption over the bundle in Brianna's lap.

"You may," I said, and pressed his hand. "I'll trust you, too." He lifted my hand to his lips, briefly, smiled at me, and rode away without looking back.

A week later, we bumped over the grass-choked ruts to the ridge where the wild strawberries grew, green and white and red together, constancy and courage, sweetness and bitterness mingled in the shadows of the trees.

The cabin was dirty and uncared for, its sheds empty and full of dead leaves. The garden was a tangle of old dried stalks and random shoots, the paddock an empty shell. The framework of the new house stood black and skeletal, reproachful on the Ridge. The place looked barely habitable, a ruin.

I had never felt such joy in any homecoming, ever.

Name, I wrote, and paused. God knew, I thought. His last name was open to question; his Christian name not yet even considered.

I called him "sweetie" or "darling," Lizzie called him "dear lad," Jamie addressed him with Gaelic formality either as "grandson" or *"a Ruaidh,"* the Red One—his dark infant fuzz and dusky skin having given way to a blazing fair ruddiness that made it clear to the most casual observer just who his grandsire was—whoever his father might have been.

Brianna found no need to call him anything; she kept him always with her, guarding him with a fierce absorption that went beyond words. She would not give him a formal name, she said. Not yet.

"When?" Lizzie had asked, but Brianna didn't answer. I knew when; when Roger came.

"And if he doesna come," said Jamie privately to me, "I expect the poor wee lad will go to his grave wi' no name at all. Christ, that lass is stubborn!"

"She trusts Roger," I said evenly. "You might try to do the same."

He gave me a sharp look.

"There is a difference between trust and hope, Sassenach, and ye ken that as well as I do."

"Well, have a stab at hope, then, why don't you?" I snapped, and turned my back on him, dipping my quill and shaking it elaborately. Little Query Mark had a rash on his bottom, that had kept him—and everyone else in the house—awake all night. I was grainy—eyed and cross, and not inclined to tolerate any show of bad faith.

Jamie walked deliberately around the table and sat down opposite me, resting his chin on his folded arms, so that I was forced to look at him.

"I would," he said, a shadow of humor in his eyes. "If I could decide whether to hope he comes or hope he does not."

I smiled, then reached across and ran the feathered tip of my quill down the bridge of his nose in token of forgiveness, before returning to my work. He wrinkled his nose and sneezed, then sat up straight, peering at the paper.

"What's that you're doing, Sassenach?"

"Making out little Gizmo's birth certificate—so far as I can," I added.

"Gizmo?" he said doubtfully. "That will be a saint's name?"

"I shouldn't think so, though you never know, what with people named Pantaleon and Onuphrius. Or Ferreolus."

"Ferreolus? I dinna think I ken that one." He leaned back, hands linked over his knee.

"One of my favorites," I told him, carefully filling in the birthdate and time of birth—even that was an estimate, poor thing. There were precisely two bits of unequivocal information on this birth certificate—the date and the name of the doctor who'd delivered him.

"Ferreolus," I went on with some enjoyment, "is the patron saint of sick poultry. Christian martyr. He was a Roman tribune and a secret Christian. Having been found out, he was chained up in the prison cesspool to await trial—I suppose the cells must have been full. Sounds rather a daredevil; he slipped his chains and escaped through the sewer. They caught up with him, though, dragged him back and beheaded him."

Jamie looked blank.

"What has that got to do wi' chickens?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. Take it up with the Vatican," I advised him.

"Mmphm. Aye, well, I've always been fond of Saint Guignole, myself." I could see the glint in his eye, but couldn't resist.

"And what's he the patron of?"

"He's invoked against impotence." The glint got stronger. "I saw a statue of him in Brest once; they did say it had been there for a thousand years. 'Twas a miraculous statue—it had a cock like a gun muzzle, and—"

"A *what?*"

"Well, the size wasna the miraculous bit," he said, waving me to silence. "Or not quite. The townsfolk say that for a thousand years, folk have whittled away bits of it as holy relics, and yet the cock is still as big as ever." He grinned at me. "They do say that a man wi' a bit of St. Guignole in his pocket can last a night and a day without tiring."

"Not with the same woman, I don't imagine," I said dryly. "It does rather make you wonder what he did to merit sainthood, though, doesn't it?"

He laughed.

"Any man who's had his prayer answered could tell ye that, Sassenach." He swiveled on his stool, looking out the open door. Brianna and Lizzie sat on the grass, skirts blooming around them, watching the baby, who lay naked on an old shawl on his stomach, red-arsed as a baboon.

Brianna Ellen, I wrote neatly, then paused.

"Brianna Ellen Randall, do you think?" I asked. "Or Fraser? Or both?"

He didn't turn around, but his shoulder moved in the faintest of shrugs.

"Does it matter?"

"It might." I blew across the page, watching the shiny black letters go dull as the ink dried. "If Roger comes back—whether he stays or not—if he chooses to acknowledge little Anonymous, I suppose his name will be MacKenzie. If he doesn't or won't, then I imagine the baby takes his mother's name."

He was silent for a moment, watching the two girls. They had washed their hair in the creek that morning; Lizzie was combing out Brianna's mane, the long strands shimmering like red silk in the summer sun.

"She calls herself Fraser," he said softly. "Or she did."

I put down my quill and reached across the table to lay a hand on his arm.

"She's forgiven you," I said. "You know she has."

His shoulders moved; not quite a shrug, but the unconscious attempt to ease some inner tightness.

"For now," he said. "But if the man doesna come?"

I hesitated. He was quite right; Brianna had forgiven him for his original mistake. Still, if Roger did not appear soon, she would be bound to blame Jamie for it—not without reason, I was forced to admit.

"Use both," he said abruptly. "Let her choose." I didn't think he meant last names.

"He'll come," I said firmly, "and it will be all right."

I picked up the quill, and added, not quite under my breath. "I hope."

He stooped to drink, the water splashing over dark green rock. It was a warm day; spring now, not autumn, but the moss was still emerald-green underfoot.

The memory of a razor was far behind him; his beard was thick and his hair hung past his shoulders. He'd bathed in a creek the night before, and done his best to wash himself and his clothes, but he had no illusions about his appearance. Neither did he care, he told himself. What he looked like didn't matter.

He turned toward the path where he had left his horse, limping. His foot ached, but that didn't matter either.

He rode slowly through the clearing where he had first met Jamie Fraser. The leaves were new and green, and in the distance he could hear the raucous calling of the ravens. Nothing stirred among the trees but the wild grasses. He breathed deep and felt a stab of memory, a broken remnant from a past life, a shard sharp as glass.

He turned his horse's head toward the top of the Ridge and urged it on, kicking gently with his good foot. Soon now. He had no idea what his reception might be, but that didn't matter.

Nothing mattered now save the fact that he was here.

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CHILD OF MY BLOOD

Some enterprising rabbit had dug its way under the stakes of my garden again. One voracious rabbit could eat a cabbage down to the roots, and from the looks of things, he'd brought friends. I sighed and squatted to repair the damage, packing rocks and earth back into the hole. The loss of Ian was a constant ache; at such moments as this, I missed his horrible dog as well.

I had brought a large collection of cuttings and seeds from River Run, most of which had survived the journey. It was mid-June, still time—barely—to put in a fresh crop of carrots. The small patch of potato vines was all right, so were the peanut bushes; rabbits wouldn't touch those, and didn't care for the aromatic herbs either, except the fennel, which they gobbled like licorice.

I wanted cabbages, though, to preserve as sauerkraut; come midwinter, we would want food with some taste to it, as well as some vitamin C. I had enough seed left, and could raise a couple of decent crops before the weather turned cold, if I could keep the bloody rabbits off. I drummed my fingers on the handle of my basket, thinking. The Indians scattered clippings of their hair around the edges of the fields, but that was more protection against deer than rabbits.

Jamie was the best repellent, I decided. Nayawenne had told me that the scent of carnivore urine would keep rabbits away—and a man who ate meat was nearly as good as a mountain lion, to say nothing of being more biddable. Yes, that would do; he'd shot a deer only two days ago; it was still hanging. I should brew a fresh bucket of spruce beer to go with the roast venison, though …

As I wandered toward the herb shed to see if I had any maypop fruits for flavoring, my eye caught a movement at the far edge of the clearing. Thinking it was Jamie, I turned to go and inform him of his new duty, only to be stopped dead in my tracks when I saw who it was.

He looked worse than he had the last time I'd seen him, which was saying quite a bit. He was hatless, hair and beard a glossy black tangle, and his clothes hung on him in tatters. He was barefoot, one foot wrapped in a bundle of filthy rags, and he limped badly.

He saw me at once, and stopped while I came up to him.

"I'm glad it's you," he said. "I wondered who I'd meet first." His voice sounded soft and rusty, and I wondered whether he had spoken to a living soul since we had left him in the mountains.

"Your foot, Roger—"

"It doesn't matter." He gripped my arm. "Are they all right? The baby? And Brianna?"

"They're fine. Everybody's in the house." His head turned toward the cabin, and I added, "You have a son."

He jerked sharply back toward me, green eyes wide with startlement.

"He's mine? *I* have a son?"

"I suppose you do," I said. "You're here, aren't you?" The look of startlement—and hope, I realized—faded slowly. He looked into my eyes and seemed to see how I felt, for he smiled—not easily, no more than a painful lifting of the corner of his mouth—but he smiled.

"I'm here," he said, and turned toward the cabin and its open doorway.

Jamie sat in his rolled-up shirt sleeves at the table, shoulder to shoulder with Brianna, frowning at a set of house drawings as she pointed with her quill. Both of them were liberally covered with ink, being inclined to enthusiasm when discussing architecture. The baby snored peacefully in his cradle nearby; Brianna was rocking it absently with one foot. Lizzie was spinning by the window, humming softly under her breath as the great wheel went round.

"Very domestic," Roger said under his breath, stopping in the dooryard. "Seems a shame to disturb them."

"Do you have a choice?" I said.

"Aye, I do," he replied. "But I've made it already." He walked purposefully up to the open door and stepped inside.

Jamie reacted instantly to this unfamiliar darkening of his door; he pushed Brianna off the bench and lunged for his pistols on the wall. He had one leveled at Roger's chest before he realized what—or whom—he was looking at, and lowered it with a small exclamation of disgust.

"Oh, it's you," he said.

The baby, rudely wakened by the crash of the overturned bench, was shrieking like a fire engine. Brianna scooped him out of his cradle and clasped him to her breast, looking wild-eyed at the apparition in the door.

I had forgotten that she hadn't had the benefit of seeing him even as recently as I had; he must be substantially changed from the young history professor who'd left her in Wilmington nearly a year before.

Roger took a step toward her; instinctively, she took a step back. He stood quite still, looking at the child. She sat down on the nursing stool, fumbling at her bodice, bending protectively over the baby. She pulled a shawl across her shoulder and gave him a breast in its shelter, and he stopped squawking at once.

I saw Roger's eyes shift from the baby to Jamie. Jamie stood beside Brianna with that utter stillness that so frightened me—straight and still as a stick of dynamite, with a lit match laid a hairsbreadth from the fuse.

The flame of Brianna's head moved slightly, looking from one to the other, and I saw what she saw; the echo of Jamie's dangerous stillness in Roger. It was both unexpected and shocking; I had never seen any resemblance between them at all—and yet at the moment they might have been day and dark, images of fire and night, each mirroring the other.

MacKenzie, I thought suddenly. Viking beasts, bloody-minded and big. And saw the third echo of that flaming heritage blaze up in Brianna's eyes, the only thing alive in her face.

I should say something, do something, to break the awful stillness. But my mouth was dry, and there was nothing I could say in any case.

Roger's reached his hand toward Jamie, palm up, and the gesture held no hint of supplication.

"I don't imagine it pleases you any more than it does me," he said, in his rusty voice, "but you are my nearest kinsman. Cut me. I've come to swear an oath in our shared blood."

I couldn't tell whether Jamie hesitated or not; time seemed to have stopped, the air in the room crystallized around us. Then I watched Jamie's dirk cut the air, honed edge draw swift across the thin, tanned wrist, and blood well red and sudden in its path.

To my surprise, Roger didn't look at Brianna, or reach for her hand. Instead, he swiped his thumb across his bleeding wrist, and stepped close to her, eyes on the baby. She pulled back instinctively, but Jamie's hand came down on her shoulder.

She stilled at once under its weight, at once a promise of restraint and protection, but she held the child tight, cradled against her breast. Roger knelt in front of her, and reaching out, pushed the shawl aside and smeared a broad red cross upon the downy curve of the baby's forehead.

"You are blood of my blood," he said softly, "and bone of my bone. I claim thee as my son before all men, from this day forever." He looked up at Jamie, challenging. After a long moment, Jamie gave the slightest nod of acknowledgment, and stepped back, letting his hand fall from Brianna's shoulder.

Roger's gaze shifted to Brianna.

"What do you call him?"

"Nothing—yet." Her eyes rested on him, questioning. It was only too clear that the man who had come back was not the man who'd left her.

Roger's eyes were fixed on hers as he stood. Blood was still dripping from his wrist. With a small shock, I realized that she was as changed to him as he to her.

“He’s my son,” Roger said quietly, nodding at the baby. “Are you my wife?”

Brianna had gone pale to the lips.

“I don’t know.”

“This man says that you are handfast.” Jamie took a step closer to her, watching Roger. “Is that true?”

“We—we were.”

“We still are.” Roger took a deep breath, and I realized suddenly that he was about to fall over, whether from hunger, exhaustion, or the shock of being cut. I took his arm, made him sit down, sent Lizzie to the dairy shed for milk, and fetched down my small medical box to bind his wrist.

This small bustle of normality seemed to break the tension a little. Meaning to help things along in that direction, I broke out a bottle of brandy from River Run, pouring a cup for Jamie, and putting a good-sized dollop in Roger’s milk. Jamie gave me a wry look, but sat back on the replaced bench and sipped his drink.

“Verra well, then,” he said, calling the meeting to order. “If you’re handfast, Brianna, then you’re married and this man is your husband.”

Brianna’s flush deepened, but she looked at Roger, not Jamie.

“You said handfasting was good for a year and a day.”

“And you said ye did not want anything temporary.”

She flinched at that, but then set her lips firmly.

“I didn’t. But I didn’t know what was going to happen.” She glanced at me and Jamie, then back at Roger. “They told you—that the baby isn’t yours?”

Roger raised his eyebrows.

“Oh, but he is mine. Mm?” He lifted his bandaged wrist in illustration.

Brianna’s face had lost its frostbitten look; she was pink around the edges.

“You know what I mean.”

He met her eyes straight on.

“I know what you mean,” he said softly. “I am sorry for it.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Roger glanced at Jamie.

“Aye, it was,” he said quietly. “I should have stayed with you; seen you safe.”

Brianna’s brows drew together.

“I told you to go, and I meant it.” She twitched her shoulders impatiently. “But it doesn’t matter now.” She took a firmer hold on the baby and sat up straight.

“I just want to know one thing,” she said, her voice trembling only a little. “I want to know why you came back.”

He set his empty cup down deliberately.

“Did ye not want me to come back?”

“Never mind what I wanted. What I want now is to know. Did you come back because you wanted to—or because you thought you should?”

He looked at her for a long moment, then down at his hands, still clasped around the cup.

“Perhaps both. Perhaps neither. I don’t know,” he said very softly. “That’s God’s truth; I don’t know.”

“Did you go to the stone circle?” she asked. He nodded, not looking at her. He fumbled in his pocket, and laid the big opal stone on the table.

“I went there. That’s why I was long in coming; it took me a long time to find it.”

She was silent for a moment, then nodded.

“You didn’t go back. But you can. Maybe you should.” She looked at him straight on, her gaze the twin of her father’s.

“I don’t want to live with you, if you came back for duty,” she said. She looked at me then, her eyes soft with pain. “I’ve seen a marriage made from obligation—and I’ve seen one made for love. If I hadn’t—” She stopped and swallowed, then went on, looking at Roger. “If I hadn’t seen both, I could have lived with obligation. But I *have* seen both—and I won’t.”

I felt as though someone had struck me in the breastbone. *My* marriages, she meant. I looked for Jamie, and found him looking at me with the same expression of shock I knew was on my own face.

He coughed to break the silence, and cleared his throat, turning to Roger.

"When were ye handfast?"

"September the second," Roger answered promptly.

"And now it is mid-June." Jamie glanced from one to the other, frowning.

"Well, *mo nighean,* if you are handfast with this man, then you are bound to him; there's no question." He turned and gave Roger a dark blue stare. "So you'll live here, as her husband. And on September the third, she will choose whether she'll wed ye by priest and book—or whether ye'll leave and trouble her no more. Ye've that long to decide why you're here—and convince her of it."

Roger and Brianna both started to speak, to protest, but he stopped them, picking up the dirk he had left on the table. He lowered the blade gently, until it touched the cloth over Roger's chest.

"Ye'll live here as her husband, I said. But if ye touch her unwilling, I'll cut your heart out and feed it to the pig. Ye understand me?"

Roger stared down at the gleaming blade for a long moment, no expression visible beneath the thick beard, then lifted his head to meet Jamie's eyes.

"You think I'd trouble a woman who didn't want me?"

A rather awkward question, given that Jamie had beaten him to pulp under precisely that mistaken assumption. Roger put a hand on Jamie's and shoved the dirk point-first into the table. He pushed back his stool abruptly and stood up, turned on his heel, and left.

Just as quickly, Jamie stood and went after him, sheathing his dirk as he went.

Brianna looked at me helplessly.

"What do you think he'll—"

She was interrupted by a loud thud and an equally loud grunt, as a heavy body struck the wall outside.

"Treat her badly and I'll rip your balls off and cram them down your throat," Jamie's voice said softly, in Gaelic.

I glanced at Brianna, and saw that her mastery of Gaelic was sufficient to have appreciated the gist of this. Her mouth opened, but she didn't get a word out.

There was the sound of a quick scuffle outside, ending in an even louder thump, as of a head striking logs.

Roger didn't have Jamie's air of quiet menace, but his voice rang with sincerity. "Lay hands on me once more, you fucking sod, and I'll stuff your head back up your arse where it came from!"

There was a moment's silence, and then the sound of feet moving off. A moment later, Jamie made a Scottish noise deep in his throat, and moved off too.

Brianna's eyes were round as she looked at me.

"Testosterone poisoning," I said, with a shrug.

"Can you do anything about it?" she asked. The corner of her mouth twitched, though I couldn't tell whether with laughter or incipient hysteria.

I pushed a hand through my hair, considering.

"Well," I said finally, "there are only two things they do with it, and one of them is try to kill each other."

Brianna rubbed her nose.

"Uh-huh," she said. "And the other …" Our eyes met with a perfect understanding.

"I'll take care of your father," I said. "But Roger's up to you."

* * *

Life on the mountain was a trifle tense, with Brianna and Roger behaving respectively like a trapped hare and a cornered badger, Jamie fixing Roger with brooding looks of Gaelic disapproval over the supper table, Lizzie falling over her feet to apologize to everyone in sight, and the baby deciding that the time was ripe to have nightly attacks of screaming colic.

It was probably the colic that spurred Jamie into a frenzy of activity on the new house. Fergus and some of the tenants had kindly put in a small planting for us, so that while we would have no extra corn this year to sell, at least we would eat. Freed of the need to tend a large acreage, Jamie instead spent every free moment on the ridge, hammering and sawing.

Roger was doing his best to assist with the other farm chores, though hampered by his lame foot. He had several times brushed off my attempts to treat it, but now I refused to be put off any longer. A few days after his arrival, I made my preparations and informed him firmly that I meant to deal with it first thing in the morning.

The time come, I made him lie down, and unwrapped the layers of rags wound around his foot. The sweet-rotten smell of deep infection tickled my nose, but I thanked God to see neither the red streaks of blood poisoning nor the black tinges of incipient gangrene. It was bad enough, for all that.

“You’ve got chronic abscesses, deep in the tissue,” I said, probing firmly with my thumbs. I could feel the squishy yielding of pockets of pus, and as I squeezed harder, the half-healed wounds broke open and a nasty yellow-gray slime oozed from an inflamed crack at the edge of the sole.

Roger went white under his tan, and his hands clenched on the wooden frame of the bed, but he didn’t make a sound.

“You’re lucky,” I said, still working his foot back and forth, flexing the tiny joints of the metacarpals. “You’ve been breaking open the abscesses and partially draining them by walking on it. They re-form, of course, but the movement’s kept the infection from moving much deeper, and it’s kept your foot flexible.”

“Oh, good,” he said faintly.

“Bree, I need you to help,” I said, turning casually toward the far end of the room, where the two girls sat, taking turns between baby and spinning wheel.

“I could; let me do it.” Lizzie sprang up, eager to help. Remorseful over her part in Roger’s ordeal, she had been trying to make amends in any way possible, constantly bringing him bits of food, offering to mend his clothes, and driving him mad generally with her expressions of contrition.

I smiled at her.

“Yes, you can help. Take the baby so Brianna can come here. Why don’t you take him outside for a little air?”

With a dubious glance, Lizzie did as I said, scooping little Gizmo into her arms and murmuring endearments to him as they went out. Brianna came to stand beside me, carefully keeping her eyes off Roger's face.

"I'm going to open this up and drain it the best I can," I said, indicating the long black-crusted slit. "Then we'll have to debride the dead tissue, disinfect it, and hope for the best."

"And what exactly does 'debride' mean?" Roger asked. I let go of his foot and his body relaxed, very slightly.

"Cleansing of a wound by the surgical or nonsurgical removal of dead tissue or bone," I said. I touched his foot. "Luckily, I don't think the bone's been affected, though there may be a bit of damage in the cartilage between the metacarpals. Don't worry," I said, patting his leg. "The debridement isn't going to hurt."

"It isn't?"

"No. It's the draining and disinfecting that will hurt." I glanced up at Bree. "Go take hold of his hands, please."

She hesitated no more than a second, then moved to the head of the couch and held out her hands to him. He took them, his eyes on her. It was the first time they had touched each other in nearly a year.

"Hold on tight," I instructed them. "This is the nasty part."

I didn't look up, but worked quickly, opening the half-healed wounds cleanly with a scalpel, pressing out as much pus and dead matter as I could. I could feel the tension quivering in his leg muscles, and the slight arcing of his body as the pain lifted and bent him, but he didn't say a word.

"Do you want something to bite down on, Roger?" I asked, taking out my bottle of dilute alcohol-water mixture for irrigating. "It's going to sting a bit, now."

He didn't answer; Brianna did.

"He's all right," she said steadily. "Go ahead."

He made a muffled noise when I began to wash out the wounds, and rolled halfway onto his side, his leg convulsing. I kept tight hold of his foot and finished the job as quickly as possible. When I let go and recorked the bottle, I looked up toward the head of the bed. She was sitting on the bed, her arms locked tight around his shoulders. His face was buried in her lap, his arms around her waist. Her face was white, but she gave me a strained smile.

"Is it over?"

"The bad part is. Just a little more to do," I assured them. I had made my preparations two days before; at this time of year, there was no difficulty. I went outside to the smoking shed. The venison carcass hung in the shadows, bathing in clouds of protectively fragrant hickory smoke. My goal was less thoroughly preserved meat, though.

Good, it had been out long enough. I picked up the small saucer from its place near the door and carried it back to the house.

"Phew!" Brianna wrinkled her nose as I came in. "What's that? It smells like rotten meat."

"That's what it is." The partial remains of a snare-killed rabbit, to be exact, retrieved from the edge of the garden and set out to wait for visitors.

She was still holding his hands. I smiled to myself and resumed my place, picking up the wounded foot and reaching for my long-nosed forceps.

"Mama! What are you *doing?*"

"It won't hurt," I said. I squeezed the foot slightly, spreading one of my surgical incisions. I picked one of the small white grubs out of the stinking scraps of rabbit meat and inserted it deftly into the gaping slit.

Roger's eyes had been closed, his forehead sheened with sweat.

"What?" he said, lifting his head and squinting over his shoulder in an effort to see what I was doing. "What are you doing?"

"Putting maggots in the wounds," I said, intent on my work. "I learned it from an old Indian lady I used to know."

Twin sounds indicative of shock and nausea came from the bedhead, but I kept a tight hold on his foot and went on with it.

"It works," I said, frowning slightly as I opened another incision and deposited three of the wriggling white larvae. "Much better than the usual means of debridement; for that, I'd have to open up your foot much more extensively, and physically scrape out as much dead tissue as I could reach—which would not only hurt like the dickens, it would likely cripple you permanently. Our little friends here eat dead tissue, though; they can get into tiny places where I couldn't reach, and do a nice, thorough job."

"Our friends the maggots," Brianna muttered. "God, Mama!"

"What, exactly, is going to stop them eating my entire leg?" Roger asked with a thoroughly spurious attempt at detachment. "They … um … they *spread,* don't they?"

"Oh, no," I assured him cheerfully. "Maggots are larval forms; they don't breed. They also don't eat live tissue—only the nasty dead stuff. If there's enough to get them through their pupal cycle, they'll develop into tiny flies and fly off—if not, when the food's exhausted, they'll simply crawl out, searching for more."

Both faces were a pale green by now. Finished with the work, I wrapped the foot loosely in gauze bandages, and patted Roger's leg.

"There now," I said. "Don't worry, I've seen it before. One brave told me that they tickle a bit, gnawing, but it doesn't hurt at all."

I picked up the saucer and took it outside to wash. At the edge of the dooryard I met Jamie, coming down from the new house, Ruaidh in his arms.

"There's Grannie," he informed the baby, removing his thumb from Ruaidh's mouth and wiping saliva from it against the side of his kilt. "Is she no a bonny woman?"

"Gleh," said Ruaidh, focusing a slightly cross-eyed look on his grandfather's shirt button, which he began to mouth in a meditative fashion.

"Don't let him swallow that," I said, standing on tiptoe and kissing first Jamie, then the baby. "Where's Lizzie?"

"I found the lassie sitting on a stump, greetin'," he said. "So I took the lad and sent her off to be by herself for a bit."

"She was crying? What's the matter?"

A small shadow crossed Jamie's face.

"She'll be grieving for Ian, won't she?" Putting that and his own grief aside, he took my arm and turned back toward the trail up the ridge.

“Come up wi’ me, Sassenach, and see what I’ve done the day. I’ve laid the floor for your surgery; all that’s needed now is a bit of a temporary roof, and it’ll do for sleeping.” He glanced back toward the cabin. “I was thinking that MacKenzie might be put there—for the time being.”

“Good idea.” Even with the additional small room to the cabin that he had built for Brianna and Lizzie, conditions were more than crowded. And if Roger was to be bedridden for several days, I would as soon not have him lying in the middle of the cabin.

“How are they faring?” he asked, with assumed casualness.

“Who? Brianna and Roger, you mean?”

“Who else?” he asked, dropping the casualness. “Is it well between them?”

“Oh, I think so. They’re getting used to each other again.”

“They are?”

“Yes,” I said, with a glance back at the cabin. “He’s just thrown up in her lap.”

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THE TOSS OF A COIN

Roger rolled onto his side and sat up. There was no glass in the windows as yet—none needed, so long as the summer weather kept fine—and the surgery was at the front of the new house, facing the slope. If he craned his neck to one side, he could watch Brianna most of the way down to the cabin, before the chestnut trees hid her from view.

A last flick of rusty homespun, and she was gone. She'd come without the baby this evening; he didn't know whether that was progress or the reverse. They'd been able to talk without the incessant interruptions of wet diapers, squawking, fussing, feeding, and spitting up; that was a rare luxury.

She hadn't stayed as long as usual, though—he could feel the presence of the child pulling her away, as though she were tethered to it by a rubber band. He did not resent the little bugger, he told himself grimly. It was only that … well, only that he resented the little bugger. Didn't mean he didn't *like* him.

He hadn't eaten yet; hadn't wanted to waste any of their rare solitude. He uncovered the basket she'd brought and inhaled the warm, rich scent of squirrel stew and salt-rising bread with fresh butter. Apple tart, too.

His foot still throbbed, and it took considerable effort not to think of the helpful maggots, but in spite of that, his appetite had returned with a vengeance. He ate slowly, savoring both the food and the quiet dusk creeping over the mountainside below.

Fraser had known what he was about when he'd chosen the site of this house. It commanded the entire slope of the mountain, with a view that ran to the distant river and beyond, with mist-filled valleys in the distance and dark peaks that touched a star-strewn sky. It was one of the most solitary, magnificent, heart-wrenchingly romantic spots he had ever seen.

And Brianna was down below, nursing a small bald parasite, while he was here—alone with a few dozen of his own.

He put the empty basket on the floor, hopped to the slop jar in the corner, then back to his lonely bed on the new surgery table. Why in hell had he told her he didn't know, when she'd asked why he'd come back?

Well, because just then, he *hadn't* known. He'd been wandering in the bloody wilderness for months, half starved and off his head with solitude and pain. He hadn't seen her in nearly a year—a year in which he'd gone through hell and back. He'd sat on the cliff above that bloody stone circle for three solid days without food or fire, thinking things over, trying to decide. And in the end he'd simply gotten up and begun walking, knowing that it was the only possible choice.

Obligation? Love? How in hell could you have love *without* obligation?

He turned restlessly onto his other side, turning his back on the glorious night of scent and sun-warmed winds. The trouble with being restored to health was that some parts of him were getting a damn sight too healthy for comfort, given that the chance of their having any proper exercise was something below nil.

He couldn't even suggest such a thing to Brianna. One, she might think he'd come back solely for *that,* and two, the bloody Great Scot had not been joking about the pig.

He knew now. He'd come back because he couldn't live on the other side. If it were guilt over abandoning them—or the simple knowledge that he would die without her … either or both, take your choice. He knew what he was giving up, and none of it bloody mattered; he had to be here, that was all.

He flopped onto his back, staring up at the dim paleness of the pine boards that roofed his shelter. Thumps and skitterings announced the nightly visitation of squirrels from the nearby hickory tree, who found it a convenient shortcut.

How to tell her that, so she would believe it? Christ, she was so jumpy that she'd barely let him touch her. A brush of lips, a touch of hands, and she was sidling away. Except for the day when she'd held him while Claire had tortured his foot. Then, she'd been truly there for him, hanging on with all her strength. He could still feel her arms around him, and the memory gave him a small thump of satisfaction in the pit of his stomach.

Thinking on that, he wondered a bit. True, the doctoring had hurt like buggery, but it was nothing he couldn't have stood with a little tooth-gritting, and Claire, with her battlefield experience, would certainly have known that.

Done it on purpose, had she? Given Bree a chance to touch him without feeling pressured or pursued? Given him a chance to remember just how strong the pull between them was? He rolled again, onto his stomach this time, and lay with his chin on his folded arms, looking out into the soft dark outside.

She could have the other foot, if she'd do it again.

* * *

Claire looked in on him once or twice each day, but he waited until the end of the week, when she came to remove the bandages, the maggots having presumably done their dirty work and—he hoped to God—cleared out.

"Oh, lovely," she said, poking his foot with a surgeon's ghoulish delight. "Granulating beautifully; almost no inflammation left."

"Great," he said. "Are they gone?"

"The maggots? Oh, yes," she assured him. "They pupate within a few days. Did a nice job, didn't they?" She ran a delicate thumbnail along the side of his foot, which tickled.

"I'll take your word for it. I'm clear to walk on it, then?" He flexed the foot experimentally. It hurt a bit, but nothing compared to what it had before.

"Yes. Don't wear shoes for a few more days, though. And for God's sake, don't step on anything sharp."

She began to put away her things, humming to herself. She looked happy but tired; there were shadows under her eyes.

"Kid still howling at night?" he asked.

"Yes, poor thing. Can you hear him up here?"

"No. You just look tired."

"I'm not surprised. Nobody's had a good night's sleep all week, especially poor Bree, since she's the only one who can feed him." She yawned briefly and shook her head, blinking. "Jamie's got the back bedroom here nearly floored; he wants to move up here as soon as it's ready—give Bree and the baby more room, and, not incidentally, have a little peace and quiet ourselves."

"Good idea. Ah—speaking of Bree …"

"Mm?"

No use dragging it out; better say it straight.

"Look—I'm trying all I can. I love her, and I want to show her that, but—she sheers off. She comes and we talk, and it's great, but then I go to put an arm around her or kiss her, and suddenly she's across the room, picking leaves off the floor. Is there something wrong, something I should do?"

She gave him one of those disconcerting yellow looks of hers; straightforward and ruthless as a hawk.

"You were her first, weren't you? The first man she slept with, I mean."

He felt the blood rising his cheeks.

"I—ah—yes."

"Well, then. So far her entire experience of what one might call the delights of sex consists of being deflowered—and I don't care how gentle you were about it, it tends to hurt—being raped two days later, then giving birth. You think this is calculated to make her fall swooning into your arms in anticipation of your reclaiming your marital rights?"

You asked for it, he thought, *and you got it. Right between the eyes.* His cheeks burned hotter than they ever had with fever.

“I never thought of that,” he muttered to the wall.

“Well, naturally not,” she said, sounding torn between exasperation and amusement. “You’re a bloody *man*. That’s why I’m telling you.”

He took a deep breath, and reluctantly turned back to face her.

“And just what *are* you telling me?”

“That she’s afraid,” she said. She cocked her head to one side, evaluating him. “Though it’s not you she’s afraid of, by the way.”

“It’s not?”

“No,” she said bluntly. “She may have convinced herself that she has to know why you came back, but that’s not it—a regiment of blind men could see that. It’s that she’s afraid she won’t be able to—mmphm.” She raised one brow at him, encompassing a wealth of indelicate suggestion.

“I see,” he said, taking a deep breath. “And just what do you suggest I do about it?”

She picked up her basket and put it over her arm.

“I don’t know,” she said, giving him another yellow look. “But I think you should be careful.”

He had just about recovered his equanimity after this unsettling consultation, when another visitor darkened his door. Jamie Fraser, bearing gifts.

“I’ve brought ye a razor,” Fraser said, looking critically at him. “And some hot water.”

Claire had clipped his beard short with her surgical scissors a few days earlier, but he had felt too shaky then to attempt shaving with what was called a “cutthroat” razor for good reason.

“Thanks.”

Fraser had brought a small looking glass and a pot of shaving soap as well. Very thoughtful. He could have wished that Fraser might have left him alone, rather than leaning against the doorframe, lending a critical eye to the proceedings, but under the circumstances Roger could scarcely ask him to leave.

Even with the unwelcome spectator, it was a sublime relief to get rid of the beard. It itched like a fiend, and he hadn't seen his own face in months.

"Work going well?" He tried for a bit of polite conversation, rinsing the blade between strokes. "I heard you hammering in the back this morning."

"Oh, aye." Fraser's eyes followed his every move with interest—sizing him up, he thought. "I've got the floor laid, and a bit of roof on. Claire and I will sleep up here tonight, I think."

"Ah." Roger stretched his neck, negotiating the turn of his jaw. "Claire's told me I can walk again; let me know which chores I can take over."

Jamie nodded, arms crossed.

"Are ye handy wi' tools?"

"Haven't done a lot of building," Roger admitted. A birdhouse done in school didn't count, he suspected.

"I dinna suppose you'll be much hand wi' a plow, or a farrowing hog?" There was a definite glimmer of amusement in Fraser's eyes.

Roger lifted his chin, clearing the last of the stubble from his neck. He'd thought about it, the last few days. Not much call for the skills of either a historian or a folk singer, on an eighteenth-century hill farm.

"No," he said evenly, putting down the razor. "Nor do I know how to milk a cow, build a chimney, split shingles, drive horses, shoot bears, gut deer, or spit someone with a sword."

"No?" Overt amusement.

Roger splashed water on his face and toweled it dry, then turned to face Fraser.

"No. What I've got is a strong back. That do you?"

"Oh, aye. Couldna ask better, could I?" One side of Fraser's mouth curled up. "Know one end of a shovel from the other, do ye?"

"That much I know."

"Then ye'll do fine." Fraser shoved himself away from the doorframe. "Claire's garden needs spading, there's barley to be turned at the still, and there's an almighty heap of manure waitin' in the stable. After that, I'll show ye how to milk a cow."

"Thanks." He wiped the razor, put it back in the bag, and handed the lot over.

"Claire and I are going to Fergus's place the eve," Fraser said casually, accepting it. "Takin' the wee maid to help Marsali for a bit."

"Ah? Well … enjoy yourselves."

"Oh, I expect we will." Fraser paused in the doorway. "Brianna thought she'd stay; the bairn's settled a bit, and she doesna want to upset him wi' the walk."

Roger stared hard at the other man. You could read anything—or nothing—in those slanted blue eyes.

"Oh, aye?" he said. "So you're telling me they'll be alone? I'll keep an eye on them, then."

One ruddy brow lifted an inch.

"I'm sure ye will." Fraser's hand reached out and opened over the empty basin. There was a small metallic clink and a red spark glowed against the pewter. "Ye'll mind I told ye, MacKenzie—my daughter doesna need a coward."

Before he could reply, the brow dropped, and Fraser gave him a level blue look.

"Ye've cost me a lad I loved, and I'm no inclined to like ye for it." He glanced down at Roger's foot, then up. "But I've maybe cost ye more than that. I'll call the score settled—or not—at your word."

Astonished, Roger nodded, then found his voice.

"Done."

Fraser nodded, and disappeared as quickly as he'd come, leaving Roger staring at the empty doorway.

* * *

He lifted the latch and pushed gently on the cabin's door. It was bolted. So much for the notion of waking Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. He lifted a fist to knock, then stopped. Wrong heroine. Sleeping Beauty hadn't had an irascible dwarf in bed with her, ready to yell the house down at any disturbance.

He circled the small cabin, checking the windows, names like Sneezy and Grumpy drifting through the back of his mind. What would they call this one? Noisy? Smelly?

The house was snug as a drum, oiled skins nailed over the windows. He could punch one loose, but the last thing he wanted was to scare her by breaking in on her.

Slowly, he circled the house once more. The sensible thing was to go back to the surgery and wait till morning. He could talk to her then. Better than waking her out of a sound sleep, waking the kid.

Yes, that was plainly the thing to do. Claire would take the little bas—the baby, if he asked her. They could talk calmly, without fear of interruption, walk in the wood, get things settled between them. Right. That was it, then.

Ten minutes later he had circled the house twice more, and was standing in the grass at the back, looking at the faint glow of the window.

"What the hell do you think you are?" he muttered to himself. "A bloody moth?"

The creak of boards prevented his answering himself. He shot around the end of the house in time to see a white-gowned figure float ghostlike down the path toward the privy.

"Brianna?"

The figure whirled, with a small yelp of fright.

"It's me," he said, and saw the dark blotch of her hand press against the white of her nightdress, over her heart.

"What's the matter with you, sneaking up on me like that?" she demanded furiously.

"I want to talk to you."

She didn't answer, but whipped round and made off down the path.

"I said, I want to talk to you," he repeated more loudly, following.

"*I* want to go to the bathroom," she said. "Go away." She shut the door of the privy with a decisive slam.

He retreated a short distance up the path and waited for her to emerge. Her step slowed when she saw him, but there was no way around him without stepping into the long, wet grass.

"You shouldn't be up walking on that foot," she said.

"The foot's fine."

"I think you should go back to bed."

"All right," he said, and moved solidly into the center of the path in front of her. "Where?"

"Where?" She froze, but made no pretense of not understanding.

"Up there?" He jerked a thumb at the ridge. "Or here?"

"I—ah—"

Be careful, her mother said, and *my daughter doesna need a coward,* said her father. He could flip a bloody coin, but for the moment he was taking Jamie Fraser's advice, and damn the torpedoes.

"You said you'd seen a marriage of obligation and one of love. And do you think the one cuts out the other? Look—I spent three days in that godforsaken circle, thinking. And by God, I thought. I thought of staying, and I thought of going. And I stayed."

"So far. You don't know what you'd be giving up, if you stay for good."

"I do! And even if I did not, I know bloody well what I'd be giving up by going." He gripped her shoulder, the light gauze of her shift coarse under his hand. She was very warm.

"I could not go, and live with myself, thinking I'd left behind a child who might be mine—who *is* mine." His voice dropped a little. "And I could not go, and live without you."

She hesitated, drawing back, trying to escape his hand.

"My father—my fathers—"

"Look, I'm neither one of your bloody fathers! Give me credit for my own sins, at least!"

"You haven't committed any sins," she said, her voice sounding choked.

"No, and neither have you."

She looked up at him, and he caught the gleam of a dark, slanted eye.

"If I hadn't—" she began.

"And if I hadn't," he interrupted roughly. "Drop it, aye? It doesn't matter what you've done—or I. I said I was neither of your fathers, and I meant it. But there they are, the two of them, and you know them well—far better than I.

"Did Frank Randall not love you as his own? Take you as the child of his heart, *knowing* you were the blood of another man, and one he'd good reason to hate?"

He took her other shoulder and gave her a little shake.

"Did that redheaded bastard not love your mother more than life? And love you enough to sacrifice even that love to save you?"

She made a small, choked noise, and a pang went through him at the sound, but he would not release her.

"If you believe it of them," he said, his voice little more than a whisper, "then by God you must believe it of me. For I am a man like them, and by all I hold holy, I do love you."

Slowly her head rose, and her breath was warm on his face.

"We have time," he said softly, and knew suddenly why it had been so important to talk to her now, here in the dark. He reached for her hand, clasped it flat against his breast.

"Do you feel it? Do you feel my heart beat?"

"Yes," she whispered, and slowly brought their linked hands to her own breast, pressing his palm against the thin white gauze.

"This is our time," he said. "Until that shall stop—for one of us, for both—it is our time. *Now*. Will ye waste it, Brianna, because you are afraid?"

"No," she said, and her voice was thick, but clear. "I won't."

There was a sudden thin wail from the house, and a surprising gush of moist heat against his palm.

"I have to go," she said, pulling away. She took two steps, then turned. "Come in," she said, and ran up the path in front of him, fleet and white as the ghost of a deer.

* * *

By the time he reached the door, she had already fetched the baby from his cradle. She had been in bed; the quilt was thrown back and the hollow of her body was printed on the feather bed. Looking self-conscious, she sidled past him and lay down.

"I usually feed him in bed at night. He stays asleep longer if he's next to me."

Roger made some murmur of assent, and drew up the low nursing chair before the fire. It was very warm in the room, and the air was thick with smells of cooking, used diapers—and Brianna. Her scent was slightly different these days; the tang of wild grass tempered with a light, sweet smell that he thought must be milk.

Her head was bent, loose red hair falling over her shoulders in a cascade of sparks and shadows. The front of her gown was open to her waist, and the full round curve of one breast showed plainly, only the nipple obscured by the roundness of the baby's head. There was a faint sound of sucking.

As though feeling his eyes on her, she raised her head.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, not to disturb the baby. "I cannot pretend not to be looking."

He couldn't tell if she flushed; the fire cast a red glow over face and breasts alike. She glanced down, though, as if she was embarrassed.

"Go ahead," she said. "Nothing much worth looking at."

Without a word, he stood up and began to undress.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was low, but shocked.

"Not fair for me to sit here gawking at you, is it? It's much less worth looking at, I expect, but …" He paused, frowning at a knot in the lacing of his breeches. "But at least you'll not feel you're on display."

"Oh." He didn't look up to see, but he thought that had made her smile. He'd got his shirt off; the fire felt good on his bare back. Feeling unspeakably self-conscious, he stood up and eased his breeches halfway down before stopping.

"Is this a striptease?" Brianna's mouth quivered as she tried to keep from laughing out loud, joggling the baby.

"I couldn't decide whether to turn my back or not." He paused. "Have you got a preference?"

"Turn your back," she said softly. "For now."

He did, and got the breeches off without falling into the fire.

“Stay that way for a minute,” she said. “Please. I like to look at you.”

He straightened up and stood still, looking into the fire. The heat played over him, uncomfortably warm, and he took a step back, a sudden memory of Father Alexandre vivid in his mind. Christ, and why would he think of that now?

“You have marks on your back, Roger,” Brianna said, her voice softer than ever. “Who hurt you?”

“The Indians. It doesn’t matter. Not now.” He hadn’t bound or cut his hair; it fell over his shoulders, tickling the bare skin of his back. He could imagine the tickle of her eyes, going lower, over back and arse and thighs and calves.

“I’m going to turn around now. All right?”

“I won’t be shocked,” she assured him. “I’ve seen pictures.”

She had her father’s trick of hiding her expressions when she wanted to. He couldn’t tell a thing from the soft, wide mouth or the slanted cat-eyes. Was she shocked, frightened, amused? Why ought she to be any of those things? She had touched everything she was now looking at; had caressed and handled him with such intimacy that he had lost himself in her hands, yielded himself to her without reservation—and she to him.

But that had been a lifetime ago, in the freedom and frenzy of hot darkness. Now he stood before her for the first time naked in the light, and she sat there watching him with a baby in her arms. Which of them had changed more, since their wedding night?

She looked at him carefully, head on one side, then smiled, her eyes rising to meet his. She sat up, shifting the child easily to the other breast, leaving her gown open, the one breast bared.

He couldn’t stand there any longer; the fire was singeing the hair on his arse. He moved to the side of the hearth and sat down again, watching her.

“What does that feel like?” he asked, partly from a need to break the silence before it got too heavy, partly from a deep curiosity.

“It feels good,” she answered softly, head bent over the child. “Sort of a pulling. It tingles. When he starts to feed, something happens, and there's a rushing feeling, like everything in me is surging toward him."

"It's not—you don't feel drained? I should have thought it would feel like your substance being taken, somehow."

"Oh, no, not like that at all. Here, look." She put a finger in the infant's mouth and detached it with a soft *pop!* She lowered the small body for an instant, and Roger saw the nipple drawn up taut, milk jetting out in a thin stream of incredible force. Before the child could start to wail, she put him back, but not before Roger had felt the spray of tiny droplets, warm and then suddenly cool against the skin of his chest.

"My God," he said, half shocked. "I didn't know it did that! It's like a squirt gun."

"Neither did I." She smiled again, her hand cupping the tiny head. Then the smile faded. "There are lots of things I couldn't have imagined before they happened to me."

"Bree." He sat forward, forgetting his nakedness in the need to touch her. "Bree, I know you're scared. So am I. I don't want you to be afraid of me—but Bree, I do want ye so."

His hand rested on the round of her knee. After a moment, her free hand came down on his, light as a landing bird.

"I want you, too," she whispered. They sat frozen together for what seemed a long time; he had no notion what to do next, only that he must not go too fast, not frighten her. *Be careful.*

The tiny sucking sounds had ceased and the bundle had gone limp and heavy in the curve of her arm.

"He's asleep," she whispered. Moving as cautiously as one holding a vial of nitroglycerine, she scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up.

She might have meant to lay the child in its cradle, but Roger lifted his hands instinctively. She hesitated for no more than a second, then bent to lay the child in his arms. Her breasts hung full and heavy in the shadow of her open gown, and he smelled the deep musk of her body as she brushed him.

The baby was surprisingly heavy; dense, for the size of the bundle. He was amazingly warm, too; warmer even than his mother's body.

Roger boosted the tiny body cautiously, cuddling it against him; the small, curved buttocks fit in the palm of his hand. It—*he*—wasn't quite bald, after all. There was a soft red-blond fuzz all over the head. Tiny ears. Almost transparent; the one he could see was red and crumpled from being pressed against his mother's arm.

"You can't tell by looking." Brianna's voice jerked him out of his contemplation. "I've tried." She was standing across the room, one drawer of the sideboard open. He thought it might be regret on her face, but the shadows were too deep to tell.

"That wasn't what I was looking for." He lowered the baby carefully to his lap. "It's only—this is the first time I've had a proper look at my son." The words sounded peculiar, stiff to his tongue. She relaxed a little, though.

"Oh. Well, he's all there." There was a small note of pride in her voice that caught at his heart, and made him look closer. The little fists were curled up tight as snail shells; he picked one up and gently stroked it with his thumb. Slowly as an octopus moving, the hand opened, enough for him to insert the tip of his index finger. The fist closed again in reflex, astonishing in the strength of its grip.

He could hear a rhythmic *whish* across the room, and realized that she was brushing her hair. He would have liked to watch her, but was too fascinated to look up.

The body had feet like a frog's; wide at the toes, narrow at the heel. Roger stroked one with a fingertip, and smiled as the tiny toes sprang wide apart. Not webbed, at least.

My son, he thought, and wasn't sure what he felt at the thought. It would take time to get used to.

But he could be, came the next thought. Not just Brianna's child, to be loved for her sake—but his own flesh and blood. That thought was even more foreign. He tried to push it from his mind, but it kept coming back. That coupling in the dark, that bittersweet mix of pain and joy—had he started this, in the midst of that?

He hadn't meant to—but he hoped like hell he had.

The child was wearing some long thing made of white gauzy stuff; he lifted it, looking at the sagging diaper and the perfect oval of the tiny navel just above. Moved by a curiosity he didn't think to question, he hooked a finger in the edge of the clout and pulled it down.

"I told you he was all there." Brianna was standing at his elbow.

"Well, it's there," Roger said dubiously. "But isn't it a bit … small?"

She laughed.

"It'll grow," she assured him. "It's not like he needs it for much yet."

His own penis, gone flaccid between his thighs, gave a small twitch at that reminder.

"Shall I take him?" She reached for the baby, but he shook his head and picked up the child again.

"Not just yet." It—he—smelled of milk and something sweetly putrid. Something else, his own indefinable smell, like nothing else Roger had ever encountered.

"Eau de baby, Mama calls it." She sat on the bed, a faint smile on her face. "She says it's a natural protective device; one of the things babies use to keep their parents from killing them."

"Killing him? But he's a sweet wee lad," Roger protested.

One eyebrow quirked up in derision.

"You haven't been living with the little fiend for the last month. This is the first night he hasn't had colic in three weeks. I would have exposed him on a hillside if he wasn't mine."

If he wasn't mine. That certainty was a mother's reward, he supposed. She'd always know—had always known. For a brief, surprising moment, he envied her.

The baby stirred and made a small, faint *yawp!* noise against his neck. Before he could move, she was up and had the child back in her arms, patting the rounded little back. There was a soft belch, and he subsided into limpness once more.

Brianna set him on his stomach in the cradle, carefully, as if he were wired to a stick of dynamite. He could see the faint outline of her body through the gauze, highlighted by the fire behind her. When she turned around, he was ready.

“You could have gone back, once you knew. There would have been time.” He held her eyes, not letting her look away. “So it’s my turn to ask, then, isn’t it? What made you wait for me? Love—or obligation?”

“Both,” she said, her eyes nearly black. “Neither. I—just couldn’t go without you.”

He breathed deeply, feeling the last small doubt in the pit of his stomach melt away.

“Then you do know.”

“Yes.” She lifted her shoulders and let them fall, and the loose gown fell too, leaving her as naked as he was. It *was* red, by God. More than red; she was gold and amber, ivory and cinnabar, and he wanted her with a longing that went beyond flesh.

“You said that you loved me, by all you hold holy,” she whispered. “What is it that’s holy to you, Roger?”

He stood and reached for her, gently, carefully. Held her against his heart, and remembered the stinking hold of the *Gloriana* and a thin, ragged woman who smelled of milk and ordure. Of fire and drums and blood, and an orphan baptized with the name of the father who had sacrificed himself for fear of the power of love.

“You,” he said, against her hair. “Him. Us. There isn’t anything else, is there?”

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DOMESTIC BLISS

August 1770

It was a peaceful morning. The baby had slept all night, for which feat he was the recipient of general praise. Two hens had obligingly laid eggs in their coop rather than scattering them round the landscape, so I was not required to crawl through the blackberry bushes in search of breakfast before cooking it.

The bread had risen to a perfect snowy mound in its bowl, been molded into loaves by Lizzie, and—the new Dutch oven sharing the general mood of cooperation—had been baked into a delicate brown fragrance that suffused the house with contentment. Spiced ham and turkey hash sizzled pleasantly on the griddle, adding their aromas to the softer morning scents of damp grass and summer flowers that came through the open window.

These things all helped, but the general atmosphere of drowsy well-being owed more to the night before than to the events of the morning.

It had been a perfect moon-drenched night. Jamie had put out the candle and gone to bolt the door, but instead he stood, arms braced on the doorframe, looking down the valley.

“What is it?” I asked.

“Nothing,” he said softly. “Come and see.”

Everything seemed to be floating, deprived of depth by the eerie light. Far off, the spurt of the falls seemed frozen, suspended in air.

The wind was toward us, though, and I could hear the faint rumble of tons of falling water.

The night air was scented with grass and water, and the breath of pine and spruce blew down cool from the mountaintops. I shivered in my shift, and drew closer to him for warmth. His shirttails were split at the side, open nearly to his waist. I slid my hand inside the opening nearest me, and cupped one round, warm buttock. The muscles tensed under my grip, then flexed as he turned.

He hadn't pulled away; only stepped back in order to yank the shirt off over his head. He stood on the porch naked, and held out a hand to me.

He was furred with silver and the moonlight carved his body from the night. I could see every small detail of him, long toes to flowing hair, clear as the clean black canes of the blackberry bushes at the bottom of the yard. Yet like them he was dimensionless; he might have been within hand's touch or a mile away.

I shrugged the shift from my shoulders and let it fall from my body, left it puddled by the door and took his hand. Without a word we had floated through the grass, walked wet-legged and cool-skinned into the forest, turned wordless toward each other's warmth and stepped together into the empty air beyond the ridge.

We had wakened in the dark after moonset, leaf-spattered, twig-strewn, bug-bitten, and stiff with cold. We had said not a word to each other, but laughing and staggering drunkenly, stumbling over roots and stones, had helped each other through the moonless wood and made our way back to bed for an hour's brief sleep before dawn.

I leaned over his shoulder now and deposited a bowl of oatmeal in front of him, pausing to pluck an oak leaf from his hair. I laid it on the table beside his bowl.

He turned his head, a smile hiding in his eyes, caught my hand and kissed it lightly. He let me go, and went back to his parritch. I touched the back of his neck, and saw the smile spread to his mouth.

I looked up, smiling myself, and found Brianna watching. One corner of her mouth turned up, and her eyes were warm with understanding. Then I saw her gaze shift to Roger, who was spooning in his parritch in a absentminded sort of way, his gaze intent on her.

This picture of domestic bliss was broken by the stentorian tones of Clarence, announcing a visitor. I missed Rollo, I reflected, going to the door to see, but at least Clarence didn't leap on visitors and knock them flat or chase them round the dooryard.

The visitor was Duncan Innes, who had come bearing an invitation.

"Your aunt asks if perhaps ye will be coming to the Gathering at Mount Helicon this autumn. She says ye did give her your word, twa year past."

Jamie shoved the platter of eggs in front of Duncan.

"I hadna thought of it," he said, frowning a little. "There's the devil of a lot to do, and I'm to have a roof on this place before snowfall." He gestured upward with his chin, indicating the slats and branches that were temporarily shielding us from the vagaries of weather.

"There's a priest coming, down from Baltimore," Duncan said, carefully avoiding looking at Roger or Brianna. "Miss Jo did think as how ye might be wishing to have the wean baptized."

"Oh." Jamie sat back, lips pursed in thought. "Aye, that's a thought. Perhaps we will go, then, Duncan."

"That's fine; your auntie will be pleased." Something appeared to be caught in Duncan's throat; he was turning slowly red as I watched. Jamie squinted at him and pushed a jug of cider in his direction.

"Ye've something in your throat, man?"

"Ah … no." Everyone had stopped eating by now, viewing the changes to Duncan's complexion in fascination. He had gone a sort of puce by the time he managed to squeeze out the next words.

"I—errr—wish to ask your consent, *an fhearr Mac Dubh,* to the marriage of Mistress Jocasta Cameron and … and—"

"And who?" Jamie asked, the corner of his mouth twitching. "The governor of the colony?"

"And myself?" Duncan seized the cup of cider and buried his face in it with the relief of a drowning man seeing a life raft float past.

Jamie burst out laughing, which seemed to be no great solace to Duncan's embarrassment.

"My consent? D'ye not think my aunt's of an age, Duncan? Or you, come to that?"

Duncan was breathing a little easier now, though the purple tinge hadn't yet begun to fade from his cheeks.

"I thought it only proper," he said, a little stiffly. "Seeing as how ye're her nearest kinsman." He swallowed, and unbent a bit. "And … it didna seem entirely right, *Mac Dubh,* that I should be takin' what might be yours."

Jamie smiled and shook his head.

"I've no claim on any of my aunt's property, Duncan—and wouldna take it when she offered. You'll be married at the Gathering? Tell her we'll come, then, and dance at the wedding."

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JEREMIAH

October 1770

Roger rode with Claire and Fergus, close to the wagon. Jamie, not trusting Brianna to drive a vehicle containing his grandson, insisted on driving, with Lizzie and Marsali in the wagon bed and Brianna on the seat beside him.

From his saddle Roger caught snatches of the discussion that had been going on ever since his arrival.

"John, for sure," Brianna was saying, frowning down at her son, who was burrowing energetically under her shawl. "But I don't know if it should be his first name. And if it was—should it maybe be Ian? That's 'John' in Gaelic—and I'd like to name him that, but would it be too confusing, with Uncle Ian and our Ian, too?"

"Since neither one of them is here, I think it wouldna be too troublesome," Marsali put in. She glanced up at her stepfather's back. "Did ye not say ye wanted to use one of Da's names, as well?"

"Yes, but which one?" Brianna twisted around to talk to Marsali. "Not James, that *would* be confusing. And I don't think I like Malcolm much. He'll already have MacKenzie, of course, so maybe—" She caught Roger's eye and smiled up at him.

"What about Jeremiah?"

"John Jeremiah Alexander Fraser MacKenzie?" Marsali frowned, saying the names over to taste them.

"I rather like Jeremiah," Claire chipped in. "Very Old Testament. It's one of your names, isn't it, Roger?" She smiled at him and drew closer to the wagon, leaning over to talk to Brianna.

"Besides, if Jeremiah seems too formal, you can call him Jemmy," she said. "Or is that too much like Jamie?"

Roger felt a small chill prickle down his spine, at the sudden recollection of another child whose mother had called him Jemmy—a child whose father was fair-haired, with eyes as green as Roger's own.

He waited until Brianna had turned to rummage through her bag for a fresh diaper, handing the fussing baby to Lizzie to mind. He kneed his horse, urging it up close to Claire's mare.

"Do you recall something?" he asked in a low voice. "When you first came to call on me in Inverness, with Brianna—you'd had my genealogy researched beforehand."

"Yes?" She quirked a brow at him.

"It's been some time, and you likely wouldn't have noticed in any case …" He hesitated, but he had to know, if it could be known. "You pointed out the place on my family tree where the substitution was made; where Geilie Duncan's child by Dougal was adopted in place of another child who'd died, and given his name."

"William Buccleigh MacKenzie," she said promptly, and smiled at his look of surprise. "I went over that genealogy at some length," she said dryly. "I could probably tell you every name on it."

He took a deep breath, uneasiness curling at the back of his neck.

"Can you? What I'm wondering—do you know the name of the changeling's wife—my six-times great-grandmother? Her name wasn't listed on my own family tree; only William Buccleigh."

Soft lashes dropped over the golden eyes as she thought, lips pursed.

"Yes," she said at last, and looked at him. "Morag. Her name was Morag Gunn. Why?"

He only shook his head, too shaken to reply. He glanced at Brianna; the baby lay half naked in her lap, the soggy diaper in a heap on the seat beside her—and remembered the smooth damp skin and soggy clout of the little boy named Jemmy.

"And their son's name was Jeremiah," he said at last, so softly that Claire had to lean close to hear it.

“Yes.” She watched him curiously, then turned her head to look down the twisting road ahead, disappearing between the dark pines.

“I asked Geilie,” Claire said suddenly. “I asked her why. Why we can do it.”

“And did she have an answer?” Roger stared at a deerfly on his wrist without seeing it.

“She said—‘To change things.’ ” Claire smiled at him, her mouth curled wryly. “I don’t know whether that’s an answer or not.”

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THE GATHERING

It had been nearly thirty years since the last Gathering I had seen; the Gathering at Leoch, and the oath-taking of clan MacKenzie. Colum MacKenzie was dead now, and his brother Dougal—and all the clans with them. Leoch lay in ruins, and there would be no more Gatherings of the clans in Scotland.

Yet here were the plaids and the pipes, and the remnants of the Highlanders themselves, undiminished in fierce pride, among the the new mountains they claimed for their own. MacNeills and Campbells, Buchanans and Lindseys, MacLeods and MacDonalds; families, slaves and servants, indentured men and lairds.

I looked out over the stir and bustle of the dozens of encampments to see if I could find Jamie, and spotted instead a familiar tall form, striding loose-jointed through the scattered throng. I stood up and waved, calling out to him.

“Myers! Mr. Myers!”

John Quincy Myers spotted me and, beaming, made his way up the slope to our encampment.

“Mrs. Claire!” he exclaimed, sweeping off his disreputable hat and bowing over my hand with his usual courtliness. “I’m right uplifted to see ye.”

“The feeling is mutual,” I assured him, smiling. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Oh, I usually reckon to come to a Gathering,” he said, straightening up and beaming down at me. “If I’m down from the mountains in time. Fine place to sell my hides; any little bits of things I have to get rid of. Speakin' of which …" He began a slow, methodical rummage through the contents of his big buckskin pouch.

"Will you have been far to the north, Mr. Myers?"

"Oh, 'deed I have, 'deed I have, Mrs. Claire. Halfway up the Mohawk River, to the place they call the Upper Castle."

"The Mohawk?" My heart began to beat faster.

"Mm." He withdrew something from his bag, squinted at it, put it back, and rummaged further. "Imagine my surprise, Mrs. Claire, when I stopped at a Mohawk village to the south, to see a familiar face."

"Ian! You've seen Ian? Is he all right?" I was so excited, I grasped him by the arm.

"Oh, aye," he assured me. "Fine-lookin' boy—though I will say it did give me a right turn to see him rigged out like a brave, and his face burnt dark enough that I might ha' taken him for one, did he not hail me by name."

At last he found what he was looking for, and handed me a small package wrapped in thin leather and tied with a strip of buckskin—a woodpecker's feather thrust through the knot.

"He trusted me with that, ma'am, to bring to you and your goodman." He smiled kindly. "Reckon as you'll want to read that right promptly; I'll meet up with ye a mite later, Mrs. Claire." He bowed with solemn formality, and walked away, hailing acquaintances as he passed.

I wouldn't read it without waiting for Jamie; luckily, he appeared no more than a few minutes later. The letter was written on what seemed to be the torn-out flyleaf of a book, its ink the pale brown of oak-galls, but legible enough. *Ian salutat avunculus Jacobus,* the note began, and a grin broke out on Jamie's face.

Ave! That exhausting my Remembrance of the Latin tongue, I must now lapse into Plain English, of which I recall much more. I am well, Uncle, and Happy—I ask you to believe it. I have been married, after the custom of the Mohawk, and live in the house of my Wife. You will remember Emily, who carves so cleverly. Rollo has sired a Great many puppies; the village is littered with small wolfish Replicas. I cannot hope to claim the same profligacy of Procreation—yet I hope you will write to my Mother with the wish that she has not yet so many Grandchildren that she will overlook the addition of one more. The birth will be in spring; I will send Word of its outcome so soon as I may. In the meantime, you will oblige me by Remembering me to all at Lallybroch, at River Run, and Fraser's Ridge. I remember them all most Fondly, and will, so long as I shall live. My love to Auntie Claire, to Cousin Brianna, and most of all to yourself. Your most affectionate nephew, Ian Murray. Vale, avunculus.

Jamie blinked once or twice, and folding the torn page carefully, tucked it in his sporran.

"It's *avuncule,* ye wee idiot," he said softly. "A greeting takes the vocative case."

* * *

Looking over the dotted campfires that evening, I would have said that every Scottish family between Philadelphia and Charleston had come—and yet more arrived with the dawn next day, and kept coming.

It was on the second day, while Lizzie, Brianna, and I were comparing babies with two of Farquard Campbell's daughters, that Jamie made his way through a mass of women and children, a wide smile on his face.

"Mrs. Lizzie," he said. "I've a wee surprise for ye. Fergus!"

Fergus, likewise beaming, came from behind a wagon, ushering a slight man with windblown, thin fair hair.

"Da!" Lizzie shrieked, and flung herself into his arms. Jamie put a finger in his ear and wiggled it, looking amazed.

"I dinna think I've ever heard her make a noise that loud before," he said. He grinned at me and handed me two pieces of paper; originally part of one document, they had been carefully torn apart so that the notched edge of one fitted the jagged edge of the other.

“That’ll be Mr. Wemyss’s indenture,” he said. “Put it away for now, Sassenach; we’ll burn it at the bonfire tonight.”

Then he vanished back into the crowd, summoned by a wave and a shout of *Mac Dubh*! from across the clearing.

* * *

By the third day of the Gathering, I had heard so much news, gossip, and general chatter that my ears rang with the sound of Gaelic. Those who were not talking were singing; Roger was in his element, wandering through the grounds and listening. He was hoarse from singing himself; he had been up most of the night before, strumming a borrowed guitar and singing to a crowd of enchanted listeners while Brianna sat curled by his feet, looking smug.

“Is he any good?” Jamie had murmured to me, squinting dubiously at his putative son-in-law.

“Better than good,” I assured him.

He lifted one eyebrow and shrugged, then leaned down to take the baby from me.

“Aye, well, I’ll take your word for it. I think wee Ruaidh and I will go and find a game of dice.”

“You’re going gambling with a baby?”

“Of course,” he said, and grinned at me. “He’s never too young to learn an honest trade, in case he canna sing for his supper like his Da.”

* * *

“When you make bashed neeps,” I said, “be sure to boil the tops along with the turnips. Then save the pot liquor and give it to the children; you take some too—it’s good for your milk.”

Maisri Buchanan pressed her smallest child to her breast and nodded solemnly, committing my advice to memory. I could not persuade most of the new immigrants either to eat fresh greens or to feed them to their families, but now and then I found opportunity to introduce a bit of vitamin C surreptitiously into their usual diet—which consisted for the most part of oatmeal and venison.

I had tried the expedient of making Jamie eat a plate of sliced tomatoes in public view, in hopes that the sight of him would ease some of the new immigrants' fears. This had not been successful; most of them regarded him with a half-superstitious awe, and I was given to understand that Himself could naturally survive the eating of things that would kill a normal person dead on the spot.

I dismissed Maisri, and welcomed the next visitor to my impromptu clinic, a woman with two little girls, covered with an eczematous rash that I at first thought evidence of more nutritional deficiency, but which fortunately proved to be only poison ivy.

I became aware of a stir in the crowd, and paused in my ministrations, turning to see who had arrived. Sunlight glinted from metal near the edge of the clearing, and Jamie's was not the only hand to go to gun or knife hilt.

They came into the sun in marchstep, though their drums were muffled, with no more than a soft *tap-tap!* of stick on rim to guide them. Muskets pointing skyward, broadswords waggling like scorpion tails, they emerged from the grove in small bursts of scarlet, two by two, green kilts aswish around their knees.

Four, and six, and eight, and ten … I was counting silently, with everyone else. Forty men came on, eyes straight ahead beneath their bearskin caps, looking neither to left nor to right, with no sound but the shuffle of feet and the tap of their drum.

Across the clearing, I saw MacNeill of Barra rise from his seat and straighten up; there was a subtle stir around him, a few steps bringing his men to stand near him. I didn't need to look around to sense the same thing happening behind me; felt, rather than saw, the eddies of similar small rallyings around the mountain's foot, each group with one eye on the intruders, one eye on its chief for direction.

I looked for Brianna and was startled, if not surprised, to find her just behind me, the baby in her arms, watching intently over my shoulder.

"Who are they?" she asked, low-voiced, and I could hear the echo of the question running through the Gathering like ripples in water.

"A Highland regiment," I said.

"I see that," she said tartly. "Friend or foe?"

That was plainly the question—were they here as Scots, or as soldiers? But I didn't have an answer, nor did anyone else, judging from the shiftings and mutterings among the crowd. There were incidents of troops coming to disperse unruly groups, of course. But surely not a peaceable gathering like this, which had no political purpose?

At one time, though, the mere presence of a number of Scots in one place was a political declaration, and most of those present remembered those times. The murmuring got louder, Gaelic spoken with the muffled sibilance of vehemence, sighing round the mountain like the wind before a storm.

There were forty soldiers coming up the road with guns and swords. There were two hundred Scotsmen here, most of them armed, many with slaves and servants. But also with their wives and children.

I thought of the days after Culloden, and without looking round, said to Brianna, "If anything happens—anything at all—take the baby up into the rocks."

Roger appeared suddenly in front of me, his attention focused on the soldiers. He didn't look at Jamie but moved silently so they stood, shoulder to shoulder, a bulwark before us. All over the clearing, the same thing was happening; the women gave not an inch, but their men stepped out before them. Anyone coming into the clearing would think that the women had melted into invisibility, leaving an implacable phalanx of Scotsmen staring down the glen.

Then two men rode out from the shelter of the trees; an officer on horseback, his aide by his side, regimental banner flying. Spurring up, they rode past the column of soldiers into the edge of the crowd. I saw the aide lean down from his horse to ask a question, saw the officer's head turn toward us in acknowledgment of the answer.

The officer barked an order and the soldiers stood to rest, muskets planted in the dust, their checkered legs apart. The officer turned his horse into the crowd, slowly nosing his way among the throng, who gave way reluctantly before him.

He was coming toward us; I saw his eyes fix on Jamie from a distance, so conspicuous by his height and his hair, bright as scarlet maple leaves.

The man drew up before us, and took off his feathered cap. He slid off his horse, took two steps toward Jamie, and bowed, rigidly correct. He was a short man, but solid, maybe thirty, with dark eyes that glittered bright as the gorget at his throat. Closer now, I saw what I had missed before, the smaller bit of metal pinned to the shoulder of his red coat; a battered brooch of tarnished gilt.

“Ma name is Airchie Hayes,” he said in broad Scots. His eyes were fixed on Jamie’s face, dark with hope. “They say ye kent my faither.”

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CIRCLE’S CLOSE

“I have a thing to say to you,” Roger said. He’d waited for some time to catch Jamie Fraser alone. Fraser was much in demand; everyone wanted his ear for a moment. For this moment, though, he was by himself, sitting on the fallen log from which he held court. He looked up at Roger, brows raised, but nodded toward a seat on the log.

Roger sat down. He had the baby with him; Brianna and Lizzie were making the dinner, and Claire had gone to visit with the Camerons of Isle Fleur, whose fire was nearby. The night air was thick with the scent of woodsmoke rather than peat fires, but in many ways it might be Scotland, he thought.

Jamie’s eye lighted on the curve of little Jemmy’s skull, dusted with copper fuzz that shone in the firelight. He held out his arms, and with only the slightest hesitation, Roger carefully passed the sleeping baby to him.

“Balach Boidheach,” Jamie murmured as the baby stirred against him. “There now, it’s fine.” He looked across at Roger. “You’ve a thing to say to me, you said.”

Roger nodded.

“I have, though not on my own account. You might say it is a message to be passed on for someone else.”

Jamie lifted one quizzical brow, in a gesture so reminiscent of Brianna that Roger felt a small internal start. To cover it, he coughed.

“I—ah—when Brianna went to the stones on Craigh na Dun, I was forced to wait a few weeks until I could follow after her.”

“Aye?” Jamie looked wary, as he always did at any mention of stone circles.

“I went to Inverness,” Roger continued, keeping his eyes on his father-in-law. “I stayed at the house that my father had lived in, and I spent part of the time in sorting through his papers; he was a great saver of letters and bits of old rubbish.”

Jamie nodded, evidently wondering what Roger was on about, but too polite to interrupt him.

“I found a letter.” Roger took a deep breath, feeling his heart thump in his chest. “I committed it to memory, thinking that if I found Claire, I would tell her of it. But then when I found her”—he shrugged—“I was not sure whether I should tell her or not—or tell Brianna.”

“And you are asking me if you should tell them?” Fraser’s brows rose, thick and ruddy, showing his puzzlement.

“Perhaps I am. But thinking on it, it occurred to me that the letter was perhaps of more concern to you than to them.” Now that the moment was at hand, Roger found himself feeling some sympathy for Fraser.

“You’ll know my father was a minister? The letter was to him. I suppose it was written under the seal of confession, in a way—but I imagine death has dissolved this particular seal.”

Roger took a deep breath and closed his eyes, seeing the black letters slanting across the page, in the neat, angular handwriting. He’d read it over more than a hundred times; he was sure of every word.

Dear Reg (the letter said);

I’ve something the matter with my heart. Besides Claire, I mean (says he, with irony). The doctor says it might be years yet, with care, and I hope it is—but there’s the odd chance. The nuns at Bree’s school used to scare the kids into fits about the horrible fate in store for sinners who died unconfessed and unforgiven; damned (if you’ll pardon the *expression) if I'm afraid of whatever comes after—if anything. But again—there's the odd chance, isn't there?*

Not a thing I could say to my parish priest, for obvious reasons. I doubt he'd see the sin in it, even if he didn't slip out to telephone discreetly for psychiatric help!

But you're a priest, Reg, if not a Catholic—and more importantly, you're my friend. You needn't reply to this; I don't suppose a reply is possible. But you can listen. One of your great gifts, listening. Had I told you that before?

I'm delaying, though I don't know why I should. Best have it out.

You'll recall the favor I asked you a few years ago—about the gravestones at St. Kilda's? Kind friend that you are, you never asked, but it's time I should tell you why.

God knows why old Black Jack Randall should have been left out there on a Scottish hill instead of taken home to Sussex for burial. Perhaps no one cared enough to bring him home. Sad to think of; I rather hope it wasn't that.

There he is, though. If Bree's ever interested in her history—in my history—she'll look, and she'll find him there; the location of his grave is mentioned in the family papers. That's why I asked you to have the other stone put up nearby. It will stand out—all the other stones in that kirkyard are crumbling away with age.

Claire will take her to Scotland one day; I'm sure of that much. If she goes to St. Kilda's, she'll see it—no one goes into an old churchyard and doesn't have a browse round the stones. If she wonders, if she cares to look further—if she asks Claire—well, that's as far as I'm prepared to go. I've made the gesture; I shall leave it to chance what happens when I've gone.

You know all the rubbish Claire talked when she came back. I did all I could to get it out of her head, but she wouldn't be budged; God, she is a stubborn woman!

You'll not credit this, perhaps, but when I came last to visit you, I hired a car and went to that damned hill—to Craigh na Dun. I told you about the witches dancing in the circle, just before Claire disappeared. With that eerie sight in mind, standing there in the early light among those stones—I could almost believe her. I touched one. Nothing happened, of course.

And yet. I looked. Looked for the man—for Fraser. And perhaps I found him. At least I found a man of that name, and what I could dredge up of his connections matched what Claire told me of him. Whether she was telling the truth, or whether she had grafted some delusion onto real experience … well, there was a man, I'm sure of that!

You'll scarcely credit this, but I stood there with my hand on that bloody stone, and wanted nothing more than that it should open, and put me face-to-face with James Fraser. Whoever he was, whenever he was, I wanted nothing more in life than to see him—and to kill him.

I have never seen him—I don't know that he existed!—and yet I hate this man as I have never hated anyone else. If what Claire said and what I found was true—then I've taken her from him, and kept her by me through these years by a lie. Maybe only a lie of omission, but nonetheless a lie for that. I could call that revenge, I suppose.

Priests and poets call revenge a two-edged sword; and the other edge of it is that I'll never know—if I gave her the choice, would she have stayed with me? Or if I told her that her Jamie survived Culloden, would she have been off to Scotland like a shot?

I cannot think Claire would leave her daughter. I hope she'd not leave me, either … but … if I had any certainty of it, I swear I'd have told her, but I haven't, and that's the truth of it.

Fraser—shall I curse him for stealing my wife, or bless him for giving me my daughter? I think these things, and then I stop, appalled that I should be giving a moment's credence to such a preposterous theory. And yet … I have the oddest sense of James Fraser, almost a memory, as though I must have seen him somewhere. Though likely this is just the product of jealousy and imagination—I know what the bastard looks like, well enough; I see his face on my daughter, day by day!

That's the queer side of it, though—a sense of obligation. Not just to Bree, though I do think she's a right to know—later. I told you I had a sense of the bastard? Funny thing is, it's stayed with me. I can almost feel him, sometimes, looking over my shoulder, standing across the room.

Hadn't thought of this before—do you suppose I'll meet him in the sweet by-and-by, if there is one? Funny to think of it. Should we meet as friends, I wonder, with the sins of the flesh behind us? Or end forever locked in some Celtic hell, with our hands wrapped round each other's throat?

I treated Claire badly—or well, depending how one looks at it. I won't go into the sordid details; leave it that I'm sorry.

So there it is, Reg. Hate, jealousy, lying, stealing, unfaithfulness, the lot. Not much to balance it save love. I do love her—love them. My women. Maybe it's not the right kind of love, or not enough. But it's all I've got.

Still, I won't die unshriven—and I'll trust you for a conditional absolution. I raised Bree as a Catholic; do you suppose there's some forlorn hope that she'll pray for me?

"It was signed, 'Frank,' of course," Roger said.

"Of course," Jamie echoed softly. He sat quite still, his face unreadable.

Roger didn't need to read it; he knew well enough the thoughts that were going through the other's mind. The same thoughts he'd wrestled with, during those weeks between Beltane and

Midsummer's Eve, during the search for Brianna across the ocean, during his captivity—and at the last, in the circle in the rhododendron hell, hearing the song of the standing stones.

If Frank Randall had chosen to keep secret what he'd found, had never placed that stone at St. Kilda's—would Claire have learned the truth anyway? Perhaps; perhaps not. But it had been the sight of that spurious grave that had led her to tell her daughter the story of Jamie Fraser, and to set Roger on the path of discovery that had led them all to this place, this time.

It had been the stone that had at once sent Claire back to the arms of her Scottish lover—and possibly to her death in those arms. That had given Frank Randall's daughter back to her other father, and simultaneously condemned her to live in a time not her own; that had resulted in the birth of a red-haired boy who might otherwise not have been—the continuance of Jamie Fraser's blood. Interest on the debt owed? Roger wondered.

And then there were Roger's private thoughts, of another boy who might not have been, save for that cryptic stone hint, left by Frank Randall for the sake of forgiveness. Morag and William MacKenzie were not at the Gathering; Roger was unsure whether to be disappointed or relieved.

Jamie Fraser stirred at last, though his eyes stayed fixed on the fire.

"Englishman," he said softly, and it was a conjuration. The hair rose very slightly on the back of Roger's neck; he could believe he saw something move in the flames.

Jamie's big hands spread, cradling his grandson. His face was remote, the flames catching sparks from hair and brows.

"Englishman," he said, speaking to whatever he saw beyond the flames. "I could wish that we shall meet one day. And I could hope that we shall not."

Roger waited, hands loose on his knees. Fraser's eyes were shadowed, his face masked by the flicker of the dancing fire. At last, something like a shudder seemed to go over the big frame; he shook his head as though to clear it, and seemed to realize for the first time that Roger was still there.

"Do I tell her?" Roger said. "Claire?"

The big Highlander's eyes sharpened.

"Will ye have told Brianna?"

"Not yet; but I will." He gave back Fraser's stare, eye for eye. "She is my wife."

"For now."

"Forever—if she will."

Fraser looked toward the Camerons' fire. Claire's lithe shape was visible, dark against the brightness.

"I did promise her honesty," he said at last, very quietly. "Aye, tell her."

* * *

By the fourth day, the slopes of the mountain were filled with new arrivals. Just before dusk, the men began to bring wood, piling it in the burnt space at the foot of the mountain. Each family had its campfire, but here was the great fire, around which everyone gathered each night to see who had come during the day.

As the dark came on, the fires bloomed on the mountainside, dotted here and there among the shallow ledges and sandy pockets. For a moment, I had a vision of the MacKenzie clan badge—a "burning mountain"—and realized suddenly what it was. Not a volcano, as I had thought. No, it was the image of a Gathering like this one, the fires of families burning in the dark, a signal to all the clan was present—and together. And for the first time, I understood the motto that went with the image: *Luceo non uro; I shine, not burn*.

Soon the mountainside was alive with fires. Here and there were smaller, moving flames, as the head of each family or plantation thrust a brand into his fire and brought it down the hill, to add to the blazing pyre at the foot. From our perch high on the mountainside, the figures of the men showed small and dark in silhouette against the huge fire.

A dozen families had declared themselves before Jamie finished his conversation with Gerald Forbes, and rose himself. He handed me the baby, who was sleeping soundly in spite of all the racket around him, and bent to light a brand from our fire. The shouts came from far below, thin but audible on the clear autumn air.

"The MacNeills of Barra are here!"

"The Lachlans of Glen Linnhe are here!"

And after a little, Jamie's voice, loud and strong on the dark air.

"The Frasers of the Ridge are here!" There was a brief spatter of applause from those around me—whoops and yelps from the tenants who had come with us, just as there had been from the followers of the other heads of families.

I sat quietly, enjoying the feel of the limp, heavy little body in my arms. He slept with the abandonment of total trust, tiny pink mouth half open, his breath warm and humid on the slope of my breast.

Jamie came back smelling of woodsmoke and whisky, and sat down on the log behind me. He took me by the shoulders and I leaned back against him, enjoying the feeling of him behind me. Across the fire, Brianna and Roger were talking earnestly, their heads close together. Their faces shone in the firelight, each reflecting the other.

"Ye dinna suppose they're going to change his name again, do you?" Jamie said, frowning slightly at them.

"I don't think so," I said. "There are other things ministers do besides christenings, you know."

"Oh, aye?"

"It's well past the third of September," I said, tilting back my head to look at him. "You did tell her to choose by then."

"So I did." A lopsided moon floated low in the sky, shedding a soft light over his face. He leaned forward and kissed my forehead.

Then he reached down and took my free hand in his own.

"And will ye choose, too?" he asked softly. He opened his hand, and I saw the glint of gold. "Do ye want it back?"

I paused, looking up into his face, searching it for doubt. I saw none there, but something else; a waiting, a deep curiosity as to what I might say.

"It was a long time ago," I said softly.

"And a long time," he said. "I am a jealous man, but not a vengeful one. I would take you from him, my Sassenach—but I wouldna take him from you."

He paused for a moment, the fire glinting softly from the ring in his hand. "It was your life, no?"

And he asked again, "Do you want it back?"

I held up my hand in answer and he slid the gold ring on my finger, the metal warm from his body.

From F. to C. with love. Always.

"What did you say?" I asked. He had murmured something in Gaelic above me, too low for me to catch.

"I said, 'Go in peace,' " he answered. "I wasna talking to you, though, Sassenach."

Across the fire, something winked red. I glanced across in time to see Roger lift Brianna's hand to his lips; Jamie's ruby shone dark on her finger, catching the light of moon and fire.

"I see she's chosen, then," Jamie said softly.

Brianna smiled, her eyes on Roger's face, and leaned to kiss him. Then she stood up, brushing sand from her skirts and bent to pick up a brand from the campfire. She turned and held it out to him, speaking in a voice loud enough to carry to us where we sat across the fire.

"Go down," she said, "and tell them the MacKenzies are here."

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This book turned out to have a lot to do with fathers,
and so it's for my own father, Tony Gabaldon, who also tells stories.

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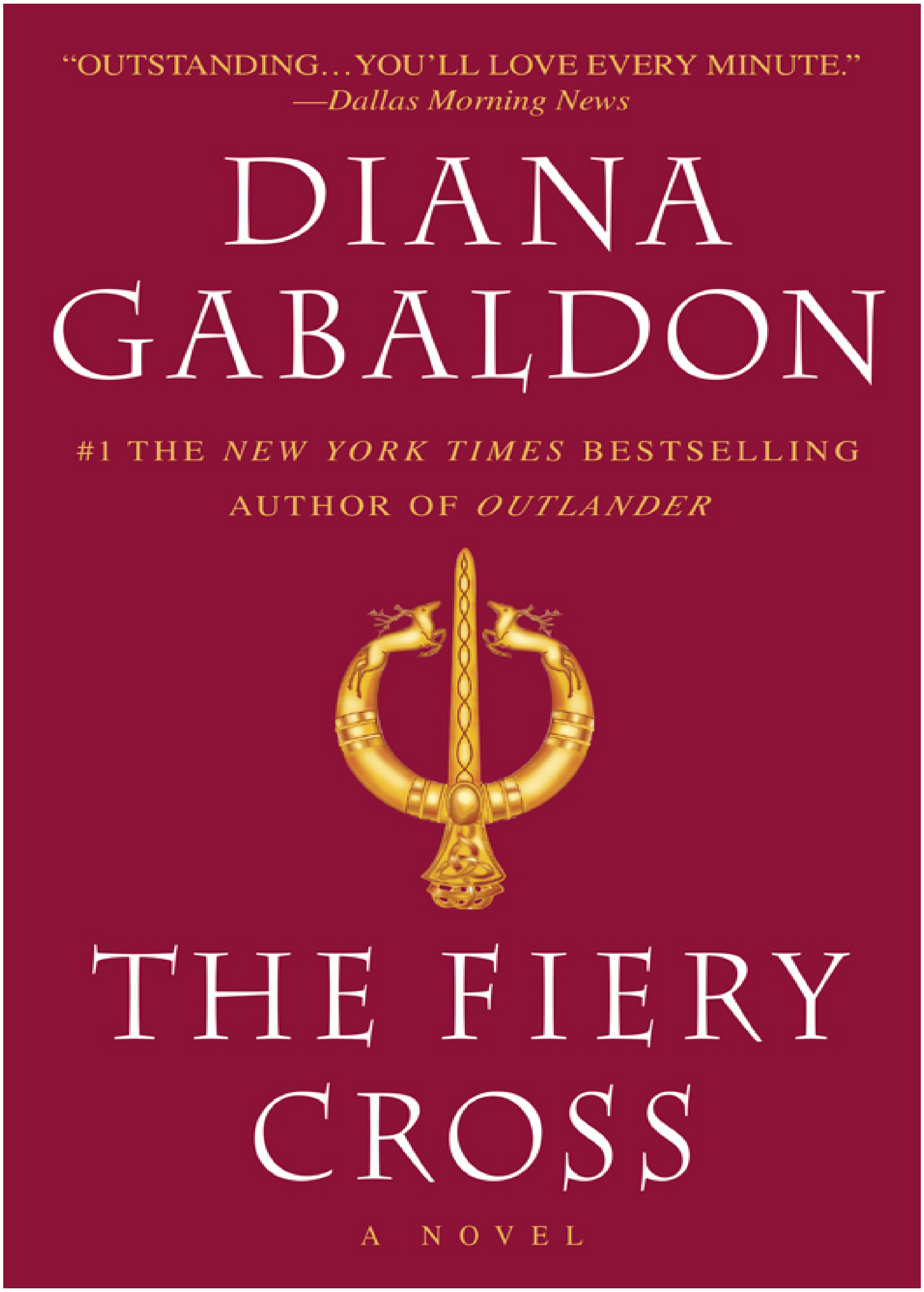

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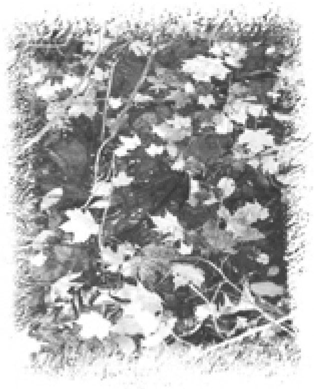

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Dedication
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I have lived through war, and lost much. I know what’s worth the fight, and what is not.

Honor and courage are matters of the bone, and what a man will kill for, he will sometimes die for, too.

And that, O kinsman, is why a woman has broad hips; that bony basin will harbor a man and his child alike. A man’s life springs from his woman’s bones, and in her blood is his honor christened.

For the sake of love alone, would I walk through fire again.

* * *

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PART ONE

In Medias Res

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1

HAPPY THE BRIDE THE SUN SHINES ON

Mount Helicon
The Royal Colony of North Carolina
Late October, 1770

I woke to the patter of rain on canvas, with the feel of my first husband's kiss on my lips. I blinked, disoriented, and by reflex put my fingers to my mouth. To keep the feeling, or to hide it? I wondered, even as I did so.

Jamie stirred and murmured in his sleep next to me, his movement rousing a fresh wave of scent from the cedar branches under our bottom quilt. Perhaps the ghost's passing had disturbed him. I frowned at the empty air outside our lean-to.

Go away, Frank, I thought sternly.

It was still dark outside, but the mist that rose from the damp earth was a pearly gray; dawn wasn't far off. Nothing stirred, inside or out, but I had the distinct sense of an ironic amusement that lay on my skin like the lightest of touches.

Shouldn't I come to see her married?

I couldn't tell whether the words had formed themselves in my thoughts, or whether they—and that kiss—were merely the product of my own subconscious. I had fallen asleep with my mind still busy with wedding preparations; little wonder that I should wake from dreams of weddings. And wedding nights.

I smoothed the rumpled muslin of my shift, uneasily aware that it was rucked up around my waist and that my skin was flushed with more than sleep. I didn't remember anything concrete about the dream that had wakened me; only a confused jumble of image and sensation. I thought perhaps that was a good thing.

I turned over on the rustling branches, nudging close to Jamie. He was warm and smelled pleasantly of woodsmoke and whisky, with a faint tang of sleepy maleness under it, like the deep note of a lingering chord. I stretched myself, very slowly, arching my back so that my pelvis nudged his hip. If he were sound asleep or disinclined, the gesture was slight enough to pass unnoticed; if he were not …

He wasn't. He smiled faintly, eyes still closed, and a big hand ran slowly down my back, settling with a firm grip on my bottom.

"Mmm?" he said. "Hmmmm." He sighed, and relaxed back into sleep, holding on.

I nestled close, reassured. The immediate physicality of Jamie was more than enough to banish the touch of lingering dreams. And Frank—if that *was* Frank—was right, so far as that went. I was sure that if such a thing were possible, Bree would want both her fathers at her wedding.

I was wide awake now, but much too comfortable to move. It was raining outside; a light rain, but the air was cold and damp enough to make the cozy nest of quilts more inviting than the distant prospect of hot coffee. Particularly since the getting of coffee would involve a trip to the stream for water, making up the campfire—oh, God, the wood would be damp, even if the fire hadn't gone completely out—grinding the coffee in a stone quern and brewing it, while wet leaves blew round my ankles and drips from overhanging tree branches slithered down my neck.

Shivering at the thought, I pulled the top quilt up over my bare shoulder and instead resumed the mental catalogue of preparations with which I had fallen asleep.

Food, drink … luckily I needn't trouble about that. Jamie's aunt Jocasta would deal with the arrangements; or rather, her black butler, Ulysses, would. Wedding guests—no difficulties there. We were in the middle of the largest Gathering of Scottish Highlanders in the Colonies, and food and drink were being provided. Engraved invitations would not be necessary.

Bree would have a new dress, at least; Jocasta's gift as well. Dark blue wool—silk was both too expensive and too impractical for life in the backwoods. It was a far cry from the white satin and orange blossom I had once envisioned her wearing to be married in—but then, this was scarcely the marriage anyone might have imagined in the 1960s.

I wondered what Frank might have thought of Brianna's husband. He likely would have approved; Roger was a historian—or once had been—like Frank himself. He was intelligent and humorous, a talented musician and a gentle man, thoroughly devoted to Brianna and little Jemmy.

Which is very admirable indeed, I thought in the direction of the mist, *under the circumstances*.

You admit that, do you? The words formed in my inner ear as though he had spoken them, ironic, mocking both himself and me.

Jamie frowned and tightened his grasp on my buttock, making small whuffling noises in his sleep.

You know I do, I said silently. *I always did, and you know it, so just bugger off, will you?!*

I turned my back firmly on the outer air and laid my head on Jamie's shoulder, seeking refuge in the feel of the soft, crumpled linen of his shirt.

I rather thought Jamie was less inclined than I—or perhaps Frank—to give Roger credit for accepting Jemmy as his own. To Jamie, it was a simple matter of obligation; an honorable man could not do otherwise. And I knew he had his doubts as to Roger's ability to support and protect a family in the Carolina wilderness. Roger was tall, well-built, and capable—but "bonnet, belt, and swordie" were the stuff of songs to Roger; to Jamie, they were the tools of his trade.

The hand on my bottom squeezed suddenly, and I started.

"Sassenach," Jamie said drowsily, "you're squirming like a toadling in a wee lad's fist. D'ye need to get up and go to the privy?"

"Oh, you're awake," I said, feeling mildly foolish.

"I am *now,*" he said. The hand fell away, and he stretched, groaning. His bare feet popped out at the far end of the quilt, long toes spread wide.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Och, dinna fash yourself," he assured me. He cleared his throat and rubbed a hand through the ruddy waves of his loosened hair, blinking. "I was dreaming like a fiend; I always do when I sleep cold." He lifted his head and peered down across the quilt, wiggling his exposed toes with disfavor. "Why did I not sleep wi' my stockings on?"

"Really? What were you dreaming about?" I asked, with a small stab of uneasiness. I rather hoped he hadn't been dreaming the same sort of thing I had.

"Horses," he said, to my immediate relief. I laughed.

"What sort of fiendish dreams could you be having about horses?"

"Oh, God, it was terrible." He rubbed his eyes with both fists and shook his head, trying to clear the dream from his mind. "All to do wi' the Irish kings. Ye ken what MacKenzie was sayin' about it, at the fire last night?"

"Irish ki—oh!" I remembered, and laughed again at the recollection. "Yes, I do."

Roger, flushed with the triumph of his new engagement, had regaled the company around the fireside the night before with songs, poems, and entertaining historical anecdotes—one of which concerned the rites with which the ancient Irish kings were said to have been crowned. One of these involved the successful candidate copulating with a white mare before the assembled multitudes, presumably to prove his virility—though I thought it would be a better proof of the gentleman's *sangfroid,* myself.

"I was in charge o' the horse," Jamie informed me. "And *everything* went wrong. The man was too short, and I had to find something for him to stand on. I found a rock, but I couldna lift it. Then a stool, but the leg came off in my hand. Then I tried to pile up bricks to make a platform, but they crumbled to sand. Finally they said it was all right, they would just cut the legs off the mare, and I was trying to stop them doing that, and the man who would be king was jerkin' at his breeks and complaining that his fly buttons wouldna come loose, and then someone noticed that it was a *black* mare, and that wouldna do at all."

I snorted, muffling my laughter in a fold of his shirt for fear of wakening someone camped near us.

"Is that when you woke up?"

"No. For some reason, I was verra much affronted at that. I said it *would* do, in fact the black was a much better horse, for everyone knows that white horses have weak een, and I said the offspring would be blind. And they said no, no, the black was ill luck, and I was insisting it was not, and …" He stopped, clearing his throat.

"And?"

He shrugged and glanced sideways at me, a faint flush creeping up his neck.

"Aye, well. I said it would do fine, I'd show them. And I had just grasped the mare's rump to stop her moving, and was getting ready to … ah … make myself king of Ireland. *That's* when I woke."

I snorted and wheezed, and felt his side vibrate with his own suppressed laughter.

"Oh, now I'm *really* sorry to have wakened you!" I wiped my eyes on the corner of the quilt. "I'm sure it was a great loss to the Irish. Though I do wonder how the queens of Ireland felt about that particular ceremony," I added as an afterthought.

"I canna think the ladies would suffer even slightly by comparison," Jamie assured me. "Though I have heard of men who prefer—"

"I wasn't thinking of *that*," I said. "It was more the hygienic implications, if you see what I mean. Putting the cart before the horse is one thing, but putting the horse before the queen …"

"The—oh, aye." He was flushed with amusement, but his skin darkened further at that. "Say what ye may about the Irish, Sassenach, but I do believe they wash now and then. And under the circumstances, the king might possibly even have found a bit of soap useful, in … in …"

"*In medias res*?" I suggested. "Surely not. I mean, after all, a horse is quite large, relatively speaking …"

"It's a matter of readiness, Sassenach, as much as room," he said, with a repressive glance in my direction. "And I can see that a man might require a bit of encouragement, under the circumstances. Though it's *in medias res*, in any case," he added. "Have ye never read Horace? Or Aristotle?"

"No. We can't all be educated. And I've never had much time for Aristotle, after hearing that he ranked women somewhere below worms in his classification of the natural world."

"The man can't have been married." Jamie's hand moved slowly up my back, fingering the knobs of my spine through my shift. "Surely he would ha' noticed the bones, else."

I smiled and lifted a hand to his own cheekbone, rising stark and clean above a tide of auburn stubble.

As I did so, I saw that the sky outside had lightened into dawn; his head was silhouetted by the pale canvas of our shelter, but I could see his face clearly. The expression on it reminded me exactly why he had taken off his stockings the night before. Unfortunately, we had both been so tired after the prolonged festivities that we had fallen asleep in mid-embrace.

I found that belated memory rather reassuring, offering as it did some explanation both for the state of my shift and for the dreams from which I had awakened. At the same time, I felt a chilly draft slide its fingers under the quilt, and shivered. Frank and Jamie were very different men, and there was no doubt in my mind as to who had kissed me, just before waking.

"Kiss me," I said suddenly to Jamie. Neither of us had yet brushed our teeth, but he obligingly skimmed my lips with his, then, when I caught the back of his head and pressed him closer, shifted his weight to one hand, the better to adjust the tangle of bedclothes round our lower limbs.

"Oh?" he said, when I released him. He smiled, blue eyes creasing into dark triangles in the dimness. "Well, to be sure, Sassenach. I must just step outside for a moment first, though."

He flung back the quilt and rose. From my position on the ground, I had a rather unorthodox view which provided me with engaging glimpses under the hem of his long linen shirt. I did hope that what

I was looking at was not the lingering result of his nightmare, but thought it better not to ask.

"You'd better hurry," I said. "It's getting light; people will be up and about soon."

He nodded and ducked outside. I lay still, listening. A few birds cheeped faintly in the distance, but this was autumn; not even full light would provoke the raucous choruses of spring and summer. The mountain and its many camps still lay slumbering, but I could feel small stirrings all around, just below the edge of hearing.

I ran my fingers through my hair, fluffing it out round my shoulders, and rolled over, looking for the water bottle. Feeling cool air on my back, I glanced over my shoulder, but dawn had come and the mist had fled; the air outside was gray but still.

I touched the gold ring on my left hand, restored to me the night before, and still unfamiliar after its long absence. Perhaps it was his ring that had summoned Frank to my dreams. Perhaps tonight at the wedding ceremony, I would touch it again, deliberately, and hope that he could see his daughter's happiness somehow through my eyes. For now, though, he was gone, and I was glad.

A small sound, no louder than the distant birdcalls, drifted through the air. The brief cry of a baby waking.

I had once thought that no matter the circumstances, there ought really to be no more than two people in a marriage bed. I still thought so. However, a baby was more difficult to banish than the ghost of a former love; Brianna and Roger's bed must perforce accommodate three.

The edge of the canvas lifted, and Jamie's face appeared, looking excited and alarmed.

"Ye'd best get up and dress, Claire," he said. "The soldiers are drawn up by the creek. Where are my stockings?"

I sat bolt upright, and far down the mountainside the drums began to roll.

Cold fog lay like smoke in the hollows all round; a cloud had settled on Mount Helicon like a broody hen on a single egg, and the air was thick with damp. I blinked blearily across a stretch of rough grass, to where a detachment of the 67th Highland regiment was drawn up in full splendor by the creek, drums rumbling and the company piper tootling away, grandly impervious to the rain.

I was very cold, and more than slightly cross. I'd gone to bed in the expectation of waking to hot coffee and a nourishing breakfast, this to be followed by two weddings, three christenings, two tooth extractions, the removal of an infected toenail, and other entertaining forms of wholesome social intercourse requiring whisky.

Instead, I'd been wakened by unsettling dreams, led into amorous dalliance, and then dragged out into a cold drizzle *in medias* bloody *res*, apparently to hear a proclamation of some sort. No coffee yet, either.

It had taken some time for the Highlanders in their camps to rouse themselves and stagger down the hillside, and the piper had gone quite purple in the face before he at last blew the final blast and left off with a discordant wheeze. The echoes were still ringing off the mountainside, as Lieutenant Archibald Hayes stepped out before his men.

Lieutenant Hayes's nasal Fife accent carried well, and the wind was with him. Still, I was sure the people farther up the mountain could hear very little. Standing as we did at the foot of the slope, though, we were no more than twenty yards from the Lieutenant and I could hear every word, in spite of the chattering of my teeth.

"By his EXCELLENCY, WILLIAM TRYON, Esquire, His Majesty's Captain-General, Governor, and Commander-in-Chief, in and over the said Province," Hayes read, lifting his voice in a bellow to carry above the noises of wind and water, and the premonitory murmurs of the crowd.

The moisture shrouded trees and rocks with dripping mist, the clouds spat intermittent sleet and freezing rain, and erratic winds had lowered the temperature by some thirty degrees. My left shin, sensitive to cold, throbbed at the spot where I had broken the bone two years before. A person given to portents and metaphors might have been tempted to draw comparisons between the nasty weather and the reading of the Governor's Proclamation, I thought—the prospects were similarly chill and foreboding.

"Whereas," Hayes boomed, glowering at the crowd over his paper, *"I have received information that a great Number of outrageous and disorderly Persons did tumultuously assemble themselves together in the Town of Hillsborough, on the 24th and 25th of last Month, during the sitting of the Superior Court of Justice of that District to oppose the Just Measures of Government and in open Violation of the Laws of their Country, audaciously attacking his Majesty's Associate Justice in the Execution of his Office, and barbarously beating and wounding several Persons in and during the sitting of said Court, and offering other enormous Indignities and Insults to his Majesty's Government, committing the most violent Outrages on the Persons and properties of the Inhabitants of the said Town, drinking Damnation to their lawful Sovereign King George and Success to the Pretender—"*

Hayes paused, gulping air with which to accomplish the next clause. Inflating his chest with an audible whoosh, he read on:

"To the End therefore, that the Persons concerned in the said outrageous Acts may be brought to Justice, I do, by the Advice and Consent of his Majesty's Council, issue this my Proclamation, hereby requiring and strictly enjoining all his Majesty's Justices of the Peace in this Government to make diligent Inquiry into the above recited Crimes, and to receive the Deposition of such Person or Persons as shall appear before them to make Information of and concerning the same; which Depositions are to be transmitted to me, in Order to be laid before the General Assembly, at New Bern, on the 30th day of November next, to which time it stands Prorogued for the immediate Dispatch of Public Business."

A final inhalation; Hayes's face was nearly as purple as the piper's by now.

"Given under my Hand, and the Great Seal of the Province, at New Bern, the 18th Day of October, in the 10th Year of his Majesty's Reign, Anno Domini 1770.

"Signed, William Tryon," Hayes concluded, with a final puff of steamy breath.

"Do you know," I remarked to Jamie, "I believe that was all one single sentence, bar the closing. Amazing, even for a politician."

"Hush, Sassenach," he said, his eyes still fixed on Archie Hayes. There was a subdued rumble from the crowd behind me, of interest and consternation—touched with a certain amount of amusement at the phrases regarding treasonous toasts.

This was a Gathering of Highlanders, many of them exiled to the Colonies in the wake of the Stuart Rising, and had Archie Hayes chosen to take official notice of what was said over the cups of ale and whisky passed round the fires the night before … but then, he had but forty soldiers with him, and whatever his own opinions of King George and that monarch's possible damnation, he kept them wisely to himself.

Some four hundred Highlanders surrounded Hayes's small beachhead on the creekbank, summoned by the tattoo of drums. Men and women sheltered among the trees above the clearing, plaids and arisaids pulled tight against the rising wind. They too were keeping their own counsel, judging from the array of stony faces visible under the flutter of scarves and bonnets. Of course, their expressions might derive from cold as much as from natural caution; my own cheeks were stiff, the end of my nose had gone numb, and I hadn't felt my feet anytime since daybreak.

"Any person wishing to make declaration concerning these most serious matters may entrust such statements safely to my care," Hayes announced, his round face an official blank. "I will remain in my tent with my clerk for the rest of the day. God save the King!"

He handed the Proclamation to his corporal, bowed to the crowd in dismissal, and turned smartly toward a large canvas tent that had been erected near the trees, regimental banners flapping wildly from a standard next to it.

Shivering, I slid a hand into the slit of Jamie's cloak and over the crook of his arm, my cold fingers comforted by the warmth of his body. Jamie pressed his elbow briefly to his side in acknowledgment of my frozen grasp, but didn't look down at me; he was studying

Archie Hayes's retreating back, eyes narrowed against the sting of the wind.

A compact and solid man, of inconsequent height but considerable presence, the Lieutenant moved with great deliberation, as though oblivious of the crowd on the hillside above. He vanished into his tent, leaving the flap invitingly tied up.

Not for the first time, I reluctantly admired Governor Tryon's political instincts. This Proclamation was clearly being read in towns and villages throughout the colony; he could have relied on a local magistrate or sheriff to carry his message of official fury to this Gathering. Instead, he had taken the trouble to send Hayes.

Archibald Hayes had taken the field at Culloden by his father's side, at the age of twelve. Wounded in the fight, he had been captured and sent south. Presented with a choice of transportation or joining the army, he had taken the King's shilling and made the best of it. The fact that he had risen to be an officer in his mid-thirties, in a time when most commissions were bought rather than earned, was sufficient testimony to his abilities.

He was as personable as he was professional; invited to share our food and fire the day before, he had spent half the night talking with Jamie—and the other half moving from fire to fire under the aegis of Jamie's presence, being introduced to the heads of all the important families present.

And whose notion had that been? I wondered, looking up at Jamie. His long, straight nose was reddened by the cold, his eyes hooded from the wind, but his face gave no inkling of what he was thinking. And that, I thought, was a bloody good indication that he was thinking something rather dangerous. Had he known about this Proclamation?

No English officer, with an English troop, could have brought such news into a Gathering like this, with any hope of cooperation. But Hayes and his Highlanders, stalwart in their tartan … I didn't miss the fact that Hayes had had his tent erected with its back to a thick grove of pines; anyone who wished to speak to the Lieutenant in secret could approach through the woods, unseen.

"Does Hayes expect someone to pop out of the crowd, rush into his tent, and surrender on the spot?" I murmured to Jamie. I personally knew of at least a dozen men among those present who had taken part in the Hillsborough riots; three of them were standing within arm's length of us.

Jamie saw the direction of my glance and put his hand over mine, squeezing it in a silent adjuration of discretion. I lowered my brows at him; surely he didn't think I would give anyone away by inadvertence? He gave me a faint smile and one of those annoying marital looks that said, more plainly than words, *You know how ye are, Sassenach. Anyone who sees your face kens just what ye think.*

I sidled in a little closer, and kicked him discreetly in the ankle. I might have a glass face, but it certainly wouldn't arouse comment in a crowd like this! He didn't wince, but the smile spread a little wider. He slid one arm inside my cloak, and drew me closer, his hand on my back.

Hobson, MacLennan, and Fowles stood together just in front of us, talking quietly among themselves. All three came from a tiny settlement called Drunkard's Creek, some fifteen miles from our own place on Fraser's Ridge. Hugh Fowles was Joe Hobson's son-in-law, and very young, no more than twenty. He was doing his best to keep his composure, but his face had gone white and clammy as the Proclamation was read.

I didn't know what Tryon intended to do to anyone who could be proved to have had a part in the riot, but I could feel the currents of unrest created by the Governor's Proclamation passing through the crowd like the eddies of water rushing over rocks in the nearby creek.

Several buildings had been destroyed in Hillsborough, and a number of public officials dragged out and assaulted in the street. Gossip had it that one ironically titled justice of the peace had lost an eye to a vicious blow aimed with a horsewhip. No doubt taking this demonstration of civil disobedience to heart, Chief Justice Henderson had escaped out of a window and fled the town, thus effectively preventing the Court from sitting. It was clear that the

Governor was *very* annoyed about what had happened in Hillsborough.

Joe Hobson glanced back at Jamie, then away. Lieutenant Hayes's presence at our fire the previous evening had not gone unremarked.

If Jamie saw the glance, he didn't return it. He lifted one shoulder in a shrug, tilting his head down to speak to me.

"I shouldna think Hayes expects anyone to give themselves up, no. It may be his duty to ask for information; I thank God it isna mine to answer." He hadn't spoken loudly, but loudly enough to reach the ears of Joe Hobson.

Hobson turned his head and gave Jamie a small nod of wry acknowledgment. He touched his son-in-law's arm, and they turned away, scrambling up the slope toward the scattered campsites above, where their womenfolk were tending the fires and the younger children.

This was the last day of the Gathering; tonight there would be marryings and christenings, the formal blessing of love and its riotous fruits, sprung from the loins of the unchurched multitude during the year before. Then the last songs would be sung, the last stories told, and dancing done amid the leaping flames of many fires—rain or no rain. Come morning, the Scots and their households would all disperse back to their homes, scattered from the settled banks of the Cape Fear River to the wild mountains of the west—carrying news of the Governor's Proclamation and the doings at Hillsborough.

I wiggled my toes inside my damp shoes and wondered uneasily who among the crowd might think it their duty to answer Hayes's invitation to confession or incrimination. Not Jamie, no. But others might. There had been a good deal of boasting about the riots in Hillsborough during the week of the Gathering, but not all the listeners were disposed to view the rioters as heroes, by any means.

I could feel as well as hear the mutter of conversation breaking out in the wake of the Proclamation; heads turning, families drawing close together, men moving from group to group, as the content of Hayes's speech was relayed up the hill, repeated to those who stood too far away to have heard it.

"Shall we go? There's a lot to do yet before the weddings."

"Aye?" Jamie glanced down at me. "I thought Jocasta's slaves were managing the food and drink. I gave Ulysses the barrels of whisky—he'll be *soghan.*"

"Ulysses? Did he bring his wig?" I smiled at the thought. The *soghan* was the man who managed the dispensing of drink and refreshment at a Highland wedding; the term actually meant something like "hearty, jovial fellow." Ulysses was possibly the most dignified person I had ever seen—even without his livery and powdered horsehair wig.

"If he did, it's like to be stuck to his head by the evening." Jamie glanced up at the lowering sky and shook his head. "Happy the bride the sun shines on," he quoted. "Happy the corpse the rain falls on."

"That's what I like about Scots," I said dryly. "An appropriate proverb for all occasions. Don't you dare say that in front of Bree."

"What d'ye take me for, Sassenach?" he demanded, with a half-smile down at me. "I'm her father, no?"

"Definitely yes." I suppressed the sudden thought of Brianna's other father, and glanced over my shoulder, to be sure she wasn't in hearing.

There was no sign of her blazing head among those nearby. Certainly her father's daughter, she stood six feet tall in her stocking feet; nearly as easy as Jamie himself to pick out of a crowd.

"It's not the wedding feast I need to deal with, anyway," I said, turning back to Jamie. "I've got to manage breakfast, then do the morning clinic with Murray MacLeod."

"Oh, aye? I thought ye said wee Murray was a charlatan."

"I said he was ignorant, stubborn, and a menace to the public health," I corrected. "That's not the same thing—quite."

"Quite," said Jamie, grinning. "Ye mean to educate him, then—or poison him?"

"Whichever seems most effective. If nothing else, I might accidentally step on his fleam and break it; that's probably the only way I'll stop him bleeding people. Let's go, though, I'm freezing!"

"Aye, we'll away, then," Jamie agreed, with a glance at the soldiers, still drawn up along the creekbank at parade rest. "No doubt wee Archie means to keep his lads there 'til the crowd's gone; they're going a wee bit blue round the edges."

Though fully armed and uniformed, the row of Highlanders was relaxed; imposing, to be sure, but no longer threatening. Small boys —and not a few wee girls—scampered to and fro among them, impudently flicking the hems of the soldiers' kilts or dashing in, greatly daring, to touch the gleaming muskets, dangling canteens, and the hilts of dirks and swords.

"Abel, *a charaid*!" Jamie had paused to greet the last of the men from Drunkard's Creek. "Will ye ha' eaten yet the day?"

MacLennan had not brought his wife to the Gathering, and thus ate where luck took him. The crowd was dispersing around us, but he stood stolidly in place, holding the ends of a red flannel handkerchief pulled over his balding head against the spatter of rain. Probably hoping to cadge an invitation to breakfast, I thought cynically.

I eyed his stocky form, mentally estimating his possible consumption of eggs, parritch, and toasted bread against the dwindling supplies in our hampers. Not that simple shortage of food would stop any Highlander from offering hospitality—certainly not Jamie, who was inviting MacLennan to join us, even as I mentally divided eighteen eggs by nine people instead of eight. Not fried, then; made into fritters with grated potatoes, and I'd best borrow more coffee from Jocasta's campsite on the way up the mountain.

We turned to go, and Jamie's hand slid suddenly downward over my backside. I made an undignified sound, and Abel MacLennan turned round to gawk at me. I smiled brightly at him, resisting the urge to kick Jamie again, less discreetly.

MacLennan turned away, and scrambled up the slope in front of us with alacrity, coattails bouncing in anticipation over worn breeks. Jamie put a hand under my elbow to help me over the rocks, bending down as he did so to mutter in my ear.

"Why the devil are ye not wearing a petticoat, Sassenach?" he hissed. "Ye've nothing at all on under your skirt—you'll catch your death of cold!"

"You're not wrong there," I said, shivering in spite of my cloak. I did in fact have on a linen shift under my gown, but it was a thin, ragged thing, suitable for rough camping-out in summertime, but quite insufficient to stem the wintry blasts that blew through my skirt as though it were cheesecloth.

"Ye had a fine woolen petticoat yesterday. What's become of it?"

"You don't want to know," I assured him.

His eyebrows went up at this, but before he could ask further questions, a scream rang out behind us.

"Germain!"

I turned to see a small blond head, hair flying as the owner streaked down the slope below the rocks. Two-year-old Germain had taken advantage of his mother's preoccupation with his newborn sister to escape custody and make a dash for the row of soldiers. Eluding capture, he charged headlong down the slope, picking up speed like a rolling stone.

"Fergus!" Marsali screamed. Germain's father, hearing his name, turned round from his conversation, just in time to see his son trip over a rock and fly headlong. A born acrobat, the little boy made no move to save himself, but collapsed gracefully, rolling into a ball like a hedgehog as he struck the grassy slope on one shoulder. He rolled like a cannonball through the ranks of soldiers, shot off the edge of a rocky shelf, and plopped with a splash into the creek.

There was a general gasp of consternation, and a number of people ran down the hill to help, but one of the soldiers had already hurried to the bank. Kneeling, he thrust the tip of his bayonet through the child's floating clothes and towed the soggy bundle to the shore.

Fergus charged into the icy shallows, reaching out to clasp his waterlogged son.

"Merci, mon ami, mille merci beaucoup," he said to the young soldier. *"Et toi, toto,"* he said, addressing his spluttering offspring with a small shake. *"Comment ça va,* ye wee chowderheid?"

The soldier looked startled, but I couldn't tell whether the cause was Fergus's unique patois, or the sight of the gleaming hook he wore in place of his missing left hand.

"That's all right then, sir," he said, with a shy smile. "He'll no be damaged, I think."

Brianna appeared suddenly from behind a chinkapin tree, six-month-old Jemmy on one shoulder, and scooped baby Joan neatly out of Marsali's arms.

"Here, give Joanie to me," she said. "You go take care of Germain."

Jamie swung the heavy cloak from his shoulders and laid it in Marsali's arms in place of the baby.

"Aye, and tell the soldier laddie who saved him to come and share our fire," he told her. "We can feed another, Sassenach?"

"Of course," I said, swiftly readjusting my mental calculations. Eighteen eggs, four loaves of stale bread for toast—no, I should keep back one for the trip home tomorrow—three dozen oatcakes if Jamie and Roger hadn't eaten them already, half a jar of honey …

Marsali's thin face lighted with a rueful smile, shared among the three of us, then she was gone, hastening to the aid of her drenched and shivering menfolk.

Jamie looked after her with a sigh of resignation, as the wind caught the full sleeves of his shirt and belled them out with a muffled *whoomp*. He crossed his arms across his chest, hunching his shoulders against the wind, and smiled down at me, sidelong.

"Ah, well. I suppose we shall both freeze together, Sassenach. That's all right, though. I wouldna want to live without ye, anyway."

"Ha," I said amiably. "You could live naked on an ice floe, Jamie Fraser, and melt it. What have you done with your coat and plaid?" He wore nothing besides his kilt and sark save shoes and stockings, and his high cheekbones were reddened with cold, like the tips of his ears. When I slipped a hand back inside the crook of his arm, though, he was warm as ever.

"Ye dinna want to know," he said, grinning. He covered my hand with one large, callused palm. "Let's go; I'm starved for my breakfast."

"Wait," I said, detaching myself. Jemmy was indisposed to share his mother's embrace with the newcomer, and howled and squirmed in protest, his small round face going red with annoyance under a blue knitted cap. I reached out and took him from Brianna, as he wriggled and fussed in his wrappings.

"Thanks, Mama." Brianna smiled briefly, boosting tiny Joan into a more secure position against her shoulder. "Are you sure you want that one, though? This one's quieter—and weighs half as much."

"No, he's all right. Hush, sweetie, come see Grannie." I smiled as I said it, with the still-new feeling of mingled surprise and delight that I could actually be someone's grandmother. Recognizing me, Jemmy abandoned his fuss and went promptly into his mussel-clinging-to-a-rock routine, chubby fists gripped tight in my hair. Disentangling his fingers, I peered over his head, but things below seemed under control.

Fergus, breeches and stockings soaking wet, Jamie's cloak draped round his shoulders, was wringing out his shirtfront one-handed, saying something to the soldier who had rescued Germain. Marsali had whipped off her arisaid and wrapped the little boy in it, her loosened blond hair flying out from under her kerch like cobwebs in the wind.

Lieutenant Hayes, attracted by the noise, was peering out from the flap of his tent like a whelk from its shell. He looked up, and caught my eye; I waved briefly, then turned to follow my own family back to our campsite.

Jamie was saying something to Brianna in Gaelic, as he helped her over a rocky patch in the trail ahead of me.

"Yes, I'm ready," she said, replying in English. "Where's your coat, Da?"

"I lent it to your husband," he said. "We dinna want him to look a beggar at your wedding, aye?"

Bree laughed, wiping a flying strand of red hair out of her mouth with her free hand.

"Better a beggar than an attempted suicide."

"A what?" I caught up with them as we emerged from the shelter of the rocks. The wind barreled across the open space, pelting us with sleet and bits of stinging gravel, and I pulled the knitted cap further down over Jemmy's ears, then pulled the blanket up over his head.

"Whoof!" Brianna hunched over the swaddled baby girl she carried, sheltering her from the blast. "Roger was shaving when the drums started up; he nearly cut his throat. The front of his coat is covered with bloodstains." She glanced at Jamie, eyes watering with the wind. "So you've seen him this morning. Where is he now, do you know?"

"The lad's in one piece," he assured her. "I told him to go and talk wi' Father Donahue, while Hayes was about his business." He gave her a sharp look. "Ye might have told me the lad was no a Catholic."

"I might," she said, unperturbed. "But I didn't. It's no big deal to me."

"If ye mean by that peculiar expression, that it's of no consequence—" Jamie began with a distinct edge in his voice, but was interrupted by the appearance of Roger himself, resplendent in a kilt of green-and-white MacKenzie tartan, with the matching plaid draped over Jamie's good coat and waistcoat. The coat fit decently—both men were of a size, long-limbed and broad-shouldered, though Jamie was an inch or two the taller—and the gray wool was quite as becoming to Roger's dark hair and olive skin as it was to Jamie's burnished auburn coloring.

"You look very nice, Roger," I said. "Where did you cut yourself?" His face was pink, with the raw look common to just-shaved skin, but otherwise unmarked.

Roger was carrying Jamie's plaid under his arm, a bundle of red and black tartan. He handed it over and tilted his head to one side, showing me the deep gash just under his jawbone.

"Just there. Not so bad, but it bled like the dickens. They don't call them cutthroat razors for nothing, aye?"

The gash had already crusted into a neat dark line, a cut some three inches long, angled down from the corner of his jaw across the side of his throat. I touched the skin near it briefly. Not bad; the blade of the razor had cut straight in, no flap of skin needing suture.

No wonder it had bled a lot, though; it did look as though he had tried to cut his throat.

"A bit nervous this morning?" I teased. "Not having second thoughts, are you?"

"A little late for that," Brianna said dryly, coming up beside me. "Got a kid who needs a name, after all."

"He'll have more names than he knows what to do with," Roger assured her. "So will you—Mrs. MacKenzie."

A small flush lit Brianna's face at the name, and she smiled at him. He leaned over and kissed her on the forehead, taking the cocooned baby from her as he did so. A look of sudden shock crossed his face as he felt the weight of the bundle in his arms, and he gawked down at it.

"That's not ours," Bree said, grinning at his look of consternation. "It's Marsali's Joan. Mama has Jemmy."

"Thank God," he said, holding the bundle with a good deal more caution. "I thought he'd evaporated or something." He lifted the blanket slightly, exposing tiny Joan's sleeping face, and smiled—as people always did—at sight of her comical quiff of brown hair, which came to a point like a Kewpie doll's.

"Not a chance," I said, grunting as I hoisted a well-nourished Jemmy, now peacefully comatose in his own wrappings, into a more comfortable position. "I think he's gained a pound or two on the way uphill." I was flushed from exertion, and held the baby a little away from myself, as a sudden wave of heat flushed my cheeks and perspiration broke out under the waves of my disheveled hair.

Jamie took Jemmy from me, and tucked him expertly under one arm like a football, one hand cupping the baby's head.

"Ye've spoken wi' the priest, then?" he said, eyeing Roger skeptically.

"I have," Roger said dryly, answering the look as much as the question. "He's satisfied I'm no the Anti-Christ. So long as I'm willing the lad should be baptized Catholic, there's no bar to the wedding. I've said I'm willing."

Jamie grunted in reply, and I repressed a smile. While Jamie had no great religious prejudices—he had dealt with, fought with, and commanded far too many men, of every possible background—the revelation that his son-in-law was a Presbyterian—and had no intention of converting—had occasioned some small comment.

Bree caught my eye and gave me a sidelong smile, her own eyes creasing into blue triangles of catlike amusement.

“Very wise of you not to mention religion ahead of time,” I murmured, careful not to speak loudly enough for Jamie to hear me. Both men were walking ahead of us, still rather stiff in their attitudes, though the formality of their demeanor was rather impaired by the trailing draperies of the babies they carried.

Jemmy let out a sudden squawk, but his grandfather swung him up without breaking stride, and he subsided, round eyes fixed on us over Jamie’s shoulder, sheltered under the hooding of his blanket. I made a face at him, and he broke into a huge, gummy smile.

“Roger wanted to say something, but I told him to keep quiet.” Bree stuck out her tongue and wiggled it at Jemmy, then fixed a wifely look on Roger’s back. “I knew Da wouldn’t make a stramash about it, if we waited ’til just before the wedding.”

I noted both her astute evaluation of her father’s behavior, and her easy use of Scots. She resembled Jamie in a good deal more than the obvious matter of looks and coloring; she had his talent for human judgment and his glibness with language. Still, there was something niggling at my mind, something to do with Roger and religion …

We had come up close enough behind the men to hear their conversation.

“… about Hillsborough,” Jamie was saying, leaning toward Roger so as to be heard over the wind. “Calling for information about the rioters.”

“Oh, aye?” Roger sounded both interested and wary. “Duncan Innes will be interested to hear that. He was in Hillsborough during the troubles, did you know?”

“No.” Jamie sounded more than interested. “I’ve barely seen Duncan to speak to this week. I’ll ask him, maybe, after the wedding —if he lives through it.” Duncan was to marry Jamie’s aunt, Jocasta

Cameron, in the evening, and was nervous to the point of prostration over the prospect.

Roger turned, shielding Joan from the wind with his body as he spoke to Brianna.

“Your aunt’s told Father Donahue he can hold the weddings in her tent. That’ll be a help.”

“Brrrr!” Bree hunched her shoulders, shivering. “Thank goodness. It’s no day to be getting married under the greenwood tree.”

A huge chestnut overhead sent down a damp shower of yellow leaves, as though in agreement. Roger looked a little uneasy.

“I don’t imagine it’s quite the wedding you maybe thought of,” he said. “When ye were a wee girl.”

Brianna looked up at Roger and a slow, wide smile spread across her face. “Neither was the first one,” she said. “But I liked it fine.”

Roger’s complexion wasn’t given to blushing, and his ears were red with cold in any case. He opened his mouth as though to reply, caught Jamie’s gimlet eye, and shut it again, looking embarrassed but undeniably pleased.

“Mr. Fraser!”

I turned to see one of the soldiers making his way up the hill toward us, his eyes fixed on Jamie.

“Corporal MacNair, your servant, sir,” he said, breathing hard as he reached us. He gave a sharp inclination of the head. “The Lieutenant’s compliments, and would ye be so good as to attend him in his tent?” He caught sight of me, and bowed again, less abruptly. “Mrs. Fraser. My compliments, ma’am.”

“Your servant, sir.” Jamie returned the Corporal’s bow. “My apologies to the Lieutenant, but I have duties that require my attendance elsewhere.” He spoke politely, but the Corporal glanced sharply up at him. MacNair was young, but not callow; a quick look of understanding crossed his lean, dark face. The last thing any man would want was to be seen going into Hayes’s tent by himself, immediately following that Proclamation.

“The Lieutenant bids me request the attendance upon him of Mr. Farquard Campbell, Mr. Andrew MacNeill, Mr. Gerald Forbes, Mr. Duncan Innes, and Mr. Randall Lillywhite, as well as yourself, sir.”

A certain amount of tension left Jamie's shoulders.

"Does he," he said dryly. So Hayes meant to consult the powerful men of the area: Farquard Campbell and Andrew MacNeill were large landowners and local magistrates; Gerald Forbes a prominent solicitor from Cross Creek, and a justice of the peace; Lillywhite a magistrate of the circuit court. And Duncan Innes was about to become the largest plantation owner in the western half of the colony, by virtue of his impending marriage to Jamie's widowed aunt. Jamie himself was neither rich nor an official of the Crown—but he *was* the proprietor of a large, if still largely vacant, land grant in the backcountry.

He gave a slight shrug and shifted the baby to his other shoulder, settling himself.

"Aye. Well, then. Tell the Lieutenant I shall attend him as soon as may be convenient."

Nothing daunted, MacNair bowed and went off, presumably in search of the other gentlemen on his list.

"And what's all that about?" I asked Jamie. "Oops." I reached up and skimmed a glistening strand of saliva from Jemmy's chin before it could reach Jamie's shirt. "Starting a new tooth, are we?"

"I've plenty of teeth," Jamie assured me, "and so have you, so far as I can see. As to what Hayes may want with me, I canna say for sure. And I dinna mean to find out before I must, either." He cocked one ruddy eyebrow at me, and I laughed.

"Oh, a certain flexibility in that word 'convenient,' is there?"

"I didna say it would be convenient for *him*," Jamie pointed out. "Now, about your petticoat, Sassenach, and why you're scampering about the forest bare-arsed—Duncan, *a charaid*!" The wry look on his face melted into genuine pleasure at sight of Duncan Innes, making his way toward us through a small growth of bare-limbed dogwood.

Duncan clambered over a fallen log, the process made rather awkward by his missing left arm, and arrived on the path beside us, shaking water droplets from his hair. He was already dressed for his wedding, in a clean ruffled shirt and starched linen stock above his kilt, and a coat of scarlet broadcloth trimmed in gold lace, the empty sleeve pinned up with a brooch. I had never seen Duncan look so elegant, and said so.

"Och, well," he said diffidently. "Miss Jo did wish it." He shrugged off the compliment along with the rain, carefully brushing away dead needles and bits of bark that had adhered to his coat in the passage through the pines.

"Brrr! A gruesome day, *Mac Dubh*, and no mistake." He looked up at the sky and shook his head. "Happy the bride the sun shines on; happy the corpse the rain falls on."

"I do wonder just how delighted you can expect the average corpse to be," I said, "whatever the meteorological conditions. But I'm sure Jocasta will be quite happy regardless," I added hastily, seeing a look of bewilderment spread itself across Duncan's features. "And you too, of course!"

"Oh … aye," he said, a little uncertainly. "Aye, of course. I thank ye, ma'am."

"When I saw ye coming through the wood, I thought perhaps Corporal MacNair was nippin' at your heels," Jamie said. "You're no on your way to see Archie Hayes, are you?"

Duncan looked quite startled.

"Hayes? No, what would the Lieutenant want wi' me?"

"You were in Hillsborough in September, aye? Here, Sassenach, take this wee squirrel away." Jamie interrupted himself to hand me Jemmy, who had decided to take a more active interest in the proceedings and was attempting to climb his grandfather's torso, digging in his toes and making loud grunting noises. The sudden activity, however, was not Jamie's chief motive for relieving himself of the burden, as I discovered when I accepted Jemmy.

"Thanks a lot," I said, wrinkling my nose. Jamie grinned at me, and turned Duncan up the path, resuming their conversation.

"Hmm," I said, sniffing cautiously. "Finished, are you? No, I thought not." Jemmy closed his eyes, went bright red, and emitted a popping noise like muffled machine-gun fire. I undid his wrappings sufficiently to peek down his back.

"Whoops," I said, and hastily unwound the blanket, just in time. "*What* has your mother been feeding you?"

Thrilled to have escaped his swaddling bands, Jemmy churned his legs like a windmill, causing a noxious yellowish substance to ooze from the baggy legs of his diaper.

“Pew,” I said succinctly, and holding him at arm’s length, headed off the path toward one of the tiny rivulets that meandered down the mountainside, thinking that while I could perhaps do without such amenities as indoor plumbing and motorcars, there were times when I sincerely missed things like rubber pants with elasticated legs. To say nothing of toilet rolls.

I found a good spot on the edge of the little stream, with a thick coating of dead leaves. I knelt, laid out a fold of my cloak, and parked Jemmy on it on his hands and knees, pulling the soggy clout off without bothering to unpin it.

“Weee!” he said, sounding surprised as the cold air struck him. He clenched his fat little buttocks and hunched like a small pink toad.

“Ha,” I told him. “If you think a cold wind up the bum is bad, just wait.” I scooped up a handful of damp yellow-brown leaves, and cleaned him off briskly. A fairly stoic child, he wiggled and squirmed, but didn’t screech, instead making high-pitched “Eeeeee” noises as I excavated his crevices.

I flipped him over, and with a hand held prophylactically over the danger zone, administered a similar treatment to his private parts, this eliciting a wide, gummy grin.

“Oh, you *are* a Hieland man, aren’t you?” I said, smiling back.

“And just what d’ye mean by that remark, Sassenach?” I looked up to find Jamie leaning against a tree on the other side of the streamlet. The bold colors of his dress tartan and white linen sark stood out bright against the faded autumn foliage; face and hair, though, made him look like some denizen of the wood, all bronze and auburn, with the wind stirring his hair so the free ends danced like the scarlet maple leaves above.

“Well, he’s apparently impervious to cold and damp,” I said, concluding my labors and discarding the final handful of soiled leaves. “Beyond that … well, I’ve not had much to do with male infants before, but isn’t this rather precocious?”

One corner of Jamie's mouth curled up, as he peered at the prospect revealed under my hand. The tiny appendage stood up stiff as my thumb, and roughly the same size.

"Ah, no," he said. "I've seen a many wee lads in the raw. They all do that now and again." He shrugged, and the smile grew wider. "Now, whether it's only *Scottish* lads, I couldna be saying …"

"A talent that improves with age, I daresay," I said dryly. I tossed the dirty clout across the streamlet, where it landed at his feet with a splat. "Get the pins and rinse that out, will you?"

His long, straight nose wrinkled slightly, but he knelt without demur and picked the filthy thing up gingerly between two fingers.

"Oh, so *that's* what ye've done wi' your petticoat," he said. I had opened the large pocket I wore slung at my waist and extracted a clean, folded rectangle of cloth. Not the unbleached linen of the clout he held, but a thick, soft, often-washed wool flannel, dyed a pale red with the juice of currants.

I shrugged, checked Jemmy for the prospect of fresh explosions, and popped him onto the new diaper.

"With three babies all in clouts, and the weather too damp to dry anything properly, we were rather short of clean bits." The bushes around the clearing where we had made our family camp were all festooned with flapping laundry, most of it still wet, owing to the inopportune weather.

"Here." Jamie stretched across the foot-wide span of rock-strewn water to hand me the pins extracted from the old diaper. I took them, careful not to drop them in the stream. My fingers were stiff and chilly, but the pins were valuable; Bree had made them of heated wire, and Roger had carved the capped heads from wood, in accordance with her drawings. Honest-to-goodness safety pins, if a bit larger and cruder than the modern version. The only real defect was the glue used to hold the wooden heads to the wire; made from boiled milk and hoof parings, it was not entirely waterproof, and the heads had to be reglued periodically.

I folded the diaper snugly about Jemmy's loins and thrust a pin through the cloth, smiling at sight of the wooden cap. Bree had taken one set and carved a small, comical frog—each with a wide, toothless grin—onto each one.

“All right, Froggie, here you go, then.” Diaper securely fastened, I sat down and boosted him into my lap, smoothing down his smock and attempting to rewrap his blanket.

“Where did Duncan go?” I asked. “Down to see the Lieutenant?”

Jamie shook his head, bent over his task.

“I told him not to go yet. He *was* in Hillsborough during the troubles there. Best he should wait a bit; then if Hayes should ask, he can swear honestly there’s no man here who took part in the riots.” He looked up and smiled, without humor. “There won’t be, come nightfall.”

I watched his hands, large and capable, wringing out the rinsed clout. The scars on his right hand were usually almost invisible, but they stood out now, ragged white lines against his cold-reddened skin. The whole business made me mildly uneasy, though there seemed no direct connection with us.

For the most part, I could think of Governor Tryon with no more than a faint sense of edginess; he was, after all, safely tucked away in his nice new palace in New Bern, separated from our tiny settlement on Fraser’s Ridge by three hundred miles of coastal towns, inland plantations, pine forest, piedmont, trackless mountains, and sheer howling wilderness. With all the other things he had to worry about, such as the self-styled “Regulators” who had terrorized Hillsborough, and the corrupt sheriffs and judges who had provoked the terror, I hardly thought he would have time to spare a thought for us. I hoped not.

The uncomfortable fact remained that Jamie held title to a large grant of land in the North Carolina mountains as the gift of Governor Tryon—and Tryon in turn held one small but important fact tucked away in his vest pocket: Jamie was a Catholic. And Royal grants of land could be made only to Protestants, by law.

Given the tiny number of Catholics in the colony, and the lack of organization among them, the question of religion was rarely an issue. There were no Catholic churches, no resident Catholic priests; Father Donahue had made the arduous journey down from

Baltimore, at Jocasta's request. Jamie's aunt Jocasta and her late husband, Hector Cameron, had been influential among the Scottish community here for so long that no one would have thought of questioning their religious background, and I thought it likely that few of the Scots with whom we had been celebrating all week knew that we were Papists.

They were, however, likely to notice quite soon. Bree and Roger, who had been handfasted for a year, were to be married by the priest this evening, along with two other Catholic couples from Bremerton—and with Jocasta and Duncan Innes.

"Archie Hayes," I said suddenly. "Is he a Catholic?"

Jamie hung the wet clout from a nearby branch and shook water from his hands.

"I havena asked him," he said, "but I shouldna think so. That is, his father was not; I should be surprised if he was—and him an officer."

"True." The disadvantages of Scottish birth, poverty, and being an ex-Jacobite were sufficiently staggering; amazing enough that Hayes had overcome these to rise to his present position, without the additional burden of the taint of Papistry.

What was troubling me, though, was not the thought of Lieutenant Hayes and his men; it was Jamie. Outwardly, he was calm and assured as ever, with that faint smile always hiding in the corner of his mouth. But I knew him very well; I had seen the two stiff fingers of his right hand—maimed in an English prison—twitch against the side of his leg as he traded jokes and stories with Hayes the night before. Even now, I could see the thin line that formed between his brows when he was troubled, and it wasn't concern over what he was doing.

Was it simply worry over the Proclamation? I couldn't see why that should be, given that none of our folk had been involved in the Hillsborough riots.

"… a Presbyterian," he was saying. He glanced over at me with a wry smile. "Like wee Roger."

The memory that had niggled at me earlier dropped suddenly into place.

"You knew that," I said. "You *knew* Roger wasn't a Catholic. You saw him baptize that child in Snaketown, when we … took him from the Indians." Too late, I saw the shadow cross his face, and bit my tongue. When we took Roger—and left in his place Jamie's dearly loved nephew Ian.

A shadow crossed his face momentarily, but he smiled, pushing away the thought of Ian.

"Aye, I did," he said.

"But Bree—"

"She'd marry the lad if he were a Hottentot," Jamie interrupted. "Anyone can see that. And I canna say I'd object overmuch to wee Roger if he *were* a Hottentot," he added, rather to my surprise.

"You wouldn't?"

Jamie shrugged, and stepped over the tiny creek to my side, wiping wet hands on the end of his plaid.

"He's a braw lad, and he's kind. He's taken the wean as his own and said no word to the lass about it. It's no more than a man should do—but not every man would."

I glanced down involuntarily at Jemmy, curled up cozily in my arms. I tried not to think of it myself, but could not help now and then searching his bluntly amiable features for any trace that might reveal his true paternity.

Brianna had been handfast with Roger, lain with him for one night—and then been raped two days later, by Stephen Bonnet. There was no way to tell for sure who the father had been, and so far Jemmy gave no indication of resembling either man in the slightest. He was gnawing his fist at the moment, with a ferocious scowl of concentration, and with his soft fuzz of red-gold plush, he looked like no one so much as Jamie himself.

"Mm. So why all the insistence on having Roger vetted by a priest?"

"Well, they'll be married in any case," he said logically. "I want the wee lad baptized a Catholic, though." He laid a large hand gently on Jemmy's head, thumb smoothing the tiny red brows. "So if I made a bit of a fuss about MacKenzie, I thought they'd be pleased to agree about *an gille ruaidh* here, aye?"

I laughed, and pulled a fold of blanket up around Jemmy's ears.

"And I thought Brianna had *you* figured out!"

"So does she," he said, with a grin. He bent suddenly and kissed me.

His mouth was soft and very warm. He tasted of bread and butter, and he smelled strongly of fresh leaves and unwashed male, with just the faintest trace of effluvium of diaper.

"Oh, that's nice," I said with approval. "Do it again."

The wood around us was still, in the way of woods. No bird, no beast, just the sough of leaves above and the rush of water underfoot. Constant movement, constant sound—and at the center of it all, a perfect peace. There were a good many people on the mountain, and most of them not that far away—yet just here, just now, we might have been alone on Jupiter.

I opened my eyes and sighed, tasting honey. Jamie smiled at me, and brushed a fallen yellow leaf from my hair. The baby lay in my arms, a heavy, warm weight, the center of the universe.

Neither of us spoke, not wishing to disturb the stillness. It was like being at the tip of a spinning top, I thought—a whirl of events and people going on all round, and a step in one direction or another would plunge us back into that spinning frenzy, but here at the very center—there was peace.

I reached up and brushed a scatter of maple seeds from his shoulder. He seized my hand, and brought it to his mouth with a sudden fierceness that startled me. And yet his lips were tender, the tip of his tongue warm on the fleshy mound at the base of my thumb—the mount of Venus, it's called, love's seat.

He raised his head, and I felt the sudden chill on my hand, where the ancient scar showed white as bone. A letter "J," cut in the skin, his mark on me.

He laid his hand against my face, and I pressed it there with my own, as though I could feel the faded "C" he bore on his own palm, against the cold skin of my cheek. Neither of us spoke, but the pledge was made, as we had made it once before, in a place of sanctuary, our feet on a scrap of bedrock in the shifting sands of threatened war.

It was not near; not yet. But I heard it coming, in the sound of drums and proclamation, saw it in the glint of steel, knew the fear of it in heart and bone when I looked in Jamie's eyes.

The chill had gone, and hot blood throbbed in my hand as though to split the ancient scar and spill my heart's blood for him once again. It would come, and I could not stop it.

But this time, I wouldn't leave him.

I followed Jamie out of the trees, across a scrabble of rocks and sand and tufted grass, to the well-trampled trail that led upward to our campsite. I was counting in my head, readjusting the breakfast requirements yet again, in light of Jamie's revelation that he had invited two more families to join us for the meal.

"Robin McGillivray and Geordie Chisholm," he said, holding back a branch for me to pass. "I thought we should make them welcome; they mean to come and settle on the Ridge."

"Do they," I said, ducking as the branch slapped back behind me. "When? And how many of them are there?"

These were loaded questions. It was close to winter—much too close to count on building even the crudest cabin for shelter. Anyone who came to the mountains now would likely have to live in the big house with us, or crowd into one of the small settlers' cabins that dotted the Ridge. Highlanders could, did, and would live ten to a room when necessary. With my less strongly developed sense of English hospitality, I rather hoped it wouldn't be necessary.

"Six McGillivrays and eight Chisholms," Jamie said, smiling. "The McGillivrays will come in the spring, though. Robin's a gunsmith—he'll have work in Cross Creek for the winter—and his family will bide with kin in Salem—his wife's German—until the weather warms."

"Oh, that's good." Fourteen more for breakfast, then, plus me and Jamie, Roger and Bree, Marsali and Fergus, Lizzie and her father—Abel MacLennan, mustn't forget him—oh, and the soldier lad who'd rescued Germain, that made twenty-four …

"I'll go and borrow some coffee and rice from my aunt, shall I?" Jamie had been reading the growing look of dismay on my features. He grinned, and held out his arms for the baby. "Give me the laddie; we'll go visiting, and leave your hands free for the cooking."

I watched them go with a small sense of relief. Alone, if only for a few moments. I drew a long, deep breath of damp air, becoming aware of the soft patter of the rain on my hood.

I loved Gatherings and social occasions, but was obliged to admit to myself that the strain of unrelieved company for days on end rather got on my nerves. After a week of visiting, gossip, daily medical clinics, and the small but constant crises that attend living rough with a large family group, I was ready to dig a small hole under a log and climb in, just for the sake of a quarter hour's solitude.

Just at the moment, though, it looked as though I might be saved the effort. There were shouts, calls, and snatches of pipe music from higher up the mountain; disturbed by the Governor's Proclamation, the Gathering was reestablishing its normal rhythm, and everyone was going back to their family hearths, to the clearing where the competitions were held, to the livestock pens beyond the creek, or to the wagons set up to sell everything from ribbons and churns to powdered mortar and fresh—well, relatively fresh—lemons. No one needed me for the moment.

It was going to be a very busy day, and this might be my only chance of solitude for a week or more—the trip back would take at least that long, moving slowly with a large party, including babies and wagons. Most of the new tenants had neither horses nor mules, and would make the journey on foot.

I needed a moment to myself, to gather my strength and focus my mind. What focus I had, though, was not on the logistics of breakfast or weddings, nor even on the impending surgery I was contemplating. I was looking farther forward, past the journey, longing for home.

Fraser's Ridge was high in the western mountains, far beyond any town—or even any established roads. Remote and isolated, we had few visitors. Few inhabitants, too, though the population of the

Ridge was growing; more than thirty families had come to take up homesteads on Jamie's granted land, under his sponsorship. Most of these were men he had known in prison, at Ardsmuir. I thought Chisholm and McGillivray must be ex-prisoners, too; Jamie had put out a standing invitation for such men, and would hold to it, no matter the expense involved in helping them—or whether we could afford it.

A raven flew silently past, slow and heavy, its feathers burdened by the rain. Ravens were birds of omen; I wondered whether this one meant us good or ill. Rare for any bird to fly in such weather—that must mean it was a special omen.

I knocked the heel of my hand against my head, trying to smack the superstition out of it. Live with Highlanders long enough, and every damn rock and tree meant something!

Perhaps it did, though. There were people all round me on the mountain—I knew that—and yet I felt quite alone, shielded by the rain and fog. The weather was still cold, but I was not. The blood thrummed near the surface of my skin, and I felt heat rise in my palms. I reached a hand out to the pine that stood by me, drops of water trembling on each needle, its bark black with wet. I breathed its scent and let the water touch my skin, cool as vapor. The rain fell in shushing stillness all around me, dampening my clothes 'til they clung to me softly, like clouds upon the mountain.

Jamie had told me once that he must live on a mountain, and I knew now why this was so—though I could in no wise have put the notion into words. All my scattered thoughts receded, as I listened for the voice of rocks and trees—and heard the bell of the mountain strike once, somewhere deep beneath my feet.

I might have stood thus enchanted for some time, all thought of breakfast forgotten, but the voices of rocks and trees hushed and vanished with the clatter of feet on the nearby path.

"Mrs. Fraser."

It was Archie Hayes himself, resplendent in bonnet and sword despite the wet. If he was surprised to see me standing by the path alone, he didn't show it, but inclined his head in courteous greeting.

"Lieutenant." I bowed back, feeling my cheeks flush as though he had caught me in the midst of bathing.

"Will your husband be about, ma'am?" he asked, voice casual. Despite my discomfiture, I felt a stab of wariness. Young Corporal MacNair had come to fetch Jamie, and failed. If the mountain had come to Mohammed now, the matter wasn't casual. Was Hayes intending to drag Jamie into some sort of witch-hunt for Regulators?

"I suppose so. I don't really know *where* he is," I said, consciously not looking up the hill to the spot where Jocasta's big tent showed its canvas peak among a stand of chestnut trees.

"Ah, I expect he'll be that busy," Hayes said comfortably. "A great deal to do for a man like himself, and this the last day of the Gathering."

"Yes. I expect … er … yes."

The conversation died, and I was left in a state of increasing discomfort, wondering how on earth I was to escape without inviting the Lieutenant to breakfast. Even an Englishwoman couldn't get away with the rudeness of not offering food without exciting remark.

"Er … Corporal MacNair said you wanted to see Farquard Campbell as well," I said, seizing the bull by the horns. "Perhaps Jamie's gone to talk with him. Mr. Campbell, I mean." I waved helpfully toward the Campbells' family campsite, which lay on the far side of the slope, nearly a quarter mile from Jocasta's.

Hayes blinked, drops running from his lashes down his cheeks.

"Aye," he said. "Perhaps that's so." He stood a moment longer, then tipped his cap to me. "Good day to ye, mum." He turned away up the path—toward Jocasta's tent. I stood watching him go, all sense of peace destroyed.

"Damn," I said under my breath, and set off to see about breakfast.

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2

LOAVES AND FISHES

We had chosen a site well off the main path, but situated in a small, rocky clearing with a good view of the wide creekbank below. Glancing downward through a scrim of holly bushes, I could see the flash of green-and-black tartans as the last of the soldiers dispersed; Archie Hayes encouraged his men to mingle with the people at the Gathering, and most were only too glad to obey.

I wasn't sure whether this policy of Archie's was dictated by guile, penury, or simply humanitarianism. Many of his soldiers were young, separated from home and family; they were glad of the chance to hear Scottish voices again, to be welcomed at a homely fireside, offered brose and parritch, and to bask in the momentary warmth of familiarity.

As I came out of the trees, I saw that Marsali and Lizzie were making a small fuss of the bashful young soldier who had fished Germain out of the creek. Fergus stood close to the fire, wisps of steam rising from his wet garments, muttering in French as he rubbed Germain's head briskly with a towel, one-handed. His hook was braced against the little boy's shoulder to keep him steady, and the blond head wobbled back and forth, Germain's face quite tranquil, in complete disregard of his father's scolding.

Neither Roger nor Brianna were anywhere in sight, but I was rather alarmed to see Abel MacLennan sitting on the far side of the clearing, nibbling a bit of toasted bread on a stick. Jamie was already back with the borrowed supplies, which he was unpacking on the ground next to the fire. He was frowning to himself, but the frown melted into a smile at sight of me.

“There ye are, Sassenach!” he said, rising to his feet. “What kept ye?”

“Oh … I met an acquaintance on the trail,” I said, with a significant look toward the young soldier. It was evidently not significant enough, since Jamie knitted his brows in puzzlement.

“The Lieutenant is looking for you,” I hissed, leaning close to him.

“Well, I kent *that,* Sassenach,” he said, in a normal tone of voice. “He’ll find me soon enough.”

“Yes, but … ahem.” I cleared my throat and raised my brows, glancing pointedly from Abel MacLennan to the young soldier. Jamie’s notions of hospitality wouldn’t countenance having his guests dragged away from under his rooftree, and I would have supposed that the same principle applied to his campfire as well. The young soldier might find it awkward to arrest MacLennan, but I was sure the Lieutenant would have no such hesitation.

Jamie looked rather amused. Raising his own brows, he took my arm, and led me over to the young man.

“My dear,” he said formally, “may I present Private Andrew Ogilvie, late of the village of Kilburnie? Private Ogilvie, my wife.”

Private Ogilvie, a ruddy-faced boy with dark curly hair, blushed and bowed.

“Your servant, mum!”

Jamie squeezed my arm lightly.

“Private Ogilvie was just telling me that the regiment is bound for Portsmouth, in Virginia—there to take ship for Scotland. Ye’ll be glad to see home, I expect, lad?”

“Oh, aye, sir!” the lad said fervently. “The regiment will disband in Aberdeen, and then I’m off home, so fast as my legs will carry me!”

“The regiment is disbanding?” Fergus asked, coming to join the conversation, a towel draped round his neck and Germain in his arms.

“Aye, sir. With the Frenchies settled—er, beggin’ your pardon, sir—and the Indians safe, there’s naught for us to do here, and the Crown willna pay us to sit at home,” the lad said ruefully. “Peace may be a guid thing, all in all, and I'm glad of it, surely. But there's no denying as it's hard on a soldier."

"Almost as hard as war, aye?" Jamie said dryly. The boy flushed darkly; young as he was, he couldn't have seen much in the way of actual fighting. The Seven Years War had been over for nearly ten years—at which time Private Ogilvie would likely still have been a barefoot lad in Kilburnie.

Ignoring the boy's embarrassment, Jamie turned to me.

"The lad tells me," he added, "that the Sixty-seventh is the last regiment left in the Colonies."

"The last Highland regiment?" I asked.

"No, mum, the last of the Crown's regular troops. There are the garrisons here and there, I suppose, but all of the standing regiments have been recalled to England or Scotland. We're the last—and behind our time, too. We meant to sail from Charleston, but things went agley there, and so we're bound for Portsmouth now, so fast as we can make speed. It's late in the year, but the Lieutenant's had word of a ship that may risk passage to take us. If not—" He shrugged, glumly philosophic. "Then we shall winter in Portsmouth, I suppose, and make shift as we can."

"So England means to leave us unprotected?" Marsali looked rather shocked at the thought.

"Oh, I shouldna think there's any great danger, mum," Private Ogilvie assured her. "We've dealt wi' the Frenchies for good and all, and the Indians willna be up to much without the frogs to stir them up. Everything's been quite peaceful for a good time now, and doubtless it'll stay so." I made a small noise in the back of my throat, and Jamie squeezed my elbow lightly.

"Have ye not thought perhaps to stay, then?" Lizzie had been peeling and grating potatoes while listening to this; she put down the bowl of glistening white shreds by the fire and began to smear grease on the griddle. "Stay in the Colonies, I mean. There's plenty of land still to be had, to the west."

"Oh." Private Ogilvie glanced down at her, her white kerch modestly bent over her work, and his color deepened again. "Well, I will say I've heard worse prospects, miss. But I am bound to go wi' my regiment, I'm afraid."

Lizzie picked up two eggs and cracked them neatly against the side of the bowl. Her own face, usually pale as whey, bore a faint pink echo of the Private's rich blush.

"Ah. Well, it's a great pity that ye should go awa so soon," she said. Her pale blond lashes swept down against her cheeks. "Still, we'll not send ye away on an empty stomach."

Private Ogilvie went slightly pinker round the ears.

"That's … verra kind of ye, miss. Verra kind indeed."

Lizzie glanced up shyly, and blushed more deeply.

Jamie coughed gently and excused himself, leading me away from the fire.

"Christ," he said in an undertone, bending down so I could hear him. "And she's been a woman less than a full day, too! Have ye been givin' her lessons, Sassenach, or are women just born wi' it?"

"Natural talent, I expect," I said circumspectly.

The unexpected advent of Lizzie's menarche after supper last night had in fact been the straw that broke the camel's back, with regard to clean clouts, and the precipitating event that had caused me to sacrifice my petticoat. Lizzie naturally had no menstrual cloths with her, and I didn't want to oblige her to share the children's diapers.

"Mmphm. I suppose I'd best begin looking for a husband for her, then," Jamie said in resignation.

"A husband! Why, she's scarcely fifteen!"

"Aye, so?" He glanced at Marsali, who was rubbing Fergus's dark hair dry with the towel, and then back at Lizzie and her soldier, and raised a cynical brow at me.

"Aye, so, yourself," I said, a little crossly. All right, Marsali *had* been only fifteen when she married Fergus. That didn't mean—

"The point being," Jamie went on, dismissing Lizzie for the moment, "that the regiment leaves for Portsmouth tomorrow; they havena got either time nor disposition to trouble with this business in Hillsborough—that's Tryon's concern."

"But what Hayes said—"

“Oh, if anyone tells him anything, I’m sure he’ll send the depositions along to New Bern—but as for himself, I imagine he’d not much care if the Regulators set fire to the Governor’s Palace, so long as it doesna delay his sailing.”

I heaved a deep sigh, reassured. If Jamie was right, the last thing Hayes would do was take prisoners, no matter what the evidence to hand. MacLennan was safe, then.

“But what do you suppose Hayes wants with you and the others, then?” I asked, bending to rummage in one of the wicker hampers for another loaf of bread. “He *is* hunting you—in person.”

Jamie glanced back over his shoulder, as though expecting the Lieutenant to appear at any moment through the holly bushes. As the screen of prickly green remained intact, he turned back to me, frowning slightly.

“I dinna ken,” he said, shaking his head, “but it’s naught to do with this business of Tryon’s. If it was that, he might have told me last night—for that matter, if he cared himself about the matter, he *would* have told me last night,” he added. “No, Sassenach, depend upon it, the rioters are no more than a matter of duty to wee Archie Hayes.

“As for what he wants wi’ me—” He leaned over my shoulder to swipe a finger round the top of the honey pot. “I dinna mean to trouble about it until I must. I’ve three kegs of whisky left, and I mean to turn them into a plowshare, a scythe blade, three ax-heids, ten pound of sugar, a horse, and an astrolabe before this evening. Which is a conjuring trick that might take some attention, aye?” He drew the sticky tip of his finger gently across my lips, then turned my head toward him and bent to kiss me.

“An astrolabe?” I said, tasting honey. I kissed him back. “Whatever for?”

“And then I want to go home,” he whispered, ignoring the question. His forehead was pressed against mine, and his eyes very blue.

“I want to take ye to bed—*in* my bed. And I mean to spend the rest of the day thinking what to do to ye once I’ve got ye there. So wee Archie can just go and play at marbles with his ballocks, aye?”

"An excellent thought," I whispered back. "Care to tell him that yourself?"

My eye had caught the flash of a green-and-black tartan on the other side of the clearing, but when Jamie straightened up and whirled round, I saw that the visitor was in fact not Lieutenant Hayes but rather John Quincy Myers, who was sporting a soldier's plaid wrapped round his waist, the ends fluttering gaily in the breeze.

This added a further touch of color to Myers's already striking sartorial splendor. Extremely tall, and decorated from the top down with a slouch hat stuck through with several needles and a turkey quill, two ragged pheasant feathers knotted into his long black hair, a vest of dyed porcupine quills worn over a beaded shirt, his usual breechclout, and leggings wrapped with strings of small bells, the mountain man was hard to miss.

"Friend James!" John Quincy smiled broadly at sight of Jamie, and hastened forward, hand extended and bells chiming. "Thought I should find you at your breakfast!"

Jamie blinked slightly at this vision, but gamely returned the mountain man's encompassing handshake.

"Aye, John. Will ye join us?"

"Er … yes," I chimed in, with a surreptitious look into the food hamper. "Please do!"

John Quincy bowed ceremoniously to me, sweeping off his hat.

"Your servant, ma'am, and I'm much obliged. Maybe later. Right now, I come to fetch away Mr. Fraser, though. He's wanted, urgent-like."

"By whom?" Jamie asked warily.

"Robbie McGillivray, he says his name is. You know the man?"

"Aye, I do." Whatever Jamie knew about McGillivray, it was causing him to delve into the small chest where he kept his pistols. "What's the trouble?"

"Well." John Quincy scratched meditatively at his bushy black beard. " 'Twas his wife as asked me to come find you, and she don't speak what you'd call right good English, so may be as I've muddled the account of it a bit. But what I *think* she said to me was as how there was a thief-taker who'd grabbed holt of her son, sayin' as how the boy was one o' the ruffians who broke up Hillsborough, and meanin' to take him to the gaol in New Bern. Only Robbie, he says no one's takin' a son of his anywhere, and—well, after that, the poor woman got right flustered and I couldn't make out but one word to the dozen. But I do believe Robbie would 'preciate it if you'd come by and lend a hand with the proceedings."

Jamie grabbed Roger's bloodstained green coat, which was hung on a bush waiting to be cleaned. Shrugging into it, he thrust the newly loaded pistol through his belt.

"Where?" he said.

Myers gestured economically with one large thumb, and pushed off into the holly bushes, Jamie at his heels.

Fergus, who had been listening to this exchange, Germain in his arms, set the boy down at Marsali's feet.

"I must go help *Grand-père*," he told Germain. He picked up a stick of firewood and put it into the little boy's hands. "You stay; protect *Maman* and little Joan from bad people."

"Oui, Papa." Germain scowled fiercely under his blond fringe and took a firm grip on his stick, settling himself to defend the camp.

Marsali, MacLennan, Lizzie, and Private Ogilvie had been watching the byplay with rather glazed looks. As Fergus picked up another length of firewood and plunged purposefully into the holly bushes, Private Ogilvie came to life, stirring uneasily.

"Er …" he said. "Perhaps I … should I go for my sergeant, do ye think, ma'am? If there's like to be any trouble …"

"No, no," I said hurriedly. The last thing we needed was for Archie Hayes and his regiment to show up en masse. This struck me as the sort of situation which would benefit strongly from being kept unofficial.

"I'm sure everything will be quite all right. It's sure to be nothing but a misunderstanding. Mr. Fraser will sort it directly, never fear." Even as I spoke, I was sidling round the fire toward the spot where my medical supplies lay, sheltered from the drizzle under a sheet of canvas. Reaching under the edge, I grabbed my small emergency kit.

"Lizzie, why don't you give Private Ogilvie some of the strawberry preserves for his toast? And Mr. MacLennan would like a bit of honey in his coffee, I'm sure. Do excuse me, won't you, Mr. MacLennan, I must just go and … er …" Smiling inanely, I sidled through the holly leaves. As the branches swished and crackled behind me, I paused to take my bearings. A faint chime of bells reached me on the rainy wind; I turned toward the sound, and broke into a run.

It was some way; I was out of breath and sweating from the exercise by the time I caught them up near the competition field. Things were just getting under way; I could hear the buzz of talk from the crowd of men gathering, but no shouts of encouragement or howls of disappointment as yet. A few brawny specimens stamped to and fro, stripped to the waist and swinging their arms to limber up; the local "strongmen" of various settlements.

The drizzle had started up again; the wetness gleamed on curving shoulders and plastered swirls of dark body hair flat against the pale skins of chests and forearms. I had no time to appreciate the spectacle, though; John Quincy threaded his way adroitly through the knots of spectators and competitors, waving cordially to this and that acquaintance as we passed. On the far side of the crowd, a small man detached himself from the mass and came hurrying to meet us.

"*Mac Dubh!* Ye've come, then—that's good."

"Nay bother, Robbie," Jamie assured him. "What's to do, then?"

McGillivray, who looked distinctly harried, glanced at the strongmen and their supporters, then jerked his head toward the nearby trees. We followed him, unnoticed by the crowd gathering round two large stones wrapped with rope, which I assumed some of the strongmen present were about to prove their prowess by lifting.

"It's your son, is it, Rob?" Jamie asked, dodging a water-filled pine branch.

"Aye," Robbie answered, "or it was."

That sounded sinister. I saw Jamie's hand brush the butt of his pistol; mine went to my medical kit.

"What's happened?" I asked. "Is he hurt?"

"Not him," McGillivray replied cryptically, and ducked ahead, beneath a drooping chestnut bough hung with scarlet creeper.

Just beyond was a small open space, not really big enough to be called a clearing, tufted with dead grass and studded with pine saplings. As Fergus and I ducked under the creeper after Jamie, a large woman in homespun whirled toward us, shoulders hunching as she raised the broken tree limb she clutched in one hand. She saw McGillivray, though, and relaxed fractionally.

"Wer ist das?" she asked suspiciously, eyeing us. Then John Quincy appeared from under the creeper, and she lowered the club, her solidly handsome features relaxing further.

"Ha, Myers! You brung me den Jamie, *oder*?" She cast me a curious look, but was too busy glancing between Fergus and Jamie to inspect me closely.

"Aye, love, this is Jamie Roy—*Sheumais Mac Dubh*." McGillivray hastened to take credit for Jamie's appearance, putting a respectful hand on his sleeve. "My wife, Ute, *Mac Dubh*. And *Mac Dubh*'s son," he added, waving vaguely at Fergus.

Ute McGillivray looked like a Valkyrie on a starchy diet; tall, very blond, and broadly powerful.

"Your servant, ma'am," Jamie said, bowing.

"Madame," Fergus echoed, making her a courtly leg.

Mrs. McGillivray dropped them a low curtsy in return, eyes fixed on the prominent bloodstains streaking the front of Jamie's—or rather, Roger's—coat.

"Mein Herr," she murmured, looking impressed. She turned and beckoned to a young man of seventeen or eighteen, who had been lurking in the background. He bore such a marked resemblance to his small, wiry, dark-haired father that his identity could scarcely be in doubt.

"Manfred," his mother announced proudly. "*Mein* laddie."

Jamie inclined his head in grave acknowledgment.

“Mr. McGillivray.”

“Ah … your s-servant, sir?” The boy sounded rather dubious about it, but put out his hand to be shaken.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance, sir,” Jamie assured him, shaking it. The courtesies duly observed, he looked briefly round at the quiet surroundings, raising one eyebrow.

“I had heard that you were suffering some inconvenience wi’ regard to a thief-taker. Do I take it that the matter has been resolved?” He glanced in question from McGillivray Junior to McGillivray Senior.

The three McGillivrays exchanged assorted glances among themselves. Robin McGillivray gave an apologetic cough.

“Well, not to say *resolved*, quite, *Mac Dubh*. That is to say …” He trailed off, the harried look returning to his eyes.

Mrs. McGillivray gave him a stern look, then turned to Jamie.

“*Ist kein* bother,” she told him. “*Ich haf den* wee ball of shite safe put. But only we want to know, how we best *den Korpus* hide?”

“The … body?” I said, rather faintly.

Even Jamie looked a bit disturbed at that.

“Ye’ve killed him, Rob?”

“Me?” McGillivray looked shocked. “Christ’s sake, *Mac Dubh*, what d’ye take me for?”

Jamie raised the eyebrow again; evidently the thought of McGillivray committing violence was scarcely far-fetched. McGillivray had the grace to look abashed.

“Aye, well. I suppose I might have—and I did—well, but, *Mac Dubh*! That business at Ardsmuir was all long ago and done wi’, aye?”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “It was. What about this business wi’ the thief-taker, though? Where is he?”

I heard a muffled giggle behind me, and swung round to see that the rest of the family McGillivray, silent ’til now, was nonetheless present. Three teenaged girls sat in a row on a dead log behind a screen of saplings, all immaculately attired in clean white caps and aprons, only slightly wilted with the rain.

“*Meine* lassies,” Mrs. McGillivray announced, with a wave in their direction—unnecessarily, since all three of the girls looked like smaller versions of herself. “Hilda, Inga, *und* Senga.”

Fergus bowed elegantly to the three.

“Enchanté, mes demoiselles.”

The girls giggled and bobbed their heads in response, but without rising, which struck me as odd. Then I noticed some disturbance taking place under the skirt of the oldest girl; a sort of heaving flutter, accompanied by a muffled grunt. Hilda swung her heel sharply into whatever it was, all the time smiling brightly at me.

There was another grunt—much louder this time—from under the skirt, which caused Jamie to start and turn in her direction.

Still smiling brightly, Hilda bent and delicately picked up the edge of her skirt, under which I could see a frantic face, bisected by a dark strip of cloth tied round his mouth.

“That’s him,” said Robbie, sharing his wife’s talent for stating the obvious.

“I see.” Jamie’s fingers twitched slightly against the side of his kilt. “Ah … perhaps we could have him out, then?”

Robbie motioned to the girls, who all stood up together and stepped aside, revealing a small man who lay against the base of the dead log, bound hand and foot with an assortment of what looked like women’s stockings, and gagged with someone’s kerchief. He was wet, muddy, and slightly battered round the edges.

Myers bent and hoisted the man to his feet, holding him by the collar.

“Well, he ain’t much to look at,” the mountain man said critically, squinting at the man as though evaluating a substandard beaver skin. “I guess thief-takin’ don’t pay so well as ye might think.”

The man was in fact skinny and rather ragged, as well as disheveled, furious—and frightened. Ute sniffed contemptuously.

“Saukerl!” she said, and spat neatly on the thief-taker’s boots. Then she turned to Jamie, full of charm.

“So, *mein Herr*. How we are to kill him best?”

The thief-taker’s eyes bulged, and he writhed in Myers’s grip. He bucked and twisted, making frantic gargling noises behind the gag.

Jamie looked him over, rubbing a knuckle across his mouth, then glanced at Robbie, who gave a slight shrug, with an apologetic glance at his wife.

Jamie cleared his throat.

“Mmphm. Ye had something in mind, perhaps, ma’am?”

Ute beamed at this evidence of sympathy with her intentions, and drew a long dagger from her belt.

“I thought maybe to butcher, *wie ein Schwein, ja?* But see …” She poked the thief-taker gingerly between the ribs; he yelped behind the gag, and a small spot of blood bloomed on his ragged shirt.

“Too much *Blut,*” she explained, with a moue of disappointment. She waved at the screen of trees, behind which the stone-lifting seemed to be proceeding well. “*Die Leute* will schmell.”

“Schmell?” I glanced at Jamie, thinking this some unfamiliar German expression. He coughed, and brushed a hand under his nose. “Oh, *smell*!” I said, enlightened. “Er, yes, I think they might.”

“I dinna suppose we’d better shoot him, then,” Jamie said thoughtfully. “If ye’re wanting to avoid attention, I mean.”

“I say we break his neck,” Robbie McGillivray said, squinting judiciously at the trussed thief-taker. “That’s easy enough.”

“You think?” Fergus squinted in concentration. “I say a knife. If you stab in the right spot, the blood is not so much. The kidney, just beneath the ribs in back … eh?”

The captive appeared to take exception to these suggestions, judging from the urgent sounds proceeding from behind the gag, and Jamie rubbed his chin dubiously.

“Well, that’s no verra difficult,” he agreed. “Or strangle him. But he *will* lose his bowels. If it were to be a question of the smell, even crushing his skull … but tell me, Robbie, how does the man come to be here?”

“Eh?” Robbie looked blank.

“You’re no camped nearby?” Jamie waved a hand briefly at the tiny clearing, making his meaning clear. There was no trace of hearthfire; in fact, no one had camped on this side of the creek. And yet all the McGillivrays were here.

“Oh, no,” Robbie said, comprehension blossoming on his spare features. “Nay, we’re camped some distance up. Only, we came to have a wee keek at the heavies”—he jerked his head toward the competition field—“and the friggin’ vulture spied our Freddie and took hold of him, so as to drag him off.” He cast an unfriendly look at the thief-taker, and I saw that a coil of rope dangled snakelike from the man’s belt. A pair of iron manacles lay on the ground nearby, the dark metal already laced with orange rust from the damp.

“We saw him grab aholt of Brother,” Hilda put in at this point. “So we grabbed aholt of *him* and pushed him through here, where nobody could see. When he said he meant to take Brother away to the sheriff, me and my sisters knocked him down and sat on him, and Mama kicked him a few times.”

Ute patted her daughter fondly on one sturdy shoulder.

“They are *gut*, strong *Mädchen*, *meine* lasses,” she told Jamie. “Ve *komm* see *hier die Wettkämpfer*, maybe choose husband for Inga or Senga. Hilda *hat einen Mann* already promised,” she added, with an air of satisfaction.

She looked Jamie over frankly, her eye dwelling approvingly on his height, the breadth of his shoulders, and the general prosperity of his appearance.

“He is fine, big, your *Mann*,” she said to me. “You haf sons, maybe?”

“No, I’m afraid not,” I said apologetically. “Er … Fergus is married to my husband’s daughter,” I added, seeing her gaze shift appraisingly to Fergus.

The thief-taker appeared to feel that the subject was drifting somewhat afield, and summoned attention back to himself with an indignant squeal behind his gag. His face, which had gone pale at the discussion of his theoretical demise, had grown quite red again, and his hair was matted down across his forehead in spikes.

“Oh, aye,” Jamie said, noticing. “Perhaps we should let the gentleman have a word?”

Robbie narrowed his eyes at this, but reluctantly nodded. The competitions had got well under way by now, and there was a considerable racket emanating from the field; no one would notice the odd shout over here.

"Don't let 'em kill me, sir! You know it ain't right!" Hoarse from his ordeal, the man fixed his appeal on Jamie as soon as the gag was removed. "I'm only doin' as I ought, delivering a criminal to justice!"

"Ha!" all the McGillivrays said at once. Unanimous as their sentiment appeared to be, the expression of it immediately disintegrated into a confusion of expletives, opinions, and a random volley of kicks aimed at the gentleman's shins by Inga and Senga.

"Stop that!" Jamie said, raising his voice enough to be heard over the uproar. As this had no result, he grabbed McGillivray Junior by the scruff of the neck and roared, *"Ruhe!"* at the top of his lungs, which startled them into momentary silence, with guilty looks over their shoulders in the direction of the competition field.

"Now, then," Jamie said firmly. "Myers, bring the gentleman, if ye will. Rob, Fergus, come along with ye. *Bitte*, Madame?" He bowed to Mrs. McGillivray, who blinked at him, but then nodded in slow acquiescence. Jamie rolled an eye at me, then, still holding Manfred by the neck, he marched the male contingent off toward the creek, leaving me in charge of the ladies.

"Your *Mann*—he will save my son?" Ute turned to me, fair brows knitted in concern.

"He'll try." I glanced at the girls, who were huddled together behind their mother. "Do you know whether your brother *was* at Hillsborough?"

The girls looked at one another, and silently elected Inga to speak.

"Well, *ja*, he was, then," she said, a little defiantly. "But he wasna riotin', not a bit of it. He'd only gone for to have a bit of harness mended, and was caught up in the mob."

I caught a quick glance exchanged between Hilda and Senga, and deduced that this was perhaps not the entire story. Still, it wasn't my place to judge, thank goodness.

Mrs. McGillivray's eyes were fixed on the men, who stood murmuring together some distance away. The thief-taker had been untied, save for his hands, which remained bound. He stood with his back against a tree, looking like a cornered rat, eyeteeth showing in a snarl of defiance. Jamie and Myers were both looming over him, while Fergus stood by, frowning attentively, his chin propped on his hook. Rob McGillivray had taken out a knife, with which he was contemplatively flicking small chips of wood from a pine twig, glancing now and then at the thief-taker with an air of dark intent.

"I'm sure Jamie will be able to … er … do something," I said, privately hoping that the something wouldn't involve too much violence. The unwelcome thought occurred to me that the diminutive thief-taker would probably fit tidily in one of the empty food hampers.

"Gut." Ute McGillivray nodded slowly, still watching. "Better that I do not kill him." Her eyes turned suddenly back to me, light blue and very bright. "But I vill do it, if I must."

I believed her.

"I see," I said carefully. "But—I do beg your pardon—but even if that man took your son, could you not go to the sheriff too, and explain …"

More glances among the girls. This time it was Hilda who spoke.

"*Nein,* ma'am. See, it wouldna have been sae bad, had the thief-taker come on us at the camp. But down here—" She widened her eyes, nodding toward the competition field, where a muffled thud and a roar of approval marked some successful effort.

The difficulty, apparently, was Hilda's fiancé, one Davey Morrison, from Hunter's Point. Mr. Morrison was a farmer of some substance, and a man of worth, as well as an athlete skilled in the arcana of stone-throwing and caber-tossing. He had family, too—parents, uncles, aunts, cousins—all of the most upright character and—I gathered—rather judgmental attitudes.

Had Manfred been taken by a thief-taker in front of such a crowd, filled with Davey Morrison's relations, word would have spread at the speed of light, and the scandal would result in the prompt rupture of Hilda's engagement—a prospect that clearly perturbed Ute McGillivray much more than the notion of cutting the thief-taker's throat.

"Bad, too, I kill him and someone see," she said frankly, waving at the thin scrim of trees shielding us from the competition field. "*Die* Morrisons would not like."

"I suppose they might not," I murmured, wondering whether Davey Morrison had any idea what he was getting into. "But you—"

"I vill haf *meine* lassies well wed," she said firmly, nodding several times in reinforcement. "I find *gut* men *für Sie,* fine big men, *mit* land, *mit* money." She put an arm round Senga's shoulders and hugged her tight. *"Nicht wahr, Liebchen?"*

"*Ja,* Mama," Senga murmured, and laid her neat capped head affectionately on Mrs. McGillivray's broad bosom.

Something was happening on the men's side of things; the thief-taker's hands had been untied, and he stood rubbing his wrists, no longer scowling, but listening to whatever Jamie was saying with an expression of wariness. He glanced at us, then at Robin McGillivray, who said something to him and nodded emphatically. The thief-taker's jaw worked, as though he were chewing over an idea.

"So you all came down to watch the competitions this morning and look for suitable prospects? Yes, I see."

Jamie reached into his sporran and drew out something, which he held under the thief-taker's nose, as though inviting him to smell it. I couldn't make out what it was at this distance, but the thief-taker's face suddenly changed, going from wariness to alarmed disgust.

"*Ja,* only to look." Mrs. McGillivray was not watching; she patted Senga and let her go. "Ve go now to Salem, where *ist meine Familie.* Maybe ve find there a good *Mann,* too."

Myers had stepped back from the confrontation now, his shoulders drooping in relaxation. He inserted a finger under the edge of his breechclout, scratched his buttocks comfortably, and glanced around, evidently no longer interested in the proceedings. Seeing me looking in his direction, he ambled back through the sapling grove.

"No need to worry more, ma'am," he assured Mrs. McGillivray. "I knew Jamie Roy would take care of it, and so he has. Your lad's safe."

"Ja?" she said. She looked doubtfully toward the sapling grove, but it was true; the attitudes of all the men had relaxed now, and Jamie was handing the thief-taker back his set of manacles. I saw the way he handled them, with brusque distaste. He had worn irons, at Ardsmuir.

"Gott sei dank," Mrs. McGillivray said, with an explosive sigh. Her massive form seemed suddenly to diminish as the breath went out of her.

The little man was leaving, making his way away from us, toward the creek. The sound of the swinging irons at his belt reached us in a faint chime of metal, heard between the shouts of the crowd behind us. Jamie and Rob McGillivray stood close together, talking, while Fergus watched the thief-taker's departure, frowning slightly.

"Exactly what did Jamie tell him?" I asked Myers.

"Oh. Well." The mountain man gave me a broad, gap-toothed grin. "Jamie Roy told him serious-like that it was surely luck for the thief-taker—his name's Boble, by the way, Harley Boble—that we done come upon y'all when we did. He give him to understand that if we hadn't, then this lady here"—he bowed toward Ute—"would likely have taken him home in her wagon, and slaughtered him like a hog, safe out of sight."

Myers rubbed a knuckle under his red-veined nose and chortled softly in his beard.

"Boble said as how he didn't believe it, he thought she was only a-tryin' to scare him with that knife. But then Jamie Roy leaned down close, confidential-like, and said he mighta thought the same—only that he'd heard so much about Frau McGillivray's reputation as a famous sausage-maker, and had had the privilege of bein' served some of it to his breakfast this morning. Right about then, Boble started to lose the color in his face, and when Jamie Roy pulled out a bit of sausage to show him—"

"Oh, dear," I said, with a vivid memory of exactly what that sausage smelled like. I had bought it the day before from a vendor on the mountain, only to discover that it had been improperly cured, and once sliced, smelled so strongly of rotting blood that no one had been able to stomach it at supper. Jamie had wrapped the offending remainder in his handkerchief and put it in his sporran, intending either to procure a refund or to shove it down the vendor's throat. "I see."

Myers nodded, turning to Ute.

"And your husband, ma'am—bless his soul, Rob McGillivray's a real born liar—chimes in solemn-like, agreeing to it all, shakin' his head and sayin' as how he's got his work cut out to shoot enough meat for you."

The girls tittered.

"Da can't kill anything," Inga said softly to me. "He willna even wring a chicken's neck."

Myers raised his shoulders in a good-humored shrug, as Jamie and Rob made their way toward us through the wet grass.

"So Jamie promised on his word as a gentleman to protect Boble from you, and Boble promised on *his* word as a … well, he said as he'd keep clear of young Manfred."

"Hmp," said Ute, looking rather disconcerted. She didn't mind at all being considered an habitual murderess, and was quite pleased that Manfred was out of danger—but was rather put out at having her reputation as a sausage-maker maligned.

"As though I vould effer make such shite," she said, wrinkling her nose in disdain at the odorous lump of meat Jamie offered for her inspection. "Pfaugh. *Ratzfleisch*." She waved it away with a fastidious gesture, then turned to her husband and said something softly in German.

Then she took a deep breath and expanded once more, gathering all her children like a hen clucking after chicks, urging them to thank Jamie properly for his help. He flushed slightly at the chorus of thanks, bowing to her.

"Gern geschehen," he said. *"Euer ergebener Diener, Frau Ute."*

She beamed at him, composure restored, as he turned to say something in parting to Rob.

"Such a fine, big *Mann*," she murmured, shaking her head slightly as she looked him up and down. Then she turned, and caught my glance from Jamie to Rob—for while the gunsmith was a handsome man, with close-clipped, dark curly hair and a chiseled face, he was also fine-boned as a sparrow, and some inches shorter than his wife, reaching approximately to the level of her brawny shoulder. I couldn't help wondering, given her apparent admiration for large men …

"Oh, vell," she said, and shrugged apologetically. "Luff, you know." She sounded as though love were an unfortunate but unavoidable condition.

I glanced at Jamie, who was carefully swaddling his sausage before tucking it back into his sporran. "Well, yes," I said. "I do."

By the time we returned to our own campsite, the Chisholms were just departing, having been capably fed by the girls. Fortunately, Jamie had brought plenty of food from Jocasta's camp, and I sat down at last to a pleasant meal of potato fritters, buttered bannocks, fried ham, and—at last!—coffee, wondering just what *else* might happen today. There was plenty of time; the sun was barely above the trees, almost invisible behind the drifting rain clouds.

A little later, pleasantly full of breakfast, and with a third cup of coffee to hand, I went and threw back the canvas covering what I thought of as my medical supply dump. It was time to begin the business of organizing for the morning's surgery; looking at jars of sutures, restocking the herb jars in my chest, refilling the large alcohol bottle, and brewing up the medicines that must be made fresh.

Somewhat depleted of the commoner herbs I had brought with me, my stock had been augmented by the good offices of Myers, who had brought me several rare and useful things from the Indian villages to the north, and by judicious trading with Murray MacLeod, an ambitious young apothecary who had made his way inland and set up shop in Cross Creek.

I bit the inside of my cheek, considering young Murray. He harbored the usual sort of nasty notions that passed for medical wisdom nowadays—and was not shy about asserting the superiority of such scientific methods as bleeding and blistering over the old-fashioned herbcraft that such ignorant crones as myself were prone to practice!

Still, he was a Scot, and thus possessed of a strong streak of pragmatism. He had given Jamie's powerful frame one look and hastily swallowed the more insulting of his opinions. I had six ounces of wormwood and a jar of wild ginger root, and he wanted them. He was also shrewd enough to have observed that many more of the folk on the mountain who ailed with anything came to me than to him—and that most who accepted my cures were improved. If I had secrets, he wanted those, too—and I was more than happy to oblige.

Good, I had plenty of willow bark still left. I hesitated over the small rank of bottles in the upper right tray of the chest. I had several very strong emmenagogues—blue cohosh, ergot, and pennyroyal—but picked instead the gentler tansy and rue, setting a handful into a bowl and pouring boiling water on them to steep. Beyond its effects in easing menstruation, tansy had a reputation for calming nerves—and a more naturally nervous person than Lizzie Wemyss it would be difficult to imagine.

I glanced back at the fire, where Lizzie was shoveling the last of the strawberry preserves into Private Ogilvie, who appeared to be dividing his attention among Lizzie, Jamie, and his slice of toast—the greater proportion going to the toast.

Rue was quite a good anthelmintic, to boot. I didn't *know* that Lizzie suffered from worms, but a good many people in the mountains did, and a dose would certainly do her no harm.

I eyed Abel MacLennan covertly, wondering whether to slip a quick slug of hellbrew into his coffee as well—he had the pinched, anemic look of one with intestinal parasites, in spite of his stocky build. Perhaps, though, the look of pale disquiet on his features was due more to his knowledge of thief-takers in the vicinity.

Baby Joan was wailing with hunger again. Marsali sat down, reached under her arisaid to unfasten her bodice, and set the baby to her breast, her lip clenched between her teeth with trepidation. She winced, gasped in pain, then relaxed a little, as the milk began to flow.

Cracked nipples. I frowned and returned to a perusal of the medicine chest. Had I brought any sheep's-wool ointment? Drat, no. I didn't want to use bear grease, with Joan suckling; perhaps sunflower oil …

"A bit of coffee, my dear?" Mr. MacLennan, who had been watching Marsali with troubled sympathy, extended his fresh cup toward her. "My own wife did say as hot coffee eased the pangs of nursing a wean. Whisky in it's better"—his mournful jowls lifted a bit—"but all the same …"

"Taing." Marsali took the cup with a grateful smile. "I'm chilled right through this morning." She sipped the steaming liquid cautiously, and a small flush crept into her cheeks.

"Will you be going back to Drunkard's Creek tomorrow, Mr. MacLennan?" she asked politely, handing back the empty cup. "Or are ye traveling to New Bern wi' Mr. Hobson?"

Jamie looked up sharply, breaking off his conversation with Private Ogilvie.

"Hobson is going to New Bern? How d'ye ken that?"

"Mrs. Fowles says so," Marsali replied promptly. "She told me when I went to borrow a dry shirt for Germain—she's got a lad his size. She's worrit for Hugh—that's her husband—because her father—that's Mr. Hobson—wishes him to go along, but he's scairt."

"Why is Joe Hobson going to New Bern?" I asked, peering over the top of my medicine chest.

"To present a petition to the Governor," Abel MacLennan said. "Much good it will do." He smiled at Marsali, a little sadly. "No, lassie. I dinna ken where I'm bound, tell ye the truth. 'Twon't be to New Bern, though."

"Nor back to your wife at Drunkard's Creek?" Marsali looked at him in concern.

"My wife's dead, lass," MacLennan said softly. He smoothed the red kerchief across his knee, easing out the wrinkles. "Dead two months past."

"Oh, Mr. Abel." Marsali leaned forward and clasped his hand, her blue eyes full of pain. "I'm that sorry!"

He patted her hand, not looking up. Tiny drops of rain gleamed in the sparse strands of his hair, and a trickle of moisture ran down behind one large red ear, but he made no move to wipe it away.

Jamie had stood up while questioning Marsali. Now he sat down on the log beside MacLennan, and laid a hand gently on the smaller man's back.

"I hadna heard, *a charaid,*" he said quietly.

"No." MacLennan looked blindly into the transparent flames. "I—well, the truth of it is, I'd not told anyone. Not 'til now."

Jamie and I exchanged looks across the fire. Drunkard's Creek couldn't possibly harbor more than two dozen souls, in a scatter of cabins spread along the banks. Yet neither the Hobsons nor the Fowleses had mentioned Abel's loss—evidently he really hadn't told anyone.

"What was it happened, Mr. Abel?" Marsali still clasped his hand, though it lay quite limp, palm-down on the red kerchief.

MacLennan looked up then, blinking.

"Oh," he said vaguely. "So much happened. And yet … not really very much, after all. Abby—Abigail, my wife—she died of a fever. She got cold, and … she died." He sounded faintly surprised.

Jamie poured a bit of whisky into an empty cup, picked up one of MacLennan's unresisting hands, and folded it around the cup, holding the fingers in place with his own, until MacLennan's hand tightened its grasp.

"Drink it, man," he said.

Everyone was silent, watching as MacLennan obediently tasted the whisky, sipped, sipped again. Young Private Ogilvie shifted uneasily on his stone, looking as though he should like to return to his regiment, but he too stayed put, as though fearing an abrupt departure might somehow injure MacLennan further.

MacLennan's very stillness drew every eye, froze all talk. My hand hovered uneasily over the bottles in my chest, but I had no remedy for this.

"I had enough," he said suddenly. "I did." He looked up from his cup and glanced round the fire, as though challenging anyone to dispute him. "For the taxes, aye? It was no so good a year as it might have been, but I was careful. I'd ten bushels of corn put aside, and four good deer hides. It was worth more than the six shillings of the tax."

But the taxes must be paid in hard currency; not in corn and hides and blocks of indigo, as the farmers did their business. Barter was the common means of trade—I knew that well enough, I thought, glancing down at the bag of odd things folk had brought me in payment for my herbs and simples. No one ever paid for anything in money—save the taxes.

"Well, that's only reasonable," said MacLennan, blinking earnestly at Private Ogilvie, as though the young man had protested. "His Majesty canna well be doing wi' a herd of pigs, or a brace of turkeys, now, can he? No, I see quite well why it must be hard money, anyone could. And I had the corn; it would ha' brought six shillings, easy."

The only difficulty, of course, lay in turning ten bushels of corn into six shillings of tax. There were those in Drunkard's Creek who might have bought Abel's corn, and were willing—but no one in Drunkard's Creek had money, either. No, the corn must be taken to market in Salem; that was the closest place where hard coin might be obtained. But Salem lay nearly forty miles from Drunkard's Creek—a week's journey, there and back.

"I'd five acres in late barley," Abel explained. "Ripe and yellochtie, achin' for the scythe. I couldna leave it to be spoilt, and my Abby—she was a wee, slight woman, she couldna be scything and threshing."

Unable to spare a week from his harvest, Abel had instead sought help from his neighbors.

"They're guid folk," he insisted. "One or two could spare me the odd penny—but they'd their ain taxes to pay, hadn't they?" Still hoping somehow to scrape up the necessary coin without undertaking the arduous trip to Salem, Abel had delayed—and delayed too long.

"Howard Travers is Sheriff," he said, and wiped unconsciously at the drop of moisture that formed at the end of his nose. "He came with a paper, and said he mun' put us oot, and the taxes not paid."

Faced with necessity, Abel had left his wife in their cabin, and gone posthaste to Salem. But by the time he returned, six shillings in hand, his property had been seized and sold—to Howard Travers's father-in-law—and his cabin was inhabited by strangers, his wife gone.

"I kent she'd no go far," he explained. "She'd not leave the bairns."

And that in fact was where he found her, wrapped in a threadbare quilt and shivering under the big spruce tree on the hill that sheltered the graves of the four MacLennan children, all dead in their first year of life. In spite of his entreaties, Abigail would not go down to the cabin that had been theirs, would seek no aid from those who had dispossessed her. If it was madness from the fever that gripped her, or only stubbornness, he could not tell; she had clung to the branches of the tree with demented strength, crying out the names of her children—and there had died in the night.

His whisky cup was empty. He set it carefully on the ground by his feet, ignoring Jamie's gesture toward the bottle.

"They'd given her leave to carry awa what she could. She'd a bundle with her, and her grave-claes in it. I ken weel her sitting down the day after we were wed, to spin her winding-sheet. It had wee flowers all along one edge, that she'd made; she was a good hand wi' a needle."

He had wrapped Abigail in her embroidered shroud, buried her by the side of their youngest child, and then walked two miles down the road, intending, he thought, to tell the Hobsons what had happened.

"But I came to the house, and found them all abuzzing like hornets—Hugh Fowles had had a visit from Travers, come for the tax, and no money to pay. Travers grinned like an ape and said it was all one to him—and sure enough, ten days later he came along wi' a paper and three men, and put them oot."

Hobson had scraped up the money to pay his own taxes, and the Fowleses were crowded in safely enough with the rest of the family—but Joe Hobson was foaming with wrath over the treatment of his son-in-law.

"He was a-rantin', Joe, bleezin' mad wi' fury. Janet Hobson bid me come and sit, and offered me supper, and there was Joe shoutin' that he'd take the price of the land out of Howard Travers's hide, and Hugh slumped down like a trampled dog, and his wife greetin', and the weans all squealin' for their dinners like a brood o' piglets, and … well, I thought of telling them, but then …" He shook his head, as though confused anew.

Sitting half-forgotten in the chimney-corner, he had been overcome by a strange sort of fatigue, one that made him so tired that his head nodded on his neck, lethargy stealing over him. It was warm, and he was overcome with a sense of unreality. If the crowded confines of the Hobsons' one-roomed cabin were not real, neither was the quiet hillside and its fresh grave beneath the spruce tree.

He slept under the table, and woke before dawn, to find that the sense of unreality persisted. Everything around him seemed no more than a waking dream. MacLennan himself seemed to have ceased to exist; his body rose, washed itself, and ate, nodded and spoke without his cognizance. None of the outer world existed any longer. And so it was that when Joe Hobson had risen and announced that he and Hugh would go to Hillsborough, there to seek redress from the Court, that Abel MacLennan had found himself marching down the road along with them, nodding and speaking when spoken to, with no more will than a dead man.

"It did come to me, walkin' doon the road, as we were all dead," he said dreamily. "Me and Joe and Hugh and the rest. I might sae well be one place as anither; it was only moving 'til the time came to lay my bones beside Abby. I didna mind it."

When they reached Hillsborough, he had paid no great mind to what Joe intended; only followed, obedient and unthinking. Followed, and walked the muddy streets sparkling with broken glass from shattered windows, seen the torchlight and mobs, heard the shouts and screams—all quite unmoved.

"It was no but dead men, a-rattling their bones against one anither," he said with a shrug. He was still for a moment, then turned his face to Jamie, and looked long and earnestly up into his face.

"Is it so? Are ye dead, too?" One limp, callused hand floated up from the red kerchief, and rested lightly against the bone of Jamie's cheek.

Jamie didn't recoil from the touch, but took MacLennan's hand and brought it down again, held tight between his own.

"No, *a charaid*," he said softly. "Not yet."

MacLennan nodded slowly.

"Aye. Give it time," he said. He pulled his hands free and sat for a moment, smoothing his kerchief. His head kept bobbing, nodding slightly, as though the spring of his neck had stretched too far.

"Give it time," he repeated. "It's none sae bad." He stood up then, and put the square of red cloth on his head. He turned to me and nodded politely, his eyes vague and troubled.

"I thank ye for the breakfast, ma'am," he said, and walked away.

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3

BILIOUS HUMOURS

Abel MacLennan's departure put an abrupt end to breakfast. Private Ogilvie excused himself with thanks, Jamie and Fergus went off in search of scythes and astrolabes, and Lizzie, wilting in the absence of Private Ogilvie, declared that she felt unwell and subsided palely into one of the lean-to shelters, fortified with a large cup of tansy and rue decoction.

Fortunately, Brianna chose to reappear just then, sans Jemmy. She and Roger had breakfasted with Jocasta, she assured me. Jemmy had fallen asleep in Jocasta's arms, and since both parties appeared content with that arrangement, she had left him there, and come back to help me with the morning's clinic.

"Are you sure you want to help me this morning?" I eyed Bree dubiously. "It's your wedding day, after all. I'm sure Lizzie or maybe Mrs. Martin could—"

"No, I'll do it," she assured me, swiping a cloth across the seat of the tall stool I used for my morning surgery. "Lizzie's feeling better, but I don't think she's up to festering feet and putrid stomachs." She gave a small shudder, closing her eyes at the memory of the elderly gentleman whose ulcerated heel I had debrided the day before. The pain had caused him to vomit copiously on his tattered breeches, which in turn had caused several of the people waiting for my attention to throw up too, in sympathetic reflex.

I felt a trifle queasy at the memory myself, but drowned it with a final gulp of bitter coffee.

"No, I suppose not," I agreed reluctantly. "Still, your gown isn't quite finished, is it? Perhaps you should go—"

"It's fine," she assured me. "Phaedre's hemming my dress, and Ulysses is ordering all the servants around up there like a drill sergeant. I'd just be in the way."

I gave way without further demur, though I wondered a little at her alacrity. While Bree wasn't squeamish about the exigencies of normal life, like skinning animals and cleaning fish, I knew the proximity of people with disfiguring conditions or obvious illness bothered her, though she did her best to disguise it. It wasn't distaste, I thought, but rather a crippling empathy.

I lifted the kettle and poured freshly boiled water into a large, half-full jar of distilled alcohol, narrowing my eyes against hot clouds of alcoholic steam.

It *was* difficult to see so many people suffering from things that could have been easily treated in a time of antiseptics, antibiotics, and anesthesia—but I had learned detachment in the field hospitals of a time when such medical innovations were not only new but rare, and I knew both the necessity and the value of it.

I could not help anyone, if my own feelings got in the way. And I must help. It was as simple as that. But Brianna had no such knowledge to use as a shield. Not yet.

She had finished wiping down the stools, boxes, and other impedimenta for the morning surgery, and straightened up, a small frown between her brows.

"Do you remember the woman you saw yesterday? The one with the retarded little boy?"

"Not something you'd forget," I said, as lightly as possible. "Why? Here, can you deal with this?" I gestured at the folding table I used, which was stubbornly declining to fold up properly, its joints having swollen with the damp.

Brianna frowned slightly, studying it, then struck the offending joint sharply with the side of her hand. It gave way and collapsed obediently at once, recognizing superior force.

"There." She rubbed the side of her hand absently, still frowning. "You were making a big thing of telling her to try not to have any more children. The little boy—was it an inheritable condition, then?"

“You might say that,” I replied dryly. “Congenital syphilis.”

She looked up, blanching.

“Syphilis? You’re sure?”

I nodded, rolling up a length of boiled linen for bandaging. It was still very damp, but no help for it.

“The mother wasn’t showing overt signs of the late stages—yet—but it’s quite unmistakable in a child.”

The mother had come simply to have a gumboil lanced, the little boy clinging to her skirts. He’d had the characteristic “saddle nose,” with its pushed-in bridge, as well as a jaw so malformed that I wasn’t surprised at his poor nutrition; he could barely chew. I couldn’t tell how much of his evident backwardness was due to brain damage and how much to deafness; he appeared to have both, but I hadn’t tested their extent—there being exactly nothing I could do to remedy either condition. I had advised the mother to give him pot liquor, which might help with the malnutrition, but there was little else to be done for him, poor mite.

“I don’t see it so often here as I did in Paris or Edinburgh, where there were a lot of prostitutes,” I told Bree, tossing the ball of bandages into the canvas bag she held open. “Now and then, though. Why? You don’t think Roger has syphilis, do you?”

She looked at me, openmouthed. Her look of shock was obliterated by an instant flood of angry red.

“I do *not*!” she said. “Mother!”

“Well, I didn’t really think so,” I said mildly. “Happens in the best of families, though—and you *were* asking.”

She snorted heavily.

“I was *asking* about contraception,” she said, through her teeth. “Or at least I meant to, before you started in with the *Physician’s Guide to Venereal Disease.*”

“Oh, that.” I eyed her thoughtfully, taking in the dried milk stains on her bodice. “Well, breast-feeding is reasonably effective. Not absolute, by any means, but fairly effective. Less so, after the first six months”—Jemmy was now six months old—“but still effective.”

“Mmphm,” she said, sounding so like Jamie that I had to bite my lower lip in order not to laugh. “And exactly what *else* is effective?”

I hadn’t really discussed contraception—eighteenth-century style—with her. It hadn’t seemed necessary when she first appeared at Fraser’s Ridge, and then it *really* wasn’t necessary, she being already pregnant. So she thought it was now?

I frowned, slowly putting rolls of bandage and bundles of herbs into my bag.

“The most common thing is some sort of barrier. A piece of silk or a sponge, soaked with anything from vinegar to brandy—though if you have it, tansy oil or oil of cedar is supposed to work the best. I *have* heard of women in the Indies using half a lemon, but that’s obviously not a suitable alternative here.”

She uttered a short laugh.

“No, I wouldn’t think so. I don’t think the tansy oil works all that well, either—that’s what Marsali was using when she got pregnant with Joan.”

“Oh, she *was* using it? I thought perhaps she’d just not bothered once—and once is enough.”

I felt, rather than saw her stiffen, and bit my lip again, this time in chagrin. Once *had* been enough—we just didn’t know *which* once. She hunched her shoulders, though, then let them fall, deliberately dismissing whatever memories my thoughtless remark had conjured.

“She said she’d been using it—but she might have forgotten. It doesn’t work all the time, though, does it?”

I slung the bag of surgical linens and dried herbs over my shoulder and picked up the medical chest by the leather strap Jamie had made for it.

“The only thing that always works is celibacy,” I said. “I suppose that isn’t a satisfactory option in the present case?”

She shook her head, her eyes fixed broodingly on a cluster of young men visible through the trees below, taking turns at pitching stones across the creek.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” she said, and bent to pick up the folding table and a pair of stools.

I looked round the clearing, considering. Anything else? No worry about leaving the campfire, even if Lizzie fell asleep; nothing on the mountainside would burn in this weather; even the kindling and firewood we had stored at the end of our lean-to the day before were damp. Something was missing, though … what? Oh, yes. I put down the box for a moment and knelt to crawl into the lean-to. I dug about in the jumble of quilts, coming out finally with my tiny leather medicine pouch.

I said a brief prayer to St. Bride and slipped it round my neck and down inside the bodice of my dress. I was so much in the habit of wearing the amulet when I set out to practice medicine that I had almost ceased to feel ridiculous about this small ritual—almost. Bree was watching me, a rather odd look on her face, but she said nothing.

I didn't, either; merely picked up my things and followed her across the clearing, stepping carefully round the boggiest spots. It wasn't raining now, but the clouds sat on the tops of the trees, promising more at any moment, and wisps of mist rose from fallen logs and dripping bushes.

Why was Bree worrying about contraception? I wondered. Not that I didn't think it sensible—but why now? Perhaps it was to do with the imminence of her wedding to Roger. Even if they had been living as man and wife for the last several months—and they had—the formality of vows spoken before God and man was enough to bring a new sobriety to even the giddiest of young people. And neither Bree nor Roger was giddy.

"There is another possibility," I said to the back of her neck, as she led the way down the slippery trail. "I haven't tried it on anyone yet, so I can't say how reliable it may be. Nayawenne—the old Tuscaroran lady who gave me my medicine bag—she said there were 'women's herbs.' Different mixtures for different things—but one plant in particular for that; she said the seeds of it would keep a man's spirit from overwhelming a woman's."

Bree paused, half-turning as I came up beside her.

"Is that how the Indians see pregnancy?" One corner of her mouth curled wryly. "The man wins?"

I laughed.

"Well, in a way. If the woman's spirit is too strong for the man's, or won't yield to it, she can't conceive. So if a woman wants a child and can't have one, most often the shaman will treat her husband, or both of them, rather than just her."

She made a small throaty noise, partly amusement—but only partly.

"What's the plant—the women's herb?" she asked. "Do you know it?"

"I'm not positive," I admitted. "Or not sure of the name, I should say. She did show it to me, both the growing plant and the dried seeds, and I'm sure I'd know it again—but it wasn't a plant I knew by an English name. One of the Umbelliferae, though," I added helpfully.

She gave me an austere look that reminded me once more of Jamie, then turned to the side to let a small stream of Campbell women go by, clattering with empty kettles and pails, each one bobbing or bowing politely to us as they passed on their way down to the creek.

"Good day to ye, Mistress Fraser," said one, a neat young woman that I recognized as one of Farquard Campbell's younger daughters. "Is your man about? My faither would be glad of a word, he says."

"No, he's gone off, I'm afraid." I gestured vaguely; Jamie could be anywhere. "I'll tell him if I see him, though."

She nodded and went on, each of the women behind her pausing to wish Brianna happiness on her wedding day, their woolen skirts and cloaks brushing small showers of rainwater from the bayberry bushes that lined the path here.

Brianna accepted their good wishes with gracious politeness, but I saw the small line that formed between her thick red brows. Something was definitely bothering her.

"What?" I said bluntly, as soon as the Campbells were out of earshot.

"What's what?" she said, startled.

"What's troubling you?" I asked. "And don't say 'nothing,' because I see there is. Is it to do with Roger? Are you having second thoughts about the wedding?"

"Not exactly," she replied, looking wary. "I want to marry Roger, I mean—*that's* all right. It's just … I just … thought of something …” She trailed off, and a slow flush rose in her cheeks.

“Oh?” I asked, feeling rather alarmed. “What’s that?”

“Venereal disease,” she blurted. “What if I have it? Not Roger, not him, but—from Stephen Bonnet?”

Her face was flaming so hotly that I was surprised not to see the raindrops sizzle into steam when they struck her skin. My own face felt cold, my heart tight in my chest. The possibility had occurred to me—vividly—at the time, but I hadn’t wanted even to suggest such a thing, if she hadn’t thought of it herself. I remembered the weeks of watching her covertly for any hint of malaise—but women often showed no symptoms of early infection. Jemmy’s healthy birth had been a relief in more ways than one.

“Oh,” I said softly. I reached out and squeezed her arm. “Don’t worry, lovey. You haven’t.”

She took a deep breath, and let it out in a pale misty cloud, some of the tension leaving her shoulders.

“You’re sure?” she said. “You can tell? I feel all right, but I thought—women don’t always have symptoms.”

“They don’t,” I said, “but men most certainly do. And if Roger had contracted anything nasty from *you*, I’d have heard about it long since.”

Her face had faded somewhat, but the pinkness came back at that. She coughed, mist rising from her breath.

“Well, that’s a relief. So Jemmy’s all right? You’re sure?”

“Absolutely,” I assured her. I had put drops of silver nitrate—procured at considerable cost and difficulty—in his eyes at birth, just in case, but I was indeed sure. Aside from the lack of any specific signs of illness, Jemmy had an air of robust health about him that made the mere thought of infection incredible. He radiated well-being like a potful of stew.

“Is that why you asked about contraception?” I asked, waving a greeting as we passed the MacRaes’ campsite. “You were worried about having more children, in case …”

“Oh. No. I mean—I hadn’t even thought about venereal disease until you mentioned syphilis, and then it just struck me as a horrible realization—that he might have—" She stopped and cleared her throat. "Er, no. I just wanted to know."

A slippery patch of trail put paid to the conversation at that point, but not to my speculations.

It wasn't that a young bride's mind might not turn lightly to thoughts of contraception—but under the circumstances … what was it? I wondered. Fear for herself, or for a new baby? Childbirth could be dangerous, of course—and anyone who had seen the attendees at my surgery or heard the women's conversations round the campfires in the evening could be in no doubt as to the dangers to infants and children; it was the rare family that had not lost at least one infant to fever, morbid sore throat, or "the squitters"—uncontrolled diarrhea. Many women had lost three, four, or more babies. I remembered Abel MacLennan's story, and a small shiver ran down my spine.

Still, Brianna was very healthy, and while we did lack important things like antibiotics and sophisticated medical facilities, I had told her not to underestimate the power of simple hygiene and good nutrition.

No, I thought, watching the strong curve of her back as she lifted the heavy equipment over an entangling root that hunched across the trail. It wasn't that. She might have reason to be concerned, but she wasn't basically a fearful person.

Roger? On the face of it, it would seem that the best thing to do was to become pregnant again quickly, with a child that was definitely Roger's. That would certainly help to cement their new marriage. On the other hand … what if she did? Roger would be more than pleased—but what about Jemmy?

Roger had sworn a blood oath, taking Jemmy as his own. But human nature was human nature, and while I was sure that Roger would never abandon or neglect Jemmy, it was quite possible that he would feel differently—and obviously differently—for a child he knew was his. Would Bree risk that?

On due consideration, I rather thought she was wise to wait—if she could. Give Roger time to feel a close bond with Jemmy, before complicating the family situation with another child. Yes, very sensible—and Bree *was* an eminently sensible person.

It wasn't until we had arrived, finally, at the clearing where the morning surgeries were held that another possibility occurred to me.

"Can we be helpin' ye at all, Missus Fraser?"

Two of the younger Chisholm boys hurried forward to help, relieving me and Brianna of our heavy loads, and without being told, started in at once to unfold tables, fetch clean water, kindle a fire, and generally make themselves useful. They were no more than eight and ten, and watching them work, I realized afresh that in this time, a lad of twelve or fourteen could be essentially a grown man.

Brianna knew that, too. She would never leave Jemmy, I knew—not while he needed her. But … later? What might happen when he left *her*?

I opened my chest and began slowly to lay out the necessary supplies for the morning's work: scissors, probe, forceps, alcohol, scalpel, bandages, tooth pliers, suture needles, ointments, salves, washes, purges …

Brianna was twenty-three. She might be no more than in her mid-thirties by the time Jem was fully independent. And if he no longer needed her care—she and Roger might possibly go back. Back to her own time, to safety—to the interrupted life that had been hers by birth.

But only if she had no further children, whose helplessness would keep her here.

"Good morn to ye, ma'am." A short, middle-aged gentleman stood before me, the morning's first patient. He was bristling with a week's worth of whiskers, but noticeably pallid round the gills, with a clammy look and bloodshot eyes so raw with smoke and whisky that his malady was instantly discernible. Hangover was endemic at the morning surgery.

"I've a wee gripin' in my guts, ma'am," he said, swallowing unhappily. "Would ye have anything like to settle 'em, maybe?"

"Just the thing," I assured him, reaching for a cup. "Raw egg and a bit of ipecac. Have you a good vomit, and you'll be a new man."

The surgery was held at the edge of the big clearing at the foot of the hill, where the great fire of the Gathering burned at night. The damp air smelled of soot and the acrid scent of wet ashes, but the blackened patch of earth—some ten feet across, at least—was already disappearing under a crisscross of fresh branches and kindling. They'd have a time starting it tonight, I thought, if the drizzle kept up.

The gentleman with the hangover disposed of, there was a short lull, and I was able to give my attention to Murray MacLeod, who had set up shop a short distance away.

Murray had gotten an early start, I saw; the ground by his feet was dark, the scattered ashes sodden and squishy with blood. He had an early patient in hand, too—a stout gentleman whose red, spongy nose and flabby jowls gave testimony to a life of alcoholic excess. He had the man stripped to his shirt despite the rain and cold, sleeve turned up and tourniquet in place, the bleeding bowl held across the patient's knees.

I was a good ten feet from the stool where Murray plied his trade, but could see the man's eyes, yellow as mustard even in the dim morning light.

"Liver disease," I said to Brianna, taking no particular pains to lower my voice. "You can see the jaundice from here, can't you?"

"Bilious humors," MacLeod said loudly, snapping open his fleam. "An excess of the humors, clear as day." Small, dark, and neat in his dress, Murray was not personally impressive, but he *was* opinionated.

"Cirrhosis due to drink, I daresay," I said, coming closer and looking the patient over dispassionately.

"An impaction of the bile, owing to an imbalance of the phlegm!" Murray glowered at me, clearly thinking I intended to steal his thunder, if not his patient.

I ignored him and bent down to examine the patient, who looked alarmed at my scrutiny.

"You have a hard mass just under the ribs on the right, don't you?" I said, kindly. "Your piss is dark, and when you shit, it's black and bloody, am I right?"

The man nodded, mouth hanging open. We were beginning to attract attention.

"Mo-therr." Brianna was standing behind me. She gave Murray a nod and bent to mutter in my ear. "What can you do for cirrhosis, Mother? Nothing!"

I stopped, biting my lip. She was right. In my urge to show off by making the diagnosis—and keep Murray from using his stained, rusty-looking fleam on the man—I had overlooked the minor point that I had no alternative treatment to offer.

The patient was glancing back and forth between us, plainly uneasy. With an effort, I smiled at him, and nodded to Murray.

"Mr. MacLeod has the right of it," I said, forcing the words past my teeth. "Liver disease, surely—caused by an excess of humors." I supposed one could consider alcohol a humor, after all; the folk drinking Jamie's whisky last night had evidently found it hilarious.

Murray's face had been tense with suspicion; at my capitulation, it went quite comically blank with astonishment. Stepping in front of me, Brianna seized advantage of the moment.

"There's a charm," she said, smiling charmingly at him. "It … er … sharpens the blade, and eases the flow of the humors. Let me show you." Before he could tighten his grip, she snatched the fleam from his hand and turned to our small surgery fire, where a pot of water hung steaming from a tripod.

"In the name of Michael, wielder of swords, defender of souls," she intoned. I trusted that taking the name of St. Michael in vain was not actual blasphemy—or if it was, that Michael would not object in a good cause. The men laying the fire had stopped to watch, as had a few people coming to the surgery.

She raised the fleam and made a large, slow sign of the cross with it, looking from side to side, to be sure she had the attention of all the onlookers. She did; they were agog. Towering over most of the gawkers, blue eyes narrowed in concentration, she reminded me strongly of Jamie in some of his more bravura performances. I could only hope she was as good at it as he was.

“Bless this blade, for the healing of your servant,” she said, casting her eyes up to heaven, and holding the fleam above the fire in the manner of a priest offering the Eucharist. Bubbles were rising through the water, but it hadn’t quite reached the boil.

“Bless its edge, for the drawing of blood, for the spilling of blood, for the … er … the letting of poison from the body of your most humble petitioner. Bless the blade … bless the blade … bless the blade in the hand of your humble servant.… Thanks be to God for the brightness of the metal.” Thanks be to God for the repetitious nature of Gaelic prayers, I thought cynically.

Thanks be to God, the water was boiling. She lowered the short, curved blade to the surface of the water, glowered significantly at the crowd, and declaimed, “Let the cleansing of the waters from the side of our Lord Jesus be upon this blade!”

She plunged the metal into the water and held it until the steam rising over the wooden casing reddened her fingers. She lifted the fleam and transferred it hastily to her other hand, raising it into the air as she surreptitiously waggled the scalded hand behind her.

“May the blessing of Michael, defender from demons, be on this blade and on the hand of its wielder, to the health of the body, to the health of the soul. Amen!”

She stepped forward and presented the fleam ceremoniously to Murray, handle first. Murray, no fool, gave me a look in which keen suspicion was mingled with a reluctant appreciation for my daughter’s theatrical abilities.

“Don’t touch the blade,” I said, smiling graciously. “It will break the charm. Oh—and you repeat the charm, each time you use the blade. It has to be done with the water *boiling*, mind.”

“Mmphm,” he said, but took the fleam carefully by the handle. With a short nod to Brianna, he turned away to his patient, and I to mine—a young girl with nettle rash. Brianna followed, wiping her hands on her skirt and looking pleased with herself. I heard the patient’s soft grunt behind me, and the ringing patter of blood running into the metal bowl.

I felt rather guilty about MacLeod's patient, but Brianna had been quite right; there was absolutely nothing I could do for him under the circumstances. Careful long-term nursing, coupled with excellent nutrition and a complete abstinence from alcohol, might prolong his life; the chances of the first two were low, the third, nonexistent.

Brianna had brilliantly saved him from a potentially nasty blood infection—and seized the opportunity to provide a similar protection for all MacLeod's future patients—but I couldn't help a nagging sense of guilt that I could not do more myself. Still, the first medical principle I had learned as a nurse on the battlefields of France still held: treat the patient in front of you.

"Use this ointment," I said sternly to the girl with nettle rash, "and *don't scratch*."

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4

WEDDING GIFTS

The day hadn't cleared, but the rain had ceased for the moment. Fires smoked like smudge pots, as people hastened to take advantage of the momentary cessation to feed their carefully hoarded coals, pushing damp wood into the kindling blazes in a hasty effort to dry damp clothes and blankets. The air was still restless, though, and clouds of woodsmoke billowed ghostlike through the trees.

One such plume surged across the trail before him, and Roger turned to skirt it, making his way through tussocks of wet grass that soaked his stockings, and hanging boughs of pine that left dark patches of wetness on the shoulders of his coat as he passed. He paid the damp no mind, intent on his mental list of errands for the day.

To the tinkers' wagons first, to buy some small token as a wedding present for Brianna. What would she like? he wondered. A bit of jewelry, a ribbon? He had very little money, but felt the need to mark the occasion with a gift of some sort.

He would have liked to put his own ring on her finger when they made their vows, but she had insisted that the cabochon ruby that had belonged to her grandfather would do fine; it fit her hand perfectly, and there was no need to spend money on another ring. She was a pragmatic person, Bree was—sometimes dismayingly so, in contrast to his own romantic streak.

Something practical but ornamental, then—like a painted chamber pot? He smiled to himself at the idea, but the notion of practicality lingered, tinged with doubt.

He had a vivid memory of Mrs. Abercrombie, a staid and practical matron of Reverend Wakefield's congregation, who had arrived at the manse in hysterics one evening in the midst of supper, saying that she had killed her husband, and whatever should she do? The Reverend had left Mrs. Abercrombie in the temporary care of his housekeeper, while he and Roger, then a teenager, had hastened to the Abercrombie residence to see what had happened.

They had found Mr. Abercrombie on the floor of his kitchen, fortunately still alive, though groggy and bleeding profusely from a minor scalp wound occasioned by his having been struck by the new electric steam iron which he had presented to his wife on the occasion of their twenty-third wedding anniversary.

"But she said the old one scorched the tea towels!" Mr. Abercrombie had repeated at plaintive intervals, as the Reverend skillfully taped up his head with Elastoplast, and Roger mopped up the kitchen.

It was the vivid memory of the gory splotches on the worn lino of the Abercrombies' kitchen that decided him. Pragmatic Bree might be, but this was their wedding. Better, worse, death do us part. He'd go for romantic—or as romantic as could be managed on one shilling, threepence.

There was a flash of red among the spruce needles nearby, like the glimpse of a cardinal. Bigger than the average bird, though; he stopped, bending to peer through an opening in the branches.

"Duncan?" he said. "Is that you?"

Duncan Innes came out of the trees, nodding shyly. He still wore the scarlet Cameron tartan, but had left off his splendid coat, instead wrapping the end of his plaid shawllike round his shoulders in the cozy old style of the Highlands.

"A word, *a Smeòraich*?" he said.

"Aye, sure. I'm just off to the tinkers'—walk with me." He turned back to the trail—now clear of smoke—and they made their way companionably across the mountain, side by side.

Roger said nothing, waiting courteously for Duncan to choose his way into the conversation. Duncan was diffident and retiring by temperament, but observant, perceptive, and stubborn in a very quiet way. If he had something to say, he'd say it—given time. At last he drew breath and started in.

"*Mac Dubh* did say to me as how your Da was a minister—that's true, is it?"

"Aye," Roger said, rather startled at the subject. "Or at least—my real father was killed, and my mother's uncle adopted me; it was him was the minister." Even as he spoke, Roger wondered why he should feel it necessary to explain. For most of his life, he had thought and spoken of the Reverend as his father; and surely it made no difference to Duncan.

Duncan nodded, clicking his tongue in sympathy.

"But ye will have been Presbyterian yourself, then? I did hear *Mac Dubh* speak of it." Despite Duncan's normal good manners, a brief grin showed beneath the edge of his ragged mustache.

"I expect ye did, aye," Roger replied dryly. He'd be surprised if the whole Gathering hadn't heard *Mac Dubh* speak of it.

"Well, the thing about it is, so am I," Duncan said, sounding rather apologetic.

Roger looked at him in astonishment.

"You? I thought you were Catholic!"

Duncan made a small embarrassed noise, lifting the shoulder of his amputated arm in a shrug.

"No. My great-grandda on my mother's side was a Covenanter—verra fierce in his beliefs, aye?" He smiled, a little shyly. "That was watered down a good bit before it came to me; my Mam was godly, but Da wasna much of a one for the kirk, nor was I. And when I met up wi' *Mac Dubh* … well, it wasna as though he'd asked me to go to Mass with him of a Sunday, was it?"

Roger nodded, with a brief grunt of comprehension. Duncan had met with Jamie in Ardsmuir Prison, after the Rising. While most of the Jacobite troops had been Catholic, he knew there had been Protestants of different stripes among them, too—and most would likely have kept quiet about it, outnumbered by the Catholics in close quarters. And it was true enough that Jamie's and Duncan's later career in smuggling would have offered few occasions for religious discourse.

"Aye, so. And your wedding to Mrs. Cameron tonight …"

Duncan nodded, and sucked in a corner of his mouth, gnawing contemplatively at the edge of his mustache.

"That's it. Am I bound, d'ye think, to say anything?"

"Mrs. Cameron doesn't know? Nor Jamie?"

Duncan shook his head silently, eyes on the trampled mud of the trail.

Roger realized that it was, of course, Jamie whose opinion was important here, rather than Jocasta Cameron's. The issue of differing religion had evidently not seemed important to Duncan—and Roger had never heard that Jocasta was in any way devout—but hearing about Jamie's response to Roger's Presbyterianism, Duncan had now taken alarm.

"Ye went to see the priest, *Mac Dubh* said." Duncan glanced at him sidelong. "Did he—" He cleared his throat, flushing. "I mean, did he oblige ye to be … baptized Romish?"

An atrocious prospect to a devout Protestant, and plainly an uncomfortable one to Duncan. It was, Roger realized, an uncomfortable thought to him, too. Would he have done it, if he had to, to wed Bree? He supposed he would have, in the end, but he admitted to having felt a deep relief that the priest hadn't insisted on any sort of formal conversion.

"Ah … no," Roger said, and coughed as another fan of smoke washed suddenly over them. "No," he repeated, wiping streaming eyes. "But they don't baptize you, ye know, if ye've been christened already. You have been, aye?"

"Oh, aye." Duncan seemed heartened by that. "Aye, when I—that is—" A faint shadow crossed his face, but whatever thought had caused it was dismissed with another shrug. "Yes."

"Well, then. Let me think a bit, aye?"

The tinkers' wagons were already in sight, huddled like oxen, their merchandise shrouded in canvas and blankets against the rain, but Duncan stopped, clearly wanting the matter settled before going on to anything else.

Roger rubbed a hand over the back of his neck, thinking.

"No," he said finally. "No, I think ye needna say anything. See, it'll not be a Mass, only the marriage service—and that's just the same. Do ye take this woman, do ye take this man, richer, poorer, all that."

Duncan nodded, attentive.

"I can say that, aye," he said. "Though it did take a bit of coming to, the richer, poorer bit. Ye'll ken that, though, yourself."

He spoke quite without any sense of irony, merely as one stating an obvious fact, and was plainly taken aback at his glimpse of Roger's face in response to the remark.

"I didna mean anything amiss," Duncan said hastily. "That is, I only meant—"

Roger waved a hand, trying to brush it off.

"No harm done," he said, his voice as dry as Duncan's had been. "Speak the truth and shame auld Hornie, aye?"

It *was* the truth, too, though he had somehow managed to overlook it until this moment. In fact, he realized with a sinking sensation, his situation was a precise parallel with Duncan's: a penniless man without property, marrying a rich—or potentially rich—woman.

He had never thought of Jamie Fraser as being rich, perhaps because of the man's natural modesty, perhaps simply because he wasn't—yet. The fact remained that Fraser was the proprietor of ten thousand acres of land. If a good bit of that land was still wilderness, it didn't mean it would stay that way. There were tenants on that property now; there would be more soon. And when those tenancies began to pay rents, when there were sawmills and gristmills on the streams, when there were settlements and stores and taverns, when the handful of cows and pigs and horses had multiplied into fat herds of thriving stock under Jamie's careful stewardship … Jamie Fraser might be a very rich man indeed. And Brianna was Jamie's only natural child.

Then there was Jocasta Cameron, demonstrably already a very rich woman, who had stated her intention to make Brianna her heiress. Bree had exigently refused to countenance the notion—but Jocasta was as naturally stubborn as her niece, and had had more practice at it. Besides, no matter what Brianna said or did, folk would suppose …

And that was what was truly sitting in the bottom of his stomach like a curling stone. Not just the realization that he was in fact marrying well above his means and position—but the realization that everyone in the entire colony had realized it long ago, and had probably been viewing him cynically—and gossiping about him—as a rare chancer, if not an outright adventurer.

The smoke had left a bitter taste of ashes at the back of his mouth. He swallowed it down, and gave Duncan a crooked smile.

"Aye," he said. "Well. Better or worse. I suppose they must see *something* in us, eh? The women?"

Duncan smiled, a little ruefully.

"Aye, something. So, ye think it will be all right, then, about the religion? I wouldna have either Miss Jo or *Mac Dubh* think I meant aught amiss by not speaking. But I didna like to make a fizz about it, and it's no needed."

"No, of course not," Roger agreed. He took a deep breath and brushed damp hair off his face. "Nay, I think it's all right. When I spoke to the—the Father, the only condition he made was that I should let any children be baptized as Catholics. But since that's not a consideration for you and Mrs. Cameron, I suppose …" He trailed off delicately, but Duncan seemed relieved at the thought.

"Och, no," he said, and laughed, a little nervously. "No, I think I'm no bothered about that."

"Well, then." Roger forced a smile, and clapped Duncan on the back. "Here's luck to you."

Duncan brushed a finger beneath his mustache, nodding.

"And you, *a Smeòraich*."

He had expected Duncan to go off about his business, once his question was answered, but the man instead came with him, wandering slowly along the row of wagons in Roger's wake, peering at the wares on display with a slight frown.

After a week's haggling and bartering, the wagons were as full as they had been to start with—or more so, heaped with sacks of grain and wool, casks of cider, bags of apples, stacks of hides and other sundries taken in trade. The stock of fancies had dwindled considerably, but there were still things to be bought, as evidenced by the crowd of folk clustering round the wagons, thick as aphids on a rosebush.

Roger was tall enough to peer over the heads of most customers, and made his way slowly along the rank of wagons, squinting at this or that, trying to envision Brianna's response to it.

She was a beautiful woman, but not inclined to fuss over her looks. In fact, he had narrowly stopped her cutting off most of her glorious red mane out of impatience at it dangling in the gravy and Jemmy yanking on it. Maybe a ribbon *was* practical. Or a decorated comb? More likely a pair of handcuffs for the wean.

He paused by a vendor of cloth goods, though, and bent to peer under the canvas, where caps and bright ribbons hung safely suspended out of the wet, stirring in the cool dimness like the tentacles of brilliant jellyfish. Duncan, plaid hitched up about his ears against the gusting breeze, came closer, to see what he was looking at.

"Looking for something in particular, are ye, sirs?" A peddler-woman leaned forward over her goods, bosom resting on her folded arms, and divided a professional smile between them.

"Aye," Duncan said, unexpectedly. "A yard of velvet. Would ye be having such a thing? Good quality, mind, but the color's not important."

The woman's eyebrows lifted—even in his best clothes, Duncan would strike no one as a dandy—but she turned without comment and began to rootle through her diminished stock.

"D'ye think Mrs. Claire would have some lavender left?" Duncan asked, turning to Roger.

"Aye, I know she has," Roger replied. His puzzlement must have shown on his face, for Duncan smiled and ducked his head diffidently.

" 'Twas a thought I had," he said. "Miss Jo suffers from the megrims, and doesna sleep sae well as she might. I mind, my mither had a lavender pillow, and said she fell asleep like a babe the moment she laid her head upon it. So I thought, perhaps a bit o' velvet—so as she could feel it against her cheek, aye?—and perhaps Mrs. Lizzie would stitch it up for me.…”

In sickness and in health …

Roger nodded his approval, feeling touched—and slightly shamed—by Duncan’s thoughtfulness. He had had the impression that the marriage between Duncan and Jocasta Cameron was principally a matter of convenience and good business—and perhaps it was. But mad passion wasn’t a necessary prerequisite for tenderness or consideration, was it?

Duncan, purchase concluded, took his leave and went off with the velvet safely sheltered under his plaid, leaving Roger to make a slow circuit of the remaining vendors, mentally selecting, weighing, and discarding, as he wracked his brain to think what item of this myriad would best please his bride. Earrings? No, the kid would pull them. Same for a necklace—*or* a hair ribbon, now he thought.

Still, his mind dwelled on jewelry. Normally, she wore very little. But she *had* worn her father’s ruby ring—the one Jamie had given him, the one he had given her when she accepted him for good—all through the Gathering. Jem slobbered on it now and then, but couldn’t really damage it.

He stopped suddenly, letting the crowd flow round him. He could see the gold in his mind’s eye, and the deep pink-red of the cabochon ruby, vivid on her long pale finger. *Her father’s ring.* Of course; why had he not seen that before?

True, Jamie had given him the ring, but that didn’t make it his to give in turn. And he wanted, very suddenly and very badly, to give Brianna something truly of his own.

He turned with decision, and made his way back to a wagon whose metal wares gleamed and glinted, even in the rain. He knew from experiment that his little finger was just the size of her ring finger.

“This one,” he said, holding up a ring. It was cheap; made of braided strands of copper and brass, it would undoubtedly turn her finger green in minutes. *So much the better,* he thought, handing over his money. Whether she wore it all the time or not, she would be marked as his.

For this reason shall a woman leave her father's house, and cleave unto her husband, and the two shall be one flesh.

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5

RIOTOUS UNREST

By the end of the first hour, I had a substantial crowd of patients waiting, despite the intermittent drizzle. It was the final day of the Gathering, and people who had stood the pain of a toothache or the doubt of a rash had suddenly decided that they must seize the chance of having it seen to.

I dismissed a young woman with incipient goiter, admonishing her to procure a quantity of dried fish, as she lived too far inland to be sure of getting fresh each day, and eat some daily for its iodine content.

“Next!” I called, brushing damp hair out of my eyes.

The crowd parted like the Red Sea, revealing a small, elderly man, so thin he might be a walking skeleton, clad in rags and carrying a bundle of fur in his arms. As he shambled toward me through the ranks of recoiling people, I discovered the reason for the crowd’s deference; he stank like a dead raccoon.

For a moment, I thought the pile of grayish fur might *be* a dead raccoon—there was already a small pile of furs and hides near my feet, though my patients usually went to the trouble of separating these from their original possessors before presenting them to me—but then the fur stirred, and a pair of bright eyes peered out of the tangled mass.

“My dog’s hurt,” the man announced brusquely. He set the dog on my table, shoving the jumble of instruments aside, and pointed to a jagged tear in the animal’s flank. “You’ll tend him.”

This wasn’t phrased as a request, but it was, after all, the dog who was my patient, and *he* seemed fairly civil. Medium-sized and short-legged, with a bristly, mottled coat and ragged ears, he sat placidly panting, making no effort to get away.

"What happened to him?" I moved the tottering basin out of danger, and bent to rummage for my jar of sterile sutures. The dog licked my hand in passing.

"Fightin' with a she-coon."

"Hmm," I said, surveying the animal dubiously. Given its improbable parentage and evident friendliness, I thought any overtures made to a female raccoon were probably inspired by lust, rather than ferocity. As though to confirm this impression, the animal extruded a few inches of moist pink reproductive equipment in my direction.

"He likes you, Mama," Bree said, keeping a straight face.

"How flattering," I muttered, hoping that the dog's owner would not be moved to any similar demonstration of regard. Fortunately, the old man appeared not to like me in the slightest; he ignored me completely, sunken eyes fixed broodingly on the clearing below, where the soldiers were going through some drill.

"Scissors," I said, resigned, holding out my palm.

I clipped away the matted fur near the wound, and was pleased to find no great swelling or other signs of infection. The gash had clotted well; evidently it had been some time since the injury. I wondered whether the dog had met its nemesis on the mountain. I didn't recognize the old man, nor did he have the speech of a Scot. Had he been at the Gathering at all? I wondered.

"Er … would you hold his head, please?" The dog might be friendly; that didn't mean his good nature would remain unimpaired as I jabbed a needle through his hide. His owner stayed sunk in gloom, though, and made no move to oblige. I glanced around for Bree, looking for help, but she had suddenly disappeared.

"Here, *a bhalaich,* here, then," said a soothing voice beside me, and I turned in surprise to find the dog sniffing interestedly at the proffered knuckles of Murray MacLeod. Seeing my look of surprise, he shrugged, smiled, and leaned over the table, grabbing the astonished dog by scruff and muzzle.

"I should advise ye to be quick about it, Mrs. Fraser," he said.

I took a firm grip of the leg nearest me and started in. The dog responded exactly as most humans did in similar circumstances, wriggling madly and trying to escape, its claws scrabbling on the rough wood of the table. At one point, it succeeded in breaking free of Murray, whereupon it leaped off the table altogether and made for the wide-open spaces, sutures trailing. I flung myself bodily upon it, and rolled through leaves and mud, scattering onlookers in all directions until one or two of the bolder souls came to my assistance, pinning the mangy beast to the ground so that I might finish the job.

I tied the last knot, clipped the waxed thread with Murray's fleam—which had in fact been trampled underfoot in the struggle, though unfortunately not broken—and took my knee off the hound's side, panting nearly as heavily as the dog was.

The spectators applauded.

I bowed, a little dazed, and shoved masses of disheveled curls out of my face with both hands. Murray was in no better case, his queue come undone and a jagged rent in his coat, which was covered with mud. He bent, seized the dog under the belly, and swung it off its feet, heaving it up on the table beside its owner.

"Your dog, sir," he said, and stood wheezing gently.

The old man turned, laid a hand on the dog's head, and frowned, glancing back and forth between me and Murray, as though unsure what to make of this tag-team approach to surgery. He looked back over his shoulder toward the soldiers below, then turned toward me, his sparse brows knotted over a beak of a nose.

"Who're *they*?" he said, in tones of deep puzzlement. Not waiting for an answer, he shrugged, turned, and walked off. The dog, tongue lolling, hopped off the table and trotted off at its owner's side, in search of more adventure.

I took a deep breath, brushed mud off my apron, smiled thanks to Murray, and turned to wash my hands before dealing with the next patient.

"Ha," said Brianna, under her breath. "Got him!" She lifted her chin slightly, indicating something over my shoulder, and I turned to look.

The next patient was a gentleman. A real gentleman, that is, judging by his dress and bearing, both of which were a good deal superior to the general run. I had noticed him hovering near the edge of the clearing for some time, glancing back and forth between my center of operations and that of Murray, obviously in doubt as to which medico should have the privilege of his custom. Evidently the incident of the trapper's dog had tipped the balance in my favor.

I glanced at Murray, who was looking distinctly po-faced. A gentleman would likely pay in cash. I gave Murray a slight shrug of apology, then put on a pleasant professional smile, and gestured the new patient onto my stool.

"Do sit down, sir," I said, "and tell me where it hurts."

The gentleman was a Mr. Goodwin of Hillsborough, whose chief complaint, it seemed, was a pain in his arm. This was not his only trouble, I saw; a freshly healed scar zigzagged down the side of his face, the livid weal drawing down the corner of his eye and giving him a most ferocious squint. A faint discoloration over the cheek showed where some heavy object had hit him square above the jaw, as well, and his features had the blunt and swollen look of someone who had been badly beaten in the not-so-distant past.

Gentlemen were as likely to engage in brawls as anyone, given sufficient provocation, but this one seemed of rather advanced years for such entertainments, looking to be in his middle fifties, with a prosperous paunch pressing against the silver-buttoned waistcoat. Perhaps he had been set upon somewhere and robbed, I thought. Not on his way to the Gathering, though; these injuries were weeks old.

I felt my way carefully over his arm and shoulder, making him lift and move the arm slightly, asking brief questions as I palpated the limb. The trouble was obvious enough; he had dislocated the elbow, and while the dislocation had fortunately reduced itself, I thought he had torn a tendon, which was now caught between the olecranon process and the head of the ulna, the injury being thus aggravated by movement of the arm.

Not that that was all; palpating my way carefully down his arm, I discovered no fewer than three half-healed simple fractures to the bones of his forearm. The damage was not all internal; I could see the fading remnants of two large bruises on the forearm above the sites of fracture, each an irregular blotch of yellow-green with the darker red-black of deep hemorrhage at the center. Self-defense injuries, I thought, or I was a Chinaman.

"Bree, find me a decent splint, will you?" I asked. Bree nodded silently and vanished, leaving me to anoint Mr. Goodwin's lesser contusions with cajeput ointment.

"How did you come by these injuries, Mr. Goodwin?" I asked casually, sorting out a length of linen bandage. "You look as though you've been in quite a fight. I hope at least the other fellow looks worse!"

Mr. Goodwin smiled faintly at my attempted witticism.

" 'Twas a battle, indeed, Mrs. Fraser," he replied, "and yet no fight of my own. A matter of misfortune, rather—being in the wrong place at the wrong time, as you might say. Still …" He closed the squinting eye in reflex as I touched the scar. An artless job by whoever had stitched it, but cleanly healed.

"Really?" I said. "Whatever happened?"

He grunted, but seemed not displeased at the necessity of telling me.

"You heard the officer this morning, surely, ma'am—reading out the Governor's words regarding the atrocious behavior of the rioters?"

"I shouldn't think the Governor's words escaped anyone's attention," I murmured, pulling gently on the skin with my fingertips. "So you were at Hillsborough, is that what you're telling me?"

"Indeed it is." He sighed, but relaxed a little, finding that I wasn't hurting him with my probings. "I live within the town of Hillsborough, in point of fact. And if I had remained quietly at home—as my good wife begged me to do"—he gave a rueful half-smile—"doubtless I should have escaped."

"They do say that curiosity killed the cat." I had spotted something when he smiled, and pressed gently with my thumb over the discolored area on his cheek. “Someone struck you across the face here, with some force. Did they break any teeth?”

He looked mildly startled.

“Aye, ma’am. But it’s nothing you can mend.” He pulled up his upper lip, revealing a gap where two teeth were missing. One premolar had been knocked out clean, but the other had broken off at the root; I could see a jagged line of yellowed enamel, gleaming against the dark red of his gum.

Brianna, arriving at this juncture with the splint, made a slight gagging noise. Mr. Goodwin’s other teeth, while essentially whole, were heavily crusted with yellow calculus, and quite brown with the stains of tobacco chewing.

“Oh, I think I can help a bit there,” I assured him, ignoring Bree. “It’s painful to bite there, isn’t it? I can’t mend it, but I can draw the remnants of the broken tooth, and treat the gum to prevent infection. Who hit you, though?”

He shrugged slightly, watching with a slightly apprehensive interest as I laid out the shiny pliers and straight-bladed scalpel for dentistry.

“To tell the truth, ma’am, I scarcely know. I had but ventured into the town to visit the courthouse. I am bringing suit against a party in Edenton,” he explained, a frown forming on his face at the thought of it, “and I am required to file documents in support of this action. However, I was unable to transact my business, as I found the street before the courthouse quite choked with men, many armed with cudgels, whips, and rough implements of that sort.”

Seeing the mob, he had thought to leave, but just then, someone threw a rock through a window of the courthouse. The crash of glass acted on the mob like a signal, and they had surged forward, breaking down the doors and shouting threats.

“I became concerned for my friend, Mr. Fanning, whom I knew to be within.”

“Fanning … that would be Edmund Fanning?” I was only listening with half an ear, as I decided how best to approach the extraction, but I did recognize that name. Farquard Campbell had mentioned Fanning, while telling Jamie the gory details of the riots following in the wake of the Stamp Act a few years previous. Fanning had been appointed postmaster for the colony, a lucrative position that had likely cost him a pretty penny to acquire, and had cost him still more dearly when he had been obliged to resign it under force. Evidently, his unpopularity had escalated in the five years since.

Mr. Goodwin compressed his lips, tightening them to a seam of disapproval.

“Yes, ma’am, that is the gentleman. And whatever scandal folk do spread about him, he has ever been a friend to me and mine—so when I heard such grievous sentiments expressed, to the threat of his life, I determined that I must go to his aid.”

In this gallant endeavor, Mr. Goodwin had been less than successful.

“I tried to force a path through the crowd,” he said, his eyes fixed on my hands as I laid his arm along the splint and arranged the linen bandage beneath it. “I could not make much way, though, and had barely gained the foot of the steps, when there came a great shout from within, and the crowd fell back, carrying me with it.”

Struggling to keep his feet, Mr. Goodwin had been horrified to see Edmund Fanning dragged bodily through the courthouse door, knocked down, and then pulled feet first down the steps, his head striking each one in turn.

“Such a noise as it made,” he said, shuddering. “I could hear it above the shouting, thumping like a melon being rolled downstairs.”

“Dear me,” I murmured. “But he wasn’t killed, was he? I hadn’t heard of any deaths at Hillsborough. Relax your arm, please, and take a deep breath.”

Mr. Goodwin took a deep breath, but only in order to utter a loud snort. This was succeeded by a much deeper gasp, as I turned the arm, freeing the trapped tendon and bringing the joint into good alignment. He went quite pale, and a sheen of sweat broke out on his pendulous cheeks, but he blinked a few times, and recovered nobly.

“And if he wasn’t, it was by no mercy of the rioters,” he said. “ ’Twas only that they thought to have better sport with the Chief Justice, and so left Fanning insensible in the dust, as they rushed inside the courthouse. Another friend and I made shift to raise the poor man, and sought to make off with him to a place of shelter nearby, when comes the halloo in our rear, and we were beset all at once by the mob. That was how I came by this"—he raised his freshly splinted arm—"and these." He touched the weal by his eye, and the shattered tooth.

He frowned at me, heavy brows drawn down.

"Believe me, ma'am, I hope some folk here are moved to give up the names of the rioters, that they may be justly punished for such barbarous work—but were I to see here the fellow who struck me, I shouldn't be inclined to surrender him to the Governor's justice. Indeed I should not!"

His fists closed slowly, and he glowered at me as though suspecting that I had the miscreant in question hidden under my table. Brianna shifted uneasily behind me. No doubt she was thinking, as I was, of Hobson and Fowles. Abel MacLennan I was inclined to consider an innocent bystander, no matter what he might have done in Hillsborough.

I murmured something sympathetically noncommittal, and brought out the bottle of raw whisky I used for disinfection and crude anesthesia. The sight of it seemed to hearten Mr. Goodwin considerably.

"Just a bit of this to … er … fortify your spirits," I suggested, pouring him out a healthy cupful. And disinfect the nasty environs of his mouth, too. "Hold it in your mouth for a moment before you swallow—it will help to numb your tooth."

I turned to Bree, as Mr. Goodwin obediently took a large gulp of the liquor and sat with his mouth full, cheeks puffed like a frog about to burst into song. She seemed a little pale, though I wasn't sure whether it was Mr. Goodwin's story or the view of his teeth that had affected her.

"I don't think I'll need you any longer this morning, darling," I said, patting her arm in reassurance. "Why don't you go and see whether Jocasta is ready for the weddings tonight?"

"You're sure, Mama?" Even as she asked, she was untying her blood-spotted apron and rolling it into a ball. Seeing her glance toward the trailhead, I looked in that direction and saw Roger lurking behind a bush, his eyes fixed on her. I saw his face light when she turned toward him, and felt a small warm glow at sight of it. Yes, they would be all right.

"Now then, Mr. Goodwin. Just you take a drop more of that, and we'll finish dealing with this little matter." I turned back to my patient, smiling, and picked up the pliers.

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6

FOR AULD LANG SYNE

Roger waited at the edge of the clearing, watching Brianna as she stood by Claire's side, pounding herbs, measuring off liquids into small bottles, and tearing bandages. She had rolled up her sleeves, in spite of the chill, and the effort of ripping the tough linen made the muscles of her bare arms flex and swell beneath the freckled skin.

Strong in the wrists, he thought, with a faintly disturbing memory of Estella in Dickens's *Great Expectations*. Noticeably strong all over; the wind flattened her skirt against the solid slope of hips and a long thigh pressed briefly against the fabric as she turned, smooth and round as an alder trunk.

He wasn't the only one noticing. Half the people waiting for the attention of the two physicians were watching Brianna; some—mostly women—with faint and puzzled frowns, some—all men—with a covert admiration tinged with earthy speculation that gave Roger an urge to step into the clearing and assert his rights to her on the spot.

Well, let them look, he thought, quelling the urge. *It only matters if she's looking back, aye?*

He moved out of the trees, just a little, and her head turned at once as she caught sight of him. The slight frown on her face melted at once, her face lighting. He smiled back, then jerked his head in invitation, and turned away down the path, not waiting.

Was he sufficiently petty to want to demonstrate to that gang of gawpers that his woman would drop everything and come at his beck? Well … yes, he was. Embarrassment at that realization was tempered by a pleasantly fierce sense of possession at the sound of her step on the path above; yes, she *would* come to him.

She had left her work behind, but carried something in her hand; a small packet, wrapped in paper and tied with thread. He put out a hand and led her off the path, down toward a small copse where a scrim of tattered red and yellow maple leaves offered a decent semblance of privacy.

"Sorry to take you from your work," he said, though he wasn't.

"It's okay. I was glad to get away. I'm afraid I'm not all that good at blood and guts." She made a rueful face at the admission.

"That's all right," he assured her. "It's not one of the things I was looking for in a wife."

"Maybe you should have been," she said, shooting him a brooding sort of glance. "Here in *this* place, you might need a wife who can pull your teeth when they go bad, and sew your fingers back on when you cut them off chopping wood."

The grayness of the day seemed to have affected her spirits—or perhaps it was the job she had been doing. A brief glance at the run of Claire's patients was enough to depress anyone—anyone but Claire—with their parade of deformities, mutilations, wounds, and ghastly illnesses.

At least what he meant to tell Brianna might take her mind off the more gruesome details of eighteenth-century life for a bit. He cupped her cheek, and smoothed one thick red brow with a chilly thumb. Her face was cold, too, but the flesh behind her ear, beneath her hair, was warm—like her other hidden places.

"I've got what I wanted," he said firmly. "What about you, though? You're sure ye don't want a man who can scalp Indians and put dinner on the table with his gun? Blood's not my main thing, either, aye?"

A spark of humor reappeared in her eyes, and her air of preoccupation lightened.

"No, I don't think I want a bloody man," she said. "That's what Mama calls Da—but only when she's mad at him."

He laughed.

"And what will you call me, when you're mad at me?" he teased. She looked at him speculatively, and the spark grew brighter.

"Oh, don't worry; Da won't teach me any bad words in Gaelic, but Marsali taught me a lot of really evil things to say in French. Do you know what *un soulard* is? *Un grande gueule*?"

"*Oui, ma petite chou*—not that I've ever seen a cabbage with quite such a red nose." He flicked a finger at her nose, and she ducked, laughing.

"Maudit chien!"

"Save something for after the wedding," he advised. "Ye might need it." He took her hand, to draw her toward a convenient boulder, then noticed again the small package she held.

"What's that?"

"A wedding present," she said, and held it out to him with two fingers, distasteful as though it had been a dead mouse.

He took it gingerly, but felt no sinister shapes through the paper. He bounced it on his palm; it was light, almost weightless.

"Embroidery silk," she said, in answer to his questioning look. "From Mrs. Buchanan." The frown was back between her brows, and that look of … worry? No, something else, but damned if he could put a name to it.

"What's wrong with embroidery silk?"

"Nothing. It's what it's for." She took the package from him, and tucked it into the pocket she wore tied under her petticoat. She was looking down, rearranging her skirts, but he could see the tightness of her lips. "She said it's for our winding claes."

Spoken in Brianna's odd version of a Bostonian Scots accent, it took a moment for Roger to decipher this.

"Winding cl—oh, you mean shrouds?"

"Yes. Evidently, it's my wifely duty to sit down the morning after the wedding and start spinning cloth for my shroud." She bit the words off through clenched teeth. "That way, I'll have it woven and embroidered by the time I die in childbirth. And if I'm a fast worker, I'll have time to make one for you, too—otherwise, your *next* wife will have to finish it!"

He would have laughed, had it not been clear that she was really upset.

"Mrs. Buchanan is a great fool," he said, taking her hands. "You should not be letting her worry you with her nonsense." Brianna glanced at him under lowered brows.

"Mrs. Buchanan," she said precisely, "is ignorant, stupid, and tactless. The one thing she *isn't* is wrong."

"Of course she is," he said, with assumed certainty, feeling nonetheless a stab of apprehension.

"How many wives has Farquard Campbell buried?" she demanded. "Gideon Oliver? Andrew MacNeill?"

Nine, among the three of them. MacNeill would take a fourth wife this evening—an eighteen-year-old girl from Weaver's Gorge. The stab came again, deeper, but he ignored it.

"And Jenny ban Campbell's borne eight children and deviled two husbands into the ground," he countered firmly. "For that matter, Mrs. Buchanan herself has five bairns, and she's certainly still kicking. I've seen them; turnip-headed to a man, but all healthy."

That got him a reluctant twitch of the mouth, and he pressed on, encouraged.

"You've no need to fear, hen. You had no trouble with Jemmy, aye?"

"Yeah? Well, if you think it's no trouble, next time *you* can do it!" she snapped, but the corner of her mouth curled slightly up. She tugged at his hand, but he held on, and she didn't resist.

"So you're willing there should be a next time, are you? Mrs. Buchanan notwithstanding?" His tone was deliberately light, but he drew her close and held her, his face hidden in her hair, for fear she should see how much the question meant to him.

She wasn't fooled. She drew back a little, and her eyes, blue as water, searched his.

"You'd marry me, but live celibate?" she asked. "That's the only sure way. The tansy oil doesn't always work—look at Marsali!" The existence of baby Joan was eloquent testimony to the ineffectiveness of that particular method of birth control. Still …

“There are other ways, I expect,” he said. “But if you want celibacy—then yes, you’ll have it.”

She laughed, because his hand had tightened possessively on her arse, even as his lips renounced it. Then the laughter faded, and the blue of her eyes grew darker, clouded.

“You mean it, don’t you?”

“Yes,” he said, and did, though the thought of it lay heavy in his chest, like a swallowed stone.

She sighed, and drew her hand down the side of his face, tracing the line of his neck, the hollow of his throat. Her thumb pressed against his hammering pulse, so he felt the beat of it, magnified in his blood.

He meant it, but he bent his head to hers and took her mouth, so short of breath he must have hers, needing so urgently to join with her that he would do it in whatever way he might—hands, breath, mouth, arms; his thigh pressed between hers, opening her legs. Her hand lay flat against his chest, as though to push him off—then tightened convulsively, grasping shirt and flesh together. Her fingers dug deep in the muscle of his breast, and then they were glued together, openmouthed and gasping, front teeth scraping painfully in the flurry of their wanting.

“I don’t … we’re not …” He broke free for a moment, his mind grasping dimly for the fragments of words. Then her hand found its way under his kilt, a cold, sure touch on his heated flesh, and he lost all power of speech.

“Once more before we quit,” she said, and her breath wreathed him in heat and mist. “For old times’ sake.” She sank to her knees in the wet yellow leaves, pulling him down to her.

It had started raining again; her hair lay tumbled round her, streaked with damp. Her eyes were closed, her face upturned to the drizzling heavens, and raindrops struck her face, rolling down like tears. She wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry, in fact.

Roger lay with her, half on her, his weight a warm and solid comfort, his kilt spread over their tangled bare legs, protection from the rain. Her hand cupped the back of his head and stroked his hair, wet and sleek as a black seal's fur.

He stirred then, with a groan like a wounded bear, and lifted himself. A draft of cold air struck her newly exposed body, damp and heated where they had touched.

"I'm sorry," he muttered. "God, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." She opened one eye to a slit; he rose to his knees above her, swaying, and bent to pull her crumpled skirt down into decency. He'd lost his stock, and the cut under his jaw had reopened. She'd torn his shirt, and his waistcoat hung open, half its buttons gone. He was streaked with mud and blood and there were dead leaves and acorn fragments in the waves of his loose black hair.

"It's all right," she said, and sat up. She was in no better case; her breasts were heavy with milk, and huge wet spots had soaked through the fabric of shift and bodice, chilling her skin. Roger saw, and picked up her fallen cloak, draping it gently around her shoulders.

"Sorry," he said again, and reached to brush the tangled hair from her face; his hand was cold against her cheek.

"It's okay," she said, trying to gather all the stray fragments of herself that seemed to be rolling round the tiny clearing like beads of mercury. "It's only six months, and I'm still nursing Jemmy. It's—I mean, I think it's still safe." But for how much longer? she wondered. Little jolts of desire still shot through her, mingled with spurts of dread.

She had to touch him. She picked up one corner of her cloak and pressed it to the seeping wound beneath his jaw. Celibacy? When the feel of him, the smell of him, the memory of the last few minutes, made her want to knock him flat in the leaves and do it all again? When tenderness for him welled up in her like the milk that rushed unbidden to her breasts?

Her breasts ached with unsatisfied desire, and she felt dribbles of milk run tickling down her ribs beneath the cloth. She touched one breast, heavy and swollen, her guarantee of safety—for a while.

Roger put away her hand, reaching up to touch the cut.

"It's all right," he said. "It's stopped bleeding." He wore the oddest expression—or expressions. Normally his face was pleasantly reserved, even a little stern. Now his features seemed unable to settle themselves, shifting from moment to moment between a look of undeniable satisfaction and one of just as undeniable dismay.

"What's the matter, Roger?"

He shot her a quick glance, then looked away, a slight flush rising in his cheeks.

"Oh," he said. "Well. It's only that we … er … we aren't actually married at the moment."

"Well, of course not. The wedding's not 'til tonight. Speaking of which …" She looked at Roger, and a bubble of laughter rose from the pit of her stomach. "Oh, dear," she said, fighting back a fit of giggles. "You look like somebody's had their will of you in the woods, Mr. MacKenzie."

"Very funny, Mrs. Mac," he said, eyeing her own bedraggled state. "Ye've been in a rare fight, too, by the looks of you. But what I meant was that we've been handfast for the last year—and that's legally binding, in Scotland at least. But the year and a day have been up for a bit—and we're not formally married 'til this evening."

She squinted at him, wiping rain out of her eyes with the back of one hand, and once more gave way to the urge to laugh.

"My God, you think it *matters*?"

He grinned back, a little reluctantly.

"Well, no. It's only I'm a preacher's lad; I know it's fine—but somewhere inside is an old Scotch Calvinist, muttering that it's just a wee bit wicked, to be carrying on so with a woman not really my wife."

"Ha," she said, and settled her arms comfortably on her drawn-up knees. She leaned to one side and nudged him gently.

"Old Scotch Calvinist, my ass. What is it, really?"

He wouldn't look directly at her, but kept his eyes down, looking at the ground. Droplets glittered on his strongly marked dark brows and lashes, gilding the skin of his cheekbones with silver. He drew a deep breath, and let it out slowly.

"I can't say you're not right to be afraid," he said quietly. "I hadn't realized—not really thought about it before today—just how dangerous marriage is for a woman." He looked up and smiled at her, though the look of worry stayed in his moss-green eyes.

"I want you, Bree—more than I can say. It's only that I was thinking of what we just did and how fine it was—and realizing that I'll maybe—no, I *will*—be risking your life if I keep on doing it. But damned if I want to stop!"

The small strands of dread had coalesced into a cold snake that ran down her backbone and coiled deep in her belly, twisting around her womb. She knew what he wanted, and it wasn't only the thing they'd just shared—powerful as that was. Knowing what he wanted, though—and why—how could she hesitate to give it to him?

"Yeah." She took a breath to match his, and blew it out in a plume of white. "Well, it's too late to worry about that, I think." She looked at him and touched his arm. "I want you, Roger." She pulled down his head and kissed him, taking comfort from her fears in the strength of his arm around her, the warmth of his body beside her.

"Oh, God, Bree," he murmured into her hair. "I want to tell you that I'll keep you safe, save you and Jemmy from anything that might threaten you—ever. It's a terrible thing, to think it might be me that would be the threat, that I could kill you with my love—but it's true."

His heart was beating under her ear, solid and steady. She felt the warmth return to her hands, clasped tight on the bones of his back, and the thaw reached deeper, uncoiling some of the frozen strands of fear inside her.

"It's all right," she said at last, wanting to offer him the comfort he could not quite give her. "I'm sure it'll be okay. I've got the hips for it, everybody says so. Jugbutt, that's me." She ran a hand ruefully down the lush swell of one hip, and he smiled, following her hand with his own.

"You know what Ronnie Sinclair said to me last night? He was watching you bend down to pick up a stick of wood for the fire, and he sighed and said, 'Ye ken how to pick a good lass, MacKenzie?

Start at the bottom and work your way up!' Oof!" He recoiled, laughing, as she slugged him.

Then he bent and kissed her, very gently. The rain was still falling, pattering on the layer of dead leaves. Her fingers were sticky with the blood from his wound.

"You want a baby, don't you?" she asked softly. "One you know is yours?"

He kept his head bent for a moment, but at last looked up at her, letting her see the answer in his face; a great yearning, mingled with anxious concern.

"I don't mean—" he began, but she put a hand across his mouth to stop him.

"I know," she said. "I understand." She did—almost. She was an only child, as he was; she knew the yearning for connection and closeness—but hers had been gratified. She had had not one loving father but two. A mother who had loved her beyond the bounds of space and time. The Murrays of Lallybroch, that unexpected gift of family. And most of all, her son, her flesh, her blood, a small and trusting weight that anchored her firmly to the universe.

But Roger was an orphan, alone in the world for such a long time. His parents gone before he knew them, his old uncle dead—he had no one to claim him, no one to love him for the sake only of his flesh and bone—no one save her. Little wonder if he hungered for the certainty she held in her arms when she nursed her child.

He cleared his throat suddenly.

"I—ah—I was going to give ye this tonight. But maybe … well." He reached into the inner pocket of his coat and handed her a soft bundle, wrapped in cloth.

"Sort of a wedding present, aye?" He was smiling, but she could see the uncertainty in his eyes.

She opened the cloth, and a pair of black button eyes looked up at her. The doll wore a shapeless smock of green calico, and red-yarn hair exploded from its head. Her heart beat heavily in her chest, and her throat tightened.

"I thought the wean might like it—to chew on, perhaps."

She moved, and the pressure of the sodden fabric on her breasts made them tingle. She was afraid, all right; but there were things stronger than fear.

"There'll be a next time," she said, and laid a hand on his arm. "I can't say when—but there will."

He laid his hand on hers and squeezed it tight, not looking at her.

"Thanks, Jugbutt," he said at last, very softly.

The rain was heavier; it was pissing down now. Roger thumbed the wet hair out of his eyes and shook himself like a dog, scattering drops from the tight-woven wool of coat and plaid. There was a smear of mud down the front of the gray wool; he brushed at it, to no effect.

"Christ, I can't be getting married like this," he said, trying to lighten the mood between them. "I look like a beggar."

"It's not too late, you know," she said. She smiled, teasing a little tremulously. "You could still back out."

"It's been too late for me since the day I saw you," he said gruffly. "Besides," he added, lifting one brow, "your father would gut me like a hog if I said I'd had second thoughts on the matter."

"Ha," she said, but the hidden smile popped out, dimpling one cheek.

"Bloody woman! You like the idea!"

"Yes. No, I mean." She was laughing again now; that's what he'd wanted. "I don't want him to gut you. It's just nice to know he *would*. A father ought to be protective."

She smiled at him, touched him lightly. "Like you, Mr. MacKenzie."

That gave him an odd, tight feeling in the chest, as though his waistcoat had shrunk. Then a tinge of cold, as he recalled what he had to tell her. Fathers and their notions of protection varied, after all, and he wasn't sure how she would see this one.

He took her arm and drew her away, out of the rain and into the shelter of a clump of hemlocks, where the layers of needles lay dry and fragrant underfoot, protected by the wide-spreading branches overhead.

"Well, come and sit with me a moment, Mrs. Mac. It's not important, but there's a small thing I wanted to tell you about before the wedding." He drew her down to sit beside him on a rotting log, rusted with lichen. He cleared his throat, gathering the thread of his story.

"When I was in Inverness, before I followed you through the stones, I spent some time trolling through the Reverend's bumf, and I came across a letter to him, written by your father. By Frank Randall, I mean. It's no great matter—not now—but I thought … well, I thought perhaps there should be no secrets between us, before we marry. I told your father about it last night. So let me tell you now."

Her hand lay warm in his, but the fingers tightened as he talked, and a deep line grew between her brows as she listened.

"Again," she said, when he'd finished. "Tell me that again."

Obligingly, he repeated the letter—as he'd memorized it, word for word. As he'd told it the night before, to Jamie Fraser.

"That gravestone in Scotland with Da's name on it is a *fake*?" Her voice rose slightly with astonishment. "Dad—Frank—had the Reverend make it, and put it there, in the kirkyard at St. Kilda, but Da isn't—won't be, I mean—won't be under it?"

"Yes, he did, and no, he won't," Roger said, keeping careful track of the "he's" involved. "He—Frank Randall, that is—meant the stone as a sort of acknowledgment, I think; a debt owed to your father—your other father, I mean; Jamie."

Brianna's face was blotched with chill, the ends of nose and ears nipped red as the heat of their lovemaking faded.

"But he couldn't know we'd ever find it, Mama and me!"

"I don't know that he *wanted* you to find it," Roger said. "Perhaps he didn't know, either. But he felt he had to make the gesture. Besides," he added, struck by a memory, "didn't Claire say that he'd meant to bring you to England, just before he was killed? Perhaps he meant to take you there, make sure you found it—then leave it to you and Claire what to do."

She sat still, chewing that one over.

"He knew, then," she said slowly. "That he—that Jamie Fraser survived Culloden. He *knew* … but he didn't say?"

"I don't think you can blame him for not saying," Roger said gently. "It wasn't only selfish, you know."

"Wasn't it?" She was still shocked, but not yet angry. He could see her turning it over, trying to see it all before making up her mind what to think, how to feel.

"No. Think of it, hen," he urged. The spruce was cold at his back, the bark of the fallen log damp under his hand. "He loved your mother, aye, and didn't want to risk losing her again. That's maybe selfish, but she was his wife first, after all; no one could blame him for not wanting to give her up to another man. But that's not all of it."

"What's the rest, then?" Her voice was calm, blue eyes straight and level.

"Well—what if he *had* told her? There she was, with you, a young child—and remember, neither of them would have thought that you might cross through the stones as well."

The eyes were still straight, but clouded once more with trouble.

"She would have had to choose," she said softly, her gaze fixed on him. "To stay with us—or go to him. To Jamie."

"To leave you behind," Roger said, nodding, "or to stay, and live her life, knowing her Jamie was alive, maybe reachable—but out of reach. Break her vows—on purpose, this time—and abandon her child … or live with yearning. I can't think *that* would have done your family life much good."

"I see." She sighed, the steam of her exhaled breath disappearing like a ghost in cold air.

"Perhaps Frank was afraid to give her the choice," Roger said, "but he did save her—and you—from the pain of having to make it. At least then."

Her lips drew in, pushed out, relaxed.

"I wonder what her choice would have been, if he *had* told her," she said, a little bleakly. He laid his hand on hers, squeezed lightly.

“She would have stayed,” he said, with certainty. “She made the choice once, did she not? Jamie sent her back, to keep you safe, and she went. She would have known he wanted that, and she would have stayed—so long as you needed her. She wouldn’t have gone back, even when she did, save that you insisted. Ye ken that well enough, surely?”

Her face eased a bit, accepting this.

“I guess you’re right. But still … to know he was alive, and not try to reach him …”

He bit the inside of his cheek, to keep from asking. *If it were your choice, Brianna? If it was the bairn or me?* For how could any man force a choice like that on a woman whom he loved, even hypothetically? Whether for her sake or his own … he would not ask.

“But he did put that gravestone there. Why did he do that?” The line between her brows was still deep, but no longer straight; it twisted with a growing perturbation.

He hadn’t known Frank Randall, but he felt a certain empathy for the man—and not only a disinterested sympathy, either. He hadn’t fully realized why he’d felt he must tell her about the letter now, before the wedding, but his own motives were becoming clearer—and more disturbing to him—by the moment.

“I think it was obligation, as I said. Not just to Jamie or your mother—to you. If it—” he started, then stopped and squeezed her hand, hard. “Look. Take wee Jemmy. He’s mine, as much as you are—he always will be.” He took a deep breath. “But if I were the other man …”

“If you were Stephen Bonnet,” she said, and her lips were tight, gone white with chill.

“If I were Bonnet,” he agreed, with a qualm of distaste at the notion, “if I knew the child was mine, and yet he was being raised by a stranger—would I not want the child to know the truth, sometime?”

Her fingers convulsed in his, and her eyes went dark.

“You mustn’t tell him! Roger, for God’s sake, promise me you won’t tell him, ever!”

He stared at her in astonishment. Her nails were digging painfully into his hand, but he made no move to free himself.

"Bonnet? Christ, no! If I ever see the man again, I'll not waste time talking!"

"Not Bonnet." She shuddered, whether from cold or emotion, he couldn't tell. "God, keep away from that man! No, it's Jemmy I mean." She swallowed hard, and gripped both his hands. "Promise me, Roger. If you love me, promise that you'll never tell Jemmy about Bonnet, never. Even if something happens to me—"

"Nothing will happen to you!"

She looked at him, and a small, wry smile formed on her lips.

"Celibacy's not my thing, either. It might." She swallowed. "And if it does … promise me, Roger."

"Aye, I promise," he said, reluctantly. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure!"

"Would you not have wanted ever to know, then—about Jamie?"

She bit her lip at that, her teeth sinking deep enough to leave a purple mark in the soft pink flesh.

"Jamie Fraser is not Stephen Bonnet!"

"Agreed," he said dryly. "But I wasna speaking of Jemmy to start with. All I meant was that if I were Bonnet, I should want to know, and—"

"He does know." She pulled her hand from his, abruptly, and stood up, turning away.

"He *what*?" He caught up with her in two strides, and grabbed her by the shoulder, turning her back to face him. She flinched slightly, and he loosened his grip. He took a deep breath, fighting to keep his voice calm. "Bonnet knows about Jemmy?"

"Worse than that." Her lips were trembling; she pressed them tightly together to stop it, then opened them just enough to let the truth escape. "He thinks Jemmy is his."

She wouldn't sit down with him again, but he drew her arm tightly through his and made her walk with him, walk through the falling rain and tumbled stones, past the rush of the creek and the swaying trees, until the movement calmed her enough to talk, to tell him about her days left alone at River Run, a prisoner of her pregnancy. About Lord John Grey, her father's friend, and hers; how she had confided to Lord John her fears and struggles.

"I was afraid you were dead. All of you—Mama, Da, you." Her hood had fallen back and she made no effort to reclaim it. Her red hair hung in dripping rattails on her shoulders, and droplets clung to her thick red brows.

"The last thing Da said to me—he didn't say it, even, he wrote it—he had to write it, I wouldn't talk to him.…" She swallowed and ran a hand beneath her nose, wiping away a pendant drop. "He said—I had to find a way to … to forgive him. B-Bonnet."

"To do *what*?" She pulled her arm away slightly, and he realized how hard his fingers were digging into her flesh. He loosened his grip, with a small grunt of apology, and she tilted her head briefly toward him in acknowledgment.

"He knew," she said, and stopped. She turned to face him, her feelings now in hand. "You know what happened to him—at Wentworth."

Roger gave a short, awkward nod. In actuality, he had no clear notion what had been done to Jamie Fraser—and had no wish to know more than he did. He knew about the scars on Fraser's back, though, and knew from the few things Claire had said that these were but a faint reminder.

"He knew," she said steadily. "And he knew what had to be done. He told me—if I wanted to be … whole … again, I had to find a way to forgive Stephen Bonnet. So I did."

He had Brianna's hand in his, held so tight that he felt the small shift of her bones. She had not told him, he had not asked. The name of Stephen Bonnet had never been mentioned between them, not until now.

"You did." He spoke gruffly, and had to stop to clear his throat. "You found him, then? You spoke to him?"

She brushed wet hair back from her face, nodding. Grey had come to her, told her that Bonnet had been taken, condemned. Awaiting transport to Wilmington and execution, he was being held in the cellar beneath the Crown warehouse in Cross Creek. It was there that she had gone to him, bearing what she hoped was absolution—for Bonnet, for herself.

"I was huge." Her hand sketched the bulge of advanced pregnancy before her. "I told him the baby was his; he was going to die, maybe it would be some comfort to him, to think that there'd be … something left."

Roger felt jealousy grip his heart, so abrupt in its attack that for a moment, he thought the pain was physical. *Something left,* he thought. *Something of him. And what of me? If I die tomorrow—and I might, girl! Life's chancy here for me as well as you—what will be left of me, tell me that?*

He oughtn't ask, he knew that. He'd vowed never to voice the thought that Jemmy was not his, ever. If there was a true marriage between them, then Jem was the child of it, no matter the circumstances of his birth. And yet he felt the words spill out, burning like acid.

"So you were sure the child was his?"

She stopped dead and turned to look at him, eyes wide with shock.

"No. No, of course not! If I knew that, I would have told you!"

The burning in his chest eased, just a little.

"Oh. But you told him it was—you didn't say to him that there was doubt about it?"

"He was going to die! I wanted to give him some comfort, not tell him my life story! It wasn't any of his goddamn business to hear about you, or our wedding night, or—damn you, Roger!" She kicked him in the shin.

He staggered with the force of it, but grabbed her arm, preventing her from running off.

"I'm sorry!" he said, before she could kick him again, or bite him, which she looked prepared to do. "I'm sorry. You're right, it wasn't his business—and it's not my business, either, to be making you think of it all again."

She drew in a deep breath through her nose, like a dragon preparing to sear him into ash. The spark of fury in her eyes lessened slightly, though her cheeks still blazed with it. She shook off his hand, but didn't run away.

"Yes, it is," she said. She gave him a dark, flat look. "You said there shouldn't be secrets between us, and you were right. But when you tell a secret, sometimes there's another one behind it, isn't there?"

"Yeah. But it's not— I don't mean—"

Before he could say more, the sound of feet and conversation interrupted him. Four men came out of the mist, speaking casually in Gaelic. They carried sharpened sticks and nets, and all were barefoot, wet to the knees. Strings of fresh-caught fish gleamed dully in the rain-light.

"A Smeòraich!" One man, peering out from under the sodden brim of his slouch hat, caught sight of them and broke into a broad grin, as shrewd eyes passed over their dishevelment. "It is yourself, Thrush! And the daughter of the Red One, too? What, can you not restrain yourselves until the darkness?"

"No doubt it is sweeter to taste stolen fruit than to wait on a blessing from a shriveled priest." Another man thrust back his bonnet on his head, and clasped himself briefly, making clear just what he meant by "shriveled."

"Ah, no," said the third, wiping drops from the end of his nose as he eyed Brianna, her cloak pulled tight around her. "He's no but after singing her a wee wedding song, is he not?"

"I know the words to that song, too," said his companion, his grin broadening enough to show a missing molar. "But I sing it still more sweetly!"

Brianna's cheeks had begun to blaze again; her Gaelic was less fluent than Roger's, but she was certainly able to gather the sense of crude teasing. Roger stepped in front of her, shielding her with his body. The men meant no harm, though; they winked and grinned appreciatively, but made no further comment. The first man pulled off his hat and beat it against his thigh, shedding water, then set to business.

"It's glad I am to be meeting you thus, *a Òranaiche*. My mother did hear your music at the fire last night, and told it to my aunts and my cousins, how your music was making the blood dance in her feet. So now they will hear nothing but that you must come and sing for the ceilidh at Spring Creek. It is my youngest cousin will be wed, and her the only child of my uncle, who owns the flour mill."

"It will be a great affair, surely!" put in one of the younger men, the son of the first speaker, by his resemblance to the former.

"Oh, it's a wedding?" said Roger, in slow, formal Gaelic. "We'll have an extra herring, then!"

The two older men burst into laughter at the joke, but their sons merely looked bewildered.

"Ah, the lads would not be knowing a herring, was it slapped wet against their cheeks," said the bonneted man, shaking his head. "Born here, the two of them."

"And where was your home in Scotland, sir?" The man jerked, surprised at the question, put in clear-voiced Gaelic. He stared at Brianna for a moment, then his face changed as he answered her.

"Skye," he said softly. "Skeabost, near the foot of the Cuillins. I am Angus MacLeod, and Skye is the land of my sires and my grandsires. But my sons were born here."

He spoke quietly, but there was a tone in his voice that quelled the hilarity in the younger men as though a damp blanket had been thrown over them. The man in the slouch hat looked at Brianna with interest.

"And were you born in Scotland, *a nighean*?"

She shook her head mutely, drawing the cloak higher on her shoulders.

"I was," said Roger, answering a look of inquiry. "In Kyle of Lochalsh."

"Ah," said MacLeod, satisfaction spreading itself across his weathered features. "It is so, then, that you know all the songs of the Highlands and the Isles?"

"Not all," said Roger, smiling. "But many—and I will learn more."

"Do that," said MacLeod, nodding slowly. "Do that, Singer—and teach them to your sons." His eye lighted on Brianna, and a faint smile curled on his lips. "Let them sing to my sons, that they will know the place they came from—though they will never see it."

One of the younger men stepped forward, bashfully holding out a string of fish, which he presented to Brianna.

"For you," he said. "A gift for your wedding."

Roger could see one corner of her mouth twitch slightly—with humor or incipient hysteria? he wondered—but she stretched out a hand and took the dripping string with grave dignity. She picked up the edge of her cloak with one hand, and swept them all a deep curtsy.

"Chaneil facal agam dhuibh ach taing," she said, in her slow, strangely accented Gaelic. I have no words to say to you but thanks.

The young men went pink, and the older men looked deeply pleased.

"It is good, *a nighean,*" said MacLeod. "Let your husband teach you, then—and teach the *Gaidhlig* to your sons. May you have many!" He swept off his bonnet and bowed extravagantly to her, bare toes squelching in the mud to keep his balance.

"Many sons, strong and healthy!" chimed in his companion, and the two lads smiled and nodded, murmuring shyly. "Many sons to you, mistress!"

Roger made the arrangements for the ceilidh automatically, not daring to look at Brianna. They stood in silence, a foot or two apart, as the men left, casting curious looks behind them. Brianna stared down into the mud and grass where they stood, arms crossed in front of her. The burning feeling was still in Roger's chest, but now it was different. He wanted to touch her, to apologize again, but he thought that would only make things worse.

In the end, she moved first. She came to him and laid her head on his chest, the coolness of her wet hair brushing the wound in his throat. Her breasts were huge, hard as rocks against his chest, pushing against him, pushing him away.

"I need Jemmy," she said softly. "I need my baby."

The words jammed in his throat, caught between apology and anger. He had not realized how much it would hurt to think of Jemmy as belonging to someone else—not his, but Bonnet's.

"I need him, too," he whispered at last, and kissed her briefly on the forehead before taking her hand to cross the meadow once again. The mountain above lay shrouded in mist, invisible, though shouts and murmurs, scraps of speech and music drifted down, like echoes from Olympus.

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7

SHRAPNEL

The drizzle had stopped by mid-morning, and brief glimpses of pale blue sky showed through the clouds, giving me some hope that it might clear by evening. Proverbs and omens quite aside, I didn't want the wedding ceremonies dampened for Brianna's sake. It wouldn't be St. James's with rice and white satin, but it could at least be *dry*.

I rubbed my right hand, working out the cramp from the tooth-pulling pliers; Mr. Goodwin's broken tooth had been more troublesome to extract than I expected, but I had managed to get it out, roots and all, sending him away with a small bottle of raw whisky, and instructions to swish it round his mouth once an hour to prevent infection. Swallowing was optional.

I stretched, feeling the pocket under my skirt swing against my leg with a small but gratifying *chink*. Mr. Goodwin had indeed paid cash; I wondered whether it was enough for an astrolabe, and what on earth Jamie wanted with one. My speculations were disturbed, though, by a small but official-sounding cough behind me.

I turned around to find Archie Hayes, looking mildly quizzical.

"Oh!" I said. "Ah—can I help you, Lieutenant?"

"Weel, that's as may be, Mistress Fraser," he said, looking me over with a slight smile. "Farquard Campbell said his slaves are convinced that ye can raise the dead, so it might be as a bit of stray metal would pose no great trial to your skills as a surgeon?"

Murray MacLeod, overhearing, uttered a loud snort at this, and turned away to his own waiting patients.

“Oh,” I said again, and rubbed a finger under my nose, embarrassed. One of Campbell’s slaves had suffered an epileptic seizure four days before, happening to recover abruptly from it just as I laid an exploratory hand on his chest. In vain had I tried to explain what had happened; my fame had spread like wildfire over the mountain.

Even now, a small group of slaves squatted near the edge of the clearing, playing at knucklebones and waiting ’til the other patients should be attended to. I gave them a narrow eye, just in case; if one of them were dying or dangerously ill, I knew they would make no effort to tell me—both from deference to my white patients, and from their confident conviction that if anything drastic should happen while they were waiting, I would simply resurrect the corpse at my own convenience and deal with the problem then.

All of them seemed safely vertical at the moment, though, and likely to remain so for the immediate future. I turned back to Hayes, wiping muddy hands on my apron.

“Well … let me see the bit of metal, why don’t you, and I’ll see what can be done.”

Nothing loath, Hayes stripped off bonnet, coat, waistcoat, stock, and shirt, together with the silver gorget of his office. He handed his garments to the aide who accompanied him, and sat down on my stool, his placid dignity quite unimpaired by partial nakedness, by the gooseflesh that stippled his back and shoulders, or by the murmur of awed surprise that went up from the waiting slaves at sight of him.

His torso was nearly hairless, with the pale, suety color of skin that had gone years with no exposure to sunlight, in sharp contrast to the weathered brown of his hands, face, and knees. The contrasts went further than that, though.

Over the milky skin of his left breast was a huge patch of bluish-black that covered him from ribs to clavicle. And while the nipple on the right was a normal brownish-pink, the one on the left was a startling white. I blinked at the sight, and heard a soft *“A Dhia!”* behind me.

“A Dhia, tha e ’tionndadh dubh!” said another voice, somewhat louder. By God, he is turning black!

Hayes appeared not to hear any of this, but sat back to let me make my examination. Close inspection revealed that the dark coloration was not natural pigmentation but a mottling caused by the presence of innumerable small dark granules embedded in the skin. The nipple was gone altogether, replaced by a patch of shiny white scar tissue the size of a sixpence.

“Gunpowder,” I said, running my fingertips lightly over the darkened area. I’d seen such things before; caused by a misfire or shot at close range, which drove particles of powder—and often bits of wadding and cloth—into the deeper layers of the skin. Sure enough, there were small bumps beneath the skin, evident to my fingertips, dark fragments of whatever garment he had been wearing when shot.

“Is the ball still in you?” I could see where it had entered; I touched the white patch, trying to envision the path the bullet might have taken thereafter.

“Half of it is,” he replied tranquilly. “It shattered. When the surgeon went to dig it out, he gave me the bits of it. When I fitted them together after, I couldna make but half a ball, so the rest of it must have stayed.”

“Shattered? A wonder the pieces didn’t go through your heart or your lung,” I said, squatting down in order to squint more closely at the injury.

“Oh, it did,” he informed me. “At least, I suppose that it must, for it came in at my breest as ye see—but it’s keekin’ out from my back just now.”

To the astonishment of the multitudes—as well as my own—he was right. I could not only feel a small lump, just under the outer border of his left scapula, I could actually *see* it; a darkish swelling pressing against the soft white skin.

“I will be damned,” I said, and he gave a small grunt of amusement, whether at my surprise or my language, I couldn’t tell.

Odd as it was, the bit of shrapnel presented no surgical difficulty. I dipped a cloth into my bowl of distilled alcohol, wiped the area carefully, sterilized a scalpel, and cut quickly into the skin. Hayes sat quite still as I did it; he was a soldier and a Scot, and as the markings on his breast bore witness, he had endured much worse than this.

I spread two fingers and pressed them on either side of the incision; the lips of the small slit pouted, then a dark, jagged bit of metal suddenly protruded like a stuck-out tongue—far enough for me to grasp it with forceps and pull it free. I dropped the discolored lump into Hayes's hand, with a small exclamation of triumph, then clapped a pad soaked with alcohol against his back.

He expelled a long breath between pursed lips, and smiled over his shoulder at me.

"I thank ye, Mrs. Fraser. This wee fellow has been wi' me for some time now, but I canna say as I'm grieved to part company with him." He cupped his blood-smeared palm, peering at the bit of fractured metal in it with great interest.

"How long ago did it happen?" I asked curiously. I didn't think the bit of shrapnel had actually passed completely through his body, though it certainly gave the illusion of having done so. More likely, I thought, it had remained near the surface of the original wound, and traveled slowly round the torso, propelled between skin and muscle by Hayes's movements, until reaching its present location.

"Oh, twenty year and more, mistress," he said. He touched the patch of tough, numbed white that had once been one of the most sensitive spots on his body. "That happened at Culloden."

He spoke casually, but I felt gooseflesh ripple over my arms at the name. Twenty years and more … twenty-five, more like. At which point …

"You can't have been more than twelve!" I said.

"No," he replied, one eyebrow lifted. "Eleven. My birthday was the next day, though."

I choked back whatever I might have said in reply. I had thought I had lost my capacity to be shocked by the realities of the past, but evidently not. Someone had shot him—an eleven-year-old boy—at point-blank range. No chance of mistake, no shot gone awry in the heat of battle. The man who had shot him had known it was a child he meant to kill—and had fired, anyway.

My lips pressed tight as I examined my incision. No more than an inch long, and not deep; the fractured ball had lain just below the surface. Good, it wouldn't need stitching. I pressed a clean pad to the wound and moved in front of him, to fasten the linen strip that bound it in place.

"A miracle you survived," I said.

"It was that," he agreed. "I was lyin' on the ground, and Murchison's face over me, and I—"

"Murchison!" The exclamation popped out of me, and I saw a flicker of satisfaction cross Hayes's face. I had a brief premonitory qualm, remembering what Jamie had said about Hayes the night before. *He thinks more than he says, does wee Archie—and he talks quite a lot. Be careful of him, Sassenach.* Well, a little late for caution —but I doubted it could matter; even if it *had* been the same Murchison—

"You'll ken the name, I see," Hayes observed pleasantly. "I had heard in England that a Sergeant Murchison of the 26th was sent to North Carolina. But the garrison at Cross Creek was gone when we reached the town—a fire, was it?"

"Er, yes," I said, rather edgy at this reference. I was glad that Bree had left; only two people knew the whole truth of what had happened when the Crown's warehouse on Cross Creek burned, and she was one of them. As for the other—well, Stephen Bonnet was not likely to cross paths with the Lieutenant anytime soon—if Bonnet himself was still alive.

"And the men of the garrison," Hayes pursued, "Murchison and the rest—where have they gone, d'ye know?"

"Sergeant Murchison is dead," said a deep, soft voice behind me. "Alas."

Hayes looked beyond me and smiled.

"A Sheumais ruaidh," he said. "I did think ye might come to your wife, sooner or later. I've been seekin' ye the morn."

I was startled at the name, and so was Jamie; a look of surprise flashed across his features, then disappeared, replaced by wariness.

No one had called him "Red Jamie" since the days of the Rising.

"I heard," he said dryly. He sat down on my extra stool, facing Hayes. "Let's have it, then. What is it?"

Hayes pulled up the sporran that dangled between his knees, rummaged for a moment, and pulled out a square of folded paper, secured with a red wax seal, marked with a crest I recognized. My heart skipped a beat at the sight; I somehow doubted that Governor Tryon was sending me a belated birthday wish.

Hayes turned it over, checked carefully to see that the name inscribed on the front was Jamie's, and handed it across. To my surprise, Jamie didn't open it at once, but sat holding it, eyes fixed on Hayes's face.

"What brought ye here?" he asked abruptly.

"Ah, duty, to be sure," Hayes answered, thin brows arched in innocent astonishment. "Does a soldier do aught for any other reason?"

"Duty," Jamie repeated. He tapped the missive idly against his leg. "Aye, well. Duty might take ye from Charleston to Virginia, but there are quicker ways to get there."

Hayes started to shrug, but desisted at once, as the movement jarred the shoulder I was bandaging.

"I had the Proclamation to bring, from Governor Tryon."

"The Governor's no authority over you or your men."

"True," Hayes agreed, "but why should I not do the man a service, and I could?"

"Aye, and did he ask ye to do him the service, or was it your own notion?" Jamie said, a distinct tone of cynicism in his voice.

"Ye've grown a bit suspicious in your auld age, *a Sheumais ruaidh*," Hayes said, shaking his head reprovingly.

"That's how I've lived to grow as auld as I have," Jamie replied, smiling slightly. He paused, eyeing Hayes. "Ye say it was a man named Murchison who shot ye on the field at Drumossie?"

I had finished the bandaging; Hayes moved his shoulder experimentally, testing for pain.

"Why, ye kent that, surely, *a Sheumais ruaidh*. D'ye not recall the day, man?"

Jamie's face changed subtly, and I felt a small tremor of unease. The fact was that Jamie had almost no memory of the last day of the clans, of the slaughter that had left so many bleeding in the rain—him among them. I knew that small scenes from that day came back to him now and again in his sleep, fragments of nightmare—but whether it was from trauma, injury, or simple force of will, the Battle of Culloden was lost to him—or had been, until now. I didn't think he wanted it back.

"A great deal happened then," he said. "I dinna remember everything, no." He bent his head abruptly, and thrust a thumb beneath the fold of the letter, opening it so roughly that the wax seal shattered into fragments.

"Your husband's a modest man, Mistress Fraser." Hayes nodded to me as he summoned his aide with a flip of the hand. "Has he never told ye what he did that day?"

"There was a good bit of gallantry on that field," Jamie muttered, head bent over the letter. "And quite a bit of the reverse." I didn't think he was reading; his eyes were fixed, as though he were seeing something else, beyond the paper that he held.

"Aye, there was," Hayes agreed. "But it does seem worth remark, when a man's saved your life, no?"

Jamie's head jerked up at that, startled. I moved across to stand behind him, a hand laid lightly on his shoulder. Hayes took the shirt from his aide and put it slowly on, smiling in an odd, half-watchful way.

"Ye dinna recall how ye struck Murchison across the head, just as he was set to bayonet me on the ground? And then ye picked me up and carried me from the field, awa to a bittie well nearby? One of the chiefs lay on the grass there, and his men were bathin' his heid in the water, but I could see he was deid, he lay so still. There was someone there to tend me; they wished ye to stay, too, for ye were wounded and bleeding, but ye would not. Ye wished me well, in the name of St. Michael—and went back then, to the field."

Hayes settled the chain of his gorget, adjusting the small silver crescent beneath his chin. Without his stock, his throat looked bare, defenseless.

"Ye looked fair wild, man, for there was blood runnin' doon your face and your hair was loose on the wind. Ye'd sheathed your sword to carry me, but ye pulled it again as ye turned away. I didna think I should see ye again, for if ever I saw a man set to meet his death …"

He shook his head, his eyes half-closed, as though he saw not the sober, stalwart man before him, not the Fraser of Fraser's Ridge—but Red Jamie, the young warrior who had not gone back from gallantry, but because he sought to throw his life away, feeling it a burden—because he had lost me.

"Did I?" Jamie muttered. "I had … forgotten." I could feel the tension in him, singing like a stretched wire under my hand. A pulse beat quick in the artery beneath his ear. There were things he had forgotten, but not that. Neither had I.

Hayes bent his head, as his aide fastened the stock around his neck, then straightened and nodded to me.

"I thank ye, ma'am, 'twas most gracious of ye."

"Think nothing of it," I said, dry-mouthed. "My pleasure." It had come on to rain again; the cold drops struck my hands and face, and moisture glimmered on the strong bones of Jamie's face, caught trembling in his hair and thick lashes.

Hayes shrugged himself into his coat, and fastened the loop of his plaid with a small gilt brooch—the brooch his father had given him, before Culloden.

"So Murchison is dead," he said, as though to himself. "I did hear"—his fingers fumbled for a moment with the clasp of the brooch—"as how there were two brothers of that name, alike as peas in the pod."

"There were," Jamie said. He looked up then, and met Hayes's eyes. The Lieutenant's face showed no more than mild interest.

"Ah. And would ye know, then, which it was?…"

"No. But it is no matter; both are dead."

"Ah," Hayes said again. He stood a moment, as though thinking, then bowed to Jamie, formally, bonnet held against his chest.

"*Buidheachas dhut, a Sheumais mac Brian*. And may Blessed Michael defend you." He lifted the bonnet briefly to me, clapped it on his head, and turned to go, his aide following in silence.

A gust of wind blew through the clearing, with a chilly burst of rain upon it, so like the freezing April rain of Culloden. Jamie shivered suddenly beside me, with a deep, convulsive shudder that crumpled the letter he still held in his hand.

"How much do you remember?" I asked, looking after Hayes, as he picked his way across the blood-soaked ground.

"Almost nothing," he replied. He stood up and turned to look down at me, his eyes as dark as the clouded skies above. "And that is still too much."

He handed me the crumpled letter. The rain had blotted and smeared the ink here and there, but it was still quite readable. By contrast to the Proclamation, it contained *two* sentences—but the additional period didn't dilute its impact.

New Bern, 20 October

Colonel James Fraser

Whereas the Peace and good Order of this Government has been lately violated and much Injury done to the Persons and Properties of many Inhabitants of this Province by a Body of People who Stile themselves Regulators, I do by the Advice of his Majesty's Council Order and direct you forthwith to call a General Muster of so many Men as you Judge suitable to serve in a Regiment of Militia, and make Report to me as soon as possible of the Number of Volunteers that are willing to turn out in the Service of their King and Country, when called upon, and also what Number of effective Men belong to your Regiment who can be ordered out in case of an Emergency, and in case any further Violence should be attempted to be committed by the Insurgents. Your Diligent and punctual Obedience to these Orders will be well received by

Your Obed't. Servant,
William Tryon

I folded the rain-spotted letter neatly up, noticing remotely that my hands were shaking. Jamie took it from me, and held it between thumb and forefinger, as though it were some disagreeable object—as indeed it was. His mouth quirked wryly as he met my eyes.

“I had hoped for a little more time,” he said.

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8

THE FACTOR

After Brianna left to retrieve Jemmy from Jocasta’s tent, Roger made his way slowly up the hill toward their own campsite. He exchanged greetings and accepted congratulations from people he passed, but scarcely heard what was said to him.

There’ll be a next time, she’d said. He held the words close, turning them over in his mind like a handful of coins in his pocket. She hadn’t been just saying it. She meant it, and it was a promise that at the moment meant even more to him than the ones she’d made on their first wedding night.

The thought of weddings reminded him, finally, that there was in fact another coming. He glanced down at himself, and saw that Bree hadn’t been exaggerating about his appearance. Damn, and it was Jamie’s coat, too.

He began to brush off the pine needles and streaks of mud, but was interrupted by a halloo from the path above. He looked up, to see Duncan Innes making his way carefully down the steep slope, body canted to compensate for his missing arm. Duncan had put on his splendid coat, scarlet with blue facings and gold buttons, and his hair was plaited tight under a stylish new black hat. The transformation from Highland fisherman to prosperous landowner was startling; even Duncan’s attitude seemed changed, more confident by half.

Duncan was accompanied by a tall, thin, elderly gentleman, very neat but threadbare in appearance, his scanty white locks tied back from a high and balding brow. His mouth had collapsed from lack of teeth, but retained its humorous curve, and his eyes were blue and bright, set in a long face whose skin was stretched so tight across the bone as scarce to leave enough to wrinkle round the eyes, though deep lines carved the mouth and brow. With a long-beaked nose, and clad in rusty, tattered black, he looked like a genial vulture.

“A Smeòraich,” Duncan hailed Roger, looking pleased. “The very man I hoped to find! And I trust you’re weel-fettled against your marriage?” he added, his eyes falling quizzically on Roger’s stained coat and leaf-strewn hair.

“Oh, aye.” Roger cleared his throat, converting his coat-brushing to a brief thump of his chest, as though to loosen phlegm. “Damp weather for a wedding, though, eh?”

“Happy the corpse the rain falls on,” Duncan agreed, and laughed, a little nervously. “Still, we’ll hope not to die o’ the pleurisy before we’re wed, eh, lad?” He settled the fine crimson coat more snugly on his shoulders, flicking an imaginary speck of dust from the cuff.

“You’re very fine, Duncan,” Roger said, hoping to distract attention from his own disreputable state with a bit of raillery. “Quite like a bridegroom!”

Duncan flushed a little behind his drooping mustache, and his one hand twiddled with the crested buttons on his coat.

“Ah, well,” he said, seeming mildly embarrassed. “Miss Jo did say as she didna wish to stand up wi’ a scarecrow.” He coughed, and turned abruptly to his companion, as though the word had suddenly reminded him of the man’s presence.

“Mr. Bug, here’s Himself’s good-son, Roger Mac, him I tellt ye of.” He turned back toward Roger, waving vaguely at his companion, who stepped forward, extending his hand with a stiff but cordial bow. “This will be Arch Bug, *a Smeòraich*.”

“Your servant, Mr. Bug,” Roger said politely, slightly startled to observe that the large bony hand gripping his was missing its first two fingers.

“Ump,” Mr. Bug replied, his manner indicating that he reciprocated the sentiment sincerely. He might have intended to expand on the subject, but when he opened his mouth, a high-pitched feminine voice, a little cracked with age, seemed to emerge from it.

"It's that kind, sir, of Mr. Fraser, and I'm sure as he'll have nay reason to regret it, indeed he'll not, as I said to him myself. I canna tell ye what a blessing it is, and us not sure where our next bite was comin' from or how to keep a roof above our heads! I said to Arch, I said, now we must just trust in Christ and Our Lady, and if we mun starve, we shall do it in a state of grace, and Arch, he says to me …"

A small, round woman, threadbare and elderly as her husband, but likewise neatly mended, emerged into view, still talking. Short as she was, Roger hadn't seen her, hidden behind the voluminous skirts of her husband's ancient coat.

"Mistress Bug," Duncan whispered to him, unnecessarily.

"… and no but a silver ha'penny to bless ourselves with, and me a-wondering whatever was to become of us, and then that Sally McBride was sayin' as how she'd heard that Jamie Fraser had need of a good—"

Mr. Bug smiled above his wife's head. She halted in mid-sentence, eyes widening in shock at the state of Roger's coat.

"Why, look at that! Whatever have ye been up to, lad? Have ye had an accident? It looks as though someone's knocked ye down and dragged ye by your heels through the dung heap!"

Not waiting for answers, she whipped a clean kerchief from the bulging pocket tied at her waist, spat liberally on it, and began industriously cleaning the muddy smears from the breast of his coat.

"Oh, you needn't … I mean … er … thanks." Roger felt as though he'd been caught in some kind of machinery. He glanced at Duncan, hoping for rescue.

"Jamie Roy's asked Mr. Bug to come and be factor at the Ridge." Duncan seized the momentary lull afforded by Mrs. Bug's preoccupation to give a word of explanation.

"Factor?" Roger felt a small jolt at the word, as though someone had punched him just beneath the breastbone.

"Aye, for times when Himself must be abroad or occupied with other business. For it's true enough—fields and tenants dinna tend themselves."

Duncan spoke with a certain note of ruefulness; once a simple fisherman from Coigach, he frequently found the responsibilities of running a large plantation onerous, and he glanced now at Mr. Bug with a small gleam of covetousness, as though he thought momentarily of tucking this useful person into his pocket and taking him home to River Run. Of course, Roger reflected, that would have meant taking Mrs. Bug, too.

"And just the thing it is, too, *such* good fortune, and me telling Arch just yesterday that the best we might hope for was to find work in Edenton or Cross Creek, with Arch maybe takin' to the boats, but that's such a perilous living, is it no? Wet to the skin half the time and deadly agues risin' up from the swamps like ghoulies and the air sae thick wi' the miasma as it's not fit to breathe, and me perhaps to be takin' in laundry in the toon whilst he was gone abroad on the water, though I'm sure I should hate that, for we havena been apart one night since we married, have we, my dearie?"

She cast a glance of devotion upward at her tall husband, who smiled gently down at her. Perhaps Mr. Bug was deaf, Roger thought. Or perhaps they had only been married a week?

Without his needing to inquire, though, he was informed that the Bugs had been husband and wife for more than forty years. Arch Bug had been a minor tacksman to Malcolm Grant of Glenmoriston, but the years after the Rising had been hard. The estate he had held for Grant having been confiscated by the English Crown, Bug had made do for some years as a crofter, but then had been obliged by hardship and starvation to take his wife and their little remaining money and seek a new life in America.

"We had thought to try in Edinburgh—" the old gentleman said, his speech slow and courtly, with a soft Highland lilt. So he *wasn't* deaf, Roger thought. Yet.

"—for I had a cousin there as was to do wi' one of the banking houses, and we thought that perhaps it would be that he could speak a word in someone's ear—"

"But I was far too ancient and lacked sufficient skill—"

"—and lucky they would have been to have him, too! But nay, such fools as they were, they wouldna think of it, and so we had to come awa and try if we might …"

Duncan met Roger's eye and hid a smile beneath his drooping mustache as the tale of the Bugs' adventures poured out in this syncopated fashion. Roger returned the smile, trying privately to dismiss a niggling sense of discomfort.

Factor. Someone to oversee matters on the Ridge, to mind the planting, tend the harvest, deal with the concerns of tenants when Jamie Fraser was away or busy. An obvious necessity, with the recent influx of new tenants and the knowledge of what the next few years would bring.

It wasn't until this moment, though, that Roger realized that he had subconsciously assumed that *he* would be Jamie's right hand in such affairs. Or the left, at least.

Fergus assisted Jamie to some extent, riding on errands and fetching back information. Fergus's lack of a hand limited what he could do physically, though, and he couldn't be dealing with the paperwork or accounts; Jenny Murray had taught the French orphan her brother had adopted to read—after a fashion—but had failed utterly to give him a grasp of numbers.

Roger stole a glance at Mr. Bug's hand, resting now in affection on his wife's plump shoulder. It was broad, work-worn, and strong-looking despite the mutilation, but the remaining fingers were badly twisted with arthritis, the joints knobby and painful in appearance.

So Jamie thought that even an elderly, half-crippled man would be better equipped than Roger to handle the affairs of Fraser's Ridge? That was an unexpectedly bitter thought.

He knew his father-in-law had doubts of his ability, beyond any father's natural mistrust of the man bedding his daughter. Totally tone-deaf himself, Jamie would naturally not value Roger's musical gift. And while Roger was decently sized and hardworking, it was unfortunately true that he had little practical knowledge of animal husbandry, hunting, or the use of deadly weapons. And granted, he had no great experience in farming or in running a large estate—

which Mr. Bug plainly did. Roger would be the first to admit these things.

But he was Jamie's son-in-law, or about to be. Damn it, Duncan had just introduced him that way! He might have been raised in another time—but he was a Highland Scot, for all that, and he was well aware that blood and kinship counted for more than anything.

The husband of an only daughter would normally be considered as the son of the house, coming only second to the head of the household in authority and respect. Unless there was something drastically wrong with him. If he were commonly known to be a drunkard, for instance—or criminally dissolute. Or feeble-minded … Christ, was that what Jamie thought of him? A hopeless numpty?

"Sit ye doon, young man, and I'll attend to *this* fine boorachie," Mrs. Bug interrupted these dark musings. She pulled on his sleeve, making clicking noises of disapproval as she viewed the leaves and twigs in his hair.

"Look at ye, all gluthered and blashed about! Fightin', was it? Och, weel, I hope the other fellow looks worse, that's all I can say."

Before he could protest, she had him seated on a rock, had whipped a wooden comb from her pocket and the thong from his hair, and was dealing with his disordered locks in a brisk manner that felt calculated to rip several strands from his scalp.

"Thrush, is it, they call ye?" Mrs. Bug paused in her tonsorial activity, holding up a strand of glossy black and squinting suspiciously at it, as though in search of vermin.

"Oh, aye, but it's no for the color of his bonnie black locks," Duncan put in, grinning at Roger's obvious discomfiture. "It's for the singin'. Honey-throated as a wee nightingale, is Roger Mac."

"Singing?" cried Mrs. Bug. She dropped the lock of hair, enchanted. "Was it you we heard last night, then? Singin' 'Ceann-ràra,' and 'Loch Ruadhainn'? And playin' on the bodhran with it?"

"Well, it might have been," Roger murmured modestly. The lady's unbounded admiration—expressed at great length—flattered him, and made him ashamed of his momentary resentment of her husband. After all, he thought, seeing the shabbiness of her much-mended apron, and the lines in her face, the old people had clearly had a hard time of it. Perhaps Jamie had hired them as much from charity as from his own need of help.

That made him feel somewhat better, and he thanked Mrs. Bug very graciously for her assistance.

"Will ye come along to our fire now?" he asked, with an inquiring glance at Mr. Bug. "Ye'll not have met Mrs. Fraser yet, I suppose, or —"

He was interrupted by a noise like a fire engine's siren, distant but obviously coming closer. Quite familiar with this particular racket, he was not surprised to see his father-in-law emerge from one of the trails that crisscrossed the mountain, Jem squirming and squalling like a scalded cat in his arms.

Jamie, looking mildly harried, handed the child across to Roger. Roger took him and—for lack of any other inspiration—stuck his thumb in the wide-open mouth. The noise ceased abruptly, and everyone relaxed.

"What a sweet laddie!" Mrs. Bug stood a-tiptoe to coo over Jem, while Jamie, looking highly relieved, turned to greet Mr. Bug and Duncan.

"Sweet" was not the adjective Roger himself would have chosen. "Berserk" seemed more like it. The baby was bright red in the face, the tracks of tears staining his cheeks, and he sucked furiously on the sustaining thumb, eyes squashed shut in an effort to escape a patently unsatisfactory world. What hair he had was sticking up in sweaty spikes and whorls, and he had come out of his wrappings, which hung in disreputable folds and draggles. He also smelled like a neglected privy, for reasons which were all too obvious.

An experienced father, Roger at once instituted emergency measures.

"Where's Bree?"

"God knows, and He's no telling," Jamie said briefly. "I've been searchin' the mountainside for her since the wean woke in my arms and decided he wasna satisfied wi' my company." He sniffed suspiciously at the hand which had been holding his grandson, then wiped it on the skirts of his coat.

"He's not so very pleased with mine, either, seems like." Jem was champing on the thumb, drool running down his chin and over Roger's wrist, uttering squeals of frustration. "Have ye seen Marsali, then?" He knew Brianna didn't like anyone to feed Jemmy but herself, but this was plainly an emergency. He cast an eye about, hoping to spot a nursing mother somewhere nearby who might take pity on the child, if not on him.

"Let me have the poor wee bairnie," said Mrs. Bug, reaching for the baby and immediately altering her status from chattering busybody to angel of light, so far as Roger was concerned.

"There, now, *a leannan,* there, there." Recognizing a higher authority when he saw it, Jemmy promptly shut up, his eyes rounded with awe as he regarded Mrs. Bug. She sat down with the little boy on her lap and began to deal with him in the same firm and efficient manner with which she had just dealt with his father. Roger thought that perhaps Jamie had hired the wrong Bug to be factor.

Arch, though, was exhibiting both intelligence and competence, asking sensible questions of Jamie regarding stock, crops, tenants, and so forth. *But I could do that,* Roger thought, following the conversation closely. *Some of it,* he amended honestly, as the talk suddenly veered into a discussion of bag-rot. Perhaps Jamie was right to seek someone more knowledgeable … but Roger could learn, after all.…

"And who's the bonnie laddie, noo?" Mrs. Bug had risen to her feet, cooing over Jemmy, now respectably transformed into a tightly swaddled cocoon. She traced the line of a round cheek with one stubby finger, then glanced at Roger. "Aye, aye, he's eyes just like his father, then, hasn't he?"

Roger flushed, forgetting about bag-rot.

"Oh? I should say he favors his mother, mostly."

Mrs. Bug pursed her lips, narrowing her eyes at Roger, then shook her head decidedly, and patted Jem on the top of his head.

"Not the hair, maybe, but the shape of him, aye, that's yours, lad. Those fine broad shoulders!" She gave Roger a brief nod of approval, and kissed Jem on the brow. "Why, I shouldna be surprised but what his een will turn green as he ages, either. Mark me, lad, he'll be the spit of you by the time he's grown! Won't ye, wee mannie?" She nuzzled Jemmy. "Ye'll be a big, braw lad like your Da, won't ye, then?"

It's the usual thing folk say, he reminded himself, trying to quell the absurd rush of pleasure he felt at her words. *The old wifies, they always say how a bairn resembles this one or that one*. He discovered suddenly that he was afraid even to admit the possibility that Jemmy could really be his—he wanted it so badly. He told himself firmly that it didn't matter; whether the boy was his by blood or not, he would love and care for him as his son. He would, of course. But it did matter, he found—oh, it did.

Before he could say anything further to Mrs. Bug, though, Mr. Bug turned toward him, to include him courteously in the men's conversation.

"MacKenzie, is it?" he asked. "And will ye be one of the MacKenzies of Torridon, then, or maybe from Kilmarnock?"

Roger had been fielding similar questions all through the Gathering; exploring a person's antecedents was the normal beginning of any Scottish conversation—something that wouldn't change a bit in the next two hundred years, he thought, wariness tempered by the comfortable familiarity of the process. Before he could answer, though, Jamie's hand squeezed his shoulder.

"Roger Mac's kin to me on my mother's side," he said casually. "It will be MacKenzie of Leoch, aye?"

"Oh, aye?" Arch Bug looked impressed. "You're far afield, then, lad!"

"Och, no more than yourself, sir, surely—or anyone here, for that matter." Roger waved briefly at the mountainside above, from which the sounds of Gaelic shouts and the music of bagpipes drifted on the damp air.

"No, no, lad!" Mrs. Bug, Jemmy propped against her shoulder, rejoined the conversation. "That's no what Arch is meanin'," she explained. "It's that you're a good long way from the others."

"Others?" Roger exchanged a look with Jamie, who shrugged, equally puzzled.

"From Leoch," Arch got in, before his wife seized the thread of talk between her teeth.

"We did hear it on the ship, aye? There were a gaggle of them, all MacKenzies, all from the lands south of the auld castle. They'd stayed on after the laird left, him and the first lot, but now they meant to go and join what was left o' the clan, and see could they mend their fortunes, because—"

"The laird?" Jamie interrupted her sharply. "That would be Hamish mac Callum?" Hamish, son of Colum, Roger translated to himself, and paused. Or rather, Hamish mac Dougal—but there were only five people in the world who knew that. Perhaps only four, now.

Mrs. Bug was nodding emphatically. "Aye, aye, it is himself they were calling so. Hamish mac Callum MacKenzie, laird of Leoch. The third laird. They said it, just so. And—"

Jamie had evidently caught the knack of dealing with Mrs. Bug; by dint of ruthless interruption, he succeeded in extracting the story in less time than Roger would have thought possible. Castle Leoch had been destroyed by the English, in the purge of the Highlands following Culloden. So much Jamie had known, but, imprisoned himself, had had no word of the fate of those who lived there.

"And no great heart to ask," he added, with a rueful tilt of the head. The Bugs glanced at each other and sighed in unison, the same hint of melancholy shadowing their eyes that shaded Jamie's voice. It was a look Roger was well accustomed to by now.

"But if Hamish mac Callum still lives …" Jamie had not taken his hand from Roger's shoulder, and at this it squeezed tight. "That's news to gladden the heart, no?" He smiled at Roger, with such obvious joy that Roger felt an unexpected grin break out on his own face in answer.

"Aye," he said, the weight on his heart lightening. "Aye, it is!" The fact that he would not know Hamish mac Callum MacKenzie from a hole in the ground was unimportant; the man was indeed kin to him—blood kin—and that *was* a glad thought.

"Where have they gone, then?" Jamie demanded, dropping his hand. "Hamish and his followers?"

To Acadia—to Canada, the Bugs agreed. To Nova Scotia? To Maine? No—to an island, they decided, after a convoluted conference. Or was it perhaps—

Jemmy interrupted the proceedings with a yowl indicating imminent starvation, and Mrs. Bug started as though poked with a stick.

"We mun be takin' this puir lad to his Mam," she said rebukingly, dividing a glare impartially among the four men, as though accusing them collectively of conspiracy to murder the child. "Where does your camp lie, Mr. Fraser?"

"I'll guide ye, ma'am," Duncan said hastily. "Come wi' me."

Roger started after the Bugs, but Jamie kept him with a hand on his arm.

"Nay, let Duncan take them," he said, dismissing the Bugs with a nod. "I'll speak wi' Arch later. I've a thing I must say to you, *a chliamhuinn*."

Roger felt himself tense a bit at the formal term of address. So, was this where Jamie told him just what defects of character and background made him unsuitable to take responsibility for things at Fraser's Ridge?

But no, Jamie was bringing out a crumpled paper from his sporran. He handed it to Roger with a slight grimace, as though the paper burned his hand. Roger scanned it quickly, then glanced up from the Governor's brief message.

"Militia. How soon?"

Jamie lifted one shoulder.

"No one can say, but sooner than any of us should like, I think." He gave Roger a faint, unhappy smile. "Ye'll have heard the talk round the fires?"

Roger nodded soberly. He had heard the talk in the intervals of the singing, around the edges of the stone-throwing contests, among the men drinking in small groups under the trees the day before. There had been a fistfight at the caber-tossing—quickly stopped, and with no damage done—but anger hung in the air of the Gathering, like a bad smell.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face and through his hair, and shrugged, sighing.

“ ’Twas luck I should have come across auld Arch Bug and his wife today. If it comes to the fighting—and it will, I suppose, later, if not now—then Claire will ride with us. I shouldna like to leave Brianna to manage on her own, and it can be helped.”

Roger felt the small nagging weight of doubt drop away, as all became suddenly clear.

“On her own. You mean—ye want me to come? To help raise men for the militia?”

Jamie gave him a puzzled look.

“Aye, who else?”

He pulled the edges of his plaid higher about his shoulders, hunched against the rising wind. “Come along, then, Captain MacKenzie,” he said, a wry note in his voice. “We’ve work to do before you’re wed.”

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9

GERM OF DISSENT

I peered up the nose of one of Farquard Campbell's slaves, half my mind on the nasal polyp obstructing the nostril, the other half on Governor Tryon. Of the two, I felt more charitably toward the polyp, and I intended to cauterize *that* out of existence with a hot iron.

It seemed so bloody unfair, I thought, frowning as I sterilized my scalpel and set the smallest cauterizing iron in a dish of hot coals.

Was this the beginning? Or one of them? It was the end of 1770; in five years more, all of the thirteen Colonies would be at war. But each colony would come to that point by a different process. Having lived in Boston for so long, I knew from Bree's school lessons what the process had been—or would be—for Massachusetts. Tax, Boston Massacre, Harbor, Hancock, Adams, Tea Party, all that. But North Carolina? How had it happened—how *would* it happen—here?

It could be happening now. Dissension had been simmering for several years between the planters of the eastern seaboard and the hardscrabble homesteaders of the western backcountry. The Regulators were mostly drawn from the latter class; the former were wholeheartedly in Tryon's camp—on the side of the Crown, that was to say.

"All right now?" I had given the slave a good slug of medicinal whisky, by way of fortification. I smiled encouragingly, and he nodded, looking uncertain but resigned.

I had never heard of Regulators, but here they were, nonetheless—and I had seen enough by now to know just how much the history books left out. Were the seeds of revolution being sown directly under my own nose?

Murmuring soothingly, I wrapped a linen napkin round my left hand, took firm hold of the slave's chin with it, poked the scalpel up his nostril and severed the polyp with a deft flick of the blade. It bled profusely, of course, the blood gushing warmly through the cloth round my hand, but evidently was not very painful. The slave looked surprised, but not distressed.

The cautery iron was shaped like a tiny spade, a bit of square, flattened metal on the end of a slender rod with a wooden handle. The flat bit was smoking in the fire, the edges glowing red. I pressed the cloth hard against the man's nose to blot the blood, took it away, and in the split second before the blood spurted out again, pressed the hot iron up his nose against the septum, hoping against hope that I'd got the proper spot.

The slave made a strangled noise in his throat, but didn't move, though tears poured down his cheeks, wet and warm on my fingers. The smell of searing blood and flesh was just the same as the scent that rose from the barbecue pits. My stomach growled loudly; the slave's bulging, bloodshot eye met mine, astonished. My mouth twitched, and he giggled faintly through the tears and snot.

I took the iron away, cloth poised. No fresh blood flowed. I tilted the man's head far back, squinting to see, and was pleased to find the small, clean mark, high on the mucosa. The burn would be a vivid red, I knew, but without the light of a scope, it looked black, a small scab hidden like a tick in the hairy shadows of the nostril.

The man spoke no English; I smiled at him, but addressed his companion, a young woman who had clutched his hand throughout the ordeal.

"He'll be quite all right. Tell him, please, not to pick at the scab. If there should be swelling, pus or fever"—I paused, for the next line should be—"go to your doctor at once," and that was not an option.

"Go to your mistress," I said, instead, reluctantly. "Or find an herb-woman." The present Mrs. Campbell was young, and rather muddleheaded, from the little I knew of her. Still, any plantation mistress should have the knowledge and wherewithal to treat a fever. And if it should go past simple infection and into septicemia … well, there was not much anyone could do, in that case.

I patted the slave's shoulder and sent him off, beckoning to the next in line.

Infection. That was what was brewing. Things seemed quiet overall—after all, the Crown was withdrawing all its troops! But dozens, hundreds, thousands of tiny germs of dissent must linger, forming pockets of conflict throughout the Colonies. The Regulation was only one.

A small bucket of distilled alcohol stood by my feet, for disinfecting instruments. I dipped the cautery iron in this, then thrust it back in the fire; the alcohol ignited with a brief, lightless *piff!*

I had the unpleasant feeling that the note presently burning a hole in Jamie's sporran was a similar flame, touched to one of a million small fuses. Some might be stamped out, some would fizzle on their own—but enough would burn, and go on burning, searing their destructive way through homes and families. The end of it would be a clean excision, but a great deal of blood would flow before the hot iron of guns should sear the open wound.

Were we never to have a little peace, Jamie and I?

"There's Duncan MacLeod, he's got three hundred acres near the Yadkin River, but no one on it save himself and his brother." Jamie rubbed a sleeve over his face, wiping off the sheen of moisture that clung to his bones. He blinked to clear his vision, and shook himself like a dog, spattering drops that had condensed in his hair.

"But," he went on, gesturing toward the plume of smoke that marked MacLeod's fire, "he's kin to auld Rabbie Cochrane. Rabbie's not come to the Gathering—ill wi' the dropsy, I hear—but he's got eleven grown bairns, scattered over the mountains like seed corn. So, take your time wi' MacLeod, make sure he's pleased to come, then tell him to send word to Rabbie. We'll muster at Fraser's Ridge in a fortnight, tell him."

He hesitated, one hand on Roger's arm to prevent an abrupt departure. He squinted into the haze, reckoning up the possibilities. They'd visited three campsites together, and got the pledges of four men. How many more could be found at the Gathering?

"After Duncan, go across to the sheep pens. Angus Og will be there, surely—ye ken Angus Og?"

Roger nodded, hoping he recalled the correct Angus Og. He'd met at least four men of that name in the last week, but one of them had had a dog at heel, and reeked of raw wool.

"Campbell, aye? Bent like a fishhook, and a cast in one eye?"

"Aye, that's him." Jamie gave a nod of approbation, relaxing his grip. "He's too crabbit to fight himself, but he'll see his nephews come, and spread the word amongst the settlements near High Point. So, Duncan, Angus … oh, aye, Joanie Findlay."

"Joanie?"

Fraser grinned.

"Aye, auld Joan, they call her. Her camp's near my aunt, her and her brother, Iain Mhor."

Roger nodded, dubious.

"Aye. It's her I speak to, though, is it?"

"Ye'll have to," Fraser said. "Iain Mhor's got nay speech. She's two more brothers who have, though, and two sons old enough to fight. She'll see they come."

Jamie cast an eye upward; the day had warmed slightly and it wasn't raining so much as misting—a mizzle, they'd call it in Scotland. The clouds had thinned enough to show the disk of the sun, a pale blurry wafer still high in the sky, but sinking lower. Another two hours of good light, maybe.

"That'll do," he decided, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "Come back to the fire when ye've done wi' auld Joan, and we'll have a bit of supper before your wedding, aye?" He gave Roger an up-cocked brow and a slight smile, then turned away. Before Roger could move off, he turned back.

"Say straight off as you're Captain MacKenzie," he advised. "They'll mind ye better." He turned again and strode off in search of the more recalcitrant prospects on his list.

MacLeod's fire burned like a smudge pot in the mist. Roger turned toward it, repeating the names under his breath like a mantra. "Duncan MacLeod, Rabbie Cochrane, Angus Og Campbell, Joanie Findlay … Duncan MacLeod, Rabbie Cochrane …" No bother; three times and he'd have it cold, no matter whether it was the words of a new song to be learned, facts in a textbook, or directions to the psychology of potential militia recruits.

He could see the sense of finding as many of the backcountry Scots as possible now, before they scattered away to their farms and cabins. And he was heartened by the fact that the men Fraser had approached so far had accepted the militia summons with no more than a mild glower and throat-clearings of resignation.

Captain MacKenzie. He felt a small sense of embarrassed pride at the title Fraser had casually bestowed on him. "Instant Soldier," he muttered derisively to himself, straightening the shoulders of his sodden coat. "Just add water."

At the same time, he'd admit to a faint tingle of excitement. It might amount to no more than playing soldiers, now, indeed—but the thought of marching with a militia regiment, muskets shouldered and the smell of gunpowder on their hands …

It was less than four years from now, he thought, and militiamen would stand on the green at Lexington. Men who were no more soldiers to start with than these men he spoke to in the rain—no more than him. Awareness shivered over his skin, settled in his belly with an odd weight of significance.

It was coming. Christ, it was really coming.

MacLeod was no trouble, but it took longer than he'd thought to find Angus Og Campbell, up to his arse in sheep, and irascible at the distraction. "Captain MacKenzie" had had little effect on the old bastard; the invocation of "Colonel Fraser"—spoken with a degree of menace—had had more. Angus Og had chewed his long upper lip with moody concentration, nodded reluctantly, and gone back to his bargaining with a gruff, "Aye, I'll send word."

The mizzle had stopped and the clouds were beginning to break up by the time he climbed back up the slope to Joan Findlay's camp.

"Auld Joan," to his surprise, was an attractive woman in her mid-thirties, with sharp hazel eyes that regarded him with interest under the folds of her damp arisaid.

"So it's come to that, has it?" she said, in answer to his brief explanation of his presence. "I did wonder, when I heard what the soldier-laddie had to say this morning."

She tapped her lip thoughtfully with the handle of her wooden pudding-spoon.

"I've an aunt who lives in Hillsborough, ken. She's a room in the King's House, straight across the street from Edmund Fanning's house—or where it used to be." She gave a short laugh, though it held no real humor.

"She wrote to me. The mob came a-boilin' down the street, wavin' pitchforks like a flock o' demons, she said. They cut Fanning's house from its sills, and dragged the whole of it down wi' ropes, right before her eyes. So now we're meant to send our men to pull Fanning's chestnuts from the fire, are we?"

Roger was cautious; he'd heard a good deal of talk about Edmund Fanning, who was less than popular.

"I couldna say as to that, Mrs. Findlay," he said. "But the Governor—"

Joan Findlay snorted expressively.

"Governor," she said, and spat into the fire. "Pah. The Governor's friends, more like. But there—poor men mun bleed for the rich man's gold, and always will, eh?"

She turned to two small girls who had materialized behind her, silent as small shawled ghosts.

"Annie, fetch your brothers. Wee Joanie, you stir the pot. Mind ye scrape the bottom well so it doesna burn." Handing the spoon to the smallest girl, she turned away, beckoning Roger to follow.

It was a poor camp, with no more than a woolen blanket stretched between two bushes to provide a shelter of sorts. Joan Findlay squatted down before the cavelike recess so provided, and Roger followed, bending down to peer over her shoulder.

"*A bhràthair*, here's Captain MacKenzie," she said, reaching out a hand to the man that lay on a pallet of dry grass under the blanket's shelter. Roger felt a sudden shock at the man's appearance, but suppressed it.

A spastic, they would have called him in the Scotland of Roger's own time; what did they call such a condition now? Perhaps nothing in particular; Fraser had said only, *He has nay speech.*

No, nor proper movement, either. His limbs were bony and wasted, his body twisted into impossible angles. A tattered quilt had been laid over him, but his jerking movements had pulled it awry, so that the cloth was bunched, wrenched hard between his legs, and his upper body was left exposed, the worn shirt also rumpled and pulled half off by his struggles. The pale skin over shoulder and ribs gleamed cold and blue-toned in the shadows.

Joan Findlay cupped a hand about the man's cheek and turned his head so that he could look at Roger.

"This will be my brother Iain, Mr. MacKenzie," she said, her voice firm, daring him to react.

The face too was distorted, the mouth pulled askew and drooling, but a pair of beautiful—and intelligent—hazel eyes looked back at Roger from the ruin. He took firm grip of his feelings and his own features, and reached out, taking the man's clawed hand in his own. It felt terrible, the bones sharp and fragile under skin so cold it might have been a corpse's.

"Iain Mhor," he said softly. "I have heard your name. Jamie Fraser sends ye his regards."

The eyelids lowered in a graceful sweep of acknowledgment, and came up again, regarding Roger with calm brightness.

"The Captain's come to call for militiamen," Joan said from behind Roger's shoulder. "The Governor's sent orders, aye? Seems he's had enough o' riot and disorder, so he says; he'll put it down by force." Her voice held a strong tone of irony.

Iain Mhor's eyes shifted to his sister's face. His mouth moved, struggling for shape, and his narrow chest strained with effort. A few croaking syllables emerged, thick with spittle, and he fell back, breathing hard, eyes intent on Roger.

“Will there be bounty money paid, he says, Captain?” Joan translated.

Roger hesitated. Jamie had addressed that question, but there was no definite answer. He could feel the subdued eagerness, though, both in the woman behind him and the man who lay before him. The Findlays were grinding poor; that much was plain from the little girls’ ragged frocks and bare feet, from the threadbare clothes and bedding that gave Iain Mhor scant shelter from the cold. But honesty compelled him to answer.

“I don’t know. There is none advertised as yet—but there may be.” The payment of bounty money depended on the response to the Governor’s call; if a simple order produced insufficient troops, the Governor might see fit to provide further inducement for militiamen to answer the summons.

An expression of disappointment flickered in Iain Mhor’s eyes, replaced almost at once by resignation. Any income would have been welcome, but it was not really expected.

“Well, then.” Joan’s voice held the same resignation. Roger felt her draw back and turn aside, but he was still held by the long-lashed hazel eyes. They met his, unflinching and curious. Roger hesitated, unsure whether to simply take his leave. He wanted to offer help—but God, what help was there?

He stretched out a hand toward the gaping shirt, the rumpled quilt. Little enough, but something.

“May I?”

The hazel eyes closed for a moment, opened in acquiescence, and he set about the chore of putting things straight. Iain Mhor’s body was emaciated, but surprisingly heavy, and awkward to lift from such an angle.

Still, it took no more than a few moments, and the man lay decently covered, and warmer at least. Roger met the hazel eyes again, smiled, nodded awkwardly, and backed away from the grass-lined nest, wordless as Iain Mhor himself.

Joan Findlay’s two sons had come; they stood by their mother, sturdy lads of sixteen and seventeen, regarding Roger with cautious curiosity.

“This will be Hugh,” she said, reaching up to put a hand on one shoulder, then the other, “and Iain Og.”

Roger inclined his head courteously.

“Your servant, gentlemen.”

The boys exchanged glances with each other, then looked at their feet, smothering grins.

“So, *Captain* MacKenzie.” Joan Findlay’s voice came down hard on the word. “If I lend ye my sons, will ye promise me, then, to send them safe home?”

The woman’s hazel eyes were as bright and intelligent as her brother’s—and as unflinching. He braced himself not to look away.

“So far as it lies in my power, ma’am—I will see them safe.”

The edge of her mouth lifted slightly; she knew quite well what was in his power and what was not. She nodded, though, and her hands dropped to her sides.

“They’ll come.”

He took his leave then, and walked away, the weight of her trust heavy on his shoulders.

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10

GRANNIE BACON'S GIFTS

The last of my patients seen to, I stood on my toes and stretched luxuriously, feeling a pleasant glow of accomplishment. For all the conditions that I couldn't really treat, all the illnesses I couldn't cure … still, I had done what I could, and had done it well.

I closed the lid of my medical chest and picked it up in my arms; Murray had graciously volunteered to bring back the rest of my impedimenta—in return for a bag of dried senna leaves and my spare pill-rolling tile. Murray himself was still attending his last patient, frowning as he prodded the abdomen of a little old lady in bonnet and shawl. I waved in farewell at him, and he gave me an abstracted nod, turning to pick up his fleam. At least he did remember to dip it into the boiling water; I saw his lips move as he spoke Brianna's charm under his breath.

My feet were numb from standing on the cold ground, and my back and shoulders ached, but I wasn't really tired. There were people who would sleep tonight, their pain relieved. Others who would heal well now, wounds dressed cleanly and limbs set straight. A few whom I could truthfully say I had saved from the possibility of serious infection or even death.

And I had given yet another version of my own Sermon on the Mount, preaching the gospel of nutrition and hygiene to the assembled multitudes.

"Blessed are those who eat greens, for they shall keep their teeth," I murmured to a red-cedar tree. I paused to pull off a few of the fragrant berries, and crushed one with my thumbnail, enjoying the sharp, clean scent.

“Blessed are those who wash their hands after wiping their arses,” I added, pointing a monitory finger at a blue jay who had settled on a nearby branch. “For they shall not sicken.”

The camp was in sight now, and with it, the delightful prospect of a cup of hot tea.

“Blessed are those who boil water,” I said to the jay, seeing a plume of steam rising from the small kettle hung over our fire. “For they shall be called saviors of mankind.”

“Mrs. Fraser, mum?” A small voice piped up beside me, breaking my reverie, and I looked down to see Eglantine Bacon, aged seven, and her younger sister, Pansy, a pair of round-faced, towheaded little girls, liberally sprinkled with freckles.

“Oh, hallo, dear. And how are you?” I asked, smiling down at them. Quite well, from the looks of them; illness in a child is generally visible at a glance, and both the small Bacons were obviously blooming.

“Very well, mum, thank ye kindly.” Eglantine gave a short bob, then reached over and pushed on Pansy’s head to make her curtsy, too. The courtesies observed—the Bacons were townspeople, from Edenton, and the girls had been raised to have nice manners—Eglantine reached into her pocket and handed me a large wad of fabric.

“Grannie Bacon’s sent ye a present,” she explained proudly, as I unfolded the material, which proved to be an enormous mobcap, liberally embellished with lace and trimmed with lavender ribbons. “She couldna come to the Gathering this year, but she said as we must bring ye this, and give ye her thanks for the medicine ye sent for her … roo-mah-tics.” She pronounced the word carefully, her face screwed up in concentration, then relaxed, beaming in pride at having gotten it out properly.

“Why, thank you. How lovely!” I held the cap up to admire, privately thinking a few choice things about Grannie Bacon.

I had encountered that redoubtable lady a few months earlier, at Farquard Campbell’s plantation, where she was visiting Farquard’s aged and obnoxious mother. Mrs. Bacon was almost as old as the ancient Mrs. Campbell, and quite as capable of annoying her descendants, but also possessed of a lively sense of humor.

She had disapproved, audibly, repeatedly, and eventually to my face, of my habit of going about with my head uncovered, it being her opinion that it was unseemly for a woman of my age not to wear either cap or kerch, reprehensible for the wife of a man of my husband's position—and furthermore, that only "backcountry sluts and women of low character" wore their hair loose upon their shoulders. I had laughed, ignored her, and given her a bottle of Jamie's second-best whisky, with instructions to have a wee nip with her breakfast and another after supper.

A woman to acknowledge a debt, she had chosen to repay it in characteristic fashion.

"Will ye not put it on?" Eglantine and Pansy were looking trustfully up at me. "Grannie told us to be sure ye put it on, so as we could tell her how it suited ye."

"Did she, indeed." No help for it, I supposed. I shook the object out, twisted up my hair with one hand, and pulled the mobcap on. It drooped over my brow, almost reaching the bridge of my nose, and draped my cheeks in ribboned swathes, so that I felt like a chipmunk peering out from its burrow.

Eglantine and Patsy clapped their hands in paroxysms of delight. I thought I heard muffled sounds of amusement from somewhere behind me, but didn't turn to see.

"Do tell your grannie I said thank you for the lovely present, won't you?" I patted the girls gravely on their blond heads, offered them each a molasses toffee from my pocket, and sent them off to their mother. I was just reaching up to pull off the excrescence on my head, when I realized that their mother was present—had probably been there all along, in fact, lurking behind a persimmon tree.

"Oh!" I said, converting my reach into an adjustment of the floppy chapeau. I held the overhanging flap up with one finger, the better to peer out. "Mrs. Bacon! I didn't see you there."

"Mrs. Fraser." Polly Bacon's face was flushed a delicate rose color—no doubt from the chill of the day. She had her lips pressed tight together, but her eyes danced under the ruffle of her own very proper cap.

"The girls wanted to give ye the cap," she said, tactfully averting her gaze from it, "but my mother-in-law did send ye another wee gift. I thought perhaps I'd best bring that myself, though."

I wasn't sure I wanted anything to do with any more of Grannie Bacon's gifts, but took the proffered parcel with as much grace as I could manage. It was a small bag of oiled silk, plumply stuffed with something, with a faintly sweet, slightly oily botanical scent about it. A crude picture of a plant had been drawn on the front in brownish ink; something with an upright stalk and what looked like umbels. It looked faintly familiar, but I could put no name to it. I undid the string, and poured a small quantity of tiny dark-brown seeds out into my palm.

"What are these?" I asked, looking up at Polly in puzzlement.

"I don't know what they're called in English," she said. "The Indians call them *dauco*. Grannie Bacon's own grannie was a Catawba medicine woman, aye? That's where she learnt the use of them."

"Was she really?" I was more than interested now. No wonder the drawing seemed familiar; this must be the plant that Nayawenne had once shown me—the women's plant. To be sure of it, though, I asked.

"What is the use of them?"

The color rose higher in Polly's cheeks, and she glanced round the clearing to be sure no one was close enough to hear before leaning forward to whisper to me.

"They stop a woman from getting wi' child. Ye take a teaspoonful each day, in a glass of water. Each day, mind, and a man's seed canna take hold in the womb." Her eyes met mine, and while the light of amusement still lingered at the backs of them, something more serious was there as well.

"Grannie said ye were a conjure-woman, she could tell. And that bein' so, ye'd have cause often to help women. And when it is a matter of miscarriage, stillbirth, or childbed fever, let alone the misery of losing a live babe—she said I must tell ye that an ounce o' prevention is worth a pound o' cure."

"Tell your mother-in-law thank you," I said sincerely. The average woman of Polly's age might have five or six children; she had the two girls, and lacked the drained look of a woman worn with ill-timed bearing. Evidently, the seeds worked.

Polly nodded, the smile breaking out on her face.

"Aye, I'll tell her. Oh—she said as how her grannie told her it was women's magic; ye dinna mention it to men."

I glanced thoughtfully across the clearing, to where Jamie stood in conversation with Archie Hayes, Jemmy blinking sleepily in the crook of his arm. Yes, I could well see that some men might take exception to old Grannie Bacon's medicine. Was Roger one of them?

Bidding farewell to Polly Bacon, I took my chest across to our lean-to, and tucked the bag of seeds carefully away in it. A very useful addition to my pharmacopeia, if Nayawenne and Mrs. Bacon's grannie were correct. It was also a singularly well-timed gift, considering my earlier conversation with Bree.

Even more valuable than the small heap of rabbit skins I had accumulated, though those were more than welcome. Where had I put them? I looked round the scattered rubble of the campsite, half-listening to the men's conversation behind me. There they were, just under the edge of the canvas. I lifted the lid of one of the empty food hampers to put them away for the journey home.

"… Stephen Bonnet."

The name stung my ear like a spider's bite, and I dropped the lid with a bang. I glanced quickly round the campsite, but neither Brianna nor Roger was within hearing distance. Jamie's back was turned to me, but it was he who had spoken.

I pulled the mobcap off my head, hung it carefully from a dogwood branch, and went purposefully to join him.

Whatever the men had been talking about, they stopped when they saw me. Lieutenant Hayes thanked me gracefully once more for my surgical assistance, and took his leave, his bland round face revealing nothing.

"What *about* Stephen Bonnet?" I said, as soon as the Lieutenant was out of earshot.

"That's what I was inquiring about, Sassenach. Is the tea brewed yet?" Jamie made a move toward the fire, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Why?" I demanded. I didn't let go my grip, and he reluctantly turned to face me.

"Because I wish to know where he is," he said evenly. He made no pretense of not understanding me, and a small, cold feeling flickered through my chest.

"Did Hayes know where he is? Has he heard anything of Bonnet?"

He shook his head, silent. He was telling me the truth. My fingers loosened with relief, and he moved his arm out of my grasp—not angrily, but with a sense of quiet and definite detachment.

"It *is* my business!" I said, answering the gesture. I kept my voice low, glancing round to be sure that neither Bree nor Roger was within hearing. I didn't see Roger; Bree was standing by the fire, absorbed in conversation with the Bugs, the elderly couple Jamie had engaged to help care for the farm. I turned back to Jamie.

"Why are you looking for that man?"

"Is it not sense to know where danger may lie?" He wasn't looking at me but over my shoulder, smiling and nodding at someone. I glanced back to see Fergus heading for the fire, rubbing a cold-reddened hand beneath his arm. He waved cheerfully with his hook, and Jamie lifted a hand halfway in acknowledgment, but turned away a little, still facing me, effectively preventing Fergus from coming to join us.

The cold feeling returned, sharp as though someone had pierced my lung with a sliver of ice.

"Oh, of course," I said, as coolly as I could. "You want to know where he is, so that you can take pains not to go there, is that it?"

Something that might have been a smile flickered across his face.

"Oh, aye," he said. "To be sure." Given the scarcity of population in North Carolina in general, and the remoteness of Fraser's Ridge in particular, the chances of our stumbling over Stephen Bonnet by accident were roughly equivalent to walking out of the front door and stepping on a jellyfish—and Jamie bloody knew it.

I narrowed my eyes at him. The corner of his wide mouth drew in for a moment, then relaxed, his eyes gone back to seriousness. There was precisely one good reason for his wanting to locate Stephen Bonnet—and *I* bloody knew *that*.

“Jamie,” I said, and put a hand on his arm again. “Leave him alone. Please.”

He put his own hand over mine, squeezing, but I felt no reassurance from the gesture.

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach. I’ve asked throughout the Gathering, all through the week, inquiring of men from Halifax to Charleston. There’s nay report of the man anywhere in the colony.”

“Good,” I said. It was, but the fact did not escape me that he had been hunting Bonnet with assiduity—and had told me nothing of it. Nor did it escape me that he had not promised to stop looking.

“Leave him alone,” I repeated softly, my eyes holding his. “There’s enough trouble coming; we don’t need more.” He had drawn close to me, the better to forestall interruption, and I could feel the power of him where he touched me, his arm beneath my hand, his thigh brushing mine. Strength of bone and fire of mind, all wrapped round a core of steel-hard purpose that would make him a deadly projectile, once set on any course.

“Ye say it is your business.” His eyes were steady, the blue of them bleached pale with autumn light. “I know it is mine. Are ye with me, then?”

The ice blossomed in my blood, spicules of cold panic. Damn him! He meant it. There was one reason to seek out Stephen Bonnet, and one reason only.

I swung round on my heel, pulling him with me, so we stood pressed close together, arms linked, looking toward the fire. Brianna, Marsali, and the Bugs were now listening raptly to Fergus, who was recounting something, his face alight with cold and laughter. Jemmy’s face was turned toward us over his mother’s shoulder, round-eyed and curious.

"*They* are your business," I said, my voice pitched low and trembling with intensity. "And mine. Hasn't Stephen Bonnet done enough damage to them, to us?"

"Aye, more than enough."

He pulled me closer to him; I could feel the heat of him through his clothes, but his voice was cold as the rain. Fergus's glance flicked toward us; he smiled warmly at me and went on with his story. To him, no doubt we looked like a couple sharing a brief moment of affection, heads bent together in closeness.

"I let him go," Jamie said quietly. "And evil came of it. Can I let him wander free, knowing what he is, and that I have loosed him to spread ruin? It is like loosing a rabid dog, Sassenach—ye wouldna have me do that, surely."

His hand was hard, his fingers cold on mine.

"You let him go once; the Crown caught him again—if he's free now, it's not your fault!"

"Perhaps not my fault that he is free," he agreed, "but surely it is my duty to see he doesna stay so—if I can."

"You have a duty to your family!"

He took my chin in his hand and bent his head, his eyes boring into mine.

"Ye think I would risk them? Ever?"

I held myself stiff, resisting for a long moment, then let my shoulders slump, my eyelids drop in capitulation. I took a long, trembling breath. I wasn't giving in altogether.

"There's risk in hunting, Jamie," I said softly. "You know it."

His grip relaxed, but his hand still cupped my face, his thumb tracing the outline of my lips.

"I know it," he whispered. The mist of his breath touched my cheek. "But I have been a hunter for a verra long time, Claire. I willna bring danger to them—I swear it."

"Only to yourself? And just what do you think will happen to us, if you—"

I caught a glimpse of Brianna from the corner of my eye. She had half-turned, seeing us, and was now beaming tender approval on this scene of what she supposed to be parental fondness. Jamie saw her, too; I heard a faint snort of amusement.

"Nothing will happen to me," he said definitely, and gathering me firmly to him, stifled further argument with an encompassing kiss. A faint spatter of applause rose from the direction of the fire.

"Encore!" shouted Fergus.

"No," I said to him as he released me. I whispered, but spoke vehemently for all that. "Not *encore*. I don't want to hear the name of Stephen Bonnet ever bloody again!"

"It will be all right," he whispered back, and squeezed my hand. "Trust me, Sassenach."

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11

PRIDE

Roger didn't look back, but thoughts of the Findlays went with him as he made his way downhill from their camp, through clumps of brush and trodden grass.

The two boys were sandy-haired and fair, short—though taller than their mother—but broad-shouldered. The two younger children were dark, tall, and slender, with their mother's hazel eyes. Given the gap of years between the older boys and their younger siblings, Roger concluded from the evidence that Mrs. Findlay had likely had two husbands. And from the look of things now was a widow again.

Perhaps he should mention Joan Findlay to Brianna, he thought, as further evidence that marriage and childbirth were not necessarily mortal to women. Or perhaps it was better just to leave that subject lie quiet for a bit.

Beyond thoughts of Joan and her children, though, he was haunted by the soft, bright eyes of Iain Mhor. How old was he? Roger wondered, grasping the springy branch of a pine to keep from sliding down a patch of loose gravel. Impossible to tell from looking; the pale, twisted face was lined and worn—but with pain and struggle, not age. He was no larger than a boy of twelve or so, but Iain Mhor was older than his namesake, clearly—and Iain Og was sixteen.

He was likely younger than Joan; but perhaps not. She had treated him with deference, bringing Roger to him as a woman would naturally bring a visitor to the head of the family. Not greatly younger, then—say thirty or more?

Christ, he thought, how did a man like that survive so long in times like these? But as he had backed awkwardly away from Iain Mhor, one of the little girls had crawled into the crude shelter from the back, pushing a bowl of milk pudding before her, and had sat down matter-of-factly by her uncle's head, spoon in hand. Iain Mhor had limbs and fingers enough—he had a family.

That thought gave Roger a tight feeling in his chest, somewhere between pain and gladness—and a sinking feeling lower down, as he recalled Joan Findlay's words.

Send them safe home. Aye, and if he didn't, then Joan was left with two young girls and a helpless brother. Had she any property? he wondered.

He had heard a good deal of talk on the mountain about the Regulation since the morning's Proclamation. Given that the matter had plainly not been sufficiently important to make it into the history books, he thought this militia business was unlikely to come to anything. If it did, though, he vowed to himself that he would find some way of keeping Iain Og and Hugh Findlay well away from any danger. And if there was bounty money, they should have their share.

In the meantime … he hesitated. He had just passed Jocasta Cameron's camp, bustling like a small village, with its cluster of tents, wagons, and lean-tos. In anticipation of her wedding—now a double wedding—Jocasta had brought almost all of her house slaves, and not a few of the field hands as well. Beyond the livestock, tobacco, and goods brought for trade, there were trunks of clothes and bedding and dishes, trestles, tables, hogsheads of ale, and mountains of food intended for the celebration afterward. He and Bree had breakfasted with Mrs. Cameron in her tent this morning off china painted with roses: slices of succulent fried ham, studded with cloves, oatmeal porridge with cream and sugar, a compote of preserved fruit, fresh corn dodgers with honey, Jamaican coffee … his stomach contracted with a pleasant growl of recollection.

The contrasts between that lavishness and the recent poverty of the Findlay encampment were too much to be borne with complacence. He turned upon his heel with sudden decision, and began the short climb back to Jocasta's tent.

Jocasta Cameron was at home, so to speak; he saw her mud-soaked boots outside the tent. Sightless as she was, she still ventured out to call upon friends, escorted by Duncan or her black butler, Ulysses. More often, though, she allowed the Gathering to come to her, and her own tent seethed with company throughout the day, all the Scottish society of the Cape Fear and the colony coming to enjoy her renowned hospitality.

For the moment, though, she seemed fortunately alone. Roger caught a glimpse of her through the lifted flap, reclining in her cane-bottomed chair, feet in slippers, and her head fallen back in apparent repose. Her body servant, Phaedre, sat on a stool near the open tent flap, needle in hand, squinting in the hazy light over a spill of blue fabric that filled her lap.

Jocasta sensed him first; she sat up in her armchair, and her head turned sharply as he touched the tent flap. Phaedre glanced up belatedly, reacting to her mistress's movement rather than his presence.

"Mr. MacKenzie. It *is* the Thrush, is it no?" Mrs. Cameron said, smiling in his direction.

He laughed, and ducked his head to enter the tent, obeying her gesture.

"It is. And how did ye ken that, Mrs. Cameron? I've said not a word, let alone sung one. Have I a tuneful manner of breathing?" Brianna had told him of her aunt's uncanny ability to compensate for her blindness by means of other senses, but he was still surprised at her acuity.

"I heard your step, and then I smelt the blood on you," she said matter-of-factly. "The wound's come open again, has it not? Come, lad, sit. Will we fetch ye a dish of tea, or a dram? Phaedre—a cloth, if ye please."

His fingers went involuntarily to the gash in his throat. He'd forgotten it entirely in the rush of the day's events, but she was right; it had bled again, leaving a crusty stain down the side of his neck and over the collar of his shirt.

Phaedre was already up, assembling a tray from the array of cakes and biscuits on a small table by Jocasta's chair. Were it not for the earth and grass underfoot, Roger thought, he would scarcely know they were not in Mrs. Cameron's drawing room at River Run. She was wrapped in a woolen arisaid, but even that was fastened by a handsome cairngorm brooch.

"It's nothing," he said, self-conscious, but Jocasta took the cloth from her maid's hand and insisted on cleaning the cut herself. Her long fingers were cool on his skin, and surprisingly deft.

She smelled of woodsmoke, as everybody on the mountain did, and the tea she had been drinking, but there was none of the faintly camphorated musty odor he normally associated with elderly ladies.

"Tch, ye've got it on your shirt," she informed him, fingering the stiff fabric disapprovingly. "Will we launder it for ye? Though I dinna ken d'ye want to wear it sopping; it'll never dry by nightfall."

"Ah, no, ma'am. I thank ye, I've another. For the wedding, I mean."

"Well, then." Phaedre had produced a small pot of medicinal grease; he recognized it as one of Claire's, by the smell of lavender and goldenseal. Jocasta scooped up a thumbnail of the ointment and spread it carefully over his wound, her fingers steady on his jawbone.

Her skin was well-kept and soft, but it showed the effects not only of age but weather. There were ruddy patches in her cheeks, nets of tiny broken veins that from a slight distance lent her an air of health and vitality. Her hands showed no liver spots—of course, she was of a wealthy family; she would have worn gloves out-of-doors all her life—but the joints were knobbed and the palms slightly callused from the tug of reins. Not a hothouse flower, this daughter of Leoch, despite her surroundings.

Finished, she passed her hand lightly over his face and head, picked a dried leaf from his hair, then wiped his face with the damp cloth, surprising him. She dropped the cloth, then took his hand, wrapping her own fingers around his.

"There, now. Presentable once more! And now that ye're fit for company, Mr. MacKenzie—did ye come to speak to me, or were ye only passing by?”

Phaedre put down a dish of tea and a saucer of cake by his side, but Jocasta continued to hold his left hand. He found that odd, but the unexpected atmosphere of intimacy made it slightly easier to begin his request.

He put it simply; he had heard the Reverend make such requests for charity before, and knew it was best to let the situation speak for itself, leaving ultimate decision to the conscience of the hearer.

Jocasta listened carefully, a small furrow between her brows. He’d expected her to pause for thought when he’d finished, but instead she replied at once.

“Aye,” she said, “I ken Joanie Findlay, and her brother, too. Ye’re right, her husband was carried off by the consumption, two year gone. Jamie Roy spoke to me of her yesterday.”

“Oh, he did?” Roger felt mildly foolish.

Jocasta nodded. She leaned back a little, pursing her lips in thought.

“It’s no just a matter of offering help, ye ken,” she explained. “I’m glad of the chance. But she’s a proud woman, Joan Findlay—she willna take charity.” Her voice held a slight note of reproval, as though Roger ought to have realized that.

Perhaps he should, he thought. But he had acted on the impulse of the moment, moved by the Findlays’ poverty. It hadn’t occurred to him that if she had little else, it would be that much more important to Joan Findlay to cling to her one valuable possession—her pride.

“I see,” he said slowly. “But surely—there must be a way to help that wouldn’t offer offense?”

Jocasta tilted her head slightly to one side, then the other, in a small mannerism that he found peculiarly familiar. Of course—Bree did that now and then, when she was considering something.

“There may be,” she said. “The feast tonight—for the wedding, aye?—the Findlays will be there, of course, and well-fed. It wouldna be amiss for Ulysses to make up a wee parcel of food for them to take for the journey home—’twould save it spoiling, after all.” She smiled briefly, then the look of concentration returned to her features.

"The priest," she said, with a sudden air of satisfaction.

"Priest? Ye mean Father Donahue?"

One thick, burnished brow lifted at him.

"Ye ken another priest on the mountain? Aye, of course I do." She lifted her free hand, and Phaedre, ever alert, came to her mistress's side.

"Miss Jo?"

"Look out some bits from the trunks, lass," Jocasta said, touching the maid's arm. "Blankets, caps, an apron or two; breeks and plain shirts—the grooms can spare them."

"Stockings," Roger put in quickly, thinking of the little girls' dirty bare feet.

"Stockings." Jocasta nodded. "Plain stuff, but good wool and well-mended. Ulysses has my purse. Tell him to give ye ten shillings—sterling—and wrap it in one o' the aprons. Then make a bundle of the things and take them to Father Donahue. Tell him they're for Joan Findlay, but he's no to say where they've come from. He'll know what to say." She nodded again, satisfied, and dropped her hand from the maid's arm, making a little shooing gesture.

"Off wi' ye, then—see to it now."

Phaedre murmured assent and left the tent, pausing only to shake out the blue thing she had been sewing and fold it carefully over her stool. It was a decorated stomacher for Brianna's wedding dress, he saw, done with an elegant lacing of ribbons. He had a sudden vision of Brianna's white breasts, swelling above a low neckline of dark indigo, and returned to the conversation at hand with some difficulty.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am?"

"I said—will that do?" Jocasta was smiling at him, with a slightly knowing expression, as though she had been able to read his thoughts. Her eyes were blue, like Jamie's and Bree's, but not so dark. They were fixed on him—or at least pointed at him. He knew she could not see his face, but she did give the eerie impression of being able to see *through* him.

"Yes, Mrs. Cameron. That's—it's most kind of ye." He brought his feet under him, to stand and take his leave. He expected her to let go of his hand at once, but instead, she tightened her grip, restraining him.

"None so fast. I've a thing or two to say to ye, young man."

He settled back on his chair, composing himself.

"Of course, Mrs. Cameron."

"I wasna sure whether to speak now or wait until it was done—but as ye're here alone now …" She bent toward him, intent.

"Did my niece tell ye, lad, that I meant to make her heiress to my property?"

"Aye, she did."

He was at once on guard. Brianna had told him, all right—making it clear in no uncertain terms what she thought of that particular proposal. He steeled himself to repeat her objections now, hoping to do it more tactfully than she might have done herself. He cleared his throat.

"I'm sure my wife is most conscious of the honor, Mrs. Cameron," he began cautiously, "but—"

"Is she?" Jocasta asked dryly. "I shouldna have thought so, to hear her talk. But doubtless ye ken her mind better than I do. Be that as it may, though, I mean to tell her that I've changed my own mind."

"Oh? Well, I'm sure she'll—"

"I've told Gerald Forbes to be drawing up a will, leaving River Run and all its contents to Jeremiah."

"To—" It took a moment for his brain to make the connection. "What, to wee Jemmy?"

She was still leaning forward a little, as though peering at his face. Now she sat back, nodding, still holding firmly to his hand. It came to him, finally, that, unable to see his face, she thought to read him by means of this physical connection.

She was welcome to anything his fingers might tell her, he thought. He was too stunned at this news to have any notion how to respond to it. Christ, what would Bree say about it?

"Aye," she said, and smiled pleasantly. "It came to me, ye see, as how a woman's property becomes her husband's when she weds. Not that there are no means of settling it upon her, but it's difficult, and I wouldna involve lawyers more than I must—I think it always a mistake to go to the law, do ye not agree, Mr. MacKenzie?"

With a sense of complete astonishment, he realized that he was being deliberately insulted. Not only insulted, but warned. She thought—she did! She thought he was after Brianna's presumed inheritance, and was warning him not to resort to any legal contortions to get it. Mingled shock and outrage sealed his tongue for a moment, but then he found words.

"Why, that is the most—so ye take thought for Joan Findlay's pride, but ye think I have none? Mrs. Cameron, how dare ye suggest that—"

"Ye're a handsome lad, Thrush," she said, holding tight to his hand. "I've felt your face. And you've the name of MacKenzie, which is a good one, to be sure. But there are MacKenzies aplenty in the Highlands, aren't there? Men of honor, and men without it. Jamie Roy calls ye kinsman—but perhaps that's because ye're handfast to his daughter. I dinna think *I* ken your family."

Shock was giving way to a nervous impulse to laugh. Ken his family? Not likely; and how should he explain that he was the grandson—six times over—of her own brother, Dougal? That he was, in fact, not only Jamie's nephew, but her own as well, if a bit further down the family tree than one might expect?

"Nor does anyone I've spoken to this week at the Gathering," she added, head tilted to one side like a hawk watching prey.

So that was it. She'd been asking about him among her company—and had failed to turn up anyone who knew anything of his antecedents, for obvious reasons. A suspicious circumstance, to be sure.

He wondered whether she supposed he was a confidence trickster who had taken Jamie in, or whether perhaps he was meant to be involved in some scheme *with* Jamie? No, hardly that; Bree had told him that Jocasta had originally wanted to leave her property to

Jamie—who had refused, wary of close involvement with the old leg-trap. His opinion of Jamie's intelligence was reaffirmed.

Before he could think of some dignified retort, she patted his hand, still smiling.

"So, I thought to leave it all to the wee lad. That will be a tidy way of managing, won't it? Brianna will have the use of the money, of course, until wee Jeremiah should come of age—unless anything should happen to the child, that is."

Her voice held a definite note of warning, though her mouth continued to smile, her blank eyes still fixed wide on his face.

"What? What in the name of God d'ye mean by that?" He pushed his stool back, but she held tight to his hand. She was very strong, despite her age.

"Gerald Forbes will be executor of my will, and there are three trustees to manage the property," she explained. "If Jeremiah should come to any mischief, though, then everything will go to my nephew Hamish." Her face was quite serious now. "You'd not see a penny."

He twisted his fingers in hers and squeezed, hard enough that he felt her bony knuckles press together. Let her read what she liked in that, then! She gasped, but he didn't let go.

"Are ye saying to me that ye think I would harm that child?" His voice sounded hoarse to his own ears.

She had gone pale, but kept her dignity, teeth clenched and chin upraised.

"Have I said so?"

"Ye've said a great deal—and what ye've not said speaks louder than what ye have. How dare you imply such things to me?" He released her hand, all but flinging it back in her lap.

She rubbed her reddened fingers slowly with her other hand, lips pursed in thought. The canvas sides of the tent breathed in the wind with a crackling sound.

"Well, then," she said at last. "I'll offer ye my apology, Mr. MacKenzie, if I've wronged ye in any way. I thought it would be as well, though, for ye to know what was in my mind."

"As well? As well for whom?" He was on his feet, and turned toward the flap. With great difficulty, he kept himself from seizing the china plates of cakes and biscuits and smashing them on the ground as a parting gesture.

"For Jeremiah," she said levelly, behind him. "And Brianna. Perhaps, lad, even for you."

He swung round, staring at her.

"Me? What d'ye mean by that?"

She gave the ghost of a shrug.

"If ye canna love the lad for himself, I thought ye might treat him well for the sake of his prospects."

He stared at her, words jamming in his throat. His face felt hot, and the blood throbbed dully in his ears.

"Oh, I ken how it is," she assured him. "It's only to be understood that a man might not feel just so kindly toward a bairn his wife's borne to another. But if—"

He stepped forward then and gripped her hard by the shoulder, startling her. She jerked, blinking, and the candle flames flashed from the cairngorm brooch.

"Madam," he said, speaking very softly into her face. "I do not want your money. My wife does not want it. And *my son* will not have it. Cram it up your hole, aye?"

He let her go, turned, and strode out of the tent, brushing past Ulysses, who looked after him in puzzlement.

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12

VIRTUE

People moved through the gathering shadows of late afternoon, visiting from one fireside to another, as they had each day, but there was a different feeling on the mountain today.

In part it was the sweet sadness of leavetaking; the parting of friends, the severing of newfound loves, the knowledge that some faces would be seen tonight for the last time on earth. In part it was anticipation; the longing for home, the pleasures and dangers of the journey to come. In part, sheer weariness; cranky children, men harried by responsibility, women exhausted by the labor of cooking over open fires, maintaining a family's clothes and health and appetites from the sustenance of saddlebags and mule packs.

I could sympathize with all three attitudes myself. Beyond the sheer excitement of meeting new people and hearing new talk, I had had the pleasure—for pleasure it definitely was, despite its grimmer aspects—of new patients, seeing novel ailments and curing what could be cured, grappling with the need to find a way to treat what could not.

But the longing for home was strong: my spacious hearth, with its huge cauldron and its roasting jack, the light-filled peace of my surgery, with the fragrant bunches of nettle and dried lavender overhead, dusty gold in the afternoon sun. My feather bed, soft and clean, linen sheets smelling of rosemary and yarrow.

I closed my eyes for a moment, summoning up a wistful vision of this haven of delight, then opened them to reality: a crusted griddle, black with the remnants of scorched oatcake; soggy shoes and frozen feet; damp clothes that chafed with grit and sand; hampers whose abundance had dwindled to a single loaf of bread—well-nibbled by mice—ten apples, and a heel of cheese; three screeching babies; one frazzled young mother with sore breasts and cracked nipples; one expectant bride with a case of incipient nerves; one white-faced serving-maid with menstrual cramps; four slightly inebriated Scotsmen—and one Frenchman in similar condition—who wandered in and out of camp like bears and were not going to be any help whatever in packing up this evening … and a deep, clenching ache in my lower belly that gave me the unwelcome news that my own monthly—which had grown thankfully much less frequent than monthly of late—had decided to keep Lizzie's company.

I gritted my teeth, plucked a cold, damp clout off a clump of brush, and made my way duck-footed down the trail toward the women's privy trench, thighs pressed together.

The first thing to greet me on my return was the hot stink of scorching metal. I said something very expressive in French—a useful bit of phraseology acquired at L'Hôpital des Anges, where strong language was often the best medical tool available.

Marsali's mouth fell open. Germain looked at me in admiration and repeated the expression, correctly and with a beautiful Parisian accent.

"Sorry," I said, looking to Marsali in apology. "Someone's let the teakettle boil dry."

"Nay matter, Mother Claire," she said with a sigh, juggling little Joanie, who'd started to scream again. "It's no worse than the things his father teaches him a-purpose. Is there a dry cloth?"

I was already hunting urgently for a dry cloth or a pot-lifter with which to grasp the wire handle, but nothing came to hand save soggy diapers and damp stockings. Kettles were hard to come by, though, and I wasn't sacrificing this one. I wrapped my hand in a fold of my skirt, seized the handle, and jerked the kettle away from the flames. The heat shot through the damp cloth like a bolt of lightning, and I dropped it.

"Merde!" said Germain, in happy echo.

"Yes, quite," I said, sucking a blistered thumb. The kettle hissed and smoked in the wet leaves, and I kicked at it, rolling it off onto a patch of mud.

"Merde, merde, merde, merde," sang Germain, with a fair approximation of the tune of "Rose, Rose"—a manifestation of precocious musical feeling that went lamentably unappreciated in the circumstances.

"Do hush, child," I said.

He didn't. Jemmy began to screech in unison with Joan, Lizzie—who had had a relapse owing to the reluctant departure of Private Ogilvie—began to moan under her bush, and it started in to hail, small white pellets of ice dancing on the ground and pinging sharply off my scalp. I pulled the soggy mobcap off a branch and clapped it on my head, feeling like an extremely put-upon toad beneath a particularly homely mushroom. All it wanted was warts, I thought.

The hail was short-lived. As the rush and clattering lessened, though, the crunching noise of muddy boots came up the path. Jamie, with Father Kenneth Donahue in tow, crusted hail on their hair and shoulders.

"I've brought the good Father for tea," he said, beaming round the clearing.

"No, you haven't," I said, rather ominously. And if he thought I'd forgotten about Stephen Bonnet, he was wrong about that, too.

Turning at the sound of my voice, he jerked in an exaggeration of startled shock at sight of me in my mobcap.

"Is that you, Sassenach?" he asked in mock alarm, pretending to lean forward and peek under the drooping frill of my cap. Owing to the presence of the priest, I refrained from kneeing Jamie in some sensitive spot, and contented myself instead with an attempt to turn him into stone with my eyes, à la Medusa.

He appeared not to notice, distracted by Germain, who was now dancing in little circles while singing theme and variations on my initial French expression, to the tune of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat." Father Donahue was going bright pink with the effort of pretending that he didn't understand any French.

"Tais toi, crétin," Jamie said, reaching into his sporran. He said it amiably enough, but with the tone of one whose expectation of being obeyed is so absolute as not to admit question. Germain stopped abruptly, mouth open, and Jamie promptly thumbed a sweetie into it. Germain shut his mouth and began concentrating on the matter at hand, songs forgotten.

I reached for the kettle, using a handful of my hem again as pot holder. Jamie bent, picked up a sturdy twig, and hooked the handle of the kettle neatly from my hand with it.

"Voilà!" he said, presenting it.

"Merci," I said, with a distinct lack of gratitude. Nonetheless, I accepted the stick and set off toward the nearest rivulet, smoking kettle borne before me like a lance.

Reaching a rock-studded pool, I dropped the kettle with a clang, ripped off the mobcap, flung it into a clump of sedge, and stamped on it, leaving a large, muddy footprint on the linen.

"I didna mean to say it wasna flattering, Sassenach," said an amused voice behind me.

I raised a cold brow in his direction.

"You didn't mean to say it *was* flattering, did you?"

"No. It makes ye look like a poisonous toadstool. Much better without," he assured me.

He pulled me toward him and bent to kiss me.

"It's not that I don't appreciate the thought," I said, and the tone of my voice stopped him, a fraction of an inch from my mouth. "But one inch farther and I think I might just bite a small piece out of your lip."

Moving like a man who has just realized that the stone he has casually picked up is in actuality a wasp's nest, he straightened up and very, very slowly took his hands off my waist.

"Oh," he said, and tilted his head to one side, lips pursed as he surveyed me.

"Ye do look a bit frazzled, at that, Sassenach."

No doubt this was true, but it made me feel like bursting into tears to hear it. Evidently the urge showed, because he took me—very gently—by the hand, and led me to a large rock.

"Sit," he said. "Close your eyes, *a nighean donn*. Rest yourself a moment."

I sat, eyes closed and shoulders slumped. Sloshing noises and a muted clang announced that he was cleaning and filling the kettle.

He set the filled kettle at my feet with a soft clunk, then eased himself down on the leaves beside it, where he sat quietly. I could hear the faint sigh of his breath, and the occasional sniff and rustle as he wiped a dripping nose on his sleeve.

"I'm sorry," I said at last, opening my eyes.

He turned, half-smiling, to look up at me.

"For what, Sassenach? It's not as though ye've refused my bed—or at least I hope it's not come to that yet."

The thought of making love just at the moment was absolutely at the bottom of my list, but I returned the half-smile.

"No," I said ruefully. "After two weeks of sleeping on the ground, I wouldn't refuse *anyone's* bed." His eyebrows went up at that, and I laughed, taken off-guard.

"No," I said again. "I'm just … frazzled." Something griped low in my belly, and proceeded to twist. I grimaced, and pressed my hands over the pain.

"Oh!" he said again, in sudden understanding. "That kind of frazzled."

"That kind of frazzled," I agreed. I poked at the kettle with one toe. "I'd better take that back; I need to boil water so I can steep some willow bark. It takes a long time." It did; it would take an hour or more, by which time the cramps would be considerably worse.

"The hell with willow bark," he said, producing a silver flask from the recesses of his shirt. "Try this. At least ye dinna need to boil it first."

I unscrewed the stopper and inhaled. Whisky, and very good whisky, too.

"I love you," I said sincerely, and he laughed.

"I love ye too, Sassenach," he said, and gently touched my foot.

I took a mouthful and let it trickle down the back of my throat. It seeped pleasantly through my mucous membranes, hit bottom, and rose up in a puff of soothing, amber-colored smoke that filled all my crevices and began to extend warm, soothing tendrils round the source of my discomfort.

"Oooooo," I said, sighing, and taking another sip. I closed my eyes, the better to appreciate it. An Irishman of my acquaintance had once assured me that very good whisky could raise the dead. I wasn't disposed to argue the point.

"That's wonderful," I said, when I opened my eyes again. "Where did you get it?" This was twenty-year-old Scotch, if I knew anything about it—a far cry from the raw spirit that Jamie had been distilling on the ridge behind the house.

"Jocasta," he said. "It was meant to be a wedding gift for Brianna and her young man, but I thought ye needed it more."

"You're right about that."

We sat in a companionable silence, and I sipped slowly, the urge to run amok and slaughter everyone in sight gradually subsiding, along with the level of whisky in the flask.

The rain had moved off again, and the foliage dripped peacefully around us. There was a stand of fir trees near; I could smell the cool scent of their resin, pungent and clean above the heavier smell of wet, dead leaves, smoldering fires, and soggy fabrics.

"It's been three months since the last of your courses," Jamie observed casually. "I thought they'd maybe stopped."

I was always a trifle taken aback to realize how acutely he observed such things—but he was a farmer and a husbandman, after all. He was intimately acquainted with the gynecological history and estrus cycle of every female animal he owned; I supposed there was no reason to think he'd make an exception simply because I was not likely either to farrow or come in heat.

"It's not like a tap that just switches off, you know," I said, rather crossly. "Unfortunately. It just gets rather erratic and eventually it stops, but you haven't any idea when."

"Ah."

He leaned forward, arms folded across the tops of his knees, idly watching twigs and bits of leaf bobbing through the riffles of the stream.

"I'd think it would maybe be a relief to have done wi' it all. Less mess, aye?"

I repressed the urge to draw invidious sexual comparisons regarding bodily fluids.

"Maybe it will," I said. "I'll let you know, shall I?"

He smiled faintly, but was wise enough not to pursue the matter; he could hear the edge in my voice.

I sipped a bit more whisky. The sharp cry of a woodpecker—the kind Jamie called a yaffle—echoed deep in the woods and then fell silent. Few birds were out in this weather; most simply huddled under what shelter they could find, though I could hear the conversational quacking of a small flock of migratory ducks somewhere downstream. *They* weren't bothered by the rain.

Jamie stretched himself suddenly.

"Ah … Sassenach?" he said.

"What is it?" I asked, surprised.

He ducked his head, uncharacteristically shy.

"I dinna ken whether I've done wrong or no, Sassenach, but if I have, I must ask your forgiveness."

"Of course," I said, a little uncertainly. What was I forgiving him for? Probably not adultery, but it could be just about anything else, up to and including assault, arson, highway robbery, and blasphemy. God, I hoped it wasn't anything to do with Bonnet.

"What have you done?"

"Well, as to myself, nothing," he said, a little sheepishly. "It's only what I've said *you'd* do."

"Oh?" I said, with minor suspicion. "And what's that? If you told Farquard Campbell that I'd visit his horrible old mother again …"

"Oh, no," he assured me. "Nothing like that. I promised Josiah Beardsley that ye'd maybe take out his tonsils today, though."

"That I'd *what*?" I goggled at him. I'd met Josiah Beardsley, a youth with the worst-looking set of abscessed tonsils I'd ever seen, the day before. I'd been sufficiently impressed by the pustulated state of his adenoids, in fact, to have described them in detail to all and sundry over dinner—causing Lizzie to go green round the gills and give her second potato to Germain—and had mentioned at the time that surgery was really the only possible effective cure. I hadn't expected Jamie to go drumming up business, though.

"Why?" I asked.

Jamie rocked back a little, looking up at me.

"I want him, Sassenach."

"You do? What for?" Josiah was barely fourteen—or at least he thought he was fourteen; he wasn't really sure when he'd been born and his parents had died too long ago to say. He was undersized even for fourteen, and badly nourished, with legs slightly bowed from rickets. He also showed evidence of assorted parasitic infections, and wheezed with what might be tuberculosis, or merely a bad case of bronchitis.

"A tenant, of course."

"Oh? I'd have thought you had more applicants than you can handle, as it is."

I didn't just think so; I knew so. We had absolutely no money, though the trade Jamie had done at the Gathering had just about—not quite—cleared our indebtedness to several of the Cross Creek merchants for ironmongery, rice, tools, salt, and other small items. We had land in plenty—most of it forest—but no means to assist people to settle on it or farm it. The Chisholms and McGillivrays were stretching well past our limits, in terms of acquiring new tenantry.

Jamie merely nodded, dismissing these complications.

"Aye. Josiah's a likely lad, though."

"Hmm," I said dubiously. It was true that the boy seemed tough—which was likely what Jamie meant by "likely"; simply to have survived this long by himself was evidence of that. "Maybe so. So are lots of others. What's he got that makes you want him specially?"

"He's fourteen."

I looked at him, one brow raised in question, and his mouth twisted in a wry smile.

"Any man between sixteen and sixty must serve in the militia, Sassenach."

I felt a small, unpleasant contraction in the pit of my stomach. I hadn't forgotten the Governor's unwelcome summons, but what with one thing and another, I hadn't had the leisure to reflect on exactly what the practical consequences of it were likely to be.

Jamie sighed and stretched out his arms, flexing his knuckles until they cracked.

"So you'll do it?" I asked. "Form a militia company and go?"

"I must," he said simply. "Tryon's got my ballocks in his hand, and I'm no inclined to see whether he'll squeeze, aye?"

"I was afraid of that."

Jamie's picturesque assessment of the situation was unfortunately accurate. Looking for a loyal and competent man willing to undertake the settlement of a large section of wild backcountry, Governor Tryon had offered Jamie a Royal grant of land just east of the Treaty Line, with no requirement of quitrent for a period of ten years. A fair offer, though given the difficulties of settlement in the mountains, not quite so generous as it might have looked.

The catch was that holders of such grants were legally required to be white Protestant males of good character, above the age of thirty. And while Jamie met the other requirements, Tryon was well aware of his Catholicism.

Do as the Governor required, and … well, the Governor was a successful politician; he knew how to keep his mouth shut about inconvenient matters. Defy him, though, and it would take no more than a simple letter from New Bern to deprive Fraser's Ridge of its resident Frasers.

"Hmm. So you're thinking that if you take the available men from the Ridge—can't you leave out a few?"

"I havena got so many to start with, Sassenach," he pointed out. "I can leave Fergus, because of his hand, and Mr. Wemyss to look after our place. He's a bond servant, so far as anyone knows, and only freemen are obliged to join the militia."

"And only able-bodied men. That lets out Joanna Grant's husband; he's got a wooden foot."

He nodded.

"Aye, and old Arch Bug, who's seventy if he's a day. That's four men—and maybe eight boys under sixteen—to look after thirty homesteads and more than a hundred and fifty people."

"The women can probably manage fairly well by themselves," I said. "It's winter, after all; no crops to deal with. And there shouldn't be any difficulties with the Indians, not these days." My ribbon had come loose when I pulled off the cap. Hair was escaping from its undone plaits in every direction, straggling down my neck in damp, curly strands. I pulled the ribbon off and tried to comb my hair out with my fingers.

"What's so important about Josiah Beardsley, anyway?" I asked. "Surely one fourteen-year-old boy can't make so much difference."

"Beardsley's a hunter," Jamie answered, "and a good one. He brought in nearly two hundred weight of wolf, deer, and beaver skins to the Gathering—all taken by himself alone, he said. I couldna do better, myself."

That was a true encomium, and I pursed my lips in silent appreciation. Hides were the main—in fact, the only—winter crop of any value in the mountains. We had no money now—not even the paper Proclamation money, worth only a fraction of sterling—and without hides to sell in the spring, we were going to have difficulty getting the seed corn and wheat we needed. And if all the men were required to spend a good part of the winter tramping round the colony subduing Regulators instead of hunting …

Most women on the Ridge could handle a gun, but almost none could hunt effectively, as they were tethered to their homes by the needs of their children. Even Bree, who was a very good hunter, could venture no more than half a day's travel away from Jemmy—not nearly far enough for wolf and beaver.

I rubbed a hand through my damp locks, fluffing out the loosened strands.

"All right, I understand that part. Where do the tonsils come in, though?"

Jamie looked up at me and smiled. Without answering at once, he got to his feet and circled behind me. With a firm hand, he gathered in the fugitive strands, captured the flying bits, and braided it into a tight, thick plait at the base of my neck. He bent over my shoulder, plucked the ribbon from my lap, and tied it neatly in a bow.

"There." He sat down by my feet again. "Now, as to the tonsils. Ye told the lad he must have them out, or his throat would go from bad to worse."

"It will."

Josiah Beardsley had believed me. And, having come near death the winter before when an abscess in his throat had nearly suffocated him before bursting, he was not eager to risk another such occurrence.

"You're the only surgeon north of Cross Creek," Jamie pointed out. "Who else could do it?"

"Well, yes," I said uncertainly. "But—"

"So, I've made the lad an offer," Jamie interrupted. "One section of land—wee Roger and myself will help him to put up a cabin on it when the time comes—and he'll go halves with me in whatever he takes in the way of skins for the next three winters. He's willing—provided you'll take out his tonsils as part o' the bargain."

"But why today? I can't take someone's tonsils out here!" I gestured at the dripping forest.

"Why not?" Jamie raised one eyebrow. "Did ye not say last night it was a small matter—only a few wee cuts wi' your smallest knife?"

I rubbed a knuckle under my nose, sniffing with exasperation. "Look, just because it isn't a massive bloody job like amputating a leg doesn't mean it's a simple matter!" It was, in fact, a relatively simple operation—surgically speaking. It was the possibility of infection following the procedure, and the need for careful nursing—a poor substitute for antibiotics, but much better than neglect—that raised complications.

"I can't just whack out his tonsils and turn him loose," I said. "When we get back to the Ridge, though—"

"He doesna mean to come back with us directly," Jamie interrupted.

"Why not?" I demanded.

"He didna say; only that he had a bit of business to do, and would come to the Ridge by the first week of December. He can sleep in the loft above the herb shed," he added.

"So you—and he—expect me just to slash out his tonsils, put in a few stitches, and see him on his merry way?" I asked sardonically.

"Ye did nicely wi' the dog," he said, grinning.

"Oh, you heard about that."

"Oh, aye. And the lad who chopped his foot with an ax, and the bairns wi' milk rash, and Mrs. Buchanan's toothache, and your battle wi' Murray MacLeod over the gentleman's bile ducts …"

"It *was* rather a busy morning." I shuddered briefly in remembrance, and took another sip of whisky.

"The whole Gathering is talking of ye, Sassenach. I did think of the Bible, in fact, seeing all the crowd clamoring round ye this morning."

"The Bible?" I must have looked blank at the reference, because the grin got wider.

"And the whole multitude sought to touch him," Jamie quoted. "For there went virtue out of him, and healed them all."

I laughed ruefully, interrupting myself with a small hiccup. "Fresh out of virtue at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Dinna fash. There's plenty in the flask."

Thus reminded, I offered him the whisky, but he waved it away, brows drawn down in thought. Melting hail had left wet streaks in his hair, and it lay like ribbons of melted bronze across his shoulders—like the statue of some military hero, weathered and glistening in a public park.

"So ye'll do the lad's tonsils, once he comes to the Ridge?"

I thought a moment, then nodded, swallowing. There would still be dangers in it, and normally I wouldn't do purely elective surgery. But Josiah's condition was truly dreadful, and the continued infections might well kill him eventually, if I didn't take some steps to remedy it.

Jamie nodded, satisfied.

"I'll see to it, then."

My feet had thawed, even wet as they were, and I was beginning to feel warm and pliable. My belly still felt as though I'd swallowed a large volcanic rock, but I wasn't minding all that much.

"I was wondering something, Sassenach," he said.

"Yes?"

"Speakin' of the Bible, ye ken."

"Got Scripture on the brain today, have you?"

One corner of his mouth curled up as he glanced at me.

"Aye, well. It's only I was thinking. When the Angel of the Lord comes along to Sarah and tells her she'll have a bairn the next year, she laughs and says that's a rare jest, as it's ceased to be wi' her after the manner of women."

"Most women in that situation likely wouldn't think it at all a funny idea," I assured him. "I often think God's got a very peculiar sense of humor, though."

He looked down at the large maple leaf he was shredding between thumb and forefinger, but I caught the faint twitch of his mouth.

"I've thought that now and again myself, Sassenach," he said, rather dryly. "Be that as it may, she did have the bairn, aye?"

"The Bible says she did. *I'm* not going to call the book of Genesis a liar." I debated the wisdom of drinking more, but decided to save it for a rainy—well, a rainier—day, and put the stopper back in the flask. I could hear a certain amount of stirring in the direction of the campsite, and my ears caught a word of inquiry, borne on the chilly breeze.

"Someone's looking for Himself," I said. "Again."

Himself glanced over his shoulder and grimaced slightly, but made no immediate move to answer the call. He cleared his throat, and I saw a faint flush move up the side of his neck.

"Well, the point is," he said, carefully not looking at me, "that so far as I ken, if your name's not Mary and the Holy Ghost isna involved in the matter, there's only the one way of getting wi' child. Am I right?"

"So far as I know, yes." I put a hand over my mouth to stifle a rising hiccup.

"Aye. And if so … well, that must mean that Sarah was still bedding wi' Abraham at the time, no?"

He still wasn't looking at me, but his ears had gone pink, and I belatedly realized the point of this religious discussion. I reached out a toe and prodded him gently in the side.

"You were thinking perhaps I wouldn't want you anymore?"

"Ye dinna want me *now*," he pointed out logically, eyes on the crumbled remains of his leaf.

"I feel as though my belly is full of broken glass, I'm half-soaked and mud to the knees, and whoever's looking for you is about to burst through the shrubbery with a pack of bloodhounds at any moment," I said, with a certain amount of asperity. "Are you actually inviting me to participate in carnal revelry with you in that mound of soggy leaves? Because if you are—"

"No, no," he said hastily. "I didna mean now. I only meant—I was only wondering if—" The tips of his ears had gone a dull red. He stood up abruptly, brushing dead leaves from his kilt with exaggerated force.

"If," I said in measured tones, "you were to get me with child at this point in the proceedings, Jamie Fraser, I would have your balls *en brochette*." I rocked back, looking up at him. "As for bedding with you, though …"

He stopped what he was doing and looked at me. I smiled at him, letting what I thought show plainly on my face.

"Once you have a bed again," I said, "I promise I won't refuse it."

"Oh," he said. He drew a deep breath, looking suddenly quite happy. "Well, that's all right, then. It's only—I wondered, ye ken."

A sudden loud rustling in the shrubbery was followed by the appearance of Mr. Wemyss, whose thin, anxious face poked out of a nannyberry bush.

"Oh, it's yourself, sir," he said, in evident relief.

"I suppose it must be," Jamie said, in resignation. "Is there a difficulty, Mr. Wemyss?"

Mr. Wemyss was delayed in answering, having become inextricably entangled with the nannyberry bush, and I was obliged to go and help release him. A onetime bookkeeper who had been obliged to sell himself as an indentured servant, Mr. Wemyss was highly unsuited to life in the wilderness.

"I do apologize for troubling ye, sir," he said, rather red in the face. He picked nervously at a spiny twig that had caught in his fair, flyaway hair.

"It's only—well, she did say as she meant to cleave him from crown to crutch wi' her ax if he didna leave off, and he said no woman would speak to him in that manner, and she does *have* an ax …"

Accustomed to Mr. Wemyss's methods of communication, Jamie sighed, reached out for the whisky flask, uncorked it, and took a deep, sustaining swig. He lowered the flask and fixed Mr. Wemyss with a gimlet eye.

"Who?" he demanded.

"Oh! Er … did I not say? Rosamund Lindsay and Ronnie Sinclair."

"Mmphm."

Not good news; Rosamund Lindsay *did* have an ax; she was roasting several pigs in a pit near the creek, over hickory embers. She also weighed nearly two hundred pounds and, while normally good-humored, was possessed of a notable temper when roused. For his part, Ronnie Sinclair was entirely capable of irritating the Angel Gabriel, let alone a woman trying to cook in the rain.

Jamie sighed and handed the flask back to me. He squared his shoulders, shaking droplets from his plaid as he settled it.

"Go and tell them I'm coming, Mr. Wemyss," he said.

Mr. Wemyss's thin face expressed the liveliest apprehension at the thought of coming within speaking range of Rosamund Lindsay's ax, but his awe of Jamie was even greater. He bobbed a quick, neat bow, turned, and blundered straight into the nannyberry bush again.

A wail like an approaching ambulance betokened the appearance of Marsali, Joan in her arms. She plucked a clinging branch from Mr. Wemyss's coat sleeve, nodding to him as she stepped carefully round him.

"Da," she said, without preamble. "Ye've got to come. Father Kenneth's been arrested."

Jamie's eyebrows shot up.

"Arrested? Just now? By whom?"

"Aye, this minute! A nasty fat man who said he was sheriff o' the county. He came up wi' two men and they asked who was the priest, and when Father Kenneth said it was him, they seized him by the arms and marched him straight off, with none so much as a by your leave!"

The blood was rising in Jamie's face, and his two stiff fingers tapped briefly against his thigh.

"They've taken him from my hearth?" he said. *"A Dhia!"*

This was plainly a rhetorical question, and before Marsali could answer it, a crunching of footsteps came from the other direction, and Brianna popped into sight from behind a pine tree.

"What?" he barked at her. She blinked, taken aback.

"Ah … Geordie Chisholm says one of the soldiers stole a ham from his fire, and will you go and see Lieutenant Hayes about it?"

"Yes," he said promptly. "Later. Meanwhile, do you go back wi' Marsali and find out where they've taken Father Kenneth. And Mr. Wemyss—" But Mr. Wemyss had at last escaped the clinging embrace of the nannyberry bush. A distant crashing signaled his rush to fulfill his orders.

A quick look at Jamie's face convinced both girls that a swift retreat was the order of the day, and within seconds, we were alone again. He took a deep breath, and let it slowly out through his teeth.

I wanted to laugh, but didn't. Instead I moved closer; cold and damp as it was, I could feel the heat of his skin through his plaid.

"At least it's only the sick ones who want to touch me," I said. I held out the flask to him. "What do *you* do when all the virtue's gone out of you?"

He glanced down at me, and a slow smile spread across his face. Ignoring the flask, he stooped, cupped my face in his hands, and kissed me, very gently.

"That," he said.

Then he turned and strode downhill, presumably full of virtue once more.

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13

BEANS AND BARBECUE

I took the kettle back to our camp, only to find the place momentarily deserted. Voices and laughter in the distance indicated that Lizzie, Marsali, and Mrs. Bug—presumably with children in tow—were on their way to the women's privy, a latrine trench dug behind a convenient screen of juniper, some way from the campsites. I hung the full kettle over the fire to boil, then stood still for a moment, wondering in which direction my efforts might be best directed.

While Father Kenneth's situation might be the most serious in the long run, it wasn't one where my presence would be likely to make a difference. But I *was* a doctor—and Rosamund Lindsay *did* have an ax. I patted my damp hair and garments into some sort of order, and started downhill toward the creek, abandoning the mobcap to its fate.

Jamie had evidently been of the same mind regarding the relative importance of the emergencies in progress. When I fought my way through the thicket of willow saplings edging the creek, I found him standing by the barbecue pit, in peaceful conversation with Ronnie Sinclair—meanwhile leaning casually on the handle of the ax, of which he had somehow managed to possess himself.

I relaxed a bit when I saw that, and took my time in joining the party. Unless Rosamund decided to strangle Ronnie with her bare hands or beat him to death with a ham—neither of these contingencies being at all unthinkable—my medical services might not be needed after all.

The pit was a broad one, a natural declivity bored out of the clay creekbank by some distant flood and then deepened by judicious spadework in the years succeeding. Judging by the blackened rocks and drifts of scattered charcoal, it had been in use for some time. In fact, several different people were using it now; the mingled scents of fowl, pork, mutton, and possum rose up in a cloud of apple-wood and hickory smoke, a savory incense that made my mouth water.

The sight of the pit was somewhat less appetizing. Clouds of white smoke billowed up from the damp wood, half-obscuring a number of shapes that lay upon their smoldering pyres—many of these looking faintly and hair-raisingly human through the haze. It reminded me all too vividly of the charnel pits on Jamaica, where the bodies of slaves who had not survived the rigors of the Middle Passage were burned, and I swallowed heavily, trying not to recall the macabre roasting-meat smell of those funeral fires.

Rosamund was working down in the pit at the moment, her skirt kirtled well above plump knees and sleeves rolled back to bare her massive arms as she ladled a reddish sauce onto the exposed ribs of a huge hog's carcass. Around her lay five more gigantic shapes, shrouded in damp burlap, with the wisps of fragrant smoke curling up around them, vanishing into the soft drizzle.

"It's poison, is what it is!" Ronnie Sinclair was saying hotly, as I came up behind him. "She'll ruin it—it'll no be fit for pigs when she's done!"

"It *is* pigs, Ronnie," Jamie said, with considerable patience. He rolled an eye at me, then glanced at the pit, where sizzling fat dripped onto the biers of hickory coals below. "Myself, I shouldna think ye could do anything to a pig—in the way of cooking, that is—that would make it not worth the eating."

"Quite true," I put in helpfully, smiling at Ronnie. "Smoked bacon, grilled chops, roasted loin, baked ham, headcheese, sausage, sweetbreads, black pudding … somebody once said you could make use of everything in a pig but the squeal."

"Aye, well, but this is the barbecue, isn't it?" Ronnie said stubbornly, ignoring my feeble attempt at humor. "Anyone kens that ye sass a barbecued hog wi' vinegar—that's the proper way of it!

After all, ye wouldna put gravel into your sausage meat, would ye? Or boil your bacon wi' sweepings from the henhouse? Tcha!" He jerked his chin toward the white pottery basin under Rosamund's arm, making it clear that its contents fell into the same class of inedible adulterants, in his opinion.

I caught a savory whiff as the wind changed. So far as I could tell from smell alone, Rosamund's sauce seemed to include tomatoes, onions, red pepper, and enough sugar to leave a thick blackish crust on the meat and a tantalizing caramel aroma in the air.

"I expect the meat will be very juicy, cooked like that," I said, feeling my stomach begin to knot and growl beneath my laced bodice.

"Aye, a wonderful fat lot of pigs they are, too," Jamie said ingratiatingly, as Rosamund glanced up, glowering. She was black to the knees and her square-jowled face was streaked with rain, sweat, and soot. "Will they have been wild hogs, ma'am, or gently reared?"

"Wild," she said, with a certain amount of pride, straightening up and wiping a strand of wet, graying hair off her brow. "Fattened on chestnut mast—nothin' like it to give a flavor to the meat!"

Ronnie Sinclair made a Scottish noise indicative of derision and contempt.

"Aye, the flavor's so good ye must hide it under a larding o' yon grisly sauce that makes it look as though the meat's no even cooked yet, but bleeding raw!"

Rosamund made a rather earthy comment regarding the supposed manhood of persons who felt themselves squeamish at the thought of blood, which Ronnie seemed disposed to take personally. Jamie skillfully maneuvered himself between the two, keeping the ax well out of reach.

"Oh, I'm sure it's verra well cooked indeed," he replied soothingly. "Why, Mistress Lindsay has been hard at work since dawn, at least."

"Long before that, Mr. Fraser," the lady replied, with a certain grim satisfaction. "You want decent barbecue, you start at least a day before, and tend it all through the night. I been a-minding of these hogs since yesterday afternoon.” She drew in a great sniff of the rising smoke, wearing a beatific expression.

“Ah, that’s the stuff! Not but what a savory sass like this ’un is wasted on you bastardly Scots,” Rosamund said, replacing the burlap and patting it tenderly into place. “You’ve pickled your tongues with that everlastin’ vinegar you slop on your victuals. It’s all I can do to stop Kenny a-puttin’ it on his corn bread and porridge of a mornin’.”

Jamie raised his voice, drowning out Ronnie’s incensed response to this calumny.

“And was it Kenny that hunted the hogs for ye, mistress? Wild hogs have a chancy nature; surely it’s a dangerous business to be stalking beasts of that size. Like the wild boar that we hunted in Scotland, aye?”

“Ha.” Rosamund cast a look of good-natured scorn toward the slope above, where her husband—roughly half her size—presumably was engaged in less strenuous pursuits. “No, indeed, Mr. Fraser, I kilt this lot myself. With that ax,” she added pointedly, nodding toward the instrument in question and narrowing her eyes in a sinister fashion at Ronnie. “Caved in their skulls with one blow, I did.”

Ronnie, not the most perceptive of men, declined to take the hint.

“It’s the tomato fruits she’s using, *Mac Dubh*,” he hissed, tugging at Jamie’s sleeve and pointing at the red-crusted bowl. “Devil’s apples! She’ll poison us all!”

“Oh, I shouldna think so, Ronnie.” Jamie took a firm grip on Ronnie’s arm, and smiled engagingly at Rosamund. “Ye mean to sell the meat, I suppose, Mrs. Lindsay? It’s a poor merchant that would kill her customers, aye?”

“I ain’t yet lost a one, Mr. Fraser,” Rosamund agreed, turning back another sheet of burlap and leaning over to dribble sauce from a wooden ladle over a steaming haunch. “Ain’t never had but good words about the taste, neither,” she said, “though a-course that would be in Boston, where I come from.”

Where folk have sense, her tone clearly implied.

“I met a man from Boston, last time I went to Charlottesville,” Ronnie said, his foxy brows drawn down in disapproval. He tugged, trying to free his arm from Jamie’s grip, but to no avail. “He said to me as it was his custom to have beans at his breakfast, and oysters to his supper, and so he’d done every day since he was a wean. A wonder he hadna blown up like a pig’s bladder, filled wi’ such wretched stuff as that!”

“Beans, beans, they’re good for your heart,” I said cheerily, seizing the opening. “The more you eat, the more you fart. The more you fart, the better you feel—so let’s have beans for every meal!”

Ronnie’s mouth dropped open, as did Mrs. Lindsay’s. Jamie whooped with laughter, and Mrs. Lindsay’s look of astonishment dissolved into a booming laugh. After a moment, Ronnie rather reluctantly joined in, a small grin twisting up the corner of his mouth.

“I lived in Boston for a time,” I said mildly, as the hilarity died down a bit. “Mrs. Lindsay, that smells wonderful!”

Rosamund nodded with dignity, gratified.

“Why, so it does, ma’am, and I say so.” She leaned toward me, lowering her voice—slightly—from its normal stentorian range. “It’s my private receipt what does it,” she said, with a proprietorial pat of the pottery bowl. “Brings out the flavor, see?”

Ronnie’s mouth opened, but only a small yelp emerged, the evident result of Jamie’s hand tightening about his biceps. Rosamund ignored this, engaging in an amiable discussion with Jamie that terminated in her agreeing to reserve an entire carcass for use at the wedding feast.

I glanced at Jamie, hearing this. Given that Father Kenneth was probably at present en route either back to Baltimore or to the gaol in Edenton, I had my doubts as to whether any marriages would in fact take place tonight.

On the other hand, I had learned never to underestimate Jamie, either. With a final word of compliment to Mrs. Lindsay, he dragged Ronnie bodily away from the pit, pausing just long enough to thrust the ax into my hands.

"See that safe, aye, Sassenach?" he said, and kissed me briefly. He grinned down at me. "And where did ye learn so much about the natural history of beans, tell me?"

"Brianna brought it home from school when she was about six," I said, smiling back. "It's really a little song."

"Tell her to sing it to her man," Jamie advised. The grin widened. "He can write it down in his wee book."

He turned away, putting a companionable arm firmly about the shoulders of Ronnie Sinclair, who showed signs of trying to escape back in the direction of the barbecue pit.

"Come along wi' me, Ronnie," he said. "I must just have a wee word wi' the Lieutenant. He wishes to buy a ham of Mistress Lindsay, I think," he added, blinking at me in the owllike fashion that passed with him for winking. He turned back to Ronnie. "But I ken he'll want to hear whatever ye can tell him, about his Da. Ye were a great friend of Gavin Hayes, no?"

"Oh," said Ronnie, his scowl lightening somewhat. "Aye. Aye, Gavin was a proper man. A shame about it." He shook his head, obviously referring to Gavin's death a few years before. He glanced up at Jamie, lips pursed. "Does his lad ken what happened?"

A tender question, that. Gavin had in fact been hanged in Charleston, for theft—a shameful death, by anyone's standards.

"Aye," Jamie said quietly. "I had to tell him. But it will help, I think, if ye can tell him a bit about his Da earlier—tell him how it was for us, there in Ardsmuir." Something—not quite a smile—touched his face as he looked at Ronnie, and I saw an answering softness on Sinclair's face.

Jamie's hand tightened on Ronnie's shoulder, then dropped away, and they set off up the hill, side by side, the subtleties of barbecue forgotten.

How it was for us … I watched them go, linked by the conjuration of that one simple phrase. Five words that recalled the closeness forged by days and months and years of shared hardship; a kinship closed to anyone who had not likewise lived through it. Jamie seldom spoke of Ardsmuir; neither did any of the other men who had come out of it and lived to see the New World here.

Mist was rising from the hollows on the mountain now; within moments, they had disappeared from view. From the hazy forest above, the sound of Scottish male voices drifted down toward the smoking pit, chanting in amiable unison:

“Beans, beans, they’re good for your heart …”

Returning to the campsite, I found that Roger had returned from his errands. He stood near the fire, talking with Brianna, a troubled look on his face.

“Don’t worry,” I told him, reaching past his hip to retrieve the rumbling teakettle. “I’m sure Jamie will sort it somehow. He’s gone to deal with it.”

“He has?” He looked slightly startled. “He knows already?”

“Yes, as soon as he finds the sheriff, I imagine it will all come right.” I upended the chipped teapot I used in camp with one hand, shook the old leaves out onto the ground, and putting it on the table, tipped a little boiling water in from the kettle to warm the pot. It had been a long day, and likely to be a long evening as well. I was looking forward to the sustenance of a properly brewed cup of tea, accompanied by a slice of the fruitcake one of my patients had given me during the morning clinic.

“The sheriff?” Roger gave Brianna a baffled look, faintly tinged with alarm. “She hasn’t set a sheriff on me, has she?”

“Set a sheriff on you? Who?” I said, joining in the chorus of bafflement. I hung the kettle back on its tripod, and reached for the tin of tea leaves. “Whatever have you been doing, Roger?”

A faint flush showed over his high cheekbones, but before he could answer, Brianna snorted briefly.

“Telling Auntie Jocasta where she gets off.” She glanced at Roger, and her eyes narrowed into triangles of mildly malicious amusement as she envisioned the scene. “Boy, I wish I’d been there!”

“Whatever did you say to her, Roger?” I inquired, interested.

The flush deepened, and he looked away.

“I don’t wish to repeat it,” he said shortly. “It wasna the sort of thing one ought to say to a woman, let alone an elderly one, and particularly one about to be related to me by marriage. I was just asking Bree whether I maybe ought to go and apologize to Mrs. Cameron before the wedding.”

“No,” Bree said promptly. “The nerve of her! You had every right to say what you did.”

“Well, I don’t regret the substance of my remarks,” Roger said to her, with a wry hint of a smile. “Only the form.

“See,” he said, turning to me, “I’m only thinking that perhaps I should apologize, to keep it from being awkward tonight—I don’t want Bree’s wedding to be spoiled.”

“Bree’s wedding? You think I’m getting married by myself?” she asked, lowering thick red brows at him.

“Oh, well, no,” he admitted, smiling a little. He touched her cheek, gently. “I’ll stand up next ye, to be sure. But so long as we end up married, I’m not so much bothered about the ceremony. Ye’ll want it to be nice, though, won’t ye? Put a damper on the occasion, and your auntie crowns me with a stick of firewood before I can say ‘I will.’ ”

I was by now consumed by curiosity to know just what he *had* said to Jocasta, but thought I had better address the more immediate issue, which was that at the moment of going to press, it appeared that there might be no wedding to be spoiled.

“And so Jamie’s out looking for Father Kenneth now,” I finished. “Marsali didn’t recognize the sheriff who took him, though, which makes it difficult.”

Roger’s dark brows lifted, then drew together in concern.

“I wonder …” he said, and turned to me. “Do ye know, I think perhaps I saw him, just a few moments ago.”

“Father Kenneth?” I asked, knife suspended over the fruitcake.

“No, the sheriff.”

“What? Where?” Bree half-turned on one heel, glaring round. Her hand curled up into a fist, and I thought it rather fortunate that the sheriff wasn’t in sight. Having Brianna arrested for assault really *would* have a dampening effect on the wedding.

"He went that way." Roger gestured downhill, toward the creek—and Lieutenant Hayes's tent. As he did so, we heard the sound of footsteps squelching through mud, and a moment later, Jamie appeared, looking tired, worried, and highly annoyed. Obviously, he hadn't yet found the priest.

"Da!" Bree greeted him with excitement. "Roger thinks he's seen the sheriff who took Father Kenneth!"

"Oh, aye?" Jamie at once perked up. "Where?" His left hand curled up in anticipation, and I couldn't help smiling. "What's funny?" he demanded, seeing it.

"Nothing," I assured him. "Here, have some fruitcake." I handed him a slice, which he promptly crammed into his mouth, returning his attention to Roger.

"Where?" he demanded, indistinctly.

"I don't know that it was the man you're looking for," Roger told him. "He was a raggedy wee man. But he had got a prisoner; he was taking one of the fellows from Drunkard's Creek off in handcuffs. MacLennan, I think."

Jamie choked and coughed, spewing small bits of masticated fruitcake into the fire.

"He arrested Mr. MacLennan? And you *let* him?" Bree was staring at Roger in consternation. Neither she nor Roger had been present when Abel MacLennan had told his story over breakfast, but both of them knew him.

"I couldna very well prevent him," Roger pointed out mildly. "I did call out to MacLennan to ask if he wanted help—I thought I'd fetch your Da or Farquard Campbell, if he did. But he just looked through me, as though I might have been a ghost, and then when I called again, he gave me an odd sort of smile and shook his head. I didna think I ought to go and beat up a sheriff, just on general principle. But if you—"

"Not a sheriff," Jamie said hoarsely. His eyes were watering, and he paused to cough explosively again.

"A thief-taker," I told Roger. "Something like a bounty hunter, I gather." The tea wasn't nearly brewed yet; I found a half-full stone bottle of ale and handed that to Jamie.

“Where will he be taking Abel?” I asked. “You said Hayes didn’t want prisoners.”

Jamie shook his head, swallowed, and lowered the bottle, breathing a little easier.

“He doesna. No, Mr. Boble—it must be him, aye?—will take Abel to the nearest magistrate. And if wee Roger saw him just the now …” He turned, thinking, brows furrowed as he surveyed the mountainside around us.

“It will be Farquard, most likely,” he concluded, his shoulders relaxing a little. “I ken four justices of the peace and three magistrates here at the Gathering, and of the lot, Campbell’s the only one camped on this side.”

“Oh, that’s good.” I sighed in relief. Farquard Campbell was a fair man; a stickler for the law, but not without compassion—and more importantly, perhaps, a very old friend of Jocasta Cameron.

“Aye, we’ll ask my aunt to have a word—perhaps we’d best do it before the weddings.” He turned to Roger. “Will ye go, MacKenzie? I must be finding Father Kenneth, if there are to *be* any weddings.”

Roger looked as though he, too, had just choked on a bit of fruitcake.

“Er … well,” he said, awkwardly. “Perhaps I’m no the best man to be saying anything to Mrs. Cameron just now.”

Jamie was staring at him in mingled interest and exasperation.

“Why not?”

Blushing fiercely, Roger recounted the substance of his conversation with Jocasta—lowering his voice nearly to the point of inaudibility at the conclusion.

We heard it clearly enough, nonetheless. Jamie looked at me. His mouth twitched. Then his shoulders began to shake. I felt the laughter bubble up under my ribs, but it was nothing to Jamie’s hilarity. He laughed almost silently, but so hard that tears came to his eyes.

“Oh, Christ!” he gasped at last. He clutched his side, still wheezing faintly. “God, I’ve sprung a rib, I think.” He reached out and took one of the half-dried clean clouts from a bush, carelessly wiping his face with it.

“All right,” he said, recovering himself somewhat. “Go and see Farquard, then. If Abel’s there, tell Campbell I’ll stand surety for him. Bring him back with ye.” He made a brief shooing gesture, and Roger—puce with mortification but stiff with dignity—departed at once. Bree followed him, casting a glance of reproof at her father, which merely had the effect of causing him to wheeze some more.

I drowned my own mirth with a gulp of steaming tea, blissfully fragrant. I offered the cup to Jamie, but he waved it away, content with the rest of the ale.

“My aunt,” he observed, lowering the bottle at last, “kens verra well indeed what money will buy and what it will not.”

“And she’s just bought herself—and everyone else in the county—a good opinion of poor Roger, hasn’t she?” I replied, rather dryly.

Jocasta Cameron was a MacKenzie of Leoch; a family Jamie had once described as “charming as the larks in the field—and sly as foxes, with it.” Whether Jocasta had truly had any doubt herself of Roger’s motives in marrying Bree, or merely thought to forestall idle gossip along the Cape Fear, her methods had been undeniably successful. She was probably up in her tent chortling over her cleverness, looking forward to spreading the story of her offer and Roger’s response to it.

“Poor Roger,” Jamie agreed, his mouth still twitching. “Poor but virtuous.” He tipped up the bottle of ale, drained it, and set it down with a brief sigh of satisfaction. “Though come to that,” he added, glancing at me, “she’s bought the lad something of value as well, hasn’t she?”

“My son,” I quoted softly, nodding. “Do you think he realized it himself before he said it? That he really feels Jemmy is his son?”

Jamie made an indeterminate movement with his shoulders, not quite a shrug.

“I canna say. It’s as well he should have that fixed in his mind, though, before the next bairn comes along—one he kens for sure is his.”

I thought of my conversation that morning with Brianna, but decided it was wiser to say nothing—at least for now. It was, after all, a matter between Roger and Bree. I only nodded, and turned to tidy away the tea things.

I felt a small glow in the pit of my stomach that was only partly the result of the tea. Roger had sworn an oath to take Jemmy as his own, no matter what the little boy's true paternity might be; he was an honorable man, Roger, and he meant it. But the speech of the heart is louder than the words of any oath spoken by lips alone.

When I had gone back, pregnant, through the stones, Frank had sworn to me that he would keep me as his wife, would treat the coming child as his own—would love me as he had before. All three of those vows his lips and mind had done his best to keep, but his heart, in the end, had sworn only one. From the moment that he took Brianna in his arms, she was his daughter.

But what if there had been another child? I wondered suddenly. It had never been a possibility—but if it had? Slowly, I wiped the teapot dry and wrapped it in a towel, contemplating the vision of that mythical child; the one Frank and I might have had, but never did, and never would. I laid the wrapped teapot in the chest, gently, as though it were a sleeping baby.

When I turned back, Jamie was still standing there, looking at me with a rather odd expression—tender, yet somehow rueful.

"Did I ever think to thank ye, Sassenach?" he said, his voice a little husky.

"For what?" I said, puzzled. He took my hand, and drew me gently toward him. He smelled of ale and damp wool, and very faintly of the brandied sweetness of fruitcake.

"For my bairns," he said softly. "For the children that ye bore me."

"Oh," I said. I leaned slowly forward, and rested my forehead against the solid warmth of his chest. I cupped my hands at the small of his back beneath his coat, and sighed. "It was … my pleasure."

"Mr. Fraser, Mr. Fraser!" I lifted my head and turned to see a small boy churning down the steep slope behind us, arms waving to keep his balance and face bright red with cold and exertion.

"Oof!" Jamie got his hands up just in time to catch the boy as he hurtled down the last few feet, quite out of control. He boosted the little boy, whom I recognized as Farquard Campbell's youngest, up in his arms and smiled at him. "Aye, Rabbie, what is it? Does your Da want me to come for Mr. MacLennan?"

Rabbie shook his head, shaggy hair flying like a sheepdog's coat.

"No, sir," he panted, gasping for breath. He gulped air and the small throat swelled like a frog's with the effort to breathe and speak at once. "No, sir. My Da says he's heard where the priest is and I should show ye the way, sir. Will ye come?"

Jamie's brows flicked up in momentary surprise. He glanced at me, then smiled at Rabbie, and nodded, bending down to set him on his feet.

"Aye, lad, I will. Lead on, then!"

"Delicate of Farquard," I said to Jamie under my breath, with a nod at Rabbie, who scampered ahead, looking back over his shoulder now and then, to be sure we were managing to keep up with him. No one would notice a small boy, among the swarms of children on the mountain. Everyone would most assuredly have noticed had Farquard Campbell come himself or sent one of his adult sons.

Jamie huffed a little, the mist of his breath a wisp of steam in the gathering chill.

"Well, it's no Farquard's concern, after all, even if he has got a great regard for my aunt. And I expect if he's sent the lad to tell me, it means he kens the man who's responsible, and doesna mean to choose up sides wi' me against him." He glanced at the setting sun, and gave me a rueful look.

"I did say I should find Father Kenneth by sunset, but still—I dinna think we shall see a wedding tonight, Sassenach."

Rabbie led us onward and upward, tracing the maze of footpaths and trampled dead grass without hesitation. The sun had finally broken through the clouds; it had sunk deep in the notch of the mountains, but was still high enough to wash the slope with a warm, ruddy light that momentarily belied the chill of the day. People were gathering to their family fires now, hungry for their suppers, and no one spared a glance for us among the bustle.

At last, Rabbie came to a stop, at the foot of a well-marked path that led up and to the right. I had crisscrossed the mountain's face several times during the week of the Gathering, but had never ventured up this high. Who was in custody of Father Kenneth, I wondered—and what did Jamie propose to do about it?

"Up there," Rabbie said unnecessarily, pointing to the peak of a large tent, just visible through a screen of longleaf pine.

Jamie made a Scottish noise in the back of his throat at sight of the tent.

"Oh," he said softly, "so that's how it is?"

"Is it? Never mind how it is; *whose* is it?" I looked dubiously at the tent, which was a large affair of waxed brown canvas, pale in the gloaming. It obviously belonged to someone fairly wealthy, but wasn't one I was familiar with myself.

"Mr. Lillywhite, of Hillsborough," Jamie said, and his brows drew down in thought. He patted Rabbie Campbell on the head, and handed him a penny from his sporran. "Thank ye, laddie. Run away to your Mam now; it'll be time for your supper." Rabbie took the coin and vanished without comment, pleased to be finished with his errand.

"Oh, really." I cocked a wary eye at the tent. That explained a few things, I supposed—though not everything. Mr. Lillywhite was a magistrate from Hillsborough, though I knew nothing else about him, save what he looked like. I had glimpsed him once or twice during the Gathering, a tall, rather drooping man, his figure made distinctive by a bottle-green coat with silver buttons, but had never formally met him.

Magistrates were responsible for appointing sheriffs, which explained the connection with the "nasty fat man" Marsali had described, and why Father Kenneth was incarcerated here—but that left open the question of whether it was the sheriff or Mr. Lillywhite who had wanted the priest removed from circulation in the first place.

Jamie put a hand on my arm, and drew me off the path, into the shelter of a small pine tree.

"Ye dinna ken Mr. Lillywhite, do you, Sassenach?"

"Only by sight. What do you want me to do?"

He smiled at me, a hint of mischief in his eyes, despite his worry for Father Kenneth.

"Game for it, are ye?"

"Unless you're proposing that I bat Mr. Lillywhite over the head and liberate Father Kenneth by force, I suppose so. That sort of thing is much more your line of country than mine."

He laughed at that, and gave the tent what appeared to be a wistful look.

"I should like nothing better," he said, confirming this impression. "It wouldna be difficult in the least," he went on, eyeing the tan canvas sides of the tent appraisingly as they flexed in the wind. "Look at the size of it; there canna be more than two or three men in there, besides the priest. I could wait until the full dark, and then take a lad or two and—"

"Yes, but what do you want me to do now?" I interrupted, thinking I had best put a stop to what sounded a distinctly criminal train of thought.

"Ah." He abandoned his machinations—for the moment—and squinted at me, appraising my appearance. I had taken off the bloodstained canvas apron I wore for surgery, had put up my hair neatly with pins, and was reasonably respectable in appearance, if a trifle mud-draggled round the hems.

"Ye dinna have any of your physician's kit about ye?" he asked, frowning dubiously. "A bottle of swill, a bittie knife?"

"Bottle of swill, indeed. No, I—oh, wait a moment. Yes, there are these; will they do?" Digging about in the pocket tied at my waist, I had come up with the small ivory box in which I kept my gold-tipped acupuncture needles.

Evidently satisfied, Jamie nodded, and pulled out the silver whisky flask from his sporran.

“Aye, they’ll do,” he said, handing me the flask. “Take this too, though, for looks. Go up to the tent, Sassenach, and tell whoever’s guarding the priest that he’s ailing.”

“The guard?”

“The priest,” he said, giving me a look of mild exasperation. “I daresay everyone will ken ye as a healer by now, and know ye on sight. Say that Father Kenneth has an illness that you’ve been treating, and he must have a dose of his medicine at once, lest he sicken and die on them. I dinna suppose they want that—and they’ll not be afraid of you.”

“I shouldn’t imagine they need be,” I agreed, a trifle caustically. “You don’t mean me to stab the sheriff through the heart with my needles, then?”

He grinned at the thought, but shook his head.

“Nay, I only want ye to learn why they’ve taken the priest and what they mean to do with him. If I were to go and demand answers myself, it might put them on guard.”

Meaning that he had not completely abandoned the notion of a later commando raid on Mr. Lillywhite’s stronghold, should the answers prove unsatisfactory. I glanced at the tent and took a deep breath, settling my shawl about my shoulders.

“All right,” I said. “And what are you intending to do while I’m about it?”

“I’m going to go and fetch the bairns,” he said, and with a quick squeeze of my hand for luck, he was off down the trail.

I was still wondering exactly what he meant by *that* cryptic statement—which “bairns”? Why?—as I came within sight of the open tent flap, but all speculation was driven from my mind by the appearance of a gentleman therein who met Marsali’s description of “a nasty, fat man” so exactly that I had no doubt of his identity. He was short and toadlike, with a receding hairline, a belly that strained the buttons of a food-stained linen vest, and small, beady eyes that watched me as though assessing my immediate prospects as a food item.

"Good day to you, ma'am," he said. He viewed me without enthusiasm, no doubt finding me less than toothsome, but inclined his head with formal respect.

"Good day," I replied cheerily, dropping him a brief curtsy. Never hurt to be polite—at least not to start with. "You'll be the sheriff, won't you? I'm afraid I haven't had the pleasure of a formal introduction. I'm Mrs. Fraser—Mrs. James Fraser, of Fraser's Ridge."

"David Anstruther, Sheriff of Orange County—your servant, ma'am," he said, bowing again, though with no real evidence of delight. He didn't show any surprise at hearing Jamie's name, either. Either he simply wasn't familiar with it—rather unlikely—or he had been expecting such an ambassage.

That being so, I saw no point in beating round the bush.

"I understand that you're entertaining Father Donahue," I said pleasantly. "I've come to see him; I'm his physician."

Whatever he'd been expecting, it wasn't that; his jaw dropped slightly, exposing a severe case of malocclusion, well-advanced gingivitis, and a missing bicuspid. Before he could close it, a tall gentleman in a bottle-green coat stepped out of the tent behind him.

"Mrs. Fraser?" he said, one eyebrow raised. He bowed punctiliously. "You say you wish to speak with the clerical gentleman under arrest?"

"Under arrest?" I affected great surprise at that. "A priest? Why, whatever can he have done?"

The Sheriff and the magistrate exchanged glances. Then the magistrate coughed.

"Perhaps you are unaware, madam, that it is illegal for anyone other than the clergy of the established Church—the Church of England, that is—to undertake his office within the colony of North Carolina?"

I was not unaware of that, though I also knew that the law was seldom put into effect, there being relatively few of any kind of clergy in the colony to start with, and no one bothering to take any official notice of the itinerant preachers—many of them free lances in the most basic sense of the word—who did appear from time to time.

"Gracious!" I said, affecting shocked surprise to the best of my ability. "No, I had no idea. Goodness me! How very strange!" Mr. Lillywhite blinked slightly, which I took as an indication that that would just about do, in terms of my creating an impression of well-bred shock. I cleared my throat, and brought out the silver flask and case of needles.

"Well. I do hope any difficulties will be soon resolved. However, I should very much like to see Father Donahue for a moment. As I said, I am his physician. He has an … indisposition"—I slid back the cover of the case, and delicately displayed the needles, letting them imagine something suitably virulent—"that requires regular treatment. Might I see him for a moment, to administer his medicine? I … ah … should not like to see any mischief result from a lack of care on my part, you know." I smiled, as charmingly as possible.

The Sheriff pulled his neck down into the collar of his coat and looked malevolently amphibious, but Mr. Lillywhite seemed better affected by the smile. He hesitated, looking me over.

"Well, I am not sure that …" he began, when the sound of footsteps came squelching up the path behind me. I turned, half-expecting to see Jamie, but instead beheld my recent patient, Mr. Goodwin, one cheek still puffed from my attentions, but sling intact.

He was quite as surprised to see me, but greeted me with great cordiality, and a cloud of alcoholic fumes. Evidently Mr. Goodwin had been taking my advice regarding disinfection very seriously.

"Mrs. Fraser! You have not come to minister to my friend Lillywhite, I trust? I expect Mr. Anstruther would benefit from a good purge, though—clear the bilious humors, eh, David? Haha!" He clapped the Sheriff on the back in affectionate camaraderie; a gesture Anstruther suffered with no more than a small grimace, giving me some idea of Mr. Goodwin's importance in the social scheme of Orange County.

"George, my dear," Mr. Lillywhite greeted him warmly. "You are acquainted with this charming lady, then?"

“Oh, indeed, indeed I am, sir!” Mr. Goodwin turned a beaming countenance upon me. “Why, Mrs. Fraser did me great service this morning, great service indeed! See here!” He brandished his bound and splinted arm, which, I was pleased to see, was evidently giving him no pain whatever at the moment, though that probably had more to do with his self-administered anesthesia than with my workmanship.

“She quite cured my arm, with no more than a touch here, a touch there—and drew a broken tooth so clean that I scarce felt a thing! ’Ook!” He stuck a finger into the side of his mouth and pulled back his cheek, exposing a tuft of bloodstained wadding protruding from the tooth socket and a neat line of black stitching on the gum.

“Really, I am most impressed, Mrs. Fraser.” Lillywhite sniffed at the waft of cloves and whisky from Mr. Goodwin’s mouth, looking interested, and I saw the bulge of his cheek as his own tongue tenderly probed a back tooth.

“But what brings you up here, Mrs. Fraser?” Mr. Goodwin turned the beam of his joviality on me. “So late in the day—perhaps you will do me the honor of taking a bit of supper at my fire?”

“Oh, thank you, but I can’t, really,” I said, smiling as charmingly as possible. “I’ve just come to see another patient—that is—”

“She wants to see the priest,” Anstruther interrupted.

Goodwin blinked at that, taken only slightly aback.

“Priest. There is a priest here?”

“A Papist,” Mr. Lillywhite amplified, lips curling back a bit from the unclean word. “It came to my attention that there was a Catholic priest concealed in the assembly, who proposed to celebrate a Mass during the festivities this evening. I sent Mr. Anstruther to arrest him, of course.”

“Father Donahue is a friend of mine,” I put in, as forcefully as possible. “And he was not concealed; he was invited quite openly, as the guest of Mrs. Cameron. He is also a patient, and requires treatment. I’ve come to see that he gets it.”

“A friend of yours? Are you Catholic, Mrs. Fraser?” Mr. Goodwin looked startled; it obviously hadn’t occurred to him that he was being treated by a Popish dentist, and his hand went to his swollen cheek in bemusement.

"I am," I said, hoping that merely being a Catholic wasn't also against Mr. Lillywhite's conception of the law.

Evidently not. Mr. Goodwin gave Mr. Lillywhite a nudge.

"Oh, come, Randall. Let Mrs. Fraser see the fellow, what harm can it do? And if he's truly Jocasta Cameron's guest …"

Mr. Lillywhite pursed his lips in thought for a moment, then stood aside, holding back the flap of canvas for me.

"I suppose there can be no harm in your seeing your … friend," he said slowly. "Come in, then, madam."

Sundown was at hand, and the tent was dark inside, though one canvas wall still glowed brightly with the sinking sun behind it. I shut my eyes for a moment, to accustom them to the change of light, then blinked and looked about to get my bearings.

The tent seemed cluttered but relatively luxurious, being equipped with a camp bed and other furniture, the air within scented not only by damp canvas and wool but with the perfume of Ceylon tea, expensive wine, and almond biscuits.

Father Donahue was silhouetted in front of the glowing canvas, sitting on a stool behind a small folding table, on which were arrayed a few sheets of paper, an inkstand, and a quill. They might as well have been thumbscrews, pincers, and a red-hot poker, judging from his militantly upright attitude, evocative of expectant martyrdom.

The clinking of flint and tinderbox came from behind me, and then the faint glow of a light. This swelled, and a black boy—Mr. Lillywhite's servant, I supposed—came forward and silently set a small oil lamp on the table.

Now that I got a clear look at the priest, the impression of martyrdom grew more pronounced. He looked like Saint Stephen after the first volley of stones, with a bruise on his chin and a first-rate black eye, empurpled from browridge to cheekbone and swollen quite shut.

The nonblackened eye widened at sight of me, and he started up with an exclamation of surprise.

"Father Kenneth." I gripped him by the hand and squeezed, smiling broadly for the benefit of whatever audience might be peeking through the flap. "I've brought your medicine. How are you feeling?" I raised my eyebrows and waggled them, indicating that he should play along with the deception. He stared at me in fascination for a moment, but then appeared to catch on. He coughed, then, encouraged by my nod, coughed again, with more enthusiasm.

"It's … very kind of ye to … think of me, Mrs. Fraser," he wheezed, between hacks.

I pulled off the top of the flask, and poured out a generous measure of whisky.

"Are you quite all right, Father?" I asked, low-voiced, as I leaned across to hand it to him. "Your face …"

"Oh, it's nothing, Mrs. Fraser dear, not at all," he assured me, his faint Irish accent coming out under the stress of the occasion. " 'Twas only that I made the mistake of resistin' when the Sheriff arrested me. Not but what in the shock of it all, I didn't do a small bit of damage to the poor man's ballocks, and him only doing of his duty, may God forgive me." Father Kenneth rolled his undamaged eye upward in a pious expression—quite spoiled by the unregenerate grin underneath.

Father Kenneth was no more than middle height, and looked older than his years by virtue of the hard wear imposed by long seasons spent in the saddle. Still, he was no more than thirty-five, and lean and tough as whipcord under his worn black coat and frayed linen. I began to understand the Sheriff's belligerence.

"Besides," he added, touching his black eye gingerly, "Mr. Lillywhite did tender me a most gracious apology for the hurt." He nodded toward the table, and I saw that an opened bottle of wine and a pewter cup stood among the writing materials—the cup still full, and the level of wine in the bottle not down by much.

The priest picked up the whisky I had poured and drained it, closing his eyes in dreamy benediction.

"And a finer medicine I hope never to benefit from," he said, opening them. "I do thank ye, Mistress Fraser. I'm that restored, I might walk on water meself.” He remembered to cough, this one a delicate hack, fist held over his mouth.

“What’s wrong with the wine?” I asked, with a glance toward the door.

“Oh, not a thing,” he said, taking his hand away. “Only that I did not think it quite right to accept the magistrate’s refreshments, under the circumstances. Call it conscience.” He smiled at me again, but this time with a note of wryness in the grin.

“Why have they arrested you?” I asked, my voice low. I looked again at the tent’s door, but it was empty, and I caught the murmur of voices outside. Evidently, Jamie had been right; they weren’t suspicious of me.

“For sayin’ of the Holy Mass,” he replied, lowering his voice to match mine. “Or so they said. It’s a wicked lie, though. I’ve not said Mass since last Sunday, and that was in Virginia.” He was looking wistfully at the flask. I picked it up and poured another generous tot.

I frowned a bit, thinking, while he drank it, more slowly this time. Whatever were Mr. Lillywhite and company up to? They couldn’t, surely, be meaning to bring the priest to trial on the charge of saying Mass. It would be no great matter to find false witnesses to say he had, of course—but what would be the point of it?

While Catholicism was certainly not popular in North Carolina, I could see no great purpose in the arrest of a priest who would be leaving in the morning in any case. Father Kenneth came from Baltimore and meant to return there; he had come to the Gathering only as a favor to Jocasta Cameron.

“Oh!” I said, and Father Kenneth looked at me inquiringly over the rim of his cup.

“Just a thought,” I said, gesturing to him to continue. “Do you happen to know whether Mr. Lillywhite is personally acquainted with Mrs. Cameron?” Jocasta Cameron was a prominent and wealthy woman—and one of strong character, therefore not without enemies. I couldn’t see why Mr. Lillywhite would go out of his way to disoblige her in such a peculiar fashion, even so, but …

“I am acquainted with Mrs. Cameron,” said Mr. Lillywhite, speaking behind me. “Though alas, I can claim no intimate friendship with the lady.” I whirled to find him standing just within the tent’s entrance, followed by Sheriff Anstruther and Mr. Goodwin, with Jamie bringing up the rear. The latter flicked an eyebrow at me, but otherwise maintained an expression of solemn interest.

Mr. Lillywhite bowed to me in acknowledgment.

“I have just been explaining to your husband, madame, that it is my regard for Mrs. Cameron’s interests that led me to attempt to regularize Mr. Donahue’s position, so as to allow his continued presence in the colony.” Mr. Lillywhite nodded coldly at the priest. “However, I am afraid my suggestion was summarily rejected.”

Father Kenneth put down his cup and straightened up, his working eye bright in the lamplight.

“They wish me to sign an oath, sir,” he said to Jamie, with a gesture at the paper and quill on the table before him. “To the effect that I do not subscribe to a belief in transubstantiation.”

“Do they, indeed.” Jamie’s voice betrayed no more than polite interest, but I understood at once what the priest had meant by his remark regarding conscience.

“Well, he can’t do that, can he?” I said, looking round the circle of men. “Catholics—I mean—*we*”—I spoke with some emphasis, looking at Mr. Goodwin—“*do* believe in transubstantiation. Don’t we?” I asked, turning to the priest, who smiled slightly in response, and nodded.

Mr. Goodwin looked unhappy, but resigned, his alcoholic joviality substantially reduced by the social awkwardness.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Fraser, but that is the law. The only circumstance under which a clergyman who does not belong to the established Church may remain in the colony—legally—is upon the signing of such an oath. Many do sign it. You know the Reverend Urmstone, the Methodist circuit rider? He has signed the oath, as has Mr. Calvert, the New Light minister who lives near Wadesboro.”

The Sheriff looked smug. Repressing an urge to stamp on his foot, I turned to Mr. Lillywhite.

"Well, but Father Donahue can't sign it. So what do you propose to do with him? Throw the poor man in gaol? You can't do that—he's ill!" On cue, Father Kenneth coughed obligingly.

Mr. Lillywhite eyed me dubiously, but chose instead to address Jamie.

"I could by rights imprison the man, but out of regard for you, Mr. Fraser, and for your aunt, I shall not do so. He must, however, leave the colony tomorrow. I shall have him escorted into Virginia, where he will be released from custody. You may rest assured that all care will be taken to assure his welfare on the journey." He turned a cold gray eye on the Sheriff, who straightened up and tried to look reliable, with indifferent results.

"I see." Jamie spoke lightly, looking from one man to another, his eyes coming to rest on the Sheriff. "I trust that is true, sir—for if I should hear of any harm coming to the good Father, I should be … most distressed."

The Sheriff met his gaze, stone-faced, and held it until Mr. Lillywhite cleared his throat, frowning at the Sheriff.

"You have my word upon it, Mr. Fraser."

Jamie turned to him, bowing slightly.

"I could ask no more, sir. And yet if I may presume—might the Father not spend tonight in comfort among his friends, that they might take their leave of him? And that my wife might attend his injuries? I would stand surety for his safe delivery into your hand come morning."

Mr. Lillywhite pursed his lips and affected to consider this suggestion, but the magistrate was a poor actor. I realized with some interest that he had foreseen this request, and had his mind made up already to deny it.

"No, sir," he said, trying for a tone of reluctance. "I regret that I cannot grant your request. Though if the priest wishes to write letters to various of his acquaintance"—he gestured at the sheaf of papers—"I will undertake to see them promptly delivered."

Jamie cleared his own throat and drew himself up a bit.

"Well, then," he said. "I wonder whether I might make so bold as to ask …" He paused, seeming slightly embarrassed.

“Yes, sir?” Lillywhite looked at him curiously.

“I wonder whether the good Father might be allowed to hear my confession.” Jamie’s eyes were fixed on the tent pole, sedulously avoiding mine.

“Your confession?”

Lillywhite looked astonished at this, though the Sheriff made a noise that might charitably be called a snigger.

“Got something pressing on your conscience?” Anstruther asked rudely. “Or p’r’aps you have some premonition of impending death, eh?” He gave an evil smile at this, and Mr. Goodwin, looking shocked, rumbled a protest at him. Jamie ignored both of them, focusing his regard on Mr. Lillywhite.

“Yes, sir. It has been some time since I last had the opportunity of being shriven, ye see, and it may well be some time before such a chance occurs again. As it is—” At this point, he caught my eye, and made a slight but emphatic motion with his head toward the tent flap. “If ye will excuse us for a moment, gentlemen?”

Not waiting for a response, he seized me by the elbow and propelled me swiftly outside.

“Brianna and Marsali are up the path wi’ the weans,” he hissed in my ear, the moment we were clear of the tent. “Make sure Lillywhite and yon bastard of a sheriff are well away, then fetch them in.”

Leaving me standing on the path, astonished, he ducked back into the tent.

“Your pardon, gentlemen,” I heard him say. “I thought perhaps … there are some things a man shouldna quite like to be saying before his wife … you understand?”

There were male murmurs of understanding, and I caught the word “confession” repeated in dubious tones by Mr. Lillywhite. Jamie lowered his voice to a confidential rumble in response, interrupted by a rather loud, “You *what*?” from the Sheriff, and a peremptory shushing by Mr. Goodwin.

There was a bit of confused conversation, then a shuffle of movement, and I barely made it off the path and into the shelter of the pines before the tent flap lifted and the three Protestants emerged from the tent. The day had all but faded now, leaving burning embers of sunlit cloud in the sky, but close as they were, there was enough light for me to see the air of vague embarrassment that beset them.

They moved a few steps down the path, stopping no more than a few feet from my own hiding place. They stood in a cluster to confer, looking back at the tent, from which I could now hear Father Kenneth's voice, raised in a formal Latin blessing. The lamp in the tent went out, and the forms of Jamie and the priest, dim shadows on the canvas, disappeared into a confessional darkness.

Anstruther's bulk sidled closer to Mr. Goodwin.

"What in fuck's name is transubstantiation?" he muttered.

I saw Mr. Goodwin's shoulders straighten as he drew himself up, then hunch toward his ears in a shrug.

"In all honesty, sir, I am not positive of the meaning of the term," he said, rather primly, "though I perceive it to be some form of pernicious Papist doctrine. Perhaps Mr. Lillywhite could supply you with a more complete definition—Randall?"

"Indeed," the magistrate said. "It is the notion that by the priest's speaking particular words in the course of offering his Mass, bread and wine are transformed into the very substance of Our Savior's body and blood."

"What?" Anstruther sounded confused. "How can anyone do that?"

"Change bread and wine into flesh and blood?" Mr. Goodwin sounded quite taken aback. "But that is witchcraft, surely!"

"Well, it would be, if it happened," Mr. Lillywhite said, sounding a bit more human. "The Church very rightly holds that it does not."

"Are we sure of that?" Anstruther sounded suspicious. "Have you seen them do it?"

"Have I attended a Catholic Mass? Assuredly not!" Lillywhite's tall form drew up, austere in the gathering dusk. "What do you take me for, sir!"

"Now, Randall, I am sure the Sheriff means no offense." Goodwin put a placatory hand on his friend's arm. "His office deals with more earthly matters, after all."

"No, no, no offense meant, sir, none at all," Anstruther said hurriedly. "I was meaning more, like, has *anybody* seen this kind of goings-on, so as to be a decent witness, for the prosecution of it, I mean."

Mr. Lillywhite appeared still to be somewhat offended; his voice was cold in reply.

"It is scarcely necessary to have witnesses to the heresy, Sheriff, as the priests themselves willingly admit to it."

"No, no. Of course not." The Sheriff's squat form seemed to flatten obsequiously. "But if I'm right, sir, Papists do … er … *partake* of this—this transubwhatnot, aye?"

"Yes, so I am told."

"Well, then. That's frigging cannibalism, isn't it?" Anstruther's bulk popped up again, enthused. "I know *that's* against the law! Why not let this bugger do his bit of hocus-pocus, and we'll arrest the whole boiling lot of 'em, eh? Get shut of any number of the bastards at one blow, I daresay."

Mr. Goodwin emitted a low moan. He appeared to be massaging his face, no doubt to ease a recurrent ache from his tooth.

Mr. Lillywhite exhaled strongly through his nose.

"No," he said evenly. "I am afraid not, Sheriff. My instructions are that the priest is not to be allowed to perform any ceremonial, and shall be prevented from receiving visitors."

"Oh, aye? And what's he doing now, then?" Anstruther demanded, gesturing toward the darkened tent, where Jamie's voice had begun to speak, hesitant and barely audible. I thought perhaps he was speaking in Latin.

"That is quite different," Lillywhite said testily. "Mr. Fraser is a gentleman. And the prohibition against visitors is to insure that the priest shall perform no secret marriages; hardly a concern at present."

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned." Jamie's voice spoke in English, suddenly louder, and Mr. Lillywhite started. Father Kenneth murmured interrogatively.

"I have been guilty of the sins of lust and impurity, both in thought and in my flesh," Jamie announced—with what I thought rather more volume than was quite discreet.

"Oh, to be sure," said Father Kenneth, suddenly louder too. He sounded interested. "Now, these sins of impurity—what form, precisely, did they take, my son, and upon how many occasions?"

"Aye, well. I've looked upon women with lust, to be starting with. How many occasions—oh, make it a hundred, at least, it's been a time since I was last to confession. Did ye need to know which women, Father, or only what it was I thought of doing to them?"

Mr. Lillywhite stiffened markedly.

"I think we'll not have time for the lot, Jamie dear," said the priest. "But if ye were to tell me about one or two of these occasions, just so as I could be formin' a notion as to the … er … severity of the offense …?"

"Och, aye. Well, the worst was likely the time wi' the butter churn."

"Butter churn? Ah … the sort with the handle pokin' up?" Father Kenneth's tone encompassed a sad compassion for the lewd possibilities suggested by this.

"Oh, no, Father; it was a barrel churn. The sort that lies on its side, aye, with a wee handle to turn it? Well, it's only that she was workin' the churn with great vigor, and the laces of her bodice undone, so that her breasts wobbled to and fro, and the cloth clinging to her with the sweat of her work. Now, the churn was just the right height—and curved, aye?—so as make me think of bendin' her across it and lifting her skirts, and—"

My mouth opened involuntarily in shock. That was my bodice he was describing, my breasts, and my butter churn! To say nothing of my skirts. I remembered that particular occasion quite vividly, and if it had started with an impure thought, it certainly hadn't stopped there.

A rustling and murmuring drew my attention back to the men on the path. Mr. Lillywhite had grasped the Sheriff—still leaning avidly toward the tent, ears flapping—by the arm and was hissing at him as he forced him hastily down the path. Mr. Goodwin followed, though with an air of reluctance.

The noise of their departure had unfortunately drowned out the rest of Jamie's description of that particular occasion of sin, but had luckily also covered the leaf-rustling and twig-snapping behind me that announced the appearance of Brianna and Marsali, Jemmy and Joan swaddled in their arms and Germain clinging monkeylike to his mother's back.

"I thought they'd never go," Brianna whispered, peering over my shoulder toward the spot where Mr. Lillywhite and his companions had disappeared. "Is the coast clear?"

"Yes, come along." I reached for Germain, who leaned willingly into my arms.

"Ou nous allees, Grand-mère?" he inquired in a sleepy voice, blond head nuzzling affectionately into my neck.

"Shh. To see *Grand-père* and Father Kenneth," I whispered to him. "We have to be very quiet, though."

"Oh. Like this?" he hissed, in a loud whisper, and began to sing a very vulgar French song, chanting half under his breath.

"Shh!" I clapped a hand across his mouth, moist and sticky with whatever he'd been eating. "Don't sing, sweetheart, we don't want to wake the babies."

I heard a small, stifled noise from Marsali, a strangled snort from Bree, and realized that Jamie was still confessing. He appeared to have hit his stride, and was now inventing freely—or at least I hoped so. He certainly hadn't been doing any of that with *me.*

I poked my head out, looking up and down the trail, but no one was near. I motioned to the girls, and we scuttled across the path and into the darkened tent.

Jamie stopped abruptly as we fumbled our way inside. Then I heard him say quickly, "And sins of anger, pride, and jealousy—oh, and the odd wee bit of lying as well, Father. Amen." He dropped to his knees, raced through an Act of Contrition in French, and was on his feet and taking Germain from me before Father Kenneth had finished saying the *"Ego te absolvo."*

My eyes were becoming adapted to the dark; I could make out the voluminous shapes of the girls, and Jamie's tall outline. He stood

Germain on the table before the priest, saying, "Quickly, then, Father; we havena much time."

"We haven't any water, either," the priest observed. "Unless you ladies thought to bring any?" He had picked up the flint and tinderbox, and was attempting to relight the lamp.

Bree and Marsali exchanged appalled glances, then shook their heads in unison.

"Dinna fash, Father." Jamie spoke soothingly, and I saw him reach out a hand for something on the table. There was the brief squeak of a cork being drawn, and the hot, sweet smell of fine whisky filled the tent, as the light caught and grew from the wick, the wavering flame steadying to a small, clear light.

"Under the circumstances …" Jamie said, holding out the open flask to the priest.

Father Kenneth's lips pressed together, though I thought with suppressed amusement, rather than irritation.

"Under the circumstances, aye," he repeated. "And what should be more appropriate than the water of life, after all?" He reached up, undid his stock, and pulled up a leather string fastened round his neck, from which dangled a wooden cross and a small glass bottle, stoppered with a cork.

"The holy chrism," he explained, undoing the bottle and setting it on the table. "Thank the Virgin Mother that I had it on my person. The Sheriff took the box with my Mass things." He made a quick inventory of the objects on the table, counting them off on his fingers. "Fire, chrism, water—of a sort—and a child. Very well, then. You and your husband will stand as godparents to him, I suppose, ma'am?"

This was addressed to me, Jamie having gone to take up a station by the tent flap.

"For all of them, Father," I said, and took a firm grip on Germain, who seemed disposed to leap off the table. "Hold still, darling, just for a moment."

I heard a small *whish* behind me; metal drawn from oiled leather. I glanced back to see Jamie, dim in the shadows, standing guard by the door with his dirk in his hand. A qualm of apprehension curled through my belly, and I heard Bree draw in her breath beside me.

"Jamie, my son," said Father Kenneth, in a tone of mild reproval.

"Be going on with it, if ye please, Father," Jamie replied, very calmly. "I mean to have my grandchildren baptized this night, and no one shall prevent it."

The priest drew in his breath with a slight hiss, then shook his head.

"Aye. And if you kill someone, I hope there'll be time for me to shrive you again before they hang us both," he muttered, reaching for the oil. "If there's a choice about it, try for the Sheriff, will you, man dear?"

Switching abruptly to Latin, he pushed back Germain's heavy mop of blond hair and his thumb flicked deftly over forehead, lips, and then—diving under the boy's gown in a gesture that made Germain double up in giggles—heart, in the sign of the Cross.

"On-behalf-of-this-child-do-you-renounce-Satan-and-all-his-works?" he asked, speaking so fast that I scarcely realized he was speaking English again, and barely caught up in time to join with Jamie in the godparents' response, dutifully reciting, "I do renounce them."

I was on edge, keeping an ear out for any noises that might portend the return of Mr. Lillywhite and the Sheriff, envisioning just what sort of brouhaha might ensue if they did come back to discover Father Kenneth in the midst of what would surely be considered an illicit "ceremonial."

I glanced back at Jamie; he was looking at me, and gave me a faint smile that I thought was likely meant for reassurance. If so, it failed utterly; I knew him too well. He wanted his grandchildren baptized, and he would see their souls safely given into God's care, if he died for it—or if we all went to gaol, Brianna, Marsali, and the children included. Of such stuff are martyrs made, and their families are obliged to lump it.

"Do-you-believe-in-one-God-the-Father-the-Son-and-the-Holy-Ghost?"

"Stubborn man," I mouthed at Jamie. His smile widened, and I turned back, hastily chiming in with his firm, "I do believe." Was that a footfall on the path outside, or only the evening wind, making the tree branches crack as it passed?

The questions and responses finished, and the priest grinned at me, looking like a gargoyle in the flickering lamplight. His good eye closed briefly in a wink.

"We'll take it that your answers will be the same for the others, shall we, ma'am? And what will be this sweet lad's baptismal name?"

Not breaking his rhythm, the priest took up the whisky flask, and dribbled a careful stream of spirit onto the little boy's head, repeating, "I baptize thee, Germain Alexander Claudel MacKenzie Fraser, in the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Amen."

Germain watched this operation with profound interest, round blue eyes crossing as the amber liquid ran down the shallow bridge of his nose and dripped from its stubby tip. He put out a tongue to catch the drops, then made a face at the taste.

"Ick," he said clearly. "Horse piss."

Marsali made a brief, shocked "Tst!" at him, but the priest merely chuckled, swung Germain off the table, and beckoned to Bree.

She held Jemmy over the table, cradled in her arms like a sacrifice. She was intent on the baby's face, but I saw her head twitch slightly, her attention drawn by something outside. There *were* sounds on the path below; I could hear voices. A group of men, I thought, talking together, voices genial but not drunken.

I tensed, trying not to look at Jamie. If they came in, I decided, I had better grab Germain, scramble under the far edge of the tent, and run for it. I took a preparatory grip on the collar of his gown, just in case. Then I felt a gentle nudge as Bree shifted her weight against me.

"It's all right, Mama," she whispered. "It's Roger and Fergus." She nodded toward the dark, then returned her attention to Jemmy.

It was, I realized, and the skin of my temples prickled with relief. Now that I knew, I could make out the imperious, slightly nasal sound of Fergus's voice, raised in a lengthy oration of some kind, and a low Scottish rumble that I thought must be Roger's. A higher-pitched titter that I recognized as Mr. Goodwin's drifted through the night, followed by some remark in Mr. Lillywhite's aristocratic drawl.

I did glance at Jamie this time. He still held the dirk, but his hand had fallen to his side, and his shoulders had lost a little of their tension. He smiled at me again, and this time I returned it.

Jemmy was awake, but drowsy. He made no objection to the oil, but startled at the cold touch of the whisky on his forehead, eyes popping open and arms flinging wide. He uttered a high-pitched "Yeep!" of protest, then, as Bree gathered him hastily up into his blanket against her shoulder, screwed up his face and tried to decide whether he was sufficiently disturbed to cry about it.

Bree patted his back like a bongo drum and made little hooting noises in his ear, distracting him. He settled for plugging his mouth with a thumb and glowering suspiciously at the assemblage, but by that time, Father Kenneth was already pouring whisky on the sleeping Joan, held low in Marsali's arms.

"I baptize thee, Joan Laoghaire Claire Fraser," he said, following Marsali's lead, and I glanced at Marsali, startled. I knew she was called Joan for Marsali's younger sister, but I hadn't known what the baby's other names would be. I felt a small lump in my throat, watching Marsali's shawled head bent over the child. Both her sister and her mother, Laoghaire, were in Scotland; the chances of either ever seeing this tiny namesake were vanishingly small.

Suddenly, Joan's slanted eyes popped wide open and so did her mouth. She let out a piercing shriek, and everyone started as though a bomb had exploded in our midst.

"Go in peace, to serve the Lord! And go fast!" Father Kenneth said, his fingers already nimbly corking up bottle and flask, frantically whisking away all traces of the ceremony. Down the path, I could hear voices raised in puzzled question.

Marsali was out the tent flap in a flash, the squalling Joan against her breast, a protesting Germain clutched by the hand. Bree paused just long enough to put a hand behind Father Kenneth's head and kiss him on the forehead.

"Thank you, Father," she whispered, and was gone in a flurry of skirts and petticoats.

Jamie had me by the arm and was hustling me out of the tent as well, but stopped for a half-second at the door, turning back.

"Father?" he called in a whisper. *"Pax vobiscum!"*

Father Kenneth had already seated himself behind the table, hands folded, the accusing sheets of blank paper spread out once more before him. He looked up, smiling slightly, and his face was perfectly at peace in the lamplight, black eye and all.

"*Et cum spiritu tuo*, man," he said, and raised three fingers in parting benediction.

"What on earth did you do that for?" Brianna's whisper floated back to me, loud with annoyance. She and Marsali were only a few feet in front of us, going slowly because of the children, but close as they were, the girls' shawled and bunchy shapes were scarcely distinguishable from the bushes overgrowing the path.

"Do what? Leave that, Germain; let's find Papa, shall we? No, don't put it in your mouth!"

"You pinched Joanie—I saw you! You could have got us all caught!"

"But I had to!" Marsali sounded surprised at the accusation. "And it wouldna have mattered, really—the christening was done by then. They couldna make Father Kenneth take it back, now, could they?" She giggled slightly at the thought, then broke off. "Germain, I said drop it!"

"What do you mean, you had to? Let go, Jem, that's my hair! Ow! Let go, I said!"

Jemmy was evidently now wide awake, interested in the novel surroundings, and wanting to explore them, judging from his repeated exclamations of "Argl!" punctuated by the occasional curious "Gleb?"

"Why, she was asleep!" Marsali said, sounding scandalized. "She didna wake when Father Kenneth poured the water—I mean the whisky—on her head—Germain, come back here! *Thig air ais a seo!* —and ye ken it's ill luck for a child not to make a wee skelloch when it's baptized; that's how ye ken as the original sin is leaving it! I couldna let the *diabhol* stay in my wee lassie. Could I, *mo mhaorine*?" There were small kissing noises, and a faint coo from Joanie, promptly drowned by Germain, who had started to sing again.

Bree gave a small snort of amusement, her irritation fading.

"Oh, I see. Well, as long as you had a good reason. Though I'm not so sure it worked on Jemmy and Germain. Look at the way they're acting—I'd swear they were possessed. Ow! Don't bite me, you little fiend, I'll feed you in a minute!"

"Och, well, they're boys, after all," Marsali said tolerantly, raising her voice slightly to be heard above the racket. "Everyone kens that boys are full o' the devil; I suppose it would take more than a bit of holy water to drown it all, even if it *was* ninety-proof. Germain! *Where* did ye hear such a filthy song, ye wee ratten?"

I smiled, and next to me, Jamie laughed quietly, listening to the girls' conversation. We were far enough from the scene of the crime by now not to worry about being heard, among the snatches of song, fiddle music, and laughter that flickered through the trees with the light of the campfires, bright against the growing dark.

The business of the day was largely done, and folk were settling down to the evening meal, before the calling, the singing, and the last round of visits started. The scents of smoke and supper trailed tantalizing fingers through the cold, dark air, and my stomach rumbled gently in answer to their summons. I hoped Lizzie was sufficiently restored as to have begun cooking.

"What's *mo mhaorine*?" I asked Jamie. "I haven't heard that one before."

"It means 'my wee potato,' I think," he said. "It's Irish, aye? She learnt it from the priest."

He sighed, sounding deeply satisfied with the evening's work so far.

“May Bride bless Father Kenneth for a nimble-fingered man; for a moment, I thought we wouldna manage it. Is that Roger and wee Fergus?”

A couple of dark shadows had come out of the wood to join the girls, and the sound of muffled laughter and murmured voices—punctuated by raucous shrieks from both little boys at sight of their daddies—drifted back to us from the little knot of young families.

“It is. And speaking of that, my little sweet potato,” I said, taking a firm grip of his arm to slow him, “what do you mean by telling Father Kenneth all that about me and the butter churn?”

“Ye dinna mean to say ye minded, Sassenach?” he said, in tones of surprise.

“Of course I minded!” I said. The blood rose warm in my cheeks, though I wasn’t sure whether this was due to the memory of his confession—or to the memory of the original occasion. My innards warmed slightly at that thought as well, and the last remnants of cramp began to subside as my womb clenched and relaxed, eased by the pleasant inward glow. It was scarcely a suitable time or place, but perhaps later in the evening, we might manage sufficient privacy—I pushed the thought hastily aside.

“Privacy quite aside, it wasn’t a sin at all,” I said primly. “We’re married, for goodness’ sake!”

“Well, I did confess to telling lies, Sassenach,” he said. I couldn’t see the smile on his face, but I could hear it well enough in his voice. I supposed he could hear mine, too.

“I had to think of a sin frightful enough to drive Lillywhite away—and I couldna confess to theft or buggery; I may have to do business with the man one day.”

“Oh, so you think he’d be put off by sodomy, but he’d consider your attitude toward women in wet chemises just a minor flaw of character?” His arm was warm under the cloth of his shirt. I touched the underside of his wrist, that vulnerable place where the skin lay bare, and stroked the line of the vein that pulsed there, disappearing under the linen toward his heart.

“Keep your voice down, Sassenach,” he murmured, touching my hand. “Ye dinna want the bairns to hear ye. Besides,” he added, his voice dropping low enough that he was obliged to lean down and whisper in my ear, "it's not all women. Only the ones with lovely round arses." He let go my hand and patted my backside familiarly, showing remarkable accuracy in the darkness.

"I wouldna cross the road to see a scrawny woman, if she were stark naked and dripping wet. As for Lillywhite," he resumed, in a more normal tone of voice, but without removing his hand, which was molding the cloth of my skirt thoughtfully round one buttock, "he may be a Protestant, Sassenach, but he's still a man."

"I didn't realize the two states were incompatible," Roger's voice said dryly, coming out of the darkness nearby.

Jamie snatched his hand away as though my bottom were on fire. It wasn't—quite—but there was no denying that his flint had struck a spark or two among the kindling, damp as it was. It was a long time before bedtime, though.

Pausing just long enough to administer a brief, private squeeze to Jamie's anatomy that made him gasp sharply, I turned to find Roger clasping a large wriggling object in his arms, its nature obscured by the dark. Not a piglet, I surmised, despite the loud grunting noises it was making, but rather Jemmy, who seemed to be gnawing fiercely on his father's knuckles. A small pink fist shot out into a random patch of light, clenched in concentration, then disappeared, meeting Roger's ribs with a solid thump.

Jamie gave a small grunt of amusement himself, but wasn't discomposed in the slightest by having his opinion of Protestants overheard.

" 'All are gude lasses,' " he quoted in broad Scots, " 'but where do the ill wives come frae?' "

"Eh?" Roger said, sounding a bit bewildered.

"Protestants are *born* wi' pricks," Jamie explained, "the men, at least—but some let them wither from disuse. A man who spends his time pokin' his … nose into others' sinfulness has nay time to tend his own."

I converted a laugh into a more tactful cough.

"And some just become bigger pricks, what with the practice," Roger said, more dryly still. "Aye, well. I came to thank you … for managing about the baptism, I mean."

I noticed the slight hesitation; he still had not settled on any comfortable name by which to call Jamie to his face. Jamie addressed *him* impartially as "Wee Roger," "Roger Mac," or "MacKenzie"—more rarely, by the Gaelic nickname Ronnie Sinclair had given Roger, *a Smeòraich*, in honor of his voice. *Singing Thrush*, it meant.

"It's me should be thanking you, *a charaid*. We shouldna have managed there at the last, save for you and Fergus," Jamie said, laughter warming his own voice.

Roger was clearly visible in outline, tall and lean, with the glow of someone's fire behind him. One shoulder rose as he shrugged, and he shifted Jemmy to his other arm, wiping residual drool from his hand against the side of his breeches.

"No trouble," he said, a little gruffly. "Will the—the Father be all right, d'ye think? Brianna said he'd been roughly handled. I hope they'll not mistreat him, once he's away."

Jamie sobered at that. He shrugged a little as he straightened the coat on his shoulders.

"I think he'll be safe enough, aye—I had a word with the Sheriff." There was a certain grim emphasis on "word" that made his meaning clear. A substantial bribe might have been more effective, but I was well aware that we had exactly two shillings, threepence, and nine farthings in cash to our names at the moment. Better to save the money and rely on threats, I thought. Evidently Jamie was of the same mind.

"I shall speak to my aunt," he said, "and have her send a note tonight to Mr. Lillywhite, wi' her own opinion on the subject. That will be a better safeguard for Father Kenneth than anything I can say myself."

"I don't suppose she'll be at all pleased to hear that her wedding is postponed," I observed. She wouldn't be. Daughter of a Highland laird and widow of a very rich planter, Jocasta Cameron was used to having her own way.

"No, she won't," Jamie agreed wryly, "though I suppose Duncan may be a bit relieved."

Roger laughed, not without sympathy, and fell in beside us as we started down the path. He shifted Jemmy, still grunting ferociously, under his arm like a football.

"Aye, he will. Poor Duncan. So the weddings are definitely off, are they?"

I couldn't see Jamie's frown, but I felt the movement as he shook his head doubtfully.

"Aye, I'm afraid so. They wouldna give the priest to me, even with my word to hand him over in the morning. We could maybe take him by force, but even so—"

"I doubt that would help," I interrupted, and told them what I had overheard while waiting outside the tent.

"So I can't see them standing round and letting Father Kenneth perform marriages," I finished. "Even if you got him away, they'd be combing the mountain for him, turning out tents and causing riots."

Sheriff Anstruther wouldn't be without aid; Jamie and his aunt might be held in good esteem among the Scottish community, but Catholics in general and priests in particular weren't.

"Instructions?" Jamie repeated, sounding astonished. "You're sure of it, Sassenach? It was Lillywhite who said he had 'instructions'?"

"It was," I said, realizing for the first time how peculiar that was. The Sheriff was plainly taking instructions from Mr. Lillywhite, that being his duty. But who could be giving instructions to the magistrate?

"There's another magistrate here, and a couple of justices of the peace, but surely …" Roger said slowly, shaking his head as he thought. A loud squawk interrupted his thoughts, and he glanced down, the light from a nearby fire shining off the bridge of his nose, outlining a faint smile as he spoke to his offspring. "What? You're hungry, laddie? Don't fret yourself, Mummy will be back soon."

"Where *is* Mummy?" I said, peering into the shifting mass of shadows ahead. A light wind had risen, and the bare branches of oak and hickory rattled like sabers overhead. Still, Jemmy was more than loud enough for Brianna to hear him. I caught Marsali's voice faintly up ahead, engaged in what appeared to be amiable conversation with Germain and Fergus regarding supper, but there was no sound of Bree's lower, huskier Boston-bred tones.

"Why?" Jamie said to Roger, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

"Why what? Here, Jem, see that? Want it? Aye, of course ye do. Yes, good lad, gnaw on that for a bit." A spark of light caught something shiny in Roger's free hand; then the object disappeared, and Jemmy's cries ceased abruptly, succeeded by loud sucking and slurping noises.

"What is that? It isn't small enough for him to swallow, is it?" I asked anxiously.

"Ah, no. It's a watch chain. Not to worry," Roger assured me, "I've a good grip on the end of it. If he swallows it, I can pull it back out."

"Why would someone not want you to be married?" Jamie said patiently, ignoring the imminent danger to his grandson's digestive system.

"Me?" Roger sounded surprised. "I shouldn't think anyone cares whether I'm married or not, save myself—and you, perhaps," he added, a touch of humor in his voice. "I expect ye'd like the boy to have a name. Speaking of that"—he turned to me, the wind pulling long streamers of his hair loose and turning him into a wild black fiend in silhouette—"what *did* he end up being named? At the christening, I mean."

"Jeremiah Alexander Ian Fraser MacKenzie," I said, hoping I recalled it correctly. "Is that what you wanted?"

"Oh, I didn't mind so much what he was called," Roger said, edging gingerly round a large puddle that spread across the path. It had begun to sprinkle again; I could feel small chilly drops on my face, and see the dimpling of the water in the puddle where the firelight shone across it.

"I wanted Jeremiah, but I told Bree the other names were up to her. She couldn't quite decide between John for John Grey, and—and Ian, for her cousin, but of course they're the same name in any case."

Again I noticed the faint hesitation, and I felt Jamie's arm stiffen slightly under my hand. Jamie's nephew Ian was a sore point—and fresh in everyone's mind, thanks to the note we had received from him the day before. That must be what had decided Brianna at last.

"Well, if it isna you and my daughter," Jamie pursued doggedly, "then who is it? Jocasta and Duncan? Or the folk from Bremerton?"

"You think someone's out specially to prevent the marriages tonight?" Roger seized the opportunity to talk about something other than Ian Murray. "You don't think it's just general dislike of Romish practices, then?"

"It might be, but it's not. If it were, why wait 'til now to arrest the priest? Wait a bit, Sassenach, I'll fetch ye over."

Jamie let go of my hand and stepped round the puddle, then reached back, grabbed me by the waist, and lifted me bodily across in a swish of skirts. The wet leaves slipped and squelched under my boots as he set me down, but I seized his arm for balance, righting myself.

"No," Jamie continued the conversation, turning back toward Roger. "Lillywhite and Anstruther have no great love of Catholics, I expect, but why stir up a stramash now, when the priest would be gone in the morning, anyway? Do they maybe think he'll corrupt all the God-fearing folk on the mountain before dawn if they dinna keep him in ward?"

Roger gave a short laugh at that.

"No, I suppose not. Is there anything else the priest was meant to do tonight, beyond performing marriages and baptisms?"

"Perhaps a few confessions," I said, pinching Jamie's arm. "Nothing else that I know of." I squeezed my thighs together, feeling an alarming shift in my intimate arrangements. Damn, one of the pins holding the cloth between my legs had come loose when Jamie lifted me. Had I lost it?

"I don't suppose they'd be trying to keep him from hearing someone's confession? Someone in particular, I mean?" Roger sounded doubtful, but Jamie took the idea and turned it round in his hands, considering.

"They'd no objection to his hearing mine. And I shouldna think they'd care if a Catholic was in mortal sin or not, as by their lights, we're all damned anyway. But if they kent someone desperately needed confession, and they thought there was something to be gained by it …"

"That whoever it was might pay for access to the priest?" I asked skeptically. "Really, Jamie, these are Scots. I should imagine that if it were a question of paying out hard money for a priest, your Scottish Catholic murderer or adulterer would just say an Act of Contrition and hope for the best."

Jamie snorted slightly, and I saw the white mist of his breath purl round his head like candle smoke; it was getting colder.

"I daresay," he said dryly. "And if Lillywhite had any thought of setting up in the confession business, he's left it a bit late in the day to make much profit. But what if it wasna a matter of stopping someone's confession—but rather only of making sure that they overheard it?"

Roger uttered a pleased grunt, evidently thinking this a promising supposition.

"Blackmail? Aye, that's a thought," he said, with approval. Blood will out, I thought; Oxford-educated or not, there was little doubt that Roger was a Scot. There was a violent upheavel under his arm, followed by a wail from Jemmy. Roger glanced down.

"Oh, did ye drop your bawbee? Where's it gone, then?" He hoicked Jemmy up onto his shoulder like a bundle of laundry and squatted down, poking at the ground in search of the watch chain, which Jemmy had evidently hurled into the darkness.

"Blackmail? I think that's a trifle far-fetched," I objected, rubbing a hand under my nose, which had begun to drip. "You mean they might suspect that Farquard Campbell, for instance, had committed some dreadful crime, and if they knew about it for sure, they could hold him up about it? Isn't that awfully devious thinking? If you find a pin down there, Roger, it's mine."

"Well, Lillywhite and Anstruther are Englishmen, are they not?" Jamie said, with a delicate sarcasm that made Roger laugh. "Deviousness and double-dealing come naturally to that race, no, Sassenach?"

"Oh, rubbish," I said tolerantly. "Pot calling the kettle black isn't in it. Besides, they didn't try to overhear *your* confession."

"I havena got anything to be blackmailed for," Jamie pointed out, though it was perfectly obvious that he was only arguing for the fun of it.

"Even so," I began, but was interrupted by Jemmy, who was becoming increasingly restive, flinging himself to and fro with intermittent steam-whistle shrieks. Roger grunted, pinched something gingerly between his fingers, and stood up.

"Found your pin," he said. "No sign of the chain, though."

"Someone will find it in the morning," I said, raising my voice to be heard over the increasing racket. "Perhaps you'd better let me take him." I reached for the baby, and Roger surrendered his burden with a distinct air of relief—explained when I got a whiff of Jemmy's diaper.

"Not *again*?" I said. Apparently taking this as a personal reproach, he shut his eyes and started to howl like an air-raid siren.

"Where *is* Bree?" I asked, trying simultaneously to cradle him reassuringly and to keep him at a sanitary distance. "Ouch!" He seemed to have taken advantage of the darkness to grow a number of extra limbs, all of which were flailing or grabbing.

"Oh, she's just gone to run a wee errand," Roger said, with an air of vagueness that made Jamie turn his head sharply. The light caught him in profile, and I saw the thick red brows drawn down in suspicion. Fire gleamed off the long, straight bridge of his nose as he lifted it, questioning. Obviously, he smelled a rat. He turned toward me, one eyebrow lifted. Was I in on it?

"I haven't any idea," I assured him. "Here, I'm going across to McAllister's fire to borrow a clean clout. I'll see you at our camp in a bit."

Not waiting for an answer, I took a firm grasp on the baby and shuffled into the bushes, heading for the nearest campsite. Georgiana McAllister had newborn twins—I'd delivered them four days before—and was happy to provide me with both a clean diaper and a private bush behind which to effect my personal repairs. These accomplished, I chatted with her and admired the twins, all the while wondering about the recent revelations. Between Lieutenant Hayes and his proclamation, the machinations of

Lillywhite and company, and whatever Bree and Roger were up to, the mountain seemed a perfect hotbed of conspiracy tonight.

I was pleased that we had managed the christening—in fact, I was surprised to find just how gratified I did feel about it—but I had to admit to a pang of distress over Brianna's canceled wedding. She hadn't said much about it, but I knew that both she and Roger had been looking forward very much to the blessing of their union. The firelight winked briefly, accusingly, off the gold ring on my left hand, and I mentally threw up my hands in Frank's direction.

And just what do you expect me to do about it? I demanded silently, while externally agreeing with Georgiana's opinion on the treatment of pinworms.

"Ma'am?" One of the older McAllister girls, who had volunteered to change Jemmy, interrupted the conversation, dangling a long, slimy object delicately between two fingers. "I found this gaud in the wean's cloot; is it maybe your man's?"

"Good grief!" I was shocked by the watch chain's reappearance, but a moment's rationality corrected my first alarmed impression that Jemmy had in fact swallowed the thing. It would take several hours for a solid object to make its way through even the most active infant's digestive tract; evidently he had merely dropped his toy down the front of his gown and it had come to rest in his diaper.

"Gie it here, lass." Mr. McAllister, catching sight of the watch chain, reached out and took it with a slight grimace. He pulled a large handkerchief from the waist of his breeks and wiped the object carefully, bringing to light the gleam of silver links and a small round fob, bearing some kind of seal.

I noted the fob with some grimness, and made a mental resolve to give Roger a proper bollocking about what he let Jemmy put in his mouth. Thank goodness it hadn't come off.

"Why, that's Mr. Caldwell's wee gaud, surely!" Georgiana leaned forward, peering over the heads of the twins she was nursing.

"Is it?" Her husband squinted at the object, and fumbled in his shirt for his spectacles.

"Aye, I'm sure it is! I saw it when he preached Sunday. The first of my pains was just comin' on," she explained, turning to me, "and I had to come away before he'd finished. He saw me turn to go, and must ha' thought he'd outstayed his welcome, for he pulled the watch from his pocket to have a wee keek, and I saw the glint from that bittie round thing on the chain."

"That's called a seal, *a nighean*," her husband informed her, having now settled a pair of half-moon spectacles firmly atop his nose, and turning the little metal emblem over between his fingers. "You're right, though, it's Mr. Caldwell's, for see?" A horny finger traced the outline of the figure on the seal: a mace, an open book, a bell, and a tree, standing on top of a fish with a ring in its mouth.

"That's from the University of Glasgow, that is. Mr. Caldwell's a scholar," he told me, blue eyes wide with awe. "Been to learn the preachin', and a fine job he makes of it.

"You did miss a fine finish, Georgie," he added, turning to his wife. "He went sae red in the face, talkin' of the Abomination of Desolation and the wrath at world's end, that I thought surely he'd have an apoplexy, and then what should we do? For he wouldna have Murray MacLeod to him, Murray bein' in the way of a heretic to Mr. Caldwell—he's New Light, Murray"—Mr. McAllister explained in an aside to me—"and Mrs. Fraser here a Papist, as well as bein' otherwise engaged wi' you and the bairns."

He leaned over and patted one of the twins gently on its bonneted head, but it paid no attention, blissfully absorbed in its suckling.

"Hmp. Well, Mr. Caldwell could ha' burst himself, for all I cared at the time," his wife said frankly. She hitched up her double armload and settled herself more comfortably. "And for mysel', I shouldna much mind if the midwife was a red Indian or English—oh, I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Fraser—so long as she kent how to catch a babe and stop the bleedin'."

I murmured something modest, brushing away Georgiana's apologies, in favor of finding out more about the watch chain's origins.

"Mr. Caldwell. He's a preacher, you say?" A certain suspicion was stirring in the back of my mind.

"Oh, aye, the best I've heard," Mr. McAllister assured me. "And I've heard 'em all. Now, Mr. Urmstone, he's a grand one for the sins, but he's on in years, and gone a bit hoarse now, so as ye need to be right up front to hear him—and that's a bit dangerous, ye ken, as it's the folk in front whose sins he's likely to start in upon. The New Light fella, though, he's nay much; no voice to him."

He dismissed the unfortunate preacher with the scorn of a connoisseur.

"Mr. Woodmason's all right; a bit stiff in his manner—an Englishman, aye?—but verra faithful about turning up for services, for all he's well stricken in years. Now, young Mr. Campbell from the Barbecue Church—"

"This wean's fair starved, ma'am," the girl holding Jemmy put in. Evidently so; he was red in the face and keening. "Will I give him a bit o' parritch, maybe?"

I gave a quick glance at the pot over the fire; it was bubbling, so likely well-cooked enough to kill most germs. I pulled out the horn spoon I carried in my pocket, which I could be sure was reasonably clean, and handed it to the girl.

"Thank you so much. Now, this Mr. Caldwell—he wouldn't by chance be a Presbyterian, would he?"

Mr. McAllister looked surprised, then beamed at my perceptivity.

"Why, so he is, indeed! Ye'll have heard of him, then, Mrs. Fraser?"

"I think perhaps my son-in-law is acquainted with him," I said, with a tinge of irony.

Georgiana laughed.

"I should say your grandson kens him, at least." She nodded at the chain, draped across her husband's broad palm. "Bairns that size are just like magpies; they'll seize upon any shiny bawbee they see."

"So they do," I said slowly, staring at the silver links and their dangling fob. That put something of a different complexion on the matter. If Jemmy had picked Mr. Caldwell's pocket, it had obviously been done sometime before Jamie had arranged the impromptu christening.

But Bree and Roger had known about Father Kenneth's arrest and the possible cancelation of their wedding well before that; there would have been plenty of time for them to make other plans while

Jamie and I were dealing with Rosamund, Ronnie, and the other assorted crises. Plenty of time for Roger to go and talk to Mr. Caldwell, the Presbyterian minister—with Jemmy along for the ride.

And as soon as Roger had confirmed the unlikelihood of the priest's performing any marriages tonight, Brianna had disappeared on a vague "errand." Well, if Father Kenneth had wanted to interview a Presbyterian groom before marrying him, I supposed Mr. Caldwell might be allowed the same privilege with a prospective Papist bride.

Jemmy was devouring porridge with the single-mindedness of a starving piranha; we couldn't leave quite yet. That was just as well, I thought; let Brianna break the news to her father that she would have her wedding after all—priest or no priest.

I spread out my skirt to dry the damp hem, and the firelight glowed from both my rings. A strong disposition to laugh bubbled up inside me, at the thought of what Jamie would say when he found out, but I suppressed it, not wanting to explain my amusement to the McAllisters.

"Shall I take that?" I said instead to Mr. McAllister, with a nod toward the watch chain. "I think perhaps I shall be seeing Mr. Caldwell a little later."

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HAPPY THE BRIDE THE MOON SHINES ON

We were lucky. the rain held off, and shredding clouds revealed a silver moon, rising lopsided but luminous over the slope of Black Mountain; suitable illumination for an intimate family wedding.

I had met David Caldwell, though I hadn't recalled it until I saw him; a small but immensely personable gentleman, very tidy in his dress, despite camping in the open for a week. Jamie knew him, too, and respected him. That didn't prevent a certain tightness of expression as the minister came into the firelight, his worn prayer book clasped in his hands, but I nudged Jamie warningly, and he at once altered his expression to one of inscrutability.

I saw Roger glance once in our direction, then turn back to Bree. There might have been a slight smile at the corner of his mouth, or it could have been only the effect of the shadows. Jamie exhaled strongly through his nose, and I nudged him again.

"You had your way over the baptism," I whispered. He lifted his chin slightly. Brianna glanced in our direction, looking slightly anxious.

"I havena said a word, have I?"

"It's a perfectly respectable Christian marriage."

"Did I say it was not?"

"Then look *happy*, damn you!" I hissed. He exhaled once more, and assumed an expression of benevolence one degree short of outright imbecility.

"Better?" he asked, teeth clenched in a genial smile. I saw Duncan Innes turn casually toward us, start, and turn hastily away, murmuring something to Jocasta, who stood near the fire, white hair shining, and a blindfold over her damaged eyes to shield them from the light. Ulysses, standing behind her, had in fact put on his wig in honor of the ceremony; it was all I could see of him in the darkness, hanging apparently disembodied in the air above her shoulder. As I watched, it turned sideways, toward us, and I caught the faint shine of eyes beneath it.

"Who that, *Grand-mère*?"

Germain, escaped as usual from parental custody, popped up near my feet, pointing curiously at the Reverend Caldwell.

"That's a minister, darling. Auntie Bree and Uncle Roger are getting married."

"*Ou qu'on va* minster?"

I drew a deep breath, but Jamie beat me to it.

"It's a sort of priest, but not a proper priest."

"Bad priest?" Germain viewed the Reverend Caldwell with substantially more interest.

"No, no," I said. "He's not a bad priest at all. It's only that … well, you see, we're Catholics, and Catholics have priests, but Uncle Roger is a Presbyterian—"

"That's a heretic," Jamie put in helpfully.

"It is *not* a heretic, darling, *Grand-père* is being funny—or thinks he is. Presbyterians are …"

Germain was paying no attention to my explanation, but instead had tilted his head back, viewing Jamie with fascination.

"Why *Grand-père* is making faces?"

"We're verra happy," Jamie explained, expression still fixed in a rictus of amiability.

"Oh." Germain at once stretched his own extraordinarily mobile face into a crude facsimile of the same expression—a jack-o'-lantern grin, teeth clenched and eyes popping. "Like this?"

"Yes, darling," I said, in a marked tone. "*Just* like that."

Marsali looked at us, blinked, and tugged at Fergus's sleeve. He turned, squinting at us.

"Look happy, Papa!" Germain pointed to his gigantic smile. "See?"

Fergus's mouth twitched, as he glanced from his offspring to Jamie. His face went blank for a moment, then adjusted itself into an enormous smile of white-toothed insincerity. Marsali kicked him in the ankle. He winced, but the smile didn't waver.

Brianna and Roger were having a last-minute conference with Reverend Caldwell, on the other side of the fire. Brianna turned from this, brushing back her loose hair, saw the phalanx of grinning faces, and stared, her mouth slightly open. Her eyes went to me; I shrugged helplessly.

Her lips pressed tight together, but curved upward irrepressibly. Her shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. I felt Jamie quiver next to me.

Reverend Caldwell stepped forward, a finger in his book at the proper place, put his spectacles on his nose, and smiled genially at the assemblage, blinking only slightly when he encountered the row of leering countenances.

He coughed, and opened his Book of Common Worship.

"Dearly beloved, we are assembled here in the presence of God …"

I felt Jamie relax slightly, as the words went on, evidencing unfamiliarity, perhaps, but no great peculiarities. I supposed that he had in fact never taken part in a Protestant ceremony before—unless one counted the impromptu baptism Roger himself had conducted among the Mohawk. I closed my eyes and sent a brief prayer upward for Young Ian, as I did whenever I thought of him.

"Let us therefore reverently remember that God has established and sanctified marriage, for the welfare and happiness of mankind …"

Opening them, I saw that all eyes now were focused on Roger and Brianna, who stood facing each other, hands entwined. They were a handsome pair, nearly of a height, she bright and he dark, like a photograph and its negative. Their faces were nothing alike, and yet both had the bold bones and clean curves that were their joint legacy from the clan MacKenzie.

I glanced across the fire to see the same echo of bone and flesh in Jocasta, tall and handsome, her blind face turned in absorption toward the sound of the minister's voice. As I watched, I saw her hand reach out and rest on Duncan's arm, the long white fingers gently squeeze. The Reverend Caldwell had kindly offered to perform their marriage as well, but Jocasta had refused, wishing to wait instead for a Catholic ceremony.

"We are in no great hurry, after all, are we, my dear?" she had asked Duncan, turning toward him with an outward exhibition of deference that fooled no one. Still, I thought that Duncan had seemed relieved, rather than disappointed, by the postponement of his own wedding.

"By His apostles, He has instructed those who enter into this relation to cherish a mutual esteem and love …"

Duncan had put a hand over Jocasta's, with a surprising air of tenderness. That marriage would not be one of love, I thought, but mutual esteem—yes, I thought there was that.

"I charge you both, before the great God, the Searcher of all hearts, that if either of you know any reason why ye may not lawfully be joined together in marriage, ye do now confess it. For be ye well assured that if any persons are joined together otherwise than as God's Word allows, their union is not blessed by Him."

Reverend Caldwell paused, glancing warningly back and forth between Roger and Brianna. Roger shook his head slightly, his eyes fixed on Bree's face. She smiled faintly in response, and the Reverend cleared his throat and continued.

The air of muted hilarity around the fire had subsided; there was no sound but the Reverend's quiet voice and the crackle of the flames.

"Roger Jeremiah, wilt thou have this Woman to be thy wife, and wilt thou pledge thy troth to her, in all love and honor, in all duty and service, in all faith and tenderness, to live with her, and cherish her, according to the ordinance of God, in the holy bond of marriage?"

"I will," Roger said, his voice deep and husky.

I heard a deep sigh to my right, and saw Marsali lean her head on Fergus's shoulder, a dreamy look on her face. He turned his head and kissed her brow, then leaned his own dark head against the whiteness of her kerch.

“I will,” Brianna said clearly, lifting her chin and looking up into Roger’s face, in response to the minister’s question.

Mr. Caldwell looked benevolently round the circle, firelight glinting on his spectacles.

“Who giveth this Woman to be married to this Man?”

There was the briefest of pauses, and I felt Jamie jerk slightly, taken by surprise. I squeezed his arm, and saw the firelight gleam on the gold ring on my hand.

“Oh. I do, to be sure!” he said. Brianna turned her head and smiled at him, her eyes dark with love. He gave her back the smile, then blinked, clearing his throat, and squeezed my hand hard.

I felt a slight tightening of the throat myself, as they spoke their vows, remembering both of my own weddings. And Jocasta? I wondered. She had been married three times; what echoes of the past did she hear in these words?

“I, Roger Jeremiah, take thee, Brianna Ellen, to be my wedded wife …”

The light of memory shone on most of the faces around the fire. The Bugs stood close together, looking at each other with identical gazes of soft devotion. Mr. Wemyss, standing by his daughter, bowed his head and closed his eyes, a look of mingled joy and sadness on his face, no doubt thinking of his own wife, dead these many years.

“In plenty and in want …”

“In joy and in sorrow …”

“In sickness and in health …”

Lizzie’s face was rapt, eyes wide at the mystery being carried out before her. How soon might it be her turn, to stand before witnesses and make such awesome promises?

Jamie reached across and took my right hand in his, his fingers linking with mine, and the silver of my ring shone red in the glow of the flames. I looked up into his face and saw the promise spoken in his eyes, as it was in mine.

“As long as we both shall live.”

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15

THE FLAMES OF DECLARATION

The great fire below was blazing, damp wood snapping with cracks that rang like pistol shots against the mountainside—a distant gunfire, though, and little noticed through the noise of merrymaking.

While she had elected not to be married by the Reverend Caldwell, Jocasta had nonetheless generously provided a lavish wedding feast in honor of Roger and Brianna's nuptials. Wine, ale, and whisky flowed like water under the aegis of Ulysses, whose white wig bobbed through the mob round our family campfire, ubiquitous as a moth round a candle flame.

Despite the chill damp and the clouds that had regathered overhead, at least half the Gathering was here, dancing to the music of fiddle and mouth organ, descending locustlike on the groaning tables of delicacies, and drinking the health of the newlyweds—and the eventually-to-be-wed—with so much enthusiasm that if all such wishes were to take effect, Roger, Bree, Jocasta, and Duncan would each live to be a thousand, at least.

I thought I might be good for a hundred years or so, myself. I was feeling no pain; nothing but an encompassing sense of giddy well-being, and a pleasant sense of impending dissolution.

At one side of the fire, Roger was playing a borrowed guitar, serenading Bree before a rapt circle of listeners. Closer, Jamie sat on a log with Duncan and his aunt, talking with friends.

"Madam?" Ulysses materialized at my elbow, tray in hand and resplendent in livery, behaving as though he were in the parlor at

River Run, rather than on a soggy mountainside.

"Thank you." I accepted a pewter cup full of something, and discovered it to be brandy. Fairly good brandy, too. I took a small sip and let it percolate through my sinuses. Before I could absorb much more of it, though, I became conscious of a sudden lull in the surrounding gaiety.

Jamie glanced around the circle, gathering eyes, then stood and held out his arm to me. I was a little surprised, but hastily replaced the cup on Ulysses's tray, smoothed back my hair, tucked in my kerchief, and went to take my place at his side.

"Thig a seo, a bhean uasa," he said, smiling at me. Come, lady. He turned and raised his chin, summoning the others. Roger put down his guitar at once, covering it carefully with a canvas, then held out a hand to Bree.

"Thig a seo, a bhean," he said, grinning. With a look of surprise, she got to her feet, Jemmy in her arms.

Jamie stood still, waiting, and little by little, the others rose, brushing away pine needles and sand from hems and seats, laughing and murmuring in puzzlement. The dancers, too, paused in their whirling, and came to see what was to do, the fiddle music dying away in the rustle of curiosity.

Jamie led me down the dark trail toward the leaping flames of the great bonfire below, the others following in a murmur of speculation. At the end of the main clearing he stopped and waited. Dark figures flitted through the shadows; a man's shape stood in silhouette before the fire, arm raised.

"The Menzies are here!" the man called, and flung the branch that he carried into the fire. Faint cheers went up, from those of his clan and sept within hearing.

Another took his place—MacBean—and another—Ogilvie. Then it was our turn.

Jamie walked forward alone, into the light of the leaping flames. The fire was built of oak and pinewood, and it burned higher than a tall man, tongues of transparent yellow so pure and ardent as almost to burn white against the blackened sky. The light of it shone on his upturned face, on his head and shoulders, and threw a long shadow that stretched halfway across the open ground behind him.

"We are gathered here to welcome old friends," he said in Gaelic. "And meet new ones—in hopes that they may join us in forging a new life in this new country."

His voice was deep and carrying; the last scraps of conversation ceased as the folk pushing and crowding around the fire hushed and craned to listen.

"We have all suffered much hardship on the road here." He turned slowly, looking from face to face around the fire. Many of the men of Ardsmuir were here: I saw the Lindsay brothers, homely as a trio of toads; Ronnie Sinclair's fox-eyed face, ginger hair slicked up in horns; the Roman-coin features of Robin McGillivray. All looked out from the shadows, ridge of brow and bridge of nose shining in the glow, each face crossed by fire.

Under the influence of brandy and emotion, I could easily see too the ranks of ghosts who stood behind them; the families and friends who remained still in Scotland, whether on the earth … or under it.

Jamie's own face was lined with shadow, the firelight showing the mark of time and struggle on his flesh as wind and rain mark stone.

"Many of us died in battle," he said, his voice scarcely audible above the rustle of the fire. "Many died of burning. Many of us starved. Many died at sea, many died of wounds and illness." He paused. "Many died of sorrow."

His eyes looked beyond the firelit circle for a moment, and I thought perhaps he was searching for the face of Abel MacLennan. He lifted his cup then, and held it high in salute for a moment.

"Slàinte!" murmured a dozen voices, rising like the wind.

"Slàinte!" he echoed them—then tipped the cup, so that a little of the brandy fell into the flames, where it hissed and burned blue for an instant's time.

He lowered the cup, and paused for a moment, head bent. He lifted his head then, and raised the cup toward Archie Hayes, who stood across the fire from him, round face unreadable, fire sparking from his silver gorget and his father's brooch.

"While we mourn the loss of those who died, we must also pay tribute to you who fought and suffered with equal valor—and survived."

"Slàinte!" came the salute, louder this time with the rumble of male voices.

Jamie closed his eyes for an instant, then opened them, looking toward Brianna, who stood with Lizzie and Marsali, Jemmy in her arms. The rawness and strength of his features stood out by contrast with the round-faced innocence of the children, the gentleness of the young mothers—though even in their delicacy, I thought, the firelight showed the seams of Scottish granite in their bones.

"We pay tribute to our women," he said, lifting the cup in turn to Brianna, to Marsali, and then, turning, to me. A brief smile touched his lips. "For they are our strength. And our revenge upon our enemies will be at the last the revenge of the cradle. *Slàinte!*"

Amid the shouts of the crowd, he drained the wooden cup, and threw it into the fire, where it lay dark and round for a moment, then burst all at once into brilliant flame.

"Thig a seo!" he called, putting out his right hand to me. *"Thig a seo, a Shorcha, nighean Eanruig, neart mo chridhe." Come to me,* he said. *Come to me, Claire, daughter of Henry, strength of my heart.* Scarcely feeling my feet or those I stumbled over, I made my way to him, and clasped his hand, his grip cold but strong on my fingers.

I saw him turn his head; was he looking for Bree? But no—he stretched out his other hand toward Roger.

"Seas ri mo làmh, Roger an t'òranaiche, mac Jeremiah MacChoinneich!" Stand by my hand, Roger the singer, son of Jeremiah MacKenzie. Roger stood stock-still for a moment, eyes dark on Jamie, then moved toward him, like one sleepwalking. The crowd was still excited, but the shouting had died down, and people craned to hear what was said.

"Stand by me in battle," he said in Gaelic, his eyes fixed on Roger, left hand extended. He spoke slowly and clearly, to be sure of understanding. "Be a shield for my family—and for yours, son of my house."

Roger’s expression seemed suddenly to dissolve, like a face seen in water when a stone is tossed into it. Then it solidified once more, and he clasped Jamie’s hand, squeezing hard.

Jamie turned to the crowd then, and began the calling. This was something I had seen him do before, many years before, in Scotland. A formal invitation and identification of tenants by a laird, it was a small ceremony often done on a quarter-day or after the harvest. Faces lighted here and there with recognition; many of the Highland Scots knew the custom, though they would not have seen it in this land before tonight.

“Come to me, Geordie Chisholm, son of Walter, son of Connaught the Red!”

“Stand with me, *a Choinneich*, Evan, Murdo, you sons of Alexander Lindsay of the Glen!”

“Come to my side, Joseph Wemyss, son of Donald, son of Robert!” I smiled to see Mr. Wemyss, flustered but terribly pleased at this public inclusion, make his way toward us, head proudly raised, fair hair flying wild in the wind of the great fire.

“Stand by me, Josiah the hunter!”

Was Josiah Beardsley here? Yes, he was; a slight, dark form slid out of the shadows, to take up a shy place in the group near Jamie. I caught his eye and smiled at him; he looked hastily away, but a small, embarrassed smile clung to his lips, as though he had forgotten it was there.

It was an impressive group by the time he had finished—nearly forty men, gathered shoulder-close and flushed as much with pride as with whisky. I saw Roger exchange a long look with Brianna, who was beaming across the fire at him. She bent her head to whisper something to Jemmy, who was submerged in his blankets, half-asleep in her arms. She picked up one of his wee paws and waved it limply toward Roger, who laughed.

“… Air mo mhionnan …” Distracted, I had missed Jamie’s final statement, catching only the last few words. Whatever he had said met with approval, though; there was a low rumble of solemn assent from the men around us, and a moment’s silence.

Then he let go my hand, stooped, and picked up a branch from the ground. Lighting this, he held it aloft, then threw the blazing brand high into the air. It tumbled end over end as it fell straight down, into the heart of the fire.

"The Frasers of the Ridge are here!" he bellowed, and the clearing erupted in a massive cheer.

As we made our way back up the slope to resume the interrupted festivities, I found myself next to Roger, who was humming something cheerful under his breath. I put a hand on his sleeve, and he looked down at me, smiling.

"Congratulations," I said, smiling back. "Welcome to the family—son of the house."

He grinned enormously.

"Thanks," he said. "Mum."

We came to a level spot, and walked side by side for a moment, not speaking. Then he said, in a quite different tone, "That was … something quite special, wasn't it?"

I didn't know whether he meant historically special, or special in personal terms. In either case, he was right, and I nodded.

"I didn't catch all of the last bit, though," I said. "And I don't know what *earbsachd* means—do you?"

"Oh … aye. I know." It was quite dark here between the fires; I could see no more of him than a darker smudge against the black of shrub and tree. There was an odd note in his voice, though. He cleared his throat.

"It's an oath—of a sort. He—Jamie—he swore an oath to us, to his family and tenants. Support, protection, that kind of thing."

"Oh, yes?" I said, mildly puzzled. "What do you mean, 'of a sort'?"

"Ah, well." He was silent for a moment, evidently marshaling his words. "It means a word of honor, rather than just an oath," he said carefully. "*Earbsachd*"—he pronounced it YARB-sochk—"was once said to be the distinguishing characteristic of the MacCrimmons of Skye, and meant basically that their word once given must unfailingly be acted upon at no matter what cost. If a MacCrimmon said he would do something"—he paused and drew breath—"he would do it, though he should burn to death in the doing."

His hand came up under my elbow, surprisingly firm.

"Here," he said quietly. "Let me help; it's slippery underfoot."

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16

ON THE NIGHT THAT OUR WEDDING IS ON US

"Will you sing for me, Roger?"

She stood in the opening of the borrowed tent, facing outward. From the back, he could see no more than her silhouette against the gray of the clouded sky, her long hair drifting in the rainy wind. She had worn it unbound to be married—maiden's hair, though she had a child.

It was cold tonight, quite different from that first night together, that hot, gorgeous night that had ended in anger and betrayal. Months of other nights lay between that one and this—months of loneliness, months of joy. And yet his heart beat as fast now as it had on their first wedding night.

"I always sing for you, hen." He came behind her, drew her back against him, so that her head rested on his shoulder, her hair cool and live against his face. His arm curled round her waist, holding her secure. He bent his head, nuzzling for the curve of her ear.

"No matter what," he whispered, "no matter where. No matter whether you're there to hear or not—I'll always sing for you."

She turned into his arms then, with a small hum of content in her throat, and her mouth found his, tasting of barbecued meat and spiced wine.

The rain pattered on the canvas above, and the cold of late autumn curled up from the ground around their feet. The first time, the air had smelled of hops and mudflats; their bower had had the earthy tang of hay and donkeys. Now the air was live with pine and juniper, spiced with the smoke of smoldering fires—and the faint, sweet note of baby shit.

And yet she was once more dark and light in his arms, her face hidden, her body gleaming. Then she had been moist and molten, humid with the summer. Now her flesh was cool as marble, save where he touched it—and yet the summer lived still in the palm of his hand where he touched her, sweet and slick, ripe with the secrets of a hot, dark night. It was right, he thought, that these vows should have been spoken as the first ones had, out of doors, part of wind and earth, fire and water.

"I love you," she murmured against his mouth, and he seized her lip between his teeth, too moved to speak the words in reply just yet.

There had been words between them then, as there had been words tonight. The words were the same, and he had meant them the first time no less than he did now. Yet it *was* different.

The first time he had spoken them to her alone, and while he had done so in the sight of God, God had been discreet, hovering well in the background, face turned away from their nakedness.

Tonight he said them in the blaze of firelight, before the face of God and the world, her people and his. His heart had been hers, and whatever else he had—but now there was no question of him and her, his and hers. The vows were given, his ring put on her finger, the bond both made and witnessed. They were one body.

One hand of their joint organism crushed a breast a little too hard, and one throat made a small sound of discomfort. She drew back from him a little, and he felt rather than saw her grimace. The air came cold between them and his own skin felt suddenly raw, exposed, as though he had been severed from her with a knife.

"I need—"she said, and touched her breast, not finishing. "Just a minute, okay?"

Claire had fed the child while Brianna went to make her overtures to Reverend Caldwell. Bursting with porridge and stewed peaches, Jemmy could scarcely be roused to suckle briefly before relapsing into somnolence and being taken away by Lizzie, his wee round belly tight as a drum. That was as well for their privacy—drugged into such a gluttonous stupor, it was unlikely the bairn would wake before dawn. The price of it, though, was the unused milk.

No one living in the same house with a nursing mother was likely to be unaware of her breasts, let alone her husband. They had a life of their own, those breasts. They changed size from hour to hour, for the one thing, swelling from their normal soft globes into great round hard bubbles that gave him the eerie feeling that if he touched one it would burst.

Now and then, one *did* burst, or at least gave that impression. The ridge of soft flesh would rise like kneaded bread, slowly but surely pushing above the edge of Brianna's bodice. Then suddenly there would be a big, wet circle on the cloth, appearing magically, as though some invisible person had thrown a snowball at her. Or two snowballs—for what one breast did, its fellow rushed at once to follow suit.

Sometimes the Heavenly Twins were foiled, though; Jemmy drained one side, but inconsiderately fell asleep before performing the same service for the other. This left his mother gritting her teeth, gingerly taking the swollen orb in the palm of her hand, pressing the edge of a pewter cup just under the nipple to catch the spray and dribble as she eased the aching fullness, enough to sleep herself.

She was doing it now; modestly turned away from him, an arisaid gathered round her shoulders against the chill. He could hear the hiss of the milk, a tiny chime against the metal.

He was reluctant to drown the sound, which he found erotic, but nonetheless picked up the guitar, and put his thumb to the strings, his hand on the frets. He didn't strum or strike chords, but plucked single notes, small voices to echo his own, the thrum of one string ringing through the chanted line.

A love song, to be sure. One of the very old ones, in the Gaelic. Even if she didn't know all the words, he thought she'd take the sense of it.

"On the night that our wedding is on us,
I will come leaping to thee with gifts,

On the night that our wedding is on us …"

He closed his eyes, seeing in memory what the night now hid. Her nipples were the color of ripe plums and the size of ripe cherries, and Roger had a vivid mental picture of how one would feel in his mouth. He had suckled them once, long before—before the coming of Jemmy—but no more.

"You will get a hundred silver salmon …
A hundred badger skins …"

She never asked him not to, never turned away—and yet he could tell by the faint intake of her breath that, often, she was bracing herself not to flinch when he touched her breasts.

Was it only tenderness? he wondered. Did she not trust him to be gentle?

He shied away from the thought, drowning it in a small cascade of notes, liquid as a waterfall.

It might not be you, whispered the voice, stubbornly refusing to be distracted. *Perhaps it was* him*—something that he did to her.*

Fuck. Off, he thought succinctly to the voice, marking each word with a sharp-plucked string. Stephen Bonnet would have no place in their wedding bed. None.

He laid a hand on the strings to silence them briefly, and as she slid the arisaid from her shoulders, began again, this time in English. A special song, too—one for the two of them alone. He didn't know whether anyone else might hear, but it made no difference if they did. She stood and slid the shift from her shoulders as his fingers touched the quiet opening of the Beatles' "Yesterday."

He heard her laugh, once, then sigh, and the linen whispered against her skin as it fell.

She came naked behind him as the soft melancholy yearning of the song filled the dark. Her hand stroked his hair, gathered it tight at the nape of his neck. She swayed, and he felt her press against his back, her breasts soft now, yielding and warm through his shirt, her breath tickling his ear. Her hand rested on his shoulder briefly, then slid down inside his shirt, fingers cool on his chest. He could feel the warm hard metal of her ring on his skin, and felt a surge of possession that pulsed through him like a gulp of whisky, a heat suffusing his flesh.

He ached to turn and take hold of her, but pushed the urge down, heightening anticipation. He bent his head closer to the strings, and sang until all thought left him and there was nothing left but his body and hers. He could not have said when her hand closed over his on the frets, and he rose and turned to her, still filled with the music and his love, soft and strong and pure in the dark.

She lay quiet in the dark, feeling the thunder of her heart boom slowly in her ears. The throb of it echoed in the pulse of her neck, her wrists, her breasts, her womb. She had lost track of her boundaries; slowly the sense of limbs and digits, head and trunk, of space occupied, returned. She moved the single finger glued between her legs, and felt the last of the tingling shocks run down her thighs as it slid free.

She drew breath slowly, listening.

His breath still came in long, regular exhalations; thank God, he hadn't wakened. She had been careful, moving no more than a fingertip, but the final jolt of climax had struck her so hard that her hips jerked as her belly quivered and convulsed, her heels digging into the pallet with a loud rustling of straw.

He'd had a very long day—they all had. Even so, she could still hear faint sounds of festivity on the mountainside around them. The chance to celebrate like this came so rarely that no one would let something so inconsequential as rain, cold, or tiredness keep them from the revels.

She herself felt like a puddle of liquid mercury; soft and heavy, shimmering with each heartbeat. The effort of moving was unthinkable; but her final convulsion had pulled the quilt off his shoulders, and the skin of his back lay smooth and bare, dark by contrast with the pale cloth. The pocket of warmth around her was snug and perfect, but she couldn’t luxuriate while he lay exposed to the chilly midnight air like that. Tendrils of fog had crept under the tent flap and hung ghostlike and clammy all around them; she could see the faint gleam of moisture on the high curve of his cheekbone.

She summoned back the notion of bones and muscles, found a motor neuron in working order, and sternly ordered it to fire. Embodied once more, she rolled onto her side, facing him, and gently pulled the quilt up around his ears. He stirred and murmured something; she stroked his tumbled black hair and he smiled faintly, eyelids half-opening in the blank stare of one who sees dreams. They dropped again and he took a long, sighing breath and fell back asleep.

“I love you,” she whispered, filled with tenderness.

She stroked his back lightly, loving the feel of his flat shoulder blades through the quilt, the solid knob of bone at the nape of his neck, and the long, smooth groove that ran down the center of his spine to arch into the swell of his buttocks. A cold breeze rippled the tiny hairs of her arm, and she pulled it back under the covers, letting her hand rest lightly on Roger’s bottom.

The feel of it was no novelty, but thrilled her just the same, with its perfect warm roundness, its coarse curly hair. A faint echo of her solitary joy encouraged her to do it again, and her free hand crept between her legs, but sheer exhaustion stayed her, limp fingers cupped on the swollen flesh, one languid finger tracing the slickness.

She’d hoped it would be different tonight. Without the ever-present danger of waking Jemmy, free to take as much time as they wanted, and riding the waves of emotion from their exchange of vows, she’d thought … but it was the same.

It wasn’t that she wasn’t aroused; quite the contrary. Every movement, each touch, imprinted itself in the nerves of her skin, the crevices of mouth and memory, drowning her with scent, branding her with sensation. But no matter how wonderful the lovemaking, there remained some odd sense of distance, some barrier that she couldn’t penetrate.

And so once more she found herself lying beside him as he slept, reliving in memory each moment of the passion they had just shared—and able in memory at last to yield to it.

Perhaps it was that she loved him too much, she thought, was too mindful of his pleasure to take her own. The satisfaction she felt when he lost himself, gasping and moaning in her arms, was far greater than the simple physical pleasure of climax. And yet, there was something darker under that; a peculiar sense of triumph, as though she had won some undeclared and unacknowledged contest between them.

She sighed and butted her forehead against the curve of his shoulder, enjoying the reek of him—a smell of strong and bitter musk, like pennyroyal.

The thought of herbs reminded her, and she reached down again, cautiously so as not to waken him, and slid one slippery finger deep inside to check. No, it was all right; the slip of sponge soaked with tansy oil was still in place, its fragile, pungent presence safeguarding the entrance to her womb.

She moved closer, and he moved unconsciously, his body half-turning to accommodate her, his warmth at once enclosing her, comforting her. His hand groped like a bird flying blind, skimming her hip, her soft belly, in search of a resting place. She seized it in both hands and folded it, secure beneath her chin. His hand curled over hers; she kissed one large, rough knuckle and he sighed deeply, his hand relaxing.

The sounds of revelry on the mountain had faded, as the dancers tired, and the musicians grew hoarse and weary. The rain began again, pattering on the canvas overhead, and gray mist touched her face with cool damp fingers. The smell of wet canvas made her think of camping trips as a child with her father, with their mingled sensations of excitement and safety, and she nestled deeper into the curve of Roger's body, feeling a similar sense of comfort and anticipation.

It was early days, she thought. They had all their lives before them. The time of surrender would surely come.

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17

WATCHFIRE

From where they lay, he could see down through a gap in the rocks, all the way to the watch fire that burned before Hayes's tent. The great fire of the Gathering had burned itself to embers, the glow of it faint memory of the towering flames of declaration, but the smaller fire burned steady as a star against the cold night. Now and then a dark, kilted figure rose to tend it, stood stark for a moment against the brightness, then faded back again into the night.

He was faintly conscious of the racing clouds that dimmed the moon, the heavy flutter of the canvas overhead, and the rock-black shadows of the mountain slope, but he had no eyes for anything save the fire below, and the white patch of the tent behind it, shapeless as a ghost.

He had slowed his breath, relaxed the muscles of arms and chest, back, buttocks, legs. Not in an attempt to sleep; sleep was far from him, and he had no mind to seek it.

Nor was it an attempt to fool Claire into thinking he slept. So close against his body, so close to his mind as she was, she would know him wakeful. No, it was only a signal to her; an acknowledged pretense that freed her from any need to pay heed to him. She might sleep, knowing him occupied within the walnut shell of his mind, having no immediate demand to make of her.

Few slept on the mountain tonight, he thought. The sound of the wind masked the murmur of voices, the shuffle of movement, but his hunter's senses registered a dozen small stirrings, identifying things half-heard, putting names to moving shadows. A scrape of shoe leather on rock, the flap of a blanket shaken out. That would be Hobson and Fowles, making a quiet departure alone in the dark, fearful of waiting for the morning, lest they be betrayed in the night.

A few notes of music came down on a gust of wind from above; concertina and fiddle. Jocasta's slaves, unwilling to surrender this rare celebration to the needs of sleep or the imperatives of weather.

An infant's thin wail. Wee Jemmy? No, from behind. Tiny Joan, then, and Marsali's voice, low and sweet, singing in French.

"… Alouette, gentil Alouette …"

There, a sound he had expected; footsteps passing on the far side of the rocks that bordered his family's sanctuary. Quick and light, headed downhill. He waited, eyes open, and in a few moments heard the faint hail of a sentry near the tent. No figure showed in the firelight below, but the tent flap beyond it stirred, gaped open, then fell unbroken.

As he had thought, then; sentiment lay strong against the rioters. It was not held a betrayal of friends, but rather the necessary giving up of criminals for the protection of those who chose to live by law. It might be reluctant—the witnesses had waited for the dark—but not secretive.

"… j'ante plumerai la tête …"

It occurred to him to wonder why the songs sung to bairns were so often gruesome, and no thought given to the words they took in with their mothers' milk. The music of the songs was no more to him than tuneless chanting—perhaps that was why he paid more mind than most to the words.

Even Brianna, who came from what was presumably a more peaceable time, sang songs of fearsome death and tragic loss to wee Jem, all with a look on her face as tender as the Virgin nursing the Christ Child. That verse about the miner's daughter who drowned amidst her ducklings …

It occurred to him perversely to wonder what awful things the Blessed Mother might have counted in her own repertoire of cradle songs; judging from the Bible, the Holy Land had been no more peaceful than France or Scotland.

He would have crossed himself in penance for the notion, but Claire was lying on his right arm.

“Were they wrong?” Claire’s voice came softly from beneath his chin, startling him.

“Who?” He bent his head to hers, and kissed the thick softness of her curls. Her hair smelt of woodsmoke and the sharp, clear tang of juniper berries.

“The men in Hillsborough.”

“Aye, I think so.”

“What would you have done?”

He sighed, moved one shoulder in a shrug.

“Can I say? Aye, if it was me that was cheated, and no hope of redress, I might have laid hands on the man who’d done it. But what was done there—ye heard it. Houses torn down and set afire, men dragged out and beaten senseless only for cause of the office they held … no, Sassenach. I canna say what I might have done—but not that.”

She turned her head a little, so he saw the high curve of her cheekbone, rimmed in light, and the flexing of the muscle that ran in front of her ear as she smiled.

“I didn’t think you would. Can’t see you as part of a mob.”

He kissed her ear, not to reply directly. *He* could see himself as part of a mob, all too easily. That was what frightened him. He knew much too well the strength of it.

One Highlander was a warrior, but the mightiest man was only a man. It was the madness that took men together that had ruled the glens for a thousand years; that thrill of the blood, when you heard the shrieks of your companions, felt the strength of the whole bear you up like wings, and knew immortality—for if you should fall of yourself, still you would be carried on, your spirit shrieking in the mouths of those who ran beside you. It was only later, when the blood lay cold in limp veins, and deaf ears heard the women weeping …

“And if it wasn’t a man who cheated you? If it was the Crown, or the Court? No one person, I mean, but an institution.”

He knew where she meant to lead him. He tightened his arm around her, her breath warm on the knuckles of his hand, curled just under her chin.

“It isna that. Not here. Not now.” The rioters had lashed out in response to the crimes of men, of individuals; the price of those crimes might be paid in blood, but not requited by war—not yet.

“It isn’t,” she said quietly. “But it will be.”

“Not now,” he said again.

The piece of paper was safely hidden in his saddlebag, its damnable summons concealed. He must deal with it, and soon, but for tonight he would pretend it wasn’t there. One final night of peace, with his wife in his arms, his family around him.

Another shadow by the fire. Another hail by the sentry, one more to pass through the traitor’s gate.

“And are *they* wrong?” A slight tilt of her head toward the tent below. “The ones going to turn in their acquaintances?”

“Aye,” he said, after a moment. “They’re wrong as well.”

A mob might rule, but it was single men would pay the price for what was done. Part of the price was the breaking of trust, the turning of neighbor against neighbor, fear a noose squeezing tight until there was no longer any breath of mercy or forgiveness.

It had come on to rain; the light spatter of drops on the canvas overhead turned to a regular thrum, and the air grew live with the rush of water. It was a winter storm; no lightning lit the sky, and the looming mountains were invisible.

He held Claire close, curving his free hand low over her belly. She sighed, a small sound of pain in it, and settled herself, her arse nesting round as an egg in the cup of his thighs. He could feel the melting begin as she relaxed, that odd merging of his flesh with hers.

At first it had happened only when he took her, and only at the last. Then sooner and sooner, until her hand upon him was both invitation and completion, a surrender inevitable, offered and accepted. He had resisted now and then, only to be sure he could, suddenly fearful of the loss of himself. He had thought it a treacherous passion, like the one that swept a mob of men, linking them in mindless fury.

Now he trusted it was right, though. The Bible did say it, *Thou shalt be one flesh,* and *What God has joined together, let no man put asunder.*

He had survived such a sundering once; he could not stand it twice, and live. The sentries had put up a canvas lean-to near their fire to shelter them from the rain. The flames sputtered as the rain blew in, though, and lit the pale cloth with a flicker that pulsed like a heartbeat. He was not afraid to die with her, by fire or any other way—only to live without her.

The wind changed, carrying with it the faint sound of laughter from the tiny tent where the newlyweds slept—or didn't. He smiled to himself, hearing it. He could only hope that his daughter would find such joy in her marriage as he had—but so far, so good. The lad's face lit when he looked at her.

"What will you do?" Claire said quietly, her words almost lost in the pattering of the rain.

"What I must."

It was no answer, but the only one.

There was no world outside this small confine, he told himself. Scotland was gone, the Colonies were going—what lay ahead he could only dimly imagine from the things Brianna told him. The only reality was the woman held fast in his arms; his children and grandchildren, his tenants and servants—these were the gifts that God had given to him; his to harbor, his to protect.

The mountainside lay dark and quiet, but he could feel them there all round him, trusting him to see them safe. If God had given him this trust, surely He would also grant the strength to keep it.

He was becoming aroused by the habit of close contact, his rising cock uncomfortably trapped. He wanted her, had been wanting for days, the urge pushed aside in the bustle of the Gathering. The dull ache in his balls echoed what he thought must be the ache in her womb.

He had taken her in the midst of her courses now and then, when the two of them had wanted too urgently for waiting. He had found it messy and disturbing, but exciting too, leaving him with a faint sense of shame that was not entirely unpleasant. Now was not the time or place for it, of course, but the memory of other times and other places made him shift, twisting away from her, not to trouble her with the bodily evidence of his thoughts.

Yet what he felt now was not lust—not quite. Nor was it even the need of her, the wanting of soul's company. He wished to cover her with his body, possess her—for if he could do that, he could pretend to himself that she was safe. Covering her so, joined in one body, he might protect her. Or so he felt, even knowing how senseless the feeling was.

He had stiffened, his body tensing involuntarily with his thoughts. Claire stirred, and reached back with one hand. She laid it on his leg, let it lie for a moment, then reached gently farther up, in drowsy question.

He bent his head, put his lips behind her ear. Said what he was thinking, without thought.

"Nothing will harm ye while there is breath in my body, *a nighean donn*. Nothing."

"I know," she said. Her limbs went slowly slack, her breathing eased, and the soft round of her belly swelled under his palm as she melted into sleep. Her hand stayed on him, covering him. He lay stiff and wide awake, long after the watch fire had been quenched by the rain.

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PART TWO

The Chieftain’s Call

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18

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Gideon darted out his head like a snake, aiming for the leg of the rider just ahead.

"Seas!" Jamie wrenched the big bay's head around before he could take a bite. "Evil-minded whoreson," he muttered under his breath. Geordie Chisholm, unaware of his narrow escape from Gideon's teeth, caught the remark, and looked back over his shoulder, startled. Jamie smiled and touched his slouch hat apologetically, nudging the horse past Chisholm's long-legged mule.

Jamie kicked Gideon ungently in the ribs, urging him past the rest of the slow-moving travelers at a speed fast enough to keep the brute from biting, kicking, trampling stray bairns, or otherwise causing trouble. After a week's journey, he was all too well acquainted with the stallion's proclivities. He passed Brianna and Marsali, halfway up the column, at a slow trot; by the time he passed Claire and Roger, riding at the head, he was moving too fast to do more than flourish his hat at them in salute.

"A mhic an dhiobhail," he said, clapping the hat back on and leaning low over the horse's neck. "Ye're a deal too lively for your own good, let alone mine. See how long ye last in the rough, eh?"

He pulled hard left, off the trail, and down the slope, trampling dry grass and brushing leafless dogwood out of the way with a gunshot snapping of twigs. What the seven-sided son of a bitch needed was flat country, where Jamie could gallop the bejesus out of him and bring him back blowing. Given that there wasn't a flat spot in twenty miles, he'd have to do the next best thing.

He gathered up the reins, clicked his tongue, jabbed both heels into the horse's ribs, and they charged up the shrubby hillside as though they had been fired from a cannon.

Gideon was large-boned, well-nourished, and sound of wind, which was why Jamie had bought him. He was also a hard-mouthed, bad-tempered reester of a horse, which was why he hadn't cost much. More than Jamie could easily afford, even so.

As they sailed over a small creek, jumped a fallen log, and hared up an almost vertical hillside littered with scrub oak and persimmon, Jamie found himself wondering whether he'd got a bargain or committed suicide. That was the last coherent thought he had before Gideon veered sideways, crushing Jamie's leg against a tree, then gathered his hindquarters and charged down the other side of the hill into a thicket of brush, sending coveys of quail exploding from under his huge flat hooves.

Half an hour of dodging low branches, lurching through streams, and galloping straight up as many hillsides as Jamie could point them at, and Gideon was, if not precisely tractable, at least exhausted enough to be manageable. Jamie was soaked to the thighs, bruised, bleeding from half a dozen scratches, and breathing nearly as hard as the horse. He was, however, still in the saddle, and still in charge.

He turned the horse's head toward the sinking sun and clicked his tongue again.

"Come on, then," he said. "Let's go home."

They had exerted themselves mightily, but given the rugged shape of the land, had not covered so much ground as to lose themselves entirely. He turned Gideon's head upward, and within a quarter hour, had come out onto a small ridge he recognized.

They picked their way along the ridge, searching for a safe way down through the tangles of chinkapin, poplar, and spruce. The party was not far away, he knew, but it could take some time to cross to them, and he would as soon rejoin them before they reached the Ridge. Not that Claire or MacKenzie could not guide them—but he admitted to himself that he wished very much to return to Fraser's Ridge at the head of the party, leading his people home.

"Christ, man, ye'd think ye were Moses," he muttered, shaking his head in mock dismay at his own pretensions.

The horse was lathered, and when the trees opened out for a space, Jamie halted for a moment's rest—relaxing the reins, but keeping a sufficient grip as to discourage any notions the outheidie creature might still be entertaining. They stood among a grove of silver birch, at the lip of a small rocky outcrop above a forty-foot drop; he thought the horse held much too high an opinion of himself to contemplate self-destruction, but best to be careful, in case he had any thought of flinging his rider off into the laurels below.

The breeze was from the west. Jamie lifted his chin, enjoying the cold touch of it on his heated skin. The land fell away in undulating waves of brown and green, kindled here and there with patches of color, lighting the mist in the hollows like the glow of campfire smoke. He felt a peace come over him at the sight, and breathed deep, his body relaxing.

Gideon relaxed, too, all the feistiness draining slowly out of him like water from a leaky bucket. Slowly, Jamie let his hands drop lightly on the horse's neck, and the horse stayed still, ears forward. Ah, he thought, and the realization stole over him that this was a Place.

He thought of such places in a way that had no words, only recognizing one when he came to it. He might have called it holy, save that the feel of such a place had nothing to do with church or saint. It was simply a place he belonged to be, and that was sufficient, though he preferred to be alone when he found one. He let the reins go slack across the horse's neck. Not even a thrawn-minded creature like Gideon would give trouble here, he felt.

Sure enough, the horse stood quiet, massive dark withers steaming in the chill. They could not tarry long, but he was deeply glad of the momentary respite—not from the battle with Gideon, but from the press of people.

He had learned early on the trick of living separately in a crowd, private in his mind when his body could not be. But he was born a mountain-dweller, and had learned early, too, the enchantment of solitude, and the healing of quiet places.

Quite suddenly, he had a vision of his mother, one of the small vivid portraits that his mind hoarded, producing them unexpectedly in response to God knew what—a sound, a smell, some passing freak of memory.

He had been snaring for rabbits on a hillside then, hot and sweaty, his fingers pricked with gorse and his shirt stuck to him with mud and damp. He had seen a small grove of trees and gone to them for shade. His mother was there, sitting in the greenish shadow, on the ground beside a tiny spring. She sat quite motionless —which was unlike her—long hands folded in her lap.

She had not spoken, but smiled at him, and he had gone to her, not speaking either, but filled with a great sense of peace and contentment, resting his head against her shoulder, feeling her arm go about him and knowing he stood at the center of the world. He had been five, maybe, or six.

As suddenly as it had come, the vision disappeared, like a bright trout vanishing into dark water. It left behind it the same deep sense of peace, though—as though someone had briefly embraced him, a soft hand touched his hair.

He swung himself down from the saddle, needing the feel of the pine needles under his boots, some physical connection with this place. Caution made him tie the reins to a stout pine, though Gideon seemed calm enough; the stallion had dropped his head and was nuzzling for tufts of dried grass. Jamie stood still for a moment, then turned himself carefully to the right, facing the north.

He no longer recalled who had taught him this—whether it was Mother, Father, or Auld John, Ian's father. He spoke the words, though, as he turned himself sunwise, murmuring the brief prayer to each of the four airts in turn, and ended facing west, into the setting sun. He cupped his empty hands and the light filled them, spilling from his palms.

“May God make safe to me each step,
May God make open to me each pass,
May God make clear to me each road,
And may He take me in the clasp of His own two hands.”

With an instinct older than the prayer, he took the flask from his belt and poured a few drops on the ground.

Scraps of sound reached him on the breeze; laughter and calling, the sound of animals making their way through brush. The caravan was not far away, only across a small hollow, coming slowly round the curve of the hillside opposite. He should go now, to join them on the last push upward to the Ridge.

Still he hesitated for a moment, loath to break the spell of the Place. Some tiny movement caught the corner of his eye, and he bent down, squinting as he peered into the deepening shadows beneath a holly bush.

It sat frozen, blending perfectly with its dusky background. He would never have seen it had his hunter’s eye not caught its movement. A tiny kitten, its gray fur puffed out like a ripe milkweed head, enormous eyes wide open and unblinking, almost colorless in the gloom beneath the bush.

“A Chait,” he whispered, putting out a slow finger toward it. “Whatever are ye doing here?”

A feral cat, no doubt; born of a wild mother, fled from some settlers’ cabin, and long free of the trap of domesticity. He brushed the wispy fur of its breast, and it sank its tiny teeth suddenly into his thumb.

“Ow!” He jerked away, and examined the drop of blood welling from a small puncture wound. He glowered at the cat for a moment, but it merely stared back at him, and made no move to run. He paused, then made up his mind. He shook the blood drop from his finger onto the leaves, an offering to join the dram he had spilled, a gift to the spirits of this Place—who had evidently made up their minds to offer him a gift, themselves.

“All right, then,” he said under his breath. He knelt, and stretched out his hand, palm up. Very slowly, he moved one finger, then the next, and the next and the next, then again, in the undulant motion of seaweed in the water. The big pale eyes fixed on the movement, watching as though hypnotized. He could see the tip of the miniature tail twitch, very slightly, and smiled at the sight.

If he could guddle a trout—and he could—why not a cat?

He made a small noise through his teeth, a whistling hiss, like the distant chittering of birds. The kitten stared, mesmerized, as the gently swaying fingers moved invisibly closer. When at last he touched its fur again, it made no move to escape. One finger edged beneath the fur, another slid under the cold wee pads of one paw, and it let him scoop it gently into his hand and lift it from the ground.

He held it for a moment against his chest, stroking it with one finger, tracing the silken jawline, the delicate ears. The tiny cat closed its eyes and began to purr in ecstasy, rumbling in his palm like distant thunder.

"Oh, so ye'll come away wi' me, will you?" Receiving no demur from the cat, he opened the neck of his shirt and tucked the tiny thing inside, where it poked and prodded at his ribs for a bit before curling up against his skin, purr reduced to a silent but pleasant vibration.

Gideon seemed pleased by the rest; he set off willingly enough, and within a quarter hour, they had caught up with the others. The stallion's momentary docility evaporated, though, under the strain of the final upward climb.

Not that the horse could not master the steep trail; what he couldn't abide was following another horse. It didn't matter whether Jamie wished to lead them home or not—if Gideon had anything to do with the matter, they would be not only in the lead, but several furlongs ahead.

The column of travelers was strung out over half a mile, each family party traveling at its own speed: Frasers, MacKenzies, Chisholms, MacLeods, and Aberfeldys. At every space and widening of the trail, Gideon shouldered his way rudely ahead, shoving past pack mules, sheep, foot-travelers, and mares; he even scattered the three pigs trudging slowly behind Grannie Chisholm. The pigs bolted into the brush in a chorus of panicked oinks as Gideon bore down upon them.

Jamie found himself more in sympathy with the horse than not; eager to be home and working hard to get there, irritated by anything that threatened to hold him back. At the moment, the main impediment to progress was Claire, who had—blast the woman—halted her mare in front of him and slid off in order to gather yet another bit of herbage from the trailside. As though the entire house was not filled from doorstep to rooftree with plants already, and her saddlebags a-bulge with more!

Gideon, picking up his rider's mood with alacrity, stretched out his neck and nipped the mare's rump. The mare bucked, squealed, and shot off up the trail, loose reins dangling. Gideon made a deep rumbling noise of satisfaction and started off after her, only to be jerked unceremoniously to a halt.

Claire had whirled round at the noise, eyes wide. She looked up at Jamie, up the trail after her vanished horse, then back at him. She shrugged apologetically, hands full of tattered leaves and mangy roots.

"Sorry," she said, but he saw the corner of her mouth tuck in and the flush rise in her skin, the smile glimmering in her eyes like morning light on trout water. Quite against his will, he felt the tension in his shoulders ease. He had had it in mind to rebuke her; in fact, he still did, but the words wouldn't quite come to his tongue.

"Get up, then, woman," he said instead, gruffly, with a nod behind him. "I want my supper."

She laughed at him and scrambled up, kilting her skirts out of the way. Gideon, irascible at this additional burden, whipped round to take a nip of anything he could reach. Jamie was ready for that; he snapped the end of the rein sharply off the stallion's nose, making him jerk back and snort in surprise.

"That'll teach ye, ye wee bastard." He pulled his hat over his brow and settled his errant wife securely, fluttering skirts tucked in beneath her thighs, arms round his waist. She rode without shoes or stockings, and her long calves were white and bare against the dark bay hide. He gathered up the reins and kicked the horse, a trifle harder than strictly necessary.

Gideon promptly reared, backed, twisted, and tried to scrape them both off under a hanging poplar bough. The kitten, rudely roused from its nap, sank all its claws into Jamie's midsection and yowled in alarm, though its noise was quite lost in Jamie's much louder screech. He yanked the horse's head halfway round, swearing, and shoved at the hindquarters with his left leg.

No easy conquest, Gideon executed a hop like a corkscrew. There was a small "eek!" and a sudden feeling of emptiness behind him, as Claire was slung off into the brush like a bag of flour. The horse suddenly yielded to the pull on his mouth, and shot down the path in the wrong direction, hurtling through a screen of brambles and skidding to a halt that nearly threw him onto his hindquarters in a shower of mud and dead leaves. Then he straightened out like a snake, shook his head, and trotted nonchalantly over to exchange nuzzles with Roger's horse, which was standing at the edge of the spring clearing, watching them with the same bemusement exhibited by its dismounted rider.

"All right there?" asked Roger, raising one eyebrow.

"Certainly," Jamie replied, trying to gasp for breath while keeping his dignity. "And you?"

"Fine."

"Good." He was already swinging down from the saddle as he spoke. He flung the reins toward MacKenzie, not waiting to see whether he caught them, and ran back toward the trail, shouting, "Claire! Where are ye?"

"Just here!" she called cheerfully. She emerged from the shadow of the poplars, with leaves in her hair and limping slightly, but looking otherwise undamaged. "Are you all right?" she asked, cocking one eyebrow at him.

"Aye, fine. I'm going to shoot that horse." He gathered her in briefly, wanting to assure himself that she was in fact whole. She was breathing heavily, but felt reassuringly solid, and kissed him on the nose.

"Well, don't shoot him until we get home. I don't want to walk the last mile or so in my bare feet."

"Hey! Let that alone, ye bugger!"

He let go of Claire and turned to find Roger snatching a fistful of ragged-looking plants away from Gideon's questing Roman nose. More plants—what was this mania for gathering? Claire was still panting from the accident, but leaned forward to see them, looking interested.

"What's that you've got, Roger?"

"For Bree," he said, holding them up for her inspection. "Are they the right kind?" To Jamie's jaundiced eye, they looked like the yellowed tops of carrots gone to seed and left too long in the ground, but Claire fingered the mangy foliage, and nodded approval.

"Oh, yes," she said. "*Very* romantic!"

Jamie made a small tactful noise, indicating that they ought perhaps to be making their way, since Bree and the slower-moving tribe of Chisholms would be catching them up soon.

"Yes, all right," Claire said, patting his shoulder in what he assumed she meant to be a soothing gesture. "Don't snort; we're going."

"Mmphm," he said, and bent to put a hand under her foot. Tossing her up into the saddle, he gave Gideon a "Don't try it on, you bastard" look and swung up behind her.

"You'll wait for the others, then, and bring them up?" Without waiting for Roger's nod, Jamie reined around and set Gideon upon the trail again.

Mollified at being far in the lead, Gideon settled down to the job at hand, climbing steadily through the thickets of hornbeam and poplar, chestnut and spruce. Even so late in the year, some leaves still clung to the trees, and small bits of brown and yellow floated down upon them like a gentle rain, catching in the horse's mane, resting in the loose, thick waves of Claire's hair. It had come down in her precipitous descent, and she hadn't bothered to put it up again.

Jamie's own equanimity returned with the sense of progress, and was quite restored by the fortuitous finding of the hat he had lost, hanging from a white oak by the trail, as though placed there by some kindly hand. Still, he remained uneasy in his mind, and could not quite grasp tranquillity, though the mountain lay at peace all round him, the air hazed with blue and smelling of wood-damp and evergreens.

Then he realized, with a sudden jolt in the pit of his stomach, that the kitten was gone. There were itching furrows in the skin of his chest and abdomen, where it had climbed him in a frantic effort to escape, but it must have popped out the neck of his shirt and been flung off his shoulder in the mad career down the slope. He glanced from side to side, searching in the shadows under bushes and trees, but it was a vain hope. The shadows were lengthening, and they were on the main trail now, where he and Gideon had torn through the wood.

"Go with God," he murmured, and crossed himself briefly.

"What's that?" Claire asked, half-turning in the saddle.

"Nothing," he said. After all, it was a wild cat, though a small one. Doubtless it would manage.

Gideon worked the bit, pecking and bobbing. Jamie realized that the tension in his hands was running through the reins once more, and consciously slackened his grip. He loosened his grip on Claire, too, and she took a sudden deep breath.

His heart was beating fast.

It was impossible for him ever to come home after an absence without a certain sense of apprehension. For years after the Rising, he had lived in a cave, approaching his own house only rarely, after dark and with great caution, never knowing what he might find there. More than one Highland man had come home to his place to find it burned and black, his family gone. Or worse, still there.

Well enough to tell himself not to imagine horrors; the difficulty was that he had no need of imagination—memory sufficed.

The horse dug with his haunches, pushing hard. No use to tell himself this was a new place; it was, with its own dangers. If there were no English soldiers in these mountains, there were still marauders. Those too shiftless to take root and fend for themselves, but who wandered the backcountry, robbing and plundering. Raiding Indians. Wild animals. And fire. Always fire.

He had sent the Bugs on ahead, with Fergus to guide them, to save Claire dealing with the simultaneous chores of arrival and hospitality. The Chisholms, the MacLeods, and Billy Aberfeldy, with his wife and wee daughter, would all bide with them at the big house for a time; he had told Mrs. Bug to begin cooking at once. Decently mounted and not hindered by children or livestock, the Bugs should have reached the Ridge two days before. No one had come back to say aught was amiss, so perhaps all was well. But still …

He hadn't realized that Claire was tensed, too, until she suddenly relaxed against him, a hand on his leg.

"It's all right," she said. "I smell chimney smoke."

He lifted his head to catch the air. She was right; the tang of burning hickory floated on the breeze. Not the stink of remembered conflagration, but a homely whiff redolent with the promise of warmth and food. Mrs. Bug had presumably taken him at his word.

They rounded the last turn of the trail and saw it, then, the high fieldstone chimney rising above the trees on the ridge, its fat plume of smoke curling over the rooftree.

The house stood.

He breathed deep in relief, noticing now the other smells of home; the faint rich scent of manure from the stable, of meat smoked and hanging in the shed, and the breath of the forest nearby—damp wood and leaf-rot, rock and rushing water, the touch of it cold and loving on his cheek.

They came out of the chestnut grove and into the large clearing where the house stood, solid and neat, its windows glazed gold with the last of the sun.

It was a modest frame house, whitewashed and shingle-roofed, clean in its lines and soundly built, but impressive only by comparison with the crude cabins of most settlers. His own first cabin still stood, dark and sturdy, a little way down the hill. Smoke was curling from that chimney, too.

“Someone’s made a fire for Bree and Roger,” Claire said, nodding at it.

“That’s good,” he said. He tightened his arm about her waist, and she made a small, contented noise in her throat, wriggling her bottom into his lap.

Gideon was happy, too; he stretched out his neck and whinnied to the two horses in the penfold, who trotted to and fro in the enclosure, calling greetings. Claire’s mare was standing by the fence, reins dangling; she curled her lip in what looked like derision, the wee besom. From somewhere far down the trail behind them came a deep, joyous bray; Clarence the mule, hearing the racket and delighted to be coming home.

The door flew open, and Mrs. Bug popped out, round and flustered as a tumble-turd. Jamie smiled at sight of her, and gave Claire an arm to slide down before dismounting himself.

“All’s well, all’s well, and how’s yourself, sir?” Mrs. Bug was reassuring him before his boots struck ground. She had a pewter cup in one hand, a polishing cloth in the other, and didn’t cease her polishing for an instant, even as she turned up her face to accept his kiss on her withered round cheek.

She didn’t wait for an answer, but turned at once and stood a-tiptoe to kiss Claire, beaming.

“Oh, it’s grand that you’re home, ma’am, you and Himself, and I’ve the supper all made, so you’ll not be worrit a bit with it, ma’am, but come inside, come inside, and be takin’ off those dusty cloots, and I’ll send old Arch along to the mash-hoose for a bit of the lively, and we’ll …” She had Claire by one hand, towing her into the house, talking and talking, the other hand still polishing briskly away, her stubby fingers dexterously rubbing the cloth inside the cup. Claire gave him a helpless glance over one shoulder, and he grinned at her as she disappeared inside the house.

Gideon shoved an impatient nose under his arm and bumped his elbow.

“Oh, aye,” he said, recalled to his chores. “Come along, then, ye prickly wee bastard.”

By the time he had the big horse and Claire's mare unsaddled, wiped down, and turned out to their feed, Claire had escaped from Mrs. Bug; coming back from the paddock, he saw the door of the house swing open and Claire slip out, looking guiltily over her shoulder as though fearing pursuit.

Where was she bound? She didn't see him; she turned and hurried toward the far corner of the house, disappearing in a swish of homespun. He followed, curious.

Ah. She had seen to her surgery; now she was going to her garden before it got completely dark; he caught a glimpse of her against the sky on the upward path behind the house, the last of the daylight caught like cobwebs in her hair. There would be little growing now, only a few sturdy herbs and the overwintering things like carrots and onions and turnips, but it made no difference; she always went to see how things were, no matter how short a time she had been gone.

He understood the urge; he would not feel entirely home himself until he had checked all the stock and buildings, and made sure of matters up at the still.

The evening breeze brought him an acrid hint from the distant privy, suggesting that matters there were shortly going to require his attention, speaking of buildings. Then he bethought him of the new tenants coming, and relaxed; digging a new privy would be just the thing for Chisholm's eldest two boys.

He and Ian had dug this one, when they first came to the Ridge. God, he missed the lad.

"A Mhicheal bheanaichte," he murmured. *Blessed Michael, protect him.* He liked MacKenzie well enough, but had it been his choice, he would not have exchanged Ian for the man. It had been Ian's choice, though, not his, and no more to be said about it.

Pushing away the ache of Ian's loss, he stepped behind a tree, loosened his breeks, and relieved himself. If she saw him, Claire would doubtless make what she considered witty remarks about dogs and wolves marking their home ground as they returned to it. Nothing of the sort, he replied to her mentally; why walk up the hill, only to make matters worse in the privy? Still, if you came down to it, it *was* his place, and if he chose to piss on it … He tidied his clothes, feeling more settled.

He raised his head and saw her coming down the path from the garden, her apron bulging with carrots and turnips. A gust of wind sent the last of the leaves from the chestnut grove swirling round her in a yellow dance, sparked with light.

Moved by sudden impulse, he stepped deeper into the trees and began to look about.

Normally, he paid attention only to such vegetation as was immediately comestible by horse or man, sufficiently straight-grained to serve for planks and timbers, or so obstructive as to pose difficulty in passage. Once he began looking with an eye to aesthetics, though, he found himself surprised at the variety to hand.

Stalks of half-ripe barley, the seeds laid in rows like a woman's plait. A dry, fragile weed that looked like the lace edging on a fine handkerchief. A branch of spruce, unearthly green and cool among the dry bits, leaving its fragrant sap on his hand as he tore it from the tree. A twig of glossy dried oak leaves that reminded him of her hair, in shades of gold and brown and gray. And a bit of scarlet creeper, snatched for color.

Just in time; she was coming round the corner of the house. Lost in thought, she passed within a foot or two of him, not seeing him.

"Sorcha," he called softly, and she turned, eyes narrowed against the rays of the sinking sun, then wide and gold with surprise at the sight of him.

"Welcome home," he said, and held out the small bouquet of leaves and twigs.

"Oh," she said. She looked at the bits of leaf and stick again, and then at him, and the corners of her mouth trembled, as though she might laugh or cry, but wasn't sure which. She reached then, and took the plants from him, her fingers small and cold as they brushed his hand.

"Oh, Jamie—they're *wonderful.*" She came up on her toes and kissed him, warm and salty, and he wanted more, but she was hurrying away into the house, the silly wee things clasped to her breast as though they were gold.

He felt pleasantly foolish, and foolishly pleased with himself. The taste of her was still on his mouth.

"Sorcha," he whispered, and realized that he had called her so a moment before. Now, that was odd; no wonder she had been surprised. It was her name in the Gaelic, but he never called her by it. He liked the strangeness of her, the Englishness. She was his Claire, his Sassenach.

And yet in the moment when she passed him, she was *Sorcha*. Not only "Claire," it meant—but light.

He breathed deep, contented.

He was suddenly ravenous, both for food and for her, but he made no move to hasten inside. Some kinds of hunger were sweet in themselves, the anticipation of satisfaction as keen a pleasure as the slaking.

Hoofsteps and voices; the others were finally here. He had a sudden urge to keep his peaceful solitude a moment longer, but too late—in seconds, he was surrounded by confusion, the shrill cries of excited children and calls of distracted mothers, the welcoming of the newcomers, the bustle and rush of unloading, turning out the horses and mules, fetching feed and water … and yet in the midst of this Babel, he moved as though he were still alone, peaceful and quiet in the setting sun. He had come home.

It was full dark before everything was sorted, the smallest of the wild Chisholm bairns rounded up and sent inside for his supper, all the stock cared for and settled for the night. He followed Geoff Chisholm toward the house, but then held back, lingering for a moment in the dark dooryard.

He stood for a moment, idly chafing his hands against the chill as he admired the look of the place. Snug barn and sound sheds, a penfold and paddock in good repair, a tidy fence of palisades around Claire's scraggly garden, to keep out the deer. The house loomed white in the early dark, a benevolent spirit guarding the ridge. Light spilled from every door and window, and the sound of laughter came from inside.

He sensed a movement in the darkness, and turned to see his daughter coming from the spring house, a pail of fresh milk in her hand. She stopped by him, looking at the house.

"Nice to be home, isn't it?" she said softly.

"Aye," he said. "It is." They looked at each other, smiling. Then she leaned forward, peering closely at him. She turned him, so the light from the window fell on him, and a small frown puckered the skin between her brows.

"What's that?" she said, and flicked at his coat. A glossy scarlet leaf fell free and floated to the ground. Her brows went up at sight of it. "You'd better go and wash, Da," she said. "You've been in the poison ivy."

"Ye might have told me, Sassenach." Jamie glowered at the table near the bedroom window, where I'd set his bouquet in a cup of water. The bright, blotchy red of the poison ivy glowed, even in the dimness of the firelight. "And ye might get rid of it, too. D'ye mean to mock me?"

"No, I don't," I said, smiling as I hung my apron from the peg and reached for the laces of my gown. "But if I'd told you when you gave it to me, you'd have snatched it back. That's the only posy you've ever given me, and I don't imagine I'll get another; I mean to keep it."

He snorted, and sat down on the bed to take off his stockings. He'd already stripped off coat, stock, and shirt, and the firelight gleamed on the slope of his shoulders. He scratched at the underside of one wrist, though I'd told him it was psychosomatic; he hadn't any signs of rash.

"You've never come home with poison ivy rash," I remarked. "And you're bound to have run into it now and again, so much time as you spend in the woods and the fields. I think you must be immune to it. Some people are, you know."

"Oh, aye?" He looked interested at that, though he went on scratching. "Is that like you and Brianna not catching illness?"

"Something like, but for different reasons." I peeled off the gown of pale green homespun—more than a little grubby, after a week's travel—and stripped off my stays with a sigh of relief.

I got up to check the pan of water I had set to heat in the embers. Some of the newcomers had been sent off to spend the night with Fergus and Marsali, or with Roger and Bree, but the kitchen, the surgery, and Jamie's study below were full of guests, all sleeping on the floor. I wasn't going to bed without washing off the stains of travel, but I didn't care to provide a public spectacle while doing it, either.

The water shimmered with heat, tiny bubbles clinging to the sides of the pot. I put a finger in, just to check—lovely and hot. I poured some into the basin and put the rest back to keep warm.

"We aren't completely immune, you know," I warned him. "Some things—like smallpox—we can't ever catch, Roger and Bree and I, because we've been vaccinated against them, and it's permanent. Other things, like cholera and typhoid, we aren't *likely* to catch, but the injections don't give permanent immunity; it wears off after a time."

I bent to rummage in the saddlebags he had brought up and dumped by the door. Someone at the Gathering had given me a sponge—a real one, imported from the Indies—in payment for my extracting an abscessed tooth. Just the thing for a quick bath.

"Things like malaria—what Lizzie has—"

"I thought ye'd cured her of that," Jamie interrupted, frowning.

I shook my head, regretful.

"No, she'll always have it, poor thing. All I can do is try to lessen the severity of the attacks, and keep them from coming too often. It's in her blood, you see."

He pulled off the thong that bound back his hair, and shook out the ruddy locks, leaving them ruffled round his head like a mane.

"That doesna make any sense," he objected, rising to unfasten his breeks. "Ye told me that when a person had the measles, if he lived, he'd not get it again, because it stayed in the blood. And so I couldna catch pox or measles now, because I'd had them both as a child—they're in my blood."

"Well, it's not quite the same thing," I said, rather lamely. The thought of trying to explain the differences among active immunity, passive immunity, acquired immunity, antibodies, and parasitic infection was more of a challenge than I felt up to, after a long day's ride.

I dipped the sponge into the basin, let it take up water, then squeezed it out, enjoying the oddly silky, fibrous texture. A fine mist of sand floated out of the pores and settled to the bottom of the china basin. The sponge was softening as it took up water, but I could still feel a hard spot at one edge.

"Speaking of riding—"

Jamie looked mildly startled.

"Were we speaking of riding?"

"Well, no, but I was thinking of it." I waved a hand, dismissing the inconsequent distinction. "In any case, what do you mean to do about Gideon?"

"Oh." Jamie dropped his breeks in a puddle on the floor and stretched himself, considering. "Well, I canna afford just to shoot him, I suppose. And he's a braw enough fellow. I'll cut him, to start. That may settle his mind a bit."

"Cut him? Oh, castrate him, you mean. Yes, I suppose that would get his attention, though it seems a bit drastic." I hesitated a moment, reluctant. "Do you want me to do it?"

He stared at me in amazement, then burst out laughing.

"Nay, Sassenach, I dinna think cutting an eighteen-hand stallion is a job for a woman, surgeon or no. It doesna really require the delicate touch, aye?"

I was just as pleased to hear this. I had been working at the sponge with my thumb; it loosened a bit, and a tiny shell popped suddenly out of a large pore. It floated down through the water, a perfect miniature spiral, tinted pink and purple.

"Oh, look," I said, delighted.

"What a bonnie wee thing." Jamie leaned over my shoulder, a big forefinger gently touching the shell at the bottom of the basin. "How did it get into your sponge, I wonder?"

"I expect the sponge ate it by mistake."

"Ate it?" One ruddy eyebrow shot up at that.

"Sponges are animals," I explained. "Or to be more exact, stomachs. They suck in water, and just absorb everything edible as it passes through."

"Ah, so that's why Bree called the bairn a wee sponge. They do that." He smiled at the thought of Jemmy.

"Indeed they do." I sat down and slipped the shift off my shoulders, letting the garment fall to my waist. The fire had taken the chill off the room, but it was still cold enough that the skin of my breasts and arms bloomed into gooseflesh.

Jamie picked up his belt and carefully removed the assorted impedimenta it held, laying out pistol, cartridge box, dirk, and pewter flask on top of the small bureau. He lifted the flask and raised an inquiring eyebrow in my direction.

I nodded enthusiastically, and he turned to find a cup amid the rubble of oddments. With so many people and their belongings stuffed into the house, all of our own saddlebags, plus the bundles and bits acquired at the Gathering, had been carried up and dumped in our room; the humped shadows of the luggage flickering on the wall gave the chamber the odd look of a grotto, lined with lumpy boulders.

Jamie was as much a sponge as his grandson, I reflected, watching him rootle about, completely naked and totally unconcerned about it. He took in everything, and seemed able to deal with whatever came his way, no matter how familiar or foreign to his experience. Maniac stallions, kidnapped priests, marriageable maidservants, headstrong daughters, and heathen sons-in-law … Anything he could not defeat, outwit, or alter, he simply accepted—rather like the sponge and its embedded shell.

Pursuing the analogy further, I supposed I was the shell. Snatched out of my own small niche by an unexpected strong current, taken in and surrounded by Jamie and his life. Caught forever among the strange currents that pulsed through this outlandish environment.

The thought gave me a sudden queer feeling. The shell lay still at the bottom of the basin—delicate, beautiful … but empty. Rather slowly, I raised the sponge to the back of my neck and squeezed, feeling the tickle of warm water down my back.

For the most part, I felt no regrets. I had chosen to be here; I *wanted* to be here. And yet now and then small things like our conversation about immunity made me realize just how much had been lost—of what I had had, of what I had been. It was undeniable that some of my soft parts had been digested away, and the thought did make me feel a trifle hollow now and then.

Jamie bent to dig in one of the saddlebags, and the sight of his bare buttocks, turned toward me in all innocence, did much to dispel the momentary sense of disquiet. They were gracefully shaped, rounded with muscle—and pleasingly dusted with a red-gold fuzz that caught the light of fire and candle. The long, pale columns of his thighs framed the shadow of his scrotum, dark and barely visible between them.

He had found a cup at last, and poured it half full. He turned and handed it to me, lifting his eyes from the surface of the dark liquid, startled to find me staring at him.

“What is it?” he said. “Is there something the matter, Sassenach?”

“No,” I said, but I must have sounded rather doubtful, for his brows drew momentarily together.

“No,” I said, more positively. I took the cup from him and smiled, lifting it slightly in acknowledgment. “Only thinking.”

An answering smile touched his lips.

“Aye? Well, ye dinna want to do too much of that late at night, Sassenach. It will give ye the nightmare.”

“Daresay you’re right about that.” I sipped from the cup; rather to my surprise, it was wine—and very good wine. “Where did you get this?”

“From Father Kenneth. It’s sacramental wine—but not consecrated, aye? He said the Sheriff’s men would take it; he would as soon it went with me.”

A slight shadow crossed his face at mention of the priest.

"Do you think he'll be all right?" I asked. The Sheriff's men had not struck me as civilized enforcers of an abstruse regulation, but rather as thugs whose prejudice was momentarily constrained by fear—of Jamie.

"I hope so." Jamie turned aside, restless. "I told the Sheriff that if the Father were misused, he and his men would answer for it."

I nodded silently, sipping. If Jamie learned of any harm done to Father Donahue, he would indeed make the Sheriff answer for it. The thought made me a trifle uneasy; this wasn't a good time to make enemies, and the Sheriff of Orange County wasn't a good enemy to have.

I looked up to find Jamie's eyes still fixed on me, though now with a look of deep appreciation.

"You're in good flesh these days, Sassenach," he observed, tilting his head to one side.

"Flatterer," I said, giving him a cold look as I picked up the sponge again.

"Ye must have gained a stone, at least, since the spring," he said with approval, disregarding the look and circling round me to inspect. "It's been a good fat summer, aye?"

I turned round and flung the wet sponge at his head.

He caught it neatly, grinning.

"I didna realize how well ye'd filled out, Sassenach, so bundled as ye've been these last weeks. I havena seen ye naked in a month, at least." He was still eyeing me with an air of appraisal, as though I were a prime entrant in the Silver Medalist Round at the Shropshire Fat Pigs Show.

"Enjoy it," I advised him, my cheeks flushed with annoyance. "You may not see it again for quite some time!" I snatched the top of the chemise up again, covering my—undeniably rather full—breasts.

His eyebrows rose in surprise at my tone.

"You're never angry wi' me, Sassenach?"

"Certainly not," I said. "Whatever gives you an idea like *that*?"

He smiled, rubbing the sponge absently over his chest as his eyes traveled over me. His nipples puckered at the chill, dark and stiff among the ruddy, curling hairs, and the damp gleamed on his skin.

"I like ye fat, Sassenach," he said softly. "Fat and juicy as a plump wee hen. I like it fine."

I might have considered this a simple attempt to remove his foot from his mouth, were it not for the fact that naked men are conveniently equipped with sexual lie detectors. He *did* like it fine.

"Oh," I said. Rather slowly, I lowered the chemise. "Well, then."

He lifted his chin, gesturing. I hesitated for a moment, then stood up and let the chemise fall on the floor, joining his breeks. I reached across and took the sponge from his hand.

"I'll … um … just finish washing, shall I?" I murmured. I turned my back, put a foot on the stool to wash, and heard an encouraging rumble of appreciation behind me. I smiled to myself, and took my time. The room was getting warmer; by the time I had finished my ablutions, my skin was pink and smooth, with only a slight chill in fingers and toes.

I turned round at last, to see Jamie still watching me, though he still rubbed at his wrist, frowning slightly.

"Did *you* wash?" I asked. "Even if it doesn't trouble you, if you have oil from the poison ivy on your skin, it can get on things you touch—and *I'm* not immune to the stuff."

"I scrubbed my hands with lye soap," he assured me, putting them on my shoulders in illustration. Sure enough, he smelled strongly of the acrid soft soap we made from suet and wood-ash—it wasn't perfumed toilet soap, but it did get things clean. Things like floorboards and iron pots. No wonder he'd been scratching; it wasn't easy on the skin, and his hands were rough and cracked.

I bent my head and kissed his knuckles, then reached across to the small box where I kept my personal bits and pieces, and took out the jar of skin balm. Made of walnut oil, beeswax, and purified lanolin from boiled sheep's wool, it was pleasantly soothing, green-scented with the essences of chamomile, comfrey, yarrow, and elderflowers.

I scooped out a bit with my thumbnail, and rubbed it between my hands; it was nearly solid to begin with, but liquefied nicely when warmed.

"Here," I said, and took one of his hands between my own, rubbing the ointment into the creases of his knuckles, massaging his callused palms. Slowly, he relaxed, letting me stretch each finger as I worked my way down the joints and rubbed more ointment into the tiny scrapes and cuts. There were still marks on his hands where he had kept the leather reins wrapped tightly.

"The posy's lovely, Jamie," I said, nodding at the little bouquet in its cup. "Whatever made you do it, though?" While in his own way quite romantic, Jamie was thoroughly practical as well; I didn't think he had ever given me a completely frivolous present, and he was not a man to see value in any vegetation that could not be eaten, taken medicinally, or brewed into beer.

He shifted a bit, clearly uncomfortable.

"Aye, well," he said, looking away. "I just—I mean—well, I had a wee thing I meant to give ye, only I lost it, but then you seemed to think it a sweet thing that wee Roger had plucked a few gowans for Brianna, and I—" He broke off, muttering something that sounded like *"Ifrinn!"* under his breath.

I wanted very much to laugh. Instead, I lifted his hand and kissed his knuckles, lightly. He looked embarrassed, but pleased. His thumb traced the edge of a half-healed blister on my palm, left by a hot kettle.

"Here, Sassenach, ye need a bit of this, too. Let me," he said, and leaned to take a dab of the green ointment. He engulfed my hand in his, warm and still slippery with the oil and beeswax mixture.

I resisted for a moment, but then let him take my hand, making deep slow circles on my palm that made me want to close my eyes and melt quietly. I gave a small sigh of pleasure, and must have closed my eyes after all, because I didn't see him move in close to kiss me; just felt the brief soft touch of his mouth.

I raised my other hand, lazily, and he took it, too, his fingers smoothing mine. I let my fingers twine with his, thumbs jousting gently, the heels of our hands lightly rubbing. He stood close enough that I felt the warmth of him, and the delicate brush of the sun-bleached hairs on his arm as he reached past my hip for more of the ointment.

He paused, kissing me lightly once more in passing. Flames hissed on the hearth like shifting tides, and the firelight flickered dimly on the whitewashed walls, like light dancing on the surface of water far above. We might have been alone together at the bottom of the sea.

“Roger wasn’t being strictly romantic, you know,” I said. “Or maybe he was—depending how one wants to look at it.”

Jamie looked quizzical, as he took my hand again. Our fingers locked and twined, moving slowly, and I sighed with pleasure.

“Aye?”

“Bree asked me about birth control, and I told her what methods there are now—which are frankly not all that good, though better than nothing. But old Grannie Bacon gave me some seeds that she says the Indians use for contraception; supposed to be very effective.”

Jamie’s face underwent the most comical change, from drowsy pleasure to wide-eyed astonishment.

“Birth con—what? She—ye mean he—those clatty weeds—”

“Well, yes. Or at least I think they may help prevent pregnancy.”

“Mmphm.” The movement of his fingers slowed, and his brows drew together—more in concern than disapproval, I thought. Then he returned to the job of massaging my hands, enveloping them in his much larger grasp with a decided movement that obliged me to yield to him.

He was quiet for a few moments, working the ointment into my fingers more in the businesslike way of a man rubbing saddle soap into harness than one making tender love to his wife’s devoted hands. I shifted slightly, and he seemed to realize what he was doing, for he stopped, frowning, then squeezed my hands lightly and let his face relax. He lifted my hand to his lips, kissed it, then resumed his massage, much more slowly.

“Do ye think—” he began, and stopped.

“What?”

“Mmphm. It’s only—does it not seem a bit strange to ye, Sassenach? That a young woman newly wed should be thinking of such a thing?”

“No, it doesn’t,” I said, rather sharply. “It seems entirely sensible to me. And they aren’t all that newly wed—they’ve been … I mean, they *have* got a child already.”

His nostrils flared in soundless disagreement.

“*She* has a child,” he said. “That’s what I mean, Sassenach. It seems to me that a young woman well-suited with her man wouldna be thinking first thing how *not* to bear his child. Are ye sure all is well between them?”

I paused, frowning as I considered the notion.

“I think so,” I said at last, slowly. “Remember, Jamie—Bree comes from a time where women *can* decide whether or when to have babies, with a fair amount of certainty. She’d feel that such a thing was her right.”

The wide mouth moved, pursed in thought; I could see him struggling with the notion—one entirely contrary to his own experience.

“That’s the way of it, then?” he asked, finally. “A woman can say, I will, or I won’t—and the man has no say in it?” His voice was filled with astonishment—and disapproval.

I laughed a little.

“Well, it’s not *exactly* like that. Or not all the time. I mean, there are accidents. And ignorance and foolishness; a lot of women just let things happen. And most women would certainly *care* what their men thought about it. But yes … I suppose if you come right down to it, that’s right.”

He grunted slightly.

“But MacKenzie’s from that time, too. So he’ll think nothing odd of it?”

“He picked the weeds for her,” I pointed out.

“So he did.” The line stayed between his brows, but the frown eased somewhat.

It was growing late, and the muffled rumble of talk and laughter was dying down in the house below. The growing quiet of the house was pierced suddenly by a baby's wail. Both of us stood still, listening—then relaxed as the murmur of the mother's voice reached us through the closed door.

"Besides, it's not so unusual for a young woman to think of such a thing—Marsali came and asked me about it, before she married Fergus."

"Oh, did she?" One eyebrow went up. "Did ye not tell her, then?"

"Of course I did!"

"Whatever ye told her didna work all that well, did it?" One corner of his mouth curled up in a cynic smile; Germain had been born approximately ten months following his parents' marriage, and Marsali had become pregnant with Joan within days of weaning him.

I felt a flush rising in my cheeks.

"Nothing works all the time—not even modern methods. And for that matter—nothing works at all if you don't use it." In fact, Marsali had wanted contraception not because she didn't want a baby—but only because she had feared that pregnancy would interfere with the intimacy of her relationship with Fergus. *When we get to the prick part, I want to like it* had been her words on that memorable occasion, and my own mouth curled at the memory.

My equally cynical guess was that she had liked it fine, and had decided that pregnancy was unlikely to diminish her appreciation of Fergus's finer points. But that rather came back to Jamie's fears about Brianna—for surely her intimacy with Roger was well established. Still, that was hardly …

One of Jamie's hands remained entwined with mine; the other left my fingers and reached elsewhere—very lightly.

"Oh," I said, beginning to lose my train of thought.

"Pills, ye said." His face was quite close, eyes hooded in thought as he worked. "That's how it's done—then?"

"Um … oh. Yes."

"Ye didna bring any with you," he said. "When ye came back."

I breathed deep and let it out, feeling as though I were beginning to dissolve.

"No," I said, a little faintly.

He paused a moment, hand cupped lightly.

"Why not?" he asked quietly.

"I … well, I … I actually—I thought—you have to keep taking them. I couldn't have brought enough. There's a permanent way, a small operation. It's fairly simple, and it makes one permanently … barren." I swallowed. Viewing the prospect of coming back to the past, I had in fact thought seriously about the possibilities of pregnancy—and the risks. I thought the possibility very low indeed, given both my age and previous history, but the risk …

Jamie stood stock-still, looking down.

"For God's sake, Claire," he said at last, low-voiced. "Tell me that ye did it."

I took a deep breath, and squeezed his hand, my fingers slipping a little.

"Jamie," I said softly, "if I'd done it, I would have told you." I swallowed again. "You … would have wanted me to?"

He was still holding my hand. His other hand left me, touched my back, pressed me—very gently—to him. His skin was warm on mine.

We stood close together, touching, not moving, for several minutes. He sighed then, chest rising under my ear.

"I've bairns enough," he said quietly. "I've only the one life—and that's you, *mo chridhe*."

I reached up and touched his face. It was furrowed with tiredness, rough with whiskers; he hadn't shaved in days.

I *had* thought about it. And had come very close indeed to asking a surgeon friend to perform the sterilization for me. Cold blood and clear head had argued for it; no sense in taking chances. And yet … there was no guarantee that I would survive the journey, would reach the right time or place, would find him again. Still less, a chance that I might conceive again at my age.

And yet, gone from him for so long, not knowing if I might find him—I could not bring myself to destroy any possibility between us. I did not want another child. But if I found him, and *he* should want it … then I would risk it for him.

I touched him, lightly, and he made a small sound in his throat and laid his face against my hair, holding me tight. Our lovemaking was always risk and promise—for if he held my life in his hands when he lay with me, I held his soul, and knew it.

"I thought … I thought you'd never see Brianna. And I didn't know about Willie. It wasn't right for me to take away any chance of your having another child—not without telling you."

You are Blood of my blood, I had said to him, *Bone of my bone*. That was true, and always would be, whether children came of it or not.

"I dinna want another child," he whispered. "I want you."

His hand rose, as though by itself, touched my breast with a fingertip, left a shimmer of the scented ointment on my skin. I wrapped my hand, slippery and green-scented, round him, and stepped backward, bringing him with me toward the bed. I had just enough presence of mind left to extinguish the candle.

"Don't worry for Bree," I said, reaching up to touch him as he rose over me, looming black against the firelight. "Roger picked the weeds for her. He knows what she wants."

He gave a deep sigh, the breath of a laugh, that caught in his throat as he came to me, and ended in a small groan of pleasure and completion as he slid between my legs, well-oiled and ready.

"I ken what I want, too," he said, voice muffled in my hair. "I shall pick ye another posy, tomorrow."

Drugged with fatigue, languid with love, and lulled by the comforts of a soft, clean bed, I slept like the dead.

Somewhere toward dawn, I began to dream—pleasant dreams of touch and color, without form. Small hands touched my hair, patted my face; I turned on my side, half-conscious, dreaming of nursing a child in my sleep. Tiny soft fingers kneaded my breast, and my hand came up to cup the child's head. It bit me.

I shrieked, shot bolt upright in bed, and saw a gray form race across the quilt and disappear over the end of the bed. I shrieked again, louder.

Jamie shot sideways out of bed, rolled on the floor, and came up standing, shoulders braced and fists half-clenched.

“What?” he demanded, glaring wildly round in search of marauders. “Who? What?”

“A rat!” I said, pointing a trembling finger at the spot where the gray shape had vanished into the crevice between bed-foot and wall.

“Oh.” His shoulders relaxed. He scrubbed his hands over his face and through his hair, blinking. “A rat, aye?”

“A rat in our *bed,*” I said, not disposed to view the event with any degree of calm. “It bit me!” I peered closely at my injured breast. No blood to speak of; only a couple of tiny puncture marks that stung slightly. I thought of rabies, though, and my blood ran cold.

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach. I’ll deal with it.” Squaring his shoulders once more, Jamie picked up the poker from the hearth and advanced purposefully on the bed-foot. The footboard was solid; there was a space of only a few inches between it and the wall. The rat must be trapped, unless it had managed to escape in the scant seconds between my scream and Jamie’s eruption from the quilts.

I got up onto my knees, ready to leap off the bed if necessary. Scowling in concentration, Jamie raised the poker, reached out with his free hand, and flipped the hanging coverlid out of the way.

He whipped the poker down with great force—and jerked it aside, smashing into the wall.

“What?” I said.

“What?” he echoed, in a disbelieving tone. He bent closer, squinting in the dim light, then started to laugh. He dropped the poker, squatted on the floor, and reached slowly into the space between the bed-foot and wall, making a small chirping noise through his teeth. It sounded like birds feeding in a distant bush.

“Are you *talking* to the rat?” I began to crawl toward the foot of the bed, but he motioned me back, shaking his head, while still making the chirping sound.

I waited, with some impatience. Within a minute, he made a grab, evidently catching whatever it was, for he gave a small exclamation of satisfaction. He stood up, smiling, a gray, furry shape clutched by the nape, dangling like a tiny purse from his fingers.

"Here's your wee ratten, Sassenach," he said, and gently deposited a ball of gray fur on the coverlet. Huge eyes of a pale celadon green stared up at me, unblinking.

"Well, goodness," I said. "Wherever did *you* come from?" I extended a finger, very slowly. The kitten didn't move. I touched the edge of a tiny gray-silk jaw, and the big green eyes disappeared, going to slits as it rubbed against my finger. A surprisingly deep purr rumbled through its miniature frame.

"That," Jamie said, with immense satisfaction, "is the present I *meant* to give ye, Sassenach. He'll keep the vermin from your surgery."

"Well, possibly very *small* vermin," I said, examining my new present dubiously. "I think a large cockroach could carry him—is it a him?—off to its lair, let alone a mouse."

"He'll grow," Jamie assured me. "Look at his feet."

He—yes, it was a he—had rolled onto his back and was doing an imitation of a dead bug, paws in the air. Each paw was roughly the size of a broad copper penny, small enough by themselves, but enormous by contrast with the tiny body. I touched the minuscule pads, an immaculate pink in their thicket of soft gray fur, and the kitten writhed in ecstasy.

A discreet knock came at the door, and I snatched the sheet up over my bosom as the door opened and Mr. Wemyss's head poked in, his hair sticking up like a pile of wheat straw.

"Er … I hope all is well, sir?" he asked, blinking shortsightedly. "My lass woke me, sayin' as she thought there was a skelloch, like, and then we heard a bit of a bang, like—" His eyes, hastily averted from me, went to the scar of raw wood in the whitewashed wall, left by Jamie's poker.

"Aye, it's fine, Joseph," Jamie assured him. "Only a wee cat."

"Oh, aye?" Mr. Wemyss squinted toward the bed, his thin face breaking into a smile as he made out the blot of gray fur. "A cheetie, is it? Well, and he'll be a fine help i' the kitchen, I've nae doubt."

"Aye. Speakin' of kitchens, Joseph—d'ye think your lassie might bring up a dish of cream for the baudrons here?"

Mr. Wemyss nodded and disappeared, with a final avuncular smile at the kitten.

Jamie stretched, yawned, and scrubbed both hands vigorously through his hair, which was behaving with even more reckless abandon than usual. I eyed him, with a certain amount of purely aesthetic appreciation.

"You look like a woolly mammoth," I said.

"Oh? And what is a mammoth, besides big?"

"A sort of prehistoric elephant—you know, the animals with the long trunks?"

He squinted down the length of his body, then looked at me quizzically.

"Well, I thank ye for the compliment, Sassenach," he said. "Mammoth, is it?" He thrust his arms upward and stretched again, casually arching his back, which—quite inadvertently, I didn't think—enhanced any incidental resemblances that one might note between the half-engorged morning anatomy of a man, and the facial adornments of a pachyderm.

I laughed.

"That's not *precisely* what I meant," I said. "Stop waggling; Lizzie's coming in any minute. You'd better put your shirt on or get back in bed."

The sound of footsteps on the landing sent him diving under the quilts, and sent the little cat scampering up the sheet in fright. In the event, it was Mr. Wemyss himself who had brought the dish of cream, sparing his daughter a possible sight of Himself in the altogether.

The weather being fine, we had left the shutters open the night before. The sky outside was the color of fresh oysters, moist and pearly gray. Mr. Wemyss glanced at it, blinked and nodded at Jamie's thanks, and toddled back to his bed, thankful for a last half hour's sleep before the dawn.

I disentangled the kitten, who had taken refuge in my hair, and set him down by the bowl of cream. I didn't suppose he could ever have seen a bowl of cream in his life, but the smell was enough—in moments, he was whisker-deep, lapping for all he was worth.

"He's a fine thrum to him," Jamie remarked approvingly. "I can hear him from here."

"He's lovely; wherever did you get him?" I nestled into the curve of Jamie's body, enjoying his warmth; the fire had burned far down during the night, and the air in the room was chilly, sour with ash.

"Found him in the wood." Jamie yawned widely, and relaxed, propping his head on my shoulder to watch the tiny cat, who had abandoned himself to an ecstasy of gluttony. "I thought I'd lost him when Gideon bolted—I suppose he'd crept into one of the saddlebags, and came up wi' the other things."

We lapsed into a peaceful stupor, drowsily cuddled in the warm nest of our bed, as the sky lightened, moment by moment, and the air came alive with the voices of waking birds. The house was waking, too—a baby's wail came from below, followed by the stir and shuffle of rising, the murmur of voices. We should rise, too—there was so much to be done—and yet neither of us moved, each reluctant to surrender the sense of quiet sanctuary. Jamie sighed, his breath warm on my bare shoulder.

"A week, I think," he said quietly.

"Before you must go?"

"Aye. I can take that long to settle things here, and speak to the men from the Ridge. A week then, to pass through the country between the Treaty Line and Drunkard's Creek and call a muster—then I'll bring them here to drill. If Tryon should call up the militia, then …"

I lay quiet for a moment, my hand wrapped round Jamie's, his loose fist curled against my breast.

"If he calls, I'll go with you."

He kissed the back of my neck.

"D'ye wish it?" he said. "I dinna think there will be need. Neither you nor Bree know of any fighting will be done here now."

"That only means that if anything *will* happen, it won't be a huge battle," I said. "This—the Colonies—it's a big place, Jamie. And two hundred years of things happening—we wouldn't know about the smaller conflicts, especially ones that happened in a different place. Now, in Boston—” I sighed, squeezing his hand.

I wouldn’t know a great deal about events in Boston myself, but Bree would; growing up there, she had been exposed in school to a good bit of local and state history. I had heard her telling Roger things about the Boston Massacre—a small confrontation between citizens and British troops that had taken place the past March.

“Aye, I suppose that’s true,” he said. “Still, it doesna seem as though it will come to anything. I think Tryon only means to frighten the Regulators into good behavior.”

This was in fact likely. However, I was quite aware of the old adage—“Man proposes and God disposes”—and whether it was God or William Tryon in charge, heaven only knew what might happen in the event.

“Do you think so?” I asked. “Or only hope so?”

He sighed, and stretched his legs, his arm tightening about my waist.

“Both,” he admitted. “Mostly I hope. And I pray. But I do think so, too.”

The kitten had completely emptied the dish of cream. He sat down with an audible thump on his tiny backside, rubbed the last of the delicious white stuff from his whiskers, then ambled slowly toward the bed, sides bulging visibly. He sprang up onto the coverlet, burrowed close to me, and fell promptly asleep.

Perhaps not quite asleep; I could feel the small vibration of his purring through the quilt.

“What do you think I should call him?” I mused aloud, touching the tip of the soft, wispy tail. “Spot? Puff? Cloudy?”

“Foolish names,” Jamie said, with a lazy tolerance. “Is that what ye were wont to call your pussie-baudrons in Boston, then? Or England?”

“No. I’ve never had a cat before,” I admitted. “Frank was allergic to them—they made him sneeze. And what’s a good Scottish cat name, then—Diarmuid? McGillivray?”

He snorted, then laughed.

“Adso,” he said, positively. “Call him Adso.”

"What sort of name is that?" I demanded, twisting to look back at him in amazement. "I've heard a good many peculiar Scottish names, but that's a new one."

He rested his chin comfortably on my shoulder, watching the kitten sleep.

"My mother had a wee cat named Adso," he said, surprisingly. "A gray cheetie, verra much like this one."

"Did she?" I laid a hand on his leg. He rarely spoke of his mother, who had died when he was eight.

"Aye, she did. A rare mouser, and that fond of my mother; he didna have much use for us bairns." He smiled in memory. "Possibly because Jenny dressed him in baby-gowns and fed him rusks, and I dropped him into the millpond, to see could he swim. He could, by the way," he informed me, "but he didna like to."

"I can't say I blame him," I said, amused. "Why was he called Adso, though? Is it a saint's name?" I was used to the peculiar names of Celtic saints, from Aodh—pronounced OOH—to Dervorgilla, but hadn't heard of Saint Adso before. Probably the patron saint of mice.

"Not a saint," he corrected. "A monk. My mother was verra learned—she was educated at Leoch, ye ken, along with Colum and Dougal, and could read Greek and Latin, and a bit of the Hebrew as well as French and German. She didna have so much opportunity for reading at Lallybroch, of course, but my father would take pains to have books fetched for her, from Edinburgh and Paris."

He reached across my body to touch a silky, translucent ear, and the kitten twitched its whiskers, screwing up its face as though about to sneeze, but didn't open its eyes. The purr continued unabated.

"One of the books she liked was written by an Austrian, from the city of Melk, and so she thought it a verra suitable name for the kit."

"Suitable …?"

"Aye," he said, nodding toward the empty dish, without the slightest twitch of lip or eyelid. "Adso of Milk."

A slit of green showed as one eye opened, as though in response to the name. Then it closed again, and the purring resumed.

“Well, if he doesn’t mind, I suppose I don’t,” I said, resigned. “Adso it is.”

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THE DEVIL YE KEN

A week later, we—that is, the women—were engaged in the backbreaking business of laundry when Clarence the mule let out his clarion announcement that company was coming. Little Mrs. Aberfeldy leaped as though she'd been stung by a bee, and dropped an armload of wet shirts in the dirt of the yard. I could see Mrs. Bug and Mrs. Chisholm opening their mouths in reproach, and took the opportunity to wipe my hands on my apron and hurry round to the front, to greet whatever visitor might be approaching.

Sure enough; a bay mule was coming out of the trees at the head of the trail, followed by a fat brown mare on a leading rein. The mule's ears flicked forward and he brayed enthusiastically in reply to Clarence's greeting. I stuck my fingers in my ears to block the ungodly racket, and squinted against the dazzle of the afternoon sun to make out the mule's rider.

"Mr. Husband!" Pulling my fingers out of my ears, I hurried forward to greet him.

"Mrs. Fraser—good day to thee!"

Hermon Husband pulled off his black slouch hat and gave me a brief nod of greeting, then slid off the mule with a groan that spoke of a good many hours in the saddle. His lips moved soundlessly in the framework of his beard as he straightened stiffly; he was a Quaker, and didn't use strong language. Not out loud, at least.

"Is thy husband at home, Mrs. Fraser?"

"I just saw him heading for the stable; I'll go and find him!" I shouted, above the continued braying of the mules. I took the hat from him, and gestured toward the house. "I'll see to your animals!"

He nodded thanks and limped slowly round the house, toward the kitchen door. From the back, I could see how painfully he moved; he could barely put weight on his left foot. The hat in my hand was covered with dust and mud stains, and I had smelled the odor of unwashed clothes and body when he stood near me. He'd been a long time riding, and not just today—for a week or more, I thought, and sleeping rough for the most of it.

I unsaddled the mule, removing in the process two worn saddlebags half-filled with printed pamphlets, badly printed and crudely illustrated. I studied the illustration with some interest; it was a woodcut of several indignant and righteous-looking Regulators defying a group of officials, among whom was a squat figure I had no trouble identifying as David Anstruther; the caption didn't mention him by name, but the artist had captured the Sheriff's resemblance to a poisonous toad with remarkable facility. Had Husband taken to delivering the bloody things door-to-door? I wondered.

I turned the animals out into the paddock, dumped the hat and saddlebags by the porch, then trekked up the hill to the stable, a shallow cave that Jamie had walled with thick palisades. Brianna referred to it as the maternity ward, since the usual occupants were imminently expectant mares, cows, or sows.

I wondered what brought Hermon Husband here—and whether he was being followed. He owned a farm and a small mill, both at least two days' ride from the Ridge; not a journey he would undertake simply for the pleasure of our company.

Husband was one of the leaders of the Regulation, and had been jailed more than once for the rabble-rousing pamphlets he printed and distributed. The most recent news I had heard of him was that he had been read out of the local Quaker meeting, the Friends taking a dim view of his activities, which they regarded as incitement to violence. I rather thought they had a point, judging from the pamphlets I'd read.

The door of the stable stood open, allowing the pleasantly fecund scents of straw, warm animals, and manure to drift out, along with a stream of similarly fecund words. Jamie, no Quaker, did believe in strong language, and was using rather a lot of it, albeit in Gaelic, which tends toward the poetic, rather than the vulgar.

I translated the current effusion roughly as, “May your guts twine upon themselves like serpents and your bowels explode through the walls of your belly! May the curse of the crows be upon you, misbegotten spawn of a lineage of dung flies!” Or words to that effect.

“Who are you talking to?” I inquired, putting my head round the stable door. “And what’s the curse of the crows?”

I blinked against the sudden dimness, seeing him only as a tall shadow against the piles of pale hay stacked by the wall. He turned, hearing me, and strode into the light from the door. He’d been running his hands through his hair; several strands were pulled from their binding, standing on end, and there were straws sticking out of it.

“Tha nighean na galladh torrach!” he said, with a ferocious scowl and a brief gesture behind him.

“White daughter of a bi—oh! You mean that blasted sow has done it again?”

The big white sow, while possessed of superior fatness and amazing reproductive capacity, was also a creature of low cunning, and impatient of captivity. She had escaped her brood pen twice before, once by the expedient of charging Lizzie, who had—wisely—screamed and dived out of the way as the pig barged past, and again by assiduously rooting up one side of the pen, lying in wait until the stable door was opened, and knocking me flat as she made for the wide-open spaces.

This time, she hadn’t bothered with strategy, but merely smashed out a board from her pen, then rooted and dug under the palisades, making an escape tunnel worthy of British prisoners-of-war in a Nazi camp.

“Aye, she has,” Jamie said, reverting to English now that his initial fury had subsided somewhat. “As for the curse o’ the crows, it depends. It might mean ye want the corbies to come down on a man’s fields and eat his corn. In this case, I had in mind the birds pecking out the evil creature’s eyes.”

"I suppose that would make her easier to catch," I said, sighing. "How near is she to farrowing, do you think?"

He shrugged and shoved a hand through his hair.

"A day, two days, three, maybe. Serve the creature right if she farrows in the wood and is eaten by wolves, her and her piglets together." He kicked moodily at the heap of raw earth left by the sow's tunneling, sending a cascade of dirt down into the hole. "Who's come? I heard Clarence yammering."

"Hermon Husband."

He turned sharply toward me, instantly forgetting the pig.

"Has he, then?" he said softly, as though to himself. "Why, I wonder?"

"So did I. He's been riding for some time—distributing pamphlets, evidently."

I had to scamper after Jamie as I added this; he was already striding down the hill toward the house, tidying his hair as he went. I caught up just in time to brush bits of straw from his shoulders before he reached the yard.

Jamie nodded casually to Mrs. Chisholm and Mrs. MacLeod, who were hoicking steaming bales of wet clothes from the big kettle with paddles and spreading them on bushes to dry. I scuttled along with Jamie, ignoring the women's accusing stares and trying to look as though I had much more important concerns to deal with than laundry.

Someone had found Husband refreshment; a plate of partially eaten bread and butter and a half-full mug of buttermilk lay on the table. So did Husband, who had put his head on his folded arms and fallen asleep. Adso crouched on the table beside him, fascinated by the bushy gray whiskers that quivered like antennae with the Quaker's reverberating snores. The kitten was just reaching an experimental paw toward Husband's open mouth when Jamie nabbed him by the scruff of the neck and dropped him neatly into my hands.

"Mr. Husband?" he said quietly, leaning over the table. "Your servant, sir."

Husband snorted, blinked, then sat up suddenly, nearly upsetting the buttermilk. He goggled briefly at me and Adso, then seemed to recollect where he was, for he shook himself, and half-rose, nodding to Jamie.

"Friend Fraser," he said thickly. "I am—I beg pardon—I have been—"

Jamie brushed away his apologies and sat down opposite him, casually picking up a slice of bread and butter from the plate.

"May I be of service to ye, Mr. Husband?"

Husband scrubbed a hand over his face, which did nothing to improve his looks, but did seem to rouse him more fully. Seen clearly in the soft afternoon light of the kitchen, he looked even worse than he had outside, his eyes pouched and bloodshot and his grizzled hair and beard tangled in knots. He was only in his mid-fifties, I knew, but looked at least ten years older. He made an attempt to straighten his coat, and nodded to me, then Jamie.

"I thank thee for the hospitality of thy welcome, Mrs. Fraser. And thee also, Mr. Fraser. I have come indeed to ask a service of thee, if I may."

"Ye may ask, of course," Jamie said courteously. He took a bite of bread and butter, raising his eyebrows in question.

"Will thee buy my horse?"

Jamie's eyebrows stayed raised. He chewed slowly, considering, then swallowed.

"Why?"

Why, indeed. It would have been a great deal easier for Husband to sell a horse in Salem or High Point, if he didn't want to ride as far as Cross Creek. No one in his right mind would venture to a remote place like the Ridge, simply to sell a horse. I set Adso on the floor and sat down beside Jamie, waiting for the answer.

Husband gave him a look, clear and direct for all its bloodshot quality.

"Thee is appointed a colonel of militia, I'm told."

"For my sins," Jamie said, bread poised in the air. "Do ye suppose the Governor has given me money to provide mounts for my regiment?" He took a bite, half-smiling.

The corner of Husband's mouth lifted briefly in acknowledgment of the joke. A colonel of militia supplied his regiment himself, counting upon eventual reimbursement from the Assembly; one reason why only men of property were so appointed—and a major reason why the appointment was not considered an unalloyed honor.

"If he had, I should be pleased to take some of it." At Jamie's gesture of invitation, Husband reached out and selected another slice of bread and butter, which he munched gravely, looking at Jamie under thick salt-and-pepper brows. Finally, he shook his head.

"Nay, friend James. I must sell my stock to pay the fines levied upon me by the Court. If I do not sell what I can, it may be seized. And if I will not, then I have no choice save to quit the colony and remove my family elsewhere—and if I remove, then I must dispose of what I cannot take—for what price I may get."

A small line formed between Jamie's brows.

"Aye, I see," he said slowly. "I would help ye, Hermon, in any way I might. Ye ken that, I hope. But I have scarce two shillings in cash money—not even proclamation money, let alone sterling. If there is anything I have that would be of use to ye, though …"

Husband smiled slightly, his harsh features softening.

"Aye, friend James. Thy friendship and thy honor are of great use to me, indeed. For the rest …" He sat back from the table, groping in the small shoulder bag he had set down beside him. He came up with a thin letter, bearing a red wax seal. I recognized the seal, and my chest tightened.

"I met the messenger at Pumpkin Town," Husband said, watching as Jamie took the letter and put his thumb beneath the flap. "I offered to carry the letter to thee, as I was bound here in any case."

Jamie's brows lifted, but his attention was focused on the sheet of paper in his hand. I came close, to see over his shoulder.

November 22, 1770

Colonel James Fraser

> *Whereas I am informed that those who stile themselves Regulators have gathered together in some force near Salisbury, I have sent word to General Waddell to proceed thither at once with the militia troops at his disposal in hopes of dispersing this unlawful assemblage. You are requested and commanded to gather such men as you judge fit to serve in a Regiment of Militia, and proceed with them to Salisbury with as much despatch as may be managed so as to join the General's troops on or before 15 December, at which point he will march upon Salisbury. So far as possible, bring with you flour and other provision sufficient to supply your men for a space of two weeks.*
>
> *Your ob't. servant,*
> *William Tryon*

The room was quiet, save for the soft rumbling of the cauldron over the coals in the hearth. Outside, I could hear the women talking in short bursts, interspersed with grunts of effort, and the smell of lye soap drifted through the open window, mingling with the scents of stew and rising bread.

Jamie looked up at Husband.

"Ye ken what this says?"

The Quaker nodded, the lines of his face sagging in sudden fatigue.

"The messenger told me. The Governor has no wish to keep his intent secret, after all."

Jamie gave a small grunt of agreement, and glanced at me. No, the Governor wouldn't want to keep it secret. So far as Tryon was concerned, the more people who knew that Waddell was heading for Salisbury with a large militia troop, the better. Hence also the setting of a specific date. Any wise soldier would prefer to intimidate an enemy rather than fight him—and given that Tryon had no official troops, discretion was certainly the better part of valor.

"What about the Regulators?" I asked Husband. "What are they planning to do?"

He looked mildly startled.

"Do?"

"If your people are assembling, it is presumably to some purpose," Jamie pointed out, a slightly sardonic tone to his voice. Husband heard it, but didn't take exception.

"Certainly there is purpose," he said, drawing himself up with some dignity. "Though thee is mistaken to say these men are mine, in any way save that of brethren, as are all men. But as to purpose, it is only to protest the abuses of power as are all too common these days—the imposition of illegal taxes, the unwarranted seizure of—"

Jamie made an impatient gesture, cutting him off.

"Aye, Hermon, I've heard it. Worse, I've read your writings about it. And if that is the Regulators' purpose, what is yours?"

The Quaker stared at him, thick brows raised and mouth half open in question.

"Tryon has no wish to keep his intentions secret," Jamie elaborated, "but you might. It doesna serve the Regulators' interest that those intentions be carried out, after all." He stared at Husband, rubbing a finger slowly up and down the long, straight bridge of his nose.

Husband raised a hand and scratched at his chin.

"Thee mean why did I bring that"—he nodded toward the letter, which lay open on the table—"when I might have suppressed it?"

Jamie nodded patiently.

"I do."

Husband heaved a deep sigh, and stretched himself, joints cracking audibly. Small white puffs of dust rose from his coat, dissipating like smoke. He settled back into himself then, blinking and looking more comfortable.

"Putting aside any consideration of the honesty of such conduct, friend James … I did say that it was thy friendship that would be of most use to me."

"So ye did." The hint of a smile touched the corner of Jamie's mouth.

"Say for the sake of argument that General Waddell does march upon a group of Regulators," Husband suggested. "Is it to the benefit of the Regulators to face men who do not know them, and are inimical to them—or to face neighbors, who know them and are perhaps in some sympathy with their cause?”

“Better the Devil ye ken than the Devil ye don’t, eh?” Jamie suggested. “And I’m the Devil ye ken. I see.”

A slow smile blossomed on Husband’s face, matching the one on Jamie’s.

“One of them, friend James. I have been a-horse these ten days past, selling my stock and visiting in one house and another, across the western part of the colony. The Regulation makes no threat, seeks no destruction of property; we wish only that our complaints be heard, and addressed; it is to draw attention to the widespread nature and the justness of these complaints that those most offended are assembling at Salisbury. But I cannot well expect sympathy from those who lack information of the offense, after all.”

The smile faded from Jamie’s face.

“Ye may have my sympathy, Hermon, and welcome. But if it comes to it … I am Colonel of militia. I will have a duty to be carried out, whether that duty is to my liking or no.”

Husband flapped a hand, dismissing this.

“I would not ask thee to forsake duty—if it comes. I pray it does not.” He leaned forward a little, across the table. “I would ask something of thee, though. My wife, my children … if I must leave hurriedly …”

“Send them here. They will be safe.”

Husband sat back then, shoulders slumping. He closed his eyes and breathed once, deeply, then opened them and set his hands on the table, as though to rise.

“I thank thee. As to the mare—keep her. If my family should have need of her, someone will come. If not—I should greatly prefer that thee have the use of her, rather than some corrupt sheriff.”

I felt Jamie move, wanting to protest, and laid a hand on his leg to stop him. Hermon Husband needed reassurance, much more than he needed a horse he could not keep.

“We’ll take good care of her,” I said, smiling into his eyes. “And of your family, if the need comes. Tell me, what is her name?”

“The mare?” Hermon rose to his feet, and a sudden smile split his face, lightening it amazingly. “Her name is Jerusha, but my wife calls her Mistress Piggy; I am afraid she does possess a great appetite,” he added apologetically to Jamie, who had stiffened perceptibly at the word “pig.”

“No matter,” Jamie said, dismissing pigs from his mind with an obvious effort. He rose, glancing at the window, where the rays of the afternoon sun were turning the polished pinewood of the sills and floors to molten gold. “It grows late, Hermon. Will ye not sup with us, and stop the night?”

Husband shook his head, and stooped to retrieve his shoulder bag.

“Nay, friend James, I thank thee. I have many places still to go.”

I insisted that he wait, though, while I made up a parcel of food for him, and he went with Jamie to saddle his mule while I did so. I heard them talking quietly together as they came back from the paddock, voices so low-pitched that I couldn’t make out the words. As I came out onto the back porch with the package of sandwiches and beer, though, I heard Jamie say to him, with a sort of urgency, “Are ye sure, Hermon, that what ye do is wise—or necessary?”

Husband didn’t answer immediately, but took the parcel from me with a nod of thanks. Then he turned to Jamie, the mule’s bridle in his other hand.

“I am minded,” he said, glancing from Jamie to me, “of James Nayler. Thee will have heard of him?”

Jamie looked as blank as I did, and Hermon smiled in his beard.

“He was an early member of the Society of Friends, one of those who joined George Fox, who began the Society in England. James Nayler was a man of forceful conviction, though he was … individual in his expression of it. Upon one famous occasion, he walked naked through the snow, whilst shouting doom to the city of Bristol. George Fox inquired of him then, ‘Is thee *sure* the Lord told thee to do this?’ ”

The smile widened, and he put his hat carefully back on his head.

“He said that he was. And so am I, friend James. God keep thee and thy family.”

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SHOOTING LESSONS

Brianna glanced back over her shoulder, feeling guilty. The house below had disappeared beneath a yellow sea of chestnut leaves, but the cries of her child still rang in her ears.

Roger saw her look back down the mountainside, and frowned a little, though his voice was light when he spoke.

“He’ll be fine, hen. You know your mother and Lizzie will take good care of him.”

“Lizzie will spoil him rotten,” she agreed, but with a queer tug at her heart at the admission. She could easily see Lizzie carrying Jemmy to and fro all day, playing with him, making faces at him, feeding him rice pudding with molasses … Jemmy would love the attention, once he got over the distress of her leaving. She felt a sudden surge of territorial feeling regarding Jemmy’s small pink toes; she hated the very idea of Lizzie playing Ten Wee Piggies with him.

She hated leaving him, period. His shrieks of panic as she pried his grip from her shirt and handed him over to her mother echoed in her mind, magnified by imagination, and his tearstained look of outraged betrayal lingered in her mind.

At the same time, her need to escape was urgent. She couldn’t wait to peel Jem’s sticky, clutching hands off her skin and speed away into the morning, free as one of the homing geese that honked their way south through the mountain passes.

She supposed, reluctantly, that she wouldn’t feel nearly so guilty about leaving Jemmy, had she not secretly been so eager to do it.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” she reassured herself, more than Roger. “It’s just … I’ve never really left him for very long before.”

“Mmphm.” Roger made a noncommittal noise that might have been interpreted as sympathy. His expression, however, made it clear that he personally thought it well past time that she *had* left the baby.

A momentary spurt of anger warmed her face, but she bit her tongue. He hadn’t said anything, after all—had clearly made an effort not to say anything, in fact. She could make an effort, too—and she supposed that it was perhaps not fair to quarrel with someone on the basis of what you thought they were thinking.

She choked off the acrimonious remark she’d had in mind, and instead smiled at him.

“Nice day, isn’t it?”

The wary look faded from his face, and he smiled, too, his eyes warming to a green as deep and fresh as the moss that lay in thick beds at the shaded feet of the trees they passed.

“Great day,” he said. “Feels good to be out of the house, aye?”

She shot a quick look at him, but it seemed to be a simple statement of fact, with no ulterior motives behind it.

She didn’t answer, but nodded in agreement, lifting her face to the errant breeze that wandered through the spruce and fir around them. A swirl of rusty aspen leaves blew down, clinging momentarily to the homespun of their breeches and the light wool of their stockings.

“Wait a minute.”

On impulse, she stopped and pulled off her leather buskins and stockings, pushing them carelessly into the rucksack on her shoulder. She stood still, eyes closed in ecstasy, wiggling long bare toes in a patch of damp moss.

“Oh, Roger, try it! This is wonderful!”

He lifted one eyebrow, but obligingly set down the gun—he had taken it, when they left the house, and she had let him, despite a proprietorial urge to carry it herself—undid his own footgear, and cautiously slid one long-boned foot into the moss beside hers. His eyes closed involuntarily, and his mouth rounded into a soundless "ooh."

Moved by impulse, she leaned over and kissed him. His eyes flew open in startlement, but he had fast reflexes. He wrapped a long arm around her waist and kissed her back, thoroughly. It was an unusually warm day for late autumn, and he wore no coat, only a hunting shirt. His chest felt startlingly immediate through the woolen cloth of his shirt; she could feel the tiny bump of his nipple rising under the palm of her hand.

God knew what might have happened next, but the wind changed. A faint cry drifted up from the sea of tossing yellow below. It might have been a baby's cry, or perhaps only a distant crow, but her head swiveled toward it, like a compass needle pointing to true north.

It broke the mood, and he let go, stepping back.

"D'ye want to go back?" he asked, sounding resigned.

She pressed her lips together and shook her head.

"No. Let's get a little farther away from the house, though. We don't want to bother them with the noise. Of—of shooting, I mean."

He grinned, and she felt the blood rise hot in her face. No, she couldn't pretend she hadn't realized there was more than one motive for this private expedition.

"No, not that, either," he said. He stooped for his shoes and stockings. "Come on, then."

She declined to put on her own footwear, but took the opportunity to reappropriate the gun. It wasn't that she didn't trust him with it, though he admitted he hadn't fired such a gun before. She just liked the feel of it, and felt secure with its weight balanced on her shoulder, even unloaded. A Land pattern musket, it was more than five feet long, and weighed a good ten pounds or so, but the butt of the polished walnut stock fitted snugly into her hand and the weight of the steel barrel felt right, laid in the hollow of her shoulder, muzzle to the sky.

"You're going to go barefoot?" Roger cast a quizzical glance at her feet, then ahead, up the mountainside, where a faint path wove through blackberry brambles and fallen branches.

"Just for a while," she assured him. "I used to go barefoot all the time when I was little. Daddy—Frank—took us to the mountains every summer, to the White Mountains or the Adirondacks. After a week, the bottoms of my feet were like leather; I could have walked on hot coals and not felt a thing."

"Aye, I did, too," he said, smiling, and tucked his shoes away as well. "Granted," he said, with a nod toward the faint path that wove its way through brush and half-buried granite outcrops, "the walking along the riverbank of the Ness or the shingle by the Firth was a bit easier going than this, stones notwithstanding."

"That's a point," she said, frowning slightly at his feet. "Have you had a tetanus shot recently? In case you step on something sharp and get punctured?"

He was already climbing ahead of her, choosing his footing cautiously.

"I had injections for everything one could possibly have injections for, before I came through the stones," he assured her, over one shoulder. "Typhoid, cholera, dengue fever, the lot. I'm sure tetanus was in there."

"Dengue fever? I thought I'd had shots for everything, too, but not that one." Digging her toes into the cool mats of dead grass, she took a few long strides to catch him up.

"Shouldn't need it up here." The path ambled round the curve of a steep bank overgrown with yellowing pawpaw and vanished under the overhang of a clump of black-green hemlock. He held the heavy branches back for her and she ducked under them into the pungent gloom, gun held carefully crosswise.

"I wasn't sure where I might have to go, see." His voice came from behind her, casual, damped by the darkened air under the trees. "If it was the coastal towns, or the West Indies … there were … there *are*," he corrected himself, automatically, "any number of entertaining African diseases, brought in by the slave ships. Thought I'd best be prepared."

She took advantage of the rough terrain not to answer, but was dismayed—and at the same time, rather shamefully pleased—to discover the lengths to which he'd been prepared to go in order to follow and find her.

The ground was covered with the mottled brown of shed needles, but so damp that there was neither crackle nor prick beneath her feet. It felt spongy, cool, and pleasant under her bare soles, with a give to it that made her think the mass of dead needles must be a foot thick, at least.

"Ow!" Roger, not so lucky in his passage, had set his foot on a rotten persimmon and slid, barely catching himself by grabbing hold of a holly bush, which promptly stabbed him with its prickly leaves.

"Shit," he said, sucking the wounded thumb. "Good thing about the tetanus, aye?"

She laughed in agreement, but found herself worrying as they climbed. What about Jemmy, when he began to walk, and clamber over mountains barefoot? She'd seen enough of the small MacLeods and Chisholms—to say nothing of Germain—to realize that small boys punctured, scraped, lacerated, and fractured themselves on a weekly basis, at least. She and Roger were protected against things like diphtheria and typhoid—Jemmy would have no such protection.

She swallowed, remembering the night before. That murderous horse of her father's had bitten him in the arm, and Claire had made Jamie sit down shirtless before the fire while she cleaned and dressed the bite. Jemmy had poked a curious head up from his cradle, and his grandfather, smiling, had scooped him out and taken him upon his knee.

"Gallopy trot, gallopy trot," he'd chanted, bouncing a delighted Jemmy gently up and down. " 'Tis a wicked horse that I have got!/Gallopy trot, gallopy trot/Let's send him to hell and then he'll be hot!"

It wasn't the charming scene of the two redheads giggling at each other that stuck in her mind, though; it was the firelight glowing in her son's translucent, perfect, untouched skin—and shining silver on the webbed scars across her father's back, black-red on the bloody gash in his arm. It was a dangerous time for men.

She couldn't keep Jem safe from harm; she knew that. But the thought of him—or Roger—being injured or ill made her stomach knot and cold sweat come out on the sides of her face.

"Is your thumb all right?" She turned back toward Roger, who looked surprised, having forgotten all about his thumb.

"What?" He looked at it, puzzled. "Aye, of course."

Nonetheless, she took his hand, and kissed the wounded thumb.

"You be *careful*," she said fiercely.

He laughed, and looked surprised when she glared at him.

"I will," he said, sobering a little. He nodded at the gun she carried. "Don't worry; I may not have fired one, but I know a wee bit about them. I won't blow my fingers off. Does this look all right for a bit of practice?"

They had come out into a heath bald, a high meadow thick with grass and rhododendron. There was a stand of aspen at the far side, their pale branches aflutter with a few late tatters of gold and crimson leaves, vivid against the deep blue sky. A stream gurgled downhill, somewhere out of sight, and a red-tailed hawk circled high overhead. The sun was well up now, warm on her shoulders, and there was a pleasant, grassy bank nearby.

"Just right," she said, and swung the gun down from her shoulder.

It was a beautiful gun, more than five feet long, but so perfectly balanced you could rest it across your outstretched arm without a wobble—which Brianna was doing, by way of demonstration.

"See?" she said, pulling her arm in and sweeping the stock up to her shoulder in one fluid movement. "That's the balance point; you want to put your left hand right there, grab the stock by the trigger with your right, and butt it back into your shoulder. Snug it in, really solidly. There's some kick to it." She bumped the burled walnut stock gently into the socket of her buckskinned shoulder in illustration, then lowered the gun and handed it to Roger, with a somewhat more tender caution than she showed when handing him her infant child, he noted wryly. On the other hand, so far as he could tell, Jemmy was much more indestructible than the gun.

She showed him, hesitant at first, reluctant to correct him. He bit his own tongue, though, and imitated her carefully, following the smooth flow of the steps from ripping the cartridge open with his teeth to priming, loading, ramming, and checking, annoyed at his own novice awkwardness, but secretly fascinated—and more than slightly aroused—by the casual ferocity of her movements.

Her hands were nearly as large as his own, though finely boned; she handled the long gun with the familiarity other women showed with needle and broom. She wore breeks of homespun, and the long muscle of her thigh rose up tight and round against the cloth when she squatted beside him, head bent as she groped in her leather bag.

"What, you packed a lunch?" he joked. "I thought we'd just shoot something and eat it."

She ignored him. She pulled out a ragged white kerchief to use as a target, and shook it out, frowning critically. Once he had thought of her scent as jasmine and grass; now she smelled of gunpowder, leather, and sweat. He breathed it, his fingers unobtrusively stroking the wood of the gunstock.

"Ready?" she said, glancing at him with a smile.

"Oh, aye," he said.

"Check your flint and priming," she said, rising. "I'll pin up the target."

Seen from the back, her ruddy hair clubbed tightly back, and clad in a loose buckskin hunting shirt that covered her from shoulder to thigh, her resemblance to her father was intensified to a startling degree. No mistaking the two, though, he thought. Breeks or no, Jamie Fraser had never in life had an arse like *that*. He watched her walk, congratulating himself on his choice of instructor.

His father-in-law would have given him a lesson, willingly. Jamie was a fine shot, and a patient teacher; Roger had seen him taking the Chisholm boys out after supper, to practice blasting away at rocks and trees in the empty cornfield. It was one thing for Jamie to know that Roger was inexperienced with guns; it was another to suffer the humiliation of demonstrating just *how* inexperienced, under that dispassionate blue gaze.

Beyond the matter of pride, though, he had an ulterior motive in asking Brianna to come out shooting with him. Not that he thought said motive was in any way hidden; Claire had glanced from him to her daughter when he had suggested it, and looked amused in a particularly knowing way that had made Brianna frown and say, "Mother!" in an accusatory tone of voice.

Beyond the all-too-brief hours of their wedding night at the Gathering, this was the first—and only—time he'd had Brianna to himself, free from the insatiable demands of her offspring.

He caught the gleam of sun off metal as she lowered her arm. She was wearing his bracelet, he realized with a deep feeling of pleasure. He had given it to her when he'd asked her to marry him—a lifetime ago, in the freezing mists of a winter night in Inverness. It was a simple circlet of silver, engraved with a series of phrases in French. *Je t'aime*, it said: *I love you. Un peu, beaucoup, passionnément, pas du tout: A little, a lot, passionately—not at all.*

"Passionnément," he murmured, envisioning her wearing nothing *but* his bracelet and her wedding ring.

First things first, though, he told himself, and picked up a fresh cartridge. After all, they had time.

Satisfied that his loading habits were on the way to being well established, if not yet rapid, Brianna finally allowed him to practice sighting, and at last, to shoot.

It took a dozen tries before he could hit the white square of the kerchief, but the sense of exultation he felt when a dark spot appeared suddenly near the edge of it had him reaching for a fresh cartridge before the smoke of the shot had dissipated. The sense of excited accomplishment took him through another dozen cartridges, scarcely noticing anything beyond the jerk and boom of the gun, the flash of powder, and the breathless instant of realization when he saw an occasional shot go home.

The kerchief hung in tatters by this time, and small clouds of whitish smoke floated over the meadow. The hawk had decamped at the sound of the first shot, along with all the other birds of the neighborhood, though the ringing in his ears sounded like a whole chorus of distant titmice.

He lowered the gun and looked at Brianna, grinning, whereupon she burst into laughter.

"You look like the end man in a minstrel show," she said, the end of her nose going pink with amusement. "Here, clean up a little, and we'll try shooting from farther away."

She took the gun and handed him a clean handkerchief in exchange. He wiped black soot from his face, watching as she swiftly swabbed the barrel and reloaded. She straightened, then heard something; her head rose suddenly, eyes fixing on an oak across the meadow.

Ears still ringing from the roar of the gun, Roger had heard nothing. Swinging round, though, he caught a flicker of movement; a dark gray squirrel, poised on a pine branch at least thirty feet above the ground.

Without the slightest hesitation, Brianna raised the gun to her shoulder and seemed to fire in the same motion. The branch directly under the squirrel exploded in a shower of wood chips, and the squirrel, blown off its feet, plunged to the ground, bouncing off the springy evergreen branches as it went.

Roger ran across to the foot of the tree, but there was no need to hurry; the squirrel lay dead, limp as a furry rag.

"Good shot," he said in congratulation, holding up the corpse as Brianna came to see. "But there's not a mark on him—you must have scared him to death."

Brianna gave him a level look from beneath her brows.

"If I'd meant to hit him, Roger, I'd have hit him," she said, with a slight edge of reproof. "And if I *had* hit him, you'd be holding a handful of squirrel mush. You don't aim right at something that size; you aim to hit just under them and knock them down. It's called barking," she explained, like a kindly kindergarten teacher correcting a slow pupil.

"Oh, aye?" He repressed a small sense of irritation. "Your father teach you that?"

She gave him a slightly odd look before replying.

"No, Ian did."

He made a noncommittal noise in response to that. Ian was a point of awkwardness in the family. Brianna's cousin had been well-loved, and he knew the whole family missed him. Still, they hesitated to speak of Young Ian before Roger, out of delicacy.

It hadn't exactly been Roger's *fault* that Ian Murray had remained with the Mohawk—but there was no denying that he had had a part in the matter. If he hadn't killed that Indian …

Not for the first time, he pushed aside the confused memories of that night in Snaketown, but felt nonetheless the physical echoes; the quicksilver rush of terror through his belly and the judder of impact through the muscles of his forearms, as he drove the broken end of a wooden pole with all his strength into a shadow that had sprung up before him out of the shrieking dark. A very solid shadow.

Brianna had crossed the meadow, and set up another target; three irregular chunks of wood set on a stump the size of a dinner table. Without comment, he wiped his sweating hands on his breeks, and concentrated on the new challenge, but Ian Murray refused to leave his mind. He'd barely seen the man, but remembered him clearly; hardly more than a youth, tall and gangly, with a homely but appealing face.

He couldn't think of Murray's face without seeing it as he last had, scabbed with a line of freshly tattooed dots that looped across the cheeks and over the bridge of his nose. His face was brown from the sun, but the skin of his freshly plucked scalp had been a fresh and startling pink, naked as a baby's bum and blotched red from the irritation of the plucking.

"What's the matter?"

Brianna's voice startled him, and the barrel jerked up as he fired, the shot going wild. Or wilder, rather. He hadn't managed to hit any of the wooden blocks in a dozen shots.

He lowered the gun and turned to her. She was frowning, but didn't look angry, only puzzled and concerned.

"What's wrong?" she asked again.

He took a deep breath and rubbed his sleeve across his face, careless of the smears of black soot.

"Your cousin," he said abruptly. "I'm sorry about him, Bree."

Her face softened, and the worried frown eased a little.

"Oh," she said. She laid a hand on his arm and drew near, so he felt the warmth of her closeness. She sighed deeply and laid her forehead against his shoulder.

"Well," she said at last, "I'm sorry, too—but it isn't any more your fault than mine or Da's—or Ian's, for that matter." She gave a small snort that might have been intended for a laugh. "If it's anyone's fault, it's Lizzie's—and nobody blames *her*."

He smiled at that, a little wryly.

"Aye, I see," he answered, and cupped a hand over the cool smoothness of her plait. "You're right. And yet—I killed a man, Bree."

She didn't startle or jerk away, but somehow went completely still. So did he; it was the last thing he'd meant to say.

"You never told me that before," she said at last, raising her head to look at him. She sounded tentative, unsure whether to pursue the matter. The breeze lifted a strand of hair across her face, but she didn't move to brush it away.

"I—well, to tell ye the truth, I've scarcely thought of it." He dropped his hand, and the stasis was broken. She shook herself a little and stood back.

"That sounds terrible, doesn't it? But—" He struggled for words. He'd not meant to say anything, but now he'd started, it seemed urgently necessary to explain, to put it into proper words.

"It was at night, during a fight in the village. I escaped—I'd a bit of broken pole in my hand, and when someone loomed up out of the darkness, I …"

His shoulders slumped suddenly, as he realized that there was no possible way to explain, not really. He looked down at the gun he still held.

“I didn’t know I’d killed him,” he said quietly, eyes on the flint. “I didn’t even see his face. I still don’t know who it was—though it had to be someone I knew; Snaketown was a small village, I knew all *ne rononkwe*.” Why, he wondered suddenly, had he never once thought of asking who the dead man was? Plain enough; he hadn’t asked because he didn’t want to know.

“Ne rononkwe?” She repeated the words uncertainly.

“The men … the warriors … braves. It’s what they call themselves, the *Kahnyen’kehaka*.” The Mohawk words felt strange on his tongue; alien and familiar at once. He could see wariness on her face, and knew his speaking of it had sounded odd to her; not the way one uses a foreign term, handling it gingerly, but the way her father sometimes casually mingled Gaelic and Scots, mind seizing on the most available word in either language.

He stared down at the gun in his hand, as though he’d never seen one before. He wasn’t looking at her, but felt her draw near again, still tentative, but not repulsed.

“Are you … sorry about it?”

“No,” he said at once, and looked up at her. “I mean … aye, I’m sorry it happened. But sorry I did it—no.” He had spoken without pausing to weigh his words, and was surprised—and relieved—to find them true. He felt regret, as he’d told her, but what guilt there was had nothing to do with the shadow’s death, whoever it had been. He had been a slave in Snaketown, and had no great love for any of the Mohawk, though some were decent enough. He’d not intended killing, but had defended himself. He’d do it again, in the same circumstance.

Yet there was a small canker of guilt—the realization of just how easily he had dismissed that death. The *Kahnyen’kehaka* sang and told stories of their dead, and kept their memory alive around the fires of the longhouses, naming them for generations and recounting their deeds. Just as the Highlanders did. He thought suddenly of Jamie Fraser, face ablaze at the great fire of the Gathering, calling his people by name and by lineage. *Stand by my hand, Roger the singer, son of Jeremiah MacKenzie*. Perhaps Ian Murray found the Mohawk not so strange, after all.

Still, he felt obscurely as though he had deprived the unknown dead man of name, as well as life, seeking to blot him out by forgetting, to behave as though that death had never happened, only to save himself from the knowledge of it. And that, he thought, was wrong.

Her face was still, but not frozen; her eyes rested on his with something like compassion. Still, he looked away, back at the gun whose barrel he gripped. His fingers, soot-stained, had left greasy black ovals on the metal; she reached out and took it from him, rubbing the marks away with the hem of her shirt.

He let her take it, and watched, rubbing his dirty fingers against the side of his breeches.

"It's just … does it not seem that if ye must kill a man, it should be on purpose? Meaning it?"

She didn't answer, but her lips pursed slightly, then relaxed.

"If you shoot someone with this, Roger, it will be on purpose," she said quietly. She looked up at him, then, blue eyes intent, and he saw that what he had taken for compassion was in fact a fierce stillness, like the small blue flames in a burned-out log.

"And if you have to shoot someone, Roger, I want you to mean it."

Two dozen rounds later, he could hit the wooden blocks at least once in six tries. He would have kept it up, doggedly, but she could see the muscles in his forearms beginning to tremble as he lifted the gun, stilled by effort of will. He would begin to miss more often now, out of fatigue, and that would do him no good.

Or her. Her breasts were beginning to ache, engorged with milk. She'd have to do something about it soon.

"Let's go and eat," she said, smiling as she took the musket from him after the last shot. "I'm starving."

The exertion of shooting, reloading, putting up targets, had kept them both warm, but it was nearly winter, and the air was cold; much too cold, she thought regretfully, to lie naked in the dry ferns.

But the sun was warm, and with forethought, she had packed two ratty quilts in her rucksack, along with the lunch.

He was quiet, but it was a comfortable quiet. She watched him cut slivers from the chunk of hard cheese, dark lashes lowered, and admired the long-limbed, competent look of him, fingers neat and quick, gentle mouth compressed slightly as he concentrated on his work, a drop of sweat rolling down the high brown curve of his cheekbone, in front of his ear.

She wasn't sure what to make of what he had told her. Still, she knew enough to realize that it was a good thing that he had told her, even though she didn't like to hear or think of his time with the Mohawk. It had been a bad time for her—alone, pregnant, doubting whether he or her parents would ever return—as well as for him. She reached to accept a bit of cheese, brushed his fingers with her own, and leaned forward, to make him kiss her.

He did, then sat back, his eyes gone soft green and clear, free of the shadow that had haunted them.

"Pizza," he said.

She blinked, then laughed. It was one of their games; taking turns to think of things they missed from the other time, the time before—or after, depending how you looked at it.

"Coke," she said promptly. "I think I could maybe do pizza—but what good is pizza without Coca-Cola?"

"Pizza with beer is perfectly fine," he assured her. "And we can have beer—not that Lizzie's homemade hell-brew is quite on a par with MacEwan's Lager, yet. But you really think you could make pizza?"

"Don't see why not." She nibbled at the cheese, frowning. "This wouldn't do"—she brandished the yellowish remnant, then popped it in her mouth—"too strong-flavored. But I think …" She paused to chew and swallow, then washed it down with a long drink of rough cider.

"Come to think of it, this would go pretty well with pizza." She lowered the leather bottle and licked the last sweet, semi-alcoholic drops from her lips. "But the cheese—I think maybe sheep's cheese would do. Da brought some from Salem last time he went there. I'll ask him to get some more and see how it melts."

She squinted against the bright, pale sun, calculating.

"Mama's got plenty of dried tomatoes, and tons of garlic. I know she has basil—don't know about the oregano, but I could do without that. And crust—" She waved a dismissive hand. "Flour, water, and lard, nothing to it."

He laughed, handing her a biscuit filled with ham and Mrs. Bug's piccalilli.

"How Pizza Came to the Colonies," he said, and lifted the cider bottle in brief salute. "Folk always wonder where humanity's great inventions come from; now we know!"

He spoke lightly, but there was an odd tone in his voice, and his glance held hers.

"Maybe we do know," she said softly, after a moment. "You ever think about it—why? Why we're here?"

"Of course." The green of his eyes was darker now, but still clear. "So do you, aye?"

She nodded, and took a bite of biscuit and ham, the piccalilli sweet with onion and pungent in her mouth. Of course they thought of it. She and Roger and her mother. For surely it had meaning, that passage through the stones. It must. And yet … her parents seldom spoke of war and battle, but from the little they said—and the much greater quantity she had read—she knew just how random and how pointless such things could sometimes be. Sometimes a shadow rises, and death lies nameless in the dark.

Roger crumbled the last of his bread between his fingers, and tossed the crumbs a few feet away. A chickadee flew down, pecked once, and was joined within seconds by a flock that swooped down out of the trees, vacuuming up the crumbs with chattering efficiency. He stretched, sighing, and lay back on the quilt.

"Well," he said, "if you ever figure it out, ye'll be sure to tell me, won't you?"

Her heartbeat was tingling in her breasts; no longer safely contained behind the rampart of her breastbone, but set loose to crackle through her flesh, small jolts of electricity tweaking her nipples. She didn't dare to think of Jem; the barest hint of him and her milk would let down in a gush.

Before she could let herself think too much about it, she pulled the hunting shirt over her head.

Roger's eyes were open, fixed on her, soft and brilliant as the moss beneath the trees. She undid the knot of the linen strip, and felt the cool touch of the wind on her bare breasts. She cupped them in her hands, feeling the heaviness rise, begin to tingle and crest.

"Come here," she said softly, eyes on his. "Hurry. I need you."

They lay half-clothed and comfortably tangled beneath the tattered quilt, sleepy and sticky with half-dried milk, the heat of their joining still warm around them.

The sun through the empty branches overhead made black ripples behind the lids of her closed eyes, as though she looked down through a dark red sea, wading in the blood-warm water, seeing black volcanic sand change and ripple round her feet.

Was he awake? She didn't turn her head or open her eyes to see, but tried to send a message to him, a slow, lazy pulse of a heartbeat, a question surging from blood to blood. *Are you there?* she asked silently. She felt the question move up through her chest and out along her arm; she imagined the pale underside of her arm and the blue vein along it, as though she might see some telltale subterranean flash as the impulse threaded through her blood and down her forearm, reached her palm, her finger, and delivered the faintest throb of its pressure against his skin.

Nothing happened at once. She could hear his breathing, slow and regular, a counterpoint to the sough of breeze through trees and grass, like surf coming in upon a sandy shore.

She imagined herself as a jellyfish, he another. She could see them clearly; two transparent bodies, lucent as the moon, veils pulsing in and out in hypnotic rhythm, borne on the tide toward one another, tendrils trailing, slowly touching …

His finger crossed her palm, so lightly it might have been the brush of fin or feather.

I'm here, it said. *And you?*

Her hand closed over it, and he rolled toward her.

Late in the year as it was, the light died early. It was still a month 'til the winter solstice, but by mid-afternoon, the sun was already brushing the slope of Black Mountain, and their shadows stretched to impossible lengths before them as they turned eastward, toward home.

She carried the gun; instruction was over for the day, and while they weren't hunting, if the opportunity of game offered, she would take it. The squirrel she had killed earlier was already cleaned and tucked in her sack, but that was barely flavoring for a vegetable stew. A few more would be nice. Or a possum, she thought dreamily.

She wasn't sure of the habits of possum, though; perhaps they hibernated over winter, and if so, they might already be gone. The bears were still active; she'd seen half-dried scat on the trail, and scratches on the bark of a pine, still oozing yellow sap. A bear was good game, but she didn't mean either to look for one, or to risk shooting at one unless it attacked them—and that wasn't likely. Leave bears alone, and they'll generally leave you alone; both her fathers had told her that, and she thought it excellent advice.

A covey of bobwhite blasted out of a nearby bush like exploding shrapnel, and she jerked, heart in her mouth.

"Those are good to eat, aren't they?" Roger nodded at the last of the disappearing gray-white blobs. He had been startled, too, but less than she had, she noticed with annoyance.

"Yeah," she said, disgruntled at being taken unawares. "But you don't shoot them with a musket, unless all you want is feathers for a pillow. You use a fowling piece, with bird shot. It's like a shotgun."

"I know," he said, shortly.

She felt disinclined to talk, jarred out of their peaceful mood. Her breasts were beginning to swell again; it was time to go home, to find Jemmy.

Her step quickened a little at the thought, even as her mind reluctantly surrendered the memory of the pungent smell of crushed dry fern, the glow of sunlight on Roger's bare brown shoulders above her, the hiss of her milk, gilding his chest in a spray of fine droplets, slick and warm and cool by turns between their writhing bodies.

She sighed deeply, and heard him laugh, low in his throat.

"Mmm?" She turned her head, and he motioned to the ground before them. They had begun to move together as they walked, neither noticing the unconscious pull of the gravitational force that bound them. Now their shadows had merged at the top, so an odd, four-legged beast paced spiderlike before them, its two heads tilted toward each other.

He put an arm around her waist, and one shadow-head dipped, joining the other in a single bulbous shape.

"It's been a good day, aye?" he said softly.

"Aye, it has," she said, and smiled. She might have spoken further, but a sound came to her above the rattle of tree branches, and she pulled suddenly away.

"What—" he began, but she put a finger to her lips to shush him, beckoning as she crept toward a growth of red oak.

It was a flock of turkeys, scratching companionably in the earth beneath a large oak tree, turning up winter grubs from the mat of fallen leaves and acorns. The late sun shone low, lighting the iridescence in their breast feathers, so the birds' drab black glimmered with tiny rainbows as they moved.

She had the gun already loaded, but not primed. She groped for the powder flask at her belt and filled the pan, scarcely looking away from the birds. Roger crouched beside her, intent as a hound dog on the scent. She nudged him, and held the gun toward him in invitation, one eyebrow up. The turkeys were no more than twenty yards away, and even the smaller ones were the size of footballs.

He hesitated, but she could see the desire to try it in his eyes. She thrust the gun firmly into his hands and nodded toward a gap in the brush.

He shifted carefully, trying for a clear line of sight. She hadn't taught him to fire from a crouch as yet, and he wisely didn't try, instead standing, though it meant firing downward. He hesitated, the long barrel wavering as he shifted his aim from one bird to another, trying to choose the best shot. Her fingers curled and clenched, aching to correct his aim, to pull the trigger.

She felt him draw breath and hold it. Then three things happened, so quickly as to seem simultaneous. The gun went off with a huge *phwoom!*, a spray of dried oak leaves fountained up from the earth under the tree, and fifteen turkeys lost their minds, running like a demented football squad straight at them, gobbling hysterically.

The turkeys reached the brush, saw Roger, and took to the air like flying soccer balls, wings frantically clapping the air. Roger ducked to avoid one that soared an inch above his head, only to be struck in the chest by another. He reeled backward, and the turkey, clinging to his shirt, seized the opportunity to run nimbly up his shoulder and push off, raking the side of his neck with its claws.

The gun flew through the air. Brianna caught it, flipped a cartridge from the box on her belt, and was grimly reloading and ramming as the last turkey ran toward Roger, zigged away, saw her, zagged in the other direction, and finally zoomed between them, gobbling alarms and imprecations.

She swung around, sighted on it as it left the ground, caught the black blob outlined for a split second against the brilliant sky, and blasted it in the tail feathers. It dropped like a sack of coal, and hit the ground forty yards away with an audible thud.

She stood still for a moment, then slowly lowered the gun. Roger was staring at her, openmouthed, pressing the cloth of his shirt against the bloody scratches on his neck. She smiled at him, a little weakly, feeling her hands sweaty on the wooden stock and her heart pounding with delayed reaction.

"Holy God," Roger said, deeply impressed. "That wasn't just luck, was it?"

"Well … some," she said, trying for modesty. She failed, and felt a grin blossom across her face. "Maybe half."

Roger went to retrieve her prize while she cleaned the gun again, coming back with a ten-pound bird, limp-necked and leaking blood like a punctured waterskin.

"What a thing," he said. He held it at arm's length to drain, admiring the vivid reds and blues of the bare, warty head and dangling wattle. "I don't think I've ever seen one, save roasted on a platter, with chestnut dressing and roast potatoes."

He looked from the turkey to her with great respect, and nodded at the gun.

"That's great shooting, Bree."

She felt her cheeks flush with pleasure, and restrained the urge to say, "Aw, shucks, it warn't nothin'," settling instead for a simple, "Thanks."

They turned again toward home, Roger still carrying the dripping carcass, held slightly out from his body.

"You haven't been shooting all that long, either," Roger was saying, still impressed. "What's it been, six months?"

She didn't want to lower his estimation of her prowess, but laughed, shrugged, and told the truth anyway.

"More like six years. Really more like ten."

"Eh?"

"Daddy—Frank—taught me to shoot when I was eleven or twelve. He gave me a twenty-two when I was thirteen, and by the time I was fifteen, he was taking me to shoot clay pigeons at ranges, or to hunt doves and quail on weekends in the fall."

Roger glanced at her in interest.

"I thought Jamie'd taught you; I'd no idea Frank Randall was such a sportsman."

"Well," she said slowly. "I don't know that he was."

One black brow went up in inquiry.

"Oh, he knew how to shoot," she assured him. "He'd been in the Army during World War Two. But he never shot much himself; he'd just show me, and then watch. In fact, he never even owned a gun."

"That's odd."

"Isn't it?" She moved deliberately closer to him, nudging his shoulder so that their shadows merged again; now it looked like a two-headed ogre, carrying a gun over one shoulder, and a third head held bloodily in its hand. "I wondered about that," she said, with attempted casualness. "After you told me—about his letter and all that, at the Gathering."

He shot her a sharp look.

"Wondered what?"

She took a deep breath, feeling the linen strips bite into her breasts.

"I wondered why a man who didn't ride or shoot should take such pains to see that his daughter could do both those things. I mean, it wasn't like it was common for girls to do that." She tried to laugh. "Not in Boston, anyway."

There was no sound for a moment but the shuffling of their feet through dry leaves.

"Christ," Roger said softly, at last. "He looked for Jamie Fraser. He said so, in his letter."

"And he found a Jamie Fraser. He said that, too. We just don't know whether it was the right one or not." She kept her eyes on her boots, wary of snakes. There were copperheads in the wood, and timber rattlers; she saw them now and then, basking on rocks or sunny logs.

Roger took a deep breath, lifting his head.

"Aye. And so you're wondering now—what else might he have found?"

She nodded, not looking up.

"Maybe he found me," she said softly. Her throat felt tight. "Maybe he knew I'd go back, through the stones. But if he did—he didn't tell me."

He stopped walking, and put a hand on her arm to turn her toward him.

"And perhaps he didn't know that at all," he said firmly. "He may only have thought ye *might* try it, if you ever found out about Fraser. And if you did find out, and did go … then he wanted you to be safe. I'd say no matter what he knew, that's what he wanted; you to be safe.” He smiled, a little crookedly. “Like you want me to be safe. Aye?”

She heaved a deep sigh, feeling comfort descend on her with his words. She’d never doubted that Frank Randall had loved her, all the years of her growing up. She didn’t want to doubt it now.

“Aye,” she said, and tilted up an inch on her toes to kiss him.

“Fine, then,” he said, and gently touched her breast, where the buckskin of her shirt showed a small wet patch. “Jem’ll be hungry. Come on; it’s time we were home.”

They turned again and went down the mountain, into the golden sea of chestnut leaves, watching their shadows go before them as they walked, embracing.

“Do you think—” she began, and hesitated. One shadow head dipped toward the other, listening.

“Do you think Ian’s happy?”

“I hope so,” he replied, and his arm tightened round her. “If he has a wife like mine—then I’m sure he is.”

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TWENTY-TWENTY

"Now, hold this over your left eye, and read the smallest line you can see clearly."

With a long-suffering air, Roger held the wooden spoon over his right eye and narrowed his left, concentrating on the sheet of paper I had pinned to the kitchen door. He was standing in the front hall, just inside the door, as the length of the corridor was the only stretch of floor within the house approaching twenty feet.

"Et tu Brute?" he read. He lowered the spoon and looked at me, one dark eyebrow raised. "I've never seen a literate eye chart before."

"Well, I always did think the 'f, e, 5, z, t, d' things on the regular charts rather boring," I said, unpinning the paper and flipping it over. "Other eye, please. What's the smallest line you can read easily?"

He reversed the spoon, squinted at the five lines of hand-printing—done in such even decrements of size as I could manage—and read the third one, slowly.

"*Eat no onions*. What's that from?"

"Shakespeare, of course," I said, making a note. "*Eat no onions nor garlic, for we are to utter sweet breath*. That's the smallest you can read, is it?"

I saw Jamie's expression alter subtly. He and Brianna were standing just behind Roger, out on the porch, watching the proceedings with great interest. Brianna was leaning slightly toward Roger, a faintly anxious expression on her face, as though willing him to see the letters.

Jamie's expression, though, showed slight surprise, faint pity—and an undeniable glint of satisfaction. *He*, evidently, could read the fifth line without trouble. *I honor him.* One from *Julius Caesar: As he was valiant, I honor him; as he was ambitious, I slew him.*

He felt my gaze on him, and the expression vanished, his face instantly resuming its usual look of good-humored inscrutability. I narrowed my eyes at him, with a "You're not fooling *me*" sort of look, and he looked away, the corner of his mouth twitching slightly.

"You can't make out any of the next line?" Bree had moved close to Roger, as though drawn by osmosis. She stared intently at the paper, then at him, with an encouraging look. Obviously she could see the last two lines without difficulty, too.

"No," Roger said, rather shortly. He'd agreed to let me check his eyes at her request, but he obviously wasn't happy about it. He slapped the palm of his hand lightly with the spoon, impatient to be done with this. "Anything else?"

"Just a few small exercises," I said, as soothingly as possible. "Come in here, where the light is better." I put a hand on his arm and drew him toward my surgery, giving Jamie and Bree a hard look as I did so. "Brianna, why don't you go and lay the table for supper? We won't be long."

She hesitated for a moment, but Jamie touched her arm and said something to her in a low voice. She nodded, glanced once more at Roger with a small, anxious frown, and went. Jamie gave me an apologetic shrug, and followed her.

Roger was standing among the litter in my surgery, looking like a bear that hears barking hounds in the distance—simultaneously annoyed and wary.

"There's no need for this," he said, as I closed the door. "I see fine. I just don't shoot very well yet. There's nothing the matter with my eyes." Still, he made no move to escape, and I picked up the hint of doubt in his voice.

"Shouldn't think there is," I said lightly. "Let me have just a quick look, though … just curiosity on my part, really.…" I got him sat down, however reluctantly, and for lack of the standard small flashlight, lit a candle.

I brought it close to check the dilation of his pupils. His eyes were the most lovely color, I thought; not hazel at all, but a very clear dark green. Dark enough to look almost black in shadow, but a startling color—almost emerald—when seen directly in bright light. A disconcerting sight, to one who had known Geilie Duncan and seen her mad humor laugh out of those clear green depths. I did hope Roger hadn't inherited anything *but* the eyes from her.

He blinked once, involuntarily, long black lashes sweeping down over them, and the memory disappeared. These eyes were beautiful—but calm, and above all, sane. I smiled at him, and he smiled back in reflex, not understanding.

I passed the candle before his face, up, down, right, left, asking him to keep looking at the flame, watching the changes as his eyes moved to and fro. Since no answers were required in this exercise, he began to relax a bit, his fists gradually uncurling on his thighs.

"Very nice," I said, keeping my voice low and soothing. "Yes, that's good … can you look up, please? Yes, now look down, toward the corner by the window. Mm-hm, yes … Now, look at me again. You see my finger? Good, now close your left eye and tell me if the finger moves. Mm-hmmm …"

Finally, I blew out the candle, and straightened up, stretching my back with a small groan.

"So," Roger said lightly, "what's the verdict, Doctor? Shall I go and be making myself a white cane?" He waved away the drifting wisps of smoke from the blown-out candle, making a good attempt at casualness—belied only by the slight tension in his shoulders.

I laughed.

"No, you won't need a Seeing Eye dog for some time yet, nor even spectacles. Though speaking of that—you said you'd never seen a literate eye chart before. But you have seen eye charts, I take it. Did you ever wear glasses as a child?"

He frowned, casting his mind back.

"Aye, I did," he said slowly. "Or rather"—a faint grin showed on his face—"I *had* a pair of specs. Or two or three. When I was seven or eight, I think. They were a nuisance, and gave me a headache. So I was inclined to leave them on the public bus, or at school, or on the rocks by the river … I can't recall actually *wearing* them for more than an hour at a time, and after I'd lost the third pair, my father gave up." He shrugged.

"I've never felt as though I needed spectacles, to be honest."

"Well, you don't—now."

He caught the tone of my voice and looked down at me, puzzled.

"What?"

"You're a bit shortsighted in the left eye, but not by enough to cause you any real difficulty." I rubbed the bridge of my nose, as though feeling the pinch of spectacles myself. "Let me guess—you were good at hockey and football when you were at school, but not at tennis."

He laughed at that, eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Tennis? At an Inverness grammar school? Soft Southron sport, we'd have called it; game for poofters. But I take your point—no, you're right, I was fine at the football, but not much at rounders. Why?"

"You don't have any binocular vision," I said. "Chances are that someone noticed it when you were a child, and made an effort to correct it with prismatic lenses—but it's likely that it would have been too late by the time you were seven or eight," I added hastily, seeing his face go blank. "If that's going to work, it needs to be done very young—before the age of five."

"I don't … binocular vision? But doesn't everyone?… I mean, both my eyes do work, don't they?" He looked mildly bewildered. He looked down into the palm of his hand, closing one eye, then the other, as though some answer might be found among the lines there.

"Your eyes are fine," I assured him. "It's just that they don't work *together*. It's really a fairly common condition—and many people who have it don't realize it. It's just that in some people, for one reason or another, the brain never learns to merge the images coming in from both eyes in order to make a three-dimensional image."

"I don't see in three dimensions?" He looked at me, now, squinting hard, as though expecting me suddenly to flatten out against the wall.

"Well, I haven't quite got a trained oculist's kit"—I waved a hand at the burned-out candle, the wooden spoon, the drawn figures, and a couple of sticks I had been using—"nor yet an oculist's training. But I'm reasonably sure, yes."

He listened quietly as I explained what I could. His vision seemed fairly normal, in terms of acuity. But since his brain was not fusing the information from his eyes, he must be estimating the distance and relative location of objects simply by unconscious comparison of their sizes, rather than by forming a real 3-D image. Which meant …

"You can see perfectly well for almost anything you want to do," I assured him. "And you very likely can learn to shoot all right; most of the men I see shooting close one eye when they fire, anyway. But you might have trouble hitting moving targets. You can see what you're aiming at, all right—but without binocular vision, you may not be able to tell *precisely* where it is in order to hit it."

"I see," he said. "So, if it comes to a fight, I'd best rely on straightforward bashing, is that it?"

"In my humble experience of Scottish conflicts," I said, "most fights amount to no more than bashing, anyway. You only use a gun or arrow if your goal is murder—and in that case, a blade is usually the weapon of preference. So much surer, Jamie tells me."

He gave a small grunt of amusement at that, but said nothing else. He sat quietly, considering what I'd told him, while I tidied up the disorder left by the day's surgery. I could hear thumping and clanging from the kitchen, and the pop and sizzle of fat that went with the tantalizing aroma of frying onions and bacon that floated down the corridor.

It was going to be a hasty meal; Mrs. Bug had been busy all day with the preparations for the militia expedition. Still, even Mrs. Bug's least elaborate spreads were well worth the eating.

Muffled voices came through the wall—Jemmy's sudden wail, a brief exclamation from Brianna, another from Lizzie, then Jamie's deep voice, evidently comforting the baby while Bree and Lizzie dealt with dinner.

Roger heard them, too; I saw his head turn toward the sound.

"Quite a woman," he said, with a slow smile. "She can kill it *and* cook it. Which looks like being a good thing, under the circumstances," he added ruefully. "Evidently I won't be putting much meat on the table."

"Pah," I said briskly, wishing to forestall any attempt on his part to feel sorry for himself. "I've never shot a thing in my life, and I put food on this table every day. If you really feel you must kill things, you know, there are plenty of chickens and geese and pigs. And if you can catch that damnable white sow before she undermines the foundation entirely, you'll be a local hero."

That made him smile, though with a wry twist to it nonetheless.

"I expect my self-respect will recover, with or without the pigs," he said. "The worst of it will be telling the sharpshooters"—he jerked his head toward the wall, where Brianna's voice mingled with Jamie's in muffled conversation—"what the problem is. They'll be very kind—like one is to somebody who's missing a foot."

I laughed, finished swabbing out my mortar, and reached up to put it away in the cupboard.

"Bree's only worrying about you, because of this Regulation trouble. But Jamie thinks it won't amount to anything; the chances of you needing to shoot someone are very small. Besides, birds of prey haven't got binocular vision, either," I added, as an afterthought. "Except for owls. Hawks and eagles can't have; their eyes are on either side of their heads. Just tell Bree and Jamie I said you have eyes like a hawk."

He laughed outright at that, and stood up, dusting off the skirts of his coat.

"Right, I will." He waited for me, opening the door to the hall for me. As I reached it, though, he put a hand on my arm, stopping me.

"This binocular thing," he said, gesturing vaguely toward his eyes. "I was born with it, I suppose?"

I nodded.

"Yes, almost certainly."

He hesitated, clearly not knowing quite how to put what he wanted to say.

"Is it … inherited, then? My father was in the RAF; he can't have had it, surely—but my mother wore spectacles. She kept them on a chain round her neck; I remember playing with it. I might have gotten the eye thing from her, I mean."

I pursed my lips, trying to recall what—if anything—I had ever read on the subject of inherited eye disorders, but nothing concrete came to mind.

"I don't know," I said at last. "It might be. But it might not, too. I really don't know. Are you worried about Jemmy?"

"Oh." A faint look of disappointment crossed his features, though he blotted it out almost at once. He gave me an awkward smile, and opened the door, holding it for me to pass through.

"No, not worried. I was just thinking—if it was inherited, and if the little fella should have it, too … then I'd know."

The corridor was full of the savory scents of squirrel stew and fresh bread, and I was starving, but I stood still, staring up at him.

"I wouldn't wish it on him," Roger said hastily, seeing my expression. "Not at all! Just, if it should be that way—" He broke off and looked away, swallowing. "Look, don't tell Bree I thought of it, please."

I touched his arm lightly.

"I think she'd understand. Your wanting to know—for sure."

He glanced at the kitchen door, from which Bree's voice rose, singing "Clementine," to Jemmy's raucous pleasure.

"She might understand," he said. "That doesn't mean she wants to hear it."

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22

THE FIERY CROSS

The men were gone. Jamie, Roger, Mr. Chisholm and his sons, the MacLeod brothers … they had all disappeared before daybreak, leaving no trace behind save the jumbled remains of a hasty breakfast, and a collection of muddy bootprints on the doorsill.

Jamie moved so quietly that he seldom woke me when he left our bed to dress in the dark predawn. He did usually bend to kiss me goodbye, though, murmuring a quick endearment in my ear and leaving me to carry the touch and scent of him back into dreams.

He hadn't wakened me this morning.

That job had been left to the tender offices of the junior Chisholms and MacLeods, several of whom had held a pitched battle directly under my window, just after dawn.

I had sprung into wakefulness, momentarily confused by the shouts and screams, my hands reaching automatically for sponge and oxygen, syringe and alcohol, visions of a hospital emergency room vivid around me. Then I drew breath, and smelled woodsmoke, not ethanol. I shook my head, blinking at the sight of a rumpled blue and yellow quilt, the peaceful row of clothes on their pegs, and the wash of pure, pale light streaming through half-opened shutters. Home. I was home, on the Ridge.

A door banged open below, and the racket died abruptly, succeeded by a scuffle of flight, accompanied by muffled giggling.

"Mmmphm!" said Mrs. Bug's voice, grimly satisfied at having routed the rioters. The door closed, and the clank of wood and clang of metal from below announced the commencement of the day's activities.

When I went down a few moments later, I found that good lady engaged simultaneously in toasting bread, boiling coffee, making parritch, and complaining as she tidied up the men's leavings. Not about the untidiness—what else could be expected of men?—but rather that Jamie had not waked her to provide a proper breakfast for them.

"And how's Himself to manage, then?" she demanded, brandishing the toasting-fork at me in reproach. "A fine, big man like that, and him out and doing wi' no more to line his wame than a wee sup of milk and a stale bannock?"

Casting a bleary eye over the assorted crumbs and dirty crockery, it appeared to me that Himself and his companions had probably accounted for at least two dozen corn muffins and an entire loaf of salt-rising bread, accompanied by a pound or so of fresh butter, a jar of honey, a bowl of raisins, and all of the first milking.

"I don't think he'll starve," I murmured, dabbing up a crumb with a moistened forefinger. "Is the coffee ready?"

The older Chisholm and MacLeod children had mostly been sleeping by the kitchen hearth at night, rolled in rags or blankets. They were up and out now, their coverings heaped behind the settle. As the smell of food began to permeate the house, murmurous sounds of rising began to come through the walls and down the stairs, as the women dressed and tended the babies and toddlers. Small faces began to reappear from outside, peeking hungrily round the edge of the door.

"Have ye washed your filthy paws, wee heathens?" Mrs. Bug demanded, seeing them. She waved a porridge spoon at the benches along the table. "If ye have, come in and set yourselves doon. Mind ye wipe your muddy feet!"

Within moments, the benches and stools were filled, Mrs. Chisholm, Mrs. MacLeod, and Mrs. Aberfeldy yawning and blinking among their offspring, nodding and murmuring "Good morn" to me and each other, straightening a kerchief here and a shirttail there, using a thumb wet with spittle to plaster down the spiked hair on a little boy's head or wipe a smudge from a little girl's cheek.

Faced with a dozen gaping mouths to feed, Mrs. Bug was in her element, hopping back and forth between hearth and table. Watching her bustle to and fro, I thought she must have been a chickadee in a former life.

"Did you see Jamie when he left?" I asked, as she paused momentarily to refill all the coffee cups, a large uncooked sausage in her other hand.

"No, indeed." She shook her head, neat white in its kerch. "I didna ken a thing about it. I heard my auld lad up and stirring before dawn, but I thought it was only him out to the privy, he not liking to trouble me with the noise o' the pot. He didna come back, though, and by the time I waked myself, they'd all gone off. Ah! None of that, now!"

Catching a movement from the corner of her eye, she dotted a six-year-old MacLeod smartly on the head with her sausage, causing him to snatch his fingers back from the jam jar.

"Perhaps they've gone hunting," Mrs. Aberfeldy suggested timidly, spooning porridge into the little girl she held on her knee. Barely nineteen, she seldom said much, shy of the older women.

"Better they be hunting homesteads, and timber for houses," Mrs. MacLeod said, hoisting a baby onto her shoulder and patting its back. She pushed a strand of graying hair out of her face and gave me a wry smile. "It's nay reflection upon your hospitality, Mrs. Fraser, but I'd as soon not spend the winter under your feet. Geordie! Leave your sister's plaits alone, or ye'll wish ye had!"

Not at my best so early in the day, I smiled and murmured something politely incomprehensible. I would as soon not have five or ten extra people in my house for the winter, either, but I wasn't sure it could be avoided.

The Governor's letter had been quite specific; all able-bodied men in the backcountry were to be mustered as militia troops and to report to Salisbury by mid-December. That left very little time for house-building. Still, I hoped Jamie had some plan for relieving the congestion; Adso the kitten had taken up semipermanent residence in a cupboard in my surgery, and the scene in the kitchen was quickly assuming its usual daily resemblance to one of the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch.

At least the kitchen had lost its early morning chill with so many bodies crowded into it, and was now comfortably warm and noisy. What with the mob scene, though, it was several moments before I noticed that there were four young mothers present, rather than three.

"Where did you come from?" I asked, startled at sight of my daughter, huddled frowsily under a rug in a corner of the settle.

Bree blinked sleepily and shifted Jemmy, who was nursing with single-minded concentration, oblivious of the crowd.

"The Muellers showed up in the middle of the night and pounded on our door," she said, yawning. "Eight of them. They didn't speak much English, but I *think* they said Da sent for them."

"Really?" I reached for a slice of raisin cake, narrowly beating a young Chisholm to it. "Are they still there?"

"Uh-huh. Thanks, Mama." She stretched out a hand for the bit of cake I offered her. "Yes. Da came and hauled Roger out of bed while it was still dark, but he didn't seem to think he needed the Muellers yet. When Roger left, a big old Mueller got up off the floor, said, *'Bitte, Maedle,'* and lay down next to me." A delicate pink flushed her cheeks. "So I thought maybe I'd get up and come up here."

"Oh," I said, suppressing a smile. "That would be Gerhard." Eminently practical, the old farmer would see no reason why he should lay his old bones on a hard plank floor, if there was bed space available.

"I suppose so," she said indistinctly, through a mouthful of cake. "I guess he's harmless, but even so …"

"Well, he'd be no danger to *you*," I agreed. Gerhard Mueller was the patriarch of a large German family who lived between the Ridge and the Moravian settlement at Salem. He was somewhere in his late seventies, but by no means harmless.

I chewed slowly, remembering how Jamie had described to me the scalps nailed to the door of Gerhard's barn. Women's scalps, long hair dark and silken, ends lifting in the wind. *Like live things*, he'd said, his face troubled at the memory, *like birds, pinned to the* *wood.* And the white one Gerhard had brought to me, wrapped in linen and flecked with blood. No, not harmless. I swallowed, the cake feeling dry in my throat.

"Harmless or not, they'll be hungry," said Mrs. Chisholm practically. She bent and gathered up a corn-dolly, a soggy diaper, and a squirming toddler, contriving somehow to leave a hand free for her coffee. "Best we clear this lot awa, before the Germans smell food and come hammering at the door."

"Is there anything left to feed them?" I said, uneasily trying to remember how many hams were left in the smokeshed. After two weeks of hospitality, our stores were dwindling at an alarming rate.

"Of course there is," Mrs. Bug said briskly, slicing sausage and flipping the slices onto the sizzling griddle. "Let me just ha' done with this lot, and ye can send them along for their breakfasts. You, *a muirninn*—" She tapped a girl of eight or so on the head with her spatula. "Run ye doon the root cellar and fetch me up an apronful of potatoes. Germans like potatoes."

By the time I had finished my porridge and begun to collect up bowls to wash, Mrs. Bug, broom in hand, was sweeping children and debris out of the back door with ruthless efficiency, while issuing a stream of orders to Lizzie and Mrs. Aberfeldy—Ruth, that was her name—who seemed to have been dragooned as assistant cooks.

"Shall I help …" I began, rather feebly, but Mrs. Bug shook her head and made small shooing motions with the broom.

"Dinna think of it, Mrs. Fraser!" she said. "You'll have enough to do, I'm sure, and—here now, ye'll no be comin' intae my nice, clean kitchen wi' those mucky boots! Out, out and wipe them off before ye think of setting foot in here!"

Gerhard Mueller, followed by his sons and nephews, stood in the doorway, nonplussed. Mrs. Bug, undeterred either by the fact that he towered over her by more than a foot, or that he spoke no English, screwed up her face and poked fiercely at his boots with her broom.

I waved welcomingly to the Muellers, then seized the chance of escape, and fled.

Seeking to avoid the crowd in the house, I washed at the well outside, then went to the sheds and occupied myself in taking inventory. The situation was not as bad as I'd feared; we had enough, with careful management, to last out the winter, though I could see that Mrs. Bug's lavish hand might have to be constrained a bit.

Besides six hams in the smokeshed, there were four sides of bacon and half another, plus a rack of dried venison and half of a relatively recent carcass. Looking up, I could see the low roof beams, black with soot and thick with clusters of smoked, dried fish, split and bound stiffly in bunches, like the petals of large ugly flowers. There were ten casks of salt fish, as well, and four of salt pork. A stone crock of lard, a smaller one of the fine leaf lard, another of headcheese … I had my doubts about that.

I had made it according to the instructions of one of the Mueller women, as translated by Jamie, but I had never seen headcheese myself, and was not quite sure it was meant to look like *that.* I lifted the lid and sniffed cautiously, but it smelled all right; mildly spiced with garlic and peppercorn, and no scent at all of putrefaction. Perhaps we wouldn't die of ptomaine poisoning, though I had it in mind to invite Gerhard Mueller to try it first.

"How can ye bide the auld fiend in your house?" Marsali had demanded, when Gerhard and one of his sons had ridden up to the Ridge a few months earlier. She had heard the story of the Indian women from Fergus, and viewed the Germans with horrified revulsion.

"And what would ye have me do?" Jamie had demanded in return, spoon lifted halfway from his bowl. "Kill the Muellers—all of them, for if I did for Gerhard, I'd have to do for the lot—and nail their hair to *my* barn?" His mouth quirked slightly. "I should think it would put the cow off her milk. It would put me off the milkin', to be sure."

Marsali's brow puckered, but she wasn't one to be joked out of an argument.

"Not that, maybe," she said. "But ye let them into your house, and treat them as friends!" She glanced from Jamie to me, frowning. "The women he killed—*they* were your friends, no?"

I exchanged a look with Jamie, and gave a slight shrug. He paused for a moment, gathering his thoughts, as he slowly stirred his soup. Then he laid down the spoon and looked at her.

"It was a fearful thing that Gerhard did," he said simply. "But it was a matter of vengeance to him; thinking as he did, he couldna have done otherwise. Would it make matters better for me to take vengeance on him?"

"Non," Fergus said positively. He laid a hand on Marsali's arm, putting a stop to whatever she might have said next. He grinned up at her. "Of course, Frenchmen do not believe in vengeance."

"Well, perhaps some Frenchmen," I murmured, thinking of the Comte St. Germain.

Marsali wasn't to be put off so easily, though.

"Hmph," she said. "What ye mean is, they weren't *yours,* isn't it?" Seeing Jamie's brow flick up in startlement, she pressed the point. "The women who were murdered. But if it were your family? If it had been me and Lizzie and Brianna, say?"

"That," said Jamie evenly, "is my point. It *was* Gerhard's family." He pushed back from the table and stood up, leaving half his soup unfinished. "Are ye done, Fergus?"

Fergus cocked a sleek brow at him, picked up his bowl, and drank it down, Adam's apple bobbing in his long brown throat.

"Oui," he said, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. He stood and patted Marsali on the head, then plucked a strand of her straw-pale hair free of her kerch. "Do not worry yourself, *chéri*—even though I do not believe in vengeance, if anyone should hunt your hair, I promise I will make a tobacco pouch of his scrotum. And your papa will tie up his stockings with the malefactor's entrails, surely."

Marsali gave a small *pfft!* of irritated amusement and slapped at his hand, and no more was said about Gerhard Mueller.

I lifted the heavy crock of headcheese and set it down by the door of the smokeshed, so as not to forget it when I went back to the house. I wondered whether Gerhard's son Frederick had come with him—likely so; the boy was less than twenty, not an age willing to be left out of anything that promised excitement. It was Frederick's young wife Petronella and her baby who had died—of measles, though Gerhard had thought the infection a deliberate curse put on his family by the Tuscarora.

Had Frederick found a new wife yet? I wondered. Very likely. Though if not … there were two teenaged girls among the new tenants. Perhaps Jamie's plans involved finding them fast husbands? And then there was Lizzie …

The corncrib was more than three-quarters full, though there were worrying quantities of mouse droppings on the ground outside. Adso was growing rapidly, but perhaps not fast enough; he was just about the size of an average rat. Flour—that was a little low, only eight sacks. There might be more at the mill, though; I must ask Jamie.

Sacks of rice and dried beans, bushels of hickory nuts, butternuts, and black walnuts. Heaps of dried squash, burlap bag of oatmeal and cornmeal, and gallon upon gallon of apple cider and cider vinegar. A crock of salted butter, another of fresh, and a basket of spherical goat cheeses, for which I had traded a bushel of blackberries and another of wild currants. The rest of the berries had been carefully dried, along with the wild grapes, or made up into jam or preserve, and were presently hidden in the pantry, safe—I hoped—from childish depredations.

The honey. I stopped, pursing my lips. I had nearly twenty gallons of purified honey, and four large stone jars of honeycomb, gleaned from my hives and waiting to be rendered and made into beeswax candles. It was all kept in the walled cave that served as stable, in order to keep safe from bears. It wasn't safe from the children who had been deputed to feed the cows and pigs in the stable, though. I hadn't seen any telltale sticky fingers or faces yet, but it might be as well to take some preventative steps.

Between meat, grain, and the small dairy, it looked as though no one would starve this winter. My concern now was the lesser but still important threat of vitamin deficiency. I glanced at the chestnut grove, its branches now completely bare. It would be a good four months before we saw much of fresh greenery, though I did have plenty of turnips and cabbage still in the ground.

The root cellar was reassuringly well-stocked, heady with the earthy smell of potatoes, the tang of onions and garlic, and the wholesome, bland scent of turnips. Two large barrels of apples stood at the back—with the prints of several sets of childish feet leading up to them, I saw.

I glanced up. Enormous clusters of wild scuppernong grapes had been hung from the rafters, drying slowly into raisins. They were still there, but the lower, more reachable bunches had been reduced to sprays of bare stems. Perhaps I needn't worry about outbreaks of scurvy, then.

I wandered back toward the house, trying to calculate how many provisions should be sent with Jamie and his militia, how much left for the consumption of the wives and children. Impossible to say; that would depend in part on how many men he raised, and on what they might bring with them. He was appointed Colonel, though; the responsibility of feeding the men of his regiment would be primarily his, with reimbursement—if it ever came—to be paid later by appropriation of the Assembly.

Not for the first time, I wished heartily that I knew more. How long might the Assembly be a functional body?

Brianna was out by the well, walking round and round it with a meditative look furrowing her brows.

"Pipe," she said, without preliminaries. "Do people make metal piping now? The Romans did, but—"

"I've seen it in Paris and Edinburgh, being used to carry rain off roofs," I offered. "So it exists. I'm not sure I've seen any in the Colonies, though. If there is any, it will be terribly expensive." Beyond the simplest of things, like horseshoes, all ironmongery had to be imported from Britain, as did all other metal goods like copper, brass, and lead.

"Hmm. At least they'll know what it is." She narrowed her eyes, calculating the slope of land between well and house, then shook her head and sighed. "I can make a pump, I think. Getting water into the house is something else." She yawned suddenly, and blinked, eyes watering slightly in the sunlight. “God, I’m so tired, I can’t think. Jemmy squawked all night and just when he finally conked out, the Muellers showed up—I don’t think I slept at all.”

“I recall the feeling,” I said, with sympathy—and grinned.

“Was I a very cranky baby?” Brianna asked, grinning back.

“Very,” I assured her, turning toward the house. “And where is yours?”

“He’s with—”

Brianna stopped dead, clutching my arm.

“What—” she said. “What in the name of God is *that*?”

I turned to look, and felt a spasm of shock, deep in the pit of my stomach.

“It’s quite evident *what* it is,” I said, walking slowly toward it. “The question is—why?”

It was a cross. Rather a big cross, made of dried pine boughs, stripped of their twigs and bound together with rope. It was planted firmly at the edge of the dooryard, near the big blue spruce that guarded the house.

It stood some seven feet in height, the branches slender, but solid. It was not bulky or obtrusive—and yet its quiet presence seemed to dominate the dooryard, much as a tabernacle dominates a church. At the same time, the effect of the thing seemed neither reverent nor protective. In fact, it was bloody sinister.

“Are we having a revival meeting?” Brianna’s mouth twitched, trying to make a joke of it. The cross made her as uneasy as it did me.

“Not that I’ve heard of.” I walked slowly round it, looking up and down. Jamie had made it—I could tell that by the quality of the workmanship. The branches had been chosen for straightness and symmetry, carefully trimmed, the ends tapered. The cross piece had been neatly notched to fit the upright, the rope binding crisscrossed with a sailor’s neatness.

“Maybe Da’s starting his own religion.” Brianna lifted a brow; she recognized the workmanship, too.

Mrs. Bug appeared suddenly round the corner of the house, a bowl of chicken feed in her hands. She stopped dead at sight of us, her mouth opening immediately. I braced myself instinctively for the onslaught, and heard Brianna snicker under her breath.

"Och, there ye are, ma'am! I was just sayin' to Lizzie as how it was a shame, a mortal shame it is, that those spawn should be riotin' upstairs and doon, and their nasty leavings scattered all about the hoose, and even in Herself's own stillroom, and she said to me, did Lizzie, she said—"

"In my surgery? What? Where? What have they done?" Forgetting the cross, I was already hastening toward the house, Mrs. Bug hard on my heels, still talking.

"I did catch twa o' them wee de'ils a-playin' at bowls in there with your nice blue bottles and an apple, and be sure I boxed their ears sae hard for it I'm sure they're ringin' still, the wicked creeturs, and them a-leavin' bits of good food to rot and go bad, and—"

"My bread!" I had reached the front hall, and now flung open the door of the surgery to find everything within spick-and-span—including the countertop where I had laid out my most recent penicillin experiments. It now lay completely bare, its oaken surface scoured to rawness.

"Nasty it was," Mrs. Bug said from the hall behind me. She pressed her lips together with prim virtue. "Nasty! Covered wi' mold, just covered, all blue, and—"

I took a deep breath, hands clenched at my sides to avoid throttling her. I shut the surgery door, blotting out the sight of the empty counter, and turned to the tiny Scotswoman.

"Mrs. Bug," I said, keeping my voice level with great effort, "you know how much I appreciate your help, but I *did* ask you not to—"

The front door swung open and crashed into the wall beside me.

"Ye wretched auld besom! How dare ye to lay hands on my weans!"

I swung round to find myself nose-to-nose with Mrs. Chisholm, face flushed with fury and armed with a broom, two red-faced toddlers clinging to her skirts, their cheeks smeared with recent tears. She ignored me completely, her attention focused on Mrs. Bug, who stood in the hallway on my other side, bristling like a diminutive hedgehog.

"You and your precious weans!" Mrs. Bug cried indignantly. "Why, if ye cared a stitch for them, ye'd be raisin' them proper and teachin' them right from wrong, not leavin' them to carouse about the hoose like Barbary apes, strewin' wreck and ruin from attic to doorstep, and layin' their sticky fingers on anything as isna nailed to the floor!"

"Now, Mrs. Bug, really, I'm sure they didn't mean—" My attempt at peacemaking was drowned out by steam-whistle shrieks from all three Chisholms, Mrs. Chisholm's being by far the loudest.

"Who are you, to be callin' my bairns thieves, ye maundering auld nettercap!" The aggrieved mother waved the broom menacingly, moving from side to side as she tried to get at Mrs. Bug. I moved with her, hopping back and forth in an effort to stay between the two combatants.

"Mrs. Chisholm," I said, raising a placating hand. "Margaret. Really, I'm sure that—"

"Who am I?" Mrs. Bug seemed to expand visibly, like rising dough. "Who am I? Why, I'm a God-fearin' woman and a Christian soul! Who are *you* to be speakin' to your elders and betters in such a way, you and your evil tribe a-traipsin' the hills in rags and tatters, wi'out sae much as a pot to piss in?"

"Mrs. Bug!" I exclaimed, whirling round to her. "You mustn't—"

Mrs. Chisholm didn't bother trying to find a rejoinder to this, but instead lunged forward, broom at the ready. I flung my arms out to prevent her shoving past me; finding herself foiled in her attempt to swat Mrs. Bug, she instead began poking at her over my shoulder, jabbing wildly with the broom as she tried to skewer the older woman.

Mrs. Bug, obviously feeling herself safe behind the barricade of my person, was hopping up and down like a Ping-Pong ball, her small round face bright red with triumph and fury.

"Beggars!" she shouted, at the top of her lungs. "Tinkers! Gypsies!"

"Mrs. Chisholm! Mrs. Bug!" I pleaded, but neither paid the least attention.

"Kittock! Mislearnit pilsh!" bellowed Mrs. Chisholm, jabbing madly with her broom. The children shrieked and yowled, and Mrs. Chisholm—who was a rather buxom woman—trod heavily on my toe.

This came under the heading of more than enough, and I rounded on Mrs. Chisholm with fire in my eye. She shrank back, dropping the broom.

"Ha! Ye pert trull! You and—"

Mrs. Bug's shrill cries behind me were suddenly silenced, and I whirled round again to see Brianna, who had evidently run round the house and come in through the kitchen, holding the diminutive Mrs. Bug well off the floor, one arm round her middle, the other hand firmly pressed across her mouth. Mrs. Bug's tiny feet kicked wildly, her eyes bulging above the muffling hand. Bree rolled her eyes at me, and retreated through the kitchen door, carrying her captive.

I turned round to deal with Mrs. Chisholm, only to see the flick of her homespun gray skirt, disappearing hastily round the corner of the doorstep, a child's wail receding like a distant siren. The broom lay at my feet. I picked it up, went into the surgery, and shut the door behind me.

I closed my eyes, hands braced on the empty counter. I felt a sudden, irrational urge to hit something—and did. I slammed my fist on the counter, pounded it again and again with the meaty side of my hand, but it was built so solidly that my blows made scarcely any sound, and I stopped, panting.

What on earth was the matter with me? Annoying as Mrs. Bug's interference was, it was not critical. Neither was Mrs. Chisholm's maternal pugnacity—she and her little fiends would be gone from the house sooner or later. Sooner, I hoped.

My heart had begun to slow a little, but prickles of irritation still ran over my skin like nettle rash. I tried to shake it off, opening the big cupboard to assure myself that neither Mrs. Bug's nor the children's depredations had harmed anything truly important.

No, it was all right. Each glass bottle had been polished to a jewellike gleam—the sunlight caught them in a blaze of blue and green and crystal—but each had been put back exactly in its place, each neatly written label turned forward. The gauzy bundles of dried herbs had been shaken free of dust, but carefully hung back on their nails.

The sight of the assembled medicines was calming. I touched a jar of anti-louse ointment, feeling a miser's sense of gratification at the number and variety of bags and jars and bottles.

Alcohol lamp, alcohol bottle, microscope, large amputation saw, jar of sutures, box of plasters, packet of cobweb—all were arrayed with military precision, drawn up in ranks like ill-assorted recruits under the eye of a drill sergeant. Mrs. Bug might have the flaws of her greatness, but I couldn't help but admit her virtue as a housekeeper.

The only thing in the cabinet that plainly hadn't been touched was a tiny leather bag, the amulet given to me by the Tuscaroran shaman Nayawenne; that lay askew in a corner by itself. Interesting that Mrs. Bug wouldn't touch that, I thought; I had never told her what it was, though it did look Indian, with the feathers—from raven and woodpecker—thrust through the knot. Less than a year in the Colonies, and less than a month in the wilderness, Mrs. Bug regarded all things Indian with acute suspicion.

The odor of lye soap hung in the air, reproachful as a housekeeper's ghost. I supposed I couldn't really blame her; moldy bread, rotted melon, and mushy apple slices might be research to me; to Mrs. Bug, they could be nothing but a calculated offense to the god of cleanliness.

I sighed and closed the cupboard, adding the faint perfume of dried lavender and the skunk scent of pennyroyal to the ghosts of lye and rotted apples. I had lost experimental preparations many times before, and this one had not been either complex or in a greatly advanced state. It would take no more than half an hour to replace it, setting out fresh bits of bread and other samples. I wouldn't do it, though; there wasn't enough time. Jamie was clearly beginning to gather his militiamen; it could be no more than a few days before they would depart for Salisbury, to report to Governor

Tryon. Before *we* would depart—for I certainly meant to accompany them.

It occurred to me, quite suddenly, that there hadn't been enough time to finish the experiment when I had set it up to begin with. I had known we would leave soon; even if I got immediate good growth, I would not have had time to collect, dry, purify … I'd known that, consciously—and yet I had done it anyway, gone right on with my plans, pursuing my routines, as though life were still settled and predictable, as though nothing whatever might threaten the tenor of my days. As though acting might make it true.

"You really are a fool, Beauchamp," I murmured, pushing a curl of hair tiredly behind one ear. I went out, shutting the door of the surgery firmly behind me, and went to negotiate peace between Mrs. Bug and Mrs. Chisholm.

Superficially, peace in the house was restored, but an atmosphere of uneasiness remained. The women went about their work tense and tight-lipped; even Lizzie, the soul of patience, was heard to say "Tcha!" when one of the children spilled a pan of buttermilk across the steps.

Even outside, the air seemed to crackle, as though a lightning storm were near. As I went to and fro from sheds to house, I kept glancing over my shoulder at the sky above Roan Mountain, half-expecting to see the loom of thunderheads—and yet the sky was still the pale slate-blue of late autumn, clouded with nothing more than the wisps of mare's tails.

I found myself distracted, unable to settle to anything. I drifted from one task to another, leaving a pile of onions half-braided in the pantry, a bowl of beans half-shelled on the stoop, a pair of torn breeks lying on the settle, needle dangling from its thread. Again and again, I found myself crossing the yard, coming from nowhere in particular, bound upon no specific errand.

I glanced up each time I passed the cross, as though expecting it either to have disappeared since my last trip, or to have acquired some explanatory notice, neatly pinned to the wood. If not *Iesus Nazarenus Rex Iudaeorum*, then *something*. But no. The cross remained, two simple sticks of pinewood, bound together by a rope. Nothing more. Except, of course, that a cross is *always* something more. I just didn't know what it might be, this time.

Everyone else seemed to share my distraction. Mrs. Bug, disedified by the conflict with Mrs. Chisholm, declined to make any lunch, and retired to her room, ostensibly suffering from headache, though she refused to let me treat it. Lizzie, normally a fine hand with food, burned the stew, and billows of black smoke stained the oak beams above the hearth.

At least the Muellers were safely out of the way. They had brought a large cask of beer with them, and had retired after breakfast back to Brianna's cabin, where they appeared to be entertaining themselves very nicely.

The bread refused to rise. Jemmy had begun a new tooth, a hard one, and screamed and screamed and screamed. The incessant screeching twisted everyone's nerves to the snapping point, including mine. I should have liked to suggest that Bree take him away somewhere out of earshot, but I saw the deep smudges of fatigue under her eyes and the strain on her face, and hadn't the heart. Mrs. Chisholm, tried by the constant battles of her own offspring, had no such compunction.

"For God's sake, why do ye no tak' that bairn awa to your own cabin, lass?" she snapped. "If he mun greet so, there's no need for us all to hear it!"

Bree's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Because," she hissed, "your two oldest sons are sitting in my cabin, drinking with the Germans. I wouldn't want to disturb them!"

Mrs. Chisholm's face went bright red. Before she could speak, I quickly stepped forward and snatched the baby away from Bree.

"I'll take him out for a bit of a walk, shall I?" I said, hoisting him onto my shoulder. "I could use some fresh air. Why don't you go up and lie down on my bed for a bit, darling?" I said to Bree. "You look just a little tired."

"Uh-huh," she said. One corner of her mouth twitched. "And the Pope's a little bit Catholic, too. Thanks, Mama." She kissed Jemmy's hot, wet cheek, and vanished toward the stairwell.

Mrs. Chisholm scowled horridly after her, but caught my eye, coughed, and called to her three-year-old twins, who were busily demolishing my sewing basket.

The cold air outside was a relief, after the hot, smoky confines of the kitchen, and Jemmy quieted a little, though he continued to squirm and whine. He rubbed his hot, damp face against my neck, and gnawed ferociously on the cloth of my shawl, fussing and drooling.

I paced slowly to and fro, patting him gently and humming "Lilibuleero" under my breath. I found the exercise soothing, in spite of Jemmy's crankiness. There was only one of him, after all, and he couldn't talk.

"You're a male, too," I said to him, pulling his woolen cap over the soft bright down that feathered his skull. "As a sex, you have your defects, but I will say that catfighting isn't one of them."

Fond as I was of individual women—Bree, Marsali, Lizzie, and even Mrs. Bug—I had to admit that taken en masse, I found men much easier to deal with. Whether this was the fault of my rather unorthodox upbringing—I had been raised largely by my Uncle Lamb and his Persian manservant, Firouz—my experiences in the War, or simply an aspect of my own unconventional personality, I found men soothingly logical and—with a few striking exceptions—pleasingly direct.

I turned to look at the house. It stood serene amid the spruce and chestnut trees, elegantly proportioned, soundly built. A face showed at one of the windows. The face stuck out its tongue and pressed flat against the pane, crossing its eyes above squashed nose and cheeks. High-pitched feminine voices and the sound of banging came to me faintly through the cold, clean air.

"Hmm," I said.

Reluctant as I was to leave home again so soon, and little as I liked the idea of Jamie being involved in armed conflicts of any kind, the thought of going off to live in the company of twenty or thirty unshaven, reeking men for a week or two had developed a certain undeniable attraction. If it meant sleeping on the ground …

“Into each life some rain must fall,” I told Jemmy with a sigh. “But I suppose you’re just learning that now, aren’t you, poor thing?”

“Gnnnh!” he said, and drew himself up into a ball to escape the pain of his emergent teeth, his knees digging painfully into my side. I settled him more comfortably on my hip, and gave him an index finger to chew on. His gums were hard and knobbly; I could feel the tender spot where the new tooth was coming in, swollen and hot under the skin. A piercing shriek came from the house, followed by the sound of shouts and running feet.

“You know,” I said conversationally, “I think a bit of whisky would be just the thing for that, don’t you?” and withdrawing the finger, I tucked Jemmy up against my shoulder. I ducked past the cross and into the shelter of the big red spruce—just in time, as the door of the house burst open and Mrs. Bug’s penetrating voice rose like a trumpet on the chilly air.

It was a long way to the whisky clearing, but I didn’t mind. It was blessedly quiet in the forest, and Jemmy, lulled by the movement, finally relaxed into a doze, limp and heavy as a little sandbag in my arms.

So late in the year, all the deciduous trees had lost their leaves; the trail was ankle-deep in a crackling carpet of brown and gold, and maple seeds whirled past on the wind, brushing my skirt with a whisper of wings. A raven flew past, high above. It gave an urgent, raucous cry, and the baby jerked in my arms.

“Hush,” I said, hugging him close. “It’s nothing, lovey; just a bird.”

Still, I looked after the raven, and listened for another. They were birds of portent—or so said Highland superstition. One raven was an omen of change; two were good fortune; three were ill. I tried to dismiss such notions from my mind—but Nayawenne had told me the raven was my guide, my spirit animal—and I never saw the big, black shadows pass overhead without a certain shiver up the spine.

Jemmy stirred, gave a brief squawk, and fell back into silence. I patted him and resumed my climb, wondering as I made my way slowly up the mountain, what animal might be his guide?

The animal spirit chose you, Nayawenne told me, not the other way around. You must pay careful attention to signs and portents, and wait for your animal to manifest itself to you. Ian's animal was the wolf; Jamie's the bear—or so the Tuscarora said. I had wondered at the time what one was supposed to do if chosen by something ignominious like a shrew or a dung beetle, but was too polite to ask.

Only one raven. I could still hear it, though it was out of sight, but no echoing cry came from the firs behind me. An omen of change.

"You could have saved yourself the trouble," I said to it, under my breath so as not to wake the baby. "Hardly as though I needed telling, is it?"

I climbed slowly, listening to the sigh of the wind and the deeper sound of my own breath. At this season, change was in the air itself, the scents of ripeness and death borne on the breeze, and the breath of winter in its chill. Still, the rhythms of the turning earth brought change that was expected, ordained; body and mind met it with knowledge and—on the whole—with peace. The changes coming were of a different order, and one calculated to disturb the soul.

I glanced back at the house; from this height, I could see only the corner of the roof, and the drifting smoke from the chimney.

"What do you think?" I said softly, Jemmy's head beneath my chin, round and warm in its knitted cap. "Will it be yours? Will you live here, and your children after you?"

It would be a very different life, I thought, from the one he might have led. If Brianna had risked the stones to take him back—but she had not, and so the little boy's fate lay here. Had she thought of that? I wondered. That by staying, she chose not only for herself, but him? Chose war and ignorance, disease and danger, but had risked all that, for the sake of his father—for Roger. I was not entirely sure it had been the right choice—but it hadn't been my choice to make.

Still, I reflected, there was no way of imagining beforehand what having a child was like—no power of the mind was equal to the knowledge of just what the birth of a child could do, wresting lives and wrenching hearts.

"And a good thing, too," I said to Jemmy. "No one in their right mind would do it, otherwise."

My sense of agitation had faded by now, soothed by the wind and the peace of the leafless wood. The whisky clearing, as we called it, was hidden from the trail. Jamie had spent days searching the slopes above the Ridge, before finding a spot that met his requirements.

Or spots, rather. The malting floor was built in a small clearing at the foot of a hollow; the still was farther up the mountain in a clearing of its own, near a small spring that provided fresh, clear water. The malting floor was out of direct sight of the trail, but not difficult to get to.

"No point in hiding it," Jamie had said, explaining his choice to me, "when anyone wi' a nose could walk to it blindfolded."

True enough; even now, when there was no grain actively fermenting in the shed or toasting on the floor, a faintly fecund, smoky scent lingered in the air. When grain was "working," the musty, pungent scent of fermentation was perceptible at a distance, but when the sprouting barley was spread on the floor above a slow fire, a thin haze of smoke hung over the clearing, and the smell was strong enough to reach Fergus's cabin, when the wind was right.

No one was at the malting floor now, of course. When a new batch was working, either Marsali or Fergus would be here to tend it, but for the moment, the roofed floor lay empty, smooth boards darkened to gray by use and weather. There was a neat stack of firewood piled nearby, though, ready for use.

I went close enough to see what sort of wood it was; Fergus liked hickory, both because it split more easily, and for the sweet taste it gave the malted grain. Jamie, deeply traditional in his approach to whisky, would use nothing but oak. I touched a chunk of split wood;

wide grain, light wood, thin bark. I smiled. Jamie had been here recently, then.

Normally, a small keg of whisky was kept at the malting floor, both for the sake of hospitality and caution. "If someone should come upon the lass alone there, best she have something to give them," Jamie had said. "It's known what we do there; best no one should try to make Marsali tell them where the brew is." It wasn't the best whisky—generally a very young, raw spirit—but certainly good enough either for uninvited visitors or a teething child.

"You haven't got any taste buds yet, anyway, so what's the odds?" I murmured to Jemmy, who stirred and smacked his lips in his sleep, screwing up his tiny face in a scowl.

I hunted about, but there was no sign of the small whisky keg either in its usual place behind the bags of barley or inside the pile of firewood. Perhaps taken away for refilling, perhaps stolen. No great matter, in either case.

I turned to the north, past the malting floor, took ten steps and turned right. The stone of the mountain jutted out here, a solid block of granite thrusting upward from the growth of turpelo and buttonbush. Only it wasn't solid. Two slabs of stone leaned together, the open crack below them masked by holly bushes. I pulled my shawl over Jemmy's face to protect him from the sharp-edged leaves, and squeezed carefully behind them, ducking down to go through the cleft.

The stone face fell away in a crumple of huge boulders on the far side of the cleft, with saplings and undergrowth sprouting willy-nilly in the crevices between the rocks. From below, it looked impassable, but from above, a faint trail was visible, threading down to another small clearing. Hardly a clearing; no more than a gap in the trees, where a clear spring bubbled from the rock and disappeared again into the earth. In summer, it was invisible even from above, shielded by the leafy growth of the trees around it.

Now, on the verge of winter, the white glimmer of the rock by the spring was easily visible through the leafless scrim of alder and mountain ash. Jamie had found a large, pale boulder, and rolled it to the head of the spring, where he had scratched the form of a cross upon it, and said a prayer, consecrating the spring to our use. I had thought at the time of making a joke equating whisky with holy water—thinking of Father Kenneth and the baptisms—but had on second thoughts refrained; I wasn't so sure Jamie would think it a joke.

I made my way cautiously down the slope, the faint trail leading through the boulders, and finally round an outcrop of rock, before debouching into the spring clearing. I was warm from the walking, but it was cold enough to numb my fingers where I gripped the edges of my shawl. And Jamie was standing at the edge of the spring in nothing but his shirt.

I stopped dead, hidden by a scrubby growth of evergreens.

It wasn't his state of undress that halted me, but rather something in the look of him. He looked tired, but that was only reasonable, since he had been up and gone so early.

The ragged breeks he wore for riding lay puddled on the ground nearby, his belt and its impedimenta neatly coiled beside them. My eye caught a dark blotch of color, half-hidden in the grass beyond; the blue and brown cloth of his hunting kilt. As I watched, he pulled the shirt over his head and dropped it, then knelt down naked by the spring and splashed water over his arms and face.

His clothes were mud-streaked from riding, but he wasn't filthy, by any means. A simple hand-and-face wash would have sufficed, I thought—and could have been accomplished in much greater comfort by the kitchen hearth.

He stood up, though, and taking the small bucket from the edge of the spring, scooped up cold water and poured it deliberately over himself, closing his eyes and gritting his teeth as it streamed down his chest and legs. I could see his balls draw up tight against his body, looking for shelter as the icy water sluiced through the auburn bush of his pubic hair and dripped off his cock.

"Your grandfather has lost his bloody mind," I whispered to Jemmy, who stirred and grimaced in his sleep, but took no note of ancestral idiosyncrasies.

I knew Jamie wasn't totally impervious to cold; I could see him gasp and shudder from where I stood in the shelter of the rock, and

I shivered in sympathy. A Highlander born and bred, he simply didn't regard cold, hunger, or general discomfort as anything to take account of. Even so, this seemed to be taking cleanliness to an extreme.

He took a deep, gasping breath, and poured water over himself a second time. When he bent to scoop up the third bucketful, it began to dawn on me what he was doing.

A surgeon scrubs before operating for the sake of cleanliness, of course, but that isn't all there is to it. The ritual of soaping the hands, scrubbing the nails, rinsing the skin, repeated and repeated to the point of pain, is as much a mental activity as a physical one. The act of washing oneself in this obsessive way serves to focus the mind and prepare the spirit; one is washing away external preoccupation, sloughing petty distraction, just as surely as one scrubs away germs and dead skin.

I had done it often enough to recognize this particular ritual when I saw it. Jamie was not merely washing; he was cleansing himself, using the cold water not only as solvent but as mortification. He was preparing himself for something, and the notion made a small, cold trickle run down my own spine, chilly as the spring water.

Sure enough, after the third bucketful, he set it down and shook himself, droplets flying from the wet ends of his hair into the dry grass like a spatter of rain. No more than half-dry, he pulled the shirt back over his head, and turned to the west, where the sun lay low between the mountains. He stood still for a moment—very still.

The light streamed through the leafless trees, bright enough that from where I stood, I could see him now only in silhouette, light glowing through the damp linen of his shirt, the darkness of his body a shadow within. He stood with his head lifted, shoulders up, a man listening.

For what? I tried to still my own breathing, and pressed the baby's capped head gently into my shoulder, to keep him from waking. I listened, too.

I could hear the sound of the woods, a constant soft sigh of needle and branch. There was little wind, and I could hear the water of the spring nearby, a muted rush past stone and root. I heard quite clearly the beating of my own heart, and Jemmy's breath against my neck, and suddenly I felt afraid, as though the sounds were too loud, as though they might draw the attention of something dangerous to us.

I froze, not moving at all, trying not to breathe, and like a rabbit under a bush, to become part of the wood around me. Jemmy's pulse beat blue, a tender vein across his temple, and I bent my head over him, to hide it.

Jamie said something aloud in Gaelic. It sounded like a challenge—or perhaps a greeting. The words seemed vaguely familiar—but there was no one there; the clearing was empty. The air felt suddenly colder, as though the light had dimmed; a cloud crossing the face of the sun, I thought, and looked up—but there were no clouds; the sky was clear. Jemmy moved suddenly in my arms, startled, and I clutched him tighter, willing him to make no sound.

Then the air stirred, the cold faded, and my sense of apprehension passed. Jamie hadn't moved. Now the tension went out of him, and his shoulders relaxed. He moved just a little, and the setting sun lit his shirt in a nimbus of gold, and caught his hair in a blaze of sudden fire.

He took his dirk from its discarded sheath, and with no hesitation, drew the edge across the fingers of his right hand. I could see the thin dark line across his fingertips, and bit my lips. He waited a moment for the blood to well up, then shook his hand with a sudden hard flick of the wrist, so that droplets of blood flew from his fingers and struck the standing stone at the head of the pool.

He laid the dirk beneath the stone, and crossed himself with the blood-streaked fingers of his right hand. He knelt then, very slowly, and bowed his head over folded hands.

I'd seen him pray now and then, of course, but always in public, or at least with the knowledge that I was there. Now he plainly thought himself alone, and to watch him kneeling so, stained with blood and his soul given over, made me feel that I spied on an act more private than any intimacy of the body. I would have moved or spoken, and yet to interrupt seemed a sort of desecration. I kept silent, but found I was no longer a spectator; my own mind had turned to prayer unintended.

Oh, Lord, the words formed themselves in my mind, without conscious thought, *I commend to you the soul of your servant James. Help him, please.* And dimly thought, but help him with what?

Then he crossed himself, and rose, and time started again, without my having noticed it had stopped. I was moving down the hillside toward him, grass brushing my skirt, with no memory of having taken the first step. I didn't recall his rising, but Jamie was walking toward me, not looking surprised, but his face filled with light at sight of us.

"Mo chridhe," he said softly, smiling, and bent to kiss me. His beard stubble was rough and his skin still chilled, fresh with water.

"You'd better put your trousers on," I said. "You'll freeze."

"I'll do. *Ciamar a tha thu, an gille ruaidh?*"

To my surprise, Jemmy was awake and drooling, eyes wide blue in a rose-leaf face, all hint of temper gone without a trace. He leaned, twisting to reach for Jamie, who lifted him gently from my arms and cradled him against a shoulder, pulling the woolly cap down snugly over his ears.

"We're starting a tooth," I told Jamie. "He wasn't very comfortable, so I thought perhaps a bit of whisky on his gums … there wasn't any in the house."

"Oh, aye. We can manage that, I think. There's a bit in my flask." Carrying the baby to the spot where his clothes lay, he bent and rummaged one-handed, coming up with the dented pewter flask he carried on his belt.

He sat on a rock, balancing Jemmy on his knee, and handed me the flask to open.

"I went to the mash house," I said, pulling the cork with a soft *pop,* "but the cask was gone."

"Aye, Fergus has it. Here, I'll do it; my hands are clean." He held out his left index finger, and I dribbled a bit of the spirit onto it.

"What's Fergus doing with it?" I asked, settling myself on the rock beside him.

“Keeping it,” he said, uninformatively. He stuck the finger in Jemmy’s mouth, gently rubbing at the swollen gum. “Oh, there it is. Aye, that hurts a bit, doesn’t it? Ouch!” He reached down and gingerly disentangled Jemmy’s fingers from their grip on the hairs of his chest.

“Speaking of that …” I said, and reached out to take his right hand. Shifting his other arm to keep hold of Jemmy, he let me take the hand and turn his fingers upward.

It was a very shallow cut, just across the tips of the first three fingers—the fingers with which he had crossed himself. The blood had already clotted, but I dribbled a bit more of the whisky over the cuts and cleaned the smears of blood from his palm with my handkerchief.

He let me tend him in silence, but when I finished and looked up at him, he met my eyes with a faint smile.

“It’s all right, Sassenach,” he said.

“Is it?” I said. I searched his face; he looked tired, but tranquil. The slight frown I had seen between his brows for the last few days was gone. Whatever he was about, he had begun it.

“Ye saw, then?” he asked quietly, reading my own face.

“Yes. Is it—it’s to do with the cross in the dooryard, is it?”

“Oh, in a way, I suppose.”

“What is it for?” I asked bluntly.

He pursed his lips, rubbing gently at Jemmy’s sore gum. At last he said, “Ye never saw Dougal MacKenzie call the clan, did you?”

I was more than startled at this, but answered cautiously.

“No. I saw Colum do it once—at the oath-taking at Leoch.”

He nodded, the memory of that long-ago night of torches deep in his eyes.

“Aye,” he said softly. “I mind that. Colum was chief, and the men would come when he summoned them, surely. But it was Dougal who led them to war.”

He paused a moment, gathering his thoughts.

“There were raids, now and again. That was a different thing, and often no more than a fancy that took Dougal or Rupert, maybe an urge born of drink or boredom—a small band out for the fun of it, as much as for cattle or grain. But to gather the clan for war, all the fighting men—that was a rarer thing. I only saw it the once, myself, but it's no a sight ye would forget."

The cross of pinewood had been there when he woke one morning at the castle, surprising him as he crossed the courtyard. The inhabitants of Leoch were up and about their business as usual, but no one glanced at the cross or referred to it in any way. Even so, there were undercurrents of excitement running through the castle.

The men stood here and there in knots, talking in undertones, but when he joined a group, the talk shifted at once to desultory conversation.

"I was Colum's nephew, aye, but newly come to the castle, and they kent my sire and grandsire." Jamie's paternal grandfather had been Simon, Lord Lovat—chief of the Frasers of Lovat, and no great friend of the MacKenzies of Leoch.

"I couldna tell what was afoot, but something was; the hair on my arms prickled whenever I caught someone's eye." At last, he had made his way to the stable, and found Old Alec, Colum's Master of Horse. The old man had been fond of Ellen MacKenzie, and was kind to the son for his mother's sake, as well as his own.

" 'Tis the fiery cross, lad," he'd told Jamie, tossing him a currycomb and jerking his head toward the stalls. "Ye'll not ha' seen it before?"

It was auld, he'd said, one of the ways that had been followed for hundreds of years, no one quite knowing where it had started, who had done it first or why.

"When a Hielan' chief will call his men to war," the old man had said, deftly running his gnarled hand through a knotted mane, "he has a cross made, and sets it afire. It's put out at once, ken, wi' blood or wi' water—but still it's called the fiery cross, and it will be carried through the glens and corries, a sign to the men of the clan to fetch their weapons and come to the gathering place, prepared for battle."

"Aye?" Jamie had said, feeling excitement hollow his belly. "And who do we fight, then? Where do we ride?"

The old man's grizzled brow had crinkled in amused approval at that "we."

"Ye follow where your chieftain leads ye, lad. But tonight, it will be the Grants we go against."

"It was, too," Jamie said. "Though not that night. When darkness came, Dougal lit the cross and called the clan. He doused the burnin' wood wi' sheep's blood—and two men rode out of the courtyard wi' the fiery cross, to take it through the mountains. Four days later, there were three hundred men in that courtyard, armed wi' swords, pistols, and dirks—and at dawn on the fifth day, we rode to make war on the Grants."

His finger was still in the baby's mouth, his eyes distant as he remembered.

"That was the first time I used my sword against another man," he said. "I mind it well."

"I expect you do," I murmured. Jemmy was beginning to squirm and fuss again; I reached across and lifted him into my own lap to check—sure enough, his clout was wet. Luckily, I had another, tucked into my belt for convenience. I laid him out across my knee to change.

"And so this cross in our dooryard …" I said delicately, eyes on my work. "To do with the militia, is it?"

Jamie sighed, and I could see the shadows of memory moving behind his eyes.

"Aye," he said. "Once, I could have called, and the men would come without question—because they were mine. Men of my blood, men of my land."

His eyes were hooded, looking out over the mountainside that rose up before us. I thought he did not see the wooded heights of the Carolina wilderness, though; rather, the scoured mountains and rocky crofts of Lallybroch. I laid my free hand on his wrist; the skin was cold, but I could feel the heat of him, just below the surface, like a fever rising.

"They came for you—but you came for them, Jamie. You came for them at Culloden. You took them there—and you brought them back."

Ironic, I thought, that the men who had come then to serve at his summons were for the most part still safe at home in Scotland. No part of the Highlands had been untouched by war—but Lallybroch and its people were for the most part still whole—because of Jamie.

"Aye, that's so." He turned to look at me, and a rueful smile touched his face. His hand tightened on mine for a moment, then relaxed, and the line deepened again between his brows. He waved a hand toward the mountains around us.

"But these men—there is no debt of blood between them and me. They are not Frasers; I am not born either laird or chief to them. If they come to fight at my call, it will be of their own will."

"Well, that," I said dryly, "and Governor Tryon's."

He shook his head at that.

"Nay, not that. Will the Governor ken which men are here, or which ones come to meet his summons?" He grimaced slightly. "He kens me—and that will do nicely."

I had to admit the truth of this. Tryon would neither know nor care whom Jamie brought—only that he appeared, with a satisfactory number of men behind him, ready to do the Governor's dirty work.

I pondered that for a moment, patting Jemmy's bottom dry with the hem of my skirt. All I knew of the American Revolution were the things I had heard at second hand from Brianna's schoolbooks—and I, of all people, knew just how great the gap could be between written history and the reality.

Also, we had lived in Boston, and the schoolbooks naturally reflected local history. The general impression one got from reading about Lexington and Concord and the like was that the militia involved every able-bodied man in the community, all of whom sprang into action at the first hint of alarm, eager to perform their civic duty. Perhaps they did, perhaps not—but the Carolina backcountry wasn't Boston, not by a long chalk.

"… ready to ride and spread the alarm," I said, half under my breath, *"to every Middlesex village and farm."*

"What?" Jamie's brows shot up. "Where's Middlesex?"

“Well, you’d think it was halfway between male and female,” I said, “but it’s really just the area round Boston. Though of course that’s named after the one in England.”

“Yes?” he said, looking bewildered. “Aye, if ye say so, Sassenach. But—”

“Militia.” I lifted Jemmy, who was bucking and squirming like a landed fish, making noises of extreme protest at being forcibly diapered. He kicked me in the stomach. “Oh, give over, child, do.”

Jamie reached over and took the baby under the arms, hoisting him from my lap.

“Here, I’ll have him. Does he need more whisky?”

“I don’t know, but at least he can’t squawk if your finger’s in his mouth.” I relinquished Jemmy with some relief, returning to my train of thought.

“Boston’s been settled for more than a hundred years, even now,” I said. “It *has* villages and farms—and the farms aren’t all that far from the villages. People have been living there for a long time; everyone knows each other.”

Jamie was nodding patiently at each of these startling revelations, trusting that I would eventually come to some point. Which I did, only to discover that it was the same point he’d been making to me.

“So when someone musters militia there,” I said, suddenly seeing what he’d been telling me all along, “they come, because they’re accustomed to fighting together to defend their towns and because no man would want to be thought a coward by his neighbors. But here …” I bit my lip, contemplating the soaring mountains all around us.

“Aye,” he said, nodding, seeing the realization dawn in my face. “It’s different here.”

There was no settlement large enough to be called a town within a hundred miles, save the German Lutherans at Salem. Bar that, there was nothing in the backcountry but scattered homesteads; sometimes a place where a family had settled and spread, brothers or cousins building houses within sight of one another. Small settlements and distant cabins, some hidden in the mountain hollows, screened by laurels, where the residents might not see another white face for months—or years—at a time.

The sun had sunk below the angled slope of the mountain, but the light still lingered, a brief wash of color that stained the trees and rocks gold around us and flushed the distant peaks with blue and violet. There were living creatures in that cold, brilliant landscape, I knew, habitations nearby and warm bodies stirring; but so far as the eye could see, nothing moved.

Mountain settlers would go without question to help a neighbor—because they might as easily require such help themselves at any moment. There was, after all, no one else to turn to.

But they had never fought for a common purpose, had nothing in common to defend. And to abandon their homesteads and leave their families without defense, in order to serve the whim of a distant governor? A vague notion of duty might compel a few; a few would go from curiosity, from restlessness, or in the vague hope of gain. But most would go only if they were called by a man they respected; a man that they trusted.

I am not born either laird or chief to them, he'd said. Not born to them, no—but born to it, nonetheless. He could, if he wished, make himself chief.

"Why?" I asked softly. "Why will you do it?" The shadows were rising from the rocks, slowly drowning the light.

"Do you not see?" One eyebrow lifted as he turned his head to me. "Ye told me what would happen at Culloden—and I believed ye, Sassenach, fearful as it was. The men of Lallybroch came home safe as much because of you as because of me."

That was not entirely true; any man who had marched to Nairn with the Highland army would have known that disaster lay somewhere ahead. Still … I *had* been able to help in some small way, to make sure that Lallybroch was prepared, not only for the battle, but its aftermath. The small weight of guilt that I always felt when I thought of the Rising lifted slightly, easing my heart.

"Well, perhaps. But what—"

"Ye've told me what will happen here, Sassenach. You and Brianna and MacKenzie, all three. Rebellion, and war—and this time … victory.”

Victory. I nodded numbly, remembering what I knew of wars and the cost of victory. It was, however, better than defeat.

“Well, then.” He stooped to pick up his dirk, and gestured with it to the mountains around us. “I have sworn an oath to the Crown; if I break it in time of war, I am a traitor. My land is forfeit—and my life—and those who follow me will share my fate. True?”

“True.” I swallowed, hugging my arms tight around me, wishing I still held Jemmy. Jamie turned to face me, his eyes hard and bright.

“But the Crown willna prevail, this time. Ye’ve told me. And if the King is overthrown—what then of my oath? If I have kept it, then I am traitor to the rebel cause.”

“Oh,” I said, rather faintly.

“Ye see? At some point, Tryon and the King will lose their power over me—but I dinna ken when that may be. At some point, the rebels will hold power—but I dinna ken when *that* may be. And in between …” He tilted the point of his dirk downward.

“I do see. A very tidy little cleft stick,” I said, feeling somewhat hollow as I realized just how precarious our situation was.

To follow Tryon’s orders now was plainly the only choice. Later, however … for Jamie to continue as the Governor’s man into the early stages of the Revolution was to declare himself a Loyalist—which would be fatal, in the long run. In the short run, though, to break with Tryon, forswear his oath to the King, and declare for the rebels … that would cost him his land, and quite possibly his life.

He shrugged, with a wry twist of the mouth, and sat back a little, easing Jemmy on his lap.

“Well, it’s no as though I’ve never found myself walking between two fires before, Sassenach. I may come out of it a bit scorched round the edges, but I dinna think I’ll fry.” He gave a faint snort of what might be amusement. “It’s in my blood, no?”

I managed a short laugh.

“If you’re thinking of your grandfather,” I said, “I admit he was good at it. Caught up with him in the end, though, didn’t it?”

He tilted his head from one side to the other, equivocating.

“Aye, maybe so. But do ye not think things perhaps fell out as he wished?”

The late Lord Lovat had been notorious for the deviousness of his mind, but I couldn’t quite see the benefit in planning to have his head chopped off, and said so.

Jamie smiled, despite the seriousness of the discussion.

“Well, perhaps beheading wasna quite what he’d planned, but still—ye saw what he did; he sent Young Simon to battle, and he stayed home. But which of them was it who paid the price on Tower Hill?”

I nodded slowly, beginning to see his point. Young Simon, who was in fact close to Jamie’s own age, had not suffered physically for his part in the Rising, overt though it had been. He had not been imprisoned or exiled, like many of the Jacobites, and while he had lost most of his lands, he had in fact regained quite a bit of his property since, by means of repeated and tenacious lawsuits brought against the Crown.

“And Old Simon *could* have blamed his son, and Young Simon would have ended up on the scaffold—but he didn’t. Well, I suppose even an old viper like that might hesitate to put his own son and heir under the ax.”

Jamie nodded.

“Would ye let someone chop off your head, Sassenach, if it was a choice betwixt you and Brianna?”

“Yes,” I said, without hesitation. I was reluctant to admit that Old Simon might have possessed such a virtue as family feeling, but I supposed even vipers had some concern for their children’s welfare.

Jemmy had abandoned the proffered finger in favor of his grandfather’s dirk, and was gnawing fiercely on the hilt. Jamie wrapped his hand around the blade, holding it safely away from the child, but made no effort to take the knife away.

“So would I,” Jamie said, smiling slightly. “Though I do hope it willna come to that.”

“I don’t think either army was—will be—inclined to behead people,” I said. That did, of course, leave a number of other unpleasant options available—but Jamie knew that as well as I did.

I had a sudden, passionate wish to urge him to throw it all up, turn away from it. Tell Tryon to stuff his land, tell the tenants they must make their own way—abandon the Ridge and flee. War was coming, but it need not engulf us; not this time. We could go south, to Florida, or to the Indies. To the west, to take refuge with the Cherokee. Or even back to Scotland. The Colonies would rise, but there were places one could run to.

He was watching my face.

"This," he said, a gesture dismissing Tryon, the militia, the Regulators, "this is a verra little thing, Sassenach, perhaps nothing in itself. But it is the beginning, I think."

The light was beginning to fail now; the shadow covered his feet and legs, but the last of the sun threw his own face into strong relief. There was a smudge of blood on his forehead, where he had touched it, crossing himself. I should have wiped it away, I thought, but made no move to do so.

"If I will save these men—if they will walk wi' me between the fires—then they must follow me without question, Sassenach. Best it begins now, while not so much is at stake."

"I know," I said, and shivered.

"Are ye cold, Sassenach? Here, take the wean and go home. I'll come in a bit, so soon as I'm dressed."

He handed me Jemmy and the dirk, since the two seemed momentarily inseparable, and rose. He picked up his kilt and shook out the tartan folds, but I didn't move. The blade of the knife was warm where I gripped it, warm from his hand.

He looked at me in question, but I shook my head.

"We'll wait for you."

He dressed quickly, but carefully. Despite my apprehensions, I had to admire the delicacy of his instincts. Not his dress kilt, the one in crimson and black, but the hunting kilt. No effort to impress the mountain men with richness; but an oddity of dress, enough to make the point to the other Highlanders that he was one of them, to draw the eye and interest of the Germans. Plaid pinned up with the running-stag brooch, his belt and scabbard, clean wool stockings. He was quiet, absorbed in what he was doing, dressing with a calm precision that was unnervingly reminiscent of the robing of a priest.

It would be tonight, then. Roger and the rest had clearly gone to summon the men who lived within a day's ride; tonight he would light his cross and call the first of his men—and seal the bargain with whisky.

"So Bree was right," I said, to break the silence in the clearing. "She said perhaps you were starting your own religion. When she saw the cross, I mean."

He glanced at me, startled. He looked in the direction where the house lay, then his mouth curled wryly.

"I suppose I am," he said. "God help me."

He took the knife gently away from Jemmy, wiped it on a fold of his plaid, and slid it away into its scabbard. He was finished.

I stood to follow him. The words I couldn't speak—wouldn't speak—were a ball of eels in my throat. Afraid one would slither free and slip out of my mouth, I said instead, "Was it God you were calling on to help you? When I saw you earlier?"

"Och, no," he said. He looked away for a second, then met my eyes with a sudden queer glance. "I was calling Dougal MacKenzie."

I felt a deep and sudden qualm go through me. Dougal was long dead; he had died in Jamie's arms on the eve of Culloden—died with Jamie's dirk in his throat. I swallowed, and my eyes flicked involuntarily to the knife at his belt.

"I made my peace wi' Dougal long ago," he said softly, seeing the direction of my glance. He touched the hilt of the knife, with its knurl of gold, that had once been Hector Cameron's. "He was a chieftain, Dougal. He will know that I did then as I must—for my men, for you—and that I will do it now again."

I realized now what it was he had said, standing tall, facing the west—the direction to which the souls of the dead fly home. It had been neither prayer nor plea. I knew the words—though it was many years since I had heard them. He had shouted *"Tulach Ard!"*—the war cry of clan MacKenzie.

I swallowed hard.

"And will he … help you, do you think?"

He nodded, serious.

"If he can," he said. "We will ha' fought together many times, Dougal and I; hand to hand—and back to back. And after all, Sassenach—blood is blood."

I nodded back, mechanically, and lifted Jemmy up against my shoulder. The sky had bleached to a winter white, and shadow filled the clearing. The stone at the head of the spring stood out, a pale and ghostly shape above black water.

"Let's go," I said. "It's nearly night."

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23

THE BARD

It was full dark when Roger finally reached his own door, but the windows glowed welcomingly, and sparks showered from the chimney, promising warmth and food. He was tired, chilled, and very hungry, and he felt a deep and thankful appreciation for his home—substantially sharpened by the knowledge that he would leave it on the morrow.

"Brianna?" He stepped inside, squinting in the dim glow, looking for his wife.

"There you are! You're so late! Where have you been?" She popped out of the small back room, the baby balanced on her hip and a heap of tartan cloth clutched to her chest. She leaned over it to kiss him briefly, leaving him with a tantalizing taste of plum jam.

"I've been riding up hill and down dale for the last ten hours," he said, taking the cloth from her and tossing it onto the bed. "Looking for a mythical family of Dutchmen. Come here and kiss me properly, aye?"

She obligingly wrapped her free arm round his waist and gave him a lingering, plum-scented kiss that made him think that hungry as he was, dinner could perhaps wait for a bit. The baby, however, had other ideas, and set up a loud wail that made Brianna hastily detach herself, grimacing at the racket.

"Still teething?" Roger said, observing his offspring's red and swollen countenance, covered with a shiny coating of snot, saliva, and tears.

"How did you guess?" she said caustically. "Here, can you take him, just for a minute?" She thrust Jemmy, writhing, into his father's arms, and tugged at her bodice, the green linen damply creased and stained with pale splotches of spit-up milk. One of her breasts bobbed into view, and she reached out for Jemmy, sitting down with him in the nursing chair by the fire.

"He's been fussing all day," she said, shaking her head as the baby squirmed and whined, batting at the proffered nourishment with a fretful hand. "He won't nurse for more than a few minutes, and when he does, he spits it up again. He whines when you pick him up, but he screams if you set him down." She shoved a hand tiredly through her hair. "I feel like I've been wrestling alligators all day."

"Oh, mm. That's too bad." Roger rubbed his aching lower back, trying not to be ostentatious about it. He pointed toward the bed with his chin. "Ah … what's the tartan for?"

"Oh, I forgot—that's yours." Attention momentarily distracted from the struggling child, she glanced up at Roger, taking in for the first time his disheveled appearance. "Da brought it down for you to wear tonight. You have a big smudge of mud on your face, by the way—did you fall off?"

"Several times." He moved to the washstand, limping only slightly. One sleeve of his coat and the knee of his breeches were plastered with mud, and he rubbed at his chest, trying to dislodge bits of dry leaf that had got down the neck of his shirt.

"Oh? That's too bad. Shh, shh, shh," she crooned to the child, rocking him to and fro. "Did you hurt yourself?"

"Ah, no. It's fine." He shed the coat and turned his back, pouring water from the pitcher into the bowl. He splashed cold water over his face, listening to Jemmy's squeals and privately calculating the odds of being able to make love to Brianna sometime before having to leave next morning. Between Jemmy's teeth and his grandfather's plans, the chances seemed slight, but hope sprang eternal.

He blotted his face with the towel, glancing covertly around in hopes of food. Both table and hearth were empty, though there was a strong vinegar scent in the air.

"Sauerkraut?" he guessed, sniffing audibly. "The Muellers?"

"They brought two big jars of it," Brianna said, gesturing toward the corner where a stone crock stood in the shadows. "That one's ours. Did you get anything to eat while you were out?"

"No." His belly rumbled loudly, evidently willing to consider cold sauerkraut, if that was all that was on offer. Presumably there would be food at the big house, though. Cheered by this thought, he pulled off his breeches and began the awkward business of pleating up the tartan cloth to make a belted plaid.

Jemmy had quieted a little, now making no more than intermittent yips of discomfort as his mother rocked him to and fro.

"What was that about mythical Dutchmen?" Brianna asked, still rocking, but now with a moment's attention to spare.

"Jamie sent me up to the northeast to look for a family of Dutchmen he'd heard had settled near Boiling Creek—to tell the men about the militia summons and have them come back with me, if they would." He frowned at the cloth laid out on the bed. He'd worn a plaid like this only twice before, and both times, had had help to put the thing on. "Is it important for me to wear this, do you think?"

Brianna snorted behind him with brief amusement.

"I think you'd better wear *something*. You can't go up to the big house in nothing but your shirt. You couldn't find the Dutchmen, then?"

"Not so much as a wooden shoe." He had found what he *thought* was Boiling Creek, and had ridden up the bank for miles, dodging—or not—overhanging branches, bramble patches, and thickets of witch hazel, but hadn't found a sign of anything larger than a fox that had slipped across his path, disappearing into the brush like a flame suddenly extinguished.

"Maybe they moved on. Went up to Virginia, or Pennsylvania." Brianna spoke with sympathy. It had been a long, exhausting day, with failure at the end of it. Not a terrible failure; Jamie had said only, "Find them if ye can"—and if he *had* found them, they might not have understood his rudimentary Dutch, gained on brief holidays to the Amsterdam of the 1960s. Or might not have come, in any case. Still, the small failure nagged at him, like a stone in his shoe.

He glanced at Brianna, who grinned widely at him in anticipation.

"All right," he said with resignation. "Laugh if ye must." Getting into a belted plaid wasn't the most dignified thing a man could do, given that the most efficient method was to lie down on the pleated fabric and roll like a sausage on a girdle. Jamie could do it standing up, but then, the man had had practice.

His struggles—rather deliberately exaggerated—were rewarded by Brianna's giggling, which in turn seemed to have a calming effect on the baby. By the time Roger made the final adjustments to his pleats and drapes, mother and child were both flushed, but happy.

Roger made a leg to them, flourishing, and Bree patted her own leg in one-handed applause.

"Terrific," she said, her eyes traveling appreciatively over him. "See Daddy? Pretty Daddy!" She turned Jemmy, who stared openmouthed at the vision of male glory before him and blossomed into a wide, slow smile, a trickle of drool hanging from the pouting curve of his lip.

Roger was still hungry, sore, and tired, but it didn't seem so important. He grinned, and held out his arms toward the baby.

"Do you need to change? If he's full and dry, I'll take him up to the house—give you a bit of time to fix up."

"You think I need fixing up, do you?" Brianna gave him an austere look down her long, straight nose. Her hair had come down in wisps and straggles, her dress looked as though she'd been sleeping in it for weeks, and there was a dark smear of jam on the upper curve of one breast.

"You look great," he said, bending and swinging Jemmy deftly up. "Hush, *a bhalaich*. You've had enough of Mummy, and she's definitely had enough of you for a bit. Come along with me."

"Don't forget your guitar!" Bree called after him as he headed for the door. He glanced back at her, surprised.

"What?"

"Da wants you to sing. Wait, he gave me a list."

"A list? Of *what*?" To the best of Roger's knowledge, Jamie Fraser paid no attention whatever to music. It rankled him a bit, in fact, though he seldom admitted it—that his own greatest skill was one that Fraser didn't value.

“Songs, of course.” She furrowed her brow, conjuring up the memorized list. “He wants you to do ‘Ho Ro!’ and ‘Birniebouzle,’ and ‘The Great Silkie’—you can do other stuff in between, he said, but he wants those—and then get into the warmongering stuff. That’s not what *he* called it, but you know what I mean—‘Killiecrankie’ and ‘The Haughs of Cromdale,’ and ‘The Sherrifsmuir Fight.’ Just the older stuff, though; he says don’t do the songs from the ’45, except for ‘Johnnie Cope’—he wants that one for sure, but toward the end. And—”

Roger stared at her, disentangling Jemmy’s foot from the folds of his plaid.

“I wouldn’t have thought your father so much as knew the names of songs, let alone had preferences.”

Brianna had stood up and was reaching for the long wooden pin that held her hair in place. She pulled it out and let the thick red shimmer cascade over shoulders and face. She ran both hands through the ruddy mass and pushed it back, shaking her head.

“He doesn’t. Have preferences, I mean. Da’s completely tone-deaf. Mama says he has a good sense of rhythm, but he can’t tell one note from another.”

“That’s what I thought. But why—”

“He may not listen to music, Roger, but he *listens*.” She glanced at him, snigging the comb through the tangles of her hair. “And he watches. He knows how people act—and how they feel—when they hear you do those songs.”

“Does he?” Roger murmured. He felt an odd spark of pleasure at the thought that Fraser had indeed noticed the effect of his music, even if he didn’t appreciate it personally. “So—he means me to soften them up, is that it? Get them in the mood before he goes on for his own bit?”

“That’s it.” She nodded, busy untying the laces of her bodice. Escaped from confinement, her breasts bobbed suddenly free, round and loose under the thin muslin shift.

Roger shifted his weight, easing the fit of his plaid. She caught the slight movement and looked at him. Slowly, she drew her hands up, cupping her breasts and lifting them, her eyes on his and a slight smile on her lips. Just for a moment, he felt as though he had stopped breathing, though his chest continued to rise and fall.

She was the first to break the moment, dropping her hands and turning to delve into the chest where she kept her linen.

"Do you know exactly what he's up to?" she asked, her voice muffled in the depths of the chest. "Did he have that cross up when you left?"

"Aye, I know about it." Jemmy was making small huffing noises, like a toy engine struggling up a hill. Roger tucked him under one arm, his hand cradling the fat little belly. "It's a fiery cross. D'ye ken what that is?"

She emerged from the chest, a fresh shift in her hands, looking mildly disturbed.

"A fiery cross? You mean he's going to *burn* a cross in the yard?"

"Well, not burn it all the way, no." Taking down his bodhran with his free hand and flicking a finger against the drum head to check the tautness, he explained briefly the tradition of the fiery cross. "It's a rare thing," he concluded, moving the drum out of Jemmy's grasping reach. "I don't think it was ever done in the Highlands again, after the Rising. Your father told me he'd seen it once, though—it's something really special, to see it done here."

Flushed with historical enthusiasm, he didn't notice at once that Brianna seemed slightly less eager.

"Maybe so," she said uneasily. "I don't know … it sort of gives me the creeps."

"Eh?" Roger glanced at her in surprise. "Why?"

She shrugged, pulling the crumpled shift off over her head.

"I don't know. Maybe it's just that I *have* seen burning crosses—on the evening news on TV. You know, the KKK—or do you know? Maybe they don't—didn't—report things like that on television in Britain?"

"The Ku Klux Klan?" Roger was less interested in fanatical bigots than in the sight of Brianna's bare breasts, but made an effort to focus on the conversation. "Oh, aye, heard of them. Where d'you think they got the notion?"

"What? You mean—"

“Sure,” he said cheerfully. “They got it from the Highland immigrants—from whom they were descended, by the bye. That’s why they called it ‘Klan,’ aye? Come to think,” he added, interested, “it could be this—tonight—that’s the link. The occasion that brings the custom from the Old World to the New, I mean. Wouldn’t that be something?”

“Something,” Brianna echoed faintly. She’d pulled on a fresh shift, and now shook out a clean dress of blue linen, looking uneasy.

“Everything starts somewhere, Bree,” he said, more gently. “Most often, we don’t know where or how; does it matter if this time we do? And the Ku Klux Klan won’t get started for a hundred years from now, at least.” He hoisted Jemmy slightly, bouncing him on one hip. “It won’t be us who sees it, or even wee Jeremiah here—maybe not even his son.”

“Great,” she said dryly, pulling on her stays and reaching for the laces. “So our *great*-grandson can end up being the Grand Dragon.”

Roger laughed.

“Aye, maybe so. But for tonight, it’s your father.”

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24

PLAYING WITH FIRE

He wasn't sure what he had expected. Something like the spectacle of the great fire at the Gathering, perhaps. The preparation was the same, involving large quantities of food and drink. A huge keg of beer and a smaller one of whisky stood on planks at the edge of the dooryard, and a huge roast pig on a spit of green hickory turned slowly over a bed of coals, sending whiffs of smoke and mouthwatering aromas through the cold evening air.

He grinned at the fire-washed faces in front of him, slicked with grease and flushed with booze, and struck his bodhran. His stomach rumbled loudly, but the noise was drowned beneath the raucous chorus of "Killiecrankie."

"O, I met the De-ev-il and Dundeeee …
On the brae-aes o' Killiecrankie-O!"

He would have earned his own supper by the time he got it. He had been playing and singing for more than an hour, and the moon was rising over Black Mountain now. He paused under cover of the refrain, just long enough to grab the cup of ale set under his stool and wet his throat, then hit the new verse fresh and solid.

"I fought on land, I fought on sea,
At hame I fought my auntie, Oh!
I met the Devil and Dundee …
On the braes o' Killiecrankie-O!"

He smiled professionally as he sang, meeting an eye here, focusing on a face there, and calculated progress in the back of his mind. He'd got them going now—with a bit of help from the drink on offer, admittedly—and well stuck into what Bree had called "the warmongering stuff."

He could feel the cross standing at his back, almost hidden by the darkness. Everyone had had a chance to see it, though; he'd heard the murmurs of interest and speculation.

Jamie Fraser was away to one side, out of the ring of firelight. Roger could just make out his tall form, dark in the shadow of the big red spruce that stood near the house. Fraser had been working his way methodically through the group all evening, stopping here and there to exchange cordialities, tell a joke, pause to listen to a problem or a story. Now he stood alone, waiting. Nearly time, then—for whatever he meant to do.

Roger gave them a moment for applause and his own refreshment, then launched into "Johnnie Cope," fast, fierce, and funny.

He'd done that one at the Gathering, several times, and knew pretty much how they'd take it. A moment's pause, uncertainty, then the voices beginning to join in—by the end of the second verse, they'd be whooping and shouting ribald remarks in the background.

Some of the men here had fought at Prestonpans; if they'd been defeated at Culloden, they'd still routed Johnnie Cope's troops first, and loved the chance to relive that famous victory. And those Highlanders who hadn't fought had heard about it. The Muellers, who had likely never heard of Charles Stuart and probably understood one word in a dozen, seemed to be improvising their own sort of yodeling chorus round the back, waving their cups in sloshing salute to each verse. Aye, well, so long as they were having a good time.

The crowd was half-shouting the final chorus, nearly drowning him out.

"Hey, Johnnie Cope, are ye walking yet?
And are your drums a-beatin' yet?
If ye were walkin', I wad wait,

Tae gang tae the coals in the mornin'!"

He hit a final thump, and bowed to huge applause. That was the warm-up done; time for the main act to come onstage. Bowing and smiling, he rose from his stool and faded off, fetching up in the shadows near the hacked remains of the huge pork carcass.

Bree was there waiting for him, Jemmy wide-awake and owl-eyed in her arms. She leaned across and kissed him, handing him the kid as she did so, and taking his bodhran in exchange.

"You were great!" she said. "Hold him; I'll get you some food and beer."

Jem usually wanted to stay with his mother, but was too stupefied by the noise and the leaping flames to protest the handover. He snuggled against Roger's chest, gravely sucking his thumb.

Roger was sweating from the exertion, his heart beating fast from the adrenaline of performance, and the air away from the fire and the crowd was cold on his flushed face. The baby's swaddled weight felt good against him, warm and solid in the crook of his arm. He'd done well, and knew it. Let's hope it was what Fraser wanted.

By the time Bree reappeared with a drink and a pewter plate heaped with sliced pork, apple fritters, and roast potatoes, Jamie had come into the circle of firelight, taking Roger's place before the standing cross.

He stood tall and broad-shouldered in his best gray gentleman's coat, kilted below in soft blue tartan, his hair loose and blazing on his shoulders, with a small warrior's plait down one side, adorned with a single feather. Firelight glinted from the knurled gold hilt of his dirk and the brooch that held his looped plaid. He looked pleasant enough, but his manner overall was serious, intent. He made a good show—and knew it.

The crowd quieted within seconds, men elbowing their more garrulous neighbors to silence.

"Ye ken well enough what we're about here, aye?" he asked without preamble. He raised his hand, in which he held the Governor's crumpled summons, the red smear of its official seal visible in the leaping firelight. There was a rumble of agreement;

the crowd was still cheerful, blood and whisky coursing freely through their veins.

"We are called in duty, and we come in honor to serve the cause of law—and the Governor."

Roger saw old Gerhard Mueller, leaning to one side to hear the translation that one of his sons-in-law was murmuring in his ear. He nodded his approval, and shouted, *"Ja! Lang lebe* Governor*!"* There was a ripple of laughter, and echoing shouts in English and Gaelic.

Jamie smiled, waiting for the noise to die down. As it did, he turned slowly, nodding as he looked from one face to the next, acknowledging each man. Then he turned to the side and lifted a hand to the cross that stood stark and black behind him.

"In the Highlands of Scotland, when a chieftain would set himself for war," he said, his tone casually conversational, but pitched to be heard throughout the dooryard, "he would burn the fiery cross, and send it for a sign through the lands of his clan. It was a signal to the men of his name, to gather their weapons and come to the gathering place, prepared for battle."

There was a stir in the midst of the crowd, a brief nudging and more cries of approval, though these were more subdued. A few men had seen this, or at least knew what he was talking about. The rest raised their chins and craned their necks, mouths half-open in interest.

"But this is a new land, and while we are friends"—he smiled at Gerhard Mueller—"*Ja, Freunde,* neighbors, and countrymen"—a look at the Lindsay brothers—"and we will be companions in arms, we are not clan. While I am given command, I am not your chief."

The hell you aren't, Roger thought. *Or well on your way to it, anyroad.* He took a last deep swallow of cold beer and put down cup and plate. The food could wait a bit longer. Bree had taken back the baby and had his bodhran tucked under her arm; he reached for it, and she gave him a glancing smile, but most of her attention was fixed on her father.

Jamie bent and pulled a torch from the fire, stood with it in his hand, lighting the broad planes and sharp angles of his face.

"Let God witness here our willingness, and may God strengthen our arms—" He paused, to let the Germans catch up. "But let this fiery cross stand as testament to our honor, to invoke God's protection for our families—until we come safe home again."

He turned and touched the torch to the upright of the cross, holding it until the dry bark caught and a small flame grew and glimmered from the dark wood.

Everyone stood silent, watching. There was no sound but the shift and sigh of the crowd, echoing the sough of the wind in the wilderness around them. It was no more than a tiny tongue of fire, flickering in the breeze, on the verge of going out altogether. No petrol-soaked roar, no devouring conflagration. Roger felt Brianna sigh beside him, some of the tension leaving her.

The flame steadied and caught. The edges of the jigsaw-pieces of pine bark glowed crimson, then white, and vanished into ash as the flame began to spread upward. It was big and solid, and would burn slowly, this cross, halfway through the night, lighting the dooryard as the men gathered beneath it, talking, eating, drinking, beginning the process of becoming what Jamie Fraser meant them to be: friends, neighbors, companions in arms. Under his command.

Fraser stood for a moment, watching, to be sure the flame had caught. Then he turned back to the crowd of men and dropped his torch back into the fire.

"We cannot say what may befall us. God grant us courage," he said, very simply. "God grant us wisdom. If it be His will, may He grant us peace. We ride in the morning."

He turned then and left the fire, glancing to find Roger as he did so. Roger nodded back, swallowed to clear his throat, and began to sing softly from the darkness, the opening to the song Jamie had wanted to finish the proceedings—"The Flower of Scotland."

"Oh, flower of Scotland,
When will we see your like again?
That fought and died for
Your wee bit hill and glen …"

Not one of the songs Bree called the warmongering ones. It was a solemn song, that one, and melancholy. But not a song of grief, for all that; one of remembrance, of pride and determination. It wasn't even a legitimately ancient song—Roger knew the man who'd written it, in his own time—but Jamie had heard it, and knowing the history of Stirling and Bannockburn, strongly approved the sentiment.

"And stood against him,
Proud Edward's army,
And sent him homeward
Tae think again."

The Scottish members of the crowd let him sing alone through the verse, but voices lifted softly, then louder, in the refrain.

"And sent him ho-omeward …
Tae think again!"

He remembered something Bree had told him, lying in bed the night before, during the few moments when both of them were still conscious. They had been talking of the people of the times, speculating as to whether they might one day meet people like Jefferson or Washington face to face; it was an exciting—and not at all impossible—prospect. She had mentioned John Adams, quoting something she had read that he had said—or would say, rather—during the Revolution:

"I am a warrior, that my son may be a merchant—and his son may be a
poet."
"The hills are bare now,
And autumn leaves lie thick and still,
O'er land that is lost now,
Which those so dearly held.
And stood against him,

Proud Edward's army,
And sent him homeward
Tae think again."

No longer Edward's army, but George's. And yet the same proud army. He caught a glimpse of Claire, standing with the other women, apart, at the very edge of the circle of light. Her face was remote and she stood very still, hair floating loose around her face, the gold eyes dark with inner shadow—fixed on Jamie, who stood quiet by her side.

The same proud army with which she had once fought; the proud army with which his father had died. He felt a catch at his throat, and forced air from down deep, singing through it fiercely. *I will be a warrior, that my son may be a merchant—and his son may be a poet.* Neither Adams nor Jefferson had fought; Jefferson had no son. He had been the poet, whose words had echoed through the years, raised armies, burned in the hearts of those who would die for them, and for the country founded on them.

Perhaps it's the hair, Roger thought ironically, seeing the gleam of ruddy light as Jamie moved, watching silently over the thing he had started. Some Viking tinge in the blood, that gave those tall fiery men the gift of rousing men to war.

"That fought and died for
Your wee bit hill and glen …"

So they had; so they would again. For that was what men always fought for, wasn't it? Home and family. Another glint of red hair, loose in firelight, by the bones of the pig. Bree, holding Jemmy. And if Roger found himself now bard to a displaced Highland chieftain, still he must try also to be a warrior when the time came, for the sake of his son, and those who would come after.

"And sent him homeward
Tae think again.
Tae think … again."

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THE ANGELING OF MY REST

Late as it was, we made love by unspoken consent, each wanting the refuge and reassurance of the other's flesh. Alone in our bedroom, with the shutters closed tight against the sounds of the voices in the dooryard—poor Roger was still singing, by popular demand—we could shed the urgencies and fatigues of the day—at least for a little while.

He held me tightly afterward, his face buried in my hair, clinging to me like a talisman.

"It will be all right," I said softly, and stroked his damp hair, dug my fingers deep into the place where neck and shoulder met, the muscle there hard as wood beneath the skin.

"Aye, I know." He lay still for a moment, letting me work, and the tension of his neck and shoulders gradually relaxed, his body growing heavier on mine. He felt me draw breath under him, and moved, rolling onto his side.

His stomach rumbled loudly, and we both laughed.

"No time for dinner?" I asked.

"I canna eat, just before," he answered. "It gives me cramp. And there wasna time, after. I dinna suppose there's anything edible up here?"

"No," I said regretfully. "I had a few apples, but the Chisholms got them. I'm sorry, I should have thought to bring something up for you." I did know that he seldom ate "before"—before any fight, confrontation, or other socially stressful situation, that is—but hadn't thought that he might not have a chance to eat afterward, what with everyone and his brother wanting to “have just a wee word, sir.”

“It’s not as though ye didna have other things to think of, Sassenach,” he answered dryly. “Dinna fash yourself; I’ll do ’til breakfast.”

“Are you sure?” I put a foot out of bed, making to rise. “There’s plenty left; or if you don’t want to go down, I could go and—”

He stopped me with a hand on my arm, then dragged me firmly back under the covers, tucking me spoon-fashion into the curve of his body and wrapping an arm over me to insure that I stayed there.

“No,” he said definitely. “This may be the last night I spend in a bed for some time. I mean to stay in it—with you.”

“All right.” I snuggled obediently under his chin, and relaxed against him, just as pleased to stay. I understood; while no one would come to fetch us unless there was some emergency, the mere sight of either of us downstairs would cause an immediate rush of people needing this or that, wanting to ask a question, offer advice, require something … much better to stay here, snug and peaceful with each other.

I had put out the candle, and the fire was burning low. I wondered briefly whether to get up and add more wood, but decided against it. Let it burn itself to embers if it liked; we would be gone at daybreak.

Despite my tiredness and the serious nature of the journey, I was looking forward to it. Beyond the lure of novelty and the possibility of adventure, there was the delightful prospect of escape from laundry, cookery, and female warfare. Still, Jamie was right; tonight was likely the last we would have of privacy and comfort for some little time.

I stretched, consciously enjoying the soft embrace of the feather bed, the smooth, clean sheets with their faint scent of rosemary and elderflower. Had I packed sufficient bedding?

Roger’s voice reached through the shutters, still strong but beginning to sound a bit ragged with fatigue.

“The Thrush had best get to his bed,” Jamie said, with mild disapproval, “if he means to bid his wife a proper farewell.”

"Goodness, Bree and Jemmy went to bed hours ago!" I said.

"The wean, perhaps; the lass is still there. I heard her voice, a moment ago."

"Is she?" I strained to listen, but made out no more than a rumble of muted applause as Roger brought his song to a close. "I suppose she wants to stay with him as long as she can. Those men are going to be exhausted in the morning—to say nothing of hung over."

"So long as they can sit a horse, I dinna mind if they slip off to have a vomit in the weeds now and again," Jamie assured me.

I nestled down, covers drawn up warm around my shoulders. I could hear the deep rumble of Roger's voice, laughing, but declining firmly to sing anymore. Little by little, the noises in the dooryard ceased, though I could still hear bumpings and rattlings as the beer keg was picked up and shaken empty of the last few drops. Then a hollow thud as someone dropped it on the ground.

There were noises in the house; the sudden yowl of a wakening baby, footsteps in the kitchen, the sleepy whine of toddlers disturbed by the men, a woman's voice raised in remonstrance, then reassurance.

My neck and shoulders ached, and my feet were sore from the long walk to the whisky spring, carrying Jemmy. Still, I found myself annoyingly wakeful, unable to shut out the noises of the external world as completely as the shutters blocked it from view.

"Can you remember everything you did today?" This was a small game we played sometimes at night, each trying to recall in detail everything done, seen, heard, or eaten during the day, from getting up to going to bed. Like writing in a journal, the effort of recall seemed to purge the mind of the day's exertions, and we found great entertainment in each other's experiences. I loved to hear Jamie's daily accounts, whether pedestrian or exciting, but he wasn't in the mood tonight.

"I canna remember a thing that happened before we closed the chamber door," he said, squeezing my buttock in a companionable way. "After that, though, I expect I could recall a detail or two."

"It's reasonably fresh in my mind, too," I assured him. I curled my toes, caressing the tops of his feet.

We stopped speaking, then, and began to shift and settle toward sleep, as the sounds below ceased, replaced by the buzz and rasp of miscellaneous snores. Or at least I tried to. Late as it was, and exhausted as my body undoubtedly was, my mind appeared determined to stay up and carouse. Fragments of the day appeared behind my eyelids the moment I shut my eyes—Mrs. Bug and her broom, Gerhard Mueller's muddy boots, bare-stemmed grape clusters, blanched tangles of sauerkraut, the round halves of Jemmy's miniature pink bottom, dozens of young Chisholms running amok … I resolutely strove to discipline my fugitive mind by turning instead to a mental checklist of my preparations for leaving.

This was most unhelpful, as within moments I was wide awake with suppressed anxiety, imagining the complete destruction of my surgery; Brianna, Marsali, or the children succumbing to some sudden hideous epidemic; and Mrs. Bug inciting riot and bloodshed from one end of the Ridge to the other.

I rolled onto my side, looking at Jamie. He had rolled onto his back as usual, arms neatly folded across his abdomen like a tomb figure, profile pure and stern against the dying glow of the hearth, tidily composed for sleep. His eyes were closed, but there was a slight frown on his face, and his lips twitched now and then, as though he were conducting some kind of interior argument.

"You're thinking so loudly, I can hear you from over here," I said, in conversational tones. "Or are you only counting sheep?"

His eyes opened at once, and he turned over to smile ruefully at me.

"I was counting pigs," he informed me. "And doing nicely, too. Only I kept catchin' sight of that white creature from the corner of my eye, skippin' to and fro just out of reach, taunting me."

I laughed with him, and scooted toward him. I laid my forehead against his shoulder and heaved a deep sigh.

"We really must sleep, Jamie. I'm so tired, my bones feel as though they're melting, and you've been up even longer than I have."

"Mmm." He put an arm around me, pulling me into the curve of his shoulder.

"That cross—it isn't going to catch the house afire, is it?" I asked after a moment, having thought of something else to worry about.

"No." He sounded slightly drowsy. "It's burnt out long since."

The fire in the hearth had burned down to a bed of glowing embers. I rolled over again and lay watching them for a few minutes, trying to empty my mind of everything.

"When Frank and I were married," I said, "we went to be counseled by a priest. He advised us to begin our married life by saying the rosary together in bed each night. Frank said he wasn't sure whether this was meant to be devotion, an aid to sleep, or only a Church-sanctioned method of birth control."

Jamie's chest vibrated with silent laughter behind me.

"Well, we could try if ye like, Sassenach," he said. "Though ye'll have to keep count of the Hail Marys; you're lyin' on my left hand and my fingers have gone numb."

I shifted slightly to allow him to pull his hand out from under my hip.

"Not that, I don't think," I said. "But perhaps a prayer. Do you know any good going-to-bed prayers?"

"Aye, lots," he said, holding up his hand and flexing his fingers slowly as the blood returned to them. Dark in the dimness of the room, the slow movement reminded me of the way in which he lured trout from under rocks. "Let me think a bit."

The house below was silent now, save for the usual creaks and groans of settling timbers. I thought I heard a voice outside, raised in distant argument, but it might have been no more than the rattle of tree branches in the wind.

"Here's one," Jamie said at last. "I'd nearly forgotten it. My father taught it to me, not so long before he died. He said he thought I might one day find it useful."

He settled himself comfortably, head bent so his chin rested on my shoulder, and began to speak, low and warm-voiced, in my ear.

"Bless to me, O God, the moon that is above me,

Bless to me, O God, the earth that is beneath me,
Bless to me, O God, my wife and my children,
And bless, O God, myself who have care of them;
Bless to me my wife and my children,
And bless, O God, myself who have care of them."

He had begun with a certain self-consciousness, hesitating now and then to find a word, but that had faded with the speaking. Now he spoke soft and sure, and no longer to me, though his hand lay warm on the curve of my waist.

"Bless, O God, the thing on which mine eye doth rest,
Bless, O God, the thing on which my hope doth rest,
Bless, O God, my reason and my purpose,
Bless, O bless Thou them, Thou God of life;
Bless, O God, my reason and my purpose,
Bless, O bless Thou them, Thou God of life."

His hand smoothed the curve of my hip, lifted to stroke my hair.

"Bless to me the bed companion of my love,
Bless to me the handling of my hands,
Bless, O bless Thou to me, O God, the fencing of my defense,
And bless, O bless to me the angeling of my rest;
Bless, O bless Thou to me, O God, the fencing of my defense,
And bless, O bless to me the angeling of my rest."

His hand lay still, curled under my chin. I wrapped my own hand round his, and sighed deeply.

"Oh, I like that. Especially 'the angeling of my rest.' When Bree was small, we'd put her to bed with an angel prayer—'May Michael be at my right, Gabriel at my left, Uriel behind me, Rafael before me—and above my head, the Presence of the Lord.' "

He didn't answer, but squeezed my fingers in reply. An ember in the hearth fell apart with a soft *whuff,* and sparks floated for an instant in the dimness of the room.

Sometime later, I returned briefly to consciousness, feeling him slide out of bed.

"Wha—?" I said sleepily.

"Nothing," he whispered. "Just a wee note I'd meant to write. Sleep, *a nighean donn*. I'll wake beside ye."

Fraser's Ridge, 1 December, 1770
James Fraser, Esq., to Lord John Grey,
Mount Josiah Plantation

My Lord,

I write in hopes that all continues well with your Establishment and its Inhabitants; my particular Regard to your Son.

All are well in my House and—so far as I am aware—at River Run, as well. The Nuptials planned for my Daughter and my Aunt, of which I wrote you, were unexpectedly interfered with by Circumstance (principally a Circumstance by the name of Mr. Randall Lillywhite, whose Name I mention in case it may one Day pass your Cognizance), but my Grandchildren were fortunately christened, and while my Aunt's Wedding has been postponed to a later Season, my Daughter's Union with Mr. MacKenzie was solemnized by the Courtesy of the Reverend Mr. Caldwell, a worthy Gentleman, though Presbyterian.

Young Jeremiah Alexander Ian Fraser MacKenzie (the name "Ian" is of course the Scottish variant of "John"—my Daughter's Compliment to a Friend, as well as her Cousin) survived both the Occasion of his Baptism and the Journey home in good Spirit. His Mother bids me tell you that your Namesake now possesses no fewer than four Teeth, a fearsome Accomplishment which renders him exceeding dangerous to those unwary Souls charmed by his apparent Innocence, who surrender their Digits all unknowing to his pernicious Grasp. The Child bites like a Crocodile.

Our Population here exhibits a gratifying Growth of late, with the addition of some twenty Families since last I wrote. God has prospered our Efforts during the Summer, blessing us with an Abundance of Corn and wild Hay, and an Abundance of Beasts to consume them. I estimate the Hogs running at large in my Wood to number no fewer than forty at present, two Cows have borne Calves, and I have bought a new Horse. This Animal's Character lies in grave Doubt, but his Wind does not.

Thus, my good News.

And so to the bad. I am made Colonel of Militia, ordered to muster and deliver so many Men as I can to the Service of the Governor, by mid-month, this Service to be of Aid in the Suppression of local Hostilities.

You may have heard, during your visit to North Carolina, of a Group of Men who style themselves "Regulators"—or you may not, as other Matters compelled your Attention on that Occasion (my Wife is pleased to hear good Report of your own Health, and sends with this a Parcel of Medicines, with Instructions for their Administration should you still be plagued with Headache).

These Regulators are no more than Rabble, less disciplined in their Actions even than the Rioters whom we hear have hanged Gov. Richardson in Effigy in Boston. I do not say there is no Substance to their Complaint, but the Means of its Expression seems unlikely to result in Redress by the Crown—rather, to provoke both Sides to further Excess, which cannot fail to end in Injury.

There was a serious outbreak of Violence in Hillsborough on 24 September, in which much Property was wantonly destroyed and Violence done—some justly, some not—to officials of the Crown. One Man, a Justice, was grievously Wounded; many of the Regulation were arrested. Since then, we have heard little more than Murmurs; Winter damps down Discontent, which smolders by the

Hearths of Cottages and Pothouses, but once let out with the Spring Airing, it will flee abroad like the foul Odors from a sealed House, staining the Air.

Tryon is an able Man, but not a Farmer. If he were, he would scarce think of seeking to make War in Winter. Still, it may be that he hopes by making Show of Force now—when he is likely sure it will not be needed—so to intimidate the Rapscallions as to obviate its Necessity later. He is a Soldier.

Such remarks bring me to the true Point of this Missive. I expect no evil Outcome of the present Enterprise, and yet—you are a Soldier, too, even as I am. You know the Unpredictability of Evil, and what Catastrophe may spring from trivial Beginnings.

No man can know the Particulars of his own End—save that he will have one. Thus, I have made such Provision as I can, for the Welfare of my Family.

I enumerate them here, as you will not know them all: Claire Fraser, my beloved Wife; my Daughter Brianna and her Husband, Roger MacKenzie, and their Child, Jeremiah MacKenzie. Also my Daughter Marsali and her Husband, Fergus Fraser (who is my adopted Son)—they have now two young ones, Germain and Joan by Name. Wee Joan is named for Marsali's sister, known as Joan MacKenzie, presently abiding still in Scotland. I have not the leisure to acquaint you with the History of the Situation, but I am disposed for good Reason to regard this young Woman likewise as a Daughter, and I hold myself similarly obligated for her Welfare, and that of her Mother, one Laoghaire MacKenzie.

I pray you for the Sake of our long Friendship and for the Sake of your Regard for my Wife and Daughter, that if Mischance should befall me in this Enterprise, you will do what you can to see them safe.

I depart upon the Morrow's Dawn, which is now not far off.

Your most humble and obedient Servant,
James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser

Postscriptum: My Thanks for the Intelligence you provide in answer to my earlier Query regarding Stephen Bonnet. I note your accompanying Advice with the greatest Appreciation and Gratitude for its kind Intent—though as you suspect, it will not sway me.

Post-Postscriptum: Copies of my Will and Testament, and of the Papers pertaining to my Property and Affairs here and in Scotland, will be found with Farquard Campbell, of Greenoaks, near Cross Creek.

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PART THREE

Alarms and Excursions

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THE MILITIA RISES

The weather favored us, keeping cold but clear. With the Muellers and the men from the nearby homesteads, we set out from Fraser's Ridge with a party of nearly forty men—and me.

Fergus would not serve with the militia, but had come with us to raise men, he being the most familiar with the nearby settlements and homesteads. As we approached the Treaty Line, and the farthest point of our peripatetic muster, we formed a respectable company in number, if not in expertise. Some of the men had been soldiers once, if not trained infantrymen; either in Scotland, or in the French and Indian Wars. Many had not, and each evening saw Jamie conducting military drills and practice, though of a most unorthodox sort.

"We havena got time to drill them properly," he'd told Roger over the first evening's fire. "It takes weeks, ken, to shape men so they willna run under fire."

Roger merely nodded at that, though I thought a faint look of uneasiness flickered across his face. I supposed he might be having doubts regarding his own lack of experience, and exactly how he himself would respond under fire. I'd known a lot of young soldiers in my time.

I was kneeling by the fire, cooking corn dodgers on an iron griddle set in the ashes. I glanced up at Jamie, to find him looking at me, a slight smile hidden in the corner of his mouth. He'd not only known young soldiers; he'd been one. He coughed, and bent forward to stir the coals with a stick, looking for more of the quails I'd set to bake, wrapped in clay.

"It's the natural thing, to run from danger, aye? The point of drilling troops is to accustom them to an officer's voice, so they'll hear, even over the roar of guns, and obey without thinkin' of the danger."

"Aye, like ye train a horse not to bolt at noises," Roger interrupted, sardonically.

"Aye, like that," Jamie agreed, quite seriously. "The difference being that ye need to make a horse believe ye ken better than he does; an officer only needs to be louder." Roger laughed, and Jamie went on, half-smiling.

"When I went for a soldier in France, I was marched to and fro and up and down, and wore a pair of boots clear through before they gave me powder for my gun. I was sae weary at the end of a day of drilling that they could have shot off cannon by my pallet and I wouldna have turned a hair."

He shook his head a little, the half-smile fading from his face. "But we havena got the time for that. Half our men will have had a bit of soldiering; we must depend on them to stand if it comes to fighting, and keep heart in the others." He glanced past the fire, and gestured toward the fading vista of trees and mountains.

"It's no much like a battlefield, is it? I canna say where the battle may be—if there is one—but I think we must plan for a fight where there's cover to be had. We'll teach them to fight as Highlanders do; to gather or to scatter at my word, and otherwise, to make shift as they can. Only half the men were soldiers, but all of them can hunt." He raised his chin, gesturing toward the recruits, several of whom had bagged small game during the day's ride. The Lindsay brothers had shot the quail we were eating.

Roger nodded, and bent down, scooping a blackened ball of clay out of the fire with his own stick, keeping his face hidden. Almost all. He had gone out shooting every day since our return to the Ridge, and had still to bag even a possum. Jamie, who had gone with him once, had privately expressed the opinion to me that Roger would do better to hit the game on the head with his musket, rather than shoot at it.

I lowered my brows at Jamie; he raised his at me, returning my stare. Roger's feelings could take care of themselves, was the blunt message there. I widened my own eyes, and rose.

"But it isn't really like hunting, is it?" I sat down beside Jamie, and handed him one of the hot corn dodgers. "Especially now."

"What d'ye mean by that, Sassenach?" Jamie broke the corn dodger open, half-closing his eyes in bliss as he inhaled the hot, fragrant steam.

"For one, you don't know that it will come to a fight at all," I pointed out. "For another, if it does, you won't be facing trained troops—the Regulators aren't soldiers, any more than your men are. For a third, you won't really be trying to kill the Regulators; only frighten them into retreat or surrender. And for a fourth"—I smiled at Roger—"the point of hunting is to kill something. The point of going to war is to come back alive."

Jamie choked on a bite of corn dodger. I thumped him helpfully on the back, and he rounded on me, glaring. He coughed crumbs, swallowed, and stood up, plaid swinging.

"Listen to me," he said, a little hoarsely. "Ye're right, Sassenach—and ye're wrong. It's no like hunting, aye. Because the game isna usually trying to kill *you*. Mind me—" He turned to Roger, his face grim. "She's wrong about the rest of it. War is killing, and that's all. Think of anything less—think of half-measures, think of frightening—above all, think of your own skin—and by God, man, ye will be dead by nightfall of the first day."

He flung the remains of his corn dodger into the fire, and stalked away.

I sat frozen for a moment, until heat from the fresh corn dodger I was holding seeped through the cloth round it and burned my fingers. I set it down on the log with a muffled "ouch," and Roger shifted a little on his log.

"All right?" he said, though he wasn't looking at me. His eyes were fixed on the direction in which Jamie had vanished, toward the horses.

“Fine.” I soothed my scorched fingertips against the cold, damp bark of the log. With the awkward silence eased by this little exchange, I found it possible to address the matter at hand.

“Granted,” I said, “that Jamie has a certain amount of experience from which to speak … I do think what he said was rather an overreaction.”

“Do you?” Roger didn’t seem upset or taken aback by Jamie’s remarks.

“Of course I do. Whatever happens with the Regulators, we know perfectly well that it isn’t going to be an all-out war. It’s likely to be nothing at all!”

“Oh, aye.” Roger was still looking into the darkness, lips pursed in thoughtfulness. “Only—I think that’s not what he was talking about.”

I lifted one eyebrow at him, and he shifted his gaze to me, with a wry half-smile.

“When he went out hunting with me, he asked me what I knew about what was coming. I told him. Bree said he’d asked her, and she told him, too.”

“What was coming—you mean, the Revolution?”

He nodded, eyes on the fragment of corn dodger he was crumbling between long, callused fingers.

“I told him what I knew. About the battles, the politics. Not all the detail, of course, but the chief battles I remembered; what a long, drawn-out, bloody business it will be.” He was quiet for a moment, then looked up at me, a slight glint of green in his eye.

“I suppose ye’d call it fair exchange. It’s hard to tell with him, but I *think* I maybe scared him. He’s just returned the favor.”

I gave a small snort of amusement, and stood up, brushing crumbs and ashes off my skirt.

“The day you scare Jamie Fraser by telling him war stories, my lad,” I said, “will be the day hell freezes over.”

He laughed, not discomposed in the slightest.

“Maybe I didn’t scare him, then—though he got very quiet. But I tell you what”—he sobered somewhat, though the glint stayed in his eye—"he did scare me, just now."

I glanced off in the direction of the horses. The moon hadn't yet risen, and I couldn't see anything but a vague jumble of big, restless shadows, with an occasional gleam of firelight off a rounded rump or the brief shine of an eye. Jamie wasn't visible, but I knew he was there; there was a subtle shift and mill of movement among the horses, with faint whickers or snorts, that told me someone familiar was among them.

"He wasn't just a soldier," I said at last, speaking quietly, though I was fairly sure Jamie was too far away to hear me. "He was an officer."

I sat down on the log again, and put a hand on the corn dodger. It was barely warm now. I picked it up, but didn't bite into it.

"I was a combat nurse, you know. In a field hospital in France."

He nodded, dark head cocked in interest. The fire threw deep shadows on his face, emphasizing the contrast of heavy brow and strong bones with the gentle curve of his mouth.

"I nursed soldiers. They were *all* scared." I smiled a little, sadly. "The ones who'd been under fire remembered, and the ones who hadn't, imagined. But it was the officers who couldn't sleep at night."

I ran a thumb absently over the bumpy surface of the corn dodger. It felt faintly greasy, from the lard.

"I sat with Jamie once, after Preston, while he held one of his men in his arms as he died. And wept. He remembers that. He doesn't remember Culloden—because he can't bear to." I looked down at the lump of fried dough in my hand, picking at the burned bits with my thumbnail.

"Yes, you scared him. He doesn't want to weep for you. Neither do I," I added softly. "It may not be now, but when the time does come—take care, will you?"

There was a long silence. Then, "I will," he said quietly. He stood up and left, his footsteps fading quickly into silence on the damp earth.

The other campfires burned brightly, as the night deepened. The men still kept to the company of relative and friend, each small group around its own fire. As we went on, they would begin to join together, I knew. Within a few days, there would be one large fire, everyone gathered together in a single circle of light.

Jamie wasn't scared by what Roger had told him, I thought—but by what he himself knew. There were two choices for a good officer: let concern for his responsibilities tear him apart—or let necessity harden him to stone. He knew that.

And as for me … I knew a few things, too. I had been married to two soldiers—officers, both; for Frank had been one, too. I had been nurse and healer, on the fields of two wars.

I knew the names and dates of battles; I knew the smell of blood. And of vomit, and voided bowels. A field hospital sees the shattered limbs, the spilled guts, and bone ends … but it also sees the men who never raised a gun, but died there anyway, of fever and dirt and sickness and despair.

I knew that thousands died of wounds and killing on the battlefields of two World Wars; I knew that hundreds upon hundreds of thousands died there of infection and disease. It would be no different now—nor in four years.

And that scared me very much indeed.

The next night, we made camp in the woods on Balsam Mountain, a mile or so above the settlement of Lucklow. Several of the men wanted to push on, to reach the hamlet of Brownsville. Brownsville was the outer point of our journey, before turning back toward Salisbury, and it held the possibility of a pothouse—or at least a hospitable shed to sleep in—but Jamie thought better to wait.

"I dinna want to scare the folk there," he had explained to Roger, "riding in with a troop of armed men after dark. Better to announce our business by daylight, then give the men a day—and a night—to make ready to leave." He had stopped then, and coughed heavily, shoulders racked with the spasm.

I didn't like either the looks of Jamie or the sound of him. He had the patchy look of a mildewed quilt, and when he came to the fire to fill his dinner bowl, I could hear a faint wheezing sigh in every breath. Most of the men were in similar condition; red noses and coughing were endemic, and the fire popped and sizzled every few moments, as someone hawked and spat into it.

I should have liked to tuck Jamie up in bed with a hot stone to his feet, a mustard plaster on his chest, and a hot tisane of aromatic peppermint and ephedra leaves to drink. Since it would have taken a brace of cannon, leg irons, and several armed men to get him there, I contented myself with fishing up a particularly meaty ladle of stew and plopping it into his bowl.

"Ewald," Jamie called hoarsely to one of the Muellers. He stopped and cleared his throat, with a sound like tearing flannel. "Ewald—d'ye take Paul and fetch along more wood for the fire. It'll be a cold night."

It already was. Men were standing so close to the fire that the fringes of their shawls and coats were singed, and the toes of their boots—those who had boots—stank of hot leather. My own knees and thighs were close to blistering, as I stood perforce near the blaze in order to serve out the stew. My backside was like ice, though, in spite of the old pair of breeks I wore under shift and petticoat—both for insulation and for the avoidance of excessive friction while on horseback. The Carolina backwoods were no place for a sidesaddle.

The last bowl served, I turned round to eat my own stew, with the fire at my back, a grateful bloom of warmth embracing my frozen bottom.

"All right, is it, ma'am?" Jimmy Robertson, who had made the stew, peered over my shoulder in search of compliment.

"Lovely," I assured him. "Delicious!" In fact, it was hot and I was hungry. That, plus the fact that I hadn't had to cook it myself, lent a sufficient tone of sincerity to my words that he retired, satisfied.

I ate slowly, enjoying the heat of the wooden bowl in my chilly hands, as well as the soothing warmth of food in my stomach. The cacophony of sneezing and hacking behind me did nothing to impair the momentary sense of well-being engendered by food and the prospect of rest after a long day in the saddle. Even the sight of the woods around us, bone-cold and black under growing starlight, failed to disturb me.

My own nose had begun to run rather freely, but I hoped it was merely the result of eating hot food. I swallowed experimentally, but there was no sign of sore throat, nor rattling of congestion in my chest. Jamie rattled; he had finished eating and come to stand beside me, warming his backside at the blaze.

"All right, Sassenach?" he asked hoarsely.

"Just vasomotor rhinitis," I replied, dabbing at my nose with a handkerchief.

"Where?" He cast a suspicious look at the forest. "Here? I thought ye said they lived in Africa."

"What—oh, rhinoceroses. Yes, they do. I just meant my nose is running, but I haven't got *la grippe*."

"Oh, aye? That's good. I have," he added unnecessarily, and sneezed three times in succession. He handed me his emptied bowl, in order to use both hands to blow his nose, which he did with a series of vicious honks. I winced slightly, seeing the reddened, raw look of his nostrils. I had a bit of camphorated bear grease in my saddlebag, but I was sure he wouldn't let me anoint him in public.

"Are you sure we oughtn't to push on?" I asked, watching him. "Geordie says the village isn't far, and there is a road—of sorts."

I knew the answer to that; he wasn't one to alter strategy for the sake of personal comfort. Besides, camp was already made and a good fire going. Still, beyond my own longing for a warm, clean bed—well, any bed, I wasn't fussy—I was worried for Jamie. Close to, the sigh in his breath had a deeper, wheezing note to it that troubled me.

He knew what I meant. He smiled, tucking away the sodden kerchief in his sleeve.

"I'll do, Sassenach," he said. "It's no but a wee cold in the neb. I've been a deal worse than this, many times."

Paul Mueller heaved another log onto the fire; a big ember broke and roared up with a flare that made us step away in order to avoid the spray of sparks. Well baked in the rear by this time, I turned to face the fire. Jamie, though, stayed facing outward, a slight frown on his face as he surveyed the shadows of the looming wood.

The frown relaxed, and I turned to see two men emerging from the woods, shaking needles and bits of bark from their clothes. Jack Parker, and a new man—I didn't yet know his name, but he was plainly a recent immigrant from somewhere near Glasgow, judging from his speech.

"All quiet, sir," said Parker, touching his hat in brief salute. "Cold as charity, though."

"Aye, Ah hivny felt ma privates anytime since dinner," the Glaswegian chimed in, grimacing and rubbing himself as he headed for the fire. "Might as well be gone aetegither!"

"I take your meaning, man," Jamie said, grinning. "Went for a piss a moment ago, but I couldna find it." He turned amid the laughter and went to check the horses, a half-finished second bowl of stew in one hand.

The other men were already making ready their bedrolls, debating the wisdom of sleeping with feet or head near the fire.

"It'll scorch the soles o' your boots, and ye get too close," argued Evan Lindsay. "See? Charred the pegs right out, and now look!" He lifted one large foot, exhibiting a battered shoe with a wrapping of rough twine tied round it to hold it together. The leather soles and heels were sometimes stitched, but more often fastened with tiny whittled pegs of wood or leather, glued with pine gum or some other adhesive. The pine gum in particular was flammable; I'd seen occasional sparks burst from the feet of men who slept with their feet too near the fire, when a shoe peg suddenly ignited from the heat.

"Better than settin' your hair on fire," Ronnie Sinclair argued.

"I dinna think the Lindsays need worry about that owermuch." Kenny grinned at his elder brother, and tugged down the knit cap he wore—like his two brothers—over a balding head.

"Aye, headfirst every time," Murdo agreed. "Ye dinna want to chill your scalp; it'll go right to your liver, and then you're a dead man." Murdo was tenderly solicitous of his exposed scalp, being seldom seen without either his knitted nightcap or a peculiar hat made from the hairy skin of a possum, lined and rakishly trimmed with skunk fur. He glanced enviously at Roger, who was tying back his own thick black hair with a bit of leather string.

"MacKenzie needna worry; he's furred like a bear!"

Roger grinned in response. Like the others, he had stopped shaving when we left the Ridge; now, eight days later, a thick scurf of dark stubble did give him a fiercely ursine look. It occurred to me that beyond convenience, a heavy beard undoubtedly kept the face warm on nights like this; I tucked my own bare and vulnerable chin down into the sheltering folds of my shawl.

Returning from the horses in time to hear this, Jamie laughed, too, but it ended in a spasm of coughing. Evan waited 'til it ended.

"How say ye, *Mac Dubh*? Heads or tails?"

Jamie wiped his mouth on his sleeve and smiled. Hairy as the rest, he looked a proper Viking, with the fire glinting red, gold, and silver from his sprouting beard and loosened hair.

"Nay bother, lads," he said. "I'll sleep warm enough nay matter *how* I'm laid." He tilted his head in my direction, and there was a general rumble of laughter, with a spattering of mildly crude remarks in Scots and Gaelic from the Ridge men.

One or two of the new recruits eyed me with a brief, instinctive speculation, quickly abandoned after a glance at Jamie's height, breadth, and air of genial ferocity. I met one man's eyes and smiled; he looked startled, but then smiled back, ducking his head in shyness.

How the hell did Jamie do that? One brief, crude joke, and he'd laid public claim to me, removed me from any threat of unwanted advances, and reasserted his position as leader.

"Just like a bloody baboon troop," I muttered under my breath. "And I'm sleeping with the head baboon!"

"Baboons are the monkeys with no tails?" Fergus asked, turning from an exchange with Ewald about the horses.

"You know quite well they are." I caught Jamie's eye, and his mouth curled up on one side. I knew what he was thinking, and he knew I did; the smile widened.

Louis of France kept a private zoo at Versailles, among the inhabitants of which were a small troop of mandrill baboons. One of the most popular Court activities on spring afternoons was to visit the baboon quarters, there to admire both the sexual prowess of the male, and his splendidly multicolored bottom.

One M. de Ruvel had offered—in my hearing—to have his posterior similarly tattooed, if it would result in such a favorable reception by the ladies of the Court. He had, however, been firmly informed by Madame de la Tourelle that his physique was in every way inferior to that of the mandrill, and coloring it was unlikely to improve matters.

The firelight made it difficult to tell, but I was reasonably sure that Jamie's own rich color owed as much to suppressed amusement as to heat.

"Speakin' of tails," he murmured in my ear. "Have ye got those infernal breeks on?"

"Yes."

"Take them off."

"What, here?" I gave him a wide-eyed look of mock innocence. "You want me to freeze my arse off?"

His eyes narrowed slightly, with a blue cat-gleam in the depths.

"Oh, it wilna freeze," he said softly. "I'll warrant ye that."

He moved behind me, and the fierce shimmer of the blaze on my flesh was replaced by the cool solidness of his body. No less fierce, though, as I discovered when he put his arms round my waist and drew me back against him.

"Oh, you found it," I said. "How nice."

"Found what? Had you lost something?" Roger paused, coming from the horses with a lumpy roll of blankets under one arm, his bodhran under the other.

"Oh, just a pair of auld breeks," Jamie said blandly. Under cover of my shawl, one hand slid inside the waistband of my skirt. "D'ye mean to give us a song, then?"

"If anyone likes, sure." Roger smiled, the firelight ruddy on his features. "Actually, I'm meaning to learn one; Evan's promised to sing me a silkie-song his grannie knew."

Jamie laughed.

"Oh, I ken that one, I think."

One of Roger's eyebrows shot up, and I twisted slightly round, to look up at Jamie in surprise.

"Well, I couldna *sing* it," he said mildly, seeing our amazement. "I ken the words, though. Evan sang it often and again, in the prison at Ardsmuir. It's a bit bawdy," he added, with that faintly prim tone that Highlanders often adopt, just before telling you something truly shocking.

Roger recognized it, and laughed.

"I'll maybe write it down, then," he said. "For the benefit of future generations."

Jamie's fingers had been working skillfully away, and at this point, the breeks—which were his, and thus about six sizes too large for me—came loose and dropped silently to the ground. A cold draft whooshed up under my skirt and struck my newly bared nether portions. I drew in my breath with a faint gasp.

"Cold, isn't it?" Roger hunched his shoulders, smiling as he shivered exaggeratedly in sympathy.

"Yes, indeed," I said. "Freeze the balls off a brass monkey, wouldn't it?"

Jamie and Roger burst into simultaneous coughing fits.

Sentry in place and horses bedded down, we retired to our own resting place, a discreet distance from the circle by the fire. I had dug the largest rocks and twigs out of the leaf mold, cut spruce branches, and spread our blankets over them by the time Jamie finished his last round of the camp. The warmth of food and fire had faded, but I didn't begin to shiver in earnest until he touched me.

I would have moved at once to get under the blankets, but Jamie still held me. His original intent appeared intact—to say the least—but his attention was momentarily distracted. His arms were still clasped round me, but he was standing quite still, head up as though listening, looking into the murk of the wood. It was full dark; no more showed of the trees than the glow of fire reflected from the few trunks that stood nearest the camp—the last shadow of twilight had faded, and everything beyond was a depthless black.

"What is it?" I drew back a little, pressing instinctively against him, and his arms tightened round me.

"I dinna ken. But I do feel something, Sassenach." He moved a little, lifting his head in restless query, like a wolf scenting the wind, but no message reached us save a distant rattling of leafless branches.

"If it's no rhinoceroses, it's something," he said softly, and a whisper of unease raised the hairs on the back of my neck. "A moment, lass."

He left me, the wind blowing suddenly cold about me with the loss of his presence, and went to speak quietly with a couple of the men.

And what might he feel, out there in the dark? I had the greatest respect for Jamie's sense of danger. He had lived too long as hunter and as hunted, not to sense the edgy awareness that lay between the two—invisible or not.

He returned a moment later, and squatted beside me as I burrowed shivering into the blankets.

"It's all right," he said. "I've said we'll have two guards tonight, and each man to keep his piece loaded and to hand. But I think it's all right." He looked beyond me, into the wood, but his face now was merely thoughtful.

"It's all right," he repeated again, more certainly.

"Is it gone?"

He turned his head, his lips curling slightly. His mouth looked soft, tender and vulnerable amid the stiff, ruddy wires of his starting beard.

"I dinna ken if it was ever there, Sassenach," he said. "I thought I felt eyes upon me, but it could have been a passing wolf, an owl—or nay more than a restless *spiorad*, a-roaming in the wood. But aye, it's gone now."

He smiled at me; I saw the flicker of the light that rimmed his head and shoulders as he turned, silhouetted by the fire. Beyond, the sound of Roger's voice drifted to me above the crackle of the fire, as he learned the melody of the silkie-song, following Evan's voice, hoarse but confident. Jamie slid into the blankets beside me and I turned to him, cold hands fumbling to return the favor he had done me earlier.

We shivered convulsively, urgent for each other's warmth. I found him, and he turned me, ruffling up the layers of fabric between us, so that he lay behind me, his arm secure around me, the small secret patches of our nakedness joined in warmth beneath the blankets. I lay facing the darkness of the wood, watching the firelight dance among the trees, as Jamie moved behind me—behind, between, within—warm and big, and so slowly as scarcely to rustle the branches beneath us. Roger's voice rose strong and sweet above the murmur of the men, and the shivering slowly stopped.

I woke much later beneath a blue-black sky, dry-mouthed, the rasping sigh of Jamie's breath in my ear. I had been dreaming; one of those pointless dreams of uneasy repetition, that fades at once with the waking but leaves a nasty taste in mouth and mind. Needing both water and relief of my bladder, I squirmed carefully out from under Jamie's arm, and slid out from between the blankets. He stirred and groaned slightly, snuffling in his sleep, but didn't wake.

I paused to lay a hand lightly on his forehead. Cool, no fever. Perhaps he was right, then—just a bad cold. I stood up, reluctant to leave the warm sanctuary of our nest, but knowing I couldn't wait until morning.

The songs were stilled, the fire smaller now, but still burning, kept up by the sentry on duty. It was Murdo Lindsay; I could see the white fur of his possum-skin cap, perched atop what looked like a huddled pile of clothing and blankets. The anonymous Glaswegian crouched on the other side of the clearing, musket on his knees; he nodded to me, face shadowed by the brim of his slouch hat. The white cap turned in my direction too, at the sound of my step. I sketched a wave, and Murdo nodded toward me, then turned back toward the wood.

The men lay in a shrouded circle, buried in their blankets. I felt a sudden qualm as I walked between them. With the spell of night and dreams still on me, I shivered at sight of the silent forms, lying so still, side by side. Just so had they laid the bodies at Amiens. At Preston. Still and shrouded, side by side, faces covered and anonymous. War seldom looks on the faces of its dead.

And why should I wake from love's embrace, thinking of war and the sleeping ranks of dead men? I wondered, stepping lightly past the shrouded line of bodies. Well, that was simple enough, given our errand. We were headed for battle—if not now, then soon enough.

One blanket-wrapped form grunted, coughed, and turned over, face invisible, indistinguishable from the others. The movement startled me, but then one big foot thrust free of the blanket, revealing Evan Lindsay's twine-wrapped shoe. I felt the anxious burden of imagination ease, with this evidence of life, of individuality.

It's the anonymity of war that makes the killing possible. When the nameless dead are named again on tombstone and on cenotaph, then they regain the identity they lost as soldiers, and take their place in grief and memory, the ghosts of sons and lovers. Perhaps this journey would end in peace. The conflict that was coming, though … the world would hear of that, and I stepped past the last of the sleeping men, as though walking through an evil dream not fully waked from.

I picked up a canteen from the ground near the saddlebags and drank deep. The water was piercingly cold, and my somber thoughts began to dissipate, washed away by the sweet, clean taste of it. I paused, gasping from the coldness, and wiped my mouth.

Best take some back to Jamie; if he wasn't wakened by my absence, he would be by my return, and I knew his mouth would be dry as well, since he was completely unable to breathe through his nose at the moment. I slung the strap of the canteen over my shoulder and stepped into the shelter of the wood.

It was cold under the trees, but the air was still and crystal clear. The shadows that had seemed sinister viewed from the fireside were oddly reassuring, seen from the shelter of the wood. Turned away from the fire's glow and crackle, my eyes and ears began to adapt to the dark. I heard the rustle of something small in the dried grass nearby, and the unexpected distant hooting of an owl.

Finished, I stood still for a few minutes, enjoying the momentary solitude. It was very cold, but very peaceful. Jamie had been right, I thought; whatever might or might not have been here earlier, the wood held nothing inimical now.

As though my thought of him had summoned him, I heard a cautious footfall, and the slow, wheezing rasp of his breath. He coughed, a muffled, strangled noise that I didn't like at all.

"Here I am," I said softly. "How's the chest?"

The cough choked off in a sudden wheeze of panic, and there was a crunch and flurry among the leaves. I saw Murdo start up by the fire, musket in hand, and then a dark shape darted past me.

"Hoy!" I said, startled rather than frightened. The shape stumbled, and by reflex, I swung the canteen off my shoulder and whirled it by the strap. It struck the figure in the back with a hollow *thunk!* and whoever it was—certainly not Jamie—fell to his knees, coughing.

There followed a short period of chaos, with men exploding out of their blankets like startled jack-in-the-boxes, incoherent shouting, and general mayhem. The Glaswegian leaped over several struggling bodies and charged into the wood, musket over his head, bellowing. Barreling into the darkness, he charged the first shape he saw, which happened to be me. I went flying headlong into the leaves, where I ended inelegantly sprawled and windless, the Glaswegian kneeling on my stomach.

I must have given a sufficiently feminine grunt as I fell, for he paused, narrowly checking himself as he was about to club me in the head.

"Eh?" He put down his free hand and felt cautiously. Feeling what was unmistakably a breast, he jerked back as though burned, and slowly edged off me.

"Err … hmm!" he said.

“Whoof,” I replied, as cordially as possible. The stars were spinning overhead, shining brightly through the leafless branches. The Glaswegian disappeared, with a small Scottish noise of embarrassment. There was a lot of shouting and crashing, off to my left, but I hadn’t attention for anything at the moment bar getting my wind back.

By the time I made it back onto my feet, the intruder had been captured and dragged into the light of the fire.

Had he not been coughing when I hit him, he likely would have gotten away. As it was, though, he was hacking and wheezing so badly that he could barely stand upright, and his face was dark with the effort to snatch a breath in passing. The veins on his forehead stood out like worms, and he made an eerie whistling noise as he breathed—or tried to.

“What the hell are *you* doing here?” Jamie demanded hoarsely, then paused to cough in sympathy.

This was a purely rhetorical question, since the boy plainly couldn’t talk. It was Josiah Beardsley, my potential tonsillectomy patient, and whatever he’d been doing since the Gathering, it hadn’t improved his health to any marked extent.

I hurried to the fire, where the coffeepot sat in the embers. I seized it in a fold of my shawl and shook it. Good, there was some left, and since it had been brewing since supper, it would be strong as Hades.

“Sit him down, loosen his clothes, bring me cold water!” I shoved my way into the circle of men around the captive, forcing them aside with the hot coffeepot.

Within a moment or two, I had a mug of strong coffee at his lips, black and tarry, diluted with no more than a splash of cold water to keep it from burning his mouth.

“Breathe out slowly to the count of four, breathe in to the count of two, breathe out and take a drink,” I said. The whites of his eyes showed all round the iris, and spittle had collected at the corners of his mouth. I put a firm hand on his shoulder though, urging him to breathe, to count, to breathe—and the desperate straining eased a little.

One sip, one breath, one sip, one breath, and by the time the coffee was all inside him, his face had faded from its alarming crimson hue to something more approximating fish belly, with a couple of faint reddish marks where the men had hit him. The air still whistled in his lungs, but he *was* breathing, which was a substantial improvement.

The men stood about murmuring and watching with interest, but it was cold, it was late, and as the excitement of the capture faded, they began to droop and yawn. It was, after all, only a lad, and a scrawny, ill-favored one at that. They departed willingly enough to their blankets when Jamie dispatched them, leaving Jamie and me to attend to our unexpected guest.

I had him swaddled in spare blankets, larded with camphorated bear grease, and provided with another cup of coffee in his hands, before I would let Jamie question him. The boy seemed deeply embarrassed at my attentions, shoulders hunched and eyes on the ground, but I didn't know whether he was simply unused to being fussed over, or whether it was the looming presence of Jamie, arms crossed, that discomfited him.

He was small for fourteen, and thin to the point of emaciation; I could have counted his ribs when I opened his shirt to listen to his heart. No beauty otherwise; his black hair had been chopped short, and stood on his head in matted spikes, thick with dirt, grease, and sweat, and his general aspect was that of a flea-ridden monkey, eyes large and black in a face pinched with worry and suspicion.

At last having done all I could, I was satisfied with the look of him. At my nod, Jamie lowered himself to the ground beside the boy.

"So, Mr. Beardsley," he said pleasantly. "Have ye come to join our troop of militia, then?"

"Ah … no." Josiah rolled the wooden cup between his hands, not looking up. "I … uh … my business chanced to take me this way, that's all." He spoke so hoarsely that I winced in sympathy, imagining the soreness of his inflamed throat.

"I see." Jamie's voice was low and friendly. "So ye saw our fire by chance, and thought to come and seek shelter and a meal?"

"I did, aye." He swallowed, with evident difficulty.

"Mmphm. But ye came earlier, no? You were in the wood just after sundown. Why wait 'til past moonrise to make yourself known?"

"I didn't … I wasn't …"

"Oh, indeed ye were." Jamie's voice was still friendly, but firm. He put out a hand and grasped Josiah's shirtfront, forcing the boy to look at him.

"Look ye, man. There's a bargain between us. You're my tenant; it's agreed. That means you've a right to my protection. It means also that I've a right to hear the truth."

Josiah looked back, and while there was fear and wariness in the look, there was also a sense of self-possession that seemed far older than fourteen. He made no effort to look away, and there was a look of deep calculation in the clever black eyes.

This child—if one could regard him as a child; plainly Jamie didn't—was used to relying on himself alone.

"I said to you, sir, that I would come to your place by the New Year, and so I mean to. What I do in the meantime is my own affair."

Jamie's brows shot up, but he nodded slowly, and released his grip.

"True enough. You'll admit, though, that one might be curious."

The boy opened his mouth as though to speak, but changed his mind and buried his nose instead in his cup of coffee.

Jamie tried again.

"May we offer you help in your business? Will ye travel a ways with us, at least?"

Josiah shook his head.

"No. I am obliged to you, sir, but the business is best managed by myself alone."

Roger had not gone to sleep, but sat a little behind Jamie, watching silently. He leaned forward now, green eyes intent on the boy.

"This business of yours," he said. "It's not by any means connected with that mark on your thumb?"

The cup hit the ground and coffee splashed up, spattering my face and bodice. The boy was out of his blankets and halfway across the clearing before I could blink my eyes to see what was happening—and by then, Jamie was up and after him. The boy had circled the fire; Jamie leaped over it. They disappeared into the wood like fox and hound, leaving Roger and myself gaping after them.

For the second time that night, men erupted from their bedrolls, grabbing for their guns. I began to think the Governor would be pleased with his militia; they were certainly ready to spring into action at a moment's notice.

"What in hell …?" I said to Roger, wiping coffee from my eyebrows.

"Maybe I shouldn't have mentioned it so suddenly," he said.

"Wha? Wha? What's amiss, then?" bellowed Murdo Lindsay, glaring round as he swept his musket barrel past the shadowed trees.

"Are we attacked? Where's the bastards?" Kenny popped up on hands and knees beside me, peering out from under the band of his knitted cap like a toad beneath a watering pot.

"Nobody. Nothing's happened. I mean—it's really quite all right!"

My efforts to calm and explain went largely unnoticed in the racket. Roger, however, being much larger and much louder, succeeded at last in quelling the disturbance and explaining matters—so far as they could be explained. What did a lad more or less matter? With considerable grumbling, the men settled down once more, leaving Roger and me staring at each other over the coffeepot.

"What was it, then?" I asked, a little testily.

"The mark? I'm pretty sure it was the letter 'T'—I saw it when you made him take the coffee and he wrapped his hand round the cup."

My stomach tightened. I knew what that meant; I'd seen it before.

"Thief," Roger said, eyes on my face. "He's been branded."

"Yes," I said unhappily. "Oh, dear."

"Would the folk on the Ridge not accept him, if they knew?" Roger asked.

"I doubt most of them would be much bothered," I said. "It's not that; it's that he ran when you mentioned it. He isn't just a convicted thief—I'm afraid he may be a fugitive. And Jamie called him, at the Gathering."

"Ah." Roger scratched absently at his whiskers. "*Earbsachd*. Jamie will feel obliged to him in some way, then?"

"Something like that."

Roger was a Scot, and—technically, at least—a Highlander. But he had been born long after the death of the clans, and neither history nor heritage could ever have taught him the strength of the ancient bonds between laird and tenant, between chief and clansman. Most likely, Josiah himself had no idea of the importance of the *earbsachd*—of what had been promised and accepted on both sides. Jamie had.

"Do you think Jamie will catch him?" Roger asked.

"I expect he already has. He can't be tracking the boy in the dark, and if he'd lost him, he would have come back already."

There were other possibilities—that Jamie had fallen over a precipice in the dark, tripped on a stone and broken his leg, or met with a catamount or a bear, for instance—but I preferred not to dwell on those.

I stood up, stretching my cramped limbs, and looked into the woods, where Jamie and his prey had disappeared. Josiah might be a good woodsman and hunter; Jamie had been one much longer. Josiah was small, quick, and impelled by fear; Jamie had a considerable advantage in size, strength, and sheer bloody-mindedness.

Roger stood up beside me. His lean face was slightly troubled, as he peered into the encircling trees.

"It's taking a long time. If he's caught the lad, what's he doing with him?"

"Extracting the truth from him, I imagine," I said. I bit my lip at the thought. "Jamie doesn't like being lied to."

Roger looked down at me, mildly startled.

"How?"

I shrugged.

"However he can." I'd seen him do it by reason, by guile, with charm, with threats—and on occasion, by means of brute force. I hoped he hadn't had to use force—though more for his sake than Josiah's.

"I see," Roger said quietly. "Well, then."

The coffeepot was empty; I bundled my cloak round me and went down to the stream to rinse and fill it, hung it to brew once more above the fire, and sat down to wait.

"You should go to sleep," I said to Roger, after a few minutes. He merely smiled at me, wiped his nose, and hunched deeper into his cloak.

"So should you," he said.

There was no wind, but it was very late, and the cold had settled well into the hollow, lying damp and heavy on the ground. The men's blankets had grown limp with condensation, and I could feel the dense chill of the ground seeping through the folds of my skirt. I thought about retrieving my breeches, but couldn't muster the energy to search for them. The excitement of Josiah's appearance and escape had faded, and the lethargy of cold and fatigue was setting in.

Roger poked up the fire a bit, and added a few small chunks of wood. I tucked another fold of skirt beneath my thighs and pulled cloak and shawl close around me, burying my hands in the folds of fabric. The coffeepot hung steaming, the hiss of occasional droplets falling into the fire punctuating the phlegm-filled snores of the sleeping men.

I wasn't seeing the blanket-rolled shapes, though, or hearing the sough of dark pines. I heard the crackle of dried leaves in a Scottish oak wood, in the hills above Carryarrick. We had camped there, two days before Prestonpans, with thirty men from Lallybroch—on our way to join Charles Stuart's army. And a young boy had come suddenly out of the dark; a knife had glinted in the light of a fire.

A different place, a different time. I shook myself, trying to dispel the sudden memories: a thin white face and a boy's eyes huge with shock and pain. The blade of a dirk, darkening and glowing in the embers of the fire. The smell of gunpowder, sweat, and burning flesh.

"I mean to shoot you," he had told John Grey. *"Head, or heart?"* By threat, by guile—by brute force.

That was then; this was now, I told myself. But Jamie would do what he thought he must.

Roger sat quietly, watching the dancing flames and the wood beyond. His eyes were hooded, and I wondered what he was thinking.

"D'you worry for him?" he asked softly, not looking at me.

"What, now? Or ever?" I smiled, though without much humor. "If I did, I'd never rest."

He turned his head toward me, and a faint smile touched his lips.

"You're resting now, are you?"

I smiled again, a real one in spite of myself.

"I'm not pacing to and fro," I answered. "Nor yet wringing my hands."

One dark eyebrow flicked up.

"Might help keep them warm."

One of the men stirred, muttering in his wrappings, and we ceased talking for a moment. The coffeepot was boiling; I could hear the soft rumble of the liquid inside.

Whatever could be keeping him? He couldn't be taking all this time to question Josiah Beardsley—he would either have gotten what answers he required in short order, or he would have let the boy go. No matter what the boy had stolen, it was no concern of Jamie's—save for the promise of the *earbsachd*.

The flames were mildly hypnotic; I could look into the wavering glow and see in memory the great fire of the Gathering, the figures dark around it, and the sound of distant fiddles.…

"Should I go to look for him?" Roger asked suddenly, low-voiced.

I jerked, startled out of sleepy hypnosis. I rubbed a hand over my face and shook my head to clear it.

"No. It's dangerous to go into strange woods in the dark, and you couldn't find him anyway. If he isn't back by the morning—that will be time enough."

As the moments wore slowly on, I began to think that the dawn *might* come before Jamie did. I was worried for Jamie—but there was in fact nothing that could be done before the morning. Disquieting thoughts tried to push their way in; did Josiah have a knife? Surely he did. But even if the boy was desperate enough to use it, could he possibly take Jamie by surprise? I pushed aside these anxious speculations, trying to occupy my mind instead with counting the number of coughs from the men around the fire.

Number eight was Roger; a deep, loose cough that shook his shoulders. Was he worried for Bree and Jemmy? I wondered. Or did he wonder whether Bree worried about *him*? I could have told him that, but it wouldn't have helped him to know. Men fighting—or preparing to fight—needed the idea of home as a place of utter safety; the conviction that all was well there kept them in good heart and on their feet, marching, enduring. Other things would make them fight, but fighting is such a small part of warfare.…

A damned important part, Sassenach, said Jamie's voice in the back of my head.

I began at last to nod off, waking repeatedly as my head jerked sharply on my neck. The last time, it was the feel of hands on my shoulders that wakened me, but only briefly. Roger eased me to the ground, wadding half my shawl beneath my head for a pillow, tucking the rest of it snug about my shoulders. I caught a brief glimpse of him in silhouette against the fire, black and bearlike in his cloak, and then I knew no more.

I don't know how long I slept; I woke quite suddenly, at the sound of an explosive sneeze nearby. Jamie was sitting a few feet away, holding Josiah Beardsley's wrist in one hand, his dirk in the other. He paused long enough to sneeze twice more, wiped his nose impatiently on his sleeve, then thrust the dirk into the embers of the fire.

I caught the stink of hot metal, and raised myself abruptly on one elbow. Before I could say or do anything, something twitched and moved against me. I looked down in astonishment, then up, then down again, convinced in my muddled state that I was still dreaming.

A young boy lay under my cloak, curled against my body, sound asleep. I saw black hair and a scrawny frame, a pallid skin smeared with grime and grazed with scratches. Then there was a sudden loud hiss from the fire and I jerked my gaze back to see Jamie press Josiah's thumb against the searing metal of his blackened dirk.

Jamie glimpsed my convulsive movement from the corner of his eye and scowled in my direction, lips pursed in a silent adjuration to stillness. Josiah's face was contorted, lips drawn back from his teeth in agony—but he made no noise. On the far side of the fire, Kenny Lindsay sat watching, silent as a rock.

Still convinced that I was dreaming—or hoping that I was—I put a hand on the boy curled against me. He moved again, and the feel of solid flesh under my fingers woke me completely. My hand closed on his shoulder, and his eyes sprang open, wide with alarm.

He jerked away, scrambling awkwardly to get to his feet. Then he saw his brother—for plainly Josiah *was* his brother—and stopped abruptly, glancing wildly around the clearing, at the scattered men, at Jamie, Roger, and myself.

Ignoring what must have been the frightful pain of a burned hand, Josiah rose from his seat and stepped quick and soft to his brother's side, taking him by the arm.

I got to my feet, moving slowly so as not to frighten them. They watched me, identical looks of wariness on the thin, white faces. Identical. Yes, just the same pinched faces—though the other boy's hair was worn long. He was dressed in nothing but a ragged shirt, and he was barefoot. I saw Josiah squeeze his brother's arm in reassurance, and began to suspect just what it was he had stolen. I summoned a smile for the two of them, then stretched out my hand to Josiah.

"Let me see your hand," I whispered.

He hesitated a moment, then gave me his right hand. It was a nice, neat job; so neat that it made me slightly faint for a moment. The ball of the thumb had been sliced cleanly off, the open wound cauterized with searing metal. A red-black, crusted oval had replaced the incriminating brand.

There was a soft movement behind me; Roger had fetched my medicine box and set it down by my feet.

There wasn't a great deal to do for the injury, save apply a little gentian ointment and bandage the thumb with a clean, dry cloth. I was conscious of Jamie as I worked; he had sheathed his dirk and risen quietly, to go and rummage among the packs and saddlebags. By the time I had finished my brief job, he was back, with a small bundle of food wrapped in a kerchief, and a spare blanket tied in a roll. Over his arm were my discarded breeches.

He handed these to the new boy, gave the food and blanket to Josiah, then clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder, and squeezed hard. He touched the other boy gently, turning him toward the wood with a hand on his back. Then he jerked his head toward the trees, and Josiah nodded. He touched his forehead to me, the bandage glinting white on his thumb, and whispered, "Thank'ee, ma'am."

The two boys disappeared silently into the forest, the twin's bare feet winking pale below the flapping hem of the breeks as he followed his brother.

Jamie nodded to Kenny, then sat down again by the fire, shoulders slumping in sudden exhaustion. I poured him coffee and he took it, his mouth twitching in an attempted smile of acknowledgment that dissipated in a fit of heavy coughing.

I reached for the cup before it could spill, and caught Roger's eye over Jamie's shoulder. He nodded toward the east, and laid a finger across his lips, then shrugged with a grimace of resignation. He wanted as much as I did to know what had just happened—and why. He was right, though; the night was fading. Dawn would be here soon, and the men—all accustomed to wake at first light—would be floating toward the surface of consciousness.

Jamie had stopped coughing, but was making horrible gurgling noises in an attempt to clear his throat—he sounded rather like a pig drowning in mud.

“Here,” I whispered, giving him back the cup. “Drink it, and lie down. You should sleep a little.”

He shook his head and lifted the cup to his lips. He swallowed, grimacing at the bitterness.

“Not worth it,” he croaked. He nodded toward the east, where the tufted pines were now inked black on a graying sky. “And besides, I’ve got to think what the hell to do now.”

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DEATH COMES CALLING

I could scarcely contain my impatience until the men had roused and eaten, broken camp—in an irritatingly leisurely fashion—and mounted. At last, though, I found myself once more on horseback, riding through a morning so crisp and cold, I thought the air might shatter as I breathed it.

“Right,” I said without preamble, as my mount nosed her way up next to Jamie’s. “Talk.”

He glanced back at me and smiled. His face was creased with tiredness, but the brisk air—and a lot of very strong coffee—had revived him. Despite the troubled night, I felt quick and lively myself, blood coursing near the surface of my skin and blooming in my cheeks.

“Ye dinna mean to wait for wee Roger?”

“I’ll tell him later—or you can.” There was no way of riding three abreast; it was only owing to a washout that had left a fan of gravel down the mountainside that we were able to pick our way side by side for the moment, out of hearing of the others. I nudged my mount closer to Jamie’s, my knees wreathed in steam from the horse’s nostrils.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, and shook himself, as though to throw off fatigue.

“Aye, well,” he said. “You’ll have seen they were brothers?”

“I did notice that, yes. Where the hell did the other one come from?”

“From there.” He lifted his chin, pointing toward the west. Thanks to the washout, there was an unimpeded view of a small cove in the hollow below—one of those natural breaks in the wilderness, where the trees gave way to meadow and stream. From the trees at the edge of the cove, a thin plume of smoke rose upward, pointing like a finger in the still, cold air.

Squinting, I could make out what looked like a small farmhouse, with a couple of rickety outbuildings. As I watched, a tiny figure emerged from the house and headed toward one of the sheds.

“They’re just about to discover that he’s gone,” Jamie said, a trifle grimly. “Though with luck, they’ll think he’s only gone to the privy, or to milk the goats.”

I didn’t bother asking how he knew they had goats.

“Is that their home? Josiah and his brother?”

“In a manner of speaking, Sassenach. They were bond servants.”

“Were?” I said skeptically. Somehow I doubted that the brothers’ terms of indenture had just happened to expire the night before.

Jamie lifted one shoulder in a shrug, and wiped a dripping nose on his sleeve.

“Unless someone catches them, aye.”

“You caught Josiah,” I pointed out. “What did he tell you?”

“The truth,” he said, with a slight twist of the mouth. “Or at least I think so.”

He had hunted Josiah through the dark, guided by the sound of the boy’s frantic wheezing, and trapped him at last in a rocky hollow, seizing him in the dark. He had wrapped the freezing boy in his plaid, sat him down, and with judicious application of patience and firmness—augmented with sips of whisky from his flask—had succeeded at last in extracting the story.

“The family were immigrants—father, mother, and six bairns. Only the twins survived the passage; the rest perished of illness at sea. There were no relatives here—or none that met the boat, at any rate—and so the ship’s master sold them. The price wouldna cover the cost of the family’s passage, so the lads were indentured for thirty years, their wages to be put toward the debt.”

His voice in the telling was matter-of-fact; these things happened. I knew they did, but was much less inclined to accept them without comment.

“Thirty years! Why, that’s—how old were they at the time?”

“Two or three,” he said.

I was taken aback at that. Overlooking the basic tragedy, that was some mitigation, I supposed; if the boys’ purchaser had been providing for their welfare as children … but I remembered Josiah’s scrawny ribs, and the bowing of his legs. They hadn’t been all that well provided for. But then, neither were a good many children who came from loving homes.

“Josiah’s no idea who his parents were, where they came from, nor what their names were,” Jamie explained. He coughed briefly, and cleared his throat.

“He kent his own name, and that of his brother—the brother’s name is Keziah—but nothing else. Beardsley is the name o’ the man who took them, but as for the lads, they dinna ken if they’re Scots, English, Irish—with names like that, they likely aren’t German or Polish, but even that’s not impossible.”

“Hmm.” I puffed a cloud of thoughtful steam, temporarily obscuring the farmhouse below. “So Josiah ran away. I imagine that had something to do with the brand on his thumb?”

Jamie nodded, eyes on the ground as his horse picked its way down the slope. The ground to either side of the gravel was soft, and clumps of black dirt showed like creeping fungus through the scree.

“He stole a cheese—he was honest enough about that.” His mouth widened in momentary amusement. “Took it from a dairy shed in Brownsville, but the dairymaid saw him. In fact, the maid said ’twas the other—the brother—who took it, but …” Jamie’s ruddy brows drew together for a moment.

“Perhaps Josiah wasna so honest about it as I thought. At any rate, one of the boys took the cheese; Beardsley caught the two of them with it and summoned the sheriff, and Josiah took the blame—and the punishment.”

The boy had run away from the farm following this incident, which took place two years before. Josiah had—he told Jamie—always intended to return and rescue his brother, so soon as he could contrive a place for them to live. Jamie’s offer had seemed a godsend to him, and he had left the Gathering to make his way back on foot.

"Imagine his surprise to find us perched there on the hillside," Jamie said, and sneezed. He wiped his nose, eyes watering slightly. "He was lurking close by, trying to make up his mind whether to wait until we'd gone, or find out whether we were headed for the farm—thinking if so, we might make a fine distraction for him to slip in and steal away his brother."

"So you decided to slip in with him instead, and help with the stealing." My own nose was dripping from the cold. I groped for my handkerchief with one hand, trusting to the horse, Mrs. Piggy, not to catapult us head over heels down the mountain while I blew my nose. I eyed Jamie over the hanky. He still had the clammy, red-nosed look of illness, but his high cheekbones were flushed with the morning sun and he looked remarkably cheerful for a man who'd been out in a cold wood all night. "Fun, was it?"

"Oh, aye, it was. I've not done anything like that in years." Jamie's eyes creased into blue triangles with his grin. "It reminded me o' raiding into the Grants' lands with Dougal and his men, when I was a lad. Creepin' through the dark, stealing into the barn without a sound—Christ, I had to stop myself in time before I took the cow. Or I would have, if they'd had one."

I sniffed, and laughed indulgently.

"You are the most complete bandit, Jamie," I said.

"Bandit?" he said, mildly affronted. "I'm a verra honest man, Sassenach. Or at least I am when I can afford to be," he amended, with a quick glance behind, to be sure we were not overheard.

"Oh, you're entirely honest," I assured him. "Too honest for your own good, in fact. You're just not very law-abiding."

This observation appeared to disconcert him slightly, for he frowned and made a gruff sound in his throat that might have been either a Scottish noise of disagreement or merely an attempt to dislodge phlegm. He coughed, then reined in, and standing up in his stirrups, waved his hat to Roger, who was some distance up the slope. Roger waved back, and turned his horse's nose in our direction.

I pulled my horse in beside Jamie, and dropped the reins on its neck.

"I'll have wee Roger take the men on to Brownsville," Jamie explained, sitting back in his saddle, "while I go and call upon the Beardsleys alone. Will ye come with me, Sassenach, or go on wi' Roger?"

"Oh, I'll come with you," I said, without hesitation. "I want to see what these Beardsleys are like."

He smiled and brushed back his hair with one hand before replacing his hat. He wore his hair loose to cover his neck and ears against the cold, and it shone like molten copper in the morning sun.

"I thought ye might. Mind your face, though," he said, in half-mocking warning. "Dinna go gape-jawed or gooseberry, and they mention their missing servant lad."

"Mind your own face," I said, rather crossly. "Gooseberry, indeed. Did Josiah say that he and his brother were badly treated?" I wondered whether there had been more to Josiah's leaving than the cheese incident.

Jamie shook his head.

"I didna ask, and he didna say—but ask yourself, Sassenach: would ye leave a decent home to go and live in the woods alone, to make your bed in cold leaves and eat grubs and crickets 'til ye learned to hunt meat?"

He nudged his horse into motion, and rode up the slope to meet Roger, leaving me pondering that conjecture. He returned a few moments later, and I turned my mount in beside him, another question in my mind.

"But if things were bad enough here as to force him to leave—why didn't his brother go with him?"

Jamie glanced at me, surprised, but then smiled, a little grimly.

"Keziah's deaf, Sassenach."

Not born deaf, from what Josiah had told him; his twin had lost his hearing as the result of an injury, occurring at the age of five or so. Keziah could therefore speak, but not hear any but the loudest of noises; and unable to perceive the sound of rustling leaves or shuffling feet, could neither hunt nor avoid pursuit.

"He says Keziah understands him, and doubtless he does. When we crept into the barn, I kept watch below while the lad went up the ladder to the loft. I didna hear a sound, but within a minute, both lads were down on the floor beside me, Keziah rubbing the sleep from his eyes. I hadna realized they were twins; gave me a turn to see the two of them, so like."

"I wonder why Keziah didn't bring away his breeches," I said, touching on one thing that had been puzzling me.

Jamie laughed.

"I asked. Seems he'd taken them off the night before, left them in the hay, and one o' the barn cats had kittens on them. He didna want to disturb her."

I laughed too, though with an uneasy memory of pale bare feet, blue-tinged skin showing purple in the firelight.

"Kind lad. And his shoes?"

"He hadn't any."

By now we had reached the bottom of the slope. The horses milled for a moment, turning in a slow gyre round Jamie as directions were decided, rendezvous appointed, farewells taken. Then Roger—with only slight evidence of self-consciousness—whistled through his teeth and waved his hat in the air in summons. I watched him ride away, and noticed him half-turn in the saddle, then turn back, looking straight ahead.

"He's no sure they'll really follow him," Jamie said, watching. He shook his head critically, then shrugged, dismissing it. "Aye, well. He'll manage, or not."

"He'll manage," I said, thinking of the night before.

"I'm glad ye think so, Sassenach. Come on, then." He clicked his tongue and reined his horse's head around.

"If you're not sure Roger can manage, why are you sending him on his own?" I inquired of his back, swaying in the saddle as we turned into the thin copse that lay between us and the now-invisible farm. "Why not keep the men together, and take them into Brownsville yourself?"

"For one thing, he'll no learn, and I dinna give him the chance. For another …" He paused, turning to look back at me. "For another, I didna want the whole boiling coming along to the Beardsleys' and maybe hearing of their missing servant. The whole camp saw Josiah last night, aye? If you've a lad missing, and hear of a lad popping up and causing a stir in the forest nearby, conclusions might be drawn, d'ye not think?"

He turned back, and I followed him through a narrow defile between the pine trees. Dew gleamed like diamonds on bark and needle, and small icy drops fell from the boughs above, startling my skin where they fell.

"Unless this Beardsley is old or infirm, though, won't he be joining you?" I objected. "Someone's bound to mention Josiah in his hearing sooner or later."

He shook his head, not turning round.

"And tell him what, if they do? They saw the lad when we dragged him in, and they saw him run away again. For all they ken, he got clear away."

"Kenny Lindsay saw them both when you brought them back."

He shrugged.

"Aye, I had a word wi' Kenny, while we were saddling the horses. He'll say nothing." He was right, I knew. Kenny was one of his Ardsmuir men; he would follow Jamie's orders without question.

"No," Jamie went on, skillfully reining round a large boulder, "Beardsley's not infirm; Josiah told me he's an Indian trader—taking goods across the Treaty Line to the Cherokee villages. What I don't know is if he's to home just now. If he is, though—" He drew breath and paused to cough as the cold air tickled his lungs.

"That's the other reason for sending the men ahead," he continued, wheezing slightly. "We'll not join them again until tomorrow, I think. By that time, they'll have had a night to drink and be sociable in Brownsville; they'll scarce recall the lad, and be the less likely to speak of him in Beardsley's hearing. With luck, we'll be well away before anything's said—no chance of Beardsley leaving us to pursue the lad then."

So he was counting on the Beardsleys being sufficiently hospitable as to put us up for the night. A reasonable expectation, in this neck of the woods. Listening to him cough again, I resolved to sit on his chest this evening, if necessary, and oblige him to be well-greased with camphor, whether he liked it or not.

We emerged from the trees, and I glanced dubiously at the farmhouse ahead. It was smaller than I had thought, and rather shabby, with a cracked step, a sagging porch, and a wide patch of shingles missing from the weathered roof. Well, I had slept in worse places, and likely would again.

The door to a stunted barn gaped open, but there was no sign of life. The whole place seemed deserted, save for the plume of smoke from the chimney.

I had meant what I said to Jamie, though I hadn't been entirely accurate. He *was* honest, and also law-abiding—provided that the laws were those he chose to respect. The mere fact that a law had been established by the Crown was not, I knew, sufficient to make it law in his eyes. Other laws, unwritten, he would likely die for.

Still, while the law of property meant somewhat less to an erstwhile Highland raider than it might to others, it hadn't escaped my attention—and therefore certainly hadn't escaped his—that he was about to claim both hospitality and duty from a man whose property he had just helped to abscond. Jamie had no deep-seated objection to indenture as such, I knew; ordinarily, he would respect such a claim. That he hadn't meant that he perceived some higher law in operation—though whether that was friendship, pity, the claim of his *earbsachd*, or something else, I didn't know. He had paused, waiting for me.

"Why did you decide to help Josiah?" I asked bluntly, as we made our way across the ragged cornfield that lay before the house. Dry stalks snapped beneath the horses' feet, and ice crystals glittered on the litter of dead leaves.

Jamie took off his hat, and set it on the saddle before him, as he tied back his hair in preparation for meeting company.

"Well, I said to him that if he was set on this course, so be it. But if he chose to come to the Ridge—alone or with his brother—then we must rid him of the mark on his thumb, for it would cause talk, and word might get back to yon Beardsley, wi' the devil to pay and a' that."

He took a deep breath and let it out, the smoke of it wisping white around his head, then turned to look at me, his face serious.

"The lad didna hesitate for a moment, though he'd been branded; he knew. And I'll tell ye, Sassenach—while a man may do a desperate thing once from love or courage … it takes something more than that, if ye've done it once already, and ye know damn well what it's going to feel like to have to do it again."

He turned away without waiting for my response, and rode into the dooryard, scattering a flock of foraging doves. He sat his horse upright, his shoulders broad and square. There was no hint of the deep-webbed scars that lined his back beneath the homespun cloak, but I knew them well.

So that was it, I thought. *As in water face answereth to face, so the heart of man to man.* And the law of courage was the one he had lived by for the longest.

Several chickens huddled on the porch, fluffed into balls of yellow-eyed resentment. They muttered balefully among themselves as we dismounted, but were too cold to do more than shuffle away from us, reluctant to abandon their patch of sunshine. Several boards of the porch itself were broken, and the yard nearby was littered with scraps of half-hewn lumber and scattered nails, as though someone had meant to mend it, but had not yet found a moment to attend to the job. The procrastination had lasted for some time, I thought; the nails were rusty, and the newly cut boards had warped and split with damp.

"Ho! The house!" Jamie shouted, stopping in the center of the dooryard. This was accepted etiquette for approaching a strange house; while most people in the mountains were hospitable, there were not a few who viewed strangers warily—and were inclined to make introductions at gunpoint, until the callers' bona fides should be established.

With this in mind, I kept a cautious distance behind Jamie, but made sure I was visible, ostentatiously spreading my skirts and brushing them down, displaying my gender as evidence of our peaceable intent.

Damn, there was a small hole burnt through the brown wool, no doubt from a flying campfire spark. I concealed the burned spot in a fold of skirt, thinking how odd it was that everyone regarded women as inherently harmless. Had I been so inclined, I could easily have burgled houses and murdered hapless families from one end of the Ridge to the other.

Fortunately the impulse to do so hadn't struck me, though it *had* dawned on me now and then that the Hippocratic Oath and its injunction to "Do no harm" might not have strictly to do with medical procedure. I'd had the impulse to dot one of my more recalcitrant patients over the head with a stick of firewood more than once, but had so far managed to keep the urge in check.

Of course, most people hadn't the advantage of a doctor's jaundiced view of humanity. And it was true that women didn't go in so much for the recreational sorts of mayhem that men enjoyed—I rarely found women beating each other into pulp for fun. Give them a good motive, though, and …

Jamie was walking toward the barn, shouting at intervals, to no apparent effect. I glanced round, but there were no fresh tracks in the dooryard save our own. A scatter of dung balls lay near the half-hewn log, but those had plainly been left days ago; they were moist with dew, but not fresh—most had crumbled to powder.

No one had come, no one had gone, save on foot. The Beardsleys, whoever and however many of them there were, were likely still within.

Lying low, though. It was early, but not so early that farm people would not already be about their chores; I had seen someone earlier, after all. I stepped back and shaded my eyes against the rising sun, looking for any sign of life. I was more than curious about these Beardsleys—and more than slightly apprehensive about the prospects of having one or more male Beardsleys riding with us, given recent events.

I turned back to the door, and noticed an odd series of notches cut into the wood of the jamb. Each one was small, but there were a great many, running the complete length of one doorpost, and halfway down the other. I looked closer; they were arranged in groups of seven, a scant width of unscarred wood between the groups, as a prisoner might count, keeping track of the weeks.

Jamie emerged from the barn, followed by a faint bleating. The goats he'd mentioned, of course; I wondered whether it had been Keziah's job to milk them—if it was, his absence was going to become rapidly apparent, if it wasn't already.

Jamie took a few paces toward the house, cupped his hands round his mouth, and shouted again. No answer. He waited a few moments, then shrugged and strode up onto the porch, where he hammered on the door with the hilt of his dirk. It made enough noise to wake the dead, had there been any in the vicinity, and sent the chickens squawking away in a feather-scattering panic, but no one appeared in answer to the thunderous summons.

Jamie glanced back at me, one eyebrow raised. People didn't normally go off and leave their farms untended, not if they had livestock.

"Someone's here," he said, in answer to the unvoiced thought. "The goats are fresh-milked; there are drops still on their teats."

"Do you think they could all be out searching for … er … you know who?" I murmured, moving closer to him.

"Perhaps." He moved to the side, bending to peer into a window. It had once been glassed, but most of the panes were cracked or missing, and a sheet of ratty muslin had been tacked over the opening. I saw Jamie frown at it, with the craftsman's disdain for a shoddy repair.

He turned his head suddenly, then looked at me.

"D'ye hear something, Sassenach?"

"Yes. I thought it was the goats, but …"

The bleat came again—this time unmistakably from the house. Jamie set his hand to the door, but it didn't budge.

"Bolted," he said briefly, and moved back to the window, where he reached carefully into the frame and pulled loose a corner of the muslin cloth.

"Phew," I said, wrinkling my nose at the air that wafted out. I was used to the odors of a winter-sealed cabin, where the scents of sweat, dirty clothes, wet feet, greasy hair, and slop jars mingled with baking bread, stewing meat, and the subtler notes of fungus and mold, but the aroma within the Beardsley residence went well beyond the norm.

"Either they're keeping the pigs in the house," I said, with a glance at the barn, "or there are ten people living in there who haven't come out since last spring."

"It's a bit ripe," Jamie agreed. He put his face into the window, grimacing at the stink, and bellowed, "*Thig a mach!* Come out, Beardsley, or I'm comin' in!"

I peered over his shoulder, to see whether this invitation might produce results. The room within was large, but so crowded that scarcely any of the stained wooden floor was visible through the rubble. Sniffing cautiously, I deduced that the barrels I saw contained—among other things—salt fish, tar, apples, beer, and sauerkraut, while bundles of woolen blankets dyed with cochineal and indigo, kegs of black powder, and half-tanned hides reeking of dog turds lent their own peculiar fragrances to the unique mephitis within. Beardsley's trade goods, I supposed.

The other window had been covered as well, with a tattered wolf hide, so that the interior was dim and shadowy; with all the boxes, bundles, barrels, and bits of furniture lying in heaps, it looked like a poverty-stricken version of Ali Baba's cave.

The sound came again from the back of the house, somewhat louder; a noise midway between a squeal and a growl. I took a step back, sound and acrid smell together vividly recalling an image of dark fur and sudden violence.

"Bears," I suggested, half-seriously. "The people are gone and there's a bear inside."

"Aye, Goldilocks," Jamie said, very dryly. "Nay doubt. Bears or not, there's something wrong. Fetch the pistols and cartridge box from my saddlebag."

I nodded and turned to go, but before I could step off the porch, a shuffling noise came from inside, and I turned back sharply. Jamie had grasped his dirk, but as he saw whatever was inside, his hand relaxed on the hilt. His eyebrows also rose in surprise, and I leaned over his arm to see.

A woman peered out from between two hillocks of goods, looking round suspiciously, like a rat peering out of a garbage dump. She was not particularly ratlike in appearance, being wavy-haired and quite stout, but she blinked at us in the calculating way of vermin, reckoning the threat.

"Go away," she said, evidently concluding that we were not the vanguard of an invading army.

"Good morning to ye, ma'am," Jamie began, "I am James Fraser, of—"

"I don't care who you are," she replied. "Go away."

"Indeed I will not," he said firmly. "I must speak with the man o' the house."

An extraordinary expression crossed her plump face; concern, calculation, and what might have been amusement.

"Must you?" she said. She had a slight lisp; it came out as *mutht you?* "And who says that you must?"

Jamie's ears were beginning to redden slightly, but he answered calmly enough.

"The Governor, madam. I am *Colonel* James Fraser," he said, with emphasis, "charged with the raising of militia. All able-bodied men between the ages of sixteen and sixty are called to muster. Will ye fetch Mr. Beardsley, please?"

"Mili-ish-ia, is it?" she said, handling the word with care. "Why, who will you be fighting, then?"

"With luck, no one. But the call to muster is sent out; I must answer, and so must all able-bodied men within the Treaty Line." Jamie's hand tightened on the crosspiece of the inner frame and rattled it experimentally. It was made of flimsy pine sticks, the wood shrunken and badly weathered; he could plainly rip it out of the wall and step through the opening, if he chose to do so. He met her eyes straight on, and smiled pleasantly.

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips, thinking.

"Able-bodied men," she said at last. "Hmp. Well, we've none of those. The bond lad's run off again, but even if he were here, he's not able; deaf as that doorpotht, and quite as dumb." She nodded toward the door in illustration. "If you care to hunt him down, you're welcome to keep him, though."

It didn't look as though there would be any hue and cry after Keziah, then. I took a deep breath, in a sigh of relief, but let it out again, swiftly.

Jamie wasn't giving up easily.

"Is Mr. Beardsley in the house?" he asked. "I wish to see him." He gave an experimental tug on the frame, and the dry wood cracked with a sound like a pistol shot.

"He's thcarce fit for company," she said, and the odd note was back in her voice; wary, but at the same time, filled with something like excitement.

"Is he ill?" I asked, leaning over Jamie's shoulder. "I might be able to help; I'm a doctor."

She shuffled forward a step or two, and peered at me, frowning under a heavy mass of wavy brown hair. She was younger than I'd thought; seen in better light, the heavy face showed no cobweb of age or slackening of flesh.

"A doctor?"

"My wife's well-kent as a healer," Jamie said. "The Indian folk call her White Raven."

"The conjure woman?" Her eyes flew wide in alarm, and she took a step back.

Something struck me odd about the woman, and looking at her, I realized what it was. Despite the reek in the house, both the woman's person and her dress were clean, and her hair was soft and fluffy—not at all the norm at this time of year, when people generally didn't bathe for several months in the cold weather.

"Who are you?" I asked bluntly. "Are you Mrs. Beardsley? Or perhaps Miss Beardsley?"

No more than twenty-five, I thought, in spite of the bulk of her swaddled figure. Her shoulders swelled fatly under her shawl, and the width of her hips brushed the barrels she stood between. Evidently trade with the Cherokee was sufficiently profitable to keep Beardsley's family in adequate food, if not his bond servants. I eyed her with some dislike, but she met my gaze coolly enough.

"I am Mrs. Beardthley."

The alarm had faded; she pursed her lips, and pushed them in and out, regarding me with an air of calculation. Jamie flexed his arm, and the window frame cracked loudly.

"Come you in, then."

The odd tone was still in her voice; half defiance, half eagerness. Jamie caught it and frowned, but released his grip on the frame.

She moved out from between the boxes and turned toward the door. I caught no more than a glimpse of her in motion, but that was enough to see that she was lame; one leg dragged, her shoe scraping on the wooden floor.

There was a bumping and grunting as she fumbled with the bolt; a grating noise, and then a *thunk* as she dropped it on the floor. The door was warped, stuck in its frame; Jamie put his shoulder to it and it sprang loose and swung in, boards quivering with the shock. How long since it had been opened? I wondered.

A good long time, evidently. I heard Jamie snort and cough as he went in, and did my best to breathe through my mouth as I followed. Even so, the smell was enough to knock a ferret over. Beyond the reek of the goods, there was an outhouse smell from somewhere; stale urine and a ripe fecal stench. Rotting food, too, but something else besides. My nostrils twitched cautiously as I tried to inhale no more than a few molecules of air for analysis.

"How long has Mr. Beardsley been ill?" I asked.

I had picked out a distinct stench of sickness amid the general fetor. Not only the ghost of long-dried vomit, but the sweet smell of purulent discharge and that indefinable musty, yeast-rising odor that seems to be simply the smell of illness itself.

"Oh … thome time."

She shut the door behind us, and I felt a sudden surge of claustrophobia. Inside, the air seemed thick, both from the stench and from the lack of light. I had a great impulse to rip down the coverings from both windows and let in a little air, and clenched my hands in the fabric of my cloak to keep from doing it.

Mrs. Beardsley turned sideways and scuttled crablike through a narrow passage left between the stacks of goods. Jamie glanced at me, made a Scottish noise of disgust in his throat, and ducked under a jutting bundle of tent poles to follow her. I made my way cautiously after, trying not to notice that my foot fell now and then on objects of an unpleasant squashiness. Rotten apples? Dead rats? I pinched my nose and didn't look down.

The farmhouse was simple in construction; one big room across the front, one behind.

The rear room was a striking contrast to the squalid clutter of the front. There was no ornament or decoration; the room was plain and orderly as a Quaker meeting hall. Everything was bare and spotless, the wooden table and stone hearth scrubbed to rawness, a few pewter utensils gleaming dully on a shelf. One window here had been left uncovered, glass intact, and the morning sun fell across the room in pure white radiance. The room was quiet and the air still, increasing the odd feeling that we had entered a sanctuary of some sort from the chaos of the front room.

The impression of peace was dispelled at once by a loud noise from above. It was the sound we had heard earlier, but close at hand, a loud squeal filled with desperation, like a tortured hog. Jamie started at the sound, and turned at once toward a ladder at the far side of the room, which led upward to a loft.

"He'th up there," Mrs. Beardsley said—unnecessarily, as Jamie was already halfway up the ladder. The squealing noise came again, more urgently, and I decided not to fetch my medicine box before investigating.

Jamie's head appeared at the top of the ladder as I grasped it.

"Bring a light, Sassenach," he said briefly, and his head vanished.

Mrs. Beardsley stood motionless, hands buried in her shawl, making no effort to find a light. Her lips were pressed tight together,

her plump cheeks mottled with red. I pushed past her, seized a candlestick from the shelf, and knelt to light it at the hearth before hastening upward.

"Jamie?" I poked my head above the edge of the loft, holding my candle cautiously above my head.

"Here, Sassenach." He was standing at the far end of the loft, where the shadows lay thickest. I scrambled over the top of the ladder and made my way toward him, stepping gingerly.

The stench was much stronger here. I caught the gleam of something in the dark, and brought the candle forward to see.

Jamie drew in his breath, as shocked as I was, but quickly mastered his emotion.

"Mr. Beardsley, I presume," he said.

The man was enormous—or had been. The great curve of his belly still rose whalelike out of the shadows, and the hand that lay slack on the floorboards near my foot could have cupped a cannonball with ease. But the flesh of the upper arm hung slack, white and flabby, the massive chest sunken in the center. What must once have been the neck of a bull had wasted to stringiness, and a single eye gleamed, frantic behind strands of matted hair.

The eye widened, and he made the noise again, his head straining upward urgently. I felt a shudder go through Jamie. It was enough to raise the hair on the back of my own neck, but I disregarded it, pushing the candlestick into Jamie's hands.

"Hold the light for me."

I sank to my knees, too late feeling the liquid ooze through the fabric of my skirt. The man lay in his own filth, and had been lying so for quite some time; the floor was thick with slime and wet. He was naked, covered by no more than a linen blanket, and as I turned it back, I glimpsed ulcerated sores amid the smears of ordure.

It was clear enough what ailed Mr. Beardsley; one side of his face sagged grotesquely, the eyelid drooping, and both the arm and the leg on the near side of his body splayed limp and dead, the joints left knobby and weirdly distorted by the falling away of the muscle around them. He snuffled and bleated, tongue poking and slobbering from the corner of his mouth in his vain but urgent attempts at speech.

"Hush," I said to him. "Don't talk; it's all right now."

I took the wrist to check his pulse; the flesh moved loosely on the bones of his arm, with not the slightest twitch of response to my touch.

"A stroke," I said softly to Jamie. "An apoplexy, you call it." I put my hand on Beardsley's chest, to offer the comfort of touch.

"Don't worry," I said to him. "We've come to help." I spoke reassuringly, though even as I said the words, I wondered what help was possible. Well, cleanliness and warmth at least; it was nearly as cold in the loft as it was outside, and his chest was chilly and pebbled with gooseflesh among the bushy hair.

The ladder creaked heavily, and I turned to see the outline of Mrs. Beardsley's fluffy head and heavy shoulders, silhouetted by the light from the kitchen below.

"How long has he been like this?" I asked sharply.

"Perhapth … a month," she said, after a pause. "I could not move him," she said, defensive. "He ith too heavy."

That was plainly true. However …

"Why is he up here?" Jamie demanded. "If ye didna move him, how did he get here?" He turned, shedding the light of the candle over the loft. There was little here that would draw a man; an old straw mattress, a few scattered tools, and bits of household rubbish. The light shone on Mrs. Beardsley's face, turning her pale blue eyes to ice.

"He wath … chathing me," she said faintly.

"What?" Jamie strode over to the ladder, and bending down, seized her by the arm, helping her—rather against her will, it seemed—to clamber up the rest of the way into the loft.

"What d'ye mean, chasing you?" he demanded. She hunched her shoulders, looking round and homely as a cookie jar in her bundled shawls.

"He thtruck me," she said simply. "I came up the ladder to get away from him, but he followed. I tried to hide back here in the thadows, and he came, but then … he fell. And … he could not get up." She shrugged again.

Jamie held the candlestick near her face. She gave a small nervous smile, eyes darting from me to Jamie, and I saw that the lisp was caused by the fact that her front teeth were broken—snapped off at an angle, just beyond the gums. A small scar ran through her upper lip; another showed white in the hairs of one eyebrow.

A horrible noise came from the man on the floor—a furious squeal of what sounded like protest—and she flinched, eyes shut tight in reflexive dread.

"Mmphm," Jamie said, glancing from her to her husband. "Aye. Well. Fetch up some water, ma'am, and ye will. Another candle and some fresh rags as well," he called after her departing back as she hastened toward the ladder, only too glad to be given an excuse to leave.

"Jamie—bring back the light, will you?"

He came and stood beside me, holding the candle so it shed its glow on the ruined body. He gave Beardsley a dark look of mingled pity and dislike, and shook his head slowly.

"God's judgment, d'ye think, Sassenach?"

"Not entirely God's, I don't think," I said, my voice lowered so as not to carry to the kitchen below. I reached up and took the candlestick from him. "Look."

A flask of water and a plate of bread, hard and tinged with blue mold, stood in the shadows near Beardsley's head; orts and bits of gluey, half-chewed bread covered the floor nearby. She had fed him—enough to keep him alive. Yet I had seen great quantities of food in that front room as we passed—hanging hams, barrels of dried fruit and salt fish and sauerkraut.

There were bundles of furs, jugs of oil, piles of woolen blankets—and yet the master of those goods lay here in the dark, starved and shivering beneath a single sheet of linen.

"Why did she not just let him die, I wonder?" Jamie asked softly, eyes fixed on the moldy bread. Beardsley gargled and growled at this; his open eye rolled angrily, tears running down his face and snot bubbling from his nose. He flailed and grunted, arching his body in frustration, collapsing with a meaty thud that shook the boards of the loft.

"He can understand you, I think. Can you?" I addressed this remark to the sick man, who gobbled and drooled in a manner that made it clear that he understood at least that he was being spoken to.

"As to why …"

I gestured toward Beardsley's legs, moving the candle slowly above them. Some of the sores were indeed compression sores, caused by lying helpless for a long time. Others were not. Parallel slashes, clearly made by a knife, showed black and clotted on one massive thigh. The shin was decorated with a regular line of ulcerations, angry red wounds rimmed with black and oozing. Burns, left to fester.

Jamie gave a small grunt at the sight, and glanced over his shoulder, toward the ladder. The sound of a door opening came from below, and a cold draft blew up into the loft, making the candle flame dance wildly. The door shut, and the flame steadied.

"I can make shift to lower him, I think." Jamie lifted the candle, assessing the beams overhead. "A sling, perhaps, with a rope put over yon beam there. Is it all right to move him?"

"Yes," I said, but I wasn't paying attention. Bending over the sick man's legs, I had caught a whiff of something that I hadn't smelled in a long, long time—a very bad and sinister stink.

I hadn't encountered it often, but even once would have been enough; the pungent smell of gas gangrene is strikingly memorable. I didn't want to say anything that might alarm Beardsley—if he was capable of understanding—so instead, I patted him reassuringly and stood up to go and fetch the candle from Jamie for a better look.

He gave it to me, leaning close to murmur in my ear as he did so.

"Can ye do aught for him, Sassenach?"

"No," I said, equally low-voiced. "Not for the apoplexy, that is. I can treat the sores and give him herbs against fever—that's all."

He stood for a moment, looking at the humped figure in the shadows, now quiescent. Then he shook his head, crossed himself, and went quickly down the ladder to hunt a rope.

I went slowly back to the sick man, who greeted me with a thick "Haughhh" and a restless thumping of one leg, like a rabbit's warning. I knelt by his feet, talking soothingly of nothing in particular, while I held the light close to examine them. The toes. All the toes on his dead foot had been burned, some only blistered, others burned nearly to the bone. The first two toes had gone quite black, and a greenish tinge spread over the upper aspect of the foot nearby.

I was appalled—as much by the thought of what might have led to this as by the action itself. The candle wavered; my hands were shaking, and not only with cold. I was not only horrified by what had happened here; I was also worried by the immediate prospects. What on earth were we to do about these wretched people?

Plainly we couldn't take Beardsley with us—just as plainly, he could not be left here, under the care of his wife. There were no near neighbors to look in, no one else on the farm to safeguard him. I supposed we might manage to transport him to Brownsville; there might be a wagon in the barn. But even if so, what then?

There was no hospital to care for him. If one of the homes in Brownsville might take him in for the sake of charity … well and good, but seeing Beardsley's state after a month, I thought it unlikely that his condition—in terms either of paralysis or speech—would improve much. Who would keep him, if it meant caring for him day and night for the rest of his life?

The rest of his life, of course, could be rather short, depending on my success in dealing with the gangrene. Worry retreated as my mind turned to the immediate problem. I would have to amputate; it was the only possibility. The toes were easy—but the toes might not be enough. If I had to take off the foot or part of it, we ran a greater risk from shock and infection.

Could he feel it? Sometimes stroke victims retained feeling in an affected limb, but not movement, sometimes movement without feeling—sometimes neither. Cautiously, I touched the gangrenous toe, eyes on his face.

His working eye was open, focused on the beams overhead. He didn't glance at me or make a noise, which answered that question. No, he couldn't feel the foot. That was a relief, in a way—at least he wouldn't suffer pain from the amputation. Nor, it occurred to me, had he felt the damage inflicted on his limb. Had she been aware of that? Or had she chosen to attack his dead side only because he retained some strength on the other, and might still defend himself?

There was a soft rustle behind me. Mrs. Beardsley was back. She set down a bucket of water and a pile of rags, then stood behind me, watching in silence as I began to sponge away the filth.

"Can you cure him?" she asked. Her voice was calm, remote, as though she spoke of a stranger.

The patient's head lolled suddenly back, so his open eye fixed on me.

"I think I can help a bit," I said carefully. I wished Jamie would return. Aside from need of my medical box, I was finding the company of the Beardsleys rather unnerving.

The more so when Mr. Beardsley inadvertently released a small quantity of urine. Mrs. Beardsley laughed, and he made a sound in reply that made the goose bumps rise on my arms. I wiped the liquid off his thigh and went on with my work, trying to ignore it.

"Have you or Mr. Beardsley any kin nearby?" I asked, as conversationally as possible. "Someone who might come to lend you a hand?"

"No one," she said. "He took me from my father's house in Maryland. To thith place." *This place* was spoken as though it were the fifth circle of hell; so far as I could see, there was certainly some resemblance at the present moment.

The door opened below, and a welcome draft of cold air announced Jamie's return. There was a clunking noise as he set my box on the table, and I hastily rose, eager to escape them, if only for a moment.

"There's my husband with my medicines. I'll just … er … go and fetch … um …" I edged past Mrs. Beardsley's bulk, and fled down the ladder, sweating in spite of the chill in the house.

Jamie stood by the table, frowning as he turned a length of rope in his hands. He glanced up as he heard me, and his face relaxed a little.

“How is it, Sassenach?” he asked, low-voiced, with a jerk of the chin toward the loft.

“Very bad,” I whispered, coming to stand beside him. “Two of his toes are gangrenous; I’ll have to take them off. And she says they’ve no family near to help.”

“Mmphm.” His lips tightened, and he bent his attention to the sling he was improvising.

I reached for my medical chest, to check my instruments, but stopped when I saw Jamie’s pistols lying on the table beside it, along with his powder horn and shot case. I touched his arm and jerked my head at them, mouthing, “What?” at him.

The line between his brows deepened, but before he could answer, a dreadful racket came from the loft above, a great thrashing and thumping, accompanied by a gargling noise like an elephant drowning in a mud bog.

Jamie dropped the rope and shot for the ladder, with me at his heels. He let out a shout as his head topped the ladder, and dived forward. As I scrambled into the loft behind him, I saw him in the shadows, grappling with Mrs. Beardsley.

She smashed an elbow at his face, hitting him in the nose. This removed any inhibitions he might have had about manhandling a woman, and he jerked her round to face him and struck her with a short, sharp uppercut to the chin that clicked her jaws and made her stagger, eyes glazing. I dashed forward to save the candle, as she collapsed on her rump in a pouf of skirts and petticoats.

“God … dab … that … womad.” Jamie’s voice was muffled, his sleeve pressed across his face to stanch the flow of blood from his nose, but the sincerity in it was unmistakable.

Mr. Beardsley was flopping like a landed fish, wheezing and gurgling. I lifted the candle and found him flailing at his neck with one splayed hand. A linen kerchief had been twisted into a rope and wrapped round his neck, and his face was black, his one eye popping. I hastily seized the kerchief and undid it, and his breathing eased with a great whoosh of fetid air.

"If she'd been faster, she'd have had him." Jamie lowered his blood-streaked arm and felt his nose tenderly. "Christ, I think she broke my dose."

"Why? Why did you thtop me?" Mrs. Beardsley was still conscious, though swaying and glassy-eyed. "He thould die, I want him to die, he mutht die."

"*A nighean na galladh*, ye could ha' killed him at your leisure any time this month past, if ye wanted him dead," Jamie said impatiently. "Why in God's name wait until ye had witnesses?"

She looked up at him, eyes suddenly sharp and clear.

"I did not want him dead," she said. "I wanted him to *die*." She smiled, showing the stubs of her broken teeth. "Thlowly."

"Oh, Christ," I said, and wiped a hand across my face. It was only mid-morning, but I felt as though the day had lasted several weeks already. "It's my fault. I told her I thought I could help; she thought I'd save him, maybe cure him altogether." The curse of a reputation for magic healing! I might have laughed, had I been in the mood for irony.

There was a sharp, fresh stink in the air, and Mrs. Beardsley turned on her husband with a cry of outrage.

"Filthy beast!" She scrambled to her knees, snatched up a hard roll from the plate, and threw it at him. It bounced off his head. "Filthy, thtinking, dirty, wicked …" Jamie seized her by the hair as she hurled herself at the prone body, grabbed her arm, and jerked her away, sobbing and shrieking abuse.

"Bloody hell," he said, over the uproar. "Fetch me that rope, Sassenach, before I kill them both myself."

The job of getting Mr. Beardsley down from the loft was enough to leave both Jamie and me sweat-soaked and streaked with filth, reeking and weak in the knees with effort. Mrs. Beardsley squatted on a stool in the corner, quiet and malevolent as a toad, making no effort to help.

She gave a gasp of outrage when we laid the big, lolling body on the clean table, but Jamie glared at her, and she sank back on her stool, mouth clamped to a thin, straight line.

Jamie wiped his bloodstained sleeve across his brow, and shook his head as he looked at Beardsley. I didn't blame him; even cleaned up, warmly covered, and with a little warm gruel spooned into him, the man was in a dreadful state. I examined him once more, carefully, in the light from the window. No doubt about the toes; the stink of gangrene was distinct, and the greenish tinge covered the outer dorsal aspect of the foot.

I'd have to take more than the toes—I frowned, feeling my way carefully around the putrefying area, wondering whether it was better to try for a partial amputation between the metacarpals, or simply to take the foot off at the ankle. The ankle dissection would be faster, and while I would normally try for the more conservative partial amputation, there was really no point to it in this case; Beardsley was plainly never going to walk again.

I gnawed my lower lip dubiously. For that matter, the whole business might be moot; he burned with intermittent fever, and the sores on legs and buttocks oozed with suppuration. What were the chances of his recovering from the amputation without dying of infection?

I hadn't heard Mrs. Beardsley come up behind me; for a heavyset woman, she moved with remarkable silence.

"What do you mean to do?" she asked, her voice sounding neutral and remote.

"Your husband's toes are gangrenous," I said. No point in trying not to alarm Beardsley now. "I'll have to amputate his foot." There was really no choice, though my heart sank at the notion of spending the next several days—or weeks—here, nursing Beardsley. I could hardly leave him to the tender care of his wife!

She circled the table slowly, coming to a stop near his feet. Her face was blank, but a tiny smile appeared at the corners of her mouth, winking on and off, as though quite without her willing it. She looked at the blackened toes for a long minute, then shook her head.

"No," she said softly. "Let him rot."

The question of Beardsley's understanding was resolved, at least; his open eye bulged, and he let out a shriek of rage, thrashing and flailing in an effort to get at her, so that he came perilously near to falling onto the floor in his struggles. Jamie seized him, shoving and heaving to keep his ponderous bulk on the table. As Beardsley at last subsided, gasping and making mewling noises, Jamie straightened up, gasping himself, and gave Mrs. Beardsley a look of extreme dislike.

She hunched her shoulders, pulling her shawl tight around them, but didn't retreat or look away. She raised her chin defiantly.

"I am hith wife," she said. "I thall not let you cut him. It ith a rithk to hith life."

"It's certain death if I don't," I said shortly. "And a nasty one, too. You—" I didn't get to finish; Jamie put a hand on my shoulder, squeezing hard.

"Take her outside, Claire," he said quietly.

"But—"

"Outside." His hand tightened on my shoulder, almost painful in its pressure. "Dinna come back until I call for ye."

His face was grim, but there was something in his eyes that made me go hollow and watery inside. I glanced at the sideboard, where his pistols lay beside my medicine chest, then back at his face, appalled.

"You can't," I said.

He looked at Beardsley, his face bleak.

"I would put down a dog in such case without a second's thought," he said softly. "Can I do less for him?"

"He is not a dog!"

"No, he is not." His hand dropped from my shoulder, and he circled the table, until he stood by Beardsley's side.

"If ye understand me, man—close your eye," he said quietly. There was a moment's silence, and Beardsley's bloodshot eye fixed on Jamie's face—with undeniable intelligence. The lid closed slowly, then rose again.

Jamie turned to me.

"Go," he said. "Let it be his choice. If—or if not—I will call for ye."

My knees were trembling, and I knotted my hands in the folds of my skirt.

"No," I said. I looked at Beardsley, then swallowed hard and shook my head. "No," I said again. "I—if you … you must have a witness."

He hesitated a moment, but then nodded.

"Aye, you're right." He glanced at Mrs. Beardsley. She stood stock-still, hands knotted under her apron, eyes darting from me to Jamie to her husband and back. Jamie shook his head briefly, then turned back to the stricken man, squaring his shoulders.

"Blink once for yes, twice for nay," he said. "You understand?"

The eyelid lowered without hesitation.

"Listen, then." Jamie drew a deep breath and began to speak, in a flat, unemotional tone of voice, his eyes steady on the ruined face and the fierce gaze of its open eye.

"Ye ken what has happened to you?"

Blink.

"Ye ken that my wife is a physician, a healer?"

The eye rolled in my direction, then back to Jamie. Blink.

"She says that you have suffered an apoplexy, that the damage canna be mended. You understand?"

A huffing sound came from the lopsided mouth. This was not news. Blink.

"Your foot is putrid. If it is not taken off, you will rot and die. You understand?"

No response. The nostrils flared suddenly, moist, questing; then the air was expelled with a snort. He had smelled the rot; had suspected, perhaps, but not known for sure that it came from his own flesh. Not 'til now. Slowly, a blink.

The quiet litany went on, statements and questions, each a shovelful of dirt, taken from a deepening grave. Each ending with the inexorable words, "You understand?"

My hands and feet and face felt numb. The odd sense of sanctuary in the room had altered; it felt like a church, but no longer a place of refuge. A place now in which some ritual took place, leading to a solemn, predestined end.

And it was predestined, I understood. Beardsley had made his choice long since—perhaps even before we arrived. He had had a month in that purgatory, after all, suspended in the cold dark between heaven and earth, in which to think, to come to grips with his prospects and make his peace with death.

Did he understand?

Oh, yes, very well.

Jamie bent over the table, one hand on Beardsley's arm, a priest in stained linen, offering absolution and salvation. Mrs. Beardsley stood frozen in the fall of light from the window, a stolid angel of denunciation.

The statements and the questions came to an end.

"Will ye have my wife take your foot and tend your wounds?"

One blink, then two, exaggerated, deliberate.

Jamie's breathing was audible, the heaviness in his chest making a sigh of each word.

"Do ye ask me to take your life?"

Though one half of his face sagged lifeless and the other was drawn and haggard, there was enough of Beardsley left to show expression. The workable corner of the mouth turned up in a cynical leer. *What there is left of it*, said his silence. The eyelid fell—and stayed shut.

Jamie closed his own eyes. A small shudder passed over him. Then he shook himself briefly, like a man shaking off cold water, and turned to the sideboard where his pistols lay.

I crossed swiftly to him, laying a hand on his arm. He didn't look at me, but kept his eyes on the pistol he was priming. His face was white, but his hands were steady.

"Go," he said. "Take her out."

I looked back at Beardsley, but he was my patient no longer; his flesh beyond my healing or my comfort. I went to the woman and took her by the arm, turning her toward the door. She came with me, walking mechanically, and did not turn to look back.

The outdoors seemed unreal, the sunlit yard unconvincingly ordinary. Mrs. Beardsley pulled free of my grip and headed toward the barn, walking fast. She glanced back over her shoulder at the house, then broke into a heavy run, disappearing through the open barn door as though fiends were after her.

I caught her sense of panic and nearly ran after her. I didn't, though; I stopped at the edge of the yard and waited. I could feel my heart beating, slowly, thumping in my ears. That seemed unreal, too.

The shot came, finally, a small flat sound, inconsequent amid the soft bleating of goats from the barn and the rustle of chickens scratching in the dirt nearby. Head, I wondered suddenly, or heart, and shuddered.

It was long past noon; the cold, still air of the morning had risen and a chilly breeze moved through the dooryard, stirring dust and wisps of hay. I stood and waited. He would have paused, I thought, to say a brief prayer for Beardsley's soul. A moment passed, two, then the back door opened. Jamie came out, took a few steps, then stopped, bent over, and vomited.

I started forward, in case he needed me, but no. He straightened and wiped his mouth, then turned and walked across the yard away from me, heading for the wood.

I felt suddenly superfluous, and rather oddly affronted. I had been at work no more than moments before, deeply absorbed in the practice of medicine. Connected to flesh, to mind and body; attentive to symptoms, aware of pulse and breath, the vital signs. I hadn't liked Beardsley in the least, and yet I had been totally engaged in the struggle to preserve his life, to ease his suffering. I could still feel the odd touch of his slack, warm flesh on my hands.

Now my patient was abruptly dead, and I felt as though some small part of my body had been amputated. I thought I was perhaps a trifle shocked.

I glanced at the house, my original sense of caution superseded by distaste—and something deeper. The body must be washed, of course, and decently laid out for burial. I had done such things before—with no great qualms, if without enthusiasm—and yet I found myself now with a great reluctance to go back into the place.

I'd seen death by violence—and many much more distasteful than this was likely to have been. Death was death. Whether it came as passage, as parting, or in some cases, as dearly desired release … Jamie had freed Beardsley very suddenly from the prison of his stricken body; did his spirit perhaps still linger in the house, having not yet realized its freedom?

"You are being superstitious, Beauchamp," I said severely to myself. "Stop it at once." And yet I didn't take a step toward the house, but hovered in the yard, keyed up like an indecisive hummingbird.

If Beardsley was beyond my help, and Jamie in no need of it, there was still one who might require it. I turned my back on the house and went toward the barn.

This was no more than a large open shed with a loft, fragrantly dark and filled with hay and moving shapes. I stood in the doorway until my eyes adjusted. There was a stall in one corner, but no horse. A rickety fence with a milking stanchion made a goat pen in the other corner; she was crouched inside it, on a pile of fresh straw. Half a dozen goats crowded and bumped around her, jostling and nibbling at the fringes of her shawl. She was little more than a hunched shape, but I caught the brief shine of a wary eye in the shadows.

"Ith it over?" The question was asked softly, barely audible above the quiet grunting and bleating.

"Yes." I hesitated, but she seemed in no need of my support; I could see better now—she had a small kid curled in her lap, her fingers stroking the small, silky head. "Are you quite all right, Mrs. Beardsley?"

Silence, then the heavy figure shrugged and settled, some tension seeming to leave her.

"I thcarthely know," she said softly. I waited, but she neither moved nor spoke further. The peaceful company of the goats seemed as likely as mine to be a comfort to her, so I turned and left them, rather envying her the warm refuge of the barn and her cheerful companions.

We had left the horses in the dooryard, still saddled, tethered to an alder sapling. Jamie had loosened their girths and removed their saddlebags when he went to fetch my medicine box, but had not taken the time to unsaddle them. I did that now; plainly it would be some time yet before we could leave. I took off the bridles as well, and hobbled them, turning them loose to graze on the winter-brown grass that still grew thickly at the edge of the pines.

There was a hollowed half-log on the western side of the house, plainly meant to serve as a horse trough, but it was empty. Welcoming the chore for the delay it allowed me, I raised water from the well and emptied bucket after bucket into the trough.

Wiping my wet hands on my skirt, I looked round for further useful occupation, but there wasn't any. No choice, then. I braced myself, poured more water into the bucket, dropped in the hollow drinking gourd that stood on the edge of the well, and carried it back around the house, concentrating fiercely on not spilling any, in order to avoid thinking about the prospects within.

When I raised my eyes, I was startled to see that the back door stood open. I was sure it had been closed before. Was Jamie inside? Or Mrs. Beardsley?

Keeping a wary distance, I craned my neck to peep into the kitchen, but as I sidled closer, I heard the steady *chuff* of a spade shifting dirt. I went around the far corner to find Jamie digging near a mountain-ash tree that stood by itself in the yard, a short distance from the house. He was still in shirtsleeves, and the wind blew the stained white linen against his body, ruffling the red hair over his face.

He brushed it back with one wrist, and I saw with a small sense of shock that he was crying. He wept silently and somehow savagely, attacking the soil as though it were an enemy. He caught my movement from a corner of his eye, and stopped, swiping a blood-smeared shirtsleeve quickly across his face, as though to wipe away sweat from his brow.

He was breathing hoarsely, loud enough to hear from a distance. I came silently and offered him the gourd of water, along with a clean handkerchief. He didn't meet my eyes, but drank, coughed, drank again, handed back the gourd, and blew his nose, gingerly. It was swollen, but no longer bleeding.

"We won't sleep here tonight, will we?" I ventured to ask, seating myself on the chopping block that stood under the ash tree.

He shook his head.

"God, no," he said hoarsely. His face was blotched and his eyes bloodshot, but he had firm hold of himself. "We'll see him decently buried and go. I dinna mind if we sleep cold in the wood again—but not here." I agreed wholeheartedly with that notion, but there was one thing more to be considered.

"And … her?" I asked delicately. "Is she in the house? The back door is open."

He grunted, and thrust in his shovel.

"No, that was me. I'd forgot to leave it open when I came out before—to let the soul go free," he explained, seeing my upraised eyebrow.

It was the complete matter-of-factness with which he offered this explanation, rather than the fact that it echoed my own earlier notion, that made the hairs prickle along my neck.

"I see," I said, a little faintly.

Jamie dug steadily for a bit, the shovel biting deep into the dirt. It was loamy soil and leaf mold here; the digging was easy. At last, without breaking the swing of the blade, he said, "Brianna told me a story she'd read once. I dinna recall all about it, quite, but there was a murder done, only the person killed was a wicked man, who had driven someone to it. And at the end, when the teller of the tale was asked what should be done, he said, 'Let pass the justice of God.' "

I nodded. I was in agreement, though it seemed a trifle hard on the person who found himself required to be the instrument of such justice.

"Do you suppose that's what it was, in this case? Justice?"

He shook his head; not in negation, but in puzzlement, and went on digging. I watched him for a bit, soothed by his nearness and by the hypnotic rhythm of his movements. After a bit, though, I stirred, steeling myself to face the task awaiting me.

"I suppose I'd best go and lay out the body and clear up the loft," I said reluctantly, drawing my feet under me to rise. "We can't leave that poor woman alone with such a mess, no matter what she did."

"No, wait, Sassenach," Jamie said, pausing in his digging. He glanced at the house, a little warily. "I'll go in with ye, in a bit. For now"—he nodded toward the edge of the wood—"d'ye think ye could fetch a few stones for the cairn?"

A cairn? I was more than slightly surprised at this; it seemed an unnecessary elaboration for the late Mr. Beardsley. Still, there were undoubtedly wolves in the wood; I'd seen scats on the trail two days before. It also occurred to me that Jamie might be contriving an honorable excuse for me to postpone entering the house again—in which case, hauling rocks seemed a thoroughly desirable alternative.

Fortunately, there was no shortage of suitable rocks. I fetched the heavy canvas apron that I wore for surgery from my saddlebag, and began to trundle to and fro, an ant collecting laborious crumbs. After half an hour or so of this, the thought of entering the house had begun to seem much less objectionable. Jamie was still hard at it, though, so I kept on.

I stopped finally, gasping, and dumped yet another load out of my apron onto the ground by the deepening grave. The shadows were falling long across the dooryard, and the air was cold enough that my fingers had gone numb—a good thing, in view of the various scrapes and nicks on them.

"You look a right mess," I observed, shoving a disheveled mass of hair off my own face. "Has Mrs. Beardsley come out yet?"

He shook his head, but took a moment to get his breath back before replying.

"No," he said, in a voice so hoarse I could scarcely hear him. "She's still wi' the goats. I daresay it's warm in there."

I eyed him uneasily. Grave-digging is hard work; his shirt was clinging to his body, soaked through in spite of the coldness of the day, and his face was flushed—with labor, I hoped, rather than fever. His fingers were white and as stiff as mine, though; it took a visible effort for him to uncurl them from the handle of the shovel.

"Surely that's deep enough," I said, surveying his work. I would myself have settled for the shallowest of gouges in the soft earth, but slipshod work was never Jamie's way. "Do stop, Jamie, and change your shirt at once. You're wringing wet; you'll catch a terrible chill."

He didn't bother arguing, but took up the spade and carefully neatened the corners of the hole, shaping the sides to keep them from crumbling inward.

The shadows under the pine trees were growing thick, and the chickens had all gone to roost, feathery blobs perched in the trees like bunches of brown mistletoe. The forest birds had fallen silent, too, and the shadow of the house fell long and cold across the new grave. I hugged my elbows, and shivered at the quiet.

Jamie tossed the shovel onto the ground with a clunk, startling me. He climbed up out of the hole, and stood still for a minute, eyes closed, swaying with weariness. Then he opened his eyes and smiled tiredly at me.

"Let's finish, then," he said.

Whether the open door had indeed allowed the deceased's spirit to flee, or whether it was only that Jamie was with me, I felt no hesitation in entering the house now. The fire had gone out, and the kitchen was cold and dim, yet there was no sense of anything evil within. It was simply … empty.

Mr. Beardsley's mortal remains rested peacefully under one of his own trade blankets, mute and still. Empty, too.

Mrs. Beardsley had declined to assist with the formalities—or even to enter the house, so long as her husband's body remained inside—so I swept the hearth, kindled a new fire, and coaxed it into reluctant life, while Jamie took care of the mess in the loft. By the time he came down again, I had turned to the main business at hand.

Dead, Beardsley seemed much less grotesque than he had in life; the twisted limbs were relaxed, the air of frantic struggle gone. Jamie had placed a linen towel over the head, though when I peeked beneath it, I could see that there was no gory mess to deal with; Jamie had shot him cleanly through the blind eye, and the ball had not burst the skull. The good eye was closed now, the blackened wound left staring. I laid the towel gently back over the face, its symmetry restored in death.

Jamie climbed down the ladder, and came quietly to stand behind me, touching my shoulder briefly.

"Go and wash," I said, gesturing behind me to the small kettle of water I had hung over the fire to heat. "I'll manage here."

He nodded, stripped off his sodden, filthy shirt, and dropped it on the hearth. I listened to the small, homely noises he made as he washed. He coughed now and then, but his breathing sounded somewhat easier than it had outside in the cold.

"I didna ken it might be that way," he said from behind me. "I thought an apoplexy would kill a man outright."

"Sometimes that's so," I said, a little absently, frowning as I concentrated on the job at hand. "Most often that's the way of it, in fact."

"Aye? I never thought to ask Dougal, or Rupert. Or Jenny. Whether my father—" The sentence stopped abruptly, as though he had swallowed it.

Ah. I felt a small jolt of realization in my solar plexus. So that was it. I hadn't remembered, but he had told me of it, years before, soon after we were married. His father had seen Jamie flogged at Fort William, and under the shock of it, had suffered an apoplexy and died. Jamie, wounded and ill, had been spirited away from the Fort and gone into exile. He had not been told of his father's death until weeks later—had no chance of farewell, had been able neither to bury his father nor honor his grave.

"Jenny would have known," I said gently. "She would have told you, if …" If Brian Fraser had suffered a death of such lingering ignominy as this, dwindled and shrunken, powerless before the eyes of the family he had striven to protect.

Would she? If she had nursed her father through incontinence and helplessness? If she had waited days or weeks, suddenly bereft of both father and brother, left alone to stare death in the face as it approached, moment by slow moment … and yet Jenny Fraser was a very strong woman, who had loved her brother dearly. Perhaps she would have sought to shield him, both from guilt and from knowledge.

I turned to face him. He was half-naked, but clean now, with a fresh shirt from his saddlebag in his hands. He was looking at me, but I saw his eyes slip beyond me, to fasten on the corpse with a troubled fascination.

“She would have told you,” I repeated, striving to infuse my voice with certainty.

Jamie drew a deep, painful breath.

“Perhaps.”

“She would,” I said more firmly.

He nodded, drew another deep breath, and let it out, more easily. I realized that the house was not the only thing haunted by Beardsley’s death. Jenny held the key of the only door that could be opened for Jamie, though.

I understood now why he had wept, and had taken such care with the digging of the grave. Not from either shock or charity, let alone from regard for the dead man—but for the sake of Brian Fraser; the father he had neither buried nor mourned.

I turned back and drew the edges of the blanket up, folded them snugly over the cleaned and decent remains, and tied it with twine at head and feet, making a tidy, anonymous package. Jamie was forty-nine; the same age at which his father had died. I stole a quick glance at him, as he finished dressing. If his father had been such a one as he was … I felt a sudden pang of sorrow, for the loss of so much. For strength cut off and love snuffed out, for the loss of a man I knew had been great, only from the reflection I saw of him in his son.

Dressed, Jamie circled round the table to help me lift the body. Instead of putting his hands under it, though, he reached across and took my hands in both of his.

“Swear to me, Claire,” he said. His voice was nearly gone with hoarseness; I had to lean close to hear it. “If it should one day fall to my lot as it did to my father … then swear ye will give me the same mercy I gave this wretched bugger here.”

There were fresh blisters on his palms from the digging; I felt the strange softness of them, fluid-filled and shifting as he gripped my hands.

“I’ll do what must be done,” I whispered back, at last. “Just as you did.” I squeezed his hands and let them go. “Come now and help me bury him. It’s over.”

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BROWNSVILLE

It was mid-afternoon before Roger, Fergus, and the militia reached Brownsville, having missed their road and wandered in the hills for several hours before meeting two Cherokee who pointed the way.

Brownsville was half a dozen ramshackle huts, strewn among the dying brush of a hillside like a handful of rubbish tossed into the weeds. Near the road—if the narrow rut of churned black mud could be dignified by such a word—two cabins leaned tipsily on either side of a slightly larger and more solid-looking building, like drunkards leaning cozily on a sober companion. Rather ironically, this larger building seemed to operate as Brownsville's general store and taproom, judging from the barrels of beer and powder and the stacks of drenched hides that stood in the muddy yard beside it—though to apply either term to it was granting that more dignity than it deserved, too, Roger thought.

Still, it was plainly the place to start—if only for the sake of the men with him, who had begun to vibrate like iron filings near a magnet at sight of the barrels; the yeasty scent of beer floated out like a welcome. He wouldn't say no to a pint, either, he thought, waving a hand to signal a halt. It was a numbingly cold day, and a long time since this morning's breakfast. They weren't likely to get anything beyond bread or stew here, but as long as it was hot and washed down with some sort of alcohol, no one would complain.

He slid off his horse, and had just turned to call to the others when a hand clutched his arm.

"Attendez." Fergus spoke softly, barely moving his lips. He was standing beside Roger, looking at something beyond him. "Do not

move.”

Roger didn’t, nor did any of the men still on their horses. Whatever Fergus saw, so did they.

“What is it?” Roger asked, keeping his voice low, too.

“Someone—two someones—are pointing guns at us, through the window.”

“Ah.” Roger noted Jamie’s good sense in not riding into Brownsville after dark the night before. Evidently, he knew something about the suspicious nature of remote places.

Moving very slowly, he raised both his hands into the air, and jerked his chin at Fergus, who reluctantly did the same, his hook gleaming in the afternoon sun. Still keeping his hands up, Roger turned very slowly. Even knowing what to expect, he felt his stomach contract at sight of the two long, gleaming barrels protruding from behind the oiled deerskin that covered the window.

“Hallo the house!” he shouted, with as much authority as could be managed with his hands over his head. “I am Captain Roger MacKenzie, in command of a militia company under Colonel James Fraser, of Fraser’s Ridge!”

The only effect of this intelligence was to cause one gun barrel to swivel, centering on Roger, so that he could look straight down the small, dark circle of its muzzle. The unwelcome prospect did, though, cause him to realize that the other gun had not been trained on him to start with. It had been, and remained, pointing steadily over his right shoulder, toward the cluster of men who still sat their horses behind him, shifting in their saddles and murmuring uneasily.

Great. Now what? The men were waiting for him to do *something*. Moving slowly, he lowered his hands. He was drawing breath to shout again, but before he could speak, a hoarse voice rang out from behind the deerskin.

“I see you, Morton, you bastard!”

This imprecation was accompanied by a significant jerk of the first gun barrel, which turned abruptly from Roger to focus on the same target as the second—presumably Isaiah Morton, one of the militiamen from Granite Falls.

There was a scuffling noise among the mounted men, startled shouts, and then all hell broke loose as both guns went off. Horses reared and bolted, men bellowed and swore, and drifts of acrid white smoke fumed from the window.

Roger had thrown himself flat at the first explosion. As the echoes died away, though, he scrambled up as though by reflex, flung mud out of his eyes, and charged the door, headfirst. To his detached surprise, his mind was working very clearly. Brianna took twenty seconds to load and prime a gun, and he doubted that these buggers were much faster. He thought he had just about ten seconds' grace left, and he meant to use them.

He hit the door with his shoulder, and it flew inward, smashing against the wall inside and causing Roger to rush staggering into the room and crash into the wall on the opposite side. He struck his shoulder a numbing blow on the chimney piece, bounced off, and managed somehow to keep his feet, stumbling like a drunkard.

Several people in the room had turned to gape at him. His vision cleared enough to see that only two of them were in fact holding guns. He took a deep breath, lunged for the nearest of these, a scrawny man with a straggling beard, and seized him by the shirtfront, in imitation of a particularly fearsome third-form master at Roger's grammar school.

"What do you think you are doing, you *wee* man, you!?" he roared, jerking the man up onto his toes. Mr. Sanderson would have been pleased, he supposed, at the thought that his example had been so memorable. Effective, too; while the scrawny man in Roger's grip did not either wet himself or snivel, as the first-form students occasionally had under such treatment, he did make small gobbling sounds, pawing ineffectually at Roger's hand clutching his shirt.

"You, sir! Leave hold of my brother!" Roger's victim had dropped both his gun and powder horn when seized, spilling black powder all over the floor. The other gunman had succeeded in reloading his weapon, though, and was now endeavoring to bring it to bear on Roger. He was somewhat impeded in this attempt by the three women in the room, two of whom were blethering and pulling at his gun, getting in his way. The third had flung her apron over her head and was uttering loud, rhythmic shrieks of hysteria.

At this point, Fergus strolled into the house, an enormous horse pistol in his hand. He pointed this negligently at the man with the gun.

“Be so kind as to put that down, if you will,” he said, raising his voice to be heard above the racket. “And perhaps, madame, you could pour some water upon this young woman? Or slap her briskly?” He gestured toward the screaming woman with his hook, wincing slightly at the noise.

Moving as though hypnotized, one of the women went slowly toward the screeching girl, shook her roughly by the shoulder, and began to murmur in the girl’s ear, not taking her eyes off Fergus. The shrieking stopped, replaced by irregular gulps and sobs.

Roger felt an immense relief. Sheer rage, simple panic, and the absolute necessity of doing *something* had got him this far, but he would freely admit that he had not the slightest idea what to do next. He took a deep breath, feeling his legs begin to tremble, and slowly lowered his victim, releasing his grip with an awkward nod. The man took several fast steps backward, then stood brushing at the creases in his shirt, narrowed eyes fixed on Roger in resentment.

“And who in blazes are *you*?” The second man, who had indeed put his weapon down, looked at Fergus in confusion.

The Frenchman waved his hook—which, Roger noticed, seemed to fascinate the women—in a gesture of dismissal.

“That is of no importance,” he said grandly, lifting his aristocratically prominent nose another inch. “I require—that is, *we* require”—he amended, with a polite nod toward Roger—“to know who *you* are.”

The inhabitants of the cabin all exchanged confused looks, as though wondering who they might in fact be. After a moment’s hesitation, though, the larger of the two men thrust out his chin pugnaciously.

“My name is Brown, sir. Richard Brown. This is my brother, Lionel, my wife, Meg, my brother’s daughter, Alicia”—that appeared to be the girl in the apron, who had now removed the garment from her head and stood tearstained and gulping—"and my sister, Thomasina."

"Your servant, madame, mesdemoiselles." Fergus made the ladies an extremely elegant bow, though taking good care to keep his pistol aimed at Richard Brown's forehead. "My apologies for the disturbance."

Mrs. Brown nodded back, looking a little glazed. Miss Thomasina Brown, a tall, severe-looking person, looked from Roger to Fergus and back with the expression of one comparing a cockroach and a centipede, deciding which to step on first.

Fergus, having managed to transform the atmosphere from an armed confrontation to that of a Parisian *salon*, looked pleased. He glanced at Roger and inclined his head, clearly handing management of the situation over to him.

"Right." Roger was wearing a loose woolen hunting shirt, but he felt as though it were a straitjacket. He took another deep breath, trying to force air into his chest. "Well. As I said, I am … ah … Captain MacKenzie. We are charged by Governor Tryon with raising a militia company, and have come to notify you of your obligation to provide men and supplies."

Richard Brown looked surprised at this; his brother glowered. Before they could offer objections, though, Fergus moved closer to Roger, murmuring, "Perhaps we should discover whether they have killed Mr. Morton, *mon capitaine*, before we accept them into our company?"

"Oh, mphm." Roger fixed the Browns with as stern an expression as possible. "Mr. Fraser. Will you see about Mr. Morton? I will remain here." Keeping the Browns in his gaze, he held out a hand for Fergus's pistol.

"Oh, yon Morton's still canty, Captain. He isny wae us, forbye, 'cause he's ta'en to the broosh like a bit' moggie wae a scorchit tail, but he wiz movin' a' his limbs when I saw um last." A nasal Glaswegian voice spoke from the doorway, and Roger glanced over to see a cluster of interested heads peering into the cabin, Henry Gallegher's bristly nob among them. A number of drawn guns were also in evidence, and Roger's breath came a little easier.

The Browns had lost interest in Roger, and were staring at Gallegher in sheer bewilderment.

"What did he say?" Mrs. Brown whispered to her sister-in-law. The older lady shook her head, lips drawn in like a pursestring.

"Mr. Morton is alive and well," Roger translated for them. He coughed. "Fortunately for you," he said to the male Browns, with as much menace as he could contrive to put into his voice. He turned to Gallegher, who had now come into the room and was leaning against the doorjamb, musket in hand and looking distinctly entertained.

"Is everyone else all right, then, Henry?"

Gallegher shrugged.

"They crap-bags hivny holed anyone, but they gie'd your saddlebag rare laldy wae a load o' bird shot. Sir," he added as an afterthought, teeth showing in a brief flash through his beard.

"The bag with the whisky?" Roger demanded.

"Get awa!" Gallegher bugged his eyes in horror, then grinned in reassurance. "Nah, t'other."

"Och, well." Roger waved a hand dismissively. "That's only my spare breeks, isn't it?"

This philosophical response drew laughter and hoots of support from the men crammed in the doorway, which heartened Roger enough to round on the smaller Brown.

"And what d'ye have against Isaiah Morton?" he demanded.

"He's dishonored my daughter," Mr. Brown replied promptly, having recovered his composure. He glared at Roger, beard twitching with anger. "I told him I'd see him dead at her feet, if ever he dared show his wretched countenance within ten miles of Brownsville—and damn my eyes if the grass-livered spittle-snake hasn't the face to ride right up to my door!"

Mr. Richard Brown turned to Gallegher.

"You mean to tell me we both *missed* the bastard?"

Gallegher shrugged apologetically.

"Aye. Sorry."

The younger Miss Brown had been following this exchange, mouth hanging slightly open.

"They missed?" she asked, hope lighting her reddened eyes. "Isaiah's still alive?"

"Not for long," her uncle assured her grimly. He reached down to pick up his fowling piece, and all the female Browns burst out in a chorus of renewed screeches, as the guns of the militia at the door all raised simultaneously, trained on Brown. He very slowly put the gun back down.

Roger glanced at Fergus, who lifted one brow and gave the slightest of shrugs. Up to him.

The Browns had drawn together, the two brothers glaring at him, the women huddled behind them, sniffling and murmuring. Militiamen poked their heads curiously through the windows, all staring at Roger, waiting for direction.

And just what was he to tell them? Morton was a member of the militia, and therefore—he assumed—entitled to its protection. Roger couldn't very well turn him over to the Browns, no matter what he'd done—always assuming he could be caught. On the other hand, Roger was charged with enlisting the Browns and the rest of the able-bodied men in Brownsville, and extracting at least a week's supplies from them as well; they didn't look as though such a suggestion would be well received at this point.

He had the galling conviction that Jamie Fraser would have known immediately how best to resolve this diplomatic crisis. He personally hadn't a clue.

He did, at least, have a delaying tactic. Sighing, he lowered the pistol, and reached for the pouch at his waist.

"Henry, fetch in the saddlebag with the whisky, aye? And Mr. Brown, perhaps ye will allow me to purchase some food, and a barrel of your beer, for my men's refreshment."

And with luck, by the time it was all drunk, Jamie Fraser would be here.

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ONE-THIRD OF A GOAT

It wasn't quite over, after all. It was well past dark by the time we had finished everything at the Beardsley farm, tidied up, repacked the bags, and resaddled the horses. I thought of suggesting that we eat before leaving—we had had nothing since breakfast—but the atmosphere of the place was so disturbing that neither Jamie nor I had any appetite.

"We'll wait," he said, heaving the saddlebags over the mare's back. He glanced over his shoulder at the house. "I'm hollow as a gourd, but I couldna stomach a bite within sight o' this place."

"I know what you mean." I glanced back, too, uneasily, though there was nothing to see; the house stood still and empty. "I can't wait to get away from here."

The sun had sunk below the trees, and a chill blue shadow spread across the hollow where the farmhouse stood. The raw earth of Beardsley's grave showed dark with moisture, a humped mound beneath the bare branches of the mountain ash. It was impossible to look at it without thinking of the weight of wet earth and immobility, of corruption and decay.

You will rot and die, Jamie had said to him. I hoped the reversal of those two events had been of some benefit to Beardsley—it had not, to me. I hugged my shawl tight around my shoulders and breathed out hard, then deeply in, hoping the cold, clean scent of the pines would eradicate the phantom reek of dead flesh that seemed to cling to hands and clothes and nose.

The horses were shifting, stamping, and shaking their manes, eager to be off. I didn't blame them. Unable to stop myself, I looked back once more. A more desolate sight would be hard to imagine. Even harder to imagine was the thought of staying here, alone.

Evidently, Mrs. Beardsley *had* imagined it, and come to similar conclusions. At this point, she emerged from the barn, the kid in her arms, and announced that she was coming with us. So, evidently, were the goats. She handed me the kid, and disappeared back into the barn.

The kid was heavy and half-asleep, flexible little joints folded up into a cozy bundle. It huffed warm air over my hand, nibbling gently to see what I was made of, then made a small "meh" of contentment and relaxed into peaceful inertness against my ribs. A louder "meh!" and a nudge at my thigh announced the presence of the kid's mother, keeping a watchful eye on her offspring.

"Well, she can't very well leave them here," I muttered to Jamie, who was making disgruntled noises in the dusk behind me. "They have to be milked. Besides, it's not a terribly long way, is it?"

"D'ye ken how fast a goat walks, Sassenach?"

"I've never had occasion to time one," I said, rather testily, shifting my small hairy burden. "But I shouldn't think they'd be a lot slower than the horses, in the dark."

He made a guttural Scottish noise at that, rendered more expressive even than usual by the phlegm in his throat. He coughed.

"You sound awful," I said. "When we get where we're going, I'm taking the mentholated goose grease to you, my lad."

He made no objection to this proposal, which rather alarmed me, as indicating a serious depression of his vitality. Before I could inquire further into his state of health, though, I was interrupted by the emergence from the barn of Mrs. Beardsley, leading six goats, roped together like a gang of jovially inebriate convicts.

Jamie viewed the procession dubiously, sighed in resignation, and turned to a consideration of the logistical problems at hand. There was no question of mounting Mrs. Beardsley on Gideon the Man-Eater. Jamie glanced from me to Mrs. Beardsley's substantial figure, then at the small form of my mare, little bigger than a pony, and coughed.

After a bit of contemplation, he had Mrs. Beardsley mounted on Mrs. Piggy, the sleepy kid balanced before her. I would ride with him, on Gideon's withers, theoretically preventing any attempt on that animal's part to fling me off his hindquarters into the underbrush. He tied a rope round the billy goat's neck, and affixed this loosely to the mare's saddle, but left the nannies loose.

"The mother will stay wi' the kid, and the others will follow the billy here," he told me. "Goats are sociable creatures; they'll no be wanting to stray awa by themselves. Especially not at night. Shoo," he muttered, pushing an inquisitive nose out of his face as he squatted to check the saddle girth. "I suppose pigs would be worse. They *will* gang their own way." He stood up, absently patting a hairy head.

"If anything should come amiss, pull it loose at once," he told Mrs. Beardsley, showing her the half-bow loop tied to the saddle near her hand. "If the horse should run away wi' ye all, your wee fellow there will be hangit."

She nodded, a hunched mound atop the horse, then lifted her head and looked toward the house.

"We should go before moonrithe," she said softly. "She cometh out then."

An icy ripple ran straight up my spine, and Jamie jerked, head snapping round to look at the darkened house. The fire had gone out, and no one had thought to close the open door; it gaped like an empty eye socket.

"She *who*?" Jamie asked, a noticeable edge in his voice.

"Mary Ann," Mrs. Beardsley answered. "She was the latht one." There was no emphasis whatever in her voice; she sounded like a sleepwalker.

"The last *what*?" I asked.

The latht wife," she replied, and picked up her reins. "She thtands under the rowan tree at moonrithe."

Jamie's head turned toward me. It was too dark to see his expression, but I didn't need to. I cleared my throat.

"Ought we … to close the door?" I suggested. Mr. Beardsley's spirit had presumably got the idea by now, and whether or not Mrs.

Beardsley had any interest in the house and its contents, it didn't seem right to leave it at the mercy of marauding raccoons and squirrels, to say nothing of anything larger that might be attracted by the scent of Mr. Beardsley's final exit. On the other hand, I really had no desire at all to approach the empty house.

"Get on the horse, Sassenach."

Jamie strode across the yard, slammed the door somewhat harder than necessary, then came back—walking briskly—and swung into the saddle behind me.

"Hup!" he said sharply, and we were off, the glow of a rising half-moon just visible above the trees.

It was perhaps a quarter mile to the head of the trail, the ground rising from the hollow in which the Beardsleys' farmhouse stood. We were moving slowly, because of the goats, and I watched the grass and shrubs as we brushed through them, wondering whether they seemed more visible only because my eyes were adapting to the dark—or because the moon had risen.

I felt quite safe, with the powerful bulk of the horse under me, the sociable natter of the goats around us, and Jamie's equally reassuring presence behind me, one arm clasped about my waist. I wasn't sure that I felt quite safe enough to turn and look back again, though. At the same time, the urge to look was so compelling as almost to counter the sense of dread I felt about the place. Almost.

"It's no really a rowan tree, is it?" Jamie's voice came softly from behind me.

"No," I said, taking heart from the solid arm around me. "It's a mountain ash. Very like, though." I'd seen mountain ash many times before; the Highlanders often planted them near cabins or houses because the clusters of deep orange berries and the pinnate leaves did indeed look like the rowan tree of Scotland—a close botanical relative. I gathered that Jamie's comment stemmed not from taxonomic hairsplitting, though, but rather from doubt as to whether the ash possessed the same repellent qualities, in terms of protection from evil and enchantment. He hadn't chosen to bury Beardsley under that tree from a sense either of aesthetics or convenience.

I squeezed his blistered hand, and he kissed me gently on top of the head.

At the head of the trail, I did glance back, but I could see nothing but a faint gleam from the weathered shingles of the farmhouse. The mountain ash and whatever might—or might not—be under it were hidden in darkness.

Gideon was unusually well-behaved, having made no more than a token protest at being double-mounted. I rather thought he was happy to leave the farm behind, too. I said as much, but Jamie sneezed and expressed the opinion that the wicked sod was merely biding his time while planning some future outrage.

The goats seemed inclined to view this nocturnal excursion as a lark, and ambled along with the liveliest interest, snatching mouthfuls of dry grass, bumping into one another and the horses, and generally sounding like a herd of elephants in the crackling underbrush.

I felt great relief at leaving the Beardsley place at last. As the pines blotted out the last sight of the hollow, I resolutely turned my mind from the disturbing events of the day, and began to think what might await us in Brownsville.

“I hope Roger’s managed all right,” I said, leaning back against Jamie’s chest with a small sigh.

“Mmphm.” From long experience, I diagnosed this particular catarrhal noise as indicating a polite general agreement with my sentiment, this overlaying complete personal indifference to the actuality. Either he saw no reason for concern, or he thought Roger could sink or swim.

“I hope he’s found an inn of sorts,” I offered, thinking this prospect might meet with a trifle more enthusiasm. “Hot food and a clean bed would be lovely.”

“Mmphm.” That one held a touch of humor, mingled with an inborn skepticism—fostered by long experience—regarding the possible existence of such items as hot food and clean beds in the Carolina backcountry.

“The goats seem to be going along very well,” I offered, and waited in anticipation.

"Mmphm." Grudging agreement, mingled with a deep suspicion as to the continuance of good behavior on the part of the goats.

I was carefully formulating another observation, in hopes of getting him to do it again—three times was the record so far—when Gideon suddenly bore out Jamie's original mistrust by flinging up his head with a loud snort and rearing.

I crashed back into Jamie's chest, hitting my head on his collarbone with a thump that made me see stars. His arm crushed the air out of me as he dragged at the reins one-handed, shouting.

I had no idea what he was saying, or even whether he was shouting in English or Gaelic. The horse was screaming, rearing and pawing with his hooves, and I was scrabbling for a grip on anything at all, mane, saddle, reins.… A branch whipped my face and blinded me. Pandemonium reigned; there was screeching and bleating and a noise like tearing fabric and then something hit me hard and sent me flying into the darkness.

I wasn't knocked out, but it didn't make much difference. I was sprawled in a tangle of brush, struggling for breath, unable to move, and unable to see anything whatever beyond a few scattered stars in the sky overhead.

There was an ungodly racket going on some little distance away, in which a chorus of panicked goats figured largely, punctuated by what I took to be a woman's screams. Two women's screams.

I shook my head, confused. Then I flung myself over and started crawling, having belatedly recognized what was making that noise. I had heard panthers scream often enough—but always safely far in the distance. This one wasn't far away at all. The tearing-fabric noise I'd heard had been the cough of a big cat, very close at hand.

I bumped into a large fallen log and promptly rolled under it, wedging myself as far into the small crevice there as possible. It wasn't the best hiding place I'd ever seen, but might at least prevent anything leaping out of a tree onto me.

I could still hear Jamie shouting, though the tenor of his remarks had changed to a sort of hoarse fury. The goats had mostly quit yammering—surely the cat couldn't have killed all of them? I couldn't hear anything of Mrs. Beardsley, either, but the horses were making a dreadful fuss, squealing and stamping.

My heart was hammering against the leafy ground, and a cold sweat tingled along my jaw. There isn't much for invoking raw terror like the primitive fear of being eaten, and my sympathies were entirely with the animals. There was a crashing in the brush near at hand, and Jamie shouting my name.

"Here," I croaked, unwilling to move out of my refuge until I knew for certain where the panther was—or at least knew for certain that it wasn't anywhere near me. The horses had stopped squealing, though they were still snorting and stamping, making enough noise to indicate that neither of them had either fallen prey to our visitor or run away.

"Here!" I called, a little louder.

More crashing, close at hand. Jamie stumbled through the darkness, crouched, and felt under the log until his hand encountered my arm, which he seized.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"I hadn't thought to notice, but I think so," I replied. I slid cautiously out from under my log, taking stock. Bruises here and there, abraded elbows, and a stinging sensation where the branch had slapped my cheek. Basically all right, then.

"Good. Come quick, he's hurt." He hauled me to my feet and started propelling me through the dark with a hand in the small of my back.

"Who?"

"The goat, of course."

My eyes were well-adapted to the dark by now, and I made out the large shapes of Gideon and the mare, standing under a leafless poplar, manes and tails swishing with agitation. A smaller shape that I took to be Mrs. Beardsley was crouched nearby, over something on the ground.

I could smell blood, and a powerful reek of goat. I squatted and reached out, touching rough, warm hair. The goat jerked at my touch, with a loud "MEHeheh!" that reassured me somewhat. He might be hurt, but he wasn't dying—at least not yet; the body under my hands was solid and vital, muscles tense.

"Where's the cat?" I asked, locating the ridged hardness of the horns and feeling my way hastily backward along the spine, then down the ribs and flanks. The goat had objections, and heaved wildly under my hands.

"Gone," Jamie said. He crouched down, too, and put a hand on the goat's head. "There, now, *a bhalaich*. It's all right, then. *Seas, mo charaid*."

I could feel no open wound on the goat's body, but I could certainly smell blood; a hot, metallic scent that disturbed the clean night air of the wood. The horses did, too; they whickered and moved uneasily in the dark.

"Are we fairly *sure* it's gone?" I asked, trying to ignore the sensation of eyes fastened on the back of my neck. "I smell blood."

"Aye. The cat took one of the nannies," Jamie informed me. He knelt next to me, laying a big hand on the goat's neck.

"Mrs. Beardsley loosed this brave laddie, and he went for the cat, bald-heided. I couldna see it all, but I think the creature maybe slapped at him; I heard it screech and spit, and the billy gave a skelloch just then, too. I think his leg is maybe broken."

It was. With that guidance, I found the break easily, low on the humerus of the right front leg. The skin wasn't broken, but the bone was cracked through; I could feel the slight displacement of the raw ends. The goat heaved and thrust his horns at my arm when I touched the leg. His eyes were wild and rolling, the odd square pupils visible but colorless in the faint moonlight.

"Can ye mend him, Sassenach?" Jamie asked.

"I don't know." The goat was still struggling, but the flurries of movement were growing perceptibly weaker, as shock set in. I bit my lip, groping for a pulse in the fold between leg and body. The injury itself was likely repairable, but shock was a great danger; I had seen plenty of animals—and a few people, for that matter—die quickly following a traumatic incident, of injuries that were not fatal in themselves.

“I don’t know,” I said again. My fingers had found a pulse at last; it was trip-hammer fast, and thready. I was trying to envision the possibilities for treatment, all of them crude. “He may well die, Jamie, even if I can set the leg. Do you think perhaps we ought to slaughter him? He’d be a lot easier to carry, as meat.”

Jamie stroked the goat’s neck, gently.

“It would be a great shame, and him such a gallant creature.”

Mrs. Beardsley laughed at that, a nervous small giggle, like a girl’s, coming out of the dark beyond Jamie’s bulk.

“Hith name ith Hiram,” she said. “He’th a good boy.”

“Hiram,” Jamie repeated, still stroking. “Well, then, Hiram. *Courage, mon brave.* You’ll do. You’ve balls as big as melons.”

“Well, persimmons, maybe,” I said, having inadvertently encountered the testicles in question while making my examination. “Perfectly respectable, though, I’m sure,” I added, taking shallow breaths. Hiram’s musk glands were working overtime. Even the harsh iron smell of blood took second place.

“I was speaking figuratively,” Jamie informed me, rather dryly. “What will ye be needing, Sassenach?”

Evidently, the decision had been made; he was already rising to his feet.

“Right, then,” I said, brushing back my hair with the back of a wrist. “Find me a couple of straight branches, about a foot long, no twigs, and a bit of rope from the saddlebags. Then you can help here,” I added, trying to achieve a good grip on my struggling patient. “Hiram seems to like you. Recognizes a kindred spirit, no doubt.”

Jamie laughed at that, a low, comforting sound at my elbow. He stood up with a final scratch of Hiram’s ears, and rustled off, coming back within moments with the requested items.

“Right,” I said, loosing one hand from Hiram’s neck in order to locate the sticks. “I’m going to splint it. We’ll have to carry him, but the splint will keep the leg from flexing and doing any more damage. Help me get him onto his side.” Hiram, whether from male pride or goat stubbornness—always assuming these to be different things—kept trying to stand up, broken leg notwithstanding. His head was bobbing alarmingly, though, as the muscles in his neck weakened, and his body lurched from side to side. He scrabbled feebly at the ground, then stopped, panting heavily.

Mrs. Beardsley hovered over my shoulder, the kid still clutched in her arms. It gave a faint bleat, as though it had awakened suddenly from a nightmare, and Hiram gave a loud, echoing "Mehh" in reply.

"There's a thought," Jamie murmured. He stood up suddenly, and took the kid from Mrs. Beardsley. Then he knelt down again, pushing the little creature up close to Hiram's side. The goat at once ceased struggling, bending his head around to sniff at his offspring. The kid cried, pushing its nose against the big goat's side, and a long, slimy tongue snaked out, slobbering over my hand as it sought the kid's head.

"Work fast, Sassenach," Jamie suggested.

I needed no prompting, and within minutes, had the leg stabilized, the splinting padded with one of the multiple shawls Mrs. Beardsley appeared to be wearing. Hiram had settled, making only occasional grunts and exclamations, but the kid was still bleating loudly.

"Where is its mother?" I asked, though I didn't need to hear the answer. I didn't know a great deal about goats, but I knew enough about mothers and babies to realize that nothing but death would keep a mother from a child making that sort of racket. The other goats had come back, drawn by curiosity, fear of the dark, or a simple desire for company, but the mother didn't push forward.

"Poor Beckie," said Mrs. Beardsley sadly. "Thuch a thweet goat."

Dark forms bumped and jostled; there was a whuff of hot air in my ear as one nibbled at my hair, and another stepped on my calf, making me yelp as the sharp little hooves scraped the skin. I made no effort to shoo them away, though; the presence of his harem seemed to be doing Hiram the world of good.

I had the leg bones back in place and the splint bandaged firmly round them. I had found a good pulse point at the base of his ear, and was monitoring it, Hiram's head resting in my lap. As the other goats pressed in, nuzzling at him and making plaintive noises, he suddenly lifted his head and rolled up onto his chest, the broken leg awkwardly stuck out before him in its bindings.

He swayed to and fro like a drunken man for a moment, then uttered a loud, belligerent “MEEEEEHHH” and lurched onto three feet. He promptly fell down again, but the action cheered everyone. Even Mrs. Beardsley emitted a faint trill of pleasure at the sight.

“All right.” Jamie stood up, and ran his fingers through his hair with a deep sigh. “Now, then.”

“Now, then *what*?” I asked.

“Now I shall decide what to do,” he said, with a certain edge to his voice.

“Aren’t we going on to Brownsville?”

“We might,” he said. “If Mrs. Beardsley happens to ken the way well enough to find the trail again by starlight?” He turned expectantly toward her, but I could see the negative motion of her head, even in the shadows.

It dawned on me that we were, in fact, no longer on the trail—which was in any case no more than a narrow deer track, winding through the forest.

“We can’t be terribly far off it, surely?” I looked round, peering vainly into the dark, as though some lighted sign might indicate the position of the trail. In fact, I had no idea even in which direction it might lie.

“No,” Jamie agreed. “And by myself, I daresay I could pick it up sooner or later. But I dinna mean to go floundering through the forest in the dark with this lot.” He glanced round, evidently counting noses. Two very skittish horses, two women—one distinctly odd and possibly homicidal—and six goats, two of them incapable of walking. I rather saw his point.

He drew his shoulders back, shrugging a little, as though to ease a tight shirt.

“I’ll go and have a keek round. If I find the way at once, well and good. If I don’t, we’ll camp for the night,” he said. “It will be a deal easier to look for the trail by daylight. Be careful, Sassenach.”

And with a final sneeze, he vanished into the woods, leaving me in charge of the camp followers and wounded.

The orphaned goat was becoming louder and more anguished in its cries; it hurt my ears, as well as my heart. Mrs. Beardsley, though, had become somewhat more animated in Jamie's absence; I thought she was rather afraid of him. Now she brought up one of the other nannies, persuading her to stand still for the orphan to suckle. The kid was reluctant for a moment, but hunger and the need for warmth and reassurance were overwhelming, and within a few minutes, it was feeding busily, its small tail wagging in a dark flicker of movement.

I was happy to see it, but conscious of a small feeling of envy; I was all at once aware that I had eaten nothing all day, that I was very cold, desperately tired, sore in a number of places—and that without the complications of Mrs. Beardsley and her companions, I would long since have been safely in Brownsville, fed, warm, and tucked up by some friendly fireside. I put a hand on the kid's stomach, growing round and firm with milk, and thought rather wistfully that I should like someone simply to take care of *me*. Still, for the moment, I seemed to be the Good Shepherd, and no help for it.

"Do you think it might come back?" Mrs. Beardsley crouched next to me, shawl pulled tight around her broad shoulders. She spoke in a low tone, as though afraid someone might overhear.

"What, the panther? No, I don't think so. Why should it?" Nonetheless, a small shiver ran over me, as I thought of Jamie, alone somewhere in the dark. Hiram, his shoulder firmly jammed against my thigh, snorted, then laid his head on my knee with a long sigh.

"Thome folk thay the catth hunt in pairth."

"Really?" I stifled a yawn—not of boredom, simply fatigue. I blinked into the darkness, a chilled lethargy stealing over me. "Oh. Well, I should think a good-sized goat would do for two. Besides"—I yawned again, a jaw-cracking stretch—"besides, the horses would let us know."

Gideon and Mrs. Piggy were companionably nose-and-tailing it under the poplar tree, showing no signs now of agitation. This seemed to comfort Mrs. Beardsley, who sat down on the ground quite suddenly, her shoulders sagging as though the air had gone out of her.

"And how are you feeling?" I inquired, more from an urge to maintain conversation than from any real desire to know.

"I am glad to be gone from that place," she said simply.

I definitely shared that sentiment; our present situation was at least an improvement on the Beardsley homestead, even with the odd panther thrown in. Still, that didn't mean I was anxious to spend very long here.

"Do you know anyone in Brownsville?" I asked. I wasn't sure how large a settlement it was, though from the conversation of some of the men we had picked up, it sounded like a fair-sized village.

"No." She was silent for a moment, and I felt rather than saw her tilt back her head, looking up at the stars and the peaceful moon.

"I … have never been to Brownsville," she added, almost shyly.

Or anywhere else, it seemed. She told the story hesitantly, but almost eagerly, with no more than slight prodding on my part.

Beardsley had—in essence—bought her from her father, and brought her, with other goods acquired in Baltimore, down to his house, where he had essentially kept her prisoner, forbidding her to leave the homestead, or to show herself to anyone who might come to the house. Left to do the work of the homestead while Beardsley traveled into the Cherokee lands with his trade goods, she had had no society but a bond lad—who was little company, being deaf and speechless.

"Really," I said. In the events of the day, I had quite forgotten Josiah and his twin. I wondered whether she had known both of them, or only Keziah.

"How long is it since you came to North Carolina?" I asked.

"Two yearth," she said softly. "Two yearth, three month, and five dayth." I remembered the marks on the doorpost, and wondered when she had begun to keep count. From the very beginning? I stretched my back, disturbing Hiram, who grumbled.

"I see. By the way, what is your Christian name?" I asked, belatedly aware that I had no idea.

"Frantheth," she said, then tried again, not liking the mumbled sound of it. "Fran-*cess*," the end of it a hiss through her broken teeth. She gave a shrug, then, and laughed—a small, shy sound. "Fanny," she said. "My mother called me Fanny."

"Fanny," I said, encouragingly. "That's a very nice name. May I call you so?"

"I … would be pleathed," she said. She drew breath again, but stopped without speaking, evidently too shy to say whatever she'd had in mind. With her husband dead, she seemed entirely passive, quite deprived of the force that had animated her earlier.

"Oh," I said, belatedly realizing. "Claire. Do call me Claire, please."

"Claire—how pretty."

"Well, it hasn't any esses, at least," I said, not thinking. "Oh—I do beg your pardon!"

She made a small *pff* sound of dismissal. Encouraged by the dark, the faint sense of intimacy engendered by the exchange of names—or simply from a need to talk, after so long—she told me about her mother, who had died when she was twelve, her father, a crabber, and her life in Baltimore, wading out along the shore at low tide to rake oysters and gather mussels, watching the fishing craft and the warships come in past Fort Howard to sail up the Patapsco.

"It wath … peatheful," she said, rather wistfully. "It wath tho open—nothing but the thky and the water." She tilted back her head again, as though yearning for the small bit of night sky visible through the interlacing branches overhead. I supposed that while the forested mountains of North Carolina were refuge and embrace to a Highlander like Jamie, they might well seem claustrophobic and alien to someone accustomed to the watery Chesapeake shore.

"Will you go back there, do you think?" I asked.

"Back?" She sounded slightly startled. "Oh. I … I hadn't thought …"

"No?" I had found a tree trunk to lean against, and stretched slightly, to ease my back. "You must have seen that your—that Mr. Beardsley was dying. Didn't you have some plan?" Beyond the fun of torturing him slowly to death, that is. It occurred to me that I had been getting altogether too comfortable with this woman, alone in the dark with the goats. She might truly have been Beardsley's victim—or she might only be saying so now, to enlist our aid. It would behoove me to remember the burned toes on Beardsley's foot, and the appalling state of that loft. I straightened up a little, and felt for the small knife I carried at my belt—just in case.

"No." She sounded a little dazed—and no wonder, I supposed. I felt more than a little dazed myself, simply from emotion and fatigue. Enough so that I almost missed what she said next.

"What did you say?"

"I thaid … Mary Ann didn't tell me what I wath to do … after."

"Mary Ann," I said cautiously. "Yes, and that would be … the first Mrs. Beardsley, would it?"

She laughed, and the hair on my neck rippled unpleasantly.

"Oh, no. Mary Ann wath the fourth one."

"The … fourth one," I said, a little faintly.

"Thye'th the only one he buried under the rowan tree," she informed me. "That wath a mithtake. The otherth are in the woodth. He got lazy, I think; he did not want to walk tho far."

"Oh," I said, for lack of any better response.

"I told you—sshe thtands under the rowan tree at moonrithe. When I thaw her there at firtht, I thought sshe wath a living woman. I wath afraid of what *he* might do, if he thaw her there alone—tho I sstole from the houthe to warn her."

"I see." Something in my voice must have sounded less than credulous, for her head turned sharply toward me. I took a firmer grip on the knife.

"You do not believe me?"

"Of course I do!" I assured her, trying to edge Hiram's head off my lap. My left leg had gone to sleep from the pressure of his weight, and I had no feeling in my foot.

"I can thow you," she said, and her voice was calm and certain. "Mary Ann told me where they were—the otherth—and I found them. I can thow you their graveth."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," I said, flexing my toes to restore circulation. If she came toward me, I decided, I would shove the goat into her path, roll to the side, and make off as fast as possible on all fours, shouting for Jamie. And where in bloody hell *was* Jamie, anyway?

"So … um … Fanny. You're saying that Mr. Beardsley"—it occurred to me that I didn't know his name either, but I thought I would just as soon keep my relations with his memory formal, under the circumstances—"that your husband *murdered* four wives? And no one knew?" Not that anyone necessarily *would* know, I realized. The Beardsley homestead was very isolated, and it wasn't at all unusual for women to die—of accident, childbirth, or simple overwork. Someone might have known that Beardsley had lost four wives—but it was entirely possible that no one cared how.

"Yeth." She sounded calm, I thought; not incipiently dangerous, at least. "He would have killed me, too—but Mary Ann thtopped him."

"How did she do that?"

She drew a deep breath and sighed, settling herself on the ground. There was a faint, sleepy bleat from her lap, and I realized that she was holding the kid again. I relaxed my grip on the knife; she could hardly attack me with a lapful of goat.

She had, she said, gone out to speak to Mary Ann whenever the moon was high; the ghostly woman appeared under the rowan tree only between half-moon wax and half-moon wane—not in the dark of the moon, or at crescent.

"Very particular," I murmured, but she didn't notice, being too absorbed in the story.

This had gone on for some months. Mary Ann had told Fanny Beardsley who she was, informed her of the fate of her predecessors, and the manner of her own death.

"He choked her," Fanny confided. "I could see the markth of his handth on her throat. Sshe warned me that he would do the thame to me, one day."

One night a few weeks later, Fanny was sure that the time had come.

"He wath far gone with the rum, you thee," she explained. "It wath alwayth worth when he drank, and thith time …"

Trembling with nerves, she had dropped the trencher with his supper, splattering food on him. He had sprung to his feet with a roar, lunging for her, and she had turned and fled.

"He wath between me and the door," she said. "I ran for the loft. I hoped he would be too drunk to manage the ladder, and he wath."

Beardsley had stumbled, lurching, and dragged the ladder down with a crash. As he struggled, mumbling and cursing, to put it into place again, there came a knock on the door.

Beardsley shouted to know who it was, but no answer came; only another knock at the door. Fanny had crept to the edge of the loft, to see his red face glaring up at her. The knock sounded for a third time. His tongue was too thick with drink to speak coherently; he only growled in his throat and held up a finger in warning to her, then turned and staggered toward the door. He wrenched it open, looked out—and screamed.

"I have never heard thuch a thound," she said, very softly. "Never."

Beardsley turned and ran, tripping over a stool and sprawling full-length, scrabbling to his feet, stumbling to the foot of the ladder and scrambling up it, missing rungs and clawing for purchase, crying out and shouting.

"He kept thouting to me to help him, help him." Her voice held an odd note; perhaps only astonishment that such a man should have called to her for help—but with a disquieting note that I thought betrayed a deep and secret pleasure in the memory.

Beardsley had reached the top of the ladder, but could not take the final step into the loft. Instead, his face had gone suddenly from red to white, his eyes rolled back, and then he fell senseless onto his face on the boards, his legs dangling absurdly from the edge of the loft.

"I could not get him down; it wath all I could do to pull him up into the loft." She sighed. "And the retht … you know."

"Not quite." Jamie spoke from the dark near my shoulder, making me jump. Hiram grunted indignantly, shaken awake.

"How the hell long have *you* been there?" I demanded.

"Long enough." He moved to my side and knelt beside me, a hand on my arm. "And what was it at the door, then?" he asked Mrs. Beardsley. His voice held no more than light interest, but his hand was tight on my arm. A slight shudder went over me. *What*, indeed.

"Nothing," she said simply. "There wath no one there at all, that I could thee. But—you can thee the rowan tree from that door, and there *wath* a half-moon rithing."

There was a marked period of silence at this. Finally, Jamie rubbed a hand hard over his face, sighed, and got to his feet.

"Aye. Well. I've found a spot where we can shelter for the night. Help me wi' the goat, Sassenach."

We were on hilly ground, spiked with rocky outcrops and small tangles of sweet shrub and greenbrier, making the footing between the trees so uncertain in the dark that I fell twice, catching myself only by luck before breaking my neck. It would have been difficult going in broad daylight; by night, it was nearly impossible. Fortunately, it was no more than a short distance to the spot Jamie had found.

This was a sort of shallow gash in the side of a crumbling clay bank, overhung with a tattered grapevine and thatched with matted grasses. At one time, there had been a stream here, and the water had carved away a good-sized chunk of earth from the bank, leaving an overhanging shelf. Something had diverted the flow of water some years ago, though, and the rounded stones of what had been the streambed were scattered and half-sunk in mossy soil; one rolled under my foot and I fell to one knee, striking it painfully on another of the beastly stones.

"All right, Sassenach?" Jamie heard my rude exclamation and stopped, turning toward me. He stood on the hillside just above me, Hiram on his shoulders. From below, silhouetted against the sky, he looked grotesque and rather frightening; a tall, horned figure with hunched and monstrous shoulders.

"Fine," I said, rather breathless. "Just here, is it?"

"Aye. Help me … will ye?" He sounded a lot more breathless than I did. He sank carefully to his knees, and I hurried to help him lower

Hiram to the ground. Jamie stayed kneeling, one hand on the ground to brace himself.

"I hope it won't be too hard to find the trail in the morning," I said, watching him anxiously. His head was bent with exhaustion, air rattling wetly in his chest with each breath. I wanted him in a place with fire and food, as fast as possible.

He shook his head, and coughed, clearing his throat.

"I ken where it is," he said, and coughed again. "It's only—" The coughing shook him hard; I could see his shoulders braced against it. When he stopped, I put a hand gently on his back, and could feel a fine, constant tremor running through him; not a chill, just the trembling of muscles forced beyond the limits of their strength.

"I canna go any further, Claire," he said softly, as though ashamed of the admission. "I'm done."

"Lie down," I said, just as softly. "I'll see to things."

There was a certain amount of bustle and confusion, but within a half hour or so, everyone was more or less settled, the horses hobbled, and a small fire going.

I knelt to check my chief patient, who was sitting on his chest, splinted leg stuck out in front. Hiram, with his ladies safely gathered behind him in the shelter of the bank, emitted a belligerent "Meh!" and threatened me with his horns.

"Ungrateful sod," I said, pulling back.

Jamie laughed, then broke off to cough, his shoulders shaking with the spasm. He was curled at one side of the depression in the bank, head pillowed on his folded coat.

"And as for you," I said, eyeing him, "I wasn't joking about that goose grease. Open your cloak, lift your shirt, and do it now."

He narrowed his eyes at me, and shot a quick glance in Mrs. Beardsley's direction. I hid a smile at his modesty, but gave Mrs. Beardsley the small kettle from my saddlebag and sent her off to fetch water and more firewood, then dug out the gourd of mentholated ointment.

Jamie's appearance alarmed me slightly, now that I had a good look at him. He was pale and white-lipped, red-rimmed round the nostrils, and his eyes were bruised with fatigue. He looked very sick, and sounded worse, the breath wheezing in his chest with each respiration.

"Well, I suppose if Hiram wouldn't die in front of his nannies, you won't die in front of me, either," I said dubiously, scooping out a thumbful of the fragrant grease.

"I am not dying in the least degree," he said, rather crossly. "I'm only a wee bit tired. I shall be entirely myself in the morn—oh, Christ, I hate this!"

His chest was quite warm, but I thought he wasn't fevered; it was hard to tell, my own fingers being very cold.

He jerked, made a high-pitched "eee" noise, and tried to squirm away. I seized him firmly by the neck, put a knee in his belly, and proceeded to have my way with him, all protests notwithstanding. At length, he gave up struggling and submitted, only giggling intermittently, sneezing, and uttering an occasional small yelp when I reached a particularly ticklish spot. The goats found it all very entertaining.

In a few minutes, I had him well-greased and gasping on the ground, the skin of his chest and throat red from rubbing and shiny with grease, a strong aroma of peppermint and camphor in the air. I patted a thick flannel into place on his chest, pulled down his shirt, drew the folds of his cloak around him, and tucked a blanket up snugly under his chin.

"Now, then," I said with satisfaction, wiping my hands on a cloth. "As soon as I have hot water, we'll have a nice cup of horehound tea."

He opened one eye suspiciously.

"We will?"

"Well, you will. I'd rather drink hot horse piss, myself."

"So would I."

"Too bad; it hasn't any medicinal effects that I know of."

He groaned and shut the eye. He breathed heavily for a moment, sounding like a diseased bellows. Then he raised his head a few inches, opening his eyes.

"Is yon woman back yet?"

"No, I imagine it will take her a little time to find the stream in the dark." I hesitated. "Did you … hear everything she was telling me?"

He shook his head.

"Not all—but enough. Mary Ann and that?"

"Yes, that."

He grunted.

"Did ye believe her, Sassenach?"

I didn't reply immediately, but took my time in cleaning the goose grease out from under my fingernails.

"I did at the time," I finally said. "Just now—I'm not sure."

He grunted again, this time with approval.

"I shouldna think she's dangerous," he said. "But keep your wee knife about ye, Sassenach—and dinna turn your back on her. We'll take watch and watch about; wake me in an hour."

He shut his eyes, coughed, and without further ado, fell fast asleep.

Clouds were beginning to drift across the moon, and a cold wind stirred the grass on the bank above us.

"Wake him in an hour," I muttered, shifting myself in an effort to achieve some minimal level of comfort on the rocky ground. "Ha, bloody ha." I leaned over and hoisted Jamie's head into my lap. He groaned slightly, but didn't twitch.

"Sniffles," I said accusingly to him. "Ha!"

I wriggled my shoulders and leaned back, finding some support against the sloping wall of our shelter. Despite Jamie's warning, it seemed unnecessary to keep an eye on Mrs. Beardsley; she had obligingly built up the fire, then curled up among the goats and—being merely flesh and blood, and therefore exhausted by the day's events—had gone immediately to sleep. I could hear her on the far side of the fire, snoring peacefully among the assorted wheezings and grunts of her companions.

"And what do you think you are, anyway?" I demanded of the heavy head resting on my thigh. "Vulcanized rubber?" My fingers touched his hair, quite without intent, and smoothed it gently. One corner of his mouth lifted suddenly, in a smile of startling sweetness.

It was gone as quickly as it had come, and I stared at him in astonishment. No, he was sound asleep; his breath came hoarse but even, and the long parti-colored lashes rested dark against his cheeks. Very softly, I stroked his head again.

Sure enough; the smile flickered like the touch of a flame, and disappeared. He sighed, very deeply, bent his neck to nuzzle closer, then relaxed completely, his body going limp.

"Oh, Christ, Jamie," I said softly, and felt tears sting my eyes.

It had been years since I'd seen him smile in his sleep like that. Not since the early days of our marriage, in fact—at Lallybroch.

He'd always do it as a wee lad, his sister Jenny had told me then. *I think it means he's happy.*

My fingers curled into the soft, thick hair at the nape of his neck, feeling the solid curve of his skull, the warm scalp and the hair-thin line of the ancient scar across it.

"Me, too," I whispered to him.

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SPAWN OF SATAN

Mrs. MacLeod and her two children had gone to stay with Evan Lindsay's wife, and with the leaving of the MacLeod brothers with the militia, plus Geordie Chisholm and his two eldest sons, the congestion in the big house was eased substantially. Not nearly enough, though, Brianna reflected, considering that Mrs. Chisholm remained.

The problem was not Mrs. Chisholm as such; the problem was Mrs. Chisholm's five younger children, all boys, and referred to collectively—by Mrs. Bug—as "the spawn of Satan." Mrs. Chisholm, perhaps understandably, objected to this terminology. While the other inhabitants of the house were less forthright than Mrs. Bug in stating their opinions, there was a remarkable unanimity among them. Three-year-old twin boys *would* have that effect, Brianna thought, eyeing Jemmy with some trepidation as she envisioned the future.

He was at the moment giving no indication of a potential for future rampage, being half-asleep on the rag rug of Jamie's study, where Brianna had retired in the faint hope of fifteen minutes' semi-solitude in which to write. Residual awe of Jamie was sufficient to keep the little warts out of this room, for the most part.

Mrs. Bug had informed eight-year-old Thomas, six-year-old Anthony, and five-year-old Toby Chisholm that Mrs. Fraser was a notable witch; a White Lady, who would undoubtedly turn them into toads on the spot—and no great loss to society, she gave them to understand—should any harm come to the contents of her surgery. That didn't keep them out—quite the opposite; they were fascinated—but it had so far prevented them breaking much.

Jamie's inkstand stood to hand on the table; a hollow gourd, neatly corked with a large acorn, with a pottery jar of neatly sharpened turkey quills beside it. Motherhood had taught Brianna to seize random moments; she seized this one, and a quill, flipping open the cover of the small journal in which she kept what she thought of as her private accounts.

> *Last night I dreamed about making soap. I haven't made soap yet, myself, but I'd been scrubbing the floor yesterday, and the smell of the soap was still on my hands when I went to bed. It's a nasty smell, something between acid and ashes, with a horrible faint stink from the hog fat, like something that's been dead for a long time.*
>
> *I was pouring water into a kettle of wood ash, to make lye, and it was turning to lye even as I poured. Big clouds of poisonous smoke were coming up from the kettle; it was yellow, the smoke.*
>
> *Da brought me a big bowl of suet, to mix with the lye, and there were babies' fingers in it. I don't remember thinking there was anything strange about this—at the time.*

Brianna had been trying to ignore a series of crashing noises from upstairs, which sounded like several persons jumping up and down on a bedstead. These ceased abruptly, succeeded by a piercing scream, which in turn was followed by the sound of flesh meeting flesh in a loud slap, and several more screams of assorted pitches.

She flinched and shut her eyes tight, recoiling as the sounds of conflict escalated. A moment more, and they were thundering down the stairs. With a glance at Jemmy, who had been startled awake, but didn't seem frightened—my God, he was getting used to it, she thought—she put down the quill and stood up, sighing.

Mr. Bug was there to tend the farm and livestock and repel physical threats; Mr. Wemyss was there to chop firewood, haul water, and generally maintain the fabric of the house. But Mr. Bug was silent, Mr. Wemyss timid; Jamie had left Brianna formally in charge. She was, therefore, the court of appeal, and judge in all conflicts. Herself, if you would.

Herself flung open the study door and glowered at the mob. Mrs. Bug, red in the face—as usual—and brimming with accusation. Mrs. Chisholm, ditto, overflowing with maternal outrage. Little Mrs. Aberfeldy, the color of an eggplant, clutching her two-year-old daughter, Ruth, protectively to her bosom. Tony and Toby Chisholm, both in tears and covered with snot. Toby had a red handprint on the side of his face; little Ruthie's wispy hair appeared to be oddly shorter on one side than the other. They all began to talk at once.

"… Red savages!"

"… My baby's beautiful hair!"

"She started it!"

"… Dare to strike my son!"

"We was just playin' at scalpin', ma'am …"

"… EEEEEEEEEEE!"

"… and torn a great hole in my feather bed, the wee spawn!"

"*Look* what she's done, the wicked auld besom!"

"*Look* what they've done!"

"Look ye, ma'am, it's only …"

"AAAAAAAAAAA!"

Brianna stepped out into the corridor and slammed the door behind her. It was a solid door, and the resultant boom temporarily halted the outcry. On the other side, Jemmy began to cry, but she ignored him for the moment.

She drew a deep breath, prepared to wade into the melee, but then thought better of it. She couldn't face the thought of the interminable wrangling that would come of dealing with them as a group. Divide and conquer was the only way.

"I am *writing*," she declared instead, and looked narrow-eyed from face to face. "Something important." Mrs. Aberfeldy looked impressed; Mrs. Chisholm affronted; Mrs. Bug astonished.

She nodded coolly to each one in turn.

"I'll talk to each of you about it later. Aye?"

She opened the door, stepped inside, and shut it very gently on the three pop-eyed faces, then pressed her back against it, closed her eyes, and let out the breath she had been holding.

There was silence outside the door, then a distinct “Hmp!” in Mrs. Chisholm’s voice, and the noise of footsteps going away—one set up the stairs, another toward the kitchen, and a heavier tread into the surgery across the hall. A rush of small footsteps out the front door announced Tony and Toby making their escape.

Jemmy ceased wailing when he saw her, and started sucking his thumb instead.

“I hope Mrs. Chisholm doesn’t know anything about herbs,” she told him, whispering. “I’m sure Grandma keeps poisons in there.” A good thing her mother had taken the box of saws and scalpels with her, at least.

She stood still a moment, listening. No sounds of breaking glass. Perhaps Mrs. Chisholm had merely stepped into the surgery in order to avoid Mrs. Aberfeldy and Mrs. Bug. Brianna sank down in the straight chair by the small table her father used as a desk. Or maybe Mrs. Chisholm was lying in wait, hoping to snare Brianna to listen to her own grievances, as soon as the others were safely out of the way.

Jemmy was now lying on his back with his feet in the air, happily mangling a bit of rusk he had found somewhere. Her journal had fallen to the floor. Hearing Mrs. Chisholm come out of the surgery, she hastily seized the quill, and snatched one of the ledger books from the stack on the desk with the other.

The door opened an inch or two. There was a moment’s silence, during which she bent her head, frowning in exaggerated concentration at the page before her, scratching with an empty quill. The door closed again.

“Bitch,” she said, under her breath. Jemmy made an interrogative noise, and she looked down at him. “You didn’t hear that, all right?”

Jemmy made an agreeable noise and crammed the soggy remnant of his toast into his left nostril. She made an instinctive movement to take it away from him, then stopped herself. She wasn’t in the mood for any more conflict this morning. Or this afternoon, either.

She tapped the black quill thoughtfully on the ledger page. She'd have to do something, and fast. Mrs. Chisholm might have found the deadly nightshade—and she *knew* Mrs. Bug had a cleaver.

Mrs. Chisholm had the advantage in weight, height, and reach, but Brianna personally would put her money on Mrs. Bug, in terms of guile and treachery. As for poor little Mrs. Aberfeldy, she'd be caught in the crossfire, riddled with verbal bullets. And little Ruthie would likely be bald as an egg before another week was out.

Her father would have sorted them out in nothing flat by the joint exercise of charm and male authority. She gave a small snort of amusement at the thought. Come, he sayeth to one, and she curleth up at his feet, purring like Adso the cat. Go, he sayeth to another, and she goeth promptly out into the kitchen and baketh him a plate of buttered muffins.

Her mother would have seized the first excuse to escape the house—to tend a distant patient or gather medicinal herbs—and left them to fight it out among themselves, returning only when a state of armed neutrality had been restored. Brianna hadn't missed the look of relief on her mother's face as she swung up into her mare's saddle—or the faintly apologetic glance she sent her daughter. Still, neither strategy was going to work for her—though the urge to seize Jemmy and run for the hills was pretty strong.

For the hundredth time since the men had left, she wished passionately that she could have gone with them. She could imagine the bulk of a horse moving under her, the clean, cold air in her lungs, and Roger riding by her side, the sun glowing off his dark hair, and unseen adventure to be faced together, somewhere ahead.

She missed him with a deep ache, like a bruise to the bone. How long might he be gone, if it really came to fighting? She pushed that thought aside, not wanting to look at the thought that came after it; the thought that if it came to fighting, there was a possibility—however faint—that he would come back ill or injured—or wouldn't come back at all.

"It's *not* going to come to that," she said firmly, aloud. "They'll be back in a week or two."

There was a rattling sound as a blast of icy rain struck the window. The weather was turning cold; it would be snowing by nightfall. She shivered, drawing the shawl around her shoulders, and glanced at Jem to see that he was warm enough. His smock was puddled up around his middle, his diaper was plainly damp, and one stocking had fallen off, leaving his small pink foot bare. He appeared not to notice, being absorbed in babbling a song to the bare toes idly flexing overhead.

She looked dubiously at him, but he seemed happy enough—and the brazier in the corner *was* putting out some heat.

"Okay," she said, and sighed. She had Jem, and that was that. That *being* that, the problem was to find some means of dealing with the Three Furies before they drove her crazy or assassinated each other with rolling pin or knitting needle.

"Logic," she said to Jemmy, sitting up straight in the chair and pointing the quill at him. "There must be a logical way. It's like that problem where you have to get a cannibal, a missionary, and a goat across a river in a canoe. Let me think about this."

Jem began trying to get his foot into his crumb-encrusted mouth, despite the clear illogic of the procedure.

"You must take after Daddy," she told him, tolerantly. She put the quill back in its jar, and started to close the ledger, then stopped, attracted by the sprawling entries. The sight of Jamie's characteristically messy writing still gave her a faint thrill, remembering her first sight of it—on an ancient deed of sasine, its ink gone pale brown with age.

This ink had been pale brown to start with, but had now darkened, the iron-gall mixture achieving its typical blue-black with exposure to air over a day or so.

It was not so much a ledger, she saw, as a logbook, recording the daily activities of the farm.

> ***16 July****—Rec'd six weaned piglets of Pastor Gottfried, in trade for two bottles muscat wine and a goosewing axhead. Have put them in the stable 'til they be grown enough to forage conveniently.*

> ***17 July****—One of the hives commenced to swarm in the afternoon, and came into the stable. My wife fortunately recaptured the swarm, which she housed in an empty churn. She says Ronnie Sinclair must make her a new one.*
>
> ***18 July****—Letter from my aunt, asking advice re sawmill on Grinder's Creek. Replied, saying I will ride to inspect the situation within the month. Letter sent with R. Sinclair, who goes to Cross Creek with a load of 22 barrels, from which I am to receive half his profit toward payment of debt on cobbler's tools. Have arranged to deduct cost of new churn from this amount.*

The flow of entries was soothing, as peaceful as the summer days they recorded. She felt the knot of tension between her shoulder blades beginning to relax, and her mind began to loosen and stretch, ready to seek a way out of her difficulties.

> ***20 July****—Barley in the lower field as high as my stocking-tops. A healthy heifer calf born to red cow soon after midnight. All well. An excellent day.*
>
> ***21 July****—Rode to Muellers'. Exchanged one jar honeycomb for leather bridle in poor repair (but can be mended). Home well after dark, in consequence of seeing a twilight hatch rising upon the pond near Hollis's Gap. Stopped to fish, and caught a string of ten fine trout. Six eaten for supper; the rest will do for breakfast.*
>
> ***22 July****—My grandson has a rash, though my wife declares it of no moment. The white sow has broken through her pen again and escaped into the forest. I am in two minds whether I shall pursue her or only express sympathy for the unfortunate predator that first encounters her. Her temper is similar to that of my daughter at the moment, the latter having slept little these past few nights …*

Brianna leaned forward, frowning at the page.

> *… in consequence of the infant's screaming, which my wife says is the colic and will pass. I trust she is right. Meanwhile, I have settled Brianna and the child in the old cabin, which is some relief*

to us in the house, if not to my poor daughter. The white sow ate four of her last litter before I could prevent her.

“Why, you bloody *bastard*!” she said. She was familiar with the white sow in question, and not flattered by the comparison. Jemmy, alarmed by her tone, stopped crooning and dropped his toast, his mouth beginning to quiver.

“No, no, it’s all right, sweetie.” She got up and scooped him into her arms, swaying gently to soothe him. “Shh, it’s all right. Mummy is just talking to Grandpa, that’s all. You didn’t hear that word either, okay? Shh, shh.”

Jemmy was reassured, but leaned out from her arms, reaching after his discarded meal with small grunts of anxiety. She stooped and picked it up, eyeing the half-dissolved object with distaste. The crust was not only stale and wet, but had acquired a light coating of what seemed to be cat hair.

“Ick. You don’t really want that, do you?”

Evidently he did, and was persuaded only with difficulty to accept a large iron bull’s ring—used for leading male animals by the nose, she noted with some irony—from the shelf in lieu of it. A brief nibble confirmed the desirability of the nose ring, though, and he settled down in her lap to single-minded gnawing, allowing her to reread the conclusion of the offensive entry.

“Hmm.” She leaned back, shifting Jemmy’s weight more comfortably. He could sit up easily now, though it still seemed incredible that his noodle-neck could support the round dome of his head. She regarded the ledger broodingly.

“It’s a thought,” she said to Jemmy. “If I shift the old bi—I mean, Mrs. Chisholm—to our cabin, it will get her and her horrible little monsters out of everyone’s hair. Then … hmm. Mrs. Aberfeldy and Ruthie could go in with Lizzie and her father, if we move the trundle from Mama and Da’s room in there. The Bugs get their privacy back, and Mrs. Bug stops being an evil-minded old … er … anyway, then I suppose you and I could sleep in Mama and Da’s room, at least ’til they come back.”

She hated to think of moving from the cabin. It was her home, her private place, her family's place. She could go there and close the door, leaving the furor here behind. Her things were there; the half-built loom, the pewter plates, the pottery jug she had painted—all the small, homely objects with which she had made the space her own.

Beyond the sense of possession and peace, she had an uncomfortable sense of something like superstition about leaving it. The cabin was the home Roger had shared with her; to leave it, however temporarily, seemed somehow an admission that he might not return to share it again.

She tightened her grip on Jemmy, who ignored her in favor of concentration on his toy, his fat little fists shiny with drool where he grasped the ring.

No, she didn't want to give up her cabin at all. But it *was* an answer, and a logical one. Would Mrs. Chisholm agree? The cabin was much more crudely built than the big house, and lacking its amenities.

Still, she was pretty sure Mrs. Chisholm would accept the suggestion. If ever she'd seen someone whose motto was, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven …" Despite her trouble, she felt a small bubble of laughter rise beneath her stays.

She reached out and flipped the ledger closed, then tried to replace it on the stack from which she'd taken it. One-handed, though, and encumbered by Jemmy, she couldn't quite reach, and the book slipped off, falling back onto the table.

"Rats," she muttered, and scooted forward on her chair, reaching to pick it up again. Several loose sheets had fallen out, and she stuffed these back as tidily as she could with her free hand.

One, plainly a letter, had the remnants of its wax seal still attached. Her eye caught the impression of a smiling half-moon, and she paused. That was Lord John Grey's seal. It must be the letter he had sent in September, in which he described his adventures hunting deer in the Dismal Swamp; her father had read it to the family several times—Lord John was a humorous correspondent, and the deer hunt had been beset by the sort of misfortunes that were no doubt uncomfortable to live through, but which made picturesque recounting afterward.

Smiling in memory, she flipped the letter open with her thumb, looking forward to seeing the story again, only to find that she was looking at something quite different.

13 October, Anno Domini 1770

Mr. James Fraser
Fraser's Ridge, North Carolina

My dear Jamie,

I woke this Morning to the sound of the Rain which has beat upon us for the last Week, and to the gentle clucking of several Chickens, who had come to roost upon my Bedstead. Rising under the Stare of numerous beady Eyes, I went to make Inquiry as to this Circumstance, and was informed that the River has risen so far under the Impetus of the recent Rain as to have undermined both the Necessary House and the Chicken Coop. The contents of the latter were rescued by William (my Son, whom you will recall), and two of the Slaves, who swept the dispossessed Fowl out of the passing Floodwaters with Brooms. I cannot say whose was the Notion to sequester the hapless feathered Flood Victims in my Sleeping Chamber, but I hold certain Suspicions in this regard.

Resorting to use of my Chamber Pot (I could wish that the Chickens shared this Facility, they are distressing incontinent Fowl), I dressed and ventured forth to see what might be salvaged. Some few Boards and the shingled Roof of the Chicken Coop remain, but my Privy, alas, has become the Property of King Neptune—or whatever minor water Deity presides over so modest a Tributary as our River.

I pray you will suffer no Concern for us, though; the House is at some distance from the River, and safely placed upon a Rise of Ground, such as to render us quite safe from even the most *incommodious flooding. (The Necessary had been dug by the old homestead, and we had not yet attempted a new structure more convenient; this minor disaster, by affording us the* Necessary *opportunity for rebuilding, thus may prove a blessing in disguise.)*

Brianna rolled her eyes at the pun, but smiled nonetheless. Jemmy dropped his ring and began at once to whine for it. She stooped to pick it up, but stopped halfway down, riveted by the words at the beginning of the next paragraph.

Your letter mentions Mr. Stephen Bonnet, and inquires whether I have news or knowledge of him. I have met with him, you will collect, but have unfortunately no Memory whatever of the Encounter, not even to Recalling of his Appearance, though as you know, I carry a small Hole in my Head, as a singular Memento of the occasion. (You may inform your Lady Wife that I am healed well, with no further Symptoms of Discomfort than the occasional Headache. Beyond this, the Silver Plate with which the Opening is covered is subject to sudden chill when the Weather is cold, which tends to make my left Eye water, and to cause a great Discharge of Snot, but this is of no consequence.)

As I thus share your Interest in Mr. Bonnet and his Movements, I have long since had Inquiries dispersed among such Acquaintance as I have near the Coast, since the Descriptions of his Machinations cause me to believe the man is most like to be found there (this is a comforting Notion, given the Great Distance between the Coast and your remote Eyrie). The River being navigable to the Sea, however, I had some Thought that the River Captains and Water Scallywags who now and again grace my Dinner Table might at some Point bear me Word of the man.

I am not pleased by the Obligation to report that Bonnet still resides among the Living, but both Duty and Friendship compel me to impart such Particulars of him as I have obtained. These are *sparse; the Wretch appears sensible of his criminal Situation, so far as to render him subtle in his Movements until now.*

Jemmy was kicking and squawking. As though in a trance, she stooped, holding him, and picked up the ring, her eyes still fixed on the letter.

I had heard little of him, save a Report at one Point that he had repaired to France—good News. However, two Weeks past I had a Guest, one Captain Liston ("Captain" being no more than a title of courtesy; he claims service with the Royal Navy, but I will stake a Hogshead of my best Tobacco [a sample of which you will find accompanying this Missive—and if you do not, I would be obliged to hear of it, since I do not altogether trust the Slave by whom I send it] that he has never so much as smelled the Ink on a Commission, let alone the Reek of the Bilges) who gave me a more recent—and highly disagreeable—History of the man Bonnet.

Finding himself at large in the Port of Charleston, Liston said that he fell in with some Companions of low Aspect, who invited him to accompany them to a Cockfight, held in the Innyard of an Establishment called the Devil's Glass. Among the Rabble there was a Man notable for the fineness of his Dress, and the Freedom with which he spent his Coin—Liston heard this man referred to as Bonnet, and was told by the Landlord that this Bonnet had the name of a Smuggler upon the Outer Banks, being Popular with the Merchants of the coastal Towns in North Carolina, though much less so with the Authorities, who were Helpless to deal with the Man by reason of his Business and the dependence of the Towns of Wilmington, Edenton, and New Bern upon his Trade.

Liston took little further Note of Bonnet (he said) until an Altercation rose over a Wager upon the Fighting. Hot Words were exchanged, and nothing would do save Honor be satisfied by the drawing of Blood. Nothing loath, the Spectators at once began to *wager upon the Outcome of the human Contest, in the same manner as that of the fighting Fowl.*

One combatant was the man Bonnet, the other a Captain Marsden, a half-pay Army Captain known to my Guest as a good Swordsman. This Marsden, feeling himself the injured Party, damned Bonnet's eyes, and invited the Smuggler to accommodate him upon the Spot, an Offer at once accepted. Wagers ran heavy upon Marsden, his Reputation being known, but it was soon clear that he had met his Match and more in Bonnet. Within no more than a few moments, Bonnet succeeded in disarming his Opponent, and in Wounding him so grievously in the Thigh that Marsden sank down upon his Knees and yielded to his Opponent—having no Choice in the Matter at that Point, to be sure.

Bonnet did not accept of this Surrender, though, but instead performed an Act of such Cruelty as made the deepest Impression upon all who saw it. Remarking with great coolness that it was not his own Eyes that would be damned, he drew the Tip of his Weapon across Marsden's Eyes, twisting it in such Fashion as not only to blind the Captain, but to inflict such Mutilation as would make him an Object of the greatest Horror and Pity to all who might behold him.

Leaving his Foe thus mangled and fainting upon the bloody Sand of the Innyard, Bonnet cleansed his Blade by wiping it upon Marsden's Shirtfront, sheathed it, and left—though not before removing Marsden's Purse, which he claimed in payment of his original Wager. None present had any Stomach to prevent him, having so cogent an Example of his Skill before them.

I recount this History both to acquaint you with Bonnet's last known whereabouts, and as warning to his Nature and Abilities. I know you are already well acquainted with the Former, but I draw your Attention to the Latter, out of due Regard for your Well-being. Not that I expect a word of my well-meant Advice will find lodging *in your Breast, so filled must it be with animadverse Sentiment toward the Man, but I would beg that you take Notice at least of Liston's Mention of Bonnet's Connexions.*

Upon the occasion of my own Meeting with the man, he was a Condemned Felon, and I cannot think he has since performed such Service toward the Crown as would gain him official Pardon. If he is content to flaunt himself thus openly in Charleston—where scant Years ago he escaped the Hangman's Noose—it would seem he is in no great Fears for his Safety—and this can only mean that he now enjoys the Protection and Patronage of powerful Friends. You must discover and beware of these, if you seek to destroy Bonnet.

I will continue my Inquiries in this regard, and notify you at once of any further Particulars. In the meantime, keep you well, and spare a thought now and again to your drenched and shivering Acquaintance in Virginia. I remain, sir, with all good Wishes toward your Wife, Daughter, and Family,

Your ob't. servant,
John William Grey, Esq.
Mount Josiah Plantation
Virginia

Postscriptum: I have been in search of an Astrolabe, per your Request, but so far have heard of nothing that would suit your Purpose. I am sending to London this month for assorted Furnishings, though, and will be pleased to order one from Halliburton's in Green Street, their Instruments are of the highest Quality.

Very slowly, Brianna sat back down on the chair. She placed her hands gently but firmly over her son's ears, and said a very bad word.

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ORPHAN OF THE STORM

I fell asleep, leaning against the bank, with Jamie’s head on my lap. I dreamed luridly, as one does when cold and uncomfortable. I dreamed of trees; endless, monotonous forests of them, with each trunk and leaf and needle etched like scrimshaw on the inside of my eyelids, each one crystal-sharp, all just alike. Yellow goat-eyes floated in the air between the tree trunks, and the wood of my mind rang with the screams of she-panthers and the crying of motherless children.

I woke suddenly, with the echoes of their cries still ringing in my ears. I was lying in a tangle of cloaks and blankets, Jamie’s limbs heavily entwined with my own, and a fine, cold snow was falling through the pines.

Granules of ice crusted my brows and lashes, and my face was cold and wet with melted snow. Momentarily disoriented, I reached out by reflex to touch Jamie; he stirred and coughed thickly, his shoulder shaking under my hand. The sound of it brought back the events of the day before—Josiah and his twin, the Beardsley farm, Fanny’s ghosts; the smell of ordure and gangrene and the cleaner reek of gunpowder and wet earth. The bleating of goats, still echoing from my dreams.

A thin cry came through the whisper of snow, and I sat up abruptly, flinging back the blankets in a spray of icy powder. Not a goat. Not at all.

Startled awake, Jamie jerked and rolled instinctively away from the mess of cloaks and blankets, coming up in a crouch, hair in a wild tangle and eyes darting round in search of threat.

"What?" he whispered hoarsely. He reached for his knife, lying nearby in its sheath on the ground, but I lifted a hand to stop him moving.

"I don't know. A noise. Listen!"

He lifted his head, listening, and I saw his throat move painfully as he swallowed. I could hear nothing but the chisping of the snow, and saw nothing but dripping pines. Jamie heard something, though—or saw it; his face changed suddenly.

"There," he said softly, nodding at something behind me. I scrambled round on my knees, to see what looked like a small heap of rags, lying some ten feet away, next to the ashes of the burned-out fire. The cry came again, unmistakable this time.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ." I was scarcely aware of having spoken, as I scrambled toward the bundle. I snatched it up and began to root through the layers of swaddling cloth. It was plainly alive—I had heard it cry—and yet it lay inert, almost weightless in the curve of my arm.

The tiny face and hairless skull were blue-white, the features closed and sere as the husk of a winter fruit. I laid my palm over nose and mouth and felt a faint, moist warmth against my skin. Startled by my touch, the mouth opened in a mewling cry, and the slanted eyes crimped tighter shut, sealing out the threatening world.

"Holy God." Jamie crossed himself briefly. His voice was little more than a phlegmy crackle; he cleared his throat and tried again, glancing around. "Where's the woman?"

Shocked by the child's appearance, I had not paused to consider its origin, nor was there time to do so now. The baby twitched a little in its wrappings, but the tiny hands were cold as ice, the skin mottled blue and purple with chill.

"Never mind her now—get my shawl, will you, Jamie? The poor thing's nearly frozen." I fumbled one-handed with the lacing of my bodice; it was an old one that opened down the front, worn for ease of dressing on the trail. I pulled loose my stays and the drawstring of my shift and pressed the small icy creature against my bare breasts, my skin still warm from sleep. A blast of wind drove stinging snow across the exposed skin of my neck and shoulders. I pulled my shift hastily up over the child and hunched myself, shivering. Jamie flung the shawl round my shoulders, then wrapped his arms round us both, hugging fiercely as though to force the heat of his own body into the child.

The heat of him was considerable; he was burning with fever.

“My God, are you all right?” I spared a glance up at him; white-faced and red-eyed, but steady enough.

“Aye, fine. Where is she?” he asked again, hoarsely. “The woman.”

Gone, evidently. The goats were huddled close together under the shelter of the bank; I saw Hiram’s horns bobbing among the nannies’ brindled backs. Half a dozen pairs of yellow eyes watched us with interest, reminding me of my dreams.

The place where Mrs. Beardsley had lain was empty, with no more than a patch of flattened grass to testify that she had ever been there. She must have gone some distance away in order to give birth; there was no trace of it near the fire.

“It is hers?” Jamie asked. I could still hear the congestion in his voice, but the small wheezing sound in his chest had eased; that was a relief.

“I suppose it must be. Where else could it have come from?”

My attention was divided between Jamie and the child—it had begun to stir, with little crablike movements against my belly—but I spared a glance around our makeshift camp. The pines stood black and silent under the whispering snow; if Fanny Beardsley had gone into the forest, no trace remained on the matted needles to mark her passage. Snow crystals rimed the trunks of the trees, but not enough had fallen to stick to the ground; no chance of footprints.

“She can’t have gone far,” I said, craning to peer round Jamie’s shoulder. “She hasn’t taken either of the horses.” Gideon and Mrs. Piggy stood close together under a spruce tree, ears morosely flattened by the weather, their breath making clouds of steam around them. Seeing us up and moving, Gideon stamped and whinnied, big yellow teeth showing in an impatient demand for sustenance.

“Aye, ye auld bugger, I’m coming.” Jamie dropped his arms and stepped back, wiping his knuckles beneath his nose.

“She couldna have taken a horse, if she meant to be secret. If she had, the other would have made a fuss and roused me.” He laid a gentle hand on the bulge under my shawl. “I’ll need to go and feed them. Is he all right, Sassenach?”

“He’s thawing out,” I assured him. “But he—or she, for that matter—will be hungry, too.” The baby was beginning to move more, squirming sluggishly, like a chilled worm, its mouth blindly groping. The feeling was shocking in its familiarity; my nipple sprang up by reflex, the flesh of my breast tingling with electricity as the tiny mouth groped, rooted, found the nipple, and clamped on.

I gave a small yelp of surprise, and Jamie raised one eyebrow.

“It … um … *is* hungry,” I said, readjusting my burden.

“I see that, Sassenach,” he said. He glanced at the goats, still snug in their sheltered spot by the bank, but beginning to shift and stir with drowsy grumbles. “He’s no the only one starving. A moment, aye?”

We had brought large forage nets of dry hay from the Beardsley farm; he opened one of these and scattered feed for the horses and goats, then returned to me. He stooped to disentangle one of the cloaks from the damp heap of coverings, and put it round my shoulders, then rootled through the pack for a wooden cup, with which he purposefully approached the grazing goats.

The baby was suckling strongly, my nipple pulled deep into its mouth. I found this reassuring so far as the health of the child was concerned, but the sensation was rather unsettling.

“It’s not that I mind at all, really,” I said to the child, trying to distract both of us. “But I’m afraid I’m *not* your mother, you see? Sorry.”

And where in bloody hell *was* its mother, anyway? I turned slowly round in a circle, searching the landscape more carefully, but still discerned no trace of Fanny Beardsley, let alone any reason for her disappearance—or her silence.

What on earth could have happened? Mrs. Beardsley could have—and quite obviously *had*—hidden an advanced pregnancy under that mound of fat and wrappings—but why should she have done so?

"Why not tell us? I wonder," I murmured to the top of the baby's head. It was growing restless, and I rocked from foot to foot to soothe it. Well, perhaps she had feared that Jamie wouldn't take her with us, if he knew she was so far gone with child. I didn't blame her for not wanting to remain in that farmhouse, whatever the circumstance.

But still, why had she now abandoned the child? *Had* she abandoned it? I considered for a moment the possibility that someone, or something—my spine prickled momentarily at the thought of panthers—had come and stolen the woman from the fireside, but my common sense dismissed the notion.

A cat or bear might conceivably have entered the camp without waking Jamie or me, exhausted as we were, but there wasn't a chance that it could have come near without raising alarms from the goats and horses, who had all had quite enough to do with wild beasts by this time. And a wild animal looking for prey would clearly prefer a tender tidbit like this child, to a tough item like Mrs. Beardsley.

But if a human agency had been responsible for Fanny Beardsley's disappearance—why had they left the child?

Or, perhaps, brought it back?

I sniffed deeply to clear my nose, then turned my head, breathing in and out, testing the air from different quarters. Birth is a messy business, and I was thoroughly familiar with the ripe scents of it. The child in my arms smelled strongly of such things, but I could detect no trace at all of blood or birth waters on the chilly wind. Goat dung, horse manure, cut hay, the bitter smell of wood ash, and a good whiff of camphorated goose grease from Jamie's clothes—but nothing else.

"Right, then," I said aloud, gently jiggling my burden, who was growing restless. "She went away from the fire to give birth. Either she went by herself—or someone made her go. But if someone took her and saw that she was about to deliver, why would they have bothered bringing you back? Surely they'd either have kept you, killed you, or simply left you to die. Oh—sorry. Didn't mean to upset you. Shh, darling. Hush, hush."

The baby, beginning to thaw from its stupor, had had time to consider what else was lacking in its world. It had relinquished my breast in frustration, and was wriggling and wailing with encouraging strength by the time Jamie returned with a steaming cup of goat's milk and a moderately clean handkerchief. Twisting this into a makeshift teat, he dipped it in the milk and carefully inserted the dripping cloth into the open maw. The mewling ceased at once, and we both sighed with relief as the noise stopped.

"Ah, that's better, is it? *Seas, a bhalaich, seas,*" Jamie was murmuring to the child, dipping more milk. I peered down at the tiny face, still pale and waxy with vernix, but no longer chalky, as it suckled with deep concentration.

"How could she have left it?" I wondered aloud. "And why?"

That was the best argument for kidnapping; what else could have made a new mother abandon her child? To say nothing of making off on foot into a darkened wood immediately after giving birth, heavy-footed and sore, her own flesh still torn and oozing … I grimaced at the thought, my womb tightening in sympathy.

Jamie shook his head, his eyes still intent on his task.

"She had some reason, but Christ and the saints only ken what it is. She didna hate the child, though—she might have left it in the wood, and us none the wiser."

That was true; she—or someone—had wrapped the baby carefully, and left it as close to the fire as she could. She wished it to survive, then—but without her.

"You think she left willingly, then?"

He nodded, glancing at me.

"We're no far from the Treaty Line here. It *could* be Indians—but if it was, if someone took her, why should they not capture us as well? Or kill us all?" he asked logically. "And Indians would have taken the horses. Nay, I think she went on her own. But as to why …" He shook his head, and dipped the handkerchief again.

The snow was falling faster now, still a dry, light snow, but beginning to stick in random patches. We should leave soon, I thought, before the storm grew worse. It seemed somehow wrong, though, simply to go, with no attempt to determine the fate of Fanny Beardsley.

The whole situation seemed unreal. It was as though the woman had suddenly vanished through some sorcery, leaving this small substitute in exchange. It reminded me bizarrely of the Scottish tales of changelings; fairy offspring left in the place of human babies. I couldn't fathom what the fairies could possibly want with Fanny Beardsley, though.

I knew it was futile, but turned slowly round once more, surveying our surroundings. Nothing. The clay bank loomed over us, fringed with dry, snow-dusted grass. The trickle of a tiny stream ran past a little distance away, and the trees rustled and sighed in the wind. There was no mark of hoof or foot on the layer of damp, spongy needles, and no hint of any trail. The woods were not at all silent, what with the wind, but dark and deep, all right.

"And miles to go before we sleep," I remarked, turning back to Jamie with a sigh.

"Eh? Ah, no, it's no more than an hour's ride to Brownsville," he assured me. "Or maybe two," he amended, glancing up at the white-muslin sky, from which the snow was falling faster. "I ken where we are, now it's light."

He coughed again, a sudden spasm racking his body, then straightened, and handed me the cup and dummy.

"Here, Sassenach. Feed the poor wee *sgaogan* while I tend the beasts, aye?"

Sgaogan. A changeling. So the air of supernatural strangeness about the whole affair had struck him, too. Well, the woman had claimed to see ghosts; perhaps one of them had come for her? I shivered, and cradled the baby closer.

"Is there any settlement near here, besides Brownsville? Anywhere Mrs. Beardsley might have decided to go?"

Jamie shook his head, a line between his brows. The snow melted where it touched his heated skin, and ran down his face in tiny streams.

“Naught that I ken,” he said. “Is the wean takin’ to the goat’s milk?”

“Like a kid,” I assured him, and laughed. He looked puzzled, but one side of his mouth turned up nonetheless—he wanted humor just now, whether he understood the joke or not.

“That’s what the Americans call—will call—children,” I told him. “Kids.”

The smile broadened across his face.

“Oh, aye? So that’s why Brianna and MacKenzie call wee Jem so, is it? I thought it was only a bit of private fun between them.”

He milked the rest of the goats quickly while I dribbled more nourishment into the child, bringing back a brimming bucket of warm milk for our own breakfast. I should have liked a nice hot cup of tea—my fingers were chilled and numb from dipping the false teat over and over—but the creamy white stuff was delicious, and as much comfort to our chilled and empty stomachs as to the little one’s.

The child had stopped suckling, and had wet itself copiously; a good sign of health, by and large, but rather inconvenient just at the moment, as both its swaddling cloth and the front of my bodice were now soaked.

Jamie rootled hastily through the packs once again, this time in search of diapering and dry clothes. Fortunately, Mrs. Piggy had been carrying the bag in which I kept lengths of linen and wads of cotton lint for cleansing and bandaging. He took a handful of these and the child, while I went about the awkward and drafty business of changing my shift and bodice without removing skirt, petticoat, or cloak.

“P-put on your own cloak,” I said, through chattering teeth. “You’ll die of f-frigging pneumonia.”

He smiled at that, eyes focused on his job, though the tip of his nose glowed redly in contrast to his pale face.

“I’m fine,” he croaked, then cleared his throat with a noise like ripping cloth, impatient. “Fine,” he repeated, more strongly, then stopped, eyes widening in surprise.

“Oh,” he said, more softly. “Look. It’s a wee lassie.”

“Is it?” I dropped to my knees beside him to look.

“Rather plain,” he said, critically surveying the little creature. “A good thing she’ll have a decent dowry.”

“I don’t suppose you were any great beauty when you were born, either,” I said rebukingly. “She hasn’t even been properly cleaned, poor thing. What do you mean about her dowry, though?”

He shrugged, contriving to keep the child covered with a shawl, meanwhile sliding a folded sheet of linen dexterously beneath her miniature bottom.

“Her father’s dead and her mother’s gone. She’s no brothers or sisters to share, and I didna find any will in the house saying that anyone else was to have Beardsley’s property. There’s a decent farm left, though, and a good bit in trade goods there—to say nothing of the goats.” He glanced at Hiram and his family, and smiled. “So they’ll all be hers, I expect.”

“I suppose so,” I said slowly. “So she’ll be a rather well-to-do little girl, won’t she?”

“Aye, and she’s just shit herself. Could ye not have done that before I’d put ye on a fresh clout?” he demanded of the child. Unfazed by the scolding, the little girl blinked sleepily at him and gave a soft belch.

“Oh, well,” he said, resigned. He shifted himself to better shelter her from the wind, lifted the coverings briefly, and wiped a smear of blackish slime deftly off the budlike privates.

The child seemed healthy, though rather undersized; she was no bigger than a large doll, her stomach bulging slightly with milk. That was the immediate difficulty; small as she was, and with no body fat for insulation, she would die of hypothermia within a very short time, unless we could keep her warm as well as fed.

“Don’t let her get chilled.” I put my hands in my armpits to warm them, in preparation for picking up the child.

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach. I must just wipe her wee bum and then—” He stopped, frowning.

“What’s this, Sassenach? Is she damaged, d’ye think? Perhaps yon silly woman dropped her?”

I leaned close to look. He held the baby's feet up in one hand, a wad of soiled cotton lint in the other. Just above the tiny buttocks was a dark bluish discoloration, rather like a bruise.

It wasn't a bruise. It was, though, an explanation of sorts.

"She isn't hurt," I assured him, pulling another of Mrs. Beardsley's discarded shawls up to shelter her daughter's bald head. "It's a Mongol spot."

"A what?"

"It means the child is black," I explained. "African, I mean, or partly so." Jamie blinked, startled, then bent to peer into the shawl, frowning.

"No, she isn't. She's as pale as ye are yourself, Sassenach."

That was quite true; the child was so white as to seem devoid of blood.

"Black children don't usually look black at birth," I explained to him. "In fact, they're often quite pale. The pigmentation of the skin begins to develop some weeks later. But they're often born with this faint discoloration of the skin at the base of the spine—it's called a Mongol spot."

He rubbed a hand over his face, blinking away snowflakes that tried to settle on his lashes.

"I see," he said slowly. "Aye, well, that explains a bit, does it not?"

It did. The late Mr. Beardsley, whatever else he might have been, had assuredly not been black. The child's father had been. And Fanny Beardsley, knowing—or fearing—that the child she was about to bear would reveal her as an adulteress, had thought it better to abandon the child and flee before the truth was revealed. I wondered whether the mysterious father had had anything to do with what had happened to Mr. Beardsley, for that matter.

"Did she know for sure that the father was a Negro, I wonder?" Jamie touched the small underlip, now showing a tinge of pink, gently with one finger. "Or did she never see the child at all? For after all, she must have given birth in the dark. If she had seen it looked white, perhaps she would ha' chosen to brazen it out."

"Perhaps. But she didn't. Who do you suppose the father can have been?" Isolated as the Beardsleys' farm had been, I couldn't imagine Fanny having the opportunity to meet very many men, other than the Indians who came to trade. Did Indian babies perhaps have Mongol spots? I wondered.

Jamie glanced bleakly around at the desolate surroundings, and scooped the child up into his arms.

"I dinna ken, but I shouldna think he'll be hard to spot, once we've reached Brownsville. Let's go, Sassenach."

Jamie reluctantly decided to leave the goats behind, in the interest of reaching shelter and sustenance for the child as quickly as possible.

"They'll be fine here for a bit," he said, scattering the rest of the hay for them. "The nannies wilna leave the auld fellow—and ye're no going anywhere for the present, are ye, *a bhalaich*?" He scratched Hiram between the horns in farewell, and we left to a chorus of protesting *mehs*, the goats having grown used to our company.

The weather was worsening by the moment; as the temperature rose, the snow changed from dry powder to large, wet flakes that stuck to everything, dusting ground and trees with icing sugar, and melting down through the horses' manes.

Well-muffled in my thick hooded cloak, with multiple shawls beneath and the child snuggled in a makeshift sling against my stomach, I was quite warm, in spite of the flakes that brushed my face and stuck in my lashes. Jamie coughed now and then, but on the whole, looked much healthier than he had; the need to take charge of an emergency had energized him.

He rode just behind me, keeping an eye out in case of marauding panthers or other menaces. I thought myself that any self-respecting cat—particularly one with a bellyful of goat—would spend a day like this curled up in some cozy den, not out tramping through the snow. Still, it was very reassuring to have him there; I was vulnerable, riding with one hand on the reins, the other wrapped protectively over the bulge under my cloak.

The child was sleeping, I thought, but not quiet; it stretched and squirmed with the slow, languid movements of the water world, not yet accustomed to the freedom of life outside the womb.

"Ye look as though you're wi' child, Sassenach." I glanced back over my shoulder, to see Jamie looking amused under the brim of his slouch hat, though I thought there was something else in his expression; perhaps a slight wistfulness.

"Probably because I *am* with child," I replied, shifting slightly in the saddle to accommodate the movements of my companion. "It's just somebody else's child I'm with." The pressure of small knees and head and elbows shifting against my belly were in fact unsettlingly like the sensations of pregnancy; the fact that they were outside rather than inside made remarkably little difference.

As though drawn to the swelling under my cloak, Jamie nudged Gideon up beside me. The horse snorted and tossed his head, wanting to push ahead, but Jamie held him back with a soft *"Seas!"* of rebuke, and he subsided, huffing steam.

"Ye're troubled for her?" Jamie asked, with a nod toward the surrounding forest.

No need to ask whom he meant. I nodded, my hand on the curled tiny backbone, arched still to fit the curve of the vanished womb. Where was she, Fanny Beardsley, alone in the wood? Crawled off to die like a wounded beast—or making, perhaps, for some imagined haven, floundering blindly through frozen leaf mold and deepening snow, heading back, maybe, toward the Chesapeake Bay and some memory of open sky, of broad waters and happiness?

Jamie leaned over and laid a hand on mine where it curled over the sleeping child; I could feel the chill of his ungloved fingers through the layer of cloth between us.

"She's made her choice, Sassenach," he said. "And she's trusted us wi' the bairn. We'll see the wee lass safe; that's all we can do for the woman."

I couldn't turn my hand to take his, but nodded. He let my hand go with a squeeze and dropped back, and I turned my face toward our destination, my lashes wet and spiky as I blinked away the melting drops.

By the time we came in sight of Brownsville, though, most of my concern for Fanny Beardsley had been subsumed by anxiety for her daughter. The child was awake and bawling, pummeling my liver with tiny fists in search of food.

I lifted myself in the saddle, peering through the curtain of falling snow. How big a place was Brownsville? I could see no more than the roofline of a single cabin peeping through the evergreen of pine and laurel. One of the men from Granite Falls had said it was sizable, though—what was "sizable," here in the backcountry? What were the odds that at least one of the residents of Brownsville might be a woman with a nursing child?

Jamie had emptied out the canteen and filled it with goat's milk, but it was better, I thought, to reach shelter before trying to feed the baby again. If there was a mother who might offer her milk to the child, that would be best—but if not, the goat's milk would need to be heated; cold as it was outside, to give the baby cold milk might lower her body temperature dangerously.

Mrs. Piggy snorted out a great gout of steam, and suddenly picked up her pace. She knew civilization when she smelled it—and other horses. She threw up her head and whinnied piercingly. Gideon joined her, and when the racket stopped, I could hear the encouraging replies of a number of horses in the distance.

"They're here!" I exhaled in a steamy burst of relief. "The militia—they made it!"

"Well, I should hope so, Sassenach," Jamie replied, taking a firm grip to prevent Gideon's bolting. "If wee Roger couldna find a village at the end of a straight trail, I'd have my doubts of his wits as well as his eyesight." But he was smiling, too.

As we came round a curve in the trail, I could see that Brownsville really *was* a village. Chimney smoke drifted up in soft gray plumes from a dozen cabins, scattered over the hillside that rose to our right, and a cluster of buildings stood together by the road, clearly placed for custom, judging from the rubble of discarded kegs, bottles, and other rubbish strewn in the dead weeds of the roadside.

Across the road from this pothouse, the men had erected a crude shelter for the horses, roofed with pine boughs and walled on one side with more branches to break the wind. The militiamen's horses were gathered under this in a cozy knot, hobbled and snorting, wreathed in clouds of their mingled breath.

Spotting this refuge, our own horses were moving at a good clip; I had to pull heavily on the reins one-handed in order to keep Mrs. Piggy from breaking into a trot, which would have seriously jostled my passenger. As I hauled her back to a reluctant walk, a slight figure detached itself from the shelter of a pine tree and stepped into the road before us, waving.

"Milord," Fergus greeted Jamie, as Gideon slewed to a reluctant halt. He peered up at Jamie from beneath the band of an indigo-dyed knitted cap, which he wore pulled down over his brows. It made his head look rather like the top of a torpedo, dark and dangerous. "You are well? I thought perhaps you had encountered some difficulty."

"Och." Jamie waved vaguely at me, indicating the bulge beneath my cloak. "No really a difficulty; it's only—"

Fergus was staring over Gideon's shoulder at the bulge with some bemusement.

"Quelle virilité, monsieur," he said to Jamie, in tones of deep respect. "My congratulations."

Jamie gave him a scathing look and a Scottish noise that sounded like boulders rolling underwater. The baby began to cry again.

"First things first," I said. "Are there any women here with babies? This child needs milk, and she needs it now."

Fergus nodded, eyes wide with curiosity.

"*Oui*, milady. Two, at least, that I have seen."

"Good. Lead me to them."

He nodded again, and taking hold of Piggy's halter, turned toward the settlement.

"What's amiss, then?" Jamie inquired, and cleared his throat. In my anxiety for the baby, I hadn't paused to consider what Fergus's presence meant. Jamie was right, though; simple concern for our well-being wouldn't have brought him out on the road in this weather.

"Ah. We appear to have a small difficulty, milord." He described the events of the previous afternoon, concluding with a Gallic shrug and a huff of breath. "… and so Monsieur Morton has taken refuge with the horses"—he nodded ahead, toward the makeshift shelter—"while the rest of us enjoy the *hospitalité* of Brownsville."

Jamie looked a trifle grim at this; no doubt from a contemplation of what the *hospitalité* for forty-odd men might cost.

"Mmphm. I take it that the Browns dinna ken Morton is there?"

Fergus shook his head.

"Why *is* Morton there?" I asked, having temporarily stifled the baby by putting it to my own breast. "I should have thought he'd be off away, back to Granite Falls, and pleased to be alive."

"He will not go, milady. He says he cannot forgo the bounty." Word had come just before our departure from the Ridge; the Governor was offering forty shillings per man as an inducement to serve in the militia; a substantial sum, particularly to a new homesteader such as Morton, facing a bleak winter.

Jamie rubbed a hand slowly over his face. This was a dilemma, all right; the militia company needed the men and supplies from Brownsville, but Jamie could scarcely conscript several Browns who would immediately attempt to assassinate Morton. Nor could he afford to pay Morton's bounty himself. Jamie looked as though he were tempted to assassinate Morton personally, but I supposed this wasn't a reasonable alternative.

"Perhaps Morton could be induced to marry the girl?" I suggested delicately.

"I thought of that," Fergus said. "Regretfully, Monsieur Morton is already possessed of a wife in Granite Falls." He shook his head, which was beginning to look like a small snowcapped hillock in his cap.

"Why did the Browns not follow yon Morton?" Jamie asked, apparently following his own train of thought. "If an enemy comes upon your land, and you wi' your kin, ye dinna just let him flee; ye hunt him down and kill him."

Fergus nodded, clearly familiar with this brand of Highland logic.

"I believe that was the intent," he said. "They were distracted, however, by *le petit Roger*."

I could hear a distinct note of amusement in his voice; so could Jamie.

"What did he do?" he asked warily.

"Sang to them," Fergus said, the amusement becoming more pronounced. "He has been singing most of the night, and playing upon his drum. The entire village came to hear—there are six men of suitable age for the militia, and," he added practically, "the two women *avec lait*, as I said, milady."

Jamie coughed, wiped a hand under his nose, and nodded to Fergus, with a wave at me.

"Aye. Well, the wee lass must eat, and I canna stay back or the Browns will tumble to it that Morton's here. Go and say to him that I shall come and speak to him as soon as may be."

He reined his horse's head toward the tavern, and I nudged Mrs. Piggy to follow.

"What are you going to do about the Browns?" I asked.

"Christ," Jamie said, more to himself than to me. "How in hell should I know?" And coughed again.

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MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

Our arrival with the baby created a sufficient sensation to distract everyone in Brownsville from their private concerns, be these practical or homicidal. A look of intense relief crossed Roger's face at sight of Jamie, though this was instantly suppressed, replaced by a bland attitude of square-shouldered self-assurance. I ducked my head to hide a smile, and glanced at Jamie, wondering if he had noted this rapid transformation. He sedulously avoided my eye, indicating that he had.

"Ye've done well," he said in a casual undertone, clapping Roger's shoulder in greeting before turning to receive the salutations of the other men and introductions to our involuntary hosts.

Roger merely nodded in an offhand sort of way, but his face took on a muted glow, as though someone had lit a candle inside him.

Young Miss Beardsley caused a great stir; one of the nursing mothers was fetched and at once put the screeching baby to her breast, hastily handing me her own child in exchange. A three-month-old boy of placid temperament, he looked up at me with mild bewilderment, but seemed not to object to the substitution, merely blowing a few thoughtful spit bubbles in my direction.

A certain amount of confusion ensued, with everyone asking questions and offering speculations at once, but Jamie's story—edited to terseness—of events at the Beardsley farm put a stop to the hubbub. Even the red-eyed young woman whom I recognized from Fergus's story as Isaiah Morton's inamorata forgot her grief, listening openmouthed.

"Poor little creature," she said, peering at the baby as it suckled fiercely at her cousin's breast. "So you have no parents at all, it seems." Miss Brown cast a dark look at her own father, apparently thinking orphanhood had its advantages.

"What will become of her?" Mrs. Brown asked, with more practicality.

"Oh, we'll see she's taken good care of, my dear. She'll find a secure place with us." Her husband put a reassuring hand on her arm, at the same time exchanging a glance with his brother. Jamie saw it, too; I saw his mouth twitch as though he might say something, but he shrugged slightly and turned instead to confer with Henry Gallegher and Fergus, his two stiff fingers tapping gently on his leg.

The elder Miss Brown leaned toward me, preparing to ask another question, but was prevented by a sudden blast of arctic wind that blew through the big room, lifting the loose hides over the windows and peppering the room with a spray of snow like frozen bird shot. Miss Brown gave a small whoop, abandoned her curiosity, and ran to fasten down the window coverings; everyone else stopped discussing the Beardsleys and began hastily to batten down hatches.

I caught a quick glimpse outside, as Miss Brown struggled with the unwieldy hides. The storm had arrived now in good earnest. Snow was coming down thick and fast; the black ruts of the road had all but disappeared under a coating of white, and it was obvious that Fraser's Company was going nowhere for the time being. Mr. Richard Brown, looking mildly disgruntled, nonetheless graciously offered us a second night's shelter, and the militiamen settled in for supper among the houses and barns of the village.

Jamie went out to bring in our bedding and provisions from the horses, and see them fed and sheltered. Presumably he would also take the opportunity to speak privately with Isaiah Morton, if the latter was still lurking out there in the blizzard.

I did wonder what Jamie meant to do with his mountain Romeo, but I hadn't time for much speculation. It was getting on now for twilight, and I was sucked into the swirl of activity around the hearth, as the women rose to the fresh challenge of providing supper for forty unexpected guests.

Juliet—that is, the younger Miss Brown—moped sullenly in the corner, refusing to help. She did, though, take over care of the Beardsley baby, rocking the little girl and crooning to her long after it was plain that the child was asleep.

Fergus and Gallegher had been sent off to retrieve the goats, and returned with them just before suppertime, wet and muddy to the knees, their beards and eyebrows frosted with snow. The nannies were wet and snow-caked, too, their chilled udders red with cold, milk-swollen and swinging painfully against their legs. They were enchanted to be back in the bosom of civilization, though, and nattered to each other in cheerful excitement.

Mrs. Brown and her sister-in-law took the goats off to the tiny barn to be milked, leaving me in charge of the stewpot and Hiram, who was installed in solitary majesty near the hearth, contained in a makeshift pen composed of an overturned table, two stools, and a blanket chest.

The cabin was essentially one large, drafty room, with a walled loft above and a small lean-to at the back for storage. Crowded as it was with tables, benches, stools, kegs of beer, bundles of hides, a small handloom in one corner, a chiffonier—with a most incongruous chiming clock, adorned with cupids—in another, a bed against the wall, two settles by the hearth, a musket and two fowling pieces hung above the chimney breast, and various aprons and cloaks on pegs by the door, the presence of a sick goat was surprisingly inconsequential.

I had a look at my erstwhile patient, who *meh*ed ungratefully at me, long blue tongue protruding in derision. Snow was melting from the deep spirals of his horns, leaving them black and shiny, and his coat was soaked into brindled spikes round his shoulders.

“There’s gratitude for you,” I said rebukingly. “If it weren’t for Jamie, you’d be cooking *over* that fire, instead of beside it, and good enough for you, too, you wicked old sod.”

“Meh!” he said shortly.

Still, he was cold, tired, and hungry, and his harem wasn't there to be impressed, so he suffered me to rub his head and scratch his ears, feed him wisps of hay, and—eventually—to step into his pen and run a light hand down his injured leg to check the splinting. I was more than a little tired and hungry, too, having had nothing to eat since a little goat's milk at dawn. Between the smell of the simmering stew and the flickering light and shadows in the room, I felt light-headed, and very slightly disembodied, as though I were floating a foot or two above the floor.

"You're a nice old lad, aren't you?" I murmured. After an afternoon spent in close contact with babies, all in varying stages of moistness and shrieking, the company of the irascible old goat was rather soothing.

"Is he going to die?"

I looked up in surprise, having quite forgotten the younger Miss Brown, who had been overlooked in the shadows of the settle. She was standing by the hearth now, still holding the Beardsley baby and frowning down at Hiram, who was trying to nibble the edge of my apron.

"No," I said, twitching the cloth out of his mouth. "I shouldn't think so." What *was* her name? I groped blearily through my memory, matching up faces and names from the earlier flurry of introductions. Alicia, that was it, though I couldn't help still thinking of her as Juliet.

She wasn't much older than Juliet; barely fifteen, if that. She was a plain child, though, round-jawed and pasty. Narrow in the shoulder and broad through the hip; not much of the jewel in the Ethiop's ear about her. She said nothing more, and to keep the conversation going, I nodded at the baby, still in her arms. "How's the little one?"

"All right," she said listlessly. She stood staring at the goat a moment longer. Then tears suddenly welled in her eyes.

"I wish *I* was dead," she said.

"Oh, really?" I said, taken aback. "Er … well …" I rubbed a hand over my face, trying to summon enough presence of mind to deal with this. Where was the beastly girl's mother? I cast a quick look at the door, but heard no one coming. We were momentarily alone, the women milking or minding supper, the men all caring for the stock.

I stepped out of Hiram's pen and laid a hand on her arm.

"Look," I said in a low voice. "Isaiah Morton's not worth it. He's married; did you know that?"

Her eyes went wide, then squinted nearly shut, spurting sudden tears. No, evidently she hadn't known.

Tears were pouring down her cheeks and dripping on the baby's oblivious head. I reached out and took the swaddled child gently from her, steering her toward the settle with my free hand.

"H-how did you …? Wh-who …?" She was gurgling and sniffling, trying to ask questions and get control of herself at the same time. A man's voice shouted something outside, and she scrubbed frantically at her cheeks with her sleeve.

The gesture reminded me that while the situation seemed rather melodramatic—not to say slightly comic—in my currently muzzy frame of mind, it was a matter of great seriousness to the principals involved in it. After all, her male relations *had* tried to kill Morton, and would certainly try again, if they found him. I tensed at the sound of approaching feet, and the baby stirred and whined a little in my arms. But the footsteps crunched past in the road, and the sound vanished in the wind.

I sat down beside Alicia Brown, sighing with the sheer pleasure of taking weight off my feet. Every muscle and joint in my body ached from the aftereffects of the previous day and night, though I hadn't had time until now to think about it much. Jamie and I would undoubtedly spend the night wrapped in blankets on someone's floor; I eyed the grimy, firelit boards with an emotion approaching lust.

It was incongruously peaceful in the large room, with the snow whispering down outside, and the stewpot burbling away in the hearth, filling the air with the enticing scents of onion, venison, and turnips. The baby slept on my breast, emanating peaceful trust. I would have liked just to sit and hold her, thinking of nothing, but duty called.

"How do I know? Morton told one of my husband's men," I said. "I don't know who his wife is, though; only that she lives in Granite Falls." I patted the tiny back, and the baby burped faintly and relaxed again, her breath warm beneath my ear. The women had washed and oiled her, and she smelled rather like a fresh pancake. I kept one eye on the door, and the other warily on Alicia Brown, in case of further hysterics.

She sniffed and sobbed, hiccuped once, and then relapsed into silence, staring at the floor.

"I wish I was *dead*," she whispered again, in tones of such fierce despair that I set both eyes on her, startled. She sat hunched, hair hanging limply beneath her cap, her hands fisted and crossed protectively over her belly.

"Oh, dear," I said. Given her pallor, the circumstances, and her behavior toward the Beardsley baby, that particular gesture made it no great leap to the obvious conclusion. "Do your parents know?"

She gave me a quick look, but didn't bother asking how *I* knew.

"Mama and Aunt do."

She was breathing through her mouth, with intermittent wet snuffles.

"I thought—I thought Papa would have to let me wed him, if—"

I never had thought blackmail a very successful basis for marriage, but this seemed the wrong time to say so.

"Mmm," I said instead. "And does Mr. Morton know about it?"

She shook her head, disconsolate.

"Does he—does his wife have children, do you know?"

"I've no idea." I turned my head, listening. I could hear men's voices in the distance, carried on the wind. So could she; she gripped my arm with surprising strength, wet brown eyes spike-lashed and urgent.

"I heard Mr. MacKenzie and the men talking last night. They said you were a healer, Mrs. Fraser—one said you were a conjure woman. About babies. Do you know how—"

"Someone's coming." I pulled away from her, interrupting before she could finish. "Here, take care of the baby. I need to—to stir the stew."

I thrust the child unceremoniously into her arms and rose. When the door opened to admit a blast of wind and snow along with a large number of men, I was standing at the hearth, spoon in hand, eyes fixed on the pot and my mind bubbling as vigorously as the stew.

She hadn't had time to ask explicitly, but I knew what she'd been about to say. *Conjure woman,* she'd called me. She wanted my help to get rid of the child, almost certainly. How? I wondered. How could a woman think of such a thing, with a living child in her arms, less than a day out of the womb?

But she was very young. Very young, and suffering from the shock of hearing that her lover was untrue. Not yet far enough advanced in pregnancy to show, either; if she hadn't yet felt her own child move, no doubt it seemed quite unreal to her. She'd seen it only as a means of forcing her father's consent; now it likely seemed a trap that had closed suddenly upon her.

No wonder if she was distraught, looking frantically for escape. Give her a little time to recover, I thought, glancing at the settle, where the shadows hid her. I should talk to her mother, to her aunt.…

Jamie appeared suddenly beside me, rubbing reddened hands over the fire, snow melting from the folds of his clothes. He looked extremely cheerful, in spite of his cold, the complications of Isaiah Morton's love life, and the storm going on outside.

"How is it, Sassenach?" he asked hoarsely, and without waiting for me to reply, took the spoon from my hand, put one hard, cold arm around me, and pulled me off my feet and up into a hearty kiss, made the more startling by the fact that his half-sprouted beard was thickly encrusted with snow.

Emerging slightly dazed from this stimulating embrace, I realized that the general attitude of the men in the room was similarly jolly. Backs were being slapped, boots stamped, and coats shaken to the accompaniment of the sort of hoots and roaring noises men make when feeling particularly exuberant.

"What is it?" I asked, looking round in surprise. To my astonishment, Joseph Wemyss stood in the center of the crowd. The tip of his nose was red with cold, and he was being knocked half off his feet by men smacking him on the back in congratulations. “What’s happened?”

Jamie gave me a brilliant smile, teeth gleaming in the frozen wilderness of his face, and thrust a limp crumple of wet paper into my hand, fragments of red wax still clinging to it.

The ink had run with the wet, but I could make out the relevant words. Hearing of General Waddell’s intended approach, the Regulators had decided that discretion was the better part of valor. They had dispersed. And as per this order from Governor Tryon—the militia was stood down.

“Oh, *good*!” I said. And flinging my arms round Jamie, kissed him back, snow and ice notwithstanding.

Thrilled with the news of the stand-down, the militia took advantage of the bad weather to celebrate. Equally thrilled not to be obliged to join the militia, the Browns instead joined heartily in the celebration, contributing three large kegs of Thomasina Brown’s best home-brewed beer and six gallons of hard cider to the cause—at half-cost.

By the time supper was over, I sat in the corner of a settle with the Beardsley baby in my arms, half-dissolved with weariness, and kept vertical only by the fact that there was no place as yet to lie down. The air shimmered with smoke and conversation, I had drunk strong cider with my supper, and both faces and voices tended to swim in and out of focus, in a way that was not at all disagreeable, though mildly disconcerting.

Alicia Brown had had no further chance to speak with me—but I had had no chance to speak with her mother or her aunt. The girl had taken up a seat by Hiram’s pen, and was methodically feeding the goat crusts of corn bread left from supper, her face set in lines of sullen misery.

Roger was singing French ballads, by popular request, in a soft, true voice. A young woman’s face floated into view in front of me, eyebrows raised in question. She said something, lost in the babble of voices, then reached gently to take the baby from me.

Of course. Jemima, that was her name. The young mother who had offered to nurse the child. I stood up to give her room on the settle, and she put the baby at once to her breast.

I leaned against the chimney piece, watching with dim approval as she cupped the child's head, guiding it and murmuring. She was both tender and businesslike; a good combination. Her own baby—little Christopher, that was his name—snored peaceably in his grandmother's arms, as the old lady bent to light her clay pipe from the fire.

I glanced back at Jemima, and had the oddest sense of déjà vu. I blinked, trying to catch the fleeting vision, and succeeded in capturing a sense of overwhelming closeness, of warmth and utter peace. For an instant, I thought it was the sense of nursing a child, and then, odder still, realized that it was not the mother's sense I felt … but the child's. I had the very distinct memory—if that's what it was—of being held against a warm body, mindless and replete in the sure conviction of absolute love.

I closed my eyes, and took a firmer grip on the chimney breast, feeling the room begin a slow and lazy spin about me.

"Beauchamp," I murmured, "you are *quite* drunk."

If so, I wasn't the only one. Delighted at the prospect of imminent return to their homes, the militiamen had absorbed most of the drinkables in Brownsville, and were working assiduously on the remainder. The party was beginning to break up now, though, with men stumbling off to cold beds in barns and sheds, others thankfully rolling up in blankets by the fire.

I opened my eyes to see Jamie throw back his head and yawn enormously, gape-jawed as a baboon. He blinked and stood up, shaking off the stupor of food and beer, then glanced toward the hearth and saw me standing there. He was plainly as tired as I was, if not quite as giddy, but he had a sense of deep content about him, apparent in the long-limbed ease with which he stretched and settled himself.

“I’m going to see to the horses,” he said to me, voice husky from grippe and much talking. “Fancy a walk in the moonlight, Sassenach?”

The snow had stopped, and there *was* moonlight, glowing through a haze of vanishing cloud. The air was lung-chillingly cold, still fresh and restless with the ghost of the passing storm, and did much to clear my spinning head.

I felt a childish delight in being the first to mark the virgin snow, and stepped high and carefully, making neat bootprints and looking back to admire them. The line of footprints wasn’t very straight, but fortunately no one was testing my sobriety.

“Can you recite the alphabet backward?” I asked Jamie, whose footsteps were wavering companionably along with my own.

“I expect so,” he replied. “Which one? English, Greek, or Hebrew?”

“Never mind.” I took a firmer grip of his arm. “If you remember all three forward, you’re in better condition than I am.”

He laughed softly, then coughed.

“You’re never drunk, Sassenach. Not on three cups of cider.”

“Must be fatigue, then,” I said dreamily. “I feel as though my head’s bobbing about on a string like a balloon. How do you know how much I drank? Do you notice *everything*?”

He laughed again, and folded a hand round mine where it clutched his arm.

“I like to watch ye, Sassenach. Especially in company. You’ve the loveliest shine to your teeth when ye laugh.”

“Flatterer,” I said, feeling nonetheless flattered. Given that I hadn’t so much as washed my face in several days, let alone bathed or changed my clothes, my teeth were likely the only things about me that could be honestly admired. Still, the knowledge of his attention was singularly warming.

It was a dry snow, and the white crust compressed beneath our feet with a low crunching noise. I could hear Jamie’s breathing, hoarse and labored still, but the rattle in his chest had gone, and his skin was cool.

"It will be fair by morning," he said, looking up at the hazy moon. "D'ye see the ring?"

It was hard to miss; an immense circle of diffuse light that ringed the moon, covering the whole of the eastern sky. Faint stars were showing through the haze; it would be bright and clear within the hour.

"Yes. We can go home tomorrow, then?"

"Aye. It will be muddy going, I expect. Ye can feel the air changing; it's cold enough now, but the snow will melt as soon as the sun's full on it."

Perhaps it would, but it *was* cold enough now. The horses' brushy shelter had been reinforced with more cut branches of pine and hemlock, and it looked like a small, lumpy hillock rising from the ground, thickly covered over with snow. Dark patches had melted clear, though, warmed by the horses' breath, and wisps of steam rose from them, scarcely visible. Everything was quiet, with a palpable sense of drowsy content.

"Morton will be cozy, if he's in there," I observed.

"I shouldna think so. I sent Fergus out to tell him the militia was disbanded, so soon as Wemyss came wi' the note."

"Yes, but if I were Isaiah Morton, I don't know that I would have set straight out on the road home in a blinding snowstorm," I said dubiously.

"Likely ye would, if ye had all the Browns in Brownsville after ye wi' guns," he said. Nonetheless, he paused in his step, raised his voice a little, and called "Isaiah!" in a croaking rasp.

There was no answer from the makeshift stable, and taking my arm again, he turned back toward the house. The snow was virgin no longer, trampled and muddied by the prints of many feet, as the militia dispersed to their beds. Roger had stopped singing, but there were still voices from inside the house; not everyone was ready to retire.

Reluctant to go back at once to the atmosphere of smoke and noise, we walked by unspoken mutual consent round the house and barn, enjoying the silence of the snowy wood and the nearness of each other. Coming back, I saw that the door of the lean-to at the rear of the house stood ajar, creaking in the wind, and pointed it out to Jamie.

He poked his head inside, to see that all was in order, but then, instead of closing the door, he reached back and took my arm, pulling me into the lean-to after him.

"I'd a question to ask ye, Sassenach, before we go in," he said. He set the door open, so the moonlight streamed in, shining dimly on the hanging hams, the hogsheads and burlap bags that inhabited the lean-to with us.

It was cold inside, but out of the wind I at once felt warmer, and put back the hood of my cloak.

"What is it?" I said, mildly curious. The fresh air had cleared my head, at least, and while I knew I would be as good as dead the instant I lay down, for the moment I had that sense of pleasant lightness that comes with the feeling of effort completed, honor satisfied. It had been a terrible day and night, and a long day after, but now it was done, and we were free.

"Do ye want her, Sassenach?" he asked softly. His face was a pale oval, blurred by the mist of his breath.

"Who?" I asked, startled. He gave a small grunt of amusement.

"The child. Who else?"

Who else, indeed.

"Do I want her—to keep her, you mean?" I asked cautiously. "Adopt her?" The notion hadn't crossed my mind consciously, but must have been lurking somewhere in my subconscious, for I was not startled at his question, and at the speaking, the idea sprang into full flower.

My breasts had been tender since the morning, feeling full and engorged, and I felt the demanding tug of the little girl's mouth in memory. I could not feed the baby myself—but Brianna could, or Marsali. Or she could live on cow's milk, goat's milk.

I realized suddenly that I had unconsciously cupped one breast, and was gently massaging it. I stopped at once, but Jamie had seen it; he moved closer and put an arm around me. I leaned my head against him, the rough weave of his hunting shirt cold against my cheek.

"Do *you* want her?" I asked. I wasn't sure whether I was hopeful of his answer, or fearful of it. The answer was a slight shrug.

"It's a big house, Sassenach," he said. "Big enough."

"Hmm," I said. Not a resounding declaration—and yet I knew it was commitment, no matter how casually expressed. He had acquired Fergus in a Paris brothel, on the basis of three minutes' acquaintance, as a hired pickpocket. If he took this child, he would treat her as a daughter. Love her? No one could guarantee love—not he … and not I.

He had picked up my dubious tone of voice.

"I saw ye with the wean, Sassenach, riding. Ye've a great tenderness about ye always—but when I saw ye so, wi' the bairn tumbling about beneath your cloak, it—I remembered, how it was, how ye looked, when ye carried Faith."

I caught my breath. To hear him speak the name of our first daughter like that, so matter-of-factly, was startling. We spoke of her seldom; her death was so long in the past that sometimes it seemed unreal, and yet the wound of her loss had scarred both of us badly.

Faith herself was not unreal at all, though.

She was near me, whenever I touched a baby. And this child, this nameless orphan, so small and frail, with skin so translucent that the blue threads of her veins showed clear beneath—yes, the echoes of Faith were strong. Still, she wasn't *my* child. Though she could be; that was what Jamie was saying.

Was she perhaps a gift to us? Or at least our responsibility?

"Do you think we ought to take her?" I asked cautiously. "I mean—what might happen to her if we don't?"

Jamie snorted faintly, dropping his arm, and leaned back against the wall of the house. He wiped his nose, and tilted his head toward the faint rumble of voices that came through the chinked logs.

"She'd be well cared for, Sassenach. She's in the way of being an heiress, ken."

That aspect of the matter hadn't occurred to me at all.

“Are you sure?” I said dubiously. “I mean, the Beardsleys are both gone, but as she’s illegitimate—”

He shook his head, interrupting me.

“Nay, she’s legitimate.”

“But she can’t be. No one realizes it yet except you and me, but her father—”

“Her father was Aaron Beardsley, so far as the law is concerned,” he informed me. “By English law, a child born in wedlock is the legal child—*and* heir—of the husband—even if it’s known for a fact that the mother committed adultery. And yon woman did say that Beardsley married her, no?”

It struck me that he was remarkably positive about this particular provision of English law. It also struck me—in time, thank God, before I said anything—exactly *why* he was positive.

William. His son, conceived in England, and so far as anyone in England knew—with the exception of Lord John Grey—presumably the ninth Earl of Ellesmere. Evidently, he legally *was* the ninth Earl, according to what Jamie was telling me, whether the eighth Earl had been his father or not. The law really was an ass, I thought.

“I see,” I said slowly. “So little Nameless will inherit all Beardsley’s property, even after they discover that he can’t have been her father. That’s … reassuring.”

His eyes met mine for a moment, then dropped.

“Aye,” he said quietly. “Reassuring.” There might have been a hint of bitterness in his voice, but if there was, it vanished without trace as he coughed and cleared his throat.

“So ye see,” he went on, matter-of-factly, “she’s in no danger of neglect. An Orphan Court would give Beardsley’s property—goats and all”—he added, with a faint grin—“to whomever is her guardian, to be used for her welfare.”

“And her guardians’,” I said, suddenly recalling the look Richard Brown had exchanged with his brother, when telling his wife the child would be “well cared for.” I rubbed my nose, which had gone numb at the tip.

“So the Browns would take her willingly, then.”

"Oh, aye," he agreed. "They kent Beardsley; they'll ken well enough how valuable she is. It would be a delicate matter to get her away from them, in fact—but if ye want the child, Sassenach, then ye'll have her. I promise ye that."

The whole discussion was giving me a very queer feeling. Something almost like panic, as though I were being pushed by some unseen hand toward the edge of a precipice. Whether that was a dangerous cliff or merely a foothold for a larger view remained to be seen.

I saw in memory the gentle curve of the baby's skull, and the tissue-paper ears, small and perfect as shells, their soft pink whorls fading into an otherworldly tinge of blue.

To give myself a little time to organize my thoughts, I asked, "What did you mean, it would be a delicate matter to get her away from the Browns? They've no claim on her, have they?"

He shook his head.

"Nay, but none of them shot her father, either."

"What—oh." That was a potential trap that I hadn't seen; the possibility that Jamie might be accused of killing Beardsley in order to get his hands on the trader's farm and goods, by then adopting the orphan. I swallowed, the back of my throat tasting faintly of bile.

"But no one knows how Aaron Beardsley died, except us," I pointed out. Jamie had told them only that the trader had had an apoplexy and died, leaving out his own role as the angel of deliverance.

"Us and Mrs. Beardsley," he said, a faint tone of irony in his voice. "And if she should come back, and accuse me of murdering her husband? It would be hard to deny, and I'd taken the child."

I forbore from asking why she might do such a thing; in light of what she had already done, it was clear enough that Fanny Beardsley might do anything.

"She won't come back," I said. Whatever my own uncertainties about the rest of it, I was sure that in this respect at least, I spoke the truth. Wherever Fanny Beardsley had gone—or why—I was sure she had gone for good.

"Even if she did," I went on, pushing aside my vision of snow drifting through an empty wood, and a wrapped bundle lying by the burned-out fire, "I was there. I could say what happened."

"If they'd let ye," Jamie agreed. "Which they wouldna. You're a marrit woman, Sassenach; ye couldna testify in a court, even if ye weren't my own wife."

That brought me up short. Living as we did in the wilderness, I seldom encountered the more outrageous legal injustices of the times in a personal way, but I was aware of some of them. He was right. In fact, as a married woman, I had no legal rights at all. Ironically enough, Fanny Beardsley *did*, being now a widow. *She* could testify in a court of law—if she wished.

"Well, bloody hell!" I said, with feeling. Jamie laughed, though quietly, then coughed.

I snorted, with a satisfactory explosion of white vapor. I wished momentarily that I was a dragon; it would have been extremely enjoyable to huff flame and brimstone on a number of people, starting with Fanny Beardsley. Instead, I sighed, my harmless white breath vanishing in the dimness of the lean-to.

"I see what you mean by 'delicate,' then," I said.

"Aye—but not impossible." He cupped a large, cold hand along my cheek, turning my face up to his. His eyes searched my own, dark and intent.

"If ye want the child, Claire, I will take her, and manage whatever comes."

If I wanted her. I could feel the soft weight of the child, sleeping on my breast. I had forgotten the intoxication of motherhood for years; pushed aside the memory of the feelings of exaltation, exhaustion, panic, delight. Having Germain and Jemmy and Joan nearby, though, had reminded me vividly.

"One last question," I said. I took his hand and brought it down, fingers linked with mine. "The baby's father wasn't white. What might that mean to her?"

I knew what it would have meant in Boston of the 1960s, but this was a very different place, and while in some ways society here was more rigid and less officially enlightened than the time I had come from, in others it was oddly much more tolerant.

Jamie considered carefully, the stiff fingers of his right hand tapping out a silent rhythm of contemplation on the head of a barrel of salt pork.

"I think it will be all right," he said at last. "There's no question of her being taken into slavery. Even if it could be proved that her father was a slave—and there's no proof at all—a child takes the mother's status. A child born to a free woman is free; a child born to a slave woman is a slave. And whatever yon dreadful woman might be, she wasna a slave."

"Not in name, at least," I said, thinking of the marks on the doorpost. "But beyond the question of slavery …?"

He sighed and straightened.

"I think not," he said. "Not here. In Charleston, aye, it would likely matter; at least if she were in society. But in the backcountry?"

He shrugged. True enough; so close as we were to the Treaty Line, there were any number of mixed-breed children. It was in no way unusual for settlers to take wives among the Cherokee. It was a good deal rarer to see children born of a black and white liaison in the backcountry, but they were plentiful in the coastal areas. Most of them slaves—but there, nonetheless.

And wee Miss Beardsley would not be "in society," at least, not if we left her with the Browns. Here, her potential wealth would matter a great deal more than the color of her skin. With us, it might be different, for Jamie was—and always would be, despite his income or lack of it—a gentleman.

"That wasn't the last question, after all," I said. I laid a hand over his, cold on my cheek. "The last one is—why are you suggesting the notion?"

"Ah. Well, I only thought …" He dropped his hand, and looked away. "What ye said when we came home from the Gathering. That ye could have chosen the safety of barrenness—but did not, for my sake. I thought—" He stopped again, and rubbed the knuckle of his free hand hard along the bridge of his nose. He took a deep breath and tried again.

"For my sake," he said firmly, addressing the air in front of him as though it were a tribunal, "I dinna want ye to bear another child. I wouldna risk your loss, Sassenach," he said, his voice suddenly husky. "Not for a dozen bairns. I've daughters and sons, nieces and nephews, grandchildren—weans enough."

He looked at me directly then, and spoke softly.

"But I've no life but you, Claire."

He swallowed audibly, and went on, eyes fixed on mine.

"I did think, though … if ye do want another child … perhaps I could still give ye one."

Brief tears blurred my eyes. It was cold in the lean-to, and our fingers were stiff. I fumbled my hand into his, squeezing tight.

Even as we had spoken, my mind had been busy, envisioning possibilities, difficulties, blessings. I did not need to think further, for I knew the decision had made itself. A child was a temptation of the flesh, as well as of the spirit; I knew the bliss of that unbounded oneness, as I knew the bittersweet joy of seeing that oneness fade as the child learned itself and stood alone.

But I had crossed some subtle line. Whether it was that I was born myself with some secret quota embodied in my flesh, or only that I knew my sole allegiance must be given elsewhere now … I knew. As a mother, I had the lightness now of effort complete, honor satisfied. Mission accomplished.

I leaned my forehead against his chest and spoke into the shadowed cloth above his heart.

"No," I said softly. "But, Jamie … I so love you."

We stood wrapped in each other's arms for a time, hearing the rumble of voices from the other side of the wall that separated the house from the lean-to, but silent ourselves, and content with the peace of it. We were at once too exhausted to make the effort to go in, and reluctant to abandon the tranquillity of our rude retreat.

“We’ll have to go in soon,” I murmured at last. “If we don’t, we’ll fall down right here, and be found in the morning, along with the hams.”

A faint wheeze of laughter ran through his chest, but before he could answer, a shadow fell over us. Someone stood in the open door, blocking the moonlight.

Jamie lifted his head sharply, hands tight on my shoulders, but then he let his breath out, and his grip relaxed, allowing me to step back and turn round.

“Morton,” Jamie said, in a long-suffering sort of voice. “What in Christ’s name are ye doing here?”

Isaiah Morton didn’t much look like a rakish seducer, but then, I supposed tastes must differ. He was slightly shorter than I, but broad through the shoulder, with a barrel-shaped torso and slightly bowed legs. He did have rather pleasant-looking eyes and a nice mop of wavy hair, though I was unable to tell the color of either, in the dim light of the lean-to. I estimated his age at somewhere in the early twenties.

“Colonel, sir,” he said in a whisper. “Ma’am.” He gave me a quick, brief bow. “Didn’t mean to give you fright, ma’am. Only I heard the Colonel’s voice and thought I best seize the day, so to speak.”

Jamie regarded Morton narrowly.

“So to speak,” he repeated.

“Yes, sir. I couldn’t make out how I was to get Ally to come forth, and was just a-circling of the house again, when I caught heed of you and your lady talking.”

He bowed to me again, as though by reflex.

“Morton,” Jamie said, softly, but with a certain amount of steel in his voice, “why have ye not gone? Did Fergus not tell ye that the militia is stood down?”

“Oh, aye, sir, he did, sir.” He bowed to Jamie this time, looking faintly anxious. “But I couldn’t go, sir, not without seeing Ally.”

I cleared my throat and glanced at Jamie, who sighed and nodded to me.

“Er … I’m afraid that Miss Brown has heard about your prior entanglement,” I said delicately.

"Eh?" Isaiah looked blank, and Jamie made an irritable noise.

"She means the lass kens ye've a wife already," he said brutally, "and if her father doesna shoot ye on sight, she may stab ye to the heart. And if neither of them succeeds," he went on, drawing himself up to his fully menacing height, "I'm inclined to do the job myself, wi' my bare hands. What sort of man would slip round a lass and get her with child, and him with no right to give it his name?"

Isaiah Morton paled noticeably, even in the dim light.

"With child?"

"She is," I said, quite coldly.

"She is," Jamie repeated, "and now, ye wee bigamist, ye'd best leave, before—"

He stopped speaking abruptly, as Isaiah's hand came out from under his cloak, holding a pistol. Close as he was, I could see that it was both loaded and cocked.

"I'm that sorry, sir," he said apologetically. He licked his lips, glancing from Jamie to me, and back. "I wouldn't do you harm, sir, nor certain sure your lady. But you see, I just got to see Ally." His rather pudgy features firmed a little, though his lips seemed inclined to tremble. Still, he pointed the pistol at Jamie with decision.

"Ma'am," he said to me, "if might be as you'd be so kind, would you go on into the house and fetch Ally out? We'll … just wait here, the Colonel and me."

I hadn't had time to feel afraid. I wasn't really afraid now, though I was speechless with astonishment.

Jamie closed his eyes briefly, as though praying for strength. Then he opened them and sighed, his breath a white cloud in the cold air.

"Put it down, idiot," he said, almost kindly. "Ye ken fine ye willna shoot me, and so do I."

Isaiah tightened both his lips and his trigger finger, and I held my breath. Jamie continued to look at him, his gaze a mixture of censure and pity. At last, the finger relaxed, and the pistol barrel sank, along with Isaiah's eyes.

"I just got to see Ally, Colonel," he said softly, looking at the ground.

I drew a deep breath, and looked up at Jamie. He hesitated, then nodded.

“All right, Sassenach. Go canny, aye?”

I nodded, and turned to slip into the house, hearing Jamie mutter something under his breath in Gaelic behind me, to the general effect that he must have lost his mind.

I wasn’t sure he hadn’t, though I had also felt the strength of Morton’s appeal. If any of the Browns happened to discover this rendezvous, though, there would be hell to pay—and it wouldn’t be only Morton who paid.

The floor inside was littered with sleeping bodies wrapped in blankets, though a few men still huddled round the hearth, gossiping and passing a jug of something spirituous among themselves. I looked carefully, but fortunately Richard Brown was not among them.

I made my way across the room, carefully stepping through and over the bodies on the floor, and peered into the bed that stood against the wall as I passed. Richard Brown and his wife were both curled up in it, sound asleep, nightcaps pulled well down over their respective ears, though the house was warm enough, what with all the trapped body heat.

There was only one place that Alicia Brown could be, and I pushed open the door to the loft stair, as quietly as I could. It made little difference; no one by the fire paid the slightest attention. One of the men appeared to be trying to get Hiram to drink from the jug, with some success.

By contrast to the room below, the loft was quite cold. This was because the small window was uncovered, and quite a lot of snow had drifted in, together with a freezing wind. Alicia Brown was lying in the little snowdrift under the window, stark naked.

I walked over and stood looking down at her. She lay stiffly on her back, arms folded over her chest. She was shivering, and her eyes were squinched shut with ferocious concentration. Obviously, she hadn’t heard my footsteps, over the noises from below.

“What in God’s name are you doing?” I inquired politely.

Her eyes popped open and she gave a small shriek. Then she clapped a hand over her mouth and sat up abruptly, staring at me.

"I've heard of a number of novel ways of inducing miscarriage," I told her, picking up a quilt from the cot and dropping it over her shoulders, "but freezing to death isn't one of them."

"If I'm d-dead, I won't need to m-m-miscarry," she said, with a certain amount of logic. Nonetheless, she drew the quilt around her, teeth chattering.

"Scarcely the best means of committing suicide, either, I shouldn't think," I said. "Though I don't mean to sound critical. Still, you can't do it now; Mr. Morton is out in the lean-to and won't go away until you come down to speak to him, so you'd better get up and put something on."

Her eyes flew wide and she scrambled to her feet, her muscles so stiff with cold that she stumbled awkwardly and would have fallen, had I not grabbed her arm. She said nothing more, but dressed as quickly as her chilled fingers would allow, wrapping a thick cloak around herself.

Bearing in mind Jamie's adjuration to "Go canny," I sent her down the narrow stair alone. Alone, she would be merely assumed to be going to the privy—if anyone even noticed her departure. Both of us together might cause comment.

Left by myself in the darkened loft, I drew my own cloak around me and went to the narrow window to wait for the few minutes necessary before I could leave, too. I heard the soft thump of the door closing below, but couldn't see Alicia from this high angle. Judging from her response to my summons, she didn't intend to stab Isaiah to the heart, but heaven knew what either of them *did* intend.

The clouds were gone now, and the frozen landscape stretched before me, brilliant and ghostly under a setting moon. Across the road, the horses' brushy shelter stood dark, dappled with clumps of snow. The air had changed, as Jamie had said, and warmed by the horses' breath, chunks of melting snow slid free and plopped to the ground.

In spite of my annoyance with the young lovers, and the undertones of comic absurdity attending the whole situation, I couldn't help but feel some sympathy for them. They were so in earnest, so intent on nothing but each other.

And Isaiah's unknown wife?

I hunched my shoulders, shivering slightly inside my cloak. I should disapprove—I did, in fact—but no one knew the true nature of a marriage, save those who made it. And I was too aware of living in a glass house, to think of throwing stones myself. Almost absently, I stroked the smooth metal of my gold wedding ring.

Adultery. Fornication. Betrayal. Dishonor. The words dropped softly in my mind, like the clumps of falling snow, leaving small dark pits, shadows in moonlight.

Excuses could be made, of course. I had not sought what had happened to me, had fought against it, had had no choice. Except that, in the end, one always has a choice. I had made mine, and everything had followed from it.

Bree, Roger, Jemmy. Any children that might be born to them in the future. All of them were here, in one way or another, because of what I had chosen to do, that far-off day on Craigh na Dun.

You take too much upon yourself. Frank had said that to me, many times. Generally in tones of disapproval, meaning that I did things he would have preferred I did not. But now and then in kindness, meaning to relieve me of some burden.

It was in kindness that the thought came to me now, whether it was truly spoken, or only called forth from my exhausted memory for what comfort the words might hold. Everyone makes choices, and no one knows what may be the end of any of them. If my own was to blame for many things, it was not to blame for everything. Nor was harm all that had come of it.

'Til death us do part. There were a great many people who had spoken those vows, only to abandon or betray them. And yet it came to me that neither death nor conscious choice dissolved some bonds. For better or for worse, I had loved two men, and some part of them both would be always with me.

The dreadful thing, I supposed, was that while I had often felt a deep and searing regret for what I had done, I had never felt guilt. With the choice so far behind me, now, perhaps, I did.

I had apologized to Frank a thousand times, and never once had I asked him for forgiveness. It occurred to me suddenly that he had given it, nonetheless—to the best of his ability. The loft was dark, save for faint lines of light that seeped through the chinks of the floor, but it no longer seemed empty.

I stirred abruptly, pulled from my abstraction by sudden movement below. Silent as flying reindeer, two dark figures darted hand-in-hand across the field of snow, cloaks like clouds around them. They hesitated for a moment outside the horses' shelter, then disappeared inside.

I leaned on the sill, heedless of the snow crystals under my palms. I could hear the noise of the horses rousing; whickers and stamping came clearly to me across the clear air. The sounds in the house below had grown fainter; now a clear, loud *"Meh-eh-eh!"* came up through the floorboards, as Hiram sensed the horses' uneasiness.

There was renewed laughter from below, temporarily drowning the sounds across the road. Where was Jamie? I leaned out, the wind billowing the hood of my cloak, brushing a spray of ice across my cheek.

There he was. A tall dark figure, walking across the snow toward the shelter, but going slowly, kicking up white clouds of dusty ice. What … but then I realized that he was following in the lovers' tracks, stamping and floundering deliberately to obliterate a trail that must tell its story clearly to any of the trackers in the house below.

A hole appeared suddenly in the brushy shelter, as a section of the branched wall fell away. Clouds of steam roiled out into the air, and then a horse emerged, carrying two riders, and set off to the west, urged from a walk to a trot and then a canter. The snow was not deep; no more than three or four inches. The horse's hooves left a clear dark trail, leading down the road.

A piercing whinny rose from the shelter, followed by another. Sounds of alarm came from below, scuffling and thuds as men rolled from their blankets or lunged for their weapons. Jamie had disappeared.

All at once, horses burst from the shelter, knocking down the wall and trampling the fallen branches. Snorting, whinnying, kicking, and jostling, they spilled out over the road in a chaos of flying manes and rolling eyes. The last of them sprang from the shelter and joined the runaway, tail whisking away from the switch that landed on its rump.

Jamie flung away the switch and ducked back into the shelter, just as the door below flung open, spilling pale gold light over the scene.

I seized the opportunity of the commotion to run downstairs without being seen. Everyone was outside; even Mrs. Brown had rushed out, nightcap and all, leaving the quilts pulled half off the bed. Hiram, smelling strongly of beer, swayed and *meh*ed tipsily at me as I passed, yellow eyes moist and protuberant with conviviality.

Outside, the roadway was full of half-dressed men, surging to and fro and waving their arms in agitation. I caught sight of Jamie in the midst of the crowd, gesticulating with the best of them. Among the excited bits of question and comment, I heard scraps of speech—"spooked" … "panther?" … "goddamn!" and the like.

After a bit of milling around and incoherent argument, it was unanimously decided that the horses would likely come back by themselves. Snow was blowing off the trees in veils of whirling ice; the wind stuck freezing fingers through every crevice of clothing.

"Would *you* stay out on a night like this?" Roger demanded, reasonably enough. It being generally decided that no sane man would—and horses being, if not quite sane, certainly sensible creatures—the party began to trickle back into the house, shivering and grumbling as the heat of excitement began to die down.

Among the last stragglers, Jamie turned toward the house and saw me, still standing on the porch. His hair was loose and the light from the open door lit him like a torch. He caught my eye, rolled his own toward heaven, and raised his shoulders in the faintest of shrugs.

I put cold fingers to my lips and blew him a small frozen kiss.

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PART FOUR

I Hear No Music
But the Sound of Drums

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33

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

"What would you have done?" Brianna asked. She turned over, moving carefully in the narrow confines of Mr. Wemyss's bed, and parked her chin comfortably in the hollow of Roger's shoulder.

"What would I have done about what?" Warm through for the first time in weeks, filled to bursting with one of Mrs. Bug's dinners, and having finally achieved the nirvana of an hour's privacy with his wife, Roger felt pleasantly drowsy and detached.

"About Isaiah Morton and Alicia Brown."

Roger gave a jaw-cracking yawn and settled himself deeper, the corn-shuck mattress rustling loudly under them. He supposed the whole house had heard them at it earlier, and he didn't really care. She'd washed her hair in honor of his homecoming; waves of it spread over his chest, a silky rich gleam in the dim glow of the hearth. It was only late afternoon, but the shutters were closed, giving the pleasant illusion that they were inside a small private cave.

"I don't know. What your Da did, I suppose; what else? Your hair smells great." He smoothed a lock of it around his finger, admiring the shimmer.

"Thanks. I used some of that stuff Mama makes with walnut oil and marigolds. What about Isaiah's poor wife in Granite Falls, though?"

"What about her? Jamie couldn't force Morton to go home to her—assuming that she wants him back," he added logically. "And the girl—Alicia—was evidently more than willing; your father couldn't very well have made a kerfuffle about Morton leaving with her, unless he wanted the man dead. If the Browns had found Morton there, they would have killed him on the spot and nailed his hide to their barn door."

He spoke with conviction, remembering the pointed guns that had greeted him in Brownsville. He smoothed the hair behind her ear, and lifted his head far enough to kiss her between the eyebrows. He'd been imagining that for days, that smooth pale space between the heavy brows. It seemed like a tiny oasis among the vivid danger of her features; the flash of eyes and blade of nose were more than attractive, to say nothing of a mobile brow and a wide mouth that spoke its mind as much by its shape as by its words—but not peaceful. After the last three weeks, he was in a mood for peace.

He sank back on the pillow, tracing the stern arch of one ruddy brow with a finger.

"I think the best he could do under the circumstances was to give the young lovers a bit of room to get safe away," he said. "And they did. By the morning, the snow was already melting to mud, and with all the trampling, you couldn't have told whether a regiment of bears had marched through, let alone which way they were going."

He spoke with feeling; the weather had turned suddenly to a warm thaw, and the militia had returned to their homes in good spirits, but muddy to the eyebrows.

Brianna sighed, her breath raising a pleasant gooseflesh across his chest. She lifted her own head a little, peering in interest.

"What? Have I got filth stuck to me still?" He had washed, but in haste, eager to eat, more eager to get to bed.

"No. I just like it when you get goose bumps. All the hairs on your chest stand up, and so do your nipples." She flicked one of the objects in question lightly with a fingernail, and a fresh wave of gooseflesh raced across his chest for her entertainment. He arched his back a little, then relaxed. No, he'd have to go downstairs soon, to deal with the evening chores; he'd heard Jamie go out already.

Time for a change of subject. He breathed deep, then lifted his head from the pillow, sniffing with interest at the rich aroma seeping through the floor from the kitchen below.

"What's that cooking?"

"A goose. Or geese—a dozen of them." He thought he caught an odd undertone in her voice, a faint tinge of regret.

"Well, that's a treat," he said, running a lingering hand down the length of her back. A pale gold down covered her back and shoulders, invisible save when there was candlelight behind her, as there was now. "What's the occasion? For our homecoming?"

She lifted her head from his chest and gave him what he privately classified as A Look.

"For Christmas," she said.

"What?" He groped blankly, trying to count the days, but the events of the last three weeks had completely erased his mental calendar. "When?"

"Tomorrow, idiot," she said with exaggerated patience. She leaned over and did something unspeakably erotic to his nipple, then heaved herself up in a rustle of bedclothes, leaving him bereft of blissful warmth and exposed to chilly drafts.

"Didn't you see all the greenery downstairs when you came in? Lizzie and I made the little Chisholm monsters go out with us to cut evergreens; we've been making wreaths and garlands for the last three days." The words were somewhat muffled, as she wormed her way into her shift, but he thought she sounded only incredulous, rather than angry. He could hope.

He sat up and swung his feet down, toes curling as they came in contact with the cold boards of the floor. His own cabin had a braided rug by the bed—but his cabin was full of Chisholms at the moment, or so he was informed. He rubbed a hand through his hair, groping for inspiration, and found it.

"I didn't see anything when I came in but you."

That was the simple truth, and evidently honesty was the best policy. Her head popped through the neckhole of her shift and she gave him a narrow look, which faded into a slow smile as she saw the evident sincerity stamped on his features.

She came over to the bed and put her arms around him, enveloping his head in a smother of marigolds, butter-soft linen, and … milk. Oh, aye. The kid would be needing to eat again soon. Resigned, he put his arms round the swell of her hips and rested his head between her breasts for the few moments that were his own meager share of that abundance.

“Sorry,” he said, words muffled in her warmth. “I’d forgotten it entirely. I’d have brought you and Jem something, if I’d thought.”

“Like what? A piece of Isaiah Morton’s hide?” She laughed and let go, straightening up to smooth her hair. She was wearing the bracelet he’d given her on an earlier Christmas Eve; the hearthlight glinted off the silver as she lifted her arm.

“Aye, ye could cover a book in it, I suppose. Or make a pair of wee boots for Jem.” It had been a long ride, men and horses pushing past tiredness, eager for home. He felt boneless, and would have asked no better present himself than to go back to bed with her, pressed tight together in warmth, to drift toward the inviting depths of deep black sleep and amorous dreams. Duty called, though; he yawned, blinked, and heaved himself up.

“Are the geese for our supper tonight, then?” he asked, squatting to poke through the discarded pile of mud-caked garments he’d shucked earlier. He might have a clean shirt somewhere, but with the Chisholms in his cabin, and Bree and Jem temporarily lodged here in the Wemysses’ room, he had no idea where his own things were. No sense to put on something clean only to go and muck out a byre and feed horses, anyway. He’d shave and change before supper.

“Uh-huh. Mrs. Bug has half a hog barbecuing in a pit outside for tomorrow’s Christmas dinner. I shot the geese yesterday, though, and she wanted to use them fresh. We were hoping you guys would be home in time.”

He glanced at her, picking up the same undertone in her voice.

“Ye don’t care for goose?” he asked. She looked down at him, with an odd expression.

“I’ve never eaten one,” she answered. “Roger?”

“Aye?”

“I was just wondering. I wanted to ask if you knew …”

“If I know what?”

He was moving slowly, still wrapped in a pleasant fog of exhaustion and lovemaking. She had put her gown on, brushed her hair, and put it up neatly in a thick coil on her neck, all in the time it had taken him to disentangle his stockings and breeches. He shook the breeks absentmindedly, sending a shower of dried mud fragments pattering over the floor.

"Don't do that! What's the matter with you?" Flushed with sudden annoyance, she snatched the breeks away from him. She thrust open the shutters and leaned out, flapping the garment violently over the sill. She jerked the shaken breeks back in and threw them in his general direction; he dived to catch them.

"Hey. What's the matter with *you*?"

"Matter? You shower dirt all over the floor and you think there's something wrong with *me*?"

"Sorry. I didn't think—"

She made a noise deep in her throat. It wasn't very loud, but it was threatening. Obeying a deep-seated masculine reflex, he shoved a leg into his breeches. Whatever might be happening, he'd rather meet it with his trousers on. He jerked them up, talking fast.

"Look, I'm sorry I didn't think of it being Christmas. It was—there were important things to deal with; I lost track. I'll make it up to ye. Perhaps when we go to Cross Creek for your aunt's wedding. I could —"

"The hell with Christmas!"

"What?" He stopped, breeks half-buttoned. It was winter dusk, and dark in the room, but even by candlelight, he could see the color rising in her face.

"The hell with Christmas, the hell with Cross Creek—and the fucking hell with you, too!" She punctuated this last with a wooden soap dish from the washstand, which whizzed past his left ear and smacked into the wall behind him.

"Now just a fucking minute!"

"Don't you use language like that to me!"

"But you—"

"You and your 'important things'!" Her hand tightened on the big china ewer and he tensed, ready to duck, but she thought better of it and her hand relaxed.

"I've spent the last *month* here, up to my eyeballs in laundry and baby shit and screeching women and horrible children while you're out doing 'important things' and you come marching in here covered in mud and tromp all over the clean floors without even noticing they *were* clean in the first place! Do you have any idea what a pain it is to scrub pine floors on your hands and knees? With lye soap!" She waved her hands at him in accusation, but too quickly for him to see whether they were covered with gaping sores, rotted off at the wrist, or merely reddened.

"… And you don't even want to look at your son or hear anything about him—he's learned to *crawl*, and I wanted to show you, but all *you* wanted was to go to bed, and you didn't even bother to shave first …"

Roger felt as though he'd walked into the blades of a large, rapidly whirling fan. He scratched at his short beard, feeling guilty.

"I … ah … thought you wanted to—"

"I did!" She stamped her foot, raising a small cloud of dust from the disintegrated mud. "That hasn't got anything to do with it!"

"All right." He bent to get his shirt, keeping one eye warily on her. "So—you're mad because I didn't notice you'd washed the floor, is that it?"

"No!"

"No," he repeated. He took a deep breath and tried again. "So, it *is* that I forgot it's Christmas?"

"No!"

"You're angry that I wanted to make love to you, even though you wanted to do it, too?"

"NO! Would you just shut up?"

Roger was strongly tempted to accede to this request, but a dogged urge to get to the bottom of things made him push on.

"But I don't understand why—"

"I know you don't! *That's* the problem!"

She spun on her bare heel and stomped over to the chest that stood by the window. She flung back the lid with a bang, and began rummaging, with a series of small snorts and growls.

He opened his mouth, shut it again, and jerked the dirty shirt on over his head. He felt simultaneously irritated and guilty, a bad combination. He finished dressing in an atmosphere of charged silence, considering—and rejecting—possible remarks and questions, all of which seemed likely to inflame the situation further.

She had found her stockings, yanked them on, and gartered them with small savage movements, then thrust her feet into a pair of battered clogs. Now she stood at the open window, drawing deep breaths of air as though she were about to perform a set of RAF exercises.

His inclination was to escape while she wasn't looking, but he couldn't bring himself simply to leave, with something wrong—whatever in God's name it was—between them. He could still feel the sense of closeness that they had shared, less than a quarter of an hour before, and couldn't bring himself to believe that it had simply evaporated into thin air.

He walked up behind her, slowly, and put his hands on her shoulders. She didn't whirl round and try either to stamp on his foot or to knee him in the stones, so he took the risk of kissing her lightly on the back of the neck.

"You were going to ask me something about geese."

She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, relaxing just a little against him. Her anger seemed to have vanished as quickly as it had appeared, leaving him baffled but grateful. He put his arms round her waist, and pulled her back against him.

"Yesterday," she said, "Mrs. Aberfeldy burnt the biscuits for breakfast."

"Oh. Aye?"

"Mrs. Bug accused her of being too taken up with her daughter's hair ribbons to pay attention to what she was doing. And what was she doing—Mrs. Bug said—putting blueberries into buttermilk biscuits in the first place?"

"Why shouldn't one put blueberries into buttermilk biscuits?"

"I have no idea. But Mrs. Bug doesn't think you should. And then Billy MacLeod fell down the stairs, and his mother was nowhere to be found—she went to the privy and got stuck—and—”

“She *what*?” Mrs. MacLeod was short and rather stout, but had a well-defined rear aspect, with an arse like two cannonballs in a sack. It was all too easy to envision such an accident befalling her, and Roger felt laughter gurgle up through his chest. He tried manfully to stifle it, but it emerged through his nose in a painful snort.

“We shouldn’t laugh. She had splinters.” Despite this rebuke, Brianna herself was quivering against him, tremors of mirth fracturing her voice.

“Christ. What then?”

“Well, Billy was screaming—he didn’t break anything, but he banged his head pretty hard—and Mrs. Bug shot out of the kitchen with her broom, hollering because she thought we were being attacked by Indians, and Mrs. Chisholm went to find Mrs. MacLeod and started yelling from the privy, and … well, anyway, the geese came over in the middle of all of it, and Mrs. Bug looked up at the ceiling with her eyes popping, then said ‘Geese!’ so loud that everybody stopped yelling, and she ran into Da’s study and came back with the fowling piece and shoved it at me.”

She had relaxed a little with the telling. She snorted, and settled back against him.

“I was so mad, I just really *wanted* to kill something. And there were a lot of them—the geese—you could hear them calling all across the sky.”

He had seen the geese, too. Black V-shapes, flexing in the winds of the upper air, arrowing their way through the winter sky. Heard them calling, with a strange feeling of loneliness at the heart, and wished she were beside him there.

Everyone had rushed out to watch; the wild Chisholm children and a couple of the half-wild Chisholm dogs went scampering through the trees with whoops and barks of excitement, to retrieve the fallen birds, while Brianna shot and reloaded, as quickly as she could.

“One of the dogs got one, and Toby tried to wrestle it away, and the dog bit him, and he was running around and around the yard screaming that his finger was bitten off, and there was blood all over him, and nobody could make him stop so we could see whether it was, and Mama wasn't here, and Mrs. Chisholm was down by the creek with the twins …"

She was stiffening again, and he could see the hot blood rising once more, flushing the back of her neck. He tightened his hold on her waist.

"Was his finger bitten off, then?"

She stopped and took a deep breath, then looked round at him over her shoulder, the color fading slightly from her face.

"No. The skin wasn't even broken; it was goose blood."

"Well, so. Ye did well, didn't you? The larder full, not a finger lost—and the house still standing."

He'd meant it as a joke, and was surprised to feel her heave a deep sigh, a little of the tension going out of her.

"Yes," she said, and her voice held a note of undeniable satisfaction. "I did. All present and accounted for—and everybody fed. With minimal bloodshed," she added.

"Well, it's true what they say about omelettes and eggs, aye?" He laughed and bent to kiss her, then remembered his beard. "Oh—sorry. I'll go and shave, shall I?"

"No, don't." She turned as he released her, and brushed a fingertip across his jaw. "I sort of like it. Besides, you can do that later, can't you?"

"Aye, I can." He bent his head and kissed her gently, but thoroughly. Was that it, then? She'd only wanted him to say that she'd done well, left on her own to run the place? He was thinking she deserved it, if so. He'd known she hadn't been only sitting by the hearth singing cradle songs to Jemmy in his absence—but he hadn't envisioned the gory details.

The smell of her hair and the musk of her body was all round him, but breathing deep to get more of it, he realized that the room was fragrant with juniper and balsam, too, and the mellow scent of beeswax candles. Not just one; there were three of them, set in candlesticks about the room. Normally, she would have lit a rush dip, saving the valuable candles, but the small room glowed now with soft gold light, and he realized that the bloom of it had lit them through their lovemaking, leaving him with memories of russet and ivory and the gold down that covered her like a lion's pelt, the shadowed crimson and purple of her secret places, the dark of his skin on the paleness of hers—memories that glowed vivid against white sheets in his mind.

The floor *was* clean—or had been—its white-pine boards scrubbed, and the corners strewn with dried rosemary. He could see the tumbled bed past her ear, and realized that she'd made it up with fresh linen and a new quilt. She'd taken trouble for his homecoming. And he'd come barging in, brimming with his adventures, expecting praise for the feat of coming back alive, and seeing none of it—blind to everything in his urgent need to get his hands on her and feel her body under his.

"Hey," he said softly in her ear. "I may be a fool, but I love you, aye?"

She sighed deeply, her breasts pushing against his bare chest, warm even through the cloth of shift and gown. They were firm; filling with milk, but not yet hard.

"Yeah, you are," she said frankly, "but I love you too. And I'm glad you're home."

He laughed and let go. There was a branch of juniper tacked above the window, heavy with its clouded blue-green berries. He reached up and broke off a sprig, kissed it, and tucked it into the neck of her gown, between her breasts, as a token of truce—and apology.

"Merry Christmas. Now, what was it about the geese?"

She put a hand to the juniper sprig, a half-smile growing, then fading.

"Oh. Well. It's not important. It's just …" He followed the direction of her eyes, turned, and saw the sheet of paper, propped up behind the basin on the washstand.

It was a drawing, done in charcoal; wild geese against a stormy sky, striving through the air above a lash of wind-tossed trees. It was a wonderful drawing, and looking at it gave him the same odd feeling at the heart that hearing the geese themselves had done—half joy, half pain.

"Merry Christmas," Brianna said softly, behind him. She came to stand beside him, wrapping a hand around his arm.

"Thanks. It's … God, Bree, you're good." She was. He bent and kissed her, hard, needing to do something to lessen the sense of yearning that haunted the paper in his hand.

"Look at the other one." She pulled a little away from him, still holding his arm, and nodded at the washstand.

He hadn't realized there were two. The other drawing had been behind the first.

She *was* good. Good enough to chill the blood at his heart. The second drawing was in charcoal, too, the same stark blacks and whites and grays. In the first, she had seen the wildness of the sky, and put it down: yearning and courage, effort enduring in faith amid the emptiness of air and storm. In this, she had seen stillness.

It was a dead goose, hung by the feet, its wings half-spread. Neck limp and beak half-open, as though even in death it sought flight and the loud-calling company of its companions. The lines of it were grace, the details of feather, beak, and empty eyes exquisite. He had never seen anything so beautiful, nor so desolate, in his life.

"I drew that last night," she said quietly. "Everybody was in bed, but I couldn't sleep."

She had taken a candlestick and prowled the crowded house, restless, going outside at last in spite of the cold, seeking solitude, if not rest, in the chill dark of the outbuildings. And in the smokeshed, by the light of the embers there, had been struck by the beauty of the hanging geese, their clear plumage black and white against the sooty wall.

"I checked to be sure Jemmy was sound asleep, then brought my sketch box down and drew, until my fingers were too cold to hold the charcoal anymore. That was the best one." She nodded at the picture, her eyes remote.

For the first time, he saw the blue shadows in her face, and imagined her by candlelight, up late at night and all alone, drawing dead geese. He would have taken her in his arms then, but she turned away, going to the window, where the shutters had begun to bang.

The thaw had faded, to be followed by a freezing wind that stripped the last sere leaves from the trees and sent acorns and chestnut hulls sailing through the air to rattle on the roof like buckshot. He followed her, reached past her to draw in the shutters and fasten them against the bitter wind.

"Da told me stories, while I was—while I was waiting for Jemmy to be born. I wasn't paying close attention"—the corner of her mouth quirked with wryness—"but a bit here and there stuck with me."

She turned around then, and leaned against the shutters, hands gripping the sill behind her.

"He said when a hunter kills a greylag goose, he must wait by the body, because the greylag mate for life, and if you kill only one, the other will mourn itself to death. So you wait, and when the mate comes, you kill it, too."

Her eyes were dark on his, but the candle flames struck glints of blue in their depths.

"What I wondered is—are all geese like that? Not only greylags?" She nodded at the pictures.

He touched her, and cleared his throat. He wanted to comfort her, but not at the price of an easy lie.

"Maybe so. I don't know for sure, though. You're worried, then, about the mates of the birds you shot?"

The soft pale lips pressed tight together, then relaxed.

"Not worried. Just … I couldn't help thinking about it, afterward. About them, flying on … alone. You were gone—I couldn't help thinking—I mean, I *knew* you were all right, this time, but next time, you might not come—well, never mind. It's just silly. Don't worry about it."

She stood up, and would have pushed past him into the room, but he put his arms around her and held her, close so she couldn't see his face.

He knew that she didn't absolutely require him—not to make hay, to plow, to hunt for her. If needs must, she could do those things herself—or find another man. And yet … the wild geese said she needed *him*—would mourn his loss if it came. Perhaps forever. In his present vulnerable mood, that knowledge seemed a great gift.

"Geese," he said at last, his voice half-muffled in her hair. "The next-door neighbors kept geese, when I was a wee lad. Big white buggers. Six of them; they went round in a gang, all high-nosed and honking. Terrorized dogs and children and folk that passed by on the street."

"Did they terrorize you?" Her breath tickled warm on his collarbone.

"Oh, aye. All the time. When we played in the street, they'd rush out honking and peck at us and beat us with their wings. When I wanted to go out into the back garden to play with a mate, Mrs. Graham would have to come, too, to drive the bastards off to their own yard with a broomstick.

"Then the milkman came by one morning while the geese were in their front garden. They went for him, and he ran for his float—and his horse took fright at all the honking and screeching, and stamped two of the geese flatter than bannocks. The kids on the street were all thrilled."

She was laughing against his shoulder, half-shocked but amused.

"What happened then?"

"Mrs. Graham took them and plucked them, and we had goose pie for a week," he said matter-of-factly. He straightened up and smiled at her. She was flushed and rosy. "That's what I ken about geese—they're wicked buggers, but they taste great."

He turned and plucked his mud-stained coat from the floor.

"So, then. Let me help your Da with the chores, and then I want to see how ye've taught my son to crawl."

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CHARMS

I touched a finger to the gleaming white surface, then rubbed my fingers together appraisingly.

"There is absolutely nothing greasier than goose grease," I said with approval. I wiped my fingers on my apron and took up a large spoon.

"Nothing better for a nice pastry crust," Mrs. Bug agreed. She stood on her tiptoes, watching jealously as I divided the soft white fat, ladling it from the kettle into two large stone crocks; one for the kitchen, one for my surgery.

"A nice venison pie we'll have for Hogmanay," she said, eyes narrowing as she envisioned the prospect. "And the haggis to follow, wi' cullen skink, and a bit o' corn crowdie … and a great raisin tart wi' jam and clotted cream for sweeties!"

"Wonderful," I murmured. My own immediate plans for the goose grease involved a salve of wild sarsaparilla and bittersweet for burns and abrasions, a mentholated ointment for stuffy noses and chest congestion, and something soothing and pleasantly scented for diaper rash—perhaps a lavender infusion, with the juice of crushed jewelweed leaves.

I glanced down in search of Jemmy; he had learned to crawl only a few days before, but was already capable of an astonishing rate of speed, particularly when no one was looking. He was sitting peaceably enough in the corner, though, gnawing intently at the wooden horse Jamie had carved for him as a Christmas present.

Catholic as many of them were—and nominally Christian as they *all* were—Highland Scots regarded Christmas primarily as a religious observance, rather than a major festive occasion. Lacking priest or minister, the day was spent much like a Sunday, though with a particularly lavish meal to mark the occasion, and the exchange of small gifts. My own gift from Jamie had been the wooden ladle I was presently using, its handle carved with the image of a mint leaf; I had given him a new shirt with a ruffle at the throat for ceremonial occasions, his old one having worn quite away at the seams.

With a certain amount of forethought, Mrs. Bug, Brianna, Marsali, Lizzie, and I had made up an enormous quantity of molasses toffee, which we had distributed as a Christmas treat to all the children within earshot. Whatever it might do to their teeth, it had the beneficial effect of gluing their mouths shut for long periods, and in consequence, the adults had enjoyed a peaceful Christmas. Even Germain had been reduced to a sort of tuneful gargle.

Hogmanay was a different kettle of fish, though. God knew what feverish pagan roots the Scottish New Year's celebration sprang from, but there was a reason why I wanted to have a good lot of medicinal preparations made up in advance—the same reason Jamie was now up at the whisky spring, deciding which barrels were sufficiently aged as not to poison anyone.

The goose grease disposed of, there was a good bit of dark broth left in the bottom of the kettle, aswirl with bits of crackled skin and shreds of meat. I saw Mrs. Bug eyeing it, visions of gravy dancing in her brain.

"Half," I said sternly, reaching for a large bottle.

She didn't argue; merely shrugged her rounded shoulders and settled back on her stool in resignation.

"Whatever will ye do with that, though?" she asked curiously, watching as I put a square of muslin over the neck of the bottle, in order to strain the broth. "Grease, aye, it's a wonder for the salves. And broth's good for a body wi' the ague or a wabbly wame, to be sure—but it willna keep, ye know." One sketchy eyebrow lifted at me in warning, in case I hadn't actually known that. "Leave it more than a day or two, and it'll be blue with the mold."

"Well, I do hope so," I told her, ladling broth into the muslin square. "I've just set out a batch of bread to mold, and I want to see if it will grow on the broth, too."

I could see assorted questions and responses flickering through her mind, all based on a growing fear that this mania of mine for rotten food was expanding, and would soon engulf the entire output of the kitchen. Her eyes darted toward the pie safe, then back at me, dark with suspicion.

I turned my head to hide a smile, and found Adso the kitten balanced on his hind legs on the bench, foreclaws anchored in the tabletop, his big green eyes watching the movements of the ladle with fascination.

"Oh, you want some, too?" I reached for a saucer from the shelf and filled it with a dark puddle of broth, savory with bits of goose meat and floating fat globules.

"This is from my half," I assured Mrs. Bug, but she shook her head vigorously.

"Not a bit of it, Mrs. Fraser," she said. "The bonnie wee laddie's caught *six* mice in here in the past two days." She beamed fondly at Adso, who had leaped down and was lapping broth as fast as his tiny pink tongue could move. "Yon cheetie's welcome to anything he likes from my hearth."

"Oh, has he? Splendid. He can come and have a go at the ones in my surgery, then." We were presently entertaining a plague of mice; driven indoors by cold weather, they skittered along the baseboards like shadows after nightfall, and even in broad daylight, shot suddenly across floors and leaped out of opened cupboards, causing minor heart failure and broken dishes.

"Well, ye can scarcely blame the mice," Mrs. Bug observed, darting a quick glance at me. "They go where the food is, after all."

The pool of broth had nearly drained through the muslin, leaving a thick coating of flotsam behind. I scraped this off and dropped it on Adso's saucer, then scooped up a fresh ladle of broth.

"Yes, they do," I said, evenly. "And I'm sorry about it, but the mold is important. It's medicine, and I—"

"Oh, aye! Of course it is," she assured me hurriedly. "I ken that." There was no tinge of sarcasm in her voice, which rather surprised me. She hesitated, then reached through the slit in her skirt, into the capacious pocket that she wore beneath.

"There was a man, as lived in Auchterlonie—where we had our hoose, Arch and me, in the village there. He was a carline, was Johnnie Howlat, and folk went wary near him—but they went. Some went by day, for grass cures and graiths, and some went by night, for to buy charms. Ye'll ken the sort?" She darted another glance at me, and I nodded, a little uncertainly.

I knew the sort of person she meant; some Highland charmers dealt not only in remedies—the "graiths" she'd mentioned—but also in minor magic, selling lovephilters, fertility potions … ill wishes. Something cold slid down my back and vanished, leaving in its wake a faint feeling of unease, like the slime trail of a snail.

I swallowed, seeing in memory the small bunch of thorny plants, so carefully bound with red thread and with black. Placed beneath my pillow by a jealous girl named Laoghaire—purchased from a witch named Geillis Duncan. A witch like me.

Was that what Mrs. Bug was getting at? "Carline" was not a word I was certain of, though I thought it meant "witch," or something like it. She was regarding me thoughtfully, her normal animation quite subdued.

"He was a filthy wee mannie, Johnnie Howlat was. He'd no woman to do for him, and his cot smelt of dreadful things. So did he." She shivered suddenly, in spite of the fire at her back.

"Ye'd see him, sometimes, in the wood or on the moor, pokin' at the ground. He'd find creatures that had died, maybe, and bring back their skins and their feet, bones and teeth for to make his charms. He wore a wretched auld smock, like a farmer, and sometimes ye'd see him comin' doon the path wi' something pooched up under his smock, and stains of blood—and other things—seepin' through the cloth."

"Sounds most unpleasant," I said, eyes fixed on the bottle as I scraped the cloth again and ladled more broth. "But people went to him anyway?"

“There was no one else,” she said simply, and I looked up. Her dark eyes fixed unblinkingly on mine, and her hand moved slowly, fingering something inside her pocket.

“I didna ken at first,” she said. “For Johnnie kept mool from the graveyard and bone dust and hen’s blood and all manner of such things, but you”—she nodded thoughtfully at me, white kerch immaculate in the fire-glow—“ye’re a cleanly sort.”

“Thank you,” I said, both amused and touched. That was a high compliment from Mrs. Bug.

“Bar the moldy bread,” she added, the corners of her mouth primming slightly. “And that heathen wee pooch ye keep in your cabinet. But it’s true, no? Ye’re a charmer, like Johnnie was?”

I hesitated, not knowing what to say. The memory of Cranesmuir was vivid in my mind, as it had not been for many years. The last thing I wanted was for Mrs. Bug to be spreading the rumor that I was a carline—some already called me a conjure-woman. I was not worried about legal prosecution as a witch—not here, not now. But to have a reputation for healing was one thing; to have people come to me for help with the other things that charmers dealt in …

“Not exactly,” I said, guardedly. “It’s only that I know a bit about plants. And surgery. But I really don’t know anything at all about charms or … spells.”

She nodded in satisfaction, as though I had confirmed her suspicions instead of denying them.

Before I could respond, there was a sound from the floor like water hitting a hot pan, followed by a loud screech. Jemmy, tiring of his toy, had cast it aside and crawled over to investigate Adso’s saucer. The cat, disinclined to share, had hissed at the baby and frightened him. Jemmy’s shriek in turn had frightened Adso under the settle; only the tip of a small pink nose and a flicker of agitated whiskers showed from the shadows.

I picked Jem up and soothed his tears, while Mrs. Bug took over the broth-straining. She looked over the goose debris on the platter and picked out a leg bone, the white cartilage at the end smooth and gleaming.

“Here, laddie.” She waved it enticingly under Jemmy’s nose. He at once stopped crying, grabbed the bone, and put it in his mouth. Mrs. Bug selected a smaller wing bone, with shreds of meat still clinging to it, and put that down on the saucer.

“And that’s for you, lad,” she said to the darkness under the settle. “Dinna fill your wame too full, though—stay hungry for the wee moosies, aye?”

She turned back to the table, and began to scoop the bones into a shallow pan.

“I’ll roast these; they’ll do for soup,” she said, eyes on her work. Then without changing tone or looking up, she said, “I went to him once, Johnnie Howlat.”

“Did you?” I sat down, Jemmy on my knee. “Were you ill?”

“I wanted a child.”

I had no idea what to say; I sat still, listening to the drip of the broth through the muslin cloth, as she scraped the last bit of gristle neatly into the roasting pan, and carried it to the hearth.

“I’d slippit four, in the course of a year,” she said, back turned to me. “Ye’d not think it, to look at me now, but I was nay more than skin and bane, the color o’ whey, and my paps shrunk awa to nothing.”

She settled the pan firmly into the coals and covered it.

“So I took what money we had, and I went to Johnnie Howlat. He took the money, and put water in a pan. He sat me doon on the one side of it and him on the other, and there we sat for a verra long time, him starin’ into the water and me starin’ at him.

“At last, he shook himself a bit and got up, and went awa to the back of his cot. ’Twas dark, and I couldna see what he did, but he rummaged and poked, and said things beneath his breath, and finally he came back to me, and handed me a charm.”

Mrs. Bug straightened up and turned round. She came close, and laid her hand on Jemmy’s silky head, very gently.

“He said to me, Johnnie did, that here was a charm that would close up the mouth of my womb, and keep a babe safe inside, until it should be born. But there was a thing he’d seen, lookin’ in the water, and he must tell me. If I bore a live babe, then my husband would die, he said. So he would give me the charm, and the prayer that went with it—and then it was my choice, and who could say fairer than that?"

Her stubby, work-worn finger traced the curve of Jemmy's cheek. Engaged with his new toy, he paid no attention.

"I carried that charm in my pocket for a month—and then I put it away."

I reached up and put my hand over hers, squeezing. There was no sound but the baby's slobbering and the hiss and pop of the bones in the coals. She stayed still for a moment, then drew her hand away, and put it back in her pocket. She drew out a small object, and put it on the table beside me.

"I couldna quite bring myself to throw it away," she said, gazing down at it dispassionately. "It cost me three silver pennies, after all. And it's a wee thing; easy enough to carry along when we left Scotland."

It was a small chunk of stone, pale pink in color, and veined with gray, badly weathered. It had been crudely carved into the shape of a pregnant woman, little more than a huge belly, with swollen breasts and buttocks above a pair of stubby legs that tapered to nothing. I had seen such figures before—in museums. Had Johnnie Howlat made it himself? Or perhaps found it in his pokings through wood and moor, a remnant of much more ancient times?

I touched it gently, thinking that whatever Johnnie Howlat might have been, or might have seen in his pan of water, he had no doubt been astute enough to have seen the love between Arch and Murdina Bug. Was it easier for a woman, then, to forswear the hope of children, thinking it a noble sacrifice for the sake of a much-loved husband, than to suffer bitterness and self-blame for constant failure? Carline he may have been, Johnnie Howlat—but a charmer, indeed.

"So," Mrs. Bug said, matter-of-factly, "it may be as ye'll find some lass who's a use for it. Shame to let it go to waste, aye?"

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HOGMANAY

The year ended clear and cold, with a small, brilliant moon that rose high in the violet-black vault of the sky, and flooded the coves and trails of the mountainside with light. A good thing, as people came from all over the Ridge—and some, even farther—to keep Hogmanay at "the Big House."

The men had cleared the new barn and raked the floor clean for the dancing. Jigs and reels and strathspeys—and a number of other dances for which I didn't know the names, but they looked like fun—were executed under the light of bear-oil lanterns, accompanied by the music of Evan Lindsay's scratchy fiddle and the squeal of his brother Murdo's wooden flute, punctuated by the heartbeat thump of Kenny's bodhran.

Thurlo Guthrie's ancient father had brought his pipes, too—a set of small uilleann pipes that looked nearly as decrepit as did Mr. Guthrie, but produced a sweet drone. The melody of his chanter sometimes agreed with the Lindsays' notion of a particular tune, and sometimes didn't, but the overall effect was cheerful, and sufficient whisky and beer had been taken by this point in the festivities that no one minded in the least.

After an hour or two of the dancing, I privately decided that I understood why the word "reel" had come to indicate drunkenness; even performed without preliminary lubrication, the dance was enough to make one dizzy. Done under the influence of whisky, it made all the blood in my head whirl round like the water in a washing machine. I staggered off at the end of one such dance, leaned against one of the barn's uprights, and closed one eye, in hopes of stopping the spinning sensation.

A nudge on my blind side caused me to open that eye, revealing Jamie, holding two brimming cups of something. Hot and thirsty as I was, I didn't mind what it was, so long as it was wet. Fortunately it was cider, and I gulped it.

"Drink it like that, and ye'll founder, Sassenach," he said, disposing of his own cider in precisely similar fashion. He was flushed and sweating from the dancing, but his eyes sparkled as he grinned at me.

"Piffle," I said. With a bit of cider as ballast, the room had quit spinning, and I felt cheerful, if hot. "How many people are in here, do you think?"

"Sixty-eight, last time I counted." He leaned back beside me, viewing the milling throng with an expression of deep content. "They come in and out, though, so I canna be quite sure. And I didna count the weans," he added, moving slightly to avoid collision as a trio of small boys caromed through the crowd and shot past us, giggling.

Heaps of fresh hay were stacked in the shadows at the sides of the barn; the small bodies of children too wee to stay awake were draped and curled among them like so many barn kittens. The flicker of lantern light caught a gleam of silky red-gold; Jemmy was sound asleep in his blanket, happily lulled by the racket. I saw Bree come out of the dancing and lay her hand briefly on him to check, then turn back. Roger put out a hand to her, dark and smiling, and she took it, laughing as they whirled back into the stamping mass.

People did come in and out—particularly small groups of young people, and courting couples. It was freezing and frost-crisp outside, but the cold made cuddling with a warm body that much more appealing. One of the older MacLeod boys passed near us, his arm round a much younger girl—one of old Mr. Guthrie's granddaughters, I thought; he had three of them, all much alike to look at—and Jamie said something genial to him in Gaelic that made his ears go red. The girl was already pink with dancing, but went crimson in the face.

"What did you say to them?"

"It doesna bear translation," he said, putting a hand in the small of my back. He was pulsing with heat and whisky, alight with a flame of joy; looking at him was enough to kindle my own heart. He saw that, and smiled down at me, the heat of his hand burning through the cloth of my gown.

"D'ye want to go outside for a moment, Sassenach?" he said, his voice pitched low and rich with suggestion.

"Well, since you mention it … yes," I said. "Maybe not just yet, though." I nodded past him, and he turned to see a cluster of elderly ladies sitting on a bench against the wall, all viewing us with the bright-eyed curiosity of a flock of crows. Jamie waved and smiled at them, making them all burst into pink-faced giggles, and turned back to me with a sigh.

"Aye, well. In a bit, then—after the first-footing, maybe."

The latest spate of dancing came to an end, and there was a general surge in the direction of the tub of cider, presided over by Mr. Wemyss at the far end of the barn. The dancers clustered round it like a horde of thirsty wasps, so that all that was visible of Mr. Wemyss was the top of his head, fair hair almost white under the glow of the lanterns.

Seeing it, I looked round for Lizzie, to see whether she was enjoying the party. Evidently so; she was holding court on a hay bale, surrounded by four or five gawky boys, who were all behaving very much like the dancers round the cider tub.

"Who's the big one?" I asked Jamie, calling his attention to the small gathering with a nod of my head. "I don't recognize him." He glanced over, squinting slightly.

"Oh," he said, relaxing, "that will be Jacob Schnell. He's ridden over from Salem with a friend; they came with the Muellers."

"Really." Salem was a good long ride; nearly thirty miles. I wondered whether the attraction had been the festivities alone. I looked for Tommy Mueller, whom I had privately marked out as a possible match for Lizzie, but didn't see him in the crowd.

"Do you know anything about this Schnell lad?" I asked, giving the boy in question a critical look. He was a year or two older than the other boys dancing attendance on Lizzie, and quite tall. Plain-featured but good-natured-looking, I thought; heavy-boned, and with a thickness through the middle that foretold the development of a prosperous paunch in middle age.

"I dinna ken the lad himself, but I've met his uncle. It's a decent family; I think his father's a cobbler." We both looked automatically at the young man's shoes; not new, but very good quality, and with pewter buckles, large and square in the German fashion.

Young Schnell appeared to have gained an advantage; he was leaning close, saying something to Lizzie, whose eyes were fixed on his face, a slight frown of concentration wrinkling the skin between her fair brows as she tried to make out what he was saying. Then she worked it out, and her face relaxed in laughter.

"I dinna think so." Jamie shook his head, a slight frown on his face as he watched them. "The family's Lutheran; they wouldna let the lad marry a Catholic—and it would break Joseph's heart to send the lass to live so far away."

Lizzie's father *was* deeply attached to her; and having lost her once, he was unlikely to give her so far away in marriage as to lose sight of her again. Still, I thought that Joseph Wemyss would do almost anything to insure his daughter's happiness.

"He might go with her, you know."

Jamie's expression grew bleak at the thought, but he nodded in reluctant acknowledgment.

"I suppose so. I should hate to lose him; though I suppose Arch Bug might—"

Shouts of *"Mac Dubh!"* interrupted him.

"Come on, *a Sheumais ruaidh*, show him how!" Evan called from the far end of the barn, and jerked his bow authoritatively.

There had been a break in the dancing, to give the musicians time to breathe and have a drink, and in the interim, some of the men had been trying their hand at sword dancing, which could be done with only the accompaniment of pipes or to a single drum.

I had been paying little attention to this, only hearing the shouts of encouragement or derision from that end of the barn. Evidently, most of those present were no great hand at the sport—the latest gentleman to try it had tripped over one of the swords and fallen flat; he was being helped to his feet, red-faced and laughing, returning genial insults with his friends as they beat the hay and dirt from his clothes.

"Mac Dubh, Mac Dubh!" Kenny and Murdo shouted in invitation, beckoning, but Jamie waved them off, laughing.

"Nay, I havena done that in more time than I—"

"Mac Dubh! Mac Dubh! Mac Dubh!" Kenny was thumping his bodhran, chanting in rhythm, and the group of men around him were joining in. *"Mac Dubh! Mac Dubh! Mac Dubh!"*

Jamie cast me a brief look of helpless appeal, but Ronnie Sinclair and Bobby Sutherland were already heading purposefully toward us. I stepped away, laughing, and they seized him each by an arm, smothering his protests with raucous shouts as they hustled him into the center of the floor.

Applause and shouts of approval broke out as they deposited him in a clear space, where the straw had been trampled into the damp earth far enough to make a hard-packed surface. Seeing that he had no choice, Jamie drew himself up and straightened his kilt. He caught my eye, rolled an eye in mock resignation, and began to take off his coat, waistcoat, and boots, as Ronnie scrambled to lay out the two crossed broadswords at his feet.

Kenny Lindsay began to tap gently on his bodhran, hesitating between the beats, a sound of soft suspense. The crowd murmured and shifted in anticipation. Clad in shirt, kilt, and stockinged feet, Jamie bowed elaborately, turning sunwise to dip four times, to each of the "airts" in turn. Then he stood upright, and moved to take his place, standing just above the crossed swords. His hands lifted, fingers pointing stiff above his head.

There was an outburst of clapping nearby, and I saw Brianna put two fingers in her mouth and give an earsplitting whistle of approbation—to the marked shock of the people standing next to her.

I saw Jamie glance at Bree, with a faint smile, and then his eyes found mine again. The smile stayed on his lips, but there was something different in his expression; something rueful. The beat of the bodhran began to quicken.

A Highland sword dance was done for one of three reasons. For exhibition and entertainment, as he was about to do it now. For competition, as it was done among the young men at a Gathering. And as it first was done, as an omen. Danced on the eve of a battle, the skill of the dancer foretold success or failure. The young men had danced between crossed swords, the night before Prestonpans, before Falkirk. But not before Culloden. There had been no campfires the night before that final fight, no time for bards and battle songs. It didn't matter; no one had needed an omen, then.

Jamie closed his eyes for a moment, bent his head, and the beat of the drum began to patter, quick and fast.

I knew, because he had told me, that he had first done the sword dance in competition, and then—more than once—on the eve of battles, first in the Highlands, then in France. The old soldiers had asked him to dance, had valued his skill as reassurance that they would live and triumph. For the Lindsays to know his skill, he must also have danced in Ardsmuir. But that was in the Old World, and in his old life.

He knew—and had not needed Roger to tell him—that the old ways had changed, were changing. This was a new world, and the sword dance would never again be danced in earnest, seeking omen and favor from the ancient gods of war and blood.

His eyes opened, and his head snapped up. The tipper struck the drum with a sudden *thunk!* and it began with a shout from the crowd. His feet struck down on the pounded earth, to the north and the south, to the east and the west, flashing swift between the swords.

His feet struck soundless, sure on the ground, and his shadow danced on the wall behind him, looming tall, long arms upraised. His face was still toward me, but he didn't see me any longer, I was sure.

The muscles of his legs were strong as a leaping stag's beneath the hem of his kilt, and he danced with all the skill of the warrior he had been and still was. But I thought he danced now only for the sake of memory, that those watching might not forget; danced, with the sweat flying from his brow as he worked, and a look of unutterable distance in his eyes.

People were still talking of it when we adjourned to the house, just before midnight, for stovies, beer, and cider, before the first-footing.

Mrs. Bug brought out a basket of apples, and gathered all the young unmarried girls together in a corner of the kitchen, where—with much giggling and glancing over shoulders toward the young men—each peeled a fruit, keeping the peeling in one piece. Each girl tossed her peel behind her, and the group all whirled round to cluster and exclaim over the fallen strip and see what was the shape of the letter it made.

Apple peelings being by their nature fairly circular, there were a good many "C"s, "G"s, and "O"s discovered—good news for Charley Chisholm, and Young Geordie Sutherland—and much speculation as to whether "Angus Og" might be the meaning of an "O" or not, for Angus Og MacLeod was a canty lad, and much liked, while the only "Owen" was an elderly widower, about five feet tall, and with a large wen on his face.

I had taken Jemmy up to put him to bed, and after depositing him limp and snoring in his cradle, came down in time to see Lizzie cast her peeling.

" 'C'!" chorused two of the Guthrie girls, almost knocking heads as they bent to look.

"No, no, it's a 'J'!"

Appealed to as the resident expert, Mrs. Bug bent down, eyeing the strip of red peel with her head on one side, like a robin sizing up a likely worm.

"A 'J' it is, to be sure," she ruled, straightening up, and the group burst out in giggles, turning as one to stare at John Lowry, a young farmer from Woolam's Mill, who peered over his shoulder at them in total bewilderment.

I caught a flash of red from the corner of my eye, and turned to see Brianna in the doorway to the hall. She tilted her head, beckoning me, and I hurried to join her.

"Roger's ready to go out, but we couldn't find the ground salt; it wasn't in the pantry. Do you have it in your surgery?"

"Oh! Yes, I have," I said guiltily. "I'd been using it to dry snakeroot, and forgot to put it back."

Guests packed the porches and lined the wide hallway, spilling out of the kitchen and Jamie's study, all talking, drinking, and eating, and I threaded my way through the crush after her toward my surgery, exchanging greetings as I ducked brandished cups of cider, stovie crumbs crunching under my feet.

The surgery itself was nearly empty, though; people tended to avoid it, through superstition, painful associations, or simple wariness, and I had not encouraged them to go in, leaving the room dark, with no fire burning. Only one candle was burning in the room now, and the only person present was Roger, who was poking among the bits and pieces I'd left on the counter.

He looked up as we entered, smiling. Still faintly flushed from the dancing, he had put his coat back on and draped a woolen scarf round his neck; his cloak lay over the stool beside him. Custom held that the most fortunate "firstfoot" on a Hogmanay was a tall and handsome dark-haired man; to welcome one as the first visitor across the threshold after midnight brought good fortune to the house for the coming year.

Roger being beyond argument the tallest—and quite the best-looking—dark man available, he had been elected to be firstfoot, not only for the Big House, as folk called it, but for those homes nearby. Fergus and Marsali and the others who lived near had already rushed off to their houses, to be ready to greet their firstfoot when he should come.

A red-haired man, though, was frightful ill luck as a firstfoot, and Jamie had been consigned to his study, under the riotous guard of the Lindsay brothers, who were to keep him safely bottled up 'til after midnight. There were no clocks nearer than Cross Creek, but old Mr. Guthrie had a pocket watch, even older than himself; this instrument would declare the mystic moment when one year yielded to the next. Given the watch's propensity for stopping, I doubted that this would be more than a symbolic pronouncement, but that was quite enough, after all.

"Eleven-fifty," Brianna declared, popping into the surgery after me, her own cloak over her arm. "I just checked Mr. Guthrie's watch."

"Plenty of time. Are ye coming with me, then?" Roger grinned at Bree, seeing her cloak.

"Are you kidding? I haven't been out after midnight in years." She grinned back at him, swirling the cloak around her shoulders. "Got everything?"

"All but the salt." Roger nodded toward a canvas bag on the counter. A firstfoot was to bring gifts to the house: an egg, a faggot of wood, a bit of salt—and a bit of whisky, thus insuring that the household would not lack for necessities during the coming year.

"Right. Where did I—oh, Christ!" Swinging open the cupboard door to search for the salt, I was confronted by a pair of glowing eyes, glaring out of the darkness at me.

"Good grief." I put a hand over my chest, to keep my heart from leaping out, waving the other hand weakly at Roger, who had sprung up at my cry, ready to defend me. "Not to worry—it's just the cat."

Adso had taken refuge from the party, bringing along the remains of a freshly killed mouse for company. He growled at me, evidently thinking I meant to snatch this treat for myself, but I pushed him crossly aside, digging the small bag of ground salt out from behind his furry hindquarters.

I closed the cupboard door, leaving Adso to his feast, and handed Roger the salt. He took it, laying down the object he had had in his hand.

"Where did ye get that wee auld wifie?" he asked, nodding toward the object as he put the salt away in his bag. I glanced at the counter, and saw that he had been examining the little pink stone figure that Mrs. Bug had given me.

“Mrs. Bug,” I replied. “She says it’s a fertility charm—which is certainly what it looks like. It *is* very old, then?” I’d thought it must be, and seeing Roger’s interest confirmed the impression.

He nodded, still looking at the thing.

“Very old. The ones I’ve seen in museums are dated at thousands of years.” He traced the bulbous outlines of the stone with a reverent forefinger.

Brianna moved closer to see, and without thinking, I set a hand on her arm.

“What?” she said, turning her head to smile at me. “I shouldn’t touch it? Do they work *that* well?”

“No, of course not.”

I took my hand away, laughing, but feeling rather self-conscious. At the same time, I became aware that I would really rather she *didn’t* touch it, and was relieved when she merely bent down to examine it, leaving it on the counter. Roger was looking at it, too—or rather, he was looking at Brianna, his eyes fixed on the back of her head with an odd intensity. I could almost imagine that he was willing her to touch the thing, as strongly as I was willing her not to.

Beauchamp, I said silently to myself, *you have had much too much to drink tonight.* All the same, I reached out by impulse and scooped the figure up, dropping it into my pocket.

“Come on! We have to go!” The odd mood of the moment abruptly broken, Brianna straightened up and turned to Roger, urging him.

“Aye, right. Let’s go, then.” He slung the bag over his shoulder and smiled at me, then took her arm and they disappeared, letting the surgery door close behind them.

I put out the candle, ready to follow them, and then stopped, suddenly reluctant to go back at once to the chaos of the celebration.

I could feel the whole house in movement, throbbing around me, and light flowed under the door from the hall. Just here, though, it was quiet. In the silence, I felt the weight of the little idol in my pocket, and pressed it, hard and lumpy against my leg.

There is nothing special about January the first, save the meaning we give to it. The ancients celebrated a new year at Imbolc, at the beginning of February, when the winter slackens and the light begins to come back—or the date of the spring equinox, when the world lies in balance between the powers of dark and light. And yet I stood there in the dark, listening to the sound of the cat chewing and slobbering in the cupboard, and felt the power of the earth shift and stir beneath my feet as the year—or something—prepared to change. There was noise and the sense of a crowd nearby, and yet I stood alone, while the feeling rose through me, hummed in my blood.

The odd thing was that it was not strange in the slightest. It was nothing that came from outside me, but only the acknowledgment of something I already possessed, and recognized, though I had no notion what to call it. But midnight was fast approaching. Still wondering, I opened the door, and stepped into the light and clamor of the hall.

A shout from across the hall betokened the arrival of the magic hour, as announced by Mr. Guthrie's timepiece, and the men came jostling out of Jamie's office, joking and pushing, faces turned expectantly toward the door.

Nothing happened. Had Roger decided to go to the back door, given the crowd in the kitchen? I turned to look down the hall, but no, the kitchen doorway was crowded with faces, all looking back at me in expectation.

Still no knock at the door, and there was a small stir of restiveness in the hallway, and a lull in conversation, one of those awkward silences when no one wants to talk for fear of sudden interruption.

Then I heard the sound of footsteps on the porch, and a rapid knock, one-two-three. Jamie, as householder, stepped forward to fling the door open and bid the firstfoot welcome. I was near enough to see the look of astonishment on his face, and looked quickly to see what had caused it.

Instead of Roger and Brianna, two smaller figures stood on the porch. Skinny and bedraggled, but definitely dark-haired, the two Beardsley twins stepped shyly in together, at Jamie's gesture.

"A happy New Year to you, Mr. Fraser," said Josiah, in a bullfrog croak. He bowed politely to me, still holding his brother by the arm. "We've come."

The general agreement was that dark-haired twins were a most fortunate omen, obviously bringing twice the luck of a single firstfoot. Nonetheless, Roger and Bree—who had met the twins hesitating in the yard, and sent them up to the door—went off to do their best for the other houses on the Ridge, Bree being severely warned not to enter any house until Roger had crossed the threshold.

Fortunate or not, the appearance of the Beardsleys caused a good deal of talk. Everyone had heard of the death of Aaron Beardsley—the official version, that is, which was that he had perished of an apoplexy—and the mysterious disappearance of his wife, but the advent of the twins caused the whole affair to be raked up and talked over again. No one knew what the boys had been doing between the militia's expedition and New Year's; Josiah said only "wanderin' " in his raspy croak, when asked—and his brother Keziah said nothing at all, obliging everyone to talk about the Indian trader and his wife until exhaustion caused a change of subject.

Mrs. Bug took the Beardsleys at once under her wing, taking them off to the kitchen to be washed, warmed, and fed. Half the partygoers had gone home to be firstfooted; those who would not leave 'til morning split into several groups. The younger people returned to the barn to dance—or to seek a bit of privacy among the hay bales—the older ones sat to talk of memories by the hearth, and those who had overindulged in dance or whisky curled up in any convenient corner—and quite a few inconvenient ones—to sleep.

I found Jamie in his study, leaning back in his chair with his eyes closed, a drawing of some kind on the table before him. He wasn't asleep, and opened his eyes when he heard my step.

"Happy New Year," I said softly, and bent to kiss him.

"A guid New Year to you, *a nighean donn*." He was warm and smelled faintly of beer and dried sweat.

"Still want to go outside?" I asked, with a glance at the window. The moon had set long since, and the stars burned faint and cold in the sky. The yard outside was bleak and black.

"No," he said frankly, rubbing a hand over his face. "I want to go to bed." He yawned and blinked, trying to smooth down the disheveled bits of hair sticking up on the top of his head. "I want you to come, too, though," he added, generously.

"I'd like nothing better," I assured him. "What's that?" I circled round behind him, looking over his shoulder at the drawing, which seemed to be some sort of floor plan, with mathematical calculations scribbled in the margins.

He sat up, looking a trifle more alert.

"Ah. Well, this is wee Roger's gift to Brianna, for Hogmanay."

"He's building her a house? But they—"

"Not her." He grinned up at me, hands flat on either side of the drawing. "The Chisholms."

Roger, with a guile that would have become Jamie himself, had scouted round among the settlers on the Ridge, and engineered an agreement between Ronnie Sinclair and Geordie Chisholm.

Ronnie had a large and commodious cabin next to his cooperage. So the agreement was that Ronnie, who was unmarried, would move into the cooper's shop, where he could easily sleep. The Chisholms would then move into Ronnie's cabin, to which they would at once—weather allowing—add two rooms, as per the plan on Jamie's table. In return, Mrs. Chisholm would undertake to make Ronnie's meals and do his washing. In the spring, when the Chisholms took possession of their own homestead and built a house there, Ronnie would take back his newly enlarged cabin—when the grandness of his improved accommodation might prove sufficient inducement for some young woman to accept his proposal of marriage, he hoped.

"And in the meantime, Roger and Bree get back their cabin, Lizzie and her father stop sleeping in the surgery, and everything is beer and skittles!” I squeezed his shoulders, delighted. “That’s a wonderful arrangement!”

“What’s a skittle?” he inquired, frowning back at me in puzzlement.

“One of a set of ninepins,” I said. “I believe the expression is meant to exemplify a state of general delight with prevailing conditions. Did you do the plan?”

“Aye. Geordie’s no carpenter, and I dinna want the place to fall down about his ears.” He squinted at the drawings, then took a quill from the jar, flipped open the inkwell, and made a small correction to one of the figures.

“There,” he said, dropping the quill. “That’ll do. Wee Roger wants to show it to Bree when they come back tonight; I said I’d leave it out for him.”

“She’ll be thrilled.” I leaned against the back of his chair, massaging his shoulders with my hands. He leaned back, the weight of his head warm against my stomach, and closed his eyes, sighing in pleasure.

“Headache?” I asked softly, seeing the vertical line between his eyes.

“Aye, just a bit. Oh, aye, that’s nice.” I had moved my hands to his head, gently rubbing his temples.

The house had quieted, though I could still hear the rumble of voices in the kitchen. Beyond them, the high sweet sound of Evan’s fiddle drifted through the cold, still air.

“ ‘My Brown-Haired Maid,’ ” I said, sighing reminiscently. “I do love that song.” I pulled loose the ribbon binding his plait, and unbraided the hair, enjoying the soft, warm feel of it as I spread it with my fingers.

“It’s rather odd that you don’t have an ear for music,” I said, making small talk to distract him, as I smoothed the ruddy arcs of his brows, pressing just within the edge of the orbit. “I don’t know why, but an aptitude for mathematics often goes along with one for music. Bree has both.”

“I used to,” he said absently.

“Used to what?”

"Have both." He sighed and bent forward to stretch his neck, his elbows resting on the table. "Oh, Christ. Please. Oh, aye. Ah!"

"Really?" I massaged his neck and shoulders, kneading the tight muscles hard through the cloth. "You mean you used to be able to *sing*?" It was a family joke; while possessed of a fine speaking voice, Jamie's sense of pitch was so erratic that any song in his voice was a chant so tuneless that babies were stunned, rather than lulled, to sleep.

"Well, perhaps not that, so much." I could hear the smile in his voice, muffled by the fall of hair that hid his face. "I could tell one tune from another, though—or say if a song was sung badly or well. Now it's no but noise or screeching." He shrugged, dismissing it.

"What happened?" I asked. "And when?"

"Oh, it was before I kent ye, Sassenach. In fact, quite soon before." He lifted a hand, reaching toward the back of his head. "Do ye recall, I'd been in France? It was on my way back wi' Dougal MacKenzie and his men, when Murtagh came across ye, wanderin' the Highlands in your shift.…"

He spoke lightly, but my fingers had found the old scar under his hair. It was no more now than a thread, the welted gash healed to a hairbreadth line. Still, it had been an eight-inch wound, laid open with an ax. It had nearly killed him at the time, I knew; he had lain near death in a French abbey for four months, and suffered from crippling headaches for years.

"It was that? You mean that you … couldn't hear music anymore, after you were hurt?"

His shoulders lifted briefly in a shrug.

"I hear no music but the sound of drums," he said simply. "I've the rhythm of it still, but the tune is gone."

I stopped, my hands on his shoulders, and he turned to look back at me, smiling, trying to make a joke of it.

"Dinna be troubled for it, Sassenach; it's no great matter. I didna sing well even when I *could* hear it. And Dougal didna kill me, after all."

"Dougal? You do think it was Dougal, then?" I was surprised at the certainty in his voice. He had thought at the time that it might perhaps have been his uncle Dougal who had made the murderous attack upon him—and then, surprised by his own men before being able to finish the job, had pretended instead to have found him wounded. But there had been no evidence to say for sure.

"Oh, aye." He looked surprised, too, but then his face changed, realizing.

"Oh, aye," he said again, more slowly. "I hadna thought—you couldna tell what he said, could you? When he died, I mean—Dougal." My hands were still resting on his shoulders, and I felt an involuntary shiver run through him. It spread through my hands and up my arms, raising the hairs all the way to the back of my neck.

As clearly as though the scene took place before me now, I could see that attic room in Culloden House. The bits and pieces of discarded furniture, things toppled and rolling from the struggle—and on the floor at my feet, Jamie crouching, grappling with Dougal's body as it bucked and strained, blood and air bubbling from the wound where Jamie's dirk had pierced the hollow of his throat. Dougal's face, blanched and mottled as his lifeblood drained away, eyes fierce black and fixed on Jamie as his mouth moved in Gaelic silence, saying … something. And Jamie's face, as white as Dougal's, eyes locked on the dying man's lips, reading that last message.

"What did he say?" My hands were tight on his shoulders, and his face was turned away as my thumbs rose up under his hair to seek the ancient scar again.

"Sister's son or no—I would that I had killed you, that day on the hill. For I knew from the beginning that it would be you or me." He spoke calm and low-voiced, and the very emotionlessness of the words made the shudder pass again, this time from me to him.

It was quiet in the study. The sound of voices in the kitchen had died to a murmur, as though the ghosts of the past gathered there to drink and reminisce, laughing softly among themselves.

"So that was what you meant," I said quietly. "When you said you'd made your peace with Dougal."

"Aye." He leaned back in his chair and reached up, his hands wrapping warmly round my wrists. "He was right, ken. It *was* him or me, and would have been, one way or the other."

I sighed, and a small burden of guilt dropped away. Jamie had been fighting to defend me, when he killed Dougal, and I had always felt that death to be laid at my door. But he was right, Dougal; too much lay between them, and if that final conflict had not come then, on the eve of Culloden, it would have been another time.

Jamie squeezed my wrists, and turned in his chair, still holding my hands.

"Let the dead bury the dead, Sassenach," he said softly. "The past is gone—the future is not come. And we are here together, you and I."

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WORLDS UNSEEN

The household was quiet; it was the perfect opportunity for my experiments. Mr. Bug had gone to Woolam's Mill, taking the Beardsley twins; Lizzie and Mr. Wemyss had gone to help Marsali with the new mash; and Mrs. Bug, having left a pot of porridge and a platter of toast in the kitchen, was out, too, combing the woods for the half-wild hens, catching them one by one and dragging them in by the feet to be installed in the handsome new chicken coop her husband had built. Bree and Roger sometimes came up to the big house for their breakfast, but more often chose to eat by their own hearth, as was the case this morning.

Enjoying the peace of the empty house, I made up a tray with cup, teapot, cream, and sugar, and took it with me to my surgery, along with my samples. The early morning light was perfect, pouring through the window in a brilliant bar of gold. Leaving the tea to steep, I took a couple of small glass bottles from the cupboard and went outside.

The day was chilly but beautiful, with a clear pale sky that promised a little warmth later in the morning. At the moment, though, it was cold enough that I was glad of my warm shawl, and the water in the horses' trough was frigid, rimmed with sheets of fragile ice. Not cold enough to kill the microbes, I supposed; I could see long strands of algae coating the boards of the trough, swaying gently as I buckled the thin crust of ice and disturbed the water, scraping one of my bottles along the slimy edge of the trough.

I scooped up further samples of liquid from the springhouse and from a puddle of muddy standing water near the privy, then hurried back to the house to make my trials while the light was still good.

The microscope stood by the window where I had set it up the day before, all gleaming brass and bright mirrors. A few seconds' work to place droplets on the glass slides I'd laid ready, and I bent to peer through the eyepiece with rapt anticipation.

The ovoid of light bulged, diminished, went out altogether. I squinted, turning the screw as slowly as I could, and … there it was. The mirror steadied and the light resolved itself into a perfect pale circle, window to another world.

I watched, enchanted, as the madly beating cilia of a paramecium bore it in hot pursuit of invisible prey. Then a quiet drifting, the field of view itself in constant movement as the drop of water on my slide shifted in its microscopic tides. I waited a moment more, in hopes of spotting one of the swift and elegant Euglena, or even a hydra, but no such luck; only bits of mysterious black-green, daubs of cellular debris and burst algal cells.

I shifted the slide to and fro, but found nothing else of interest. That was all right; I had plenty of other things to look at. I rinsed the glass rectangle in a cup of alcohol, let it dry for a moment, then dipped a glass rod into one of the small beakers I had lined up before my microscope, dabbing a drop of liquid onto the clean slide.

It had taken some experimentation to put the microscope together properly; it wasn't much like a modern version, particularly when reduced to its component parts for storage in Dr. Rawlings's handsome box. Still, the lenses were recognizable, and with that as a starting point, I had managed to fit the optical bits into the stand without much trouble. Obtaining sufficient light, though, had been more difficult, and I was thrilled finally to have got it working.

"What are ye doing, Sassenach?" Jamie, with a piece of toast in one hand, paused in the doorway.

"Seeing things," I said, adjusting the focus.

"Oh, aye? What sorts of things?" He came into the room, smiling. "Not ghosties, I trust. I will have had enough o' those."

"Come look," I said, stepping back from the microscope. Mildly puzzled, he bent and peered through the eyepiece, screwing up his other eye in concentration.

He squinted for a moment, then gave an exclamation of pleased surprise.

"I see them! Wee things with tails, swimming all about!" He straightened up, smiling at me with a look of delight, then bent at once to look again.

I felt a warm glow of pride in my new toy.

"Isn't it marvelous?"

"Aye, marvelous," he said, absorbed. "Look at them. Such busy wee strivers as they are, all pushing and writhing against one another—and such a mass of them!"

He watched for a few moments more, exclaiming under his breath, then straightened up, shaking his head in amazement.

"I've never seen such a thing, Sassenach. Ye'd told me about the germs, aye, but I never in life imagined them so! I thought they might have wee teeth, and they don't—but I never kent they would have such handsome, lashing wee tails, or swim about in such numbers."

"Well, some microorganisms do," I said, moving to peer into the eyepiece again myself. "These particular little beasts aren't germs, though—they're sperms."

"They're what?"

He looked quite blank.

"Sperms," I said patiently. "Male reproductive cells. You know, what makes babies?"

I thought he might just possibly choke. His mouth opened, and a very pretty shade of rose suffused his countenance.

"Ye mean seed?" he croaked. "Spunk?"

"Well … yes." Watching him narrowly, I poured steaming tea into a clean beaker and handed it to him as a restorative. He ignored it, though, his eyes fixed on the microscope as though something might spring out of the eyepiece at any moment and go writhing across the floor at our feet.

"Sperms," he muttered to himself. "Sperms." He shook his head vigorously, then turned to me, a frightful thought having just occurred to him.

"Whose are they?" he asked, his tone one of darkest suspicion.

“Er … well, yours, of course.” I cleared my throat, mildly embarrassed. “Who else’s would they be?”

His hand darted reflexively between his legs, and he clutched himself protectively.

“How the hell did ye get them?”

“How do you think?” I said, rather coldly. “I woke up in custody of them this morning.”

His hand relaxed, but a deep blush of mortification stained his cheeks dark crimson. He picked up the beaker of tea and drained it at a gulp, temperature notwithstanding.

“I see,” he said, and coughed.

There was a moment of deep silence.

“I … um … didna ken they could stay alive,” he said at last. “Errrrm … outside, I mean.”

“Well, if you leave them in a splotch on the sheet to dry out, they don’t,” I said, matter-of-factly. “Keep them from drying out, though”—I gestured at the small, covered beaker, with its small puddle of whitish fluid—“and they’ll do for a few hours. In their proper habitat, though, they can live for up to a week after … er … release.”

“Proper habitat,” he repeated, looking pensive. He darted a quick glance at me. “Ye do mean—”

“I do,” I said, with some asperity.

“Mmphm.” At this point, he recalled the piece of toast he still held, and took a bite, chewing meditatively.

“Do folk know about this? Now, I mean?”

“Know what? What sperm look like? Almost certainly. Microscopes have been around for well over a hundred years, and the first thing anyone with a working microscope does is to look at everything within reach. Given that the inventor of the microscope was a man, I should certainly think that … Don’t you?”

He gave me a look, and took another bite of toast, chewing in a marked manner.

“I shouldna quite like to refer to it as ‘within reach,’ Sassenach,” he said, through a mouthful of crumbs, and swallowed. “But I do take your meaning.”

As though compelled by some irresistible force, he drifted toward the microscope, bending to peer into it once more.

“They seem verra fierce,” he ventured, after a few moments’ inspection.

“Well, they do need to be,” I said, suppressing a smile at his faintly abashed air of pride in his gametes’ prowess. “It’s a long slog, after all, and a terrific fight at the end of it. Only one gets the honor, you know.”

He looked up, blank-faced. It dawned on me that he *didn’t* know. He’d studied languages, mathematics, and Greek and Latin philosophy in Paris, not medicine. And even if natural scientists of the time were aware of sperm as separate entities, rather than a homogenous substance, it occurred to me that they probably didn’t have any idea what sperm actually did.

“Wherever did you *think* babies came from?” I demanded, after a certain amount of enlightenment regarding eggs, sperms, zygotes, and the like, which left Jamie distinctly squiggle-eyed. He gave me a rather cold look.

“And me a farmer all my life? I ken precisely where they come from,” he informed me. “I just didna ken that … er … that all of this daffery was going on. I thought … well, I thought a man plants his seed into a woman’s belly, and it … well … grows.” He waved vaguely in the direction of my stomach. “You know—like … seed. Neeps, corn, melons, and the like. I didna ken they swim about like tadpoles.”

“I see.” I rubbed a finger beneath my nose, trying not to laugh. “Hence the agricultural designation of women as being either fertile or barren!”

“Mmphm.” Dismissing this with a wave of his hand, he frowned thoughtfully at the teeming slide. “A week, ye said. So it’s possible that the wee lad really *is* the Thrush’s get?”

Early in the day as it was, it took half a second or so for me to make the leap from theory to practical application.

“Oh—Jemmy, you mean? Yes, it’s quite possible that he’s Roger’s child.” Roger and Bonnet had lain with Brianna within two days of each other. “I told you—and Bree—so.”

He nodded, looking abstracted, then remembered the toast and pushed the rest of it into his mouth. Chewing, he bent for another look through the eyepiece.

"Are they different, then? One man's from another, I mean?"

"Er … not to look at, no." I picked up my cup of tea and had a sip, enjoying the delicate flavor. "They *are* different, of course—they carry the characteristics a man passes to his offspring.…" That was about as far as I thought it prudent to go; he was sufficiently staggered by my description of fertilization; an explanation of genes and chromosomes might be rather excessive at the moment. "But you can't see the differences, even with a microscope."

He grunted at that, swallowed the mouthful of toast, and straightened up.

"Why are ye looking, then?"

"Just curiosity." I gestured at the collection of bottles and beakers on the countertop. "I wanted to see how fine the resolution of the microscope was, what sorts of things I might be able to see."

"Oh, aye? And what then? What's the purpose of it, I mean?"

"Well, to help me diagnose things. If I can take a sample of a person's stool, for instance, and see that he has internal parasites, then I'd know better what medicine to give him."

Jamie looked as though he would have preferred not to hear about such things right after breakfast, but nodded. He drained his beaker and set it down on the counter.

"Aye, that's sensible. I'll leave ye to get on with it, then."

He bent and kissed me briefly, then headed for the door. Just short of it, though, he turned back.

"The, um, sperms …" he said, a little awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"Can ye not take them out and give them decent burial or something?"

I hid a smile in my teacup.

"I'll take good care of them," I promised. "I always do, don't I?"

There they were. Dark stalks, topped with clublike spores, dense against the pale bright ground of the microscope's field of view. Confirmation.

"Got them." I straightened up, slowly rubbing the small of my back as I looked over my preparations.

A series of slides lay in a neat fan beside the microscope, each bearing a dark smear in the middle, a code written on the end of each slide with a bit of wax from a candle stub. Samples of mold, taken from damp corn bread, from spoiled biscuit, and a bit of discarded pastry crust from the Hogmanay venison pie. The crust had yielded the best growth by far; no doubt it was the goose grease.

Of the various test substrates I had tried, those were the three resultant batches of mold that had contained the highest proportion of *Penicillium*—or what I could be fairly sure was *Penicillium*. There were a dismaying number of molds that would grow on damp bread, in addition to several dozen different strains of *Penicillium*, but the samples I had chosen contained the best matches for the textbook pictures of *Penicillium* sporophytes that I had committed to memory, years ago, in another life.

I could only hope that my memory wasn't faulty—and that the strains of mold I had here were among those species that produced a large quantity of penicillin, that I had not inadvertently introduced any virulent bacteria into the meat-broth mixture, and that—well, I could hope for a lot of things, but there came a point when one abandoned hope for faith, and trusted fate for charity.

A line of broth-filled bowls sat at the back of the countertop, each covered with a square of muslin to prevent things—insects, airborne particles, and mouse droppings, to say nothing of mice—from falling in. I had strained the broth and boiled it, then rinsed each bowl with boiling water before filling it with the steaming brown liquid. That was as close as I could come to a sterile medium.

I had then taken scrapings from each of my best mold samples, and swished the knife blade gently through the cooled broth, dissipating the clumps of soft blue as best I could before covering the bowl with its cloth and leaving it to incubate for several days.

Some of the cultures had thrived; others had died. A couple of bowls showed hairy dark green clumps that floated beneath the surface like submerged sea beasts, dark and sinister. Some intruder—mold, bacterium, or perhaps a colonial alga—but not the precious *Penicillium*.

Some anonymous child had spilled one bowl; Adso had knocked another onto the floor, maddened by the scent of goose broth, and had lapped up the contents, mold and all, with every evidence of enjoyment. There obviously hadn't been anything toxic in *that* one; I glanced down at the little cat, curled up in a pool of sunshine on the floor, the picture of somnolent well-being.

In three of the remaining bowls, though, spongy velvet mats of mottled blue covered the surface, and my examination of a sample taken from one of them had just confirmed that I did indeed have what I sought. It wasn't the mold itself that was antibiotic—it was a clear substance secreted *by* the mold, as a means of protecting itself from attack by bacteria. That substance was penicillin, and that was what I wanted.

I had explained as much to Jamie, who sat on a stool watching me as I poured the broth from each live culture through another bit of gauze to strain it.

"So what ye've got there is broth that the mold has pissed in, is that right?"

"Well, if you insist on putting it that way, yes." I gave him an austere glance, then took up the strained solution and began distributing it into several small stoneware jars.

He nodded, pleased to have got it right.

"And the mold piss is what cures sickness, aye? That's sensible."

"It is?"

"Well, ye use other sorts of piss for medicine, so why not that?"

He lifted the big black casebook in illustration. I had left it open on the counter after recording the latest batch of experiments, and he had been amusing himself by reading some of the earlier pages, those recorded by the book's previous owner, Dr. Daniel Rawlings.

"Possibly Daniel Rawlings did—*I* don't." Hands busy, I lifted my chin at the entry on the open page. "What was he using it for?"

“Electuary for the Treatment of Scurvy,” he read, finger following the neat small lines of Rawlings’s script. *“Two Heads of Garlic, crushed with six Radishes, to which are added Peru Balsam and ten drops of Myrrh, this Compound mixed with the Water of a Man-child so as to be conveniently drunk.”*

“Bar the last, it sounds like a rather exotic condiment,” I said, amused. “What would it go with best, do you think? Jugged hare? Ragout of veal?”

“Nay, veal’s too mild-flavored for radish. Hodgepodge of mutton, maybe,” he replied. “Mutton will stand anything.” His tongue flicked absentmindedly across his upper lip in contemplation.

“Why a man-child, d’ye think, Sassenach? I’ve seen the mention of it in such receipts before—Aristotle has it so, and so have some of the other ancient philosophers.”

I gave him a look, as I began tidying up my slides.

“Well, it’s certainly easier to collect urine from a male child than from a little girl; just try it, sometime. Oddly enough, though, urine from baby boys *is* very clean, if not entirely sterile; it may be that the ancient philosophers noticed they had better results with it in their formulae, because it was cleaner than the usual drinking water, if they were getting that from public aqueducts and wells and the like.”

“Sterile meaning that it hasna got the germs in it, not that it doesna breed?” He gave my microscope a rather wary glance.

“Yes. Or rather—it doesn’t breed germs, because there aren’t any there.”

With the countertop cleared, save for the microscope and the jars of penicillin-containing broth—or at least I hoped that’s what they were—I began the preparations for surgery, taking down my small case of surgical instruments, and fetching a large bottle of grain alcohol out of the cupboard.

I handed this to Jamie, along with the small alcohol burner I had contrived—an empty ink bottle, with a twisted wick of waxed flax drawn up through a cork stuck into the neck.

“Fill that up for me, will you? Where are the boys?”

"In the kitchen, getting drunk." He frowned in concentration, carefully pouring the alcohol. "Is the urine of wee lassies not clean, then? Or is it only harder to get?"

"No, actually, it isn't as clean as that of boys." I unfolded a clean cloth on the countertop and laid out two scalpels, a pair of long-nosed forceps, and a bunch of small cautery irons. I dug about in the cupboard, unearthing a handful of cotton pledgets. Cotton cloth was hideously expensive, but I had had the good fortune to cajole a sack of raw cotton bolls from Farquard Campbell's wife, in return for a jar of honey.

"The … um … route to the outside isn't quite so direct, you might say. So the urine tends to pick up bacteria and bits of debris from the skin folds." I looked over my shoulder at him and smiled. "Not that you ought to go feeling superior on that account."

"I shouldna dream of it," he assured me. "Are ye ready, then, Sassenach?"

"Yes, fetch them in. Oh, and bring the basin!"

He went out, and I turned to face the east window. It had snowed heavily the day before, but today was a fine, bright day, clear and cold, with the sun reflecting off the snow-covered trees with the light of a million diamonds. I couldn't have asked for better; I should need all the light I could get.

I set the cautery irons in the small brazier to heat. Then I fetched my amulet from the cabinet, put it round my neck so it hung beneath the bodice of my gown, and took down the heavy canvas apron from its hook behind the door. I put that on, too, then went to the window and looked out at the cold icing-sugar landscape, emptying my mind, steadying my spirit for what I was about to do. It was not a difficult operation, and I had done it many times before. I had not, however, done it on someone who was sitting upright and conscious, and that always made a difference.

I hadn't done it in several years, either, and I closed my eyes in recollection, visualizing the steps to take, feeling the muscles of my hand twitch slightly in echo of my thoughts, anticipating the movements I would make.

"God help me," I whispered, and crossed myself.

Stumbling footsteps, nervous giggles, and the rumble of Jamie's voice came from the hallway, and I turned round smiling to greet my patients.

A month of good food, clean clothes, and warm beds had improved the Beardsleys immensely, in terms of both health and appearance. They were both still small, skinny, and slightly bowlegged, but the hollows of their faces had filled out a bit, their dark hair lay soft against their skulls, and the look of hunted wariness had faded a little from their eyes.

In fact, both pairs of dark eyes were presently a little glazed, and Lizzie was obliged to grab Keziah by the arm in order to prevent his stumbling over a stool. Jamie had Josiah gripped firmly by the shoulder; he steered the boy over to me, then set down the pudding basin he carried under his other arm.

"All right, are you?" I smiled at Josiah, looking deep into his eyes, and squeezed his arm in reassurance. He swallowed hard, and gave me a rather ghastly grin; he wasn't drunk enough not to be scared.

I sat him down, chatting soothingly, wrapped a towel round his neck, and set the basin on his knees. I hoped he wouldn't drop it; it was china, and the only large pudding basin we had. To my surprise, Lizzie came to stand behind him, putting her small hands on his shoulders.

"Are you sure you want to stay, Lizzie?" I asked dubiously. "We can manage all right, I think." Jamie was thoroughly accustomed to blood and general carnage; I didn't think Lizzie could ever have seen anything beyond the common sorts of illness and perhaps a childbirth or two.

"Oh, no, ma'am; I'll stay." She swallowed, too, but set her small jaw bravely. "I promised Jo and Kezzie as I'd stay with them, all through."

I glanced at Jamie, who lifted one shoulder in the hint of a shrug.

"All right, then." I took one of the stoneware jars of penicillin broth, poured it into two cups, and gave one to each of the twins to drink.

Stomach acid would likely inactivate most of the penicillin, but it would—I hoped—kill the bacteria in their throats. Following surgery, another dose washed over the raw surfaces might prevent infection.

There was no way of knowing exactly how much penicillin there might be in the broth; I might be giving them massive doses—or too little to matter. At least I was reasonably sure that whatever penicillin was in the broth was presently active. I had no means of stabilizing the antibiotic, and no notion how long it might be potent—but fresh as it was, the solution was bound to be medicinally active, and there was a good chance that the rest of the broth would remain usable for at least the next few days.

I would make new cultures, as soon as the surgery was complete; with luck, I could dose the twins regularly for three or four days, and—with greater luck—thus prevent any infections.

"Oh, so ye can drink the stuff, can ye?" Jamie was eyeing me cynically over Josiah's head. I had injected him with penicillin following a gunshot injury a few years before, and he obviously now considered that I done so with purely sadistic intent.

I eyed him back.

"You can. Injectable penicillin is much more effective, particularly in the case of an active infection. However, I haven't any means of injecting it just at present, and this is meant to prevent them getting an infection, not to cure one. Now, if we're *quite* ready …"

I had thought that Jamie would restrain the patient, but both Lizzie and Josiah insisted that this was not necessary; Josiah would sit quite still, no matter what. Lizzie still gripped his shoulders, her face paler than his, and her small knuckles sharp and white.

I had examined both boys at length the day before, but had another quick look before starting, using a tongue depressor made of a slip of ash wood. I showed Jamie how to use this to keep the tongue pressed out of my way, then took up forceps and scalpel and drew a long breath.

I looked deep into Josiah's dark eyes, and smiled; I could see two tiny reflections of my face there, both looking pleasantly competent.

"All right, then?" I asked.

He couldn't speak, with the tongue depressor in his mouth, but made a good-natured sort of grunt that I took for assent.

I needed to be quick, and I was. The preparations had taken hours; the operation, no more than a few seconds. I seized one spongy red tonsil with the forceps, stretched it toward me, and made several small, quick cuts, deftly separating the layers of tissue. A trickle of blood was running out of the boy's mouth and down his chin, but nothing serious.

I pulled the gobbet of flesh free, dropped it into the basin, and shifted my grip to the other tonsil, where I repeated the process, only a trifle more slowly in consequence of working backhanded.

The whole thing couldn't have taken more than thirty seconds per side. I drew the instruments out of Josiah's mouth, and he goggled at me, astonished. Then he coughed, gagged, leaned forward, and another small chunk of flesh bounced into the basin with a small *splat,* together with a quantity of bright red blood.

I seized him by the nose and thrust his head back, stuffed pledgets into his mouth to absorb sufficient blood that I could see what I was doing, then snatched a small cautery iron and took care of the largest vessels; the smaller ones could clot and seal on their own.

His eyes were watering ferociously, and his hands were clamped in a death grip on the basin, but he had neither moved nor made a sound. I hadn't expected that he would, after what I had seen when Jamie removed the brand from his thumb. Lizzie was still gripping his shoulders, her eyes tight shut. Jamie reached up and tapped her on the elbow, and her eyes sprang open.

"Here, *a muirninn,* he's done. Take him and put him to his bed, aye?"

Josiah declined to go, though. Mute as his brother, he shook his head violently, and sat down upon a stool, where he sat swaying and white-faced. He gave his brother a ghastly grin, his teeth outlined in blood.

Lizzie hovered between the two boys, looking back and forth between them. Jo caught her eye, and pointed firmly at Keziah, who had assumed the patient's stool with an outward show of fortitude, chin upraised. She patted Jo gently on the head, and went at once to take hold of Keziah's shoulders. He turned his head and gave her a smile of remarkable sweetness, then bent his head and kissed her hand. Then he turned to me, shutting his eyes and opening his mouth; he looked just like a nestling begging for worms.

This operation was somewhat more complicated; his tonsils and adenoids were terribly enlarged, and badly scarred from chronic infection. It was a bloody business; both the towel and my apron were heavily splattered before I had done. I finished the cautery and looked closely at my patient, who was white as the snow outside, and completely glassy-eyed.

“Are you all right?” I asked. He couldn’t hear me, but my concerned expression was clear enough. His mouth twitched in what I thought was a gallant effort to smile. He began to nod; then his eyes rolled up and he slid off the stool, ending with a crash at my feet. Jamie caught the basin, rather neatly.

I thought Lizzie might faint as well; there was blood everywhere. She did totter a little, but went obediently to sit down beside Josiah when I told her to. Josiah sat looking on, squeezing Lizzie’s hand fiercely while Jamie and I picked up the pieces.

Jamie gathered Keziah up in his arms; the boy lay limp and bloodstained, looking like a murdered child. Josiah rose to his feet, his eyes resting anxiously on his brother’s unconscious body.

“It will be all right,” Jamie said to him, in tones of complete confidence. “I told ye, my wife is a great healer.” They all turned then, and looked at me, smiling: Jamie, Lizzie, and Josiah. I felt as though I ought to take a bow, but contented myself with smiling, too.

“It will be all right,” I said, echoing Jamie. “Go and rest now.”

The small procession left the room, more quietly than they had come in, leaving me to put away my instruments and tidy up.

I felt very happy, glowing with the calm sort of satisfaction that attends successful work. I had not done this sort of thing for a long time; the exigencies and limitations of the eighteenth century precluded most surgeries save those done in emergency. Without anesthesia and antibiotic, elective surgery was simply too difficult and too dangerous.

But now I had penicillin, at least. And it *would* be all right, I thought, humming to myself as I extinguished the flame of my alcohol lamp. I had felt it in their flesh, touching the boys as I worked. No germ would threaten them, no infection mar the cleanliness of my work. There was always luck in the practice of medicine—but the odds had shifted today, in my favor.

“All shall be well,” I quoted to Adso, who had silently materialized on the counter, where he was industriously licking one of the empty bowls, “and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.”

The big black casebook lay open on the counter where Jamie had left it. I turned to the back pages, where I had been recording the progress of my experiments, and took up my quill. Later, after supper, I would write down the details of the surgery. For the moment … I paused, then wrote *Eureka!* at the bottom of the page.

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MAIL CALL

Fergus undertook his bimonthly trip to Cross Creek in mid-February, returning with salt, needles, indigo, a few more miscellaneous necessities, and a bag full of mail. He arrived in mid-afternoon, so anxious to get back to Marsali that he stayed only long enough for a quick mug of beer, leaving Brianna and me to sort through the parcels, gloating over the bounty.

There was a thick stack of newspapers from Wilmington and New Bern; a few from Philadelphia and Boston as well, sent by friends in the north to Jocasta Cameron, and thence forwarded on to us. I flipped through these; the most recent was dated three months prior. No matter; newspapers were as good as novels, in a place where reading material was almost literally scarcer than gold.

Jocasta had also sent two issues of *Brigham's Lady's Book* for Brianna, this being a periodical featuring drawings of fashionable London costumes, and articles of interest to women of such tastes.

"How to Clean Gold Lace," Brianna read, arching one eyebrow as she opened one of these at random. "That's something everybody ought to know how to do, for sure."

"Look in the back," I advised her. "That's where they publish the articles about how to avoid catching gonorrhea and what to do about your husband's piles."

The other brow went up, making her look just like Jamie, presented with some highly questionable proposition.

"If my husband gave me gonorrhea, I think he could just worry about his own piles." She turned several pages, and the eyebrows arched higher. *"A Spur to Venus. This being a List of infallible Remedys for Fatigue of the Male Member."*

I peered over her arm, my own eyebrows rising.

"Goodness. *A Dozen of Oysters, soaked overnight in a Mixture of Wine and Milk, to be baked in a Tart with Crushed Almonds and Lobstermeat, and served with Spiced Peppers*. I don't know what it would do for the male member, but it would probably give the gentleman attached to it violent indigestion. Of course, we haven't got any oysters here anyway."

"No loss," she assured me, frowning at the page in concentration. "Oysters remind me of big plugs of snot."

"That's only the raw ones; they're more or less edible when cooked. Speaking of snot, though—where's Jemmy?"

"Asleep, or at least I hope so." She cast a suspicious eye toward the ceiling, but no untoward noises manifested themselves, and she returned to the page.

"Here's one we could do. *The Testicles of a Male Animal*—like you'd get them from a female animal—*taken with six large Mushrooms and boyled in Sour Ale until tender, then both Testicles and Mushrooms to be sliced thin, well-pepper'd and seasoned with Salt, then sprinkl'd with Vinegar and brown'd before the Fire until crusty*. Da hasn't gotten around to castrating Gideon yet, has he?"

"No. I'm sure he'd be happy to give you the objects in question, if you want to try."

She went very pink in the face, and cleared her throat with a noise that reminded me even more of her father. "I—um—don't think we need that *just* yet."

I laughed and left her to her fascinated perusal, turning back to the mail.

There was a wrapped object addressed to Jamie that I knew must be a book, sent from a bookseller in Philadelphia, but with Lord John Grey's seal affixed—a daub of blue wax whimsically marked with a smiling half-moon and a single star. Half our library came from John Grey, who insisted that he sent us books primarily for his own satisfaction, as he knew no one in the Colonies other than

Jamie who was capable of carrying on a decent discussion of literature.

There were several letters addressed to Jamie, too; I looked these over carefully, in hopes of seeing his sister's characteristic spiky script, but no such luck. There was a letter from Ian, who wrote faithfully once a month, but nothing from Jenny; there had been no word from her in the past six months; not since Jamie had written reluctantly to tell her of the fate of her youngest son.

I frowned, setting the letters in a small stack at the edge of the desk for Jamie's later attention. I could scarcely blame Jenny, under the circumstances—but I'd been there, after all. It hadn't been Jamie's fault, even though he'd accepted the blame for it. Young Ian had chosen to stay with the Mohawk. He was a man, if a young one, and the decision was his to make. But then, I reflected, he had been still a lad when he left his parents, and likely still was, so far as Jenny was concerned.

I knew that her silence hurt Jamie deeply, though. He continued to write to her, as he always had, stubbornly putting down a few paragraphs most evenings, putting by the pages until someone should be going down from the mountain, to Cross Creek or Wilmington. He was never obvious about it, but I saw the way his eyes flicked across each batch of letters, looking for her writing, and the almost-invisible tightening at the corner of his mouth when he didn't find it.

"Drat you, Jenny Murray," I murmured under my breath. "Forgive him and have done with it!"

"Hmm?" Brianna had put down the periodical and was examining a square letter, frowning as she did so.

"Nothing. What's that you have there?" I put down the letters I had been sorting and came to look.

"It's from Lieutenant Hayes. What do you think he's writing about?"

A tiny spurt of adrenaline tightened my belly. It must also have shown on my unwary face, for Brianna put down the letter and looked at me, brow furrowed.

"What?" she demanded.

"Nothing," I said, but it was too late. She stood looking at me, a fist doubled on her hip, and raised one brow.

"You are the most terrible liar, Mama," she said tolerantly. Without hesitation, she broke the seal.

"That's addressed to your father," I said, though my protest lacked strength.

"Um-hm. So was the other one," she said, head bent over the unfolded sheet of paper.

"What?" But I had come to her side, and was reading over her arm, even as I spoke.

Lieutenant Archibald Hayes
Portsmouth, Virginia

Mr. James Fraser
Fraser's Ridge, North Carolina

January 18, 1771

Sir—

I write to inform you that we are at present in Portsmouth, and like to remain here until Spring. If you are acquainted with any Sea Captains willing to grant Passage to Perth for forty Men, on promise of Recompense from the Army once Port is reached, I should be glad to hear of it at your earliest Convenience.

In the Meantime, we have put our Hands to various Labors, that we might sustain ourselves through the Winter Months. Several of my Men have obtained Work in the Repair of Boats, which are plentiful here. I myself am employed as Cook in a local Tavern, but make shift to visit my Men regularly in the assorted Quarters where they are lodged, to make myself acquainted with their State.

I called upon one such Lodging two Evenings ago. In course of Conversation, one of the Men—a Private Ogilvie, whom I think you will know—mentioned to me a Conversation which he had *overheard in the Shipyard. As this pertained to one Stephen Bonnet, who I recollect is of Interest to you, I pass on herewith the Intelligence of the Matter.*

Bonnet appears by Report to be a Smuggler, scarce an uncommon Occupation in the Area. Howsoever, he seems to deal in a higher Quality—and Quantity—of Contraband than is the usual, and in Consequence, the Nature of his Connexions appears also unusual. Which is to say that certain Warehouses on the Carolina Coast periodically contain Goods of a Nature not generally to be found therein, and that such Visitations coincide with Sightings of Stephen Bonnet in the Taverns and "Holes" nearby.

Private Ogilvie has little Recollection of specific Names overheard, as he had no Knowledge that Bonnet was of Interest, and mentioned the Matter to me only as a curious Piece of Information. One Name mentioned was "Butler," he says, but he is uncertain whether this Name had aught to do with Bonnet. Another name was "Karen," but Ogilvie does not know whether this pertained to a Woman or perhaps to a Ship.

A Warehouse which he supposed to be a particular Building indicated in the Conversation—though he freely admits that he is uncertain of this—happened to be at no great Distance from the Shipyard, and when he told me of his Intelligence, I took it upon myself to pass by this Building and make Enquiries concerning its Ownership. The Building is owned jointly by two Partners: one Ronald Priestly and one Phillip Wylie. I have no Information concerning either Man at Present, but will continue my Enquiries as my Time permits.

Having learned the Above, I have made an Effort to solicit Conversation concerning Bonnet in the local Taprooms, but to little Effect. I should say that the Name is known, but few wish to speak of him.

Your most obedient servant,
Archibald Hayes, Lieutenant
67th Highland Regiment

All the normal noises of the house were still around us, but Bree and I seemed suddenly to be together in a small, clear bubble of silence, where time had abruptly stopped.

I felt reluctant to put down the letter, for that would mean that time would go on, and something must at that point be done. At the same time, I wanted not merely to put it down but to throw it into the fire, and pretend neither of us had seen it.

Then Jemmy began to cry upstairs, Brianna jerked in response and turned toward the door, and things began to move normally again.

I set the letter down in a space by itself, and returned to the rest of the mail, setting things tidily aside for Jamie's later attention, putting the newspapers and periodicals into a neat stack, untying the string round the parcel; as I had supposed, it was a book—Tobias Smollett's *The Expedition of Humphrey Clinker.* I wound up the string and tucked it into my pocket, while all the time a small "Now-what, now-what" beat in the back of my mind like a metronome.

Brianna came back, carrying Jemmy, who was red and creased from his nap, and obviously in that state of mind where one rouses from sleep to a dazed irritation at the intrusive demands of consciousness. I sympathized.

She sat down, pulled down the neck of her shift, and put the baby to her breast. His cries ceased like magic, and I had a moment of intense wishfulness that I could do something that immediately effective for her. As it was, she looked pale, but composed.

I had to say something.

"I am sorry, sweetheart," I said. "I tried to stop him—Jamie, I mean. I know he didn't mean you to know about it. To worry about it."

"That's okay. I already knew." Reaching across one-handed, she slid one of the ledgers out of the stack Jamie kept on his desk, and holding it by the spine, shook out a folded letter. She nodded over Jemmy's head at it.

"Look at that. I found it while you were gone with the militia."

I read Lord John's account of the duel between Bonnet and Captain Marsden, feeling a coldness gather beneath my breastbone. I hadn't been under any illusions regarding Bonnet's character, but I hadn't known that he had that much skill. I greatly preferred dangerous criminals to be incompetent.

"I thought maybe Lord John was just answering a casual question for Da—but I guess not. What do you think?" Bree asked. Her tone was cool, almost detached, as though she were inquiring my opinion of a hair-ribbon or a shoe-buckle. I looked up at her sharply.

"What do *you* think?" It was Brianna who was important in this—or that was *my* opinion.

"About what?" Her eyes slid away from mine, glancing off the letter, then fastening themselves on the curve of Jemmy's head.

"Oh, the price of tea in China, for starters," I said, with some irritation. "Going on promptly to the topic of Stephen Bonnet, if you like." It felt oddly shocking to say the name out loud; we had all avoided it for months, by unspoken consent.

Her teeth were fastened in her lower lip. She kept her eyes fixed on the floor for a moment, then shook her head, very slightly.

"I don't want to hear about him, or think about him," she said, very evenly. "And if I ever see him again, I might just … just …" She shuddered violently, then looked up at me, eyes fierce and sudden.

"What's *wrong* with him?" she cried. "How could he do this?" Her clenched fist struck her thigh, and Jemmy, startled, lost his grip and began to wail.

"Your father, you mean—not Bonnet."

She nodded, pressing Jemmy back toward her breast, but he had picked up her agitation, and was squirming and howling. I reached down and took him, hoisting him to my shoulder and patting his back in automatic comfort. Bree's hands, left empty, fastened on her knees, crumpled the cloth of her skirt.

"Why couldn't he leave Bonnet alone?" She had to raise her voice to be heard above the baby's wailing, and the bones of her face seemed to have shifted, so that the skin looked tight-drawn over them.

"Because he's a man—and a bloody Highlander," I said. " 'Live and let live' is not in their vocabulary." Milk was dripping slowly from her nipple onto the fabric of her shift; I reached out one-handed and tweaked the cloth up to cover her. She put a hand over her breast and pressed hard to stop the milk.

"What does he mean to do, though? If he finds him."

"*When* he finds him, I'm afraid," I said reluctantly. "Because I don't believe he's going to stop looking until he does. As to what he'll do then … well … then he'll kill him, I suppose." It sounded oddly offhand, put that way, and yet I didn't see any other way of putting it, really.

"You mean he'll *try* to kill him." She glanced at the letter from Lord John, then away, swallowing. "What if he …"

"Your father has a great deal of experience in killing people," I said bleakly. "In fact, he's awfully good at it—though he hasn't done it for some time."

This didn't seem to reassure her to any great extent. It hadn't reassured me, either.

"It's such a big place," she murmured, shaking her head. "America, I mean. Why couldn't he just—go away? Far away?" An excellent question. Jemmy was snorting, rubbing his face furiously in my shoulder, but no longer screaming.

"I was rather hoping that Stephen Bonnet would have the good sense to go and pursue his smuggling in China or the West Indies, but I suppose he has local connections that he didn't want to abandon." I shrugged, patting Jemmy.

Brianna let go of her skirt and reached for the baby, who was still twisting like an eel.

"Well, he doesn't know he has Sherlock Fraser and his sidekick Lord John Watson on his trail, after all." It was a brave try, but her lip trembled as she said it, and she bit the lower one again. I hated to cause her more worry, but there was no point now in avoiding things.

“No, but he very likely will, before too long,” I said reluctantly. “Lord John is very discreet—Private Ogilvie isn’t. If Jamie goes on asking questions—and he will, I’m afraid—his interest is going to be rather widely known before long.” I wasn’t sure whether Jamie had hoped to discover Bonnet quickly and take him unawares—or whether his plan was to smoke Bonnet out into the open by means of his inquiries. Or whether he meant in fact to draw Bonnet’s attention deliberately, and cause him to come to *us*. The last possibility made me a little weak in the knees, and I sat down heavily on the stool.

Brianna drew a slow, deep breath and let it out through her nose, settling the baby back at her breast.

“Does Roger know? I mean, is he in on this—this—bloody *vendetta*?”

I shook my head.

“I don’t think so. I mean, I’m sure not. He would have told you—wouldn’t he?”

Her expression eased a little, though a shadow of doubt still darkened her eyes.

“I’d hate to think he’d keep something like that from me. On the other hand,” she added, voice sharpening a little in accusation, “*you* did.”

I felt the sting of it, and pressed my lips tight together.

“You said that you didn’t want to think of Stephen Bonnet,” I said, looking away from the turbulence of feeling in her face. “Naturally not. I—we—didn’t want you to have to.” With a certain feeling of inevitability, I realized that I was being drawn into the vortex of Jamie’s intentions, through no consent of my own.

“Now, look,” I said briskly, sitting up straight and giving Brianna a sharp look. “*I* don’t think it’s a good idea to look for Bonnet, and I’ve done all I could to discourage Jamie from doing it. In fact,” I added ruefully, with a nod toward Lord John’s letter, “I thought I *had* discouraged him. But apparently not.”

A look of determination was hardening Brianna's mouth, and she settled herself more solidly in the chair.

"*I'll* bloody discourage him," she said.

I gave her a look, considering. If anyone had the necessary stubbornness and force of character to sway Jamie from his chosen path, it would be his daughter. That was, however, a very large "if."

"You can try," I said, a little dubiously.

"Don't I have the right?" Her initial shock had vanished, and her features were back under control, her expression cold and hard. "Isn't it for me to say whether I want … what I want?"

"Yes," I agreed, a twinge of uneasiness rippling down my back. Fathers were inclined to think they had rights, too. So were husbands. But perhaps that was better left unsaid.

A momentary silence fell between us, broken only by Jemmy's noises, and the calling of crows outside. Almost by impulse, I asked the question that had risen to the surface of my mind.

"Brianna. What do you want? Do you want Stephen Bonnet dead?"

She glanced at me, then away, looking out the window while she patted Jemmy's back. She didn't blink. Finally, her eyes closed briefly, then opened to meet mine.

"I can't," she said, low-voiced. "I'm afraid if I ever let that thought in my mind … I'd never be able to think about anything else, I'd want it so much. And I will be *damned* if I'll let … him … ruin my life that way."

Jemmy gave a resounding belch, and spit up a little milk. Bree had an old linen towel across her shoulder, and deftly wiped his chin with it. Calmer now, he had lost his look of vexed incomprehension, and was concentrating intently on something over his mother's shoulder. Following the direction of his clear blue gaze, I saw the shadow of a spiderweb, high up in the corner of the window. A gust of wind shook the window frame, and a tiny spot moved in the center of the web, very slightly.

"Yeah," Brianna said, very softly. "I do want him dead. But I want Da and Roger alive, more."

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38

THE DREAMTIME

Roger had gone to sing for Joel MacLeod's nephew's wedding, as arranged at the Gathering, and come home with a new prize, which he was anxious to commit to paper before it should escape.

He left his muddy boots in the kitchen, accepted a cup of tea and a raisin tart from Mrs. Bug, and went directly to the study. Jamie was there, writing letters; he glanced up with an absent murmur of acknowledgment, but then returned to his composition, a slight frown between his heavy brows as he formed the letters, hand cramped and awkward on the quill.

There was a small, three-shelf bookcase in Jamie's study, which held the entire library of Fraser's Ridge. The serious works occupied the top shelf: a volume of Latin poetry, Caesar's *Commentaries*, the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, a few other classic works, Dr. Brickell's *Natural History of North Carolina*, lent by the Governor and never returned, and a schoolbook on mathematics, much abused, with *Ian Murray the Younger* written on the flyleaf in a staggering hand.

The middle shelf was given over to more light-minded reading: a small selection of romances, slightly ragged with much reading, featuring *Robinson Crusoe*; *Tom Jones*, in a set of seven small, leather-covered volumes; *Roderick Random*, in four volumes; and Sir Henry Richardson's monstrous *Pamela*, done in two gigantic octavo bindings—the first of these decorated with multiple bookmarks, ranging from a ragged dried maple leaf to a folded penwiper, these indicating the points which various readers had reached before giving up, either temporarily or permanently. A copy of *Don Quixote* in Spanish, ratty, but much less worn, since only Jamie could read it.

The bottom shelf held a copy of *Dr. Sam. Johnson's Dictionary*, Jamie's ledgers and account books, several of Brianna's sketchbooks, and the slender buckram-bound journal in which Roger recorded the words of unfamiliar songs and poems acquired at ceilidhs and hearthsides.

He took a stool on the other side of the table Jamie used as a desk, and cut a new quill for the job, taking care with it; he wanted these records to be readable. He didn't know precisely what use the collection might be put to, but he had been ingrained with the scholar's instinctive value for the written word. Perhaps this was only for his own pleasure and use—but he liked the feeling that he might be leaving something to posterity as well, and took pains both to write clearly and to document the circumstances under which he had acquired each song.

The study was peaceful, with no more than Jamie's occasional sigh as he stopped to rub the kinks from his cramped hand. After a while, Mr. Bug came to the door, and after a brief colloquy, Jamie put away his quill and went out with the factor. Roger nodded vaguely as they bade him farewell, mind occupied with the effort of recall and recording.

When he finished, a quarter of an hour later, his mind was pleasantly empty, and he sat back, stretching the ache from his shoulders. He waited a few moments for the ink to be thoroughly dry before he put the book away, and while waiting, went to pull out one of Brianna's sketchbooks from the bottom shelf.

She wouldn't mind if he looked; she had told him he was welcome to look at them. At the same time, she showed him only the occasional drawing, those she was pleased with, or had done especially for him.

He turned over the pages of the notebook, feeling the sense of curiosity and respect that attends the prying into mystery, searching for small glimpses of the workings of her mind.

There were lots of portrait sketches of the baby in this one, a study in circles.

He paused at one small sketch, caught by memory. It was a sketch of Jemmy sleeping, back turned, his small sturdy body curled up in a comma. Adso the cat was curled up beside him, in precisely similar fashion, his chin perched on Jemmy's fat little foot, eyes slits of comatose bliss. He remembered that one.

She drew Jemmy often—nearly every day, in fact—but seldom fullface.

"Babies don't really have faces," she had told him, frowning critically at her offspring, who was industriously gnawing on the leather strap of Jamie's powder horn.

"Oh, aye? And what's that on the front of his head, then?" He had lain flat on the floor with the baby and the cat, grinning up at her, which made it easier for her to look down her nose at him.

"I mean, strictly speaking. Naturally they have faces, but they all look alike."

"It's a wise father that kens his own child, eh?" he joked, regretting it instantly, as he saw the shadow cloud her eyes. It passed, quick as a summer cloud, but it had been there, nonetheless.

"Well, not from an artist's point of view." She drew the blade of her penknife at an angle across the tip of the charcoal stick, sharpening the point. "They don't have any bones—that you can see, I mean. And it's the bones that you use to show the shape of a face; without bones, there isn't much there."

Bones or not, she had a remarkable knack for capturing the nuances of expression. He smiled at one sketch; Jemmy's face wore the aloof and unmistakable expression of one concentrating hard on the production of a truly terrible diaper.

Beyond the pictures of Jemmy, there were several pages of what looked like engineering diagrams. Finding these of no great interest, he bent and replaced the book, then drew out another.

He realized at once that it was not a sketchbook. The pages were dense with Brianna's tidy, angular writing. He flipped curiously through the pages; it wasn't really a diary, but appeared to be a sort of record of her dreams.

Last night I dreamed that I shaved my legs. Roger smiled at the inconsequence, but a vision of Brianna's shins, long-boned and glimmering, kept him reading.

> *I was using Daddy's razor and his shaving cream, and I was thinking that he'd complain when he found out, but I wasn't worried. The shaving cream came in a white can with red letters, and it said Old Spice on the label. I don't know if there ever was shaving cream like that, but that's what Daddy always smelled of, Old Spice aftershave and cigarette smoke. He didn't smoke, but the people he worked with did, and his jackets always smelled like the air in the living room after a party.*

Roger breathed in, half-conscious of the remembered scents of fresh baking and tea, furniture polish and ammonia. No cigarettes at the decorous gatherings held in the manse's parlor—and yet his father's jackets too had smelled of smoke.

> *Once Gayle told me that she'd gone out with Chris and hadn't had time to shave her legs, and she spent the whole evening trying to keep him from putting his hand on her knee, for fear he'd feel the stubble. Afterward, I never shaved my legs without thinking of that, and I'd run my fingers up my thigh, to see whether I could feel anything there, or if it was okay to stop shaving at my kneecaps.*

The hair on Brianna's thighs was so fine it could not be felt; and only seen when she rose up naked over him, with the sun behind her gilding her body, gleaming through that delicate nimbus of secrecy. The thought that no one would ever see it but himself gave him a small glow of satisfaction, like a miser counting each hair of gold and copper, enjoying his secret fortune undisturbed by any fear of theft.

He turned the page, feeling unspeakably guilty at this intrusion, yet drawn irresistibly by the urge to penetrate the intimacy of her dreams, to know the images that filled her sleeping mind.

The entries were undated, but each entry began with the same words: *Last night, I dreamed.*

Last night I dreamed that it was raining. Hardly surprising, since it was *raining, and has been for two days. When I went out to the privy this morning, I had to jump over a huge puddle by the door, and sank up to the ankles in the soft spot by the blackberries.*

We went to bed last night with the rain pounding on the roof. It was so nice to curl up with Roger and be warm in our bed, after a wet, chilly day. Raindrops fell down the chimney and hissed in the fire. We told each other stories from our youths—maybe that's where the dream came from, thinking about the past.

There wasn't much to the dream, just that I was looking out a window in Boston, watching the cars go past, throwing up big sheets of water from their wheels, and hearing the swoosh and rush of their tires on the wet streets. I woke up still hearing that sound; it was so clear in my mind that I actually went to the window and peeked out, half expecting to see a busy street, full of cars rushing through the rain. It was a shock to see spruce trees and chestnuts and wild grass and creepers, and hear nothing but the soft patter of raindrops bouncing and trembling on the burdock leaves.

Everything was so vivid a green, so lush and overgrown, that it seemed like a jungle, or an alien planet—a place I'd never been, with nothing I recognized, though in fact I see it every day.

All day, I've heard the secret rush of tires in the rain, somewhere behind me.

Feeling guilty, but fascinated, Roger turned the page.

Last night I dreamed of driving my car. It was my own blue Mustang, and I was driving fast down a winding road, through the mountains—these mountains. I never have driven through these mountains, though I have been through the mountain woodlands in upstate New York. It was definitely here, though; I knew it was the Ridge.

It was so real. I can still feel my hair snapping in the wind, the wheel in my hands, the vibration of the motor and the rumble of tires on the pavement. But that sensation—as well as the car—is impossible. It can't happen now, anywhere but in my head. And yet *there it is, embedded in the cells of my memory, as real as the privy outside, waiting to be called back to life at the flick of a synapse.*

That's another oddness. Nobody knows what a synapse is, except me and Mama and Roger. What a strange feeling; as though we three share all kinds of secrets.

Anyway, that particular bit—the driving—is traceable to a known memory. But what about the dreams, equally vivid, equally real, of things I do not know of my waking self. Are some dreams the memories of things that haven't happened yet?

Last night I dreamed that I made love with Roger.

He had been about to close the book, feeling a sense of guilt at his intrusion. The guilt was still there—in spades—but totally insufficient to overcome his curiosity. He glanced at the door, but the house was quiet; women were moving about in the kitchen, but no one was near the study.

Last night I dreamed that I made love with Roger.

It was great; for once I wasn't thinking, wasn't watching from the outside, like I always do. In fact, I wasn't even aware of myself for a long time. There was just this … very wild, exciting stuff, and I was part of it and Roger was part of it, but there wasn't any him or me, just us.

The funny thing is that it was Roger, but I didn't think of him like that. Not by his name—not that name. It was like he had another name, a secret, real one—but I knew what it was.

(I've always thought everybody has that kind of name, the kind that isn't a word. I know who I am—and whoever it is, her name isn't "Brianna." It's me, that's all. "Me" works fine as a substitute for what I mean—but how do you write down someone else's secret name?)

I knew Roger's real name, though, and that seemed to be why it was working. And it really was working, too; I didn't think about it or worry about it, and I only thought toward the very end, Hey, it's happening!

And then it did happen and everything dissolved and shook and throbbed—

Here she had blacked out the rest of the line, with a small, cross note in the margin, that said,

Well, none of the books I've ever read could describe it, either!

Despite his shocked fascination, Roger laughed aloud, then choked it off, glancing round hastily to see that he was still alone. There were noises in the kitchen, but no sound of footsteps in the hall, and his eyes went back to the page like iron filings drawn to a magnet.

I had my eyes closed—in the dream, that is—and I was lying there with little electric shocks still going off, and I opened my eyes and it was Stephen Bonnet inside me.

It was such a shock it woke me up. I felt like I'd been screaming—my throat was all raw—but I couldn't have been, because Roger and the baby were sound asleep. I was hot all over, so hot I was sweating, but I was cold, too, and my heart was pounding. It took a long time before things settled down enough for me to go back to sleep; all the birds were carrying on.

That's what finally let me go back to sleep, in fact—the birds. Da—and Daddy, too, come to think of it—told me that the jays and crows give alarm calls, but songbirds stop singing when someone comes near, so when you're in a forest, you listen for that. With so much racket in the trees by the house, I knew it was safe—nobody was there.

There was a small blank space at the foot of the page. He turned it, feeling his palms sweat and his heartbeat heavy in his ears. The writing resumed at the top of the page. Before, the writing had been fluid, almost hasty, the letters flattened as they raced across the page. Here, they were formed with more care, rounded and upright, as though the first shock of the experience were spent, and she had returned, with a stubborn caution, to think further about it.

> *I tried to forget it, but that didn't work. It kept coming back and coming back into my mind, so I finally went out by myself to work in the herb shed. Mama keeps Jemmy when I'm there because he gets in things, so I knew I could be alone. So I sat down in the middle of all the hanging bunches and closed my eyes and tried to remember every single thing about it, and think to myself about the different parts, "That's okay," or "That's just a dream." Because Stephen Bonnet scared me, and I felt sick when I thought of the end—but I really wanted to remember how. How it felt, and how I did it, so maybe I can do it again, with Roger.*
>
> *But I keep having this feeling that I can't, unless I can remember Roger's secret name.*

There the entry stopped. The dreams continued on the next page, but Roger didn't read further. He closed the book very carefully and slid it back behind the others on the shelf. He rose to his feet and stood looking out the window for some time, unconsciously rubbing his sweating palms over the seams of his breeches.

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PART FIVE

’Tis Better to Marry Than Burn

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39

IN CUPID'S GROVE

"Do ye think they'll share a bed?"

Jamie didn't raise his voice, but he'd made no effort to lower it, either. Luckily, we were standing at the far end of the terrace, too far away for the bridal couple to hear. A number of heads turned in our direction, though.

Ninian Bell Hamilton was openly staring at us. I smiled brightly and fluttered my closed fan at the elderly Scotsman in greeting, meanwhile giving Jamie a swift nudge in the ribs.

"A nice, respectable sort of thing for a nephew to be wondering about his aunt," I said under my breath.

Jamie shifted out of elbow range and lifted an eyebrow at me.

"What's respectable to do with it? They'll be married. And well above the age of consent, both o' them," he added, with a grin at Ninian, who went bright pink with smothered mirth. I didn't know how old Duncan Innes was, but my best guess put him in his mid-fifties. Jamie's aunt Jocasta had to be at least a decade older.

I could just see Jocasta over the heads of the intervening crowd, graciously accepting the greetings of friends and neighbors at the far end of the terrace. A tall woman gowned in russet wool, she was flanked by huge stone vases holding sprays of dried goldenrod, and her black butler Ulysses stood at her shoulder, dignified in wig and green livery. With an elegant white lace cap crowning her bold MacKenzie bones, she was undeniably the queen of River Run Plantation. I stood on tiptoe, searching for her consort.

Duncan was slightly shorter than Jocasta, but he should still have been visible. I'd seen him earlier in the morning, dressed in an absolute blaze of Highland finery, in which he looked dashing, if terribly self-conscious. I craned my neck, putting a hand on Jamie's arm to keep my balance. He grabbed my elbow to steady me.

"What are ye looking for, Sassenach?"

"Duncan. Shouldn't he be with your aunt?"

No one could tell by looking that Jocasta was blind—that she stood between the big vases to keep her bearings, or that Ulysses was there to whisper in her ear the names of approaching guests. I saw her left hand drift outward from her side, touch empty air, and drift back. Her face didn't change, though; she smiled and nodded, saying something to Judge Henderson.

"Run away before the wedding night?" suggested Ninian, lifting his chin and both eyebrows in an effort to see over the crowd without standing on his toes. "I'd maybe feel a bit nervous at the prospect myself. Your aunt's a handsome woman, Fraser, but she could freeze the ballocks off the King o' Japan, and she wanted to."

Jamie's mouth twitched.

"Duncan's maybe caught short," he said. "Whatever the reason. He's been to the necessary house four times this morning."

My own brows went up at this. Duncan suffered from chronic constipation; in fact, I had brought a packet of senna leaves and coffee-plant roots for him, in spite of Jamie's rude remarks about what constituted a suitable wedding present. Duncan must be more nervous than I'd thought.

"Well, it's no going to be any great surprise to my aunt, and her wi' three husbands before him," Jamie said, in reply to a murmured remark of Hamilton's. "It'll be the first time Duncan's been married, though. That's a shock to any man. I remember my own wedding night, aye?" He grinned at me, and I felt the heat rise in my cheeks. I remembered it, too—vividly.

"Don't you think it's rather warm out here?" I flicked my fan into an arc of ivory lace, and fluttered it over my cheeks.

"Really?" he said, still grinning at me. "I hadna taken notice of it."

"Duncan has," Ninian put in. His wrinkled lips pursed closed, holding in the laughter. "Sweating like a steamed pudding when I saw him last."

It was in fact a little chilly out, in spite of the cast-iron tubs full of hot embers that sent the sweet smell of applewood smoke wisping up from the corners of the stone terrace. Spring had sprung, and the lawns were fresh and green, as were the trees along the river, but the morning air still held a sharp nip of winter's bite. It *was* still winter in the mountains, and we had encountered snow as far south as Greensboro on our journey toward River Run, though daffodils and crocuses poked bravely through it.

It was a clear, bright March day now, though, and house, terrace, lawn, and garden were thronged with wedding guests, glowing in their finery like an unseasonable flight of butterflies. Jocasta's wedding was clearly going to be the social event of the year, so far as Cape Fear society was concerned; there must be nearly two hundred people here, from places as far distant as Halifax and Edenton.

Ninian said something to Jamie in low-voiced Gaelic, with a sidelong glance at me. Jamie replied with a remark elegant in phraseology and extremely crude in content, blandly meeting my eye as the older man choked with laughter.

I did in fact understand Gaelic fairly well by now, but there were moments when discretion was the better part of valor. I spread my fan wide, concealing my expression. True, it took some practice to achieve grace with a fan, but it was a useful social tool to someone cursed, as I was, with a glass face. Even fans had their limits, though.

I turned away from the conversation, which gave every promise of degenerating further, and surveyed the party for signs of the absent bridegroom. Perhaps Duncan was truly ill, and not with nerves. If so, I should have a look at him.

"Phaedre! Have you seen Mr. Innes this morning?" Jocasta's body servant was flying past, her arms full of tablecloths, but came abruptly to a halt at my call.

"Ain't seen Mister Duncan since breakfast, ma'am," she said, with a shake of her neatly capped head.

"How did he seem then? Did he eat well?" Breakfast was an ongoing affair of several hours, the resident guests serving themselves from the sideboard and eating as they chose. It was more likely nerves than food poisoning that was troubling Duncan's bowels, but some of the sausage I had seen on the sideboard struck me as highly suspect.

"No, ma'am, nary a bite." Phaedre's smooth brow puckered; she was fond of Duncan. "Cook tried to tempt him with a nice coddled egg, but he just shook his head and looked peaked. He did take a cup of rum punch, though," she said, seeming somewhat cheered at the thought.

"Aye, that'll settle him," Ninian remarked, overhearing. "Dinna trouble yourself, Mrs. Claire; Duncan will be well enough."

Phaedre curtsied and made off toward the tables being set up under the trees, starched apron flapping in the breeze. The succulent aroma of barbecuing pork wafted through the chill spring air, and fragrant clouds of hickory smoke rose from the fires near the smithy, where haunches of venison, sides of mutton, and broiled fowl in their dozens turned on spits. My stomach gurgled loudly in anticipation, despite the tight lacing of my stays.

Neither Jamie nor Ninian appeared to notice, but I took a discreet step away, turning to survey the lawn that stretched from the terrace to the river landing. I wasn't so positive of the virtues of rum, particularly taken on an empty stomach. Granted, Duncan wouldn't be the first groom to go to the altar in an advanced state of intoxication, but still …

Brianna, brilliant in blue wool the color of the spring sky, was standing near one of the marble statues that graced the lawn, Jemmy balanced on her hip, deep in conversation with Gerald Forbes, the lawyer. She also had a fan, but at the moment, it was being put to better use than usual—Jemmy had got hold of it and was munching on the ivory handle, a look of fierce concentration on his small pink face.

Of course, Brianna had less need of good fan technique than I did, she having inherited Jamie's ability to hide all thoughts behind a mask of pleasant blandness. She had the mask in place now, which gave me a good idea of her opinion of Mr. Forbes. Where was Roger? I wondered. He'd been with her earlier.

I turned to ask Jamie what he thought of this epidemic of disappearing husbands, only to discover that he had joined it. Ninian Hamilton had turned away to talk to someone else, and the space at my side was now occupied by a pair of slaves, staggering under the weight of a fresh demijohn of brandywine as they headed for the refreshment tables. I stepped hastily out of their way, and turned to look for Jamie.

He had vanished into the crowd like a grouse into heather. I turned slowly, surveying the terrace and lawns, but there wasn't a sign of him among the milling crowd. I frowned against the bright sunlight, shading my eyes with my hand.

It wasn't as though he were inconspicuous, after all; a Highlander with the blood of Viking giants in his veins, he stood head and shoulders above most men, and his hair caught the sun like polished bronze. To add icing to the cake, he was dressed today in his best to celebrate Jocasta's wedding—a belted plaid in crimson and black tartan, with his good gray coat and weskit, and the gaudiest pair of red-and-black Argyle stockings ever to grace a Scotsman's shins. He should have stood out like a splotch of blood on fresh linen.

I didn't find him, but did see a familiar face. I stepped off the terrace and eeled my way through the knots of partygoers.

"Mr. MacLennan!" He turned toward my call, looking surprised, but then a cordial smile spread across his blunt features.

"Mrs. Fraser!"

"How lovely to see you," I said, giving him my hand. "How are you?" He looked much better than when last seen, clean and decent in a dark suit and plain laced hat. There were hollows in his cheeks, though, and a shadow behind his eyes that remained even as he smiled at me.

"Oh … I'm well enough, ma'am. Quite well."

"Are you—where are you living, these days?" That seemed a more delicate question than "Why aren't you in jail?" No fool, he answered both questions.

"Och, well, your husband was sae kind as to write to Mr. Ninian there"—he nodded across the lawn toward the lean figure of Ninian Bell Hamilton, who was in the middle of a heated discussion of some kind—"and to tell him of my trouble. Mr. Ninian's a great friend to the Regulation, ken—and a great friend of Judge Henderson's, forbye." He shook his head, mouth pursed in puzzlement.

"I couldna say quite how it fell out, but Mr. Ninian came and fetched me out of the gaol, and took me into his own household. So I am there, for the present. 'Twas kind—verra kind." He spoke with evident sincerity, and yet with a certain air of abstraction. He fell silent then. He was still looking at me, but his eyes were blank. I groped for something to say, hoping to bring him back to the present, but a shout from Ninian brought him out of his trance, saving me the trouble. Abel excused himself politely to me and went to assist in the argument.

I strolled down the lawn, nodding to acquaintances over my fan. I was glad to see Abel again, and know he was physically well, at least—but I couldn't deny that the sight of him cast a chill over my heart. I had the feeling that in fact, it made little difference to Abel MacLennan where his body resided; his heart still lay in the grave with his wife.

Why had Ninian brought him today? I wondered. Surely a wedding could not but recall his own marriage to him; weddings did that to everyone.

The sun had risen high enough to warm the air, but I shivered. The sight of MacLennan's grief reminded me too much of the days after Culloden, when I had gone back to my own time, knowing Jamie dead. I knew too well that deadness of heart; the sense of sleepwalking through days and lying open-eyed at night, finding no rest, knowing only emptiness that was not peace.

Jocasta's voice floated down from the terrace, calling to Ulysses. She had lost three husbands, and now was fixed to take a fourth. Blind she might be, but there was no deadness in her eyes. Did that mean she had not cared deeply for any of her husbands? I wondered. Or only that she was a woman of great strength, capable of overcoming grief, not once, but over and again?

I had done it once, myself—for Brianna's sake. But Jocasta had no children; not now, at least. Had she once had them, and put aside the pain of a sundered heart, to live for a child?

I shook myself, trying to dispel such melancholy thoughts. It was, after all, a festive occasion, and a day to match. The dogwoods in the grove were in bloom, and courting bluebirds and cardinals shot in and out of the greening trees like bits of confetti, crazed with lust.

"But of course they have," a woman was saying, in an authoritative tone of voice. "My God, they've shared a house for months now!"

"Aye, that's so," one of her companions agreed, sounding doubtful. "But ye wouldna think it from the looks of them. Why, they scarcely glance at each other! Ah … I mean—well, of course, she canna be looking at him, blind as she is, but ye'd think …"

It wasn't only the birds, I thought, amused. A certain sense of rising sap suffused the whole gathering. Glancing up at the terrace, I could see young women clustered, tittering and gossiping in small groups like hens, while the men strode oh-so-casually up and down in front of them, gaudy as peacocks in their party clothes. I wouldn't be surprised if at least a few engagements resulted from this celebration—and a few pregnancies as well. Sex was in the air; I could smell it, under the heady fragrances of spring flowers and cooking food.

The sense of melancholy had quite left me, though I still had a strong urge to find Jamie.

I had gone down one side of the lawn and up the other, but saw no sign of him anywhere between the big plantation house and the dock, where slaves in livery were still greeting latecomers arriving by water. Among those still expected—and very late indeed—was the priest who was to perform the wedding.

Father LeClerc was a Jesuit, bound from New Orleans to a mission near Quebec, but seduced from the strict path of duty by a substantial donation made by Jocasta to the Society of Jesus. Money might not buy happiness, I reflected, but it was a useful commodity, nonetheless.

I glanced in the other direction and stopped dead. At one side, Ronnie Campbell caught my eye and bowed; I lifted my fan in acknowledgment, but was too distracted to speak to him. I hadn't found Jamie, but I had just spotted the likely reason for his abrupt disappearance. Ronnie's father, Farquard Campbell, was coming up the lawn from the landing, accompanied by a gentleman in the red and fawn of His Majesty's army, and another in naval uniform—Lieutenant Wolff.

The sight gave me an unpleasant shock. Lieutenant Wolff was not my favorite person. He wasn't all that popular with anyone else who knew him, either.

I supposed it was reasonable for him to have been invited, as His Majesty's navy was the principal buyer of River Run's production of timber, tar, and turpentine, and Lieutenant Wolff was the navy's representative in such matters. And it was possible that Jocasta had invited him for more personal reasons as well—the Lieutenant had at one point asked her to marry him. Not, as she had dryly noted, from any desire for her person, but rather to get his hands on River Run.

Yes, I could see her enjoying the Lieutenant's presence here today. Duncan, less naturally given to ulterior motives and manipulations, might not.

Farquard Campbell had spotted me, and was making for me through the crowd, the armed forces in tow. I got my fan up and made the necessary facial adjustments for polite conversation, but—much to my relief—the Lieutenant spotted a servant carrying a tray of glasses across the terrace and sheared off in pursuit, abandoning his escort in favor of refreshment.

The other military gentleman glanced after him, but dutifully followed Farquard. I squinted at him, but he was no one I'd met before, I was sure. Since the removal of the last Highland regiment in the autumn, the sight of a red coat was unusual anywhere in the colony. Who could this be?

My features fixed in what I hoped was a pleasant smile, I sank into a formal curtsy, spreading my embroidered skirts to best advantage.

“Mr. Campbell.” I glanced covertly behind him, but Lieutenant Wolff had fortunately vanished in the pursuit of alcoholic sustenance.

“Mrs. Fraser. Your servant, ma’am.” Farquard made me a graceful leg in reply. An elderly, desiccated-looking man, Mr. Campbell was sedate as usual in black broadcloth, a small burst of ruffles at the throat being his only concession to the festivities.

He looked over my shoulder, frowning slightly in puzzlement. “I had seen—I *thought* I had seen your husband with you?”

“Oh. Well, I think he’s … er … gone …” I twiddled my fan delicately toward the trees where the necessary facilities lurked, separated from the main house by an aesthetic distance and a screen of small white pines.

“Ah, I see. Just so.” Campbell cleared his throat, and gestured to the man who accompanied him. “Mrs. Fraser, may I present Major Donald MacDonald?”

Major MacDonald was a rather hawk-nosed but handsome gentleman in his late thirties, with the weathered face and erect bearing of a career soldier, and a pleasant smile belied by a pair of sharp blue eyes, the same pale, vivid shade as Brianna’s dress.

“Your servant, ma’am.” He bowed, very gracefully. “May I say, ma’am, how particularly that color becomes you?”

“You may,” I said, relaxing a little. “Thank you.”

“The Major is but recently arrived in Cross Creek. I assured him he would find no greater opportunity to pursue acquaintance with his countrymen and familiarize himself with his surroundings.” Farquard swept a hand around the terrace, encompassing the party—which did indeed comprise a Who’s Who of Scottish society along the Cape Fear.

“Indeed,” the Major said politely. “I have not heard so many Scottish names since last I was in Edinburgh. Mr. Campbell gives me to understand that your husband is the nephew of Mrs. Cameron—or Mrs. Innes, perhaps I should say?”

"Yes. Have you met Mrs.… er … Innes yet?" I glanced toward the far end of the terrace. Still no sign of Duncan, let alone Roger or Jamie. Blast it, where *was* everybody? Holding summit conferences in the necessary house?

"No, but I shall look forward to presenting my compliments. The late Mr. Cameron was by way of being an acquaintance of my father, Robert MacDonald of Stornoway." He inclined his wigged head a respectful inch in the direction of the small white marble building at the side of the lawn—the mausoleum that presently sheltered the fleshly remnants of Hector Cameron. "Has your husband any connection with the Frasers of Lovat, by chance?"

With an internal groan, I recognized a Scottish spiderweb in the making. The meeting of any two Scots invariably began with the casting out of skeins of inquiry until enough strands of relation and acquaintanceship had stuck to form a useful network. I tended to become entangled in the sticky strands of sept and clan, myself, ending up like a fat, juicy fly, thoroughly trapped and at the mercy of my questioner.

Jamie had survived the intrigues of French and Scottish politics for years by means of such knowledge, though—skating precariously along the secret strands of such webs, keeping away from the sticky snares of loyalty and betrayal that had doomed so many others. I settled myself to pay attention, struggling to place this MacDonald among the thousand others of his ilk.

MacDonald of Keppoch, MacDonald of the Isles, MacDonald of Clanranald, MacDonald of Sleat. How many kinds of MacDonald were there, anyway? I wondered, a little crossly. Surely one or two should be sufficient to most purposes.

MacDonald of the Isles, evidently; the Major's family hailed from the Isle of Harris. I kept one eye out during the interrogation, but Jamie had safely gone to earth.

Farquard Campbell—no mean player himself—seemed to be enjoying the verbal game of battledore and shuttlecock, his dark eyes flicking back and forth between me and the Major with a look of amusement. The amusement faded into a look of surprise as I finished a rather confused analysis of Jamie's paternal lineage, in response to the Major's expert catechism.

"Your husband's grandfather was Simon, Lord Lovat?" Campbell said. "The Old Fox?" His voice rose slightly with incredulity.

"Well … yes," I said, a little uneasily. "I thought you knew that."

"Indeed," said Farquard. He looked as though he had swallowed a brandied plum, noticing too late that the stone was still in it. He'd known Jamie was a pardoned Jacobite, all right, but plainly Jocasta hadn't mentioned his close connection with the Old Fox—executed as a traitor for his role in the Stuart Rising. Most of the Campbells had fought on the Government side of that particular brouhaha.

"Yes," MacDonald said, ignoring Campbell's reaction. He frowned slightly in concentration. "I have the honor to be slightly acquainted with the present Lord Lovat—the title has been restored, I collect?"

He went on, turning to Campbell in explanation. "That would be Young Simon, who raised a regiment to fight the French in … '58? No, '57. Yes, '57. A gallant soldier, excellent fighting man. And he would be your husband's … nephew? No, uncle."

"Half-uncle," I clarified. Old Simon had been married three times, and made no secret of his extramarital by-blows—of which Jamie's father had been one. No need to point that out, though.

MacDonald nodded, lean face clearing in satisfaction at having got it all neatly sorted. Farquard's face relaxed a little, hearing that the family reputation had gone so far toward rehabilitation.

"Papist, of course," MacDonald added, "but an excellent soldier, nonetheless."

"Speaking of soldiers," Campbell interrupted, "do you know …"

I breathed a sigh of relief that made my corset strings creak, as Mr. Campbell smoothly led the Major into an analysis of some past military event. The Major, it seemed, was not on active duty, but like many, presently retired on half-pay. Unless and until the Crown found some further use for his services, he was thus left to mooch round the Colonies in search of occupation. Peace was hard on professional soldiers.

Just wait, I thought, with a small premonitory shiver. Four years, or less, and the Major would be busy enough.

I caught a flash of tartan from the corner of my eye and turned to look, but it was neither Jamie nor Duncan. One less mystery, though; it was Roger, dark-haired and handsome in his kilt. His face lit as he spotted Brianna, and his stride lengthened. She turned her head, as though feeling his presence, and her own face brightened in answer.

He reached her side, and without the least acknowledgment of the gentleman with her, embraced her and kissed her soundly on the mouth. As they drew apart, he held out his arms for Jemmy, and dropped another kiss on the silky red head.

I returned to the conversation at hand, belatedly realizing that Farquard Campbell had been talking for some time without my having any notion what he had said. Seeing my bemusement, he smiled, a little wryly.

"I must go and pay my respects elsewhere, Mrs. Fraser," he said. "If you will pardon me? I shall leave you to the Major's excellent company." He touched his hat courteously, and eeled off toward the house, perhaps intending to track down Lieutenant Wolff and stop him pocketing the silver.

Thus marooned with me, the Major cast about for suitable conversation, and fell back upon the most commonly asked question between new acquaintances.

"Are you and your husband long arrived in the colony, ma'am?"

"Not long," I said, rather wary. "Three years or so. We live in a small settlement in the backcountry—" I waved my closed fan toward the invisible mountains to the west. "A place called Fraser's Ridge."

"Ah, yes. I have heard of it." A muscle twitched near the corner of his mouth, and I wondered uneasily just what he had heard. Jamie's still was an open secret in the backcountry, and among the Scottish settlers of the Cape Fear—in fact, several kegs of raw whisky from the still were sitting in plain sight by the stables, Jamie's wedding present to his aunt and Duncan—but I hoped the secret wasn't quite so open that an army officer newly arrived in the colony would already have heard about it.

"Tell me, Mrs. Fraser …" He hesitated, then plunged ahead. "Do you encounter a great deal of … factionalism in your area of the colony?"

"Factionalism? Oh, er … no, not a great deal." I cast a wary eye toward Hector Cameron's mausoleum, where Hermon Husband's dark Quaker gray showed up like a blot against the pure white marble. Factionalism was a code word for the activities of men like Husband and James Hunter—Regulators.

The Governor's militia action in December had quashed the violent demonstrations, but the Regulation was still a simmering pot under a very tight lid. Husband had been arrested and imprisoned for a short time in February on the strength of his pamphlets, but the experience had in no way softened either his disposition or his language. A boilover could happen at any time.

"I am pleased to hear it, ma'am," Major MacDonald said. "Do you hear much news, remotely situated as you are?"

"Not a great deal. Er … nice day, isn't it? We've been so fortunate in the weather this year. Was it an easy journey from Charleston? So early in the year—the mud …"

"Indeed, ma'am. We had some small difficulties, but no more than …"

The Major was assessing me quite openly as he chatted, taking in the cut and quality of my gown, the pearls at my throat and ears—borrowed from Jocasta—and the rings on my fingers. I was familiar with such a look; there was no hint of lechery or flirtation in it. He was simply judging my social standing and my husband's level of prosperity and influence.

I took no offense. I was busy doing the same thing to him, after all. Well-educated and of good family; that much was plain from his rank alone, though the heavy gold signet on his right hand clinched the matter. Not personally well-off, though; his uniform was worn at the seams, and his boots were deeply scarred, though well-polished.

A light Scots accent with a hint of French gutturality—experience in Continental campaigns. And very newly arrived in the colony, I thought; his face was drawn from recent illness, and the whites of his eyes bore the slight tinge of jaundice common to new arrivals, who tended to contract everything from malaria to dengue fever, when exposed to the seething germ pools of the coastal towns.

"Tell me, Mrs. Fraser—" the Major began.

"You insult not only me, sir, but every man of honor here present!"

Ninian Bell Hamilton's rather high-pitched voice rang out through a lull in the general conversation, and heads turned all over the lawn.

He was face-to-face with Robert Barlow, a man I had been introduced to earlier in the morning. A merchant of some kind, I vaguely recalled—from Edenton? Or possibly New Bern. A heavyset man with the look of one unused to contradiction, he was sneering openly at Hamilton.

"Regulators, you call them? Gaolbirds and rioters! You suggest that such men possess a sense of honor, do you?"

"I do not suggest it—I state it as fact, and will defend it as such!" The old gentleman drew himself upright, hand groping for a sword-hilt. Fortunately for the occasion, he wasn't wearing a sword; none of the gentlemen present were, given the congeniality of the gathering.

Whether this fact affected Barlow's behavior, I couldn't have said, but he laughed contemptuously, and turned his back on Hamilton, to walk away. The elderly Scot, inflamed, promptly kicked Barlow in the buttocks.

Taken unaware and off balance, Barlow pitched forward, landing on hands and knees, his coattails ludicrously up over his ears. Whatever their respective political opinions, all the onlookers burst into laughter. Thus encouraged, Ninian puffed up like a bantam rooster and strutted round his fallen opponent to address him from the front.

I could have told him that this was a tactical error, but then, I had the benefit of seeing Barlow's face, which was crimson with mortified rage. Eyes bulging, he scrambled awkwardly to his feet and launched himself with a roar, knocking the smaller man flat.

The two of them rolled in the grass, fists and coattails flying, to whoops of encouragement from the spectators. Wedding guests came rushing from lawn and terrace to see what was going on. Abel MacLennan pushed his way through the mob, obviously intent on offering support to his patron. Richard Caswell seized his arm to prevent him, and he swung round, pushing Caswell off balance.

James Hunter, lean face alight with glee, tripped Caswell, who sat down hard on the grass, looking surprised. Caswell's son George let out a howl of outrage and punched Hunter in the kidney. Hunter whirled round and slapped George on the nose.

A number of ladies were shrieking—not all with shock. One or two appeared to be cheering on Ninian Hamilton, who had got temporarily atop his victim's chest and was endeavoring to throttle him, though with little success, owing to Barlow's thick neck and heavy stock.

I looked frantically round for Jamie—or Roger, or Duncan. Goddamn it, where were they all?

George Caswell had fallen back in surprise, hands to his nose, which was dribbling blood down his shirtfront. DeWayne Buchanan, one of Hamilton's sons-in-law, was shoving his way purposefully through the gathering crowd. I didn't know whether he meant to get his father-in-law off Barlow, or assist him in his attempt to murder the man.

"Oh, bloody hell," I muttered to myself. "Here, hold this." I thrust my fan at Major MacDonald, and hitched up my skirts, preparing to wade into the melee, and deciding whom to kick first—and where—for best effect.

"Do you want me to stop it?"

The Major, who had been enjoying the spectacle, looked disappointed at the thought, but resigned to duty. At my rather startled nod, he reached for his pistol, pointed it skyward, and discharged it into the air.

The bang was loud enough to temporarily silence everyone. The combatants froze, and in the momentary lull, Hermon Husband shoved his way into the scene.

"Friend Ninian," he said, nodding cordially round. "Friend Buchanan. Allow me." He grabbed the elderly Scot by both arms and lifted him bodily off Barlow. He gave James Hunter a warning look; Hunter gave an audible "Humph!" but retired a few steps.

The younger Mrs. Caswell, a woman of sense, had got her husband off the field of battle already, and was applying a handkerchief to his nose. DeWayne Buchanan and Abel MacLennan had each got hold of one of Ninian Hamilton's arms, and were making a great show of restraining him as they marched him off toward the house—though it was reasonably apparent that either one of them could simply have picked him up and carried him.

Richard Caswell had got up by himself, and while looking rather affronted, was evidently not disposed to hit anyone. He stood brushing dried grass from the back of his coat, lips pressed together in disapproval.

"Your fan, Mrs. Fraser?" Jerked from my appraisal of the conflict, I found Major MacDonald politely offering me back my fan. He looked quite pleased with himself.

"Thank you," I said, taking it and eyeing him with some respect. "Tell me, Major, do you always go about with a loaded pistol?"

"An oversight, ma'am," he replied blandly. "Though perhaps a fortunate one, aye? I had been in the town of Cross Creek yesterday, and as I was returning alone to Mr. Farquard Campbell's plantation after dark, I thought it would be as well to go canny on the road."

He nodded over my shoulder.

"Tell me, Mrs. Fraser, who is the ill-shaven individual? He seems a man of guts, despite his lack of address. Will he take up the cudgels in his own behalf now, do ye think?"

I swung round, to see Hermon Husband nose-to-nose with the risen Barlow, his round black hat thrust down on his head and his beard bristling with pugnacity. Barlow stood his ground, red-faced and thunder-browed, but had his arms folded tightly across his chest as he listened to Husband.

"Hermon Husband is a Quaker," I said, with a slight tone of reproof. "No, he won't resort to violence. Just words."

Quite a lot of words. Barlow kept trying to interject his own opinions, but Husband ignored these, pressing his argument with such enthusiasm that drops of spittle flew from the corners of his mouth.

"… an heinous miscarriage of justice! Sheriffs, or so they call themselves, who have not been appointed by any legal writ, but rather appoint themselves for the purposes of corruptly enriching themselves and scorn all legitimate …"

Barlow dropped his arms, and began to edge backward, in an effort to escape the barrage. When Husband paused momentarily to draw breath, though, Barlow seized the opportunity to lean forward and jab a threatening finger into Husband's chest.

"You speak of justice, sir? What have riot and destruction to do with justice? If you advocate the ruin of property as means to redress your grievances—"

"I do not! But is the poor man to fall a spoil to the unscrupulous, and his plight pass unregarded? I say to you, sir, God will unmercifully requite those who oppress the poor, and—"

"What are they arguing about?" MacDonald asked, viewing the exchange with interest. "Religion?"

Seeing Husband involved, and realizing that no further punch-ups were to be expected, most of the crowd had lost interest, wandering away toward the buffet tables and the braziers on the terrace. Hunter and a few other Regulators hung about to give Husband moral support, but most of the guests were planters and merchants. While they might side with Barlow in theory, in practice most were disinclined to waste a rare festive occasion in controversy with Hermon Husband over the rights of the tax-paying poor.

I wasn't all that eager to examine the rhetoric of the Regulation in detail, either, but did my best to give Major MacDonald a crude overview of the situation.

"… and so Governor Tryon felt obliged to raise the militia to deal with it, but the Regulators backed down," I concluded. "But they haven't abandoned their demands, by any means."

Husband hadn't abandoned his argument, either—he never did—but Barlow had at last succeeded in extricating himself, and was restoring his tissues at the refreshment tables under the elm trees in company with some sympathetic friends, who all cast periodic glances of disapproval in Husband's direction.

"I see," MacDonald said, interested. "Farquard Campbell did tell me something of this disruptive movement. And the Governor has raised a militia on occasion to deal with it, you say, and may again. Who commands his troops, do you know?"

"Um … I believe General Waddell—that's Hugh Waddell—has command of several companies. But the Governor himself was in command of the main body; he's been a soldier himself."

"Has he indeed?" MacDonald seemed to find this very interesting; he hadn't put away his pistol, but was fondling it in an absentminded sort of way. "Campbell tells me that your husband is the holder of a large grant of land in the backcountry. He is by way of being an intimate of the Governor?"

"I wouldn't put it that strongly," I said dryly. "But he does *know* the Governor, yes."

I felt a trifle uneasy at this line of conversation. It was—strictly speaking—illegal for Catholics to hold Royal land grants in the Colonies. I didn't know whether Major MacDonald was aware of that fact, but he did plainly realize that Jamie was likely a Catholic, given his family background.

"Do you suppose your husband might be prevailed upon for an introduction, dear lady?" The pale blue eyes were bright with speculation, and I realized suddenly what he was after.

A career soldier with no war was at a distinct disadvantage in terms of occupation and income. The Regulation might be a tempest in a teapot, but on the other hand, if there was any prospect of military action … After all, Tryon had no regular troops; he might well be inclined to welcome—and to pay—an experienced officer, if the militia were called out again.

I cast a wary eye toward the lawn. Husband and his friends had withdrawn a bit, and were in close conversation in a little knot near one of Jocasta's new statues. If the recent near-brawl was any indication, the Regulation was still dangerously on the boil.

"That might be done," I said cautiously. I couldn't see any reason why Jamie would object to providing a letter of introduction to

Tryon—and I did owe the Major something, after all, for having averted a full-scale riot. “You’d have to ask my husband, of course, but I’d be happy to put in a word for you.”

“You shall have my utmost gratitude, ma’am.” He put away his pistol, and bowed low over my hand. Straightening up, he glanced over my shoulder. “I think I must take my leave now, Mrs. Fraser, but I shall hope to make your husband’s acquaintance soon.”

The Major marched off toward the terrace, and I turned, to see Hermon Husband stumping toward me, Hunter and a few other men in his wake.

“Mrs. Fraser, I must ask thee to give my good wishes and my regrets to Mrs. Innes, if thee will,” he said without preamble. “I must go.”

“Oh, must you leave so soon?” I hesitated. On the one hand, I wanted to urge him to stay; on the other, I could foresee further trouble if he did. Barlow’s friends had not taken their eyes off him since the near-brawl.

He saw the thought cross my face, and nodded soberly. The flush of debate had faded from his face, leaving it set in grim lines.

“It will be better so. Jocasta Cameron has been a good friend to me and mine; it would ill repay her kindness for me to bring discord to her wedding celebrations. I would not choose that—and yet, I cannot in conscience remain silent, hearing such pernicious opinions as I have received here.” He gave Barlow’s group a look of cold contempt, which was met in kind.

“Besides,” he added, turning his back on the Barlowites in dismissal, “we have business that compels our attention elsewhere.” He hesitated, clearly wondering whether to tell me more, but then decided against it. “Thee will tell her?”

“Yes, of course. Mr. Husband—I’m sorry.”

He gave me a faint smile, tinged with melancholy, and shook his head, but said no more. As he left, though, trailed by his companions, James Hunter paused to speak to me, low-voiced.

“The Regulators are a-gathering. There’s a big camp, up near Salisbury,” he said. “You might see fit to tell your husband that.”

He nodded, put his hand to his hat-brim, and without waiting for acknowledgment, strode off, his dark coat disappearing in the crowd like a sparrow swallowed by a flock of peacocks.

From my vantage point at the edge of the terrace, I could see the whole sweep of the party, which flowed in a stream of festivity from house to river, its eddy-pools obvious to the knowledgeable eye.

Jocasta formed the eye of the largest social swirl—but smaller pools swirled ominously around Ninian Bell Hamilton and Richard Caswell, and a restless current meandered through the party, leaving deposits of conversation along its edges, rich in the fertile silt of speculation. From the things I overheard, the question of our hosts' putative sex life was the predominant subject of conversation—but politics ran a close second.

I still saw no sign either of Jamie or of Duncan. There was the Major again, though. He stopped, a glass of cider in each hand; he had caught sight of Brianna. I smiled, watching.

Brianna often stopped men in their tracks, though not always entirely from admiration. She had inherited a number of things from Jamie; slanted blue eyes and flaming hair, a long straight nose and a wide, firm mouth; the bold facial bones that came from some ancient Norseman. In addition to these striking attributes, though, she had also inherited his height. In a time when the average woman stood a hair less than five feet tall, Brianna reached six. People were inclined to stare.

Major MacDonald was doing so, cider forgotten in his hands. Roger noticed; he smiled and nodded, but took that one step closer to Brianna that said unmistakably, *She's mine, mate.*

Watching the Major in conversation, I noticed how pale and spindly he looked by comparison with Roger, who stood nearly as tall as Jamie. He was broad-shouldered and olive-skinned, and his hair shone black as a crow's wing in the spring sun, perhaps the legacy of some ancient Spanish invader. I had to admit that there was no noticeable resemblance between him and little Jem, ruddy as a fresh-forged brass candlestick. I could see the flash of white as Roger smiled; the Major kept his lips pulled down when smiling, as most people over the age of thirty did, to hide the gaps and decay that were endemic. Perhaps it was the stress of the Major's occupation, I thought; perhaps merely the effects of poor nourishment. Being of good family didn't mean a child in this time ate very well.

I ran my tongue lightly over my own teeth, testing the biting edge of my incisors. Straight and sound, and I took considerable pains to see they would stay that way, given the current state of the art of dentistry.

"Why, Mrs. Fraser." A light voice broke in on my thoughts, and I looked round to find Phillip Wylie at my elbow. "Whatever can you be thinking, my dear? You look positively … feral." He took my hand and lowered his voice, baring his own fairly decent teeth in a suggestive smile.

"I am not your dear," I said with some acerbity, jerking my hand out of his. "And as for feral, I'm surprised no one has bitten you in the backside yet."

"Oh, I have hopes," he assured me, eyes twinkling. He bowed, managing in the process to get hold of my hand again. "Might I have the honor to claim a dance later, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Indeed you may not," I said, tugging. "Let go."

"Your wish is my command." He let go, but not before planting a light kiss on the back of my hand. I suppressed the urge to wipe the moist spot on my skirt.

"Go away, child," I said. I flicked my fan at him. "Shoo."

Phillip Wylie was a dandy. I had met him twice before, and on both occasions, he had been got up regardless: satin breeches, silk stockings, and all the trappings that went with them, including powdered wig, powdered face, and a small black crescent beauty mark, stuck dashingly beside one eye.

Now, however, the rot had spread. The powdered wig was mauve, the satin waistcoat was embroidered with—I blinked. Yes, with lions and unicorns, done in gold and silver thread. The satin breeches were fitted to him like a bifurcated glove, and the crescent had given way to a star at the corner of his mouth. Mr. Wylie had become a macaroni—with cheese.

"Oh, I have no intention of deserting you, Mrs. Fraser," he assured me. "I have been searching everywhere for you."

"Oh. Well, you've found me," I said, eyeing his coat, which was velvet, rose in color, and had six-inch cuffs of palest pink silk and button-covers embroidered with scarlet peonies. "Though it's no wonder you had trouble. I expect you were blinded by the glare from your waistcoat."

Lloyd Stanhope was with him, as usual, quite as prosperous, but much more plainly dressed than his friend. Stanhope guffawed, but Wylie ignored him, and bowed low, making me a graceful leg.

"Ah, well, Fortuna has smiled upon me this year. The trade with England has quite recovered, may the gods be thanked—and I have had my share of it, and more besides. You must come with me to see —"

I was saved at this point by the sudden appearance of Adlai Osborn, a well-to-do merchant from somewhere up the coast, who tapped Wylie on the shoulder. Seizing the opportunity afforded by the distraction, I put up my fan and sidled away through a gap in the crowd.

Left momentarily to my own devices, I strolled nonchalantly off the terrace and down the lawn. I still had an eye out for Jamie or Duncan, but this was my first opportunity to examine Jocasta's latest acquisitions, which were causing considerable comment among the wedding guests. These were two statues, carved from white marble, one standing squarely in the center of each lawn.

The one closest to me was a life-size replica of a Greek warrior—Spartan, I assumed, from the fact that the more frivolous items of attire had been omitted, leaving the gentleman clad in a sturdy-looking plumed helmet, with a sword in one hand. A large shield was planted at his feet, strategically placed so as to cover the more glaring deficiencies of his wardrobe.

There was a matching statue on the right lawn, this one of Diana the Huntress. While the lady was rather skimpily draped, and her shapely white marble breasts and buttocks were attracting a certain amount of sidelong appreciation from the gentlemen present, she was no match for her companion, in terms of public fascination. I smiled behind my fan, seeing Mr. and Mrs. Sherston swan past the statue without so much as a glance. After all, their raised noses and bored looks at each other said, such artworks were commonplace in Europe. Only rude Colonials, lacking both experience and breeding, would consider it a *spectacle*, my dear.

Examining the statue myself, I discovered that it was not an anonymous Greek after all, but rather Perseus. From this new angle, I could see that what I had assumed to be a rock resting beside the shield was in fact the severed head of a Gorgon, half its snakes standing on end in shocked dismay.

The evident artistry of these reptiles was affording an excuse for close examination of the statue by a number of ladies, who were brazening it out, pursing their lips knowingly and making sounds of admiration about the sculptor's skillfulness in rendering every scale, just so. Every so often one would allow her eyes to dart upward for a split second, before jerking her gaze back to the Gorgon, cheeks reddened—by the morning air and the mulled wine being served, no doubt.

My attention was distracted from Perseus by a steaming mug of this beverage, thrust beneath my nose in invitation.

"Do have some, Mrs. Fraser." It was Lloyd Stanhope, roundly amiable. "You wouldn't want to take a chill, dear lady."

There was no danger of that, given the increasing warmth of the day, but I accepted the cup, enjoying the scent of cinnamon and honey that wafted from it.

I leaned to one side, looking for Jamie, but he was still nowhere to be seen. A group of gentlemen arguing the merits of Virginia tobacco versus indigo as a crop were clustered round one side of Perseus, while the statue's rear aspect now sheltered three young girls, who were glancing at it from behind their fans, red-faced and giggling.

"… unique," Phillip Wylie was saying to someone. The eddies of conversation had brought him back to my side. "Absolutely unique! Black pearls, they're called. Never seen anything like them, I'll wager.” He glanced round and, seeing me, reached out to touch my elbow lightly. “I collect you have spent some time in France, Mrs. Fraser. Have you seen them there, perhaps?”

“Black pearls?” I said, scrambling to catch hold of the threads of the conversation. “Well, yes, a few. I recall the Archbishop of Rouen had a small Moorish page boy who wore a very large one in his nose.”

Stanhope’s jaw sagged ludicrously. Wylie stared at me for a split second, then uttered a whoop of laughter so loud that both the tobacco lobby and the giggling girls stopped dead and stared at us.

“You will be the death of me, my dear lady,” Wylie wheezed, as Stanhope declined into choked snorts of mirth. Wylie drew out a lacy kerchief and dabbed delicately at the corners of his eyes, lest tears of merriment blotch his powder.

“Really, Mrs. Fraser, have you not seen my treasures?” He grasped my elbow and propelled me out of the crowd with surprising skill. “Come, let me show you.”

He guided me smoothly through the gathering throng and past the side of the house, where a flagged path led toward the stables. Another crowd—mostly men—was clustered round the paddock, where Jocasta’s groom was throwing down hay for several horses.

There were five of them—two mares, a couple of two-year-olds, and a stallion. All five black as coal, with coats that gleamed in the pale spring sun, even shaggy as they were with winter hair. I was no expert in horse conformation, but knew enough by now to notice the deep chests, barreled vaults, and sculpted quarters, which gave them a peculiar but deeply appealing look of elegant sturdiness. Beyond the beauties of conformation and coat, though, what was most striking about these horses was their hair.

These black horses had great floating masses of silky hair—almost like women’s hair—that rose and fluttered with their movements, matching the graceful fall of their long, full tails. In addition, each horse had delicate black feathers decorating hoof and fetlock, that lifted like floating milkweed seed with each step. By contrast to the usual rawboned riding horses and rough draft animals used for haulage, these horses seemed almost magical—and from the awed comment they were occasioning among the spectators, might as well have come from Fairyland as from Phillip Wylie's plantation in Edenton.

"They're yours?" I spoke to Wylie without looking at him, unwilling to take my eyes away from the enchanting sight. "Wherever did you get them?"

"Yes," he said, his usual affectations erased by simple pride. "They are mine. They are Friesians. The oldest breed of warm-bloods—their lineage can be traced back for centuries.

"As to where I got them"—he leaned over the fence, extending a hand palm-up and wiggling his fingers toward the horses in invitation—"I have been breeding them for several years. I brought these at Mrs. Cameron's invitation; she has it in mind perhaps to purchase one of my mares, and suggested that one or two of her neighbors might also be interested. As for Lucas, here, though"—the stallion had come over, recognizing his owner, and was submitting gracefully to having his forehead rubbed—"he is not for sale."

Both mares were heavily in foal; Lucas was the sire, and so had been brought, Wylie said, as proof of the bloodlines. That, I thought, privately amused, and for purposes of showing him off. Wylie's "black pearls" were exciting keen interest, and a number of the horse-breeding gentlemen from the neighborhood had gone visibly green with envy at sight of Lucas. Phillip Wylie preened like a cock grouse.

"Oh, there ye are, Sassenach." Jamie's voice came suddenly in my ear. "I was looking for you."

"Were you, indeed?" I said, turning away from the paddock. I felt a sudden warmth under my breastbone at sight of him "And where have *you* been?"

"Oh, here and there," Jamie said, undisturbed by my tone of accusation. "A verra fine horse indeed, Mr. Wylie." A polite nod, and he had me by the arm and headed back toward the lawn before Wylie's murmured "Your servant, sir" had been quite voiced.

"What are ye doing out here wi' wee Phillip Wylie?" Jamie asked, picking his way through a flock of house slaves, who streamed past from the cookhouse with platters of food steaming alluringly under white napkins.

"Looking at his horses," I said, putting a hand over my stomach in hopes of suppressing the resounding borborygmi occasioned by the sight of food. "And what have you been doing?"

"Looking for Duncan," he said, guiding me round a puddle. "He wasna in the necessary, nor yet the smithy, the stables, the kitchen, the cookhouse. I took a horse and rode out to the tobacco-barns, but not a smell of the man."

"Perhaps Lieutenant Wolff has assassinated him," I suggested. "Disappointed rival, and all that."

"Wolff?" He stopped, frowning at me in consternation. "Is yon gobshite here?"

"In the flesh," I replied, waving my fan toward the lawn. Wolff had taken up a station next the refreshment tables, his short, stout figure unmistakable in its blue and white naval uniform. "Do you suppose your aunt invited him?"

"Aye, I do," he said, sounding grim but resigned. "She couldna resist rubbing his nose in it, I expect."

"That's what I thought. He's only been here for half an hour or so, though—and if he goes on mopping it up at that rate," I added, looking disapprovingly at the bottle clutched in the Lieutenant's hand, "he'll be out cold before the wedding takes place."

Jamie dismissed the Lieutenant with a contemptuous gesture.

"Well, then, let him pickle himself and welcome, so long as he only opens his mouth to pour drink in. Where's Duncan hidden himself, though?"

"Perhaps he's thrown himself in the river?" It was meant as a joke, but I glanced toward the river nonetheless, and saw a boat headed for the landing, the oarsman standing in the prow to throw his mooring rope to a waiting slave. "Look—is that the priest at last?"

It was; a short, tubby figure, black soutane hiked up over hairy knees as he scrambled ignominiously onto the dock, with the help of a push from the boatmen below. Ulysses was already hurrying down to the landing, to greet him.

“Good,” Jamie said, in tones of satisfaction. “We’ve a priest, then, and a bride. Two of three—that’s progress. Here, Sassenach, wait a bit—your hair’s coming down.” He traced the line of a fallen curl slowly down my back, and I obligingly let the shawl fall back from my shoulders.

Jamie put up the curl again, with a skill born of long practice, then kissed me gently on the nape of the neck, making me shiver. He wasn’t immune to the prevailing airs of spring, either.

“I suppose I must go on looking for Duncan,” he said, with a tinge of regret. His fingers lingered on my back, thumb delicately tracing the groove of my spine. “Once I’ve found him, though … there must be some place here with a bit of privacy to it.”

The word “privacy” made me lean back against Jamie, and glance toward the riverbank, where a clump of weeping willows sheltered a stone bench—quite a private and romantic spot, especially at night. The willows were thick with green, but I caught a flash of scarlet through the drooping branches.

“Got him!” I exclaimed, straightening up so abruptly that I trod on Jamie’s toe. “Oh—sorry!”

“Nay matter,” he assured me. He had followed the direction of my glance, and now drew himself up purposefully. “I’ll go and fetch him out. Do ye go up to the house, Sassenach, and keep an eye on my aunt and the priest. Dinna let them escape until this marriage is made.”

Jamie made his way down the lawn toward the willows, absently acknowledging the greetings of friends and acquaintances as he went. In truth, his mind was less on Duncan’s approaching nuptials than on thoughts of his own wife.

He was generally aware that he had been blessed in her beauty; even in her usual homespun, knee-deep in mud from her garden, or stained and fierce with the blood of her calling, the curve of her bones spoke to his own marrow, and those whisky eyes could make him drunk with a glance. Besides, the mad collieshangie of her hair made him laugh.

Smiling to himself even at the thought, it occurred to him that he *was* slightly drunk. Liquor flowed like water at the party, and there were already men leaning on old Hector's mausoleum, glaze-eyed and slack-jawed; he caught a glimpse of someone behind the thing, too, having a piss in the shrubbery. He shook his head. There'd be a body under every bush by nightfall.

Christ. One thought of bodies under bushes, and his mind had presented him with a blindingly indecent vision of Claire, lying sprawled and laughing under one, breasts falling out of her gown and the dead leaves and dry grass the same colors as her rumpled skirts and the curly brown hair between her—He choked the thought off abruptly, bowing cordially to old Mrs. Alderdyce, the Judge's mother.

"Your servant, ma'am."

"Good day to ye, young man, good day." The old lady nodded magisterially and passed by, leaning on the arm of her companion, a long-suffering young woman who gave Jamie a faint smile in response to his salute.

"Master Jamie?" One of the maids hovered beside him, holding out a tray of cups. He took one, smiling his thanks, and drank half its contents in a gulp.

He couldn't help it. He had to turn and look after Claire. He caught no more than a glimpse of the top of her head among the crowd on the terrace—she wouldn't wear a proper cap, of course, the stubborn wee besom, but had some foolishness pinned on instead, a scrap of lace caught up with a cluster of ribbons and rose hips. That made him want to laugh, too, and he turned back toward the willows, smiling to himself.

It was seeing her in the new gown that did it. It had been months since he'd seen her dressed like a lady, narrow-waisted in silk, and her white breasts round and sweet as winter pears in the low neck of her gown. It was as though she were suddenly a different woman; one intimately familiar and yet still excitingly strange.

His fingers twitched, remembering that one rebel lock, spiraling free down her neck, and the feel of her slender nape—and the feel of her plump warm arse through her skirts, pressed against his leg. He had not had her in more than a week, what with the press of people round them, and was feeling the lack acutely.

Ever since she had shown him the sperms, he had been uncomfortably aware of the crowded conditions that must now and then obtain in his balls, an impression made forcibly stronger in situations such as this. He kent well enough that there was no danger of rupture or explosion—and yet he couldn't help but think of all the shoving going on.

Being trapped in a seething mass of others, with no hope of escape, was one of his own personal visions of Hell, and he paused for a moment outside the screen of willow trees, to administer a brief squeeze of reassurance, which he hoped might calm the riot for a bit.

He'd see Duncan safely married, he decided, and then the man must see to his own affairs. Come nightfall, and if he could do no better than a bush, then a bush it would have to be. He pushed aside a swath of willow branches, ducking to go through.

"Duncan," he began, and then stopped, the swirl of carnal thoughts disappearing like water down a sewer. The scarlet coat belonged not to Duncan Innes but to a stranger who turned toward him, with surprise equal to his own. A man in the uniform of His Majesty's army.

The look of momentary startlement faded from the man's face, almost as quickly as Jamie's own surprise. This must be MacDonald, the half-pay soldier Farquard Campbell had mentioned to him. Evidently Farquard had described him to MacDonald, as well; he could see the man had put a name to him.

MacDonald held a cup of punch, as well; the slaves had been busy. He drained the cup deliberately, then set it down on the stone bench, wiping his lips on the back of his hand.

"Colonel Fraser, I presume?"

"Major MacDonald," he replied, with a nod that mingled courtesy with wariness. "Your servant, sir."

MacDonald bowed, punctilious.

"Colonel. If I might command a moment of your time?" He glanced over Jamie's shoulder; there were giggles on the riverbank behind them, and the excited small screams of very young women pursued by very young men. "In private?"

Jamie noted the usage of his militia title with a sour amusement, but nodded briefly, and discarded his own cup, still half-full, alongside the Major's.

He tilted his head toward the house in inquiry; MacDonald nodded and followed him out of the willows, as loud rustlings and squealings announced that the bench and its sheltering trees had now become the province of the younger element. He wished them good luck with it, privately noting the location for his own possible use, after dark.

The day was cold but still and bright, and a number of guests, mostly men who found the civilized atmosphere within too suffocating for their tastes, were clustered in argumentative groups in the corners of the terrace, or strolling round the paths of the newly-sprouting garden, where their tobacco pipes might fume in peace. Assessing the latter venue as the best means of avoiding interruption, Jamie led the Major toward the brick-lined path that curved toward the stables.

"Have you seen Wylie's Friesians?" the Major asked as they rounded the house, making casual conversation 'til they should be safely out of earshot.

"Aye, I have. The stallion's a fine animal, is he not?" By reflex, Jamie's eyes turned toward the paddock by the barn. The stallion was browsing, nibbling at the weeds by the trough, while the two mares head-and-tailed it companionably near the stable, broad backs shining in the pale sun.

"Aye? Well, perhaps." The Major squinted toward the paddock, one eye half-shut in dubious agreement. "Sound enough, I daresay.

Good chest. All that hair, though—wouldn't do in a cavalry horse, though I suppose if it were proper shaved and dressed …"

Jamie suppressed the urge to ask whether MacDonald liked his women shaved as well. The image of the loosened curl spiraling down that bare white neck was still in his mind. Perhaps the stables might afford a better opportunity.… He pushed that thought aside, for later reference.

"You had some matter with which ye were concerned, Major?" he asked, more abruptly than he'd meant to.

"Not so much my own concern," MacDonald replied equably. "I had been told that you have some interest in the whereabouts of a gentleman named Stephen Bonnet. Am I reliably informed, sir?"

He felt the name like a blow to the chest; it took his wind for a moment. Without conscious thought, his left hand curled over the hilt of his dirk.

"I—yes. You know his whereabouts?"

"Unfortunately, no." MacDonald's brow lifted, seeing his response. "I ken where he *has* been, though. A wicked lad, our Stephen, or so I gather?" he inquired, with a hint of jocularity.

"Ye might say so. He has killed men, robbed me—and raped my daughter," Jamie said bluntly.

The Major drew breath, face darkening in sudden understanding.

"Ah, I see," he said softly. He lifted his hand briefly, as though to touch Jamie's arm, but let it fall to his side. He walked a few steps further, brows puckered in concentration.

"I see," he said again, all hint of amusement gone from his voice. "I hadn't realized … yes. I see." He lapsed into silence once again, his steps slowing as they neared the paddock.

"I trust you do intend to tell me what ye know of the man?" Jamie said politely. MacDonald glanced up at him, and appeared to recognize that regardless of his intentions, Jamie's own intent was to gain what knowledge he had, whether by conversation or more direct methods.

"I have not met the man myself," MacDonald said mildly. "What I know, I learnt in the course of a social evening in New Bern last month."

It was an evening of whist tables hosted by Davis Howell, a wealthy shipowner and a member of the Governor's Royal Council. The party, small but select, had begun with an excellent supper, then moved on to cards and conversation, well marinated with rum punch and brandy.

As the hour grew late and the smoke of cigarillos heavy in the air, the conversation grew unguarded, and there were jocular references to the recent improvement in one Mr. Butler's fortunes, with much half-veiled speculation as to the source of his new riches. One gentleman, expressing envy, was heard to say, "If one could but have a Stephen Bonnet in one's pocket …" before being elbowed into silence by a friend whose discretion was not quite so much dissolved in rum.

"Was Mr. Butler among those present at this soiree?" Jamie asked sharply. The name was unfamiliar, but if Butler was known to members of the Royal Council … well, the circles of power in the colony were small; someone in them would be known to his aunt, or to Farquard Campbell.

"No, he wasn't." They had reached the paddock; MacDonald rested his folded arms atop the rail, eyes fixed on the stallion. "He resides, I believe, in Edenton."

As did Phillip Wylie. The stallion—Lucas, that was his name—sidled toward them, soft black nostrils flaring in curiosity. Jamie stretched out his knuckles mechanically and, the horse proving amiable, rubbed the sleek jawline. Beautiful as the Friesian was, he scarcely noticed it, his thoughts spinning like a whirligig.

Edenton lay on the Albemarle Sound, easily accessible by boat. Likely, then, that Bonnet had returned to his sailor's trade—and with it, piracy and smuggling.

"Ye called Bonnet 'a wicked lad,' " he said, turning to MacDonald. "Why?"

"Much of a hand at whist, Colonel Fraser?" MacDonald glanced at him inquiringly. "I recommend it particularly. It shares some advantage with chess, in terms of discovering the mind of one's opponent, and the greater advantage, in that it can be played against a greater number." The hard-bitten lines of his face relaxed momentarily in a faint smile. “And the still greater advantage that it is possible to earn a living by it, which is seldom the case with chess.”

“I am familiar with the game, sir,” Jamie returned, with extreme dryness.

MacDonald was a half-pay officer, with neither official duties nor an active regiment. It was by no means unusual for such men to eke out their meager salary by the acquisition of small bits of intelligence, which might be sold or traded. No price was being asked—now—but that didn’t mean that the debt would not be called in later. Jamie gave a brief nod in acknowledgment of the situation, and MacDonald nodded in turn, satisfied. He would say what he wanted, in good time.

“Well, sir. I was, as ye might suppose, intrigued to learn who this Bonnet might be—and if he were indeed a golden egg, which goose’s arse he’d dropped out of.”

MacDonald’s companions had regained their caution, though, and he could learn nothing further of the mysterious Bonnet—save the effect he had on those who had met him.

“You’ll ken that often enough, ye learn as much from what men don’t say, as what they do? Or from *how* they say it?” Without waiting for Jamie’s nod, he went on.

“There were eight of us at play. Three were making free with their speculations, but I could see they kent nay more of Mr. Bonnet than I did myself. Two more seemed neither to know nor to care, but the last two—” He shook his head. “They became very quiet, sir. Like those who will not speak of the devil, for fear of summoning him.”

MacDonald’s eyes were bright with speculation.

“You are familiar with the fellow Bonnet yourself?”

“I am. The two gentlemen who knew him?”

“Walter Priestly and Hosea Wright,” MacDonald responded promptly. “Both particular friends of the Governor.”

“Merchants?”

“Among other things. Both have warehouses; Wright in Edenton and Plymouth, Priestly in Charleston, Savannah, Wilmington, and

Edenton. Priestly has business concerns in Boston, as well," MacDonald added as an afterthought. "Though I know little of their nature. Oh—and Wright's a banker."

Jamie nodded. His hands were folded together beneath the tails of his coat as he walked; no one could see how tightly his fingers clenched.

"I believe I have heard of Mr. Wright," he said. "Phillip Wylie mentioned that a gentleman of that name owns a plantation near his own."

MacDonald nodded in affirmation. The end of his nose had gone quite red, and small broken blood vessels stood out in his cheeks, mementoes of years spent campaigning.

"Aye, that would be Four Chimneys." He glanced sidewise at Jamie, tongue probing a back tooth as he thought.

"Ye mean to kill him, then?"

"Of course not," Jamie replied evenly. "A man so well-connected wi' those in high places?"

MacDonald looked at him sharply, then away with a brief snort.

"Aye. Just so."

They paced side by side for several moments without speech, each occupied with his private calculations—and each aware of the other's.

The news of Bonnet's associations cut both ways; on the one hand, it would likely make the man easier to find. On the other, those associations would complicate matters quite a bit, when it came to the killing. It wouldn't stop Jamie—and MacDonald clearly perceived that—but it was a matter for thought, to be sure.

MacDonald himself was a considerable complication. Bonnet's business associates would be interested to hear that someone meant to cut off their source of profit—and would be more than likely to take action to prevent it. They would also pay well for the news that their golden goose was threatened; a prospect MacDonald would naturally appreciate.

There was no immediate way of corking up MacDonald, though; Jamie lacked the means for bribery, and that was a poor recourse in any case, as a man who could be bought once was always for sale.

He glanced at MacDonald, who met his eye, smiled slightly, then turned his head away. No, intimidation wouldn't serve, even had he a mind to threaten one who'd done him a service. What, then? He could scarcely knock MacDonald on the head, only to prevent his spilling to Wright, Priestly, or Butler.

Well, and if it could not be bribery or force, the only thing left to stop the man's mouth was blackmail. Which presented its own complications, insofar as he knew nothing—for the moment—to MacDonald's discredit. A man who lived as the Major did almost certainly had weak spots, but finding them … how much time might he have?

That thought triggered another.

"How did ye hear that I sought news of Stephen Bonnet?" he demanded abruptly, breaking in on MacDonald's own contemplations.

MacDonald shrugged, and settled his hat and wig more firmly.

"I heard it from a half dozen different sources, sir, in places from taverns to magistrates' courts. Your interest is well known, I fear. But not," he added delicately, with a sideways glance, "its reason."

Jamie grunted, deep in his throat. It seemed he had no knife with but a single edge. Casting a wide net had brought him his fish—but without doubt, it had also caused ripples that might warn away the whale. If the whole coast knew he sought Bonnet—then so did Bonnet.

Perhaps this was a bad thing; or perhaps it was not. If Brianna were to hear of it—she had been outspoken in her desire that he leave Bonnet to his own fate. That was nonsense, of course, but he hadn't argued with her; only listened with every appearance of consideration. She need know nothing until the man was safely dead, after all. If an unwary word were to reach her before that, though … He had only begun to turn the possibilities over in his mind when MacDonald spoke again.

"Your daughter … that would be Mrs. MacKenzie, would it?"

"Does it matter?" He spoke coldly, and MacDonald's lips tightened briefly.

“No. To be sure. ’Twas only—I had some conversation of Mrs. MacKenzie, and found her most … charming. The thought of—” He broke off, clearing his throat. “I have a daughter, myself,” he said abruptly, stopping and turning to face Jamie.

“Aye?” Jamie had not heard that MacDonald was married. Quite possibly he wasn’t. “That would be in Scotland?”

“In England. Her mother’s English.” The chill had painted streaks of color on the soldier’s weathered skin. They deepened, but MacDonald’s pale blue eyes stayed steady on Jamie’s, the same color as the hazy sky behind him.

Jamie felt the tightness down his backbone ease. He lifted his shoulders in a shrug, and let them fall. MacDonald nodded infinitesimally. The two men turned, without discussion, and started back toward the house, conversing casually of the price of indigo, the latest news from Massachusetts, and the surprising clemency of the weather for the season.

“I had spoken with your wife, a little earlier,” MacDonald remarked. “A charming woman, and most amiable—you are a fortunate man, sir.”

“I am inclined to think so,” Jamie replied, darting a glance at MacDonald.

The soldier coughed, delicately.

“Mrs. Fraser was so kind as to suggest that you might consider providing me with a letter of introduction to his Excellency, the Governor. In light of the recent threat of conflict, she thought that perhaps a man of my experience might be able to provide something in the way of … you see?”

Jamie saw fine. And while he doubted that Claire had suggested any such thing, he was relieved to find the price asked so cheap.

“It shall be done at once,” he assured MacDonald. “See me after the wedding this afternoon, and I shall have it in hand for ye.”

MacDonald inclined his head, looking gratified.

As they reached the path that led to the necessary houses, MacDonald nodded farewell and took his leave with a raised hand, passing by Duncan Innes, who was coming from that direction, looking drawn and haggard as a man will whose bowels are tied in sheepshank knots.

"Are ye well, Duncan?" Jamie asked, eyeing his friend with some concern. Despite the coolness of the day, a faint sheen of sweat shone on Innes's brow, and his cheeks were pale. Jamie hoped that if it were an ague, it wasn't catching.

"No," Innes said, in answer to his question. "No, I am … *Mac Dubh*, I must speak to ye."

"Of course, *a charaid*." Alarmed by the man's appearance, he took hold of Duncan's arm, to support him. "Shall I fetch my wife to ye? D'ye need a wee dram?" From the smell of him, he'd had several already, but nothing out of the ordinary for a bridegroom. He didn't appear to be the worse for drink, but was plainly the worse for something. Perhaps a bad mussel at last night's supper.…

Innes shook his head. He swallowed, and grimaced, as though something hard was stuck in his throat. He drew air through his nose then, and set his shoulders, steeling himself to something.

"No, *Mac Dubh*, it's yourself I am needing. A bit of counsel, if ye might be so kind …"

"Aye, Duncan, surely." More curious than alarmed now, he let go of Duncan's arm. "What is it, man?"

"About—about the wedding night," Duncan blurted. "I—that is, I have—" He broke off abruptly, seeing someone turning into the path before them, heading for the necessary.

"This way." Jamie turned toward the kitchen gardens, which were safely enclosed in sheltering brick walls. Wedding night? he thought, both reassured and curious. Duncan had not been married before, he knew, and when they were in Ardsmuir together, Duncan had never spoken of women as some men did. He had thought it only a modest constraint at the time, but perhaps … but no, Duncan was well past fifty; surely the opportunity had occurred.

That left buggery or the clap, he thought, and he'd swear Duncan had no taste for boys. A bit awkward, to be sure, but he had full faith that Claire could deal with it. He did hope it was only drip, and not the French disease, though; that was a cruel plague.

“Here, *a charaid*,” he said, drawing Duncan after him into the shelter of the onion beds. “We’ll be quite private here. Now, then, what’s your trouble?”

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DUNCAN'S SECRET

Father Leclerc spoke no English, with the exception of a jolly "Tally-ho!" which he used alternately as a greeting, an interjection of amazement, and an exclamation of approbation. Jocasta was still at her toilette, so I introduced the priest to Ulysses, then escorted him to the main parlor, saw him provided with suitable refreshment, and sat him down to make conversation with the Sherstons, who were Protestant and rather bug-eyed at meeting a Jesuit, but so eager to show off their French that they were willing to overlook Father LeClerc's unfortunate profession.

Mentally wiping my brow after this bit of delicate social rapprochement, I made my excuses and went out to the terrace, to see whether Jamie had succeeded in retrieving Duncan. Neither man was in sight, but I met Brianna, coming up from the lawn with Jemmy.

"Hallo, darling, how are you?" I reached for Jemmy, who seemed restless, squirming and smacking his lips like someone sitting down to a six-course meal after a trek through the Sahara. "Hungry, are we?"

"Hak!" he said, then feeling this perhaps an insufficient explanation, repeated the syllable several times, with increasing volume, bouncing up and down by way of emphasis.

"*He's* hungry; *I'm* about to explode," Brianna said, lowering her voice and plucking gingerly at her bosom. "I'm just going to take him upstairs and feed him. Auntie Jocasta said we could use her room."

"Oh? That's good. Jocasta's just gone up herself—to rest a bit and change, she said. The wedding's set for four o'clock, now the priest is here." I had just heard the case clock in the hall chime noon; I did hope Jamie had got Duncan safely in hand. Perhaps he should be shut up somewhere, to prevent his wandering away again.

Bree reached to take Jemmy back, sticking a prophylactic knuckle in his mouth to muffle his remarks.

"Do you know the Sherstons?" she asked.

"Yes," I replied warily. "Why, what have they done?"

She raised one eyebrow at me.

"They've asked me to paint a portrait of Mrs. Sherston. A commission, I mean. Evidently Auntie Jocasta sang my praises to them, and showed them some of the things I did when I stayed here last spring, and now they want a picture."

"Really? Oh, darling, that's marvelous!"

"Well, it will be if they have any money," she said practically. "What do you think?"

It was a good question; fine clothes and appointments didn't always reflect actual worth, and I didn't know much about the Sherstons' circumstances; they were from Hillsborough, not Cross Creek.

"Well, they're rather vulgar," I said dubiously, "and dreadful snobs, but I think he's legitimately rich. He owns a brewery, I think. But ask Jocasta; she'll know for sure."

"Rah-tha vul-gah," she drawled, mocking my own accent, and grinned. "Who's a snob, then?"

"I am not a snob," I said with dignity. "I am a keen observer of social nuance. Have you seen your father and Duncan anywhere?"

"Not Duncan, but Da's down there by the trees with Mr. Campbell." She pointed helpfully, and I spotted Jamie's bright hair and crimson tartan, a fiery gleam at the bottom of the lawn. Not a sign of Duncan's scarlet coat, though.

"Damn the man," I said. "Where *has* he got to?"

"Went to the necessary, and fell in," Bree suggested. "All right, hold your horses, we're going!" Addressing this last to Jemmy, who was uttering plaintive cries suggestive of imminent starvation, she disappeared into the house.

I settled my shawl and strolled down the lawn to join Jamie. A picnic lunch was being served to accommodate the guests, and I snatched a biscuit and a slice of ham as I passed the refreshment tables, improvising a hasty snack in order to stave off my own hunger pangs.

The air was still cool, but the sun was high and hot on my shoulders; it was a relief to join the men in the shade of a small grove of oaks that stood near the bottom of the lawn. They were pin oaks, and had begun to leaf out already, the unfolding leaves peeping out like a baby's fingers. What had Nayawenne told me about oaks? Oh, yes; one planted corn when the oak leaves were the size of a squirrel's ear.

Judging by that, the slaves could be planting corn in the River Run kitchen garden any day now. It would be weeks before the oak leaves were out on the Ridge, though.

Jamie had evidently just said something humorous, for Campbell made the low, creaking noise that passed with him for laughter, nodding to me in greeting.

"I shall leave ye to the practice of your own affairs, then," he said to Jamie, recovering his composure. "Call upon me, though, at need." He shaded his eyes, looking up toward the terrace.

"Ah, the prodigal returns. In shillings, sir, or bottles of brandy?"

I turned to look as well, in time to see Duncan crossing the terrace, nodding and smiling shyly to well-wishers as he passed. I must have looked bewildered, for Mr. Campbell bowed to me, dry mouth crooked with amusement.

"I'd laid your husband a small wager, ma'am."

"Five to one on Duncan, the night," Jamie explained. "That he and my aunt will share a bed, I mean."

"Goodness," I said, rather crossly. "Is anyone here talking of anything else? Minds like sewers, the lot of you."

Campbell laughed, then turned aside, distracted by the urgencies of a small grandson.

"Don't tell me ye werena wondering the same thing." Jamie nudged me gently.

"Indeed I was not," I said primly. I wasn't—but only because I already knew.

"Oh, indeed," he said, one corner of his mouth curling up. "And you wi' lechery as plain on your face as whiskers on a cat."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" I demanded. Just in case he was right, I flicked the fan open and covered the lower half of my face. I peered over its ivory lacework, batting my eyelashes in mock innocence.

He made a derisive Scottish noise in his throat. Then, with a quick glance round, he bent low and whispered in my ear.

"It means ye look as ye do when ye want me to come to your bed." A warm breath stirred the hair over my ear. "Do you?"

I smiled brilliantly at Mr. Campbell, who was viewing us with interest over his grandson's head, snapped the fan open, and using it as a shield, stood on tiptoe to whisper in Jamie's ear. I dropped back on my heels and smiled demurely at him, fanning away for all I was worth.

Jamie looked mildly shocked, but definitely pleased. He glanced at Mr. Campbell, who had fortunately turned away, drawn into conversation elsewhere. Jamie rubbed his nose and regarded me with intense speculation, his dark blue gaze lingering on the scalloped neckline of my new gown. I fluttered the fan delicately over my décolletage.

"Ah … we could …" His eyes flicked up, assessing our surroundings for possible prospects of seclusion, then down again, ineluctably drawn to the fan as though it were a magnet.

"No we couldn't," I informed him, smiling and bowing to the elderly Misses MacNeil, who were strolling past behind him. "Every nook and cranny in the house is filled with people. So are the barns and stables and outbuildings. And if you had in mind a rendezvous under a bush on the riverbank, think again. This dress cost a bloody fortune." A fortune in illegal whisky, but a fortune nonetheless.

"Oh, I ken that well enough."

His eyes traveled slowly over me, from the coils of upswept hair to the tips of my new calf-leather shoes. The dress was pale amber silk, bodice and hem embroidered with silk leaves in shades of brown and gold, and if I did say so myself, it fit me like a glove.

"Worth it," he said softly, and leaned down to kiss me. A chilly breeze stirred the oak branches overhead, and I moved closer to him, seeking his warmth.

What with the long journey from the Ridge and the crush of guests caused by the impending celebration, we hadn't shared a bed ourselves in more than a week.

It wasn't so much an amorous encounter I wanted—though I would certainly not say no, if the opportunity offered. What I missed was simply the feel of his body next to mine; being able to reach out a hand in the dark and rest it on the long swell of his thigh; to roll toward him in the morning and cup his round, neat buttocks in the curve of thigh and belly; to press my cheek against his back and breathe the scent of his skin as I slipped into sleep.

"Damn," I said, resting my forehead briefly in the folds of his shirt ruffle, and inhaling the mingled scents of starch and man with longing. "You know, if your aunt and Duncan *don't* need the bed, perhaps …"

"Oh, so ye *were* wondering."

"No, I wasn't," I said. "Besides, what business is it of yours?"

"Oh, none at all," he said, unperturbed. "Only I've been asked by four men this morning if I think they will—or have done already. Which is rather a compliment to my aunt, no?"

It was true; Jocasta MacKenzie must be well into her sixties, and yet the thought of her sharing a man's bed was by no means unthinkable. I had met any number of women who had gratefully abandoned all notion of sex, directly the cessation of childbearing made it possible—but Jocasta wasn't one of them. At the same time —

"They haven't," I said. "Phaedre told me yesterday."

"I know. Duncan told me, just now." He was frowning slightly, but not at me. Toward the terrace, where the bright splotch of Duncan's tartan showed between the huge stone vases.

"Did he?" I was more than a little surprised at that. A sudden suspicion struck me. "You didn't *ask* him, did you?"

He gave me a slightly reproachful look.

"I did not," he said. "What d'ye take me for, Sassenach?"

"A Scot," I said. "Sex fiends, the lot of you. Or so one would think, listening to all the talk around here." I gave Farquard Campbell a hard look, but he had turned his back, engrossed in conversation.

Jamie regarded me thoughtfully, scratching the corner of his jaw.

"Sex fiends?"

"You know what I mean."

"Oh, aye, I do. I'm only wondering—is that an insult, would ye say, or a compliment?"

I opened my mouth, then paused. I gave him back the thoughtful look.

"If the shoe fits," I said, "wear it."

He burst out laughing, which made a number of those nearby turn and look at us. Taking my arm, he steered me across the lawn and into the patchy shade of the elms.

"I did mean to ask ye something, Sassenach," he said, checking over his shoulder to be sure we were out of earshot. "Can ye find occasion to speak wi' my aunt, alone?"

"In this madhouse?" I glanced toward the terrace; a swarm of well-wishers surrounded Duncan like bees round a flower patch. "Yes, I suppose I could catch her in her room, before she comes down for the wedding. She's gone up to rest." I wouldn't mind a lie-down, either; my legs ached with hours of standing, and my shoes were new and slightly too tight.

"That'll do." He nodded pleasantly to an approaching acquaintance, then turned his back, shielding us from interruption.

"All right," I said. "Why?"

"Well, it's to do wi' Duncan." He looked at once amused and slightly worried. "There's a wee difficulty, and he canna bring himself to speak to her about it."

"Don't tell me," I said. "He was married before, and he thought his first wife was dead, but he's just seen her here, eating cullen skink."

"Well, no," he said, smiling. "Not so bad as that. And perhaps it's nay so troublesome as Duncan fears. But he's worrit in his mind about it, and yet he canna bring himself to speak to my aunt; he's a bit shy of her, aye?"

Duncan was a shy and modest man altogether; an ex-fisherman pressed into service during the Rising, he had been captured after Culloden, and spent years in prison. He had been released, rather than transported, only because he had contracted blood poisoning from a scratch, and had lost one arm, making him unfit for labor and unsalable as an indenture. I didn't have to wonder whose idea this marriage had been; such lofty aspirations would never have occurred to Duncan in a million years.

"I can see that. What's he worried about, though?"

"Well," he said slowly, "it's true that Duncan hasna been wed before. Did ye not wonder why?"

"No," I said. "I'd just assumed that the Rising had—oh, dear." I stopped, catching a notion of what this might be about. "It's not—goodness. You mean … he likes men?" My voice rose involuntarily.

"No!" he said, scandalized. "Christ, ye dinna think I'd let him marry my aunt, and him a sodomite? Christ." He glanced around, to be sure no one had heard this calumny, and shepherded me into the shelter of the trees, just in case.

"Well, you wouldn't necessarily know, would you?" I asked, amused.

"I'd know," he said grimly. "Come along." He lifted an overhanging bough and ushered me beneath it, a hand in the small of my back. The grove was a large one, and it was easy enough to get out of sight of the party.

"No," he said again, reaching a small open space well in among the trunks. "The filthy mind of you, Sassenach! No, it's nothing o' the sort." He glanced behind him, but we were a good distance from the lawn, and reasonably shielded from view. "It's only that he's … incapable." He lifted one shoulder slightly, looking profoundly uncomfortable at the thought.

"What—impotent?" I felt my mouth hanging open, and closed it.

“Aye. He was betrothed, as a young man, but there was a dreadful accident; a cart horse knocked him into the street and kicked him in the scrotum.” He made a slight motion, as though to touch himself for reassurance, but checked it. “He healed, but it—well, he wasna fit for nuptial rites any longer, so he released the young woman and she marrit elsewhere.”

“The poor man!” I said, with a pang of sympathy. “Gracious, poor Duncan’s had nothing but bad luck.”

“Well, he’s alive,” Jamie observed. “A good many others aren’t. Besides”—he gestured over one shoulder, at the spread of River Run behind him—“I shouldna be inclined to call his present situation precisely unlucky. Bar the one small difficulty, that is,” he added.

I frowned, running through the medical possibilities. If the accident had resulted in severe vascular damage, there wasn’t much I could do; I was in no way equipped for fine reconstructive surgery. If it were only a hemocoel, though, then perhaps …

“When he was a young man, you said? Hmm. Well, it’s not promising, after so long, but I can certainly have a look and see whether—”

Jamie stared at me, incredulous.

“A look? Sassenach, the man goes puce when ye inquire after the health of his bowels, and he nearly died o’ shame, telling me. He’ll have an apoplexy, and ye go pokin’ his privates.”

A strand of hair had been pulled loose by an oak twig; I pushed it irritably behind my ear.

“Well, what did you expect me to do, then? I can’t heal him with spell-casting!”

“Of course not,” he said, a little impatiently. “I dinna want ye to do anything to Duncan—only to speak to my aunt.”

“What—you mean she doesn’t know? But they’ve been engaged to be married for months, and living together for most of it!”

“Aye, but …” Jamie made the odd half-shrugging gesture he used when feeling embarrassed or uncomfortable, as though his shirt were too tight. “D’ye see—when the question of marriage rose, it never occurred to Duncan that it was a matter of … mmphm.”

"Mmphm," I said, raising one eyebrow. "Doesn't marriage usually involve at least the possibility of mmphm?"

"Well, he didna think my aunt was wanting him for his manly beauty, aye?" Jamie said, raising his own brows back at me. "It seemed only a matter of business and convenience—there are things he could manage as owner of River Run that he couldna do as overseer. At that, he wouldna have agreed, save she persuaded him."

"And he never thought to mention this … this impediment?"

"Oh, he thought. But there wasna any indication that my aunt regarded marriage in any but the sense of business. *She* didna mention the matter of bed; he was too shy to say. And the question didna really arise, ken."

"I gather that it now *has* arisen? What happened? Did your aunt slip her hand under his kilt this morning and make a bawdy remark about the wedding night?"

"He didna happen to say," he replied dryly. "But it wasna until this morning, when he began to hear the jests among the guests, that it occurred to Duncan that perhaps my aunt was expecting him to … well."

He lifted one shoulder, and let it fall. "He couldna think what to do, and was in a panic, listening to everyone."

"I see." I rubbed a knuckle across my upper lip, thinking. "Poor Duncan; no wonder he's been nervous."

"Aye." Jamie straightened up, with the air of one having settled something. "So, if ye'll be so kind as to speak wi' Jocasta, and see it's all straight—"

"Me? You want *me* to tell her?"

"Well, I shouldna think she'll mind greatly," he said, looking quizzically down at me. "After all, at her age, I shouldna think—"

I made a rude noise.

"Her age? Your grandfather Simon was well into his seventies and still putting it about, when last seen."

"My aunt is a woman," he said, rather austerely. "If ye hadna noticed it."

"And you think that makes a difference?"

"You don't?"

"Oh, it makes a difference, all right," I said. I leaned back against a tree, arms crossed under my bosom, and gave him a look from under my lashes. "When I am a hundred and one, and you're ninety-six, I'll invite you to my bed—and we'll see which one of us rises to the occasion, hmm?"

He looked at me thoughtfully, a glint in the dark blue of his eyes.

"I've a mind to take ye where ye stand, Sassenach," he said. "Payment on account, hmm?"

"I've a mind to take you up on it," I said. "However …" I glanced through the screen of branches toward the house, which was clearly visible. The trees were beginning to leaf out, but the tiny sprays of tender green were by no means sufficient camouflage. I turned back, just as Jamie's hands descended on the swell of my hips.

Events after that were somewhat confused, with the predominant impressions being an urgent rustling of fabric, the sharp scent of trodden onion grass, and the crackling of last year's oak leaves, dry underfoot.

My eyes popped open a few moments later.

"Don't stop!" I said, disbelieving. "Not *now*, for God's sake!"

He grinned down at me, stepping back and letting his kilt fall into place. His face was flushed a ruddy bronze with effort, and his chest heaved under his shirt ruffles.

He grinned maliciously, and wiped a sleeve across his forehead.

"I'll gie ye the rest when I'm ninety-six, aye?"

"You won't live that long! Come here!"

"Oh," he said. "So ye'll speak to my aunt."

"Effing blackmailer," I panted, fumbling at the folds of his kilt. "I'll get you for this, I swear I will."

"Oh, aye. You will."

He put an arm round my waist and swung me off my feet, turning round so that his back was to the house, screening me with his body. His long fingers deftly ruffled up the skirt of my gown, then the two petticoats beneath, and even more deftly, slid between my bare legs.

“Hush,” he murmured in my ear. “Ye dinna want folk to hear, do ye?” He set his teeth gently in the curve of my ear, and proceeded about his business in a workmanlike way, ignoring my intermittent—and admittedly rather feeble—struggles.

I was more than ready and he knew what he was doing. It didn’t take long. I dug my fingers into his arm, hard as an iron bar across my middle, arched backward for a moment of dizzying infinity, and then collapsed against him, twitching like a worm on the end of a hook. He made a deep chuckling sound, and let go of my ear.

A cold breeze had sprung up, and was wafting the folds of my skirts about my legs. The scent of smoke and food drifted through the cool spring air, along with the rumble of talk and laughter from the lawn. I could dimly hear it, under the slow, loud thumping of my heart.

“Come to think of it,” Jamie remarked, releasing me, “Duncan has still got the one good hand.” He set me gently on my feet, keeping hold of my elbow, lest my knees give way. “Ye might mention that to my aunt, if ye think it will help.”

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MUSIC HATH CHARMS

Roger MacKenzie made his way through the crowd, nodding here and there to a familiar face, but pushing on purposefully, preventing any attempt at conversation. He was not in a talkative mood.

Brianna had gone off to feed the kid, and while he missed her, he was just as pleased that she was out of sight for the moment. He didn't care at all for the sort of looks she'd been getting. Those directed at her face were admiring, but respectful enough; he'd caught that wee bastard Forbes staring at her rear view with an expression similar to the one the gentlemen were using on the undraped marble goddess on the lawn, though.

At the same time, he was more than proud of her. She was gorgeous in her new dress, and he felt a pleasant sense of possession when he looked at her. Still, his pleasure was slightly spoiled by the uneasy thought that she looked as though she belonged here, mistress of all this … this …

Yet another slave trotted past him, skirts hooped up over one arm as she made for the house, a basin of fresh rolls balanced on her head and another under her arm. How many slaves did Jocasta Cameron keep? he wondered.

Of course, that alone put the notion of Brianna's inheriting River Run out of the question. She wouldn't countenance the notion of slaves, not ever. Nor would he himself; still, it was comforting to think that it wasn't merely his own pride keeping Bree from her rightful inheritance.

He caught the thin wail of a fiddle coming from the house, and felt his ears prick up at the sound. Of course there would be music for the party. And with luck, a few new songs that he didn't know.

He turned across the terrace toward the house. He hadn't a notebook with him, but doubtless Ulysses could provide him with something. He bowed to Mrs. Farquard Campbell, who looked like a particularly horrible but expensive lampshade in pink silk. He paused to let her precede him into the house, biting the inside of his cheek as the four-foot spread of her skirt stuck momentarily in the three-foot doorway. She twitched adroitly sideways, though, and sidled crabwise into the hall, Roger following at a respectful distance.

The fiddle had ceased, but he could hear the twang and throb of instruments being handled and tuned nearby. They were in the big drawing room, whose double doors could be thrown open to allow dancers to spill out across the foyer, when the time came. At the moment, there were only a few guests in the drawing room, engaged in casual conversation.

Roger made his way past Ulysses, who was standing at the hearth, immaculate in wig and green livery, a poker held at the ready as he supervised two maidservants in the making of a gigantic vat of fresh rum punch. His eyes flicked automatically to the door, registered Roger's presence and identity, then returned to his business.

The musicians were huddled at the far end of the room, casting occasional thirsty glances at the hearth as they readied their instruments.

"What will you be giving us the day?" Roger inquired, pausing beside the fiddler. He smiled as the man turned round to him. " 'Ewie wi' the Crooked Horn,' perhaps, or 'Shawn Bwee'?"

"Oh, God love ye, sir, nothin' fancy." The conductor of the small ensemble, a cricketlike Irishman whose bent back was belied by the brightness of his eyes, waved a hand in cordial scorn at his motley crew of musicians.

"They ain't up to more than jigs and reels. No more are the folk as will be dancin', though," he added, practically. " 'Tisn't the Assembly Rooms in Dublin, after all, nor even Edenton; a good fiddler can keep 'em up to snuff."

“And that would be you, I expect?” Roger said with a smile, nodding at the cracked fiddle case the conductor had set on a whatnot, carefully out of the way of being stepped or sat on.

“That would be me,” the gentleman agreed, with a graceful bow of acknowledgment. “Seamus Hanlon, sir—your servant.”

“I am obliged, sir. Roger MacKenzie, of Fraser’s Ridge.” He returned the bow, taking pleasure in the old-fashioned formality, and clasped Hanlon’s hand briefly, careful of the twisted fingers and knobby joints. Hanlon saw his care of the arthritic hand and gave a brief grimace of deprecation.

“Ah, they’ll be fine with a drop of lubrication, so they will.” Hanlon flexed one hand experimentally, then flipped the fingers in dismissal, fixing Roger with a bright glance.

“And yourself, sir; I felt the calluses on your fingertips. Not a fiddler, perhaps, but would ye be after playin’ some stringed instrument?”

“Only to pass the time of an evening; nothing like you gentlemen.” Roger nodded politely toward the ensemble, which, now unpacked, boasted a battered cello, two viols, a trumpet, a flute, and something which he thought might have started life as a hunting horn, though it appeared to have been amended since by the addition of several odd loops of tubing that stuck out in different directions.

Hanlon eyed him shrewdly, taking in his breadth of chest.

“And hark at the voice in him! Sure, and you’re a singer, Mr. MacKenzie?”

Roger’s reply was interrupted by a loud thump and a dolorous twang behind him. He whirled to see the cello player inflating himself over his instrument in the manner of a hen with a very large chick, to protect it from further injury by the gentleman who had evidently kicked it carelessly in passing.

“Watch yourself, then!” the cellist snapped. “Clumsy sot!”

“Oh?” The intruder, a stocky man in naval uniform, glowered menacingly at the cellist. “You dare … dare shpeak to me …” His face was flushed an unhealthy red, and he swayed slightly as he stood; Roger could smell the fumes of alcohol from a distance of six feet.

The officer raised a forefinger to the cellist, and appeared to be on the point of speech. A tongue tip showed pinkly between his teeth, but no words emerged. His empurpled jowls quivered for a moment, then he abandoned the attempt, turned on his heel, and made off, swerving narrowly to avoid an incoming footman with a tray of drinks, and caroming off the doorjamb as he passed into the corridor.

“ ’Ware, then, Mr. O’Reilly.” Seamus Hanlon spoke dryly to the cellist. “Were we near the sea, I should reckon there’d be a press-gang waitin’ for ye, the instant ye set foot outside. As it is, I’d put no odds on him layin’ for ye with a marlinspike or something of the kind.”

O’Reilly spat eloquently on the floor.

“I know him,” he said contemptuously. “Wolff, he’s called. Dog, more like, and a poor dog at that. He’s tight as a tick—he’ll not remember me, an hour hence.”

Hanlon squinted thoughtfully at the doorway through which the Lieutenant had vanished.

“Well, that’s as may be,” he allowed. “But I know the gentleman, too, and I do believe his mind may be somewhat sharper than his behavior might suggest.” He stood for a moment, tapping the bow of his fiddle thoughtfully against the palm of his hand, then turned his head toward Roger.

“Fraser’s Ridge, ye said? Will ye be a kinsman of Mrs. Cameron’s—or Mrs. Innes, I should say?” he corrected himself.

“I’m married to Jamie Fraser’s daughter,” Roger said patiently, having discovered that this was the most efficient description, as most of the county appeared to know who Jamie Fraser was, and it prevented further questions regarding Roger’s own family connections.

“Ho-ho,” Seamus said, looking visibly impressed. “Well, then. Hum!”

“What’s that bladder doing here, anyway?” the cellist demanded, still glaring after the departed officer. He patted his instrument soothingly. “Everyone knows he meant to wed Mrs. Cameron and have River Run for himself. I wonder he’s the tripes to show his face today!”

“Perhaps he’s come to show there are no hard feelings,” Roger suggested. “A civil gesture—best man won and all that, aye?”

The musicians emitted a medley of sniggers and guffaws at this suggestion.

“Maybe,” said the flutist, shaking his head over his instrument. “But if you’re any friend to Duncan Innes, tell him to watch his back in the dancin’.”

“Aye, do that,” Seamus Hanlon concurred. “Be off with ye, young man, and speak to him—but see ye come back.”

He crooked a finger at the waiting footman, and scooped a cup neatly from the proffered tray. He lifted this in salute, grinning at Roger over its rim. “It may be you’ll know a tune or two that’s new to me.”

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THE DEASIL CHARM

Brianna sat back in the leather wing chair before the hearth, nursing Jemmy as she watched her great-aunt ready herself for the wedding.

"What you think, then?" Phaedre asked, dipping the silver comb into a small pot of pomade. "Dress it up high, with the curls over the top?" Her voice was hopeful, but wary. She disapproved overtly of her mistress's refusal to wear a wig, and would do her level best to create a similarly fashionable effect with Jocasta's own hair, if allowed.

"Tosh," said Jocasta. "This isn't Edinburgh, child, let alone London." She leaned back, head lifted and eyes closed, basking. Bright spring sunshine poured through the panes, sparking off the silver comb, and making dark shadows of the slave's hands against the nimbus of shining white hair.

"Maybe not, but 'taint the wild Caribee nor the backcountry, neither," Phaedre countered. "You the mistress here; this your weddin'. Everybody be lookin' at you—you wantin' to shame me, wear your hair down your shoulders like a squaw, and everybody be thinkin' I don't know my business?"

"Oh, heaven forbid." Jocasta's wide mouth twisted with an irritable humor. "Dress it simply, if you please, swept back and put up with combs. Perhaps my niece will let you show off your skill on her locks."

Phaedre cast a narrow glance over her shoulder at Brianna, who simply smiled and shook her head. She'd worn a lace-edged cap for the sake of public decency, and wasn't disposed to fuss with her hair. The slave snorted, and resumed her attempt to cajole Jocasta.

Brianna closed her eyes, letting the amicable bickering recede into the background. Warm sun fell through the casement over her feet, and the fire purred and crackled at her back, embracing her like the old woolen shawl she had wrapped about herself and little Jem.

Beyond the voices of Jocasta and Phaedre, she could hear the thrum of the house below. Every room in the house was bursting with guests. Some were staying at nearby plantations, and had ridden in for the festivities, but enough were staying at River Run overnight that all the bedchambers were full, with guests sleeping five and six to a bed, and more on pallets in the tents by the river landing.

Brianna eyed the expanse of Jocasta's big tester bed enviously. Between the exigencies of travel, Jemmy, and the crowded conditions at River Run, she and Roger hadn't slept together in more than a week, and weren't likely to, until they returned to the Ridge.

Not that sleeping together was the major concern, nice as it was. The tug of the baby's mouth on her breast aroused a number of nonmaternal urges elsewhere, which required both Roger and a little privacy for satisfaction. They had started something promising the night before, in the pantry, but had been interrupted by one of the kitchen slaves, coming in to fetch a cheese. Perhaps the stable? She stretched her legs out, toes curling, and wondered whether the grooms slept in the stable or not.

"Well, I shall wear the brilliants, then, but only to please you, *a nighean.*" Jocasta's humorous voice pulled her out of the alluring vision of a dark, hay-lined stall, and Roger's body, naked limbs half-seen in the gloom.

She glanced up from Jemmy's blissful suckling, to where Jocasta sat upon the window seat, the spring light through the casement falling across her face. She looked abstracted, Bree thought, as though she were listening to something faint and far-off, that only she could hear. Maybe the hum of the wedding guests below.

The murmur in the house below reminded her of her mother's summer hives; a thrum that you could hear if you put your ear against one of the bee gums, a distant sound of busy content. The product of this particular swarm was talk, rather than honey, though the intent was similar—the laying up of reserves to see them through bleak and nectarless days of deprivation.

"That will do, that will do." Jocasta waved Phaedre away, getting to her feet. She shooed the maid out of the room, then stood tapping her fingers restlessly on the dressing table, clearly thinking of further details that should be attended to. Jocasta's brows drew together, and she pressed two fingers against the skin above her eyes.

"Have you got a headache, Auntie?" Brianna kept her voice low, so as not to disturb Jemmy, who was nearly asleep. Jocasta dropped her hand and turned toward her niece with a small, wry smile.

"Och, it's nothing. Whenever the weather turns, my poor head turns with it!"

In spite of the smile, Brianna could see small lines of pain tugging at the corners of Jocasta's eyes.

"Jem's nearly finished. I'll go and fetch Mama, shall I? She could make you a tisane."

Jocasta flapped a hand in dismissal, pushing away the pain with an obvious effort.

"No need, *a muirninn*. It's none so bad as that." She rubbed at her temple, careful of the hairdressing, the gesture belying her words.

Jemmy's mouth released its hold with a small, milky *pop!* and his head lolled back. The crook of Brianna's elbow was hot and sweaty, where his head had rested; his tiny ear was crumpled and crimson. She lifted his inert body and sighed with relief as the cool air struck her skin. A soft belch bubbled out of him with a dribble of excess milk, and he subsided against her shoulder like a half-filled water balloon.

"Full, is he?" Jocasta smiled, blind eyes turned toward them at the faint sound.

"As a drum," Brianna assured her. She patted his small back, to be sure, but heard no more than the soft sigh of sleep-filled breathing. She rose, wiped the milk from his chin, and laid the baby on his stomach in his makeshift cradle, a drawer from Jocasta's mahogany chiffonier, laid on the floor and thickly padded with pillows and quilts.

Brianna hung the shawl over the back of the chair, shivering slightly in a draft that leaked around the window frame. Not wanting to risk her new dress being stained with spit-up milk, she'd been nursing Jemmy in shift and stockings, and her bare forearms were pebbled with gooseflesh.

Jocasta turned her head in answer to the creak of wood and rustle of fabric, as Brianna opened the big armoire and took out two linen petticoats and her dress, smoothing the panels of soft, pale blue wool with satisfaction. She had woven the cloth and engineered the design of the gown herself—though Mrs. Bug had spun the thread, Claire had dyed it with indigo and saxifrage, and Marsali had helped with the sewing.

"Shall I call Phaedre back to dress ye, lass?"

"No, that's all right, I can manage—if you'll help me with the laces?" She didn't like to call on the services of the slaves, any more than could be helped. The petticoats were no problem; she simply stepped into them, one at a time, and fastened the drawstrings round her waist. The stays needed to be laced up the back, though, and so did the gown itself.

Jocasta's brows were still dark, bronze against the pale apricot hue of her skin. They rose a little at the suggestion that she help to dress her niece, but she nodded, with no more than a brief hesitation. She turned her blind eyes toward the hearth, frowning a little.

"I suppose I can. The laddie's not too near the fire, is he? Sparks can jump, aye?"

Brianna wriggled into the stays, scooping her breasts up into the scalloped hollows that supported them, then pulled the gown on over them.

"No, he's not too near the fire," she said patiently. She'd made the bodice with light boning in the front and sides. Brianna turned slightly to and fro, admiring the effect in Jocasta's looking glass. Catching sight in the mirror of her aunt's slight frown behind her, she rolled her eyes at herself, then bent and pulled the drawer a little farther from the hearth, just in case.

"Thanks to ye for humoring an auld woman," Jocasta said dryly, hearing the scrape of wood.

"You're welcome, Aunt," Brianna replied, letting both warmth and apology show in her voice. She laid a hand on her great-aunt's shoulder, and Jocasta put her own long hand over it, squeezing gently.

"It's no that I think ye're a neglectful mother, aye?" Jocasta said. "But when ye've lived so long as I have, ye may be cautious, too, lass. I have seen dreadful things happen to bairns, ye ken?" she said, more softly. "And I should rather be set afire myself, than see harm come to our bonnie lad."

She moved behind Brianna and ran her hands lightly down her niece's back, finding the lacings without trouble.

"Ye've regained your figure, I see," the old woman said with approval, her hands skimming the sides of Brianna's waist. "What is this—crewelwork? What color is it?"

"Dark indigo blue. Flowering vines done in heavy cotton, to contrast with the pale blue wool." She took one of Jocasta's hands and guided the fingertips lightly over the vines that covered each bone in the bodice, running from the scalloped neck to the V of the waist, dropped sharply in front to show off the trim figure Jocasta had remarked upon.

Brianna drew in her breath as the laces tightened, glancing from her reflection to her son's small head, round as a cantaloupe and heartbreakingly perfect. Not for the first time, she wondered about her great-aunt's life. Jocasta had had children, or at least Jamie thought so—but she never spoke of them, and Brianna hesitated to ask. Perhaps lost in infancy; so many were. Her chest tightened at the thought.

"Dinna fash yourself," her aunt said. Jocasta's face readjusted itself into determined cheerfulness in the mirror. "Yon laddie's born for great things; nay harm will come to him, I'm sure."

She turned, the green silk of her dressing gown rustling over her petticoats, leaving Bree freshly startled at her aunt's ability to divine people's feelings, even without seeing their faces.

“Phaedre!” Jocasta called. “Phaedre! Bring my case—the black one.”

Phaedre was nearby, as always, and a brief rustling in the drawers of the armoire produced the black case. Jocasta sat down with it at her secretary.

The black leather case was old and worn, a narrow box covered in weathered hide, unadorned save for its silver hasp. Jocasta kept her best jewels in a much grander case of velvet-lined cedarwood, Brianna knew. What could be in this one?

She moved to stand beside her aunt as Jocasta put back the lid. Inside the case was a short length of turned wood, the thickness of a finger, and on it were ranged three rings: a plain band of gold set with a beryl, another with a large cabochon emerald, and the last with three diamonds, surrounded by smaller stones that caught the light and threw it back in rainbows that danced across the walls and beams.

“What a lovely ring!” Bree exclaimed involuntarily.

“Oh, the diamond one? Well, Hector Cameron was aye a rich man,” said Jocasta, absently touching the biggest ring. Her long fingers—unadorned—sorted deftly through a small heap of trinkets that lay in the box beside the rings, and came out with something small and dull.

She handed the tiny object to Brianna, who discovered it to be a small pierced-work tin brooch, rather tarnished, made in the shape of a heart.

“That’s a *deasil* charm, *a muirninn*,” Jocasta said, with a satisfied nod. “Put it on the wean’s skirts, behind.”

“A charm?” Brianna glanced at Jemmy’s huddled form. “What kind of charm?”

“Against the fairies,” Jocasta said. “Keep it pinned to the lad’s smock—always to the back, mind—and naught born of the Auld Folk will trouble him.”

The hair on Brianna’s forearms prickled slightly at the matter-of-factness in the old woman’s voice.

“Your mother should ha’ told ye,” Jocasta went on, with a hint of reproval in her voice. “But I ken as she’s a Sassenach, and your father likely wouldna think of it. Men don't," she added, with a hint of bitterness. "It's a woman's job to see to the weans, to keep them from harm."

Jocasta stooped to the kindling basket and groped among the bits of debris, coming up with a long pine twig in her hand, the bark still on it.

"Take that," she commanded, holding it out toward Brianna. "Light the end of it from the hearth, and walk ye round the bairn three times. Sunwise, mind!"

Mystified, Brianna took the stick and thrust it into the fire, then did as she was bid, holding the flaming twig well away from both the makeshift cradle and her blue wool skirts. Jocasta tapped her foot rhythmically on the floor, and chanted, half under her breath.

She spoke in Gaelic, but slowly enough that Brianna could make out most of the words.

"Wisdom of serpent be thine,
Wisdom of raven be thine,
Wisdom of valiant eagle.
Voice of swan be thine,
Voice of honey be thine,
Voice of the Son of the stars.
Sain of the fairy-woman be thine,
Sain of the elf-dart be thine,
Sain of the red dog be thine.
Bounty of sea be thine,
Bounty of land be thine,
Bounty of the Father of Heaven.
Be each day glad for thee,
No day ill for thee,
A life joyful, satisfied."

Jocasta paused for a moment, a slight frown on her face, as though listening for any backtalk from Fairyland. Evidently satisfied, she motioned toward the hearth.

"Throw it into the fire. Then the wean will be safe from burning."

Brianna obeyed, finding to her fascination that she did not find any of this even faintly ridiculous. Odd, but very satisfying to think that she was protecting Jem from harm—even harm from fairies, which she didn't personally believe in. Or she hadn't, before this.

A thread of music drifted up from below; the screek of a fiddle, and the sound of a voice, deep and mellow. She couldn't make out any words, but knew the sound of the song.

Jocasta cocked her head, listening, and smiled.

"He's a good voice, your young man."

Brianna listened, too. Very faintly, she heard the familiar rise and fall of "My Love Is in America," somewhere below. *When I sing, it's always for you.* Her breasts were soft now, drained of milk, but they tingled slightly at the memory.

"You have good ears, Auntie," she said, tucking the thought away with a smile.

"Are ye pleased in your marriage?" Jocasta asked abruptly. "D'ye find yourself well-suited wi' the lad?"

"Yes," Brianna said, a little startled. "Yes—very much."

"That's good." Her great-aunt stood still, head tilted to the side, still listening. "Aye, that's good," she repeated, softly.

Seized by impulse, Brianna laid a hand on the older woman's wrist.

"And you, Auntie?" she asked. "Are you … pleased?"

"Happy" seemed not quite the word, in view of that row of rings in the case. "Well-suited" seemed not quite right, either, with her memory of Duncan, skulking in the corner of the drawing room the night before, shy and wordless whenever anyone but Jamie spoke to him, sweating and nervous this morning.

"Pleased?" Jocasta sounded puzzled. "Oh—to be married, ye mean!" To Brianna's relief, her aunt laughed, the lines of her face drawing up in genuine amusement.

"Oh, aye, surely," she said. "Why, it's the first time I shall ha' changed my name in fifty years!"

With a small snort of amusement, the old lady turned toward the window and pressed her palm against the glass.

"It's a fine day out, lass," she said. "Why not take your cloak and have a bit of air and company?"

She was right; the distant river gleamed silver through a lacework of green branches, and the air inside, so cozy a few moments ago, seemed now suddenly stale and frowsty.

"I think I will." Brianna glanced toward the makeshift cradle. "Shall I call Phaedre to watch the baby?"

Jocasta waved a hand at her, shooing.

"Och, away wi' ye. I'll mind the bairnie. I dinna mean to go down yet a while."

"Thanks, Auntie." She kissed the old woman's cheek, and turned to go—then, with a glance at her aunt, took a step back toward the hearth, and unobtrusively slid the cradle a little farther from the fire.

The air outside was fresh, and smelled of new grass and barbecue smoke. It made her want to skip down the brick paths, blood humming in her veins. She could hear the strains of music from the house, and the sound of Roger's voice. A quick turn in the fresh air, and then she'd go in; perhaps Roger would be ready for a break by then, and they could—

"Brianna!" She heard her name, hissed from behind the wall of the kitchen garden, and turned, startled, to find her father's head poking cautiously round the corner, like a ruddy snail. He jerked his chin at her and disappeared.

She cast a quick look over her shoulder to be sure no one was watching, and hastily whisked round the wall into the shelter of a sprouting carrot bed, to find her father crouched over the recumbent body of one of the black maids, who was sprawled atop a pile of aging manure with her cap over her face.

"What on earth—" Brianna began. Then she caught a whiff of alcohol, pungent among the garden scents of carrot tops and sun-ripened manure. "Oh." She squatted next to her father, skirts ballooning over the brick path.

"It was my fault," he explained. "Or some of it, at least. I left a cup under the willows, still half-full." He nodded toward the brick path, where one of Jocasta's punch cups lay on its side, a sticky drop of liquid still clinging to its rim. "She must have found it."

Brianna leaned over and sniffed at the edge of the maid's rumpled cap, now fluttering with heavy snores. Rum punch was the prevailing odor, but she also detected the richly sour scent of ale and the smooth tang of brandy. Evidently the slave had been thriftily disposing of any dregs left in the cups she collected for washing.

She lifted the ruffled edge of the cap with a cautious finger. It was Betty, one of the older maids, her face slack-lipped and drop-jawed in alcoholic stupor.

"Aye, it wasna the first half-cup she'd had," Jamie said, seeing her. "She must have been reeling. I canna think how she walked so far from the house, in such condition."

Brianna glanced back, frowning. The brick-walled kitchen garden was near to the cookhouse, but a good three hundred yards from the main house, and separated from it by a rhododendron hedge, and several flower beds.

"Not just how," Brianna said, and tapped a finger against her lip in puzzlement. "Why?"

"What?" He had been frowning at the maid, but glanced up at her tone. She rose, and tilted her head at the snoring woman.

"Why *did* she walk out here? It looks like she's been tippling all day—she can't have been dashing out here with every cup; somebody would have noticed. And why bother? It's not like it would be hard to do without being noticed. If I were drinking leftovers, I'd just stay there under the willows and gulp it."

Her father gave her a startled look, replaced at once with one of wry amusement.

"Would ye, then? Aye, that's a thought. But perhaps there was enough in the cup that she thought to enjoy it in peace."

"Maybe so. But there are surely hiding places nearer the river than this." She reached down and scooped up the empty cup. "What was it you were drinking, rum punch?"

"No, brandy."

"Then it wasn't yours that pushed her over the edge." She held out the cup, tilting it so he could see the dark dregs at the bottom. Jocasta's rum punch was made not only with the usual rum, sugar, and butter but also with dried currants, the whole concoction being mulled with a hot poker. The result not only was dark brown in color but always left a heavy sediment in the cups, composed of tiny grains of soot from the poker and the charred remnants of incinerated currants.

Jamie took the cup from her, frowning. He inserted his nose into the cup and took a deep sniff, then stuck a finger into the liquid and put it in his mouth.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing his face change.

"Punch," he said, but ran the tip of his tongue back and forth over his teeth, as though to cleanse it. "With laudanum, I think."

"Laudanum! Are you sure?"

"No," he said frankly. "But there's something in it beyond dried currants, or I'm a Dutchman." He held the cup out to her, and she took it, sniffing furiously. She couldn't make out much beyond but the sweet, burned smell of rum punch. Perhaps there was a sharper tang, something oily and aromatic … perhaps not.

"I'll take your word for it," she said, wiping the tip of her nose on the back of her hand. She glanced at the supine maid. "Shall I go look for Mama?"

Jamie squatted beside the maid and inspected her carefully. He lifted a limp hand and felt it, listened to her breathing, then shook his head.

"I canna say whether she's drugged, or only drunk—but I dinna think she's dying."

"What shall we do with her? We can't leave her lie."

He looked down at the slave, frowning.

"No, of course not." He stooped and—quite gently—gathered the woman into his arms. One worn shoe fell off, and Brianna retrieved it from the brick walk.

"D'ye ken where she sleeps?" Jamie asked, gingerly negotiating his stertorous burden round the edge of a cucumber frame.

"She's a house slave; she must sleep in the attics."

He nodded, tossing his head to dislodge a strand of red hair that had blown into his mouth.

"Verra well, then, we'll go round the stables and see can we get up the back stair without bein' seen. Go across, will ye, lass, and signal me when it's clear."

She tucked shoe and cup under her cloak to hide them, then ducked quickly out onto the narrow walk that led past the kitchen garden, branching to cookhouse and necessary. She glanced to and fro, feigning casualness. There were a few people within sight, near the paddock, but that was some distance away—and all of them had their backs to her, engrossed with Mr. Wylie's black Dutch horses.

As she turned to signal to her father, she caught sight of Mr. Wylie himself, escorting a lady into the stable block. A gleam of gold silk—wait, it was her mother! Claire's pale face turned momentarily in her direction, but her attention was fixed on something Wylie was saying, and she didn't notice her daughter on the path.

Bree hesitated, wanting to call to her mother, but couldn't do so without attracting unwanted attention. Well, at least she knew where Claire was. She could come and fetch her mother to help—once they had Betty safely tucked away.

With a few close alarms and near-misses, they managed to get Betty up to the long attic room she shared with the other female house servants. Jamie, panting, dumped her unceremoniously on one of the narrow beds, then wiped his sweating brow on his coat sleeve, and, long nose wrinkled, began fastidiously to dust manure crumbs from the skirts of his coat.

"So, then," he said, a little grumpily. "She's safe, aye? If ye tell one of the other slaves she's taken ill, I suppose no one who matters will find out."

"Thanks, Da." She leaned close and kissed his cheek. "You're a sweet man."

"Oh, aye," he said, sounding resigned. "My bones are filled wi' honey, to be sure." Still, he didn't look displeased. "Have ye got that shoe, still?" He took off the maid's remaining shoe, and placed it neatly beside its fellow beneath the bed, then drew the coarse woolen blanket gently over the woman's feet, grimy white in their thick stockings.

Brianna checked the maid's condition; so far as she could tell, everything seemed all right; the woman was still snoring wetly, but in a reassuringly regular manner. As they tiptoed cautiously back down the rear stairs, she gave Jamie the silver cup.

"Here. Did you know this was one of Duncan's cups?"

"No." He arched one brow, frowning. "What d'ye mean, 'Duncan's cups'?"

"Aunt Jocasta had a set of six cups made for Duncan, for a wedding present. She showed them to me yesterday. See?" She turned the cup in her hand, to show him the engraved monogram—"I," for "Innes," with a tiny fish, its scales beautifully detailed, swimming round the letter.

"Does that help?" she asked, seeing his brow crease in interest.

"It may." He pulled out a clean cambric handkerchief and wrapped the cup carefully before putting it in the pocket of his coat. "I'll go and find out. Meanwhile, can ye find Roger Mac?"

"Of course. Why?"

"Well, it does occur to me that if yon Betty drank part of a cup of rum punch and was laid out like a fish on a slab, then I should like to find whoever drank the first part of it, and see if they're in a similar condition." He raised one brow at her. "If the punch was drugged, then likely it was meant for someone, aye? I thought perhaps you and Roger Mac might look round discreetly for bodies in the shrubbery."

That aspect of the matter hadn't struck her in the rush to get Betty upstairs.

"All right. I should find Phaedre or Ulysses first, though, and tell one of them that Betty's sick."

"Aye. If ye speak with Phaedre, ye might inquire whether yon Betty is an opium-eater as well as a bibber. Though I will say I think it unlikely," he added dryly.

"So do I," she said, matching his tone. She took his point, though; perhaps the punch had not been drugged, but Betty had taken the laudanum herself, on purpose. It was possible; she knew Jocasta kept some in the stillroom. If she had taken it herself, though, was it for recreational use—or had the maid perhaps intended to commit suicide?

She frowned at Jamie's back, as he paused at the foot of the stair, listening before stepping onto the landing. It was easy enough to think that the misery of slavery might dispose one to suicide. At the same time, honesty compelled her to admit that Jocasta's house servants lived reasonably well; better than any number of free individuals—black *or* white—that she'd seen in Wilmington and Cross Creek.

The servants' room was clean, the beds rough but comfortable. The house servants had decent clothes, even to shoes and stockings, and more than enough to eat. As for the sorts of emotional complications that could lead one to contemplate suicide—well, those weren't limited to slaves.

Much more likely that Betty was merely a toper, of the sort who would drink anything even vaguely alcoholic—the reek of her garments certainly suggested as much. But in that case, why take the risk of stealing laudanum, on a day when the wedding party insured there would be an abundance of every kind of drink?

She was reluctantly forced to the same conclusion that she was sure her father had already reached. Betty had taken the laudanum—if that's what it was, she reminded herself—by accident. And if that was so … whose cup had she drunk from?

Jamie turned, lips pursed to enjoin silence, and beckoned to her that the coast was clear. She followed him quickly across the landing and outside, letting out her breath in relief as they arrived on the path unobserved.

"What were you doing there in the first place, Da?" she asked. He looked blank.

"In the kitchen garden," she elaborated. "How did you find Betty?"

"Oh." He took her arm, fetching her away from the house. They walked casually toward the paddock; innocent guests bent on viewing the horses. "I was just havin' a word wi' your mother, over by the grove. I came back through the kitchen garden, and there the woman was, flat on her back on the shit heap."

"That's a point, isn't it?" she asked. "Did she lie down in the garden on purpose, or was it only an accident that you found her there?"

He shook his head.

"I dinna ken," he said. "But I mean to speak to Betty, once she's sober. D'ye ken where your mother is now?"

"Yes, she's with Phillip Wylie. They were headed for the stables, I think." Her father's nostrils flared slightly at mention of Wylie, and she suppressed a smile.

"I'll find her," he said. "Meanwhile, lass, do you go and speak to Phaedre—and, lass—"

She had already turned to go; at this, she looked back, surprised.

"I think perhaps ye should tell Phaedre to say nothing unless someone asks her where Betty is, and if they do, to tell you—or me." He straightened abruptly, clearing his throat. "Go find your husband then, lass—and, lass? Make sure no one kens what you're about, aye?"

He lifted one brow, and she nodded in reply. He turned on his heel then, and strode off toward the stables, the fingers of his right hand tapping gently against his coat as though he were deep in thought.

The chilly wind nipped under her skirts and petticoats, belling them out and sending a deep shiver through her flesh. She understood his implication well enough.

If it was neither attempted suicide nor accident—then it might be intended murder. But of whom?

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FLIRTATIONS

Jamie had given me a lingering kiss for encouragement after our interlude, and crashed off through the underbrush, intending to hunt down Ninian Bell Hamilton and find out just what the Regulators were up to at the camp Hunter had mentioned. I followed, after a moment's interval for decency, but paused at the edge of the grove before emerging back into public view, to be sure I was seemly.

I had a rather light-headed sense of well-being, and my cheeks were very flushed, but I thought that wasn't incriminating in and of itself. Neither would coming out of the wood be inculpatory; women and men alike often simply stepped into the shelter of the trees along the lawn in order to relieve themselves, rather than making their way to the overcrowded and smelly necessaries. Coming out of the wood flushed and breathing heavily, with leaves in my hair and sap stains on my skirt, though, would cause a certain amount of comment behind the fans.

There were a few sandburs and an empty cicada shell clinging to my skirt, a ghostly excrescence that I picked off with a shudder of distaste. There were dogwood petals on my shoulder; I brushed them off and felt carefully over my hair, dislodging a few more that fluttered away like scraps of fragrant paper.

Just as I stepped out from under the trees, it occurred to me to check the back of my skirt for stains or bits of bark, and I was craning my neck to see over my shoulder when I walked slap into Phillip Wylie.

“Mrs. Fraser!” He caught me by the shoulders, to prevent my falling backward. “Are you quite all right, my dear?”

“Yes, certainly.” My cheeks were flaming legitimately at this point, and I stepped back, shaking myself back into order. Why did I keep bumping into Phillip Wylie? Was the little pest following me? “I do apologize.”

“Nonsense, nonsense,” he said heartily. “It was my fault entirely. Deuced clumsy of me. May I get you something to restore your spirits, my dear? A glass of cider? Wine? Rum punch? A syllabub? Applejack? Or—no, brandy. Yes, allow me to bring you a bit of brandy to recover from the shock!”

“No, nothing, thank you!” I couldn’t help laughing at his absurdities, and he grinned back, obviously thinking himself very witty.

“Well, if you are quite recovered, then, dear lady, you must come with me. I insist.”

He had my hand tucked into the crook of his arm, and was towing me determinedly off in the direction of the stable, despite my protests.

“It will take no more than a moment,” he assured me. “I have been looking forward all day to showing you my surprise. You will be utterly entranced, I give you my word!”

I subsided feebly; it seemed less trouble to go and look at the damned horses again than to argue with him—and there was plenty of time to speak with Jocasta before the wedding, in any case. This time, though, we skirted the paddock where Lucas and his companions were submitting tolerantly to inspection by a couple of bold gentlemen who had climbed the fence for a closer look.

“That *is* an amazingly good-tempered stallion,” I said with approval, mentally contrasting Lucas’s kindly manners with Gideon’s rapacious personality. Jamie still had not found time to castrate the horse, who had consequently bitten almost everyone, horse and man alike, on the journey to River Run.

“A mark of the breed,” Wylie replied, pushing open the door that led to the main stable. “They are the most amiable of horses, though a gentle disposition does not impair their intelligence, I do assure you. This way, Mrs. Fraser."

By contrast with the brilliant day outside, it was pitch-dark in the stable; so dark that I stumbled over an uneven brick in the floor, and Mr. Wylie seized my arm as I lurched forward with a startled cry.

"Are you all right, Mrs. Fraser?" he asked, setting me upright again.

"Yes," I said, a little breathless. In fact I had both stubbed my toe viciously and turned my ankle; my new morocco-heeled shoes were lovely, but I wasn't used to them yet. "Just let me stand a moment—'til my eyes adjust."

He did, but he didn't let go of my arm. Instead, he pulled my hand through the crook of his elbow and set it solidly, to give me more support.

"Lean on me," he said, simply.

I did, and we stood quietly for a moment, me with my injured foot drawn up like a heron's, waiting for my toes to stop throbbing. For once, Mr. Wylie seemed bereft of quips and sallies; perhaps because of the peaceful atmosphere.

Stables on the whole *are* peaceful, horses and the people who tend them being generally kindly sorts of creatures. This one, though, had a special air, both quiet and vibrant. I could hear small rustlings and stampings, and the contented noise of a horse champing hay close at hand.

So close to Phillip Wylie, I was aware of his perfume, but even the expensive whiff of musk and bergamot was overcome by the stable smells. It smelled of fresh straw and grain, of brick and wood, but there was a faint scent as well of more elemental things—manure and blood and milk; the basic elements of motherhood.

"It's rather womblike in here, isn't it?" I said softly. "So warm and dark, I mean. I can almost feel the heartbeat."

Wylie laughed, but quietly.

"That's mine," he said. He touched a hand briefly to his waistcoat, a dark shadow against the pale satin.

My eyes adapted quickly to the dark, but even so, the place was very dim. The lithe shadow-shape of a stable cat glided past, making me wobble and set down my injured foot. It wouldn't yet bear weight, but I could at least put it to the floor.

"Can you stand for a moment alone?" Wylie asked.

Without waiting for my reply, he detached himself and went to light a lantern that stood on a nearby stool. There were a few faint chinks of flint and steel, then the wick caught and a soft globe of yellow light ballooned around us. Taking my arm again with his free hand, he led me toward the far end of the stable.

They were in the loose-box at the end. Phillip raised the lantern high, turning to smile at me as he did so. The lantern light gleamed on hide that shone and rippled like midnight water, and glowed in the huge brown eyes of the mare as she turned toward us.

"Oh," I said softly, "how beautiful," and then, a little louder, "Oh!" The mare had moved a little, and her foal peered out from behind her mother's legs. She was long-legged and knob-kneed, her tiny rump and sloping shoulders rounded echoes of her mother's muscular perfection. She had the same large, kind eyes, fringed with long, long lashes—but instead of the sleek hide of rippling black, she was a dark reddish-brown and fuzzy as a rabbit, with an absurd little whisk broom of a tail.

Her dam had the same glorious profusion of flowing mane I had noted on the Friesians in the paddock; the baby had a ridiculous crest of stiff hair, about an inch long, that stuck straight up like a toothbrush.

The foal blinked once, dazzled by the light, then ducked swiftly behind the shelter of her mother's body. A moment later, a small nose protruded cautiously into sight, nostrils twitching. A big eye followed, blinked—and the nose vanished, only to reappear almost instantly, a little further this time.

"Why, you little flirt!" I said, delighted.

Wylie laughed.

"She is indeed," he said, voice filled with pride of ownership. "Are they not magnificent?"

"Well, yes," I said, considering. "They are. Still, I'm not sure that's quite it. 'Magnificent' seems more like what you'd say of a stallion, or a warhorse of some kind. These horses are … well, they're *sweet*!"

Wylie gave a small, amused sort of snort.

"Sweet?" he said. *"Sweet?"*

"Well, you know," I said, laughing. "Charming. Good-natured. Delightful."

"All those things," he said, turning to me. "And beautiful, as well." He wasn't looking at the horses, but rather at me, a faint smile on his face.

"Yes," I said, feeling a small, obscure twinge of unease. "Yes, they are very beautiful."

He was standing very close; I took a step to the side and turned away, under the pretext of looking at the horses again. The foal was nuzzling at the mare's swollen udder, scraggy tail waggling with enthusiasm.

"What are their names?" I asked.

Wylie moved to the bar of the loose-box, casually, but in such a way that his arm brushed my sleeve as he reached above me to hang the lantern from a hook on the wall.

"The mare's name is Tessa," he said. "You saw the sire, Lucas. As for the filly …" He reached for my hand, and lifted it, smiling. "I thought I might name her La Belle Claire."

I didn't move for a second, stunned by sheer disbelief at the expression that showed quite clearly on Phillip Wylie's face.

"What?" I said blankly. Surely I was wrong, I thought. I tried to snatch my hand away, but I had hesitated one second too long, and his fingers tightened on mine. Surely he wasn't really meaning to …

He was.

"Charming," he said softly, and moved closer. "Good-natured. Delightful. And … beautiful." He kissed me.

I was so shocked that I didn't move for a moment. His mouth was soft, the kiss brief and chaste. That hardly mattered, though; it was the fact that he had done it.

"Mr. Wylie!" I said. I took a hasty step back, but was brought up short by the rail.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said softly, and took the same step forward. "My dear."

"I am *not* your—" I began, and he kissed me again. Without the least hint of chasteness. Still shocked, but no longer stunned, I shoved him, hard. He wobbled, and lost his grip on my hand, but recovered instantly, seizing me by the arm and slipping his other hand behind me.

"Flirt," he whispered, and lowered his face toward mine. I kicked him. Unfortunately, I kicked him with my injured foot, which deprived the blow of much force, and he ignored it.

I began to struggle in good earnest, as the sense of stunned disbelief faded into the awareness that the young man had one hand firmly on my backside. At the same time, I was aware that there were a good many people in the vicinity of the stable; the last thing I wanted was to attract attention.

"Stop that!" I hissed. "Stop it at once!"

"You madden me," he breathed, pressing me to his bosom and attempting to stick his tongue in my ear.

I certainly thought he was mad, but I declined absolutely to accept any responsibility for the condition. I jerked back as far as I could—not far, with the railing at my back—and fought to get one hand between us. Shock quite gone by now, I was thinking with surprising clarity. I couldn't knee him in the balls; he had one leg thrust between my own, trapping a wodge of skirt in my way. If I could get my hand round his throat and get a sound hold of his carotids, though, he'd drop like a rock.

I did get hold of his throat, but his blasted stock was in the way; my fingers scrabbled at it, and he jerked to the side, grabbing at my hand.

"Please," he said. "I want—"

"I don't give a damn *what* you want!" I said. "Let go of me this instant, you—you—" I groped wildly for some suitable insult. "You —*puppy*!"

Rather to my surprise, he stopped. His face couldn't go pale, being already covered in rice flour—I could taste it on my lips—but his mouth was set, and his expression was … rather wounded.

"Is that really what you think of me?" he asked in a low voice.

"Yes, it bloody is!" I said. "What else am I to think? Have you lost your mind, behaving in this—this despicable fashion? What is the matter with you?"

"Despicable?" He seemed quite taken aback to hear his advances described in this fashion. "But I—that is, you—I thought you were … I mean, might be not averse—"

"You can't," I said, positively. "You can't possibly have thought anything of the sort. I've never given you the *slightest* reason to think such a thing!" Nor had I—intentionally. The uneasy thought came to me, though, that perhaps my perceptions of my own behavior were not quite the same as Phillip Wylie's.

"Oh, haven't you?" His face was changing, clouding with anger. "I beg to differ with you, madam!"

I had told him I was old enough to be his mother; it had never for a moment occurred to me that he didn't believe it.

"Flirt," he said again, though in quite a different tone than the first time. "No reason? You have given me every reason, since the first occasion of our meeting."

"What?" My voice went up a tone, in incredulity. "I've never done anything but engage you in civil conversation. If that constitutes flirtation in *your* book, my lad, then—"

"Don't call me that!"

Oh, so he *had* noticed that there was a difference of age. He simply hadn't appreciated the magnitude, I thought. It came to me, with a certain feeling of apprehension, that at Phillip's level of society, most flirtation was indeed conducted under the guise of banter. What in the name of God had I said to him?

I had some dim recollection of having discussed the Stamp Act with him and his friend Stanhope. Yes, taxes, and, I thought, horses—but surely that couldn't have been sufficient to inflame his misapprehensions?

"Thine eyes are like the fishpools in Heshbon," he said, low-voiced and bitter. "Do you not recall the evening when I said that to you? The Song of Solomon is merely 'civil conversation' to you, is it?"

“Good grief.” I was, despite myself, beginning to feel slightly guilty; we *had* had a brief exchange along those lines, at Jocasta’s party, two or three years ago. And he remembered it? The Song of Solomon was reasonably heady stuff; perhaps the simple reference … Then I shook myself mentally, and drew myself up straight.

“Nonsense,” I declared. “You were teasing me, and I simply answered you in kind. Now, I really must—”

“You came in here with me today. Alone.” He took another step toward me, eyes determined. He was talking himself back into it, the fatheaded popinjay!

“Mr. Wylie,” I said firmly, sliding sideways. “I am terribly sorry if you have somehow misunderstood the situation, but I am very happily married, and I have no romantic interest in you whatsoever. And now, if you will excuse me …” I ducked past him, and hurried out of the stable, as fast as my shoes would allow. He made no effort to follow me, though, and I reached the outdoors unmolested, my heart beating fast.

There were people near the paddock; I turned in the other direction, going round the end of the stable block before anyone should see me. Once out of sight, I made a swift inventory, checking to be sure that I didn’t look too disheveled. I didn’t know whether anyone had seen me going into the stable with Wylie; I could only hope no one had seen my hasty exit.

Only one lock of hair had come down in the recent contretemps; I pinned it carefully back, and dusted a few bits of straw from my skirts. Fortunately, he hadn’t torn my clothes; a retucked kerchief and I was quite decent again.

“Are ye all right, Sassenach?”

I leaped like a gaffed salmon, and so did my heart. I whirled, adrenaline jolting through my chest like an electic current, to find Jamie standing beside me, frowning slightly as he surveyed me.

“What have ye been doing, Sassenach?”

My heart was still stuck in my throat, choking me, but I forced out what I hoped were a few nonchalant words.

"Nothing. I mean, looking at the horses—horse. The mare. She has a new foal."

"Aye, I know," he said, looking at me oddly.

"Did you find Ninian? What did he have to say?" I groped behind my head, tidying my hair and taking the opportunity to turn away a little, to avoid his eye.

"He says it's true—though I hadna doubted it. There are more than a thousand men, camped near Salisbury. And more joining them each day, he says. The auld mumper is pleased about it!" He frowned, drumming the two stiff fingers of his right hand lightly against his leg, and I realized that he was rather worried.

Not without cause. Putting aside the threat of conflict itself, it was spring. Only the fact that River Run was in the piedmont had allowed us to come to Jocasta's wedding; down here, the woods were cloudy with blossom and crocuses popped through the earth like orange and purple dragon's-teeth, but the mountains were still cloaked in snow, the tree branches sporting swollen buds. In two weeks or so, those buds would burst, and it would be time for the spring planting on Fraser's Ridge.

True, Jamie had provided for such an emergency by finding old Arch Bug, but Arch could manage only so much by himself. And as for the tenants and homesteaders … if the militia were raised again, the women would be left to do the planting alone.

"The men in this camp—they're men who've left their land, then?" Salisbury was in the piedmont, as well. It wasn't thinkable for working farmers to abandon their land at this time of year for the sake of protest against the government, no matter how annoyed they were.

"Left it, or lost it," he said briefly. The frown deepened as he looked at me. "Have ye spoken wi' my aunt?"

"Ah … no," I said, feeling guilty. "Not yet. I was just going … oh—you said there was another problem. What else has happened?"

He made a sound like a hissing teakettle, which for him betokened rare impatience.

"Christ, I'd nearly forgot her. One of the slave women's been poisoned, I think."

"What? Who? How?" My hands dropped from my hair as I stared at him. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I *am* telling ye, am I not? Dinna fash yourself, she's in no danger. Only stinking drunk." He twitched his shoulders irritably. "The only difficulty is that perhaps it wasna her that was meant to be poisoned. I've sent Roger Mac and Brianna to look, and they've not come back to say anyone's dead, so maybe not."

"*Maybe* not?" I rubbed the bridge of my nose, distracted from the extant worries by this new development. "I grant you, alcohol is poisonous, not that anyone seems ever to realize it, but there's a difference between being drunk and being deliberately poisoned. What do you mean—"

"Sassenach," he interrupted.

"What?"

"What in the name o' God have ye been doing?" he burst out.

I stared at him in bewilderment. His face had been growing redder as we talked, though I had supposed it to be only frustration and worry over Ninian, and the Regulators. It dawned on me, catching a dangerous blue glint in his eye, that there was something rather more personal about his attitude. I tilted my head to one side, giving him a wary look.

"What do you mean, what have I been doing?"

His lips pressed tight together, and he didn't answer. Instead, he extended a forefinger and touched it, very delicately, beside my mouth. He turned his hand over then, and presented me with a small dark object clinging to the tip of his finger—Phillip Wylie's star-shaped black beauty mark.

"Oh." I felt a distinct buzzing in my ears. "That. Er …" My head felt light, and small spots—all shaped like black stars—danced before my eyes.

"Yes, that," he snapped. "Christ, woman! I'm deviled to death wi' Duncan's havers and Ninian's pranks—and why did ye not tell me he'd been fighting wi' Barlow?"

"I'd scarcely describe it as a fight," I said, struggling to regain a sense of coolness. "Besides, Major MacDonald put a stop to it since *you* were nowhere to be found. And if you want to be told things, the Major wants—"

"I ken what he wants." He dismissed the Major with a curt flick of his hand. "Aye, I'm up to my ears in Majors and Regulators and drunken maid servants, and *you're* out in the stable, canoodling wi' that fop!"

I felt the blood rising behind my eyes, and curled my fists, in order to control the impulse to slap him.

"I was *not* 'canoodling' in the slightest degree, and you know it! The beastly little twerp made a pass at me, that's all."

"A pass? Made love to ye, ye mean? Aye, I can see that!"

"He did not!"

"Oh, aye? Ye asked him to let ye try his bawbee on for luck, then?" He waggled the finger with the black patch under my nose, and I slapped it away, recalling a moment too late that "make love to" merely meant to engage in amorous flirtation, rather than fornication.

"I *mean*," I said, through clenched teeth, "that he kissed me. Probably for a joke. I'm old enough to be his mother, for God's sake!"

"More like his grandmother," Jamie said brutally. "Kissed ye, forbye—why in hell did ye encourage him, Sassenach?"

My mouth dropped open in outrage—insulted as much at being called Phillip Wylie's grandmother as at the accusation of having encouraged him.

"Encourage him? Why, you bloody idiot! You know perfectly well I didn't encourage him!"

"Your own daughter saw ye go in there with him! Have ye no shame? With all else there is to deal with here, am I to be forced to call the man out, as well?"

I felt a slight qualm at the thought of Brianna, and a larger one at the thought of Jamie challenging Wylie to a duel. He wasn't wearing his sword, but he'd brought it with him. I stoutly dismissed both thoughts.

"*My* daughter is neither a fool nor an evil-minded gossip," I said, with immense dignity. "She wouldn't think a thing of my going to look at a horse, and why ought she? Why ought anyone, for that matter?"

He blew out a long breath through pursed lips, and glared at me.

"Why, indeed? Perhaps because everyone saw ye flirt with him on the lawn? Because they saw him follow ye about like a dog after a bitch in heat?" He must have seen my expression alter dangerously at that, for he coughed briefly and hurried on.

"More than one person's seen fit to mention it to me. D'ye think I like bein' made a public laughingstock, Sassenach?"

"You—you—" Fury choked me. I wanted to hit him, but I could see interested heads turning toward us. " 'Bitch in heat'? How dare you say such a thing to me, you bloody bastard?"

He had the decency to look slightly abashed at that, though he was still glowering.

"Aye, well. I shouldna have said it quite that way. I didna mean—but ye *did* go off with him, Sassenach. As though I hadna enough to contend with, my own wife … and if ye'd gone to see my aunt, as I asked ye, then it wouldna have happened in the first place. Now see what ye've done!"

I had changed my mind about the desirability of a duel. I wanted Jamie and Phillip Wylie to kill each other, promptly, publicly, and with the maximum amount of blood. I also didn't care who was looking. I made a very serious effort to castrate him with my bare hands, and he grabbed my wrists, pulling them up sharply.

"Christ! Folk are watching, Sassenach!"

"I … don't … bloody … care!" I hissed, struggling to get free. "Let go of me, and I'll fucking give them something to watch!"

I didn't take my eyes off his face, but I was aware of a good many other faces turning toward us in the crowd on the lawn. So was he. His brows drew together for a moment, then his face set in sudden decision.

"All right, then," he said. "Let them watch."

He wrapped his arms around me, pressed me tight against himself, and kissed me. Unable to get loose, I quit fighting, and went stiff and furious instead. In the distance, I could hear laughter and raucous whoops of encouragement. Ninian Hamilton shouted something in Gaelic that I was pleased not to understand.

He finally moved his lips off mine, still holding me tightly against him, and very slowly bent his head, his cheek lying cool and firm next to mine. His body was firm, too, and not at all cool. The heat of him was leaching through at least six layers of cloth to reach my own skin: shirt, waistcoat, coat, gown, shift, and stays. Whether it was anger, arousal, or both, he was fully stoked and blazing like a furnace.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly, his breath hot and tickling in my ear. "I didna mean to insult ye. Truly. Shall I kill him, and then myself?"

I relaxed, very slightly. My hips were pressed solidly against him, and with only five layers of fabric between us there, the effect was reassuring.

"Perhaps not quite yet," I said. I felt light-headed from the rush of adrenaline, and took a deep breath to steady myself. Then I drew back a little, recoiling from the pungent reek that wafted off his clothes. Had I not been so upset, I would have noticed immediately that he was the source of the vile aroma I had been smelling.

"What on earth have you been doing?" I sniffed at the breast of his coat, frowning. "You smell terrible! Like—"

"Manure," he said, sounding resigned. "Aye, I know." His arms relaxed.

"Yes, manure," I said, sniffing further. "And rum punch"—he hadn't been drinking rum punch himself, though; I had tasted nothing but brandy when he kissed me—"and something awful, like old sweat, and—"

"Boiled turnips," he said, sounding more resigned. "Aye, the maid servant I was telling ye about, Sassenach. Betty, she's called." He tucked my hand into the crook of his arm, and with a deep bow of acknowledgment toward the crowd—who all applauded, damn them—turned to steer me toward the house.

"It would be as well if ye can get anything sensible out of her," he said, with a glance toward the sun, which hung in mid-sky above the tops of the willows along the river. "But it's growing late; I think perhaps ye'd best go up and speak to my aunt first, if there's to be a wedding at four o'clock."

I took a deep breath, trying to settle myself. A good deal of unexpended emotion was still sloshing round inside me, but there was plainly work to do.

"Right, then," I said. "I'll see Jocasta, and then have a look at Betty. As for Phillip Wylie …"

"As for Phillip Wylie," he interrupted, "dinna give him another thought, Sassenach." A certain look of inward intentness grew in his eyes. "I'll take care of him, later."

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PRIVATE PARTS

I left Jamie in the parlor, and made my way up the stairs and along the hall toward Jocasta’s room, nodding distractedly to friends and acquaintances encountered along the way. I was disconcerted, annoyed—and at the same time, reluctantly amused. I hadn’t spent so much time in bemused contemplation of a penis since I was sixteen or so, and here I was, preoccupied with three of the things.

Finding myself alone in the hall, I opened my fan, peering thoughtfully into the tiny round looking glass that served as a lake in the pastoral scene painted on it. Meant as an aid to intrigue rather than grooming, the glass showed me no more than a few square inches of my face at once—one eye and its arched brow regarded me quizzically.

It was quite a pretty eye, I admitted. There were lines around it, true, but it was nicely shaped, gracefully lidded, and equipped with long, curving lashes whose dark sable complemented the black pupil and contrasted very strikingly with the gold-flecked amber of the iris.

I moved the fan a bit, to get a view of my mouth. Full-lipped, and rather fuller than usual at present, to say nothing of a dark, moist pink. The lips looked as though someone had been kissing them rather roughly. They also looked as though they’d liked it.

“Hm!” I said, and snapped shut the fan.

With my blood no longer boiling, I could admit that Jamie might perhaps be right about Phillip Wylie’s intent in making objectionable advances to me. He might not be, too. But regardless of the young man’s underlying motives, I did have incontrovertible proof that he had found me physically appealing, grandmother or not. I rather thought I wouldn't mention that to Jamie, though; Phillip Wylie was a very annoying young man, but upon cooler reflection, I had decided that I would prefer not to have him disemboweled on the front lawn, after all.

Still, maturity did alter one's perspective somewhat. For all the personal implications of those male members in an excited state, it was the flaccid one that most interested me at the moment. My fingers itched to get hold of Duncan Innes's private parts—figuratively, at least.

There were not so many kinds of trauma, short of outright castration, that would cause physical impotence. Surgery nowadays being the primitive affair it was, I supposed that it was possible that whatever doctor had attended the original injury—if one did—had in fact simply removed both testicles. If that were the case, though, would Duncan not have said so?

Well, perhaps not. Duncan was an intensely shy and modest man, and even a more extroverted personality might hesitate to confide a misfortune of that extent, even to an intimate friend. Could he have concealed such an injury in the close confines of a prison, though? I drummed my fingers on the inlaid marquetry of the table outside Jocasta's door, considering.

It was certainly possible for men to go for several years without bathing; I'd seen a few who obviously had. On the other hand, the prisoners at Ardsmuir had been forced to work outdoors, cutting peat and quarrying stone; they would have had regular access to open water, and presumably would at least have washed periodically, if only to keep the itching of vermin at bay. I supposed one could wash without necessarily stripping naked, though.

I suspected that Duncan was still more or less intact. It was much more likely, I thought, that his impotence was psychological in origin; having one's testes badly bruised or crushed was bound to give a man pause, after all, and an early experiment might easily have convinced Duncan that all was up with him—or rather, down.

I paused before knocking, but not for long. I had had some experience of giving people bad news, after all, and the one thing that experience had taught me was that there was no point in preparation, or worry over what to say. Eloquence didn't help, and bluntness was no bar to sympathy.

I rapped sharply on the door, and entered at Jocasta's invitation.

Father LeClerc was present, seated at a small table in the corner, dealing in a workmanlike manner with a large assortment of edibles. Two bottles of wine—one empty—stood on the table as well, and the priest looked up at my entrance with a greasily beaming smile that appeared to go round his face and tie together behind his ears.

"Tally-ho, Madame!" he said cheerfully, and brandished a turkey leg at me in greeting. "Tally-ho, Tally-ho!"

"Bonjour" seemed almost repressive by contrast, so I contented myself with a curtsy and a brief "Cheerio, then!" in reply.

There was clearly no way of dislodging the priest, and nowhere else to take Jocasta, as Phaedre was in the dressing room, making a great to-do with a pair of clothes brushes. Still, given the limits of Father LeClerc's English, I supposed absolute privacy was not a requirement.

I touched Jocasta's elbow, therefore, and murmured discreetly that perhaps we might sit down in the window seat, as I had something of importance to discuss with her. She looked surprised, but nodded, and with a bow of excuse toward Father LeClerc—who didn't notice, being occupied with a stubborn bit of gristle—came to sit down beside me.

"Aye, niece?" she said, having adjusted her skirts over her knees. "What is it, then?"

"Well," I said, taking a deep breath, "it's to do with Duncan. You see …"

And she did. Her face grew quite blank with astonishment as I began to talk, but I was conscious of a growing sense of something else in her attitude as she listened—almost … relief, I thought, surprised.

Her lips pursed in absorption, the blind blue eyes fixed in her usual unsettling way, a little over my right shoulder. There was concern in her manner, but no great distress. Her expression was altering, in fact, changing from startlement to the look of one who suddenly finds an explanation for a previously troubling circumstance—and is both relieved and satisfied to have discovered it.

It occurred to me that she and Duncan *had* been living under the same roof for more than a year, and had been engaged to be married for months. Duncan's attitude toward her in public was always respectful—even deferential—and thoughtful, but he made no physical gestures of tenderness or possession toward her. That was not unusual in the least, for the times; though some gentlemen were demonstrative toward their wives, others were not. But perhaps he hadn't made such gestures in private, either, and she had expected them.

She had been beautiful, was handsome still, and quite accustomed to the admiration of men; sightless or not, I had seen her flirt skillfully with Andrew MacNeill, Ninian Bell Hamilton, Richard Caswell—even with Farquard Campbell. Perhaps she had been surprised, and even mildly discomfited, to provoke no apparent show of physical interest from Duncan.

Now she knew why, though, and drew in a deep breath, shaking her head slowly.

"My God, the poor man," she said. "To suffer such a thing, and come to terms with it and then, all at once, to have it be dragged up afresh to worry him. Dear Bride, why cannot the past leave us be in what peace we have made with it?" She looked down, blinking, and I was both surprised and touched to see that her eyes were moist.

A large presence loomed up suddenly beyond her, and I glanced up to see Father LeClerc hovering over us, like a sympathetic thundercloud in his black habit.

"Is there trouble?" he said to me, in French. "Monsieur Duncan, he has suffered some injury?"

Jocasta didn't speak more than *"Comment allez-vous?"* French, but was clearly able to understand the tone of the question, as well as to pick out Duncan's name.

"Don't tell him," she said to me, with some urgency, putting her hand on my knee.

"No, no," I assured her. I looked up at the priest, flicking my fingers in indication that there was nothing to worry about.

"Non, non," I said in turn to him. *"C'est rien."* It's nothing.

He frowned at me, uncertain, then glanced at Jocasta.

"A difficulty of the marriage bed, is it?" he asked bluntly, in French. My face must have betrayed dismay at this, for he gestured discreetly downward, toward the front of his habit. "I heard the word 'scrotum,' Madame, and think you do not speak of animals."

I realized—a good bit too late—that while Father LeClerc spoke no English, he most certainly spoke Latin.

"Merde," I said under my breath, causing Jocasta, who had glanced up sharply at the word "scrotum" herself, to turn back toward me. I patted her hand reassuringly, trying to make up my mind what to do. Father LeClerc was regarding us with curiosity, but also with great kindness in his soft brown eyes.

"I'm afraid he's guessed the general shape of things," I said apologetically to Jocasta. "I think perhaps I had better explain."

Her upper teeth fastened over her lower lip, but she made no demur, and I explained matters in French, as briefly as I could. The priest's eyebrows rose, and he clutched automatically for the wooden rosary that hung from his belt.

"Oui, merde, Madame," he said. *"Quelle tragédie."* He crossed himself briefly with the crucifix, then quite unself-consciously wiped the grease from his beard onto his sleeve, and sat down beside Jocasta.

"Ask her, please, Madame, what is her desire in this matter," he said to me. The tone was polite, but it was an order.

"Her desire?"

"*Oui*. Does she wish still to be married to Monsieur Duncan, even knowing this? For see you, Madame, by the laws of Holy Mother Church, such an impediment to consummation is a bar to true marriage. I ought not to administer the sacrament of matrimony, knowing this. However—" he hesitated, pursing his lips in thought as he glanced at Jocasta. "However, the purpose of such provision is the intent that marriage shall be a fruitful union, if God so wills. In this case, there is no question of God willing such a thing. So, you see …" He raised one shoulder in a Gallic shrug.

I translated this question to Jocasta, who had been squinting toward the priest, as though she could divine his meaning by sheer force of will. Enlightened, her face grew blank, and she sat back a little. Her face had assumed a MacKenzie look; that characteristic calm, still mask that meant a great deal of furious thinking was going on behind it.

I was slightly disturbed, and not only on Duncan's behalf. It hadn't occurred to me that this revelation could prevent the wedding. Jamie wanted his aunt protected, and Duncan provided for. The marriage had seemed the perfect answer; he would be perturbed if things should come unstuck at this late date.

After only a moment, though, Jocasta stirred, letting out her breath in a deep sigh.

"Well, thank Christ I'd the luck to get a Jesuit," she said dryly. "One of them could argue the Pope out of his drawers, let alone deal wi' a small matter of reading the Lord's mind. Aye, tell him I do desire to be married, still."

I conveyed this to Father LeClerc, who frowned slightly, examining Jocasta with great attention. Unaware of this scrutiny, she raised one brow, waiting for his reply.

He cleared his throat, and spoke, his eyes still on her, though he was speaking to me.

"Tell her this, Madame, if you please. While it is true that procreation is the basis of this law of the Church, that is not the only matter to consider. For marriage—true marriage of a man and woman—this … union of the flesh, it is important of itself. The language of the rite—the two shall become one flesh, it says, and there is reason for that. Much happens between two people who share a bed, and joy in each other. That is not all a marriage is, but it is something, truly."

He spoke with great seriousness, and I must have looked surprised, for he smiled slightly, now looking directly at me.

"I have not always been a priest, Madame," he said. "I was married once. I know what that is, as I know what it is to put aside forever that … fleshly … part of life.” The wooden beads of his rosary clicked softly together as he shifted.

I nodded, took a deep breath, and translated this directly as he had said it. Jocasta listened, but took no time for thought this time; her mind was made up.

“Tell him I thank him for his advice,” she said, with only the slightest edge in her voice. “I too have been married before—more than once. And with his help, I shall be married once again. Today.”

I translated, but he had already taken her meaning from her upright posture and the tone of her voice. He sat for a moment, rubbing his beads between his fingers, then nodded.

“Oui, Madame,” he said. He reached over and squeezed her hand in gentle encouragement. “Tally-ho, Madame!”

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IF IT QUACKS …

Well, that was one down, I thought, mounting the stairs to the attic. Next on the agenda of pressing affairs, the slave Betty. Had she really been drugged? It had been more than two hours since Jamie had discovered her in the kitchen garden, but I thought I might still be able to discern symptoms, if she had been as badly affected as he had described her. I heard the muffled chime of the grandfather clock far below. One, two, three. An hour left before the wedding—though it could easily be postponed a bit, if Betty required more attention than I expected.

Given the undesirable position of Catholics in the colony, Jocasta would not offend her guests—mostly Protestants of one stripe or another—by obliging them to witness the Popish ceremony itself. The marriage would be performed discreetly, in her boudoir, and then the newlywed couple would descend the stairs arm-in-arm, to celebrate with their friends, all of whom could then diplomatically pretend that Father LeClerc was merely an eccentrically dressed wedding guest.

As I neared the attic, I was surprised to hear a murmur of voices above. The door to the female slaves' dormitory stood ajar; I pushed it open, to discover Ulysses standing at the head of one narrow bed, arms folded, looking like an avenging angel carved in ebony. Obviously, he considered this unfortunate occurrence to be a grave dereliction of duty on Betty's part. A small, dapper man in a frock coat and a large wig stooped by her side, some small object in his hand.

Before I could speak, he pressed this against the maid's limp arm. There was a small, sharp *click!* and he removed the object, leaving a rectangle of welling blood, a rich dark red against the slave's brown skin. The drops bloomed, merged, and began to trickle down her arm and into a bleeding bowl at her elbow.

"A scarificator," the little man explained to Ulysses, with some pride, displaying his object. "A great improvement over such crudities as lancets and fleams. Got it from Philadelphia!"

The butler bent his head courteously, either in acceptance of the invitation to examine the instrument, or acknowledgment of its distinguished provenance.

"I am sure Mistress Cameron is most obliged for your kind condescension, Dr. Fentiman," he murmured.

Fentiman. So, this was the medical establishment of Cross Creek. I cleared my throat and Ulysses lifted his head, eyes alert.

"Mistress Fraser," he said, with a small bow. "Dr. Fentiman has just been—"

"Mistress Fraser?" Doctor Fentiman had swung round, and was eyeing me with the same sort of suspicious interest with which I was viewing him. Evidently he'd been hearing things, too. Manners triumphed, though, and he made me a leg, one hand to the bosom of his satin waistcoat.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said, wobbling slightly as he came upright again. I smelled gin on his breath, and saw it in the blossoms of burst blood vessels in his nose and cheeks.

"Enchanted, I'm sure," I said, giving him my hand to kiss. He looked at first surprised, but then bent over it with a deep flourish. I looked over his powdered head, trying to make out as much as I could in the dim light of the attic.

Betty might as well have been dead for a week, judging from the ashy cast of her skin, but such light as there was in the attic came through thick oiled paper nailed across the tiny gables. Ulysses himself looked gray, like charcoal frosted with ash.

The blood from the slave's arm had already begun to clot; that was good—though I shuddered to think how many people Fentiman might have used his nasty little implement on since acquiring it. His case was open on the floor beside the bed, and I saw no indication that he thought of cleaning his instruments between usages.

"Your kindness does you great credit, Mrs. Fraser," the doctor pronounced, straightening up, but keeping hold of my hand—to steady himself, I thought. "There is no need of your troubling yourself, however. Mrs. Cameron is an old and valued acquaintance; I am quite content to attend her slave." He smiled benignly, blinking in an attempt to bring me into focus.

I could hear the maid's breathing, deep and stertorous, but quite regular. I itched to get my hands on her pulse. I inhaled deeply, as unobtrusively as possible. Above the pungent scent of Dr. Fentiman's wig, which had evidently been treated with nettle powder and hyssop against lice, and a strong fog of ancient sweat and tobacco from the doctor's body, I caught the sharp copper scent of fresh blood, and the older reek of caked, decayed blood from the inside of his case. No, Fentiman didn't clean his blades.

Beyond that, I could easily smell the alcoholic miasma that Jamie and Brianna had described, but I couldn't tell how much of it came from Betty, and how much from Fentiman. If there was any hint of laudanum in the mix, I would have to get closer to detect it, and do it fast, before the volatile aromatic oils could completely evanesce.

"How exceedingly kind of you, Doctor," I said, smiling insincerely. "I'm sure my husband's aunt is most grateful for your efforts. But surely a gentleman such as yourself—I mean, you must have many more important demands upon your attention. I'm sure that Ulysses and myself can see to the woman's nursing; you'll surely be missed by your companions." Especially those eager to win a few pounds off you at cards, I thought. They'll want a chance before you sober up!

Rather to my surprise, the doctor did not at once succumb to the flattery of this speech. Releasing my hand, he smiled at me with an insincerity equal to my own.

"Oh, no, not at all, my dear. I assure you, no nursing is required here. It is no more than a simple case of overindulgence, after all. I have administered a strong emetic; as soon as it shall have its effect, the woman may safely be left. Do return to your pleasures, my dear lady; there is no need for you to risk soiling such a lovely gown, no need at all."

Before I could remonstrate, there came a heavy gagging noise from the bed, and Doctor Fentiman turned at once, snatching up the chamber pot from beneath the bed.

In spite of his own impairment, he was commendably attentive to the patient. I would myself have hesitated to administer an emetic to a comatose patient, but I had to admit that it wasn't an unreasonable thing to do in a case of suspected poisoning, even if the poison was something as commonly accepted as alcohol—and if Dr. Fentiman had perhaps detected the same thing Jamie had …

The slave had eaten heavily; no surprise, with so much food available for the festivities. That in itself might have saved her life, I thought, slowing the absorption of alcohol—and anything else—into her bloodstream. The vomitus reeked of mingled rum and brandy, but I did think I smelled the ghost of opium as well, faint and sickly sweet, among the other odors.

"What sort of emetic did you use?" I asked, bending over the woman and thumbing open one eye. The iris stared upward, brown and glassy as an agate marble, the pupil shrunk to a pinpoint. Ha, definitely opium.

"Mrs. Fraser!" Dr. Fentiman glared at me in irritation, his wig fallen half askew over one ear. "Do you go, please, and cease interfering! I am greatly occupied, and have no time to indulge your fancies. You, sir—remove her!" He waved a hand at Ulysses and turned back to the bed, shoving his wig into place as he did so.

"Why, you little—" I choked off the intended epithet, seeing Ulysses take an uncertain step toward me. He clearly hesitated to remove me bodily, but it was just as clear that he would obey the Doctor's orders in preference to mine.

Trembling with fury, I swept around and left the room.

Jamie was waiting for me at the foot of the stair. Seeing my face as I descended, he took my arm at once and led me out into the yard.

"That—that—" Words failed me.

"Officious worm?" he supplied helpfully. "Unsonsie sharg?"

"Yes! Did you hear him?! The gall of him, that jumped-up butcher, that bloody little … squirt! No time to indulge my fancies! How dare he?"

Jamie made a guttural noise, indicating sympathetic outrage.

"Shall I go up and knivvle him?" he inquired, hand on his dirk. "I could gut him for ye—or just beat his face in, if ye'd rather."

Attractive as this prospect sounded, I was forced to decline.

"Well … no," I said, bringing my choler under control with some difficulty. "No, I don't think you'd better do that."

The echo of our similar conversation regarding Phillip Wylie struck me. It struck Jamie, too; I saw one corner of his long mouth curl with wry humor.

"Damn," I said ruefully.

"Aye," he agreed, reluctantly taking his hand off his dirk. "It doesna look as though I shall be allowed to spill anyone's blood today, does it?"

"You want to, do you?"

"Verra much," he said, dryly. "So do you, Sassenach, from the looks of it."

I couldn't argue with that; I should have liked nothing better than to disembowel Dr. Fentiman with a blunt spoon. Instead, I rubbed a hand over my face, and took a deep breath, bringing my feelings back into some semblance of order.

"Is he likely to kill the woman?" Jamie asked, jerking his chin back toward the house.

"Not immediately." Bleeding and purging were highly objectionable and possibly dangerous, but not likely to be instantly fatal. "Oh—you were probably right about the laudanum."

Jamie nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

"Well, then. The important thing is to speak wi' Betty, once she's in a condition to make sense. Ye dinna think Fentiman's the sort to stand watch over a sick slave's bed?"

Now it was my turn to think, but finally I shook my head.

"No. He *was* doing his best for her," I admitted reluctantly. "But so far as I could tell, she's in no great danger. She should be watched, but only in case she should vomit and choke in her sleep, and I doubt he'd hang about to do that, even if he thinks of it."

"Well, then." He stood in thought for a moment, the breeze lifting strands of red hair from the crown of his head. "I've sent Brianna and her man to poke about and see whether any of the guests is snoring in a corner. I'll go and do the same for the slaves. Can ye maybe steal up to the attic when Fentiman's gone, and talk to Betty as soon as she wakes?"

"I imagine so." I would have gone up in any case, if only to assure myself of Betty's welfare. "Don't take too long, though; they're almost ready for the wedding."

We stood for a moment, looking at each other.

"Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach," he said softly, and tucked a wisp of hair behind my ear. "The doctor's a wee fool; dinna mind him."

I touched his arm, thankful for his comfort and wishing to offer him the same solace for bruised feelings.

"I am sorry about Phillip Wylie," I said. I realized at once that no matter what my intentions, the effect of this reminder had not been soothing. The soft curve of his mouth tightened, and he moved back, his shoulders stiffening.

"Dinna fash yourself about him, either, Sassenach," he said. His voice was still soft, but there was nothing even slightly reassuring in it. "I shall settle wi' Mr. Wylie, by and by."

"But—" I broke off, helpless. Evidently there was nothing I could say or do that would make matters right again. If Jamie felt his honor offended—and he plainly did, regardless of what I said—then Wylie would pay for it, and that was all about it.

"You are the most pigheaded man I have ever met," I said crossly.

"Thank you," he said, with a small bow.

"That was not a compliment!"

"Aye, it was." And with another bow, he turned on his heel and strode off on his errand.

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QUICKSILVER

To Jamie's relief, the wedding went off with no further difficulties. The ceremony—conducted in French—took place in Jocasta's small sitting room upstairs, attended only by the bridal pair, the priest, himself and Claire as witnesses, and Brianna and her young man. Jemmy had been present, too, but scarcely counted, as he had slept through the service.

Duncan had been pale, but composed, and Jamie's aunt had spoken her vows in a firm voice, with no evidence of hesitation. Brianna, recently wed herself and sentimental in consequence, had looked on with misty approbation, squeezing her lad's arm tight, and Roger Mac looking down at her tender-eyed. Even knowing what he did regarding the nature of this particular marriage, Jamie had felt moved himself by the sacrament, and had lifted Claire's fingers to his lips, brushing a brief kiss across them as the fat little priest intoned the blessing.

Then, the formalities concluded and the wedding contracts signed, they had all come down to join the guests at a lavish wedding supper, under the light of torches that lined the terrace, their long flames streaming over tables that groaned with the abundance of River Run.

He took a glass of wine from one of the tables, and leaned back against the low terrace wall, feeling the tension of the day drain away down his spine. One down, then.

The maid Betty was still out like a brained ox, but safe enough for the present. No one else had been found poisoned, so it was likely she'd taken the stuff herself. Auld Ninian and Barlow were both nearly as legless as the maid, and no threat to each other or anyone else. And whatever Husband and his Regulators were up to, they were doing it at a safe distance. Jamie felt pleasantly light, relieved of responsibility, and ready to turn his mind to recreation.

He raised his glass in automatic salute to Caswell and Hunter, who wandered by, heads together in earnest discourse. He had no wish for political conversation, though; he got up and turned aside, making his way through the crowds near the refreshment tables.

What he really wanted was his wife. Early as it was, the sky was already dark, and a sense of reckless festivity was spreading over the house and terrace as the torches flamed high. The air was cold, and with good wine pulsing through his blood, his hands recalled the warm touch of her under her skirt in the grove, soft and succulent as a split peach in his palm, sun-ripe and juicy.

He wanted her badly.

There. At the end of the terrace, torchlight shining on the waves of her hair, where it swooped up under that ridiculous bit of lace. His fingers twitched; once he got her alone, he'd take out her pins, one by one, and pile up her hair on her head with his hands, for the pleasure of letting it fall again, loose down her back.

She was laughing at something Lloyd Stanhope had said, a glass in her hand. Her face was slightly flushed with wine and the sight of it gave him a pleasurable itch of anticipation.

Bedding her could be anything from tenderness to riot, but to take her when she was a bit the worse for drink was always a particular delight.

Intoxicated, she took less care for him than usual; abandoned and oblivious to all but her own pleasure, she would rake him, bite him—and beg him to serve her so, as well. He loved the feeling of power in it, the tantalizing choice between joining her at once in animal lust, or of holding himself—for a time—in check, so as to drive her at his whim.

He sipped his own wine, savoring the rare pleasure of a decent vintage, and watched her covertly. She was the center of a small knot of gentlemen, with whom she seemed to be enjoying a clash of wits. A glass or two loosened her tongue and limbered her mind, as it did his. A few glasses more, and her glow would turn to a molten heat. It was early yet, and the real feasting not yet started.

He caught her eye briefly on him, and smiled. He held the goblet by its bowl and his fingers curved round the smooth glass as though it were her breast. She saw, and understood. She lowered her lashes in coquetry to him, and turned back to her conversation, color heightened.

The delightful paradox of having her in drink was that, having abandoned consciousness of him as anything save the agent of her own sensation, she would also cease to guard herself in any way, and thus lay entirely open to him. He might tease and caress, or churn her like butter, leading her through frenzy to gasping limpness beneath him, lying at his mercy.

She was using her fan to good effect, opening her eyes wide over the edge of it, in feigned shock at something that sodomite Forbes had said. He ran the tip of his tongue thoughtfully within the tender margin of his lower lip, tasting sweet silver blood in memory. Mercy? No, he would have none.

That decision made, he was turning his mind to the more practical problem of finding a spot sufficiently secluded to carry out this engaging agenda, but was interrupted by the advent of George Lyon, looking sleek and full of himself. He had been introduced, but knew little of the man.

“Mr. Fraser. A word with you, sir?”

“Your servant, sir.”

He turned aside for a moment to set down his glass, a slight shift of his weight enough to effect discreet adjustment of his plaid, glad that he wasn’t wearing tight satin breeks like that fop, Wylie. Indecent, he thought them, and grossly uncomfortable, forbye. Why, a man would be risking slow emasculation in female company, if he were not a natural eunuch—and Wylie clearly wasn’t that, for all his powder and patches. A belted plaid, though, could hide a multitude of sins—or at the least, a dirk and pistol—let alone a random cockstand.

“Shall we walk a bit, Mr. Lyon?” he suggested, turning back. If the man had such private business as his manner implied, they had best not stand here, where they might be interrupted at any moment by one of the wedding guests.

They strolled slowly to the end of the terrace, exchanging commonplaces with each other, and pleasantries with passersby, until they had gained the freedom of the yard, where they hesitated for a moment.

"The paddock, perhaps?" Not waiting for Lyon's nod of assent, Jamie turned toward the distant stable yard. He wanted to see the Friesians again, in any case.

"I have heard much of you, Mr. Fraser," Lyon began pleasantly, as they ambled toward the tall clock tower of the stable block.

"Have you, sir? Well, and I trust not a great deal of it was to my discredit, then." He had heard a bit about Lyon; a dealer in what anyone would buy or sell—and maybe not just that bit too scrupulous regarding the provenance of his goods. Rumor had it that he dealt in things less tangible than iron and paper on occasion, too, but that was only rumor.

Lyon laughed, showing teeth that were even enough, but badly stained with tobacco.

"Indeed not, Mr. Fraser. Bar the slight impediment of your familial connections—which can scarcely be held to be your fault, though folk *will* make assumptions—I have heard none but the most glowing encomiums, both of your character and your accomplishments."

A Dhia, Jamie thought, blackmail and butter, all in the first sentence. Was it only that North Carolina was a backwater, and not worth the time of a more competent intriguer? He smiled politely, with a murmur of modest dismissal, and waited to see what the blockheid wanted.

Not so much, at least to start. The strength of Fraser's militia regiment, and the names of the men. That was interesting, he thought. Lyon was not the Governor's man, then, or he would have such information to hand. Who was behind him, if anyone? Not the Regulation surely; the only one of them with a spare shilling to his name was Ninian Bell Hamilton, and if auld Ninian had wanted to know a thing, he would have come and asked himself. One of the rich planters from the coast, then? Most aristocrats had an interest in the colony that went no further than their pockets.

Which led to the logical conclusion that whoever Lyon's intended market was thought there'd be something either to gain or to lose from the potential disaffections in the colony. Who might that be?

"Chisholm, McGillivray, Lindsay …" Lyon was saying reflectively. "So the majority of your men are Scottish Highlanders. The sons of earlier settlers, are they, or perhaps retired soldiers, like yourself, sir?"

"Oh, I should doubt that a soldier is ever truly retired, sir," Jamie said, stooping to let one of the stable dogs smell his knuckles. "Once a man has lived under arms, I suspect he is marked for life. In fact I have heard it remarked that old soldiers never die; they just fade away."

Lyon laughed immoderately at that, declaring it a fine epigram, was it his own? Without stopping to hear the answer, he went on, clearly paddling into well-charted waters.

"I am pleased to hear such a sentiment expressed, Mr. Fraser. His Majesty has always relied upon the stoutness of the Highlanders, and their abilities as fighting men. Did you or your neighbors perhaps serve with your cousin's regiment? The Seventy-eighth Frasers acquitted themselves with great distinction during the recent conflict; I daresay the art of warfare runs in the blood, eh?"

That was a bald enough swipe. Young Simon Fraser was not in fact his cousin, but his half-uncle, son of his grandfather. It was as expiation of the old man's treason and in an effort to retrieve the family fortunes and estates that Young Simon had raised two regiments for the Seven Years' War—what Brianna persisted in calling the French and Indian Wars, as though Britain had had nothing to do with it.

Lyon was asking now whether Jamie had also sought to establish his credentials as a loyal soldier of the Crown, by taking commission with one of the Highland regiments? He could scarcely believe the flat-footedness of the man.

"Ah, no. I regret that I was unable to serve in such a capacity," Jamie said. "An indisposition from an earlier campaign, you understand?" The minor indisposition of having been a prisoner of the Crown for several years after the Rising, though he did not mention that. If Lyon didn't know it already, there was no sense in telling him.

They had reached the paddock by now, and leaned comfortably upon the split-rail fence. The horses had not yet been put away for the night; the big black creatures moved like shadows, their coats glossy in the torchlight.

"What strange horses, are they not?" He interrupted Lyon's disquisition on the evils of factionalism, watching them move in fascination.

It wasn't just the enormously long, silky manes, rippling like water as they tossed their heads, nor yet the coal-black coats nor the springy arch of the neck, thicker and more muscular than Jocasta's thoroughbreds. Their bodies were thick as well, broad through chest, withers, and barrel so that each one seemed almost blocky—and yet they moved as gracefully as any horse he had ever seen, adroit and light-footed, with a sense of playfulness and intelligence.

"Yes, it is a very old breed," Lyon said, putting aside his inquisitiveness for the moment in order to watch. "I've seen them before—in Holland."

"Holland. Ye will have traveled there a great deal?"

"Not so much. I was there some years ago, though, and chanced to meet a kinsman of yours. A wine merchant named Jared Fraser?"

Jamie felt a jolt of surprise, succeeded by a warm sense of pleasure at the mention of his cousin.

"Did ye indeed? Aye, Jared is my father's cousin. I trust ye found him well."

"Very well indeed." Lyon moved fractionally closer, settling himself on the fence, and Jamie realized that they had now reached the point of the man's business, whatever that might be. He drained the rest of the wine in his glass and set it down, prepared to listen.

"I understand that a … talent for liquor runs in the family as well, Mr. Fraser."

He laughed, though he felt no great humor.

"A taste, perhaps, sir. I couldna say, as to talent."

"Couldn't you? Ah, well. I am sure you are too modest, Mr. Fraser. The quality of your whisky is well known."

"Ye flatter me, sir." He knew what was coming now, and settled himself to pretend attention. It wouldn't be the first time someone had suggested a partnership; he to provide the whisky, they to manage the distribution of it to Cross Creek, to Wilmington, even as far as Charleston. Lyon, it seemed, had grander schemes in mind.

The best aged stuff would go by boat up the coast to Boston and Philadelphia, he suggested. The raw whisky, though, could go across the Treaty Line, there to be delivered to the Cherokee villages, in return for hides and furs. He had partners, who would provide …

Jamie listened in growing disapproval, then cut Lyon off abruptly.

"Aye. I thank ye for your interest, sir, but I fear I havena anything like sufficient product for what ye suggest. I make whisky only for my family's use, and a few barrels beyond that, now and then, for local trade. No more."

Lyon grunted amiably.

"I am sure you could increase your production, Mr. Fraser, given your knowledge and skill. If it were to be a matter of the materials … some arrangement could be made, I am sure … I can speak with the gentlemen who would be our partners in the enterprise, and—"

"No, sir. I fear not. If ye will excuse me …?" He bowed abruptly, turned on his heel, and headed back toward the terrace, leaving Lyon in the dark.

He must ask Farquard Campbell about Lyon. The man would bear watching. It was not that Jamie had any great objection to smuggling. He did, however, have a great objection to being caught at it, and could think of few things more dangerous than a large-scale operation of the sort Lyon was suggesting, where he himself would be involved up to the neck, but have no control over the more dangerous parts of the process.

Aye, the thought of the money was attractive, but not so much as to blind him to the risks. If he were to engage in such a trade, he would do it himself, perhaps with the aid of Fergus or Roger Mac—maybe old Arch Bug and Joe Wemyss—but no one else. A great deal safer to keep it small, keep it private … though since Lyon had suggested the notion, perhaps it was worth a bit of thought. Fergus was no farmer, that was sure; something must be found for him to do, and the Frenchman was well acquainted with the risky business, as they called it, from their time in Edinburgh.…

He strolled back to the terrace, pondering, but the sight of his wife erased all thought of whisky from his mind.

Claire had left Stanhope and his cronies, and stood by the buffet table, looking over the delicacies on display with a faint frown upon her broad clear brow, as though puzzled by such surfeit.

He saw Gerald Forbes's eyes rest on her, alight with speculation, and he moved at once by reflex, interposing himself neatly between his wife and the lawyer. He felt the man's eyes slap against his back, and smiled grimly to himself. *Mine, corbie*, he thought to himself.

"Can ye not decide where to begin, Sassenach?" He reached down and took the empty wineglass from her hand, taking advantage of the movement to come close against her back, feeling the warmth of her through his clothes.

She laughed, and swayed back against him, leaning on his arm. She smelled faintly of rice powder and warm skin, with the scent of rose hips in her hair.

"I'm not even terribly hungry. I was just counting the jellies and preserves. There are thirty-seven different ones—unless I've missed my count."

He spared a glance for the table, which did indeed hold a bewildering array of silver dishes, porcelain bowls, and wooden platters, groaning with more food than would feed a Highland village for a month. He wasn't hungry, either, though. At least not for puddings and savories.

"Well, Ulysses will have seen to that; he wouldna have my aunt's hospitality put to shame."

"No fear of that," she assured him. "Did you see the barbecue pit out back? There are no fewer than three whole oxen roasting on spits out there, and at least a dozen pigs. I didn't even try to count the chickens and ducks. Do you think it's just hospitality, or is your aunt meaning to make a show of what a good job Duncan's done—

showing off how profitable River Run is under his management, I mean?”

“I suppose she might,” he said, though privately he thought it unlikely that Jocasta’s motives were either so thoughtful or so generous in nature. He considered that the lavishness of the present celebration was much more likely owing to her desire to wipe Farquard Campbell’s eye, overshadowing the fete he had held at Green River in December, to celebrate his most recent marriage.

And speaking of marriage …

“Here, Sassenach.” He deposited her empty glass on a passing tray borne by a servant, and took a full one in return, which he set in her hand.

“Oh, I’m not—” she began, but he forestalled her, taking another glass from the proffered tray and lifting it to her in salute. Her cheeks flushed deeper, and her eyes glowed amber.

“To beauty,” he said softly, smiling.

I felt pleasantly liquid inside, as though belly and limbs were filled with quicksilver. It wasn’t all to do with the wine, though that was very good. More the release of tension, after all the worries and conflicts of the day.

It had been a quiet, tender wedding, and while the evening’s celebration was likely to be noisy in the extreme—I had heard a number of the younger men plotting vulgar hilarities for the later festivities—I needn’t worry about any of that. My own intent had been to enjoy the delightful supper that had been laid on, perhaps take a glass or two more of the excellent wine … and then find Jamie and go to investigate the romantic potential of the stone bench beneath the willows.

Jamie had appeared a trifle prematurely in the program, insofar as I had not yet eaten anything, but I had no objection to rearranging my priorities. There would be plenty of leftovers, after all.

The torchlight burnished him, making hair and brows and skin glow like copper. The evening breeze had come up, flapping tablecloths and pulling the torch flames into fiery tongues, and it nipped strands of hair from his queue and lashed them across his face. He raised his glass, smiling at me across the rim.

"To beauty," he said softly, then drank, not taking his eyes off me.

The quicksilver shifted, quivering through my hips and down the backs of my legs.

"To … ah … privacy," I replied, with a slight lift of my own glass. Feeling pleasantly reckless, I reached slowly up, and deliberately pulled the ornamented lace from my hair. Half-unpinned, curls fell loose down my back, and I heard someone draw in his breath in shock behind me.

In front of me, Jamie's face went suddenly blank, his eyes fixed on me like a hawk's on a rabbit. I lifted my glass, holding his eyes with mine, and drank, swallowing slowly as I drained it. The scent of black grapes perfumed the inside of my head and the heat of the wine warmed my face, my throat, my breasts, my skin. Jamie moved abruptly to take the empty glass from my hand, his fingers cold and hard on mine.

And then a voice spoke from the candlelit French doors behind him.

"Mr. Fraser."

We both started, and the glass fell between us, exploding into shards on the flags of the terrace. Jamie whirled round, his left hand going by reflex to the hilt of his dirk. Then it relaxed, as he saw the silhouetted figure, and he stepped back, mouth twisting in a wry grimace.

Phillip Wylie stepped out into the torchlight. His color was high enough to show through the powder, burning in hectic spots across his cheekbones.

"My friend Stanhope has proposed a table or two of whist this evening," he said. "Will you not join us, Mr. Fraser?"

Jamie gave him a long, cool look, and I saw the damaged fingers of his right hand twitch, very slightly. The pulse was throbbing at the side of his neck, but his voice was calm.

"At whist?"

"Yes." Wylie gave a thin smile, sedulously avoiding looking at me. "I hear you are a good hand at the cards, sir." He pursed his lips. "Though of course, we do play for rather high stakes. Perhaps you do not feel that you—"

"I shall be delighted," Jamie said, in a tone of voice that made it perfectly clear that the only thing that would truly have delighted him was the prospect of cramming Phillip Wylie's teeth down his throat.

The teeth in question gleamed briefly.

"Ah. Splendid. I shall … look forward to the occasion."

"Your servant, sir." Jamie bowed abruptly, then spun on his heel, seized my elbow, and marched off down the terrace, me decorously in tow.

I marched along, keeping step and keeping silence, until we were safely out of earshot. The quicksilver had shot up out of my lower regions, and was rolling nervously up and down my spine, making me feel dangerously unstable.

"Are you quite out of your mind?" I inquired politely. Receiving nothing but a brief snort in reply, I dug in my heels and pulled on his arm to make him stop.

"That was not a rhetorical question," I said, rather more loudly. "High-stakes whist?"

Jamie was indeed an excellent card player. He also knew most of the possible ways of cheating at cards. However, whist was difficult if not impossible to cheat at, and Phillip Wylie also had the reputation of an excellent player—as did Stanhope. Beyond this, there remained the fact that Jamie didn't happen to possess *any* stakes, let alone high ones.

"Ye expect me to allow yon popinjay to trample my honor, and then insult me to my face?" He swung round to face me, glaring.

"I'm sure he didn't mean—" I began, but broke off. It was quite apparent that if Wylie had not intended outright insult, he had meant it as a challenge—and to a Scot, the two were likely indistinguishable.

"But you don't *have* to do it!"

I would have had a much greater effect had I been arguing with the brick wall of the kitchen garden.

“I do,” he said stiffly. “I have my pride.”

I rubbed a hand over my face in exasperation.

“Yes, and Phillip Wylie plainly knows it! Heard the one about pride going before a fall, have you?”

“I havena the slightest intention of falling,” he assured me. “Will ye give me your gold ring?”

My mouth fell open in shock.

“Will I … my ring?” My fingers went involuntarily to my left hand, and the smooth gold of Frank’s wedding band.

He was watching me intently, eyes steady on mine. The torches along the terrace had been lit; the dancing light caught him from the side, throwing the stubborn set of his bones into sharp relief, lighting one eye with burning blue.

“I shall need a stake,” he said quietly.

“Bloody hell.” I swung away from him, and stood staring off the edge of the terrace. The torches on the lawn had been lit, too, and Perseus’s white marble buttocks glimmered through the dark.

“I willna lose it,” Jamie said behind me. His hand rested on my shoulder, heavy through my shawl. “Or if I do—I shall redeem it. I know ye … value it.”

I twitched my shoulder out from under his hand, and moved a few steps away. My heart was pounding, and my face felt at once clammy and hot, as though I were about to faint.

He didn’t speak, or touch me; only stood there, waiting.

“The gold one,” I said at last, flatly. “Not the silver?” Not *his* ring; not *his* mark of ownership.

“The gold is worth more,” he said, and then, after the briefest hesitation, added, “in terms of money.”

“I know that.” I turned round to face him. The torch flames fluttered in the wind and cast a moving light across his features that made them hard to read.

“I meant—hadn’t you better take both of them?” My hands were cold and slippery with sweat; the gold ring came off easily; the silver was tighter, but I twisted it past my knuckle. I took his hand and dropped the two rings clinking into it.

Then I turned and walked away.

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THE LISTS OF VENUS

Roger made his way from the drawing room out onto the terrace, threading through the gathering crowd that clustered thick as lice round the supper tables. He was hot and sweating and the night air struck coldly refreshing on his face. He paused in the shadows at the end of the terrace, where he could unbutton his waistcoat inconspicuously and flap his shirtfront a bit, letting the cold air inside.

The pine torches that lined the edge of the terrace and the brick paths were flickering in the wind, casting wildly shifting shadows over the mass of celebrants, from which limbs and faces emerged and disappeared in bewildering succession. Fire gleamed off silver and crystal, gold lace and shoe-buckles, earrings and coat buttons. From a distance, it looked as though the assembly were lit by fireflies, winking in and out among the dark mass of rustling fabric. Brianna was not wearing anything reflective, he thought, but she should be easy enough to spot, nonetheless, on account of her height.

He had caught no more than tantalizing glimpses of her during the day; she had been dancing attendance on her aunt, or caring for Jemmy, or engaged in conversation with the—apparently—dozens of people she knew from her earlier sojourn at River Run. He didn't begrudge her the opportunity in the least; there was precious little society to be had on Fraser's Ridge, and he was pleased to see her enjoying herself.

He'd been having a great time himself; his throat had an agreeably raspy feeling now, from the exertion of prolonged singing, and he had learned three new songs from Seamus Hanlon, safely committed to memory. He'd bowed out at last, and left the little orchestra playing in the drawing room, throbbing away in a steamy haze of effort, sweat, and alcohol.

There she was; he caught the glint of her hair as she came out of the parlor doors, turning back to say something to the woman behind her.

She caught sight of him as she turned back, and her face lit up, touching off a complementary warm glow beneath his rebuttoned waistcoat.

"There you are! I've barely seen you all day. Heard you now and then, though," she added, with a nod toward the open drawing-room doors.

"Oh, aye? Sound all right, did it?" he asked casually, shamelessly fishing for compliments. She grinned and tapped his chest with her closed fan, mimicking the gesture of an accomplished coquette—which she wasn't.

"Oh, Mrs. MacKenzie," she said, pitching her voice high and through her nose, "your husband's voice is divinity itself! Were I so fortunate, I am sure I should spend hours just *drrrinking* in the sound of it!"

He laughed, recognizing Miss Martin, old Miss Bledsoe's young and rather plain companion, who had hung about wide-eyed and sighing while he sang ballads in the afternoon.

"You know you're good," she said, dropping back into her own voice. "You don't need me to tell you."

"Maybe not," he admitted. "Doesn't mean I don't like to hear it, though."

"Really? The adulation of the multitudes isn't enough?" She was laughing at him, eyes gone to triangles of amusement.

He didn't know how to answer that, and laughed instead, taking her hand.

"D'ye want to dance?" He cocked his head toward the end of the terrace where the French doors to the drawing room stood open, letting out the cheerful strains of "Duke of Perth," then back toward the tables. "Or to eat?"

"Neither. I want to get away from here for a minute; I can hardly breathe." A drop of sweat ran down her neck, glinting red in the torchlight before she swiped it away.

"Great." He took her hand and drew it through his arm, turning toward the herbaceous border that lay beyond the terrace. "I know just the place."

"Great. Oh—wait. Maybe I do want something to eat." She lifted a hand and stopped a slave boy, coming up to the terrace from the cookhouse with a small covered tray from which an appetizing steam wafted into the air. "What's that, Tommy? Can I have some?"

"You have all you want, Miss Bree." He smiled, whipping the napkin away to display a selection of savories. She inhaled beatifically.

"I want them all," she said, taking the tray, to Tommy's amusement. Roger, seizing the chance, murmured his own request to the slave, who nodded, disappeared, and returned within moments with an open bottle of wine and two goblets. Roger took these, and together they wandered down the path that led from the house to the dock, sharing tidbits of news along with the pigeon pies.

"Did you find any of the guests passed out in the shrubbery?" she asked, her words muffled by a mouthful of mushroom pasty. She swallowed, and became more distinct. "When Da asked you to go and look this afternoon, I mean."

He snorted briefly, selecting a dumpling made of sausage and dried pumpkin.

"Ken the difference between a Scottish wedding and a Scottish funeral, do ye?"

"No, what?"

"The funeral has one less drunk."

She laughed, scattering crumbs, and took a Scotch egg.

"No," he said, steering her skillfully to the right of the dock, and toward the willows. "Ye'll see a few feet sticking out of the bushes now, but this afternoon, they hadn't had the time to get rat-legged yet."

"You have *such* a way with words," she said appreciatively. "I went and talked to the slaves; all present and accounted for, and mostly sober, too. A couple of the women admitted that Betty does tipple at parties, though."

"To say the least, from what your Da said. Stinking, he described her as, and I gather he didn't mean only drunk." Something small and dark leaped out of his path. Frog; he could hear them piping away in the grove.

"Mmm. Mama said she seemed to be okay later on, in spite of Dr. Fentiman insisting on bleeding her." She gave a small shudder, drawing her shawl round her shoulders one-handed. "He gives me the creeps, the Doctor. He looks like a little goblin or something, and he's got the clammiest hands I ever felt. And he smells terrible, speaking of stinking."

"I haven't had the pleasure yet," Roger said, amused. "Come on." He pushed aside the hanging veil of willow branches, alert lest he disturb some courting couple that had beaten them to the stone bench, but all was well. Everyone was up at the house, dancing, eating, drinking, and planning a later serenade of the wedding pair. Better Duncan and Jocasta than us, he thought, rolling his eyes inwardly at some of the things he'd heard suggested. Another time, he might have been interested to see a shivaree, and trace all the roots of it from French and Highland customs—but not bloody now.

It was suddenly quiet under the willows, most of the noise from the house drowned by the rushing of water and the monotonous chirping of frogs. It was also dark as midnight, and Brianna felt carefully for the bench, in order to set down her tray.

Roger shut his eyes hard and counted to thirty; when he opened them, he could at least make out her form, silhouetted against the dim light that filtered through the willows, and the horizontal line of the bench. He set down the glasses and poured out the wine, the neck of the bottle chinking faintly against the goblets as he felt his way.

He put out a hand and ran it down her arm, locating her hand in order to put the full goblet safely into it. He raised his own glass in salute.

“To beauty,” he said, letting the smile show in his voice.

“To privacy,” she said, returning the toast, and drank. “Oh, that’s good,” she said, a moment later, sounding slightly dreamy. “I haven’t had wine in … a year? No, nearly two. Not since before Jemmy was born. In fact, not since …” Her voice stopped abruptly, then resumed, more slowly. “Not since our *first* wedding night. In Wilmington, remember.”

“I remember.” He reached out and cupped a hand round her cheek, tracing the bones of her face softly with his thumb. It was no wonder that she thought of that night now. They had begun it there, under the drooping branches of a huge horse-chestnut tree, that had sheltered them from the noise and light of a nearby tavern. Their present situation was oddly and movingly reminiscent of that dark and private secrecy, the two of them amid the smell of leaves and nearby water—the nearby racket of lust-crazed tree frogs replacing the tavern noises.

That had been a hot night, though, thick and humid enough that flesh melted to flesh. Now it was cold enough that his body yearned for the warmth of hers, and the scent that enclosed them was the spring smell of green leaves and running river, not the musty smell of leaf-litter and mudflats.

“Do you think they’ll sleep together?” Brianna asked. She sounded slightly breathless; perhaps it was the wine.

“Who? Oh, Jocasta, ye mean, and Duncan? Why not? They’ll be married.” He drained his own glass and set it down, the glass chiming faintly on the stone.

“It was a beautiful wedding, wasn’t it?” She didn’t resist as he took the glass from her hand and set it down with his own. “Quiet, but awfully nice.”

“Aye, very nice.” He kissed her, softly, and held her close against him. He could feel the back lacing of her gown, crisscrossed under the thin knitted shawl.

“Mmm. You taste good.”

“Oh, aye, like sausages and wine. So do you.” His hand twitched up the edge of the shawl, getting beneath and fumbling for the end of the lace, somewhere down near the small of her back. She pressed against him, making it easier.

"Will we still want to make love, do you think, when we're as old as they are?" she murmured in his ear.

"I will," he assured her, getting hold of the small bow that secured the lace. "I hope you will, too; I shouldna like to have to do it alone."

She laughed, and took a deep breath, her back swelling suddenly as the tight lacing came loose. There were the stays underneath, too, though, damn it. He used both hands, looking for the inner lacings, and she arched her back helpfully, which made her breasts swell up into sight just below his chin. The sight made him take one hand off her back, to deal with this new and delightful development.

"I haven't got my … I mean, I didn't bring …" She pulled back a little, sounding dubious.

"Ye've taken the seeds today, though?" Away to hell with pizza and loo-paper, he thought; at the moment, he'd trade all prospects of indoor plumbing for a rubber condom.

"Yes." She still sounded doubtful, though, and he gritted his teeth, taking a firmer hold on her, as though she might bolt.

"It's all right," he whispered, nuzzling his way down the side of her neck toward that heartbreaking slope where the muscle of her shoulder joined it. She was smooth beneath his lips, her skin cool in the air, warm and scented beneath the fall of her hair. "We needn't … I mean … I won't … just let me …"

The neckline of her dress was fashionably low with her kerchief pulled off, still lower, with her gown unlaced, and her breast was heavy and soft in his hand. He felt the nipple big and round as a ripe cherry against his palm, and bent on impulse to put his mouth to it.

She stiffened, then relaxed with an odd little sigh, and he felt a warm sweet taste on his tongue, then a strange pulsing and a flooding of the … he swallowed by reflex, shocked. Shocked, and terribly aroused. He hadn't thought; he hadn't meant … but she pulled his head hard against her, holding him.

He went on, emboldened, and pushed her gently backward, easing her down onto the edge of the bench, so that he knelt before her. A sudden thought had come to him, prompted by the stinging memory of that entry in her dreambook.

“Don’t worry,” he whispered to her. “We won’t … risk anything. Let me do this—just for you.”

She hesitated, but let him run his hands under her skirt, up the silken curves of stockinged calf and round, bare thigh, under the flattened curve of her buttocks, cool and bare on the stone, beneath the froth of petticoats. One of Seamus’s songs had described a gentleman’s exploits “in the lists of Venus.” The words drifted through his head with the rushing of the water, and he was determined to acquit himself with honor in those lists.

Maybe she couldn’t describe it, but he meant to make sure she knew it had happened. She shivered between his hands, and he cupped one hand between her thighs.

“Miss Bree?”

Both of them jerked convulsively, Roger snatching his hands away as though burned. He could feel the thunder of blood in his ears—and his balls.

“Yes, what is it? Is that you, Phaedre? What’s wrong—is it Jemmy?”

He was sitting back on his heels, trying to breathe, feeling dizzy. He caught the brief pale gleam of her breasts above him as she stood up and turned toward the voice, tucking her kerchief hastily back in, pulling the shawl up over her unfastened gown.

“Yes, ma’am.” Phaedre’s voice came out from under the willow nearest the house; nothing of the slave showed but the whiteness of her cap, floating dimly in the shadows. “Poor child, he woke up hot and fussin’, wouldn’t take neither mush nor milk, and then he started in to cough, sounded bad enough, Teresa said we best fetch Dr. Fentiman along to him, but I said …”

“Dr. Fentiman!”

Brianna disappeared with a ferocious rustling of willow branches, and he heard the hurrying thump of slippered feet on earth as she ran toward the house, Phaedre in her wake.

Roger got to his feet, and paused for a moment, hand on his fly-buttons. The temptation was strong; it wouldn't take more than a minute—less, probably, in his present condition. But no, Bree might need him to deal with Fentiman. The thought of the Doctor using his gory instruments on Jemmy's soft flesh was enough to send him crashing through the willows in hot pursuit. The lists of Venus would have to wait.

He found Bree and Jemmy in Jocasta's boudoir, the center of a small knot of women, all of whom looked surprised—even mildly scandalized—at his appearance. Disregarding the raised eyebrows and huffing noises, he forged his way through the skirts to Brianna's side.

The little fella did look bad, and Roger felt a clutch of fear in the pit of his stomach. Christ, how could it happen so fast? He'd seen Jem at the wedding only a few hours before, curled up pink and sweet in his makeshift cradle, and before that, being his usual raucously genial self at the party. Now he lay against Brianna's shoulder, flush-cheeked and heavy-eyed, whimpering a little, with a slick of clear mucus dribbling from his nose.

"How is he?" He reached out and touched a flushed cheek gently, with the back of his hand. God, he was hot!

"He's sick," Brianna said tersely. As though in confirmation, Jemmy began to cough, a dreadful noise, loud but half-choked, like a seal choking on its fish. The blood surged into his already flushed face, and his round blue eyes bulged with the effort of drawing breath between the spasms.

"Shit," Roger muttered. "What do we do?"

"Cold water," one of the women standing beside him said, authoritatively. "Put him altogether under a bath of cold water, then make him drink more of it."

"No! Heavens, Mary, you'll kill the child." Another young matron reached out to pat Jemmy's quivering back. "It's the croup; my lot have had it now and again. Sliced garlic, warmed and put to the soles of his feet," she told Brianna. "That works well, sometimes."

"And if it doesn't?" another woman said, skeptical. The first woman's nostrils pinched, and her friend butted in helpfully.

"Johanna Richards lost two babes to the croup. Gone like that!" She snapped her fingers, and Brianna flinched as though the sound were one of her own bones cracking.

"Why are we havering so, and a medico to hand? You, girl, go and fetch Dr. Fentiman! Did I not say so?" One of the women clapped her hands sharply at Phaedre, who stood pressed back against the wall, eyes fixed on Jemmy. Before she could move to obey, though, Brianna's head shot up.

"No! Not him, I won't have him." She glared round at the women, then shot Roger a look of urgent entreaty. "Find Mama for me. Quick!"

He turned and shoved past the women, fear momentarily assuaged by the ability to do something. Where was Claire likely to be? *Help*, he thought, *help me find her, help him be all right*, directing the incoherent prayer toward anyone who might be listening—God, the Reverend, Mrs. Graham, Saint Bride, Claire herself—he wasn't particular.

He thundered down the front stair to the foyer, only to meet Claire hurrying across it toward him. Someone had told her; she gave him one quick look, asked, "Jemmy?" with a lift of her chin, and at his breathless nod, was up the stairs in a flash, leaving a foyer full of people gaping after her.

He caught her up in the hall above and was in time to open the door for her—and to receive an undeserved but much appreciated look of gratitude from Bree.

He stood back out of the way, catching his breath and marveling. The moment Claire stepped into the room, the atmosphere of worry and near-panic changed at once. There was still an air of concern among the women, but they gave way without hesitation, standing back respectfully and murmuring to one another as Claire headed straight for Jemmy and Bree, ignoring everything else.

"Hallo, lovey. What is it, then, are we feeling miserable?" She was murmuring to Jem, turning his head to one side and feeling gently under his flushed chubby jowls and behind his ears. "Poor thing. It's all right, sweetheart, Mummy's here, Grannie's here, everything will be just fine.… How long has he been like this? Has he had anything to drink? Yes, darling, that's right.… Does it hurt him to swallow?"

She alternated between comforting remarks to the baby and questions to Brianna and Phaedre, all delivered in the same tone of calm reassurance as her hands touched here and there, exploring, soothing. Roger felt it working on him, too, and drew a deep breath, feeling the tightness in his own chest ease a bit.

Claire took a sheet of Jocasta's heavy notepaper from the secretary, rolled it into a tube, and used it to listen intently to Jemmy's back and chest as he made more of the choking-seal noises. Roger noticed dimly that her hair had fallen down somehow; she had to brush it out of the way to listen.

"Yes, of course it's croup," she said absently, in answer to a half-questioning diagnosis offered diffidently by one of the bystanders. "But that's only the cough and the difficult breathing. You can have croup by itself, so to speak, or as an early symptom of various other things."

"Such as?" Bree had a death grip on Jemmy, and her face was nearly as white as her knuckles.

"Oh.…" Claire seemed to be listening intently, but not to Bree. More to whatever was happening inside Jemmy, who had quit coughing and was lying exhausted against his mother's shoulder, breathing thickly in steam-engine gasps. "Um … coryza—that's only a common cold. Influenza. Asthma. Diphtheria. But it isn't that," she added hurriedly, looking up and catching a glimpse of Brianna's face.

"You're sure?"

"Yes," Claire replied firmly, straightening up and putting aside her makeshift stethoscope. "It doesn't feel at all like diphtheria to me. Besides, there isn't any of that about, or I'd have heard. And he's still being breast-fed; he'll have immunity—" She stopped speaking abruptly, suddenly aware of the women looking on. She cleared her own throat, bending down again, as though to encourage Jemmy by example. He made a small whimper and coughed again. Roger felt it, like a rock in his chest.

"It isn't serious," Claire announced firmly, straightening. "We must put him in a croup tent, though. Bring him down to the kitchen. Phaedre, will you find me a couple of old quilts, please?"

She moved toward the door, shooing the women before her like a flock of hens.

Obeying an impulse that he didn't stop to question, Roger reached for the baby, and after a instant's hesitation, Brianna let him take him. Jemmy didn't fuss, but hung listless and heavy, the limp slackness a terrible change from his normal India-rubber bounce. The baby's cheek burned through the cloth of Roger's shirt as he carried the little boy downstairs, Bree at his elbow.

The kitchen was in the brick-walled basement of the house, and Roger had a brief vision of Orpheus descending into the underworld, Eurydice close behind him, as they made their way down the dark back stair into the shadowy depths of the kitchen. Instead of a magic lyre, though, he bore a child who burned like coal and coughed as though his lungs would burst. If he didn't look back, he thought, the boy would be all right.

"Perhaps a little cold water wouldn't come amiss." Claire put her hand on Jemmy's forehead, judging his temperature. "Have you got an ear infection, sweetheart?" She blew gently into one of the baby's ears, then the other; he blinked, coughed hoarsely, and swiped a chubby hand across his face, but didn't flinch. The slaves were bustling round in a corner of the kitchen, bringing boiling water, pinning the quilts to a rafter to make the tent at her direction.

Claire took the baby out of Roger's arms to bathe him, and he stood bereft, wanting urgently to do something, anything, until Brianna took his hand and clutched it hard, her nails digging into his palm.

"He'll be all right," she whispered. "He will." He squeezed hard back, wordless.

Then the tent was ready, and Brianna ducked under the hanging quilt, turning to reach back for Jemmy, who was alternately coughing and crying, having not liked the cold water at all. Claire had sent a slave to fetch her medicine box, and now rummaged through it, coming up with a vial filled with a pale yellow oil, and a jar of dirty white crystals.

Before she could do anything with them, though, Joshua, one of the grooms, came thumping down the stairs, half-breathless with his hurry.

"Mrs. Claire, Mrs. Claire!"

Some of the gentlemen had been firing off their pistols in celebration of the happy event, it seemed, and one of them had suffered some kind of mishap, though Josh seemed uncertain as to exactly what had happened.

"He isna bad hurt," the groom assured Claire, in the Aberdonian Scots that came so peculiarly from his black face, "but he is bleedin' quite free, and Dr. Fentiman—well, he's maybe no quite sae steady as he might be the noo. Will ye come, Ma'am?"

"Yes, of course." In the blink of an eye, she had thrust vial and jar into Roger's hands. "I'll have to go. Here. Put some in the hot water; keep him breathing the steam until he stops coughing." Quick and neat, she'd closed up her box and handed it to Josh to carry, heading for the stair before Roger could ask her anything. Then she was gone.

Wisps of steam were escaping through the opening in the tent; seeing that, he paused long enough to shed coat and waistcoat, leaving them in a careless heap on the floor as he bent and ducked into the darkness, vial and jar in hand.

Bree was crouched on a stool, Jemmy on her lap, a big white pudding-basin full of steaming water at her feet. A swath of light from the hearth fell momentarily across her face, and Roger smiled at her, trying to look reassuring, before the quilt dropped back into place.

"Where's Mama? Did she leave?"

"Aye, there was some sort of emergency. It'll be fine, though," he said firmly. "She gave me the stuff to put in the water; said just to keep him in the steam until the coughing stops."

He sat down on the floor beside the basin of water. It was very dim in the tent, but not totally dark. As his eyes adjusted, he could see well enough. Bree still looked worried, but not nearly so frightened as she'd been upstairs. He felt better, too; at least he knew what to be doing, and Claire hadn't seemed too bothered about leaving her grandson; obviously she thought he wasn't going to choke on the spot.

The vial contained pine oil, sharp and reeking of resin. He wasn't sure how much to use, but poured a generous dollop into the water. Then he pried the cork out of the jar, and the pungent scent of camphor rose up like a genie from the bottle. Not really crystals, he saw; lumps of some sort of dried resin, grainy and slightly sticky. He poured some into the palm of his hand, then rubbed them hard between his hands before dropping them into the water, wondering even as he did so at the instinctive familiarity of the gesture.

"Oh, that's it," he said, realizing.

"What's it?"

"This." He waved a hand round the snug sanctuary, rapidly filling with pungent steam. "I remember being in my cot, with a blanket over my head. My mother put this stuff in hot water—smelled just like this. That's why it seemed familiar."

"Oh." The thought seemed to reassure her. "Did you have croup when you were little?"

"I suppose so, though I don't remember it. Just the smell." Steam had quite filled the little tent by now, moist and pungent. He drew a deep breath, pulling in a penetrating lungful, then patted Brianna's leg.

"Don't worry; this'll do the trick," he said.

Jemmy promptly started coughing his guts out with more seal noises, but they seemed less alarming now. Whether it was the darkness, the smell, or simply the homely racket of the renewed kitchen noises outside the tent, things seemed calmer. He heard Bree take in a deep breath, too, and let it out, and felt rather than saw the subtle shift of her body as she relaxed a little, patting Jemmy's back.

They sat quietly for a bit, listening to Jemmy cough, wheeze, gasp, cough, and finally catch his breath, hiccupping slightly. He'd stopped whimpering, seeming soothed by the proximity of his parents.

Roger had dropped the cork to the camphor jar; he patted round on the floor until he found it, then pushed it firmly back in.

"I wonder what your mother's done with her rings?" he said, looking for some easy subject of conversation to break the steam-filled silence.

"Why should she have done anything with them?" Brianna brushed back a lock of hair; she'd had it put up for the evening, but it was slipping out of its pins, clinging damply to her face.

"She wasn't wearing them when she gave me the stuff." He nodded at the camphor jar, set out of harm's way near the wall. He had a clear memory of her hands, the fingers long, white, and bare; they'd struck him, since he'd never seen her hands without the gold and silver rings.

"Are you sure? She never takes them off, except to do something really nasty." She giggled, a nervous, unexpected sound. "The last time I remember was when Jem dropped his bawbee in the chamber pot."

Roger gave a brief snort of amusement. A bawbee was any sort of small object, but that's what they'd taken to calling the iron ring—originally meant for leading cattle by the nose—that Jem liked to chew on. It was his favorite toy, and he didn't like to go to bed without it.

"Ba-ba?" Jem raised his head, eyes half-closed. He was still breathing thickly, but beginning to display an interest in something besides his own discomfort. "Ba-ba!"

"Oops, shouldn't have mentioned it." Bree joggled him gently on her knee, and began to sing softly, half under her breath, to distract him.

"In a can-yon, in a cav-ern, exca-va-ting for a mine … Dwelt a min-er, forty-nin-er, and his daugh-ter, Clementine …"

The dark privacy of the tent reminded Roger of something; he realized that it had something of the same feeling of peaceful enclosure that the bench beneath the willows had had, though the tent was a lot hotter. The linen of his shirt was already limp on his shoulders, and he could feel sweat trickling down his back from under the hair tied at his neck.

"Hey." He nudged Bree's leg. "D'ye maybe want to go up and take off your new dress? It'll be spoilt if ye stay in here for long."

"Oh. Well …" She hesitated, biting her lip. "No, I'll stay, it's okay."

He got up, stooping under the quilts, and gathered Jem up off her lap, hacking and gurgling.

"Go," he said firmly. "You can fetch his b—his you-know-what. And don't worry. Ye can tell it's helping, the steam. He'll be right in no time."

It took a bit more argument, but at last she consented, and Roger sat down on the vacated stool, Jemmy cuddled in the crook of his arm. The pressure of the wooden seat reminded him of a certain amount of residual congestion from the encounter under the willows, and he shifted slightly to ease the discomfort.

"Well, it doesn't do ye any lasting harm," he muttered to Jemmy. "Ask any girl; they'll tell ye."

Jemmy snorted, snuffled, said something unintelligible beginning with "Ba—?" and coughed again, but only briefly. Roger put the back of his hand against the soft round cheek. He *thought* it was cooler. Hard to tell, warm as it was in here. The sweat was running freely down his face, and he wiped it with a sleeve.

"Ba-ba?" asked a froggy little voice against his chest.

"Aye, in a bit. Hush, now."

"Ba-ba. Ba-ba!"

"Shhhh."

"Ba—"

"Light she was, and like a fairy—" He groped for the words to the song.

"BA—"

"AND HER SHOES WERE NUMBER NINE!" Roger abruptly raised the volume, causing startled silence both inside the tent and outside,

in the kitchen. He cleared his throat and lowered his voice back to lullaby level.

"Erm … *Herring boxes without topses … Sandals were for Clementine. Oh, my darling, oh, my darling, oh, my darling Clementine … Thou art lost, and gone for-ev-er, oh, my darling … Clementine."*

The singing seemed to be having an effect. Jemmy's eyelids had dropped to half-mast. He put a thumb in his mouth and began to suck, but plainly couldn't breathe through his clogged nose. Roger gently pulled the thumb away, and held the little fist enclosed in his own. It was wet and sticky, and very small, but felt reassuringly sturdy.

"Fed she duck-lings, by the water, every mor-ning just at nine … Hit her foot a-gainst a splin-ter, fell into the foaming brine."

The eyelids fluttered briefly, then gave up the struggle and closed. Jemmy sighed and went completely limp, the heat coming off his skin in waves. Tiny beads of moisture trembled on each lash—tears, sweat, steam, or all three.

"Ruby lips a-bove the wa-ter, blowing bub-bles soft and fine … Alas for me, I was no swim-mer, so I lost my Clementine. Oh, my darling, oh, my darling …"

He wiped his face again, bent and kissed the soft thatch of damp, silky hair. *Thank you,* he thought with heartfelt sincerity, addressing everyone from God on down the line.

"… Oh, my darling … Clementine."

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STRANGERS IN THE NIGHT

It was very late by the time I made my way to bed after a last check on the welfare of all my patients. DeWayne Buchanan had suffered a slight flesh wound in the upper arm when Ronnie Campbell neglected to raise his pistol high enough while carousing on the riverbank, but was in good spirits after having the wound cleaned and dressed. Having been liberally plied with further spirits by a remorseful Ronnie, he was quite literally feeling no pain at present.

One of Farquard Campbell's slaves, a man named Rastus, had been badly burned on the hand when taking grilled fowl off a skewer; all I could do there was to wrap the hand in clean cloth, set it in a bowl of cold water, and prescribe gin, to be taken internally. I had also treated several young men who were considerably the worse for drink, and sporting miscellaneous contusions, abrasions, and missing teeth as the result of a disagreement over dice. Six cases of indigestion, all treated with peppermint tea, and reporting improvement. Betty was in what looked like a deep but natural sleep, snoring loudly in bed. Jemmy was doing likewise, his fever abated.

Most of the loud revelry had died down by now; only the most die-hard of the card players were still at it, peering red-eyed at their pasteboards through a cloud of tobacco smoke in the small drawing room. I glanced into the other rooms as well, as I made my way across the ground floor to the front stair. A few gentlemen lingered in low-voiced political conversation at one end of the dining room, the table long since cleared and empty brandy glasses forgotten by their elbows. Jamie wasn't one of them.

A heavy-eyed slave in livery bowed as I poked my head in, murmuring to ask whether I wanted food or drink. I hadn't eaten anything since supper, but I waved him away, too tired to think of food.

I paused at the first landing and glanced down the hall toward Jocasta's suite of rooms, but all was quiet there, the charivari and horseplay over. There was a large dent in the linenfold paneling, where a heavy body had struck, and glancing up, I could see several burned spots in the ceiling, where shots had been fired into it.

The butler Ulysses sat guard on a stool by the door, still dressed in wig and formal livery, head nodding over folded arms. A candle guttered and spat in the sconce above him. By its wavering light, I could see that his eyes were closed, but he wore a deep frown; he hunched in his sleep, and his lips moved briefly, as though he dreamed of evil things. I thought to waken him, but even as I moved toward him, the dream passed. He stretched, half-rousing, then fell asleep again, his face relaxing into calm. An instant later, the candle flickered out.

I listened, but heard no sound in the darkness save Ulysses's heavy breathing. Whether Duncan and Jocasta murmured understandings to each other behind the curtains of their bed, or lay silent, side by side and eternally separate, no one would ever know. I sent them a mental wish for happiness, and dragged myself upward, knees and back aching, wishing for my own bed—and my own husband's understanding.

Through an open casement on the second-floor landing, I heard distant whoops, laughter, and the occasional crack of recreational gunfire, borne on the night air. The younger, wilder gentlemen—and a few old enough to know better—had gone down to the river landing in company with a dozen bottles of whisky and brandy to shoot frogs, or so I was informed.

The ladies, though, were all asleep. The second floor was quiet save for the buzz of muffled snoring. By contrast to the chilly corridor outside, the chamber itself was stifling, though the fire had burned down to a crimson coal bed that shed no more than an eerie red glow across the hearth.

With so many guests in the house, the only people with the luxury of a private bedroom were the bridal pair; everyone else was crammed into the few available rooms, willy-nilly. Two large tester beds and a trundle occupied the room, with straw-tick pallets spread over most of the remaining floor space. Each bed was packed like a sardine tin with shift-clad women lying side by side across the mattress, radiating as much moist heat as a greenhouse full of orchids.

I breathed shallowly—the air was filled with a cloying mixture of stale sweat, barbecue, and fried onions, French perfume, drink-sodden breath, and the sharp, sweet smell of vanilla beans—and shed my gown and shoes as quickly as I could, hoping not to break out into a drenching sweat before I could undress. I was still keyed up from the events of the day, but exhaustion was pulling like lead weights at my limbs, and I was glad enough to tiptoe through the sprawl of bodies and creep into my accustomed space near the foot of one of the big beds.

My mind was still buzzing with speculations of all sorts, and in spite of the hypnotic lull of so much slumber all around me, I lay stiff-limbed and sore, watching the silhouette of my bare toes against the hearth's dying light.

Betty had passed from her stupor into what looked like a normal deep sleep. When she woke in the morning, we would find out who had given her the cup, and—perhaps—what was in it. I hoped that Jemmy would sleep comfortably as well. But what was really on my mind, of course, was Jamie.

I hadn't seen him among the card players, nor yet among the men talking low-voiced of taxes and tobacco.

I hadn't seen Phillip Wylie anywhere on the first floor of the house, either. I could well believe he was out with the revelers by the river landing. That was his set and his style, wealthy young men who would seek diversion in drink and carouse in the dark, careless both of cold and danger, laughing and chasing each other by the light of random gunfire.

That was neither Jamie's set nor his style, but the thought of him among them was what made my feet curl with chill, despite the heat of the room.

He wouldn't do anything stupid, I assured myself, rolling onto my side, knees drawn up as much as possible in the cramped quarters. He wouldn't; but his notion of stupid wasn't always the same as mine, by any means.

Most of the male guests were bedded down in the outbuildings, or in the parlors; as I passed, I had seen anonymous sleeping figures sprawled on the floor of the front parlor, snoring loudly, wrapped in their cloaks before the fire. I had not gone to poke among them, but doubtless Jamie was there—he had had as long a day as I had, after all.

But it was not like him to retire without coming to wish me good night, no matter what the circumstances. Of course, he had been annoyed with me, and despite the promise of our interrupted conversation on the terrace, we had not quite made up the quarrel. Re-inflamed it, rather, with beastly Phillip Wylie's invitation. My hands curled, thumbs rubbing at the slight calluses that marked the spots where my rings normally sat. Effing Scot!

Next to me Jemima Hatfield stirred and murmured, disturbed by my restlessness. I eased myself slowly back onto my side, and stared sightlessly at the oaken footboard in front of me.

Yes, he was undoubtedly still angry about Phillip Wylie's advances. So was I—or I would be, were I not so tired. How dare he—I yawned, nearly dislocating my jaw, and decided that it really wasn't worth the bother of being annoyed, at least not now.

But it wasn't like Jamie to avoid me, angry or not. He wasn't the sort of man to sulk or brood. He would seek a confrontation or provoke a fight, without a moment's hesitation; but I didn't think he had ever let the sun go down on anger—at least not with regard to me.

Which left me to worry about where he was, and what in bloody hell he was doing. And the necessity of worrying about him was making me *really* angry, if only because that was better than being worried.

But it *had* been a very long day, and as the moments passed, and the faint pops of gunfire from the river landing gradually ceased, languor stole over me, blunting my fears and scattering my thoughts like spilled sand. The gentle breathing of the women all around me lulled me like the sound of wind in the trees, and my grip on reality slackened and at last fell free.

I might have expected dreams of violence or nightmares of dread, but my subconscious had plainly had enough of that. In the contrary way of such things, it instead chose to dwell on another thread of the day's events. Perhaps it was the warmth of the room, or simply the closeness of so many bodies, but I dreamed vividly and erotically, the tides of arousal washing me now and then near to the shores of wakefulness, then once more carrying me out into the deeps of unconsciousness.

There were horses in my dreams; glowing black Friesians with flowing manes that rippled in the wind as the stallions ran beside me. I saw my own legs stretch and leap; I was a white mare, and the ground flew past in a blur of green beneath my hooves, until I stopped and turned, waiting for the one, a broad-chested stallion who came to me, his breath hot and moist against my neck, his white teeth closing on my nape …

"I am the King of Ireland," he said, and I came slowly awake, tingling from head to foot, to find that someone was gently stroking the sole of said foot.

Still bemused by the carnal images of my dreams, I was not alarmed by this, but merely muzzily pleased to discover that I had feet after all, and not hooves. My toes curled and my foot flexed, reveling in the delicate touch of the thumb that traced its way from the ball of my foot down the high arch and up into the hollow below my anklebone, managing to stimulate an entire plexus of sensation. Then I came all the way awake, with a small jerk.

Whoever it was plainly sensed my return to consciousness, for the touch left my foot momentarily. Then it came back, this time more firmly, a large warm hand curling quite round my foot, the thumb executing a firm but languid massage at the base of my toes.

By this time, I was quite awake, and mildly startled, but not frightened. I wiggled my foot briefly, as though to throw off the hand, but it squeezed my foot lightly in response, and then its companion gently pinched my great toe.

This little piggy went to market, this little piggy stayed home … I could hear the rhyme as clearly as though it had been spoken aloud, as the fingers deftly pinched their way across my toes, one by one.

And this little piggy went weee-weee-weee, all the way home! The touch flicked tickling down the sole of my foot and I jerked, an involuntary giggle caught in my throat.

I lifted my head, but the hand seized my foot again and squeezed in admonition. The fire had gone out altogether and the room was black as velvet; even with eyes completely dark-adapted, I could gain nothing but the sense of a hunched figure near my feet, an amorphous blob that shifted like mercury, its edges blending with and disappearing into the dark of the air.

The hand slid gently up the calf of my leg. I twitched violently, and the woman next to me snorted, reared up with a bleary, “Hnh?” and collapsed again, in a whoosh.

My stomach muscles quivered with suppressed laughter. He must have felt the slight vibration—the fingers left my little toe with a gentle squeeze, and stroked the bottom of my foot, making all my toes curl tight.

The fingers curled into a fist, pressing along the length of my sole, then suddenly opened, cupping my heel. His thumb stroked my ankle, and paused, questioning. I didn’t move.

His fingers were getting warmer; there was only a faint sensation of cold as they followed the curve of my calf and sought shelter in the soft place behind my knee. The fingers played a quick tattoo on the sensitive skin there, and I twitched in agitation. They slowed and stopped, settling surely on the artery where my pulse beat fast; I could feel it, blood rushing past where the skin was so thin the veins would show blue beneath it.

I heard a sigh as he shifted his weight; then one hand cupped the round of my thigh, and slid slowly upward. The other followed, pressing my legs gently, inexorably apart.

My heart was thumping in my ears and my breasts felt swollen, nipples poking hard and round through the thin muslin of my shift. I took a deep breath, and smelled rice powder.

All at once, my heart gave a double-thump and nearly stopped, as the sudden thought sprang to life in my mind—what if it wasn't Jamie?

I lay quite still, trying not to breathe, concentrating on the hands, which were doing something delicate and quite unspeakable. Large hands, they *were* large hands; I could feel the knuckles pressing the soft inner flesh of my thigh. But Phillip Wylie had large hands, too; quite large for his size. I had seen him scoop up a handful of oats for his stallion, Lucas, and the horse bury its big black nose in the palm.

Calluses; the roving hands—oh, God!—were smoothly callused. But so were Wylie's; dandy he might be, but a horseman; his palms were quite as smooth and hard as Jamie's.

It had to be Jamie, I assured myself, lifting my head an inch or so and peering into the black velvet darkness. Ten little pigs … of course it was Jamie! Then one of the hands did something quite startling and I gasped out loud and jerked, limbs twitching. My elbow slammed into the ribs of the woman next to me, who snapped upright with a loud exclamation. The hands retreated abruptly, squeezing my ankles in a hasty farewell.

There was a shuffling noise as someone crawled hurriedly across the floor, then a flash of dim light and a breath of cold air from the corridor as the door opened and shut again immediately.

"Wha—?" said Jemima next to me, in woozy astonishment. "Whozat?"

Receiving no answer, she flounced, muttered, and at last lay down again, to fall promptly fast asleep.

I did not.

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IN VINO VERITAS

I lay sleepless for quite a long time, listening to the peaceful snores and rustlings of my bedmates, and to the agitated thump of my own heart. Every nerve in my body felt as though it were sticking out through my skin, and when Jemima Hatfield rolled unconsciously into me, I jabbed her viciously in the ribs with my elbow, so that she uttered a startled "Whoof?" and sat halfway up, blinking and muttering, before collapsing slowly back into the communal sea of sleep.

As for me, my small bark of consciousness was adrift on the flood, spinning rudderless, but without the slightest chance of being pulled under.

I simply couldn't decide how to feel. On the one hand, I was aroused—unwillingly, to be sure, but still most definitely aroused. Whoever my nocturnal visitor had been, he knew his way around a woman's body.

That would argue for its being Jamie, I thought. Still, I had no idea how experienced Phillip Wylie might be in the arts of love—I had spurned his approaches in the stable so promptly that he had had no chance of demonstrating any skills he might possess in that direction.

But my midnight visitor had not used any caress that I could positively identify as being in Jamie's repertoire. Now, if he had used his mouth … I shied away from *that* line of thought like a spooked horse, and Jemima gave a muffled grunt as I convulsed slightly, my skin rippling in involuntary response to the images it evoked.

I didn't know whether to feel amused or outraged, seduced or violated. I *was* extremely angry; I was sure of that much, at least, and the surety gave me some small anchor in the maelstrom of emotion. Still, I had no idea as to the correct target of my anger, and with nowhere to aim that particularly destructive emotion, it was simply crashing round inside me, knocking things down and leaving dents.

"Oof," said Jemima, in a pointed—and quite conscious—tone of voice. Evidently I wasn't the only one being dented by my emotions.

"Mmmm?" I murmured, feigning half-sleep. "Glrgl. Bzg."

There was a small tinge of guilt in the mix, as well.

If I were sure it *had* been Jamie, would I be angry?

The worst of it was, I realized, that there was absolutely nothing I could do to find out who it had been. I could scarcely ask Jamie whether he had crept in and fondled me in the darkness—because if he *hadn't*, his immediate response would certainly be to assassinate Phillip Wylie bare-handed.

I felt as though tiny electric eels were squirming under my skin. I stretched as hard as I could, alternately tensed and relaxed every muscle—and still could find no way to keep still.

At last, I slid cautiously off the bed, and made my way to the door, with a glance at my erstwhile bedmates, who lay slumbering peacefully under the quilts like a row of perfumed sausages. Moving with great stealth, I eased the door open and peeked out into the hallway. It was either very late or very early; the tall window at the end of the corridor had gone to gray, but the last of the stars still showed, vanishing pinpoints on the charcoal satin of the sky.

It was cold in the hall, away from the contained body heat of the women, but I welcomed the chill; the blood was pulsing just under my skin, and I bloomed with heat and agitation. A nice cooldown was exactly what I wanted. I made my way quietly to the back stairs, meaning to go down and outside for a breath of air.

I stopped dead at the top of the staircase. A man stood at the foot of the stair, a silhouette tall and black against the panes of the double French doors. I didn't think I had made any sound, but he turned at once, face lifted toward me. Even in the poor light, I knew at once that it was Jamie.

He was still clad in the clothes he had worn the night before—coat and waistcoat, frilled shirt and buckled breeches. The shirt was open at the neck, though, coat and weskit unbuttoned and askew. I could see the narrow line of white linen, the flesh of his throat dark against it. His hair was loose; he had been running his hands through it.

"Come down," he said softly.

I hesitated, looking back over my shoulder. A ladylike medley of snores came from the room I had just left. Two slaves were sleeping on the floor in the hall, curled under blankets, but neither moved.

I looked back. He didn't speak again, but lifted two fingers, beckoning. The scent of smoke and whisky filled the stairwell.

The blood was thrumming in my ears—and elsewhere. My face was flushed, my hair damp at the temples and on my neck; cool air rose up under my shift, touched the patch of dampness at the base of my spine, the film of slickness where my thighs brushed together.

I came down slowly, cautiously, trying not to let the stairs creak under my bare feet. It occurred to me belatedly that this was ridiculous; the slaves thundered up and down these stairs hundreds of times a day. Even so, I felt the need for secrecy; the house was still asleep, and the stairwell was filled with a gray light that seemed as fragile as smoked glass. A sudden sound, a move too quick, and something might explode under my feet, with a flash like a lightbulb popping.

His eyes stayed fixed on me, dark triangles in the paler dark of his face. He stared at me with a fierce intensity, as though to drag me down the stairs by the force of his gaze alone.

I stopped, one step from the bottom. There was no blood on his clothes; thank God for that.

It wasn't that I'd never seen Jamie drunk before. No wonder he hadn't come up the stairs to me. I thought he was very drunk now, and yet there was something quite different in this. He stood rock-solid, legs set wide, betrayed only by a certain deliberation in the way he moved his head to look at me.

“What—” I began, whispering.

“Come here,” he said. His voice was low, rough with sleeplessness and whisky.

I hadn’t time either to reply or to acquiesce; he seized my arm and pulled me toward him, then swept me off the last step, crushed me to him, and kissed me. It was a most disconcerting kiss—as though his mouth knew mine all too well, and would compel my pleasure, regardless of my desires.

His hair smelled of a long night’s smoke—tobacco and woodsmoke and the smoke of beeswax candles. He tasted so strongly of whisky that I felt light-headed, as though the alcohol in his blood were seeping into mine through our skins where they touched, through the sealed membranes of our mouths. Something else was seeping into me from him, as well—a sense of overpowering lust, as blind as it was dangerous.

I wanted to remonstrate with him, to push him away. Then I decided that I didn’t, but it wouldn’t have made any difference if I had. He didn’t mean to let go.

One big hand was gripping the back of my neck, warm and hard on my skin, and I thought of a stallion’s teeth closing on the neck of the mare he mounts, and shivered from scalp to sole. His thumb accidentally pressed the great artery under my jaw; darkness swam behind my eyes and my knees began to buckle. He felt it and let go, easing me back so that I was almost lying prone upon the stairs, his weight half on me and his hands seeking.

I was naked under my shift, and the thin muslin might as well not have been there.

The hard edge of a stair pressed into my back, and it occurred to me, in the dim way that things do when you’re drunk, that he was just about to take me right there on the stairs, and devil take anyone who might see.

I got my mouth free of his long enough to gasp, “Not here!” in his ear. That seemed to bring him momentarily to his senses; he lifted his head, blinking like one roused from a nightmare, eyes wide and blind. Then he nodded once, jerkily, and rose, pulling me to my feet with him.

The maids' cloaks were hanging by the door; he seized one and wrapped it round me, then picked me up bodily and shouldered his way through the door, past a staring housemaid with a slop jar in her hands.

He set me down when he reached the brick path outside; the bricks were cold under my feet. Then we were moving together through the gray light across a landscape of shadow and wind, still entangled with each other, stumbling, jostling, and yet somehow almost flying, clothes fluttering round us and cold air brushing our skins with the rude touch of spring, bound for some vaguely sensed and yet inevitable destination.

The stables. He hit the door and pulled me through with him into the warm dark, thrust me hard against a wall.

"I must have ye now, or die," he said, breathless, and then his mouth was on mine again, his face cold from the air outside, and his breath steaming with mine.

Then he drew abruptly away, and I staggered, pressing my hands against the rough bricks of the wall to keep my balance.

"Hold up your hands," he said.

"What?" I said stupidly.

"Your hands. Put them up."

In complete bewilderment, I held them up, and felt him take hold of the left one, fumbling. Pressure and warmth, and the faint light from the open door shone on my gold wedding ring. Then he seized my right hand, shoved my silver ring onto my finger, the metal warm from the heat of his body. He raised my hand to his mouth, and bit my knuckles, hard.

Then his hand was on my breast, cold air brushed my thighs, and I felt the scratch of the bricks on my bare backside.

I made a noise, and he clapped a hand over my mouth. Speared as neatly as a landed trout, I was just as helpless, pinned flapping against the wall.

He took his hand away and replaced it with his mouth, engulfing mine. I could feel the small urgent growls he was making in his throat, and felt another one, much louder, rising in mine.

My shift was wadded high around my waist, and my bare buttocks smacked rhythmically against the roughened brick, but I felt no pain at all. I gripped him by the shoulders and held on.

His hand skimmed my thigh, pushing at the drifts of linen that threatened to come between us. I remembered, vividly, those hands in the darkness, and bucked convulsively.

"Look." His breath came hot in my ear. "Look down. Watch while I take ye. Watch, damn you!"

His hand pressed my neck, bending my head forward to look down in the dimness, past the folds of sheltering fabric to the naked fact of my possession.

I arched my back and then collapsed, biting the shoulder of his coat to make no noise. His mouth was on my neck, and fastened tight as he shuddered against me.

We lay tangled together in the straw, watching daylight creep through the half-open door across the red-brick floor of the stable. My heart was still thumping in my ears, blood tingling through skin and temples, thighs and fingers, but I felt somehow detached from such sensations, as though they were happening to someone else. I felt unreal—and slightly shocked.

My cheek lay flat against his chest. Moving my eyes slightly, I could see the fading red flush of his skin in the open neck of his shirt, and the coarse curly hairs, so deep an auburn that they looked nearly black in the shadowed light.

A pulse was throbbing in the hollow of his throat, no more than an inch from my hand. I wanted to lay my fingers on it, feel his heartbeat echo in my blood. I felt oddly shy, though, as though such a gesture were too intimate to contemplate. Which was completely ridiculous, in view of what we had just done with—and to—each another.

I did move my index finger, just a bit, so that my fingertip brushed the tiny three-cornered scar on his throat; a faded white knot, pale against his bronzed skin.

There was a slight catch in the rhythm of his breathing, but he didn't move. His arm was round me, his hand splayed on the small of my back. Two breaths, three … and then the faint pressure of a fingertip against my spine.

We lay silent, breathing lightly, both concentrated on the delicate acknowledgment of our connection, but didn't speak or move; slightly embarrassed, with the return of reason, at what we had just done.

The sound of voices coming toward the stable galvanized me into motion, though. I sat up abruptly, yanked my shift up over my shoulders, and began to brush straw from my hair. Jamie rolled up onto his knees, his back to me, and began hastily to tuck in his shirttail.

The voices outside stopped abruptly, and we both froze. There was a brief, charged silence, and then the sound of footsteps, delicately retreating. I let out the breath I had been holding, feeling my racing heart begin to slow. The stable was filled with the rustlings and whickers of the horses, who had heard the voices and footsteps, too. They were getting hungry.

"So you won," I said to Jamie's back. My voice sounded strange to me, as though I hadn't used it in a long time.

"I promised ye I would." He spoke softly, head bent as he rearranged the folds of his plaid.

I stood up, feeling mildly dizzy, and leaned against the wall to keep my balance as I brushed sand and straw from my feet. The rough feel of the bricks behind me was a vivid reminder, and I spread my hands out against them, bracing myself against the rush of recalled sensation.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?" He turned his head sharply to look up at me, sensing my movement.

"Yes. Yes," I repeated. "Fine. Just … I'm fine. And you?"

He looked pale and scruffy, his face stubbled and hollow with strain, eyes smudged black from a long and sleepless night. He met my eyes for a moment, then glanced away. A hint of color showed on his cheekbones, and he swallowed audibly.

"I—" he began, then stopped. He got to his feet and stood before me. His formal queue had come undone, and the tails of his hair splayed over his shoulder, glimmering redly as the bar of light from the door lit him.

"Ye dinna hate me?" he asked abruptly. Taken by surprise, I laughed.

"No," I said. "Do you think I should?"

His mouth twitched a little, and he rubbed his knuckles across it, scraping on the stubble of his beard.

"Well, maybe so," he said, "but I'm glad if ye don't."

He took my hands gently in his own, his thumb rubbing lightly across the interlaced pattern of my silver ring. His hands were cold, chilled by the dawn.

"Whyever do you think I might hate you?" I asked. "Because of the rings, do you mean?" Granted, I would have been upset and furious with him, had he lost either one. Since he hadn't … Of course, he *had* caused me to worry all night about where he was and what he was doing, to say nothing of sneaking into my room and making improper advances to my feet. Perhaps I ought to be annoyed with him, after all.

"Well, starting wi' that," he said dryly. "I havena let my pride get the better of me in some time, but I couldna seem to stop myself, what with wee Phillip Wylie preenin' about, smirkin' at your breasts, and—"

"He was?" I hadn't noticed that part.

"He was," Jamie said, glowering momentarily at the thought. Then he dismissed Phillip Wylie, returning to the catalogue of his own sins.

"And then, draggin' ye out of the house in your shift and going after ye like a ravening beast—" He gently touched my neck, where I could still feel the tingling soreness of a bite mark.

"Oh. Well, I quite liked that part, actually."

"You did?" His eyes flicked wide and blue in momentary startlement.

"Yes. Though I rather think I have bruises on my bottom."

"Oh." He looked down, apparently abashed, though the corner of his mouth twitched slightly. "I'm sorry for that. When I'd finished—at the whist, I mean—I couldna think of anything but finding ye, Sassenach. I went up and down that stair a dozen times, going to your door, and back away again."

"Oh, you did?" I was pleased to hear this, as it seemed to increase the odds that he had in fact been my midnight visitor.

He picked up a hank of my rumpled hair and ran his fingers gently through it.

"I kent I couldna sleep, and thought, well, I shall go out and walk in the night for a time, and I would, but then I should find myself again outside your room, not knowing how I'd come there, but only trying to think how I might get to ye—trying to will ye to come out to me, I suppose."

Well, that explained my dreams of wild stallions, I thought. The place where he had bitten my neck throbbed slightly. And where had he brought me? A stable. King of Ireland, forsooth.

He squeezed my hands lightly.

"I thought the force of my wanting must wake ye, surely. And then ye *did* come.…" He stopped, looking at me with eyes gone soft and dark. "Christ, Claire, ye were so beautiful, there on the stair, wi' your hair down and the shadow of your body with the light behind ye.…" He shook his head slowly.

"I did think I should die, if I didna have ye," he said softly. "Just then."

I reached up to stroke his face, his beard a soft bristle on my palm.

"Wouldn't want you to die," I whispered, tucking back a lock of hair behind his ear.

We smiled at each other then, but whatever else we might have said was interrupted by a loud whinny from one of the horses, followed by stamping noises. We were interfering with their breakfast.

I dropped my hand and Jamie bent to pick up his coat, which lay half-buried in the straw. He didn't lose his balance as he bent, but I saw him wince as the blood went suddenly to his head.

“Did you have a terrible lot to drink last night?” I asked, recognizing the symptoms.

He straightened up with a small grunt of amusement.

“Aye, quarts,” he said, ruefully. “Ye can tell?”

A person with much less experience than I had could have told at a distance of roughly half a mile; putting aside the more obvious indications of recent intoxication, he smelled like a distillery.

“It didn’t impair your card playing, evidently,” I said, being tactful. “Or was Phillip Wylie similarly affected?”

He looked surprised, and slightly affronted.

“Ye dinna think I’d get besotted whilst I was playing, do ye? And with your rings at stake? No, that was after—MacDonald fetched a bottle of champagne and another of whisky, and insisted that we must celebrate our winnings in proper style.”

“MacDonald? Donald MacDonald? He was playing with you?”

“Aye, he and I were partnered against Wylie and Stanhope.” He shook the coat, sending bits of straw flying. “I couldna say what sort of soldier he was, but the man’s a fine hand at the whist, to be sure.”

Mention of the words “fine hand” reminded me. He’d come to the door of my room, he said; he hadn’t mentioned coming in. Had he, and been too far gone between liquor and longing to recall doing it? Had I, dazed with dreams of equine lust, imagined the whole thing? Surely not, I thought, but shook off the sense of vague disquiet engendered by the memory, in favor of another word from his remark.

“You said winnings?” In the stress of the moment, it had only seemed important that he had kept my rings, but it occurred to me belatedly that those were only his stake. “What did you take off Phillip Wylie?” I asked, laughing. “His embroidered coat buttons? Or his silver shoe buckles?”

His face had an odd expression as he glanced at me.

“Well, no,” he said. “I took his horse.”

He swung his coat round my shoulders, put an arm round my waist, and led me down the main aisle of the stable block, past the loose-boxes and stalls.

Joshua had come in quietly, through the other door, and was working at the far end of the stable, silhouetted against the light from the open double-doors as he pitchforked hay into the end stall. As we reached him, he glanced at us and nodded in greeting, his face carefully neutral at the sight of us, bedraggled, barefoot, and prickled with straw. Even in a household with a blind mistress, a slave knew what not to see.

No business of his, his downcast countenance said clearly. He looked nearly as tired as I felt, eyes heavy and bloodshot.

"How is he?" Jamie asked, lifting his chin toward the stall. Josh perked up a bit at the inquiry, putting down his pitchfork.

"Oh, he's bonnie," he said, with an air of satisfaction. "A bonnie lad, Mr. Wylie's Lucas."

"Indeed he is," Jamie agreed. "Only he's mine now."

"He's what?" Josh goggled at him, openmouthed.

"He's mine." Jamie went to the railing and reached out a hand to scratch the ears of the big stallion, busily engaged in eating hay from his manger.

"Seas," he murmured to the horse. *"Ciamar a tha thu, a ghille mhoir?"*

I followed him, peering over his arm at the horse, who lifted his head for a moment, regarded us with a genial eye, snorted, tossed his veil-like mane out of his face, and went back to his breakfast with single-minded intent.

"A lovely creature, is he no?" Jamie was admiring Lucas, a look of distant speculation in his eyes.

"Well, yes, he is, but—" My own admiration was substantially tinged with dismay. If Jamie had set out to avenge his own pride at the cost of Wylie's, he'd done it in spades. Despite my irritation with Wylie, I couldn't help a small pang at the thought of how he must be feeling at the loss of his magnificent Friesian.

"But what, Sassenach?"

"Well, just—" I fumbled awkwardly for words. I could scarcely say I felt sorry for Phillip Wylie, under the circumstances. "Just—well, what do you mean to do with him?"

Even I could see that Lucas was totally unsuited to life on Fraser's Ridge. The thought of plowing or hauling with him seemed sacrilegious, and while I supposed Jamie *could* use him only for riding … I frowned dubiously, envisioning the boggy bottoms and rocky trails that would threaten those well-turned legs and splinter the glossy hooves; the hanging boughs and undergrowth that would tangle in mane and tail. Gideon the Man-eater was a thousand times better suited to such rough environs.

"Oh, I dinna mean to keep him," Jamie assured me. He looked at the horse and sighed regretfully. "Though I should dearly love to. But ye're right; he wouldna do for the Ridge. No, I mean to sell him."

"Oh, good." I was relieved to hear this. Wylie would undoubtedly buy Lucas back, no matter what the cost. I found that a comforting thought. And we could certainly use the money.

Joshua had gone out while we were talking. At this point, he reappeared in the doorway, a sack of grain on his shoulder. His previous sluggish air had disappeared, though; his eyes were still bloodshot, but he looked alert, and mildly alarmed.

"Mrs. Claire?" he said. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but I met Teresa by the barn just now; she's says as how there's summat gone amiss wi' Betty. I thought ye'd maybe want to know."

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BLOOD IN THE ATTIC

The attic room looked like the scene of a murder, and a brutal one, at that. Betty was struggling on the floor beside her overturned bed, knees drawn up and fists doubled into her abdomen, the muslin of her shift torn and saturated with blood. Fentiman was on the floor with her, dwarfed by her bulk but vainly grappling with her spasming body, nearly as smeared with gore as she was.

The sun was fully up now, and pouring in through the tiny windows in brilliant shafts that spotlighted parts of the chaos, leaving the rest in shadowed confusion. Cots were pushed aside and upset, bedding tangled in mounds, worn shoes and bits of clothing scattered like debris among the splotches of fresh blood on the wooden floor.

I hurried across the attic, but before I could reach her, Betty gave a deep, gurgling cough, and more blood gushed from her mouth and nose. She curled forward, arched back, doubled hard again … and went limp.

I fell to my knees beside her, though it was apparent from a glance that her limbs had relaxed into that final stillness from which there could be no hope of revival. I lifted her head and pressed my fingers under her jaw; her eyes had rolled back, only the whites showing. No breath, no sign of a pulse in the clammy neck.

From the quantities of blood spread round the room, I thought there could be very little left in her body. Her lips were blue, and her skin had gone the color of ashes. Fentiman knelt behind her, wigless and white-faced, skinny arms still locked about her heavy torso, holding her slumped body half off the floor.

He was in his nightshirt, I saw, a pair of blue satin breeches hastily pulled on beneath it. The air reeked of blood, bile, and feces, and he was smeared with all those substances. He looked up at me, though he showed no sign of recognition, his eyes wide and blank with shock.

"Dr. Fentiman." I spoke softly; with the noise of struggle ceased, the attic was stricken with that absolute silence that often follows in the wake of death, and it seemed sacrilege to break it.

He blinked, and his mouth worked a little, but he seemed to have no notion how to reply. He didn't move, though the spreading pool of blood had soaked through the knees of his breeches. I put a hand on his shoulder; it was bird-boned, but rigid with denial. I knew the feeling; to lose a patient you have fought for is a terrible thing—and yet one all doctors know.

"You have done all you can," I said, still softly, and tightened my grip. "It is not your fault." What had happened the day before wasn't important. He was a colleague, and I owed him what absolution lay in my power to give.

He licked dry lips, and nodded once, then bent to lay the body gently down. A shaft of light skimmed the top of his head, glowing through the scanty bristles of cropped gray hair, and making the bones of his skull seem thin and fragile. He seemed suddenly frail altogether, and let me help him to his feet without protest.

A low moan made me turn, still holding his arm. A knot of female slaves huddled in the shadowed corner of the room, faces stark and dark hands fluttering with distress against the pale muslin of their shifts. There were male voices on the stair outside, muted and anxious. I could hear Jamie, low-voiced and calm, explaining.

"Gussie?" I called toward the women in the corner with the first name that came to mind.

The knot of slaves clung together for a moment, then reluctantly unraveled, and Gussie stepped out, a pale brown moth of a girl from Jamaica, small under a turban of blue calico.

"Madam?" She kept her eyes on mine, steadfastly away from the still form on the floor.

"I'm taking Doctor Fentiman downstairs. I'll have some of the men come to … to take care of Betty. This …" I made a small gesture toward the mess on the floor, and she nodded, still shocked, but obviously relieved to have something to do.

"Yes, Madam. We do that, quick." She hesitated, eyes darting round the room, then looked back at me. "Madam?"

"Yes?"

"Someone must go—tell that girl name Phaedre what's gone with Betty. You tell her, please?"

Startled, I looked, and realized that Phaedre was not among the slaves in the corner. Of course; as Jocasta's body servant, she would sleep downstairs, near her mistress, even on her wedding night.

"Yes," I said, uncertainly. "Of course. But—"

"This Betty that girl's mama," Gussie said, seeing my incomprehension. She swallowed, tears swimming in her soft brown eyes. "Somebody—can I go, Madam? Can I go tell her?"

"Please," I said, and stepped back, motioning her to go. She tiptoed past the body, then darted for the door, callused bare feet thumping softly on the boards.

Dr. Fentiman had begun to emerge from his shock. He pulled away from me and stooped toward the floor, making vague groping gestures. I saw that his medical kit had been upset in the struggle; bottles and instruments were strewn across the floor in a litter of metal and broken glass.

Before he could retrieve his kit, though, there was a brief commotion on the stair, and Duncan came into the room, Jamie on his heels. I noticed with some interest that Duncan was still wearing his wedding clothes, though minus coat and waistcoat. Had he been to bed at all? I wondered.

He nodded to me, but his eyes went at once to Betty, now sprawled on the floor, bloody shift crumpled round her broad, splayed thighs. One breast spilled from the torn fabric, heavy and slack as a half-filled pouch of meal. Duncan blinked several times. Then he wiped the back of his hand across his mustache, and took a visible breath. He bent to pluck a quilt from the carnage and laid it gently over her.

“Help me with her, *Mac Dubh,*” he said.

Seeing what he was about, Jamie knelt and gathered the dead woman up into his arms. Duncan drew himself upright, and turned his face toward the women in the corner.

“Dinna fash yourselves,” he said quietly. “I shall see her taken care of.” There was an unusual note of authority in his voice that made me realize that in spite of his natural modesty, he had accepted the fact that he was master here.

The men left with their burden, and I heard Dr. Fentiman give a deep sigh. It felt as though the whole attic sighed with him; the atmosphere was still thick with stench and sorrow, but the shock of violent death was dissipating.

“Leave it,” I said to Fentiman, seeing him move again to pick up a bottle lying on the floor. “The women will take care of it.” Not waiting for argument, I took him firmly by the elbow and marched him out the door and down the stair.

People were up; I caught the sounds of rattling dishes from the dining room, and the faint scent of sausages. I couldn’t take him through the public rooms in his current state, nor up to the bedrooms; he was undoubtedly sharing a room with several other men, any of whom might still be abed. For lack of a better idea, I took him outside, pausing to snatch another of the maids’ cloaks from the pegs by the door and wrap it round his shoulders.

So Betty was—or had been—Phaedre’s mother. I hadn’t known Betty well, but I did know Phaedre, and felt grief for her tighten my throat. There was nothing I could do for her just now, though; but perhaps I could help the doctor.

Silent with shock, he followed me obediently as I led him down the side path by the lawns, shielded from view by Hector Cameron’s white-marble mausoleum and its growth of ornamental yew bushes. There was a stone bench by the river, half-hidden under a weeping willow. I doubted anyone would be patronizing it at this hour of the morning.

No one was, though two wine goblets sat on the bench, stained red with beeswing, abandoned remnants of the night’s festivities. I wondered briefly whether someone had been having a romantic rendezvous, and was reminded suddenly of my own midnight tryst. Damn it, I still didn't know for sure who the owner of those hands had been!

Pushing the nagging question away with the wineglasses, I sat down, gesturing to Doctor Fentiman to join me. It was chilly, but the bench was in full sun at this hour, and the heat was warm and comforting on my face. The Doctor was looking better for the fresh air; vestiges of color had come back into his cheeks, and his nose had resumed its normal roseate hue.

"Feeling a bit better, are you?"

He nodded, hunching the cloak around his narrow shoulders.

"I am, I thank you, Mrs. Fraser."

"Rather a shock, wasn't it?" I asked, employing my most sympathetic bedside manner.

He closed his eyes, and shook his head briefly.

"Shocked … yes, very shocked," he muttered. "I would never have …" He trailed off, and I let him sit quiet for a moment. He would need to talk about it, but best to let him take it at his own pace.

"It was good of you to come so quickly," I said, after a bit. "I see they called you from your bed. Had she grown suddenly worse, then?"

"Yes. I could have sworn she was on the mend last night, after I bled her." He rubbed his face with both hands, and emerged blinking, eyes very bloodshot. "The butler roused me just before dawn, and I found her once again complaining of griping in the guts. I bled her again, and then administered a clyster, but to no avail."

"A clyster?" I murmured. Clysters were enemas; a favorite remedy of the time. Some were fairly harmless; others were positively corrosive.

"A tincture of nicotiana," he explained, "which I find answers capitally in most cases of dyspepsia."

I made a noncommittal noise in response. Nicotiana was tobacco; I supposed a strong solution of that, administered rectally, would probably dispose promptly of a case of pinworms, but I didn't think it would do much for indigestion. Still, it wouldn't make anyone bleed like that, either.

"Extraordinary amount of bleeding," I said, putting my elbows on my knees and resting my chin in my hands. "I don't think I've ever seen anything like it." That was true. I was curious, turning over various possibilities in my mind, but no diagnosis quite fit.

"No." Doctor Fentiman's sallow cheeks began to show spots of red. "I—if I had thought …"

I leaned toward him, and laid a consoling hand on his arm.

"I'm sure you did all that anyone could possibly do," I said. "She wasn't bleeding at all from the mouth when you saw her last night, was she?"

He shook his head, hunching deeper into his cloak.

"No. Still, I blame myself, I really do."

"One does," I said ruefully. "There's always that sense that one should have been able to do *something* more."

He caught the depth of feeling in my voice and turned toward me, looking surprised. The tension in him relaxed a little, and the red color began to fade from his cheeks.

"You have … a most remarkably sympathetic understanding, Mrs. Fraser."

I smiled at him, not speaking. He might be a quack, he might be ignorant, arrogant, *and* intemperate—but he had come at once when called, and had fought for his patient to the best of his ability. That made him a physician, in my book, and deserving of sympathy.

After a moment, he put his hand over mine. We sat in silence, watching the river go by, dark brown and turbid with silt. The stone bench was cold under me, and the morning breeze kept sticking chilly fingers under my shift, but I was too preoccupied to take much note of such minor discomforts. I could smell the drying blood on his clothes, and saw again the scene in the attic. What on earth had the woman died of?

I prodded him gently, asking tactful questions, extracting what details he had gleaned, but they were not helpful. He was not an observant man at the best of times, and it had been very early and the attic dark. He grew easier with the talking, though, gradually purging himself of that sense of personal failure that is the frequent price of a physician's caring.

"I hope Mrs. Cameron—Mrs. Innes, I mean—will not feel that I have betrayed her hospitality," he said uneasily.

That seemed a rather odd way to put it. On the other hand … Betty *had* been Jocasta's property. I supposed that beyond any sense of personal failure, Dr. Fentiman was also contemplating the possibility that Jocasta might blame him for not preventing Betty's death, and try to claim recompense.

"I'm sure she'll realize that you did all you could," I said soothingly. "I'll tell her so, if you like."

"My dear lady." Doctor Fentiman squeezed my hand with gratitude. "You are as kind as you are lovely."

"Do you think so, Doctor?"

A male voice spoke coldly behind me, and I jumped, dropping Dr. Fentiman's hand as though it were a high-voltage wire. I whirled on the bench to find Phillip Wylie, leaning against the trunk of the willow tree with a most sardonic expression on his face.

" 'Kind' is not the word that springs most immediately to mind, I must say. 'Lewd,' perhaps. 'Wanton,' most certainly. But 'lovely,' yes—I'll give you that."

His eyes raked me from head to toe with an insolence that I would have found absolutely reprehensible—had it not suddenly dawned on me that Dr. Fentiman and I had been sitting hand in hand in what could only be called a compromising state of dishabille, both still in our nightclothes.

I stood up, drawing my dressing gown round me with great dignity. His eyes were fixed on my breasts—with a knowing expression? I wondered. I folded my arms under my breasts, lifting my bosom defiantly.

"You forget yourself, Mr. Wylie," I said, as coldly as possible.

He laughed, but not as though he thought anything were funny.

"I forget myself? Have you not forgotten something, Mrs. Fraser? Such as your gown? Do you not find it a trifle cold, dressed like that? Or do the good doctor's embraces warm you sufficiently?"

Doctor Fentiman, as shocked as I was by Wylie's appearance, had got to his feet and now pushed his way in front of me, his thin cheeks mottled with fury.

"How dare you, sir! How do you have the infernal presumption to speak to a lady in such fashion? Were I armed, sir, I should call you out upon the instant, I swear it!"

Wylie had been staring boldly at me. At this, his gaze shifted to Fentiman, and he saw the blood staining the doctor's legs and breeches. His hot-eyed scowl grew less certain.

"I—has something happened, sir?"

"It is none of your concern, I assure you." Fentiman bristled like a banty rooster, drawing himself upright. Rather grandly, he presented me with his arm.

"Come, Mrs. Fraser. You need not be exposed to the insulting gibes of this puppy." He glared at Wylie, red-eyed. "Allow me to escort you back to your husband."

Wylie's face underwent an instant transformation at the word "puppy," turning a deep, ugly red. So early in the morning, he was wearing neither paint nor powder, and the blotches of fury stood out like a rash on his fair skin. He seemed to swell noticeably, like an enraged frog.

I had a sudden urge to laugh hysterically, but nobly suppressed it. Biting my lip instead, I accepted the doctor's proffered arm. He came up roughly to my shoulder, but pivoted on his bare heel and marched us away with all the dignity of a brigadier.

Looking back over my shoulder, I saw Wylie still standing under the willow tree, staring after us. I lifted my hand and gave him a small wave of farewell. The light sparked from my gold ring, and I saw him stiffen further.

"I do hope we'll be in time for breakfast," Doctor Fentiman said cheerfully. "I believe I have quite recovered my appetite."

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SUSPICION

The guests began to depart after breakfast. Jocasta and Duncan stood together on the terrace, the very picture of a happily united couple, bidding everyone farewell, as a line of carriages and wagons made its slow way down the drive. Those folk from downriver waited on the quay, the women exchanging last-minute recipes and bits of gossip, while the gentlemen lit pipes and scratched themselves, relieved of their uncomfortable clothes and formal wigs. Their servants, all looking considerably the worse for wear, sat openmouthed and red-eyed on bundles of luggage.

"You look tired, Mama." Bree looked rather tired herself; she and Roger had both been up 'til all hours. A faint smell of camphor wafted from her clothes.

"Can't imagine why," I replied, stifling a yawn. "How's Jemmy this morning?"

"He's got a sniffle," she said, "but no fever. He ate some porridge for breakfast, and he's—"

I nodded, listened automatically, and went with her to examine Jemmy, who was cheerfully rambunctious, if runny-nosed, all in a slight daze of exhaustion. It reminded me of nothing so much as the sensation I had had now and then when flying from America to England. Jet lag, they called it; an odd feeling, of being conscious and lucid, and yet not quite solidly fixed within one's body.

The girl Gussie was watching Jemmy; she was as pale and bloodshot as everyone else on the premises, but I thought her air of dull suffering derived from emotional distress rather than hangover. All the slaves had been affected by Betty's death; they went about the chores of clearing up after the wedding festivities in near-silence, their faces shadowed.

"Are you feeling all right?" I asked her, when I had finished looking in Jemmy's ears and down his throat.

She looked startled, then confused; I wondered whether anyone had ever asked her that before.

"Oh. Oh, yes, Madam. Surely." She smoothed down her apron with both hands, clearly nervous at my scrutiny.

"All right. I'll just go and have a look at Phaedre, then."

I had come back to the house with Dr. Fentiman and turned him over to Ulysses, to be fed and tidied up. I had then gone directly to find Phaedre, taking time only to wash and change my clothes—not wanting to come to her so visibly smeared with her mother's blood.

I had found her in Ulysses's pantry, sitting numb and shocked on the stool where he sat to polish silver, a large glass of brandy by her side, undrunk. One of the other slaves, Teresa, was with her; she breathed a short sigh of relief at my appearance and came to greet me.

"She's none sae weel," Teresa muttered to me, shaking her head with a wary glance back at her charge. "She's no said a word, nor wept a drop."

Phaedre's beautiful face might have been carved of fruitwood; normally a delicate cinnamon, her complexion had faded to a pale, ligneous brown, and her eyes stared fixedly through the open door of the pantry at the blank wall beyond.

I put a hand on her shoulder; it was warm, but so motionless that she might have been a stone in the sun.

"I am sorry," I said to her, softly. "Very sorry. Dr. Fentiman came to her; he did all that he could." That was true; no point in giving an opinion of Fentiman's skill—it was irrelevant now, in any case.

No response. She was breathing; I could see the slight rise and fall of her bosom, but that was all.

I bit the inside of my lower lip, trying to think of anything or anyone that might possibly give her comfort. Jocasta? Did Jocasta even know of Betty's death yet? Duncan knew, of course, but he might have chosen not to tell her until after the guests had left.

"The priest," I said, the idea occurring suddenly to me. "Would you like Father LeClerc to—to bless your mother's body?" I thought it rather too late for Last Rites—assuming that Phaedre knew what those were—but I was sure that the priest would not mind offering any comfort he could. He had not left yet; I had seen him in the dining room only a few moments since, polishing off a platter of pork-chops garnished with fried eggs and gravy.

A slight tremor went through the shoulder under my hand. The still, beautiful face turned toward me, dark eyes opaque.

"What good will that do?" she whispered.

"Ah … well …" Flustered, I groped for a reply, but she had already turned away, staring at a stain in the wood of the table.

What I had done in the end was to give her a small dose of laudanum—an irony I resolutely ignored—and tell Teresa to put her to bed on the cot where she normally slept, in the dressing room off Jocasta's boudoir.

I pushed open the door of the dressing room now, to see how she was. The small room was windowless and dark, smelling of starch and burnt hair and the faint flower fragrance of Jocasta's toilet water. A huge armoire and its matching chiffonier stood at one side, a dressing table at the other. A folding screen marked off the far corner, and behind this was Phaedre's narrow cot.

I could hear her breathing, slow and deep, and felt reassured by that. I moved quietly through the dark room, and pulled back the screen a little; she lay on her side, turned away, curled into a ball with her knees drawn up.

Bree had come into the dressing room behind me; she looked over my shoulder, her breath warm on my ear. I made a small gesture indicating that everything was all right, and pushed the screen back into place.

Just inside the door to the boudoir, Brianna paused. She turned to me suddenly, put her arms about me, and hugged me fiercely. In the lighted room beyond, Jemmy missed her and began to shriek.

"Mama! Ma! Ma-MA!"

I thought I ought to eat something, but with the smell of the attic and the scent of toilet water still lingering in the back of my sinuses, I had no appetite. A few guests still lingered in the dining room; particular friends of Jocasta's, they would be staying on for a day or two. I nodded and smiled as I passed, but ignored the invitations to come and join them, instead heading for the stairs to the second floor.

The bedroom was empty, the mattresses stripped and the windows opened to air the room. The hearth had been swept and the room was cold, but blessedly quiet.

My own cloak still hung in the wardrobe. I lay down on the bare ticking, pulled the cloak over me, and fell instantly asleep.

I woke just before sunset, starving, with an oddly mixed sense of reassurance and unease. The reassurance I understood at once; the scent of blood and flowers had been replaced by one of shaving soap and body-warmed linen, and the pale gold light streaming through the window shone on the pillow beside me, where a long red-gold hair glinted in the hollow left by someone's head. Jamie had come and slept beside me.

As though summoned by my thought, the door opened and he smiled in at me. Shaved, combed, freshly dressed, and clear-eyed, he seemed to have erased all traces of the night before—bar the expression on his face when he looked at me. Frowsy and ill-kempt as I was by contrast with his own neat appearance, the look of tenderness in his eyes warmed me, in spite of the lingering chill in the room.

"Awake at last. Did ye sleep well, Sassenach?"

"Like the dead," I replied automatically, and felt a small internal lurch as I said it.

He saw it reflected on my face, and came swiftly to sit down on the bed beside me.

"What is it? Have ye had an evil dream, Sassenach?"

"Not exactly," I said slowly. In fact, I had no memory of having dreamed at all. And yet, my mind appeared to have been ticking away in the shadows of unconsciousness, making notes and drawing its deductions. Prompted now by the word "dead," it had just presented me with its conclusions, which accounted for the feeling of unease with which I had awoken.

"That woman Betty. Have they buried her yet?"

"No. They've washed the body and put it in a shed, but Jocasta wished to wait until the morning for the burial, so as not to trouble her guests. Some are staying on for another night." He frowned slightly, watching me. "Why?"

I rubbed a hand over my face, less to rouse myself than to collect my words.

"There's something wrong. About her death, I mean."

"Wrong … how?" One eyebrow lifted. "It was a fearful way to die, to be sure, but that's not what ye mean, is it?"

"No." My hands were cold; I reached automatically for his, and he took them, engulfing my fingers with warmth. "I mean—I don't believe it was a natural death. I think someone killed her."

Blurted out that way, the words hung cold and stark in the air between us.

His brows drew together, and he pursed his lips slightly, thinking. I noticed, though, that he did not reject the idea out of hand, and that strengthened my conviction.

"Who?" he asked at last. "And are ye sure of it, Sassenach?"

"I have no idea. And I can't be totally sure," I admitted. "It's only—" I hesitated, but he squeezed one of my hands lightly in encouragement. I shook my head. "I've been a nurse, a doctor, a healer, for a long time, Jamie. I've seen a dreadful number of people die, and from all sorts of things. I can't quite put into words what it is here, but now that I've slept on it, I just know—I think—it's wrong," I ended, rather lamely.

The light was fading; shadows were coming down from the corners of the room, and I shivered suddenly, gripping his hands.

"I see," he said softly. "But there's no way ye can tell for sure, is there?"

The window was still half-open; the curtains billowed suddenly into the room with a gust of wind, and I felt the hairs rise on my arms with cold.

“There might be,” I said.

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A HARD DAY'S NIGHT

The outbuilding where they had put the body was well away from the house—a small toolshed outside the kitchen garden. The waning moon was low in the sky, but still shed light enough to see the brick path through the garden; the espaliered fruit trees spread black as spiderwebs against the walls. Someone had been digging; I could smell the cold damp of recently turned earth, and shivered involuntarily at the hint of worms and mold.

Jamie felt it, and put a light hand on my back.

"All right, Sassenach?" he whispered.

"Yes." I gripped his free hand for reassurance. They would hardly be burying Betty in the kitchen garden; the digging must be for something prosaic, like an onion bed or a trench for early peas. The thought was comforting, though my skin still felt cold and thin, prickling with apprehensions.

Jamie himself was far from easy, though he was outwardly composed, as usual. He was no stranger to death, and had no great fear of it. But he was both Catholic and Celt, with a strong conviction of another, unseen world that lay past the dissolution of the body. He believed implicitly in *tannasgeach*—in spirits—and had no desire to meet one. Still, if I was determined, he would brave the otherworld for my sake; he squeezed my hand hard, and didn't let go.

I squeezed back, deeply grateful for his presence. Beyond the debatable question of how Betty's ghost might feel about my proposed plan of action, I knew that the notion of deliberate mutilation disturbed him deeply, however much his own intelligence might be convinced that a soulless body was no more than clay.

"To see men hacked to death on a battlefield is one thing," he'd said earlier in the evening, still arguing with me. "That's war, and it's honorable, cruel as it may be. But to take a blade and carve up a poor innocent like yon woman in cold blood …" He looked at me, eyes dark with troubled thought. "Ye're sure ye must do it, Claire?"

"Yes, I am," I had said, eyes fixed on the contents of the bag I was assembling. A large roll of lint wadding, to soak up fluids, small jars for organ samples, my largest bone saw, a couple of scalpels, a wicked pair of heavy-bladed shears, a sharp knife borrowed from the kitchen … it was a sinister-looking collection, to be sure. I wrapped the shears in a towel to prevent them clanking against the other implements, and put them in the bag, carefully marshaling my words.

"Look," I said at last, raising my eyes to meet his. "There's something wrong, I know it. And if Betty was killed, then surely we owe it to her to find that out. If you were murdered, wouldn't you want someone to do whatever they could to prove it? To—to avenge you?"

He stood still for a long moment, eyes narrowed in thought as he looked down at me. Then his face relaxed, and he nodded.

"Aye, I would," he said quietly. He picked up the bone saw, and began wrapping it with cloth.

He hadn't protested further. He hadn't asked me again whether I was sure. He had merely said firmly that if I was going to do it, he was coming with me, and that was all about it.

As for being sure, I wasn't. I did have an abiding feeling that something was very wrong about this death, but I was less confident in my sense of what it was, with the cold moon sinking through an empty sky and wind brushing my cheeks with the touch of icy fingers.

Betty might have died only by accident, not malice. I could be wrong; perhaps it was a simple hemorrhage of an esophageal ulcer, the bursting of an aneurysm in the throat, or some other physiological oddity. Unusual, but natural. Was I doing this, in fact, only to try to vindicate my faith in my own powers of diagnosis?

The wind belled my cloak and I pulled it tighter around me, one-handed, stiffening my spine. No. It wasn't a natural death, I knew it. I couldn't have said *how* I knew it, but fortunately Jamie hadn't asked me that.

I had a brief flash of memory; Joe Abernathy, a jovial smile of challenge on his face, reaching into a cardboard box full of bones, saying, "I just want to see can you do it to a dead person, Lady Jane?"

I could; I had. He had handed me a skull, and the memory of Geillis Duncan shuddered through me like liquid ice.

"Ye needna do it, Claire." Jamie's hand tightened on mine. "I willna think ye a coward." His voice was soft and serious, barely audible above the wind.

"I would," I said, and felt him nod. That was the matter settled, then; he let go of my hand and went ahead of me, to open the gate.

He paused, and my dark-adapted eyes caught the clean sharp line of his profile as he turned his head, listening. The dark-lantern he carried smelled hot and oily, and a faint gleam escaping from its pierced-work panel sprinkled the cloth of his cloak with tiny flecks of dim light.

I glanced round myself, and looked back at the house. Late as it was, candles still burned in the back parlor, where the card games lingered on; I caught a faint murmur of voices as the wind changed, and a sudden laugh. The upper floors were mostly dark—save one window which I recognized as Jocasta's.

"Your aunt's awake late," I whispered to Jamie. He turned and looked up at the house.

"Nay, it's Duncan," he said softly. "My aunt doesna need the light, after all."

"Perhaps he's reading to her in bed," I suggested, trying to leaven the solemnity of our errand. A small derisive huff came from Jamie, but the oppressive atmosphere did lift just a bit. He unlatched the gate and pushed it open, showing a square of utter black beyond. I turned my back on the friendly lights of the house and stepped through, feeling just a bit like Persephone entering the Underworld.

Jamie swung the gate to, and handed me the lantern.

"What are you doing?" I whispered, hearing the rustle of his clothing. It was so dark by the gate that I couldn't see him as more than a dark blur, but the faint sound that came next told me what he was doing.

"Pissing on the gateposts," he whispered back, stepping back and rustling further as he did up his breeks. "If we must, then we will, but I dinna want anything to be following us back to the house."

I made my own small huffing noise at that, but made no demur when he insisted upon repeating this ritual at the door to the shed. Imagination or not, the night seemed somehow inhabited, as though invisible things moved through the darkness, murmuring under the voice of the wind.

It was almost a relief to go inside, where the air was still, even though the scents of death mingled thickly with the dankness of rust, rotted straw, and mildewed wood. There was a faint rasp of metal as the dark-lantern's panel slid back, and a dazzling shaft of light fell over the confines of the shed.

They had laid the dead slave on a board across two trestles, already washed and properly laid out, wrapped in a rough muslin shroud. Beside her stood a small loaf of bread and a cup of brandy. A small posy of dried herbs, carefully twisted into a knot, lay on the shroud, just above the heart. Who had left those? I wondered. One of the other slaves, surely. Jamie crossed himself at the sight, and looked at me, almost accusingly.

"It's ill luck to touch grave goods."

"I'm sure it's only ill luck to take them," I assured him, low-voiced, though I crossed myself before taking the objects and putting them on the ground in a corner of the shed. "I'll put them back when I've finished."

"Mmphm. Wait just a moment, Sassenach. Dinna touch her yet."

He dug in the recesses of his cloak, and emerged with a tiny bottle. He uncorked this, and putting his fingers to the opening, poured out a little liquid, which he flicked over the corpse, murmuring a quick Gaelic prayer that I recognized as an invocation to St. Michael to protect us from demons, ghouls, and things that go bump in the night. Very useful.

"Is that holy water?" I asked, incredulous.

"Aye, of course. I got it from Father LeClerc." He made the sign of the Cross over the body, and laid his hand briefly on the draped curve of the head, before nodding reluctant approval for me to proceed.

I extracted a scalpel from my bag and slit the stitching on the shroud carefully. I'd brought a stout needle and waxed thread, to sew up the body cavity; with luck, I could also repair the shroud sufficiently that no one would realize what I'd been doing.

Her face was almost unrecognizable, round cheeks gone slack and sunken, and the soft bloom of her black skin faded to an ashy gray, the lips and ears a livid purple. That made it easier; it was clear that this was indeed only a shell, and not the woman I had seen before. That woman, if she was still in the vicinity, would have no objections, I thought.

Jamie made the sign of the Cross again and said something soft in Gaelic, then stood still, the lantern held high so that I could work by its light. The light threw his shadow on the wall of the shed, gigantic and eerie in the wavering flicker. I looked away from it, down to my work.

The most formal and sanitary of modern autopsies is simple butchery; this was no better—and worse only in the lack of light, water, and specialized tools.

"You needn't watch, Jamie," I said, standing back for a moment to wipe a wrist across my brow. Cold as it was in the shed, I was sweating from the heavy work of splitting the breastbone, and the air was thick with the ripe smells of an open body. "There's a nail on the wall; you could hang up the lantern, if you want to go out for a bit."

"I'm all right, Sassenach. What is that?" He leaned forward, pointing carefully. The look of disquiet on his features had been replaced by one of interest.

"The trachea and bronchi," I replied, tracing the graceful rings of cartilage, "and a bit of a lung. If you're all right, then can I have the light a little closer here, please?"

Lacking spreaders, I couldn't wrench the rib cage far enough apart to expose the complete lung on either side, but thought I could see enough to eliminate some possibilities. The surfaces of both lungs were black and grainy; Betty was in her forties, and had lived all her life with open wood fires.

"Anything nasty that you breathe in and don't cough up again—tobacco smoke, soot, smog, what-have-you—gradually gets shoved out between the lung tissue and the pleura," I explained, lifting a bit of the thin, half-transparent pleural membrane with the tip of my scalpel. "But the body can't get rid of it altogether, so it just stays there. A child's lung would be a nice clean pink."

"Do mine look like that?" Jamie stifled a small, reflexive cough. "And what is smog?"

"The air in cities like Edinburgh, where you get smoke mixing with fog off the water." I spoke abstractedly, grunting slightly as I pulled the ribs back, peering into the shadowed cavity. "Yours likely aren't so bad, since you've lived out of doors or in unheated places so much. Clean lungs are one compensation to living without fire."

"That's good to know, if ye've got no choice about it," he said. "Given the choice, I expect most folk would rather be warm and cough."

I didn't look up, but smiled, slicing through the upper lobe of the right lung.

"They would, and they do." No indication of hemorrhage in either lung; no blood in the airway; no evidence of pulmonary embolism. No pooling of blood in the chest or abdominal cavity, either, though I was getting some seepage. Blood will clot soon after death, but then gradually reliquefies.

"Hand me a bit more of the wadding, will you, please?" A little spotting of blood on the shroud likely wouldn't worry anyone, given the spectacular nature of Betty's demise, but I didn't want enough to make anyone sufficiently suspicious to check inside.

I leaned across to take the lint from his hand, inadvertently putting a hand on the corpse's side. The body emitted a low groan and Jamie leaped back with a startled exclamation, the light swinging wildly.

I had jumped, myself, but quickly recovered.

"It's all right," I said, though my heart was racing and the sweat on my face had gone suddenly cold. "It's only trapped gas. Dead bodies often make odd noises."

"Aye." Jamie swallowed and nodded, steadying the lantern. "Aye, I've seen it often. Takes ye a bit by surprise, though, doesn't it?" He smiled at me, lopsided, though a pale sheen of sweat gleamed on his forehead.

"It does that." It occurred to me that he had doubtless dealt with a good many dead bodies, all unembalmed, and was likely at least as familiar with the phenomena of death as I was. I set a cautious hand in the same place, but no further noises resulted, and I resumed my examination.

Another difference between this impromptu autopsy and the modern form was the lack of gloves. My hands were bloody to the wrist, and the organs and membranes had a faint but unpleasant feel of sliminess; cold though it was in the shed, the inexorable process of decomposition had started. I got a hand under the heart and lifted it toward the light, checking for gross discolorations of the surface, or visible ruptures of the great vessels.

"They move, too, now and then," Jamie said, after a minute. There was an odd tone to his voice, and I glanced up at him, surprised. His eyes were fixed on Betty's face, but with a remote look that made it plain he was seeing something else.

"Who moves?"

"Corpses."

Gooseflesh rippled up my forearms. He was right, though I thought he might have kept that particular observation to himself for the moment.

"Yes," I said, as casually as possible, looking back at my work. "Common postmortem phenomena. Usually just the movement of gases."

"I saw a dead man sit up once," he said, his tone as casual as my own.

"What, at a wake? He wasn't really dead?"

"No, in a fire. And he was dead enough."

I glanced up sharply. His voice was flat and matter-of-fact, but his face bore an inward look of deep abstraction; whatever he'd seen, he was seeing it again.

"After Culloden, the English burned the Highland dead on the field. We smelled the fires, but I didna see one, save when they took me out and put me in the wagon, to send me home."

He had lain hidden under a layer of hay, nose pressed to a crack in the boards in order to breathe. The wagon driver had taken a circuitous route off the field, to avoid any questions from troops near the farmhouse, and at one point, had stopped for a moment to wait for a group of soldiers to move away.

"There was a fresh pyre burning, perhaps ten yards away; they'd set it alight no more than a short time before, for the clothes had only just begun to char. I saw Graham Gillespie lyin' on the heap near me, and he was surely dead, for there was the mark of a pistol shot on his temple."

The wagon had waited for what seemed a long time, though it was hard to tell, through the haze of pain and fever. But as he watched, he had seen Gillespie suddenly sit up amid the flames, and turn his head.

"He was lookin' straight at me," he said. "Had I been in my right mind, I expect I would ha' let out a rare skelloch. As it was, it only seemed … friendly of Graham." There was a hint of uneasy amusement in his voice. "I thought he was perhaps tellin' me it wasna so bad, being dead. That, or welcoming me to hell, maybe."

"Postmortem contracture," I said, absorbed in the excavation of the digestive system. "Fire makes the muscles contract, and the limbs often twist into very lifelike positions. Can you bring the light closer?"

I had the esophagus pulled free, and carefully slit the length of it, turning back the flabby tissue. There was some irritation toward the lower end, and there was blood in it, but no sign of rupture or hemorrhage. I bent, squinting up into the pharyngeal cavity, but it was too dark to see much there. I was in no way equipped for detailed exploration, so instead returned my examinations to the other end, slipping a hand under the stomach and lifting it up.

I felt a sharpening of the sense of wrongness that I had had through this whole affair. If there was something amiss, this was the most likely place to find evidence of it. Logic as well as sixth sense said as much.

There was no food in the stomach; after such vomiting that was hardly surprising. When I cut through the heavy muscular wall, though, the sharp scent of ipecac cut through the reek of the body.

"What?" Jamie leaned forward at my exclamation, frowning at the body.

"Ipecac. That quack dosed her with ipecac—and recently! Can you smell it?"

He grimaced with distaste, but took a cautious sniff, and nodded.

"Would that not be a proper thing to do, when you've a person wi' a curdled wame? Ye gave wee Beckie MacLeod ipecacuanha yourself, when she'd drunk your blue stuff."

"True enough." Five-year-old Beckie had drunk half a bottle of the arsenic decoction I made to poison rats, attracted by the pale blue color, and evidently not at all put off by the taste. Well, the rats liked it, too. "But I did that right away. There's no point in giving it hours afterward, when the poison or irritant has already passed out of the stomach."

Given Fentiman's state of medical knowledge, though, would he have known that? He might simply have administered ipecac again because he could think of nothing else to do. I frowned, turning back the heavy wall of the stomach. Yes, this was the source of the hemorrhage; the inner wall was raw-looking, dark red as ground meat. There was a small amount of liquid in the stomach; clear lymph that had begun to separate from the clotted blood left in the body.

"So you're thinking that it was maybe the ipecac that killed her?"

"I was … but now I'm not so sure," I murmured, probing carefully. It had occurred to me that if Fentiman had given Betty a heavy dose of ipecac, the violent vomiting provoked by it might have caused an internal rupture and hemorrhage—but I wasn't finding any evidence of that. I used the scalpel to slit the stomach further open, pulling back the edges, and opening the duodenum.

"Can you hand me one of the small empty jars? And the wash bottle, please?"

Jamie hung the lantern on the nail and obligingly knelt to rummage through the bag, while I rummaged further through the stomach. There was some granular material forming a pale sludge in the furrows of the rugae. I scraped gingerly at it, finding that it came free easily, a thick, gritty paste between my fingertips. I wasn't sure what it was, but a suspicion was growing unpleasantly in the back of my mind. I meant to flush the stomach, collect the residue, and take it back to the house, where I could examine it in a decent light, come morning. If it was what I thought—

Without warning, the door of the shed swung open. A whoosh of cold air made the flame of the lantern burn suddenly high and bright—bright enough to show me Phillip Wylie's face, pale and shocked in the frame of the doorway.

He stared at me, his mouth hanging slightly open, then closed it and swallowed; I heard the sound of it clearly. His eyes traveled slowly over the scene, then returned to my face, wide pools of horror.

I was shocked, too. My heart had leapt into my throat, and my hands had frozen, but my brain was racing.

What would happen if he caused an outcry? It would be the most dreadful scandal, whether I was able to explain what I was doing, or not. If not—fear rippled over me in a chilly wave. I had come close to being burned for witchcraft once before; and that was one time too often.

I felt a slight movement of the air near my feet, and realized that Jamie was crouched in the deep shadow below the table. The light of the lantern was bright, but limited; I stood in a pool of darkness that reached to my waist. Wylie hadn't seen him. I reached out a toe and nudged him, as a signal to stay put.

I forced myself to smile at Phillip Wylie, though my heart was stuck firmly in my throat, and beating wildly. I swallowed hard and said the first thing that came into my mind, which happened to be "Good evening."

He licked his lips. He was wearing neither patch nor powder at the moment, but was quite as pale as the muslin sheet.

"Mrs.… Fraser," he said, and swallowed again. "I—er—what *are* you doing?"

I should have thought that was reasonably obvious; presumably his question had to do with the reasons why I was doing it—and I had no intention of going into those.

"Never you mind that," I said crisply, recovering a bit of nerve. "What are *you* doing, skulking round the place at dead of night?"

Evidently that was a good question; his face shifted at once from open horror to wariness. His head twitched, as though to turn and look over his shoulder. He stopped the motion before it was completed, but my eyes followed the direction of it. There was a man standing in the darkness behind him; a tall man who now stepped forward, his face glimmering pale in the glow of the lantern, sardonic eyes the green of gooseberries. Stephen Bonnet.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said.

A number of things happened at that point: Jamie came out from under the table with a rush like a striking cobra, Phillip Wylie leaped back from the door with a startled cry, and the lantern crashed from its nail to the floor. There was a strong smell of splattered oil and brandy, a soft *whoosh* like a furnace lighting, and the crumpled shroud was burning at my feet.

Jamie was gone; there were shouts from the darkness outside, and the sound of running feet on brick. I kicked at the burning fabric, meaning to stamp it out.

Then I thought better, and instead lunged against the table, knocking it over and dumping its contents. I seized the blazing shroud with one hand and dragged it over corpse and upturned table. The floor of the shed was thick with sawdust, already burning in spots. I kicked the shattered lantern hard, knocking it into the dry boards of the wall, and spilling out the rest of its oil, which ignited at once.

There were shouts from the kitchen garden, voices calling in alarm; I had to get out. I seized my bag and fled, red-handed, into the night, my fist still clenched tight about the evidence. It was the one point of certainty in the prevailing chaos. I had no notion what was going on, or what might happen next, but at least I knew for sure that I was right. Betty had indeed been murdered.

There were a pair of agitated servants in the kitchen garden, apparently wakened by the disturbance. They were casting round in a haphazard manner, calling out to each other, but with no light but that of the fading moon, it was an easy matter to keep to the shadows and slip past them.

No one had come out of the main house yet, but the shouts and flames were going to attract attention soon. I crouched against the wall, in the shadows of a huge raspberry cane, as the gate flung open and two more slaves came rushing through from the stable, half-dressed and incoherent, shouting something about the horses. The smell of burning was strong in the air; no doubt they thought the stable was on fire, or about to be.

My heart was pounding so hard against the inside of my chest that I could feel it, like a fist. I had an unpleasant vision of the flaccid heart I had just held in my hand, and of what my own must look like now—a dark red knob of slick muscle, pulsing and thumping, battering mindlessly away in its neatly socketed cave between the lungs.

The lungs weren't working nearly so well as the heart; my breath came short and hard, in gasps that I tried to stifle for fear of detection. What if they dragged Betty's desecrated body from the shed? They wouldn't know who had been responsible for the mutilation, but the discovery would cause the most fearful outcry, with resultant wild rumors and public hysteria.

A glow was visible now above the far wall of the kitchen garden; the roof of the shed was beginning to burn, fire-glow showing in brilliant thin lines as the pine shingles began to smoke and curl.

Sweat was prickling behind my ears, but my breath came a little easier when I saw the slaves standing by the far gate in a knot, bunched together in awed silhouette. Of course—they wouldn't try to put it out, well caught as it was. The nearest water was in the horse troughs; by the time buckets were fetched, the shed would be well on its way to ashes. There was nothing near it that would burn. Best to let it go.

Smoke purled up in quickening billows, high into the air. Knowing what was in the shed, it was much too easy to imagine spectral shapes in the transparent undulations. Then the fire broke through the roof, and tongues of flame lit the smoke from below in an eerie, beautiful glow.

A high-pitched wail broke from behind me, and I started back, banging my elbow against the brick wall. Phaedre had come through the gate, Gussie and another female slave behind her. She ran through the garden, screaming "Mama!" as her white shift caught the light of the flames that now burst through holes in the shed's roof, showering sparks.

The men by the gate caught her; the women hurried after, reaching for her, calling out in agitation. I tasted blood in my mouth, and realized that I had bitten my lower lip. I closed my eyes convulsively, trying not to hear Phaedre's frantic cries and the antiphonal babble of her comforters.

A frightful sense of guilt washed over me. Her voice was so like Bree's, and I could imagine so clearly what Bree might feel, were it my own body, burning in that shed. But there were worse things Phaedre might feel, had I not let loose the fire. My hands were shaking from cold and tension, but I groped for my bag, which I had dropped on the ground at my feet.

My hands felt stiff and dreadful, gummy with drying blood and lymph. I mustn't—*mustn't*—be found this way. I fumbled in the sack with my free hand, finally coming up by feel with a lidded jar, normally used to keep leeches, and the small wash bottle of dilute alcohol and water.

I couldn't see, but felt blood crack and flake away as I opened my cramped fingers and gingerly scraped the contents of my hand into the jar. I couldn't grip the cork of the bottle with my shaking fingers; finally I pulled it out with my teeth, and poured the alcohol over my open palm, washing the rest of the grainy residue into the jar.

The house had been roused now; I could hear voices coming from that direction. What was going on? Where was Jamie—and where were Bonnet and Phillip Wylie? Jamie had not been armed with anything save a bottle of holy water; were either of the others? I had heard no shots, at least—but blades made no noise.

I rinsed both hands hastily with the rest of the wash bottle, and dried them on the dark lining of my cloak, where the smears wouldn't show. People were running back and forth through the garden, shadows flitting along the walkways like phantoms, mere feet from my hiding place. Why did they make no noise? Were they truly people, or shades, somehow roused by my sacrilege?

Then one figure shouted; another replied. I realized dimly that the running people made no sound on the bricks because they were barefoot and because my ears were ringing. My face was tingling with cold sweat, my hands far more numb than chill would account for.

You idiot, Beauchamp, I thought to myself. *You're going to faint. Sit down*!

I must have managed to do so, for I came to myself a few moments later, sprawled in the dirt under the raspberry canes, half-leaning against the wall. The kitchen garden seemed full of people by now; jostling pale shapes of guests and servants, indistinguishable as ghosts in their shifts.

I waited for the space of a few breaths, to be sure I was recovered, then lurched awkwardly to my feet and stepped out onto the dark path, bag in hand.

The first person I saw was Major MacDonald, standing on the path watching the shed burn, his white wig gleaming in the light from the fire. I gripped him by the arm, startling him badly.

"What is happening?" I said, not bothering to apologize.

"Where is your husband?" he said in the same moment, peering round me in search of Jamie.

"I don't know," I said, all too truthfully. "I'm looking for him."

"Mrs. Fraser! Are you all right, dear lady?" Lloyd Stanhope popped up by my elbow, looking like a very animated boiled egg in his nightshirt, his polled head startlingly round and pale without his wig.

I assured him that I was quite all right, which I was, by now. It wasn't until I saw Stanhope and noticed that most of the other gentlemen present were in a similar state of dishabille that I realized the Major was fully clothed, from wig to buckled shoes. My face must have changed as I looked at him, for I saw his brows raise and his gaze run from my bound hair to my shod feet, as he quite obviously noticed the same thing about me.

"I heard shouts of 'Fire!' and thought someone might be hurt," I said coolly, lifting the bag. "I've brought my medical kit. Is everyone all right, do you know?"

"So far as I—" MacDonald began, but then sprang back in alarm, grasping my arm and dragging me back, too. The roof gave way with a deep sighing noise, and sparks plumed high, showering down among the crowd in the garden.

Everyone gasped and cried out, falling back. Then there came one of those brief, inexplicable pauses when everyone in a crowd falls suddenly silent at once. The fire was still burning, with a noise like crumpling paper, but over it I could hear a distant shouting. It was a woman's voice, high and cracked, but strong for all that, and full of fury.

"Mrs. Cameron!" Stanhope exclaimed, but the Major was already making for the house at a run.

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THE FRENCHMAN’S GOLD

We found Jocasta Cameron Innes on the window seat in her room, clad in her chemise, bound hand and foot with strips of bed linen, and absolutely scarlet-faced with fury. I had no time to take further note of her condition, for Duncan Innes, clad for the night in nothing but his shirt, was lying sprawled on his face on the floor near the hearth.

I rushed over and knelt by him at once, searching for a pulse.

“Is he dead?” The Major peered over my shoulder, evidencing more curiosity than sympathy.

“No,” I said briefly. “Get these people out of here, will you?” The chamber was crammed with guests and servants, all exclaiming over the newly freed Jocasta, expostulating, speculating, and generally making bloody nuisances of themselves. The Major blinked at my peremptory tone, but retired without demur to deal with the situation.

Duncan was certainly alive, and a cursory examination showed me no injury beyond a large lump behind one ear; evidently, he had been clubbed with the heavy silver candlestick which lay beside him on the floor. He had a nasty color, but his pulse was fairly good, and he was breathing evenly. I thumbed open his eyelids, one at a time, and bent close to check his pupils. They stared back at me, glazed, but the same size and not abnormally dilated. So far, so good.

Behind me, the Major was making good use of his military experience, barking orders in a parade-ground voice. Since most of those present were not soldiers, this was having a limited effect.

Jocasta Cameron was having a much greater one. Released from her bonds, she staggered across the room, leaning heavily on Ulysses's arm, parting the crowd like the waves of the Red Sea.

"Duncan! Where is my husband?" she demanded, turning her head from side to side, blind eyes fierce. People gave way before her, and she reached my side in seconds.

"Who is there?" Her hand swept in a flat arc before her, searching for position.

"It's me—Claire." I reached up to touch her hand, guiding her down beside me. Her own fingers were chilled and trembling, and there were deep red marks on her wrists from the bonds. "Don't worry; I think Duncan will be all right."

She put out a hand, seeking to see for herself, and I guided her fingers to his throat, setting them on the big vein I could see pulsing at the side of his neck. She uttered a small exclamation and leaned forward, putting both hands on his face, tracing his features with an anxious tenderness that quite moved me, so at odds as it was with her normal autocratic mien.

"They struck him … is he badly hurt?"

"I think not," I assured her. "Only a knock on the head."

"Are you quite sure?" Her face turned toward me, frowning, and her sensitive nostrils flared. "I smell blood."

With a small shock, I realized that while my hands were mostly clean, my fingernails were still heavily ringed with dark blood from the impromptu autopsy. I repressed the urge to curl my hands, instead murmuring discreetly, "That's me, I expect; my courses." Major MacDonald was glancing curiously in our direction; had he heard her?

There was a stir at the doorway, and I turned. To my immense relief, it was Jamie. He was disheveled, his coat was torn, and he sported what looked like the beginnings of a black eye, but otherwise appeared undamaged.

My relief must have shown on my face, for his grim look softened a little, and he nodded as he met my eye. Then it hardened again, as he saw Duncan. He dropped to one knee beside me.

"He's all right," I said, before he could ask. "Someone hit him on the head and tied up your aunt."

"Aye? Who?" He glanced up at Jocasta, and laid a hand on Duncan's chest, as though to reassure himself that Duncan was indeed still breathing.

"I havena the slightest notion," she replied crisply. "If I had, I should have sent men to hunt the ill-deedie shargs down by now." Her lips tightened into a thin line, and the high color surged back into her face at thought of the assailants. "Did no one see the rascals?"

"I think not, Aunt," Jamie replied calmly. "With such a boiling in the house, no one kens what to look for, aye?"

I raised one eyebrow at him in silent question. What did he mean by that? Had Bonnet got away? For surely it must have been Bonnet who had invaded Jocasta's chamber; boiling or no, there couldn't be multiple violent criminals at large on the same night in a place the size of River Run.

Jamie shook his head briefly. He glanced at my hands, saw the blood under my nails, and raised an eyebrow of his own. Had I discovered anything? Had there been time for me to be sure? I nodded, and a slight shudder went over me; yes, I knew.

Murder, I mouthed to him.

He squeezed my arm in quick reassurance, and glanced over his shoulder; the Major had at last succeeded in pushing most of the crowd out into the hallway, sending the servants for restoratives and refreshments, a groom for the Sheriff in Cross Creek, the men out to search the grounds for possible miscreants, and the ladies down to the salon in a flutter of excited puzzlement. The Major closed the door firmly behind them, then came briskly over to us.

"Shall we get him onto the bed, then?"

Duncan was beginning to stir and groan. He coughed and gagged a little, but fortunately didn't throw up. Jamie and Major MacDonald got him up, limp arms about their shoulders, and conveyed him to the big four-poster, where they laid him down with complete disregard for the quilted silk coverlet.

With a faint atavistic sense of housewifeliness, I tucked a soft green velvet pillow under his head. It was filled with bran, but crackled faintly under my hand and gave off a strong scent of lavender. Lavender was good for headache, all right, but I wasn't sure it was quite up to this.

"Where is Phaedre?"

Ulysses had guided Jocasta to her chair, and she sank back in its leather depths, looking suddenly exhausted and old. The color had left her face along with her rage, and her white hair was coming down in straggles round her shoulders.

"I sent Phaedre to bed, Auntie." Bree had come in, unnoticed in the scrum, and had resisted removal by the Major. She bent over Jocasta, touching her hand with solicitude. "Don't worry; I'll take care of you."

Jocasta put her own hand over Bree's in gratitude, but sat up straighter, looking puzzled.

"Sent her to bed? Why? And what in God's name is burning?" She jerked bolt upright, alarmed. "Are the stables afire?" The wind had changed, and the night air was streaming in through a broken pane above the window seat, heavy with the scent of smoke and a faint, dreadful smell of burned flesh.

"No, no! The stables are fine. Phaedre was upset," Bree explained, with some delicacy. "The shed by the kitchen garden seems to have burned down; her mother's body …"

Jocasta's face went quite blank for a moment. Then she drew herself up, and an extraordinary look came into her face, something almost like satisfaction, though with a tinge of puzzlement.

Jamie was standing behind me. He evidently saw it, too, for I heard him give a soft grunt.

"Are ye somewhat recovered, Aunt?" he asked.

She turned her face toward him, one eyebrow lifted in sardonic reply.

"I shall be the better for a dram," she said, accepting the cup that Ulysses set deftly into her hands. "But aye, nephew, I'm well enough. Duncan, though?"

I was sitting by Duncan on the bed, his wrist in my hand, and could feel him coming toward the surface of consciousness, eyelids fluttering and fingers twitching slightly against my palm.

"He's coming round," I assured her.

"Give him brandy, Ulysses," Jocasta commanded, but I stopped the butler with a shake of my head.

"Not quite yet. He'll choke."

"Do ye feel yourself equal to telling us what happened, Aunt?" Jamie asked, with a noticeable edge to his voice. "Or must we wait for Duncan to come to himself?"

Jocasta sighed, closing her eyes briefly. She was as good as all the MacKenzies at hiding what she thought, but in this case, it was evident at least that she *was* thinking, and furiously, at that. The tip of her tongue flicked out, touching a raw spot at the corner of her mouth, and I realized that she must have been gagged as well as bound.

I could feel Jamie behind me, seething with some strong feeling. Near as he was, I could hear his stiff fingers drumming softly on the bedpost. Much as I wanted to hear Jocasta's story, I wanted even more to be alone with Jamie, to tell him what I had discovered, and to find out what had happened in the darkness of the kitchen garden.

Outside, voices murmured in the hall; not all the guests had dispersed. I caught muffled phrases—"quite burnt up, nothing left but the bones," "… stolen? Don't know …" "… check the stables," "Yes, completely burned …" A deep shiver struck me, and I gripped Duncan's hand hard, fighting a panic that I did not understand. I must have looked odd, for Bree said softly, "Mama?" She was looking at me, brow creased with worry. I tried to smile at her, but my lips felt stiff.

Jamie's hands settled on my shoulders, large and warm. I had been holding my breath without realizing it; at his touch, I let it out in a small gasp, and breathed again. Major MacDonald glanced curiously at me, but his attention was at once deflected by Jocasta, who opened her eyes and turned her face in his direction.

"It is Major MacDonald, is it not?"

“At your service, Mum.” The Major made an automatic bow, forgetting—as folk often did—that she could not see him.

“I thank ye for your gallant service, Major. My husband and I are most indebted to ye.”

The Major made a politely dismissive sound.

“No, no,” she insisted, straightening up and brushing back her hair with one hand. “Ye’ve been put to great trouble on our account, and we must not impose further on your kindness. Ulysses—take the Major down to the parlor and find him proper refreshment.”

The butler bowed obsequiously—I noticed for the first time that he was dressed in a nightshirt over unbuckled breeches, though he had clapped his wig on his head—and ushered the Major firmly toward the door. MacDonald looked ludicrously surprised and not a little disgruntled at being given the push in this civilized fashion, he having quite obviously intended to stay and hear all the gory details. Still, there was no graceful way of resisting, and he made the best of it, bowing in a dignified manner as he took his leave.

The panic had begun to recede, as bafflingly as it had come. Jamie’s hands radiated a warmth that seemed to spread through my body, and my breath came easily again. I was able to focus my attention on my patient, who had got his eyes open, though he seemed to be regretting it.

“Och, *mo cheann*!” Duncan squinted against the glow of the lamp, focusing with some difficulty on my face, then rising to Jamie’s behind me. “*Mac Dubh*—what’s come amiss?”

One of Jamie’s hands left my shoulder, and reached down to tighten on Duncan’s arm.

“Dinna fash yourself, *a charaid*.” He glanced meaningfully at Jocasta. “Your wife is just about to tell us what has happened. Are ye not, Aunt?”

There was a slight but definite emphasis on the “not,” and Jocasta, thus put on the spot, pursed her lips, but then sighed and sat straight, plainly resigned to the unpleasant necessity of confidence.

“There is no one here but family?”

Being assured that there was not, she nodded, and began.

She had sent away her maid, and been on the point of retiring, she said, when the door from the hall had suddenly opened to admit what she thought were two men.

"I am sure there was more than one—I heard their footsteps, and breathing," she said, frowning in concentration. "There *might* have been three, but I think not. Only one of them spoke, though. I think the other must have been someone I ken, for he stayed far away, quite at the end of the room, as though he were afraid I should recognize him by some means."

The man who had spoken to her was a stranger; she was positive that she had never heard his voice before.

"He was an Irishman," she said, and Jamie's hand tightened abruptly on my shoulder. "Well enough spoken, but not a gentleman, by any means." Her nostrils flared a little, with unconscious disdain.

"No, hardly that," Jamie said, under his breath. Bree had started slightly at the word "Irishman," though her face bore no more than a slight frown of concentration as she listened.

The Irishman had been polite, but blunt in his demands; he wanted the gold.

"Gold?" It was Duncan who spoke, but the question was plain on everyone's face. "What gold? We've no money in the house save a few pounds sterling and a bit of the Proclamation money."

Jocasta's lips pressed tight. There was no help for it, though; not now. She made a small growling noise in her throat, an inarticulate protest at being compelled to give up the secret she had kept for so long.

"The Frenchman's gold," she said, abruptly.

"What?" said Duncan in bewilderment. He touched the lump behind his ear, gingerly, as though convinced it had affected his hearing.

"The French gold," Jocasta repeated, rather irritably. "That was sent, just before Culloden."

"Before—" Bree began, wide-eyed, but Jamie interrupted her.

"Louis's gold," he said softly. "That's what ye mean, Aunt? The Stuarts' gold?"

Jocasta uttered a short laugh, quite without humor.

"Once it was."

She paused, listening. The voices had moved away from the door, though there were still noises in the hallway. She turned toward Bree, and motioned toward the door.

"Go and see that no one's got his lug to the keyhole, lass. I havena held my peace these twenty-five years only to spill it to the whole county."

Bree opened the door briefly, peered out, then closed it, reporting that no one was near.

"Good. Come ye here, lass. Sit by me. But no—first, fetch me the case I showed ye yesterday."

Looking more than puzzled, Bree vanished into the dressing room, returning with a slender case of worn black leather. She laid it in Jocasta's lap and settled onto a stool beside her aunt, giving me a look of faint concern.

I was feeling quite myself again, though a faint echo of that odd fear still rang in my bones. I nodded reassuringly to Bree, though, and bent to give Duncan a sip of watered brandy. I knew what it was now, that ancient distress. It was that phrase overheard, the words by chance the same that a small girl had once heard spoken, whispered in the next room by the strangers who had come to say her mother would not be coming back, that she had died. An accident; a crash; fire. *Burnt to bones,* the voice had said, filled with the awe of it. *Burnt to bones,* and the desolation of a daughter, forever abandoned. My hand trembled, and the cloudy liquid ran in a trickle down Duncan's chin.

But that was long ago, and in another country, I thought, steeling myself against the riptide of memory.

And besides …

Jocasta drained her own cup, set it down with a small thump, and opened the case in her lap. A gleam of gold and diamonds showed inside, and she lifted out a slender wooden rod that held three rings.

"I had three daughters, once," she said. "Three girls. Clementina, Seonag, and Morna." She touched one of the rings, a wide band, set with three large diamonds.

"This was for my girls; Hector gave it to me when Morna was born. She was his, Morna—you know it means 'beloved'?" Her other hand left the box and stretched out, groping. She touched Bree's cheek, and Bree took the hand, cradling it between her own.

"I had one living child of each marriage." Jocasta's long fingers probed delicately, touching each ring in turn. "Clementina belonged to John Cameron; him I wed when I myself was little more than a child; I bore her at sixteen. Seonag was the daughter of Black Hugh—she was dark, like her sire, but she had my brother Colum's eyes." She turned her own blind eyes toward Jamie, briefly, then bent her head back, touching the ring with three diamonds again.

"And then Morna, my last child. She was but sixteen when she died."

The old woman's face was bleak, but the line of her mouth softened, speaking the names of her vanished girls.

"I'm sorry, Aunt." Bree spoke softly. She bent her head to kiss the knuckles of the hand she cradled, knobbed with age. Jocasta tightened her hand a little in acknowledgment, but did not mean to be distracted from her story.

"Hector Cameron gave me this," Jocasta said, touching the ring. "And he killed them all. My children, my daughters. He killed them for the Frenchman's gold."

The shock of it took my breath and hollowed my stomach. I felt Jamie go still behind me, and saw Duncan's bloodshot eyes go wide. Brianna didn't change expression. She closed her eyes for a moment, but still held on to the long bony hand.

"What happened to them, Aunt?" she said quietly. "Tell me."

Jocasta was silent for a few moments. So was the room; there was no sound save the hiss of beeswax burning, and the faint asthmatic wheeze of her breath. To my surprise, when she spoke again, it wasn't to Brianna. Instead, she lifted her head and turned again toward Jamie.

"You know about the gold, then, *a mhic mo pheathar?*" she said. If he found this a strange question, he gave no sign of it, but answered calmly.

"I have heard something of it," he said. He moved, coming round the bed to sit beside me, closer to his aunt. "It has been a rumor in the Highlands, ever since Culloden. Louis would send gold, they said, to help his cousin in his holy fight. And then they said the gold had come, yet no man saw it."

"I saw it." Jocasta's wide mouth, so like her nephew's, widened further in a sudden grimace, then relaxed. "I saw it," she repeated.

"Thirty thousand pound, in gold bullion. I was with them the night it came ashore, rowed in from the French ship. It was in six small chests, each one so heavy that only two at a time could be brought, else the boat would sink. Each chest had the fleur-de-lis carved on the lid, each one bound with iron bands and a lock, each lock itself sealed with red wax, and the wax bore the print of King Louis's ring. The *fleur-de-lis*."

A sigh ran through us all at the words, a collective breath of awe. Jocasta nodded slowly, blind eyes open to the sights of that night long past.

"Where was it brought ashore, Aunt?" Jamie asked softly.

She nodded slowly, as though to herself, eyes fixed on the scene her memory painted.

"On Innismaraich," she said. "A tiny isle, just off Coigach."

I had been holding my breath. Now I let it out, slowly, and met Jamie's eyes. Innismaraich. Island of the Sea-people; the silkies' isle, it meant. We knew that place.

"There were the three men trusted with it," she said. "Hector was one, my brother Dougal was another—the third man was masked; they all were, but of course I kent Hector and Dougal. I didna ken the third man, nor did any of them speak his name. I knew his servant, though; a man named Duncan Kerr."

Jamie had stiffened slightly at Dougal's name; at the name of Duncan Kerr he froze.

"There were servants, too?" he asked.

"Two," she said, and a faint, bitter smile twisted her mouth. "The masked man brought Duncan Kerr, as I said, and my brother Dougal had a man with him from Leoch—I kent his face, but not his name. Hector had me to help him; I was a braw, strong woman—like you, *a leannan,* like you," she said softly, squeezing Brianna's hand. "I was strong, and Hector trusted me as he could trust no other. I trusted him, too—then."

The noises from outside had died away, but a breeze through the broken pane stirred the curtains, uneasy as a ghost that hears its name called from a distance.

"There were three boats. The chests were small, but heavy enough that it took two persons to carry one between them. We took two chests into our boat, Hector and I, and we rowed away, into the fog. I could hear the splash of the others' oars, growing fainter as they drew away, and then lost in the night."

"When was this, Aunt?" Jamie asked, his eyes intent on her. "When did the gold come from France?"

"Too late," she whispered. "Much too late. Damn Louis!" she exclaimed, with a sudden fierceness that brought her upright in her seat. "Damn the wicked Frenchman, and may his eyes rot as mine have! To think what might have been, had he been true to his blood and his word!"

Jamie's eyes met mine, sidelong. Too late. Had the gold come sooner—when Charles landed at Glenfinnan, perhaps, or when he took Edinburgh, and for a few brief weeks held the city as a king returned—what then?

The ghost of a smile touched Jamie's lips with ruefulness, and he glanced at Brianna, then back at me, the question asked and answered in his eyes. What, then?

"It was March," Jocasta said, recovering from her outburst. "A freezing night, but clear as ice. I stood upon the cliff and looked far out to sea, and the path of the moon lay like gold on the water. The ship came sailing in upon that golden path, like a king to his coronation, and I did think it a sign." Her head turned toward Jamie, and her mouth twisted abruptly.

"I did think I heard him laughing, then," she said. "Black Brian. Him who took my sister from me. It would have been like him. But he was not there; I suppose it was only the barking of the silkies."

I was watching Jamie as she spoke. He didn't move, but like magic, the reddish hairs on his forearm rose, glinting like wires in the candlelight.

"I didna ken ye knew my father," he said, a faint edge to his voice. "But let that be for now, Aunt. It was March, ye say?"

She nodded.

"Too late," she repeated. "It was meant to have come two months before, Hector said. There were delays …"

It *had* been too late. In January, after the victory at Falkirk, such a show of support from France might have been decisive. But in March, the Highland Army was already moving north, turned back at Derby from its invasion of England. The last slim chance of victory had been lost, and Charles Stuart's men were marching then toward destruction at Culloden.

With the chests safe ashore, the new guardians of the gold had conferred over what to do with the treasure. The army was moving, and Stuart with it; Edinburgh was once more in the hands of the English. There was no safe place to take it, no trustworthy hands into which it could be delivered.

"They didna trust O'Sullivan or the others near the Prince," Jocasta explained. "Irishmen, Italians … Dougal said he hadna gone to so much trouble, only to have the gold squandered or stolen by foreigners." She smiled, a little grimly. "He meant he didna want to chance losing the credit for having got it."

The three keepers had been no more willing to trust one another than the Prince's advisers. Most of the night had been spent in argument in the bleak upper room of a desolate tavern, while Jocasta and the two servants slept on the floor, among the red-sealed chests. Finally, the gold had been divided; each man had taken two of the chests, swearing on his blood to keep the secret and hold the treasure faithfully, in trust for his rightful monarch, King James.

"They made the two servants swear as well," Jocasta said. "They cut each man, and the drops of blood shone redder in the candlelight than the wax seals on the chests."

"Did you swear, too?" Brianna spoke quietly, but her eyes were intent on the white-haired figure in the chair.

"No, I didna swear." Jocasta's lips, still finely shaped, curved slightly, as though amused. "I was Hector's wife; his oath bound me. Then."

Uneasy in possession of so much wealth, the conspirators had left the tavern before dawn, bundling the chests in blankets and rags to hide them.

"A pair of travelers rode in, as the last of the chests was brought down. It was their coming that saved the innkeeper's life, for it was a lonely spot, and he the only witness to our presence there that night. I think Dougal and Hector would not have thought to do such a thing—but the third man, he meant to dispose of the landlord; I saw it in his eyes, in the crouch of his body as he waited near the bottom of the stair, his hand on his dirk. He saw me watching—he smiled at me, beneath his mask."

"And did he never unmask, this third man?" Jamie asked. His ruddy brows drew together as though by sheer concentration he could recreate the scene she saw in her mind's eye, and identify the stranger.

She shook her head.

"No. I asked myself, now and then, when I thought of that night, would I know the man again, did I see him. I thought I would; he was dark, a slender man, but with a strength in him like knife steel. Could I see his eyes again, I would be sure of it. But now …" She shrugged. "Would I ken him by his voice alone? I canna say, so long ago it was."

"But he wasna by any means an Irishman, this man?" Duncan was still pale and clammy-looking, but had raised himself on one elbow, listening with deep absorption.

Jocasta started a little, as though she had forgotten his presence.

"Ah! No, *a dhuine*. A Scot by his speech—a Highland gentleman."

Duncan and Jamie exchanged glances.

"A MacKenzie or a Cameron?" Duncan asked softly, and Jamie nodded.

"Or perhaps one of the Grants."

I understood their half-voiced speculations. There were—had been—a staggeringly complex array of associations and feuds among the Highland clans, and there were many who would not—could not—have cooperated in an undertaking of such importance and secrecy.

Colum MacKenzie had negotiated a close alliance with the Camerons; in fact, Jocasta herself had been part of that alliance, her marriage to a Cameron chief the token of it. If Dougal MacKenzie was one of the men who had engineered the receipt of the French gold, and Hector Cameron another, it was odds-on that the third man had been someone from one of those clans, or from another trusted by both. MacKenzie, Cameron … or Grant. And if Jocasta had not known the man by sight, the odds on his being a Grant improved, for she would have known most high-ranking tacksmen of clans MacKenzie or Cameron.

But there was no time now to consider such things; the story was not finished.

The conspirators had separated then, each going by his own way, each with one-third of the French gold. Jocasta had no knowledge of what Dougal MacKenzie or the unknown man had done with their chests; Hector Cameron had put the two chests he brought away into a hole in the floor of his bedroom, an old hiding place made by his father to conceal valuables.

Hector meant to leave it there until the Prince had reached some place of safety, where he could receive the gold, and use it for the furtherance of his aims. But Charles Stuart was already in flight, and would not find a place to rest for many months. Before he reached his final refuge, disaster intervened.

“Hector left the gold—and me—at home, and went to join the Prince and the army. On the seventeenth of April, he rode back into the dooryard at sunset, his horse lathered to a froth. He swung down and left the poor beast to a groom, while he rushed into the house and bade me pack what valuables I could—the Cause was lost, he said, and we must flee, or die with the Stuarts.”

Cameron was wealthy, even then, and canny enough to have kept his coach and horses, rather than giving them to the Stuart cause. Canny enough, too, not to carry two chests of French gold in his flight.

"He took three bars of the gold from one of the chests, and gave them to me. I hid them under the seat of the coach; he and the groom carried the chests awa to the wood—I didna see where they buried them."

It was midday of April 18, when Hector Cameron boarded his coach, with his wife, his groom, his daughter Morna, and three bars of French bullion, and headed hell-for-leather south toward Edinburgh.

"Seonag was married to the Master of Garth—he declared early for the Stuarts; he was killed at Culloden, though of course we didna know it then. Clementina was widowed already, and living with her sister at Rovo."

She took a deep breath, shuddering slightly, unwilling to relive the events she recounted, unable to resist them.

"I begged Hector to go to Rovo. It was only ten miles out of the way—it would have taken no but a few hours—but he wouldna stop. We could not, he said. Too big a risk, to take the time needed to fetch them. Clementina had two children, Seonag the one. Too many people for the coach, he said; it would slow us too much.

"Not to bring them away, then, I said. Only to warn them—only to see them once more."

She paused.

"I kent where we were bound—we had talked of it, though I didna ken he had things in such readiness."

Hector Cameron had been a Jacobite, but was also a keen judge of human affairs, and no man to throw his own life after a lost cause. Seeing how matters were falling out, and fearing some disaster, he had taken pains to engineer an escape. He had quietly put aside a few bags of clothing and necessities, turned what he could of his property into money, and secretly booked three open passages, from Edinburgh to the Colonies.

"Sometimes, I think I canna blame him," Jocasta said. She sat bolt upright, the light of the candles gleaming from her hair. "He thought Seonag wouldna go without her husband, and Clementina wouldna risk her bairns at sea. Perhaps he was right about that. And perhaps it would have made no difference to warn them. But I knew

I shouldna see them again.…" Her mouth closed, and she swallowed.

In any case, Hector had refused to stop, fearing pursuit. Cumberland's troops had converged upon Culloden, but there were English soldiers on the Highland roads, and word of Charles Stuart's defeat was spreading like ripples near the edge of a whirlpool, moving faster and faster, in a vortex of danger.

As it was, the Camerons were discovered, two days later, near Ochtertyre.

"A wheel came off the coach," Jocasta said with a sigh. "Lord, I can see it now, spinning down the road by itself. The axletree was broke, and we'd no choice but to camp there by the road, while Hector and the groom made shift to mend it."

Repairs had taken the best part of a day, and Hector had grown more and more edgy as the work went on, his anxiety infecting the rest of the party.

"I didna ken then what he'd seen at Culloden," Jocasta said. "He kent weel enough that if the English took him, it was all up wi' him. If they didna kill him on the spot, he'd be hangit as a traitor. He was sweating as he worked, and more wi' fear than with the heat of his labor. But even so …" Her lips pressed tight for a moment, before she went on.

"It was nearly dusk—it was spring, dusk came early—when they got the wheel back on the coach, and everyone got back aboard. The coach had been in a wee hollow when the wheel flew off; the groom urged the horses up a long slope, and just as we reached the crest of the hill, two men with muskets stepped out from the shadows into the road ahead."

It was a company of English soldiers, Cumberland's men. Arriving too late to join in the victory at Culloden, they were inflamed by news of it—but frustrated at not sharing in the battle, and only too ready to wreak what vengeance they could on fleeing Highlanders.

Always a quick thinker, Hector had sunk back in the corner of the coach at sight of them, his head bent and a shawl pulled over it, pretending to be an aged crone, sunk in sleep. Following his hissed instructions, Jocasta had leaned out of the window, prepared to pose as a respectable lady traveling with her daughter and mother.

The soldiers had not waited to hear her speech. One yanked open the door of the coach, and dragged her out. Morna, panicked, had leapt out after her, trying to pull her mother away from the soldier. Another man had grabbed the girl, and dragged her back, so that he stood between Jocasta and the coach.

“Another minute, and they meant to have ‘Grannie’ out on the ground as well—and then they would find the gold, and it would be all up wi’ all of us.”

A pistol shot startled all of them into momentary immobility. Leaning from the coach’s open door, Hector had fired at the soldier holding Morna—but it was dusk and the light was poor; perhaps the horses had moved, jostling the coach. The shot struck Morna in the head.

“I ran to her,” Jocasta said. Her voice was hoarse, her throat gone dry and thick. “I ran to her, but Hector jumped out and seized me. The soldiers were all standing, staring with the shock. He dragged me back, into the coach, and shouted to the groom to drive, drive on!”

She licked her lips and swallowed, once.

“ ‘She is dead,’ he said to me. Over and over, ‘She is dead, you cannot help,’ he said, and held me tight when I would have thrown myself from the coach in my despair.”

Slowly she pulled her hand away from Brianna; she had needed support to begin her story, but needed none to finish it. Her hands folded into fists, pressed hard against the white linen of her shift, as though to stanch the bleeding of a desecrated womb.

“It had gone dark by then,” she said, and her voice was remote, detached. “I saw the glow of fires against the sky to the north.”

Cumberland’s troops were spreading outward, burning and pillaging. They reached Rovo, where Clementina and Seonag were with their families, and set the manor house afire. Jocasta never learned whether they had died in the fire, or later, starved and freezing in the cold Highland spring.

“So Hector saved his life—and mine, for what it was worth then,” she said, still detached. “And of course, he saved the gold.” Her fingers sought the ring again, and turned it slowly round upon its rod, so the stones caught the lamplight, glimmering.

“Indeed,” Jamie murmured. His eyes were fixed on the blind face, watching her intently. It struck me suddenly as unfair that he should watch her so, almost judging, when she could not look back, or even know how he looked at her. I touched him, and he glanced aside at me, then took my hand, squeezing it hard.

Jocasta put aside the rings and rose, restless now that the worst part of the story was told. She moved toward the window seat, knelt there, and brushed back the curtains. It was hard to believe her blind, seeing her move with such purpose—and yet this was her room, her place, and every item in it was scrupulously placed so that she could find her way. She pressed her hands against the icy glass and the night outside, and a white fog of condensation flared around her fingers like cold flames.

“Hector bought this place with the gold we brought,” she said. “The land, the mill, the slaves. To do him credit”—her tone suggested that she was not inclined to do any such thing—“the worth of it now is due in great part to his own work. But it was the gold that bought it, to begin with.”

“What of his oath?” Jamie asked softly.

“What of it?” she said, and uttered a short laugh. “Hector was a practical man. The Stuarts were finished; what need had they of gold, in Italy?”

“Practical,” I repeated, surprising myself; I hadn’t meant to speak, but I thought I had heard something odd in the way she spoke the word.

Evidently, I had. She turned around to face us, turning toward my voice. She was smiling, but a chill ran down my backbone at the sight of it.

“Aye, practical,” she said, nodding. “My daughters were dead; he saw no reason to waste tears upon them. He never spoke of them, and would not let me speak, either. He had been a man of worth once, he would be, again—not so easy here, had anyone known.”

She breathed out, a heavy sound of stifled anger. “I daresay there are none in this land who even ken I was once a mother.”

“You still are,” said Brianna softly. “That much I know.” She glanced at me, and her blue eyes met mine, dark with understanding. I felt the sting of tears behind the smile I gave her back. Yes, that much she knew, as did I.

So did Jocasta; the lines of her face relaxed for a moment, fury and remembered despair displaced for a moment by longing. She walked slowly to where Brianna sat on her stool, and laid her free hand on Bree’s head. It rested there for a moment, then slid down, the long, sensitive fingers probing Brianna’s strong cheekbones, her wide lips and long, straight nose, tracing the small track of the wetness down her cheek.

“Aye, *a leannan*,” she said softly. “Ye ken what I mean. And ye ken now, why I would leave this place to you—or to your blood?”

Jamie coughed, breaking in before Bree could answer.

“Aye,” he said, in a matter-of-fact tone. “So that is what ye told the Irishman tonight? Not all the story, to be sure—but that ye have no gold here?”

Jocasta’s hands dropped from Brianna’s face and she turned to face Jamie.

“Aye, I told them. Him. Told him that for all I kent, those chests were still buried in the wood in Scotland; he was welcome, I said, to go and dig there, and it suited him.” One corner of her mouth curled up in a bitter smile.

“He wasna inclined to take your word for it?”

She shook her head, lips pressed together.

“He wasna a gentleman,” she said again. “I canna say how it might have fallen out—for I sat near the bed, and I keep a wee knife beneath my pillow; I wouldna have suffered him to lay hands on me unscathed. Before I could reach for it, though, I heard footsteps in the dressing room.”

She waved a hand toward the door near the fireplace; her dressing room lay beyond, joining her bedroom to another—the room that had once been Hector Cameron’s, and was now presumably Duncan’s.

The intruders had heard the footsteps, too; the Irishman hissed something to his friend, then moved away from Jocasta, toward the hearth. The other fellow had come close then, and seized her from behind, a hand across her mouth.

"All I could tell ye from that was that the fellow wore a cap pulled low over his head, and he stank of liquor, as though he'd poured it over himself instead of drinking it." She made a brief grimace of distaste.

The door had opened, Duncan had come in, and the Irishman had apparently leapt from behind the open door and clubbed him over the head.

"I dinna recall a thing," Duncan said ruefully. "I came to bid Miss—that is, my wife—good night. I recall settin' my hand upon the knob of the door, and next thing, I was lyin' here wi' my head split open." He touched the lump tenderly, then looked at Jocasta with an anxious concern.

"You are all right, yourself, *mo chridhe*? The bastards didna offer ye ill use?" He stretched out a hand to her, then, realizing that she could not see him, tried to sit up. He collapsed with a stifled groan, and she stood up at the sound, coming hurriedly to the bedside.

"Of course I am all right," she said, crossly, groping until she found his hand. "Save for the distress of thinking myself about to be a widow for the fourth time." She let out a sigh of exasperation and sat down beside him, smoothing back a swath of loosened hair from her face.

"I couldna tell what had happened; I only heard the thud, and a dreadful groan as ye fell. Then the Irishman came back toward me, and the creature holding me let go."

The Irishman had informed her pleasantly that he did not believe a word of her claim that there was no gold at River Run. He was convinced that the gold was here, and while he would not dream of offering harm to a lady, the same inhibitions did not obtain with respect to her husband.

"If I didna tell him where it was, he said, he and his companion would set in to cut wee bits off Duncan, beginning with his toes, and advancing to his ballocks," Jocasta said bluntly. Duncan hadn't much blood in his face to begin with, but what there was drained away at this. Jamie glanced at Duncan, then away, clearing his throat.

"Ye were convinced he meant it, I suppose."

"He'd a good sharp knife; he ran it across the palm of my hand to show me that he was in earnest." She opened her free hand; sure enough, a hair-thin red line ran across the heel of it.

She shrugged.

"Well, I supposed I couldna have that. So I made pretense of reluctance, until the Irishman went to pick up one of Duncan's feet—then I wept and carried on, in hopes that someone would hear, but the damned servants had gone to bed, and the guests were too busy drinking my whisky and fornicating in the grounds and stables to hear."

At this last remark, Bree's face flamed a sudden crimson. Jamie saw it and coughed, avoiding my eye.

"Aye. So then—"

"So then I told them at last that the gold was buried under the floor of the shed outside the kitchen garden." The look of satisfaction returned briefly to her face. "I thought they would come upon the body and 'twould put them off their stride for a bit. By the time they'd nerved themselves to dig, I hoped I should have found some way to escape or to give the alarm—and so I did."

They had bound and gagged her hastily and gone to the shed, threatening to return and resume operations where they had left off, should they discover she had been lying to them. They had made no great job of the gag, though, and she had soon succeeded in tearing it away and kicking out a windowpane, through which to shout for help.

"So I am thinking that when they opened the door to the shed and saw the corpse, they must have dropped their lantern in shock, and so set fire to the place." She nodded in grim satisfaction. "A small price. I could but wish I thought they had gone up with it!"

"Ye dinna suppose they set the fire on purpose?" Duncan asked. He was looking a little better, though still gray and ill. "To cover any marks of digging?"

Jocasta shrugged, dismissing the notion.

“To what end? There was nothing to be found there, and they dug themselves to China.” She was beginning to relax a little, a normal color returning to her face, though her broad shoulders had begun to droop with exhaustion.

Silence fell among us, and I became aware that there had been rising noises downstairs for some minutes now; male voices and footsteps. The various search parties had returned, but it was apparent from the tired, disgruntled tones that no suspects had been apprehended.

The candle on the table had burned very low by now; the flame stretched high near my elbow as the wick reached its last inch. One of the candles on the mantelpiece guttered and went out in a fragrant wisp of beeswax smoke. Jamie glanced automatically at the window; it was still dark outside, but the character of the night had changed, as it does soon before dawn.

The curtains moved silently, a chilly, restless air breathing through the room. Another candle went out. A second sleepless night was telling on me; I felt cold all over, numb and disembodied, and the various horrors I had seen and heard had begun to fade into unreality in my mind, with nothing save a lingering strong scent of burning to bear witness to them.

There seemed no more to say or to do. Ulysses came back, sliding discreetly into the room with a fresh candlestick and a tray holding a bottle of brandy and several glasses. Major MacDonald reappeared briefly to report that indeed, they had found no sign of the miscreants. I checked both Duncan and Jocasta briefly, and then left Bree and Ulysses to put them to bed.

Jamie and I made our way downstairs in silence. At the bottom of the staircase, I turned to him. He was white with fatigue, his features drawn and set as though he had been carved of marble, his hair and beard stubble dark in the shadowed light.

“They’ll come back, won’t they?” I said quietly.

He nodded, and taking my elbow, led me toward the kitchen stair.

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TÊTE-À-TÊTE, WITH CRUMBCAKE

So early in the year, the kitchen in the cellar of the house was still in use, with the summer cookhouse reserved for messier or malodorous preparations. Roused by the commotion, all the slaves were up and working, though a few looked as though they would collapse into the nearest corner and go back to sleep at the first opportunity. The chief cook, though, was wide-awake, and it was clear that no one was sleeping on *her* watch.

The kitchen was warm and welcoming, the windows still dark, walls red with hearth-glow, and the air suffused with the comforting scents of broth, hot bread, and coffee. I thought this would be an excellent place to sit down and recuperate for a bit before toddling off to bed, but evidently Jamie had other ideas.

He paused in conversation with the cook, just long enough for politeness, acquiring in the process not only an entire fresh crumb cake, dusted with cinnamon and soaked with melted butter, but a large jug of freshly brewed coffee. Then he made his farewells, scooped me up off the stool onto which I had thankfully subsided, and we were off again, into the cool wind of the dying night.

I had a very odd sense of déjà vu as he turned down the brick path toward the stables. The light was just the same as it had been twenty-four hours earlier, with the same pinprick stars just fading from the same blue-gray sky. The same faint breath of spring passed by, and my skin shivered in memory.

But we were walking sedately side by side, not flying—and overlaid on my memories of the day before were the unsettling odors of blood and burning. With each step I felt as though I were about to reach out to push through the swinging doors of a hospital; that the hum of fluorescent light and the subdued reek of medicines and floor polish were about to engulf me.

“Lack of sleep,” I murmured to myself.

“Time enough for sleep later, Sassenach,” Jamie replied. He shook himself briefly, throwing off tiredness as a dog shakes off water. “There’s a thing or two to be done, first.” He shifted the paper-wrapped cake, though, and took hold of my elbow with his free hand, in case I was about to fall facefirst into the cabbage bed from fatigue.

I wasn’t. I had meant only that it was the lack of sleep that was giving me the mildly hallucinatory feeling of being back in a hospital. For years, as an intern, resident, and mother, I had worked through long sleepless shifts, learning to function—and function well—despite complete exhaustion.

It was that same feeling that was stealing over me now, as I passed through simple sleepiness and out again, into a state of artificially heightened alertness.

I felt cold and shrunken, as though I inhabited only the innermost core of my body, insulated from the world around me by a thick layer of inert flesh. At the same time, every tiny detail of my surroundings seemed unnaturally vivid, from the delicious fragrance of the food Jamie carried and the rustle of his coat skirts, to the sound of someone singing in the distant slave quarters and the spikes of sprouting corn in the vegetable beds beside the path.

The sense of lucid detachment stayed with me, even as we followed the turn of the path toward the stables. A thing to be done, he’d said. I supposed that he did not mean he intended to repeat yesterday’s performance. If he proposed a more sedate form of orgy, though, involving cake and coffee, it seemed peculiar to hold it in the stable, rather than the parlor.

The side door was unbarred; he pushed it open, and the warm scents of hay and sleeping animals rushed out.

“Who is it?” said a soft, deep voice from the shadows inside. Roger. Of course; he hadn’t been among the mob in Jocasta’s room.

“Fraser,” Jamie replied, equally softly, and drew me inside, closing the door behind us.

Roger stood silhouetted against the dim glow of a lantern, near the end of the row of loose-boxes. He was wrapped in a cloak, and the light shone in a reddish nimbus round his dark hair as he turned toward us.

“How is it, *a Smeòraich*?” Jamie handed him the jug of coffee. Roger’s cloak fell back as he reached for it, and I saw him thrust a pistol into the waist of his breeches with his other hand. Without comment, he pulled the cork and lifted the jug to his mouth, lowering it several moments later with an expression of sheer bliss. He sighed, breath steaming.

“Oh, God,” he said fervently. “That’s the best thing I’ve tasted in months.”

“Not quite.” Sounding faintly amused, Jamie took the jug back and handed him the wrapped crumb cake. “How is he, then?”

“Noisy at first, but he’s been quiet for a bit. I think he may be asleep.”

Already tearing at the butter-soaked wrappings, Roger nodded toward the loose-box. Jamie took down the lantern from its hook and held it high over the barred gate. Peering under his arm, I could see a huddled shape, half-buried in the straw at the back of the box.

“Mr. Wylie?” Jamie called, still softly. “Are ye asleep, sir?”

The shape stirred, with a rustling of hay.

“I am not, sir,” came the reply, in tones of cold bitterness. The shape began slowly to unfold itself, and Phillip Wylie rose to his feet, shaking straw from his clothes.

I had certainly seen him appear to better advantage. Several buttons were missing from his coat, one shoulder seam was split, and both knees of his breeches hung loose, the buckles burst and his stockings drooping in unseemly fashion about his shins. Someone had evidently hit him in the nose; a trickle of blood had dried on his upper lip, and there was a splotch of crusty brown on the embroidered silk of his waistcoat.

Despite the deficiencies of his wardrobe, his manner was unimpaired, being one of icy outrage.

“You will answer for this, Fraser, by God you will!”

“Aye, I will,” Jamie said, unperturbed. “At your pleasure, sir. But not before I’ve had answers from yourself, Mr. Wylie.” He unlatched the gate of the loose-box and swung it open. “Come out.”

Wylie hesitated, unwilling either to remain in the box, or to come out of it at Jamie’s command. I saw his nostrils twitch, though; evidently he had caught scent of the coffee. That seemed to decide him, and he came out of the box, head held high. He brushed within a foot of me, but kept his eyes straight ahead, affecting not to see me.

Roger had collected two stools and an upturned bucket. I took the latter and shoved it modestly into the shadows, leaving Jamie and Wylie to seat themselves within easy strangling distance of each other. Roger himself retired discreetly into the shadows beside me with the crumb cake, looking interested.

Wylie accepted the jug of coffee stiffly, but a few deep swallows seemed to restore his composure to a noticeable degree. He lowered it at last and breathed audibly, his features a little more relaxed.

“I thank you, sir.” He handed the jug back to Jamie with a small bow and sat bolt upright on his stool, tenderly adjusting his wig, which had survived the evening’s adventures, but was much the worse for its experiences. “Now, then. May I inquire the reason for this … this … unspeakable behavior?”

“Ye may, sir,” Jamie replied, drawing himself up straight in turn. “I wish to discover the nature of your associations with a certain Stephen Bonnet, and your knowledge of his present whereabouts.”

Wylie’s face went almost comically blank.

“Who?”

“Stephen Bonnet.”

Wylie began to turn toward me, to ask for clarification, then recalled that he was not acknowledging my presence. He glowered at Jamie, dark brows drawn down.

“I have no acquaintance with any gentleman of that name, Mr. Fraser, and thus no knowledge of his movements—though if I did, I greatly doubt that I should feel myself obliged to inform you of them.”

“No?” Jamie took a thoughtful sip of coffee, then handed the jug to me. “What of the obligations of a guest toward his host, Mr. Wylie?”

The dark brows rose in astonishment.

“What do you mean, sir?”

“I take it that you are not aware, sir, that Mrs. Innes and her husband were assaulted last evening, and an attempt at robbery made upon them?”

Wylie’s mouth fell open. Either he was a very good actor, or his surprise was genuine. Given my acquaintance with the young man to date, I thought he was no kind of actor.

“I was not. Who—” A thought struck him, and bewilderment vanished in renewed outrage. His eyes bulged slightly. “You think that I was concerned in this—this—”

“Dastardly enterprise?” Roger suggested. He seemed to be enjoying himself, relieved of the boredom of guard duty. “Aye, I expect we do. A bit of crumb cake with your coffee, sir?” He held out a chunk of cake; Wylie stared at it for a moment, then leaped to his feet, striking the cake out of Roger’s hand.

“You blackguard!” He rounded on Jamie, fists clenched. “You dare to imply that I am a thief?”

Jamie rocked back a little on his stool, chin lifted.

“Aye, I do,” he said coolly. “Ye tried to steal my wife from under my nose—why should ye scruple at my aunt’s goods?”

Wylie’s face flushed a deep and ugly crimson. Had it not been a wig, his hair would have stood on end.

“You … absolute … *cunt*!” he breathed. Then he launched himself at Jamie. Both of them went over with a crash, in a flurry of arms and legs.

I leaped back, clasping the coffee jug to my bosom. Roger lunged toward the fray, but I snatched at him, catching his cloak to hold him back.

Jamie had the advantage of size and skill, but Wylie was by no means a novice in the art of fisticuffs, and was in addition propelled by a berserk rage. Given a few moments more, Jamie would have him hammered into submission, but I was not inclined to wait.

Monstrously irritated with the pair of them, I stepped forward and upended the coffee jug. It wasn't boiling, but hot enough. There were simultaneous yelps of surprise, and the two men rolled apart, scrambling and shaking themselves. I thought I heard Roger laugh behind me, but when I whirled on him, he had assumed a look of straight-faced interest. He raised his eyebrows at me, and crammed another chunk of cake into his mouth.

I turned back to find Jamie already on his feet, and Wylie rising from his knees, both soaked with coffee, and both with expressions implying that they intended to resume proceedings at the point where I had interrupted them. I pushed my way between them and stamped my foot.

"I have bloody well had enough of this!"

"I haven't!" Wylie said hotly. "He has impugned my honor, and I demand—"

"Oh, to hell with your beastly honor—and yours, too!" I snarled, glaring from him to Jamie. Jamie, who had evidently been going to say something equally inflammatory, contented himself instead with a resounding snort.

I kicked one of the fallen stools, and pointed at it, still glaring at Jamie.

"Sit!"

Plucking the soaked fabric of his shirt away from his chest, he righted the stool and sat on it, with immense dignity.

Wylie was less inclined to pay attention to me, and was carrying on with further remarks about his honor. I kicked him in the shin. This time, I was wearing stout boots. He yelped and hopped on one foot, holding his affronted leg. The horses, thoroughly roused by the commotion, were stamping and snorting in their boxes, and the air was full of floating chaff.

"Ye dinna want to trifle with her when she's in a temper," Jamie told Wylie, with a wary glance at me. "She's dangerous, aye?"

Wylie glowered at me, but his scowl altered to a look of uncertainty—whether because of the empty coffee jug, which I was now holding by the neck like a club, or because of his memories of the night before, when he had discovered me in the midst of Betty's autopsy. With an effort, he swallowed whatever he had been going to say, and sat slowly down upon the other stool. He pulled a kerchief from his stained waistcoat pocket, and blotted a trickle of blood that was running down the side of his face from a cut above the brow.

"I would like," he said, with exquisite politeness, "to know what is going on here, please."

He had lost his wig; it was lying on the floor in a puddle of coffee. Jamie bent and picked it up, holding it gingerly, like a dead animal. He wiped a smear of mud off the side of his jaw with his free hand, and held the wig out, dripping, to Wylie.

"We are in agreement, then, sir."

Wylie took the wig with a stiff nod of acknowledgment and laid it on his knee, disregarding the coffee soaking into his breeches. Both men looked at me, with identical expressions of skeptical impatience. Evidently, I had been appointed mistress of ceremonies.

"Robbery, murder, and heaven knows what else," I said firmly. "And we mean to get to the bottom of it."

"Murder?" Roger and Wylie spoke together, both sounding startled.

"Who has been murdered?" Wylie asked, looking wildly back and forth between me and Jamie.

"A slave woman," Jamie said, with a nod toward me. "My wife suspected ill doing in her death, and so we meant to discover the truth of the matter. Thus our presence in the shed when you came upon us last night."

"Presence," Wylie echoed. His face was already pale, but he looked slightly ill at the recollection of what he had seen me doing in the shed. "Yes. I … see." He darted a look at me from the corner of his eye.

"So she was killed?" Roger came into the circle of lantern light and set the bucket back in place, sitting down at my feet. He set the remains of the cake on the floor. "What killed her?"

"Someone fed her ground glass," I said. "I found quite a lot of it still in her stomach."

I paid particular attention to Phillip Wylie as I said this, but his face bore the same expression of blank astonishment as did Jamie's and Roger's.

"Glass." Jamie was the first to recover. He sat up on his stool, shoving a disordered hank of hair behind his ear. "How long might that take to kill a body, Sassenach?"

I rubbed two fingers between my brows; the numbness of the early hour was giving way to a throbbing headache, made worse by the rich smell of coffee and the fact that I hadn't gotten to drink any of it.

"I don't know," I said. "It would go into the stomach within minutes, but it might take quite a long time to do enough damage to cause major hemorrhage. Most of the damage would likely be to the small intestine; the glass particles would perforate the lining. And if the digestive system were somewhat impaired—by drink, say—and not moving well, then it might take even longer. Or if she'd taken a lot of food with it."

"Is this the woman that you and Bree found in the garden?" Roger turned to Jamie, inquiring.

"Aye." Jamie nodded, his eyes still fixed on me. "She was insensible wi' the drink then. And when ye saw her later, Sassenach—were there signs of it, then?"

I shook my head.

"The glass might have been working then—but she was out cold. One thing—Fentiman did say she woke in the middle of the night, complaining of griping in her guts. So she was certainly affected by that time. But I can't say for sure whether she'd been given the ground glass before you and Bree found her, or whether perhaps she roused from her stupor in the early evening, and someone gave it to her then."

"Griping in the guts," Roger murmured. He shook his head, mouth grim at the thought. "Christ, what a way to go."

"Aye, it's black wickedness," Jamie agreed, nodding. "But why? Who should wish the woman's death?"

"A good question," Wylie said shortly. "However, I can assure you that it wasn't I."

Jamie gave him a long stare of assessment.

"Aye, maybe," he said. "If not, though—how came ye to the shed last night? What business might ye have there, save perhaps to look upon the face of your victim?"

"*My* victim!" Wylie jerked bolt upright, stiff with renewed outrage. "It was not I in that shed, red to the elbow with the woman's gore and snatching bits of bone and offal!" He snapped his head to the side, glaring up at me.

"My victim, indeed! It is a capital crime to defile a body, Mrs. Fraser. And I have heard things—oh, yes, I have heard things about you! I put it to you that it is *you* who did the woman to death, for the purpose of obtaining—"

His words ended in a gurgle, as Jamie's hand jerked his shirtfront tight and twisted it hard about his neck. He punched Wylie in the stomach, hard, and the young man doubled up, coughed, and spewed coffee, bile, and a few more disagreeable substances all over the floor, his knees, and Jamie.

I sighed wearily. The briefly warming effects of the discussion had faded, and I was feeling cold and mildly disoriented again. The stench didn't help.

"That's not really helpful, you know," I said reprovingly to Jamie, who had released Wylie and was now hastily removing his own outer garments. "Not that I don't appreciate the vote of confidence."

"Oh, aye," he said, voice muffled in the shirt as he pulled it over his head. He popped out, glaring at me, and dropped the shirt on the floor with a splat. "D'ye think I'm going to sit idle and let this popinjay insult ye?"

"I don't suppose he'll do it again," Roger said. He stood and bent over Wylie, who was still doubled up on his stool, rather green in the face. Roger glanced back over his shoulder at Jamie.

"Is he right, though? About it being a capital crime to tamper with a body?"

"I dinna ken," Jamie said, rather shortly. Stripped to the waist, stained with blood and vomit, and with his red hair wild in the lantern light, he looked a far cry from the polished gentleman who had gone off to play whist.

"It scarcely matters," he added, "as he isna going to tell anyone about it. Because if he does, I shall cut him like a stirk and feed both his ballocks and his lying tongue to the pigs." He touched the hilt of his dirk, as though assuring himself that it was handy if wanted.

"But I am sure ye dinna mean to make any such unfounded accusations regarding my wife, do ye … sir?" he said to Wylie, with excessive politeness.

I was not surprised to see Phillip Wylie shake his head, evidently still incapable of speech. Jamie made a noise of grim satisfaction and stooped to pick up the cloak he had dropped earlier.

Feeling rather weak-kneed after this latest exhibition of the male sense of honor, I sat down on the bucket.

"All right," I said, and pushed back a strand of hair. "Fine. If we've got all that settled, then … where were we?"

"Betty's murder," Roger prompted. "We don't know who, we don't know when, and we don't know why—though for the sake of argument, might I suggest we assume that no one amongst the present company had anything to do with it?"

"Verra well." Jamie dismissed murder with a brusque gesture and sat down. "What about Stephen Bonnet?"

Roger's expression, hitherto one of interest, darkened at that.

"Aye, what about him? Is he involved in this business?"

"Not in the murder, perhaps—but my aunt and her husband were assaulted in their chamber last evening by two villains. One of whom was an Irishman." Jamie wrapped his cloak about his bare shoulders, bending a sinister glance on Phillip Wylie, who had recovered sufficiently to sit up.

"I repeat," he said coldly, hands still pressed against his stomach, "that I have no acquaintance with a gentleman of that name, whether Irishman or Hottentot."

"Stephen Bonnet is not a gentleman," Roger said. The words were mild enough, but carried an undertone that made Wylie glance up at him.

"I do not know the fellow," he said firmly. He took a shallow breath by way of experiment, and finding it bearable, breathed deeper. "Why do you suppose that the Irishman who committed the outrage upon Mr. and Mrs. Innes should be this Bonnet? Did he leave his card, perchance?”

I laughed, surprising myself. In spite of everything, I had to admit to a certain amount of respect for Phillip Wylie. Held captive, battered, threatened, doused with coffee, and deprived of his wig, he retained a good deal more dignity than would most men in his situation.

Jamie glanced at me, then back at Wylie. I thought the corner of his mouth twitched, but it was impossible to tell in the dim light.

“No,” he said. “I *do* claim some acquaintance with Stephen Bonnet, who is a felon, a degenerate, and a thief. And I saw the man with ye, sir, when ye happened upon my wife and myself at the shed.”

“Yes,” I said. “I saw him, too—standing right behind you. And what were you doing there, anyway?” I asked, this question suddenly occurring to me.

Wylie’s eyes had widened at Jamie’s accusation. At my statement, he blinked. He took another deep breath and looked down, rubbing his knuckles beneath his nose. Then he looked up at Jamie, the bluster gone.

“I do not know him,” he said quietly. “I had some thought that I was followed, but, glancing behind me, I saw no one, and so paid it no great mind. When I … saw what lay within the shed”—his eyes flicked toward me, but would not quite meet my own—“I was too much shocked to give heed to aught but what lay before my eyes.”

That, I could believe.

Wylie lifted his shoulders, and let them fall.

“If this Bonnet was indeed behind me, then I must take your word for it, sir. And yet I assure you that he was not there by my doing, nor with my recognition.”

Jamie and Roger exchanged glances, but they could hear the ring of truth in Wylie’s words, just as I could. There was a brief silence, in which I could hear the horses moving in their stalls. They were no longer agitated, but were getting restive, anticipating food. Dawn light was filtering through the cracks beneath the eaves, a soft, smoky radiance that leached the air inside the stable of all color, and yet revealed the dim outlines of harness hanging on the wall, pitchforks and shovels standing in the corner.

"The grooms will be coming soon." Jamie stirred and drew breath, drawing up his shoulders in a half-shrug. He glanced back at Wylie.

"Verra well, sir. I accept your word as a gentleman."

"Do you? I am flattered."

"Still," Jamie went on, pointedly ignoring the sarcasm, "I should like to know what it was that brought ye to the shed last night."

Wylie had half-risen from his seat. At this, he hesitated, then slowly sat again. He blinked once or twice, as though thinking, then sighed, giving up.

"Lucas," he said simply. He didn't look up, but kept his eyes fixed on his hands, hanging limp between his thighs. "I was there, the night he was foaled. I raised him, broke him to the saddle, trained him." He swallowed once; I saw the tremor move beneath the frill at his neck. "I came to the stable to have a few moments alone with him … to bid him farewell."

For the first time, Jamie's face lost the shadow of dislike that it bore whenever he looked at Wylie. He breathed deep, and nodded slightly.

"Aye, I see," he said quietly. "And then?"

Wylie straightened a little.

"When I left the stable, I thought I heard voices near the wall of the kitchen garden. And when I came nearer to see what might be afoot, I saw light shining through the cracks of the shed." He shrugged. "I opened the door. And you know better than I what happened then, Mr. Fraser."

Jamie rubbed a hand hard over his face, then shook his head hard.

"Aye," he said. "I do. I went for Bonnet, and ye got in my way."

"You attacked me," Wylie said coldly. He hitched the ruined coat higher up on his shoulders. "I defended myself, as I had every right to do. And then you and your son-in-law seized me between you, frog-marched me in there"—he jerked his chin at the box stall behind him—"and held me captive half the night!"

Roger cleared his throat. So did Jamie, though with more dour intent.

“Aye, well,” he said. “We willna argue about it.” He sighed and stood back, gesturing to Wylie that he might go. “I suppose ye didna see in which direction Bonnet fled?”

“Oh, yes. Though I did not know his name, of course. I expect he is well beyond reach by now,” Wylie said. There was an odd note in his voice; something like satisfaction. Jamie turned sharply.

“What d’ye mean?”

“Lucas.” Wylie nodded down the dim aisle of the stable, toward the shadows at the farther end. “His stall is at the far end. I know his voice well, the sound of his movement. And I have not heard him this morning. Bonnet—if that was who it was—fled toward the stable.”

Before Wylie had finished talking, Jamie had seized the lantern and was striding down the stable. Horses thrust inquiring noses over their stall doors as he passed, snorting and whuffling in curiosity—but no black nose appeared at the end of the row, no black mane floated out in joyous greeting. The rest of us hastened after him, leaning to see past him as he held the lantern high.

The yellow light shone on empty straw.

We stood silent for a long moment, looking. Then Phillip Wylie sighed and drew himself up.

“If I no longer have him, Mr. Fraser—neither do you.” His eyes rested on me, then, darkly ironic. “But I wish you joy of your wife.”

He turned and walked away, stockings sagging, the red heels of his shoes winking in the growing light.

Outside, dawn was breaking, still and lovely. Only the river seemed to move, the spreading light flashing silver on its current beyond the trees.

Roger had gone off to the house, yawning, but Jamie and I lingered by the paddock. People would be stirring within minutes; there would be more questions, speculations, talk. Neither one of us wanted any more talk; not now.

At last, Jamie put his arm about my shoulders, and with an air of decision, turned away from the house. I didn’t know where he was going, and didn't much care, though I did hope I could lie down when we got there.

We passed the smithy, where a small, sleepy-looking boy was blowing up the forge with a pair of bellows, making red sparks float and flash like fireflies in the shadows. Past the outbuildings, around a corner, and then we were in front of a nondescript shed with a large double door. Jamie lifted the latch and swung one door open a bit, beckoning me inside.

"I canna think why I never thought of this place," he said, "when I was looking for a spot to be private."

We were in the carriage shed. A wagon and a small buggy stood in the shadows, as did Jocasta's phaeton. An open carriage like a large sleigh on two wheels, it had a bench seat with blue velvet squabs, and a scroll-like singletree like the prow of a ship. Jamie picked me up by the waist and swung me in, then clambered up after me. There was a buffalo robe lying across the squabs; he pulled this off and spread it on the floor of the phaeton. There was just room for two people to curl up there, if they didn't mind lying close together.

"Come on, Sassenach," he said, sinking to his knees. "Whatever comes next … it can wait."

I quite agreed. Though on the verge of unconsciousness, I couldn't help drowsily asking, "Your aunt … do you trust her? What she said, about the gold and all?"

"Oh, aye, of course I do," he mumbled in my ear. His arm was heavy where it lay over my waist. "At least as far as I could throw her."

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DEDUCTIONS

At last forced from our refuge by thirst and hunger, we made our way out of the carriage shed and past the tactfully averted eyes of the yard slaves, still busy clearing up the debris from the wedding feast. At the edge of the lawn, I saw Phaedre, coming up from the mausoleum with her arms full of plates and cups that had been left in the shrubbery. Her face was swollen and blotched with grief, and her eyes were red, but she was not crying.

She saw us, and stopped.

"Oh," she said. "Miss Jo be lookin' for you, Master Jamie."

She spoke dully, as though the words had little meaning for her, and appeared to find nothing odd in our sudden appearance or disheveled dress.

"Oh? Aye." Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, nodding. "Aye, I'll go up to her."

She nodded, and was turning to go when Jamie reached out and touched her shoulder.

"I'm sorry for your trouble, lass," he said quietly.

Sudden tears welled in her eyes and spilled over, but she didn't speak. She dropped a brief curtsy, turned, and hurried away, moving so fast that a knife fell from the stack of crockery, bouncing on the grass behind her.

I stooped and picked it up, the feel of the knife's handle reminding me suddenly and vividly of the blade I had used to open her mother's body. For a disorienting moment, I was no longer on the lawn before the house, but in the dark confines of the shed, the scent of death heavy in the air and the proof of murder gritty in my hand.

Then reality readjusted itself, and the green lawn was covered with flocks of doves and sparrows, foraging peacefully for crumbs at the feet of a marble goddess, bright with sun.

Jamie was saying something.

“…. go and wash and rest a bit, Sassenach?”

“What? Oh … no, I’ll come with you.” I was suddenly anxious to have this business done with, and go home. I had had enough society for the moment.

We found jocasta, Duncan, Roger, and Brianna all together in Jocasta’s sitting room, digging into what looked like a substantial, if very late, breakfast. Brianna cast a sharp look at Jamie’s ruined clothes, but said nothing, and went back to sipping tea, her eyebrows still raised. She and Jocasta both wore dressing gowns, and while Roger and Duncan were dressed, they looked pale and scruffy after the adventures of the night. Neither had shaved, and Duncan sported a large blue bruise on the side of his face where he had hit the hearthstone in falling, but he seemed otherwise all right.

I assumed that Roger had told everyone about our tête-à-tête with Phillip Wylie, and the disappearance of Lucas. At least no one asked questions. Duncan silently shoved a platter of bacon in Jamie’s direction, and there was no sound for a bit save the musical tinkling of cutlery on plates and the sloshing noises of tea being drunk.

At last, replete and feeling somewhat restored, we sat back and began hesitantly to discuss the events of the day—and night—before. So much had happened that I thought perhaps it might be best to try to reconstruct events in a logical sort of way. I said as much, and while Jamie’s mouth twitched in an annoying manner that suggested he found the notion of logic incompatible with me personally, I ignored this and firmly called the meeting to order.

“It begins with Betty, don’t you think?”

"Whether it does or not, I suppose that's as good a starting point as any, Sassenach," Jamie agreed.

Brianna finished buttering a final slice of toast, looking amused.

"Carry on, Miss Marple," she said, waving it at me before taking a bite. Roger made a brief choking noise, but I ignored that, too, with dignity.

"Fine. Now, I thought Betty was likely drugged when I saw her, but since Dr. Fentiman stopped me examining her, I couldn't be positive. But we are reasonably sure that Betty did drink drugged punch, is that right?" I looked round the circle of faces, and both Bree and Jamie nodded, adopting solemn expressions.

"Aye, I tasted *something* in the cup that wasna liquor," Jamie said.

"And I talked to the house slaves after I left Da," Brianna added, leaning forward. "Two of the women admitted that Betty tipples—tippled—from the dregs of drinks at parties, but both of them insisted she was no more than what they called 'cheerful' when she helped serve rum punch in the drawing room."

"And I was in the drawing room then, with Seamus Hanlon and his musicians," Roger confirmed. He glanced at Bree and squeezed her knee gently. "I saw Ulysses make the punch himself—that was the first time during the day that you made it, Ulysses?"

All heads swiveled toward the butler, who stood closed-faced behind Jocasta's chair, his neat wig and pressed livery a silent reproach to the general air of exhausted dishevelment.

"No, the second," he said softly. "The first was all drunk at breakfast." His eyes were alert, if bloodshot, but the rest of his face might have been chiseled from gray granite. The household and its servants were his charge, and it was clear that he felt recent events to be a mortifying personal reproach to his stewardship.

"Right." Roger turned back toward me, rubbing a hand over his stubbled face. He might have snatched a nap since the confrontation with Wylie in the stable, but he didn't look it.

"I didn't take any notice of Betty myself, but the point is, I think I *would* surely have noticed, if she were drunk and reeling at that point. So would Ulysses, I expect." He glanced over his shoulder for confirmation, and the butler nodded, reluctantly.

“Lieutentant Wolff *was* drunk and reeling,” Roger added. “Everyone noticed that—they all remarked how early it was for anyone to be in that condition.”

Jocasta made a rude noise, and Duncan bent his head, hiding a smile.

“The point being,” Jamie summed up neatly, “that the second lot of rum punch was served out just past midday, and I found the woman flat on her back in the dung heap, steamin’ with drink and a punch cup beside her, nay more than an hour later. I’ll no say it couldna be done, but it would be quick work to get mortal in that span of time, especially if it was all done wi’ dregs.”

“So we assume that she was indeed drugged,” I said. “The most likely substance being laudanum. Was there some available in the stillroom here?”

Jocasta caught the lift of my voice and knew the question was addressed to her; she straightened up in her chair, tucking a wisp of white hair back under her ribboned cap. She seemed to have recovered nicely from the night before.

“Oh, aye. But that’s naught to go by,” she objected. “Anyone might ha’ brought it; it’s no sae hard to come by, and ye have the price. I ken at least two women among the guests who take the stuff regular. I daresay they’d have brought a bit with them.”

I would have loved to know which of Jocasta’s acquaintances were opium addicts, and how she knew, but dismissed that point, moving on to the next.

“Well, wherever the laudanum—for the sake of argument—came from, it apparently ended up inside Betty.” I turned to Jamie. “Now, you said that it occurred to you when you found her that she might have drunk something—drugged or poisonous—intended for someone else.”

He nodded, following me closely.

“Aye, for why would someone seek to harm or kill a slave?”

“I don’t know why, but someone *did* kill her,” Brianna interrupted, a definite edge in her voice. “I can’t see how she could have eaten ground glass meant for someone else, can you?”

“Don’t rush me! I’m trying to be logical.” I frowned at Bree, who made a rude noise akin to Jocasta’s, but not as loud.

“No,” I went on, “I don’t think she can have taken the ground glass by accident, but I don’t know when she *did* take it. Almost certainly, it was sometime after you and Jamie took her up to the attic, though, and after Dr. Fentiman saw her the first time.”

Fentiman’s emetics and purgatives would have caused extensive bleeding, had Betty already ingested the glass—as indeed they did, when he returned to treat her renewed complaints of internal distress toward dawn.

“I think you’re right,” I told Brianna, “but just to be tidy—when you went to look round, Roger, you didn’t find any of the guests who looked as though they might be drugged?”

He shook his head, dark brows drawn together, as though the sunlight bothered him. I wasn’t surprised if he had a headache; the cotton-wool feeling had turned into a throbbing inside my own skull.

“No,” he said, and dug a knuckle hard between his brows. “There were at least twenty who were beginning to stagger a bit, but they all seemed just legitimately drunk.”

“What about Lieutenant Wolff?” Duncan asked at this point, to everyone’s surprise. He blushed slightly, seeing everyone’s eyes on him, but doggedly pursued his point.

“*A Smeòraich* said the man was drunk and reeling in the drawing room. Might he have taken the laudanum, or whatever it was, drunk the half, and given the rest to the slave there?”

“I don’t know,” I said dubiously. “If ever I saw anyone who could have achieved intoxication within an hour, purely on the basis of straight alcohol …”

“When I went to check the guests, the Lieutenant was propped up against the wall of the mausoleum with a bottle in his fist,” Roger said. “Mostly incoherent, but still conscious.”

“Aye, he fell down in the shrubbery later,” Jamie put in, looking dubious. “I saw him, in the afternoon. He didna look like yon slave woman, though, only drunk.”

"The timing is about right, though," I said thoughtfully. "So it's possible, at least. Did anyone see the Lieutenant later in the day?"

"Yes," Ulysses said, causing everyone to swivel round to look at him again. "He came into the house during the supper, asked me to find him a boat at once, and left by water. Still very drunk," he added precisely, "but lucid."

Jocasta made a small puffing sound with her lips, and muttered, "Lucid, forbye," under her breath. She massaged her temples with both forefingers; evidently she had a headache, too.

"I suppose that puts the Lieutenant out as a suspect? Or is the fact that he left so suddenly suspicious by itself?" Brianna, the only person present who seemed *not* to have a headache, dropped several lumps of sugar into her tea and stirred it vigorously. Jamie shut his eyes, wincing at the noise.

"Are ye no overlooking something?" Jocasta had been following all the arguments intently, a slight frown of concentration on her face. Now she leaned forward, stretching out her hand toward the low table with its breakfast things. She tapped her fingers lightly here and there to locate what she wanted, then picked up a small silver cup.

"Ye showed me the cup from which Betty drank, Nephew," she said to Jamie, holding out the one in her hand. "It was like this, aye?"

The cup was sterling silver, and brand-new, the incised design barely showing. Later, when the metal began to acquire a patina, black tarnish would settle into the lines of the etching and cause it to stand out, but for the moment, the capital letter "I" and the small fish that swam around it were almost lost in the gleam of light off the metal.

"Aye, it was one like that, Aunt," Jamie replied, touching the hand that held the cup. "Brianna says it was one of a set?"

"It was. I gave them to Duncan in the morning of our wedding day, as a bride-gift." She set down the cup, but laid her long fingers across the top of it. "We drank from two of the cups, Duncan and I, with our breakfast, but the other four stayed up here." She waved a hand behind her, indicating the small sideboard against the wall, where the platters of bacon and fried eggs had been placed. Decorated plates were propped upright along the back of the sideboard, interspersed with a set of crystal sherry glasses. I counted; all six of the silver fish cups were on the table now, filled with port, which Jocasta appeared to like with breakfast. There was no indication which of them had held the drugged liquor, though.

“Ye didna take any of these cups down to the drawing room on the wedding day, Ulysses?” she asked.

“No, Madam.” He looked shocked at the thought. “Of course not.”

She nodded, and turned her blind eyes toward Jamie, then toward me.

“So ye see,” she said simply. “It was Duncan’s cup.”

Duncan looked startled, then uneasy, as the implications of what she had said sank in.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “Ach, no. Couldna be.” But tiny droplets of sweat had begun to form a dew across the weathered skin of his jaw.

“Did anyone offer ye a drink day before yesterday, *a charaid*?” Jamie asked, leaning forward intently.

Duncan shrugged helplessly.

“Aye, everyone did!”

And of course they had. He was, after all, the bridegroom. He had accepted none of the proffered refreshment, though, owing to the digestive upset occasioned by his nerves. Nor had he noticed particularly whether any of the drinks on offer had been served in a silver cup.

“I was that distracted, *Mac Dubh*, I shouldna have noticed if anyone had been offering me a live snake in his hand.” Ulysses plucked a linen napkin from the tray and offered it unobtrusively. Blindly, Duncan took it and wiped his face.

“So … you think that someone was trying to harm *Duncan*?” The astonishment in Roger’s voice might not have been strictly flattering, but Duncan appeared not to take it amiss.

“But why?” he said, bewildered. “Who could hate *me*?”

Jamie chuckled under his breath, and the tension round the table relaxed slightly. It was true; while Duncan was intelligent and competent, he was of so modest a disposition that it was impossible to conceive of his having offended anyone, let alone driven them into a murderous frenzy.

“Well, *a charaid*,” Jamie said tactfully, “it might not just be personal, ken?” He caught my eye, and made a wry grimace. More than one attempt had been made on his own life, for reasons having to do only with who he was, rather than anything he had done. Not that people hadn’t tried to kill him occasionally for things he’d done, as well.

Jocasta appeared to have been thinking along the same lines.

“Indeed,” she said. “I have been thinking, myself. Do ye not recall, nephew, what happened at the Gathering?”

Jamie lifted one eyebrow, and picked up a cup of tea.

“A good many things happened there, Aunt,” he said. “But I take it ye mean what happened with Father Kenneth?”

“I do.” She reached up a hand automatically, as Ulysses set a fresh cup into it. “Did ye not tell me that yon Lillywhite said something about the priest being prevented from performing ceremonials?”

Jamie nodded, closing his eyes briefly as he took a mouthful of tea.

“Aye, he did. So, ye think it was maybe your marriage with Duncan he meant? That was the ‘ceremonial’ to be prevented?”

My headache was growing worse. I pressed my fingers between my brows; they were warm from the teacup, and the heat felt good on my skin.

“Wait just one minute,” I said. “Are you saying that someone wanted to prevent your aunt’s marriage to Duncan, and succeeded in doing so at the Gathering, but then couldn’t think of any way of preventing it now, and so tried to murder Duncan, in order to stop it?” My own voice echoed the astonishment on Duncan’s features.

“I’m no saying so, myself,” Jamie said, eyeing Jocasta with interest, “but I gather that my aunt is suggesting as much.”

“I am,” she said calmly. She drank off her tea, and set down the cup with a sigh. “I dinna wish to rate myself too high, nephew, but the fact is that I have been courted by this one and that one, ever since Hector died. River Run is a rich property, and I am an auld woman."

There was a moment's silence, as everyone absorbed that. Duncan's face reflected an uneasy horror.

"But—" he said, stuttering slightly, "but—but—if it was that, *Mac Dubh*, why wait?"

"Wait?"

"Aye." He looked around the table, seeking understanding. "See you, if someone meant to stop the marriage at the Gathering, well and good. But it's been four months since then, and no one's lifted a hand against me. I mostly ride alone; 'twould have been a simple matter, surely, to lay for me on the road as I went about my business, and put a bullet through my head." He spoke matter-of-factly, but I saw a small shiver pass through Jocasta at the notion.

"So why wait until almost the hour of the wedding itself, and in the presence of hundreds of people? Aye, well, it's a point, Duncan," Jamie admitted.

Roger had been following all this, elbows propped on his knees, chin resting in his hands. He straightened up at this.

"One reason I can think of," he said. "The priest."

Everyone stared at him, eyebrows raised.

"The priest was here," he explained. "See, if it's River Run that's behind all this, then it isn't only a matter of getting Duncan out of the way. Kill him, and our murderer is right back where he started—Jocasta's not married to Duncan, but she isn't married to *him*, either, and no way to force the issue.

"But," Roger raised a finger, "if the priest is here, and all set to perform a private ceremony … then it's simple. Kill Duncan—in a manner that might suggest suicide or accident—and then swoop up to Jocasta's suite, and force the priest to perform the marriage at gunpoint. The servants and guests are all occupied with Duncan, no one to make objections or interfere. There's the bed to hand—" He nodded at the big tester, visible through the doorway into the bedroom. "Take Jocasta straight there and consummate the marriage by force … and Bob's your uncle."

At this point, Roger caught sight of Jocasta's dropped jaw and Duncan's stunned look, and it occurred to him that this was not merely an interesting academic proposition. He blushed crimson, and cleared his throat.

"Ah … I mean … it's been done."

Jamie coughed, and cleared his own throat. It had been done. His own bloody-minded grandfather had begun his social rise by forcibly wedding—and promptly bedding—the elderly and wealthy dowager Lady Lovat.

"What?" Brianna swiveled round to stare at Roger, obviously appalled. "That's the most … but they couldn't get away with something like that!"

"I expect they could, really," Roger said, almost apologetically. "See, hen, possession is a lot more than nine-tenths of the law when it comes to women. Marry a woman and take her to bed, and she and all her property are yours, whether she likes it or not. Without another male relative to protest, it's not likely a court would do a thing."

"But she *does* have a male relative!" Brianna flipped a hand toward Jamie—who did have a protest to make, but probably not along the lines Brianna had expected.

"Aye, well, but. Witnesses," he objected. "Ye canna do something like that, without ye have a witness to say it was a valid marriage." He cleared his throat again, and Ulysses reached for the teapot.

Old Simon had had witnesses; two of his friends, plus the two attendants of the dowager. One of whom had later become Jamie's grandmother, though I did trust less force had been involved in that transaction.

"I can't see that that's a difficulty," I said, brushing crumbs off my bosom. "Obviously, this wasn't a one-man show. Whoever the intending bridegroom is—and mind, we don't even know there is one, but for the sake of argument—anyway, whoever he is, if he exists, plainly he has accomplices. Randall Lillywhite, for one."

"Who wasna here," Jamie reminded me.

"Hm. That's true," I admitted. "But still, the principle holds."

“Yes,” Roger said stubbornly, “and if he *does* exist, then the chief suspect is Lieutenant Wolff, isn’t he? Everyone knows he’s made more than one try to marry Jocasta. And he *was* here.”

“But pie-eyed,” Jamie added, dubiously.

“Or not. As I said, Seamus and his boys were surprised that anyone could be that drunk so early on, but what if it was a sham?” Roger glanced round the table, one eyebrow lifted.

“If he were only pretending to be reeling drunk, no one would pay attention to him or treat him later as a suspect, and yet he could manage to be in position to poison a cup of punch, give it to Betty with instructions to give it to Duncan, then slip away and hang about, ready to nip upstairs the moment word came that Duncan had collapsed. And if Betty then offered it to Duncan, who refused it—well, there she was, with a full cup of fresh rum punch in her hand.”

He shrugged.

“Who could blame her for stealing away into the kitchen garden to enjoy it?”

Jocasta and Ulysses snorted simultaneously, making it reasonably clear what they thought of the blameworthiness of Betty’s action. Roger coughed and hurried on with his analysis.

“Right. Well. But the dose didn’t kill Betty. Either the murderer miscalculated or …” Another bright thought occurred to Roger. “Perhaps he didn’t intend the drug to kill Duncan. Maybe he only meant to render him unconscious, and then tip him quietly into the river. That would have been even better. Ye can’t swim, can you?” he asked, turning to Duncan, who shook his head in a dazed sort of way. His one hand rose, mechanically massaging the stump of his missing arm.

“Aye. So a nice drowning would have passed for accident, no worry.” Roger rubbed his hands together, looking pleased. “But then it all went wrong, because the maid drank the drugged punch, not Duncan. And *that’s* why she was killed!”

“Why?” Jocasta was looking quite as dazed as Duncan.

“Because she could identify the man who’d given her the cup,” Jamie put in. He nodded, lounging thoughtfully back in his chair.

"And she would have, the minute folk started in on her about it. Aye, that's sense. But of course he couldna make away with her by violent means; the risk of being seen coming or going to the attic was too great."

Roger nodded approval at this quick appreciation.

"Aye. But it would have been no great trick to get your hands on ground glass—how many goblets and tumblers were floating through this place during the day? Drop one on the bricks and grind the shards under your heel, and there ye are."

Even that might not have been necessary; there had been shattered glass all over the paths and the terrace, after the post-wedding celebrations. I had dropped one glass myself, when surprised by Phillip Wylie.

I turned to address Ulysses.

"There's still the problem of how the ground glass was administered. Do you know what Betty was given to eat or drink, Ulysses?"

A frown rippled over the butler's face, like a stone thrown into dark water.

"Dr. Fentiman ordered her a syllabub," he said slowly. "And a bit of porridge, if she were awake enough to swallow. I made up the syllabub myself, and gave it to Mariah to take up to her. I gave the order for porridge to the cook, but I do not know whether Betty ate it, or who might have carried it."

"Hmm." Jocasta pursed her lips, frowning. "The cookhouse would be madness. And with so many folk about … well, we can ask Mariah and the others, but I shouldna be surprised if they dinna recall even carrying the dishes, let alone someone tampering with them. It would take nay more than a moment, ken; distract the girl, whisk in the glass …" She waved a hand, indicating the scandalous ease with which murder could be committed.

"Or someone could have gone up to the attic under the pretext of seeing how she was, and given her something to drink, with the glass in it then," I suggested. "A syllabub would be perfect. People were coming and going, but Betty was alone up there for long stretches, between Dr. Fentiman's visit, and the time the other slaves came to bed. It would be quite possible for someone to go up there unseen."

"Very nice, Inspector Lestrade," Brianna said to Roger, *sotto voce*. "But there's no proof, is there?"

Jocasta and Duncan were sitting side by side, rigid as a pair of Toby jugs, carefully not facing each other. At this, Jocasta took a deep and audible breath, obviously forcing herself to relax.

"True," she said. "There's not. Ye dinna recall Betty offering you a cup of punch, *a dhuine*?"

Duncan gnawed fiercely on his moustache for a moment, concentrating, but then shook his head.

"She might have … *a bhean*. But she might not, too."

"Well, then."

Everyone fell silent for a moment, during which Ulysses moved silently round the table, clearing things away. At last Jamie gave a deep sigh and straightened up.

"Well, so. Then there's what happened last night. We are agreed that the Irishman who entered your chamber, Aunt, was Stephen Bonnet?"

Brianna's hand jerked, and the cup of tea crashed to the table.

"Who?" she said hoarsely. "Stephen Bonnet—here?"

Jamie glanced at me, frowning.

"I thought ye'd told her, Sassenach."

"When?" I said, with some irritation. "I thought *you'd* told her," I said, turning to Roger, who merely shrugged, stone-faced. Ulysses had swooped down with a cloth and was blotting up the tea. Bree was white-faced, but had regained her self-possession.

"Never mind," she said. "He was here? Last night?"

"Aye, he was," Jamie said reluctantly. "I saw him."

"So he was the thief who came after the gold—or one of them?" Brianna reached for one of the silver cups of port and drank it off as though it were water. Ulysses blinked, but hastened to refill the cup from the decanter.

"It would seem so." Roger reached for a fresh scone, carefully avoiding Brianna's eyes.

"How did he find out about the gold, Aunt?" Jamie leaned back in his chair, eyes half-closed in concentration.

Jocasta gave a small snort, and held out her hand. Ulysses, accustomed to her needs, put a piece of buttered toast into it.

"Hector Cameron told someone; my brother Dougal told someone; or the third man told someone. And knowing them as I did, I should lay odds it wasna either Hector nor Dougal." She shrugged and took a bite of toast.

"But I'll tell ye one thing," she added, swallowing. "The second man in my room, the one who reeked of drink. I said he didna speak, aye? Well, that's plain enough, no? He was someone I ken, whose voice I should have known, if he spoke."

"Lieutenant Wolff?" Roger suggested.

Jamie nodded, a crease forming between his brows.

"Who better than the navy, to find a pirate when one's wanted, aye?"

"*Would* one want a pirate?" Brianna murmured. The port had restored her composure, but she was still pale.

"Aye," Jamie said, paying little attention to her. "No small undertaking, ten thousand pound in gold. It would take more than one man to deal with such a sum—Louis of France and Charles Stuart kent that much; they sent six to deal with thirty thousand." Little wonder, then, if whoever learned of the gold had enlisted the help of Stephen Bonnet—a well-known smuggler and pirate, and one with not only the means of transport but the connections to dispose of the gold.

"A boat," I said slowly. "The Lieutenant left by boat, during the supper. Suppose that he went downriver, and met Stephen Bonnet. They came back together, and waited for the opportunity to sneak into the house and try to terrorize Jocasta into telling them where the gold was."

Jamie nodded.

"Aye, that could be. The Lieutenant has had dealings here for years. Is it possible, Aunt, that he saw something that made him suspect ye had the gold here? Ye said Hector had three bars; is any of it left?"

Jocasta's lips pressed tight, but after a moment's hesitation, she gave a grudging nod.

"He *would* keep a lump of it on his desk, to weight his papers. Aye, Wolff might have seen—but how would he have kent what it was?"

"Perhaps he didn't at the time," Brianna suggested, "but then later heard about the French gold, and put two and two together."

There was a nodding and murmuring at this. As a theory, it fitted well enough. I didn't see quite how one would go about proving it, though, and said so.

Jamie shrugged, and licked a smear of jam off his knuckle.

"I shouldna think proving what's happened is so important, Sassenach. It's maybe what comes next." He looked at Duncan, straight on.

"They'll come back, *a charaid*," he said quietly. "Ye ken that, aye?"

Duncan nodded. He looked unhappy, but determined.

"Aye, I ken." He reached out a hand and took Jocasta's—the first gesture of the sort I had ever seen him make toward her. "We shall be ready, *Mac Dubh*."

Jamie nodded, slowly.

"I must go, Duncan. The planting willna wait. But I shall send word to those I ken, to have a watch of some sort kept upon Lieutenant Wolff."

Jocasta had sat silent, her hand unmoving in Duncan's. She sat up taller in her chair at this.

"And the Irishman?" she said. Her other hand rubbed slowly across her knee, pressing lightly with the heel of her hand, where the knife blade had cut.

Jamie exchanged a glance with Duncan, then with me.

"He'll come back," he said, grim certainty in his voice.

I was looking at Brianna as he said it. Her face was calm, but I was her mother, and I saw the fear move in her eyes, like a snake through water. Stephen Bonnet, I thought, with a sinking heart, was already back.

We left next day for the mountains. We were no more than five miles on our journey, when I caught the sound of hoofbeats on the road behind us, and saw a flash of scarlet, through the spring-green of the chestnut trees.

It was Major MacDonald, and the look of delight upon his face as he spurred toward us told me all I needed to know.

"Oh, bloody *hell*!" I said.

The note bore Tryon's scarlet seal, bloodred as the Major's coat.

"It came this morning to Greenoaks," the Major said, reining up to watch as Jamie broke the seal. "I offered to bring it, as I was bound this way, in any case." He knew already what the note contained; Farquard Campbell would already have opened his.

I watched Jamie's face as he read. His expression didn't change. He finished reading, and handed me the note.

19th March, 1771

To the Commanding Officers of the Militia:

Sirs:

I Yesterday determined by Consent of His Majesty's Council to march with a Body of Forces taken from several Militia Regiments, into the Settlements of the Insurgents to reduce them to Obedience, who by their Rebellious Acts and Declarations have set the Government at defiance and interrupted the Course of Justice by obstructing, overturning and shutting up the Courts of Law. That some of your Regiment therefore may have a Share in the Honor of serving their Country in this important Service, I am to require you to make a choice of thirty men, who shall join the Body of my Force in this Endeavor.

It is not intended to move the Troops before the twentieth of next Month before which time you shall be informed of the day you are *to assemble your Men, the time of march and the Road you are to take.*

It is recommended as a Christian Duty incumbent on every Planter that remains at Home, to take care of, and assist to the utmost of his Abilities the Families of those Men who go on this Service that neither their Families nor plantations may suffer while they are employed on a Service where the Interest of the whole is concerned.

For the Expenditures ordered on this Expedition I shall give printed Warrants payable to the Bearers, These Warrants will become negotiable, until the Treasury can pay them out of the contingent Fund in case there is not a sufficiency of Money in the Treasury to answer the necessary Services of this Expedition.

I am &c. &c.,
William Tryon

Had Hermon Husband and James Hunter known, when they left River Run? I thought they must. And the Major, of course, was bound for New Bern now, to offer his services to the Governor. His boots were filmed with the dust of his ride, but the hilt of his sword gleamed in the sun.

"Bloody, bloody, fucking hell," I said softly, again, with emphasis. Major MacDonald blinked. Jamie glanced at me, and the corner of his mouth twitched up.

"Aye, well," he said. "Nearly a month. Just time to get the barley in."

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PART SIX

The War of the Regulation

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"… AND FIGHT THEM, SAYING THEY HAD MEN ENOUGH TO KILL THEM, WE CAN KILL THEM"

Deposition of Waightstill Avery, Witness
North Carolina
Mecklenburg County

Waightstill Avery Testifieth and saith that on the sixth Day of March Instant about nine or Ten OClock in the Morning He this Deponent was at the now dwelling house of one Hudgins who lives at the lower end of the long Island.

And He this Deponent there saw Thirty or Forty of those People who style themselves Regulators, and was then and there arrested and forceably detained a prisoner by one of them (who said his Name was James McQuiston) in the Name of them all, and that soon after one James Graham (or Grimes) spoke to this Deponent these Words "You are now a Prisoner and You must not go any where without a Guard." immediately after adding that "You must keep with Your Guard and You shan't be hurt."

This Deponent was then conducted under Guard of two Men to the regulating Camp (as they termed it) about a Mile distant, where were many more persons of the same Denomination and others came there some Hours after, in the whole as this Deponent supposes and imagines about two hundred and Thirty.

That from themselves He this Deponent learned the Names of five of their Captains or leading Men then present (Viz., Thomas Hamilton and one other Hamilton, James Hunter, Joshua Teague one Gillespie and the aforesaid James Grimes (or Graham). He this

Deponent heard many of them whose Names are to Him unknown say approbrious Things against the Governor, the Judges of the Superior Court, against the House of Assembly and other persons in Office. While a surrounding Crowd were uttering Things still more approbrious the said Thomas Hamilton stood in the Midst and spoke Words of the following Tenor and purport (the Crowd still assenting to and affirming the Truth of what was said):

"What Business has Maurice Moore to be judge, He is no Judge, he was not appointed by the King He nor Henderson neither, They'll neither of them hold Court. The Assembly have gone and made a Riotous Act, and the people are more inraged than ever, it was the best thing that could be for the Country for now We shall be forced to kill all the Clerks and Lawyers, and We will kill them and I'll be damned if they are not put to Death. If they had not made that Act We might have suffered some of them to live. A Riotous Act! there never was any such Act in the Laws of England or any other Country but France, they brought it from France, and they'll bring the Inquisition."

Many of them said the Governor was a Friend to the Lawyers and the Assembly had worsted the Regulators in making Laws for Fees. They shut Husband up in Gaol that He might not see their roguish proceedings and then the Governor and the Assembly made just such Laws as the Lawyers wanted. The Governor is a Friend to the Lawyers, the Lawyers carry on every Thing, they appoint weak ignorant Justices of Peace for their own purposes.

There should be no Lawyers in the province, they damned themselves if there should. Fanning was outlawed as of the Twenty-Second of March and any Regulator that saw Him after that Time would kill him and some said they would not wait for that, wished they could see him, and swore they would kill him before they returned if they could find him at Salisbury—Some wished they could see Judge Moore at Salisbury that they might flog him, others that they might kill him. One Robert Thomson said Maurise Moore was purjured and called him by approbrious Names as Rascal, Rogue, Villian, Scoundral, etc. others assented to it.

When News was brought that Captain Rutherford at the head of His Company was parading in the Streets of Salisbury, this Deponent heard Sundry of them urge very hard and strenuously that the whole Body of the Regulators then present should March into Salisbury with their Arms and fight them saying They had Men enough to kill them, We can kill them We'll teach them to oppose Us.

Taken sworn to & Subscribed this eighth
Day of March 1771 before Me

(signed) Waightstill Avery

(witnessed) Wm. Harris, Justice of the Peace

William Tryon to General Thomas Gage
North Carolina
New Bern ye 19th March 1771

Sir,

It was Yesterday determined in His Majestys Council of this Province to Raise a Body of Forces from the Militia Regiments and Companies to March into the Settlements of the Insurgents, who by their Rebellious Acts and Declarations have set this Government at defiance.

As we have few Military Engines or implements in this Country, I am to request your assistance in procuring me for this Service the Articles (cannon, shot, colours, drums, etc.) listed hereby.

I intend to begin My March from this Town about the Twentieth of next Month, and assemble the Militia as I march through the Counties. My Plan is to form fifteen Hundred Men, though from the Spirit that now appears on the Side of Government that Number may be considerably increased.

I am with much Respect and Esteem
Sir Your Most Obedt. Servt.,
Wm. Tryon

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NOW I LAY ME DOWN TO SLEEP ...

Fraser's Ridge
15 April, 1771

Roger lay in bed, listening for the intermittent whine of an invisible mosquito that had squeezed past the hide covering the cabin window. Jem's cradle was covered by gauze netting, but he and Brianna had no such shielding. If the damn thing would just light on him, he'd get it—but it seemed to circle tirelessly above their bed, occasionally swooping down to sing taunting little *neeeee* songs into his ear, before zooming off again into the dark.

He should have been tired enough to fall asleep in the face of an assault by airborne squadrons of mosquitoes, after the last few days of frantic activity. Two days of fast riding through the mountain coves and ridges, spreading the word to the nearer settlements, whose inhabitants would in turn alert those militia members farther away. The spring planting had been accomplished in record time, all the available men spending the hours from dawn to dusk in the fields. His system was still charged with adrenaline, and little jolts of it zapped through mind and muscle, as though he'd been taking coffee intravenously.

He'd spent all day today helping to ready the farm for their departure, and fragmented images of the round of chores scrolled behind his closed lids whenever he shut his eyes. Fence repair, hay hauling, a hasty excursion to the mill for the bags of flour needed to feed the regiment on the march. Fixing a split rim on the wagon's wheel, splicing a broken harness trace, helping to catch the white sow, who had made an abortive escape attempt from the stable, wood-chopping, and finally, a brisk hour's digging just before supper so Claire could plant her wee patch of yams and peanuts before they left.

In spite of the hurry and labor, that dusk-lit digging had been a welcome respite in the organized frenzy of the day; the thought of it made him pause now, reliving it in hopes of slowing his mind and calming himself enough to sleep.

It was April, warm for the season, and Claire's garden was rampant with growth: green spikes and sprouting leaves and small brilliant flowers, climbing vines that twisted up the palisades and opened silent white trumpets slowly above him as he worked in the gathering twilight.

The smells of the plants and the fresh-turned earth rose round him as the air cooled, strong as incense. The moths came to the trumpet flowers, soft things drifting out of the wood in mottled shades of white and gray and black. Clouds of midges and mosquitoes came too, drawn to his sweat, and after them, the mosquito-hawks, dark fierce creatures with narrow wings and furry bodies, who whirred through the hollyhocks with the aggressive attitude of football hooligans.

He stretched long toes out against the weight of the quilts, his leg just touching his wife's, and felt in memory the chunk of the spade, hard edge beneath his foot, and the satisfying feeling of cracking earth and snapping roots as another spadeful yielded, the black earth moist and veined with the blind white rhizomes of wild grass and the fugitive gleam of earthworms writhing frantically out of sight.

A huge cecropia moth had flown past his head, lured by the garden scents. Its pale brown wings were the size of his hand, and marked with staring eye-spots, unearthly in their silent beauty.

Who makes a garden works with God. That had been written on the edge of the old copper sundial in the garden of the manse in Inverness where he had grown up. Ironic, in view of the fact that the Reverend had neither time nor talent for gardening, and the place was a jungle of unmown grass and ancient rosebushes run wild and leggy with neglect. He smiled at the thought, and made his mental good-night to the Reverend's shade.

Good-night, Dad. God bless you.

It had been a long time since he'd lost the habit of bidding good-night in this fashion to a brief list of family and friends; the hangover of a childhood of nightly prayers that ended with the usual list of, "God bless Nana, and Grandpa Guy in heaven, and my best friend Peter, and Lillian the dog, and the grocer's cat …"

He hadn't done it in years, but a memory of the peace of that small ritual made him draw up a new list, now. Better than counting sheep, he supposed—and he wanted the sense of peace he remembered, more than he wanted sleep.

Good-night, Mrs. Graham, he thought, and smiled to himself, summoning a brief, vivid image of the Reverend's old housekeeper, dipping her hand in a bowl and flicking water onto a hot griddle, to see if the drops would dance. *God bless.*

The Reverend, Mrs. Graham, her granddaughter Fiona and Fiona's husband Ernie … his parents, though that was a *pro forma* nod toward two faceless shapes. Claire, up at the big house, and, with a slight hesitation, Jamie. Then his own small family. He warmed at the thought of them.

Good night, wee lad, he thought, turning his head in the direction of the cradle where Jemmy slept. *God bless.* And Brianna.

He turned his head the other way, and opened his eyes, seeing the dark oval of her sleeping face turned toward his, no more than a foot away on the pillow. He eased himself as quietly as possible onto his side, and lay watching her. They had let the fire go out, since they would be leaving early in the morning; it was so dark in the room he could make out no more of her features than the faint markings of brows and lips.

Brianna never lay wakeful. She rolled onto her back, stretched and settled with a sigh of content, took three deep breaths and was out like a light. Maybe exhaustion, maybe just the blessings of good health and a clear conscience—but he sometimes thought it was eagerness to escape into that private dreamscape of hers, that place where she roamed free at the wheel of her car, hair snapping in the wind.

What was she dreaming now? he wondered. He could feel the faint warmth of her breath on his face.

Last night, I dreamed I made love with Roger. The memory of that particular entry still rankled, hard as he'd tried to dismiss it. He had been drifting toward sleep, lulled by his litany, but the memory of her dreambook pulled him back to wakefulness. She had damn well better not be dreaming such a thing now! Not after the time he'd just given her.

He closed his eyes again, concentrating on the regular pulse of her breathing. His forehead was mere inches from hers. Perhaps he could catch the echo of her dream, through the bones of her skull? What he felt, though, was the echo of her flesh, and the reverberations of their farewell, with all its doubts and pleasures.

She and the lad would leave in the morning, too; their things were packed and stood with his own bundle beside the door. Mr. Wemyss would drive them to Hillsborough, where she would presumably be safely—and gainfully—employed in painting Mrs. Sherston's portrait.

"You be bloody careful," he'd said to her, for the third time in an evening. Hillsborough was smack in the center of the Regulators' territory, and he had considerable reservations about her going at all. She had dismissed his concern, though, scoffing at the notion that she or Jem might be in any danger. She was likely right—and yet he wasn't so sure that she would act differently if there *was* danger. She was so excited at the prospect of her damn commission, he thought, she'd walk straight through armed mobs to get to Hillsborough.

She was singing softly to herself—"Loch Lomond," of all bloody things. "Oh, you'll take the high road, and I'll take the low road, and I'll be in Scotland aforrrrrrre ye …"

"Did ye hear me?" he'd asked, catching hold of her arm as she folded the last of Jemmy's dresses.

"Yes, dear," Bree had murmured, lashes fluttering in mocking submission. That had irritated him into grabbing her wrist and pulling her round to face him.

"I mean it," he said. He stared into her eyes, wide open now, but with a hint of mockery still glinting in dark blue triangles. He tightened his grip on her wrist; tall and well-built as she was, her bones felt delicate, almost frail in his grasp. He had a sudden vision of the bones beneath Brianna's skin—high, wide cheekbones, domed skull, and long white teeth; all too easy to imagine those teeth exposed to the root in a permanent rictus of bone.

He had pulled her to him then with sudden violence, kissed her hard enough to feel her teeth against his own, not caring if he bruised either of them.

She wore only a shift and he hadn't bothered to take it off, merely shoving her backward onto the bed and pushing it above her thighs. She'd lifted her hands toward him, but he hadn't let her touch him; he'd pinned her arms at first, then later, borne her into the hollow of the mattress with the weight of his body, grinding, grasping, seeking reassurance in the thin padding of flesh that kept her bones from his.

They had done it in silence, half-aware of the sleeping child nearby. And yet somewhere in the midst of it, her body had answered him, in some deep and startling way that went beyond words.

"I mean it," he'd repeated, moments later, speaking softly into the tangle of her hair. He lay on her, enclosing her with his arms, keeping her from moving. She twitched, and he tightened his grasp, holding her still. She sighed, and he felt her mouth move, her teeth sink gently into the flesh below his collarbone. She bit him. Not abruptly, but in a slow, sucking bite that made him gasp and lift up to break away.

"I know," she said, and wriggled her arms free, to come round his back and hold him close to her damp, warm softness. "I mean it, too."

"That what you wanted?" He whispered the words now, but softly, not to awaken her. The warmth of her body radiated through the bedclothes; she was deep asleep.

If it was what she'd wanted—what, exactly, was it? Was it the brutal nature of his lovemaking that she'd responded to? Or had she sensed the strength of what lay behind it, and acknowledged that—the desperation of his need to keep her safe?

And if it was the roughness … he swallowed, clenching a fist against the thought of Stephen Bonnet. She'd never told him what had passed between them, her and Bonnet—and it was unthinkable that he should ask. More unthinkable that he should suspect anything in that encounter might have shamefully stirred her. And yet she did stir visibly on those rare occasions when something led him to take her abruptly, without his usual gentleness.

He was a long way from praying now.

He felt as he had once before, trapped in a rhododendron hell, with the same maze of damp roots and hanging leaves always before him, no matter in which direction he turned. Dim tunnels seemed to offer hope of escape, and yet led only to further tangles.

For me and my true love will never meet again, on the bonnie banks and braes of Loch Lomond …

He was wound tight again, skin prickling and his legs twitching with restlessness. The mosquito whined by and he slapped at it—too late, of course. Unable to keep still, he slid quietly out of bed, and did a quick series of deep knee-bends to loosen the cramped muscles.

That brought some relief, and he dropped to the floor to do push-ups, counting silently as he dipped toward the floorboards. One. Two. Three. Four. Concentrating only on the increasing burn in chest and arms and shoulders, the soothing monotony of the count. Twenty-six, twenty-seven, twenty-eight …

At last, muscles quivering with temporary exhaustion, he stood up, untacked the hide from the window, and stood naked, letting the damp night air flood in upon him. He might let in more mosquitoes—but the one might go out, too.

The wood was silvered with moonlight, and a faint fire-glow in the darkened heart of it spoke of the militia encamped there. They had been coming in all day, on mules or ragged horses, muskets laid across the bundles of their blankets. He caught the sound of voices and casual laughter, a fragment borne on the breeze. At least he wasn't the only one wakeful; the notion comforted him.

A brighter light glowed at the side of the big house, at the farther side of the clearing. A lantern; two figures walking close together, one tall, one smaller.

The man said something, an interrogative rumble; he recognized Jamie's voice, but couldn't make out the words.

"No," Claire's voice answered, lighter, clear as they came closer. He saw her hands flutter, silhouetted in the lantern's glow. "I'm filthy from the planting. I'm going to wash before I come in. You go up to bed."

The larger figure hesitated, then handed her the lantern. Roger saw Claire's face in the light for a moment, turned upward, smiling. Jamie bent and kissed her briefly, then stepped back.

"Hurry, then," he said, and Roger could hear the answering smile in his voice. "I dinna sleep well without ye beside me, Sassenach."

"You're going to sleep right away, are you?" She paused, a bantering note in her voice.

"Not right away, no." Jamie's figure had melted into the darkness, but the breeze was toward the cabin, and his voice came out of the shadows, part of the night. "But I canna very well do the other unless ye're beside me, either, now can I?"

Claire laughed, though softly.

"Start without me," she said, turning away toward the well. "I'll catch you up."

Roger waited by the window until he saw her come back, the lantern swinging with the haste of her step, and go inside. The breeze had turned, and he heard no more of the men in the wood, though their fire still burned.

"You're early, mate," he said, and eased a finger toward the firefly, gently nudging. "Think there's anyone else out there yet?"

The insect moved a few inches, then stopped, abdomen stubbornly blinking.

He looked toward the wood, his skin cool now, and gooseflesh rose on his chest. He rubbed absently at it, and felt the tender spot where she had bitten him. It was dark in the moonlight, a faint blotch on his skin; would it still be there come morning? he wondered.

Reaching up to pull the hide back into place, he caught the gleam of moonlight on glass. Brianna's small collection of personal items lay on the shelf by the window: the pair of tortoiseshell combs Jocasta had given her, her silver bracelet. The small glass jar of tansy oil, two or three discreet slips of sponge beside it. And the larger gleam of the jarful of Dauco seeds. She hadn't had time for the tansy oil tonight, but he'd bet his life she'd taken the seeds sometime today.

He tacked down the hide, and made his way back to bed, pausing by the cradle to put down a hand and feel the baby's breath through the mosquito-netting, warm and reassuring on his skin.

Jem had kicked his covers off; Roger lifted the netting and pulled them up by feel, tucking them firmly in. There was something soft … oh, Jemmy's rag-doll; the baby was clutching it to his chest. Roger stood for a moment, hand on Jemmy's back, feeling the soothing rise and fall of his breathing.

"Good-night, laddie," he whispered at last, and touched the soft padded round of the little boy's bottom. "God bless you and keep you safe."

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO YOU

May 1, 1771
May Union Camp

I woke up just past dawn, roused by an insect of some sort walking up my leg. I twitched my foot and whatever it was scuttled hastily away into the grass, evidently alarmed to discover that I was alive. I wriggled my toes suspiciously, but finding no more intruders in my blanket, drew a deep breath of sap-filled fresh air and relaxed luxuriously.

I could hear faint stirrings nearby, but it was only the stamp and blowing of the officers' horses, who woke long before the men did. The camp itself was still silent—or as silent as a camp containing several hundred men was likely to be at any hour. The sheet of canvas overhead glowed with soft light and leaf-shadows, but the sun was not yet fully up. I closed my eyes half-way, delighted at the thought that I needn't get up for some time yet—and when I did, someone else would have made breakfast.

We had come into camp the night before, after a winding journey down from the mountains and across the piedmont, to arrive at the place of rendezvous, at Colonel Bryan's plantation. We were in good time; Tryon had not yet arrived with his troops from New Bern, nor had the Craven and Carteret County detachments, who were bringing the artillery field pieces and swivel guns. Tryon's troops were expected sometime today; or so Colonel Bryan had told us over supper the night before.

A grasshopper landed on the canvas above with an audible thump. I eyed it narrowly, but it didn't seem disposed to come inside, thank goodness. Perhaps I should have accepted Mrs. Bryan's offer to find me a bed in the house, along with a few other officers' wives who had accompanied their husbands. Jamie had insisted upon sleeping in the field with his men, though, and I had gone with him, preferring a bed involving Jamie and bugs to one with neither.

I glanced sideways, careful not to move in case he was still asleep. He wasn't. He was lying quite still, though, utterly relaxed, save for his right hand. He had this raised, and appeared to be examining it closely, turning it to and fro and slowly curling and uncurling his fingers—as well as he could. The fourth finger had a fused joint, and was permanently stiff; the middle finger was slightly twisted, a deep white scar spiraling round the middle joint.

His hand was callused and battered by work, and the tiny stigma of a nail-wound still showed, pale-pink, in the middle of his palm. The skin of his hand was deeply bronzed and weathered, freckled with sun-blots and scattered with bleached gold hairs. I thought it remarkably beautiful.

"Happy Birthday," I said, softly. "Taking stock?"

He let the hand fall on his chest, and turned his head to look at me, smiling.

"Aye, something of the sort. Though I suppose I've a few hours left. I was born at half-six; I willna have lived a full half-century until suppertime."

I laughed and rolled onto my side, kicking the blanket off. The air was still delightfully cool, but it wouldn't last long.

"Do you expect to disintegrate much further before supper?" I asked, teasing.

"Oh, I dinna suppose anything is likely to fall off by then," he said, consideringly. "As to the workings … aye, well …" He arched his back, stretching, and sank back with a gratified groan as my hand settled on him.

"It all seems to be in perfect working order," I assured him. I gave a brief, experimental tug, making him yelp slightly. "Not loose at all."

"Good," he said, folding his hand firmly over mine to prevent further unauthorized experiments. "How did ye ken what I was doing? Taking stock, as ye say?"

I let him keep hold of the hand, but shifted to set my chin in the center of his chest, where a small depression seemed made for the purpose.

"I always do that, when I have a birthday—though I generally do it the night before. More looking back, I think, reflecting a bit on the year that's just gone. But I do check things over; I think perhaps everyone does. Just to see if you're the same person as the day before."

"I'm reasonably certain that I am," he assured me. "Ye dinna see any marked changes, do ye?"

I lifted my chin from its resting place and looked him over carefully. It was in fact rather hard to look at him objectively; I was both so used to his features and so fond of them that I tended to notice tiny, dear things about him—the freckle on his earlobe, the lower incisor pushing eagerly forward, just slightly out of line with its fellows—and to respond to the slightest change of his expression—but not really to look at him as an integrated whole.

He bore my examination tranquilly, eyelids half-lowered against the growing light. His hair had come loose while he slept and feathered over his shoulders, its ruddy waves framing a face strongly marked by both humor and passion—but which possessed a paradoxical and most remarkable capacity for stillness.

"No," I said at last, and set my chin down again with a contented sigh. "It's still you."

He gave a small grunt of amusement, but lay still. I could hear one of the cooks stumbling round nearby, cursing as he tripped over a wagon-tongue. The camp was still in the process of assembling; a few of the companies—those with a high proportion of ex-soldiers among their officers and men—were tidy and organized. A good many were not, and tipsy tents and strewn equipment sprawled across the meadow in a quasi-military hodgepodge.

A drum began to beat, to no apparent effect. The army continued to snooze.

"Do you think the Governor is going to be able to do anything with these troops?" I asked dubiously.

The local avatar of the army appeared to have gone back to sleep as well. At my question, though, the long auburn lashes lifted in lazy response.

"Oh, aye. Tryon's a soldier. He kens well enough what to do—at least to start. It's no so verra difficult to make men march in column and dig latrines, ken. To make them fight is another thing."

"Can he do that?"

The chest under my chin lifted in a deep sigh.

"Maybe so. Maybe no. The question is—will he have to?"

That was the question, all right. Rumors had flown round us like autumn leaves in a gale, all the way from Fraser's Ridge. The Regulators had ten thousand men, who were marching in a body upon New Bern. General Gage was sailing from New York with a regiment of official troops to subdue the Colony. The Orange County militia had rioted and killed their officers. Half the Wake County men had deserted. Hermon Husband had been arrested and spirited onto a ship, to be taken to London for trial on charges of treason. Hillsborough had been taken by the Regulators, who were preparing to fire the town and put Edmund Fanning and all his associates to the sword. I did hope that one wasn't true—or if it was, that Hubert Sherston was not one of Fanning's intimates.

Sorting through the mass of hearsay, supposition, and sheer wild invention, the only fact of which we could be sure appeared to be that Governor Tryon was en route to join the militia. After which, we would just see, I supposed.

Jamie's free hand rested on my back, his thumb idly stroking the edge of my shoulder blade. With his usual capacity for mental discipline, he appeared to have dismissed the uncertainty of the military prospects completely from his mind, and was thinking of something else entirely.

"Do ye ever think—" he began, and then broke off.

"Think what?" I bent and kissed his chest, arching my back to encourage him to rub it, which he did.

"Well … I'm no so sure I can explain, but it's struck me that now I have lived longer than my father did—which is not something I expected to happen," he added, with faint wryness. "It's only … well, it seems odd, is all. I only wondered, did ye ever think of that, yourself—having lost your mother young, I mean?"

"Yes." My face was buried in his chest, my voice muffled in the folds of his shirt. "I used to—when I was younger. Like going on a journey without a map."

His hand on my back paused for a moment.

"Aye, that's it." He sounded a little surprised. "I kent more or less what it would be like to be a man of thirty, or of forty—but now what?" His chest moved briefly, with a small noise that might have been a mixture of amusement and puzzlement.

"You invent yourself," I said softly, to the shadows inside the hair that had fallen over my face. "You look at other women—or men; you try on their lives for size. You take what you can use, and you look inside yourself for what you can't find elsewhere. And always … always … you wonder if you're doing it right."

His hand was warm and heavy on my back. He felt the tears that ran unexpectedly from the corners of my eyes to dampen his shirt, and his other hand came up to touch my head and smooth my hair.

"Aye, that's it," he said again, very softly.

The camp was beginning to stir outside, with clangings and thumps, and the hoarse sound of sleep-rough voices. Overhead, the grasshopper began to chirp, the sound like someone scratching a nail on a copper pot.

"This is a morning my father never saw," Jamie said, still so softly that I heard it as much through the walls of his chest, as with my ears. "The world and each day in it is a gift, *mo chridhe*—no matter what tomorrow may be."

I sighed deeply and turned my head, to rest my cheek against his chest. He reached over gently and wiped my nose with a fold of his shirt.

“And as for taking stock,” he added practically, “I’ve all my teeth, none of my parts are missing, and my cock still stands up by itself in the morning. It could be worse.”

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MILITARY ENGINES

Journal of the Expedition against the Insurgents
Kept by William Tryon, Governor

Thursday, May 2nd

The Craven and Carteret Detachments marched out of New Bern with the two Field Pieces, Six Swivel Guns mounted on Carriages, Sixteen Waggons, & four Carts, loaded with Baggage, Ammunition and as much provisions as would supply the several Detachments that were to join them on their Route to Col. Bryan's, the place of General Rendezvous.

The Governor left New Bern the 27th of April, and arrived at Col. Bryan's the 1st of May. Today the Troops from the two Districts joined.

Friday, 3d. of May, Union Camp

The Governor Reviewed at 12 O'Clock the Detachments in the Meadow at Smiths Ferry on the West Side of Neuse River.

Saturday, the 4th of May

The Whole marched to Johnston Court House. Nine Miles.

Sunday, 5th of May

Marched to Major Theophilus Hunter's in Wake County. Thirteen Miles.

Monday, 6th of May

The Army halted, and the Governor reviewed the Wake Regiment at a Genl. Muster. Mr. Hinton Colonel of the Regiment acquainted the Governor that he had got but Twenty two Men of the Company he had received Orders to raise, owing to a Disaffection among the Inhabitants of the County.

The Governor observing a General Discontent in the Wake Regiment as he passed along the Front Rank of the Battalion, seeing that not more than one Man in five had Arms, & finding that upon his calling on them to turn out as Volunteers in the Service, they refused to obey, ordered the Army to surround the Battalion; which being effected he directed three of his Colonels to draft out Forty of the most Sightly & Most active Men, which Manouvre caused no small Panic in the Regiment, consisting at the Time of about four Hundred Men.

During the drafting the Officers of the Army were active in persuading the men to enlist, and in less than two Hours completed the Wake Company to Fifty Men. Night coming on the Wake Regiment was dismissed, much ashamed both of their Disgrace, & their own Conduct which occasioned it. The Army returned to Camp.

Wednesday, the 8th of May

Col. Hinton's Detachment was left behind, with a View to prevent the disaffected in that County from forming into a Body, and joining the Regulators in the adjacent Counties.

This Morning a Detachment marched to the dwelling House of Turner Tomlinson, a Notorious Regulator, and brought him prisoner to Camp, where he was closely confined. He confess'd he was a Regulator, but would make no discoveries.

The Army marched, & incamped near Booth's, on New Hope Creek.

Friday, the 10th of May

Halted, ordered the Waggons to be refitted, Horses to be shod, and every thing put in Repair. Reviewed in Hillsborough two Companies of the Orange Militia.

The Prisoner Tomlinson made his escape this Evening, from the Quarter Guard. Detachments set after him, but without Success.

Sunday, the 12th of May

Marched, and forded Haw River, and encamped on the West Side of the Banks. It was expected the Regulators would have opposed the passages of the Royalists over this River, as it was their Intent, but not suspecting that the Army would move out of Hillsborough till after Monday, they were by this Sudden Movement of the Army defeated in that part of their plan.

Received this Day flying Reports that General Waddell was forced by the Regulators, with the Troops under his Command to repass the Yadkin River.

Divine Service, with Sermon, performed by the Revd. Mr. McCartny. Text: "If You have no Sword Sell your Garment & Buy One."

This Day Twenty Gentlemen Volunteers joined the Army, chiefly from Granville & Bute Counties. They were formed into a Troop of Light Horse under the Command of Major MacDonald. A Regulator taken by the flanking parties laying in ambush with his Gun. The Commissary took out of his House part of a Hogshead of Rum lodged there for the Use of the Regulators. Also some Hogs which were to be accounted to His Family.

Monday, the 13th of May

Marched to O'Neal. At 12 O'Clock an Express rider arrived from General Waddell, with a Verbal Message, the Express not daring to take a Letter for fear of its being intercepted. The Purport of which Message was that on Thursday Evening the 9th Instant the Regulators to the Number of two Thousand surrounded his Camp, and in the most daring & insolent Manner required the General to retreat with the Troops over the Yadkin River, of which he was then within two Miles. He refused to comply, insisting he had the Governor's Orders to proceed. This made them more insolent, and with many Indian shouts they endeavoured to intimidate his Men.

The General finding his Men not exceeding three Hundred, and generally unwilling to engage; and many of his Sentries going over to the Regulators, was reduced to comply with their requisition, & early the next Morning repassed the Yadkin River, with his Cannon and Baggage; the Regulators agreeing to disperse and return to their several Habitations.

A Council of War was held immediately to deliberate on the Subject of the Intelligence brought by the Express, composed of the Honorable John Rutherford, Lewis DeRosset, Robert Palmer, & Sam Cornell, of His Majesty's Council, and the Colonels & Field Officers of the Army, Wherein it was resolved that the Army should change their Route, get into the Road at Captain Holt's that leads from Hillsborough to Salisbury, pass the little and great Alamance Rivers with all possible Expedition, & march without Loss of Time to join General Waddell; accordingly the Army got under March, and before Night encamped on the West Side of little Alamance, a strong Detachment being sent forward to take possession of the West Banks of Great Alamance, to prevent the Enemy's Parties from occupying that strong Post.

This evening received Intelligence that the Regulators were sending Scouts through all their Settlements, and assembling on Sandy Creek, near Hunter's.

Marched and joined the Detachment on the West Banks of Great Alamance where a strong Camp was chosen. Here the Army halted till more provisions could be brought from Hillsborough, for which purpose several Waggons now emptied and sent from Camp to Hillsborough

Intelligence being brought this Evening into Camp that the Rebels intended to attack the camp in the Night, the Necessary preparations were made for an Engagement, and one third of the Army ordered to remain under Arms all Night, & the Remainder to lay down near their Arms. No Alarm given.

Tuesday, the 14th of May

Halted, the Men ordered to keep in Camp.

The Army lay on their Arms all Night, as in the preceeding. No alarm.

Wednesday, the 15th of May

About 6 O'Clock in the Evening, the Governor received a Letter from the Insurgents which he laid before the Council of War, wherein it was determined that the Army should march against the Rebels early the next Morning, that the Governor should send them a Letter offering them Terms, and in Case of Refusal, should attack them.

The Men remained all Night under Arms. No alarm, tho' the Rebels lay within five Miles of the Camp.

From the Dreambook:

Hillsborough, May 15

"Last night I fell asleep early, and woke up before dawn inside a gray cloud. All day, I've felt like I was walking inside a mist; people talk to me and I don't hear them; I can see their mouths move, and I nod and smile, and then go away. The air is hot and muggy and everything smells like hot metal. My head aches, and the cook is clanging pans.

I've tried all day to remember what I dreamed of, and I can't. There's only gray, and a feeling of fear. I've never been near a battle, but I have the feeling that what I'm dreaming of is cannon smoke."

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COUNCIL OF WAR

Jamie came back from the Council of War, well after suppertime, and informed the men briefly of Tryon's intent. The general response was approval, if not outright enthusiasm.

"Ist gut we move now," said Ewald Mueller, stretching out his long arms and cracking all his knuckles simultaneously. "Longer we stay, we are growing moss!"

This sentiment was greeted by laughter and nods of agreement. The mood of the company brightened noticeably at the prospect of action in the morning; men settled down to talk around the fires, the rays of the setting sun glinting off tin cups and the polished barrels of the muskets laid carefully by their feet.

Jamie made a quick round of inspection, answering questions and administering reassurances, then came to join me at our smaller fire. I looked at him narrowly; in spite of the stress of the immediate situation, there was a sense of suppressed satisfaction about him that at once excited my suspicions.

"What have you done?" I asked, handing him a large chunk of bread and a bowl of stew.

He didn't bother denying that he'd been doing something.

"Got Cornell alone long enough after the Council, to ask him about Stephen Bonnet." He ripped off a chunk of bread with his teeth and swallowed it with the minimum of chewing. "Christ, I'm starved. I've not eaten all day, what wi' creepin' through the brambles on my belly like a snake."

"Surely Samuel Cornell wasn't hanging about in the brambles." Cornell was one of the Governor's Royal Council, a stout and wealthy merchant from Edenton, and grossly unsuited by position, build, and temperament for snaking through brambles.

"No, that was later." He swabbed the bread through the stew, took another enormous bite, then waved a hand, momentarily speechless. I handed him a cup of cider, which he used to wash down the mess.

"We were searchin' out the Rebel lines," he explained, the obstruction cleared. "They're no far off, ken. Though 'lines' is giving them the benefit of considerable doubt," he added, scooping up more stew. "I've not seen such a rabble since I fought in France, and we took a village where a gang o' wine-smugglers were. Half of them whoring and all of them drunk; we had to pick them up off the ground to arrest them. This lot's little better, from what I could see. Not so many whores, though," he added, to be fair, and shoved the rest of his bread into his mouth.

At least half the Governor's army was slightly the worse for drink at the moment, but that was so usual a condition as not to call for comment. I gave him another piece of bread, concentrating on the important aspect of the conversation.

"So you've found out something about Bonnet, then?"

He nodded, chewed, and gulped.

"Cornell's not met him, but he's heard talk. It seems he works his way up and down the Outer Banks for a bit, and then disappears for three or four months. Then suddenly, one day he'll be there again, drinking in the taverns in Edenton or Roanoke, gold pieces spilling from his pockets."

"So he's bringing in goods from Europe and selling them." Three or four months was the time it would take to sail a ship to England and back. "Contraband, I suppose?"

Jamie nodded.

"Cornell thinks so. And d'ye ken where he brings the stuff ashore?" He wiped the back of a hand across his mouth, seeming grimly amused. "Wylie's Landing. Or so rumor says."

"What—you don't mean Phillip Wylie is in cahoots with him?" I was shocked—and rather distressed—to hear this, but Jamie shook his head.

"As to that, I couldna say. But the Landing adjoins Phillip Wylie's plantation, to be sure. And the wee shite *was* wi' Bonnet the night he came to River Run, no matter what he may have said about it, later," he added. He flapped a hand, dismissing Phillip Wylie for the moment.

"But Cornell says that Bonnet's disappeared again; he's been gone, this past month. So my aunt and Duncan are likely safe enough, for the moment. That's one thing off my mind—and a good thing; there's enough to worry about without that."

He spoke without irony, glancing round at the encampment that sprawled around us. As the light failed, the fires began to glow through the dimness of twilight, like hundreds of fireflies along the banks of Great Alamance.

"Hermon Husband is here," he said.

I looked up from the fresh bowl of stew I was dishing out.

"Did you speak to him?"

He shook his head.

"I couldna go near. He's with the Regulators, aye? I was on a wee hill, lookin' down across the stream, and saw him in the distance; he was in a great mass of men, but I couldna mistake his dress."

"What will he do?" I handed him the full bowl. "Surely he won't fight—or allow them to fight." I was inclined to view Husband's presence as a hopeful sign. Hermon Husband was the closest thing the Regulators had to a real leader; they would listen to him, I was sure.

Jamie shook his head, looking troubled.

"I dinna ken, Sassenach. He willna take up arms himself, no—but as for the rest …" He trailed off, thinking. Then his face set in sudden decision. He handed me back the bowl, and turning on his heel, made his way across the camp.

I saw him touch Roger on the shoulder, and draw him aside a little. They spoke together for a few moments, then Jamie reached into his coat, drew out something white, and handed it to Roger. Roger looked at whatever it was for a moment, then nodded, and tucked it away in his own coat.

Jamie clapped him on the shoulder, left him, and came back across the camp, pausing to laugh and exchange rude remarks with the Lindsay brothers.

He came back smiling, and took the bowl from me, seeming relieved.

"I've told Roger Mac to go first thing in the morning, to find Husband," he said, setting about the stew with renewed appetite. "If he can, I've told him to bring Husband here—to speak face to face wi' Tryon. If he canna convince Tryon—which he can't—perhaps Tryon will convince Husband that he's in earnest. If Hermon sees that it will mean bloodshed, then perhaps he will prevail upon his men to stand down."

"Do you really think so?" It had rained lightly in the afternoon, and banks of cloud still covered the eastern sky. The edges of those clouds glowed faintly red—not from the slanting rays of sunset, but from the fires of the Regulators, camped invisibly on the opposite bank of the Alamance.

Jamie wiped his bowl and took a last bite of bread, shaking his head.

"I dinna ken," he said simply. "But there's nothing else to try, is there?"

I nodded, and stooped to put more wood on the fire. No one would sleep early tonight.

The campfires had burned all day, smoking and sputtering in a light rain. Now, though, the drizzle had ceased and the clouds had parted, shredding into long, wispy mare's-tails that glowed like fire across the whole arc of the western sky, eclipsing the puny efforts of the earthbound flames. Seeing it, I put a hand on Jamie's arm.

"Look," I said. He turned, wary lest someone had appeared at his heels with a fresh problem, but his face relaxed as I gestured upward.

Frank, urged to look at some wonder of nature whilst preoccupied with a problem, would have paused just long enough not to seem discourteous, said, "Oh, yes, lovely, isn't it?" and returned at once to the maze of his thoughts. Jamie lifted his face to the glowing glory of the heavens and stood still.

What is the matter with you? I thought to myself. *Can't you let Frank Randall rest in peace?*

Jamie put an arm about my shoulders, and sighed.

"In Scotland," he said, "the sky would be like lead all day, and even at the twilight, ye'd see no more than the sun sinking into the sea like a red-hot cannonball. Never a sky like this one is."

"What makes you think of Scotland?" I asked, intrigued that his mind should run as mine did, on things of the past.

"Dawn and twilight, and the season of the year," he said, and his wide mouth curled slightly upward in reminiscence. "Whenever there is a change in the air around me, it makes me think of what has been, and what is now. I dinna always do it in a house, but when I'm living rough, I'll often wake dreaming of folk I once knew, and then sit quiet in the twilight, thinking of other times and places." He shrugged a little. "So now the sun is going down, and it is Scotland in my mind."

"Oh," I said, comforted at having such an explanation. "That must be it."

"Must be what?" The setting sun bathed his face in gold, softening the lines of strain as he looked down at me.

"I was thinking of other times and places, too," I said, and leaned my head against his shoulder. "Just now, though … I can't think of anything but this."

"Oh?" He hesitated for a moment, but then said, carefully, "I dinna much mention it, Sassenach, for if the answer's 'yes,' there's nay so much I can do to mend it—but do ye often long for … the other times?"

I waited for the space of three heartbeats to answer; I heard them, Jamie's heart beating slow under my ear, and I curled my left hand closed, feeling the smooth metal of the gold ring on my finger.

"No," I said, "but I remember them."

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ULTIMATUMS

Great Alamance Camp
May 16th 1771

To the People now Assembled
in Arms, who Style themselves
Regulators

In Answer to your Petition, I am to acquaint you that I have ever been attentive to the true Interest of this Country, and to that of every Individual residing within it. I lament the fatal Necessity to which you have now reduced me, by withdrawing yourselves from the Mercy of the Crown, and the Laws of your Country, to require you are assembled as Regulators, to lay down your Arms, Surrender up the outlawed Ringleaders, and Submit yourselves to the Laws of your Country, and then rest on the lenity and Mercy of Government. By accepting these Terms in one Hour from the delivery of this Dispatch, you will prevent an effusion of Blood, as you are at this time in a state of War and Rebellion against your King, your Country, and your Laws.

Wm. Tryon

Jamie had gone before I woke; his blanket lay neatly folded beside me, and Gideon was gone from the pin-oak to which Jamie had tethered him the night before.

"Colonel's gone to meet with the Governor's Council of War," Kenny Lindsay told me, yawning widely. He blinked, shaking himself like a wet dog. "Tea, ma'am, or coffee?"

"Tea, please." I supposed it was the tenor of current events that was causing me to think of the Boston Tea Party. I couldn't recall for sure when that brouhaha and its subsequent events were due to occur, but had an obscure feeling that I ought to seize every opportunity of drinking tea while it was still obtainable, in hopes of saturating my tissues—like a bear tucking into the grubs and berries in anticipation of winter.

The day had dawned still and clear, and while it was cool for the moment, there was already a hint of mugginess in the air from the rain the day before. I sipped my tea, feeling small tendrils of hair escape from bondage to curl round my face, sticking to my cheeks in the steam from my cup.

Tissues restored for the moment, I fetched a couple of buckets and set off for the stream. I hoped it wouldn't be needed, but it would be as well to have a quantity of boiled sterile water on hand, just in case. And if it wasn't needed for medical purposes, I could rinse my stockings, which were much in need of attention.

Despite its name the Great Alamance was not a particularly impressive river, being no more than fifteen or twenty feet across for most of its length. It was also shallow, mud-bottomed, and kinked like a wool-raveling, with multiple small arms and tributaries that wandered all over the landscape. I supposed it was a decent military demarcation, though; while a body of men could certainly ford the stream without much trouble, there was no chance of them doing so by stealth.

Dragonflies darted over the water, and over the heads of a couple of militia-men, chatting companionably as they relieved themselves into the murky waters of the stream. I paused tactfully behind a bush until they had left, reflecting as I made my way down the sloping bank with my buckets how fortunate it was that most of the troops would consider *drinking* water only if actually dying of dehydration.

When I came back into camp, I found it wide awake, every man alert, if red-eyed. The atmosphere was one of watchfulness, though, rather than immediate battle-readiness, and there was no more than a general stir of interest when Jamie returned, Gideon threading his way past the campfires with surprising delicacy.

"How is it, *Mac Dubh*?" Kenny asked, standing to greet him as Jamie reined up. "Anything ado?"

Jamie shook his head. He was dressed with a neatness approaching severity, hair clubbed back, dirk and pistols fixed on his belt, sword at his side. A yellow cockade fixed to his coat was the only touch of decoration. Battle-ready, and a small *frisson* crept up my spine at the thought.

"The Governor's sent across his wee letter to the Regulators. Four sheriffs each took a copy; they're to read it out to every group they come across. We must just wait, and see what happens."

I followed his glance toward the third campfire. Roger had likely left as soon as it was light, before the camp woke.

I had emptied the buckets into the kettle for boiling. I picked them up for another trip to the stream, when Gideon's ears pricked and he lifted his head suddenly, with a sharp whicker of greeting. Jamie instantly nudged the horse in front of me, and his hand dropped to his sword. My view was blocked by Gideon's enormous chest and withers; I couldn't see who was coming, but I did see Jamie's hand relax its grip on the sword-hilt as whoever it was came in sight. A friend, then.

Or if not precisely a friend, at least someone he didn't mean to run through or hack out of the saddle. I heard a familiar voice, raised in greeting, and peered out from under Gideon's chin to see Governor Tryon riding across the small meadow, accompanied by two aides.

Tryon sat his horse decently, if without great style, and was dressed as usual for campaigning, in a serviceable blue uniform coat and doeskin breeches, a yellow officer's cockade in his hat, and with one of the cavalry cutlasses called a hanger at his side—not for show; the hilt showed nicks and the scabbard was worn.

Tryon pulled up his horse and nodded, touching his hat to Jamie, who did likewise. Seeing me lurking in Gideon's shadow, the Governor politely removed his cocked hat altogether, bowing from the saddle.

"Mrs. Fraser, your servant." He glanced at the pails I held, then turned in his saddle, beckoning to one of the aides. "Mr. Vickers. Kindly help Mrs. Fraser, if you will."

I surrendered the pails gratefully to Mr. Vickers, a pink-cheeked young man of eighteen or so, but instead of going with him, I simply directed him where to take them. Tryon raised one eyebrow at me, but I returned his expression of mild displeasure with a bland smile, and stood my ground. I wasn't going anywhere.

He was wise enough to recognize that, and make no issue of my presence. Dismissing me instead from his cognizance, he nodded again to Jamie.

"Your troops are in order, Colonel Fraser?" He glanced pointedly around. The only troops visible at the moment were Kenny, who had his nose buried in his cup, and Murdo Lindsay and Geordie Chisholm, who were engaged in a vicious game of mumblety-peg in the shadows of the copse.

"Aye, sir."

The Governor raised both brows in patent skepticism.

"Call them, sir. I will inspect their readiness."

Jamie paused for a moment, gathering up his reins. He squinted against the rising sun, evaluating the Governor's mount. "A nice gelding ye have there, sir. Is he steady?"

"Of course." The Governor frowned. "Why?"

Jamie threw back his head and gave a ululating Highland cry, of the sort meant to be heard over several acres of mountainside. The Governor's horse jerked at the reins, eyes rolling back. Militiamen poured out of the thicket, shrieking like banshees, and a black cloud of crows exploded from the trees above them like a puff of cannon smoke, raucous in flight. The horse reared, decanting Tryon in an undignified heap on the grass, and bolted for the trees on the far side of the meadow.

I took several steps backward, out of the way.

The Governor sat up, purple-faced and gasping for breath, to find himself in the center of a ring of grinning militiamen, all pointing their weapons at him. The Governor glared into the barrel of the rifle poking into his face and batted it away with one hand, making small choking noises, like an angry squirrel. Jamie cleared his throat in a meaningful manner, and the men faded quietly back into the copse.

I thought that on the whole, it would be a mistake either to offer the Governor a hand to arise, or to let him get a look at my face. I tactfully turned my back and wandered a few steps away, affecting to have discovered an absorbing new plant springing from the ground near my feet.

Mr. Vickers reappeared from the wood, looking startled, a pail of water in each hand.

"What has happened?" He started toward the Governor, but I put a hand on his sleeve to detain him. Best if Mr. Tryon had a moment to recover both his breath and his dignity.

"Nothing important," I said, recovering my pails before he could spill them. "Er … how many militia troops are assembled here, do you know?"

"One thousand and sixty-eight, mum," he said, looking thoroughly bewildered. "That is not accounting for General Waddell's troops, of course. But what—"

"And you have cannon?"

"Oh, yes, several, mum. We have two detachments with artillery. Two six-pounders, ten swivel-guns, and two eight-pound mortars." Vickers stood a little straighter, important with the thought of so much potential destruction.

"There are two thousand men across the creek, sir—but the most of them barely armed. Many carry no more than a knife." Jamie's voice came from behind me, drawing Vickers's attention away. I turned round, to find that Jamie had dismounted, and was standing face to face with the Governor, holding the latter's hat. He slapped it casually against his thigh and offered it back to its owner, who accepted it with as much grace as might be managed under the circumstances.

“I have been told as much, Mr. Fraser,” he said dryly, “though I am pleased to hear that your intelligence corroborates my own. Mr. Vickers, will you be so kind as to go and fetch my horse?” The purple hue had faded from Tryon’s face, and while his manner still held a certain constraint, he seemed not to be holding a grudge. Tryon had both a sense of fairness, and—more importantly at present—a sense of humor, both of which seemed to have survived the recent demonstration of military readiness.

Jamie nodded.

“I suppose that your agents have also told you that the Regulators have no leader, as such?”

“On the contrary, Mr. Fraser. I am under the impression that Hermon Husband is and has been for some considerable time one of the chief agitators of this movement. James Hunter, too, is a name that I have often seen appended to letters of complaint and the endless petitions that reach me in New Bern. And there are others—Hamilton, Gillespie …”

Jamie made an impatient gesture, brushing a hovering cloud of gnats from his face.

“In some circumstances, sir, I should be willing to dispute with ye whether the pen is mightier than the sword—but not on the edge of a battlefield, and that is where we stand. A boldness in writing pamphlets does not fit a man to lead troops—and Husband is a Quaker gentleman.”

“I have heard as much,” Tryon agreed. He gestured toward the distant creek, one brow raised in challenge. “And yet he is here.”

“He is here,” Jamie agreed. He paused for a moment, gauging the governor’s mood before proceeding. The Governor was tightly wound; there was no missing the tautness in his figure, or the brightness of his eyes. Still, battle was not yet imminent and the tension was well-leashed. He could still listen.

“I have fed the man at my own hearth, sir,” Jamie said carefully. “I have eaten at his. He makes no secret either of his views or his character. If he has come here today, I am certain that he has done so in torment of mind.” Jamie drew a deep breath. He was on dicey ground here.

“I have sent a man across the creek, sir, to find Husband, and beg him to meet with me. It may be that I can persuade him to use his considerable influence to cause these men—these citizens”—he gestured briefly toward the creek and the invisible myrmidons beyond—“to abandon this disastrous course of action, which cannot but end in tragedy.” He met Tryon’s eyes straight on.

“May I ask you, sir—may I beg of you—if Husband will come, will you not speak with him yourself?”

Tryon stood silent, oblivious of the dusty tricorne he turned around and around in his hands. The echoes of the recent commotion had faded; a vireo sang from the branches of the elm above us.

“They are citizens of this colony,” he said at last, with a nod in the direction of the creek. “I should regret that harm should come to them. Their grievances are not without merit; I have acknowledged as much—publicly!—and taken steps toward redress.” He glanced toward Jamie, as though to see whether this statement was accepted. Jamie stood silent, waiting.

Tryon took a deep breath, and slapped the hat against his leg.

“Yet I am Governor of this colony. I cannot see the peace disturbed, the law flouted, riot and bloodshed run rampant and unpunished!” He glanced bleakly at me. “I will not.”

He turned his attention back to Jamie.

“I think he will not come, sir. Their course is set”—he nodded once more toward the trees that edged Alamance Creek—“and so is mine. Still …” He hesitated for a moment, then made up his mind, and shook his head.

“No. If he *does* come, then by all means reason with him, and if he will agree to send his men home peaceably—at that point, bring him to me and we shall arrange terms. But I cannot wait upon the possibility.”

Mr. Vickers had retrieved the Governor’s mount. The boy stood a little way apart, holding both horses by their reins, and I saw him nod slightly at this, as though affirming the Governor’s words. His own hat shaded him from the sun, yet his face was flushed, and his eyes bright; he was eager for the fight.

Tryon was not; yet he was ready. Neither was Jamie—but he was ready, too. He held the Governor's gaze for a moment, and then nodded, accepting inevitability.

"How long?" he asked quietly.

Tryon glanced upward at the sun, which stood a little short of mid-morning. Roger had been gone for nearly two hours; how long might it take him to find Hermon Husband and return?

"The companies are in battle order," Tryon said. He glanced at the copse, and the corner of his mouth twitched. Then he returned a dark gaze to Jamie's face. "Not long. Stand ready, Mr. Fraser."

He turned away, and clapping his hat on his head, seized the reins of his horse and swung into the saddle. He rode away without looking back, followed by his aides.

Jamie watched him go, expressionless.

I moved beside him, touching his hand. I didn't need to say that I hoped Roger would hurry.

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“STRAGLERS AND SUSPECTED PERSONS”

> ***Item #12*** *- No Officer or Soldier to go beyond the Limits of the Camp which is within the distance of the Grand Guard.*
>
> ***Item #63*** *- Commanding Officers of Corps are to examine all Straglers and suspected Persons, and those who cannot give a good account of themselves to be confined and Report thereof made to Head Quarters.*
>
> ***“Camp Duties and Regulations”:*** *Orders Given Out by His Excellency Governor Tryon to the Provincials of North Carolina.*

Roger touched the pocket of his breeches, where he had tucked away his pewter militia badge. An inch-and-a-half-wide button of metal, pierced round the edges, stamped with a crude “FC” for “Fraser’s Company” and meant to be sewn onto coat or hat, such badges—and the cloth cockades—were the sole items of uniform for most of the Governor’s foot-troops, and the only means of distinguishing a member of the militia from one of the Regulators.

“And exactly how d’ye know whom to shoot?” he had inquired ironically, when Jamie had handed him the badge at supper, two days before. “If you get close enough to see the badge before ye fire, won’t the other bugger get you first?”

Jamie had given him a glance of equal irony, but courteously forbore any observations on Roger’s marksmanship and the likelihood—or otherwise—of his doing any damage with his musket.

"I wouldna wait to see, myself," he said. "If anyone runs toward ye with a gun, fire, and hope for the best."

A few men seated around the fire nearby sniggered at this, but Jamie ignored them. He reached for a stick and pulled three roasting yams out of the coals, so they lay side by side, black and steaming in the cool evening air. He kicked one gently, sending it rolling back into the ashes.

"That's us," he explained. He kicked the next yam. "That's Colonel Leech's company, and that"—he booted the third, which rolled erratically after its fellows—"is Colonel Ashe's. D'ye see?" He cocked an eyebrow at Roger.

"Each company will go forward in its own path, so ye're no likely to see any other militia, at least to begin with. Anyone coming toward us is most probably the enemy." Then his long mouth curled up a bit, as he gestured toward the men all round them, busy with their suppers.

"Ye ken every man here well enough? Well, dinna shoot any of them, and ye'll be fine, aye?"

Roger smiled ruefully to himself as he made his way carefully down a slope covered with tiny yellow-flowered plants. It was sound advice; he was much less concerned with the possibility of being shot than with the fear of accidentally harming someone himself—including the not-inconsiderable worry of blowing off a few of his own fingers.

Privately, he was resolved not to fire at anyone, regardless either of circumstance or of the possibility of his hitting them. He'd heard enough of the Regulators' stories—Abel MacLennan, Hermon Husband. Even allowing for the natural hyperbole of Husband's style, his pamphlets burned with a sense of injustice that was inescapable. How could Roger look to kill a man or maim him, only for protesting against abuses and corruption so blatant that they must offend any just-minded person?

A trained historian, he'd seen enough of present circumstances to understand just how widespread the problems were, how they'd come about—and he understood well enough the difficulties of correcting them. He sympathized with Tryon's position—to a point

—but his sympathy stopped a good way short of rendering him a willing soldier in the cause of upholding the Crown's authority—still less, the cause of preserving William Tryon's reputation and personal fortune.

He stopped for a moment, hearing voices, and stepped softly behind the trunk of a large poplar.

Three men came in sight a moment later, talking casually amongst themselves. All three had guns and bullet-boxes, but the impression they gave was of three friends on their way to hunt rabbits, rather than grim troopers on the eve of battle.

In fact, this appeared to be exactly what they were—foragers. One had a cluster of furry bodies slung from his belt, and another carried a muslin bag stained with something that might have been fresh blood. As Roger watched from the shelter of the poplar, one man stopped, hand out to check his comrades, who both stiffened like hounds, noses pointing toward a clump of trees some sixty yards distant.

Even knowing something was there, it took a moment before Roger spotted the small deer, standing still against a grove of saplings, a veil of dappled light through the spring leaves overhead masking it almost perfectly from view.

The first man swung his gun stealthily down from his shoulder, reaching for rod and cartridge, but one of the others stopped him with a hand on his arm.

"Hold there, Abram," said the second man, speaking softly but clearly. "You don't want to be firing so close to the crick. You heard what the Colonel said—Regulators are drawn right up to the bank near that point." He nodded toward the heavy growth of alder and willow that marked the edge of the invisible creek, no more than a hundred yards distant. "You don't want to be provokin' them, not just now."

Abram nodded reluctantly, and put up his gun again.

"Aye, I suppose. Will it be today, do you think?"

Roger glanced back at the sapling grove, but the deer had vanished, silent as smoke.

"Can't see how it won't be." The third man pulled a yellow kerchief from his sleeve and wiped his face; the weather was warm and the air muggy. "Tryon's had his guns in place since dawn; he's not the man to let anybody get a jump on him. He might wait for Waddell's men—but he may think he's no need of them."

Abram snorted with mild contempt.

"To crush those rabble? Seen them, have you? A poorer set of soldiers you'd not see in a month of Sundays."

The man with the kerchief smiled cynically.

"Well, that's as may be, Abie. Seen some of the backcountry militia, have you? Speakin' of rabble. And speakin' of the Regulators, there's a lot of 'em, rabble or not. Two to one, Cap'n Neale says."

Abram grunted, casting a last reluctant glance toward the wood and the creek beyond.

"Rabble," he repeated, more confidently, and turned away. "Come along, then, let's have a look upslope."

The foragers were on the same side as himself; they wore no cockades, but he saw the militia badges on breast and hat, glinting silver in the morning sun. Still, Roger remained in the shadows until the men had vanished, talking casually amongst themselves. He was reasonably sure that Jamie had sent him on this mission with no authority beyond his own; best if he were not asked to explain himself.

The attitude amongst most of the militia toward the Regulation was at best scornful. At worst—at the upper levels of command—it was coldly vindictive.

"Crush them once and for all," Caswell had said, over a cup of coffee by the fire the night before. A plantation owner from the eastern part of the colony, Richard Caswell had no sympathy with the Regulators' grievances.

Roger patted his pocket again, considering. No, best leave it. He could produce the badge if he were challenged, and he didn't think anyone would shoot him in the back without at least a shout of warning. Still, he felt oddly exposed as he walked through the lush grass of the river-meadow, and sighed with involuntary relief, as the languishing branches of the creek-side willows enfolded him in cool shadow.

He had, with Jamie's approval, left his musket behind, and come unarmed, save for the knife at his belt that was a normal accoutrement for any man. His only other item of equipment was a large white kerchief, presently folded up inside his coat.

"If ye should be threatened—anywhere—wave it and cry 'Truce,' " Jamie had instructed him. "Then tell them to fetch me, and dinna say more until I come. If no one prevents you, bring me Husband under its protection."

The vision of himself leading Hermon Husband back across the creek, holding the flapping kerchief on a stick above his head like a guide leading tourists through an airport, made him want to hoot with laughter. Jamie hadn't laughed, though, or even smiled, and so he had accepted the cloth solemnly, tucking it away with care. He peered through the screen of drooping leaves, but the creek ran past sparkling in the new day's sun, silent save for the rush of water past stones and clay. No one was in sight, and the noise of the water drowned any sound that might have come from beyond the trees on the other side. While the militia might not shoot him in the back, he wasn't so sanguine about the possibilities of Regulators shooting him from the front, if they saw him crossing from the Government side.

Still, he couldn't skulk in the trees all day. He emerged onto the bank, and made his way downstream toward the point the foragers had indicated, watching the trees carefully for any signs of life. The crossing near the point was better, shallow water and a rocky bottom. Still, if the Regulators were "drawn up" anywhere nearby, they were being damned quiet about it.

A more peaceful scene could scarcely be imagined, and yet his heart was hammering suddenly in his ears. He had again the odd feeling of someone standing near him. He glanced around in all directions, but nothing moved save the rushing water and the trailing willow fronds.

"That you, Dad?" he said softly, under his breath, and at once felt foolish. Still, the feeling of someone near remained strong, though benign.

With a mental shrug, he bent and took off his shoes and stockings. It must be the circumstances, he thought. Not that one could quite compare wading a shallow creek in search of a Quaker rabble-rouser to flying a Spitfire across the night-time Channel on a bombing run to Germany. A mission was a mission, though, he supposed.

He looked round once again, but saw only tadpoles wriggling in the shallows. With a slightly crooked smile, he stepped into the water, sending the tadpoles into frenzied flight.

"Over the top, then," he said to a wood-duck. The bird ignored him, going on with its foraging among the dark-green rafts of floating cress.

No challenge came from the trees on either side; no sounds at all, bar the cheerful racket of nesting birds. It was as he sat on a sunwarmed rock, drying his feet before putting his shoes and stockings back on, that he finally heard some indication that the far side of the creek was populated by humans.

"So what do you want then, sweeting?"

The voice came from the shrubbery behind him, and he froze, blood thundering in his ears. It was a woman's voice. Before he could move or think to answer, though, he heard a laugh, deeper in pitch, and with a particular tone to it that made him relax.

Instinct informed him before his reason did that voices with that particular intonation were not a threat.

"Dunno, hinney, what will it cost me?"

"Ooh, hark at him! Not the time to count your pennies, is it?"

"Don't you worry, ladies, we'll take up a collection amongst us if we have to."

"Oh, is that the way of it? Well and good, sir, but be you aware, in this congregation, the collection comes *before* the singing!"

Listening to this amiable wrangling, Roger deduced that the voices in question belonged to three men and two women, all of whom seemed confident that whatever the financial arrangements, three would go into two quite evenly, with no awkward remainders.

Picking up his shoes, he stole quietly away, leaving the unseen sentries—if that's what they were—to their sums. Evidently, the army of the Regulation wasn't quite so organized as the government troops.

Less organized was putting it mildly, he thought, a little later. He had kept to the creek bank for some distance, unsure where the main body of the army might be. He had walked nearly a quarter-mile, with neither sight nor sound of a soul other than the two whores and their customers. Feeling increasingly surreal, he wandered through small pine groves, and across the edges of grassy meadows, with no company save courting birds and small gossamer butterflies in shades of orange and yellow.

"What the hell sort of way is this to run a war?" he muttered, shoving his way through a blackberry bramble. It was like one of those science fiction stories, in which everyone but the hero had suddenly vanished from the face of the earth. He was beginning to be anxious; what if he didn't manage to find the bloody Quaker—or even the army—before the shooting started?

Then he rounded a bend in the creek, and caught his first glimpse of the Regulators proper; a group of women, washing clothes in the rushing waters by a cluster of boulders.

He ducked back into the brush before they should see him, and turned away from the creek, heartened. If the women were here, the men weren't far away.

They weren't. Within a few more yards, he heard the sounds of camp—casual voices, laughter, the clank of spoons and tea-kettles and the clunk of splitting wood. Rounding a clump of hawthorn, he was nearly knocked over by a gang of young men who ran past, hooting and yelling, as they chased one of their number who brandished a fresh-cut racoon's tail overhead, floating in the breeze as he ran.

They charged past Roger without a second glance, and he went on, a bit less warily. He wasn't challenged; there were no sentries. In fact, a strange face appeared to be neither a novelty nor a threat. A few men glanced casually at him, but then turned back to their talk, seeing nothing odd in his appearance.

"I'm looking for Hermon Husband," he said bluntly to a man roasting a squirrel over the pale flames of a fire. The man looked blank for a moment.

"The Quaker?" Roger amplified.

"Oh, aye, him," the man said, features clearing. "He's a ways beyond—that way, I think." He gestured helpfully with his stick, the charred squirrel pointing the way with the stubs of its blackened forelegs.

"A ways beyond" was some way. Roger passed through three more scattered camps before reaching what looked to be the main body of the army—if one could dignify it by such a term. True, there did seem to be an increasing air of seriousness; there was less of the carefree frolicking he had seen near the creek. Still, it wasn't Strategic Command headquarters, by a long shot.

He began to feel mildly hopeful that violence could still be avoided, even with the armies drawn up face to face and the gun-crews standing by. There had been an air of excited readiness among the militia as he passed through their lines, but no atmosphere of hatred or blood-thirstiness.

Here, the situation was far different than it was among the orderly militia lines, but even less disposed to immediate hostilities. As he pressed on further, though, asking his way at each campfire he passed, he began to feel something different in the air—a sense of increasing urgency, almost of desperation. The horseplay he'd seen in the outer camps had vanished; men clustered talking in close groups, their heads together, or sat by themselves, grimly loading guns and sharpening knives.

As he got closer, the name of Hermon Husband was recognized by everyone, the pointing fingers surer of direction. The name seemed almost a magnet, pulling him farther and farther into the center of a thickening mass of men and boys, all excited—all armed. The noise grew greater all the time, voices beating on his ears like hammers on a forge.

He found Husband at last, standing on a rock like a large gray wolf at bay, surrounded by a knot of some thirty or forty men, all clamoring in angry agitation. Elbows jabbed and feet trampled, without regard to impact on their fellows. Clearly they were demanding an answer, but unable to pause long enough to hear one were it given.

Husband, stripped to his shirtsleeves and red in the face, was shouting at one or two of those closest to him, but Roger could hear nothing of what was said, above the general hub-bub. He pushed through the outer ring of spectators, but was stopped nearer the center by the press of men. At least here, he could pick up a few words.

“We must! You know it, Hermon, there’s no choice!” shouted a lanky man in a battered hat.

“There’s *always* a choice!” Husband bellowed back. “Now is the time to choose, and God send we do it wisely!”

“Aye, with cannon pointed at us?”

“No, no, forward, we must go forward, or all is lost!”

“Lost? We have lost everything so far! We must—”

“The Governor’s taken choice from us, we must—”

“We must—”

“We must—!”

All single words were lost in a general roar of anger and frustration. Seeing that there was nothing to be gained by waiting for an audience, Roger shoved his way ruthlessly between two farmers and seized Husband by the sleeve of his shirt.

“Mr. Husband—I must speak with you!” he shouted in the Quaker’s ear.

Husband gave him a glazed sort of look, and made to shake him off, but then stopped, blinking as he recognized him. The square face was flushed with color above the sprouting beard, and Husband’s coarse gray hair, unbound, bristled out from his head like the quills of a porcupine. He shook his head and shut his eyes, then opened them again, staring at Roger like a man seeking to dispel some impossible vision, and failing.

He grabbed Roger’s arm, and with a fierce gesture at the crowd, leaped down from his rock and made off toward the shelter of a ramshackle cabin that leaned drunkenly in the shade of a maple grove. Roger followed, glaring round at those nearest to discourage pursuit.

A few followed, nonetheless, waving arms and expostulating hotly, but Roger slammed the door in their faces, and dropped the bolt, placing his back against the door for good measure. It was cooler inside, though the air was stale and smelt of wood-ash and burnt food.

Husband stood panting in the middle of the floor, then picked up a dipper and drank deeply from a bucket that stood upon the hearth—the only object left in the cabin, Roger saw. Husband's coat and hat hung neatly on a hook by the door, but bits of rubbish were scattered across the packed-earth floor. Whoever owned the cabin had evidently decamped in haste, carrying their portable belongings.

Calmed by the moment's respite, Husband straightened his rumpled shirt and made shift to tidy his hair.

"What does thee here, friend MacKenzie?" he asked, with characteristic mildness. "Thee does not come to join the cause of Regulation, surely?"

"Indeed I do not," Roger assured him. He cast a wary eye at the window, lest the crowd try to gain access that way, but while the rumble of voices outside continued their argument, there was no immediate sound of assault upon the building. "I have come to ask if you will go across the creek with me—under a flag of truce, your safety is assured—to speak with Jamie Fraser."

Husband glanced at the window, too.

"I fear the time for speaking has long passed," he said, with a wry twist of the lips. Roger was inclined to think so, too, but pressed on, determined to fulfill his commission.

"Not so far as the Governor is concerned. He has no wish to slaughter his own citizenry; if the mob could be convinced to disperse peaceably—"

"Does it seem to thee a likely prospect?" Husband waved at the window, giving him a cynical glance.

"No," Roger was forced to admit. "Still, if you would come—if they could see that there was still some possibility of—"

"If there were possibility of reconciliation and redress, it should have been offered long since," Husband said sharply. "Is this a token of the Governor's sincerity, to come with troops and cannon, to send a letter that—"

"Not redress," Roger said bluntly. "I meant the possibility of saving all your lives."

Husband stood quite still. The ruddy color faded from his cheeks, though he looked still composed.

"Has it come to that?" he asked quietly, his eyes on Roger's face. Roger took a deep breath and nodded.

"There is not much time. Mr. Fraser bid me tell you—if you could not come to speak with him yourself—there are two companies of artillery arrayed against you, and eight of militia, all well-armed. All lies in readiness—and the Governor will not wait past dawn of tomorrow, at the latest."

He was aware that it was treason to give such information to the enemy—but it was what Jamie Fraser would have said, could he have come himself.

"There are near two thousand men of the Regulation here," Husband said, as though to himself. "Two thousand! Would thee not think the sight of it would sway him? That so many would leave home and hearth and come in protest—"

"It is the Governor's opinion that they come in rebellion, therefore in a state of war," Roger interrupted. He glanced at the window, where the oiled parchment covering hung in tatters. "And having seen them, I must say that I think he has reasonable grounds for that opinion."

"It is no rebellion," Husband said stubbornly. He drew himself up, and pulled a worn black silk ribbon from his pocket, with which to tie back his hair. "But our legitimate complaints have been ignored, disregarded! We have no choice but to come as a physical body, to lay our grievances before Mr. Tryon and thus impress him with the rightness of our objection."

"I thought I heard you speak of choice a few moments past," Roger said dryly. "And if now is the time to choose, as you say, it would seem to me that most of the Regulators have chosen violence—judging from such remarks as I heard on my way here."

"Perhaps," Husband said reluctantly. "Yet we—they—are not an avenging army, not a mob …" And yet his unwilling glance toward the window suggested his awareness that a mob was indeed what was forming on the banks of the Alamance.

"Do they have a chosen leader, anyone who can speak officially for them?" Roger interrupted again, impatient to deliver his message and be gone. "Yourself, or perhaps Mr. Hunter?"

Husband paused for a long moment, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth as though to expunge some lingering rancid taste. He shook his head.

"They have no real leader," he said softly. "Jim Hunter is bold enough, but he has no gift of commanding men. I asked him—he said that each man must act for himself."

"You have the gift. You can lead them."

Husband looked scandalized, as though Roger had accused him of a talent for card-sharping.

"Not I."

"You have led them here—"

"They have *come* here! I asked none to—"

"You are here. They followed you."

Husband flinched slightly at this, his lips compressed. Seeing that his words had some effect, Roger pressed his case.

"You spoke for them before, and they listened. They came with you, after you. They'll still listen, surely!"

He could hear the noise outside the cabin growing; the crowd was impatient. If it wasn't yet a mob, it was damn close. And what would they do if they knew who he was, and what he had come to do? His palms were sweating; he pressed them down across the fabric of his coat, feeling the small lump of his militia badge in the pocket, and wished he had paused to bury it somewhere when he crossed the creek.

Husband looked at him a moment, then reached out and seized him by both hands.

"Pray with me, friend," he said quietly.

"I—"

“Thee need say nothing,” Husband said. “I know thee is Papist, but it is not our way to pray aloud. If thee would but remain still with me, and ask in your heart that wisdom be granted—not only to me, but to all here …”

Roger bit his tongue to keep from correcting Husband; his own religious affiliation was scarcely important at the moment, though evidently Husband’s was. Instead he nodded, suppressing his impatience, and squeezed the older man’s hands, offering what support he might.

Husband stood quite still, his head slightly lowered. A fist hammered on the flimsy door of the cabin, voices calling out.

“Hermon! You all right in there?”

“Come on, Hermon! There’s no time for this! Caldwell’s come back from the Governor—”

“An hour, Hermon! He’s given us an hour, no more!”

A trickle of sweat ran down Roger’s back between his shoulder blades, but he ignored the tickle, unable to reach it.

He glanced from Husband’s weathered fingers to his face, and found the other man’s eyes seemingly fixed on his own—and yet distant, as though he listened to some far-off voice, disregarding the urgent shouts that came through the walls. Even Husband’s eyes were Quaker gray, Roger thought—like pools of rainwater, shivering into stillness after a storm.

Surely they would break down the door. But no; the blows diminished to an impatient knocking, and then to random thumps. He could feel the beating of his own heart, slowing gradually to a quiet, even throb in his chest, anxiety fading in his blood.

He closed his own eyes, trying to fix his thoughts, to do as Husband asked. He groped in his mind for some suitable prayer, but nothing save confused fragments of the Book of Common Worship came to hand.

Help us, O Lord …

Hear us …

Help us, O Lord, his father’s voice whispered. His other father, the Reverend, speaking somewhere in the back of his mind. *Help us, O Lord, to remember how often men do wrong through want of thought,* *rather than from lack of love; and how cunning are the snares that trip our feet.*

Each word flickered briefly in his mind like a burning leaf, rising from a bonfire's wind, and then disappeared away into ash before he could grasp it. He gave it up then and simply stood, clasping Husband's hands in his own, listening to the man's breathing, a low rasping note.

Please, he thought silently, though with no idea what he was asking for. That word too evaporated, leaving nothing in its place.

Nothing happened. The voices still called outside, but they seemed of no more importance now than the calling of birds. The air in the room was still, but cool and lively, as though a draft played somewhere in the corners, not touching them where they stood in the center of the floor. Roger felt his own breath ease, his heart slow its beat still more.

He didn't remember opening his eyes, and yet they were open. Husband's soft gray eyes had flecks of blue in them, and tiny splinters of black. His lashes were thick, and there was a small swelling at the base of one, a healing sty. The tiny dome was smooth and red, fading from a ruby dot at the center through such successions of crimson, pink, and rose red as might have graced the dawn sky on the day of Creation.

The face before him was sculpted with lines that drew rough arcs from nose to mouth, that curved above the heavy, grizzled brows whose every hair was long and arched with the grace of a bird's wing. The lips were broad and smooth, a dusky rose; the white edge of a tooth glistened, strangely hard by contrast with the pliable flesh that sheltered it.

Roger stood without moving, wondering at the beauty of what he saw. The notion of Husband as a stocky man of middle age and indeterminate feature had no meaning; what he saw now was a heartbreaking singularity, a thing unique and wonderful; irreplaceable.

It struck him that this was same feeling with which he had studied his infant son, marveling at the perfection of each small toe, the curve of cheek and ear that squeezed his heart, the radiance of the newborn skin that let the innocence within shine through. And here was the same creation, no longer new, perhaps less innocent, but no less marvelous.

He looked down and saw his own hands then, still gripping Husband's smaller ones. A sense of awe came on him, with the realization of the beauty of his own fingers, the curving bones of wrist and knuckle, the ravishing loveliness of a thin red scar that ran across the joint of his thumb.

Husband's breath left him in a deep sigh, and he pulled his hands away. Roger felt momentarily bereft, but then felt the peace of the room settle upon him once more, the astonishment of beauty succeeded by a sense of deep calm.

"I thank thee, Friend Roger," Husband said softly. "I had not hoped to receive such grace—but it is welcome."

Roger nodded, wordless. He watched as Husband took down his coat and put it on, his face settled now in lines of calm determination. Without hesitation, the Quaker lifted the bolt from the door and pushed it open.

The crowd of men outside fell back, the surprise on their faces giving way at once to eagerness and irritation. Husband ignored the storm of questions and exhortations, and walked directly to a horse that stood tethered to a sapling behind the cabin. He untied it and swung up into the saddle, and only then looked down into the faces of his fellow Regulators.

"Go home!" he said, in a loud voice. "We must leave this place; each man must return to his own home!"

This announcement was met with a moment of stunned silence, and then by cries of puzzlement and outrage.

"What home?" called a young man with a scraggly ginger beard. "Maybe you got a home to go to—I ain't!"

Husband sat solid in his saddle, unmoved by the outcry.

"Go home!" he shouted again. "I exhort you—nothing but violence remains to be done here!"

"Aye, and we'll bloody do it!" bellowed one thickset man, thrusting his musket overhead, to a ragged chorus of cheers.

Roger had followed Husband, and was largely ignored by the Regulators. He stood at a little distance, watching as the Quaker began slowly to ride away, bending down from his saddle as he did so, to shout and gesture to the men who ran and shoved beside him. One man grabbed Husband by the sleeve, and the Quaker drew up his rein, leaning down to listen to what was obviously an impassioned speech.

At the end of it, though, he straightened up, shaking his head, and clapped his hat on.

"I cannot stay and let blood be shed by my staying. If thee remain here, friends, there will be murder done. Leave! Thee can still go—I pray thee do so!"

He was no longer shouting, but the noise around him had ceased long enough for his words to carry. He raised a face creased with worry, and saw Roger standing in the shadow of a dogwood. The stillness of peace had left him, but Roger saw that the look of determination was still there in his eyes.

"I am going!" he called. "I beg thee all—go home!" He reined his horse round with sudden decision, and kicked it into a trot. A few men ran after him, but soon stopped. They turned back, looking puzzled and resentful, muttering in small groups and shaking their heads in confusion.

The noise was rising again, as everyone talked at once, arguing, insisting, denying. Roger turned away, walking quietly toward the cover of the maple grove. It seemed wiser to be gone as soon as possible, now that Husband had departed.

A hand seized him by the shoulder, and spun him round.

"Who the hell are you? What did you say to Hermon to make him go?" A grimy fellow in a ragged leather vest confronted him, fists clenched. The man looked angry, ready to take out his frustration on the nearest available object.

"I told him that the Governor doesn't want anyone to be harmed, if it can be avoided," Roger said, in what he hoped was a calming tone.

"Do you come from the Governor?" a black-bearded man asked skeptically, eyeing Roger's grubby homespun. "D'ye come to offer different terms than Caldwell has?”

“No.” Roger had been still under the effects of the meeting with Husband, feeling sheltered from the currents of anger and incipient hysteria that swirled about the cabin, but the peace of it was fading fast. Others were coming to join his interrogators, attracted by the sound of confrontation.

“No,” he said again, louder. “I came to warn Husband—to warn all of you. The Governor wants—”

He was interrupted by a chorus of rude shouts, indicating that what Tryon wanted was a matter of no concern to those present. He glanced around the circle of faces, but saw none that offered any expression of forbearance, let alone friendliness. He shrugged then, and stepped back.

“You’ll suit yourselves, then,” he said, as coolly as possible. “Mr. Husband gave you his best advice—I second it.” He turned to leave, but was gripped by a pair of hands that descended on his shoulders, pulling him forcibly around to face the ring of questioners once more.

“Not so fast, chuck,” said the man in the leather vest. He was still flushed with angry excitement, but his fists were no longer clenched. “You’ve spoke with Tryon, have you?”

“No,” Roger admitted. “I was sent—” He hesitated; ought he to use Jamie Fraser’s name? No, better not; it was as likely to cause trouble as to save it. “I came to ask Hermon Husband to come across the creek and discover for himself how matters stand. He chose instead to accept my account of the situation. You saw what his response was.”

“So *you* say!” A burly man with ginger sidewhiskers raised his chin pugnaciously. “And why should anyone accept your account of the situation?” He mimicked Roger’s clipped Scots in a burlesque that brought laughter from his comrades.

The calm he had carried from the cabin had not altogether left him; Roger gathered its remnants about him and spoke quietly.

“I cannot compel you to listen, sir. But for those who have ears—hear this.” He looked from one face to another, and reluctantly, one by one, they left off making noise, until he stood as the center of a ring of unwilling attention.

"The Governor's troops stand ready and well-armed." His voice sounded odd to his own ears, calm but somehow muffled, as though someone else were speaking, some distance away. "I have not seen the Governor myself, but I have heard his stated purpose: he does not wish to see blood shed, but he is determined to take such actions as he perceives necessary to disperse this assembly. Yet if you will return peaceably to your homes, he is disposed to leniency."

A moment of silence greeted this, to be broken by a hawking noise. A glob of mucus, streaked brown with tobacco juice, landed with a splat in the mud near Roger's boot.

"That," observed the spitter concisely, "for the Governor's leniency."

"And that for you, fuckwit!" said one of his companions, swinging an open palm toward Roger's face.

He ducked the blow, and lowering his shoulder, charged the man, who staggered off-balance and gave way. There were more beyond him, though; Roger stopped, fists balled, ready to defend himself if need be.

"Don't hurt him, boys," called the man in the leather vest. "Not yet, anyways." He sidled round Roger, keeping well out of range of his fists, and eyed him warily.

"Whether you've seen Tryon's face or not, reckon you've seen his troops, haven't you?"

"I have." Roger's heart was beating fast, and the blood sang in his temples, but oddly enough, he wasn't afraid. The crowd was hostile, but not bloodthirsty—not yet.

"So how many men does Tryon have?" The man was watching him closely, with a glint in his eye. Best to answer honestly; the odds were good that the answer was already known; there was nothing whatever to hinder men of the Regulation from crossing the Alamance and assessing the situation for themselves.

"A few more than a thousand," Roger said, watching the man's face carefully. No surprise; he *had* known. "But they are trained militia," Roger added pointedly, with a glance at a number of the Regulators, who, having lost interest in Roger, had resumed a wrestling match nearby. "And they have artillery. I think you have none, sir?"

The man's face closed like a fist.

"Think what you like," he said shortly. "But you can tell Tryon that we boast twice his number. And be we *trained* or not—" his mouth twisted ironically, "we are all armed, each man with his musket." He tilted back his head, squinting against the light.

"An hour, is it?" he asked, more softly. "Sooner than that, I think." He lowered his gaze, looking Roger in the eye.

"Go you back across the creek, then, sir. Tell Governor Tryon that we mean to have our say, and have our way of it. If he will listen and do as we demand, well and good. If not …" He touched the hilt of the pistol in his belt, and nodded once, his face settling into grim lines.

Roger glanced around at the circle of silent faces. Some bore looks of uncertainty, but most were sullen or openly defiant. He turned without a word and walked away, the Reverend's words whispering among the spring leaves as he passed beneath the trees.

Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.

He hoped one got credit for trying.

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THE SURGEON'S BOOK I

> ***Item #28*** *- The Surgeons to keep a Book and enter each Man that comes under his care, Vixt. the Mans Name, the Company he belongs to, the Day he comes under his Hands, and the day he discharges him.*
>
> —"*Camp Duties and Regulations*"

I felt a cool breeze touch my cheek, and shivered, though the day was very warm. I had the sudden absurd thought that it was the glancing touch of a wing-feather, as though the Angel of Death had silently passed by me, intent on his dark business.

"Nonsense," I said aloud. Evan Lindsay heard me; I saw his head turn momentarily, but then turn back. Like all the others, he kept glancing toward the east.

People who don't believe in telepathy have never set foot on a battlefield, nor served with an army. Something passes unseen from man to man when an army is about to move; the air itself is live with feeling. Half dread, half eagerness, it dances over the skin and bores the length of the spine with an urgency like sudden lust.

No messenger had come yet, but one would, I knew it. Something had happened, somewhere.

Everyone stood rooted, waiting. I felt an overwhelming urge to move, to break that spell, and turned abruptly, my hands flexing with the need to stir, to do something. The kettle had boiled, the water sat ready, covered with a piece of clean linen. I had set up my medicine chest on a stump; I put back the lid and began to go mindlessly through its contents yet again, though I knew all was in order.

I touched the gleaming bottles one by one, their names a soothing litany.

Atropine, Belladonna, Laudanum, Paregoric, Oil of Lavender, Oil of Juniper, Pennyroyal, Lady's-vetch,… and the squat brown-glass bottle of alcohol. Always alcohol. I had a keg of it, still on the wagon.

Movement caught my eye; it was Jamie, the sun sparking on his hair through the leaves as he moved quietly under the trees, bending here to speak a word in someone's ear, touching there a shoulder, like a magician bringing statues to life.

I stood still, hands twisted in the folds of my apron, not wanting to distract him, yet wanting very much to attract his attention. He moved easily, joking, touching casually—and yet I could see the tension in him. When had he last stood with an army, waiting the order to charge?

At Culloden, I thought, and the hairs rippled erect on my forearms, pale in the spring sun.

Hoofsteps sounded nearby, and the crashing sound of horses moving through brush. Everyone swung round in expectation, muskets held loose in their hands. There was a general gasp and murmur as the first rider came into view, ducking her bright red head beneath the maple boughs.

"Holy Christ," Jamie said, loudly enough to be heard across the clearing. "What in hell is *she* doing here?" There was a ripple of laughter from the men who knew her, fracturing the tension like cracks in ice. Jamie's shoulders relaxed, very slightly, but his face was rather grim as he strode to meet her.

By the time Brianna had pulled up her horse and swung down from her saddle next to him, I had reached them, too.

"What—" I began, but Jamie was already nose to nose with his daughter, his hand on her arm, eyes narrowed and speaking in a rapid torrent of low-voiced Gaelic.

"I'm that sorry, Mum, but she *would* come." A second horse ambled out of the trees, an apologetic-looking young black man on top. It was Joshua, Jocasta's groom. "I couldna prevent her, nor could Missus Sherston. We did try."

"So I see," I said.

Brianna's color had risen in response to whatever Jamie was saying to her, but she showed no sign of getting back on her horse and leaving. She said something to him, also in Gaelic, that I didn't catch, and he reared back as though stung on the nose by a wasp. She nodded sharply once, as though satisfied with the impact of her statement, and turned on her heel. Then she saw me, and a wide smile transformed her face.

"Mama!" She embraced me, her gown smelling faintly of fresh soap, beeswax, and turpentine. There was a small streak of cobalt-blue paint on her jaw.

"Hallo, darling. Wherever did you come from?" I kissed her cheek and stood back, cheered by the sight of her, in spite of everything. She was dressed very plainly, in the rough brown homespun she wore on the Ridge, but the clothes were fresh and clean. Her long red hair was tied back in a plait, and a broad straw hat hung from its strings down her back.

"Hillsborough," she said. "Someone who came to dinner at the Sherstons' last night told us that the militia was camped here—so I came. I brought some food"— she waved at the bulging saddlebags on her horse—"and some herbs from the Sherstons' garden I thought you might use."

"Oh? Oh, yes. Lovely." I was uneasily aware of Jamie's glowering presence somewhere behind me, but didn't look around. "Ah … I don't mean to sound as though I'm not pleased to see you, darling, but there is just possibly going to be a fight here before too long, and…."

"I know that." Her color was still high, and it deepened somewhat at this. She raised her voice slightly.

"That's all right; I didn't come to fight. If I had, I would have worn my breeches." She darted a glance over my shoulder, and I heard a loud snort from that direction, followed by guffaws from the

Lindsay brothers. She lowered her head to hide a grin, and I couldn't help smiling, too.

"I'll stay with you," she said, lowering her voice as well, and touching my arm. "If there's nursing to be done … afterward—I can help."

I hesitated, but there was no question that if things did come to a fight, there would be wounded to treat, and an extra pair of hands would be useful. Brianna wasn't skilled at nursing, but she did understand about germs and antisepsis, knowledge of much more value in its way than a grasp of anatomy or physiology.

Bree had straightened. Her glance flickered over the men who waited in the maples' shade, searching.

"Where's Roger?" she asked, her voice low but level.

"He's all right," I assured her, hoping it was true. "Jamie sent him across the creek this morning, with a flag of truce, to bring back Hermon Husband to talk with the Governor."

"He's over *there*?" Her voice rose involuntarily, and she lowered it, self-conscious. "With the enemy? If that's the right word for them."

"He'll be back." Jamie stood by my elbow, viewing his daughter with no great favor, but obviously resigned to her presence. "Dinna fash, lassie. No one will trouble him, under a flag of truce."

Bree raised her head, looking as far as she could into the distance toward the creek. Her face had drawn in upon itself, a pale knot of apprehension.

"Will a flag of truce help him if he's still over there when the shooting starts?"

The answer to that—which she obviously knew—was "Probably not." So did Jamie, who didn't bother saying it. He also didn't bother saying that perhaps it wouldn't come to shooting; the air was thick with anticipation, acrid with the scent of spilled black powder and nervous sweat.

"He'll be back," Jamie repeated, though in a gentler tone. He touched her face, smoothing back a random lock of hair. "I promise, lass. He'll be all right."

The look of apprehension faded a bit as she searched his face. She seemed to find some reassurance there, for a little of the tension left her, and she nodded, in mute acceptance. Jamie leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead, then turned away to speak to Rob Byrnes.

Bree stood looking after him for a moment, then untied the strings of her bonnet and came to sit down beside me on a rock. Her hands were trembling slightly; she took a deep breath, and clasped her knees to still them.

“Is there anything I can do to help now?” she asked, with a nod toward my open medicine box. “Do you need me to fetch anything?”

I shook my head.

“No, I have everything I need. There isn’t anything to do but wait.” I grimaced slightly. “That’s the hardest part.”

She made a small sound of reluctant agreement, and relaxed, with a visible effort. She assessed the waiting equipment, a slight frown between her brows: the fire, the boiling water, the folding table, the large instrument box, and the smaller pack that held my emergency kit.

“What’s in there?” she asked, poking a boot-shod toe at the canvas sack.

“Alcohol and bandages, a scalpel, forceps, amputation saw, tourniquets. They’ll bring the wounded here, if they can, or to one of the other surgeons. But if I have to go to a man wounded on the field—someone too bad to walk or be carried—I can snatch that up and go at once.”

I heard her swallow, and when I glanced up at her, the freckles stood out on the bridge of her nose. She nodded, and drew a deep breath to speak. Her face changed suddenly, though, switching comically from seriousness to repugnance. She sniffed once, suspiciously, her long nose wrinkling like an ant-eater’s.

I could smell it, too; the stink of fresh feces, coming from the grove directly behind us.

“That’s rather common before a battle,” I said, low-voiced, trying not to laugh at her expression. “They’re caught short, poor things.”

She cleared her throat and didn’t say anything, but I saw her gaze roam round the clearing, resting now on one man, then another. I knew what she was thinking. How was it possible? How could one look at such an orderly, compact bundle as a man, head bent to catch a friend’s words, arm stretched to take a canteen, face moving from smile to frown, eyes lighted and muscles taut—and envision rupture, abrasion, fracture … and death?

It couldn’t be done. It was an act of the imagination that lay beyond the capability of one who hadn’t ever seen that particular obscene transformation.

It could, however, be remembered. I coughed, and leaned forward, hoping to distract us both.

“Whatever did you say to your father?” I asked, out of the side of my mouth. “When you came, when you were speaking Gaelic.”

“Oh, that.” A slight flush of amusement momentarily relieved her paleness. “He was snarling at me, wanting to know what I thought I was playing at—did I mean to leave my child an orphan, he said, risking my life along with Roger’s?” She wiped a strand of red hair away from her mouth, and gave me a small, edgy smile. “So I said to him, if it was so dangerous, where did he get off, risking making *me* an orphan by having you here, hm?”

I laughed, though keeping that, too, under my breath.

“It’s not dangerous for you, is it?” she asked, surveying the militia encampment. “Back here, I mean?”

I shook my head.

“No. If the fighting comes anywhere close, we’ll move, right away. But I don’t think—”

I was interrupted by the sound of a horse, coming fast, and was on my feet, along with the rest of the camp, by the time the messenger appeared; one of Tryon’s baby-faced aides, pale with bottled-up excitement.

“Stand ready,” he said, hanging out of his saddle, half-breathless.

“And what d’ye think we’ve been doing since dawn?” Jamie demanded, impatient. “What in God’s name is happening, man?”

Very little, apparently, but that little was important enough. A minister from the Regulators’ side had come to parley with the

Governor.

“A minister?” Jamie interrupted. “A Quaker, do you mean?”

“I do not know, sir,” said the aide, annoyed at being interrupted. “Quakers have no clergy, anyone knows as much. No, it was a minister named Caldwell, the Reverend David Caldwell.”

Regardless of religious affiliation, Tryon had been unmoved by the ambassador’s appeal. He could not, would not, deal with a mob, and there was an end to it. Let the Regulators disperse, and he would promise to consider any just complaints laid before him in a proper manner. But disperse they must, within an hour.

“Could you, would you, in a box?” I murmured under my breath, half unhinged by the waiting. “Could you, would you, with a fox?” Jamie had taken off his hat, and the sun shone bright on his ruddy hair. Bree gave a strangled giggle, as much shock as amusement.

“He could not, would not, with a mob,” she murmured back. “Could not, would not … do the job?”

“He can, though,” I said, sotto voce. “And I’m very much afraid he will.” For the hundredth time that morning, I glanced toward the scrim of willows through which Roger had disappeared on his errand.

“An hour,” Jamie repeated, in answer to the aide’s message. He glanced in the same direction, toward the creek. “And how much time is left of that?”

“Perhaps half an hour.” The aide looked suddenly much younger even than his years. He swallowed, and put on his hat. “I must go, sir. Listen for the cannon, sir, and luck to you!”

“And with you, sir.” Jamie touched the aide’s arm in farewell, then slapped the horse’s rump with his hat, sending it off.

As though it had been a signal, the camp sprang into a flurry of activity, even before the Governor’s aide had disappeared through the trees. Weapons already primed and loaded were checked and rechecked, buckles unfastened and refastened, badges polished, hats beaten free of dust and cockades affixed, stockings pulled up and tightly gartered, filled canteens shaken for reassurance that their contents had not evaporated in the last quarter-hour.

It was catching. I found myself running my fingers over the rows of glass bottles in the chest yet again, the names murmuring and blurring in my mind like the words of someone telling rosary beads, sense lost in the fervor of petition. *Rosemary, atropine, lavender, oil of cloves …*

Bree was notable for her stillness among all this bustle. She sat on her rock, with no movement save the stir of a random breeze in her skirts, her eyes fixed on the distant trees. I heard her say something, under her breath, and turned.

“What did you say?”

“It’s not in the books.” She didn’t take her eyes off the trees, and her hands were knotted in her lap, squeezing together as though she could will Roger to appear through the willows. She lifted her chin, gesturing toward the field, the trees, the men around us.

“This,” she said. “It’s not in the history books. I read about the Boston Massacre. I saw it *there*, in the history books, and I saw it *here*, in the newspaper. But I never saw this there. I never read a word about Governor Tryon, or North Carolina, or a place called Alamance. So nothing’s going to happen.” She spoke fiercely, willing it. “If there was a big battle here, someone would have written *something* about it. Nobody did—so nothing’s going to happen. Nothing!”

“I hope you’re right,” I said, and felt a small warming of the chill in the small of my back. Perhaps she was. Surely it couldn’t be a major battle, at least. We were no more than four years from the outbreak of the Revolution; even the minor skirmishes preceding that conflict were well-known.

The Boston Massacre had happened a little more than a year before—a street-fight, a clash between a mob and a platoon of nervous soldiers. Shouted insults, a few stones thrown. An unauthorized shot, a panicked volley, and five men dead. It had been reported, with a good deal of fierce editorializing, in one of the Boston newspapers; I had seen it, in Jocasta’s parlor; one of her friends had sent her a copy.

And two hundred years later, that brief incident was immortalized in children’s textbooks, evidence of the rising disaffection of the

Colonists. I glanced at the men who stood around us, preparing to fight. Surely, if there was to be a major battle here, a Royal Governor putting down what was essentially a tax-payer's rebellion, that would have been worth noting!

Still, that was theory. And I was uneasily aware that neither warfare nor history took much account of what *should* happen.

Jamie was standing by Gideon, whom he had tethered to a tree. He would go into battle with his men, on foot. He was taking his pistols from the saddlebag, putting away the extra ammunition in the pouch at his belt. His head was bent, absorbed in the details of what he was doing.

I felt a sudden, dreadful urgency. I must touch him, must say something. I tried to tell myself that Bree was right; this was nothing; likely not even a shot would be fired—and yet there were three thousand armed men here on the banks of the Alamance, and the knowledge of bloodshed hummed and buzzed among them.

I left Brianna sitting on her rock, burning eyes fixed on the wood, and hurried to him.

"Jamie," I said, and put a hand on his arm.

It was like touching a high-voltage wire; power hummed inside the insulation of his flesh, ready to erupt in a burst of crackling light. They say one can't let go of such a line; a victim of electrocution simply freezes to the wire, helpless to move or save himself, as the current burns through brain and heart.

He put his hand on mine, looking down.

"A nighean donn," he said, and smiled a little. "Have ye come to wish me luck, then?"

I smiled back as best I could, though the current sizzled through me, stiffening the muscles of my face as it burned.

"I couldn't let you go without saying … something. I suppose 'Good luck' will do." I hesitated, words jamming in my throat with the sudden urge to say much more than there was time for. In the end, I said only the important things. "Jamie—I love you. Be careful!"

He didn't remember Culloden, he said. I wondered suddenly whether that loss of memory extended to the hours just before the battle, when he and I had said farewell. Then I looked into his eyes and knew it did not.

“ ‘Good luck’ will do,” he said, and his hand tightened on mine, likewise frozen to the current that surged between us. “ ‘I love ye’ does much better.”

He touched my hand, lifted his own and touched my hair, my face, looking into my eyes as though to capture my image in this moment—just in case it should be his last glimpse of me.

“There may come a day when you and I shall part again,” he said softly, at last, and his fingers brushed my lips, light as the touch of a falling leaf. He smiled faintly. “But it willna be today.”

The notes of a bugle came through the trees, far away, but piercing as a woodpecker’s call. I turned, looking. Brianna sat still as a statue on her rock, looking toward the wood.

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SIGNAL FOR ACTION

Note, when on the March the discharge of three Pieces of Cannon will be the signal to form the line of Battle, and five the signal for Action.

—Order of Battle, Wm. Tryon

Roger walked slowly away from the Regulators' camp, willing himself neither to run nor to look back. A few shouted insults and half-meant threats were hurled in his direction, but by the time he was well into the trees, the crowd had lost interest in him, drawn back into its buzzing controversy. It was past noon, and a hot day for May, but he found his shirt sweat-soaked and clinging to him in a manner more befitting July.

He stopped as soon as he was out of sight. He was breathing fast, and felt dizzy, slightly sick with the aftereffects of adrenaline. In the center of that ring of hostile faces, he hadn't felt a thing—not a thing. Safely away, though, the muscles of his legs were trembling and his fists ached from clenching. He uncurled them, flexed his stiff fingers, and tried to slow his breathing.

Maybe a bit more like the night-time Channel and the anti-aircraft guns than he'd thought, after all.

He'd made it back, though; would be going home to his wife and son. The thought gave him a queer pang; bone-deep relief, and an even deeper grief, quite unexpected, for his father, who hadn't been so lucky.

A slight breeze played about him, lifting the damp hairs on his neck with a breath of welcome coolness. He'd sweated through shirt and coat together, and his damp stock felt suddenly as though it would strangle him. He shucked his coat and pawed at the neckband, jerking it off with shaking fingers, then stood with his eyes closed and the piece of cloth dangling from his hand, breathing great draughts of air, until the momentary sense of nausea subsided.

He called to mind his last sight of Brianna, framed in the doorway, Jemmy in her arms. He saw her lashes wet with tears and the baby's round solemn eyes, and felt a deep echo of the feeling he had experienced in the cabin with Husband; a vision of beauty, a conviction of joy that soothed his mind and eased his soul. He would go back to them; that was all that mattered.

After a moment, he opened his eyes, picked up his coat, and set off, beginning to feel more settled in body, if not in mind, as he made his way slowly back toward the creek.

He hadn't brought back Husband to Jamie, but he had achieved as much as Jamie himself might have. It was possible that the mob—they were no army, whatever Tryon thought of them—would in fact fall apart, disperse now and go home, deprived of even the faint semblance of leadership Husband had provided. He hoped so.

Or they might not. Another man might rise out of that seething mob, one fit to take command. A thought struck him, with a phrase recalled from the confusion near the cabin.

"D'ye come to offer different terms than Caldwell has?" The man with the black beard had asked him that. And earlier, dimly heard through the pounding at the door of the cabin, as he stood in prayer with Husband—"*There's no time for this!"* someone had shouted. "Caldwell's come back from the Governor—" and someone else had added, in tones of desperation, *"An hour, Hermon! He's given us an hour, no more!"*

"Shit," he said, aloud. David Caldwell, the Presbyterian minister who had married him and Bree. It must be. Evidently the man had gone to speak with Tryon on the Regulators' behalf—and been rebuffed, with a warning.

"An hour, no more." An hour to disperse, to leave peaceably? Or an hour to reply to some ultimatum?

He glanced up; the sun stood overhead, just a bit past noon. He pulled on his coat and stuffed the discarded stock in his pocket, next to the unused flag of truce. Whatever it meant, that hour's grace, it was clearly time to be going.

The day was still bright and hot, the smell of grass and tree-leaves pungent with rising sap. Now, though, his sense of urgency and his memory of the Regulators, buzzing like hornets, deprived him of any appreciation of the beauties of nature. Even so, some trace of peace remained deep within him as he made his way quickly toward the creek; a faint echo of what he had felt in the cabin.

That odd sense of awe had stayed with him, hidden but accessible, like a smooth stone in his pocket. He turned it over in his mind as he made his way toward the creek, largely oblivious to clutching brambles and brush in his path.

How peculiar, he thought. Nothing whatever had *happened,* and in fact the entire experience had felt quite ordinary—nothing otherworldly or supernatural about it. And yet, having seen by that particular clear light, he could not forget it. Could he explain it to Brianna? he wondered.

A trailing branch brushed past his face and he reached to push it aside, feeling even as he did so a faint surprise at the cool green gloss of the leaves, the odd delicacy of their edges, jagged as knives but paper-light. An echo, faint but recognizable, of what he had seen before, that piercing beauty. Did Claire see that? he thought suddenly. Did she see the touch of beauty in the bodies beneath her hands? Was that perhaps how—and why—she was a healer?

Husband had seen it, too, he knew; had shared that perception. And seeing it, had been confirmed in his Quaker principles, and had left the field, unable either to do violence or to countenance it.

And what of his own principles? He supposed they were unchanged; if he hadn't meant to shoot anyone before, he could mean it still less, now.

The scents of spring still hung in the air, and a small blue butterfly floated past his knee with no apparent sense of care. It was still a fine spring day, but all illusion of tranquillity had vanished. The smell of sweat, of dirt and fear and anger, that seemed to hang in the air of the encampment, was still in his nostrils, mingling with the cleaner scents of trillium and water.

What about Jamie Fraser's principles? he wondered, turning past the thicket of willow that marked the ford. He often wondered what made Fraser tick, drawn both by a personal liking for the man, and by his colder historian's curiosity. Roger had made his own decision regarding this conflict—or had it made for him. He couldn't in conscience intend harm to anyone, though he supposed he could defend his own life, if needful. But Jamie?

He was fairly sure that Jamie's sympathies, as such, lay with the Regulators. He thought it likely also that his father-in-law had no sense of personal loyalty to the Crown; oath or no oath, surely no man could have lived through Culloden and its aftermath and emerged with any notion that he owed the King of England fealty, let alone anything more substantial. No, not to the Crown, but perhaps to William Tryon?

No loyalty of a personal nature there, either—but there was definitely an obligation felt. Tryon had summoned Jamie Fraser, and he had come. Given conditions as they stood, he had had little choice about that. Having come, though—would he fight?

How could he not? He must lead his men, and if it came to a battle—Roger glanced over his shoulder, as though the cloud of anger that hung over the Regulators' army might be now visible, swelling dark above the treetops—yes, he would have to fight, no matter what his private feelings on the matter might be.

Roger tried to envision himself aiming a musket at a man with whom he had no quarrel and pulling the trigger. Or worse, riding down a neighbor, sword in hand. Smashing in Kenny Lindsay's head, for instance? Imagination failed completely. No wonder that Jamie had sought to enlist Husband's help in ending the conflict before it began!

Still, Claire had told him once that Jamie had fought in France as a mercenary, as a young man. He *had* presumably killed men with whom he had no quarrel. How—

He pushed through the willows, and heard their voices before he saw them. A group of women were working on the far side of the stream; camp-followers. Some crouched bare-legged in the shallows, washing, others were carrying wet laundry up the bank, to be hung from trees and bushes. His eye passed casually beyond them, then jerked back, caught by … what? What was it?

There. He couldn't say why he had spotted her at all—there was nothing even faintly distinctive about her. And yet she stood out among the other women as though she had been outlined, drawn with black ink to stand out against the backdrop of stream and budding foliage.

"Morag," he whispered, and his heart thumped suddenly with a small shock of joy. She was alive.

He was halfway through the screen of willows before it occurred to him to wonder what he was doing, let alone why he was doing it. It was too late by then, though; he was already out on the bank, walking openly toward them.

Several of the women glanced at him; a few half-froze, watchful. But he was only one man, unarmed. There were more than twenty women by the river, their own men nearby. They watched him, curious, but not alarmed, as he splashed across the shallow creek.

She stood stock-still, knee-deep in the water, her skirts kirtled high, and watched him come. She knew him, he could see, but she gave him no sign of acknowledgment.

The other women fell back slightly, wary of him. She stood among the darting dragonflies, strands of brown hair poking out from her cap, a wet smock held forgotten in her hands. He stepped up out of the water and stood before her, wet to the knees.

"Mrs. MacKenzie," he said softly. "Well met."

A tiny smile touched the corner of her mouth. Her eyes were brown; he hadn't noticed that before.

"Mr. MacKenzie," she said, and gave him a small nod. His mind was working, thinking what to do. He must warn her, but how? Not before all the other women.

He stood helpless and awkward for a moment, not knowing what to do, then, inspired, he stooped and seized an armload of dripping laundry where it swirled in the water near her legs. He turned and clambered up the bank with it, Morag following in sudden haste.

"What are ye doing?" she demanded. "Here, come back wi' my clothes!"

He carried the wad of wet clothes a short way into the trees, then dropped them casually into a bush, mindful enough of the effort of washing not to let them drag in the dirt. Morag was right behind him, face flushed with indignation.

"What d'ye think you're about, ye thievin' clotheid?" she demanded heatedly. "Give those back!"

"I'm not stealing them," Roger assured her. "I only wanted to talk to you alone for a bit."

"Oh, aye?" She gave him a suspicious glance. "What about, then?"

He smiled at her; she was still thin, he saw, but her arms were brown and her small face a healthy color—she was clean, and she had lost the pallid, bruised look she had had on board the *Gloriana*.

"I wished to ask if you are well," he said softly. "And your child—Jemmy?" To speak the name gave him an odd frisson, and for a split second he saw the image of Brianna in the doorway, her son in her arms, laid over his memory of Morag, holding her baby in the dimness of the hold, ready to kill or die to keep him.

"Oh," she said, and the suspicion faded slightly, replaced by a reluctant acknowledgment of his right to ask. "We're well … the both of us. And my husband, too," she added pointedly.

"I'm pleased to hear it," he assured her. "Very pleased." He groped for something else to say, feeling awkward. "I—had thought of you now and then … wondered whether—whether everything was all right. When I saw you just now … well, I thought I'd ask, that's all."

"Oh, aye. Aye, I see. Well, I do thank ye, Mr. MacKenzie." She looked up and met his eyes directly as she said it, her own gaze brown and earnest. "I ken what ye did for us. I'll not forget; ye're in my prayers each night."

“Oh.” Roger felt as though some soft weight had struck him in the breast. “Ahh … thank you.” He had wondered, now and then, if she ever thought of him. Did she remember the kiss he had given her, there in the hold, seeking the spark of her warmth as some shield against the chill of loneliness? He cleared his throat, flushing at the memory.

“You—live nearby?”

She shook her head, and some thought, some memory, tightened her mouth.

“We did, but now—well, that’s no matter.” She turned, suddenly business-like, and began to take her wet clothes from the bush, shaking each one before folding it. “I do thank ye for your concern, Mr. MacKenzie.”

He was clearly dismissed. He wiped his hands down his breeks and shifted his feet, not wanting to leave. He must tell her—but having found her again, he was oddly reluctant simply to warn her and leave; curiosity bubbled in him—curiosity and a peculiar sense of connection.

Perhaps not so peculiar; this small brown woman was his relative, his own family—the only person of his own blood he had known since the death of his parents. At the same time, it was *very* peculiar, he realized, even as his hand reached out and curved around her arm. She was his many-times great-grandmother, after all.

She stiffened, tried to pull away, but he kept hold of her forearm. Her skin was cold from the water, but he felt her pulse throb under his fingers.

“Wait,” he said. “Please. Just a moment. I—I need to tell you … things.”

“No, ye don’t. I’d rather ye didn’t.” She pulled harder, and her hand slid through his, pulled free.

“Your husband. Where is he?” Belated realizations were forming in his brain. If she did not live nearby, then she was what he had first thought when he saw the women—a camp-follower. She was not a whore, he would stake his life on that; so she followed her husband, which meant—

“He is very nearby!” She backed up a step, eyeing the distance between herself and the remnants of her laundry. Roger stood between her and the bush; she would have to pass near him in order to retrieve her petticoats and stockings.

Realizing suddenly that she was slightly afraid of him, he turned hastily, grabbing a handful of things at random.

“I’m sorry. Your laundry … here.” He thrust them at her, and she reached to take them by reflex. Something fell—a baby’s gown—and both ducked to reach for it, cracking foreheads with a solid smack.

“Oh! Oh! Mary and Bride!” Morag clutched her head, though she still clasped the wet clothes against her bosom with one hand.

“Christ, are you all right? Morag—Mrs. MacKenzie—are you all right? I’m very sorry!” Roger touched her shoulder, squinting at her through eyes that watered with pain. He stooped to pick up the tiny gown that had fallen to the ground between them, and made a vain effort to wipe the smears of mud off the wet cloth. She blinked, eyes similarly watering, and laughed at his expression of dismay.

The collision had somehow broken the tension between them; she stepped back, but seemed not to feel threatened now.

“Aye, I’m fine.” She sniffed and wiped her eyes, then touched the spot on her forehead gingerly. “I’ve got a thick skull, my Mam always said. Are you all right yourself, then?”

“Aye, fine.” Roger touched his own forehead, suddenly and tinglingly aware that the curve of the browbone under his fingers was precisely echoed on the face before him. Hers was smaller, lighter—but just the same.

“I’ve a thick skull, too.” He grinned at her, feeling ridiculously happy. “It runs in my family.”

He handed her the mud-stained shirt, carefully.

“I *am* sorry,” he said, apologizing again—and not only for the ruined laundry. “Your husband. I asked about him because—is he one of the Regulators, then?”

She looked at him curiously, one brow lifted.

“Of course. Are ye not with the Regulation yourself?”

Of course. Here on this side of Alamance, what else? Tryon’s troops were drawn up in good military order on the field beyond the creek; over here, the Regulators swarmed like bees, without leadership or direction, an angry mass buzzing with random violence.

"No," he said. "I've come with the militia." He waved toward the distant smudge, where the smoke of Tryon's campfires hung, far beyond the creek. Her eyes grew wary again, but not frightened; he was only one man.

"That's the thing I wanted to tell you," he said. "To warn you, and your husband. The Governor is serious this time; he's brought organized troops, he's brought cannon. Lots of troops, all armed." He leaned toward her, holding out the rest of the wet stockings. She reached out a hand to take them, but kept her eyes on his, waiting.

"He means to put down this rebellion, by any means necessary. He has given orders to kill, if there is resistance. Do you understand? You must tell your husband, make him leave before—before anything happens."

She paled, and her hand went reflexively to her belly. The wet from the clothes had soaked through her muslin dress, and he saw the small swelling that had been hidden there, round and smooth as a melon under the damp cloth. He felt the jolt of her fear go through him, as though the wet stockings she held conducted electricity.

"We did, but not now …" she had said, when he asked whether they lived nearby. She might mean only that they had moved to some new place, but … there were baby's things in her wash; her son was with her here. Her husband was somewhere in this boiling of men.

A single man might pick up his gun and join a mob, for no reason beyond drink or boredom; a married man with a child would not. That spoke of serious disaffection, consequential grievance. And to bring both wife and child to war suggested that he had no safe place to leave them.

Roger thought it likely that Morag and her husband had no home at all now, and he understood her fear perfectly. If her husband should be maimed or killed, how was she to provide for Jemmy, for the new baby swelling under her skirt? She had no one, no family here to turn to.

Except that she did, though she did not know it. He gripped her hand hard, pulling her toward him, overcome with the need somehow to protect her and her children. He had saved them once; he could do it again.

"Morag," he said. "Hear me. If anything should happen—anything—come to me. If you are in need of anything at all. I'll take care of you."

She made no effort to pull away, but searched his face, her eyes brown and serious, a small frown between those curving brows. He had an irresistible urge to make some physical connection between them—this time for her sake, as much as his. He leaned forward and kissed her, very gently.

He opened his eyes then, and lifted his head, to find himself looking over her shoulder, into the disbelieving face of his many-times great-grandfather.

"Get away from my wife." William Buccleigh MacKenzie emerged from the shrubbery with a great rustling of leaves and a look of sinister intent upon his face. He was a tall man, close to Roger's own height, and burly through the shoulders. Further personal details seemed inconsequent, given that he also had a knife. It was still sheathed at his belt, but his hand rested on the hilt in a significant manner.

Roger resisted his original impulse, which had been to say, "It's not what you think." It wasn't, but there weren't any plausible alternatives to suggest.

"I meant her no disrespect," he said, instead, straightening up slowly. He felt it would be unwise to make any quick moves. "My apologies."

"No? And just what the hell d'ye mean by it, then?" MacKenzie put a possessive hand on his wife's shoulder, glowering at Roger. She flinched; her husband's fingers were digging into her flesh. Roger would have liked to knock the hand away, but that was likely to cause more trouble than he had already.

"I met your wife—and you—" he added, "on board the *Gloriana*, a year or two ago. When I recognized her here, I thought to inquire as to the family's welfare. That's all."

"He meant nay harm, William." Morag touched her husband's hand, and the painful grip lessened. "It's right, what he says. Do ye not ken the man? It was him that found me and Jemmy in the hold when we hid there—he brought us food and water."

"You asked me to care for them," Roger added pointedly. "During the fight, that night when the sailors threw the sick ones into the sea."

"Oh, aye?" MacKenzie's features relaxed a trifle. "It was you, was it? I didna see your face, in the dark."

"I didn't see yours, either." He could see it clearly now, and despite the awkwardness of the present circumstances, couldn't help studying it with interest.

So this was the son—unacknowledged—of Dougal MacKenzie, erstwhile war chief of the MacKenzies of Leoch. He looked it. His was a rougher, squarer, fairer version of the family face, but looking carefully, Roger could easily spot the broad cheekbones and high forehead that Jamie Fraser had inherited from his mother's clan. That and the family height; MacKenzie stood over six feet tall, nearly eye to eye with Roger himself.

The man turned slightly at a sound in the brush, and the sun lit those eyes with a flash of bright moss-green. Roger had a sudden urge to shut his own eyes, lest MacKenzie feel the same bolt of recognition.

MacKenzie had other concerns, though. Two men emerged from the bushes, wary-eyed and grimy with long camping. One held a musket; the other was armed with nothing but a rough club cut from a fallen limb.

"Who's this, then, Buck?" the man with the gun asked, eyeing Roger with some suspicion.

"That's what I mean to be finding out." The momentary softening had disappeared, leaving MacKenzie's face grimly set. He turned his wife away from him and gave her a small push. "Go ye back to the women, Morag. I'll deal with this fellow."

"But, William—" Morag glanced from Roger to her husband, face drawn in distress. "He hasna done anything—"

"Oh, ye think it's nothing, do you, that a man should cheek up to ye in public, like a common radge?" William turned a black look on her, and she blushed suddenly crimson, evidently recalling the kiss, but stumbled on.

"I—no, I mean—that is—he was kind to us, we shouldna be—"

"I said go back!"

She opened her mouth as though to protest, then flinched as William made a sudden move in her direction, fist clenched. Without an instant of conscious decision, Roger swung from the waist, his own fist hitting MacKenzie's jaw with a crack that jarred his arm to the elbow.

Caught off-balance, William staggered and fell to one knee, shaking his head like a pole-axed ox. Morag's gasp was drowned by startled exclamations from the other men. Before he could turn to face them, Roger heard a sound behind him—quiet in itself, but loud enough to chill the blood; the small, cold snick of a hammer drawing back.

There was a brief *pst!* of igniting powder, and then a *phfoom!* as the gun went off with a roar and a puff of black smoke. Everyone jerked and stumbled with the noise, and Roger found himself struggling in a confused sort of way with one of the other men, both of them coughing and half-deafened. As he shoved his assailant off, he caught sight of Morag, kneeling in the leaves, dabbing at her husband's face with a bit of wet laundry. William shoved her roughly away, scrambled to his feet, and headed for Roger, his eyes bulging, face blotched red with fury.

Roger spun on his heel, slipping in the leaves, and shook off the grip of the man with the gun, making for the shelter of the bushes. Then he was into the thicket, twigs and small branches splintering around him, raking face and arms as he thrust his way through. A heavy crashing and the huff of breath came just behind him, and a hand fastened on his shoulder with a grip of iron.

He seized the hand and twisted hard, hearing a crack of joint and bone. The hand's owner yelled and jerked back, and Roger flung himself headlong toward an opening in the scrub.

He hit the ground on one shoulder, half-curled, rolled, broke through a small bush, and tobogganed down a steep clay bank and into the water, where he landed with a splash.

Scrabbling to find a foothold, he plunged and coughed and flapped upright, shaking hair and water from his eyes, only to see William MacKenzie poised at the top of the bank above him. Seeing his enemy thus at a disadvantage, MacKenzie launched himself with a whoop.

Something like a cannonball crashed into Roger's chest and he fell back into the water in a mighty splash, hearing the distant shrieks of women. He couldn't breathe and couldn't see, but grappled with the twisting mess of clothes and limbs and roiling mud, churning the bottom as he strove vainly for footing, lungs bursting for air.

His head broke the surface. His mouth opened and closed like a fish's, gulping air, and he heard the wheeze of his breath, and MacKenzie's, too. MacKenzie broke away, floundering, and stood upright a few feet away, wheezing like an engine as water poured from his clothes. Roger bent, chest heaving, hands braced on his thighs and his arms quivering with effort. With a final gulp of air, he straightened, wiping away the wet hair plastered over his face.

"Look," he began, panting, "I—"

He got no further, for MacKenzie, still breathing heavily himself, was advancing on him through the waist-deep water. The man's face had an odd, eager look, and the moss-green eyes were very bright.

Belatedly, Roger thought of something else. The man was the son of Dougal MacKenzie. But the son also of Geillis Duncan, witch.

Somewhere beyond the willows, there was a deep booming noise, and flocks of startled birds rose screeching from the trees. The battle had begun.

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ALAMANCE

The Governor then sent Captain Malcolm, one of his Aides-de-Camp, and the Sherif of Orange, with his Letter, requiring the Rebels, to lay down their Arms, Surrender up their outlawed Ringleaders &c. About half past ten Capt. Malcolm and the Sherif returned with the Information that the Sherif had read the Letter four several Times, to different Divisions of the Revels, who rejected the Terms offered, with disdain, said they wanted no time to consider of them, & with Rebellious Clamours called out for Battle.

—"A Journal of the Expedition against the Insurgents," Wm. Tryon

"Ye'll watch for MacKenzie." Jamie touched Geordie Chisholm's shoulder, and Geordie turned his head, acknowledging the message with a slight nod.

All of them knew. They were good lads, they'd be careful. They'd find him, surely, coming back toward them.

He told himself so for the dozenth time, but the reassurance rang as hollow this time as it had before. Christ, what had happened to the man?

He moved up into the lead, shoving aside the brush with as much violence as though it were a personal enemy. If they were watching out, they'd see MacKenzie in time, not shoot him by mistake. Or so he told himself, knowing perfectly well that in the midst of enemies and the heat of battle, one fired at whatever moved, and there was seldom time to check the features of a man who came at you out of the smoke.

Not that it would make so much difference who did for MacKenzie, if anyone did. Brianna and Claire would hold him responsible for the man's life, and rightly so.

Then, to his relief, there was no more time to think. They broke out into open ground and the men spread out and ran, bending low, zigzagging through the grass in threes and fours as he had taught them, one seasoned soldier to each group. Somewhere behind them, the first boom of cannon came like thunder from a sunny sky.

He spotted the first of the Regulators then, a group of men running, as they were, coming from the right across the open ground. They hadn't seen his men yet.

Before they could, he bellowed "Casteal an DUIN!" and charged them, musket raised overhead in signal to the men behind him. Roars and shrieks split the air, and the Regulators, startled and taken unawares, stumbled to an untidy halt, fumbling their weapons and interfering with each other.

"Thugham! Thugham!" To me, to me! Close enough, it was close enough. He dropped to one knee, crouched over the musket, brought it to bear, and fired just over the heads of the milling men.

Behind him, he heard the grunt of his men falling into firing order, the clink of flint and then the deafening noise of the volley.

One or two of the Regulators crouched, returning fire. The rest broke and ran for cover, toward a small rise of grassy ground.

"*A draigha!* Left! *Nach links!* Cut them off!" He heard himself bellowing, but did it without thought, already running himself.

The small group of Regulators split, a few making off toward the creek, the rest bunching like sheep, galloping for the shelter of the rise.

They made it, disappearing around the curve of the hill, and Jamie called his troops back, with a piercing whistle that would carry over the rising thunder of the guns. He could hear firing now, a rattle of muskets, away to their left. He sheared off in that direction, trusting that they would follow.

A mistake; the land here was marshy, full of boggy holes and clinging mud. He shouted and waved again, back toward the higher ground. Fall back there, let the enemy come to them across the bog, if they would.

The high ground was heavy with brush, but dry, at least. He spread his fingers wide and waved, gesturing the men to spread out, take cover.

The blood was pumping through his veins, and his skin prickled and tingled with it. A puff of gray-white smoke drifted through the nearby trees, acrid with the scent of black powder. The boom of artillery was regular now, as the gun-crews fell into their rhythm, thumping like a huge, slow heart in the distance.

He made his way slowly toward the west, keeping an eye out. The brush here was mostly sumac and redbud, with waist-high tangles of bramble and clumps of pine that rose above his head. Visibility was poor, but he would hear anyone coming, long before he saw them—or they saw him.

None of his own men were in sight. He took cover in a stand of dogwood and gave a sharp call, like a bobwhite quail. Similar calls of "bob-WHITE!" came from behind him, none in front. Good, they knew roughly where one another were. Cautiously, he went forward, pressing through the brush. It was cooler here, with the shade of the trees, but the air was thick and sweat ran down his neck and back.

He heard the thump of feet and pressed back into the branches of a pinetree, letting the dark-needled fans swing over him, his musket raised to sight on an opening in the bushes. Whoever it was was coming fast. A crack of snapping twigs underfoot and the sound of labored breath, and a young man shoved through the shrubbery, panting. He had no gun, but a skinning-knife glinted in his hand.

The lad was familiar, the first glance gave him that, and Jamie's memory put a name to the young man's face before his finger had relaxed upon the trigger.

"Hugh!" he called, low-voiced but sharp. "Hugh Fowles!"

The young man let out a startled yelp, and swung round staring. He saw Jamie and his gun through the screen of needles, and froze like a rabbit.

Then a surge of panicked determination rose in his face, and he launched himself toward Jamie, screaming. Startled, Jamie barely got his musket up in time to catch the knife-blade on its barrel. He forced the knife up and back; it sheared down the barrel with a screech of metal, glancing off Jamie's knuckles. Young Hugh whipped back his arm for a stab, and he kicked the boy briskly in the knee, stepping back out of the way as the lad lost his balance and lurched to one side, knife swinging wildly.

Jamie kicked him again, and he fell down, the knife embedding itself in the ground.

"Will ye stop that?" Jamie said, rather crossly. "For Christ's sake, lad, do ye not know me?"

He couldn't tell whether Fowles knew him or not—nor even whether the boy had heard him. Face white and eyes staring, Fowles was thrashing in a panic, stumbling and gasping as he tried to get up, trying at the same time to wrench his knife free.

"Will you—" Jamie began, and then jerked back as Fowles abandoned the knife and threw himself forward with a grunt of effort.

The boy's weight knocked Jamie backward, and hands scrabbled at him, trying for a grip on his throat. He dropped the musket, turned a shoulder into Fowles's grip, and put a stop to this nonsense with a quick, brutal punch to the lad's midsection.

Hugh Fowles collapsed and lay curled into a ball on the ground, twitching like a wounded centipede, and making the shocked breathless faces of a man whose breakfast has just been knocked up into his lungs.

Jamie put his right hand to his mouth, sucking blood from his grazed knuckles. The boy's knife had skinned all four, and the punch hadn't helped; they burned like fire, and the blood had the taste of hot silver in his mouth.

More feet, coming fast. He had barely time to seize his musket before the bushes burst open once more, this time to reveal Fowles's father-in-law, Joe Hobson, his own musket held at the ready.

"Stop right there." Jamie crouched behind his gun, training the muzzle on Hobson's chest. Hobson halted as though a puppet-master had jerked his strings.

"What have ye done to him?" Hobson's eyes flicked from Jamie to his son-in-law and back.

"Nothing permanent. Put your gun down, aye?"

Hobson didn't move. He was grimed with filth and sprouting a beard, but the eyes were live and watchful in his face.

"I mean ye nay harm. Set it down!"

"We'll not be taken," Hobson said. His finger rested on the trigger of his gun, but there was a dubious note in his voice.

"Ye already are, fool. Dinna fash yourself, nay harm will come to you or the lad. You're a deal safer in gaol than out here, man!"

A whistling crash punctuated his statement, as something flew through the trees a few feet overhead, shearing branches as it went. Chain shot, Jamie thought automatically, even as he ducked in reflex, bowels clenched.

Hobson jerked in terror, swinging the barrel of his musket toward Jamie. He jerked again, and his eyes went wide with surprise, as a red stain flowered slowly on his breast. He looked down at it in puzzlement, the muzzle of his gun drooping like a wilted stem. Then he dropped the gun, sat down quite suddenly, leaned back against a fallen tree, and died.

Jamie whirled on his heel, still squatting, and saw Geordie Chisholm behind him, face half-black with the smoke of his shot, looking at Hobson's body as though wondering just how *that* had happened.

The boom of artillery came again, and another missile crashed through the branches and landed nearby with a thud Jamie felt through the soles of his boots. He flung himself flat on his belly and writhed toward Hugh Fowles, who had got himself up on hands and knees now, retching.

He grabbed Fowles's arm, disregarding the pool of vomit, and jerked, hard.

"Come on!" He scrambled up, seizing Fowles by waist and shoulder, and dragged him toward the shelter of the copse behind them. “Geordie! Geordie, help me!”

Chisholm was there. Between them, they got Fowles onto his feet and half-dragged, half-carried him, running and stumbling as they went.

The air was filled with the pungent scent of tree-sap, oozing from the severed branches, and he thought fleetingly of Claire’s garden, turned earth, churned earth beneath his boots, the fresh-turned earth of furrows and graves, and Hobson sitting in the sun by the log, the look of surprise not yet gone from his eyes.

Fowles stank of vomit and shit. He hoped it was Fowles.

He thought he would vomit himself from sheer nerves, but bit his tongue, tasting blood again, and clenched the muscles of his belly, willing his wame to go back down.

Someone rose from the shrubbery to his left. He held the gun in his left hand, raised it by reflex, fired one-handed. He stumbled through his own smoke, seeing whoever he had fired at turn and run, smashing heedless through the trees.

Fowles had his feet back under him now, and Jamie let go his arm, leaving Geordie to it. He fell to one knee, groping for powder and shot, ripped the cartridge with his teeth and tasted gunpowder tinged with blood, poured and rammed home, filled his priming pan, checked his flint—all the while noticing with a sense of bemusement that his hands were not shaking in the least, but went about their business with a deft calm, as though they knew just what to do.

He raised the barrel and bared his teeth, only half-conscious of doing it. There were men coming, three, and he raised the gun to bear on the first. With a last shred of conscious thought, he jerked it higher and fired above their heads, the musket jolting in his hands. They stopped, and he dropped the gun, ripped the dirk from his belt, and charged them, screaming.

The words seared his throat, raw from the smoke.

“Run!”

As though from a distance, he watched himself, thinking that it was just so that Hugh Fowles had done, and he had thought it foolish then.

“Run!”

The men scattered like fleeing quail. As a wolf might do, he turned at once after the slowest, bounding over the broken ground, a ferocious joy flooding his legs, blooming in his belly. He could run forever, the wind cold on his skin and shrill in his ears, the spring of the earth beneath him lifting his feet so he flew over grass and rock.

The man he pursued heard him coming, glanced back over his shoulder, and with a shriek of terror, ran full-tilt into a tree. He threw himself upon his prey, landing on the man’s back and feeling the springy crack of ribs beneath his knee. He gripped a handful of hair, slick and hot with greasy sweat, and jerked back the man’s head. He barely stopped himself cutting the naked throat that lay before him, stretched and defenseless. He could feel the shock of the blade on flesh, the hotness of the spurting blood, and wanted it.

He gulped air, panting.

Very slowly, he drew the knife away from the leaping pulse. The movement left him trembling with need, as though he had been dragged from his woman’s body on the verge of spilling seed.

“You are my prisoner,” he said.

The man stared up at him, uncomprehending. The man was weeping, tears making tracks through the dirt on his face, and trying to speak, sobbing, but unable to draw enough air to make words with his head wrenched back. Vaguely, it occurred to Jamie that he had spoken in Gaelic; the man did not understand.

Slowly, he loosened his grip, made himself release the man’s head. He groped for the English words, buried somewhere under the bloodlust that pulsed through his brain.

“You are … my … prisoner,” he managed at last, panting for air between words.

“Yes! Yes! Anything, don’t kill me, please don’t kill me!” The man huddled under him, sobbing, hands clasped to the back of his neck and shoulders hunched around his ears, as though he feared Jamie would seize his neck in his teeth and snap his spine.

At the thought, he felt a dim desire to do so, but the thrum of his blood was even now dying down. He could hear again, as his heartbeat faded in his ears. The wind no longer sang to him, but made its own way, heedless and alone, through the leaves above. There was a popping of distant gunshots, but the boom of the artillery had ceased.

Sweat dripped from chin and eyebrows, and his shirt was sodden with it, reeking.

He slid slowly off his prisoner, and knelt beside the prone body. The muscles of his thighs trembled and burned from the effort of the chase. He felt a sudden inexpressible tenderness for the man, and reached to touch him, but the feeling was succeeded by a sense of horror, quite as sudden, and as suddenly gone. He closed his eyes and swallowed, feeling sick, the place where he had bitten his tongue throbbing.

The energy the earth had lent him was draining from his body now, flowing out of his legs, going back to the earth. He reached out and patted the prisoner's shoulder, awkwardly, then struggled to his feet against the dead weight of his own exhaustion.

"Get up," he said. His hands were shaking; it took three tries to sheathe his dirk.

"Ciamar a tha thu, Mac Dubh?" Ronnie Sinclair was at his side, asking if he was all right. He nodded, and stood back as Sinclair pulled the man to his feet and made him turn his coat. The others were coming, in ones and twos: Geordie, the Lindsays, Gallegher, catching up and clustering round him like iron filings drawn to a bit of magnet steel.

The others had bagged prisoners, too; six in all, looking sullen, frightened, or simply exhausted, their coats turned lining-out to show their status. Fowles was among them, white and wretched.

His mind had cleared now, though his body felt limp and heavy. Henry Gallegher had a bloody graze across his forehead; one of the men from Brownsville—Lionel, was it?—carried one arm at an awkward angle, obviously broken. Bar that, no one seemed to be injured; that was good.

"Ask if they have seen MacKenzie," he said to Kenny Lindsay in Gaelic, with a small gesture toward the prisoners.

The gunshots had mostly ceased. There was only a random firing now, and a flock of doves passed overhead in a racket of wings, belatedly alarmed.

None had seen Roger MacKenzie, to know him. Jamie nodded, hearing, and wiped the last of the sweat from his face with his sleeve.

“Either he has come back safe, or he has not. But whatever’s done is done now. Ye’ve done brawly, lads—let’s go.”

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A NECESSARY SACRIFICE

This Evening the Dead were interred with military Honors; and three Outlaws taken in the Battle were hanged at the Head of the Army. This gave great Satisfaction to the Men & at this Time it was a necessary Sacrifice to appease the Murmurings of the Troops, who were importunate that public Justice should be immediately executed against some of the Outlaws that were taken in the Action and in opposing of whom they had braved so many Dangers, & suffered such Loss of lives and Blood.

—"A Journal of the Expedition against the Insurgents,"
Wm. Tryon

Roger jerked hard at the rope round his wrists, but succeeded only in digging the rough hemp farther into his flesh. He could feel the burn of abraded skin and a damp feel that he thought was oozing blood, but his hands had gone so numb that he wasn't sure. His fingers felt the size of sausages, the skin stretched tight.

He was lying where Buccleigh and his friends had thrown him, after tying his wrists and ankles, in the shade of a fallen log. Soaked through from the river, he would have been shivering with cold, had he not been struggling so desperately to get loose. Instead, sweat ran down his neck, his cheeks burned, and he felt as though his head would burst from the influx of furious blood.

They'd gagged him with the flag of truce, stuffing the kerchief so deep into his throat that he was close to choking, and knotting his own stock round his mouth. Ancestor or no, he was going to mangle William Buccleigh MacKenzie, if it was the last thing he ever did.

Shots were still being fired nearby; not in volleys, but a ragged popcorn rattle. The air reeked with black powder smoke, and every so often, something came whistling through the trees like a jabberwock, with a tremendous ripping and snapping of branches and leaves. Chain-shot? Cannonballs?

A cannonball had thudded into the riverbank, earlier, burying itself in a small explosion of mud and momentarily interrupting the fight. One of Buccleigh's friends had uttered a cry and run, splashing, for the shelter of the trees, but the other had stayed, grappling and punching, heedless of the shooting and yelling, until he and Buccleigh had managed to press Roger's head beneath the water and overpower him. He could still feel the burn of the river-water in his sinuses.

He'd managed to get to his knees now, hunched like an inchworm, but didn't dare to raise his head above the log, for fear of having it shot off. Fury was running so strong through his veins that he hadn't really been frightened, even at the realization that the battle was going on round him, but he hadn't lost his mind entirely.

He rubbed his face hard against the crumbling bark of the log, trying to snag the strip of linen tied round his head. It worked; the stub of a twig caught, and he jerked his head up, pulling the stock down below his chin. Grunting with the effort, he shoved the wadded kerchief out a little way, caught it on the same twig, and drew back, the soggy rag pulling out of his throat like a snake-swallower in reverse.

He gagged with reaction, feeling bile rise up the back of his throat. He gulped air, greedy for oxygen, and his stomach settled a bit.

Great, he could breathe, now what? The firing was still going on, and he could hear crashing off to his left, as several men plowed through the bushes, heedless of obstruction.

Running feet were coming toward him; he ducked behind the shelter of the log, just in time to avoid being flattened as a body catapulted over it. His new companion scrambled up onto hands and knees, pressing tight against the log, only then becoming aware of his presence.

"You!" It was Black-beard, from Husband's encampment. He stared at Roger, face suffusing slowly with blood. He could smell the man, a rank, penetrating reek of fear and anger.

Black-beard grabbed him by the shirt-front, jerking him close.

"This is your fault! Bastard!"

With his hands and feet still tied, he had no means of fighting back, but jerked back, trying to free himself.

"Let go, fool!"

Only then did the man realize that he was tied, and in his astonishment, did let go. Off-balance, Roger fell to the side, scraping his face painfully on the rough bark of the log. Black-beard's eyes bulged with amazement, then narrowed in glee.

"By Dad, you been captured! If that ain't luck! Who's got you, fool?"

"He's mine." A low Scottish voice behind him announced the return of William Buccleigh MacKenzie. "What d'ye mean it's his fault? What is?"

"This!" Black-beard flung out an arm, indicating the field around them, and the dying battle. The artillery had ceased, and there were no more than scattered rifle-shots in the distance.

"This damn smooth-talker come unto the camp this morning, asking for Hermon Husband, and took him away for a private word. I don't know what in desolation's name he said, but when he finished it, Husband come out, got straight onto his horse, told us all to go home, and rode off!"

Black-beard glared at Roger, and drawing back his hand, slapped him hard across the face. "What did you say to him, arse-bite?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned back to Buccleigh, who was glancing back and forth between his captive and his visitor, a look of deep interest furrowing the thick, fair brows. "If Hermon had stuck with us, we might ha' stood," Black-beard raged. "But with him goin' off like that, it cut the ground right from under us—wasn't no one knew quite what to do, and the next thing you know, here's Tryon a-bawling surrender at us—and a course we wasn't goin' to do that, but we wasn't what you'd call prepared to fight neither …" He trailed off at this, catching Roger's eye on him, and uncomfortably aware that Roger had seen him fleeing in panic.

There was nothing but silence on the far side of the log; all firing had stopped. It was dawning on Roger that the battle was not only over, but well and truly lost. Which meant in turn that the militia were likely to be swarming over this place in short order. His eyes were still watering from the slap, but he blinked them clear, glaring at Black-beard.

"I said to Husband what I say to you," he said, with as much authority as he could muster, lying trussed on the ground like a Christmas goose. "The Governor is serious. He means to put down this rebellion, and by the looks of things, he's done just that. If you have a care for your skin—and I'd say you do—"

With an inarticulate growl of rage, Black-beard seized Roger by the shoulders and tried to smash his head into the log.

Roger twisted like an eel. He reared back, breaking the man's grip, then threw himself forward, and butted the man squarely, smashing Black-beard's nose with his forehead. He felt the satisfying crunch of bone and cartilage, and the spurt of blood hot and wet against his face, and fell back onto one elbow, panting.

He'd not given anyone a Glasgow kiss before, but it seemed to come natural. The jar of it hurt his wrist badly, but he was beyond caring. Just let Buccleigh come close enough to get the same, that's all he wanted.

Buccleigh eyed him with a mixture of amusement and wary respect.

"Oh, a man of talent, aye? A traitor, a wife-stealer, *and* a bonnie brawler, all in the same wee bundle, is it?"

Black-beard threw up, choking on the blood from his crushed nose, but Roger paid no attention. His vision clear now, he kept his eyes square on Buccleigh. He knew which man of the two was the greater threat.

"A man who's sure of his wife needn't worry that someone else might steal her," he said, anger only slightly tempered with wariness. "I'm sure of my own wife, and have no need of yours, *amadain*."

Buccleigh was sunburned and deeply flushed from fighting, but at this, a darker red crept into his cheeks. Still, he kept his composure, smiling lightly.

"Marrit, are ye? Your wife must be ill-favored, surely, for ye to be sniffing after mine. Or is it only that she's put ye out of her bed, because ye couldna serve her decently?"

The rasp of the rope on his wrists reminded Roger that he was in no position to bandy words. With an effort, he bit back the retort that sat at the tip of his tongue, and swallowed it. It tasted foul, going down.

"Unless ye mean your wife to be a widow, I think it's time ye were going, aye?" he said. He jerked his head toward the far side of the log, where the brief silence had been succeeded by the distant sound of voices.

"The battle's over, your cause is lost. I don't know if they mean to take prisoners—"

"They've taken several." Buccleigh frowned at him, clearly undecided. There weren't that many options, Roger thought; Buccleigh must let him go, leave him tied, or kill him. Either of the first two was acceptable. As for the third, surely if Buccleigh meant to kill him, he'd be already dead.

"You'd best go while ye can," Roger suggested. "Your wife will be worried."

It was a mistake to have mentioned Morag again. Buccleigh's face grew darker, but before he could say anything, he was interrupted by the appearance of the woman herself, in company with the man who had helped Buccleigh tie him earlier.

"Will! Oh, Willie! Thank Christ you're safe! Are ye hurt at all?" She was pale and anxious, and had a small child in her arms, clinging monkeylike to her neck. Despite the burden, she reached out a hand to touch her husband, to assure herself that he was indeed unharmed.

“Dinna fash yourself, Morag,” Buccleigh said gruffly. “I’ve taken no harm.” Still, he patted her hand, and kissed her self-consciously on the forehead.

Ignoring this tender reunion, Buccleigh’s companion prodded Roger interestedly in the side with the toe of his boot.

“What shall we do with this, then, Buck?”

Buccleigh hesitated, his attention drawn momentarily from his wife. Morag, spotting Roger on the ground, uttered a muffled scream and clapped her hand across her mouth.

“What have ye done, Willie?” she cried. “Let him go, for Bride’s sake!”

“I shan’t. He’s a damned traitor.” Buccleigh’s mouth set in a grim line, obviously displeased at his wife’s taking notice of Roger.

“He’s not, he can’t be!” Clutching her son tightly to her, Morag stooped to peer at Roger, an anxious crease between her brows. Seeing the state of his hands, she gasped and turned indignantly to her husband.

“Will! How can ye treat this man so, and after he’s done such service to your own wife and bairn!”

For God’s sake, Morag, back off! Roger thought, seeing Buccleigh’s fist clench suddenly. Buccleigh was plainly a jealous bastard to start with, and being on the losing side of the battle just past was doing his temper no good at all.

“Bugger off, Morag,” said Buccleigh, echoing Roger’s sentiment in less-gallant language. “This is no place for you or the bairn; take him and go.”

Black-beard had recovered slightly by this time, and loomed up alongside Buccleigh. He glared down at Roger, hands pressed tenderly to his swollen nose.

“Slit his throat, I say, and good riddance.” He emphasized this opinion with a kick in the ribs that curled Roger up like a shrimp.

Morag uttered a fierce cry and kicked Black-beard in the shin.

“Let him alone!”

Black-beard, taken off-guard, let out a yelp and hopped backward. Buccleigh’s other companion appeared to find this more than funny, but stifled his hilarity when Buccleigh turned an awful glare on him.

Morag was on her knees, her small belt-knife in her hand, trying one-handed to cut the bonds about Roger's wrists. Much as he appreciated her intent, Roger wished she wouldn't try to help him. It was all too apparent that the original green-eyed monster had firm possession of the soul of William Buccleigh MacKenzie, and was glaring out of his eye-sockets in an emerald fury.

Buccleigh seized his wife by the arm and jerked her to her feet. The baby, startled, began to shriek.

"Leave, Morag!" Buccleigh snarled. "Go, and go now!"

"Yes, go!" Black-beard put in, glowering. "We've no need of your help, you interfering little bizzom!"

"Don't you speak to my wife that way!" Turning on his heel, Buccleigh punched Black-beard swiftly in the stomach. The man sat down hard, his mouth opening and closing in comical astonishment. Roger could almost feel a certain sympathy for Black-beard, who appeared to be faring no better between the two MacKenzies than he was himself.

Buccleigh's other friend, who had been observing the exchange with the fascination of someone watching a close tennis match, seized the opportunity to join the conversation, butting in as Morag tried to soothe her baby's crying.

"Whatever ye mean to do, Buck, best we do it and be gone." He nodded toward the creek, uneasy. There were a number of men coming in their direction, judging from the rumble of voices. Not fleeing Regulators; it was a purposeful sound. Militia, coming in search of prisoners? Roger sincerely hoped so.

"Aye." Buccleigh glanced in the direction of the noises, then turned to his wife. He took her by the shoulders, but gently.

"Go, Morag. I'd have ye safe."

She heard the note of pleading in his voice, and her face softened. Still, she looked from her husband to Roger, who was now trying mental telepathy, beaming thoughts at her in increasing desperation.

Leave, for God's sake, woman, before you get me killed!

Morag turned back to her husband, small jaw set in determination.

“I’ll go. But you swear to me, William Buccleigh, that ye willna harm one hair of this man’s head!”

Buccleigh’s eyes bulged slightly, and his hands curled into fists, but Morag stood her ground, small and fierce.

“Swear it!” she said. “For by the name of Bride, I’ll not share the bed of a murderer!”

Clearly torn, Buccleigh glanced from the sullen Black-beard to his other friend, who was shuffling from one foot to the other like a man in urgent need of a privy. The party of militia was getting closer. Then he looked down into his wife’s face.

“All right, Morag,” he said gruffly. He gave her a small push. “Go, now!”

“No.” She reached out and took her husband’s hand, pulling it toward her breast. Little Jemmy had got over his alarm, and was curled into his mother’s shoulder, noisily sucking his thumb. Morag placed his father’s hand on the little boy’s head.

“Swear on your son’s head, Will, that ye’ll not hurt this man nor see him killed.”

Roger mentally applauded the gesture, but was afraid she’d gone too far; Buccleigh stiffened for a moment, and the blood rose in his face again. After a tense moment, though, he nodded, once.

“I swear,” he said quietly, and let his hand fall. Morag’s face eased, and without a word, she turned then and hurried away, the baby held close to her bosom.

Roger let out the breath he’d been holding. God, what a woman! He hoped passionately that she and her baby *would* be safe—though if her fat-headed husband chose to step in a gopher hole and break his neck …

William Buccleigh was looking down at him, green eyes narrowed in contemplation, ignoring the increasing agitation of his friend.

“Come on, Buck!” The man glanced over his shoulder toward the creek, where loud calls to and fro indicated searchers combing the ground. “There’s no time to be lost. They did say Tryon means to hang prisoners, and I’ve no mind to be one!”

“Does he,” Buccleigh said softly. He held Roger’s eyes with his, and Roger thought for a moment that something familiar stirred in those depths. A chill of unease ran down his spine.

"He's right," he said to Buccleigh, with a jerk of the head toward the other man. "Go. I'll not speak against you—for your wife's sake."

Buccleigh pursed his lips slightly, thinking.

"No," he said at last, "I dinna think ye will. Speak against me, that is." He stooped and picked up the sodden, dirt-smeared ex-flag of truce from the ground. "Go along with ye, Johnny. See to Morag. I'll meet ye later."

"But, Buck …"

"Go! I'm safe enough." With a faint smile, his eyes still on Roger, Buccleigh put his hand in his pouch and drew out a small bit of dull silver metal. With a small shock, Roger recognized his own militia badge, the crudely lettered "FC" burned black in the pewter disc.

Tossing the badge lightly in his palm, Buccleigh turned to Black-beard, who was taking a suddenly renewed interest in the proceedings.

"I've a thought, sir, regarding our mutual friend." He nodded toward Roger. "If you're with me?"

Black-beard looked at Roger, back at MacKenzie, and a slow smile began to grow beneath his bulbous, reddened nose. The ripple of unease down Roger's back blossomed suddenly into a full-blown jolt of fear.

"Help!" he roared. "Help, militia! Help!" He rolled, twisting to avoid them, but Black-beard seized him by the shoulders, pulling him back. Calls came from beyond the trees, and the sound of feet, beginning to run.

"No, sir," said William Buccleigh, kneeling down in front of him. He seized Roger's jaw in a grip of iron, strangling his yells and squeezing his cheeks to force open his mouth. "I do not think you'll speak, indeed." With a slight smile, he rammed the sodden cloth down Roger's throat again, and tied the tattered neckcloth fast around it.

He stood up, then, the militia badge held tight in his hand. As the bushes opened, he turned toward them and waved an arm in hearty greeting.

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AFTERMATH

It being now half past two O'Clock the Enemy entirely dispersed, and the Army five Miles from Camp, it was thought adviseable to lose no Time, but to return immediately to the Camp at Alamance. Empty Waggons were ordered from Camp which took both the killed and wounded of the Loyalists, and even several of the wounded Rebels, who acknowledged had they gained the day no Quarters would have been given but to such as would have turned Regulators, these were nevertheless, taken good Care of, and had their wounds dressed.

—*"A Journal of the Expedition against the Insurgents,"*
Wm. Tryon

A musket-ball had shattered David Wingate's elbow. Bad luck; had it struck an inch higher, it would have broken the bone, but healed cleanly. I'd opened the joint with a semicircular incision across the outer aspect, and dug out both the flattened ball and several bone chips, but the cartilage was badly damaged, and the biceps tendon had been sheared through completely; I could see the silvery gleam of one end, hiding deep in the dark-red meat of the muscle.

I gnawed my lower lip, considering. If I left matters as they were, the arm would be permanently—and badly—crippled. If I could reattach the severed tendon and bring the bone-ends in the joint capsule into good alignment, he might just possibly regain some use of it.

I glanced round the campsite, which now resembled an ambulance depot, littered with bodies, equipment, and blood-stained bandages. Most of the bodies were moving, thank God, if only to curse or moan. One man had been dead when his friends brought him in; he lay quiet in the shade of a tree, wrapped in his blanket.

Most of the injuries I saw had been slight, though there were two men shot through the body; I could do nothing for them but keep them warm and hope for the best. Brianna was checking them every few minutes for signs of shock and fever, in between rounds of administering honeyed water to those suffering more superficial wounds. Best she kept busy, I thought, and she did keep moving, though her face looked like one of the wild morning glories on the vine that climbed the bush behind me—white and puckered, pinched tight closed against the terrors of the day.

I had had to amputate a leg, soon after the battle ended. It was a man from Mercer's Company—camped near to us, and lacking a surgeon of their own—struck by a rebounding chunk of a mortar round that had torn off most of his foot and left the flesh of the lower leg hanging in ribbons from the shattered bone. I'd thought she would faint when the heavy limb thumped into the dirt at her feet, and she'd thought so, too, but had by some miracle stayed upright, supporting the patient—who really *had* fainted, thank the Lord for small mercies—while I cauterized the bleeding vessels and bound the stump with brutal speed.

Jamie was gone; he had brought back his men, hugged me hard and kissed me once, fiercely, then left with the Lindsays to take the prisoners to the Governor—and inquire along the way for any news of Roger.

Relief at Jamie's return buoyed my heart, but fear for Roger was a small heavy counterweight below my breastbone. I could ignore it while I worked, though. No news was good news for a short time yet, and I welcomed the immediate realities of triage and treatment as a refuge from imagination.

Nothing else looked exigent. Men were still straggling in, but Bree looked up at each one, her heart in her eyes. If any of them needed me, she would call. All right, I decided. There was time; I'd try it. There was little to lose, bar a bit more suffering for Mr. Wingate, and I would ask if he were willing.

He was wax-pale and sweating, but still upright. He nodded his permission and I gave him the whisky bottle again; he applied it to his mouth with his sound hand as though it contained the elixir of life. I called one of the other men to hold his arm steady while I worked, and swiftly incised the skin just above the bend of the elbow in an inverted "T," exposing the lower head of the biceps and making the site more accessible. I began to probe with my longest forceps, teasing out the tough silver strand of the sheared tendon, pulling it down as far as I could, until I had a sound spot where I could pierce it with a suture, and set about the delicate work of rejoining the severed ends.

I lost touch then with everything around me, all my attention focused on the problem before me. I was dimly conscious of the *pit! pit! pit!* of drops striking the ground at my feet, but didn't know whether it was the sweat that ran down my arms and face, the patient's oozing blood, or both. I could have used the hands of a trained surgical nurse to help, but didn't have them, so made do with my own. I had a fine surgeon's needle, though, and thin boiled-silk sutures; the stitches showed small and neat, a stark black zigzag that marked a sturdy hold on the slippery, gleaming tissue. I would normally have used the cat-gut sutures for internal work like this, as those would gradually dissolve and be absorbed by the body. Tendons healed so slowly, though—if at all—that I couldn't risk that. The silk stitches would simply stay permanently in place, and I prayed would cause no problems of their own.

Then the hard part was done, and time started again. I was able to talk soothingly to David, who had come through it gallantly; he nodded and made a feeble attempt to smile when I told him it was done, though his teeth were clenched and his cheeks wet with tears. He screamed when I washed the wounds with diluted alcohol—they always did; they couldn't help it, poor things—but then sagged back, trembling, while I stitched the surgical incisions and bandaged the wounds.

That took no great skill, though; I had attention to spare now, and gradually became aware that some of the men behind me were discussing the recent battle, full of praise for Governor Tryon.

“Did you see it, then?” one was asking eagerly. “Did he really do as they said?”

“Hope I may be gutted and fried for breakfast if it ain’t so,” his companion replied sententiously. “Saw him with my own eyes, didn’t I? He rode up within a hundred yards of the swine, and ordered ’em face-to-face to surrender. They wasn’t much answer for a minute, only them kind of lookin’ to and fro amongst themselves to see who might speak, and then somebody shouts out that no, damn it all, they ain’t a-going to surrender nohow. So the Governor, he’s a-scowlin’ fit to fright a thundercloud, and he rears up and lifts his sword high, then brings it down and shouts, ‘Fire on them!’ ”

“And did they do so straight off?”

“No, we didn’t,” put in another voice, more educated, and rather dry in tone. “Do you blame us? A forty-shilling bounty for joining the militia is one thing, but to fire in cold blood on folk you know is something else. I looked across and who should I see on the other side but my wife’s own cousin, grinning back at me! Now, I’m not saying that the rascal is any great favorite with me or the family, but how am I to go home and tell my Sally as I’ve just shot her cousin Millard full of holes?”

“Better than Cousin Millard doin’ the same service by you,” said the first voice, with an audible grin, and the third man laughed.

“True enough,” he said. “But we didn’t wait to see if it might come to that. The Governor, he went red as a turkey-cock when the men there with him hesitated. He stood up in his stirrups with his sword held on high, glared round at us all, and he hollered out, ‘Fire, Goddamn you! Fire on them, or on me!’ ”

The narrator put a good deal of enthusiasm into this re-enactment, and there was a murmur of admiration from his hearers.

“Now there’s a soldier for ye!” said one voice, followed by a general rumble of agreement.

“So we fired,” said the narrator, a faint shrug in his voice. “Didn’t take so long, once it started. Cousin Millard is right fast, it seems, once he’s started running. Bastard got clean away.”

More laughter at this, and I smiled, patting David’s shoulder. He was listening, too, the conversation a welcome distraction.

“No sir,” another agreed. “I reckon Tryon means to make sure of his victory this time. Heard he’s gone to hang the leaders of the Regulation on the field.”

“He what?” I whirled round at this, bandage still in hand.

The small group of men blinked up at me, surprised.

“Yes, ma’am,” said one man, with an awkward tug at the brim of his hat. “A fellow from Lillington’s brigade told me so; he was off to see the fun.”

“Fun,” muttered another of the men, and crossed himself.

“Shame if he hangs the Quaker,” another opined, face shadowed. “Old Husband’s a right terror in print, but he ain’t a ruffian. Nor are James Hunter or Ninian Hamilton.”

“Perhaps he’ll hang Cousin Millard,” another suggested, nudging his neighbor with a grin. “Then you’ll be rid of him and your wife can blame the Governor!”

There was a chorus of laughter at this, but the tone was subdued. I turned back to my work, concentrating fiercely to blot out the picture of what was now happening on the field of war.

War was bad enough, even when it was necessary. Cold-blooded revenge by the victor was one degree beyond. And yet from Tryon’s point of view, that might be necessary, too. As battles went, this one had been both quick, and relatively minor in terms of casualty. I had only twenty or so wounded in my keeping, and had seen only one fatality. There would be more elsewhere, of course, yet from the comments of those nearby, it had been a rout, but not a slaughter, the militiamen being largely unenthusiastic about butchering their fellow citizens, cousins or not.

That meant that most of the men of the Regulation survived unharmed. I supposed that the Governor might feel that a drastic gesture was required, to seal his victory, intimidate the survivors, and stamp once and for all on the long-smoldering wick of that dangerous movement.

There was a stir, and the sound of a horse's hooves. I looked up—next to me, Bree's head jerked up, her body tense—to see Jamie returning, riding double with Murdo Lindsay. Both men slid off, and he sent Murdo away with a word to care for Gideon, then came at once to me.

I could see from the anxious look of his face that he had no word of Roger; he glanced at my face and saw the answer to his own question there. His shoulders dropped slightly in discouragement, then straightened, stiffening.

"I will go to search the field," he said to me, low-voiced. "I have sent word already, through the companies. If he is brought in anywhere, someone will bring us word."

"I'm going with you." Brianna was already taking off her grubby apron, wadding it into a ball.

Jamie glanced at her, then nodded.

"Aye, lass, of course. Just a moment, then—I'll fetch wee Josh to help your mother."

"I'll get—get the horses ready." Her movements were quick and jerky, without her usual athletic grace, and she dropped the water bottle she was holding, fumbling several times before she succeeded in retrieving it. I took it from her before she could drop it again, and squeezed her hand, hard.

The corner of her mouth trembled as she looked at me; I thought she meant it for a smile.

"He'll be all right," she said. "We'll find him."

"Yes," I said, and let go her hand. "I know you will."

I watched her hurry across the clearing, hands clenched in her raised skirts, and felt the counterweight of fear come loose, plunging like a stone into my belly.

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EXECUTION OF ORDERS

Roger woke slowly, to throbbing pain and a sense of dreadful urgency. He had no idea where he was, or how he came to be there, but there were voices, lots of voices, some talking just beyond the range of comprehension, some singing like harpies, in shrill discord. For a moment, he felt the voices were inside his head. He could see them, little brown things with leather wings and sharp teeth, banging into each other in paroxysms of interruption that set off small bombs of light behind his eyes.

He could feel the seam along which his head must surely split under the pressure, a burning streak across the top of his skull. He wanted someone to come and unzip it, to let out all the flying voices and their racket, to leave his skull an empty bowl of shining bone.

He had no real sense of opening his eyes, and stared numbly for some minutes, thinking that the scene on which he looked was still part of the confusion inside his skull. Men swarmed before him in a sea of colors, swirling blues and reds and yellows, mixed with blobs of green and brown.

A defect in his vision deprived him of perspective and caused him to see them in fragments—a distant cluster of heads floating like a bobble of hairy balloons, a waving arm that held a crimson banner, seemingly severed from its body. Several pairs of legs that must be close by … was he sitting on the ground? He was. A fly droned past his ear and landed, buzzing, on his upper lip, and he moved by reflex to swat it, only then realizing that he was indeed awake—and still bound.

His hands had gone numb beyond any sense of pain, but the ache now throbbed through the straining muscles of his arms and shoulders. He shook his head to clear it, a terrible mistake. Blinding pain shot through his head, bringing water to his eyes.

He blinked hard and breathed deep, willing himself to grasp some shred of reality, to come to himself. *Focus*, he thought. *Hold on*. The singing voices had faded away, leaving only a faint ringing in his ears. The others were still talking, though, and now he knew that the sound was real, he was able to seize on a word here and there, and pin it down, flapping, to examine for meaning.

"Example."

"Governor."

"Rope."

"Piss."

"Regulators."

"Stew."

"Foot."

"Hang."

"Hillsborough."

"Water."

"Water." That one made sense. He knew water. He *wanted* water; wanted it badly. His throat was dry, his mouth felt as though it was stuffed with … it was stuffed with something; he gagged as his tongue moved in an unconscious attempt at swallowing.

"Governor." The repeated word, spoken just above him, made him look up. He fixed his floating vision on a face. Lean, dark, frowning with a fierce intent.

"You are sure?" the face said, and he wondered dimly, *Sure of what?* He was sure of nothing, save that he was in a bad way.

"Yessir," said another voice, and he saw another face swim into view alongside the first. This one seemed familiar, fringed with thick black beard. "I saw him in Hermon Husband's camp, palavering with Husband. You ask amongst the prisoners, sir—they'll say so."

The first head nodded. It turned to the side, and up, addressing someone taller. Roger's eyes drifted up, seeking, and he jerked upright with a muffled exclamation, as he saw the green eyes looking down on him, dispassionate.

"He's James MacQuiston," said the green-eyed man, nodding confirmation. "From Hudgin's Ferry."

"You saw him in the battle?" The first man was coming into complete focus, a soldierly-looking fellow in his late thirties, dressed in uniform. Something else was coming into focus—James MacQuiston. He'd heard of MacQuiston … what …?

"He killed a man in my company," Green-eyes said, his voice rough with anger. "Shot him in cold blood as he lay wounded on the ground."

The Governor—that was who it must be, Governor … Tryon! That was the name! The Governor was nodding, the frown etched deep on his face.

"Take him, too, then," he said, and turned away. "Three are enough for now."

Hands gripped Roger's arms and jerked him upright, supporting him for a moment, then pulling him so that he stumbled, off-balance, and found himself half-walking, his weight supported by two men dressed in uniform. He pulled against them, wanting to turn and find Green-eyes—damn, what was the man's name?—but they yanked him round, compelling him to stumble toward a small rise, topped with a huge white oak.

The rise was surrounded by a sea of men, but they fell back, making way for Roger and his escorts. The sense of urgency was back, a feeling like ants beneath the surface of his brain.

MacQuiston, he thought, the name suddenly clear in his memory. *James MacQuiston*. MacQuiston was a minor leader of the Regulation, a rabble-rouser from Hudgin's Ferry whose fiery speech of threat and denunciation had been published in the *Gazette*; Roger had seen it.

Why in hell had Green-eyes—Buccleigh! It was Buccleigh. His sense of relief at remembering the name was succeeded instantly by shock as he realized that Buccleigh had told them he was MacQuiston. Why—

He had not even time to form the question when the last ranks broke before him, and he saw the horses beneath the tree, the looped nooses hanging above the empty saddles from its branches.

They held the horses by the heads, while the men were put upon them. Leaves brushed his cheek; twigs caught in his hair, and he ducked, turning his head by instinct to save his eyes being put out.

Some way across the clearing, he saw a woman's figure, half-hidden in the crowd; indistinct but with the unmistakable curve of a child in her arm, a small brown Madonna. The sight brought him upright with a jolt through chest and belly, the memory of Bree with Jemmy in her arms searing through his mind.

He threw himself to the side, back arched, felt himself slide and had no hands to save himself. Other hands caught him, pushed him back, one struck him hard across the face. He shook his head, eyes watering, and through the blur of tears saw the brown Madonna thrust her burden into someone's hands, pick up her skirts, and run as though the devil chased her.

Something dropped upon his breast with the heavy slither of a serpent. Prickly hemp touched his neck, drew tight about his throat, and he screamed behind the gag.

He struggled without thought for consequence or possibility, impelled by the desperation of the instinct to survive. Heedless of bleeding wrists and wrenching muscle, thighs clenched so hard about the horse's body that it jerked under him in protest, he strained at his bonds with a strength beyond what he had ever imagined he possessed.

Across the clearing, the child had begun to shriek for his mother. The crowd had fallen silent and the baby's cries rang loud. The dark soldier sat on his horse, arm lifted, sword upraised. He seemed to speak, but Roger heard nothing for the roar of blood in his ears.

The bones of his hands popped and a line of liquid heat ran down one arm as a muscle tore. The sword fell, a flash of sunlight from its blade. His buttocks slid back over the horse's rump, legs trailing helpless, and his weight fell free in an empty-bellied plunge.

A wrenching jerk …

And he was spinning, choking, fighting for air, and his fingers scrabbled, nails tearing at the rope sunk deep in his flesh. His hands had come loose, but it was too late, he couldn't feel them, couldn't manage. His fingers slipped and slid on the twisted strands, futile, numb, and unresponsive as wood.

He dangled, kicking, and heard a far-off rumble from the crowd. He kicked and bucked, feet pawing empty air, hands clawing at his throat. Chest strained, back arched, and his sight had gone black, small lightnings flickering in the corners of his eyes. He reached for God and heard no plea for mercy deep within himself but only a shriek of *no!* that echoed in his bones.

And then the stubborn impulse left him and he felt his body stretch and loosen, reaching, reaching for the earth. A cool wind embraced him and he felt the soothing warmth of his body's voidings. A brilliant light blazed up behind his eyes, and he heard nothing more but the bursting of his heart and the distant cries of an orphaned child.

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HIDEOUS EMERGENCY

Jamie and Bree were nearly ready to leave. Smoke-stained and weary as they were, a number of the men had offered to join the search-party, an offer that made Bree bite her lip and nod thanks. She was grateful for the offer of help, I knew—but it takes time to move a larger group, and I could see the impatience flare up in red blotches under her skin as weapons were cleaned, canteens refilled, cast-off shoes located.

"Wee Josh" had been mildly apprehensive regarding his new position as surgeon's assistant, but he was a groom, after all, and thus accustomed to tending the ills of horseflesh. The only difference, as I told him—making him grin—was that human patients could tell you where it hurt.

I had paused to wash my hands before stitching a lacerated scalp, when I became aware of some disturbance taking place at the edge of the meadow behind me. Jamie, hearing it too, turned his head—and then came swiftly back across the clearing, eyebrows raised.

"What is it?" I turned to look, and saw a young woman, evidently in a dreadful state, heading toward us at a lopsided trot. She was slight of build and limping badly—she had lost a shoe somewhere—but still half-running, supported on one side by Murdo Lindsay, who seemed to be expostulating with her even as he helped her along.

"Fraser," I heard her gasp. "Fraser!" She let go of Murdo and pushed her way through the waiting men, her eyes raking the faces as she passed, searching. Her brown hair was tangled and full of leaves, her face scratched and bloody.

"James … Fraser … I must … are you …?" She was panting for breath, her chest heaving and her face so red it looked as though she might have an apoplexy on the spot.

Jamie stepped forward and took her by the arm.

"I'm Jamie Fraser, lass," he said. "Is it me ye want?"

She nodded, gasping, but had no breath for words. I hastily poured a cup of water and offered it to her, but she shook her head violently, instead waving her arms in agitation, gesturing wildly toward the creek.

"Rog … er," she got out, gulping air like a landed fish. "Roger. MacKen … zie." Before the final syllable left her mouth, Brianna was at the young woman's side.

"Where is he? Is he hurt?" She seized the young woman's arm, as much to compel answers as to provide support.

The girl's head bobbed up and down, shook back and forth, and she gasped out, "Hang … they … they are … hanging him! Gov—ner!"

Brianna let go of her and ran for the horses. Jamie was already there, untying reins with the same swift intensity he had shown when the fighting began. Without a word, he stooped, hands cupped; Brianna stepped up and swung into the saddle, kicking the horse into motion before Jamie had reached his own. Gideon caught the mare up within moments, though, and both horses disappeared into the willows, as though swallowed up.

I said something under my breath, with no consciousness of whether I'd uttered a curse or a prayer. I thrust needle and suture into Josh's startled hands, caught up the sack with my emergency kit, and ran for my own horse, leaving the brown-haired woman collapsed on the grass, vomiting from her effort.

I caught them up within a few moments. We didn't know precisely where Tryon was holding his drumhead court, and valuable time was lost as Jamie was compelled to stop, time and again, and lean from his horse to ask directions—these often muddled and contradictory. Bree was gathered into herself, quivering like a nocked arrow, ready for flight, but lacking direction.

I tried to ready myself for anything, including the worst. I had no idea what preliminaries Tryon might have engaged in, or how much time might elapse between condemnation and execution. Not bloody long, I thought. I'd known Tryon long enough to see that he acted with thought, but also with dispatch—and he would know that if such things were done, 'twas best they were done quickly.

As to the why of it … imagination failed completely. I could only hope that the woman was wrong; that she had mistaken someone else for Roger. And yet I didn't think so; neither did Brianna, urging her horse through a boggy patch ahead with an intensity that suggested she would be better pleased to leap off the horse and drag it bodily through the mud.

The afternoon was fading, and clouds of small gnats surrounded us, but Jamie made no move to brush them away. His shoulders were set like stone, braced to bear the burden of knowledge. It was that as much as my own fears that told me Roger was likely dead.

The thought beat against me like a small, sharp hammer, the sort meant for breaking rocks. So far, I felt only brief, recurrent shocks of imagined loss, each time I glanced at Brianna's white face, thought of tiny Jemmy orphaned, heard the echo of Roger's soft, deep voice, laughing in the distance, singing through my heart. I did not try to push the hammering thoughts aside; it would do no good. And I would not truly break, I knew, until I saw his body.

Even then, the break would be internal. Brianna would need me. Jamie would stand like a rock for her, would do what must be done—but he, too, would need me, later. No one could absolve him of the guilt I knew he felt, but I could at least be confessor for him, and his intercessor with Brianna. My own mourning could wait—a long time, I hoped.

The ground opened, flattening into the edge of a wide meadow, and Jamie kicked Gideon into a gallop, the other horses streaming after him. Our shadows flew like bats across the grass, the sound of our hoofbeats lost in the sounds of a crowd of men who filled the field.

On a rise at the far end of the meadow stood a huge white oak, its spring leaves bright in the slanting sun. My horse moved suddenly, dodging past a group of men, and I saw them, three stick-figures, dangling broken in the tree's deep shadow. The hammer struck one final blow, and my heart shattered like ice.

Too late.

It was a bad hanging. Without benefit of official troops, Tryon had had no one to hand with a hangsman's gruesome—and necessary—skills. The three condemned men had been sat on horses, the ropes round their necks thrown over tree branches above, and at the signal, the horses had been led out from under them, leaving them dangling.

Only one had been fortunate enough to die of a snapped neck. I could see the sharp angle of his head, the limpness of his limbs in their bonds. It wasn't Roger.

The others had strangled, slowly. The bodies were twisted, held by their bonds in the final postures of their struggle. One man—one body—was cut down as I rode up, and carried past me in the arms of his brother. There was not much to choose between their faces, each contorted, each darkened in its separate agony. They had used what rope was to hand; it was new, unstretched. Roger's toes trailed in the dust; he had been taller than the rest. His hands had come free; he had managed to hook the fingers of one hand beneath the rope. The fingers were nearly black, all circulation cut off. I couldn't look at his face at once. I looked at Brianna's, instead; white and utterly still, each bone and tendon set like death.

Jamie's face was the same, but where Brianna's eyes were blank with shock, Jamie's burned, holes charred black in the bone of his skull. He stood for a moment before Roger, then crossed himself, and said something very quietly in Gaelic. He drew the dirk from his side.

"I'll hold him. Cut him down, lass." Jamie handed the knife to Brianna, not looking at her, and stepping forward, took hold of the body round the middle, lifting slightly to take the strain off the rope.

Roger moaned. Jamie froze, arms wrapped tight, and his eyes flicked to me, huge with shock. It was the faintest of sounds; it was only Jamie's response that convinced me I had indeed heard it—but I had, and so had Brianna. She leapt at the rope, and sawed at it in silent frenzy, and I—stunned into temporary immobility—began to think, as fast as possible.

Maybe not; maybe it was only the sound of the body's residual air escaping with the movement—but it wasn't; I could see Jamie's face, holding him, and I knew it wasn't.

I darted forward, reaching upward as Roger's body fell, to catch and cradle the head in my hands, to steady him as Jamie lowered him to the ground. He was cold, but firm. Of course, if he were alive, he must be, but I had prepared myself for the flaccid-meat touch of dead flesh, and the shock of feeling life under my hands was considerable.

"A board," I said, breathless as though someone had just punched me in the stomach. "A plank, a door, something to put him on. We mustn't move his head; his neck may be broken."

Jamie swallowed once, hard, then jerked his head in an awkward nod, and set off, walking stiffly at first, then faster and faster, past the knots of sorrowing kin and eager gawkers, whose curious gaze was turning now in our direction.

Brianna had the dirk still in her hand. As people began to come toward us, she moved past me, and I caught a glimpse of her face. It was still white, still set—but the eyes burned now with a black light that would sear any soul so reckless as to come too near.

I had no attention to spare for interference—or anything else. He wasn't breathing visibly; no obvious movement of the chest, no twitch of lips or nostrils. I felt vainly for a pulse in his free wrist—pointless to poke at the mass of swollen tissue in his neck—finally found an abdominal pulse, beating faintly just below the breastbone.

The noose was sunk deep in his flesh; I groped frantically in my pocket for my penknife. It was a new rope, raw hemp. The fibers were hairy, stained brown with dried blood. I registered the fact faintly, in the remote part of my mind that had time for such things while my hands were busy. New ropes stretch. A real hangsman has his own ropes, already stretched and oiled, well-tested for ease of use. The raw hemp jabbed my fingers, stabbed painfully under my nails as I clawed and pried and ripped at it.

The last strand popped and I yanked it free, heedless of laceration—that hardly mattered. I daren't risk tilting his head back; if the cervical vertebrae were fractured, I could cripple or kill him. And if he couldn't breathe, that wouldn't matter, either.

I gripped his jaw, tried to sweep my fingers through his mouth, to clear mucus and obstructions. No good, his tongue was swollen, not sticking out, but in the way. Air takes less room than fingers do, though. I pinched his nose tight, breathed two or three times, as deeply as I could, then sealed my mouth on his and blew.

Had I seen his face as he hung, I would have realized at once that he wasn't dead; his features had gone slack with loss of consciousness and his lips and eyelids were blue—but his face wasn't black with congested blood, and his eyes were closed, not bulging. He'd lost his bowels, but his spinal cord wasn't snapped, and he hadn't strangled—yet.

He was, however, in the process of doing so before my eyes. His chest wasn't moving. I took another breath, and blew, free hand on his breast. Nothing. Blow. No movement. Blow. Something. Not enough. Blow. Air leaking all around the edges of my mouth. Blow. Like blowing up a rock, not a balloon. Blow again.

Confused voices over my head, Brianna shouting, then Jamie at my elbow.

"Here's the board," he said calmly. "What must we do?"

I gasped for breath, and wiped my mouth.

"Take his hips, Bree his shoulders. Move when I tell you, not before."

We shifted him quickly, my hands holding his head like the Holy Grail. There were people all around us now, but I had no time to look or listen; I had eyes only for what must be done.

I ripped off my petticoat, rolled it and used it to brace his neck; I hadn't felt any grinding or crackling in the neck when we lifted him, but I needed all the luck I had for other things. By stubbornness or sheer miracle, he wasn't dead. But he had hung by the neck for the best part of an hour, and the swelling of the tissues in his throat was very shortly going to accomplish what the rope itself hadn't.

I didn't know whether I had a few minutes or an hour, but the process was inevitable, and there was only one thing to do about it. No more than a few molecules of air were seeping through that mass of crushed and mangled tissue; a bit more swelling would seal it off altogether. If no air could reach his lungs by means of nose or mouth, another channel must be provided.

I turned to look for Jamie, but it was Brianna who knelt beside me. A certain amount of racket in the background indicated that Jamie was dealing with the spectators.

A cricothrotomy? Fast, and requiring no great skill, but difficult to keep open—and it might not be sufficient to relieve the obstruction. I had one hand on Roger's sternum, the soft bump of his heart secure under my fingers. Strong enough … maybe.

"Right," I said to Brianna, hoping I sounded quite calm. "I'll need a bit of help."

"Yes," she said—and thank God, *she* sounded calm. "What shall I do?"

In essence, nothing all that difficult; simply hold Roger's head pulled well back, and keep it steady while I slit his throat. Of course, hyperextending the neck could easily sever the spinal cord if there were a fracture, or compress it irreversibly. But Brianna needn't worry about that—or know about it, either.

She knelt by his head and did as I told her, and the mediastinum of the trachea bulged into view as the skin and fascia over it tightened. There it was, neatly lined up—I hoped—between the great vessels on either side. If it wasn't, I could easily lacerate the common carotid or the internal jugular, and he'd bleed to death right under my hands.

The only virtue to hideous emergency is that it gives one license to attempt things that could never be done in cold blood.

I fumbled for the small bottle of alcohol that I carried in my pocket. I nearly dropped it, but by the time I had poured the contents over my fingers and wiped both my scalpel and Roger's neck, the surgeon's trance had come over me, and my hands were once more steady.

I took a moment, hands on his neck, eyes closed, feeling for the faint throb of the artery, the slightly softer mass of the thyroid. I pressed upward; yes, it moved. I massaged the isthmus of the thyroid, pushing it out of the way, hard toward his head, and with my other hand, pressed the knife blade down into the fourth tracheal cartilage.

The cartilage here was U-shaped, the esophagus behind it soft and vulnerable; I must not stab too deeply. I felt the fibrous parting of skin and fascia, resistance, then the soft pop as the blade went in. There was a sudden loud gurgle, and a wet kind of whistling noise; the sound of air being sucked through blood. Roger's chest moved. I felt it, and it was only then that I realized my eyes were still shut.

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ALL IS WELL

The blackness cradled him, comforting in its warm completeness. He felt some faint stirring of something outside it, a painful, intrusive presence, and shrank back into the shelter of the dark. It was melting away around him, though, slowly exposing parts of him to light and harshness.

He opened his eyes. He couldn't tell what he was looking at, and struggled to understand. His head throbbed and so did a dozen smaller pulses, each one a brilliant, tender burst of pain. He felt the points of pain like pins that nailed him like a butterfly to a board. If he could but pry them free, he might fly away …

He closed his eyes again, seeking the comfort of the darkness. He felt a dim recollection of terrible effort, his rib-muscles tearing with the struggle for air. There was water somewhere in his memory, filling his nose, wetness ballooning the hollows of his clothes … was he drowning? The idea sent a faint flicker of alarm through his mind. They said it was an easy death, drowning, like falling asleep. Was he sinking, falling into a treacherous and final ease, even as he sought the beguiling dark?

He jerked, flailing with his arms, trying to turn and reach the surface. Pain burst through his chest and burned in his throat; he tried to cough and could not, tried to gulp air and found none, struck something hard—

Something seized him, held him still. A face appeared above him, a blur of skin, a blaze of reddish hair. Brianna? The name floated into his mind like a bright balloon. Then his eyes focused a little, bringing a harsher, fiercer face into view. Jamie. The name hung in front of him, floating, but seeming somehow reassuring.

Pressure, warmth … a hand was clasping his arm, another on his shoulder, pressing hard. He blinked, his vision swimming, gradually clearing. He felt no air moving in mouth or nose, his throat was closed and his chest still burned, but he *was* breathing; he felt the soreness of the tiny muscles between his ribs as they moved. He hadn't drowned then; it hurt too much.

"You are alive," Jamie said. Blue eyes stared intently into his, so close he felt warm breath on his face. "You are alive. You are whole. All is well."

He examined the words with a sense of detachment, turning them over like a handful of pebbles, feeling the weight of them in the palm of his mind.

You are alive. You are whole. All is well.

A vague feeling of comfort came over him. That seemed to be all he needed to know just then. Anything else could wait. The waiting black rose up again, with the inviting aspect of a soft couch, and he sank gratefully upon it, still hearing the words like plucked harpstrings.

You are alive. You are whole. All is well.

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A FEEBLE SPARK

“Mrs. Claire?”

It was Robin McGillivray hovering in the doorway of the tent, his dark wiry hair standing up on end like a bottle-brush. He looked like a harried raccoon, the skin round his eyes wiped free of sweat and soot, the rest still blackened with the smoke of battle.

At sight of him, Claire rose at once.

“Coming.” She was on her feet, kit in hand and already moving toward the door before Brianna could speak.

“Mother!” It was no more than a whisper, but the tone of panic brought Claire round as though she had stepped on a turntable. The amber eyes fastened on Brianna’s face for a moment, flicked to Roger, then back to her daughter.

“Watch his breathing,” she said. “Keep the tube clear. Give him honey-water, if he’s conscious enough to swallow a bit. And touch him. He can’t turn his head to see you; he needs to know you’re there.”

“But—” Brianna stopped dead, her mouth too dry to speak. *Don’t go!* she wanted to cry. *Don’t leave me alone! I can’t keep him alive, I don’t know what to do!*

“They need me,” Claire said, very gently. She turned, skirts whispering, to the impatiently waiting Robin, and vanished into the twilight.

“And I don’t?” Brianna’s lips moved, but she didn’t know whether she had spoken aloud or not. It didn’t matter; Claire was gone, and she was alone.

She felt light-headed, and realized that she had been holding her breath. She breathed out, and in, deeply, slowly. The fear was a poisonous snake, writhing round her spine, slithering through her mind. Ready to sink its fangs in her heart. She took one more breath through gritted teeth, seized the snake by the head, mentally stuffed it wriggling into a basket, and slammed down the lid. So much for panic, then.

Her mother would not have left, were there any immediate danger, she told herself firmly, nor if there were anything more that could be done medically. So there wasn't. Was there anything *she* could do? She breathed, deep enough to make the boning of her stays creak.

Touch him. Speak to him. Let him know you're with him. That was what Claire had said, speaking urgently but somehow absentmindedly, during the messy proceedings following the impromptu tracheotomy.

Brianna turned back to Roger, looking in vain for something safe to touch. His hands were swollen like inflated gloves, stained purple-red with bruising, the crushed fingers nearly black, raw rope-weals sunk so deep in the flesh of his wrists that she was queasily sure she could see white bone. They looked unreal, badly-done makeup for a horror play.

Grotesque as they were, they were better than his face. That was bruised and swollen, too, with a ghastly ruff of leeches attached beneath his jaw, but it was more subtly deformed, like some sinister stranger pretending to be Roger.

His hands were lavishly decorated with leeches, too. He must be wearing every leech available, she thought. Claire had sent Josh rushing to the other surgeons, to beg their supplies, and then sent him and the two Findlay boys splashing down the creek banks in hasty search of more.

Watch his breathing. That, she could do. She sat down, moving as quietly as she could, from some obscure urge not to wake him. She laid a hand lightly over his heart, so relieved to find him warm to the touch that she gave a great sigh. He grimaced slightly at the feel of her breath on his face, tensed, then relaxed again.

His own breath came so shallowly that she took her hand away, feeling that the pressure of her palm on his chest might be enough to stop its labored rise. He *was* breathing, though; she could hear the faint whistle of air through the tube in his throat. Claire had commandeered Mr. Caswell's imported English pipe, ruthlessly breaking off the amber stem. Rinsed hastily with alcohol, it was still stained with tobacco tar, but seemed to be functioning well enough.

Two fingers of Roger's right hand were broken, all his nails clawed bloody, torn, or missing. Her own throat tightened at this evidence of just how ferociously he had fought to live. His state seemed so precarious that she hesitated to touch him, as though she might startle him over some invisible edge between death and life. And yet she could see what her mother meant; the same touch might hold him back, keep him from stumbling over just such an edge, lost in the dark.

She squeezed his thigh firmly, reassured by the solid feel of the long, curving muscle under the blanket that covered his lower body. He made a small sound, tensed, and relaxed again. She wondered for a surreal moment whether to cup his genitals.

"That would let him know I'm here, all right," she murmured, swallowing a hysterical desire to laugh. His leg quivered slightly at the sound of her voice.

"Can you hear me?" she asked softly, leaning forward. "I'm here, Roger. It's me—Bree. Don't worry, you aren't alone."

Her own voice sounded strange; too loud, stiff and awkward.

"Bi socair, mo chridhe," she said, and relaxed a little. *"Bi samnach, tha mi seo."*

It was easier, somehow, in Gaelic, its formality a thin dam against the intensity of feelings that might swamp her, were they ever set free. Love and fear and anger, swirled together in a mix so strong her hand trembled with it.

She realized suddenly that her breasts were turgid, aching with milk; there had been no time in the last several hours even to think of it, let alone take the time to relieve the pressure. Her nipples stung and tingled at the thought, and she gritted her teeth against the small gush of milk that leaked into her bodice, mingling with her sweat. She yearned toward Roger, wanting suddenly to suckle him, wanting to cradle him against her breast and let life flow into him from her.

Touch him. She was forgetting to touch him. She stroked his arm, squeezed his forearm gently, hoping to distract herself from discomfort.

He seemed to feel her hand on his arm; one eye opened a little, and she thought she saw a consciousness of her flicker in its depths.

“You look like the male version of Medusa,” she said, the first thing that popped into her head. One dark eyebrow twitched slightly upward.

“The leeches,” she said. She touched one of those on his neck, and it contracted sluggishly, already half-full. “A beard of snakes. Can you feel them? Do they bother you?” she asked before remembering what her mother had said. His lips moved, though, forming a soundless “no,” with obvious effort.

“Don’t talk.” She glanced at the other bed, feeling self-conscious, but the wounded man in it was quiet, eyes closed. She turned back, bent, and quickly kissed Roger, the merest touch of lips. His mouth twitched; she thought he meant to smile.

She wanted to shout at him. *What happened? What in hell did you DO?* But he couldn’t answer.

Suddenly, fury overwhelmed her. Mindful of the people passing to and fro nearby, she didn’t shout, but instead leaned down and gripped his shoulder—that seeming one of the reasonably undamaged spots—and hissed, “How in God’s name did you *do* this?” in his ear.

His eyes rolled slowly toward her, fixing on her face. He made a slight grimace which she couldn’t interpret at all, and then the shoulder under her hand began to vibrate. She stared at him in complete perplexity for a few seconds, before she realized that he was laughing. Laughing!

The tube in his throat jiggled, and made a soft wheezing noise, which aggravated her beyond bearing. She stood up, hands pressed against her aching breasts.

“I’ll be right back,” she said. “Don’t you bloody go anywhere, damn you!”

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TINDER AND CHAR

Gerald Forbes was a successful lawyer, and normally looked the part. Even dressed in his campaigning gear, and with the soot of gunpowder staining his face, he still had an air of solid assurance that served him well as a captain of militia. This air had not quite deserted him, but he seemed visibly uneasy, curling and uncurling the brim of his hat as he stood in the doorway of the tent.

At first I assumed that it was merely the discomfort that afflicts many people in the presence of illness—or perhaps awkwardness over the circumstances of Roger's injury. But evidently it was something else; he barely nodded toward Brianna, who sat by Roger's bed.

"My sympathies for your misfortune, ma'am," he said, then turned at once to Jamie. "Mr. Fraser. If I might—a word? And Mrs. Fraser, too," he added, with a grave bow in my direction.

I glanced at Jamie, and at his nod, got up, reaching by reflex for my medical kit.

There was not a great deal I could do; that much was obvious. Isaiah Morton lay on his side in Forbes's tent, his face dead-white and sheened with sweat. He still breathed, but slowly, and with a horrible gurgling effect that reminded me unpleasantly of the sound when I had pierced Roger's throat. He wasn't conscious, which was a small mercy. I made a cursory examination, and sat back on my heels, wiping sweat from my face with the hem of my apron; the evening had not cooled much, and it was close and hot in the tent.

"Shot through the lung," I said, and both men nodded, though they both clearly knew as much already.

“Shot in the back,” Jamie said, a grim tone to his voice. He glanced at Forbes, who nodded, not taking his eyes from the stricken man.

“No,” he said quietly, answering an unspoken question. “He wasn’t a coward. And it was a clean advance—no other companies in the line behind us.”

“No Regulators behind you? No sharpshooters? No ambush?” Jamie asked, but Forbes was shaking his head before the questions were finished.

“We chased a few Regulators as far as the creek, but we stopped there and let them go.” Forbes still held the hat between his fingers, and he mechanically rolled and unrolled the brim, over and over. “I had no stomach for killing.”

Jamie nodded, silent.

I cleared my throat, and drew the bloody remnants of Morton’s shirt gently over him.

“He was shot *twice* in the back,” I said. The second bullet had only grazed his upper arm, but I could plainly see the direction of the furrow it had left.

Jamie closed his eyes briefly, then opened them.

“The Browns,” he said, in grim resignation.

Gerald Forbes glanced at him, surprised.

“Brown? That’s what he said.”

“He spoke?” Jamie squatted beside the injured man, a frown drawing his ruddy brows together. He glanced at me, and I shook my head mutely. I was holding Isaiah Morton’s wrist, and could feel the flutter and stumble in his pulse. He would not likely speak again.

“When they brought him in.” Forbes squatted by Jamie, at last setting down the maltreated hat. “He asked for you, Fraser. And then he said, ‘Tell Ally. Tell Ally Brown.’ He said that several times, before he—” He gestured mutely at Morton, whose half-closed lids showed slices of white, his eyes rolled up in agony.

Jamie said something obscene, very softly, under his breath in Gaelic.

"Do you really think they did this?" I asked, equally softly. The pulse thumped and shuddered under my thumb, struggling.

He nodded, looking down at Morton.

"I shouldna have let them go," he said, as though to himself. Morton and Alicia Brown, he meant.

"You couldn't have stopped them." I reached my free hand toward him, to touch him in reassurance, but couldn't quite reach him, tethered as I was to Morton's pulse.

Gerald Forbes was looking at me in puzzlement.

"Mr. Morton … eloped with the daughter of a man named Brown," I explained delicately. "The Browns weren't happy about it."

"Oh, I see." Forbes nodded understandingly. He glanced down at Morton's body and clicked his tongue, a sound mingling reproof with sympathy. "The Browns—do you know which company they belong to, Fraser?"

"Mine," Jamie said shortly. "Or they did. I havena seen either of them, since the end of the battle." He turned to me. "Is there aught to do for him, Sassenach?"

I shook my head, but didn't let go of his wrist. The pulse hadn't improved, but it hadn't gotten worse, either.

"No. I thought he might be gone already, but he isn't sinking yet. The ball must not have struck a major vessel. Even so …" I shook my head again.

Jamie sighed deeply and nodded.

"Aye. Will ye stay with him, then, until …?"

"Yes, of course. Will you go back to our tent, though, and make sure everything's under control there? If Roger—I mean, come and fetch me if I'm needed."

He nodded once more and left. Gerald Forbes came near, and put a tentative hand on Morton's shoulder.

"His wife—I shall see that she has help. If he should come round again, will you tell him that?"

"Yes, of course," I said again, but my hesitation made him look up, brows raised.

"It's just that he … um … has *two* wives," I explained. "He was already married when he eloped with Alicia Brown. Hence the difficulty with her family, you see."

Forbes's face went comically blank.

"I see," he said, and blinked. "The … ah … first Mrs. Morton. Do you know her name?"

"No, I'm afraid I—"

"Jessie."

The word was barely more than a whisper, but it might have been a gunshot, for its effect in stopping the conversation.

"What?" My grip on Morton's wrist must have tightened, for he flinched slightly, and I loosened it.

His face was still dead white, but his eyes were open, fogged with pain but definitely conscious.

"Jessie …" he whispered again. "Jeze … bel. Jessie Hatfield. Water?"

"Wat—oh, yes!" I let go of his wrist and reached at once for the water jug. He would have glugged it, but I let him have only small sips, for the present.

"Jezebel Hatfield, and Alicia Brown," Forbes said carefully, evidently noting the names in his neatly-docketed lawyer's mind. "That is correct? And where do these women live?"

Morton took a breath, coughed, and interrupted the cough abruptly with a gasp of pain. He struggled for a moment, then found speech.

"Jessie—in Granite Falls. Ally's—in Greenboro." He breathed very shallowly, gasping between words. And yet I heard no gurgling of blood in his throat, saw none oozing from nose or mouth. I could still hear the sucking sound from the wound in his back, and moved by inspiration, I pulled him slightly forward and jerked back the pieces of his shirt.

"Mr. Forbes, have you a sheet of paper?"

"Why … yes. I … that is …" Forbes had thrust his hand into his coat in automatic response, and come out with a folded sheet of paper. I snatched this from him, unfolded it, poured water over it, and plastered it flat against the small hole beneath Morton's shoulder blade. The ink mixed with blood and ran in little dark runnels over the pasty skin, but the sucking noise abruptly stopped.

Holding the paper in place with my hand, I could feel the beating of his heart. It was still faint, but steadier—yes, it was steadier.

"I'll be damned," I said, leaning to the side to look at his face. "You aren't going to die, are you?"

Sweat poured from his face, and the rags of his shirt hung dark and sodden against his chest, but the edge of his mouth trembled in an attempt at a smile.

"No, ma'am," he said. "I ain't." He was still breathing in short gasps, but the breaths were deeper. "Ally. Baby's … next … month. Told her … I be there."

I picked up the edge of the blanket with my free hand, and wiped some of the sweat from his face.

"We'll do our best to see that you are," I assured him, then glanced up at the lawyer, who had been watching these proceedings with his mouth hanging slightly open.

"Mr. Forbes. I think perhaps we had better take Mr. Morton back to my tent. Will you find a couple of men to carry him?"

He closed his mouth abruptly.

"Oh. Yes. Of course, Mrs. Fraser. At once." He didn't move right away, though, and I saw his eyes dart toward the wet sheet of paper plastered over Morton's back. I glanced down at it. I could read only a few indistinct words between my fingers, but those were enough to tell me that Jamie's casually insulting references to Forbes as a sodomite were likely inaccurate. "My darling Valencia," the letter began. I knew only one woman named Valencia in the vicinity of Cross Creek—in the colony of North Carolina, for that matter. Farquard Campbell's wife.

"I'm terribly sorry about your paper," I said, looking up at Forbes. Holding his gaze with my own, I carefully rubbed the palm of my hand over the sheet of paper, irrevocably smearing every word on it into a mess of blood and ink. "I'm afraid it's quite ruined."

He took a deep breath, and clapped his hat back on his head.

"That is quite all right, Mrs. Fraser. Perfectly all right. I'll—go and fetch some men."

Evening brought relief from the flies, as well as the heat. Drawn by sweat, blood, and manure, they swarmed over the encampment, biting, stinging, crawling, and buzzing in maddening fashion. Even after they had gone, I kept slapping absentmindedly at arms and neck, imagining I felt the tickle of feet.

But they were gone, at last. I glanced round my small kingdom, saw that everyone was breathing—if with an astounding variety of sound effects—and ducked out of the tent for a breath of cool air, myself.

A highly undervalued activity, breathing. I stood for a moment, eyes closed, appreciating the easy rise and fall of my bosom, the soft inrush, the cleansing flux. Having spent the last several hours in keeping air out of Isaiah Morton's chest, and getting it into Roger's, I was inclined to cherish the privilege. Neither of them would draw a single breath without pain for some time—but they *were* both breathing.

They were my only remaining patients; the other seriously wounded had all been claimed by the surgeons of their own companies, or taken to the Governor's tent to be tended by his personal physician. Those with minor injuries had gone back to their fellows, to boast of their scars or nurse their pains with beer.

I heard a ruffle of drums in the distance, and stood still, listening. A solemn cadence played, and stopped abruptly. There was a moment's silence, in which all motion seemed suspended, and then the boom of a cannon.

The Lindsay brothers were nearby, sprawled on the ground by their fire. They too had looked up at the sound of drums.

"What is it?" I called to them. "What's happening?"

"They're bringin' up the dead, Mrs. Fraser," Evan called back. "Ye'll no be worrit, aye?"

I waved to them in reassurance, and began to walk toward the creek. The frogs were singing, a descant to the distant drums. Full military honors for the battle dead. I wondered whether the two hanged ringleaders would be buried in the same place, or whether some separate and less honorable grave would be set aside for them, if their families didn't claim them. Tryon wasn't the sort to leave even an enemy to the flies.

He would know by now, surely. Would he come, to apologize for his mistake? What apology was possible, after all? It was only by the fluke of fortune and a new rope that Roger was alive.

And he might still die.

When I set my hand on Isaiah Morton, I could feel the burning of the bullet lodged in his lung—but I could feel the stronger burning of his ferocious will to live in spite of it, too. When I set my hand on Roger, I felt that same burning … but it was a feeble spark. I listened to the whistle of his breath and in my mind I saw charred wood, with a tiny patch of white-hot ember still alight, but trembling on the verge of abrupt extinction.

Tinder, I thought, absurdly. That's what you did with a fire that threatened to go out. You blew on the spark—but then there must be char; something for the spark to catch, to feed on and grow.

A creaking of wagon wheels made me look up from my contemplation of a patch of reeds. It was a small wagon, with a single horse, and a single driver.

"Mrs. Fraser? Is that you?"

It took a moment for me to recognize the voice.

"Mr. MacLennan?" I asked, astonished.

He pulled up alongside me, and touched a hand to his hat. By starlight, his face was dim and grave in its shadow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked, drawing close and lowering my voice, though there was no one anywhere near to hear me.

"I came to find Joe," he replied, with a slight motion of his head toward the wagonbed. It should have been no great shock; I had been seeing death and destruction all day, and I was no more than slightly acquainted with Joe Hobson. I hadn't known he was dead, though, and the hairs rippled on my forearms.

Without speaking further, I went round to the back of the wagon. I felt the small jerk and vibration through the wood as Abel put on the wagon-brake, and got down to join me.

The body wasn't shrouded, though someone had laid a large half-clean kerchief over the face. Three huge black flies rested on it, still and bloated. It made no difference, but I dashed them away with the back of my hand. They drifted up buzzing, and settled again, out of my reach.

"Were you in the fighting?" I asked, not looking at Abel MacLennan. He must have been with the Regulators, but there was no smell of gunpowder on him.

"No," he said softly behind my shoulder. "I'd no wish to fight. I came wi' Joe Hobson, Mr. Hamilton, and the others—but when it looked as though there would be fighting, I came awa'. I walked away, as far as the mill on the other side of the town. And then, when the sun went down, and no sign of Joe … I came back," he finished simply.

"What now?" I asked. We both spoke softly, as though we might disturb the dead man's slumber. "Shall we give you help to bury him? My husband—"

"Och, no," he interrupted, still softly. "I'll be takin' him home, Mrs. Fraser. Though I thank ye for the kindness. If ye might spare a bit o' water, though, or food for the way …"

"Of course. Wait here—I'll get it."

I hurried back toward our tent, thinking as I went of the distance to Drunkard's Spring from Alamance. Four days, five, six? And the sun so hot, and the flies … but I knew the sound of a Scot whose mind was made up, and went without argument.

I took a moment to check the two men; both breathing. Noisily, painfully—but breathing. I had replaced the wet paper on Morton's wound with a bit of oiled linen, stuck down round the edges with honey, which made an excellent seal. No leakage; very good.

Brianna still sat by Roger. She had found a wooden comb, and was combing out his tumbled hair, gently removing burs and twigs, working at the tangles, slowly and patiently. She was singing something under her breath—*"Frère Jacques."* The bodice of her dress showed wet circles. She had gone out once or twice during the day to relieve the growing pressure of milk, but obviously it was time again. The sight made my own breasts ache with remembered strain.

She looked up and I caught her eye. I touched my breast briefly and nodded toward the tent-flap, eyebrow raised. She gave me a nod and a tiny smile, meant to be bravely reassuring, but I could see the bleakness in her eyes. I supposed it had occurred to her that while Roger might live, he would likely never sing—or perhaps even talk—again.

I couldn't speak past the lump in my own throat; only nodded to her and hurried out again, the parcel under my arm.

A figure stepped out of the darkness in front of me, and I nearly ran bang into it. I stopped short with an exclamation, clutching the parcel to my chest.

"My apologies, Mrs. Fraser. I did not realize that you didn't see me." It was the Governor. He took another step, into the glow of light from the tent.

He was alone, and looked very tired, the flesh of his face furrowed and loose. He smelt of drink; his Council and the militia officers would have been toasting his victory, I supposed. His eyes were clear, though, and his step firm.

"Your son-in-law," he said, and glanced toward the tent behind me. "Is he—"

"He is alive," said a soft, deep voice behind the Governor. He whirled round with a smothered exclamation, and my head jerked up.

I saw a shadow move and take shape, and Jamie rose up slowly out of the night; he had been sitting at the base of a hickory tree, invisible in the dark. How long had he been there? I wondered.

"Mr. Fraser." The Governor had been startled, but he firmed his jaw, hands folded into fists at his sides. He was obliged to tilt his head back to look up at Jamie, and I could see that he didn't like it. Jamie could see it, too, and plainly didn't care. He stood close to Tryon, looming over him, with an expression on his face that would have rattled most people.

It appeared to rattle Tryon, too, but he lifted his chin, determined to say whatever he had come to say.

“I have come to make my apologies for the injury done to your son-in-law,” he said. “It was a most regrettable error.”

“Most regrettable,” Jamie repeated, with an ironic intonation. “And would ye care to say, sir, how this … error … came about?” He took a step forward, and Tryon automatically took a step back. I could see the heat rise in the Governor’s face, and his jaw clench.

“It was a mistake,” he said, through his teeth. “He was wrongly identified as one of the outlawed ringleaders of the Regulation.”

“By whom?” Jamie’s voice was polite.

Small hectic spots burned in the Governor’s cheeks.

“I do not know. By several people. I had no reason to doubt the identification.”

“Indeed. And did Roger MacKenzie say nothing in his own defense? Did he not say who he was?”

Tryon’s lower teeth fastened briefly in the flesh of his upper lip, then let go.

“He … did not.”

“Because he was bloody bound and gagged!” I said. I had pulled the gag from his mouth myself, when Jamie had cut him down from the hanging tree. “You didn’t *let* him speak, did you, you—you—”

The lamplight from the tent-flap gleamed off Tryon’s gorget, a crescent of silver that hung round his throat. Jamie’s hand rose slowly—so slowly that Tryon plainly perceived no threat—and very gently fitted itself around the Governor’s throat, just above the gorget.

“Leave us, Claire,” he said. There was no particular threat in his voice; he sounded merely matter-of-fact. A flash of panic lit Tryon’s eyes, and he jerked backward, gorget flashing in the light.

“You dare to lay hands on me, sir!” The panic subsided at once, replaced by fury.

“Oh, I do, aye. As ye laid hands on my son.”

I didn’t *think* Jamie actually intended to harm the Governor. On the other hand, this was by no means merely an act of intimidation; I could feel the core of cold rage inside him, and see it like an ice-burn in his eyes. So could Tryon.

"It was a mistake! And one I have come to rectify, so far as I may!" Tryon was standing his ground, jaw tight as he glared upward.

Jamie made a sound of contempt, low in his throat.

"A mistake. And is the loss of an innocent man's life no more than that to ye? You will kill and maim, for the sake of your glory, and pay no heed to the destruction ye leave—save only that the record of your exploits may be enlarged. How will it look in the dispatches ye send to England—sir? That ye brought cannon to bear on your own citizens, armed with no more than knives and clubs? Or will it say that ye put down rebellion and preserved order? Will it say that in your haste to vengeance, ye hanged an innocent man? Will it say there that ye made 'a mistake'? Or will it say that ye punished wickedness, and did justice in the King's name?"

Tryon's jaw muscles bulged, and his limbs trembled, but he kept his temper in check. He breathed deeply through his nose, in and out, before he spoke.

"Mr. Fraser. I will tell you something that is known to a few, but is not yet public knowledge."

Jamie didn't reply, but raised one brow, glinting red in the light. His eyes were cold, dark and unblinking.

"I am made Governor of the colony of New York," Tryon said. "The letter of appointment arrived more than a month past. I shall leave by July to take up the new appointment; Josiah Martin is made Governor here in my room." He glanced from Jamie to me, and back. "So you see. I had no personal stake in this; no need to glorify my exploits, as you put it." His throat moved as he swallowed, but fear had been replaced now by a coldness equal to Jamie's own.

"I have done what I have done as a matter of duty. I would not leave this colony in a state of disorder and rebellion, for my successor to deal with—though I might rightfully have done so."

He took a deep breath, and stepped back, forcing his hands to relax from the fists into which they had been clenched.

"You have experience of war, Mr. Fraser, and of duty. And if you are an honest man, you will know that mistakes are made—and made often—in both realms. It cannot be otherwise.”

He met Jamie’s eyes straight on, and they stood in silence, looking at each other.

My attention was jerked away from this confrontation quite suddenly, by the distant sound of a baby crying. I turned, head up, just as Brianna emerged from the tent-flap behind me, in a rustle of agitated skirts.

“Jem,” she said. “That’s Jemmy!”

It was, too. A disturbance of voices at the far side of the camp came closer, resolving itself into the round, flounced shape of Phoebe Sherston, looking frightened but determined, followed by two slaves: a man carrying two huge baskets, and a woman, with a wrapped and squirming bundle in her arms that was making a terrible racket.

Brianna made for the bundle like a compass needle swinging north, and the racket ceased as Jemmy emerged from his blankets, hair sticking up in red tufts and feet churning in paroxysms of joyous relief. Mother and child disappeared promptly into the shadows under the trees, and a certain amount of confusion ensued, with Mrs. Sherston explaining disjointedly to a gathering crowd of interested onlookers that she had just become *so* distraught, hearing reports of the battle, so terrible, and she feared … but Mr. Rutherford’s slave had come to say all was well … and she thought perhaps … and so … and the child would *not* give over shrieking … so …

Jamie and the Governor, shaken out of their nose to nose confrontation, had also retired to the shadows; I could see them, two stiff shadows, one tall and one shorter, standing close together. The element of danger had gone out of their *tête-à-tête*, though; I could see Jamie’s head bent slightly toward Tryon’s shadow, listening.

“… brought food,” Phoebe Sherston was telling me, her round face pink with excited self-importance. “Fresh bread, and butter, and some blackberry jam and cold chicken and …”

“Food!” I said, abruptly reminded of the parcel I held under my arm. “Do pardon me!” I gave her a quick, bright smile, and ducked away, leaving her open-mouthed in front of the tent.

Abel MacLennan was where I had left him, waiting patiently under the stars. He brushed aside my apologies, thanking me for the food and jug of beer.

"Is there anything—?" I began, then broke off. What else could I possibly do for him?

And yet it seemed there was something.

"Young Hugh Fowles," he said, tidily tucking the parcel beneath the wagon's seat. "They said he was taken prisoner. Would—would your husband maybe speak for him, d'ye think? As he did for me?"

"I expect he would. I'll ask him."

It was quiet here, far enough from the camp that the sounds of conversation didn't carry above the song of frogs and crickets, and the rushing of the creek.

"Mr. MacLennan," I said, moved by impulse, "where will you go? After you've taken Joe Hobson back, I mean."

He took off his hat and scratched his balding head, quite unselfconsciously, though the gesture was not one of puzzlement, but merely of one preparing to state something already settled in his mind.

"Och," he said. "I dinna mean to go anywhere. There are the women there, aye? And the weans. They've no man, with Joe dead and Hugh prisoner. I shall stay."

He bowed to me then, and put on his hat. I shook his hand—surprising him—and then he climbed aboard his wagon and clicked his tongue to the horse. He lifted his hand to me in farewell, and I waved back, realizing the difference in him as I did so.

There was still grief in his voice, and sorrow on his shoulders; and yet he sat upright on his errand, the starlight shining on his dusty hat. His voice was firm, and his hand likewise. If Joe Hobson had left for the land of the dead, Abel MacLennan had come back from there.

Things had settled somewhat by the time I came back to the tent. The Governor and Mrs. Sherston were gone, with her slaves. Isaiah Morton slept, moaning now and then, but without fever. Roger lay still as a tomb-figure, face and hands black with bruises, the faint whistle of his breathing tube a counterpoint to Brianna's murmured song as she rocked Jemmy.

The little boy's face was slack, mouth pinkly open in the utter abandonment of sleep. With sudden inspiration, I held out my arms, and Bree, looking surprised, let me take him. Very carefully, I laid the limp, heavy little body on Roger's chest. Bree made a small movement, as though to catch the baby and stop him sliding off—but Roger's arm moved up, stiff and slow, and folded across the sleeping child. *Tinder*, I thought, satisfied.

Jamie was outside the tent, leaning against the hickory tree. When I had made sure of things inside, I came out to join him in the shadows. He raised his arms without speaking, and I came inside them.

We stood together in the shadows, listening to the crackle of campfires and the crickets' songs.

Breathing.

Great Alamance Camp
Friday 17th May 1771
Parole - Granville
Countersign - Oxford

The Governor impressed with the most affectionate sense of Gratitude gives Thanks to both Officers and Soldiers of the Army for the Vigorous and Generous support they afforded Him Yesterday in the Battle near Alamance, it was to their Valour and steady Conduct that he owed under the Providence of Almighty God, the signal Victory obtained over obstinate and infatuated Rebels,—His Excellency simpathises with the Loyalists for the brave Men that fell and suffered in the Action, but when he reflects that the fate of Constitution depended on the success of the Day, and the important Services thereby rendered to their King and Country, He considers this Loss (though at present the Cause of Affliction to their Relations *and Friends) as a Monument of lasting Glory and Honor to themselves and Families.*

The Dead to be interred at five OClock this Evening in the Front of the Park of Artillery, Funeral Service to be performed with Military Honors to the deceased—after the Ceremony, Prayers and Thanksgiving for the signal Victory it has pleased Divine Providence Yesterday to Grant the Army over the Insurgents.

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PART SEVEN

Alarms of Struggle and Flight

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A WHITER SHADE OF PALE

Mrs. Sherston, with an unexpected generosity, offered us her hospitality. I moved to the Sherstons' large house in Hillsborough with Brianna, Jemmy, and my two patients; Jamie divided his time between Hillsborough and the militia camp, which remained in place at Alamance Creek while Tryon satisfied himself that the Regulation had indeed been decisively crushed.

While I couldn't reach the bullet lodged in Morton's lung with my forceps, it didn't appear to be troubling him greatly, and the wound had begun to seal itself in a satisfactory fashion. There was no telling exactly where the bullet was, but plainly it hadn't pierced any major vessels; as long as it didn't move further, it was quite possible for him simply to live with the bullet embedded in his body; I had known a good many war veterans who had—Archie Hayes among them.

I was not at all sure how stable my small stock of penicillin might prove to be, but it seemed to work; there was a little redness and seepage at the wound site, but no infection, and very little fever. Beyond penicillin, the appearance a few days after the battle of Alicia Brown, now enormously pregnant, was the most important boost to Morton's recovery. Within an hour of her arrival, he was sitting up in his cot, pale but jubilant, hair sticking up on end and his hand lovingly pressed against the writhing bulges of his unborn child.

Roger was another matter. He was not badly injured, beyond the crushing of his throat—though that was bad enough. The fractures to his fingers were simple; I had set them with splints and they should heal with no trouble. The bruising faded fairly quickly from livid reds and blues into a spectacular array of purple, green, and yellow that made him look as though he had just been exhumed after having been dead for a week or so. His vital signs were excellent. His vitality was not.

He slept a great deal, which should have been good. His slumber wasn't restful, though; it had about it something unsettling, as though he sought unconsciousness with a fierce desire, and once achieved, clung to it with a stubbornness that bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

Brianna, who possessed her own brand of stubbornness, had the job of forcing him back to wakefulness every few hours, to take some nourishment and have the tube and its incision cleansed and tended. During these procedures, he would fix his eyes on the middle distance, and stare darkly at nothing, making the barest acknowledgment of remarks addressed to him. Once finished, his eyes would close again, and he would lie back on his pillow, bandaged hands folded across his chest like a tomb-figure, with no sound save the soft, breathy whistle from the tube in his neck.

Two days after the battle of Alamance, Jamie arrived at the Sherstons' house in Hillsborough just before supper, tired from long riding, and covered with reddish dust.

"I had a wee talk wi' the Governor today," he said, taking the cup of water I had brought out to him in the yard. He drained it in a gulp and sighed, wiping sweat from his face with a coat-sleeve. "He was fashed about wi' all the to-do, and of no mind to think about what happened after the battle—but *I* was of no mind to let it be."

"I don't imagine it was much of a contest," I murmured, helping him to peel off the dusty coat. "William Tryon's not even Scots, let alone a Fraser."

That got me a reluctant half-smile. "Stubborn as rocks," was the succinct description of the Fraser clan I had been given years before—and nothing in the intervening time period had given me cause to think it inaccurate in any way.

"Aye, well." He shrugged and stretched luxuriously, his vertebrae cracking from the long ride. "Oh, Christ. I'm starved; is there food?"

He relaxed and lifted his long nose, sniffing the air hopefully.

"Baked ham and sweet potato pie," I told him, unnecessarily, since the honey-soaked fragrances of both were thick on the humid air. "So what did the Governor say, once you'd got him properly browbeaten?"

His teeth showed briefly at that description of his interview with Tryon, but I gathered from his faint air of satisfaction that it wasn't totally incorrect.

"Oh, a number of things. But to begin with, I insisted he recall to me the circumstances when Roger Mac was taken; who gave him up, and what was said. I mean to get to the bottom of it." He pulled the thong from his hair and shook out the damp locks, dark with sweat.

"Did he remember anything when you pressed him?"

"Aye, a bit more. Tryon says there were three men who had Roger Mac captive; one of them had a badge for Fraser's Company, so of course he thought the man was one of mine. He says," he added, with irony.

That would have been a reasonable assumption for the Governor to make, I thought—but Jamie was plainly in no mood to be reasonable.

"It must have been Roger's badge that the man had," I said. "The rest of your company came back with you—all except the Browns, and it wouldn't have been them." The two Browns had vanished, seizing the opportunity of the confusion of battle to take their vengeance on Isaiah Morton and then to escape before anyone discovered the crime. They wouldn't have hung about to frame Roger, even had they some motive for doing so.

He nodded, dismissing the conclusion with a brief gesture.

"Aye. But why? He said Roger Mac was bound and gagged—a dishonorable way to treat a prisoner of war, as I said to him."

"And what did he say to that?" Tryon might be slightly less stubborn than Jamie; he wasn't any more amenable to insult.

"He said it wasna war; it was treasonable insurrection, and he was justified in taking summary measures. But to seize and hang a man, without allowing him to speak a word in his own behalf—" The color was rising dangerously in his face. “I swear to ye, Claire, if Roger Mac had died at the end of yon rope, I would have snapped Tryon’s neck and left him for the crows!”

I hadn’t the slightest doubt that he meant it; I could still see his hand, fitting itself so slowly, so gently, about the Governor’s neck above the silver gorget. I wondered whether William Tryon had had the slightest notion of the danger in which he had stood, that night after the battle.

“He didn’t die, and he isn’t going to.” I hoped I was right, but spoke as firmly as I could, laying a hand on his arm. The muscles in his forearm bulged and shifted with the restrained desire to hit someone, but stilled under my touch, as he looked down at me. He took a deep breath, then another, drummed his stiff fingers twice against his thigh, then got his anger under control once more.

“Well, so. He said the man identified Roger Mac as James MacQuiston, one of the ring-leaders of the Regulation. I have been asking after MacQuiston,” he added, with another glance at me. He was growing slightly calmer, talking. “Would it surprise ye, Sassenach, to discover that no one kens MacQuiston, by his face?”

It would, and I said so. He nodded, the high color receding slightly from his cheeks.

“So it did me. But it’s so; the man’s words are there in the papers for all to see—but no one has ever seen the man. Not auld Ninian, not Hermon Husband—no one of the Regulators that I could find to speak to—though the most of them are lying low, to be sure,” he added.

“I even found the printer who set one of MacQuiston’s speeches in type; he said the script of it was left upon his doorstep one morning, with a brick of cheese and two certificates of proclamation money to pay for the printing.”

“Well, that *is* interesting,” I said. I took my hand gingerly off his arm, but he seemed under control now. “So you think ‘James MacQuiston’ is likely an assumed name.”

“Verra likely indeed.”

Pursuing the implications of that line of thought, I had a sudden idea.

“Do you think that perhaps the man who identified Roger to the Governor as MacQuiston might have been MacQuiston himself?”

Jamie’s brows went up, and he nodded slowly.

“And he sought to shield himself, by having Roger Mac hanged in his place? Being dead is an excellent protection against arrest. Aye, that’s a bonnie idea—if a trifle vicious,” he added judiciously.

“Oh, just a trifle.”

He seemed less angry with the vicious and fictitious MacQuiston than with the Governor—but then, there was no doubt as to what Tryon had done.

We had moved across the yard to the well. There was a half-filled bucket sitting on the coping, warm and brackish from the day’s heat. He rolled up his sleeves, cupped his hands, and dashed water from the bucket up into his face, then shook his head violently, spattering droplets into Mrs. Sherston’s hydrangeas.

“Did the Governor recall what any of these men who had Roger looked like?” I asked, handing him a crumpled linen towel from the well-coping. He took it and wiped his face, shaking his head.

“Only the one. The one who had the badge, who did most of the talking. He said it was a fair-haired fellow, verra tall and well set up. Green-eyed, he thought. Tryon wasna taking careful note of his appearance, of course, bein’ exercised in his mind at the time. But he recalled that much.”

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” I said, struck by a thought. “Tall, fair-haired, and green-eyed. Do you think it could have been Stephen Bonnet?”

His eyes opened wide and he stared at me over the towel for a moment, face blank with astonishment.

“Jesus,” he said, and set the towel down absentmindedly. “I never thought of such a thing.”

Neither had I. What I knew of Bonnet didn’t seem to fit the picture of a Regulator; most of them were poor and desperate men, like Joe Hobson, Hugh Fowles, and Abel MacLennan. A few were outraged idealists, like Husband and Hamilton. Stephen Bonnet might occasionally have been poor and desperate—but I was reasonably sure that the notion of seeking redress from the government by protest wasn't one that would have occurred to him. Take it by force, certainly. Kill a judge or sheriff in vengeance for some offense, quite possibly. But—no, it was ridiculous. If I was certain of anything regarding Stephen Bonnet, it was that he didn't pay taxes.

"No." Jamie shook his head, having evidently come to the same conclusions. He wiped a lingering droplet off the end of his nose. "There's nay money anywhere in this affair. Even Tryon had to appeal to the Earl of Hillsborough for funds to pay his militia. And the Regulators—" He waved a hand, dismissing the thought of the Regulators paying anyone for anything. "I dinna ken everything about Stephen Bonnet, but from what I've seen of the man, I think that only gold or the promise of it would bring him to a battlefield."

"True." The clink of china and chime of silver came faintly through the open window, accompanying the soft voices of slaves; the table was being set for dinner. "I don't suppose there's any way Bonnet could be James MacQuiston, is there?"

He laughed at that, his face relaxing for the first time.

"No, Sassenach. That I *can* be sure of. Stephen Bonnet canna read, nor write much more than his name."

I stared at him.

"How do you know that?"

"Samuel Cornell told me so. He hasna met Bonnet himself, but he said that Walter Priestly came to him once, to borrow money urgently. He was surprised, for Priestly's a wealthy man—but Priestly told him that he had a shipment coming that must be paid for in gold—for the man bringing it would not take warehouse receipts, proclamation money, or even bank-drafts. He didna trust words on paper that he couldna read himself, nor would he trust anyone to read them to him. Only gold would do."

"Yes, that does sound like Bonnet." I had been holding his coat, folded over one arm. Now I shook it out, and began to beat the red dust from its skirts, averting my face from the resultant clouds. "What you said about gold … do you think Bonnet could have been at Alamance by accident? On his way to River Run, perhaps?"

He considered that one for a moment, but then shook his head, rolling down the cuffs of his shirt.

"It wasna a great war, Sassenach—not the sort of thing where a man might be caught up unawares and carried along. The armies faced each other for more than two days, and the sentry lines had holes like a fishing seine; anyone could have left Alamance, or ridden round it. And Alamance is nowhere near River Run. No, whoever it was that tried to kill wee Roger, it was someone who was there on his own account."

"So we're back to the mysterious Mr. MacQuiston—whoever he might be."

"Perhaps," he said dubiously.

"But who else could it be?" I protested. "Surely no one among the Regulators could have had anything personal against Roger!"

"Ye wouldna think so," Jamie admitted. "But we're no going to know until the lad can tell us, aye?"

After supper—during which there was naturally no mention of MacQuiston, Stephen Bonnet, or anything else of an upsetting nature—I went up to check on Roger. Jamie came with me, and quietly dismissed the slave woman who sat by the window, mending. Someone had to stay with Roger at all times, to make sure the tube in his throat didn't become clogged or dislodged, as it was still his only means of breathing. It would be several days yet before the swelling of the mangled tissues in his throat subsided enough for me to risk removing it.

Jamie waited until I had checked Roger's pulse and breathing, then at my nod, sat down by his bedside.

"Do ye ken the names of the men who denounced ye?" he asked without preliminaries. Roger looked up at him, frowning, dark brows drawn together. Then he nodded slowly, and held up one finger.

"One of them. How many were there?"

Three fingers. That agreed with Tryon's recollection, then.

"They were Regulators?"

A nod.

Jamie glanced at me, then back at Roger.

"It wasna Stephen Bonnet?"

Roger sat up bolt upright, mouth open. He clutched at the tube in his throat, struggling vainly to speak, and shaking his head violently.

I grabbed for his shoulder, one hand reaching for the tube; the violence of his movement had jerked it nearly out of the incision, and a trickle of blood ran down his neck where the wound had reopened. Roger himself seemed oblivious; his eyes were fixed on Jamie's and his mouth was working urgently, asking silent questions.

"No, no. If ye didna see him, then he wasna there." Jamie took him firmly by the other shoulder, helping me to ease him back on the pillow. "It was only that Tryon described the man who betrayed ye as a tall, fair-haired fellow. Green-eyed, maybe. We thought perhaps …"

Roger's face relaxed at that. He shook his head again and sank back, mouth twisted a little. Jamie pressed on.

"Ye kent the man, though; ye'd met him before?" Roger glanced away, nodded, then shrugged. He looked both irritated and helpless; I could hear his breathing quicken, whistling through the amber tube. I cleared my throat signficantly, frowning at Jamie. Roger was out of immediate danger; that didn't mean he was well, or anywhere near it.

Jamie ignored me. He'd picked up Bree's sketching-box on his way upstairs; laying a sheet of paper on it, he put it on Roger's lap, then extended one of the sticks of hardened charcoal to him.

"Will ye try again?" He had been trying to get Roger to communicate on paper ever since he had regained full consciousness, but Roger's hands had been too swollen even to close around a pen. They were still puffed and bruised, but repeated leeching and gentle massage had improved them to the point that they did at least *look* vaguely like hands again.

Roger's lips pressed together momentarily, but he wrapped his hand clumsily around the charcoal. The first two fingers on that hand were broken; the splints stuck out in a crude "V" sign—which I thought rather appropriate, under the circumstances.

Roger frowned in concentration, and began to scrawl something slowly. Jamie watched intently, holding the paper flat with both hands to keep it from sliding.

The stick of charcoal snapped in two, the fragments flying off across the floor. I went to pick them up, while Jamie leaned frowning over the smeared sheet of paper. There was a sprawling "W" and an "M," then a space, and an awkward "MAC."

"William?" He looked up at Roger for verification. Sweat shone on Roger's cheekbones, but he nodded, very briefly.

"William Mac," I said, peering over Jamie's shoulder. "A Scotsman, then—or a Scottish name, at least?" Not that that narrowed down the possibilities a great deal: MacLeod, MacPherson, MacDonald, MacDonnel, Mac … Quiston?

Roger raised his hand and thumped it against his chest. He thumped it again, and mouthed a word. Recalling television shows based on charades, I was for once quicker than Jamie.

"MacKenzie?" I asked, and was rewarded with a quick flash of green eyes, and a nod.

"MacKenzie. William MacKenzie." Jamie was frowning, obviously running through his mental roster of names and faces, but not turning up a match.

I was watching Roger's face. Still heavily bruised, it too was beginning to look more normal, despite the livid weal under his jaw, and I thought there was something odd about his expression. I could see physical pain in his eyes, helplessness, and frustration at his immediate inability to tell Jamie what he wanted to know, but I thought there was something else there, too. Anger, certainly, but something like bafflement, as well.

"Do you know any William MacKenzies?" I asked Jamie, who was tapping his fingers lightly on the table as he thought.

"Aye, four or five," he replied, brows still knotted in concentration. "In Scotland. But none here, and none that—"

Roger's hand lifted abruptly at the word "Scotland," and Jamie stopped, fixed on Roger's face like a pointing bird dog.

"Scotland," he said. "Something about Scotland? The man is a new immigrant?"

Roger shook his head violently, then stopped abruptly, grimacing in pain. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, then opened them, and waved urgently at the bits of charcoal I still held in my hand.

It took several tries, and at the end of it Roger lay back exhausted on the pillow, the neck of his nightshirt damp with sweat and spotted with blood from his throat. The result of his effort was smeared and straggling, but I could read the word clearly.

Dougal, it said. Jamie's look of interest sharpened into something like wariness.

"Dougal," he repeated carefully. He knew several Dougals as well; a few of them resident in North Carolina. "Dougal Chisholm? Dougal O'Neill?"

Roger shook his head and the tube in his throat wheezed with his exhalation. He lifted his hand and pointed emphatically at Jamie, the splinted fingers jabbing. Getting only a blank look in response, he fumbled for the bit of charcoal again, but it rolled off the sketch-box and shattered on the floor.

His fingers were smeared with charcoal dust. Grimacing, he pressed the tip of his ring finger against the page, and by dint of using all the fingers in turn, produced a faint and ghostly scrawl that sent a small electric shock shooting up from the base of my spine.

Geilie, it said.

Jamie stared at the name for a moment. Then I saw a small shiver move over him, and he crossed himself.

"A Dhia," he said softly, and looked at me. Awareness thickened between us; Roger saw it and fell back on his pillow, exhaling loudly through his breathing-tube.

"Dougal's son by Geillis Duncan," Jamie said, turning to Roger with incredulity writ large on his face. "He was named William, I think. Ye mean it? Ye're sure of it?"

A brief nod, and Roger's eyes closed. Then they opened again; one splinted finger rose wavering, and pointed to his own eye—a deep, clear green, the color of moss. He was white as the linen he lay on, and his charcoal-smeared fingers were trembling. His mouth was twitching; he wanted badly to talk, to explain—but further explanations were going to have to wait, for a little while, at least.

His hand dropped, and his eyes closed again.

The revelation of William Buccleigh MacKenzie's identity didn't alter Jamie's urgent desire to find the man, but it did change his intention of murdering him immediately, once found. On the whole, I was grateful for small favors.

Brianna, summoned from her painting to consult, arrived in my room in her smock, smelling strongly of turpentine and linseed oil, with a smear of cobalt blue on one earlobe.

"Yes," she said, bewildered by Jamie's abrupt questions. "I've heard of him. William Buccleigh MacKenzie. The changeling."

"The what?" Jamie's brows shot up toward his hairline.

"That's what I called him," I said. "When I saw Roger's family tree, and realized who William Buccleigh MacKenzie must be. Dougal gave the child to William and Sarah MacKenzie, remember? And they gave him the name of the child they'd lost two months before."

"Roger mentioned that he'd seen William MacKenzie and his wife, on board the *Gloriana*, when he sailed from Scotland to North Carolina," Bree put in. "But he said he didn't realize who the man was until later, and didn't have a chance to talk to him. So he is here—William, I mean—but why on earth would he try to kill Roger—and why that way?" She shuddered briefly, though the room was very warm. It was early summer, and even with the windows open, the air was hot and liquid with humidity.

"He's the witch's get," Jamie said shortly, as though that was sufficient answer—as perhaps it was.

"They thought I was a witch, too," I reminded him, a little tartly. That got me a sideways blue glance, and a curve of the mouth.

"So they did," he said. He cleared his throat, and wiped a sleeve across his sweating brow. "Aye, well. I suppose we must just wait and find out. And having a name helps. I shall send to Duncan and Farquard; have them put out word." He drew a deep breath of exasperation, and blew it out again.

"What am I to do when I find him, though? Witch-son or no, he's my own blood; I canna kill him. Not after Dougal—" He caught himself in time, and coughed. "I mean, he's Dougal's son. He's my own cousin, for God's sake."

I knew what he really meant. Four people knew what had happened in that attic room at Culloden House, the day before that distant battle. One of those was dead, the other disappeared and almost certainly dead too, in the tumult of the Rising. Only I was left as the witness to Dougal's blood and the hand that had spilled it. No matter what crime William Buccleigh MacKenzie had committed, Jamie would not kill him, for his father's sake.

"You were going to kill him? Before you found out who he was?" Bree didn't look shocked at the thought. She had a stained paint-rag in her hands, and was twisting it slowly.

Jamie turned to look at her.

"Roger Mac is your man, the son of my house," he said, very seriously. "Of course I would avenge him."

Brianna flicked a glance at me, then looked away. She looked thoughtful, with a certain intentness that gave me a slight chill to see.

"Good," she said, very softly. "When you find William Buccleigh MacKenzie, I want to know about it." She folded up the rag, thrust it into the pocket of her smock, and went back to her work.

Brianna scraped a tiny blob of viridian onto the edge of her palette, and feathered a touch of it into the big smear of pale gray she had created. She hesitated a moment, tilting the palette back and forth in the light from the window to judge the color, then added the faintest dab of cobalt to the other side of the smear, producing a range of subtle tones that ran from blue-gray to green-gray, all so faint as scarcely to be distinguishable from white by the uneducated eye.

She took one of the short, thick brushes, and worked the gray tones along the curve of the jaw on her canvas with tiny overlapping strokes. Yes, that was just about right; pale as fired porcelain, but with a vivid shadow under it—something both delicate and earthy.

She painted with a deep absorption that shut out her surroundings, engrossed in an artist's double vision, comparing the evolving image on the canvas with the one so immutably etched in her memory. It wasn't that she had never seen a dead person before. Her father—Frank—had had an open-casket funeral, and she had been to the obsequies of older family friends in her own time, as well. But the colors of the embalmer's art were crude, almost coarse by comparison with those of a fresh corpse. She had been staggered by the contrast.

It was the blood, she thought, taking a fine two-haired brush to add a dot of pure viridian in the deep curve of the eye socket. Blood and bone—but death didn't alter the curves of the bones, nor the shadows they cast. Blood, though, colored those shadows. In life, you got the blues and reds and pinks and lavenders of moving blood beneath the skin; in death, the blood stilled and pooled and darkened … clay-blue, violet, indigo, purple-brown … and something new: that delicate, transient green, barely there, that her artist's mind classified with brutal clarity as "early rot."

Unfamiliar voices came from the hall, and she looked up, wary. Phoebe Sherston was fond of bringing in visitors to admire the painting in progress. Normally, Brianna didn't mind being watched, or talking about what she was doing, but this was a tricky job, and one with limited time; she couldn't work with such subtle colors save for a short period just before sunset, when the light was clear but diffuse.

The voices passed on to the parlor, though, and she relaxed, taking up the thicker brush again.

She resummoned the vision in her mind; the dead man they had laid under a tree at Alamance, near her mother's makeshift field hospital. She had expected to be shocked by battle-wounds and death—and was instead shocked by her own fascination. She had seen terrible things, but it wasn't like attending at her mother's normal surgeries, where there was time to empathize with the patients, to take note of all the small indignities and nastinesses of weak flesh. Things happened too fast on a battlefield; there was too much to be done for squeamishness to take hold.

And in spite of the haste and urgency, each time she had passed near that tree, she had paused for an instant. Bent to turn back the blanket over the corpse and look at the man's face; appalled at her own fascination but making no effort to resist it—committing to memory the amazing, inexorable change of color and shadow, the stiffening of muscle and shifting of shape, as skin settled and clung to bone, and the processes of death and decay began to work their awful magic.

She hadn't thought to ask the dead man's name. Was that unfeeling? she wondered. Probably; the fact was that all her feelings had been otherwise engaged at the time—and still were. Still, she closed her eyes for a moment and said a quick prayer for the repose of the soul of her unknown sitter.

She opened her eyes to see that the light was fading. She scraped the palette and began to clean her brushes and hands, returning slowly and reluctantly to the world outside her work.

Jem would have been fed his supper and bathed already, but he refused to go to bed without being nursed and rocked to sleep. Her breasts tingled slightly at the thought; they were pleasantly full, though they seldom became excruciatingly engorged since he had taken to eating solid food and thus decreased his voracious demands on her flesh.

She'd nurse Jem and put him down, and then go have her own belated supper in the kitchen. She had not eaten with the others, wanting to take advantage of the evening light, and her stomach was growling softly, as the lingering smells of food in the air replaced the astringent scents of turps and linseed oil.

And then … then she would go upstairs to Roger. Her lips tightened at the thought; she realized it, and forced her mouth to relax, blowing air out so that her lips vibrated with a flatulent noise like a motorboat.

At this unfortunate moment, Phoebe Sherston's capped head popped through the door. She blinked slightly, but had sufficiently good manners to pretend that she hadn't seen anything.

"Oh, my dear, there you are! Do come into the parlor for a moment, won't you? Mr. and Mrs. Wilbur are *so* eager to make your acquaintance."

"Oh—well, yes, of course," Brianna said, with what graciousness she could summon. She gestured at her paint-stained smock. "Let me just go and change—"

Mrs. Sherston waved away the smock, obviously wanting to show off her tame artist in costume.

"No, no, don't trouble about that. We are quite simple this evening. No one will mind."

Brianna moved reluctantly toward the drawing room.

"All right. Only for a minute, though; I need to put Jem to bed."

Mrs. Sherston's rosebud mouth primmed slightly at that; she saw no reason why her slaves could not take care of the child altogether—but she had heard Brianna's opinions on the subject before, and was wise enough not to press the issue.

Brianna's parents were in the parlor with the Wilburs, who turned out to be a nice, elderly couple—what her mother would call a Darby and Joan. They fussed appropriately over her appearance, insisted politely on seeing the portrait, expressed profound admiration for both subject and painter—though blinking slightly at the former—and generally behaved with such kindness that she felt herself relaxing.

She was just on the verge of making her excuses, when Mr. Wilbur took advantage of a lull in the conversation to turn to her, smiling benevolently.

"I understand that congratulations upon your good fortune are in order, Mrs. MacKenzie."

"Oh? Ah … thank you," she said, uncertain what she was being congratulated for. She glanced at her mother for some clue; Claire grimaced slightly, and glanced at Jamie, who coughed.

"Governor Tryon has granted your husband five thousand acres of land, in the back-country," he said. His voice was even, almost colorless.

"He has?" She felt momentarily bewildered. "What—why?"

There was a brief stir of embarrassment among the party, with small throat-clearings and marital glances between the Sherstons and the Wilburs.

"Compensation," her mother said tersely, darting a marital glance of her own at Jamie.

Brianna understood then; no one would be so uncouth as to mention Roger's accidental hanging openly, but it was much too sensational a story not to have made the rounds of Hillsborough society. She realized suddenly that Mrs. Sherston's invitation to her parents and Roger had perhaps not been motivated purely by kindness, either. The notoriety of having the hanged man as house-guest would focus the attention of Hillsborough on the Sherstons in a most gratifying way—better, even, than having an unconventional portrait painted.

"I do hope that your husband is much improved, my dear?" Mrs. Wilbur tactfully bridged the conversational gap. "We were so sorry to hear of his injury."

Injury. That was as circumspect a description of the situation as could well be imagined.

"Yes, he's much better, thank you," she said, smiling as briefly as politeness allowed before turning back to her father.

"Does Roger know about this? The land grant?"

He glanced at her, then away, clearing his throat.

"No. I thought perhaps ye might wish to tell him of it yourself."

Her first response was gratitude; she would have something to say to Roger. It was an awkward business, talking to someone who couldn't talk back. She stored up conversational fodder during the day; tiny thoughts or events that she could turn into stories, to tell him when she saw him. Her stock of stories ran out all too soon, though, and left her sitting by his bed, groping for inanities.

Her second response was a feeling of annoyance. Why had her father not told her privately, rather than exposing her family's business to total strangers? Then she caught the subtle interplay of glances between her parents, and realized that her mother had just asked him that, silently—and he had replied, with the briefest flick of the eyes toward Mr. Wilbur, then toward Mrs. Sherston, before the long auburn lashes swept down to hide his gaze.

Better to speak the truth before a reputable witness, his expression said*, than to let gossip spread of its own accord*.

She had no great regard for her own reputation—"notorious" did not begin to encompass it—but she had grasped enough of the social realities to realize that real damage could be done to her father by scandal. If a false report were to get around, for instance, that Roger had really been a Regulation ring-leader, then Jamie's own loyalties would be suspect.

She had begun to realize, listening to the talk in the Sherstons' parlor over the last few weeks, that the Colony was a vast spiderweb. There were innumerable strands of commerce along which a few large spiders—and a number of smaller ones—made their delicate way, always listening for the faint hum of distress made by a fly that had blundered in, always testing for a thinning strand, a broken link.

The smaller entities glided warily along the margins of the web, with an eye out always for the movements of the bigger ones—for spiders were cannibals—and so, she thought, were ambitious men.

Her father's position was prominent—but by no means so secure as to resist the undermining effects of gossip and suspicion. She and Roger had talked about it before, privately, speculating; the fracture-lines were already there, plain enough to someone who knew what was coming; the strains and tensions that would deepen into sudden chasm—one deep enough to sunder the colonies from England.

Let the strain grow too great, too quickly, let the strands between Fraser's Ridge and the rest of the Colony fray too far … and they might snap, wrapping sticky ends in a thick cocoon round her family and leaving them suspended by a thread—alone, and prey to those who would suck their blood.

You are *morbid tonight*, she thought to herself, sourly amused at her mind's choice of imagery. She supposed that painting death would do that.

Neither the Wilburs nor the Sherstons appeared to have noticed her mood; her mother had, and gave her a long, thoughtful look—but said nothing. She exchanged a few more pleasantries, then excused herself to the company.

Her mood was not lightened by the discovery that Jemmy had grown tired of waiting for her to come, and fallen asleep, tear-tracks on his cheeks. She knelt by his crib for a minute, one hand laid lightly on his back, hoping that he might sense her nearness and wake up. His small back rose and fell in the warm rhythm of utter peace, but he didn't stir. Perspiration glimmered wetly in the creases of his neck.

The heat of the day rose upward, and the second floor of the house was always stifling by evening. The window, of course, was firmly closed, lest the dangerous night airs get in and do the baby harm. Mrs. Sherston had no children of her own, but she knew what precautions must be taken.

In the mountains, Brianna would not have hesitated to open the window. In a heavily-populated town like Hillsborough, full of strangers from the coast, and rife with stagnant horse troughs and dank wells …

Weighing the relative danger of malaria-bearing mosquitoes versus that of suffocation, Brianna finally settled for pulling the light quilt off her son and gently removing his gown, leaving him comfortably sprawled on the sheet in nothing but a clout, his soft skin damp and rosy in the dim light.

Sighing, she put out the candle and left, leaving the door ajar so that she could hear if he woke. It was nearly dark now; light welled up through the bannisters from the floor below, but the upstairs hall lay in deep shadow. Mrs. Sherston's gilded tables and the portraits of Mr. Sherston's ancestors were no more than spectral shapes in the darkness.

There was a light in Roger's room; the door was shut, but a fan of soft candle-glow spread across the polished boards beneath it, just catching the edge of the blue hall-runner. She moved toward the door, thoughts of food subsumed in a greater hunger for touch. Her breasts had begun to ache.

A slave was nodding in the corner, hands slack on the knitting that had fallen to her lap. She jerked, startled, as the door opened, and blinked guiltily at Brianna.

Bree looked at once toward the bed, but it was all right; she could hear the hiss and sigh of his breath. She frowned a little at the woman, but made a small gesture of dismissal. The woman clumsily gathered up her half-finished stocking and blundered out, avoiding Brianna's eye.

Roger lay on his back, eyes closed, a sheet drawn tidily over the sharp angles of his body. *He's so thin,* she thought, *how did he get so thin, so fast*? He could swallow no more than a few spoonsful of soup and Claire's penicillin broth, but surely two or three days was not enough to leave his bones showing so prominently?

Then she realized that he had likely been thin already, from the stress of campaigning—both her parents were thinner than usual. The prominence of his bones had been disguised by the dreadful swelling of his features; now that that had subsided, his cheekbones were high and gaunt, the hard, graceful line of his jaw once more visible, stark above the white linen of the bandage wrapped around his lacerated throat.

She realized that she was staring at his jaw, appraising the color of the fading bruises. The yellow-green of a healing bruise was different than the delicate gray-green of new death; just as sickly, but withal, a color of life. She took a deep breath, suddenly aware that the window in this room was closed, too, and sweat was trickling down the small of her back, seeping unpleasantly into the crack of her buttocks.

The sound of the sash rising wakened him—he turned his head on the pillow, and smiled faintly when he saw her.

"How are you?" She spoke in a hushed voice, as though in a church. Her own voice always seemed too loud, talking to herself.

He lifted one shoulder in a slight shrug, but mouthed a silent "Okay." He looked wilted and damp, the dark hair at his temples sweat-soaked.

"It's awfully hot, isn't it?" She waved at the window, where warm air—but moving air—came in. He nodded, poking at the collar of his shirt with one bandaged hand. She took the hint and untied it, spreading the slit open as far as it would go, to expose his chest to the breeze.

His nipples were small and neat, the aureoles pinkish-brown under the dark curly hairs. The sight reminded her of her own milk-full breasts, and she had a moment's insane urge to lift his head, pull down her shift, and put his mouth to her breast. She had an instant's vivid recall of the moment when he had done that, under the willows at River Run, and a warm rush spread through her, tingling from breasts to womb. Blood rising in her cheeks, she turned to look over the nourishment available on the bedside table.

There was cold meat-broth—spiked with penicillin—in a covered bowl, and a flask of honey-sweetened tea alongside. She took up the spoon and raised a brow inquiringly, her hand hovering over the table.

He grimaced slightly, but nodded at the broth. She picked up the cup and sat down on the stool beside him.

"Open up the stable-door," she said cheerily, circling the spoon toward his mouth as though he were Jem. "Heeeeere comes the horsie!" He rolled his eyes upward in exasperation.

"When I was little," she said, ignoring his scowl, "my parents said things like, 'Here comes the tugboat, open the drawbridge!' 'Open the garage, here comes the car!'—but I can't use those with Jem. Did your mother do cars and airplanes?"

His lips twisted, but finally settled on a reluctant smile. He shook his head and lifted one hand, pointing toward the ceiling. She turned to see a dark spot on the plaster—looking closer, she could see that it was a vagrant bee, blundered in from the garden during the day, somnolent now in the shadows.

"Yeah? Okay, here comes the honeybee," she said, more softly, slipping the spoon into his mouth. "Bzzz, bzzz, bzzz."

She couldn't keep up the attempted air of playfulness, but the atmosphere had relaxed a little. She talked about Jem, who had a new favorite word—"Wagga"—but no one yet had figured out what he meant by it.

"I thought maybe it meant 'cat,' but he calls the cat 'Mow-mow.' " She brushed a drop of sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand, then dipped the spoon again.

"Mrs. Sherston says he should be walking by now," she said, eyes fixed on his mouth. "Her sister's children were both walking at a year old, naturally! I asked Mama, though; she says he's fine. She says kids walk when they're ready, and it can be any time between ten months and as much as eighteen, but fifteen months is about the usual."

She had to watch his mouth in order to guide the spoon, but was aware of his eyes, watching her. She wanted to look into them, but was halfway afraid of what she might see in those dark green depths; would it be the Roger she knew, or the silent stranger—the hanged man?

"Oh—I almost forgot." She interrupted herself in the middle of an account of the Wilburs. She hadn't forgotten, but hadn't wanted to blurt the news out right away. "Da spoke to the Governor this afternoon. He—the Governor, I mean—is giving you a land grant. Five thousand acres." Even as she said it, she realized the absurdity of it. Five thousand acres of wilderness, in exchange for a life almost destroyed. *Cancel the "almost,"* she thought suddenly, looking at Roger.

He frowned at her in what looked like puzzlement, then shook his head and lay back on the pillow, eyes closing. He lifted his hands and let them fall, as though this was simply too much to be asked to contemplate. Maybe it was.

She stood watching him in silence, but he didn't open his eyes. There were deep creases where his brows drew together.

Moved by the need to touch him, to bridge the barrier of silence, she traced the shadow of the bruise that lay over his cheekbone, her fingers drifting, barely touching his skin.

She could see the oddly blurred edges of the bruise, could almost see the dark clotted blood beneath the skin, where the capillaries had ruptured. It was beginning to yellow; her mother had told her that the body's leukocytes would come to the site of an injury, where they gradually broke down the injured cells, thriftily recycling the spilled blood; the changing colors were the result of this cellular housekeeping.

His eyes opened, fixed on her face, his own expression impassive. She knew she looked worried, and tried to smile.

"You don't look dead," she said. That broke the impassive facade; his eyebrows twitched upward, and a faint gleam of humor came into his eyes.

"Roger—" At a loss for words, she moved impulsively toward him. He stiffened slightly, hunching instinctively to protect the fragile tube in his throat, but she put her arms around his shoulders, careful, but needing desperately to feel the substance of his flesh.

"I love you," she whispered, and her hand tightened on the muscle of his arm, urging him to believe it.

She kissed him. His lips were warm and dry, familiar—and yet a feeling of shock ran through her. No air moved against her cheek, no warm breath touched her from his nose or mouth. It was like kissing a mask. Air, damp from the secret depths of his lungs, hissed cool from the amber tube against her neck, like the exhalation from a cave. Gooseflesh ran down her arms and she stepped back, hoping that neither shock nor revulsion showed on her face.

His eyes were closed, squeezed tight shut. The muscle of his jaw bulged; she saw the shift of the shadow there.

"You … rest," she managed, her voice shaky. "I'll—I'll see you in the morning."

She made her way downstairs, barely noticing that the candlestick in the hall was lit now, or that the waiting slave slid silently from the shadows back into the room.

Her hunger had come back, but she didn't go downstairs in search of food. She had to do something about the unused milk, first. She turned toward her parents' room, feeling a faint draft move through the stifling shadows. In spite of the warm, muggy air, her fingers felt cold, as though turpentine was still evaporating from her skin.

Last night I dreamed about my friend Deborah. She used to make money doing Tarot readings in the Student Union; she'd always offer to do one for me, for free, but I wouldn't let her.

Sister Marie Romaine told us in the fifth grade that Catholics aren't allowed to do divination—we weren't to touch Ouija boards or Tarot cards or crystal balls, because things like that are seductions of the D-E-V-I-L—she always spelled it out like that, she'd never say the word.

I'm not sure where the Devil came into it, but somehow I couldn't bring myself to let Deb do readings for me. She was, last night, though, in my dream.

I used to watch her do it for other people; the Tarot cards fascinated me—maybe just because they seemed forbidden. But the names were so cool—the Major Arcana, the Minor Arcana; Knight of Pentacles, Page of Cups, Queen of Wands, King of Swords. The Empress, the Magician. And the Hanged Man.

Well, what else would I dream about? I mean, this was not a subtle dream, no doubt about it. There it was, right in the middle of the spread of cards, and Deb was telling me about it.

"A man is suspended by one foot from a pole laid across two trees. His arms, folded behind his back, together with his head, form a triangle with the point downward; his legs form a cross. To an extent, the Hanged Man is still earthbound, for his foot is attached to the pole."

I could see the man on the card, suspended permanently halfway between heaven and earth. That card always looked odd to me—the man didn't seem to be at all concerned, in spite of being upside-down and blind-folded.

Deb kept scooping up the cards and laying them out again, and that one kept coming up in every spread.

"The Hanged Man represents the necessary process of surrender and sacrifice," she said. "This card has profound significance," she said, and she looked at me and tapped her finger on it. "But much of it is veiled; you have to figure out the meaning for yourself. Self-surrender leads to transformation of the personality, but the person has to accomplish his own regeneration."

Transformation of the personality. That's what I'm afraid of, all right. I liked Roger's personality just fine the way it was!

Well … rats. I don't know how much the D-E-V-I-L has to do with it, but I am sure that trying to look too far into the future is a mistake. At least right now.

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THE SOUNDS OF SILENCE

It was ten days before Penelope Sherston's portrait was completed to her satisfaction. By that point, both Isaiah Morton and Roger had recovered sufficiently for travel. Given the imminence of Morton's offspring and the danger to him in coming anywhere near either Granite Falls or Brownsville, Jamie had arranged for him and Alicia to lodge with the brewmaster of Mr. Sherston's brewery; Isaiah would undertake employment as a wagoner for the brewery, as soon as his strength permitted.

"I canna imagine why," Jamie had said to me privately, "but I've grown a bit fond of the immoral wee loon. I shouldna like to see him murdered in cold blood."

Isaiah's spirits had revived spectacularly upon the arrival of Alicia, and within a week, he had made his way downstairs, to sit watching Alicia like a devoted dog as she worked in the kitchen—and to pause on his way back to bed to offer comments on the progress of Mrs. Sherston's portrait.

"Don't it look just like her?" he'd said admiringly, standing in his nightshirt in the door of the drawing-room where the sitting was in progress. "Why, if you was to see that picture, you'd know just who it was."

Given the fact that Mrs. Sherston had chosen to be painted as Salome, I was not positive that this would be considered a compliment, but she flushed prettily and thanked him, evidently recognizing the sincerity in his tone.

Bree *had* done a marvelous job, contriving to portray Mrs. Sherston both realistically and flatteringly, but without overt irony

—difficult as that must have been. The only point where she had given in to temptation was in a minor detail; the severed head of John the Baptist bore a striking resemblance to Governor Tryon's saturnine features, but I doubted that anyone would notice, what with all the blood.

We were ready to go home, and the house was filled with a spirit of restless excitement and relief—except for Roger.

Roger was indisputably better, in purely physical terms. His hands were mobile again, bar the broken fingers, and most of the bruising over his face and body had faded. Best of all, the swelling in his throat had subsided enough that he could move air through his nose and mouth again. I was able to remove the tube from his throat, and stitch up the incision—a small but painful operation that he had borne with body stiff and eyes wide open, staring up at the ceiling while I worked.

In mental terms, I was not so sure of his recovery. After stitching his throat, I had helped him sit up, wiped his face, and given him a little water mixed with brandy as a restorative. I had watched carefully as he swallowed, then put my fingers lightly on his throat, felt carefully, and asked him to swallow again. I closed my eyes, feeling the movement of his larynx, the rings of his trachea as he swallowed, assessing as best I could the degree of damage.

At last I opened my eyes, to find his eyes two inches from my own and still wide open, the question in them cold and stark as glacier ice.

"I don't know," I said at last, my own voice no more than a whisper. My fingers still rested on his throat; I could feel the thrum of blood through the carotid under my palm, his life flowing just below the skin. But the angular hardness of his larynx lay still under my fingers, queerly misshapen; I felt no pulsing there, no vibration of air across the vocal cords.

"I don't know," I said again, and drew my fingers slowly away. "Do you—want to try now?"

He had shaken his head then, and risen from the bed, going to the window, facing away from me. His arms were braced against the frame as he looked down into the street, and a faint, uneasy memory stirred in my mind.

It had been a moonlit night, then, not broad day—in Paris. I had waked from sleep to see Jamie standing naked in the window frame, the scars on his back pale silver, arms braced and body gleaming with cold sweat. Roger was sweating, too, from the heat; the linen of his shirt stuck to his body—and the lines of his body were just the same; the look of a man braced to meet fear; one who chose to face his demons alone.

I could hear voices in the street below; Jamie, coming back from the camp, with Jemmy held before him on his saddle. He had formed the habit of taking Jem with him on his daily errands, so that Bree could work without distraction. In consequence, Jemmy had learned four new words—only two of them obscene—and Jamie's good coat sported jam stains and smelled like a soiled diaper, but both of them seemed generally pleased with the arrangement.

Bree's voice floated up from below, laughing as she went out to retrieve her son. Roger stood as though he'd been carved out of wood. He couldn't call to them, but he might have knocked on the window frame, or made some other noise, waved to them. But he didn't move.

After a moment, I rose quietly and left the room, feeling a lump in my throat, hard and unswallowable.

When Bree had carried Jemmy off for his bath, Jamie told me that Tryon had released most of the men captured during the battle. "Hugh Fowles among them." He put aside his coat and loosened the collar of his shirt, raising his face to the slight breeze from the window. "I spoke for him—and Tryon listened."

"As well he might," I said, with an edge to my voice. He glanced at me, and made a noise deep in his throat. It reminded me of Roger, whose larynx was no longer capable of that peculiarly Scottish form of expression.

I must have looked distressed at the thought, for Jamie raised his brows and touched my arm. It was too hot to embrace, but I pressed my cheek against his shoulder briefly, taking comfort from the solidness of his body under the thin, damp linen.

"I sewed up Roger's throat," I said. "He can breathe—but I don't know whether he'll ever be able to talk again." *Let alone sing.* The unvoiced thought floated in the muggy air.

Jamie made another noise, this one deep and angry.

"I spoke to Tryon regarding his promise to Roger Mac, as well. He's given me the document of the land grant—five thousand acres, adjoining my own. His last official act as Governor—almost."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I said he's released most of the prisoners?" He moved away, restless. "All but twelve. He has a dozen men still gaoled, outlawed ringleaders of the Regulation. Or so he says." The irony in his voice was as thick as the dusty air. "He'll hold them for trial in a month, on charges of rebellion."

"And if they're found guilty—"

"At least they'll be able to speak before they hang."

He had stopped in front of the portrait, frowning, though I wasn't sure whether he was actually seeing it or not.

"I willna stay to see it. I told Tryon that we must go, to tend our crops and farms. He has released the militia company from service, on those grounds."

I felt a lightening of the weight on my heart. It would be cool in the mountains, the air green and fresh. It was a good place to heal.

"When will we go?"

"Tomorrow." He *had* noticed the portrait; he nodded at the gape-jawed head on the platter in grim approval. "There's only the one thing to stay for, and I think there's little point to it, now."

"What's that?"

"Dougal's son," he said, turning away from the portrait. "I have been seeking William Buccleigh MacKenzie from one end of the county to the other for the past ten days. I found some who kent him, but none who has seen him since Alamance. Some said perhaps he had left the Colony altogether. A good many of the Regulators have fled; Husband's gone—taken his family to Maryland, they say.

But as for William MacKenzie, the man's disappeared like a snake down a rat-hole; him, and his family with him."

Last night I dreamed that we were lying under a big rowan tree, Roger and I. It was a beautiful summer day, and we were having one of those conversations we used to have all the time, about things we missed. Only the things we were talking about were there on the grass between us.

I said I'd sell my soul for a Hershey bar with almonds, and there it was. I slipped the outer wrapper off, and I could smell the chocolate. I unfolded the white paper wrapper inside and started eating the chocolate, but it was the paper we were talking about, then—the wrapper.

Roger picked it up and said what he missed most was loo-paper; this was too slick to wipe your arse with. I laughed and said there wasn't anything complicated about toilet paper—people could make it now, if they wanted to. There was a roll of toilet paper on the ground; I pointed at it, and a big bumblebee flew down and grabbed the end of it and flew off, unfurling the toilet paper in its wake. It flew in and out, weaving it through the branches overhead.

Then Roger said it was blasphemy to think about wiping yourself with paper—it is, here. Mama writes in tiny letters when she does her case-notes, and when Da writes to Scotland he writes on both sides of the page, and then he turns it sideways and writes across the lines, so it looks like lattice-work.

Then I could see Da, sitting on the ground, writing a letter to Aunt Jenny on the toilet paper, and it was getting longer and longer and the bee was carrying it up into the air, flying off toward Scotland with it.

I use more paper than anyone. Aunt Jocasta gave me some of her old sketchbooks to use, and a whole quire of watercolor paper—but I feel guilty when I use them, because I know how expensive it is. I have to draw, though. A nice thing about doing this portrait for Mrs.

Sherston—since I'm earning money, I feel like I can use a little paper.

Then the dream changed and I was drawing pictures of Jemmy, with a #2B yellow pencil. It said "Ticonderoga" on it in black letters, like the ones we used to use in school. I was drawing on toilet paper, though, and the pencil kept ripping through it, and I was so frustrated that I wadded up a bunch in my hand.

Then it went into one of those boring, uncomfortable dreams where you're wandering around looking for a place to go to the bathroom and can't find one—and finally you wake up enough to realize that you do have to go to the bathroom.

I can't decide whether I'd rather have the Hershey bar, the toilet paper, or the pencil. I think the pencil. I could smell the freshly-sharpened wood on the point, and feel it between my fingers, and my teeth. I used to chew my pencils, when I was little. I still remember what it felt like to bite down hard and feel the paint and wood give, just a little, and munch my way up and down the length of the pencil, until it looked like a beaver had been gnawing on it.

I was thinking about that, this afternoon. It made me feel sad that Jem won't have a new yellow pencil, or a lunchbox with Batman on it, when he goes to school—if he ever does go to school.

Roger's hands are still too bad to hold a pen.

And now I know that I don't want pencils or chocolate, or even toilet paper. I want Roger to talk to me again.

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SPEAK MY NAME

Our journey back to Fraser's Ridge was much quicker than the one to Alamance, for all that the return was uphill. It was late May, and the cornstalks stood already high and green in the fields around Hillsborough, shedding golden pollen on the wind. The grain would just be up, in the mountains, and the newborn stock appearing, calves and foals and lambs needing protection from wolf and fox and bear. The militia company had disbanded at once upon receiving the Governor's dismissal, its members scattering in haste to return to their homesteads and fields.

We were in consequence a much smaller party going back; only two wagons. A few of the men who lived near the Ridge had chosen to travel with us, as had the two Findlay boys, since we would pass by their mother's homestead on our way.

I cast a covert glance at the Findlays, who were helping to unload the wagon and set up our nightly camp. Nice boys, though quiet. They were respectful of—and rather awed by—Jamie, but had developed a peculiar sense of allegiance to Roger over the course of the short-lived campaign, and this odd fidelity had continued, even after the militia's disbanding.

They had come, the two of them, to see him in Hillsborough, wriggling their bare toes in embarrassment on Phoebe Sherston's Turkish carpets. Scarlet-faced and nearly speechless themselves, they had presented Roger with three early apples, lopsided green nubbins obviously stolen from someone's orchard on the way.

He had smiled broadly at them in thanks, picked up one of the apples, and taken a heroic bite from it before I could stop him. He hadn't swallowed anything but soup for a week, and nearly choked to death. Still, he got it down, strangling and gasping, and all three of them had sat there grinning wordlessly at each other, tears standing in their eyes.

The Findlays were usually to be found somewhere near Roger as we traveled, always watchful, leaping to help with anything he couldn't quite manage with his injured hands. Jamie had told me about their uncle, Iain Mhor; plainly they had a good deal of experience in anticipating unspoken needs.

Young and strong, Roger had healed quickly, and the fractures weren't bad ones—but two weeks was not a long time for broken bones to knit. I would have preferred to keep him bandaged for another week, but he was all too plainly chafing at the restraint. I had reluctantly taken the splints off his fingers the day before, warning him to take things easy.

"Don't you *dare*," I said now, seizing his arm as he reached into the wagon for one of the heavy rucksacks of supplies. He looked down at me, one eyebrow raised, then shrugged good-naturedly and stood back, letting Hugh Findlay pull out the sack and carry it away. Roger pointed at the ring of fire-stones Iain Findlay was assembling, then at the woods nearby. Could he gather firewood?

"Certainly not," I said firmly. He pantomimed drinking, and raised his brows. Fetch water?

"No," I said. "All it needs is for a bucket to slip, and …"

I looked around, trying to think of something he could safely do, but all camp-making chores involved rough work. At the same time, I knew how galling he found it to stand by, feeling useless. He was bloody tired of being treated like an invalid, and I could see the gleam of incipient rebellion in his eye. One more "no" and he would probably try to pick up the wagon, just to spite me.

"Can he write, Sassenach?" Jamie had paused by the wagon, and noticed the impasse in progress.

"Write? Write what?" I asked in surprise, but he was already reaching past me, digging out the battered portable writing-desk he carried when traveling.

“Love letters?” Jamie suggested, grinning down at me. “Or sonnets, maybe?” He tossed the lap-desk to Roger, who caught it neatly in his arms, even as I yelped in protest. “But perhaps before ye compose an epic in William Tryon’s honor, Roger Mac, ye might oblige me wi’ the tale of how our mutual kinsman came to try and murder ye, aye?”

Roger stood stock-still for a moment, clutching the desk, but then gave Jamie a lopsided smile, and nodded slowly.

He had begun while the camp was set up, paused to eat supper, and then taken up the task again. It was tiresome work, and very slow; the fractures were mostly healed, but his hands were very stiff, sore, and awkward. He had dropped the quill a dozen times. It made my own finger-joints ache just to watch him.

“Ow! Will you *stop* that?” I looked up from scouring out a pan with a handful of rushes and sand, to find Brianna locked in mortal combat with her son, who was arched backward like a bow over her arm, kicking, squirming, and making the sort of nerve-wracking fuss that makes even devoted parents momentarily contemplate infanticide. I saw Roger’s shoulders draw up toward his ears at the racket, but he went doggedly on with his writing.

“What is the *matter* with you?” Bree demanded crossly. She knelt and wrestled Jemmy into a semi-sitting position, evidently trying to make him lie down so she could change his clout for the night.

The diaper in question was much in need of attention, being wet, grimy, and hanging halfway down the little boy’s legs. Jem, having slept most of the afternoon in the wagon, had wakened sun-dazed, cranky, and in no mood to be trifled with, let alone changed and put to bed.

“Perhaps he isn’t tired yet,” I suggested. “He’s eaten, though, hasn’t he?” This was a rhetorical question; Jemmy’s face was smeared with hasty pudding, and he had bits of eggy toast in his hair.

“Yes.” Bree ran a hand through her own hair, which was cleaner, but no less disheveled. Jem wasn’t the only cranky one in the MacKenzie family. “Maybe *he’s* not tired, but *I* am.” She was; she had walked beside the wagon most of the day, to spare the horses on the steepening slopes. So had I.

"Leave him here and go have a wash, why don't you?" I said, nobly suppressing a yawn. I picked up a large wooden spoon and waggled it alluringly toward Jem, who was oscillating backward and forward on his hands and knees, emitting horrible whining noises. Spotting the spoon, he stopped making the noise, but crouched in place, glaring suspiciously.

I added an empty tin cup to the lure, setting it on the ground near him. That was enough; he rolled onto his bottom with a squish, picked up the spoon with both hands and began trying to pound the cup into the dirt with it.

Bree cast me a look of profound gratitude, scrambled to her feet, and disappeared into the woods, heading down the slope to the small creek. A quick rinse in cold water, surrounded by dark forest, wasn't quite the sybaritic escape that a fragrant bubble-bath by candlelight might be—but "escape" was the important word here. A little solitude worked wonders for a mother, as I knew from experience. And if cleanliness was not quite next to godliness, having clean feet, face, and hands definitely improved one's outlook on the universe, particularly after a day of sweat, grime, and dirty diapers.

I examined my own hands critically; between horse-leading, fire-starting, cooking, and pot-scouring, my own outlook on the universe could stand a bit of improvement, too.

Still, water was not the only liquid capable of lifting one's spirits. Jamie reached over my shoulder, put a cup of something into my hands, and sat down beside me, his own cup in hand.

"Slàinte, mo nighean donn," he said softly, smiling at me as he lifted his cup in salute.

"Mmm." I closed my eyes, inhaling the fragrant fumes. "Is it proper to say *'Slàinte,'* if it isn't whisky you're drinking?" The liquid in the cup was wine—and a nice one, too, rough but with a good round flavor, redolent of sun and grape leaves.

"I canna see why not," Jamie said logically. "It's only to wish ye good health, after all."

"True, but I think 'Good Health' may be more a practical wish than a figurative one, at least with some whiskies—that you hope the person you're toasting survives the experience of drinking it, I mean."

He laughed, eyes creasing in amusement.

"I havena killed anyone wi' my distilling yet, Sassenach."

"I didn't mean yours," I assured him, pausing for another sip. "Oh, that's nice. I was thinking of those three militiamen from Colonel Ashe's regiment." The three in question had been found blind-drunk—in one case, literally blind—by a sentry, after having indulged in a bottle of so-called whisky, obtained from God knew where.

As Ashe's Company had no surgeon, and we were camped next to them, I had been summoned in the middle of the night to deal with the matter, as best I could. All three men had survived, but one had lost the sight in one eye and another plainly had minor brain-damage—though privately, I had my doubts as to how intelligent he could have been to start with.

Jamie shrugged. Drunkenness was a simple fact of life, and bad brewing was another.

"Thig a seo, a chuisle!" he called, seeing Jemmy, who had lost interest in spoon and cup, making off on hands and knees toward the coffeepot, which had been left to keep hot between the stones of the fire-ring. Jemmy ignored the summons, but was snatched away from danger by Tom Findlay, who snagged him neatly round the waist and delivered him, kicking, to Jamie.

"Sit," Jamie said firmly to him, and without waiting for a response, parked the child on the ground and handed him his ball of rags. Jemmy clutched this, looking craftily from his grandfather to the fire.

"Throw that in the fire, *a chuisle*, and I'll smack your bum," Jamie informed him pleasantly. Jemmy's brow contorted and his lower lip protruded, quivering dramatically. He didn't throw the ball into the fire, though.

"A chuisle?" I said, trying out the pronunciation. "That's a new one. What's it mean?"

"Oh." Jamie rubbed a finger across the bridge of his nose, considering. "It means 'my blood.' "

"I thought that was *mo fuil*."

"Aye, it is, but that's blood like what comes out when ye wound yourself. *A chuisle* is more like … 'O, thou in whose veins runs my very blood.' Ye only say it to a wee bairn, mostly—one ye're related to, of course."

"That's lovely." I set my empty wine-cup on the ground and leaned against Jamie's shoulder. I still felt tired, but the magic of the wine had smoothed the rough edges of exhaustion, leaving me pleasantly muzzy.

"Would you call Germain that, do you think, or Joan? Or is it meant very literally, *a chuisle*?"

"I should be more inclined to call Germain *un petit emmerdeur*," he said, with a faint snort of amusement. "But Joan—aye, I would call wee Joanie *a chuisle*. It's blood of the heart, ken, not only the body."

Jemmy had let his rag-ball fall to the ground and was staring in open-mouthed enchantment at the fireflies, which had begun to blink in the grass as darkness fell. With our stomachs full and cool rest at hand, everyone was beginning to feel the soothing effects of the gathering night.

The men were sprawled in the grassy dark under a sycamore tree, passing the wine bottle from hand to hand and exchanging talk in the easy, half-connected fashion of men who know each other well. The Findlay boys were on the wagon-track, that being the only really clear space, throwing something back and forth, missing half their catches as darkness fell, and exchanging genial shouted insults.

There was a loud rustling of bushes beyond the fire, and Brianna emerged, looking damp, but much more cheerful. She paused by Roger, a hand light on his back, and looked over his shoulder at what he was writing. He glanced up at her, then, with a shrug of resignation, withdrew the finished pages of his opus and handed them to her. She knelt down beside him and began to read, brushing back wet strands of hair and frowning to make out the letters by firelight.

A firefly landed on Jamie's shirt, glowing cool green in the shadowed folds of cloth. I moved a finger toward it, and it flew away, spiraling above the fire like a runaway spark.

"It was a good idea, making Roger write," I said, looking across the fire with approval. "I can't wait to find out what actually happened to him."

"Nor I," Jamie agreed. "Though wi' William Buccleigh vanished, what's happened to Roger Mac is maybe no so important as what *will* happen to him."

I didn't have to ask what he meant by that. More than anyone, he knew what it meant, to have a life kicked out from under one—and what strength was required to rebuild it. I reached for his right hand, and he let me take it. Under cover of darkness, I stroked his crippled fingers, tracing the thickened ridges of the scars.

"So it doesn't matter to you, to find out whether your cousin is a cold-blooded murderer or not?" I asked lightly, to cover the more serious conversation going on silently between our hands.

He made a small, gruff sound that might have been a laugh. His fingers curled over mine, smooth with callus, pressing in acknowledgment.

"He's a MacKenzie, Sassenach. A MacKenzie of Leoch."

"Hm." The Frasers were stubborn as rocks, I'd been told. And Jamie himself had described the MacKenzies of Leoch—*charming as larks in the field—and sly as foxes, with it.* That had certainly been true of his uncles, Colum and Dougal. I hadn't heard anything to indicate that his mother, Ellen, had shared that particular family characteristic—but then, Jamie had been only eight when she died. His aunt Jocasta? No one's fool, certainly, but with a good deal less scope for plotting and scheming than her brothers had had, I thought.

"You *what*?" Brianna's exclamation drew my attention back to the other side of the fire. She was looking at Roger, the pages in her hand, an expression of mingled amusement and dismay on her face. I couldn't see Roger's face; he was turned toward her. One hand rose in a shushing gesture, though, and he turned his head toward the tree where the men sat drinking, to be sure no one had heard her exclamation.

I caught a glimpse of firelight shining on the bones of his face, and then his expression changed in an instant, from wariness to horror. He lunged to his feet, mouth open.

"STOKH!" he roared.

It was a terrible cry, loud and harsh, but with a ghastly strangled quality to it, like a shout forced out around a fist shoved down his throat. It froze everyone in earshot—including Jemmy, who had abandoned the fireflies and stealthily returned to an investigation of the coffeepot. He stared up at his father, his hand six inches from the hot metal. Then his face crumpled, and he began to wail in fright.

Roger reached across the fire and snatched him up; the little boy screamed, kicking and squirming to get away from this terrifying stranger. Bree hastily took him, clutching him to her bosom and burying his face in her shoulder. Her own face had gone pale with shock.

Roger looked shocked, too. He put a hand to his throat, gingerly, as though unsure he was really touching his own flesh. The ridge of the rope-scar was still dark under his jaw; I could see it, even in the flicker of the firelight, along with the smaller, neater line of my own incision.

The initial shock of his shout had worn off, and the men came scrambling out from under the tree, the Findlays rushing in from the road, to gather round Roger, exclaiming in astonishment and congratulation. Roger nodded, submitting to having his hand shaken and his back pounded, all the while looking as though he would strongly prefer to be elsewhere.

"Say somethin' else," Hugh Findlay coaxed him.

"Yes, sir, you can do it," Iain joined in, round face beaming. "Say … say 'She sells sea shells, by the sea-shore'!"

This suggestion was howled down, to be replaced by a rain of other excited proposals. Roger was beginning to look rather desperate, his jaw set tight. Jamie and I had got to our feet; I could feel Jamie setting himself to intervene in some way.

Then Brianna pushed her way through the excited throng, with Jemmy perched on one hip, regarding the proceedings with intense distrust. She took Roger's hand with her free one, and smiled at him, the smile trembling only a little round the edges.

"Can you say my name?" she asked.

Roger's smile matched hers. I could hear the air rasp in his throat as he took a breath.

This time he spoke softly; very softly, but everyone held silence, leaning forward to listen. It was a ragged whisper, thick and painful, the first syllable punched hard to force it through his scarred vocal cords, the last of it barely audible. But,

"BRREEah … nah," he said, and she burst into tears.

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BLOOD MONEY

Fraser's Ridge
June, 1771

I sat in the visitor's chair in Jamie's study, companionably grating bloodroots while he wrestled with the quarterly accounts. Both were slow and tedious businesses, but we could share the light of a single candle and enjoy each other's company—and I found enjoyable distraction in listening to the highly inventive remarks he addressed to the paper under his quill.

"Egg-sucking son of a porcupine!" he muttered. "Look at this, Sassenach—the man's nay more than a common thief! Two shillings, threepence for two loaves of sugar and a brick of indigo!"

I clicked my tongue sympathetically, forbearing to note that two shillings seemed a modest enough price for substances produced in the West Indies, transported by ship to Charleston, and thence carried by wagon, pirogue, horseback, and foot another several hundred miles overland, to be finally brought to our door by an itinerant peddler who did not expect payment for the three or four months until his next visit—and who would in any case likely not get cash, but rather six pots of gooseberry jam or a haunch of smoked venison.

"Look at that!" Jamie said rhetorically, scratching his way down a column of figures and arriving with a vicious stab at the bottom. "A cask of brandywine at twelve shillings, two bolts of muslin at three and ten each, ironmongery—what in the name of buggery is wee

Roger wanting wi' an ironmonger, has he thought of a way to play tunes on a hoe?—ironmongery, ten and six!"

"I believe that was a ploughshare," I said pacifically. "It's not ours; Roger brought it for Geordie Chisholm." Ploughshares were in fact rather expensive. Having to be imported from England, they were rare amongst colonial small farmers, many of whom made do with nothing more than wooden dibbles and spades, with an ax and perhaps an iron hoe for ground-clearing.

Jamie squinted balefully at his figures, rumpling a hand through his hair.

"Aye," he said. "Only Geordie hasna got a spare penny to bless himself with, not until next year's crops are sold. So it's me that's paying the ten and six now, isn't it?" Without waiting for an answer, he plunged back into his calculations, muttering "Turd-eating son of a flying tortoise" under his breath, with no indication whether this applied to Roger, Geordie, or the ploughshare.

I finished grating a root and dropped the stub into a jar on the desk. Bloodroot is aptly named; the scientific name is *Sanguinaria*, and the juice is red, acrid, and sticky. The bowl in my lap was full of oozy, moist shavings, and my hands looked as though I had been disemboweling small animals.

"I have six dozen bottles of cherry cordial made," I offered, picking up another root. As though he didn't know that; the whole house had smelled like cough syrup for a week. "Fergus can take those over to Salem and sell them."

Jamie nodded absently.

"Aye, I'm counting on that to buy seedcorn. Have we anything else that can go to Salem? Candles? Honey?"

I gave him a sharp glance, but encountered only the whorled cowlicks on top of his head, bent studiously over his figures. The candles and honey were a sensitive subject.

"I think I can spare ten gallons of honey," I said guardedly. "Perhaps ten—well, all right, twelve dozen candles."

He scratched the tip of his nose with the end of the quill, leaving a blot of ink.

"I thought ye'd had a good year wi' the hives," he said mildly.

I had; my original single hive had expanded, and I now had nine bee-gums bordering my garden. I had taken nearly fifty gallons of honey from them, and enough beeswax for a good thirty dozen candles. On the other hand, I had uses in mind for those things.

"I need some of the honey for the surgery," I said. "It makes a good antibacterial dressing over wounds."

One eyebrow went up, though he kept his eyes on the hen-scratches he was making.

"I should think it would draw flies," he said, "if not bears." He flicked the end of his quill, dismissing the thought. "How much d'ye need then? I shouldna think you've so many wounded coming through your surgery as to require forty gallons of honey—unless you're plastering them with it, head to toe."

I laughed, despite my wariness.

"No, two or three gallons should be enough for dressings—say five, allowing extra to make up electrolytic fluids."

He glanced up at me, both brows raised.

"Electric?" He looked at the candle, its flame wavering in the draft from the window, then back at me. "Did Brianna not say that was something to do wi' lights? Or lightning, at least?"

"No, electrolyte," I amplified. "Sugar-water. You know, when a person is feeling shocked, or is too ill to eat, or has the flux—an electrolytic fluid is one that supports the body by putting back the essential ions they've lost from bleeding or diarrhea—the bits of salt and sugar and other things—which in turn draws water into the blood and restores blood pressure. You've seen me use it before."

"Oh, is that how it works?" His face lighted with interest, and he seemed about to ask for an explanation. Then he caught sight of the stack of receipts and correspondence still waiting on his desk, sighed, and picked up his quill again.

"Verra well, then," he conceded. "Keep the honey. Can I sell the soap?"

I nodded, pleased. I had, with a good deal of cautious experimentation, succeeded at last in producing a soap that did not smell like a dead pig soaked in lye, and that did not remove the upper layer of the epidermis. It required sunflower oil or olive oil in lieu of suet, though; both very expensive.

I had it in mind to trade my spare honey to the Cherokee ladies for sunflower oil with which to make both more soap and shampoo. Those, in turn, would fetch excellent prices almost anywhere—Cross Creek, Wilmington, New Bern—even Charleston, should we ever venture that far. Or so I thought. I was unsure whether Jamie would agree to gamble on that enterprise, though; it would take months to come to fruition, while he could dispose of the honey at an immediate profit. If he saw for sure that the soap would bring much more than the raw honey, though, there would be no difficulty in getting my way.

Before I could expound on the prospects, we heard the sound of light footsteps in the hall, and a soft rap at the door.

"Come," Jamie called, pulling himself up straight. Mr. Wemyss poked his head into the room, but hesitated, looking mildly alarmed at the sight of the sanguinary splotches on my hands. Jamie beckoned him companionably in with a flick of his quill.

"Aye, Joseph?"

"If I might speak a word in your ear, sir?" Mr. Wemyss was dressed casually, in shirt and breeks, but had slicked down his fine, pale hair with water, indicating some formality about the situation.

I pushed back my chair, reaching to gather up my leavings, but Mr. Wemyss stopped me with a brief gesture.

"Oh, no, Ma'am. If ye wouldna mind, I should like ye to stay. It's about Lizzie, and I should value a woman's opinion on the matter."

"Of course." I sat back, brows raised in curiosity.

"Lizzie? Have ye found our wee lass a husband, then, Joseph?" Jamie dropped his quill into the jar on his desk and sat forward, interested, gesturing toward an empty stool.

Mr. Wemyss nodded, the candlelight throwing the bones of his thin face into prominence. He took the proffered seat with a certain air of dignity, quite at odds with his usual attitude of mild discombobulation.

"I am thinking so, Mr. Fraser. Robin McGillivray came to call upon me this morning, to *speir* for my Elizabeth, to be pledged to his lad, Manfred."

My eyebrows went a little higher. To the best of my knowledge, Manfred McGillivray had seen Lizzie less than half a dozen times, and had not spoken more than the briefest of courtesies to her. It wasn't impossible that he should have been attracted; Lizzie had grown into a delicately pretty girl, and if still very shy, was possessed of nice manners. It scarcely seemed the basis for a proposal of marriage, though.

As Mr. Wemyss laid out the matter, it became a little clearer. Jamie had promised Lizzie a dowry, consisting of a section of prime land, and Mr. Wemyss, freed from his indenture, had a freeman's homestead claim of fifty acres as well—to which Lizzie was heir. The Wemyss land adjoined the McGillivrays' section, and the two together would make a very respectable farm. Evidently, with her three girls now married or suitably engaged, Manfred's marriage was the next step in Ute McGillivray's master plan. Reviewing all of the available girls within a twenty-mile radius of the Ridge, she had settled upon Lizzie as the best prospect, and sent Robin round to open negotiations.

"Well, the McGillivrays are a decent family," Jamie said judiciously. He dipped a finger into my bowl of bloodroot shavings and dotted it thoughtfully on his blotter, leaving a chain of red fingerprints. "They've not much land, but Robin does well enough for himself, and wee Manfred's a hard worker, from all I hear." Robin was a gunsmith, with a small shop in Cross Creek. Manfred had been apprenticed to another gun-maker in Hillsborough, but was now a journeyman himself.

"Would he take her to live in Hillsborough?" I asked. That might weigh heavily with Joseph Wemyss. While he would do anything to insure his daughter's future, he loved Lizzie dearly, and I knew that the loss of her would strike him to the heart.

He shook his head. His hair had dried, and was beginning to rise in its usual fair wisps.

"Robin says not. He says the lad plans to ply his trade in Woolam's Creek—providing he can manage a wee shop. They'd live at the farm." He darted a sideways glance at Jamie, then looked away, blood rising under his fair skin.

Jamie bent his head, and I saw the corner of his mouth tuck in. So this was where he entered the negotiation, then. Woolam's Creek was a small but growing settlement at the base of Fraser's Ridge. While the Woolams, a local Quaker family, owned the mill there, and the land on the far side of the creek, Jamie owned all of the land on the Ridge side.

He had so far provided land, tools, and supplies to Ronnie Sinclair, Theo Frye, and Bob O'Neill, for the building of a cooper's shop, a smithy—still under construction—and a small general store, all on terms that provided us with an eventual share of any profit, but no immediate income.

If Jamie and I had plans for the future, so did Ute McGillivray. She knew, of course, that Lizzie and her father held a place of special esteem with Jamie, and that he would in all likelihood be moved to do what he could for her. And that—of course—was what Joseph Wemyss was very delicately asking now; might Jamie provide premises for Manfred at Woolam's Creek as part of the agreement?

Jamie glanced at me out of the corner of his eye. I lifted one shoulder in the faintest of shrugs, wondering whether Lizzie's physical delicacy had entered into Ute McGillivray's calculations. There were a good many girls sturdier than Lizzie, and better prospects for motherhood. Still, if Lizzie should die in childbirth, then the McGillivrays would be the richer both for her dower-land, and the Woolam's Creek property—and new wives were not so difficult to come by.

"I expect something might be done," Jamie said cautiously. I saw his gaze drift to the open ledger, with its depressing columns of figures, then speculatively to me. Land was not a problem; with no cash and precious little credit, tools and materials would be. I firmed my lips and returned his stare; no, he was not getting his hands on my honey!

He sighed, and sat back, tapping his red-tinged fingers lightly on the blotter.

“I’ll manage,” he said. “What does the lass say, then? Will she have Manfred?”

Mr. Wemyss looked faintly dubious.

“She says she will. He’s a nice enough lad, though his mother … a fine woman,” he added hurriedly, “verra fine. If just a trifle … erhm. But …” he turned to me, narrow forehead furrowed. “I am not sure Elizabeth knows her mind, ma’am, to say truly. She kens ’twould be a good match, and that it would keep her near me …” His expression softened at the thought, then firmed again. “But I wouldna have her make the match only because she thinks I favor it.” He glanced shyly at Jamie, then at me.

“I did love her mother so,” he said, the words coming out in a rush, as though confessing some shameful secret. He blushed bright pink, and looked down at the thin hands he had twisted together in his lap.

“I see,” I said, tactfully averting my own gaze, and brushing a few bits of stray bloodroot off the desk. “Would you like me to talk to her?”

“Oh, I should be most grateful, Mum!” Lightened by relief, he nearly sprang to his feet. He wrang Jamie’s hand fervently, bowed repeatedly to me, and at last made his way out, with much bobbing and murmuring of thanks.

The door closed behind him, and Jamie sighed, shaking his head.

“Christ knows it’s trouble enough to get daughters married when they *do* ken their own minds,” he said darkly, plainly thinking of Brianna and Marsali. “Maybe it’s easier if they don’t.”

The single candle was guttering, casting flickering shadows over the room. I got up and went to the shelf where a few fresh ones lay. To my surprise, Jamie got up and came to join me. He reached past the assortment of half-burned tapers and fresh candles, pulling out the squat clock-candle that sat behind them, hidden in the shadows.

He set it on the desk, and used one of the tapers to light it. The wick was already blackened; the candle had been used before, though it wasn't burned down very far. He looked at me, and I went quietly to shut the door.

"Do you think it's time?" I asked softly, moving back to stand beside him.

He shook his head, but didn't answer. He sat back a little in his chair, hands folded in his lap, watching the flame of the clock-candle take hold and swell into a wavering light.

Jamie sighed and put out a hand to turn his account-book toward me. I could see the state of our affairs laid out there in black and white—dismal, so far as cash went.

Very little business in the Colony was done on a cash basis—virtually none, west of Asheville. The mountain homesteaders all dealt in barter, and so far as that went, we managed fairly well. We had milk, butter, and cheese to trade; potatoes and grain, pork and venison, fresh vegetables and dried fruit, a little wine made from the scuppernong grapes of the autumn past. We had hay and timber—though so did everyone else—and my honey and beeswax. And above everything else, we had Jamie's whisky.

That was a limited resource, though. We had fifteen acres in new barley, which—bar hailstones, forest fires, and other Acts of God—would eventually be made into nearly a hundred kegs of whisky, which could be sold or traded for quite a lot, even completely raw and unaged. The barley was still green in the field, though, and the whisky no more than a profitable phantom.

In the meantime, we had used or sold almost all the spirit on hand. True, there were fourteen small kegs of spirit remaining—buried in a small cave above the whisky-spring—but that couldn't be used. From each distilling, Jamie put aside two kegs, to be religiously kept for aging. The eldest barrel in this cache was only two years old; it would stay there for ten more, God willing, to emerge as liquid gold—and almost as valuable as the solid kind.

The immediate financial demands were not going to wait ten years, though. Beyond the possibility of a gunsmith's shop for Manfred McGillivray and a modest dowry for Lizzie, there were the normal expenses of farming, livestock maintenance, and an ambitious plan to provide ploughshares to every tenant—many of whom were still tilling by hand.

And beyond our own expenses, there was one very burdensome obligation. Bloody Laoghaire MacKenzie damn-her-eyes Fraser.

She wasn't precisely an ex-wife—but she wasn't precisely not an ex-wife, either. Thinking me permanently gone, if not actually dead, Jamie had married her, under the prodding of his sister Jenny. The marriage had rather quickly proved to be a mistake, and upon my reappearance, an annulment had been sought, to the relief—more or less—of all parties.

Generous to a fault, though, Jamie had agreed to pay a large sum to her in annual maintenance, plus a dowry to each of her daughters. Marsali's dowry was being paid gradually, in land and whisky, and there was no news of Joan's impending marriage. But the money to keep Laoghaire in whatever style she kept in Scotland was falling due—and we didn't have it.

I glanced at Jamie, who was brooding, eyes half-closed over his long, straight nose. I didn't bother suggesting that we allow Laoghaire to put in for a gaberlunzie badge and go begging through the parish. No matter what he thought of the woman personally, he considered her his responsibility, and that was that.

I supposed that paying the debt in casks of salt fish and lye-soap was not a suitable option, either. That left us three alternatives: We could sell the whisky from the cache, though that would be a great loss in the long term. We could borrow money from Jocasta; possible, but highly distasteful. Or we could sell something else. Several horses, for instance. A large number of pigs. Or a jewel.

The candle was burning strongly, and the wax around the wick had melted. Looking down into the clear puddle of molten wax, I could see them: three gemstones, dark against the pale gray-gold of the candle, their vivid hues subdued but still visible in the wax. An emerald, a topaz, and a black diamond.

Jamie didn't touch them, but stared at them, thick ruddy brows drawn together in concentration.

Selling a gemstone in colonial North Carolina would not be easy; it would likely require a trip to Charleston or Richmond. It could be done, though, and would result in enough money to pay Laoghaire her blood-money, as well as to meet the other mounting expenses. The gemstones had a value, though, that went beyond money—they were the currency of travel through the stones; protection for the life of a traveler.

What few things we knew about that perilous journey were based largely on the things that Geillis Duncan had written or had told me; it was her contention that gems gave a traveler not only protection from the chaos in that unspeakable space between the layers of time, but some ability to navigate, as it were—to choose the time in which one might emerge.

Moved by impulse, I went back to the shelf, and standing on tiptoe, groped for the hide-wrapped bundle hidden in the shadows there. It was heavy in my hand, and I unwrapped it carefully, laying the oval stone on the desk beside the candle. It was a large opal, its fiery heart revealed within a matrix of dull stone by the carving that covered the surface—a spiral; a primitive drawing of the snake that eats its tail.

The opal was the property of another traveler—the mysterious Indian called Otter-Tooth. An Indian whose skull showed silver fillings in the teeth; an Indian who seemed at one time to have spoken English. He had called this stone his “ticket back”—so it seemed that Geilie Duncan was not the only one who believed that gemstones had some power in that dreadful place … between.

“Five, the witch said,” Jamie said thoughtfully. “She said ye needed five stones?”

“She thought so.” It was a warm evening, but the down hairs on my jaw prickled at the thought of Geilie Duncan, of the stones—and of the Indian I had met on a dark hillside, his face painted black for death, just before I had found the opal, and the skull buried with it. Was it his skull we had buried, silver fillings and all?

“Was it needful for the stones to be polished, or cut?”

“I don’t know. I think she said cut ones were better—but I don’t know why she thought so—or if she was right.” That was always the rub; we knew so little for sure.

He made a little *hmf* noise, and rubbed the bridge of his nose slowly with one knuckle.

"Well, we've these three, and my father's ruby. Those are cut and polished stones, and that makes four. Then that wee bawbee"—he glanced at the opal—"and the stone in your amulet, which are not." The point here being that the cut or polished stones would fetch a great deal more in cash than would the rough opal or the raw sapphire in my medicine bag. And yet—could we risk losing a stone that might be needed, that might someday spell the difference between life and death for Bree or Roger?

"It's not likely," I said, answering his thought, rather than his words. "Bree will stay, certainly until Jemmy's grown; perhaps for good." After all, how could one abandon a child, the possibility of grandchildren? And yet, I had done it. I rubbed a finger absently over the smooth metal of my gold ring.

"Aye. But the lad?" He looked up at me, one eyebrow raised, the candlelight clear in his eyes, blue as sapphires cut and polished.

"He wouldn't," I said. "He wouldn't leave Bree and Jemmy." I spoke stoutly, but there was a thread of doubt in my heart, and it was reflected in my voice.

"Not yet," Jamie said quietly.

I took a deep breath, but did not reply. I knew very well what he meant. Wrapped in silence, Roger seemed to withdraw further day by day.

His fingers had healed; I had suggested to Brianna that perhaps he would find solace in his bodhran. She had nodded, doubtfully. I didn't know whether she had mentioned it to him or not—but the bodhran hung on the wall of their cabin, silent as its owner.

He did still smile and play with Jemmy, and was unfailingly attentive to Brianna—but the shadow in his eyes never lessened, and when he was not required for some chore, he would disappear for hours, sometimes all day, to walk the mountains, returning after dark, exhausted, dirt-stained—and silent.

"He hasna slept with her, has he? Since it happened?"

I sighed, brushing a strand of hair off my forehead.

"A few times. I asked. My guess would be that it hasn't happened lately, though."

Bree was doing her best to keep him close, to draw him out of the depths of his gathering depression—but it was clear to me, as well as to Jamie, that she was losing the battle, and knew it. She too was growing silent, and had shadows in her eyes.

"If he went … back … might there be a cure for his voice? There in your own time?" Jamie ran a finger over the opal as he spoke, eyes following the spiral as his finger traced it.

I sighed again, and sat down.

"I don't know. There would be help—perhaps surgery, certainly speech therapy. I can't say how *much* it would help; no one can. The thing is … he might recover a good deal of his voice naturally, if he'd only work at it. But he isn't going to do that. And of course," honesty compelled me to add, "he might *not* get it back, no matter how hard he worked."

Jamie nodded, silent. Regardless of the possibilities of medical help, the fact was that if the marriage between Roger and Brianna failed, there was nothing whatever to keep him here. Whether he would choose to go back then …

Jamie sat up in his chair, and blew the candle out.

"Not yet," he said in the darkness, his voice firm. "We've a few weeks yet before I must send money to Scotland; I'll see what else we might contrive. For now, we'll keep the stones."

Last night I dreamed that I was making bread. Or at least I was trying to make bread. I'd be mixing dough and suddenly realize that I didn't have any flour. Then I'd put the bread in pans and put it in the oven and realize that it hadn't risen, and take it back out. I'd knead it and knead it and then I'd be carrying it around in a bowl under a cloth, looking for a warm place to put it, because you have to keep it warm or the yeast dies, and I was getting frantic because I couldn't find a warm place; there was a cold wind blowing and the *bowl was heavy and slippery and I thought I was going to drop it; my hands and feet were freezing and going numb.*

Then I woke up and I really was cold. Roger had pulled all the covers off and rolled himself up in them, and there was a terrible draft blowing in under the door. I nudged him and yanked on the blankets, but I couldn't get them loose and I didn't want to make a lot of noise and wake Jemmy up. Finally, I got up and got my cloak off the peg and went back to sleep under that.

Roger got up before me this morning and went out; I don't think he noticed that he'd left me in the cold.

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A PACKAGE FROM LONDON

The package arrived in August, by the good offices of Jethro Wainwright, one of the few itinerant peddlers with sufficient enterprise to ascend the steep and winding paths that led to the Ridge. Red-faced and wheezing from the climb and the work of unloading his donkey's pack-frame, Mr. Wainwright handed me the package with a nod, and staggered gratefully off toward the kitchen at my invitation, leaving his donkey to crop grass in the yard.

It was a small parcel, a box of some sort, sewn up carefully in oilskin and tied with twine for good measure. It was heavy. I shook it, but the only sound was a soft clunking, as though whatever lay within was padded. The label read simply "To Mr. James Fraser, Esq., Fraser's Ridge, the Carolinas."

"Well, what do you suppose this is?" I asked the donkey. It was a rhetorical question, but the donkey, an amiable creature, looked up from her meal and hee-hawed in reply, stems of fescue hanging from the corner of her mouth.

The sound set off answering cries of curiosity and welcome from Clarence and the horses, and within seconds, Jamie and Roger appeared from the direction of the barn, Brianna came out of the springhouse, and Mr. Bug rose up from behind the manure pile in his shirtsleeves like a vulture rising from a carcass, all drawn by the noise.

"Thanks," I said to the donkey, who flicked a modest ear at me and went back to the grass.

"What is it?" Brianna stood on her toes to peer over Jamie's shoulder as he took the package from me. "It's not from Lallybroch, is it?"

"No, it's neither Ian's hand … nor my sister's," Jamie replied with no more than a brief hesitation, though I saw him glance twice to make sure. "It's come a good way, though—by ship?" He held the parcel under my nose inquiringly. I sniffed and nodded.

"Yes; there's a whiff of tar about it. No documents, though?"

He turned the package over, then shook his head.

"It had a seal, but that's gone." Grayish fragments of wax clung to the twine, but the seal that might have provided a clue to the sender had long since succumbed to the vicissitudes of travel and Mr. Wainwright's pack.

"Ump." Mr. Bug shook his head, squinting dubiously at the package. "Not a mattock."

"No, it's nay a mattock-head," Jamie agreed, hefting the little parcel appraisingly. "Nor yet a book, let alone a quire of paper. I havena ordered anything else that I can think of. D'ye think it might be seeds, Sassenach? Mr. Stanhope did promise to send ye bits from his friend's garden, aye?"

"Oh, it might be!" That was an exciting possibility; Mr. Stanhope's friend Mr. Crossley had an extensive ornamental garden, with a large number of exotic and imported species, and Stanhope had offered to see whether Crossley might be amenable to an exchange; seeds and cuttings of some of the rarer European and Asian herbs from his collection, for bulbs and seeds from what Stanhope described as my "mountain fastness."

Roger and Brianna exchanged a brief look. Seeds were a good deal less intriguing to them than either paper or books would be. Still, the novelty of any letter or package was sufficient that no one suggested opening it until the full measure of enjoyment should have been extracted from speculation about its contents.

In the event, the package was not opened until after supper, when everyone had had a chance to weigh the parcel, poke and sniff at it, and offer an opinion regarding its contents. Pushing his empty plate aside, Jamie finally took up the parcel with all due ceremony, shook it once more, and then handed it to me.

"That knot's a job for a surgeon's hands, Sassenach," he said with a grin. It was; whoever had tied it was no sailor, but had substituted thoroughness for knowledge. It took me several minutes of picking, but I got the knot undone at last, and rolled the twine up tidily for future use.

Jamie then slit the stitching carefully with the point of his dirk, and drew out a small wooden box, to gasps of astonishment. It was plain in design, but elegant in execution, made of a polished dark wood, equipped with brass hinges and hasp, and with a matching small brass plate set into the lid.

"From the Workshop of Messrs. Halliburton and Halliburton, 14 Portman Square, London." Brianna read it out, leaning across the table and craning her neck. "Who on earth are Norman and Greene?"

"I havena the slightest idea," Jamie replied. He lifted the hasp with one finger, and delicately put back the lid. Inside was a small bag of dark red velvet. He pulled this out, opened its drawstring, and slowly drew out a … thing.

It was a flat golden disk, about four inches across. Goggling in astonishment, I could see that the rim was slightly raised, like that of a plate, and printed with tiny symbols of some kind. Set into the central part of the disk was an odd pierced-work arrangement, made of some silvery metal. This consisted of a small open dial, rather like a clock-face, but with three arms connecting its outer rim to the center of the bigger, golden disk.

The small silver circle was also adorned with printed arcana, almost too fine to see, and attached to a lyre-shape which itself rested in the belly of a long, flat silver eel, whose back curved snugly round the inner rim of the golden disk. Surmounting the whole was a gold bar, tapered at the ends like a very thick compass needle, and affixed with a pin that passed through the center of the disk and allowed the bar to revolve. Engraved in flowing script down the center of the bar was the name "James Fraser."

"Why, whatever in the name of Bride will *that* be?" Mrs. Bug, naturally, recovered first from her surprise.

"It's a planispheric astrolabe," Jamie answered, recovered from his surprise, and sounding now almost matter-of-fact.

"Oh, of *course*," I murmured. "Naturally!"

He turned the thing over, displaying a flat surface etched with several concentric circles, these in turn subdivided by hundreds of tiny markings and symbols. This side had a revolving bit like the compass-needle thing on the other side, but rectangular in shape, and with the ends bent upward, flattened and notched so that the notches formed a pair of sights.

Bree reached out a finger and touched the gleaming surface reverently.

"My God," she said. "Is that really *gold*?"

"It is." Jamie placed the object gingerly into her outstretched palm. "And what I should like to know is why?"

"Why gold, or why an astrolabe?" I asked.

"Why gold," he replied, frowning at the thing. "I'd been wanting such an instrument for some time, and couldna find one anywhere between Albany and Charleston. Lord John Grey had promised to have one sent me from London, and I suppose this is it. But why in Christ's name …"

Everyone's attention was still riveted by the astrolabe itself, but Jamie glanced away, reaching instead for the box it had come in. Sure enough, at the bottom of the box lay a note, crisply folded and sealed with blue wax. The insignia, though, was not Lord John's customary smiling half-moon-and-stars, but an unfamiliar crest, showing a fish with a ring in its mouth.

Jamie glanced at this, frowning, then broke the seal and opened the note.

Mr. James Fraser, Esq.
at Fraser's Ridge
Royal Colony of North Carolina

My dear sir,

I have the honor to send the enclosed, with the compliments of my father, Lord John Grey. Upon my departure for London, he gave me instructions to obtain the finest instrument possible, and with knowledge of the high esteem in which he holds your friendship, I have taken pains to do so. I hope it will meet with your approval.

Your obdt. servant,
William Ransome, Lord Ellesmere,
Captain, 9th Regiment

"William Ransome?" Brianna had stood up in order to read over Jamie's shoulder. She glanced at me, frowning. "He says his father's Lord John—but isn't Lord John's son still a little boy?"

"He's fifteen." Jamie's voice held an odd note, and I saw Roger glance up abruptly from the astrolabe in his hands, green eyes suddenly intent. His gaze shifted to me, with that odd look he had developed of late, of listening to something no one else could hear. I looked away.

"… not Grey," Brianna was saying.

"No." Jamie was still looking at the note in his hand, and sounded a little abstracted. He shook his head briefly, as though dispelling some thought, and returned to the matter at hand.

"No," he repeated more firmly, laying down the note. "The lad is John's stepson—his father was the Earl of Ellesmere; the boy's the ninth of that title. Ransome is Ellesmere's family name."

I kept my eyes fixed sedulously on the table and the empty box, afraid to look up for fear that my transparent face might reveal something—if only the fact that there was something to be revealed.

William Ransome's father had not, in fact, been the eighth Earl of Ellesmere. His father had been James Fraser, and I could feel the tension in Jamie's leg where it touched mine beneath the table, though his face now wore an expression of mild exasperation.

"Evidently the lad's been bought a commission," he said, folding the letter neatly and tucking it back in the box. "So he's gone off to London, and purchased the thing there at John's instruction. But I suppose that to a lad of his background, ‘fine’ must necessarily mean plated wi’ gold!”

He stretched out a hand and Mr. Wainwright, who had been admiring his reflection in the polished golden surface, reluctantly surrendered the astrolabe.

Jamie examined it critically, rotating the inset silver eel with an index finger.

“Aye, well,” he said, almost reluctantly. “It *is* verra fine, as to the workmanship of the thing.”

“Pretty.” Mr. Bug nodded his approval, reaching for one of the hot stovies his wife was offering round. “Survey?”

“Aye, that’s right.”

“Survey?” Brianna took two of the little potato dumplings and sat down beside Roger, automatically passing him one. “It’s for surveying?”

“Among other things.” Jamie turned the astrolabe over and gently pushed the flat bar, making the notched sights revolve. “This bit—it’s used as a transit. Ye’ll ken what that is?”

Brianna nodded, looking interested.

“Sure. I know how to do different sorts of surveying, but we generally used …”

I saw Roger grimace as he swallowed, the roughness of the stovie catching at his throat. I lifted my hand toward the water pitcher, but he caught my eye and shook his head, almost imperceptibly. He swallowed again, more easily this time, and coughed.

“I recall ye said ye could survey.” Jamie regarded his daughter with approval. “That’s why I wanted this”—he hefted the object in his hand—“though I did have something a wee bit less gaudy in mind. Pewter would ha’ been more serviceable. Still, so long as I havena got to pay for it …”

“Let me see.” Brianna extended a hand and took the thing, frowning in absorption as she moved the inner dial.

“Do you know how to use an astrolabe?” I asked her dubiously.

“I do,” Jamie said, with a certain degree of smugness. “I was taught, in France.” He stood up, and jerked his chin toward the door.

“Bring it outside, lass. I’ll show ye how to tell the time.”

“… Aye, just there.” Jamie leaned intently over Bree’s shoulder, pointing at a spot on the outer dial. She moved the inner dial carefully to match, looked up at the sun, and twitched the pointer a fraction of an inch.

“Five-thirty!” she exclaimed, flushed with delight.

“Five thirty-five,” Jamie corrected, grinning broadly. “See there?” He pointed at one of the tiny symbols on the rim, which at this distance, appeared to be no more than a flyspeck to me.

“Five thirty-five,” Mrs. Bug said, in tones of awe. “Think of that, Arch! Why—I havena kent the time for sure, since … since …”

“Edinburgh,” her husband said, nodding.

“Aye, that’s right! My cousin Jane had a case-clock, a lovely thing, ’twould chime like a church bell, and its face wi’ brass numbers, and a pair of wee cherubs flying right across, so—”

“This is the first time I’ve known what time it was, since I left the Sherstons’ house.” Bree was ignoring both Mrs. Bug’s raptures and the instrument in her hands. I saw her meet Roger’s eyes, and smile—and after a moment, his own lopsided smile in return. How long had it been for him?

Everyone was squinting up at the setting sun, waving clouds of gnats from their eyes and discussing when they had last known the time. How very odd, I thought, with some amusement. Why this preoccupation with measuring time? And yet I had it, too.

I tried to think when the last time had been for me. At Jocasta’s wedding? No—on the field near Alamance Creek, just before the battle. Colonel Ashe had had a pocket watch, and—I stopped, remembering. No. It was after the battle. And that was very likely the last time Roger had known what time it was—if he had been sufficiently conscious to hear one of the Army surgeons announce that it was then four o’clock—and to give his considered opinion that Roger would not live to see the hour of five.

“What else can you do with it, Da?”

Bree handed the astrolabe carefully back to Jamie, who took it and at once began polishing away the fingermarks with the tail of his shirt.

"Oh, a great number of things. Ye can find your position, whether on land or at sea, tell the time, find a particular star in the sky …"

"Very useful," I observed. "Though perhaps not quite so convenient as a clock. But I suppose telling time wasn't your chief intent?"

"No." He shook his head, stowing the astrolabe tenderly away in its velvet bag. "I must have the land of the two grants properly surveyed—and soon."

"Why soon?" Bree had been turning to go, but turned back at this, one brow raised.

"Because time grows short." Jamie looked up at her, the pleasure of his acquisition subsiding into seriousness. He glanced over his shoulder, but there was no one left on the porch save himself and me, Brianna and Roger.

Mr. Wainwright, uninterested in scientific marvels, had gone down to the yard and was lugging his packs into the house, aided by Mr. Bug, and hindered by Mrs. Bug's running commentary. Everyone on the Ridge would know he was here by tomorrow, and would come to the house to buy, sell, and hear the latest news.

"Ye ken what's coming, the two of ye." Jamie glanced from Bree to Roger. "The King may fall, but the land will stay. And if we are to hold this land through it all, we must have it properly surveyed and registered. When there is trouble, when folk must leave their land or maybe have it seized—it's the devil and all to get back, but it's maybe possible, forbye—and ye have a proper deed to say what was once yours."

The sun sparked gold and fire from the curve of his head as he looked up. He nodded toward the dark line of the mountains, silhouetted by a glorious spray of pink and gold cloud, but I could see from the look of distance in his eyes that he saw something far beyond.

"Lallybroch—we saved it by means of a deed of sasine. And Young Simon, Lovat's son—he fought for his land, after Culloden, and got most of it back at last. But only because he had the papers to prove what had been his. So."

He put back the lid of the box he had brought out, and laid the velvet bag gently in it. "I will have papers. And whether it is one George or the other who rules in time—this land will be ours. And yours," he added softly, raising his eyes to Brianna's. "And your children's after you."

I laid my hand on his, where it rested on the box. His skin was warm with work and the heat of the day, and he smelt of clean sweat. The hairs on his forearm shone red and gold in the sun, and I understood very well just then, why it is that men measure time. They wish to fix a moment, in the vain hope that so doing will keep it from departing.

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NO SMALL THING

Brianna had come up to the big house to borrow a book. She left Jemmy in the kitchen with Mrs. Bug, and went down the hall to her father's study. He was gone, the room empty, though it smelled faintly of him—some indefinable masculine scent, composed of leather, sawdust, sweat, whisky, manure—and ink.

She rubbed a finger under her nose, nostrils twitching, and smiled at the thought. Roger smelled of those things, too—and yet he had his own scent, underneath. What was it? she wondered. His hands used to smell slightly of varnish and metal, when he owned a guitar. But that was long ago and far away.

Pushing away the thought, she bent her attention to the books on the shelf. Fergus had brought back three new books from his latest trip to Wilmington: a set of essays by Michel de Montaigne—those were in French, no good—a tattered copy of Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, and a very thin, paper-covered book by B. Franklin, *The Means and Manner of Obtaining Virtue*.

No contest, she thought, plucking out *Moll Flanders*. The book had seen hard use; the spine was cracked and the pages loose. She hoped they were all there; nothing worse than reaching a good part of the story and discovering that the next twenty pages were missing. She flipped carefully through, checking, but the pages seemed to be complete, if occasionally crumpled or stained with food. The book had a rather peculiar smell, as though it had been dipped in tallow.

A sudden crash from her mother's surgery jerked her from her contemplation of the books. She looked instinctively for Jem—but of course he wasn't there. Shoving the book hastily back into place, she rushed out of the study, only to meet her mother hurrying down the hall from the kitchen.

She beat Claire to the door of the surgery by a scant moment.

"Jem!"

The door of the big standing cupboard stood ajar, and the smell of honey was strong in the air. A broken stoneware bottle lay on the floor in a sticky golden puddle, and Jemmy sat in the middle of it, liberally smeared, his blue eyes absolutely round, mouth open in guilty shock.

Blood surged into her face. Ignoring the stickiness, she grabbed him by the arm and stood him on his feet.

"Jeremiah Alexander MacKenzie," Brianna said, in awful tones, "you are a Bad Boy!" She checked him hastily for blood or injury, found none, and fetched him a smack on the bottom, hard enough to make the palm of her hand sting.

The resulting screech gave her an instant qualm of guilt. Then she saw the rest of the carnage in the surgery, and quelled the impulse to spank him again.

"Jeremiah!"

Bunches of dried rosemary, yarrow, and thyme had been pulled out of the drying rack and shredded. One of the gauze shelves of the rack itself had been pulled loose, the fabric ripped and hanging. Bottles and jars from the cupboards lay tipped and rolling; some of the corks had fallen out, spilling multi-colored powders and liquids. A big linen bag of coarse ground salt had been rifled, handsful of the crystals tossed around with abandon.

Worst of all, her mother's amulet lay on the floor, the little leather pouch torn open, flat and empty. Scattered bits of dried plants, a few tiny bones, and other debris lay strewn round it.

"Mama, I'm so sorry—he got away. I wasn't looking—I should have kept a better eye on—" She had nearly to shout her apologies, to be heard above Jemmy's bawling.

Claire, flinching slightly at the noise, looked round the surgery, taking hasty inventory. Then she stooped and picked Jemmy up, disregarding the honey.

“Shhhh,” she said, putting a hand lightly over his mouth. This proving ineffective, she patted the hand over the gaping orifice, producing a “wa-wa-wa-wa” sound that made Jemmy stop bellowing at once. He stuck a thumb in his mouth, snuffling loudly round it, and pressed a filthy cheek to Claire’s shoulder.

“Well, they do get into things,” she said to Bree, looking more amused than upset. “Don’t worry, darling, it’s only a bit of a mess. He couldn’t reach the knives, thank goodness, and I keep the poisons up high, too.”

Brianna felt her heart begin to slow down. Her hand felt hot, pulsing with blood.

“But your amulet …” She pointed, and saw a shadow cross her mother’s face when she saw the desecration.

“Oh.” Claire took a deep breath, patted Jemmy’s back, and put him down. Her teeth set in her lower lip, she stooped and gingerly picked up the limp pouch with its draggled feathers.

“I’m sorry,” Brianna repeated, helplessly.

She could see the effort it cost, but her mother made a small dismissive gesture, before crouching to pick up the bits and pieces from the floor. Her curly hair was untied, and swung forward, hiding her face.

“I always did wonder what was in this thing,” Claire said. She gingerly began to pick up the tiny bones, collecting them carefully in the palm of one hand. “What do you think these are from—a shrew?”

“I don’t know.” Keeping a wary eye on Jemmy, Brianna squatted and began to pick things up. “I thought maybe they were from a mouse or a bat.”

Her mother glanced up at her, surprised. “Aren’t you clever—look.” She plucked a small, papery brown object from the floor and held it out. Bending to look closer, Brianna could see that the thing that looked like a crumpled dried leaf was in fact a fragment of a tiny bat’s wing, the fragile leather dried to translucence, a bone slender as a needle curving through it like the central rib of a leaf.

“Eye of newt, and toe of frog/ Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,” Claire quoted. She spilled the handful of bones onto the counter, looking at them with fascination. “I wonder what she meant by that?”

“She?”

“Nayawenne—the woman who gave me the pouch.” Crouching, Claire swept up the crumbled bits of leaf—at least Brianna hoped they were real leaves—into her hand, and sniffed them. There were so many odors in the air of the surgery that she herself couldn’t distinguish anything beyond the overwhelming sweetness of honey, but evidently her mother’s sensitive nose had no trouble in making out individual scents.

“Bayberry, balsam fir, wild ginger, and Arsesmart,” she said, sniffing like a truffle-hound. “Bit of sage, too, I think.”

“Arsesmart? Is that a comment on what she thought of you?” In spite of her distress, Brianna laughed.

“Ha bloody ha,” he mother replied tartly, dusting the little heap of dried plant matter onto the table with the bones. “Otherwise known as water-pepper. It’s a rather irritating little thing that grows near brooks—gives you blisters and smarts the eyes—or other things, I imagine, if you happen to carelessly sit on it.”

Jemmy, rebukes forgotten, had got hold of a surgical clamp and was turning it to and fro, evidently trying to decide whether it was edible. Brianna debated taking it away from him, but given that her mother always sterilized her metal implements by boiling, decided to let him keep it for the moment, since it had no sharp edges.

Leaving him with Claire, she went back to the kitchen to fetch hot water and some cloths with which to deal with the honey. Mrs. Bug was there but was sound asleep, snoring gently on the settle, hands folded on her rounded stomach, her kerch comfortably askew over one ear.

Tiptoeing back with the bucket of water and a handful of cloths, she found most of the debris already swept up, and her mother crawling round on hands and knees, peering under things.

“Have you lost something?” She glanced at the bottom shelf of the cupboard, but didn’t see anything missing, bar the honey-jar. The other bottles had been neatly stoppered and replaced, and everything looked much as usual.

"Yes." Claire crouched lower, frowning as she peered under the cupboard itself. "A stone. About so big"—she held out a hand, thumb and index finger circled, describing a sphere about the diameter of a small coin—"and a sort of grayish-blue. Translucent in spots. It's a raw sapphire."

"Was it in the cupboard? Maybe Mrs. Bug moved it."

Claire sat back on her heels, shaking her head.

"No, she doesn't touch anything in here. Besides, it wasn't in the cupboard—it was in there." She nodded at the table, where the amulet's empty pouch lay beside the bones and plant debris.

A quick search—and then a slower one—of the surgery revealed no sign of the stone.

"You know," Claire said, running a hand through her hair as she looked thoughtfully at Jemmy, "I hate to suggest this, but do you think …?"

"Shi—I mean rats," Brianna said, concern escalating to mild alarm. She stooped to look at Jemmy, who loftily ignored her, concentrating on the job of inserting the surgical clamp into his left nostril. "There *were* crumbs of dried plant matter stuck to the honey around his mouth, but surely that was just rosemary or thyme …"

Offended at the close scrutiny, he tried to whack her with the clamp, but she seized his wrist in a grip of iron, removing the clamp from his grasp with her other hand.

"Don't hit Mummy," she said automatically, "it's not nice. Jem—did you swallow Grannie's rock?"

"No," he said, just as automatically, grabbing at the clamp. "Mine!"

She sniffed at his face, causing him to lean back at an alarming angle, but couldn't be sure. She didn't think it was rosemary, though.

"Come smell him," she said to her mother, standing up. "I can't tell."

Claire stooped to oblige, and Jemmy shrieked in giggling alarm, preparing for an enjoyable game of "Eat me up." He was disappointed, though; his grandmother merely inhaled deeply, said definitely, "wild ginger," then leaned in for a closer look, seizing a damp cloth to rub away the honey smears, in spite of increasing howls of protest.

"Look." Claire pointed at the soft skin around his mouth. Freshly cleansed, Brianna could see them clearly—two or three tiny blisters, like seed pearls.

"Jeremiah," she said sternly, attempting to look him in the eye. "Tell Mummy. Did you eat Grannie's rock?"

Jeremiah avoided her gaze and wriggled away, putting both hands protectively behind him.

"No hit," he said. "Nod nice!"

"I'm not going to spank you," she assured him, grabbing an escaping foot. "I just want to know. Did you swallow a rock about this big?" She held up thumb and forefinger. Jemmy giggled.

"Hot," he said. That was his new favorite word, applied without distinction to any object he liked.

Brianna closed her eyes, sighing in exasperation, then opened them to look at her mother.

"I'm afraid so. Will it hurt him?"

"Shouldn't think so." Claire regarded her grandson thoughtfully, tapping a finger against her lips. Then she crossed the room, opening one of the high cupboards and withdrawing a large brown-glass bottle.

"Castor-bean oil," she explained, rummaging in a drawer for a spoon. "Not *quite* as tasty as honey," she added, fixing Jemmy with a gimlet eye, "but *very* effective."

Castor oil might be effective, but it took a while. Keeping a close eye on Jemmy, who was set down to play with his basket of wooden blocks after being dosed, Brianna and Claire used the waiting time to tidy the surgery, and then turned to the peaceful, but time-consuming, job of compounding medicines. It was some time since Claire had had time to do this, and there was a staggering profusion of leaves and roots and seeds to be shredded, grated, pounded, boiled in water, steeped in oil, extracted with alcohol, strained through gauze, stirred into melted beeswax or bear grease, mixed with ground talc or rolled into pills, then jarred or bottled or bagged for preservation.

It was a pleasantly warm day, and they left the windows open for the breeze, even though this meant constantly swatting flies, shooing gnats, and picking the occasional enthusiastic bumblebee out of some bubbling solution.

“Be careful, sweetie!” Brianna reached hastily to brush away a honeybee that had lighted on one of Jemmy’s blocks, just before Jem could grab it. “Bad bug. Ouchie!”

“They smell their honey,” Claire said, waving away another. “I’d better give them some of it back.” She set a bowl of honey-water on the windowsill, and within moments, bees were thick about the rim of it, drinking greedily.

“Single-minded, aren’t they?” Brianna observed, blotting a trickle of sweat that ran between her breasts.

“Well, single-mindedness will get you a long way,” Claire murmured absently, frowning slightly as she stirred a solution warming over an alcohol lamp. “Does this look done to you?”

“You know a lot better than I do.” Still, she bent obligingly and sniffed. “I think so; it smells pretty strong.”

Claire dipped a quick finger into the bowl, then tasted it.

“Mm, yes, I think so.” Taking the bowl off the flame, she poured the dark greenish liquid carefully through a gauze strainer into a bottle. Several other tall glass bottles stood in a row on the counter, the sunlight glowing through their contents like red and green and yellow gems.

“Did you always know you were meant to be a doctor?” Brianna asked curiously. Her mother shook her head, skillfully shredding a handful of dogwood bark with a sharp knife.

“Never thought of it when I was young. Girls mostly didn’t, then, of course. Growing up, I always assumed that I’d marry, have children, make a home … does Lizzie look all right to you? I thought she was looking a bit yellow round the edges last night, but it might only have been the candlelight.”

"I think she's all right. Do you think she's really in love with Manfred?" They had celebrated Lizzie's betrothal to Manfred McGillivray the night before, with the entire McGillivray family traveling from their homestead for a lavish supper. Mrs. Bug, who was fond of Lizzie, had given of her best; no wonder she was asleep today.

"No," Claire said frankly. "But as long as she isn't in love with anyone else, it's probably all right. He's a good lad, and quite good-looking. And Lizzie likes his mother, which is also a good thing, under the circumstances." She smiled at the thought of Ute McGillivray, who had taken Lizzie at once under her capacious maternal wing, picking out particularly delicious tidbits and poking them assiduously down Lizzie's gullet, like a robin feeding a puny nestling.

"I think she may like Mrs. McGillivray more than she likes Manfred. She was really young when her own mother died; it's nice for her to sort of have one again." Brianna glanced at her mother from the corner of her eye. She could remember all too well the feeling of being motherless—and the sheer bliss of being mothered once more. By reflex, she glanced at Jemmy, who was holding an animated if mostly unintelligible conversation with Adso the cat.

Claire nodded, rubbing the shredded bark between her hands into a small round jar full of alcohol.

"Yes. Still, I think it's as well they wait a bit—Lizzie and Manfred, I mean—and get used to each other." It had been agreed that the marriage would take place the next summer, after Manfred had finished setting up his shop in Woolam's Creek. "I hope this will work."

"What?"

"The dogwood bark." Claire stoppered the bottle and put it in the cupboard. "Dr. Rawlings' casebook says it can be used as a substitute for cinchona bark—for quinine, you know. And it's certainly easier to get, to say nothing of less expensive."

"Great—I hope it does work." Lizzie's malaria had stayed in abeyance for several months—but there was always the threat of recurrence, and cinchona bark *was* hideously expensive.

The subject of their earlier conversation lingered in her mind, and she returned to it, as she took a fresh handful of sage leaves for her mortar, bruising them carefully before putting them to steep.

"You didn't plan to be a doctor when you were young, you said. But you seemed pretty single-minded about it, later on." She had scattered, but vivid, memories of Claire's medical training; she could still smell the hospital smells caught in her mother's hair and clothing, and feel the soft cool touch of the green scrubs her mother sometimes wore, coming in to kiss her goodnight when she came in late from work.

Claire didn't answer at once, concentrating on the dried corn silk she was cleaning, plucking out rotted bits and flicking them through the open window.

"Well," she said at last, not taking her eyes off her work. "People—and it's not just women, not by any means—people who know who they are, and what they're meant to be … they'll find a way. Your father—Frank, I mean—" She scooped up the cleaned silk and transferred it to a small woven basket, small fragments scattering across the counter as she did so. "He was a very good historian. He liked the subject, and he had the gift of discipline and concentration that made him a success, but it wasn't really a … a *calling* for him. He told me himself—he could have done other things just as well, and it wouldn't have mattered a great deal. For some people, one thing *does* matter a great deal, though. And when it does … well, medicine mattered a great deal to me. I didn't know, early on, but then I realized that it was simply what I was meant to do. And once I knew that …" She shrugged, dusting her hands, and covered the basket with a bit of linen, securing it with twine.

"Yes, but … you can't always do what you're meant to, can you?" she said, thinking of the ragged scar on Roger's throat.

"Well, life certainly forces some things on one," her mother murmured. She glanced up, meeting Brianna's eyes, and her mouth quirked in a small, wry smile. "And for the common man—or woman—life as they find it is often the life they lead. Marsali, for instance. I shouldn't think it's ever entered her mind that she might do other than she does. Her mother kept a house and raised children; she sees no reason why she should do anything else. And yet—” Claire lifted one shoulder in a shrug, and reached across the table for the other mortar. “She had one great passion—for Fergus. And that was enough to jar her out of the rut her life would have been—”

“And into another just like it?”

Claire bent her head in a half-nod, not looking up.

“Just like it—except that she’s in America, rather than Scotland. And she’s got Fergus.”

“Like you have Jamie?” She seldom used his given name, and Claire glanced up in surprise.

“Yes,” she said. “Jamie’s part of me. So are you.” She touched Bree’s face, quick and light, then turned half away, reaching to take down a tied bundle of marjoram from the array of hanging herbs on the beam above the hearth. “But neither of you is all of me,” she said softly, back turned. “I am … what I am. Doctor, nurse, healer, witch—whatever folk call it, the name doesn’t matter. I was born to be that; I will be that ’til I die. If I should lose you—or Jamie—I wouldn’t be quite a whole person any longer, but I would still have that left. For a little time,” she went on, so softly that Brianna had to strain to hear her, “after I went … back … before you came … that was all I had. Just the knowing.”

Claire crumbled the dried marjoram into the mortar, and took up the pestle to grind it. The sound of clumping boots came from outside, and then Jamie’s voice, a friendly remark to a chicken that crossed his path.

And was loving Roger, loving Jemmy, not enough for her? Surely it should be. She had a dreadful, hollow feeling that perhaps it was not, and spoke quickly, before the thought should find words.

“What about Da?”

“What about him?”

“Does he—is he one who knows what he is, do you think?”

Claire’s hands stilled, the clanking pestle falling silent.

“Oh, yes,” she said. “He knows.”

“A laird? Is that what you’d call it?”

Her mother hesitated, thinking.

"No," she said at last. She took up the pestle and began to grind again. The fragrance of dried marjoram filled the room like incense. "He's a man," she said, "and that's no small thing to be."

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LONESOME ME

Brianna closed the book, with a mingled sense of relief and foreboding. She hadn't objected to Jamie's notion that she teach a few of the little girls on the Ridge their ABC's. It filled the cabin with cheerful noise for a couple of hours, and Jemmy loved the cosseting of a half-dozen miniature mothers.

Still, she was not a natural teacher, and always felt relieved at the end of a lesson. The foreboding came on its heels, though. Most of the girls came alone, or under the care of an older sister. Anne and Kate Henderson, who lived two miles away, were escorted by their older brother, Obadiah.

She wasn't sure when or how it had started. Perhaps from the first day, when he had looked her in the eye, smiling faintly, and held the glance for a moment too long before patting his sisters' heads and leaving them to her care. But there had been nothing she could reasonably object to. Not then, not in the days since. And yet …

Stated bluntly to herself, Obadiah Henderson gave her the creeps. He was a tall lad of twenty or so, heavily muscled and not bad-looking, brown-haired and blue-eyed. But there was something about him that was somehow not right; a sense of something brutal about the mouth, something feral in the deepset eyes. And something very unsettling in the way he looked at her.

She hated going to the door at the end of a lesson. The little girls would scatter in a flutter of dresses and giggles—and Obadiah would be waiting, leaning against a tree, sitting on the well-coping, once even lounging on the bench outside her door.

The constant uncertainty, never knowing where he would be—but knowing that he was there, somewhere, got on her nerves nearly as much as that half-smiling look of his, and the silent smirk as he left her, almost winking, as though he knew some dirty little secret about her, but chose to keep it to himself—for now.

It occurred to her, with a certain sense of irony, that her discomfort near Obadiah was at least partly because of Roger. She had grown accustomed to hearing things that weren't spoken aloud.

And Obadiah didn't speak aloud. He didn't say anything to her, made no improper motions toward her. Could she tell him not to look at her? That was ridiculous. Ridiculous, too, that something so simple could cause her heart to jump into her throat when she opened the door, and make sweat prick beneath her arms when she saw him.

Bracing herself, she opened the door for the girls and called goodbye as they scattered, then stood and looked around. He wasn't there. Not by the well, the tree, the bench … nowhere.

Anne and Kate weren't looking; they were already halfway across the clearing with Janie Cameron, all three hand in hand.

"Annie!" she called. "Where's your brother?"

Annie half-turned, pigtails bouncing.

"He's gone to Salem, Miss," she called back. "We're going home to sup with Jane today!" Not waiting for acknowledgment, the girls all skipped away, like a trio of bouncing balls.

The tension melted slowly from her neck and shoulders as she drew a long, deep breath. She felt blank for a moment, as though she weren't quite sure what to do. Then she drew herself up and brushed down her rumpled apron. Jemmy was asleep, lulled by the girls' nasal singing of the alphabet song. She could take advantage of his nap to go and fetch some buttermilk from the springhouse. Roger liked buttermilk biscuits; she'd make them for supper, with a little ham.

The springhouse was cool and dark, and restful with the sound of water running through the stone-lined channel in the floor. She loved going in there, and waiting for her eyes to adjust to the darkness, so she could admire the trailing fronds of dark-green algae that clung to the stone, drifting in the current. Jamie had mentioned that a family of bats had taken up residence in the springhouse, too—yes, there they were, four tiny bundles hung up in the darkest corner, each one barely two inches long, as neat and tidy as a Greek dolmade wrapped in grape leaves. She smiled at the thought, though it was followed by a pang.

She had eaten dolmades with Roger, at a Greek restaurant in Boston. She didn't care all that much for Greek food, but it would have been a memory of their own time to share with him, when she told him about the bats. If she told him now, she thought, he would smile in response—but the smile wouldn't quite reach his eyes, and she would remember alone.

She left the springhouse, walking slowly, the bucket of buttermilk in one hand balanced by a wedge of cheese in the other. A cheese omelette would be good for lunch; quick to cook, and Jemmy loved it. He preferred to use his spoon to kill his prey, then devour it messily with both hands, but he *would* feed himself, and that was progress.

She was still smiling when she looked up from the path to see Obadiah Henderson sitting on her bench.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice was sharp, but higher than she'd intended it to be. "The girls said you'd gone to Salem."

"So I had." He rose to his feet and stepped forward, that knowing half-smile on his lips. "I came back."

She suppressed the urge to take a step back. This was her house; damned if he'd make her back away from her own door.

"Well, the girls have gone," she said, as coolly as she could manage. "They're at the Camerons'." Her heart was thumping heavily, but she moved past him, meaning to put the bucket down on the porch.

She bent, and he put his hand on the small of her back. She froze momentarily. He didn't move his hand, didn't try to stroke or squeeze—but the weight of it lay on her spine like a dead snake. She jerked upright and whirled around, taking a step back, and to hell with not letting him intimidate her. He'd already done that.

"I brought ye something," he said. "From Salem." The smile was still on his lips, but it seemed completely disconnected from the look in his eyes.

"I don't want it," she said. "I mean—thank you. But no. It isn't right for you to—my husband wouldn't like it."

"No need for him to know." He took a step toward her; she took one back, and the smile grew wider.

"I hear your husband's not home much, these days," he said softly. "That sounds lonesome."

He put out a large hand, reaching toward her face. Then there was an odd, small sound, a sort of meaty *tnk!*, and his face went blank, his eyes shocked wide.

She stared at him for a moment, completely unable to grasp what had happened. Then he turned those staring eyes to his outstretched hand, and she saw the small knife stuck in the flesh of his forearm, and the growing stain of red on the shirt around it.

"Leave this place." Jamie's voice was low, but distinct. He stepped out of the trees, eyes fixed on Henderson in a most unfriendly manner. He reached them in three strides, put out his hand, and pulled the knife from Henderson's arm. Obadiah made a small sound, deep in his throat, like a wounded animal might make, baffled and pitiable.

"Go," Jamie said. "Never come here again."

The blood was flowing down Obadiah's arm, dripping from his fingers. A few drops fell into the buttermilk, floating crimson on the rich yellow surface. In a dazed sort of way, she recognized the horrid beauty of it—like rubies set in gold.

Then the boy was going, free hand clamped to his wounded arm, shambling, then running for the trail. He disappeared into the trees, and the dooryard was very still.

"Did you have to do that?" was the first thing she managed to say. She felt stunned, as though she herself had been struck with something. The blood drops were beginning to blur, their edges dissolving into the buttermilk, and she thought she might throw up.

"Should I have waited?" Her father caught her by the arm, pulled her down to sit on the porch.

"No. But you—couldn't you just … have *said* something to him?" Her lips felt numb and there were small flashing lights in the periphery of her vision. Remotely, she realized that she was going to faint, and leaned forward, her head between her knees, face buried in the sanctuary of her apron.

"I did. I told him to go." The porch creaked as Jamie sat down beside her.

"You know what I mean." Her voice sounded odd to her own ears, muffled in the folds of cloth. She sat up slowly; the red spruce by the big house wavered slightly in her vision, but then steadied. "What were you *doing*? Showing off? How could you count on sticking somebody with a knife at that distance? And what was that, anyway—a *pen*knife?"

"Aye. It was all I had in my pocket. And in fact, I didna mean to stick him," Jamie admitted. "I meant to throw into the wall o' the cabin, and when he looked to see what made the noise, hit him from behind. He moved, though."

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply through her nose, willing her stomach to settle.

"Ye're all right, *a muirninn*?" he asked quietly. He laid a hand gently on her back—somewhat higher than Obadiah had. It felt good; large, warm and comforting.

"I'm fine," she said, opening her eyes. He looked worried, and she made an effort, smiling at him. "Fine."

He relaxed a bit, then, and his eyes grew less troubled, though they stayed intent on hers.

"Well, then," he said. "It's no the first time, aye? How long has yon gomerel been tryin' it on wi' you?"

She took another breath, and forced her fists to uncurl. She wanted to minimize the situation, moved by a sense of guilt—for surely she should have found some way to stop it? Faced with that steady blue gaze, though, she couldn't lie.

"Since the first week," she said.

His eyes widened.

"So long? And why did ye not tell your man about it?" he demanded, incredulous.

She was startled, and fumbled for a reply.

"I—well—I didn't think … I mean, it wasn't his problem." She heard the sudden intake of his breath, no doubt the precursor to some biting remark about Roger, and hurried to defend him.

"It—he—he didn't actually *do* anything. Just looks. And … smiles. How could I tell Roger he was *looking* at me? I didn't want to look weak, or helpless." Though she had been both, and knew it. The knowledge burned under her skin like ant bites.

"I didn't want to … to have to ask him to defend me."

He stared at her, his face blank with incomprehension. He shook his head slowly, not taking his eyes away from her.

"What in God's name d'ye think a man is *for*?" he asked at last. He spoke quietly, but in tones of complete bewilderment. "Ye want to keep him as a pet, is it? A lapdog? Or a caged bird?"

"You don't understand!"

"Oh. Do I not?" He blew out a short breath, in what might have been a sardonic laugh. "I have been marrit near thirty years, and you less than two. What is it that ye think I dinna understand, lass?"

"It isn't—it isn't the same for you and Mama as it is for me and Roger!" she burst out.

"No, it's not," he agreed, his voice level. "Your mother has regard for my pride, and I for hers. Or do ye maybe think her a coward, who canna fight her own battles?"

"I … no." She swallowed, feeling perilously close to tears, but determined not to let them escape. "But, Da—it *is* different. We're from another place, another time."

"I ken that fine," he said, and she saw the edge of his mouth curl up in a wry half-smile. His voice grew more gentle. "But I canna think that men and women are so different, then."

"Maybe not." She swallowed, forcing her voice to steady. "But maybe Roger's different. Since Alamance."

He drew breath as though to speak, but then let it out again slowly, saying nothing. He had taken his hand away; she felt the lack of it. He leaned back a little, looking out over the dooryard, and his fingers tapped lightly on the boards of the porch between them.

“Aye,” he said at last, quietly. “Maybe so.”

She heard a muffled thump in the cabin behind them, then another. Jem was awake, throwing his toys out of his cradle. In a moment, he would start calling for her to come and pick them up. She stood up suddenly, straightening her dress.

“Jem’s up; I have to go in.”

Jamie stood up, too, and picking up the bucket, flung the buttermilk in a thick yellow splash across the grass.

“I’ll fetch ye more,” he said, and was gone before she could tell him not to bother.

Jem was standing up, clinging to the side of his cradle, eager for escape, and launched himself into her arms when she bent to pick him up. He was getting heavy, but she clutched him tightly to her, pressing her cheek against his head, damp with sweaty sleep. Her heart was beating heavily, feeling bruised inside her chest.

“That sounds lonesome,” Obadiah Henderson had said. He was right.

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CREAMED CRUD

Jamie leaned back from the table, sighing in repletion. As he started to get up, though, Mrs. Bug popped up from her place, wagging an admonitory finger at him.

"Now, sir, now, sir, ye'll be going nowhere, and me left wi' gingerbread and fresh crud to go to waste!"

Brianna clapped a hand to her mouth, with the muffled noise characteristic of one who has just shot milk up one's nose. Jamie and Mr. Bug, to whom "crud" was the familiar Scottish usage for "curds," both looked at her curiously, but made no comment.

"Well, I'll surely burst, Mrs. Bug, but I expect I'll die a happy man," Jamie informed her. "Bring it on, then—but I've a wee thing to fetch whilst ye serve it out." With amazing agility for a man who had just consumed a pound or two of spiced sausage with fried apples and potatoes, he slid out of his chair and disappeared down the hall toward his study.

I took a deep breath, pleased that I had smelled the gingerbread cooking earlier in the afternoon, and had had the foresight to remove my stays before sitting down to supper.

"Wan' crud!" Jemmy crowed, picking up infallibly on the word most calculated to cause maternal consternation. He pounded his hands on the table in ecstasy, chanting, "Crud-crud-crud-crud!" at the top of his lungs.

Roger glanced at Bree with a half-smile, and I was pleased to see that she caught it, smiling back even as she captured Jemmy's hands and started the job of wiping the remains of dinner off his face.

Jamie returned just as the gingerbread and curds—these being sugared and whipped into creamy blobs—made their appearance. He reached over Roger's shoulder as he passed, and deposited a cloth-bound ledger on the table in front of him, topped with the small wooden box containing the astrolabe.

"The weather's good for another two months, maybe," he said casually, sitting down and sticking a finger into the huge dollop of creamed crud on his plate. He stuck the finger in his mouth, closing his eyes in bliss.

"Aye?" The word came out choked and barely audible, but enough to make Jemmy quit babbling and stare at his father open-mouthed. I wondered whether it was the first time Roger had spoken today.

Jamie had opened his eyes and picked up his spoon, eyeing his dessert with the determination of a man who means to die trying.

"Aye, well, Fergus will be going down to the coast just before snowfall—if he can take the surveying reports to be filed in New Bern then, that will be good, no?" He dug into the gingerbread in a businesslike way, not looking up.

There was a silence, filled only with heavy breathing and the clack of spoons on wooden plates. Then Roger, who had not picked up his spoon, spoke.

"I can … do that." It might have been no more than the effort it took to force air through his scarred throat, but there was an emphasis on the last word, that made Brianna wince. Only slightly, but I saw it—and so did Roger. He glanced at her, then looked down at his plate, lashes dark against his cheek. His jaw tightened, and he picked up his spoon.

"Good, then," Jamie said, even more casually. "I'll show ye how. Ye can go in a week."

Last night I dreamed that Roger was leaving. I've been dreaming about his going for a week, ever since Da suggested it. Suggested—

ha. Like Moses brought down the Ten Suggestions from Mount Sinai.

In the dream, Roger was packing things in a big sack, and I was busy mopping the floor. He kept getting in my way, and I kept pushing the sack aside to get at another part of the floor. It was filthy, with all sorts of stains and sticky glop. There were little bones scattered around, like Adso had eaten some little animal there, and the bones kept getting caught up in my mop.

I don't want him to go, but I do, too. I hear all the things he isn't saying; they echo in my head. I keep thinking that when he's gone, it will be quiet.

She passed abruptly from sleep to instant wakefulness. It was just past dawn, and she was alone. There were birds singing in the wood. One was caroling near the cabin, its notes sharp and musical. Was it a thrush? she wondered.

She knew he was gone, but lifted her head to check. The rucksack was gone from beside the door, as was the bundle of food and bottle of cider she had prepared for him the night before. The bodhran still hung in its place on the wall, seeming to float suspended in the unearthly light.

She had tried to get him to play again, after the hanging, feeling that at least he could still have music, if not his voice. He had resisted, though, and finally she could see that she was angering him with her insistence, and had stopped. He would do things his way—or not at all.

She glanced toward the cradle, but all was quiet, Jemmy still sound asleep. She lay back on her pillow, hands lifting to her breasts. She was naked, and they were smooth, round, and full as gourds. She squeezed one nipple gently, and tiny pearls of milk popped out. One swelled bigger, overflowed, and ran in a tiny, tickling droplet down the side of her breast.

They had made love before sleeping, the night before. At first, she hadn't thought he would, but when she came up to him and put her arms around him, he had clasped her hard against himself, kissed her slowly for a long, long time, and finally carried her to bed.

She had been so anxious for him, wanting to assure him of her love with mouth and hands and body, to give him something of herself to take away, that she had forgotten herself completely, and been surprised when the climax overtook her. She slid one hand down, between her legs, remembering the sense of being caught up suddenly by a great wave, swept helplessly toward shore. She hoped that Roger had noticed; he hadn't said anything, nor opened his eyes.

He had kissed her goodbye in the dark before dawn, still silent. Or had he? She put a hand to her mouth, suddenly unsure, but there was no clue in the smooth, cool flesh of her lips.

Had he kissed her goodbye? Or had she only dreamed it?

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BEAR-KILLER

August, 1771

The horses neighing from the direction of the paddock announced company. Curious, I abandoned my latest experiment and went to peer out of the window. Neither horse nor man was in evidence in the dooryard, but the horses were still snorting and carrying on as they did when they saw someone new. The company must be afoot, then, and have gone round to the kitchen door—which most people did, this being mannerly.

This supposition was almost instantly borne out by a high-pitched shriek from the back of the house. I poked my head out into the hall just in time to see Mrs. Bug race out of the kitchen as though discharged from a cannon, screaming in panic.

Not noticing me, she shot past and out of the front door, which she left hanging open, thus enabling me to see her cross the dooryard and vanish into the woods, still in full cry. It came as something of an anticlimax, when I glanced the other way and saw an Indian standing in the kitchen doorway, looking surprised.

We eyed each other warily, but as I appeared indisposed to screaming and running, he relaxed slightly. As he appeared unarmed and lacking paint or any other evidence of malevolent intent, I relaxed slightly.

"Osiyo," I said cautiously, having observed that he was a Cherokee, and dressed for visiting. He wore three calico shirts, one atop the other, homespun breeches, and the odd drooping cap, rather like a half-wound turban, that men favored for formal

occasions, plus long silver earrings and a handsome brooch in the shape of the rising sun.

He smiled brilliantly in response to my greeting, and said something I didn't understand at all. I shrugged helplessly, but smiled in return, and we stood there nodding at one another and smiling back and forth for several moments, until the gentleman, struck by inspiration, reached into the neck of his innermost shirt—a dressy number printed with small yellow diamonds on a blue background—and withdrew a leather thong, on which were strung the curved black claws of one or more bears.

He held these up, rattled them gently, and raised his eyebrows, glancing to and fro as though searching for someone under the table or on the cabinet.

"Oh," I said, comprehending immediately. "You want my husband." I mimed someone aiming a rifle. "The Bear-Killer?"

A flash of good teeth in a beaming smile rewarded my intelligence.

"I expect he'll be along any minute," I said, waving first at the window, indicating the path taken by the exiting Mrs. Bug—who had undoubtedly gone to inform Himself that there were red savages in the house, bent on murder, mayhem, and the desecration of her clean floor—and then in the direction of the kitchen. "Come back, won't you, and have a drink of something?"

He followed me willingly, and we were seated at the table, companionably sipping tea and exchanging further nods and smiles, when Jamie came in, accompanied not only by Mrs. Bug, who stuck close to his coattails, casting suspicious looks at our guest, but by Peter Bewlie.

Our guest was promptly introduced as Tsatsa'wi, the brother of Peter's Indian wife. He lived in a small town some thirty miles past the Treaty Line, but had come to visit his sister, and was staying with the Bewlies for a time.

"We were havin' a wee pipe after our supper last night," Peter explained, "and Tsatsa'wi was a-telling of my wife about a difficulty in their village—and she tellin' it to me, ye see, him havin' no English and me not speakin' so verra much of their tongue, no but the names of things and the odd politeness here and there—but as I say, he was telling of a wicked bear, what's been a-plaguing of them for months past."

"I should think Tsatsa'wi well-equipped to deal wi' such a creature, by the looks of it," Jamie said, nodding at the Indian's necklace of claws, and touching his own chest in indication. He smiled at Tsatsa'wi, who evidently gathered the meaning of the compliment and smiled broadly back. Both men bowed slightly to each other over the cups of tea, in token of mutual respect.

"Aye," Peter agreed, licking droplets of liquid from the corners of his mouth, and smacking his lips in approval. "He's a bonnie hunter, is Tsatsa'wi, and in the usual course o' things, I expect he and his cousins might manage well enough. But it seems as how this particular bear is just that wee bit above the odds. So I says to him as perhaps we'll come and tell *Mac Dubh* about it, and maybe as Himself would spare the time to go and sort the creature for them."

Peter lifted his chin to his brother-in-law, and nodded toward Jamie, with a proprietorial air of pride. *See,* said the gesture. *I told you. He can do it.*

I suppressed a smile at this. Jamie caught my eye, coughed modestly and set down his cup.

"Aye, well. I canna come just yet awhile, but perhaps when the hay is in. D'ye ken what's the nature of this problematical bear, Peter?"

"Oh, aye," Peter said cheerfully. "It's a ghost."

I choked momentarily on my own tea. Jamie didn't seem too shocked, but rubbed his chin dubiously.

"Mmphm. Well, what's it done, then?"

The bear had first made its presence known nearly a year before, though no one had seen it for some time. There had been the usual incidents of depredation—the carrying away of racks of drying fish or strings of corn hung outside houses, the stealing of meat from lean-tos—but at first the townspeople had regarded this merely as the work of a bear slightly more clever than the usual—the usual bear being completely unconcerned as to whether he was observed in the act.

“It would only come at night, ye see,” Peter explained. “And it didna make a great deal o’ noise. Folk would just come out in the morning and find their stores broken into, and not a sound made to rouse them.”

Brianna, who had seen Mrs. Bug’s unceremonious exit and come up to investigate the cause, began humming softly under her breath—a song to which memory promptly supplied the words, *“Oh, he’ll sleep ’til noon, but before it’s dark … he’ll have every picnic basket that’s in Jellystone Park …”* I pressed a napkin to my mouth, ostensibly to blot the remains of the tea.

“They kent it was a bear from the first, aye?” Peter explained. “Footprints.”

Tsatsa’wi knew that word; he spread his two hands out on the table, thumb to thumb, demonstrating the span of the footprint, then touched the longest of the claws hung round his neck, nodding significantly.

The townspeople, thoroughly accustomed to bears, had taken the usual precautions, moving supplies into more protected areas, and putting out their dogs in the evening. The result of this was that a number of dogs had disappeared—again without sound.

Evidently the dogs had grown warier, or the bear hungrier. The first victim was a man, killed in the forest. Then, six months ago, a child had been taken. Brianna stopped humming abruptly.

The victim was a baby, snatched cradle-board and all from the bank of the river where its mother was washing clothes toward sunset. There had been no sound, and no clue left save a large clawed footprint in the mud.

Four more of the townspeople had been killed in the months since. Two children, picking wild strawberries by themselves in late afternoon. One body had been found, the neck broken, but otherwise untouched. The other had disappeared; marks showed where it had been dragged into the woods. A woman had been killed in her own cornfield, again toward sunset, and partially eaten where she fell. The last victim, a man, had in fact been hunting the bear.

“They didna find anything of *him*, save his bow and a few bits o’ bloodied clothes,” Peter said. I heard a small thump behind me, as Mrs. Bug sat down abruptly on the settle.

“So they have hunted it themselves?” I asked. “Or tried to, I should say?”

Peter took his eyes off Jamie and looked at me, nodding seriously.

“Oh, aye, Mrs. Claire. That’s how they kent what it was, finally.”

A small party of hunters had gone out loaded—literally—for bear, armed with bows, spears, and the two muskets the village boasted. They had circled the village in a widening gyre, convinced that since the bear’s attentions focused on the town, it would not wander far away. They had searched for four days, now and then finding old spoor, but no trace of the bear itself.

“Tsatsa’wi was wi’ them,” Peter said, lifting a finger toward his brother-in-law. “He and one of his friends were sittin’ up at night, keepin’ watch whilst the others slept. ’Twas just past moonrise, he said, when he got up to make water. He turned back to the fire—just in time to see his friend bein’ dragged off, stone-dead, wi’ his neck crushed in the jaws of the thing itself!”

Tsatsa’wi had been following the tale intently. At this juncture, he nodded, and made a gesture that appeared to be the Cherokee equivalent of the Sign of the Cross—some quick and formal gesture to repel evil. He began to talk himself, then, hands flying as he pantomimed the subsequent events.

He had of course shouted, rousing his remaining comrades, and had rushed at the bear, hoping to frighten it into dropping his friend—though he could see that the man was already dead. He tilted his head sharply to indicate a broken neck, letting his tongue loll in an expression that would have been quite funny under different circumstances.

The hunters were accompanied by two dogs, which had also flown at the bear, barking. The bear had in fact dropped its prey, but instead of fleeing, had charged toward him. He had thrown himself to one side, and the bear had paused long enough to swipe one of the dogs off its feet, and then disappeared into the darkness of the wood, pursued by the other dog, a hail of arrows, and a couple of musket balls—none of which had touched it.

They had chased the bear into the wood with torches, but been unable to discover it. The second dog had returned, looking ashamed of itself—Brianna made a small fizzing noise at Tsatsa'wi's pantomime of the dog—and the hunters, thoroughly unnerved, had gone back to their fire, and spent the rest of the night awake, before returning to their village in the morning. From whence, Tsatsa'wi indicated with a graceful gesture, he had now come to solicit the assistance of the Bear-Killer.

"But why do they think it's a ghost?" Brianna leaned forward, interest displacing her initial horror at the tale.

Peter glanced at her, one eyebrow raised.

"Oh, aye, he didna say—or rather I expect he did, but not so as ye'd understand it. The thing was much bigger than the usual bear, he says—and pure white. He says when it turned to look at him, the beast's eyes glowed red as flame. They kent at once it must be a ghost, and so they werena really surprised that their arrows didna touch it."

Tsatsa'wi broke in again, pointing first at Jamie, then tapping his bear-claw necklace, and then—to my surprise—pointing at me.

"Me?" I said. "What have I got to do with it?"

The Cherokee heard my tone of surprise, for he leaned across the table, took my hand in his own, and stroked it—not in any affectionate manner, but merely as an indication of my skin. Jamie made a small sound of amusement.

"You're verra white, Sassenach. Perhaps the bear will think ye're a kindred spirit." He grinned at me, but Tsatsa'wi evidently gathered the sense of this, for he nodded seriously. He dropped my hand, and made a brief cawing noise—a raven's call.

"Oh," I said, distinctly uneasy. I didn't know the words in Cherokee, but evidently the people of Tsatsa'wi's town had heard of White Raven as well as the Bear-Killer. Any white animal was regarded as being significant—and often sinister. I didn't know whether the implication here was that I might exert some power over the ghost-bear—or merely serve as bait—but evidently I was indeed included in the invitation.

And so it was that a week later, the hay safely in and four sides of venison peacefully hanging in the smokehouse, we set off toward the Treaty Line, bent on exorcism.

Besides Jamie and myself, the party consisted of Brianna and Jemmy, the two Beardsley twins, and Peter Bewlie, who was to guide us to the village, his wife having gone ahead with Tsatsa'wi. Brianna had not wanted to come, more for fear of taking Jemmy into the wilderness than from disinclination to join the hunt, I thought. Jamie had insisted that she come, though, claiming that her marksmanship would be invaluable. Unwilling to wean Jemmy yet, she had been obliged to bring him—though he seemed to be thoroughly enjoying the trip, hunched bright-eyed on the saddle in front of his mother, alternately gabbling happily to himself about everything he saw, or sucking his thumb in dreamy content.

As for the Beardsleys, it was Josiah that Jamie wanted.

"The lad's killed two bears, at least," he told me. "I saw the skins, at the Gathering. And if his brother likes to come along, I canna see the harm in it."

"Neither do I," I agreed. "But why are you making Bree come? Can't you and Josiah handle the bear between you?"

"Perhaps," he said, running an oily rag over the barrel of his gun. "But if two heids are better than one, then a third should be better still, no? Especially if it shoots like yon lass can."

"Yes?" I said skeptically. "And what else?"

He glanced up at me and grinned.

"What, ye dinna think I have ulterior motives, do ye, Sassenach?"

"No, I don't think so—I know so."

He laughed and bent his head over his gun. After a few moments' swabbing and cleaning, though, he said, not looking up, "Aye, well. I thought it no bad idea for the lass to have friends among the Cherokee. In case she should need a place to go, sometime."

The casual tone of voice didn't fool me.

"Sometime. When the Revolution comes, you mean?"

"Aye. Or … when we die. Whenever that might be," he added precisely, picking the gun up and squinting down the barrel to check the sight.

It was bright Indian summer still, but I felt shards of ice crackle down my back. Most days, I managed to forget that newspaper clipping—the one that reported the death by fire of one James Fraser and his wife, on Fraser's Ridge. Other days, I remembered it, but shoved the possibility to the back of my mind, refusing to dwell on it. But every now and then, I would wake up at night, with bright flames leaping in the corners of my mind, shivering and terrified.

"The clipping said, 'no living children,' " I said, determined to face down the fear. "Do you suppose that means that Bree and Roger will have gone … somewhere … before then?" To the Cherokee, perhaps. Or to the stones.

"It might." His face was sober, eyes on his work. Neither one of us was willing to admit the other possibility—no need, in any case.

Reluctant though she had been to come, Brianna too seemed to be enjoying the trip. Without Roger, and relieved of the chores of cabin housekeeping, she seemed much more relaxed, laughing and joking with the Beardsley twins, teasing Jamie, and nursing Jemmy by the fire at night, before curling herself around him and falling peacefully asleep.

The Beardsleys were having a good time, too. The removal of his infected adenoids and tonsils had not cured Keziah's deafness, but had improved it markedly. He could understand fairly loud speech now, particularly if you faced him and spoke clearly, though he seemed to make out anything his twin said with ease, no matter how softly voiced. Seeing him look round wide-eyed as we rode through the thick, insect-buzzing forest, fording streams and finding faint deer paths through the thickets, I realized that he had never been anywhere in his life, save the area near the Beardsley farm, and Fraser's Ridge.

I wondered what he would make of the Cherokee—and they of him and his brother. Peter had told Jamie that the Cherokee regarded twins as particularly blessed and lucky; the news that the Beardsleys would be joining the hunt had delighted Tsatsa’wi.

Josiah seemed to be having fun, too—insofar as I could tell, he being a very contained sort of person. As we drew closer to the village, though, I thought that he was becoming slightly nervous.

I could see that Jamie was a trifle uneasy, too, though in his case, I suspected the reason for it. He didn’t mind at all going to help with a hunt, and was pleased to have the opportunity to visit the Cherokee. But I rather thought that having his reputation as the Bear-Killer trumpeted before him, so to speak, was making him uncomfortable.

This supposition was borne out when we camped on the third night of our journey. We were no more than ten miles from the village, and would easily make it by mid-day next day.

I could see him making up his mind to something as we rode, and as we all sat down to supper round a roaring fire, I saw him suddenly set his shoulders and stand up. He walked up to Peter Bewlie, who sat staring dreamily into the fire, and faced him with decision.

“There’s a wee thing I have to be sayin’, Peter. About this ghost-bear we’re off to find.”

Peter looked up, startled out of his trance. He smiled, though, and slid over to make room for Jamie to sit down.

“Oh, aye, *Mac Dubh*?”

Jamie did so, and cleared his throat.

“Well, ye see—the fact is that I dinna actually ken a great deal about bears, as there havena been any in Scotland for quite some years now.”

Peter’s eyebrows went up.

“But they say ye killed a great bear wi’ naught but a dirk!”

Jamie rubbed his nose with something approaching annoyance.

“Aye, well … so I did, then. But I didna hunt the creature down. It came after me, so I hadna got a choice about it, after all. I’m none so sure that I shall be of any great help in discovering this ghost-bear. It must be a particularly clever bear, no? To have been walking in and out of their village for months, I mean, and no one with more than a single glimpse of it?"

"Smarter than the average bear," Brianna agreed, her mouth twitching slightly. Jamie gave her a narrow look, which he switched to me as I choked on a swallow of beer.

"What?" he demanded testily.

"Nothing," I gasped. "Nothing at all."

Turning his back on us in disgust, Jamie suddenly caught sight of Josiah Beardsley, who, while not guffawing, was doing a little mouth-twitching of his own.

"What?" Jamie barked at him. "They're no but loons"—he jerked a thumb over his finger at Brianna and me—"but what's to do wi' *you*, eh?"

Josiah immediately erased the grin from his face and tried to look grave, but the corner of his mouth kept on twitching, and a hot flush was rising in his narrow cheeks, visible even by firelight. Jamie narrowed his eyes and a stifled noise that might have been a giggle escaped Josiah. He clapped a hand across his mouth, staring up at Jamie.

"What, then?" Jamie inquired politely.

Keziah, obviously gathering that something was up, hunched closer to his twin, squaring up beside him in support. Josiah made a brief, unconscious movement toward Kezzie, but didn't look away from Jamie. His face was still red, but he seemed to have got himself under control.

"Well, I suppose I best say, sir."

"I suppose ye had." Jamie gave him a quizzical look.

Josiah drew a deep breath, resigning himself.

" 'Twasn't a bear, always. Sometimes it was me."

Jamie stared at him for a moment. Then the corners of his mouth began to twitch.

"Oh, aye?"

"Not all the time," Josiah explained. But when his wanderings through the wilderness brought him within reach of one of the Indian villages—"Only if I was hungry, though, sir"—he hastened to add—he would lurk cautiously in the forest nearby, stealing into the place after dark and absconding with any easily-reached edibles. He would remain in the area for a few days, eating from the village stores until his strength and his pack were replenished, then move on to hunt, eventually returning with his hides to the cave where he had made a cache.

Kezzie's expression throughout this recital hadn't changed; I wasn't sure how much of it he had heard, but he didn't appear surprised. His hand rested on his twin's arm for a moment, then slid off, reaching for a skewer of meat.

Brianna's laughter had subsided, and she had been listening to Josiah's confession with a furrowed brow.

"But you didn't—I mean, I'm *sure* you didn't take the baby in its cradleboard. And you didn't kill the woman who was partly eaten … did you?"

Josiah blinked, though he seemed more baffled than shocked by the question.

"Oh, no. Why'd I do that? You don't think *I* ate 'em, do ye?" He smiled at that, an incongruous dimple appearing in one cheek. "Mind, I been hungry enough now and then as I might consider it, if I happened on somebody dead—providin' it was fairly recent," he added judiciously. "But not hungry enough as I'd kill someone a-purpose."

Brianna cleared her throat, with something startlingly like one of Jamie's Scottish noises.

"No, I didn't think you ate them," she said dryly. "I just thought that if *someone* happened to have killed them—for some other reason—the bear could have come along and gnawed on the bodies."

Peter nodded thoughtfully, seeming interested but unfazed by the assorted confessions.

"Aye, a bear'll do that," he said. "They're no picky eaters, bears. Carrion is fine by them."

Jamie nodded in response, but his attention was still fixed on Josiah.

"Aye, I've heard that, forbye. But Tsatsa'wi said he did see the bear take his friend—so it *does* kill people, no?"

"Well, it killed that one," Josiah agreed. There was an odd tone to his voice, though, and Jamie's look sharpened. He lifted a brow at Josiah, who worked his lips slowly in and out, deciding something. He glanced at Kezzie, who smiled at him. Kezzie, I saw, had a dimple in his left cheek, while Josiah's was in the right.

Josiah sighed and turned back to face Jamie.

"I wasn't a-goin' to say about this part," he said frankly. "But you been straight with us, sir, and I see it ain't right I let you go after that bear not knowin' what else might be there."

I felt the hairs rise on the back of my neck, and resisted the sudden impulse to turn round and look into the shadows behind me. The urge to laugh had left me.

"What else?" Jamie slowly lowered the chunk of bread he had been about to bite into. "And just … what else *might* be there, then?"

"Well, 'twas only the once I saw for sure, mind," Josiah warned him. "And 'twas a moonless night, too. But I'd been out all the night, and my eyes was well-accustomed to the starlight—you'll know the way of it, sir."

Jamie nodded, looking bemused.

"Aye, well enough. And ye were where, at the time?"

Near the village we were headed toward. Josiah had been there before, and was familiar with the layout of the place. A house at the end of the village was his goal; there were strings of corn hung to dry beneath the eaves, and he thought he could get away with one easily enough, provided he didn't rouse the village dogs.

"Rouse one, ye've got 'em all a-yowling on your tail," he said, shaking his head. "And it wasn't but a couple of hours before the dawn. So I crept along slow-like, looking to see was one of the rascals curled up asleep by the house I had my eye on." Lurking in the wood, he had seen a figure come out of the house. As no dogs took exception to this, it was a reasonable conclusion that the person belonged to the house. The man had paused to make water, and then, to Josiah's alarm, had shouldered a bow and quiver, and marched directly toward the woods where he lay hidden.

"I didn't think as he could be after me, but I went up a tree quick as a bob-tail cat, and not makin' no more noise than one, neither," he said, not bragging.

The man had most likely been a hunter, making an early start for a distant stream where raccoon and deer would come to drink at dawn. Not seeing any need of caution so near his own village, the man had not displayed any, walking through the forest quietly, but with no attempt at concealment.

Josiah had crouched in his tree, no more than a few feet above the man's head, holding his breath. The man had gone on, disappearing at once into the heavy undergrowth. Josiah had been just about to descend from his perch when he had heard a sudden exclamation of surprise, followed by the sounds of a brief scuffle that concluded with a sickening *thunk!*

"Just like a ripe squash when you chunk it with a rock to break it open," he assured Jamie. "Made my arse-hole draw up like a purse-string, hearin' that noise, there in the dark."

Alarm was no bar to curiosity, though, and he had eased through the wood in the direction of the sound. He could hear a rustling noise, and as he peered cautiously through a screen of cedar branches, he made out a human form stretched upon the ground, and another bending over it, evidently struggling to pull some kind of garment off the prone man's body.

"He was dead," Josiah explained, matter-of-factly. "I could smell the blood, and a shit-smell, too. Reckon the little fella caved in his head with a rock or maybe a club."

"Little fella?" Peter had been following the story with close attention. "How little d'ye mean? Did ye see his face?"

Josiah shook his head.

"No, I saw naught but the shadow of him, movin' about. It was full dark, still; the sky hadn't started to go light yet." He squinted, making a mental estimate. "Reckon he'd be shorter than me; maybe so high." He held out a hand in illustration, measuring a distance some four and a half feet from the ground.

The murderer had been interrupted in his work of plundering the body, though. Josiah, intent on watching, had noticed nothing, until there came a sudden crack from a breaking stick, and the inquiring *whuff* of a questing bear.

"You best believe the little fella run when he heard that," he assured Jamie. "He dashed right past, no further from me than you are now. That was when I got the only good look I had at him."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense," I said, as he paused to take a gulp of his beer. "What *did* he look like?"

He wiped a line of foam from the sparse whiskers on his upper lip, looking thoughtful.

"Well, ma'am, I was pretty near sure he was the devil. Only I did think the devil would be bigger," he added, taking another drink.

This statement naturally caused some confusion. Upon further elucidation, it appeared that Josiah merely meant that the mysterious "little fella" had been black.

"Wasn't 'til I went along to that Gathering of yours that it come to me that some regular folks just *are* black," he explained. "I hadn't never seen anybody who was, nor heard tell of it, neither."

Kezzie nodded soberly at this.

"Devil in the Book," he said, in his odd, gruff voice.

"The Book," it seemed, was an old Bible that Aaron Beardsley had taken somewhere in trade and never found a buyer for. Neither of the boys had ever been taught to read, but they were most entertained by the pictures in the Book, which included several drawings of the devil, depicted as a crouching black creature, going about his sly business of tempting and seduction.

"I didn't see no forked tail," Josiah said, shaking his head, "but then, he went by so fast, stood to reason I might have missed it in the dark and all."

Not wanting to draw the attention of such a person to himself, Josiah had stood still, and thus been in a position to hear the bear giving its attention to the unfortunate inhabitant of the village.

"It's like Mr. Peter says," he said, nodding at Peter Bewlie in acknowledgment. "Bears ain't particular. I never did see this 'un, so I can't say was it the white one or no—but it surely did eat on that Indian. I heard it, chawin' and slobberin' like anything." He seemed untroubled by this recollection, but I saw Brianna's nostrils pinch at the thought.

Jamie exchanged looks with Peter, then glanced back at Josiah. He rubbed a forefinger slowly down the bridge of his nose, thinking.

"Well, then," he said at last. "It seems that not all the evil doings in your brother-in-law's village can be laid at the ghost-bear's door, aye? What wi' Josiah stealin' food, and wee black devils killing folk. What d'ye ken, Peter? Might a bear take a taste for human flesh, once he'd had it, and then maybe go to hunting humans on his own?"

Peter nodded slowly, face creased in concentration.

"That might be, *Mac Dubh,*" he allowed. "And if there's a wee black bastard hangin' about in the wood—who's to say how many the bear's killed, and how many the wee black devil's done for, and the bear takin' the blame?"

"But who *is* this wee black devil?" Bree asked. The men looked from one to another, and shrugged, more or less in unison.

"It must be an escaped slave, surely?" I said, lifting my brows at Jamie. "I can't see why a free black in his right mind would off go into the wilderness alone like that."

"Maybe he isn't in his right mind," Bree suggested. "Slave *or* free. If he's going around killing people, I mean." She cast an uneasy look at the wood around us, and put a hand on Jemmy, who was curled in a blanket on the ground beside her, sound asleep.

The men looked automatically to their weapons, and even I reached under my apron to touch the knife I wore at my belt for digging and chopping.

The forest seemed suddenly both sinister and claustrophobic. It was much too easy to imagine lurking eyes in the shadows, ascribe the constant soft rustle of leaves to stealthy footsteps or the brush of passing fur.

Jamie cleared his throat.

"Your wife's not mentioned black devils, I suppose, Peter?"

Bewlie shook his head. The concern with which he had greeted Josiah's tale was still stamped upon his grizzled face, but a small touch of amusement gleamed in his eyes.

"No. I can't say as she has, *Mac Dubh*. The only thing I recall in that regard is the Black Man o' the West."

"And who is that?" Josiah asked, interested.

Peter shrugged and scratched at his beard.

"Aye, well, I shouldna say it's anyone, so to speak. Only that the shamans say there is a spirit who lives in each o' the four directions, and each spirit has a color to him—so when they go to singin' their prayers and the like, they'll maybe call the Red Man o' the East to help the person they're singing for, because Red is the color of triumph and success. North, that's blue—the Blue Man, to give the spirit of the North his right name—that's defeat and trouble. So ye'd call on *him* to come and give your enemy a bit of grief, aye? To the South, that's the White Man, and he's peace and happiness; they sing to him for the women with child, and the like."

Jamie looked both startled and interested to hear this.

"That's verra like the four airts, Peter, is it no?"

"Well, it is, then," Peter agreed, nodding. "Odd, no? That the Cherokee should get hold of the same notions as we Hielanders have?"

"Oh, not so much." Jamie gestured to the dark wood, beyond the small circle of our fire. "They live as we do, aye? Hunters, and dwellers in the mountains. Why should they not see what we have seen?"

Peter nodded slowly, but Josiah was impatient with this philosophizing.

"Well, what's the Black Man o' the West, then?" he demanded. Both Jamie and Peter turned their heads as one to look at him. The two men looked nothing alike—Peter was short, squat, and genially bearded, Jamie tall and elegant, even in his hunting clothes—and yet there was something identical in their eyes, that made little mouse-feet run skittering down my spine. "What we have seen," indeed! I thought.

"The West is the home of the dead," Jamie said softly, and Peter nodded, soberly.

"And the Black Man o' the West is death himself," he added. "Or so say the Cherokee."

Josiah was heard to mutter that he didn't think so very much of *that* idea, but Brianna thought even less of it.

"I do *not* believe that the spirit of the West was out in the woods conking people on the head," she declared firmly. "It was a person Josiah saw. And it was a black person. Ergo, it was either a free black or an escaped slave. And given the odds, I vote for escaped slave."

I wasn't sure it was a matter for democratic process, but I was inclined to agree with her.

"Here's another thought," she said, looking round. "What if it's this little black man who's responsible for some of the half-eaten people? Aren't some of the African slaves cannibals?"

Peter Bewlie's eyes popped at that; so did the Beardsleys'. Kezzie cast an uneasy look over his shoulder and edged closer to Josiah.

Jamie appeared amused at this suggestion, though.

"Well, I suppose ye might get the odd cannibal here and there in Africa," he agreed. "Though I canna say I've heard of one amongst the slaves. I shouldna think they'd be verra desirable as house-servants, aye? Ye'd be afraid to turn your back, for fear of being bitten in the backside."

This remark made everyone laugh, and relieved the tension somewhat. People began to stir and make preparations for going to bed.

We took especial care in putting the food into two of the saddlebags, which Jamie hung up in a tree, a good distance from the camp. Even if the ghost-bear had been revealed to be less powerful than previously supposed, there was an unspoken agreement that there was no sense taking chances.

For the most part, I managed to put aside the knowledge that we lived in a wilderness. Now and then some tangible evidence would shove the fact under my nose: nocturnal visits by foxes, possums, and raccoons, or the occasional unnerving screams of panthers, with their uncanny resemblance to the crying of women or the shrieks of small children. It was quiet now, where we were. But there was no way of standing in the center of those mountains at night, submerged in the absolute black at their feet, listening to the secret murmurs of the great trees overhead, and pretending that one was anywhere but in the grip of the forest primeval—or of doubting that the wilderness could swallow us in one gulp, if it cared to, leaving not a clue behind of our existence.

For all her logic, Brianna was by no means immune to the whispers of the forest—not with a small and tender child to guard. She didn't help with the readying of camp for the night, but instead sat close to Jemmy, loading her rifle.

Jamie, after a quick look at Brianna, announced that he and she would take the first watch; Josiah and I the next, and Peter and Kezzie the last watch of the night. Heretofore, we hadn't kept a watch, but no one complained at this suggestion.

A long day in the saddle is one of the best soporifics, and I lay down beside Jamie with that utter gratitude for being horizontal that compensates for the hardest of beds. Jamie's hand rested gently on my head; I turned my face and kissed his palm, feeling safe and protected.

Peter and the Beardsley twins fell asleep within seconds; I could hear them snoring on the other side of the fire. I was nearly asleep myself, lulled by the quiet, half-heard talk between Jamie and Bree, when I became aware that the tenor of their conversation had changed.

"Are ye worrit for your man, *a nighean*?" he asked softly.

She gave a small, unhappy laugh.

"I've been worrit since they hanged him," she said. "Now I'm scared, too—or should that be 'scairt'?" she asked, trying to make a joke of it.

Jamie made a low noise in his throat, which I think he meant to be soothing.

"He's in no more danger tonight than he was last night, lass—nor any night since he set out."

"True," she answered dryly. "But just because I didn't know about ghost-bears and black murderers last week doesn't mean they weren't out there."

"My point precisely," he replied. "He'll be no safer for your fear, will he?"

“No. You think that’s going to stop me worrying?”

There was a low, rueful chuckle in reply.

“I shouldna think so, no.”

There was a brief silence, before Brianna spoke again.

“I just—keep thinking. What will I do, if something does happen—if he … doesn’t come back? I’m all right during the day, but at night, I can’t help thinking …”

“Och, well,” he said softly. I saw him tilt up his head to the stars, blazing overhead. “How many nights in twenty years, *a nighean*? How many hours? For I spent that long in wondering whether my wife still lived, and how she fared. She and my child.”

His hand ran smoothly over my head, gently stroking my hair. Brianna said nothing in reply, but made a small, inarticulate sound in her throat.

“That is what God is for. Worry doesna help—prayer does. Sometimes,” he added honestly.

“Yes,” she said, sounding uncertain. “But if—”

“And if she had not come back to me”—he interrupted firmly—“if you had not come—if I had never known—or if I had known for sure that both of you were dead …” He turned his head to look at her, and I felt the shift of his body as he lifted his hand from my hair and reached out his other hand to touch her. “Then I would still have lived, *a nighean*, and done what must be done. So will you.”

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A DARKENING SKY

Roger pushed his way through a thick growth of sweet gum and pin oak, sweating. He was close to water; he couldn't hear it yet, but could smell the sweet, resinous scent of some plant that grew on streambanks. He didn't know what it was called, or even for sure which plant it was, but he recognized the scent.

The strap of his pack caught on a twig, and he jerked it free, setting loose a flutter of yellow leaves like a small flight of butterflies. He would be glad to reach the stream, and not only for the sake of water, though he needed that. The nights were growing cold, but the days were still warm, and he had emptied his canteen before noon.

More urgently than water, though, he needed open air. Down here in the bottomland, the stands of dogwood and sweet bay grew so thickly that he could barely see the sky, and where the sun poked through, thick grass sprang up knee-high and the prickly leaves of dahoon caught at him as he passed.

He had brought Clarence the mule, as being better suited than the horses to the rough going in the wilderness, but some places were too rough even for a mule. He had left Clarence hobbled on the higher ground, with his bedroll and saddlebags, while he thrashed his way through the brush to reach the next point for a survey reading.

A wood-duck burst from the brush at his feet, nearly stopping his heart with the drumming of its wings. He stood still, heart thumping in his ears, and a horde of vivid little parakeets came chattering through the trees, swooping down to look at him, friendly and curious. Then something unseen gave them alarm and they rose up in a bright shriek of flight, arrowing away through the trees.

It was hot; he took off his coat and tied the sleeves round his waist, then wiped his face with a shirtsleeve and resumed his shoving, the weight of the astrolabe swinging on a thong round his neck. From the top of a mountain, he could look down on the misty hollows and wooded ridges, and take a certain awed pleasure in the thought that he owned such a place. Down here, come to grips with wild vines, burrowing fox-tails, and thickets of bamboolike cane higher than his head, the thought of ownership was ridiculous—how could something like this—this fucking swamp primeval—possibly be *owned*?

Ownership aside, he wanted to finish with this jungle and get back to higher ground. Even dwarfed by the gigantic trees of the virgin forest, a man could breathe in the space beneath. The limbs of the giant tulip trees and chestnuts stretched in a canopy overhead that shaded the ground beneath, so that only small things grew beneath—mats of delicate wildflowers, lady's slippers, trilliums—and the trees' dead leaves rained down in such profusion that one's feet sank inches into the springy mat.

Incomprehensible that such a place should ever alter—and yet it did, it would. He knew that fine; *knew* it—better than knew it, he'd bloody *seen* it! He'd driven a car down a paved highway, straight through the heart of a place once like this. He knew it could be changed. And yet as he struggled through the growth of sumac and partridgeberry, he knew even better that this place could swallow him without a second's hesitation.

Still, there was something about the sheer awful scale of the wilderness that soothed him. Among the gigantic trees and teeming wildlife, he found some peace; peace from the dammed-up words inside his head, from the unspoken worry in Brianna's eyes, the judgment in Jamie's—judgment withheld, but hanging there like the sword of Damocles. Peace from the glances of pity or curiosity, from the constant slow, aching effort of speech—peace from the memory of singing.

He missed them all, especially Bree and Jem. He seldom dreamed with any coherence; not like Bree—what was she writing now in her book?—but he had wakened this morning from a vivid impression of Jem, crawling over him as he liked to do, poking and prodding inquisitively, then softly patting Roger's face, exploring eyes and ears, nose and mouth, as though searching for the missing words.

He hadn't spoken at all for the first few days of surveying, terribly relieved not to have to. Now he was beginning to talk again, though —disliking the hoarse, mangled sound of the words, but not so bothered, since there was no one else to hear.

He heard the gurgle then of water over stones, and burst through a screen of willow saplings to find the stream at his feet, sun sparking off the water. He knelt and drank and splashed his face, then chose the spots along the bank from which to take his sightings. He dug the ledger book, ink, and quill from the leather bag over his shoulder, and fished the astrolabe out of his shirt.

He had a song in his head—again. They sneaked in when he wasn't looking, melodies singing in his inner ear like sirens from the rocks, ready to dash him in pieces.

Not this one, though. He smiled to himself, as he nudged the bar of the astrolabe and sighted on a tree on the opposite bank. It was a children's song, one of the counting songs Bree sang to Jemmy. One of those terrible songs that got into one's head and wouldn't get out again. As he took his sightings and made the notations in his book, he chanted under his breath, ignoring the cracked distortion of the sounds.

"The … ants go … mar-shing … one … by one."

Five thousand acres. What in hell was he to do with it? What in hell was he to do, period?

"Down … to … the gr-grround … to ggetout … atha RAIN … bum, bum, bum …"

I discovered quickly why my name had appeared to have significance to Tsatsa'wi; the name of the village was Kalanun'yi—

Raventown. I didn't see any ravens as we rode in, but did hear one, calling hoarsely from the trees.

The village lay in a charming location; a narrow river valley at the foot of a smallish mountain. The town itself was surrounded by a small spread of fields and orchards. A middling stream ran past it, dropping down a small cataract and flowing off down the valley into what looked from a distance like a huge thicket of bamboo—a canebrake, it was called, the leafy giant canes glowing dusty gold in the sun of early afternoon.

We were greeted with cordial enthusiasm by the residents of the town, lavishly fed and entertained for a day and a night. In the afternoon of the second day, we were invited to join in what I gathered was a petition to whichever Cherokee deity was in charge of hunting, to invoke favor and protection for the expedition against the ghost-bear that was to take place next day.

It had not occurred to me, prior to meeting Jackson Jolly, that there might be as much variance in talent among Indian shaman as there was among the Christian clergy. I had by this time encountered several of both species, but buffered by the mysteries of language, had not previously realized that a calling as shaman did not necessarily guarantee a person the possession of personal magnetism, spiritual power, or a gift for preaching.

Watching a slow glaze spread across the features of the people packed into Peter Bewlie's wife's father's house, I realized now that whatever his personal charm or connections with the spirit world, Jackson Jolly was sadly lacking in the last of these talents.

I had noticed a certain look of resignation on the faces of some of the congregation as the shaman took his place before the hearth, clad in a shawl-like blanket of red flannel, and wearing a mask carved in the semblance of a bird's face. As he began to speak, in a loud, droning voice, the woman next to me shifted her weight heavily from one leg to the other and sighed.

The sighing was contagious, but it wasn't as bad as the yawning. Within minutes, half the people around me were gaping, eyes watering like fountains. My own jaw muscles ached from being clenched, and I saw Jamie blinking like an owl.

Jolly was undoubtedly a sincere shaman; he also appeared to be a boring one. The only person who appeared riveted by his petitions was Jemmy, who perched in Brianna's arms, mouth hanging open in awe.

The chant for bear-hunting was a fairly monotonous one, featuring endless repetitions of *"He! Hayuya'haniwa, hayuya'haniwa, hayuya'haniwa …"* Then slight variations on the theme, each verse ending up with a rousing—and rather startling—*"Yoho!",* as though we were all about to set sail on the Spanish main with a bottle of rum.

The congregation exhibited more enthusiasm during this song, though, and it finally dawned on me that what was wrong was probably not with the shaman himself. The ghost-bear had been plaguing the village for months; they must have gone through this particular ceremony several times, already, with no success. No, it wasn't that Jackson Jolly was a poor preacher; only that his congregation was suffering a lack of faith.

After the conclusion of the song, Jolly stamped fiercely on the hearth as punctuation to something he was saying, then took a sage-wand from his pouch, thrust it into the fire, and began to march round the room, waving the smoke over the congregation. The crowd parted politely as he marched up to Jamie and circled him and the Beardsley twins several times, chanting and perfuming them with wafts of fragrant smoke.

Jemmy thought this intensely funny. So did his mother, who was standing on my other side, vibrating with suppressed giggling. Jamie stood tall and straight, looking extremely dignified, as Jolly—who was quite short—hopped around him like a toad, lifting the tail of his coat to perfume his backside. I didn't dare catch Brianna's eye.

This phase of the ceremony complete, Jolly regained his position by the fire and began to sing again. The woman next to me shut her eyes and grimaced slightly.

My back was beginning to ache. At long last, the shaman concluded his proceedings with a shout. He then retired into the offing and took off his mask, wiping the sweat of righteous labor from his brow and looking pleased with himself. The headman of the village then stepped up to speak, and people began to shift and stir.

I stretched, as unobtrusively as possible, wondering what there might be for supper. Distracted by these musings, I didn't at first notice that the shiftings and stirrings were becoming more pronounced. Then the woman beside me straightened up abruptly and said something loud, in a tone of command. She cocked her head to one side, listening.

The headman stopped talking at once, and all around me people began to look upward. Bodies grew rigid and eyes grew wide. I heard it, too, and a sudden shiver raised gooseflesh on my forearms. The air was filled with a rush of wings.

"What on earth is that?" Brianna whispered to me, looking upward like everyone else. "The descent of the Holy Ghost?"

I had no idea, but it was getting louder—much louder. The air was beginning to vibrate, and the noise was like a long, continuous roll of thunder.

"Tsiskwa!" shouted a man in the crowd, and all of a sudden there was a stampede for the door.

Rushing out of the house, I thought at first that a storm had come suddenly upon us. The sky was dark, the air filled with thunder, and a strange, dim light flickered over everything. But there was no moisture in the air, and a peculiar smell filled my nose—not rain. Definitely not rain.

"Birds, my god, it's birds!" I barely heard Brianna behind me, among the chorus of amazement all around. Everyone stood in the street, looking up. Several children, frightened by the noise and darkness, started to cry.

It *was* unnerving. I had never seen anything like it—nor had most of the Cherokee, judging from their reaction. It felt as though the ground was shaking; the air was certainly shaking, vibrating to the clap of wings like a drum being slapped with frantic hands. I could feel the pulse of it on my skin, and the cloth of my kerchief tugged, wanting to rise on the wind.

The paralysis of the crowd didn't last long. There were shouts here and there, and all of a sudden, people were rushing up and down the street, charging into their houses and racing out again, with bows. Within seconds, a perfect hail of arrows was zipping up into the cloud of birds, and feathered bodies plopped out of the sky to land in limp, blood-soaked blobs, pierced with arrows.

Bodies weren't the only thing plopping out of the sky. A juicy dropping struck my shoulder, and I could see a rain of falling particles, a noxious precipitation from the thundering flock overhead, raising tiny puffs of dust from the street as the droppings struck. Down feathers shed from the passing birds floated in the air like dandelion seeds, and here and there, larger feathers knocked from tails and wings spiraled down like miniature lances, bobbing in the wind. I hastily backed up, taking shelter under the eaves of a house with Brianna and Jemmy.

We watched from our refuge in awe, as the villagers jostled each other in the street, archers shooting as fast as they could, one arrow following on the heels of another. Jamie, Peter Bewlie, and Josiah had all run for their guns, and were among the crowd, blasting away, not even troubling to aim. It wasn't necessary; no one could miss. Children, streaked with bird droppings, dodged and darted through the crowd, picking up the fallen birds, piling them in heaps by the doorsteps of the houses.

It must have lasted for nearly half an hour. We crouched under the eaves, half-deafened by the noise, hypnotized by the unceasing rush overhead. After the first fright, Jemmy stopped crying, but huddled close in his mother's arms, head buried under the drape of her kerchief.

It was impossible to make out individual birds in that violent cascade; it was no more than a river of feathers that filled the sky from one side to the other. Above the thunder of the wings, I could hear the birds calling to each other, a constant susurrus of sound, like a wind storm rushing through the forest.

At last—at long last—the great flock passed, stray birds trailing from the ragged fringe of it as it crossed the mountain and disappeared.

The village sighed as one. I saw people rubbing at their ears, trying to get rid of the clap and echo of the flight. In the midst of the crowd, Jackson Jolly stood beaming, liberally plastered with down feathers and bird droppings, eyes glowing. He spread out his arms and said something, and the people nearby murmured in response.

"We are blessed," Tsatsa'wi's sister translated for me, looking deeply impressed. She nodded at Jamie and the Beardsley twins. "The Ancient White has sent us a great sign. They will find the evil bear, surely."

I nodded, still feeling slightly stunned. Beside me, Brianna stooped and picked up a dead bird, holding it by the slender arrow that pierced it through. It was a plump thing, and very pretty, with a delicate, smoky-blue head and buff-colored breast feathers, the wing plumage a soft reddish-brown. The head lolled limp, the eyes covered by fragile, wrinkled gray-blue lids.

"It is, isn't it?" she said, softly.

"I think it must be," I answered, just as softly. Gingerly, I put out a finger and touched the smooth plumage. As signs and portents went, I was unsure whether this one was a good omen, or not. I had never seen one before, but I was quite sure that the bird I touched was a passenger pigeon.

The hunters set forth before dawn the next day. Brianna parted reluctantly from Jemmy, but swung up into her saddle with a lightness that made me think she wouldn't pine for him while hunting. As for Jemmy himself, he was much too absorbed in rifling the baskets under the bed platform to take much notice of his mother's leaving.

The women spent the day in plucking, roasting, smoking, and preserving the pigeons with wood-ash; the air was filled with drifting down and the scent of grilled pigeon livers was thick in the air, as the whole village gorged on this delicacy. For my part, I helped with the pigeons, interspersing this work with entertaining conversation and profitable barter, only pausing now and then to look toward the mountain where the hunters had gone, and say a brief silent prayer for their well-being—and Roger's.

I had brought twenty-five gallons of honey with me, as well as some of the imported European herbs and seeds from Wilmington. Trade was brisk, and by the evening, I had exchanged my stocks for quantities of wild ginseng, cohosh, and—a real rarity—a chaga. This item, a huge warty fungus that grows from ancient birch trees, had a reputation—or so I was told—for the cure of cancer, tuberculosis, and ulcers. A useful item for any physician to have on hand, I thought.

As for the honey, I had traded that straight across, for twenty-five gallons of sunflower oil. This was provided in bulging skin bags, which were piled up under the eaves of the house where we were staying, like a small heap of cannon balls. I paused to look at them with satisfaction whenever I went outside, envisioning the soft, fragrant soap to be made from the oil—no more hands reeking of dead pig fat! And with luck, I could sell the bulk of it for a high enough price to make up the next chunk of Laoghaire's blood money, damn her eyes.

The next day was spent in the orchards with my hostess, another of Tsatsa'wi's sisters, named Sungi. A tall, sweet-faced woman of thirty or so, she had a few words of English, but some of her friends had slightly more—and a good thing, my own Cherokee being so far limited to "Hello," "Good," and "More."

In spite of the Indian ladies' increased fluency, I had some difficulty in making out exactly what "Sungi" meant—depending upon whom I was talking to, it seemed to mean either "onion," "mint," or—confusingly—"mink." After a certain amount of cross talk and sorting out, I got it established that the word seemed to mean none of these things precisely, but rather to indicate a strong scent of some kind.

The apple trees in the orchard were young, still slender, but bearing decently, providing a small yellowish-green fruit that wouldn't have impressed Luther Burbank, but which did have a nice crunchy texture and a tart flavor—an excellent antidote to the greasy taste of pigeon livers. It was a dry year, Sungi said, frowning critically at the trees; not so much fruit as the year before, and the corn was not so good, either.

Sungi put her two young daughters in charge of Jemmy, obviously warning them to be careful, with much pointing toward the wood.

"Is good the Bear-Killer come," she said, turning back to me, apple basket on her hip. "This bear not-bear; is not speak us."

"Oh, ah," I said, nodding intelligently. One of the other ladies helpfully amplified this idea, explaining that a reasonable bear would pay attention to the shaman's invocation, which called upon the bear-spirit, so that hunters and bears would meet appropriately. Given the color of this bear, as well as its stubborn and malicious behavior, it was apparent that it was not a real bear, but rather some malign spirit that had decided to manifest itself as a bear.

"Ah," I said, somewhat more intelligently. "Jackson mentioned 'the Ancient White'—was it the bear he meant?" Surely Peter had said that white was one of the favorable colors, though.

Another lady—who had given me her English name of Anna, rather than try to explain what her Cherokee name meant—laughed in shock at that.

"No, no! Ancient White, he the fire." Other ladies chipping in here, I finally gathered that the fire, while obviously powerful and to be treated with deep respect, was a beneficial entity. Thus the atrociousness of the bear's conduct; white animals normally were accorded respect and considered to be carriers of messages from the otherworld—here one or two of the ladies glanced sideways at me—but this bear was not behaving in any manner they understood.

Knowing what I did about the bear's assistance from Josiah Beardsley and the "wee black devil," I could well understand this. I didn't want to implicate Josiah, but I mentioned that I had heard stories—carefully not saying where I had heard them—of a black man in the forest, who did evil things. Had they heard of this?

Oh, yes, they assured me—but I should not be troubled. There was a small group of the black men, who lived "over there"—nodding toward the far side of the village, and the invisible canebrake and bottomlands beyond the river. It was possible that these persons were demons, particularly since they came from the west.

It was possible that they were not. Some of the village hunters had found them, and followed them carefully for several days, watching to see what they did. The hunters reported that the black men lived wretchedly, having barely scraps of clothing and without decent houses. This seemed not how self-respecting demons should live.

However, they were too few and too poor to be worth raiding—and the hunters said there were only three women, and those very ugly—and they might be demons, after all. So the villagers were content to leave them alone for now. The black men never came near the village, one lady added, wrinkling her nose; the dogs would smell them. Conversation lapsed then, as we spread out through the orchard, gathering ripe fruit from the trees, while the younger girls gathered the windfalls from the ground.

We went home in mid-afternoon, tired, sunburnt, and smelling of apples, to find that the hunters had come back.

“Four possums, eighteen rabbits, and nine squirrels,” Jamie reported, sponging his face and hands with a damp cloth. “We found a great many birds, too, but what wi’ the pigeons, we didna bother, save for a nice hawk that George Gist wanted for the feathers.” He was windblown, the bridge of his nose burned red, but very cheerful. “And Brianna, bless her, killed a fine elk, just the other side of the river. A chest shot, but she brought it down—and cut the throat herself, though that’s a dicey thing to do, and the beast’s still thrashing.”

“Oh, good,” I said, rather faintly, envisioning a flurry of sharp hooves and lethal antlers in the close vicinity of my daughter.

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach,” he said, seeing my expression. “I taught her the proper way of it. She came from behind.”

“Oh, good,” I said, a little more tartly. “I imagine the hunters were impressed?”

“Verra much,” he said cheerfully. “Did ye ken, Sassenach, that the Cherokee let their women make war, as well as hunt? Not that they do it so often," he added, "but now and again, one will take it into her head, and go out as what they call a War Woman. The men will follow her, in fact."

"Very interesting," I said, trying to ignore the vision this summoned up, of Brianna being invited to head up a Cherokee raiding party. "Blood will out, I suppose."

"What?"

"Never mind. Did you happen to see any bears, or were you too busy exchanging interesting tidbits of anthropological lore?"

He narrowed one eye at me over the towel with which he was wiping his face, but answered equably enough.

"We found a deal of bear-sign. Josiah's an eye for it. Not only the droppings; he spotted a scratching-tree—one wi' bits of hair caught in the bark. He says that a bear has a favorite tree or two, and will come back to the same one again and again, so if ye're set to kill a particular bear, ye could do worse than camp nearby and wait."

"I gather that strategy didn't answer at present?"

"I daresay it would," he answered, grinning, "save it was the wrong bear. The hair on the tree was dark brown, not white."

The expedition had not, however, been a failure. The hunters had completed a great semi-circle round the village, casting far out into the wood, then ranging down as far as the river. And in the soft earth of the bottomland near the canebrake, they had found footprints.

"Josiah said they were different than the prints of the bear whose hair we found—and Tsatsa'wi thought they were the same as the prints he'd seen when the white bear killed his friend."

The logical conclusion, agreed upon by all the bear-experts present, was that the ghost-bear had in all probability made its den in the canebrake. Such places were dense, dark, and cool in the heat of summer, and teeming with birds and small game. Even deer would hide there in hot weather.

"You can't get into such a place on horseback, can you?" I asked. He shook his head, combing leaves out of his hair with his fingers.

"No, nor can ye make much headway on foot, either, dense as it is. But we dinna mean to go in after the bear."

Instead, the plan was to set fire to the canebrake, driving the bear—and any other game present—out onto the flat bottomland on the other side, where it could be easily killed. Evidently, this was common practice in hunting, particularly in the fall, when the canebrakes grew dry and flammable. However, the burning would likely drive out a good deal more game than only the bear. That being so, an invitation had been sent to another village, some twenty miles distant, for their hunters to come and join with those of Ravenstown. With luck, enough game would be taken to supply both villages for the winter, *and* the extra hunters would insure that the evil ghost-bear did not escape.

"Very efficient," I said, amused. "I hope they don't smoke out the slaves, too."

"What?" He paused in his tidying.

"Black devils," I said, "or something along those lines." I told him what I had learned about the settlement—if that's what it was—of escaped slaves—if that's what they were.

"Well, I dinna suppose they're demons," he said dryly, sitting down in front of me so that I could braid his hair up neatly into a queue. "But I shouldna think they'll be in danger. They must live on the far side of the canebrake, on the opposite bank o' the river. I'll ask, though. There's time; it will be three or four days before the hunters come from Kanu'gala'yi."

"Oh, good," I said, tying the thong neatly in a bow. "That will give you just about time enough to eat all the leftover pigeon livers."

The next few days passed pleasantly, though with a sense of rising anticipation that culminated with the arrival of the hunters from Kanu'gala'yi—Briertown, or so I was told. I wondered whether they had been invited because of a particular expertise in dealing with thorny territory, but forbore asking. Jamie, with his usual spongelike facility, was picking up Cherokee words like headlice, but I didn't want to tax his ability with trying to translate puns, just yet.

Jemmy appeared to have inherited his grandfather's touch with languages, and in the week since our arrival, had roughly doubled his vocabulary, with half his words being now in English and the other half in Cherokee, which rendered him unintelligible to everyone except his mother. My own vocabulary had expanded by the addition of the words for "water," "fire," "food," and "Help!"—for the rest, I depended on the kindness of the English-speaking Cherokee.

After the proper ceremonies and a large welcoming feast—featuring smoked pigeon livers with fried apples—the large party of hunters set off at dawn, equipped with pine torches and firepots, in addition to bows, muskets, and rifles. Having seen them off with a suitable breakfast—cornmeal mush mixed with pigeon livers and fresh apples—those of us not in the hunting party repaired to the houses, to pass the time in basketry, sewing, and talk.

The day was hot, muggy, and still. Not a breeze stirred in the fields, where the dry stalks of harvested corn and sunflowers lay like scattered pick-up sticks. No breath of air moved the dust in the village street. If one was going to set something on fire, I thought, it was a good day for the job. For myself, I was pleased to take refuge in the cool, shadowy interior of Sungi's cabin.

In the course of the day's conversation, I thought to ask about the components of the amulet that Nayawenne had made for me. Granted, she had been a Tuscaroran medicine-woman, so the underlying beliefs might not be the same—but I *was* curious about the bat.

"There is a story about bats," Sungi began, and I hid a smile. The Cherokee were in fact a great deal like the Scottish Highlanders, particularly in terms of liking stories. I had heard several already, in the few days we had spent in the village.

"The animals and the birds decided to play a ball game," Anna said, translating smoothly as Sungi talked. "At this time, bats walked on four feet, like the other animals. But when they came to play in the ball game, the other animals said no, they couldn't play; they were too small, and would surely be crushed. The bats didn't like this." Sungi frowned, with a grimace indicating a displeased bat.

"So the bats went to the birds, and offered to play on their side, instead. The birds accepted this offer, and so they took leaves and sticks, and they made wings for the bats. The birds won the ball game, and the bats liked their wings so much that—"

Sungi stopped talking abruptly. Her head lifted, and she sniffed the air. All around us, the women stopped talking. Sungi rose swiftly and went to the door, hand braced on the doorframe as she looked out.

I could smell the smoke—had been smelling it for the last hour as it came floating in on the wind—but I realized that the reek of burning had indeed gotten much stronger now. Sungi stepped outside; I got up and followed her with the other women, small prickles of unease beginning to nip at the backs of my knees.

The sky was beginning to darken with rain clouds, but the cloud of smoke was darker still, a roiling black smudge that rose above the distant trees. A wind had come up, riding on the edge of the approaching storm, and flurries of dry leaves rolled past us with a sound like small, skittering feet.

Most languages have a few monosyllables suitable for use in situations of sudden dismay, and so does Cherokee. Sungi said something I didn't catch, but the meaning was clear. One of the younger women licked a finger and held it up, but the gesture was unnecessary—I could feel the wind on my face, strong enough to lift the hair from my shoulders, cool on my neck. It was blowing straight toward the village.

Anna drew a long, deep breath; I could see her inflate herself, shoulders squaring to deal with the situation. Then all at once, the women were in motion, hurrying down the street toward their houses, calling for children, stopping to sweep the contents of a rack of drying jerky into a skirt or snatch a string of onions or squash from the eaves in passing.

I wasn't sure where Jemmy was; one of the older Indian girls had taken him to play with, but in the flurry, I couldn't be sure which one it was. I picked up my skirts and hurried down the street, ducking into each house without invitation, looking for him. There was a strong feeling of urgency in the air, but not panic. The sound of the dry leaves seemed constant, though, a faint rustling that followed at my heels.

I found him in the fifth house, sound asleep with several other children of different ages, all nestled like puppies in the folds of a buffalo robe. I would never have spotted him, save for his bright hair, shining like a beacon in the midst of the soft darkness. I woke them as gently as possible, and extricated Jemmy. He came awake at once, though, and was looking round, blinking in confusion.

"Come with Grannie, sweetheart," I said. "We're going to go now."

"Go horsie?" he asked, brightening at once.

"An excellent idea," I replied, hoisting him onto one hip. "Let's go find the horsie, shall we?"

The smell of smoke was much stronger when we emerged into the street. Jemmy coughed, and I could taste something acrid and bitter at the back of my mouth as I breathed. The evacuation was in full progress; people—mostly women—were hurrying in and out of the houses, pushing children before them, carrying hastily wrapped bundles of belongings. Still, there was no sense of panic or alarm in the exodus; everyone seemed concerned, but fairly matter-of-fact about it all. It occurred to me that a wooden village located in a deep forest must now and then be exposed to the risk of fire. No doubt the inhabitants had faced at least the possibility of a forest fire before, and were prepared to deal with it.

That realization calmed me a little—though the further realization that the constant dry-leaf rustling that I was hearing was in fact the crackle of the approaching fire wasn't calming at all.

Most of the horses had gone with the hunters. When I reached the brush pen, there were only three left. One of the older men of the village was mounted on one, and had Judas and the other horse on tethers, ready to lead away. Judas was saddled, and wore his saddlebags, and a rope halter. When the old man saw me, he grinned and called something, gesturing to Judas.

“Thank you!” I called back. The man leaned down and scooped Jemmy deftly from my arms, allowing me to mount Judas and get proper hold of the reins before handing Jemmy carefully back.

The horses were all restless, stamping and shifting. They knew as well as we did what fire was—and liked it even less. I took a firm hold on the halter with one hand, and a firmer hold on Jemmy with the other.

“Right, beast,” I said to Judas, with an assumption of authority. “We’re going now.”

Judas was all in favor of this suggestion; he headed for the open gap in the brush fence as though it were the finish line of a race, snagging my skirts on the thorns of the fence as we passed. I managed to hold him back a little, long enough for the old man and his two horses to emerge from the brushy paddock and catch us up.

The man shouted something to me, and pointed toward the mountain, away from the fire. The wind had picked up; it blew his long gray hair across his face, muffling his words. He shook it away, but didn’t bother to repeat himself, instead merely wheeling his mount in the direction he had pointed.

I kneed Judas in the side, turning him to follow, but kept a close rein, hesitating. I looked back over my shoulder toward the village, to see small streams of people trickling out from between the houses, all heading in the general direction the old man had indicated. No one was running, though they were all walking with great purpose.

Bree would be coming for Jemmy, as soon as she realized that the village was in danger. I knew she trusted me to see him safe, but no mother in such circumstances would rest until reunited with her child. We were not in any immediate peril, so I held back, waiting, in spite of Judas’s increasing agitation.

The wind was lashing through the trees now, ripping loose billows of green and red and yellow leaves that pelted past us, plastering my skirt and Judas’s hide in autumn patchwork. The whole sky had gone a violet-black, and I heard the first grumbles of thunder under the whistle of wind and rustle of fire. I could smell the tang of coming rain, even through the smoke, and felt a sudden hope. A good hard drench seemed just what the situation called for, and the sooner the better.

Jemmy was wildly excited by the atmospherics, and beat his fat little hands on the pommel, shouting a personal war chant toward the heavens that sounded something like "Oogie-oogie-oogie!"

Judas didn't care for this sort of behavior at all. I was having an increasingly hard time keeping him under any sort of control; he kept jerking at the halter while executing a sort of corkscrew maneuver that carried us in erratic circles. The wrapped rope was cutting hard into my hand, and Jemmy's bare heels were drumming a tattoo against my thighs.

I had just decided to give up and let the horse have his head, when he suddenly swung round and flung the head in question up, neighing loudly toward the village.

Sure enough, there were riders coming; I saw several horses coming out of the forest on the far side of the village at a trot. Judas, overjoyed to see other horses, was more than willing to go back into the village, even though it was in the direction of the fire.

I met Brianna and Jamie in the middle of the village, both looking anxiously round as they rode down the street. Jemmy shrieked with delight at sight of his mother, and lunged across into her arms, narrowly missing being dropped under the horses' nervous hooves.

"Did you get the bear?" I called to Jamie.

"No!" he shouted back, over the rising wind. "Come away, Sassenach!"

Bree was already off, heading for the forest, where the last of the villagers were disappearing into the trees. Relieved of my responsibility for Jemmy, though, I had thought of something else.

"Just a minute!" I shouted. I pulled up, and slid off Judas's back, throwing the reins toward Jamie. He leaned out to catch them, and yelled something after me, but I didn't catch it.

We were outside Sungi's house, and I had caught sight of the skins of sunflower oil, piled under the eaves. I risked a glance back in the direction of the canebrake. The fire was definitely coming closer; there were visible wisps of smoke swirling past me, and I *thought* I could see the glimmer of distant flame among the lashing trees. Still, I was fairly sure that we could outrun the fire on horseback—and that was a year's honey-profit lying about on the ground; I wasn't leaving it for the fire to take.

I dashed into the house, ignoring Jamie's infuriated bellows, and scrabbled madly through the scattered baskets, hoping against hope that Sungi hadn't taken … she hadn't. I seized a handful of rawhide strips and ran back outside.

Kneeling amid the swirling dust and smoke, I whipped strips of hide around the necks of two of the skin bags, and knotted the long ends of the two strips together, pulling the leather as tight as I could. Gathering the unwieldy pair up into my arms, I staggered back to the horses.

Jamie, seeing what I was about, gathered both sets of reins up one-handed, leaned out, and grabbed the makeshift handle that joined the skins, heaving the contraption over Gideon's withers so that the bags hung on either side.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"One more!" I called back, already running back to the house. From the corner of my eye, I could see him fighting the horses, who were plunging and snorting, anxious to be away. He was yelling uncomplimentary things about me in Gaelic, but I sensed a certain resignation in his tone, and couldn't help smiling to myself, in spite of the anxiety that tightened my chest and made me fumble with the slippery hide strips.

Judas was snorting and rolling his eyes, baring his teeth intermittently with fear, but Jamie pulled him up close, holding his head tightly while I managed to fling the second pair of oil-filled bags across his saddle, and then mount myself.

The moment Jamie's iron grip on his halter relaxed, Judas was off. The rope was in my hands, but realizing its uselessness, I merely clung to the saddle for dear life, the oil bags bouncing madly against my legs as we hightailed it for the safety of the rising ground.

The storm was a lot closer now; the wind had dropped, but the thunder sounded in a loud clap overhead, which made Judas dig in his heels and bound over the open ground like a jackrabbit. Judas hated thunder. Remembering what had happened the last time I'd ridden him in a rainstorm, I flattened myself along his back and clung like a cocklebur, grimly determined not to be thrown or scraped off in his mad career.

Then we were into the wood, and leafless branches lashed at me like whips. I pressed myself lower against the horse's neck, closing my eyes to avoid having one poked out. Judas was moving more slowly now, by necessity, but was clearly still panicked; I could feel the churn of his hindquarters, driving us upward, and hear the breath whistling through his nostrils.

The thunder came again, and he lost his footing on the slippery leaves, slewing sideways and smashing into a stand of saplings. The springy wood saved us major damage, though, and we stumbled and staggered back upright, still moving upward. Opening one eye cautiously, I could tell that Judas had somehow found a trail—I could see the faint line of it, zigging through the dense growth in front of us.

Then the trees closed in again, and I could see nothing but a claustrophobic array of interwoven trunks and branches, twined with the yellowing remnants of wild honeysuckle and the flash of scarlet creepers. The thick growth slowed the horse still further, and I was at last able to draw a deep breath and wonder where Jamie was.

The thunder cracked again, and in its wake, I heard a high-pitched neigh, not far behind me. Of course—Judas hated thunder, but Gideon hated to follow another horse. He would be close behind, pushing to catch up.

A heavy drop of rain struck me between the shoulder blades, and I heard the rustle of the beginning rain, striking drop by drop by drop on leaves and wood and ground around me. The scent of ozone was sharp in my nostrils, and the whole wood seemed to give a green sigh, opening itself to the rain.

I gave a deep sigh, too, of relief.

Judas took a few steps further, and lurched to a halt, panting and blowing. Not waiting for another clap of thunder to set him off again, I hastily slid to the ground, and seizing his halter-rope, tied him to a small tree—no easy task, with my hands stiff and shaking.

Just in time. The thunder crashed again, a clap so loud that I could feel it on my skin. Judas screamed and reared, jerking at his rope, but I had wrapped it round the tree trunk. I stumbled back to get away from his panic, and Jamie caught me from behind. He started to say something, but the thunder boomed again, drowning him out.

I turned and clung to him, shaking with the adrenaline of delayed shock. The rain began to fall in good earnest now, drops cool on my face. He kissed my forehead, then let go and led me under the overhang of a big hemlock, whose fans of needles broke the rain, providing a fragrant, almost-dry cave beneath.

As the adrenaline surging through my body began to die down, I had a moment to look around, and realized that we were not the first inhabitants of this refuge.

"Look," I said, pointing into the shadows. The traces were slight, but obvious; someone had eaten here, discarding a tidy pile of small bones. Animals were not so tidy. Animals didn't scrape up dead needles into a comfy pillow, either.

Jamie winced at another bang of thunder, but nodded.

"Aye, it's a mankiller's spot, though I dinna think it's been used lately."

"A *what*?"

"Mankiller," he repeated. The lightning flashed behind him, a vivid sheet that left his silhouette imprinted on my retina. "It's what they call the sentries; the warriors who stay outside the village, to keep watch and stop anyone coming in unaware. D'ye see?"

"I can't see a thing, just yet." I put out a hand, groping, and touched his coatsleeve, moving blindly into the shelter of his arm. I closed my eyes, in hopes of restoring my vision, but even against my sealed lids, I could see the flash and burst of lightning.

The thunder seemed to be moving off a little, or at least growing less frequent. I blinked, and found that I could see again. Jamie moved aside, gesturing, and I saw that we were standing on a sort of ledge, with the face of the mountain rising steeply behind us. Screened from view from below by a row of conifers, there was a narrow clearing—obviously man-made, as that was the only sort of clearing that occurred in these mountains. Looking out through the conifer branches, though, I had a breathtaking view over the small valley where Ravenstown lay.

The rain had slackened. Looking out from this high vantage point, though, I could see that the clouds were not one storm, but several; patches of dark rain hung randomly from the clouds like veils of gray velvet, and silent, jagged forks of lightning lanced suddenly across the black sky above the distant peaks, thunder grumbling in their wake.

Smoke still bloomed from the canebrake, a low flat crown of pale gray, almost white against the darkened sky. Even as high as we were, the smell of burning stung the nose, mingling oddly with the scent of rain. Here and there I could see flame-licks, still burning in the cane, but it was apparent that the fire was mostly out; the next shower of rain would quench it entirely. I could see, too, the people returning to the village, small groups making their way from the wood, bundles and children in tow.

I looked for riders, but saw none, let alone any with red hair. Surely Brianna and Jemmy were safe, though? I shivered suddenly; with the changeableness of mountain weather, the air had gone from smothering blanket to chill within less than an hour.

"All right, Sassenach?" Jamie's hand settled warmly on my neck, fingers rubbing gently along the tense ridge of my shoulders. I took a deep breath and let them relax, as much as I could.

"Yes. Do you think it's safe to ride down?" My only impression of the trail was that it was both narrow and steep; it would be muddy now, and slippery with wet, dead leaves.

"No," he said, "but I dinna think—" He stopped abruptly, frowning in thought as he gauged the sky. He glanced behind us; I could barely make out the outline of the horses, standing close together under the shelter of the tree where I had tied Judas.

"I was going to say I didna think it particularly safe to stay here," he said at last. His fingers tapped gently on my shoulder as he thought, pattering like raindrops.

"But yon storm is moving fast; ye can see the lightning come across the mountain, and the thunder …" With melodramatic timing, a sharp boom of thunder rolled across the valley. I heard a shrill whinny of protest from one of the horses, and the rattle of foliage as he tugged at his halter. Jamie glanced over his shoulder, expression bleak.

"Your mount's got a strong mislike of thunder, Sassenach."

"Yes, I noticed that," I said, huddling closer to him for warmth. The wind was picking up again, as the next storm rolled in.

"Aye, he'll likely break his neck, and yours, too, if ye're so misfortunate as to be on that trail when it—" Another boom of thunder drowned his words, but I took his meaning.

"We'll wait," he said, positively.

He pulled me in front of him, and put his arms round me, sighing as he rested his chin on the top of my head. We stood together in the shelter of the hemlock, waiting for the storm to come.

Far below, the canebrake seethed and hissed, the smoke of the burning beginning to rise and fly with the wind. Away from the village, this time, toward the river. I wondered suddenly where Roger was—somewhere under that murky sky. Had he found safe refuge from the storm?

"I wonder where that bear is, too," I said, voicing half my thoughts. Jamie's chest moved in a rueful laugh, but the thunder drowned his voice.

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WILDFIRE

Roger half-woke with the smell of smoke burning in his throat. He coughed and sank back into sleep, fragmented images of a sooty hearth and burnt sausages fading into mist. Tired from a morning of shoving his way through impenetrable thickets of brush and cane, he had eaten a sparse lunch and lain down for an hour's rest in the shade of a black willow on the river bank.

Lulled by the rushing water, he might have sunk back into solid slumber, but a distant shriek pulled him upright, blinking. The shriek was repeated, far off but loud. The mule!

He was on his feet, stumbling toward the sound, before he remembered the leather bag that held his ink and quills, the half-chain, and the precious surveying records. He lunged back to snatch it, then splashed across the shallows toward Clarence's hysterical braying, the weight of the astrolabe swinging on its thong against his chest. He crammed it inside his shirt to stop it catching on branches, looking desperately for the way by which he had come.

Smoke—he *did* smell smoke. He coughed, half choking as he tried to stifle it. Coughing hurt his throat, with a searing pain as the scar tissue inside seemed to tear.

"Coming," he breathed, in Clarence's direction. It wouldn't have mattered if he could have shouted; even when he'd had a voice, it hadn't the carrying quality of Clarence's. He'd left the mule hobbled in a grassy patch on the edge of the canebrake, but he hadn't come in very far.

"Again," he muttered, throwing his weight against a stand of young cane to force his way through. "Yell … again … dammit."

The sky was dark. Springing from sleep and blundering off as he had, he had no sense of where he was, save for Clarence.

Shit, what was happening? The smell of smoke was noticeably stronger; as his mind cleared from the muddle of sleep and panic, he realized that something was drastically wrong. The birds, normally somnolent in mid-day, were agitated, fluttering and calling with loud, disjointed screeches past his head. Air moved restless through the canes, fluttering their ragged leaves, and he caught a touch of warmth on his face—not the moist, clinging, all-embracing warmth of the muggy canebrake, but a dry, hot touch that brushed his cheek and sent a paradoxical chill right down his back. Holy Christ, the place was on fire.

He took a deep breath, calming himself deliberately. The canebrake was alive around him; a hot wind was moving, rattling dry canes, driving flocks of songbirds and parakeets before it, flung like handsful of bright confetti through the leaves. The smoke crept into his chest and gripped his lungs, burning, keeping him from drawing a full breath.

"Clarence," he rasped, as loudly as he could. No good; he could scarcely hear himself above the rising agitation of the canebrake. He couldn't hear the mule at all. Surely the fat-headed animal hadn't been burned to a crisp already? No, more likely, he'd broken his rag hobbles and galloped off to safety.

Something brushed his leg and he looked down in time to see the naked, scaly tail of a possum, scampering into the brush. That was as good a direction as any, he thought, and plunged into the growth of buttonbush after it.

There was a grunting somewhere near; a small pig burst out of a patch of yaupon and crossed his path, heading to the left. Pig, possum—was either known to have a good sense of direction? He hesitated for a moment, then followed the pig; it was big enough to help break a path.

A path there seemed to be; small patches of bare earth showed here and there, trampled between the tussocks of grass. Wild orchids winked among them, vivid as small jewels, and he wondered at the delicacy of them—how could he notice such things, at such a time?

The smoke was thicker; he had to stop and cough, bending nearly double and clutching at his throat, as though he could keep the tissue intact, keep it from tearing with his hands. Eyes streaming, he straightened up to find that the trail had disappeared. A thrill of panic squeezed his insides as he saw a wisp of drifting smoke, nosing its way slowly through the undergrowth, delicately questing.

He clenched his fists hard enough to feel the short nails bite into his palms, using the pain to focus his mind. He turned slowly round, eyes closed to concentrate, listening, turning his face from side to side, searching for a draft of fresh air, a sense of heat—anything that would tell him which way to go, away from the fire.

Nothing. Or rather, everything. Smoke was everywhere now, in thickening clouds that crept low across the ground, rolled black out of thickets, choking. He could *hear* the fire now, a chuckling noise, like someone laughing, low down in a scar-choked throat.

Willows. His mind clung to the notion of willows; he could see a growth of them in the distance, barely visible above the waving canes. Willows grow near water; that was where the river was.

A small red and black snake slid across his foot as he reached the water, but he scarcely noticed. There was no time for any fear but the fear of fire. He splashed into the center of the stream and dropped to his knees, bending to get his face as close to the water as he could.

There was moving air, there, cool from the water, and he gulped it, deep enough to make him cough again, shaking his body with a series of racking, tearing spasms. Which way, which way? The stream wound to and fro through acres of cane and river thicket. To follow it one way would lead him toward the bottomland—perhaps, out of the fire, or at least to open country—a place where he could see again to run. To go the other way might take him straight to the heart of the fire. But there was nothing overhead but cloudy darkness, and no way of knowing.

He pressed his arms tight against his body, trying to stifle the coughing, and felt the bulge of his leather bag. The records.

Goddamn it, he could countenance the possibility of his own death, but not the loss of those records, made over so many laborious days. Floundering and stumbling, he made his way to the river's edge. He dug frantically with his hands, scrabbling in the soft mud, ripping out handsful of the long, tough grass, yanking horsetails up by the roots. They came apart in his hands and he flung the segments heedless over his shoulder, breath sobbing in his chest as he gasped and dug.

The air was hot all round him, searing in his lungs. He crammed the leather bag into the damp hole he had made, reached out his arms and grasped the dirt, pulling it to him, the mud a comfort on his skin as he scooped it in.

He stopped, panting. He should be sweating, but the sweat dried before it reached the surface of his skin. The fire was close. Rocks, he needed rocks to mark the place—they wouldn't burn. He splashed back into the creek, groped beneath the surface, oh God it was cold, it was wet, thank God, grasped a boulder slick with green slime and threw it toward the bank. Another, a handful of smaller rocks, grasped in desperation, another big one, a flat one, another—enough, it would have to be enough, the fire was coming.

He piled his rocks into a hasty cairn, and commending his soul to the mercy of God, plunged back into the river and fled, stumbling and choking, rocks rolling and sliding under his feet, fled for as long as his trembling legs would carry him, before the smoke seized him by the throat, filled head and nose and chest, and choked him, the band of scarring a hand that squeezed out air and life, and left only blackness behind his eyes, lit by the flickering redness of fire.

He was fighting. Fighting the noose, fighting the bonds on his wrists, fighting most of all the black void that crushed his chest and sealed his throat, fighting for one final sip of precious air. He bucked, straining with every ounce of force, and then was rolling on the ground, arms flying free.

He struck something with one flailing hand. It was soft, and yelped in surprise.

Then there were hands on his shoulders, his legs, and he was sitting up, vision fractured and chest heaving in the effort to breathe. Something struck him hard in the middle of the back. He choked, coughed, gulped enough air to cough down deep in the charred center of himself, and a huge gobbet of black phlegm rolled up out of his chest, warm and slimy as a rotten oyster on his tongue.

He spat it out, choked and heaved as the bile rose up burning through the raw squeezed channel of his throat. Then spat again, gulped, and sat up, gasping.

He had no attention to spare for anything, lost in the miracle of air and breath. There were voices around him, and vague faces in the dark; everything smelled of burning. Nothing mattered but the oxygen flooding through his chest, plumping up his shriveled cells like raisins soaked in water.

Water touched his mouth, and he looked up, eyes blinking and watering in the effort to see. His eyeballs felt seared; light and shadow smeared together, and he blinked hard, warm tears a balm to the rawness of his eyes, cooling his skin as they ran down his cheeks. Someone held a cup to his lips; a woman, face blackened with soot. No, not soot. He blinked, squinted, blinked. She was black of herself. Slave?

He took a brief gulp of water, unwilling to interrupt his breathing even for the pleasure of the coolness on his ravaged throat. It was good, though—very good. His hands rose and wrapped around the cup, surprising him. He had expected the pain of broken fingers, long-numbed flesh … but his hands were whole and serviceable. He reached automatically for the hollow of his neck, expecting pain and the whistle of amber—and prodded unbelievingly at the solid flesh there. He breathed, and the air whistled through his nose and down the back of his throat. The world shifted around him, and realigned itself.

He was sitting in a ramshackle hut of some sort. There were several people in the hut, and more peering in at the door. Most of them were black, all were in rags, and none of the faces looked even faintly friendly.

The woman who had given him water looked scared. He tried a smile at her, and coughed again. She looked up at him under the ragged cloth tied round her brows, and he saw that the whites of her eyes were scarlet, the lids red-rimmed and swollen. His must look the same, from the feel of them. The air was still thick with smoke, and he could hear the distant cracks and pops of heat-split cane, the dying rumble of the fire. Somewhere nearby, a bird called once in alarm, then fell abruptly silent.

There was a conversation going on near the door, conducted in sibilant whispers. The men who were talking—no, arguing—glanced at him now and then, their faces masks of fear and distrust. It had begun to rain outside; he couldn't smell it, but cool air struck his face, and he heard the patter of drops on the roof, on the trees outside.

He drained the rest of the water, then offered the woman back the cup. She shrank back, as though he might be contaminated. He set the cup on the ground, nodding to her, and swiped at his eyes with the back of his wrist. The hair on his arm was singed; it crumbled to dust at a touch.

He strained to pick out words, but heard nothing but gabble. The men weren't speaking English, nor yet French or Gaelic. He had heard some of the fresh blackbirds brought up from Charleston for sale in the Wilmington market, talking among themselves in just that sort of husky, secretive murmur. Some African tongue—or more than one.

His skin was blistered, hot and painful in several places, and the air in the hut was so thickly warm that sweat ran down his face with the water from his eyes, but a chill touched the base of his spine at the realization. He was not on a plantation—there were none, so far into the mountains. Such isolated homesteads as there were up here would be too poor to have slaves, let alone such a number. Some of the Indians kept slaves—but not black ones.

Only one answer possible, one confirmed by their behavior. They were maroons, then, his captors—his saviors? Escaped slaves, living here in secrecy.

Their freedom—and perhaps their lives—depended on that secrecy. And here he sat, a living threat to it. His insides gelled as he realized just how tenuous his position was. *Had* they saved him from the fire? If so, they must now be regretting it, judging from the looks of the men by the door.

One of the arguants broke away from the group, came and squatted down before him, pushing the woman out of the way. Narrow black eyes darted over him, from face to chest, then back. "Who you?"

He didn't think the pugnacious questioner wanted his name. Rather, he wanted to know Roger's purpose. Possibilities flickered through Roger's mind—what would be most likely to keep him alive?

Not "hunter"—if they thought him English and alone, they'd kill him for sure. Could he pretend to be French? A Frenchman wouldn't seem so dangerous to them. Perhaps.

He blinked hard to clear his vision, and was opening his mouth to say, *"Je suis Francais—un voyageur,"* when he felt a sharp pain in the center of his chest that made him suck breath.

The metal of the astrolabe had seared him in the fire, and quick blisters had risen and burst beneath it, gluing the thing to him with their sticky fluid. As he moved now, the weight of it had torn free, ripping the ragged shreds of skin away, and leaving a throbbing raw patch in the center of his chest.

He dipped two fingers into the neck of his shirt, and carefully pulled up the leather thong.

"Sur … vey … or," he croaked, forcing the syllables past the knot of soot and scar in his throat.

"Hau!"

His questioner stared at the golden disk, eyes bulging. The men by the door pushed and shoved each other, trying to get close enough to see.

One reached out and snatched the astrolabe, dragging it off over his head. He made no attempt to keep it, but sat back, taking advantage of their preoccupation with the gaudy thing to gather his feet slowly under him. He strained to keep his eyes open, against the nearly irresistible urge to squeeze them shut; even the soft daylight from the door was painful.

One of the men glanced at him, and said something sharp. Two of them moved at once between him and the door, bloodshot eyes fixed on him like basilisks. The man holding the astrolabe called out something, a name, he thought, and there was a movement at the door, someone pushing through the bodies there.

The woman who came in looked much like the others; dressed in a ragged shift, damp with rain, with a square of cloth tied round her head, hiding her hair. One major difference, though; the thin arms and legs protruding from the shift were the weathered, freckled brown of a white person. She stared at Roger, keeping her eyes fixed on him as she moved into the center of the hut. Only the weight of the astrolabe in her hand pulled her gaze away from him.

A tall, rawboned man with one eye shoved forward. He moved close to the woman, poked a finger at the astrolabe, and said something that sounded like a question. She shook her head slowly, tracing the markings round the edge of the disk with puzzled fascination. Then she turned it over.

Roger saw her shoulders stiffen when she saw the engraved letters, and a flicker of hope sprang up in his chest; she knew it. She recognized the name.

He had been gambling that they might know what a surveyor was, might realize that the word implied that there were people awaiting his results—people who would come looking for him, if he did not return. From their point of view, there could be no gain in killing him, if others would come searching. But if the woman knew the name "James Fraser" …

The woman shot Roger a sudden, hard look, quite at odds with her earlier hesitation. She approached him, slowly, but without apparent fear.

"You are not Jameth Frather," she said, and he jerked, startled at the sound of her voice, clear but lisping. He blinked and squinted, then rose slowly to his feet, shading his eyes to see her against the glare of light from the door.

She might have been any age between twenty and sixty, though the light brown hair that showed at her temples was unmarked with gray. Her face was lined, but with struggle and hunger, he thought, not age. He smiled at her, deliberately, and her mouth drew back in reflex, a hesitant grimace, but nonetheless enough for him to catch a glimpse of her front teeth, broken off at an angle. Squinting, he made out the thin slash of a scar through one eyebrow. She was much thinner than Claire's description of her, but that was hardly surprising.

"I am not … James Fraser," he agreed hoarsely, and had to stop to cough. He cleared his throat, hawking up more soot and slime. He spat, turning politely aside, then turned back to her. "But you are … Fanny Beardsley … aren't you?"

He hadn't been sure, in spite of the teeth, but the look of shock that crossed her face at his words was solid confirmation. The men knew that name, too. The one-eyed man took a quick step forward and seized the woman by the shoulder; the others moved menacingly closer.

"James Fraser is … my wife's father," he said, as quickly as he could, before they could lay hands on him. "Do you want to know—about the child?"

The look of suspicion faded from her face. She didn't move, but a look of such hunger rose in her eyes that he had to steel himself not to step back from it.

"Fahnee?" The tall man still had a hand on her shoulder. He drew closer to her, his one eye flicking back and forth in suspicion, from the woman to Roger.

She said something, almost under her breath, and put up her hand, to cover the man's where it rested on her shoulder. His face went suddenly blank, as though wiped with a slate eraser. She turned to him, looking up into his face, talking in a low tone, quick and urgent.

The atmosphere in the hut had changed. It was still charged, but an air of confusion now mingled with the general mood of menace. There was thunder overhead, much louder than the sound of the rain, but no one took note of it. The men near the door looked at each other, then, frowning, at the couple arguing in whispers. Lightning flashed, silent, framing the people in the door with darkness. There were murmuring voices outside, sounds of puzzlement. Another boom of thunder.

Roger stood motionless, gathering his strength. His legs felt like rubber, and while breathing was still a joy, each breath burned and tickled in his lungs. He wouldn't go fast or far, if he had to run.

The argument stopped abruptly. The tall man turned and made a sharp gesture toward the door, saying something that made the other men grunt with surprise and disapproval. Still, they went, slowly, and with much muttered grumbling. One short fellow with his hair in knots glared back at Roger, bared his teeth, and drew the edge of a hand across his throat with a hiss. With a small shock, Roger saw that the man's teeth were jagged, filed to points.

The ramshackle door had barely closed behind them when the woman clutched his sleeve.

"Tell me," she said.

"Not so … fast." He coughed again, wiping spittle from his mouth with the back of his hand. His throat was seared; the words felt like cinders, forced burning from his chest. "You get … me … out of here. Then … I'll tell you. All I know."

"Tell me!"

Her fingers dug hard into his arm. Her eyes were bloodshot from the smoke, and the brown irises glowed like coals. He shook his head, coughing.

The tall man brushed the woman aside, grabbing Roger by a handful of shirt. Something gleamed dully, too close to Roger's eye to see clearly, and amid the stench of burning, he caught the reek of rotting teeth.

"You tell her, man, or I rip you guts!"

Roger brought a forearm up between them, and with an effort, shoved the man back, stumbling.

"No," he said doggedly. "You get … me out. Then I tell."

The man hesitated, crouched, the knife blade wavering in a small arc of uncertainty. His one eye flicked to the woman.

"You sure he know?"

The woman had not taken her eyes off Roger's face. She nodded slowly, not looking away.

"He knows."

"It was … a girl." Roger looked at her steadily, fighting the urge to blink. "You'll know … that much … yourself."

"Does she live?"

"Get me … out."

She was not a tall woman, nor a large one, but her urgency seemed to fill the hut. She fairly quivered with it, hands clenched into fists at her sides. She glared at Roger for a long minute more, than whirled on her heel, saying something violent to the man in the odd African tongue.

He tried to argue, but it was fruitless; the stream of her words struck him like water from a fire hose. He flung up his hands in frustrated surrender, then reached out and snatched the rag from the woman's head. He undid the knots with quick, long fingers, and whipped it into the shape of a blindfold, muttering under his breath.

The last thing Roger saw before the man fastened the cloth round his eyes was Fanny Beardsley, hair in a number of small greasy plaits round her shoulders, her eyes still on him, burning like embers. Her broken teeth were bared, and he thought she would bite him, if she could.

They didn't get out without some argument; a chorus of angry voices surrounded them for some way, and hands plucked at his clothes and limbs. But the one-eyed man still had the knife. Roger heard a shout, a scuffling of feet and bodies close by, and a sharp cry. The voices dropped, and the hands no longer snatched at him.

They walked on, his hand on Fanny Beardsley's shoulder for guidance. He thought it was a small settlement; at least, it took very little time before he felt the trees close around him. Leaves brushed his face, and the resin smell of sap was heightened by the hot, smoky air. It was still raining fairly hard, but the smell of smoke was everywhere. The ground was lumpy, layers of leaf-mold punctuated by upthrusting rocks, studded with stumps and fallen branches.

The man and woman exchanged occasional remarks, but soon fell silent. His clothes grew wet and clung to him, the seams of his breeches chafing as he walked. The blindfold was too tight to allow him to see anything, but light leaked under the edge, and from that, he could judge the changing time of day. He thought it was just past mid-afternoon when they left the hut; when they stopped at last, the light had faded almost completely.

He blinked when the blindfold was taken off, the sudden flood of light compensating for its dimness. It was late twilight. They stood in a hollow, already halfway filled with darkness. Looking up, he saw the sky above the mountains blazing with orange and crimson, the smoky haze lit up as though the world itself were still burning. Overhead, the clouds had broken; a slice of pure blue sky shone through, soft, and bright with twilight stars.

Fanny Beardsley faced him, looking smaller beneath the canopy of a towering chestnut tree, but every bit as intent as she had in the hut.

He had had plenty of time to think about it. Ought he to tell her where the child was, or should he claim not to know? If she knew, would she make an attempt to reclaim the little girl? And if so, what might be the fallout—for the child, the escaped slaves—or even for Jamie and Claire Fraser?

Neither of them had said anything about the events that had transpired at the Beardsley farmhouse, beyond the simple fact that Beardsley had died of an apoplexy. Roger was sufficiently familiar with them both, though, to draw silent deductions from Claire's troubled face and Jamie's impassive one. He didn't know what had happened, but Fanny Beardsley did—and it might well be something the Frasers would prefer remain undiscovered. If Mrs. Beardsley reappeared in Brownsville, seeking to reclaim her daughter, questions would certainly be asked—and perhaps it was to no one's benefit that they be answered.

The blazing sky washed her face with fire, though, and faced with the hunger in those burning eyes, he could speak nothing but the truth.

"Your daughter … is well," he began firmly, and she made a small strangled noise, deep in her throat. By the time he had finished telling what he knew, the tears were running down her face, making tracks in the soot and dust that covered her, but her eyes stayed wide, fixed on him as though to blink would be to miss some vital word.

The man hung back a little, wary, keeping watch. His attention was mostly on the woman, but he stole occasional glances at Roger as he spoke, and at the end, stood beside the woman, his one eye bright as hers.

"She have de money?" he asked. He had the lilt of the Indies in his speech, and a skin like dark honey. He would have been handsome, save for whatever accident had deprived him of his eye, leaving a pocket of livid flesh beneath a twisted, drooping lid.

"Yes, she's … inherited … all of Aaron … Beardsley's property," Roger assured him, breath rasping in his throat from so much talking. "Mr. Fraser saw … to it." He and Jamie had both gone to the hearing of the Orphan's Court, for Jamie to bear witness to the girl's identity. Richard Brown and his wife had been given the guardianship of the child—and her property. They had named the little girl—from what depths of sentiment or outrage, he had no idea—"Alicia."

"No matta she black?" He saw the slave's one eye flick sideways toward Fanny Beardsley, then slide away. Mrs. Beardsley heard the note of uncertainty in the man's voice, and turned on him like a viper striking.

"She is yourss!" she said. "She could not be histh, could not!"

"Yah, you say so," he replied, his face cast down in sullenness. "Dey give money to black girl?"

She stamped her foot, noiseless on the ground, and slapped at him. He straightened up and turned his face aside, but made no other attempt to escape her fury.

"Do you think I would have left her, *ever* left her, if she had been white, if she could posthibly have been white?" she shouted. She punched at him, pummelling his arms and chest with blows. "It wath your fault I had to leave her, yourss! You and that damned black hide, God damn you—"

It was Roger who seized her flailing wrists and held them tight against her straining, letting her shriek herself to hoarseness before she collapsed at last in tears.

The slave, who had watched all this with an expression between shame and anger, lifted his hands a little toward her. It was the slightest of movements, but enough; she turned at once from Roger and flung herself into her lover's arms, sobbing against his chest. He wrapped his arms awkwardly around her and held her close, rocking back and forth on his bare heels. He looked sheepish, but no longer angry.

Roger cleared his throat, grimacing at the soreness. The slave looked up at him, and nodded.

"You go, man," he said softly. Then, before Roger could turn to go, he said, "Wait … true, man, de child fix good?"

Roger nodded, feeling unutterably tired. Whatever adrenaline or sense of self-preservation had been keeping him going was all used up. The blazing sky had gone to ashes, and everything in the hollow was fading, blurring into dark.

"She's all … right. They'll take … good care of her." He groped, wanting to offer something else. "She's … pretty," he said at last. His voice was nearly gone, no more than a whisper. "A pretty … girl."

The man's face shifted, caught between embarrassment, dismay, and pleasure.

"Oh," he said. "Dat be from de mama, sure." He patted Fanny Beardsley's back, very gently. She had stopped sobbing, but stood with her face pressed against his chest, still and silent. It was nearly full dark; in the deep dusk, all color was leached away; her skin seemed the same color as his.

The man wore nothing but a tattered shirt, wet through, so that his dark skin showed in patches through it. He had a rope belt, though, with a rough cloth bag strung on it. He groped one-handed in this, and drew out the astrolabe, which he extended toward Roger.

“You don’t mean … to keep that?” Roger asked. He felt as though he was standing inside a cloud; everything was beginning to feel far away and hazy, and words reached him as though filtered through cotton wool.

The ex-slave shook his head.

“No, man, what I do wid dat? Beside,” he added, with a wry lift of the mouth, “maybe no one come look you, man, but de masta what own dat ting—he come look, maybe.”

Roger took the heavy disk, and put the thong over his neck. It took two tries; his arms felt like lead.

“Nobody … will come looking,” he said. He turned and walked away, with no idea where he was, or where he might be going. After a few steps, he turned and looked back, but the night had already swallowed them.

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BURNT TO BONES

The horses settled slightly, but were still uneasy, pawing, stamping, and jerking at their tethers, as the thunder rumbled hollowly in the distance. Jamie sighed, kissed the top of my head, and pushed his way back through the conifers to the tiny clearing where they stood.

"Well, if ye dinna like it up here," I heard him say to them, "why did ye come?" He spoke tolerantly, though, and I heard Gideon whinny briefly in pleasure at seeing him. I was turning to go and help with the reassuring, when a flicker of movement caught my eye below.

I leaned out to see it, keeping a tight grip on one of the hemlock's branches for safety, but it had moved. A horse, I thought, but coming from a different direction than that in which the refugees had come. I wove my way down the line of conifers, peeking through the branches, and reached a spot near the end of the narrow ledge where I had a clear view of the river valley below.

Not a horse, quite—it was—

"It's Clarence!" I shouted.

"Who?" Jamie's voice came back from the far end of the ledge, half-drowned by the rustle of the branches overhead. The wind was still rising, damp with returning rain.

"Clarence! Roger's mule!" Not waiting for a reply, I ducked beneath an overhanging branch and balanced myself precariously on the lip of the ledge, clinging to a rocky outcrop that jutted from the cliff where it met the ledge. There were serried ranks of trees below, marching down the slope, their tops no more than a few inches below the level of my feet, but I didn't want to risk falling down into them.

It *was* Clarence, I was sure of it. I was by no means expert enough to recognize any quadruped by its distinctive gait, but Clarence had suffered some form of mange or other skin disease in his youth, and the hair had grown in white over the healed patches, leaving him peculiarly piebald over the rump.

He was lolloping over the stubbled corn fields, ears pointed forward and obviously happy to be rejoining society. He was also saddled and riderless, and I said a very bad word under my breath when I saw it.

"He's broken his hobbles and run." Jamie had appeared at my shoulder, peering down at the small figure of the mule. He pointed. "See?" I hadn't noticed, in my alarm, but there was a small rag of cloth tied round one of his forelegs, flapping as he ran.

"I suppose that's better," I said. My hands had gone sweaty, and I wiped my palms on the elbows of my sleeves, unable to look away. "I mean—if he was hobbled, then Roger wasn't on him. Roger wasn't thrown, or knocked off and hurt."

"Ah, no." Jamie seemed concerned, but not alarmed. "He'll have a long walk back, is all." Still, I saw his gaze shift out, over the narrow river valley, now nearly filled with smoke. He shook his head slightly, and said something under his breath—no doubt a cousin to my own bad word.

"I wonder if this is how the Lord feels," he said aloud, and gave me a wry glance. "Able to see what foolishness men are up to, but canna do a bloody thing about it."

Before I could answer him, lightning flashed, and the thunder cracked on its heels with a clap so loud and sudden that I jumped, nearly losing my grip. Jamie seized my arm to stop me falling, and pulled me back from the edge. The horses were throwing fits again, at the far end of the ledge, and he turned toward them, but stopped suddenly, his hand still on my arm.

"What?" I looked where he was looking, and saw nothing but the wall of the cliff, some ten feet away, festooned with small rock plants.

He let go my arm, and without answering, walked toward the cliff. And, I saw, toward an old fire-blasted snag that stood near it. Very delicately, he reached out and tweaked something from the dead tree's bark. I reached his side and peered into the palm of his hand, where he cradled several long, coarse hairs. White hairs.

Rain began to fall again, settling down in a businesslike way to the job of soaking everything in sight. A piercing pair of whinnies came from the horses, who didn't like being abandoned one bit.

I looked at the trunk of the tree; there were white hairs all over it, caught in the cracks of the ragged bark. *A bear has special scratching trees*, I could hear Josiah saying. *He'll come back to one, again and again*. I swallowed, hard.

"Perhaps," Jamie said very thoughtfully, "it's no just the thunder that troubles the horses."

Perhaps not, but it wasn't helping. Lightning flashed into the trees far down the slope and the thunder sounded with it. Another flash-bang following on its heels, and another, as though an ack-ack gun were going off beneath our feet. The horses were having hysterics, and I felt rather like joining them.

I had put on my hooded cloak when I left the village, but both hood and hair were matted to my skull, the rain pounding down on my head like a shower of nails. Jamie's hair was plastered to his head as well, and he grimaced through the rain.

He made a "stay here" gesture, but I shook my head and followed him. The horses were in a complete state, saturated manes dangling over rolling eyes. Judas had succeeded in half-uprooting the small tree I had tied him to, and Gideon had his ears laid flat, flexing his lip repeatedly over his big yellow teeth, looking for someone or something to bite.

Seeing this, Jamie's lips tightened. He glanced back toward the place where we had found the scratching-tree, invisible from our present position. The lightning flashed, the thunder shuddered through the rock, and the horses both screamed and lunged. Jamie shook his head, making the decision, and grabbed Judas's reins, holding him steady. Evidently we were getting off the mountain, slippery trail or not.

I got into the saddle in a swash of wet skirts, and took a firm grip, trying to shout soothing words into Judas's ear as he skittered and danced, eager to be gone. We were dangerously close to the conifers at the edge, and I leaned hard inward, trying to get him toward the cliff side of the ledge.

An extraordinary prickling sensation ran over my body, as though I were being bitten from head to toe by thousands of tiny ants. I looked at my hands and saw them glowing, limned in blue light. The hairs on my forearms stood straight out, each one glowing blue. My hood had fallen back, and I felt the hair on my head rise all at once, as though a giant hand had gently lifted it.

The air smelled suddenly of brimstone, and I looked about in alarm. Trees, rocks, the ground itself was bathed in blue light. Tiny snakes of brilliant white electricity hissed across the surface of the cliff, a few yards away.

I turned, calling for Jamie, and saw him on Gideon, turning toward me, his mouth open as he shouted, all words lost in the reverberation of the air around us.

Gideon's mane began to rise, as though by magic. Jamie's hair floated up from his shoulders, shot with wires of crackling blue. Horse and rider glowed with hell-light, each muscle of face and limb outlined. I felt a rush of air over my skin, and then Jamie flung himself from his saddle and into me, hurling us both into emptiness.

The lightning struck before we hit the ground.

I came to, smelling burned flesh and the throat-searing sting of ozone. I felt as though I had been turned inside out; all of my organs seemed to be exposed.

It was still raining. I lay still for a while, letting the rain run over my face and soak my hair, while the neurons of my nervous system slowly began to work again. My finger twitched, by itself. I tried to do it on purpose, and succeeded. I flexed my fingers—not so good. A few more minutes, though, and enough circuits were working to allow me to sit up.

Jamie was lying near me, sprawled on his back like a rag doll among a patch of sumac. I crawled over to him, and found that his eyes were open. He blinked at me, and a muscle twitched at the side of his mouth in an attempt at a smile.

I couldn't see any blood, and while his limbs were thrown awry, they were all straight. The rain pooled in his eye sockets, running into his eyes. He blinked violently, then turned his head to let the water drain off his face. I put a hand on his stomach, and felt the big abdominal pulse beneath my fingers, very slow, but steady.

I didn't know how long we had been unconscious, but this storm too had moved away. Sheet lightning flashed beyond the distant mountains, throwing the peaks into sharp relief.

"Thunder is good," I quoted, watching it in a sort of dreamy stupor, "thunder is impressive; but it is the lightning that does the work."

"It's done a job of work on me. Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"Splendid," I said, still feeling pleasantly remote. "And you?"

He glanced at me curiously, but seemed to conclude that it was all right. He grasped a sumac bush and dragged himself laboriously to his feet.

"I canna feel my toes just yet," he told me, "but the rest is all right. The horses, though—" He glanced upward, and I saw his throat move as he swallowed.

The horses were silent.

We were some twenty feet below the ledge, among the firs and balsams. I *could* move, but didn't seem able to summon the will to do so. I sat still, taking stock, while Jamie shook himself, then began the climb back up to the mankiller's ledge.

It seemed very quiet; I wondered whether I had been deafened by the blast. My foot was cold. I looked down and discovered that my left shoe was gone—whether knocked off by the lightning or lost in the fall, I had no idea, but I didn't see it anywhere nearby. The stocking was gone, too; there was a small dark starburst of veins, just below the anklebone—a legacy of my second pregnancy. I sat staring at it as though it were the key to the secrets of the universe.

The horses must be dead; I knew that. Why weren't we? I breathed in the stink of burning flesh, and a tiny shudder arose, somewhere deep inside me. Were we alive now, only because we were doomed to die in four years? When it came our turn, would we lie in the burnt ruins of our house, shells of charred and reeking flesh?

Burnt to bones, whispered the voice of my memory. Tears ran down my face with the rain, but they were distant tears—for the horses, for my mother—not for myself. Not yet.

There were blue veins beneath the surface of my skin, more prominent than before. On the backs of my hands, they traced a roadmap … in the tender flesh behind my knee, they showed in webs and traceries; along my shin, one large vein swelled snakelike, distended. I pressed a finger on it; it was soft and disappeared, but came back the instant I removed the finger.

The inner workings of my body were becoming slowly more visible, the taut skin thinning, leaving me vulnerable, with everything outside, exposed to the elements, that once was safely sheltered in the snug casing of the body. Bone and blood push through … there was an oozing graze on the top of my foot.

Jamie was back, drenched to the skin and breathless from the climb. Both his shoes were gone, I saw.

“Judas is dead,” he said, sitting down beside me. He took my cold hand in his own cold hand and pressed it hard.

“Poor thing,” I said, and the tears ran faster, warm streams mingling with cold rain. “He knew, didn’t he? He always hated thunder and lightning, always.”

Jamie put an arm round my shoulders and pressed my head against his chest, making little soothing noises.

“And Gideon?” I asked at last, raising my head and making an effort to wipe my nose on a fold of sodden cloak. Jamie shook his head, with a small, incredulous smile.

“He’s alive,” he said. “He’s burnt down the side of his right shoulder and foreleg and his mane’s singed off entirely.” He picked up a fold of his own tattered cloak and tried to wipe my face, with no better results than I had had myself. “I expect it will do wonders for his temper,” he said, trying to make a joke of it.

“I suppose so.” I was too worn out and shaken to laugh, but I managed a small smile, and it felt good. “Can you lead him down, do you think? I—I have some ointment. It's good for burns."

"Aye, I think so." He gave me a hand and helped me stand up. I turned to brush down my crumpled skirts, and as I did so, caught sight of something.

"Look," I said, my voice no more than a whisper. "Jamie—look."

Ten feet away, up the slope from us, stood a big balsam fir, its top sheared cleanly away and half its remaining branches charred and smoking. Wedged between one branch and the stump of the trunk was a huge, rounded mass. It was half black, the tissues turned to carbon—but the hair on the other half lay in sodden white spikes, the cream-white color of trilliums.

Jamie stood looking up at the corpse of the bear, his mouth half open. Slowly he closed it, and shook his head. He turned to me, then, and looked past me, toward the distant mountains, where the retreating lightning flashed silently.

"They do say," he said softly, "that a great storm portends the death of a king."

He touched my face, very gently.

"Wait here, Sassenach, while I fetch the horse. We'll go home."

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HEARTHFIRE

Fraser's Ridge
October, 1771

The season changed, from one hour to the next. She had gone to sleep in the cool balm of an Indian summer evening, and wakened in the middle of the night to the sharp bite of autumn, her feet freezing under the single quilt. Still drowsy, she couldn't fall sleep again, not without more covers.

She dragged slit-eyed out of bed, padded over the icy floor to check Jemmy. He was warm enough, sunk deep into his tiny featherbed, the quilt drawn up around his small pink ears. She laid a gentle hand on his back, waiting for the reassurance of the rise and fall of his breath. Once, twice, once more.

She rummaged for an extra quilt and spread it on the bed, reached for a cup of water to ease her dry throat, and realized with a grunt of annoyance that it was empty. She thought with longing of crawling back into bed, sinking into deep, warm slumber—but not dying of thirst.

There was a bucket of well water by the stoop. Yawning and grimacing, she slid the bolt from its brackets and set it gently down—though Jem slept so soundly at night, there wasn't much danger of waking him.

Still, she opened the door with care and stepped out, shivering slightly as the cold air twitched the shift about her legs. She bent and groped in the darkness. No bucket. Where—

She saw a flicker of movement from the corner of her eye and whirled. For an instant, she thought it was Obadiah Henderson, sitting on the bench beside her door, and her heart clenched like a fist as he stood up. Then she realized, and was in Roger's arms before her mind could consciously sort out the details of him.

Pressed against him, speechless, she had time to notice things: the arch of his collarbone against her face, the smell of clothes gone so long worn, so long unwashed that they didn't smell even of sweat any longer, but of the wood he walked through and the earth he slept upon, and mostly of the bitter smoke he breathed. The strength of his arm about her and the rasp of his beard on her skin. The cracked cold leather of his shoes beneath her bare toes, and the shape of the bones of his feet within them.

"It's you," she said, and was crying. "You're home!"

"Aye, I'm home," he whispered in her ear. "You're well? Jem's well?"

She relaxed her hold on his ribs and he smiled at her, so strange to see his smile through a growth of thick black beard, the curve of his lips familiar in the moonlight.

"We're fine. You're all right?" She sniffed, eyes overflowing as she looked at him. "What are you doing out here, for heaven's sake? Why didn't you knock?"

"Aye. I'm fine. I didn't want to scare ye. Thought I'd sleep out here, knock in the morning. Why are ye crying?"

She realized then that he wasn't whispering from any desire to avoid waking Jem; what voice he had was a ragged husk, warped and breathless. And yet he spoke clearly, the words unforced, without the painful hesitation he had had.

"You can talk," she said, wiping hastily at her eyes with the back of a wrist. "I mean—better." Once, she would have hesitated to touch his throat, fearful of his feelings, but instinct knew better than to waste the sudden intimacy of shock. The strain might come again, and they be strangers, but for a moment, for *this* moment in the dark, she could say anything, do anything, and she put her fingers on the warm ragged scar, touched the incision that had saved his life, a clean white line through the whiskers.

"Does it still hurt to talk?"

"It hurts," he said, in the faint croaking rasp, and his eyes met hers, dark and soft in the moonlight. "But I can. I will—Brianna."

She stepped back, one hand on his arm, unwilling to let go.

"Come in," she said. "It's cold out here."

I had any number of objections to hearthfire, ranging from splinters under the fingernails and pitch on the hands to blisters, burns, and the sheer infuriating contrariness of the element. I would, however, say two things in its favor: it was undeniably warm, and it cast the act of love in a light of such dim beauty that all the hesitations of nakedness could safely be forgotten.

Our mingled shadows flowed together on the wall, here a limb, there the curve of back or haunch showed clean, some part of an undulating beast. Jamie's head rose clear, a great maned creature looming over me, back arched in his extremity.

I reached up across the stretch of glowing skin and trembling muscle, brushed the sparking hairs of arms and chest, to bury my hands in the warmth of his hair and pull him down gasping to the dark hollow of my breasts.

I kept my eyes half-closed, my legs as well, unwilling to surrender his body, to give up the illusion of oneness—if illusion it was. How many more times might I hold him so, even in the enchantment of firelight?

I clung with all my might to him, and to the dying pulse of my own flesh. But joy grasped is joy vanished, and within moments I was no more than myself. The dark starburst on my ankle showed clearly, even in firelight.

I slackened my grip on his shoulders and touched the rough whorls of his hair with tenderness. He turned his head and kissed my breast, then stirred and sighed and slid sideways.

"And they say hen's teeth are rare," he said, gingerly touching a deep bite-mark on one shoulder.

I laughed, in spite of myself.

"As rare as a rooster's cock, I suppose." I raised myself on one elbow and peered toward the hearth.

"What is it, wee hen?"

"Just making sure my clothes won't catch fire." What with one thing and another, I hadn't much noticed where he'd thrown my garments, but they seemed to be a safe distance from the flames; the skirt was in a small heap by the bed, the bodice and shift somehow had ended up in separate corners of the room. My brassiere-strip was nowhere to be seen.

Light flickered on the whitewashed walls, and the bed was full of shadows.

"You are beautiful," he whispered to me.

"If you say so."

"Do ye not believe me? Have I ever lied to you?"

"That's not what I mean. I mean—if you say it, then it's true. You make it true."

He sighed and shifted, easing us into comfort. A log cracked suddenly in the hearth, sending up a spray of gold sparks, and subsided, hissing as the heat struck a hidden seam of damp. I watched the new wood turn black, then red, blazing into white-hot light.

"Do ye say it of me, Sassenach?" he asked suddenly. He sounded shy, and I turned my head to look up at him in surprise.

"Do I say what? That you're beautiful?" My mouth curved involuntarily, and he smiled in return.

"Well … not that. But that ye can bear my looks, at least."

I traced the faint white line of the scar across his ribs, left by a sword, long ago. The longer, thicker scar of the bayonet that had ripped the length of one thigh. The arm that held me, browned and roughened, the hairs of it bleached white-gold with long days of sun and work. Near my hand, his cock curled between his thighs, gone soft and small and tender now, in its nest of auburn hair.

"You're beautiful to me, Jamie," I said softly, at last. "So beautiful, you break my heart."

His hand traced the knobs of my backbone, one at a time.

"But I am an auld man," he said, smiling. "Or should be. I've white hairs in my head; my beard's gone gray."

"Silver," I said, brushing the soft stubble on his chin, parti-colored as a quilt. "In bits."

"Gray," he said firmly. "And scabbit-looking with it. And yet …" His eyes softened as he looked at me. "Yet I burn when I come to ye, Sassenach—and will, I think, 'til we two be burned to ashes."

"Is that poetry?" I asked cautiously. "Or do you mean it literally?"

"Oh," he said. "No. I hadna meant … no." He tightened his arm around me and bent his head to mine.

"I dinna ken about that. If it should be—"

"It won't."

A breath of laughter stirred my hair.

"Ye sound verra sure of it, Sassenach."

"The future can be changed; I do it all the time."

"Oh, aye?"

I rolled away a bit, to look at him.

"I do. Look at Mairi MacNeill. If I hadn't been there last week, she would have died, and her twins with her. But I *was* there, and they didn't."

I put a hand behind my head, watching the reflection of the flames ripple like water across the ceiling beams.

"I do wonder—there are lots I can't save, but some I do. If someone lives because of me, and later has children, and *they* have children, and so on … well, by the time you reach my time, say, there are probably thirty or forty people in the world who wouldn't otherwise have been there, hm? And they've all been doing things meanwhile, living their lives—don't you think that's changing the future?" For the first time, it occurred to me to wonder just how much I was single-handedly contributing to the population explosion of the twentieth century.

"Aye," he said slowly. He picked up my free hand and traced the lines of my palm with one long finger.

"Aye, but it's *their* future ye change, Sassenach, and perhaps you're meant to." He took my hand in his and pulled gently on the fingers. One knuckle popped, making a small sound like a log spitting in the hearth. “Physicians have saved a good many folk over the years, surely.”

“Of course they do. And not just physicians, either.” I sat up, impelled by the force of my argument. “But it doesn’t matter—don’t you see? You—” I pointed one finger at him, “—you’ve saved a life now and then. Fergus? Ian? And here they are, both going about the world doing things and procreating and what-not. You changed the future for them, didn’t you?”

“Aye, well … perhaps. I couldna do otherwise, though, could I?”

That simple statement stopped me, and we lay in silence for a bit, watching the flicker of light on the white-plastered wall. At last he stirred beside me, and spoke again.

“I dinna say it for pity,” he said. “But ye ken … now and then my bones ache a bit.” He didn’t look at me, but spread his crippled hand, turning it in the light, so the shadow of the crooked fingers made a spider on the wall.

Now and then. I kent, all right. I knew the limits of the body—and its miracles. I’d seen him sit down at the end of a day’s labor, exhaustion written in every line of his body. Seen him move slowly, stubborn against the protests of flesh and bone when he rose on cold mornings. I would be willing to bet that he had not lived a day since Culloden without pain, the physical damages of war aggravated by damp and harsh living. And I would also be willing to bet that he had never mentioned it to anyone. Until now.

“I know that,” I said softly, and touched the hand. The twisting scar that runneled his leg. The small depression in the flesh of his arm, legacy of a bullet.

“But not with you,” he said, and covered my hand where it lay on his arm. “D’ye ken that the only time I am without pain is in your bed, Sassenach? When I take ye, when I lie in your arms—my wounds are healed, then, my scars forgotten.”

I sighed and laid my head in the curve of his shoulder. My thigh pressed his, the softness of my flesh a mold to his harder form.

“Mine, too.”

He was silent for a time, stroking my hair with his good hand. It was wild and bushy, freed from its moorings by our earlier struggles, and he smoothed one curly strand at a time, combing down each lock between his fingers.

"Your hair's like a great storm cloud, Sassenach," he murmured, sounding half-asleep. "All dark and light together. No two hairs are the same color."

He was right; the lock between his fingers bore strands of pure white, of silver and blond, dark streaks, nearly sable, and several bits still of my young light brown.

His fingers went under the mass of hair, and I felt his hand cup the base of my skull, holding my head like a chalice.

"I saw my mother in her coffin," he said at last. His thumb touched my ear, drew down the curve of helix and lobule, and I shivered at his touch.

"The women had plaited her hair, to be seemly, but my father wouldna have it. I heard him. He didna shout, though, he was verra quiet. He would have his last sight of her as she was to him, he said. He was half-crazed wi' grief, they said, he should let well alone, be still. He didna trouble to say more to them, but went to the coffin himself. He undid her plaits and he spread out her hair in his two hands across the pillow. They were afraid to stop him."

He paused, his thumb stilled.

"I was there, keepin' quiet in the corner. When they all went out to meet the priest, I crept up close. I hadna seen a dead person before."

I let my fingers curl over the ridge of his forearm, quietly. My mother had left me one morning, kissed my forehead, and slid in the clip that fell out of my curly hair. I had never seen her again. Her coffin had been closed.

"Was it—her?"

"No," he said softly. His eyes were half-lidded as he looked into the fire. "Not quite. The face had the look of her, but no more. Like as if someone had set out to carve her from birch wood. But her hair—that was still alive. That was still … her."

I heard him swallow, and half-clear his throat.

"The hair lay down across her breast, so it covered the child who lay with her. I thought perhaps he wouldna like it; to be smothered so. So I lifted up the locks of red to let him out. I could see him—my wee brother, curled up in her arms, wi' his head on her breast, all shadowed and snug under the curtain of her hair.

"So then I thought no, he'd be happier if I left him so—so I smoothed her hair down again, to cover his head." He drew a deep breath, and I felt his chest rise under my cheek. His fingers ran slowly down through my hair.

"She hadna one white hair, Sassenach. Not one."

Ellen Fraser had died in childbirth, aged thirty-eight. My own mother had been thirty-two. And I … I had the richness of all those long years lost to them. And more.

"To see the years touch ye gives me joy, Sassenach," he whispered, "—for it means that ye live."

He lifted his hand and let my hair fall slowly from his fingers, brushing my face, skimming my lips, floating soft and heavy on my neck and shoulders, lying like feathers at the tops of my breasts.

"Mo nighean donn," he whispered, "*mo chridhe*. My brown lass, my heart."

"Come to me. Cover me. Shelter me, *a bhean*, heal me. Burn with me, as I burn for you."

I lay on him, covered him, my skin, his bone, and still—still!—that fierce bright core of flesh to join us. I let my hair fall down around us both, and in the fire-shot cavern of its darkness, whispered back.

"Until we two be burned to ashes."

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THERE'S A HOLE IN THE BOTTOM OF THE SEA

Fraser's Ridge
October, 1771

Roger was instantly awake, in that way that allowed no transition through drowsiness; body inert, but mind alert, ears tuned to the echo of what had wakened him. He had no conscious recollection of Jemmy's cry, but it echoed in his inner ear, with that combination of hope and resignation that is the lot of the more-easily wakened parent.

Sleep dragged at him, pulling him back under the waves of slumber like a ten-ton boulder chained to his foot. A tiny rustling noise kept his head momentarily above the surface.

"Go back to sleep," he thought fiercely, in the direction of the cradle. *"Shhhhh. Hush. Quiet. Go … to … sleeeeeep."* This telepathic hypnosis seldom worked, but it delayed for a few precious seconds the necessity of moving. And now and then the miracle happened, and his son actually *did* go back to sleep, relaxing into the warm sogginess of wet diaper and crumb-caked dreams.

Roger held his breath, clinging to the fading edge of sleep, hoarding the cherished seconds of immobility. Then another small sound came, and he was on his feet at once.

"Bree? Bree, what is it?" The "r" in her name fluttered in his throat, not quite there, but he didn't take the time to be troubled by it. All his attention was for her.

She was standing by the cradle, a ghostly column in the dark. He touched her, took her by the shoulders. Her arms were wrapped tight around the little boy, and she was shuddering with cold and fear.

He pulled her close by instinct; her cold infected him at once. He felt the chill on his heart and forced himself to hold tighter, not to look at the empty cradle.

"What is it?" he whispered. "Is it Jemmy? What's … happened?"

A shiver rose up the length of her body, and he felt the goosebumps rise under the thin cloth of her shift. Despite the warmth of the room, he felt the hair on his own arms rising.

"Nothing," she said. "He's all right." Her voice was thick, but she was right; Jem, waking to find himself uncomfortably squashed between his parents, let out a sudden yelp of surprised indignation, and began to churn his arms and legs like an eggbeater.

This sturdy battering filled Roger with a flood of warm relief, drowning the cold imaginings that had seized his mind at the sight of her. With a little difficulty, he pried Jemmy from his mother's arms and hoisted him high against his own shoulder.

He patted the solid little back in reassurance—reassurance of himself, as much as Jemmy—and made soft hissing noises through his teeth. Jemmy, finding this accustomed procedure soothing, yawned widely, relaxed into his normal hamlike state, and began to hum drowsily in Roger's ear, with the rising and falling note of a distant siren.

"DadeeDadeeDadee …"

Brianna was still standing by the cradle, empty arms wrapped now around herself. Roger reached out with his free hand and stroked her hair, her hard-boned shoulder, and drew her close against him.

"Shhh," he said to them both. "Shhh, shhh. It's all right now, shhh."

Her arms went around him, and he could feel the wetness on her face through the linen shirt. His other shoulder was already damp with Jemmy's sleepy, sweaty warmth.

“Come to bed,” he said softly. “Come under the quilt, it’s … cold out here.” It wasn’t; the air in the cabin was warm. She came, nonetheless.

Brianna reached for the child, taking him to her breast even before she lay down. Never one to refuse nourishment at any hour, Jemmy accepted the offer with alacrity, curling up into an apostrophe of content against his mother’s stomach as she settled on one side.

Roger slid into bed behind her, and echoed his son’s posture, bringing up his knees behind Brianna’s, curling his body in a protective comma around her. Thus securely punctuated, Brianna began slowly to relax, though Roger could still feel the tension in her body.

“All right now?” he asked softly. Her skin was still clammy to the touch, but warming.

“Yeah.” She took in a deep breath and let it out in a shuddering sigh. “Had a bad dream. I’m sorry I woke you.”

“It’s OK.” He stroked the swell of her hip, over and over, like one gentling a horse. “Want to tell me?” He hoped she did, though the sound of Jemmy’s suckling was rhythmic and soothing, and he felt sleep stealing over him as the three of them warmed, melting together like candle wax.

“I was cold,” she said softly. “I think the quilt must have fallen off. But in the dream, I was cold because the window was open.”

“Here? One of these windows?” Roger lifted a hand, indicating the faint oblong of the window in the far wall. Even in the middle of the darkest night, the oiled hide covering the window was very slightly lighter than the surrounding blackness.

“No.” She took a deep breath. “It was in the house in Boston; where I grew up. I was in bed, but I was cold, and the cold woke me—in the dream. I got up to see where the draft was coming from.”

There were French windows in her father’s study. The cold wind came from there, bellying the long white curtains into the room. The cradle stood by the antique desk, the end of a thin white blanket flickering in the draft.

“He was gone.” Her voice had steadied, but had a momentary catch in it at the memory of terror. “Jemmy was gone. The cradle was empty, and I knew something came through the window and took him.”

She pressed back against him, unconsciously seeking reassurance. “I was afraid of it—whatever it was—but it didn’t matter—I had to find Jemmy.”

One hand was curled up tight under her chin. He folded it in his, and squeezed lightly, embracing her.

“I threw open the curtains and ran out, and—and there was nothing there. Only water.” She was shaking at the memory.

“Water?” He stroked her clenched fist with a thumb, trying to calm her.

“Ocean. The sea. Just—water, lapping up against the edge of the terrace. It was dark, and I knew it went down forever, and that Jemmy was down there, he’d drowned, and I was too late—” She choked, but got her voice back and went on, more steadily. “But I dived in anyway, I had to. It was dark, and there were things in the water with me—I couldn’t see them, but they brushed by me; big things. I kept looking and looking but I couldn’t see anything, and then the water suddenly got lighter and I—I saw him.”

“Jemmy?”

“No. Bonnet—Stephen Bonnet.”

Roger forced himself not to move, not to stiffen. She dreamed often; he always imagined that the dreams she would not tell him were of Bonnet.

“He was holding Jemmy, and laughing. I went to take him, and Bonnet held him up away from me. He kept doing that, and I tried to hit him, and he just caught my hand and laughed. Then he looked up and his face changed.”

She took a deep breath, and took hold of Roger’s fingers, holding on for comfort.

“I never saw a look like that, Roger, never. There was something behind me that he could see, something coming—and it scared him more than I’ve ever seen anyone scared. He was holding me; I couldn't turn around to look, and I couldn't get away—I couldn't leave Jemmy. It was coming—and … then I woke up."

She gave a small, shaky laugh.

"My friend Gayle's grandmother always said that when you fall off a cliff in a dream, if you hit the bottom, you'll die. Really die, I mean. You figure the same thing goes for getting eaten by a sea monster?"

"No. Besides, you always wake up in time from dreams like that."

"I have so far." She sounded a little dubious. Still, dream told, she was eased of its terror; her body let go its last resistance and she breathed deep and easy against him; he could feel the swell of her rib cage under his arm.

"You always will. Don't be troubled now; Jemmy's safe. I'm here; I'll keep you both safe." He put his arm gently round her, and cupped his hand around Jemmy's fat bottom, warm in its linen clout. Jemmy, all his bodily needs met, had relapsed into a peaceful torpor, contagious in its abandon. Brianna sighed and put her hand over Roger's, squeezing lightly.

"There were books on the desk," she said, beginning to sound drowsy. "On Dad's desk. He'd been working, I could tell—there were open books and scattered papers everywhere. There was a paper lying in the middle of the desk, with writing on it; I wanted to read it, to see what he'd been doing—but I couldn't stop."

"Mm-hm."

Brianna shivered slightly, and the movement rustled the corn shucks in the mattress, a tiny seismic disturbance of their small, warm universe. She tensed, fighting sleep, and then relaxed, as his hand cupped her breast.

Roger lay awake, watching the square of the window grow slowly lighter, holding his family safe in his arms.

It was overcast and morning-cool, but very humid; Roger could feel the sweat film his body like the skin on boiled milk. It was no more than an hour past dawn, they weren't yet out of sight of the house, and his scalp was prickling already, slow droplets gathering under the plait at the base of his skull.

He flexed his shoulders with resignation, and the first trickle crawled tickling down his backbone. At least sweating helped to ease the soreness; his arms and shoulders had been so stiff this morning that Brianna had had to help him dress, pulling his shirt over his head and buttoning his flies with deft fingers.

He smiled inwardly, remembering what else those long fingers had done. It had taken his mind temporarily off the stiffness of his body, and banished the troubling memory of dreams. He stretched, groaning, feeling the pull of muscle on tender joints. The clean linen was already sticking to chest and back.

Jamie was ahead of him on the trail, a damp patch growing visibly between his shoulder blades where the strap of the canteen crossed his back. Roger noted with some consolation that his father-in-law was moving with a good bit less than his usual pantherlike grace this morning, too. He knew the Great Scot was only human, but it was reassuring to have that fact confimed now and then.

“Think the weather will hold?” Roger said it as much for the sake of speaking as for anything else; Jamie was by no means garrulous, but he seemed abnormally quiet this morning, barely speaking beyond a murmured “Aye, morning,” in reply to Roger’s earlier greeting. Perhaps it was the grayness of the day, with its threat—or promise—of rain.

The sky overhead curved low and dull as the inside of a pewter bowl. An afternoon indoors, with rain beating on the oiled hides of the windows, and wee Jemmy curled up peaceful as a dormouse for a nap, while his mother shed her shift and came to bed in the soft gray light … aye, well, some ways of breaking a sweat were better than others.

Jamie stopped and glanced up at the lowering sky. He flexed his right hand, closing it to an awkward fist, then opening it slowly. The stiff fourth finger made delicate chores such as writing difficult, but did provide one dubious benefit in compensation; the swollen joints signaled rain as reliably as a barometer.

Jamie wiggled the fingers experimentally, and gave Roger a faint smile.

"No but a wee twinge," he said. "Nay rain before nightfall." He stretched, easing his back in anticipation, and sighed. "Let's get to it, aye?"

Roger glanced back; the house and cabin had disappeared. He frowned at Jamie's retreating back, debating. It was nearly half a mile to the new field; ample time for conversation. Not the right time, though, not yet. It was a matter to be addressed face-to-face, and at leisure—later, then, when they paused to eat.

The woods were hushed, the air still and heavy. Even the birds were quiet, only the occasional machine-gun burst of a woodpecker startling the silence. They threaded their way through the forest, silent as Indians on the layer of rotted leaves, and emerged from the scrub-oak thicket with a suddenness that sent a flock of crows shrieking out of the torn earth of the new-cleared field like demons escaping from the netherworld.

"Jesus!" Jamie murmured, and crossed himself involuntarily. Roger's throat closed tight, and his stomach clenched. The crows had been feeding on something lying in the hollow left by an uprooted tree; all he could see above the ragged clods of earth was a pale curve that looked unsettlingly like the round of a naked shoulder.

It *was* a naked shoulder—of a pig. Jamie squatted by the boar's carcass, frowning at the livid weals that marred the thick, pale skin. He touched the deep gouges on the flank with distaste; Roger could see the busy movement of flies inside the black-red cavities.

"Bear?" he asked, squatting beside Jamie. His father-in-law shook his head.

"Cat." He brushed aside the stiff, sparse hairs behind the ear and pointed to the bluish puncture wounds in the folded lard. "Broke the neck wi' one bite. And see the claw marks?" Roger had, but lacked the knowledge to differentiate the marks of a bear's claws from those of a panther's. He looked closely, committing the pattern to memory.

Jamie stood, and wiped a sleeve across his face.

"A bear would ha' taken more of the carcass. This is barely touched. Cats will do that, though—make a kill and leave it, then come back to nibble at it, day after day."

Muggy as it was, the hair pricked with chill on Roger's neck. It was much too easy to imagine yellow eyes in the shadow of the thicket behind him, fixed with cool appraisal on the spot where skull met fragile spine.

"Think it's still close by?" He glanced about, trying to seem casual. The forest was just as it had been, but now the silence seemed unnatural and sinister.

Jamie waved away a couple of questing flies, frowning.

"Aye, maybe. This is a fresh kill; no maggots yet." He nodded at the gaping wound in the pig's flank, then stooped to grasp the stiff trotters. "Come, let's hang it. It's too much meat to waste."

They dragged the carcass to a tree with a low, sturdy limb. Jamie reached into his sleeve and pulled out a grubby kerchief, to tie round his head to keep the sweat from burning into his eyes. Roger groped for his own kerchief—carefully washed, neatly ironed—and did likewise. Mindful of the laundering, they stripped their clean shirts and hung them over an alder bush.

There was rope in the field, left from the stump-pulling of earlier days' work; Jamie whipped a length several times around the pig's forelimbs, then flung the free end over the branch above. It was a full-grown sow, some two-hundredweight of solid flesh. Jamie set his feet and hauled back on the rope, grunting with the sudden effort.

Roger held his breath as he bent to help hoist the stiffened corpse, but Jamie had been right; it was fresh. There was the usual fleshy pig-scent, gone faint with death, and the sharper tang of blood—nothing worse.

Rough hair scraped the skin of his belly as he wrapped his arms around the carcass, and he set his teeth against a grimace of distaste. There are few things deader than a large, dead pig. Then a word from Jamie, and the carcass was secure. He let go, and the pig swung gently to and fro, a meaty pendulum.

Roger was wringing wet; more than the effort of lifting accounted for. There was a big smudge of brownish blood over his chest and stomach. He rubbed the heel of his hand over the knot in his belly, smearing the blood with sweat. He glanced casually round once more. Nothing moved among the trees.

"The women will be pleased," he said.

Jamie laughed, taking the dirk from his belt.

"I shouldna think so. They'll be up half the night, butchering and salting." He nodded in the direction of Roger's glance.

"Even if it's near, it willna trouble us. Cats dinna hunt large prey unless they're hungry." He looked wryly at the torn flank of the dangling pig. "A half-stone of prime bacon will ha' satisfied it for the moment, I should think. Though if not—" He glanced at his long rifle, leaning loaded against the trunk of a nearby hickory.

He held the pig while Jamie gutted it, then wrapped the stinking mass of intestines in the cloth from their lunch, while Jamie patiently worked at kindling a fire of green sticks that would keep the flies away from the hanging carcass. Streaked and reeking with blood, waste, and sweat, Roger walked across the field to the small stream that ran by the woods.

He knelt and splashed, arms and face and torso, trying to rid himself of the feeling of being watched. More than once, he had crossed an empty moor in Scotland, only to have a full-grown stag erupt from nowhere in front of him, springing by apparent magic from the heather at his feet. Despite Jamie's words, he was all too aware that some piece of quiet landscape could abruptly detach itself and take life in a thunder of hooves or a snarl of sudden teeth.

He rinsed his mouth, spat, and drank deep, forcing water past the lingering tightness in his throat. He could still feel the stiff coldness of the pig's carcass, see the caked dirt in the nostrils, the raw sockets where crows had pecked out the eyes. Gooseflesh prickled over his shoulders, chilled as much by his thoughts as by the cold stream-water.

No great difference between a pig and a man. Flesh to flesh, dust to dust. One stroke, that's all it took. Slowly, he stretched, savoring the last soreness in his muscles.

There was a raucous croaking from the chestnut overhead. The crows, black blotches in the yellow leaves, voicing their displeasure at the robbery of their feast.

"Whaur … shall we gang and … dine the day?" he murmured under his breath, looking up at them. "Not here … you bastards. Get along!" Seized by revulsion, he scooped a stone from the bank and hurled it into the tree with all his might. The crows erupted into shrieking flight, and he turned back to the field, grimly satisfied.

But his belly was still knotted, and the words of the corbies' mocking song echoed in his ears: *"Ye'll sit on his white hause-bane/and I'll pick oot his bonny blue e'en. Wi' ae lock o' his golden hair/we'll theek oor nest when it grows bare."*

Jamie glanced at his face when he came back, but said nothing. Beyond the field, the pig's carcass hung above the fire, its outlines hidden in wreaths of smoke.

They had cut the fencerails already, made from pine saplings they'd uprooted; the rough-barked logs lay ready by the edge of the forest. The fence would have drystone pillars to join the wooden rails, though; not one of the simple rick-rack fences meant to keep out deer or mark boundaries, but one solid enough to withstand the jostling of three- and four-hundred-pound hogs.

Within the month, it would be time to drive in the pigs that had been turned out to live wild in the forest, fattening themselves on the chestnut mast that lay thick on the ground. Some would have fallen prey to wild animals or accident, but there would likely be fifty or sixty left to slaughter or sell.

They worked well together, he and Jamie. Much of a size, each had an instinct for the other's moves. When a hand was needed, it was there. No need for it just now, though—this part of the job was the worst, for there was no interest to soften the tedium, no skill to ease the labor. Only rocks, hundreds of rocks, to be hoisted from the loamy soil and carried, dragged, wrestled to the field, to be piled and fitted into place.

Often they talked as they worked, but not this morning. Each man worked alone with his thoughts, tramping to and fro with the endless load. The morning passed in silence, broken only by the far-off calling of the disgruntled crows, and by the thunk and grate of stones, dropped on the growing pile.

It had to be done. There was no choice. He'd known that for a long time, but now that the dim prospect had hardened into reality … Roger eyed his father-in-law covertly. Would Jamie agree to it, though?

From a distance, the scars on his back were barely visible, masked by the gleam of sweat. Constant hard work kept a man trim and taut, and no one seeing Fraser in outline—or close enough to see the deep groove of his backbone, the flat belly and long clean lines of arm and thigh—would have taken him for a man in middle age.

Jamie had showed him the scars, though, the first day they went out to work together, after he had come back from the surveying. Standing by the half-built dairy-shed, Jamie had pulled the shirt off and turned his back, saying casually, "Have a keek, then."

Up close, the scars were old and well-healed, thin white crescents and lines for the most part, with here and there a silvery net or a shiny lump, where a whipstroke had flayed the skin in too wide a patch for the edges of the wound to draw cleanly together. There was some skin untouched, showing fair and smooth among the weals—but not much.

And what was he to say? Roger had wondered. I'm sorry for it? Thanks for the viewing privileges?

In the event, he had said nothing. Jamie had merely turned around, handed Roger an ax with complete matter-of-factness, and they had begun their work, bare-chested. But he had noticed that Jamie never stripped to work, if the other men were with them.

All right. Of all men, Jamie would understand the need, the necessity—the burden of Brianna's dreaming, that lay in Roger's belly like a stone. Certainly he would help. But would he consent to allow Roger to finish it alone? Jamie, after all, had some stake in the matter, too.

The crows were still calling, but farther off, their cries thin and desperate, like those of lost souls. Perhaps he was foolish even to think of acting alone. He flung an armload of stones onto the pile; small rocks clacked and rolled away.

“Preacher’s lad.” That’s what the other lads at school had called him, and that’s what he was, with all the ambiguity the term implied. The initial urge to prove himself manly by means of force, the later awareness of the ultimate moral weakness of violence. But that was in another country—

He choked off the rest of the quotation, grimly bending to lever a chunk of rock free of moss and dirt. Orphaned by war, raised by a man of peace—how was he to set his mind to murder? He trundled the stone down toward the field, rolling it slowly end over end.

“You’ve never killed anything but fish,” he muttered to himself. “What makes you think …” But he knew all too well what made him think.

By mid-morning, there were enough rocks collected to begin the first pillar; with a nod and a murmur, they set to work, dragging and heaving, stacking and fitting, with now and then a muffled exclamation at a smashed finger or bruised toes.

Jamie heaved a big stone into place, then straightened up, gasping for breath.

Roger drew his own deep breath. It might as well be now; no better opportunity was likely to come.

“I’ve a favor to ask,” he said abruptly.

Jamie glanced up, breathing heavily, one eyebrow raised. He nodded, waiting for the request.

“Teach me to fight.”

Jamie wiped an arm across his streaming face, and blew out a deep breath.

“Ye ken well enough how to fight,” he said. One corner of his mouth quirked up. “D’ye mean will I teach ye to handle a sword without cutting off your foot?”

Roger kicked a stone back into the pile.

“That will do, to start.”

Jamie stood for a moment, looking him over. It was a thoroughly dispassionate examination, much as he would have given a bullock he thought to buy. Roger stood still, feeling the sweat stream down the groove of his back, and thought that once more, he was being compared—to his disadvantage—with the absent Ian Murray.

"You're auld for it, mind," Jamie said at last. "Most swordsmen start when they're boys." He paused. "I had my first sword at five."

Roger had had a train when he was five. With a red engine that tooted its whistle when you pulled the cord. He met Jamie's eye, and smiled pleasantly.

"Old for it, maybe," he said. "But not dead."

"Ye could be," Fraser answered. "A little learning is a dangerous thing—a fool wi' a blade by his side in a scabbard is safer than a fool who thinks he kens what to do with it."

"A little learning is a dangerous thing," Roger quoted. "*Drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring.* Do you think me a fool?"

Jamie laughed, surprised into amusement.

"There shallow draughts intoxicate the brain," he replied, finishing the verse. "*And drinking largely sobers us again.* As for foolish—ye'll no just be drunk on the thought of it, I suppose?"

Roger smiled slightly in reply; he had given up being surprised by the breadth of Jamie's reading.

"I'll drink deep enough to stay sober," he said. "Will ye teach me?"

Jamie squinted, then lifted one shoulder slightly. "Ye've size to your credit, and a good reach, forbye." He looked Roger head to toe once more and nodded. "Aye, ye'll maybe do."

He turned and walked away, toward the next heap of stones. Roger followed, feeling oddly gratified, as though he had passed some small but important test.

The test hadn't yet begun, though. It was only partway through the building of the new pillar that Jamie spoke again.

"Why?" he asked, eyes on the huge stone he was slowly heaving into place. It was too heavy to lift, the size of a whisky keg. Knotted clumps of grass roots stuck out from under it, ripped out of the earth by the stone's slow and brutal passage across the ground.

Roger bent to lend his own weight to the task. The lichens on the rock's surface were rough under his palms, green and scabby with age.

“I’ve a family to protect,” he said. The rock moved grudgingly, sliding a few inches across the uneven ground. Jamie nodded, once, twice; on the silent “three,” they shoved together, with an echoed grunt of effort. The monster half-rose, paused, rose altogether and overbalanced, chunking down into place with a *thunk!* that quivered through the ground at their feet.

“Protect from what?” Jamie stood and wiped a wrist across his jaw. He glanced up and away, gesturing with his chin at the hanging pig. “I shouldna care to take on a panther wi’ a sword, myself.”

“Oh, aye?” Roger bent his knees and maneuvered another large rock into his arms. “I hear you’ve killed two bears—one with a dirk.”

“Aye, well,” Jamie said dryly. “A dirk’s what I had. As for the other—if it was a sword, it was Saint Michael’s, not mine.”

“Aye, and if ye’d known ahead of time that you might—ugh—meet it—would you not have armed yourself—better?” Roger bent his knees, lowering the stone carefully into place. He let it drop the last few inches, and wiped stinging hands on his breeks.

“If I’d *known* I should meet a damn bear,” Jamie said, grunting as he lifted another stone into place, “I would have taken another path.”

Roger snorted and wiggled the new stone, easing its fit against the others. There was a small gap at one side that left it loose; Jamie eyed it, walked to the stone pile, and picked up a small chunk of granite, tapered at one end. It fit the gap exactly, and the two men smiled involuntarily at each other.

“D’ye think there’s another path to take, then?” Roger asked.

Fraser rubbed a hand across his mouth, considering.

“If it’s the war ye mean—then, aye, I do.” He gave Roger a stare. “Maybe I’ll find it and maybe I won’t—but aye, there’s another path.”

“Maybe so.” He hadn’t meant the oncoming war, and he didn’t think Jamie had, either.

“As to bears, though …” Jamie stood still, eyes steady. “There’s a deal of difference, ye ken, between meeting a bear unawares—and hunting one."

The sun still wasn't visible, but it wasn't necessary, either. Noon came as a rumbling in the belly, a soreness of the hands; a sudden awareness of the weariness of back and legs as timely as the chiming of a grandfather's clock. The last large rock fell into place, and Jamie straightened up, gasping for breath.

By unspoken but mutual consent, they sat down with the packet of food, clean shirts draped across bare shoulders, against the chill of drying sweat.

Jamie chewed industriously, washing down a large bite with a gulp of ale. He made an involuntary face, pursed his lips to spit, then changed his mind and swallowed.

"Ach! Mrs. Lizzie's been at the mash again." He grimaced and took a remedial bite of biscuit, to erase the taste.

Roger grinned at his father-in-law's face.

"What's she put in it this time?" Lizzie had been trying her hand at flavored ales—with indifferent success.

Jamie sniffed warily at the mouth of the stone bottle.

"Anise?" he suggested, passing the bottle to Roger.

Roger smelt it, wrinkling up his nose involuntarily at the alcoholic whiff.

"Anise *and* ginger," he said. Nevertheless, he took a cautious sip. He made the same face Jamie had, and emptied the bottle over a compliant blackberry vine.

"Waste not, want not, but …"

"It's nay waste to keep from poisoning ourselves." Jamie heaved himself up, took the emptied bottle, and set off toward the small stream on the far side of the field.

He came back, sat down, and handed Roger the bottle of water. "I've had word of Stephen Bonnet."

It was said so casually that Roger didn't register the meaning of the words at first.

"Have you?" he said at last. Piccalilli relish was oozing over his hand. Roger wiped the relish from his wrist with a finger, and put it into his mouth, but didn't take another bite of sandwich; his appetite had vanished.

"Aye. I dinna ken where he is now—but I ken where he'll be come next April—or rather, where I can cause him to be. Six months, and then we kill him. Do ye think that will give ye time?"

He was looking at Roger, calm as though he had suggested an appointment with a banker, rather than an appointment with death.

Roger could believe in netherworlds—and demons, too. He hadn't dreamed last night, but the demon's face floated always at the edge of his mind, just out of sight. Time to summon him, perhaps, and bring him into view. You had to call a demon up, didn't you, before you could exorcise him?

There were preparations to make, though, before that could happen. He flexed his shoulders and his arms once more, this time in anticipation. The soreness had mostly gone.

"There's mony an ane for him maks mane
but nane shall ken where he is gane.
O'er his white banes when they are bare,
The wind shall blaw forever mair, O—
The wind shall blaw forever mair."

"Aye," he said. "That'll do."

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EN GARDE

For a moment, he didn't think he was going to be able to lift his hand to the latch-string. Both arms hung as though weighted with lead, and the small muscles of his forearm jumped and trembled with exhaustion. It took two tries, and even then, he could do no more than catch the string clumsily between two middle fingers; his thumb wouldn't close.

Brianna heard him fumbling; the door opened suddenly and his hand fell nerveless from the latch. He had no more than a glimpse of tumbled hair and a beaming face with a smear of soot down one cheek, and then she had her arms around him, her mouth on his, and he was home.

"You're back!" she said, letting go.

"I am." And glad of it, too. The cabin smelt of hot food and lye soap, with a clean, faint tang of juniper overlaying the smoke of reed candles and the muskier scents of human occupation. He smiled at her, suddenly a little less tired.

"Dadee, Dadee!" Jemmy was bouncing up and down in excitement, clinging to a low stool for balance. "Da—*deeee*!"

"Hallo, hallo," Roger said, reaching down to pat the boy's fluffy head. "Who's a good lad, then?" He missed his mark and his hand brushed a soft cheek instead, but Jemmy didn't care.

"Me! Me!" he shouted, and grinned with a huge expanse of pink gum, showing off all his small white teeth. Brianna echoed the grin, with substantially more enamel but no less delight.

"We have a surprise for you. Watch this!" She went swiftly toward the table, and sank to one knee, a pace from Jemmy. She stretched out her arms, her hands no more than a few inches from his. “Come to Mama, sweetie. Come here, baby, come to Mama.”

Jemmy swayed precariously, loosed one hand, reached for his mother, then let go and took one drunken step, then two, and fell shrieking into her arms. She clutched him, giggling in delight, then turned him toward Roger.

“Go to Daddy,” Brianna encouraged. “Go on, go to Daddy.”

Jemmy screwed up his face in doubtful concentration, looking like a first-time parachutist at the open door of a circling plane. He swayed dangerously to and fro.

Roger squatted, hands held out, tiredness forgotten for the moment.

“Come on, mate, come on, you can do it!”

Jemmy clung a moment, leaning, leaning, then let go his mother’s hand and staggered drunkenly toward Roger, faster and faster and faster through three steps, falling headlong into Roger’s saving grasp.

He hugged Jemmy tight against him, the little boy wriggling and crowing in triumph.

“Good lad! Be into everything now, won’t you?”

“Like he’s not already!” Brianna said, rolling her eyes in resignation. As though in illustration, Jemmy wriggled loose from Roger’s grasp, dropped to hands and knees, and crawled off at a high rate of speed, heading for his basket of toys.

“And what else have ye been doing today?” Roger asked, sitting down at the table.

“What *else*?” Her eyes went wide, then narrowed. “You don’t think learning to walk is enough for one day?”

“Of course; it’s wonderful, it’s marvelous!” he assured her hastily. “I was only making conversation.”

She relaxed, appeased.

“Well, then. We scrubbed the floor—not that anybody could tell the difference—” She glanced down with some distaste at the rough, discolored boards underfoot, “—and we made bread and set it to rise, only it didn’t, so that’s why you’re having flat-bread with your dinner.”

“Love flat-bread,” he assured her hastily, catching the gimlet gleam in her eye.

“Sure you do,” she said, lifting one thick red brow. “Or at least you know which side it’s buttered on.”

He laughed. Here in the warm, the chill was wearing off, and his hands were starting to throb, but he felt good, nonetheless. Tired enough to fall off his stool, but good. Good and hungry. His stomach growled in anticipation.

“Flat-bread and butter is a start,” he said. “What else? I smell something good.” He looked at the bubbling cauldron and sniffed hopefully. “Stew?”

“No, laundry.” Bree glowered at the kettle. “The third bloody batch today. I can’t fit much in that dinky thing, but I couldn’t take the wash up to the big kettle at the house, because of washing the floor and spinning. When you do wash outside, you have to stay there, to tend the fire and stir it, so you can’t do much else at the same time.” Her lips clamped and thinned. “Very inefficient.”

“Shame.” Roger passed lightly over the logistics of laundry, in favor of more pressing issues. He lifted his chin toward the hearth.

“I do smell meat. You don’t think a mouse has fallen into the pot?”

Jemmy, catching this, let go his hold on a rag-ball and crawled eagerly toward the fire. “Mouzee? See mouzee?”

Brianna grabbed the collar of Jemmy’s smock and turned the glower on Roger.

“Certainly not. No, baby, no mousie. Daddy’s being silly. Here, Jemmy, come eat.” Letting go the collar, she seized the little boy by the waist and lifted him—kicking and struggling—into his high chair. “Eat, I said! You stay put.” Jemmy arched his back, grunting and squealing in protest, then suddenly relaxed, sliding down out of the chair and disappearing into the folds of his mother’s skirt.

Brianna grappled for him, going red in the face with laughter and exasperation.

“All *right*!” she said, hauling him upright. “Don’t eat, then. See if I care.” She reached for the litter of toys, spilled out of their basket, and plucked a battered corn-husk doll from the rubble. “Here, see dolly? Nice dolly.”

Jemmy clasped the doll to his bosom, sat down abruptly on his bottom, and began to address the doll in earnest tones, shaking it now and then for emphasis.

“Eat!” he said sternly, poking it in the stomach. He laid the doll on the floor, picked up the basket, and carefully turned it over on top of the dolly. “Say put!”

Brianna rubbed a hand down her face, and sighed. She gave Roger a glance. “And you want to know what I do all day.”

The glance sharpened, as she truly looked at him for the first time.

“And what have *you* been doing, Mr. MacKenzie? You look like you’ve been in the wars.” She touched his face gently; there was a knot forming on his forehead; he could feel the skin tightening there, and the tiny stab of pain when she touched it.

“Something like. Jamie’s been showing me the rudiments of swordsmanship.”

Her brows went up, and he laughed self-consciously, keeping his hands in his lap.

“Wooden swords, aye?”

Several wooden swords. They’d broken three so far, though the makeshift weapons were stout lengths of wood; not twigs, by any means.

“He stabbed you in the *head*?” Brianna’s voice had a slight edge, though Roger couldn’t tell whether it was meant for him or for her father.

“Ah … no. Not exactly.”

With hazy memories of swashbuckling films and university fencing matches, he’d been unprepared for the sheer brutal force involved in hand-to-hand combat with swords. Jamie’s first blow had knocked Roger’s sword from his hand and sent it flying; a later one had split the wood and sent a large chunk of it rocketing past his ear.

“What does ‘not exactly’ mean?”

"Well, he was showing me something called *corps a corps*—which appears to be French for 'Get your opponent's sword wrapped round your own, then knee him in the balls and punch his head while he's trying to get loose.' "

Brianna gave a brief, shocked laugh.

"You mean he—"

"No, but it was a near thing," he said, wincing at the memory. "I've a bruise on my thigh the size of my hand."

"Are you hurt anywhere else?" Brianna was frowning at him, worried.

"No." He smiled up at her, keeping his hands in his lap. "Tired. Sore. Starving."

The frown eased and her smile flickered back, though a small line stayed between her brows. She reached for the wooden platter on the sideboard, turned, and squatted by the hearth.

"Quail," she said with satisfaction, raking a number of blackened bundles out of the ashes with the poker. "Da brought them this morning. He said not to pluck them; just wrap them in mud and bake them. I hope he knows what he's talking about." She jerked her head toward the boiling cauldron. "Jemmy helped me with the mud; that's why we had to do another pot of laundry. Ouch!" She snatched away her hand and sucked a burned finger, then picked up the platter and brought it to the table.

"Let them cool a little," she instructed him. "I'll get some of those pickles you like."

The quail looked like nothing so much as charred rocks. Still, a tantalizing steam drifted up through cracks in a few of the blackened lumps. Roger felt like picking one up and eating it on the spot, burned mud and all. Instead, he fumbled at the cloth-covered plate on the table, discovering the maligned flat-bread underneath. Stiff-fingered, he managed to tear off a good chunk, and stuffed it silently into his mouth.

Jemmy had abandoned his ball of rags under the bed, and come to see what his father was doing. Pulling himself upright by the table leg, he spotted the bread and reached up, making urgent noises of demand. Roger carefully tore off another bit of bread and handed it to his offspring, nearly dropping it in the process. His hands were cut and battered; the knuckles of his right hand blood-grazed, swollen, and black with fresh bruising. Half his right thumbnail had been knocked away, and the bit of raw nail bed showed red and oozing.

"Ow-ee." Clutching his bread, Jemmy looked at Roger's hands, then up at his face. "Daddy owee?"

"Dad's all right," Roger assured him. "Just tired."

Jemmy stared at the injured thumb, then slowly raised his hand to his mouth and inserted his own thumb, sucking loudly.

It actually looked like a good idea. His thumb stung and ached, where the nail had gone, and all his fingers were cold and stiff. With a quick glance at Brianna's back, he lifted his hand and stuck his thumb in his mouth.

It felt alien, thick and hard and tasting of silvery blood and cold grime. Then suddenly it fit, and tongue and palate closed round the injured digit in a warm and soothing pressure.

Jemmy butted him in the thigh, his usual signal for "up," and he grasped the back of the little boy's clout with his free hand, boosting him up onto his knee. Jemmy made himself at home, rooting and squirming, then relaxed in sudden peace, bread squashed in one hand, sucking quietly on his thumb.

Roger slowly relaxed, one elbow propped on the table, the other arm round his son. Jemmy's heavy warmth and heavy breathing against his ribs were a soothing accompaniment to the homely noises Brianna was making as she dished the supper. To his surprise, his thumb stopped hurting, but he left it where it was, too tired to question the odd sense of comfort.

His muscles were gradually relaxing, too, coming off the state of tensed readiness in which he'd held them for hours.

His inner ear still rang with brisk instruction. *Use your forearm, man—the wrist, the wrist! Dinna move your hand out like that, keep it near the body. It's a sword, aye? Not a bloody club. Use the tip!*

He'd thrown Jamie heavily against a tree, at one point. And Fraser had tripped over a rock and gone down once, Roger on top.

As for any actual damage inflicted with a sword, he might as well have been fighting a cloud.

Dirty fighting is the only kind there is, Fraser had told him, panting, as they knelt at the stream and splashed cold water over sweating faces. *Anything else is no but exhibition.*

His head jerked on his neck and he blinked, coming back abruptly from the grate and crash of wooden swords to the dim warmth of the cabin. The platter was gone; Brianna was cursing softly under her breath at the sideboard, banging the hilt of his dirk against the blackened lumps of clay-baked quail to crack them open.

Watch your footing. Back, back—aye, now, come back at me! No, dinna reach so far … keep your guard up!

And the stinging *whap!* of the springy "blade" across arms and thighs and shoulders, the solid thunk of it driven bruising home between his ribs, sunk deep and breathless in his belly. Had it been cold steel, he would have been dead in minutes, cut to bleeding ribbons.

Don't catch the blade on yours—throw it off. Beat, beat it off! Come at me, thrust! Keep it close, keep it close … aye, good … ha!

His elbow slipped and his hand fell. He jerked upright, barely keeping hold of the sleeping child, and blinked, vision swimming with firelight.

Brianna started guiltily and shut her notebook. Getting to her feet, she thrust it out of sight behind a pewter plate, resting upright on its edge at the back of the sideboard.

"It's ready," she said hurriedly. "I just—I'll get the milk." She disappeared into the pantry in a rustle of skirts.

Roger shifted Jemmy, got a grip, and lifted the small, solid body up to his shoulder, though his arms felt like cooked noodles. The little boy was sound asleep, but kept his thumb plugged firmly into his mouth.

Roger's own thumb was wet with spittle, and he felt a flush of embarrassment. Christ, had she been drawing him that way? No doubt; she must have caught sight of him sucking his thumb and thought it "cute"; it wouldn't be the first time she'd drawn him in what he considered a compromising position. Or was she writing dreams again?

He laid Jemmy gently in his cradle, brushed damp bread crumbs off the coverlet, and stood rubbing his bruised knuckles with the fingers of his other hand. Sloshing noises came from the pantry. Moving quietly, he stepped to the sideboard and extracted the book from its hiding place. Sketches, not dreams.

It was no more than a few quick lines, the essence of a sketch. A man tired to death, still watchful; head on one hand, neck bowed with exhaustion—free arm clamped tight around a treasured, helpless thing.

She'd titled it. *En garde*, it said, in her slanted, spiky script.

He closed the book and slid it back behind the plate. She was standing in the pantry doorway, the milk jug in her hand.

"Come and eat," she said softly, eyes on his. "You need your strength."

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ROGER BUYS A SWORD

Cross Creek
November, 1771

He'd handled eighteenth-century broadswords before; neither the weight nor the length surprised him. The basket around the hilt was slightly bent, but not enough to interfere with fitting his hand inside the grip. He'd done that before, too. There was a considerable difference, though, beyond reverently placing an antique artifact into a museum display, and picking up a length of sharpened metal with the conscious intent of driving it through a human body.

"It's a bit battered," Fraser had told him, squinting critically down the length of the sword before handing it to him, "but the blade's well-balanced. Try the feel of it, to see if it suits."

Feeling a total fool, he slipped his hand into the basket and struck a fencing pose, based on memories of Errol Flynn films. They were standing in the busy lane outside the smithy in Cross Creek, and a few passersby paused to watch and offer helpful comment.

"What's Moore asking for that bit of pot tin?" someone asked disparagingly. "Anything more than two shillings, and it's highway robbery."

"That's a fine sword," said Moore, leaning over the half-door of his forge and glowering. "I had it from my uncle, who saw service at Fort Stanwyck. Why, that blade's killed a-many Frenchmen, and no but the one wee nick to be seen in it."

"One nick!" cried the disparager. "Why, the thing's bent so, if you went to stick a man, you'd end up cutting off his ear!"

There was a laugh from the gathering crowd that drowned the smith's response. Roger lowered the point of the sword, raised it slowly. How the hell did one road-test a sword? Ought he to wave it to and fro? Stick something with it? There was a cart standing a little way down the lane, loaded with burlap bags of something—raw wool, from the smell.

He looked for the proprietor of the bags, but couldn't pick him out from the growing crowd; the huge draft horse hitched to the cart was unattended, ears twitching sleepily over his dropped reins.

"Ah, if it's a sword the young man's wanting, sure and Malachy McCabe has a better one than that, left from his service. I think he'd part with it for nay more than three shillings." The cobbler from across the lane pursed his lips, nodding shrewdly at the sword.

" 'Tisn't an elegant piece," one middle-aged ex-soldier agreed, head tilted on one side. "Serviceable, though, I grant you that."

Roger extended his arm, lunged toward the door of the smithy, and narrowly missed Moore, coming out to defend the quality of his wares. The smith leaped aside with a startled cry, and the crowd roared.

Roger's apology was interrupted by a loud, nasal voice behind him.

"Here, sir! Let me offer a foe more worthy of your steel than an unarmed smith!"

Whirling round, Roger found himself confronting Dr. Fentiman, who was pulling a long, thin blade from the head of his ornamental cane. The doctor, who was roughly half Roger's size, brandished his rapier with a genial ferocity. Obviously fueled by a liberal luncheon, the tip of his nose glowed like a Christmas bulb.

"A test of skill, sir?" The doctor whipped his sword to and fro, so the narrow blade sang as it cut the air. "First to pink his man, first to draw blood is the victor, what say you?"

"Oh, an unfair advantage to the doctor! And isn't drawing blood your business, then?"

"Ha ha! And if ye run him through instead of pinking him, will ye patch the hole for no charge?" yelled another onlooker. "Or are ye out to drum up business, leech?"

"Watch yourself, young man! Turn your back on him and he's like to give ye a clyster!"

"Better a clyster than a blade up the arse!"

The doctor ignored these and similar vulgar observations, holding his blade upright in readiness. Roger shot a glance at Jamie, who was leaning against the wall, looking amused. Jamie raised one eyebrow and shrugged slightly.

"Try the feel of it," Jamie'd said. Well, and he supposed a duel with a drunken midget was as good a test as any.

Roger raised his blade and fixed the doctor with a menacing look.

"En garde," he said, and the knot of onlookers roared approval.

"Gardez vous," replied the doctor promptly, and lunged. Roger spun on one heel and the doctor shot past, rapier pointed like a lance. Moore the smith leaped aside just in time to avoid being skewered for the second time, cursing fluently.

"What am I, a friggin' target?" he shouted, shaking a fist.

Disregarding the near miss, the doctor regained his balance and charged back toward Roger, uttering shrill cries of self-encouragement.

It was rather like being attacked by a wasp, Roger thought. If you didn't panic, you found it possible to follow the thing and bat it away. Perhaps the doctor was a decent swordsman when sober; in his current state, his frenzied thrusts and mad flurries were easily fended off—as long as Roger paid attention.

It occurred to him early on that he could end the contest at any time, merely by meeting the doctor's slender rapier edge-on with his own much heavier weapon. He was beginning to enjoy himself, though, and was careful to parry with the flat of the broadsword.

Gradually everything disappeared from Roger's view but the flashing point of the rapier; the shouts of the crowd faded to a bee-buzz, the dirt of the lane and the wall of the smithy were scarcely visible. He grazed his elbow on the wall, moved back, moved in a circle to gain more room, all without conscious thought.

The rapier beat on his wider blade, engaged, and screeched loose with a *whinggg!* of metal. Clang and click and the whish of empty air and the ringing beat that vibrated in his wristbones with every blow of the doctor's sword.

Watch the stroke, follow it, bat it away. He had no idea what he was doing, but did it anyway. The sweat was running in his eyes; he shook his head to fling it away, nearly missed a low lunge toward his thigh, stopped it close, and flung the rapier back.

The doctor staggered, thrown off balance, and feral shouts of *"Now! Take him! Stick him now!"* rang in the dust-filled air. He saw the expanse of the doctor's embroidered waistcoat, unguarded, filled with silken butterflies, and choked back the visceral urge to lunge for it.

Shaken by the intensity of the urge, he took a step back. The doctor, sensing weakness, leapt forward, bellowing, blade pointed. Roger took a half-step sideways, and the doctor shot past, grazing the hock of the draft horse in his path.

The horse emitted an outraged scream, and promptly sent swordsman and sword flying through the air, to crash against the front of the cobbler's shop. The doctor fell to ground like a crushed fly, surrounded by lasts and scattered shoes.

Roger stood still, panting. His whole body was pulsing with every heartbeat, hot with the fighting. He wanted to go on, he wanted to laugh, he wanted to hit something. He wanted to get Brianna up against the nearest wall, and *now*.

Jamie gently lifted his hand and pried his fingers from the hilt of the sword. He hadn't remembered he was holding it. His arm felt too light without it, as though it might fly up toward the sky, all by itself. His fingers were stiff from gripping so hard, and he flexed them automatically, feeling the tingle as the blood came back.

The blood was tingling everywhere. He hardly heard the laughter, the offers of drinks, or felt the blows of congratulation rained on his back.

"A clyster, a clyster, give him a clyster!" a gang of apprentices was chanting, following along as the doctor was borne off for first-aid in the nearest tavern. The horse's owner was fussing solicitously over the big bay, who looked more bemused than injured.

"I suppose he's won. After all, he drew first blood."

Roger didn't realize that he'd spoken until he heard his own voice, strangely calm in his ears.

"Will it do?" Jamie was looking at him in question, the sword held lightly on the palms of his hands.

Roger nodded. The lane was bright and filled with white dust; it gritted under his eyelids, between his teeth when he closed his mouth.

"Aye," he said. "It will do."

"Good," said Jamie. "So will you," he added casually, turning away to pay the smith.

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PART EIGHT

A-Hunting We Will Go

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THE MOONS OF JUPITER

Late November, 1771

For the fourth time in as many minutes, Roger assured himself that it was not medically possible to die of sexual frustration. He doubted that it would even cause lasting damage. On the other hand, it wasn't doing him any great good, either, in spite of his efforts to consider it as an exercise in building character.

He eased himself onto his back, careful of the rustling mattress, and stared at the ceiling. No good; from a crack at the edge of the oiled hide covering the window, early morning sun was streaming in across the bed, and from the corner of his eye, he could still see the pure golden haunches of his wife, lit as though spotlighted.

She was lying on her stomach, face buried in the pillow, and the linen sheet had slipped down past the swell of her buttocks, leaving her bare from her nape to the crack of her arse. She lay so close in the narrow bed that his leg touched hers, and the warmth of her breathing brushed his bare shoulder. His mouth was dry.

He closed his eyes. That didn't help; he promptly started seeing images of the night before: Brianna by the dim light of a smothered fire, the flames of her hair sparking in the shadows, light gleaming sudden across the curve of a naked breast as she slipped the butter-soft linen from her shoulders.

Late as it was, tired as he was, he'd wanted her desperately. Someone else had wanted her more, though. He cracked an eyelid and raised himself just slightly, enough to see over Brianna's tumbled red locks, to where the cradle stood against the wall, still in shadow. No sign of movement.

They had a long-standing agreement. He woke instantly when disturbed, she was groggy and maladroit. So when a siren shriek from the cradle jerked him into heart-pounding alertness, it was Roger who would rise, pick up the soggy, yowling bundle, and deal with the immediate necessities of hygiene. By the time he brought Jemmy to his mother, bucking and squirming in the search for sustenance, Brianna would have roused herself far enough to wriggle free of her gown, and would reach up for the child, drawing him down in warm dark to the murmuring, milky refuge of her body.

Now that Jem was older, he seldom woke at night, but when he did, with bellyache or nightmare, it took a lot longer to settle him back to sleep than it had when he was tiny. Roger had fallen back to sleep while Bree was still administering comfort, but woke when she turned in the narrow bed, her buttocks sliding past his thigh. The corn shucks under them crackled loudly with a noise like a thousand distant firecrackers, all going off down the length of his spine, waking him to full awareness of an urgent, nearly painful arousal.

He'd felt the pressure of her arse against him and narrowly restrained himself from rolling over and assaulting her from the rear. Small suckling noises from the other side of her body stopped him. Jem was still in their bed.

He'd lain still, listening, praying that she'd stay awake long enough to return the little bugger to his cradle; sometimes they fell asleep together, mother and child, and Roger would wake in the morning to the confusingly mingled scents of a beddable woman and baby pee. And then in the end, he'd fallen asleep himself, in spite of his discomfort, worn out from a day of felling logs on the mountainside.

He inhaled gently. No, she'd put him back. No scent in his bed now save Brianna's, the earthy smell of woman-flesh, a faint, sweet cloud of sweat and slippery willingness.

She sighed in her sleep, murmured something incomprehensible, and turned her head on the pillow. There were blue smudges under her eyes; she'd been up late making jelly, up again twice more with the little bas—with the baby. How could he wake her, only to gratify his own base urges?

How could he *not*?

He gritted his teeth, torn between temptation, compassion, and the sure conviction that if he yielded to his inclinations, he would get precisely as far as the worst possible moment before an interruption from the vicinity of the cradle compelled him to stop.

Experience had been a harsh teacher, but the urgings of the flesh were louder than the voice of reason. He put out a stealthy hand and gently grasped the buttock nearest. It was cool and smooth and round as a gourd.

She made a small noise deep in her throat and stretched luxuriously. She arched her back, pushing her backside up in a way that convinced Roger that the course of wisdom was to fling back the quilt, roll on top of her, and achieve his goal in the ten seconds flat it was likely to take.

He got as far as flinging back the quilt. As he raised his head from the pillow, a round, pale object rose slowly into view over the rim of the cradle, like one of the moons of Jupiter. A pair of blue eyes regarded him with clinical dispassion.

"Oh, *shit*!" he said.

"Oh, *chit*!" Jemmy said, in happy mimicry. He clambered to his feet and stood, bouncing up and down as he gripped the edge of the cradle he was rapidly outgrowing, chanting *"Chit-chit-chit-chit"* in what he evidently thought was a song.

Brianna jerked into wakefulness, blinking through tangled locks.

"What? What's wrong?"

"Ah … something stung me." Roger flipped the edge of the quilt discreetly back in place. "Must be a wasp in here."

She stretched on her pillow, groaning and smoothing her hair out of her face with one hand, then picked up the cup from the table and took a drink; she always woke up thirsty.

Her eyes traveled over him, and a slow smile spread across her wide, soft mouth. "Yeah? Nasty sting you got there. Want me to rub it?” She put down the cup, rolled gracefully up onto an elbow, and reached out a hand.

“Ye’re a sadist,” Roger said, gritting his teeth. “No doubt about it. Ye must get it from your father.”

She laughed, took her hand off the quilt, and stood up, pulling her shift on over her head.

“MAMA! Chit, Mama!” Jemmy informed her, beaming, as she swung him up out of his cradle with a grunt of effort.

“You rat,” she said, affectionately. “You aren’t very popular with Daddy this morning. Your timing stinks.” She wrinkled her nose. “And not only your timing.”

“Depends on your perspective, I suppose.” Roger rolled onto his side, watching. “I imagine from *his* point of view, the timing was perfect.”

“Yeah.” Brianna gave him a raised brow. “Hence the new word, huh?”

“He’s heard it before,” Roger said dryly. “Many times.” He sat up, swinging his legs out of bed, and rubbed a hand through his hair and over his face.

“Well, all we have to do now is figure out how to get from the abstract to the concrete, huh?” She put Jemmy on his feet and knelt in front of him, kissing him on the nose, then unpinning his diaper. “Oh, yag. Is eighteen months too soon for toilet-training, do you think?”

“Are ye asking me, or him?”

“Pew. I don’t care; whichever one of you has an opinion.”

Jemmy plainly didn’t; cheerfully stoic, he was ignoring his mother’s determined assault on his private parts with a cold, wet cloth, absorbed in a new song of his own composition, which went along the lines of “Pew, pew, chit, chit, PEW, PEW …”

Brianna put a stop to this by swinging him up in her arms and sitting down with him in the nursing chair by the hearth.

“Want snackies?” she said, pulling down the neck of her shift invitingly.

“God, yes,” Roger said, with feeling. Bree laughed, not without sympathy, as she settled Jemmy on her lap, where he settled happily to suckling.

"Your turn next," she assured Roger. "You want oatmeal porridge, or fried mush for breakfast?"

"Anything else on the menu?" Damn, he'd been nearly ready to stand up. Back to square one.

"Oh, sure. Toast with strawberry jam. Cheese. Eggs, but you'll have to go get them from the coop; I don't have any in the pantry."

Roger found it hard to concentrate on the discussion, faced with the sight of Brianna in the dim smoky light of the cabin, long thighs spread under her shift, her heels tucked under the chair. She seemed to detect his lack of interest in matters dietary, for she looked up and smiled at him, her eyes taking in his own nakedness.

"You look nice, Roger," she said softly. Her free hand drifted down, resting lightly on the inner curve of one thigh. The long, blunt-nailed fingers made slow circles, barely moving.

"So do you." His voice was husky. "Better than nice."

Her hand rose and patted Jemmy softly on the back.

"Want to go see Auntie Lizzie after breakfast, sweetie?" she asked, not looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on Roger's, and her wide mouth curved in a slow smile.

He didn't think he could wait until after breakfast to touch her, at least. Her shawl was thrown across the foot of the bed; he grabbed it and wrapped it round his hips for the sake of decency as he got out of bed and crossed to kneel beside her chair.

Her hair stirred and lifted in a draft from the window, and he saw the stipple of gooseflesh break out suddenly on her arms. He put his arms around them both. The draft was cold on his bare back, but he didn't care.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear. His hand lay over hers, resting on her thigh.

She turned her head and kissed him, a glancing contact of soft lips.

"I love you, too," she said.

She had rinsed her mouth with water and wine, and tasted of autumn grapes and cold streams. He was just settling down to more serious business when a loud hammering shivered the timbers of the door, accompanied by his father-in-law's voice.

"Roger! Are ye in there, man? Up wi' ye this minute!"

"What does he mean am I in here?" Roger hissed to Brianna. "Where the hell else would I be?"

"Shh." She nipped his neck and reluctantly let go, her eyes traveling over him with deep appreciation.

"He's already up, Da!" she called.

"Aye, it's likely to be a permanent condition, too," Roger muttered. "Coming!" he bellowed. "Where the hell are my clothes?"

"Under the bed where you left them last night." Brianna set down Jemmy, who shrieked ecstatically at the sound of his grandfather's voice and ran to pound on the bolted door. Having finally ventured to walk, he had lost no time with the next stage, moving on to rapid—and perpetual—locomotion within a matter of days.

"Hurry!" Sunlight flooded into the cabin as the hide over the window was thrust aside, revealing Jamie Fraser's broad-boned face, flushed with excitement and morning sun. He lifted an eyebrow at the view of Roger thus revealed, crouched on the floor with a shirt clutched protectively to his midsection.

"Move yourself, man," he said, mildly. "It's no time to be hangin' about bare-arsed; MacLeod says there are beasts just over the ridge." He blew a kiss to Jemmy. *"A ghille ruaidh, a charaid! Ciamar a tha thu?"*

Roger forgot both sex and self-consciousness. He jerked the shirt over his head and stood up.

"What kind? Deer, elk?"

"I dinna ken, but they're meat!" The hide dropped suddenly, leaving the room half in shadow.

The intrusion had let in a blast of cold air, breaking the warm, smoke-laden atmosphere and bringing with it the breath of hunting weather, of crisp wind and crimson leaves, of mud and fresh droppings, of wet wool and sleek hide, all spiced with the imaginary reek of gunpowder.

With a final, longing look at his wife's body, Roger grabbed his stockings.

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DANGER IN THE GRASS

Grunting and puffing, the men pushed into the dark-green zone of the conifers by noon. High on the upper ridges, clusters of balsam fir and hemlock huddled with spruce and pine, over the tumbled rock. Here they stood secure in seasonal immortality, needles murmuring lament for the bright fragility of the fallen leaves below.

Roger shivered in the cold shadow of the conifers, and was glad of the thick wool hunting shirt he wore over the linen one. There was no conversation; even when they paused briefly to draw breath, there was a stillness in the wood here that forbade unnecessary speech.

The wilderness around them felt calm—and empty. Perhaps they were too late, and the game had moved on; perhaps MacLeod had been wrong. Roger had not yet mastered the killing skills, but he had spent a good deal of time alone in sun and wind and silence; he had acquired some of the instincts of a hunter.

The men came out into full sun as they emerged on the far side of the ridge. The air was thin and cold, but Roger felt heat strike through his chilled body, and closed his eyes in momentary pleasure. The men paused together in unspoken appreciation, basking in a sheltered spot, momentarily safe from the wind.

Jamie stepped to the edge of a rocky shelf, sun glinting off his tailed copper hair. He turned to and fro, squinting downward through the trees. Roger saw his nostrils flare, and smiled to himself. Well, then, perhaps he did smell the game. He wouldn't be surprised. Roger sniffed experimentally, but got nothing but the must of decaying leaves and a strong whiff of well-aged perspiration from the body of Kenny Lindsay.

Fraser shook his head, then turned to Fergus, and with a quiet word, climbed over the edge of the shelf and disappeared.

“We wait,” Fergus said laconically to the others, and sat down. He produced a pair of carved stone balls from his bag, and sat rolling them to and fro in his palm, concentrating intently, rolling a sphere out and back along the length of each dexterous finger.

A brilliant fall sun poked long fingers through the empty branches, administering the last rites of seasonal consolation, blessing the dying earth with a final touch of warmth. The men sat talking quietly, reeking in the sun. He hadn’t noticed in the colder wood, but here in the sun, the tang of fresh sweat was apparent, overlying the deeper layers of grime and body odors.

Roger reflected that perhaps it was not extraordinary olfactory acuteness on the part of animals, but merely the extreme smelliness of human beings that made it so difficult to get near game on foot. He had sometimes seen the Mohawk rub themselves with herbs, to disguise their natural odor when hunting, but even oil of peppermint wouldn’t make a dent in Kenny Lindsay’s stench.

He didn’t reek like that himself, did he? Curious, he bent his head toward the open neck of his shirt and breathed in. He felt a trickle of sweat run down the back of his neck, under his hair. He blotted it with his collar and resolved to bathe before going back to the cabin, no matter if the creek was crusted with ice.

Showers and deodorants were of more than aesthetic importance, he reflected. One got used to almost any habitual stink in short order, after all. What he’d not realized, secure in his relatively odorless modern environment, were the more intimate implications of smell. Sometimes he felt like a bloody baboon, his most primitive responses unleashed without warning, by some random assault of odor.

He remembered what had happened just the week before, and felt a hot blush creep over him at the memory.

He had walked into the dairy shed, looking for Claire. He’d found her—and Jamie, too. They were both fully clothed, standing well apart—and the air was so filled with the musk of desire and the sharp scent of male completion that Roger had felt the blood burn in his face, the hair on his body prickling erect.

His first instinct had been to turn and leave, but there was no excuse for that. He had given his message to Claire, conscious of Fraser's eyes on him, bland and quizzical. Conscious, too, of the unspoken communication between the two of them, an unseen thrum in the air, as though they were two beads strung on a wire stretched tight.

Jamie had waited until Roger left, before leaving himself. From the corner of his eye, Roger had caught a slight movement, seen the light touch of the hand with which he left her, and even now, felt a queer clutch of his insides at the memory.

He blew out his breath to ease the tightness in his chest, then stretched out in the leaves, letting the sun beat down on his closed eyelids. He heard a muffled groan from Fergus, then the rustle of footsteps as the Frenchman made another hasty withdrawal. Fergus had eaten half-cured sauerkraut the night before—a fact made clear to anyone who sat near him for long.

His thoughts drifted back to that awkward moment in the dairy shed.

It was not prurience, nor even simple curiosity, and yet he often found himself watching them. He saw them from the cabin window, walking together in the evening, Jamie's head bent toward her, hands clasped behind his back. Claire's hands moved when she talked, rising long and white in the air, as though she would catch the future between them and give it shape, would hand Jamie her thoughts as she spoke them, smooth and polished objects, bits of sculptured air.

Once aware of what he was doing, Roger watched them purposefully, and brushed aside any feelings of shame at such intrusion, minor as it was. He had a compelling reason for his curiosity; there was something he needed to know, badly enough to excuse any lack of manners.

How was it done, this business of marriage?

He had been brought up in a bachelor's house. Given all he needed as a boy in terms of affection by his great-uncle and the Reverend's elderly housekeeper, he found himself lacking something as an adult, ignorant of the threads of touch and word that bound a married couple. Instinct would do, for a start.

But if love like that could be learned …

A touch on his elbow startled him and he jerked round, flinging out an arm in quick defense. Jamie ducked neatly, eluding the blow, and grinned at him.

Fraser jerked his head toward the edge of the shelf.

"I've found them," he said.

Jamie raised a hand, and Fergus went at once to his side. The Frenchman came barely to the big Scot's shoulder, but didn't look ridiculous. He shaded his eyes with his one hand, peering down where Fraser pointed.

Roger came up behind them, looking down the slope. A flicker shot through a clearing below, marked by the swooping dip and rise of its flight. Its mate called deep in the wood, a sound like a high-pitched laugh. He could see nothing else remarkable below; it was the same dense tangle of mountain laurel, hickory, and oak that existed on the side of the ridge from which they had come; far below, a thick line of tall leafless trees marked the course of a stream.

Fraser saw him, and gestured downward with a twist of the head, pointing with his chin.

"By the stream; d'ye see?" he said.

At first, Roger saw nothing. The stream itself wasn't visible, but he could chart its course by the growth of bare-limbed sycamore and willows. Then he saw it; a bush far down the slope moved, in a way that wasn't like the wind-blown tossings of the branches near it. A sudden jerk that shook the bush as something pulled at it, feeding.

"Jesus, what's that?"

His glimpse of a sudden dark bulk had been enough only to tell him that the thing was big—very big.

"I dinna ken. Bigger than a deer. Wapiti, maybe." Fraser's eyes were intent, narrowed against the wind. He stood easy, musket in one hand, but Roger could see his excitement.

"A moose, perhaps?" Fergus frowned under his shading hand. "I have not seen one, but they are very large, no?"

"No." Roger shook his head. "I mean yes, but that's not what it is. I've hunted moose—with the Mohawk. They don't move like that at all." Too late, he saw Fraser's mouth tighten briefly, then relax; by unspoken consent, they avoided mention of Roger's captivity among the Mohawk. Fraser said nothing, though, only nodded at the tangle of woodland below.

"Aye, it's not deer or moose, either—but there's more than one. D'ye see?"

Roger squinted harder, then saw what Fraser was doing, and did likewise—swaying from foot to foot, deliberately letting his eyes drift casually across the landscape.

With no attempt to focus on a single spot in the panorama below, he could instead see the whole slope as a blurred patchwork of color and motion—like a Van Gogh painting, he thought, and smiled at the thought. Then he saw what Jamie had seen, and stiffened, all thought of modern art forgotten.

Here and there among the faded grays and browns and the patches of evergreen was a disjunction, a knot in the pattern of nature's weft—strange movements, not caused by the rushing wind. Each beast was invisible itself, but made its presence known, nonetheless, by the twitchings of the bushes nearby. God, how big must they be? There … and there … he let his eyes drift to and fro, and felt a tightening of excitement through chest and belly. Christ, there were half a dozen, at least!

"I was right! I was right, was I no, *Mac Dubh*?" MacLeod exulted. His round face beamed from one to another, flushed with triumph. "I did say as I'd seen beasts, aye?"

"Jesus, there's a whole herd of them," Evan Lindsay breathed, echoing his thought. The Highlander's face was bright, fierce with anticipation. He glanced at Jamie.

"How will it be, *Mac Dubh*?"

Jamie lifted one shoulder slightly, still peering into the valley. "Hard to say; they're in the open. We canna corner them anywhere." He licked a finger and held it to the breeze, then pointed.

"The wind's from the west; let us come down the runnel there to the foot of the slope. Then wee Roger and I will pass to the side, near that great outcrop; ye see the one?"

Lindsay nodded slowly, a crooked front tooth worrying the thin flesh of his lip.

"They're near the stream. Do you circle about—keep well clear until ye're near to the big cedar tree; ye see it? Aye, then spread yourselves, two to each bank of the stream. Evan's the best marksman; have him stand ready. Roger Mac and I will come behind the herd, to drive them toward ye."

Fergus nodded, surveying the land below.

"I see. And if they shall see us, they will turn into that small defile, and so be trapped. Very good. *Allonsy!*"

He gestured imperiously to the others, his hook gleaming in the sun. Then he grimaced slightly, hand to his belly, as a long, rumbling fart despoiled the silence of the wood. Jamie gave him a thoughtful look.

"Keep downwind, aye?" he said.

It was impossible to walk silently through the drifts of dry leaves, but Roger stepped as lightly as possible. Seeing Jamie load and prime his own gun, Roger had done likewise, feeling mingled excitement and misgiving at the acrid scent of powder. From his impressions of the size of the beasts they followed, even he might have a chance at hitting one.

Putting aside his doubts, he paused for a moment, turning his head from side to side to listen. Nothing but the faint rush of wind through the bare branches overhead, and the far-off murmur of water. A small *crack* sounded in the underbrush ahead, and he caught a glimpse of red hair. He cupped the gunstock in his hand, the wood warm and solid in his palm, barrel aimed upward over his shoulder, and followed.

Stealing carefully round a sumac bush, Roger felt something give suddenly under his foot, and jerked back to keep his balance. He looked at what he'd stepped on, and in spite of his instant disappointment, felt a strong urge to laugh.

"Jamie!" he called, not bothering any longer about stealth or silence.

Fraser's bright hair appeared through a screen of laurel, followed by the man himself. He didn't speak, but lifted one thick brow in inquiry.

"I'm no great tracker," Roger said, nodding downward, "but I've stepped in enough of these to know one when I see one." He scraped the side of his shoe on a fallen log, and pointed with his toe. "What d'ye think we've been creeping up on, all this time?"

Jamie stopped short, squinting, then walked forward and squatted next to the corrugated brown splotch. He prodded it with a forefinger, then looked up at Roger with an expression of mingled amusement and dismay.

"I will be damned," he said. Still squatting, he turned his head, frowning as he surveyed the wilderness around them. "But what are they doing here?" he murmured.

He stood up, shading his eyes as he looked toward the creek, where the lowering sun dazzled through the branches.

"It doesna make a bit of sense," he said, squinting into the shadows. "There are only three kine on the Ridge, and I saw two of them bein' milked this morning. The third belongs to Bobby MacLeod, and I should think he'd ken if it was his own cow he'd seen. Besides …" He turned slowly on his heel, looking up the steep slope they'd just descended.

He didn't have to speak; no cow not equipped with a parachute could have come down that way.

"There's more than one—a lot more," Roger said. "You saw."

"Aye, there are. But where did they come from?" Jamie glanced at him, frowning in puzzlement. "The Indians dinna keep kine, especially not at this season—they'd slaughter any beasts they had, and smoke the meat. And there's no farm in thirty miles where they might have come from."

"Maybe a wild herd?" Roger suggested. "Escaped a long time ago, and wandering?" Speculation sprang up in Jamie's eyes, echoing the hopeful gurgle of Roger's stomach.

"If so, they'll be easy hunting," Jamie said. Skepticism tempered his voice, even as he smiled. He stooped and broke off a small piece of the cow-pat, crushed it with a thumb, then tossed it away.

"Verra fresh," he said. "They're close; let's go."

Within a half-hour's walking, they emerged onto the bank of the stream they had glimpsed from above. It was wide and shallow here, with willows trailing leafless branches in the water. Nothing moved save a sparkle of sun on the riffles, but it was plain that the cows had been there; the mud of the bank was cut and churned with drying hoofprints, and in one place, the dying plants had been pawed away in a long, messy trough where something large had wallowed.

"Why did I not think to bring rope?" Jamie muttered, pushing through the willow saplings on the bank as they skirted the wallow. "Meat's one thing, but milk and cheese would be—" The muttering died away, as he turned from the stream, following a trail of broken foliage back into the wood.

Without speaking, the two men spread out, walking softly. Roger listened with all his might to the quiet of the forest. They had to be nearby; even such an inexperienced eye as Roger's had picked up the freshness of the signs. And yet the wood was autumn-still, the silence broken only by a raven, calling in the distance. The sun was hanging low in the sky, filling the air in the wood with a golden haze. It was getting noticeably colder; Roger passed through a patch of shadow, and shivered, in spite of his coat. They'd have to find the others and make camp soon; twilight was short. A fire would be good. Better, of course, if there were something to cook over it.

They were going down, now, into a small hollow where wisps of autumn mist rose from the cooling earth. Jamie was some distance ahead, walking with as much purpose as the broken ground allowed; evidently the trail was still plain to him, in spite of the thick vegetation.

A herd of cows couldn't just vanish, he thought, even in mist as heavy as this … not unless they were faery kine. And that, he wasn't quite prepared to believe, in spite of the unearthly quiet of the woods just here.

"Roger." Jamie spoke very quietly, but Roger had been listening so intently that he located his father-in-law at once, some distance to his right. Jamie jerked his head at something nearby. "Look."

He held aside a large, brambly bush, exposing the trunk of a substantial sycamore tree. Part of the bark had been rubbed away, leaving an oozing whitish patch on the gray bark.

"Do cows rub themselves like that?" Roger peered dubiously at the patch, then picked out a swatch of woolly dark hair, snagged by the roughened bark.

"Aye, sometimes," Jamie replied. He leaned close, shaking his head as he peered at the dark-brown tangle in Roger's hand. "But damned if I've ever seen a cow wi' a coat like that. Why ye'd think it was …"

Something moved at Roger's elbow and he turned, to find a monstrous dark head peering over his shoulder. A tiny, blood-dark eye met his own, and he let out a yell and jerked backward. There was a loud bang as his gun went off, and then a rush and a thud, and he was lying wrapped round a tree trunk, the breath knocked out of him, left with no more than a fleeting notion of a hairy dark bulk and a power that had sent him flying like a leaf.

He sat up, fighting for breath, and found Jamie on his knees in the leaves, scrabbling frantically for Roger's gun.

"Up!" he said. "Up, wee Roger! My God, it's buffalo!"

Then he was up, following Jamie. Still half-winded, but running, his gun in his hand with no clear memory of how it got there, powder-horn bumping against his hip.

Jamie was bounding like a deer through bushes, bundled cloak bouncing against his back. The wood wasn't silent any longer; ahead there were crashings and splinterings, and low snorting bellows.

He caught up Jamie on the upward slope; they labored up it, feet sliding on damp leaves, lungs burning from the effort, then topped a rise and came out onto a long downward slope, scattered with spindly pine and hickory saplings.

There they were; eight or nine of the huge, shaggy beasts, clustering together as they thundered down the hill, splitting to go around thickets and trees. Jamie dropped to one knee, sighted, and fired, to no apparent effect.

There was no time to stop and reload; they must keep the herd in sight. A bend of the stream glinted between the trees, below and to the right. Roger charged down the slope in a rush of excitement, canteen and bullet-box flying, heart thundering like the hooves of the buffalo herd. He could hear Jamie bellowing behind him, shouting Gaelic exhortations.

An exclamation in a different tone made Roger glance back. Jamie had stopped, his face frozen in shock. Before Roger could call to him, shock shifted to a look of fury. Teeth bared, he seized his gun by the barrel, and brought down the stock with a vicious *tchunk!* Barely pausing, he lifted the gun and clubbed it down again—and again, shoulders rolling with the effort.

Reluctantly abandoning the chase, Roger turned and bounded up the slope toward him.

“What the hell—?” Then he saw, and felt the hair on his body rise in a surge of revulsion. Brown coils squirmed between the tussocks, thick and scaly. One end of the snake had been battered to pulp, and its blood stained the butt of Fraser’s musket, but the body writhed on, wormlike and headless.

“Stop! It’s dead. D’ye hear me? Stop, I say!” He grasped Fraser’s arm, but his father-in-law jerked free of his hold and brought the gun-butt down once more. Then he did stop, and stood shuddering violently, half-leaning on his gun.

“Christ! What happened? Did it get you?”

“Aye, in the leg. I stepped on it.” Jamie’s face was white to the lips. He looked at the still-writhing corpse and a deep shudder ran through him again.

Roger repressed his own shudder and grabbed Fraser’s arm.

"Come away. Sit down, we'll have a look."

Jamie came, half-stumbling, and collapsed onto a fallen log. He fumbled at his stocking top, fingers shaking. Roger pushed Jamie's hand away and stripped buskin and stocking off the right foot. The fang marks were clear, a double dark-red puncture in the flesh of Fraser's calf. The flesh around the small holes had a bluish tinge, visible even in the late gold light.

"It's poisonous. I've got to cut it." Roger felt dry-mouthed, but oddly calm, with no sense of panic. He pulled the knife from his belt, thought briefly of sterilization, and dismissed the notion. It would take precious minutes to light a fire, and there was no time at all to waste.

"Wait." Fraser was still white, but had stopped shaking. He took the small flask from his belt and trickled whisky over the blade, then poured a few drops on his fingers and rubbed the liquid over the wound. He gave Roger a brief twitch of the mouth, meant as a smile.

"Claire does that, when she sets herself to cut someone." He leaned back, hands braced on the mossy trunk, and nodded. "Go on, then."

Biting his lip in concentration, Roger pressed the tip of the knife into the skin just above one of the puncture marks. The skin was surprisingly tough and springy; the knife dented it, but didn't penetrate. Fraser reached down and clasped his hand around Roger's; he shoved, with a deep, vicious grunt, and the knife sank suddenly in, an inch or more. Blood welled up around the blade; the gripping hand fell away.

"Again. Hard—and quick, man, for God's sake." Jamie's voice was steady, but Roger felt clear droplets of sweat fall onto his hand from Fraser's face, warm and then cold on his skin.

He braced himself to the necessary force, stabbed hard and cut quick—two X marks over the punctures, just as the first-aid guides said. The wounds were bleeding a lot, blood pouring down in thick streams. That was good, though, he thought. He had to go deep; deep enough to get beyond the poison. He dropped the knife and bent, mouth to the wounds.

There was no panic, but his sense of urgency was rising. How fast did venom spread? He had no more than minutes, maybe less. Roger sucked as hard as he could, blood filling his mouth with the taste of hot metal. He sucked and spat in quiet frenzy, blood spattering on the yellow leaves, Fraser's leg hairs scratchy against his lips. With the peculiar diffusion of mind that attends emergency, he thought of a dozen fleeting things at once, even as he bent his whole concentration to the task at hand.

Was the bloody snake really dead?

How poisonous was it?

Had the bison got away?

Christ, was he doing this right?

Brianna would kill him if he let her father die. So would Claire.

He had the devil of a cramp in his right thigh.

Where in hell were the others? Fraser should call for them—no, he *was* calling, was bellowing somewhere outside Roger's ken. The flesh of the leg Roger held had gone rock-hard, muscles rigid under his pressing fingers.

Something grasped the hair on the back of his head and twisted, forcing him to stop. He glanced up, breathing hard.

"That's enough, aye?" Jamie said mildly. "You'll drain me dry." He gingerly wiggled his bared foot, grimacing at his leg. The slashmarks were vivid, still oozing blood, and the flesh around them was swollen from the sucking, blotched and bruised.

Roger sat back on his heels, gulping air.

"I've made more—of a mess—than the snake did."

His mouth filled with saliva; he coughed and spat. Fraser silently offered him the whisky flask; he swirled a mouthful round and spat once more, then drank deep.

"All right?" He wiped his chin with the back of a hand, still tasting iron, and nodded at the lacerated leg.

"I'll do." Jamie was still pale, but one corner of his mouth turned up. "Go and see are the others in sight."

They weren't; the view from the top of the outcrop showed nothing but a sea of bare branches, tossing to and fro. The wind had come up. If the bison still moved along the river, there was no trace visible, either of them or of their hunters.

Hoarse from hallooing into the wind, Roger made his way back down the slope. Jamie had moved a little, finding a sheltered spot among rocks at the foot of a big balsam fir. He was sitting, back against a rock and legs outstretched, a handkerchief bound round his wounded leg.

“No sign of anyone. Can ye walk?” Roger bent over his father-in-law, and was alarmed to see him flushed and sweating heavily, despite the gathering chill of the air.

Jamie shook his head and gestured toward his leg.

“I can—but not for long.” The leg was noticeably swollen near the bite, and the blue tinge had spread; it showed like a faint fresh bruise on either side of the encircling handkerchief.

Roger felt the first stab of uneasiness. He had done everything he knew to do; first-aid guides always had as the next step in the treatment of snakebite, “Immobilize limb and get patient to hospital as soon as possible.” The cutting and sucking were meant to pull poison from the wound—but clearly there was plenty still left, spreading slowly through Jamie Fraser’s body. He hadn’t been in time to get it all—if he’d gotten any. And the nearest thing to a hospital—Claire and her herbs—a day’s walk away.

Roger sank slowly down onto his haunches, wondering what the hell to do next. Immobilize the limb—well, that was effectively taken care of, for what good it might do.

“Hurt much?” he asked awkwardly.

“Yes.”

With this unhelpful response, Jamie leaned back against the rock and closed his eyes. Roger eased himself down onto a sheaf of dry needles, trying to think.

It was getting dark fast; the brief warmth of the day had faded, and the shadows under the trees had taken on the deep blue look of evening, though it couldn’t be more than four or so. Plainly they weren’t going anywhere tonight; navigation in the mountains was nearly impossible in the dark, even if Fraser could walk. If the others were here, they could make a shift to carry him—but would that be any better than leaving him where he was? While he urgently wished Claire were here, sense told him there was little even she could do—except, perhaps, comfort Jamie if he were to die …

The thought knotted his belly. Shoving it firmly aside, he reached into his pouch, checking supplies. He had a small quantity of johnny-cake still in his bag; water was never a difficulty in these mountains—through the sound of the trees, he could hear the gurgle of a stream somewhere below, not far off. He'd better be gathering wood while it was still light, though.

"We'd best make a fire." Jamie spoke suddenly, startling Roger with this echo of his thought. Jamie opened his eyes and looked down at one hand, turning it over and back as though he'd never seen it before.

"I've pins and needles in my fingers," he remarked with interest. He touched his face with one hand. "Here, too. My lips have gone numb. Is that usual, d'ye ken?"

"I don't know. I suppose it is, if you've been drinking the whisky." It was a feeble joke, but he was relieved to have it greeted with a faint laugh.

"Nay." Jamie touched the flask beside him. "I thought I might need it more, later."

Roger took a deep breath and stood up.

"Right. Stay there; you shouldn't move. I'll fetch along some wood. The others will likely see the light of the fire." The other men would be of no particular help, at least not until morning—but it would be a comfort not to be alone.

"Fetch the snake, too," Jamie called after him. "Fair's fair; we'll hae a bite of *him* for our supper!"

Grinning in spite of present worry, Roger gave a reassuring wave and turned down the slope.

What were the chances? he asked himself, stooping to wrest a thick pine knot from the soft wood of a rotted log. Fraser was a big man, and in robust health. Surely he would survive.

Yet folk did die of snakebite, and not infrequently; he'd heard only last week of a German woman near High Point; bent to pick up a stick of wood from her woodpile, struck full in the throat by a snake lying hidden there, dead in minutes. Reaching under a bush for a dry branch just as this recollection came to him, he hastily withdrew his bare hand, gooseflesh running up his arm. Berating himself for stupidity, he got a stick and thoroughly stirred the drift of dry leaves before reaching once more cautiously into it.

He couldn't help glancing up the slope every few minutes, feeling a small stab of alarm whenever Fraser was out of sight. What if he should collapse before Roger returned?

Then he relaxed a little as he remembered. No, it was all right. Jamie wasn't going to die tonight, either of snakebite or cold. He couldn't; he was meant to die some years hence, by fire. For once, future doom meant present reassurance. He took a deep breath and let it out in relief, then steeled himself to approach the snake.

It was motionless now, quite obviously dead. Still, it took some effort of will to pick the thing up. It was as thick around as his wrist and nearly four feet long. It had begun to stiffen; in the end, he was obliged to lay it across the armload of firewood, like a scaly branch. Seeing it so, he had no trouble imagining how the snake that had bitten the German woman had escaped notice; the subtle browns and grays of its patterns made it nearly invisible against its background.

Jamie skinned the thing while Roger built the fire. Watching from the corner of his eye, he could see that his father-in-law was making an unusually clumsy job of it; the numbness in his hands must be getting worse. Still, he went on doggedly, hacking at the corpse, stringing chunks of pale raw flesh onto a half-peeled twig with trembling fingers.

The job complete, Jamie extended the stick toward the budding fire and nearly dropped it. Roger grabbed for it, and felt through the stick the tremor that shook Jamie's hand and arm.

"You all right?" he said, and reached automatically to feel Jamie's forehead. Fraser jerked back, surprised and mildly affronted.

"Aye," he said, but then paused. "Aye, well … I do feel a bit queer," he admitted.

It was hard to tell in the uncertain light, but Roger thought he looked a good bit more than queer.

"Lie down for a bit, why don't you?" he suggested, trying to sound casual. "Sleep if ye can; I'll wake ye when the food's ready."

Jamie didn't argue, which alarmed Roger more than anything else so far. He curled himself into a drift of leaves, moving his wounded leg with a care that told Roger just how painful it was.

The snakemeat dripped and sizzled, and in spite of a slight distaste at the notion of eating snake, Roger felt his stomach rumble in anticipation; damned if it didn't smell like roasting chicken! Not for the first time, he reflected on the thin line that separated appetite from starvation; give the most finicky gourmand a day or two without food, and he'd be eating slugs and lizards without the least hesitation; Roger had, on the journey back from his surveying trip.

He kept an eye on Jamie; he didn't move, but Roger could see him shiver now and then, in spite of the now-leaping flames. His eyes were closed. His face looked red, but that might be only firelight—no telling his real color.

By the time the meat had cooked through, it was full dark. Roger fetched water, then heaped armloads of dried grass and wood on the fire, making the flames dance and crackle, higher than his head; if the other men were anywhere within a mile, they should see it.

Fraser roused himself with difficulty to eat. It was clear that he had no appetite, but he forced himself to chew and swallow, each bite a dogged effort. What was it? Roger wondered. Simple stubbornness? A notion of vengeance against the snake? Or perhaps some Highland superstition, the idea that consuming the reptile's flesh might be a cure for its bite?

"Did the Indians ken aught to do for snakebite?" Jamie asked abruptly, lending some credence to the last guess.

"Yes," Roger answered cautiously. "They had roots and herbs that they mixed with dung or hot cornmeal, to make a poultice."

"Did it work?" Fraser held a bit of meat in his hand, wrist drooping as though too tired to raise it to his mouth.

"I only saw it done twice. Once, it seemed to work perfectly—no swelling, no pain; the little girl was quite all right by evening of the same day. The other time—it didn't work." He had only seen the hide-wrapped body taken from the longhouse, not witnessed the grisly details of the death. Evidently he was going to get another chance to see the effects of snakebite up close, though.

Fraser grunted.

"And what would they do in your time?"

"Give you an injection of something called antivenin."

"An injection, aye?" Jamie looked unenthusiastic. "Claire did that to me, once. I didna like it a bit."

"Did it work?"

Jamie merely grunted in reply, and tore off another small morsel of meat between his teeth.

In spite of his worry, Roger wolfed his share of the meat, and the uneaten part of Jamie's meal as well. The sky spread black and starry overhead, and a cold wind moved through the trees, chilling hands and face.

He buried the remnants of the snake—all they needed now was for some large carnivore to show up, drawn by the smell of blood—and tended the fire, all the time listening for a shout from the darkness. No sound came but the moaning of wind and cracking of branches; they were alone.

Fraser had pulled off his hunting shirt in spite of the chill, and was sitting with his eyes closed, swaying slightly. Roger squatted next to him and touched his arm. Jesus! The man was blazing hot to the touch.

He opened his eyes, though, and smiled faintly. Roger held up a cup of water; Jamie nodded and took the cup, fumbling. The leg was grotesquely swollen below the knee, nearly twice its normal size. The skin showed irregular dark red blotches, as though some succubus had come to place its hungry mouth upon the flesh, then left unsatisfied.

Roger wondered uneasily whether he might, perhaps, be wrong. He'd been convinced that the past couldn't be changed; ergo, the time and manner of Fraser's death was set—some four years in the future. If it weren't for that certainty, though, he thought, he'd be bloody worried by the look of the man. Just how certain *was* he, after all?

"Ye could be wrong." Jamie had put down the cup and was regarding him with a steady blue gaze.

"About what?" he asked, startled to hear his thought spoken aloud. Had he been muttering to himself, not realizing it?

"About the changing. Ye thought it wasna possible to change history, ye said. But what if ye're wrong?"

Roger bent to poke the fire.

"I'm not wrong," he said firmly, as much to himself as to Fraser. "Think, man. You and Claire—you tried to stop Charles Stuart—change what he did—and ye couldn't. It can't be done."

"That's no quite right," Fraser objected. He leaned back, eyes half-hooded against the fire's brightness.

"What's not right?"

"It's true we failed to keep him from the Rising—but that didna depend only on us and on him; there were a good many other folk had to do wi' that. The chiefs who followed him, the damn Irishmen who flattered him—even Louis; him and his gold."

He waved a hand, dismissing it. "But that's neither here nor there. Ye said Claire and I couldna stop him—and it's true, we couldna stop the beginning. But we might have stopped the end."

"Culloden, you mean?" Roger stared into the fire, remembering dimly that long-ago day when Claire had first told him and Brianna the story of the stones—and Jamie Fraser. Yes, she had spoken of a last opportunity—the chance to prevent that final slaughter of the clans …

He glanced up at Fraser.

"By killing Charles Stuart?"

"Aye. If we had done so—but neither she nor I could bring ourselves to it." His eyes were nearly closed, but he turned his head restlessly, clearly uncomfortable. "I have wondered many times since, if that was decency—or cowardice."

"Or maybe something else," Roger said abruptly. "You don't know. If Claire had tried to poison him, I'm betting something would have happened; the dish would have spilled, a dog would have eaten it, someone else would have died—it wouldn't have made a difference!"

Fraser's eyes opened slowly.

"So ye think it's all destined, do ye? A man has no free choice at all?" He rubbed at his mouth with the back of his hand. "And when ye chose to come back, for Brianna, and then again, for her and the wean—it wasna your choice at all, aye? Ye were meant to do it?"

"I—" Roger stopped, hands clenched on his thighs. The smell of the *Gloriana*'s bilges seemed suddenly to rise above the scent of burning wood. Then he relaxed, and gave a short laugh. "Hell of a time to get philosophical, isn't it?"

"Aye, well," Fraser spoke quite mildly. "It's only that I may not have another time." Before Roger could expostulate, he went on. "If there is nay free choice … then there is neither sin nor redemption, aye?"

"Jesus," Roger muttered, shoving the hair back from his forehead. "Come out with Hawkeye and end up under a tree with bloody Augustine of Hippo!"

Jamie ignored him, intent on his point.

"We chose—Claire and I. We wouldna do murder. We wouldna shed the blood of one man; but does the blood of Culloden then rest on us? We wouldna commit the sin—but does the sin find us, still?"

"Of course not." Roger rose to his feet, restless, and stood poking the fire. "What happened at Culloden—it wasn't your fault, how could it be? All the men who took part in that—Murray, Cumberland, all the chiefs … it was not any one man's doing!"

"So ye think it is all meant? We're doomed or saved from the moment of birth, and not a thing can change it? And you a minister's son!" Fraser gave a dry sort of chuckle.

"Yes," Roger said, feeling at once awkward and unaccountably angry. "I mean no, I don't think that. It's only … well, if something's already happened one way, how can it happen another way?"

"It's only you that thinks it's happened," Fraser pointed out.

"I don't think it, I know!"

“Mmphm. Aye, because ye’ve come from the other side of it; it’s behind you. So perhaps *you* couldna change something—but I could, because it’s still ahead of me?”

Roger rubbed a hand hard over his face.

“That makes—” he began, and then stopped. How could he say it made no sense? Sometimes he thought nothing in the world made sense anymore.

“Maybe,” he said wearily. “God knows; I don’t.”

“Aye. Well, I suppose we’ll find out soon enough.”

Roger glanced sharply at him, hearing a strange note in his voice.

“What d’ye mean by that?”

“Ye think ye ken that I died three years from now,” Fraser said calmly. “If I die tonight, then you’re wrong, aye? What ye think happened won’t have happened—so the past *can* be changed, aye?”

“You’re not going to die!” Roger snapped. He glowered at Fraser, daring him to contradict.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Fraser said. “But I think I’ll take a bit o’ the whisky now. Draw the cork for me, aye? My fingers willna grasp it.”

Roger’s own hands were far from steady. Perhaps it was only the heat of Fraser’s fever that made his own skin feel cold as he held the flask for his father-in-law to drink. He doubted that whisky was recommended for snakebite, but it didn’t seem likely to make much difference now.

“Lie down,” he said gruffly, when Jamie had finished. “I’ll fetch a bit more wood.”

He was unable to keep still; there was plenty of wood to hand, yet still he prowled the darkness, keeping just within sight of the blazing fire.

He had had a lot of nights like this; alone under a sweep of sky so vast that it made him dizzy to look up, chilled to the bone, moving to keep warm. The nights when he had wrestled with choice, too restless to lie in a comforting burrow of leaves, too tormented to sleep.

The choice had been clear then, but far from easy to make: Brianna on the one hand, and all that came with her; love and danger, doubt and fear. And on the other, surety. The knowledge of who and what he was—a certainty he had forsaken, for the sake of the woman who was his … and the child who might be.

He had chosen. Dammit, he *had* chosen! Nothing had forced him, he had made the choice himself. And if it meant remaking himself from the ground up, then he'd bloody well chosen that, too! And he'd chosen to kiss Morag, too. His mouth twisted at the thought; he'd had even less notion of the consequences of *that* small act.

Some small echo stirred in his mind, a soft voice far back in the shadows of his memory.

"… what I was born does not matter, only what I will make of myself, only what I will become."

Who'd written that? he wondered. Montaigne? Locke? One of the bloody Enlightenment lads, them and their notions of destiny and the individual? He'd like to see what they had to say about time traveling! Then he remembered where he'd read it, and the marrow of his spine went cold.

"This is the grimoire of the witch, Geillis. It is a witch's name, and I take it for my own; what I was born does not matter, only what I will make of myself, only what I will become."

"Right!" he said aloud, defiant. "Right, and you couldn't change things either, could you, Grandma?"

A sound came from the forest behind him, and the hair rose on the back of his neck before he recognized it; it wasn't laughter, as he'd thought at first—only a panther's distant cry.

She had, though, he thought suddenly. True, she'd not managed to make a king of Charles Stuart—but she'd done a good number of other things. And now he came to think on the matter … She and Claire had both done something guaranteed to change things; they'd borne children, to men of another time. Brianna … William Buccleigh—and when he thought of the effect those two births had had on his own life, let alone anything else …

That *had* to change things, didn't it? He sat down slowly on a fallen log, feeling the bark cold and damp under him. Yes, it did. To name one minor effect, his own bloody existence was the result of Geilie Duncan's taking charge of her destiny. If Geilie hadn't borne a child to Dougal MacKenzie … of course, she hadn't *chosen* to do that.

Did intention make any difference, though? Or was that exactly the point he'd been arguing with Jamie Fraser?

He got up and circled the fire quietly, peering into the shadows. Fraser was lying down, a humped shape in the darkness, very still.

He walked lightly, but his feet crunched on the needles. Fraser didn't twitch. His eyes were closed. The blotchiness had spread to his face. Roger thought his features had a thick, congested look, lips and eyelids slightly swollen. In the wavering light, it was impossible to tell whether he was still breathing.

Roger knelt and shook him, hard.

"Hey! Are ye still alive?" He'd meant to say it jokingly, but the fear in his voice was apparent to his own ears.

Fraser didn't move. Then one eye cracked open.

"Aye," he muttered. "But I'm no enjoying it."

Roger didn't leave again. He wiped Jamie's face with a wet cloth, offered more whisky—which was refused—then sat beside the recumbent form, listening for each rasping breath.

Much against his will, he found himself making plans, proceeding from one unwelcome assumption to the next. What if the worst happened? Against his will, he thought it possible; he had seen several people die who didn't look nearly as bad as Fraser did just now.

If the worst *should* happen, and the others not have returned, he would have to bury Jamie. He could neither carry the body nor leave it exposed; not with panthers or other animals nearby.

His eye roamed uneasily over the surroundings. Rocks, trees, brush—everything looked alien, the shapes half-masked by darkness, outlines seeming to waver and change in the flickering glow, the wind moaning past like a prowling beast.

There, maybe; the end of a half-fallen tree loomed jagged in the darkness, leaning at an angle. He could scrape a shallow trench, perhaps, then lever the tree and let it fall to cover the temporary grave …

He pressed his head hard against his knees.

"No!" he whispered. "Please, no!"

The thought of telling Bree, telling Claire, was a physical pain, stabbing him in chest and throat. It wasn't only them, either—what about Jem? What about Fergus and Marsali, Lizzie and her father, the Bugs, the Lindsays, the other families on the Ridge? They all looked to Fraser for confidence and direction; what would they do without him?

Fraser shifted, and groaned with the movement. Roger laid a hand on his shoulder, and he stilled.

Don't go, he thought, the unspoken words balled tight in his throat. *Stay with us. Stay with me.*

He sat for a long time, his hand resting on Fraser's shoulder. He had the absurd thought that he was somehow holding Fraser, keeping him anchored to the earth. If he held on 'til the sunrise, all would be well; if he lifted his hand, that would be the end.

The fire was burning low now, but he put off from moment to moment the necessity of tending it, unwilling to let go.

"MacKenzie?" It was no more than a murmur, but he bent at once.

"Aye, I'm here. Ye want water? A drop of whisky?" He was reaching for the cup even as he spoke, spilling water in his anxiety. Fraser took two swallows, then waved the cup away with a twitch of his hand.

"I dinna ken yet if ye're right or you're wrong," Fraser said. His voice was soft and hoarse, but distinct. "But if you're wrong, wee Roger, and I'm dying, there are things I must say to ye. I dinna want to leave it too late."

"I'm here," Roger repeated, not knowing what else to say.

Fraser closed his eyes, gathering strength, then brought his hands beneath him and rolled halfway over, ponderous and clumsy. He grimaced, and took a moment to catch his breath.

"Bonnet. I must tell ye what I've put in train."

"Aye?" For the first time, Roger felt something other than simple worry for Fraser's welfare.

"There is a man named Lyon—Duncan Innes will ken best how to find him. He works on the coast, buying from the smugglers who run the Outer Banks. He sought me out at the wedding, to see would I deal with him, over the whisky."

The plan in outline was simple enough; Jamie meant to send word—by what route, Roger had no notion—to this Lyon, indicating that he was willing to enter into business, provided that Lyon would bring Stephen Bonnet to a meeting, to prove that he had a man of the necessary reputation and skill to manage the transport up and down the coast.

"Necessary reputation," Roger echoed under his breath. "Aye, he's got that."

Fraser made a sound that might have been a laugh.

"He'll not agree that easily—he'll bargain and set terms—but he'll agree. Tell him ye've got enough whisky to make it worth his while—give him a barrel of the two-year-old to try, if ye must. When he sees what folk will pay for it, he'll be eager enough. The place—" He stopped, frowning, and breathed for a moment before going on.

"I'd thought to make it Wylie's Landing—but if it's you, ye should choose a place to your liking. Take the Lindsays with ye to guard your back, if they'll go. If not, find someone else; dinna go alone. And go ready to kill him at the first shot."

Roger nodded, swallowing heavily. Jamie's eyelids were swollen, but he looked up under them, his eyes glinting sharp in the firelight.

"Dinna let him get close enough to take ye with a sword," he said. "Ye've done well—but ye're not good enough to meet a man like Bonnet."

"And you are?" Roger couldn't stop himself from saying. He thought Fraser was smiling, but it was difficult to tell.

"Oh, aye," he said softly. "If I live." He coughed then, and lifted a hand, dismissing Bonnet for the moment.

"For the rest … watch Sinclair. He's a man to be used—he kens everything that passes in the district—but no a man to turn your back on, ever."

He paused, brow furrowed in thought.

"Ye can trust Duncan Innes and Farquard Campbell," he said. "And Fergus—Fergus will help ye, if he can. For the rest—" He shifted again and winced. "Go wary of Obadiah Henderson; he'll try ye. A-many of them will, and ye let them—but dinna let Henderson. Take him at the first chance—ye willna get another."

Slowly, with frequent pauses to rest, he went down the list of the names of the men on the Ridge, the inhabitants of Cross Creek, the prominent men of the Cape Fear valley. Characters, leanings, secrets, obligations.

Roger fought down panic, struggling to listen carefully, commit it all to memory, wanting to reassure Fraser, tell him to stop, to rest, that none of this was necessary—at the same time knowing it was more than necessary. There was war coming; it didn't take a time traveler to know it. If the welfare of the Ridge—of Brianna and Jemmy, of Claire—were to be left in Roger's inexperienced hands, he must take heed of every scrap of information that Fraser could give him.

Fraser's voice trailed off in hoarseness. Had he lost consciousness? The shoulder under Roger's hand was slack, inert. He sat quietly, not daring to move.

It wouldn't be enough, he thought, and a dull fear settled in the pit of his stomach, an aching dread that underlay the sharper pangs of grief. He couldn't do it. Christ, he couldn't even shoot a thing the size of a house! And now he was meant to step into Jamie Fraser's shoes? Keep order with fists and brain, feed a family with gun and knife, tread the tightrope of politics over a lighted powderkeg, tenants and family all balanced on his shoulders? Replace the man they called Himself? Not fucking likely, he thought bleakly.

Fraser's hand twitched suddenly. The fingers were swollen like sausages, the skin stretched red and shiny. Roger laid his free hand over it, and felt the fingers move, trying to curl around his own.

"Tell Brianna I'm glad of her," Fraser whispered. "Give my sword to the bairn."

Roger nodded, unable to speak. Then, realizing that Fraser couldn't see him, cleared his throat.

"Aye," he said gruffly. "I'll tell her." He waited, but Fraser said no more. The fire had burned very low, but the hand in his burned hot as embers. A gust of wind knifed past, whipping strands of his hair against his cheek, sending up a spray of sudden sparks from the fire.

He waited as long as he thought he dared, the cold night creeping past in lonely minutes. Then leaned close, so Fraser could hear him.

"Claire?" he asked quietly. "Is there anything ye'd have me tell her?"

He thought he'd waited too long; Fraser lay motionless for several minutes. Then the big hand stirred, half-closing swollen fingers; the ghost of a motion, grasping after time that slipped away.

"Tell her … I meant it."

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DOMESTIC MANAGEMENT

I’ve never seen anything like that in my entire life.” I leaned closer, peering. “That is absolutely *bizarre*.”

“And you a healer half your life,” Jamie muttered crossly. “Ye canna tell me they’ve no got snakes in your time.”

“They haven’t got many in downtown Boston. Besides, they wouldn’t call out a surgeon to deal with a case of snakebite. Closest I came was when a keeper at the zoo was bitten by a king cobra—a friend of mine did the autopsy, and invited me to come and watch.”

I refrained from saying that Jamie looked a lot worse at present than the subject of the autopsy had.

I set a hand gingerly on his ankle. The skin was puffy, hot and dry under my hand. It was also red. Bright red. The brilliant color extended from his feet up nearly to his rib cage; he looked as though he’d been dipped in boiling water.

His face, ears, and neck were also flushed the color of a plum tomato; only the pale skin of his chest had escaped, and even that was dotted with pinpricks of red. Beyond the lobsterlike coloration, the skin was peeling from his feet and hands, hanging in wispy shreds like Spanish moss.

I peered closely at his hip. Here, I could see that the redness was caused by a denser version of the rash on his chest; the stipple of tiny dots showed up clearly on the stretched skin over the ilial crest.

“You look like you’ve been roasted over a slow fire,” I said, rubbing a finger over the rash in fascination. “I’ve never seen anything so red in my life.” Not raised; I couldn’t feel the individual spots, though I could see them at close range. Not a rash as such; I thought it must be petechiae, pinpoint hemorrhages under the skin. But so many of them …

“I shouldna say ye’ve much room to criticize, Sassenach,” he said. Too weak to nod, he cut his eyes at my fingers—stained with huge blotches of yellow and blue.

“Oh, *damn*!” I leaped to my feet, threw the quilts hastily on top of him, and ran for the door. Distracted by Jamie’s dramatic arrival, I had left a vat full of dyeing to mind itself in the side yard—and the water had been low. Christ, if it boiled dry and burned the clothes …

The hot reek of urine and indigo hit me in the face as I shot out the door. In spite of that, I drew a deep breath of relief, as I saw Marsali, red in the face with the effort of levering a dripping mass from the pot with the big wooden clothes-fork. I went hastily to help her, snatching the steaming garments one by one from the sopping pile and flinging them onto the blackberry bushes to dry.

“Thank goodness,” I said, waving my scalded fingers in the air to cool them. “I was afraid I’d ruined the lot.”

“Weel, they’ll be a bit dark, maybe.” Marsali wiped a hand across her face, plastering back the fine blond strands that escaped from her kerch. “If the weather keeps fine, though, ye can leave them in the sun to fade. Here, let’s move the pot before it scorches!”

Crusts of indigo had already started to crackle and blacken in the bottom of the pot as we tipped it off the fire, and clouds of acrid smoke rose up around us.

“It’s all right,” Marsali said, coughing and fanning smoke from her face. “Leave it, Mother Claire; I’ll fetch up water so it can soak. Ye’ll need to see to Da, aye? I came down at once when I heard; is he verra poorly?”

“Oh, thank you, dear.” I was overwhelmed with gratitude; the last thing I had time to do just now was to haul several buckets of water from the spring to soak the pot. I blew on my scalded fingers to cool them; the skin under the splotches of dye was nearly as red as Jamie’s.

“I think he’ll be all right,” I assured her, suppressing my own fears. “He feels dreadful, and looks worse—I’ve never seen anyone look like that in all my born days—but if the wound doesn't get infected …" I crossed my sore fingers in superstitious prophylaxis.

"Ah, he'll do," Marsali said confidently. "Fergus said as they thought he was dead when they found him and Roger Mac, but by the time they crossed the second ridge, he was makin' terrible jokes about the snake, so they didna worry anymore."

I wasn't quite so sanguine myself, having seen the state of his injured leg, but I smiled reassuringly.

"Yes, I think he'll be fine. I'm just going to make an onion poultice and clean out the wound a bit. Go and see him, why don't you, while I fetch the onions?"

Luckily there were plenty of onions; I had pulled them two weeks before, when the first frost came, and dozens of knobbly braided strings hung in the pantry, fragrant and crackling when I brushed against them. I broke off six large onions and brought them into the kitchen to slice. My fingers were tingling, half-burned and stiff from handling the boiling clothes, and I worked slowly, not wanting to slice off a finger accidentally.

"Here, I'll do that, *a leannan*." Mrs. Bug took the knife out of my hand and dealt briskly with the onions. "Is it a poultice? Aye, that'll be the thing. A good onion poultice will mend anything." Still, a worried frown puckered her forehead as she glanced toward the surgery.

"Can I help, Mama?" Bree came in from the hallway, also looking worried. "Da looks awful; is he all right?"

"Ganda full?" Jem popped into the kitchen after his mother, less worried about his grandfather than interested in the knife Mrs. Bug was using. He dragged his little stool toward her, face purposeful under his coppery fringe. "Me do!"

I brushed the hair out of my face with the back of my hand, eyes watering fiercely from the onions.

"I think so." I sniffed and blotted my eyes. "How's Roger?"

"Roger's good." I could hear the small note of pride in her voice; Jamie had told her Roger had saved his life. Possibly he had. I just hoped it *stayed* saved.

"He's asleep," she added. Her mouth curved slightly as she met my eyes, with complete understanding. If a man was in bed, at least you knew where he was. And that he was safe, for the moment.

"Jem! You leave Mrs. Bug alone!" She scooped him off his stool and whirled him away from the chopping board, feet kicking in protest. "Do you need anything, Mama?"

I rubbed a finger between my brows, considering.

"Yes, can you try to find me some maggots? I'll need them for Jamie's leg." I frowned, glancing out the window at the bright autumn day. "I'm afraid the frost has killed all the flies; I haven't seen one in days. Try the paddock, though; they'll lay eggs in the warm dung."

She made a brief face of distaste, but nodded, setting Jemmy down on the floor.

"Come on, pal, let's go find ickies for Grannie."

"Icky-icky-icky-icky!" Jemmy scampered after her, enchanted at the prospect.

I dropped the sliced onions into a bowl made from a hollowed gourd and scooped a little of the hot water from the cauldron into it. Then I left the onions to stew, and went back to the surgery. In the center of the room was a sturdy pine table, serving as examination table, dentist's chair, drug preparation surface, or auxiliary dining table, depending on medical exigencies and the number of dinner guests. At the moment, it was supporting the supine form of Jamie, scarcely visible under his heap of quilts and blankets. Marsali stood close to the table, head bent toward him as she held a cup of water for him to sip.

"You're sure you're all right, Da?" she said. One hand stole toward him, but she stopped, clearly afraid to touch him in his present condition.

"Oh, aye, I'll do." I could hear the deep fatigue in his voice, but a big hand rose slowly out from under the quilts to touch her cheek.

"Fergus did braw work," he said. "Kept the men together through the night, found me and Roger Mac in the morning, brought everyone home safe across the mountain. He's a fine sense of direction."

Marsali's head was still bent, but I saw her cheek curve in a smile.

"I did tell him so. He'll no give over berating himself for lettin' the beasts get away, though. Just one would ha' fed the whole Ridge for the winter, he said."

Jamie gave a small grunt of dismissal.

"Och, we'll manage."

It was plainly an effort for him to speak, but I didn't try to send Marsali away. Roger told me Jamie had been vomiting blood as they brought him back; I couldn't give him brandy or whisky to ease the pain, and I hadn't any laudanum. Marsali's presence might help to distract him from his wretchedness.

I opened the cupboard quietly and brought out the big lidded bowl where I kept my leeches. The pottery was cold, soothing to my scalded hands. I had a dozen or so big ones; somnolent black blobs, half-floating in their murky brew of water and cattail roots. I scooped three into a smaller bowl full of clear water, and set it by the brazier to warm.

"Wake up, lads," I said. "Time to earn your keep."

I laid out the other things I would need, listening to the murmured conversation behind me—Germain, baby Joan, a porcupine in the trees near Marsali and Fergus's cabin.

Coarse gauze for the onion poultice, the corked bottle with its mixture of alcohol and sterile water, the stoneware jars of dried goldenseal, coneflower, and comfrey. And the bottle of penicillin broth. I cursed silently, looking at the label on it. It was nearly a month old; caught up in the bear hunt and the autumn chores upon our return, I had not made a fresh batch for weeks.

It would have to do. Pressing my lips together, I rubbed the herbs between my hands, into the beechwood brewing cup, and with no more than a faint sense of self-consciousness, silently said the blessing of Bride over it. I'd take all the help I could get.

"Are the cut pine-fans ye find on the ground verra fresh?" Jamie asked, sounding slightly more interested in the porcupine than in Joan's new tooth.

"Aye, green and fresh. I ken weel enough he's up there, the wicked creature, but it's a great huge tree, and I canna spot him from the ground, let alone fire on him." Marsali was no more than a middling shot, but since Fergus couldn't fire a musket at all with his one hand, she did the family's hunting.

"Mmphm." Jamie cleared his throat with an effort, and she hastily gave him more water. "Take a bit o' salted pork rind from the pantry and rub it ower a stick of wood. Set it on the ground, not too far from the trunk of the tree, and let Fergus sit up to watch. Porcupines are gey fond o' the salt, and of grease; they'll smell it and venture down after dark. Once it's on the ground, ye needna waste shot; just bat it ower the head. Fergus can do that fine."

I opened the medical chest and frowned into the tray that held saws and scalpels. I took out the small, curve-bladed scalpel, its handle cool under my fingers. I would have to debride the wound—clean away the dead tissue, the shreds of skin and bits of leaf and cloth and dirt; the men had plastered his leg with mud and wrapped it with a filthy neckerchief. Then I could sprinkle the penicillin solution over the exposed surfaces; I hoped that would help.

"That would be grand," Marsali said, a little wistfully. "I've no had such a beast before, but Ian did tell me they were fine; verra fat, and the quills good for sewing and all manner o' things."

I bit my lip, looking at the other blades. The biggest was a folding saw, meant for field amputation, with a blade nearly eight inches long; I hadn't used it since Alamance. The thought of using it now made cold sweat spring out under my arms and inch down my sides—but I'd seen his leg.

"The meat's greasy," Jamie said, "but that's good—" He stopped abruptly as he shifted his weight, with a muffled groan as he moved his leg.

I could feel the steps of the process of amputation, echoing in the muscles of my hands and forearms; the tensile severing of skin and muscle, the grate of bone, the snap of tendon, and the slippery, rubbery, blood-squirting vessels, sliding away into the severed flesh like … snakes.

I swallowed. No. It wouldn't come to that. Surely not.

"Ye need fat meat. You're verra thin, *a muirninn*," Jamie said softly, behind me. "Too thin, for a woman breeding."

I turned round, swearing silently to myself once more. I'd thought so, but had hoped I was wrong. Three babies in four years! And a one-handed husband, who couldn't manage the man's work of a homestead and wouldn't do the "women's work" of baby-minding and mash-brewing that he could handle.

Marsali made a small sound, half-snort, half-sob.

"How did you know? I havena even told Fergus yet."

"Ye should—though he kens it already."

"He told you?"

"No—but I didna think it only the indigestion that troubled him, whilst we were hunting. Now I see ye, I ken what it is that's weighin' on him."

I was biting my tongue hard enough to taste blood. Did the tansy oil and vinegar mixture I'd given her not work? Or the *dauco* seeds? Or, as I strongly suspected, had she just not bothered to use either one regularly? Well, too late for questions or reproaches. I caught her eye as she glanced up, and managed—I hoped—to look encouraging.

"Och," she said with a feeble smile. "We'll manage."

The leeches were stirring, bodies stretching slowly like animated rubber bands. I turned back the quilt over Jamie's leg, and pressed the leeches gently onto the swollen flesh near the wound.

"It looks nastier than it is," I said reassuringly, hearing Marsali's unguarded gasp at the sight. That was true, but the reality was nasty enough. The slashmarks were crusted black at the edges, but still gaped. Instead of the sealing and granulation of normal healing, they were beginning to erode, the exposed tissues oozing pus. The flesh around the wounds was hugely swollen, black and mottled with sinister reddish streaks.

I bit my lip, frowning as I considered the situation. I didn't know what kind of snake had bitten him—not that it made much difference, with no antivenin for treatment—but it had plainly had a powerful hemolytic toxin. Tiny blood vessels had ruptured and bled all over his body—internally, as well as externally—and larger ones, near the site of the wound.

The foot and ankle on the injured side were still warm and pink—or rather, red. That was a good sign, insofar as it meant the deeper circulation was intact. The problem was to improve circulation near the wound, enough to prevent a massive die-off and sloughing of tissue. The red streaks bothered me very much indeed, though; they *could* be only part of the hemorrhagic process, but it was more likely that they were the early signs of septicemia—blood poisoning.

Roger hadn't told me much of their night on the mountain, but he hadn't had to; I'd seen men before who'd sat through the dark with death beside them. If Jamie had lived a night and a day since then, chances were he would go on surviving—if I could control the infection. But in what condition?

I hadn't treated snakebite injuries before, but I'd seen sufficient textbook illustrations. The poisoned tissue would die and rot; Jamie could easily lose most of the muscle of his calf, which would cripple him permanently—or worse, the wound could turn gangrenous.

I stole a look at him under my lashes. He was covered with quilts and so ill he could barely move—and yet the lines of his body were drawn with grace and the promise of strength. I couldn't bear the thought of mutilating him—and yet I would do it if I must. To cripple Jamie … to leave him halt and half-limbed … the thought made my stomach clench and sweat break out on my blue-blotched palms.

Would he wish that himself?

I reached for the cup of water by Jamie's head and drained it myself. I wouldn't ask him. The choice was his by right—but he was mine, and I had made my choice. I wouldn't give him up, no matter what I had to do to keep him.

"You're sure you're all right, Da?" Marsali had been watching my face. Her eyes darted from me to Jamie and back, looking scared. I hastily tried to rearrange my features into a look of competent assurance.

Jamie had been watching me, too. One corner of his mouth turned up.

"Aye, well, I did think so. Now I'm none so sure, though."

"What's the matter? Do you feel worse?" I asked anxiously.

"No, I feel fine," he assured me—lying through his teeth. "It's only, when I've hurt myself, but it's all right, ye always scold like a magpie—but if I'm desperate bad, ye're tender as milk. Now, ye havena called me wicked names or uttered a word of reproach since I came home, Sassenach. Does that mean ye think I'm dyin'?"

One eyebrow rose in irony, but I could see a true hint of worry in his eyes. There were no vipers in Scotland; he couldn't know what was happening to his leg.

I took a deep breath and laid my hands lightly on his shoulders.

"Bloody man. Stepping on a snake! Couldn't you have looked where you were going?"

"Not whilst chasing a thousand-weight of meat downhill," he said, smiling. I felt a tiny relaxation in the muscles under my hands, and repressed the urge to smile back. I glared down at him instead.

"You scared bloody hell out of me!" That at least was sincere.

The eyebrow went up again.

"Maybe ye think I wasna frightened, too?"

"You're not allowed," I said firmly. "Only one of us can be scared at a time, and it's my turn."

That made him laugh, though the laughter was quickly succeeded by coughing and a shaking chill.

"Fetch me a hot stone for his feet," I said to Marsali, quickly tucking in the quilts around him. "And fill the teapot with boiling water and bring that, too."

She darted hastily toward the kitchen. I glanced toward the window, wondering whether Brianna was having any luck in finding maggots. They had no equal in cleaning pustulant wounds without damage to the healthy flesh nearby. If I was to save his leg as well as his life, I needed more help than Saint Bride's.

Wondering vaguely if there were a patron saint of maggots, I lifted the edge of the quilt and stole a quick look at my other invertebrate assistants. Good; I let out a small sigh of relief. The leeches worked fast; they were already swelling into plumpness, sucking away the blood that was flooding the tissues of his leg from ruptured capillaries. Without that pressure, healthy circulation *might* be restored in time to keep skin and muscle alive.

I could see his hand clenched on the edge of the table, and could feel the shuddering of his chill through my thighs, pressed against the wood.

I took his head between my hands; the skin of his cheeks was burning hot.

“You are *not* going to die!” I hissed. “You’re not! I won’t let you!”

“People keep sayin’ that to me,” he muttered, eyes closed and sunken with exhaustion. “Am I not allowed my own opinion?”

“No,” I said. “You’re not. Here, drink this.”

I held the cup of penicillin broth to his lips, steadying it while he drank. He made faces, squinching his eyes shut, but swallowed it obediently enough.

Marsali had brought the teapot, brimful of boiling water. I poured most of it over the waiting herbs, and left them to steep, while I poured him a cup of cold water to wash away the taste of the penicillin.

He swallowed the water, eyes still shut, then lay back on the pillow.

“What is that?” he asked. “It tastes of iron.”

“Water,” I replied. “Everything tastes of iron; your gums are bleeding.” I handed the empty water jug to Marsali and asked her to bring more. “Put honey in it,” I said. “About one part honey to four parts water.”

“Beef tea is what he needs,” she said, pausing to look at him, brow furrowed with concern. “That’s what my Mam did swear by, and her Mam before her. When a body’s lost a deal o’ blood, there’s naught like beef tea.”

I thought Marsali must be seriously worried; she seldom mentioned her mother in my hearing, out of a natural sense of tact. For once, though, bloody Laoghaire was right; beef tea would be an excellent thing—if we happened to have any fresh beef, which we didn’t.

“Honey water,” I said briefly, shooing her out of the room. I went to fetch reinforcements from the leech department, pausing to check on Brianna’s progress through the front window.

She was out by the paddock, barefoot, skirts kilted up above the knee, shaking bits of horse dung from one foot. No luck so far, then. She saw me at the window and waved, then motioned to the ax that stood nearby, then to the edge of the wood. I nodded and waved back; a rotted log might be a possibility.

Jemmy was on the ground nearby, his leading-strings securely tied to the paddock fence. He certainly didn't need them to help him stay upright, but they did keep him from escaping while his mother was busy. He was industriously engaged in pulling down the remains of a dried gourd-vine that had grown up over the fence, crowing with delight as bits of crumbled leaf and the dried remains of frostbitten gourds showered over his flaming hair. His round face bore a look of determined intent, as he set about the task of getting a gourd the size of his head into his mouth.

A movement caught the corner of my eye; Marsali, bringing up water from the spring, to fill the crusted cauldron. No, she wasn't showing at all yet—Jamie was right, she was much too thin—but now that I knew, I could see the pallor in her face, and the shadows under her eyes.

Damn. Another glimpse of movement; Bree's long pale legs, flashing under her kilted skirts in the shadow of the big blue spruce. And was *she* using the tansy oil? She was still nursing Jemmy, but that was no guarantee, not at his age …

I swung around at a sound behind me, to find Jamie climbing slowly back into his nest of quilts, looking like a great crimson sloth, my amputation saw in one hand.

"What the hell are you doing?"

He eased himself down, grimacing, and lay back on the pillow, breathing in long, deep gasps. The folded saw was clasped to his chest.

"I repeat," I said, standing menacingly over him, hands on my hips, "what the hell …"

He opened his eyes and lifted the saw an inch or so.

"No," he said positively. "I ken what ye're thinking, Sassenach, and I willna have it."

I took a deep breath, to keep my voice from quivering.

"You know I wouldn't, not unless I absolutely had to."

"No," he said again, and gave me a familiar look of obstinacy. No surprise at all that *he* never wondered who Jemmy looked like, I thought with sour amusement.

"You don't know what may happen—"

"I ken what's happening to my leg better than you do, Sassenach," he interrupted, then paused to breathe some more. "I dinna care."

"Maybe you don't, but *I* do!"

"I'm no going to die," he said firmly, "and I dinna wish to live with half a leg. I've a horror of it."

"Well, I'm not very keen on it myself. But if it's a choice between your leg and your life?"

"It's not."

"It damn well may be!"

"It won't." Age made not the slightest difference, I thought. Two years or fifty, a Fraser was a Fraser, and no rock was more stubborn. I rubbed a hand through my hair.

"All. Right," I said, between clenched teeth. "Give me the bloody thing and I'll put it away."

"Your word."

"My what?" I stared at him.

"Your word," he repeated, giving me back the stare, with interest. "I may be fevered and lose my wits. I dinna want ye to take my leg if I'm in no state to stop it."

"If you're in that sort of state, I'll have no choice!"

"Perhaps ye don't," he said evenly, "but I do. I've made it. Your word, Sassenach."

"You bloody, unspeakable, *infuriating*—"

His smile was startling, a white grin in the ruddy face. "If ye call me a Scot, Sassenach, then I *know* I'm going to live."

A shriek from outside kept me from answering. I swung round to the window, in time to see Marsali drop two pails of water on the ground. The water geysered over her skirt and shoes, but she paid no attention. I glanced hastily in the direction she was looking, and gasped.

It had walked casually through the paddock fence, snapping the rails as though they were matchsticks, and stood now in the midst of the pumpkin patch by the house, vines jerking in its mouth as it chewed. It stood huge and dark and wooly, ten feet away from Jemmy, who stared up at it with round, round eyes and open mouth, his gourd forgotten in his hands.

Marsali let out another screech, and Jemmy, catching her terror, began to scream for his mother. I turned, and—feeling as though I were moving in slow motion, though I was surely not—snatched the saw neatly from Jamie's hand, went out the door, and headed for the yard, thinking as I did so that buffalo looked so much smaller in zoos.

As I cleared the stoop—I must have leaped; I had no memory of the steps—Brianna came out of the woods. She was running silently, ax in her hand, and her face was set, inward and intent. I had no time to call out before she reached it.

She had drawn back the ax, still running, swung it in an arc as she took the last step, and brought it down with all her strength, just behind the huge beast's ears. A thin spray of blood flew up and spattered on the pumpkins. It bellowed and lowered its head, as though to charge forward.

Bree dodged to one side, dived for Jemmy, was on her knees, tugging at the strings that bound him to the fence. From the corner of my eye, I could see Marsali, yelling Gaelic prayers and imprecations as she seized a newly dyed petticoat from the blackberry bushes.

I had somehow unfolded the saw as I ran; I cut Jemmy's strings with two swipes, then was on my feet and running back across the dooryard. Marsali had thrown the petticoat over the buffalo's head; it stood bewildered, shaking its head and swaying to and fro, blood showing black on the yellow-green of the fresh-dyed indigo.

It stood as tall as I at the shoulder, and it smelt strange; dusty and warm, gamey but oddly familiar, with a barn-smell, like a cow. It took a step, another, and I dug my fingers into its wool, holding on. I could feel the tremors running through it; they shook me like an earthquake.

I had never done it, but felt as though I had, a thousand times. Dreamlike and sure, I ran a hand under slobbering lips, felt warm breath blow down my sleeve. The great pulse throbbed in the angle of the jaw; I could see it in my mind, the big meaty heart and its pumping blood, warm in my hand, cold against my cheek where it pressed the sodden petticoat.

I drew the saw across the throat, cut hard, and felt in hands and forearms the tensile severing of skin and muscle, the grate of bone, the snap of tendon, and the slippery, rubbery, blood-squirting vessels, sliding away.

The world shook. It shifted and slid, and landed with a thud. When I came to myself, I was sitting in the middle of my dooryard, one hand still twisted in its hair, one leg gone numb beneath the weight of the buffalo's head, my skirts plastered to my thighs, hot and stinking, sodden with its blood.

Someone said something and I looked up. Jamie was on his hands and knees on the stoop—mouth open, stark naked. Marsali sat on the ground, legs splayed out in front of her, soundlessly opening and closing her mouth.

Brianna stood over me, Jemmy held against her shoulder. Terror forgotten, he leaned far over, looking down in curiosity at the buffalo.

"Ooo!" he said.

"Yes," I said. "Very well put."

"You're all right, Mama?" Bree asked, and I realized she had asked several times before. She put down a hand and rested it gently on my head.

"I don't know," I said. "I think so."

I took her hand and laboriously worked my leg free, leaning on her as I stood up. The same tremors that had gone through the buffalo were going through her—and me—but they were fading. She took a deep breath, looking down at the massive body. Lying on its side, it rose nearly as high as her waist. Marsali came to stand beside us, shaking her head in awe at its size.

"Mother of God, how on earth are we going to butcher *that*?" she said.

“Oh,” I said, and dragged a trembling hand through my hair. “I suppose we’ll manage.”

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I GET BY WITH A LITTLE HELP FROM MY FRIENDS

I leaned my forehead against the cool glass of my surgery window, blinking at the scene outside. Exhaustion lent the scene in the dooryard an extra tinge of surrealism—not that it needed much extra.

The sun had all but set, flaming gold in the last ragged leaves of the chestnut trees. The spruces stood black against the dying glow, as did the gibbet in the center of the yard, and the grisly remains that swung from it. A bonfire had been lit near the blackberry bushes, and silhouetted figures darted everywhere, disappearing in and out of flames and shadow. Some attacked the hanging carcass, armed with knives and hatchets; others plodded laden away, carrying slabs of flesh and buckets of fat. Near the fire, the skirted bell-shapes of women showed, bending and reaching in silent ballet.

Dark as it was, I could pick Brianna's tall, pale figure out of the horde of demons hacking at the buffalo—keeping order, I thought. Before being forcibly returned to the surgery, Jamie had estimated the buffalo's weight at something between eighteen hundred and two thousand pounds. Brianna had nodded at this, handed Jemmy to Lizzie, then walked slowly around the carcass, squinting in deep thought.

"Right," she'd said, and as soon as the men began to appear from their homesteads, half-dressed, unshaven, and wild-eyed with excitement, had issued cool directions for the cutting of logs and the building of a pulley-frame capable of hoisting and supporting a ton of meat.

The men, disgruntled at not being in on the kill, hadn't been inclined to pay attention to her at first. Brianna, however, was large, vivid, strongly-spoken—and stubborn.

"Whose stroke is that?" she'd demanded, staring down Geordie Chisholm and his sons as they started toward the carcass, knives in hand. She pointed at the deep gash across the neck, then wiped her hand slowly down her sleeve, drawing attention to the splashed blood there. "Or that?" One long bare foot pointed delicately at the severed throat, and the pool of blood that soaked the dooryard. My stockings lay at the edge of the congealing puddle where I had stripped them off, limp red rags, but recognizably feminine.

Watching from the window, I had seen more than one face glance toward the house, frowning with the realization that Brianna was Himself's daughter—a fact the wise kept well in mind.

It was Roger who had turned the tide for her, though, with a cool stare that brought the Lindsay brothers to heel behind him, axes in hand.

"It's her kill," he said, in his husking croak. "Do what she says." He squared his shoulders and gave the other men a look that strongly suggested there should be no further controversy.

Seeing this, Fergus had shrugged and bent to seize the beast—one-handed—by its spindly tail.

"Where will you have us put it, madame?" he asked politely. The men had all laughed, and then with sheepish glances and shrugs of resignation, reluctantly pitched in as well, following her directions.

Brianna had given Roger a look of surprise, then gratitude, and then—the bit firmly between her teeth—had taken charge of the whole enterprise, with remarkable results. It was barely nightfall, and the butchery was almost done, the meat distributed to all the households on the Ridge. She knew everyone, knew the number of mouths in each cabin, and parceled out the meat and sweetbreads as they were cut. Not even Jamie could have managed it better, I thought, feeling a warm swell of pride in her.

I glanced across at the table, where Jamie lay swaddled in blankets. I had wanted to move him upstairs to his bed, but he had insisted on staying downstairs, where he could hear—if not see—what was going on.

“They’re nearly finished with the butchering,” I said, coming to lay a hand on his head. Still flushed and blazing. “Brianna’s done a wonderful job of it,” I added, to distract both of us.

“Has she?” His eyes were half-open, but fixed in a fever-stare; that dream-soaked daze where shadows writhe in the wavering hot air over a fire. As I spoke, though, he came slowly back from wherever he had been, and his eyes met mine, heavy-lidded but clear, and he smiled faintly. “That’s good.”

The hide had been pegged out to dry, the enormous liver sliced for quick searing, intestines taken to soak for cleaning, haunches to the shed for smoking, strips of meat taken off for drying into jerky, fat for rendering into suet and soap. Once stripped bare, the bones would be boiled for soup, salvaged for buttons.

The prized hooves and horns sat bloodily discreet on my counter, brought in by Murdo Lindsay. Tacit trophies, I supposed; the eighteenth-century equivalent of two ears and a tail. I had got the gallbladder, too, though that was simply by default; no one wanted it, but it was popularly assumed that I must have some medicinal use for almost any natural object. A greenish thing the size of my fist, it sat oozing in a dish, looking rather sinister next to the set of detached and muddy hooves.

Everyone on the Ridge had come at the news—even Ronnie Sinclair, from his cooper’s shop at the foot of the slope—and little remained of the buffalo now, save a rack of scavenged bones. I caught the faint odor of roasting meat, of burning hickory wood and coffee, and pushed up the window all the way to let in the appetizing smells.

Laughter and the crackle of fire came in on a gust of cold wind. It was warm in the surgery now, and the cold air from the window felt good against my flushed cheeks.

“Are you hungry, Jamie?” I asked. I was starving myself; though I hadn’t realized it ’til I smelled food. I closed my eyes and inhaled, buoyed up by the hearty scent of liver and onions.

“No,” he said, sounding drowsy. “I dinna fancy anything.”

"You should eat a bit of soup, if you can, before you fall asleep." I turned and smoothed the hair off his face, frowning a little as I looked at him. The flush had faded a bit, I thought—hard to tell for sure in the uncertain light of fire and candle. We had got enough honey-water and herb tea into him so that his eyes were no longer sunken with dehydration, but the bones of cheek and jaw were still prominent; he hadn't eaten in more than forty-eight hours, and the fever was consuming an immense amount of energy, consuming his tissues.

"D'ye need more hot water, ma'am?" Lizzie appeared in the doorway, looking more disheveled than usual, Jemmy clutched in her arms. She had lost her kerch and her fine, fair hair had escaped from its bun; Jemmy had a good handful of it in his chubby fist, and was yanking fretfully at it, making her squint with each yank.

"Mama-mama-mama," he said, in an escalating whine that made it obvious that he'd been saying the same thing for quite some time. "Mama-mama-MAMA!"

"No, I have enough; thank you, Lizzie. Stop that, young man," I said, getting hold of Jemmy's hand and forcibly unpeeling his fat little fingers. "We don't pull hair." There was a small chuckle from the nest of blankets on the table behind me.

"Ye'd never ken it to look at ye, Sassenach."

"Mm?" I turned my head and stared blankly at him for a moment, then followed the direction of his glance with my hand. Sure enough, my own cap had somehow disappeared, and my hair was standing out like a bramblebush. Attracted by the word "hair," Jemmy abandoned Lizzie's fine locks, leaned over, and grabbed a fistful of mine.

"Mama-mama-mama-mama …"

"Foo," I said, crossly, reaching to disentangle him. "Let go, you little fiend. And why aren't you in bed, anyway?"

"MAMA-MAMA-MAMA …"

"He wants his mother," Lizzie explained, rather redundantly. "I've put him in his cot a dozen times, but he'll be climbin' out again, the instant my back's turned. I couldna keep him—"

The outer door opened, letting in a strong draft that made the embers in the brazier glow and smoke, and I heard the pad of bare feet on the oak boards in the hall.

I'd heard the expression, "blood to the eyebrows" before, but I hadn't seen it all that often, at least not outside the confines of a battlefield. Brianna's eyebrows were invisible, being red enough to have blended into the mask of gore over her face. Jemmy took a good look at her, and turned down his mouth in an expression of doubtful distress, just this side of outright wails.

"It's me, baby," she reassured him. She reached a hand toward him, but stopped short of touching him. He didn't cry, but burrowed his face into Lizzie's shoulder, rejecting the notion that this apocalyptic vision had anything at all to do with the mother he'd been fussing for a few minutes earlier.

Brianna ignored both her son's rejection and the fact that she was leaving footprints composed in equal parts of mud and blood all over the floor.

"Look," she said, holding out a closed fist to me. Her hands were caked with dried blood, her fingernails crescents of black. She reverently uncurled her fingers to show me her treasure; a handful of tiny, wriggling white worms that made my heart give a quick bump of excitement.

"Are they the right kind?" she asked anxiously.

"I think so; let me check." I hastily dumped the wet leaves from the herb tea onto a small plate, to give the worms a temporary refuge. Brianna gently deposited them on the mangled foliage and carried the plate to the counter where my microscope stood, as though the plate bore specks of gold dust, rather than maggots.

I picked up one of the worms with the edge of a fingernail, and deposited it on a glass slide, where it writhed unhappily in a futile search for nourishment. I beckoned to Bree to bring me another candle.

"Nothing but a mouth and a gut," I muttered, tilting the mirror to catch the light. It was much too dim for microscopic work, but might just be sufficient for this. "Voracious little buggers."

I held my breath, peering through the fragile eyepiece, straining to see. Ordinary blow-fly and flesh-fly larvae had one line visible on the body; screw-worm larvae had two. The lines were faint, invisible to the naked eye, but very important. Blow-fly maggots ate carrion, and only carrion—dead, decaying flesh. Screw-worm larvae burrowed into the living flesh, and consumed the live muscle and blood of their host. Nothing I wanted to insert into a fresh wound!

I closed one eye, to let the other adapt to the moving shadows in the eyepiece. The dark cylinder of the maggot's body writhed, twisting in all directions at once. One line was clearly visible. Was that another? I squinted until my eye began to water, but could see no more. Letting out the breath I'd been holding, I relaxed.

"Congratulations, Da," Brianna said, moving to Jamie's side. He opened one eye, which passed with a marked lack of enthusiasm down Brianna's figure. Stripped to a knee-length shift for butchering, she was splotched from head to toe with gouts of dark blood, and the muslin had stuck to her in random patches.

"Oh, aye?" he said. "For what?"

"The maggots. You did it," she explained. She opened her other hand, revealing a misshapen blob of metal—a squashed rifle-ball. "The maggots were in a wound in the hindquarters—I dug this out of the hole behind them."

I laughed, as much from relief as from amusement.

"Jamie! You shot it in the arse?"

Jamie's mouth twitched a little.

"I didna think I'd hit it at all," he said. "I was only trying to turn the herd toward Fergus." He reached up a slow hand and took the ball, rolling it gently between his fingers.

"Maybe you should keep it for good luck," Brianna said. She spoke lightly, but I could see the furrow between her invisible brows. "Or to bite on while Mama's working on your leg."

"Too late," he said, with a very faint smile.

It was then she caught sight of the small leather strip that lay on the table near his head, marked with overlapping crescents—the deep imprints of Jamie's teeth. She glanced at me, appalled. I lifted one shoulder slightly. I had spent more than an hour cleaning the wound in his leg, and it hadn't been easy on either of us.

I cleared my throat, and turned back to the maggots. From the corner of my eye, I saw Bree lay the back of her hand gently against Jamie's cheek. He turned his head and kissed her knuckles, blood notwithstanding.

"Dinna fash, lassie," he said. His voice was faint, but steady. "I'm fine."

I opened my mouth to say something, but caught sight of Bree's face and bit my tongue instead. She'd been working hard, and still had Jemmy and Roger to care for; she needn't worry for Jamie, too—not yet.

I dropped the maggots into a small bowl of sterile water and swished them rapidly round, then dumped them back on the bed of wet leaves.

"It won't hurt," I said to Jamie, trying to reassure myself as much as him.

"Oh, aye," he said, with an unbecoming cynicism. "I've heard *that* one before."

"Actually, she's right," said a soft, rasping voice behind me. Roger had already had a quick wash; his dark hair lay damp against his collar, and his clothes were clean. Jemmy, half asleep, lay against his father's shoulder, dreamily sucking his thumb. Roger came over to the table to look down at Jamie.

"How is it, man?" he said quietly.

Jamie moved his head on the pillow, dismissive of discomfort.

"I'll do."

"That's good." To my surprise, Roger grasped Jamie's shoulder in a brief gesture of comfort. I'd never seen him do that before, and once more I wondered just what had passed between them on the mountain.

"Marsali's bringing up some beef tea—or rather, buffalo tea—for him," Roger said, frowning slightly as he looked at me. "Maybe you'd best be having some, too."

"Good idea," I said. I closed my eyes briefly and took a deep breath.

Only when I sat down did I realize that I had been on my feet since the early morning. Pain outlined every bone in my feet and legs, and I could feel the ache where I had broken my left tibia, a few years before. Duty called, though.

"Well, time and tide wait for no maggot," I said, struggling back to my feet. "Best get on with it."

Jamie gave a small snort and stretched, then relaxed, his long body reluctantly readying itself. He watched with resignation while I fetched the plate of maggots and my forceps, then reached for the leather strip by his head.

"You'll not need that," Roger said. He pulled up another stool and sat down. "It's true what she said, the wee beasts don't hurt."

Jamie snorted again, and Roger grinned at him.

"Mind," he said, "they tickle something fierce. That's only if ye think about it, though. If ye can keep all thought of them out of your mind, why, there's nothing to it."

Jamie eyed him.

"Ye're a great comfort, MacKenzie," he said.

"Thanks," said Roger, with a husk of a laugh. "Here, I brought ye something." He leaned forward and deposited a drowsy Jemmy into Jamie's arms. The little boy uttered a small squawk of surprise, then relaxed as Jamie's arms tightened about him in reflex. One chubby hand swung free, seeking anchorage, then found it.

"Hot," he murmured, smiling beatifically. Fist twined in Jamie's ruddy hair, he sighed deeply and went soundly to sleep on his grandfather's fever-warm chest.

Jamie narrowed his eyes at me as I picked up the forceps. Then he gave a slight shrug, laid his stubbled cheek gently against Jemmy's silk-bright hair, and closed his own eyes, though the tenseness in his features was a marked contrast to the rounded peace of Jemmy's.

It couldn't have been easier; I simply lifted away the fresh onion poultice, and tucked the maggots one by one into the ulcerated slashmarks on Jamie's calf. Roger circled behind me to watch.

"It looks almost like a leg again," he said, sounding surprised. "I never thought it would."

I smiled, though I didn't look round at him, too intent on my delicate work. "Leeches are very effective," I said. "Though your rather crude knifework may have been useful, too—you left big enough holes that the pus and fluid were able to drain; that helped."

It was true; while the limb was still hot and grossly discolored, the swelling had subsided markedly. The long stretch of shinbone and the delicate arch of foot and ankle were once more visible. I was under no illusion about the dangers still remaining—infection, gangrene, sloughing—but nonetheless, my heart grew lighter. It was recognizably Jamie's leg.

I pinched another maggot just behind the head with my forceps, careful not to crush it. I lifted the edge of the skin with the slender probe I held in my other hand, and deftly inserted the tiny, wiggling thing into the small pocket thus provided—trying to ignore the nastily spongy feel of the flesh under my fingers, and my memory of Aaron Beardsley's foot.

"Done," I said, a moment later, and gently replaced the poultice. Stewed onion and garlic wrapped in muslin and soaked with penicillin broth would keep the wounds moist and draining. Renewed every hour or so, I hoped that the warmth of the poultices would also encourage circulation in the leg. And then a dressing of honey, to prevent any further bacterial invasions.

Concentration alone had kept my hands steady. Now it was done, and there was nothing more to do but wait. The saucer of wet leaves rattled against the counter as I set it down.

I didn't think I had ever been so tired before.

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CHOICES

Between them, Roger and Mr. Bug got Jamie up to our bedroom. I hadn't wanted to disturb his leg by moving him from the surgery, but he insisted.

"I dinna want ye to be sleeping on the floor down here, Sassenach," he said, when I protested. He smiled at me. "Ye should be in your bed—but I ken ye willna leave me alone, and so that means I must go and be in it, too, aye?"

I would have argued further, but in all truth, I was so tired that I wouldn't have complained much if he had insisted we both sleep in the barn.

Once he was settled, though, my doubts returned.

"I'll joggle your leg," I said, hanging up my gown on one of the pegs. "I'll just make up a pallet by the fire here, and—"

"You will not," he said definitely. "Ye'll sleep wi' me." He lay back on the pillows, eyes closed, his hair an auburn tumble against the linen. His skin had begun to fade; it wasn't quite so red. It was, however, alarmingly pale where the tiny hemorrhages didn't stain it.

"You would argue on your deathbed," I said crossly. "You don't *have* to be constantly in charge, you know. You *could* lie still and let other people take care of things, for once. What do you think would happen, if—"

He opened his eyes and gave me a dark blue look.

"Sassenach," he said softly.

"What?"

"I would like ye to touch me … without hurting me. Just once before I sleep. Would ye mind much?"

I stopped and drew breath, terribly disconcerted at the realization that he was right. Caught up in the emergency and worry of his condition, everything I had done to him during the day had been painful, intrusive, or both. Marsali, Brianna, Roger, Jemmy—all of them had touched him in gentleness, offering sympathy and comfort.

And I—I had been so terrified at the possibility of what might happen, of what I might be forced to do, that I had taken no time, allowed no room for gentleness. I looked away for a moment, blinking until the tears retreated. Then I stood and walked over to the bed, bent, and kissed him, very softly.

I stroked the hair back from his forehead, smoothed his brows with my thumb. Arch Bug had shaved him; the skin of his cheek was smooth, hot against the side of my hand. His bones were hard under his skin, framing his strength—and yet he seemed suddenly fragile. I felt fragile, too.

"I want ye to sleep beside me, Sassenach," he whispered.

"All right." I smiled at him, my lips trembling only a little. "Let me brush out my hair."

I sat down in my shift, shook out my hair, and took up the brush. He watched me, not speaking, but with a faint smile on his lips, as I worked. He liked to watch me brush my hair; I hoped it was as soothing to him as it was to me.

There were noises downstairs, but they were muffled, safely distant. The shutters were ajar; firelight flickered against the glass of the window from the dying bonfire in the yard. I glanced at the window, wondering if I ought to close the shutters.

"Leave them, Sassenach," he murmured from the bed. "I like to hear the talk." The sound of voices from outside *was* comforting, rising and falling, with small bursts of laughter.

The sound of the brush was soft and regular, like surf on sand, and I felt the stress of the day lessen slowly, as though I could brush all the anxieties and dreads out of my hair as easily as tangles and bits of pumpkin vine. When at last I put down the brush and rose, Jamie's eyes were closed.

I knelt to smoor the fire, rose to blow out the candle, and went at last to bed.

I eased myself gently into the bed beside him, not to jostle. He lay turned away from me, on his side, and I turned toward him, echoing the curve of his body with my own, careful not to touch him.

I lay very quietly, listening. All the house sounds had settled to their night-time rhythm; the hiss of the fire and the rumble of wind in the flue, the sudden startling *crack!* of the stairs, as though some unwary foot had stepped upon a riser. Mr. Wemyss's adenoidal snoring reached me, reduced to a soothing buzz by the thickness of the intervening doors.

There were still voices outside, muffled by distance, disjointed with drink and the lateness of the hour. All jovial, though; no sound of hostility or incipient violence. I didn't really care, though. The inhabitants of the Ridge could hammer each other senseless and dance on the remains, for all I cared. All my attention was focused on Jamie.

His breathing was shallow but even, his shoulders relaxed. I didn't want to disturb him; he needed rest above all things. At the same time, I ached to touch him. I wanted to reassure myself that he was here, alive beside me—but I also needed badly to know how things went with him.

Was he feverish? Had the incipient infection in his leg blossomed in spite of the penicillin, spreading poison through his blood?

I moved my head cautiously, bringing my face within an inch of his shirt-covered back, and breathed in, slow and deep. I could feel the warmth of him on my face, but couldn't tell through the linen nightshirt just how hot he really was.

He smelt faintly of the woods, more strongly of blood. The onions in the dressing gave off a bitter tang; so did his sweat.

I inhaled again, testing the air. No scent of pus. Too early for the smell of gangrene, even if the rot was beginning, invisible under the bandages. I thought there was a strange scent about his skin, though; something I hadn't smelled before. Necrosis of the tissue?

Some breakdown product of the snake's venom? I blew a short breath through my nose and took in a fresh one, deeper.

"Do I stink verra badly?" he inquired.

"Uk!" I said, startled into biting my tongue, and he quivered slightly, in what I took to be suppressed amusement.

"Ye sound like a wee truffle-pig, Sassenach, snortling away back there."

"Oh, indeed," I said, a bit crossly. I touched the tender spot on my tongue. "Well, at least you're awake. How do you feel?"

"Like a pile of moldy tripes."

"Very picturesque," I said. "Can you be a trifle more specific?" I put a hand lightly on his side, and he let his breath out in a sound like a small moan.

"Like a pile of moldy tripes …" he said, and pausing to breathe heavily, added, "…. with *maggots*."

"You'd joke on your deathbed, wouldn't you?" Even as I said it, I felt a tremor of unease. He *would,* and I hoped this wasn't it.

"Well, I'll try, Sassenach," he murmured, sounding drowsy. "But I'm no really at my best under the circumstances."

"Do you hurt much?"

"No. I'm just … tired." He sounded as though he were in fact too exhausted to search for the proper word, and had settled for that one by default.

"Little wonder if you are. I'll go and sleep somewhere else, so you can rest." I made to throw back the covers and rise, but he stopped me, raising one hand slightly.

"No. No, dinna leave me." His shoulder fell back toward me, and he tried to lift his head from the pillow. I felt still more uneasy when I realized that he was too weak even to turn over by himself.

"I won't leave you. Maybe I should sleep in the chair, though. I don't want to—"

"I'm cold," he said softly. "I'm verra cold."

I pressed my fingers lightly just under his breastbone, seeking the big abdominal pulse. His heartbeat was rapid, shallower than it should have been. He wasn't feverish. He didn't just feel cold, he *was* cold to the touch, his skin chilled and his fingers icy. I found that very alarming.

No longer shy, I cuddled close against him, my breasts squashing softly against his back, cheek resting on his shoulder blade. I concentrated as hard as I could on generating body heat, trying to radiate warmth through my skin and into his. So often he had enfolded me in the curve of his body, sheltering me, giving me the warmth of his big body. I wished passionately that I were larger, and could do the same for him now; as it was, I could do no more than cling to him like a small, fierce mustard plaster, and hope I had the same effect.

Very gently, I found the hem of his shirt and pulled it up, then cupped my hands to fit the rounds of his buttocks. They tightened slightly in surprise, then relaxed.

It occurred to me to wonder just why I felt I must lay hands on him, but I didn't trouble my mind with it; I had had the feeling many times before, and had long since given up worrying that it wasn't scientific.

I could feel the faintly pebbled texture of the rash upon his skin, and the thought came unbidden of the lamia. A creature smooth and cool to the touch, a shape-shifter, passionately venomous, its nature infectious. A swift bite and the snake's poison spreading, slowing his heart, chilling his warm blood; I could imagine tiny scales rising under his skin in the dark.

I forcibly repressed the thought, but not the shudder that went with it.

"Claire," he said softly. "Touch me."

I couldn't hear his heartbeat. I could hear mine; a thick, muffled sound in the ear pressed to the pillow.

I slid my hand over the slope of his belly, and more slowly down, fingers parting the coarse curly tangle, dipping low to cup the rounded shapes of him. What heat he had was here.

I stroked him with a thumb and felt him stir. The breath went out of him in a long sigh, and his body seemed to grow heavier, sinking into the mattress as he relaxed. His flesh was like candle wax in my hand, smooth and silky as it warmed.

I felt very odd; no longer frightened, but with all my senses at once preternaturally acute and yet … peaceful. I was no longer conscious of any sounds save Jamie's breathing and the beating of his heart; the darkness was filled with them. I had no conscious thought, but seemed to act purely by instinct, reaching down and under, seeking the heart of his heat in the center of his being.

Then I was moving—or we were moving together. One hand reached down between us, up between his legs, my fingertips on the spot just behind his testicles. My other hand reached over, around, moving with the same rhythm that flexed my thighs and lifted my hips, thrusting against him from behind.

I could have done it forever, and felt that perhaps I did. I had no sense of time passing, only of a dreamy peace, and that slow, steady rhythm as we moved together in the dark. Somewhere, sometime, I felt a steady pulsing, first in the one hand, then in both. It melded with the beat of his heart.

He sighed, long and deep, and I felt the air rush from my own lungs. We lay silent and passed gently into unconsciousness, together.

I woke feeling utterly peaceful. I lay still, without thought, listening to the thrum of blood through my veins, watching the drift of sunlit particles in the beam of light that fell through the half-opened shutters. Then I remembered, and flung myself over in bed, staring.

His eyes were closed, and his skin was the color of old ivory. His head was turned slightly away from me, so that the cords of his neck stood out, but I couldn't see any pulse in his throat. He was still warm, or at least the bedclothes were still warm. I sniffed the air, urgently. The room was fetid with the scent of onions and honey and fever-sweat, but no stink of sudden death.

I clapped a hand on the center of his chest, and he jerked, startled, and opened his eyes.

"You *bastard*," I said, so relieved to feel the rise of his chest as he drew breath that my voice trembled. "You tried to die on me, didn't you?”

His chest rose and fell, rose and fell, under my hand, and my own heart jerked and shuddered, as though I had been pulled back at the last moment from an unexpected precipice.

He blinked at me. His eyes were heavy, still clouded with fever.

“It didna take much effort, Sassenach,” he said, his voice soft and husky from sleep. “Not dying was harder.”

He made no pretense of not understanding me. In the light of day, I saw clearly what exhaustion and the aftereffects of shock had stopped me seeing the night before. His insistence on his own bed. The open shutters, so he could hear the voices of his family below, his tenants outside. And me beside him. He had, very carefully, and without saying a word to me, decided how and where he wanted to die.

“You thought you were dying when we brought you up here, didn’t you?” I asked. My voice sounded more bewildered than accusing.

It took him a moment to answer, though he didn’t look hesitant. It was more as though he was looking for the proper words.

“Well, I didna ken for sure, no,” he said slowly. “Though I did feel verra ill.” His eyes closed, slowly, as though he were too tired to keep them open. “I still do,” he added, in a detached sort of voice. “Ye needna worry, though—I’ve made my choice.”

“What on earth do you mean by that?”

I groped beneath the covers, and found his wrist. He *was* warm; hot again, in fact, and with a pulse that was too fast, too shallow. Still, it was so different from the deathly chill I had felt in him the night before that my first reaction was relief.

He took a couple of deep breaths, then turned his head and opened his eyes to look at me.

“I mean I could have died last night.”

He could, certainly—and yet that wasn’t what he meant. He made it sound like a conscious—

“What do you mean you’ve made your choice? You’ve decided not to die, after all?” I tried to speak lightly, but it wasn’t working very well. I remembered all too well that odd sense of timeless stillness that had surrounded us.

"It was verra strange," he said. "And yet it wasna strange at all." He sounded faintly surprised.

"I think," I said carefully, keeping a thumb on his pulse, "you'd better tell me just what happened."

He actually smiled at that, though the smile was more in his eyes than his lips. Those were dry, and painfully cracked in the corners. I touched his lips with a finger, wanting to go and fetch some soothing ointment for him, some water, some tea—but I put aside the impulse, steeling myself to stay and hear.

"I dinna really know, Sassenach—or rather, I do, but I canna think quite how to say it." He still looked tired, but his eyes stayed open. They lingered on my face, a vivid blue in the morning light, with an expression almost of curiosity, as though he hadn't seen me before.

"You are so beautiful," he said, softly. "So verra beautiful, *mo chridhe*."

My hands were covered with fading blue blotches and overlooked smears of buffalo blood, I could feel my hair clinging in unwashed tangles to my neck, and I could smell everything from the stale-urine odor of dye to the reek of fear-sweat on my body. And yet whatever he saw lit his face as though he were looking at the full moon on a summer night, pure and lovely.

His eyes stayed fixed on my face as he talked, absorbed, moving slightly as they seemed to trace my features.

"I felt verra badly indeed when Arch and Roger Mac brought me up," he said. "Terribly sick, and my leg and my head both throbbing with each heartbeat, so much that I began to dread the next. And so I would listen to the spaces between. Ye wouldna think it," he said, sounded vaguely surprised, "but there is a great deal of time between the beats of a heart."

He had, he said, begun to hope, in those spaces, that the next beat would not come. And slowly, he realized that his heart was indeed slowing—and that the pain was growing remote, something separate from himself.

His skin had grown colder, the fever fading from both body and mind, leaving the latter oddly clear.

"And this is where I canna really say, Sassenach." He pulled his wrist from my grip in the intensity of his story, and curled his fingers over mine. "But I … saw."

"Saw what?" And yet I already knew that he couldn't tell me. Like any doctor, I had seen sick people make up their minds to die—and I knew that look they sometimes had; eyes wide-fixed on *something* in the distance.

He hesitated, struggling to find words. I thought of something, and jumped in to try to help.

"There was an elderly woman," I said. "She died in the hospital where I was on staff—all her grown children with her, it was very peaceful." I looked down, my own eyes fixed on his fingers, still red and slightly swollen, interlaced with my own stained and bloody digits.

"She died—she was *dead*, I could see her pulse had stopped, she wasn't breathing. All her children were by her bedside, weeping. And then, quite suddenly, her eyes opened. She wasn't looking at any of them, but she was seeing *something*. And she said, quite clearly, 'Oooh!' Just like that—thrilled, like a little girl who's just seen something wonderful. And then she closed her eyes again." I looked up at him, blinking back tears. "Was it—like that?"

He nodded, speechless, and his hand tightened on mine.

"Something like," he said, very softly.

He had felt oddly suspended, in a place he could by no means describe, feeling completely at peace—and seeing very clearly.

"It was as if there was a—it wasna a door, exactly, but a passageway of some kind—before me. And I could go through it, if I wanted. And I did want to," he said, giving me a sideways glance and a shy smile.

He had known what lay behind him, too, and realized that for that moment, he could choose. Go forward—or turn back.

"And that's when you asked me to touch you?"

"I knew ye were the only thing that could bring me back," he said simply. "I didna have the strength, myself."

There was a huge lump in my throat; I couldn't speak, but squeezed his hand very tight.

"Why?" I asked at last. "Why did you … choose to stay?" My throat was still tight, and my voice was hoarse. He heard it, and his hand tightened on mine; a ghost of his usual firm grip, and yet with the memory of strength within it.

"Because ye need me," he said, very softly.

"Not because you love me?"

He looked up then, with a shadow of a smile.

"Sassenach … I love ye now, and I will love ye always. Whether I am dead—or you—whether we are together or apart. You know it is true," he said quietly, and touched my face. "I know it of you, and ye know it of me as well."

He bent his head then, the bright hair swinging down across his cheek.

"I didna mean only you, Sassenach. I have work still to do. I thought—for a bit—that perhaps it wasna so; that ye all might manage, with Roger Mac and auld Arch, Joseph and the Beardsleys. But there is war coming, and—for my sins—" he grimaced slightly, "I am a chief."

He shook his head slightly, in resignation.

"God has made me what I am. He has given me the duty—and I must do it, whatever the cost."

"The cost," I echoed uneasily, hearing something harsher than resignation in his voice. He looked at me, then glanced, almost off-handed, toward the foot of the bed.

"My leg's no much worse," he said, matter-of-factly, "but it's no better. I think ye'll have to take it off."

I sat in my surgery, staring out the window, trying to think of another way. There had to be something else I could do. Had to.

He was right; the red streaks were still there. They hadn't advanced any further, but they were still there, ugly and threatening. The oral and topical penicillin had evidently had some effect on the infection, but not enough. The maggots were dealing nicely with the small abscesses, but they couldn't affect the underlying bacteremia that was poisoning his blood.

I glanced up at the brown glass bottle; only about a third full. It might help him hold his ground for a little longer, but there wasn't enough—and it wasn't likely to have sufficient effect, administered by mouth—to eradicate whatever deadly bacterium was multiplying in his blood.

"Ten thousand to ten million milligrams," I murmured to myself. Recommended dosage of penicillin for bacteremia or sepsis, according to the *Merck Manual*, the physician's basic desk reference. I glanced at Daniel Rawlings' casebook, then back at the bottle. With no way of telling what concentration of penicillin I had, administration was likely still more efficacious than the combination of snakeroot and garlic Rawlings advised—but not enough to matter, I was afraid.

The amputation saw was still lying on the counter, where he had left it the day before. I'd given him my word—and he'd given it back.

I clenched my hands, a feeling of unutterable frustration washing over me, so strongly as almost to overwhelm my sense of despair. Why, why, *why* hadn't I started more penicillin brewing at once? How could I have been so feckless, so careless—so bloody fucking *stupid*?

Why had I not insisted on going to Charleston, or at least Wilmington, in hopes of finding a glassblower who could make me the barrel and plunger for a hypodermic syringe? Surely I could have improvised *something* for a needle. All that difficulty, all that experimentation, to get the precious substance in the first place—and now that I desperately needed it …

A tentative movement at the open door made me turn round, struggling to get my face under control. I'd have to tell the household what was happening, and soon. But it would be better to choose my time, and tell them all together.

It was one of the Beardsleys. With their hair grown out and neatly trimmed to the same length by Lizzie, it was increasingly difficult to tell them apart—unless one was close enough to see their thumbs. Once they spoke, of course, it was simple.

"Ma'am?" It was Kezzie.

"Yes?" No doubt I sounded short, but it didn't matter; Kezzie couldn't distinguish nuances of speech.

He was carrying a cloth bag. As he came into the room, I saw the bag twitch and change shape, and a small shudder of revulsion came over me. He saw that, and smiled a little.

"This for Himself," he said, in his loud, slightly flat voice, holding up the bag. "Him—old Aaron—said this works good. A big snake bite you, get you a little 'un, cut his head off, drink his blood." He thrust out the bag, which I very gingerly accepted, holding it as far away from me as I could. The contents of the sack shifted again, making my skin crawl, and a faint buzzing noise issued through the cloth.

"Thank you," I said faintly. "I'll … ah … do something with it. Thank you."

Keziah beamed and bowed his way out, leaving me in personal custody of a sack containing what appeared to be a small but highly annoyed rattlesnake. I looked round frantically for some place to put it. I didn't dare throw it out of the window; Jemmy often played in the dooryard near the house.

Finally, I pulled the big clear glass jar of salt over to the edge of the counter, and—holding the bag at arm's length—used my other hand to dump the salt out on the counter. I dropped the bag into the jar and slammed the lid on it, then rushed to the other side of the room and collapsed on a stool, the backs of my knees sweaty with dread.

I didn't really mind snakes in theory; in practice, though …

Brianna poked her head through the door.

"Mama? How's Da this morning?"

"Not all that well." My face evidently told her just how serious it was, for she came into the room and stood beside me, frowning.

"Really bad?" she asked softly, and I nodded, unable to speak. She let her breath out in a deep sigh.

"Can I help?"

I let out an identical sigh, and made a helpless gesture. I had one vague glimmering of an idea—or rather, the return of an idea I'd had in the back of my mind for some time.

"The only thing I can think of doing is to open the leg—cut down deep through the muscle—and pour what penicillin I have left directly into the wounds. It's much more effective against bacterial infections if you can inject it, rather than give it orally. Raw penicillin like this"—I nodded at the bottle—"is very unstable in the presence of acid. It's not likely enough would make it through the stomach to do any good."

"That's more or less what Aunt Jenny did, isn't it? That's what made that huge scar on his thigh."

I nodded, wiping my palms unobtrusively over my knees. I didn't normally suffer from sweaty hands, but the feel of the amputation saw was much too clear in my memory.

"I'd have to do two or three deep cuts. It would likely cripple him permanently—but it might work." I tried to give her a smile. "I don't suppose MIT taught you how to engineer a hypodermic syringe, did they?"

"Why didn't you say so before?" she said calmly. "I don't know if I can make a syringe, but I'd be really surprised if I can't figure out something that does the same thing. How long have we got?"

I stared at her, my mouth half open, then shut it with a snap.

"A few hours, at least. I thought if we didn't get any improvement with the hot poultices, I'd have to either cut or amputate by this evening."

"Amputate!" All the blood drained out of her face. "You can't do that!"

"I can—but my God, I don't want to." My hands curled hard, denying their skill.

"Let me think, then." Her face was still pale, but the shock was passing as her mind began to focus. "Oh—where's Mrs. Bug? I was going to leave Jemmy with her, but—"

"She's gone? Are you sure she isn't just out in the hencoop?"

"No, I stopped there when I came up to the house. I didn't see her anywhere—and the kitchen fire is smoored."

That was more than odd; Mrs. Bug had come to the house as usual to make breakfast—what could have induced her to leave again? I hoped Arch hadn't suddenly been taken ill; that would just about put the cocked hat on things.

"Where's Jemmy, then?" I asked, looking round for him. He didn't normally go far away from his mother, though he was beginning to wander a bit, as small boys did.

"Lizzie took him upstairs to see Da. I'll ask her to look after him for a while."

"Fine. Oh!"

My exclamation made her turn back at the door, eyebrows raised in question.

"Do you think you could take that"—I gestured distastefully at the big glass jar—"outside, darling? Dispose of it somewhere?"

"Sure. What is it?" Curious, she walked over to the jar. The little rattlesnake had crawled out of its bag and was coiled up in a suspicious dark knot; as she extended a hand toward the jar, it lunged, striking at the glass, and Brianna jumped back with a yelp.

"Ifrinn!" she said, and I laughed, in spite of the general stress and worry.

"Where did you get him, and what is he for?" she asked. Recovering from the initial shock, she leaned forward cautiously and tapped lightly on the glass. The snake, who appeared irascible in the extreme, struck the side of the jar with an audible thump, and she jerked her hand away again.

"Kezzie brought him in; Jamie is meant to drink his blood as a cure," I explained.

She reached out a cautious forefinger, and traced the path of a small droplet of yellowish liquid, sliding down the glass. Two droplets, in fact.

"Look at that! He tried to bite me right through the glass! That's a really mad snake; I guess he doesn't think much of the idea."

He didn't. He—if it was a he—was coiled again, tiny rattles vibrating in an absolute frenzy of animosity.

"Well, that's all right," I said, coming to stand beside her. "I'm sure Jamie wouldn't think much of the idea, either. He's rather strongly anti-snake at the moment."

"Mmphm." She was still staring at the little snake, a slight frown drawing down her thick red brows. "Did Kezzie say where he got it?"

"I didn't think to ask. Why?"

"It's getting cold out—snakes hibernate, don't they? In dens?"

"Well, Dr. Brickell says they do," I replied, rather dubiously. The good doctor's *Natural History of North Carolina* made entertaining reading, but I took leave to doubt some of his observations, particularly those pertaining to snakes and crocodiles, of whose prowess he appeared to have a rather exaggerated opinion.

She nodded, not taking her eyes off the snake.

"See, the thing is," she said, sounding rather dreamy, "pit-vipers have beautiful engineering. Their jaws are disarticulated, so they can swallow prey bigger than they are—and their fangs fold back against the roof of their mouth when they aren't using them."

"Yes?" I said, giving her a slightly fishy look, which she ignored.

"The fangs are hollow," she said, and touched a finger to the glass, marking the spot where the venom had soaked into the linen cloth, leaving a small yellowish stain. "They're connected to a venom sac in the snake's cheek, and so when they bite down, the cheek muscles squeeze venom out of the sac … and down through the fang into the prey. Just like a—"

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said.

She nodded, finally taking her eyes off the snake in order to look at me.

"I was thinking of trying to do something with a sharpened quill, but this would work lots better—it's already designed for the job."

"I see," I said, feeling a small surge of hope. "But you'll need a reservoir of some kind …"

"First I need a bigger snake," she said practically, turning toward the door. "Let me go find Jo or Kezzie, and see if that one *did* come from a den—and if so, if there are more of them there."

She set off promptly on this mission, taking the glass jar with her, and leaving me to return to a contemplation of the antibiotic situation with renewed hope. If I was going to be able to inject the solution, it needed to be strained and purified as much as possible.

I would have liked to boil the solution, but didn't dare to; I didn't know whether high temperatures would destroy or inactivate raw penicillin—if, in fact, there still *was* active penicillin in there. The surge of hope I had experienced at Brianna's idea dimmed somewhat. Having a hypodermic apparatus wouldn't help, if I had nothing useful to inject.

Restlessly, I moved around the surgery, picking things up and putting them down again.

Steeling myself, I put my hand on the saw again, and closed my eyes, deliberately reliving the movements and sensations, trying also to recapture the sense of otherworldly detachment with which I had killed the buffalo.

Of course, it was Jamie who'd been talking to the otherworld this time. *Nice of you to give him the choice*, I thought sardonically. *I see you aren't going to make it easy on him, though.*

But he wouldn't have asked for that. I opened my eyes, startled. I didn't know whether that answer came from my own subconscious, or elsewhere—but there it was in my mind, and I recognized the truth of it.

Jamie was accustomed to make his choice and abide by it, no matter the cost. He saw that living would likely mean the loss of his leg and all that that implied—and had accepted that as the natural price of his decision.

"Well, I don't bloody accept it!" I said out loud, chin uplifted toward the window. A cedar waxwing swinging on the end of a tree limb gave me a sharp look through his black robber's mask, decided I was mad but harmless, and went about his business.

I pulled open the cupboard door, threw open the top of my medicine chest, and fetched a sheet of paper, quill, and ink from Jamie's study.

A jar of dried red wintergreen berries. Extract of pipsissewa. Slippery elm bark. Willow bark, cherry bark, fleabane, yarrow. Penicillin was by far the most effective of the antibiotics available, but it wasn't the only one. People had been waging war on germs for thousands of years, without any notion what they were fighting. I knew; that was some slight advantage.

I began to make a list of the herbs I had on hand, and under each name, all the uses that I knew for that herb—whether I had ever made such use of it or not. Any herb used to treat a septic condition was a possibility—cleansing lacerations, treating mouth sores, treatment of diarrhea and dysentery … I heard footsteps in the kitchen, and called to Mrs. Bug, wanting her to bring me a kettle of boiling water, so I could set things to steeping at once.

She appeared in the doorway, her cheeks bright pink from the cold and her hair coming down in untidy wisps from under her kerch, a large basket clutched in her arms. Before I could say anything, she came and plunked the basket down on the counter in front of me. Just behind her came her husband, with another basket, and a small open keg, from which came a pungent alcoholic scent. The air around them held a faint ripe smell, like the distant reek of a garbage dump.

"I did hear ye say as how ye'd not enough mold on hand," she started in, anxious but bright-eyed, "so I said to Arch, I said, we must go round to the houses nearabouts, and see what we can fetch back wi' us for Mrs. Fraser, for after all, bread does go bad so quick when it's damp, and the good Lord kens that Mrs. Chisholm is a slattern, for all I'm sure she's a good heart, and what goings-on there may be at her hearth I'm sure I shouldna like even to *think* about, but we—"

I wasn't paying attention, but was staring at the results of the Bugs' morning raid on the pantries and middens of the Ridge. Crusts of bread, spoilt biscuit, half-rotted squash, bits of pie with the marks of teeth still visible in the pastry … a hodgepodge of gluey orts and decaying fragments—all sprouting molds in patches of velvet-blue and lichen-green, interspersed with warty blobs of pink and yellow and dustings of splotchy white. The keg was half-filled with decaying corn, the resultant murky liquid rimmed with floating islands of blue mold.

"Evan Lindsay's pigs," Mr. Bug explained, in a rare burst of loquacity. Both Bugs beamed at me, begrimed with their efforts.

“Thank you,” I said, feeling choked, and not only from the smell. I blinked, eyes watering slightly from the miasma of the corn liquor. “Oh, thank you.”

It was just after dark when I made my way upstairs, carrying my tray of potions and implements, feeling a mixture of excitement and trepidation.

Jamie was propped on his pillows, surrounded by visitors. People had been coming by the house all day to see him and wish him well; a good many of them had simply stayed, and a host of anxious faces turned toward me as I came in, glimmering in the light of the candles.

He looked very ill, flushed and drawn, and I wondered whether I ought to have chased the visitors away. I saw Murdo Lindsay take his hand, though, and squeeze it tight, and realized that the distraction and support of his company through the day was probably much more helpful to him than the rest that he wouldn’t have taken in any case.

“Well, then,” Jamie said, with a good assumption of casualness, “we’re ready, I suppose.” He stretched his legs, flexing his toes hard under the blanket. Given the state of his leg, it must have hurt dreadfully, but I recognized that he was taking what he thought would be the last opportunity to move the limb, and bit the inside of my lip.

“Well, we’re ready to have a go at something,” I said, smiling at him with an attempt at confident reassurance. “And anyone who would like to pray about it, please do.”

A rustle of surprise replaced the air of dread that had been sprung up at my appearance, and I saw Marsali, who was holding a sleeping Joan with one hand, grope hastily in her pocket with the other to pull out her rosary.

There was a rush to clear the bedside table, which was littered with books, papers, candle-stubs, various treats brought up to tempt Jamie’s appetite—all untouched—and, for some unfathomable reason, the fret-board of a dulcimer and a half-tanned groundhog hide. I set down the tray, and Brianna, who had come up with me, stepped forward, her invention carefully held in both hands, like an acolyte presenting bread to a priest.

"What in the name of Christ is that?" Jamie frowned at the object, then up at me.

"It's sort of a do-it-yourself rattlesnake," Brianna told him.

Everyone murmured with interest, craning their necks to see—though the interest was diverted almost at once as I turned back the quilt and began to unwrap his leg, to a chorus of shocked murmurs and sympathetic exclamations at sight of it.

Lizzie and Marsali had been faithfully applying fresh, hot onion and flaxseed poultices to it all day, and wisps of steam rose from the wrappings as I put them aside. The flesh of his leg was bright red to the knee, at least in those parts that weren't black or seeping with pus. We had removed the maggots temporarily, afraid the heat would kill them; they were presently downstairs on a plate in my surgery, happily occupied with some of the nastier bits of the Bugs' gleanings. If I succeeded in saving the leg, they could help with the tidying-up, later.

I had carefully gone through the detritus bit by bit, examining the blue molds with my microscope, and putting aside everything that could be identified as bearing *Penicillium* into a large bowl. Over this miscellaneous collection I had poured the fermented corn liquor, allowing the whole to steep during the day—and with luck, to dissolve any actual raw penicillin from the garbage into the alcoholic liquid.

Meanwhile, I had made a selection of those herbs with a reputation for the internal treatment of suppurative conditions, and made a stiff decoction of them, steeped in boiling water for several hours. I poured a cup of this highly aromatic solution, and handed it to Roger, carefully averting my nose.

"Make him drink it," I said. "All of it," I added pointedly, fixing Jamie with a look.

Jamie sniffed the proffered cup, and gave me the look back—but obediently sipped, making exaggerated faces for the entertainment of his company, who giggled appreciatively. The mood thus lightened, I proceeded to the main event, turning to take the makeshift hypodermic from Bree.

The Beardsley twins, standing shoulder-to-shoulder in the corner, pressed forward to see, swelling with pride. They had gone out at once at Bree's request, coming back in mid-afternoon with a fine rattlesnake, nearly three feet long—and fortunately dead, having been cut nearly in half with an ax, so as to preserve the valuable head.

I had dissected out the poison sacs with great caution, detaching the fangs, and then had put Mrs. Bug to the task of rinsing the fangs repeatedly with alcohol, to eradicate any lingering traces of venom.

Bree had taken the oiled silk that had been used to wrap the astrolabe, and stitched part of it into a small tube, gathering one end of this with a draw-stitch, like a purse-string. She had cut a thick segment from a turkey's wing-quill, softened with hot water, and used this to join the gathered end of the silk tube to the fang. Melted beeswax had sealed the joints of tube, quill, and fang, and been spread carefully along the line of the stitching, to prevent leakage. It was a nice, neat job—but it *did* look quite like a small, fat snake with one enormous curved fang, and occasioned no little comment from the spectators.

Murdo Lindsay was still holding one of Jamie's hands. As I motioned to Fergus to hold the candle for me, I saw Jamie reach out the other toward Roger. Roger looked momentarily startled, but grabbed the hand and knelt down by the bed, holding on tight.

I ran my fingers lightly over the leg, selected a good spot, clear of major blood vessels, swabbed it with pure alcohol, and jabbed the fang in, as deeply as I could. There was a gasp from the spectators, and a sharp intake of breath from Jamie, but he didn't move.

"All right." I nodded at Brianna, who was standing by with the bottle of strained corn-alcohol. Teeth sunk in her lower lip, she poured carefully, filling the silk tube as I supported it. I folded the open top tightly over, and with thumb and forefinger, firmly pressed downward, forcing the liquid out through the fang and into the tissues of the leg.

Jamie made a small, breathless noise, and both Murdo and Roger leaned inward instinctively, their shoulders pressing against his, holding on.

I didn't dare go too fast, for fear of cracking the wax seals by exerting too much pressure, though we had a second syringe, made with the other fang, just in case. I worked my way up and down the leg, with Bree refilling the syringe with each injection, and blood rose glistening from the holes as I withdrew the fang, rolling in tiny rivulets down the side of his leg. Without being asked, Lizzie picked up a cloth and blotted it clean, eyes intent on the job.

The room was silent, but I felt everyone's breath held as I chose a new spot, let out in a sigh as the stab was made—and then the unconscious leaning toward the bed as I squeezed the stinging alcohol deep into the infected tissues. The muscles stood out in knots on Jamie's forearms, and sweat ran down his face like rain, but neither he, nor Murdo, nor Roger made a sound or moved.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Joseph Wemyss stroke back the hair from Jamie's forehead, and wipe away the sweat from his face and neck with a towel.

"Because ye need me," he'd said. And I realized then that it wasn't only me that he'd meant.

It didn't take a long time. When it was done, I spread honey carefully over all the open wounds, and rubbed oil of wintergreen into the skin of foot and calf.

"That's a nice job of basting, Sassenach. D'ye reckon it's ready for the oven yet?" Jamie asked, and wiggled his toes, causing the tension in the room to relax into laughter.

Everyone did leave, then, patting Jamie's shoulder or kissing his cheek in farewell, with gruff wishes of good luck. He smiled and nodded, lifting his hand in farewell, exchanging goodbyes, making small jokes.

When the door closed behind the last of them, he lay back on the pillow and closed his eyes, letting all his breath out in a long, deep sigh. I set about tidying my tray, setting the syringe to soak in alcohol, corking bottles, folding bandages. Then I sat down beside him, and he reached out a hand to me, not opening his eyes.

His skin was warm and dry, the hand reddened from Murdo’s fierce grip. I traced his knuckles gently with my thumb, listening to the rumble and clatter of the house below, subdued but lively.

“It will work,” I said softly, after a minute. “I know it will.”

“I know,” he said. He took a deep breath, and at last, began to weep.

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NEW BLOOD

Roger woke abruptly, out of a black and dreamless sleep. He felt like a landed fish, jerked gasping into an alien and unimagined element. He saw but did not grasp his surroundings; strange light and flattened surfaces. Then his mind made sense of Brianna's touch on his arm, and he was once more inside his skin, and in a bed.

"Hwh?" He sat up suddenly, making a hoarse noise of inquiry.

"I'm sorry to wake you." Brianna smiled, but a line of concern drew her brows together as her eyes searched his face. She smoothed the tangled hair back from his brow, and he reached for her by reflex, falling back against the pillow with her heavy in his arms.

"Hwm." Holding her was an anchor to reality—solid flesh and warm skin, her hair soft as dreams against his face.

"Okay?" she asked softly. Long fingers touched his chest and his nipple puckered, curly hairs around it rising.

"Okay," he said, and sighed deeply. He kissed her forehead briefly, and relaxed, blinking. His throat was dry as sand, and his mouth felt sticky, but he was beginning to think coherently again. "Whatime ist?" He was in his own bed, and it was dim enough in the room to be evening, but that was because the door was closed and the windows covered. Something felt wrong about the light, the air.

She pushed herself up off him, sweeping back the fall of red hair with one hand.

"It's a little past noon. I wouldn't have waked you up, but there's a man, and I don't know what to do about him." She glanced in the direction of the big house, and lowered her voice, though surely no one was near enough to hear her.

“Da’s sound asleep, and Mama, too,” she said, confirming this impression. “I don’t want to wake them—even if I could.” She smiled briefly, one corner of her long mouth curling up with her father’s irony. “It would take gunpowder, I think. They’re dead to the world.”

She turned away and reached for the pitcher on the table. The sound of water pouring fell on Roger’s ears like rain on parched land, and he drained the offered cup in three gulps and held it out again.

“More. Please. Man?” That was an improvement; he was making complete words again, and his capacity to think coherently was coming back.

“He says his name is Thomas Christie. He’s come to see Da; he says he was at Ardsmuir.”

“Yeah?” Roger drank the second cup more slowly, assembling his thoughts. Then he put down the cup and swung his legs out of bed, reaching for the discarded shirt that hung from the peg. “Okay. Tell him I’ll be there in a minute.”

She kissed him briefly and left, pausing long enough to untack the hide over the window and let in a brilliant shaft of light and chilly air.

He dressed slowly, his mind still pleasantly torpid. As he bent to dredge his stockings out from under the bed, though, something in the tumbled bedclothes caught his eye, just under the edge of the pillow. He reached out slowly and picked it up. The “auld wifie”—the tiny fertility charm, its ancient pink stone smooth in the sun, surprisingly heavy in his hand.

“I will be damned,” he said, aloud. He stood staring at it for a moment, then bent and tucked it gently back beneath the pillow.

Brianna had put the visitor in Jamie’s study—what most of the tenants still called the speak-a-word room. Roger stopped for a moment in the corridor, checking to be sure all his bodily parts were present and attached. There hadn't been time to shave, but he'd combed his hair; there was a limit to what this Christie might expect, under the circumstances.

Three faces turned toward the door as he came in, surprising him. Bree hadn't thought to warn him that Christie had outriders. Still, the elder man, a square-set gentleman with trimly cut black hair streaked with gray, was obviously Thomas Christie; the dark-haired younger man was no more than twenty, and just as obviously Christie's son.

"Mr. Christie?" He offered the older man his hand. "I'm Roger MacKenzie; I'm married to Jamie Fraser's daughter—you've met my wife, I think."

Christie looked mildly surprised, and looked over Roger's shoulder, as though expecting Jamie to materialize behind him. Roger cleared his throat; his voice was still thick from sleep, and thus even more hoarse than it usually was.

"I'm afraid my father-in-law is … not available at present. Could I be of service to you?"

Christie frowned at him, assessing his potential, then nodded slowly. He took Roger's hand, and shook it firmly. To his astonishment, Roger felt something both familiar and grossly unexpected; the distinctive pressure against his knuckle of a Masonic greeting. He had not experienced that in years, and it was more reflex than reason that caused him to respond with what he hoped was the proper countersign. Evidently it was satisfactory; Christie's severe expression eased slightly, and he let go.

"Perhaps ye may, Mr. MacKenzie, perhaps ye may," Christie said. He fixed a piercing gaze on Roger. "I wish to find land on which to settle with my family—and I was told that Mr. Fraser might feel himself in a position to put something suitable in my way."

"That might be possible," Roger replied cautiously. *What the hell?* he thought. Had Christie just been trying it on at a venture, or had he reason to expect that sign would be recognized? If he did—that presumably meant that he knew Jamie Fraser would recognize it, and thought his son-in-law might, as well. Jamie Fraser, a

Freemason? The thought had never so much as crossed Roger's mind, and Jamie himself had certainly never spoken of it.

"Please—do sit down," he said abruptly, motioning to the visitors. Christie's family—the son and a girl who might be either Christie's daughter or the son's wife—had risen as well when Roger came in, standing behind the paterfamilias like attendants behind some visiting potentate.

Feeling more than slightly self-conscious, Roger waved them back to their stools, and sat down himself behind Jamie's desk. He plucked one of the quills from the blue salt-glazed jar, hoping this would make him seem more businesslike. Christ, what questions ought he to ask a potential tenant?

"Now, then, Mr. Christie." He smiled at them, conscious of his unshaven jaws. "My wife says that you were acquainted with my father-in-law, in Scotland?"

"In Ardsmuir prison," Christie answered, darting Roger a sharp look, as though daring him to make something of this.

Roger cleared his throat again; healed as it was, it tended still to be clogged and rasping for some time after rising. Christie appeared to take it as an adverse comment, however, and bristled slightly. He had thick brows and prominent eyes of a light yellowish-brown color, and this, coupled with feathery, close-clipped dark hair and the lack of any visible neck, gave him the aspect of a large, irascible owl.

"Jamie Fraser was a prisoner there as well," he said. "Surely ye knew as much?"

"Why, yes," Roger said mildly. "I understand that several of the men who are settled here on the Ridge came from Ardsmuir."

"Who?" Christie demanded, increasing the owlish impression.

"Ah … the Lindsays—that's Kenny, Murdo, and Evan," Roger said, rubbing a hand over his brow to assist thought. "Geordie Chisholm and Robert MacLeod. I think—yes, I'm fairly sure Alex MacNeill was from Ardsmuir, too."

Christie had been following this list with close attention, like a barn owl keeping track of a rustling in the hay. Now he relaxed, settling his feathers, as Roger thought.

“I know them,” he said, with an air of satisfaction. “MacNeill will vouch for my character, if that’s needful.” His tone strongly suggested that it shouldn’t be.

Roger had never seen Jamie interview a potential tenant, but he had heard Fraser talk to Claire about the ones he chose. Accordingly, he posed a few questions regarding Christie’s more recent past, trying to balance courtesy with an attitude of authority, and—he thought—managing it none too badly.

Christie had been transported with the other prisoners, he said, but had been fortunate in having his indenture purchased by a plantation owner in South Carolina, who upon finding that Christie possessed some learning, had made him schoolmaster to his own six children, taking fees from the nearby families for the privilege of sending their children also to be tutored by Christie. Once Christie’s term of indenture had expired, he had agreed to remain, working for wages.

“Really?” Roger said, his interest in Christie increasing markedly. A schoolmaster, eh? It would please Bree no end, to be able to resign her involuntary position as what she disparagingly termed Bo-Peep. And Christie looked more than capable of dealing with intransigent scholars. “What brings you here, then, Mr. Christie? It’s some way from South Carolina.”

The man shrugged broad shoulders. He was road-worn and quite dusty, but his coat was of decent cloth, and he had sound shoes.

“My wife died,” he said gruffly. “Of the influenza. So did Mr. Everett, the owner. His heir did not require my services, and I did not wish to remain there without employment.” He shot Roger a piercing look under shaggy brows. “You said Mr. Fraser is not available. How long will it be until his return?”

“I couldn’t say.” Roger tapped the end of the quill against his teeth, hesitating. In fact, he couldn’t say how long Jamie might be incapacitated; when seen last night, he’d looked barely alive. Even if he recovered uneventfully, he could be ill for some time. And he hated to send Christie away, or make him wait; it was late in the year, and not much time to spare, if the man and his family were to be settled for the winter.

He glanced from Christie to his son. Both sizable men, and strong, from the looks of them. Neither had the look of a drunkard or a lout, and both had the callused palms that bespoke at least familiarity with manual labor. They had a woman to look after their domestic requirements. And after all, Masonic brotherhood quite aside, Christie had been one of Jamie's Ardsmuir men. He knew that Jamie always made a special effort to find such men a place.

Making a decision, Roger pulled out a clean sheet of paper and uncapped the inkwell. He cleared his throat once more.

"Very well, Mr. Christie. I think we can reach some … accommodation."

To his pleased surprise, the study door opened, and Brianna came in, carrying a tray of biscuits and beer. She cast down her eyes modestly as she set it on the desk, but he caught the flash of amusement she sent him under her lashes. He bent his head, smiling, and touched her wrist lightly in acknowledgment as she set out the mugs in front of him. The gesture reminded him of Christie's handshake, and he wondered whether Brianna knew anything about Jamie's history in that direction. He rather thought not; surely she would have mentioned it.

"Brianna, say hello to our new tenants," he said, with a nod at the Christies. "Mr. Thomas Christie, and …"

"My son, Allan," Christie said, with a jerk of the head, "and my daughter, Malva."

The son had none of his father's owlish look, being much fairer in aspect, with a broad, square, clean-shaven face, though he had the same feathery, tufted dark hair. He nodded in silent acknowledgment of the introduction, eyes fixed on the refreshment.

The girl—Malva?—barely looked up, her hands folded modestly in her lap. Roger had the vague impression of a tallish girl, perhaps seventeen or eighteen, neat in a dark blue dress and white kerch, with a soft frill of black curls just visible around the pale oval of her face. Another point in Christie's favor, Roger thought absently; girls of marriageable age were rare, pretty ones still rarer. Malva Christie would likely have several offers before the spring planting.

Bree nodded to each of them, looking at the girl with particular interest. Then a loud shriek came from the kitchen, and she fled with a murmured excuse.

"My son," Roger said, in apology. He lifted a mug of beer, offering it. "Will you take a bit of refreshment, Mr. Christie?"

The tenant contracts were all kept in the left-hand drawer of the desk; he'd seen them, and knew the general outlines. Fifty acres would be granted outright, more land rented as needed, with provision for payment made according to individual situations. A little discussion over the beer and biscuits, and they had reached what seemed an adequate agreement.

Completing the contract with a flourish, Roger signed his own name, as agent for James Fraser, and pushed the paper across the desk for Christie to sign. He felt a deep, pleasant glow of accomplishment. A sound tenant, and willing to pay half his quitrent by serving as schoolmaster for five months of the year. Jamie himself, Roger thought complacently, would not have done better.

Then he caught himself. No, Jamie would have taken one more step, and seen the Christies offered not only hospitality but lodging, a place to stay until they could achieve some shelter of their own. Not here, though; not with Jamie ill and Claire occupied in nursing him. He thought for a moment, then stepped to the door and called for Lizzie.

"We've a new tenant come, and his family, *a muirninn*," he said, smiling at her anxious, willing mouse-face. "This is Mr. Thomas Christie, and his son and daughter. Can ye ask your Da will he take them up to Evan Lindsay's cabin? It's near where they'll have their own land, and I'm thinking perhaps Evan and his wife have room for them to stay for a bit, until they can get a start on a place of their own."

"Oh, aye, Mister Roger." Lizzie bobbed a quick curtsy toward Christie, who acknowledged her with a small bow. Then she glanced at Roger, thin brows lifted. "Will Himself know about it, then?"

Roger felt a slight flush rise in his cheeks, but gave no sign of discomposure.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll be telling him, so soon as he's feeling better."

"Mr. Fraser is ill? I am sorry to hear it." The unfamiliar soft voice came from behind, startling him, and he turned to find Malva Christie looking up at him in question. He hadn't taken much notice of her, but was now struck by the beauty of her eyes—an odd light gray, almond-shaped and luminous, and thickly fringed with long black lashes. Perhaps sooner than the spring planting, he thought, and coughed.

"Bitten by a snake," he said abruptly. "Not to worry, though; he's mending."

He thrust out a hand to Christie, ready this time for the secret grip.

"Welcome to Fraser's Ridge," he said. "I hope you and your family will be happy here."

Jamie was sitting up in bed, attended hand and foot by devoted women, and looking desperate in consequence. His face relaxed a little at sight of a fellow man, and he waved away his handmaidens. Lizzie, Marsali, and Mrs. Bug left reluctantly, but Claire remained, busy with her bottles and blades.

Roger moved to sit down on the bed-foot, only to be shooed off by Claire, who motioned him firmly to a stool before lifting the sheet to check matters beneath and be sure that his ill-advised gesture had caused no damage.

"All right," she said at last, poking at the white cheesecloth dressing with an air of satisfaction. The maggots were back, evidently earning their keep. She straightened up and nodded to Roger—like the Grand Vizier granting an audience with the Caliph of Baghdad, Roger thought, amused. He glanced at Jamie, who rolled his eyes upward, then gave Roger a small, wry smile of greeting.

"How is it?" both of them said at once. Roger smiled, and the corner of Jamie's mouth turned up. He gave a brief shrug.

"I'm alive," he said. "Mind, that doesna prove ye were right. Ye're not."

"Right about what?" Claire asked, glancing up with curiosity from the bowl in her hands.

"Oh, a wee point of philosophy," Jamie told her. "Regarding choice, and chance."

She snorted.

"I don't want to hear a word about it."

"Just as well. I'm no inclined to discuss such matters on nothing but bread and milk." Jamie glanced with mild distaste at a bowl of that nourishing but squashy substance, sitting half-finished on the table at his side. "So, have ye seen to the ulcer on the mule's leg, then, Roger Mac?"

"I did," Claire told him. "It's healing very well. Roger's been busy, interviewing new tenants."

"Oh, aye?" Fraser's brows went up in interest.

"Aye, a man named Tom Christie and his family. He said he was at Ardsmuir with you."

For a split second, Roger felt as though all the air in the room had been removed by a vacuum, freezing everything. Fraser stared at him, expressionless. Then he nodded, his expression of pleasant interest restored as though by magic, and normal time resumed.

"Aye, I mind Tom Christie fine. Where has he been in the last twenty years?"

Roger explained both Tom Christie's account of his wanderings, and what accommodations had been reached for his tenancy.

"That will do verra well," Jamie said approvingly, hearing of Christie's willingness to be schoolmaster. "Tell him he may use any of the books here—and ask him to make up a list of others he might need. I'll tell Fergus to look about, next time he's in Cross Creek or Wilmington."

The conversation moved on to more mundane affairs, and after a few minutes, Roger got up to take his leave.

Everything seemed perfectly all right, and yet he felt obscurely uneasy. Surely he hadn't imagined that instant? Turning to close the door behind him, he saw that Jamie had folded his hands neatly on his chest and closed his eyes; if not yet asleep, effectively forbidding conversation. Claire was looking at her husband, her yellow hawk-eyes narrowed in speculation. No, she'd seen it, too.

So he hadn't imagined it. What on earth was the matter with Tom Christie?

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THE SUMMER DIM

The next day Roger closed the door behind him and stood on the porch for a moment, breathing the cold bright air of the late morning—late, Christ, it couldn't be more than half seven, but it was a good deal later than he was accustomed to start the day. The sun had already drifted into the chestnut trees on the highest ridge, the curve of its flaming disk visible in silhouette through the last of the yellow leaves.

The air still held the tang of blood, but there was no trace of the buffalo left, beyond a dark patch in the flattened pumpkin vines. He glanced around, taking stock as he mentally made his list of chores for the day. Chickens scratched in the fall-shabby yard, and he could hear a small group of hogs rooting for mast in the chestnut grove.

He had the odd feeling that he had left his work months, or even years, before, not days. The feeling of dislocation—so strong at first—had left him for quite a long time, but now it had come back again, stronger than before. If he closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again, surely he would find himself on the Broad Street in Oxford, the smell of auto exhaust in his nostrils and the prospect of a peaceful morning's work among the dusty books of the Bodleian ahead.

He smacked a hand against one thigh, to dispel the feeling. Not today. This was the Ridge, not Oxford, and the work might be peaceful, but it would be done with hands, not head. There were trees to be girdled and hay to be gathered; not the field hay, but the small wild patches scattered through the hills that would yield an armload here, an armload there—enough to allow the keeping of an extra cow through the winter.

A hole in the roof of the smoke-shed, made by a falling tree branch. The roof to be mended and re-shingled and the branch itself to be chopped for wood. A fresh privy-hole to be dug, before the ground froze or turned to mud. Flax to be chopped. Fence rails to split. Lizzie's spinning wheel to mend …

He felt groggy and stupid, incapable of simple choice, let alone complex thought. He had slept enough—more than enough—to be physically recovered from the exhaustion of the last few days, but Thomas Christie and his family, coming on the heels of the desperate business of getting Jamie safely home, had taken all the mental energy he had.

He glanced at the sky; a low sweep of mare's tails, sketched against the sky. No rain for a bit, the roof could wait. He shrugged and scratched his scalp. Hay, then, and tree-girdling. He stuffed a stone jar of ale and the packet of sandwiches Bree had made for him into his bag, and went to fetch the hand-scythe and hatchet.

Walking began to rouse him. It was cold in the shadows under the pines, but the sun was now high enough to make itself felt whenever he walked through the bright patches. His muscles warmed and loosened with the exercise, and by the time he had climbed to the first of the high meadows, he had begun to feel himself again, solidly embedded in the physical world of mountain and forest. The future had gone back to the world of dreams and memory, and he was once more present and accounted for.

"Good thing, too," he muttered to himself. "Don't want to be cutting off your foot." He dropped the ax under a tree, and bent to cut hay.

It wasn't the soothingly monotonous labor of regular haying, where the big two-handed scythe laid the dry, rich grass in pleasing swathes across a field. This was at once rougher but easier work, that involved grasping a clump of sprouting muhly or blue-stem with one hand, slicing the stalks near the root, and stuffing the handful of wild hay into the burlap sack he had brought.

It took no great strength, but required attention, rather than the mindless muscular effort of field-haying. The grass clumps grew thickly all over this small break in the trees, but were interspersed with outcrops of granite, small bushes, decaying snags, and brambles.

It was soothing labor, and while it did require some watchfulness, soon enough his mind began to stray to other things. The things Jamie had told him, out on the black mountainside, under the stars.

Some he had known; that there was bad feeling between Alex MacNeill and Nelson McIver, and the cause of it; that one of Patrick Neary's sons was likely a thief, and what should be done about it. Which land to sell, when, and to whom. Others, he had had no inkling of. He pressed his lips tight together, thinking of Stephen Bonnet.

And what should be done about Claire.

"If I am dead, she must leave," Jamie had said, rousing suddenly from a feverish stupor. He had gripped Roger's arm with surprising strength, his eyes burning dark. "Send her. Make her go. Ye should all go, if the bairn can pass. But she must go. Make her go to the stones."

"Why?" Roger had asked quietly. "Why should she go?" It was possible that Jamie was deranged by fever, not thinking clearly. "It's a dangerous thing, to go through the stones."

"It is dangerous for her here, without me." Fraser's eyes had momentarily lost their sharp focus; the lines of his face relaxed in exhaustion. His eyes half-closed and he sagged back. Then, suddenly, his eyes opened again.

"She is an Old One," he said. "They will kill her, if they know." Then his eyes had closed again, and he had not spoken again until the others had found them at daylight.

Viewed now in the clear light of an autumn morning, safely removed from the whining wind and dancing flames of that lost night on the mountain, Roger was reasonably sure that Fraser had only been wandering in the mists of his fever, concern for his wife muddled by phantoms that sprang from the poison in his blood. Still, Roger couldn't help but take notice.

"She is an Old One." Fraser had been speaking in English, which was too bad. Had it been Gaelic, his meaning would have been clearer. Had he said *"She is ban-sidhe,"* Roger would have known whether Jamie truly thought his wife was one of the faery-folk, or only a thoroughly human wisewoman.

Surely he couldn't … but he might. Even in Roger's own time, the belief in "the others" ran strongly, if less widely admitted, in the blood of the Highlands. Now? Fraser believed quite openly in ghosts—to say nothing of saints and angels. To Roger's cynical Presbyterian mind, there wasn't a great deal of difference between lighting candles to St. Genevieve and putting out a pan of milk for the faeries.

On the other hand, he was uneasily aware that he would himself never have disturbed milk meant for the Others, nor touched a charm hung over cow-byre or door lintel—and not only from respect for the person who had placed it there.

The work had warmed him thoroughly; his shirt was beginning to stick to his shoulders, and sweat trickled down his neck. He paused for a moment, to drink from his water gourd and tie a rag round his brow as a sweatband.

Fraser might just have a point, he thought. While the notion of himself or Brianna—even of Claire—as being *sìdheanach* was laughable on the face of it … there was more than one face to it, wasn't there? They *were* different; not everyone could travel through the stones, let alone did.

And there were others. Geillis Duncan. The unknown traveler she had mentioned to Claire. The gentleman whose severed head Claire had found in the wilderness, silver fillings intact. The thought of that one made the hairs prickle on his forearms, sweat or no.

Jamie had buried the head, with due respect and a brief prayer, on a hill near the house—the first inhabitant of the small, sun-filled clearing intended as the future cemetery of Fraser's Ridge. At Claire's insistence, he had marked the small grave with a rough chunk of granite, unlabeled—for what was there to say?—but marbled with veins of green serpentine.

Was Fraser right? *Ye should all go back, if the bairn can pass.*

And if they didn't go back … then someday they might all lie there in the sunny clearing together: himself, Brianna, Jemmy, each under a chunk of granite. The only difference was that each would bear a name. What on earth would they carve for dates? he wondered suddenly, and wiped sweat from his jaw. Jemmy's would be no problem, but for the rest of them …

There was the rub, of course—or one of them. *If the bairn can pass*. If Claire's theory was right, and the ability to pass through the stones was a genetic trait, like eye color or blood-type—then fifty/fifty, if Jemmy were Bonnet's child; three chances out of four, or perhaps certainty, if he were Roger's.

He hacked savagely at a clump of grass, not bothering to grasp it, and grain heads flew like shrapnel. Then he remembered the small pink figure underneath his pillow, and breathed deep. And if it worked, if there were to be another child, one that was his for sure, by blood? Odds three out of four—or perhaps another stone, one day, in the family graveyard.

The bag was almost full, and there was no more hay worth the cutting here. Fetching the hatchet, he slung the bag across his shoulder and made his way downhill, to the edge of the highest cornfield.

It bore no more resemblance to the British cornfields he had been used to than did the high meadows to a hayfield. Once a patch of virgin forest, the trees still stood, black and dead against the pale blue sky. They had been girdled and left to die, the corn planted in the open spaces between them.

It was the quickest way to clear land sufficiently for crops. With the trees dead, enough sunlight came through the leafless branches for the corn below. One or two or three years later, the dead tree roots would have rotted sufficiently to make it possible to push the trunks over, to be gradually cut for wood and hauled away. For now, though, they stood, an eerie band of black scarecrows, spreading empty arms across the corn.

The corn itself had been gathered; flocks of mourning doves foraged for bugs among the litter of dry stalks, and a covey of bobwhite took fright at Roger's approach, scattering like a handful of marbles thrown across the ground. A ladder-backed woodpecker, secure above his head, uttered a brief shriek of startlement and paused in its hammering to inspect him before returning to its noisy excavations.

"You should be pleased," he said to the bird, setting down the bag and unlimbering the hatchet from his belt. "More bugs for you, aye?" The dead trees were infested by myriad insects; several woodpeckers could be found in any field of girdled trees, heads cocked to hear the subterranean scratchings of their burrowing prey.

"Sorry," he murmured under his breath to the tree he had selected. It was ridiculous to feel pity for a tree; the more so in this sprawling wilderness, where saplings sprang out of the thawing earth with such spring vigor as to crack solid rock and the mountains were so thickly blanketed with trees that the air itself was a smoky blue with their exhalations. For that matter, the emotion wouldn't last longer than it took to begin the job; by the time he reached the third tree, he would be sweating freely and cursing the awkwardness of the work.

Still, he always approached the job with a faint reluctance, disliking the manner of it more than the result. Chopping down a tree for timber was straight-forward; girdling it seemed somehow mean-spirited, if practical, leaving the tree to die slowly, unable to bring water from its roots above the ring of bare, exposed wood. It was not so unpleasant in the fall, at least, when the trees were dormant and leafless already; it must be rather like dying in their sleep, he thought. Or hoped.

Chips of aromatic wood flew past his head, as he chopped his way briskly around the big trunk, and went on without pause to the next victim.

Needless to say, he took care never to let anyone hear him apologize to a tree. Jamie always said a prayer for the animals he killed, but Roger doubted that he would regard a tree as anything other than fuel, building material, or sheer bloody obstruction. The woodpecker screeched suddenly overhead. Roger swung round to see what had caused the alarm, but relaxed at once, seeing the small, wiry figure of Kenny Lindsay approaching through the trees.

It appeared that Lindsay had come on the same business; he flourished his own girdling knife in cordial greeting.

“Madain mhath, a Smeòraich!” he shouted. “And what’s this I hear, that we’ve a newcomer?”

No longer even faintly surprised at the speed with which news passed over the mountain, Roger offered his ale-jug to Lindsay, and gave him the details of the new family.

“Christie is their name, is it?” Kenny asked.

“Yes. Thomas Christie, and his son and daughter. You’ll know him—he was at Ardsmuir.”

“Aye? Oh.”

There it was again, that faint tremor of reaction at Christie’s name.

“Christie,” Kenny Lindsay repeated. The tip of his tongue showed briefly, tasting the name. “Mm. Aye, well.”

“What’s the matter with Christie?” Roger demanded, feeling more uneasy by the minute.

“Matter?” Kenny looked startled. “Nothing’s the matter with him—is there?”

“No. I mean—you seemed a bit taken aback to hear his name. I wondered whether perhaps he was a known thief, or a drunkard, or the like.”

Enlightenment spread across Kenny’s stubbled face like sun on a morning meadow.

“Oh, aye, I take your meaning now. No, no, Christie’s a decent enough sort, so far as I ken the man.”

“So far as ye ken? Were ye not at Ardsmuir together, then? He said so.”

“Och, aye, he was there right enough,” Kenny agreed, but seemed still vaguely hesitant. Additional prodding by Roger elicited nothing, though, save a shrug, and after a few moments, they returned to the cutting, pausing only for the occasional swig of ale or water. The weather was cool, thank God, but working like that made the sweat run free, and at the end of the job, Roger took a last drink, and then poured the rest of his water over his head, gasping with the welcome chill on his heated skin.

"You'll come ben for a bit, *a Smeòraich*?" Kenny laid down his ax and eased his back with a groan. He jerked his head toward the pines on the far side of the meadow. "My wee house is just there. The wife's awa' to sell her pork, but there's fresh buttermilk in the spring."

Roger nodded, smiling.

"I will then, Kenny, thanks."

He went with Kenny to tend his beasts; Lindsay had two milch-goats and a penned sow. Kenny fetched them water from a small nearby creek, while Roger stacked the hay and threw a forkful into the goats' manger.

"Nice pig," Roger said politely, waiting while Kenny poured cracked corn into the trough for the sow, a big mottled creature with one ragged ear and a nasty look in her eye.

"Mean as a viper, and nearly as fast," Kenny said, giving the pig a narrow look. "Near as Godalmighty took my hand off at the wrist yesterday. I meant to take her to *Mac Dubh's* boar for breeding, but she wasna inclined to go."

"Not much ye can do with a female who's not in the mood," Roger agreed.

Kenny wobbled his head from one side to the other, considering.

"Och, well, that's as may be. There are ways to sweeten them, aye? That's a trick my brother Evan taught me." He gave Roger a gap-toothed grin, and nodded toward a barrel in the corner of the shed, that gave off the sweet pungency of fermenting corn.

"Aye?" Roger said, laughing. "Well, I hope it works, then." He had an involuntary vision of Kenny and his imposing wife, Rosamund, in bed together, and wondered in passing whether alcohol played much part in their unlikely marriage.

"Oh, it'll work," Kenny said with confidence. "She's a terror for the sour-mash, is that one. Trouble is, if ye give her enough to improve her disposition, she canna walk just so verra well. We'll need to bring the boar to her, instead, when *Mac Dubh*'s on his feet."

"Is she in season? I'll bring the boar tomorrow," Roger said, feeling reckless. Kenny looked startled, but then nodded, pleased.

"Aye, that's kind, *a Smeòraich.*" He paused a moment, then added casually, "I hope *Mac Dubh* is on his feet soon, then. Will he be well enough to have met Tom Christie?"

"He hasn't met him, no—but I told him."

"Oh? Oh. Well, that's fine, isn't it?"

Roger narrowed his eyes, but Kenny looked away.

His sense of unease about Christie persisted, and seized by a sudden impulse, Roger leaned across the hay and grasped Kenny by the hand, startling the older man considerably. He gave the squeeze, the tap on the knuckle, and then let go.

Kenny gawked at him, blinking in the beam of sunlight from the door. Finally, he set down the empty pail, carefully wiped his hand on his ragged kilt, and offered it formally to Roger.

When he let go, they were still friendly, but the situation between them had altered, very subtly.

"Christie, too," Roger observed, and Kenny nodded.

"Oh, aye. All of us."

"All of you at Ardsmuir? And—Jamie?" He felt a sense of astonishment at the thought.

Kenny nodded again, bending to pick up his bucket.

"Oh, aye, it was *Mac Dubh* started it. Ye didna ken?"

No point in prevarication. He shook his head, dismissing the matter. He'd mention it to Jamie when he saw him—assuming Jamie was in any shape to be questioned then. He fixed Kenny with a direct look.

"So, then. About Christie. Is there anything wrong about the man?"

Lindsay's earlier constraint had disappeared, now that it was no longer a matter of discussing a Masonic brother with an outsider. He shook his head.

"Och, no. It's only I was a bit surprised to see him here. He didna quite get on sae well wi' *Mac Dubh,* is all. If he had another place to go, I wouldna have thought he'd seek out Fraser's Ridge."

Roger was momentarily surprised by the revelation that there was someone from Ardsmuir who didn't think the sun shone out of Jamie Fraser's arse, though on consideration, there was no reason why this shouldn't be so; God knew the man was quite as capable of making enemies as friends.

"Why?"

What he was asking was plain. Kenny looked about the goat-shed, as though seeking escape, but Roger stood between him and the door.

"No great matter," he said, finally, shoulders slumping in capitulation. "Only Christie's a Protestant, see?"

"Aye, I see," Roger said, very dryly. "But he was put in with the Jacobite prisoners. So, was there trouble in Ardsmuir over it, is that what you're telling me?"

Likely enough, he reflected. In his own time, there was no love lost between the Catholics and the stern Scottish sons of John Knox and his ilk. Nothing Scots liked better than a wee spot of religious warfare—and if you got right down to it, that's what the entire Jacobite cause had been.

Take a few staunch Calvinists, convinced that if they didn't tuck their blankets tight, the Pope would nip down the chimney and bite their toes, and bang them up in a prison cheek-by-jowl with men who prayed out loud to the Virgin Mary … aye, he could see it. Football riots would be nothing to it, numbers being equal.

"How did he come to be in Ardsmuir, then—Christie, I mean?"

Kenny looked surprised.

"Och, he was a Jacobite—arrested wi' the rest after Culloden, tried and imprisoned."

"A Protestant Jacobite?" It wasn't impossible, or even farfetched—politics made stranger bedfellows than that, and always had. It was unusual, though.

Kenny heaved a sigh, glancing toward the horizon, where the sun was slowly sinking into the pines.

"Come along inside then, MacKenzie. If Tom Christie's come to the Ridge, I suppose it's best someone tells ye all about it. If I hurry myself, ye'll be in time for your supper."

Rosamund was not at home, but the buttermilk was cool in the well, as advertised. Stools fetched and the buttermilk poured, Kenny Lindsay was good as his word, and started in in businesslike fashion.

Christie was a Lowlander, Kenny said; MacKenzie would have gathered as much. From Edinburgh. At the time of the Rising, Christie had been a merchant in the city, with a good business, newly inherited from a hard-working father. Tom Christie was far from lazy, himself, and determined to set up for a gentleman.

With this in mind, and Prince *Tearlach*'s army occupying the city, Christie had put on his best suit of clothes and gone calling on O'Sullivan, the Irishman who had charge of the army commissary. "Naebody kens what passed between them, other than words—but when Christie came out, he had a contract to victual the Highland Army, and an invitation to dance at Holyrood that night." Kenny took a long drink of sweet buttermilk and set down the cup, his mustache thickly coated with white. He nodded wisely at Roger.

"We heard what they were like, those balls at the Palace. *Mac Dubh* told us of them, time and again. The Great Gallery, wi' the portraits of all the kings o' Scotland, and the hearths of blue Dutch tile, big enough to roast an ox. The Prince, and all the great folk who'd come to see him, dressed in silks and laces. And the food! Sweet Jesus, such food as he'd tell about." Kenny's eyes grew round and dreamy, remembering descriptions heard on an empty stomach. His tongue came out and absently licked the buttermilk from his upper lip.

Then he shook himself back to the present.

"Well, so," he said, matter-of-factly. "When the Army left Edinburgh, Christie cam' along. Whether it was to mind his investment, or that he meant to keep himself in the Prince's eye, I canna say."

Roger noted privately that the notion of Christie having acted from patriotic motives wasn't on Kenny Lindsay's list of possibilities. Whether from prudence or ambition, whatever his reasons, Christie had stayed—and stayed too long. He had left the Army at Nairn, the day before Culloden, and started back toward Edinburgh, driving one of the commissary wagons.

"If he'd left the wagon and ridden one o' the horses, he might ha' made it," Kenny said cynically. "But no; he ran smack into a sackful o' Campbells. Government troops, aye?"

Roger nodded.

"I heard tell as he tried to pass himself off as a peddler, but he'd taken a load of corn from a farmhouse on that road, and the farmer swore himself purple that Christie'd been in his yard no more than three days before, wi' a white cockade on his breest. So they took him, and that was that."

Christie had gone first to Berwick Prison, and then—for reasons known only to the Crown—to Ardsmuir, where he had arrived a year before Jamie Fraser.

"I came at the same time." Kenny peered into his empty mug, then reached for the pitcher. "It was an old prison—half-falling down—but they'd not used it for some years. When the Crown decided to reopen it, they brought men from here and from there; maybe a hundred and fifty men, all told. Mostly convicted Jacobites—the odd thief, and a murderer or two." Kenny grinned suddenly, and Roger couldn't help smiling in response.

Kenny was no great storyteller, but he spoke with such simple vividness that Roger had no trouble seeing the scene he described: the soot-streaked stones and the ragged men. Men from all over Scotland, ripped from home, deprived of kin and companions, thrown like bits of rubbish into a heap of compost, where filth, starvation, and close quarters generated a heat of rot that broke down both sensibility and civilness.

Small groups had formed, for protection or for the comfort of society, and there was constant conflict between one group and another. They banged to and fro like pebbles in the surf, bruising each other and now and then crushing some hapless individual who got in between.

"It's food and warmth, aye?" Kenny said dispassionately. "There's naught else to care for, in a place like that."

Among the groups had been a small obdurate knot of Calvinists, headed by Thomas Christie. Mindful of their own, they shared food and blankets, defended each other—and behaved with a dour self-righteousness that roused the Catholics to fury.

"If one of us was to catch afire—and now and then, someone would, bein' pushed into the hearth whilst sleepin'—they wouldna piss on him to put it out," Kenny said, shaking his head. "They wouldna be stealing food, to be sure, but they *would* stand in the corner and pray out loud, rattlin' on and on about whore-mongers and usurers and idolaters and the lot—and makin' damn sure we kent who was meant by it!"

"And then came *Mac Dubh*." The late autumn sun was sinking; Kenny's stubbled face was blurred with shadow, but Roger could see the slight softening that came across it, relaxing the grimness of expression that accompanied Lindsay's reminiscence.

"Something like the Second Coming, was it?" Roger said. He spoke half under his breath, and was surprised when Kenny laughed.

"Only if ye mean some of us kent *Sheumais ruaidh* already. No, man, they'd brought him by boat. Ye'll ken Jamie Roy doesna take to boats, aye?"

"I'd heard something of the sort," Roger answered dryly.

"Whatever ye heard, it's true," Kenny assured him, grinning. "He staggered into the cell green as a lass, vomited in the corner, then crawled under a bench and stayed there for the next day or two."

Upon his emergence, Fraser had kept quiet for a time, watching to see who was who and what was what. But he was a gentleman born, and had been both a laird and a fierce warrior; a man much respected among the Highlanders. The men deferred to him naturally, seeking his opinion, asking his judgment, and the weaker sheltering in his presence.

"And that griped Tom Christie's arse like a saddle-gall," Kenny said, nodding wisely. "See, he'd got to thinking as how he was the biggest frog in the pond, aye?" Kenny ducked his chin and puffed his throat, popping his eyes in illustration, and Roger burst out laughing.

"Aye, I see. And he didn't care for the competition, was that it?"

Kenny nodded, off-hand.

"It wouldna have been so bad, maybe, save that half his wee band of salvationers started creepin' off from their prayers to hear *Mac Dubh* tell stories. But the main thing was the new governor."

Bogle, the prison's original governor, had left, replaced by Colonel Harry Quarry. Quarry was a relatively young man, but an experienced soldier, who had fought at Falkirk and at Culloden. Unlike his predecessor, he viewed the prisoners under his command with a certain respect—and he knew Jamie Fraser by repute, regarding him as an honorable, if defeated, foe.

"Quarry had *Mac Dubh* brought up to see him, soon after he took command at Ardsmuir. I couldna say what happened between them, but soon it was a matter of course; once a week, the guards would come and take *Mac Dubh* off to shave and wash himself, and he would go take a bit of supper with Quarry, and speak to him of whatever was needed."

"And Tom Christie didn't like that, either," Roger guessed. He was forming a comprehensive picture of Christie; ambitious, intelligent—and envious. Competent himself, but lacking Fraser's fortunate birth and skill at warfare—advantages that a self-made merchant with social aspirations might well have resented, even before the catastrophe of Culloden. Roger felt a certain sneaking sympathy for Christie; Jamie Fraser was stiff competition for the merely mortal.

Kenny shook his head, and tilted back to drain his cup. He set it down with a sigh of repletion, raising his brows with a gesture toward the jug. Roger waved a hand, dismissing it.

"No, no more, thanks. But the Freemasons … how did that happen? You said it was to do with Christie?" The light was nearly gone. He would have to walk home in the dark—but that was no matter; his curiosity wouldn't let him leave without learning what had happened.

Kenny grunted, rearranging his kilt over his thighs. Hospitality was all very well, but he had chores to do as well. Still, courtesy was courtesy, and he liked the Thrush for himself, not only that he was *Mac Dubh*'s good son.

"Aye, well." He shrugged, resigning himself. "No, Christie didna like it a bit, that *Mac Dubh* should be the great one, when he felt it his own place by right." He cast a shrewd glance at Roger, assessing. "I dinna think he kent what it might cost to be chief in a place like that—not 'til later. But that's naught to do with it." He flapped a hand, waving off irrelevancy.

"The thing was, Christie *was* a chief himself; only not just so good at it as was *Mac Dubh*. But there were those who listened to him, and not only the God-naggers."

If Roger was a trifle taken aback at hearing this characterization of his co-religionists, he disregarded it in his eagerness to hear more.

"Aye, so?"

"There was trouble again." Kenny shrugged again. "Small things, aye, but ye could see it happening."

Shifts and schisms, the small faults and fractures that result when two land masses come together, straining and shoving until either mountains rise between them or one is subsumed by the other, in a breaking of earth and a shattering of stone.

"We could see *Mac Dubh* thinking," Kenny said. "But he's no the man to be telling anyone what's in his mind, aye?"

Almost no one, Roger thought suddenly, with the memory of Fraser's voice, so low as barely to be heard beneath the whining autumn wind. *He told me*. The thought was a small sudden warmth in his chest, but he pushed it aside, not to be distracted.

"So one evening *Mac Dubh* came back to us, quite late," Kenny said. "But instead of lying down to his rest, he came and summoned us—me and my brothers, Gavin Hayes, Ronnie Sinclair … and Tom Christie."

Fraser had roused the six men quietly from their sleep, and brought them to one of the cell's few windows, where the light of the night sky might shine upon his face. The men had gathered round him, heavy-eyed and aching from the day's labors, wondering what this might mean. Since the last small clash—a fight between two men over a meaningless insult—Christie and Fraser had not exchanged a word, but had kept each man to himself.

It was a soft spring night, the air still crisp, but smelling of fresh green things from the sprouting moor and the salt scent of the distant sea; a night to make a man yearn to run free upon the earth and feel the blood humming dark in his veins. Tired or not, the men roused to it, alive and alert.

Christie was alert; wary-eyed and watchful. Here he was, called face-to-face with Fraser and five of his closest allies—what might they intend? True, they stood in a cell with fifty men sleeping round them, and some of those would come to Christie's aid if he called; but a man could be beaten or killed before anyone knew he was threatened.

Fraser had spoken not a word to start, but smiled and put out his hand to Tom Christie. The other man had hesitated for a moment, suspicious—but there was no choice, after all.

"Ye would have thought *Mac Dubh* held a bolt of lightning in his hand, the way the shock of it went through Christie." Kenny's own hand lay open on the table between them, the palm hard as horn with calluses. The short, thick fingers curled slowly closed, and Kenny shook his head, a broad grin creasing his face.

"I dinna ken how it was *Mac Dubh* found out that Christie was a Freemason, but he knew it. Ye should have seen the look on Tom's face when he realized that Jamie Roy was one besides!

"It was Quarry did it," Kenny explained, seeing the question still on Roger's face. "He was a Master himself, see."

A Master Mason, that was, and head of a small military lodge, composed of the officers of the garrison. One of their members had died recently, though, leaving them one man short of the required seven. Quarry had considered the situation, and after some cautiously exploratory conversation on the matter, invited Fraser to join them. A gentleman was a gentleman, after all, Jacobite or no.

Not precisely an orthodox situation, Roger thought, but this Quarry sounded the type to adjust regulations to suit himself. For that matter, so was Fraser.

"So Quarry made him, and he moved from Apprentice to Fellow Craft in a month's time, and was a Master himself a month after that—and that was when he chose to tell us of it. And so we founded a new lodge that night, the seven of us—Ardsmuir Lodge Number Two."

Roger snorted in wry amusement, seeing it.

"Aye. You six—and Christie." Tom Christie the Protestant. And Christie, stiff-necked but honorable, sworn to the Mason's oaths, would have had no choice, but been obliged to accept Fraser and his Catholics as brethren.

"To start with. Within three months, though, every man in the cells was made Apprentice. And there wasna so much trouble after that."

There wouldn't have been. Freemasons held as basic principles the notions of equality—gentleman, crofter, fisherman, laird; such distinctions were not taken account of in a lodge—and tolerance. No discussion of politics or religion among the brothers, that was the rule.

"I can't think it did Jamie any harm to belong to the officers' lodge, either," Roger said.

"Oh," said Kenny, rather vaguely. "No, I dinna suppose it did." He pushed back his stool and made to rise; the story was done; the dark had come and it was time to light a candle. He made no move toward the clay candlestick that stood on the hearth, but Roger glanced toward the glow of the banked fire, and noticed for the first time that there was no smell of cooking food.

"It's time I was away home for supper," he said, rising himself. "Come with me, aye?"

Kenny brightened noticeably.

"I will, then, *a Smeòraich*, and thanks. Give me a moment to milk the goats, and I'll be right along."

When I came back upstairs next morning after a delicious breakfast featuring omelettes made with minced buffalo meat, sweet onions, and mushrooms, I found Jamie awake, though not noticeably bright-eyed.

"How are you this morning?" I asked, setting down the tray I had brought him and putting a hand on his forehead. Still warm, but no longer blazing; the fever was nearly gone.

"I wish I were deid, if only so folk would stop asking how am I?" he replied grumpily. I took his mood as an indicator of returning health, and took my hand away.

"Have you used the chamberpot yet this morning?"

He raised one eyebrow, glowering.

"Have you?"

"You know, you are perfectly impossible when you don't feel well," I remarked, rising to peer into the crudely glazed pot for myself. Nothing.

"Does it not occur to ye, Sassenach, that perhaps it's yourself that's impossible when I'm ill? If ye're not feeding me some disgusting substance made of ground beetles and hoof-shavings, you're pokin' my belly and making intimate inquiries into the state of my bowels. Ahh!"

I had in fact pulled down the sheet and prodded him in the lower abdomen. No distention from a swollen bladder; his exclamation appeared to be due entirely to ticklishness. I quickly palpated the liver, but found no hardness—that was a relief.

"Have you a pain in your back?"

"I've a marked pain in my backside," he said, narrowing one eye at me and folding his arms protectively across his middle. "And it's getting worse by the moment."

"I am trying to determine whether the snake venom has affected your kidneys," I explained patiently, deciding to overlook this last remark. "If you can't piss—"

"I can do that fine," he assured me, pulling the sheet up to his chest, lest I demand proof. "Now, just leave me to my breakfast, and I'll—"

"How do you know? You haven't—"

"I have." Seeing my skeptical glance at the chamberpot, he glowered under his brows, and muttered something ending in "… window." I swung round to the open window, shutters open and sash raised in spite of the chilly morning air.

"You did what?"

"Well," he defended himself, "I was standing up, and I just thought I would, that's all."

"Why were you standing up?"

"Oh, I thought I would." He blinked at me, innocent as a day-old child. I left the question, going on to more important matters.

"Was there blood in—"

"What have ye brought for my breakfast?" Ignoring my clinical inquiries, he rolled to one side, and lifted the napkin draped over the tray. He looked at the bowl of bread and milk thus revealed, then turned his head, giving me a look of the most profound betrayal.

Before he could start in on further grievances, I forestalled him by sitting down on the stool beside him and demanding bluntly, "What's wrong with Tom Christie?"

He blinked, taken by surprise.

"Is something amiss wi' the man?"

"I wouldn't know; I haven't seen him."

"Well, I havena seen him in more than twenty years myself," he said, picking up the spoon and prodding the bread and milk suspiciously. "If he's grown a spare head in that time, it's news to me."

"Ho," I said tolerantly. "You may—and I say *may*—possibly have fooled Roger, but I know you."

He looked up at that, and gave me a sidelong smile.

"Oh, aye? D'ye know I dinna care much for bread and milk?"

My heart fluttered at sight of that smile, but I maintained my dignity.

"If you're thinking of blackmailing me into bringing you a steak, you can forget it," I advised him. "I can wait to find out about Tom Christie, if I have to." I stood up, shaking out my skirts as though to leave, and turned toward the door.

"Make it parritch with honey, and I'll tell ye."

I turned round to find him grinning at me.

"Done," I said, and came back to the stool.

He considered for a moment, but I could see that he was only deciding how and where to begin.

"Roger told me about the Masonic lodge at Ardsmuir," I said, to help out. "Last night."

Jamie shot me a startled look.

"And where did wee Roger Mac find that out? Did Christie tell him?"

"No, Kenny Lindsay did. But evidently Christie gave Roger a Masonic sign of some sort when he arrived. I thought Catholics weren't allowed to be Masons, actually."

He raised one eyebrow.

"Aye, well. The Pope wasna in Ardsmuir prison, and I was. Though I havena heard that it's forbidden, forbye. So wee Roger's a Freemason, too, is he?"

"Apparently. And perhaps it isn't forbidden, now. It will be, later." I flapped a hand, dismissing it. "There's something else about Christie, though, isn't there?"

He nodded, and glanced away.

"Aye, there is," he said quietly. "D'ye recall a Sergeant Murchison, Sassenach?"

"Vividly." I had met the Sergeant only once, more than two years previously, in Cross Creek. The name seemed familiar in some other, more recent context, though. Then I recalled where I had heard it.

"Archie Hayes mentioned him—or them. That was it; there were two of them, twins. One of them was the man who shot Archie at Culloden, wasn't he?"

Jamie nodded. His eyes were hooded, and I could see that he was looking back into the time he had spent in Ardsmuir.

"Aye. And to shoot a lad in cold blood was nay more than one could expect from either of them. A crueler pair I hope never to meet." The corner of his mouth turned up, but without humor. "The only thing I ken to Stephen Bonnet's credit is that he killed one o' yon lurdans."

"And the other?" I asked.

"I killed the other."

The room seemed suddenly very quiet, as though the two of us were far removed from Fraser's Ridge, alone together, that bald statement floating in the air between us. He was looking straight at me, blue eyes guarded, waiting to see what I would say. I swallowed.

"Why?" I asked, vaguely surprised at the calmness of my own voice.

He did look away then, shaking his head.

"A hundred reasons," he said softly, "and none." He rubbed absently at his wrist, as though feeling the weight of iron fetters.

"I could tell ye stories of their viciousness, Sassenach, and they would be true. They preyed upon the weak, robbing and beating—and they were the sort who took delight in cruelty for its own sake. There's no recourse against such men, not in a prison. But I dinna say so as an excuse—for there is none."

The prisoners at Ardsmuir were used for labor, cutting peats, quarrying and hauling stone. They worked in small groups, each group guarded by an English soldier, armed with musket and club. The musket, to prevent escape—the club, to enforce orders and ensure submission.

"It was summer. Ye'll ken the summer in the Highlands, Sassenach—the summer dim?"

I nodded. The summer dim was the light of the Highland night, late in summer. So far to the north, the sun barely set on Midsummer's Eve; it would disappear below the horizon, but even at midnight, the sky was pale and milky white, and the air was not dark, but seemed filled with unearthly mist.

The prison governor took advantage of the light, now and then, to work the prisoners into the late hours of the evening.

"We didna mind so much," Jamie said. His eyes were open, but fixed on whatever he was seeing in the summer dim of memory. "It was better to be outside than in. And yet, by the evening, we would be so droukit wi' fatigue that we could barely set one foot before the other. It was like walking in a dream."

Both guards and men were numb with exhaustion, by the time the work of the day was done. The groups of prisoners were collected, formed up into a column, and marched back toward the prison, shuffling across the moorland, stumbling and nodding, drunk with the need to fall down and sleep.

"We were still by the quarry, when they set off; we were to load the wagon wi' the stone-cutting tools and the last of the blocks, and follow. I remember—I heaved a great block up into the wagon bed, and stood back, panting wi' the effort. There was a sound behind me, and I turned to see Sergeant Murchison—Billy, it was, though I didna find that out 'til later."

The Sergeant was no more than a squat black shape in the dim, face invisible against a sky the color of an oyster's shell.

"I wondered, now and then, if I wouldna have done it, had I seen his face." The fingers of Jamie's left hand stroked his wrist absently, and I realized that he still felt the weight of the irons he had worn.

The Sergeant had raised his club, poked Jamie hard in the ribs, then used it to point to a maul left lying on the ground. Then the Sergeant turned away.

"I didna think about it for a moment," Jamie said softly. "I was on him in two steps, wi' the chain of my fetters hard against his throat. He hadna time to make a sound."

The wagon stood no more than ten feet from the lip of the quarry pool; there was a drop of forty feet straight down, and the water below, a hundred feet deep, black and waveless under that hollow white sky.

"I tied him to one of the blocks and threw him over, and then I went back to the wagon. The two men from my group were there, standing like statues in the dim, watching. They said nothing, nor did I. I stepped up and took the reins, they got into the back of the wagon, and I drove toward the prison. We caught up to the column before too long, and all went back together, without a word. No one missed Sergeant Murchison until the next evening, for they thought he was down in the village, off-duty. I dinna think they ever found him."

He seemed to notice what he was doing, then, and took his hand away from his wrist.

"And the two men?" I asked softly. He nodded.

"Tom Christie and Duncan Innes."

He sighed deeply, and stretched his arms, shifting his shoulders as though to ease the fit of his shirt—though he wore a loose nightshirt. Then he raised one hand and turned it to and fro, frowning at his wrist in the light.

“That’s odd,” he said, sounding faintly surprised.

“What is?”

“The marks—they’re gone.”

“Marks … from the irons?” He nodded, examining both his wrists in bemusement. The skin was fair, weathered to a pale gold, but otherwise unblemished.

“I had them for years—from the chafing, aye? I never noticed that they’d gone.”

I set a hand on his wrist, rubbing my thumb gently over the pulse where his radial artery crossed the bone.

“You didn’t have them when I found you in Edinburgh, Jamie. They’ve been gone a long time.”

He looked down at his arms, and shook his head, as though unable to believe it.

“Aye,” he said softly. “Well, so has Tom Christie.”

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PART NINE

A Dangerous Business

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AURUM

It was quiet in the house; Mr. Wemyss had gone to the gristmill, taking Lizzie and Mrs. Bug with him, and it was too late in the day for anyone on the Ridge to come visiting—everyone would be at their chores, seeing that the beasts were fed and bedded down, wood and water fetched, the fires built up for supper.

My own beast was already fed and bedded; Adso perched in a somnolent ball in a patch of late sun on the window ledge, feet tucked up and eyes closed in an ecstasy of repletion. My contribution to the supper—a dish Fergus referred to elegantly as *lapin aux chanterelles* (known as rabbit stew to the vulgar among us)—had been burbling cheerfully away in the cauldron since early morning, and needed no attention from me. As for sweeping the floor, polishing the windows, dusting, and general drudgery of that sort … well, if women's work was never done, why trouble about how much of it wasn't being accomplished at any given moment?

I fetched down ink and pen from the cupboard, and the big black clothbound casebook, then settled myself to share Adso's sun. I wrote up a careful description of the growth on little Geordie Chisholm's ear, which would bear watching, and added the most recent measurements I had taken of Tom Christie's left hand.

Christie *did* suffer from arthritis in both hands, and had a slight degree of clawing in the fingers. Having observed him closely at dinner, though, I was nearly sure that what I was seeing in the left hand was not arthritis, but Dupuytren's contracture—an odd, hooklike drawing-in of the ring and little fingers toward the palm of the hand, caused by shortening of the palmar aponeurosis.

Ordinarily, I should have been in no doubt, but Christie's hands were so heavily callused from years of labor that I couldn't feel the characteristic nodule at the base of the ring finger. The finger had felt *wrong* to me, though, when I'd first looked at the hand—in the course of stitching a gash across the heel of it—and I'd been checking it, whenever I caught sight of Tom Christie and could persuade him to let me look at it—which wasn't often.

In spite of Jamie's apprehensions, the Christies had been ideal tenants so far, living quietly and keeping largely to themselves, aside from Thomas Christie's schoolmastering, at which he appeared to be strict but effective.

I became aware of a looming presence just behind my head. The sunbeam had moved, and Adso with it.

"Don't even think of it, cat," I said. A rumbling purr of anticipation started up in the vicinity of my left ear, and a large paw reached out and delicately patted the top of my head.

"Oh, all right," I said, resigned. No choice, really, unless I wanted to get up and go write somewhere else. "Have it your way."

Adso could not resist hair. Anyone's hair, whether attached to a head or not. Fortunately, Major MacDonald had been the only person reckless enough to sit down within Adso's reach while wearing a wig, and after all, I *had* got it back, though it meant crawling under the house where Adso had retired with his prey; no one else dared snatch it from his jaws. The Major had been rather austere about the incident, and while it hadn't stopped him coming round to see Jamie now and then, he no longer removed his hat on such visits, but sat drinking chicory coffee at the kitchen table, his tricorne fixed firmly on his head and both eyes fixed firmly upon Adso, monitoring the cat's whereabouts.

I relaxed a bit, not quite purring myself, but feeling quite mellow. It was rather soothing to have the cat knead and comb with his half-sheathed claws, pausing now and then in his delicate grooming to rub his face lovingly against my head. He was only really dangerous if he'd been in the catnip, but that was safely locked up. Eyes half-closed, I contemplated the minor complication of describing

Depuytren's contracture without calling it that, Baron Depuytren not having been born yet.

Well, a picture was worth a thousand words, and I thought I could produce a competent line drawing, at least. I did my best, meanwhile wondering how I was to induce Thomas Christie to let me operate on the hand.

It was a fairly quick and simple procedure, but given the lack of anesthesia and the fact that Christie was a strict Presbyterian and a teetotaller … perhaps Jamie could sit on his chest, Roger on his legs. If Brianna held his wrist tightly …

I gave up the problem for the moment, yawning drowsily. The drowsiness disappeared abruptly, as a three-inch yellow dragonfly came whirring in through the open window with a noise like a small helicopter. Adso sailed through the air after it, leaving my hair in wild disarray and my ribbon—which he appeared to have been quietly chewing—hanging wet and mangled behind my left ear. I removed this object with mild distaste, laid it on the sill to dry, and flipped back a few pages, admiring the neat drawing I had done of Jamie's snakebite, and of Brianna's rattlesnake hypodermic.

The leg, to my amazement, had healed cleanly and well, and while there had been a good bit of tissue sloughing, the maggots had dealt with that so effectively that the only permanent traces were two small depressions in the skin where the original fang marks had been, and a thin, straight scar across the calf where I had made an incision for debridement and maggot-placement. Jamie had a slight limp still, but I thought this would cure itself in time.

Humming in a satisfied sort of way, I flipped back farther, idly browsing through the last few pages of Daniel Rawlings' notes.

> *Josephus Howard … chief complaint being a fistula of the rectum, this of so long a standing as to have become badly abscessed, together with an advanced case of Piles. Treated with a decoction of Ale Hoof, mixed with Burnt Alum and small amount of Honey, this boiled together with juice of Marigold.*

A later note on the same page, dated a month later, referred to the efficacy of this compound, with illustrations of the condition of the patient before and after administration. I raised a brow at the drawings; Rawlings was no more an artist than I was, but had succeeded in capturing, to a remarkable degree, the intrinsic discomfort of the condition.

I tapped the quill against my mouth, thinking, then added a careful note in the margin, to the effect that a diet rich in fibrous vegetables should be recommended as an adjunct to this treatment, useful also in preventing both constipation and the more serious complications thereof—nothing like a little object lesson!

I wiped the quill, laid it down, and turned the page, wondering whether Ale Hoof was a plant—and if so, which one—or a suppurative condition of horses' feet. I could hear Jamie rustling about in his study; I'd go ask him in a moment.

I nearly missed it. It had been jotted on the back of the page containing the drawing of Mr. Howard's fistula, evidently added as a casual afterthought on the day's activities.

> *Have spoke with Mr. Hector Cameron of River Run, who begs me come examine his wife's eyes, her sight being sadly affected. It is a far distance to his plantation, but he will send a horse.*

That bit overcame the soporific atmosphere of the afternoon at once. Fascinated, I sat up and turned the page, looking to see whether the doctor had in fact examined Jocasta. I had—with some difficulty—persuaded her to allow me to examine her eyes once, and I was curious as to Rawlings' conclusions. Without an ophthalmoscope, there was no way of making sure of the cause of her blindness, but I had strong suspicions—and I could at least rule out such things as cataracts and diabetes with a fair amount of certainty. I wondered whether Rawlings had seen anything I had missed, or whether her condition had changed noticeably since he had seen her.

> *Bled the smith of a pint, purged his wife with senna oil (10 minims), and administered 3 minims of same to the cat (gratis), I having observed a swarming of worms in the animal's stool.*

I smiled at that; however crude his methods, Daniel Rawlings was a good doctor. I wondered once again what had happened to him, and whether I should ever get the chance to meet him. I had the rather sad feeling that I should not; I couldn't imagine a doctor not returning somehow to claim such beautiful instruments as his, if he was in any condition to do so.

Under the prodding of my curiosity, Jamie had obligingly made inquiries, but with no results. Daniel Rawlings had set out for Virginia—leaving his box of instruments behind—and had promptly vanished into thin air.

Another page, another patient; bleeding, purging, lancing of boils, removal of an infected nail, drawing of an abscessed tooth, cautery of a persistent sore on a woman's leg … Rawlings had found plenty of business in Cross Creek. Had he ever made it as far as River Run, though?

Yes, there it was, a week later and several pages on.

> *Reached River Run after a dire journey, wind and rain fit to sink a ship, and the road washed away entirely in places, so was obliged to ride cross-country, lashed by hail, mud to the eyebrows. Had set out at dawn with Mr. Cameron's black servant, who brought a horse for me—did not reach sanctuary 'til well past dark, exhausted and starving. Made welcome by Mr. Cameron, who gave me brandy.*

Having gone to the expense of procuring a doctor, Hector Cameron had evidently decided to make the most of the opportunity, and had had Rawlings examine all the slaves and servants, as well as the master of the house himself.

> *Aged Seventy-three, of middling height, broad-shouldered, but somewhat bowed in Stature,* Rawlings had written of Hector, *with hands so gnarled by rheumatism as to make the handling of any*

> *implement more subtle than a spoon impossible. Otherwise, is well-preserved, very Vigorous in his age. Complains of rising in the night, painful Micturition. I am inclined to suspect a prurient Distemper of the Bladder, rather than Stone or chronic Disease of the inward male parts, as the complaint is recurrent, but not of long standing on any occasion of its evidence—two weeks being the average duration of each attack and accompanied by Burning in the male Organ. A low fever, tenderness upon palpation of the lower abdomen and a Black Urine, smelling strongly, incline me further to this belief.*
>
> *The household being possessed of a good quantity of dried cranberries, have prescribed a decoction, the inspissated juice to be drunk thrice daily, a cupful at a time. Also recommend infusion of Cleavers, drunk morning and evening, for its cooling Effect, and in case of there being Gravel present in the Bladder, which may aggravate this Condition.*

I found myself nodding approvingly. I didn't always agree with Rawlings, either in terms of diagnosis or treatment, but I thought he was likely spot-on on this occasion. What about Jocasta, though?

There she was, on the next page.

> *Jocasta Cameron, Sixty-four years in age, tri-gravida, well-nourished and in good Health generally, very youthful in Aspect.*

Tri-gravida? I paused for a moment at that matter-of-fact remark. So plain, so stark a term, to stand for the bearing—let alone the loss—of three children. To have raised three children past the dangers of infancy, only to lose them all at once, and in such cruel fashion. The sun was warm, but I felt a chill on my heart, thinking of it.

If it was Brianna? Or little Jemmy? How did a woman bear such loss? I had done it, myself, and still had no idea. It had been a long time, and yet still, now and then, I would wake in the night, feeling a child's warm weight sleeping on my breast, her breath warm on my neck. My hand rose and touched my shoulder, curved as though the child's head lay there.

I supposed that it might be easier to have lost a daughter at birth, without the years of acquaintance that would leave ragged holes in the fabric of daily life. And yet I knew Faith to the last atom of her being; there was a hole in my heart that fit her shape exactly. Perhaps it was that that had been a natural death, at least; it gave me the feeling that she was still with me in some way, was taken care of, and not alone. But to have children slain in blood, butchered in war?

So many things could happen to children in this time. I returned to my persual of her case history with a troubled mind.

> *No sign of organic Illness, nor external Damage to the Eyes. The White of the Eye is clear, the lashes free of any Matter, no Tumor visible. The Pupils respond normally to a Light passed before them, and to shading of the Light. A candle held close to one side illuminates the vitreous Humor of the Eye, but shows no Defect therein. I note a slight Clouding, indicating incipient Cataract in the lens of the right eye, but this is insufficient to explain the gradual loss of Sight.*

"Hum," I said aloud. Both Rawlings' observations and his conclusions matched mine. He briefly noted the length of time over which sight had failed—roughly two years—and the process of its failure—nothing abrupt, but a gradual shrinking of the field of vision.

I thought it likely had taken longer; sometimes the loss was so gradual that people didn't notice the tiny decrements at all, until the sight was seriously threatened.

> *… bits of the vision whittled away like cheese parings. Even the small remnant of sight remaining is of use only in dim light, as patient exhibits great irritation and pain when the eye is exposed to strong sunlight.*
>
> *I have seen this condition twice before, always in persons of some age, though not so far advanced. Gave it as my opinion that sight would soon be completely obliterated, with no amelioration possible.*

> *Fortunately, Mr. Cameron has a black servant capable of reading, whom he has given to his wife to accompany her and warn her of obstacles, likewise to read to her and apprise her of her surroundings.*

It had gone further than that now; the light had gone, and Jocasta was entirely blind. So, a progressive condition—that didn't tell me much, most of them were. When had Rawlings seen her?

It could be any number of conditions—macular degeneration, tumor of the optic nerve, parasitic damage, retinitis pigmentosa, temporal arteritis—probably not retinal detachment, that would have happened abruptly—but my own preliminary suspicion was of glaucoma. I remembered Phaedre, Jocasta's body servant, wringing out cloths in cold tea, observing that her mistress was suffering from headache *"again,"* in a tone of voice that suggested this was a frequent occurrence—and Duncan asking me to make up a lavender pillow, to ease his wife's "megrims."

The headaches might have nothing to do with Jocasta's eyesight, though—and I had not inquired at the time as to the nature of the headaches; they might be simple tension headaches or migraines, rather than the pressure-band type that might—or might not—attend glaucoma. Arteritis would cause frequent headache, too, after all. The frustrating thing about it was that glaucoma by itself had absolutely no predictable symptoms—save eventual blindness. It was caused by a failure of proper drainage of the fluid inside the eyeball, so that pressure inside the eye increased to the point of damage, with no warning at all to the patient or her physician. But other kinds of blindness were largely symptomless as well …

I was still contemplating the possibilities, when I became aware that Rawlings had continued his notes onto the back of the page—in Latin.

I blinked at that, a little surprised. I could tell that he had written it as a continuation of the earlier passage; quill-writing shows a characteristic darkening and fading of words, as the ink is renewed with each dip of the pen, and the shading of each passage tended to be different, as different inks were used. No, this had been written at the same time as the passage on the preceding page.

But why drop suddenly into Latin? Rawlings knew some Latin, plainly—which argued some degree of formal education, even if not formal medical education—but he didn't normally use it in his clinical notes, beyond the occasional word or phrase required for the formal description of some condition. Here was a page and a half of Latin, though, and written in scrupulous letters, smaller than his usual writing, as though he had thought carefully about the contents of the passage—or perhaps as though he felt secretive about it, as the Latin itself seemed to argue.

I flipped back through the casebook, checking to verify my impression. No, he had written in Latin here and there—but not often, and always as he did here; as the continuation of a passage begun in English. How odd. I turned back to the passage concerning River Run and began to try to puzzle it out.

Within a sentence or two, I abandoned the effort and went to find Jamie. He was in his own study, across the hall, writing letters. Or not.

The inkstand—made of a small gourd with a cork to keep the ink from drying—stood at hand, freshly filled; I could smell the woody reek of oak galls brewed with iron filings. A new turkey quill lay on the desk, trimmed to a point of such sharpness that it looked more suitable for stabbing than writing, and a fresh sheet of paper lay on the blotter, three words black and lonely at its head. It took no more than a glance at his face to know what they said.

My dear Sister.

He looked up at me, smiled wryly, and shrugged.

"What shall I say?"

"I don't know." At sight of him, I had shut the casebook, clasping it under one arm. I came in and stood behind him, laying a hand on his shoulder. I squeezed gently, and he laid his own hand over mine for a moment, then reached to pick up the quill.

"I canna go on saying that I'm sorry." He rolled the quill slowly to and fro between his thumb and middle finger. "I've said it in each letter. If she was disposed to forgive me …"

If she was, Jenny would have replied by now to at least one of the letters that he sent faithfully to Lallybroch each month.

"Ian's forgiven you. And the children." Missives from Jamie's brother-in-law arrived sporadically—but they did come, along with occasional notes from his namesake, Young Jamie, and now and then a line from Maggie, Kitty, Michael, or Janet. But the silence from Jenny was so deafening as to drown out all other communications.

"Aye, it would be worse if …" he trailed off, staring at the blank paper. In fact, nothing could be worse than this estrangement. Jenny was closer to him, more important to him, than anyone in the world—with the possible exception of myself.

I shared his bed, his life, his love, his thoughts. She had shared his heart and soul since the day he was born—until the day when he had lost her youngest son. Or so she plainly saw it.

It pained me to see him go on carrying the guilt of Ian's disappearance—and I felt some small resentment toward Jenny. I understood the depth of her loss, and sympathized with her grief, but still, Ian wasn't dead—so far as we knew. She alone could absolve Jamie, and surely she must know it.

I pulled up a stool and sat down by him, laying the book aside. A small stack of papers lay to one side, covered with his labored writing. It cost him dearly to write, wrong-handed, and that hand crippled—and yet he wrote stubbornly, almost every evening, recording the small events of the day. Visitors to the Ridge, the health of the animals, progress in building, new settlers, news from the Eastern counties … He wrote it down, one word at a time, to be sent off when some visitor arrived who would take the accumulated pages away, on the first stage of their precarious journey to Scotland. All the letters might not arrive at their destination, but some would. Likewise, most letters from Scotland would reach us, too—if they were sent.

For a time, I had hoped that Jenny's letter had simply been mis-sent, misplaced, lost somewhere in transit. But it had been too long, and I had stopped hoping. Jamie hadn't.

“I thought perhaps I should send her this.” He shuffled through the stack of papers at the side of the desk, and withdrew a small sheet, stained and grubby, ragged along one edge where it had been torn from a book.

It was a message from Ian; the only concrete evidence we had that the boy was still alive and well. It had reached us at the Gathering in November, through the agency of John Quincy Myers, a mountain man who roamed the wilderness, as much at home with Indian as with settler, and more at home with deer and possum than with anyone who lived in a house.

Written in clumsy Latin as a joke, the note assured us that Ian was well, and happy. Married to a girl “in the Mohawk fashion” (meaning, I thought, that he had decided to share her house, bed, and hearth, and she had decided to let him), he expected to become a father himself “in the spring.” And that was all. Spring had come and gone, with no further word. Ian wasn’t dead, but the next thing to it. The chances of us ever seeing him again were remote, and Jamie knew it; the wilderness had swallowed him.

Jamie touched the ratty paper gently, tracing the round, still-childish letters. He’d told Jenny what the note said, I knew—but I also knew why he hadn’t sent the original before. It was the only physical link with Ian; to give it up was in some final way to relinquish him to the Mohawk.

“Ave!” said the note, in Ian’s half-formed writing. *“Ian salutat avunculus Jacobus.”* Ian salutes his uncle James.

Ian was more to Jamie than one of his nephews. Much as he loved all of Jenny’s children, Ian was special—a foster-son, like Fergus; but unlike Fergus, a son of Jamie’s blood, replacement in a way for the son he had lost. That son wasn’t dead, either, but could not ever be claimed. The world seemed suddenly full of lost children.

“Yes,” I said, my throat tight. “I think you should send it. Jenny should have it, even if …” I coughed, reminded suddenly by the note of the casebook. I reached for it, hoping it would distract him.

“Um. Speaking of Latin … there’s an odd bit in here. Could you have a look at it, perhaps?”

"Aye, of course." He set Ian's note aside and took the book from me, moving it so the last of the afternoon sun fell across the page. He frowned slightly, a finger tracing the lines of writing.

"Christ, the man's no more grasp of Latin grammar than ye have yourself, Sassenach."

"Oh, thanks. We can't all be scholars now, can we?" I moved closer, peering over his shoulder as he read. I'd been right, then; Rawlings didn't drop casually into Latin for the fun of it, or merely to show off his erudition.

"An oddity …" Jamie said, translating slowly as his finger moved across the page. "I am awake—no, he means 'I was wakened,' I think—by sounds in the chamber adjoining that where I lay. I am thinking—'I thought'—that my patient went to make water, and am risen to follow … Why should he do that, I wonder?"

"The patient—it's Hector Cameron, by the way—had a problem with his bladder. Rawlings would have wanted to watch him urinate, to see what sort of difficulty he had, whether he had pain, or blood in the urine, that sort of thing."

Jamie gave me a side-long glance, one brow raised, then shook his head and returned to the casebook, murmuring something about the peculiar tastes of physicians.

"*Homo prodediente* … the man proceeds … Why does he call him 'the man,' rather than his name?"

"He was writing in Latin to be secret," I said, impatient to hear what came next. "If Cameron saw his name in the book, he'd be curious, I expect. What happened?"

"The man goes out—outdoors, does he mean, or only out of his chamber?—outdoors, it must be … goes out, and I follow. He walks steadily, quickly … Why should he not? Oh, here—I am puzzled. I give—have given—the man twelve grains of laudanum …"

"Twelve *grains*? Are you sure that's what he says?" I leaned over Jamie's arm, peering, but sure enough—he pointed to the entry, inscribed in clear black and white. "But that's enough laudanum to fell a horse!"

"Aye, 'twelve grains of laudanum to assist sleep,' he says. No wonder the doctor was puzzled, then, to see Cameron scampering about the lawn in the middle of the night."

I nudged him with an elbow.

"Get on!"

"Mmphm. Well, he says he went to the necessary house—no doubt thinking to find Cameron—but no one was there, and there wasna any smell of … er … he didna think anyone had been there recently."

"You needn't be delicate on my account," I said.

"I know," he said, grinning. "But my own sensibilities are no quite coarsened yet, in spite of my long association with you, Sassenach. Ow!" He jerked away, rubbing his arm where I had pinched him. I lowered my brows and gave him a stare, though inwardly pleased to have lightened the mood for both of us.

"Less about your sensibilities, *if* you please," I said, tapping my foot. "Besides, you haven't got any in the first place, or you'd never have married me. Where was Cameron, then?"

He scanned the page, lips silently forming words.

"He doesna ken. He prowled about the place until the butler popped out of his wee hole, thinking him a marauder of some sort, and threatened him wi' a bottle of whisky."

"A formidable weapon, that," I observed, smiling at the thought of a nightcapped Ulysses, brandishing his implement of destruction. "How do you say 'bottle of whisky' in Latin?"

Jamie gave the page a glance.

"*He* says *'aqua vitae,'* which is doubtless as close as he could manage. It must have been whisky, though; he says the butler gave him a dram to cure the shock."

"So he never found Cameron?"

"Aye, he did, after he left Ulysses. Tucked up in his wee white bed, snoring. Next morning, he asked, but Cameron didna recall getting up in the night." He flipped the page over with one finger and glanced at me. "Would the laudanum keep him from remembering?"

"It could do," I said, frowning. "Easily. But it's simply incredible that anyone with that much laudanum in him could have been up marching round in the first place … unless …" I cocked a brow at him, recalling Jocasta's remarks during our discussion at River Run. "Any chance your Uncle Hector was an opium-eater or the like? Someone who took a great deal of laudanum by habit would have a tolerance for it, and might not be really affected by Rawlings' dose."

Never one to be shocked by any intimation of depravity among his relatives, Jamie considered the suggestion, but finally shook his head.

"If so, I've heard naught of it. But then," he added logically, "there's no reason anyone would tell me so."

That was true enough. If Hector Cameron had had the means to indulge in imported narcotics—and he certainly had, River Run being one of the most prosperous plantations in the area—then it would have been no one's business save his own. Still, I did think someone might have mentioned it.

Jamie's mind was running on other lines.

"Why would a man leave his house in dead of night to piss, Sassenach?" he asked. "I *know* Hector Cameron had a chamber pot; I've used it myself. It had his name and the Cameron badge painted on the bottom."

"Excellent question." I stared down at the page of cryptic scratchings. "If Hector Cameron was having great pain or difficulty—passing a kidney stone, for example—I suppose he might have gone out, to avoid waking the house."

"I havena heard my uncle was an opium-eater, but I havena heard he was ower-mindful of his wife or servants' convenience, either," Jamie observed, rather cynically. "From all accounts, Hector Cameron was a bit of a bastard."

I laughed.

"No doubt that's why your aunt finds Duncan so congenial."

Adso wandered in, the remains of the dragonfly in his mouth, and sat down at my feet so I could admire his prize.

"Fine," I told him, with a cursory pat. "Don't spoil your appetite, though; there are a lot of cockroaches in the pantry that I want you to deal with."

"Ecce homo," Jamie murmured thoughtfully, tapping a finger on the casebook. "A French homo, do you think?"

"A what?" I stared at him.

"Does it not occur to ye, Sassenach, that perhaps it wasna Cameron that the doctor followed outside?"

"Not 'til this minute, no." I leaned forward and peered at the page. "Why ought it to be anyone else, though, let alone a Frenchman?"

Jamie pointed to the edge of the page, where there were a few small drawings; doodles, I'd thought. The one under his finger was a fleur-de-lis.

"*Ecce homo*," he said again, tapping it. "The doctor wasna easy in his mind about the man he followed—that's why he didna call him by name. If Cameron were drugged, then it was someone else who left the house that night—yet he doesna speak of anyone else who was present."

"But he might not mention it, unless he'd examined whoever it was," I argued. "He does put in personal notes, but most of this is strictly his case histories; his observations of his patients and the treatments he was administering. But still …" I frowned at the page. "A fleur-de-lis scribbled in the margin doesn't necessarily mean anything at all, let alone that there was a Frenchman there." Save Fergus, Frenchmen were not at all common in North Carolina. There were some French settlements south of Savannah, I knew—but that was hundreds of miles away.

The fleur-de-lis *could* be nothing more than a random doodle—and yet, Rawlings hadn't made such scribbles anywhere else in his book that I recalled. When he added drawings, they were careful and to the point, intended as a reminder to himself, or as a guide to any physician who should come after him.

Above the fleur-de-lis was a figure that looked rather like a triangle with a small circle at the apex and a curved base; below it was a sequence of letters. *Au et Aq.*

"A … u," I said slowly, looking at that. "Aurum."

"Gold?" Jamie glanced up at me, surprised. I nodded.

"It's the scientific abbreviation for gold, yes. 'Aurum et aqua.' Gold and water—I suppose he means *goldwasser*, bits of gold flake suspended in an aqueous solution. It's a remedy for arthritis—oddly enough, it often works, though no one knows why."

"Expensive," Jamie observed. "Though I suppose Cameron could afford it—perhaps he saved an ounce or two of his gold bars, eh?"

"He did say Cameron suffered from arthritis." I frowned at the page and its cryptic marginalia. "Maybe he meant to advise the use of *goldwasser* for the condition. But I don't know about the fleur-de-lis or that other thing—" I pointed at it. "It's not the symbol for any medical treatment *I* know of."

To my surprise, Jamie laughed.

"I shouldna think so, Sassenach. It's a Freemason's compass."

"It is?" I blinked at it, then glanced at Jamie. "Was Cameron a Mason?"

He shrugged, running a hand through his hair. Jamie never spoke of his own association with the Freemasons. He had been "made," as the saying went, in Ardsmuir, and beyond any secrecy imposed by membership in the society, he seldom spoke of anything that had happened between those dank stone walls.

"Rawlings must have been one as well," he said, clearly reluctant to talk about Freemasonry, but unable to keep from making logical connections. "Else he'd not have kent what that is." One long finger tapped the sign of the compass.

I didn't know quite what to say next, but was saved from indecision by Adso, who spit out a pair of amber wings, and sprang up onto the desk in search of more hors d'oeuvres. Jamie made a grab for the inkwell with one hand, and seized his new quill protectively in the other. Deprived of prey, Adso strolled to the edge of the desk and sat on the stack of Jamie's letters, tail waving gently as he pretended to admire the view.

Jamie's eyes narrowed at this insolence.

"Take your furry wee arse off of my correspondence, beast," he said, poking at Adso with the sharp end of his quill. Adso's big green eyes widened as they fixed on the tip of the moving feather, and his shoulder blades tensed in anticipation. Jamie twiddled the quill tantalizingly, and Adso made an abortive swipe at it with one paw.

I seized the cat hastily before mayhem could ensue, lifting him off the papers with a surprised and indignant *mirp!* of protest.

"No, that's *his* toy," I said to the cat, and gave Jamie a reproving look. "Come along now; there are cockroaches to attend to."

I reached for the casebook with my free hand, but to my surprise, Jamie stopped me.

"Let me keep it a bit longer, Sassenach," he said. "There's something verra odd about the notion of a French Freemason wandering River Run by night. I should like to see what else Dr. Rawlings might have to say when he's speaking Latin."

"All right." I hoisted Adso, who had begun to purr loudly in anticipation of cockroaches, to my shoulder, and glanced out the window. The sun had set to a burning glow beyond the chestnut trees, and I could hear the noise of women and children in the kitchen; Mrs. Bug was starting to lay the supper, helped by Brianna and Marsali.

"Dinner soon," I said, and bent to kiss the top of Jamie's head, where the last of the light touched his crown with fire. He smiled and touched his fingers to his lips and then to me, but he had already gone back to a perusal of the close-written pages by the time I reached the door. The single sheet with its three black words lay at the edge of the desk, forgotten—for the moment.

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CONDITIONS OF THE BLOOD

I caught a flash of brown outside the door, and Adso shot off the counter as though someone had shouted “Fish!” The next best thing, evidently; it was Lizzie, on her way back from the dairy shed, a bowl of clotted cream in one hand, a butter dish in the other, and a large jug of milk pressed to her bosom, precariously held in place by her crossed wrists. Adso was twining round her ankles like a furry rope, in obvious hopes of tripping her up and making her drop the booty.

“Think again, cat,” I told him, reaching to rescue the milk jug.

“Oh, thank ye, ma’am.” Lizzie relaxed, easing her shoulders with a little sigh. “It’s only as I didna want to be making two trips.” She sniffed and tried to wipe her nose with a forearm, imperiling the butter.

I snatched a handkerchief from my pocket and applied it, repressing the maternal impulse to say, “Now, blow.”

“Thank ye, ma’am,” she repeated, bobbing.

“Are you quite well, Lizzie?” Without waiting for an answer, I took her by the arm and towed her into my surgery, where the large windows gave me light enough to see by.

“I’m well enough, ma’am. Truly, I’m fine!” she protested, clutching the cream and butter to her as though for protection.

She was pale—but Lizzie was always pale, looking as though she had not a corpuscle to spare. There was an odd pallid look to her skin, though, that gave me an uneasy feeling. It had been nearly a year since her last attack of malarial fever, and she did seem generally well, but …

“Come here,” I said, drawing her toward a pair of high stools. “Have a seat, just for a moment.”

Clearly unwilling, but not daring to protest, she sat down, balancing the dishes on her knees. I took them from her and—after a glance at Adso’s unblinkingly predatory green gaze—put them in the cupboard for safekeeping.

Pulse normal—normal for Lizzie, that is; she tended always to be a trifle fast and shallow. Breathing … all right, no catch or wheezing. The lymph glands under the jaw were palpable, but that was not unusual; the malaria had left them permanently enlarged, like the curve of a quail’s egg under the tender skin. Those in the neck were enlarged now, too, though—and those I generally could *not* feel.

I thumbed an eyelid up, peering closely at the pale gray orb that looked anxiously back. Superficially fine, though slightly bloodshot. Again, though—there was something not quite … right … about her eyes, though I couldn’t put my finger on what that something might be. Could there possibly be a tinge of yellow to the white? I frowned, turning her head to the side with a hand under her unresisting chin.

“Hullo, there. Everything all right?” Roger paused in the doorway, a very large, very dead bird held nonchalantly in one hand.

“A turkey!” I exclaimed, summoning a warm note of admiration. I liked turkeys, all right, but Jamie and Bree had killed five of the enormous birds the week before, introducing a certain note of monotony into dinner of late. Three of the things were hanging in the smoking shed at the moment. On the other hand, wild turkeys were wily and difficult to kill, and so far as I knew, Roger had never managed to bag one before.

“Did you shoot it yourself?” I asked, coming dutifully to admire the thing. He held it by the feet, and the big cupped wings flapped halfway open, the breast-feathers catching sunlight in iridescent patterns of blackish green.

“No.” Roger’s face was flushed, from sun, excitement or both, a warm hue spreading under the tanned skin. “I ran it down,” he said proudly. “Hit it in the wing with a stone, then chased it and broke its neck.”

“Wonderful,” I said, with somewhat more genuine enthusiasm. We wouldn’t have to pick buckshot out of the flesh while cleaning it, or risk breaking a tooth in the eating.

“It’s a lovely bird, Mr. Mac.” Lizzie had slid off her stool and come to admire it, too. “Such a fat one as it is! Will I take it and clean it for ye, then?”

“What? Oh, thanks, Lizzie, no—I’ll, um, take care of it.” The color rose a little higher under his skin, and I suppressed a smile. He meant he wanted to show off his catch to Brianna, in all its glory. He shifted the bird to his left hand, and held out the right to me, wrapped in a bloodstained cloth.

“I had a bit of an accident, wrestling the bird. Do you think perhaps …?”

I unwrapped the cloth, pursing my lips at what lay underneath. The turkey, fighting for its life, had ripped three jagged gashes across the back of his hand with its claws. The blood had mostly clotted, but fresh drops welled up from the deepest puncture, rolling down his finger to drip on the floor.

“Oh, just a bit,” I said, glancing up at him with eyebrows raised. “Yes, I do think perhaps. Come over here and sit down. I’ll clean it, and—Lizzie! Wait a moment!”

Lizzie, seizing the distraction as an opportunity to escape, was sidling toward the door. She stopped as though shot in the back.

“Really, ma’am, I’m quite all right,” she pleaded. “Nothing’s wrong, really there isn’t.”

In fact, I had stopped her only to remind her to retrieve the butter and cream from the cupboard. Too late for the milk; Adso stood on his hind legs, head and shoulders stuck completely into the mouth of the jug, from which came small lapping noises. The sound of it echoed the small splat of Roger’s blood dripping on the floor, though, and gave me a sudden thought.

“I’ve had an idea,” I said. “Sit down again, Lizzie—I want just a tiny bit of your blood.”

Lizzie looked like a field mouse that has suddenly looked up from its crumb to discover itself in the midst of a meeting of barn owls, but she wasn't the sort to defy an order from anyone. Very reluctantly, she climbed back onto the stool beside Roger, who had laid his turkey on the floor beside him.

"Why do you want blood?" he asked, interested. "You can have all ye want of mine, for free." Grinning, he lifted the injured hand.

"A generous offer," I said, laying out a linen cloth and a handful of clean glass rectangles. "But you haven't had malaria, have you?" I plucked Adso out of the milk jug by the scruff of the neck and dropped him on the floor, before reaching into the cupboard above.

"Not so far as I know." Roger was watching my preparations, deeply interested.

Lizzie gave a small, forlorn sound of mirth.

"Ye'd ken it well enough if ye had, sir."

"I suppose I would." He gave her a look of sympathy. "Very nasty, from all I hear."

"It is that. Your bones ache so ye think they've all broken inside ye, and your eyes flame like a demon's. Then the sweat pours off your skin in rivers, and the chills come on, fit to crack your teeth with the chatterin' …" She hunched into herself, shuddering at the memory. "I did think it was gone, though," she said, glancing uneasily at the lancet I was sterilizing in the flame of my alcohol lamp.

"I hope it is," I said, frowning at the tiny blade. I picked up a small cloth and the blue glass bottle that held my distilled alcohol, and thoroughly cleaned the tip of her middle finger. "Some people never have another attack after the first, and I do hope you're one of them, Lizzie. But for most people, it does come back now and then. I'm trying to find out whether yours might be coming back. Ready?"

Without waiting for her nod, I jabbed the lancet swiftly through the skin, then set it down and snatched up a glass slide. I squeezed the fingertip, dotting generous blood drops on each of three slides, then wrapped the cloth round her finger and let go.

Working swiftly, I took up a clean slide and laid it over a blood-drop, then drew it quickly away, smearing the blood thinly across the original slide. Again, and a third, and I laid them down to dry.

"That's all, then, Lizzie," I told her with a smile. "It will take a bit of preparation before these are ready to look at. When they are, I'll call you, shall I?"

"Oh … no, that's quite all right, ma'am," she murmured, sliding off the high stool with a fearful look at the blood-smeared slides. "I dinna need to see." She set down the discarded cloth, brushed at her apron, and scampered out of the room—forgetting the butter and cream, after all.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," I apologized to Roger. "I just thought …" I reached into the cupboard, withdrew three small earthenware pots, and uncorked them.

"Not a problem," he assured me. He watched with fascination as I checked each slide to be sure the blood-smear was dry, then slid a bit of glass into each of the pots.

"All right, then." Now I could turn my attention to cleaning and dressing his hand—a straightforward-enough process. "Not so bad as I thought," I murmured, wiping caked blood off his knuckles. "It bled quite a bit, which is good."

"Aye, if you say so." He didn't flinch at all, but carefully kept his face turned away from what I was doing, his attention focused out the window.

"Washes out the wounds," I explained, dabbing with alcohol. "I needn't swab so deeply to clean them."

He drew in his breath with a sharp hiss, then, to distract himself, nodded at the pots where the slides were soaking.

"Speaking of blood, what are you doing with Mistress Mousie's?"

"Trying something. I don't know whether it will work or not, but I've made up some experimental stains, using extracts from some of the dyeing-plants. If any of them work on blood, I'll be able to see the red cells clearly under the microscope—and what's in them." I spoke with a mixture of hope and tentative excitement.

Trying to duplicate cellular stains with the materials I had at hand was a long shot—but not totally unfeasible. I had the ordinary solvents—alcohol, water, turpentine and its distillates—and I had a great range of plant pigments to try, from indigo to rosehips, along with a good working knowledge of their dyeing properties.

I hadn't any crystal violet or carbofuchsin, but I had been able to produce a reddish stain that made epithelial cells highly visible, if only temporarily. It remained to be seen whether the same stain would work on red blood cells and their inclusions, or whether I should need to try differential staining.

"What *is* in them?" Roger turned to look at me, interested.

"Plasmodium vivax," I said. "The protozoan that causes malaria."

"You can *see* it? I thought germs were much too small to see, even under a microscope!"

"You're as bad as Jamie," I said tolerantly. "Though I do love to hear a Scotsman say 'gerrrms.' Such a sinister word, spoken in a deep voice with that rolling 'r,' you know."

Roger laughed. The hanging had destroyed much of the power of his voice, but the lower, harsher registers remained.

"Nearly as good as murrrrderr," he said, rumbling like a cement mixer.

"Oh, nothing's as good as 'murrrderr' to a Scot," I assured him. "Bloody-minded blokes that you all are."

"What, all of us?" He grinned, plainly not minding this gross generalization in the least.

"To a man," I assured him. "Mild enough to look at, but insult a Scot or trouble his family, and it's up wi' the bonnets of bonnie Dundee. All the blue bonnets are over the border, and next thing you know, it's lances and swords all over the Haughs of Cromdale."

"Remarkable," he murmured, eyeing me. "And you've been married to one for …"

"Quite long enough." I finished my sponging and rinsing and blotted the back of his hand, small red patches soaking into the fresh gauze. "Speaking of bloody men," I added casually, "do you happen to know your own blood type?"

One dark brow went up at that. Well, I didn't mean to slip it by him, after all; I'd only wanted a way to broach the question.

"Yes," he said slowly, "I do. It's O-positive."

The dark green eyes were fixed on mine, steady with interest.

"Very interesting," I said. I replaced the gauze square with a fresh one, and started winding a bandage around it.

"Just *how* interesting is it?" he asked. I glanced at him, and met his eyes.

"Moderately." I drew out the slides, dripping pink and blue dyes. One slide I propped against the milk jug to dry, the other two I exchanged, putting the pink slide into the blue stain, and vice-versa.

"There are three main blood groups," I said, blowing gently on the propped-up slide. "More really, but those three are the ones everyone knows about. It's called the ABO grouping, and everyone is said to have type A, type B, or type O blood. The thing is, like all your other traits, it's determined genetically, and—human beings being heterosexual, generally speaking—you have one half your genes for any trait from one parent, the other half from the other."

"I dimly recall that bit from school," Roger said dryly. "All those bloody charts—excuse me—about hemophilia in the Royal Family, and the like. I assume it has a certain amount of personal significance now, though?"

"I don't know," I said. "It might have." The pink slide looked dry; I laid it gently on the stage of the microscope and bent to adjust the mirror.

"The thing is," I said, squinting through the eyepiece as I twiddled the focusing knob, "those blood groups are to do with antibodies—little odd-shaped things on the surfaces of blood cells. That is, people who are type A have one sort of antibody on their cells, people with type B have a different sort, and people with type O don't have any at all."

The red blood cells showed up suddenly, faintly stained, like round pink ghosts. Here and there a blotch of darker pink indicated what might be a bit of cellular debris, or perhaps one of the larger white blood cells. Not much else, though.

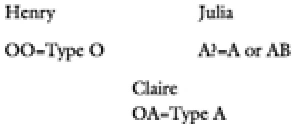
"So," I went on, lifting the other two slides from their baths, "if one of his parents gave a child the gene for type O blood, and the other gave him one for type A, the child's blood will show up as type A, because it's the antibodies that are tested for. The child does still *have* the gene for type O, though."

I waved one of the slides gently in the air, drying it.

“My blood type is A. Now, I happen to know that my father’s blood was type O. In order to show up with type O blood, that means that both his genes must have been for O. So whichever of those genes he gave me, it has to have been for O. The A gene therefore came from my mother.”

Seeing a familiar glaze come over his features, I sighed and set the slide down. Bree had been drawing pictures of penicillin spores for me, and had left her pad and graphite pencil by the microscope. I took it and flipped to a fresh page.

“Look,” I said, and drew a quick chart.



Henry
OO–Type O

Julia
A?–A or AB

Claire
OA–Type A

“Do you see?” I pointed with the stick of graphite. “I don’t know my mother’s type for sure, but it doesn’t matter; for me to have type A blood, she must have given me her gene for it, because my father hadn’t one.”

The next slide was nearly dry; I laid down the pencil, put the slide in place, and bent to look through the eyepiece.

“Can you see blood types—these antibodies—through a microscope?” Roger was quite close behind me.

“No,” I said, not looking up. “The resolution’s nowhere near good enough. But you can see other things—I hope.” I moved the knob a fraction of an inch, and the cells sprang into focus. I let out the breath I had been holding, and a small thrill went through me. There they were; the disc-shaped pinkish blobs of the red blood cells—and here and there, inside a few of the cells, a darkish blob, some rounded, some looking like miniature nine-pins. My heart thumped with excitement, and I made a small exclamation of delight.

“Come look,” I said, and stood aside. Roger bent, looking quizzical.

“What am I looking at?” he asked, squinting.

"Plasmodium vivax," I said proudly. "Malaria. The small dark blobs inside the cells." The rounded blobs were the protozoans, the single-celled creatures transferred to the blood in a mosquito's bite. The few that looked like bowling pins—those were protozoa in the act of budding, getting ready to reproduce themselves.

"When they bud," I explained, bending for another look myself, "they multiply until they burst the blood cell, and then they move into new blood cells, multiply, and burst those, too—that's when the patient suffers a malarial attack, with the fever and chills. When the *Plasmodium* are dormant—not multiplying—the patient is all right."

"And what makes them multiply?" Roger was fascinated.

"No one knows, exactly." I drew a deep breath, and corked up my bottles of stain again. "But you can check, to see what's happening, if they *are* multiplying. No one can live on quinine, or even take it for a long period—Jesuit bark is too expensive, and I don't know what the long-term effects on the body might be. And you can't touch most protozoans with penicillin, unfortunately.

"But I'll check Lizzie's blood every few days; if I see the *Plasmodium* increasing sharply, then I'll start giving her the quinine at once. With luck, that might prevent an outbreak. Worth a try, certainly."

He nodded, looking at the microscope and the pink-and-blue-splotched slide.

"Well worth it," he said quietly.

He watched me move about, tidying up the small debris of my operations. As I bent to retrieve the bloody cloth in which he'd wrapped his hand, he asked, "And you know Bree's blood type, of course?"

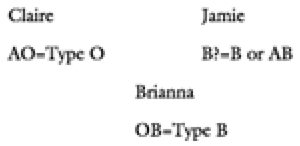
"Type B," I said, eyes on the box of bandages. "Quite rare, particularly for a white person. You see it mostly in small, rather isolated populations—some Indian tribes in the American Southwest, certain black populations; probably they came from a specific area of Africa, but of course by the time blood groups were discovered, that connection had been long lost."

"Small, isolated populations. Scottish Highlanders, perhaps?"

I lifted my eyes.

“Perhaps.”

He nodded silently, clearly thinking to himself. Then he picked up the pencil, and slowly drew a small chart of his own on the pad.



“That’s right,” I said, nodding as he looked up at me in question. “Exactly right.”

He gave me a small, wry smile in response, then dropped his eyes, studying the charts.

“Can you tell, then?” he asked finally, not looking up. “For sure?”

“No,” I said, and dropped the cloth into the laundry basket with a small sigh. “Or rather—I can’t tell for sure whether Jemmy is yours. I *might* be able to tell for sure if he’s not.”

The flush had faded from his skin.

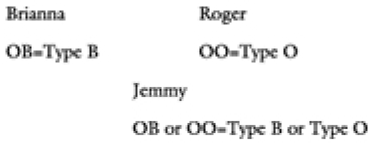
“How’s that?”

“Bree is type B, but I’m type A. That means she’ll have a gene for B *and* my gene for O, either of which she might have given Jemmy. You could only have given him a gene for type O, because that’s all you have.”

I nodded at a small rack of tubes near the window, the serum in them glowing brownish-gold in the late afternoon sun.

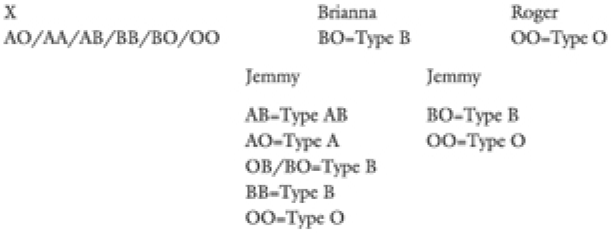
“So. If Bree gave him an O gene, and you—his father—gave him an O gene, he’d show up as type O—his blood won’t have any antibodies, and won’t react with serum from my blood or from Jamie’s or Bree’s. If Bree gave him her B gene, and you gave him an O, he’d show up as type B—his blood would react with my serum, but not Bree’s. In either case, you might be the father—but so might anyone with type-O blood. IF, however—”

I took a deep breath, and picked up the pencil from the spot where Roger had laid it down. I drew slowly as I talked, illustrating the possibilities.



Brianna
OB=Type B
Roger
OO=Type O
Jemmy
OB or OO=Type B or Type O

"But"—I tapped the pencil on the paper—"if Jemmy were to show as type A or type AB—then his father was not homozygous for type O—homozygous means both genes are the same—and you are." I wrote in the alternatives, to the left of my previous entry.



X
AO/AA/AB/BB/BO/OO
Brianna
BO=Type B
Roger
OO=Type O
Jemmy
AB=Type AB
AO=Type A
OB/BO=Type B
BB=Type B
OO=Type O
Jemmy
BO=Type B
OO=Type O

I saw Roger's eyes flick toward that "X," and wondered what had made me write it that way. It wasn't as though the contender for Jemmy's paternity could be just anyone, after all. Still, I could not bring myself to write "Bonnet"—perhaps it was simple superstition; perhaps just a desire to keep the thought of the man at a safe distance.

"Bear in mind," I said, a little apologetically, "that type O is very common, in the population at large."

Roger grunted, and sat regarding the chart, eyes hooded in thought.

"So," he said at last. "If he's type O or type B, he may be mine, but not for sure. If he's type A or type AB, he's not mine—for sure."

One finger rubbed slowly back and forth over the fresh bandage on his hand.

"It's a very crude test," I said, swallowing. "I can't—I mean, there's always the possibility of a mistake in the test itself."

He nodded, not looking up.

"You told Bree this?" he asked softly.

"Of course. She said she doesn't want to know—but that if you did, I was to make the test."

I saw him swallow, once, and his hand lifted momentarily to the scar across his throat. His eyes were fixed on the scrubbed planks of the floor, hardly blinking.

I turned away, to give him a moment's privacy, and bent over the microscope. I would have to make a grid, I thought—a counting grid that I could lay across a slide, to help me estimate the relative density of the *Plasmodium*-infected cells. For the moment, though, a crude eyeball count would have to do.

It occurred to me that now that I had a workable stain, I ought to test the blood of others on the Ridge—those in the household, for starters. Mosquitoes were much rarer in the mountains than near the coast, but there were still plenty, and while Lizzie might be well herself, she was still a sink of potential infection.

"… four, five, six …" I was counting infected cells under my breath, trying to ignore both Roger on his stool behind me, and the sudden memory that had popped up, unbidden, when I told him Brianna's blood type.

She had had her tonsils removed at the age of seven. I still recalled the sight of the doctor, frowning at the chart he held—the chart that listed her blood type, and those of both her parents. Frank had been type A, like me. And two type-A parents could not, under any circumstances, produce a type B child.

The doctor had looked up, glancing from me to Frank and back, his face twisted with embarrassment—and his eyes filled with a kind of cold speculation as he looked at me. I might as well have worn a scarlet "A" embroidered on my bosom, I thought—or in this case, a scarlet "B."

Frank, bless him, had seen the look, and said easily, "My wife was a widow; I adopted Bree as a baby." The doctor's face had thawed at once into apologetic reassurance, and Frank had gripped my hand, hard, behind the folds of my skirt. My hand tightened in remembered acknowledgment, squeezing back—and the slide tilted suddenly, leaving me staring into blank and blurry glass.

There was a sound behind me, as Roger stood up. I turned round, and he smiled at me, eyes dark and soft as moss.

"The blood doesn't matter," he said quietly. "He's my son."

“Yes,” I said, and my own throat felt tight. “I know.”

A loud crack broke the momentary silence, and I looked down, startled. A puff of turkey-feathers drifted past my foot, and Adso, discovered in the act, rushed out of the surgery, the huge fan of a severed wing-joint clutched in his mouth.

“You *bloody* cat!” I said.

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CLEVER LAD

A cold wind blew from the east tonight; Roger could hear the steady whine of it past the mud-chinked wall near his head, and the lash and creak of the wind-tossed trees beyond the house. A sudden gust struck the oiled hide tacked over the window; it bellied in with a *crack!* and popped loose at one side, the whooshing draft sending papers scudding off the table and bending the candle flame sideways at an alarming angle.

Roger moved the candle hastily out of harm's way, and pressed the hide flat with the palm of his hand, glancing over his shoulder to see if his wife and son had been awakened by the noise. A kitchen-rag stirred on its nail by the hearth, and the skin of his bodhran thrummed faintly as the draft passed by. A sudden tongue of fire sprang up from the banked hearth, and he saw Brianna stir as the cold air brushed her cheek.

She merely snuggled deeper into the quilts, though, a few loose red hairs glimmering as they lifted in the draft. The trundle where Jemmy now slept was sheltered by the big bed; there was no sound from that corner of the room.

Roger let out the breath he had been holding, and rummaged briefly in the horn dish that held bits of useful rubbish, coming up with a spare tack. He hammered it home with the heel of his hand, muffling the draft to a small, cold seep, then bent to retrieve his fallen papers.

"O will ye let Telfer's kye gae back?
Or will ye do aught for regard o' me?"

He repeated the words in his mind as he wiped the half-dried ink from his quill, hearing the words in Kimmie Clellan's cracked old voice.

It was a song called "Jamie Telfer of the Fair Dodhead"—one of the ancient reiving ballads that went on for dozens of verses, and had dozens of regional variations, all involving the attempts of Telfer, a Borderer, to revenge an attack upon his home by calling upon the help of friends and kin. Roger knew three of the variations, but Clellan had had another—with a completely new subplot involving Telfer's cousin Willie.

"Or by the faith of my body, quo' Willie Scott.
I'se ware my dame's calfskin on thee!"

Kimmie sang to pass the time of an evening by himself, he had told Roger, or to entertain the hosts whose fire he shared. He remembered all the songs of his Scottish youth, and was pleased to sing them as many times as anyone cared to listen, so long as his throat was kept wet enough to float a tune.

The rest of the company at the big house had enjoyed two or three renditions of Clellan's repertoire, began to yawn and blink through the fourth, and finally had mumbled excuses and staggered glazen-eyed off to bed—*en masse*—leaving Roger to ply the old man with more whisky and urge him to another repetition, until the words were safely committed to memory.

Memory was a chancy thing, though, subject to random losses and unconscious conjectures that took the place of fact. Much safer to commit important things to paper.

"I winna let the kye gae back,
Neither for thy love, nor yet thy fear …"

The quill scratched gently, capturing the words one by one, pinned like fireflies to the page. It was very late, and Roger's muscles were cramped with chill and long sitting, but he was determined to get all the new verses down, while they were fresh in his mind. Clellan might go off in the morning to be eaten by a bear or killed by falling rocks, but Telfer's cousin Willie would live on.

"But I will drive Jamie Telfer's kye,
In spite of every Scot that's …"

The candle made a brief sputtering noise as the flame struck a fault in the wick. The light that fell across the paper shook and wavered, and the letters faded abruptly into shadow as the candle flame shrank from a finger of light to a glowing blue dwarf, like the sudden death of a miniature sun.

Roger dropped his quill, and seized the pottery candlestick with a muffled curse. He blew on the wick, puffing gently, in hopes of reviving the flame.

"But Willie was stricken owre the head," he murmured to himself, repeating the words between puffs, to keep them fresh. *"But Willie was stricken owre the head/And through the knapscap the sword has gane/And Harden grat for very rage/When Willie on the grund lay slain … When Willie on the grund lay slain …"*

A ragged corona of orange rose briefly, feeding on his breath, but then dwindled steadily away despite continued puffing, winking out into a dot of incandescent red that glowed mockingly for a second or two before disappearing altogether, leaving no more than a wisp of white smoke in the half-dark room, and the scent of hot beeswax in his nose.

He repeated the curse, somewhat louder. Brianna stirred in the bed, and he heard the corn shucks squeak as she lifted her head with a noise of groggy inquiry.

"It's all right," he said in a hoarse whisper, with an uneasy glance at the trundle in the corner. "The candle's gone out. Go back to sleep."

But Willie was stricken owre the head …

"Ngm." A plop and sigh, as her head struck the goose-down pillow again.

Like clockwork, Jemmy's head rose from his own nest of blankets, his nimbus of fiery fluff silhouetted against the hearth's dull glow.

He made a sound of confused urgency, not quite a cry, and before Roger could stir, Brianna had shot out of bed like a guided missile, snatching the boy from his quilt and fumbling one-handed with his clothing.

"Pot!" she snapped at Roger, poking blindly backward with one bare foot as she grappled with Jemmy's clothes. "Find the chamber pot! Just a minute, sweetie," she cooed to Jemmy, in an abrupt change of tone. "Wait juuuuust a minute, now …"

Impelled to instant obedience by her tone of urgency, Roger dropped to his knees, sweeping an arm in search through the black hole under the bed.

Willie was stricken owre the head … And through the … kneecap? nobskull? Overwhelmed by the situation, some remote bastion of memory clung stubbornly to the song, singing in his inner ear. Only the melody, though—the words were fading fast.

"Here!" He found the earthenware pot, accidentally struck the leg of the bed with it—thank Christ, it didn't break!—and bowled it across the floor to Bree.

She clapped the now-naked Jemmy down onto it with an exclamation of satisfaction, and Roger was left to grope about in the semi-dark for his fallen candle while she murmured encouragements.

"OK, sweetie, yes, that's right …"

Willie was struck about … no, stricken …

He found the candle, luckily uncracked, and sidled carefully round the drama in progress to kneel and relight the charred wick from the embers of the fire. While he was at it, he poked up the embers and added a fresh stick of wood. The fire revived, illuminating Jemmy, who was making what looked like a very successful effort to go back to sleep, in spite of his position and his mother's urging.

"Don't you need to go potty?" she was saying, shaking his shoulder gently.

"Go potty?" Roger said, this curious locution pushing the remnants of the verse from his mind. "What do you mean, *go* potty?" It was his personal opinion, based on current experience as a father, that small children were *born* potty, and improved very slowly thereafter. He said as much, causing Brianna to give him a remarkably dirty look.

"What?" she said, in an edgy tone. "What do you mean, they're born potty?" She had one hand on Jemmy's shoulder, balancing him, while the other cupped his round little belly, an index finger disappearing into the shadows below to direct his aim.

"Potty," Roger explained, with a brief circular gesture at his temple in illustration. "You know, barmy. Daft."

She opened her mouth to say something in reply to this, but Jemmy swayed alarmingly, his head sagging forward.

"No, no!" she said, taking a fresh grip. "Wake up, honey! Wake up and go potty!"

The insidious term had somehow taken up residence in Roger's mind, and was merrily replacing half the fading words of the verse he had been trying to recapture.

Willie sat upon his pot/The sword to potty gane …

He shook his head, as though to dislodge it, but it was too late—the real words had fled. Resigned, he gave it up as a bad job and crouched down next to Brianna to help.

"Wake up, chum. There's work to be done." He drew a finger gently under Jemmy's chin, then blew in his ear, ruffling the silky red tendrils that clung to the child's temple, still damp with sleep-sweat.

Jemmy's eyelids cracked in a slit-eyed glower. He looked like a small pink mole, cruelly excavated from its cozy burrow and peering balefully at an inhospitable upper world.

Brianna yawned widely, and shook her head, blinking and scowling in the candlelight.

"Well, if you don't like 'go potty,' what do you say in Scotland, then?" she demanded crabbily.

Roger moved the tickling finger to Jem's navel.

"Ah … I seem to recall a friend asking his wee son if he needed to do a poo," he offered. Brianna made a rude noise, but Jemmy's eyelids flickered.

"Poo," he said dreamily, liking the sound.

"Right, that's the idea," Roger said encouragingly. His finger twiddled gently in the slight depression, and Jemmy gave the ghost of a giggle, beginning to wake up.

"Pooooooo," he said. "Poopoo."

"Whatever works," Brianna said, still cross, but resigned. "Go potty, go poo—just get it over with, all right? Mummy wants to go to sleep."

"Perhaps you should take your finger off of his … mmphm?" Roger nodded toward the object in question. "You'll give the poor lad a complex or something."

"Fine." Bree took her hand away with alacrity, and the stubby object sprang back up, pointing directly at Roger over the rim of the pot.

"Hey! Now, just a min—" he began, and got his hand up as a shield just in time.

"Poo," Jemmy said, beaming in drowsy pleasure.

"Shit!"

"Chit!" Jemmy echoed obligingly.

"Well, that's not quite—would you stop laughing?" Roger said testily, wiping his hand gingerly on a kitchen rag.

Brianna snorted and gurgled, shaking her head so the straggling locks of hair that had escaped her plait fell down around her face.

"*Good* boy, Jemmy!" she managed.

Thus encouraged, Jemmy took on an air of inner absorption, scrunched his chin down into his chest, and without further ado, proceeded to Act Two of the evening's drama.

"Clever lad!" Roger said sincerely.

Brianna glanced at him, momentary surprise interrupting her own applause.

He was surprised himself. He had spoken by reflex, and hearing the words, just for a moment, his voice hadn't sounded like his own. Very familiar—but not his own. It was like writing the words of Clellan's song, hearing the old man's voice, even as his own lips formed the words.

"Aye, that's clever," he said, more softly, and patted the little boy gently on his silky head.

He took the pot outside to empty it while Brianna put Jemmy back to bed with kisses and murmurs of admiration. Basic sanitation accomplished, he went to the well to wash his hands before coming back inside to bed.

"Are you through working?" Bree asked drowsily, as he slid into bed beside her. She rolled over and thrust her bottom unceremoniously into his stomach, which he took as a gesture of affection, given the fact that she was about thirty degrees warmer than he was after the sortie outside.

"Aye, for tonight." He put his arms round her and kissed the back of her ear, the warmth of her body a comfort and delight. She took his chilly hand in hers without comment, folded it, and tucked it snugly beneath her chin, with a small kiss on the knuckle. He stretched slightly, then relaxed, letting his muscles go slack and feeling the tiny movements as their bodies adjusted, shaping to each other. A faint buzzing snore rose from the trundle, where Jemmy slept the sleep of the righteously dry.

Brianna had freshly smoored the fire; it burned with a low, even heat and the sweet scent of hickory, making small occasional pops as the buried flame reached a pocket of resin or a spot of damp. Warmth crept over him, and sleep tiptoed in its wake, drawing a blanket of drowsiness up round his ears, unlocking the tidy cupboards of his mind, and letting all the thoughts and impressions of the day spill out in brightly colored heaps.

Resisting unconsciousness for a last few moments, he poked desultorily among the scattered riches thus revealed, in the faint hope of finding a corner of the Telfer song poking out; some scrap of word or music that would allow him to seize the vanished verses and drag them back into the light of consciousness. It wasn't the story of the ill-fated Willie that emerged from the rubble, though, but rather a voice. Not his own, and not that of old Kimmie Clellan, either.

Clever lad! it said, in a clear warm contralto, tinged with laughter. Roger jerked.

"Whaju say?" Brianna mumbled, disturbed by the movement.

“Go on—be clever,” he said slowly, echoing the words as they formed in his memory. “That’s what she said.”

“Who?” Brianna turned her head, with a rustle of hair on the pillow.

“My mother.” He put his free hand round her waist, resettling them both. “You asked what they said in Scotland. I’d forgotten, but that’s what she used to say to me. ‘Go on—be clever!’ or ‘Do ye need to be clever?’ ”

Bree gave a small grunt of sleepy amusement.

“Well, it’s better than poo,” she said.

They lay quiet for a bit. Then she said, still speaking softly, but with all traces of sleep gone from her voice, “You talk about your dad now and then—but I’ve never heard you mention your mother before.”

He gave a one-shouldered shrug, bringing his knees up against the yielding backs of her thighs.

“I don’t remember a lot about her.”

“How old were you when she died?” Brianna’s hand floated up to rest over his.

“Oh, four, I think, nearly five.”

“Mmm.” She made a small sound of sympathy, and squeezed his hand. She was quiet for a moment, alone in private thought, but he heard her swallow audibly, and felt the slight tension in her shoulders.

“What?”

“Oh … nothing.”

“Aye?” He disengaged his hand, used it to lift the heavy plait aside, and gently massaged the nape of her neck. She turned her head away to make it easier, burying her face in the pillow.

“Just—I was just thinking—if I died now, Jemmy’s so young—he wouldn’t remember me at all,” she whispered, words half-muffled.

“Yes, he would.” He spoke in automatic contradiction, wanting to give her reassurance, even knowing that she was likely right.

“You don’t remember, and you were lots older when you lost your mother.”

"Oh … I do remember her," he said slowly, digging the ball of his thumb into the place where her neck joined her shoulder. "Only, it's just in bits and pieces. Sometimes, when I'm dreaming, or thinking of something else, I get a quick glimpse of her, or some echo of her voice. A few things I recall clearly—like the locket she used to wear round her neck, with her initials on it in wee red stones. Garnets, they were."

That locket had perhaps saved his life, during his first ill-fated attempt to pass through the stones. He felt the loss of it now and then, like a small thorn buried beneath the surface of the skin, but pushed the feeling aside, telling himself that after all, it was nothing more than a bit of metal.

At the same time, he missed it.

"That's a *thing*, Roger." Her voice held a hint of sharpness. "Do you remember *her*? I mean—what would Jemmy know about me—about you, for that matter—if all he had left of us was"—she cast about for some suitable object—"was your bodhran and my pocket knife?"

"He'd know his dad was musical, and his mum was bloodthirsty," Roger said dryly. "Ouch!" He recoiled slightly as her fist came down on his thigh, then set his hands placatingly on her shoulders. "No, really. He'd know a lot about us, and not just from the bits and bobs we'd left behind, though those would help."

"How?"

"Well …" Her shoulders had relaxed again; he could feel the slender edge of her shoulder blade, hard against the skin—she was too thin, he thought. "You studied history for a time, didn't you? You know how much one can tell from homely objects like dishes and toys."

"Mmm." She sounded dubious, but he thought that she simply wanted to be convinced.

"And Jem would know a lot more than that about you, from your drawings," he pointed out. *And a hell of a lot more than a son ought, if he ever read your dream-book,* he thought. The sudden impulse to say so, to confess that he himself had read it, trembled on his tongue, but he swallowed it. Beyond simple fear of how she might respond if she discovered his intrusion, was the greater fear that she would cease to write in it, and those small secret glimpses of her mind would be lost to him.

"I guess that's true," she said slowly. "I wonder if Jem will draw—or be musical."

If Stephen Bonnet plays the flute, Roger thought cynically, but choked off that subversive notion, refusing to contemplate it.

"That's how he'll know the most of us," he said instead, resuming his gentle kneading. "He'll look at himself, aye?"

"Mmm?"

"Well, look at you," he pointed out. "Everyone who sees you says, 'You must be Jamie Fraser's lass!' And the red hair isn't the only thing—what about the shooting? And the way you and your mother are about tomatoes …"

She smacked her lips reflexively, and giggled when he laughed.

"Yeah, all right, I see," she said. "Mmm. Why did you have to mention tomatoes? I used the last of the dried ones last week, and it'll be six months before they're on again."

"Sorry," he said, and kissed the back of her neck in apology.

"I did wonder," he said, a moment later. "When you found out about Jamie—when we began to look for him—you must have wondered what he was like." He knew she had; *he* certainly had. "When you found him—how did he compare? Was he at all like you thought he'd be, from what you knew about him already? Or—from what you knew about yourself?"

That made her laugh again, a little wryly.

"I don't know," she said. "I didn't know then, and I still don't know."

"What d'ye mean by that?"

"Well, when you hear things about somebody before you meet them, of course the real person isn't just like what you heard, or what you imagined. But you don't forget what you imagined, either; that stays in your mind, and sort of merges with what you find out when you meet them. And then—" She bent her head forward, thinking. "Even if you know somebody *first*, and then hear things about them later—that kind of affects how you see them, doesn't it?"

"Aye? Mmm, I suppose so. Do ye mean … your other dad? Frank?"

"I suppose I do." She shifted under his hands, shrugging it away. She didn't want to talk about Frank Randall, not just now.

"What about your parents, Roger? Do you figure that's why the Reverend saved all their old stuff in those boxes? So later you could look through it, learn more about them, and sort of add that to your real memories of them?"

"I—yes, I suppose so," he said uncertainly. "Not that I have any memories of my real dad in any case; he only saw me the once, and I was less than a year old then."

"But you do remember your mother, don't you? At least a little bit?"

She sounded slightly anxious; she wanted him to remember. He hesitated, and a thought struck him with a small shock. The truth of it was, he realized, that he never consciously *tried* to remember his mother. The realization gave him a sudden and unaccustomed feeling of shame.

"She died in the War, didn't she?" Bree's hand had taken up his suspended massage, reaching back to gently knead the tightened muscle of his thigh.

"Yes. She—in the Blitz. A bomb."

"In Scotland? But I thought—"

"No. In London."

He didn't want to speak of it. He never *had* spoken of it. On the rare occasions when memory led in that direction, he veered away. That territory lay behind a closed door, with a large "No Entry" sign that he had never sought to pass. And yet tonight … he felt the echo of Bree's brief anguish at the thought that her son might not recall her. And he felt the same echo, like a faint voice calling, from the woman locked behind that door in his mind. But was it locked, after all?

With a hollow feeling behind his breastbone that might have been dread, he reached out and put his hand on the knob of that closed door. How much *did* he recall?

“My Gran, my mother’s mum, was English,” he said slowly. “A widow. We went south to live with her in London, when my dad was killed.”

He had not thought of Gran, any more than his mum, in years. But with his speaking, he could smell the rosewater and glycerine lotion his grandmother had used on her hands, the faintly musty smell of her upstairs flat in Tottenham Court Road, crammed with horsehair furniture too large for it, remnants of a previous life that had held a house, a husband, and children.

He took a deep breath. Bree felt it, and pressed her broad firm back encouragingly against his chest. He kissed the back of her neck. So the door *did* open—just a crack, maybe, but the light of a wintry London afternoon shone through it, lighting up a stack of battered wooden blocks on a threadbare carpet. A woman’s hand was building a tower with them, the faint sun scattering rainbows from a diamond on her hand. His own fingers curled in reflex, seeing that slim hand.

“Mum—my mother—she was small, like Gran. That is, they both seemed big, to me, but I remember … I remember seeing her stand on her tiptoes to reach things down from the shelf.”

Things. The tea-caddy, with its cut-glass sugar bowl. The battered kettle, three mismatched mugs. His had had a panda bear on it. A package of biscuits—bright red, with a picture of a parrot … My God, he hadn’t seen those kind ever again—did they still make them? No, of course not, not now …

He pulled his veering mind firmly back from such distractions.

“I know what she looked like, but mostly from pictures, not from my own memories.” And yet he did *have* memories, he realized, with a disturbing sensation in the pit of his stomach. He thought “Mum,” and suddenly he didn’t see the photos anymore; he saw the chain of her spectacles, a string of tiny metal beads against the soft curve of a breast, and a pleasant warm smoothness, smelling of soap against his cheek; the cotton fabric of a flowered housedress. Blue flowers. Shaped like trumpets, with curling vines; he could see them clearly.

"What did she look like? Do you look like her at all?"

He shrugged, and Bree shifted, rolling over to face him, her head propped upon her outstretched arm. Her eyes shone in the half-dark, sleepiness overcome by interest.

"A little," he said slowly. "Her hair was dark, like mine." *Shiny, curly. Lifting in the wind, sprinkled with white grains of sand. He'd sprinkled sand on her head, and she brushed it from her hair, laughing. A beach somewhere?*

"The Reverend kept some pictures of her, in his study. One showed her holding me on her lap. I don't know what we were looking at—but both of us look as though we're trying hard to keep from laughing. We look a lot alike in that one. I have her mouth, I think—and … maybe … the shape of her brows."

For a long time he had felt a tightness in his chest whenever he saw the pictures of his mother. But then it had passed, the pictures lost their meaning and became no more than objects in the casual clutter of the Reverend's house. Now he saw them clearly once again, and the tightness in his chest was back. He cleared his throat hard, hoping to ease it.

"Need water?" She made to rise, reaching for the jug and cup she kept for him on the stool by the bed, but he shook his head, a hand on her shoulder to stop her.

"It's all right," he said, a little gruffly, and cleared his throat again. It felt as tight and painful as it had in the weeks just past the hanging, and his hand involuntarily sought the scar, smoothing the ragged line beneath his jaw with the tip of a finger.

"You know," he said, seeking at least a momentary diversion, "you should do a self-portrait, next time you go to see your aunt at River Run."

"What, me?" She sounded startled, though, he thought—perhaps a bit pleased at the idea.

"Sure. You could, I know. And then there'd be … well, a permanent record, I mean." *For Jem to remember, in case anything should happen to you.* The words floated above them in the dark, striking them both momentarily silent. Damn, and he'd been trying to reassure her.

“I’d like a portrait of you,” he said softly, and reached out a finger to trace the curve of cheek and temple. “So we can look at it when we’re very old, and I can tell ye that you haven’t changed a bit.”

She gave a small snort, but turned her head and kissed his fingers briefly, before rolling onto her back. She stretched, pointing her toes until her joints cracked, then relaxed with a sigh.

“I’ll think about it,” she said.

The room was quiet, save for the murmur of the fire and the gentle creak of settling timber. The night was cold, but still; the morning would be foggy—he had felt the damp gathering in the ground when he’d gone outside, breathing from the trees. But it was warm and dry within. Brianna sighed again; he could feel her sinking back toward sleep beside him, could feel it coming for him, too.

The temptation to give in and let it carry him painlessly away was great. But while Brianna’s fears were eased for the moment, he still heard that whisper—“He wouldn’t remember me at all.” But it came now from the other side of the door in his mind.

Yes, I do, Mum, he thought, and shoved it open all the way.

“I was with her,” he said softly. He was on his back, staring up at the pine-beamed ceiling, the joins of the rafters barely visible to his dark-adapted eyes.

“What? With who?” He could hear the lull of sleep in her voice, but curiosity roused her briefly.

“With my mother. And my grandmother. When … the bomb.”

He heard her head turn sharply toward him, hearing the strain in his voice, but he looked straight upward into the dark roof-beams, not blinking.

“Do you want to tell me?” Brianna’s hand found his, curled round it, squeezing. He wasn’t sure at all that he did, but he nodded a little, squeezing back.

“Aye. I suppose I must,” he said softly. He sighed deeply, smelling the lingering scents of fried corn-mush and onions that hung in the corners of the cabin. Somewhere in the back of his nose, the imagined scents of hot-air registers and breakfast porridge, wet woolens, and the petrol fumes of lorries woke silent guides through the labyrinth of memory.

"It was at night. The air-raid sirens went. I knew what it was, but it scared the shit out of me every time. There wasn't time to dress; Mum pulled me out of bed and put my coat on over my pajamas, then we rushed out and down the stairs—there were thirty-six steps, I'd counted them all that day, coming home from the shops—and we hurried to the nearest shelter."

The nearest shelter for them was the Tube station across the street; grubby white tiles and the flicker of fluorescent lights, the thrilling rush of air somewhere deep below, like the breathing of dragons in nearby caves.

"It was exciting." He could see the crush of people, hear the shouting of the wardens over the noise of the crowd. "Everything was vibrating; the floors, the walls, the air itself."

Feet thundered on the wooden treads as streams of refugees poured into the bowels of the earth, down one level to a platform, down another, yet another, burrowing toward safety. It was panic—but an orderly panic.

"The bombs could go through fifty feet of earth—but the lower levels were safe."

They had reached the bottom of the first stairway, run jostling with a mass of others through a short, white-tiled tunnel to the head of the next. There was a wide space at the head of the stairway, and the crowd pooled in a swirling eddy into it, swelling with the pressure of refugees pouring from the tunnel behind, draining only slowly as a thin stream crowded onto the stair leading down.

"There was a wall round the head of the stair; I could hear Gran worrying that I'd be crushed against it—people were pouring down from the street, pressing from behind."

He could just see over the wall, standing on his toes, chest pressed against the concrete. Down below, emergency lights shone in interrupted streaks along the walls, striping the milling crowd below. It was late night; most of the people were dressed in whatever they had been able to seize when the siren went, and the light glowed on unexpected flashes of bare flesh and extraordinary garments. One woman sported an extravagant hat, decorated with feathers and fruit, worn atop an ancient overcoat.

He had been watching the crowd below in fascination, trying to see if it was really a whole pheasant on the hat. There was shouting; an air-raid warden in a white helmet with a big black "W," beckoning madly, trying to hasten the already rushing crowd toward the far end of the platform, making room for those coming off the stair.

"There were children crying, but not me. I wasn't really afraid at all." He hadn't been afraid, because Mum was holding his hand. *If she was there, nothing bad could happen.*

"There was a big thump nearby. I could see the lights shake. Then there was a noise like something tearing overhead. Everyone looked up and began to scream."

The crack through the slanted ceiling hadn't looked particularly frightening; just a thin black line that zigzagged back and forth like a jigsaw snake, following the lines of the tiles. But then it widened suddenly, a gaping maw like a dragon's mouth, and dirt and tiles began to pour down.

He had long since thawed, and yet every hair on his body rippled now with gooseflesh. His heart pounded against the inside of his chest, and he felt as though the noose had drawn tight about his neck again.

"She let go," he said, in a strangled whisper. "She let go my hand."

Brianna's hand gripped his in both of hers, hard, trying to save the child he'd been.

"She had to," she said, in an urgent whisper. "Roger, she wouldn't have let go unless she had to."

"No." He shook his head violently. "That's not what—I mean—wait. Wait a minute, OK?"

He blinked hard, trying to slow his breathing, fitting back the shattered pieces of that night. Confusion, frenzy, pain … but what had actually *happened*? He had kept nothing save an impression of bedlam. But he had lived through it; he must know what had happened—if he could bring himself to live through it again.

Brianna's hand clutched his, her fingers still squeezing tight enough to stop the blood. He patted her hand, gently, and her grip relaxed a little.

He closed his eyes, and let it happen.

"I didn't remember at first," he said at last, quietly. "Or rather, I did—but I remembered what people told me had happened." He had had no memory of being carried unconscious through the tunnel, and once rescued, he had spent several weeks being shuttled round Aid shelters and foster homes with other orphans, mute with terrified bewilderment.

"I knew my name, of course, and my address, but that didn't help much under the circumstances. My dad had already gone down—anyway, by the time the Aid people located Gran's brother—that was the Reverend—and he came to fetch me, they'd pieced together the story of what happened in the shelter.

"It was a miracle that I hadn't been killed with everyone else on that stair, they told me. They said my mother must somehow have lost hold of me in the panic—I must have been separated from her and carried down the stair by the crowd; that's how I ended on the lower level, where the roof hadn't given way."

Brianna's hand was still curled over his, protective, but no longer squeezing.

"But now you remember what happened?" she asked quietly.

"I did remember her letting go my hand," he said. "And so I thought the rest of it was right, too. But it wasn't.

"She let go my hand," he said. The words came more easily now; the tightness in his throat and chest was gone. "She let go my hand … and then she picked me up. That small woman—she picked me up, and threw me over the wall. Down into the crowd of people on the platform below. I was knocked mostly out by the fall, I think—but I remember the roar as the roof went. No one on the stair survived."

She pressed her face against his chest, and he felt her take a deep, shuddering breath. He stroked her hair, and his pounding heart began to slow at last.

“It’s all right,” he whispered to her, though his voice was thick and cracked, and the firelight burst in starry blurs through the moisture in his eyes. “We won’t forget. Not Jem, not me. No matter what. We won’t forget.”

He could see his mother’s face, shining clear among the stars.

Clever lad, she said, and smiled.

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BROTHER

The snow began to melt. I was torn between pleasure at the thawing of the world and the throb of spring in the ground—and disturbance at the loss of the frozen barrier that shielded us, however temporarily, from the world outside.

Jamie had not changed his mind. He spent an evening in composing a carefully worded letter to Milford Lyon. He was now ready, he wrote, to contemplate the sale of his goods—for which, read illegal whisky—as Mr. Lyon had suggested, and was pleased to say that a substantial quantity was now available. He was, however, concerned lest his goods suffer some misfortune in delivery—i.e., interception by customs authorities or pilferage en route—and wished some assurance that his goods would be handled by a gentleman of known ability in such matters—in other words, a smuggler who knew his way up and down the coast.

He had received assurances from his good friend Mr. Priestly of Edenton (whom he did not, of course, know from a hole in the ground), he wrote, and from Mr. Samuel Cornell, with whom he had had the honor to serve upon the Governor's Council of War, that one Stephen Bonnet was by far the most able in such endeavors, with a reputation for ability unsurpassed by others. If Mr. Lyon would arrange a meeting with Mr. Bonnet, so that Jamie might form his own impressions and assure himself of the safety of the arrangement contemplated, why then …

"Do you think he'll do it?" I asked.

"If he knows Stephen Bonnet or can find him, aye, he will." Jamie pressed his father's cabochon ring into the wax seal. "Priestly and

Cornell are names to conjure with, to be sure."

"And if he does find Bonnet—"

"Then I will go and meet with him." He cracked the ring from the hardened wax, leaving a smooth indentation surrounded by the tiny strawberry leaves of the Fraser crest. Constancy, they stood for. In some moods, I was sure this was merely another word for stubbornness.

The letter to Lyon was dispatched with Fergus, and I tried to dismiss it from my mind. It was still winter; with only a little luck, Bonnet's ship might meet with a storm and sink, saving us all a good deal of trouble.

Still, the matter lurked in the recesses of my mind, and when I returned to the house after attending a childbirth to find a pile of letters on the desk in Jamie's study, my heart leaped into my throat.

There was—thank God!—no answer among them from Milford Lyon. Even had such an answer come, though, it would have been promptly eclipsed and forgotten—for among the sheaf of correspondence was a letter bearing Jamie's name, written in his sister's strong black hand.

I could scarcely keep myself from tearing it open at once—and if it were some searing reproach, sticking it directly into the fire before Jamie could see it. Honor prevailed, though, and I managed to contain myself until Jamie arrived from an errand to Salem, plastered with mud from the impassable trails. Informed of the waiting missive, he splashed hands and face hastily with water, and came to the study, carefully shutting the door before breaking the seal of the letter.

His face showed nothing, but I saw him take a deep breath before opening it, as though bracing for the worst. I moved quietly round behind him, and put a hand on his shoulder in encouragement.

Jenny Fraser Murray wrote in a well-schooled hand, the letters round and graceful, the lines straight and easily readable on the page.

September 16, 1771

Brother,

Well. Having taken up my pen and written the single word above, I have now sat here staring at it 'til the candle has burned almost an inch, and me having not one thought what I shall say. It would be a wicked waste of good beeswax to continue so, and yet if I were to put the candle out and go to bed, I should have spoilt a sheet of paper to no purpose—so I see I must go on, in the name of thrift.

I could berate you. That would occupy some space upon the page, and preserve what my husband is pleased to compliment as the most foul and hideous curses he has been privileged to hear in a long life. That seems thrifty, as I was at great pains in the composition of them at the time, and should not like to see the effort wasted. Still, I think I have not so much paper as would contain them all.

I think also that perhaps, after all, I do not wish to rail or condemn you, for you might take this as a just punishment, and so ease your conscience in perceived expiation, so that you leave off your chastising of yourself. That is too simple a penance; I would that if you have wove a hairshirt for yourself, you wear it still, and may it chafe your soul as the loss of my son chafes mine.

In spite of this, I suppose that I am writing to forgive you—I had some purpose in taking up my pen, I know, and while forgiveness seems a doubtful enterprise to me at present, I expect the notion will grow more comfortable with practice.

Jamie's brows rose nearly to his hairline at this, but he continued to read aloud with fascination.

You will be curious to know what has led me to this action, I suppose, so I will tell you.

I rode to visit Maggie early Monday last; she has a new babe, so you are once more an uncle; a bonnie wee lassie called Angelica, which is a foolish name, I think, but she is very fair and born with a *strawberry mark on her chest, which is a charm for good. I left them in the evening, and had made some way towards home when my mule chanced to step into a mole's hole and fell. Both mule and I rose up somewhat lamed from this accident, and it was clear that I could not ride the creature nor yet make shift to travel far by foot myself.*

I found myself on the road Auldearn just over the hill from Balriggan. I should not normally seek the society of Laoghaire MacKenzie—for she has resumed that name, I having made plain in the district my dislike of her use of "Fraser," she having no proper claim to that style—but it was the only place where I might obtain food and shelter, for night was coming on, with the threat of rain.

So I unsaddled the mule and left him to find his supper by the road, while I limped off in search of mine.

I came down behind the house, past the kailyard, and so came upon the arbor that you built. The vines are well grown on it now, so I could see nothing, but I could hear that there were folk inside, for I heard voices.

The rain had begun by then. It was not but a smizzle, yet the patter on the leaves must have drowned my voice, for no one answered when I called. I came closer—creeping like a spavined snail, to be sure, for I was gromished from the fall and my right ankle gruppit—and was just about to call once more, when I heard sounds of a rare hochmagandy from inside the arbor.

"Hochmagandy?" I glanced at Jamie, brows raised in question.
"Fornication," he said tersely.
"Oh," I said, and moved to look over his shoulder at the letter.

I stood still, of course, thinking what was best to do. I could hear that it was Laoghaire shedding her shanks, but I had no hint who her partner might be. My ankle was blown up like a bladder, so I *could not walk much farther, and so I was obliged to stand about in the wet, listening to all this* inhonesté.

I should have known, had she been courted by a man of the district, and I had heard nothing of her paying heed to any—though several have tried; she has Balriggan, after all, and lives like a laird on the money you pay her.

I was filled with outrage at the hearing, but somewhat more filled with amazement to discover the cause. That being a sense of fury on your behalf—irrational as such fury might be, in the circumstances. Still, having discovered such an emotion springing full-blown in my breast. I was reluctantly compelled to the realization that my feelings for you must not in fact have perished altogether.

Here the text broke off, as Jenny had apparently been called away upon some domestic errand. It resumed, freshly dated, on the next page.

September 18, 1771

I dream of young Ian now and then….

"What?" I exclaimed. "To hell with Young Ian—who was with Laoghaire?"

"I should like to know that myself," Jamie muttered. The tips of his ears were dark with blood, but he didn't look up from the page.

I dream of Ian now and then. These dreams most often take the shape of daily life, and I see him here at Lallybroch, but now and again I dream of him in his life among the savages—if indeed he still lives (and I persuade myself that my heart would by some means know if he did not).

So I see that what it comes to in the end is only the same thing with which I began—that one word, "Brother." You are my brother, *as young Ian is my son, the both of you my flesh and my spirit and always shall be. If the loss of Ian haunts my dreams, the loss of you haunts my days, Jamie.*

He stopped reading for a moment, swallowing, then went on, his voice steady.

I have been writing letters all the morning, debating with myself whether to finish this one, or to put it into the fire instead. But now the accounts are done, I have written to everyone I can think of, and the clouds have gone away, so the sun shines through the window by my desk, and the shadows of Mother's roses are falling over me.

I have thought to myself often and often that I heard my mother speak to me, through all these years. I do not need to hear her now, though, to ken well enough what she would say. And so I shall not put this in the fire.

You remember, do you, the day I broke the good cream-pitcher, flinging it at your head because you deviled me? I know you recall the occasion, for you once spoke to Claire of it. I hesitated to admit the crime, and you took the blame upon yourself, but Father kent the truth of it, and punished us both.

So now I am a grandmother ten times over, with my hair gone grey, and still I feel my cheeks go hot with shame and my wame shrink like a fist, thinking of Father bidding us kneel down side by side and bend over the bench to be whipped.

You yelped and grunted like a puppy when he tawsed you, and I could scarce breathe and did not dare to look at you. Then it was my turn, but I was so wrought with emotion that I think I barely felt the strokes. No doubt you are reading this and saying indignantly that it was only Father was softer with me because I was a lass. Well, maybe so, and maybe no; I will say Ian is gentle with his daughters.

Jamie snorted at this.

"Aye, ye've got that right," he muttered. He rubbed his nose with one finger and resumed, drumming his fingers on the desk as he read.

But then Father said you would have another whipping, this one for lying—for the truth was the truth, after all. I would have got up and fled away then, but he bade me stay as I was, and he said to me, quiet, that while you would pay the price of my cowardice, he did not think it right for me to escape it altogether.

Do you know that you did not make a sound, the second time? I hope you did not feel the strokes of the tawse on your backside, because I felt each one.

I swore that day that I should not ever be a coward again.

And I see that it is cowardice indeed, that I should go on blaming you for Young Ian. I have always kent what it is to love a man—be he husband or brother, lover or son. A dangerous business; that's what it is.

Men go where they will, they do as they must; it is not a woman's part to bid them stay, nor yet to reproach them for being what they are—or for not coming back.

I knew it when I sent Ian to France with a cross of birchwood and a lock of my hair made into a love knot, praying that he might come home to me, body and soul. I knew it when I gave you a rosary and saw you off to Leoch, hoping you would not forget Lallybroch or me. I knew it when Young Jamie swam to the seal's island, when Michael took ship for Paris, and I should have known it, too, when wee Ian went with you.

But I have been blessed in my life; my men have always come back to me. Maimed, perhaps; a bit singed round the edges now and then; crippled, crumpled, tattered, and torn—but I have always got *them back. I grew to expect that as my right, and I was wrong to do so.*

I have seen so many widows since the Rising. I cannot say why I thought I should be exempt from their suffering, why I alone should lose none of my men, and only one of my babes, my wee girl-child. And since I had lost Caitlin, I treasured Ian, for I knew he was the last babe I should bear.

I thought him my babe still; I should have kent him for the man he was. And that being so, I know well enough that whether you might have stopped him or no, you would not—for you are one of the damnable creatures, too.

Now I have nearly reached the end of this sheet, and I think it profligate to begin another.

Mother loved you always, Jamie, and when she kent she was dying, she called for me, and bade me care for you. As though I could ever stop.

Your most Affectionate and Loving Sister,
Janet Flora Arabella Fraser Murray

Jamie held the paper for a moment, then set it down, very gently. He sat with his head bent, propped on his hand so that I couldn't see his face. His fingers were splayed through his hair, and kept moving, massaging his forehead as he slowly shook his head, back and forth. I could hear him breathing, with a slight catch in his breath now and then.

Finally he dropped his hand and looked up at me, blinking. His face was deeply flushed, there were tears in his eyes, and he wore the most remarkable expression, in which bewilderment, fury, and laughter were all mingled, laughter being only slightly uppermost.

"Oh, God," he said. He sniffed, and wiped his eyes on the back of his hand. "Oh, Christ. How in *hell* does she do that?"

"Do what?" I pulled a clean handkerchief from my bodice and handed it to him.

"Make me feel as though I am eight years old," he said ruefully. "And an idiot, to boot."

He wiped his nose, then reached out a hand to touch the flattened roses, gently.

I was thrilled with Jenny's letter, and knew that Jamie's heart was substantially lightened by its receipt. At the same time, I remained extremely curious about the incident she had begun to describe—and knew that Jamie was even more interested, though he carefully refrained from saying so.

A letter arrived a week or so later, sent by his brother-in-law Ian, but while this contained the usual news of Lallybroch and Broch Mordha, it made no mention whatever of Jenny's adventure near Balriggan, nor her subsequent discovery in the grape arbor.

"I don't suppose you could ask either of them?" I suggested delicately, perched on the fence as I watched him preparing to castrate a litter of piglets. "Ian or Jenny?"

"I could not," Jamie replied firmly. "And after all, it's no my business, is it? If yon woman was ever my wife, she surely is not now. If she chooses to take a lover, it's her own affair. Surely." He stamped on the foot-bellows, fanning up the small fire in which the cautery iron was heating, and pulled the castrating shears from his belt. "Which end of the business d'ye want, Sassenach?"

It was a choice between the strong possibility of being bitten while clipping the teeth and the certainty of being shitten while assaulting the other end. The unfortunate truth was that Jamie was far stronger than I, and while he could certainly castrate an animal with no difficulty at all, I did have some professional expertise. It was therefore practicality rather than heroism that dictated my choice, and I had prepared for this activity by donning my heavy canvas apron, wooden clogs, and a ragged ex-shirt that had once belonged to Fergus, and was bound from the pigpen straight into the fire.

“You hold; I’ll snip.” I slid off the fence and took the shears.

There ensued a brief but noisy interlude, after which the five piglets were sent off to a consolatory meal of kitchen scraps, their rear aspects heavily daubed with a tar and turpentine mixture to prevent infection.

“What do you think?” I asked, seeing them settle down to their feeding in an apparent state of content. “If you were a pig, I mean. Would you rather root for your food, but keep your balls, or give them up and wallow in luxurious swill?” These would be kept penned, raised carefully on slops for tender meat, while most of the pigs were routinely turned out into the wood to manage for themselves.

Jamie shook his head.

“I suppose they canna miss what they’ve never had,” he said. “And they’ve had food, after all.” He leaned on the fence for a few moments, watching the curly tails begin to wag and twirl with pleasure, the tiny wounds beneath apparently forgotten.

“Besides,” he added cynically, “a pair of ballocks may bring a man more sorrow than joy—though I havena met many who’d wish them gone, for all that.”

“Well, priests might find them a burden, I suppose.” I pulled the stained shirt gingerly away from my body before lifting it over my head. “Phew. Nothing smells worse than pig excrement—nothing.”

“What—not a blackbirder’s hold, or a rotting corpse?” he asked, laughing. “Festering wounds? A billy goat?”

“Pig shit,” I said firmly. “Hands down.”

Jamie took the wadded shirt from me and ripped it into strips, reserving the cleanest ones for jobs like wiping tools and wedging cracks. The rest he consigned to the fire, stepping back as a random breeze blew a plume of reeking smoke in our direction.

“Aye, well, there was Narses. He was a great general, or so they say, in spite of being a eunuch.”

“Perhaps a man’s mind works better without the distraction,” I suggested, laughing.

He gave no more than a brief snort in reply to this, though it was tinged with amusement. He shoveled dirt onto the cinders of the fire, while I retrieved my cautery iron and tar-pot, and we went back to the house, talking of other things.

My mind lingered on that one remark, though—"a pair of ballocks may bring a man more sorrow than joy." Had he been speaking only generally? I wondered. Or had there been some personal allusion lurking in it?

In everything he had ever said to me regarding his brief marriage to Laoghaire MacKenzie—little as that was, by our common consent—there had been no hint that he had felt physically drawn to her. He had wed her from loneliness and a sense of duty, wanting some small anchor in the emptiness his life had been after his return from England. Or so he had said.

And I believed what he'd said. He was a man of honor and duty, and I knew what his loneliness had been—for I had had my own. On the other hand, I knew his body, nearly as well as my own. If it had a great capacity to endure hardship, it had an equal capacity to experience great joy. Jamie could be ascetic from necessity—never from natural temperament.

Most of the time I succeeded in forgetting that he had shared Laoghaire's bed, however briefly and—he said—unsatisfactorily. I did not forget that she had been, and was still, quite an attractive woman.

Which left me rather wishing that Jenny Murray had found some other inspiration for the conversion of her feelings toward her brother.

Jamie was quiet and abstracted through the rest of the day, though he roused himself to be sociable when Fergus and Marsali arrived with their children for a visit after supper. He taught Germain to play draughts, while Fergus recalled for Roger the words of a ballad he had picked up in the alleys of Paris as a juvenile pickpocket. The women retired to the hearth to stitch baby gowns, knit booties, and

—in honor of Marsali's advancing pregnancy and Lizzie's engagement—entertain each other with hair-raising anecdotes of labor and birth.

"Laid sideways, the babe was, and the size of a six-month shoat …"

"Ha, Germain had a head like a cannonball, the midwife said, and he was facing *backward*, the wee rattan—"

"Jemmy had a huge head, but it was his shoulders that were the problem.…"

"… *le bourse* … the lady's 'purse,' of course, is her—"

"Her means of making a living, aye, I see. Then the next bit, where her customer puts his fingers *in* her purse—"

"No, ye dinna get to move yet, it's still my turn, for I've jumped your man *there*, and so I can go *here*—"

"Merde!"

"Germain!" Marsali bellowed. She glared at her offspring, who hunched his shoulders, scowling at the draughtboard, lower lip thrust out.

"Dinna fash yourself, man, for see? Now it's your turn, ye can go *there*, and *there*, and *there*—"

"… *Avez-vous ête a la selle aujourd'hui?*… and what he is asking the whore, of course—"

" 'Have you—been in the saddle today?' Or would it be, 'Have you had a ride today?' "

Fergus laughed, the end of his aristocratic nose pinkening with amusement.

"Well, that is one translation, surely."

Roger lifted a brow at him, half-smiling.

"Aye?"

"That particular expression is also what a French doctor says," I put in, seeing his incomprehension. "Colloquially speaking, it means, 'Have you had a bowel movement today?' "

"The lady in question being perhaps *une specialiste*," Fergus explained cheerfully. "I used to know one who—"

"Fergus!" Marsali's whole face was pink, though she seemed more amused than outraged.

"I see," Roger murmured, eyebrows still raised as he struggled with the nuances of this bit of sophisticated translation. I did wonder how one would set it to music.

"Comment sont vos selles, grandpere?" Germain inquired chummily, evidently familiar with this line of social inquiry. And how are your stools, grandfather?

"Free and easy," his grandfather assured him. "Eat up your parritch every morning, and ye'll never have piles."

"Da!"

"Well, it's true," Jamie protested.

Brianna was bright red, and emitting small fizzing noises. Jemmy stirred in her lap.

"*Le petit rouge* eats parritch," Germain observed, frowning narrowly at Jemmy, who was nursing contentedly at his mother's breast, eyes closed. "He shits stones."

"Germain!" all the women shouted in unison.

"Well, it's true," he said, in perfect imitation of his grandfather. Looking dignified, he turned his back on the women and began building towers with the draughts-men.

"He doesna seem to want to give up the teat," Marsali observed, nodding at Jemmy. "Neither did Germain, but he'd no choice—nor did poor wee Joanie." She glanced ruefully down at her stomach, which was barely beginning to swell with Number Three.

I caught the barest flicker of a glance between Roger and Bree, followed by a Mona Lisa smile on Brianna's face. She settled herself more comfortably, and stroked Jemmy's head. *Enjoy it while you can, sweetheart,* her actions said, more vividly than words.

I felt my own eyebrows rise, and glanced toward Jamie. He'd seen that little byplay, too, and gave me the male equivalent of Brianna's smile, before turning back to the draughtsboard.

"I like parritch," Lizzie put in shyly, in a minor attempt to change the subject. "Specially with honey and milk."

"Ah," said Fergus, reminded of his original task. He turned back to Roger, lifting a finger. "Honeypots. The refrain, you see, where *les abeilles* come buzzing—"

“Aye, aye, that’s so,” Mrs. Bug neatly recaptured the conversation, when he paused to draw breath, “parritch wi’ honey is the best thing for the bowels, though sometimes even that fails. Why, I kent a man once, who couldna move his bowels for more than a month!”

“Indeed. Did he try a pellet of wax rolled in goose-grease? Or a tisane of grape leaves?” Fergus was instantly diverted. French to the core, he was a great connoisseur of purges, laxatives, and suppositories.

“Everything,” Mrs. Bug assured him. “Parritch, dried apples, wine mixed wi’ an ox’s gall, water drunk at the dark o’ the moon at midnight … nothing at all would shift him. ’Twas the talk of the village, wi’ folk placing wagers, and the poor man gone quite gray in the face. Nervous spasms, it was, and his bowels tied up like garter strings, so that—”

“Did he explode?” Germain asked, interested.

Mrs. Bug shook briefly with laughter.

“No, that he didna, laddie. Though I did hear as how it was a near thing.”

“What was it finally shifted him, then?” Jamie asked.

“She finally said she’d marry me, and not the other fellow.” Mr. Bug, who had been dozing in the corner of the settle through the evening, stood up and stretched himself, then put a hand on his wife’s shoulder, smiling tenderly down at her upturned face. “ ’Twas a great relief, to be sure.”

It was late when we went to bed, after a convivial evening that ended with Fergus singing the prostitute’s ballad in its lengthy entirety to general applause, Jamie and German beating time on the table with their hands.

Jamie lay back against the pillow, hands crossed behind his head, chuckling to himself now and then as bits of the song came back to him. It was cold enough that the windowpanes were misted with our breath, but he wore no nightshirt, and I admired the sight of him as I sat brushing my hair.

He had recovered well from the snakebite, but was still thinner than usual, so that the graceful arch of his collarbone was visible, and the long muscles of his arms roped from bone to bone, distinct beneath his skin. The skin of his chest was bronze where his shirt usually lay open, but the tender skin on the underside of his arms was white as milk, a tracery of blue veins showing. The light shadowed the prominent bones of his face and glimmered from his hair, cinnamon and amber where it lay across his shoulders, dark auburn and red-gold where it dusted his bared body.

"The candlelight becomes ye, Sassenach," he said, smiling, and I saw that he was watching me, blue eyes the color of bottomless ocean.

"I was just thinking the same of you," I said, standing up and putting aside my brush. My hair floated in a cloud round my shoulders, clean, soft, and shining. It smelled of marigolds and sunflowers and so did my skin. Bathing and shampooing in winter was a major undertaking, but I had been determined not to go to bed smelling of pig shit.

"Let it burn, then," he said, reaching out to stop me as I bent to blow the candle out. His hand curled round my wrist, urging me toward him.

"Come to bed, and let me watch ye. I like the way the light moves in your eyes; like whisky, when ye pour it on a haggis, and then set it on fire."

"How poetic," I murmured, but made no demur as he made room for me, pulled loose the drawstring of my shift, and slipped it off me. The air of the room was cold enough to make my nipples draw up tight, but the skin of his chest was delightfully warm on my breasts as he gathered me into him, sighing with pleasure.

"It's Fergus's song inspiring me, I expect," he said, cupping one of my breasts in his hand and weighing it with a nice balance between admiration and appraisal. "God, ye've the loveliest breasts. Ye recall that one verse, where he says the lady's tits were so enormous, she could wrap them round his ears? Yours aren't so big as that, of course, but d'ye think ye maybe could wrap them round—"

"I don't think they need to be enormous to do *that,*" I assured him. "Move up. Besides, I don't believe it's actually wrapping round, so much as it is squashing together, and they're certainly large enough for … see?"

"Oh," he said, sounding deeply gratified and a little breathless. "Aye, ye're right. That's … oh, that looks verra beautiful, Sassenach—at least from here."

"It looks very interesting from here, too," I assured him, trying neither to laugh nor go cross-eyed. "Which one of us moves, do you think?"

"Me, for now. I'm no chafing ye, Sassenach?" he inquired.

"Well, just a bit. Wait, though—" I reached out a hand, feeling blindly over the table by the bed. I got hold of the little pot of creamy almond ointment I used for hand lotion, flicked the lid off, and dug a finger into it.

"Yes, that's much better," I said. "Isn't it?"

"Oh. Oh. Aye."

"And then there's that other verse, isn't there?" I said thoughtfully, letting go for a moment, and drawing a slippery finger slowly round the curve of his buttock. "About what the prostitute did to the choirboy?"

"Oh, Christ!"

"Yes, that's what he said. According to the song."

Much later, in the dark, I roused from sleep to feel his hands on me again. Still pleasantly adrift in dreams, I didn't move, but lay inert, letting him do what he would.

My mind was loosely tethered to reality, and it took some time for me to come to the slow realization that something wasn't quite right. It took even longer to focus my mind and struggle toward the surface of wakefulness, but at last I got my eyes open, blinking away clouds of sleep.

He was crouched half over me, his face half-lit by the dim glow from the smoored hearth. His eyes were closed, and he was frowning a little, his breath coming through half-opened lips. He moved almost mechanically, and I wondered, muzzily astonished, whether he could possibly be doing it in his sleep?

A thin film of sweat gleamed on the high cheekbones, the long straight bridge of his nose, on the slopes and curves of his naked body.

He was stroking me in an odd, monotonous sort of way, like a man working at some repetitive task. The touch was more than intimate, but weirdly impersonal; I might have been anybody—or anything—I thought.

Then he moved, and eyes still closed, flipped back the quilt covering me and moved between my legs, spreading them apart in a brusque fashion that was quite unlike him. His brows were drawn together, knotted in a frown of concentration. I moved instinctively to close my legs, squirming away. His hands clamped down on my shoulders then, his knee thrust my thighs apart, and he entered me roughly.

I made a high-pitched sound of startled protest, and his eyes popped open. He stared at me, his eyes no more than an inch from mine, unfocused, then sharpening into abrupt awareness. He froze.

“Who the *bloody* hell do you think I am?” I said, low-voiced and furious.

He wrenched himself away and flung himself off the bed, leaving the covers hanging to the floor in disarray. He seized his clothes from the peg, reached the door in two strides, opened it, and disappeared, slamming it behind him.

I sat up, feeling thoroughly rattled. I scrabbled the quilts back up around myself, feeling dazed, angry—and halfway disbelieving. I rubbed my hands over my face, trying to wake up all the way. Surely *I* hadn’t been dreaming?

No. He was. He’d been half-asleep—or wholly so—and he’d bloody thought I was bloody Laoghaire! Nothing else could account for the way he had been touching me, with a sense of painful impatience tinged with anger; he had never touched me like that in his life.

I lay back down, but it was patently impossible to go back to sleep. I stared at the shadowy rafters for a few minutes, then rose with decision, and got dressed.

The dooryard was bleak and cold under a high, bright moon. I stepped out, closing the kitchen door softly behind me, and clutched my cloak round me, listening. Nothing stirred in the cold, and the wind was no more than a sigh through the pines. At some distance, though, I heard a faint, regular noise, and turned toward it, making my way carefully through the dark.

The door of the haybarn was open.

I leaned against the doorjamb, and crossed my arms, watching as he stamped to and fro, pitching hay in the moonlight, working off his temper. Mine was still pulsing in my temples, but began to subside as I watched him.

The difficulty was that I did understand, and all too well. I had not met many of Frank's women—he was discreet. But now and then, I would catch a glance exchanged at a faculty party or the local supermarket—and a feeling of black rage would well up in me, only to be followed by bafflement as to what, precisely, I was to do with it.

Jealousy had nothing to do with logic.

Laoghaire MacKenzie was four thousand miles away; likely neither of us would ever see her again. Frank was even farther away, and it was certain neither of us would ever see him again, this side the grave.

No, jealousy had nothing at all to do with logic.

I began to be cold, but went on standing there. He knew I was there; I could see it in the way he kept his head turned toward his work. He was sweating, in spite of the cold; the thin cloth of his shirt stuck to him, making a dark spot on his back. At last, he stabbed the pitchfork into the stack, left it, and sat down on a bench made from half a log. He put his head in his hands, fingers rubbing violently through his hair.

Finally, he looked up at me, with an expression halfway between dismay and reluctant amusement.

"I dinna understand it."

"What?" I moved toward him, and sat down near him, curling my feet under me. I could smell the sweat on his skin, along with almond cream and the ghost of his earlier lust.

He gave me a sidelong glance, and answered dryly, "Anything, Sassenach."

"Can't be that bad, can it?" I reached tentatively for him, and ran a hand lightly down the curve of his back.

He heaved a deep sigh, blowing air through pursed lips.

"When I was three-and-twenty, I didna understand how it was that to look at a woman could turn my bones to water, yet make me feel I could bend steel in my hands. When I was five-and-twenty, I didna understand how I could want both to cherish a woman and ravish her, all at once."

"*A* woman?" I asked, and got what I wanted—the curl of his mouth and a glance that went through my heart.

"One woman," he said. He took the hand I laid on his knee, and held it tightly, as though afraid I might snatch it back. "Just one," he repeated, his voice husky.

It was quiet in the barn, but the boards creaked and settled in the cold. I moved a little on the bench, scooting toward him. Just a little. Moonlight streamed through the wide-open door, glowing dimly off the piled hay.

"And that," he said, squeezing my fingers tighter, "is what I dinna ken now. I love *you, a nighean donn.* I have loved ye from the moment I saw ye, I will love ye 'til time itself is done, and so long as you are by my side, I am well pleased wi' the world."

A flush of warmth went through me, but before I could do more than squeeze his hand in reply, he went on, turning to look at me with an expression of bewilderment so desperate as to be almost comical.

"And that bein' so, Claire—why, in the name of Christ and all his saints—*why* do I want to take ship to Scotland, hunt down a man whose name and face I dinna ken at all, and kill him, for swiving a woman to whom I have nay claim, and who I couldna stand to be in the same room with for more than three minutes at the most?"

He brought his free hand down in a fist, striking the log with a thump that vibrated through the wood under my buttocks.

“I do *not* understand!”

I suppressed the urge to say, “And you think *I* do?” Instead, I merely sat quietly, and after a moment, stroked his knuckles very lightly with my thumb. It was less a caress than a simple reassurance, and he took it so.

After a moment, he sighed deeply, squeezed my hand, and stood up.

“I am a fool,” he said.

I sat still for a moment, but he seemed to expect some sort of confirmation, so I nodded obligingly.

“Well, perhaps,” I said. “But you aren’t going to Scotland, are you?”

Instead of replying, he got to his feet and walked moodily to and fro, kicking clumps of dried mud, which burst like small bombs. Surely he wasn’t contemplating … he couldn’t be. With some difficulty, I kept my mouth shut, and waited patiently, until he came back to stand in front of me.

“All right,” he said, in the tone of one stating a declaration of principle. “I dinna ken why it galls me that Laoghaire should seek another man’s company—no, that’s no the truth, is it? I ken well enough. And it isna jealousy. Or … well, it is, then, but that’s no the main thing.” He shot me a look, as though daring me to contradict this assertion, but I kept my mouth shut. He exhaled strongly through his nose, and took a deep breath, looking down.

“Well, then. If I’m honest about it.” His lips pressed tight together for a moment. “Why?” he burst out, looking up at me. “What is it about him?”

“What is what about who? The man she—”

“She hated it, the bedding!” he interrupted me, stamping a clod into powder. “Perhaps I flatter myself, or you flatter me …” He gave me a look that wanted to be a glare, but ended in bewilderment. “Am I … am I …?”

I wasn’t sure whether he wanted me to say, “Yes, you are!” or “No, you’re not!” but satisfied myself with a smile that said both.

"Aye. Well," he said reluctantly. "I didna *think* it was me. And before we were wed, even Laoghaire liked me well enough." I must have made a small snort at that, for he glanced at me, but I shook my head, dismissing it.

"I thought it must be a mislike for men in general, or only for the act. And if it was so … well, it wasna quite so bad, if it wasna my fault, though I did feel somehow I should be able to mend it.…" He trailed off into this thoughts, brow furrowed, then resumed with a sigh.

"But maybe I was wrong about that. Perhaps it *was* me. And that's a thought that sticks in my craw."

I had no real idea what to say to him, but clearly I had to say something.

"I think it was her," I said, firmly. "Not you. Though of course I may be prejudiced. She did try to kill me, after all."

"She what?" He swung round, looking blank.

"You didn't know that? Oh." I tried to think; had I not told him? No, I supposed not. What with one thing and another, it hadn't seemed important at the time; I had never expected to see her again. And later … well, it really *wasn't* important then. I explained briefly about Laoghaire's having sent me to join Geillie Duncan that day in Cranesmuir, fully aware that Geillie was about to be arrested for witchcraft, and hoping that I would be taken with her—as indeed I was.

"The wicked wee bitch!" he said, sounding more astonished than anything else. "No, I didna ken that at all—Christ, Sassenach, ye canna think I would have marrit the woman, knowing she'd done such a thing to you!"

"Well, she was only sixteen at the time," I said, able under the circumstances to be tolerantly forgiving. "And she might not have realized that we'd be tried or that the witch-court would try to burn us. She might only have meant mischief—thinking that if I were accused as a witch, it would make you lose interest in me." The revelation of her chicanery seemed at least to have distracted Jamie's mind, which was all to the good.

His only response to this was a snort. He paced restlessly to and fro for a bit, his feet rustling in the spilled straw. He hadn't taken his shoes or stockings, and was barefoot, though the cold seemed not to trouble him.

At last he stopped, heaved a massive sigh, and bent forward, resting a hand on the bench, his head on my shoulder.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

I put my arms round his shoulders and pulled him close, holding him hard until at last he sighed again, and the knotted strain in his shoulders relaxed. I let go, and he stood up, giving me a hand to rise.

We closed the barn door and walked back to the house in silence, hand in hand.

"Claire," he said suddenly, sounding a little shy.

"Yes?"

"I dinna mean to excuse myself—not at all. It's only I was wondering … do ye ever … think of Frank? When we …" He stopped and cleared his throat. "Does the shadow of the Englishman perhaps cross my face—now and then?"

And what on earth could I say to that? I couldn't lie, surely, but how could I say the truth, either, in a way he would understand, that wouldn't hurt him?

I drew a deep breath and let it out, watching the mist of it purl softly away.

"I don't want to make love to a ghost," I said at last, firmly. "And I don't think you do, either. But I suppose every now and then a ghost might have other ideas."

He made a small sound that was mostly a laugh.

"Aye," he said. "I suppose they might. I wonder if Laoghaire would like the Englishman's bed better than mine?"

"Serve her right if she did," I said. "But if you like mine, I suggest you come and get back into it. It's *bloody* cold out here."

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DEAD WHALE

By late March, the trails down the mountain were passable. No word had come yet from Milford Lyon, and after some debate on the matter, it was decided that Jamie and I, with Brianna, Roger, and Marsali, would travel to Wilmington, while Fergus took the survey reports to New Bern to be formally filed and registered.

The girls and I would buy supplies depleted over the winter, such as salt, sugar, coffee, tea, and opium, while Roger and Jamie would make discreet inquiries after Milford Lyon—and Stephen Bonnet. Fergus would come to join us, so soon as the surveying reports were taken care of, making his own inquiries along the coast as chance offered.

After which, presumably, Jamie and Roger, having located Mr. Bonnet, would drop round to his place of business and take turns either shooting him dead or running him through with a sword, before riding back into the mountains, congratulating themselves on a job well done. Or so I understood the plan to be.

“The best-laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley,” I quoted to Jamie, in the midst of one discussion on the matter. He raised one brow and gave me a look.

“What sorts of plans have mice got?”

“Well, there you have me,” I admitted. “The principle holds, though; you haven’t any idea what may happen.”

“That’s true,” he agreed. “But whatever *does* happen, I shall be ready for it.” He patted the dirk that lay on the corner of his desk, and went back to making lists of farm supplies.

The weather warmed markedly as we descended from the mountains, and as we drew nearer to the coast, flocks of seagulls and crows wheeled and swarmed over the fresh-plowed fields, shrieking ecstatically in the bright spring sunshine.

The trees in the mountains were barely beginning to leaf out, but in Wilmington, flowers were already glowing in the gardens, spikes of yellow columbine and blue larkspur nodding over the tidy fences on Beaufort Street. We found lodgings in a small, clean inn a little way from the quay. It was relatively cheap and reasonably comfortable, if a trifle crowded and dark.

"Why don't they have more windows?" Brianna grumbled, nursing a stubbed toe after stumbling over Germain in the darkness on the landing. "Somebody's going to burn the place down, lighting candles to see where they're going. Glass can't be *that* expensive."

"Window tax," Roger informed her, picking Germain up and dangling him head-down over the bannister, to Germain's intense delight.

"What? The Crown taxes *windows*?"

"It does. Ye'd think people would care more about that than stamps or tea, but apparently they're used to the window tax."

"No wonder they're about to have a revolu— Oh, good morning, Mrs. Burns! The breakfast smells wonderful."

The girls, the children, and I spent several days in careful shopping, while Roger and Jamie mixed business with pleasure in assorted taprooms and taverns. Most of their errands were completed, and Jamie produced a small but useful subsidiary income from card-playing and betting on horses, but all he was able to hear of Stephen Bonnet was that he had not been seen in Wilmington for some months. I was privately relieved to hear this.

It rained later in the week, hard enough to keep everyone indoors for two days. More than simple rain; it was a substantial storm, with winds high enough to bend the palmetto trees half over and plaster the muddy streets with torn leaves and fallen branches. Marsali sat up late into the night, listening to the wind, alternating between saying the rosary and playing cards with Jamie for distraction.

“Fergus did say it was a large ship he would be coming on from New Bern? The *Octopus*? That sounds good-sized, doesn’t it, Da?”

“Oh, aye. Though I believe the packet boats are verra safe, too. No, dinna discard that, lass—throw away the trey of spades instead.”

“How do ye know I have the trey of spades?” she demanded, frowning suspiciously at him. “And it’s no true about the packet boats. Ye ken that as well as I do; we saw the wreckage of one at the bottom of Elm Street, day before yesterday.”

“I know ye’ve got the trey of spades because I haven’t,” Jamie told her, tucking his hand of cards neatly against his chest, “and all the other spades have already turned up on the table. Besides, Fergus might come overland from New Bern; he may not be on a boat at all.”

A gust of wind struck the house, rattling the shutters.

“Another reason not to have windows,” Roger observed, looking over Marsali’s shoulder at her hand. “No, he’s right, discard the trey of spades.”

“Here, you do it. I’ve got to go and see to Joanie.” She rose suddenly, and thrusting the cards into Roger’s hand, rustled off to the small room next door that she shared with her children. I hadn’t heard Joanie cry.

There was a loud thump and scrape overhead, as a detached tree limb sailed across the roof. Everyone looked up. Below the high-pitched keen of the wind, we could hear the hollow rumble of the surf, boiling across the submerged mudflats, pounding on the shore.

“They that go down to the sea in ships,” Roger quoted softly, “that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep. For he commandeth, and raiseth the stormy wind, which lifteth up the waves thereof.”

“Oh, you’re a big help,” Brianna said crossly. Already edgy, her temper had not been improved by the enforced seclusion. Jemmy, terrified by all the racket, had been wrapped around her like a poultice for the better part of two days; both of them were hot, damp, and exceedingly cranky.

Roger appeared not to be put off by her mood. He smiled, and bending down, peeled Jemmy away from her, with some difficulty. He put the little boy on the floor, holding him by the hands.

"They reel to and fro," he said theatrically, pulling Jem's hands so that he lurched, off-balance. "And stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit's end."

Jemmy was giggling, and even Brianna was beginning to smile, reluctantly.

"Then they cry unto the Lord in their trouble, and he *bringeth* them out of their distresses—" On *"bringeth,"* he swung Jemmy suddenly up in the air, caught him under the arms and whirled him round, making him shriek in delight.

"He maketh the storm a calm, so that the waves thereof are still. Then are they glad because they be quiet—" He pulled Jemmy in close, and kissed him on the head, "—so he bringeth them unto their desired haven."

Bree applauded the performance sarcastically, but smiled nonetheless. Jamie had retrieved the cards, shuffling the deck neatly back together. He stopped, looking up. Caught by his sudden stillness, I turned my head to look at him. He glanced at me and smiled.

"The wind has dropped," he said. "Hear it? Tomorrow, we'll go out."

The weather had cleared by morning, and a fresh breeze came in from the sea, bearing with it a tang of the shore, smelling of sea-lavender, pines, and a strong reek of something maritime rotting in the sun. The quay still exhibited a depressing lack of masts; no large ships lay at anchor, not even a ketch or packet boat, though the water in Wilmington harbor swarmed with dinghies, rafts, canoes, and pirettas, the little four-oared boats that flitted across the water like dragonflies, droplets sparkling from their flying oars.

One of these spotted our small party standing disconsolately on the wharf, and darted toward us, its oarsmen calling out to know whether we required transport? As Roger leaned out to shout a polite refusal, the breeze off the harbor whipped away his hat, which whirled giddily out over the brownish waters and lighted on the foam, spinning like a leaf.

The craft sculled at once toward the floating hat, and one of the oarsmen speared it deftly, raising it dripping in triumph on the end of his oar. As the piretta drew up beside the quay, though, the boatman's look of jubilation changed to one of astonishment.

"MacKenzie!" he cried. "Bugger me wi' a silver toothpick if it isn't!"

"Duff! Duff, me auld lad!" Roger leaned down and grabbed his hat, then reached back to give his erstwhile acquaintance a hand up. Duff, a small, grizzled Scot with a very long nose, sparse jowls, and a fine sprout of graying whiskers that made him look as though he'd been thickly dusted in icing sugar, leaped nimbly up onto the quay and proceeded to clasp Roger in a manly embrace, punctuated by fierce thumpings on the back and ejaculations of amazement, all heartily returned by Roger. The rest of us stood politely watching this reunion, while Marsali prevented Germain from jumping off the quay into the water.

"Do you know him?" I asked Brianna, who was dubiously examining her husband's old friend.

"I *think* he might have been on a ship with Roger once," she replied, renewing her grip on Jemmy, who was wildly excited by the sight of seagulls, finding these much more entertaining than Mr. Duff.

"Why, look at him!" Duff exclaimed, finally standing back and wiping a sleeve happily under his nose. "A coat like a lairdie's and buttons to match. And the hat! Christ, lad, ye're so slick these days as shit wouldna stick to ye, would it?"

Roger laughed, and bent to pick up his soggy hat. He slapped it against his thigh to dislodge a strand of bladder-wrack, and handed it absently to Bree, who was still viewing Mr. Duff with a rather narrow eye.

"My wife," Roger introduced her, and waved a hand at the rest of us. "And her family. Mr. James Fraser, Mrs. Fraser … and my wife's good-sister, also Mrs. MacKenzie."

"Your servant, sir—ladies." Duff bowed to Jamie, and put a finger to the disreputable object on his head in brief token of respect. He glanced at Brianna, and a broad grin stretched his lips.

"Oh, so ye married her. Got her out o' the breeks, I see." He nudged Roger familiarly in the ribs, lowering his voice to a hoarse whisper. "Did ye pay her faither for her, or did he pay you to take her?" He emitted a creaking noise, which I took to be laughter.

Jamie and Bree gave Mr. Duff identical cold looks down the bridges of their long, straight noses, but before Roger could reply, the other oarsman shouted something incomprehensible from the boat below.

"Oh, aye, aye, hold your water, man." Mr. Duff waved a quelling hand at his partner. "That's by way of a jest," he explained to me confidentially. "What with us bein' sailors, ken. 'Hold your water,' aye? Forbye ye *don't* hold water, then ye'll be at the bottom o' the harbor, aye?" He quivered with merriment, making the creaking noise again.

"Most amusing," I assured him. "Did he say something about a whale?"

"Oh, to be sure! Was that not why ye've come down to the shore this morning?"

Everyone looked blank.

"No," Marsali said, too bent upon her errand to pay much attention to anything else, including whales. "Germain, come back here! No, sir, we've come to see if there's any word of the *Octopus*. Ye'll not have heard anything, yourself?"

Duff shook his head.

"No, Missus. But the weather's been that treacherous off the Banks for a month past …" He saw Marsali's face go pale, and hastened to add, "A good many ships will ha' sheered off, see? Gone to another port, maybe, or lyin' to just off the coast, in hopes of fair skies to make the run in. Ye recall, MacKenzie—we did that ourselves, when we came in wi' the *Gloriana*."

"Aye, that's true." Roger nodded, though his eyes grew wary at mention of the *Gloriana*. He glanced briefly at Brianna, then back at

Duff, and lowered his voice slightly. “You’ve parted company with Captain Bonnet, I see.”

A small jolt shot through the soles of my feet, as though the dock had been electrified. Jamie and Bree both reacted, too, though in different fashion. He took an immediate step toward Duff, she took one back.

“Stephen Bonnet?” Jamie said, eyeing Duff with interest. “Ye’ll be acquainted with that gentleman, will ye?”

“I have been, sir,” Duff said, and crossed himself.

Jamie nodded slowly, seeing this.

“Aye, I see. And will ye ken somewhat about Mr. Bonnet’s present whereabouts, perhaps?”

“Och, well, as to that …”

Duff looked up at him speculatively, taking in the details of his clothing and appearance, and obviously wondering exactly how much the answer to that question might be worth. His partner below was growing increasingly restive, though, and shouted impatiently.

Marsali was restive, too.

“Where might they go, then? If they’ve gone to another port? Germain, stop! Ye’ll fall in, next thing!” She bent to retrieve her offspring, who had been hanging over the edge of the wharf, peacefully exploring its underside, and hoicked him up onto one hip.

“Bonnet?” Jamie raised his brows, contriving to look simultaneously encouraging and menacing.

“They gone see da whale or don’t they?” yelled the gentleman in the boat, impatient to be off on more profitable ventures.

Duff seemed somewhat at a loss as to whom to reply to first. His small eyes blinked, shifting to and fro between Jamie, Marsali, and his increasingly vociferous partner below. I stepped in to break the impasse.

“What’s all this about a whale?”

Compelled to focus on this straightforward question, Duff looked relieved.

"Why, the dead whale, Missus. A big 'un, gone aground on the Island. I thought sure as ye'd all come down to see."

I looked out across the water, and for the first time realized that the boat traffic was not entirely random. While a few large canoes and barges were headed toward the mouth of Cape Fear, most of the smaller craft were plying to and fro, disappearing into the distant haze, or returning from it, bearing small groups of passengers. Linen parasols sprouted like pastel mushrooms from the boats, and there was a sprinkling of what were obviously townspeople on the dock, standing as we were, looking expectantly across the harbor.

"Two shillin's the boatload," Duff suggested ingratiatingly. "Over and back."

Roger, Brianna, and Marsali looked interested. Jamie looked uneasy.

"In *that*?" he asked, with a skeptical glance at the piretta, bobbing gently below. Duff's partner—a gentleman of indeterminate race and language—seemed inclined to take offense at this implied criticism of his craft, but Duff was reassuring.

"Oh, it's dead calm today, sir, dead calm. Why, 'twould be like sittin' on a tavern bench. Congenial, aye? Verra suitable to conversation." He blinked, innocently affable.

Jamie drew a deep breath in through his nose, and I saw him glance once more at the piretta. Jamie hated boats. On the other hand, he would do far more desperate things than get into a boat in pursuit of Stephen Bonnet. The only question was whether Mr. Duff actually had information to that end, or was only inveigling passengers. Jamie swallowed hard and braced his shoulders, steeling himself to it.

Not waiting, Duff reinforced his position by turning craftily to Marsali.

"There's a lighthouse on the Island, ma'am. Ye can see a good ways out to sea from the top o' that. See if any ships should be lyin' off."

Marsali's hand dropped at once to her pocket, fumbling for the strings. I observed Germain solicitously poking a dead mussel over her shoulder toward Jemmy's eagerly open mouth, like a mother bird feeding her offspring a nice juicy worm, and tactfully intervened, taking Jemmy into my own arms.

"No, sweetheart," I said, dropping the mussel off the dock. "You don't want that nasty thing. Wouldn't you like to go see a nice dead whale, instead?"

Jamie sighed in resignation, and reached for his sporran. "Ye'd best call for another boat, then, so as we'll not all drown together."

It was lovely out on the water, with the sun covered by a hazy layer of cloud, and a cool breeze that made me take my hat off for the pleasure of feeling the wind in my hair. While not quite flat calm, the rise and fall of the surf was peacefully lulling—to those of us not afflicted by seasickness.

I glanced at Jamie's back, but his head was bent, shoulders moving in an easy, powerful rhythm as he rowed.

Resigned to the inevitable, he had taken brisk charge of the situation, summoning a second boat and herding Bree, Marsali, and the boys into it. Thereupon Jamie had unfastened his brooch and announced that he and Roger would row the remaining piretta, in order that Duff might put himself at ease and thus improve his chances of recollecting interesting facts regarding Stephen Bonnet.

"Less chance of me puking if I've something to do," he muttered to me, stripping off his coat and plaid.

Roger gave a small snort of amusement, but nodded agreeably and shed his own coat and shirt. With Duff and Peter installed at one end of the craft in a state of high hilarity over the turnabout of being paid to be rowed in their own boat, I was told off to sit in the other end, facing them.

"Just to keep a bit of an eye on things, Sassenach." Under cover of the wadded clothes, Jamie wrapped my hand around the stock of his pistol, and squeezed gently. He handed me down into the boat, then climbed down gingerly himself, going only slightly pale as the craft swayed and shifted under his weight.

It *was* a calm day, fortunately. A faint haze hung over the water, obscuring the dim shape of Smith Island in the distance. Kittiwakes and terns wheeled in gyres far above, and a heavy-bodied gull seemed to hang immobile in the air nearby, riding the wind as we sculled slowly out into the harbor mouth.

Seated just before me, Roger rowed easily, broad bare shoulders flexing rhythmically, obviously accustomed to the exercise. Jamie, on the seat in front of Roger, handled the oars with a fair amount of grace, but somewhat less assurance. He was no sailor, and never would be. Still, the distraction of rowing did seem to be keeping his mind off his stomach. For the moment.

"Oh, I could find myself accustomed to this, what d'ye say, Peter?" Duff lifted a long nose into the breeze, half-closing his eyes as he savored the novelty of being rowed.

Peter, who appeared to be some exotic blend of Indian and African, grunted in reply, but lounged on the seat beside Duff, equally pleased. He wore nothing but a pair of stained homespun breeches, tied at the waist with a length of tarred rope, and was burned so dark by the sun that he might have been a Negro, save for the spill of long black hair that fell over one shoulder, decorated with bits of shell and tiny dried starfish tied into it.

"Stephen Bonnet?" Jamie inquired pleasantly, drawing strongly on the oars.

"Oh, him." Duff looked as though he would have preferred to put off this subject of discussion indefinitely, but a glance at Jamie's face resigned him to the inevitable.

"What d'ye want to know, then?" The little man hunched his shoulders warily.

"To begin with, where he is," Jamie said, grunting slightly as he hauled on the oars.

"No idea," Duff said promptly, looking happier.

"Well, where did ye last see the bugger?" Jamie asked patiently.

Duff and Peter exchanged glances.

"Well, noo," Duff began cautiously, "d'ye mean by 'see,' where it was I last clapped een on the captain?"

“What else would he mean, clotheid?” Roger said, grunting with a backward stroke.

Peter nodded thoughtfully, evidently awarding a point to our side, and elbowed Duff in the ribs.

“He was in a pot-house on Roanoke, eatin’ fish pie,” Duff said, capitulating. “Baked wi’ oysters and breadcrumbs on the top, and a pint of dark ale to wash it down. Molasses pudding, too.”

“Ye’ve a keen sense of observation, Mr. Duff,” Jamie said. “How’s your sense of time, then?”

“Eh? Oh, aye, I tak’ your meanin’, man. When was it … twa month past, aboot.”

“And if ye were close enough to see what the man was eating,” Jamie observed mildly, “then I expect ye were at table with him, no? What did he speak of?”

Duff looked mildly embarrassed. He glanced at me, then up at one of the circling gulls.

“Aye, well. The shape of the arse on the barmaid, mostly.”

“I shouldna think that a topic of conversation to occupy the course of a meal, even if the lassie was particularly shapely,” Roger put in.

“Ah, ye’d be surprised how much there is to say about a woman’s bum, lad,” Duff assured him. “This one was round as an apple, and heavy as a steamed puddin’. ’Twas cold as charity in the place, and the thought of havin’ such a plump, hot, wee bridie in your hands—meanin’ no offense to ye, ma’am, I’m sure,” he added hurriedly, tipping his hat in my direction.

“None taken,” I assured him cordially.

“Can you swim, Mr. Duff?” Jamie asked, his tone still one of mild curiosity.

“What?” Duff blinked, taken back. “I … ah … well …”

“No, he can’t,” Roger said cheerfully. “He told me.”

Duff gave him a look of outraged betrayal over Jamie’s head.

“Well, there’s loyalty!” he said, scandalized. “A fine shipmate *you* are! Givin’ me away so—ye should be ashamed of yersel’, so ye should!”

Jamie raised his oars, dripping, out of the water, and Roger followed suit. We were perhaps a quarter-mile from shore, and the water beneath our hull was a deep, soft green, portending a bottom several fathoms deep. The boat rocked gently, lifting on the bosom of a long, slow swell.

"Bonnet," Jamie said, still politely, but with a definite edge. Peter folded his arms and closed his eyes, making it clear that the subject had nothing to do with *him*. Duff sighed and eyed Jamie narrowly.

"Aye, well. It's true, I've no notion where the man is. When I saw him on Roanoke, he was makin' arrangements to have some … goods … brought in. For what that might be worth to ye," he added, rather ungraciously.

"What goods? Brought in where? And going where?" Jamie was leaning on his shipped oars, apparently casual. I could see a certain tension in the line of his body, though, and it occurred to me that while his attention might be fixed on Duff's face, he was of necessity also watching the horizon behind Duff—which was rising and falling hypnotically as the swell lifted the piretta and let it drop. Over and over and …

"Tea-chests was what I took in for him," Duff answered warily. "Couldna say, for the rest."

"The rest?"

"Christ, man, every boat on this water brings in the odd bit of jiggery-pokery here and there—surely ye ken that much?"

Peter's eyes had opened to half-slits; I saw them rest on Jamie's face with a certain expression of interest. The wind had shifted a few points, and the smell of dead whale was decidedly stronger. Jamie took a slow, deep breath, and let it out again, rather faster.

"Ye brought in tea, then. Where from? A ship?"

"Aye." Duff was watching Jamie, too, in growing fascination. I shifted uneasily on the narrow seat. I couldn't tell from the back of his neck, but I thought it more than likely that he was beginning to turn green.

"The *Sparrow*," Duff went on, eyes fixed on Jamie. "She anchored off the Banks, and the boats went out to her. We loaded the cargo and came in through Joad's Inlet. Cam' ashore at Wylie's Landing, and handed over to a fellow there."

"What … fellow?" The wind was cool, but I could see sweat trickling down the back of Jamie's neck, dampening his collar and plastering the linen between his shoulders.

Duff didn't answer immediately. A look of speculation flickered in his small, deep-set eyes.

"Don't think about it, Duff," Roger said, softly, but with great assurance. "I can reach ye from here with an oar, ken?"

"Aye?" Duff glanced thoughtfully from Jamie, to Roger, and then to me. "Aye, reckon ye might. But allowin' for the sake for argyment as how you can swim, MacKenzie—and even that Mr. Fraser might keep afloat—I dinna think that's true of the lady, is it? Skirts and petticoats …" He shook his head, pursing thin lips in speculation as he looked at me. "Go to the bottom like a stone, she would."

Peter shifted ever so slightly, bringing his feet under him.

"Claire?" Jamie said. I saw his fingers curl tight round the oars, and heard the note of strain in his voice. I sighed and drew the pistol out from under the coat across my lap.

"Right," I said. "Which one shall I shoot?"

Peter's eyes snapped open, wide enough that I saw a rim of white show all round his black pupils. He looked at the pistol, then at Duff, then directly at Jamie.

"Give tea to a man name Butlah," he said. "Work for Mist' Lyon." He pointed at me, then at Duff. "Shoot him," he suggested.

The ice thus broken, it took very little time for our two passengers to confide the rest of what they knew, pausing only momentarily for Jamie to be sick over the side between questions.

Smuggling was, as Duff had suggested, so common in the area as to constitute general business practice; most of the merchants—and all of the small boatmen—in Wilmington engaged in it, as did most others on the Carolina coast, in order to avoid the crippling duties on officially imported goods. Stephen Bonnet, however, was not only one of the more successful smugglers, but also rather a specialist.

“Brings in goods to order, like,” Duff said, twisting his neck in order to scratch more effectively between his shoulder blades. “And in what ye might call quantity.”

“How much quantity?” Jamie’s elbows rested on his knees, his head sunk onto his hands. It seemed to be helping; his voice was steady.

Duff pursed his lips and squinted, calculating.

“There was six of us at the tavern on Roanoke. Six wi’ small boats, I mean, as could run the inlets. If we were each to be fetchin’ along as much as we could manage … say, fifty chests of tea all told, then.”

“And he brings in such a load how often—every two months?” Roger had relaxed a little, leaning on his oars. I hadn’t, and gave Duff a hard eye over the pistol to indicate as much.

“Oh, more often than that,” Duff answered, eyeing me warily. “Couldn’t say exactly, but you hear talk, aye? From what the other boats say, I reckon he’s got a load comin’ every two weeks in the season, somewhere on the coast betwixt Virginia and Charleston.” Roger gave a brief grunt of surprise at that, and Jamie looked up briefly from his cupped hands.

“What about the Navy?” he asked. “Who’s he paying?” That was a good question. While small boats might escape the Navy’s eye, Bonnet’s operation evidently involved large quantities of contraband, coming in on large ships. It would be hard to hide something on that scale—and the obvious answer was that he wasn’t bothering to hide it.

Duff shook his head and shrugged.

“Can’t say, man.”

“But you haven’t worked for Bonnet since February?” I asked. “Why not?”

Duff and Peter exchanged a glance.

“You eat scorpion-fish, you hungry,” Peter said to me. “You don’ eat dem, iffen you got sumpin’ bettah.”

“What?”

“The man’s dangerous, Sassenach,” Jamie translated dryly. “They dinna like to deal with him, save for need.”

“Well, see him, Bonnet,” Duff said, warming to the topic. “He’s no bad at all to deal with—sae long as your interest runs wi’ his. Only, if it might be as all of a sudden it *doesna* quite run with his …”

Peter solemnly drew a finger across his stringy neck, nodding in affirmation.

“And it’s no as if there’s warnin’ about it, either,” Duff added, nodding too. “One minute, it’s whisky and segars, the next, ye’re on your back in the sawdust, breathin’ blood, and happy still to be breathin’ at that.”

“A temper, has he?” Jamie drew a hand down over his face, then wiped his sweaty palm on his shirt. The linen clung damply to his shoulders, but I knew he wouldn’t take it off.

Duff, Peter, and Roger all shook their heads simultaneously at the question.

“Cold as ice,” Roger said, and I heard the small note of strain in his voice.

“Kill ye without the turn of an arse-hair,” Duff assured Jamie.

“Rip you like dem whale,” Peter put in helpfully, with a wave toward the island. The current had carried us a good deal closer to the land, and I could see the whale as well as smell it. Seabirds whirled and screamed in a great cloud over the carcass, swooping down to tear away gobbets of flesh, and a small crowd of people clustered nearby, hands to their noses, clearly clutching handkerchiefs and sachets.

Just then, the wind changed, and a fetid gust of decay washed over us like a breaking wave. I clapped Roger’s shirt to my own face, and even Peter appeared to pale.

“Mother of God, have mercy on me,” Jamie said, under his breath. “I—oh, Christ!” He leaned to the side and threw up, repeatedly.

I nudged Roger in the buttock with my toe.

“Row,” I suggested.

Roger obeyed with alacrity, putting his back into it, and within a few minutes, the keel of the piretta touched sand. Duff and Peter leaped out to run the hull up onto the beach, then gallantly assisted me out of the boat, evidently not holding the pistol against me.

Jamie paid them, then staggered a short distance up the beach and sat down, quite suddenly, in the sand beneath a loblolly pine. He was roughly the same shade as the dead whale, a dirty gray with white blotches.

“Will we wait for ye, sir, and row ye back?” Duff, his purse now bulging healthily, hovered helpfully over Jamie.

“No,” Jamie said. “Take them.” He waved feebly at me and Roger, then closed his eyes and swallowed heavily. “As for me, I believe … I shall just … swim back.”

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MONSTERS AND HEROES

The little boys were mad to see the whale, and tugged their reluctant mothers along like kites. I came along, keeping a somewhat more discreet distance from the towering carcass, leaving Jamie on the beach to recover. Roger took Duff aside for a bit of private conversation, while Peter subsided into somnolence in the bottom of the boat.

The carcass was newly washed up on the beach, though it must have been dead for some time before its landing; such an impressive state of decomposition must have taken days to develop. The stench notwithstanding, a number of the more intrepid visitors were standing on the carcass, waving cheerily to their companions on the beach below, and a gentleman armed with a hatchet was employed in hacking chunks of flesh from the side of the animal, dropping these into a pair of large buckets. I recognized him as the proprietor of an ordinary on Hawthorn Street, and made a mental note to strike that establishment from our list of potential eating-places.

Numbers of small crustaceans, not nearly so fastidious in their habits, swarmed merrily over the carcass, and I saw several people, also armed with buckets, picking the larger crabs and crayfish off like ripe fruit. Ten million sand fleas had joined the circus, too, and I retreated to a safe distance, rubbing my ankles.

I glanced back down the beach, seeing that Jamie had risen now and joined the conversation—Duff was looking increasingly restive, glancing back and forth from the whale to his boat. Clearly, he was anxious to return to business, before the attraction should disappear altogether.

At last he succeeded in escaping, and scampered away toward his piretta, looking hunted. Jamie and Roger came toward me, but the little boys were clearly not ready yet to leave the whale. Brianna nobly volunteered to watch them both, so that Marsali could climb the nearby lighthouse tower, to see whether there might be any sign of the *Octopus.*

“What have you been saying to poor Mr. Duff?” I asked Jamie. “He looked rather worried.”

“Aye? No need of worry,” he said, glancing toward the water, where Duff’s piretta was rapidly pulling back to the quay. “I’ve only put a wee bit of business in his way.”

“He knows where Lyon is,” Roger put in. He looked disturbed, but excited.

“And Mr. Lyon knows where Bonnet is—or if not where, precisely, at least how to get word to him. Let us go a bit higher, aye?” Jamie was still pale; he gestured toward the stair of the tower with his chin, wiping sweat from the side of his neck.

The air *was* fresher at the top of the tower, but I had little attention to spare for the view out over the ocean.

“And so …?” I said, not sure I wanted to hear the answer.

“So I have commissioned Duff to carry a message to Mr. Lyon. All being agreeable, we will meet with Mr. Bonnet at Wylie’s Landing, in a week’s time.”

I swallowed, feeling a wave of dizziness that had nothing to do with the height. I closed my eyes, clutching the wooden rail that surrounded the tiny platform we stood on. The wind was blowing hard, and the boards of the tower creaked and groaned, feeling frighteningly insubstantial.

I heard Jamie shift his weight, moving toward Roger.

“He is a man, ken?” he said quietly. “Not a monster.”

Was he? It was a monster, I thought, who haunted Brianna—and perhaps her father. Would killing him reduce him, make him no more than a man again?

“I know.” Roger’s voice was steady, but lacked conviction.

I opened my eyes, to see the ocean falling away before me into a bank of floating mist. It was vast and beautiful—and empty. One might well fall off the end of the world, I thought.

“Ye sailed wi’ our Stephen, aye? For what, two months, three?”

“Near on three,” Roger answered.

Our Stephen, was it? And what did Jamie mean by that homely usage, then?

Jamie nodded, not turning his head. He looked out over the rolling wash of the sea, the breeze whipping strands of hair loose from their binding to dance like flames, pale in daylight.

“Ye’ll have kent the man well enough, then.”

Roger leaned his weight against the rail. It was solid, but wet and sticky with half-dried spray, where spume from the rocks below had reached it.

“Well enough,” he echoed. “Aye. Well enough for what?”

Jamie turned then, to look him in the face. His eyes were narrowed against the wind, but straight and bright as razors.

“Well enough to ken he *is* a man—and no more.”

“What else would he be?” Roger felt the edge in his own voice.

Jamie turned back toward the sea, shading his eyes with his hand as he looked toward the sinking sun.

“A monster,” he said softly. “Something less than a man—or more.”

Roger opened his mouth to reply, but found he could not. For it was a monster that shadowed his own heart with fear.

“How did the sailors see him?” Claire’s voice came from Jamie’s other side; she leaned over the rail to look around him, and the wind seized her hair and shook it out in a flying cloud, stormy as the distant sky.

“On the *Gloriana*?” Roger took a deep breath, a whiff of dead whale mingling with the fecund scent of the salt marsh behind. “They … respected him. Some of them were afraid of him.” *Like me*. “He had the reputation of a hard captain, but a good one. Competent. Men were willing to ship with him, because he always came safe into port, his voyages were always profitable.”

“Was he cruel?” Claire asked. A faint line showed between her brows.

“All captains are cruel sometimes, Sassenach,” Jamie said, with a slight tinge of impatience. “They need to be.”

She glanced up at him, and Roger saw her expression change, memory softening her eyes, a wry thought tightening the corner of her mouth. She laid a hand on Jamie’s arm, and he saw her knuckles whiten as she squeezed.

“You’ve never done other than you had to,” she said, so quietly that Roger could scarcely hear her. No matter; the words were plainly not meant for him. She raised her voice then, slightly. “There’s a difference between cruelty and necessity.”

“Aye,” Jamie said, half under his breath. “And a thin line, maybe, between a monster and a hero.”

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THE BATTLE OF WYLIE'S LANDING

The sound was calm and flat, the surface barely ruffled by tiny wind-driven waves. And a bloody good thing, too, Roger thought, looking at his father-in-law. Jamie had his eyes open, at least, fixed on the shore with a sort of desperate intensity, as though the sight of solid land, however unreachable, might yet impart some comfort. Droplets of sweat gleamed on his upper lip, and his face was the same nacreous color as the dawn sky, but he hadn't vomited yet.

Roger wasn't seasick, but he felt nearly as ill as Jamie looked. Neither of them had eaten any breakfast, but he felt as though he'd swallowed a large mass of parritch, liberally garnished with carpet-tacks.

"That's it." Duff sat back on his oars, nodding toward the wharf ahead. It was cool on the water—almost cold at this hour—but the air was thick with moisture, and sweat ran down his face from his efforts. Peter sat silent on his own oars, dark face set in an expression indicating that he wanted nothing to do with this enterprise, and the sooner their unwelcome cargo disembarked, the better.

Wylie's Landing seemed like a mirage, floating in a layer of mist above the water amid a thick growth of needlerush and cord grass. Marshland, clumps of stunted coastal forest, and broad stretches of open water surrounded it, under an overwhelming arch of pale gray sky. By comparison to the green enclosures of the mountains, it seemed uncomfortably exposed. At the same time, it was completely isolated, evidently miles from any other sign of human habitation.

That was in part illusion; Roger knew that the plantation house was no more than a mile from the landing, but it was hidden by a dense growth of scraggy-looking forest that sprang from the marshy ground like some misshapen, dwarfish Sherwood, thick with vines and brush.

The landing itself consisted of a short wooden dock on pilings, and a collection of ramshackle sheds adjoining it, weathered to a silver-gray that seemed about to disappear into the lowering sky. A small open boat was drawn up on the shore, hull upturned. A zigzag split-rail fence enclosed a small pen beyond the sheds; Wylie must ship livestock by water now and then.

Jamie touched the cartridge box that hung at his belt, either for reassurance, or perhaps only to insure that it was still dry. His eyes went to the sky, assessing, and Roger realized with a sudden qualm that if it rained, the guns might not be dependable. Black powder clumped in the damp; more than a trace of moisture and it wouldn't fire at all. And the last thing he wanted was to find himself facing Stephen Bonnet with a useless gun.

He is a man, no more, he repeated silently to himself. Let Bonnet swell to supernatural proportions in his mind, and he was doomed. He groped for some reassuring image, and fastened on a memory of Stephen Bonnet, seated in the head of the *Gloriana,* breeches puddled round his bare feet, blond-stubbled jaw slack in the morning light, his eyes half-closed in the pleasure of taking a peaceful crap.

Shit, he thought. Think of Bonnet as a monster, and it became impossible; think of him as a man, and it was worse. And yet, it had to be done.

His palms were sweating; he rubbed them on his breeks, not even bothering to try to hide it. There was a dirk on his belt, along with the pair of pistols; the sword lay in the bottom of the boat, solid in its scabbard. He thought of John Grey's letter, and Captain Marsden's eyes, and tasted something bitter and metallic at the back of his throat.

At Jamie's direction, the piretta drew slowly nearer the landing, everyone on board alert for any sign of life.

"No one lives here?" Jamie asked, low-voiced, leaning over Duff's shoulder to scan the buildings. "No slaves?"

"No," Duff said, grunting as he pulled. "Wylie doesna use the landing sae often these days, for he's built a new road from his house—goes inland and joins wi' the main road toward Edenton."

Jamie gave Duff a cynical glance.

"And if Wylie doesna use it, there are others who do, aye?"

Roger could see that the landing was well situated for casual smuggling; out of sight from the landward side, but easily accessible from the Sound. What he had at first taken for an island to their right was in fact a maze of sandbars, separating the channel that led to Wylie's Landing from the main sound. He could see at least four smaller channels leading into the sandbanks, two of them wide enough to accommodate a good-sized ketch.

Duff chuckled under his breath.

"There's a wee shell-road as leads to the house, man," he said. "If anyone should come that way, ye'll have fair warnin'."

Peter stirred restively, jerking his head toward the sandbars.

"Tide," he muttered.

"Oh, aye. Ye'll no have long to wait—or ye will, depending." Duff grinned, evidently thinking this funny.

"Why?" Jamie said gruffly, not sharing the amusement. He was looking somewhat better, now that escape was at hand, but was obviously in no mood yet for jocularity.

"The tide's comin' in." Duff stopped rowing and leaned on his oars long enough to remove his disreputable cap and wipe his balding brow. He waved the cap at the sandbars, where a crowd of small shorebirds were running up and down in evident dementia.

"When the tide's out, the channel's too shallow to float a ketch. In two hours"—he squinted at the glow in the east that marked the sun's rising, and nodded to himself—"or a bit more, they can come in. If they're waitin' out there now, they'll come in at once, so as to finish the job and get off again before the tide turns. But if they've not come yet, they'll maybe need to wait for the evening surge. It's a chancy job, to risk the channels by night—but Bonnet's no the lad to be put off by a bit o' darkness. Still, if he's in nay rush, he might well delay 'til next morning. Aye, ye might have a bit of a wait."

Roger realized he had been holding his breath. He let it out and drew a deep, slow breath, smelling of salt and pines, with a faint stink of dead shellfish. So it would be soon—or perhaps not until after nightfall, or not until the next day's dawn. He hoped it would be soon—and hoped at the same time that it wouldn't.

The piretta slid in close to the wharf, and Duff thrust out an oar against one of the barnacle-crusted pilings, swinging the tiny boat deftly alongside. Jamie hoisted himself up onto the dock with alacrity, eager to reach dry land. Roger handed up the swords and the small bundle that contained their canteens and spare powder, then followed. He knelt on the dock, all his senses alert for the slightest sound of human movement, but heard nothing but the liquid singing of blackbirds in the marsh and the cry of gulls on the Sound.

Jamie rummaged in his pouch and pulled out a small purse, which he tossed down to Duff, with a nod. No more need be said; this was a token payment. The rest would be paid when Duff returned for them, in two days.

Jamie had waited to the last possible moment to make the arrangements, ensuring that Bonnet at least would be unreachable until after the meeting—the ambush—had taken place. If it was successful, Jamie would pay the rest of the money agreed; if it was not—Claire would pay.

He had a vision of Claire's face, pale and drawn, nodding in stiff-lipped agreement as Jamie explained the arrangements to Duff. Her eyes had flicked to Duff, then, with the fierce yellow ruthlessness of a hawk about to eviscerate a rat, and he had seen Duff flinch at the implicit threat. He hid a smile at the memory. If friendship and money were insufficient to keep Duff's mouth shut, perhaps fear of the White Lady would suffice.

They stood silently together on the dock, watching the piretta pull slowly away. The knot in Roger's stomach tightened. He would have prayed, but could not. He couldn't ask help for such a thing as he meant now to do—not from God or Michael the archangel; not from the Reverend or his parents. Only from Jamie Fraser.

He wondered now and then how many men Fraser had killed—if he counted. If he knew. It was a different thing, of course, to kill a man in battle or in self-defense, than to lie in ambush for him, planning murder in cold blood. Still, surely it would be easier for Fraser, what they meant to do.

He glanced at Fraser, and saw him watching the boat pull away. He stood still as stone, and Roger saw that his eyes were fixed somewhere far beyond the boat, beyond the sky and water—looking on some evil thing, not blinking. Fraser took a deep breath and swallowed hard. No, it wouldn't be easier for him.

Somehow, that seemed a comfort.

They explored all the sheds briefly, finding nothing but scattered rubbish: broken packing crates, heaps of moldy straw, a few gnawed bones left by dogs or slaves. One or two of the sheds had evidently once been used as living quarters, but not recently. Some animal had built a large, untidy nest against the wall of one shed; when Jamie prodded it with a stick, a plump gray rodent-like thing shot out, ran between Roger's feet, and sailed off the dock into the water with an unnerving splash.

They took up quarters in the largest shed, which was built on the wharf itself, and settled down to wait. More or less.

The plan was simplicity itself; shoot Bonnet the instant he appeared. Unless it rained, in which case it would be necessary to employ swords or knives. Stated like that, the procedure sounded altogether straightforward. Roger's imagination, though, was unable to leave it at that.

"Walk about if ye like," Jamie said, after a quarter-hour of watching Roger fidget. "We'll hear him come." He himself sat tranquil as a frog on a lily pad, methodically checking the assortment of weapons laid out before him.

"Mmphm. What if he doesna come alone?"

Jamie shrugged, eyes fixed on the flint of the pistol in his hand. He wiggled it to be sure it was firmly seated, then set the gun down.

"Then he does not. If there are men with him, we must separate him from them. I shall take him into one of the small sheds, on pretext of private conversation, and dispatch him there. You keep anyone from following; I shallna require more than a minute."

"Oh, aye? And then ye come strolling out and inform his men ye've just done for their captain, and then what?" Roger demanded.

Jamie rubbed a hand down the bridge of his nose, and shrugged again.

"He'll be dead. D'ye think he's the man to inspire such loyalty as would make his men seek vengeance for him?"

"Well … no," Roger said slowly. "Perhaps not." Bonnet was the type to inspire hard work from his men, but it was labor based on fear and the hope of profit, not love.

"I have discovered a good deal regarding Mr. Bonnet," Jamie observed, laying down the pistol. "He has regular associates, aye, but he doesna have particular friends. He doesna sail always with the same mate, the same crew—which sea captains often do when they find a few men who suit them well. Bonnet picks his crews as chance provides, and he chooses them for strength or skill—not for liking. That being so, I wouldna expect to find any great liking for him among them."

Roger nodded, acknowledging the truth of this observation. Bonnet had run a tight ship on the *Gloriana*, but there had been no sense of camaraderie, even with his mate and bosun. And it was true, what Jamie said; everything they had learned suggested that Bonnet picked up assistants as he required them; if he brought men with him to this rendezvous, they were unlikely to be a devoted lieutenant and crew—more likely sailors picked at random off the docks.

"All right. But if—when—we kill him, any men with him—"

"Will be in need of new employment," Jamie interrupted. "Nay, so long as we take care not to fire upon them, or give them reason to think we threaten them, I dinna think they'll trouble owermuch about Bonnet's fate. Still—" He picked up his sword, frowning slightly, and slid it in and out of the scabbard, to be sure it moved easily.

"I think if that should be the situation, then I will take Bonnet aside, as I said. Give me a minute to deal with him, then make some excuse and come as though to fetch me. Dinna stop, though; go straight through the sheds, and head for the trees. I'll come and meet ye there."

Roger eyed Jamie skeptically. Christ, the man made it sound like a Sunday outing—a turn by the river, and we'll meet in the park, I'll bring ham sandwiches and you fetch the tea.

He cleared his throat, cleared it again, and picked up one of his own pistols. The feel of it was cool and solid in his hand, a reassuring weight.

"Aye, then. Just the one thing. I'll take Bonnet."

Fraser glanced sharply at him. He kept his own eyes steady, listening to the pulse that had begun to hammer hard inside his ears.

He saw Fraser start to speak, then stop. The man stared thoughtfully at him, and he could hear the arguments, hammering on his inner ear with his pulse, as plainly as if they'd been spoken aloud.

You have never killed a man, nor even fought in battle. You are no marksman, and only half-decent with a sword. Worse, you are afraid of the man. And if you try and fail …

"I know," he said aloud, to Fraser's deep blue stare. "He's mine. I'll take him. Brianna's your daughter, aye—but she's my wife."

Fraser blinked and looked away. He drummed his fingers on his knee for a moment, then stopped, drawing breath in a deep sigh. He drew himself slowly upright and turned toward Roger once again, eyes straight.

"It is your right," he said, formally. "So, then. Dinna hesitate; dinna challenge him. Kill him the instant ye have the chance." He paused for a moment, then spoke again, eyes steady on Roger's. "If ye fall, though—know I will avenge you."

The nail-studded mass in his belly seemed to have moved upward, sticking in his throat. He coughed to shift it, and swallowed.

“Great,” he said. “And if you fall, I’ll avenge *you.* A bargain, is it?”

Fraser didn’t laugh, and in that moment, Roger understood why men would follow him anywhere, to do anything. He only looked at Roger for a long moment, and then nodded.

“A rare bargain,” he said softly. “Thank you.” Taking the dirk from his belt, he began to polish it.

They had no timepiece, but they didn’t need one. Even with the sky shrouded in low-lying clouds and the sun invisible, it was possible to feel the creep of minutes, the gradual shift of the earth as the rhythms of the day changed. Birds that had sung at dawn ceased singing, and the ones who hunted in morning began. The sound of water lapping against the pilings changed in tone, as the rising tide echoed in the space beneath the wharf.

The time of high tide came and passed; the echo beneath the wharf began to grow hollow, as the water started to drop. The pulse in Roger’s ears began to slacken, along with the knots in his gut.

Then something struck the dock, and the vibration juddered through the floor of the shed.

Jamie was up in an instant, two pistols through his belt, another in his hand. He cocked his head at Roger, then disappeared through the door.

Roger jammed his own pistols securely in his belt, touched the hilt of his dirk for reassurance, and followed. He caught a quick glimpse of the boat, the dark wood of its rail just showing above the edge of the wharf, and then was inside the smaller shed to the right. Jamie was nowhere in sight; he’d got to his own post, then, to the left.

He pressed himself against the wall, peering out through the slit afforded between hinge and door. The boat was drifting slowly along the edge of the dock, not yet secured. He could see just a bit of the stern; the rest was out of sight. No matter; he couldn’t fire until Bonnet appeared on the wharf.

He wiped his palm on his breeks and drew the better of his two pistols, checking for the thousandth time that priming and flint were in order. The metal of the gun smelled sharp and oily, in his hand.

The air was damp; his clothes stuck to him. Would the powder fire? He touched the dirk, for the ten-thousandth time, running through Fraser's instructions on killing with a knife. *Hand on his shoulder, drive it up beneath the breastbone, hard. From behind, the kidney, up from under*. God, could he do it face to face? Yes. He hoped it would be face to face. He wanted to see—

A coil of rope hit the dock; he heard the heavy thump, and then the scramble and thud of someone springing over the rail to tie up. A rustle and a grunt of effort, a pause … He closed his eyes, trying to hear through the thunder of his heart. Steps. Slow, but not furtive. Coming toward him.

The door stood half-ajar. He stepped silently to the edge of it, listening. Waiting. A shadow, dim in the cloudy light, fell through the door. The man stepped in.

He lunged out from behind the door and flung himself bodily at the man, knocking him back into the wall with a hollow thud. The man whooped in surprise at the impact, and the sound of the cry stopped him just as he got his hands round a distinctly unmasculine throat.

"Shit!" he said. "I mean, I—I—I beg your pardon, ma'am."

She was pressed against the wall, all his weight on her, and he was well aware that the rest of her was unmasculine, too. Blood, hot in his cheeks, he released her and stepped back, breathing heavily.

She shook herself like a dog, straightening her garments, and tenderly touching the back of her head where it had struck the wall.

"I'm sorry," he said, feeling both shocked and a complete prat. "I didn't mean— Are you hurt?"

The girl was as tall as Brianna, but more solidly built, with dark brown hair and a handsome face, broad-boned and deep-eyed. She grinned at Roger and said something incomprehensible, strongly scented with onions. She looked him up and down in a bold sort of way, then, evidently approving, put her hands under her breasts in a gesture of unmistakable invitation, jerking her head toward a corner of the shed, where mounds of damp straw gave off a fecund scent of not-unpleasant decay.

"Ahhh …" Roger said. "No. I'm afraid you're mistaken—no, don't touch that. No. *Non! Nein!"* He fumbled with her hands, which seemed determined to unfasten his belt. She said something else in the unfamiliar tongue. He didn't understand a word, but he got the sense of it well enough.

"No, I'm a married man. Would ye stop!"

She laughed, gave him a flashing glance from under long black lashes, and renewed her assault on his person.

He would have been convinced he was hallucinating, were it not for the smell. Engaged at close quarters, he realized that onions were the least of it. She wasn't filthy to look at, but had the deep-seated reek of someone just off a long sea voyage; he recognized that smell at once. Beyond that, though, the unmistakable scent of pigs wafted from her skirts.

"Excusez-moi, mademoiselle." Jamie's voice came from somewhere behind him, sounding rather startled. The girl was startled, too, though not frightened. She let go of his balls, though, allowing him to step back.

Jamie had a pistol drawn, though he held it by his side. He raised one eyebrow at Roger.

"Who's this, then?"

"How in hell should I know?" Struggling for composure, Roger shook himself back into some kind of order. "I thought she was Bonnet or one of his men, but evidently not."

"Evidently." Fraser seemed disposed to find something humorous in the situation; a muscle near his mouth was twitching fiercely. *"Qui êtes-vous, mademoiselle?"* he asked the girl.

She frowned at him, clearly not understanding, and said something in the odd language again. Both Jamie's brows rose at that.

"What's she speaking?" Roger asked.

"I've no idea." His look of amusement tinged with wariness, Jamie turned toward the door, raising his pistol. "Watch her, aye? She'll no be alone."

This was clear; there were voices on the wharf. A man's voice, and another woman. Roger exchanged baffled glances with Jamie. No, the voice was neither Bonnet's nor Lyon's—and what in God's name were all these women doing here?

The voices were coming closer, though, and the girl suddenly called out something in her own language. It didn't sound like a warning, but Jamie quickly flattened himself beside the door, pistol at the ready and his other hand on his dirk.

The narrow door darkened almost completely, and a dark, shaggy head thrust into the shed. Jamie stepped forward and shoved his pistol up under the chin of a very large, very surprised-looking man. Seizing the man by the collar, Jamie stepped backward, drawing him into the shed.

The man was followed almost at once by a woman whose tall, solid build and handsome face identified her at once as the girl's mother. The woman was blond, though, while the man—the girl's father?—was as dark as the bear he strongly resembled. He was nearly as tall as Jamie, but almost twice as broad, massive through the chest and shoulders, and heavily bearded.

None of them appeared to be at all alarmed. The man looked surprised, the woman affronted. The girl laughed heartily, pointing at Jamie, then at Roger.

"I begin to feel rather foolish," Jamie said to Roger. Removing the pistol, he stepped back warily. *"Wer seid Ihr?"* he said.

"I don't think they're German," Roger said. "She"—he jerked a thumb at the girl, who was now eyeing Jamie in an appraising sort of way, as though sizing up his potential for sport in the straw—"didna seem to understand either French or German, though perhaps she was pretending."

The man had been frowning, glancing from Jamie to Roger in an attempt to make out what they were saying. At the word "French," though, he seemed to brighten.

"Comment ça va?" he said, in the most execrable accent Roger had ever heard.

"Parlez-vous Francais?" Jamie said, still eyeing the man cautiously.

The giant smiled and put a callused thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"Un peu."

A very little *peu*, as they shortly discovered. The man had roughly a dozen words of French, just about enough to introduce himself as one Mikhail Chemodurow, his wife Iva, and his daughter, Karina.

"Rooshki," Chemodurow said, slapping a hand across his beefy chest.

"Russians?" Roger stared at them, flabbergasted, though Jamie seemed fascinated.

"I've never met a Russian before," he said. "What in Christ's name are they doing here, though?"

With some difficulty, this question was conveyed to Mr. Chemodurow, who beamed and flung a massive arm out, pointing toward the wharf.

"Les cochons," he said. *"Pour le Monsieur Wylie."* He looked expectantly at Jamie. *"Monsieur Wylie?"*

Given the eye-watering aroma rising off all three of the Russians, the mention of pigs came as no great surprise. The connection between Russian swineherds and Phillip Wylie was somewhat less obvious. Before the question could be gone into, though, there was a loud thump outside, and a grinding noise, as though some large wooden object had struck the dock. This was succeeded immediately by a piercing chorus of bellows and squeals—mostly porcine, but some of them human—and female.

Chemodurow moved with amazing speed for his size, though Jamie and Roger were on his heels as he shot through the door of the shed.

Roger had barely time to see that there were two boats now tied up at the wharf; the Russian's small bark, and a smaller open boat. Several men, bristling with knives and pistols, were swarming out of the smaller boat onto the dock.

Seeing this, Jamie dived to one side, disappearing out of sight round the edge of a smaller shed. Roger grabbed his pistol, but hesitated, not sure whether to fire or run. Hesitated a moment too long. A musket jammed up under his ribs, knocking out his breath, and hands snatched at his belt, taking pistols and dirk.

"Don't move, mate," the man holding the musket said. "Twitch, and I'll blow your liver out through your backbone."

He spoke with no particular animus, but sufficient sincerity that Roger wasn't inclined to test it. He stood still, hands half-raised, watching.

Chemodurow had waded into the invaders without hesitation, laying about him with hands like hams. One man was in the water, evidently having been knocked off the wharf, and the Russian had another in his grip, throttling him with brutal efficiency. He ignored all shouts, threats, and blows, his concentration fixed on the man he was killing.

Screams rent the air; Iva and Karina had rushed toward their boat, where two of the invaders had appeared on deck, each clutching a slightly smaller version of Karina. One of the men pointed a pistol at the Russian women. He appeared to pull the trigger; Roger saw a spark, and a small puff of smoke, but the gun failed to fire. The women didn't hesitate, but charged him, shrieking. Panicking, he dropped the gun and the girl he was holding, and jumped into the water.

A sickening thud wrenched Roger's attention from this byplay. One of the men, a short, squat figure, had clubbed Chemodurow over the head with the butt of a gun. The Russian blinked, nodded, and his grip on his victim loosened slightly. His assailant grimaced, took a tighter hold on the gun, and smashed him again. The Russian's eyes rolled up into his head and he dropped to the dock, shaking the boards with the impact.

Roger had been looking from man to man, searching urgently amid the melee for Stephen Bonnet. Look as he might, though, there was no trace of the *Gloriana*'s erstwhile captain.

What was wrong? Bonnet was no coward, and he was a natural fighter. It wasn't thinkable that he would send men in, and hang back himself. Roger looked again, counting heads, trying to keep track of men, but the conclusion became stronger, as the chaos quickly died down. Stephen Bonnet wasn't there.

Roger hadn't time to decide whether he was disappointed or relieved by this discovery. The man who had clubbed Chemodurow turned toward him at this point, and he recognized David Anstruther, the sheriff of Orange County. Anstruther recognized him, too—he saw the man's eyes narrow—but didn't seem surprised to see him.

The fight—such as it was—was wrapping up quickly. The four Russian women had all been rounded up and pushed into the largest shed, amid much screaming and shouting of curses, and the fallen Chemodurow was dragged in as well, leaving a disquieting smear of blood along the boards in his wake.

At this point, a pair of well-kept hands appeared on the edge of the dock, and a tall, elegantly lean man pulled himself up from the boat. Roger had no difficulty in recognizing Mr. Lillywhite, one of the Orange County magistrates, even without his wig and bottle-green coat.

Lillywhite had dressed for the occasion in plain black broadcloth, though his linen was as fine as ever and he had a gentleman's sword at his side. He made his way across the dock, in no great hurry, observing the disposition of matters as he went. Roger saw his mouth tighten fastidiously at sight of the trail of blood.

Lillywhite gestured to the man holding Roger, and at last, the bruising pressure of the gun-muzzle eased, allowing him to draw a deep breath.

"Mr. MacKenzie, is it not?" Lillywhite asked pleasantly. "And where is Mr. Fraser?"

He'd been expecting that question, and had had time to contemplate the answer.

"In Wilmington," he said, matching Lillywhite's pleasant tone. "You're rather far afield yourself, are ye not, sir?"

Lillywhite's nostrils pinched momentarily, as though smelling something bad—which he certainly was, though Roger doubted the reek of pigs was causing his disedification.

"Do not trifle with me, sir," the magistrate said curtly.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Roger assured him, keeping an eye on the fellow with the musket, who seemed disposed to resume jabbing.

"Though if we're asking that sort of question—where's Stephen Bonnet?"

Lillywhite gave a brief laugh, a sort of wintry amusement coming into his pale gray eyes.

"In Wilmington."

Anstruther appeared at the magistrate's elbow, squat and sweaty. He gave Roger a nod and an ugly grin.

"MacKenzie. Nice to see you again. Where's your father-in-law, and more important—where's the whisky?"

Lillywhite frowned at the sheriff.

"You haven't found it? Have you searched the sheds?"

"Aye, we looked. Nothing there but bits of rubbish." He rocked up onto his toes, menacing. "So, MacKenzie, where'd you hide it?"

"I haven't hidden anything," Roger replied equably. "There isn't any whisky." He was beginning to relax a little. Wherever Stephen Bonnet was, he wasn't here. He didn't expect them to be pleased at discovering that the whisky was a ruse, but—

The Sheriff hit him in the pit of the stomach. He doubled up, his vision went dark, and he struggled vainly to breathe, fighting a flash of panic as he relived his hanging, the black, the lack of air …

Bright floating spots appeared at the edges of his vision, and he drew breath, gasping. He was sitting on the dock, legs splayed out before him, the Sheriff clutching a handful of his hair.

"Try again," Anstruther advised him, shaking him roughly by the hair. The pain was irritating, rather than discomfiting, and he swiped a fist at the Sheriff, catching him a solid blow on the thigh. The man yelped and let go, hopping backward.

"Did you look on the other boat?" Lillywhite demanded, ignoring the Sheriff's discomfort. Anstruther glowered at Roger, rubbing his thigh, but shook his head in answer.

"Nothing there but pigs and girls. And where in fuck's name did *they* come from?" he demanded.

"Russia." Roger coughed, clenched his teeth against the resulting burst of pain, and got slowly to his feet, holding an arm across his middle to keep his guts from spilling out. The Sheriff doubled a fist in anticipation, but Lillywhite made a quelling gesture toward him. He looked incredulously at Roger.

"Russia? What have they to do with this business?"

"Nothing, so far as I know. They arrived soon after I did."

The magistrate grunted, looking displeased. He frowned for a moment, thinking, then decided to try another tack.

"Fraser had an arrangement with Milford Lyon. I have now assumed Mr. Lyon's part of the agreement. It is altogether proper for you to deliver the whisky to me," he said, attempting to infuse a note of businesslike politeness into his voice.

"Mr. Fraser has made other arrangements," Roger said, with equal politeness. "He sent me to say as much to Mr. Lyon."

That seemed to take Lillywhite aback. He pursed his lips, and worked them in and out, staring hard at Roger, as though to estimate his truthfulness. Roger stared blandly back, hoping that Jamie wouldn't reappear inopportunely and put paid to his story.

"How did you get here?" Lillywhite demanded abruptly. "If you did not travel on that boat?"

"I came overland from Edenton." Blessing Duff for the information, he waved casually over his shoulder. "There's a shell road back there."

The two of them stared at him, but he stared back, undaunted.

"Something smells fishy, and it isn't the marsh." Anstruther sniffed loudly in illustration, then coughed and snorted. "Phew! What a stink."

Lillywhite disregarded this, but went on looking at Roger with a narrowed eye.

"I think perhaps I must inconvenience you for a little longer, Mr. MacKenzie," he said, and turned to the Sheriff. "Put him in with the Russians—if that's what they are."

Anstruther accepted this commission with alacrity, prodding Roger in the buttocks with the muzzle of his musket as he forced him toward the shed where the Russians were imprisoned. Roger gritted his teeth and ignored it, wondering how high the Sheriff might bounce, if picked up and slammed down on the boards of the dock.

The Russians were all clustered in the corner of the shed, the women tending solicitously to their wounded husband and father, but they all looked up at Roger's entrance, with a babble of incomprehensible greetings and questions. He gave them as much of a smile as he could manage, and waved them back, pressing his ear to the wall of the shed in order to hear what Lillywhite and company were up to now.

He had hoped they would simply accept his story and depart—and they might still do that, once they satisfied themselves that there really was no whisky hidden anywhere near the landing. Another possibility had occurred to him, though; one that was making him increasingly uneasy.

It was clear enough from the behavior of the men that they had intended to take the whisky by force—if there had been any. And the way Lillywhite had held back, concealing himself … it wouldn't do, obviously, for a county magistrate to be revealed as having connections with smugglers and pirates.

As it was, since there was no whisky, Roger could report no actual wrong-doing on Lillywhite's part—it was illegal to deal in contraband, of course, but such arrangements were so common on the coast that the mere rumor of it wasn't likely to damage Lillywhite's reputation in his own inland county. On the other hand, Roger was alone—or Lillywhite thought he was.

There was clearly some connection between Lillywhite and Stephen Bonnet—and if Roger and Jamie Fraser began to ask questions, chances were good that it would come to light. Was whatever Lillywhite was engaged in sufficiently dangerous that he might think it worth killing Roger to prevent his talking? He had the uneasy feeling that Lillywhite and Anstruther might well come to that conclusion.

They could simply take him into the marsh, kill him and sink his body, then return to their companions, announcing that he had gone back to Edenton. Even if someone eventually traced the members of Lillywhite's gang, *and* if they could be persuaded to talk—both matters of low probability—nothing could be proved.

There was a lot of thumping and banging outside, gradually succeeded by more distant calling, as the sheds were re-searched, and the search then spread to the nearby marsh.

It occurred to Roger that Lillywhite and Anstruther might well have intended to kill him and Jamie after taking the whisky. In which case, there was still less to prevent them doing it now; they would be already prepared for it. As for the Russians—would they harm them? He hoped not, but there was no telling.

A light pattering rang on the tin roof of the shed; it was beginning to rain. Fine, if their powder got wet, they wouldn't shoot him; they'd have to cut his throat. He went from hoping that Jamie wouldn't show up too soon, to hoping fervently that he wouldn't show up too late. As to what he might do if and when he *did* show up …

The swords. Were the swords still where they had left them, in the corner of the shed? The rain had grown too loud for him to hear anything outside, anyway; he abandoned his listening post and went to look.

The Russians all looked up at him with mingled expressions of wariness and concern. He smiled and nodded, making little shooing gestures to get them out of the way. Yes, the swords were still there—that was something, and he felt a small surge of hope.

Chemodurow was conscious; he said something in a slurred voice, and Karina got up at once and came to stand by Roger. She patted him gently on the arm, then took one of the swords from him. She drew it from its scabbard with a ringing whoosh that made them all jump, then laugh nervously. She wrapped her hands round the hilt and held it over her shoulder, like a baseball bat. She marched over to the door and took up her station beside it, scowling fiercely.

"Great," Roger said, and gave her a broad smile of approval. "Anyone pokes his head in, take it off, aye?" He mimed a chopping motion with the side of his hand, and the Russians all made loud growling sounds of enthusiastic support. One of the younger girls reached for the other sword, but he smiled and indicated that he would keep it, thanks anyway.

To his surprise, she shook her head, saying something in Russian. He raised his eyebrows and shook his head helplessly. She tugged on his arm, and made him come with her, back toward the corner.

They had been busy during the brief period of their captivity. They had moved aside the rubbish, made a comfortable pallet for the injured man—and uncovered the large trapdoor installed in the floor, meant to be used by boats coming under the wharf at low tide, so that cargo could be handed directly up into the shed, rather than unloaded onto the dock.

The tide was going out now; it was a drop of more than six feet to the water's dark surface. He stripped to his breeks and hung by his hands from the edge of the trapdoor before dropping in feetfirst, not wanting to risk a dive into what might be dangerous shallows.

The water was higher than his head, though; he sank in a shower of silver bubbles, then his feet touched the sandy bottom and he launched himself upward, breaking the surface with a whoosh of air. He waved reassuringly at the circle of Russian faces peering down at him through the trapdoor, then struck out for the far end of the wharf.

From his perch on the roof of the shed, Jamie assessed the magistrate's way of moving, and the manner in which he fondled the weapon. Lillywhite turned away, his hand nervously caressing the hilt of his sword. A long reach, and a good bearing; quick, too, if a little jerky. To wear a sword under these circumstances suggested both a habit of familiarity with the weapon and a fondness for it.

He couldn't see Anstruther, who had pressed himself back against the wall of the shed, under the overhang of the roof, but he was less concerned with the Sheriff. A brawler, that one, and short in the arm.

"I say we kill them all. Only way to be safe."

There was a grunt of dubious assent from Lillywhite.

"That may be—but the men? We do not wish to put our fate in the hands of witnesses who may talk. We could have dealt with

Fraser and MacKenzie safely out of sight—but so many … perhaps we may leave these Russians; they are foreigners and seem not to speak any English.…"

"Aye, and how did they come here, I'd like to know? I'll warrant they wasn't caught up in a waterspout and set down here by accident. Someone knows about 'em, someone will come looking for 'em—and whoever that someone is, he's got some means to talk to 'em, I'll be bound. They've seen too much already—and if you mean to go on using this place …"

The rain was still light, but coming down steadily. Jamie turned his head to wipe the moisture out of his eyes against his shoulder. He was lying flat, arms and legs outspread like a frog's to keep from sliding down the pitch of the tin roof. He didn't dare to move, just yet. The rain was whispering out on the Sound, though, puckering the water like drawn silk, and making a faint ringing noise on the metal around him. Let it rain just that wee bit harder, and it would cover any noise he made.

He shifted his weight a little, feeling the press of the dirk, hard under his hipbone. The pistols lay beside him on the roof, likely useless in the rain. The dirk was his only real weapon at the moment, and one much better suited to surprise than to a frontal attack.

"… send the men back with the boat. We can go by the road, after …"

They were still talking, low-voiced, but he could tell that the decision had been made; Lillywhite only needed to convince himself that it was a matter of necessity, and that wouldn't take long. They'd send the men away first, though; the magistrate was right to be afraid of witnesses.

He blinked water out of his eyes and glanced toward the larger shed, where Roger Mac and the Russians were. The sheds were close together; the gaps between the staggered tin roofs no more than three or four feet. There was one shed between him and the larger one. Well, then.

He would take advantage of the men leaving to move across the roofs, and trust to luck and the rain to prevent Lillywhite or

Anstruther from looking up. Crouch above the door to the shed, and when they came to do the deed, wait just until they'd got the door open, then drop on the magistrate from above and hope to break his neck or at least disable him at once. Roger Mac could be depended on to rush out and help deal with the Sheriff, then.

It was the best plan he could contrive under the circumstances, and not a bad one, he thought. If he didn't slip and break his own neck, of course. Or a leg. He flexed his left leg, feeling the slight stiffness of the muscles in his calf. It was healed, but there was no denying the slight weakness remaining. He could manage well enough, walking, but jumping across rooftops …

"Aye, well, needs must when the Devil drives," he muttered. If it came to smash and he ruined the leg again, he'd better hope the Sheriff killed him, because Claire surely would.

The thought made him smile, but he couldn't think about her now. Later, when it was finished. His shirt was soaked through, stuck to his shoulders, and the rain was chiming off the tin roofs like a chorus of fairy-bells. Squirming cautiously backward, he got his knees under him and rose to a crouch, ready to drop flat again if anyone was looking up.

No one was on the dock. There were four men besides Lillywhite and the Sheriff; all of them were out in the soft ground to the south of the landing, poking through the waist-high grass in a desultory fashion. He took a deep breath and got his feet slowly under him. As he swiveled round, though, he caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye, and froze.

Holy Christ, there were men coming out of the wood. For an instant, he thought it was more of Lillywhite's doing, and then he realized that the men were black. All but one.

Les Cochons, the Russian had said. *Pour le Monsieur Wylie.* And here was Monsieur Wylie, coming with his slaves to collect his pigs!

He lay down on his belly again and squirmed over the wet metal, eeling toward the back of the shed roof. It was open to question, he thought, whether Wylie would be better disposed to help him or to run him through himself—but he did suppose the man had some stake in preserving his Russians.

The water was cold, but not numbing, and the pull of the tidal current wasn't great yet. Still, the injury to his throat and the searing of the canebrake fire had left him much shorter of breath than he used to be, and Roger found himself obliged to bob to the surface and gasp for air with every three or four strokes.

Ruby lips, above the water, he sang ironically to himself, *blowing bubb-les soft and fine* … He drew in a gulp of air, and trod water, listening. He had headed toward the south side of the landing first, but had heard voices above, and so reversed direction. He was just under the north edge of the wharf now, hidden in the deep shadow by the Russians' boat.

The smell of pigs was overwhelming, and he could hear muffled thumps and grunts from the hold, coming through the wood beside him. Christ, had they sailed that tiny craft all the way from Russia? It looked it; the wood was battered and dented.

No sound of voices nearby. It was raining hard, shushing into the Sound; that would help cover any racket he made. Ready, steady, go, then. He took a great lungful of air and launched himself into the rainy light beyond the landing.

He swam desperately, trying not to splash, expecting a musket ball between the shoulder blades every moment. He blundered into the weeds, felt the grasp and slash of sawgrass on arm and leg, rolled half-over, gasping, salt burning in the cuts, and then was on his hands and knees, crawling through the growth of marsh plants, black needlerushes waving over his head, rain pounding on his back, the water lapping just below his chin.

He stopped at last, chest heaving with the need for air, and wondered what in hell to do next. It was good to be out of the shed, but he hadn't a plan for what happened now. Find Jamie, he supposed—if he could, without being caught again.

As though the thought had drawn attention to him, he heard the slosh and swish of someone walking slowly through the marsh nearby. Searching. He froze, hoping the rain would cover the sound of his breath, loud and rasping in his ears.

Closer. Damn, they were coming closer. He fumbled at his belt, but he had lost the dirk, somewhere in his swimming. He got one knee up under his chin, braced himself to spring and run.

The grass above him swept suddenly away, and he leaped to his feet, just in time to avoid the spear that sliced into the water where he'd lain.

The spear quivered in front of him, six inches from his face. On the other side of it, a black man gaped at him, eyes saucered in amazement. The Negro closed his mouth, blinked at him, and spoke in tones of deepest accusation.

"You ain't no possum!"

"No," said Roger, mildly. "I'm not." He brushed a trembling hand down his chest, assuring himself that his heart was still inside it. "Sorry."

Phillip Wylie looked a great deal different at home, Roger thought, than he did in society. Attired for pig-catching in loose breeks and a farmer's smock, damp with rain, and minus any trace of wig, paint, powder, or patches, he was still elegantly slender, but looked quite normal, and reasonably competent. He also looked somewhat more intelligent, though his mouth did tend to keep dropping open, and he did insist on breaking into Jamie's account with questions and expostulations.

"Lillywhite? Randall Lillywhite? But what can he—"

"Concentrate, man," Jamie said impatiently. "I'm telling ye now, and I'll tell ye more later, but he and yon sheriff are like to be carving up your Russians like a set of Christmas hams, and we dinna go and tend to the matter this minute."

Wylie glared at Jamie, then looked suspiciously at Roger, who was standing under the cover of the forest, half-naked, soaking wet, and covered with blood-streaked mud.

"He's right," Roger croaked, then coughed, cleared his throat, and repeated it, more firmly. "He's right; there's not much time."

Wylie's lips compressed into a thin line, and he exhaled strongly through his nose. He looked round at his slaves, as though counting them; a half-dozen men, all carrying stout sticks. One or two had cane-knives at their belts. Wylie nodded, making up his mind.

"Come on, then."

Avoiding the telltale crunching of the shell-road, they made slow but steady progress through the marsh.

"Why pigs?" He heard Jamie ask curiously, as he and Wylie forged ahead of the group.

"Not pigs," Wylie replied. "Russian boars. For sport." He spoke rather proudly, swishing his own stick through the thick grass. "Everyone says that of all game, the Russian boar is the fiercest and most wily opponent. I propose to release them in the woods on my property and allow them to breed."

"Ye mean to hunt them?" Jamie sounded mildly incredulous. "Have ye ever hunted a boar?"

Roger saw Wylie's shoulders stiffen under his damp smock at the question. The rain had slackened, but was still coming down.

"No," he said. "Not yet. Have you?"

"Yes," Jamie said, but wisely didn't amplify the answer.

As they drew near the landing, Roger caught a glimpse of movement beyond. The smaller boat was pulling away.

"They've given up looking for me or the whisky, and sent their men away." Jamie wiped a hand down his face, slicking the rain off. "What say ye, Wylie? There's no time to lose. The Russians are in the main shed, on the wharf."

Once decided, Wylie was no ditherer.

"Storm the place," he said shortly.

He waved a hand, beckoning his slaves to follow, and headed for the landing at a trot. The whole party swerved onto the shell-road, thundering toward the wharf with a noise like an avalanche. That ought to give Lillywhite and Anstruther pause in their murdering, Roger thought. They sounded like an approaching army.

Barefoot, Roger kept to the marshy ground, and was in consequence slower than the rest. He saw a startled face peer out between the sheds, and quickly withdraw.

Jamie saw it too, and gave one of his wild Highland cries. Wylie jerked, startled, but then joined in, bellowing "Get out of it, you bastards!" Thus encouraged, the Negroes all began shouting and bellowing, waving their sticks with enthusiasm as they charged the landing.

It was something of an anticlimax to arrive on the wharf and find no one there save the captive Russians, who narrowly missed beheading Phillip Wylie when he imprudently shoved open the door to their prison without announcing himself.

A brief search of the Russian boat and the surrounding marsh turned up no trace of Lillywhite and Anstruther.

"Most like they swim for it," one of the Negroes said, returning from the search. He nodded across the channel, toward the tangle of the sandbars, and fingered his spear. "We go hunt them?" It was the man who had discovered Roger, evidently still eager to try his luck.

"They didn't swim," Wylie said shortly. He gestured at the tiny beach near the landing, an empty stretch of oyster shells. "They've taken my boat, blast them."

He turned away, disgusted, and began to give orders for unloading and penning the Russian boars. Chemodurow and his family had already been taken off to the plantation house, with the girls alternating between amazement at the black slaves and coy looks at Roger, who had retrieved his shirt and shoes, but whose breeches were still plastered to his body.

One of the slaves appeared from the shed with an armful of discarded weaponry, recalling Wylie temporarily to the duties of a host.

"I am obliged to you for your help in preserving my property, sir," he said to Jamie. He bowed, rather stiffly. "Will you not allow me to offer you and Mr. MacKenzie my hospitality?" He didn't sound thrilled about it, Roger noted, but still, he'd offered.

"I am obliged to you, sir, for your help in preserving our lives," Jamie said with equal stiffness, returning the bow. "And I thank ye, but—"

"We'd be delighted," Roger interrupted. "Thanks." He gave Wylie a firm handshake, surprising him very much, and grabbed Jamie by the arm, steering him toward the shell-road before he could protest. There were times and places to be on your high horse, he supposed, but this wasn't one of them.

"Look, ye havena got to kiss the man's bum," he said, in response to Jamie's mutterings, as they slogged toward the forest. "Let his butler give us a dry towel and a bit of lunch, and we'll be off while he's still busy with his boars. I've had no breakfast, and neither have you. And if we've got to walk to Edenton, I'm no doing it on an empty belly."

The mention of food seemed to go some way toward restoring Jamie's equanimity, and as they reached the semi-shelter of the wood, a mood of almost giddy cheerfulness had sprung up between them. Roger wondered if this was the sort of way you felt after a battle; the sheer relief of finding yourself alive and unwounded made you want to laugh and arse about, just to prove you still could.

By unspoken consent, they left discussion of recent events—and speculation as to the present whereabouts of Stephen Bonnet—for later.

"Russian boars, for Christ's sake," Jamie said, shaking himself like a dog as they paused under the shelter of the wood. "And I doubt the man's ever seen a boar in his life! Ye'd think he could manage to kill himself without going to such expense about it."

"Aye, what d'ye think it must have cost? More money than we'll see in ten years, likely, just to haul a lot of pigs … what, six thousand miles?" He shook his head, staggered at the thought.

"Well, to be fair about it, they're more than only pigs," Jamie said tolerantly. "Did ye not see them?"

Roger had, though only briefly. The slaves had been herding one of the animals across the dock as he'd emerged from the shed with his clothes. It was tall and hairy, with long yellow tushes that looked nasty enough.

It was emaciated from the long sea-voyage, though, its ribs showing and half its bristly pelt rubbed bald. It had obviously not got its landlegs yet, staggering and careening drunkenly on its ridiculous small hooves, eyes rolling, grunting in panic as the slaves shouted and poked at it with their poles. Roger had felt quite sorry for it.

"Oh, they're big enough, aye," he said. "And I suppose once they're filled out a bit, they'd be something to see. I wonder how they'll like this, though, after Russia?" He waved a hand at the damp, scrubby wood around them. The air was moist with rain, but the trees blocked most of the downfall, leaving it dark and resin-smelling under the low canopy of scrub oak and scraggy pines. Twigs and acorn caps crunched pleasantly under their boots on the sandy earth.

"Well, there are acorns and roots aplenty," Jamie observed, "and the odd Negro now and then, for a treat. I expect they'll do well enough."

Roger laughed, and Jamie grunted in amusement.

"Ye think I'm jesting, aye? Ye'll not have hunted boar, either, I suppose."

"Mmphm. Well, perhaps Mr. Wylie will invite us to come and—"

The back of his head exploded, and everything disappeared.

At some point he became aware again. Aware mostly of a pain so great that unconsciousness seemed immensely preferable. But aware too of pebbles and leaves pressing into his face, and of noises nearby. The clash and thud and grunt of men fighting in earnest.

He forced himself toward consciousness, and raised his head, though the effort made colored fireworks go off inside his eyes and made him want very badly to throw up. He braced himself on his folded arms, teeth gritted, and after a moment, his vision cleared, though things were still blurred.

It took a moment to make out what was happening; they were ten feet or so beyond the spot where he lay, with bits of tree and brush obscuring the fight. He caught a muttered "*A Dhia!*" though, among the panting and grunting, and felt a sharp pang of relief. Jamie was alive, then.

He got to his knees, swaying, and stayed there for a moment, his vision winking in and out of blackness. When it steadied, his head had fallen forward and he was staring at the ground. His sword lay a few feet away, half-covered with scuffed sand and leaves. One of his pistols was with it, but he didn't bother with that; he couldn't hold it steady, even if the powder were still dry enough to fire.

He scrabbled and fumbled, but once he'd got his hand wedged into the basket of the sword's hilt, he felt a little better; he wouldn't drop it, now. Something wet was running down his neck—blood, rain? It didn't matter. He staggered, clutched a tree with his free hand, blinked away the blackness, took another step.

He felt like the boar, unfamiliar ground shifting and treacherous under his feet. He trod on something that rolled and gave way, and he fell, landing hard on one elbow.

He turned awkwardly over, hampered by the sword, and found that he had stepped on Anstruther's leg. The Sheriff was lying on his back, mouth open, looking surprised. There was a large rip in his neck, and a lot of blood had soaked into the sand around him, rusty and stinking.

He recoiled, and the shock of it got him on his feet, with no memory of having stood up. Lillywhite's back was to him, the linen of his shirt wet and sticking to his flesh. He lunged, grunting, then flung back, beat, riposted …

Roger shook his head, trying to clear it of the idiotic terms of swordsmanship, then stopped, gasping with pain. Jamie's face was set in a maniac half-grin, teeth bared with effort as he followed his opponent's weapon. He'd seen Roger, though.

"Roger!" he shouted, breathless with the fight. "Roger, *a charaid!*"

Lillywhite didn't turn, but flung himself forward, feinting, beating away, lunging back in tierce.

"Not … stupid …" he gasped.

Roger realized dimly that Lillywhite thought Jamie was bluffing, trying to make him turn around. His vision was flickering round the edges again, and he grabbed for a tree, gripping hard to stay upright. The foliage was wet; his grip was slipping.

"Hey …" he called hoarsely, unable to think of any words. He raised his sword, the tip trembling. "Hey!"

Lillywhite stepped back and whirled around, eyes wide with shock. Roger lunged blindly, with no aim, but with all the power left in his body behind it.

The sword went into Lillywhite's eye, and a slithering crunch ran up Roger's arm, as metal scraped bone and went through to something softer, where it stuck. He tried to let go, but his hand was trapped in the basket-hilt. Lillywhite went stiff, and Roger could feel the man's life run straight down the sword, through his hand, and up his arm, swift and shocking as an electric current.

Panicked, he jerked and twisted, trying to get the sword free. Lillywhite spasmed, went limp, and fell toward him, flopping like a huge dead fish as Roger wrenched and yanked, vainly trying to free himself from the sword.

Then Jamie seized him by the wrist and got him loose, got an arm around him, and led him away, stumbling and blind with panic and pain. Held his head and rubbed his back, murmuring nonsense in Gaelic while he puked and heaved. Wiped his face and neck with handsful of wet leaves, wiped the snot from his nose with the wet sleeve of his shirt.

"You okay?" Roger mumbled, somewhere in the midst of this.

"Aye, fine," Jamie said, and patted him again. "You're fine, too, all right?"

At length he was on his feet again. His head had gone past the point of pain; it still hurt, but the pain seemed a separate thing from himself, hovering somewhere nearby, but not actually touching him.

Lillywhite lay face-up in the leaves. Roger closed his eyes and swallowed. He heard Jamie mutter something under his breath, and then a grunt, a rustling of leaves, and a small thud. When Roger opened his eyes, Lillywhite was lying face-down, the back of his shirt smeared with sand and acorn hulls.

"Come on." Jamie got him under the arm, pulled the arm over his shoulder. Roger lifted his free hand, waved it vaguely toward the bodies.

"Them. What should we do with … them?"

"Leave them for the pigs."

Roger could walk by himself by the time they left the wood, though he had a tendency to drift to one side or the other, unable to steer quite straight as yet. Wylie's house lay before them, a handsome construction in red brick. They picked their way across the lawn, ignoring the stares of several house-servants, who clustered at the upstairs windows, pointing down at them and murmuring to one another.

"Why?" Roger asked, stopping for a moment to shake some of the leaves from his shirt. "Did they say?"

"No." Jamie pulled a soggy wad of cloth that had once been a handkerchief from his sleeve and swished it in the ornamental fountain. He used it to mop his face, looked critically at the resultant streaks of filth, and soused it in the fountain again.

"The first I knew was the thud when Anstruther clubbed ye—here, your head's still bleedin'. I turned round to see ye lyin' on the ground, and the next instant, a sword came at me out o' nowhere, right across my ribs. Look at that, will ye?" He poked his fingers through a large rent in his shirt, wiggling them. "I ducked behind a tree, and barely got my own blade out in time. But neither of them said a word at all."

Roger pressed the proffered handkerchief gingerly to the back of his head. He sucked air through his teeth with a hiss as the cold water touched the wound.

"Shit. Is it only that my head's cracked, or does that make no sense? Why in Christ's name try so hard to kill us?"

"Because they wanted us dead," Jamie said logically, turning up his sleeves to wash his hands in the fountain. "Or someone else does."

The pain had decided to take up residence in Roger's head again. He was feeling sick again.

"Stephen Bonnet?"

"If I were a gambling man, I'd put good odds on it."

Roger closed one eye in order to correct a tendency for there to be two of Jamie.

"You *are* a gambling man. I've seen ye do it."

“Well, there ye are, then.”

Jamie ran a hand absently through his matted hair, and turned toward the house. Karina and her sisters had appeared at the window, and were waving ecstatically.

“What I want verra much to know just now is, where *is* Stephen Bonnet?”

“Wilmington.”

Jamie swung round, frowning at him.

“What?”

“Wilmington,” Roger repeated. He cautiously opened the other eye, but it seemed all right. Only one Jamie. “That’s what Lillywhite said—but I thought he was joking.”

Jamie stared at him for a moment.

“I hope to Christ he was,” he said.

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AMONG THE MYRTLES

Wilmington

By contrast with Fraser's Ridge, Wilmington was a giddy metropolis, and under normal circumstances, the girls and I should have fully enjoyed its delights. Given the absence of Roger and Jamie, and the nature of the errand they were bound upon, though, we were able to find little distraction.

Not that we didn't try. We lived through the creeping minutes of nights broken by crying children and haunted by imaginations worse than nightmare might be. I was sorry that Brianna had seen as much as she had, after the battle at Alamance; vague imaginings based on fear were bad enough; those based on close acquaintance with the look of ruined flesh, of smashed bone and staring eyes, were a good deal worse.

Rising heavy-eyed amid a crumple of discarded clothes and stale linen, we fed and dressed the children and went out to seek what mental respite might be found during the day in the distractions of horse-racing, shopping, or the competing musicales hosted once a week—on successive evenings—by Mrs. Crawford and Mrs. Dunning, the two most prominent hostesses in town.

Mrs. Dunning's evening had taken place the day after Roger and Jamie left. Performances upon the harp, violin, harpsichord, and flute were interspersed with recitations of poetry—at least it was referred to as poetry—and "Songs, both Comick and Tragick," sung by Mr. Angus McCaskill, the popular and courteous proprietor of the largest ordinary in Wilmington.

The Tragick songs were actually much funnier than the Comick ones, owing to Mr. McCaskill's habit of rolling his eyes up into his head during the more lugubrious passages, as though he had the lyrics written on the inside of his skull. I adopted a suitably solemn expression of appreciation, though, biting the inside of my cheek throughout.

Brianna required no such aid to courtesy. She sat staring at all the performances with a countenance of such brooding intensity that it seemed to disconcert a few of the musicians, who eyed her nervously, and edged toward the other side of the room, getting the harpsichord safely between her and them. Her attitude had nothing to do with the performance, I knew, but rather with a reliving of the arguments that had preceded the men's departure.

These had been prolonged, vigorous, and conducted in low voices, as the four of us walked up and down the quay at sunset. Brianna had been impassioned, eloquent, and ferocious. Jamie had been patient, cool, and immovable. I had kept my mouth shut, for once more stubborn than either of them. I could not in conscience side with Bree; I knew what Stephen Bonnet was. I would not side with Jamie; I knew what Stephen Bonnet was.

I knew what Jamie was, too, and while the thought of his going to deal with Stephen Bonnet was enough to make me feel as though I were hanging from a fraying rope over a bottomless pit, I did know that there were few men better equipped for such a task. For beyond the question of deadly skill, which he certainly had, there was the question of conscience.

Jamie was a Highlander. While the Lord might insist that vengeance was His, no male Highlander of my acquaintance had ever thought it right that the Lord should be left to handle such things without assistance. God had made man for a reason, and high on the list of those reasons was the protection of a family and the defense of its honor—whatever the cost.

What Bonnet had done to Brianna was not a crime that Jamie would ever forgive, let alone forget. And beyond simple vengeance, and the continuing threat that Bonnet might pose to Bree or Jemmy, there was the fact that Jamie felt himself responsible, at least in part, for such harm as Bonnet might do in the world—to our family, or to others. He had helped Bonnet to escape the gallows once; he would not be at peace until he had amended that mistake—and said so.

"Fine!" Brianna had hissed at him, fists clenched at her sides. "So you'll be at peace. Just fine! And how peaceful do you think Mama and I will be, if you or Roger is dead?"

"Ye'd prefer me to be a coward? Or your husband?"

"Yes!"

"No, ye wouldn't," he said with certainty. "Ye only think so now, because ye're afraid."

"Of course I'm afraid! So is Mama, only she won't say so, because she thinks you'll go anyway!"

"If she does think so, she's right," Jamie said, giving me a sidelong look, with a hint of a smile. "She's known me a long time, aye?"

I glanced at him, but shook my head and turned away, sealing my lips and staring out at the masts of the ships anchored in the harbor while the argument raged on.

Roger had finally put a stop to it.

"Brianna," he said softly, when she paused for breath. She turned toward him, face anguished, and he touched her shoulder. "I willna have this man in the same world as my children," he said, still softly, "or my wife. Do we go then with your blessing—or without it?"

She had sucked in her breath, bitten her lip, and turned away. I saw the tears brimming in her eyes, and the working of her throat as she swallowed them. She said no more.

Whatever word of blessing she had given him had been spoken in the night, in the quiet of their bed. I had given Jamie blessing and farewell in that same darkness—still without speaking a word. I couldn't. He *would* go, no matter what I said.

Neither of us slept that night; we lay in each other's arms, silently aware of each breath and shift of body, and when the shutters began to show cracks of gray light, we rose—he to make his preparations, I because I could not lie still and watch him go.

As he left, I stood on tiptoe to kiss him, and whispered the only important thing.

"Come back," I'd said. He'd smiled at me, smoothing a curl behind my ear.

"Ye ken what I said at Alamance? Well, it's no today, either, Sassenach. We'll both be back."

Mrs. Crawford's assembly, held the next evening, boasted the same performers, for the most part, as had Mrs. Dunning's, but had one novelty; it was there that I smelled myrtle candles for the first time.

"What is that lovely scent?" I asked Mrs. Crawford during the interval, sniffing at the candelabra that decorated her harpsichord. The candles were beeswax, but the scent was something both delicate and spicy—rather like bayberry, but lighter.

"Wax-myrtle," she replied, gratified. "I don't use them for the candles themselves, though one *can*—but it does take such a tremendous quantity of the berries, near eight pound to get only a pound of the wax, imagine! It took my bond-maid a week of picking, and she brought me barely enough as would make a dozen candles. So I rendered the wax, but then I mixed it in with the regular beeswax when I dipped the candles, and I will say I am pleased. It does give such a pleasant aroma, does it not?"

She leaned closer to me, lowering her voice to a confidential whisper.

"*Someone* said to me that Mrs. Dunning's home smelt last night as though the cook had scorched the potatoes at supper!"

And so, on the third day, faced with the alternatives of a day spent cooped up with three small children in our cramped lodgings, or a repeat visit to the much-diminished remains of the dead whale, I borrowed several buckets from our landlady, Mrs. Burns, commissioned a picnic basket, and marshalled my troops for a foraging expedition.

Brianna and Marsali consented to the notion with alacrity, if not enthusiasm.

“Anything is better than sitting around worrying,” Brianna said. “Anything!”

“Aye, and anything is better than the stink of filthy clouts and sour milk, too,” Marsali added. She fanned herself with a book, looking pale. “I could do wi’ a bit of air.”

I worried a little about Marsali’s ability to walk so far, given her expanding girth—she was in her seventh month—but she insisted that the exercise would benefit her, and Brianna and I could help to carry Joanie.

As is usual in cases of travel with small children, our departure was somewhat prolonged. Joanie spit up mashed sweet potato down the front of her gown, Jemmy committed a sanitary indiscretion of major proportions, and Germain disappeared during the confusion occasioned by these mishaps. He was discovered, at the conclusion of a half-hour search involving everyone in the street, behind the public livery stable, happily engaged in throwing horse dung at passing carriages and wagons.

Everyone forcibly cleaned, redressed, and—in Germain’s case—threatened with death and dismemberment, we descended the stairs again, to find that the landlord, Mr. Burns, had helpfully dug out an old goat-cart, with which he kindly presented us. The goat, however, was employed in eating nettles in the next-door garden, and declined to be caught. After a quarter of an hour’s heated pursuit, Brianna declared that she would prefer to pull the cart herself, rather than spend any longer playing ring-around-the-rosy with a goat.

“Mrs. Fraser, Mrs. Fraser!” We were halfway down the street, the children, buckets, and picnic basket in the goat-cart, when Mrs. Burns came hurrying out of the inn after us, a jug of small beer in one hand, and an ancient flintlock pistol in the other.

“Snakes,” she explained, handing me the latter. “My Annie says she saw at least a dozen adders, last time she walked that way.”

“Snakes,” I said, accepting the object and its attendant paraphernalia with reluctance. “Quite.”

Given that “adder” could mean anything from a water moccasin to the most harmless grass snake, and also given that Annie Burns had a marked talent for melodrama, I was not unduly concerned. I thought of dropping the gun into the picnic basket, but a glance at Germain and Jemmy, pictures of cherubic innocence, decided me of the unwisdom of leaving even an unloaded firearm anywhere near them. I dropped the pistol into my berry-bucket, instead, and put it over my arm.

The day was overcast and cool, with a light breeze off the ocean. The air was damp, and I thought there was a good chance of rain before long, but for the moment, it was very pleasant out, with the sandy earth packed down sufficiently from earlier rains to make the walking easy.

Following Mrs. Crawford's directions, we made our way a mile or so down the beach, and found ourselves at the edge of a thick growth of coastal forest, where scanty-needled pines mingled with mangroves and palmetto in a dense, sun-splintered tangle, twined with vines. I closed my eyes and breathed in, nostrils flaring at the intoxicating mixture of scents: mudflats and wet sand, pine resins and sea air, the last faint whiffs of dead whale, and what I had been looking for—the fresh, tangy scent of wax-myrtles.

"That way," I said, pointing into the tangle of vegetation. The going was too heavy for the cart now, so we left it, allowing the little boys to run wild, chasing tiny crabs and bright birds, as we made our way slowly into the scrubby forest. Marsali carried Joan, who curled up like a dormouse in her mother's arms and went to sleep, lulled by the sound of ocean and wind.

In spite of the heavy growth, the walking was more pleasant here than on the open beach; the wind-stunted trees were tall enough to give a pleasing sense of secrecy and refuge, and the footing was better, with a thin layer of decaying leaves and needles underfoot.

Jemmy grew tired of walking, and tugged on my skirt, raising both arms to be picked up.

"All right." I hung a berry-bucket from one wrist, and swung him up, with a crackle and pop of vertebrae; he was a very solid little boy. He twined his sandy feet comfortably round my waist and rested his face on my shoulder with a sigh of relief.

“All very well for you,” I said, gently patting his back. “Who’s going to give Grannie a ride, hey?”

“Grand-da,” he said, and giggled. He lifted his head, looking round. “W’ere Grand-da?”

“Grand-da’s busy,” I told him, taking care to keep my voice light and cheerful. “We’ll see Grand-da and Daddy soon.”

“Want Daddy!”

“Yes, so does Mummy,” I murmured. “Here, sweetie. See that? See the little berries? We’re going to pick some, won’t that be fun? No, don’t eat them! Jemmy, I said *no*, do *not* put them in your mouth, they’ll make you sick!”

We had found a luxuriant patch of wax-myrtles, and soon spread out, losing sight of each other amid the bushes as we picked, but calling out every few minutes, in order not to lose each other entirely.

I had put Jemmy down again, and was idly contemplating whether there might be any use for the berry-pulp, once the myrtle berries were boiled to render the wax, when I heard the soft crunch of footsteps on the other side of the bush I was picking from.

“Is that you, darling?” I called, thinking it was Brianna. “Perhaps we ought to have our lunch soon; I think it’s maybe coming on to rain.”

“Well, it’s a kind invitation, sure,” said a male voice, sounding amused. “I thank ye, ma’am, but I’ve made a decent breakfast not long since.”

He stepped out from behind the bush, and I stood paralyzed, completely unable to speak. My mind, oddly enough, was not paralyzed in the slightest; my thoughts were running at the speed of light.

If Stephen Bonnet’s here, Jamie and Roger are safe, thank God.

Where are the children?

Where is Bree?

Where’s that gun, goddamnit?

“Who’s that, *Grandmere*?” Germain, appearing from behind a bush with what appeared to be a dead rat dangling from one hand, approached me warily, blue eyes narrowed at the intruder.

"Germain," I said in a croak, not taking my eyes off Bonnet. "Go find your mother, and stay with her."

"*Grandmere*, is it? And who will his mother be, then?" Bonnet glanced from me to Germain and back, interested. He tilted back the hat he wore, and scratched at the side of his jaw.

"Never mind that," I said, as firmly as I could. "Germain, go!" I stole a look downward, but the pistol was not in my bucket. There were six buckets, and we had left three on the goat-cart; undoubtedly the gun was in one of those, worse luck.

"Oh, don't be goin' just yet, young sir." Bonnet made a move toward Germain, but the little boy took alarm at the gesture and skittered back, throwing the rat at Bonnet. It hit him in the knee, surprising him and making him hesitate for the split second necessary for Germain to vanish into the myrtles. I could hear his feet chuffing the sand as he ran, and hoped he knew where Marsali was. The last thing we needed was for him to lose himself.

Well, possibly not the very last thing, I amended. The very last thing we needed was for Stephen Bonnet to lay eyes on Jemmy, which he promptly did, when the latter wandered out of the bushes an instant later, his short gown smeared with mud, more mud oozing through the fingers of his clenched fists.

There was no sun, but Jemmy's hair seemed to blaze with the brilliance of a striking match. Paralysis disappearing in a heartbeat, I grabbed him up, and backed away several steps, knocking over the half-filled bucket of myrtle berries.

Bonnet's eyes were the pale green of a cat's, and they brightened now with the intentness of a cat that spots a creeping mouse.

"And who will this sweet manneen be?" he asked, taking a step toward me.

"My son," I said instantly, and pulled Jem tight against my shoulder, ignoring his struggles. With the natural perversity of small children, he seemed to be fascinated by Bonnet's Irish lilt, and kept turning his head to stare at the stranger.

"Favors his father, I see." Drops of sweat glistened in the heavy blond brows. He smoothed first one, then the other, with the tip of his finger, so the sweat ran in trickles down the sides of his face, but the pale green eyes never wavered in their regard. “As does his … sister. And is your lovely daughter anyplace nearby, dear one? I should enjoy to renew our acquaintaince—such a charmin’ girl, Brianna.” He smiled.

“No doubt you would,” I said, making no particular effort to disguise the edge in my voice. “No, she isn’t. She’s at home—with her husband.” I leaned heavily on the word *husband*, hoping that Brianna was near enough to hear me and take warning, but he paid it no mind.

“At home, now. And where do ye call home then, Mum?” He took off the hat and wiped his face with his sleeve.

“Oh … in the backcountry. A homestead.” I waved vaguely in the direction I thought roughly west. What was this—social conversation? And yet the choices seemed distinctly limited. I could turn and flee—at which point he would catch me handily, burdened as I was with Jemmy. Or I could stand here until he revealed what he wanted. I didn’t think he was out for a picnic among the myrtles.

“A homestead,” he repeated, a muscle twitching in his cheek. “What business brings ye so far from home, and I might ask?”

“You might not,” I said. “Or rather—you might ask my husband. He’ll be along shortly.”

I took another step backward as I said this, and he took a step toward me at the same time. A flicker of panic must have crossed my face, for he looked amused, and took another step.

“Oh, I doubt that, Mrs. Fraser dear. For see, the man’s dead by now.”

I squeezed Jemmy so hard that he let out a strangled squawk.

“What do you mean?” I demanded hoarsely. The blood was draining from my head, coagulating in an icy ball round my heart.

“Well, d’ye see, it was a bargain,” he said, the look of amusement growing. “A division of duties, ye might say. My friend Lillywhite and the good Sheriff were to attend to Mr. Fraser and Mr. MacKenzie, and Lieutenant Wolff was to manage Mrs. Cameron’s end of the business. That left me with the pleasant task of makin’ myself reacquainted with my son and his mother.” His eyes sharpened, focusing on Jemmy.

"I don't know what you are talking about," I said, through stiff lips, taking a better grip on Jemmy, who was watching Bonnet, owl-eyed.

He gave a short laugh at that.

"Sure, and ye're no hand at lyin', ma'am; you'll forgive the observation. Ye'd never make a card player. Ye know well enough what I mean—ye saw me there, at River Run. Though I confess as how I should be obliged to hear exactly what you and Mr. Fraser was engaged in, a-butchering that Negro woman that Wolff killed. I did hear as how the picture of a murderer shows in the victim's eyes—but ye didn't seem to be looking at her eyes, from what I could see. Was it magic of a sort ye were after doing?"

"Wolff—it *was* him, then?" Just at the moment, I didn't really care whether Lieutenant Wolff had murdered scores of women, but I was willing to engage in any line of conversation that offered the possibility of distracting him.

"Aye. He's a bungler, Wolff," he said, dispassionately. "But 'twas him that found out about the gold to begin with, so he claimed a part in the doings."

How far away were Marsali and Brianna? Had Germain found them? I could hear nothing over the whine of insects and the distant wash of surf. Surely they must hear us talking, though.

"Gold," I said, raising my voice a little. "Whatever do you mean, gold? There isn't any gold at River Run; Jocasta Cameron told you as much."

He puffed air through his lips in genial disbelief.

"I will say as Mrs. Cameron is a better liar than yourself, dear one, but sure, I didn't believe her, either. The doctor saw the gold, see."

"What doctor?" A baby's high-pitched cry came faintly through the bushes—Joan. I coughed, hoping to drown it out, and repeated, more loudly, "What doctor do you mean?"

"Rawls, I think was his name, or Rawlings." Bonnet was frowning slightly, head turned toward the sound. "I'd not the pleasure of his acquaintance, though; I might be mistaken."

"I'm sorry—I still have no idea what you're talking about." I was trying simultaneously to hold his gaze and to scan the ground nearby for anything that might be used as a weapon. Bonnet had a pistol in his belt, and a knife, but showed no disposition to draw either one. Why should he? A woman with an armload of two-year-old was not any sort of threat.

One thick blond brow flicked up, but he seemed in no great hurry, whatever he was about.

“No? Well, ’twas Wolff, as I was sayin’. It was a tooth to be drawn or somesuch; he met with this sawbones in Cross Creek. Bought the fellow a drink in reward, and spent the evening inside a wine-skin with him, in the end. Ye’ll know the Lieutenant’s weakness for the drink—the doctor was another sot, I hear, and the two of them thick as thieves before the dawn. Rawlings let out that he’d seen a great quantity of gold at River Run, for he’d just come from there, see?”

Rawlings had either passed out or sobered up enough to say no more, but the revelation had been enough to renew the Lieutenant’s determination to gain the hand—and property—of Jocasta Cameron.

“The lady would be havin’ none of him, though, and then she ups and declares as she’ll be takin’ the one-armed fella instead. ’Twas a cruel blow to the Lieutenant’s pride, alas.” He grinned at that, showing a missing molar on one side.

Lieutenant Wolff, furious and baffled, appealed to his particular friend, Randall Lillywhite, for advice.

“Why, that—so that’s why he arrested the priest at the Gathering? To prevent him marrying Mrs. Cameron to Duncan Innes?”

Bonnet nodded.

“That would be the way of it. A matter of delay, ye might say, so as to be havin’ the opportunity of lookin’ further into the matter.”

Said opportunity had occurred at the wedding. As we had theorized, someone—Lieutenant Wolff—had in fact attempted to drug Duncan Innes with a cup of punch spiked with laudanum. The plan had been to render him insensible and pitch him into the river. During the uproar occasioned by Duncan’s disappearance and presumedly accidental death, Wolff would have the chance to search the premises thoroughly for the gold—and eventually, to renew his addresses to Jocasta.

"But the black bitch drank the stuff herself," he said dispassionately. "Didn't die of it, worse luck—but she could have said who gave the cup to her, of course, and so Wolff slipped round and mixed ground glass into the gruel they were after feedin' her."

"What I want to know," I said, "is just how *you* got involved in this. Why were you there at River Run?"

"And isn't the Lieutenant the friend of my bosom these many years past, dear one? He came to me for help in disposing of the one-armed lad, so as he could take care to be seen in the midst of the party, enjoyin' himself in all innocence whilst accident was befallin' his rival." He frowned slightly, tapping a finger on the hilt of his pistol.

"I would have done better to bash the Innes fella on the head and toss him in, once I saw the laudanum had gone astray. Couldn't get at him, though—he spent half the day in the jakes, and someone always in there with him, bad cess to them."

There was nothing on the ground near me that could possibly be used as a weapon. Twigs, leaves, scattered fragments of shell, a dead rat—well, that had worked for Germain, but I didn't think Bonnet could be surprised twice in that fashion. Jemmy was losing his fear of the stranger as we talked, and was beginning to squirm to get down.

I edged backward a little; Bonnet saw it, and smiled. He wasn't bothered. Obviously he didn't think I could escape, and just as obviously, he was waiting for something. Of course—he had told me, himself. He was waiting for Brianna. I realized belatedly that he had clearly followed us out here from town; he knew that Marsali and Brianna were somewhere nearby—much easier simply to wait until they revealed themselves.

My best hope was that someone else would happen along; the weather was muggy and damp, but not raining yet, and this was a well-known spot for picnicking, according to Mrs. Burns. If someone did come along, how could I take advantage of it? I knew that Bonnet would not have the slightest compunction in simply shooting anyone who got in his way—he was boasting about the rest of his bloodthirsty plans.

"Mrs. Cameron—Mrs. Innes, she'll be now—seemed willin' enough to talk, when I suggested that her husband might soon be lackin' a few of his treasured parts, though as it happens, she was lyin', then, too, deceitful old trout. But it came to me, ponderin' the matter afterward, that she might be more obligin', were it a matter of her heir." He nodded toward Jemmy, and clicked his tongue at the boy. "So, lad, will we be goin' to see your great-auntie, then?"

Jemmy looked suspiciously at Bonnet, cuddling back against me.

"Whozat?" he asked.

"Oh, it's a wise child that knows its father, isn't it? I'm your Da, lad—was your mother not after telling you so?"

"Daddy?" Jemmy looked at Bonnet, then at me. "At's not Daddy!"

"No, he isn't your daddy," I assured Jemmy, shifting my hold. My arms were beginning to ache under the strain of holding him. "He's a bad man; we don't like him."

Bonnet laughed.

"Is there no shame with you at all, dear one? Of course he's mine—it's your daughter has said so, to my face."

"Nonsense," I said. I had maneuvered my way into a narrow gap between two of the evergreen wax-myrtle bushes. I'd try to distract him back into conversation, then seize a moment to whirl round, set Jemmy down, and urge him to run. With luck, I could block the gap long enough to prevent Bonnet grabbing him before he could get away—if he *would* run.

"Lillywhite," I said, taking hold of the conversation. "What did you mean, Lillywhite and the Sheriff were going to—to attend to my husband and Mr. MacKenzie?" Merely mentioning the possibility made me feel sick; sweat was running down my sides, but my face felt cold and clammy.

"Oh, that? What I said, Mrs. Fraser. Your husband is dead." He had started looking past me, pale green eyes flicking through the shrubbery. He was clearly expecting Brianna to show up at any moment.

"What happened at the wedding showed us clear enough that it wouldn't do, to leave Mrs. Cameron with so much protection. No, if we meant to try again, the thing to do was to see that she's no manfolks to call upon, either for help, or vengeance. So when your husband suggested to Mr. Lyon that he fetch me along to a private meeting, I thought that might be a suitable opportunity to dispose of him and Mr. MacKenzie—two birds with one whisky keg, as ye might be sayin'—but then I thought best if Lillywhite were the lad to handle that end of things, him and his tame sheriff." He smiled. "I thought best I come to be fetchin' my son and his mother along, so as not to risk anything goin' amiss, ye see. We'll—"

I shifted weight, spun on my heel, and plunked Jemmy on the ground on the far side of the bushes.

"Run!" I said urgently to him. "Run, Jem! Go!" There was a flash of red as he scampered away, whimpering with fear, and then Bonnet crashed into me.

He tried to shove me aside, but I was ready for that, and grabbed for the pistol at his belt. He felt me snatch, and jerked back, but I had my fingers on the butt. I got it free and flung it behind me, as I fell to the ground with him on top of me.

He rolled off me and up on to his knees, where he froze.

"Stay there, or by the Holy Virgin, I'll blow your head off!"

Gasping from the fall, I sat up slowly, to see Marsali, pale as a sheet, aiming the ancient flintlock at him over the swell of her belly.

"Shoot him, *Maman*!" Germain was behind her, small face alight with eagerness. "Shoot him like a porcupine!"

Joan was somewhere back in the bushes; she began to wail at the sound of her mother's voice, but Marsali didn't take her eyes off Bonnet. Christ, had she loaded and primed the gun? I thought she must have; I could smell a whiff of black powder.

"Well, now," Bonnet said slowly. I could see his eyes trace the distance between him and Marsali—fifteen feet or more, too much to reach her with a dive. He put one foot on the ground, beginning to rise. He could reach her in three strides.

"Don't let him stand up!" I scrabbled up onto my own feet, shoving at his shoulder. He fell to the side, catching himself on one hand, then heaved back, faster than I could have imagined, seizing me round the waist and pulling me back down, this time on top of him.

There were screams from behind me, but I had no attention to spare. I stabbed my fingers at his eye, narrowly missing as he jerked me sideways; my nails slid off his cheekbone, raking furrows in his skin. We rolled in a flurry of petticoats and Irish oaths, me grabbing for his privates, him trying at once to throttle me and protect himself.

Then he squirmed and flipped over like a fish, and we ended with his arm locked tight around my neck, holding me against his chest. There was a whisper of metal on leather, and something cold against my neck. I stopped struggling, and took a deep breath.

Marsali's eyes were the size of saucers, her mouth clamped tight. Her gaze, thank heaven, was still trained on Bonnet, and so was the gun.

"Marsali," I said, very calmly, "shoot him. Right now."

"Be putting the gun down, colleen," Bonnet said, with equal calmness, "or I'll cut her throat on the count of three. One—"

"Shoot him!" I said, with all my force, and took my last deep gulp of air.

"Two."

"Wait!"

The pressure of the blade across my throat lessened, and I felt the sting of blood as I took a breath I had not expected to be given. I hadn't time to enjoy the sensation, though; Brianna stood amid the myrtles, Jemmy clinging to her skirts.

"Let her go," she said.

Marsali had been holding her breath; she let it out with a gasp and sucked air deep.

"He isn't about to let me go, and it doesn't matter," I said fiercely to them both. "Marsali, shoot him. *Now!*"

Her hand tightened on the gun, but she couldn't quite do it. She glanced at Brianna, white-faced, then back, her hand trembling.

"Shoot him, *Maman*," Germain whispered, but the eagerness had gone from his face. He was pale, too, and stood close to his mother.

"You'll come along with me, darlin', you and the lad." I could feel the vibration through Bonnet's chest as he spoke, and sensed the half-smile on his face, though I couldn't see it. "The others can go."

"Don't," I said, trying to make Bree look at me. "He won't let us go, you know he won't. He'll kill me and Marsali, no matter what he says. The only thing to do is shoot him. If Marsali can't do it, Bree, you'll have to."

That got her attention. Her eyes jerked to me, shocked, and Bonnet grunted, half in annoyance, half in amusement.

"Condemn her mother? She's not the girl to be doing such a thing, Mrs. Fraser."

"Marsali—he'll kill you, and the babe with you," I said, straining every muscle to make her understand, to force her to fire. "Germain and Joan will die out here, alone. What happens to me doesn't matter, believe me—for God's sake, *shoot him now!*"

She fired.

There was a spark and puff of white smoke, and Bonnet jerked. Then her hand sagged, the muzzle of the gun tilted down—and the wad and ball fell out on the sand with a tiny plop. Misfire.

Marsali moaned in horror, and Brianna moved like lightning, seizing the fallen bucket and hurling it at Bonnet's head. He yelped and threw himself aside, letting go his grip on me. The bucket struck me in the chest and I caught it, stupidly staring down into it. It was damp inside, with a scattering of the blue-white waxy berries stuck to the wood.

Then Germain and Jemmy were both crying, Joan was shrieking her head off in the wood, and I dropped the bucket and crawled madly for shelter behind a yaupon bush.

Bonnet was back on his feet, face flushed, the knife in his hand. He was clearly furious, but made an effort to smile at Brianna.

"Ah, now, darlin'," he said, having to raise his voice to be heard above the racket. "It's only yourself and my son I'm wanting. I'll not be harming either of you."

"He's not your son," Brianna said, low-voiced and vicious. "He'll never be yours."

He grunted contemptuously.

"Oh, aye? That's not how I heard it, in that dungeon in Cross Creek, sweetheart. And now I see him …" He looked at Jemmy again, nodding slowly. “He’s mine, darlin’ girl. He’s the look of me—haven’t ye, boyo?”

Jemmy buried his face in Brianna’s skirts, howling.

Bonnet sighed, shrugged, and gave up any pretense of cajolement.

“Come on, then,” he said, and started forward, obviously intending to scoop Jemmy up.

Brianna’s hand rose out of her skirts, and aimed the pistol I had yanked out of his belt back at the place it had come from. Bonnet stopped in mid-step, mouth open.

“What about it?” she whispered, and her eyes were fixed, unblinking. “Do you keep your powder dry, Stephen?”

She braced the pistol with both hands, drew aim at his crotch, and fired.

He was fast, I’d give him that. He hadn’t time to turn and run, but was reaching to cover his threatened balls with both hands, even as she pulled the trigger. Blood exploded in a thick spray through his fingers, but I couldn’t tell what she’d hit.

He staggered back, clutching himself. He stared wildly round, as though unable to believe it, then sank to one knee. I could hear him breathing, hard and fast.

We all stood paralyzed, watching. One hand scrabbled at the sand, leaving bloody furrows. Then he rose, slowly, doubled over, the other hand pressed into his middle. His face was dead white, green eyes like dull water.

He stumbled round, gasping, and made off like a bug that’s been stepped on, leaking and hitching. There was a crashing noise as he blundered through the bushes, and then he was gone. Beyond a palmetto tree, I could see a line of pelicans flying, ungainly and impossibly graceful against the lowering sky.

I was still crouched on the ground, chilled with shock. I felt something warm slide down my cheek, and realized it was a raindrop.

“Is he right?” Brianna was crouching beside me, helping me sit up. “Do you think he’s right? Are they dead?” She was white to the lips, but not hysterical. She had Jemmy in the crook of her arm, clinging to her neck.

"No," I said. Everything seemed remote, as though it were happening in slow motion. I stood up slowly, balancing precariously, as though not sure quite how to do it.

"No," I said again, and felt no fear, no panic at the memory of what Bonnet had said; nothing but a certainty in my chest, like a small, comforting weight. "No, they're not." Jamie had told me; this was not the day when he and I would part.

Marsali had vanished into the wood to retrieve Joanie. Germain was bent over the splotches of blood on the sand, studying them with fascination. It occurred to me dimly to wonder what type they were, but then I dismissed the thought from my mind.

"He'll never be yours," she had said.

"Let's go," I said, patting Jemmy gently. "I think we'll make do with unscented candles, for now."

Roger and Jamie appeared at dawn two days later, rousing everyone in the inn by pounding at the door, and causing people in the neighboring houses to throw open their shutters and put their nightcapped heads out in alarm, owing to the resultant whooping and yelling. I was reasonably sure that Roger had a minor concussion, but he refused to be put to bed—though he did allow Bree to hold his head in her lap and make noises of shocked sympathy about the impressive lump on it, while Jamie gave us a terse account of the battle of Wylie's Landing, and we gave a somewhat confused explanation of our adventures in the myrtle groves.

"So Bonnet's not dead?" Roger asked, opening one eye.

"Well, we don't know," I explained. "He got away, but I don't know how badly he was hurt. There wasn't a dreadful lot of blood, but if he was hit in the lower abdomen, that would be a terrible wound, and almost certainly fatal. Peritonitis is a very slow and nasty way to die."

"Good," Marsali said, vindictively.

"Good!" Germain echoed, looking proudly up at her. "*Maman* shot the bad man, *Grandpere,*" he told Jamie. "So did Auntie. He was *full* of holes—there was blood everywhere!"

"Holes," Jemmy said happily. "Holes, holes, lotsa holes!"

"Well, maybe one hole," Brianna murmured. She didn't look up from the damp cloth with which she was gently sponging dried blood from Roger's scalp and hair.

"Oh, aye? Well, if ye only took off a finger or one of his balls, lass, he might survive," Jamie observed, grinning at her. "Wouldna improve his temper, though, I dinna suppose."

Fergus arrived on the noon packet boat, triumphantly bearing the registered, stamped, and officially sealed deeds for the two land grants, thus putting the cocked hat on the day's rejoicing. The celebrations were limited, though, owing to the sobering knowledge that one rather major loose end remained.

After a vigorous discussion, it was decided—meaning that Jamie made up his mind and pigheadedly refused to entertain dissenting views—that he and I would ride west at once to River Run. The young families would remain in Wilmington for a few days, to complete business, and to keep an ear out for any report of a wounded or dying man. They would then proceed back to Fraser's Ridge, keeping strictly clear of Cross Creek and River Run.

"Lieutenant Wolff canna be using threats to you or the lad to influence my aunt, if ye're nowhere near him," Jamie pointed out to Brianna.

"And as for you, *mo charadean,*" he said to Roger and Fergus, "ye canna be leaving the women and weans to look out for themselves—God kens who they might shoot next!"

It was only as he closed the door on the resulting laughter that he turned to me, ran a fingertip over the scratch on my throat, and then pulled me so hard against himself that I thought my ribs would break. I clung tight to him on the landing, not caring that I couldn't breathe, nor whether anyone might see; happy only to be touching him—and to have him there to touch.

"Ye did right, Claire," he muttered at last, mouth against my hair. "But for God's sake, never do it again!"

So it was that he and I left at dawn next day, alone.

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SLY AS FOXES

We arrived at River Run near sundown three days later, horses lathered and filthy, and ourselves in no better case. The place seemed peaceful enough, the last of the spring light glowing on green lawns and spotlighting the white marble statues and the stone of Hector's mausoleum among its dark yews.

"What do you think?" I asked Jamie. We had reined up at the foot of the lawn, looking the situation over cautiously before approaching the house.

"Well, no one's burned the place down," he replied, standing in his stirrups to survey the prospect. "And I dinna see rivers of blood cascading down the front stair. Still …" He sat down, reached into his saddlebag, and withdrew a pistol, which he loaded and primed as a precaution. With this tucked into the waistband of his breeks and concealed by the skirts of his coat, we rode slowly up the drive to the front door.

By the time we had reached it, I knew something was wrong. There was a sinister air of stillness about the house; no sound of scurrying servants, no music from the parlor, no scents of supper being fetched in from the cookhouse. Most peculiar of all, Ulysses was not there to greet us; our knocking went unanswered for several minutes, and when the door was at last opened, it was Phaedre, Jocasta's body-servant, who appeared.

She had looked dreadful when I had last seen her, nearly a year before, after her mother's death. She didn't look much better now; there were circles under her eyes, and her skin looked bruised and drawn, like a fruit beginning to go bad.

When she saw us, though, her eyes lighted and her mouth relaxed in visible relief.

"Oh, Mr. Jamie!" she cried. "I been prayin' for somebody to come help, ever since yesterday, but I thought for sure it would be Mr. Farquard, and then we maybe be in worse trouble, he such a man for the law and all, even if he is your auntie's friend."

Jamie raised an eyebrow at this rather confused declaration, but nodded reassuringly and squeezed her hand.

"Aye, lass. I dinna believe I've been an answer to prayer before, but I've no objection. Is my aunt … well?"

"Oh, yes, sir—*she's* well enough."

Withdrawing before we could ask further questions, she beckoned us toward the stair.

Jocasta was in her boudoir, knitting. She raised her head at the sound of feet, alert, and before anyone could say anything, asked "Jamie?" in a quavering voice, and stood up. Even at a distance, I could see that there were mistakes in the knitting, missed stitches and open runs; most unlike her usual fastidious needlework.

"Aye, it's me, Aunt. And Claire. What's amiss, then?" Crossing the room in two strides, he reached her side and took her arm, patting her hand in reassurance.

Her face underwent the same transformation of relief that we had seen in Phaedre, and I thought she might give way at the knees. She stiffened her spine, though, and turned toward me.

"Claire? Thank Blessed Bride ye've come, though how—well, never mind it for now. Will ye come? Duncan's hurt."

Duncan lay in bed in the next room, inert under a stack of comforters. At first, I was afraid he might be dead, but he stirred at once at the sound of Jocasta's voice.

"Mac Dubh?" he said, puzzled. He poked his head up from the mound of covers, squinting to see in the dimness of the room. "What in God's name brings you here?"

"Lieutenant Wolff," Jamie said, a little caustically. "Is the name perhaps familiar to ye?"

"Aye, ye might say so." There was a slightly odd tone to Duncan's voice, but I paid it no mind, engaged in lighting candles and in excavating him sufficiently from the bedclothes to find out what the matter was.

I was expecting to find a knife or gunshot wound. At first examination, there was nothing whatever of the sort visible, and it took a few moments' mental regrouping to discover that what he was suffering from was a broken leg. It was a simple fracture of the lower tibia, fortunately, and while undoubtedly painful, it seemed to be no great threat to his health.

I sent Phaedre to find some splinting materials, while Jamie, informed that Duncan stood in no great danger, sat down to get to the bottom of things.

"He has been here? Lieutenant Wolff?" he asked.

"Aye, he has." Again the slight hesitation.

"Has he gone, then?"

"Oh, aye." Duncan shuddered a little, involuntarily.

"Am I hurting you?" I asked.

"Oh, no, Mrs. Claire," he assured me. "I was only—well …"

"Ye may as well tell me straight out, Duncan," Jamie said, in a tone of mild exasperation. "I think it'll no be a tale that improves wi' keeping, aye? And if it's the sort of tale I think, then I have a bittie story to tell to you, as well."

Duncan eyed him narrowly, but then sighed, capitulating, and lay back on the pillow.

The Lieutenant had arrived at River Run two days before, but unlike his usual habit, had not come to the front door to be announced. Instead, he had left his horse hobbled in a field a mile from the house, and approached stealthily on foot.

"We only realized as much, because of finding the horse later, ye see," Duncan explained to me, as I bound his leg. "I didna ken he was here at all, until I went out to the necessary after supper, and he leaped at me, out o' the dark. I near died o' fright, and then I near died of being shot, for he fired at me, and if I had had an arm on that side, I daresay he would have struck it. Only I hadna got one, so he didn't."

In spite of his disability, Duncan had fought back ferociously, butting the Lieutenant in the face, charging him, and knocking him backward.

"He staggered and tripped himself on the brick walk, and fell backward so as he hit his head a dreadful smackit." He shuddered again at memory of the sound. "Like a melon hit wi' an ax, it was."

"Och, aye. So, was he killed at once, then?" Jamie asked, interested.

"Well, no." Duncan had grown easier in his manner, telling the tale, but now began to look uneasy again. "Now, see, *Mac Dubh*, here's the pinch of the matter. For I'd gone staggering, too, when I knocked him ower, and I stepped into the stone channel from the necessary and snapped my leg, and there I lay, groaning by the walk. Ulysses heard me callin' at last, and came down, and Jo after him."

Duncan had told Jocasta what had happened, as Ulysses had gone to fetch a couple of grooms to help carry Duncan into the house. And then, between the pain of his broken leg and his habit of leaving difficulties to the butler to be resolved, had likewise left the Lieutenant.

"It was my fault, *Mac Dubh,* and I ken it well," he said, his face drawn and pale. "I ought to have given orders of some kind; though in fact I canna think even now what I ought to have said, and I've had time and plenty enough to think."

The rest of the story, pried out of him with some reluctance, was that Jocasta and Ulysses had evidently conferred on the matter, and concluded that the Lieutenant had gone beyond being a nuisance, and become an outright threat. And that being so …

"Ulysses killed him," Duncan said baldly, then stopped, as though appalled afresh. He swallowed, looking deeply unhappy. "Jo says as how she ordered him to do it—and Christ knows, *Mac Dubh,* she might have done so. She's no the woman to be trifled with, let alone to have her servants murdered, herself threatened, and her husband set upon."

I gathered from his hesitance, though, that some small doubt about Jocasta's part in this still lingered in his mind.

Jamie had grasped the main point troubling him, though.

"Christ," he said. "The man Ulysses will be hangit on the spot, or worse, if anyone hears of it. Whether my aunt ordered it, or no."

Duncan looked a little calmer, now that the truth was out. He nodded.

"Aye, that's it," he agreed. "I canna let him go to the gallows—but what am I to do about the Lieutenant? There's the Navy to be considered, to say nothing of sheriffs and magistrates." That was a definite point. A good deal of the prosperity of River Run depended upon its naval contracts for timber and tar; Lieutenant Wolff had in fact been the naval liaison responsible for such contracts. I could see that His Majesty's Navy might just possibly be inclined to look squiggle-eyed at a proprietor who had killed his local naval representative, no matter what the excuse. I imagined that the law, in the person of Sheriff and magistrates, might take a more lenient view of the situation—save for the person of the perpetrator.

A slave who shed the blood of a white person was automatically condemned, regardless of provocation. It would make no difference what had happened—even with a dozen witnesses to testify to Wolff's attack on Duncan, Ulysses would be doomed. If anyone found out about it. I began to understand the air of desperation that hung over River Run; the other slaves were well aware of what might happen.

Jamie rubbed a knuckle over his chin.

"Ah … just how did … I mean, would it not be possible to say that ye'd done it yourself, Duncan? It was self-defense, after all—and I've evidence that the man did come in order to murder ye, wi' the notion of marrying my aunt then by force, or at least holding her hostage so as she might be threatened into telling about the gold."

"Gold?" Duncan looked blank. "But there isna any gold here. I thought we'd got that straight last year."

"The Lieutenant and his associates thought there was," I told him. "But Jamie can tell you all about that, in a bit. What *did* happen to the Lieutenant, exactly?"

"Ulysses cut his throat," Duncan said, and swallowed, Adam's apple bobbing in his own throat. "I should be pleased enough to say

I'd done it, aye, only …"

Beyond the simple difficulty of cutting someone's throat with only one hand, it was evidently all too apparent that the Lieutenant's throat had been cut by a left-handed person—and Duncan, of course, lacked a left hand altogether.

I happened to know that Jocasta Cameron—like her nephew—was left-handed, but it seemed more tactful not to mention that at the moment. I glanced at Jamie, who raised both brows at me.

Would she? I asked silently.

A MacKenzie of Leoch? his cynical look said back.

"Where *is* Ulysses?" I asked.

"In the stable, most like, if he hasna already headed west." Knowing that if anyone learned the truth of the Lieutenant's death, Ulysses would be condemned at once, Jocasta had sent her butler to saddle a horse, with instructions to flee into the mountains, should anyone come.

Jamie drew a deep breath and rubbed a hand over his head, thinking.

"Well, then. I should say the best thing, perhaps, is for the Lieutenant to disappear. Where have ye put him for the moment, Duncan?"

A muscle near Duncan's mouth twitched, in an uneasy attempt at a smile.

"I believe he's in the barbecue pit, *Mac Dubh*. Covered over wi' burlap, and piled with hickory wood, disguised as a pork carcass."

Jamie's brows went up again, but he merely nodded.

"Aye, then. Leave it to me, Duncan."

I left instructions for Duncan to be given honeyed water and tea brewed with boneset and cherry bark, and went outside with Jamie to contemplate methods of disappearance.

"The simplest thing would be just to bury him somewhere, I suppose," I said.

"Mmphm," Jamie said. He lifted the pine torch he was carrying, frowning thoughtfully at the humped mound of burlap in the pit. I hadn't liked the Lieutenant in the least, but it looked rather pitiful.

“Maybe. I’m thinkin’, though—the slaves all ken what’s happened. If we bury him on the place, they’ll ken that, too. They wouldna tell anyone, of course—but he’ll haunt the place, aye?”

A shiver ran up my spine, engendered as much by the matter-of-factness of his tone as by his words, and I pulled my shawl closer round me.

“Haunt the place?”

“Aye, of course. A murder victim, done to death here, and hidden, unavenged?”

“You mean … really haunt the place?” I asked, carefully, “or do you only mean the slaves would think so?”

He shrugged, twitching his shoulders uneasily.

“I dinna think it matters so much, does it? They’ll avoid the spot where he’s buried, one of the women will see the ghost at night, rumors will get round, as they do—and next thing, a slave at Greenoaks will say something, someone in Farquard’s family will hear of it, and before ye know it, someone will be over here, asking questions. Given that the Navy is like to be looking for the Lieutenant before too long anyway … what d’ye say to weighting the body and putting it in the river? That’s what he had in mind for Duncan, after all.”

“Not a bad notion,” I said, considering it. “But he meant Duncan to be found. There’s a lot of boat traffic on the river, and it isn’t very deep up this far. Even if we weighted the body well, it’s possible it would rise, or someone snag it with a pole. Would it matter if someone found it, though, do you think? The body wouldn’t be connected with River Run.”

He nodded slowly, moving the torch aside to keep the sparks from showering over his sleeve. There was a light wind, and the elms near the barbecue pit whispered restlessly overhead.

“Aye, that’s so. Only, if someone does find him, there’ll be an inquiry. The Navy will send someone to try to find out the truth of the matter—and they’ll come here, asking questions. What d’ye think will happen, if they were to badger the slaves, askin’ had they seen the Lieutenant, and so on?”

"Mm, yes." Given the slaves' present acute state of nerves, I imagined that any inquiry would send one or more of them into a state of panic, in which anything might be blurted out.

Jamie was standing quite still, staring at the burlap-draped shape with an expression of deep abstraction. I drew a deep breath, caught a faint scent of decaying blood, and let it out again, quick.

"I suppose … we could burn him," I said, and swallowed a sudden taste of bile. "He *is* already in the pit, after all."

"It's a thought," Jamie said, and one corner of his mouth quirked in a faint smile. "But I think I've a better one, Sassenach." He turned to look thoughtfully at the house. A few windows were dimly alight, but everyone was inside, cowering.

"Come on, then," he said, with sudden decision. "There'll be a sledgehammer in the stable, I expect."

The front of the mausoleum was covered by an ornamental grille of black wrought iron, with an enormous lock, its metal decorated by sixteen-petalled Jacobite roses. I had always considered this to be merely one of Jocasta Cameron's affectations, since I doubted that grave-robbers were a great threat in such a rural setting. The hinges scarcely creaked when Jamie unlocked the grille and swung it open; like everything else at River Run, it was maintained in impeccable condition.

"You really think this is better than burying or burning him?" I asked. There was no one nearby, but I spoke in a near whisper.

"Oh, aye. Auld Hector will take care of him, and prevent him doin' harm," Jamie replied matter-of-factly. "And it's blessed ground, in a manner of speaking. No a matter of leaving his soul to wander about, makin' trouble, aye?"

I nodded, a little uncertainly. He was probably right; in terms of belief, Jamie understood the slaves much better than I did. For that matter, I wasn't sure whether he was speaking only of what the psychological effect on them might be—or whether he was himself convinced that Hector Cameron ought to be capable of dealing with this *ex post facto* threat to his wife and plantation.

I lifted the torch so Jamie could see what he was doing, and set my teeth in my lower lip.

He had wrapped the sledgehammer in rags, so as not to chip the marble blocks. The small blocks of the front wall, inside the grille, had been expertly cut to fit and lightly mortared in place. The first blow knocked two of the blocks a few inches out of place. A few more blows, and a dark space showed, where the blocks had given way enough to show the blackness inside the mausoleum.

Jamie stopped to wipe sweat from his forehead, and muttered something under his breath.

"What did you say?"

"I said, it stinks," he replied, sounding puzzled.

"This is surprising, is it?" I asked, a little testily. "How long has Hector Cameron been dead, four years?"

"Well, aye, but it's no—"

"What are you doing?" Jocasta Cameron's voice rang out behind me, sharp with agitation, and I jumped, dropping the torch.

It flickered, but didn't go out, and I snatched it up again, waving it to encourage the flame. The flame rose and steadied, shedding a ruddy glow on Jocasta, who stood on the path behind us, ghostly in her white nightgown. Phaedre huddled behind her mistress, no more of her face visible than the brief shine of eyes in the darkness. The eyes looked scared, flicking from Jamie and me to the dark hole in the facade of the mausoleum.

"What am I doing? Disposing of Lieutenant Wolff, what else?" Jamie, who had been as startled as I had by his aunt's sudden appearance, sounded a little cross. "Leave it to me, Aunt. Ye needna concern yourself."

"You are not—no, ye mustn't open Hector's tomb!" Jocasta's long nose twitched, obviously picking up the scent of decay—which was faint, but distinct.

"Dinna fash yourself, Aunt," Jamie said. "Go back to the house. I'll manage. It will all be well."

She ignored his soothing words, advancing blindly over the walk, hands groping in the empty air.

"No, Jamie! Ye mustn't. Close it up again. Close it, for God's sake!"

The panic in her voice was unmistakable, and I saw Jamie frown in confusion. He looked uncertainly from his aunt to the hole in the mausoleum. The wind had dropped, but now rose in a small gust, wafting a much stronger scent of death around us. Jamie's face changed, and ignoring his aunt's cries of protest, he knocked loose more blocks with several quick blows of the padded hammer.

"Bring the torch, Sassenach," he said, setting down the hammer, and with a sense of creeping horror, I did so.

We stood shoulder to shoulder, peering through the narrow gap in the blocks. Two coffins of polished wood stood inside, each on a pedestal of marble. And on the floor between them …

"Who is he, Aunt?" Jamie's voice was quiet as he turned to speak to her.

She stood as if paralyzed, the muslin of her gown flapping round her legs in the wind, pulling strands of white hair from beneath her cap. Her face was frozen, but the blind eyes darted to and fro, seeking an impossible escape.

Jamie stepped forward and grabbed her fiercely by the arm, making her start from her frozen trance.

"Co a th'ann?" he growled. "Who is he? Who?"

Her mouth worked, trying to form words. She stopped, swallowed, tried again, eyes still flickering to and fro over his shoulder, looking at God knew what. Had she still been able to see when they put him in there? I wondered. Did she see it now, in memory?

"His name—his name was Rawlings," she said faintly, and something inside my chest fell like an iron weight.

I must have moved or made some sound, for Jamie's eyes went to me. He reached out a hand for mine, and held on tightly, though his eyes went back to Jocasta.

"How?" he asked, calmly, but with a tone that warned that he would brook no evasion.

She closed her eyes then, and sighed, broad shoulders slumping suddenly.

"Hector killed him," she said.

"Oh, aye?" Jamie cast a cynical glance at the coffins inside the mausoleum, and the huddled mass that lay on the floor between them. "A good trick, that. I hadna realized my uncle was so capable."

"Before." Her eyes opened again, but she spoke dully, as though nothing mattered any longer. "He was a doctor, Rawlings. He'd come to look at my eyes, once before. When Hector took ill, he called the man back. I canna say quite what happened, but Hector caught him nosing round where he should not, and smashed his head in. He was a hot-tempered man, Hector."

"I should say so," Jamie said, with another glance at the body of Dr. Rawlings. "How did he get in here?"

"We—he—hid the corpse, meaning to carry it off and leave it in the wood. But then … Hector got worse, and couldna leave his bed. Within a day, he was dead, too. And so …" She lifted a long white hand, gesturing toward the draft of dank chill that floated from the open tomb.

"Great minds think alike," I murmured, and Jamie gave me a dirty look, letting go my hand. He stood contemplating the stillness inside the violated mausoleum, thick brows drawn down in a frown of concentration.

"Oh, aye?" he said again. "Whose is the second coffin?"

"Mine." Jocasta was recovering her nerve; her shoulders straightened and her chin lifted.

Jamie made a small puffing noise and glanced at me. I could believe that Jocasta would callously leave a dead man to lie exposed, rather than put him in her own pristine coffin … and yet. To do so drastically increased the odds of discovery, slim as those might be.

No one would have opened Jocasta's coffin until it was time to receive her own body; Dr. Rawlings' corpse could have lain there in complete safety, even were the mausoleum to be opened for some reason. Jocasta Cameron was selfish—but by no means stupid.

"Put Wolff in, then, if you must," she said. "He can lie on the floor with the other one."

"Why not put him in your coffin, Aunt?" Jamie asked, and I saw that he was looking at her intently.

"No!" She had begun to turn away, but at this whipped back, her blind face fierce in the torchlight. "He is dung. Let him lie and rot in the open!"

Jamie narrowed his eyes at her response, but didn't reply. Instead, he turned to the tomb and began to shift the loosened blocks.

"What are you doing?" Jocasta could hear the grating noise of the shifting marble, and became agitated anew. She turned round on the walk, but became disoriented, staring off toward the river. I realized that she must now be completely blind, unable even to see the light from the torch.

I had no attention to pay her just then, though. Jamie wedged himself through the gap in the blocks, and stepped inside.

"Light me, Sassenach," he said softly, and his voice echoed slightly in the small stone chamber.

Breathing very shallowly, I followed him. Phaedre had begun to moan in the darkness outside; she sounded like the *ban-sidhe* that howls for approaching death—but this death had come long since.

The coffins were equipped with brass plates, gone slightly green with damp, but still easily readable. "Hector Alexander Robert Cameron," read one, and "Jocasta Isobeail MacKenzie Cameron," the other. Without hesitation, Jamie seized the edges of the lid of Jocasta's coffin and pulled up.

It wasn't nailed; the lid was heavy, but shifted at once.

"Oh," Jamie said softly, looking down.

Gold will never tarnish, no matter how damp or dank its surroundings. It will lie at the bottom of the sea for centuries, to emerge one day in some random fisherman's net, bright as the day it was smelted. It glimmers from a rocky matrix, a siren's song that has called to men for thousands of years.

The ingots lay in a shallow layer over the bottom of the coffin. Enough to fill two small chests, each chest heavy enough to require two men—or a man and a strong woman—to carry it. Each ingot stamped with a fleur-de-lis. One third of the Frenchman's gold.

I blinked at the shimmer, and looked aside, my eyes blurring with fractured light. It was dark on the floor, but I could still make out the huddled form against the pale marble. "Nosing where he should not." And what had he seen, Daniel Rawlings, that had made him draw the fleur-de-lis in the margin of his casebook, with that discreet notation, "Aurum"?

Hector Cameron was still alive, then. The mausoleum had not yet been sealed. Perhaps when Dr. Rawlings rose to follow his wandering patient, Hector had led him here unwitting, going down in the night to view his hoard? Perhaps. Neither Hector Cameron nor Daniel Rawlings could say, now, how it had been, or what had happened.

I felt a thickening in my throat, for the man whose bones lay now at my feet, the friend and colleague whose instruments I had inherited, whose shade had stood at my elbow, lending me both courage and comfort, when I laid hands on the sick and sought to heal them.

"Such a waste," I said softly, looking down.

Jamie lowered the coffin lid, gently, as though the coffin held an occupant whose rest had been disturbed.

Outside, Jocasta stood still on the path. She had an arm round Phaedre, who had stopped whimpering, but it was not clear which of them was supporting the other. Jocasta must know now from the noise where we were, but she faced the river still, eyes fixed, unblinking in the torchlight.

I cleared my throat, hugging the shawl tighter with my free hand.

"What shall we do, then?" I asked Jamie.

He turned and looked back into the tomb for a moment, then shrugged a little.

"We'll leave the Lieutenant to Hector, as we planned. As for the doctor …" He drew breath slowly, troubled gaze fixed on the slender bones that lay in a graceful fan, pale and still in the light. A surgeon's hand—once.

“I think,” he said, “we will take him home with us—to the Ridge. Let him lie among friends.”

He brushed past the two women without acknowledgment or pardon, and went to fetch Lieutenant Wolff.

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A THRUSH'S DREAM

Fraser's Ridge
May, 1772

The night air was cool and fresh. So early in the year, the bloodthirsty flies and mosquitoes hadn't started yet; only random moths came in through the open window now and then, to flutter round the smoored hearth like bits of burning paper, brushing past their outflung limbs in brief caress.

She lay as she had fallen, half on top of him, heart thumping loud and slow in her ears. From here, she could see out through the window; the jagged black line of trees on the far side of the dooryard, and beyond them a section of sky, lit with stars, so near and bright that it should be possible to step out among them and walk from one to another, higher and higher, to the hook of the crescent moon.

"You're not mad at me?" he whispered. He spoke more easily now, but lying with her ear on his chest, she could hear the faint catch in his voice, the point where he forced air hard through his scarred throat to form the words.

"No." His hand was on her hair, stroking. "I didn't ever tell you not to read it."

His fingers touched her shoulder, lightly, and her toes curled with pleasure at the feeling. Did she mind? No. She supposed she ought to feel exposed in some way, the privacy of her thoughts and dreams laid bare to him—but she trusted him with them. He would never use those things against her.

Besides, once set down on paper, the dreams became a separate thing from her, herself. Much like the drawings that she made; a reflection of one facet of her mind, a brief glimpse of something once seen, once thought, once felt—but not the same thing as the mind or heart that made them. Not quite.

"Fair's fair, though." Her chin rested in the hollow of his shoulder. He smelled good, bitter and musky with the scent of satisfied desire. "Tell me one of your dreams, then."

A laugh vibrated through his chest, nearly soundless, but she felt it.

"Only one?"

"Yes, but it has to be an important one. Not the flying ones, or the ones where you're being chased by a monster, or the ones where you go to school without your clothes on. Not the ones that everybody has—one that only *you* have."

One of her hands was on his chest, scratching gently to make the dark curly hairs twitch and rise. The other was under the pillow; if she moved her fingers slightly, she could feel the smooth little shape of the ancient wifie, as he called it. She could imagine her own womb swelling, round and hard. She could feel the clutch and soft spasm in her lower belly; aftershocks of their lovemaking. Would it be this time?

He turned his head on the pillow, thinking. Long lashes lay against his cheek, black as the lines of the trees outside. He turned back then, lifting them, and his eyes were the color of moss, soft and vivid in the shadowed light.

"I could be romantic," he whispered, and his fingers drifted down her back, so that she felt gooseflesh rise in their wake. "I could say this is my dream—you and me, here alone … us and our children." He turned his head a little, checking the trundle in the corner, but Jemmy was sound asleep, invisible.

"You could," she echoed, and ducked her head so her forehead pressed against his shoulder. "But that's a waking dream—not a real dream. You know what I mean."

"Aye, I do."

He was quiet for a minute, his hand lying still, broad and warm across the base of her spine.

"Sometimes," he whispered at last, "sometimes, I dream I am singing, and I wake from it with my throat aching."

He couldn't see her face, or the tears that prickled at the corners of her eyes.

"What do you sing?" she whispered back. She heard the *shush* of the linen pillow as he shook his head.

"No song I've ever heard, or know," he said softly. "But I know I'm singing it for you."

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THE SURGEON'S BOOK II

July 27, 1772

"Was called from churning to attend Rosamund Lindsay, who arrived in late afternoon with a severe laceration to the left hand, sustained with an axe while girdling trees. Wound was extensive, having nearly severed the left thumb; laceration extended from base of index finger to two inches above the styloid process of the radius, which was superficially damaged. Injury had been sustained approximately three days prior, treated with rough binding and bacon grease. Extensive sepsis apparent, with suppuration, gross swelling of hand and forearm. Thumb blackened; gangrene apparent; characteristic pungent odor. Subcutaneous red streaks, indicative of blood poisoning, extended from site of injury nearly to antecubital fossa.

Patient presented with high fever (est. 104 degrees F., by hand), symptoms of dehydration, mild disorientation. Tachycardia evident.

In view of the seriousness of patient's condition, recommended immediate amputation of limb at elbow. Patient refused to consider this, insisting instead upon application of pigeon poultice, consisting of the split body of a freshly-killed pigeon, applied to wound (patient's husband had brought pigeon, neck freshly wrung). Removed thumb at base of metacarpal, ligated remains of radial artery (crushed in original injury) and superficialis volae. Debrided and drained wound, applied approximately 1/2 oz. crude penicillin powder (source: rotted casaba rind, batch #23, prep. 15/4/72) topically, followed by application of mashed raw garlic (three *cloves), barberry salve—and pigeon poultice, at insistence of husband applied over dressing. Administered fluids by mouth; febrifuge mixture of red centaury, bloodroot, and hops; water ad lib. Injected liquid penicillin mixture (batch # 23), IV, dosage 1/4 oz in suspension in sterile water.*

Patient's condition deteriorated rapidly, with increasing symptoms of disorientation and delirium, high fever. Extensive urticaria appeared on arm and upper torso. Attempted to relieve fever by repeated applications of cold water, to no avail. Patient being incoherent, requested permission to amputate from husband; permission denied on grounds that death appeared imminent, and patient "would not want to be buried in pieces."

Repeated penicillin injection. Patient lapsed into unconsciousness shortly thereafter, and expired just before dawn.

I dipped my quill again, but then hesitated, letting the drops of ink slide off the sharpened point. How much more should I say?

The deeply-ingrained disposition for scientific thoroughness warred with caution. It was important to describe what had happened, as fully as possible. At the same time, I hesitated to put down in writing what might amount to an admission of manslaughter—it wasn't murder, I assured myself, though my guilty feelings made no such distinctions.

"Feelings aren't truth," I murmured. Across the room, Brianna looked up from the bread she was slicing, but I bent my head over the page, and she returned to her whispered conversation with Marsali by the fire. It was no more than mid-afternoon, but dark and rainy outside. I had lit a candle by which to write, but the girls' hands flickered over the dim table like moths, lighting here and there among the plates and platters.

The truth was that I didn't think Rosamund Lindsay had died of septicemia. I was fairly sure that she had died of an acute reaction to an unpurified penicillin mixture—of the medicine I gave her, in short. Of course, the truth also was that the blood poisoning would certainly have killed her, left untreated.

The truth also was that I had had no way of knowing what the effects of the penicillin would be—but that was rather the point, wasn't it? To make sure someone else *might* know?

I twiddled the quill, rolling it between thumb and forefinger. I had kept a faithful account of my experiments with penicillin—the growing of cultures on media ranging from bread to chewed pawpaw and rotted melon rind, painstaking descriptions of the microscopic and gross identification of the *Penicillium* molds, the effects of—to this point—very limited applications.

Yes, certainly I must include a description of the effects. The real question, though, was—for whom was I keeping this careful record?

I bit my lip, thinking. If it was only for my own reference, it would be a simple matter; I could simply record the symptoms, timing, and effects, without explicitly noting the cause of death; I was unlikely to forget the circumstances, after all. But if this record were ever to be useful to someone else … someone who had no notion of the benefits and dangers of an antibiotic …

The ink was drying on the quill. I lowered the point to the page.

Age—44, I wrote slowly. In this day, casebook accounts like this often ended with a pious description of the deceased's last moments, marked—presumably—by Christian resignation on the part of the holy, repentance by the sinful. Neither attitude had marked the passage of Rosamund Lindsay.

I glanced at the coffin, sitting on its trestles under the rain-smeared window. The Lindsays' cabin was very small, not suited for a funeral in the pouring rain, where a large number of mourners were expected. The coffin was open, awaiting the evening wake, but the muslin shroud had been drawn up over her face.

Rosamund had been a whore in Boston; growing too stout and too old to ply her trade with much profit, she had drifted south, looking for a husband. "I couldn't bide another of them winters," she had confided to me, soon after her arrival on the Ridge. "Nor yet another of them stinkin' fishermen."

She had found the necessary refuge in Kenneth Lindsay, who was looking for a wife to share the work of homesteading. Not a match born of physical attraction—the Lindsays had had perhaps six sound teeth between them—or emotional compatibility, still it had seemed an amicable relationship.

Shocked rather than grief-stricken, Kenny had been taken off by Jamie for medication with whisky—a somewhat more effective treatment than my own. At least I didn't think it would be lethal.

Immediate cause of death—I wrote, and paused again. I doubted that Rosamund's response to approaching death would have found outlet in either prayer or philosophy, but she had had opportunity for neither. She had died blue-faced, congested, and bulging-eyed, unable to force word or breath past the swollen tissues of her throat.

My own throat felt tight at the memory, as though I were being choked. I picked up the cooling cup of catmint tea and took a sip, feeling the pungent liquid slide soothingly down. It was little comfort that the septicemia would have killed her more lingeringly. Suffocation was quicker, but not much more pleasant.

I tapped the quill point on the blotter, leaving inky pinpoints that spread through the rough fibers of the paper, forming a galaxy of tiny stars. As to that—there was another possibility. Death might conceivably have been due to a pulmonary embolism—a clot in the lung. That would be a not-impossible complication of the septicemia, and could have accounted for the symptoms.

It was a hopeful thought, but not one I placed much credence in. It was the voice of experience, as much as the voice of conscience, that bade me dip the quill and write down "anaphylaxis," before I could think again.

Was anaphylaxis a known medical term yet? I hadn't seen it in any of Rawlings' notes—but then, I hadn't read them all. Still, while death from the shock of allergic reaction was not unknown in any time, it wasn't common, and might not be known by name. Better describe it in detail, for whoever might read this.

And that was the rub, of course. Who *would* read it? I thought it unlikely, but what if a stranger should read this and take my account for a confession of murder? That was far-fetched—but it could happen. I had come perilously close to being executed as a witch, in part because of my healing activities. Once almost burned, twice shy, I thought wryly.

Extensive swelling in affected limb, I wrote, and lifted the quill, the last word fading as the pen ran dry. I dipped it again and scratched doggedly on. *Swelling extended to upper torso, face, and neck. Skin pale, marked with reddish blotches. Respiration increasingly rapid and shallow, heartbeat very fast and light, tending to inaudibility. Palpitations evident. Lips and ears cyanotic. Pronounced exophthalmia.*

I swallowed again, at the thought of Rosamund's eyes, bulging under the lids, rolling to and fro in uncomprehending terror. We had tried to shut them, when we cleansed the body and laid it out for burial. It was customary to uncover the corpse's face for the wake; I thought it unwise in this case.

I didn't want to look at the coffin again, but did, with a small nod of acknowledgment and apology. Brianna's head turned toward me, then sharply away. The smell of the food laid out for the wake was filling the room, mingling with the scents of oak-wood fire and oak-gall ink—and the fresh-planed oak of the coffin's boards. I took another hasty gulp of tea, to stop my gorge rising.

I knew damn well why the first line of Hippocrates' oath was, "First, do no harm." It was too bloody easy to do harm. What hubris it took to lay hands on a person, to interfere. How delicate and complex were bodies, how crude a physician's intrusions.

I could have sought seclusion in surgery or study, to write these notes. I knew why I hadn't. The coarse muslin shroud glowed soft white in the rainy light from the window. I pinched the quill hard between thumb and forefinger, trying to forget the *pop* of the cricoid cartilage, when I had jabbed a penknife into Rosamund's throat in a final, futile attempt to let air into her straining lungs.

And yet … there was not one practicing physician, I thought, who had never faced this. I had had it happen a few times before—even in a modern hospital, equipped with every life-saving device known to man—then.

Some future physician here would face the same dilemma; to undertake a possibly dangerous treatment, or to allow a patient to die who *might* have been saved. And that was my own dilemma—to balance the unlikely possibility of prosecution for manslaughter against the unknown value of my records to someone who might seek knowledge in them.

Who might that be? I wiped the pen, thinking. There were as yet few medical schools, and those few, mostly in Europe. Most physicians gained their knowledge from apprenticeship and experience. I slipped a finger into the casebook, feeling blind between the early pages, kept by the book's original owner.

Rawlings had not gone to a medical school. Though if he had, many of his techniques would still have been shocking by my standards. My mouth twisted at the thought of some of the treatments I had seen described in those closely written pages—infusions of liquid mercury to cure syphilis, cupping and blistering for epileptic fits, lancing and bleeding for every disorder from indigestion to impotence.

And still, Daniel Rawlings had been a doctor. Reading his case notes, I could feel his care for his patients, his curiosity regarding the mysteries of the body.

Moved by impulse, I turned back to the pages containing Rawlings' notes. Perhaps I was only delaying to let my subconscious reach a decision—or perhaps I felt the need of communication, no matter how remote, with another physician, someone like me.

Someone like me. I stared at the page, with its neat, small writing, its careful illustration, seeing none of the details. Who was there, like me?

No one. I had thought of it before, but only vaguely, in the way of a problem acknowledged, but so distant as not to require any urgency. In the colony of North Carolina, so far as I knew, there was only one formally designated "doctor"—Fentiman. I snorted, and took another sip of tea. Better Murray MacLeod and his nostrums—most of those were harmless, at least.

I sipped my tea, regarding Rosamund. The simple truth was that I wouldn't last forever, either. With luck, a good long time yet—but still, not forever. I needed to find someone to whom I could pass on at least the rudiments of what I knew.

A stifled giggle from the table, the girls whispering over the pots of head-cheese, the bowls of sauerkraut and boiled potatoes. No, I thought, with some regret. Not Brianna.

She would be the logical choice; she knew what modern medicine was, at least. There would be no overcoming of ignorance and superstition, no need to convince of the virtues of asepsis, the dangers of germs. But she had no natural inclination, no instinct for healing. She was not squeamish or afraid of blood—she had helped me with any number of childbirths and minor surgical procedures—and yet she lacked that peculiar mixture of empathy and ruthlessness a doctor needs.

She was perhaps Jamie's child more than mine, I reflected, watching the firelight ripple in the falls of her hair as she moved. She had his courage, his great tenderness—but it was the courage of a warrior, the tenderness of a strength that could crush if it chose. I had not managed to give her my gift; the knowledge of blood and bone, the secret ways of the chambers of the heart.

Brianna's head lifted sharply, turning toward the door. Marsali, slower, turned too, listening.

It was barely audible through the thrumming of the rain, but knowing it was there, I could pick it out—a male voice, raised high, chanting. A pause, and then a faint answering rumble that might have been distant thunder, but wasn't. The men were coming down from the shelter on the mountain.

Kenny Lindsay had asked Roger to chant the *caithris* for Rosamund; the formal Gaelic lament for the dead. "She wasna Scots," Kenny had said, wiping eyes bleared from tears and a long night's watching. "Nor even God-fearin'. But she was that fond o' singin', and she fair admired your way o' it, MacKenzie."

Roger had never done a *caithris* before; I knew he had never heard one. "Dinna fash," Jamie had murmured to him, hand on his arm, "all ye need to be is loud." Roger had bent his head gravely in acquiescence, and went with Jamie and Kenneth, to drink whisky by the malting floor and learn what he could of Rosamund's life, the better to lament her passing.

The hoarse chant vanished; the wind had shifted. It was a freak of the storm that we had heard them so soon—they would be headed down the Ridge now, to collect mourners from the outlying cabins, and then to lead them all in procession back up to the house, for the feasting and singing and storytelling that would go on all night.

I yawned involuntarily, my jaw cracking at the thought of it. I'd never last, I thought in dismay. I had had a few hours' sleep in the morning, but not enough to sustain me through a full-blown Gaelic wake and funeral. The floors would be thick with bodies by dawn, all of them smelling of whisky and wet clothes.

I yawned again, then blinked, my eyes swimming as I shook my head to clear it. Every bone in my body ached with fatigue, and I wanted nothing more than to go to bed for several days.

Deep in thought, I hadn't noticed Brianna coming to stand behind me. Her hands came down on my shoulders, and she moved closer, so I felt the warmth of her touching me. Marsali had gone; we were alone. She began to massage my shoulders, long thumbs moving slowly up the cords of my neck.

"Tired?" she asked.

"Mm. I'll do," I said. I closed the book, and leaned back, relaxing momentarily in the sheer relief of her touch. I hadn't realized I was strung so tightly.

The big room was quiet and orderly, ready for the wake. Mrs. Bug was tending the barbecue. The girls had lit a pair of candles, one at each end of the laden table, and shadows flickered over the whitewashed walls, the quiet coffin, as the candle flames bent in a sudden draft.

"I think I killed her," I said suddenly, not meaning to say it at all. "It was the penicillin that killed her."

The long fingers didn't stop their soothing movement.

"Was it?" she murmured. "You couldn't have done any differently, though, could you?"

"No."

A small shudder of relief went over me, as much from the bald confession as from the gradual release of the painful tightness in my neck and shoulders.

"It's okay," she said softly, rubbing, stroking. "She would have died anyway, wouldn't she? It's sad, but you didn't do wrong. You know that."

"I know that." To my surprise, a single tear slid down my cheek and dropped on the page, puckering the paper. I blinked hard, struggling for control. I didn't want to distress Brianna.

She wasn't distressed. Her hands left my shoulders, and I heard the scraping of stool legs. Then her arms came around me, and I let her draw me back, my head resting just under her chin. She simply held me, letting the rise and fall of her breathing calm me.

"I went to dinner with Uncle Joe once, just after he'd lost a patient," she said finally. "He told me about it."

"Did he?" I was a little surprised; I wouldn't have thought Joe would talk about such things with her.

"He didn't mean to. I could see something was bothering him, though, so I asked. And—he needed to talk, and I was there. Afterward, he said it was almost like having you there. I didn't know he called you Lady Jane."

"Yes," I said. "Because of the way I talk, he said." I felt a breath of laughter against my ear, and smiled slightly in response. I closed my eyes, and could see my friend, gesturing in passionate conversation, face alight with the desire to tease.

"He said—that when something like that happened, sometimes there would be a sort of formal inquiry, at the hospital. Not like a trial, not that—but a gathering of the other doctors, to hear exactly what happened, what went wrong. He said it was sort of like confession, to tell it to other doctors, who could understand—and it helped."

"Mm-hm." She was swaying slightly, rocking me as she moved, as she rocked Jemmy, soothing.

"Is that what's bothering you?" she asked quietly. "Not just Rosamund—but that you're alone? You don't have anybody who can really understand?"

Her arms wrapped around my shoulders, her hands crossed, resting lightly on my chest. Young, broad, capable hands, the skin fresh and fair, smelling of fresh-baked bread and strawberry jam. I lifted one, and laid the warm palm against my cheek.

"Apparently I do," I said.

The hand curved, stroked my cheek, and dropped away. The big young hand moved slowly, smoothing the hair behind my ear with soft affection.

"It will be all right," she said. "Everything will be all right."

"Yes," I said, and smiled, despite the tears blurring my eyes.

I couldn't teach her to be a doctor. But evidently I had, without meaning to, somehow taught her to be a mother.

"You should go lie down," she said, taking her hands away reluctantly. "It will be an hour at least, before they get here."

I let my breath go out in a sigh, feeling the peace of the house around me. If Fraser's Ridge had been a short-lived haven for Rosamund Lindsay, still it had been a true home. We would see her safe, and honored in death.

"In a minute," I said, wiping my nose. "I need to finish something, first."

I sat up straight and opened my book. I dipped my pen, and began to write the lines that must be there, for the sake of the unknown physician who would follow me.

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ZUGUNRUHE

September, 1772

I woke drenched in sweat. The thin chemise in which I slept clung to me, transparent with wet; the darkness of my flesh showed in patches through the cloth, even in the dim light from the unshuttered window. I had kicked away sheet and quilt in my disordered sleep, and lay sprawled with the linen shift rucked up above my thighs—but still my skin pulsed with heat, waves of smothering warmth that flowed over me like melted candle wax.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed, and stood up, feeling dizzy and disembodied. My hair was soaked and my neck was slick with perspiration; a trickle of sweat ran down between my breasts and disappeared.

Jamie was still asleep; I could see the humped mound of his upturned shoulder, and the spill of his hair, dark across the pillow. He shifted slightly and mumbled something, but then lapsed into the regular deep breaths of sleep. I needed air, but didn't want to wake him. I pushed away the gauze netting, stepped softly across to the door, and into the small box-room across the hall.

It was a small room, but it had a large window, in order to balance the one in our bedroom. This one had no glass as yet; it was covered only by wooden shutters, and I could feel drafts of night air drifting through the slats, swirling across the floor, caressing my bare legs. Urgent for the coolness of it, I stripped off my wet shift and sighed in relief as the draft skimmed upward over hips and breasts and arms.

The heat was still there, though, hot waves pulsing over my skin with each heartbeat. Fumbling in the dark, I unfastened the shutters and pushed them open, gasping for the great draughts of cool night that flooded in upon me.

From here, I could see above the trees that screened the house, down the slope of the ridge, almost to the faint black line of the river far away. The wind stirred in the treetops, murmuring, and wafted over me with blessed coolness and the pungent green smell of leaves and summer sap. I closed my eyes and stood still; within a minute or two, the heat was gone, vanished like a quenched coal, leaving me damp but peaceful.

I didn't want to go back to bed yet; my hair was damp, and the sheets where I had lain would still be clammy. I leaned naked on the sill, the down-hairs of my body prickling pleasantly as my skin cooled. The peaceful whooshing of the trees was interrupted by the thin sound of a child's wail, and I glanced toward the cabin.

It was a hundred yards from the house; the wind must be toward me, to have carried the sound. Sure enough, the wind changed as I leaned out of the window, and the crying was lost in the flutter of leaves. The breeze passed on, though, and I could hear the screeching, louder now, in the silence.

It was louder because it was getting closer. There was a creak and the groan of wood as the cabin door opened, and someone stepped out. There was no lamp or candle lit in the cabin, and the quick glimpse I had of the emerging figure showed me nothing but a tall form silhouetted against the dim glow of the banked hearth inside. It seemed to have long hair—but both Roger and Brianna slept with their hair untied and capless. It was pleasant to imagine Roger's glossy black locks mingling with the fire of Brianna's on the pillow—did they share a pillow? I wondered suddenly.

The screeching hadn't abated. Fretful and cranky, but not agonized. Not belly-ache. A bad dream? I waited a moment, watching, to see whether whoever it was would bring the child to the house, in search of me, and put out a hand to my crumpled shift, just in case. No—the tall figure had vanished into the spruce grove; I could hear the receding wails. Not fever, then.

I realized that my breasts had begun to tingle and stiffen in response to the crying, and smiled, a little ruefully. Strange, that instinct went so deep and lasted so long—would I come one day to a point when nothing in me stirred to the sound of a crying baby, to the scent of a man aroused, to the brush of my own long hair against the skin of my naked back? And if I did come to such a point—would I mourn the loss, I wondered, or find myself peaceful, left to contemplate existence without the intrusion of such animal sensations?

It wasn't only the glories of the flesh that were the gifts of the world, after all; a doctor sees the plentiful miseries flesh is heir to, as well—and yet … standing cool in the flood of late summer's air from the window, the boards smooth under my bare feet and the touch of wind on bare skin … I could not wish to be a pure spirit—not yet.

The crying grew louder, and I heard the low murmur of an adult's voice below it, trying unsuccessfully to soothe it. Roger, then.

I cupped my breasts gently, liking the soft, full weight of them. I remembered what they'd been like when I was very young; small hard swellings, so sensitive that the touch of a boy's hand made me weak in the knees. The touch of my own hand, come to that. They were different now—and yet peculiarly the same.

This was not the discovery of a new and unimagined thing, but rather only a new awareness, the acknowledgment of something that had risen while my back was turned, like a shadow cast upon the wall, its presence unsuspected, seen only when I turned to look at it—but there all the time.

Oh, I have a little shadow that goes in and out with me,
And what can be the use of him, is more than I can see.

And if I turned my back again, the shadow would not leave me. It was irrevocably attached to me, whether I chose to notice it or not, crouched always insubstantial, intangible but *present*, small to vanishing under my feet when the light of other preoccupations shone upon me, blown up to gigantic proportions in the glare of some sudden urge.

Resident demon, or guardian angel? Or only the shadow of the beast, constant reminder of the inescapability of the body and its hungers?

Another noise mingled with the whinging below; coughing, I thought, but it didn't stop, and the rhythm sounded wrong. I put my head out, cautious as a snail after a thunderstorm, and made out a few words in the rasping gurgle.

"… excavating for a mine … forty-niner … da-aughter, Clementine."

Roger was singing.

I felt the tears sting my eyes, and drew my head in hastily, lest I be seen. There was no tune to it—the pitch varied no more than the hooting of wind across the mouth of an empty bottle—and yet it was music. A dogged, ragged gasp of a song, and yet Jemmy's wailing quieted to sniffling sobs, as though he was trying to make out the words, so painfully forced through his father's scarred throat.

"Fed she duck-lings … by the wa-ter …" He was having to gasp for breath after each whispered phrase, the sound of it like tearing linen. I curled my fingers into fists, as though by sheer force of will I could help him get the words out.

"Herring box-es … without top-ses … san-dals were for … Clementine." The breeze was rising again, stirring in the tops of the trees. The next line was lost in their rustle, and I heard no more for a minute or two, strain my ears as I would.

Then I saw Jamie, standing still.

He made no noise, but I felt him at once; a warmth, a thickening, in the cool air of the room.

"Are ye well, Sassenach?" he asked softly from the doorway.

"Yes, fine." I spoke in a whisper, not to wake Lizzie and her father, who slept in the back bedroom. "Just needed a breath of air; I didn't mean to wake you."

He came closer, a tall naked ghost, smelling of sleep.

"I always wake when you do, Sassenach; I sleep ill without ye by my side." He touched my forehead briefly. "I thought ye were maybe fevered; the bed was damp where ye'd lain. You're sure you're all right?"

"I was hot; I couldn't sleep. But yes, I'm all right. And you?" I touched his face; his skin was warm with sleep.

He came to stand beside me at the window, looking out into the late summer night. The moon was full, and the birds were restless; from near at hand, I heard the faint chirp of a late-nesting warbler, and farther off, the squeak of a hunting saw-whet owl.

"You recall Laurence Sterne?" Jamie asked, evidently reminded of the naturalist by the sounds.

"I doubt anyone who's met him would forget him," I said dryly. "The bag of dried spiders makes rather an impression. To say nothing of the smell." Sterne carried with him a distinctive aroma, composed in equal parts of natural body odor, an expensive cologne that he favored—which was sufficiently strong to compete with—though not to conquer—the pungencies of various preservatives such as camphor and alcohol—and a faint reek of decay from the specimens he collected.

He chuckled softly.

"That's true. He stinks worse than you do."

"I do not stink!" I said indignantly.

"Mmphm." He took my hand and lifted it to his nose, sniffing delicately. "Onions," he said, "and garlic. Something hot … peppercorns. Aye, and clove. Squirrel-blood and meat-juice." His tongue flicked out like a snake's, touching my knuckles. "Starch—potatoes—and something woody. Toadstools."

"Not fair at all," I said, trying to get my hand back. "You know perfectly well what we had for dinner. And they weren't toadstools, they were woodears."

"Mm?" He turned my hand over and sniffed at my palm, then my wrist and up my forearm. "Vinegar and dill; ye've been making cucumber pickles, aye? Good, I like those. Mm, oh, and soured milk here in the fine hairs on your arm—were ye splashed churning butter, or skimming cream?"

"You guess, since you're so good at it."

"Butter."

"Damn." I was still trying to pull away, but only because the stubble on his face tickled the sensitive skin of my upper arm. He smelled his way up my arm into the hollow of my shoulder, making me squeak as the strands of his hair drifted across my skin.

He lifted my arm a bit, touched the damp silky hair there, and ran his fingers under his nose. *“Eau de femme,”* he murmured, and I heard the laughter in his voice. *“Ma petite fleur.”*

“And I *bathed*, too,” I said ruefully.

“Aye, with the sunflower soap,” he said, a slight tone of surprise in his voice as he sniffed at the hollow of my collarbone. I gave a small, high-pitched yelp, and he reached up to lay a large, warm hand across my mouth. *He* smelt of gunpowder, hay, and manure, but I couldn’t say so, what with him muffling me.

He straightened a little, and leaned close, so the roughness of his whiskers brushed my cheek. His hand fell away, and I felt the softness of his lips against my temple, the butterfly touch of his tongue on my skin.

“And salt,” he said, very softly, his breath warm on my face. “There is salt on your face, and your lashes are wet. D’ye weep, Sassenach?”

“No,” I said, though I had a sudden, irrational urge to do just that. “No, I sweat. I was … hot.”

I wasn’t any longer; my skin was cool; cold where the night-draft from the window chilled my backside.

“Ah, but here … mm.” He was on his knees now, one arm about my waist to hold me still, his nose buried in the hollow between my breasts. “Oh,” he said, and his voice had changed again.

I didn’t normally wear perfume, but I had a special oil, sent from the Indies, made with orange flowers, jasmine, vanilla beans, and cinnamon. I had only a tiny vial, and wore a small dab infrequently —for occasions that I thought might perhaps be special.

“Ye wanted me,” he said ruefully. “And I fell asleep without even touching you. I’m sorry, Sassenach. Ye should have said.”

“You were tired.” His hand had left my mouth; I stroked his hair, smoothing the long dark strands behind his ear. He laughed, and I felt the warmth of his breath on my bare stomach.

“Ye could raise me from the dead for that, Sassenach, and I wouldna mind it.”

He stood up then, facing me, and even in the dim light I could see that no such desperate measures on my part would be required.

"It's hot," I said. "I'm sweating."

"Ye think I'm not?"

His hands closed on my waist and he lifted me suddenly, setting me down on the broad windowsill. I gasped at contact with the cool wood, reflexively grasping the window frame on either side.

"What on earth are you doing?"

He didn't bother answering; it was an entirely rhetorical question, in any case.

"Eau de femme," he murmured, his soft hair brushing across my thighs as he knelt. The floorboards creaked under his weight. "*Parfum d'amor,* mm?"

The cool breeze lifted my hair, drew it tickling across my back like the lightest of lover's touches. Jamie's hands were firm on the curve of my hips; I was in no danger of falling, and yet I felt the dizzy drop behind me, the clear and endless night, with its star-strewn empty sky into which I might fall and go on falling, a tiny speck, blazing hotter and hotter with the friction of my passage, bursting finally into the incandescence of a shooting … star.

"Ssh," Jamie murmured, far off. He was standing now, his hands on my waist, and the moaning noise might have been the wind, or me. His fingers brushed my lips. They might have been matches, striking flames against my skin. Heat danced over me, belly and breast, neck and face, burning in front, cool behind, like St. Lawrence on his gridiron.

I wrapped my legs around him, one heel settled in the cleft of his buttocks, the solid strength of his hips between my legs my only anchor.

"Let go," he said in my ear. "I'll hold you." I did let go, and leaned back on the air, safe in his hands.

"You did start out to tell me something about Laurence Sterne," I murmured drowsily, much later.

“So I did.” Jamie stretched and settled himself, a hand curved proprietorially over my buttock. My knuckles brushed the hairs on his thigh. It was too hot to lie pressed together, but we didn’t want to separate entirely.

“We were talking of birds; he bein’ uncommon fond of them. I asked him why it was that in the late summer, the birds sing at night—the nights are shorter then, ye’d think they’d want their rest, but no. There’s rustling and twittering and all manner o’ carryings-on, all the night long in the hedges and the trees.”

“Are there? I hadn’t noticed.”

“Ye’re no in the habit of sleeping in the forest, Sassenach,” he said tolerantly. “I have been, and so had Sterne. He’d noticed the same thing, he said, and wondered why.”

“And did he have an answer?”

“Not an answer—but a theory, at least.”

“Oh, even better,” I said, in sleepy amusement.

He gave a soft grunt of agreement and rolled slightly to one side, admitting a little welcome air between our salty skins. I could see the gleam of moisture over the slope of his shoulder, and the prickle of sweat among the dark curly hairs of his chest. He scratched gently at it, with a softly agreeable rasping sound.

“What he did was to capture a number of the birds, and shut them up in cages lined with blotting paper.”

“What?” That waked me up a bit, if only to laugh. “Whatever for?”

“Well, not lined entirely, only on the floor,” he explained. “He put out a wee plate on the floor filled with ink and a cup of seed in the middle, so that they couldna feed without getting the ink on their feet. Then as they hopped to and fro, their footprints would show on the blotting paper.”

“Umm. And what, precisely, did that show—other than black footprints?”

The insects were beginning to find us, drawn by the musk of our heated flesh. A tiny *zeeeeee* by my ear prompted me to slap at the invisible mosquito, then reach for the gauze-cloth that Jamie had pushed back when he rose to find me. This was fastened to an ingenious mechanism—Brianna's invention—fixed to the beam above the bed, so that when unrolled, the cloth fell down on all sides, shielding us from the bloodthirsty hordes of the summer nights.

I pulled it into place with some regret, for while it excluded mosquitoes, gnats, and the unnervingly large mosquito-hawk moths, it also unavoidably shut out some of the air and all sight of the luminous night sky beyond the window. I lay down again at a little distance on the bed; while Jamie's natural furnace was a great boon on winter nights, it had its drawbacks in the summer. I didn't mind melting in an inferno of blazing desire, if it came to that, but I had no more clean shifts.

"There were a great many footprints, Sassenach—but most of them were on one side of the cage. In all the cages."

"Oh, really? And what did Sterne think that signified?"

"Well, he had the bright thought of putting down a compass by the cages. And it seems that all the night through, the birds were hopping and striving toward the southeast—which is the direction in which they migrate, come the fall."

"That's very interesting." I pulled my hair back into a tail, lifting it off my neck for coolness. "But it's not quite the time to migrate, is it, in late summer? And they don't fly at night, do they, even when they migrate?"

"No. It was as though they felt the imminence of flight, and the pull of it—and that disturbed their rest. The stranger it was, because most of the birds that he had were young ones, who had never yet made the journey; they hadna seen the place where they were bound, and yet they felt it there—calling to them, perhaps, rousing them from sleep."

I moved slightly, and Jamie lifted his hand from my leg.

"Zugunruhe," he said softly, tracing with a fingertip the damp mark he had left on my skin.

"What's that?"

"It's what Sterne called it—the wakefulness of the wee birds, getting ready to leave on their long flight."

"Does it mean something in particular?"

“Aye. ‘Ruhe’ is stillness, rest. And ‘zug’ is a journey of some sort. So ‘zugunruhe’ is a restlessness—the uneasiness before a long journey.”

I rolled toward him, butting my forehead affectionately against his shoulder. I inhaled, in the style of one savoring the delicate aroma of a fine cigar.

“Eau de homme?”

He raised his head and sniffed dubiously, wrinkling up his nose.

“*Eau de chevre,* I think,” he said. “Though it might be something worse. Is there a French word for skunk, I wonder?”

“Le Pew.” I suggested, giggling.

The birds sang all night.

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TULACH ARD

October, 1772

Jamie nodded at something behind him, smiling.

"I see we've help today."

Roger looked back to see Jemmy stumping along behind them, his small fair brow furrowed in fierce concentration, a fist-sized rock clutched to his chest with both hands. Roger wanted to laugh at the sight, but instead turned and squatted down, waiting for the boy to catch them up.

"Is that for the new hogpen, a ghille ruaidh?" he said.

Jemmy nodded solemnly. The morning was still cool, but the little boy's cheeks glowed with effort.

"Thank you," Roger said gravely. He held out his hand. "Shall I take it, then?"

Jemmy shook his head violently, heavy fringe flying.

"Me do!"

"It's a long walk, a ghille ruaidh," Jamie said. "And your mother will miss ye, no?"

"No!"

"Grand-da's right, *a bhalaich*, Mummy needs you," Roger said, reaching for the rock. "Here, let me take …"

"No!" Jemmy clutched the rock protectively against his smock, mouth set in a stubborn line.

"But ye can't …" Jamie began.

"Come!"

"No, I said ye must …" Roger began.

"COME!"

"Now, look, lad—" both men began together, then stopped, looked at each other, and laughed.

"Where's Mummy, then?" Roger said, trying another tack. "Mummy will be worried about you, aye?"

The small red head shook in vehement negation.

"Claire said the women meant to be quilting today," Jamie said to Roger. "Marsali's brought a pattern; they'll maybe have started the stitching of it." He squatted down beside Roger, eye to eye with his grandson.

"Have ye got away from your mother, then?"

The soft pink mouth, hitherto clamped tight, twitched, allowing a small giggle to escape.

"Thought so," Roger said in resignation. "Come on, then. Back to the house." He stood up and swung the little boy up into his arms, rock and all.

"No, no! NO!" Jemmy stiffened in resistance, his feet digging painfully into Roger's belly as his body arched backward like a bow. "Me help! Me HELP!"

Trying to make his own arguments heard through Jemmy's roars without shouting, while at the same time keeping the boy from falling backward onto his head, Roger didn't at first hear the cries from the direction of the house. When he finally resorted to clapping a hand over his offspring's wide-open mouth, though, feminine calls of "Jeeeeemmmeeeeeeee!" were clearly audible through the trees.

"See, Mrs. Lizzie's looking for ye," Jamie said to his grandson, jerking a thumb toward the sound.

"Not only Lizzie," Roger said. More women's voices were echoing the chorus, with increasing notes of annoyance. "Mum and Grannie Claire, and Grannie Bug and Auntie Marsali, too, from the sounds of it. They don't sound very pleased with you, lad."

"We'd best take him, back, then," Jamie said. He looked at his grandson, not without sympathy. "Mind, you're like to get your bum smacked, laddie. Women dinna like it when ye run off on them."

This threatening prospect caused Jemmy to drop his rock and wrap his arms and legs tightly round Roger.

"Go with YOU, Daddy," he said coaxingly.

"But Mummy—"

"NO MUMMY! Want Daddy!"

Roger patted Jemmy's back, small but solid under his grubby smock. He was torn; this was the first time Jem had so definitely wanted *him* in preference to Bree, and he had to admit to a sneaking feeling of flattery. Even if his son's present partiality sprang as much from an urge to avoid punishment as from a desire for his company, Jem *had* wanted to come with him.

"I suppose we could take him," he said to Jamie, over Jem's head, now nestled trustingly against his collarbone. "Just for the morning; I could fetch him back at noon."

"Oh, aye," Jamie said. He smiled at his grandson, picked up the fallen stone, and handed it back to him. "Building hogpens is proper man's work, aye? None of this prinking and yaffling the ladies are so fond of."

"Speaking of yaffling …" Roger lifted his chin in the direction of the house, where the cries of "JEEMEEEEE!" were now taking on a distinctly irritated tone, tinged with panic. "We'd best tell them we have him."

"I'll go." Jamie dropped the rucksack off his shoulder with a sigh, and raised one eyebrow at his grandson. "Mind, lad, ye owe me. When women are in a fret, they'll take it out on the first man they see, whether he's to blame or not. Like enough I'll get *my* bum smacked." He rolled his eyes, but grinned at Jemmy, then turned and set off for the house at a trot.

Jemmy giggled.

"Smack, Grand-da!" he called.

"Hush, wee rascal." Roger gave him a soft slap on the bottom, and realized that Jem was wearing short breeks under his smock, but no clout under them. He swung the boy down onto his feet.

"D'ye need to go potty?" he asked automatically, falling into Brianna's peculiar idiom.

"No," Jem said, just as automatically, but with a reflexive kneading of his crotch that made his father take him by the arm, firmly steering him off the path and behind a convenient bush.

"Come on. Let's have a try, while we wait for Grand-da."

It seemed rather a long time before Jamie reappeared, though the indignant cries of the searchers had been quickly stilled. If Jamie had got his bum smacked, Roger thought cynically, he appeared to have enjoyed it. A slight flush showed on the high cheekbones, and he wore a faint but definite air of satisfaction.

This was explained at once, though, when Jamie produced a small bundle from inside his shirt and unwrapped a linen towel, revealing half a dozen fresh biscuits, still warm, and dripping with melted butter and honey.

"I think perhaps Mrs. Bug meant them for the quilting circle," he said, distributing the booty. "But there was plenty of batter left in the bowl; I doubt they'll be missed."

"If they are, I'll blame it on you," Roger assured him, catching a dribble of warm honey that ran down his wrist. He wiped it off and sucked his finger, eyes closing momentarily in ecstasy.

"What now, ye'd give me up to the Inquisition?" Jamie's eyes creased into blue triangles of amusement as he wiped crumbs from his mouth. "And after I shared my plunder with ye, too—there's gratitude!"

"Your reputation will stand it," Roger said wryly. "Jem and I are *persona non grata* after what happened to her spice cake last week, but Himself can do no wrong, as far as Grannie Bug is concerned. She wouldn't mind if you ate the entire contents of the pantry single-handed."

Jamie licked a smear of honey from the corner of his mouth, with the smug complacency of a man permanently in Mrs. Bug's good books.

"Well, that's as may be," he admitted. "Still, if ye expect to blame it on me, we'd best wipe a bit of the evidence off the laddie before we go home.”

Jemmy had been addressing himself to his treat with single-minded concentration, with the result that his entire face gleamed with butter, daubs of honey ran in amber trails down his smock, and what appeared to be several small globs of half-chewed biscuit were stuck in his hair.

“How in hell did you do that so fast?” Roger demanded in amazement. “Look what ye’ve done to your shirt! Your mother will kill us both.” He took the towel and made an abortive attempt to wipe some of the mess off, but succeeded only in spreading it farther.

“Dinna fash,” Jamie said tolerantly. “He’ll be so covered wi’ filth by the end of the day, his mother will never notice a few crumbs extra. Watch out, lad!” A quick grab saved half a biscuit that had broken off as the boy made an attempt to cram the last pastry into his mouth in a single gulp.

“Still,” Jamie said, biting thoughtfully into the rescued biscuit-half as he looked at his grandson, “perhaps we’ll souse him in the creek a bit. We dinna want the pigs to smell the honey on him.”

A faint qualm of unease went over Roger, as he realized that Jamie was in fact not joking about the pigs. It was common to see or hear pigs in the wood nearby, rooting through the leaf-mold under oaks and poplars, or grunting blissfully over a trove of chestnut mast. Food was plentiful at this season, and the pigs were no threat to grown men. A small boy, though, smelling of sweetness … you thought of pigs as only eating roots and nuts, but Roger had a vivid memory of the big white sow, seen a few days before, with the naked, blood-smeared tail of a possum dangling from her maw as she champed placidly away.

A chunk of biscuit seemed to be stuck in his throat. He picked Jemmy up, despite the stickiness, and tucked him giggling under one arm, so the little boy’s arms and legs dangled in the air.

“Come on, then,” Roger said, resigned. “Mummy won’t like it a bit, if you get eaten by a pig.”

Fence poles lay piled near the stone pillar. Roger dug about until he found a splintered piece short enough for convenience, and used it to lever a big chunk of granite up far enough to get both hands under it. Squatting, he got it onto his thighs, and very slowly stood up, his back straightening one vertebra at a time, fingers digging into the lichen-splotched surface with the effort of lifting. The rag tied round his head was drenched, and perspiration was running down his face. He shook his head to flick the stinging sweat out of his eyes.

"Daddy, Daddy!"

Roger felt a sudden tug at his breeches, blinked sweat out of his eye, and planted his feet well apart to keep his balance without dropping the heavy rock. He tightened his grip and glanced down, annoyed.

"What, lad?"

Jemmy had tight hold of the cloth with both hands. He was looking toward the wood.

"Pig, Daddy," he whispered. "*Big* pig."

Roger glanced in the direction of the little boy's gaze and froze.

It was a huge black boar, perhaps eight feet away. The thing stood more than three feet at the shoulder, and must weigh two hundred pounds or more, with curving yellow tushes the length of Jemmy's forearm. It stood with lifted head, piggy snout moistly working as it snuffed the air for food or threat.

"Shit," Roger said involuntarily.

Jemmy, who would normally have seized on any inadvertent vulgarity and trumpeted it gleefully, now merely clung tighter to his father's leg.

Thoughts raced through Roger's mind like colliding freight cars. Would it attack if he moved? He had to move; the muscles of his arms were trembling under the strain. He'd splashed Jem with water; did the boy still smell—or look—like something on the pig's menu?

He picked one coherent thought out of the wreckage.

"Jem," he said, his voice very clam, "get behind me. Do it *now,*" he added with emphasis, as the boar turned its head in their direction.

It saw them; he could see the small dark eyes change focus. It took a few steps forward, its hooves absurdly small and dainty under its menacing bulk.

“Do you see Grand-da, Jem?” he asked, keeping his voice calm. Streaks of fire were burning through his arms, and his elbows felt as though they’d been crushed in a vise.

“No,” Jemmy whispered. Roger could feel the little boy crowding close behind him, pressed against his legs.

“Well, look round. He went to the stream; he’ll be coming back from that direction. Turn round and look.”

The boar was cautious, but not afraid. That was what came of not hunting the things sufficiently, he thought. They ought to be gutting a few in the wood once a week, as an object lesson to the rest.

“Grand-da!” Jemmy’s voice rang out from behind him, shrill with fear.

At the sound, the pig’s hackles sprang suddenly erect in a ridge of coarse hair down its spine and it lowered its head, muscles bunching.

“Run, Jem!” Roger cried. “Run to Grand-da!” A surge of adrenaline shot through him and suddenly the rock weighed nothing. He flung it at the charging pig, catching it on the shoulder. It gave a *whuff!* of surprise, faltered, then opened its mouth with a roar and came at him, tushes slashing as it swung its head.

He couldn’t duck aside and let it go past; Jem was still close behind him. He kicked it in the jaw with all his strength, then flung himself on it, grasping for a hold round its neck.

His fingers slipped and slid, unable to get a firm grip on the wiry hair, stubbing and sliding off the hard rolls of tight-packed flesh. Christ, it was like wrestling an animated sack of concrete! He felt something warm and wet on his hand and jerked it back; had it slashed him? He felt no pain. Maybe only saliva from the gnashing jaws—maybe blood from a gash too deep to feel. No time to look. He thrust the hand back down, flailing blindly, got his fingers round a hairy leg, and pulled hard.

The pig fell sideways with a squeal of surprise, throwing him off its back. He hit the ground on hands and one knee, and his knee struck stone. A bolt of pain shot from ankle to groin, and he curled up involuntarily, momentarily paralyzed from the shock.

The boar was up, shaking itself with a grunt and a rattle of bristles, but facing away from him. Dust rose from its coat and he could see the corkscrew tail, coiled up tight against its rump. A second more, and the pig would turn, rip him from gut to gullet, and stamp on the pieces. He grabbed for a rock, but it burst in his hand, nothing but a clod of dirt.

The gasp and thud of a running man came from his left, and he heard a breathless shout.

"Tulach Ard! Tulach Ard!"

The boar heard Jamie's cry and swung snorting round to meet this new enemy, mouth agape and eyes gone red with rage.

Jamie had his dirk in his hand; Roger saw the gleam of metal as Jamie dropped low and swung it wide, slashing at the boar, then danced aside as it charged. A knife. Fight that thing with a *knife*?

You are out of your fucking mind, Roger thought quite clearly.

"No, I'm not," Jamie said, panting, and Roger realized that he must have spoken aloud. Jamie crouched, balanced on the balls of his feet, and reached his free hand toward Roger, his eyes still fastened on the pig, which had paused, kneading the ground with its hooves and clashing its teeth, swinging its head back and forth between the two men, estimating its chances.

"Bioran!" Jamie said, beckoning urgently. "Stick, spear—gie it to me!"

Spear … the splintered fence-pole. His numbed leg still wouldn't work, but he could move. He threw himself to the side, grabbed the ragged shaft of wood, and fell back on his haunches, bracing it before him like a boar-spear, sharp end pointed toward the foe.

"Tulach Ard!" he bellowed. "Come here, you fat fucker!"

Distracted for an instant, the boar swung toward him. Jamie lunged at it, stabbing down, aiming between the shoulder blades. There was a piercing squeal and the boar wheeled, blood flying from a deep gash in its shoulder. Jamie threw himself sideways, tripped on something, fell, and skidded hard across the mud and grass, the knife spinning from his outflung hand.

Lunging forward, Roger jabbed his makeshift spear as hard as he could just below the boar's tail. The animal uttered a piercing squeal and appeared to rise straight into the air. The spear jerked through his hands, rough bark ripping skin off his palms. He grabbed it hard and managed to keep hold of it as the boar crashed onto its side in a blur of writhing fury, gnashing, roaring, and spraying blood and black mud in all directions.

Jamie was up, mud-streaked and bellowing. He'd got hold of another fence-pole, with which he took a mighty swing at the rising pig, the wood meeting its head with a crack like a well-hit baseball just as the animal achieved its feet. The boar, mildly stunned, gave a grunt and sat down.

A shrill cry from behind made Roger whirl on his haunches. Jemmy, his grandfather's dirk held over his head with both hands and wobbling precariously, was staggering toward the boar, his face beet-red with ferocious intent.

"Jem!" he shouted. "Get back!"

The boar grunted loudly behind him, and Jamie shouted something. Roger had no attention to spare; he lunged toward his son, but caught a flicker of movement from the wood beyond Jemmy that made him glance up. A streak of gray, low to the ground and moving so fast that he had no more than an impression of its nature.

That was enough.

"Wolves!" he shouted to Jamie, and with a feeling that wolves on top of pigs was patently unfair, reached Jemmy, grabbed the knife, and threw himself on top of the boy.

He pressed himself to the ground, feeling Jemmy squirm frantically under him, and waited, feeling strangely calm. Would it be tusk or tooth? he wondered.

"It's all right, Jem. Be still. It's all right, Daddy's got you." His forehead was pressed against the earth, Jem's head tucked in the hollow of his shoulder. He had one arm sheltering the little boy, the knife gripped in his other hand. He hunched his shoulders, feeling the back of his neck bare and vulnerable, but couldn't move to protect it.

He could hear the wolf now, howling and yipping to its companions. The boar was making an ungodly noise, a sort of long, continuous scream, and Jamie, too short of breath to go on shouting, seemed to be calling it names in brief, incoherent bursts of Gaelic.

There was an odd whirr overhead and a peculiar, hollow-sounding *thump!*, succeeded by sudden and utter silence.

Startled, Roger raised his head a few inches, and saw the pig standing a few feet before him, its jaw hanging open in what looked like sheer astonishment. Jamie was standing behind it, smeared from forehead to knee with blood-streaked mud, and wearing an identical expression.

Then the boar's front legs gave way and it fell to its knees. It wobbled, eyes glazing, and collapsed onto its side, the shaft of an arrow poking up, looking frail and inconsequential by comparison to the animal's bulk.

Jemmy was squirming and crying underneath him. He sat up slowly, and gathered the little boy up into his arms. He noticed, remotely, that his hands were shaking, but he felt curiously blank. The torn skin on his palms stung, and his knee was throbbing. Patting Jemmy's back in automatic comfort, he turned his head toward the wood and saw the Indian standing at the edge of the trees, bow in hand.

It occurred to him, dimly, to look for the wolf. It was nosing at the pig's carcass, no more than a few feet from Jamie, but his father-in-law was paying it no mind at all. He too was staring at the Indian.

"Ian," he said softly, and a look of incredulous joy blossomed slowly through the smears of mud, grass, and blood. "Oh, Christ. It's Ian."

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THE VOICE OF TIME

As Lizzie had no mother to see to her proper “fitting out” for marriage, the women on the Ridge had grouped together to provide things like petticoats, nightgowns, and knitted stockings, with a few of the more talented ladies piecing quilt blocks. When a quilt-top was completed, everyone would come up to the “Big House” to see to the actual quilting—the laborious stitching together of quilt-top and backing, with whatever might be available in the way of batting—worn-out blankets, stitched-together rags, or wool-combings—laid in between quilt-top and backing for warmth.

I had neither great talent nor great patience for sewing generally, but I did have the manual dexterity for small, fine stitches. More importantly, I had a large kitchen with good light and enough room for a quilting-frame, plus the services of Mrs. Bug, who kept the quilters well supplied with mugs of tea and endless plates of apple scones.

We were in the midst of quilting a block pattern Mrs. Evan Lindsay had pieced out in creams and blues, when Jamie appeared suddenly in the door to the hallway. Caught up in an absorbing conversation about the snoring of husbands in general and theirs in particular, most of the women didn’t notice him, but I was facing the door. He seemed not to want to interrupt, or to attract attention, for he didn’t come into the room—but once he’d caught my eye, he jerked his head urgently, and disappeared toward his study.

I glanced at Bree, who was sitting next to me. She’d seen him; she raised an eyebrow and shrugged. I popped the knot—jerking the knotted end of my thread up between the layers of fabric, so it wouldn't show—stabbed my needle through the quilt-top, and got up, murmuring an excuse.

"Give him beer to his supper," Mrs. Chisholm was advising Mrs. Aberfeldy. "A great deal of it, and well-watered. That way, he'll have to wake to piss every half-hour, and can't get started wi' the sort of rumption that shakes the shingles loose."

"Oh, aye," Mrs. Aberfeldy objected. "I tried that. But then when he comes back to bed, he's wantin' to … mmphm." She flushed red as the ladies all cackled. "I get less sleep than I do with the snorin'!"

Jamie was waiting in the hall. The moment I appeared, he grabbed me by the arm and hustled me out of the front door.

"What—" I began, bewildered. Then I saw the tall Indian sitting on the edge of the stoop.

"What—" I said again, and then he stood up, turned, and smiled at me.

"Ian!" I shrieked, and flung myself into his arms.

He was thin and hard as a piece of sun-dried rawhide, and his clothes smelled of wood-damp and earth, with a faint echo of the smoke and body-smells of a long-house. I stood back, wiping my eyes, to look at him, and a cold nose nudged my hand, making me utter another small shriek.

"You!" I said to Rollo. "I thought I'd never see you again!" Overcome with emotion, I rubbed his ears madly. He uttered a short bark and dropped to his forepaws, wagging equally madly.

"Dog! Dog-dog! Here, dog!" Jemmy burst from the door of his own cabin, running as fast as his short legs would carry him, wet hair standing on end and face beaming. Rollo shot toward him, hitting him amidships and bowling him over in a flurry of squeals.

I had at first feared that Rollo—who was, after all, half-wolf—saw Jemmy as prey, but it was immediately apparent that the two were merely engaged in mutually ecstatic play. Brianna's maternal sonar had picked up the squealing, though, and she came rushing to the door.

"What—" she began, eyes going to the melee taking place on the grass. Then Ian stepped forward, took her in his arms, and kissed her. Her shriek in turn brought the quilting circle boiling out onto the porch, in an eruption of questions, exclamations, and small subsidiary shrieks in acknowledgment of the general excitement.

In the midst of the resulting pandemonium, I suddenly noticed that Roger, who had appeared from somewhere, was sporting a fresh raw graze across his forehead, a black eye, and a clean shirt. I glanced at Jamie, who was standing next to me watching the goings-on, his face wreathed in a permanent grin. His shirt, by contrast, was not only filthy but ripped down the front, and with an enormous rent in one sleeve. There were huge smears of mud and dried blood on the linen, too, though I didn't see any fresh blood showing. Given Jemmy's wet hair and clean shirt—not that it was, anymore—this was all highly suspicious.

"What on earth have you lot been doing?" I demanded.

He shook his head, still grinning.

"It doesna signify, Sassenach. Though I have got a fresh hog for ye to butcher—when ye've the time."

I pushed back a lock of hair in exasperation.

"Is this the local equivalent of killing the fatted calf in honor of the prodigal's return?" I asked, nodding at Ian, who was by now completely submerged in a tide of women. Lizzie, I saw, was clinging to one of his arms, her pale face absolutely ablaze with excitement. I felt a slight qualm, seeing it, but pushed it away for the moment.

"Has Ian brought friends? Or—his family, perhaps?" He had said his wife was expecting, and that was nearly two years back. The child—if all had gone well—must be nearly old enough to walk.

Jamie's smile dimmed a little at that.

"No," he said. "He's alone. Save for the dog, of course," he added, with a nod at Rollo, who was lying on his back, paws in the air, squirming happily under Jemmy's onslaught.

"Oh. Well." I smoothed down my hair and re-tied the ribbon, beginning to think what ought to be done regarding the quilters, the fresh hog, and some sort of celebratory supper—though I supposed Mrs. Bug would deal with that.

"How long is he staying, did he say?"

Jamie took a deep breath, putting a hand on my back.

"For good," he said, and his voice was full of joy—but with an odd tinge of sadness that made me look up at him in puzzlement. "He's come home."

It was very late indeed before the butchering, the quilting, and the supper were all finished, and the visitors finally left, charged with gossip. Though not so much gossip as all that; Ian had been friendly to everyone, but reticent, saying very little about his journey from the north—and nothing at all about the reasons behind it.

"Did Ian tell you anything?" I asked Jamie, finding him temporarily alone in his study before dinner. He shook his head.

"Verra little. Only that he had come back to stay."

"Do you suppose something dreadful happened to his wife? And the baby?" I felt a deep pang of distress, both for Ian, and for the slight, pretty Mohawk girl called Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa—Works With Her Hands. Ian had called her Emily. Death in childbirth was not uncommon, even among the Indians.

Jamie shook his head again, looking sober.

"I dinna ken, but I think it must be something of the kind. He hasna spoken of them at all—and the lad's eyes are a great deal older than he is."

Lizzie had appeared at the door then, with an urgent message from Mrs. Bug regarding dispositions for supper, and I had to go. Following Lizzie toward the kitchen, though, I couldn't help wondering just what Ian's return might mean to her—particularly if we were right in our suppositions about Ian's Mohawk wife.

Lizzie had been half in love with Ian, before he had left, and had pined for months following his decision to stay with the Kahnyen'kehaka. But that was more than two years ago, and two years can be a very long time, especially in a young person's life.

I knew what Jamie meant about Ian's eyes, and knew for certain that he wasn't the same impulsive, cheerful lad we had left with the Mohawk. Lizzie wasn't quite the timidly adoring girl-mouse she had been, either.

What she *was*, though, was Manfred McGillivray's betrothed. I could only be thankful that neither Ute McGillivray nor any of her daughters had been present at this afternoon's quilting circle. With luck, the glamor of Ian's return would be short-lived.

"Will you be all right down here?" I asked Ian, dubiously. I had put several quilts and a goose-down pillow on the surgery table for him, he having politely rejected Mr. Wemyss's offer of his own bed and Mrs. Bug's desire to make him a comfortable pallet before the kitchen hearth.

"Oh, aye, Auntie," he said, and grinned at me. "Ye wouldna credit the places Rollo and I have been sleeping." He stretched, yawning and blinking. "Christ—I've no been up past sunset anytime this month or more."

"And up at dawn, too, I expect. That's why I thought you might be better in here; no one will disturb you, if you'd like to sleep late in the morning."

He laughed at that.

"Only if I leave the window open, so Rollo can come and go as he likes. Though he seems to think the huntin' might be good enough inside."

Rollo was seated in the middle of the floor, muzzle lifted in anticipation, his yellow wolf-eyes fixed unwaveringly on the upper cupboard door. A low rumbling noise, like water bumping in a kettle, issued from behind the door.

"I'll gie ye odds on the cat, Ian," Jamie observed, coming into the surgery. "He's a verra high opinion of himself, has wee Adso. I saw him chase a fox, last week."

"The fact that you were behind him with a gun had nothing to do with the fox's running away, of course," I said.

"Well, not so far as yon cheetie's concerned," Jamie agreed, grinning.

"Cheetie," Ian repeated softly. "It feels … verra good to speak Scots again, Uncle Jamie."

Jamie's hand brushed Ian's arm lightly.

"I suppose it does, *a mhic a pheathar*," he said, just as softly. "Will ye have forgot all your Gaelic, then?"

“ ’S beag ’tha fhios aig fear a bhaile mar ’tha fear na mara bèo,” Ian replied, without hesitation. It was a well-known saying: “Little does the landsman know how the seaman lives.”

Jamie laughed in gratified surprise, and Ian grinned broadly back. His face was weathered to a deep brown, and the dotted lines of his Mohawk tattoos ran in fierce crescents from nose to cheekbones—but for a moment, I saw his hazel eyes dance with mischief, and saw again the lad we had known.

“I used to say things over in my mind,” he said, the grin fading a little. “I’d look at things, and say the words in my mind—*‘Avbhar,’ ‘Coire,’ ‘Skirlie’*—so as not to forget.” He glanced shyly at Jamie. “Ye did tell me to remember, Uncle.”

Jamie blinked, and cleared his throat.

“So I did, Ian,” he murmured. “I’m glad of it.” He squeezed Ian’s shoulder hard—and then they were embracing fiercely, thumping each other’s backs with wordless emotion.

By the time I had wiped my own eyes and blown my nose, they had separated and resumed an air of elaborate casualness, affecting to ignore my descent into female sentiment.

“I kept hold of the Scots and the Gaelic, Uncle,” Ian said, clearing his own throat. “The Latin was a bit beyond me, though.”

“I canna think ye’d have much occasion to practice your Latin,” Jamie said. He wiped his shirtsleeve under his nose, smiling. “Unless a wandering Jesuit happened by.”

Ian looked a little queer at that. He glanced from Jamie to me, then at the door to the surgery, to be sure no one was coming.

“Well, it wasna exactly that, Uncle,” he said.

He walked quietly to the door, peeked out into the hallway, then closed the door softly, and came back to the table. He had worn a small leather bag tied at his waist, which—aside from knife, bow, and quiver—appeared to contain the whole of his worldly possessions. He had put this aside earlier, but now picked it up and rummaged briefly in it, withdrawing a small book, bound in black leather. He handed this to Jamie, who took it, looking puzzled.

“When I—that is, just before I left Snaketown—the old lady, Tewaktenyonh, gave me that wee book. I’d seen it before; Emily”—

he stopped, clearing his throat hard, then went on steadily—"Emily begged a page of it for me, to send ye a note to say all was well. Did ye get that?"

"Yes, we did," I assured him. "Jamie sent it to your mother, later."

"Oh, aye?" Ian's expression lightened at thought of his mother. "That's good. She'll be pleased to hear I've come back, I hope."

"I'll lay ye any odds ye like on that one," Jamie assured him. "But what's this?" He lifted the book, raising a brow in question. "It looks like a priest's breviary."

"So it does." Ian nodded, scratching at a mosquito bite on his neck. "That's not what it is, though. Look at it, aye?"

I moved close to Jamie, looking over his elbow as he opened the book. There was a ragged edge of paper, where the flyleaf had been torn out. There was no title page, though, nor printing. The book appeared to be a journal of some sort; the pages were filled with writing in black ink.

Two words stood alone at the top of the first page, scrawled in large, shaky letters.

Ego sum, they said. *I am.*

"Are you, then?" said Jamie, half under his breath. "Aye, and who will ye be?" Half down the page, the writing continued. Here the writing was smaller, more controlled, though something seemed odd-looking about it.

"*Prima cogitatio est …*"

"This is the first thing that comes into my head," Jamie read softly, translating aloud.

> *"I am; I still exist. Did I, in that place between? I must have, for I remember it. I will try later to describe it. Now I have no words. I feel very ill."*

The letters were small and rounded, each printed singly. The work of a neat and careful writer, but they staggered drunkenly, words slanting up the page. He did feel ill, if the writing were any indication.

When the tidy printing resumed on the next page, it had steadied, along with the writer's nerve.

> *"Ibi denum locus …*
>
> *It is the place. Of course it would be. But it is the proper time as well, I know it. The trees, the bushes are different. There was a clearing to the west and now it is completely filled with laurels. I was looking at a big magnolia tree when I stepped into the circle, and now it is gone; there is an oak sapling there. The sound is different. There is no noise of highway and vehicles in the distance. Only birds, singing very loudly. Wind.*
>
> *I am still dizzy. My legs are weak. I cannot stand yet. I woke under the wall where the snake eats its tail, but some distance from the cavity where we laid the circle. I must have crawled, there are dirt and scratches on my hands and clothes. I lay for some time after waking, too ill to rise. I am better now. Still weak and sick, but I am exultant nonetheless. It worked. We have succeeded."*

"We?" I said, looking at Jamie with both eyebrows raised. He shrugged and turned the page.

> *"The stone is gone. Only a smear of soot in my pocket. Raymond was right, then. It was a small unpolished sapphire. I must remember to put down everything, for the sake of others who may come after me."*

A small, cold shudder of premonition flowed up my back and over me, making my scalp tingle as the hair on my head began to stand. Others who may come after me. Not meaning to, I reached out and touched the book; an irresistible impulse. I needed to touch him somehow, make some contact with the vanished writer of these words.

Jamie glanced curiously at me. With some effort, I took my hand away, curling my fingers into a fist. He hesitated for a moment, but then looked back at the book, as though the neat black writing compelled his gaze as it did my own.

I knew now what had struck me about that writing. It had not been written with a quill. Quill-writing, even the best, was uneven in color, dark where the quill was freshly dipped, fading slowly through a line of writing. Every word of this was the same—written in a thin, hard line of black ink that slightly dented the fibers of the page. Quills never did that.

"Ball point," I said. "He wrote it with a ball-point pen. My God."

Jamie glanced back at me. I must have looked pale, for he moved as though to close the book, but I shook my head, motioning to him to go on reading. He frowned dubiously, but with one eye still on me, looked back. Then his attention shifted wholly to the book, and his brows rose as he looked at the writing on the next page.

"Look," he said softly, turning the book toward me and pointing to one line. Written in Latin like the others, but there were unfamiliar words mixed into the text—long, strange-looking words.

"Mohawk?" Jamie said. He looked up, into Ian's face. "That is a word in an Indian tongue, surely. One of the Algonquian tongues, no?"

"Rains Hard," said Ian, quietly. "It is the Kahnyen'kehaka—the Mohawk tongue, Uncle. Rains Hard is someone's name. And the others written there, too—Strong Walker, Six Turtles, and Talks With Spirits."

"I thought the Mohawk have no written language," Jamie said, one ruddy eyebrow lifted. Ian shook his head.

"Nor they do, Uncle Jamie. But someone wrote that"—he nodded at the page,—"and if ye work out the sound of the words …" He shrugged. "They are Mohawk names. I'm sure of it."

Jamie looked at him for a long moment, then without comment bent his head and resumed his translation.

> *"I had one of the sapphires, Rains Hard the other. Talks With Spirits had a ruby, Strong Walker took the diamond, and Six Turtles had the emerald. We were not sure of the diagram—whether it should be four points, for the directions of the compass, or five, in a pentacle. But there were the five of us, sworn by blood to this deed, so we laid the circle with five points."*

There was a small gap between this sentence and the next, and the writing changed, becoming now firm and even, as though the writer had paused, then taken up his story at a later point.

> *"I have gone back to look. There is no sign of the circle—but I see no reason why there should be, after all. I think I must have been unconscious for some time; we laid the circle just inside the mouth of the crevice, but there are no marks in the earth there to show how I crawled or rolled to the spot where I woke, and yet there are marks in the dust, made by rain. My clothes are damp, but I cannot tell if this is from rain, from morning dew, or sweat from lying in the sun; it was near midday when I woke, for the sun was overhead, and it was hot. I am thirsty. Did I crawl away from the crevice, and then collapse? Or was I thrown some distance by the force of the transition?"*

I had the most curious sense, hearing this, that the words were echoing, somewhere inside my head. It wasn't that I had heard it before, and yet the words had a dreadful familiarity. I shook my head, to clear it, and looked up to find Ian's eyes on me, soft brown and full of speculation.

"Yes," I said baldly, in answer to his look. "I am. Brianna and Roger, too." Jamie, who had paused to disentangle a phrase, looked up. He saw Ian's face, and mine, and reached to put his hand on mine.

"How much could ye read, lad?" he asked quietly.

"Quite a lot, Uncle," Ian answered, but his eyes didn't leave my face. "Not everything"—a brief smile touched his lips—"and I'm sure I havena got the grammar right—but I think I understand it. Do you?"

It wasn't clear whether he addressed the question to me or Jamie; both of us hesitated, exchanged a glance—then I turned back to Ian and nodded, and so did Jamie. Jamie's hand tightened on mine.

"Mmphm," Ian said, and his face lighted with an expression of profound satisfaction. "I *knew* ye weren't a fairy, Auntie Claire!"

Unable to stay awake much longer, Ian had finally retired, yawning, though pausing in his flight toward bed to seize Rollo by the scruff of the neck and immobilize him while I removed Adso from the cupboard, fluffed to twice his normal size and hissing like a snake. Holding the cat by his own scruff to avoid being disemboweled, I had carried him out of harm's way, up to our bedroom, where I dumped him unceremoniously on the bed, turning at once to Jamie.

"What happened next?" I demanded.

He was already lighting a fresh candle. Unfastening his shirt with one hand and thumbing the book open with the other, he sank down onto the bed, still absorbed in the reading.

"He couldna find any of his friends. He searched the countryside nearby for two days, calling, but there was no trace. He was verra much distraught, but at last he thought he must go on; he was in need of food, and had nothing but a knife and a bit of salt with him. He must hunt, or find people."

Ian said that Tewaktenyonh had given him the book, enjoining him to bring it to me. It had belonged to a man named Otter-Tooth, she said—a member of my family.

An icy finger had touched my spine at that—and hadn't gone away. Little ripples of unease kept tickling over my skin like the touch of ghostly fingers. My family, indeed.

I *had* told her that Otter-Tooth was perhaps one of "my family," unable to describe the peculiar kinship of time-travelers in any other way. I had never met Otter-Tooth—at least not in the flesh—but if he was the man I thought he was, then his was the head buried in our small burying-ground—complete with silver fillings.

Perhaps I was at last going to learn who he had really been—and how on earth he had come to meet such a startling end.

"He wasna much of a hunter," Jamie said critically, frowning at the page. "Couldna catch so much as a ground-squirrel with a snare, and in the middle of summer, forbye!"

Fortunately for Otter-Tooth—if it was indeed he—he had been familiar with a number of edible plants, and seemed extremely pleased with himself for recognizing pawpaw and persimmon.

"Recognizing a persimmon is no great feat, for God's sake," I said. "They look like orange baseballs!"

"And they taste like the bottom of a chamber pot," Jamie added, he not caring at all for persimmons. "Still, he was hungry by that time, and if ye're hungry enough …" He trailed off, lips moving silently as he continued his translation.

The man had wandered through the wilderness for some time—though "wandering" seemed not quite right; he had chosen a specific direction, guided by the sun and stars. That seemed odd—what had he been looking for?

Whatever it was, he had eventually found a village. He didn't speak the language of the inhabitants—"Why ought he to think he should?" Jamie wondered aloud—but had become extraordinarily distraught, according to his writing, at the discovery that the women were using iron kettles to cook with.

"Tewaktenyonh said that!" I interrupted. "When she was telling me about him—if it's the same man," I added, *pro forma*, "she said he carried on all the time about the cooking pots, and the knives and guns. He said the Indians were … How did she put it?—they needed to 'return to the ways of their ancestors,' or the white man would eat them alive."

"A verra excitable fellow," Jamie muttered, still riveted to the book. "And with a taste for rhetoric, too."

Within a page or two, though, the source of Otter-Tooth's strange preoccupation with cooking pots became somewhat clearer.

"I have failed," Jamie read. "I am too late." He straightened his back, and glanced at me, then went on.

> *"I do not know exactly when I am, nor can I find out—these people will not reckon years by any scale I know, even had I enough of their tongue to ask. But I know I am too late.*
>
> *Had I arrived when I meant to, before 1650, there would be no iron in a village so far inland. To find it here in such casual use means that I am at least fifty years too late—perhaps more!"*

Otter-Tooth was cast into great gloom by this discovery, and spent several days in utmost despair. But then he pulled himself together, determining that there was nothing to be done but to go on. And so he had set out alone, though, with the gift of some food from the villagers—heading north.

"I've no idea what the man thought he was doing," Jamie observed. "But I will say he shows courage. His friends are dead or gone, and he's nothing with him, no notion where he is—and yet he goes on."

"Yes—though in all honesty, I don't suppose he could think of anything else to do," I said. I touched the book again, gently, remembering the first few days after my own passage through the stones.

The difference, of course, was that this man had chosen to come through the stones on purpose. Exactly *why* he had done it—and how—was not revealed just yet.

Traveling alone through the wilderness, with nothing but this small book for company, Otter-Tooth had—he said—decided that he would occupy his mind with setting down an account of his journey, with its motives and intents.

> *"Perhaps I will not succeed in my attempt—our attempt. In fact, it seems likely at the moment that I will simply perish here in the wilderness. But if that is so, then the thought that some record of our noble endeavor remains will be some consolation—and it is all the memorial I can provide for those who were my brothers; my companions in this adventure."*

Jamie stopped and rubbed his eyes. The candle had burned far down; my own eyes were watering so much from yawning that I could scarcely see the page in the flickering light, and I felt light-headed from fatigue.

"Let's stop," I said, and laid my head on Jamie's shoulder, taking comfort from its warm solidness. "I can't stay awake any longer, I really can't—and it doesn't seem right to rush through his story. Besides"—I stopped, interrupted by a jaw-cracking yawn that left me swaying and blinking—"perhaps Bree and Roger should hear this, too."

Jamie caught my yawn and gaped hugely, then shook his head violently, blinking like a large red owl shaken rudely out of its tree.

"Aye, ye're right, Sassenach." He closed the book, and laid it gently on the table by the bed.

I didn't bother with any sort of bedtime toilette, merely removing my outer clothes, brushing my teeth, and crawling into bed in my shift. Adso, who had been snoozing happily on the pillow, was disgruntled at our appropriation of his space, but grumpily moved at Jamie's insistence, making his way to the foot of the bed, where he collapsed on my feet like a large, furry rug.

After a few moments, though, he abandoned his pique, kneaded the bedclothes—and my feet—gently with his claws, and began to purr in a somnolent fashion.

I found his presence almost as soothing as Jamie's soft, regular snoring. For the most part, I felt at home, secure in the place I had made for myself in this world, happy to be with Jamie, whatever the circumstances. But now and then, I saw suddenly and clearly the magnitude of the gulf I had crossed—the dizzying loss of the world I had been born to—and felt very much alone. And afraid.

Hearing this man's words, his panic and desperation, had brought back to me the memory of all the terror and doubts of my journeys through the stones.

I cuddled close to my sleeping husband, warmed and anchored, and heard Otter-Tooth's words, as though they were spoken in my inner ear—a cry of desolation that echoed through the barriers of time and language.

Toward the foot of that one page, the tiny Latin writing had grown increasingly hasty, some of the letters no more than dots of ink, the endings of words swallowed in a frantic spider's dance. And then the last lines, done in English, the writer's Latin dissolved in desperation.

> *Oh God, oh God….*
> *Where are they?*

It was afternoon of the next day before we managed to collect Brianna, Roger, and Ian and retire privately to Jamie's study without attracting unwanted attention. The night before, the haze of fatigue, following on the heels of Ian's sudden appearance, had combined to make almost anything seem reasonable. But going about my chores in the bright light of morning, I found it increasingly difficult to believe that the journal really existed, and was not merely something I had dreamed.

There it was, though, small, but black and solid on Jamie's desk-table. He and Ian had spent the morning in his study, immersed in translation; when I joined him, I could tell by the way Jamie's hair was sticking up that he had found the journal's account either deeply absorbing, terribly upsetting—or possibly both.

"I've told them what it is," he said without preamble, nodding toward Roger and Bree. The two of them sat close together on stools, looking solemn. Jemmy, having refused to be parted from his mother, was under the table, playing with a string of carved wooden beads.

"Have you read through the whole thing?" I asked, subsiding into the extra chair.

Jamie nodded, with a glance at Young Ian, who stood by the window, too restless to sit. His hair was cropped short, but nearly as disordered as Jamie's.

"Aye, we have. I'm no going to read the whole thing aloud, but I thought I'd best start wi' the bit where he's made up his mind to put it all down from the beginning."

He had marked the spot with the scrap of tanned leather he customarily used as a bookmark. Opening the journal, he found his spot and began to read.

> *"The name I was given at birth is Robert Springer. I reject this name, and all that goes with it, because it is the bitter fruit of centuries of murder and injustice, a symbol of theft, slavery, and oppression—"*

Jamie looked up over the edge of the book, remarking, “Ye see why I dinna want to read every word; the man’s gey tedious about it.” Running a finger across the page, he resumed:

“In the year of Our Lord—their lord, that Christ in whose name they rape and pillage and—well, more of the same, but when he gets down to it, it was the year nineteen-hundred-and-sixty-eight. So I suppose ye’ll be familiar wi’ all this murder and pillage he’s talking about?” He raised his eyebrows at Bree and Roger.

Bree sat up abruptly, clutching Roger’s arm.

“I know that name,” she said, sounding breathless. “Robert Springer. I know it!”

“You knew *him*?” I asked, feeling a thrill of something—excitement, dread, or simple curiosity—run through me.

She shook her head.

“No, I didn’t know *him*, but I know the name—I saw it in the newspapers. Did you—?” She turned toward Roger, but he shook his head, frowning.

“Well, maybe you wouldn’t, in the UK, but it was a big deal in Boston. I *think* Robert Springer was one of the Montauk Five.”

Jamie pinched the bridge of his nose.

“The five what?”

“It was just a—a thing people did to call attention to themselves.” Brianna flapped a hand in dismissal. “It’s not important. They were AIM activists, or at least they started out that way, only they were even too nuts for AIM, and so—”

“Nuts? W’ere nuts?” Jemmy, picking the only word of personal interest out of this account, emerged from under the table.

“Not that kind of nuts, baby, sorry.” Looking around for some object of interest to distract him, Bree slipped off her silver bracelet and gave it to him. Seeing the puzzled looks on the faces of father and cousin, she took a deep breath and started over, trying—with occasional clarifications from Roger and me—to define things, and give a short, if confused, account of the sad state of the American Indian in the twentieth century.

“So this Robert Springer is—or was—an Indian, of sorts, in your own time?” Jamie tapped his fingers in a brief tattoo on the table, frowning in concentration. “Well, that corresponds wi’ his own account; he and his friends apparently took no little exception to the behavior of what they called ‘whites.’ I would suppose those to be Englishmen? Or Europeans, at least?”

“Well, yes—except that by nineteen sixty-eight, of course they weren’t Europeans anymore, they were Americans, only the Indians were Americans first—and so that’s when they started calling themselves *native* Americans, and—”

Roger patted her knee, stopping her in mid-flow.

“Perhaps we can do the history a bit later,” he suggested. “What was it ye read about Robert Springer in the papers?”

“Oh.” Taken aback, she furrowed her brow in concentration. “He disappeared. They disappeared—the Montauk Five, I mean. They were all wanted by the government, for blowing things up or threatening to or something, I forget—and they were arrested, but then they got out on bail, and the next thing you know, they’d all disappeared.”

“Evidently so,” Young Ian murmured, glancing toward the journal.

“It was a big deal in the papers for a week or so,” Brianna went on. “The other activist types were all accusing the government of having done away with them, so that stuff coming out of the trial wouldn’t embarrass the government, and of course the government was denying it. So there was a big search on, and I think I remember reading that they found the body of one of the missing men—out in the woods somewhere in New Hampshire or Vermont or someplace—but they couldn’t tell how he died—and nobody turned up any trace of the others.”

“Where are they?” I quoted softly, the hair rippling on the back of my neck. *“My God, where are they?”*

Jamie nodded soberly.

“Aye, then; I think this Springer may well be your man.” He touched the page before him, with something like respect.

“He and his four companions all renounced any association with the white world, taking new names from their real heritage—or so he says.”

"That would be the proper thing to do," Ian said softly. He had a new, strange stillness to him, and I was forcibly reminded that he had been a Mohawk for the last two years—washed free of his white blood, renamed Wolf's Brother—one of the Kahnyen'kehaka, the Guardians of the Western Gate.

I thought Jamie was aware of this stillness, too, but he kept his eyes on the journal, flipping pages slowly as he summarized their content.

Robert Springer—or Ta'wineonawira—"Otter-Tooth," as he chose henceforth to call himself had numerous associations in the shadow world of extremist politics and the deeper shadows of what he called Native American shamanism—I had no notion how much resemblance there was between what he was doing, and the original beliefs of the Iroquois, but Otter-Tooth believed that he was descended from the Mohawk, and embraced such remnants of tradition as he could find—or invent.

It was at a naming ceremony that I first met Raymond. I sat up abruptly, hearing that. He had mentioned Raymond in the beginning, but I had taken no particular note of the name, then.

"Does he describe this Raymond?" I asked urgently.

Jamie shook his head.

"Not in terms of appearance, no. He says only that Raymond was a great shaman, who could transform himself into birds or animals—and who could walk through time," he added delicately. He glanced at me, one eyebrow raised.

"I don't know," I said. "I thought so, once—but, now, I don't know."

"What?" Brianna was looking back and forth between us, puzzled. I shook my head, smoothing back my hair.

"Never mind. Someone I knew in Paris was named Raymond, and I thought—but what in the name of *anything* would he be doing in America in nineteen sixty-eight?" I burst out.

"Well, you were there, aye?" Jamie pointed out. "But putting that aside for the moment—" He returned to the text, laying it all out in the oddly stilted English of the translation: Intrigued by Raymond, Otter-Tooth had met with the man repeatedly, and brought several of his closest friends to him as well. Gradually, the scheme—*a great, audacious plan, stunning in conception*—"Modest, isn't he?" Roger muttered—*had been conceived.*

> *"There was a test. Many failed, but I did not. There were five of us who passed the test, who heard the voice of time, five of us who swore in our blood and by our blood that we would undertake this great venture, to rescue our people from catastrophe. To rewrite their history and redress their wrongs, to—"*

Roger gave a faint groan.

"Oh, God," he said. "What did they mean to do—assassinate Christopher Columbus?"

"Not quite," I said. "He meant to arrive before 1600, he said. What happened then, do you know?"

"I dinna ken what happened then," Jamie told me, rubbing a hand through his hair, "but I ken well enough what he thought he was doing. His plan was to go to the Iroquois League, and rouse them against the white settlers. He thought that there were few enough settlers then, that the Indians could easily wipe them out, if the Iroquois led the way."

"Perhaps he was right," Ian said softly. "I've heard the old people tell the stories. When the first of the O'seronni came, how they were welcomed, how they brought trade goods. A hundred years ago, the O'seronni were few—and the Kahnyen'kehaka were masters, leaders of the Nations. Aye, they could have done it—had they wished to."

"Well, but he couldn't possibly have stopped the Europeans," Brianna objected. "There were just way too many. He didn't mean to get the Mohawk to invade Europe, did he?"

A broad grin crossed Jamie's face at the thought.

"I should have liked to see that," he said. "The Mohawk would have given the Sassenachs something to think about. But no, alas"—he gave me a sardonic look—"our friend Robert Springer wasna *quite* so ambitious."

What Otter-Tooth and his companions had had in mind was sufficiently ambitious, though—and perhaps … just perhaps … possible. Their intention was not to prevent white settlement altogether—they were, just barely, sane enough to realize the impossibility of that. What they intended was to put the Indians on their guard against the whites, to establish trade on *their* terms, to deal from a position of power.

"Instead of allowing them to settle in great numbers, they might keep the whites bottled up in small towns. Instead of allowing them to build fortifications, demand weapons from the start. Establish trade on their own terms. Keep them outnumbered, and outgunned—and force the Europeans to teach them the ways of metal.

"Prometheus redux," I said, and Jaime snorted.

Roger shook his head, half-admiringly.

"It's a crack-brained scheme," he said, "but ye do have to admire their League nerve. It might just possibly have worked—*if* he could convince the Iroquois, and *if* they acted at the right time, before the balance of power shifted to the Europeans. It all went wrong, though, didn't it? First he comes to the wrong time—much too late—and then he realizes none of his friends have made it with him."

I saw goosebumps rise suddenly on Brianna's arms, and caught the look she sent me—one of sudden understanding. She had abruptly imagined just how it might be, to arrive suddenly out of one's own time … alone.

I gave her a small smile, and put my hand on Jamie's arm. Absentmindedly, he put his own hand over mine, and squeezed it gently.

"Aye. He nearly despaired, as he says, when he realized that it had all gone wrong. He thought of going back—but he didna have a gemstone anymore, and this Raymond had said ye must have one, for protection."

"He did find one eventually, though," I said. Getting up, I reached to the top shelf and brought down the big raw opal, its inner fire flickering through the carved spiral on its surface.

"That is—I'm assuming there can't have been multiple Indians named Otter-Tooth, associated with Snaketown." Tewaktenyonh, an elderly Mohawk woman, and leader of the Council of Mothers, had given me the stone when we went to the village of Snaketown to rescue Roger from captivity. She had also told me the story of Otter-Tooth, and how he met his death—and I shivered, though it was warm in the room.

The big smooth stone felt warm in my hand, too; I rubbed a thumb gingerly over the spiral. *The snake that eats its tail,* he'd said.

"Aye. He doesna mention that, though." Jamie sat back, running both hands through his loosened hair, then rubbing a hand over his face. "The story ends with him deciding that there's no help for it; whatever year it may be—and he had no notion—and whether he was alone or not, he would carry out his plan."

Everyone was silent for a moment, regarding the enormity—and the futility—of such a plan.

"He can't have thought it would work," Roger said, the rasping husk of his voice giving the words a sense of finality.

Jamie shook his head, looking down at the book, though his eyes were clearly looking through it, dark blue and remote.

"Nor he did," he said softly. "What he said, here at the last"—his fingers touched the page, very gently—"was that thousands of his people had died for their freedom, thousands more would die in years to come. He would walk the path they walked, for the honor of his blood, and to die fighting was no more than a warrior of the Mohawk should ask."

I heard Ian draw breath behind me in a sigh, and Brianna bent her head, so the bright hair hid her face. Roger's own face was turned toward her, grave in profile—but it was none of them I saw. I saw a man with his face painted black for death, walking through a dripping forest at night, holding a torch that burned with cold fire.

A yank on my skirt pulled me away from this vision, and I glanced down to find Jemmy standing beside me, pulling on my hand.

"Watsat?"

"What—oh! It's a rock, sweetheart; a pretty rock, see?" I held out the opal, and he seized it with both hands, plumping down on his bottom to look at it.

Brianna wiped a hand underneath her nose, and Roger cleared his throat with a noise like ripping cloth.

“What I want to know,” he said gruffly, gesturing toward the journal, “is why in hell did he write that in Latin?”

“Oh. He says that. He’d learnt Latin in school—perhaps that was what turned him against Europeans”—Jamie grinned at Young Ian, who grimaced—“and he thought if he wrote in Latin, anyone who happened to see it would think it only a priest’s book of prayers, and pay it no heed.”

“They did think that—the Kahnyen’kehaka,” Ian put in. “Old Tewaktenyonh kept the book, though. And when I—left, she gave me the wee book, and said as I must bring it back wi’ me, and give it to you, Auntie Claire.”

“To me?” I felt a sense of hesitation at touching the book, but nonetheless reached out a hand and touched the open pages. The ink, I saw, had begun to run dry toward the end—the letters skipped and stuttered, and some words were no more than indentations on the paper. Had he thrown the empty pen away, I wondered, or kept it, a useless reminder of his vanished future?

“Do you think she knew what was in the book?” I asked. Ian’s face was impassive, but his soft hazel eyes held a hint of trouble. When he had been a Scot, he hadn’t been one to hide his feelings.

“I dinna ken,” he said. “She kent *something*, but I couldna say what. She didna tell me—only that I must bring ye the book.” He hesitated, glancing from me to Brianna and Roger, then back. “Is it true?” he asked. “What ye said, cousin—about what will happen to the Indians?”

She looked up, meeting his eyes squarely, and nodded.

“I’m afraid so,” she said softly. “I’m sorry, Ian.”

He only nodded, rubbing a knuckle down the bridge of his nose, but I wondered.

He hadn’t forsaken his own people, I knew, but the Kahnyen’kehaka were his as well. No matter what had happened to cause him to leave.

I was opening my mouth to ask Ian about his wife, when I heard Jemmy. He had retired back under the table with his prize, and had been talking to it in a genially conversational—if unintelligible—

manner for several minutes. His voice had suddenly changed, though, to a tone of alarm.

"Hot," he said, "Mummy, HOT!"

Brianna was already rising from her stool, a look of concern on her face, when I heard the noise. It was a high-pitched ringing sound, like the weird singing of a crystal goblet when you run a wet finger round and round the rim. Roger sat up straight, looking startled.

Brianna bent and snatched Jemmy out from under the table, and as she straightened with him, there was a sudden *pow!* like a gunshot, and the ringing noise abruptly stopped.

"Holy God," said Jamie, rather mildly under the circumstances.

Splinters of glimmering fire protruded from the bookshelf, the books, the walls, and the thick folds of Brianna's skirts. One had whizzed past Roger's head, barely nicking his ear; a thin trickle of blood was running down his neck, though he didn't seem to have noticed yet.

A stipple of brilliant pinpoints glinted on the table—a shower of the sharp needles had been thrust upward through the inch-thick wood. I heard Ian exclaim sharply, and bend to pull a tiny shaft from the flesh of his calf. Jemmy began to cry. Outside, Rollo the dog was barking furiously.

The opal had exploded.

It was still broad daylight; the candleflame was nearly invisible, no more than a waver of heat in the late afternoon light from the window. Jamie blew out the taper he had used to light it, and sat down behind his desk.

"Ye didna sense anything odd about yon stone when ye gave it to the lad, Sassenach?"

"No." I still felt shaken by the explosion, the echoes of that eerie noise still chiming in my inner ear. "It felt warm—but everything in the room is warm. And it certainly wasn't making that noise."

"Noise?" He looked at me queerly. "When it went bang, d'ye mean?"

Now it was my turn to look askance.

"No—before that. Didn't you hear it?" He shook his head, a small frown between his brows, and I glanced round at the others. Bree and Roger nodded—both of them looked pale and ill—but Ian shook his head, looking interested, but puzzled.

"I didna hear a thing," he said. "What did it sound like?"

Brianna opened her mouth to answer, but Jamie raised a hand to stop her.

"A moment, *a nighean*. Jem, *a ruradh*—did ye hear a noise before the bang?"

Jemmy had settled down from his fright, but was still crouching in his mother's lap, thumb in his mouth. He looked at his grandfather out of wide blue eyes that had already begun to show a definite slant, and slowly nodded, not removing the thumb.

"And the stone Grannie gave ye—it was hot?"

Jemmy cast a glare of intense accusation in my direction and nodded again. I felt a small surge of guilt—followed by a much larger one, when I thought of what might have happened, had Bree not snatched him up at once.

We had picked most of the splinters out of the woodwork; they lay on the desk in a small heap of brittle fire. One had sliced a tiny flap of skin from my knuckle; I put it in my mouth, tasting silver blood.

"My God, those things are sharp as broken glass."

"They *are* broken glass." Brianna clutched Jem a little closer.

"Glass? You mean it wasn't a real opal?" Roger raised his brows, leaning forward to pick up one of the needlelike shards.

"Sure it is—but opals are glass. Really hard volcanic glass. Gemstones are gemstones because they have a crystalline structure that makes them pretty; opals just have a really brittle structure, compared to most." The color was beginning to come back into Brianna's face, though she kept her arms wrapped tightly round her son.

"I knew you could break one if you hit with a hammer or something, but I never heard of one doing *that*." She nodded at the pile of glimmering fragments.

Jamie picked a large shard out of the pile with finger and thumb and held it out to me.

"Put it in your hand, Sassenach. Does it feel warm to you?"

I accepted the jagged piece of stone gingerly. It was thin, nearly weightless, and translucent, sparkling with vivid blues and oranges.

"Yes," I said, tilting my palm cautiously to and fro. "Not remarkably hot—just about skin temperature."

"It felt cool to me," Jamie said. "Give it to Ian."

I transferred the bit of opal to Ian, who put it in the palm of his hand and stroked it cautiously with a fingertip, as though it were some small animal that might bite him if annoyed.

"It feels cool," he reported. "Like a bit of glass, like Cousin Brianna says."

A bit more experimentation established that the stone felt warm—though not strikingly so—to Brianna, Roger, and me—but not to Jamie or Ian. By this time, the wax had melted in the top of the big clock candle, allowing Jamie to extract the gemstones hidden there. He fished them out, rubbed the last of the hot wax off on his handkerchief, and laid them out in a row along the edge of the desk to cool.

Jemmy watched this with great interest, his misadventure apparently forgotten.

"D'ye like these, *a ghille ruaidh*?" Jamie asked him, and he nodded eagerly, leaning out of his mother's lap, reaching toward the stones.

"Hot," he said, then, remembering, shrank back a little, a look of doubt crossing his small, blunt features. "Hot?"

"Well, I do hope not," his grandfather said. He took a deep breath and picked up the emerald, a crudely faceted stone the size of his thumbnail. "Put out your hand, *a bhalaich*."

Brianna looked as though she wanted to protest, but bit her lower lip, and encouraged Jemmy to do as his grandfather asked. He took the stone, still looking suspicious, but then the look of wariness faded into a smile as he looked down at the stone.

"Pretty rock!"

"Is it hot?" Brianna asked, poised to snatch it out of his hand.

"Yes, hot," he said, with satisfaction, holding it against his stomach.

"Let Mama see." With a little difficulty, Brianna succeeded in getting her fingers onto the rock, though Jemmy wouldn't surrender it. "It's warm," she said, looking up. "Like the piece of opal—but not way hot. If it gets way hot, you drop it *fast*, OK?" she said to Jemmy.

Roger had been watching this with fascination.

"He's got it, hasn't he?" he said softly. "Fifty/fifty, you said, or three chances in four, depending—but he's got it, doesn't he?"

"What?" Jamie glanced at Roger, then me, one red brow raised in question.

"I think he can … travel," I said, feeling a tightening of my chest at the thought. "You know what Otter-Tooth said—" I nodded at the journal, which lay discarded on the desk. "He said they had to take a test—to see if they could hear 'the voice of time.' We know that not everyone can … do this." I felt unaccountably shy, talking of it before Ian. "But some can. From what Otter-Tooth said, there was a way of finding out who could and couldn't, ahead of time, without having actually to try."

Jemmy was paying no attention to the grown-up conversation, instead rocking back and forth, humming to the stone clutched in his pudgy hand.

"Do you suppose the 'voice of time' is—Jem, can you *hear* the rock?" Roger leaned forward, taking hold of Jemmy's arm to compel his attention away from the emerald. "Jem, is the rock singing to you?"

Jemmy looked up, surprised.

"No," he said uncertainly. Then, "Yes." He held the rock up to his ear, frowning, then thrust it at Roger. "You sing, Daddy!"

Roger accepted the emerald gingerly, smiling at Jemmy.

"I don't know any rock songs," he said, in his husky rasp of a voice. "Unless ye count the Beatles." He lifted the rock to his own ear, looking self-conscious. He listened intently, frowning, then lowered his hand, shaking his head.

"It's not—I can't—I couldna really say I *hear* anything. And yet—here, you try." He passed the stone to Brianna, and she in turn to me. Neither of us heard anything in particular, and yet I thought I could perceive something, if I listened very hard. Not exactly a sound, more a sense of very, very faint vibration.

"What is it?" Ian asked. He had been following the proceedings with rapt interest. "Ye're no *sìdheanach*, the three of ye—but why is it you can do … what ye do, and Uncle Jamie and I canna? Ye can't, can ye, Uncle Jamie?" he asked dubiously.

"No, thank God," his uncle replied.

"It's genetic, isn't it?" Brianna asked, looking up. "It has to be."

Jamie and Ian looked wary at the unfamiliar term.

"Genetic?" Ian asked. His feathery brows drew together in puzzlement.

"Why shouldn't it be?" I said. "Everything else is—blood type, eye color."

"But everyone has eyes and blood, Sassenach," Jamie objected. "Whatever color his eyes may be, everyone can see. This—" He waved at the small collection of stones.

I sighed with impatience.

"Yes, but there are other things that are genetic—everything, if you come right down to it! Look—" I turned to him and stuck out my tongue. Jamie blinked, and Brianna giggled at his expression.

Disregarding this, I pulled in my tongue and put it out again, this time with the edges rolled up into a cylinder.

"What about that?" I asked, popping it back in. "Can you do that?"

Jamie looked amused.

"Of course I can." He stuck out a rolled tongue and wiggled it, demonstrating, then pulled it back. "Everyone can do that, surely? Ian?"

"Oh, aye, of course." Ian obligingly demonstrated. "Anyone can."

"I can't," said Brianna. Jamie stared at her, taken aback.

"What d'ye mean ye can't?"

“Bleah.” She stuck out a flat tongue and waggled it from side to side. “I can’t.”

“Of course ye can.” Jamie frowned. “Here, it’s simple, lass—anyone can do it!” He stuck out his own tongue again, rolling and unrolling it like a paternal anteater, anxiously encouraging its offspring toward an appetizing mass of insects. He glanced at Roger, brows lifted.

“You’d think so, wouldn’t you?” Roger said ruefully. He stuck out his own tongue, flat. “Bleah.”

“See?” I said triumphantly. “Some people can roll their tongues, and some simply can’t. It can’t be learned. You’re born with it, or you’re not.”

Jamie looked from Bree to Roger and back, frowning, then turned to me.

“Allowing for the moment that ye may be right—why can the lass not do it, if you and I both can? Ye did assure me she’s my daughter, aye?”

“She is most assuredly your daughter,” I said. “As anyone with eyes in their head could tell you.” He glanced at Brianna, taking in her lean height and mass of ruddy hair. She smiled at him, blue eyes creasing into triangles. He smiled back and turned to me, shrugging in good-natured capitulation.

“Well, I shall take your word for it, Sassenach, as an honorable woman. But the tongue, then?” He rolled his own again, in doubtful fashion, still not quite believing that anyone couldn’t do it if they put their mind to it.

“Well, you do know where babies come from,” I began. “The egg and the …”

“I do,” he said, with a noticeable edge to his voice. The tips of his ears turned slightly pink.

“I mean, it takes something from the mother and something from the father.” I could feel my own cheeks pinken slightly, but carried on gamely. “Sometimes the father’s influence is more visible than the mother’s; sometimes the other way round—but both … er … influences are still there. We call them genes—the things babies get from their two parents that affect the child's appearance and abilities."

Jamie glanced at Jemmy, who was humming again, engaged in trying to balance one gemstone on top of another, the sunlight glinting off his coppery hair. Looking back, he caught Roger's eye, and quickly turned his attention to me.

"Aye, so?"

"Well, genes affect more than simply hair or eye-color. Now," I warmed to my lecture, "each person has two genes for every trait—one from the father, one from the mother. And when the . . er . . gametes are formed in the ovaries and testes—"

"Perhaps ye should tell me all about it later, Sassenach," Jamie interrupted, with a sidelong glance at Brianna. Evidently he didn't think the word "testes" suitable for his daughter's ears; his own were blazing.

"It's all right, Da. I know where babies come from," Bree assured him, grinning.

"Well, then," I said, taking back command of the conversation. "You have a pair of genes for each trait, one gene from your mother and one gene from your father—but when the time comes to pass these on to your own offspring, you can only pass *one* of the pair. Because the child will get another gene from his other parent, you see?" I raised an eyebrow at Jamie and Roger, who nodded in unison, as though hypnotized.

"Right. Well, then. Some genes are said to be dominant, and others recessive. If a person has a dominant gene, then that's the one that will be expressed—will be visible. They may have another gene that's recessive and so you don't see it—but it can still be passed to the offspring."

My collective audience looked wary.

"Surely you learned this in school, Roger?" Bree asked, amused.

"Well, I did," he muttered, "but I think perhaps I wasna paying proper attention at the time. After all, I wasn't expecting it actually to *matter*."

"Right," I said dryly. "Well, then. You and I, Jamie, evidently each have one of the dominant genes that allows us to roll our tongues. *But*—” I continued, raising a finger, “we must also each have a recessive gene, that *doesn’t* allow tongue-rolling. And evidently, each of us gave the recessive gene to Bree. Therefore, she can’t roll her tongue. Likewise, Roger must have two copies of the non-rolling recessive gene, since if he had even one of the dominant genes, he could do it—and he can’t. Q.E.D.” I bowed.

“Wat’s tes-tees?” inquired a small voice. Jemmy had abandoned his rocks and was looking up at me in profound interest.

“Er …” I said. I glanced round the room in search of aid.

“That’s Latin for your balls, lad,” Roger said gravely, suppressing a grin.

Jemmy looked quite interested at that.

“I gots balls? W’ere I gots balls?”

“Er …” said Roger, and glanced at Jamie.

“Mmphm,” said Jamie, and looked at the ceiling.

“Well, ye do have a kilt on, Uncle Jamie,” Ian said, grinning. Jamie gave his nephew a look of gross betrayal, but before he could move, Roger had leaned forward and cupped Jemmy gently between the legs.

“Just there, *a bhalaich*,” he said.

Jemmy kneaded his crotch briefly, then looked at Roger, small strawberry brows knitted into a puzzled frown.

“Nots a ball. ’Sa willy!”

Jamie sighed deeply and got up. He jerked his head at Roger, then reached down and took Jemmy’s hand.

“Aye, all right. Come outside with me and your Da, we’ll show ye.”

Bree’s face was the exact shade of her hair, and her shoulders shook briefly. Roger, also suspiciously pink about the cheeks, had opened the door and stood aside for Jamie and Jem to go through.

I didn’t think Jamie paused to think about it; seized by impulse, he turned to Jemmy, rolling up his tongue into a cylinder and sticking it out.

“Can you do that, *a ruaidh*?” he asked, pulling it back in again.

Brianna drew in her breath with a sound like a startled duck, and froze. Roger froze, too, his eyes resting on Jemmy as though the little boy were an explosive device, primed to go off like the opal.

A second too late, Jamie realized, and his cheeks went pale.

"Damn," he said, very quietly under his breath.

Jemmy's eyes grew round with reproach.

"Bad, Granda! At'sa bad word. Mama?"

"Yes," Brianna said, narrowed eyes on Jamie. "We'll have to wash Grand-da's mouth out with soap, won't we?"

He looked very much as though he had already swallowed a good mouthful of soap, and lye-soap, at that.

"Aye," he said, and cleared his throat. The flush had faded entirely from his face. "Aye, that was verra wicked of me, Jeremiah. I must beg pardon o' the ladies." He bowed, very formally, to me and Brianna. *"Je suis navré, Madames. Et Monsieur,"* he added softly to Roger. Roger nodded very slightly. His eyes were still on Jemmy, but his lids were lowered and his face carefully blank.

Jemmy's own round face assumed the expression of beatific delight that he wore whenever French was spoken near him, and—as Jamie had clearly intended—broke immediately into his own pet contribution to that language of art and chivalry.

"*Frère Jacques, Frère Jacques.…*"

Roger looked up at Bree, and something seemed to pass through the air between them. He reached down and took hold of Jem's other hand, momentarily interrupting his song.

"So, *a bhalaich,* can ye do it, then?"

"*FRÈRE* … do whats?"

"Look at Grand-da." Roger nodded at Jamie, who took a deep breath and quickly put out his tongue, rolled into a cylinder.

"Can ye do that?" Roger asked.

"Chure." Jemmy beamed and put out his tongue. Flat. "Bleah!"

A collective sigh gusted through the room. Jemmy, oblivious, swung his legs up, his weight suspended momentarily from Roger's and Jamie's hands, then stomped his feet down on the floor again, recalling his original question.

"Grand-da gots balls?" he asked, pulling on the men's hands and tilting his head far back to look up at Jamie.

“Aye, lad, I have,” Jamie said dryly. “But your Da’s are bigger. Come on, then.”

And to the sound of Jemmy’s tuneless chanting, the men trundled him outside, hanging like a gibbon between them, his knees drawn up to his chin.

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MAN OF BLOOD

I crumbled dry sage leaves in my hands, letting the gray-green flakes fall into the burning coals. The sun hung low in the sky above the chestnut trees, but the small burying-ground lay already in shadow, and the fire was bright.

The five of us stood in a circle around the chunk of granite with which Jamie had marked the stranger's grave. *There were five of us, and so we laid the circle with five points.* By common consent, this was not only for the man with the silver fillings, but for his four unknown companions—and for Daniel Rawlings, whose fresh and final grave lay under a mountain-ash, nearby.

The smoke rose up from the small iron fire-pot, pale and fragrant. I had brought other herbs as well, but I knew that for the Tuscarora, for the Cherokee, and for the Mohawk, sage was holy, the smoke of it cleansing.

I rubbed juniper needles between my hands into the fire, and followed them with rue, called herb-of-grace, and rosemary—that's for remembrance, after all.

The leaves of the trees nearby rustled gently in the evening breeze, and the twilight lit the drifting smoke, turning it from gray to gold as it rose up and up into heaven's vault, where the faint stars waited.

Jamie lifted his head, touched with fire as bright as the blaze by his feet, and looked toward the west, where the souls of the dead fly away. He spoke softly, in Gaelic, but all of us knew enough by now to follow.

"Thou goest home this night to thy home of winter,
To thy home of autumn, of spring, and of summer;
Thou goest home this night to thy perpetual home,
To thine eternal bed, to thine eternal slumber.
The sleep of the seven lights be thine, O brother,
The sleep of the seven joys be thine, O brother,
The sleep of the seven slumbers be thine, O brother,
On the arm of the Jesus of blessings, the Christ of grace.
The shade of death lies upon thy face, beloved,
But the Jesus of Grace has His hand round about thee;
In nearness to the Trinity farewell to thy pains,
Christ stands before thee and peace is in His mind."

Ian stood by him, close, but not touching. The fading light touched his face, fierce upon his scars. He said it first in the Mohawk tongue, but then in English, for the rest of us.

"Be the hunt successful,
Be your enemies destroyed before your eyes,
Be your heart ever joyful in the lodge of your brothers."

"Ye're meant to say it over and over again, a good many times," he added, ducking his head apologetically. "Wi' the drums, aye? But I thought once would do, for now."

"That will do fine, Ian," Jamie assured him, and looked then toward Roger.

Roger coughed and cleared his throat, then spoke, the husk of his voice as transparent and as penetrating as the smoke.

"Lord, make me to know mine end,
And the measure of my days, what it is;
That I may know how frail I am.
Behold, Thou has made my days as an hand-breadth;
And mine age is as nothing before Thee.
Hear my prayer, O Lord, and give ear unto my cry;
Hold not Thy peace at my tears:

For I am a stranger with Thee,
And a sojourner, as all my fathers were."

We stood in silence then, as the darkness came quietly around us. As the last of the light faded and the leaves overhead lost their brilliance, Brianna picked up the pitcher of water, and poured it over the pot of coals. Smoke and steam rose up in a ghostly cloud, and the scent of remembrance drifted through the trees.

It was nearly dark as we came down the narrow trail back to the house. I could see Brianna in front of me, though, leading the way; the men were a little behind us. The fireflies were out in great profusion, drifting through the trees, and lighting the grass near my feet. One of the little bugs lighted briefly in Brianna's hair and clung there for a moment, blinking.

A wood at twilight holds a deep hush, that bids the heart be still, the foot step lightly on the earth.

"Have ye thought, then, a *cliamhuinn*?" Jamie said, behind me. His voice was low, the tone of it friendly enough—but the formal address made it clear that the question was seriously meant.

"Of what?" Roger's voice was calm, hushed from the service, the rasp of it barely audible.

"Of what ye shall do—you and your family. Now that ye ken both that the wee lad can travel—and what it might mean, if ye stay."

What it might mean to them all. I drew breath, uneasy. War. Battle. Uncertainty, save for the certainty of danger. The danger of illness or accident, for Brianna and Jem. The danger of death in the toils of childbirth, if she was again with child. And for Roger—danger both of body and soul. His head had healed, but I saw the stillness at the back of his eyes, when he thought of Randall Lillywhite.

"Oh, aye," Roger said, softly, invisible behind me. "I have thought—and am still thinking … *m' athair-cèile*."

I smiled a little, to hear him call Jamie "father-in-law," but the tone of his voice was altogether serious.

"Shall I tell ye what I think? And you will tell me?"

"Aye, do that. There is time still, for thinking."

"I have been thinking, lately, of Hermon Husband."

"The Quaker?" Jamie sounded surprised. Husband had left the colony with his family, after the battle of Alamance. I thought I heard that they had gone to Maryland.

"Aye, him. What d'ye think might have happened, had he not been a Quaker? Had he gone ahead, and led the Regulators to their war?"

Jamie grunted slightly, thinking.

"I dinna ken," he said, though he sounded interested. "Ye mean they might have succeeded, with a proper leader?"

"Aye. Or maybe not—they'd no weapons, after all—but they would have done better than they did. And if so—"

We had come within sight of the house, now. Light was glowing in the back windows as the hearth-fire was stoked up for the evening, the candles lit for supper.

"What's going to happen here—I am thinking, had the Regulation been properly led, perhaps it would have started here and then; not three years from now, in Massachusetts."

"Aye? And if so, what then?"

Roger gave a brief snort, the verbal equivalent of a shrug.

"Who knows? I know what's going on in England now—they are not ready, they've no notion of what they're risking here. If war were to break out suddenly, with little warning—if it *had* broken out, at Alamance—it might spread quickly. It might be over before the English had a clue what was happening. It might have saved years of warfare, thousands of lives."

"Or not," Jamie said dryly, and Roger laughed.

"Or not," he agreed. "But the point there is this; I think there are times for men of peace—and a time for men of blood, as well."

Brianna had reached the house, but turned and waited for the rest of us. She had been listening to the conversation, too.

Roger stopped beside her, looking up. Bright sparks flew from the chimney in a firework shower, lighting his face by their glow.

"Ye called me," he said at last, still looking up into the blazing dark. "At the Gathering, at the fire."

"Seas vi mo lâmh, Roger an t'oranaiche, mac Jeremiah mac Choinneich," Jamie said quietly. "Aye, I did. Stand by my side, Roger the singer, son of Jeremiah."

"Seas vi mo lâmh, a mhic mo thaighe," Roger said. "Stand by my side—son of my house. Did ye mean that?"

"Ye know that I did."

"Then I mean it, too." He reached out and rested his hand on Jamie's shoulder, and I saw the knuckles whiten as he squeezed.

"I will stand by you. We will stay."

Beside me, Brianna let out the breath she had been holding, in a sigh like the twilight wind.

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AND YET GO OUT TO MEET IT

The big clock candle had burned down a little, but there were still a good many of the black rings that marked the hours. Jamie dropped the stones back into the pool of melted wax around the flame: one, two, three—and blew it out. The fourth stone, the big topaz, was ensconced in a small wooden box, which I had sewn up in oiled cloth. It was bound for Edinburgh, consigned to Mrs. Bug's cousin's husband, who, with his banking connections, would manage the sale of the stone, and—with the deduction of a suitable commission for his help—would see the funds transmitted to Ned Gowan.

The accompanying letter, lying sealed in the box with the stone, charged Ned to determine whether one Laoghaire MacKenzie was living with a man in a state tantamount to marriage—and if so, further charged him to declare the contract between one Laoghaire MacKenzie and one James Fraser to be fulfilled, whereupon the funds from the sale of the stone were to be placed on deposit in a bank, to be used for the dowry of one Joan MacKenzie Fraser, daughter of the aforesaid Laoghaire, when she should marry.

"You're sure you don't want to ask Ned particularly to tell you who the man is?" I asked.

He shook his head firmly.

"If he chooses to tell me, that's fine. And if he doesna, that's fine, as well." He looked up at me with a faint, wry look. Unsatisfied curiosity was to be his penance, evidently.

Down the hall, I could hear Brianna simultaneously talking to Mrs. Bug and admonishing Jemmy, then Roger's voice, interrupting, and Jemmy's excited squeal as Roger swept him up into the air.

"Do you think Roger chose well?" I asked quietly. I was very glad of Roger's decision—and knew that Jamie was, as well. But in spite of the peculiar perspective that Brianna, Roger, and I had on coming events, I knew that Jamie had far better an idea of what was truly coming. And if the stone passage had its dangers, so did war.

He paused, thinking, then leaned past me, reaching for a small volume at the end of the bookcase. It was bound cheaply in cloth, and much used; an edition of Thucydides he had acquired in the wildly optimistic hope that Germain and Jemmy might eventually learn sufficient Greek to read it.

He opened the book gently, to keep the pages from falling out. Greek lettering looked to me like the conniptions of an ink-soaked worm, but he found the bit he was looking for with no difficulty.

> *"The bravest are surely those who have the clearest vision of what*
> *is before them, glory and danger alike, and yet notwithstanding*
> *go out to meet it."*

The words were before him, and yet I thought he was not reading them from the paper, but from the pages of his memory, from the open book of his heart.

The door slammed, and I heard Roger shouting outside now, cracked voice raised in warning, calling out to Jemmy, and then his laugh, deep and half-choked, as Bree said something to him, a lighter sound too far away to hear in words.

Then they moved away, and there was silence, save for the sough of the wind in the trees.

"The bravest are those who have the clearest vision. Well, you'd know about that, wouldn't you?" I said softly. I laid a hand on his shoulder, just where it joined his neck. I traced the powerful cords of his neck with my thumb, looking at the worm-writhings on the page. He would, and so would I; for the vision he had was the one I had shown him.

He kept hold of the book, but tilted his head to one side, so that his cheek brushed my hand, and the thickness of his hair touched my wrist, soft and warm.

"Ah, no," he said. "Not me. It's only brave if there's a choice about it, aye?"

I laughed, sniffed, and wiped the wrist of my free hand across my eyes.

"And you think you haven't a choice?"

He paused for a moment, then shut the book, though he continued to hold it in his hands.

"No," he said at last, with a queer tone in his voice. "Not now."

He turned in his chair, looking through the window. Nothing was visible but the big red spruce at the side of the clearing, and the deep shade of the oak grove behind it, tangled with the brambles of wild blackberry, escaped from the yard. The blackened spot where the fiery cross had stood was overgrown now, covered with thick wild barley.

The air moved and I realized that it was not silent, after all. The sounds of the mountain were all around us, birds calling, water rushing in the distance—and there were voices, too, speaking in the murmured traffic of daily rounds, a word by the pigpen, a call from the privy. And under and over everything, the sound of children, faint shrieks and giggles borne on the restless air.

"I suppose you're right," I said, after a moment. He was; there *was* no choice about it now, and the knowledge gave me a sort of peace. What was coming, would come. We would meet it as best we might, and hope to survive; that was all. If we didn't—perhaps they would. I gathered the tail of his hair in my hand and twined my fingers through it, holding tight, like an anchor's rope.

"What about the other choices, though?" I asked him, looking out with him over the empty dooryard, and into the shades of the forest beyond. "All the ones you made that brought you here? Those were real—and bloody well brave, if you ask me."

Beneath the tip of my index finger, I could feel the hair-thin line of his ancient scar, buried deep beneath the ruddy waves. He leaned back against the pull of my hand, and swiveled round to look up at me, so my hand now cupped the bone of his jaw.

“Oh. Well,” he said, smiling slightly. His hand touched mine, and drew my fingers into his. “Ye’d know about that, now, wouldn’t ye, Sassenach?”

I sat down beside him, close, my hand on his leg, and his hand on mine. We sat thus for a bit, side by side, watching the rain clouds roll in over the river, like a threat of distant war. And I thought that whether it was choice or no choice, it might be that it came to the same thing in the end.

Jamie’s hand still lay on mine. It tightened a little, and I glanced at him, but his eyes were still fixed somewhere past the dooryard; past the mountains, and the distant clouds. His grip tightened further, and I felt the edges of my ring press into my flesh.

“When the day shall come, that we do part,” he said softly, and turned to look at me, “if my last words are not ‘I love you’—ye’ll ken it was because I didna have time.”

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This book is for my Sister, Theresa Gabaldon,
with whom I told the first Stories.

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—Diana Gabaldon
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#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
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A BREATH OF SNOW AND ASHES

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PROLOGUE

Time is a lot of the things people say that God is.

There's the always preexisting, and having no end. There's the notion of being all powerful—because nothing can stand against time, can it? Not mountains, not armies.

And time is, of course, all-healing. Give anything *enough* time, and everything is taken care of: all pain encompassed, all hardship erased, all loss subsumed.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. Remember, man, that thou art dust; and unto dust thou shalt return.

And if Time is anything akin to God, I suppose that Memory must be the Devil.

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PART ONE

Rumors of War

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1

AN INTERRUPTED CONVERSATION

The dog sensed them first. Dark as it was, Ian Murray felt rather than saw Rollo's head lift suddenly near his thigh, ears pricking. He put a hand on the dog's neck, and felt the hair there ridged with warning.

So attuned as they were to each other, he did not even think consciously, "Men," but put his other hand to his knife and lay still, breathing. Listening.

The forest was quiet. It was hours 'til dawn and the air was still as that in a church, with a mist like incense rising slowly up from the ground. He had lain down to rest on the fallen trunk of a giant tulip tree, preferring the tickle of wood-lice to seeping damp. He kept his hand on the dog, waiting.

Rollo was growling, a low, constant rumble that Ian could barely hear but felt easily, the vibration of it traveling up his arm, arousing all the nerves of his body. He hadn't been asleep—he rarely slept at night anymore—but had been quiet, looking up into the vault of the sky, engrossed in his usual argument with God. Quietness had vanished with Rollo's movement. He sat up slowly, swinging his legs over the side of the half-rotted log, heart beating fast now.

Rollo's warning hadn't changed, but the great head swiveled, following something unseen. It was a moonless night; Ian could see the faint silhouettes of trees and the moving shadows of the night, but nothing more.

Then he heard them. Sounds of passage. A good distance away, but coming nearer by the moment. He stood and stepped softly into the pool of black under a balsam fir. A click of the tongue, and Rollo left off his growling and followed, silent as the wolf who had been his father.

Ian's resting-place overlooked a game trail. The men who followed it were not hunting.

White men. Now that was odd, and more than odd. He couldn't see them, but didn't need to; the noise they made was unmistakable. Indians traveling were not silent, and many of the Highlanders he lived among could move like ghosts in the wood—but he had no doubt whatever. Metal, that was it. He was hearing the jingle of harness, the clink of buttons and buckles—and gun barrels.

A lot of them. So close, he began to smell them. He leaned forward a little, eyes closed, the better to snuff up what clue he could.

They carried pelts; now he picked up the dried-blood cold-fur smell that had probably waked Rollo—but not trappers, surely; too many. Trappers moved in ones and twos.

Poor men, and dirty. Not trappers, and not hunters. Game was easy to come by at this season, but they smelled of hunger. And the sweat of bad drink.

Close by now, perhaps ten feet from the place where he stood. Rollo made a tiny snorting sound, and Ian closed his hand once more on the dog's ruff, but the men made too much noise to hear it. He counted the passing footsteps, the bumping of canteens and bullet boxes, foot-sore grunts and sighs of weariness.

Twenty-three men, he made it, and there was a mule—no, two mules with them; he could hear the creak of laden panniers and that querulous heavy breathing, the way a loaded mule did, always on the verge of complaint.

The men would never have detected them, but some freak of the air bore Rollo's scent to the mules. A deafening bray shattered the dark, and the forest erupted in front of him with a clishmaclaver of crashing and startled shouts. Ian was already running when pistol shots crashed behind him.

"A Dhia!" Something struck him in the head and he fell headlong. Was he killed?

No. Rollo was pushing a worried wet nose into his ear. His head buzzed like a hive and he saw bright flashes of light before his eyes.

"Run! Ruith!" he gasped, pushing at the dog. "Run out! Go!" The dog hesitated, whining deep in his throat. He couldn't see, but felt the big body lunge and turn, turn back, undecided.

"Ruith!" He got himself up onto hands and knees, urging, and the dog at last obeyed, running as he had been trained.

There was no time to run himself, even could he have gained his feet. He fell facedown, thrust hands and feet deep into the leaf mold, and wriggled madly, burrowing in.

A foot struck between his shoulder blades, but the breath it drove out of him was muffled in wet leaves. It didn't matter, they were making so much noise. Whoever had stepped on him didn't notice; it was a glancing blow as the man ran over him in panic, doubtless thinking him a rotted log.

The shooting ceased. The shouting didn't, but he made no sense of it. He knew he was lying flat on his face, cold damp on his cheeks and the tang of dead leaves in his nose—but felt as though very drunk, the world revolving slowly round him. His head didn't hurt much, past the first burst of pain, but he didn't seem able to lift it.

He had the dim thought that if he died here, no one would know. His mother would mind, he thought, not knowing what had become of him.

The noises grew fainter, more orderly. Someone was still bellowing, but it had the sound of command. They were leaving. It occurred to him dimly that he might call out. If they knew he was white, they might help him. And they might not.

He kept quiet. Either he was dying or he wasn't. If he was, no help was possible. If he wasn't, none was needed.

Well, I asked then, didn't I? he thought, resuming his conversation with God, calm as though he lay still on the trunk of the tulip tree, looking up into the depths of heaven above. *A sign, I said. I didna quite expect Ye to be so prompt about it, though.*

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2

DUTCH CABIN

March 1773

No one had known the cabin was there, until Kenny Lindsay had seen the flames, on his way up the creek.

"I wouldna ha' seen at all," he said, for perhaps the sixth time. "Save for the dark comin' on. Had it been daylight, I'd never ha' kent it, never." He wiped a trembling hand over his face, unable to take his eyes off the line of bodies that lay at the edge of the forest. "Was it savages, *Mac Dubh*? They're no scalped, but maybe—"

"No." Jamie laid the soot-smeared handkerchief gently back over the staring blue face of a small girl. "None of them is wounded. Surely ye saw as much when ye brought them out?"

Lindsay shook his head, eyes closed, and shivered convulsively. It was late afternoon, and a chilly spring day, but the men were all sweating.

"I didna look," he said simply.

My own hands were like ice; as numb and unfeeling as the rubbery flesh of the dead woman I was examining. They had been dead for more than a day; the rigor of death had passed off, leaving them limp and chilled, but the cold weather of the mountain spring had preserved them so far from the grosser indignities of putrefaction.

Still, I breathed shallowly; the air was bitter with the scent of burning. Wisps of steam rose now and then from the charred ruin of the tiny cabin. From the corner of my eye, I saw Roger kick at a nearby log, then bend and pick up something from the ground beneath.

Kenny had pounded on our door long before daylight, summoning us from warm beds. We had come in haste, even knowing that we were far too late to offer aid. Some of the tenants from the homesteads on Fraser's Ridge had come, too; Kenny's brother Evan stood with Fergus and Ronnie Sinclair in a small knot under the trees, talking together in low-voiced Gaelic.

"D'ye ken what did for them, Sassenach?" Jamie squatted beside me, face troubled. "The ones under the trees, that is." He nodded at the corpse in front of me. "I ken what killed this puir woman."

The woman's long skirt stirred in the wind, lifting to show long, slender feet shod in leather clogs. A pair of long hands to match lay still at her sides. She had been tall—though not so tall as Brianna, I thought, and looked automatically for my daughter's bright hair, bobbing among the branches on the far side of the clearing.

I had turned the woman's apron up to cover her head and upper body. Her hands were red, rough-knuckled with work, and with callused palms, but from the firmness of her thighs and the slenderness of her body, I thought she was no more than thirty—likely much younger. No one could say whether she had been pretty.

I shook my head at his remark.

"I don't think she died of the burning," I said. "See, her legs and feet aren't touched. She must have fallen into the hearth. Her hair caught fire, and it spread to the shoulders of her gown. She must have lain near enough to the wall or the chimney hood for the flames to touch; that caught, and then the whole bloody place went up."

Jamie nodded slowly, eyes on the dead woman.

"Aye, that makes sense. But what was it killed them, Sassenach? The others are singed a bit, though none are burned like this. But they must have been dead before the cabin caught alight, for none o' them ran out. Was it a deadly illness, perhaps?"

"I don't think so. Let me look at the others again."

I walked slowly down the row of still bodies with their cloth-covered faces, stooping over each one to peer again beneath the makeshift shrouds. There were any number of illnesses that could be quickly fatal in these days—with no antibiotics to hand, and no way of administering fluids save by mouth or rectum, a simple case of diarrhea could kill within twenty-four hours.

I saw such things often enough to recognize them easily; any doctor does, and I had been a doctor for more than twenty years. I saw things now and then in this century that I had never encountered in my own—particularly horrible parasitical diseases, brought with the slave trade from the tropics—but it was no parasite that had done for these poor souls, and no illness that I knew, to leave such traces on its victims.

All the bodies—the burned woman, a much older woman, and three children—had been found inside the walls of the flaming house. Kenny had pulled them out, just before the roof fell in, then ridden for help. All dead before the fire started; all dead virtually at the same time, then, for surely the fire had begun to smolder soon after the woman fell dead on her hearth?

The victims had been laid out neatly under the branches of a giant red spruce, while the men began to dig a grave nearby. Brianna stood by the smallest girl, her head bent. I came to kneel by the little body, and she knelt down across from me.

"What was it?" she asked quietly. "Poison?"

I glanced up at her in surprise.

"I think so. What gave you that idea?"

She nodded at the blue-tinged face below us. She had tried to close the eyes, but they bulged beneath the lids, giving the little girl a look of startled horror. The small, blunt features were twisted in a rictus of agony, and there were traces of vomit in the corners of the mouth.

"Girl Scout handbook," Brianna said. She glanced at the men, but no one was near enough to hear. Her mouth twitched, and she looked away from the body, holding out her open hand. *"Never eat any strange mushroom,"* she quoted. *"There are many poisonous varieties, and distinguishing one from another is a job for an expert.* Roger found these, growing in a ring by that log over there."

Moist, fleshy caps, a pale brown with white warty spots, the open gills and slender stems so pale as to look almost phosphorescent in the spruce shadows. They had a pleasant, earthy look to them that belied their deadliness.

"Panther toadstools," I said, half to myself, and picked one gingerly from her palm. "*Agaricus pantherinus*—or that's what they *will* be called, once somebody gets round to naming them properly. *Pantherinus,* because they kill so swiftly—like a striking cat."

I could see the gooseflesh ripple on Brianna's forearm, raising the soft, red-gold hairs. She tilted her hand and spilled the rest of the deadly fungus on the ground.

"Who in their right mind would eat toadstools?" she asked, wiping her hand on her skirt with a slight shudder.

"People who didn't know better. People who were hungry, perhaps," I answered softly. I picked up the little girl's hand, and traced the delicate bones of the forearm. The small belly showed signs of bloat, whether from malnutrition or postmortem changes I couldn't tell—but the collarbones were sharp as scythe blades. All of the bodies were thin, though not to the point of emaciation.

I looked up, into the deep blue shadows of the mountainside above the cabin. It was early in the year for foraging, but there was food in abundance in the forest—for those who could recognize it.

Jamie came and knelt down beside me, a big hand lightly on my back. Cold as it was, a trickle of sweat streaked his neck, and his thick auburn hair was dark at the temples.

"The grave is ready," he said, speaking low, as though he might alarm the child. "Is that what's killed the bairn?" He nodded at the scattered fungi.

"I think so—and the rest of them, too. Have you had a look around? Does anyone know who they were?"

He shook his head.

“Not English; the clothes are wrong. Germans would have gone to Salem, surely; they’re clannish souls, and no inclined to settle on their own. These were maybe Dutchmen.” He nodded toward the carved wooden clogs on the old woman’s feet, cracked and stained with long use. “No books nor writing left, if there was any to begin with. Nothing that might tell their name. But—”

“They hadn’t been here long.” A low, cracked voice made me look up. Roger had come; he squatted next to Brianna, nodding toward the smoldering remains of the cabin. A small garden plot had been scratched into the earth nearby, but the few plants showing were no more than sprouts, the tender leaves limp and blackened with late frost. There were no sheds, no sign of livestock, no mule or pig.

“New emigrants,” Roger said softly. “Not bond servants; this was a family. They weren’t used to outdoor labor, either; the women’s hands have blisters and fresh scars.” His own broad hand rubbed unconsciously over a homespun knee; his palms were as smoothly callused as Jamie’s now, but he had once been a tender-skinned scholar; he remembered the pain of his seasoning.

“I wonder if they left people behind—in Europe,” Brianna murmured. She smoothed blond hair off the little girl’s forehead, and laid the kerchief back over her face. I saw her throat move as she swallowed. “They’ll never know what happened to them.”

“No.” Jamie stood abruptly. “They do say that God protects fools—but I think even the Almighty will lose patience now and then.” He turned away, motioning to Lindsay and Sinclair.

“Look for the man,” he said to Lindsay. Every head jerked up to look at him.

“Man?” Roger said, and then glanced sharply at the burned remnants of the cabin, realization dawning. “Aye—who built the cabin for them?”

“The women could have done it,” Bree said, lifting her chin.

“*You* could, aye,” he said, mouth twitching slightly as he cast a sidelong look at his wife. Brianna resembled Jamie in more than coloring; she stood six feet in her stockings and had her father’s clean-limbed strength.

“Perhaps they could, but they didn’t,” Jamie said shortly. He nodded toward the shell of the cabin, where a few bits of furniture still held their fragile shapes. As I watched, the evening wind came down, scouring the ruin, and the shadow of a stool collapsed noiselessly into ash, flurries of soot and char moving ghostlike over the ground.

“What do you mean?” I stood and moved beside him, looking into the house. There was virtually nothing left inside, though the chimney stack still stood, and jagged bits of the walls remained, their logs fallen like jackstraws.

“There’s no metal,” he said, nodding at the blackened hearth, where the remnants of a cauldron lay, cracked in two from the heat, its contents vaporized. “No pots, save that—and that’s too heavy to carry away. Nay tools. Not a knife, not an ax—and ye see whoever built it had that.”

I did; the logs were unpeeled, but the notches and ends bore the clear marks of an ax.

Frowning, Roger picked up a long pine branch and began to poke through the piles of ash and rubble, looking to be sure. Kenny Lindsay and Sinclair didn’t bother; Jamie had told them to look for a man, and they promptly went to do so, disappearing into the forest. Fergus went with them; Evan Lindsay, his brother Murdo, and the McGillivrays began the chore of collecting stones for a cairn.

“If there *was* a man—did he leave them?” Brianna murmured to me, glancing from her father to the row of bodies. “Did this woman maybe think they wouldn’t survive on their own?”

And thus take her own life, and those of her children, to avoid a long-drawn-out death from cold and starvation?

“Leave them and take all their tools? God, I hope not.” I crossed myself at the thought, though even as I did so, I doubted it. “Wouldn’t they have walked out, looking for help? Even with children … the snow’s mostly gone.” Only the highest mountain passes were still packed with snow, and while the trails and slopes were wet and muddy with runoff, they’d been passable for a month, at least.

"I've found the man," Roger said, interrupting my thoughts. He spoke very calmly, but paused to clear his throat. "Just—just here."

The daylight was beginning to fade, but I could see that he had gone pale. No wonder; the curled form he had unearthed beneath the charred timbers of a fallen wall was sufficiently gruesome as to give anyone pause. Charred to blackness, hands upraised in the boxer's pose so common to those dead by fire, it was difficult even to be sure that it *was* a man—though I thought it was, from what I could see.

Speculation about this new body was interrupted by a shout from the forest's edge.

"We've found them, milord!"

Everyone looked up from contemplation of this new corpse, to see Fergus waving from the edge of the wood.

"Them," indeed. Two men, this time. Sprawled on the ground within the shadow of the trees, found not together, but not far apart, only a short distance from the house. And both, so far as I could tell, probably dead of mushroom poisoning.

"*That's* no Dutchman," Sinclair said, for probably the fourth time, shaking his head over one body.

"He might be," said Fergus dubiously. He scratched his nose with the tip of the hook he wore in replacement of his left hand. "From the Indies, *non*?"

One of the unknown bodies was in fact that of a black man. The other was white, and both wore nondescript clothes of worn homespun—shirts and breeches; no jackets, despite the cold weather. And both were barefoot.

"No." Jamie shook his head, rubbing one hand unconsciously on his own breeches, as though to rid himself of the touch of the dead. "The Dutch keep slaves on Barbuda, aye—but these are better fed than the folk from the cabin." He lifted his chin toward the silent row of women and children. "They didna live here. Besides …" I saw his eyes fix on the dead men's feet.

The feet were grubby about the ankles and heavily callused, but basically clean. The soles of the black man's feet showed yellowish pink, with no smears of mud or random leaves stuck between the toes. These men hadn't been walking through the muddy forest barefoot, that much was sure.

"So there were perhaps more men? And when these died, their companions took their shoes—and anything else of value"—Fergus added practically, gesturing from the burned cabin to the stripped bodies—"and fled."

"Aye, maybe." Jamie pursed his lips, his gaze traveling slowly over the earth of the yard—but the ground was churned with footsteps, clumps of grass uprooted and the whole of the yard dusted with ash and bits of charred wood. It looked as though the place had been ravaged by rampaging hippopotami.

"I could wish that Young Ian was here. He's the best of the trackers; he could maybe tell what happened there, at least." He nodded into the wood, where the men had been found. "How many there were, maybe, and which way they've gone."

Jamie himself was no mean tracker. But the light was going fast now; even in the clearing where the burned cabin stood, the dark was rising, pooling under the trees, creeping like oil across the shattered earth.

His eyes went to the horizon, where streamers of cloud were beginning to blaze with gold and pink as the sun set behind them, and he shook his head.

"Bury them. Then we'll go."

One more grim discovery remained. Alone among the dead, the burned man had not died of fire or poison. When they lifted the charred corpse from the ashes to bear him to his grave, something fell free of the body, landing with a small, heavy thunk on the ground. Brianna picked it up, and rubbed at it with the corner of her apron.

"I guess they overlooked this," she said a little bleakly, holding it out. It was a knife, or the blade of one. The wooden hilt had burned entirely away, and the blade itself was warped with heat.

Steeling myself against the thick, acrid stench of burned fat and flesh, I bent over the corpse, poking gingerly at the midsection. Fire destroys a great deal, but preserves the strangest things. The triangular wound was quite clear, seared in the hollow beneath his ribs.

“They stabbed him,” I said, and wiped my sweating hands on my own apron.

“They killed him,” Bree said, watching my face. “And then his wife—” She glanced at the young woman on the ground, the concealing apron over her head. “She made a stew with the mushrooms, and they all ate it. The children, too.”

The clearing was silent, save for the distant calls of birds on the mountain. I could hear my own heart, beating painfully in my chest. Vengeance? Or simple despair?

“Aye, maybe,” Jamie said quietly. He stooped to pick up an end of the sheet of canvas they had placed the dead man on. “We’ll call it accident.”

The Dutchman and his family were laid in one grave, the two strangers in another.

A cold wind had sprung up as the sun went down; the apron fluttered away from the woman’s face as they lifted her. Sinclair gave a strangled cry of shock, and nearly dropped her.

She had neither face nor hair anymore; the slender waist narrowed abruptly into charred ruin. The flesh of her head had burned away completely, leaving an oddly tiny, blackened skull, from which her teeth grinned in disconcerting levity.

They lowered her hastily into the shallow grave, her children and mother beside her, and left Brianna and me to build a small cairn over them, in the ancient Scottish way, to mark the place and provide protection from wild beasts, while a more rudimentary resting place was dug for the two barefoot men.

The work finally done, everyone gathered, white-faced and silent, around the new-made mounds. I saw Roger stand close beside Brianna, his arm protectively about her waist. A small shudder went through her, which I thought had nothing to do with the cold. Their child, Jemmy, was a year or so younger than the smallest girl.

“Will ye speak a word, *Mac Dubh*?” Kenny Lindsay glanced inquiringly at Jamie, pulling his knitted bonnet down over his ears against the growing chill.

It was nearly nightfall, and no one wanted to linger. We would have to make camp, somewhere well away from the stink of burning, and that would be hard enough, in the dark. But Kenny was right; we couldn't leave without at least some token of ceremony, some farewell for the strangers.

Jamie shook his head.

"Nay, let Roger Mac speak. If these were Dutchmen, belike they were Protestant."

Dim as the light was, I saw the sharp glance Brianna shot at her father. It was true that Roger was a Presbyterian; so was Tom Christie, a much older man whose dour face reflected his opinion of the proceedings. The question of religion was no more than a pretext, though, and everyone knew it, including Roger.

Roger cleared his throat with a noise like tearing calico. It was always a painful sound; there was anger in it now as well. He didn't protest, though, and he met Jamie's eyes straight on, as he took his place at the head of the grave.

I had thought he would simply say the Lord's Prayer, or perhaps one of the gentler psalms. Other words came to him, though.

"Behold, I cry out of wrong, but I am not heard: I cry aloud, but there is no judgment. He hath fenced up my way that I cannot pass, and He hath set darkness in my paths."

His voice had once been powerful, and beautiful. It was choked now, no more than a rasping shadow of its former beauty—but there was sufficient power in the passion with which he spoke to make all those who heard him bow their heads, faces lost in shadow.

"He hath stripped me of my glory, and taken the crown from my head. He hath destroyed me on every side, and I am gone: and my hope hath He removed like a tree." His face was set, but his eyes rested for a bleak moment on the charred stump that had served the Dutch family for a chopping block.

"He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintance are verily estranged from me. My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me." I saw the three Lindsay brothers exchange

glances, and everyone drew a little closer together, against the rising wind.

"Have pity upon me, have pity upon me, O ye my friends," he said, and his voice softened, so that it was difficult to hear him, above the sighing of the trees. *"For the hand of God has touched me."*

Brianna made a slight movement beside him, and he cleared his throat once more, explosively, stretching his neck so that I caught a glimpse of the rope scar that marred it.

"Oh, that my words were now written! Oh, that they were printed in a book! That they were graven with an iron pen and lead in the rock forever!"

He looked slowly round from face to face, his own expressionless, then took a deep breath to continue, voice cracking on the words.

"For I know that my redeemer liveth, and that He shall stand at the latter day upon the earth: And though after my skin worms destroy this body"—Brianna shuddered convulsively, and looked away from the raw mound of dirt—*"yet in my flesh shall I see God. Whom I shall see for myself, and mine eyes shall behold."*

He stopped, and there was a brief collective sigh, as everyone let out the breath they had been holding. He wasn't quite finished, though. He had reached out, half-unconsciously, for Bree's hand, and held it tightly. He spoke the last words almost to himself, I thought, with little thought for his listeners.

"Be ye afraid of the sword: for wrath bringeth the punishments of the sword, that ye may know there is a judgment."

I shivered, and Jamie's hand curled round my own, cold but strong. He looked down at me, and I met his eyes. I knew what he was thinking.

He was thinking, as I was, not of the present, but the future. Of a small item that would appear three years hence, in the pages of the *Wilmington Gazette,* dated February 13, 1776.

> *It is with grief that the news is received of the deaths by fire of James MacKenzie Fraser and his wife, Claire Fraser, in a conflagration that destroyed their house in the settlement of*

> *Fraser's Ridge, on the night of January 21 last. Mr. Fraser, a nephew of the late Hector Cameron of River Run Plantation, was born at Broch Tuarach in Scotland. He was widely known in the Colony and deeply respected; he leaves no surviving children.*

It had been easy, so far, not to think too much of it. So far in the future, and surely not an unchangeable future—after all, forewarned was forearmed … wasn't it?

I glanced at the shallow cairn, and a deeper chill passed through me. I stepped closer to Jamie, and put my other hand on his arm. He covered my hand with his, and squeezed tight in reassurance. No, he said to me silently. No, I will not let it happen.

As we left the desolate clearing, though, I could not free my mind of one vivid image. Not the burned cabin, the pitiful bodies, the pathetic dead garden. The image that haunted me was one I had seen some years before—a gravestone in the ruins of Beauly Priory, high in the Scottish Highlands.

It was the tomb of a noble lady, her name surmounted by the carving of a grinning skull—very like the one beneath the Dutchwoman's apron. Beneath the skull was her motto:

> *Hodie mihi cras tibi—sic transit gloria mundi.*
>
> *My turn today—yours tomorrow. Thus passes the glory of the world.*

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3

KEEP YOUR FRIENDS CLOSE

We returned to Fraser's Ridge just before sunset the next day, to discover a visitor waiting. Major Donald MacDonald, late of His Majesty's army, and even more lately of Governor Tryon's personal light-horse guard, was sitting on the front stoop, my cat in his lap and a jug of beer beside him.

"Mrs. Fraser! Your servant, mum," he called genially, seeing me approach. He tried to stand up, but then let out a gasp as Adso, objecting to the loss of his cozy nest, dug his claws into the Major's thighs.

"Do sit, Major," I said, waving him hastily back. He subsided with a grimace, but nobly refrained from flinging Adso into the bushes. I came up onto the stoop beside him and sat down, sighing with relief.

"My husband is just seeing to the horses; he'll be down directly. I see that someone's made you welcome?" I nodded at the beer, which he promptly offered to me with a courtly gesture, wiping the neck of the jug on his sleeve.

"Oh, yes, mum," he assured me. "Mrs. Bug has been most assiduous of my welfare."

Not to seem uncordial, I accepted the beer, which in all truth went down very well. Jamie had been anxious to get back, and we'd been in the saddle since dawn, with only a brief break for refreshment at midday.

"It is a most excellent brew," the Major said, smiling as I exhaled after swallowing, my eyes half-closing. "Your own making, perhaps?"

I shook my head and took another swallow, before handing the jug back to him. "No, it's Lizzie's. Lizzie Wemyss."

"Oh, your bondmaid; yes, of course. Will you give her my compliments?"

"Isn't she here?" I glanced toward the open door behind him, rather surprised. At this time of day, I would have expected Lizzie to be in the kitchen, making supper, but she would surely have heard our arrival and come out. There was no smell of cooking, now that I noticed. She wouldn't have known when to expect us, of course, but …

"Mm, no. She is …" The Major knitted his brows in the effort of recall, and I wondered how full the jug had been before he got at it; there were no more than a couple of inches left now. "Ah, yes. She went to the McGillivrays' with her father, Mrs. Bug said. To visit her affianced, I believe?"

"Yes, she's engaged to Manfred McGillivray. But Mrs. Bug—"

"—is in the springhoose," he said, with a nod up the hill toward the small shed. "A matter of cheese, I believe she said. An omelette was most graciously proposed for my supper."

"Ah …" I relaxed a bit more, the dust of the ride settling with the beer. It was wonderful to come home, though my sense of peace was uneasy, tainted by the memory of the burned cabin.

I supposed that Mrs. Bug would have told him our errand, but he made no reference to it—nor to whatever had brought him up to the Ridge. Naturally not; all business would wait appropriately for Jamie. Being female, I would get impeccable courtesy and small bits of social gossip in the meantime.

I could do social gossip, but needed to be prepared for it; I hadn't a natural knack.

"Ah … Your relations with my cat seem somewhat improved," I hazarded. I glanced involuntarily at his head, but his wig had been expertly mended.

"It is an accepted principle of politics, I believe," he said, ruffling his fingers through the thick silver fur on Adso's belly. "Keep your friends close—but your enemies closer."

"Very sound," I said, smiling. "Er … I hope you haven't been waiting long?"

He shrugged, intimating that any wait was irrelevant—which it generally was. The mountains had their own time, and a wise man did not try to hurry them. MacDonald was a seasoned soldier, and well-traveled—but he had been born in Pitlochry, close enough to the Highland peaks to know their ways.

"I came this morning," he said. "From New Bern."

Small warning bells went off in the back of my mind. It would have taken him a good ten days to travel from New Bern, if he had come directly—and the state of his creased and mud-stained uniform suggested that he had.

New Bern was where the new royal governor of the colony, Josiah Martin, had taken up his residence. And for MacDonald to have said, "From New Bern," rather than mentioning some later stop on his journey, made it reasonably plain to me that whatever business had impelled this visit, it had originated *in* New Bern. I was wary of governors.

I glanced toward the path that led to the paddock, but Jamie wasn't visible yet. Mrs. Bug was, emerging from the springhouse; I waved to her and she gestured enthusiastically in welcome, though hampered by a pail of milk in one hand, a bucket of eggs in the other, a crock of butter under one arm, and a large chunk of cheese tucked neatly underneath her chin. She negotiated the steep descent with success, and disappeared round the back of the house, toward the kitchen.

"Omelettes all round, it looks like," I remarked, turning back to the Major. "Did you happen to come through Cross Creek, by chance?"

"I did indeed, mum. Your husband's aunt sends you her kind regards—and a quantity of books and newspapers, which I have brought with me."

I was wary of newspapers these days, too—though such events as they reported had undoubtedly taken place several weeks—or months—previously. I made appreciative noises, though, wishing Jamie would hurry up, so I could excuse myself. My hair smelled of burning and my hands still remembered the touch of cold flesh; I wanted a wash, badly.

"I beg your pardon?" I had missed something MacDonald was saying. He bent politely closer to repeat it, then jerked suddenly, eyes bulging.

"Frigging cat!"

Adso, who had been doing a splendid imitation of a limp dishcloth, had sprung bolt upright in the Major's lap, eyes glowing and tail like a bottlebrush, hissing like a teakettle as he flexed his claws hard into the Major's legs. I hadn't time to react before he had leapt over MacDonald's shoulder and swarmed through the open surgery window behind him, ripping the Major's ruffle and knocking his wig askew in the process.

MacDonald was cursing freely, but I hadn't attention to spare for him. Rollo was coming up the path toward the house, wolflike and sinister in the gloaming, but acting so oddly that I was standing before conscious thought could bring me to my feet.

The dog would run a few steps toward the house, circle once or twice as though unable to decide what to do next, then run back into the wood, turn, and run again toward the house, all the while whining with agitation, tail low and wavering.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said. "Bloody Timmy's in the well!" I flew down the steps and ran for the path, barely registering the Major's startled oath behind me.

I found Ian a few hundred yards down the path, conscious, but groggy. He was sitting on the ground, eyes closed and both hands holding his head, as though to keep the bones of his skull from coming apart. He opened his eyes as I dropped to my knees beside him, and gave me an unfocused smile.

"Auntie," he said hoarsely. He seemed to want to say something else, but couldn't quite decide what; his mouth opened, but then simply hung that way, tongue moving thoughtfully to and fro.

“Look at me, Ian,” I said, as calmly as possible. He did—that was good. It was too dark to see whether his pupils were unnaturally dilated, but even in the evening shadow of the pines that edged the trail, I could see the pallor of his face, and the dark trail of bloodstains down his shirt.

Hurried steps were coming after me down the trail; Jamie, followed closely by MacDonald.

“How is it, lad?”

Jamie gripped him by one arm, and Ian swayed very gently toward him, then dropped his hands, closed his eyes, and relaxed into Jamie’s arms with a sigh.

“Is he bad?” Jamie spoke anxiously over Ian’s shoulder, holding him up as I frisked him for damage. The back of his shirt was saturated with dried blood—but it *was* dried. The tail of his hair was stiff with it, too, and I found the head wound quickly.

“I don’t think so. Something’s hit him hard on the head and taken out a chunk of his scalp, but—”

“A tomahawk, do you think?”

MacDonald leaned over us, intent.

“No,” said Ian drowsily, his face muffled in Jamie’s shirt. “A ball.”

“Go away, dog,” Jamie said briefly to Rollo, who had stuck his nose in Ian’s ear, eliciting a stifled squawk from the patient and an involuntary lifting of his shoulders.

“I’ll have a look in the light, but it may not be too bad,” I said, observing this. “He walked some way, after all. Let’s get him up to the house.”

The men made shift to get him up the trail, Ian’s arms over their shoulders, and within minutes, had him laid facedown on the table in my surgery. Here, he told us the story of his adventures, in a disjoint fashion punctuated by small yelps as I cleaned the injury, clipped bits of clotted hair away, and put five or six stitches into his scalp.

“I thought I was dead,” Ian said, and sucked air through his teeth as I drew the coarse thread through the edges of the ragged wound. “Christ, Auntie Claire! I woke in the morning, though, and I wasna dead after all—though I thought my head was split open, and my brains spilling down my neck.”

“Very nearly was,” I murmured, concentrating on my work. “I don’t think it was a bullet, though.”

That got everyone’s attention.

“I’m not shot?” Ian sounded mildly indignant. One big hand lifted, straying toward the back of his head, and I slapped it lightly away.

“Keep still. No, you aren’t shot, no credit to you. There was a deal of dirt in the wound, and shreds of wood and tree bark. If I had to guess, one of the shots knocked a dead branch loose from a tree, and it hit you in the head when it fell.”

“You’re quite sure as it wasn’t a tomahawk, are ye?” The Major seemed disappointed, too.

I tied the final knot and clipped the thread, shaking my head.

“I don’t believe I’ve ever seen a tomahawk wound, but I don’t think so. See how jagged the edges are? And the scalp’s torn badly, but I don’t believe the bone is fractured.”

“It was pitch-dark, the lad said,” Jamie put in logically. “No sensible person would fling a tomahawk into a dark wood at something he couldna see.” He was holding the spirit lamp for me to work by; he moved it closer, so we could see not only the ragged line of stitches, but the spreading bruise around it, revealed by the hair I had clipped off.

“Aye, see?” Jamie’s finger spread the remaining bristles gently apart, tracing several deep scratches that scored the bruised area. “Your auntie’s right, Ian; ye’ve been attacked by a tree.”

Ian opened one eye a slit.

“Has anyone ever told ye what a comical fellow ye are, Uncle Jamie?”

“No.”

Ian closed the eye.

“That’s as well, because ye’re not.”

Jamie smiled, and squeezed Ian’s shoulder.

“Feeling a bit better then, are ye?”

“No.”

"Aye, well, the thing is," Major MacDonald interrupted, "that the lad did meet with some sort of banditti, no? Had ye reason to think they might be Indians?"

"No," said Ian again, but this time he opened the eye all the way. It was bloodshot. "They weren't."

MacDonald didn't appear pleased with this answer.

"How could ye be sure, lad?" he asked, rather sharply. "If it was dark, as ye say."

I saw Jamie glance quizzically at the Major, but he didn't interrupt. Ian moaned a little, then heaved a sigh and answered.

"I smelt them," he said, adding almost immediately, "I think I'm going to puke."

He raised himself on one elbow and promptly did so. This effectively put an end to any further questions, and Jamie took Major MacDonald off to the kitchen, leaving me to clean Ian up and settle him as comfortably as I could.

"Can you open both eyes?" I asked, having got him tidied and resting on his side, with a pillow under his head.

He did, blinking a little at the light. The small blue flame of the spirit lamp was reflected twice over in the darkness of his eyes, but the pupils shrank at once—and together.

"That's good," I said, and put down the lamp on the table. "Leave it, dog," I said to Rollo, who was nosing at the strange smell of the lamp—it was burning a mix of low-grade brandy and turpentine. "Take hold of my fingers, Ian."

I held out my index fingers and he slowly wrapped a large, bony hand round each of them. I put him through the drill for neurological damage, having him squeeze, pull, push, and then concluded by listening to his heart, which was thumping along reassuringly.

"Slight concussion," I announced, straightening up and smiling at him.

"Oh, aye?" he asked, squinting up at me.

"It means your head aches and you feel sick. You'll feel better in a few days."

"I could ha' told ye that," he muttered, settling back.

“So you could,” I agreed. “But ‘concussion’ sounds so much more important than ‘cracked heid,’ doesn’t it?”

He didn’t laugh, but smiled faintly in response. “Will ye feed Rollo, Auntie? He wouldna leave me on the way; he’ll be hungry.”

Rollo pricked his ears at the sound of his name, and shoved his muzzle into Ian’s groping hand, whining softly.

“He’s fine,” I said to the dog. “Don’t worry. And yes,” I added to Ian, “I’ll bring something. Do you think you could manage a bit of bread and milk, yourself?”

“No,” he said definitely. “A dram o’ whisky, maybe?”

“No,” I said, just as definitely, and blew out the spirit lamp.

“Auntie,” he said, as I turned to the door.

“Yes?” I’d left a single candlestick to light him, and he looked very young and pale in the wavering yellow glow.

“Why d’ye suppose Major MacDonald wants it to be Indians I met in the wood?”

“I don’t know. But I imagine Jamie does. Or will, by now.”

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4

SERPENT IN EDEN

Brianna pushed open the door to her cabin, listening warily for the scamper of rodent feet or the dry whisper of scales across the floor. She'd once walked in in the dark and stepped within inches of a small rattlesnake; while the snake had been nearly as startled as she was, and slithered madly away between the hearthstones, she'd learned her lesson.

There was no scuttle of fleeing mice or voles this time, but something larger had been and gone, pushing its way through the oiled skin tacked over the window. The sun was just setting, and there was enough daylight left to show her the woven-grass basket in which she kept roasted peanuts, knocked from its shelf onto the floor and the contents cracked and eaten, a litter of shells scattered over the floor.

A loud rustling noise froze her momentarily, listening. It came again, followed by a loud clang as something fell to the ground, on the other side of the back wall.

"You little *bastard*!" she said. "You're in my pantry!"

Fired with righteous indignation, she seized the broom and charged into the lean-to with a banshee yell. An enormous raccoon, tranquilly munching a smoked trout, dropped its prey at sight of her, dashed between her legs, and made off like a fat banker in flight from creditors, making loud *birring* noises of alarm.

Nerves pulsing with adrenaline, she put aside the broom and bent to salvage what she could of the mess, cursing under her breath. Raccoons were less destructive than squirrels, who would chew and shred with hapless abandon—but they had bigger appetites.

God knew how long he'd been in here, she thought. Long enough to lick all the butter out of its mold, pull down a cluster of smoked fish from the rafters—and how something so fat had managed the acrobatic feat required for *that* … Luckily, the honeycomb had been stored in three separate jars, and only one had been despoiled. But the root vegetables had been dumped on the floor, a fresh cheese mostly devoured, and the precious jug of maple syrup had been overturned, draining into a sticky puddle in the dirt. The sight of this loss enraged her afresh, and she squeezed the potato she had just picked up so hard that her nails sank through its skin.

"Bloody, bloody, beastly, horrible, bloody *beast*!"

"Who?" said a voice behind her. Startled, she whirled and fired the potato at the intruder, who proved to be Roger. It struck him squarely in the forehead and he staggered, clutching the door frame.

"Ow! Christ! Ow! What the hell's going on in here?"

"Raccoon," she said shortly, and stepped back, letting the waning light from the door illuminate the damage.

"He got the maple syrup? Bugger! Did you get the bastard?" Hand pressed to his forehead, Roger ducked inside the lean-to pantry, glancing about for furry bodies.

Seeing that her husband shared both her priorities and her sense of outrage soothed her somewhat.

"No," she said. "He ran. Are you bleeding? And where's Jem?"

"I don't think so," he said, taking the hand gingerly from his forehead and glancing at it. "Ow. You've a wicked arm, girl. Jem's at the McGillivrays'. Lizzie and Mr. Wemyss took him along to celebrate Senga's engagement."

"Really? Who did she pick?" Both outrage and remorse were immediately subsumed in interest. Ute McGillivray, with German thoroughness, had carefully selected partners for her son and three daughters according to her own criteria—land, money, and respectability ranking highest, with age, personal appearance, and charm coming well down the list. Not surprisingly, her children had other ideas—though such was the force of *Frau* Ute's personality that both Inga and Hilda had married men that she approved of.

Senga, though, was her mother's daughter—meaning that she possessed similarly strong opinions and a similar lack of inhibition in expressing them. For months, she had been hovering between two suitors: Heinrich Strasse, a dashing but poor young man—and a Lutheran!—from Bethania, and Ronnie Sinclair, the cooper. A well-off man, by the standards of the Ridge, and to Ute, the fact that Ronnie was thirty years Senga's senior was no bar.

The business of Senga McGillivray's marriage had been a topic of intense speculation on the Ridge for the last several months, and Brianna was aware of several substantial wagers riding on the outcome.

"So who's the lucky man?" she repeated.

"Mrs. Bug doesn't know, and it's driving her mad," Roger replied, breaking into a grin. "Manfred McGillivray came to fetch them yesterday morning, but Mrs. Bug hadn't come down to the Big House yet, so Lizzie left a note pinned to the back door to say where they'd gone—but she didn't think to say who the fortunate bridegroom is."

Brianna glanced at the setting sun; the orb itself had sunk out of sight, though the blazing light through the chestnut trees still lit the dooryard, making the spring grass look deep and soft as emerald velvet.

"I suppose we'll have to wait 'til tomorrow to find out," she said, with some regret. The McGillivrays' place was a good five miles; it would be full dark long before they reached it, and even past the thaw, one didn't wander the mountains at night without a good reason—or at least a better reason than mere curiosity.

"Aye. D'ye want to go up to the Big House for supper? Major MacDonald's come."

"Oh, him." She considered for a moment. She would like to hear any news the Major had brought—and there was something to be said for having Mrs. Bug make supper. On the other hand, she was really in no mood to be sociable, after a grim three days, a long ride, and the desecration of her pantry.

She became aware that Roger was carefully not contributing an opinion. One arm leaning on the shelf where the dwindling stock of winter apples was spread, he idly caressed one of the fruits, a forefinger slowly stroking the round yellow cheek of it. Faint, familiar vibrations were coming off him, suggesting silently that there might be advantages to an evening at home, sans parents, acquaintances—or baby.

She smiled at Roger.

"How's your poor head?"

He glanced at her briefly, the waning rays of the sun gilding the bridge of his nose and striking a flash of green from one eye. He cleared his throat.

"I suppose ye might kiss it," he suggested diffidently. "If ye liked."

She obligingly rose on her tiptoes and did so, gently, brushing back the thick black hair from his brow. There was a noticeable lump, though it hadn't begun to bruise yet.

"Is that better?"

"Not yet. Better try again. Maybe a bit lower?"

His hands settled on the swell of her hips, drawing her in. She was nearly as tall as he was; she'd noticed before what an advantage of fit this was, but the impression struck her forcibly anew. She wriggled slightly, enjoying it, and Roger drew a deep, rasping breath.

"Not quite that low," he said. "Not yet, anyway."

"Picky, picky," she said tolerantly, and kissed him on the mouth. His lips were warm, but the scent of bitter ash and damp earth clung to him—as it did to her—and she shivered a little, drawing back.

He kept a hand lightly on her back, but leaned past her, running a finger along the edge of the shelf where the jug of maple syrup had been overturned. He ran the finger lightly along her lower lip, then his own, and bent again to kiss her, sweetness rising up between them.

* * *

“I can’t remember how long it’s been since I’ve seen ye naked.”

She closed one eye and looked at him skeptically.

“About three days. I guess it wasn’t all that memorable.” It had been a great relief to shed the clothes she’d been wearing for the last three days and nights. Even naked and hastily washed, though, she still smelled dust in her hair and felt the grime of the journey between her toes.

“Oh, well, aye. That’s not what I mean, though—I mean, it’s been a long while since we’ve made love in the daylight.” He lay on his side, facing her, and smiled as he passed a light hand over the deep curve of her waist and the swell of buttock. “Ye’ve no idea how lovely ye look, stark naked, wi’ the sun behind you. All gold, like ye were dipped in it.”

He closed one eye, as though the sight dazzled him. She moved, and the sun shone in his face, making the open eye glow like an emerald in the split second before he blinked.

“Mmm.” She put out a lazy hand and drew his head in close to kiss him.

She did know what he meant. It felt strange—almost wicked, in a pleasant sort of way. Most often, they made love at night, after Jem was asleep, whispering to each other in the hearth-lit shadows, finding each other among the rustling, secret layers of quilts and nightclothes. And while Jem normally slept as though he’d been poleaxed, they were always half-conscious of the small, heavy-breathing mound beneath the quilt of his trundle bed nearby.

She was oddly just as conscious of Jem now, in his absence. It felt strange to be apart from him; not constantly aware of where he was, not feeling his body as a small, very mobile extension of her own. The freedom was exhilarating, but left her feeling uneasy, as though she had misplaced something valuable.

They’d left the door open, the better to enjoy the flood of light and air on their skins. The sun was nearly down now, though, and while the air still glowed like honey, there was a shadow of chill in it.

A sudden gust of wind rattled the hide tacked over the window and blew across the room, slamming the door and leaving them abruptly in the dark.

Brianna gasped. Roger grunted in surprise and swung off the bed, going to open the door. He flung it wide, and she gulped in the freshet of air and sunshine, only then aware that she had held her breath when the door closed, feeling momentarily entombed.

Roger seemed to feel the same. He stood in the doorway, bracing himself against the frame, letting the wind stir the dark, curling hairs of his body. His hair was still bound in a tail; he hadn't bothered undoing it, and she had a sudden desire to come behind him, untie the leather thong and run her fingers through the soft, glossy black of it, the legacy of some ancient Spaniard, shipwrecked among the Celts.

She was up and doing it before she had consciously decided to, combing tiny yellow catkins and twigs from his locks with her fingers. He shivered, from her touch or that of the wind, but his body was warm.

"You have a farmer's tan," she said, lifting the hair off his neck and kissing him on the bone at the base of his nape.

"Well, so. Am I not a farmer, then?" His skin twitched under her lips, like a horse's hide. His face, neck, and forearms had paled over the winter, but were still darker than the flesh of back and shoulders—and a faint line still lingered round his waist, demarcating the soft buckskin color of his torso from the startling paleness of his backside.

She cupped his buttocks, enjoying the high, round solidity of them, and he breathed deeply, leaning back a little toward her, so her breasts pressed against his back and her chin rested on his shoulder, looking out.

It was still daylight, but barely. The last long shafts of the sinking sun burst through the chestnut trees, so the tender spring green of their leaves burned with cool fire, brilliant above the lengthening shadows. It was near evening, but it was spring; the birds were still at it, chattering and courting. A mockingbird sang from the forest nearby, in a medley of trills, liquid runs, and odd yowls, which she thought it must have learned from her mother's cat.

The air was growing nippy, and gooseflesh stippled her arms and thighs—but Roger's body against her own was very warm. She wrapped her arms around his waist, the fingers of one hand playing idly with the thicket of his short and curlies.

"What are you looking at?" she asked softly, for his eyes were fixed on the far side of the dooryard, where the trail emerged from the forest. The trailhead was dim, shadowed by a growth of dark pines—but empty.

"I'm watching out for a snake bearing apples," he said, and laughed, then cleared his throat. "Are ye hungry, Eve?" His hand came down to twine with hers.

"Getting there. Are you?" He must be starving; they had had only a hasty snack at midday.

"Aye, I am, but—" He broke off, hesitating, and his fingers tightened in hers. "Ye'll think I'm mad, but—would ye mind if I went to fetch wee Jem tonight, instead of waiting for the morning? It's only, I'd feel a bit better to have him back."

She squeezed his hand in return, her heart lifting.

"We'll both go. It's a great idea."

"Maybe so, but it's five miles to McGillivrays', too. It'll be long dark before we're there." He was smiling, though, and his body brushed against her breasts as he turned to face her.

Something moved by her face, and she drew back sharply. A tiny caterpillar, green as the leaves on which it fed and vibrant against Roger's dark hair, reared itself into an S-shape, looking vainly for sanctuary.

"What?" Roger slid his eyes sideways, trying to see what she was looking at.

"Found your snake. I expect he's looking for an apple, too." She coaxed the tiny worm onto her finger, stepped outside, and squatted to let it crawl onto a grass blade that matched its vivid green. But the grass was in shadow. In only an instant, the sun had gone down, the forest no longer the color of life.

A thread of smoke reached her nose; chimney smoke from the Big House, but her throat closed at the smell of burning. Suddenly her uneasiness was stronger. The light was fading, night coming on. The mockingbird had fallen silent, and the forest seemed full of mystery and threat.

She rose to her feet, shoving a hand through her hair.

“Let’s go, then.”

“Do ye not want supper, first?” Roger looked quizzically at her, breeches in hand.

She shook her head, chill beginning to creep up her legs.

“No. Let’s just go.” Nothing seemed to matter, save to get Jem, and be together again, a family.

“All right,” Roger said mildly, eyeing her. “I do think ye’d best put on your fig leaf first, though. Just in case we meet an angel with a flaming sword.”

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5

THE SHADOWS WHICH FIRE THROWS

I abandoned Ian and Rollo to the juggernaut of Mrs. Bug's benevolence—let Ian try telling *her* he didn't want bread and milk—and sat down to my own belated supper: a hot, fresh omelette, featuring not only cheese, but bits of salty bacon, asparagus, and wild mushroom, flavored with spring onions.

Jamie and the Major had finished their own meals already, and sat by the fire beneath a companionable fug of tobacco smoke from the Major's clay pipe. Evidently, Jamie had just finished telling Major MacDonald about the gruesome tragedy, for MacDonald was frowning and shaking his head in sympathy.

"Puir gomerels!" he said. "Ye'll be thinking that it was the same banditti, perhaps, who set upon your nephew?"

"I am," Jamie replied. "I shouldna like to think there were two such bands prowling the mountains." He glanced toward the window, cozily shuttered for the night, and I noticed suddenly that he had taken down his fowling piece from over the hearth and was absently wiping the spotless barrel with an oily rag. "Do I gather, *a charaid,* that ye've heard some report of similar doings?"

"Three others. At least." The Major's pipe threatened to go out, and he drew on it mightily, making the tobacco in the bowl glow and crackle sudden red.

A small qualm made me pause, a bite of mushroom warm in my mouth. The possibility that a mysterious gang of armed men might be roaming at large, attacking homesteads at random, had not occurred to me ’til this moment.

Obviously, it had occurred to Jamie; he rose, put the fowling piece back on its hooks, touched the rifle that hung above it for reassurance, then went to the sideboard, where his dags and the case with its elegant pair of dueling pistols were kept.

MacDonald watched with approval, puffing clouds of soft blue smoke, as Jamie methodically laid out guns, shot pouches, bullet molds, patches, rods, and all the other impedimenta of his personal armory.

“Mmphm,” MacDonald said. “A verra nice piece, that, Colonel.” He nodded at one of the dags, a long-barreled, elegant thing with a scroll butt and silver-gilt fittings.

Jamie gave MacDonald a narrow glance, hearing the “Colonel,” but answered calmly enough.

“Aye, it’s a bonny thing. It doesna aim true at anything over two paces, though. Won it in a horse race,” he added, with a small apologetic gesture at the gun, lest MacDonald think him fool enough to have paid good money for it.

He checked the flint nonetheless, replaced it, and set the gun aside.

“Where?” Jamie said casually, reaching for the bullet mold.

I had resumed chewing, but looked inquiringly at the Major myself.

“Mind, it’s only what I’ve heard,” MacDonald warned, taking the pipe from his mouth for a moment, then hastily putting it back for another puff. “A homestead some distance from Salem, burned to the ground. Folk called Zinzer—Germans.” He sucked hard, cheeks hollowing.

“That was in February, late in the month. Then three weeks later, a ferry, on the Yadkin north of Woram’s Landing—the house robbed, and the ferryman killed. The third—” Here he broke off, puffing furiously, and cut his eyes at me, then back at Jamie.

“Speak, o, friend,” Jamie said in Gaelic, looking resigned. “She will have been seeing more dreadful things than you have, by far.”

I nodded at this, forking up another bite of egg, and the Major coughed.

“Aye. Well, saving your presence, mum—I happened to find myself in a, er, establishment in Edenton.…”

“A brothel?” I put in. “Yes, quite. Do go on, Major.”

He did, rather hurriedly, his face flushing dark beneath his wig.

“Ah … to be sure. Well, d’ye see, ’twas one of the, er, lasses in the place, told me as she’d been stolen from her home by outlaws who set upon the place one day without warning. She’d no but an auld grannie she lived with, and said they’d kilt the auld woman, and burned the house above her head.”

“And who did she say had done it?” Jamie had turned his stool to face the hearth, and was melting lead scrap in a ladle for the bullet mold.

“Ah, mmphm.” MacDonald’s flush deepened, and the smoke fumed from his pipe with such ferocity that I could barely make out his features through the curling wreaths.

It transpired, with much coughing and circumlocution, that the Major had not really believed the girl at the time—or had been too interested in availing himself of her charms to pay much attention. Putting the story down simply as one of the tales whores often told to elicit sympathy and the odd extra glass of geneva, he had not bothered to ask for further detail.

“But when I heard by chance later of the other burnings … well, d’ye see, I’ve had the luck to be charged by the Governor with keeping an ear to the ground, as it were, in the backcountry, for signs of unrest. And I began to think that this particular instance of unrest was maybe not just sae much of a coincidence as might at first appear.”

Jamie and I exchanged glances at that, Jamie’s tinged with amusement, mine with resignation. He’d bet me that MacDonald—a half-pay cavalry officer who survived by freelancing—would not only survive Governor Tryon’s resignation, but would succeed in worming his way promptly into some position with the new regime, now that Tryon had left to take up a superior position as governor of New York. *"He's a gentleman o' fortune, our Donald,"* he'd said.

The militant smell of hot lead began to permeate the room, competing with the Major's pipe smoke, and quite overpowering the pleasantly domestic atmosphere of rising bread, cooking, dried herbs, scouring rushes, and lye soap that normally filled the kitchen.

Lead melts suddenly; one instant, a deformed bullet or a bent button sits in the ladle, whole and distinct; the next, it's gone, a tiny puddle of metal shimmering dully in its place. Jamie poured the molten lead carefully into the mold, averting his face from the fumes.

"Why Indians?"

"Ah. Well, 'twas what the whore in Edenton said. She said some of those who burned her house and stole her away were Indians. But as I say, at the time I paid her story little mind."

Jamie made a Scottish noise indicating that he took the point, but with skepticism.

"And when did ye meet this lassie, Donald, and hear her story?"

"Near Christmas." The Major poked at the bowl of his pipe with a stained forefinger, not looking up. "Ye mean when was her house attacked? She didna say, but I think … perhaps not too long before. She was still … fairly, er, fresh." He coughed, caught my eye, caught his breath, and coughed again, hard, going red in the face.

Jamie's mouth pressed tight, and he looked down, flipping open the mold to drop a new-made ball onto the hearth.

I put down my fork, the remnants of appetite vanished.

"How?" I demanded. "How did this young woman come to be in the brothel?"

"Why, they sold her, mum." The flush still stained MacDonald's cheeks, but he had recovered his countenance enough to look at me. "The brigands. They sold her to a river trader, she said, a few days after they'd stolen her. He kept her for a bit, on his boat, but then a man came one night to do business, took a fancy to her, and bought her. He brought her as far as the coast, but I suppose he'd tired of her by then.…" His words trailed off, and he stuck the pipe back into his mouth, drawing hard.

"I see." I did, and the half of the omelette I'd eaten lay in a small hard ball in the bottom of my stomach.

"Still fairly fresh." How long did it take, I wondered? How long would a woman last, passed from hand to casual hand, from the splintered planks of a riverboat's deck to the tattered mattress of a hired room, given only what would keep her alive? It was more than possible that the brothel in Edenton had seemed a haven of sorts by the time she reached it. The thought didn't make me feel any more kindly toward MacDonald, though.

"Do you remember her name at least, Major?" I asked, with icy courtesy.

I thought I saw the edge of Jamie's mouth twitch, from the corner of my eye, but kept my stare focused on MacDonald.

He took the pipe from his mouth, exhaled a long stream of smoke, then looked up into my face, his eyes pale blue and very direct.

"In truth, mum," he said, "I just call them all Polly. Saves trouble, ken?"

I was saved from reply—or from something worse—by the return of Mrs. Bug, bearing an empty bowl.

"The laddie's eaten, and now he'll sleep," she announced. Her sharp eyes flicked from my face to my half-empty plate. She opened her mouth, frowning, but then glanced at Jamie, and seeming to pick up some unspoken command from him, shut her mouth again, and picked up the plate with a brief "hmp!"

"Mrs. Bug," said Jamie quietly. "Will ye awa' just now, and ask Arch to come down to me? And, if it's no troubling ye too much, the same word to Roger Mac?"

Her small black eyes went round, then narrowed as she glanced at MacDonald, obviously suspecting that if there were mischief afoot, he was behind it.

"I will," she said, and shaking her head with admonishment at me for my lack of appetite, she put down the dishes and went out, leaving the door on the latch.

"Woram's Landing," Jamie said to MacDonald, resuming their conversation as though it had not been interrupted. "And Salem.

And if it is the same men, Young Ian met them in the forest, a day's travel west of here. Near enough."

"Near enough to be the same? Aye, it is."

"It's early in the spring." Jamie glanced at the window as he spoke; it was dark now, and the shutters closed, but a cool breeze crept through and stirred the threads where I had strung mushrooms to dry, dark wizened shapes that swayed like tiny dancers, frozen against the pale wood.

I knew what he meant by that. The ground in the mountains was impassable during the winter; the high passes still held snow, and the lower slopes had only begun to green and blossom in the last few weeks. If there was an organized gang of marauders, they might only now be moving into the backcountry, after a winter spent lying low in the piedmont.

"It is," MacDonald agreed. "Early enough, perhaps, to have folk on their guard. But before your men come, sir—perhaps we should speak of what brought me?"

"Aye?" Jamie said, squinting carefully as he poured a glittering stream of lead. "Of course, Donald. I should have kent no small matter would bring ye so far. What is it?"

MacDonald smiled like a shark; now we'd come to it.

"Ye've done well wi' your place here, Colonel. How many families it is ye have on your land the noo?"

"Thirty-four," Jamie said. He didn't look up, but turned out another bullet into the ashes.

"Room for a few more, perhaps?" MacDonald was still smiling. We were surrounded by thousands of miles of wilderness; the handful of homesteads on Fraser's Ridge made scarcely a dent in it—and could vanish like smoke. I thought momentarily of the Dutch cabin, and shivered, despite the fire. I could still taste the bitter, cloying smell of burned flesh, thick in the back of my throat, lurking beneath the lighter flavors of the omelette.

"Perhaps," Jamie replied equably. "The new Scottish emigrants, is it? From up past Thurso?"

Major MacDonald and I both stared at him.

“How the devil d’ye ken that?” MacDonald demanded. “I heard it myself only ten days since!”

“Met a man at the mill yesterday,” Jamie replied, picking up the ladle again. “A gentleman from Philadelphia, come into the mountains to collect plants. He’d come up from Cross Creek and seen them.” A muscle near his mouth twitched. “Apparently, they made a bit of a stir at Brunswick, and didna feel themselves quite welcome, so they came up the river on flatboats.”

“A bit of a stir? What did they do?” I asked.

“Well, d’ye see, mum,” the Major explained, “there are a great many folk come flooding off ships these days, straight from the Highlands. Whole villages, packed into the bowels of a ship—and looking as though they’ve been shat out when they disembark, too. There’s nothing for them on the coast, though, and the townsfolk are inclined to point and snigger, seein’ them in their outlandish rig—so for the most part, they get straight onto a barge or a flatboat and head up the Cape Fear. Campbelton and Cross Creek at least have folk who can talk to them.”

He grinned at me, brushing a smudge of dirt from the skirts of his uniform coat.

“The folk in Brunswick willna be quite accustomed to such rawboned Highlanders, they having seen only such civilized Scotch persons as your husband and his aunt.”

He nodded toward Jamie, who gave him a small, ironic bow in return.

“Well, relatively civilized,” I murmured. I was not ready to forgive MacDonald for the whore in Edenton. “But—”

“They’ve barely a word of English among them, from what I hear,” MacDonald hurried on. “Farquard Campbell came down to speak wi’ them, and brought them north to Campbelton, or I doubt not but they’d be milling about onshore yet, wi’ no notion at all where to go or what to do next.”

“What’s Campbell done wi’ them?” Jamie inquired.

“Ah, they’re parceled out amongst his acquaintance in Campbelton, but ’twon’t suit in the long run, ye can see that, of course.” MacDonald shrugged. Campbelton was a small settlement near Cross Creek, centered around Farquard Campbell's successful trading store, and the land around it was entirely settled—mostly by Campbells. Farquard had eight children, many of whom were also married—and as fertile as their father.

"Of course," Jamie said, looking wary. "But they're from the northern coast. They'll be fishermen, Donald, not crofters."

"Aye, but they're willing to make a change, no?" MacDonald gestured toward the door, and the forest beyond. "There's nothing for them left in Scotland. They've come here, and now they must make the best of it. A man can learn to farm, surely?"

Jamie looked rather dubious, but MacDonald was in the full flush of his enthusiasm.

"I've seen many a fisher-lad and plowboy become a soldier, man, and so have you, I'll wager. Farming's no more difficult than soldiering, surely?"

Jamie smiled a little at that; he had left farming at nineteen and fought as a mercenary in France for several years before returning to Scotland.

"Aye, well, that's maybe true, Donald. But the thing about being a soldier is that someone's tellin' ye what to do, from the moment ye rise until ye fall down at night. Who's to tell these poor wee gomerels which end o' the cow to milk?"

"That would be you, I expect," I said to him. I stretched myself, easing my back, stiff from riding, and glanced across at MacDonald. "Or at least I suppose that's what you're getting at, Major?"

"Your charm is exceeded only by your quickness of wit, mum," said MacDonald, bowing gracefully in my direction. "Aye, that's the meat of it. All your folk are Highlanders, sir, and crofters; they can speak to these newcomers in their own tongue, show them what they'll need to know—help them to make their way."

"There are a good many other folk in the colony who have the *Gaidhlig,*" Jamie objected. "And most of them a great deal more convenient to Campbelton."

"Aye, but you've vacant land that needs clearing, and they haven't." Obviously feeling that he had won the argument, MacDonald sat back and took up his neglected mug of beer.

Jamie looked at me, one eyebrow raised. It was perfectly true that we had vacant land: ten thousand acres, but barely twenty of them under cultivation. It was also true that lack of labor was acute in the entire colony, but even more so in the mountains, where the land didn't lend itself to tobacco or rice—the sorts of crops suited to slave labor.

At the same time, though—

"The difficulty is, Donald, how to settle them." Jamie bent to turn out another ball on the hearth, and straightened, brushing back a loose strand of auburn hair behind his ear. "I've land, aye, but little else. Ye canna be loosing folk straight from Scotland into the wilderness, and expect them to claw a living out of it. I couldna even give them the shoon and suit of clothes a bondsman would have, let alone tools. And to feed them and all their wives and weans through the winter? To offer them protection?" He lifted his ladle in illustration, then shook his head and dropped in another lump of lead.

"Ah, protection. Well, since ye've mentioned that, let me proceed to another wee matter of interest." MacDonald leaned forward, lowering his voice confidentially, though there was no one to hear.

"I've said I'm the Governor's man, aye? He's charged me to travel about, over the western part of the colony, and keep an ear to the ground. There are Regulators still unpardoned, and"—he glanced warily to and fro, as though expecting one of these persons to bound out of the fireplace—"ye'll have heard of the Committees of Safety?"

"A bit."

"Ye'll not have one established yet, here in the backcountry?"

"Not that I've heard of, no." Jamie had run out of lead to melt, and now stooped to scoop the new-made balls from the ashes at his feet, the warm light of the fire glowing red on the crown of his head. I sat down beside him on the settle, picking up the shot pouch from the table and holding it open for him.

"Ah," said MacDonald, looking pleased. "I see I've come in good time, then."

In the wake of the civil unrest that surrounded the War of the Regulation a year before, a number of such informal citizens' groups had sprung up, inspired by similar groups in the other colonies. If the Crown was no longer able to assure the safety of the colonists, they argued, then they must take the matter into their own hands.

The sheriffs could no longer be trusted to keep order; the scandals that had inspired the Regulator movement had assured that. The difficulty, of course, was that since the committees were self-appointed, there was no more reason to trust them than the sheriffs.

There were other committees, too. The Committees of Correspondence, loose associations of men who wrote letters to and fro, spreading news and rumor between the colonies. And it was out of these various committees that the seeds of rebellion would spring —were germinating even now, somewhere out in the cold spring night.

As I did now and then—and much more often, now—I reckoned up the time remaining. It was nearly April of 1773 And *on the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five* … as Longfellow so quaintly put it …

Two years. But war has a long fuse, and a slow match. This one had been lit at Alamance, and the bright, hot lines of the creeping fire in North Carolina were already visible—for those who knew to look.

The lead balls in the shot pouch I held rolled and clicked together; my fingers had tightened on the leather. Jamie saw it and touched my knee, quick and light, in reassurance, then took the pouch and rolled it up, tucking it into the cartridge box.

"Good time," he repeated, looking at MacDonald. "What d'ye mean by that, Donald?"

"Why, who should lead such a committee other than yourself, Colonel? I had suggested as much to the Governor." MacDonald tried to look modest, and failed.

"Verra obliging of ye, Major," Jamie said dryly. He raised an eyebrow at me. The state of the colony's government must be worse even than he had supposed, for Governor Martin to be not only tolerating the existence of the committees—but clandestinely sanctioning them.

The long-drawn whine of a dog's yawn reached me faintly from the hall, and I excused myself, to go and check on Ian.

I wondered whether Governor Martin had the slightest idea what he was loosing. I rather thought he did, and was making the best of a bad job, by trying to ensure that some, at least, of the Committees of Safety were run by men who had backed the Crown during the War of the Regulation. The fact remained that he could not control—or even know about—many such committees. But the colony was beginning to seethe and bump like a teakettle on the boil, and Martin had no official troops at his command, only such irregulars as MacDonald—and the militia.

Which was why MacDonald was calling Jamie "Colonel," of course. The previous governor, William Tryon, had appointed Jamie—quite against his will—colonel of militia for the backcountry above the Yadkin.

"Hmph," I said to myself. Neither MacDonald nor Martin was a fool. Inviting Jamie to set up a Committee of Safety meant that he would call upon those men who had served under him in the militia—but would commit the government to nothing, in terms of paying or equipping them—and the Governor would be clear of any responsibility for their actions, since a Committee of Safety was not an official body.

The danger to Jamie—and all of us—in accepting such a proposal, though—that was considerable.

It was dark in the hall, with no light but the spill from the kitchen behind me, and the faint glow of the single candle in the surgery. Ian was asleep, but restless, a faint frown of discomfort wrinkling the soft skin between his brows. Rollo raised his head, thick tail swishing to and fro across the floor in greeting.

Ian didn't respond when I spoke his name, or when I set a hand on his shoulder. I shook him gently, then harder. I could see him struggling, somewhere under the layers of unconsciousness, like a man drifting in the underwater currents, yielding to the beckoning depths, then snagged by an unexpected fishhook, a stab of pain in cold-numbed flesh.

His eyes opened suddenly, dark and lost, and he stared at me in incomprehension.

"Hallo there," I said softly, relieved to see him wake. "What's your name?"

I could see that the question made no sense to him at once, and repeated it, patiently. Awareness stirred somewhere in the depths of his dilated pupils.

"Who am I?" he said in Gaelic. He said something else, slurred, in Mohawk, and his eyelids fluttered, closing.

"Wake up, Ian," I said firmly, resuming the shaking. "Tell me who you are."

His eyes opened again, and he squinted at me in confusion.

"Try something easier," I suggested, holding up two fingers. "How many fingers do you see?"

A flicker of awareness sprang up in his eyes.

"Dinna let Arch Bug see ye do that, Auntie," he said drowsily, the hint of a smile touching his face. "That's verra rude, ken."

Well, at least he had recognized me, as well as the "V" sign; that was something. And he must know who he was, if he was calling me Auntie.

"What's your full name?" I asked again.

"Ian James FitzGibbons Fraser Murray," he said, rather crossly. "Why d'ye keep asking me my name?"

"FitzGibbons?" I said. "Where on earth did you get that one?"

He groaned and put two fingers against his eyelids, wincing as he pressed gently.

"Uncle Jamie gave it me—blame him," he said. "It's for his auld godfather, he said. Murtagh FitzGibbons Fraser, he was called, but my mother didna want me named Murtagh. I think I'm going to puke again," he added, taking his hand away.

In the event, he heaved and retched a bit over the basin, but didn't actually vomit, which was a good sign. I eased him back onto his side, white and clammy with sweat, and Rollo stood on his hind legs, front paws braced on the table, to lick his face, which made him giggle between groans and try feebly to push the dog away.

"Theirig dhachaigh, Okwaho," he said. "Theirig dhachaigh" meant "go home," in Gaelic, and Okwaho was evidently Rollo's Mohawk name. Ian seemed to be having some difficulty choosing among the three languages in which he was fluent, but was obviously lucid, in spite of that. After I had made him answer a few more annoyingly pointless questions, I wiped his face with a damp cloth, let him rinse his mouth with well-watered wine, and tucked him in again.

"Auntie?" he said drowsily, as I was turning for the door. "D'ye think I'll ever see my Mam again?"

I stopped, having no idea how to answer that. In fact, there was no need; he had dropped back into sleep with the suddenness that concussion patients often showed, and was breathing deeply before I could find any words.

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6

AMBUSH

Ian woke abruptly, hand closing round his tomahawk. Or what should have been his tomahawk, but was instead a handful of breeches. For an instant, he had no notion at all where he was, and sat up straight, trying to make out shapes in the dark.

Pain shot through his head like heat lightning, making him gasp soundlessly and clutch it. Somewhere in the dark below him, Rollo gave a small, startled *wuff*?

Christ. The piercing smells of his aunt's surgery stabbed the back of his nose, alcohol and burned wick and dried medicine leaves and the foul brews she called penny-syllin. He closed his eyes, put his forehead on his drawn-up knees, and breathed slowly through his mouth.

What had he been dreaming? Some dream of danger, something violent—but no clear image came to him, only the feel of being stalked, something following him through the wood.

He had to piss, badly. Fumbling for the edge of the table he lay on, he eased himself slowly upright, squinting against the flashes of pain in his head.

Mrs. Bug had left him a pot, he remembered her saying so, but the candle had gone out and he'd no mind to crawl round the floor looking for it. Faint light showed him where the door was; she had left it ajar, and a glow spread down the hall from the kitchen hearth. With that as bearing, he made his way to the window, got it open, fumbled free the shutter fastening, and stood in the flood of air from the cool spring night, eyes closed in relief as his bladder eased.

That was better, though with the relief came new awareness of the queasiness of his stomach and the throbbing in his head. He sat down, putting his arms on his knees and his head on his arms, waiting for everything to ease.

There were voices in the kitchen; he could hear them clearly, now that he paid attention.

It was Uncle Jamie and yon MacDonald, and old Arch Bug, as well, with Auntie Claire now and again putting in a word, her English voice sharp by contrast with the gruff mutter of Scots and Gaelic.

“Would ye care, perhaps, to be an Indian agent?” MacDonald was saying.

What was that? he wondered—then it came to him. Aye, of course; the Crown employed men to go out to the tribes, offer them gifts, tobacco, and knives and the like. Tell them silliness about German Geordie, as though the King was like to come and sit down by the council fires at the next Rabbit Moon and speak like a man.

He smiled grimly to think of it. The notion was plain enough; cozen the Indians to fight for the English, when fighting was needed. But why should they think it needed now? The French had yielded, retreated to their northern foothold in Canada.

Oh. He remembered belatedly what Brianna had told him about the new fighting to come. He’d not known whether to believe her—perhaps she was right, though, in which case … he didn’t want to think about it. Or about anything.

Rollo padded over to him, sat and leaned heavily against him. He leaned back, resting his head in the thick fur.

An Indian agent had come once, while he lived in Snaketown. A fat wee fellow, shifty-eyed and with a tremble in his voice. He thought the man—Christ, what was his name? The Mohawk had called him Bad Sweat, and that fit; he stank as though with a mortal illness—he thought the man was not accustomed to the Kahnyen’kehaka; he’d not much of their speech, and plainly expected them to take his scalp at any moment, something they had thought hilarious—and one or two would likely have tried it, for a joke, save that Tewaktenyonh said to treat him with respect. Ian had been pressed to interpret for him, a job he'd done, though without much pleasure in it. He would much sooner think himself Mohawk than acknowledge any kinship with Bad Sweat.

Uncle Jamie, though … he'd make a better job of it, by far. Would he do it? Ian listened to the voices with a vague sense of interest, but it was clear that Uncle Jamie would not be pressed for a decision. MacDonald might as soon get a grip on a frog in a spring, he thought, hearing his uncle elude commitment.

He sighed, put his arm around Rollo, and eased more of his weight onto the dog. He felt awful. He would have supposed he was dying, save that Auntie Claire had said he'd feel poorly for several days. He was sure she would have stayed if he were dying, not gone and left him with only Rollo for company.

The shutters were still open, and cold air poured over him, chilly and soft at once, the way spring nights were. He felt Rollo raise his nose, sniffing, and utter a low, eager whine. Possum, maybe, or a raccoon.

"Go on, then," he said, straightening up and giving the dog a small push. "I'm fine."

The dog sniffed him suspiciously, and tried to lick the back of his head, where the stitches were, but left off when Ian yelped and covered them with his hands.

"Go, I said!" He cuffed the dog gently, and Rollo snorted, circled once, then sailed over his head and out through the window, hitting the ground outside with a solid thump. A frightful screech rent the air and there was the sound of scrabbling feet and heavy bodies tearing through shrubbery.

Startled voices came from the direction of the kitchen, and he heard Uncle Jamie's step in the hall, an instant before the surgery door pushed in.

"Ian?" called his uncle softly. "Where are ye, lad? What's amiss?"

He stood up, but a sheet of blinding white came down inside his eyes and he staggered. Uncle Jamie caught him by the arm, and set him down on a stool.

“What is it, lad?” His vision clearing, he could see his uncle in the light from the door, rifle in one hand, his face looking concerned but humorous as he glanced toward the open window. He sniffed deeply. “Not a skunk, I suppose.”

“Aye, well, I suppose it’s one thing or the other,” Ian said, touching his head gingerly. “Either Rollo’s gone after a painter, or he’s treed Auntie’s cat.”

“Oh, aye. He’d fare better wi’ the painter.” His uncle set the rifle down and went to the window. “Shall I close the shutter, or d’ye need the air, lad? You’re that bit peaked.”

“I feel peaked,” Ian admitted. “Aye, leave it, if ye will, Uncle.”

“Shall ye rest, Ian?”

He hesitated. His stomach still lurched uneasily and he felt very much that he would like to lie down again—but the surgery made him uneasy, with its strong smells and the glints here and there of tiny blades and other mysterious and painful things. Uncle Jamie seemed to guess the trouble, for he bent and got a hand under Ian’s elbow.

“Come along, lad. Ye can sleep upstairs in a proper bed, if ye dinna mind Major MacDonald in the other.”

“I dinna mind,” he said, “but I’ll stay here, I think.” He gestured toward the window, not wanting to nod and bother his head again. “Rollo will likely be back soon.”

Uncle Jamie didn’t argue with him, something he was grateful for. Women fussed. Men just got on with it.

His uncle boosted him unceremoniously back into his bed, covered him up, then began rootling about in the dark, in search of the rifle he had put down. Ian began to feel that perhaps he could do with just a wee bit of fuss, after all.

“Could ye get me a cup o’ water, Uncle Jamie?”

“Eh? Oh, aye.”

Auntie Claire had left a jug of water close to hand. There was the comfortable sound of glugging liquid, and then the rim of a pottery cup held to his mouth, his uncle’s hand at his back to keep him upright. He didn’t need it, but didn’t object; the touch was warm and comforting. He hadn't realized how chilled he was from the night air, and shivered briefly.

"All right, laddie?" Uncle Jamie murmured, his hand tightening on Ian's shoulder.

"Aye, fine. Uncle Jamie?"

"Mphm?"

"Did Auntie Claire tell ye about—about a war? One coming, I mean. With England."

There was a moment's silence, his uncle's big form gone still against the light from the door.

"She has," he said, and took away his hand. "Did she tell you?"

"No, Cousin Brianna did." He lay down on his side, careful of his tender head. "D'ye believe them?"

There was no hesitation this time.

"Aye, I do." It was said with his uncle's usual dry matter-of-factness, but something in it prickled the hairs on the back of Ian's neck.

"Oh. Well, then."

The goose-down pillow was soft under his cheek, and smelled of lavender. His uncle's hand touched his head, smoothed the ruffled hair back from his face.

"Dinna fash yourself about it, Ian," he said softly. "There's time, yet."

He picked up the gun and left. From where he lay, Ian could see across the dooryard and above the trees where they dropped from the edge of the Ridge, past the slope of Black Mountain, and on into the black sky beyond, thick with stars.

He heard the back door open, and Mrs. Bug's voice, rising high above the others.

"They're no to hame, sir," she was saying, breathless. "And the hoose is dark, no fire in the hearth. Wherever might they go, this time o' night?"

He wondered dimly who was gone, but it didn't seem to matter much. If it was trouble, Uncle Jamie would deal with it. The thought was comforting; he felt like a small boy, safe in bed, hearing his father’s voice outside, talking to a tenant in the cold dark of a Highland dawn.

Warmth spread slowly over him beneath the quilt, and he slept.

* * *

The moon was beginning to rise when they set out, and a good thing, too, Brianna thought. Even with the big, lopsided gold orb sailing up out of a cradle of stars and shedding its borrowed radiance over the sky, the trail beneath their feet was invisible. So were their feet, drowned in the absolute black of the forest at night.

Black, but not quiet. The giant trees rustled overhead, small things squealed and snuffled in the dark, and now and then the silent flutter of a bat passed close enough to startle her, as though part of the night had suddenly come loose and taken wing under her nose.

“The Minister’s Cat is an apprehensive cat?” Roger suggested, as she gasped and clutched at him in the wake of one such leather-winged visitation.

“The Minister’s Cat is an … appreciative cat,” she replied, squeezing his hand. “Thank you.” They’d likely end up sleeping on their cloaks in front of the McGillivrays’ fire, instead of cozily tucked up in their own bed—but at least they’d have Jemmy.

He squeezed back, his hand bigger and stronger than hers, very reassuring in the dark.

“It’s all right,” he said. “I want him, too. It’s a night to have your family all together, safe in one place.”

She made a small sound in her throat, acknowledgment and appreciation, but wanted to keep up the conversation, as much to keep the sense of connection with him as because it would keep the dark at bay.

“The Minister’s Cat was a very eloquent cat,” she said delicately. “At the—the funeral, I mean. For those poor people.”

Roger snorted; she saw the brief curl of his breath, white on the air.

“The Minister’s Cat was a highly embarrassed cat,” he said. “Your father!”

She smiled, since he couldn't see her.

"You did really well," she said mildly.

"Mmphm," he said, with another brief snort. "As for eloquence … if there was any, it was none of mine. All I did was quote bits of some psalm—I couldna even tell ye which it was."

"It didn't matter. Why did you pick—what you said, though?" she asked, curious. "I sort of thought you'd say the Lord's Prayer, or maybe the Twenty-Third Psalm—everybody knows that one."

"I thought I would, too," he admitted. "I meant to. But when I came to it …" He hesitated, and she saw in memory those raw, cold mounds, and shivered, smelling soot. He tightened his grasp on her hand, and drew her closer, tucking the hand into the crook of his elbow.

"I don't know," he said gruffly. "It just seemed—more suitable, somehow."

"It was," she said quietly, but didn't pursue the subject, choosing instead to steer the conversation into a discussion of her latest engineering project, a hand pump to raise water from the well.

"If I had something to use for pipe, I could get water into the house, easy as anything! I've already got most of the wood I need for a nice cistern, if I can get Ronnie to cooper it for me—so we can shower with rainwater, at least. But hollowing out tree limbs"—the method employed for the small amount of piping used for the pump—"it would take me months to manage enough just to get from the well to the house, let alone the stream. And there's not a chance of getting any rolled copper. Even if we could afford any, which we can't, bringing it up from Wilmington would be—" She threw her free hand up in frustration at the monumental nature of the undertaking.

He considered that for a bit, the chuff of their shoes on the rocky trail a comforting rhythm.

"Well, the ancient Romans did it with concrete; the recipe's in Pliny."

"I know. But it takes a particular kind of sand, which we don't happen to have. Likewise, quicklime, which we likewise don't have. And—"

"Aye, but what about clay?" he interrupted. "Did ye see that plate at Hilda's wedding? The big brown and red one, with the beautiful patterns?"

"Yes," she said. "Why?"

"Ute McGillivray said someone from Salem brought it. I dinna recall the name, but she said he was quite the big noise in potting—or whatever ye call making dishes."

"I'll bet you any amount of money she didn't say that!"

"Well, words to that effect." He went on, undeterred. "The point being that he made it *here;* it wasn't something he'd brought from Germany. So there's clay about that's suitable for firing, eh?"

"Oh, I *see.* Hmm. Well, now, that's an idea, isn't it?"

It was, and an attractive one whose discussion occupied them for most of the rest of the journey.

They had come down off the Ridge and were within a quarter-mile of the McGillivrays' place when she began to have an uneasy feeling down the back of her neck. It *could* be only imagination; after the sights they had seen in that deserted hollow, the dark air of the wood seemed thick with threat, and she had been imagining ambush at every blind bend, tensing with the anticipation of attack.

Then she heard something crack in the trees to her right—a small dry branch breaking, in a way that neither wind nor animal would break it. Real danger had its own taste, vivid as lemon juice, by contrast with the weak lemonade of imagination.

Her hand tightened on Roger's arm in warning, and he stopped at once.

"What?" he whispered, hand on his knife. "Where?" He hadn't heard it.

Damn, why hadn't she brought her gun, or at least her own dirk? All she had was her Swiss Army knife, carried always in her pocket—and what weapons the landscape offered.

She leaned into Roger, pointing, her hand close to his body to be sure he followed the direction of her gesture. Then she stooped, feeling about in the darkness for a rock, or a stick to use as a club.

"Keep talking," she whispered.

“The Minister’s Cat is a fraidy cat, is she?” he said, his tone one of fairly convincing teasing.

“The Minister’s Cat is a *ferocious* cat,” she replied, trying to match his bantering tone, meanwhile fumbling one-handed in her pocket. Her other hand closed on a stone, and she pulled it free of the clinging dirt, cold and heavy in her palm. She rose, all her senses focused on the darkness to their right. “She’ll freaking disembowel anything that—”

“Oh, it’s you,” said a voice in the woods behind her.

She shrieked, and Roger jerked in reflex, spun on his heel to face the threat, grabbed her and thrust her behind him, all in the same motion.

The push sent her staggering backward. She caught a heel in a hidden root in the dark, and fell, landing hard on her backside, from which position she had an excellent view of Roger in the moonlight, knife in hand, charging into the trees with an incoherent roar.

Belatedly, she registered what the voice had said, as well as the unmistakable tone of disappointment in it. A very similar voice, loud with alarm, spoke from the wood on the right.

“Jo?” it said. “What? Jo, what?”

There was a lot of thrashing and yelling going on in the woods to the left. Roger’d got his hands on someone.

“Roger!” she shouted. “Roger, stop! It’s the Beardsleys!”

She’d dropped the rock when she fell, and now got to her feet, rubbing the dirt from her hand on the side of her skirt. Her heart was still pounding, her left buttock was bruised, and her urge to laugh was tinged with a strong desire to strangle one or both of the Beardsley twins.

“Kezzie Beardsley, come out of there!” she bellowed, then repeated it, even louder. Kezzie’s hearing had improved after her mother had removed his chronically infected tonsils and adenoids, but he was still rather deaf.

A loud rustling in the brush yielded the slight form of Keziah Beardsley, dark-haired, white-faced, and armed with a large club, which he swung off his shoulder and tried abashedly to hide behind him when he saw her.

Meanwhile, much louder rustling and a certain amount of cursing behind her portended the emergence of Roger, gripping the scrawny neck of Josiah Beardsley, Kezzie's twin.

"What in the name of God d'ye wee bastards think ye're up to?" Roger said, shoving Jo across to stand by his brother in a patch of moonlight. "D'ye realize I nearly killed you?"

There was just enough light for Brianna to make out the rather cynical expression that crossed Jo's face at this, before it was erased and replaced with one of earnest apology.

"We're that sorry, Mr. Mac. We heard someone coming, and thought it might be brigands."

"Brigands," Brianna repeated, feeling the urge to laugh rising, but keeping it firmly in check. "Where on earth did you get that word?"

"Oh." Jo looked at his feet, hands clasped behind his back. "Miss Lizzie was a-readin' to us, from that book what Mr. Jamie brought. 'Twas in there. About brigands."

"I see." She glanced at Roger, who met her eye, his annoyance obviously waning into amusement, as well. *"The Pirate Gow,"* she explained. "Defoe."

"Oh, aye." Roger sheathed his dirk. "And why, exactly, did ye think there might be brigands coming?"

Kezzie, with the quirks of his erratic hearing, picked that up and answered, as earnestly as his brother, though his voice was louder and slightly flat, the result of his early deafness.

"We come across Mr. Lindsay, sir, on his way home, and he did tell us what passed, up by Dutchman's Creek. It's true, so, what he said? They was all burned to cinders?"

"They were all dead." Roger's voice had lost any tinge of amusement. "What's that to do with you lot lurking in the woods with clubs?"

"Well, you see, sir, McGillivrays' is a fine, big place, what with the cooper's shop and the new house and all, and being on a road, like—well, if *I* was a brigand, sir, 'tis just the sort of place I might choose," replied Jo.

"And Miss Lizzie's there, with her Pap. And your son, Mr. Mac," Kezzie added pointedly. "Shouldn't want no harm to come to 'em."

"I see." Roger smiled a little crookedly. "Well, thanks to ye, then, for the kind thought. I doubt the brigands will be anywhere near, though; Dutchman's Creek is a long way away."

"Aye, sir," Jo agreed. "But brigands might be anywhere, mightn't they?"

This was undeniable, and sufficiently true as to give Brianna a renewed feeling of chill in the pit of the stomach.

"They might be, but they aren't," Roger assured them. "Come along to the house with us, aye? We're just going to collect wee Jem. I'm sure *Frau* Ute would give ye a bed by the fire."

The Beardsleys exchanged inscrutable looks. They were nearly identical—small and lithe, with thick dark hair, distinguished only by Kezzie's deafness and the round scar on Jo's thumb—and to see the two fine-boned faces wearing precisely the same expression was a little unnerving.

Whatever information had been exchanged by that look, it had evidently included as much consultation as was required, for Kezzie nodded slightly, deferring to his brother.

"Ah, no, sir," Josiah said politely. "We'll bide, I think." And with no further talk, the two of them turned and crunched off into the dark, scuffling leaves and rocks as they went.

"Jo! Wait!" Brianna called after them, her hand having found something else in the bottom of her pocket.

"Aye, ma'am?" Josiah was back, appearing by her elbow with unsettling abruptness. His twin was no stalker, but Jo was.

"Oh! I mean, oh, there you are." She took a deep breath to slow her heart, and handed him the carved whistle she'd made for Germain. "Here. If you're going to stand guard, this might be helpful. To call for help, if someone *should* come."

Jo Beardsley had plainly never seen a whistle before, but didn't care to admit it. He turned the little object over in his hand, trying not to stare at it.

Roger reached out, took it from him, and blew a healthy blast that shattered the night. Several birds, startled from their rest, shot out of the nearby trees, shrieking, followed closely by Kezzie Beardsley, eyes huge with amazement.

"Blow in that end," Roger said, tapping the appropriate end of the whistle before handing it back. "Squeeze your lips a bit."

"Much obliged, sir," Jo murmured. His normal stoic facade had shattered with the silence, and he took the whistle with the wide-eyed look of a boy on Christmas morning, turning at once to show the prize to his twin. It struck her quite suddenly that neither boy likely ever *had* had a Christmas morning—or any other sort of gift.

"I'll make another one for you," she told Kezzie. "Then the two of you can signal back and forth. If you see any brigands," she added, smiling.

"Oh, yes, ma'am. We'll do that, we surely will!" he assured her, scarcely glancing at her in his eagerness to examine the whistle his brother had put in his hands.

"Blow it three times, if ye want help," Roger called after them, taking her arm.

"Aye, sir!" came back from the darkness, followed by a belated faint "Thank you, ma'am!"—this in turn followed at once by a fusillade of puffs, gasps, and breathless rattles, punctuated by briefly successful shrill toots.

"Lizzie's been teaching them manners, I see," Roger said. "As well as their letters. D'ye think they'll ever be truly civilized, though?"

"No," she said, with a trace of regret.

"Really?" She couldn't see his face in the dark, but heard the surprise in his voice. "I was only joking. Ye really think not?"

"I do—and no wonder, after the way they grew up. Did you see the way they were with that whistle? No one's ever given them a present, or a toy."

"I suppose not. D'ye think that's what makes boys civilized? If so, I imagine wee Jem will be a philosopher or an artist or something. Mrs. Bug spoils him rotten."

"Oh, as if you don't," she said tolerantly. "And Da, and Lizzie, and Mama, and everyone else in sight."

"Oh, well," Roger said, unembarrassed at the accusation. "Wait 'til he has a bit of competition. Germain's in no danger of spoiling, is he?" Germain, Fergus and Marsali's eldest son, was harried by two small sisters, known to one and all as the hell-kittens, who followed their brother constantly, teasing and pestering.

She laughed, but felt a slight sense of uneasiness. The thought of another baby always made her feel as though she were perched at the top of a roller coaster, short of breath and stomach clenched, poised somewhere between excitement and terror. Particularly now, with the memory of their lovemaking still softly heavy, shifting like mercury in her belly.

Roger seemed to sense her ambivalence, for he didn't pursue the subject, but reached for her hand and held it, his own large and warm. The air was cold, the last vestiges of a winter chill lingering in the hollows.

"What about Fergus, then?" he asked, taking up an earlier thread of the conversation. "From what I hear, he hadn't much of a childhood, either, but he seems fairly civilized."

"My aunt Jenny had the raising of him from the time he was ten," she objected. "You haven't met my aunt Jenny, but believe me, she could have civilized Adolf Hitler, if she put her mind to it. Besides, Fergus grew up in Paris, not the backwoods—even if it *was* in a brothel. And it sounds like it was a pretty high-class brothel, too, from what Marsali tells me."

"Oh, aye? What does she tell you?"

"Oh, just stories that he's told her, now and then. About the clients, and the wh—the girls."

"Can ye not say 'whore,' then?" he asked, amused. She felt the blood rise in her cheeks, and was pleased that it was dark; he teased her more when she blushed.

"I can't help it that I went to a Catholic school," she said, defensive. "Early conditioning." It was true; she couldn't say certain words, save when in the grip of fury or when mentally prepared. "Why can you, though? You'd think a preacher's lad would have the same problem."

He laughed, a little wryly.

"Not precisely the same problem. It was more a matter of feeling obliged to curse and carry on in front of my friends, to prove I could."

"What kind of carrying on?" she asked, scenting a story. He didn't often talk about his early life in Inverness, adopted by his great-uncle, a Presbyterian minister, but she loved hearing the small tidbits he sometimes let fall.

"Och. Smoking, drinking beer, and writing filthy words on the walls in the boys' toilet," he said, the smile evident in his voice. "Tipping over dustbins. Letting air out of automobile tires. Stealing sweeties from the Post Office. Quite the wee criminal I was, for a time."

"The terror of Inverness, huh? Did you have a gang?" she teased.

"I did," he said, and laughed. "Gerry MacMillan, Bobby Cawdor, and Dougie Buchanan. I was odd man out, not only for being the preacher's lad, but for having an English father and an English name. So I was always out to show them I was a hard man. Meaning I was usually the one in most trouble."

"I had no idea you were a juvenile delinquent," she said, charmed at the thought.

"Well, not for long," he assured her wryly. "Come the summer I was fifteen, the Reverend signed me up on a fishing boat, and sent me to sea with the herring fleet. Couldna just say whether he did it to improve my character, keep me out of jail, or only because he couldn't stand me round the house any longer, but it did work. Ye want to meet hard men sometime, go to sea with a bunch of Gaelic fishermen."

"I'll remember that," she said, trying not to giggle and producing a series of small, wet snorts instead. "Did your friends end up in jail, then, or did they go straight, without you to mislead them?"

"Dougie joined the army," he said, a tinge of wistfulness in his voice. "Gerry took over his dad's shop—his dad was a tobacconist. Bobby … aye, well, Bobby's dead. Drowned, that same summer, out lobstering with his cousin off Oban."

She leaned closer to him and squeezed his hand, her shoulder brushing his in sympathy.

"I'm sorry," she said, then paused. "Only … he isn't dead, is he? Not yet. Not now."

Roger shook his head, and made a small sound of mingled humor and dismay.

"Is that a comfort?" she asked. "Or is it horrible to think about?"

She wanted to keep him talking; he hadn't talked so much in one go since the hanging that had taken his singing voice. Being forced to speak in public made him self-conscious, and his throat tightened. His voice was still rasping, but relaxed as he was now, he wasn't choking or coughing.

"Both," he said, and made the sound again. "I'll never see him again, either way." He shrugged slightly, pushing the thought away. "D'ye think of your old friends much?"

"No, not much," she said softly. The trail narrowed here, and she linked her arm in his, drawing close as they approached the last turn, which would bring them in sight of the McGillivrays'. "There's too much here." But she didn't want to talk about what *wasn't* here.

"Do you think Jo and Kezzie are just playing?" she asked. "Or are they up to something?"

"What should they be up to?" he asked, accepting her change of subject without comment. "I canna think they're lying in wait to commit highway robbery—not at this time of night."

"Oh, I believe them about standing guard," she said. "They'd do anything to protect Lizzie. Only—" She paused. They had come out of the forest onto the wagon road; the far verge fell away in a steep bank, looking at night like a bottomless pool of black velvet—by daylight, it would be a tangled mass of fallen snags, clumps of rhododendron, redbud, and dogwood, overgrown with the snarls of ancient grapevines and creepers. The road made a switchback further on and curved back on itself, arriving gently at the McGillivrays' place, a hundred feet below.

"The lights are still on," she said with some surprise. The small group of buildings—the Old Place, the New Place, Ronnie Sinclair's cooper's shop, Dai Jones's blacksmith's forge and cabin—were mostly dark, but the lower windows of the McGillivrays' New Place were striped with light, leaking through the cracks of the shutters, and a bonfire in front of the house made a brilliant blot of light against the dark.

“Kenny Lindsay,” Roger said matter-of-factly. “The Beardsleys said they’d met him. He’ll have stopped to share the news.”

“Mm. We’d better be careful, then; if they’re looking out for brigands, too, they might shoot at anything that moves.”

“Not tonight; it’s a party, remember? What were ye saying, though, about the Beardsley boys protecting Lizzie?”

“Oh.” Her toe stubbed against some hidden obstacle, and she clutched his arm to keep from falling. “Oof! Only that I wasn’t sure who they thought they were protecting her from.”

Roger tightened his grip on her arm in reflex.

“Whatever d’ye mean by that?”

“Just that if I were Manfred McGillivray, I’d take good care to be nice to Lizzie. Mama says the Beardsleys follow her around like dogs, but they don’t. They follow her like tame wolves.”

“I thought Ian said it wasn’t possible to tame wolves.”

“It isn’t,” she said tersely. “Come on, let’s hurry, before they smoor the fire.”

* * *

The big log house was literally overflowing with people. Light spilled from the open door and glowed in the row of tiny arrow-slit windows that marched across the front of the house, and dark forms wove in and out of the bonfire’s light. The sounds of a fiddle came to them, thin and sweet through the dark, borne on the wind with the scent of roasting meat.

“I suppose Senga’s truly made her choice, then,” Roger said, taking her arm for the final steep descent to the crossroad. “Who d’ye bet it is? Ronnie Sinclair or the German lad?”

“Oh, a bet? What are the stakes? Woops!” She stumbled, tripping on a half-buried rock in the path, but Roger tightened his grip, keeping her upright.

“Loser sets the pantry to rights,” he suggested.

“Deal,” she said promptly. “I think she chose Heinrich.”

"Aye? Well, ye may be right," he said, sounding amused. "But I have to tell you, it was five to three in favor of Ronnie, last I heard. *Frau* Ute's a force to be reckoned with."

"She is," Brianna admitted. "And if it was Hilda or Inga, I'd say it was no contest. But Senga's got her mother's personality; nobody's telling *her* what to do—not even *Frau* Ute.

"Where did they get 'Senga,' anyway?" she added. "There are lots of Ingas and Hildas over toward Salem, but I've never heard of another Senga."

"Ah, well, ye wouldn't—not in Salem. It's not a German name, ken—it's Scots."

"Scots?" she said in astonishment.

"Oh, aye," he said, the grin evident in his voice. "It's Agnes, spelt backward. A girl named that is bound to be contrary, don't ye think?"

"You're kidding! Agnes, spelled backward?"

"I wouldna say it's common, exactly, but I've certainly met one or two Sengas in Scotland."

She laughed.

"Do the Scots do that with any other names?"

"Back-spelling?" He considered. "Well, I did go to school with a lass named Adnil, and there was a grocer's lad who got in the messages for old ladies in the neighborhood—his name's pronounced 'Kirry,' but it's spelt 'C-i-r-e.' "

She looked sharply at him, in case he was teasing, but he wasn't. She shook her head.

"I think Mama's right about Scots. So yours spelled backward would be—"

"Regor," he confirmed. "Sounds like something from a Godzilla film, doesn't it? A giant eel, maybe, or a beetle with death-ray eyes." He sounded pleased at the notion.

"You thought about it, didn't you?" she said, laughing. "Which would you rather be?"

"Well, when I was a kid, I thought the beetle with the death-ray eyes would be best," he admitted. "Then I went to sea and started hauling up the occasional Moray eel in my net. Those are not the kind of thing ye'd want to meet in a dark alley, believe me."

"More agile than Godzilla, at least," she said, shuddering slightly at the recollection of the one Moray eel she'd met personally. A four-foot length of spring steel and rubber, fast as lightning and equipped with a mouthful of razors, it had come up from the hold of a fishing boat she'd watched being unloaded in a little port town called MacDuff.

She and Roger had been leaning on a low rock wall, idly watching the gulls hover in the wind, when a shout of alarm from the fishing boat just below had made them look down in time to see fishermen scrambling back from something on deck.

A dark sine wave had flashed through the silver wash of fish on deck, shot under the rail, and landed on the wet stones of the quay, where it had caused similar panic among the fishermen hosing down their gear, writhing and lashing about like a crazed high-tension cable until one rubber-booted man, gathering his self-possession, had rushed up and kicked it back into the water.

"Well, they're no really bad sorts, eels," Roger said judiciously, evidently recalling the same memory. "Ye canna blame them, after all; being dragged up from the bottom of the sea without warning—anyone would thrash about a bit."

"So they would," she said, thinking of themselves. She took his hand, threading her fingers between his, and found his firm, cold grip a comfort.

They were close enough now to catch snatches of laughter and talk, billowing up into the cold night with the smoke of the fire. There were children running loose; she saw two small forms dart through the legs of the crowd around the fire, black and thin-limbed as Halloween goblins.

That wasn't Jem, surely? No, he was smaller, and surely Lizzie wouldn't—

"Mej," Roger said.

"What?"

"Jem, backward," he explained. "I was just thinking it would be a lot of fun to see Godzilla films with him. Maybe he'd like to be the beetle with death-ray eyes. Be fun, aye?”

He sounded so wistful that a lump came to her throat, and she squeezed his hand hard, then swallowed.

“Tell him Godzilla stories,” she said firmly. “It’s make-believe anyway. I’ll draw him pictures.”

He laughed at that.

“Christ, you do, and they’ll be stoning ye for trafficking with the devil, Bree. Godzilla looks like something straight out of the Book of Revelation—or so I was told.”

“Who told you that?”

“Eigger.”

“Who … oh,” she said, going into mental reverse. “Reggie? Who’s Reggie?”

“The Reverend.” His great-uncle, his adoptive father. There was still a smile in his voice, but one tinged with nostalgia. “When we went to the monster films together of a Saturday. Eigger and Regor—and ye should have seen the looks on the faces of the Ladies’ Altar and Tea Society, when Mrs. Graham let them in without announcing them, and they came into the Reverend’s study to find us stamping round and roaring, kicking hell out of a Tokyo built of blocks and soup tins.”

She laughed, but felt tears prick at the backs of her eyes.

“I wish I’d known the Reverend,” she said, squeezing his hand.

“I wish ye had, too,” he said softly. “He would have liked ye so much, Bree.”

For the space of a few moments, while he talked, the dark forest and the flaming fire below had faded away; they were in Inverness, cozy in the Reverend’s study, with rain on the windows and the sound of traffic going by in the street. It happened so often when they talked like this, between themselves. Then some small thing would fracture the moment—now, it was a shout from the fire as people began to clap and sing—and the world of their own time vanished in an instant.

What if he were gone, she thought suddenly. Could I bring it back, all by myself?

A spasm of elemental panic gripped her, just for a moment, at the thought. Without Roger as her touchstone, with nothing but her own memories to serve as anchor to the future, that time would be lost. Would fade into hazy dreams, and be lost, leaving her no firm ground of reality to stand upon.

She took a deep breath of the cold night air, crisp with woodsmoke, and dug the balls of her feet hard into the ground as they walked, trying to feel solid.

"MamaMamaMAMA!" A small blob detached itself from the confusion round the fire and rocketed toward her, crashing into her knees with enough force to make her grab hold of Roger's arm.

"Jem! There you are!" She scooped him up and buried her face in his hair, which smelled pleasantly of goats, hay, and spicy sausage. He was heavy, and more than solid.

Then Ute McGillivray turned and saw them. Her broad face was creased in a frown, but broke into a beam of delight at seeing them. People turned at her call of greeting, and they were engulfed at once by the crowd, everyone asking questions, expressing gratified surprise at their coming.

A few questions were asked about the Dutch family, but Kenny Lindsay had brought the news of the burning earlier; Brianna was glad of that. People clucked and shook their heads, but by now they had exhausted most of their horrified speculations, and were turning to other matters. The cold of the graves beneath the fir trees still lingered as a faint chill on her heart; she had no wish to make *that* experience real again by talking about it.

The newly engaged couple were seated together on a pair of upturned buckets, holding hands, faces blissful in the glow of the bonfire.

"I win," Brianna said, smiling at sight of them. "Don't they look happy?"

"They do," Roger agreed. "I doubt Ronnie Sinclair is. Is he here?" He glanced round, and so did she, but the cooper was nowhere in sight.

"Wait—he's in his shop," she said, putting a hand on Roger's wrist and nodding toward the small building on the opposite side of the road. There were no windows on this side of the cooper's shop, but a faint glow showed round the edge of the closed door.

Roger glanced from the darkened shop to the convivial crowd round the fire; a good many of Ute's relations had ridden over with the lucky bridegroom and his friends from Salem, bringing with them an immense barrel of black beer, which was adding to the festivities. The air was yeasty with the tang of hops.

By contrast, the cooper's shop had a desolate, glowering sort of air about it. She wondered whether anyone around the fire had yet missed Ronnie Sinclair.

"I'll go and have a bit of a blether with him, aye?" Roger touched her back in brief affection. "He could maybe use a sympathetic ear."

"That and a stiff drink?" She nodded toward the house, where Robin McGillivray was visible through the open door, pouring what she assumed to be whisky for a select circle of friends.

"I imagine he will have managed that for himself," Roger replied dryly. He left her, making his way around the convivial group by the fire. He disappeared in the dark, but then she saw the door of the cooper's shop open, and Roger silhouetted briefly against the glow from within, his tall form blocking the light before vanishing inside.

"Wanna drink, Mama!" Jemmy was wriggling like a tadpole, trying to get down. She set him on the ground, and he was off like a shot, nearly upsetting a stout lady with a platter of corn fritters.

The aroma of the steaming fritters reminded her that she hadn't had any supper, and she made her way after Jemmy to the table of food, where Lizzie, in her role as almost-daughter-of-the-house, helped her importantly to sauerkraut, sausages, smoked eggs, and something involving corn and squash.

"Where's *your* sweetheart, Lizzie?" she asked, teasing. "Shouldn't you be spooning with him?"

"Oh, him?" Lizzie looked like someone recalling a thing of vague general interest, but no immediate importance. "Manfred, ye mean? He's … ower there." She squinted against the glow of the fire, then pointed with her serving spoon. Manfred McGillivray, her own betrothed, was with three or four other young men, all with arms linked, swaying to and fro as they sang something in German. They appeared to have trouble remembering the words, as each verse dissolved into giggles and shoving accusations.

"Here, *Schätzchen*—that's 'sweetheart,' ken, in German," Lizzie explained, leaning down to give Jemmy a bite of sausage. He snapped the tidbit up like a starving seal and chewed industriously, then mumbled, "Wagga gink," and wandered off into the night.

"Jem!" Brianna made to go after him, but was hampered by an oncoming crowd headed for the table.

"Ah, dinna fash yourself about him," Lizzie assured her. "Everyone kens who he is; he'll come to nay harm."

She might still have gone after him, save that she saw a small blond head pop up beside Jem's. Germain, Jem's bosom friend. Germain was two years older, and had a great deal more worldly knowledge than the average five-year-old, thanks in great part to his father's tutelage. She did hope he wasn't picking pockets in the crowd, and made a mental note to frisk him for contraband, later.

Germain had Jem firmly by the hand, so she allowed herself to be persuaded to sit down with Lizzie, Inga, and Hilda, on the bales of straw that had been placed a little way from the fire.

"Und where's *your* sweetheart, then?" teased Hilda. "Yon big bonny black devil?"

"Oh, him?" Brianna said, mimicking Lizzie, and they all broke into rather unladylike roars of laughter; evidently the beer had been making the rounds for some time.

"He's comforting Ronnie," she said, with a nod toward the darkened cooper's shop. "Is your mother upset about Senga's choice?"

"Och, aye," said Inga, rolling her eyes with great expressiveness. "Should ha' heard them at it, her and Senga. Hammer and tongs, hammer and tongs. Da went out to the fishing, and stayed awa' three days."

Brianna ducked her head to hide a grin. Robin McGillivray liked a peaceful life, something he was never likely to enjoy in the company of his wife and daughters.

"Ah, well," Hilda said philosophically, leaning back a little to ease the strain of her first pregnancy, which was well advanced. "She couldna really say so much, *meine Mutter*. Heinrich's her own cousin's son, after all. Even if he *is* poor."

"But young," Inga added practically. "Da says Heinrich will have time to get rich." Ronnie Sinclair wasn't precisely rich—and he *was* thirty years older than Senga. On the other hand, he did own both his cooper's shop and half of the house in which he and the McGillivrays lived. And Ute, having shepherded both her elder daughters to solid marriages with men of property, had obviously seen the advantages of a match between Senga and Ronnie.

"I can see that it might be a little awkward," Brianna said tactfully. "Ronnie going on living with your family, after—" She nodded at the betrothed couple, who were feeding each other bits of cake.

"Hoo!" Hilda exclaimed, rolling her eyes. "I'm that glad not to be living here!"

Inga nodded vigorous agreement, but added, "Well, but *Mutti* isna the one to be greetin' over spilt milk. She's got an eye out for a wife for Ronnie. Just watch her." She nodded toward the food table, where Ute was chatting and smiling with a group of German women.

"Who d'ye think it is she has picked out?" Inga asked her sister, eyes narrowed as she watched her mother operate. "That wee Gretchen? Or your Archie's cousin, maybe? The walleyed one—Seona?"

Hilda, married to a Scot from Surry County, shook her head at this.

"She'll want a German girl," she objected. "For she'll be thinkin' of what will happen if Ronnie dies, and the wife marries again. If it's a German girl, chances are Mama can bully her into a new marriage with one of her nephews or cousins—keep the property in the family, aye?"

Brianna listened with fascination as the girls discussed the situation, with perfect matter-of-factness—and wondered whether Ronnie Sinclair had the slightest idea that his fate was being decided in this pragmatic fashion. But he'd been living with the McGillivrays for more than a year, she reasoned; he must have some idea of Ute's methods.

Thanking God silently that she was not herself compelled to live in the same house with the redoubtable *Frau* McGillivray, she looked round for Lizzie, feeling a pang of sympathy for her erstwhile bondmaid. Lizzie *would* be living with Ute, once her marriage to Manfred took place next year.

Hearing the name "Wemyss," she returned to the conversation at hand, only to discover that the girls were not discussing Lizzie, but rather her father.

"Auntie Gertrud," declared Hilda, and belched softly, fist to her mouth. "She's a widow-woman herself; she'd be the best for him."

"Auntie Gertrud would have poor wee Mr. Wemyss dead in a year," Inga objected, laughing. "She's twice his size. If she didna kill him from exhaustion, she'd roll over in her sleep and squash him flat."

Hilda clapped both hands to her mouth, but less in shock than to stifle her giggles. Brianna thought she'd had her share of beer, too; her cap was awry and her pale face looked flushed, even by firelight.

"Aye, weel, I think he's no much bothered at the thought. See him?" Hilda nodded past the beer-drinkers, and Brianna had no trouble picking out Mr. Wemyss's head, his hair pale and flyaway as his daughter's. He was in animated conversation with a stout woman in apron and cap, who nudged him intimately in the ribs, laughing.

As she watched, though, Ute McGillivray made her way toward them, followed by a tall blond woman, who hesitated a little, hands folded under her apron.

"Oh, who's that?" Inga craned her neck like a goose, and her sister elbowed her, scandalized.

*"Lass das, du alte Ziege! Mutti'*s looking this way!"

Lizzie had half-risen to her knees, peering.

"Who—?" she said, sounding like an owl. Her attention was momentarily distracted by Manfred, who dropped beside her in the straw, grinning amiably.

"How is it, then, *Herzchen*?" he said, putting an arm round her waist and trying to kiss her.

"Who's that, Freddie?" she said, adroitly eluding his embrace and pointing discreetly toward the blond woman, who was smiling shyly as *Frau* Ute introduced her to Mr. Wemyss.

Manfred blinked, swaying a little on his knees, but answered readily enough.

"Oh. That's *Fraulein* Berrisch. Pastor Berrisch's sister."

Inga and Hilda made little cooing sounds of interest; Lizzie frowned a little, but then relaxed, seeing her father tilt back his head to address the newcomer; *Fraulein* Berrisch was nearly as tall as Brianna herself.

Well, that explains why she's still a Fraulein, Brianna thought with sympathy. The woman's hair was streaked with gray, where it showed beneath her cap, and she had a rather plain face, though her eyes held a calm sweetness.

"Oh, a Protestant, then," Lizzie said, in a dismissive tone that made it clear that the *Fraulein* could hardly be considered as a potential mate for her father.

"Aye, but she's a nice woman, for a' that. Come and dance, Elizabeth." Manfred had clearly lost any interest in Mr. Wemyss and the *Fraulein;* he pulled Lizzie, protesting, to her feet, and propelled her toward the circle of dancers. She went reluctantly, but Brianna saw that by the time they had reached the dance, Lizzie was laughing at something Manfred had said, and he was smiling down at her, the firelight glowing on the handsome planes of his face. They were a nice-looking couple, she thought, better-matched in appearance than Senga and her Heinrich—who was tall, but spindly and rather hatchet-faced.

Inga and Hilda had begun arguing with each other in German, allowing Brianna to devote herself to the wholehearted consumption of the excellent supper. Hungry as she was, she would have enjoyed almost anything, but the tart, crisp sauerkraut and the sausages, bursting with juice and spices, were a rare treat.

It was only as she wiped the last of the juice and grease from her wooden plate with a chunk of corn bread that she cast a glance at the cooper's shop, thinking guiltily that she ought perhaps to have saved some for Roger. He was so kind, taking thought for poor Ronnie's feelings. She felt a rush of pride and affection for him. Maybe she should go over there and rescue him.

She had put down her plate and was sorting out her skirts and petticoats, in preparation for putting this plan into action, when she was forestalled by a pair of small figures who came weaving out of the darkness.

"Jem?" she said, startled. "What's the matter?"

The flames gleamed on Jemmy's hair like freshly minted copper, but the face under it was white, and his eyes enormous dark pools, fixed and staring.

"Jemmy!"

He turned a blank face to her, said "Mama?" in a small, uncertain voice, then sat down suddenly, his legs collapsing under him like rubber bands.

She was dimly aware of Germain, swaying like a sapling in a high breeze, but had no attention to spare for him. She seized Jemmy, lifting his head and shaking him a little.

"Jemmy! Wake up! What's wrong?"

"The wee laddie's dead drunk, *a nighean,*" said a voice above her, sounding amused. "Whatever have ye been givin' him?" Robin McGillivray, rather obviously a little the worse for wear himself, leaned over and prodded Jemmy gently, eliciting nothing more than a soft gurgle. He picked up one of Jemmy's arms, then let it go; it fell, boneless as a strand of boiled spaghetti.

"*I* didn't give him anything," she replied, panic giving way to a rising annoyance, as she saw that Jemmy was in fact merely asleep, his small chest rising and falling with a reassuring rhythm. "Germain!"

Germain had subsided into a small heap, and was singing "Alouette" to himself in a dreamy sort of way. Brianna had taught it to him; it was his favorite song.

"Germain! What did you give Jemmy to drink?"

"… j'te plumerai la tete…"

"Germain!" She grabbed him by the arm, and he ceased singing, looking surprised to see her.

"What did you give Jemmy, Germain?"

"He was thirsty, m'dame," Germain said, with a smile of surpassing sweetness. "He wanted a drink." Then his eyes rolled back in his head, and he keeled over backward, limp as a dead fish.

"Oh, Jesus Christ on a piece of *toast*!"

Inga and Hilda looked shocked, but she was in no mood to worry about their sensibilities.

"Where the bloody hell is Marsali?"

"She's no here," Inga said, bending forward to inspect Germain. "She stopped at hame wi' the wee *maedchen.* Fergus is …" She straightened up, looking vaguely round. "Well, I saw him a while ago."

"What's the trouble?" The hoarse voice at her shoulder surprised her, and she turned to find Roger looking quizzical, his face relaxed from its usual sternness.

"Your son is a drunkard," she informed him. Then she caught a whiff of Roger's breath. "Following in his father's footsteps, I see," she added coldly.

Disregarding this, Roger sat down beside her and gathered Jemmy up into his lap. Holding the little boy propped against his knees, he patted Jemmy's cheek, gently but insistently.

"Hallo there, Mej," he said softly. "Hallo, then. Ye're all right, are ye?"

Like magic, Jemmy's eyelids floated up. He smiled dreamily at Roger.

"Hallo, Daddy." Still smiling beatifically, his eyes closed and he relaxed into utter limpness, cheek flattened against his father's knee.

"He's all right," Roger told her.

"Well, good," she said, not particularly mollified. "What do you think they've been drinking? Beer?"

Roger leaned forward and sniffed at his offspring's red-stained lips.

"Cherry Bounce, at a guess. There's a vat of it, round by the barn."

"Holy God!" She'd never drunk Cherry Bounce, but Mrs. Bug had told her how to make it: *"Tak' the juice of a bushel o' cherries, dissolve twenty-four pound o' sugar ower it, then ye put it into a forty-gallon cask and fill it up wi' whisky."*

"He's all right." Roger patted her arm. "Is that Germain over there?"

"It is." She leaned over to check, but Germain was peacefully asleep, also smiling. "That Cherry Bounce must be good stuff."

Roger laughed.

"It's terrible. Like industrial-strength cough syrup. I will say it makes ye very cheerful, though."

"Have you been drinking it?" She eyed him narrowly, but his lips appeared to be their usual color.

"Of course not." He leaned over and kissed her, to prove it. "Surely ye dinna think a Scotsman like Ronnie would deal wi' disappointment by drinking Cherry Bounce? When there's decent whisky to hand?"

"True," she said. She glanced at the cooperage. The faint glow from the hearth fire had faded and the outline of the door had disappeared, leaving the building no more than a faint rectangle of black against the darker mass of the forest beyond. "How *is* Ronnie dealing with it?" She glanced round, but Inga and Hilda had taken themselves off to help *Frau* Ute; all of them were clustered round the food table, clearing things away.

"Oh, he's all right, Ronnie." Roger moved Jemmy off his lap, placing him gently on his side in the straw near Germain. "He wasna in love with Senga, after all. He's suffering from sexual frustration, not a broken heart."

"Oh, well, if that's all," she said dryly. "He won't have to suffer much longer; I'm informed that *Frau* Ute has the matter well in hand."

"Aye, she's told him she'll find him a wife. He's what ye might call philosophical about the matter. Though still reeking wi' lust," he added, wrinkling his nose.

"Ew. Do you want anything to eat?" She glanced at the little boys, getting her feet under her. "I'd better get you something before Ute and the girls clear it all away."

Roger yawned, suddenly and immensely.

"No, I'm all right." He blinked, smiling sleepily at her. "I'll go tell Fergus where Germain is, maybe snatch a bite on the way." He patted her shoulder, then stood up, swaying only a little, and moved off toward the fire.

She checked the boys again; both were breathing deeply and regularly, dead to the world. With a sigh, she bundled them close together, piling up the straw around them, and covered them with her cloak. It was growing colder, but winter had gone; there was no feel of frost in the air.

The party was still going on, but it had shifted to a lower gear. The dancing had stopped and the crowd broken up into smaller groups, men gathered in a circle near the fire, lighting their pipes, the younger men disappeared somewhere. All around her, families were settling in for the night, making nests for themselves in the hay. Some were in the house, more in the barn; she could hear the sound of a guitar from somewhere behind the house, and a single voice, singing something slow and wistful. It made her yearn suddenly for the sound of Roger's voice as it had been, rich and tender.

Thinking of that, though, she realized something; his voice had been much better when he came back from consoling Ronnie. Still husky and with only a shadow of its former resonance—but it had come easily, without that choked note in it. Perhaps alcohol relaxed the vocal cords?

More likely, she thought, it simply relaxed Roger; removed some of his inhibitions about the way he sounded. That was worth knowing. Her mother had opined that his voice would improve, if he would stretch it, work with it, but he was shy of using it, wary of pain—whether from the actual sensation of speaking, or from the contrast with the way he had sounded before.

"So maybe I'll make a little Cherry Bounce," she said aloud. Then she looked at the two small forms slumbering in the hay, and contemplated the prospect of waking up alongside three hangovers, come morning. "Well, maybe not."

She bunched up enough hay for a pillow, spread her folded kerchief over it—they'd be picking hay out of their clothes most of tomorrow—and lay down, curling her body round Jem's. If either boy stirred or vomited in his sleep, she'd feel it and rouse.

The bonfire had burned down; only a ragged fringe of flames now flickered over the bed of glowing embers, and the lanterns set around the yard had all gone out or been thriftily extinguished. Guitar and singer had ceased. Without light and noise to keep it at bay, the night came in, spreading wings of cold silence over the mountain. The stars burned bright above, but they were pinpricks, millennia away. She closed her eyes against the immensity of the night, bowing to put her lips against Jem's head, cradling his warmth.

She tried to compose her mind for sleep, but without the distractions of company, and with the scent of burning timber strong in the air, memory stole back, and her normal prayers of blessing became pleas for mercy and protection.

"He hath put my brethren far from me, and mine acquaintance are verily estranged from me. My kinsfolk have failed, and my familiar friends have forgotten me."

I won't forget you, she said silently to the dead. It seemed so pitiful a thing to say—so small and futile. And yet the only thing in her power.

She shivered briefly, tightening her grip on Jemmy.

A sudden rustle of the hay, and Roger slid in behind her. He fumbled a bit, spreading his own cloak over her, then sighed with relief, his body relaxing heavily against hers as his arm came round her waist.

"Been a bloody long day, hasn't it?"

She groaned faintly in agreement. Now that everything was quiet, with no more need to talk, watch, pay attention, every fiber of her muscles seemed about to dissolve with fatigue. There was no more than a thin layer of hay between her and cold, hard ground, but she felt sleep lapping at her like the waves of the tide creeping up a sandy shore, soothing and inexorable.

“ ‘Did you get something to eat?” She put a hand on his leg, and his arm tightened in reflex, holding her close.

“Aye, if ye think beer’s food. Many folk do.” He laughed, a warm fog of hops on his breath. “I’m fine.” The warmth of his body was beginning to seep through the layers of cloth between them, dispelling the night’s chill.

Jem always gave off heat when he slept; it was like holding a clay firepot, with him curled against her. Roger was putting out even more heat, though. Well, her mother did say that an alcohol lamp burned hotter than oil.

She sighed and snuggled back against him, feeling warm, protected. The cold immensity of the night had lifted, now that she had her family close, together again, and safe.

Roger was humming. She realized it quite suddenly. There was no tune to it, but she felt the vibration of his chest against her back. She didn’t want to chance stopping him; surely that was good for his vocal cords. He stopped on his own, though, after a moment. Hoping to start him again, she reached back to stroke his leg, essaying a small questioning hum of her own.

“Hmmm-mmmm?”

His hands cupped her buttocks and fastened tight.

“Mmm-hmmm,” he said, in what sounded like a combination of invitation and satisfaction.

She didn’t reply, but made a slight dissentient motion of the behind. Under normal conditions, this would have caused him to let go. He *did* let go, but only with one hand, and this in order to slide it down her leg, evidently meaning to get hold of her skirt and ruckle it up.

She reached back hastily and grabbed the roving hand, bringing it round and placing it on her breast, as an indication that while she appreciated the notion and under other circumstances would be thrilled to oblige, just this moment she thought—

Roger was usually very good at reading her body language, but evidently this skill had dissolved in whisky. That, or—the thought came suddenly to her—he simply didn't *care* whether she wanted—

"Roger!" she hissed.

He *had* started humming again, the sound now interspersed with the low, bumping noises a teakettle makes, just before the boil. He'd got his hand down her leg and up her skirt, hot on the flesh of her thigh, groping swiftly upward—and inward. Jemmy coughed, jerking in her arms, and she made an attempt to kick Roger in the shin, as a signal of discouragement.

"God, you're beautiful," he murmured into the curve of her neck. "Oh, God, so beautiful. So beautiful … so … hmmm …" The next words were a mumble against her skin, but she *thought* he'd said "slippery." His fingers had reached their goal, and she arched her back, trying to squirm away.

"Roger," she said, keeping her voice low. "Roger, there are *people* around!" And a snoring toddler wedged like a doorstop in front of her.

He mumbled something in which the words "dark" and "nobody'll see" were distinguishable, and then the groping hand retreated—only to grab a handful of her skirts and start shoving them out of the way.

He had resumed the humming, pausing momentarily to murmur, "Love you, love you so much.…"

"I love you, too," she said, reaching back and trying to catch his hand. "Roger, *stop that*!"

He did, but immediately reached around her, and grasped her by the shoulder. A quick heave, and she was lying on her back staring up at the distant stars, which were at once blotted out by Roger's head and shoulders as he rolled on top of her in a tremendous rustling of hay and loosened clothing.

"Jem—" She flung out a hand toward Jemmy, who appeared not to have been disturbed by the sudden disappearance of his backstop, but was still curled up in the hay like a hibernating hedgehog.

Roger was, of all things, *singing* now, if one could call it that. Or chanting, at least, the words to a very bawdy Scottish song, about a miller who is pestered by a young woman wanting him to grind her corn. Whereupon he does.

"He flung her down upon the sacks, and there she got her corn ground, her corn ground…." Roger was chanting hotly in her ear, his full weight pinning her to the ground and the stars spinning madly far above.

She'd thought his description of Ronnie as "reeking wi' lust" merely a figure of speech, but evidently not. Bare flesh met bare flesh, and then some. She gasped. So did Roger.

"Oh, God," he said. He paused, frozen for an instant against the sky above her, then sighed in an ecstasy of whisky fumes and began to move with her, humming. It *was* dark, thank God, though not nearly dark enough. The remnants of the fire cast an eerie glow over his face, and he looked for an instant the bonny big, black devil Inga had called him.

Lie back and enjoy it, she thought. The hay made a tremendous rustling—but there were other rustlings nearby, and the sound of the wind soughing through the trees in the cove was nearly enough to drown them all in sibilance.

She had managed to suppress her embarrassment and was indeed beginning to enjoy it, when Roger got his hands under her, lifting.

"Wrap your legs round me," he whispered, and nipped her earlobe with his teeth. "Wrap them round my back and hammer my arse wi' your heels."

Moved partly by an answering wantonness, and partly by a desire to squeeze the breath out of him like an accordion, she flung her legs apart and swung them high, scissoring them tight across his heaving back. He gave an ecstatic groan and redoubled his efforts. Wantonness was winning; she had nearly forgotten where they were.

Hanging on for dear life and thrilled by the ride, she arched her back and jerked, shuddering against the heat of him, the night wind's touch cool and electric on thighs and buttocks, bared to the dark. Trembling and moaning, she melted back against the hay, her legs still locked around his hips. Boneless and nerveless, she let her head roll to the side, and slowly, languidly, opened her eyes.

Someone was there; she saw movement in the dark, and froze. It was Fergus, come to fetch his son. She heard the murmur of his voice, speaking French to Germain, and the quiet rustle of his footsteps in the hay, moving off.

She lay still, heart pounding, legs still locked in place. Roger, meanwhile, had reached his own quietus. Head hanging so that his long hair brushed her face like cobwebs in the dark, he murmured, “Love you … God, I love you,” and lowered himself, slowly and gently. Whereupon he breathed, “Thank you,” in her ear and lapsed into warm half-consciousness on top of her, breathing heavily.

“Oh,” she said, looking up to the peaceful stars. “Don’t mention it.” She unlocked her stiff legs, and with some difficulty, got herself and Roger disentangled, more or less covered, and restored to blessed anonymity in their hay-lined nest, Jemmy safely stowed between them.

“Hey,” she said suddenly, and Roger stirred.

“Mm?”

“What sort of monster was Eigger?”

He laughed, and the sound was low and clear.

“Oh, Eigger was a giant sponge cake. With chocolate icing. He’d fall on the other monsters, and smother them wi’ sweetness.” He laughed again, hiccuped, and subsided in the hay.

“Roger?” she said softly, a moment later. There was no answer, and she stretched a hand across the slumbering body of her son, to rest light on Roger’s arm.

“Sing to me,” she whispered, though she knew that he already was asleep.

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7

JAMES FRASER, INDIAN AGENT

“James Fraser, Indian Agent,” I said, closing one eye as though reading it off a screen. “It sounds like a Wild West television show.”

Jamie paused in the act of pulling off his stockings, and eyed me warily.

“It does? Is that good?”

“Insofar as the hero of a television show never dies, yes.”

“In that case, I’m in favor of it,” he said, examining the stocking he’d just pulled off. He sniffed it suspiciously, rubbed a thumb over a thin patch on the heel, shook his head, and tossed it into the laundry basket. “Must I sing?”

“Si—oh,” I said, recollecting that the last time I had tried to explain television to him, my descriptions had focused largely on *The Ed Sullivan Show*. “No, I don’t think so. Nor yet swing from a trapeze.”

“Well, that’s a comfort. I’m none sae young as I was, ken.” He stood up and stretched himself, groaning. The house had been built with eight-foot ceilings, to accommodate him, but his fists brushed the pine beams, even so. “Christ, but it’s been a long day!”

“Well, it’s nearly over,” I said, sniffing in turn at the bodice of the gown I’d just shed. It smelled strongly, though not disagreeably, of horse and woodsmoke. Air it a bit, I decided, and see whether it could go another little while without washing. “I couldn’t have swung on a trapeze even when I *was* young.”

"I'd pay money to see ye try," he said, grinning.

"What *is* an Indian agent?" I inquired. "MacDonald seemed to think he was doing you a signal favor by suggesting you for the job."

He shrugged, unbuckling his kilt.

"Nay doubt he thinks he is." He shook the garment experimentally, and a fine sifting of dust and horsehair bloomed on the floor beneath it. He went to the window, opened the shutters, and, thrusting the kilt outside, shook it harder.

"He would be"—his voice came faintly from the night outside, then more strongly, as he turned round again—"were it not for this war of yours."

"Of *mine*?" I said, indignant. "You sound as though you think I'm proposing to start it, single-handed."

He made a small gesture of dismissal.

"Ye ken what I mean. An Indian agent, Sassenach, is what it sounds like—a fellow who goes out and parleys wi' the local Indians, giving them gifts and talking them round, in hopes that they'll be inclined to ally themselves with the Crown's interests, whatever those might happen to be."

"Oh? And what's this Southern Department that MacDonald mentioned?" I glanced involuntarily toward the closed door of our room, but muffled snoring from across the hall indicated that our guest had already collapsed into the arms of Morpheus.

"Mmphm. There's a Southern Department and a Northern Department that deal wi' Indian affairs in the colonies. The Southern Department is under John Stuart, who's an Inverness man. Turn round, I'll do it."

I turned my back gratefully to him. With expertise born of long experience, he had the lacing of my stays undone in seconds. I sighed deeply as they loosened and fell. He plucked the shift away from my body, massaging my ribs where the boning had pressed the damp fabric into my skin.

"Thank you." I sighed in bliss and leaned back against him. "And being an Inverness man, MacDonald thinks this Stuart will have a natural predisposition to employ other Highlanders?"

“That might depend upon whether Stuart’s ever met any of my kin,” Jamie said dryly. “But MacDonald thinks so, aye.” He kissed the top of my head in absent affection, then withdrew his hands and began untying the lace that bound his hair.

“Sit,” I said, stepping out of my fallen stays. “I’ll do it.”

He sat on the stool in his shirt, closing his eyes in momentary relaxation as I unbraided his hair. He’d worn it clubbed in a tight queue for riding, bound up for the last three days; I ran my hands up into the warm fiery mass as it unraveled from its plait, and the loosened waves of it spilled cinnamon and gold and silver in the firelight as I rubbed the pads of my fingers gently into his scalp.

“Gifts, you said. Does the Crown supply these gifts?” The Crown, I had noticed, had a bad habit of “honoring” men of substance with offices that required them to come up with large amounts of their own money.

“Theoretically.” He yawned hugely, broad shoulders slumping comfortably as I took up my hair brush and set about tidying him. “Oh, that’s nice. That’s why MacDonald thinks it a favor; there’s the possibility of doing well in trade.”

“Besides generally excellent opportunities for corruption. Yes, I see.” I worked for a few minutes before asking, “Will you do it?”

“I dinna ken. I must think a bit. Ye were mentioning Wild West—Brianna’s said such a thing, telling me about cowherds—”

“Cowboys.”

He waved off the correction. “And the Indians. That’s true, is it—what she says about the Indians?”

“If what she says is that they’ll be largely exterminated over the next century or so—yes, she’s right.” I smoothed his hair, then sat down on the bed facing him and set about brushing my own. “Does that trouble you?”

His brows drew together a little as he considered it, and he scratched absently at his chest, where the curly red-gold hairs showed at the open neck of his shirt.

“No,” he said slowly. “Not precisely. It’s not as though I should be doing them to death wi’ my own hands. But … we’re coming to it, are we not? The time when I must tread wi' some care, if I'm to walk betwixt the fires."

"I'm afraid we are," I said, an uneasy tightness hovering between my shoulder blades. I saw what he meant, all too clearly. The battle lines were not clear yet—but they were being drawn. To become an Indian agent for the Crown was to appear to be a Loyalist—all very well for the moment, when the Rebel movement was no more than a radical fringe, with pockets of disaffection. But very, very dangerous, as we grew closer to the point where the disaffected seized power, and independence was declared.

Knowing the eventual outcome, Jamie dare not wait too long to ally himself to the Rebel side—but to do so too early was to risk arrest for treason. Not a good prospect for a man who was already a pardoned traitor.

"Of course," I said diffidently, "if you *were* to be an Indian agent I suppose you might actually persuade some of the Indian tribes into supporting the American side—or staying neutral, at least."

"I might," he agreed, with a certain note of bleakness in his voice. "But putting aside any question as to the honor of such a course—that would help condemn them, no? Would the same thing happen to them in the end, d'ye think, if the English were to win?"

"They won't," I said, with a slight edge.

He glanced sharply at me.

"I do believe ye," he said, with a similar edge. "I've reason to, aye?"

I nodded, my lips pressed together. I didn't want to talk about the earlier Rising. I didn't want to talk about the oncoming Revolution, either, but there was little choice about that.

"I don't know," I said, and took a deep breath. "No one can say—since it didn't happen—but if I were to *guess* … then I think the Indians might quite possibly do better under British rule." I smiled at him, a little ruefully.

"Believe it or not, the British Empire did—or will, I should say—generally manage to run its colonies without *entirely* exterminating the native people in them."

"Bar the Hieland folk," he said, very dryly. "Aye, I'll take your word for it, Sassenach."

He stood up, running a hand back through his hair, and I caught a glimpse of the tiny streak of white that ran through it, legacy of a bullet wound.

"You should talk to Roger about it," I said. "He knows a great deal more than I do."

He nodded, but didn't reply, beyond a faint grimace.

"Where do you suppose Roger and Bree went, speaking of Roger?"

"To the MacGillivrays', I suppose," he replied, surprised. "To fetch wee Jem."

"How do you know that?" I asked, equally surprised.

"When there's mischief abroad, a man wants his family safe under his eye, ken?" He raised one brow at me, and reaching to the top of the wardrobe, took down his sword. He drew it halfway from its scabbard, then put it back and set the scabbard gently back in place, the sword loosened, hilt ready to hand.

He'd brought a loaded pistol upstairs with him; that was placed on the washstand by the window. The rifle and fowling piece too had been left loaded and primed, hanging from their hooks above the hearth downstairs. And, with a small ironic flourish, he drew the dirk from its belt sheath and slid it neatly under our pillow.

"Sometimes I forget," I said a little wistfully, watching this. There had been a dirk under the pillow of our wedding couch—and under many a one since then.

"Do ye?" He smiled at that; a little lopsidedly, but he smiled.

"Don't you? Ever?"

He shook his head, still smiling, though it had a rueful tinge.

"Sometimes I wish I did."

This colloquy was interrupted by a spluttering snort across the hall, followed at once by a thrashing of bedclothes, violent oaths, and a sharp *thump!* as something—likely a shoe—struck the wall.

"Fucking cat!" bellowed Major MacDonald. I sat, hand pressed across my mouth, as the stomp of bare feet vibrated through the floorboards, succeeded briefly by the crash of the Major's door, which flung open, then shut with a bang.

Jamie too had stood frozen for an instant. Now he moved, very delicately, and soundlessly eased our own door open. Adso, tail arrogantly S-shaped, strolled in. Magnificently ignoring us, he crossed the room, leapt lightly onto the washstand, and sat in the basin, where he stuck a back leg into the air and began calmly licking his testicles.

"I saw a man once in Paris who could do that," Jamie remarked, observing this performance with interest.

"Are there people willing to pay to watch such things?" I assumed that no one was likely to engage in a public exhibition of that sort merely for the fun of it. Not in Paris, anyway.

"Well, it wasna the man, so much. More his female companion, who was likewise flexible." He grinned at me, his eyes glinting blue in the candlelight. "Like watching worms mate, aye?"

"How fascinating," I murmured. I glanced at the washstand, where Adso was now doing something even more indelicate. "You're lucky the Major doesn't sleep armed, cat. He might have potted you like a jugged hare."

"Oh, I doubt that. Our Donald likely sleeps with a blade—but he kens well enough which side of his bread's buttered. Ye wouldna be likely to give him breakfast, and he'd skewered your cat."

I glanced toward the door. The mattress-heaving and muttered curses across the hall had died down; the Major, with the practiced ease of a professional soldier, was already well on his way back to dreamland.

"I suppose not. You were right about his worming his way into a position with the new governor. Which is the real reason for his desire for your political advancement, I imagine?"

Jamie nodded, but had plainly lost interest in discussing MacDonald's machinations.

"I *was* right, no? That means ye owe me a forfeit, Sassenach."

He eyed me with an air of dawning speculation, which I hoped had not been too much inspired by his memories of the wormlike Parisians.

“Oh?” I regarded him warily. “And, um, *what* precisely …?”

“Well, I havena quite worked out all the details as yet, but I think ye should maybe lie on the bed, to begin with.”

That sounded like a reasonable start to the matter. I piled up the pillows at the head of the bed—pausing to remove the dirk—then began to climb onto it. I paused again, though, and instead bent to wind the bedkey, tightening the ropes that supported the mattress until the bedstead groaned and the ropes gave a creaking twang.

“Verra canny, Sassenach,” Jamie said behind me, sounding amused.

“Experience,” I informed him, clambering over the newly tautened bed on hands and knees. “I’ve waked up often enough after a night with you, with the mattress folded up round my ears and my arse no more than an inch off the ground.”

“Oh, I expect your arse will end up somewhat higher than that,” he assured me.

“Oh, you’re going to let me be on top?” I had mixed feelings about that. I was desperately tired, and while I enjoyed riding Jamie, all right, I’d been riding a beastly horse for more than ten hours, and the thigh muscles required for both activities were trembling spasmodically.

“Perhaps later,” he said, eyes narrowed in thought. “Lie back, Sassenach, and ruckle up your shift. Then open your legs for me, there’s a good lass no, a bit wider, aye?” He began—with deliberate slowness—to remove his shirt.

I sighed and shifted my buttocks a little, looking for a position that wouldn’t give me cramp if I had to hold it for long.

“If you have in mind what I think you have in mind, you’ll regret it. I haven’t even bathed properly,” I said reproachfully. “I’m desperately filthy and I smell like a horse.”

Naked, he raised one arm and sniffed appraisingly.

“Oh? Well, so do I. That’s no matter; I’m fond of horses.” He’d abandoned any pretense of delay, but paused to survey his arrangements, looking me over with approval.

“Aye, verra good. Now then, if ye’ll just put your hands above your head and seize the bedstead—”

"You wouldn't!" I said, and then lowered my voice, with an involuntary glance toward the door. "Not with MacDonald just across the hall!"

"Oh, I would," he assured me, "and the devil wi' MacDonald and a dozen more like him." He paused, though, studying me thoughtfully, and after a moment, sighed and shook his head.

"No," he said quietly. "Not tonight. Ye're still thinking of that poor Dutch bastard and his family, no?"

"Yes. Aren't you?"

He sat down beside me on the bed with a sigh.

"I've been trying verra hard not to," he said frankly. "But the new dead dinna lie easy in their graves, do they?"

I laid a hand on his arm, relieved that he felt the same. The night air seemed restless with the passage of spirits, and I had felt the dragging melancholy of that desolate garden, that row of graves, all through the events and alarums of the evening.

It *was* a night to be securely locked inside, with a good fire on the hearth, and people nearby. The house stirred, shutters creaking in the wind.

"I do want ye, Claire," Jamie said softly. "I need … if ye will?"

And had they spent the night before their deaths like this, I wondered? Peaceful and snug betwixt their walls, husband and wife whispering together, lying close in their bed, having no notion what the future held. I saw in memory her long white thighs as the wind blew over her, and the glimpse I'd had of the small curly mat between them, the pudenda beneath its nimbus of brown hair pale as carved marble, the seam of it sealed like a virgin's statue.

"I need, too," I said, just as softly. "Come here."

He leaned close, and pulled the drawstring neatly from the neck of my shift, so the worn linen wilted off my shoulders. I made a grab for the fabric, but he caught my hand, and held it down by my side. One-fingered, he brushed the shift lower, then put out the candle, and in a dark that smelled of wax and honey and the sweat of horses, kissed my forehead, eyes, the corners of my cheeks, my lips and chin, and so continued, slow and soft-lipped, to the arches of my feet.

He raised himself then, and suckled my breasts for a long time, and I ran my hand up his back and cupped his buttocks, naked and vulnerable in the dark.

Afterward, we lay in a pleasantly vermiform tangle, the only light in the room a faint glow from the banked hearth. I was so tired that I could feel my body sinking into the mattress, and desired nothing more than to keep going down, down, into the welcoming dark of oblivion.

"Sassenach?"

"Um?"

A moment's hesitation, then his hand found mine, curling round it.

"Ye wouldna do what she did, would ye?"

"Who?"

"Her. The Dutchwoman."

Snatched back from the edge of sleep, I was muzzy and confused, sufficiently so that even the image of the dead woman, shrouded in her apron, seemed unreal, no more disturbing than the random fragments of reality my brain tossed overboard in a vain effort to keep afloat as I sank down into the depths of sleep.

"What? Fall into the fire? I'll try not," I assured him, yawning. "Good night."

"No. Wake up." He shook my arm gently. "Talk to me, Sassenach."

"Ng." It was a considerable effort, but I pushed away the enticing arms of Morpheus, and flounced over onto my side, facing him. "Mm. Talk to you. About …?"

"The Dutchwoman," he repeated patiently. "If I were to be killed, ye wouldna go and kill your whole family, would ye?"

"What?" I rubbed my free hand over my face, trying to make some sense of this, amid the drifting shreds of sleep. "Whose whole—oh. You think she did it on purpose? Poisoned them?"

"I think maybe so."

His words were no more than a whisper, but they brought me back to full consciousness. I lay silent for a moment, then reached out, wanting to be sure he was really there.

He was; a large, solid object, the smooth bone of his hip warm and live under my hand.

“It might as well have been an accident,” I said, voice pitched low. “You can’t know for sure.”

“No,” he admitted. “But I canna keep from seeing it.” He turned restlessly onto his back.

“The men came,” he said softly, to the beams overhead. “He fought them, and they killed him there, on his own threshold. And when she saw her man was gone I think she told the men she must feed the weans first, before … and then she put toadstools into the stew, and fed it to the bairns and her mother. She took the two men with them, but I think it was *that* that was the accident. She only meant to follow him. She wouldna leave him there, alone.”

I wanted to tell him that this was a rather dramatic interpretation of what we had seen. But I couldn’t very well tell him he was wrong. Hearing him describe what he saw in thought, I saw it, too, all too clearly.

“You don’t know,” I said at last, softly. “You can’t know.” *Unless you find the other men,* I thought suddenly, *and ask them.* I didn’t say that, though.

Neither of us spoke for a bit. I could tell that he was still thinking, but the quicksand of sleep was once more pulling me down, clinging and seductive.

“What if I canna keep ye safe?” he whispered at last. His head moved suddenly on the pillow, turning toward me. “You and the rest of them? I shall try wi’ all my strength, Sassenach, and I dinna mind if I die doing it, but what if I should die too soon—and fail?”

And what answer was there to that?

“You won’t,” I whispered back. He sighed, and bent his head, so his forehead rested against mine. I could smell eggs and whisky, warm on his breath.

“I’ll try not,” he said, and I put my mouth on his, soft against mine, acknowledgment and comfort in the dark.

I laid my head against the curve of his shoulder, wrapped a hand round his arm, and breathed in the smell of his skin, smoke and salt, as though he had been cured in the fire.

“You smell like a smoked ham,” I murmured, and he made a low sound of amusement and wedged his hand into its accustomed spot, clasped between my thighs.

I let go then, at last, and let the heavy sands of sleep engulf me. Perhaps he said it, as I fell into darkness, or perhaps I only dreamed it.

“If I die,” he whispered in the dark, “dinna follow me. The bairns will need ye. Stay for them. I can wait.”

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PART TWO

A Gathering of Shadows

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8

VICTIM OF A MASSACRE

From Lord John Grey
To Mr. James Fraser, Esq.

April 14, 1773

My dear friend—

I write you in good Health, and trust that I find you and yours in similar condition.

My Son has returned to England, there to complete his Education. He writes with Delight of his Experiences (I inclose a Copy of his most recent Letter), and assures me of his Well-being. More importantly, my Mother also writes to assure me that he flourishes, though I believe—more from what she does not say than from what she does—that he introduces an unaccustomed Element of Confusion and Upheaval in her Household.

I confess to feeling the Lack of this Element in my own Household. So orderly and well-regulated a Life as mine is these Days, you would be astonished. Still, the Quiet seems oppressive to me, and while I am in Health in terms of Body, I find my Spirit somewhat flagging. I miss William sadly, I fear.

For Distraction from my solitary State, I have of late undertaken a new Employment, that of making Wine. While I admit the Product lacks the Power of your own Distillations, I *flatter myself that it is not undrinkable, and if allowed to stand for a Year or two, might eventually be palatable. I shall send you a dozen Bottles later in the Month, by the Hand of my new Servant, Mr. Higgins, whose History you may find interesting.*

You will perhaps have heard something of a disreputable Brawl occurring in Boston in March of three Years past, which I have often seen in Newspaper and Broadside called a "Massacre," most irresponsibly—and most inaccurately, to one who has been privy to the actual Occurrence.

I was not present myself, but have spoken to numerous of the Officers and Soldiers who were. If they speak truly, and I believe they do, such a View as is given by the Boston Press of the Matter has been monstrous.

Boston is by all Accounts a perfect Hellhole of republican Sentiment, with so-called "Marching Societies" at large in the Streets in every Weather, these being no more than an Excuse for the Assembly of Mobs, whose chief Sport is the tormenting of the Troops quartered there.

Higgins tells me that no Man would dare go out alone in Uniform, for fear of these Mobs, and that even when in greater Numbers, harassment from the public soon drove them back to their Quarters, save when compelled by Duty to persist.

A Patrol of five Soldiers was so beset one Evening, pursued not only by insults of the grossest Nature, but by hurled Stones, Clods of Earth and Dung, and other such Rubbish. Such was the Press of the Mob around them that the Men feared for their Safety, and thus presented their Weapons, in hopes of discouraging the raucous Attentions rained upon them. So far from accomplishing this Aim, the Action provoked still greater Outrages from the Crowd, and at some Point, a Gun was fired. No one can say for sure whether the Shot was discharged from the Crowd, or from one of the Soldier's Weapons, let alone whether it were by Accident or in Deliberation, but the Effect of it … well, you will have sufficient Knowledge of such Matters to imagine the Confusion of subsequent Events.

In the End, five of the Mob were killed, and while the Soldiers were buffeted and badly handled, they escaped alive, only to be made Scapegoats by the malicious Rantings of the mob's Leaders in the Press, these so styled as to make it seem a wanton and unprovoked Slaughter of Innocents, rather than a Matter of Self-defense against a Mob inflamed by Drink and Sloganeering.

I confess that my Sympathies must lie altogether with the Soldiers; I am sure so much is obvious to you. They were brought to Trial, where the Judge discovered Three to be Innocent, but no Doubt felt it would be Dangerous to his own Situation to free them all.

Higgins, with one other, was convicted of Manslaughter, but pled Clergy and was released after his Branding. The Army of course discharged him, and without means of making a Living and subject to the Opprobrium of the Populace, he found himself in sad Case. He tells me that he was beaten in a Tavern soon after his Release, injuries inflicted therein depriving him of the Sight in one Eye, and in fact, his very Life was threatened on more than one Occasion. So seeking Safety, he took Passage on a Sloop captained by my Friend, Captain Gill, working as a Sailor, though I have seen him sail and I assure you he is not one.

This state of Affairs became soon evident to Captain Gill, who terminated his Employment upon arrival at their first Port. I was in the Town on Business, and encountered Captain Gill, who told me of Higgins's desperate Situation.

I contrived to find the Man, feeling some Pity for a Soldier who appeared to me to have performed his Duty honorably, and thinking it hard that he should suffer by it. Discovering him to be intelligent and of a generally agreeable Character, I engaged him in Service, wherein he has proved most faithful.

I send him with the Wine, in Hopes that your Wife might be so kind as to examine him. The local Physician, one Dr. Potts, has seen him, and declares the Injury to his Eye irretrievable, as indeed it may be. Having some personal Experience of your Wife's skill, however, I wonder whether she might suggest Treatment for his other Ills; Dr. Potts was unable to be of much

Help. Tell her, please, that I am her humble Servant, and remain in perpetual Gratitude for her Kindness and Ability.

My warmest Regards to your Daughter, for whom I have sent a small Present, to arrive with the Wine. I trust her Husband will not take Offense at my Familiarity, by Consideration of my long Acquaintance with your Family, and will allow her to accept it.

As always, I remain your Ob't.
Servant,
John Grey

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9

THE THRESHOLD OF WAR

April 1773

Robert Higgins was a slight young man, so thin as to seem that his bones were barely held together by his clothes, and so pale that it was easy to imagine you could in fact see through him. He was, however, graced with large, candid blue eyes, a mass of wavy, light-brown hair, and a shy manner that caused Mrs. Bug to take him at once under her wing and declare a firm intent to "feed him up," before he should depart back to Virginia.

I quite liked Mr. Higgins myself; he was a sweet-natured boy, with the soft accent of his native Dorset. I did rather wonder, though, whether Lord John Grey's generosity toward him was as unselfish as it seemed.

I had come reluctantly to like John Grey, too, after our shared experience of the measles a few years earlier, and his friendship to Brianna while Roger was held captive by the Iroquois. Still, I remained acutely aware of the fact that Lord John did like men—specifically, Jamie, but certainly other men, as well.

"Beauchamp," I said to myself, laying out trillium roots to dry, "you have a very suspicious mind."

"Aye, ye have," said a voice behind me, sounding amused. "Whom do ye suspect of doing what?"

I jerked in startlement and sent trilliums flying in all directions.

"Oh, it's you," I said crossly. "Why must you sneak up on me like that?"

"Practice," Jamie said, kissing me on the forehead. "I shouldna like to lose my touch at stalking game. Why d'ye talk to yourself?"

"It assures me of a good listener," I said tartly, and he laughed, bending to help me pick up the roots from the floor.

"Who are ye suspecting, Sassenach?"

I hesitated, but was unable to come up with anything but the truth.

"I was wondering whether John Grey's buggering our Mr. Higgins," I said baldly. "Or intends to."

He blinked slightly, but didn't look shocked—which in itself suggested to me that he'd considered the same possibility.

"What makes ye think so?"

"He's a very pretty young man, for the one thing," I said, taking a handful of the roots from him and beginning to spread them out on a sheet of gauze. "And he's got the worst case of piles I've ever seen in a man of his age, for another."

"He let ye *look* at them?" Jamie had flushed up himself at the mention of buggery; he disliked me being indelicate, but he'd asked, after all.

"Well, it took no little persuasion," I said. "He told me about them readily enough, but he wasn't keen to have me examine them."

"I wouldna care for that prospect, either," Jamie assured me, "and I'm wed to ye. Why on earth would ye want to look at such a thing, beyond morbid curiosity?" He cast a wary glance at my big black casebook, open on the table. "Ye're no drawing pictures of poor Bobby Higgins's backside in there, are ye?"

"No need. I can't imagine a physician in any time who doesn't know what piles look like. The ancient Israelites and Egyptians had them, after all."

"They did?"

"It's in the Bible. Ask Mr. Christie," I advised.

He gave me a sidelong look.

"Ye've been discussing the Bible wi' Tom Christie? Ye're a braver man than I am, Sassenach." Christie was a most devout Presbyterian, and never happier than when hitting someone over the head with a fistful of Sacred Scripture.

"Not me. Germain asked me last week what 'emerods' are."

"What are they?"

"Piles. *Then said they, What shall be the trespass offering which we shall return to him? They answered, Five golden emerods, and five golden mice, according to the number of the lords of the Philistines,*" I quoted, "or something of the sort. That's as close as I can come from memory. Mr. Christie made Germain write out a verse from the Bible as punishment, and having an inquiring sort of mind, Germain wondered what it was he was writing."

"And he wouldna ask Mr. Christie, of course." Jamie frowned, rubbing a finger down the bridge of his nose. "Do I want to know what it was Germain did?"

"Almost certainly not." Tom Christie earned the quitrent on his land by serving as the local schoolmaster, and seemed capable of keeping discipline on his own terms. My opinion was that having Germain Fraser as a pupil was probably worth the entire amount, in terms of labor.

"Gold emerods," Jamie murmured. "Well, there's a thought." He had assumed the faintly dreamy air he often had just before coming up with some hair-raising notion involving the possibility of maiming, death, or life imprisonment. I found this expression mildly alarming, but whatever the train of thought triggered by golden hemorrhoids, he abandoned it for the moment, shaking his head.

"Well, so. We were speaking of Bobby's backside?"

"Oh, yes. As for why I wanted to look at Mr. Higgins's emerods," I said, returning to the previous point of conversation, "I wanted to see whether the best treatment was amelioration, or removal."

Jamie's eyebrows went up at that.

"Remove them? How? Wi' your wee knife?" He glanced at the case where I kept my surgical tools, and hunched his shoulders in aversion.

"I could, yes, though I imagine it would be rather painful without anesthesia. There was a much simpler method just coming into widespread use, though, when I … left." Just for a moment, I felt a deep twinge of longing for my hospital. I could all but smell the disinfectant, hear the murmur and bustle of nurses and orderlies, touch the glossy covers of the research journals bulging with ideas and information.

Then it was gone, and I was estimating the desirability of leeches versus string, with reference to Mr. Higgins's achieving ideal anal health.

"Dr. Rawlings advises the use of leeches," I explained. "Twenty or thirty, he says, for a serious case."

Jamie nodded, showing no particular revulsion at the idea. Of course, he'd been leeched a few times himself, and assured me that it didn't hurt.

"Aye. Ye havena got that many on hand, do ye? Shall I collect the wee lads and set them to gathering?"

Jemmy and Germain would like nothing better than an excuse to go bogging through the creeks with their grandfather, coming back festooned with leeches and mud to the eyebrows, but I shook my head.

"No. Or I mean, yes," I corrected. "At your convenience—but I don't need them immediately. Using leeches would relieve the situation temporarily, but Bobby's hemorrhoids are badly thrombosed—have clots of dried blood in them—" I emended, "and I think he really would be better off if I remove them entirely. I believe I can ligate them—tie a thread very tightly round the base of each hemorrhoid, I mean. That starves them of blood, and eventually, they just dry up and fall off. Very neat."

"Verra neat," Jamie murmured, in echo. He looked mildly apprehensive. "Have ye done it before?"

"Yes, once or twice."

"Ah." He pursed his lips, apparently envisioning the process. "How … er, I mean … can he shit, d'ye think, while this is going on? It must take a bit of time, surely."

I frowned, tapping a finger on the countertop.

"His chief difficulty is that he *doesn't* shit," I said. "Not often enough, I mean, and not with the proper consistency. Horrible diet," I said, pointing an accusatory finger at him. "He told me. Bread, meat, and ale. No vegetables, no fruit. Constipation is absolutely *rife* in the British army, I don't doubt. I shouldn't be surprised if every man jack of them has piles hanging out of his arse like grape clusters!"

Jamie nodded, one eyebrow raised.

"There are a great many things I admire about ye, Sassenach—especially the delicate manner of your conversation." He coughed, glancing downward. "But if ye say it's costiveness that causes piles —"

"It is."

"Aye, well. It's only—what ye were saying about John Grey. I mean, ye don't think the state of Bobby's arse is to do with … mmphm."

"Oh. Well, no, not directly." I paused. "It was more that Lord John said in his letter that he wanted me to—how did he put it?—*I might suggest treatment for his other ills.* I mean, he might possibly know about Bobby's difficulty, without … er … personal inspection, shall we say? But as *I* say, piles are so commonplace an affliction, why ought he be concerned to the point of asking me to do something about them—unless he thought that they might hamper his own eventual … er … progress?"

Jamie's face had resumed its normal hue during the discussion of leeches and constipation, but at this point, went red again.

"His—"

"I mean," I said, folding my arms beneath my bosom, "I'm just a trifle put off … by the notion that he's sent Mr. Higgins down for repair, you might say." I had been suffering from a niggling feeling of unease regarding the matter of Bobby Higgins's backside, but hadn't put this notion into words before. Now that I had, I realized precisely what was bothering me.

"The thought that I'm meant to be fixing up poor little Bobby, and then sending him home to be—" I pressed my lips tight together, and turned abruptly back to my roots, needlessly turning them.

“I don’t like the thought,” I said, to the cupboard door. “I’ll do what I can for Mr. Higgins, mind. Bobby Higgins hasn’t many prospects; no doubt he’d do … whatever his Lordship required. But perhaps I’m wronging him. Lord John, I mean.”

“Perhaps ye are.”

I turned round, to find Jamie sitting on my stool, fiddling with a jar of goose grease that seemed to have his full attention.

“Well,” I said uncertainly. “You know him better than I do. If you think he isn’t …” My words trailed off. Outside, there was a sudden soft thump as a falling spruce cone struck the wooden stoop.

“I ken more about John Grey than I wish I did,” Jamie said finally, and glanced at me, a rueful smile in the corner of his mouth. “And he kens a great deal more about me than I like to think on. But”—he leaned forward, setting down the jar, then put his hands on his knees and looked at me—“I ken the one thing beyond doubt. He’s an honorable man. He wouldna take advantage of Higgins, nor any other man under his protection.”

He sounded very definite about it, and I felt reassured. I did like John Grey. And still … the appearance of his letters, regular as clockwork, always gave me a faint sense of unease, like the hearing of distant thunder. There was nothing about the letters themselves to evoke such a response; they were like the man himself—erudite, humorous, and sincere. And he had reason to write, of course. More than one.

“He does still love you, you know,” I said quietly.

He nodded, but didn’t look at me, his gaze still fixed somewhere beyond the trees that edged the dooryard.

“Would you rather he didn’t?”

He paused, then nodded again. This time, though, he did turn to look at me.

“I would, aye. For myself. For him, certainly. But for William?” He shook his head, uncertain.

“Oh, he may have taken William on for your sake,” I said, leaning back against the counter. “But I’ve seen the two of them, remember. I’ve no doubt he loves Willie for his own sake now.”

“No, I dinna doubt that, either.” He got up, restless, and beat imaginary dust from the pleats of his kilt. His face was closed, looking inward at something he didn’t wish to share with me.

“Do you—” I began, but stopped when he glanced up at me. “No. It doesn’t matter.”

“What?” He tilted his head to one side, eyes narrowing.

“Nothing.”

He didn’t move, merely intensified the stare.

“I can see from your face that it’s not, Sassenach. What?”

I breathed deeply through my nose, fists wrapped in my apron.

“It’s only—and I’m sure it isn’t true, it’s only a passing thought—”

He made a low Scottish noise, indicating that I had better stop blethering and cough it up. Having enough experience to realize that he wouldn’t leave the matter ’til I did, I coughed.

“Did you ever wonder whether Lord John might have taken him because … well, William does look terribly like you, and evidently did from an early age. Since Lord John finds you physically … attractive …” The words died, and I could have cut my throat for speaking them, seeing the look on his face.

He closed his eyes for a moment, to stop me looking in. His fists were curled up so tightly that the veins stood out from knuckle to forearm. Very slowly, he relaxed his hands. He opened his eyes.

“No,” he said, complete conviction in his voice. He gave me a straight, hard look. “And it’s no that I canna bear the thought of it, either. I know.”

“Of course,” I said hastily, eager to leave the subject.

“I know,” he repeated more sharply. His two stiff fingers tapped, once, against his leg, and then stilled. “I thought of it, too. When he first told me he meant to wed Isobel Dunsany.”

He turned away, staring out through the window. Adso was in the dooryard, stalking something in the grass.

“I offered him my body,” Jamie said abruptly, not looking round. The words were steady enough, but I could see from the knotted shoulders how much it cost him to speak them. “In thanks, I said.

But it was—” He made an odd convulsive movement, as though trying to free himself from some constraint. “I meant to see, ken, what sort of man he might be, for sure. This man who would take my son for his own.”

His voice shook, very slightly, when he said, “take my son,” and I moved to him by instinct, wanting somehow to patch the open wound beneath those words.

He was stiff when I touched him, not wanting to be embraced—but he took my hand and squeezed it.

“Could you … really tell, do you think?” I was not shocked; John Grey had told me of that offer, years before, in Jamaica. I didn’t think he had realized the true nature of it, though.

Jamie’s hand tightened on mine, and his thumb traced the outline of mine, rubbing lightly over the nail. He looked down at me, and I felt his eyes search my face—not in question, but in the way one does when seeing anew some object grown familiar—seeing with the eyes what has been seen for a long time only with the heart.

His free hand rose and traced the line of my brows, two fingers resting for an instant on the bone of my cheek, then moved up, back, cool in the warmth of my hair.

“Ye canna be so close to another,” he said finally. “To be within each other, to smell their sweat, and rub the hairs of your body with theirs and see nothing of their soul. Or if ye *can* do that …” He hesitated, and I wondered whether he thought of Black Jack Randall, or of Laoghaire, the woman he had married, thinking me dead. “Well … that is a dreadful thing in itself,” he finished softly, and his hand dropped away.

There was silence between us. A sudden rustle came from the grass outside as Adso lunged and disappeared, and a mockingbird began to shriek alarm from the big red spruce. In the kitchen, something was dropped with a clang, and then the rhythmic *shoosh* of sweeping began. All the homely sounds of this life we had made.

Had I ever done that? Lain with a man, and seen nothing of his soul? Indeed I had, and he was right. A breath of coldness touched me, and the hairs rose, silent on my skin.

He heaved a sigh that seemed to come from his feet, and rubbed a hand over his bound hair.

"But he wouldna do it. John." He looked up then, and gave me a crooked smile. "He loved me, he said. And if I couldna give him that in return—and he kent I couldn't—then he'd not take counterfeit for true coin."

He shook himself, hard, like a dog coming out of the water.

"No. A man who would say such a thing is not one who'd bugger a child for the sake of his father's bonny blue eyes, I'll tell ye that for certain, Sassenach."

"No," I said. "Tell me …" I hesitated, and he looked at me, one eyebrow up. "If—if he *had* … er … taken you up on that offer—and you'd found him …" I fumbled for some reasonable wording. "Less, um, decent than you might hope—"

"I should have broken his neck there by the lake," he said. "It wouldna have mattered if they'd hanged me; I'd not have let him have the boy.

"But he didn't, and I did," he added with a half-shrug. "And if wee Bobby goes to his Lordship's bed, I think it will be of his own free will."

* * *

No man is really at his best with someone else's hand up his arse. I had noticed this before, and Robert Higgins was no exception to the general rule.

"Now, this won't hurt much at all," I said as soothingly as possible. "All you need to do is to keep quite still."

"Oh, I s'all do that, mum, indeed I will," he assured me fervently.

I had him on the surgery table, wearing only his shirt, and situated foursquare on hands and knees, which brought the area of operation conveniently to eye level. The forceps and ligatures I should need were placed on the small table to my right, with a bowl of fresh leeches alongside, in case of need.

He emitted a small shriek when I applied a wet cloth soaked in turpentine to the area, in order to cleanse it thoroughly, but was as good as his word and didn’t move.

“Now, we are going to obtain a very good effect here,” I assured him, taking up a pair of long-nosed forceps. “But if the relief is to be permanent, there will have to be a drastic change in your diet. Do you understand me?”

He gasped deeply, as I grasped one of the hemorrhoids and pulled it toward me. There were three, a classic presentation, at nine, two, and five o’clock. Bulbous as raspberries, and quite the same color.

“Oh! Y-yes, mum.”

“Oatmeal,” I said firmly, transferring the forceps to my other hand without lessening the grip, and taking up a needle threaded with silk thread in my right. “Porridge every morning, without fail. Have you noticed a change for the better in your bowel habits, since Mrs. Bug has been feeding you parritch for breakfast?”

I passed the thread loosely round the base of the hemorrhoid, then delicately pushed the needle up beneath the loop, making a small noose of it, and pulled tight.

“Ahhh … oh! Erm … tell ’ee truth, mum, it’s like shitting house bricks covered with hedgehog skin, makes no matter what I eat.”

“Well, it will,” I assured him, securing the ligature with a knot. I released the hemorrhoid, and he breathed deeply. “Now, grapes. You like grapes, don’t you?”

“No’m. Sets me teeth on edge to bite ’em.”

“Really?” His teeth didn’t look badly decayed; I should have a closer look at his mouth; he might be suffering from marginal scurvy. “Well, we’ll have Mrs. Bug make a nice raisin pie for you; you can eat that with no difficulty. Does Lord John have a capable cook?” I took aim with my forceps and got hold of the next one. Now accustomed to the sensation, he only grunted a bit.

“Yessum. Be an Indian, he is, named Manoke.”

“Hmm.” Round, up, tighten, tie off. “I’ll write out a receipt for the raisin pie, for you to carry back to him. Does he cook yams, or beans? Beans are quite good for the purpose.”

“I b’lieve he does, mum, but his Lordship—”

I had the windows open for ventilation—Bobby was no filthier than the average, but he was certainly no cleaner—and at this point, I heard sounds from the trailhead; voices, and the jingle of harness.

Bobby heard them, too, and glanced wildly at the window, hindquarters tensing as though to spring off the table like a grasshopper. I grasped him by one leg, but then thought better of it. There was no way of covering the window, bar closing the shutters, and I needed the light.

"Go ahead and stand up," I told him, letting go and reaching for a towel. "I'll go and see who it is." He followed this direction with alacrity, scrambling down and reaching hastily for his breeches.

I stepped out onto the porch, in time to greet the two men who led their mules up over the last arduous slope and into the yard. Richard Brown, and his brother Lionel, from the eponymously named Brownsville.

I was surprised to see them; it was a good three-day ride to Brownsville from the Ridge, and there was little commerce between the two settlements. It was at least that far to Salem, in the opposite direction, but the inhabitants of the Ridge went there much more frequently; the Moravians were both industrious and great traders, taking honey, oil, salt fish, and hides in trade for cheese, pottery, chickens, and other small livestock. So far as I knew, the denizens of Brownsville dealt only in cheap trade goods for the Cherokee, and in the production of a very inferior type of beer, not worth the ride.

"Good day, mistress." Richard, the smaller and elder of the brothers, touched the brim of his hat, but didn't take it off. "Is your husband to home?"

"He's out by the hay barn, scraping hides." I wiped my hands carefully on the towel I was carrying. "Do come round to the kitchen; I'll bring up some cider."

"Don't trouble." Without further ado, he turned and set off purposefully round the house. Lionel Brown, a bit taller than his brother, though with the same spare, almost gangly build and the same tobacco-colored hair, nodded briefly to me as he followed.

They had left their mules, reins hanging, evidently for me to tend. The animals were beginning to amble slowly across the yard, pausing to crop the long grass that edged the path.

"Hmpf!" I said, glaring after the brothers Brown.

"Who are they?" said a low voice behind me. Bobby Higgins had come out and was peering off the corner of the porch with his good eye. Bobby tended to be wary of strangers—and no wonder, given his experiences in Boston.

"Neighbors, such as they are." I lunged off the porch and caught one of the mules by the bridle as he reached for the peach sapling I had planted near the porch. Disliking this interference in his affairs, he brayed ear-splittingly in my face, and attempted to bite me.

"Here, mum, let me." Bobby, already holding the other mule's reins, leaned past to take the halter from me. "Hark at 'ee!" he said to the obstreperous mule. "Hush tha noise, else I take a stick to 'ee, then!"

Bobby had been a foot soldier rather than cavalry, it was clear to see. The words were bold enough, but ill-matched with his tentative manner. He gave a perfunctory yank on the mule's reins. The mule promptly laid back its ears and bit him in the arm.

He screamed and let go both sets of reins. Clarence, my own mule, hearing the racket, set up a loud bray of greeting from his pen, and the two strange mules promptly trotted off in that direction, stirrup leathers bouncing.

Bobby wasn't badly hurt, though the mule's teeth had broken the skin; spots of blood seeped through the sleeve of his shirt. As I was turning back the cloth to have a look at it, I heard footsteps on the porch, and looked up to see Lizzie, a large wooden spoon in hand, looking alarmed.

"Bobby! What's happened?"

He straightened at once, seeing her, assuming nonchalance, and brushed a lock of curly brown hair off his brow.

"Ah, oh! Naught, miss. Bit o' trouble with tha sons o' Belial, like. No fear, it's fine."

Whereupon his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell over in a dead faint.

"Oh!" Lizzie flew down the steps and knelt beside him, urgently patting his cheek. "Is he all right, Mrs. Fraser?"

"God knows," I said frankly. "I think so, though." Bobby appeared to be breathing normally, and I found a reasonable pulse in his wrist.

"Shall we carry him inside? Or should I fetch a burnt feather, do you think? Or the spirits of ammonia from the surgery? Or some brandy?" Lizzie hovered like an anxious bumblebee, ready to fly off in any of several different directions.

"No, I think he's coming round." Most faints last only a few seconds, and I could see his chest lift as his breathing deepened.

"Bit o' brandy wouldn't come amiss," he murmured, eyelids beginning to flutter.

I nodded to Lizzie, who vanished back into the house, leaving her spoon behind on the grass.

"Feeling a bit peaky, are you?" I inquired sympathetically. The injury to his arm was no more than a scratch, and I certainly hadn't done anything of a shocking nature to him—well, not physically shocking. What was the trouble here?

"I dunno, mum." He was trying to sit up, and while he was white as a sheet, seemed otherwise all right, so I let him. "It's only, every now and again, I gets these spots, like, whirring round me head like a swarm o' bees, and then it all goes black."

"Now and again? It's happened before?" I asked sharply.

"Yessum." His head wobbled like a sunflower in the breeze, and I put a hand under his armpit, lest he fall over again. "His Lordship was in hopes you might know summat would stop it."

"His Lord—oh, he knew about the fainting?" Well, of course he would, if Bobby were in the habit of falling over in front of him.

He nodded, and took a deep, gasping breath.

"Doctor Potts bled me regular, twice a week, but it didn't seem to help."

"I daresay not. I hope he was of somewhat more help with your piles," I remarked dryly.

A faint tinge of pink—he had scarcely enough blood to provide a decent blush, poor boy—rose in his cheeks, and he glanced away, fixing his gaze on the spoon.

"Erm … I, um, didn't mention *that* to anybody."

“You didn’t?” I was surprised at that. “But—”

“See, ’twas only the riding. From Virginia.” The pink tinge grew. “I’d not have let on, save I was in such agony after a week on yon bloody horse—saving your presence, mum—I’d no chance of hiding it.”

“So Lord John didn’t know about that, either?”

He shook his head vigorously, making the disheveled brown curls flop back over his forehead. I felt rather annoyed—with myself for having evidently misjudged John Grey’s motives, and with John Grey, for making me feel a fool.

“Well … are you feeling a bit better, now?” Lizzie was not appearing with the brandy, and I wondered momentarily where she was. Bobby was still very pale, but nodded gamely, and struggled to his feet, where he stood swaying and blinking, trying to keep his balance. The “M” branded on his cheek stood out, an angry red against the pallid skin.

Distracted by Bobby’s faint, I had ignored the sounds coming from the other side of the house. Now, though, I became aware of voices, and approaching footsteps.

Jamie and the two Browns came into sight round the corner of the house, then stopped, seeing us. Jamie had been frowning slightly; the frown grew deeper. The Browns, by contrast, seemed oddly elated, though in a grim sort of way.

“So it’s true, then.” Richard Brown stared hard at Bobby Higgins, then turned to Jamie. “You’ve a murderer on your premises!”

“Have I?” Jamie was coldly polite. “I’d no idea.” He bowed to Bobby Higgins with his best French-court manner, then straightened, gesturing to the Browns. “Mr. Higgins, may I present Mr. Richard Brown and Mr. Lionel Brown. Gentlemen, my guest, Mr. Higgins.” The words “my guest” were spoken with a particular emphasis that made Richard Brown’s thin mouth compress to near invisibility.

“Have a care, Fraser,” he said, staring hard at Bobby, as though daring him to evaporate. “Keeping the wrong company can be dangerous, these days.”

“I choose my company as I will, sir.” Jamie spoke softly, biting off each word between his teeth. “And I do not choose yours. Joseph!”

Lizzie’s father, Joseph Wemyss, appeared round the corner, leading the two renegade mules, who now seemed docile as kittens, though either of them dwarfed Mr. Wemyss.

Bobby Higgins, flabbergasted by the proceedings, looked wildly at me for explanation. I shrugged slightly, and kept silence as the two Browns mounted and rode out of the clearing, backs stiff with anger.

Jamie waited ’til they’d disappeared from view, then blew out his breath, rubbing a hand viciously through his hair and muttering something in Gaelic. I didn’t follow the finer points, but I gathered that he was comparing the character of our recent visitors to that of Mr. Higgins’s piles—to the detriment of the former.

“Beg pardon, sir?” Higgins looked bewildered, but anxious to please.

Jamie glanced at him.

“Let them awa’ and bile their heids,” he said, dismissing the Browns with a flip of the hand. He caught my eye and turned toward the house. “Come ben, Bobby; I’ve a thing or two to say to ye.”

* * *

I followed them in, both from curiosity and in case Mr. Higgins should feel faint again; he seemed steady enough, but still very pale. By contrast with Bobby Higgins, Mr. Wemyss—fair-haired and slight as his daughter—looked the picture of ruddy health. Whatever was the matter with Bobby? I wondered. I stole a discreet look at the seat of his breeches as I followed him, but that was all right; no bleeding.

Jamie led the way into his study, gesturing at the motley collection of stools and boxes he used for visitors, but both Bobby and Mr. Wemyss chose to stand—Bobby for obvious reasons, Mr. Wemyss from respect; he was never comfortable sitting in Jamie’s presence, save at meals.

Unhampered by either bodily or social reservations, I settled myself on the best stool and raised one eyebrow at Jamie, who had sat down himself at the table he used as a desk.

"This is the way of it," he said without preamble. "Brown and his brother have declared themselves head of a Committee of Safety, and came to enlist me and my tenants as members of it." He glanced at me, the corner of his mouth curling a little. "I declined, as ye doubtless noticed."

My stomach contracted slightly, thinking of what Major MacDonald had said—and of what I knew. It was beginning, then.

"Committee of Safety?" Mr. Wemyss looked bewildered, and glanced at Bobby Higgins—who was beginning to look substantially less so.

"Have they, so?" Bobby said softly. Strands of curly brown hair had escaped from their binding; he fingered one back behind his ear.

"Ye've heard of such committees before, Mr. Higgins?" Jamie inquired, raising one brow.

"Met one, zur. Close-like." Bobby touched a finger briefly below his blind eye. He was still pale, but beginning to recover his self-possession. "Mobs they be, zur. Like they mules, but more of them—and more wicious." He gave a lopsided smile, smoothing the shirt-sleeve over the bite on his arm.

The mention of mules reminded me abruptly, and I stood up, putting a sudden stop to the conversation.

"Lizzie! Where's Lizzie?"

Not waiting for an answer to this rhetorical question, I went to the study door and shouted her name—only to be met by silence. She'd gone in for brandy; there was plenty, in a jug in the kitchen, and she knew that—I'd seen her reach it down for Mrs. Bug only the night before. She must be in the house. Surely she wouldn't have gone—

"Elizabeth? Elizabeth, where are you?" Mr. Wemyss was right behind me, calling, as I strode down the hall to the kitchen.

Lizzie was lying in a dead faint on the hearth, a limp bundle of clothes, one frail hand flung out as though she had tried to save herself as she fell.

"Miss Wemyss!" Bobby Higgins shouldered his way past me, looking frantic, and scooped her up into his arms.

"Elizabeth!" Mr. Wemyss elbowed his way past me as well, his face nearly as white as his daughter's.

"Do let me *look* at her, will you?" I said, elbowing firmly back. "Put her down on the settle, Bobby, do."

He rose carefully with her in his arms, then sat down on the settle, still holding her, wincing slightly as he did so. Well, if he wanted to be a hero, I hadn't time to argue with him. I knelt and seized her wrist in search of a pulse, smoothing the pale hair off her face with my other hand.

One look had been enough to tell me what was likely the matter. She was clammy to the touch, and the pallor of her face was tinged with gray. I could feel the tremor of oncoming chills that ran through her flesh, unconscious as she was.

"The ague's back, is it?" Jamie asked. He'd appeared by my side, and was gripping Mr. Wemyss by the shoulder, at once comforting and restraining.

"Yes," I said briefly. Lizzie had malaria, contracted on the coast a few years before, and was subject to occasional relapses—though she hadn't had one in more than a year.

Mr. Wemyss took a deep, audible breath, a little color coming back to his face. He was familiar with malaria, and had confidence that I could deal with it. I had, several times before.

I hoped that I could this time. Lizzie's pulse was fast and light under my fingers, but regular, and she was beginning to stir. Still, the speed and suddenness with which the attack had come on was frightening. Had she had any warning? I hoped the concern I felt didn't show on my face.

"Take her up to her bed, cover her, get a hot stone for her feet," I said, rising and addressing Bobby and Mr. Wemyss briskly in turn. "I'll start some medicine brewing."

Jamie followed me down to the surgery, glancing back over his shoulder to be sure that the others were out of earshot before speaking.

“I thought ye were out of the Jesuit bark?” he asked, low-voiced.

“I am. Damn it.” Malaria was a chronic disease, but for the most part, I had been able to keep it under control with small, regular doses of cinchona bark. But I had run out of cinchona during the winter, and no one had yet been able to travel down to the coast for more.

“So, then?”

“I’m thinking.”

I pulled open the door of the cupboard, and gazed at the neat ranks of glass bottles therein—many of them empty, or with no more than a few scattered crumbs of leaf or root inside. Everything was depleted, after a cold, wet winter of grippe, influenza, chilblains, and hunting accidents.

Febrifuges. I had a number of things that would help a normal fever; malaria was something else. There was plenty of dogwood root and bark, at least; I had collected immense quantities during the fall, foreseeing the need. I took that down, and after a moment’s thought, added the jar containing a sort of gentian known locally as “agueweed.”

“Put on the kettle, will you?” I asked Jamie, frowning to myself as I crumbled roots, bark, and weed into my mortar. All I could do was to treat the superficial symptoms of fever and chill. And shock, I thought, better treat for that, too.

“And bring me a little honey, too, please!” I called after him, as he had already reached the door. He nodded and went hurriedly toward the kitchen, his footsteps quick and solid on the oak floorboards.

I began to pound the mixture, still turning over additional possibilities. Some small part of my mind was half-glad of the emergency; I could put off for a little while the necessity of hearing about the Browns and their beastly committee.

I had a most uneasy feeling. Whatever they wanted, it didn’t portend anything good, I was sure; they certainly hadn’t left on friendly terms. As for what Jamie might feel obliged to do in response to them—

Horse chestnut. That was sometimes used for the tertian ague, as Dr. Rawlings called it. Did I have any left? Glancing quickly over the jars and bottles in the medicine chest, I stopped, seeing one with an inch or so of dried black globules left at the bottom. *Gallberries,* the label read. Not mine; it was one of Rawlings's jars. I'd never used them for anything. But something niggled at my memory. I'd heard or read something about gallberries; what was it?

Half-unconsciously, I picked up the jar and opened it, sniffing. A sharp, astringent smell rose from the berries, slightly bitter. And slightly familiar.

Still holding the jar, I went to the table where my big black casebook lay, and flipped hastily to the early pages, those notes left by the man who had first owned both book and medicine chest, Daniel Rawlings. Where had it been?

I was still flipping pages, scanning for the shape of a half-remembered note, when Jamie came back, a jug of hot water and a dish of honey in hand—and the Beardsley twins dogging his steps.

I glanced at them, but said nothing; they tended to pop up unexpectedly, like a pair of jack-in-the boxes.

"Is Miss Lizzie fearfully sick?" Jo asked anxiously, peering around Jamie to see what I was doing.

"Yes," I said briefly, only half paying attention to him. "Don't worry, though; I'm fixing her some medicine."

There it was. A brief notation, added as an obvious afterthought to the account of treatment of a patient whose symptoms seemed clearly malarial—and who had, I noticed with an unpleasant twinge, died.

I am told by the Trader from whom I procured Jesuit Bark that the Indians use a Plant called Gallberry, which rivals the Bark of Cinchona for bitterness and is thought capital for Use in tertian and quartan Fevers. I have collected some for Experiment and propose to try an Infusion so soon as the Opportunity presents itself.

I picked out one of the dried berries and bit into it. The pungent taste of quinine at once flooded my mouth—accompanied by a copious flood of saliva, as my mouth puckered at the eye-watering bitterness. Gallberry, indeed!

I dived for the open window, spat into the herb bed beneath and went on spitting, to the accompaniment of giggles and snorts from the Beardsleys, who were most diverted at the unexpected entertainment.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?" Amusement was fighting with worry for dominance of Jamie's face. He poured a bit of water from the jug into a clay beaker, added a dollop of honey as an afterthought, and handed it to me.

"Fine," I croaked. "Don't drop that!" Kezzie Beardsley had picked up the jar of gallberries and was sniffing cautiously at it. He nodded at my admonition, but didn't put the jar down, instead handing it off to his brother.

I took a good mouthful of hot, honeyed water, and swallowed. "Those—they have something like quinine in them."

Jamie's face changed at once, the worry lessening.

"So they'll help the lass?"

"I hope so. There aren't many, though."

"D'ye mean you need more o' these things for Miss Lizzie, Mrs. Fraser?" Jo glanced up at me, dark eyes sharp over the little jar.

"Yes," I said, surprised. "You don't mean you know where to get any, surely?"

"Aye, ma'am," Kezzie said, his voice a little loud, as usual. "Indians got 'em."

"Which Indians?" Jamie asked, his gaze sharpening.

"Them Cherokee," Jo said, waving vaguely over one shoulder. "By the mountain."

This description might have suited half a dozen villages, but evidently it was a specific village that they had in mind, for the two of them turned as one, obviously intending to go directly and fetch back gallberries.

"Wait a bit, lads," Jamie said, snagging Kezzie by the collar. "I'll go along with ye. Ye'll be needing something to trade, after all."

"Oh, we got hides a-plenty, sir," Jo assured him. " 'Twas a good season."

Jo was an expert hunter, and while Kezzie still hadn't sufficiently keen hearing to hunt well, his brother had taught him to run traplines. Ian had told me that the Beardsleys' shack was stacked nearly to the rooftree with the hides of beaver, marten, deer, and ermine. The smell of it always clung to them, a faint miasma of dried blood, musk, and cold hair.

"Aye? Well, that's generous of ye, Jo, to be sure. But I'll come, nonetheless." Jamie glanced at me, acknowledging the fact that he had made his decision—but asking for my approval, nonetheless. I swallowed, tasting bitterness.

"Yes," I said, and cleared my throat. "If—if you're going, let me send some things, and tell you what to ask for in trade. You won't leave until morning, surely?"

The Beardsleys were vibrating with impatience to be gone, but Jamie stood still, looking at me, and I felt him touch me, without words or movement.

"No," he said softly, "we'll bide for the night." He turned then to the Beardsleys. "Go up, will ye, Jo, and ask Bobby Higgins to come down. I'll need to speak with him."

"He's up with Miss Lizzie?" Jo Beardsley looked displeased at this, and his brother's face echoed his expression of slit-eyed suspicion.

"What's he a-doin' in her room, then? Don't he know she's betrothed?" Kezzie asked, righteously.

"Her father's with her, too," Jamie assured them. "Her reputation's safe, aye?"

Jo snorted briefly, but the brothers exchanged glances, then left together, slender shoulders set in determination to oust this threat to Lizzie's virtue.

"So you'll do it?" I set down the pestle. "Be an Indian agent?"

"I think I must. If I do not—Richard Brown surely will. I think I canna risk that." He hesitated, then drew close and touched me lightly, fingers on my elbow. "I'll send the lads back at once with the berries ye need. I may need to stay for a day, maybe two. For the talking, aye?" To tell the Cherokee that he was now an agent for the British Crown, he meant—and to make arrangements for word to be spread that the headmen of the mountain villages should come down later to a council for parley and gifts.

I nodded, feeling a small bubble of fear swell under my breastbone. It was starting. No matter how much one knows that something dreadful is going to happen in the future, one somehow never thinks it will be *today*.

"Not—don't stay away too long, will you?" I blurted, not wanting to burden him with my fears, but unable to keep quiet.

"No," he said softly, and his hand rested for an instant in the small of my back. "Dinna fash yourself; I'll not tarry."

The sound of feet descending the stairs echoed in the hall. I supposed Mr. Wemyss had shooed the Beardsleys out, along with Bobby. They didn't stop, but went off without speaking, casting looks of veiled dislike at Bobby, who seemed quite oblivious to them.

"Yon lad said you wanted to speak to me, zur?" He'd regained some color, I was glad to see, and seemed steady enough on his feet. He glanced uneasily at the table, still spread with the sheet I'd put him on, and then at me, but I merely shook my head. I'd finish dealing with his piles later.

"Aye, Bobby." Jamie made a brief gesture toward a stool, as though to invite Bobby to sit, but I cleared my throat in a meaningful manner, and he stopped, then leaned against the table, rather than sitting down himself.

"Those two who came—Brown, they're called. They've a settlement some way away. Ye said ye've heard of the Committees of Safety, aye? So ye'll have some notion what they're about."

"Aye, zur. Tha Browns, zur—did they want me?" He spoke calmly enough, but I saw him swallow briefly, Adam's apple bobbing in his slender throat.

Jamie sighed, and ran a hand through his hair. The sun was slanting through the window now, and struck him directly, making his red hair glow with flame—and picking out here and there a flicker of the silver that was beginning to show among the ruddy strands.

"They did. They kent ye were here; heard of ye, doubtless from someone ye met along the way. Ye'll have told folk where ye were headed, I suppose?"

Bobby nodded, wordless.

“What did they want with him?” I asked, tipping the ground root bark and berries into a bowl and pouring hot water over them to steep.

“They didna make that quite clear,” Jamie said dryly. “But then, I didna give them the chance. I only told them they’d take a guest from my hearth over my dead body—and theirs.”

“I thanks ’ee for that, zur.” Bobby took a deep breath. “They—knew, I reckon? About Boston? I’d not told anyone *that,* surely.”

Jamie’s frown deepened slightly.

“Aye, they did. They pretended to think I didna ken; told me I was harboring a murderer unbeknownst, and a threat to the public welfare.”

“Well, the first is true enough,” Bobby said, touching his brand gingerly, as though it still burned him. He offered a wan smile. “But I dunno as I s’ould be a threat to anyone, these days.”

Jamie dismissed that.

“The point is, Bobby, that they do ken ye’re here. They’ll not come and drag ye away, I think. But I’d ask ye to go canny about the place. I’ll make provision to see ye safely back to Lord John, when the time comes, with an escort. I gather ye’re no quite finished with him?” he asked, turning to me.

“Not quite,” I replied equably. Bobby looked apprehensive.

“Well, then.” Jamie reached into the waist of his breeches, and drew out a pistol, which had been hidden by the folds of his shirt. It was, I saw, the fancy gilt-edged one.

“Keep it by ye,” Jamie said, handing it to Bobby. “There’s powder and shot in the sideboard. Will ye look out for my wife and family, then, whilst I’m gone?”

“Oh!” Bobby looked startled, but then nodded, tucking the pistol away in his own breeches. “I will so, zur. Depend upon it!”

Jamie smiled at him, his eyes warming.

“That’s a comfort to me, Bobby. Will ye maybe go and find my son-in-law? I’ll need a word with him before I go.”

“Aye, zur. Right away!” He squared his shoulders and set off, an expression of determination on his poet’s face.

"What do you think they would have done with him?" I asked softly, as the outer door closed behind him. "The Browns."

Jamie shook his head.

"God knows. Hanged him at a crossroad, maybe—or maybe only beaten him and driven him out of the mountains. They want to make a show of being able to protect the folk, aye? From dangerous criminals and the like," he added, with a twist of the mouth.

"A government derives its powers from the just consent of the governed," I quoted, nodding. "For a Committee of Safety to have any legitimacy, there needs to be an obvious threat *to* the public safety. Clever of the Browns to have reasoned that out."

He gave me a look, one auburn brow raised.

"Who said that? *The consent of the governed.*"

"Thomas Jefferson," I replied, feeling smug. "Or rather, he will say it in another two years."

"He'll steal it from a gentleman named Locke in another two years," he corrected. "I suppose Richard Brown must ha' been decently educated."

"Unlike me, you mean?" I said, unruffled. "If you expect trouble from the Browns, though, should you have given Bobby *that* particular pistol?"

He shrugged.

"I'll need the good ones. And I doubt verra much that he'll fire that one."

"Counting on its deterrent effect?" I was skeptical, but he was likely right.

"Aye, that. But more on Bobby."

"How so?"

"I doubt he'd fire a gun again to save his own life—but he would, maybe, to save yours. And should it come to such a pass, they'll be too close to miss." He spoke with dispassion, but I felt the hairs prickle down my nape.

"Well, that's a comfort," I said. "And just how do you know what he'd do?"

"Talked to him," he said briefly. "The man he shot in Boston was the first he'd ever killed. He doesna want to do it again." He straightened, and moved restlessly toward the counter, where he busied himself in straightening a scatter of small instruments I had laid out for cleaning.

I moved to stand beside him, watching. There was a handful of small cautery irons and scalpels, soaking in a beaker of turpentine. He took them out, one by one, wiped them dry and laid them back in their box, neatly, side by side. The spade-shaped metal ends of the irons were blackened by use; the scalpel blades were weathered to a soft glow, but the sharp edges gleamed, a hairbreadth of bright silver.

"We'll be all right," I said quietly. I meant it to be a reassuring statement, but it came out with a tinge of question.

"Aye, I know," he said. He put the last iron in its box, but didn't replace the lid. Instead, he stood, hands spread flat on the counter, looking straight ahead.

"I dinna want to go," he said softly. "I dinna want to do this."

I wasn't sure whether he was speaking to me, or to himself—but I thought he wasn't referring only to his journey to the Cherokee village.

"Neither do I," I whispered, and moved a little closer, so I felt his breathing. He lifted his hands then and turned toward me, taking me into his arms, and we stood wrapped close, listening to each other's breathing, the bitter smell of the brewing tea seeping through the homely scents of linen, dust, and sun-warmed flesh.

There were still choices to be made, decisions to reach, actions to take. Many of them. But in one day, one hour, one single declaration of intent, we had stepped across the threshold of war.

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10

DUTY CALLS

Jamie had sent Bobby after Roger Mac, but found himself too restless to wait, and set off himself, leaving Claire to her brewing.

Everything seemed peaceful and beautiful outside. A brown sheep with a pair of lambs stood indolently in her pen, jaws moving in a slow stupor of satisfaction, the lambs hopping awkwardly to and fro like fuzzy grasshoppers behind her. Claire's herb bed was full of leafing greens and sprouting flowers.

The well lid was ajar; he bent to draw it into place and found the boards had warped. He added fixing that to the constant list of chores and repairs that he carried in his head, wishing fervently that he could devote the next few days to digging, hauling manure, shingling, and the like, instead of what he was about to do.

He'd rather bury the old privy pit or castrate pigs than go and ask Roger Mac what he kent about Indians and revolutions. He found it mildly gruesome to discuss the future with his son-in-law, and tried never to do it.

The things Claire told him of her own time seemed often fantastic, with the enjoyable half-real sense of faery tales, and sometimes macabre, but always interesting, for what he learned of his wife from the telling. Brianna tended to share with him small, homely details of machinery, which were interesting, or wild stories of men walking on the moon, which were immensely entertaining, but no threat to his peace of mind.

Roger Mac, though, had a cold-blooded way of talking that reminded him to an uncomfortable degree of the works of the historians he'd read, and had therefore a sense of concrete doom about it. Talking to Roger Mac made it seem all too likely that this, that, or the other frightful happenstance was not only indeed *going* to happen—but would most likely have direct and personal consequences.

It was like talking to a particularly evil-minded fortune-teller, he thought, one you hadn't paid enough to hear something pleasant. The thought made a sudden memory pop up on the surface of his mind, bobbing like a fishing cork.

In Paris. He'd been with friends, other students, drinking in the piss-smelling taverns near the *université.* He'd been fairly drunk himself when someone took a fancy to have his palms read, and he had pushed with the others into the corner where the old woman who did it always sat, scarcely visible amid the gloom and clouds of pipe smoke.

He hadn't intended to do it himself; he had only a few pennies in his pocket, and didn't mean to waste them on unholy nonsense. He'd said so, loudly.

Whereupon a scraggy claw had shot out of the darkness and seized his hand, sinking long, filthy nails into his flesh. He'd yelped in surprise, and his friends all laughed. They laughed harder when she spat in his palm.

She rubbed the spittle into his skin in a businesslike way, bent close enough that he could smell the ancient sweat of her and see the lice crawling in the grizzled hair that keeked from the edge of her rusty-black shawl. She peered into his hand and a dirty nail traced the lines of it, tickling. He tried to pull his hand away, but she tightened her grip on his wrist, and he found to his surprise that he could not break it.

"T'es un chat, toi," the old woman had remarked, in tones of malicious interest. "You're a cat, you. A little red cat."

Dubois—that was his name, Dubois—had at once begun to miaou and yowl, to the amusement of the others. He himself refused to rise to the bait, and saying only, *“Merci, madame,”* tried again to pull away.

“Neuf,” she said, tapping rapid random places on his palm, then seizing a finger and wiggling it by way of emphasis. “You have a nine in your hand. And death,” she’d added offhandedly. “You’ll die nine times before you rest in your grave.”

She’d let go then, amidst a chorus of sarcastic *“aou-la-las!”* from the French students, and laughter from the rest.

He snorted, sending the memory back where it came from, and good riddance to it. The old woman refused to go so easily, though, and called to him through the years, as she’d called through the raucous, beer-filled air of the tavern.

“Sometimes dying doesn’t hurt, *mon p’tit chat,*” she’d called after him, mocking. “But more often it does.”

“No it doesn’t,” he muttered, and stopped, appalled, hearing himself. Christ. It wasn’t himself he was hearing, but his godfather.

“Don’t be afraid, laddie. It doesna hurt a bit, to die.” He missed his footing and staggered, caught himself and stood still, a taste of metal on the back of his tongue.

His heart was thumping, suddenly, for no reason, as though he had run miles. He saw the cabin, certainly, and heard the calling of jays in the half-leafed chestnut trees. But he saw even more clearly Murtagh’s face, the grim lines of it relaxing into peace and the deep-set black eyes fixed on his, shifting in and out of focus, as though his godfather looked at once at him and at something far beyond him. He felt the weight of Murtagh’s body in his arms, growing suddenly heavy as he died.

The vision vanished, as abruptly as it had come, and he found himself standing next to a rain puddle, staring at a wooden duck half-mired in the mud.

He crossed himself, with a quick word for the repose of Murtagh’s soul, then bent and retrieved the duck, washing the mud away in the puddle. His hands were trembling, and little wonder. His memories of Culloden were few and fragmentary—but they were beginning to come back.

So far, such things had come to him only in glimpses at the edge of sleep. He'd seen Murtagh there before, and in the dreams that followed.

He hadn't told Claire about them. Not yet.

He pushed open the door of the cabin, but it was empty, the hearth smoored, spinning wheel and loom standing idle. Brianna was likely at Fergus's place, visiting Marsali. Where would Roger Mac be now? He stepped back outside and stood listening.

The thump of an ax came faintly from somewhere in the forest beyond the cabin. It stopped, then, and he heard men's voices, raised in greeting. He turned and headed for the trail that led upslope, half grown over with spring grass, but showing the black smudges of fresh footmarks.

What might the old woman have told him if he'd paid her? he wondered. Had she lied to spite him for his miserliness—or told him the truth, for the same reason?

One of the more disagreeable things about talking to Roger Mac was that Jamie was sure he always told the truth.

He'd forgotten to leave the duck at the cabin. Wiping it on his breeches, he pushed grimly through the sprouting weeds, to hear what fate awaited him.

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11

BLOODWORK

I pushed the microscope toward Bobby Higgins, who had returned from his errand, his own discomforts forgotten in worry for Lizzie.

"See the round pinkish things?" I said. "Those are Lizzie's blood cells. Everyone has blood cells," I added. "They're what make your blood red."

" 'Strewth," he muttered, amazed. "I never knew!"

"Well, now you do," I said. "Do you see that some of the blood cells are broken? And that some have little spots in them?"

"I do, mum," he said, screwing up his face and peering intently. "What are 'ey, then?"

"Parasites. Little beasts that get into your blood if a certain kind of mosquito bites you," I explained. "They're called *Plasmodium.* Once you've got them, they go on living in your blood—but every so often, they begin to … er … breed. When there are too many of them, they burst out of the blood cells, and that's what causes a malarial attack—the ague. The sludge of the broken blood cells sort of silts up, you see, in the organs, and makes you feel terribly sick."

"Oh." He straightened up, making a face of deep aversion at the microscope. "That's … that's pure gashly, that is!"

"Yes, it is," I said, succeeding in keeping a straight face. "But quinine—Jesuit bark, you know?—will help stop it."

"Oh, that's good, mum, very good," he said, his face lightening. "However you do come to know such things," he said, shaking his head. “ ’Tis a wonder!”

“Oh, I know quite a lot of things about parasites,” I said casually, taking the saucer off the bowl in which I had been brewing the mix of dogwood bark and gallberries. The liquid was a rich purplish black, and looked slightly viscous, now that it had cooled. It also smelled lethal, from which I deduced that it was about ready.

“Tell me, Bobby—have you ever heard of hookworms?”

He looked at me blankly.

“No, mum.”

“Mm. Would you hold this for me, please?” I put a folded square of gauze over the neck of a flask and handed him the bottle to hold while I poured the purple mixture into it.

“These fainting fits of yours,” I said, eyes on the stream. “How long have you had them?”

“Oh … six months, mebbe.”

“I see. Did you by chance notice any sort of irritation—itching, say? Or a rash? Happening maybe seven months ago? Most likely on your feet.”

He stared at me, soft blue eyes thunderstruck as though I had performed some feat of mind reading.

“Why, so I did have, mum. Last autumn, ’twas.”

“Ah,” I said. “Well, then. I think, Bobby, that you may just possibly have a case of hookworms.”

He looked down at himself in horror.

“Where?”

“Inside.” I took the bottle from him and corked it. “Hookworms are parasites that burrow through the skin—most often through the soles of the feet—and then migrate through the body until they reach your intestines—your, um, innards,” I amended, seeing incomprehension cross his face. “The adult worms have nasty little hooked bills, like this”—I crooked my index finger in illustration—“and they pierce the intestinal lining and proceed to suck your blood. That’s why, if you have them, you feel very weak, and faint frequently.”

From the suddenly clammy look of him, I rather thought he was about to faint *now,* and guided him hastily to a stool, pushing his head down between his knees.

“I don’t know for sure that that’s the problem,” I told him, bending down to address him. “I was just looking at the slides of Lizzie’s blood, though, and thinking of parasites, and—well, it came to me suddenly that a diagnosis of hookworms would fit your symptoms rather well.”

“Oh?” he said faintly. The thick tail of wavy hair had fallen forward, leaving the back of his neck exposed, fair-skinned and childlike.

“How old are you, Bobby?” I asked, suddenly realizing that I had no idea.

“Twenty-three, mum,” he said. “Mum? I think I s’all have to puke.”

I snatched a bucket from the corner and got it to him just in time.

“Have I got rid of them?” he asked weakly, sitting up and wiping his mouth on his sleeve as he peered into the bucket. “I could do it more.”

“I’m afraid not,” I said sympathetically. “Assuming that you have got hookworms, they’re attached very firmly, and too far down for vomiting to dislodge them. The only way to be sure about it, though, is to look for the eggs they shed.”

Bobby eyed me apprehensively.

“It’s not exactly as I’m horrible shy, mum,” he said, shifting gingerly. “You know that. But Dr. Potts did give me great huge clysters of mustard water. Surely that would ha’ burnt they worms right out? If I was a worm, I s’ould let go and give up the ghost at once, did anyone souse me with mustard water.”

“Well, you would think so, wouldn’t you?” I said. “Unfortunately not. But I won’t give you an enema,” I assured him. “We need to see whether you truly do have the worms, to begin with, and if so, there’s a medicine I can mix up for you that will poison them directly.”

“Oh.” He looked a little happier at that. “How d’ye mean to see, then, mum?” He glanced narrowly at the counter, where the assortment of clamps and suture jars were still laid out.

“Couldn’t be simpler,” I assured him. “I do a process called fecal sedimentation to concentrate the stool, then look for the eggs under the microscope.”

He nodded, plainly not following. I smiled kindly at him.

“All you have to do, Bobby, is shit.”

His face was a study in doubt and apprehension.

“If it’s all the same to you, mum,” he said, “I think I’ll keep the worms.”

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12

FURTHER MYSTERIES OF SCIENCE

Late in the afternoon, Roger MacKenzie came back from the cooper's shop to discover his wife deep in contemplation of an object sitting on his dinner table.

"What *is* that? Some type of prehistoric Christmas tinned goods?" Roger extended a ginger forefinger toward a squat jar made of greenish glass and sealed with a cork, the latter covered with a stout layer of red wax. An amorphous chunk of something was visible inside, evidently submerged in liquid.

"Ho ho," said his wife tolerantly, moving the jar out of his reach. "You *think* you're being funny. It's white phosphorus—a present from Lord John."

He glanced at her; she was excited, the tip of her nose gone pink and bits of red hair pulled loose and waving in the breeze; like her father, she was inclined to run her hands through her hair when thinking.

"And you intend to do … *what* with it?" he asked, trying to keep any note of foreboding from his voice. He had the vaguest memories of hearing about the properties of phosphorus in his distant school days; he thought either it made you glow in the dark or it blew up. Neither prospect was reassuring.

"Wellll … make matches. Maybe." Her upper teeth fastened momentarily in the flesh of her lower lip as she considered the jar.

"I know how—in theory. But it might be a little tricky in practice."

"Why is that?" he asked warily.

"Well, it bursts into flame if you expose it to air," she explained. "That's why it's packed in water. Don't touch, Jem! It's poisonous." Grabbing Jemmy round the middle, she pulled him down from the table, where he had been eyeing the jar with greedy curiosity.

"Oh, well, why worry about that? It will explode in his face before he has a chance to get it in his mouth." Roger picked up the jar for safekeeping, holding it as though it might go off in his hands. He wanted to ask whether she were insane, but had been married long enough to know the price of injudicious rhetorical questions.

"Where d'ye mean to keep it?" He cast an eloquent glance round the confines of the cabin, which in terms of storage boasted a blanket chest, a small shelf for books and papers, another for comb, toothbrushes, and Brianna's small cache of personal belongings, and a pie hutch. Jemmy had been able to open the pie hutch since the age of seven months or so.

"I'm thinking I'd better put it in Mama's surgery," she replied, keeping an absentminded grip on Jem, who was struggling with single-minded energy to get at the pretty thing. "Nobody touches anything in there."

That was true enough; the people who were not afraid of Claire Fraser personally were generally terrified of the contents of her surgery, these featuring fearsomely painful-looking implements, mysterious murky brews, and vile-smelling medicines. In addition, the surgery had cupboards too high for even a determined climber like Jem to reach.

"Good idea," Roger said, anxious to get the jar out of Jem's vicinity. "I'll take it up now, shall I?"

Before Brianna could answer, a knock came at the door, followed immediately by Jamie Fraser. Jem instantly ceased trying to get at the jar and instead flung himself on his grandfather with shrieks of joy.

"How is it, then, *a bhailach*?" Jamie inquired amiably, neatly turning Jem upside down and holding him by the ankles. "A word, Roger Mac?"

"Sure. Ye'll sit, maybe?" He'd told Jamie earlier what he knew—lamentably little—regarding the role of the Cherokee in the upcoming Revolution. Had he come to inquire further? Reluctantly setting down the jar, Roger pulled out a stool and pushed it in his father-in-law's direction. Jamie accepted it with a nod, dexterously transferring Jemmy to a position over one shoulder and sitting down.

Jemmy giggled madly, squirming until his grandfather slapped him lightly on the seat of his breeches, whereupon he subsided, hanging contentedly upside-down like a sloth, his bright hair spilling down the back of Jamie's shirt.

"It's this way, *a charaid,*" Jamie said. "I must be going in the morning to the Cherokee villages, and there is a thing I'd ask ye to do in my place."

"Oh, aye. D'ye want me to see to the barley harvest, then?" The early grain was still ripening. Everyone had his fingers crossed that the weather would keep fair for another few weeks, but the prospects were good.

"No, Brianna can do that—if ye will, lass?" He smiled at his daughter, who raised thick ruddy eyebrows, the twins of his.

"I can," she agreed. "What are you planning to do with Ian, Roger, and Arch Bug, though?" Arch Bug was Jamie's factor, and the logical person to be overseeing the harvest in Jamie's absence.

"Well, I shall take Young Ian with me. The Cherokee ken him well, and he's comfortable wi' their speech. I'll take the Beardsley lads, too, so they can fetch back the berries and bits o' things your mother wants for Lizzie, straightaway."

"I go, too?" Jemmy inquired hopefully.

"Not this time, *a bhailach.* In the autumn, maybe." He patted Jemmy on the bottom, then returned his attention to Roger.

"That being so," he said, "I need ye to go to Cross Creek, if ye will, and collect the new tenants." Roger felt a small surge of excitement—and alarm—at the prospect, but merely cleared his throat and nodded.

"Aye. Of course. Will they—"

"Ye'll take Arch Bug along, and Tom Christie."

A moment of incredulous silence greeted this statement.

“Tom *Christie*?” Bree said, exchanging a glance of bafflement with Roger. “What on earth for?” The schoolmaster was a notably dour sort, and no one’s idea of a congenial traveling companion.

Her father’s mouth twisted wryly.

“Aye, well. There’s the one small thing MacDonald neglected to tell me, when he asked if I’d take them. They’re Protestants, the lot.”

“Ah,” said Roger. “I see.” Jamie met his eye and nodded, relieved to be so immediately understood.

“*I* don’t see.” Brianna patted her hair, frowning, then pulled off the ribbon and began to comb her fingers slowly through it, undoing the tangles as a preliminary to brushing it. “What difference does it make?”

Roger and Jamie exchanged a brief but eloquent glance. Jamie shrugged, and pulled Jem down into his lap.

“Well.” Roger rubbed his chin, trying to think how to explain two centuries of Scottish religious intolerance in any way that would make sense to an American of the twentieth century. “Ahh … ye recall the civil-rights thing in the States, integration in the South, all that?”

“Of course I do.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “Okay. So, which side are the Negroes?”

“The what?” Jamie looked entirely baffled. “Where do Negroes come into the matter?”

“Not quite that simple,” Roger assured her. “Just an indication of the depth of feeling involved. Let us say that the notion of having a Catholic landlord is likely to cause our new tenants severe qualms—and vice versa?” he asked, glancing at Jamie.

“What’s Negroes?” Jemmy asked with interest.

“Er ….dark-skinned people,” Roger replied, suddenly aware of the potential quagmire opened up by this question. It was true that the term “Negro” didn’t invariably mean also “slave”—but near enough that there was little difference. “D’ye not remember them, from your great-auntie Jocasta’s place?”

Jemmy frowned, adopting for an unsettling instant the precise expression his grandfather was wearing.

"No."

"Well, anyway," Bree said, calling the meeting to order with a sharp rap of her hairbrush on the table, "the point is that Mr. Christie is enough of a Protestant to make the new people feel comfortable?"

"Something of the sort," her father agreed, one side of his mouth curling up. "Between your man here and Tom Christie, at least they'll not think they're entering the Devil's realm entirely."

"I see," Roger said again, in a slightly different tone. So it wasn't only his position as son of the house and general right-hand man, was it—but the fact that he was a Presbyterian, at least in name. He raised a brow at Jamie, who shrugged in acknowledgment.

"Mmphm," Roger said, resigned.

"Mmphm," said Jamie, satisfied.

"Stop *doing* that," Brianna said crossly. "Fine. So you and Tom Christie are going to Cross Creek. Why is Arch Bug going?"

Roger became aware, in a subliminally marital way, that his wife was disgruntled at the thought of being left behind to organize the harvest—a filthy, exhausting job at the best of times—whilst he frolicked with a squad of his co-religionists in the romantically exciting metropolis of Cross Creek, population two hundred.

"It will be Arch, mostly, helping them to settle and build themselves shelter before the cold," Jamie said logically. "Ye dinna mean to suggest, I hope, that I send him alone to talk to them?"

Brianna smiled involuntarily at that; Arch Bug, married for decades to the voluble Mrs. Bug, was famous for his lack of speech. He *could* talk, but seldom did so, limiting his conversational contributions to the occasional genial "Mmp."

"Well, they'll likely never realize that Arch is Catholic," Roger said, rubbing his upper lip with a forefinger. "Or is he, come to that? I've never asked him."

"He is," Jamie said, very dryly. "But he's lived long enough to ken when to be silent."

"Well, I can see this is going to be a jolly expedition," Brianna said, raising one brow. "When do you think you'll be back?"

“Christ, I don’t know,” Roger said, feeling a stab of guilt at the casual blasphemy. He’d have to revise his habits, and quickly. “A month? Six weeks?”

“At least,” his father-in-law said cheerfully. “They’ll be on foot, mind.”

Roger took a deep breath, contemplating a slow march, *en masse,* from Cross Creek to the mountains, with Arch Bug on one side of him and Tom Christie on the other, twin pillars of taciturnity. His eyes lingered wistfully on his wife, envisioning six weeks of sleeping by the roadside, alone.

“Yeah, fine,” he said. “I’ll … um … go speak to Tom and Arch tonight, then.”

“Daddy go?” Catching the gist of the conversation, Jem scrambled off his grandfather’s knee and scampered over to Roger, grabbing him round the leg. “Go with *you,* Daddy!”

“Oh. Well, I don’t think—” He caught sight of Bree’s face, resigned, and then the green and red jar on the table behind her. “Why not?” he said suddenly, and smiled at Jem. “Great-Auntie Jocasta would love to see you. And Mummy can blow things up to her heart’s content without worrying where you are, aye?”

“She can do what?” Jamie looked startled.

“It doesn’t *explode,*” Brianna said, picking up the jar of phosphorus and cradling it possessively. “It just burns. Are you sure?” This last was addressed to Roger, and accompanied by a searching look.

“Yeah, sure,” he said, affecting confidence. He glanced at Jemmy, who was chanting “Go! Go! Go!”, meanwhile hopping up and down like a demented popcorn kernel. “At least I’ll have someone to talk to on the way.”

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13

SAFE HANDS

It was nearly dark when Jamie came in to find me sitting at the kitchen table, head on my arms. I jerked upright at the sound of his footstep, blinking.

“Are ye all right, Sassenach?” He sat down on the opposite bench, eyeing me. “Ye look as though ye’ve been dragged through a hedge backward.”

“Oh.” I patted vaguely at my hair, which did seem to be sticking out a bit. “Um. Fine. Are you hungry?”

“Of course I am. Have ye eaten, yourself?”

I squinted and rubbed my face, trying to think.

“No,” I decided at last. “I was waiting for you, but I seem to have fallen asleep. There’s stew. Mrs. Bug left it.”

He got up and peered into the small cauldron, then pushed the swinging hook back to bring it over the fire to warm.

“What have ye been doing, Sassenach?” he asked, coming back. “And how’s the wee lass?”

“The wee lass is what I’ve been doing,” I said, suppressing a yawn. “Mostly.” I rose, slowly, feeling my joints protest, and staggered over to the sideboard to cut some bread.

“She couldn’t keep it down,” I said. “The gallberry medicine. Not that I blame her,” I added, cautiously licking my lower lip. After she’d thrown it up the first time, I’d tasted it myself. My tastebuds were still in a state of revolt; I’d never met a more aptly named plant, and being boiled into syrup had merely concentrated the flavor.

Jamie sniffed deeply as I turned.

"Did she vomit on ye?"

"No, that was Bobby Higgins," I said. "He's got hookworms."

He raised his brows.

"Do I want to hear about them whilst I'm eating?"

"Definitely not," I said, sitting down with the loaf, a knife, and a crock of soft butter. I tore off a piece, buttered it thickly, and gave it to him, then took one for myself. My tastebuds hesitated, but wavered on the edge of forgiving me for the gallberry syrup.

"What have *you* been doing?" I asked, beginning to wake up enough to take notice. He seemed tired, but more cheerful than he had been when he'd left the house.

"Talking to Roger Mac about Indians and Protestants." He frowned at the half-eaten chunk of bread in his hand. "Is there something amiss wi' the bread, Sassenach? It tastes odd."

I waved a hand apologetically.

"Sorry, that's me. I washed several times, but I couldn't get it off completely. Perhaps you'd better do the buttering." I pushed the loaf toward him with my elbow, gesturing at the crock.

"Couldna get *what* off?"

"Well, we tried and tried with the syrup, but no good; Lizzie simply couldn't hold it down, poor thing. But I remembered that quinine can be absorbed through the skin. So I mixed the syrup into some goose grease, and rubbed it all over her. Oh, yes, thanks." I leaned forward and took a delicate bite of the buttered bit of bread he held out for me. My tastebuds gave in gracefully, and I realized that I hadn't eaten all day.

"And it worked?" He glanced up at the ceiling. Mr. Wemyss and Lizzie shared the smaller room upstairs, but all was quiet above.

"I think so," I said, swallowing. "The fever finally broke, at least, and she's asleep. We'll keep using it; if the fever doesn't come back in two days, we'll know it works."

"That's good, then."

"Well, and then there was Bobby and his hookworms. Fortunately, I have some ipecacuanha and turpentine."

"Fortunately for the worms, or for Bobby?"

"Well, neither, really," I said, and yawned. "It will probably work, though."

He smiled faintly, and uncorked a bottle of beer, passing it automatically under his nose. Finding it all right, he poured some for me.

"Aye, well, it's a comfort to know I'm leaving things in your capable hands, Sassenach. Ill-smelling," he added, wrinkling his long nose in my direction, "but capable."

"Thanks so much." The beer was better than good; must be one of Mrs. Bug's batches. We sipped companionably for a bit, both too tired to get up and serve the stew. I watched him beneath my lashes; I always did, when he was about to leave on a journey, storing up small memories of him against his return.

He looked tired, and there were small twin lines between his heavy brows, betokening slight worry. The candlelight glowed on the broad bones of his face, though, and cast his shadow clear on the plastered wall behind him, strong and bold. I watched the shadow raise its spectral beer glass, the light making an amber glow in the shadow glass.

"Sassenach," he said suddenly, putting down the glass, "how many times, would ye say, have I come close to dying?"

I stared at him for a moment, but then shrugged and began to reckon, mustering my synapses into reluctant activity.

"Well … I don't know what horrible things happened to you before I met you, but after … well, you were dreadfully ill at the abbey." I glanced covertly at him, but he seemed not to be bothered at the thought of Wentworth prison, and what had been done to him there that had caused the illness. "Hmm. And after Culloden—you said you had a terrible fever then, from your wounds, and thought you might die, only Jenny forced you—I mean, nursed you through it."

"And then Laoghaire shot me," he said wryly. "And *you* forced me through it. Likewise, when the snake bit me." He considered for a moment.

"I had the smallpox when I was a wean, but I think I wasna in danger of dying then; they said it was a light case. So only four times, then."

"What about the day I first met you?" I objected. "You nearly bled to death."

"Oh, I did not," he protested. "That was no but a wee scratch."

I lifted one brow at him, and leaning over to the hearth, scooped a ladle of aromatic stew into a bowl. It was rich with the juices of rabbit and venison, swimming in a thick gravy spiced with rosemary, garlic, and onion. So far as my tastebuds were concerned, all was forgiven.

"Have it your way," I said. "But wait—what about your head? When Dougal tried to kill you with an ax. Surely that's five?"

He frowned, accepting the bowl.

"Aye, I suppose you're right," he said, seeming displeased. "Five, then."

I regarded him gently over my own bowl of stew. He was very large, solid, and beautifully formed. And if he was a bit battered by circumstance, that merely added to his charm.

"You're a very hard person to kill, I think," I said. "That's a great comfort to me."

He smiled, reluctant, but then reached out and lifted his glass in salute, touching it first to his own lips, then to mine.

"We'll drink to that, Sassenach, shall we?"

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14

PEOPLE OF THE SNOWBIRD

“Guns,” Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning said. “Tell your King we want guns.”

Jamie suppressed the urge to reply, “Who doesn’t?” for a moment, but then gave in to it, surprising the war chief into a blink of startlement, followed by a grin.

“Who, indeed?” Bird was a short man, shaped like a barrel, and young for his office—but shrewd, his affability no disguise to his intelligence. “They all tell you this, all the village war chiefs, eh? Of course they do. What do you tell them?”

“What I can.” Jamie lifted one shoulder, let it fall. “Trade goods are certain, knives are likely—guns are possible, but I cannot yet promise them.”

They were speaking a slightly unfamiliar dialect of Cherokee, and he hoped he had got right the manner of indicating probability. He did well enough with the usual tongue in casual matters of trade and hunting, but the matters he dealt in here would not be casual. He glanced briefly at Ian, who was listening closely, but evidently what he’d said was all right. Ian visited the villages near the Ridge frequently, and hunted with the young men; he shifted into the tongue of the Tsalagi as easily as he did into his native Gaelic.

“So, well enough.” Bird settled himself more comfortably. The pewter badge Jamie had given him as a present glinted on his breast, firelight flickering over the broadly amiable planes of his face. “Tell your King about the guns—and tell him why we need them, eh?”

“You wish me to tell him that, do you? Do you think he will be willing to send you guns with which to kill his own people?” Jamie asked dryly. The incursion of white settlers across the Treaty Line into the Cherokee lands was a sore point, and he risked something by alluding to it directly, rather than addressing Bird’s other needs for guns: to defend his village from raiders—or to go raiding himself.

Bird shrugged in reply.

“We can kill them without guns, if we want to.” One eyebrow lifted a little, and Bird’s lips pursed, waiting to see what Jamie made of this statement.

He supposed Bird meant to shock him. He merely nodded.

“Of course you can. You are wise enough not to.”

“Not yet.” Bird’s lips relaxed into a charming smile. “You tell the King—not yet.”

“His Majesty will be pleased to hear that you value his friendship so much.”

Bird burst into laughter at that, rocking back and forth, and his brother Still Water, who sat beside him, grinned broadly.

“I like you, Bear-Killer,” he said, recovering. “You’re a funny man.”

“I may be,” Jamie said in English, smiling. “Give it time.”

Ian gave a small snort of amusement at that, causing Bird to look sharply at him, then away, clearing his throat. Jamie raised one brow at his nephew, who replied with a bland smile.

Still Water was watching Ian narrowly. The Cherokee welcomed them both with respect, but Jamie had noticed at once a particular edge in their response to Ian. They perceived Ian to be Mohawk—and he made them wary. In all honesty, he himself sometimes thought there was some part of Ian that had not come back from Snaketown, and perhaps never would.

Bird had given him an avenue to inquire about something, though.

"You have been much troubled by persons who come into your lands to settle," he said, nodding sympathetically. "You of course do not kill these persons, being wise. But not everyone is wise, are they?"

Bird's eyes narrowed briefly.

"What do you mean, Bear-Killer?"

"I hear of burning, Tsisqua." He held the other man's eyes with his own, careful to give no hint of accusation. "The King hears of houses burning, men killed and women taken. This does not please him."

"Hmp," Bird said, and pressed his lips together. He did not, however, say he had not heard of such things himself, which was interesting.

"Enough of such stories, and the King may send soldiers to protect his people. If he should do that, he will hardly wish to have them face guns that he himself has given," Jamie pointed out logically.

"And what should we do, then?" Still Water broke in hotly. "They come across the Treaty Line, build houses, plant fields, and take the game. If your King cannot keep his people where they belong, how can he protest if we defend our lands?"

Bird made a small flattening gesture with one hand, not looking at his brother, and Still Water subsided, though with bad grace.

"So, Bear-Killer. You will tell the King these things, will you?"

Jamie inclined his head gravely.

"That is my office. I speak of the King to you, and I will take your words to the King."

Bird nodded thoughtfully, then waved a hand for food and beer, and the talk changed firmly to neutral matters. No more business would be done tonight.

* * *

It was late when they left Tsisqua's house for the small guesthouse. He thought it was well past moonrise, but there was no moon to be seen; the sky glowed thick with cloud, and the scent of rain was live on the wind.

"Oh, God," Ian said, yawning and stumbling. "My bum's gone asleep."

Jamie yawned, too, finding it contagious, but then blinked and laughed. "Aye, well. Dinna bother waking it up; the rest of ye can join it."

Ian made a derisive noise with his lips.

"Just because Bird says ye're a funny man, Uncle Jamie, I wouldna go believing it. He's only being polite, ken?"

Jamie ignored this, murmuring thanks in Tsalagi to the young woman who had shown them the way to their quarters. She handed him a small basket—filled with corn bread and dried apples, from the smell—then wished them a soft "Good night, sleep well," before vanishing into the damp, restless night.

The small hut seemed stuffy after the cool freshness of the air, and he stood in the doorway for a moment, enjoying the movement of the wind through the trees, watching it snake through the pine boughs like a huge, invisible serpent. A spatter of moisture bloomed on his face, and he experienced the deep pleasure of a man who realizes that it's going to rain and he isn't going to have to spend the night out in it.

"Ask about, Ian, when ye're gossiping tomorrow," he said, ducking inside. "Let it be known—tactfully—that the King would be pleased to know exactly who in hell's been burning cabins—and might be pleased enough to cough up a few guns in reward. They'll not tell ye if it's them that's been doing it—but if it's another band, they might."

Ian nodded, yawning again. A small fire burned in a stone ring, the smoke of it wisping up toward a smoke hole in the roof overhead, and by its light, a fur-piled sleeping platform was visible across one side of the hut, with another stack of furs and blankets on the floor.

"Toss ye for the bed, Uncle Jamie," he said, digging in the pouch at his waist and coming out with a battered shilling. "Call it."

"Tails," Jamie said, setting down the basket and unbelting his plaid. It fell in a warm puddle of fabric round his legs and he shook out his shirt. The linen was creased and grimy against his skin, and he could smell himself; thank God this was the last of the villages. One more night, perhaps, two at the most, and they could go home.

Ian swore, picking up the coin.

“How d’ye do that? Every night ye’ve said ‘tails,’ and every night, tails it is!”

“Well, it’s your shilling, Ian. Dinna blame me.” He sat down on the bed platform and stretched himself pleasurably, then relented. “Look at Geordie’s nose.”

Ian flipped the shilling over in his fingers and held it to the light of the fire, squinting, then swore again. A tiny splotch of beeswax, so thin as to be invisible unless you were looking, ornamented the aristocratically prominent nose of George III, Rex Britannia.

“How did that get there?” Ian narrowed his eyes suspiciously at his uncle, but Jamie merely laughed and lay down.

“When ye were showing wee Jem how to spin a coin. Remember, he knocked the candlestick over; hot wax went everywhere.”

“Oh.” Ian sat looking at the coin in his hand for a moment, then shook his head, scraped the wax away with a thumbnail, and put the shilling away.

“Good night, Uncle Jamie,” he said, sliding into the furs on the ground with a sigh.

“Good night, Ian.”

He’d been ignoring his tiredness, holding it like Gideon, on a short rein. Now he dropped the reins and gave it leave to carry him off, his body relaxing into the comfort of the bed.

MacDonald, he reflected cynically, would be delighted. Jamie had planned on visits only to the two Cherokee villages closest to the Treaty Line, there to announce his new position, distribute modest gifts of whisky and tobacco—this last hastily borrowed from Tom Christie, who had fortunately purchased a hogshead of the weed on a seed-buying trip to Cross Creek—and inform the Cherokee that further largesse might be expected when he undertook ambassage to the more distant villages in the autumn.

He had been most cordially received in both villages—but in the second, Pigtown, several strangers had been visiting; young men in search of wives. They were from a separate band of Cherokee, called the Snowbird band, whose large village lay higher in the mountains.

One of the young men had been the nephew of Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning, headman of the Snowbird band, and had been exigent in pressing Jamie to return with him and his companions to their home village. Taking a hasty private inventory of his remaining whisky and tobacco, Jamie had agreed, and he and Ian had been most royally received there, as agents of His Majesty. The Snowbird had never been visited by an Indian agent before, and appeared most sensible of the honor—and prompt about seeing what advantages might accrue to themselves in consequence.

He thought Bird was the sort of man with whom he could do business, though—on various fronts.

That thought led him to belated recollection of Roger Mac and the new tenants. He'd had no time over the last few days to spare much worry there—but he doubted there was any cause for concern. Roger Mac was capable enough, though his shattered voice made him less certain than he should be. With Christie and Arch Bug, though…

He closed his eyes, the bliss of absolute fatigue stealing over him as his thoughts grew more disjointed.

A day more, maybe, then home in time to make the hay. Another malting, two maybe, before the cold weather. Slaughtering … could it be time at last to kill the damned white sow? No … the vicious creature was unbelievably fecund. What kind of boar had the balls to mate with her? he wondered dimly, and did she eat him, after? Wild boar … smoked hams, blood pudding …

He was just drifting down through the first layers of sleep when he felt a hand on his privates. Jerked out of drowsiness like a salmon out of a sea-loch, he clapped a hand to the intruder's, gripping tight. And elicited a faint giggle from his visitor.

Feminine fingers wiggled gently in his grasp, and the hand's fellow promptly took up operations in its stead. His first coherent thought was that the lassie would be an excellent baker, so good as she was at kneading.

Other thoughts followed rapidly on the heels of this absurdity, and he tried to grab the second hand. It playfully eluded him in the dark, poking and tweaking.

He groped for a polite protest in Cherokee, but came up with nothing but a handful of random phrases in English and Gaelic, none of them faintly suitable to the occasion.

The first hand was purposefully wriggling out of his grasp, eel-like. Reluctant to crush her fingers, he let go for an instant, and made a successful grab for her wrist.

"Ian!" he hissed, in desperation. "Ian, are ye there?" He couldn't see his nephew in the pool of darkness that filled the cabin, nor tell if he slept. There were no windows, and only the faintest light came from the dying coals.

"Ian!"

There was a stirring on the floor, bodies shifting, and he heard Rollo sneeze.

"What is it, Uncle?" He'd spoken in Gaelic, and Ian answered in the same language. The lad sounded calm, and not as though he'd just come awake.

"Ian, there is a woman in my bed," he said in Gaelic, trying to match his nephew's calm tone.

"There are two of them, Uncle Jamie." Ian sounded amused, damn him! "The other will be down by your feet. Waiting her turn."

That unnerved him, and he nearly lost his grip on the captive hand.

"Two of them! What do they think I am?"

The girl giggled again, leaned over, and bit him lightly on the chest.

"Christ!"

"Well, no, Uncle, they don't think you're Him," Ian said, obviously suppressing his own mirth. "They think you're the King. So to speak. You're his agent, so they're doing honor to His Majesty by sending you his women, aye?"

The second woman had uncovered his feet and was slowly stroking his soles with one finger. He was ticklish and would have found this bothersome, were he not so distracted by the first woman, with whom he was being compelled into a most undignified game of hide-the-sausage.

“Talk to them, Ian,” he said between clenched teeth, fumbling madly with his free hand, meanwhile forcing back the questing fingers of the captive hand—which were languidly stroking his ear—and wiggling his feet in a frantic effort to discourage the second lady’s attentions, which were growing bolder.

“Erm … what d’ye want me to say?” Ian inquired, switching back to English. His voice quivered slightly.

“Tell them I’m deeply sensible of the honor, but—gk!” Further diplomatic evasions were cut off by the sudden intrusion of someone’s tongue into his mouth, tasting strongly of onions and beer.

In the midst of his subsequent struggles, he was dimly aware that Ian had lost any sense of self-control and was lying on the floor giggling helplessly. It was filicide if you killed a son, he thought grimly; what was the word for assassinating a nephew?

“Madam!” he said, disengaging his mouth with difficulty. He seized the lady by the shoulders and rolled her off his body with enough force that she whooped with surprise, bare legs flying—Jesus, was she naked?

She was. Both of them were; his eyes adapted to the faint glow of the embers, he caught the shimmer of light from shoulders, breasts, and rounded thighs.

He sat up, gathering furs and blankets round him in a sort of hasty redoubt.

“Cease, the two of you!” he said severely in Cherokee. “You are beautiful, but I cannot lie with you.”

“No?” said one, sounding puzzled.

“Why not?” said the other.

“Ah … because there is an oath upon me,” he said, necessity producing inspiration. “I have sworn … sworn …” He groped for the proper word, but didn’t find it. Luckily, Ian leaped in at this point, with a stream of fluent Tsalagi, too fast to follow.

“Ooo,” breathed one girl, impressed. Jamie felt a distinct qualm.

“What in God’s name did ye tell them, Ian?”

“I told them the Great Spirit came to ye in a dream, Uncle, and told ye that ye mustn’t go with a woman until ye’d brought guns to all the Tsalagi.”

“Until I *what*?!”

“Well, it was the best I could think of in a hurry, Uncle,” Ian said defensively.

Hair-raising as the notion was, he had to admit it was effective; the two women were huddled together, whispering in awed tones, and had quite left off pestering him.

“Aye, well,” he said grudgingly. “I suppose it could be worse.” After all, even if the Crown were persuaded to provide guns, there were a damn lot of Tsalagi.

“Ye’re welcome, Uncle Jamie.” The laughter was gurgling just below the surface of his nephew’s voice, and emerged in a stifled snort.

“What?” he said testily.

“The one lady is saying it’s a disappointment to her, Uncle, because you’re verra nicely equipped. The other is more philosophical about it, though. She says they might have borne ye children, and the bairns might have red hair.” His nephew’s voice quivered.

“What’s wrong wi’ red hair, for God’s sake?”

“I dinna ken, quite, but I gather it’s not something ye want your bairn to be marked with, and ye can help it.”

“Well, fine,” he snapped. “No danger of it, is there? Can they not go home now?”

“It’s raining, Uncle Jamie,” Ian pointed out logically. It was; the wind had brought a patter of rain, and now the main shower arrived, beating on the roof with a steady thrum, drops hissing into the hot embers through the smoke hole. “Ye wouldna send them out in the wet, would ye? Besides, ye just said ye couldna lie wi’ them, not that ye meant them to go.”

He broke off to say something interrogative to the ladies, who replied with eager confidence. Jamie thought they’d said—they had. Rising with the grace of young cranes, the two of them clambered naked as jaybirds back into his bed, patting and stroking him with murmurs of admiration—though sedulously avoiding his private parts—pressed him down into the furs, and snuggled down on either side of him, warm bare flesh pressed cozily against him.

He opened his mouth, then shut it again, finding absolutely nothing to say in any of the languages he knew.

He lay on his back, rigid and breathing shallowly. His cock throbbed indignantly, clearly meaning to stay up and torment him all night in revenge for its abuse. Small chortling noises came from the pile of furs on the ground, interspersed with hiccuping snorts. He thought it was maybe the first time he'd heard Ian truly laugh since his return.

Praying for fortitude, he drew a long, slow breath, and closed his eyes, hands folded firmly across his ribs, elbows pressed to his sides.

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15

STAKIT TO DROON

Roger walked out onto the terrace at River Run, feeling pleasantly exhausted. After three weeks of strenuous work, he'd gathered the new tenants from the highways and byways of Cross Creek and Campbelton, become acquainted with all the heads of households, managed to equip them at least minimally for the journey, in terms of food, blankets, and shoes—and got them all collected in one place, firmly overcoming their tendency to panic and stray. They'd start in the morning for Fraser's Ridge, and not a moment too soon.

He looked out over the terrace in satisfaction, toward the meadow that lay beyond Jocasta Cameron Innes's stables. They were all bedded down in a temporary camp there: twenty-two families, with seventy-six individual souls, four mules, two ponies, fourteen dogs, three pigs, and God only knew how many chickens, kittens, and pet birds, bundled into wicker cages for carrying. He had all the names on a list—animals excluded—dog-eared and crumpled in his pocket. He had several other lists there, as well, scribbled over, crossed out, and amended to the point of illegibility. He felt like a walking Book of Deuteronomy. He also felt like a very large drink.

This was luckily forthcoming; Duncan Innes, Jocasta's husband, had returned from his own day's labor and was sitting on the terrace, in company with a cut-glass decanter, from which the rays of the sinking sun struck a mellow amber glow.

“How is it, then, *a charaid*?” Duncan greeted him genially, gesturing toward one of the basketwork chairs. “Ye’ll take a dram, perhaps?”

“I will, and thanks.”

He sank gratefully into the chair, which creaked amiably beneath his weight. He accepted the glass Duncan handed him, and tossed it back with a brief *“Slàinte.”*

The whisky burned through the strictures that bound his throat, making him cough, but seeming suddenly to open things, so that the constant faint sense of choking began to leave him. He sipped, grateful.

“Ready to go, are they?” Duncan nodded toward the meadow, where the smoke of campfires hung in a low golden haze.

“Ready as they’ll ever be. Poor things,” Roger added with some sympathy.

Duncan raised one shaggy brow.

“Fish out of water,” Roger amplified, holding out his glass to accept the proffered refill. “The women are terrified, and so are the men, but they hide it better. Ye’d think I was taking them all to be slaves on a sugar plantation.”

Duncan nodded. “Or sell them to Rome to clean the Pope’s shoon,” he said wryly. “I misdoubt most of them had ever smelt a Catholic before embarking. And from the wrinkled noses, they dinna care so much for the scent now, I think. Do they so much as tak’ a dram now and then, d’ye ken?”

“Only medicinally, and only if in actual danger of death, I think.” Roger took a slow, ambrosial swallow and closed his eyes, feeling the whisky warm his throat and curl in his chest like a purring cat. “Meet Hiram yet, did you? Hiram Crombie, the head man of this lot.”

“The wee sour-drap wi’ the stick up his arse? Aye, I met him.” Duncan grinned, his drooping mustache lifting at the end. “He’ll be at supper with us. Best have another.”

“I will, thanks,” said Roger, extending his glass. “Though they’re none of them much for hedonistic pleasure, so far as I can tell. Ye’d think they were all still Covenanters to the bone. The Frozen Chosen, aye?"

Duncan laughed immoderately at that.

"Well, it's no like it was in my grandsire's day," he said, recovering and reaching across for the decanter. "And thank the Lord for that." He rolled his eyes, grimacing.

"Your grandsire was a Covenanter, then?"

"God, yes." Shaking his head, Duncan poured a goodly measure, first for Roger, then himself. "A fierce auld bastard, he was. Not that he'd no cause, mind. His sister was stakit to droon, ken?"

"Was—Christ." He bit his tongue in penance, but was too interested to pay it much mind. "Ye mean—executed by drowning?"

Duncan nodded, eyes on his glass, then took a good gulp and held it for a moment in his mouth before swallowing.

"Margaret," he said. "Her name was Margaret. Eighteen she was, at the time. Her father and her brother—my grandfather, aye?—they'd fled, after the battle at Dunbar; hid in the hills. The troops came a-hunting them, but she wouldna say where they'd gone—and she had a Bible by her. They tried to make her recant then, but she wouldna do that, either—the women on that side o' the family, ye might as well talk to a stone," he said, shaking his head. "There's no moving them. But they dragged her doon to the shore, her and an auld Covenanter woman from the village, stripped them, and tied them both to stakes at the tide line. Waited there, the crowd o' them, for the water to come in."

He took another swallow, not waiting for the taste of it.

"The auld woman went under first; they'd tied her closer to the water—I suppose thinking Margaret would give in, if she saw the auld woman die." He grunted, shaking his head. "But nay, not a bit of it. The tide rose, and the waves came up ower her. She choked, and she coughed, and her hair loose, hanging over her face, plastered doon like kelp, when the water went out.

"My mither saw it," he explained, lifting his glass. "She was but seven at the time, but she never forgot. After the first wave, she said, there was the space of three breaths, and the wave came ower Margaret again. And then out … three breaths … and in again once more. And ye couldna see anything then but the swirl of her hair, floating on the tide."

He raised his glass an inch higher, and Roger lifted his own in involuntary toast. "Jesus," he said, and it was no blasphemy.

The whisky burned his throat as it went down and he breathed deep, giving thanks to God for the gift of air. Three breaths. It was the single malt of Islay, and the iodine taste of sea and kelp was strong and smoky in his lungs.

"May God give her peace," he said, his voice rasping.

Duncan nodded, and reached again for the decanter.

"I would suppose she earned it," he said. "Though they"—he pointed with his chin toward the meadow—"they'd say 'twas none of her doing at all; God chose her for salvation and chose the English to be damned; nay more to be said on the matter."

The light was fading and the campfires began to glow in the dimness of the meadow beyond the stables. The smoke of them reached Roger's nose, the scent warm and homelike, but nonetheless adding to the burn in his throat.

"I've no found sae much worth dyin' for, myself," Duncan said reflectively, then gave one of his quick, rare smiles. "But my grandsire, he'd say it only meant I was chosen to be damned. *'By the decree of God, for His everlasting glory, some men and angels are predestined unto everlasting life, and others fore-ordained to everlasting death.'* He'd say that, whenever anyone spoke of Margaret."

Roger nodded, recognizing the statement from the Westminster Confession. When was that—1646? 1647? A generation—or two—before Duncan's grandfather.

"I expect it was easier for him to think her death was God's will, and nothing to do with him," Roger said, not without sympathy. "Ye'll not believe it yourself, then? Predestination, I mean."

He asked with true curiosity. The Presbyterians of his own time did still espouse predestination as a doctrine—but, a bit more flexible in attitude, tended to soft-pedal the notion of predestined damnation, and not to think too much on the idea that every detail of life was so predestined. Himself? God knew.

Duncan lifted his shoulders, the right rising higher and making him seem momentarily twisted. "God knows," he said, and laughed. He shook his head, and drained his glass again.

"Nay, I think I don't. But I wouldna say as much before Hiram Crombie—nor yet yon Christie." Duncan lifted his chin toward the meadow, where he could see two dark figures, walking side by side toward the house. Arch Bug's tall, stooped frame was easy to recognize, as was Tom Christie's shorter, blocky build. He looked pugnacious even in silhouette, Roger thought, making short, sharp gestures as he walked, clearly arguing something with Arch.

"There'd be wicked fights ower it sometimes, in Ardsmuir," Duncan said, watching the progress of the two figures. "The Catholics took it amiss, to be told they were damned. And Christie and his wee band took the greatest pleasure in telling them so." His shoulders shook a little in suppressed laughter, and Roger wondered just how much whisky Duncan had had before he came out to the terrace. He'd never seen the older man so jovial.

"*Mac Dubh* put a stop to it, finally, when he made us all be Freemasons," he added, leaning forward to pour a fresh glass. "But a few men were nearly killed, before that." He lifted the decanter inquiringly in Roger's direction.

Looking forward to a supper including both Tom Christie and Hiram Crombie, Roger accepted.

As Duncan leaned toward him to pour, still smiling, the last of the sun shone across his weathered face. Roger caught a glimpse of a faint white line through Duncan's upper lip, half-visible beneath the hair, and realized quite suddenly why Duncan wore a long mustache—an unusual adornment, in a time when most men were clean-shaven.

He would not have spoken, likely, save for the whisky and the mood of strange alliance between them—two Protestants, amazingly bound to Catholics and bemused at the strange tides of fate that had washed over them; two men left quite alone by the misfortunes of life, and now surprised to find themselves the heads of households, holding the lives of strangers in their hands.

"Your lip, Duncan." He touched his own mouth briefly. "What did that?"

"Och, that?" Duncan touched his own lip, surprised. "Nay, I was born wi' a harelip, or so they said. I dinna recall it, myself; it was mended when I was nay more than a week old."

It was Roger's turn to be surprised.

"Who mended it?"

Duncan shrugged, one-shouldered this time.

"A traveling healer, my mither said. She'd quite resigned herself to losin' me, she said, because I couldna suck, of course. She and my aunties all took it in turn to drap milk into my mouth from a rag, but she said I'd wasted nearly to a wee skeleton, when this charmer came by the village."

He rubbed a knuckle self-consciously over his lip, smoothing the thick, grizzled hairs of his mustache.

"My faither gave him six herrings and a mull o' snuff, and he stitched it up, and gave my mither a bit o' some ointment to put on the wound. Well, and so …" He shrugged again, with a lopsided smile.

"Perhaps I was destined to live, after all. My grandsire said the Lord had chosen me—though God only kens what for."

Roger was conscious of a faint ripple of unease, dulled though it was by whisky.

A Highland charmer who could repair a harelip? He took another drink, trying not to stare, but covertly examining Duncan's face. He supposed it was possible; the scar was just barely visible—if you knew to look—under Duncan's mustache, but didn't extend up into the nostril. It must have been a fairly simple harelip, then, not one of the hideous cases like that one he'd read about—unable to look away from the page for horror—in Claire's big black doctor's book, where Dr. Rawlings had described a child born not only with a split lip, but missing the roof of its mouth, and most of the center of its face, as well.

There had been no drawing, thank God, but the visual picture conjured up by Rawlings's spare description had been bad enough.

He closed his eyes and breathed deep, inhaling the whisky's perfume through his pores.

Was it possible? Perhaps. People did *do* surgery now, bloodstained, crude, and agonizing as it was. He'd seen Murray MacLeod, the apothecary from Campbelton, expertly stitch up a man's cheek, laid open when the man was trampled by a sheep. Would it be any more difficult to stitch a child's mouth?

He thought of Jemmy's lip, tender as a blossom, pierced by needle and black thread, and shuddered.

"Are ye cold, then, *a charaid*? Shall we go in?" Duncan got his feet under him, as though to rise, but Roger waved the older man back.

"Ah, no. Goose walking on my grave." He smiled, and accepted another drop to keep the nonexistent evening chill away. And yet he felt the hairs on his arms rise, just a little. *Could there be another one—more—like us?*

There had been, he knew. His own multiple-times great-grandmother, Geillis, for one. The man whose skull Claire had found, complete with silver fillings in its teeth, for another. But had Duncan met another, in some remote Highland village half a century before?

Christ, he thought, freshly unnerved. *How often does it happen? And what happens to them?*

Before they had quite reached the bottom of the decanter, he heard footsteps behind him, and the rustle of silk.

"Mrs. Cameron." He rose at once, the world tilting just a little, and took his hostess's hand, bowing over it.

Her long hand touched his face, as was her habit, her sensitive fingertips confirming his identity.

"Och, there ye are, Jo. Had a good journey wi' the wee lad, did ye?" Duncan struggled to rise, handicapped by whisky and his single arm, but Ulysses, Jocasta's butler, had materialized silently out of the twilight behind his mistress in time to move her wicker chair into place. She sank into it without so much as putting a hand out to see that it was there, Roger noticed; she simply knew it would be.

Roger viewed the butler with interest, wondering who Jocasta had bribed to get him back. Accused—and very likely guilty of—the death of a British naval officer on Jocasta's property, Ulysses had been forced to flee the colony. But Lieutenant Wolff had not been considered a great loss to the navy—and Ulysses was indispensable to Jocasta Cameron. All things might not be possible with gold—but he was willing to bet that Jocasta Cameron hadn't yet met a circumstance she couldn't mend with money, political connections, or guile.

"Oh, aye," she replied to her husband, smiling and putting out a hand to him. " 'Twas such fun to show him off, husband! We'd a wonderful luncheon with old Mrs. Forbes and her daughter, and the wee bairn sang a song and charmed them all. Mrs. Forbes had the Montgomery lasses in, as well, and Miss Ogilvie, and we had wee lamb cutlets wi' raspberry sauce and fried apples and—oh, is that you, Mr. Christie? Do come and join us!" She raised her voice a little, and her face, appearing to look expectantly into the gloom over Roger's shoulder.

"Mrs. Cameron. Your servant, madam." Christie stepped up onto the terrace, making a courtly bow that was no less punctilious for the fact that its recipient was blind. Arch Bug followed him, bowing in turn over Jocasta's hand, and making a genial noise in his throat by way of greeting.

Chairs were brought out, more whisky, a plate of savories appeared as by magic, candles were lit—and suddenly it was a party, echoing on a higher plane the sense of slightly nervous festivity taking place in the meadow below. There was music in the distance; the sound of a tin whistle, playing a jig.

Roger let it all wash over him, enjoying the brief sense of relaxation and irresponsibility. Just for tonight, there was no need to worry; everyone was gathered, safe, fed, and prepared for the morrow's journey.

He needn't even trouble to keep up his end of the conversation; Tom Christie and Jocasta were enthusiastically discussing the literary scene in Edinburgh and a book he'd never heard of, with Duncan, looking so mellow that he might slide out of his chair any minute, putting in the occasional remark, and old Arch—where was Arch? Oh, there; gone back toward the meadow, having doubtless thought of some last minute thing he must tell someone.

He blessed Jamie Fraser for his forethought in sending Arch and Tom with him. Between the two of them, they'd saved him from any number of blunders, managed the ten thousand necessary details, and eased the fears of the new tenants regarding this latest leap into the unknown.

He took a deep, contented breath of air scented with the homely smells of campfires in the distance and roasting dinner near at hand—and belatedly recalled the one small detail whose welfare was still his exclusive concern.

Excusing himself, he made his way into the house, and discovered Jem down below in the main kitchen, cozily ensconced in the corner of a settle, eating bread pudding with melted butter and maple syrup on it.

"That's never your dinner, is it?" he asked, sitting down beside his son.

"Uh-huh. Want some, Daddy?" Jem extended a dripping spoon upward toward him, and he bent hastily to take the offered mouthful before it fell off. It was delicious, bursting-sweet and creamy on the tongue.

"Mmm," he said, swallowing. "Well, let's not tell Mummy or Grannie, shall we? They've this odd prejudice toward meat and vegetables."

Jem nodded, agreeable, and offered him another spoonful. They consumed the bowl together in a companionable silence, after which Jem crawled into his lap, and leaning a sticky face against his chest, fell sound asleep.

Servants bustled to and fro around them, smiling kindly now and then. He should, he thought vaguely, get up. Dinner would be being served in a moment—he saw the platters of roasted duck and mutton being skillfully laid out, bowls mounded with heaps of fluffy, steaming rice soaked with gravy, and a huge sallet of greens being tossed with vinegar.

Filled with whisky, bread pudding, and contentment, though, he lingered, putting off from moment to moment the necessity of parting from Jem and ending the sweet peace of holding his sleeping son.

"Mister Roger? I take him, shall I?" said a soft voice. He looked up from an examination of Jem's hair, which had bits of bread pudding stuck in it, to see Phaedre, Jocasta's body servant, stooping before him, hands held out to receive the boy.

"I wash him, put him to his bed, sir," she said, her oval face as soft as her voice as she looked at Jem.

"Oh. Yes, sure. Thanks." Roger sat up, Jem in his arms, and rose carefully, holding Jem's considerable weight. "Here—I'll carry him up for you."

He followed the slave up the narrow stairs from the kitchen, admiring—in a purely abstract and aesthetic sort of way—the grace of her carriage. How old was she? he wondered. Twenty, twenty-two? Would Jocasta allow her to marry? She must have admirers, surely. But he knew how valuable she was to Jocasta, too—seldom out of her mistress's presence. Not easy to reconcile that with a home and family of her own.

At the top of the stair, she stopped and turned to take Jem from him; he surrendered his limp burden with reluctance, but also with some relief. It was stifling-hot down below, and his shirt was damp with sweat where Jem had pressed against him.

"Mister Roger?" Phaedre's voice stopped him, as he was about to take his leave. She was looking at him over Jem's shoulder, eyes hesitant beneath the white curve of her head scarf.

"Aye?"

The thump of feet coming up the stairs made him move, narrowly avoiding Oscar, charging upstairs with an empty platter under his arm, evidently bound for the summer kitchen, where the fish were being fried. Oscar grinned at Roger as he passed, and blew a kiss toward Phaedre, whose lips tightened at the gesture.

She made a slight motion with her head, and Roger followed her down the hall, away from the bustle of the kitchen. She stopped near the door that led out to the stables, glancing round to be sure they were not overheard.

"I maybe shouldn't say nothin', sir—may be as it *is* nothin'. But I'm thinkin' I should tell you, anyway."

He nodded, shoving back the damp hair at his temple. The door stood open, and there was a little breeze here, thank God.

"We was in the town, sir, this morning, at Mr. Benjamin's warehouse, you know the one? Down by the river."

He nodded again, and she licked her lips.

"Master Jem, he got restless and went to pokin' round, whilst the mistress talked with Mr. Benjamin. I followed him, seein' as he falls into no trouble, and so I was right there when the man come in."

"Aye? Which man was this?"

She shook her head, dark eyes serious.

"I dunno, sir. Was a big man, tall as you. Light-haired; he wasn't wearin' no wig. Was a gentleman, though." By which, he assumed, she meant the man was well-dressed.

"And?"

"He looks round, sees Mr. Benjamin a-talkin' with Miss Jo, and he takes a step to the side, like as he don't want no one takin' notice he there. But then he sees Mr. Jem, and he get a sharp kind of look on his face."

She pulled Jem a little closer, recalling.

"I ain't likin' that look, sir, tell you truly. I see him start toward Jemmy and I go quick and pick the lad up, same as I got him now. The man look surprised, then like he think something's funny; he smile at Jem and ax him who his daddy be?"

She gave a quick smile, patting Jem's back.

"Folk ax him that all the time, sir, downtown, and he speak right up, say his daddy Roger MacKenzie, same as he always do. This man, he laugh and ruffle Jem's hair—they all do that, sir, he gots such pretty hair. Then he say, 'Is he, then, my wee maneen, is he indeed?' "

Phaedre was a natural mimic. She caught the Irish lilt of it perfectly, and the sweat turned cold on Roger's skin.

“And then what happened?” he demanded. “What did he do?” Unconsciously, he glanced over her shoulder through the open door, searching the night outside for danger.

Phaedre hunched her shoulders, shivering slightly.

“He ain’t *do* nothin’, sir. But he look at Jem real close, and then at me, and he smile, right in my eyes. I ain’t likin’ that smile, sir, not one bit.” She shook her head. “But then I hear Mr. Benjamin lift his voice behind me, callin’ out to say does the gentleman want him? And the man turn quick-like on his heel, and be gone out the door, just like *that.*” She clutched Jem with one arm, and snapped the fingers of her free hand briefly.

“I see.” The bread pudding had formed a solid mass that lay like iron in his stomach. “Did you say anything to your mistress about this man?”

She shook her head, solemn.

“No, sir. He ain’t really done nothin’, like I say. But he trouble me, sir, and so I study on it, comin’ home, and think finally, well, I best tell you, sir, and I gets the chance.”

“Ye did right,” he said. “Thank you, Phaedre.” He fought the urge to take Jem from her, hold him tight. “Would ye—when ye’ve got him to bed, will ye stay with him? Just until I come up. I’ll tell your mistress I asked you to.”

Her dark eyes met his with perfect understanding, and she nodded.

“Aye, sir. I keep him safe.” She bobbed the shadow of a curtsy, and went up the stairs toward the room he shared with Jem, humming something soft and rhythmic to the boy.

He breathed slowly, trying to master the overwhelming urge to seize a horse from the stables, ride to Cross Creek, and search the place, going from house to house in the dark until he found Stephen Bonnet.

“Right,” he said aloud. “And then what?” His fists curled up involuntarily, knowing quite well what to do, even as his mind acknowledged the futility of such a course.

He fought down rage and helplessness, the last of the whisky lighting his blood, throbbing in his temples. He stepped abruptly through the open door into the night, for it was full dark now. From this side of the house, the meadow was invisible, but he could still smell the smoke of their fires, and catch the faint trill of music on the air.

He'd known Bonnet would come again, one day. Down beside the lawn, the white bulk of Hector Cameron's mausoleum was a pale smear on the night. And safe inside it, hidden in the coffin that waited for Hector's wife, Jocasta, lay a fortune in Jacobite gold, the long-held secret of River Run.

Bonnet knew the gold existed, suspected it was on the plantation. He had tried for it once before, and failed. He was not a careful man, Bonnet—but he *was* persistent.

Roger felt his bones strain in his flesh, urgent with desire to hunt and kill the man who had raped his wife, threatened his family. But there were seventy-six people depending on him—no, seventy-seven. Vengeance warred with responsibility—and, most reluctantly, gave way.

He breathed slow and deep, feeling the knot of the rope scar tighten in his throat. No. He had to go, see the new tenants safe. The thought of sending them with Arch and Tom, while he remained behind to search for Bonnet, was tempting—but the job was his; he couldn't abandon it for the sake of a time-consuming—and likely futile—personal quest.

Nor could he leave Jem unprotected.

He must tell Duncan, though; Duncan could be trusted to take steps for the protection of River Run, to send word to the authorities in Cross Creek, to make inquiries.

And Roger would make sure that Jem was safe away, too, come morning, held before him on his saddle, kept in his sight every inch of the way to the sanctuary of the mountains.

"Who's your daddy?" he muttered, and a fresh surge of rage pulsed through his veins. "God damn it, *I* am, you bastard!"

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PART THREE

To Every Thing There Is a Season

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16

LE MOT JUSTE

August 1773

“Ye’re smiling to yourself,” Jamie said in my ear. “Nice, was it?”

I turned my head and opened my eyes, finding them on a level with his mouth—which was smiling, too.

“Nice,” I said thoughtfully, tracing the line of his wide lower lip with the tip of one finger. “Are you being deliberately modest, or are you hoping to inspire me to raptures of praise by means of classic understatement?”

The mouth widened further, and his teeth closed gently on my questing finger for a moment before releasing it.

“Oh, modesty, to be sure,” he said. “If I’d hopes of inspiring ye to raptures, it wouldna be with my words, now, would it?”

One hand ran lightly down my back in illustration.

“Well, the words *help,*” I said.

“They do?”

“Yes. Just now, I was actually trying to rank ‘I love you, I like you, I worship you, I have to have my cock inside you,’ in terms of their relative sincerity.”

“Did I say that?” he said, sounding slightly startled.

“Yes. Weren’t you listening?”

“No,” he admitted. “I meant every word of it, though.” His hand cupped one buttock, weighing it appreciatively. “Still do, come to that.”

“What, even the last one?” I laughed and rubbed my forehead gently against his chest, feeling his jaw rest snugly on top of my head.

“Oh, aye,” he said, gathering me firmly against him with a sigh. “I will say the flesh requires a bit of supper and a wee rest before I think of doin’ it again, but the spirit is always willing. God, ye have the sweetest fat wee bum. Only seeing it makes me want to give it ye again directly. It’s lucky ye’re wed to a decrepit auld man, Sassenach, or ye’d be on your knees with your arse in the air this minute.”

He smelled delectably of road dust and dried sweat and the deep musk of a man who has just enjoyed himself thoroughly.

“Nice to be missed,” I said contentedly into the small space beneath his arm. “I missed you, too.”

My breath tickled him and his skin shivered suddenly, like a horse shedding flies. He shifted a bit, turning me so that my head fit into the hollow of his shoulder, and sighed in matching content.

“Well, so. I see the place is still standing.”

It was. It was late afternoon, the windows open, and the sun came low through the trees to make shifting patterns on the walls and linen sheets, so that we floated in a bower of murmuring shadow leaves.

“The house is standing, the barley is mostly in, and nothing’s died,” I said, settling myself comfortably to report. Now that we’d taken care of the most important thing, he’d want to know how the Ridge had fared in his absence.

“Mostly?” he said, neatly catching the dicey bit. “What happened? It rained, aye, but the barley should all have been in a week before.”

“Not rain. Grasshoppers.” I shuddered in memory. A cloud of the nasty goggle-eyed things had come whirring through, just at the end of the barley harvest. I’d gone up to my garden to pick greens, only to discover said greens seething with wedge-shaped bodies and shuffling, clawed feet, my lettuces and cabbages gnawed to ragged nubbins and the morning-glory vine on the palisade hanging in shreds.

"I ran and got Mrs. Bug and Lizzie, and we drove them off with brooms—but then they all rose up in a big cloud and headed up through the wood to the field beyond the Green Spring. They settled in the barley; you could hear the chewing for miles. It sounded like giants walking through rice." Goosebumps of revulsion rose on my shoulders, and Jamie rubbed my skin absently, his hand large and warm.

"Mmphm. Was it only the one field they got, then?"

"Oh, yes." I took a deep breath, still smelling the smoke. "We torched the field, and burnt them alive."

His body jerked in surprise, and he looked down at me.

"What? Who thought of that?"

"I did," I said, not without pride. In cold-blooded retrospect, it was a sensible thing to have done; there were other fields at risk, not only of barley, but of ripening corn, wheat, potatoes, and hay—to say nothing of the garden patches most families depended on.

In actual fact, it had been a decision made in boiling rage—sheer, bloody-minded revenge for the destruction of my garden. I would happily have ripped the wings off each insect and stamped on the remains—burning them had been nearly as good, though.

It was Murdo Lindsay's field; slow in both thought and action, Murdo hadn't had time to react properly to my announcement that I meant to fire the barley, and was still standing on the stoop of his cabin, mouth hanging open, as Brianna, Lizzie, Marsali, Mrs. Bug, and I ran round the field with armsful of faggots, lighting them from torches and hurling the blazing sticks as far as we could out into the sea of ripe, dry grain.

The dry grass went up with a crackle, and then a roar, as the fire took hold. Confused by the heat and smoke of a dozen fires, the grasshoppers flew up like sparks, igniting as their wings caught fire and vanishing into the rising column of smoke and whirling ash.

"Of course, it *would* be just then that Roger chose to arrive with the new tenants," I said, repressing an urge to laugh inappropriately at the memory. "Poor things. It was getting dark, and here they all were, standing in the woods with their bundles and children, watching this—this bally conflagration going on, and all of us dancing round barefoot with our shifts kirtled up, hooting like gibbons and covered with soot."

Jamie covered his eyes with one hand, plainly visualizing the scene. His chest shook briefly, and a wide grin spread beneath the hand.

"Oh, God. They must ha' thought Roger Mac had brought them to hell. Or to a coven meeting, at least."

A bubble of guilty laughter was forcing itself up from under my ribs.

"They did. Oh, Jamie—the looks on their faces!" I lost my grip and buried my own face in his chest. We shook together for a moment, laughing almost soundlessly.

"I *did* try to make them welcome," I said, snorting a little. "We gave them supper, and found them all places to sleep—as many as we could fit in the house, the rest spread between Brianna's cabin, the stable, and the barn. I came down quite late at night, though—I couldn't sleep, for all the excitement—and found a dozen of them praying in the kitchen."

They had been standing in a circle near the hearth, hands linked and heads bowed reverently. All the heads had snapped up at my appearance, eyes showing white in thin, haggard faces. They'd stared at me in total silence, and one of the women had let go the hand of the man beside her to hide her own hand under her apron. In another time and place, I should have thought she was reaching for some weapon—and perhaps she was, at that; I was fairly sure she was making the sign of the horns beneath the shelter of the ragged cloth.

I'd already discovered that only a few of them spoke English. I asked in my halting Gaelic whether they needed anything? They stared at me as though I had two heads, then after a moment, one of the men, a wizened creature with a thin mouth, had shaken his head the barest inch.

"Then they went right back to their praying, leaving me to skulk off back to bed."

"Ye went down in your shift?"

"Well … yes. I didn't expect anyone to be awake at that hour."

"Mmphm." His knuckles grazed my breast, and I could tell exactly what he was thinking. My summer night rail was thin, worn linen, and yes, all right, dammit, I supposed one *could* see through it a bit in the light, but the kitchen had been lit only by the ruddy glow of a smoored hearth.

"I dinna suppose ye went down in a proper nightcap, Sassenach?" Jamie asked, running a thoughtful hand through my hair. I'd loosened it to go to bed with him, and it was writhing off merrily in all directions, à la Medusa.

"Of course not. I had it plaited, though," I protested. "Quite respectable!"

"Oh, quite," he agreed, grinning, and pushing his fingers up into the wild mass of my hair, cradled my head in his hands and kissed me. His lips were chapped from wind and sun, but agreeably soft. He hadn't shaved since his departure and his beard was short and curly, springy to the touch.

"Well, so. They're sorted now, I expect? The tenants?" His lips brushed my cheek, and nibbled gently at my ear. I inhaled deeply.

"Ah. Oh. Yes. Arch Bug took them off in the morning; he's got them parceled out with families all over the Ridge, and already working on …" My train of thought temporarily derailed, and I closed my fingers by reflex in the muscle of his chest.

"And ye told Murdo I'd make it right with him, of course. About the barley?"

"Yes, of course." My drifting attention snagged momentarily and I laughed. "He just stared at me, and then nodded in a dazed sort of way, and said, oh, just as Himself liked, to be sure. I don't know if he realized even then why I'd burnt his field; perhaps he just thought I'd taken a sudden fancy to set fire to his barley."

Jamie laughed, too—a most unsettling sensation, as he had his teeth fixed in my earlobe.

"Um," I said faintly, feeling the tickle of red beard on my neck and the very warm, firm flesh beneath my palm. "The Indians. How did you manage with the Cherokee?"

"Fine."

He moved suddenly, rolling over on top of me. He was very big, and *very* warm, and he smelled of desire, strong and sharp. The leafy shadows moved across his face and shoulders, dappled the bed and the white skin of my thighs, opened wide.

"I like ye fine, Sassenach," he murmured in my ear. "I can see ye there, half-naked in your shift and your hair down, curling over your breest.… I love you. I wor—"

"What was that about a rest and supper?"

His hands were worming themselves under me, cupping my buttocks, squeezing, his breath soft and hot on my neck.

"I *have* to have my—"

"But—"

"Now, Sassenach." He rose up abruptly, kneeling on the bed before me. There was a faint smile on his face, but his eyes were dark blue and intent. He cupped his heavy balls in one hand, the thumb moving up and down his exigent member in a slow and thoughtful manner.

"On your knees, *a nighean,*" he said softly. "Now."

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17

THE LIMITS OF POWER

From James Fraser, Esq., Fraser's Ridge
to Lord John Grey of Mount Josiah Plantation

August 14, 1773

My lord—

I write to inform you of my new Office, viz, *that of Indian Agent to the Crown, by Appointment to the Southern Department under John Stuart.*

I was originally of two Minds regarding Acceptance of this Appointment, but found my Views made more singular by Reason of a Visit by Mr. Richard Brown, a distant Neighbor, and his Brother. I expect that Mr. Higgins will already have given you an Account of their so-called Committee of Safety, and its immediate Object of arresting him.

Have you encountered such ad hoc *Bodies in Virginia? I think perhaps your Situation is not so unsettled as is our own, or that in Boston, where Mr. Higgins also reports their Presence. I hope it is not.*

I think a Person of Sense must deplore these committees in Principle. Their stated Purpose is to provide Protection from Vagabonds and Banditti, and to arrest Criminals in those Areas where no Sheriff or Constable is available. With no Law to regulate their Behavior save Self-interest, though, plainly there is

Nothing to prevent an irregular Militia from becoming more of a Threat to the Citizenry than the Dangers from which it offers to preserve them.

The Appeal is plain, though, particularly in such Case as we find ourselves here, so remotely situated. The nearest Courthouse is—or was—three days' Ride, and in the constant Unrest that has followed the Regulation, Matters have decayed even from this unsatisfactory State. The Governor and his Council are in constant Conflict with the Assembly, the Circuit Court has effectually ceased to exist, Judges are no longer appointed, and there is no Sheriff of Surry County at present, the latest Holder of that Office having resigned under Threat of having his House fired.

The Sheriffs of Orange and Rowan Counties still boast Office—but their Corruption is so well known that no one may depend upon them, save those whose Interest is invested in them.

We hear frequent reports these Days of House-burnings, Assaults, and similar Alarums in the Wake of the recent War of Regulation. Governor Tryon officially pardoned some of those involved in the Conflict, but did nothing to prevent local Retribution against them; his Successor is still less able to deal with such Events—which are in any Case occurring in the Backcountry, far from his Palace in New Bern and thus the more easily ignored. (In all Justice, the Man doubtless has Troubles nearer at Hand to deal with.)

Still, while Settlers here are accustomed to defend themselves from the normal Threats of the Wilderness, the Occurrence of such random Attacks as these—and the Possibility of Irruption of the Indians, so close to the Treaty Line—is sufficient to unnerve them, and cause them to greet with Relief the Appearance of any Body willing to undertake the Role of public Protection. Hence the Vigilantes of the Committees are welcomed—at least to begin with.

I give you so much Detail by way of explaining my Thoughts regarding the Appointment. My friend Major MacDonald (late of the 32nd Cavalry) had told me that should I ultimately decline to *become an Indian Agent, he would approach Mr. Richard Brown, Brown being in the way of doing substantial Trade with the Cherokee, and thus in a position of Acquaintance and presumed Trust that would predispose his Acceptance by the Indians.*

My Acquaintance with Mr. Brown and his Brother inclines me to regard this Prospect with Alarm. With such Rise in Influence as such an Appointment would bring, Brown's Stature in this unsettled Region might shortly become so great that no man could easily oppose him in any Venture—and that, I think, is dangerous.

My Son-in-law astutely observes that a Man's sense of Morality tends to decrease as his Power increases, and I suspect that the Brothers Brown possess relatively little of the Former to begin with. It may be mere Hubris on my part, to assume that I have more. I have seen the corrosive Effects of Power upon a Man's Soul—and I have felt its Burden, as you will understand, having borne it so often yourself. Still, if it is a choice between myself and Richard Brown, I suppose I must resort to the old Scottish Adage that the Devil you ken is better than the Devil you don't.

I am likewise made uneasy at the Thought of the long Absences from Home which my new Duties must require. And yet I cannot in Conscience allow the People under my Dominion to be subject to the Vagaries and possible Injuries of Brown's Committee.

I could of course convene my own such Committee—I think you would urge such a Course—but will not. Beyond the Inconvenience and Expense of such a Move, it would be Tantamount to declaring open War with the Browns, and I think that not prudent, not if I must be frequently away from home, leaving my Family unprotected. This new Appointment, though, will extend my own Influence, and—I trust—put some Limit to the Browns' Ambitions.

So having reached this Decision, I sent Word at once to accept the Appointment, and essayed my first Visit to the Cherokee in the Office of Indian Agent during the last Month. My initial

Reception was most Cordial, and I hope my Relations with the Villages will remain so.

I shall visit the Cherokee again in the Autumn. If you should have any Matters of Business that my new Office might assist, send to me regarding them, and rest assured that I shall make every Effort on your Behalf.

To more domestic Matters. Our small Population has nearly doubled, as the Result of an Influx of Settlers newly arrived from Scotland. While most desirable, this Incursion has caused no little Turmoil, the Newcomers being Fisher-folk from the Coast. To these, the Mountain Wilderness is full of Threat and Mystery, such Threats and Mysteries being personified by Pigs and Plowshares.

(With regard to Pigs, I am not sure but that I share their Views. The white Sow has lately taken up Residence beneath the Foundation of my House and there engages in such debauches that our Dinner is disturbed daily by hellish Noises resembling the Sounds of Souls in Torment. These Souls apparently being torn Limb from Limb and devoured by Demons beneath our Feet.)

Since I speak of Matters hellish, I must observe that our Newcomers are also, alas, stern Sons of the Covenant, to whom a Papist such as myself presents himself as one fully furnished with Horns and Tail. You will recall one Thomas Christie, I think, from Ardsmuir? By comparison of these stiff-necked Gentlemen, Mr. Christie appears the Soul of compassionate Generosity.

I had not thought to thank Providence for the Fact that my Son-in-law is Presbyterian by inclination, but I see now how true it is that the Almighty does indeed have Designs beyond the Ken of us poor mortals. While even Roger MacKenzie is a sadly depraved Libertine by their Lights, the new Tenants are at least able to speak to him without the Necessity of small Gestures and Signs intended to repel Evil, which are the constant Accompaniment to their Conversations with myself.

As for their Behavior with Respect to my Wife, you would think her the Witch of Endor, if not the Great Whore of Babylon. This, because they consider the Furnishments of her Surgery to be

“Enchantments,” and were appalled at witnessing the Entrance therein of a Number of Cherokee, gaily festooned for visiting, who had come to Trade in such Arcana as Snakes’ Fangs and the Gallbladders of Bears.

My wife begs me express her Pleasure at your kind Compliments regarding Mr. Higgins’s improved Health—and still more, at your Offer to procure medicinal Substances for her from your Friend in Philadelphia. She bids me send you the enclosed List. As I cast an Eye upon this, I suspect that your supplying of her Desires will do nothing to allay the Suspicions of the Fisher-folk, but pray do not desist on that Account, as I think nothing save Time and Custom will decrease their Fears of her.

My Daughter likewise bids me express her Gratitude for your Present of the Phosphorus. I am not certain that I share this Sentiment, given that her Experiments with the Substance prove frighteningly incendiary to date. Fortunately, none of the Newcomers observed these Experiments, or they would be in no Doubt that Satan is indeed a particular Friend to me and mine.

In happier Vein, I congratulate you upon your latest Vintage, which is indeed drinkable. I send in return a Jug of Mrs. Bug’s best Cider, and a Bottle of the barrel-aged Three-year-old, which I flatter myself you will find less corrosive to the Gullet than the last Batch.

Your ob’t. servant,
J. Fraser

Postscriptum: I have had Report of a Gentleman who by Description resembles one Stephen Bonnet, this Man appearing briefly in Cross Creek last Month. If it was indeed the Gentleman, his Business is unknown, and he seems to have vanished without Trace; my Uncle-in-law, Duncan Innes, has made Inquiries in the Area, but writes to tell me that these have proved fruitless. Should you hear of anything in this Regard, I pray you will advise me at once.

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VROOM!

From the Dreambook

Last night I dreamed of running water. Generally, this means I drank too much before I went to bed, but this was different. The water was coming from the faucet in the sink at home. I was helping Mama do the dishes; she was running hot water from the hose-sprayer over the plates, then handing them to me to dry; I could feel the hot china through the dish towel, and feel the mist of water on my face.

Mama's hair was curling up like mad because of the humidity, and the pattern on the plates was the lumpy pink roses of the good wedding china. Mama didn't let me wash that until I was ten or so, for fear I'd drop it, and when I got to wash it at last, I was so proud!

I can still see every last thing in the china cabinet in the living room: Mama's great-grandfather's hand-painted cake stand (he was an artist, she said, and won a competition with that cake stand, a hundred years ago), the dozen crystal goblets that Daddy's mother left him, along with the cut-glass olive dish and the cup and saucer hand-painted with violets and gilt rims.

I was standing in front of it, putting away the china—but we didn't keep the china in that cabinet; we kept it in the shelf over the oven—and the water was overflowing from the sink in the kitchen, and running out across the floor, puddling round my feet.

Then it started to rise, and I was sloshing back and forth to the kitchen, kicking up the water so it sparkled like the cut-glass olive dish. The water got deeper and deeper, but nobody seemed to be worried; I wasn't.

The water was warm, hot, in fact, I could see steam rising off it.

That's all there was to the dream—but when I got up this morning, the water in the basin was so cold I had to warm water in a pan on the fire before I washed Jemmy. All the time I was checking the water on the fire, I kept remembering my dream, and all those gallons and gallons of hot, running water.

What I wonder is, these dreams I have about then*—they seem so vivid and detailed; more than the dreams I have about* now. *Why do I see things that don't exist anywhere except inside my brain?*

What I wonder about the dreams is—all the new inventions people think up—how many of those things are made by people like me—like us? How many "inventions" are really memories, of the things we once knew? And—how many of us are there?

* * *

"It isn't really that hard to have hot, running water. In theory."

"No? I suppose not." Roger only half-heard, concentrated as he was on the object taking shape beneath his knife.

"I mean, it would be a big, horrible job to *do.* But it's simple in concept. Dig ditches or build sluices—and around here, it would probably be sluices.…"

"It would?" Here was the tricky bit. He held his breath, chiseling delicate, tiny slivers of wood away, one shaving at a time.

"No metal," Bree said patiently. "If you had metal, you could make surface pipes. But I bet there isn't enough metal in the whole colony of North Carolina to make the piping you'd need to bring water from the creek to the Big House. Let alone a boiler! And if there was, it would cost a fortune."

"Mmm." Feeling that this was perhaps not an adequate response, Roger added hastily, "But there's some metal available. Jamie's still, for instance.”

His wife snorted.

“Yeah. I asked him where he got it—he said he won it in a high-stakes game of loo against a ship’s captain in Charleston. Think I could travel four hundred miles to bet my silver bracelet against a few hundred feet of rolled copper?”

One more sliver … two … the smallest scrape with the tip of the knife … ah. The tiny circle came free of the matrix. It turned!

“Er … sure,” he said, belatedly realizing that she’d asked him a question. “Why not?”

She burst out laughing.

“You haven’t heard one single word I’ve said, have you?”

“Oh, sure I have,” he protested. “ ‘Ditch,’ ye said. And ‘water.’ I’m sure I remember that one.”

She snorted again, though mildly.

“Well, you’d have to do it, anyway.”

“Do what?” His thumb sought the little wheel, and set it spinning.

“Gamble. No one’s going to let *me* into a high-stakes card game.”

“Thank God,” he said, in reflex.

“Bless your little Presbyterian heart,” she said tolerantly, shaking her head. “You’re not any kind of a gambler, Roger, are you?”

“Oh, and you are, I suppose.” He said it jokingly, wondering even as he did so why he should feel vaguely reproached by her remark.

She merely smiled at that, wide mouth curving in a way that suggested untold volumes of wicked enterprise. He felt a slight sense of unease at that. She *was* a gambler, though so far … He glanced involuntarily at the large, charred spot in the middle of the table.

“That was an accident,” she said defensively.

“Oh, aye. At least your eyebrows have grown back.”

“Hmpf. I’m nearly there. One more batch—”

“That’s what ye said last time.” He was aware that he was treading on dangerous ground, but seemed unable to stop.

She took a slow, deep breath, gazing at him through slightly narrowed eyes, like one taking the range before firing off some major piece of artillery. Then she seemed to think better of whatever she had been going to say; her features relaxed and she stretched out her hand toward the object he was holding.

“What’s that you’ve been making?”

“Just a wee bawbee for Jem.” He let her take it, feeling the warmth of modest pride. “The wheels all turn.”

“Mine, Daddy?” Jemmy had been wallowing on the floor with Adso the cat, who was tolerant of small children. Hearing his name, though, he abandoned the cat, who promptly escaped through the window, and popped up to see the new toy.

“Oh, look!” Brianna ran the little car over the palm of her hand and lifted it, letting all four tiny wheels spin free. Jem grabbed eagerly for it, pulling at the wheels.

“Careful, careful! You’ll pull them off! Here, let me show you.” Crouching, Roger took the car and rolled it along the hearthstones. “See? Vroom. Vroom-vroom!”

“Broom!” Jemmy echoed. “Lemme do it, Daddy, let me!”

Roger surrendered the toy to Jemmy, smiling.

“Broom! Broom-broom!” The little boy shoved the car enthusiastically, then, losing his grip on it, watched open-mouthed as it zoomed to the end of the hearthstone by itself, hit the edge, and flipped over. Squealing with delight, he scampered after the new toy.

Still smiling, Roger glanced up, to see Brianna looking after Jem, a rather odd expression on her face. She felt his eyes on her, and looked down at him.

“Vroom?” she said quietly, and he felt a small internal jolt, like a punch in the stomach.

“Whatsit, Daddy, what’s it?” Jemmy had recaptured the toy and ran up to him, clutching it to his chest.

“It’s a … a …” he began, helpless. It was in fact a crude replica of a Morris Minor, but even the word “car,” let alone “automobile,” had no meaning here. And the internal combustion engine, with its pleasantly evocative noises, was at least a century away.

“I guess it’s a vroom, honey,” said Bree, a distinct tone of sympathy in her voice. He felt the gentle weight of her hand, resting on his head.

“Er … yeah, that’s right,” he said, and cleared a thickening in his throat. “It’s a vroom.”

“Broom,” said Jemmy happily, and knelt to roll it down the hearth again. “Broom-broom!”

* * *

Steam. *It would have to be steam- or wind-powered; a windmill would work, maybe, to pump water into the system, but if I want hot water, there would be steam anyway—why not use it?*

Containment is the problem; wood burns and leaks, clay won’t hold against pressure. I need metal, that’s all there is to it. What would Mrs. Bug do, I wonder, if I took the laundry cauldron? Well, I know what she’d do, and a steam explosion is no comparison; besides, we do need to do *the laundry. I’ll have to dream up something else.*

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19

MAKING HAY

Major MacDonald returned on the final day of haymaking. I was just maneuvering my way along the side of the house with an immense basket of bread, when I saw him near the trailhead, tying up his horse to a tree. He lifted his hat to me and bowed, then came across the dooryard, looking curiously round at the preparations taking place.

We had set up trestles under the chestnut trees, with boards laid across them for tables, and a constant stream of women scurried to and fro like ants between the house and yard, fetching food. The sun was setting, and the men would be in soon for a celebratory feast; filthy, exhausted, starving—and exhilarated by the end of their labors.

I greeted the Major with a nod, and accepted with relief his offer to carry the bread to the tables for me.

"Haying, is it?" he said, in answer to my explanation. A nostalgic smile spread across his weathered face. "I remember the haymaking, from when I was a lad. But that was in Scotland, aye? We'd seldom such glorious weather as this for it." He looked up into the blazing deep blue bowl of the August sky above. It really was perfect haying weather, hot and dry.

"It's wonderful," I said, sniffing appreciatively. The scent of fresh hay was everywhere—and so was the hay; there were shimmering mounds of it in every shed, everyone carried bits of it on their clothes, and small trails of scattered straw lay everywhere. Now the smell of cut, dry hay was mingled with the delectable scent of the barbecue that had been simmering underground overnight, the fresh bread, and the heady tang of Mrs. Bug's cider. Marsali and Bree were bringing down jugs of it from the springhouse, where it had been cooling, along with buttermilk and beer.

"I see I've chosen my time well," the Major remarked, viewing all this effort with approval.

"If you came to eat, yes," I said, rather amused. "If you came to talk to Jamie, I rather think you'll have to wait until tomorrow."

He looked at me, puzzled, but had no opportunity to inquire further; I had caught another glimpse of movement at the trailhead. The Major turned, seeing the direction of my glance, and frowned slightly.

"Why, it's that fellow with the brand on his face," he said, wary disapproval in his voice. "I saw him down at Coopersville, but he saw me first, and steered well clear. Will ye have me drive him off, mum?" He set down the bread and was already settling his sword belt on his hip, when I gripped his forearm.

"You'll do no such thing, Major," I said sharply. "Mr. Higgins is a friend."

He gave me a flat look, then dropped his arm.

"As ye like, Mrs. Fraser, of course," he said coolly, and picking up the bread again, went off toward the tables.

Rolling my eyes in exasperation, I went to greet the newcomer. Plainly Bobby Higgins could have joined the Major on the path to the Ridge; just as plainly, he had chosen not to. He had become a little more familiar with mules, I saw; he was riding one and leading another, laden with a promising array of panniers and boxes.

"His Lordship's compliments, mum," he said, saluting me smartly as he slid off. From the corner of my eye, I saw MacDonald watching—and his small start of recognition at the military gesture. So, now he knew Bobby for a soldier, and doubtless would ferret out his background in short order. I repressed a sigh; I couldn't mend matters; they'd have to settle it between themselves—if there was anything to settle.

"You're looking well, Bobby," I said, smiling as I pushed aside my disquiet. "No difficulties with the riding, I hope?"

"Oh, no, mum!" He beamed. "And I's not fallen out once since I left you last!" "Fallen out" meant "fainted," and I congratulated him on the state of his health, looking him over as he unloaded the pack mule with deft efficiency. He did seem much better; pink and fresh-skinned as a child, bar the ugly brand on his cheek.

"Yonder lobsterback," he said, affecting insouciance as he set down a box. "He's known to ye, is he, mum?"

"That's Major MacDonald," I said, carefully not looking in the Major's direction; I could feel his stare boring into my back. "Yes. He … does things for the Governor, I believe. Not regular army, I mean; he's a half-pay officer."

That bit of information seemed to ease Bobby's mind a bit. He took a breath, as though to say something, but then thought better of it. Instead, he reached into his shirt and withdrew a sealed letter, which he handed over.

"That's for you," he explained. "From his Lordship. Is Miss Lizzie by any chance about?" His eyes were already searching the flock of girls and women readying the tables.

"Yes, she was in the kitchen last I saw," I replied, a small uneasy feeling skittering down my backbone. "She'll be out in a minute. But … you do know she's betrothed, don't you, Bobby? Her fiancé will be coming with the other men for supper."

He met my eyes and smiled with singular sweetness.

"Oh, aye, mum, I know that well enough. On'y thought as I s'ould thank her for her kindness when I last was here."

"Oh," I said, not trusting that smile in the slightest. Bobby was a very handsome lad, blind eye or not—and he had been a soldier. "Well … good."

Before I could say more, I caught the sound of male voices, coming through the trees. It wasn't precisely singing; sort of a rhythmic chant. I wasn't sure what it was—there was a lot of Gaelic "Ho-ro!" and the like—but all of them seemed to be bellowing along in a cordial fashion.

Haymaking was a novel concept to the new tenants, who were much more accustomed to rake kelp than scythe grass. Jamie, Arch, and Roger had shepherded them through the process, though, and I had been asked to stitch no more than a handful of minor wounds, so I assumed it had been a success—no hands or feet lopped off, a few shouting matches, but no fistfights, and no more than the usual amount of hay trampled or ruined.

All of them seemed in good spirits as they poured into the dooryard, bedraggled, sweat-soaked, and thirsty as sponges. Jamie was in the thick of them, laughing and staggering as someone pushed him. He caught sight of me, and a huge grin split his sun-browned face. In a stride, he had reached me and swept me into an exuberant embrace, redolent of hay, horses, and sweat.

"Done, by God!" he said, and kissed me soundly. "Christ, I need a drink. And nay, that's no blasphemy, wee Roger," he added, with a glance behind him. "It's heartfelt gratitude and desperate need, aye?"

"Aye. First things first, though, hm?" Roger had appeared behind Jamie, his voice so hoarse that it was barely audible in the general uproar. He swallowed, grimacing.

"Oh, aye." Jamie shot a quick look at Roger, assessing, then shrugged and strode out into the center of the yard.

"Eìsd ris! Eìsd ris!" bellowed Kenny Lindsay, seeing him. Evan and Murdo joined him, clapping their hands and shouting "Hear him!" loudly enough that the crowd began to subside and pay attention.

"I say the prayer from my mouth,
I say the prayer from my heart,
I say the prayer to Thee Thyself,
O, Healing Hand, O Son of the God of salvation."

He didn't raise his voice much above its normal speaking level, but everyone quieted at once, so the words rang clear.

"Thou Lord God of the angels,

Spread over me Thy linen robe;
Shield me from every famine,
Free me from every spectral shape.
Strengthen me in every good,
Encompass me in every strait,
Safeguard me in every ill,
And from every enmity restrain me."

There was a stirring of faint approval in the crowd; I saw a few of the fisher-folk bow their heads, though their eyes stayed fixed on him.

"Be Thou between me and all things grisly,
Be Thou between me and all things mean,
Be Thou between me and all things gruesome
Coming darkly toward me.

"O God of the weak,
O God of the lowly,
O God of the righteous,
O shield of homesteads:
"Thou art calling upon us
In the voice of glory,
With the mouth of mercy
Of Thy beloved Son."

I glanced at Roger, who was nodding slightly with approval, as well. Evidently, they'd agreed on it together. Sensible; it would be a prayer familiar in form to the fisher-folk, and nothing specifically Catholic about it.

Jamie spread his arms, quite unconsciously, and the breeze caught the worn damp linen of his shirt as he tilted back his head and raised his face to the sky, open with joy.

"O may I find rest everlasting
In the home of Thy Trinity,

In the Paradise of the godly,
In the Sun-garden of Thy love!"

"Amen!" said Roger, as loudly as he could, and there were gratified murmurs of "amen" round the yard. Then Major MacDonald raised the tankard of cider he was holding, called *"Slàinte!"* and drained it.

Festivity became general after that. I found myself sitting on a cask, Jamie on the grass at my feet, with a platter of food and a constantly refilled mug of cider.

"Bobby Higgins is here," I told him, catching sight of Bobby in the midst of a small group of admiring young ladies. "Do you see Lizzie anywhere?"

"No," he said, stifling a yawn. "Why?"

"He asked for her particularly."

"Then I'm sure he'll find her. Will ye have a bit o' meat, Sassenach?" He held up a large rib bone, brow cocked inquiringly.

"I've had some," I assured him, and he at once tore into it, addressing himself to the vinegar-spiced barbecue as though he hadn't eaten for a week.

"Has Major MacDonald spoken to you?"

"No," he said, mouth full, and swallowed. "He'll keep. There's Lizzie—wi' the McGillivrays."

I felt reassured by that. The McGillivrays—particularly *Frau* Ute—would certainly discourage any inappropriate attentions to their new intended daughter-in-law. Lizzie was chatting and laughing with Robin McGillivray, who was smiling at her in fatherly fashion, while his son Manfred ate and drank with single-minded appetite. *Frau* Ute, I saw, was keeping a sharp and interested eye on Lizzie's father, who was sitting on the porch nearby, cozily side by side with a tall, rather plain-faced German lady.

"Who's that with Joseph Wemyss?" I asked, nudging Jamie with my knee to direct his attention.

He narrowed his eyes against the sun's glare, looking, then shrugged.

"I dinna ken. She's German; she must ha' come with Ute McGillivray. Matchmaking, aye?" He tilted up his mug and drank, sighing with bliss.

"Do you think so?" I looked at the strange woman with interest. She certainly seemed to be getting on well with Joseph—and he with her. His thin face was alight as he gestured, explaining something to her, and her neatly capped head was bent toward him, a smile on her lips.

I didn't always approve of Ute McGillivray's methods, which tended toward the juggernaut, but I had to admire the painstaking intricacy of her plans. Lizzie and Manfred would marry next spring, and I had wondered how Joseph would fare then; Lizzie was his whole life.

He might, of course, go with her when she married. She and Manfred would simply live in the McGillivrays' large house, and I imagined that they would find room for Joseph, too. Still, he would be torn, not wanting to leave us—and while any able-bodied man could always be of use on a homestead, he was by no means a natural farmer, let alone a gunsmith, like Manfred and his father. If he himself were to wed, though …

I gave Ute McGillivray a glance, and saw her watching Mr. Wemyss and his inamorata with the contented expression of a puppet master whose puppets are dancing precisely to her tune.

Someone had left a pitcher of cider beside us. I refilled Jamie's mug, then my own. It was wonderful, a dark, cloudy amber, sweet and pungent and with the bite of a particularly subtle serpent to it. I let the cool liquid trickle down my throat and bloom inside my head like a silent flower.

There was much talk and laughter, and I noticed that while the new tenants still kept to their own family groups, there was now a little more blending, as the men who had been working side-by-side for the last two weeks maintained their cordial relations, these social courtesies fueled by cider. The new tenants mostly regarded wine as a mocker, strong drink—whisky, rum, or brandy—as raging, but everyone drank beer and cider. Cider was wholesome, one of the women had told me, handing a mug to her small son. I gave it half an hour, I thought, sipping slowly, before they started dropping like flies.

Jamie made a small amused sound, and I looked down at him. He nodded at the far side of the dooryard, and I looked to see that Bobby Higgins had disentangled himself from his admirers, and by some alchemical legerdemain had managed to abstract Lizzie from the midst of the McGillivrays. They were standing in the shadow of the chestnut trees, talking.

I looked back at the McGillivrays. Manfred was leaning against the foundation of the house, head nodding over his plate. His father had curled up beside him on the ground and was snoring peacefully. The girls chatted around them, passing food to and fro over the drooping heads of their husbands, all in various stages of impending somnolence. Ute had moved to the porch, and was talking to Joseph and his companion.

I glanced back. Lizzie and Bobby were only talking, and there was a respectful distance between them. But there was something about the way he bent toward her, and the way she half-turned away from him, then back, swinging a fold of her skirt one-handed …

“Oh, dear,” I said. I shifted a little, getting my feet under me, but unsure whether I ought really to go and interrupt them. After all, they were in plain sight, and—

“Three things astonish me, nay four, sayeth the prophet.” Jamie’s hand squeezed my thigh, and I looked down to see that he was also watching the couple under the chestnut trees, his eyes half-closed. “The way of an eagle in the air, the way of a serpent on the rock, the way of a ship in the midst of the sea—and the way of a man with a maid.”

“Oh, so I’m not imagining it,” I said dryly. “Do you think I’d best do something?”

“Mmphm.” He took a deep breath and straightened up, shaking his head vigorously to wake himself. “Ah. No, Sassenach. If wee Manfred willna take the trouble to guard his woman, it’s no your place to do it for him.”

"Yes, I quite agree. I'm only thinking, if Ute should see them … or Joseph?" I wasn't sure what Mr. Wemyss would do; I thought Ute would probably make a major scene.

"Oh." He blinked, swaying a little. "Aye, I suppose ye're right." He turned his head, searching, then spotting Ian, lifted his chin in summons.

Ian had been sprawled dreamily on the grass a few feet away, next to a pile of greasy rib bones, but now rolled over and crawled obligingly to us.

"Mm?" he said. His thick brown hair had fallen half out of its binding, and several cowlicks were sticking straight up, the rest fallen disreputably over one eye.

Jamie nodded in the direction of the chestnut trees.

"Go and ask wee Lizzie to mend your hand, Ian."

Ian glanced blearily down at his hand; there was a fresh scratch across the back of it, though it was long since clotted. Then he looked in the direction Jamie indicated.

"Oh," he said. He remained on hands and knees, eyes narrowed thoughtfully, then slowly rose to his feet, and pulled the binding off his hair. Casually shoving it back with one hand, he strolled in the direction of the chestnut trees.

They were much too far away to hear anything, but we could see. Bobby and Lizzie parted like the waves of the Red Sea as Ian's tall, gangly form stepped purposefully between them. The three seemed to chat amiably for a moment, then Lizzie and Ian departed for the house, Lizzie giving Bobby a casual wave of the hand—and a brief, backward glance. Bobby stood for a moment looking after her, rocking thoughtfully on his heels, then shook his head and made for the cider.

The cider was taking its toll. I'd expected every man in the place to be laid out cold by nightfall; during haying, men commonly fell asleep in their plates from sheer exhaustion. As it was, there was still plenty of talk and laughter, but the soft twilight glow beginning to suffuse the dooryard showed an increasing number of bodies strewn in the grass.

Rollo was gnawing contentedly on Ian's discarded bones. Brianna sat a little way away; Roger lay with his head in her lap, sound asleep. The collar of his shirt was open, the ragged rope scar still vivid across his neck. Bree smiled at me, her hand gently stroking his glossy black hair, picking bits of hay out of it. Jemmy was nowhere to be seen—neither was Germain, as I ascertained with a quick look around. Luckily the phosphorus was under lock and key, in the top of my highest cupboard.

Jamie laid his own head against my thigh, warm and heavy, and I put my hand on his hair, smiling back at Bree. I heard him snort faintly, and looked in the direction of his gaze.

"For such a wee small lass, yon Lizzie does cause a good deal of trouble," he said.

Bobby Higgins was standing beside one of the tables, drinking cider, and quite evidently unaware that he was being stalked by the Beardsley twins. The two of them were slinking like foxes through the wood, not quite out of sight, converging on him from opposite directions.

One—Jo, probably—stepped out suddenly beside Bobby, startling him into spilling his drink. He frowned, wiping at the wet splotch on his shirt, while Jo leaned close, obviously muttering menaces and warnings. Looking offended, Bobby turned away from him, only to be confronted by Kezzie on the other side.

"I'm not sure it's Lizzie who's causing the trouble," I said defensively. "She only talked to him, after all." Bobby's face was growing noticeably flushed. He set down the mug he'd been drinking from and drew himself up a little, one hand folding into a fist.

The Beardsleys crowded closer, with the evident intention of forcing him into the wood. Glancing warily from one twin to the other, he took a step back, putting a solid tree trunk at his back.

I glanced down; Jamie was watching through half-closed lids, with an expression of dreamy detachment. He sighed deeply, his eyes closed altogether, and he went suddenly and completely limp, the weight of him heavy against me.

The reason for this sudden absquatulation loomed up a second later: MacDonald, ruddy with food and cider, his red coat glowing like a cinder in the sunset light. He looked down at Jamie, peacefully slumbering against my leg, and shook his head. He turned slowly round, surveying the scene.

“ ’Strewth,” he said mildly. “I’ll tell ye, mum, I’ve seen battlefields with much less carnage.”

“Oh, have you?” His appearance had distracted me, but at the mention of “carnage,” I glanced back. Bobby and the Beardsley twins had disappeared, vanished like wisps of mist in the gloaming. Well, if they were beating each other to pulp in the wood, I was sure I’d hear about it before too long.

With a small shrug, MacDonald bent, took Jamie by the shoulders, and eased him off me, laying him down in the grass with surprising gentleness.

“May I?” he asked politely, and upon my nod of assent, sat down beside me on the other side, arms companionably hooked round his knees.

He was neatly dressed, as always, wig and all, but the collar of his shirt was grimy and the skirts of his coat frayed at the hem and spattered with mud.

“A great deal of travel these days, Major?” I asked, making conversation. “You look rather tired, if you’ll pardon my mentioning it.”

I had surprised him in the middle of a yawn; he swallowed it, blinking, then laughed.

“Aye, mum. I’ve been in the saddle for the last month, and seen a bed perhaps one night in three.”

He did look tired, even in the soft sunset light; the lines of his face were cut deep with fatigue, the flesh beneath his eyes sagging and smudged. He was not a handsome man, but normally had a brash self-assurance that lent him an attractive air. Now he looked what he was: a half-pay soldier pushing fifty, lacking a regiment or regular duty, struggling for any small connections that might hold some hope of advancement.

I wouldn’t normally have spoken to him of his business, but sympathy moved me to ask, “Are you working a lot on behalf of Governor Martin these days?”

He nodded, and took another gulp of cider, breathing deeply after it.

“Aye, mum. The Governor has been kind enough to charge me with bringing him news of conditions in the backcountry—and has done me the signal favor of accepting my advice, now and then.” He glanced at Jamie, who had curled himself up like a hedgehog and commenced to snore, and smiled.

“With regard to my husband’s appointment as Indian Agent, you mean? We do thank you, Major.”

He waved a casual hand in dismissal of my thanks.

“Ah, no, mum; that had nothing to do wi’ the Governor, save indirectly. Such appointments are the province of the Superintendent of the Southern Department. Though it is of course a matter of interest to the Governor,” he added, taking another sip, “to hear news of the Indians.”

“I’m sure he’ll tell you all about it in the morning,” I assured him, with a nod at Jamie.

“Indeed, mum.” He hesitated for a moment. “Would ye ken … did Mr. Fraser perhaps mention, in his conversations in the villages—was there any mention of … burnings?”

I sat up straight, the cider buzz disappearing from my head.

“What’s happened? Have there been more?”

He nodded, and rubbed a hand tiredly down his face, scrubbing at the sprout of whiskers.

“Aye, two—but the one was a barn-burning, down below Salem. One o’ the Moravian brethren’s. And from all I can learn of the matter, ’twas likely some of the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who’ve settled in Surry County. There’s a wee arsebite of a preacher who’s got them riled about the Moravians—Godless heathen that they are—” He grinned suddenly at that, but then sobered again.

“There’s been trouble brewing in Surry County for months. To the point that the brethren have been petitioning the Governor to redraw the boundary lines, so as to put them all in Rowan County.

The line between Surry and Rowan goes right through their land, ken? And the sheriff in Surry is …" He twiddled a hand.

"Perhaps not so keen in the performance of his duty as he might be?" I suggested. "At least where the Moravians are concerned?"

"He's the arsebite's cousin," MacDonald said, and drained his cup. "Ye've had no trouble wi' your new tenants, by the way?" he added, lowering it. He smiled crookedly, looking round the dooryard at the small groups of women, chattering contentedly as their men slept by their feet. "It would appear ye've made them welcome."

"Well, they are Presbyterians, and fairly vehement about it—but they haven't tried to burn the house down yet, at least."

I took a quick glance at the porch, where Mr. Wemyss and his companion still sat, heads close in conversation. I thought Mr. Wemyss was probably the only man still conscious, bar the Major himself. The lady was plainly a German, but not, I thought, a Moravian; they very seldom married outside their community, nor did the women often travel far.

"Unless you think the Presbyterians have formed a gang for the purpose of purging the countryside of Papists and Lutherans—and you *don't* think that, do you?"

He smiled briefly at that, though without much humor.

"No. But then, I was raised Presbyterian myself, mum."

"Oh," I said. "Er … a drop more cider, Major?"

He held out his cup without demur.

"The other burning—that seems much like the others," he said, graciously choosing to overlook my remark. "An isolated homestead. A man living alone. But this one was just over the Treaty Line."

This last was said with a significant glance, and I looked involuntarily at Jamie. He'd told me that the Cherokee were upset about settlers intruding into their territory.

"I shall ask your husband in the morning, of course, mum," MacDonald said, correctly interpreting my glance. "But perhaps ye'd ken whether he's heard any references …?"

“Veiled threats from a Snowbird chief,” I confessed. “He wrote to John Stuart about them. But nothing specific. When did this latest burning happen?”

He shrugged.

“No telling. I heard of it three weeks ago, but the man who told me had heard of it a month before that—and he’d not seen it, only heard from someone else.”

He scratched thoughtfully at his jaw.

“Someone should go and inspect the place, perhaps.”

“Mm,” I said, not bothering to hide the skepticism in my voice. “And you think it’s Jamie’s job, do you?”

“I shouldna be so presumptuous as to instruct Mr. Fraser in his duties, mum,” he said, with the hint of a smile. “But I will suggest to him that the situation may be of interest, aye?”

“Yes, you do that,” I muttered. Jamie had planned another quick trip to the Snowbird villages, squeezed in between harvesting and the onset of the cold weather. The notion of marching into the village and quizzing Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning about a burned homestead seemed more than slightly risky, viewed from my perspective.

A slight chill made me shiver, and I gulped the rest of my own cider, wishing suddenly that it was hot. The sun was fully set now, and the air had grown cool, but that wasn’t what was cooling my blood.

What if MacDonald’s suspicions were right? If the Cherokee had been burning homesteads? And if Jamie were to show up, asking inconvenient questions ….

I looked at the house, standing solid and serene, its windows glowing with candlelight, a pale bulwark against the darkening woods beyond.

It is with grief that the news is received of the deaths by fire of James MacKenzie Fraser and his wife, Claire Fraser, in a conflagration that destroyed their house….

The fireflies were coming out, drifting like cool green sparks in the shadows, and I looked upward involuntarily, to see a spray of red and yellow ones from the chimney. Whenever I thought of that gruesome clipping—and I tried not to, nor to count the days between now and January 21 of 1776—I had thought of the fire as occurring by accident. Such accidents were more than common, ranging from hearth fires run amok and candlesticks tipped over, to blazes caused by the summer lightning storms. It hadn't consciously occurred to me before that it might be a deliberate act—an act of murder.

I moved my foot enough to nudge Jamie. He stirred in his sleep, reached out one hand, and clasped it warmly round my ankle, then subsided with a contented groan.

"Stand between me and all things grisly," I said, half-under my breath.

"Slàinte," said the Major, and drained his cup again.

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DANGEROUS GIFTS

Propelled by Major MacDonald's news, Jamie and Ian departed two days later for a quick visit to Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning, and the Major went off on his further mysterious errands, leaving me with Bobby Higgins for assistance.

I was dying to dig into the crates Bobby had brought, but what with one thing and another—the white pig's demented attempt to eat Adso, a goat with infected teats, a strange green mold that had got into the last batch of cheese, the completion of a much-needed summer kitchen, and a stern conversation with the Beardsleys regarding the treatment of guests, among other things—it was more than a week before I found leisure to unpack Lord John's present and read his letter.

September 4, 1773

From Lord John Grey, Mount Josiah Plantation
To Mrs. James Fraser
My dear Madam—

I trust that the Articles you requested will have arrived intact. Mr. Higgins is somewhat nervous of carrying the Oil of Vitriol, as I understand he has had some evil Experience connected with it, but we have packed the Bottle with some Care, leaving it sealed as it came from England.

After examining the exquisite Drawings you sent—do I detect your daughter's elegant Hand in them?—I rode to Williamsburg, in order to consult with a famous Glassmaker who abides there under the nomen (doubtless fabulous) of Blogweather. Mr. Blogweather allowed that the Pelican Retort would be simplicity itself, scarcely a fair Test of his Skill, but was enchanted by the Requirements of the distilling Apparatus, particularly the detachable Coil. He apprehended immediately the Desirability of such a Device in case of Breakage, and has made three of them.

Pray consider these my Gift—a most insignificant Demonstration of my abiding Gratitude for your many Kindnesses, both toward myself and Mr. Higgins.

Your most humble and obedient
servant,
John Grey

Postscriptum: I have thus far restrained my sense of vulgar Curiosity, but I do venture to hope that on some future Occasion, you may possibly gratify me by explaining the Purpose to which you intend these Articles be put.

* * *

They had packed with some care. Pried open, the crates proved to be filled with an immense quantity of straw, the bits of glassware and sealed bottles gleaming within, cradled like roc's eggs.

"You *will* be careful with that, won't 'ee, mum?" Bobby inquired anxiously, as I lifted out a squat, heavy, brown-glass bottle, the cork heavily sealed with red wax. "It's turrible noxious, that stuff."

"Yes, I know." Standing on tiptoe, I boosted the bottle up onto a high shelf, safe from marauding children or cats. "Have you seen it used, then, Bobby?"

His lips drew in tight, and he shook his head.

"Not to say used, mum. But I've seen what it *does.* Was a … a lass, in London, what I come to know a bit, whilst we was a-waitin' the ship to carry us to America. Half her face pretty and smooth as a buttercup but t'other side was so scarred you could scarce look at it. Like as it was melted in a fire, but she said 'twas vitriol." He glanced up at the bottle, and swallowed visibly. "Another whore'd thrown it on her, she said, 'cause of jealousy."

He shook his head again, sighing, and reached for the broom to sweep up the scattered straw.

"Well, you needn't worry," I assured him. "I don't propose to throw it at anyone."

"Oh, no, mum!" He was quite shocked. "I s'ould never think that!"

I disregarded this reassurance, involved in delving for more treasure.

"Oh, *look,*" I said, enchanted. I held in my hands the fruit of Mr. Blogweather's artistry: a globe of glass, the size of my head, blown to perfect symmetry and lacking even the hint of a bubble. There was a faint blue tinge to the glass, and I could see my own distorted reflection, wide-nosed and bug-eyed, like a mermaid peering out.

"Aye, mum," said Bobby, dutifully peering at the retort. "It's, er … big, in't it?"

"It's perfect. Just perfect!" Rather than being cut off cleanly from the blower's pipe, the neck of the globe had been drawn out into a thick-walled tube about two inches long and an inch in diameter. The edges and interior surface of this had been … sanded? Ground? I'd no idea what Mr. Blogweather had done, but the result was a silky, opaque surface that would form a lovely seal when a similarly finished piece was inserted into it.

My hands were damp with excitement and nervousness, lest I drop the precious thing. I clutched a fold of my apron round it, and turned to and fro, debating where best to put it. I hadn't expected one so large; I should need Bree or one of the men to make me a suitable support.

"It has to go over a small fire," I explained, frowning at the little brazier I used for brewing. "But the temperature is important; a charcoal bed may be too hard to keep at a steady heat." I placed the big ball in my cupboard, safely behind a row of bottles. "I think it will have to be an alcohol lamp—but it's bigger than I thought, I'll have to have a good-size lamp to heat it…."

I became aware that Bobby was not listening to my babbling, his attention having been distracted by something outside. He was frowning at something, and I came up behind him, peering through the open window to see what it was.

I should have guessed; Lizzie Wemyss was out on the grass, churning butter under the chestnut trees, and Manfred McGillivray was with her.

I glanced at the pair, engaged in cheerful conversation, then at Bobby's somber countenance. I cleared my throat.

"Perhaps you'd open the other crate for me, Bobby?"

"Eh?" His attention was still fixed on the pair outside.

"Crate," I repeated patiently. "That one." I nudged it with my toe.

"Crate … oh! Oh, aye, mum, to be sure." Pulling his gaze from the window, he set about the task, looking glum.

I took the rest of the glassware from the open crate, shaking off the straw and putting globes, retorts, flasks, and coils carefully into a high cupboard—but I kept an eye on Bobby as I did so, pondering this newly revealed situation. I hadn't thought his feelings for Lizzie were more than a passing attraction.

And perhaps it was no more than that, I reminded myself. But if it was … Despite myself, I glanced through the window, only to discover that the pair had become a trio.

"Ian!" I exclaimed. Bobby glanced up, startled, but I was already heading for the door, hastily brushing straw from my clothes.

If Ian was back, Jamie was—

He came through the front door just as I barreled into the hallway, and grabbed me round the waist, kissing me with sun-dusty enthusiasm and sandpaper whiskers.

"You're back," I said, rather inanely.

"I am, and there are Indians just behind me," he said, clutching my bottom with both hands and rasping his whiskers fervently against my cheek. "God, what I'd give for a quarter of an hour alone wi' ye, Sassenach! My balls are burst—ah. Mr. Higgins. I, um, didna see ye there."

He let go and straightened abruptly, sweeping off his hat and smacking it against his thigh in an exaggerated pantomime of casualness.

"No, zur," Bobby said morosely. "Mr. Ian's back, as well, is he?" He didn't sound as though this was particularly good news; if Ian's arrival had distracted Lizzie from Manfred—and it had—it did nothing to redirect her attention to Bobby.

Lizzie had abandoned her churn to poor Manfred, who was turning the crank with an air of obvious resentment, as she went laughing off in the direction of the stable with Ian, presumably to show him the new calf that had arrived during his absence.

"Indians," I said, belatedly catching what Jamie had said. "What Indians?"

"A half-dozen of the Cherokee," he replied. "What's this?" He nodded at the trail of loose straw leading out of my surgery.

"Oh, that. That," I said happily, "is ether. Or going to be. We're feeding the Indians, I suppose?"

"Aye. I'll tell Mrs. Bug. But there's a young woman with them that they've fetched along for ye to tend."

"Oh?" He was already striding down the hall toward the kitchen, and I hurried to keep up. "What's the matter with her?"

"Toothache," he said briefly, and pushed open the kitchen door. "Mrs. Bug! *Cá bhfuil tú?* Ether, Sassenach? Ye dinna mean phlogiston, do you?"

"I don't *think* that I do," I said, trying to recall what on earth phlogiston was. "I've told you about anesthesia, though, I know—that's what ether is, a sort of anesthetic; puts people to sleep so you can do surgery without hurting them."

"Verra useful in case of the toothache," Jamie observed. "Where's the woman gone to? Mrs. Bug!"

"So it would be, but it will take some time to make. We'll have to make do with whisky for the moment. Mrs. Bug is in the summer kitchen, I expect; it's bread day. And speaking of alcohol—" He was already out the back door, and I scampered across the stoop after him. “I’ll need quite a bit of high-quality alcohol, for the ether. Can you bring me a barrel of the new stuff tomorrow?”

“A barrel? Christ, Sassenach, what d’ye mean to do, bathe in it?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, yes. Or rather not me—the oil of vitriol. You pour it gently into a bath of hot alcohol, and it—”

“Oh, Mr. Fraser! I did think as how I heard someone a-callin’.” Mrs. Bug appeared suddenly with a basket of eggs over one arm, beaming. “It’s pleased I am to see ye home again safe!”

“And glad to be so, Mrs. Bug,” he assured her. “Can we be feeding a half-dozen guests for supper?”

Her eyes went wide for a moment, then narrowed in calculation.

“Sausage,” she declared. “And neeps. Here, wee Bobby, come and make yourself useful.” Handing me the eggs, she seized Bobby, who had come out of the house after us, by the sleeve and towed him off toward the turnip patch.

I had the feeling of having been caught in some rapidly revolving apparatus like a merry-go-round, and took hold of Jamie’s arm in order to steady myself.

“Did you know that Bobby Higgins is in love with Lizzie?” I asked.

“No, but it’ll do him little good if he is,” Jamie replied callously. Taking my hand on his arm as invitation, he took the eggs from me and set them on the ground, then pulled me in and kissed me again, more slowly, but no less thoroughly.

He let go with a deep sigh of content, and glanced at the new summer kitchen we had erected in his absence: a small framed structure consisting of coarse-woven canvas walls and a pine-branch roof, erected round a stone hearth and chimney—but with a large table inside. Enticing scents of rising dough, fresh-baked bread, oatcakes, and cinnamon rolls wafted through the air from it.

“Now, about that quarter of an hour, Sassenach … I believe I could manage wi’ a bit less, if necessary.…”

“Well, *I* couldn’t,” I said firmly, though I did allow my hand to fondle him for a thoughtful instant. My face was burning from contact with his whiskers. “And when we do have time, you can tell me *what* on earth you’ve been doing to bring this on.”

"Dreaming," he said.

"What?"

"I kept havin' terrible lewd dreams about ye, all the night long," he explained, twitching his breeks into better adjustment. "Every time I rolled over, I'd lie on my cock and wake up. It was awful."

I burst out laughing, and he affected to look injured, though I could see reluctant amusement behind it.

"Well, *you* can laugh, Sassenach," he said. "Ye havena got one to trouble ye."

"Yes, and a great relief it is, too," I assured him. "Er … what sort of lewd dreams?"

I could see a deep blue gleam of speculation at the back of his eyes as he looked at me. He extended one finger, and very delicately ran it down the side of my neck, the slope of my breast where it disappeared into my bodice, and over the thin cloth covering my nipple—which promptly popped up like a puffball mushroom in response to this attention.

"The sort that make me want to take ye straight into the forest, far enough that no one will hear when I lay ye on the ground, lift your skirts, and split ye like a ripe peach," he said softly. "Aye?"

I swallowed, audibly.

At this delicate moment, whoops of greeting came from the trailhead on the other side of the house.

"Duty calls," I said, a trifle breathless.

Jamie drew a deep breath of his own, squared his shoulders, and nodded.

"Well, I havena died of unrequited lust yet; I suppose I shallna do it now."

"Don't suppose you will," I said. "Besides, didn't you tell me once that abstinence makes … er … things … grow firmer?"

He gave me a bleak look.

"If it gets any firmer, I'll faint from a lack of blood to the heid. Dinna forget the eggs, Sassenach."

It was late afternoon, but plenty of light left for the job, thank goodness. My surgery was positioned to take advantage of morning light for operations, though, and was dim in the afternoons, so I set up an impromptu theater of operation in the dooryard.

This was an advantage, insofar as everyone wished to watch; Indians always regarded medical treatment—and almost anything else—as a community affair. They were particularly enthusiastic about operations, as these held a high degree of entertainment value. Everyone crowded eagerly around, commenting on my preparations, arguing with each other and talking to the patient, whom I had the greatest difficulty in discouraging from talking back.

Her name was Mouse, and I could only assume that she had been given it for some metaphysical reason, as it certainly wasn't suited either to appearance or personality. She was round-faced, unusually snub-nosed for a Cherokee, and if she wasn't precisely pretty, she had a force of character that is often more attractive than simple beauty.

It was certainly working on the males present; she was the only woman in the Indian party, the others consisting of her brother, Red Clay Wilson, and four friends who had come along, either to keep the Wilsons company, offer protection on the journey—or to vie for Miss Mousie's attention, which seemed to me the most likely explanation of their presence.

Despite the Wilsons' Scottish name, none of the Cherokee spoke any English beyond a few basic words—these including "no," "yes," "good," "bad," and "whisky!" Since the Cherokee equivalent of these terms was the extent of my own vocabulary, I was taking little part in the conversation.

We were at the moment waiting for whisky, in fact, as well as translators. A settler named Wolverhampton, from some nameless hollow to the east, had inadvertently amputated one and a half toes a week before, while splitting logs. Finding this state of things inconvenient, he had proceeded to try to remove the remaining half-digit himself with a froe.

Say what you will regarding general utility; a froe is not a precision instrument. It is, however, sharp.

Mr. Wolverhampton, a burly sort with an irascible temper, lived on his own, some seven miles from his nearest neighbor. By the time he had reached this neighbor—on foot, or what remained of it—and the neighbor had bundled him onto a mule for transport to Fraser's Ridge, nearly twenty-four hours had passed, and the partial foot had assumed the dimensions and appearance of a mangled raccoon.

The requirements of the cleanup surgery, the multiple subsequent debridements to control the infection, and the fact that Mr. Wolverhampton refused to surrender the bottle, had quite exhausted my usual surgical supply. As I needed a keg of the raw spirit for my ether-making in any case, Jamie and Ian had gone to fetch more from the whisky spring, which was a good mile from the house. I hoped they would return while there was still enough light to see what I was doing.

I interrupted Miss Mousie's loud remonstrance with one of the gentlemen, who was evidently teasing her, and indicated by means of sign language that she should open her mouth for me. She did, but went on expostulating by means of rather explicit hand signals, which seemed to be indicating various acts she expected the gentleman in question to perform upon himself, judging from his flushed countenance, and the way his companions were falling about with hilarity.

The side of her face was puffed and obviously tender. She didn't wince or shy away, though, even when I turned her face farther toward the light for a better view.

"Toothache, forsooth!" I said, involuntarily.

"Ooth?" Miss Mouse said, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"Bad," I explained, pointing at her cheek. *"Uyoi."*

"Bad," she agreed. There followed a voluble exposition—interrupted only by my inserting my fingers into her mouth periodically—which I took to be an explanation of what had happened to her.

Blunt trauma, by the look of it. One tooth, a lower canine, had been knocked completely out, and the neighboring bicuspid was so badly broken I would have to extract it. The next to that could be saved, I thought. The inside of her mouth was badly lacerated by the sharp edges, but the gum was not infected. That was heartening.

Bobby Higgins came down from the stable, drawn by the chatter, and was promptly sent back to bring me a file. Miss Mousie grinned lopsidedly at him when he brought it, and he bowed extravagantly to her, making all of them laugh.

"These folk are Cherokee, are they, mum?" He smiled at Red Clay, and made a hand sign, which seemed to amuse the Indians, though they returned it. "I've not met any Cherokee before. It's mostly other tribes near his Lordship's place in Virginia."

I was pleased to see that he was familiar with Indians, and easy in his manner toward them. Hiram Crombie, who appeared at this point, was not.

He stopped dead at the edge of the clearing, seeing the assemblage. I waved cheerily at him, and—with evident reluctance—he advanced.

Roger had told me Duncan's description of Hiram as "that wee sour-drap." It was apt. He was small and stringy, with thin grizzled hair that he wore strained back in a plait so tight that I thought he must find it difficult to blink. His face deeply lined by the rigors of a fisherman's life, he looked about sixty, but was likely much younger—and his mouth was habitually downturned, in the expression of one who has sucked not merely a lemon, but a rotten lemon.

"I was looking for Mr. Fraser," he said, with a wary eye on the Indians. "I had heard he was back." He had a hatchet in his belt, and kept a tight grip on it with one hand.

"He'll be back directly. You've met Mr. Higgins, haven't you?" Evidently he had, and had been unfavorably impressed by the experience. His eyes fixed on Bobby's brand, he made the smallest possible nod of acknowledgment. Nothing daunted, I waved a hand round at the Indians, who were all examining Hiram with much more interest than he showed in them. "May I introduce Miss Wilson, her brother Mr. Wilson, and … er … their friends?"

Hiram stiffened further, if such a thing was possible.

"Wilson?" he said, in an unfriendly voice.

"Wilson," agreed Miss Mouse cheerily.

"That is my wife's family name," he said, in a tone that made it clear he considered the use of it by Indians to be grossly outrageous.

"Oh," I said. "How nice. Do you think they might be your wife's relatives, perhaps?"

His eyes bulged slightly at that, and I heard a strangled gurgle from Bobby.

"Well, they plainly got the name from a Scottish father or grandfather," I pointed out. "Perhaps …"

Hiram's face was working like a nutcracker, emotions from fury to dismay passing in swift succession over it. His right hand curled up, forefinger and little finger protruding in the horns, the sign against evil.

"Great-Uncle Ephraim," he whispered. "Jesus save us." And without further word, he turned on his heel and tottered off.

"Goodbye!" called Miss Mousie in English, waving. He cast a single, haunted glance over his shoulder at her, then fled as though pursued by demons.

* * *

The whisky finally arrived, and, a fair amount of it passed out to patient and spectators alike, the operation at last commenced.

The file was normally used on horses' teeth, and thus a little larger than I would have liked, but worked reasonably well. Miss Mouse was inclined to be loud about the discomfort involved, but her complaints grew less with her increasing intake of whisky. By the time I had to draw her broken tooth, I thought, she wouldn't feel a thing.

Bobby, meanwhile, was entertaining Jamie and Ian with imitations of Hiram Crombie's response to the discovery that he might possibly share some family connection with the Wilsons. Ian, between bursts of laughter, translated the matter for the Indians, who all rolled on the grass in paroxysms of mirth.

"*Do* they have an Ephraim Wilson in their family tree?" I asked, taking a firm grip of Miss Mousie's chin.

"Well, they're not sure of the 'Ephraim,' but aye, they do." Jamie grinned broadly. "Their grandsire was a Scottish wanderer. Stayed long enough to get their grandmother wi' child, then fell off a cliff and was buried by a rockslide. She marrit again, of course, but liked the name."

"I wonder what it was made Great-Uncle Ephraim leave Scotland?" Ian sat up, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes.

"The proximity of people like Hiram, I expect," I said, squinting to see what I was doing. "Do you think—" I realized suddenly that everyone had quit talking and laughing, their attention focused on something across the clearing.

This something was the arrival of another Indian, carrying something in a bundle over his shoulder.

* * *

The Indian was a gentleman named Sequoyah, somewhat older than the young Wilsons and their friends. He nodded soberly to Jamie, and swinging the bundle off his shoulder, laid it on the ground at Jamie's feet, saying something in Cherokee.

Jamie's face changed, the lingering traces of amusement vanishing, replaced by interest—and wariness. He knelt, and carefully turning back the ragged canvas, revealed a jumble of weathered bones, a hollow-eyed skull staring up from the midst of them.

"Who in bloody hell is *that*?" I had stopped work, and with everyone else, including Miss Mouse, stood staring down at this latest arrival.

"He says it's the auld man who owned the homestead MacDonald told of—the one that burned inside the Treaty Line." Jamie reached down and picked up the skull, turning it gently in his hands.

He heard my small intake of breath, for he glanced at me, then turned the skull over, holding it for me to see. Most of the teeth were missing, and had been missing long enough that the jawbone had closed over the empty sockets. But the two molars remaining showed nothing but cracks and stains—no gleam of silver filling, no empty space where such fillings might have been.

I let my breath out slowly, not sure whether to be relieved or disappointed.

"What happened to him? And why is he *here*?"

Jamie knelt and laid the skull gently back in the canvas, then turned some of the bones over, examining them. He looked up, and with a small motion of the head, invited me to join him.

The bones showed no sign of having been burned, but several of them *did* show signs of having been gnawed by animals. One or two of the long bones had been cracked and split, no doubt to get at the marrow, and many of the smaller bones of hands and feet were missing. All of them had the gray, fragile look of bones that had lain outside for some time.

Ian had relayed my question to Sequoyah, who squatted down next to Jamie, explaining as he jabbed a finger here and there amongst the bones.

"He says," Ian translated, frowning, "that he knew the man a long time. They werena friends, exactly, but now and again, when he was near the man's cabin, he would stop, and the man would share his food. So he would bring things, too, when he came—a hare for the pot, a bit o' salt."

One day, a few months back, he had found the old man's body in the wood, lying under a tree, some distance from his house.

"No one kilt him, he says," Ian said, frowning in concentration at the rapid stream of words. "He just … died. He thinks the man was hunting—he had a knife on him, and his gun beside him—when the spirit left him, and he just fell down." He echoed Sequoyah's shrug.

Seeing no reason to do anything with the body, Sequoyah had left it there, and left the knife with it, in case the spirit should require it, wherever it had gone; he did not know where the spirits of white men went, or whether they hunted there. He pointed—there was an old knife, the blade almost rusted away, under the bones.

He had taken the gun, which seemed too good to leave, and as it was on his way, had stopped at the cabin. The old man had owned very little, and what he had was mostly worthless. Sequoyah had taken an iron pot, a kettle, and a jar of cornmeal, which he had carried back to his village.

“He’s no from Anidonau Nuya, is he?” Jamie asked, then repeated the question in Cherokee. Sequoyah shook his head, the small ornaments braided into his hair making a tiny chiming sound.

He was from a village some miles west of Anidonau Nuya—Standing Stone. Bird-who-sings had sent word to the nearby towns, in the wake of Jamie’s visit, asking if there was anyone who knew of the old man and his fate. Hearing Sequoyah’s account, Bird had sent him to collect what was left of the old man, and to bring the remains to Jamie, in proof that no one had killed him.

Ian asked a question, in which I caught the Cherokee word for “fire.” Sequoyah shook his head again, and replied with a stream of words.

He had not burned the cabin—why should he do such a thing? He thought no one had done so. After collecting the old man’s bones—his face showed his distaste for the procedure—he had gone to look at the cabin again. True, it was burned—but it was clear to him that a tree nearby had been struck by lightning, and had set fire to a good bit of the forest near it. The cabin was only half-burned.

He rose to his feet with an air of finality.

“Will he stay for supper?” I asked, seeing that he seemed about to depart.

Jamie conveyed the invitation, but Sequoyah shook his head. He had done what was required of him; now he had other business. He nodded to the other Indians, then turned to go.

Something struck him, though, and he stopped, turning back.

“Tsisqua says,” he said, in the careful way of one who has memorized a speech in an unfamiliar tongue, “you re-mem-ber de guns.” He nodded then decisively, and went.

* * *

The grave was marked with a small cairn of stones and a small wooden cross made of pine twigs. Sequoyah hadn’t known his acquaintance’s name, and we had no idea of his age, nor yet the dates of birth and death. We hadn't known if he was Christian, either, but the cross seemed a good idea.

It was a very small burial service, consisting of myself, Jamie, Ian, Bree and Roger, Lizzie and her father, the Bugs, and Bobby Higgins—who I was fairly sure was in attendance only because Lizzie was. Her father seemed to think so, too, judging from the occasional suspicious glances he cast at Bobby.

Roger read a brief psalm over the grave, then paused. He cleared his throat and said simply, "Lord, we commend to Thy care the soul of this our brother …"

"Ephraim," murmured Brianna, eyes cast modestly down.

A subterranean sense of laughter moved through the crowd, though no one actually laughed. Roger gave Bree a dirty look, but I saw the corner of his mouth twitching, as well.

"… of our brother, whose name Thou knowest," Roger concluded with dignity, and closed the Book of Psalms he had borrowed from Hiram Crombie—who had declined an invitation to attend the funeral.

The light had gone by the time Sequoyah had finished his revelations the night before, and I was obliged to put off Miss Mouse's dental work to the morning. Stewed to the gills, she made no objection, and was helpfully supported off to a bed on the kitchen floor by Bobby Higgins—who might or might not be in love with Lizzie, but who seemed nonetheless most appreciative of Miss Mouse's charms.

Once finished with the tooth-drawing, I had suggested that she and her friends stay for a bit, but they, like Sequoyah, had business elsewhere, and with many thanks and small gifts, had departed by mid-afternoon, smelling strongly of whisky, and leaving us to dispose of the mortal remains of the late Ephraim.

Everyone went back down the hill after the service, but Jamie and I loitered behind, seeking an opportunity to be alone for a few minutes. The house had been full of Indians the night before, with much talk and storytelling by the fire, and by the time we had finally gone to bed, we had simply curled up in each other's arms and fallen asleep, barely exchanging the brief civility of a “good night.”

The graveyard was sited on a small rise, some distance from the house, and was a pretty, peaceful place. Surrounded by pines whose golden needles blanketed the earth, and whose murmuring branches provided a constant soft susurrus, it seemed a comforting spot.

“Poor old creature,” I said, putting a final pebble on Ephraim’s cairn. “How do you suppose he ended up in such a place?”

“God knows.” Jamie shook his head. “There are always hermits, men who mislike the society of their fellows. Perhaps he was one o’ those. Or perhaps some misfortune drove him into the wilderness, and he … stayed.” He shrugged a little, and gave me a half-smile.

“I sometimes wonder how any of us came to be where we are, Sassenach. Don’t you?”

“I used to,” I said. “But after a time, there didn’t seem to be any possibility of an answer, so I stopped.”

He looked down at me, diverted.

“Have ye, then?” He put out a hand and tucked back a lock of windblown hair. “Perhaps I shouldna ask it, then, but I will. Do ye mind, Sassenach? That ye *are* here, I mean. Do ye ever wish ye were—back?”

I shook my head.

“No, not ever.”

And that was true. But I woke sometimes in the dead of night, thinking, *Is now the dream?* Would I wake again to the thick warm smell of central heating and Frank’s Old Spice? And when I fell asleep again to the scent of woodsmoke and the musk of Jamie’s skin, would feel a faint, surprised regret.

If he saw the thought on my face, he gave no sign of it, but bent and kissed me gently on the forehead. He took my arm, and we walked a little way into the wood, away from the house and its clearing below.

“Sometimes I smell the pines,” he said, taking a deep, slow breath of the pungent air. “And I think for an instant I am in Scotland. But then I come to myself and see; there is no kindly bracken here, nor great barren mountains—not the wildness that I kent, but only wilderness that I do not."

I thought I heard nostalgia in his voice, but not sorrow. He'd asked, though; so would I.

"And do you ever wish to be … back?"

"Oh, aye," he said, surprising me—and then laughed at the look on my face. "But not enough not to wish more to be here, Sassenach."

He glanced over his shoulder at the tiny graveyard, with its small collection of cairns and crosses, with here and there a larger boulder marking a particular grave.

"Did ye ken, Sassenach, that some folk believe the last person to lie in a graveyard becomes its guardian? He must stand on guard until the next person dies and comes to take his place—only then can he rest."

"I suppose our mysterious Ephraim might be rather surprised to find himself in such a position, when here he'd lain down under a tree all alone," I said, smiling a little. "But I do wonder: what is the guardian of a graveyard guarding—and from whom?"

He laughed at that.

"Oh … vandals, maybe; desecraters. Or charmers."

"Charmers?" I was surprised at that; I'd thought the word "charmer" synonymous with "healer."

"There are charms that call for bones, Sassenach," he said. "Or the ashes of a burnt body. Or soil from a grave." He spoke lightly enough, but with no sense of jesting. "Aye, even the dead may need defending."

"And who better to do it than a resident ghost?" I said. "Quite."

We climbed up through a stand of quivering aspen, whose light dappled us with green and silver, and I paused to scrape a blob of the crimson sap from a paper-white trunk. How odd, I thought, wondering why the sight of it gave me pause—and then remembered, and turned sharply to look again at the graveyard.

Not a memory, but a dream—or a vision. A man, battered and broken, rising to his feet amid a stand of aspen, rising for what he knew was the last time, his last fight, baring shattered teeth stained with blood that was the color of the aspens' sap. His face was painted black for death—and I knew that there were silver fillings in his teeth.

But the granite boulder stood silent and peaceful, drifted all about with yellow pine needles, marking the rest of the man who had once called himself Otter-Tooth.

The moment passed, and vanished. We walked out of the aspens, and into another clearing, this one higher than the rise the graveyard stood on.

I was surprised to see that someone had been cutting timber here, and clearing the ground. A sizable stack of felled logs lay to one side, and nearby lay a tangle of uprooted stumps, though several more, still rooted in the ground, poked through the heavy growth of wood sorrel and bluet.

"Look, Sassenach." Jamie turned me with a hand on my elbow.

"Oh. Oh, my."

The ground rose high enough here that we could look out over a stunning vista. The trees fell away below us, and we could see beyond our mountain, and beyond the next, and the next, into a blue distance, hazed with the breath of the mountains, clouds rising from their hollows.

"D'ye like it?" The note of proprietorial pride in his voice was palpable.

"Of course I like it. What—?" I turned, gesturing at the logs, the stumps.

"The next house will stand here, Sassenach," he said simply.

"The *next* house? What, are we building another?"

"Well, I dinna ken will it be us, or maybe our children—or grandchildren," he added, mouth curling a little. "But I thought, should anything happen—and I dinna think anything *will,* mind, but if it should—well, I should be happier to have made a start. Just in case."

I stared at him for a moment, trying to make sense of this. "Should anything happen," I said slowly, and turned to look to the east, where the shape of our house was just visible among the trees, its chimney smoke a white plume among the soft green of the chestnuts and firs. “Should it really … burn down, you mean.” Just putting the idea into words made my stomach curl up into a ball.

Then I looked at him again, and saw that the notion scared him, too. But Jamie-like, he had simply set about to take what action he could, against the day of disaster.

“D’ye like it?” he repeated, blue eyes intent. “The site, I mean. If not, I can choose another.”

“It’s beautiful,” I said, feeling tears prickle at the backs of my eyes. “Just beautiful, Jamie.”

* * *

Hot after the climb, we sat down in the shade of a giant hemlock, to admire our future view. And, with the silence broken concerning the dire possibility of the future, found we could discuss it.

“It’s not so much the idea of us dying,” I said. “Or not entirely. It’s that ‘no surviving children’ that gives me the whim-whams.”

“Well, I take your point, Sassenach. Though I’m no in favor of us dying, either, and I mean to see we don’t,” he assured me. “Think, though. It might not mean they’re dead. They might only … go.”

I took a deep breath, trying to accept that supposition without panic.

“Go. Go back, you mean. Roger and Bree—and Jemmy, I suppose. We’re assuming he can—can travel through the stones.”

He nodded soberly, arms clasped about his knees.

“After what he did to that opal? Aye, I think we must assume he can.” I nodded, recalling what he’d done to the opal: held it, complaining of it growing hot in his hand—until it exploded, shattering into hundreds of needle-sharp fragments. Yes, I thought we must assume he could time-travel, too. But what if Brianna had another child? It was plain to me that she and Roger wanted another—or at least that Roger did, and she was willing.

The thought of losing them was acutely painful, but I supposed the possibility had to be faced.

“Which leaves a choice, I suppose,” I said, trying to be brave and objective. “If we’re dead, they’d go, because without us, they’ve no real reason to be here. But if we’re *not* dead—will they go anyway?

Will we send them away, I mean? Because of the war. It won't be safe."

"No," he said softly. His head was bent, stray auburn hairs lifting from his crown, from the cowlicks he had bequeathed both to Bree and to Jemmy.

"I dinna ken," he said at last, and lifted his head, looking out into the distance of land and sky. "No one does, Sassenach. We must just meet what comes as we can."

He turned and laid his hand over mine, with a smile that had as much of pain in it as joy.

"We've ghosts enough between us, Sassenach. If the evils of the past canna hinder us—neither then shall any fears of the future. We must just put things behind us and get on. Aye?"

I laid a light hand on his chest, not in invitation, but only because I wanted the feel of him. His skin was cool from sweating, but he had helped dig the grave; the heat of his labor glowed in the muscle beneath.

"You were one of my ghosts," I said. "For a long time. And for a long time, I tried to put *you* behind me."

"Did ye, then?" His own hand came to rest lightly on my back, moving unconsciously. I knew that touch—the need of touching only to reassure oneself that the other was actually there, present in flesh.

"I thought I couldn't live, looking back—couldn't bear it." My throat was thick with the memory of it.

"I know," he said softly, his hand rising to touch my hair. "But ye had the bairn—ye had a husband. It wasna right to turn your back on them."

"It wasn't right to turn my back on *you.*" I blinked, but tears were leaking from the corners of my eyes. He drew my head close, put out his tongue, and delicately licked my face, which surprised me so much that I laughed in the midst of a sob, and nearly choked.

"I do love thee, as meat loves salt," he quoted, and laughed, too, very softly. "Dinna weep, Sassenach. Ye're here; so am I. There's naught that matters, aside from that."

I leaned my forehead against his cheek, and put my arms around him. My hands rested flat on the planes of his back, and I stroked him from the blade of his shoulder to the tapering small of his back, lightly, always lightly, tracing the whole of him, the shape of him, and not the scars that reamed his skin.

He held me close, and sighed deeply.

"D'ye ken we've been wed this time nearly twice as long as the last?"

I drew back and frowned dubiously at him, accepting the distraction.

"Were we not married in between?"

That took him by surprise; he frowned, too, and ran a finger slowly down the sunburnt bridge of his nose in thought.

"Well, there's a question for a priest, to be sure," he said. "I should think we were—but if so, are we not both bigamists?"

"Were, not are," I corrected, feeling slightly uneasy. "But we weren't, really. Father Anselme said so."

"Anselme?"

"Father Anselme—a Franciscan priest at the Abbey of St. Anne. But perhaps you wouldn't recall him; you were very ill at the time."

"Oh, I recall him," he said. "He would come and sit wi' me at night, when I couldna sleep." He smiled, a little lopsided; that time wasn't something he wished to remember. "He liked ye a great deal, Sassenach."

"Oh? And what about you?" I asked, wanting to distract him from the memory of St. Anne. "Didn't you like me?"

"Oh, I liked ye fine then," he assured me. "I maybe like ye even more now, though."

"Oh, do you, indeed." I sat up a little straighter, preening. "What's different?"

He tilted his head to one side, eyes narrowing a bit in appraisal.

"Well, ye fart less in your sleep," he began judiciously, then ducked, laughing, as a pinecone whizzed past his left ear. I seized a chunk of wood, but before I could bat him over the head with it, he lunged and caught me by the arms. He shoved me flat in the grass and collapsed on top of me, pinning me effortlessly.

“Get off, you oaf! I do *not* fart in my sleep!”

“Now, how would ye ken that, Sassenach? Ye sleep so sound, ye wouldna wake, even to the sound of your own snoring.”

“Oh, you want to talk about snoring, do you? You—”

“Ye’re proud as Lucifer,” he said, interrupting. He was still smiling, but the words were more serious. “And ye’re brave. Ye were always bolder than was safe; now ye’re fierce as a wee badger.”

“So I’m arrogant and ferocious. This does not sound like much of a catalog of womanly virtues,” I said, puffing a bit as I strained to wriggle out from under him.

“Well, ye’re kind, too,” he said, considering. “Verra kind. Though ye are inclined to do it on your own terms. Not that that’s bad, mind,” he added, neatly recapturing the arm I had extricated. He pinned my wrist over my head.

“Womanly,” he murmured, brows knotted in concentration. “Womanly virtues …” His free hand crept between us and fastened on my breast.

“Besides that!”

“You’re verra clean,” he said approvingly. He let go my wrist and ruffled a hand through my hair—which was indeed clean, smelling of sunflower and marigolds.

“I’ve never seen any woman wash herself sae much as you do—save Brianna, perhaps.

“Ye’re no much of a cook,” he went on, squinting thoughtfully. “Though ye’ve never poisoned anyone, save on purpose. And I will say ye sew a neat seam—though ye like it much better if it’s through someone’s flesh.”

“Thanks so much!”

“Tell me some more virtues,” he suggested. “Perhaps I’ve missed one.”

“Hmph! Gentleness, patience …” I floundered.

“Gentle? Christ.” He shook his head. “Ye’re the most ruthless, bloodthirsty—”

I darted my head upward, and nearly succeeded in biting him in the throat. He jerked back, laughing.

“No, ye’re no verra patient, either.”

I gave up struggling for the moment and collapsed flat on my back, tousled hair spread out on the grass.

"So what *is* my most endearing trait?" I demanded.

"Ye think I'm funny," he said, grinning.

"I … do … not …" I grunted, struggling madly. He merely lay on top of me, tranquilly oblivious to my pokings and thumpings, until I exhausted myself and lay gasping underneath him.

"And," he said thoughtfully, "ye like it verra much when I take ye to bed. No?"

"Er …" I wanted to contradict him, but honesty forbade. Besides, he bloody well knew I did.

"You are squashing me," I said with dignity. "Kindly get off."

"No?" he repeated, not moving.

"Yes! All right! Yes! Will you bloody get *off*?!"

He didn't get off, but bent his head and kissed me. I was close-lipped, determined not to give in, but he was determined, too, and if one came right down to it … the skin of his face was warm, the plush of his beard stubble softly scratchy, and his wide sweet mouth … My legs were open in abandon and he was solid between them, bare chest smelling of musk and sweat and sawdust caught in the wiry auburn hair.… I was still hot with struggling, but the grass was damp and cool around us.… Well, all right; another minute, and he could have me right there, if he cared to.

He felt me yield, and sighed, letting his own body slacken; he no longer held me prisoner, but simply held me. He lifted his head then, and cupped my face with one hand.

"D'ye want to know what it is, really?" he asked, and I could see from the dark blue of his eyes that he meant it. I nodded, mute.

"Above all creatures on this earth," he whispered, "you are faithful."

I thought of saying something about St. Bernard dogs, but there was such tenderness in his face that I said nothing, instead merely staring up at him, blinking against the green light that filtered through the needles overhead.

"Well," I said at last, with a deep sigh of my own, "so are you. Quite a good thing, really. Isn't it?"

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WE HAVE IGNITION

Mrs. Bug had made chicken fricassee for supper, but that wasn't sufficient to account for the air of suppressed excitement that Bree and Roger brought with them when they came in. They were both smiling, her cheeks were flushed, and his eyes as bright as hers.

So when Roger announced that they had great news, it was perhaps only reasonable that Mrs. Bug should leap directly to the obvious conclusion.

"You're wi' child again!" she cried, dropping a spoon in her excitement. She clapped her hands together, inflating like a birthday balloon. "Oh, the joy of it! And about time, too," she added, letting go her hands to wag a finger at Roger. "And here was me thinkin' as I should add a bit o' ginger and brimstone to your parritch, young man, so as to bring ye up to scratch! But ye kent your business weel enough in the end, I see. And you, *a bhailach,* what d'ye think? A bonny wee brother for ye!"

Jemmy, thus addressed, stared up at her, mouth open.

"Er …" said Roger, flushing up.

"Or, of course, it might be a wee sister, I suppose," Mrs. Bug admitted. "But good news, good news, either way. Here, *a luaidh,* have a sweetie on the strength of it, and the rest of us will drink to it!"

Obviously bewildered, but strongly in favor of sweeties, Jem took the proffered molasses drop and stuck it promptly in his mouth.

“But he isn’t—” Bree began.

“Nank you, Missus Bug,” Jem said hastily, putting a hand over his mouth lest his mother try to repossess this distinctly forbidden predinner treat on grounds of impoliteness.

“Oh, a wee sweetie will do him nay harm,” Mrs. Bug assured her, picking up the fallen spoon and wiping it on her apron. “Call Arch in, *a muirninn,* and we’ll tell him your news. Blessed Bride save ye, lass, I thought ye’d never get round to it! Here was all the ladies saying’ as they didna ken whether ye’d turned cold to your husband, or was it him maybe, lackin’ the vital spark, but as it is—”

“Well, *as* it is,” said Roger, raising his voice in order to be heard.

“I’m *not pregnant*!” said Bree, very loudly.

The succeeding silence echoed like a thunderclap.

“Oh,” said Jamie mildly. He picked up a serviette and sat down, tucking it into the neck of his shirt. “Well, then. Shall we eat?” He held out a hand to Jem, who scrambled up onto the bench beside him, still sucking fiercely on his molasses drop.

Mrs. Bug, momentarily turned to stone, revived with a marked “Hmpf!” Massively affronted, she turned to the sideboard and slapped down a stack of pewter plates with a clatter.

Roger, still rather flushed, appeared to find the situation funny, judging from the twitching of his mouth. Brianna was incandescent, and breathing like a grampus.

“Sit down, darling,” I said, in the tentative manner of one addressing a large explosive device. “You … um … had some news, you said?”

“Never mind!” She stood still, glaring. “Nobody cares, since I’m not pregnant. After all, what *else* could I possibly do that anybody would think was worthwhile?” She shoved a violent hand through her hair, and encountering the ribbon tying it back, yanked this loose and flung it on the ground.

“Now, sweetheart …” Roger began. I could have told him this was a mistake; Frasers in a fury tended to pay no attention to honeyed words, being instead inclined to go for the throat of the nearest party unwary enough to speak to them.

"Don't you 'sweetheart' me!" she snapped, turning on him. "You think so, too! You think everything I do is a waste of time if it isn't washing clothes or cooking dinner or mending your effing socks! And you blame me for not getting pregnant, too, you think it's my fault! Well, it's NOT, and you know it!"

"No! I don't think that, I don't at all. Brianna, please.…" He stretched out a hand to her, then thought better of the gesture and withdrew it, clearly feeling that she might take his hand off at the wrist.

"Less EAT, Mummy!" Jemmy piped up helpfully. A long string of molasses-tinged saliva flowed from the corner of his mouth and dripped down the front of his shirt. Seeing this, his mother turned on Mrs. Bug like a tiger.

"Now see what you've done, you interfering old busybody! That was his last clean shirt! And how dare you talk about our private lives with everybody in sight, what possible earthly business of yours is it, you beastly old gossiping—"

Seeing the futility of protest, Roger put his arms round her from behind, picked her up bodily off the floor, and carried her out the back door, this departure accented by incoherent protests from Bree and grunts of pain from Roger, as she kicked him repeatedly in the shins, with considerable force and accuracy.

I went to the door and closed it delicately, shutting off the sounds of further altercation in the yard.

"She gets that from *you,* you know," I said reproachfully, sitting down opposite Jamie. "Mrs. Bug, that smells wonderful. *Do* let's eat!"

Mrs. Bug dished the fricassee in huffy silence, but declined to join us at table, instead putting on her cloak and stamping out the front door, leaving us to deal with the clearing-up. An excellent bargain, if you asked me.

We ate in blissful peace, the quiet broken only by the clink of spoons on pewter and the occasional question from Jemmy as to why molasses was sticky, how did milk get *into* the cow, and when would he get his little brother?

"*What* am I going to say to Mrs. Bug?" I asked, in the brief hiatus between queries.

"Why ought ye to say anything, Sassenach? It wasna you calling her names."

"Well, no. But I'd be willing to bet that Brianna isn't going to apologize—"

"Why should she?" He shrugged. "She was provoked, after all. And I canna think Mrs. Bug has lived sae long without being called a gossiping busybody before. She'll wear herself out, telling Arch all about it, and tomorrow it will be fine again."

"Well," I said uncertainly. "Perhaps so. But Bree and Roger—"

He smiled at me, dark blue eyes crinkling into triangles.

"Dinna feel as though every disaster is yours to fash yourself about, *mo chridhe,*" he said. He reached across and patted my hand. "Roger Mac and the lass must work it out between them—and the lad did appear to have a decent grip on the situation."

He laughed, and I joined him, reluctantly.

"Well, it will be mine to fash about, if she's broken his leg," I remarked, getting up to fetch cream for the coffee. "Likely he'll come crawling back to have it mended."

At this apropos moment, a knock sounded on the back door. Wondering why Roger would knock, I opened it, and stared in astonishment at the pale face of Thomas Christie.

* * *

He was not only pale, but sweating, and had a bloodstained cloth wrapped round one hand.

"I wouldna discommode ye, mistress," he said, holding himself stiffly. "I'll just … wait upon your convenience."

"Nonsense," I said, rather shortly. "Come into the surgery while there's still some light."

I took care not to catch Jamie's eye directly, but I glanced at him as I bent to push in the bench. He was leaning forward to put a saucer over my coffee, his eyes on Tom Christie with an air of thoughtful speculation that I had last seen in a bobcat watching a flight of ducks overhead. Not urgent, but definitely taking notice.

Christie was taking no notice of anything beyond his injured hand, reasonably enough. My surgery's windows were oriented to east and south, to take best advantage of morning light, but even near sunset, the room held a soft radiance—the setting sun's reflection from the shimmering leaves of the chestnut grove. Everything in the room was suffused with golden light, save Tom Christie's face, which was noticeably green.

"Sit down," I said, shoving a stool hastily behind him. His knees buckled as he lowered himself; he landed harder than he had intended, jarring his hand, and let out a small exclamation of pain.

I put a thumb on the big vein at the wrist, to help slow the bleeding, and unwound the cloth. Given his aspect, I was expecting a severed finger or two, and was surprised to find a simple gash in the meat at the base of the thumb, angled down and running onto the wrist. It was deep enough to gape, and still bleeding freely, but no major vessels had been cut, and he had by great good fortune only nicked the thumb tendon; I could mend that with a stitch or two.

I looked up to tell him this, only to see his eyes roll back in his head.

"Help!" I shouted, dropping the hand and grabbing for his shoulders as he toppled backward.

A crash of overturned bench and the thump of running feet answered my call, and Jamie burst into the room in a heartbeat. Seeing me dragged off my feet by Christie's weight, he seized the man by the scruff of the neck and shoved him forward like a rag doll, pushing Christie's head down between his legs.

"Is he desperate bad?" Jamie asked, squinting at Christie's injured hand, which was resting on the floor, oozing blood. "Shall I lay him on the table?"

"I don't think so." I had a hand under Christie's jaw, feeling for his pulse. "He's not hurt badly; he's only fainted. Yes, see, he's coming round. Keep your head down for a bit, now, you'll be quite all right in a moment." I addressed this latter remark to Christie, who was breathing like a steam engine, but had steadied a little.

Jamie removed his hand from Christie's neck, and wiped it on his kilt with an expression of mild distaste. Christie had broken out in a profuse cold sweat; I could feel my own hand slimy with it, but picked up the fallen cloth and wiped my hand more tactfully with that.

"Would you like to lie down?" I asked, bending to look at Christie's face. He was still a ghastly color, but shook his head.

"No, mistress. I'm quite all right. Only taken queer for a moment." He spoke hoarsely, but firmly enough, so I contented myself with pressing the cloth hard against the wound to stanch the dripping blood.

Jemmy was loitering in the doorway, wide-eyed, but showing no particular alarm; blood was nothing new to him.

"Shall I fetch ye a dram, Tom?" Jamie said, eyeing the patient warily. "I ken ye dinna hold wi' strong drink, but there's a time for it, surely?"

Christie's mouth worked a little, but he shook his head.

"I … no. Perhaps … a little wine?"

"*Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake,* eh? Aye, fine. Take heart, man, I'll fetch it." Jamie clapped him encouragingly on the shoulder, and went briskly off, taking Jemmy by the hand as he went out.

Christie's mouth tightened in a grimace. I had noticed before that like some Protestants, Tom Christie regarded the Bible as being a document addressed specifically to himself and confided to his personal care for prudent distribution to the masses. Thus, he quite disliked hearing Catholics—i.e., Jamie—quoting casually from it. I had also noticed that Jamie was aware of this, and took every opportunity to make such quotes.

"What happened?" I asked, as much to distract Christie as because I wished to know.

Christie broke off his glower at the empty doorway and glanced at his left hand—then hastily away, going pale again.

"An accident," he said gruffly. "I was cutting rushes; the knife slipped." His right hand flexed slightly as he said this, and I glanced at it.

"No bloody wonder!" I said. "Here, keep that up in the air." I lifted the injured left hand, tightly wrapped, above his head, let go of it, and reached for the other.

He had been suffering from a condition in the right hand called Dupuytren's contracture—or at least it *would* be called that, once Baron Dupuytren got round to describing it in another sixty or seventy years. Caused by a thickening and shortening of the fibrous sheet that kept the hand's tendons in place when the fingers flexed, the result of it was to draw the ring finger in toward the palm of the hand. In advanced cases, the little finger and sometimes the middle finger as well were involved. Tom Christie's case had advanced quite a bit since I had last had the chance of a good look at his hand.

"Did I tell you?" I demanded rhetorically, pulling gently on the clawed fingers. The middle finger could still be halfway unfolded; the ring and little fingers could barely be lifted away from the palm. "I said it would get worse. No wonder the knife slipped—I'm surprised you could even hold it."

A slight flush appeared under the clipped salt-and-pepper beard, and he glanced away.

"I could have taken care of it easily months ago," I said, turning the hand to look critically at the angle of contracture. "It would have been a very simple matter. Now it will be rather more complicated—but I can still correct it, I think."

Had he been a less stolid man, I should have described him as wriggling with embarrassment. As it was, he merely twitched slightly, the flush deepening over his face.

"I—I do not desire—"

"I don't bloody care what you desire," I told him, putting the clawed hand back in his lap. "If you don't allow me to operate on that hand, it will be all but useless inside six months. You can barely write with it now, am I right?"

His eyes met mine, deep gray and startled.

"I can write," he said, but I could tell that the belligerence in his voice hid a deep uneasiness. Tom Christie was an educated man, a scholar, and the Ridge's schoolteacher. It was to him that many of the Ridge people went for help in the composition of letters or legal documents. He took great pride in this; I knew the threat of loss of this ability was the best lever I had—and it was no idle threat.

“Not for long,” I said, and widened my eyes at him to make my meaning clear. He swallowed uneasily, but before he could reply, Jamie reappeared, holding a jug of wine.

“Best listen to her,” he advised Christie, setting it on the counter. “I ken what it’s like to try to write wi’ a stiff finger, aye?” He held up his own right hand and flexed it, looking rueful. “If she could mend *that* wi’ her wee knife, I’d lay my hand on the block this instant.”

Jamie’s problem was almost the reverse of Christie’s, though the effect was quite similar. The ring finger had been smashed so badly that the joints had frozen; it could not be bent. Consequently, the two fingers on either side had limited motion, as well, though the joint capsules were intact.

“The difference being that your hand isn’t getting any worse,” I told Jamie. “His is.”

Christie made a small movement, pushing his right hand down between his thighs, as though to hide it.

“Aye, well,” he said uncomfortably. “It can bide awhile, surely.”

“At least long enough to let my wife mend the other,” Jamie observed, pouring out a cup of wine. “Here—can ye hold it, Tom, or shall I—?” He made a questioning gesture, holding the cup as though to feed it to Christie, who snatched his right hand out of the sheltering folds of his clothes.

“I’ll manage,” he snapped, and took the wine—holding the cup between thumb and forefinger with an awkwardness that made him flush even more deeply. His left hand still hung in the air above his shoulder. He looked foolish, and obviously felt it.

Jamie poured another cup and handed it to me, ignoring Christie. I would have thought it natural tact on his part, were I not aware of the complicated history between the two men. There was always a small barbed edge in any dealings between Jamie and Tom Christie, though they managed to keep an outwardly cordial face on things.

With any other man, Jamie's display of his own injured hand would have been just what it seemed—reassurance, and the offering of fellowship in infirmity. With Tom Christie, it might have been consciously *meant* as reassurance, but there was a threat implied, as well, though perhaps Jamie couldn't help that.

The simple fact was that people came to Jamie for help more often than they did to Christie. Jamie had widespread respect and admiration, despite his crippled hand. Christie was not a personally popular man; he might well lose what social position he had, if he lost his ability to write. And—as I had bluntly noted—Jamie's hand would not get worse.

Christie's eyes had narrowed a little over his cup. He hadn't missed the threat, whether intended or not. He wouldn't; Tom Christie was a suspicious man by nature, and inclined to see threat where it *wasn't* intended.

"I think that's settled a bit by now; let me take care of it." I took hold of his left hand, gently, and unwrapped it. The bleeding had stopped. I set the hand to soak in a bowl of water boiled with garlic, added a few drops of pure ethanol for additional disinfection, and set about gathering my kit.

It was beginning to grow dark, and I lit the alcohol lamp Brianna had made for me. By its bright, steady flame, I could see that Christie's face had lost its momentary flush of anger. He wasn't as pale as he had been, but looked uneasy as a vole at a convention of badgers, his eyes following my hands as I laid out my sutures, needles, and scissors, all clean and gleaming-sharp in the light.

Jamie didn't leave, but stayed leaning against the counter, sipping his own cup of wine—presumably, in case Christie passed out again.

A fine trembling ran through Christie's hand and arm, braced as they were on the table. He was sweating again; I could smell it, acrid and bitter. It was the scent of that, half-forgotten, but immediately familiar, that finally made me realize the difficulty: it was fear. He was afraid of blood, perhaps; afraid of pain, certainly.

I kept my eyes fixed on my work, bending my head lower to keep him from seeing anything in my face. I should have seen it sooner; I would have, I thought, had he not been a man. His paleness, the fainting … not due to loss of blood, but to shock at seeing blood lost.

I stitched up men and boys routinely; mountain farming was rough work, and it was a rare week when I wasn't presented with ax wounds, hoe gouges, spud slashes, hog bites, scalp lacerations sustained while falling over something, or some other minor calamity requiring stitches. By and large, all my patients behaved with complete matter-of-factness, accepting my ministrations stoically, and going right back to work. But nearly all of the men were Highlanders, I realized, and many not only Highlanders but erstwhile soldiers.

Tom Christie was a townsman, from Edinburgh—he had been imprisoned in Ardsmuir as a Jacobite supporter, but had never been a fighting man. He had been a commissary officer. In fact, I realized with surprise, he had likely never even *seen* a real military battle, let alone engaged in the daily physical conflict with nature that Highland farming entailed.

I became aware of Jamie, still standing in the shadows, sipping wine and watching with a faintly ironic dispassion. I glanced up quickly at him; his expression didn't alter, though he met my eyes and nodded, very slightly.

Tom Christie's lip was fixed between his teeth; I could hear the faint whistle of his breath. He couldn't see Jamie, but knew he was there; the stiffness of his back said as much. He might be afraid, Tom Christie, but he had some courage to him.

It would have hurt him less, could he have relaxed the clenched muscles of arm and hand. Under the circumstances, though, I could hardly suggest as much. I could have insisted that Jamie leave, but I was nearly finished. With a sigh of mingled exasperation and puzzlement, I clipped the final knot and laid down the scissors.

"All right, then," I said, swiping the last of the coneflower ointment across the wound and reaching for a clean linen bandage. "Keep it clean. I'll make up some fresh ointment for you; send Malva for it. Then come back in a week and I'll take the stitches out." I hesitated, glancing at Jamie. I felt some reluctance to use his presence as blackmail, but it was for Christie's own good.

"I'll take care of your right hand, then, too, shall I?" I said firmly.

He was still sweating, though the color in his face had begun to come back. He glanced at me, and then, involuntarily, at Jamie.

Jamie smiled faintly.

"Go on, then, Tom," he said. "It's naught to trouble ye. No but a wee nick. I've had worse."

The words were spoken casually, but they might as well have been written in flaming letters a foot high. *I've had worse.*

Jamie's face was still in shadow, but his eyes were clearly visible, slanted with his smile.

Tom Christie had not relaxed his rigid posture. He matched Jamie's stare, closing his gnarled right hand over the bandaged left.

"Aye," he said. "Well." He was breathing deeply. "I will, then." He rose abruptly, knocking the stool aside, and headed for the door, a little off-balance, like a man the worse for strong drink.

At the door, he paused, fumbling for the knob. Finding it, he drew himself up and turned back, looking for Jamie.

"At least," he said, breathing so hard that he stumbled over the words, "at least it will be an honorable scar. Won't it, *Mac Dubh*?"

Jamie straightened up abruptly, but Christie was already out, stamping down the corridor with a step heavy enough to rattle the pewter plates on the kitchen shelf.

"Why, ye wee pissant!" he said, in a tone somewhere between anger and astonishment. His left hand clenched involuntarily into a fist, and I thought it a good thing that Christie had made such a rapid exit.

I was rather unsure as to exactly *what* had happened—or been happening—but relieved that Christie was gone. I'd felt like a handful of grain, trapped between two grindstones, both of them trying to grind each other's faces, with no heed for the hapless corn in between.

"I've never heard Tom Christie call you *Mac Dubh,*" I observed cautiously, turning to tidy away my surgical leavings. Christie was not, of course, a Gaelic-speaker, but I had never heard him use even the Gaelic nickname that the other Ardsmuir men still called Jamie by. Christie always called Jamie "Mr. Fraser," or simply "Fraser," in moments of what passed for cordiality.

Jamie made a derisive Scottish noise, then picked up Christie's half-full cup and thriftily drained it.

"No, he wouldna—frigging Sassenach." Then he caught a glimpse of my face, and gave me a lopsided smile. "I didna mean you, Sassenach."

I knew he didn't mean me; the word was spoken with a completely different—and quite shocking—intonation; a bitterness that reminded me that "Sassenach" was by no means a friendly term in normal usage.

"Why do you call him that?" I asked curiously. "And just what did he mean by that 'honorable scar' crack?"

He looked down, and didn't answer for a moment, though the stiffened fingers of his right hand drummed soundlessly against his thigh.

"Tom Christie's a solid man," he said at last. "But by God, he is a stiff-necked wee son of a bitch!" He looked up then, and smiled at me, a little ruefully.

"Eight years he lived in a cell wi' forty men who had the Gaelic—and he wouldna lower himself to let a word of such a barbarous tongue pass his lips! Christ, no. He'd speak in English, no matter who it was he spoke to, and if it was a man who had no English, why, then, he'd just stand there, dumb as a stone, 'til someone came along to interpret for him."

"Someone like you?"

"Now and then." He glanced toward the window, as though to catch a glimpse of Christie, but the night had come down altogether, and the panes gave back only a dim reflection of the surgery, our own forms ghostlike in the glass.

"Roger did say that Kenny Lindsay mentioned something about Mr. Christie's … pretensions," I said delicately.

Jamie shot me a sharp glance at that.

"Oh, he did, did he? So, Roger Mac had second thoughts about his wisdom in taking on Christie as a tenant, I suppose. Kenny wouldna have said, unless he was asked."

I had more or less got used to the speed of his deductions and the accuracy of his insights, and didn't question this one.

"You never told me about that," I said, coming to stand in front of him. I put my hands on his chest, looking up into his face.

He put his own hands over mine, and sighed, deep enough for me to feel the movement of his chest. Then he wrapped his arms around me, and drew me close, so my face rested against the warm fabric of his shirt.

"Aye, well. It wasna really important, ken."

"And you didn't want to think about Ardsmuir, perhaps?"

"No," he said softly. "I have had enough of the past."

My hands were on his back now, and I realized suddenly what Christie had likely meant. I could feel the lines of the scars through the linen, clear to my fingertips as the lines of a fishnet, laid across his skin.

"Honorable scars!" I said, lifting my head. "Why, that little *bastard*! Is that what he meant?"

Jamie smiled a little at my indignation.

"Aye, he did," he said dryly. "That's why he called me *Mac Dubh*—to remind me of Ardsmuir, so I'd ken for sure what he meant by it. He saw me flogged there."

"That—that—" I was so angry, I could barely speak. "I wish I'd stitched his fucking hand to his balls!"

"And you a physician, sworn to do nay harm? I'm verra much shocked, Sassenach."

He was laughing now, but I wasn't amused at all.

"Beastly little coward! He's afraid of blood, did you know that?"

"Well, aye, I did. Ye canna live in a man's oxter for three years without learning a great many things ye dinna want to know about him, let alone something like that." He sobered a bit, though a hint of wryness still lurked at the corner of his mouth. "When they brought me back from being whipped, he went white as suet, went and puked in the corner, then lay down with his face to the wall. I wasna really taking notice, but I remember thinking that was a bit raw; I was the one was a bloody mess, why was he takin' on like a lass wi' the vapors?"

I snorted. "Don't you go making jokes about it! How dare he? And what does he mean, anyway—I know what happened at Ardsmuir, and those bloody well … I mean, those certainly *are* honorable scars, and everyone there knew it!"

"Aye, maybe," he said, all hint of laughter disappearing. "That time. But everyone could see when they stood me up that I'd been flogged before, aye? And no man there has ever said a word to me about those scars. Not 'til now."

That brought me up short.

Flogging wasn't merely brutal; it was shameful—meant to permanently disfigure, as well as to hurt, advertising a criminal's past as clearly as a branded cheek or cropped ear. And Jamie would, of course, prefer to have his tongue torn out by the roots, sooner than reveal to anyone the reasons for his scars, even if that meant leaving everyone with the assumption that he had been flogged for some disgraceful act.

I was so used to Jamie's always keeping his shirt on in anyone else's presence that it had never occurred to me that of course the Ardsmuir men would know about the scars on his back. And yet he hid them, and everyone pretended they did not exist—save Tom Christie.

"Hmph," I said. "Well … God damn the man, anyway. Why would he say such a thing?"

Jamie uttered a short laugh.

"Because he didna like me watching him sweat. He wanted a bit of his own back, I expect."

"Hmph," I said again, and folded my arms beneath my bosom. "Since you mention it—why *did* you do that? If you knew he couldn't stand blood and the like, I mean, why stay and watch him like that?"

"Because I kent he wouldna whimper or faint if I did," he replied. "He'd let ye thrust red-hot needles through his eyeballs before he'd squeal in front of me."

"Oh, so you noticed that?"

"Well, of course I did, Sassenach. What d'ye think I was there for? Not that I dinna appreciate your skill, but watching ye stitch up wounds isna really good for the digestion." He cast a brief glance at the discarded cloth, splotched with blood, and grimaced. "D'ye think the coffee's gone cold by now?"

"I'll heat it up." I slid the clean scissors back into their sheath, then sterilized the needle I'd used, ran a fresh silk suture through it, and coiled it up in its jar of alcohol—still trying to make sense of things.

I put everything back into the cupboard, then turned to Jamie.

"You aren't afraid of Tom Christie, are you?" I demanded.

He blinked, astonished, then laughed.

"Christ, no. What makes ye think that, Sassenach?"

"Well … the way the two of you act sometimes. It's like wild sheep, butting heads to see who's stronger."

"Oh, that." He waved a hand, dismissive. "I've a harder head by far than Tom, and he kens it well enough. But he's no going to give in and follow me round like a yearling lamb, either."

"Oh? But what do you think you're doing, then? You weren't just torturing him to prove you could, were you?"

"No," he said, and smiled faintly at me. "A man stubborn enough to speak English to Hieland men in prison for eight years is a man stubborn enough to fight beside me for the next eight years; that's what I think. It would be good if he were sure of it, himself, though."

I drew a deep breath and sighed, shaking my head.

"I do *not* understand men."

That made him chuckle, deep in his chest.

"Yes, ye do, Sassenach. Ye only wish ye didn't."

The surgery lay neat again, ready for whatever emergencies the morrow might bring. Jamie reached for the lamp, but I laid a hand on his arm, stopping him.

"You promised *me* honesty," I said. "But are you quite sure you're being honest with yourself? You weren't baiting Tom Christie just because he challenges you?"

He stopped, his eyes clear and unguarded, a few inches from mine. He lifted a hand and cupped the side of my face, his palm warm on my skin.

"There are only two people in this world to whom I would never lie, Sassenach," he said softly. "Ye're one of them. And I'm the other."

He kissed me gently on the forehead, then leaned past me and blew out the lamp.

"Mind," his voice came from the darkness, and I saw his tall form silhouetted against the faint oblong of light from the doorway as he straightened up, "I can be fooled. But I wouldna be doing it on purpose."

* * *

Roger moved a little, and groaned.

"I think ye broke my leg."

"Did not," said his wife, calmer now, but still disposed to argument. "But I'll kiss it for you, if you want."

"That'd be nice."

Tremendous rustlings of the corn-shuck mattress ensued as she clambered into position to execute this treatment, ending with a naked Brianna straddling his chest, and leaving him with a view that caused him to wish they'd taken time to light the candle.

She was in fact kissing his shins, which tickled. Given the circumstances, though, he was inclined to put up with it. He reached up with both hands. Lacking light, Braille would do.

"When I was fourteen or so," he said dreamily, "one of the shops in Inverness had a most daring window display—daring for the times, that is—a lady mannequin wearing nothing but underwear."

"Mm?"

"Aye, a full-length pink girdle, garters, the lot—with matching brassiere. Everyone was shocked. Committees were got up to protest, and calls were made to all the ministers in town. Next day, they took it down, but meanwhile, the entire male population of Inverness had been past that window, taking pains to look casual about it. ’Til this minute, I’d always thought that was the most erotic thing I’d ever seen.”

She suspended her operations for a moment, and he thought from the sense of movement that she was looking back over her shoulder at him.

“Roger,” she said thoughtfully. “I do believe you’re a pervert.”

“Yes, but one with really good night vision.”

That made her laugh—the thing he’d been striving for since he’d finally got her to stop frothing at the mouth—and he raised himself briefly, planting a light kiss on either side of the looming object of his affections before sinking contentedly back onto the pillow.

She kissed his knee, then put her head down, cheek against his thigh, so the mass of her hair spilled over his legs, cool and soft as a cloud of silk threads.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly, after a moment.

He made a dismissive noise, and ran a soothing hand over the round of her hip.

“Och, it’s no matter. Too bad, though; I wanted to see their faces when they saw what ye’d done.”

She snorted briefly, and his leg twitched at the warmth of her breath.

“Their faces were something to see, anyway.” She sounded a little bleak. “And it would have been a real anticlimax, after *that.*”

“Well, you’re right about that,” he admitted. “But ye’ll show them tomorrow, when they’re in a frame of mind to appreciate it properly.”

She sighed, and kissed his knee again.

“I didn’t mean it,” she said, after a moment. “Implying it was your fault.”

“Aye, ye did,” he said softly, still caressing. “It’s all right. Ye’re probably right.” Likely she was. He wasn’t going to pretend it hadn’t hurt to hear it, but he wouldn’t let himself be angry; that would help neither of them.

“You don’t know that.” She raised up suddenly, looming like an obelisk in silhouette against the pale rectangle of the window. Swinging one leg neatly over his supine body, she slithered down beside him. "It could be me. Or neither of us. Maybe it just isn't the right time, yet."

He put an arm around her and hugged her close in answer.

"Whatever the cause, we'll not blame each other, aye?" She made a small sound of assent and nestled closer. Well enough; there was no way to keep from blaming himself, though.

The facts were clear enough; she'd got pregnant with Jemmy after one night—whether with himself, or Stephen Bonnet, no one knew, but once was all it took. Whereas they'd been trying for the last several months, and Jem was looking more and more like being an only child. Possibly he *did* lack the vital spark, as Mrs. Bug and her chums speculated.

Who's your Daddy? echoed mockingly in the back of his mind—in an Irish accent.

He coughed explosively, and settled back, determined not to dwell on *that* little matter.

"Well, I'm sorry, too," he said, changing the subject. "Ye're maybe right about me acting like I'd rather ye cook and clean than mess about with your wee chemistry set."

"Only because you *would,*" she said without rancor.

"It's not so much the not cooking as it is the setting things on fire I mind."

"Well, you'll love the next project, then," she said, nuzzling his shoulder. "It's mostly water."

"Oh … good," he said, though even he could hear the dubious note in his voice. "Mostly?"

"There's some dirt involved, too."

"Nothing that burns?"

"Just wood. A little. Nothing special."

She was running her fingers slowly down his chest. He caught her hand and kissed her fingertips; they were smooth, but hard, callused from the constant spinning she did to help keep them clothed.

"Who can find a virtuous woman?" he quoted, *"for her price is far above rubies. She seeketh wool and flax and worketh willingly with her*

hands. She maketh herself coverings of tapestry; her clothing is silk and purple."

"I would *love* to find some dye plant that gives a true purple," she said wistfully. "I miss the bright colors. Remember the dress I wore to the man-on-the-moon party? The black one, with the bands of Day-Glo pink and lime green?"

"That was pretty memorable, aye." Privately, he thought the muted colors of homespun suited her much better; in skirts of rust and brown, jackets of gray and green, she looked like some exotic, lovely lichen.

Seized by the sudden desire to see her, he reached out, fumbling on the table by the bed. The little box was where she'd thrown it when they came back. She'd designed it to be used in the dark, after all; a turn of the lid dispensed one of the small, waxy sticks, and the tiny strip of roughened metal glued to the side was cool to his hand.

A *skritch!* that made his heart leap with its simple familiarity, and the tiny flame appeared with a whiff of sulfur—magic.

"Don't waste them," she said, but smiled in spite of the protest, delighted at the sight as she'd been when she first showed him what she'd done.

Her hair was loose and clean, just washed; shimmering over the pale round of her shoulder, clouds of it lying soft over his chest, cinnamon and amber and roan and gold, sparked by the flame.

"She does not fear the snow for her household, for all her household are clothed in scarlet," he said softly, his free hand round her, twining a lock near her face round his finger, twisting the tiny strand as he'd seen her spin yarn.

The long lids of her eyes closed halfway, like a basking cat's, but the smile remained on that wide, soft mouth—those lips that hurt, then healed. The light glowed in her skin, bronzed the tiny brown mole beneath her right ear. He could have watched her forever, but the match was burning low. Just before the flame touched his fingers, she leaned forward and blew it out.

And in the smoke-wisped dark, whispered in his ear, "*The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her. She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life.* So there."

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ENSORCELLMENT

Tom Christie didn’t come back to the surgery, but he did send his daughter, Malva, to get the ointment. The girl was dark-haired, slender, and quiet, but seemed intelligent. She paid close attention as I quizzed her on the look of the wound—so far, so good, a bit of redness, but no suppuration, no reddish streaks up the arm—and gave her instructions on how to apply the ointment and change the dressing.

“Good, then,” I said, giving her the jar. “If he should begin a fever, come and fetch me. Otherwise, make him come in a week, to have the stitches taken out.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’ll do that.” She didn’t turn and go, though, but lingered, her gaze flickering over the mounds of drying herbs on the gauze racks and the implements of my surgery.

“Do you need something else, dear? Or did you have a question?” She’d seemed to understand my instructions perfectly well—but perhaps she wanted to ask something more personal. After all, she had no mother . .

“Well, aye,” she said, and nodded at the table. “I only wondered—what is it that ye write in yon black book, ma’am?”

“This? Oh. It’s my surgical notes, and recipes … er … receipts, I mean, for medicines. See?” I turned the book round and opened it so that she could see the page where I had drawn a sketch of the damage to Miss Mouse’s teeth.

Malva's gray eyes were bright with curiosity, and she leaned forward to read, hands carefully folded behind her back as though afraid she might touch the book by accident.

"It's all right," I said, a little amused by her caution. "You can look through it, if you like." I pushed it toward her, and she stepped back, startled. She glanced up at me, a look of doubt wrinkling her brow, but when I smiled at her, she took a tiny, excited breath, and reached out to turn a page.

"Oh, look!" The page she'd turned to wasn't one of mine, but one of Daniel Rawlings's—it showed the removal of a dead child from the uterus, via the use of assorted tools of dilatation and curettage. I glanced at the page, and hastily away. Rawlings hadn't been an artist, but he had had a brutal knack for rendering the reality of a situation.

Malva didn't seem to be distressed by the drawings, though; she was bug-eyed with interest.

I began to be interested, too, watching covertly as she turned pages at random. She naturally paid most attention to the drawings—but she paused to read the descriptions and recipes, as well.

"Why d'ye write things down that ye've done?" she asked, glancing up with raised eyebrows. "The receipts, aye, I see ye might forget things—but why d'ye draw these pictures and write down the bits about how ye took off a toe wi' the frost-rot? Would ye do it differently, another time?"

"Well, sometimes you might," I said, laying aside the stalk of dried rosemary I'd been stripping of its needles. "Surgery isn't the same each time. All bodies are a bit different, and even though you may do the same basic procedure a dozen times, there will be a dozen things that happen differently—sometimes only tiny things, sometimes big ones.

"But I keep a record of what I've done for several reasons," I added, pushing back my stool and coming round the table to stand beside her. I turned another few pages, stopping at the record I kept of old Grannie MacBeth's complaints—a list so extensive that I had alphabetized it for my own convenience, beginning with *Arthritis*—

all joints, running through *Dyspepsia, Earache,* and *Fainting,* and then onward for most of two pages, terminating with *Womb, prolapsed.*

"Partly, it's so that I'll know what's been done for a particular person, and what happened—so that if they need treatment later, I can look back and have an accurate description of their earlier state. To compare, you see?"

She nodded eagerly.

"Aye, I see. So ye'd know were they getting better or worse. What else, then?"

"Well, the most important reason," I said slowly, seeking the right words, "is so that another doctor—someone who might come later—so that person could read the record, and see how I'd done this or that. It might show them a way to do something they hadn't done themselves—or a better way."

Her mouth pursed up in interest.

"Ooh! Ye mean someone might learn from this"—she touched a finger to the page, delicately—"how to do what it is ye do? Without 'prenticing himself to a doctor?"

"Well, it's best if you have someone to teach you," I said, amused at her eagerness. "And there are things you can't really learn from a book. But if there's no one to learn from—" I glanced out the window, at the vista of green wilderness swarming over the mountains. "It's better than nothing," I concluded.

"Where did you learn?" she asked, curious. "From this book? I see there's another hand, besides yours. Whose was it?"

I ought to have seen that one coming. I hadn't quite bargained on Malva Christie's quickness, though.

"Ah … I learned from a *lot* of books," I said. "And from other doctors."

"Other doctors," she echoed, looking at me in fascination. "D'ye call yourself a doctor, then? I didna ken women ever could be."

For the rather good reason that no women *did* call themselves physicians or surgeons now—nor were accepted as such.

I coughed.

"Well … it's a name, that's all. A good many people just say wisewoman, or conjure woman. Or *ban-lichtne,*" I added. "But it's all the same, really. It only matters whether I know something that might help them."

"Ban—" She mouthed the unfamiliar word. "I haven't heard that before."

"It's the Gaelic. The Highland tongue, you know? It means 'female healer' or something like."

"Oh, the Gaelic." An expression of mild derision crossed her face; I expected she had absorbed her father's attitude toward the Highlanders' ancient language. She evidently saw something in *my* face, though, for she instantly erased the disdain from her own features and bent over the book again. "Who was it wrote these other bits, then?"

"A man named Daniel Rawlings." I smoothed a creased page, with the usual sense of affection for my predecessor. "He was a doctor from Virginia."

"Him?" She looked up, surprised. "The same who's buried in the boneyard up the mountain?"

"Ah … yes, that's him." And the story of how he came to be there was not something to be shared with Miss Christie. I glanced out of the window, estimating the light. "Will your father be wanting his dinner?"

"Oh!" She stood up straight at that, glancing out the window, too, with a faint look of alarm. "Aye, he will." She cast a last look of longing toward the book, but then brushed down her skirt and set her cap straight, ready to go. "I thank ye, Mrs. Fraser, for showing me your wee book."

"Happy to," I assured her sincerely. "You're welcome to come again and look at it. In fact … would you—" I hesitated, but plunged on, encouraged by her look of bright interest. "I'm going to take a growth from Grannie Macbeth's ear tomorrow. Would you like to come along with me, to see how? It would be a help to me, to have another pair of hands," I added, seeing sudden doubt war with the interest in her eyes.

"Oh, aye, Mrs. Fraser—I'd dearly like it!" she said. "It's only my father—" She looked uneasy as she said it, but then seemed to make up her mind. "Well … I'll come. I'm sure I can talk him round."

“Would it help if I were to send a note? Or come and speak with him?” I was suddenly quite desirous that she should come with me.

She gave a small shake of the head.

“Nay, ma’am, it’ll be all right, I’m sure.” She dimpled at me suddenly, gray eyes sparkling. “I’ll tell him I’ve had a keek at your black book, and it’s no by way of being spells in it, at all, but only receipts for teas and purges. I’ll maybe not say about the drawings, though,” she added.

“Spells?” I asked incredulously. “Is that what he thought?”

“Oh, aye,” she assured me. “He warned me not to touch it, for fear of ensorcellment.”

“Ensorcellment,” I murmured, bemused. Well, Thomas Christie *was* a schoolmaster, after all. In fact, he might have been right, I thought; Malva glanced back at the book as I went with her to the door, obvious fascination on her face.

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ANESTHESIA

I closed my eyes and, holding my hand a foot or so in front of my face, wafted it gently toward my nose, like one of the *parfumeurs* I'd seen in Paris, testing a fragrance.

The smell hit me in the face like an ocean wave, and with approximately the same effect. My knees buckled, black lines writhed through my vision, and I ceased to make any distinction between up and down.

In what seemed an instant later, I came to, lying on the floor of the surgery with Mrs. Bug staring down at me in horror.

"Mrs. Claire! Are ye all right, *mo gaolach*? I saw ye fall—"

"Yes," I croaked, shaking my head gingerly as I got up on one elbow. "Put—put the cork in." I gestured clumsily at the large open flask on the table, its cork lying alongside. "Don't get your face near it!"

Face averted and screwed into a grimace of caution, she got the cork and inserted it, at arm's length.

"Phew, what *is* yon stuff?" she said, stepping back and making faces. She sneezed explosively into her apron. "I've never smelt anything like that—and Bride kens I've smelt a good many nasty things in this room!"

"That, my dear Mrs. Bug, is ether." The swimming sensation in my head had almost disappeared, replaced by euphoria.

"Ether?" She looked at the distilling apparatus on my counter in fascination, the alcohol bath bubbling gently away in its great glass bubble over a low flame and the oil of vitriol—later to be known as sulfuric acid—slicking its slow way down the slanted tubing, its malign hot scent lurking below the usual surgery smells of roots and herbs. "Fancy! And what's ether, then?"

"It puts people asleep, so they won't feel pain when you cut them," I explained, thrilled by my success. "And I know exactly who I'm going to use it on first!"

* * *

"Tom Christie?" Jamie repeated. "Have ye told him?"

"I told Malva. She's going to work on him; soften him up a bit."

Jamie snorted briefly at the thought.

"Ye could boil Tom Christie in milk for a fortnight, and he'd still be hard as a grindstone. And if ye think he'll listen to his wee lass prattle about a magic liquid that will put him to sleep—"

"No, she isn't to tell him about the ether. I'll do that," I assured him. "She's just going to pester him about his hand; convince him he needs it mended."

"Mm." Jamie still appeared dubious, though not, it seemed, entirely on Thomas Christie's account.

"This ether ye've made, Sassenach. Might ye not kill him with it?"

I had, in fact, worried considerably about that very possibility. I'd done operations frequently where ether was used, and it was on the whole a fairly safe anesthetic. But homemade ether, administered by hand … and people *did* die of anesthetic accidents, even in the most careful settings, with trained anesthetists and all sorts of resuscitating equipment to hand. And I remembered Rosamund Lindsay, whose accidental death still haunted my dreams now and then. But the possibility of having a reliable anesthetic, of being able to do surgery without pain—

"I might," I admitted. "I don't think so, but there's always some risk. Worth it, though."

Jamie gave me a slightly jaundiced look.

“Oh, aye? Does Tom think so?”

“Well, we’ll find out. I’ll explain it all carefully to him, and if he won’t—well, he won’t. But I do hope he does!”

The edge of Jamie’s mouth curled up and he shook his head tolerantly.

“Ye’re like wee Jem wi’ a new toy, Sassenach. Take care the wheels dinna come off.”

I might have made some indignant reply to this, but we had come in sight of the Bugs’ cabin, and Arch Bug was sitting on his stoop, peacefully smoking a clay pipe. He took this from his mouth and made to stand up when he saw us, but Jamie motioned him back.

“Ciamar a tha thu, a charaid?”

Arch replied with his customary “Mmp,” infused with a tone of cordiality and welcome. A raised white brow in my direction, and a twiddle of the pipe stem toward the trail indicated that his wife was at our house, if that’s who I was looking for.

“No, I’m just going into the woods to forage a bit,” I said, lifting my empty basket by way of evidence. “Mrs. Bug forgot her needlework, though—may I fetch it for her?”

He nodded, eyes creasing as he smiled round his pipe. He shifted his lean buttocks courteously to allow me to go past him into the cabin. Behind me, I heard a “Mmp?” of invitation, and felt the boards of the stoop shift as Jamie sat down beside Mr. Bug.

There were no windows, and I was obliged to stand still for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dimness. It was a small cabin, though, and it took no more than half a minute before I could make out the contents: little more than the bed frame, a blanket chest, and a table with two stools. Mrs. Bug’s workbag hung from a hook on the far wall, and I crossed to get it.

On the porch behind me, I heard the murmur of male conversation, featuring the quite unusual sound of Mr. Bug’s voice. He could and did talk, of course, but Mrs. Bug talked so volubly that when she was present, her spouse’s contribution was generally not much more than a smile and an occasional “mmp” of accord or disagreement.

“Yon Christie,” Mr. Bug was saying now, in a meditative tone of voice. “D’ye find him strange, *a Sheaumais*?”

“Aye, well, he’s a Lowlander,” Jamie said, with an audible shrug.

A humorous “mmp” from Mr. Bug indicated that this was a perfectly sufficient explanation, and was succeeded by the sucking noises of a pipe being encouraged to draw.

I opened the bag, to be sure that the knitting was inside; in fact, it was not, and I was obliged to poke round the cabin, squinting in the dimness. Oh—there it was; a dark puddle of something soft in the corner, fallen from the table and knocked aside by someone’s foot.

“Is he stranger than he might be, Christie?” I heard Jamie ask, his own tone casual.

I glanced through the door in time to see Arch Bug nod toward Jamie, though he didn’t speak, being engaged in a fierce battle with his pipe. However, he raised his right hand and waggled it, displaying the stumps of his two missing fingers.

“Aye,” he said finally, releasing a triumphant puff of white smoke with the word. “He wished to ask me whether it hurt a good deal, when this was done.”

His face wrinkled up like a paper bag, and he wheezed a little—high hilarity for Arch Bug.

“Oh, aye? And what did ye tell him, then, Arch?” Jamie asked, smiling a little.

Arch sucked meditatively on his pipe, now fully cooperative, then pursed his lips and blew a small, perfect ring of smoke.

“Weeel, I said it didna hurt a bit—at the time.” He paused, blue eyes twinkling. “Of course, that may have been because I was laid out cold as a mackerel from the shock of it. When I came round, it stung a bit.” He lifted the hand, looking it over dispassionately, then glanced through the door at me. “Ye didna mean to use an ax on poor old Tom, did ye, ma’am? He says ye’re set to mend his hand next week.”

“Probably not. May I see?” I stepped out on the porch, bending to him, and he let me take the hand, obligingly switching his pipe to the left.

The index and middle finger had been severed cleanly, right at the knuckle. It was a very old injury; so old that it had lost that shocking look common to recent mutilations, where the mind still sees what *should* be there, and tries vainly for an instant to reconcile reality with expectation. The human body is amazingly plastic, though, and will compensate for missing bits as well as it can; in the case of a maimed hand, the remnant often undergoes a subtle sort of useful deformation, to maximize what function remains.

I felt along the hand carefully, fascinated. The metacarpals of the severed digits were intact, but the surrounding tissues had shrunk and twisted, withdrawing that part of the hand slightly, so that the remaining two fingers and the thumb could make a better opposition; I'd seen old Arch use that hand with perfect grace, holding a cup to drink, or wielding the handle of a spade.

The scars over the finger stumps had flattened and paled, forming a smooth, calloused surface. The remaining finger joints were knobbed with arthritis, and the hand as a whole was so twisted that it really didn't resemble a hand anymore—and yet it was not at all repulsive. It felt strong and warm in mine, and in fact, was oddly attractive, in the same way that a piece of weathered driftwood is.

"It was done with an ax, you said?" I asked, wondering exactly how he had managed to inflict such an injury on himself, given that he was right-handed. A slippage might have gashed an arm or leg, but to take two fingers of the same hand right off like that … Realization dawned and my grasp tightened involuntarily. Oh, no.

"Oh, aye," he said, and exhaled a plume of smoke. I looked up, straight into his bright blue eyes.

"Who did it?" I asked.

"The Frasers," he said. He squeezed my hand gently, then withdrew his own and turned it to and fro. He glanced at Jamie.

"Not the Frasers of Lovat," he assured him. "Bobby Fraser of Glenhelm, and his nephew. Leslie, his name was."

"Oh? Well, that's good," Jamie replied, one eyebrow lifted. "I shouldna like to hear it was close kin of mine."

Arch chuckled, almost soundlessly. His eyes still gleamed bright in their webs of wrinkled skin, but there was something in that laugh that made me want suddenly to step back a little.

"No, ye wouldna," he agreed. "Nor me. But this was maybe the year ye would have been born, *a Sheaumais,* or a bit before. And there are no Frasers at Glenhelm now."

The hand itself had not troubled me at all, but the imagined vision of how it had got that way was making me a trifle faint. I sat down beside Jamie, not waiting for invitation.

"Why?" I said bluntly. "How?"

He drew on his pipe, and blew another ring. It struck the remnants of the first and both disintegrated in a haze of fragrant smoke. He frowned a little, and glanced down at the hand, now resting on his knee.

"Ah, well. It was my choice. We were bowmen, see," he explained to me. "All the men of my sept, we were brought up to it, early. I'd my first bow at three, and could strike a grouse through the heart at forty feet by the time I was six."

He spoke with an air of simple pride, squinting a little at a small flock of doves that were foraging under the trees nearby, as though estimating how easily he could have bagged one.

"I did hear my father tell of the archers," Jamie said. "At Glenshiels. Many of them Grants, he said—and some Campbells." He leaned forward, elbows on his knees, interested in the story, but wary.

"Aye, that was us." Arch puffed industriously, smoke wreathing up round his head. "We'd crept down through the bracken in the night," he explained to me, "and hid among the rocks above the river at Glenshiels, under the bracken and the rowans. Ye could have stood a foot away and not seen one of us, so thick as it was.

"A bit cramped," he added confidentially to Jamie. "Ye couldna stand up to take a piss, and we'd had our suppers—with a bit o' beer—before we came up the other side o' the mountain. All squatting like women, we were. Trying like the devil to keep our bowstrings dry in our shirts, too, what wi' the rain coming down and dripping down our necks through the fern.

“But come the dawn,” he went on cheerfully, “and we stood on the signal and let fly. I will say ’twas a bonny sight, our arrows hailing down from the hills on the poor sods camped there by the river. Aye, your faither fought there, too, *a Sheaumais,*” he added, pointing the stem of his pipe at Jamie. “He was one o’ those by the river.” A spasm of silent laughter shook him.

“No love lost, then,” Jamie replied, very dryly. “Between you and the Frasers.”

Old Arch shook his head, not at all discomposed.

“None,” he said. He turned his attention back to me, his manner sobering a little.

“So when the Frasers would capture a Grant alone on their land, it was their habit to give him a choice. He could lose his right eye, or the twa fingers of his right hand. Either way, he wouldna draw a bow again against them.”

He rubbed the maimed hand slowly to and fro against his thigh, stretching it out, as though his phantom fingers reached and yearned for the touch of singing sinew. Then he shook his head, as though dismissing the vision, and curled his hand into a fist. He turned to me.

“Ye werena intending to take Christie’s fingers straight off, were ye, Mrs. Fraser?”

“No,” I said, startled. “Of course not. He doesn’t think …?”

Arch shrugged, bushy white brows raised toward his receding hairline.

“I couldna say for sure, but he seemed verra much disturbed at the thought of being cut.”

“Hmm,” I said. I’d have to speak to Tom Christie.

Jamie had stood up to take his leave, and I followed suit automatically, shaking out my skirts and trying to shake out of my head the mental image of a young man’s hand, pinned to the ground, and an ax chunking down.

“No Frasers at Glenhelm, ye said?” Jamie asked thoughtfully, looking down at Mr. Bug. “Leslie, the nephew—he would have been Bobby Fraser’s heir, would he?”

"Aye, he would." Mr. Bug's pipe had gone out. He turned it over and knocked the dottle neatly out against the edge of the porch.

"Both killed together, were they? I mind my father telling of it, once. Found in a stream, their heads caved in, he said."

Arch Bug blinked up at him, eyelids lowered, lizardlike, against the sun's glare.

"Weel, ye see, *a Sheaumais,*" he said, "a bow's like a good-wife, aye? Knows her master, and answers his touch. An ax, though—" He shook his head. "An ax is a whore. Any man can use one—and it works as well in either hand."

He blew through the stem of the pipe to clear it of ash, wiped the bowl with his handkerchief, and tucked it carefully away—left-handed. He grinned at us, the remnants of his teeth sharp-edged and yellowed with tobacco.

"Go with God, *Seaumais mac Brian.*"

* * *

Later in the week, I went to the Christies' cabin, to take the stitches out of Tom's left hand and explain to him about the ether. His son, Allan, was in the yard, sharpening a knife on a foot-treadled grindstone. He smiled and nodded to me, but didn't speak, unable to be heard above the rasping whine of the grindstone.

Perhaps it was that sound, I thought, a moment later, that had aroused Tom Christie's apprehensions.

"I have decided that I shall leave my other hand as it is," he said stiffly, as I clipped the last stitch and pulled it free.

I set down my tweezers and stared at him.

"Why?"

A dull red rose in his cheeks, and he stood up, lifting his chin and looking over my shoulder, so as not to meet my eye.

"I have prayed about it, and I have come to the conclusion that if this infirmity be God's will, then it would be wrong to seek to change it."

I suppressed the strong urge to say "Stuff and nonsense!", but with great difficulty.

"Sit down," I said, taking a deep breath. "And tell me, if you would, just why you think God wants you to go about with a twisted hand?"

He did glance at me then, surprised and flustered.

"Why … it is not my place to question the Lord's ways!"

"Oh, isn't it?" I said mildly. "I rather thought that's what you were doing last Sunday. Or wasn't it you I heard, inquiring as to what the Lord thought He was about, letting all these Catholics flourish like the green bay tree?"

The dull red color darkened substantially.

"I am sure you have misunderstood me, Mistress Fraser." He straightened himself still further, so that he was nearly leaning over backward. "The fact remains that I shall not require your assistance."

"Is it because I'm a Catholic?" I asked, settling back on the stool and folding my hands on my knee. "You think perhaps I'll take advantage of you, and baptize you into the church of Rome when you're off your guard?"

"I have been suitably christened!" he snapped. "And I will thank you to keep your Popish notions to yourself."

"I have an arrangement with the Pope," I said, giving him stare for stare. "I issue no bulls on points of doctrine, and he doesn't do surgery. Now, about your hand—"

"The Lord's will—" he began stubbornly.

"Was it the Lord's will that your cow should fall into the gorge and break her leg last month?" I interrupted him. "Because if it was, then you presumably ought to have left her there to die, rather than fetching my husband to help pull her out, and then allowing me to set her leg. How is she, by the way?"

I could see the cow in question through the window, peacefully grazing at the edge of the yard, and evidently untroubled either by her nursing calf, or by the binding I had applied to support her cracked cannon bone.

"She is well, I thank you." He was beginning to sound a little strangled, though his shirt was loose at the collar. "That is—"

"Well, then," I said. "Do you think the Lord regards you as less deserving of medical help than your cow? It seems unlikely to me, what with Him regarding sparrows and all that."

He'd gone a sort of dusky purple round the jowls by this point, and clutched the defective hand with the sound one, as though to keep it safe from me.

"I see that you have heard something of the Bible," he began, very pompous.

"Actually, I've read it for myself," I said. "I read quite well, you know."

He brushed this remark aside, a dim light of triumph gleaming in his eye.

"Indeed. Then I am sure you will have read the Letter of St. Paul to Timothy, in which he says, *Let a woman be silent—*"

I had, in fact, encountered St. Paul and his opinions before, and had a few of my own.

"I expect St. Paul ran into a woman who could outargue him, too," I said, not without sympathy. "Easier to try to put a stopper on the entire sex than to win his point fairly. I should have expected better of *you,* though, Mr. Christie."

"But that's blasphemy!" he gasped, clearly shocked.

"It is not," I countered, "unless you're saying that St. Paul is actually God—and if you are, then I rather think *that's* blasphemy. But let's not quibble," I said, seeing his eyes begin to bulge. "Let me …" I rose from my stool and took a step forward, bringing me within touching distance of him. He backed up so hastily that he bumped into the table and knocked it askew, sending Malva's workbasket, a pottery jug of milk, and a pewter plate cascading to the floor with a crash.

I bent swiftly and grabbed the workbasket, in time to prevent it being soaked by the flood of milk. Mr. Christie had as swiftly seized a rag from the hearth, and bent to mop up the milk. We narrowly missed bumping heads, but did collide, and I lost my balance, falling heavily against him. He caught hold of my arms by reflex, dropping the rag, then hastily let go and recoiled, leaving me swaying on my knees.

He was on his knees, as well, breathing heavily, but now a safe distance away.

"The truth of it is," I said severely, pointing a finger at him, "you're afraid."

"I am not!"

"Yes, you are." I got to my feet, replaced the workbasket on the table, and shoved the rag delicately over the puddle of milk with my foot. "You're afraid that I'll hurt you—but I won't," I assured him. "I have a medicine called ether; it will make you go to sleep, and you won't feel anything."

He blinked at that.

"And perhaps you're afraid that you'll lose a few fingers, or what use of your hand you have."

He was still kneeling on the hearth, staring up at me.

"I can't absolutely guarantee that you won't," I said. "I don't *think* that will happen—but man proposes, and God disposes, doesn't He?"

He nodded, very slowly, but didn't say anything. I took a deep breath, for the moment out of argument.

"I *think* I can mend your hand," I said. "I can't guarantee it. Sometimes things happen. Infections, accidents—something unexpected. But …"

I reached out a hand to him, motioning toward the crippled member. Moving like a hypnotized bird trapped in a serpent's gaze, he extended his arm and let me take it. I grasped his wrist and pulled him to his feet; he rose easily and stood before me, letting me hold his hand.

I took it in both of mine and pressed the gnarled fingers back, rubbing my thumb gently over the thickened palmar aponeurosis that was trapping the tendons. I could feel it clearly, could see in my mind exactly how to approach the problem, where to press with the scalpel, how the calloused skin would part. The length and depth of the Z-shaped incision that would free his hand and make it useful once more.

"I've done it before," I said softly, pressing to feel the submerged bones. "I can do it again, God willing. If you'll let me?"

He was only a couple of inches taller than I; I held his eyes, as well as his hand. They were a clear, sharp gray, and searched my face with something between fear and suspicion—but with something else at the back of them. I became quite suddenly aware of his breathing, slow and steady, and felt the warmth of his breath on my cheek.

“All right,” he said at last, hoarsely. He pulled his hand away from mine, not abruptly, but almost with reluctance, and stood cradling it in his sound one. “When?”

“Tomorrow,” I said, “if the weather is good. I’ll need good light,” I explained, seeing the startled look in his eyes. “Come in the morning, but don’t eat breakfast.”

I picked up my kit, bobbed an awkward curtsy to him, and left, feeling rather queer.

Allan Christie waved cheerfully to me as I left, and went on with his grinding.

* * *

“Do you think he’ll come?” Breakfast had been eaten, and no sign yet of Thomas Christie. After a night of broken sleep, in which I dreamed repeatedly of ether masks and surgical disasters, I wasn’t sure whether I wanted him to come or not.

“Aye, he’ll come.” Jamie was reading the *North Carolina Gazette,* four months out of date, while munching the last of Mrs. Bug’s cinnamon toast. “Look, they’ve printed a letter from the Governor to Lord Dartmouth, saying what an unruly lot of seditious, conniving, thieving bastards we all are, and asking General Gage to send him cannon to threaten us back into good behavior. I wonder if MacDonald knows that’s public knowledge?”

“Did they really?” I said absently. I rose, and picked up the ether mask I had been staring at all through breakfast. “Well, if he does come, I suppose I’d best be ready.”

I had the ether mask Bree had made for me and the dropping bottle laid out ready in my surgery, next to the array of instruments I would need for the surgery itself. Unsure, I picked up the bottle, uncorked it, and waved a hand across the neck, wafting fumes toward my nose. The result was a reassuring wave of dizziness that blurred my vision for a moment. When it cleared, I recorked the bottle and set it down, feeling somewhat more confident.

Just in time. I heard voices at the back of the house, and footsteps in the hall.

I turned expectantly, to see Mr. Christie glowering at me from the doorway, his hand curled protectively into his chest.

“I have changed my mind.” Christie lowered his brows still further, to emphasize his position. “I have considered the matter, and prayed upon it, and I shall not allow ye to employ your foul potions upon me.”

“You stupid man,” I said, thoroughly put out. I stood up and glowered back. “What *is* the matter with you?”

He looked taken aback, as though a snake in the grass at his feet had dared to address him.

“There is nothing whatever the matter with me,” he said, quite gruff. He lifted his chin aggressively, bristling his short beard at me. “What is the matter with *you,* madam?”

“And I thought it was only Highlanders who were stubborn as rocks!”

He looked quite insulted at this comparison, but before he could take further issue with me, Jamie poked his head into the surgery, drawn by the sounds of altercation.

“Is there some difficulty?” he inquired politely.

“Yes! He refuses—”

“There is. She insists—”

The words collided, and we both broke off, glaring at each other. Jamie glanced from me to Mr. Christie, then at the apparatus on the table. He cast his eyes up to heaven, as though imploring guidance, then rubbed a finger thoughtfully beneath his nose.

“Aye,” he said. “Well. D’ye want your hand mended, Tom?”

Christie went on looking mulish, cradling the crippled hand protectively against his chest. After a moment, though, he nodded slowly.

“Aye,” he said. He gave me a deeply suspicious look. “But I shall not be having any of this Popish nonsense about it!”

"Popish?" Jamie and I spoke at the same time, Jamie sounding merely puzzled, myself deeply exasperated.

"Aye, and ye need not be thinking ye can cod me into it, either, Fraser!"

Jamie shot me an "I told ye so, Sassenach" sort of look, but squared himself to give it a try.

"Well, ye always were an awkward wee bugger, Tom," he said mildly. "Ye must please yourself about it, to be sure—but I can tell ye from experience that it does hurt a great deal."

I thought Christie paled a little.

"Tom. Look." Jamie nodded at the tray of instruments: two scalpels, a probe, scissors, forceps, and two suture needles, already threaded with gut and floating in a jar of alcohol. They gleamed dully in the sunlight. "She means to cut into your hand, aye?"

"I know that," Christie snapped, though his eyes slid away from the sinister assemblage of sharp edges.

"Aye, ye do. But ye've not the slightest notion what it's like. I have. See here?" He held up his right hand, the back of it toward Christie, and waggled it. In that position, with the morning sun full on it, the thin white scars that laced his fingers were stark against the deep bronze skin.

"That bloody *hurt,*" he assured Christie. "Ye dinna want to do something like that, and there's a choice about it—which there is."

Christie barely glanced at the hand. Of course, I thought, he would be familiar with the look of it; he'd lived with Jamie for three years.

"I have made my choice," Christie said with dignity. He sat down in the chair and laid his hand palm-up on the napkin. All the color had leached out of his face, and his free hand was clenched so hard that it trembled.

Jamie looked at him under heavy brows for a moment, then sighed.

"Aye. Wait a moment, then."

Obviously, there was no further point in argument, and I didn't bother trying. I took down the bottle of medicinal whisky I kept on the shelf and poured a healthy tot into a cup.

"Take a little wine for thy stomach's sake," I said, thrusting it firmly into his upturned hand. "Our mutual acquaintance, St. Paul. If it's all right to drink for the sake of a stomach, surely to goodness you can take a drop for the sake of a hand."

His mouth, grimly compressed in anticipation, opened in surprise. He glanced from the cup to me, then back. He swallowed, nodded, and raised the cup to his lips.

Before he had finished, though, Jamie came back, holding a small, battered green book, which he thrust unceremoniously into Christie's hand.

Christie looked surprised, but held the book out, squinting to see what it was. *HOLY BIBLE* was printed on the warped cover, *King James Version.*

"Ye'll take help where ye can, I suppose?" Jamie said a little gruffly.

Christie looked at him sharply, then nodded, a very faint smile passing through his beard like a shadow.

"I thank you, sir," he said. He took his spectacles out of his coat and put them on, then opened the little book with great care and began to thumb through it, evidently looking for a suitable inspiration for undergoing surgery without anesthetic.

I gave Jamie a long look, to which he responded with the faintest of shrugs. It wasn't merely a Bible. It was the Bible that had once belonged to Alexander MacGregor.

Jamie had come by it as a very young man, when he was imprisoned in Fort William by Captain Jonathan Randall. Flogged once, and awaiting another, frightened and in pain, he had been left in solitary confinement with no company save his thoughts—and this Bible, given to him by the garrison's surgeon for what comfort it might offer.

Alex MacGregor had been another young Scottish prisoner—one who had died by his own hand, rather than suffer the further attentions of Captain Randall. His name was written inside the book, in a tidy, rather sprawling hand. The little Bible was no stranger to fear and suffering, and if it wasn't ether, I hoped it might still possess its own power of anodyne.

Christie had found something that suited him. He cleared his throat, straightened himself in the chair, and laid his hand on the towel, palm up, in such a forthright manner that I wondered whether he had settled on the passage in which the Maccabees willingly present their hands and tongues for amputation at the hands of the heathen king.

A peek over his shoulder indicated that he was somewhere in the Psalms, though.

"At your convenience, then, Mistress Fraser," Christie said politely.

If he wasn't to be unconscious, I needed a bit of extra preparation. Manly fortitude was all very well, and so was Biblical inspiration—but there are relatively few people capable of sitting motionless while having their hand sliced into, and I didn't think Thomas Christie was one of them.

I had a plentiful supply of linen strips for bandaging. I rolled back his sleeve, then used a few of the strips to bind his forearm tightly to the little table, with an additional band holding back the clawed fingers from the site of operation.

Though Christie seemed rather shocked at the notion of drinking liquor while reading the Bible, Jamie—and, just possibly, the sight of the waiting scalpels—had convinced him that circumstances justified it. He had consumed a couple of ounces by the time I had him properly secured and his palm thoroughly swabbed with raw alcohol, and was looking significantly more relaxed than he had upon entering the room.

This sense of relaxation disappeared abruptly when I made the first incision.

His breath rushed out in a high-pitched gasp and he arched upward out of the chair, jerking the table across the floor with a screech. I grabbed his wrist in time to prevent his ripping the bandages away, and Jamie seized him by both shoulders, pressing him back into the chair.

"Now then, now then," Jamie said, squeezing firmly. "You'll do, Tom. Aye, you'll do."

Sweat had popped out all over Christie's face, and his eyes were huge behind the lenses of his spectacles. He gulped, swallowed, took a quick look at his hand, which was welling blood, then looked away fast, white as a sheet.

"If you're going to vomit, Mr. Christie, do it there, will you?" I said, shoving an empty bucket toward him with one foot. I still had one hand on his wrist, the other pressing a wad of sterilized lint hard onto the incision.

Jamie was still talking to him like one settling a panicked horse. Christie was rigid, but breathing hard, and trembling in every limb, including the one I meant to be working on.

"Shall I stop?" I asked Jamie, giving Christie a quick appraisal. I could feel his pulse hammering in the wrist I grasped. He wasn't in shock—quite—but plainly wasn't feeling at all well.

Jamie shook his head, eyes on Christie's face.

"No. Shame to waste that much whisky, aye? And he'll not want to go through the waiting again. Here, Tom, have another dram; it will do ye good." He pressed the cup to Christie's lips, and Christie gulped it without hesitation.

Jamie had let go of Christie's shoulders as he settled; now he took hold of Christie's forearm with one hand, gripping firmly. With the other, he picked up the Bible, which had fallen to the floor, and thumbed it open.

"The right hand of the Lord is exalted," he read, squinting over Christie's shoulder at the book. "*The right hand of the Lord doeth valiantly.* Well, that's appropriate, no?" He glanced down at Christie, who had subsided, his free hand clenched in a fist against his belly.

"Go on," Christie said, voice hoarse.

"I shall not die, but live, and declare the works of the Lord," Jamie went on, his voice low but firm. *"The Lord hath chastened me sore, but he hath not given me over unto death."*

Christie seemed to find this heartening; his breathing slowed a little.

I couldn't spare time to look at him, and his arm under Jamie's grasp was hard as wood. Still, he was beginning to murmur along with Jamie, catching every few words.

“Open to me the gates of righteousness… I will praise thee, for thou hast heard me.…”

I had the aponeurosis laid bare, and could clearly see the thickening. A flick of the scalpel freed the edge of it; then a ruthless slice, cutting hard down through the fibrous band of tissue … the scalpel struck bone, and Christie gasped.

“God is the Lord which has showed us light; bind the sacrifice with cords, even unto the horns of the altar.…” I could hear a tinge of amusement in Jamie’s voice as he read that bit, and felt the shift of his body as he glanced toward me.

It did look rather as though I had been sacrificing something; hands don’t bleed as profusely as head wounds, but there are plenty of small vessels in the palm, and I was hastily blotting away the blood with one hand as I worked with the other; discarded wads of bloodstained lint littered the table and the floor around me.

Jamie was flipping to and fro, picking out random bits of Scripture, but Christie was with him now, speaking the words along with him. I stole a hasty glance at him; his color was still bad, and his pulse thundering, but the breathing was better. He was clearly speaking from memory; the lenses of his spectacles were fogged.

I had the hindering tissue fully exposed now, and was trimming away the tiny fibers from the surface of the tendon. The clawed fingers twitched, and the exposed tendons moved suddenly, silver as darting fish. I grabbed the feebly wiggling fingers and squeezed them fiercely.

“You mustn’t move,” I said. “I need both hands; I can’t hold yours.”

I couldn’t look up, but felt him nod, and released his fingers. With the tendons gleaming softly in their beds, I removed the last bits of the aponeurosis, sprayed the wound with a mixture of alcohol and distilled water for disinfection, and set about closing the incisions.

The men’s voices were no more than whispers, a low susurrus to which I had paid no attention, engrossed as I was. As I relaxed my attention and began to suture the wound, though, I became aware of them again.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want…."

I looked up, wiping perspiration from my forehead with my sleeve, and saw that Thomas Christie now held the small Bible, closed and pressed against his body with his free arm. His chin jammed hard into his chest, his eyes tight closed and face contorted with pain.

Jamie still held the bound arm tight, but had his other hand on Christie's shoulder, his own head bent near Christie's; his eyes, too, were closed, as he whispered the words.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil…."

I knotted the last suture, clipped the thread, and in the same movement, cut through the linen bindings with my scissors, and let go the breath I'd been holding. The men's voices stopped abruptly.

I lifted the hand, wrapped a fresh dressing tightly around it, and pressed the clawed fingers gently back, straightening them.

Christie's eyes opened, slowly. His pupils were huge and dark behind his lenses, as he blinked at his hand. I smiled at him, and patted it.

"Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life," I said softly. *"And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."*

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24

TOUCH ME NOT

Christie's pulse was a little rapid, but strong. I set down the wrist I had been holding, and put the back of my hand against his forehead.

"You're a bit feverish," I said. "Here, swallow this." I put a hand behind his back to help him sit up in bed, which alarmed him. He sat up in a flurry of bedclothes, drawing in his breath sharply as he jostled the injured hand.

I tactfully affected not to notice his discomposure, which I put down to the fact that he was clad in his shirt and I in my nightclothes. These were modest enough, to be sure, with a light shawl covering my linen night rail, but I was reasonably sure that he hadn't been anywhere near a woman in *dishabille* since his wife died—if then.

I murmured something meaningless, holding the cup of comfrey tea for him as he drank, and then settled his pillows in comfortable but impersonal fashion.

Rather than send him back to his own cabin, I had insisted that he stay the night, so I could keep an eye on him in case of postoperative infection. Intransigent as he was by nature, I didn't by any means trust him to follow instructions and not to be slopping hogs, cutting wood, or wiping his backside with the wounded hand. I wasn't letting him out of sight until the incision had begun to granulate—which it should do by the next day, if all went well.

Still shaky from the shock of surgery, he had made no demur, and Mrs. Bug and I had put him to bed in the Wemysses' room, Mr. Wemyss and Lizzie having gone to the McGillivrays'.

I had no laudanum, but had slipped Christie a strong infusion of valerian and St. John's wort, and he had slept most of the afternoon. He had declined any supper, but Mrs. Bug, who approved of Mr. Christie, had been plying him through the evening with toddies, syllabubs, and other nourishing elixirs—all containing a high percentage of alcohol. Consequently, he seemed rather dazed, as well as flushed, and made no protest as I picked up the bandaged hand and brought the candle close to examine it.

The hand was swollen, which was to be expected, but not excessively so. Still, the bandage was tight, and cutting uncomfortably into the flesh. I snipped it, and holding the honeyed dressing that covered the wound carefully in place, lifted the hand and sniffed at it.

I could smell honey, blood, herbs, and the faintly metallic scent of fresh-severed flesh—but no sweet whiff of pus. Good. I pressed carefully near the dressing, watching for signs of sharp pain or streaks of vivid red in the skin, but bar a reasonable tenderness, I saw only a small degree of inflammation.

Still, he *was* feverish; it would bear watching. I took a fresh length of bandage and wound it carefully over the dressing, finishing with a neat bow at the back of the hand.

"Why do you never wear a proper kerch or cap?" he blurted.

"What?" I looked up in surprise, having temporarily forgotten the man attached to the hand. I put my free hand to my head. "Why should I?"

I sometimes plaited my hair before bed, but hadn't tonight. I had brushed it, though, and it floated loose around my shoulders, smelling pleasantly of the hyssop and nettle-flower infusion I combed through it to keep lice at bay.

"Why?" His voice rose a little. *"Every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven."*

"Oh, are we back to Paul again?" I murmured, returning my attention to his hand. "Does it not occur to you that that man had rather a bee in his bonnet when it came to women? Besides, I'm not praying at the moment, and I want to see how this does overnight, before I risk any prophesying about it. So far, though, it seems—"

"Your hair." I looked up to see him staring at me, mouth curved downward in disapproval. "It's …" He made a vague movement round his own clipped poll. "It's …"

I raised my brows at him.

"There's a great deal of it," he ended, rather feebly.

I eyed him for a moment, then put down his hand and reached for the little green Bible, which was sitting on the table.

"Corinthians, was it? Hmm, oh, yes, here we are." I straightened my back and read the verse: *"Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering."* I closed the book with a snap and set it down.

"Would you care to step across the landing and explain to my husband how shameful *his* hair is?" I asked politely. Jamie had gone to bed; a faint, rhythmic snoring was audible from our room. "Or do you expect he knows that already?"

Christie was already flushed from drink and fever; at this, an ugly dark red washed him from chest to hairline. His mouth moved, opening and closing soundlessly. I didn't wait for him to decide on something to say, but merely turned my attention back to his hand.

"Now," I said firmly, "you must do exercise regularly, to make sure that the muscles don't contract as they heal. It will be painful at first, but you must do it. Let me show you."

I took hold of his ring finger, just below the first joint, and keeping the finger itself straight, bent the top joint a little inward.

"Do you see? Here, you do it. Take hold with your other hand, and then try to bend just that one joint. Yes, that's it. Do you feel the pull, down through the palm of your hand? That's just what's wanted. Now, do it with the little finger … yes. Yes, that's very good!"

I looked up and smiled at him. The flush had faded a little, but he still looked thoroughly nonplussed. He didn't smile back at me, but glanced hastily away, down at his hand.

"Right. Now, put your hand flat on the table—yes, that's the way—and try to raise your fourth finger and little finger by themselves. Yes, I know it isn't easy. Keep trying, though. Are you hungry, Mr. Christie?"

His stomach had given a loud growl, startling him as much as me.

"I suppose I might eat," he mumbled ungraciously, scowling at his uncooperative hand.

"I'll fetch you something. Keep trying those exercises for a bit, why don't you?"

The house was quiet, settled for the night. Warm as it was, the shutters had been left open, and enough moonlight streamed through the windows that I didn't need to light a candle. A shadow detached itself from the darkness in my surgery, and followed me down the hallway to the kitchen—Adso, leaving off his nocturnal hunt for mice, in hopes of easier prey.

"Hallo, cat," I said, as he slithered past my ankles into the pantry. "If you think you're having any of the ham, think again. I might go as far as a saucer of milk, though." The milk jug was white earthenware with a blue band round it, a squat, pale shape floating in the darkness. I poured out a saucer and put it down on the floor for Adso, then set about assembling a light supper—aware that Scottish expectations of a light meal involved sufficient food to founder a horse.

"Ham, cold fried potatoes, cold fried mush, bread and butter," I chanted under my breath, shoveling it all onto a large wooden tray. "Rabbit dumpling, tomato pickle, a bit of raisin pie for pudding … what else?" I glanced down toward the soft lapping noises coming from the shadows at my feet. "I'd give him milk, too, but he wouldn't drink it. Well, we might as well keep on as we've started, I suppose; it will help him to sleep." I reached for the whisky decanter and put that on the tray, as well.

A faint scent of ether floated in the dark air of the hallway as I made my way back toward the stairs. I sniffed suspiciously—had Adso tipped over the bottle? No, it wasn't strong enough for that, I decided, just a few wayward molecules seeping around the cork.

I was simultaneously relieved and regretful that Mr. Christie had refused to let me use the ether. Relieved, because there was no telling how it might have worked—or not. Regretful, because I would have liked very much to add the gift of unconsciousness to my arsenal of skills—a precious gift to bestow on future patients, and one I should very much have liked to give Mr. Christie.

Beyond the fact that the surgery had hurt him badly, it was very much more difficult to operate on a conscious person. The muscles were tensed, adrenaline was flooding through the system, heart rate was vastly speeded up, causing blood to spurt rather than flow.… For the dozenth time since the morning, I envisioned exactly what I had done, asking myself whether I might have done better.

To my surprise, Christie was still doing the exercises; his face was sheened with sweat and his mouth set grimly, but he was still doggedly bending the joints.

"That's very good," I said. "Do stop now, though. I don't want you to start bleeding again." I picked up the napkin automatically and blotted the sweat from his temples.

"Is there someone else in the house?" he asked, irritably jerking his head away from my ministrations. "I heard you speaking to someone downstairs."

"Oh," I said, rather embarrassed. "No, just the cat." Prompted by this introduction, Adso, who had followed me upstairs, leapt onto the bed and stood kneading the covers with his paws, big green eyes fixed on the plate of ham.

Christie turned a gaze of deep suspicion from the cat to me.

"No, he is not my familiar," I said tartly, scooping up Adso and dumping him unceremoniously on the floor. "He's a cat. Talking to him is slightly less ridiculous than talking to myself, that's all."

An expression of surprise flitted across Christie's face—perhaps surprise that I had read his mind, or simple surprise at my idiocy—but the creases of suspicion round his eyes relaxed.

I cut up his food with brisk efficiency, but he insisted upon feeding himself. He ate clumsily with his left hand, eyes on his plate and brows knotted in concentration.

When he had finished, he drank off a cup of whisky as though it were water, set down the empty cup, and looked at me.

"Mistress Fraser," he said, speaking very precisely, "I am an educated man. I do not think ye are a witch."

"Oh, you don't?" I said, rather amused. "So you don't believe in witches? But there are witches mentioned in the Bible, you know."

He stifled a belch with his fist and regarded me fishily.

"I did not say I do not believe in witches. I do. I said ye aren't one. Aye?"

"I'm very much obliged to hear it," I said, trying not to smile. He was quite drunk; though his speech was even more precise than usual, his accent had begun to slip. Normally, he suppressed the inflections of his native Edinburgh as much as possible, but it was growing broader by the moment.

"A bit more?" I didn't wait for an answer, but poured a solid tot of whisky into his empty cup. The shutters were open and the room was cool, but sweat still gleamed in the creases of his neck. He was clearly in pain, and wasn't likely to sleep again without help.

He sipped it this time, watching me over the rim of the cup as I tidied up the supper leavings. In spite of whisky and a full stomach, he was increasingly restive, shifting his legs beneath the quilt and twitching his shoulders. I thought he needed the chamber pot, and was debating whether I ought to offer to help him with it, or simply leave promptly so he could manage by himself. The latter, I thought.

I was mistaken, though. Before I could excuse myself, he set down his cup on the table and sat up straight in bed.

"Mistress Fraser," he said, fixing me with a beady eye. "I wish to apologize to ye."

"What for?" I said, startled.

His lips pressed tight.

"For … my behavior this morning."

"Oh. Well … that's quite all right. I can see how the idea of being put to sleep must seem … quite peculiar to you."

"I dinna mean that." He glanced up sharply, then down again. "I meant … that I … could not keep myself still."

I saw the deepening flush rise up his cheeks again, and had a sudden pang of surprised sympathy. He was truly embarrassed.

I set down the tray and sat down slowly on the stool beside him, wondering what I could say that might assuage his feelings—and not make matters worse.

"But, Mr. Christie," I said. "I wouldn't expect *anyone* to hold still while having their hand taken apart. It's—it's simply not human nature!"

He shot me a quick, fierce glance.

"Not even your husband?"

I blinked, taken aback. Not so much by the words, as by the tone of bitterness. Roger had told me a bit of what Kenny Lindsay had said about Ardsmuir. It had been no secret that Christie had been envious of Jamie's leadership then—but what had that to do with this?

"What makes you say that?" I asked quietly. I took his injured hand, ostensibly to check the bindings—in fact, merely to give me somewhere to look other than into his eyes.

"It's true, aye? Your husband's hand." His beard jutted pugnaciously at me. "He said ye'd mended it for him. *He* didna wriggle and squirm when ye did it, now, did he?"

Well, no, he hadn't. Jamie had prayed, cursed, sweated, cried—and screamed, once or twice. But he hadn't moved.

Jamie's hand wasn't a matter I wanted to discuss with Thomas Christie, though.

"Everyone's different," I said, giving him as straight a look as I could. "I wouldn't expect—"

"Ye wouldna expect any man to do as well as him. Aye, I ken that." The dull red color was burning in his cheeks again, and he looked down at his bandaged hand. The fingers of his good hand were clenched in a fist.

"That's not what I meant," I protested. "Not at all! I've stitched wounds and set bones for a good many men—almost all the

Highlanders were terribly brave about—" It occurred to me, that fraction of a second too late, that Christie was *not* a Highlander.

He made a deep growling noise in his throat.

"Highlanders," he said, "hmp!" in a tone that made it clear he would have liked to spit on the floor, had he not been in the presence of a lady.

"Barbarians?" I said, responding to the tone. He glanced at me, and I saw his mouth twist, as he had his own moment of belated realization. He looked away, and took a deep breath—I smelled the gust of whisky as he let it out.

"Your husband … is … certainly a gentleman. He comes of a noble family, if one tainted by treason." The "r"s of "treason" rolled like thunder—he really was quite drunk. "But he is also … also …" He frowned, groping for a better word, then gave it up. "One of them. Surely ye ken that, and you an Englishwoman?"

"One of them," I repeated, mildly amused. "You mean a Highlander, or a barbarian?"

He gave me a look somewhere between triumph and puzzlement.

"The same thing, is it not?"

I rather thought he had a point. While I had met Highlanders of wealth and education, like Colum and Dougal MacKenzie—to say nothing of Jamie's grandfather, the treasonous Lord Lovat to whom Christie was referring—the fact was that every single one of them had the instincts of a Viking freebooter. And to be perfectly honest, so did Jamie.

"Ah … well, they, um, do tend to be rather …" I began feebly. I rubbed a finger under my nose. "Well, they are raised to be fighting men, I suppose. Or is that what you mean?"

He sighed deeply, and shook his head a little, though I thought it was not in disagreement, but simply in dismay at the contemplation of Highland customs and manners.

Mr. Christie was himself well-educated, the son of a self-made Edinburgh merchant. As such, he had pretensions—painful ones—to being a gentleman—but would obviously never make a proper barbarian. I could see why Highlanders both puzzled and annoyed him. What must it have been like, I wondered, for him to find himself imprisoned alongside a horde of uncouth—by his standards—violent, flamboyant, Catholic barbarians, treated—or mistreated—as one of them?

He had leaned back a little on his pillow, eyes closed and mouth compressed. Without opening his eyes, he asked suddenly, "D'ye ken that your husband bears the stripes of flogging?"

I opened my mouth to reply tartly that I *had* been married to Jamie for nearly thirty years—when I realized that the question implied something about the nature of Mr. Christie's own concept of marriage that I didn't want to consider too closely.

"I know," I said instead, briefly, with a quick glance toward the open door. "Why?"

Christie opened his eyes, which were a little unfocused. With some effort, he brought his gaze to bear on me.

"Ye know why?" he asked, slurring a little. "Wha' he did?"

I felt heat rise in my cheeks, on Jamie's behalf.

"At Ardsmuir," Christie said before I could answer, leveling a finger at me. He poked it at the air, almost in accusation. "He claimed a bit of tartan, aye? Forbidden."

"Aye?" I said, in baffled reflex. "I mean—did he?"

Christie shook his head slowly back and forth, looking like a large, intoxicated owl, eyes fixed now and glaring.

"Not his," he said. "A young lad's."

He opened his mouth to speak further, but only a soft belch emerged from it, surprising him. He closed his mouth and blinked, then tried again.

"It was an act of extra … extraordinary … nobility and—and courage." He looked at me, and shook his head slightly. "Im—incompre … hensible."

"Incomprehensible? How he did it, you mean?" I knew how, all right; Jamie was so bloody-mindedly stubborn that he would see out any action he intended, no matter whether hell itself barred the way or what happened to him in the process. But surely Christie knew *that* about him.

"Not how." Christie's head lolled a little, and he pulled it upright with an effort. "Why?"

"Why?" I wanted to say, *Because he's an effing hero, that's why; he can't help it*—but that wouldn't really have been right. Besides, I didn't know why Jamie had done it; he hadn't told me, and I did wonder why not.

"He'd do anything to protect one of his men," I said instead.

Christie's gaze was rather glassy, but still intelligent; he looked at me for a long moment, unspeaking, thoughts passing slowly behind his eyes. A floorboard in the hall creaked, and I strained my ears for Jamie's breathing. Yes, I could hear it, soft and regular; he was still asleep.

"Does he think that I am one of 'his men'?" Christie asked at last. His voice was low, but full of both incredulity and outrage. "Because I am not, I ass—ashure you!"

I began to think that last glass of whisky had been a grave mistake.

"No," I said with a sigh, repressing the urge to close my eyes and rub my forehead. "I'm sure he doesn't. If you mean that"—I nodded at the little Bible—"I'm sure it was simple kindness. He'd do as much for any stranger—you would yourself, wouldn't you?"

He breathed heavily for a bit, glaring, but then nodded once and lay back, as though exhausted—as well he might be. All the belligerence had gone out of him as suddenly as air from a balloon, and he looked somehow smaller, and rather forlorn.

"I am sorry," he said softly. He lifted his bandaged hand a little, and let it fall.

I wasn't sure whether he was apologizing for his remarks about Jamie, or for what he saw as his lack of bravery in the morning. I thought it wiser not to inquire, though, and stood up, smoothing down the linen night rail over my thighs.

I pulled the quilt up a bit and tugged it straight, then blew out the candle. He was no more than a dark shape against the pillows, his breathing slow and hoarse.

"You did very well," I whispered, and patted his shoulder. "Good night, Mr. Christie."

* * *

My personal barbarian was asleep, but woke, catlike, when I crawled into bed. He stretched out an arm and gathered me into himself with a sleepily interrogative "mmmm?"

I nestled against him, tight muscles beginning to relax automatically into his warmth.

"Mmmm."

"Ah. And how's our wee Tom, then?" He leaned back a little and his big hands came down on my trapezius, kneading the knots from my neck and shoulders.

"Oh. Oh. Obnoxious, prickly, censorious, and very drunk. Otherwise, fine. Oh, yes. More, please—up a bit, oh, yes. Oooh."

"Aye, well, that sounds like Tom at his best—bar the drunkenness. If ye groan like that, Sassenach, he'll think I'm rubbing something other than your neck."

"I do *not* care," I said, eyes closed, the better to appreciate the exquisite sensations vibrating through my spinal column. "I've had quite enough of Tom Christie for the moment. Besides, he's likely passed out by now, with as much as he's had to drink."

Still, I tempered my vocal response, in the interests of my patient's rest.

"Where did that Bible come from?" I asked, though the answer was obvious. Jenny must have sent it from Lallybroch; her last parcel had arrived a few days before, while I was visiting Salem.

Jamie answered the question I'd really asked, sighing so his breath stirred my hair.

"It gave me a queer turn to see it, when I came to it among the books my sister sent. I couldna quite decide what to do with it, aye?"

Little wonder if it had given him a turn.

"Why did she send it, did she say?" My shoulders were beginning to relax, the ache between them dulling. I felt him shrug behind me.

"She sent it with some other books; said she was turning out the attic and found a box of them, so decided to send them to me. But she did mention hearing that the village of Kildennie had decided to emigrate to North Carolina; they’re all MacGregors up near there, ken?”

“Oh, I see.” Jamie had once told me that his intention was one day to find the mother of Alex MacGregor, and give her his Bible, with the information that her son had been avenged. He had made inquiries after Culloden, but discovered that both of the MacGregor parents were dead. Only a sister remained alive, and she had married and left her home; no one knew quite where she was, or even whether she was still in Scotland.

“Do you think Jenny—or Ian, rather—found the sister at last? And she lived in that village?”

He shrugged again, and with a final squeeze of my shoulders, left off.

“It may be. Ye ken Jenny; she’d leave it to me whether to search for the woman.”

“And will you?” I rolled over to face him. Alex MacGregor had hanged himself, rather than live as prey to Black Jack Randall. Jack Randall was dead, had died at Culloden. But Jamie’s memories of Culloden were no more than fragments, driven from him by the trauma of the battle and the fever he had suffered afterward. He had waked, wounded, with Jack Randall’s body lying on top of him—but had no recollection of what had happened.

And yet, I supposed, Alex MacGregor *had* been avenged—whether or not by Jamie’s hand.

He thought about that for a moment, and I felt the small stirring as he tapped the two stiff fingers of his right hand against his thigh.

“I’ll ask,” he said finally. “Her name was Mairi.”

“I see,” I said. “Well, there can’t be more than, oh … three or four hundred women named Mairi in North Carolina.”

That made him laugh, and we drifted off to sleep, to the accompaniment of Tom Christie’s stertorous snores across the hall.

* * *

It might have been minutes or hours later that I woke suddenly, listening. The room was dark, the fire cold on the hearth, and the shutters rattling faintly. I tensed a little, trying to wake enough to rise and go to my patient—but then heard him, a long wheezing inspiration, followed by a rumbling snore.

It wasn't that that had wakened me, I realized. It was the sudden silence beside me. Jamie was lying stiff beside me, scarcely breathing.

I put out a hand slowly, so he would not be shocked at the touch, and rested it on his leg. He hadn't had nightmares for some months, but I recognized the signs.

"What is it?" I whispered.

He drew breath a little deeper than usual, and his body seemed momentarily to draw in upon itself. I didn't move, but left my hand on his leg, feeling the muscle flex microscopically beneath my fingers, a tiny intimation of flight.

He didn't flee, though. He moved his shoulders in a brief, violent twitch, then let out his breath and settled into the mattress. He didn't speak for a bit, but his weight drew me closer, like a moon pulled near to its planet. I lay quiet, my hand on him, my hip against his—flesh of his flesh.

He stared upward, into the shadows between the beams. I could see the line of his profile, and the shine of his eyes as he blinked now and then.

"In the dark …" he whispered at last, "there at Ardsmuir, we lay in the dark. Sometimes there was a moon, or starlight, but even then, ye couldna see anything on the floor where we lay. It was naught but black—but ye could hear."

Hear the breathing of the forty men in the cell, and the shuffles and shifts of their movement. Snores, coughing, the sounds of restless sleep—and the small furtive sounds from those who lay awake.

"It would be weeks, and we wouldna think of it." His voice was coming easier now. "We were always starved, cold. Worn to the bone. Ye dinna think much, then; only of how to put one foot in front of another, lift another stone.… Ye dinna really *want* to think, ken? And it's easy enough not to. For a time."

But every now and then, something would change. The fog of exhaustion would lift, suddenly, without warning.

"Sometimes ye kent what it was—a story someone told, maybe, or a letter that came from someone's wife or sister. Sometimes it came out of nowhere; no one said a thing, but ye'd wake to it, in the night, like the smell of a woman lying next to ye."

Memory, longing … need. They became men touched by fire—roused from dull acceptance by the sudden searing recollection of loss.

"Everyone would go a bit mad, for a time. There would be fights, all the time. And at night, in the dark …"

At night, you would hear the sounds of desperation, stifled sobs or stealthy rustlings. Some men would, in the end, reach out to another—sometimes to be rebuffed with shouts and blows. Sometimes not.

I wasn't sure what he was trying to tell me, nor what it had to do with Thomas Christie. Or, perhaps, Lord John Grey.

"Did any of them ever … touch you?" I asked tentatively.

"No. None of them would ever think to touch me," he said very softly. "I was their chief. They loved me—but they wouldna think, ever, to touch me."

He took a deep, ragged breath.

"And did you want them to?" I whispered. I could feel my own pulse begin to throb in my fingertips, against his skin.

"I hungered for it," he said so softly I could barely hear him, close as I was. "More than food. More than sleep—though I wished most desperately for sleep, and not only for the sake of tiredness. For when I slept, sometimes I saw ye.

"But it wasna the longing for a woman—though Christ knows, that was bad enough. It was only—I wanted the touch of a hand. Only that."

His skin had ached with need, 'til he felt it must grow transparent, and the raw soreness of his heart be seen in his chest.

He made a small rueful sound, not quite a laugh.

"Ye ken those pictures of the Sacred Heart—the same as we saw in Paris?"

I knew them—Renaissance paintings, and the vividness of stained glass glowing in the aisles of Notre Dame. The Man of

Sorrows, his heart exposed and pierced, radiant with love.

"I remembered that. And I thought to myself that whoever saw that vision of Our Lord was likely a verra lonely man himself, to have understood so well."

I lifted my hand and laid it on the small hollow in the center of his chest, very lightly. The sheet was thrown back, and his skin was cool.

He closed his eyes, sighing, and clasped my hand, hard.

"The thought of that would come to me sometimes, and I would think I kent what Jesus must feel like there—so wanting, and no one to touch Him."

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ASHES TO ASHES

Jamie checked his saddlebags once more, though he had done it so often of late that the exercise was little more than custom. Each time he opened the left-hand one, he still smiled, though. Brianna had remade it for him, stitching in loops of leather that presented his pistols, hilt up, ready to be seized in an emergency, and a clever arrangement of compartments that held handy his shot pouch, powder horn, a spare knife, a coil of fishing line, a roll of twine for a snare, a hussif with pins, needles, and thread, a packet of food, a bottle of beer, and a neatly rolled clean shirt.

On the outside of the bag was a small pouch that held what Bree was pleased to call a "first-aid kit," though he was unsure what it was meant to be in aid of. It contained several gauze packets of a bitter-smelling tea, a tin of salve, and several strips of her adhesive plaster, none of which seemed likely to be of use in any imaginable misadventure, but did no harm.

He removed a cake of soap she had added, along with a few more unnecessary fripperies, and carefully hid them under a bucket, lest she be offended.

Just in time, too; he heard her voice, exhorting wee Roger about the inclusion of sufficient clean stockings in his bags. By the time they came round the corner of the hay barn, he had everything securely buckled up.

"Ready, then, *a charaid*?"

"Oh, aye." Roger nodded, and slung the saddlebags he was carrying on his shoulder off onto the ground. He turned to Bree, who was carrying Jemmy, and kissed her briefly.

"I go with *you,* Daddy!" Jem exclaimed hopefully.

"Not this time, sport."

"Wanna see Indians!"

"Later, perhaps, when ye're bigger."

"I can talk Indian! Uncle Ian tellt me! Wanna go!"

"Not this time," Bree told him firmly, but he wasn't inclined to listen, and began struggling to get down. Jamie made a small rumble in his throat, and fixed him with a quelling eye.

"Ye've heard your parents," he said. Jem glowered, and stuck out his lower lip like a shelf, but ceased his fuss.

"Someday ye must tell me how ye do that," Roger said, eyeing his offspring.

Jamie laughed, and leaned down to Jemmy. "Kiss Grandda goodbye, eh?"

Disappointment generously abandoned, Jemmy reached up and seized him round the neck. He picked the little boy up out of Brianna's arms, hugged him, and kissed him. Jem smelled of parritch, toast, and honey, a homely warm and heavy weight in his arms.

"Be good and mind your mother, aye? And when ye're a wee bit bigger, ye'll come, too. Come and say farewell to Clarence; ye can tell him the words Uncle Ian taught ye." And God willing, they'd be words suitable for a three-year-old child. Ian had a most irresponsible sense of humor.

Or perhaps, he thought, grinning to himself, *I'm only recalling some o' the things I taught Jenny's bairns—including Ian—to say in French.*

He'd already saddled and bridled Roger's horse, and Clarence the pack mule was fully loaded. Brianna was checking the girth and stirrup leathers while Roger slung his saddlebags—more to keep herself busy than because of any need. Her lower lip was caught in her teeth; she was being careful not to seem worried, but was fooling no one.

Jamie took Jem up to pat the mule's nose, in order to give the lass and her man a moment's privacy. Clarence was a good sort, and suffered Jem's enthusiastic patting and mispronounced Cherokee phrases with long-suffering tolerance, but when Jem turned in his arms toward Gideon, Jamie leaned back sharply.

"Nay, lad, ye dinna want to touch yon wicked bugger. He'll take your hand right off."

Gideon twitched his ears and stamped once, impatient. The big stallion was dying to get under way and have another chance at killing him.

"Why do you keep that vicious thing?" Brianna asked, seeing Gideon's long lip wrinkle back to show his yellow teeth in anticipation. She took Jemmy from him, stepping well away from Gideon.

"What, wee Gideon? Oh, we get on. Besides, he's half my trade goods, lass."

"Really?" She gave the big chestnut a suspicious glance. "Are you sure you won't start a war, giving the Indians something like him?"

"Oh, I dinna mean to give him to them," he assured her. "Not directly, at least."

Gideon was a bad-tempered, thrawn-headed reester of a horse, with a mouth like iron and a will to match. However, these unsociable qualities seemed most appealing to the Indians, as did the stallion's massive chest, long wind, and stoutly muscled frame. When Quiet Air, the sachem in one of the villages, had offered him three deerskins for the chance to breed his spotted mare to Gideon, Jamie had realized suddenly that he had something here.

" 'Twas the greatest good fortune that I never found the time to castrate him," he said, slapping Gideon familiarly on the withers and dodging by reflex as the stallion whipped his head round to snap. "He earns his keep, and more, standing at stud to the Indian ponies. It's the only thing I've ever asked him to do that he's not balked at."

The lass was pink as a Christmas rose from the morning cold; she laughed at that, though, going an even deeper color.

“What’s castrate?” Jemmy inquired.

“Your mother will tell ye.” He grinned at her, ruffled Jemmy’s hair, and turned to Roger. “Ready, lad?”

Roger Mac nodded and stepped up into his stirrup, swinging aboard. He had a steady old bay gelding named Agrippa, who tended to grunt and wheeze, but was sound enough for all that, and good for a rider like Roger—competent enough, but with an abiding sense of inner reservation about horses.

Roger leaned down from the saddle for a last kiss from Brianna, and they were under way. Jamie’d taken a private—and thorough—leave of Claire earlier.

She was in the window of their bedroom, watching out to wave to them as they rode past, her hairbrush in her hand. Her hair was standing out in a great curly swash round her head, and the early-morning sun caught in it like flames in a thornbush. It gave him a sudden queer feeling to see her thus so disordered, half-naked in her shift. A sense of strong desire, despite what he’d done to her not an hour past. And something almost fear, as though he might never see her again.

Quite without thought, he glanced at his left hand, and saw the ghost of the scar at the base of his thumb, the “C” so faded that it was scarcely visible. He had not noticed it or thought of it in years, and felt suddenly as though there was not air enough to breathe.

He waved, though, and she threw him a mocking kiss, laughing. Christ, he’d marked *her;* he could see the dark patch of the love bite he’d left on her neck, and a hot flush of embarrassment rose in his face. He dug his heels into Gideon’s side, causing the stallion to give a squeal of displeasure and turn round to try to bite him in the leg.

With this distraction, they were safe away. He looked back only once, at the trailhead, to see her still there, framed by light. She lifted one hand, as though in benediction, and then the trees hid her from sight.

* * *

The weather was fair, though cold for as early in the autumn as it was; the horses’ breath steamed as they made their way down from the Ridge through the tiny settlement folk now called Cooperville, and along the Great Buffalo Trail to the north. He kept an eye on the sky; it was much too early for snow, but heavy rains were not uncommon. What clouds there were were mare's tails, though; no cause for worry.

They didn't speak much, each man alone with his thoughts. Roger Mac was easy company, for the most part. Jamie did miss Ian, though; he would have liked to talk over the situation as it stood now with Tsisqua. Ian understood the minds of Indians better than most white men, and while Jamie understood Bird's gesture of sending the hermit's bones well enough—it was meant as a proof of his continuing goodwill toward settlers, if the King should send them guns—he would have valued Ian's opinion.

And while it was necessary that he introduce Roger Mac in the villages, for the sake of future relations … Well, he blushed at the thought of having to explain to the man about …

Damn Ian. The lad had simply gone in the night, a few days past, him and his dog. He'd done it before, and would doubtless be back as suddenly as he'd gone. Whatever darkness he'd brought back from the north would now and then become too much for him, and he would vanish into the wood, coming back silent and withdrawn, but somewhat more at peace with himself.

Jamie understood it well enough; solitude was in its own way a balm for loneliness. And whatever memory the lad was fleeing—or seeking—in the wood …

"Has he ever spoken to you about them?" Claire had asked him, troubled. *"His wife? His child?"*

He had not. Ian did not speak of anything about his time among the Mohawk, and the only token he had brought back from the north was an armlet, made of blue-and-white wampum shells. Jamie had caught a glimpse of it in Ian's sporran once, but not enough to tell the pattern of it.

Blessed Michael defend you, lad, he thought silently toward Ian. *And may the angels mend you.*

With one thing and another, he had no real conversation with Roger Mac until they'd stopped for their noon meal. They ate the fresh stuff the women had sent, enjoying it. Enough for supper left; next day, it would be corn dodgers and anything that came across their path that could be easily caught and cooked. And one day more, and the Snowbird women would have them royally fed, as representatives of the King of England.

“Last time, it was ducks, stuffed wi’ yams and corn,” he told Roger. “It’s manners to eat as much as ye can, mind, no matter what’s served, and ye’re the guest.”

“Got it.” Roger smiled faintly, then looked down at the half-eaten sausage roll in his hand. “About that. Guests, I mean. There’s a wee problem, I think—with Hiram Crombie.”

“Hiram?” Jamie was surprised. “What’s to do wi’ Hiram?”

Roger’s mouth twitched, unsure whether to laugh or not.

“Well, it’s only—ye ken everybody’s calling the bones we buried Ephraim, aye? It’s all Bree’s fault, but there it is.”

Jamie nodded, curious.

“Well, so. Yesterday Hiram came along to me, and said he’d been studying upon the matter—praying and the like—and had come to the conclusion that if it were true that some of the Indians were his wife’s kin, then it stood to reason that some of them must be saved, as well.”

“Oh, aye?” Amusement began to kindle in his own breast.

“Yes. And so, he says, he feels called upon to bring these hapless savages the word of Christ. For how else are they to hear it?”

Jamie rubbed a knuckle over his upper lip, torn now between amusement and dismay at the thought of Hiram Crombie invading the Cherokee villages, psalmbook in hand.

“Mmphm. Well, but … do ye not believe—Presbyterians, I mean—that it’s all predestined? That some are saved, I mean, and some damned, and not a thing to be done about it? Which is why the Papists are all bound for hell in a handbasket?”

“Ah … well …” Roger hesitated, clearly not quite willing to put the matter so baldly himself. “Mmphm. There may be some difference of opinion among Presbyterians, I imagine. But yes, that’s more or less what Hiram and his cohorts think.”

"Aye. Well, then, if he thinks some o' the Indians must be saved already, why must they be preached to?"

Roger rubbed a finger between his brows.

"Well, d'ye see, it's the same reason Presbyterians pray and go to kirk and all. Even if they're saved, they feel they want to praise God for it, and—and learn to do better, so as to live as God wishes them to. In gratitude for their salvation, see?"

"I rather think Hiram Crombie's God might take a dim view of the Indian way of living," Jamie said, with vivid memories of naked bodies in the dimness of ember glow, and the smell of furs.

"Quite," Roger said, catching Claire's dry tone so exactly that Jamie laughed.

"Aye, I see the difficulty," he said, and he did, though he still found it funny. "So Hiram means to go to the Cherokee villages and preach? Is that it?"

Roger nodded, swallowing a bit of sausage.

"To be more exact, he wants you to take him there. And make introduction for him. He wouldna expect ye to interpret the preaching, he says."

"Holy God." He took a moment to contemplate this prospect, then shook his head decidedly. "No."

"Of course not." Roger pulled the cork from a bottle of beer, and offered it to him. "I just thought I should tell ye, so ye can decide best what to say to him when he asks."

"Verra thoughtful of ye," Jamie said, and taking the bottle, drank deeply.

He lowered it, took breath—and froze. He saw Roger Mac's head turn sharply and knew he had caught it, too, borne on the chilly breeze.

Roger Mac turned back to him, black brows furrowed.

"Do ye smell something burning?" he said.

* * *

Roger heard them first: a raucous caucus of cries and cackles, shrill as witches. Then a clappering of wings as they came in sight, and the birds flew up, mostly crows, but here and there a huge black raven.

"Oh, God," he said softly.

Two bodies hung from a tree beside the house. What was left of them. He could tell that it was a man and a woman, but only by their clothes. A piece of paper was pinned to the man's leg, so crumpled and stained that he saw it only because one edge lifted in the breeze.

Jamie ripped it off, unfolded it enough to read, and threw it on the ground. *Death to Regulators,* it read; he saw the scrawl for an instant, before the wind blew it away.

"Where are the bairns?" Jamie asked, turning sharply to him. "These folk have children. Where are they?"

The ashes were cold, already scattering in the wind, but the smell of burning filled him, clogged his breathing, seared his throat so that words rasped like gravel, meaningless as the scrape of pebbles underfoot. Roger tried to speak, cleared his throat, and spat.

"Hiding, maybe," he rasped, and flung out an arm toward the wood.

"Aye, maybe." Jamie stood abruptly, called into the wood, and, not waiting for an answer, set off into the trees, calling again.

Roger followed, sheering off as they reached the forest's edge, going upslope behind the house, both of them shouting words of reassurance that were swallowed up at once by the forest's silence.

Roger stumbled through the trees, sweating, panting, heedless of the pain in his throat as he shouted, barely stopping long enough to hear if anyone answered. Several times he saw movement from the corner of his eye and swung toward it, only to see nothing but the ripple of wind through a patch of drying sedges, or a dangling creeper, swaying as though someone had passed that way.

He half-imagined he was seeing Jem, playing at hide-and-seek, and the vision of a darting foot, sun gleaming off a small head, lent him strength to shout again, and yet again. At last, though, he was forced to admit that children would not have run so far, and he circled back toward the cabin, still calling intermittently, in hoarse, strangled croaks.

He came back into the dooryard to find Jamie stooping for a rock, which he threw with great force at a pair of ravens that had settled in the hanging tree, edging bright-eyed back toward its burden. The ravens squawked and flapped away—but only so far as the next tree, where they sat watching.

The day was cold, but both of them were soaked with sweat, hair straggling wet on their necks. Jamie wiped his face with his sleeve, still breathing hard.

"H-how many … children?" Roger's own breath was short, his throat so raw that the words were barely a whisper.

"Three, at least." Jamie coughed, hawked, and spat. "The eldest is twelve, maybe." He stood for a moment, looking at the bodies. Then he crossed himself and drew his dirk to cut them down.

They had nothing to dig with; the best that could be managed was a wide scrape in the leaf mold of the forest, and a thin cairn of rocks, as much to spite the ravens as for the sake of decency.

"Were they Regulators?" Roger asked, pausing in the midst of it to wipe his face on his sleeve.

"Aye, but …" Jamie's voice trailed away. "It's naught to do wi' that business." He shook his head and turned away to gather more rocks.

Roger thought it *was* a rock at first, half-hidden in the leaves that had drifted against the scorched cabin wall. He touched it, and it moved, bringing him to his feet with a cry that would have done credit to any of the corbies.

Jamie reached him in seconds, in time to help dig the little girl out of the leaves and cinders.

"Hush, *a muirninn,* hush," Jamie said urgently, though in fact the child was not crying. She was maybe eight, her clothes and hair burned away and her skin so blackened and cracked that she might have been made of stone indeed, save for her eyes.

"Oh, God, oh, God." Roger kept saying it, under his breath, long after it became clear that if it was a prayer, it was long past answering.

He was cradling her against his chest, and her eyes opened halfway, regarding him with nothing like relief or curiosity—only a calm fatality.

Jamie had poured water from his canteen onto a handkerchief; he fed the tip of it between her lips to wet them, and Roger saw her throat move in reflex as she sucked.

“Ye’ll be all right,” Roger whispered to her. “It’s all right, *a leannan.*”

“Who has done this, *a nighean*?” Jamie asked, just as gently. Roger saw that she understood; the question stirred the surface of her eyes like wind on a pond—but then passed over, leaving them calm again. She did not speak, no matter what questions they asked, only looked at them with incurious eyes, and went on sucking dreamily at the wet cloth.

“Are ye baptized, *a leannan*?” Jamie asked her at last, and Roger felt a deep jolt at the question. In the shock of finding her, he had not truly taken in her condition.

“Elle ne peut pas vivre,” Jamie said softly, his eyes meeting Roger’s. She cannot live.

His first instinct was a visceral denial. Of course she could live, she must. But huge patches of her skin were gone, the raw flesh crusted but still oozing. He could see the white edge of a knee bone, and literally see her heart beating, a reddish, translucent bulge that pulsed at the notch of her rib cage. She was light as a corn-dolly, and he became painfully aware that she seemed to float in his arms, like a slick of oil on water.

“Does it hurt, sweetheart?” he asked her.

“Mama?” she whispered. Then she closed her eyes and would say no more, only muttering “Mama?” now and then.

He had thought at first they would take her back to the Ridge, to Claire. But it was more than a day’s ride; she wouldn’t make it. Not possibly.

He swallowed, realization closing on his throat like a noose. He looked at Jamie, seeing the same sick acknowledgment in his eyes. Jamie swallowed, too.

“Do ye … know her name?” Roger could scarcely breathe, and forced the words. Jamie shook his head, then gathered himself, hunching his shoulders.

She had stopped sucking, but still murmured “Mama?” now and then. Jamie took the handkerchief from her lips and squeezed a few drops from it onto her blackened forehead, whispering the words of baptism.

Then they looked at each other, acknowledging necessity. Jamie was pale, sweat beading on his upper lip among the bristles of red beard. He took a deep breath, steeling himself, and lifted his hands, offering.

“No,” Roger said softly. “I’ll do it.” She was his; he could no more surrender her to another than he could have torn off an arm. He reached for the handkerchief, and Jamie put it into his hand, soot-stained, still damp.

He’d never thought of such a thing, and couldn’t think now. He didn’t need to; without hesitation, he cradled her close and put the handkerchief over her nose and mouth, then clamped his hand tight over the cloth, feeling the small bump of her nose caught snug between his thumb and index finger.

Wind stirred in the leaves above, and a rain of gold fell on them, whispering on his skin, brushing cool past his face. She would be cold, he thought, and wished to cover her, but had no hand to spare.

His other arm was round her, hand resting on her chest; he could feel the tiny heart beneath his fingers. It jumped, beat rapidly, skipped, beat twice more … and stopped. It quivered for a moment; he could feel it trying to find enough strength to beat one last time, and suffered the momentary illusion that it would not only do so, but would force its way through the fragile wall of her chest and into his hand in its urge to live.

But the moment passed, as did the illusion, and a great stillness came. Near at hand, a raven called.

* * *

They had almost finished the burying, when the sound of hooves and jingling harness announced visitors—a lot of visitors.

Roger, ready to decamp into the woods, glanced at his father-in-law, but Jamie shook his head, answering his unasked question.

"Nay, they'd no come back. What for?" His bleak gaze took in the smoking ruin of the homestead, the trampled dooryard, and the low mounds of the graves. The little girl still lay nearby, covered with Roger's cloak. He hadn't been able to bear putting her into the ground just yet; the knowledge of her alive was still too recent.

Jamie straightened, stretching his back. Roger saw him glance to see that his rifle was to hand, leaning against a tree trunk. Then he settled himself, leaning on the scorched board he had been using as a shovel, waiting.

The first of the riders came out of the woods, his horse snorting and tossing its head at the smell of burning. The rider pulled it skillfully round and urged it closer, leaning forward to see who they were.

"So it's you, is it, Fraser?" Richard Brown's lined face looked grimly jovial. He glanced at the charred and steaming timbers, then round at his comrades. "Didn't think you made your money just by selling whisky."

The men—Roger counted six of them—shifted in their saddles, snorting with amusement.

"Have a bit o' respect for the dead, Brown." Jamie nodded at the graves, and Brown's face hardened. He glanced sharply at Jamie, then at Roger.

"Just the two of you, is it? What are you doing here?"

"Digging graves," Roger said. His palms were blistered; he rubbed a hand slowly on the side of his breeches. "What are *you* doing here?"

Brown straightened abruptly in his saddle, but it was his brother Lionel who answered.

"Coming down from Owenawisgu," he said, jerking his head at the horses. Looking, Roger saw that there were four packhorses, laden with skins, and that several of the other horses carried bulging saddlebags. "Smelled the fire and come to see." He glanced down at the graves. "Tige O'Brian, was it?"

Jamie nodded.

"Ye kent them?"

Richard Brown shrugged.

“Aye. It’s on the way to Owenawisgu. I’ve stopped a time or two; taken supper with them.” Belatedly, he removed his hat, plastering down wisps of hair over his balding crown with the flat of his hand. “God rest ’em.”

“Who’s burnt ’em out, if it wasn’t you?” one of the younger men in the party called. The man, a Brown by his narrow shoulders and lantern jaw, grinned inappropriately, evidently thinking this a jest.

The singed bit of paper had flown with the wind; it fluttered against a rock near Roger’s foot. He picked it up and with a step forward, slapped it against Lionel Brown’s saddle.

“Know anything about that, do you?” he asked. “It was pinned to O’Brian’s body.” He sounded angry, knew it, and didn’t care. His throat ached and his voice came out as a strangled rasp.

Lionel Brown glanced at the paper, brows raised, then handed it to his brother.

“No. Write it yourself, did you?”

“What?” He stared up at the man, blinking against the wind.

“Indians,” Lionel Brown said, nodding at the house. “Indians done this.”

“Oh, aye?” Roger could hear the undercurrents in Jamie’s voice—skepticism, wariness, and anger. “Which Indians? The ones from whom ye bought the hides? Told ye about it, did they?”

“Don’t be a fool, Nelly.” Richard Brown kept his voice pitched low, but his brother flinched a little, hearing it. Brown edged his horse nearer. Jamie stood his ground, though Roger saw his hands tighten on the board.

“Got the whole family, did they?” he asked, glancing at the small body under its cloak.

“No,” Jamie said. “We’ve not found the two elder children. Only the wee lassie.”

“Indians,” Lionel Brown repeated stubbornly, from behind his brother. “They took ’em.”

Jamie took a deep breath, and coughed from the smoke.

“Aye,” he said. “I’ll ask in the villages, then.”

“Won’t find ’em,” Richard Brown said. He crumpled the note, tightening his fist suddenly. “If Indians took them, they won’t keep them near. They'll sell them on, into Kentucky."

There was a general mutter of agreement among the men, and Roger felt the ember that had simmered in his chest all afternoon burst into fire.

"Indians didn't write that," he snapped, jerking a thumb at the note in Brown's hand. "And if it was revenge against O'Brian for being a Regulator, they wouldn't have taken the children."

Brown gave him a long look, eyes narrowed. Roger felt Jamie shift his weight slightly, preparing.

"No," said Brown softly. "They wouldn't. That's why Nelly figured you wrote it yourself. Say the Indians came and stole the little 'uns, but then *you* come along and decide to take what's left. So you fired the cabin, hung O'Brian and his wife, pinned that note, and here you are. How say you to that bit of reasoning, Mr. MacKenzie?"

"I'd ask how ye kent they were hanged, Mr. Brown."

Brown's face tightened, and Roger felt Jamie's hand on his arm in warning, realizing only then that his fists were clenched.

"The ropes, *a charaid,*" Jamie said, his voice very calm. The words penetrated dimly, and he looked. True, the ropes they had cut from the bodies lay by the tree where they had fallen. Jamie was still talking, his voice still calm, but Roger couldn't hear the words. The wind deafened him, and just below the whine of it he heard the intermittent soft thump of a beating heart. It might have been his own—or hers.

"Get off that horse," he said, or thought he had. The wind swept into his face, heavy with soot, and the words caught in his throat. The taste of ash was thick and sour in his mouth; he coughed and spat, eyes watering.

Vaguely, he became aware of a pain in his arm, and the world swam back into view. The younger men were staring at him, with expressions ranging from smirks to wariness. Richard Brown and his brother were both sedulously avoiding looking at him, focused instead on Jamie—who was still gripping his arm.

With an effort, he shook off Jamie's hand, giving his father-in-law the slightest nod by way of reassurance that he wasn't about to go berserk—though his heart still pounded, and the feel of the noose was so tight about his throat that he couldn't have spoken, even had he been able to form words.

"We'll help." Brown nodded at the little body on the ground, and began to swing one leg over his saddle, but Jamie stopped him with a small gesture.

"Nay, we'll manage."

Brown stopped, awkwardly half-on, half-off. His lips thinned and he pulled himself back on, reined around and rode off with no word of farewell. The others followed, looking curiously back as they went.

"It wasna them." Jamie had taken up his rifle and held it, gazing at the wood where the last of the men had disappeared. "They ken something more about it than they'll say, though."

Roger nodded, wordless. He walked deliberately to the hanging tree, kicked aside the ropes, and drove his fist into the trunk, twice, three times. Stood panting, his forehead pressed against the rough bark. The pain of raw knuckles helped, a bit.

A trail of tiny ants was scurrying upward between the plates of bark, bound on some momentous business, all-absorbing. He watched them for a little, until he could swallow again. Then straightened up and went to bury her, rubbing at the bone-deep bruise on his arm.

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PART FOUR

Abduction

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26

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

October 9, 1773

Roger dropped his saddlebags on the ground beside the pit and peered in.

"Where's Jem?" he said.

His mud-smeared wife looked up at him and brushed a sweat-matted lock of hair out of her face.

"Hello to you, too," she said. "Have a good trip?"

"No," he said. "Where's Jem?"

Her brows rose at that, and she stabbed her shovel into the bottom of the pit, extending a hand for him to help her scramble out.

"He's at Marsali's. He and Germain are playing Vroom with the little cars you made them—or they were when I left him there."

The knot of anxiety he had carried under his ribs for the last two weeks began slowly to relax. He nodded, a sudden spasm of the throat preventing him from speaking, then reached out and pulled her to him, crushing her against him in spite of her startled yelp and mud-stained clothes.

He held her hard, his own heart hammering loud in his ears, and wouldn't—couldn't—let go, until she wriggled out of his embrace. She kept her hands on his shoulders, but cocked her head to one side, one brow raised.

"Yeah, I missed you, too," she said. "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Terrible things." The burning, the little girl's death—these had become dreamlike during their travel, their horror muted to the surreal by the monotonous labor of riding, walking, the constant whine of wind and crunch of boots on gravel, sand, pine needles, mud, the engulfing blur of greens and yellows in which they lost themselves beneath an endless sky.

But now he was home, no longer adrift in the wilderness. And the memory of the girl who had left her heart in his hand was suddenly as real as she had been in the moment she died.

"You come inside." Brianna was peering closely at him, concerned. "You need something hot, Roger."

"I'm all right," he said, but followed her without protest.

He sat at the table while she put the kettle on for tea, and told her everything that had happened, head in his hands, staring down at the battered tabletop, with its homely spills and burn scars.

"I kept thinking there must be something … some way. But there wasn't. Even while I—I put my hand over her face—I was sure it wasna really happening. But at the same time—" He sat up, then, looking into the palms of his hands. At the same time, it had been the most vivid experience of his life. He could not bear to think of it, save in the most fleeting way, but knew he could never forget the slightest thing about it. His throat closed suddenly again.

Brianna looked searchingly into his face, saw his hand touch the ragged rope scar on his throat.

"Can you breathe?" she said anxiously. He shook his head, but it wasn't true, he *was* breathing, somehow, though it felt as though his throat had been crushed in some huge hand, larynx and windpipe mangled into a bloody mass.

He flapped a hand to indicate that he would be all right, much as he doubted it himself. She came round behind him, pulled his hand from his throat, and laid her own fingers lightly over the scar.

"It'll be all right," she said quietly. "Just breathe. Don't think. Just breathe."

Her fingers were cold and her hands smelled of dirt. There was water in his eyes. He blinked, wanting to see the room, the hearth and candle and dishes and loom, to convince himself of where he was. A drop of warm moisture rolled down his cheek.

He tried to tell her that it was all right, he wasn't crying, but she merely pressed closer, holding him across the chest with one arm, the other hand still cool on the painful lump in his throat. Her breasts were soft against his back, and he could feel, rather than hear, her humming, the small tuneless noise she made when she was anxious, or concentrating very hard.

Finally, the spasm began to ease, and the feel of choking left him. His chest swelled with the unbelievable relief of a free breath, and she let go.

"What … is it … that ye're digging?" he asked, with only a little effort. He looked round at her and smiled, with a lot more. "A bar … becue pit for … a hippopot … amus?"

The ghost of a smile touched her face, though her eyes were still dark with concern.

"No," she said. "It's a groundhog kiln."

He tried for a moment to compose some witty remark about it being a really large hole for killing something as small as a groundhog, but he wasn't up to it.

"Oh," he said instead.

He took the hot mug of catnip tea she placed in his hand and held it near his face, letting the fragrant steam warm his nose and mist on the cold skin of his cheeks.

Brianna poured out a mug for herself, as well, and sat down across from him.

"I'm glad you're home," she said softly.

"Yeah. Me, too." He essayed a sip; it was still scalding. "A kiln?" He'd told her about the O'Brians; he had to, but he didn't want to talk about it. Not now. She seemed to sense this, and didn't press him.

"Uh-huh. For the water." He must have looked confused, for her smile grew more genuine. "I told you there was dirt involved, didn't I? Besides, it was your idea."

"It was?" At this point, almost nothing would surprise him, but he had no memory of having bright ideas about water.

The problem of bringing water to the houses was one of transport. God knew there was plenty of water; it ran in creeks, fell in waterfalls, dripped from ledges, sprang from springs, seeped in boggy patches under the cliffs … but making it go where you wanted required some method of containment.

"Mr. Wemyss told *Fraulein* Berrisch—that's his girlfriend; *Frau* Ute fixed them up—what I was doing, and she told him that the men's choir over in Salem was working on the same problem, so—"

"The choir?" He tried another cautious sip and found it drinkable. "Why would the choir—"

"That's just what they call them. There's the single men's choir, the single women's choir, the married choir … they don't just sing together, though, it's more like a social group, and each choir has particular jobs they do for the community. But anyway"—she flapped a hand—"they're trying to bring water into the town, and having the same problem—no metal for pipes.

"You remember, though—you reminded me about the pottery they do in Salem. Well, they tried making water pipes out of logs, but that's really hard and time-consuming, because you have to bore the middle of the log out with an augur, and you still need metal collars to bind the logs together. And they rot, after a while. But then they had the same idea you had—why not make pipes out of fired clay?"

She was becoming animated, talking about it. Her nose was no longer red from cold, but her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes bright with interest. She waved her hands when she talked—she got that from her mother, he thought to himself, amused.

"… so we parked the kids with Mama and Mrs. Bug, and Marsali and I went to Salem—"

"Marsali? But she couldn't be riding, surely?" Marsali was enormously pregnant, to the point that merely being around her made him slightly nervous, for fear she might go into labor at any moment.

“She isn’t due for a month. Besides, we didn’t ride; we took the wagon, and traded honey and cider and venison for cheese and quilts and—see my new teapot?” Proud, she waved at the pot, a homely squat thing with a red-brown glaze and yellow squiggly shapes painted round the middle. It was one of the uglier objects he’d ever seen, and the sight of it made tears come to his eyes from the sheer joy of being home.

“You don’t like it?” she said, a small frown forming between her brows.

“No, it’s great,” he said hoarsely. He fumbled for a handkerchief and blew his nose to hide his emotion. “Love it. You were saying … Marsali?”

“I was saying about the water pipes. But—there’s something about Marsali, too.” The frown deepened. “I’m afraid Fergus isn’t behaving very well.”

“No? What’s he doing? Having a mad affair with Mrs. Crombie?”

This suggestion was greeted with a withering look, but it didn’t last.

“He’s gone a lot, for one thing, leaving poor Marsali to mind the children *and* do all the work.”

“Totally normal, for the time,” he observed. “Most men do that. Your father does that. *I* do that; had ye not noticed?”

“I noticed,” she said, giving him a faintly evil look. “But what I mean is, most men do the heavy work, like plowing and planting, and let their wives manage the inside stuff, the cooking and the spinning and the weaving, *and* the laundry, *and* the preserving, *and* —well, anyway, all that stuff. But Marsali’s doing it all, plus the kids and the outdoor work, *and* working at the malting floor. And when Fergus *is* home, he’s grumpy and he drinks too much.”

This also sounded like normal behavior for the father of three small, wild children and the husband of a very pregnant wife, Roger thought, but didn’t say so.

“I’d not have thought Fergus a layabout,” he observed mildly. Bree shook her head, still frowning, and poured more tea into his mug.

"No, he's not lazy, really. It's hard for him, with only one hand; he really can't handle some of the heavy chores—but he won't help with the kids, or cook and clean while Marsali does them. Da and Ian help with the plowing, but … And he leaves for days on end—sometimes he's picking up little jobs here and there, translating for a traveler—but mostly, he's just gone. And …" She hesitated, darting a look at him as though wondering whether to go on.

"And?" he said obligingly. The tea was working; the pain in his throat was almost gone.

She looked down at the table, drawing invisible patterns on the oak with a forefinger.

"She didn't say so … but I think he hits her."

Roger felt a sudden weight on his heart. His first reaction was to dismiss the notion out of hand—but he had seen too much, living with the Reverend. Too many families, outwardly content and respectable, where the wives poked fun at their own "clumsiness," brushing away concern at black eyes, broken noses, dislocated wrists. Too many men who dealt with the pressures of providing for a family by resorting to the bottle.

"Damn," he said, feeling suddenly exhausted. He rubbed at his forehead, where a headache was starting.

"Why do you think so?" he asked bluntly. "Has she got marks?"

Bree nodded unhappily, still not looking up, though her finger had stilled.

"On her arm." She wrapped a hand around her forearm, in illustration. "Little round bruises, like fingermarks. I saw when she reached up to get a bucket of honeycomb from the wagon and her sleeve fell back."

He nodded, wishing there was something stronger than tea in his mug.

"Shall I talk to him, then, d'ye think?"

She did look up at him then, her eyes softening, though the look of worry remained.

"You know, most men wouldn't offer to do that."

"Well, it's no my idea of fun," he admitted. "But ye canna let that sort of thing go on, hoping it will cure itself. Someone has to say *something.*”

God knew what, though—or how. He was already regretting the offer, trying to think what the hell he *could* say. *“So, Fergus, old man. Hear you’re beating your wife. Be a good fellow and stop that, okay?”*

He drained the rest of his mug, and got up to look for the whisky.

“We’re out,” Brianna said, seeing his intent. “Mr. Wemyss had a cold.”

He put down the empty bottle with a sigh. She touched his arm delicately.

“We’re invited up to the Big House for supper. We could go early.” That was a cheering suggestion. Jamie invariably had a bottle of excellent single-malt, secreted somewhere on the premises.

“Aye, all right.” He took her cloak from the peg and swung it round her shoulders. “Hey. D’ye think I should mention the business about Fergus to your Da? Or best handle it myself?” He had a sudden, unworthy hope that Jamie would consider it his business and take care of the matter.

That seemed to be what Brianna was afraid of; she was shaking her head, simultaneously fluffing out her half-dried hair.

“No! I think Da would break his neck. And Fergus won’t be any good to Marsali if he’s dead.”

“Mmphm.” He accepted the inevitable, and opened the door for her. The big white house glowed on the hill above them, tranquil in the afternoon light, the big red spruce behind it a looming but benign presence; not for the first time, he felt that the tree was somehow guarding the house—and in his present fragile mental state, found that notion a comfort.

They made a short detour, so that he could properly admire the new pit and be told all about the internal workings of a groundhog kiln. He failed to follow these in any detail, only grasping the notion that the point was to make the inside very hot, but he found the flow of Brianna’s explanation soothing.

“… bricks for the chimney,” she was saying, pointing at the far end of the eight-foot pit, which at present resembled nothing so much as the resting place for an extremely large coffin. She’d made a nice, neat job of it so far, though; the corners were squared as though done with a instrument of some sort, and the walls painstakingly smoothed. He said as much, and she beamed at him, thumbing a lock of red hair behind her ear.

"It needs to be a lot deeper," she said, "maybe another three feet. But the dirt here is really good for digging; it's soft, but it doesn't crumble too much. I hope I can finish the hole before it starts to snow, but I don't know." She rubbed a knuckle under her nose, squinting dubiously at the hole. "I really need to card and spin enough more wool to weave the fabric for winter shirts for you and Jem, but I'll have to pick and preserve for the next week or so, and —"

"I'll dig it for you."

She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, just under the ear, and he laughed, suddenly feeling better.

"Not for this winter," she said, taking him contentedly by the arm, "but eventually—I'm wondering if I can vent some of the heat from the kiln, and run it under the floor of the cabin. You know what a Roman hypocaust is?"

"I do." He turned to eye the foundation of his domicile, a simple hollow base of fieldstone on which the log walls were built. The notion of central heating in a crude mountain cabin made him want to laugh, but there was really nothing impossible about it, he supposed. "You'd what? Run pipes of warm air through the foundation stones?"

"Yes. Always assuming I can actually make good pipes, which remains to be seen. What do you think?"

He glanced from the proposed project up the hill to the Big House. Even at this distance, a mound of dirt by the foundation was visible, evidence of the white sow's burrowing capabilities.

"I think ye run a great danger of having that big white buggeress transfer her affections to us, if ye make a cozy warm den under our house."

"Buggeress?" she said, diverted. "Is that physically possible?"

"It's a metaphysical description," he informed her. "And ye saw what she tried to do to Major MacDonald."

“That pig really doesn’t like Major MacDonald,” Bree said reflectively. “I wonder why not?”

“Ask your mother; she’s none so fond of him, either.”

“Oh, well, that—” She stopped suddenly, lips pursed, and looked thoughtfully at the Big House. A shadow passed the window of the surgery, someone moving inside. “Tell you what. You find Da and have a drink with him, and while you’re doing that, I’ll tell Mama about Marsali and Fergus. She might have a good idea.”

“I don’t know that it’s a medical problem, exactly,” he said. “But anesthetizing Germain would certainly be a start.”

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THE MALTING-FLOOR

I could smell the sweet, musty scent of damp grain on the wind as I made my way up the trail. It was nothing like the heady pungency of the barm mash, the faintly coffeelike toasted smell of malting, nor yet the reek of distilling—but still spoke as strongly of whisky. It was a very fragrant business, making *uisgebaugh,* and the reason why the whisky clearing was located nearly a mile from the Big House. As it was, I often caught a wild faint scent of spirit through my open surgery windows when the wind was right and the mash was making.

The whisky-making had its own cycle, and one that everyone on the Ridge was subconsciously attuned to, whether directly involved in it or not. Which was how I knew without asking that the barley in the malting shed had just begun its germination, and therefore, Marsali would be there, turning and spreading the grain evenly before the malting fire was lit.

The grain must be allowed to germinate, to assure a maximal sweetness—but must not sprout, or the mash would have a bitter taste and be ruined. No more than twenty-four hours must pass after germination began, and I had smelled the fecund damp scent of the grain begin to rise as I foraged in the woods the afternoon before. The time was here.

It was by far the best place to have a private conversation with Marsali; the whisky clearing was the only place she was ever without a cacophonous assortment of children. I often thought that she valued the solitude of the work much more than the share of whisky Jamie gave her for minding the grain—valuable though *that* was.

Brianna told me that Roger had gallantly offered to have a word with Fergus, but I thought that I should talk to Marsali first, just to find out what was really going on.

What ought I to say? I wondered. A straightforward *"Is Fergus beating you?"* I couldn't quite believe that, despite—or perhaps because of—an intimate knowledge of emergency rooms filled with the debris of domestic disputes.

It wasn't that I thought Fergus incapable of violence; he'd seen—and experienced—any amount of it from an early age, and growing up among Highlanders in the middle of the Rising and its aftermath probably did not inculcate a young man with any deep regard for the virtues of peace. On the other hand, Jenny Murray had had a hand in his upbringing.

I tried and failed to imagine any man who had lived with Jamie's sister for more than a week *ever* lifting his hand to a woman. Besides, I knew by my own observations that Fergus was a very gentle father, and there was usually an easiness between him and Marsali that seemed—

There was a sudden commotion overhead. Before I could so much as glance up, something huge crashed down through the branches in a shower of dust and dead pine needles. I leapt backward and swung my basket up in instinctive defense—but even as I did so, I realized that I was not in fact being attacked. Germain lay flat on the path in front of me, eyes bulging as he struggled for the breath that had been knocked out of him.

"What on *earth*—?" I began, rather crossly. Then I saw that he was clutching something to his chest; a late nest, filled with a clutch of four greenish eggs, which he had miraculously contrived not to break in his fall.

"For … *Maman,*" he gasped, grinning up at me.

"*Very* nice," I said. I had had enough to do with young males—well, any age, really; they all did it—to realize the complete futility of reproach in such situations, and since he had broken neither the eggs nor his legs, I merely took the nest and held it while he gulped for air and my heart resumed beating at its normal speed.

Recovered, he scrambled to his feet, disregarding the dirt, pitch, and broken pine needles that covered him from head to toe.

"*Maman*'s in the shed," he said, reaching for his treasure. "You come too, *Grandmère*?"

"Yes. Where are your sisters?" I asked suspiciously. "Are you meant to be watching them?"

"Non," he said airily. "They are at home; that's where women belong."

"Oh, really? And who told you that?"

"I forget." Thoroughly recovered, he hopped ahead of me, singing a song, the refrain of which seemed to be *"Na tuit, na tuit, na tuit, Germain!"*

Marsali was indeed at the whisky clearing; her cap, cloak, and gown hung from a branch of the yellow-leaved persimmon, and a clay firepot full of coals sat nearby, smoking in readiness.

The malting floor had been enclosed now by proper walls, making a shed in which the damp grain could be heaped, first to germinate and then to be gently toasted by a low-burning fire under the floor. The ash and charcoal had been scraped out and oak wood for a new fire laid in the space beneath the stilted floor, but it wasn't yet lit. Even without a fire, the shed was warm; I felt it from several feet away. As the grain germinated, it gave off such heat that the shed fairly glowed with it.

A rhythmic shush and scrape came from within; Marsali was turning the grain with a wooden shovel, making sure it was evenly spread before lighting the malting fire. The door of the shed was open, but there were of course no windows; from a distance, I could see only a dim shadow moving within.

The shushing of the grain had masked our footsteps; Marsali looked up, startled, when my body blocked the light from the doorway.

"Mother Claire!"

"Hallo," I said cheerfully. "Germain said you were here. I thought I'd just—"

"*Maman!* Look, look, see what I have!" Germain pushed past me with single-minded eagerness, thrusting out his prize. Marsali smiled at him, and pushed a damp strand of fair hair back behind her ear.

"Oh, aye? Well, that's grand, no? Let's take it out to the light, shall we, so I can have a proper look."

She stepped out of the shed, sighing in pleasure at the touch of the cool air. She was stripped to her shift, the muslin so wet with sweat that I could see not only the dark rounds of her areolae, but even the tiny bulge of her popped-out navel, where the cloth clung to the massive curves of her belly.

Marsali sat down with another huge sigh of relief, stretching her legs out, bare toes pointed. Her feet were somewhat swollen, and blue veins showed, distended, beneath the transparent skin of her legs.

"Ah, it's good to sit! So then, *a chuisle,* show me what ye've got."

I took the opportunity to circle round behind her, as Germain displayed his prize, and covertly check for bruises or other sinister signs.

She was thin—but Marsali simply *was* thin, bar the bulge of her pregnancy, and always had been. Her arms were slender, but hard with muscle, as were her legs. There were smudges of tiredness beneath her eyes—but she had three small children, after all, besides the discomforts of pregnancy to keep her awake. Her face was rosy and damp, thoroughly healthy-looking.

There were a couple of small bruises on her lower legs, but I dismissed those; pregnant women did bruise easily, and with all the obstructions presented by living in a log cabin and traversing wild mountains, there were few people on the Ridge—male *or* female—not sporting the odd contusion.

Or was I only seeking excuses, not wanting to admit the possibility of what Brianna had suggested?

"One for me," Germain was explaining, touching the eggs, "and one for Joan, and one for Félicité, and one for *Monsieur L'Oeuf.*" He pointed at the melonlike swell of her stomach.

"Ah, now, what a sweet lad," Marsali said, pulling him close and kissing his smudged forehead. "Ye're my wee nestling, to be sure."

Germain's beam of pleasure faded into a look of speculation as he came in contact with his mother's protruding belly. He patted it cautiously.

"When the egg hatches inside, what do you do with the shell?" he inquired. "Can I have it?"

Marsali went pink with suppressed laughter.

"People dinna come in shells," she said. "Thank God."

"You are sure, *Maman*?" He eyed her belly dubiously, then poked it gently. "It *feels* like an egg."

"Well, so it does, but it's not. That's only what Papa and I call a wee one before it's born. *You* were *'Monsieur L'Oeuf'* once, aye?"

"I was?" Germain looked thunderstruck at this revelation.

"Ye were. So were your sisters."

Germain frowned, shaggy blond fringe almost touching his nose.

"No, they weren't. They are *Mademoiselles L'Oeufs.*"

"Oui, certainement," Marsali said, laughing at him. "And perhaps this one is, too—but *Monsieur* is easier to say. Here, look." She leaned back a little and pushed a hand firmly into the side of her mound. Then she seized Germain's hand and put it on the spot. Even from where I stood, I could see the surge of flesh as the baby kicked vigorously in response to being poked.

Germain jerked his hand away, startled, then put it back, looking fascinated, and pushed.

"Hello!" he said loudly, putting his face close to his mother's belly. "*Comment ça va* in there, *Monsieur L'Oeuf*?"

"He's fine," his mother assured him. "Or she. But babies dinna talk right at first. Ye ken that much. Félicité doesna say anything but 'Mama' yet."

"Oh, aye." Losing interest in his impending sibling, he stooped to pick up an interesting-looking stone.

Marsali lifted her head, squinting at the sun.

"Ye should go home, Germain. Mirabel will be wanting milked, and I've a bit to do here yet. Go and help Papa, aye?" Mirabel was a goat, and a sufficiently new addition to the household as still to be interesting, for Germain brightened at the suggestion.

"Oui, Maman. Au'voir, Grandmère!" He took aim and flipped his rock at the shed, missing it, then turned and scampered toward the path.

"Germain!" Marsali called after him. *"Na tuit!"*

"What does that mean?" I asked curiously. "It's Gaelic, is it—or French?"

"It's the Gaelic," she said, smiling. "It means 'Don't fall!' " She shook her head in mock dismay. "That laddie canna stay out of trees to save his life." Germain had left the nest with its eggs; she set it gently on the ground, and I saw then the faint yellowed ovals on the underside of her forearm—faded, but just as Brianna had described them.

"And how *is* Fergus?" I asked, as though it had anything to do with the conversation.

"He's well enough," she replied, a look of wariness closing over her features.

"Really?" I glanced deliberately at her arm, then into her eyes. She flushed, and turned her arm quickly, hiding the marks.

"Aye, he's fine!" she said. "He's no verra good at the milking just yet, but he'll have the way of it soon enough. It's awkward wi' the one hand, to be sure, but he's—"

I sat down on the log beside her, and took hold of her wrist, turning it over.

"Brianna told me," I said. "Did Fergus do this?"

"Oh." She seemed embarrassed, and pulled her wrist away, pressing the forearm against her belly to hide the marks. "Well, aye. Aye, he did."

"Do you want me to speak to Jamie about it?"

A rich tide of color surged into her face, and she sat up in alarm.

"Christ, no! Da would break Fergus's neck! And it wasna his fault, really."

"Certainly it was his fault," I said firmly. I had seen all too many beaten women in Boston emergency rooms, all of whom claimed that it wasn't really their husband's or boyfriend's fault. Granted, the women often *did* have something to do with it, but still—

"But it wasn't!" Marsali insisted. The color had not gone from her face; if anything, it intensified. "I—he—I mean, he grabbed my arm, aye, but 'twas only because I … er … well, I was tryin' to brain him wi' a stick of wood at the time." She glanced away, blushing fiercely.

"Oh." I rubbed my nose, a little taken aback. "I see. And why were you trying to do that? Was he … attacking you?"

She sighed, shoulders slumping a little.

"Oh. No. Weel, it was because Joanie spilled the milk, and he shouted at her, and she cried, and …" She shrugged a little, looking uncomfortable. "I just had a wee de'il sittin' on my shoulder, I suppose."

"It's not like Fergus to shout at the children, is it?"

"Oh, no, it's not!" she said quickly. "He hardly ever … well, he didna used to, but with so many … well, I couldna blame him, this time. It took him a terrible time to milk the goat, and then to have it all spilt and wasted—I would ha' shouted, too, I expect."

Her eyes were fixed on the ground, avoiding mine, and she was fingering the seam of her shift, running a thumb over and over the stitching.

"Small children can certainly be trying," I agreed, with vivid memories of an incident involving a two-year-old Brianna, a phone call that had distracted me, a large bowl of spaghetti with meatballs, and Frank's open briefcase. Frank normally exhibited a saintly degree of patience with Bree—if somewhat less with me—but on that particular occasion his bellows of outrage had rattled the windows.

And now that I recalled the occasion, I actually *had* thrown a meatball at him in a fury verging on hysteria. So had Bree, though she had done it out of glee, rather than vindictiveness. Had I been standing by the stove at the time, it might easily have been the pot I threw. I rubbed a finger under my nose, not sure whether to regret the memory or to laugh at it. I never did get the stains out of the rug.

It was a shame that I couldn't share the memory with Marsali, as she was in ignorance not only of spaghetti and briefcases, but also of Frank. She was still looking down, scuffing at the dead oak leaves with a pointed toe.

" 'Twas all my fault, really," she said, and bit her lip.

"No, it wasn't." I squeezed her arm in reassurance. "Things like that are no one's fault; accidents happen, people get upset … but it all comes right in the end." So it did, I thought—though often not in any expected way.

She nodded, but the shadow still lay on her face, her lower lip tucked in.

"Aye, it's only …" she began, then trailed off.

I sat patiently, careful not to push her. She wanted—needed—to talk. And I needed to hear it, before deciding what—or if—to tell Jamie. There was something going on between her and Fergus, that was sure.

"I … was just thinking of it now, whilst I was shoveling. I wouldna have done it, I don't think, only it minded me so much … it was only I felt as though it was the same again.…"

"The same as what?" I asked, when it became clear that she had trailed off.

"I spilt the milk," she said, all in a rush. "When I was a wean. I was hungry, and I reached to pull the jug, and it spilled."

"Oh?"

"Aye. And he shouted." Her shoulders hunched a little, as though in memory of a blow.

"Who shouted?"

"I dinna ken, for sure. It might ha' been my father, Hugh—but it might have been Simon—Mam's second husband. I dinna really remember—only bein' so scairt that I wet myself, and that made him angrier." Color flamed in her face, and her toes curled with shame.

"My mother cried, for it was all the food there was, a bit o' bread and milk, and now the milk was gone—but *he* shouted that he couldna bear the noise, for Joan and I were both howling, too … and then he slapped my face, and Mam went for him bald-heided, and he pushed her so she fell against the hearth and smacked her face on the chimney—I could see the blood running from her nose."

She sniffed and brushed a knuckle under her own nose, blinking, her eyes still fixed on the leaves.

"He stamped out, then, slammin' the door, and Joanie and I rushed up to Mam, both shriekin' our heids off, for we thought she was deid … but she got up onto her hands and knees and told us it was all right, it would be all right—and her swayin' to and fro, with her cap fallen off and strings of bloody snot dripping from her face onto the floor … I'd forgot that. But when Fergus started shouting at poor wee Joanie … 'twas like he was Simon. Or maybe Hugh. *Him,* whoever he was." She closed her eyes and heaved a deep sigh, leaning forward so her arms cradled the burden of her pregnancy.

I reached out and smoothed the damp strings of hair out of her face, brushing them back from her rounded brow.

"You miss your mother, don't you?" I said softly. For the first time, I felt some sympathy for her mother, Laoghaire, as well as for Marsali.

"Oh, aye," Marsali said simply. "Something terrible." She sighed again, closing her eyes as she leaned her cheek against my hand. I drew her head against me, holding her, and stroked her hair in silence.

It was late afternoon, and the shadows lay long, cold in the oak wood. The heat had left her now, and she shivered briefly in the cooling air, a stipple of gooseflesh coming up on her fine-boned arms.

"Here," I said, standing up and swinging the cloak off my shoulders. "Put this on. You don't want to take a chill."

"Ah, no, it's all right." She straightened up, shaking back her hair, and wiped her face with the back of a hand. "There's no but a bit more to do here, and then I've got to be going home and making up the supper—"

"I'll do it," I said firmly, and tucked the cloak around her shoulders. "You rest a bit."

The air inside the tiny shed was ripe enough to make one light-headed, all by itself, thick with the fecund musk of sprouting grain and the fine sharp dust of barley hulls. The warmth was welcoming after the chill of the air outside, but within moments, my skin was damp beneath dress and shift, and I pulled the gown off over my head and hung it on a nail by the door.

No matter; she was right, there wasn't much to be done. The work would keep me warm, and then I would walk home with Marsali straightaway. I would make supper for the family, letting her rest—and while I was about it, I'd perhaps have a word with Fergus and discover more about what was going on.

Fergus could have been making the supper, I thought, frowning as I dug into the dim heaps of sticky grain. Not that he would think of such a thing, the little French layabout. Milking the goat was as far as he was likely to go in the direction of "women's work."

Then I thought of Joan and Félicité, and felt more charitable toward Fergus. Joan was three, Félicité one and a half—and anyone alone in a house with those two had my complete sympathy, no matter *what* kind of work they were doing.

Joan was outwardly a sweet brown wren of a child, and by herself was even-tempered and biddable—to a point. Félicité was the spitting image of her father, dark, fine-boned, and given to alternate bouts of languishing charm and intemperate passion. Together … Jamie referred to them casually as the hell-kits, and if they were at home, it was no wonder that Germain was out wandering in the woods—nor that Marsali found it a relief to be out here by herself, doing heavy labor.

"Heavy" was the operative term, I thought, thrusting the shovel in again and heaving. Sprouting grain was damp grain, and each shovelful weighed pounds. The turned grain was patchy, splotched dark with moisture from the underlying layers. The unturned grain was paler in color, even in the failing light. Only a few mounds of pale grain remained, in the far corner.

I attacked them with a will, realizing as I did so that I was trying very hard not to think of the story Marsali had told me. I didn't want to like Laoghaire—and I didn't. But I didn't want to feel sympathy for her, either, and that was proving harder to avoid.

It hadn't been an easy life for her, apparently. Well, nor had it been for anyone else living in the Highlands then, I thought, grunting as I flung a shovelful of grain to the side. Being a mother was not that easy anywhere—but it seemed she had made a good job of it.

I sneezed from the grain dust, paused to wipe my nose on my sleeve, then went back to shoveling.

It wasn't as though she had tried to steal Jamie from me, after all, I told myself, striving for compassion and high-minded objectivity. Rather the reverse, in fact—or at least she might well see it that way.

The edge of the shovel gritted hard against the floor as I scraped up the last of the grain. I sent the grain flying to the side, then used the flat of the blade to shove some of the new-turned grain into the empty corner and smooth down the highest hillocks.

I knew all the reasons why he said he'd married her—and I believed him. However, the fact remained that the mention of her name conjured up assorted visions—starting with Jamie kissing her ardently in an alcove at Castle Leoch, and ending with him fumbling up her nightgown in the darkness of their marriage bed, hands warm and eager on her thighs—that made me snort like a grampus and feel the blood throb hotly in my temples.

Perhaps, I reflected, I was not really a very high-minded sort of person. Occasionally quite low-minded and grudge-bearing, in fact.

This bout of self-criticism was cut short by the sound of voices and movement outside. I stepped to the door of the shed, squinting against the dazzle of the late afternoon sun.

I couldn't see their faces, nor even tell for sure how many there might be. Some were on horseback, some on foot, black silhouettes with the sinking sun behind them. I caught a movement in the corner of my eye; Marsali was on her feet, backing toward the shed.

"Who are ye, sirs?" she said, chin high.

"Thirsty travelers, mistress," said one of the black forms, edging his horse ahead of the others. "In search of hospitality."

The words were courteous enough; the voice wasn't. I stepped out of the shed, still gripping the shovel.

"Welcome," I said, making no effort to sound welcoming. "Stay where you are, gentlemen; we'll be pleased to bring you a drink. Marsali, will you fetch the keg?"

There was a small keg of raw whisky kept nearby for just such occasions. My heartbeat was loud in my ears, and I was clutching the wooden handle of the shovel so tightly that I could feel the grain of the wood.

It was more than unusual to see so many strangers in the mountains at one time. Now and then, we would see a hunting party of Cherokee—but these men were not Indians.

"No bother, mistress," said another of the men, swinging down off his horse. "I'll help her fetch it. I do think we shall be needing more than one keg, though."

The voice was English, and oddly familiar. Not a cultivated accent, but with a careful diction.

"We have only one keg ready," I said, slowly moving sideways and keeping my eyes on the man who had spoken. He was short and very slender, and moved with a stiff, jerky gait, like a marionette.

He was moving toward me; so were the others. Marsali had reached the woodpile, and was fumbling behind the chunks of oak and hickory. I could hear her breath, harsh in her throat. The keg was hidden in the woodpile. There was an ax lying next to the wood, too, I knew.

"Marsali," I said. "Stay there. I'll come and help you."

An ax was a better weapon than a shovel—but two women against … how many men? Ten … a dozen … more? I blinked, eyes watering against the sun, and saw several more walk out of the wood. I could see these clearly; one grinned at me and I had to steel myself not to look away. His grin broadened.

The short man was coming closer, too. I glanced at him, and a brief itch of recognition tickled me. Who the hell was he? I knew him; I'd seen him before—and yet I hadn't any name to attach to the lantern jaws and narrow brow.

He stank of long-dried sweat, dirt ground into the skin, and the tang of dribbled urine; they all did, and the odor of them floated on the wind, feral as the stink of weasels.

He saw me recognize him; thin lips pulled in for a moment, then relaxed.

“Mrs. Fraser,” he said, and the feeling of apprehension deepened sharply as I saw the look in his small, clever eyes.

“I think you have the advantage of me, sir,” I said, putting as bold a face on it as I might. “Have we met?”

He didn’t answer that. One side of his mouth turned up a little, but his attention was distracted by the two men who had lunged forward to take the keg as Marsali rolled it out of its hiding place. One had already seized the ax I had my eye on, and was about to stave in the top of the cask, when the thin man shouted at him.

“Leave it!”

The man looked up at him, mouth open in heavy incomprehension.

“I said leave it!” the thin man snapped, as the other glanced from the cask to the ax and back in confusion. “We’ll take it with us; I’ll not have you all befuddled with drink now!”

Turning to me, as though continuing a conversation, he said, “Where’s the rest of it?”

“That’s all there is,” Marsali said, before I could answer. She was frowning at him, wary of him, but also angry. “Take it, then, and ye must.”

The thin man’s attention shifted to her for the first time, but he gave her no more than a casual glance before turning back to me.

“Don’t trouble lying to me, Mrs. Fraser. I know well enough there’s more, and I’ll have it.”

“There is not. Give me that, ye great oaf!” Marsali snatched the ax neatly from the man holding it, and scowled at the thin man. “This is how ye repay proper welcome, is it—by thieving? Well, take what ye came for and leave, then!”

I had no choice but to follow her lead, though alarm bells were ringing in my brain every time I looked at the thin little man.

“She’s right,” I said. “See for yourselves.” I pointed at the shed, the mash tubs and the pot still that stood nearby, unsealed and patently empty. “We’re only beginning the malting. It will be weeks yet before there’s a new batch of whisky.”

Without the slightest change of expression, he took a quick step forward and slapped me hard across the face.

The blow wasn’t hard enough to knock me down, but it snapped my head back and left my eyes watering. I was more shocked than hurt, though there was a sharp taste of blood in my mouth, and I could already feel my lip beginning to puff.

Marsali uttered a sharp cry of shock and outrage, and I heard some of the men murmur in interested surprise. They had drawn in, surrounding us.

I put the back of my hand to my bleeding mouth, noticing in a detached sort of way that it was trembling. My brain, though, had withdrawn to a safe distance and was making and discarding suppositions so quickly that they fluttered past, fast as shuffling cards.

Who were these men? How dangerous were they? What were they prepared to do? The sun was setting—how long before Marsali or I was missed and someone came looking for us? Would it be Fergus, or Jamie? Even Jamie, if he came alone …

I had no doubt that these men were the same who had burned Tige O’Brian’s house, and were likely responsible for the attacks inside the Treaty Line, as well. Vicious, then—but with theft as their major purpose.

There was a copper taste in my mouth; the metal tang of blood and fear. No more than a second had passed in these calculations, but as I lowered my hand, I had concluded that it would be best to give them what they wanted, and hope that they left with the whisky at once.

I had no chance to say so, though. The thin man seized my wrist and twisted viciously. I felt the bones shift and crack with a tearing pain, and sank to my knees in the leaves, unable to make more than a small, breathless sound.

Marsali made a louder sound and moved like a striking snake. She swung the ax from the shoulder with all the power of her bulk behind it, and the blade sank deep in the shoulder of the man beside her. She wrenched it free and blood sprayed warm across my face, pattering like rain upon the leaves.

She screamed, high and thin, and the man screamed, too, and then the whole clearing was in motion, men surging inward with a roar like collapsing surf. I lunged forward and seized the thin man's knees, butted my head hard upward into his crotch. He made a choking wheeze and fell on top of me, flattening me to the ground.

I squirmed out from under his knotted body, knowing only that I had to get to Marsali, get between her and the men—but they were upon her. A scream cut in half by the sound of fists on flesh, and a dull boom as bodies fell hard against the wall of the malting shed.

The clay firepot was in reach. I seized it, heedless of its searing heat, and flung it straight into the group of men. It struck one hard in the back and shattered, hot coals spraying. Men yelled and jumped back, and I saw Marsali slumped against the shed, neck canted over on one shoulder and her eyes rolled back white in her head, legs splayed wide and the shift torn down from her neck, leaving her heavy breasts bare on the bulge of her belly.

Then someone struck me in the side of the head and I flew sideways, skidding through the leaves and ending boneless, flat on the ground, unable to rise or move or think or speak.

A great calm came over me and my vision narrowed—it seemed very slowly—the closing of some great iris, spiraling shut. Before me, I saw the nest on the ground, inches from my nose, its interwoven sticks slender, clever, the four greenish eggs round and fragile, perfect in its cup. Then a heel smashed down on the eggs and the iris closed.

* * *

The smell of burning roused me. I could have been unconscious for no more than moments; the clump of dry grass near my face was barely beginning to smoke. A hot coal glowed in a nest of char, shot with sparks. Threads of incandescence shot up the withered grass blades and the clump burst into flame, just as hands seized me by arm and shoulder, dragging me up.

Still dazed, I flailed at my captor as he lifted me, but was hustled unceremoniously to one of the horses, heaved up, and flung across the saddle with a force that knocked the wind out of me. I had barely the presence of mind to grab at the stirrup leather, as someone smacked the horse's rump and we set off at a bruising trot.

Between dizziness and jostling, everything I saw was fractured, crazed like broken glass—but I caught one last glimpse of Marsali, now lying limp as a rag doll among a dozen tiny fires, as the scattered coals began to catch and burn.

I made some strangled noise, trying to call to her, but it was lost in the clatter of harness and men's voices, speaking urgently, near at hand.

"You crazed, Hodge? You don't want that woman. Put her back!"

"I shan't." The small man's voice sounded cross, but controlled, somewhere near at hand. "She'll show us to the whisky."

"Whisky'll do us no good if we're dead, Hodge! That's Jamie Fraser's *wife,* for Christ's sake!"

"I know who she is. Get on with you!"

"But he—you don't know the man, Hodge! I see him one time—"

"Spare me your memories. Get *on,* I said!"

This last was punctuated by a sudden vicious *thunk,* and a startled sound of pain. A pistol butt, I thought. Square across the face, I added mentally, swallowing as I heard the wet, wheezing gasps of a man with a broken nose.

A hand seized me by the hair and jerked my head round painfully. The thin man's face stared down at me, eyes narrowed in calculation. He seemed only to want to assure himself that I was indeed alive, for he said nothing, and dropped my head again, indifferent as though it were a pinecone he had picked up along the way.

Someone was leading the horse I was on; there were several men on foot, as well. I heard them, calling to one another, half-running to keep up as the horses lurched up a rise, crashing and grunting like pigs through the undergrowth.

I couldn't breathe, save in shallow gasps, and was being jolted unmercifully with each step—but I had no attention to spare for physical discomfort. Was Marsali dead? She had looked it, surely, but I'd seen no blood, and I clung to that small fact for the slim—and temporary—comfort that it was.

Even if she wasn't dead yet, she soon might be. Whether from injury, shock, a sudden miscarriage—oh, God, oh, God, poor little *Monsieur L'Oeuf*—

My hands clenched helpless on the stirrup leathers, desperate. Who might find her—and when?

It had lacked little more than an hour to suppertime when I had arrived at the malting shed. How late was it now? I caught glimpses of the ground juddering past below, but my hair had come loose and streamed across my face whenever I tried to raise my head. There was a growing chill to the air, though, and a still look to the light that told me the sun was near the horizon. Within a few minutes, the light would start to fade.

And then what? How long before a search began? Fergus would notice Marsali's absence when she didn't appear to cook supper—but would he go to look for her, with the little girls in his care? No, he'd send Germain. That caused my heart to lurch and catch in my throat. For a five-year-old boy to find his mother …

I could still smell burning. I sniffed, once, twice, again, hoping that I was imagining it. But above the dust and sweat of horse, the tang of stirrup leather, and the whiff of crushed plants, I could distinctly smell the reek of smoke. The clearing, the shed—or both—were well and truly alight now. Someone would see the smoke, and come. But in time?

I shut my eyes tight, trying to stop thinking, seeking any distraction to keep from seeing in my mind's eye the scene that must be taking place behind me.

There were still voices near. The man they called Hodge again. It must be his horse I rode; he was walking near its head, on the far side of the animal. Someone else was expostulating with him, but to no more effect than the first man.

“Spread them out,” he was saying tersely. “Divide the men in two groups—you’ll ’ave one, the rest go with me. Join again in three days’ time at Brownsville.”

Bloody hell. He expected pursuit, and meant to frustrate it by splitting his group and confusing the trail. Frantically, I tried to think of something to drop; surely I had *something* to leave as a means of telling Jamie which way I had been taken.

But I wore nothing save shift, stays, and stockings—my shoes had been lost when they dragged me to the horse. The stockings seemed the only possibility; though the garters, with extreme perversity, were for once snugly tied, and quite out of my reach at the moment.

All around me I could hear the noise of men and horses moving, calling and shoving as the main body split. Hodge chirruped to the horse, and we began to move faster.

My floating hair snagged on a twig as we brushed past a bush, held for a second, then broke free with a painful *ping!* as the twig snapped, ricocheting off my cheekbone and narrowly missing my eye. I said something very rude, and someone—Hodge, for a guess—dealt me a censorious smack across the bottom.

I said something much, much ruder, but under my breath and through clenched teeth. My sole comfort was the thought that it would be no great trick to follow a band such as this, leaving as they were a wide trail of broken branches, hoofprints, and overturned stones.

I’d seen Jamie track things small and sly, as well as large and lumbering—and had seen him check the bark of trees and the twigs of bushes as he went, for scratched bark and betraying tufts of … hair.

No one was walking on the side of the horse where my head hung down. Hastily, I began to pluck hairs from my head. Three, four, five—was that enough? I stretched out my hand and dragged it through a yaupon bush; the long, curly hairs drifted on the breeze of the horse’s passing, but stayed safely tangled in the jagged foliage.

I did the same thing four times more. Surely he would see at least one of the signs, and would know which trail to follow—if he didn't waste time following the other first. There was nothing I could do about that save pray—and I set in to do that in good earnest, beginning first with a plea for Marsali and *Monsieur le Oeuf,* whose need was plainly much greater than mine.

We continued upward for quite some time; it was full dark before we reached what seemed to be the summit of a ridge, and I was nearly unconscious, my head throbbing with blood and my stays pushed so hard into my body that I felt each strip of whalebone like a brand against my skin.

I had just enough energy left to push myself backward when the horse stopped. I hit the ground and crumpled at once into a heap, where I sat light-headed and gasping, rubbing my hands, which had swollen from hanging down for so long.

The men were gathered in a small knot, occupied in low-voiced conversation, but too near for me to think of trying to creep away into the shrubbery. One man stood only a few feet away, keeping a steady eye on me.

I looked back the way we had come, half-fearing, half-hoping to see the glow of fire far below. The fire would have drawn attention from someone—someone would know by now what had happened, be even now spreading the alarm, organizing pursuit. And yet … Marsali.

Was she already dead, and the baby with her?

I swallowed hard, straining my eyes at the dark, as much to prevent tears as in hopes of seeing anything. As it was, though, the trees grew thick around us, and I could see nothing at all, save variations on inky blackness.

There was no light; the moon had not yet risen, and the stars were still faint—but my eyes had had more than enough time to adapt, and while I was no cat to see in the dark, I could distinguish enough to make a rough count. They were arguing, glancing at me now and then. Perhaps a dozen men … How many had there been, originally? Twenty? Thirty?

I flexed my fingers, trembling. My wrist was badly bruised, but that wasn't what was troubling me at present.

It was clear to me—and therefore presumably to them, as well—that they couldn't head directly for the whisky cache, even were I able to find it at night. Whether Marsali survived to talk or not—I felt my throat close at the thought—Jamie would likely realize that the whisky was the intruders' goal, and have it guarded.

Had things not fallen out as they did, the men would ideally have forced me to lead them to the cache, taken the whisky, and fled, hoping to escape before the theft was discovered. Leaving me and Marsali alive to raise the alarm and describe them? I wondered. Perhaps; perhaps not.

In the panic following Marsali's attack, though, the original plan had fallen apart. Now what?

The knot of men was breaking up, though the argument continued. Footsteps approached.

"I tell you, it won't do," one man was saying heatedly. From the thickened voice, I assumed it was the gentleman with the broken nose, undeterred by his injury. "Kill her now. Leave her here; no one'll find her before the beasts have scattered her bones."

"Aye? And if no one finds her, they'll think she's still with us, won't they?"

"But if Fraser catches up to us, and she's not, who shall he blame …"

They stopped, four or five of them surrounding me. I scrambled to my feet, my hand closing by reflex around the nearest thing approaching a weapon—an unfortunately small rock.

"How far are we from the whisky?" Hodge demanded. He had taken off his hat, and his eyes gleamed, ratlike in the shadow.

"I don't know," I said, keeping a firm grip on my nerves—and the rock. My lip was still tender, puffed from the blow he had dealt me, and I had to form the words carefully. "I don't know where we *are.*"

This was true, though I could have made a reasonable guess. We had traveled for a few hours, mostly upward, and the trees nearby were fir and balsam; I could smell their resin, sharp and clean. We were on the upper slopes, and probably near a small pass that crossed the shoulder of the mountain.

“Kill her,” urged one of the others. “She’s no good to us, and if Fraser finds her with us—”

“Shut your face!” Hodge rounded on the speaker with such violence that the man, much larger, stepped back involuntarily. That threat disposed of, Hodge ignored him and seized me by the arm.

“Don’t play coy with me, woman. You’ll tell me what I want to know.” He didn’t bother with the “or else”—something cold passed across the top of my breast, and the hot sting of the cut followed a second later, as blood began to bloom from it.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!” I said, more from surprise than pain. I jerked my arm out of his grasp. “I told you, I don’t even know where we *are,* you idiot! How do you expect me to tell you where anything else is?”

He blinked, startled, and brought the knife up by reflex, wary, as though he thought I might attack him. Realizing that I wasn’t about to, he scowled at me.

“I’ll tell you what I *do* know,” I said, and was distantly pleased to hear that my voice was sharp and steady. “The whisky cache is about half a mile from the malting shed, roughly northwest. It’s in a cave, well-hidden. I could take you there—if we began from the spring where you took me—but that’s all I can tell you in the way of direction.”

This was true, too. I could find it easily enough—but to give directions? *“Go through a gap in the brush a little way, until you see the cluster of oak where Brianna shot a possum, bear left to a squarish rock with a bunch of adder’s-tongue growing over it.…”* The fact that the need for my services as a guide was probably all that kept them from killing me on the spot was, of course, a secondary consideration.

It was a very shallow cut; I wasn’t bleeding badly at all. My face and hands were ice-cold, though, and small flashing lights came and went at the edges of my vision. Nothing was keeping me upright save a vague conviction that if it came to that, I preferred to die on my feet.

"I tell you, Hodge, you don't want nothing to do with that one—nothing." A larger man had joined the small group round me. He leaned over Hodge's shoulder, looking at me, and nodded. They were all black in the shadow, but this man had a voice tinged with the lilt of Africa—an ex-slave, or perhaps a slave-trader. "That woman—I hear about her. She is a conjure woman. I know them. They are like serpents, conjure wives. You don't touch that one, hear me? She will curse you!"

I managed to give a rather nasty-sounding laugh in answer to this, and the man closest to me took a half-step back. I was vaguely surprised; where had *that* come from?

But I was breathing better now, and the flashing lights were gone.

The tall man stretched his neck, seeing the dark line of blood on my shift.

"You draw her blood? Damn you, Hodge, you done it now." There was a distinct note of alarm in his voice, and he drew back a little, making some sort of sign toward me with one hand.

Without the slightest notion as to what moved me to do it, I dropped the rock, ran the fingers of my right hand across the cut, and in one swift motion, reached out and drew them down the thin man's cheek. I repeated the nasty laugh.

"Curse, is it?" I said. "How's this? Touch me again, and you'll die within twenty-four hours."

The streaks of blood showed dark on the white of his face. He was close enough that I could smell the sourness of his breath, and see the fury gather on his face.

What on earth do you think you are doing, Beauchamp? I thought, utterly surprised at myself. Hodge drew back his fist to strike me, but the large man caught him by the wrist with a cry of fear.

"Don't you do that! You will kill us all!"

"I'll friggin' kill *you* right now, arsebite!"

Hodge was still holding the knife in his other hand; he stabbed awkwardly at the larger man, grunting with rage. The big man gasped at the impact, but wasn't badly stricken—he wrenched at the wrist he held and Hodge gave a high, squealing cry, like a rabbit seized by a fox.

Then the others were all in it, pushing and shouting, grappling for weapons. I turned and ran, but got no more than a few steps before one of them grabbed me, flinging his arms round me and jerking me hard against himself.

"You're not going anywhere, lady," he said, panting in my ear.

I wasn't. He was no taller than I, but a good deal stronger. I lunged against his grip, but he had both arms wrapped tight around me, and squeezed tighter. I stood stiff then, heart pounding with anger and fear, not wanting to give him an excuse to maul me. He was excited; I could feel his heart pounding, too, and smell the reek of fresh sweat over the fetor of stale clothes and body.

I couldn't see what was going on, but I didn't think they were fighting so much as merely shouting at each other now. My captor shifted his weight and cleared his throat.

"Ahh … where do you come from, ma'am?" he asked, quite politely.

"What?" I said, no end startled. "Come from? Er … ah … England. Oxfordshire, originally. Then Boston."

"Oh? I'm from the north myself."

I repressed the automatic urge to reply, "Pleased to meet you," since I wasn't, and the conversation languished.

The fight had stopped, abruptly as it had started. With a lot of token snarling and growling, the rest of them backed down in the face of Hodge's bellowed assertions that he was in command here, and they'd bleedin' well do as he said or take the consequences.

"He means it, too," muttered my captor, still pressing me firmly to his filthy bosom. "You don't want to cross him, lady, believe me."

"Hmph," I said, though I assumed the advice was well-meant. I had been hoping the conflict would be noisy and prolonged, thus increasing the chances of Jamie catching up to us.

"And where is this Hodge from, speaking of origins?" I asked. He still seemed remarkably familiar to me; I was sure I had seen him *somewhere*—but where?

"Hodgepile? Ahhh … England, I reckon," said the young man gripping me. He sounded surprised. "Don't he sound like it?"

Hodge? Hodgepile? That rang a bell, certainly, but …

There was a good deal of muttering and milling round, but in much too little time, we were off again. This time, thank God, I was allowed to ride astride, though my hands were tied and bound to the saddle.

We moved very slowly; there was a trail of sorts, but even with the faint light shed by a rising moon, the going was difficult. Hodgepile no longer led the horse I rode; the young man who had recaptured me held the bridle, tugging and coaxing the increasingly reluctant horse through the thickets of brush. I could glimpse him now and then, slender, with thick, wild hair that hung past his shoulders and rendered him lion-maned in silhouette.

The threat of immediate death had receded a little, but my stomach was still knotted and the muscles of my back stiff with apprehension. Hodgepile had his way for the moment, but there had been no real agreement among the men; one of those in favor of killing me and leaving my corpse for the skunks and weasels might easily decide to put a quick end to the controversy with a lunge out of the dark.

I could hear Hodgepile's voice, sharp and hectoring, somewhere up ahead. He seemed to be passing up and down the column, bullying, nagging, nipping like a sheepdog, trying to keep his flock on the move.

They *were* moving, though it was clear even to me that the horses were tired. The one I rode was shambling, jerking her head with irritation. God knew where the marauders had come from, or how long they had traveled before reaching the whisky clearing. The men were slowing, too, a gradual fog of fatigue settling on them as the adrenaline of flight and conflict receded. I could feel lassitude stealing upon me, too, and fought against it, struggling to stay alert.

It was still early autumn, but I was wearing only my shift and stays, and we were high enough that the air chilled rapidly after dark. I shivered constantly, and the cut on my chest burned as the tiny muscles flexed beneath the skin. It wasn't at all serious, but what if it became infected? I could only hope that I would live long enough for that to be a problem.

Hard as I tried, I could *not* keep from thinking of Marsali, nor keep my mind from making medical speculations, envisioning everything from concussion with intracranial swelling to burns with smoke inhalation. I could do something—perhaps even an emergency C-section—if I were there. No one else could.

I clenched my hands hard on the edge of the saddle, straining against the rope that bound them. I needed to be there!

But I was not, and might never be.

The quarreling and muttering had all but ceased as the darkness of the forest closed in upon us, but a lingering sense of unease lay heavy on the group. In part, I thought it was apprehension and fear of pursuit, but in much greater part, a sense of internal discord. The fight had not been settled, merely postponed to a more convenient season. A sense of simmering conflict was sharp in the air.

A conflict focused squarely on *me*. Unable to see clearly during the argument, I couldn't be sure which men held which opinions, but the division was clear: one party, headed by Hodgepile, was in favor of keeping me alive, at least long enough to lead them to the whisky. A second group was for cutting their losses, and my throat. And a minority opinion, voiced by the gentleman with the African speech, was for turning me loose, the sooner the better.

Obviously, it would behoove me to cultivate this gentleman, and try to turn his beliefs to my advantage. How? I'd made a start by cursing Hodgepile—and I was still quite startled that I'd done that. I didn't think it would be advisable to start cursing them wholesale, though—ruin the effect.

I shifted in the saddle, which was beginning to chafe me badly. This wasn't the first time I'd had men recoil from me in fear of what they thought I was. Superstitious fear could be an effective weapon—but it was a very dangerous one to use. If I truly frightened them, they'd kill me without a moment's hesitation.

We had crossed into the pass. There were few trees among the boulders here, and as we emerged onto the far side of the mountain, the sky opened out before me, vast and glowing, fiery with a multitude of stars.

I must have let out a gasp at the sight, for the young man leading my horse paused, lifting his own head skyward.

"Oh," he said softly. He stared for a moment, then was pulled back to earth by the passage of another horse that brushed past us, its rider turning to peer closely at me as it did so.

"Did you have stars like this—where you came from?" my escort asked.

"No," I said, still slightly under the spell of the silent grandeur overhead. "Not so bright."

"No, they weren't," he said, shaking his head, and pulled at the rein. That seemed an odd remark, but I could make nothing of it. I might have engaged him in further conversation—God knew I needed all the allies I could get—but there was a shout from up ahead; evidently, we were making camp.

I was untied and pulled off the horse. Hodgepile pushed his way through the scrum and grasped me by the shoulder.

"You try to run, woman, and you'll wish you 'adn't." He squeezed viciously, fingers digging into my flesh. "I need you alive—I don't need you 'ole."

Still gripping my shoulder, he lifted his knife and pressed the flat of the blade against my lips, jammed the tip of it up my nose, then leaned close enough that I felt the moist warmth of his very repugnant breath on my face.

"The one thing I *won't* cut off is your tongue," he whispered. The knife blade drew slowly out of my nose, down my chin, along the line of my neck, and circled round the curve of my breast. "You take my meaning, do you?"

He waited until I managed a nod, then released me and disappeared into the darkness.

If he meant to unnerve me, he'd managed nicely. I was sweating despite the chill, and still shaking when a tall shadow loomed up beside me, took one of my hands, and pressed something into it.

"My name is Tebbe," he murmured. "You remember that—Tebbe. Remember I was good to you. Tell your spirits they don't hurt Tebbe, he was good to you."

I nodded once more, astonished, and was left again, this time with a lump of bread in my hand. I ate it hastily, observing that while very stale, it had originally been good dark rye bread, of the sort the German women of Salem made. Had the men attacked some house near there, or merely bought the bread?

A horse's saddle had been flung down on the ground near me; a canteen hung from the pommel, and I sank down on my knees to drink from it. The bread and the water—tasting of canvas and wood—tasted better than anything I'd eaten in a long while. I'd noticed before that standing very close to death improves the appetite remarkably. Still, I did hope for something more elaborate as a last meal.

Hodgepile returned a few minutes later, with rope. He didn't bother with further threats, evidently feeling that he'd made his point. He merely tied me hand and foot, and pushed me down on the ground. No one spoke to me, but someone, with a kindly impulse, threw a blanket over me.

The camp settled quickly. No fire was lit, and so no supper was cooked; the men presumably refreshed themselves in the same makeshift way I had, then scattered into the wood to seek their rest, leaving the horses tethered a little way off.

I waited until the comings and goings died down, then took the blanket in my teeth and wriggled carefully away from the spot where I had been placed, making my way inchworm fashion to another tree, a dozen yards away.

I had no thought of escape in doing this; but if one of the bandits in favor of disposing of me should think to take advantage of the darkness in order to achieve their aims, I didn't mean to be lying there like a staked goat. With luck, if anyone came skulking round the spot where I'd been, I would have enough warning to scream for help.

I knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that Jamie would come. My job was to survive until he did.

Panting, sweating, covered with crumbled leaves and with my stockings in rags, I curled up under a big hornbeam, and burrowed back under the blanket. Thus concealed, I had a try at undoing the knots in the rope around my wrists with my teeth. Hodgepile had tied them, though, and had done so with military thoroughness. Short of gnawing gopherlike through the ropes themselves, I was going nowhere.

Military. It was that thought that recalled suddenly to me who he was, and where I had seen him before. Arvin Hodgepile! He had been the clerk at the Crown's warehouse in Cross Creek. I had met him briefly, three years before, when Jamie and I brought the body of a murdered girl to the sergeant of the garrison there.

Sergeant Murchison was dead—and I'd thought Hodgepile was, as well, killed in the conflagration that had destroyed the warehouse and its contents. So, a deserter, then. Either he had had time to escape the warehouse before it went up in flames, or had simply not been there at the time. In either case, he'd been clever enough to realize that he could take this opportunity to disappear from His Majesty's army, leaving his death to be assumed.

What he had been doing since then was clear, too. Wandering the countryside, stealing, robbing, and killing—and collecting a number of like-minded companions along the way.

Not that they appeared to be of one mind just at present. While Hodgepile might be the self-proclaimed leader of this gang at the moment, it was plain to see that he hadn't held the position for long. He wasn't accustomed to command, didn't know how to manage men, save by threat. I'd seen many military commanders in my time, good and bad, and recognized the difference.

I could hear Hodgepile even now, voice raised in distant argument with someone. I'd seen his sort before, vicious men who could temporarily cow those near them by outbursts of unpredictable violence. They seldom lasted long—and I doubted that Hodgepile was going to last much longer.

He wasn't going to last any longer than it took for Jamie to find us. That thought calmed me like a slug of good whisky. Jamie would surely be looking for me by now.

I curled tighter under my blanket, shivering a little. Jamie would need light to track at night—torches. That would make him and his party visible—and vulnerable—if they came within sight of the camp. The camp itself wouldn't be visible; there was no fire lit, and the horses and men were scattered through the wood. I knew sentries had been posted; I could hear them moving in the wood now and then, talking low-voiced.

But Jamie was no fool, I told myself, trying to drive away visions of ambush and massacre. He would know, from the freshness of the horses' dung, if he were drawing close, and certainly wouldn't be marching right up to the camp, torches blazing. If he had tracked the party this far, he would—

The sound of quiet footsteps froze me. They were coming from the direction of my original resting place, and I cowered under my blanket like a field mouse with a weasel in sight.

The steps shuffled slowly to and fro, as though someone was poking his way through the dried leaves and pine needles, looking for me. I held my breath, though surely no one could hear that, with the night wind sighing through the branches overhead.

I strained my eyes at the darkness, but could make out nothing more than a faint blur moving among the tree trunks, a dozen yards away. A sudden thought struck me—could it be Jamie? If he had come close enough to locate the camp, he would very likely steal in on foot, looking for me.

I drew breath at the thought, straining against my bonds. I wanted urgently to call out, but didn't dare. If it *should* be Jamie, calling to him would expose his presence to the bandits. If I could hear the sentries, they could certainly hear me.

But if it were *not* Jamie, but one of the bandits, seeking to kill me quietly …

I let my breath out very slowly, every muscle in my body clenched and trembling. It was cool enough, but I was bathed in sweat; I could smell my own body, the reek of fear mingling with the colder smells of earth and vegetation.

The blur had vanished, the footsteps gone, and my heart was pounding like a kettledrum. The tears I had held back for hours seeped out, hot on my face, and I wept, shaking silently.

The night was immense around me, the darkness filled with threat. Overhead, the stars hung bright and watchful in the sky, and at some point, I slept.

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CURSES

I woke just before dawn, in a muck sweat and with a throbbing headache. The men were already moving, grumbling about the lack of coffee or breakfast.

Hodgepile stopped beside me, looking down with narrowed eyes. He glanced toward the tree beneath which he had left me the night before and the deep furrow of disturbed leaf mold I had created in worm-crawling toward my present spot. He had very little in the way of lips, but his lower jaw compressed in displeasure.

He pulled the knife from his belt, and I felt the blood drain from my face. However, he merely knelt and cut my bonds, rather than slicing off a finger by way of expressing his emotions.

“We leave in five minutes,” he said, and stalked off. I was quivering and faintly nauseated with fear, and so stiff that I could barely stand. I managed to get to my feet, though, and staggered the short distance to a small stream.

The air was damp and I was now chilly in my sweat-soaked shift, but cold water splashed on my hands and face seemed to help a little, soothing the throb behind my right eye. I had just time to make a hasty toilet, removing the rags of my stockings and running wet fingers through my hair, before Hodgepile reappeared to march me off again.

This time, I was put on a horse, but not tied, thank God. I wasn’t allowed to hold the reins, though; my mount was on a leading rein, held by one of the bandits.

It was my first chance to get a good look at my captors, as they came out of the wood and shook themselves into rough order, coughing, spitting, and urinating on trees without reference to my presence. Beyond Hodgepile, I counted twelve more men—a baker's dozen of villains.

It was easy to pick out the man called Tebbe; his height aside, he was a mulatto. There was another man of mixed blood—black and Indian, I thought—but he was short and squat. Tebbe didn't glance in my direction, but went about his business with head lowered, scowling.

That was a disappointment; I didn't know what had passed among the men during the night, but evidently Tebbe's insistence that I be released was no longer so insistent. A rust-spotted kerchief bound his wrist; that might have something to do with it.

The young man who had guided my horse the night before was also easy to pick out, by way of his long, bushy hair, but he didn't come near, and avoided looking at me, too. Rather to my surprise, he was an Indian—not Cherokee; perhaps a Tuscarora? I hadn't expected that from his speech, nor his curly hair. Clearly he was mixed-blood, too.

The rest of the gang were more or less white, but a motley crew, nonetheless. Three of them were no more than half-bearded boys in their mid-teens, scruffy and gangling. They *did* look at me, goggling drop-jawed, and nudging one another. I stared at one of them until he met my eye; he went bright scarlet beneath his sparse whiskers, and looked away.

Fortunately, the shift I was wearing was one with sleeves; the thing covered me decently enough from drawstring neck to the hem at mid-calf, but there was no denying that I felt uncomfortably exposed. The shift was damp and clung limply to the curve of my breasts—a sensation I was uncomfortably aware of. I wished I had kept hold of the blanket.

The men swirled slowly round me, loading the horses, and I had the distinct and unpleasant sense of being the center of the mass—in much the same way a bull's-eye lies at the center of a target. I could only hope that I looked aged and cronelike enough for my state of untidiness to be repellent, rather than interesting; my hair was loose, wild, and tangled as witch's moss around my shoulders, and I certainly *felt* as though I had been crumpled up like an old paper bag.

I held myself bolt upright in the saddle, giving an unfriendly glare to anyone who so much as glanced in my direction. One man blinked blearily at my bare leg with a faint look of speculation—only to recoil noticeably when he met my eye.

That gave me a momentary feeling of grim satisfaction—superseded almost immediately by shock. The horses had begun to move, and as mine obediently followed the man in front of me, two more men came into view, standing under a big oak. I knew them both.

Harley Boble was tying the strings on a packsaddle, scowling as he said something to another, larger man. Harley Boble was an erstwhile thieftaker, now evidently turned thief. A thoroughly nasty little man, he was unlikely to be well-disposed toward me, owing to an occurrence at a Gathering some time before.

I wasn't at all pleased to see him here, though I was by no means surprised to find him in such company. But it was the sight of his companion that caused my empty stomach to contract, and my skin to twitch like a horse with flies.

Mr. Lionel Brown, of Brownsville.

He looked up, caught sight of me, and turned hastily away again, shoulders hunching. He must have realized that I had seen him, though, for he turned back to face me, thin features set in a sort of weary defiance. His nose was swollen and discolored, a dark red bulb visible even in the grayish light. He stared at me for a moment, then nodded as though making some reluctant acknowledgment, and turned away again.

I risked a glance back over my shoulder as we entered the trees, but couldn't see him anymore. What was *he* doing here? I hadn't recognized his voice at the time, but clearly it had been he who had argued with Hodgepile about the wisdom of taking me. Little wonder! He wasn't the only one disturbed by our mutual recognition.

Lionel Brown and his brother, Richard, were traders; the founders and patriarchs of Brownsville, a tiny settlement in the hills some forty miles from the Ridge. It was one thing for freebooters like Boble or Hodgepile to roam the countryside, robbing and burning; quite another for the Browns of Brownsville to be providing a base for their depredations. The very last thing in the world Mr. Lionel Brown could wish would be for me to reach Jamie with word of what he had been up to.

And I rather thought he would take steps to prevent me doing so. The sun was coming up, beginning to warm the air, but I felt suddenly cold, as though I had been dropped in a well.

Rays of light shone through the branches, gilding the remnants of the night mist that veiled the trees and silvering the dripping edges of their leaves. The trees were alive with birdsong, and a towhee hopped and scratched in a patch of sun, oblivious of the passing men and horses. It was too early yet for flies and mosquitoes, and the soft morning breeze caressed my face. Definitely one of those prospects where only man was vile.

The morning passed quietly enough, but I was aware of the constant state of tension among the men—though no more tense than I was.

Jamie Fraser, where are *you?* I thought, concentrating fiercely on the forest around us. Every distant rustle or snap of twig might presage rescue, and my nerves began to be distinctly frayed in anticipation.

Where? When? How? I had neither reins nor weapons; if—when—an attack was made on the group, my best—well, the only possible—strategy was to fling myself off the horse and run. As we rode I constantly evaluated each patch of witch-hazel and stand of spruce, spotting footholds, plotting a zigzag path through saplings and boulders.

It wasn't only an attack by Jamie and his men that I was preparing for; I couldn't see Lionel Brown, but I knew he was somewhere nearby. A spot between my shoulder blades clenched in a knot, anticipating a knife.

I kept an eye out for potential weapons: rocks of a useful size, branches that might be seized from the ground. If and when I ran, I meant to let no one stop me. But we pushed on, moving as quickly as the horses' footing allowed, men glancing back constantly over their shoulders, hands on their guns. As for me, I was obliged to relinquish my imaginary grasp on each possible weapon in turn as it slid past, out of sight.

To my intense disappointment, we reached the gorge near midday, without incident.

I had visited the gorge once with Jamie. The cataract fell sixty feet down a granite cliff face, sparkling with rainbows and roaring with a voice like the archangel Michael. Fronds of red chokeberry and wild indigo fringed the falls, and yellow poplars overhung the river below the cataract's pool, so thick that no more than a fugitive gleam from the water's surface showed between the banks of lush vegetation. Hodgepile, of course, had not been drawn by the scenic beauty of the spot.

"Get off." A gruff voice spoke near my elbow, and I looked down to see Tebbe. "We will swim the horses across. You come with me."

"I'll take her." My heart sprang up into my throat at the sound of a thickly nasal voice. It was Lionel Brown, pushing his way past an overhanging rope of creeper, dark eyes intent on me.

"Not you." Tebbe rounded on Brown, fist closed.

"Not you," I repeated firmly. "I'm going with him." I slid off the horse and promptly took shelter behind the big mulatto's menacing frame, peering out at Brown from beneath the bigger man's arm.

I wasn't under the slightest illusion about Brown's intent. He wouldn't risk assassinating me under Hodgepile's eye, but he could—and would—drown me easily, and claim it was an accident. The river was shallow here, but still fast; I could hear it whooshing past the rocks near shore.

Brown's eyes darted right, then left, thinking whether to try it on—but Tebbe hunched his massive shoulders, and Brown gave it up as a bad job. He snorted, spat to one side, and stamped away, snapping branches.

I might never have a better chance. Not waiting for the sounds of Brown's huffy exit to subside, I slipped a hand over the big man's elbow and squeezed his arm.

"Thank you," I said, low-voiced. "For what you did last night. Are you badly hurt?"

He glanced down at me, apprehension clear in his face. My touching him plainly disconcerted him; I could feel the tension in his arm as he tried to decide whether to pull away from me or not.

"No," he said at last. "I am all right." He hesitated a moment, but then smiled uncertainly.

It was obvious what Hodgepile intended; the horses were being led, one at a time, down a narrow deer trail that edged the escarpment. We were more than a mile from the cataract, but the air was still loud with its noise. The sides of the gorge plunged steeply down to the water, more than fifty feet below, and the opposite bank was equally steep and overgrown.

A thick fringe of bushes hid the edge of the bank, but I could see that the river spread out here, becoming slower as it shallowed. With no dangerous currents, the horses could be taken downstream, to come out at some random point on the opposite shore. Anyone who had succeeded in tracking us to the gorge would lose the trail here, and have no little difficulty in picking it up on the opposite side.

With an effort, I stopped myself looking back over my shoulder for signs of imminent pursuit. My heart was beating fast. If Jamie was nearby, he would wait and attack the group when they entered the water, when they were most vulnerable. Even if he were not yet near, it would be a confusing business, crossing the river. If there were ever a time to attempt an escape …

"You shouldn't go with them," I said conversationally to Tebbe. "You'll die, too."

The arm under my hand jerked convulsively. He glanced down at me, wide-eyed. The sclera of his eyes were yellow with jaundice, and the irises broken, giving him an odd, smudgy stare.

"I told him the truth, you know." I lifted my chin toward Hodgepile, visible in the distance. "He'll die. So will all those with him. There's no need for you to die, though."

He muttered something under his breath, and pressed a fist against his chest. He had something on a string there, hanging beneath his shirt. I didn't know whether it might be a cross or some more pagan amulet, but he seemed to be responding well to suggestion so far.

So close to the river, the air was thick with moisture, live with the smell of green things and water.

"The water is my friend," I said, trying for an air of mystery suitable to a conjure woman. I was not a good liar, but I was lying for my life. "When we go into the river, let go your hold. A water horse will rise up to carry me away."

His eyes couldn't get any wider. Evidently, he'd heard of kelpies, or something like them. Even this far from the cataract, the roar of the water had voices in it—if one chose to listen.

"I am not going away with a water horse," he said with conviction. "I know about them. They take you down, drown you, and eat you."

"It won't eat me," I assured him. "You needn't go near it. Just stand clear, once we're in the water. Keep well away."

And if he did, I'd be under the water and swimming for my life before he could say Jack Robinson. I would be willing to bet that most of Hodgepile's bandits couldn't swim; few people in the mountains could. I flexed my leg muscles, readying myself, aches and stiffness dissolved in a flood of adrenaline.

Half the men were over the edge with the horses already—I could delay Tebbe, I thought, until the rest were safely in the water. Even if he wouldn't deliberately connive at my escape, if I slipped his grasp, I thought he wouldn't try to catch me.

He pulled halfheartedly at my arm, and I stopped abruptly.

"Ouch! Wait, I've stepped on a bur."

I lifted one foot, peering at the sole. Given the dirt and resin stains adhering to it, no one could possibly have told whether I had picked up cockleburs, bramble thorns, or even a horseshoe nail.

"We need to go, woman." I didn't know whether it was my proximity, the roar of the water, or the thought of water horses that was disturbing Tebbe, but he was sweating with nerves; his odor had changed from simple musk to something sharp and pungent.

"Just a moment," I said, pretending to pick at my foot. "Nearly got it."

"Leave it. I will carry you."

Tebbe was breathing heavily, looking back and forth from me to the edge of the gorge, where the deer trail disappeared into the growth, as though fearing the reappearance of Hodgepile.

It wasn't Hodgepile who popped out of the bushes, though. It was Lionel Brown, his face set with purpose, two younger men behind him, looking equally determined.

"I'll take her," he said without preamble, grabbing my arm.

"No!" By reflex, Tebbe clutched my other arm and pulled.

An undignified tug-of-war ensued, with Tebbe and Mr. Brown each jerking one of my arms. Before I could be split like a wishbone, Tebbe fortunately changed tactics. Releasing my arm, he seized me instead about the body and clutched me to himself, kicking out with one foot at Mr. Brown.

The result of this maneuver was to cause Tebbe and myself to fall backward into an untidy pile of arms and legs, while Brown also lost his balance, though I didn't realize at first that he had. All I was aware of was a loud yell and stumbling noises, followed by a crash and the rattle of dislodged stones bounding down a rocky slope.

Disengaging myself from Tebbe, I crawled out, to discover the rest of the men grouped round an ominously flattened spot in the bushes fringing the gorge. One or two were hurriedly fetching ropes and yelling contradictory orders, from which I deduced that Mr. Brown had indeed fallen into the gorge, but was not yet certifiably dead.

I rapidly reversed directions, meaning to dive headfirst into the vegetation, but came up instead against a pair of cracked boots, belonging to Hodgepile. He seized me by the hair and yanked, causing me to shriek and lash out at him in reflex. I caught him across the midriff. He oomphed and went open-mouthed, gasping for air, but didn't let go his iron grip on my hair.

Making furious faces in my direction, he let go then, and boosted me toward the edge of the gorge with a knee. One of the younger men was clinging to the bushes, feeling gingerly for footholds on the slope below, one rope tied round his waist and another slung in a coil over his shoulder.

"Frigging mort!" Hodgepile yelled, digging his fingers into my arm as he leaned through the broken bushes. "What d'ye mean by this, you bitch?"

He capered on the edge of the gorge like Rumpelstiltskin, shaking his fist and hurling abuse impartially at his damaged business partner and at me, while the rescue operations commenced. Tebbe had withdrawn to a safe distance, where he stood looking offended.

At length, Brown was hauled up, groaning loudly, and laid out on the grass. Those men not already in the river gathered round, looking hot and flustered.

"You mean to mend him, conjure woman?" Tebbe asked, glancing skeptically at me. I didn't know whether he meant to cast doubt upon my abilities, or only on the wisdom of my helping Brown, but I nodded, a little uncertainly, and came forward.

"I suppose so." An oath was an oath, though I rather wondered if Hippocrates ever ran into this sort of situation himself. Possibly he did; the ancient Greeks were a violent lot, too.

The men gave way to me easily enough; once having got Brown out of the gorge, it was obvious that they had no notion what to do about him.

I did a hasty triage. Aside from multiple cuts, contusions, and a thick coating of dust and mud, Mr. Lionel Brown had fractured his left leg in at least two places, broken his left wrist, and probably crushed a couple of ribs. Only one of the leg fractures was compound, but it was nasty, the jagged end of the broken thighbone poking through skin and breeches, surrounded by a steadily widening patch of red.

He had unfortunately not severed his femoral artery, since if he had, he would have been dead already. Still, Mr. Brown had probably ceased to be a personal threat to me for the moment, which was all to the good.

Lacking any equipment or medication, bar several filthy neckcloths, a pine branch, and some whisky from a canteen, my ministrations were necessarily limited. I managed—with no little difficulty and quite a lot of whisky—to get the femur roughly straightened and splinted without having Brown die of shock, which I thought no small accomplishment under the circumstances.

It was a difficult job, though, and I was muttering to myself under my breath—something I hadn't realized I was doing, until I glanced up to find Tebbe crouched on his heels on the other side of Brown's body, regarding me with interest.

"Oh, you curse him," he said approvingly. "Yes, that is a good idea."

Mr. Brown's eyes sprang open and bugged out. He was half off his head with pain, and thoroughly drunk by now, but not quite so drunk as to overlook this.

"Make her stop," he said hoarsely. "Here, Hodgepile—make her stop! Make her take it back!"

" 'Ere, what's this? What did you say, woman?" Hodgepile had simmered down a bit, but his animus was instantly rekindled by this. He reached down and grabbed my wrist just as I was feeling my way over Brown's injured torso. It was the wrist he had twisted so viciously the day before, and a stab of pain shot up my forearm.

"If you must know, I expect I said 'Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ'!" I snapped. "Let go of me!"

"That's what she said when she cursed you! Get her away from me! Don't let her touch me!" Panicked, Brown made to squirm away from me, a very bad idea for a man with freshly broken bones. He went dead-white under the smears of mud, and his eyes rolled back in his head.

"Look at that! He's dead!" one of the onlookers exclaimed. "She's done it! She witched him!"

This caused no little uproar, between the vocal approbation of Tebbe and his supporters, my own protests, and outcries of concern from Mr. Brown's friends and relations, one of whom squatted down by the body, putting an ear to the chest.

"He's alive!" this man exclaimed. "Uncle Lionel! You all right?"

Lionel Brown groaned loudly and opened his eyes, causing further commotion. The young man who had called him Uncle drew a large knife from his belt and pointed it at me. His eyes were open so wide that the whites showed all around.

"You get back!" he said. "Don't you touch him!"

I raised my hands, palms out, in gesture of abnegation.

"Fine!" I snapped. "I won't!" There was, in fact, little more I could do for Brown. He should be kept warm, dry, and well-hydrated, but something told me that Hodgepile would not be open to any such suggestions.

He wasn't. By means of furious and repeated bellows, he quelled the incipient riot, then declared that we were crossing the gorge, and right quickly, too.

"Put 'im on a stretcher, then," he said impatiently, in reply to protests from Brown's nephew. "And as for you—" He rounded on me, glaring. "Did I tell you? No tricks, I said!"

"Kill her," Brown said hoarsely from the ground. "Kill her now."

"Kill her? Not bloody likely, oul' son." Hodgepile's eyes gleamed with malice. "She's no more risk to *me* alive than dead—and a good bit more profit alive. But I'll keep her in line."

The knife was never far from his grasp. He had it out in an instant, and had seized my hand. Before I could so much as draw breath, I felt the blade press down, cutting partway into the base of my forefinger.

"Remember what I told you, do you?" He breathed it, his face was soft with anticipation. "I don't need you whole."

I did remember, and my belly hollowed, my throat dried to silence. My skin burned where he cut, and pain spread in a flash through my nerves; the need to jerk away from the blade was so strong that the muscles of my arm cramped with it.

I could imagine vividly the spurting stump, the shock of broken bone, ripped flesh, the horror of irrevocable loss.

But behind Hodgepile, Tebbe had risen to his feet. His odd, smudgy stare was fixed on me, with an expression of fascinated dread. I saw his hand close in a fist, his throat move as he swallowed, and felt the saliva return to my own. If I was to keep his protection, I must keep his belief.

I fixed my eyes on Hodgepile's, and made myself lean toward him. My skin quivered and jumped, and the blood roared louder in my ears than the voice of the cataract—but I opened my eyes wide. A witch's eyes—or so some said.

Very, very slowly, I lifted my free hand, still wet with Brown's blood. I reached the bloody fingers toward Hodgepile's face.

"I remember," I said, my voice a hoarse whisper. "Do you remember what *I* said?"

He would have done it. I saw the decision flash in his eyes, but before he could press the knife blade down, the bushy-haired young Indian leaped forward, grabbing at his arm with a cry of horror. Distracted, Hodgepile let go his grip, and I pulled free.

In an instant, Tebbe and two more men surged forward, hands on knives and pistol grips.

Hodgepile's thin face was pinched with fury, but the moment of incipient violence had passed. He lowered his own knife, the menace receding.

I opened my mouth to say something that might help defuse the situation further, but was forestalled by a panicked cry from Brown's nephew.

"Don't let her talk! She'll curse us all!"

"Oh, bleedin' 'ell," said Hodgepile, fury transmuted to mere crossness.

I had used several neckcloths to bind Brown's splint. Hodgepile stooped and snatched one from the ground, wadded it into a ball, and stepped forward.

"Open your mouth," he said tersely, and seizing my jaw with one hand, he forced open my mouth and crammed the wadded fabric into it. He glared at Tebbe, who had made a jerky move forward.

"I shan't kill her. But she says not a word more. Not to 'im"—he nodded at Brown, then Tebbe—"not to you. Nor me." He glanced back at me, and to my surprise, I saw a lurking uneasiness in his eyes. "Not to anyone."

Tebbe looked uncertain, but Hodgepile was already tying his own neckcloth round my head, effectively gagging me.

"Not a word," Hodgepile repeated, glaring round at the company. "Now, let's go!"

* * *

We crossed the river. To my surprise, Lionel Brown survived, but it was a lengthy business, and the sun was low by the time we made camp, two miles past the gorge on the farther side.

Everyone was wet, and a fire was kindled without discussion. The currents of dissension and distrust were still there, but had been damped by the river and exhaustion. Everyone was simply too tired for further strife.

They had tied my hands loosely, but left my feet unbound; I made my way to a fallen log near the fire and sank down, utterly drained. I was damp and chilled, my muscles trembling with exhaustion—I had been forced to walk from the river—and for the first time, I began to wonder whether Jamie would in fact find me. Ever.

Perhaps he had followed the wrong group of bandits. Perhaps he had found and attacked them—and been wounded or killed in the fight. I had closed my eyes, but opened them again, seeking to avoid the visions this thought had conjured up. I still worried about Marsali—but either they had found her in time or they hadn't; either way, her fate had been decided.

The fire was burning well, at least; cold, wet, and eager for hot food, the men had brought an immense pile of wood. A short, silent black man was stoking the fire, while a couple of the teenagers rifled the packs for food. A pot of water was set on the fire with a chunk of salt beef, and the lion-haired young Indian poured cornmeal into a bowl with a lump of lard.

Another bit of lard sizzled on an iron girdle, melting into grease. It smelled wonderful.

Saliva flooded my mouth, absorbed at once into the wad of fabric, and despite discomfort, the smell of food bolstered my spirits a little. My stays, loosened by the travel of the last twenty-four hours, had tightened again as the wet laces dried and shrank. My skin itched beneath the fabric, but the thin ribs of the boning did give me a sense of support, more than welcome at the moment.

Mr. Brown's two nephews—Aaron and Moses, I had learned—limped slowly into camp, a makeshift stretcher sagging between them. They set it gratefully down beside the fire, evoking a loud yell from the contents.

Mr. Brown had survived the river crossing, but it hadn't done him any good. Of course, I *had* told them he should be kept well-hydrated. The thought undid me, tired as I was, and I made a muffled snorting sound behind my gag.

One of the young lads nearby heard me, and reached tentatively for the knot of my gag, but dropped his hand at once when Hodgepile barked at him.

"Leave her!"

"But—don't she need to eat, Hodge?" The boy glanced uneasily at me.

"Not just yet she doesn't." Hodgepile squatted down in front of me, looking me over. "Learned your lesson yet, 'ave you?"

I didn't move. Just sat and looked at him, infusing my gaze with as much scorn as possible. The cut on my finger burned; my palms had begun to sweat—but I stared. He tried to stare back, but couldn't do it—his eyes kept slipping away.

That made him even angrier; a flush burned high on his bony cheeks.

"Stop looking at me!"

I blinked slowly, once, and kept looking, with what I hoped appeared to be interested dispassion. He was looking rather strained, our Mr. Hodgepile was. Dark circles under the eyes, muscle fibers bracketing his mouth like lines carved in wood. Sweat stains wet and hot beneath the armpits. Constant browbeating must take it out of one.

All at once, he stood up, grabbed me by the arm, and yanked me to my feet.

"I'll put you where you can't stare, bitch," he muttered, and marched me past the fire, shoving me ahead of him. A little way outside the camp, he found a tree to his liking. He untied my hands and rebound my wrists, with a loop of line wrapped round my waist and my hands fastened to it. Then he pushed me down into a seated position, fashioned a crude noose with a slipknot, and put it round my neck, tying the free end to the tree.

"So as you won't wander away," he said, pulling the rough hemp snug around my neck. "Shouldn't want you to get lost. Might be eaten by a bear, and then what, eh?" This had quite restored his humor; he laughed immoderately, and was still chuckling when he left. He turned, though, to glance back at me. I sat upright, staring, and the humor abruptly left his face. He turned and strode off, shoulders stiff as wood.

In spite of hunger, thirst, and general discomfort, I actually felt a sense of profound, if momentary, relief. If I was not strictly speaking alone, I was at least unobserved, and even this modicum of privacy was balm.

I was a good twenty yards from the fire ring, out of sight of all the men. I sagged against the tree trunk, the muscles of face and body giving way all at once, and a shiver seized me, though it wasn't cold.

Soon. Surely Jamie would find me soon. Unless—I pushed the dubious thought aside as though it were a venomous scorpion. Likewise any thought of what had happened to Marsali, or might happen if and when—no, *when*—he did find us. I didn't know how he'd manage, but he would. He just *would.*

The sun was nearly down; shadows were pooling under the trees and the light faded slowly from the air, making colors fugitive and solid objects lose their depth. There was rushing water somewhere nearby, and the calling of the occasional bird in the distant trees. These began to fall silent as the evening cooled, replaced by the rising chirp of crickets near at hand. My eye caught the flicker of movement, and I saw a rabbit, gray as the dusk, sitting up on its hind legs under a bush a few feet distant, nose twitching.

The sheer normalcy of it all made my eyes sting. I blinked away the tears, and the rabbit was gone.

The sight of it had restored my nerve a little; I essayed a few experiments, to see the limits of my present bondage. My legs were free—that was good. I could rise up into a sort of ungainly squat, and duck-waddle round the tree. Even better; I would be able to relieve myself in privacy on the far side.

I could not, however, rise entirely to my feet, nor could I reach the knot of the line that circled the tree trunk; the rope either slid or caught on the bark, but in either case, the knot remained frustratingly on the opposite side of the trunk—which had to measure nearly three feet in diameter.

I had about two feet of line between the trunk and the noose about my neck; enough to allow me to lie down, or to turn from side to side. Hodgepile was rather obviously well-acquainted with convenient methods of restraining captives; I thought of the O'Brians' homestead, and the two bodies there. The two elder children missing. A small shudder passed over me again.

Where were they? Sold to one of the Indian tribes as slaves? Taken to a sailors' brothel in one of the coastal towns? Or onto a ship, to be pressed into use on the sugar plantations of the Indies?

I was under no illusions that any of these picturesquely unpleasant fates lay in store for me. I was much too old, much too obstreperous—and much too notorious. No, the only value I held for Hodgepile was my knowledge of the whisky cache. Once he had got within sniffing distance of that, he would slit my throat without a moment's compunction.

The smell of roasting meat floated through the air, flooding my mouth with fresh saliva—a welcome relief, in spite of the growling of my stomach, since the gag dried my mouth unpleasantly.

A tiny jolt of panic tensed my muscles. I didn't want to think about the gag. Or the ropes around my wrists and neck. It would be too easy to succumb to the panic of confinement, and exhaust myself in futile struggle. I had to preserve my strength; I didn't know when or how I would need it, but need it I surely would. *Soon,* I prayed. *Let it be soon.*

The men had settled to their supper, the contentions of the day sunk in appetite. They were far enough away that I couldn't hear the particulars of their conversation, but only the stray word or phrase borne on the evening breeze. I turned my head to let the breeze smooth the hair from my face, and found that I could see a long, narrow swath of sky above the distant gorge, gone a deep, unearthly blue, as though the fragile layer of atmosphere that covered the earth grew thinner still, and the darkness of space beyond shone through.

The stars began to prick out, one by one, and I managed to lose myself in watching, counting them as they appeared, one by one by one … touching them as I might the beads of a rosary, and saying to myself such astronomical names as I knew, comforting in their sound, even though I had no idea whether such names bore any relation to the celestial bodies I saw. Alpha Centauri, Deneb, Sirius, Betelgeuse, the Pleiades, Orion …

I succeeded in soothing myself to the extent that I dozed off, only to rouse some time later to find it now full dark. The light of the fire sent a flickering glow through the underbrush, painting my feet, which lay in an open spot, with rosy shadows. I stirred and stretched myself as well as I could, trying to relieve the stiffness in my back, and wondered whether Hodgepile thought himself safe now, to be allowing such a large fire?

A loud groan came to me on the wind—Lionel Brown. I grimaced, but there was nothing I could do for him in my present condition.

I heard shuffling and a murmur of voices; someone was attending to him.

"… hot as a pistol …" one voice said, sounding only mildly concerned.

"… fetch the woman? …"

"No," said a definite voice. Hodgepile. I sighed.

"… water. No help for *that* …"

I was listening so intently, in hopes of hearing what was happening by the fire, that it was some time before I became aware of noises in the brush nearby. Not animals; only bears would make that much noise, and bears didn't giggle. The giggling was subdued, not only muffled but repeatedly interrupted.

There was whispering, too, though I couldn't make out most of the words. The overall atmosphere was so much one of excited juvenile conspiracy, though, that I knew it must be some of the younger members of the gang.

"… go *on,* then!" I caught, spoken in a vehement tone, and accompanied by a crashing noise, indicating that someone had been pushed into a tree. Another crash, indicating retaliation.

More rustling. Whisper, whisper, snigger, snort. I sat up straight, wondering what in God's name they were up to.

Then I heard, "Her legs aren't tied …" and my heart gave a small jump.

"But what if she …" mumble, mumble.

"Won't matter. She can't scream."

That came through very clearly, and I jerked my feet back to scramble up—only to be brought up short by the noose around my neck. It felt like an iron bar across my windpipe, and I fell back, seeing blood-red blotches at the corners of my eyes.

I shook my head and gulped air, trying to shake off the dizziness, adrenaline racing through my blood. I felt a hand on my ankle, and kicked out sharply.

"Hey!" he said out loud, sounding surprised. He took his hand off my ankle and sat back a little. My vision was clearing; I could see him now, but the firelight was behind him; it was one of the young lads, but no more than a faceless, hunched silhouette in front of me.

"Shh," he said, and giggled nervously, reaching out a hand toward me. I made a deep growling noise behind my gag, and he stopped, frozen in mid-reach. There was a rustling in the brush behind him.

This seemed to remind him that his friend—or friends—were watching, and he reached out with renewed resolution, patting me on the thigh.

"Don't you worry, ma'am," he whispered, duck-walking closer on his heels, "I don't mean you no harm."

I snorted, and he hesitated again—but then another rustle from the bush seemed to stiffen his resolve, and he grasped me by the shoulders, trying to make me lie down. I struggled hard, kicking and kneeing at him, and he lost his grip, lost his balance, and fell on his backside.

A muffled explosion of sniggering from the bush brought him up on his feet like a jack-in-the-box. He reached down with decision, seized my ankles, and yanked, jerking me flat. Then he flung himself on top of me, pinning me with his weight.

"Hush!" he said urgently into my ear. His hands were grappling for my throat, and I squirmed and thrashed under his weight, trying to buck him off. His hands closed tight on my neck, though, and I stopped, my vision going black and bloody once again.

"Hush, now," he said more quietly. "You just hush, ma'am, all right?" I was making small choking noises, which he must have taken for assent, for his grip slackened.

"I ain't gonna hurt you, ma'am, I really ain't," he whispered, trying to hold me down with one hand while fumbling about between us with the other. "Would you just be *still,* please?"

I wouldn't, and he finally put a forearm across my throat and leaned on it. Not hard enough to make me black out again, but hard enough to take some of the fight out of me. He was thin and wiry, but very strong, and by dint of simple determination, succeeded in pushing up my shift and wedging his knee between my thighs.

He was breathing nearly as hard as I was, and I could smell the goaty reek of his excitement. His hands had left my throat, and were feverishly grasping at my breasts, in a manner that made it reasonably clear that the only other breast he'd ever touched was likely his mother's.

"Hush, now, don't you be scared, ma'am, it's all right, I ain't … oh. Oh, my. I … uh … oh." His hand was poking about between my thighs, then left off momentarily as he raised himself briefly and wriggled down his breeches.

He collapsed heavily on top of me, hips pumping frantically as he thrust madly away—making no contact save that of friction, as he very obviously had no idea of the way in which female anatomy was constructed. I lay still, astonished into immobility, then felt a warm pulse of liquid under my thighs as he lost himself in panting ecstasy.

All the wiry tension went out of him in a rush, and he subsided on my chest like a limp balloon. I could feel his young heart pounding like a steam hammer, and his temple was pressed against my cheek, damp with sweat.

I found the intimacy of this contact quite as objectionable as the softening presence wedged between my thighs, and rolled abruptly to the side, dumping him off. He came to life suddenly, and scrambled to his knees, yanking at his drooping breeches.

He swayed to and fro for a moment, then dropped to his hands and knees and crawled up close beside me.

"I'm really sorry, ma'am," he whispered.

I made no move, and after a moment, he reached out a tentative hand and patted me gently on the shoulder.

"I'm real sorry," he repeated, still whispering, and then was gone, leaving me lying on my back in a puddle, wondering whether such an incompetent assault could legitimately be termed rape.

Distant rustling in the bushes, accompanied by muffled whoops of young male delight, decided me firmly that it could. Christ, the rest of the obnoxious little beasts would be at me in no time. Panicked, I sat up, mindful of the noose.

The glow from the fire was irregular and flickering, barely enough to make out the trunks of trees and the pale layer of needles and leaf mold on the ground. Enough to see the protrusions of granite boulders through the leaf layer, and the occasional hump of a fallen twig. Not that the lack of potential weapons mattered, given that my hands were still firmly tied.

The weight of the young assailant had made things worse; the knots had pulled tighter during my struggles, and my hands throbbed with lack of circulation. My fingers were beginning to go numb at the tips. Bloody hell. Was I about to lose several fingers to gangrene, as a result of this absurdity?

For an instant, I contemplated the wisdom of behaving compliantly with the next horrible little boy, in hopes that he would remove the gag. If he would, I could at least beg him to loosen the ropes—and then scream for help, in hopes that Tebbe would come and stop further assault, out of fear of my eventual supernatural revenge.

Here he came, a stealthy rustling in the bushes. I gritted my teeth on the gag and looked up, but the shadowy form in front of me wasn't one of the young boys.

The only thought that came to mind when I realized who the new visitor was was, *Jamie Fraser, you bastard, where* are *you?*

I froze, as though not moving might somehow render me invisible. The man moved in front of me, squatting down so as to look into my face.

"Not laughin' so much now, are you?" he said conversationally. It was Boble, the erstwhile thieftaker. "You and your husband thought it was damn funny, didn't you, what them German women did to me? And then Mr. Fraser tellin' me as they meant to make sausage meat of me, and him with a face like a Christian readin' the Bible. Thought that was funny, too, didn't you?"

To be perfectly honest, it had been funny. He was quite correct, though; I wasn't laughing now. He drew back his arm and slapped me.

The blow made my eyes water, but the fire lit him from the side; I could still see the smile on his pudgy face. A cold qualm ran through me, making me shudder. He saw that, and the smile broadened. His canine teeth were short and blunt, so the incisors stood out by contrast, long and yellowed, rodentlike.

"Reckon you'll think this is even funnier," he said, rising to his feet and reaching for his flies. "Hope Hodge don't kill you right away, so you get to tell your husband about it. Bet you he'll enjoy the joke, man with a sense of humor like he's got."

The boy's semen was still damp and sticky on my thighs. I jerked back by reflex, trying to scramble to my feet, but was brought up short by the noose round my neck. My vision went dark for an instant as the rope tightened on my carotids, then cleared, and I found Boble's face inches from mine, his breath hot on my skin.

He seized my chin in his hand and rubbed his face over mine, biting at my lips and rasping the stubble of his beard hard across my cheeks. Then he drew back, leaving my face wet with his saliva, pushed me flat, and climbed on top of me.

I could feel the violence in him, pulsing like an exposed heart, thin-walled and ready to burst. I knew I couldn't escape or prevent him—knew he would hurt me, given the slightest excuse. The only thing to do was be still and endure him.

I couldn't. I heaved under him and rolled to the side, bringing up my knee as he pushed my shift aside. It hit him a glancing blow in the thigh, and he drew back his fist by reflex and punched me in the face, sharp and quick.

Red-black pain bloomed sudden from the center of my face, filled my head, and I went blind, shocked into momentary immobility. *You utter fool,* I thought, with total clarity. *Now he'll kill you.* The second blow struck my cheek and snapped my head to the side. Perhaps I moved again in blind resistance, perhaps I didn't.

Suddenly he was kneeling astride me, punching and slapping, blows dull and heavy as the thump of ocean waves on sand, too remote as yet for pain. I twisted, curling, bringing up my shoulder and trying to shield my face against the ground, and then his weight was gone.

He was standing. He was kicking me and cursing, panting and half-sobbing as his boot thudded into sides and back and thighs and buttocks. I panted in short gasps, trying to breathe. My body jerked and quivered with each blow, skidding on the leaf-strewn ground, and I clung to the sense of the ground below me, trying so hard to sink down, be swallowed by the earth.

Then it stopped. I could hear him panting, trying to speak. "Goddamn … goddamn … oh, goddamn … frig … friggin' … bitch…"

I lay inert, trying to disappear into the darkness that enveloped me, knowing that he was going to kick me in the head. I could feel my teeth shatter, the fragile bones of my skull splinter and collapse into the wet soft pulp of my brain, and I trembled, clenching my teeth in futile resistance against the impact. It would sound like a melon being smashed, dull, sticky-hollow. Would I hear it?

It didn't come. There was another sound, a fast, hard rustling that made no sense. A faintly meaty sound, flesh on flesh in a soft smacking rhythm, and then he gave a groan and warm gouts of fluid fell wet on my face and shoulders, splattering on bare skin where the cloth of my shift had torn away.

I was frozen. Somewhere in the back of my mind, the detached observer wondered aloud whether this was in fact the single most disgusting thing I had ever encountered. Well, no, it wasn't. Some of the things I had seen at L'Hôpital des Anges, to say nothing of Father Alexandre's death, or the Beardsleys' attic … the field hospital at Amiens … heavens, no, this wasn't even close.

I lay rigid, eyes shut, recalling various nasty experiences of my past and wishing I were in fact in attendance at one of those events, instead of here.

He leaned over, seized my hair, and banged my head several times against the tree, wheezing as he did so.

"Show you …" he muttered, then dropped his hand and I heard shuffling noises as he staggered away.

When I finally opened my eyes again, I was alone.

* * *

I remained alone, a small mercy. Boble's violent attack seemed to have frightened away the boys.

I rolled onto my side and lay still, breathing. I felt very tired, and utterly forlorn.

Jamie, I thought, *where are you?*

I wasn't afraid of what might happen next; I couldn't see any further than the moment I was in, a single breath, a single heartbeat. I didn't think, and wouldn't feel. Not yet. I just lay still, and breathed.

Very slowly I began to notice small things. A fragment of bark caught in my hair, scratchy on my cheek. The give of the thick dead leaves beneath me, cradling my body. The sense of effort as my chest lifted. Increasing effort.

A tiny nerve began to twitch near one eye.

I realized quite suddenly that with the gag in my mouth and my nasal tissues being rapidly congested by blood and swelling, I was in some actual danger of suffocation. I twisted as far onto my side as I could get without strangling, and rubbed my face first against the ground, then—with increasing desperation—dug my heels into the ground and wriggled upward, scraping my face hard against the bark of the tree, trying without success to loosen or dislodge the gag.

The bark rasped lip and cheek, but the kerchief tied round my head was so tight that it cut hard into the corners of my mouth, forcing it open so that saliva leaked constantly into the wad of fabric in my mouth. I gagged at the tickle of sodden cloth in my throat, and felt vomit burn the back of my nose.

You aren't, you aren't, you aren'tyouaren'tyou aren't *going to vomit!* I dragged air bubbling through my bloody nose, tasted thick copper as it slimed down my throat, gagged harder, doubled up—and saw white light at the edge of vision, as the noose went tight around my throat.

I fell back, my head hitting hard against the tree. I hardly noticed; the noose loosened again, thank God, and I managed one, two, three precious breaths of blood-clogged air.

My nose was puffed from cheekbone to cheekbone, and swelling fast. I clenched my teeth on the gag and blew outward through my nose, trying to clear it, if only for a moment. Blood tinged with bile sprayed warm across my chin and splattered on my chest—and I sucked air fast, getting a bit.

Blow, inhale. Blow, inhale. Blow … but my nasal passages were almost swollen shut by now, and I nearly sobbed in panic and frustration, as no air came.

Christ, don't cry! You're dead if you cry, for God's sake *don't cry!*

Blow … blow … I snorted with the last reserve of stale air in my lungs, and got a hair of clearance, enough to fill them once more.

I held my breath, trying to stay conscious long enough to discover a way to breathe—there *had* to be a way to breathe.

I would *not* let a wretch like Harley Boble kill me by simple inadvertence. That wasn't right; it couldn't be.

I pressed myself, half-sitting, up against the tree to ease the strain on the noose around my neck as much as possible, and let my head fall forward, so that the blood from my nose ran down, dripping. That helped, a little. Not for long, though.

My eyelids began to feel tight; my nose was definitely broken, and the flesh all round the upper part of my face was puffing now, swelling with the blood and lymph of capillary trauma, squeezing my eyes shut, further constricting my thread of air.

I bit the gag in an agony of frustration, then, seized by desperation, began to chew at it, grinding the fabric between my teeth, trying to smash it down, compress it, shift it somehow inside my mouth.… I bit the inside of my cheek and felt the pain but didn't mind, it wasn't important, nothing mattered but breath, oh, God, I couldn't *breathe,* please help me breathe, please.…

I bit my tongue, gasped in pain—and realized that I had succeeded in thrusting my tongue past the gag, reaching the tip of it to the corner of my mouth. By poking as hard as I could with my tongue tip, I had made a tiny channel of air. No more than a wisp of oxygen could ooze through it—but it was air, and that was all that mattered.

I had my head canted painfully to one side, forehead pressed against the tree, but was afraid to move at all, for fear of losing my slender lifeline of air, if the gag should shift when I moved my head. I sat still, hands clenched, drawing long, gurgling, horribly shallow breaths, and wondering how long I could stay this way; the muscles of my neck were already quivering from strain.

My hands were throbbing again—they hadn't ever stopped, I supposed, but I hadn't had attention to spare for them. Now I did, and momentarily welcomed the shooting pains that outlined each nail with liquid fire, for distraction from the deadly stiffness spreading down my neck and through my shoulder.

The muscles of my neck jumped and spasmed; I gasped, lost my air, and arched my body bowlike, fingers dug into the binding ropes as I fought to get it back.

A hand came down on my arm. I hadn't heard him approach. I turned blindly, butting at him with my head. I didn't care who he was or what he wanted, provided he would remove the gag. Rape seemed a perfectly reasonable exchange for survival, at least at the moment.

I made desperate noises, whimpering, snorting, and spewing gouts of blood and snot as I shook my head violently, trying to indicate that I was choking—given the level of sexual incompetence so far demonstrated, he might not even realize that I couldn't breathe, and simply proceed about his business, unaware that simple rape was becoming necrophilia.

He was fumbling round my head. Thank God, thank God! I held myself still with superhuman effort, head swimming as little bursts of fire went off inside my eyeballs. Then the strip of fabric came away and I thrust the wad of cloth out of my mouth by reflex, instantly gagged, and threw up, whooping air and retching simultaneously.

I hadn't eaten; no more than a thread of bile seared my throat and ran down my chin. I choked and swallowed and *breathed,* sucking air in huge, greedy, lung-bursting gulps.

He was saying something, whispering urgently. I didn't care, couldn't listen. All I heard was the grateful wheeze of my own breathing, and the thump of my heart. Finally slowing from its frantic race to keep oxygen moving round my starved tissues, it pounded hard enough to shake my body.

Then a word or two got through to me, and I lifted my head, staring at him.

"Whad?" I said thickly. I coughed, shaking my head to try to clear it. It hurt very much. "*What* did you say?"

He was visible only as a ragged, lion-haired silhouette, bony-shouldered in the faint glow from the fire.

"I said," he whispered, leaning close, "does the name 'Ringo Starr' mean anything to you?"

* * *

I was by this time well beyond shock. I merely wiped my split lip gingerly on my shoulder, and said, very calmly, “Yes.”

He had been holding his breath; I realized it only when I heard the sigh as he released it, and saw his shoulders slump.

“Oh, God,” he said, half under his breath. “Oh, God.”

He lunged forward suddenly and caught me against him in a hard embrace. I recoiled, choking as the noose round my neck tightened once again, but he didn’t notice, absorbed in his own emotion.

“Oh, God,” he said, and buried his face in my shoulder, nearly sobbing. “Oh, God. I knew, I knew you hadda be, I knew it, but I couldn’t believe it, oh, God, oh, God, oh, God! I didn’t think I’d ever find another one, not ever—”

“Kk,” I said. I arched my back, urgently.

“Wha—oh, shit!” He let go and grabbed for the rope around my neck. He scrabbled hold of it and yanked the noose over my head, nearly tearing my ear off in the process, but I didn’t mind. “Shit, you okay?”

“Yes,” I croaked. “Un … tie me.”

He sniffed, wiping his nose on his sleeve, and glanced back over his shoulder.

“I can’t,” he whispered. “The next guy who comes along’ll see.”

“The *next* guy?” I screamed, as well as I could scream in a strangled whisper. “What do you mean, the next—”

“Well, you know.…” It seemed suddenly to dawn on him that I might have objections to waiting tamely like a trussed turkey for the next would-be rapist in the lineup. “Er … I mean … well, never mind. Who are you?”

“You know damn well who I am,” I croaked furiously, shoving him with my bound hands. “I’m Claire Fraser. Who in *bloody* hell are you, what are you doing here, and if you want one more word out of me, you’ll bloody well untie me this minute!”

He turned again to glance apprehensively over his shoulder, and it occurred to me vaguely that he was afraid of his so-called comrades. So was I. I could see his profile in silhouette; it was indeed the bushy-haired young Indian, the one I had thought might be a Tuscaroran. Indian … some connection clicked into place, deep in the tangled synapses.

"Bloody hell," I said, and dabbed at a trickle of blood that ran from the raw corner of my mouth. "Otter-Toof. Tooth. You're one of his."

"What?!" His head swung back to face me, eyes so wide the whites showed briefly. "Who?"

"Oh, what in hell was his real name? Robert … Robert th-something …" I was trembling with fury, terror, shock, and exhaustion, groping through the muddled remnants of what used to be my mind. Wreck though I might be, I remembered Otter-Tooth, all right. I had a sudden vivid memory of being alone in the dark, on a night like this, wet with rain and all alone, a long-buried skull cupped in my hands.

"Springer," he said, and gripped my arm eagerly. "Springer—was that it? Robert Springer?"

I had just enough presence of mind to clamp my jaw, thrust out my chin, and hold up my bound hands in front of him. Not another word until he cut me loose.

"Shit," he muttered again, and with another hasty glance behind him, fumbled for his knife. He wasn't skillful with it. If I had needed any evidence that he wasn't a real Indian of the time … but he got my hands free without cutting me, and I doubled up with a groan, hands tucked under my armpits as the blood surged into them. They felt like balloons filled and stretched to the point of bursting.

"When?" he demanded, paying no attention to my distress. "When did you come? Where did you find Bob? Where is he?"

"1946," I said, squeezing my arms down tight on my throbbing hands. "The first time. 1968, the second. As for Mr. Springer—"

"The second—did you say the *second* time?" His voice rose in astonishment. He choked it off, looking guiltily back, but the sounds of the men dicing and arguing round the fire were more than loud enough to drown out a simple exclamation.

“Second time,” he repeated more softly. “So you did it? You went back?”

I nodded, pressing my lips together and rocking back and forth a little. I thought my fingernails would pop off with each heartbeat.

“What about you?” I asked, though I was fairly sure that I already knew.

“1968,” he said, confirming it.

“What year did you turn up in?” I asked. “I mean—how long have you been here? Er … now, I mean.”

“Oh, God.” He sat back on his heels, running a hand back through his long, tangled hair. “I been here six years, as near as I can tell. But you said—second time. If you made it home, why in hell’d you come *back*? Oh—wait. You didn’t make it home, you went to another time, but not the one you came from? Where’d you start from?”

“Scotland, 1946. And no, I made it home,” I said, not wanting to go into details. “My husband was here, though. I came back on purpose, to be with him.” A decision whose wisdom seemed presently in severe doubt.

“And speaking of my husband,” I added, beginning to feel as though I might possess a few shreds of sanity after all, “I was *not* joking. He’s coming. You don’t want him to find you keeping me captive, I assure you. But if you—”

He disregarded this, leaning eagerly toward me.

“But that means you know how it works! You can steer!”

“Something like that,” I said, impatient. “I take it that you and your companions *didn’t* know how to steer, as you put it?” I massaged one hand with the other, gritting my teeth against the throb of blood. I could feel the furrows the rope had left in my flesh.

“We thought we did.” Bitterness tinged his voice. “Singing stones. Gemstones. That’s what we used. Raymond said … It didn’t work, though. Or maybe … maybe it did.” He was making deductions; I could hear the excitement rising again in his tone.

“You met Bob Springer—Otter-Tooth, I mean. So he *did* make it! And if he made it, maybe the others did, too. See, I thought they were all dead. I thought—thought I was alone.” There was a catch in his voice, and despite the urgency of the situation and my annoyance at him, I felt a pang of sympathy. I knew very well what it felt like to be alone in that way, marooned in time.

In a way, I hated to disillusion him, but there was no point in keeping the truth from him.

"Otter-Tooth is dead, I'm afraid."

He suddenly stopped moving and sat very still. The faint glow of firelight through the trees outlined him; I could see his face. A few long hairs lifted in the breeze. They were the only thing that moved.

"How?" he said at last, in a small, choked voice.

"Killed by the Iroquois," I said. "The Mohawk." My mind was beginning, very slowly, to work again. Six years ago, this man—whoever he was—had come. 1767, that would be. And yet Otter-Tooth, the man who had once been Robert Springer, had died more than a generation earlier. They'd started out together, but ended in different times.

"Shit," he said, though the obvious distress in his voice was mingled with something like awe. "That would have been a real bummer, especially for Bob. He, like, idolized those guys."

"Yes, I expect he was most put out about it," I replied, rather dryly. My eyelids felt thick and heavy. It was an effort to force them open, but I could still see. I glanced at the fire glow, but couldn't see anything beyond the faint movement of shadows in the distance. If there actually was a lineup of men waiting for my services, at least they were tactfully keeping out of sight. I doubted it, and gave silent thanks that I wasn't twenty years younger—there might have been.

"I met some Iroquois—Christ, I went *looking* for 'em, if you can believe that! That was the whole point, see, to find the Iroquois tribes and get them to—"

"Yes, I know what you had in mind," I interrupted. "Look, this is not really the time or place for a long discussion. I think that—"

"Those Iroquois are some nasty tumblers, I tell *you,* man," he said, jabbing me in the chest with a finger for emphasis. "You wouldn't *believe* what they do to—"

"I know. So is my husband." I gave him a glare, which—judging from the way he flinched—was probably rendered highly effective by the state of my face. I hoped so; it hurt a lot to do it.

"Now, what *you* want to do," I said, mustering as much authority into my voice as I could, "is to go back to the fire, wait for a bit, then leave casually, sneak round, and get two horses. I hear a stream down there—" I waved briefly to the right. "I'll meet you there. Once we're safely away, I'll tell you everything I know."

In fact, I probably couldn't tell him anything very helpful, but he didn't know that. I heard him swallow.

"I don't know …" he said uncertainly, glancing round again. "Hodge, he's kind of gnarly. He shot one guy, a few days ago. Didn't even say anything, just walked up to him, pulled his gun, and *boom!*"

"What for?"

He shrugged, shaking his head.

"I don't even know, man. Just … *boom,* you know?"

"I know," I assured him, holding on to temper and sanity by a thread. "Look, let's not trouble with the horses, then. Let's just go." I lurched awkwardly onto one knee, hoping that I would be able to rise in a few moments, let alone walk. The big muscles in my thighs were knotted hard in the spots where Boble had kicked me; trying to stand made the muscles jump and quiver in spasms that effectively hamstrung me.

"Shit, not now!" In his agitation, the young man seized my arm and jerked me down beside him. I hit the ground hard on one hip and let out a cry of pain.

"You all right there, Donner?" The voice came out of the darkness somewhere behind me. It was casual—obviously one of the men had merely stepped out of camp to relieve himself—but the effect on the young Indian was galvanizing. He flung himself full-length upon me, banging my head on the ground and knocking all the breath out of me.

"Fine … really … great," he called to his companion, gasping in an exaggerated manner, evidently trying to sound like a man in the throes of half-completed lust. He sounded like someone dying of asthma, but I wasn't complaining. I couldn't.

I'd been knocked on the head a few times, and generally saw nothing but blackness as a result. This time I honestly did see colored stars, and lay limp and bemused, feeling as though I sat tranquilly some distance above my battered body. Then Donner laid a hand on my breast and I came instantly back to earth.

"Let go of me this instant!" I hissed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Hey, hey, nothing, nothing, sorry," he assured me hastily. He removed the hand, but didn't get off me. He squirmed a bit, and I realized that he was aroused by the contact, whether intended or not.

"Get *off*!" I said, in a furious whisper.

"Hey, I don't mean anything, I mean I wouldn't hurt you or nothing. It's just I haven't had a woman in—"

I grabbed a handful of his hair, lifted my head, and bit his ear, hard. He shrieked and rolled off me.

The other man had gone back toward the fire. At this, though, he turned and called back, "Christ, Donner, is she *that* good? I'll have to give her a try!" This got a laugh from the men by the fire, but luckily it died away and they returned to their own concerns. I returned to mine, which was escape.

"You didn't have to do that," Donner whined in an undertone, holding his ear. "I wasn't going to *do* anything! Christ, you got nice tits, but you're like old enough to be my mother!"

"Shut up!" I said, pushing myself to a sitting position. The effort made my head spin; tiny colored lights flickered like Christmas-tree bulbs at the edge of my vision. In spite of this, some part of my mind was actively working again.

He was at least partly right. We couldn't leave immediately. After drawing so much attention to himself, the others would be expecting him to come back within a few minutes; if he didn't, they'd start looking for him—and we needed more than a few minutes' start.

"We can't go now," he whispered, rubbing his ear reproachfully. "They'll notice. Wait 'til they go to sleep. I'll come get you then."

I hesitated. I was in mortal danger every moment that I spent within reach of Hodgepile and his feral gang. If I had needed any convincing, the encounters of the last two hours had demonstrated that. This Donner needed to go back to the fire and show himself—but I could steal away. Was it worth the risk that someone would come and find me gone, before I had got beyond pursuit? It would be more certain to wait until they slept. But did I dare wait that long?

And then there was Donner himself. If he wanted to talk to me, I certainly wanted to talk to him. The chance of stumbling on another time-traveler …

Donner read my hesitation, but misunderstood it.

“You’re not going without me!” He grabbed my wrist in sudden alarm, and before I could jerk away, had whipped a bit of the cut line around it. I fought and pulled away, hissing to try to make him understand, but he was panicked at the thought that I might slip away without him, and wouldn’t listen. Hampered by my injuries, and unwilling to make enough noise to draw attention, I could only delay but not prevent his determined efforts to tie me up again.

“Okay.” He was sweating; a drop fell warm on my face as he leaned over me to check the bindings. At least he hadn’t put the noose round my neck again, instead tethering me to the tree with a rope around my waist.

“I shoulda known what you are,” he murmured, intent on his job. “Even before you said ‘Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ.’ ”

“What the hell do you mean by that?” I snapped, squirming away from his hand. “Don’t bloody do that—I’ll suffocate!” He was trying to put the cloth strip back in my mouth, but seemed to pick up the note of panic in my voice, because he hesitated.

“Oh,” he said uncertainly. “Well. I guess—” Once again, he looked back over his shoulder, but then made up his mind and dropped the gag on the ground. “Okay. But you be quiet, all right? What I meant—you don’t act afraid of men. Most of the women from now do. You oughta act more afraid.”

And with that parting shot, he rose and brushed dead leaves from his clothes before heading back to the fire.

* * *

There comes a point when the body has simply had enough. It snatches at sleep, no matter what menace the future may hold. I'd seen that happen: the Jacobite soldiers who slept in the ditches where they fell, the British pilots who slept in their planes while mechanics fueled them, only to leap to full alert again in time to take off. For that matter, women in long labor routinely sleep between contractions.

In the same manner, I slept.

That kind of sleep is neither deep nor peaceful, though. I came out of it with a hand across my mouth.

The fourth man was neither incompetent nor brutal. He was large and soft-bodied, and he had loved his dead wife. I knew that, because he wept into my hair, and called me by her name at the end. It was Martha.

* * *

I came out of sleep again sometime later. Instantly, fully conscious, heart pounding. But it wasn't my heart—it was a drum.

Sounds of startlement came from the direction of the fire, men rousing in alarm from sleep.

"Indians!" someone shouted, and the light broke and flared, as someone kicked at the fire to scatter it.

It wasn't an Indian drum. I sat up, listening hard. It was a drum with a sound like a beating heart, slow and rhythmic, then trip-hammer fast, like the frantic surge of a hunted beast.

I could have told them that Indians never used drums as weapons; Celts did. It was the sound of a bodhran.

What next? I thought, a trifle hysterically, *bagpipes*?

It was Roger, certainly; only he could make a drum talk like that. It was Roger, and Jamie was nearby. I scrambled to my feet, wanting, needing urgently to *move.* I jerked at the rope around my waist in a frenzy of impatience, but I was going nowhere.

Another drum began, slower, less skilled, but equally menacing. The sound seemed to move—it *was* moving. Fading, coming back full force. A third drum began, and now the thumping seemed to come from everywhere, fast, slow, mocking.

Someone fired a gun into the forest, panicked.

"Hold, there!" Hodgepile's voice came, loud and furious, but to no avail; there was a popcorn rattle of gunfire, nearly drowned by the sound of the drums. I heard a *snick* near my head, and a cluster of needles brushed past me as it fell. It dawned on me that standing upright while guns were blindly fired all round me was a dangerous strategy, and I promptly fell flat, burrowing into the dead needles, trying to keep the trunk of the tree betwixt me and the main body of men.

The drums were weaving, now closer, now farther, the sound unnerving even to one who knew what it was. They were circling the camp, or so it seemed. Should I call out, if they came near enough?

I was saved from the agony of decision; the men were making so much noise round the campfire that I couldn't have been heard if I'd screamed myself hoarse. They were calling out in alarm, shouting questions, bellowing orders—which apparently went ignored, judging from the ongoing sounds of confusion.

Someone blundered through the brush nearby, running from the drums. One, two more—the sound of gasping breath and crunching footsteps. *Donner?* The thought came to me suddenly and I sat up, then fell flat again as another shot whistled past overhead.

The drums stopped abruptly. Chaos reigned around the fire, though I could hear Hodgepile trying to get his men in order, yelling and threatening, nasal voice raised above the rest. Then the drums began again—much closer.

They were drawing in, drawing together, somewhere out in the forest on my left, and the mocking *tip-tap-tip-tap* beating had changed. They were thundering now. No skill, just menace. Coming closer.

Guns fired wildly, close enough for me to see the muzzle flash and smell the smoke, thick and hot on the air. The faggots of the fire had been scattered, but still burned, making a muted glow through the trees.

"There they are! I see 'em!" someone yelled from the fire, and there was another burst of musket-fire, toward the drums.

Then the most unearthly howl rose out of the dark to my right. I'd heard Scots scream going into battle before, but that particular Highland shriek made the hairs on my body prickle from tailbone to nape. *Jamie.* Despite my fears, I sat bolt upright and peered round my sheltering tree, in time to see demons boil out of the wood.

I knew them—knew I knew them—but cowered back at sight of them, blackened with soot and shrieking with the madness of hell, firelight red on the blades of knives and axes.

The drums had stopped abruptly, with the first scream, and now another set of howls broke out to the left, the drummers racing in to the kill. I pressed myself flat back against the tree, heart chokingly huge in my throat, petrified for fear the blades would strike at any random movement in the shadows.

Someone crashed toward me, blundering in the dark—Donner? I croaked his name, hoping to attract his attention, and the slight form turned toward me, hesitated, then spotted me and lunged.

It wasn't Donner, but Hodgepile. He seized my arm, dragging me up, even as he slashed at the rope that bound me to the tree. He was panting hard with exertion, or fear.

I realized at once what he was about; he knew his chances of escape were slight—having me to hostage was his only hope. But I was *damned* if I'd be his hostage. No more.

I kicked at him, hard, and caught him on the side of the knee. It didn't knock him over, but distracted him for a second. I charged him, head down, butted him square in the chest, and sent him flying.

The impact hurt badly, and I staggered, eyes watering from the pain. He was up, and at me again. I kicked, missed, fell heavily on my backside.

"Come *on,* damn you!" he hissed, jerking hard at my bound hands. I ducked my head, pulled back, and yanked him down with me. I rolled and scrabbled in the leaf mold, trying as hard as I could to wrap my legs around him, meaning to get a grip on his ribs and crush the life out of the filthy little worm, but he squirmed free and rolled atop me, punching at my head, trying to subdue me.

He struck me in one ear and I flinched, eyes shutting in reflex. Then the weight of him was suddenly gone, and I opened my eyes to see Jamie holding Hodgepile several inches off the ground. Hodgepile's spindly legs churned madly in a futile effort at escape, and I felt an insane desire to laugh.

In fact, I must actually have laughed, for Jamie's head jerked round to look at me; I caught a glimpse of the whites of his eyes before he turned his attention to Hodgepile again. He was silhouetted against a faint glow from the embers; I saw him in profile for a second, then his body flexed with effort as he bent his head.

He held Hodgepile close against his chest, one arm bent. I blinked; my eyes were swollen half-shut, and I wasn't sure what he was doing. Then I heard a small grunt of effort, and a strangled shriek from Hodgepile, and saw Jamie's bent elbow go sharply down.

The dark curve of Hodgepile's head moved back—and back. I glimpsed the marionette-sharp nose and angled jaw—angled impossibly high, the heel of Jamie's hand wedged hard beneath it. There was a muffled *pop!* that I felt in the pit of my stomach as Hodgepile's neckbones parted, and the marionette went limp.

Jamie flung the puppet body down, reached for me, and pulled me to my feet.

"You are alive, you are whole, *mo nighean donn*?" he said urgently in Gaelic. He was groping, hands flying over me, trying at the same time to hold me upright—my knees seemed suddenly to have turned to water—and to locate the rope that bound my hands.

I was crying and laughing, snuffing tears and blood, bumping at him with my bound hands, trying awkwardly to thrust them at him so that he could cut the rope.

He quit grappling, and clutched me so hard against him that I yelped in pain as my face was pressed against his plaid.

He was saying something else, urgently, but I couldn't manage to translate it. Energy pulsed through him, hot and violent, like the current in a live wire, and I vaguely realized that he was still almost berserk; he had no English.

"I'm all right," I gasped, and he let me go. The light flared up in the clearing beyond the trees; someone had collected the scattered embers, and thrown more kindling on them. His face was black, his eyes picked out blue in a sudden blaze as he turned his head and the light struck his face.

There was still some struggle going on; no screaming now, but I could hear the grunt and thud of bodies locked in combat. Jamie raised my hands, drew his dirk, and sawed through the rope; my hands dropped like lead weights. He stared at me for an instant, as though trying to find words, then shook his head, cupped a hand for an instant to my face, and disappeared, back in the direction of the fight.

I sank down on the ground, dazed. Hodgepile's body lay nearby, limbs askew. I glanced at it, the picture clear in my mind of a necklace Bree had had as a child, made of linked plastic beads that came apart when you pulled them. Pop-It pearls, they were called. I wished vaguely that I didn't remember that.

The face was lantern-jawed and hollow-cheeked; he looked surprised, eyes wide open to the flickering light. Something seemed oddly wrong, though, and I squinted, trying to make it out. Then I realized that his head was on backward.

It may have been seconds or minutes that I sat there staring at him, arms round my knees and my mind a total blank. Then the sound of soft footsteps made me look up.

Arch Bug came out of the dark, tall and thin and black against the flicker of a growing fire. I saw that he had an ax gripped hard in his left hand; it too was black, and the smell of blood came strong and rich as he leaned near.

"There are some left still alive," he said, and I felt something cold and hard touch my hand. "Will ye have your vengeance now upon them, *a bana-mhaighistear*?"

I looked down and found that he was offering me a dirk, hilt-first. I had stood up, but couldn't remember rising.

I couldn't speak, and couldn't move—and yet my fingers curled without my willing them to, my hand rising up to take the knife as I watched it, faintly curious. Then Jamie's hand came down upon the dirk, snatching it away, and I saw as from a great distance that the light fell on his hand, gleaming wet with blood smeared past the wrist. Random drops shone red, dark jewels glowing, caught in the curly hairs of his arm.

"There is an oath upon her," he said to Arch, and I realized dimly that he was still speaking in Gaelic, though I understood him clearly. "She may not kill, save it is for mercy or her life. It is myself who kills for her."

"And I," said a tall figure behind him, softly. Ian.

Arch nodded understanding, though his face was still in darkness. Someone else was there beside him—Fergus. I knew him at once, but it took a moment's struggle for me to put a name to the streaked pale face and wiry figure.

"Madame," he said, and his voice was thin with shock. "Milady."

Then Jamie looked at me, and his own face changed, awareness coming back into his eyes. I saw his nostrils flare, as he caught the scent of sweat and semen on my clothes.

"Which of them?" he said. "How many?" He spoke in English now, and his voice was remarkably matter-of-fact, as it might be if he were inquiring as to the number of guests expected for dinner, and I found the simple tone of it steadying.

"I don't know," I said. "They—it was dark."

He nodded, squeezed my arm hard, and turned.

"Kill them all," he said to Fergus, his voice still calm. Fergus's eyes were huge and dark, sunk into his head, burning. He merely nodded, and took hold of the hatchet in his belt. The front of his shirt was splashed, and the end of his hook looked dark and sticky.

In a distant sort of way, I thought I should say something. But I didn't. I stood up straight with the tree against my back and said nothing at all.

Jamie glanced at the dirk he held as though to ensure that it was in good order—it was not; he wiped the blade on his thigh, ignoring the drying blood that gummed the wooden hilt—and went back to the clearing.

I stood quite still. There were more sounds, but I paid no more heed to them than to the rush of wind through the needles overhead; it was a balsam tree, and the breath of it was clean and fresh, falling over me in a wash of fragrant resins, powerful enough to taste on my palate, though little penetrated the clotted membranes of my nose. Beneath the gentle veil of the tree's perfume, I tasted blood, and sodden rags, and the stink of my own weary skin.

Dawn had broken. Birds sang in the distant wood, and light lay soft as wood ash on the ground.

I stood quite still, and thought of nothing but how pleasant it would be to stand neck-deep in hot water, to scrub the skin quite away from my flesh, and let the blood run red and clean down my legs, billowing out in soft clouds that would hide me.

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PERFECTLY FINE

They'd ridden away then. Left them, without burial or word of consecration. In a way, that was more shocking than the killing. Roger had gone with the Reverend to more than one deathbed or scene of accident, helped comfort the bereaved, stood by as the spirit fled and the old man said the words of grace. It was what you did when someone died; turned toward God and at least acknowledged the fact.

And yet … how could you stand over the body of a man you'd killed, and look God in the face?

He couldn't sit. The tiredness filled him like wet sand, but he couldn't sit.

He stood, picked up the poker, but stood with it in hand, staring at the banked fire on his hearth. It was perfect, satin-black embers crusted with ash, the red heat smothered just beneath. To touch it would break the embers, make the flame leap up—only to die at once, without fuel. A waste of wood, to throw more on, so late at night.

He put the poker down, wandered from one wall to another, an exhausted bee in a bottle, still buzzing, though his wings hung tattered and forlorn.

It hadn't troubled Fraser. But then, Fraser had ceased even to think of the bandits, directly they were dead; all his thought had been for Claire, and that was surely understandable.

He'd led her through the morning light in that clearing, a blood-soaked Adam, a battered Eve, looking upon the knowledge of good and evil. And then he had wrapped her in his plaid, picked her up, and walked away to his horse.

The men had followed, silent, leading the bandits' horses behind their own. An hour later, with the sun warm on their backs, Fraser had turned his horse's head downhill, and led them to a stream. He had dismounted, helped Claire down, then vanished with her through the trees.

The men had exchanged puzzled looks, though no one spoke. Then old Arch Bug had swung down from his mule, saying matter-of-factly, "Well, she'll want to wash then, no?"

A sigh of comprehension went over the group, and the tension lessened at once, dissolving into the small homely businesses of dismounting, hobbling, girth-checking, spitting, having a piss. Slowly, they sought each other, looking for something to say, searching for relief in commonplace.

He caught Ian's eye, but they were yet too stiff with each other for this; Ian turned, clapped a hand round Fergus's shoulder, and hugged him, then pushed him away with a small rude joke about his stink. The Frenchman gave him a tiny smile and lifted the darkened hook in salute.

Kenny Lindsay and old Arch Bug were sharing out tobacco, stuffing their pipes in apparent tranquillity. Tom Christie wandered over to them, pale as a ghost, but pipe in hand. Not for the first time, Roger realized the valuable social aspects of smoking.

Arch had seen him, though, standing aimless near his horse, and come to talk to him, the old man's voice calm and steadying. He had no real idea what Arch said, let alone what he replied; the simple act of conversation seemed to let him breathe again and still the tremors that ran over him like breaking waves.

Suddenly, the old man broke off what he was saying, and nodded over Roger's shoulder.

"Go on, lad. He needs ye."

Roger had turned to see Jamie standing at the far side of the clearing, half-turned away and leaning on a tree, his head bowed in thought. Had he made some sign to Arch? Then Jamie glanced round, and met Roger's eye. Yes, he wanted him, and Roger found himself standing beside Fraser, with no clear memory of having crossed the ground between them.

Jamie reached out and squeezed his hand, hard, and he held on, squeezing back.

"A word, *a cliamhuinn,*" Jamie said, and let go. "I wouldna speak so now, but there may be no good time later, and there's little time to bide." He sounded calm, too, but not like Arch. There were broken things in his voice; Roger felt the hairy bite of the rope, hearing it, and cleared his own throat.

"Say, then."

Jamie took a deep breath, and shrugged a bit, as though his shirt were too tight.

"The bairn. It's no right to ask ye, but I must. Would ye feel the same for him, and ye kent for sure he wasna your own?"

"What?" Roger simply blinked, making no sense whatever of this. "Bai—ye mean Jem?"

Jamie nodded, eyes intent on Roger's.

"Well, I … I dinna ken, quite," Roger said, baffled as to what this was about. Why? And why *now,* of all times?

"Think."

He *was* thinking, wondering what the hell? Evidently this thought showed, for Fraser ducked his head in acknowledgment of the need to explain himself further.

"I ken … it's no likely, aye? But it's possible. She might be wi' child by the night's work, d'ye see?"

He did see, with a blow like a fist under the breastbone. Before he could get breath to speak, Fraser went on.

"There's a day or two, perhaps, when I might—" He glanced away, and a dull flush showed through the streaks of soot with which he had painted his face. "There could be doubt, aye? As there is for you. But …" He swallowed, that "but" hanging eloquent.

Jamie glanced away, involuntarily, and Roger's eyes followed the direction of his gaze. Beyond a screen of bush and red-tinged creeper, there was an eddy pool, and Claire knelt on the far side, naked, studying her reflection. The blood thundered in Roger's ears, and he jerked his eyes away, but the image was seared on his mind.

She did not look human, was the first thing he thought. Her body mottled black with bruises, her face unrecognizable, she looked like something strange and primal, an exotic creature of the forest pool. Beyond appearance, though, it was her attitude that struck him. She was remote, somehow, and still, in the way that a tree is still, even as the air stirs its leaves.

He glanced back, unable not to. She bent over the water, studying her face. Her hair hung wet and tangled down her back, and she skimmed it back with the palm of a hand, holding it out of the way as she surveyed her battered features with dispassionate intentness.

She prodded gently here and there, opening and closing her jaw as her fingertips explored the contours of her face. Testing, he supposed, for loose teeth and broken bones. She closed her eyes and traced the lines of brow and nose, jaw and lip, hand as sure and delicate as a painter's. Then she seized the end of her nose with determination and pulled hard.

Roger cringed in reflex, as blood and tears poured down her face, but she made no sound. His stomach was already knotted into a small, painful ball; it rose up into his throat, pressing against the rope scar.

She sat back on her heels, breathing deeply, eyes closed, hands cupped over the center of her face.

He became suddenly aware that she *was* naked, and he was still staring. He jerked away, blood hot in his face, and glanced surreptitiously toward Jamie in hopes that Fraser had not noticed. He hadn't—he was no longer there.

Roger looked wildly round, but spotted him almost at once. His relief at not being caught staring was superseded at once by a jolt of adrenaline, when he saw what Fraser was doing.

He was standing beside a body on the ground.

Fraser's gaze flicked briefly round, taking note of his men, and Roger could almost feel the effort with which Jamie suppressed his own feelings. Then Fraser's bright blue eyes fastened on the man at his feet, and Roger saw him breathe in, very slowly.

Lionel Brown.

Quite without meaning to, Roger had found himself striding across the clearing. He took up his place at Jamie's right without conscious thought, his attention similarly fixed on the man on the ground.

Brown's eyes were shut, but he wasn't asleep. His face was bruised and swollen, as well as patched with fever, but the expression of barely suppressed panic was plain on his battered features. Fully justified, too, so far as Roger could see.

The sole survivor of the night's work, Brown was still alive only because Arch Bug had stopped young Ian Murray inches away from smashing his skull with a tomahawk. Not from any hesitation about killing an injured man, from cold pragmatism.

"Your uncle will have questions," Arch had said, narrowed eyes on Brown. "Let this one live long enough to answer them."

Ian had said nothing, but pulled his arm from Arch Bug's grasp and turned on his heel, disappearing into the shadows of the forest like smoke.

Jamie's face was much less expressive than his captive's, Roger thought. He himself could tell nothing of Fraser's thoughts from his expression—but scarcely needed to. The man was still as stone, but seemed nonetheless to throb with something slow and inexorable. Merely to stand near him was terrifying.

"How say you, O, friend?" Fraser said at last, turning to Arch, who stood on the far side of the pallet, white-haired and blood-streaked. "Can he be traveling further, or will the journey kill him?"

Bug leaned forward, peering dispassionately at the supine Brown.

"I say he will live. His face is red, not white, and he is awake. You wish to take him with us, or ask your questions now?"

For a brief instant the mask lifted, and Roger, who had been watching Jamie's face, saw in his eyes precisely what he wished to do. Had Lionel Brown seen it, too, he would have leaped off his pallet and run, broken leg or no. But his eyes stayed stubbornly shut, and as Jamie and old Arch were speaking in Gaelic, Brown remained in ignorance.

Without answering Arch's question, Jamie knelt and put his hand on Brown's chest. Roger could see the pulse hammering in Brown's neck and the man's breathing, quick and shallow. Still, he kept his lids squeezed tight shut, though the eyeballs rolled to and fro, frantic beneath them.

Jamie stayed motionless for what seemed a long time—and must have been an eternity to Brown. Then he made a small sound that might have been either a contemptuous laugh or a snort of disgust, and rose.

"We take him. See that he lives, then," he said in English. "For now."

Brown had continued to play possum through the journey to the Ridge, in spite of the bloodthirsty speculations various of the party had made within his hearing on the way. Roger had helped to unstrap him from the travois at journey's end. His garments and wrappings were soaked with sweat, the smell of fear a palpable miasma round him.

Claire had made a movement toward the injured man, frowning, but Jamie had stopped her with a hand on her arm. Roger hadn't heard what he murmured to her, but she nodded and went with him into the Big House. A moment later, Mrs. Bug had appeared, uncharacteristically silent, and taken charge of Lionel Brown.

Murdina Bug was not like Jamie, nor old Arch; her thoughts were plain to see in the bloodless seam of her mouth and the thunderous brow. But Lionel Brown took water from her hand and, open-eyed, watched her as though she were the light of his salvation. She would, Roger thought, have been pleased to kill Brown like one of the cockroaches she ruthlessly exterminated from her kitchen. But Jamie wished him kept alive, so alive he would stay.

For now.

A sound at the door jerked Roger's attention back to the present. Brianna!

It wasn't, though, when he opened the door; only the rattle of wind-tossed twigs and acorn caps. He looked down the dark path, hoping to see her, but there was no sign of her yet. Of course, he told himself, Claire would likely need her.

So do I.

He squashed the thought, but stayed at the door, looking out, wind whining in his ears. She'd gone up to the Big House at once, the moment he came to tell her that her mother was safe. He hadn't said much more, but she had seen something of how matters stood—there was blood on his clothes—and had barely paused to assure herself that none of it was his before rushing out.

He closed the door carefully, looking to see that the draft hadn't wakened Jemmy. He had an immense urge to pick the boy up, and in spite of long-ingrained parental wariness about disturbing a sleeping child, scooped Jem out of his trundle; he had to.

Jem was heavy in his arms, and groggy. He stirred, lifted his head, and blinked, blue eyes glassy with sleep.

"It's okay," Roger whispered, patting his back. "Daddy's here."

Jem sighed like a punctured tire and dropped his head on Roger's shoulder with the force of a spent cannonball. He seemed to inflate again for a moment, but then put his thumb in his mouth and subsided into that peculiarly boneless state common to sleeping children. His flesh seemed to melt comfortably into Roger's own, his trust so complete that it was not necessary even to maintain the boundaries of his body—Daddy would do that.

Roger closed his eyes against starting tears, and pressed his mouth against the soft warmth of Jemmy's hair.

The firelight made black and red shadows on the insides of his lids; by looking at them, he could keep the tears at bay. It didn't matter what he saw there. He had a small collection of grisly moments, vivid from the dawn, but he could look at those unmoved—for now. It was the sleeping trust in his arms that moved him, and the echo of his own whispered words.

Was it even a memory? Perhaps it was no more than a wish—that he had once been roused from sleep, only to sleep again in strong arms, hearing, "Daddy's here."

He took deep breaths, slowing to the rhythm of Jem's breathing, calming himself. It seemed important not to weep, even though there was no one to see or care.

Jamie had looked at him, as they moved from Brown's pallet, the question clear in his eyes.

"Ye dinna think I mind only for myself, I hope?" he had said, low-voiced. His eyes had turned toward the gap in the brush where Claire had gone, half-squinting as though he could not bear to look, but couldn't keep his eyes away.

"For her," he said, so low that Roger scarcely heard. "Would she rather … have the doubt, d'ye think? If it came to that."

Roger took a deep breath of his son's hair, and hoped to God he'd said the right thing, there among the trees.

"I don't know," he'd said. "But for you—if there's room for doubt—I say, take it."

If Jamie were disposed to follow that advice, Bree should be home soon.

* * *

"I'm fine," I said firmly. "Perfectly fine."

Bree narrowed her eyes at me.

"Sure you are," she said. "You look like you've been run over by a locomotive. *Two* locomotives."

"Yes," I said, and touched my split lip gingerly. "Well. Yes. Other than that, though …"

"Are you hungry? Sit down, Mama, I'll make you some tea, then maybe a little supper."

I wasn't hungry, didn't want tea, and particularly didn't want to sit down—not after a long day on horseback. Brianna was already taking down the teapot from its shelf above the sideboard, though, and I couldn't find the proper words to stop her. All of a sudden, I seemed to have no words at all. I turned toward Jamie, helpless.

He somehow divined my feeling, though he couldn't have read much of anything on my face, given its current state. He stepped forward, though, and took the teapot from her, murmuring something too low for me to catch. She frowned at him, glanced at me, then back, still frowning. Then her face changed a little, and she came toward me, looking searchingly into my face.

"A bath?" she asked quietly. "Shampoo?"

"Oh, yes," I said, and my shoulders sagged in grateful relief. "Please."

I did sit down then, after all, and let her sponge my hands and feet, and wash my hair in a basin of warm water drawn from the cauldron in the hearth. She did it quietly, humming under her breath, and I began to relax under the soothing scrub of her long, strong fingers.

I'd slept—from sheer exhaustion—part of the way, leaning on Jamie's chest. There's no way of achieving real rest on horseback, though, and I found myself now close to nodding off, noticing only in a dreamy, detached sort of way that the water in the basin had turned a grubby, cloudy red, full of grit and leaf fragments.

I'd changed to a clean shift; the feel of the worn linen on my skin was sheer luxury, cool and smooth.

Bree was humming softly, under her breath. What was it … "Mr. Tambourine Man," I thought. One of those sweetly silly songs of the sixt—

1968.

I gasped, and Bree's hands gripped my head, steadying me.

"Mama? Are you all right? Did I touch something—"

"No! No, I'm fine," I said, looking down into the swirls of dirt and blood. I took a deep breath, heart pounding. "Perfectly fine. Just—began to doze off, that's all."

She snorted, but took her hands away and went to fetch a pitcher of water for rinsing, leaving me gripping the edge of the table and trying not to shudder.

You don't act afraid of men. You oughta act more afraid. That particularly ironic echo came to me clearly, along with the outline of the young man's head, leonine hair seen silhouetted by the firelight. I couldn't recall his face clearly—but surely I would have noticed that hair?

Jamie had taken my arm, afterward, and led me out from under my sheltering tree, into the clearing. The fire had been scattered during the fight; there were blackened rocks and patches of singed and flattened grass here and there—among the bodies. He had led me slowly from one to another. At the last, he had paused, and said quietly, “Ye see that they are dead?”

I did, and knew why he had shown me—so I need not fear their return, or their vengeance. But I had not thought to count them. Or to look closely at their faces. Even had I been sure how many there were … another shiver struck me, and Bree wrapped a warm towel around my shoulders, murmuring words I didn’t hear for the questions clamoring in my head.

Was Donner among the dead? Or had he heeded me, when I’d told him that if he were wise, he’d run? He hadn’t struck me as a wise young man.

He *had* struck me as a coward, though.

Warm water sluiced around my ears, drowning out the sound of Jamie’s and Brianna’s voices overhead; I caught only a word or two, but when I sat back up, with water dripping down my neck, clutching a towel to my hair, Bree was reluctantly moving toward her cloak, hung on the peg by the door.

“Are you *sure* you’re all right, Mama?” The worried frown was back between her brows, but this time I could muster a few words of reassurance.

“Thank you, darling; that was wonderful,” I said, with complete sincerity. “All I want just now is sleep,” I added with somewhat less.

I was still terribly tired, but now completely wakeful. What I did want was … well, I didn’t know quite what I *did* want, but a general absence of solicitous company was on the list. Besides, I’d caught a glimpse of Roger earlier, bloodstained, white, and swaying with weariness; I wasn’t the only victim of the recent unpleasantness.

“Go home, lass,” Jamie said softly. He swung the cloak from its peg and over her shoulders, patting her gently. “Feed your man. Take him to bed, and say a prayer for him. I’ll mind your mother, aye?”

Bree’s gaze swung between us, blue and troubled, but I put on what I hoped was a reassuring expression—it hurt to do it, rather—

and after a moment's hesitation, she hugged me tight, kissed my forehead very gently, and left.

Jamie shut the door and stood with his back against it, hands behind him. I was used to the impassive facade he normally used to shield his thoughts when troubled or angry; he wasn't using it, and the expression on his face troubled *me* no end.

"You mustn't worry about me," I said, as reassuringly as I could. "I'm not traumatized, or anything of that sort."

"I mustn't?" he asked guardedly. "Well … perhaps I wouldna, if I kent what ye meant by it."

"Oh." I blotted my damp face gingerly, and patted at my neck with the towel. "Well. It means … very much injured—or dreadfully shocked. It's Greek, I think—the root word, I mean, 'trauma.' "

"Oh, aye? And you're not … shocked. Ye say."

His eyes narrowed, as he examined me with the sort of critical attention usually employed when contemplating the purchase of expensive bloodstock.

"I'm fine," I said, backing away a little. "Just—I'm all right. Only a bit … shaken."

He took a step toward me, and I backed up abruptly, aware belatedly that I was clutching the towel to my bosom as though it were a shield. I forced myself to lower it, and felt blood prickle unpleasantly in patches over face and neck.

He stood very still, regarding me with that same narrow look. Then his gaze dropped to the floor between us. He stood as though deep in thought, and then his big hands flexed. Once, twice. Very slowly. And I heard—heard clearly—the sound of Arvin Hodgepile's vertebrae parting one from another.

Jamie's head jerked up, startled, and I realized that I was standing on the other side of the chair from him, the towel wadded and pressed against my mouth. My elbows moved like rusty hinges, stiff and slow, but I got the towel down. My lips were nearly as stiff, but I spoke, too.

"I am a little shaken, yes," I said very clearly. "I'll be all right. Don't worry. I don't want you to worry."

The troubled scrutiny in his eyes wavered suddenly, like the glass of a window struck by a stone, in the split second before it shatters, and he shut his eyes. He swallowed once, and opened them again.

"Claire," he said very softly, and the smashed and splintered fragments showed clear, sharp and jagged in his eyes. "I have *been* raped. And ye say I must not worry for ye?"

"Oh, God damn it!" I flung the towel on the floor, and immediately wished I had it back again. I felt naked, standing in my shift, and hated the crawling of my skin with a sudden passion that made me slap my thigh to kill it.

"Damn, damn, damn it! I *don't* want you to have to think of that again. I don't!" And yet I had known from the first that this would happen.

I took hold of the chairback with both hands and held tight, and tried to force my own gaze into his, wanting so badly to throw myself upon those glittering shards, to shield him from them.

"Look," I said, steadying my voice. "I don't want—I don't want to make you recall things better left forgotten."

The corner of his mouth actually twitched at that.

"God," he said, in something like wonder. "Ye think I'd forgot any of it?"

"Maybe not," I said, surrendering. I looked at him through swimming eyes. "But—oh, Jamie, I so wanted you to forget!"

He put out a hand, very delicately, and touched the tip of his index finger to the tip of mine, where I clutched the chair.

"Dinna mind it," he said softly, and withdrew the finger. "It's no matter now. Will ye rest a bit, Sassenach? Or eat, maybe?"

"No. I don't want … no." In fact, I couldn't decide *what* I wanted to do. I didn't want to do anything at all. Other than unzip my skin, climb out, and run—and that didn't seem feasible. I took a few deep breaths, hoping to settle myself and go back to that nice sense of utter exhaustion.

Should I ask him about Donner? But what was there to ask? *"Did you happen to kill a man with long, tangled hair?"* They'd all looked like that, to some extent. Donner had been—or possibly still was—

an Indian, but no one would have noticed that in the dark, in the heat of fighting.

"How—how is Roger?" I asked, for lack of anything better to say. "And Ian? Fergus?"

He looked a little startled, as though he had forgotten their existence.

"Them? The lads are well enough. No one took any hurt in the fight. We had luck."

He hesitated, then took a careful step toward me, watching my face. I didn't scream or bolt, and he took another, coming close enough that I could feel the warmth of his body. Not startled this time, and chilly in my damp shift, I relaxed a little, swaying toward him, and saw the tension in his own shoulders let go slightly, seeing it.

He touched my face, very gently. The blood throbbed just below the surface, tender, and I had to brace myself not to flinch away from his touch. He saw it, and drew back his hand a little, so that it hovered just above my skin—I could feel the heat of his palm.

"Will it heal?" he asked, fingertips moving over the split in my left brow, then down the minefield of my cheek to the scrape on my jaw where Harley Boble's boot had just missed making a solid connection that would have broken my neck.

"Of course it will. You know that; you've seen worse on battlefields." I would have smiled in reassurance, but didn't want to open the deep split in my lip again, and so made a sort of pouting goldfish mouth, which took him by surprise and made *him* smile.

"Aye, I know." He ducked his head a little, shy. "It's only …" His hand still hovered near my face, an expression of troubled anxiety on his own. "Oh, God, *mo nighean donn,*" he said softly. "Oh, Christ, your lovely face."

"Can you not bear to look at it?" I asked, turning my own eyes away and feeling a sharp little pang at the thought, but trying to convince myself that it didn't matter. It *would* heal, after all.

His fingers touched my chin, gently but firmly, and drew it up, so that I faced him again. His mouth tightened a little as his gaze moved slowly over my battered face, taking inventory. His eyes were soft and dark in the candlelight, the corners tight with pain.

"No," he said quietly, "I cannot bear it. The sight of ye tears my heart. And it fills me with such rage I think I must kill someone or burst. But by the God who made ye, Sassenach, I'll not lie with ye and be unable to look ye in the face."

"Lie with me?" I said blankly. "What … you mean *now*?"

His hand dropped from my chin, but he looked steadily at me, not blinking.

"Well … aye. I do."

Had my jaw not been so swollen, my mouth would have dropped open in pure astonishment.

"Ah … why?"

"Why?" he repeated. He dropped his gaze then, and made the odd shrugging motion that he made when embarrassed or discomposed. "I—well—it seems … necessary."

I had a thoroughly unsuitable urge to laugh.

"Necessary? Do you think it's like being thrown by a horse? I ought to get straight back on?"

His head jerked up and he shot me an angry glance.

"No," he said, between clenched teeth. He swallowed hard and visibly, obviously reining in strong feelings. "Are ye—are ye badly damaged, then?"

I stared at him as best I could, through my swollen lids.

"Is that a joke of some—oh," I said, it finally dawning on me what he meant. I felt heat rise in my face, and my bruises throbbed.

I took a deep breath, to be sure of being able to speak steadily.

"I have been beaten to a bloody pulp, Jamie, and abused in several nasty ways. But only one … there was only the one who actually … He—he wasn't … rough." I swallowed, but the hard knot in my throat didn't budge perceptibly. Tears made the candlelight blur so that I couldn't see his face, and I looked away, blinking.

"No!" I said, my voice sounding rather louder than I intended. "I'm not … damaged."

He said something in Gaelic under his breath, short and explosive, and shoved himself away from the table. His stool fell over with a loud crash, and he kicked it. Then he kicked it again, and again, and stamped on it with such violence that bits of wood flew across the kitchen and struck the pie safe with little pinging sounds.

I sat completely still, too shocked and numb to feel distress. Should I not have told him? I wondered vaguely. But he knew, surely. He had asked, when he found me. *"How many?"* he had demanded. And then had said, *"Kill them all."*

But then … to know something was one thing, and to be told the details another. I did know that, and watched with a dim sense of guilty sorrow as he kicked away the splinters of the stool and flung himself at the window. It was shuttered, but he stood, hands braced on the sill and his back turned to me, shoulders heaving. I couldn't tell if he was crying.

The wind was rising; there was a squall coming in from the west. The shutters rattled, and the night-smoored fire spouted puffs of soot as the wind came down the chimney. Then the gust passed, and there was no sound but the small sudden *crack!* of an ember in the hearth.

"I'm sorry," I said at last, in a small voice.

Jamie swiveled on his heel at once and glared at me. He wasn't crying, but he had been; his cheeks were wet.

"Don't you dare be sorry!" he roared. "I willna have it, d'ye hear?" He took a giant step toward the table and crashed his fist down on it, hard enough to make the saltcellar jump and fall over. "Don't be sorry!"

I had closed my eyes in reflex, but forced myself to open them again.

"All right," I said. I felt terribly, terribly tired again, and very much like crying myself. "I won't."

There was a charged silence. I could hear chestnuts falling in the grove behind the house, dislodged by the wind. One, and then another, and another, a rain of muffled tiny thumps. Then Jamie drew a deep, shuddering breath, and wiped a sleeve across his face.

I put my elbows on the table and leaned my head on my hands; it seemed much too heavy to hold up anymore.

"Necessary," I said, more or less calmly to the tabletop. "What did you mean, necessary?"

"Does it not occur to you that ye might be with child?" He'd got himself back under control, and said this as calmly as he might have asked whether I planned to serve bacon with the breakfast porridge.

Startled, I looked up at him.

"I'm not." But my hands had gone by reflex to my belly.

"I'm not," I repeated more strongly. "I can't be." I could, though —just possibly. The chance was a remote one, but it existed. I normally used some form of contraception, just to be certain—but obviously …

"I am *not,*" I said. "I'd know."

He merely stared at me, eyebrows raised. I wouldn't; not so soon. So soon—soon enough that if it *were* so, and if there were more than one man … there would be doubt. The benefit of the doubt; that's what he offered me—and himself.

A deep shudder started in the depths of my womb and spread instantly through my body, making goose bumps break out on my skin, despite the warmth of the room.

"Martha," the man had whispered, the weight of him pressing me into the leaves.

"Bloody, bloody hell," I said very quietly. I spread my hands out flat on the table, trying to think.

"Martha." And the stale smell of him, the meaty press of damp bare thighs, rasping with hair—

"No!" My legs and buttocks pressed together so tightly in revulsion that I rose an inch or two on the bench.

"You might—" Jamie began stubbornly.

"I'm not," I repeated, just as stubbornly. "But even if—you can't, Jamie."

He looked at me, and I caught the flicker of fear in his eyes. That, I realized with a jolt, was exactly what he was afraid of. Or one of the things.

"I mean we can't," I said quickly. "I'm almost sure that I'm not pregnant—but I'm not at all sure that I haven't been exposed to some disgusting disease." That was something else I hadn't thought of until now, and the goose bumps were back in full force. Pregnancy was unlikely; gonorrhea or syphilis weren't. "We—we can't. Not until I've had a course of penicillin."

I was rising from the bench even as I spoke.

"Where are ye going?" he asked, startled.

"The surgery!"

The hallway was dark, and the fire out in my surgery, but that didn't stop me. I flung open the door of the cupboard, and began groping hastily about. A light fell over my shoulder, illuminating the shimmering row of bottles. Jamie had lit a taper and come after me.

"What in the name of God are ye doing, Sassenach?"

"Penicillin," I said, seizing one of the bottles and the leather pouch in which I kept my snake-fang syringes.

"Now?"

"Yes, bloody now! Light the candle, will you?"

He did, and the light wavered and grew into a globe of warm yellow, gleaming off the leather tubes of my homemade syringes. I had a good bit of penicillin mixture to hand, luckily. The liquid in the bottle was pink; many of the *Penicillium* colonies from this batch had been grown in stale wine.

"Are ye sure it will work?" Jamie asked quietly, from the shadows.

"No," I said, tight-lipped. "But it's what I have." The thought of spirochetes, multiplying silently in my bloodstream, second by second, was making my hand shake. I choked down the fear that the penicillin might be defective. It had worked miracles on gross superficial infections. There was no reason why—

"Let me do it, Sassenach." Jamie took the syringe from my hand; my fingers were slippery and fumbling. His were steady, his face calm in candlelight as he filled the syringe.

"Do me first, then," he said, handing it back.

"What—you? But you don't need to—I mean—you hate injections," I ended feebly.

He snorted briefly and lowered his brows at me.

"Listen, Sassenach. If I mean to fight my own fears, and yours—and I do—then I shallna boggle at pinpricks, aye? Do it!" He turned his side to me and bent over, one elbow braced on the counter, and hitched up the side of his kilt, baring one muscular buttock.

I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. I might have argued further with him, but a glance at him, standing there bare-arsed and stubborn as Black Mountain, decided me of the futility of that. He'd made up his mind, and we were both going to live with the consequences.

Feeling suddenly and oddly calm, I lifted the syringe, squeezing gently to remove any air bubbles.

"Shift your weight, then," I said, nudging him rudely. "Relax this side; I don't want to break the needle."

He drew in his breath with a hiss; the needle was thick, and there was enough alcohol from the wine to make it sting badly, as I discovered when I took my own injection a minute later.

"Ouch! Ow! Oh, Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" I exclaimed, gritting my teeth as I withdrew the needle from my thigh. "Christ, that hurts!"

Jamie gave me a lopsided smile, still rubbing his backside.

"Aye, well. The rest of it won't be worse than this, I expect."

The rest of it. I felt suddenly hollow, and light-headed with it, as though I hadn't eaten for a week.

"You—you're sure?" I asked, putting down the syringe.

"No," he said. "I'm not." He took a deep breath then, and looked at me, his face uncertain in the wavering candlelight. "But I mean to try. I must."

I smoothed the linen night rail down over my punctured thigh, looking at him as I did it. He'd dropped all his masks long since; the doubt, the anger, and the fear were all there, etched plain in the desperate lines of his face. For once, I thought, my own countenance was less easy to read, masked behind its bruises.

Something soft brushed past my leg with a small *mirp!* and I looked down to see that Adso had brought me a dead vole, no doubt by way of sympathy. I started to smile, felt my lip tingle, and then looked up at Jamie and let it split as I did smile, the taste of blood warm silver on my tongue.

"Well … you've come whenever I've needed you; I rather think you'll do it this time, too."

He looked completely blank for an instant, not grasping the feeble joke. Then it struck him, and blood rushed to his face. His lip twitched, and twitched again, unable to decide between shock and laughter.

I thought he turned his back then to hide his face, but in fact, he had only turned to search the cupboard. He found what he was looking for, and turned round again with a bottle of my best muscat wine in his hand, shining dark. He held it to his body with his elbow, and took down another.

"Aye, I will," he said, reaching out his free hand to me. "But if ye think either one of us is going to do this sober, Sassenach, ye're verra much mistaken."

* * *

A gust of wind from the open door roused Roger from uneasy sleep. He had fallen asleep on the settle, his legs trailing on the floor, Jemmy snuggled warmly heavy on his chest.

He looked up, blinking and disoriented, as Brianna stooped to take the little boy from his arms.

"Is it raining out?" he said, catching a whiff of damp and ozone from her cloak. He sat up and rubbed a hand over his face to rouse himself, feeling the scruff of a four-day beard.

"No, but it's going to." She laid Jemmy back in his trundle, covered him, and hung up the cloak before coming to Roger. She smelled of the night, and her hand was cold on his flushed cheek. He put his arms round her waist and leaned his head against her, sighing.

He would have been happy to stay that way forever—or at least the next hour or two. She stroked his head gently for a moment, though, then moved away, stooping to light the candle from the hearth.

"You must be starved. Shall I fix you something?"

"No. I mean … yes. Please." As the last remnants of grogginess fell away, he realized that he was, in fact, starving. After their stop at the stream in the morning, they hadn't stopped again, Jamie anxious to get home. He couldn't recall when he'd last eaten, but hadn't felt any sense of hunger at all until this minute.

He fell on the bread and butter and jam she brought him, ravenous. He ate single-mindedly, and it was several minutes before he thought to ask, swallowing a final thick, buttery, sweet bite, "How's your mother?"

"Fine," she said, with an excellent imitation of Claire with her stiffest English upper lip. "*Perfectly* fine." She grimaced at him, and he laughed, though quietly, with an automatic glance at the trundle.

"Is she, then?"

Bree raised an eyebrow at him.

"Do *you* think so?"

"No," he admitted, sobering. "But I don't think she's going to tell you if she's not. She'll not want ye worrying."

She made a rather rude glottal noise in response to this notion, and turned her back on him, lifting the long veil of hair off her neck.

"Will you do my laces?"

"You sound just like your father when ye make that noise—only higher-pitched. Have ye been practicing?" He stood up and pulled the laces loose. Undid her stays as well, then on impulse, slid his hands inside the opened gown, resting them on the warm swell of her hips.

"Every day. Have you?" She leaned back against him, and his hands came up, cupping her breasts by reflex.

"No," he admitted. "It hurts." It was Claire's suggestion—that he try to sing, pitching his voice both higher and lower than normal, in hopes of loosening his vocal cords, perhaps restoring a bit of his original resonance.

"Coward," she said, but her voice was nearly as soft as the hair that brushed his cheek.

"Aye, I am," he said as softly. It did hurt, but it wasn't the physical pain that he minded. It was feeling the echo of his old voice in his bones—the ease and power of it—and then hearing the uncouth noises that emerged with such difficulty now from his throat—croaks and grunts and squeals. Like a pig choking to death on a crow, he thought disparagingly.

"It's them that are cowards," Bree said, still speaking softly, but with steel in her voice. She tensed a little in his arms. "Her face—her poor face! How could they? How could anybody do something like that?"

He had a sudden vision of Claire, naked by the pool, silent as the rocks, her breasts streaked with the blood from her newly set nose. He drew back, nearly jerking his hands away.

"What?" Brianna said, startled. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." He pulled his hands out of her gown and stepped back. "I—er, is there maybe a bit of milk?"

She looked at him oddly, but went out to the lean-to at the back and brought in a jug of milk. He drank it thirstily, aware of her eyes on him, watchful as a cat's, as she undressed and changed into her night rail.

She sat down on the bed and began to brush out her hair, preparing to plait it for sleep. On impulse, he reached out and took the brush from her. Without speaking, he ran one hand through the thickness of her hair, lifting it, smoothing it back from her face.

"You're beautiful," he whispered, and felt tears come to his eyes again.

"So are you." She lifted her hands to his shoulders and brought him slowly down to his knees before her. She looked searchingly into his eyes—he did his best to look back. She smiled a little, then, and reached to untie the thong that held his own hair back.

It fell around his shoulders in a dusty black tangle, smelling of burned things, stale sweat, and horses. He protested when she took up her hairbrush, but she ignored him, and made him bend his head over her lap, while she picked pine straw and sandburs from his head, slowly working out the snarls. His head bent lower, and lower still, and he found himself at last with his forehead pressed into her lap, breathing in the close scent of her.

He was reminded of medieval paintings, sinners kneeling, heads bowed in confession and remorse. Presbyterians did not confess on their knees—Catholics still did, he thought. In darkness, like this—in anonymity.

"Ye've not asked me what happened," he whispered at last, to the shadows of her thighs. "Did your father tell ye?"

He heard her draw breath, but her voice was calm when she replied.

"No."

She said no more, and the room was quiet, save for the sound of the brush through his hair, and the rising rush of the wind outside.

How would it be for Jamie? Roger wondered suddenly. Would he really do it? Try to … He shied away from the thought, unable to contemplate it. Seeing instead a picture of Claire, coming out of the dawn, her face a swollen mask. Still herself, but remote as a distant planet on an orbit departing for the outer reaches of deep space—when might it come in sight again? Stooping to touch the dead, at Jamie's urging, to see for herself the price of her honor.

It wasn't the possibility of a child, he thought suddenly. It was fear—but not of that. It was Jamie's fear that he would lose her—that she would go, swing out into a dark and solitary space without him, unless he could somehow bind her to him, keep her with him. But, Christ, what a risk to take—with a woman so shocked and brutalized, how could he risk it?

How could he not?

Brianna laid down the brush, though she kept a hand gently on his head, stroking it. He knew that fear too well himself—remembered the gulf that once had lain between them, and the courage it had taken to leap over it. For both of them.

He was some kind of a coward, maybe—but not that kind.

"Brianna," he said, and felt the lump in his throat, the scar of the rope. She heard the need in his voice and looked at him as he raised his head, hand lifting toward his face, and he seized it hard, pressing the palm of it against his cheek, rubbing against it.

"Brianna," he said again.

"What? What is it?" Her voice was soft, not to wake the bairn, but full of urgency.

"Brianna, will ye hear me?"

"You know I will. What is it?" Her body was against him, wanting to tend him, and he desired the comfort of her so badly that he would have lain down there on the rug before the fire and buried his head between her breasts—but not yet.

"Only—listen to what I must say. And then—please God—tell me I have done right." *Tell me that you love me, still,* he meant, but could not say it.

"You don't have to tell me anything," she whispered. Her eyes were dark and soft, bottomless with forgiveness not yet earned. And somewhere beyond them, he saw another pair of eyes, staring up at him in drunken bewilderment, changing abruptly into fear as he raised his arm for the killing blow.

"Yes, I do," he said softly. "Put out the candle, aye?"

* * *

Not the kitchen, still strewn with emotional wreckage. Not the surgery, with all its sharp-edged memories. Jamie hesitated, but then nodded toward the stair, raising one eyebrow. I nodded, and followed him up to our bedroom.

It seemed both familiar and strange, as places do when one is away for a time. Perhaps it was only my injured nose that made it smell strange, too; perhaps I only imagined that I could smell it—cold and somehow stale, though everything was swept and dusted. Jamie poked up the fire and light sprang up, wavering in bright swaths over the wooden walls, the scents of smoke and hot resin helping to fill the sense of emptiness in the room.

Neither of us glanced toward the bed. He lit the candlestick on the washstand, then set our two stools near the window, and opened the shutters to the restless night. He'd brought two pewter cups; he filled these and set them on the broad sill, along with the bottles.

I stood just inside the doorway, watching his preparations, feeling thoroughly peculiar.

I was suffering the oddest contradiction of feelings. On the one hand, I felt as though he were a complete stranger. I could not even imagine, let alone recall, a sense of ease in touching him. His body was no longer the comfortable extension of my own, but something foreign, unapproachable.

At the same time, alarming surges of lust ripped through me without warning. It had been happening all day. This was nothing like the slow burn of accustomed desire, nor yet the instant spark of passion. Not even that cyclic and mindless womb-yearning sense of a need to mate that belonged entirely to the body. This was frightening.

He stooped to put another stick on the fire, and I nearly staggered, as all the blood left my head. The light shone on the hair of his arms, the dark hollows of his face—

It was the sheer impersonal sense of a voracious *appetite*—something that possessed me, but was not part of me—that terrified me. It was fear of it that made me avoid his touch, more than the feeling of estrangement.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?" He had caught sight of my face, and stepped toward me, frowning. I held up a hand to stop him.

"Fine," I said, feeling breathless. I sat down hastily, my knees weak, and picked up one of the cups he had just filled. "Um … cheers."

Both his brows went up, but he moved to take his own seat opposite me.

"Cheers," he said quietly, and touched his cup to mine, the wine heavy and sweet-smelling in my hand.

My fingers were cold; so were my toes, and the tip of my nose. That changed, too, without warning. Another minute, and I might be suffused with heat, sweating and flushed. But for the moment, I was cold, and shivered in the rainy breeze from the window.

The wine's aroma was strong enough to make an impact, even on my damaged membranes, and the sweetness was a comfort to nerves and stomach alike. I drank the first cup quickly, and poured another, urgently wanting a small layer of oblivion between reality and myself.

Jamie drank more slowly, but refilled his own cup when I did. The cedar blanket chest, warmed by the fire, was beginning to spread its own familiar fragrance through the room. He glanced at me now and then, but said nothing. The silence between us was not awkward, precisely, but it *was* charged.

I should say something, I thought. But what? I sipped the second cup, racking my brain.

At last, I reached out slowly and touched his nose, where the thin line of the long-healed break pressed white against the skin.

"Do you know," I said, "you've never told me how you came to break your nose. Who set it for you?"

"Och, that? No one." He smiled, touching his nose a little self-consciously. " 'Twas only luck that the break was a clean one, for I didna pay it the slightest heed at the time."

"I suppose not. You said—" I broke off, suddenly recalling what he *had* said. When I had found him again, in his printer's shop in Edinburgh, I'd asked him when he'd broken it. He'd answered, *"About three minutes after I last saw ye, Sassenach."* On the eve of Culloden, then—on that rocky Scottish hill, below the ring of standing stones.

"I'm sorry," I said a little weakly. "You probably don't want to think about that, do you?"

He seized my free hand, hard, and looked down at me.

"You may have it," he said. His voice was very low, but he met my eyes straight on. "All of it. Anything that was ever done to me. If ye wish it, if it helps ye, I will live it through again."

"Oh, God, Jamie," I said softly. "No. I don't need to know; all I need is to know that you *did* live through it. That you're all right. But …" I hesitated. "Will I tell *you*?" What was done to me, I meant, and he knew it. He did glance away then, though he held my hand in both of his, cradling it and rubbing his palm gently over my bruised knuckles.

"Must you?"

"I think so. Sometime. But not now—not unless you … you need to hear." I swallowed. "First."

He shook his head, very slightly, but still didn't look at me.

"Not now," he whispered. "Not now."

I took my hand away, and swallowed the rest of the wine in my cup, rough and warm and musky with the tang of grape skins. I had stopped going hot and cold by turns; now I was only warm throughout, and grateful for it.

"Your nose," I said, and poured another cup. "Tell me, then. Please."

He shrugged slightly.

"Aye, well. There were two English soldiers, come scouting up the hill. I think they didna expect to find anyone—neither had his musket loaded, or I should ha' died there."

He spoke quite casually. A small shiver went over me, but not from cold.

"They saw me, ken, and then one of them saw you, up above. He shouted, and made to go after ye, so I threw myself on him. I didna care at all what happened, so long as ye were safe away, so I went for him bald-heided; plunged my dirk into his side. But his bullet box swung into my way and the knife stuck in it, and—" He smiled, lopsided. "And while I was trying to get it free and keep from bein' killed, his friend came up and swung the stock of his musket into my face."

His free hand had curled up as he spoke, grasping the hilt of a remembered dirk.

I flinched, knowing now exactly what that had felt like. Just hearing about it made my own nose throb. I sniffed, dabbed cautiously at it with the back of my hand, and poured more wine.

"How did you get away?"

"I took the musket from him and clubbed them both to death with it."

He spoke quietly, almost colorlessly, but there was an odd resonance to his voice that made my stomach shift uneasily. It was too fresh, that sight of the blood drops gleaming by dawn light in the hairs of his arm. Too fresh, that undertone of—what was it? satisfaction?—in his voice.

I was suddenly too restless to sit still. A moment before I had been so exhausted that my bones were melting; now I had to move. I stood up, leaning out over the sill. The storm was coming; the wind was freshening, blowing back my new-washed hair, and lightning flickered in the distance.

"I'm sorry, Sassenach," Jamie said, sounding worried. "I shouldna have told ye. Are ye bothered by it?"

"Bothered? No, not by that."

I spoke a little tersely. Why had I asked him about his nose, of all things? Why now, when I had been content to live in ignorance for the last several years?

"What bothers ye, then?" he asked quietly.

What was bothering me was that the wine had been doing its job of anesthetizing me nicely; now I had ruined it. All the images of the night before were back inside my head, thrown into vivid Technicolor by that simple statement, that oh-so-matter-of-fact, *"I took the musket from him and clubbed them both to death with it."* And its unspoken echo, *It is myself who kills for her.*

I wanted to throw up. Instead, I gulped more wine, not even tasting it, swallowing it down as fast as I could. I dimly heard Jamie ask again what bothered me, and swung round to glare at him.

"What bothers me—bothers! What a stupid word! What drives me absolutely *mad* is that I might have been anyone, anything—a convenient warm spot with spongy bits to squeeze—God, I was no more than a *hole* to them!"

I struck the sill with my fist, then, angered by the impotent little thump of it, picked up my cup, turned round, and hurled it against the wall.

"It wasn't that way with Black Jack Randall, was it?" I demanded. "He knew you, didn't he? He saw *you* when he used you; it wouldn't have been the same if you were anyone—he wanted *you.*"

"My God, ye think that was better?" he blurted, and stared at me, eyes wide.

I stopped, panting for breath and feeling dizzy.

"No." I dropped onto the stool and closed my eyes, feeling the room go round and round me, colored lights like a carousel behind my eyes. "No. I don't. I think Jack Randall was a bloody sociopathic, grade-A pervert, and these—these"—I flipped a hand, unable to think of a suitable word—"they were just … men."

I spoke the last word with a sense of loathing evident even to me.

"Men," Jamie said, his voice sounding odd.

"Men," I said. I opened my eyes and looked at him. My eyes felt hot, and I thought they must glow red, like a possum's in torchlight.

"I have lived through a fucking world war," I said, my voice low and venomous. "I have lost a child. I have lost two husbands. I have starved with an army, been beaten and wounded, been patronized, betrayed, imprisoned, and attacked. And I have fucking survived!" My voice was rising, but I was helpless to stop it. "And now should I be shattered because some wretched, pathetic excuses for men stuck their nasty little appendages between my legs and *wiggled* them?!" I stood up, seized the edge of the washstand and heaved it over, sending everything flying with a crash—basin, ewer, and lighted candlestick, which promptly went out.

"Well, I won't," I said quite calmly.

"Nasty little appendages?" he said, looking rather stunned.

"Not yours," I said. "I didn't mean yours. I'm rather fond of yours." Then I sat down and burst into tears.

His arms came round me, slowly and gently. I didn't startle or jerk away, and he pressed my head against him, smoothing my damp, tangled hair, his fingers catching in the mass of it.

"Christ, ye are a brave wee thing," he murmured.

"Not," I said, eyes closed. "I'm not." I grabbed his hand and brought it to my lips, closing my eyes as I did so.

I brushed my battered mouth across his knuckles, blind. They were swollen, as bruised as mine; I touched my tongue to his flesh, tasted soap and dust and the silver taste of scrapes and gashes—marks left by bones and broken teeth. Pressed my fingers to the veins beneath the skin of wrist and arm, softly resilient, and the solid lines of the bones beneath. I felt the tributaries of his veins, wished to enter into his bloodstream, travel there, dissolved and bodiless, to take refuge in the thick-walled chambers of his heart. But I couldn't.

I ran my hand up his sleeve, exploring, clinging, relearning his body. I touched the hair in his oxter and stroked it, surprised at the soft, silky feel of it.

"Do you know," I said, "I don't believe I've ever touched you there before?"

"I dinna believe ye have," he said, with a hint of nervous laughter in his voice. "I would ha' remembered. Oh!" A stipple of gooseflesh burst out over the soft skin there, and I pressed my forehead to his chest.

"The worst of it is," I said, into his shirt, "that I knew *them.* Each one of them. And I'll remember them. And feel guilty that they're dead, because of me."

"No," he said softly, but very firmly. "They are dead because of *me,* Sassenach. And because of their own wickedness. If there is guilt, let it rest upon them. Or on me."

"Not on you alone," I said, my eyes still closed. It was dark in there, and soothing. I could hear my voice, distant but clear, and wondered dimly where the words were coming from. "You're blood of my blood, bone of my bone. You said so. What you do rests on me, as well."

"Then may your vow redeem me," he whispered.

He lifted me to my feet and gathered me to him, like a tailor gathering up a length of fragile, heavy silk—slowly, long-fingered, fold upon fold. He carried me then across the room, and laid me gently on the bed, in the light from the flickering fire.

* * *

He'd meant to be gentle. Very gentle. Had planned it with care, worrying each step of the long way home. She was broken; he must go canny, take his time. Be careful in gluing back her shattered bits.

And then he came to her and discovered that she wished no part of gentleness, of courting. She wished directness. Brevity and violence. If she was broken, she would slash him with her jagged edges, reckless as a drunkard with a shattered bottle.

For a moment, two moments, he struggled, trying to hold her close and kiss her tenderly. She squirmed like an eel in his arms, then rolled over him, wriggling and biting.

He'd thought to ease her—both of them—with the wine. He'd known she lost all sense of restraint when in drink; he simply hadn't realized what she was restraining, he thought grimly, trying to seize her without hurting.

He, of all people, should have known. Not fear or grief or pain—but rage.

She raked his back; he felt the scrape of broken nails, and thought dimly that was good—she'd fought. That was the last of his thought; his own fury took him then, rage and a lust that came on him like black thunder on a mountain, a cloud that hid all from him and him from all, so that kind familiarity was lost and he was alone, strange in darkness.

It might be her neck he grasped, or anyone's. The feel of small bones came to him, knobbled in the dark, and the screams of rabbits, killed in his hand. He rose up in a whirlwind, choked with dirt and the scourings of blood.

Wrath boiled and curdled in his balls, and he rode to her spurs. Let his lightning blaze and sear all trace of the intruder from her womb, and if it burnt them both to bone and ash—then let it be.

* * *

When sense came back to him, he lay with his weight full on her, crushing her into the bed. Breath sobbed in his lungs; his hands clenched her arms so hard he felt the bones like sticks about to snap within his grasp.

He had lost himself. Was not sure where his body ended. His mind flailed for a moment, panicked lest it have been unseated altogether—no. He felt a drop of cold, sudden on his shoulder, and the scattered parts of him drew at once together like shattered bits of quicksilver, to leave him quaking and appalled.

He was still joined to her. He wanted to bolt like a startled quail, but managed to move slowly, loosening his fingers one by one from their death grip on her arms, lifting his body gently away, though the effort of it seemed immense, as though his weight were that of moons and planets. He half-expected to see her crushed and flattened, lifeless on the sheet. But the springy arch of her ribs rose and fell and rose again, roundly reassuring.

Another drop struck him in the back of his neck, and he hunched his shoulders in surprise. Caught by his movement, she looked up, and he met her eyes with shock. She shared it; the shock of strangers meeting one another naked. Her eyes flicked away from his, up toward the ceiling.

“The roof’s leaking,” she whispered. “There’s a wet patch.”

“Oh.” He had not even realized that it was raining. The room was dark with rainlight, though, and the roof thrummed overhead. The sound of it seemed inside his blood, like the beat of the bodhrana inside the night, like the beat of his heart in the forest.

He shuddered, and for lack of any other notion, kissed her forehead. Her arms came up sudden as a snare and held him fiercely, pulling him down onto her again and he seized her, too, crushing her to him hard enough to feel the breath go out of her, unable to let go. He thought vaguely of Brianna’s talk of giant orbs that whirled through space, the thing called gravity—and what was grave about it? He saw that well enough just now: a force so great as to balance some body unthinkably immense in thin air, unsupported—or send two such bodies crashing into each other, in an explosion of destruction and the smoke of stars.

He’d bruised her; there were dark red marks on her arms where his fingers had been. They would be black within the day. The marks of other men bloomed black and purple, blue and yellow, clouded petals trapped beneath the whiteness of her skin.

His thighs and buttocks were strained with effort, and a cramp took him hard, making him groan and twist to ease it. His skin was wet; so was hers, and they slid apart with slow reluctance.

Eyes puffed and bruised, clouded like wild honey, inches from his own.

“How do you feel?” she asked softly.

“Terrible,” he replied with complete honesty. He was hoarse, as though he had been screaming—God, perhaps he had been. Her mouth had bled again; there was a red smear on her chin, and the taste of metal from it in his own mouth.

He cleared his throat, wanting to look away from her eyes, but unable to do it. He rubbed a thumb over the smear of blood, clumsily erasing it.

"You?" he asked, and the words were like a rasp in his throat. "How do ye feel?"

She had drawn back a little at his touch, but her eyes were still fixed on his. He had the feeling that she was looking far beyond him, through him—but then the focus of her gaze came back, and she looked directly at him, for the first time since he had brought her home.

"Safe," she whispered, and closed her eyes. She took one huge breath and her body relaxed all at once, going limp and heavy like a dying hare.

He held her, both arms wrapped around her as though to save her from drowning, but felt her sink away all the same. He wished to call out to her not to go, not to leave him alone. She vanished into the depths of sleep, and he yearned after her, wishing her healed, fearing her flight, and bent his head, burying his face in her hair and her scent.

The wind banged the open shutters as it passed, and in the dark outside, one owl hooted and another answered, hiding from the rain.

Then he cried, soundless, muscles strained to aching that he might not shake with it, that she might not wake to know it. He wept to emptiness and ragged breath, the pillow wet beneath his face. Then lay exhausted beyond the thought of tiredness, too far from sleep even to recall what it was like. His only comfort was the small, so fragile weight that lay warm upon his heart, breathing.

Then her hands rose and rested on him, the tears cool on his face, congealing, the white of her clean as the silent snow that covers char and blood and breathes peace upon the world.

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THE CAPTIVE

It was a still, warm morning; the last of the Indian summer. A woodpecker hammered in the wood nearby, and some insect was making a noise like rasping metal in the tall grass beyond the house. I came downstairs slowly, feeling mildly disembodied—and wishing I were, since the body I had hurt almost everywhere.

Mrs. Bug hadn't come this morning; perhaps she wasn't feeling well. Or perhaps she wasn't sure yet how to deal with seeing me, or what to say to me when she did. My mouth tightened a little, something I realized only because the partially healed split in my lip stung when I did it.

I very consciously relaxed my face and went about getting down the coffee things from the kitchen shelf. There was a trail of tiny black ants running along the edge of the shelf, and a swarm of them over the small tin box in which I kept lump sugar. I flicked them off with a few stern swipes of my apron, and made a mental note to see about finding some avens root for repellant.

That resolve, small as it was, made me feel better and steadier at once. Ever since Hodgepile and his men had turned up at the malting shed, I had been completely at the mercy of someone else, prevented from any sort of independent action. For the first time in days—it seemed much longer—I was able to decide what I was going to do. It seemed a precious liberty.

Very well, I thought. What would I do, then? I would … drink some coffee. Eat a bit of toast? No. I felt gingerly with my tongue; several teeth on one side were loose, and my jaw muscles so sore that serious chewing was out of the question. Just coffee, then, and while I drank it, I would decide upon the shape of my day.

Feeling pleased with this plan, I put back the plain wooden cup, and instead ceremoniously set out my sole china cup and saucer, a delicate bit of porcelain Jocasta had given me, hand-painted with violets.

Jamie had poked up the fire earlier and the kettle was boiling; I dipped out enough water to warm the pot, swished it round, and opened the back door in order to toss it out. Fortunately, I looked first.

Ian was sitting cross-legged on the back porch, a small whetstone in one hand, knife in the other.

"Good morn to ye, Auntie," he said cheerfully, and drew the knife across the stone, making the thin, monotonous rasping noise I had heard earlier. "Feeling better, then?"

"Yes, fine," I assured him. He raised one eyebrow dubiously, looking me over.

"Well, better than ye look, I hope."

"Not *that* good," I said tartly, and he laughed. He put down the knife and stone and got to his feet. He was much taller than I; nearly Jamie's height, though thinner. He'd inherited his father's whipcord leanness, as well as the elder Ian's sense of humor—and his toughness.

He took me by the shoulders and turned me into the sunlight, pursing his lips a little as he inspected me at close range. I blinked up at him, imagining what I must look like. I hadn't had the nerve to look into a mirror yet, but I knew the bruising must be going from blacks and reds to a colorful assortment of blues, greens, and yellows. Add in assorted knobbly swellings, flecks of crusty black for the split lip and the scabby bits, and I was undoubtedly quite the picture of health.

Ian's soft hazel eyes peered intently into my face with no apparent surprise or distress, though. At last he let go, and patted my shoulder gently.

"Ye'll do, Auntie," he said. "It's still you, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said. And with no warning at all, tears welled up and overflowed. I knew exactly what he'd meant, and why he'd said it—and it was true.

I felt as though my center had turned unexpectedly to liquid and was gushing out, not from grief, but from relief. I *was* still me. Fragile, battered, sore, and wary—but myself. Only when I recognized that, did I realize how much I had feared that I might not be—that I might emerge from shock and find myself irrevocably altered, some vital part forever missing.

"I'm all right," I assured Ian, hastily wiping my eyes with the edge of my apron. "Just a bit—"

"Aye, I know," he said, and took the pot from me, tossing the water into the grass by the path. "It's a bit strange, aye? Coming back."

I took the coffeepot from him, squeezing his hand hard as I did so. He had come back twice from captivity: rescued from Geillis Duncan's strange compound on Jamaica, only to choose later exile with the Mohawk. He had come to manhood on that journey, and I did wonder what parts of himself might have been left behind on the way.

"Do you want breakfast, Ian?" I asked, sniffing and dabbing gingerly at my swollen nose.

"Of course I do," he said, grinning. "Come and sit yourself down, Auntie—I'll fetch it."

I followed him inside, filled the coffeepot and set it to brew, then sat at the table, the sun on my back through the open door, and watched as Ian rummaged the pantry. My mind felt soggy and incapable of thought, but a sense of peace crept over me, gentle as the wavering light through the chestnut trees. Even the small throbbings here and there seemed pleasant, a sense of healing being quietly accomplished.

Ian spread an armload of random foodstuffs on the table and sat down across from me.

"All right, Auntie?" he asked again, raising one of his father's feathery eyebrows.

"Yes. It's rather like sitting on a soap bubble, though. Isn't it?" I glanced at him as I poured the coffee, but he looked down at the chunk of bread he was buttering. I thought a slight smile touched his lips, but couldn't tell for sure.

"Something like," he said quietly.

The heat of the coffee warmed my hands through the china, and soothed the raw membranes of my nose and palate. I felt as though I had been screaming for hours, but didn't recall actually doing any such thing. Had I, with Jamie the night before?

I didn't quite want to think about the night before; it was part of the soap-bubble feeling. Jamie had been gone when I woke, and I wasn't sure whether I was glad or sorry about that.

Ian didn't talk, but ate his way in a businesslike manner through half a loaf with butter and honey, three raisin muffins, two thick slices of ham, and a jug of milk. Jamie had done the milking, I saw; he always used the blue jug, while Mr. Wemyss used the white one. I wondered vaguely where Mr. Wemyss was—I hadn't seen him, and the house felt empty—but didn't really care. It occurred to me that perhaps Jamie had told both Mr. Wemyss and Mrs. Bug to stay away for a bit, feeling that I might need a little time alone.

"More coffee, Auntie?"

At my nod, Ian rose from the table, reached down the decanter from the shelf, and poured a large slug of whisky into my cup before refilling it.

"Mam always said it's good for what ails ye," he said.

"Your mother is right. Do you want some?"

He sniffed at the aromatic fumes, but shook his head.

"No, I think not, Auntie. I must have a clear head this morning."

"Really? Why?" The porridge in the pot wasn't nine days old—quite—but it had been there for three or four. Of course; no one had been here to eat it. I eyed the cementlike glob adhering to my spoon critically, then decided that it was still soft enough to eat, and doused it with honey.

Ian was dealing with a mouthful of the same substance, and took a moment to clear it from his palate before replying.

"Uncle Jamie means to ask his questions," he answered, giving me a cautious glance as he reached for the bread.

"Does he?" I said, rather blankly, but before I could inquire what he meant by that, the sound of footsteps on the path announced the arrival of Fergus.

He looked as though he had been sleeping in the woods—well, of course, I thought, he had been. Or rather, not sleeping; the men had barely stopped to rest in their pursuit of Hodgepile's gang. Fergus had shaved, but his normally fastidious grooming was sadly lacking, and his handsome face was gaunt, the deep eyes shadowed.

"Milady," he murmured, and unexpectedly bent to kiss my cheek, hand on my shoulder. *"Comment ça va?"*

"Tres bien, merci," I replied, smiling gingerly. "How are Marsali and the children? And our hero, Germain?" I had asked Jamie about Marsali on the way back, and had been assured that she was all right. Germain, monkey that he was, had gone straight up a tree when he heard Hodgepile's men approaching. He had seen everything from his perch, and as soon as the men departed, had scrambled down, dragged his semiconscious mother away from the fire, and run for help.

"Ah, Germain," Fergus said, a faint smile momentarily lifting the shadows of fatigue. "*Nous p'tit guerrier.* He says *Grandpère* has promised him a pistol of his own, to shoot bad people with."

Grandpère undoubtedly meant it, I reflected. Germain couldn't manage a musket, being somewhat shorter than the gun itself—but a pistol would do. In my present state of mind, the fact that Germain was only six didn't seem particularly important.

"Have you had breakfast, Fergus?" I pushed the pot toward him.

"Non. Merci." He helped himself to cold biscuit, ham, and coffee, though I noticed that he ate without much appetite.

We all sat quietly, sipping coffee and listening to the birds. Carolina wrens had built a late nest under the eaves of the house and the parent birds swooped in and out, just above our heads. I could hear the high-pitched cheeping of the nestlings begging, and saw a scatter of twigs and a bit of empty eggshell on the floorboards of the porch. They were nearly ready to fledge; just in time, before the real cold weather came.

The sight of the brown-speckled eggshell reminded me of *Monsieur le Oeuf.* Yes, that's what I would do, I decided, with a small sense of relief at having something firm in mind. I would go and see Marsali later. And perhaps Mrs. Bug, as well.

"Did you see Mrs. Bug this morning?" I asked, turning to Ian. His cabin—little more than a brush-roofed lean-to—lay just beyond the Bugs'; he would have passed them on his way to the house.

"Oh, aye," he said, looking a little surprised. "She was sweeping out as I went by. Offered me breakfast, but I said I'd eat here. I kent Uncle Jamie had a ham, aye?" He grinned, lifting his fourth ham biscuit in illustration.

"So she's all right? I thought she might be ill; she usually comes quite early."

Ian nodded, and took an enormous bite of the biscuit.

"Aye, I expect she's busy, minding the *ciomach.*"

My fragile sense of well-being cracked like the wrens' eggs. A *ciomach* was a captive. In my soggy-minded euphoria, I had somehow managed to forget Lionel Brown's existence.

Ian's remark that Jamie meant to ask questions this morning dropped suddenly into context—as did Fergus's presence. And the knife Ian had been sharpening.

"Where is Jamie?" I asked, rather faintly. "Have you seen him?"

"Oh, aye," Ian said, looking surprised. He swallowed, and gestured toward the door with his chin. "He's just out in the woodshed, makin' new shingles. He says the roof's sprung a leak."

No sooner had he said this than the sound of hammering came from the roof, far above. Of course, I thought. First things first. But then, I supposed Lionel Brown wasn't going anywhere, after all.

"Perhaps … I should go and see Mr. Brown," I said, swallowing.

Ian and Fergus exchanged glances.

"No, Auntie, ye shouldn't," Ian said quite calmly, but with an air of authority I wasn't accustomed to seeing in him.

"Whatever do you mean?" I stared at him, but he merely went on eating, though a trifle more slowly.

"Milord says you should not," Fergus amplified, drizzling a spoonful of honey into his coffee.

"He says what?" I asked incredulously.

Neither of them would look at me, but they seemed to draw together, emanating a reluctant sort of stubborn resistance. Either one would do anything I asked, I knew—except defy Jamie. If Jamie thought I ought not to see Mr. Brown, I wasn't going to do it with the assistance of either Ian or Fergus.

I dropped the spoon back into my bowl of porridge, uneaten lumps still adhering to it.

"Did he happen to mention *why* he thinks I ought not to visit Mr. Brown?" I asked calmly, under the circumstances.

Both men looked surprised, then exchanged another look, this one longer.

"No, milady," Fergus said, his voice carefully neutral.

There was a brief silence, during which both of them seemed to be considering. Then Fergus glanced at Ian, deferring to him with a shrug.

"Well, d'ye see, Auntie," Ian said carefully, "we do mean to question the fellow."

"And we will have answers," Fergus said, eyes on the spoon with which he was stirring his coffee.

"And when Uncle Jamie is satisfied that he has told us what he can …"

Ian had laid his newly sharpened knife on the table beside his plate. He picked it up, and thoughtfully drew it down the length of a cold sausage, which promptly split open, with an aromatic burst of sage and garlic. He looked up then, and met my eyes directly. And I realized that while I might still be me—Ian was no longer the boy he used to be. Not at all.

"You'll kill him, then?" I said, my lips feeling numb in spite of the hot coffee.

"Oh, yes," Fergus said very softly. "I expect that we shall." He met my eyes now, too. There was a bleak, grim look about him, and his deep-set eyes were hard as stone.

"He—it—I mean … it wasn't him," I said. "It couldn't have been. He'd already broken his leg when—" I didn't seem to have enough air to finish my sentences. "And Marsali. It wasn't—I don't think he …"

Something behind Ian's eyes changed, as he grasped my meaning. His lips pressed tight for a moment, and he nodded.

"As well for him, then," he said shortly.

"As well," Fergus echoed, "but I think it will not matter in the end. We killed the others—why should he live?" He pushed back from the table, leaving his coffee undrunk. "I think I will go, cousin."

"Aye? I'll come too, then." Ian shoved his plate away, nodding to me. "Will ye tell Uncle Jamie we've gone ahead, Auntie?"

I nodded numbly, and watched them go, vanishing one after the other under the big chestnut tree that overhung the trail leading to the Bugs' cabin. Mechanically, I got up and began slowly to clear away the remains of the makeshift breakfast.

I really wasn't sure whether I minded a lot about Mr. Brown or not. On the one hand, I did disapprove on principle of torture and cold-blooded murder. On the other … while it was true enough that Brown had not personally violated or injured me, and he *had* tried to make Hodgepile release me—he'd been all in favor of killing me, later. And I hadn't the slightest doubt that he would have drowned me in the gorge, had Tebbe not intervened.

No, I thought, carefully rinsing my cup and drying it on my apron, perhaps I didn't really mind terribly about Mr. Brown.

Still, I felt uneasy and upset. What I *did* mind about, I realized, were Ian and Fergus. And Jamie. The fact was, killing someone in the heat of battle is a quite different thing from executing a man, and I knew that. Did they?

Well, Jamie did.

"And may your vow redeem me." He had whispered that to me, the night before. It was just about the last thing I recalled him saying, in fact. Well, all right; but I would greatly prefer that he

didn't feel in need of redemption to start with. And as for Ian and Fergus …

Fergus had fought in the Battle of Prestonpans, at the age of ten. I still remembered the face of the small French orphan, soot-smeared and dazed with shock and exhaustion, looking down at me from his perch atop a captured cannon. *"I killed an English soldier, madame,"* he'd said to me. *"He fell down and I stuck him with my knife."*

And Ian, a fifteen-year-old, weeping in remorse because he thought he had accidentally killed an intruder to Jamie's Edinburgh print shop. God knew what he had done, since; he wasn't talking. I had a sudden vision of Fergus's hook, dark with blood, and Ian, silhouetted in the dark. *"And I,"* he'd said, echoing Jamie. *"It is myself who kills for her."*

It was 1773. And *on the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five* … the shot heard round the world was already being loaded. The room was warm, but I shuddered convulsively. What in the name of God did I think I could shield them from? Any of them.

A sudden roar from the roof above startled me out of my thoughts.

I walked out into the dooryard and looked up, shading my eyes against the morning sun. Jamie was sitting astride the rooftree, rocking to and fro over one hand, which he held curled into his belly.

"What's going on up there?" I called.

"I've got a splinter," came the terse answer, obviously spoken through clenched teeth.

I wanted to laugh, if only as small escape from tension, but didn't.

"Well, come down, then. I'll pull it out."

"I'm no finished!"

"I don't care!" I said, suddenly impatient with him. "Come down this minute. I want to talk to you."

A bag of nails hit the grass with a sudden clank, followed instantly by the hammer.

First things first, then.

* * *

Technically, I supposed, it was a splinter. It was a two-inch sliver of cedarwood, and he'd driven it completely under the nail of his middle finger, nearly to the first joint.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!"

"Aye," he agreed, looking a little pale. "Ye might say that."

The protruding stub was too short to grip with my fingers. I hauled him into the surgery and jerked the sliver out with forceps, before one could say Jack Robinson. Jamie was saying a good deal more than Jack Robinson—mostly in French, which is an excellent language for swearing.

"You're going to lose that nail," I observed, submerging the offended digit in a small bowl of alcohol and water. Blood bloomed from it like ink from a squid.

"To hell wi' the nail," he said, gritting his teeth. "Cut the whole bloody finger off and ha' done with it! *Merde d'chevre!*"

"The Chinese used to—well, no, I suppose they still do, come to think of it—shove splinters of bamboo under people's fingernails to make them talk."

"Christ! *Tu me casses les couilles!*"

"Obviously a very effective technique," I said, lifting his hand out of the bowl and wrapping the finger tightly in a strip of linen. "Were you trying it out, before using it on Lionel Brown?" I tried to speak lightly, keeping my eyes on his hand. I felt his own gaze fix on me, and he snorted.

"What in the name of saints and archangels was wee Ian telling ye, Sassenach?"

"That you meant to question the man—and get answers."

"I do, and I shall," he said shortly. "So?"

"Fergus and Ian seemed to think that—you might be moved to use any means necessary," I said with some delicacy. "They're more than willing to help."

"I imagine they are." The first agony had abated somewhat. He breathed more deeply, and color was beginning to come back into his face. "Fergus has a right. It was his wife attacked."

"Ian seemed …" I hesitated, searching for the right word. Ian had seemed so calm as to be terrifying. "You didn't call Roger to help with the—the questioning?"

"No. Not yet." One corner of his mouth tucked in. "Roger Mac's a good fighter, but no the sort to scare a man, save he's truly roused. He's no deceit in him at all."

"Whereas you, Ian, and Fergus …"

"Oh, aye," he said dryly. "Wily as snakes, the lot of us. Ye've only to look at Roger Mac to see how safe their time must be, him and the lass. A bit of a comfort, that," he added, the tuck growing deeper. "To ken things will get better, I mean."

I could see that he was trying to change the subject, which was not a good sign. I made a small snorting noise, but it hurt my nose.

"And *you're* not truly roused, is that what you're telling me?"

He made a much more successful snorting noise, but didn't reply. He tilted his head to one side, watching as I laid out a square of gauze and began to rub dried leaves of comfrey into it. I didn't know how to say what was troubling me, but he plainly saw that something was.

"Will you kill him?" I asked baldly, keeping my eyes on the jar of honey. It was made of brown glass, and the light glowed through it as though it were a huge ball of clear amber.

Jamie sat still, watching me. I could feel his speculative gaze, though I didn't look up.

"I think so," he said.

My hands had started to tremble, and I pressed them on the surface of the table to still them.

"Not today," he added. "If I kill him, I shall do it properly."

I wasn't sure I wanted to know what constituted a proper killing, in his opinion, but he told me anyway.

"If he dies at my hand, it will be in the open, before witnesses who ken the truth of the matter, and him standing upright. I willna have it said that I killed a helpless man, whatever his crime."

"Oh." I swallowed, feeling mildly ill, and took a pinch of powdered bloodroot to add to the salve I was making. It had a faint, astringent smell, which seemed to help. “But—you might let him live?”

“Perhaps. I suppose I might ransom him to his brother—depending.”

“Do you know, you sound quite like your uncle Colum. He would have thought it through like that.”

“Do I?” The corner of his mouth turned up slightly. “Shall I take that as compliment, Sassenach?”

“I suppose you might as well.”

“Aye, well,” he said thoughtfully. The stiff fingers tapped on the tabletop, and he winced slightly as the movement jarred the injured one. “Colum had a castle. And armed clansmen at his beck. I should have some difficulty in defending this house against a raid, perhaps.”

“That’s what you mean by ‘depending’?” I felt quite uneasy at this; the thought of armed raiders attacking the house had not occurred to me—and I saw that Jamie’s forethought in storing Mr. Brown off our premises had perhaps not been entirely for the purpose of sparing my sensibilities.

“One of the things.”

I mixed a bit of honey with my powdered herbs, then scooped a small dollop of purified bear grease into the mortar.

“I suppose,” I said, eyes on my mixing, “that there’s no point in turning Lionel Brown over to the—the authorities?”

“Which authorities did ye have in mind, Sassenach?” he asked dryly.

A good question. This part of the backcountry had not yet formed nor joined a county, though a movement was afoot to that purpose. Were Jamie to deliver Mr. Brown to the sheriff of the nearest county for trial … well, no, perhaps not a good idea. Brownsville lay just within the borders of the nearest county, and the current sheriff was in fact named Brown.

I bit my lip, considering. In times of stress, I tended still to respond as what I was—a civilized Englishwoman, accustomed to rely on the sureties of government and law. Well, all right, Jamie had a point; the twentieth century had its own dangers, but some things had improved. *This* was nearly 1774, though, and the colonial government was already showing cracks and fault lines, signs of the collapse to come.

"I suppose we could take him to Cross Creek." Farquard Campbell was a justice of the peace there—and a friend to Jamie's aunt, Jocasta Cameron. "Or to New Bern." Governor Martin and the bulk of the Royal Council were in New Bern—three hundred miles away. "Maybe Hillsborough?" That was the center of the Circuit Court.

"Mmphm."

This noise denoted a marked disinclination to lose several weeks' work in order to haul Mr. Brown before any of these seats of justice, let alone entrust a matter of importance to the highly unreliable—and frequently corrupt—judicial system. I looked up and met his eye, humorous but bleak. If I responded as what I was, so did Jamie.

And Jamie was a Highland laird, accustomed to follow his own laws, and fight his own battles.

"But—" I began.

"Sassenach," he said quite gently. "What of the others?"

The others. I stopped moving, paralyzed by the sudden memory: a large band of black figures, coming out of the wood with the sun behind them. But that group had split in two, intending to meet again in Brownsville, in three days' time—today, in fact.

For the moment, presumably no one from Brownsville yet knew what had happened—that Hodgepile and his men were dead, or that Lionel Brown was now a captive on the Ridge. Given the speed with which news spread in the mountains, though, it would be public knowledge within a week.

In the aftermath of shock, I had somehow overlooked the fact that there were still a number of bandits at large—and while I didn't know who they were, they knew both who I was and where I was. Would they realize that I could not identify them? Or be willing to take that risk?

Obviously, Jamie was not willing to take the risk of leaving the Ridge to escort Lionel Brown anywhere, whether or not he decided to let the man live.

The thought of the others had brought something important back to me, though. It might not be the best time to mention it, but then again, there wasn't going to be a good one.

I took a deep breath, squaring myself for it.

"Jamie."

The tone of my voice jerked him immediately from whatever he'd been thinking; he looked sharply at me, one eyebrow raised.

"I—I have to tell you something."

He paled a little, but reached out at once, grasping my hand. He took a deep breath of his own, and nodded.

"Aye."

"Oh," I said, realizing that he thought I meant that I had suddenly arrived at a point where I needed to tell him the grisly details of my experiences. "Not—not that. Not exactly." I squeezed his hand, though, and held on, while I told him about Donner.

"Another," he said. He sounded slightly stunned. "Another one?"

"Another," I confirmed. "The thing is … I, um, I don't remember seeing him … seeing him dead." The eerie sense of that dawn returned to me. I had very sharp, distinct memories—but they were disjointed, so fractured as to bear no relation to the whole. An ear. I remembered an ear, thick and cup-shaped as a woodland fungus. It was shaded in the most exquisite tones of purple, brown, and indigo, shadowed in the carved whorls of the inner parts, nearly translucent at the rim; perfect in the light of a sunbeam that cut through the fronds of a hemlock to touch it.

I recalled that ear so perfectly that I could almost reach into my memory and touch it myself—but I had no idea whose ear it had been. Was the hair that lay behind it brown, black, reddish, straight, wavy, gray? And the face … I didn't know. If I had looked, I hadn't seen.

He shot me a sharp look.

"And ye think he's maybe not."

"Maybe not." I swallowed the taste of dust, pine needles, and blood, and breathed the comforting fresh scent of buttermilk. "I warned him, you see. I told him you were coming, and that he didn't want you to find him with me. When you attacked the camp

—he might have run. He struck me as a coward, certainly. But I don't know."

He nodded, and sighed heavily.

"Can you … recall, do you think?" I asked hesitantly. "When you showed me the dead. Did you look at them?"

"No," he said softly. "I wasna looking at anything save you."

His eyes had been on our linked hands. He raised them now, and looked at my face, troubled and searching. I lifted his hand and laid my cheek against his knuckles, closing my eyes for an instant.

"I'll be all right," I said. "The thing is—" I said, and stopped.

"Aye?"

"If he *did* run—where do you suppose he'd go?"

He closed his own eyes and drew a deep breath.

"To Brownsville," he said, in resignation. "And if he did, Richard Brown kens already what's become of Hodgepile and his men—and likely thinks his brother is dead, as well."

"Oh." I swallowed, and changed the subject slightly.

"Why did you tell Ian I wasn't to be allowed to see Mr. Brown?"

"I didna say that. But I think it best if ye dinna see him, that much is true."

"Because?"

"Because ye've an oath upon you," he said, sounding mildly surprised that I didn't understand immediately. "Can ye see a man injured, and leave him to suffer?"

The ointment was ready. I unwrapped his finger, which had stopped bleeding, and tamped as much of the salve under the damaged nail as I could manage.

"Probably not," I said, eyes on my work. "But why—"

"If ye mend him, care for him—and then I decide he must die?" His eyes rested on me, questioning. "How would that be for ye?"

"Well, that *would* be a bit awkward," I said, taking a deep breath to steady myself. I wrapped a thin strip of linen around the nail and tied it neatly. "Still, though …"

"Ye wish to care for him? Why?" He sounded curious, but not angry. "Is your oath so strong, then?"

“No.” I put both hands on the table to brace myself; my knees seemed suddenly weak.

“Because I’m glad they’re dead,” I whispered, looking down. My hands were raw, and I fumbled while I worked because my fingers were still swollen; there were deep purple marks still sunk in the skin of my wrists. “And I am very much—” What? Afraid; afraid of the men, afraid of myself. Thrilled, in a horrible sort of way. “Ashamed,” I said. “Terribly ashamed.” I glanced up at him. “I hate it.”

He held out his hand to me, waiting. He knew better than to touch me; I couldn’t have borne being touched just then. I didn’t take it, not at once, though I longed to. I looked away, speaking rapidly to Adso, who had materialized on the countertop and was regarding me with a bottomless green gaze.

“If I—I keep thinking … if I were to see him, help him—Christ, I *don’t* want to, I don’t at all! But if I could—perhaps that would … help somehow.” I looked up then, feeling haunted. “Make … amends.”

“For being glad they are dead—and for wanting him dead, too?” Jamie suggested gently.

I nodded, feeling as though a small, heavy weight had lifted with the speaking of the words. I didn’t remember taking his hand, but it was tight on mine. Blood from his finger was seeping through the fresh bandage, but he paid no attention.

“Do you *want* to kill him?” I asked.

He looked at me for a long moment before replying.

“Oh, aye,” he said very softly. “But for now, his life is surety for yours. For all of us, perhaps. And so he lives. For now. But I will ask questions—and I shall have answers.”

* * *

I sat in my surgery for some time after he left. Emerging slowly from shock, I had felt safe, surrounded by home and friends, by Jamie. Now I must come to grips with the fact that nothing was safe—not I, not home nor friends—and certainly not Jamie.

“But then, you never are, are you, you bloody Scot?” I said aloud, and laughed, weakly.

Feeble as it was, it made me feel better. I rose with sudden decision and began to tidy my cupboards, lining up bottles in order of size, sweeping out bits of scattered herbs, throwing away solutions gone stale or suspect.

I had meant to go and visit Marsali, but Fergus had told me during breakfast that Jamie had sent her with the children and Lizzie to stay with the McGillivrays, where she would be cared for, and safe. If there was safety in numbers, the McGillivrays’ house was certainly the place for it.

Located near Woolam’s Creek, the McGillivrays’ home place adjoined Ronnie Sinclair’s cooper’s shop, and enclosed a seething mass of cordial humanity, including not only Robin and Ute McGillivray, their son, Manfred, and their daughter Senga, but also Ronnie, who boarded with them. The usual mob scene was augmented intermittently by Senga McGillivray’s fiancé, Heinrich Strasse, and his German relatives from Salem, and by Inga and Hilda, their husbands and children, and their husbands’ relatives.

Add in the men who congregated daily in Ronnie’s shop, a convenient stopping place on the road to and from Woolam’s Mill, and likely no one would even notice Marsali and her family, in the midst of that mob. Surely no one would seek to harm her there. But for me to go and see her …

Highland tact and delicacy were one thing. Highland hospitality and curiosity were another. If I stayed peacefully at home, I would likely be left in peace—at least for a while. If I were to set foot near the McGillivrays’ … I blenched at the thought, and hastily decided that perhaps I would visit Marsali tomorrow. Or the next day. Jamie had assured me she was all right, only shocked and bruised.

The house stood around me in peace. No modern background of furnace, fans, plumbing, refrigerators. No whoosh of pilot lights or hum of compressors. Just the occasional creak of beam or floorboard, and the odd muffled scrape of a wood wasp building its nest up under the eaves.

I looked round the ordered world of my surgery—ranks of shining jars and bottles, linen screens laden with drying arrowroot and masses of lavender, bunches of nettle and yarrow and rosemary hanging overhead. The bottle of ether, sunlight glowing on it. Adso curled on the countertop, tail neatly tucked around his feet, eyes half-closed in purring contemplation.

Home. A small shiver ran down my spine. I wanted nothing more than to be alone, safe and alone, in my own home.

Safe. I had a day, perhaps two, in which home would still be safe. And then …

I realized that I had been standing still for some moments, staring blankly into a box of yellow nightshade berries, round and shiny as marbles. Very poisonous, and a slow and painful death. My eyes rose to the ether—quick and merciful. If Jamie did decide to kill Lionel Brown … But no. In the open, he'd said, standing on his feet before witnesses. Slowly, I closed the box and put it back on the shelf.

What then?

* * *

There were always chores that could be done—but nothing pressing, with no one clamoring to be fed, clothed, or cared for. Feeling quite odd, I wandered round the house for a bit, and finally went into Jamie's study, where I poked among the books on the shelf there, settling at last on Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones.*

I couldn't think how long it had been since I had read a novel. And in the daytime! Feeling pleasantly wicked, I sat by the open window in my surgery and resolutely entered a world far from my own.

I lost track of time, moving only to brush away roving insects that came through the window, or to absently scratch Adso's head when he nudged against me. Occasional thoughts of Jamie and Lionel Brown drifted through the back of my mind, but I shooed them away like the leafhoppers and midges who landed on my page, drifting in through the window. Whatever was happening in the Bugs' cabin had happened, or would happen—I simply couldn't think about it. As I read, the soap bubble formed around me once more, filled with perfect stillness.

The sun was halfway down the sky before faint pangs of hunger began to stir. It was as I looked up, rubbing my forehead and wondering vaguely whether there was any ham left, that I saw a man standing in the doorway to the surgery.

I shrieked, and leaped to my feet, sending Henry Fielding flying.

“Your pardon, mistress!” Thomas Christie blurted, looking nearly as startled as I felt. “I didna realize that you’d not heard me.”

“No. I—I—was reading.” I gestured foolishly toward the book on the floor. My heart was pounding, and blood surged to and fro in my body, seemingly at random, so that my face flushed, my ears throbbed, and my hands tingled, all out of control.

He stooped and picked the book up, smoothing its cover with the careful attitude of one who values books, though the volume itself was battered, its cover scarred with rings where wet glasses or bottles had been set down upon it. Jamie had got it from the owner of an ordinary in Cross Creek, in partial trade for a load of firewood; some customer had left it, months before.

“Is there no one here to care for you?” he asked, frowning as he looked around. “Shall I go and fetch my daughter to you?”

“No. I mean—I don’t need anyone. I’m quite all right. What about you?” I asked quickly, forestalling any further expressions of concern on his part. He glanced at my face, then hastily away. Eyes fixed carefully in the vicinity of my collarbone, he laid the book on the table and held out his right hand, wrapped in a cloth.

“I beg your pardon, mistress. I wouldna intrude, save …”

I was already unwrapping the hand. He’d ripped the incision in his right hand—probably, I realized with a small tightening of the belly, in the course of the fight with the bandits. The wound was no great matter, but there were bits of dirt and debris in the wound, and the edges were red and gaping, raw surfaces clouded with a film of pus.

“You should have come at once,” I said, though with no tone of rebuke. I knew perfectly well why he hadn’t—and in fact, I should have been in no state to deal with him, if he had.

He shrugged slightly, but didn't bother replying. I sat him down and went to fetch things. Luckily, there was some of the antiseptic salve left that I'd made for Jamie's splinter. That, a quick alcohol wash, clean bandage …

He was turning the pages of *Tom Jones* slowly, lips pursed in concentration. Evidently Henry Fielding would do as anesthetic for the job at hand; I shouldn't need to fetch a Bible.

"Do you read novels?" I asked, meaning no rudeness, but merely surprised that he might countenance anything so frivolous.

He hesitated. "Yes. I—yes." He took a very deep breath as I submerged his hand in the bowl, but it contained only water, soaproot, and a very small amount of alcohol, and he let the breath go with a sigh.

"Have you read *Tom Jones* before?" I asked, making conversation to relax him.

"Not precisely, though I know the story. My wife—"

He stopped abruptly. He'd never mentioned his wife before; I supposed that it was sheer relief at not experiencing agony yet that had made him talkative. He seemed to realize that he must complete the sentence, though, and went on, reluctantly. "My wife … read novels."

"Did she?" I murmured, setting about the job of debridement. "Did she like them?"

"I suppose that she must have."

There was something odd in his voice that made me glance up from the job at hand. He caught the glance and looked away, flushing.

"I—did not approve of reading novels. Then."

He was quiet for a moment, holding his hand steady. Then he blurted, "I burnt her books."

That sounded rather more like the response I would have expected of him.

"She couldn't have been pleased about that," I said mildly, and he shot me a startled glance, as though the question of his wife's reaction was so irrelevant as to be unworthy of remark.

"Ah … what caused you to alter your opinion?" I asked, concentrating on the bits of debris I was picking out of the wound with my forceps. Splinters and shreds of bark. What had he been doing? Wielding a club of some kind, I thought—a tree branch? I breathed deeply, concentrating on the job to avoid thinking of the bodies in the clearing.

He moved his legs restively; I was hurting him a bit now.

"I—it—in Ardsmuir."

"What? You read it in prison?"

"No. We had no books there." He took a long breath, glanced at me, then away, and fixed his eyes on the corner of the room, where an enterprising spider had taken advantage of Mrs. Bug's temporary absence to set up web-keeping.

"In fact, I have never actually read it. Mr. Fraser, though, was accustomed to recount the story to the other prisoners. He has a fine memory," he added, rather grudgingly.

"Yes, he does," I murmured. "I'm not going to stitch it; it will be better if the wound's left to heal by itself. I'm afraid the scar won't be as neat," I added regretfully, "but I think it will heal up all right."

I spread salve thickly over the injury, and pulled the edges of the wound together as tightly as I could, without cutting off the circulation. Bree had been experimenting with adhesive bandages, and had produced something quite useful in the way of small butterfly shapes, made of starched linen and pine tar.

"So you liked Tom Jones, did you?" I said, returning to the subject. "I shouldn't have thought you'd find him an admirable character. Not much of a moral example, I mean."

"I don't," he said bluntly. "But I saw that fiction"—he pronounced the word gingerly, as though it were something dangerous—"is perhaps not, as I had thought, merely an inducement to idleness and wicked fancy."

"Oh, isn't it?" I said, amused, but trying not to smile because of my lip. "What are its redeeming characteristics, do you think?"

"Aye, well." His brows drew together in thought "I found it most remarkable. That what is essentially nothing save a confection of lies should somewise still contrive to exert a beneficial effect. For it did," he concluded, sounding still rather surprised.

"Really? How was that?"

He tilted his head, considering.

"It was distraction, to be sure. In such conditions, distraction is not evil," he assured me. "While it is of course more desirable to escape into prayer …"

"Oh, of course," I murmured.

"But beyond that consideration … it drew the men together. You would not think that such men—Highlanders, crofters—that they would find themselves in particular sympathy with … such situations, such persons." He waved his free hand at the book, indicating such persons as Squire Allworthy and Lady Bellaston, I supposed.

"But they would talk it over for hours—whilst we labored the next day, they would wonder why Ensign Northerton had done as he had with regard to Miss Western, and argue whether they themselves would or would not have behaved so." His face lightened a little, recalling something. "And invariably, a man would shake his head and say, 'At least I've never been treated in *that* manner!' He might be starved, cold, covered in sores, permanently separated from his family and customary circumstances—and yet he could take comfort in never having suffered such vicissitudes as had befallen these imaginary beings!"

He actually smiled, shaking his head at the thought, and I thought the smile much improved him.

I'd finished the job, and laid his hand on the table.

"Thank you," I said quietly.

He looked startled.

"What? Why?"

"I'm assuming that that injury was perhaps the result of b-battle done on my behalf," I said. I touched his hand lightly. "I, er … well." I took a deep breath. "Thank you."

"Oh." He looked thoroughly taken aback at this, and quite embarrassed.

“I … erm … hmm!” He pushed back the stool and rose, looking flustered.

I rose, as well.

“You’ll need to have fresh salve put on every day,” I said, resuming a businesslike tone. “I’ll make up some more; you can come, or send Malva to fetch it.”

He nodded, but said nothing, having evidently exhausted his supply of sociability for the day. I saw his eye linger on the cover of the book, though, and on impulse offered it to him.

“Would you like to borrow it? You should really read it for yourself; I’m sure Jamie can’t have recalled all the details.”

“Oh!” He looked startled, and pursed his lips, frowning, as though suspecting it was a trap of some sort. When I insisted, though, he took the book, picking it up with an expression of guarded avidity that made me wonder how long it had been since he had had any book other than the Bible to read.

He nodded thanks to me, and donned his hat, turning to go. Upon a moment’s impulse, I asked, “Did you ever have the chance to apologize to your wife?”

That was a mistake. His face tightened into coldness and his eyes went flat as a snake’s.

“No,” he said shortly. I thought for a moment that he would put the book down and refuse to take it. But instead, he tightened his lips, tucked the volume more securely under his arm, and left, without further farewell.

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31

AND SO TO BED

No one else came. By the time night fell, I was beginning to feel rather edgy, starting at noises, searching the deepening shadows under the chestnut trees for lurking men—or worse. I thought I should cook something; surely Jamie and Ian intended coming home for supper? Or perhaps I should go down to the cabin, join Roger and Bree.

But I flinched from the notion of being exposed to any kind of solicitude, no matter how well meant, and while I hadn't yet got up the nerve to look in a mirror, was reasonably sure that the sight of me would frighten Jemmy—or at least lead to a lot of questions. I didn't want to have to try to explain to him what had happened to me. I was fairly sure that Jamie had told Brianna to stay away for a bit, and that was good. I really was in no shape to pretend to be all right. Not quite yet.

Dithering round the kitchen, I picked things up and put them down pointlessly. I opened the drawers of the sideboard and closed them—then opened the second one again, the one where Jamie kept his pistols.

Most of the pistols were gone. Only the gilt-trimmed one that didn't shoot straight was left, with a few loads and a tiny powder horn, the sort made for fancy dueling pistols.

Hands shaking only a little, I loaded it, and poured a bit of powder into the firing pan.

When the back door opened, quite some time later, I was sitting at the table, a copy of *Don Quixote* lying in front of me, pointing the pistol with both hands at the door.

Ian froze momentarily.

"Ye'd never hit anyone wi' that gun at this distance, Auntie," he said mildly, coming in.

"They wouldn't know that, would they?" I set the pistol down, gingerly. My palms were damp, and my fingers ached.

He nodded, taking the point, and sat down.

"Where's Jamie?" I asked.

"Washing. Are ye well, Auntie?" His soft hazel eyes took a casual but careful estimation of my state.

"No, but I'll do." I hesitated. "And … Mr. Brown? Did he—tell you anything?"

Ian made a derogatory noise.

"Pissed himself when Uncle Jamie took the dirk from his belt to clean his fingernails. We didna touch him, Auntie, dinna fash yourself."

Jamie came in then, clean-shaven, his skin cold and fresh from the well water, hair damp at his temples. Despite that, he looked tired to death, the lines of his face cut deep and his eyes shadowed. The shadows lifted a bit, though, when he saw me and the pistol.

"It's all right, *a nighean,*" he said softly, touching my shoulder as he sat down beside me. "I've men set to watch the house—just in case. Though I dinna expect any trouble for some days yet."

My breath went out in a long sigh.

"You could have told me that."

He glanced at me, surprised.

"I thought ye'd know. Surely ye wouldna think I'd leave ye unprotected, Sassenach?"

I shook my head, momentarily unable to speak. Had I been in any condition to think logically, of course I wouldn't. As it was, I had spent most of the afternoon in a state of quiet—and unnecessary—terror, imagining, remembering.…

"I'm sorry, lass," he said softly, and put a large, cold hand on mine. "I shouldna have left ye alone. I thought—"

I shook my head, but put my other hand over his, pressing tight.

"No, you were right. I couldn't have borne any company, beyond Sancho Panza."

He glanced at *Don Quixote,* then at me, brows raised. The book was in Spanish, which I didn't happen to speak.

"Well, some of it was close to French, and I did know the story," I said. I took a deep breath, taking what comfort I could in the warmth of the fire, the flicker of the candle, and the proximity of the two of them, large, solid, pragmatic, and—outwardly, at least—imperturbable.

"Is there any food, Auntie?" Ian inquired, getting up to look. Lacking any appetite myself, and too jittery to focus on anything, I hadn't eaten dinner nor made anything for supper—but there was always food in that house, and without any particular fuss, Jamie and Ian had equipped themselves in short order with the remains of a cold partridge pie, several hard-cooked eggs, a dish of piccalilli, and half a loaf of bread, which they sliced up and toasted over the fire on a fork, buttering the slices and cramming them into me in a manner brooking no argument.

Hot, buttered toast is immensely comforting, even nibbled tentatively with a sore jaw. With food in my stomach, I began to feel much calmer, and capable of inquiring what they had learned from Lionel Brown.

"He put it all on Hodgepile," Jamie told me, loading piccalilli onto a slice of pie. "He would, of course."

"You didn't meet Arvin Hodgepile," I said, with a small shiver. "Er … to talk to, I mean."

He shot me a sharp look, but didn't address that matter any further, instead leaving it to Ian to explain Lionel Brown's version of events.

It had started with him and his brother, Richard, establishing their Committee of Safety. This, he had insisted, was intended as public service, pure and simple. Jamie snorted at that, but didn't interrupt.

Most of the male inhabitants of Brownsville had joined the committee—most of the homesteaders and small farmers nearby had not. Still, so far, so good. The committee had dealt with a number of small matters, meting out justice in cases of assault, theft, and the like, and if they had appropriated the odd hog or deer carcass by way of payment for their trouble, there hadn't been too much complaint.

"There's a great deal of feeling still, about the Regulation," Ian explained, frowning as he sliced another piece of bread. "The Browns didna join the Regulation; they'd no need to, as their cousin was sheriff, and half the courthouse ring are Browns, or marrit to Browns." Corruption, in other words, had been on their side.

Regulator sentiment still ran high in the backcountry, even though the main leaders of the movement, such as Hermon Husband and James Hunter, had left the colony. In the aftermath of Alamance, most Regulators had grown more cautious of expressing themselves—but several Regulator families who lived near Brownsville had become vocal in their criticism of the Browns' influence on local politics and business.

"Tige O'Brian was one of those?" I asked, feeling the buttered toast coalesce into a small, hard lump in my stomach. Jamie had told me what had happened to the O'Brians—and I'd seen Roger's face when he'd come back.

Jamie nodded, not looking up from his pie.

"Enter Arvin Hodgepile," he said, and took a ferocious bite. Hodgepile, having neatly escaped the constraints of the British army by pretending to die in the warehouse fire at Cross Creek, had set about making a living in various unsavory ways. And, water having a strong tendency to seek its own level, had ended up with a small gang of like-minded thugs.

This gang had begun simply enough, by robbing anyone they came across, holding up taverns, and the like. This sort of behavior tends to attract attention, though, and with various constables, sheriffs, Committees of Safety, and the like on their trail, the gang had retired from the piedmont where they began, and moved up into the mountains, where they could find isolated settlements and homesteads. They had also begun killing their victims, to avoid the nuisance of identification and pursuit.

"Or most of them," Ian murmured. He regarded the half-eaten egg in his hand for a moment, then put it down.

In his career with the army in Cross Creek, Hodgepile had made various contacts with a number of river traders and coastal smugglers. Some dealt in furs, others in anything that would bring a profit.

"And it occurred to them," Jamie said, drawing a deep breath, "that girls and women and young boys are more profitable than almost anything—save whisky, maybe." The corner of his mouth twitched, but it wasn't a smile.

"Our Mr. Brown insists he'd nothing to do wi' this," Ian added, a cynical note in his voice. "Nor had his brother or their committee."

"But how did the Browns get involved with Hodgepile's gang?" I asked. "And what did they do with the people they kidnapped?"

The answer to the first question was that it had been the happy outcome of a botched robbery.

"Ye recall Aaron Beardsley's auld place, aye?"

"I do," I said, wrinkling my nose in reflex at the memory of that wretched sty, then emitting a small cry and clapping both hands over my abused appendage.

Jamie glanced at me, and put another bit of bread on his toasting fork.

"Well, so," he went on, ignoring my protest that I was full, "the Browns took it over, of course, when they adopted the wee lass. They cleaned it out, stocked it fresh, and went on using it as a trading post."

The Cherokee and Catawba had been accustomed to come to the place—horrid as it was—when Aaron Beardsley had operated as an Indian trader, and had continued to do business with the new management—a very beneficial and profitable arrangement all round.

"Which is what Hodgepile saw," Ian put in. The Hodgepile gang, with their usual straightforward methods of doing business, had walked in, shot the couple in charge, and begun systematically looting the place. The couple's eleven-year-old daughter, who had fortunately been in the barn when the gang arrived, had slipped out, mounted a mule, and ridden hell-for-leather for Brownsville and help. By good fortune, she had encountered the Committee of Safety, returning from some errand, and brought them back in time to confront the robbers.

There then ensued what in later years would be called a Mexican standoff. The Browns had the house surrounded. Hodgepile, however, had Alicia Beardsley Brown—the two-year-old girl who legally owned the trading post, and who had been adopted by the Browns upon the death of her putative father.

Hodgepile had enough food and ammunition inside the trading post to withstand a siege of weeks; the Browns were disinclined to set fire to their valuable property in order to drive him out, or to risk the girl's life by storming the place. After a day or two during which desultory shots were exchanged, and the members of the committee became increasingly edgy at having to camp in the woods surrounding the trading post, a flag of truce had been waved from the upper window, and Richard Brown had gone inside to parley with Hodgepile.

The result being a wary sort of merger. Hodgepile's gang would continue their operations, steering clear of any settlement under the Browns' protection, but would bring the proceeds of their robberies to the trading post, where they could be disposed of inconspicuously at a good profit, with Hodgepile's gang taking a generous cut.

"The proceeds," I said, accepting a fresh slice of buttered toast from Jamie. "That—you do mean captives?"

"Sometimes." His lips pressed tight as he poured a mug of cider and handed it to me. "And depending upon where they were. When they took captives in the mountains, some of them were sold to the Indians, through the trading post. Those they took from the piedmont, they sold to river pirates, or took to the coast to sell on to the Indies—that would be the best price, aye? A fourteen-year-old lad would bring a hundred pound, at least."

My lips felt numb, and not only from the cider.

"How long?" I said, appalled. "How many?" Children, young men, young women, wrenched from their homes and sold cold-bloodedly into slavery. No one to follow. Even if they were somehow to escape eventually, there would be no place—no one—to return to.

Jamie sighed. He looked unutterably tired.

"Brown doesna ken," Ian said quietly. "He says … He says he'd nothing to do with it."

"Like bloody hell he hadn't," I said, a flash of fury momentarily eclipsing horror. "He was *with* Hodgepile when they came here. He knew they meant to take the whisky. And he must have been with them before, when they—did other things."

Jamie nodded.

"He claims he tried to stop them from taking you."

"He did," I said shortly. "And then he tried to make them kill me, to stop me telling you he'd been there. And then he bloody meant to drown me himself! I don't suppose he told you that."

"No, he didn't." Ian exchanged a brief look with Jamie, and I saw some unspoken agreement pass between them. It occurred to me that I might possibly just have sealed Lionel Brown's fate. If so, I was not sure I felt guilty about it.

"What—what do you mean to do with him?" I asked.

"I think perhaps I will hang him," Jamie replied, after a moment's pause. "But I've more questions I want answered. And I must think about how best to manage the matter. Dinna bother about it, Sassenach; ye'll not see him again."

With that, he stood and stretched, muscles cracking, then shifted his shoulders, settling himself with a sigh. He gave me a hand and helped me to my feet.

"Go up to bed, Sassenach, and I'll be up directly. I must just have a wee word with Ian first."

* * *

Hot buttered toast, cider, and conversation had made me feel momentarily better. I found myself so tired, though, that I could barely drag myself up the stairs, and was obliged to sit on the bed, swaying blearily, in hopes of getting up the strength to take off my clothes. It was a few moments before I noticed that Jamie was hovering in the doorway.

“Erm …?” I said vaguely.

“I didna ken, did ye want me to stay with ye tonight?” he asked diffidently. “If ye’d rest better alone, I could take Joseph’s bed. Or if ye’d like, I could sleep beside ye, on the floor.”

“Oh,” I said blankly, trying to weigh these alternatives. “No. Stay. Sleep with me, I mean.” From the bottom of a well of fatigue, I summoned something like a smile. “You can warm the bed, at least.”

A most peculiar expression flitted across his face at that, and I blinked, not sure I’d seen it. I had, though; his face was caught between embarrassment and dismayed amusement—with somewhere behind all that the sort of look he might have worn if going to the stake: heroically resigned.

“What on *earth* have you been doing?” I asked, sufficiently surprised as to be shaken out of my torpor.

Embarrassment was getting the upper hand; the tips of his ears were going red, and a flush was visible in his cheeks, even by the dim light of the taper I’d set on the table.

“I wasna going to tell ye,” he muttered, avoiding my gaze. “I swore wee Ian and Roger Mac to silence.”

“Oh, they’ve been silent as the grave,” I assured him. Though this statement did perhaps explain the occasional odd look on Roger’s face, of late. “What’s been going on?”

He sighed, scraping the edge of his boot across the floor.

“Aye, well. It’s Tsisqua, d’ye see? He meant it as hospitality, the first time, but then when Ian told him … well, it wasna the best thing to have said, under the circumstances, only … And then the next time we came, and there they were again, only a different pair, and when I tried to make them leave, they said Bird said to say that it was honor to my vow, for what good was a vow that cost nothing to keep? And I will be damned if I ken does he mean that, or is he only thinking that either I’ll crack and he’ll have the upper hand of me for good, or that I’ll get him the guns he wants to put an end to it one way or the other—or is he only having a joke at my expense? Even Ian says he canna tell which it is, and if he—”

“Jamie,” I said. “What are you talking about?”

He stole a quick glance at me, then looked away again.

"Ah … naked women," he blurted, and went red as a piece of new flannel.

I stared at him for a moment. My ears still buzzed slightly, but there wasn't anything wrong with my hearing. I pointed a finger at him—carefully, because all my fingers were swollen and bruised.

"You," I said, in measured tones, "come here right now. Sit down right there"—I pointed at the bed beside me—"and tell me in words of one syllable *exactly* what you've been doing."

He did, with the result that five minutes later I was lying flat on the bed, wheezing with laughter, moaning with the pain to my cracked ribs, and with helpless tears running down my temples and into my ears.

"Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God," I gasped. "I can't stand it, I really can't. Help me sit up." I extended a hand, yelped with pain as his fingers closed on my lacerated wrist, but got upright at last, bent over with a pillow clutched to my middle, and clutched it tighter each time a gust of recurrent laughter struck me.

"I'm glad ye think it's sae funny, Sassenach," Jamie said very dryly. He'd recovered himself to some extent, though his face was still flushed. "Ye're sure ye're no hysterical?"

"No, not at all." I sniffed, dabbing at my eyes with a damp linen hankie, then snorted with uncontainable mirth. "Oh! Ow, God, that hurts."

Sighing, he poured a cup of water from the flask on the bedside table, and held it for me to drink. It was cool, but flat and rather stale; I thought perhaps it had been standing since before …

"All right," I said, waving the cup away and dabbing moisture very carefully from my lips. "I'm fine." I breathed shallowly, feeling my heart begin to slow down. "Well. So. At least now I know why you've been coming back from the Cherokee villages in such a state of—of—" I felt an unhinged giggle rising, and bent over, moaning as I stifled it. "Oh, Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ. And here I thought it was thoughts of me, driving you mad with lust."

He snorted then himself, though mildly. He put down the cup, rose, and turned back the coverlet. Then he looked at me, and his eyes were clear, unguarded.

"Claire," he said, quite gently, "it *was* you. It's always been you, and it always will be. Get into bed, and put the candle out. As soon as I've fastened the shutters, smoored the hearth, and barred the door, I'll come and keep ye warm."

* * *

"Kill me." Randall's eyes were fever-bright. "Kill me," he said. "My heart's desire."

He jerked awake, hearing the words echo in his head, seeing the eyes, seeing the rain-matted hair, Randall's face, wet as that of a drowned man.

He rubbed a hand hard over his own face, surprised to feel his skin dry, his beard no more than a shadow. The sense of wet, the itching scurf of a month's whiskers, was still so strong that he got up, moving quietly by instinct, and went to the window, where moonlight shone through the cracks in the shutter. He poured a little water into the basin, moved the bowl into a shaft of light, and looked in, to rid himself of that lingering sense of being someone else, somewhere else.

The face in the water was no more than a featureless oval, but smooth-shaven, and the hair lay loose on his shoulders, not bound up for battle. And yet it seemed the face of a stranger.

Unsettled, he left the water in the bowl, and after a moment, padded softly back to the bed.

She was asleep. He had not even thought of her when he woke, but now the sight of her steadied him. That face he knew, even battered and swollen as it was.

He set his hand on the bedstead, comforted by the solid wood. Sometimes when he woke, the dream stayed with him, and he felt the real world ghostly, faint around him. Sometimes he feared he was a ghost.

But the sheets were cool on his skin, and Claire's warmth a reassurance. He reached for her, and she rolled over, curled herself backward into his arms with a small moan of content, her bum roundly solid against him.

She fell asleep again at once; she hadn't really waked. He had an urge to rouse her, make her talk to him—only to be quite sure she could see him, hear him. He only held her tight, though, and over her curly head he watched the door, as though it might open and Jack Randall stand there, soaked and streaming.

Kill me, he'd said. My heart's desire.

His heart beat slow, echoing in the ear he pressed against the pillow. Some nights, he would fall asleep listening to it, comforted by the fleshy, monotonous thump. Other times, like now, he would hear instead the mortal silence in between the beats—that silence that patiently awaits all men.

He had drawn the quilts up, but now put them back, so that Claire was covered but his own back lay bare, open to the chill of the room, that he might not slip warmly into sleep and risk returning to the dream. Let sleep struggle for him in the cold, and at last pull him off the precipice of consciousness, down to the deeps of black oblivion.

For he did not wish to know what Randall had meant by what he said.

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HANGING'S TOO GOOD

In the morning, Mrs. Bug was back in the kitchen, and the air was warm and fragrant with the smells of cooking. She seemed quite as usual, and beyond a brief glance at my face and a "tsk!", not inclined to fuss. Either she had more sensitivity than I'd thought, or Jamie had had a word.

"Here, *a muirninn,* have it while it's hot." Mrs. Bug slid a heap of turkey hash from the platter onto my plate, and deftly topped it with a fried egg.

I nodded thanks and picked up my fork, with a certain lack of enthusiasm. My jaw was still so sore that eating was a slow and painful business.

The egg went down all right, but the smell of burned onion seemed very strong, oily in my nostrils. I separated a small bite of potato and mashed it against the roof of my mouth, squashing it with my tongue in lieu of chewing it, then washing it down with a sip of coffee.

More in hopes of distracting myself than because I truly wanted to know, I asked, "And how is Mr. Brown this morning?"

Her lips tightened, and she smacked down a spatula of fried potatoes as though they were Brown's brains.

"Nowhere near sae badly off as he ought to be," she said. "Hanging's too good for him, and him nay more than a wretched dungheap, crawling wi' maggots."

I spit out the bit of potato I'd been mangling, and took another hasty gulp of coffee. It hit bottom and started back up. I pushed back the bench and ran for the door, reaching it just in time to throw up into the blackberry bush, retching coffee, bile, and fried egg.

I was dimly aware of Mrs. Bug, hovering anxiously in the doorway, and waved her away with one hand. She hesitated for a moment, but then went in again, as I stood up and started toward the well.

The entire inside of my head tasted of coffee and bile, and the back of my nose stung terribly. I felt as though my nose were bleeding again, but when I touched it gingerly, discovered that it wasn't. Careful swilling with water cleansed my mouth, and did a bit to remedy the nasty taste—but nothing to drown the panic that had come in the wake of the nausea.

I had the sudden, distinct, and thoroughly bizarre impression that my skin was missing. My legs felt shaky, and I sat down on the stump where we split kindling, heedless of splinters.

I can't, I thought. *I simply can't.*

I sat on the chopping block, lacking the will to rise. I could feel my womb, very distinctly. A small, round weight at the base of my abdomen, feeling slightly swollen, very tender.

Nothing, I thought, with what determination I could muster. Entirely normal. It always feels that way, at a particular point of my cycle. And after what we had done, Jamie and I … well, no bloody wonder if I were still conscious of my interior workings. Granted, we hadn't, the night before; I'd wanted nothing but to be held. On the other hand, I'd nearly ruptured myself, laughing. A small laugh escaped me now, remembering Jamie's confession. It hurt, and I clutched my ribs, but felt a little better.

"Well, bloody hell anyway," I said aloud, and got up. "I've things to do."

Propelled by this bold statement, I fetched my basket and foraging knife, told Mrs. Bug I was off, and set out toward the Christies'.

I’d check Tom’s hand, then invite Malva to come out with me in search of ginseng root, and any other useful things we might come across. She was an apt pupil, observant and quick, with a good memory for plants. And I’d meant to teach her how to prepare penicillin colonies. Picking through a collection of damp, moldy garbage would be soothing. I ignored a slight tendency of my gorge to rise at the thought, and lifted my battered face to the morning sun.

And I wasn’t going to worry about what Jamie meant to do with Lionel Brown, either.

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IN WHICH MRS. BUG TAKES A HAND

By the next morning, I had recovered quite a bit. My stomach had settled, and I felt much more resilient, emotionally; a good thing, as whatever warnings Jamie had given Mrs. Bug about fussing over me had plainly worn off.

Everything hurt less, and my hands had nearly returned to normal, but I was still desperately tired, and it was in fact rather comforting to put my feet up on the settle and be brought cups of coffee—the tea was running very low, and no chance of more likely for several years—and dishes of rice pudding with raisins in.

“And ye’re quite sure as your face will go back to lookin’ like a face, are ye?” Mrs. Bug handed me a fresh muffin, dripping with butter and honey, and peered dubiously at me, lips pursed.

I was tempted to ask her what the thing on the front of my head looked like now, but was fairly sure I didn’t want to hear the answer. Instead, I contented myself with a brief “Yes” and a request for more coffee.

“I kent a wumman up in Kirkcaldy once, as was kicked in the face by a cow,” she said, still eyeing me critically as she dished up the coffee. “Lost her front teeth, puir creature, and ever after, her nose pointed off to the side, like *that.*” She pushed her own small round nose sharply to the side with an index finger in illustration, simultaneously tucking her upper lip under the lower one to simulate toothlessness.

I touched the bridge of my own nose carefully, but it was reassuringly straight, if still puffy.

"And then there was WIlliam McCrea of Balgownie, him who fought at Sheriffsmuir with my Arch. Got in the way of an English pike, and cleaved off half his jaw, *and* the best part of his nose! Arch said ye could see straight into his gullet and his brain-box both—but he lived. On parritch, mostly," she added. "And whisky."

"What a very good idea," I said, putting down the nibbled muffin. "I believe I'll go and get some."

Carrying my cup, I escaped as quickly as I could down the hall to my surgery, followed by shouted reminiscences of Dominic Mulroney, an Irishman who'd walked face-first into a church door in Edinburgh and him sober as a sheep at the time.…

I shut the door of the surgery behind me, opened the window, and tossed the remains of the coffee out, then took down the bottle from the shelf and filled my cup to the brim.

I had intended to ask Mrs. Bug about Lionel Brown's state of health, but … perhaps that could wait. I found that my hands were trembling again, and had to press them flat on the table for a moment to steady them before I could pick up the cup.

I took a deep breath, and a swallow of whisky. Another. Yes, that was better.

Small waves of pointless panic tended still to seize me unawares. I hadn't had one this morning, and had rather hoped they'd gone away. Not quite yet, apparently.

I sipped whisky, dabbed cold sweat from my temples, and looked round for something useful to do. Malva and I had started some fresh penicillin the day before, and had made up fresh tinctures of boneset and troutlilly, and some fresh gentian salve, as well. I ended up thumbing slowly through my big black casebook, sipping whisky and dwelling on pages recounting various horrible complications of childbirth.

I realized what I was doing, but didn't seem able to stop doing it. I was *not* pregnant. I was sure of it. And yet my womb felt tender, inflamed, and my whole being disturbed.

Oh, there was a jolly one; one of Daniel Rawlings's entries, describing a slave woman of middle age, suffering from a recto-vaginal fistula that caused her to leak a constant small stream of fecal matter through the vagina.

Such fistulas were caused by battering during childbirth, and were more common in very young girls, where the strain of prolonged labor often caused such tears—or in older women, where the tissues had grown less elastic. Of course, in older women, the damage was quite likely to be accompanied by complete perineal collapse, allowing uterus, urethra—and possibly the anus for good measure—to sag through the pelvic floor.

"How extremely fortunate that I am not pregnant," I said aloud, closing the book firmly. Perhaps I'd have another go at *Don Quixote.*

On the whole, it was a considerable relief when Malva Christie came and tapped on the door, just before noon.

She gave my face a quick glance, but as she had the day before, merely accepted my appearance without comment.

"How's your father's hand?" I asked.

"Oh, it's fine, ma'am," she replied quickly. "I looked just as ye said, but no red streaks, no pus, and just that tiny bit of redness near where the skin is cut. I made him wiggle his fingers like ye said," she added, a dimple showing briefly in her cheek. "He didna want to, and carried on like I was poking thorns into him—but he did it."

"Oh, well done!" I said, and patted her on the shoulder, which made her pinken with pleasure.

"I think that deserves a biscuit with honey," I added, having noted the delectable aroma of baking that had been wafting down the hall from the kitchen for the last hour. "Come along."

As we entered the hallway and turned toward the kitchen, though, I heard an odd sort of noise from behind us. A peculiar kind of thumping or dragging outside, as though some large animal was lumbering across the hollow boards of the front stoop.

"What's that?" Malva said, looking over her shoulder in alarm.

A loud groan answered her, and a *thud!* that shook the front door as something fell against it.

“Mary, Joseph, and Bride!” Mrs. Bug had popped out of the kitchen, crossing herself. “What’s that?”

My heart had begun to race at the noises, and my mouth went dry. Something large and dark blocked the line of light beneath the door, and stertorous breathing was clearly audible, interspersed with groans.

“Well, whatever it is, it’s sick or injured,” I said. “Stand back.” I wiped my hands on my apron, swallowed, walked forward, and pulled open the door.

For a moment, I didn’t recognize him; he was no more than a heap of flesh, wild hair, and disheveled garments smeared with dirt. But then he struggled up onto one knee and raised his head, panting, showing me a dead-white face, marked with bruises and glossy with sweat.

“Mr. Brown?” I said, incredulous.

His eyes were glazed; I wasn’t sure that he saw me at all, but clearly he recognized my voice, for he lunged forward, nearly knocking me over. I stepped smartly back, but he caught me by the foot and held on, crying, “Mercy! Mistress, have mercy on me, I pray you!”

“What in the name of—let go. Let go, I say!” I shook my foot, trying to dislodge him, but he clung like a limpet, and went on shouting, “Mercy!” in a sort of hoarse, desperate chant.

“Oh, shut your noise, man,” Mrs. Bug said crossly. Recovered from the shock of his entrance, she appeared not at all discomposed by his appearance, though substantially annoyed by it.

Lionel Brown did not shut up, but went on imploring me for mercy, despite my attempts to placate him. These were interrupted by Mrs. Bug leaning past me, a large meat-mallet in her hand, and dotting Mr. Brown smartly on the head with it. His eyes rolled back in his head and he dropped on his face without another word.

“I’m that sorry, Mrs. Fraser,” Mrs. Bug said, apologetic. “I canna think how he got out, let alone came all this way!”

I didn’t know how he’d got out, either, but it was quite clear how he’d come—he’d crawled, dragging his broken leg. His hands and legs were scratched and bloody, his breeches in tatters, and the whole of him covered with smears of mud, stuck full of grass and leaves.

I leaned down and plucked an elm leaf from his hair, trying to think what on earth to do with him. The obvious, I supposed.

"Help me get him into the surgery," I said, sighing as I bent to get him under the arms.

"Ye canna be doing that, Mrs. Fraser!" Mrs. Bug was scandalized. "Himself was verra fierce about it; ye mustna be troubled by this scoundrel, he said, nor even catch sight of the man!"

"Well, I'm afraid it's a bit late not to catch sight of him," I said, tugging at the inert body. "We can't just let him lie on the porch, can we? Help me!"

Mrs. Bug appeared to see no good reason why Mr. Brown ought *not* to continue lying on the porch, but when Malva—who had been pressed flat against the wall, wide-eyed, during the uproar—came to help, Mrs. Bug gave in with a sigh, laying down her weapon and lending a hand.

He had recovered consciousness by the time we got him manhandled onto the surgery table, and was moaning, "Don't let him kill me … please don't let him kill me!"

"Would you be quiet?" I said, thoroughly irritated. "Let me look at your leg."

No one had improved on my original rough splinting job, and his journey from the Bugs' cabin hadn't done it any good; blood was seeping through the bandages. I was frankly amazed that he had made it, considering his other injuries. His flesh was clammy and his breath shallow, but he wasn't badly fevered.

"Will you bring me some hot water, please, Mrs. Bug?" I asked, gingerly prodding the fractured limb. "And perhaps a little whisky? He'll need something for shock."

"I will not," Mrs. Bug said, giving the patient a look of intense dislike. "We should just be saving Mr. Fraser the trouble of dealing wi' the gobshite, if he hasna got the courtesy to die by himself." She was still holding her mallet, and raised it in a threatening manner, causing Mr. Brown to cower and cry out, as the movement hurt his broken wrist.

"I'll fetch the water," Malva said, and disappeared.

Ignoring my attempts to deal with his injuries, Mr. Brown seized my wrist with his one good hand, his grip surprisingly strong.

"Don't let him kill me," he said hoarsely, fixing me with bloodshot eyes. "Please, I beg you!"

I hesitated. I hadn't exactly forgotten Mr. Brown's existence, but I had more or less suppressed the knowledge of it over the last day or so. I had been only too glad not to think of him.

He saw my hesitation, and licked his lips, trying again.

"Save me, Mrs. Fraser—I implore you! You are the only one he will listen to!"

With some difficulty, I detached his hand from my wrist.

"Why, exactly, do you think anyone wants to kill you?" I asked carefully.

Brown didn't laugh, but his mouth twisted bitterly at that.

"He says that he will. I don't doubt him." He seemed a little calmer now, and took a deep, shuddering breath. "Please, Mrs. Fraser," he said more softly. "I beg you—save me."

I glanced up at Mrs. Bug, and read the truth in her folded arms and tight lips. She knew.

At this point, Malva hurried in, a beaker of hot water in one hand, the whisky jug in the other.

"What shall I do?" she asked breathlessly.

"Er … in the cupboard," I said, trying to focus my mind. "Do you know what comfrey looks like—boneset?" I had hold of Brown's wrist, automatically checking his pulse. It was galloping.

"Aye, ma'am. Shall I put some to steep, then?" She had set down the jug and beaker and was already hunting through the cupboard.

I met Brown's eyes, trying for dispassion.

"You would have killed me, if you could," I said very quietly. My own pulse was going nearly as fast as his.

"No," he said, but his eyes slid away from mine. Only a fraction, but away. "No, I never would!"

"You told H-Hodgepile to kill me." My voice shook on the name and a flush of anger burgeoned suddenly inside me. "You know you did!"

His left wrist was likely broken, and no one had set it; the flesh was puffy, dark with bruising. Even so, he pressed his free hand over mine, urgent with the need to convince me. The smell of him was rank, hot, and feral, like—

I ripped my hand free, revulsion crawling over my skin like a swarm of centipedes. I rubbed my palm hard on my apron, trying not to throw up.

It hadn’t been him. I knew that much. Of all the men, it couldn’t have been him; he had broken his leg in the afternoon. There was no way in which he could have been that heavy, inexorable presence in the night, shoving, stinking. And yet I felt he was, and swallowed bile, my head going suddenly light.

“Mrs. Fraser? Mrs. Fraser!” Malva and Mrs. Bug both spoke together, and before I knew quite what was happening, Mrs. Bug had eased me onto a stool, holding me upright, and Malva was pressing a cup of whisky urgently against my mouth.

I drank, eyes closed, trying to lose myself momentarily in the clean, pungent scent and the searing taste of it.

I remembered Jamie’s fury, the night he had brought me home. Had Brown been in the room with us then, there was no doubt he would have killed the man. Would he do so now, in colder blood? I didn’t know. Brown clearly thought so.

I could hear Brown crying, a low, hopeless sound. I swallowed the last of the whisky, pushed the cup away, and sat up, opening my eyes. To my vague surprise, I was crying, too.

I stood up, and wiped my face on my apron. It smelled comfortingly of butter and cinnamon and fresh applesauce, and the scent of it calmed my nausea.

“The tea’s ready, Mrs. Fraser,” Malva whispered, touching my sleeve. Her eyes were fixed on Brown, huddled miserably on the table. “Will ye drink it?”

“No,” I said. “Give it to him. Then fetch me some bandages—and go home.”

I had no idea what Jamie meant to do; I had no idea what I might do, when I discovered his intent. I didn’t know what to think, or how to feel. The only thing I did know for certain was that I had an injured man before me. For the moment, that would have to be enough.

* * *

For a little while, I managed to forget who he was. Forbidding him to speak, I gritted my teeth and became absorbed in the tasks before me. He sniveled, but kept still. I cleaned, bandaged, tidied, administering impersonal comfort. But as the tasks ended, I was still left with the man, and was conscious of increasing distaste each time I touched him.

At last, I was finished, and went to wash, meticulously wiping my hands with a cloth soaked in turpentine and alcohol, cleaning under each fingernail despite the soreness. I was, I realized, behaving as though he harbored some vile contagion. But I couldn't stop myself.

Lionel Brown watched me apprehensively.

"What d'ye mean to do?"

"I haven't decided yet." This was more or less true. It hadn't been a process of conscious decision, though my course of action—or lack of it—had been determined. Jamie—damn him—had been right. I saw no reason to tell Lionel Brown that, though. Not yet.

He was opening his mouth, no doubt to plead with me further, but I stopped him with a sharp gesture.

"There was a man with you named Donner. What do you know about him?"

Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't that. His mouth hung open a little.

"Donner?" he repeated, looking uncertain.

"Don't dare to tell me you don't remember him," I said, my agitation making me sound fierce.

"Oh, no, ma'am," he assured me hastily. "I recall him fine—just fine! What"—his tongue touched the raw corner of his mouth—"what d'ye want to know about him?"

The main thing I wanted to know was whether he was dead or not, but Brown almost certainly didn't know that.

“Let’s start with his full name,” I proposed, sitting down gingerly beside him, “and go from there.”

In the event, Brown knew little more for sure about Donner *than* his name—which, he said, was Wendigo.

“What?” I said incredulously, but Brown appeared to find nothing odd in it.

“That’s what he said it was,” he said, sounding hurt that I should doubt him. “Indian, in’t it?”

It was. It was, to be precise, the name of a monster from the mythology of some northern tribe—I couldn’t recall which. Brianna’s high-school class had once done a unit of Native American myths, with each child undertaking to explain and illustrate a particular story. Bree had done the Wendigo.

I recalled it only because of the accompanying picture she had drawn, which had stuck with me for some time. Done in a reverse technique, the basic drawing done in white crayon, showing through an overlay of charcoal. Trees, lashing to and fro in a swirl of snow and wind, leaf-stripped and needle-flying, the spaces between them part of the night. The picture had a sense of urgency about it, wildness and movement. It took several moments of looking at it before one glimpsed the face amid the branches. I had actually yelped and dropped the paper when I saw it—much to Bree’s gratification.

“I daresay,” I said, firmly suppressing the memory of the Wendigo’s face. “Where did he come from? Did he live in Brownsville?”

He had stayed in Brownsville, but only for a few weeks. Hodgepile had brought him from somewhere, along with his other men. Brown had taken no notice of him; he caused no trouble.

“He stayed with the widow Baudry,” Brown said, sounding suddenly hopeful. “Might be he told her something of himself. I could find out for you. When I go home.” He gave me a look of what I assumed he meant to be doglike trust, but which looked more like a dying newt.

“Hmm,” I said, giving him a look of extreme skepticism. “We’ll see about that.”

He licked his lips, trying to look pitiful.

"Could I maybe have some water, ma'am?"

I didn't suppose I could let him die of thirst, but I had had quite enough of ministering to the man personally. I wanted him out of my surgery and out of my sight, as soon as possible. I nodded brusquely and stepped into the hall, calling for Mrs. Bug to bring some water.

The afternoon was warm, and I was feeling unpleasantly prickly after working on Lionel Brown. Without warning, a flush of heat rose suddenly upward through my chest and neck and flowed like hot wax over my face, so that sweat popped out behind my ears. Murmuring an excuse, I left the patient to Mrs. Bug, and hurried out into the welcome air.

There was a well outside; no more than a shallow pit, neatly edged with stones. A big gourd dipper was wedged between two of the stones; I pulled it out and, kneeling, scooped up enough water to drink and to splash over my steaming face.

Hot flushes in themselves were not really unpleasant—rather interesting, in fact, in the same way that pregnancy was; that odd feeling as one's body did something quite unexpected, and not within one's conscious control. I wondered briefly whether men felt that way about erections.

At the moment, a hot flush seemed quite welcome. Surely, I told myself, I couldn't be experiencing hot flushes if I were pregnant. Or could I? I had the uneasy knowledge that the hormonal surges of early pregnancy were quite as capable of causing all kinds of peculiar thermal phenomena as were those of the menopause. I was certainly having the sorts of emotional conniptions that went with being pregnant—or menopausal—or from being raped—

"Don't be ridiculous, Beauchamp," I said out loud. "You know quite well you're not pregnant."

Hearing it gave me an odd feeling—nine parts relief, one part regret. Well, perhaps nine thousand, nine hundred, and ninety-nine parts relief, to one of regret—but it was still there.

The flood of sweat that sometimes followed in the wake of a hot flush, though, was something I could do without. The roots of my hair were soaked, and while the cool water on my face was lovely, waves of heat were still blooming over me, spreading like a clinging veil over chest and face and neck and scalp. Seized by impulse, I tipped half a dipperful of water down the inside of my bodice, exhaling in relief as the wetness soaked the cloth, trickling between my breasts and down over my belly, tickling cool between my legs and dripping to the ground.

I looked a mess, but Mrs. Bug wouldn't mind—and the devil with what bloody Lionel Brown thought. Dabbing at my temples with the end of my apron, I made my way back to the house.

The door stood ajar, as I'd left it. I pushed it open, and the strong pure light of the afternoon shone past me, illuminating Mrs. Bug in the act of pressing a pillow over Lionel Brown's face with all her strength.

I stood blinking for a moment, so surprised that I simply couldn't translate the sight into realization. Then I darted forward with an incoherent cry and grabbed her arm.

She was terribly strong, and so focused on what she was doing that she didn't budge, veins standing out in her forehead and her face nearly purple with effort. I jerked hard on her arm, failed to dislodge her grip, and in desperation shoved her as hard as I could.

She staggered, off-balance, and I snatched the edge of the pillow, yanking it sideways, off Brown's face. She lunged back, intent on completing the job, blunt hands shoving down into the mass of the pillow and disappearing to the wrists.

I drew back a step and flung myself at her bodily. We went over with a crash, hitting the table, upsetting the bench, and ending in a tangle on the floor amid a litter of broken earthenware and the scents of mint tea and a spilled chamber pot.

I rolled, gasped for breath, pain from my cracked ribs paralyzing me for a moment. Then I gritted my teeth, pushing her away and trying to extricate myself from a snarl of skirts—and stumbled to my feet.

His hand hung limp, trailing from the table, and I grabbed his jaw, pulling back his head, and pressed my mouth fervently to his. I blew what little breath I had into him, gasped, and blew again, all the time feeling frantically for some trace of a pulse in his neck.

He was warm, the bones of his jaw, his shoulder felt normal—but his flesh had a terrible slackness, the lips under mine flattening obscenely as I pressed and blew, blood from my split lip splattering everywhere, falling somehow away, so that I was forced to suck frantically to keep them sealed, breathing in hard through the corners of my mouth, fighting my ribs for enough air to blow again.

I felt someone behind me—Mrs. Bug—and kicked out at her. She made an effort to seize my shoulder, but I wrenched aside and her fingers slipped off. I turned round fast and hit her, as hard as I could, in the stomach, and she fell down on the floor with a loud *whoof!* No time to spare for her; I whirled and flung myself once more on Brown.

The chest under my hand rose reassuringly as I blew—but fell abruptly as I stopped. I drew back and pounded hard with both fists, smacking the hard springiness of the sternum with enough force to bruise my own hands further—and Brown's flesh, had he been capable of bruising any longer.

He wasn't. I blew and thumped and blew, until bloody sweat ran down my body in streams and my thighs were slick with it and my ears rang and black spots swam before my eyes with hyperventilating. Finally, I stopped. I stood panting in deep, wheezing gasps, wet hair hanging in my face, my hands throbbing in time to my pounding heart.

The bloody man was dead.

I rubbed my hands on my apron, then used it to wipe my face. My mouth was swollen and tasted of blood; I spat on the floor. I felt quite calm; the air had that peculiar sense of stillness that often accompanies a quiet death. A Carolina wren called in the wood nearby, "Teakettle, teakettle, teakettle!"

I heard a small rustling noise and turned round. Mrs. Bug had righted the bench and sat down on it. She sat hunched forward, hands folded together in her lap, a small frown on her wrinkled round face as she stared intently at the body on the table. Brown's hand hung limp, fingers slightly cupped, holding shadows.

The sheet was stained over his body; that was the source of the chamber pot smell. So, he'd been dead before I began my resuscitation efforts.

Another wave of heat bloomed upward, coating my skin like hot wax. I could smell my own sweat. I closed my eyes briefly, then opened them, and turned back to Mrs. Bug.

"Why on *earth,*" I asked conversationally, "did you do that?"

* * *

"She's done what?" Jamie stared at me uncomprehendingly, then at Mrs. Bug, who sat at the kitchen table, head bowed, her hands clasped together in front of her.

Not waiting for me to repeat what I'd said, he strode down the hall to the surgery. I heard his footsteps come to a sudden stop. There was an instant's silence, and then a heartfelt Gaelic oath. Mrs. Bug's plump shoulders rose around her ears.

The footsteps came back, more slowly. He came in, and walked to the table where she sat.

"O, woman, how have you dared to lay hands upon a man who was mine?" he asked very softly, in Gaelic.

"Oh, sir," she whispered. She was afraid to look up; she cowered under her cap, her face almost invisible. "I—I didna mean to. Truly, sir!"

Jamie glanced at me.

"She smothered him," I repeated. "With a pillow."

"I think ye do not do such a thing without meaning it," he said, with an edge in his voice that could have sharpened knives. "What were ye about, *a boireannach,* to do it?"

The round shoulders began to quiver with fright.

"Oh, sir, oh, sir! I ken 'twas wrong—only … only it was the wicked tongue of him. All the time I had care of him, he'd cower and tremble, aye, when you or the young one came to speak to him, even Arch—but me—" She swallowed, the flesh of her face seeming suddenly loose. "I'm no but a woman, he could speak his mind to me, and he did. Threatening, sir, and cursing most awfully. He said—he said as how his brother would come, him and his men, to free him, and would slaughter us all in our blood and burn the houses over our heids." Her jowls trembled as she spoke, but she found the courage to look up and meet Jamie's eyes.

"I kent ye'd never let that happen, sir, and did my best to pay him no mind. And when he did get under my skin enough, I told him he'd be deid long before his brother heard where he was. But then the wicked wee cur escaped—and I'm sure I've no idea how 'twas done, for I'd have sworn he was in no condition even to rise from the bed, let alone come so far, but he did, and threw himself upon your wife's mercy, and she took him up—I would have dragged his evil carcass away myself, but she wouldna have it—" Here she darted a briefly resentful glance at me, but returned an imploring gaze to Jamie almost at once.

"And she took him to mend, sweet gracious lady that she is, sir—and I could see it in her face, that having tended him so, it was coming to her that she couldna bear to see him killed. And he saw it, too, the gobshite, and when she went out, he jeered at me, saying now he was safe, he'd fooled her into tending him and she'd never let him be killed, and directly he was free of the place, he'd have a score of men down upon us like vengeance itself, and then …" She closed her eyes, swaying briefly, and pressed a hand to her chest.

"I couldn't help it, sir," she said very simply. "I really couldn't."

Jamie had been attending to her, a look like thunder on his brow. At this point, he glanced sharply at me—and evidently saw corroborative evidence upon my own battered features. His lips pressed tight together.

"Go home," he said to Mrs. Bug. "Tell your husband what you have done, and send him to me."

He turned on his heel then, and headed for his study. Not looking at me, Mrs. Bug rose awkwardly to her feet and went out, walking like a blind woman.

* * *

"You were right. I'm sorry." I stood stiffly in the door of the study, hand on the jamb.

Jamie was sitting with his elbows on his desk, head resting on his hands, but looked up at this, blinking.

"Did I not forbid ye to be sorry, Sassenach?" he said, and gave me a lopsided smile. Then his eyes traveled over me, and a look of concern came over his face.

"Christ, ye look like ye're going to fall down, Claire," he said, getting up hastily. "Come and sit."

He put me in his chair, and hovered over me.

"I'd call Mrs. Bug to bring ye something," he said, "but as I've sent her away … shall I bring ye a cup of tea, Sassenach?"

I'd been feeling like crying, but laughed instead, blinking back tears.

"We haven't got any. We haven't had for months. I'm all right. Just rather—rather shocked."

"Aye, I suppose so. Ye're bleeding a bit." He pulled a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket and, bending over, dabbed my mouth, his brows drawn together in an anxious frown.

I sat still and let him, fighting a sudden wave of exhaustion. All at once, I wanted nothing save to lie down, go to sleep, and never wake up again. And if I did wake up, I wanted the dead man in my surgery to be gone. I also wanted the house not to be burned over our heads.

But it isn't time, I thought suddenly, and found that thought—idiotic as it was—obscurely comforting.

"Will it make things harder for you?" I asked, struggling to fight off the weariness and think sensibly. "With Richard Brown?"

"I dinna ken," he admitted. "I've been trying to think. I could wish we were in Scotland," he said a little ruefully. "I'd ken better what Brown might do, were he a Scotsman."

"Oh, really? Say you were dealing with your uncle Colum, for instance," I suggested. "What would he do, do you think?"

"Try to kill me and get his brother back," he replied promptly. "If he kent I had him. And if your Donner *did* go back to Brownsville—Richard knows by now."

He was entirely right, and the knowledge made small fingers of apprehension creep briskly up my back.

The worry evidently showed on my face, for he smiled a little.

“Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach,” he said. “The Lindsay brothers left for Brownsville the morning after we came back. Kenny’s keeping an eye on the town, and Evan and Murdo are waiting at points along the road, with fresh horses. If Richard Brown and his bloody Committee of Safety should come this way, we’ll hear of it in good time.”

That was reassuring, and I sat up a little straighter.

“That’s good. But—even if Donner did go back, he wouldn’t know that you had Lionel Brown captive; you might have killed him d-during the fight.”

He flicked a narrow blue glance at me, but merely nodded.

“I could wish I had,” he said with a slight grimace. “It would have saved trouble. But then—I’d not have found out what they were doing, and I did need to know that. If Donner’s gone back, though, he’ll ha’ told Richard Brown what happened, and led them back to claim the bodies. He’ll see his brother’s no among them.”

“Whereupon he’ll draw the logical conclusion and come here looking for him.”

The sound of the back door opening at this point made me jump, heart pounding, but it was succeeded by the soft shuffle of moccasined feet in the hall, announcing Young Ian, who peered inquiringly into the study.

“I’ve just met Mrs. Bug, hurrying off to her house,” he said, frowning. “She wouldna stop and speak to me, and she looked verra queer indeed. What’s amiss?”

“What isn’t?” I said, and laughed, causing him to glance sharply at me.

Jamie sighed.

“Sit,” he said, pushing a stool toward Ian with one foot. “And I’ll tell ye.”

Ian listened with great attention, though his mouth fell open a little when Jamie reached the point about Mrs. Bug putting the pillow over Brown’s face.

“Is he still there?” he asked, at the end of the tale. He hunched a little, looking suspiciously back over his shoulder, as though expecting Brown to come through the surgery door at any moment.

“Well, I hardly think he’s going anywhere under his own steam,” I observed tartly.

Ian nodded, but got up to look anyway. He came back in a moment, looking thoughtful.

“He’s no marks on him,” he said to Jamie, sitting down.

Jamie nodded. “Aye, and he’s freshly bandaged. Your auntie had just tended him.”

They exchanged nods, both obviously thinking the same thing.

“Ye canna tell by looking that he’s been killed, Auntie,” Ian explained, seeing that I was not yet on their wavelength. “He might have died of himself.”

“I suppose you could say that he *did.* If he hadn’t tried to terrorize Mrs. Bug …” I rubbed a hand—gently—over my forehead, where a headache was beginning to throb.

“How do ye feel—” Ian began, in a worried tone, but I had quite suddenly had more than enough of people asking me how I felt.

“I scarcely know,” I said abruptly, dropping my hand. I looked down at my fists, curled in my lap.

“He—he wasn’t a *wicked* man, I don’t think,” I said. There was a splotch of blood on my apron. I didn’t know whether it was his or mine. “Just … terribly weak.”

“Better off dead then,” said Jamie matter-of-factly, and without any particular malice. Ian nodded in agreement.

“Well, so.” Jamie returned to the point of the discussion. “I was just saying to your auntie, if Brown were a Scot, I should better know how to deal with him—but then it struck me, that while he isna Scottish, he *is* by way of doing business in a Scottish manner. Him and his committee. They’re like a Watch.”

Ian nodded, sketchy brows raised.

“So they are.” He looked interested. “I’ve never seen one, but Mam told me—about the one that arrested you, Uncle Jamie, and how she and Auntie Claire went after them.” He grinned at me, his gaunt face suddenly transforming to show a hint of the boy he’d been.

“Well, I was younger then,” I said. “And braver.”

Jamie made a small noise in his throat that might have been amusement.

"They're no verra thrifty about it," he said. "Killing and burning, I mean—"

"As opposed to ongoing extortion." I was beginning to see where he was going with this. Ian had been born after Culloden; he'd never seen a Watch, one of those organized bands of armed men that rode the country, charging fees from the Highland chiefs to protect tenants, land, and cattle—and if the black rent they charged was not paid, promptly seizing goods and cattle themselves. I had. And in all truth, I'd heard of them burning and killing now and then, too—though generally only to create an example and improve cooperation.

Jamie nodded. "Well, Brown's no Scot, as I said. But business is business, isn't it?" A contemplative look had come over his face, and he leaned back a little, hands linked over one knee. "How fast can ye get to Anidonau Nuya, Ian?"

* * *

After Ian left, we stayed in the study. The situation in my surgery would have to be dealt with, but I was not quite ready yet to go and face it. Beyond a minor remark to the effect that it was a pity he had not yet had time to build an icehouse, Jamie made no reference to it, either.

"Poor old Mrs. Bug," I said, beginning to get a grip. "I'd no idea he'd been playing on her that way. He must have thought she was a soft touch." I laughed weakly. "*That* was a mistake. She's terribly strong. I was amazed."

I shouldn't have been; I'd seen Mrs. Bug walk for a mile with a full-grown goat across her shoulders—but somehow one never translates the strength required for daily farm life into a capacity for homicidal fury.

"So was I," Jamie said dryly. "Not that she was strong enough to do it, but that she dared take matters into her own hands. Why did she no tell Arch, if not myself?"

"I suppose it's what she said—she thought it wasn't her place to say anything; you'd given her the job of looking after him, and she'd move heaven and earth to do anything you asked. I daresay she thought she was coping well enough, but when he showed up that way, she … just snapped. It does happen; I've seen it."

"So have I," he muttered. A small frown had formed, deepening the crease between his brows, and I wondered what violent incidents he might be recalling. "But I shouldna have thought …"

Arch Bug came in so quietly that I didn't hear him; I only realized that he was there when I saw Jamie look up, stiffening. I whirled about, and saw the ax in Arch's hand. I opened my mouth to speak, but he strode toward Jamie, taking no notice of his surroundings. Clearly, for him, there was no one in the room save Jamie.

He reached the desk and laid the ax upon it, almost gently.

"My life for hers, O, chieftain," he said quietly in Gaelic. He stepped back then, and knelt, head bowed. He had braided his soft white hair in a narrow plait and bound it up, so that the back of his neck was left bare. It was walnut-brown and deeply seamed from weather, but still thick and muscular above the white band of his collar.

A tiny noise from the door made me turn from the scene, riveting as it was. Mrs. Bug was there, clinging to the jamb for support, and in obvious need of it. Her cap was askew, and sweaty strands of iron-gray hair stuck to a face the color of cream gone bad.

Her eyes flickered to me when I moved, but then shot back to fix again upon her kneeling husband—and on Jamie, who was now standing, looking from Arch to his wife, then back again. He rubbed a finger slowly up and down the bridge of his nose, eyeing Arch.

"Oh, aye," he said mildly. "I'm to take your head, am I? Here in my own room and have your wife mop up the blood, or shall I do it in the dooryard, and nail ye up by the hair over my lintel as a warning to Richard Brown? Get up, ye auld fraudster."

Everything in the room was frozen for an instant—long enough for me to notice the tiny black mole in the exact middle of Arch's neck—and then the old man rose, very slowly.

"It is your right," he said, in Gaelic. "I am your tacksman, *a ceann-cinnidh,* I swear by my iron; it is your right." He stood very straight, but his eyes were hooded, fixed on the desk where his ax lay, the sharpened edge a silver line against the dull gray metal of the head.

Jamie drew breath to reply, but then stopped, eyeing the old man narrowly. Something changed in him, some awareness taking hold.

"A ceann-cinnidh?" he said, and Arch Bug nodded, silent.

The air of the room had thickened in a heartbeat, and the hairs prickled on the back of my own neck.

"A ceann-cinnidh," Arch had said. O, chieftain. One word, and we stood in Scotland. It was easy to see the difference in attitude between Jamie's new tenants and his Ardsmuir men—the difference of a loyalty of agreement and one of acknowledgment. This was different still: an older allegiance, which had ruled the Highlands for a thousand years. The oath of blood and iron.

I saw Jamie weigh the present and the past and realize where Arch Bug stood between them. I saw it in his face, exasperation changing to realization—and saw his shoulders drop a little, in acceptance.

"By your word, then, it is my right," he said softly, also in Gaelic. He drew himself up, picked up the ax, and held it out, handle first. "And by that right, I give you back your woman's life—and your own."

Mrs. Bug let out a small sobbing breath. Arch didn't look round at her, but reached out and took the ax, with a grave inclination of the head. He turned then, and walked out without a further word—though I saw the fingers of his maimed hand brush his wife's sleeve, very softly, in passing.

Mrs. Bug straightened herself, hastily tucking up the straggling bits of hair with trembling fingers. Jamie didn't look at her, but sat down again, and took up his quill and a sheet of paper, though I thought he had no intention of writing anything. Not wanting to embarrass her, I affected great interest in the bookshelf, picking up

Jamie's little cherrywood snake as though to examine it more closely.

Cap on straight now, she came into the room, and bobbed a curtsy in front of him.

"Will I fetch ye a bit to eat, sir? There's bannocks made fresh." She spoke with great dignity, head upright. He raised his own head from his paper, and smiled at her.

"I should like that," he said. *"Gun robh math agaibh, a nighean."*

She nodded smartly and turned on her heel. At the door, though, she paused, looking back. Jamie raised his brows.

"I was there, ken," she said, fixing him with a direct look. "When the Sassenachs killed your grandsire, there on Tower Hill. There was a lot of blood." She pursed her lips, examining him through narrowed, reddened eyes, then relaxed.

"Ye're a credit to him," she said, and was gone in a whisk of petticoats and apron strings.

Jamie looked at me in surprise, and I shrugged.

"It wasn't necessarily a compliment, you know," I said, and his shoulders began to shake in silent laughter.

"I know," he said at last, and swiped a knuckle beneath his nose. "D'ye ken, Sassenach—sometimes I mourn the auld bastard?" He shook his head. "Sometime I must ask Mrs. Bug if it's true what he said, at the last. What they say he said, I mean."

"What's that?"

"He gave the headsman his fee, and told him to do a good job—'For I shall be very angry indeed if ye don't.' "

"Well, it certainly sounds like something he *would* say," I said, smiling a little. "What do you suppose the Bugs were doing in London?"

He shook his head again, and turned his face to me, lifting his chin so the sun from the window glimmered like water along his jaw and cheekbone.

"God knows. D'ye think she's right, Sassenach? About me being like him?"

"Not to look at," I said, smiling a little. The late Simon, Lord Lovat, had been short and squat, though powerfully built despite his age. He had also borne a strong resemblance to a malevolent—but very clever—toad.

“No,” Jamie agreed. “Thank God. But otherwise?” The light of humor was still in his eyes, but he was serious; he truly wanted to know.

I studied him thoughtfully. There was no trace of the Old Fox in his bold, clean-cut features—those had come mostly from his mother’s MacKenzie side—nor yet in the broad-shouldered height of him, but somewhere behind those slanted dark blue eyes, I now and then sensed a faint echo of Lord Lovat’s deep-set gaze, glittering with interest and sardonic humor.

“You have something of him,” I admitted. “More than a little, sometimes. You haven’t the overweening ambition, but …” I squinted a bit, considering. “I was going to say that you aren’t as ruthless as him,” I went on slowly, “but you are, really.”

“Am I, then?” He didn’t seem either surprised or put out to hear this.

“You can be,” I said, and felt somewhere in the marrow of my bones the popping sound of Arvin Hodgepile’s neck breaking. It was a warm afternoon, but gooseflesh rippled suddenly up my arms, and then was gone.

“Have I the devious nature, d’ye think?” he asked seriously.

“I don’t know, quite,” I said with some dubiousness. “You’re not a proper twister like he was—but that may be only because you’ve a sense of honor that he lacked. You don’t use people like he did.”

He smiled at that, but with less real humor than he’d shown before.

“Oh, but I do, Sassenach,” he said. “It’s only I try not to let it show.”

He sat for a moment, his gaze fixed on the little cherrywood snake that I held, but I didn’t think he was looking at it. At last, he shook his head and looked up at me, the corner of his mouth tucking wryly in.

“If there is a heaven, and my grandsire’s in it—and I take leave to doubt that last—he’s laughing his wicked auld head off now. Or he would be, if it weren’t tucked underneath his arm.”

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THE EXHIBITS IN THE CASE

And so it was that several days later, we rode into Brownsville. Jamie, in full Highland regalia, with Hector Cameron's gold-knurled dirk at his waist and a hawk's feather in his bonnet. On Gideon, who had his ears laid back and blood in his eye, as usual.

By his side, Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning, peace chief of the Snowbird Cherokee. Bird, Ian told me, was from the Long Hair clan, and looked it. His hair was not only long and glossily anointed with bear fat, but most resplendently dressed, with a high tail twisted up from the crown of his head and dropping down his back, ending in a dozen tiny braids decorated—like the rest of his costume—with wampum shell beads, glass beads, small brass bells, parakeet feathers, and a Chinese yen; God knew where he'd got that. Slung by his saddle, his newest and most prized possession—Jamie's rifle.

By Jamie's other side, me—Exhibit A. On my mule Clarence, dressed and cloaked in indigo wool—which played up the paleness of my skin and beautifully highlighted the yellow and green of the healing bruises on my face—with my necklace of freshwater pearls about my neck for moral support.

Ian rode behind us with the two braves Bird had brought as retinue, looking more like an Indian than a Scot, with the semicircles of tattooed dots that swooped across his tanned cheekbones, and his own long brown hair greased back from his face and tied in a knot, a single turkey quill thrust through it. At least he hadn't plucked his scalp in the Mohawk fashion; he looked sufficiently menacing without that.

And on a travois behind Ian's horse rode Exhibit B—the corpse of Lionel Brown. We'd put him in the springhouse to keep cool with the butter and eggs, and Bree and Malva had done their best, packing the body with moss to absorb liquids, adding as many strongly aromatic herbs as they could find, then wrapping the unsavory package in a deer's hide, bound with rawhide strips in the Indian fashion. Despite this attention, none of the horses was enthusiastic about being anywhere near it, but Ian's mount was grimly acquiescent, merely snorting loudly every few minutes and shaking his head so his harness rattled, a lugubrious counterpoint to the soft thump of hooves.

We didn't talk much.

Visitors to any mountain settlement were cause for public notice and comment. Our little entourage brought folk popping out of their houses like winkles on pins, mouths agape. By the time we reached Richard Brown's house, which doubled as the local tavern, we had a small band of followers, mostly men and boys.

The sound of our arrival brought a woman—Mrs. Brown, I recognized her—out onto the crudely built stoop. Her hand flew to her mouth, and she rushed back into the house.

We waited in silence. It was a cool, bright autumn day, and the breeze stirred the hair on my neck; I'd worn it pulled back, at Jamie's request, and wore no cap. My face was exposed, the truth written on it.

Did they know? Feeling strangely remote, as though I watched from somewhere outside my own body, I looked from face to face among the crowd.

They couldn't know. Jamie had assured me of it; I knew it, myself. Unless Donner had escaped, and come to tell them all that had happened during that final night. But he hadn't. If he had, Richard Brown would have come to us.

All they knew was what showed on my face. And that was too much.

Clarence felt the hysteria that quivered under my skin like a pool of mercury; he stamped, once, and shook his head as though wanting to dislodge flies in his ears.

The door opened, and Richard Brown came out. There were several men behind him, all armed.

Brown was pale, unkempt, with a sprouting beard and greasy hair. His eyes were red and bleared, and a miasma of beer seemed to surround him. He'd been drinking heavily, and was plainly trying to pull himself together enough to deal with whatever threat we represented.

"Fraser," he said, and stopped, blinking.

"Mr. Brown." Jamie nudged Gideon closer, so he was at eye level with the men on the porch, no more than six feet from Richard Brown.

"Ten days past," Jamie said levelly, "a band of men came upon my land. They stole my property, assaulted my daughter who is with child, burnt my malting shed, destroyed my grain, and abducted and abused my wife."

Half the men had been staring at me already; now all of them were. I heard the small, metallic click of a pistol being cocked. I kept my face immobile, my hands steady on the reins, my eyes fixed on Richard Brown's face.

Brown's mouth began to work, but before he could speak, Jamie raised a hand, commanding silence.

"I followed them, with my men, and killed them," he said, in the same level tone. "I found your brother with them. I took him captive, but did not slay him."

There was a general intake of breath, and uneasy murmurs from the crowd behind us. Richard Brown's eyes darted to the bundle on the travois, and his face went white under the scabby beard.

"You—" he croaked. "Nelly?"

This was my cue. I took a deep breath and nudged Clarence forward.

"Your brother suffered an accident before my husband found us," I said. My voice was hoarse, but clear enough. I forced more air into it, to be heard by everyone. “He was badly injured in a fall. We tended his injuries. But he died.”

Jamie let a moment of stunned silence pass, before continuing.

“We have brought him to you, so that you may bury him.” He made a small gesture, and Ian, who had dismounted, cut the ropes that held the travois. He and the two Cherokee pulled it to the porch and left it lying in the rutted road, returning silently to their horses.

Jamie inclined his head sharply, and swung Gideon’s head around. Bird followed him, pleasantly impassive as the Buddha. I didn’t know whether he understood enough English to have followed Jamie’s speech, but it didn’t matter. He understood his role, and had carried it out perfectly.

The Browns might have had a profitable sideline in murder, theft, and slavery, but their chief income lay in trade with the Indians. By his presence at Jamie’s side, Bird gave clear warning that the Cherokee regarded their relationship with the King of England and his agent as more important than trade with the Browns. Harm Jamie or his property again, and that profitable connection would be broken.

I didn’t know everything Ian had said to Bird, when asking him to come—but I thought it quite likely that there was also an unspoken agreement that no formal inquiry would be made on behalf of the Crown into the fate of any captives who might have passed into Indian hands.

This was, after all, a matter of business.

I kicked Clarence in the ribs and wheeled into place behind Bird, keeping my eyes firmly fixed on the Chinese yen that glinted in the middle of his back, dangling from his hair on a scarlet thread. I had an almost uncontrollable urge to look back, and clenched my hands on the reins, digging my fingernails into my palms.

Was Donner dead, after all? He wasn’t among the men with Richard Brown; I’d looked.

I didn’t know whether I *wanted* him to be dead. The desire to find out more about him was strong—but the desire to be done with the matter, to leave that night on the mountainside behind once and for all, all witnesses safely consigned to the silence of the grave—that was stronger.

I heard Ian and the two Cherokee come into line behind us, and within moments, we were out of sight of Brownsville, though the scent of beer and chimney smoke lingered in my nostrils. I pushed Clarence up beside Jamie; Bird had fallen back to ride with his men and Ian; they were laughing at something.

"Will this be the end of it?" I asked. My voice felt thin in the cold air, and I wasn't sure he'd heard me. But he did. He shook his head slightly.

"There is never an end to such things," he said quietly. "But we are alive. And that is good."

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PART FIVE

Great Unexpectations

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35

Laminaria

Safely returned from Brownsville, I took firm steps to resume normal life. And among these was a visit to Marsali, who had returned from her refuge with the McGillivrays. I'd seen Fergus, who had assured me that she was well recovered from her injuries and feeling well—but I needed to see for myself.

The homestead was in good order, I saw, but showing certain signs of dilapidation; a few shingles had blown off the roof, one corner of the stoop was sagging, and the oiled parchment over the single window had split partway up, the flaw hastily mended with rag stuffed through the hole. Small things, but things that should be dealt with before the snow came—and it was coming; I could feel the touch of it in the air, the brilliant blue sky of late autumn fading into the hazy gray of oncoming winter.

No one rushed out to meet me, but I knew they were home; there was a cloud of smoke and sparks from the chimney, and I thought tartly that at least Fergus seemed able to provide enough wood for the hearth. I called out a cheery "hallooo!" and pushed open the door.

I had the feeling at once. I didn't trust most of my feelings at the moment, but that one went bone-deep. It's the feeling you have, as a doctor, when you walk into an examination room and *know* that something's very wrong. Before you ask the first question, before you've taken the first vital sign. It doesn't happen often, and you'd rather it never did—but there it is. You know, and there's no way round it.

It was the children that told me, as much as anything else. Marsali sat by the window, sewing, the two girls playing quietly close by her feet. Germain—uncharacteristically indoors—sat swinging his legs at the table, frowning at a ragged but treasured picture book Jamie had brought him from Cross Creek. They knew, too.

Marsali looked up when I came in, and I saw her face tighten in shock at sight of mine—though it was much better than it had been.

"I'm fine," I said briskly, stopping her exclamation. "Only bruises. How are you, though?"

I set down my bag and cupped my hands round her face, turning it gently to the light. One cheek and ear were badly bruised, and there was a fading knot on her forehead—but she wasn't cut, and her eyes looked back at me, clear and healthy. A good color to her skin, no jaundice, no faint scent of kidney dysfunction.

She's all right. It's the baby, I thought, and dropped my hands to her middle without asking. My heart felt cold as I cupped the bulge and lifted gently. I nearly bit my tongue in surprise when a small knee shifted in answer to my touch.

I was terribly heartened at that; I had thought the child might be dead. A quick glance at Marsali's face muted my relief. She was strained between hope and fear, hoping that I would tell her that what she knew to be true wasn't.

"Has the baby moved very much, these last few days?" I asked, keeping my voice calm as I went about fetching out my stethoscope. I'd had it made by a pewtersmith in Wilmington—a small bell with a flat end piece; primitive, but effective.

"Not so much as he did," Marsali answered, leaning back to let me listen to her stomach. "But they don't, do they, when they're nearly ready to come? Joanie lay like the de—like a millstone, all the night before the waters broke."

"Well, yes, often they do do that," I agreed, ignoring what she'd nearly said. "Resting up, I suppose." She smiled in response, but the smile vanished like a snowflake on a griddle as I leaned close and put my ear to the flattened end of the flared metal tube, the wide, bell-shaped opening over her stomach.

It took some time to pick up the heartbeat, and when I did, it was unusually slow. It was also skipping beats; the hair on my arms rippled with gooseflesh when I heard it.

I went on with the examination, asking questions, making small jokes, pausing to answer questions from the other children, who were crowding round, stepping on each other's feet and getting in the way—and all the time, my mind was racing, envisioning possibilities, all bad.

The child *was* moving—but wrong. Heartbeat was there—but wrong. Everything about that belly felt *wrong* to me. What was it, though? Umbilical cord around the neck was thoroughly possible, and quite dangerous.

I pushed the smock further back, trying for a better listen, and saw the heavy bruising—ugly splotches of healing green and yellow, a few still with deep red-black centers that bloomed like deadly roses over the curve of her belly. My teeth sank into my lip at sight of them; they'd kicked her, the bastards. A wonder she hadn't miscarried on the spot.

Anger swelled suddenly under my breastbone, a huge, solid thing, pushing hard enough to burst it.

Was she bleeding at all? No. No pain, bar tenderness from the bruises. No cramping. No contractions. Her blood pressure seemed normal, so far as I could tell.

A cord accident was still possible—likely, even. But it could be a partially detached placenta, bleeding into the uterus. A ruptured uterus? Or something rarer—a dead twin, an abnormal growth … The only thing I knew for sure was that the child needed to be delivered into the air-breathing world, and as soon as possible.

"Where's Fergus?" I said, still speaking calmly.

"I dinna ken," she said, matching my tone of absolute calm. "He's no been home since the day before yesterday. Dinna put that in your mouth, *a chuisle.*" She lifted a hand toward Félicité, who was gnawing a candle stub, but couldn't reach her.

“Hasn’t he? Well, we’ll find him.” I removed the candle stub; Félicité made no protest, aware that something was going on, but not knowing what. In search of reassurance, she seized her mother’s leg and began determinedly trying to climb up into Marsali’s nonexistent lap.

“No, *bébé,*” Germain said, and clasped his sister round the waist, dragging her backward. “You come with me, *a piuthar*. Want milkie?” he added, coaxing. “We’ll go to the springhoose, aye?”

“Want Mama!” Félicité windmilled arms and legs, trying to escape, but Germain hoisted her fat little body into his arms.

“You wee lassies come with me,” he said firmly, and trundled awkwardly out the door, Félicité grunting and squirming in his grasp, Joanie scampering at his heels—pausing at the door to look back at Marsali, her big brown eyes wide and scared.

“Go on then, *a muirninn,*” Marsali called, smiling. “Take them to see Mrs. Bug. It will be all right.

“He’s a sweet lad, Germain,” Marsali murmured, folding her hands across her belly as the smile faded.

“Very sweet,” I agreed. “Marsali—”

“I know,” she said simply. “Might this one live, d’ye think?” She passed a hand gently over her belly, looking down.

I wasn’t at all sure, but the child *was* alive for the moment. I hesitated, turning over possibilities in my mind. Anything I did would entail hideous risk—to her, the child, or both.

Why had I not come sooner? I berated myself for taking Jamie’s and then Fergus’s word that she was all right, but there was no time for self-reproach—and it might not have mattered, either.

“Can you walk?” I asked. “We’ll need to go to the Big House.”

“Aye, of course.” She rose carefully, holding to my arm. She looked around the cabin, as though memorizing all its homely details, then gave me a sharp, clear glance. “We’ll talk on the way.”

* * *

There were options, most of them horrifying to contemplate. If there was danger of a placental abruption, I *could* do an emergency cesarean and possibly save the child—but Marsali would die. To deliver the child slowly, via induction of labor, was to risk the child, but was much safer for Marsali. Of course—and I kept this thought to myself—induction of labor raised the risk of hemorrhage. If that happened …

I could perhaps stop the bleeding and save Marsali—but would be unable to help the infant, who would likely also be in distress. There *was* the ether … a tempting thought, but I reluctantly put it aside. It *was* ether—but I'd not used it, had no clear idea of its concentration or effectiveness, nor did I have anything like an anesthetist's training that would allow me to calculate its effects in such a dicey situation as dangerous childbirth. For a minor operation, I could go slowly, judge the patient's respiration, and simply back off if things seemed to be going wrong. If I were in the middle of a cesarean section and things went pear-shaped, there was no way out.

Marsali seemed preternaturally calm, as though she were listening to what was going on inside rather than to my explanations and speculations. As we came near the Big House, though, we met Young Ian, coming down the hillside with a clutch of dead rabbits, dangling by their ears, and she sharpened to attention.

"Ho, cousin! How is it, then?" he asked cheerfully.

"I need Fergus, Ian," she said without preliminary. "Can ye find him?"

The smile faded from his face as he took in Marsali's paleness, and my support of her.

"Christ, the bairn's coming? But why—" He glanced up the pathway behind us, clearly wondering why we had left Marsali's cabin.

"Go and find Fergus, Ian," I cut in. *"Now."*

"Oh." He swallowed, suddenly looking quite young. "Oh. Aye. I will. Directly!" He began to bound off, then whirled back and thrust the rabbits into my hand. Then he leapt off the path and tore down the hillside, rocketing between trees and vaulting fallen logs. Rollo, not wishing to be left out of anything, flashed past in a gray blur and hurtled down the hillside after his master like a falling rock.

"Don't worry," I said, patting Marsali's arm. "They'll find him."

“Oh, aye,” she said, looking after them. “If they shouldna find him in time, though …”

“They will,” I said firmly. “Come on.”

* * *

I sent Lizzie to find Brianna and Malva Christie—I thought I might well need more hands—and sent Marsali to the kitchen to rest with Mrs. Bug, while I readied the surgery. Fresh bedding and pillows, spread on my examination table. A bed would be better, but I needed to have my equipment to hand.

And the equipment itself: the surgical instruments, carefully hidden beneath a clean towel; the ether mask, lined with fresh thick gauze; the dropping bottle—could I trust Malva to administer the ether, if I had to perform emergency surgery? I thought perhaps I could; the girl was very young, and quite untrained, but she had a remarkable coolness about her, and I knew she wasn’t squeamish. I filled the dropping bottle, averting my face from the sweet, thick scent that drifted from the liquid, and put a small twist of cotton in the spout, to keep the ether from evaporating and gassing us all—or catching fire. I glanced hastily at the hearth, but the fire was out.

What if labor was prolonged and then things went wrong—if I had to do this at night, by candlelight? I couldn’t; ether was hideously inflammable. I shoved away the mental picture of myself performing an emergency cesarean section in the pitch-dark, by feel.

“If you have a moment to spare, this would be a bloody good time to have a look-in,” I muttered, addressing this remark collectively to Saints Bride, Raymond, and Margaret of Antioch, all presumably patrons of childbirth and expectant mothers, plus any guardian angels—mine, Marsali’s, or the child’s—who might be hovering about in the offing.

Evidently, someone was listening. When I got Marsali boosted up onto the table, I was terribly relieved to find that the cervix had begun to dilate—but there was no sign of bleeding. It didn’t remove the risk of hemorrhage, by any means, but it did mean the probability was much lower.

Her blood pressure seemed all right, so far as I could tell by looking at her, and the baby's heartbeat had steadied, though the baby had stopped moving, refusing to respond to pokes and shoves.

"Sound asleep, I expect," I said, smiling at Marsali. "Resting up."

She gave me a tiny smile in return, and turned onto her side, grunting like a hog.

"I could use a bit of a rest, myself, after that walk." She sighed, settling her head into the pillow. Adso, seconding this motion, leapt up onto the table, and curled himself into her breasts, rubbing his face affectionately against her.

I would have slung him out, but Marsali seemed to find some comfort in his presence, scratching his ears until he curled up under her chin, purring madly. Well, I'd delivered children in much less sanitary surroundings, cat notwithstanding, and this was likely to be a slow process; Adso would have decamped long before his presence became a hindrance.

I was feeling a bit more reassured, but not to the point of confidence. That subtle feeling of wrongness was still there. On the way, I'd considered the various options available to me; given the slight dilatation of the cervix and the now-steady heartbeat, I thought we might try the most conservative method of inducing labor, so as not to put undue stress upon mother or child. If emergency intervened … well, we'd deal with that when and if we had to.

I only hoped the contents of the jar were usable; I'd never had occasion to open it before. *Laminaria,* said the label, written in Daniel Rawlings's flowing script. It was a small jar of dark green glass, corked tight, and very light. When I opened it, a faint whiff of iodine floated out, but no scent of decay, thank goodness.

Laminaria is seaweed. Dried, it's no more than paper-thin slips of brownish-green. Unlike many dried seaweeds, though, *Laminaria* doesn't crumble easily. And it has a most astonishing capacity to absorb water.

Inserted into the opening of the cervix, it absorbs moisture from the mucous membranes—and swells, slowly forcing the cervix further open as it does so, thus eventually causing labor to start. I'd seen *Laminaria* used, even in my own time, though in modern times it was most frequently employed to assist in expelling a dead child from the uterus. I shoved *that* thought well to the back of my mind, and selected a good piece.

It was a simple thing to do, and once done, nothing to do but wait. And hope. The surgery was very peaceful, full of light and the sounds of barn swallows rustling under the eaves.

“I hope Ian finds Fergus,” Marsali said after a period of silence.

“I’m sure he will,” I replied, distracted by an attempt to light my small brazier using flint and steel. I should have told Lizzie to have Brianna bring matches. “You said Fergus hadn’t been home?”

“No.” Her voice sounded muffled, and I looked up to see her head bent over Adso, face hidden in his fur. “I’ve scarce seen him at all, since … since the men came to the malting floor.”

“Ah.”

I didn’t know what to say to this. I hadn’t realized that Fergus had made himself scarce—though knowing what I did of eighteenth-century men, I supposed I could see why.

“He’s ashamed, the wee French gomerel,” Marsali said matter-of-factly, confirming my supposition. She turned her face, one blue eye visible above the curve of Adso’s head. “Thinks it was his fault, aye? That I was there, I mean. Thinks if he was better able to provide, I shouldna have had to go and tend the malting.”

“Men,” I said, shaking my head, and she laughed.

“Aye, men. Not that he’d *say* what the trouble is, o’ course. Much better go off and brood about it, and leave me to hame wi’ three wild bairns!” She rolled her eyes.

“Aye, well, they do that, men,” said Mrs. Bug tolerantly, coming in with a lighted taper. “No sense at all to them, but they mean weel. I heard ye clickin’ away with that steel like a deathwatch, Mrs. Claire; why would ye no just come and fetch a bit o’ fire like a sensible person?” She touched the taper to the kindling in my brazier, which promptly popped into flame.

“Practice,” I said mildly, adding sticks to the infant flame. “I have hopes of eventually learning to light a fire in less than a quarter of an hour.”

Marsali and Mrs. Bug snorted in simultaneous derision.

"Bless ye, lamb, a quarter-hour's no time at all! Why, often I've spent an hour and more, trying to catch a spark in damp tinder—in Scotland, 'specially, since nothing's ever dry in the winter there. Whyever d'ye think folk go to such trouble, a-smooring the fire?"

This caused a spirited discussion of the best way in which to smoor a fire for the night, including an argument over the proper blessing to be said while doing so, and this lasted long enough for me to have coaxed the brazier into a decent glow and set a small kettle in it for tea-making. Raspberry-leaf tea would encourage contractions.

Mention of Scotland seemed to have reminded Marsali of something, for she raised herself on one elbow.

"Mother Claire—d'ye think Da would mind, if I was to borrow a sheet of paper and some ink? I'm thinkin' it would be as well if I wrote to my mother."

"I think that would be an excellent idea." I went to fetch paper and ink, heart beating a little faster. Marsali was entirely calm; I wasn't. I'd seen it before, though; I wasn't sure whether it was fatalism, religious faith, or something purely physical—but women giving birth seemed very often to lose any sense of fear or misgiving, turning inward upon themselves and exhibiting an absorption that amounted to indifference—simply because they had no attention to spare for anything beyond the universe bounded by their bellies.

As it was, my lingering sense of dread was muted, and two or three hours passed in quiet peace. Marsali wrote to Laoghaire, but also brief notes to each of her children. "Just in case," she said laconically, handing the folded notes to me to put away. I noticed that she didn't write to Fergus—but her eyes darted toward the door every time there was a sound.

Lizzie returned to report that Brianna was nowhere to be found, but Malva Christie turned up, looking excited, and was promptly put to work, reading aloud from Tobias Smollett's *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle.*

Jamie came in, covered with road dust, and kissed me on the lips and Marsali on the forehead. He took in the unorthodox situation, and gave me the ghost of a raised eyebrow.

"How is it, then, *a muirninn*?" he asked Marsali.

She made a small face and put her tongue out, and he laughed.

"You haven't seen Fergus anywhere, have you?" I asked.

"Aye, I have," he said, looking slightly surprised. "D'ye want him?" This question was addressed to both Marsali and myself.

"We do," I said firmly. "Where is he?"

"Woolam's Mill. He's been interpreting for a French traveler, an artist come in search of birds."

"Birds, is it?" The notion seemed to affront Mrs. Bug, who put down her knitting and sat up straight. "Our Fergus speaks bird-tongue, does he? Well, ye just go and fetch the mannie this minute. Yon Frenchman can mind his own birds!"

Looking rather taken aback at this vehemence, Jamie allowed me to usher him out into the hallway and as far as the front door. Safely out of earshot, he stopped.

"What's to do wi' the lass?" he demanded, low-voiced, and darted a glance back toward the surgery, where Malva's clear, high voice had taken up her reading again.

I told him, as well as I could.

"It may be nothing; I hope so. But—she wants Fergus. She says he's been keeping away, feeling guilty for what happened at the malting floor."

Jamie nodded.

"Well, aye, he would."

"He would? Why, for heaven's sake?" I demanded in exasperation. "It wasn't *his* fault!"

He gave me a look suggesting that I had missed something patently obvious to the meanest intelligence.

"Ye think that makes a difference? And if the lass should die—or mischief come to the child? Ye think he'd not blame himself?"

"He *shouldn't,*" I said. "But rather obviously he does. You don't—" I stopped short, because in fact he *did.* He'd told me so, very clearly, the night he brought me back.

He saw the memory cross my face, and the hint of a smile, wry and painful, showed in his eyes. He reached out and traced the line of my eyebrow, where a healing gash had split through it.

"Ye think I dinna feel that?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head, not in negation, but in helplessness.

"A man's wife is his to protect," he said simply, and turned away. "I'll go fetch Fergus."

* * *

The Laminaria had been accomplishing its slow, patient work, and Marsali was beginning to have occasional contractions, though we had not really got down to it, yet. The light was beginning to fade when Jamie arrived with Fergus—and Ian, met on the way.

Fergus was unshaven, covered with dust, and plainly hadn't bathed in days, but Marsali's face lighted like the sun when she saw him. I didn't know what Jamie had told him; he looked grim and worried—but at sight of Marsali, he went to her like an arrow to its target, gathering her to him with such fervor that Malva dropped her book on the floor, staring in astonishment.

I relaxed a little, for the first time since I had entered Marsali's house that morning.

"Well," I said, and took a deep breath. "Perhaps we'll have a little food, shall we?"

I left Fergus and Marsali alone, while the rest of us ate, and returned to the surgery to find them with heads close together, talking quietly. I hated to disturb them, but it was necessary.

On the one hand, the cervix had dilated very appreciably, and there was no sign of abnormal bleeding, which was a tremendous relief. On the other … the baby's heartbeat was skipping again. Almost certainly a cord problem, I thought.

I was very conscious of Marsali's eyes, fixed on my face as I listened through my stethoscope, and I exerted every ounce of will in order to let nothing show.

"You're doing very well," I assured her, smoothing tumbled hair off her forehead and smiling into her eyes. "I think perhaps it's time to help things along a little."

There were assorted herbs that could assist labor, but most of them were not things I'd use, were there any danger of hemorrhage. At this point, though, I was uneasy enough to want to get things moving as quickly as possible. Raspberry-leaf tea might be a help without being so strong as to induce major or abrupt contractions. Ought I add blue cohosh? I wondered.

"The babe needs to come quickly," Marsali told Fergus, with every appearance of calm. Obviously, I hadn't been as successful in hiding my concern as I'd thought.

She had her rosary with her, and now wound it round her hand, the cross dangling. "Help me, *mon cher.*"

He lifted the hand with the rosary, and kissed it.

"Oui, cherie." He crossed himself then, and set to work.

Fergus had spent the first ten years of his life in the brothel where he'd been born. Consequently, he knew a great deal more about women—in some ways—than any other man I'd ever met. Even so, I was astonished to see him reach for the strings at the neck of Marsali's shift, and draw it down, exposing her breasts.

Marsali didn't seem at all surprised, merely lying back and turning slightly toward him, the hump of her belly nudging him as she did so.

He knelt on a stool beside the bed, and placing a hand tenderly but absently on the bulge, bent his head toward Marsali's breast, lips slightly pursed. Then he appeared to notice me gaping at him, and glanced up over her belly.

"Oh." He smiled at me. "You have not—well, I suppose you would perhaps not have seen this, milady?"

"I can't say that I have." I was torn between fascination and a feeling that I should avert my eyes. "What …?"

"When the birth pangs are slow to start, suckling the woman's breasts encourages the womb to move, thus to hasten the child," he explained, and brushed a thumb unconsciously over one dark-brown nipple, so that it rose, round and hard as a spring cherry. "In the brothel, if one of *les filles* had a difficulty, sometimes another would do such service for her. I have done it for *ma douce* before—when Félicité came. It helps; you will see."

And without more ado, he cupped the breast in both hands and took the nipple into his mouth, sucking gently, but with great concentration, his eyes closed.

Marsali sighed, and her body seemed to relax in the flowing way that a pregnant woman's does, as though she were suddenly boneless as a stranded jellyfish.

I was more than disconcerted, but I couldn't leave, in case anything drastic should happen.

I hesitated for a moment, then pulled out a stool and sat down on it, trying to be inconspicuous. In fact, though, neither of them appeared to be at all concerned with my presence—if they were even aware of me anymore. I did, however, turn away a little, so as not to stare.

I was both astonished and interested by Fergus's technique. He was entirely right; suckling by an infant does cause the uterus to contract. The midwives I had known at L'Hôpital des Anges in Paris had told me that, too; a newly delivered woman should be handed the child at once to nurse, so that the bleeding would slow. None of them had happened to mention use of the technique as a means of inducing labor, though.

"*In the brothel, if one of* les filles *had a difficulty, sometimes another would do such service for her,"* he'd said.

His mother had been one of *les filles,* though he had never known her. I could imagine a Parisian prostitute, dark-haired, likely young, groaning in labor—and a friend kneeling to suckle her tenderly, cupping tender, swollen breasts and whispering encouragement, as the boisterous noises of satisfied customers echoed through the floors and walls.

Had she died, his mother? In childbirth with him or a subsequent child? Throttled by a drunken client, beaten by the madame's enforcer? Or was it only that she hadn't wanted him, hadn't wished to be responsible for a bastard child, and thus she had left him to the pity of the other women, one of the nameless sons of the street, a child of no one?

Marsali shifted on the bed, and I glanced to see that she was all right. She was. She had only moved in order to put her arms about

Fergus's shoulders, bending her head to his. She had left off her cap; her yellow hair was loose, bright against the sleek darkness of his.

"Fergus … I think I'm maybe going to die," she whispered, her voice barely audible above the wind in the trees.

He released her nipple, but moved his lips delicately over the surface of her breast, murmuring. "You always think you will die, *p'tite puce,* all women think it."

"Aye, that's because a good many of them *do,* too," she said a little sharply, and opened her eyes. He smiled, eyes still closed, the tip of his tongue flicking gently against her nipple.

"Not you," he said softly, but with great assurance. He passed his hand over her stomach, first gently, then with more strength. I could see the mound firm itself, suddenly drawing up round and solid. Marsali drew a deep, sudden breath, and Fergus pressed the heel of his hand against the base of the mound, hard against her pubic bone, holding it there until the contraction relaxed.

"Oh," she said, sounding breathless.

"Tu … non," he whispered, still more softly. "Not you. I will not let you go."

I curled my hands in the stuff of my skirt. That looked like a nice, solid contraction. Nothing horrible seemed to be happening as a result.

Fergus resumed his work, pausing now and then to murmur something ridiculous to Marsali in French. I got up and sidled cautiously round toward the foot of the bed table. No, nothing untoward. I cast a quick look at the counter, to be sure all was in readiness, and it was.

Perhaps it would be all right. There was a streak of blood on the sheet—but it was only a bit of bloody show, quite normal. There was still the child's worrying heartbeat, the possibility of a cord accident—but I could do nothing about that now. Marsali had made her decision, and it was the right one.

Fergus had resumed his suckling. I stepped quietly out into the hall, and swung the door half-closed, to give them privacy. If she did hemorrhage, I could be with her in a second.

I still had the jar of raspberry leaves in my hand. I supposed I might as well go ahead and make the tea—if only to make myself feel useful!

Not finding his wife at home, old Arch Bug had come up to the house with the children. Félicité and Joan were sound asleep on the settle, and Arch was smoking his pipe by the hearth, blowing smoke rings for a rapt Germain. Meanwhile Jamie, Ian, and Malva Christie seemed to be engaged in an amiable literary argument regarding the merits of Henry Fielding, Tobias Smollett, and …

"Ovid?" I said, catching the tail end of one remark. "Really?"

"So long as you are secure you will count many friends," Jamie quoted. *"If your life becomes clouded you will be alone.* D'ye not think that's the case for poor Tom Jones and wee Perry Pickle?"

"But surely true friends wouldnae abandon a man, only because he's in some difficulty!" Malva objected. "What sort of friend is that?"

"Rather the common sort, I'm afraid," I said. "Luckily, there *are* a few of the other kind."

"Aye, there are," Jamie agreed. He smiled at Malva. "Highlanders make the truest friends—if only because they make the worst enemies."

She was slightly pink in the face, but realized that she was being teased.

"Hmp," she said, and lifted her nose in order to look down it. "My faither says Highlanders are such fierce fighters because there's sae little of any value *in* the Highlands, and the worst battles are always fought for the lowest stakes."

Everyone dissolved in laughter at that, and Jamie rose to come to me, leaving Ian and Malva to resume their wrangle.

"How is it wi' the lass?" he asked quietly, dipping up hot water from the kettle for me.

"I'm not sure," I said. "Fergus is … er … helping her."

Jamie's eyebrows went up.

"How?" he asked. "I didna ken there was much a man had to do wi' that business, once he's got it properly begun."

"Oh, you'd be surprised," I assured him. "*I* certainly was!"

He looked intrigued by this, but was prevented from asking further questions by Mrs. Bug's demand that everyone leave off talking about wretched folk who get up to no good in the pages of books, and come sit down to eat.

I sat down to supper, too, but couldn't really eat, distracted as I was by concern for Marsali. The raspberry-leaf tea had finished steeping as we ate; I poured it out and took it to the surgery—rapping cautiously on the door before entering.

Fergus was flushed and breathless, but bright-eyed. He could not be persuaded to come and eat, insisting that he would stay with Marsali. His efforts were showing fruit; she was having regular contractions now, though still fairly far apart.

"It will be fast, once the waters break," Marsali told me. She was a little flushed, too, with a look of inward listening. "It always is."

I checked the heartbeat again—no great change; still bumpy, but not weakening—and excused myself. Jamie was in his study, across the hall. I went in and sat with him, so as to be handy when needed.

He was writing his usual evening note to his sister, pausing now and then to rub the cramp from his right hand before resuming. Upstairs, Mrs. Bug was putting the children to bed. I could hear Félicité whining, and Germain attempting to sing to her.

Across the hall, small shufflings and murmurings, the shifting of weight and the creak of the table. And in the depths of my inner ear, echoing my own pulse, the soft, rapid beat of a baby's heart.

It could so easily end badly.

"What are ye doing, Sassenach?"

I looked up, startled.

"I'm not doing anything."

"Ye're staring fit to see through the wall, and it doesna seem that ye like what ye're looking at."

"Oh." I dropped my gaze, and realized that I had been pleating and repleating the fabric of my skirt between my fingers; there was a large wrinkled patch in the fawn-colored homespun. "Reliving my failures, I suppose."

He looked at me for a moment, then rose and came behind me, putting his hands on the base of my neck, kneading my shoulders with a strong, warm touch.

"What failures?" he asked.

I closed my eyes and let my head nod forward, trying not to groan with the sensations of pain from knotted muscles and the simultaneous exquisite relief.

"Oh," I said, and sighed. "Patients I couldn't save. Mistakes. Disasters. Accidents. Stillbirths."

That last word hung in the air, and his hands paused in their work for a moment, then resumed more strongly.

"There are times, surely, when there's nothing ye could do? You or anyone. Some things are beyond the power of anyone to make right, aye?"

"*You* never believe that, when it's you," I said. "Why should I?"

He paused in his kneading, and I looked up over my shoulder at him. He opened his mouth to contradict me, then realized that he couldn't. He shook his head, sighed, and resumed.

"Aye, well. I suppose it's true enough," he said, with extreme wryness.

"That what the Greeks called *hubris,* do you think?"

He gave a small snort, which might have been amusement.

"I do. And ye ken where *that* leads."

"To a lonely rock under a burning sun, with a vulture gnawing on your liver," I said, and laughed.

So did Jamie.

"Aye, well, a lonely rock under a burning sun is a verra good place to have company, I should think. And I dinna mean the vulture, either."

His hands gave a final squeeze to my shoulders, but he didn't take them away. I leaned my head back against him, eyes closed, taking comfort in his company.

In the momentary silence, we could hear small sounds across the hall, from the surgery. A muffled grunt from Marsali as a contraction came on, a soft French question from Fergus.

I felt that we really ought not to be listening—but neither of us could think of anything to say, to cover the sounds of their private conversation.

A murmur from Marsali, a pause, then Fergus said something hesitant.

"Aye, like we did before Félicité," came Marsali's voice, muffled, but quite clear.

"*Oui,* but—"

"Put something against the door, then," she said, sounding impatient.

We heard footsteps, and the door to the surgery swung open. Fergus stood there, dark hair disheveled, shirt half-buttoned, and his handsome face deeply flushed under the shadow of beard stubble. He saw us, and the most extraordinary look flitted across his face. Pride, embarrassment, and something indefinably … French. He gave Jamie a lopsided smile and a one-shouldered shrug of supreme Gallic insouciance—then firmly shut the door. We heard the grating sounds of a small table being moved, and a small thump as it was shoved against the door.

Jamie and I exchanged looks of bafflement.

Giggles came from behind the closed door, accompanied by a massive creaking and rustling.

"He's no going to—" Jamie began, and stopped abruptly, looking incredulous. "Is he?"

Evidently so, judging from the faint rhythmic creaks that began to be heard from the surgery.

I felt a slight warmth wash through me, along with a mild sense of shock—and a slightly stronger urge to laugh.

"Well … er … I *have* heard that … um … it does sometimes seem to bring on labor. If a child was overdue, the *maîtresses sage femme* in Paris would sometimes tell women to get their husbands drunk and … er-hmm."

Jamie gave the surgery door a look of disbelief, mingled with grudging respect.

"And him with not even a dram taken. Well, if that's what he's up to, the wee bugger's got balls, I'll say that for him."

Ian, coming down the hall in time to hear this exchange, stopped dead. He listened for a moment to the noises proceeding from the surgery, looked from Jamie and me to the surgery door, back, then shook his head and turned around, going back to the kitchen.

Jamie reached out and gently closed the study door.

Without comment, he sat down again, picked up his pen, and began scratching doggedly away. I went over to the small bookshelf, and stood there staring at the collection of battered spines, taking nothing in.

Old wives' tales were sometimes nothing more than old wives' tales. Sometimes they weren't.

I was seldom troubled by personal recollections while dealing with patients; I had neither time nor attention to spare. At the moment, though, I had much too much of both. And a very vivid memory indeed of the night before Bree's birth.

People often say that women forget what childbirth is like, because if they remembered, no one would ever do it more than once. Personally, I had no trouble at all remembering.

The sense of massive inertia, particularly. That endless time toward the end, when it seems that it never *will* end, that one is mired in some prehistoric tar pit, every small move a struggle doomed to futility. Every square centimeter of skin stretched as thin as one's temper.

You don't forget. You simply get to the point where you don't care what birth will feel like; anything is better than being pregnant for an instant longer.

I'd reached that point roughly two weeks before my due date. The date came—and passed. A week later, I was in a state of chronic hysteria, if one could be simultaneously hysterical and torpid.

Frank was physically more comfortable than I was, but in terms of nerves, there wasn't much to choose between us. Both of us were terrified—not merely of the birth, but of what might come after. Frank being Frank, he reacted to terror by becoming very quiet, withdrawing into himself, to a place where he could control what was happening, by refusing to let anything in.

But I was in no mood to respect anyone's barriers, and broke down in tears of sheer despair, after being informed by a cheerful obstetrician that I was not dilated at all, and "it might be several days—maybe another week."

Trying to calm me, Frank had resorted to rubbing my feet. Then my back, my neck, my shoulders—anything I would let him touch. And gradually, I had exhausted myself and lain quiet, letting him touch me. And … and we were both terrified, and terribly in need of reassurance, and neither of us had any words with which to give it.

And he made love to me, slowly and gently, and we fell asleep in each other's arms—and woke up in a state of panic several hours later when my water broke.

"Claire!" I suppose Jamie had called my name more than once; I had been so lost in memory that I had forgotten entirely where I was.

"What?" I swung round, heart pounding. "Has something happened?"

"No, not yet." He studied me for a moment, brow creased, then got up and came to stand by me.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"Yes. I—I was just thinking."

"Aye, I saw that," he said dryly. He hesitated, then—as a particularly loud moan came through the door—touched my elbow.

"Are ye afraid?" he said softly. "That ye might be wi' child yourself, I mean?"

"No," I said, and heard the note of desolation in my voice as clearly as he did. "I know I'm not." I looked up at him; his face was blurred by a haze of unshed tears. "I'm sad that I'm not—that I never will be again."

I blinked hard, and saw the same emotions on his face that I felt—relief and regret, mingled in such proportion that it was impossible to say which was foremost. He put his arms round me and I rested my forehead on his chest, thinking what comfort it was to know that I had company on this rock, as well.

We stood quietly for some time, just breathing. Then there came a sudden change in the surreptitious noises in the surgery. There was a small cry of surprise, a louder exclamation in French, and then the sound of feet landing heavily on the floor, together with the unmistakable splash of amniotic fluid.

* * *

Things did move quickly. Within an hour, I saw the crowning of a black-fuzzed skull.

"He's got lots of hair," I reported, easing the perineum with oil. "Be careful, don't push too hard! Not yet." I spanned the curve of the emerging skull with my hand. "He's got a really big head."

"I wouldna ever have guessed that," said Marsali, red-faced and panting. "Thank ye for telling me."

I barely had time to laugh, before the head eased neatly out into my hands, facedown. The cord *was* round the neck, but not tightly, thank God! I got a finger under it and eased it free, and didn't have to say, "Push!" before Marsali took a breath that went to China and shot the infant into my middle like a cannonball.

It was like being suddenly handed a greased pig, and I fumbled madly, trying to get the little creature turned upright and see whether he—or she—was breathing.

Meanwhile, there were shrieks of excitement from Malva and Mrs. Bug, and heavy footsteps hastening down the hall from the kitchen.

I found the baby's face, hastily cleared the nostrils and mouth, blew a short puff of air into the mouth, snapped a finger against the sole of one foot. The foot jerked back in reflex, and the mouth opened wide in a lusty howl.

"Bon soir, Monsieur L'Oeuf," I said, checking hastily to be sure that it was indeed *Monsieur.*

"Monsieur?" Fergus's face split in an ears-wide grin.

"Monsieur," I confirmed, and hastily wrapping the baby in a flannel, thrust him into his father's arms while I turned my attention to tying and cutting the cord, then tending to his mother.

His mother, thank God, was doing well. Exhausted and sweat-drenched, but likewise grinning. So was everyone else in the room. The floor was puddled, the bedding soaked, and the atmosphere thick with the fecund scents of birth, but no one seemed to notice in the general excitement.

I kneaded Marsali's belly to encourage the uterus to contract, while Mrs. Bug brought her an enormous mug of beer to drink.

"He's all right?" she said, emerging after thirstily engulfing this. "Truly all right?"

"Well, he's got two arms, two legs, and a head," I said. "I hadn't time to count the fingers and toes."

Fergus laid the baby on the table beside Marsali.

"See for yourself, *ma cher,*" he said. He folded back the blanket. And blinked, then leaned closer, frowning.

Ian and Jamie stopped talking, seeing him.

"Is there something amiss, then?" Ian asked, coming over.

Sudden silence struck the room. Malva glanced from one face to another, bewildered.

"Maman?"

Germain stood in the doorway, swaying sleepily.

"Is he here? *C'est Monsieur?*"

Without waiting for answer or permission, he staggered forward and leaned on the bloodstained bedding, mouth a little open as he stared at his newborn brother.

"He looks funny," he said, and frowned a little. "What's wrong with him?"

Fergus had been standing stock-still, as had we all. At this, he looked down at Germain, then glanced back at the baby, then again to his firstborn son.

"Il est un nain," he said, almost casually. He squeezed Germain's shoulder, hard enough to elicit a yelp of startlement from the boy, then turned suddenly on his heel and went out. I heard the opening of the front door, and a cold draft swept down the hall and through the room.

Il est un nain. He is a dwarf.

Fergus hadn't closed the door, and the wind blew out the candles, leaving us in semidarkness, lit only by the glow of the brazier.

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WINTER WOLVES

Little Henri-Christian appeared to be perfectly healthy; he was simply a dwarf. He was slightly jaundiced, though, with a faint gold cast to his skin that gave his round cheeks a delicate glow, like the petals of a daffodil. With a slick of black hair across the top of his head, he might have been a Chinese baby—bar the huge, round blue eyes.

In a way, I supposed I should feel grateful to him. Nothing less than the birth of a dwarf could have deflected the attention of the Ridge from me and the events of the past month. As it was, people no longer stared at my healing face or stumbled awkwardly to find something to say to me. They had quite a lot to say—to me, to each other, and not infrequently, to Marsali, if neither Bree nor I was in time to stop them.

I supposed they must be saying the same things to Fergus—if they saw him. He had come back, three days following the baby's birth, silent and dark-faced. He had stayed long enough to assent to Marsali's choice of name, and to have a brief, private conversation with her. Then he had left again.

If she knew where he was, she wasn't saying. For the time being, she and the children remained at the Big House with us. She smiled and paid attention to the other children, as mothers must, though she seemed always to be listening for something that wasn't there. Fergus's footsteps? I wondered.

One good thing: she kept Henri-Christian always close to her, carrying him in a sling, or sitting by her feet in his basket of woven rushes. I'd seen parents who had given birth to children with defects; often, their response was to withdraw, unable to deal with the situation. Marsali dealt with it in the other way, becoming fiercely protective of him.

Visitors came, ostensibly to speak to Jamie about something or to get a bit of a tonic or a salve from me—but really in hopes of catching a glimpse of Henri-Christian. It was no surprise, therefore, that Marsali tensed, clutching Henri-Christian to her bosom, when the back door opened and a shadow fell across the threshold.

She relaxed a little, though, seeing that the visitor was Young Ian.

"Hello, coz," he said, smiling at her. "Are ye well, then, and the bairn, too?"

"Verra well," she said firmly. "Come to visit your new cousin, have ye?" I could see that she eyed him narrowly.

"I have, aye, and brought him a wee present, too." He lifted one big hand, and touched his shirt, which bulged a little with whatever was inside it. "Ye're well, too, I hope, Auntie Claire?"

"Hallo, Ian," I said, getting to my feet and putting aside the shirt I'd been hemming. "Yes, I'm fine. Do you want some beer?" I was grateful to see him; I'd been keeping Marsali company while she sewed—or rather, standing guard over her to repel the less-welcome sort of visitor, while Mrs. Bug was tending to the chickens. But I had a decoction of stinging-nettle brewing in the surgery, and needed to check on it. Ian could be trusted to take care of her.

Leaving them with refreshment, I escaped to my surgery and spent a pleasant quarter of an hour alone with the herbs, decanting infusions and separating a heap of rosemary to dry, surrounded by pungent scent and the peacefulness of plants. Such solitude was hard to come by these days, with children popping up underfoot like mushrooms. Marsali was anxious to go back to her own home, I knew—but I was loath to let her go without Fergus there to provide *some* help.

"Bloody man," I muttered under my breath. "Selfish little beast."

Evidently, I wasn't the only one who thought so. As I came back down the hall, reeking of rosemary and ginseng root, I overheard Marsali expressing a similar opinion to Ian.

"Aye, I ken he's taken back, who wouldna be?" she was saying, her voice full of hurt. "But why must he run awa, and leave us alone? Did ye speak to him, Ian? Did he *say* anything?"

So that was it. Ian had been gone on one of his mysterious journeys; he must have encountered Fergus somewhere, and told Marsali about it.

"Aye," he said, after a moment's hesitation. "Just a bit." I hung back, not wanting to interrupt them, but I could see his face, the ferocity of his tattoos at odds with the sympathy that clouded his eyes. He leaned across the table, holding out his arms. "Can I hold him, coz? Please?"

Marsali's back stiffened with surprise, but she handed over the baby, who squirmed and kicked a little in his wrappings, but quickly settled against Ian's shoulder, making little smacking noises. Ian bent his head, smiling, and brushed his lips across Henri-Christian's big round head.

He said something soft to the baby, in what I thought was Mohawk.

"What's that ye said?" Marsali asked, curious.

"A sort of blessing, ye'd call it." He patted Henri-Christian's back, very softly. "Ye call upon the wind to welcome him, the sky to give him shelter, and the water and the earth to yield him food."

"Oh." Marsali's voice was soft. "That's so nice, Ian." But then she squared her shoulders, unwilling to be distracted. "Ye spoke wi' Fergus, ye said."

Ian nodded, eyes closed. His cheek rested lightly on the baby's head. He didn't speak for a moment, but I saw his throat move, the big Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed.

"I had a child, cousin," he whispered, so softly that I barely heard him.

Marsali heard him. She froze, the needle she had picked up glinting in her hand. Then, moving very slowly, put it down again.

"Did ye, then?" she said just as softly. And rising, went round the table in a quiet rustle of skirts to sit beside him on the bench, close enough that he could feel her there, and laid a small hand against his elbow.

He didn't open his eyes, but drew breath, and with the baby nestled against his heart, began to talk, in a voice hardly louder than the crackle of the fire.

* * *

He woke out of sleep, knowing that something was deeply wrong. He rolled toward the back of the bed platform, where his weapons lay at hand, but before he could seize knife or spear, he heard again the sound that must have wakened him. It came from behind him; no more than a slight catch of breath, but he heard both pain and fear in it.

The fire burned very low; he saw no more than the dark top of Wako'teqehsnonhsa's head, a red glow outlining it, and the double mound of shoulder and hip beneath the furs. She didn't move or make the sound again, but something in those still dark curves cleft through his heart like a tomahawk striking home.

He gripped her shoulder fiercely, willing her to be all right. Her bones were small and hard through her flesh. He could find no proper words; all the Kahnyen'kehaka had fled out of his head, and so he spoke in the first words that came to him.

"Lass—love—are ye all right, then? Blessed Michael defend us, are ye well?"

She knew he was there, but didn't turn to him. Something—a strange ripple, like a stone thrown in water—went through her, and the breath caught in her throat again, a small dry sound.

He didn't wait, but scrambled naked from the furs, calling for help. People came tumbling out into the dim light of the longhouse, bulky shapes hurrying toward him in a fog of questions. He couldn't speak; didn't need to. Within moments, Tewaktenyonh was there, her strong old face set in grim calm, and the women of the longhouse rushed past him, pushing him aside as they carried Emily away, wrapped in a deer's hide.

He followed them outside, but they ignored him, disappearing into the women's house at the end of the village. Two or three men came out, looked after them, then shrugged, turned, and went back inside. It was cold, and very late, and plainly women's business.

He went inside himself, after a few moments, but only long enough to pull on a few clothes. He couldn't stay in the longhouse, not with the bed empty of her and smelling of blood. There was blood on his skin as well, but he didn't pause to wash.

Outside, the stars had faded, but the sky was still black. It was bone-cold, and very still.

The hide that hung over the door of his longhouse moved, and Rollo slipped through, gray as a ghost. The big dog extended his paws and stretched, groaning with the stiffness of the hour and the cold. Then he shook his heavy ruff, snorted out a puff of white breath, and ambled slowly to his master's side. He sat down heavily, with a resigned sigh, and leaned against Ian's leg.

Ian stood a moment longer, looking toward the house where his Emily was. His face was hot, fevered with urgency. He burned harsh and bright, like a coal, but he could feel the heat seeping out of him into the cold sky, and his heart turning slowly black. Finally, he slapped his palm against his thigh and turned away into the forest, walking fast, the dog padding big and soundless by his side.

"Hail Mary, full of grace …" He paid no attention to where he was going, praying under his breath, but aloud, for the comfort of his own voice in the silent dark.

Ought he to be praying to one of the Mohawk spirits, he wondered? Would they be angry that he spoke to his old God, to God's mother? Might they take revenge for such a slight, on his wife and child?

The child is dead already. He had no notion where that knowledge came from, but he knew it was so, as surely as if someone had spoken the words to him aloud. The knowledge was dispassionate, not yet food for grief; only a fact he knew to be true—and was appalled to know it.

On he went into the woods, walking, then running, slowing only when he must, to draw breath. The air was knife-cold and still, smelling of rot and turpentine, but the trees whispered just a little as he passed. Emily could hear them talk; she knew their secret voices.

"Aye, and what good is that?" he muttered, face turned up to the starless void between the branches. "Ye dinna say anything worth knowing. Ye dinna ken how it is with her now, do ye?"

He could hear the dog's feet now and then, rustling among the dead leaves just behind him, thudding softly on patches of bare ground. He stumbled now and then, feet lost in the darkness, fell once bruisingly, stumbled to his feet, and ran clumsily on. He had stopped praying; his mind wouldn't form words any longer, couldn't choose among the fractured syllables of his different tongues, and his breath burned thick in his throat as he ran.

He felt her body against him in the cold, her full breasts in his hands, her small round buttocks thrusting back, heavy and eager as he rammed her, oh, God, he knew he ought not, he knew! And yet he'd done it, night after night, mad for the slippery tight clutch of her, long past the day when he knew he should stop, selfish, mindless, mad and wicked with lust.…

He ran, and her trees murmured condemnation above him as he went.

He had to stop, sobbing for breath. The sky had turned from black to the color that comes before the light. The dog nosed at him, whining softly in his throat, amber eyes gone blank and dark in the no-light of the hour.

Sweat poured down his body under the leather shirt, soaked the draggled breechclout between his legs. His privates were chilled, shriveled against his body, and he could smell himself, a rank, bitter scent of fear and loss.

Rollo's ears pricked, and the dog whined again, moving a step away, back, away again, tail twitching nervously. *Come,* he was saying, as clearly as words. *Come now!*

For himself, Ian could have lain down on the frozen leaves, buried his face in the earth, and stayed. But habit pulled at him; he was accustomed to heed the dog.

"What?" he muttered, dragging a sleeve across his wet face. "What is it, then?"

Rollo growled, deep in his throat. He was standing rigid, the hackles slowly rising on his neck. Ian saw it, and some distant tremor of alarm made itself felt through the fog of exhausted despair. His hand went to his belt, found emptiness there, and slapped at it, unbelieving. Christ, he had not so much as a skinning knife!

Rollo growled again, louder. A warning, meant to be heard. Ian turned, looking, but saw only the dark trunks of cedar and pine, the ground beneath them a mass of shadows, the air between them filled with mist.

A French trader who had come to their fire had called such a time, such a light, *l'heure du loup*—the hour of the wolf. And for good reason: it was a hunting time, when the night grows dim, and the faint breeze that comes before the light begins to rise, carrying the scent of prey.

His hand went to the other side of his belt, where the pouch of *taseng* should hang: bear grease steeped with mint leaves, to hide a man's scent while hunting—or hunted. But that side too was empty, and he felt his heart beat quick and hard, as the cold wind dried the sweat from his body.

Rollo's teeth were bared, the growl a continuous rolling thunder. Ian stooped and seized a fallen pine branch from the ground. It was a good length, though flimsier than he would have liked, and unwieldy, clawed with long twigs.

"Home," he whispered to the dog. He had no notion where he was, or where the village lay, but Rollo did. The dog backed slowly, eyes still fixed on the gray shadows—did they move, those shadows?

He was walking faster now, still backward, feeling the slope of the ground through the soles of his moccasins, sensing Rollo's presence from the rustle of the dog's feet, the faint whine that came now and then behind him. There. Yes, a shadow *had* moved! A gray shape, far away and seen too briefly to recognize, but there all the same—and recognizable by its presence alone.

If there was one, there were more. They did not hunt alone. They weren't near yet, though; he turned, beginning almost to run.

Not in panic now, despite the fear in the pit of his stomach. A quick, steady lope, the hill-walker's gait that his uncle had shown him, that would devour the steep, endless miles of the Scottish mountains, steady effort without exhaustion. He must save strength to fight.

He observed that thought with a wry twist of the mouth, snapping off the brittle pine twigs from his club as he went. A moment ago, he had wanted to die, and perhaps he would again, if Emily—But not now. If Emily … and besides, there was the dog. Rollo wouldn't leave him; they must defend each other.

There was water near; he heard it gurgling under the wind. But carried on the wind came another sound, a long, unearthly howl that brought the sweat out cold on his face again. Another answered it, to the west. Still far away, but they were hunting now, calling to one another. Her blood was on him.

He turned, seeking the water. It was a small creek, no more than a few feet across. He splashed into it without hesitation, splintering the skin of ice that clung to the banks, feeling the cold bite into his legs and feet as it soaked his leggings and filled his moccasins. He stopped for a split second, pulling off the moccasins, lest they be carried away in the current; Emily had made them for him, of moose hide.

Rollo had crossed the stream in two gigantic bounds, and paused on the opposite bank to shake a freezing spray of water from his coat before going on. He held to the bank, though; Ian stayed in the water, splashing shin-deep, staying as long as might be managed. Wolves hunted by wind as much as by ground scent, but no need to make it easy for them.

He had thrust the wet moccasins down the neck of his shirt, and icy trickles ran down chest and belly, soaking his breechclout. His feet were numb; he couldn't feel the rounded stones of the streambed, but now and then his foot slid on one, slippery with algae, and he lurched and stumbled to keep his balance.

He could hear the wolves more clearly; that was good, though—the wind had changed, was toward him now, carrying their voices. Or was it only that they were closer now?

Closer. Rollo was wild, darting to and fro on the far bank, whining and growling, urging him on with brief yips. A deer's path came down to the stream on that side; he stumbled out of the water onto it, panting and shaking. It took several tries to get the moccasins on again. The soaked leather was stiff, and his hands and feet refused to work. He had to put down his club and use both hands.

He had just managed the second one when Rollo suddenly charged down the bank, roaring a challenge. He whirled on the frozen mud, catching up his club, in time to see a gray shape, nearly Rollo's size, on the far side of the water, its pale eyes startlingly near.

He screeched and flung the club in reflex. It sailed across the stream and struck the ground near the wolf's feet, and the thing vanished as though by magic. He stood stock-still for an instant, staring. He had not imagined it, surely?

No, Rollo was raving, bellowing and teeth bared, flecks of foam flying from his muzzle. There were stones at the stream's edge; Ian seized one, another, scraped up a handful, another, stubbing his fingers in haste on the rocks and frozen soil, holding up the front of his shirt to make a bag.

The more-distant wolf howled again; the near one answered, so close that the hairs rose up straight on the back of his neck. He heaved a rock in the direction of the call, turned, and ran, the bundle of rocks clutched hard against his belly.

The sky had lightened into dawn. Heart and lungs strained for blood and air, and yet it seemed as though he ran so slowly that he floated over the forest floor, passing like a drifting cloud, unable to go faster. He could see each tree, each separate needle of a spruce he passed, short and thick, soft silver-green in the light.

His breath came hard, his vision blurred and cleared, as tears of effort clouded his eyes, were blinked away, welled back again. A tree branch lashed his face and blinded him, the scent of it sharp in his nose.

"Red Cedar, help me!" he gasped, the Kahnyen'kehaka coming to his lips as though he had never spoken English or called upon Christ and His mother.

Behind you. It was a small voice, quiet, perhaps no more than the voice of his own instinct, but he whirled at once, stone in hand, and slung it with all his force. Another, and another, and another, as fast as he could fling. There was a crack, a thump, and a yelp, and Rollo slewed and skidded, eager to turn and attack.

"Come-come-come!" He seized the big dog's ruff as he ran, dragging him round, forcing him along.

He could hear them now, or thought he could. The wind that comes at dawn rustled through the trees, and they whispered overhead, calling him this way, then that, guiding him as he ran. He saw nothing but color, half-blind with effort, but felt their embrace, cool in his mind; a prickling touch of spruce and fir, the skin of white aspen, smooth as a woman's, sticky with blood.

Go here, come this way, he thought he heard, and followed the sound of the wind.

A howl came from behind them, followed by short yips, and another of acknowledgment. Close, too close! He flung stones behind him as he ran, not looking, no time to turn and aim.

Then there were no more stones and he dropped the empty flap of shirt, arms pumping as he ran, a harsh panting in his ears that might have been his own breath, or the dog's—or the sound of the beasts behind him.

How many of them? How far to go? He was beginning to stagger, streaks of black and red shooting through his vision. If the village was not nearby, he had no chance.

He lurched sideways, hit the yielding branch of a tree that bent under his weight, then pushed him upright, setting him roughly back on his feet. He had lost his impetus, though, and his sense of direction.

"Where?" he gasped to the trees. "Which way?"

If there was an answer, he didn't hear it. There was a roar and a thud behind him, a mad scuffle punctuated with the growls and yelps of dogs fighting.

"Rollo!" He turned and flung himself through a growth of dead vines, to find dog and wolf squirming and biting in a writhing ball of fur and flashing teeth.

He dashed forward, kicking and shouting, punching wildly, glad at last to have something to hit, to be fighting back, even if it was the last fight. Something ripped across his leg, but he felt only the jar of impact as he rammed his knee hard into the wolf's side. It squealed and rolled away, rounding on him at once.

It leaped, and its paws struck him in the chest. He fell back, struck his head glancingly on something, lost breath for an instant, and came to himself to find his hand braced beneath the slavering jaws, straining to keep them from his throat.

Rollo sprang onto the wolf's back, and Ian lost his grip, collapsing under the weight of reeking fur and squirming flesh. He flung out a hand, seeking anything—a weapon, a tool, a grip to pull himself free—and gripped something hard.

He wrenched it from its bed in the moss and smashed it against the wolf's head. Fragments of bloody teeth flew through the air and struck his face. He struck again, sobbing, and again.

Rollo was whining, a high keening noise—no, it was him. He bashed the rock down once more on the battered skull, but the wolf had stopped fighting; it lay across his thighs, legs twitching, eyes glazing as it died. He pushed it off in a frenzy of revulsion. Rollo's teeth sank into the wolf's outstretched throat, and ripped it out, in a final spray of blood and warm flesh.

Ian closed his eyes and sat still. It didn't seem possible to move, or to think.

After a time, it seemed possible to open his eyes, and to breathe, at least. There was a large tree at his back; he had fallen against the trunk when the wolf struck him; it supported him now. Among the twisted roots was a muddy hole, from which he had wrenched the stone.

He was still holding the stone; it felt as though it had grown to his skin; he couldn't open his hand. When he looked he saw that this was because the stone had shattered; sharp fragments had cut his hand, and the pieces of the stone were glued to his hand by drying blood. Using the fingers of his other hand, he bent back the clenched fingers, and pushed the broken pieces of the stone off his palm. He scraped moss from the tree roots, made a wad of it in his hand, then let the curled fingers close over it again.

A wolf howled, in the middle distance. Rollo, who had lain down by Ian, lifted his head with a soft *wuff!* The howl came again, and seemed to hold a question, a worried tone.

For the first time, he looked at the body of the wolf. For an instant, he thought it moved, and shook his head to clear his vision. Then he looked again.

It was moving. The distended belly rose gently, subsided. It was full light now, and he could see the tiny nubs of pink nipples, showing through the belly fur. Not a pack. A pair. But a pair no more. The wolf in the distance howled again, and Ian leaned to one side and vomited.

Eats Turtles came upon him a little later, sitting with his back against the red-cedar tree by the dead wolf, Rollo's bulk pressed close against him. Turtle squatted down, a short distance away, balanced on his heels, and watched.

"Good hunting, Wolf's Brother," he said finally, in greeting. Ian felt the knot between his shoulder blades relax just a little. Turtle's voice held a quiet tone, but no sorrow. She lived, then.

"She whose hearth I share," he said, careful to avoid speaking her name. To speak it aloud might expose her to evil spirits nearby. "She is well?"

Turtle closed his eyes and raised both brows and shoulders. She was alive, and not in danger. Still, it was not for a man to say what might happen. Ian didn't mention the child. Neither did Turtle.

Turtle had brought a gun, a bow, and his knife, of course. He took the knife from his belt and handed it to Ian, matter-of-factly.

"You will want the skins," he said. "To wrap your son, when he shall be born."

A shock went through Ian, like the shock of sudden rain on bare skin. Eats Turtles saw his face, and turned his head aside, avoiding his eyes.

"This child was a daughter," Turtle said matter-of-factly. "Tewaktenyonh told my wife, when she came for a rabbit skin to wrap the body."

The muscles in his belly tightened and quivered; he thought that perhaps his own skin would burst, but it didn't. His throat was dry, and he swallowed once, painfully, then shook the moss away and held out his wounded hand for the knife. He bent slowly to skin the wolf.

Eats Turtles was poking with interest at the bloodstained remnants of the shattered stone, when the howl of a wolf brought him upright, staring.

It echoed through the forest, that howl, and the trees moved above them, murmuring uneasily at the sound of loss and desolation. The knife drew swiftly down the pale fur of the belly, dividing the two rows of pink nipples.

"Her husband will be nearby," Wolf's Brother said, not looking up. "Go and kill him."

* * *

Marsali stared at him, scarcely breathing. The sadness in her eyes was still there, but had somehow diminished, overwhelmed with compassion. The anger had left her; she had taken back Henri-Christian, and held the fat bundle of her baby with both arms against her breast, her cheek against the bold round curve of his head.

"Ah, Ian," she said softly. *"Mo charaid, mo chridhe."*

He sat looking down at his hands, clasped loosely in his lap, and seemed not to have heard her. Finally, though, he stirred, like a statue waking. Without looking up, he reached into his shirt and drew out a small, rolled bundle, bound with hair twine, and decorated with a wampum bead.

He undid this, and leaning over, spread the cured skin of an unborn wolf over the baby's shoulders. His big, bony hand smoothed the pale fur, cupping for a moment over Marsali's hand where it held the child.

"Believe me, cousin," he said, very softly, "your husband grieves. But he will come back." Then he rose and left, silent as an Indian.

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LE MAÎTRE DES CHAMPIGNONS

The small limestone cave we used for a stable was home at the moment only to a nanny goat with two brand-new kids. All the animals born in the spring were now large enough to be turned out to forage in the wood with their mothers. The goat was still getting room service, though, in the form of kitchen scraps and a little cracked corn.

It had been raining for several days, and the morning broke cloudy and damp, every leaf dripping and the air thick with the scents of resin and soggy leaf mulch. Luckily, the cloudiness kept the birds subdued; the jays and mockingbirds were quick to learn, and kept a beady eye on the comings and goings of people with food—they dive-bombed me regularly as I made my way up the hill with my basin.

I was on my guard, but even so, a bold jay dropped from a branch in a flash of blue and landed *in* the basin, startling me. Before I could react, it had seized a fragment of corn muffin and darted off, so quickly that I could scarcely believe I'd seen it, save for the racing of my heart. Luckily I hadn't dropped the basin; I heard a triumphant screech from the trees, and hurried to get inside the stable before the jay's friends should try the same tactic.

I was surprised to find that the Dutch door was unbolted at the top and stood an inch or two ajar. There was no danger of the goats escaping, of course, but foxes and raccoons were more than capable of climbing over the lower door, and so both doors were normally bolted at night. Perhaps Mr. Wemyss had forgotten; it was his job to muck out the used straw and settle the stock for the night.

As soon as I pushed open the door, though, I saw that Mr. Wemyss was not to blame. There was a tremendous rustle of straw at my feet, and something big moved in the darkness.

I uttered a sharp yelp of alarm, and this time *did* drop the basin, which fell with a clang, scattering food across the floor and rousing the nanny goat, who started blatting her head off.

"*Pardon,* milady!"

Hand to my thumping heart, I stepped out of the doorway, so the light fell on Fergus, crouched on the floor, with straws sticking out of his hair like the Madwoman of Chaillot.

"Oh, so there you are," I said quite coldly.

He blinked and swallowed, rubbing his hand over a face dark with sprouting whiskers.

"I—yes," he said. He seemed to have nothing further to add to this. I stood glaring down at him for a moment, then shook my head and stooped to retrieve the potato peelings and other fragments that had fallen from the basin. He moved as though to help me, but I stopped him with a shooing gesture.

He sat still, watching me, hands around his knees. It was dim inside the stable, and water dripped steadily from the plants growing out of the cliffside above, making a curtain of falling drops across the open door.

The goat had stopped making noise, having recognized me, but was now stretching her neck through the railing of her pen, blueberry-colored tongue extended like an anteater's, in an effort to reach an apple core that had rolled near the pen. I picked it up and handed it to her, trying to think where to start, and what to say when I did.

"Henri-Christian's doing well," I said, for lack of anything else. "Putting on weight."

I let the remark trail off, bending over the rail to pour corn and scraps into the wooden feed trough.

Dead silence. I waited a moment, then turned round, one hand on my hip.

"He's a very sweet little baby," I said.

I could hear him breathing, but he said nothing. With an audible snort, I went and pushed the bottom half of the door open wide, so that the cloudy light outside streamed in, exposing Fergus. He sat with his face turned stubbornly away. I could smell him at a goodly distance; he reeked of bitter sweat and hunger.

I sighed.

"Dwarves of this sort have got quite normal intelligence. I've checked him thoroughly, and he has all the usual reflexes and responses that he should have. There's no reason why he can't be educated, be able to work—at something."

"Something," Fergus echoed, the word holding both despair and derision. "Something." At last, he turned his face toward me, and I saw the hollowness of his eyes. "With respect, milady—you have never seen the life of a dwarf."

"And you have?" I asked, not so much in challenge as curiosity.

He closed his eyes against the morning light, nodding.

"Yes," he whispered, and swallowed. "In Paris."

The brothel where he had grown up in Paris was a large one, with a varied clientele, famous for being able to offer something for almost any taste.

"The house itself had *les filles, naturellement,* and *les enfants.* They are of course the bread and butter of the establishment. But there are always those who desire … the exotic, and will pay. And so now and then the madame would send for those who dealt in such things. *La Maîtresse des Scorpions—avec les flagellantes, tu comprends? Ou Le Maître des Champignons.*"

"The Master of Mushrooms?" I blurted.

"*Oui.* The Dwarf Master."

His eyes had sunk into his head, his gaze turned inward and his face haggard. He was seeing in memory sights and people who had been absent from his thoughts for many years—and was not enjoying the recollection.

"*Les chanterelles,* we called them," he said softly. "The females. The males, they were *les morels.*" Exotic fungi, valued for the rarity of their twisted shapes, the strange savor of their flesh.

"They were not badly treated, *les champignons,*" he said, abstracted. "They were of value, you see. *Le Maître* would buy such infants from their parents—there was one born in the brothel, once, and the madame was delighted at her good fortune—or collect them from the streets."

He looked down at his hand, the long, delicate fingers moving restlessly, pleating the cloth of his breeches.

"The streets," he repeated. "Those who escaped the brothels—they were beggars. I knew one of them quite well—Luc, he was called. We would sometimes assist each other—" The shadow of a smile touched his mouth, and he waved his intact hand in the deft gesture of one picking pockets.

"But he was alone, Luc," he continued matter-of-factly. "He had no protector. I found him one day in the alley, with his throat cut. I told the madame, and she sent the doorkeep out at once to seize the body, and sold it to a doctor in the next *arondissement.*"

I didn't ask what the doctor had wanted with Luc's body. I'd seen the broad, dried hands of dwarves, sold for divination and protection. And other parts.

"I begin to see why a brothel might seem safe," I said, swallowing heavily. "But still …"

Fergus had been sitting with his head braced on his hand, staring at the straw. At this, he looked up at me.

"I have parted my buttocks for money, milady," he said simply. "And thought nothing of it, save when it hurt. But then I met milord, and found a world beyond the brothel and the streets. That my son might return to such places …" He stopped abruptly, unable to speak. He closed his eyes again, and shook his head, slowly.

"Fergus. Fergus, dear. You can't think that Jamie—that we—would ever let such a thing happen," I said, distressed beyond measure.

He drew a deep, trembling breath, and thumbed away the tears that hung on his lashes. He opened his eyes and gave me a smile of infinite sadness.

"No, you would not, milady. But you will not live forever, nor will milord. Nor I. But the child will be a dwarf forever. And *les petits,* they cannot well defend themselves. They will be plucked up by those who seek them, taken and consumed." He wiped his nose on his sleeve and sat up a little.

"If, that is, they should be so fortunate," he added, his voice hardening. "They are not valued, outside the cities. Peasants, they believe the birth of such a child is at best a judgment on the sins of his parents." A deeper shadow crossed his face, his lips drawing tight. "It may be so. My sins—" But he broke off abruptly, turning away.

"At worst—" His voice was soft, head turned away, as though he whispered secrets to the shadows of the cave. "At worst, they are seen as monstrous, children born of some demon who has lain with the woman. People stone them, burn them—sometimes the woman, too. In the mountain villages of France, a dwarf child would be left for the wolves. But do you not know these things, milady?" he asked, suddenly turning back to face me.

"I—I suppose so," I said, and put out a hand to the wall, suddenly feeling the need of some support. I *had* known such things, in the abstract way one thinks of the customs of aborigines and savages—people whom one will never meet, safely distant in the pages of geography books, of ancient histories.

He was right; I knew it. Mrs. Bug had crossed herself, seeing the child, and then made the sign of the horns as protection from evil, pale horror on her face.

Shocked as we had all been, and then concerned with Marsali, and with Fergus's absence, I hadn't been away from the house for a week or more. I had no idea what people might be saying, on the Ridge. Fergus plainly did.

"They'll … get used to him," I said as bravely as I could. "People will see that he isn't a monster. It may take some time, but I promise you, they'll see."

"Will they? And if they let him live, what then will he do?" He rose to his feet quite suddenly. He stretched out his left arm, and with a jerk, freed the leather strip that held his hook. It fell with a soft thump into the straw, and left the narrow stump of his wrist bare, the pale skin creased with red from the tightness of the wrappings.

“Me, I cannot hunt, cannot do a proper man’s work. I am fit for nothing but to pull the plow, like a mule!” His voice shook with anger and self-loathing. “If I cannot work as a man does, how shall a dwarf?”

“Fergus, it isn’t—”

“I cannot keep my family! My wife must labor day and night to feed the children, must put herself in the way of scum and filth who misuse her, who—Even if I was in Paris, I am too old and crippled to whore!” He shook the stump at me, face convulsed, then whirled and swung his maimed arm, smashing it against the wall, over and over.

“Fergus!” I seized his other arm, but he jerked away.

“What work will he do?” he cried, tears streaming down his face. “How shall he live? *Mon Dieu! Il est aussi inutile que moi!*”

He bent and seized the hook from the ground, and hurled it as hard as he could at the limestone wall. It made a small chiming sound as it struck, and fell into the straw, startling the nanny and her kids.

Fergus was gone, the Dutch door left swinging. The goat called after him, a long *maaaah!* of disapproval.

I held on to the railing of the pen, feeling as though it was the only solid thing in a slowly tilting world. When I could, I bent and felt carefully in the straw until I touched the metal of the hook, still warm from Fergus’s body. I drew it out and wiped bits of straw and manure carefully off it with my apron, still hearing Fergus’s last words.

“My God! He is as useless as I am!”

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A DE’IL IN THE MILK

Henri-Christian’s eyes nearly crossed with the effort of focusing on the yarn bobble Brianna dangled over his face.

“I think his eyes might stay blue,” she said, peering thoughtfully at him. “What do you think he’s looking at?” He lay in her lap, knees drawn up nearly to his chin, the soft blue eyes in question fixed somewhere far beyond her.

“Oh, the wee ones still see heaven, my Mam said.” Marsali was spinning, trying out Brianna’s new treadle wheel, but spared a quick glance at her newest son, smiling a little. “Maybe there’s an angel sitting on your shoulder, aye? Or a saint who stands behind ye.”

That gave her an odd feeling, as though someone *did* stand behind her. Not creepy, though—more a mild, warm sense of reassurance. She opened her mouth to say, “Maybe it’s my father,” but caught herself in time.

“Who’s the patron saint of laundry?” she said instead. “That’s who we need.” It was raining; it had been raining for days, and small mounds of clothing lay scattered about the room or draped over the furniture: damp things in various states of drying, filthy things destined for the wash cauldron as soon as the weather broke, less-filthy things that might be brushed, shaken, or beaten into another few days’ wearing, and an ever-growing pile of things needing mending.

Marsali laughed, deftly feeding thread to the bobbin.

"Ye'd have to ask Da about that. He kens more saints than anybody. This is wonderful, this wheel! I've not seen this kind before. However did ye come to think of such a thing?"

"Oh—saw one somewhere." Bree flicked a hand, dismissing it. She had—in a folk-art museum. Building it had been time-consuming—she'd first had to make a crude lathe, as well as soak and bend the wood for the wheel itself—but not terribly difficult. "Ronnie Sinclair helped a lot; he knows what wood will do and what it won't. I can't believe how good you are at that, and this your first time using one like it."

Marsali snorted, likewise dismissing the compliment.

"I've spun since I was five, *a piuthar.* All that's different here is I can sit while I do it, instead of walking to and fro 'til I fall over wi' tiredness."

Her stockinged feet flickered back and forth under the hem of her dress, working the treadle. It made a pleasant *whish-whir* sound—though this was barely audible over the babble at the other side of the room, where Roger was carving yet another car for the children.

Vrooms were a big hit with the small-fry, and the demand for them unceasing. Brianna watched with amusement as Roger fended off Jem's inquisitiveness with a deft elbow, frowning in concentration. The tip of his tongue showed between his teeth, and wood shavings littered the hearth and his clothes, and—of course—one was stuck in his hair, a pale curl against its darkness.

"What's that one?" she asked, raising her voice to reach him. He looked up, his eyes a mossy green in the dim rainlight from the window behind him.

"I think it's a '57 Chevrolet pickup truck," he said, grinning. "Here, then, *a nighean.* This one's yours." He brushed a last shaving from his creation and handed the blocky thing to Félicité, whose mouth and eyes were round with awe.

"Issa vroom?" she said, clutching it to her bosom. "*My* vroom?"

"It's a druck," Jemmy informed her with kindly condescension. "Daddy says."

“A truck is a vroom,” Roger assured Félicité, seeing doubt begin to pucker her forehead. “It’s just a bigger kind.”

“Issa *big* vroom, see!” Félicité kicked Jem in the shin. He yelped and grabbed for her hair, only to be butted in the stomach by Joan, always there to defend her sister.

Brianna tensed, ready to intervene, but Roger broke up the incipient riot by holding Jem and Félicité each at arm’s length, glaring Joan into retreat.

“Right, you lot. No fighting, or we put the vrooms away ’til tomorrow.”

That quelled them instantly, and Brianna felt Marsali relax, resuming the rhythm of her spinning. The rain hummed on the roof, solid and steady; it was a good day to be inside, despite the difficulty of entertaining bored children.

“Why don’t you play something nice and quiet?” she said, grinning at Roger. “Like … oh … Indianapolis 500?”

“Oh, you’re a great help,” he said, giving her a dirty look, but he obligingly set the children to work laying out a racetrack in chalk on the big hearthstone.

“Too bad Germain’s not here,” he said casually. “Where’s he gone in the rain and all, Marsali?” Germain’s vroom—according to Roger, it was a Jaguar X-KE, though so far as Brianna could tell, it looked exactly like the others: a block of wood with a rudimentary cab and wheels—was sitting on the mantelpiece, awaiting its master’s return.

“He’s with Fergus,” Marsali answered calmly, not faltering in her rhythm. Her lips pressed together, though, and it was easy to hear the note of strain in her voice.

“And how’s Fergus, then?” Roger looked up at her, kindly, but intent.

The thread skipped, bounced in Marsali’s hand, and wound itself up with a visible slub in it. She grimaced, and didn’t reply until the thread was running once more smoothly through her fingers.

“Well, I will say, for a man wi’ one hand, he’s a bonny wee fighter,” she said at last, eyes on the thread and a wry note in her voice.

Brianna glanced at Roger, who raised an eyebrow back at her.

"Who's he been fighting?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"He doesna often tell me," Marsali said evenly. "Though yesterday it was the husband of a woman who asked him why he didna just strangle Henri-Christian at birth. He took offense," she added, offhand, leaving it unclear as to whether it was Fergus, the husband, or both who had taken offense. Lifting the thread, she bit it sharply off.

"I should think so," Roger murmured. His head was bent, marking off the starting line, so his hair fell over his forehead, obscuring his face. "Not the only one, though, I take it."

"No." Marsali began winding the thread onto the niddy-noddy, a small, seemingly permanent frown showing between her fair brows. "I suppose it's better than the ones who point and whisper. Those are the ones who think Henri-Christian's the—the devil's seed," she finished bravely, though her voice quivered a little. "I think they'd burn the wee man—and me and the other weans along with him, if they thought they could."

Brianna felt the bottom of her stomach drop, and cuddled the object of discussion in her lap.

"What sort of idiots could *possibly* think such a thing?" she demanded. "Let alone say it out loud!"

"Let alone do it, ye mean." Marsali put aside the yarn and rose, leaning over to take Henri-Christian and put him to her breast. With his knees still curled up, his body was scarcely half the size of a normal baby's—and with his large, round head with its sprout of dark hair, Brianna had to admit that he did look … odd.

"Da had a word here and there," Marsali said. Her eyes were closed, and she was rocking slowly back and forth, cradling Henri-Christian close. "If it weren't for that …" Her slender throat moved as she swallowed.

"Daddy, Daddy, let's *go*!" Jem, impatient with incomprehensible adult conversation, plucked at Roger's sleeve.

Roger had been looking at Marsali, his lean face troubled. At this reminder, he blinked and glanced down at his thoroughly normal son, clearing his throat.

“Aye,” he said, and took down Germain’s car. “Well, then, look. Here’s the starting line.…”

Brianna laid a hand on Marsali’s arm. It was thin, but strongly muscled, the fair skin gold from sun, spattered with tiny freckles. The sight of it, so small and brave-looking, clutched at her throat.

“They’ll stop,” she whispered. “They’ll see.…”

“Aye, maybe.” Marsali cupped Henri-Christian’s small round bottom, holding him closer. Her eyes were still closed. “Maybe not. But if Germain’s wi’ Fergus, he’ll maybe be more careful who he fights. I’d rather they didna kill him, aye?”

She bowed her head over the baby, settling into the nursing and plainly disinclined to talk any further. Brianna patted her arm, a little awkwardly, then moved to take the seat by the spinning wheel.

She’d heard the talk, of course. Or some of it. Particularly right after Henri-Christian’s birth, which had sent shock waves through the Ridge. Beyond the first overt expressions of sympathy, there had been a lot of muttering, about recent events and what malign influence might have caused them—from the assault on Marsali and the burning of the malting shed, to the kidnapping of her mother, the slaughter in the woods, and the birth of a dwarf. She’d heard one injudicious girl murmur within her hearing something about “… witchcraft, what would ye expect?”—but had rounded fiercely to glare at the girl, who had paled and slunk off with her two friends. The girl had glanced back once, though, then turned away, the three of them spitefully sniggering.

But no one had ever treated her or her mother with any lack of respect. It was clear that a number of the tenants were rather afraid of Claire—but they were much more afraid of her father. Time and habituation had seemed to be working, though—until the birth of Henri-Christian.

Working the treadle was soothing; the whir of the spinning wheel faded into the sound of the rain and the bickering of the children.

At least Fergus had come back. When Henri-Christian was born, he had left the house and not come back for several days. *Poor Marsali,* she thought, with a mental scowl at Fergus. Left alone to deal with the shock. And everyone had *been* shocked, her included. Perhaps she couldn't really blame Fergus.

She swallowed, imagining, as she did whenever she saw Henri-Christian, what it would be like to have a child born with some terrible defect. She saw them now and then—children with cleft lips, the misshapen features of what her mother said was congenital syphilis, retarded children—and every time, crossed herself and thanked God that Jemmy was normal.

But then, so were Germain and his sisters. Something like this could come out of the blue, at any time. Despite herself, she glanced at the small shelf where she kept her personal things, and the dark brown jar of *dauco* seeds. She'd been taking them again, ever since Henri-Christian's birth, though she hadn't mentioned it to Roger. She wondered whether he knew; he hadn't said anything.

Marsali was singing softly under her breath. *Did* Marsali blame Fergus? she wondered. Or he her? She hadn't seen Fergus to talk to in some time. Marsali didn't seem critical of him—and she had said she didn't want him killed. Brianna smiled involuntarily at the memory. Yet there was an undeniable sense of distance when she mentioned him.

The thread thickened suddenly, and she trod faster, trying to compensate, only to have it catch and snap. Muttering to herself, she stopped and let the wheel run itself down—only then realizing that someone had been pounding on the door of the cabin for some time, the sound of it lost in the racket inside.

She opened the door to find one of the fisher-folks' children dripping on the stoop, small, bony, and feral as a wild cat. There were several of them among the tenant families, so alike that she had trouble telling them apart.

"Aidan?" she guessed. "Aidan McCallum?"

"Good day, mistress," the little boy said, bobbing his head in nervous acknowledgment of identity. "Is meenister to hame?"

"Mee—oh. Yes, I suppose so. Come in, won't you?" Suppressing a smile, she swung the door wide, beckoning him in. The boy looked quite shocked to see Roger, crouched on the floor, playing Vroom with Jemmy and Joan and Félicité, all industriously screeching and roaring to such effect that they hadn't noticed the newcomer.

"You have a visitor," she said, raising her voice to interrupt the bedlam. "He wants the minister." Roger broke off in mid-vroom, glancing up in inquiry.

"The what?" he said, sitting up, cross-legged, his own car in hand. Then he spotted the boy, and smiled. "Oh. Aidan, *a charaid*! What is it, then?"

Aidan screwed up his face in concentration. Obviously, he had been given a specific message, committed to memory.

"Mither says will ye come, please," he recited, "for to drive out a de'il what's got intae the milk."

* * *

The rain was falling more lightly now, but they were still soaked nearly through by the time they reached the McCallum residence. If it could be dignified by such a term, Roger thought, slapping rain from his hat as he followed Aidan up the narrow, slippery path to the cabin, which was perched in a high and inconvenient notch in the side of the mountain.

Orem McCallum had managed to erect the walls of his shakily built cabin, and then had missed his footing and plunged into a rock-strewn ravine, breaking his neck within a month of arrival on the Ridge, and leaving his pregnant wife and young son to its dubious shelter.

The other men had come and hastily put a roof on, but the cabin as a whole reminded Roger of nothing so much as a pile of giant jackstraws, poised precariously on the side of the mountain and obviously only awaiting the next spring flood to slide down the mountain after its builder.

Mrs. McCallum was young and pale, and so thin that her dress flapped round her like an empty flour sack. *Christ,* he thought, *what did they have to eat?*

"Oh, sir, I do thank ye for coming." She bobbed an anxious curtsy to him. "I'm that sorry to bring ye out in the rain and all—but I just didna ken what else I might do!"

"Not a problem," he assured her. "Er … Aidan said, though, that ye wanted a minister. I'm not that, ye know."

She looked disconcerted at that.

"Oh. Well, maybe not exactly, sir. But they do say as how your faither was a minister, and that ye do ken a great deal about the Bible and all."

"Some, yes," he replied guardedly, wondering what sort of emergency might require Bible knowledge. "A … um … devil in your milk, was it?"

He glanced discreetly from the baby in its cradle to the front of her dress, unsure at first whether she might mean her own breast milk, which would be a problem he was definitely not equipped to deal with. Fortunately, the difficulty seemed to lie with a large wooden pail sitting on the ramshackle table, a muslin cloth draped across it to keep flies out, small stones knotted into the corners as weights.

"Aye, sir." Mrs. McCallum nodded at it, obviously afraid to go nearer. "Lizzie Wemyss, her from the Big House, she brought that to me last night. She said Herself said as I must give it to Aidan, and drink of it myself." She looked helplessly at Roger. He understood her reservations; even in his own time, milk was regarded as a beverage only for infants and invalids; coming from a fishing village on the Scottish coast, she had quite possibly never seen a cow before coming to America. He was sure she knew what milk was, and that it technically was edible, but she had likely never tasted any.

"Aye, that's quite all right," he assured her. "My family all drink milk; it makes the weans grow tall and strong." And wouldn't come amiss to a nursing mother on lean rations, which was undoubtedly what Claire had thought.

She nodded, uncertain.

"Well … aye, sir. I wasna quite sure … but the lad was hungry, and said he'd drink it. So I went to dip him out a bit, but it—" She glanced at the bucket with an expression of fearful suspicion. "Weel, if it's no a de'il's got into it, it's something else. It's haunted, sir, I'm sure of it!"

He didn’t know what made him look at Aidan at that moment, but he surprised a fleeting look of deep interest that vanished immediately, leaving the boy with a preternaturally solemn expression.

So it was with a certain sense of forewarning that he leaned forward and gingerly lifted the cloth. Even so, he let out a yelp and jerked back, the weighted cloth flying sideways to clack against the wall.

The malevolent green eyes that glared at him from the middle of the bucket disappeared and the milk went *gollup!,* a spray of creamy drops erupting from the bucket like a miniature volcano.

“Shit!” he said. Mrs. McCallum had backed away as far as she could get and was staring at the bucket in terror, both hands clapped across her mouth. Aidan had one hand pressed over his own mouth, and was similarly wide-eyed—but a faint fizzing sound was audible from his direction.

Roger’s heart was pounding from adrenaline—and a strong desire to wring Aidan McCallum’s scrawny neck. He wiped the splattered cream deliberately from his face, then, gritting his teeth, reached gingerly into the bucket of milk.

It took several tries to grab the thing, which felt like nothing so much as a very muscular and animated glob of mucus, but the fourth try succeeded, and he triumphantly pulled a very large and indignant bullfrog out of the bucket, showering milk in every direction.

The frog dug its back legs ferociously into his slippery palm and broke his grip, launching itself in a soaring leap that covered half the distance to the door and made Mrs. McCallum scream out loud. The startled baby woke and added to the uproar, while the cream-covered frog plopped its way rapidly out of the door and into the rain, leaving yellow splotches in its wake.

Aidan prudently followed it out at a high rate of speed.

Mrs. McCallum had sat down on the floor, thrown her apron over her head, and was having hysterics under it. The baby was shrieking, and milk dripped slowly from the edge of the table, punctuating the patter of rain outside. The roof was leaking, he saw;

long wet streaks darkened the unbarked logs behind Mrs. McCallum, and she was sitting in a puddle.

With a deep sigh, he plucked the baby out of its cradle, surprising it sufficiently that it gulped and quit screaming. It blinked at him, and stuck its fist in its mouth. He had no idea of its sex; it was an anonymous bundle of rags, with a pinched wee face and a wary look.

Holding it in one arm, he crouched and put the other round Mrs. McCallum's shoulders, patting her gingerly in hopes of getting her to stop.

"It's all right," he said. "It was just a frog, ye know."

She'd been moaning like a banshee and uttering small intermittent screams, and she kept doing that, though the screams became less frequent, and the moaning disintegrated at last into more or less normal crying, though she refused to come out from under the apron.

His thigh muscles were cramped from squatting, and he was wet, anyway. With a sigh, he lowered himself into the puddle beside her and sat, patting her shoulder every now and then so she'd know he was still there.

The baby seemed happy enough, at least; it was sucking its fist, undisturbed by its mother's fit.

"How old's the wean?" he said conversationally, during a brief pause for breath. He knew its age approximately, because it had been born a week after Orem McCallum's death—but it was something to say. And for as old as it was, it seemed terribly small and light, at least by contrast to his memories of Jemmy at that age.

She mumbled something inaudible, but the crying eased off into hiccups and sighs. Then she said something else.

"What's that, Mrs. McCallum?"

"Why?" she whispered from under the faded calico. "Why has God brought me here?"

Well, that was a bloody good question; he'd asked that one fairly often himself, but hadn't got back any really good answers yet.

"Well … we trust He's got a plan of some sort," he said a little awkwardly. "We just don't know what it is."

"A fine plan," she said, and sobbed once. "To bring us all this way, to this terrible place, and then take my man from me and leave me here to starve!"

"Oh … it's no such a terrible place," he said, unable to refute anything else in her statement. "The woods and all … the streams, the mountains … it's … um … very pretty. When it's not raining." The inanity of this actually made her laugh, though it quickly devolved into more weeping.

"What?" He put an arm round her and pulled her a little closer, both to offer comfort, and in order to make out what she was saying, under her makeshift refuge.

"I miss the sea," she said very softly, and leaned her calico-swathed head against his shoulder, as though she was very tired. "I never shall see it again."

She was very likely right, and he could find nothing to say in reply. They sat for some time in a silence broken only by the baby's slobbering over its fist.

"I won't let ye starve," he said at last, softly. "That's all I can promise, but I do. Ye won't starve." Muscles cramped, he got stiffly to his feet, and reached down to one of the small rough hands that lay limply in her lap. "Come on, then. Get up. Ye can feed the wean, while I tidy up a bit."

* * *

The rain had ceased by the time he left, and the clouds had begun to drift apart, leaving patches of pale blue sky. He paused at a turn in the steep, muddy path to admire a rainbow—a complete one, that arched from one side of the sky to the other, its misty colors sinking down into the dark wet green of the dripping mountainside across from him.

It was quiet, save for the splat and drip of water from the leaves and the gurgle of water running down a rocky channel near the trail.

"A covenant," he said softly, out loud. "What's the promise, then? Not a pot of gold at the end." He shook his head and went on, grabbing at branches and bushes to keep from sliding down the mountainside; he didn't want to end up like Orem McCallum, in a tangle of bones at the bottom.

He'd talk to Jamie, and also to Tom Christie and Hiram Crombie. Among them, they could put out the word, and ensure the widow McCallum and her children got enough food. Folk were generous to share—but someone had to ask.

He glanced back over his shoulder; the crooked chimney was just visible above the trees, but no smoke came from it. They could gather enough firewood, she said—but wet as it was, it would be days before they had anything that would burn. They needed a shed for the wood, and logs cut, big enough to burn for a day, not the twigs and fallen branches Aidan could carry.

As though the thought had summoned him, Aidan came into view then. The boy was fishing, squatting on a rock beside a pool some thirty feet below, back turned to the trail. His shoulder blades stuck out through the worn fabric of his shirt, distinct as tiny angel wings.

The noise of the water covered Roger's footsteps as he made his way down the rocks. Very gently, he fitted his hand around the skinny, pale neck, and the bony shoulders hunched in surprise.

"Aidan," he said. "A word wi' you, *if* ye please."

* * *

The dark came down on All Hallows' Eve. We went to sleep to the sound of howling wind and pelting rain, and woke on the Feast of All Saints to whiteness and large soft flakes falling down and down in absolute silence. There is no more perfect stillness than the solitude in the heart of a snowstorm.

This is the thin time, when the beloved dead draw near. The world turns inward, and the chilling air grows thick with dreams and mystery. The sky goes from a sharp clear cold where a million stars burn bright and close, to the gray-pink cloud that enfolds the earth with the promise of snow.

I took one of Bree's matches from its box and lit it, thrilling to the tiny leap of instant flame, and bent to put it to the kindling. Snow was falling, and winter had come; the season of fire. Candles and hearth fire, that lovely, leaping paradox, that destruction contained but never tamed, held at a safe distance to warm and enchant, but always, still, with that small sense of danger.

The smell of roasting pumpkins was thick and sweet in the air. Having ruled the night with fire, the jack-o'-lanterns went now to a more peaceful fate as pies and compost, to join the gentle rest of the earth before renewal. I had turned the earth in my garden the day before, planting the winter seeds to sleep and swell, to dream their buried birth.

Now is the time when we reenter the womb of the world, dreaming the dreams of snow and silence. Waking to the shock of frozen lakes under waning moonlight and the cold sun burning low and blue in the branches of the ice-cased trees, returning from our brief and necessary labors to food and story, to the warmth of firelight in the dark.

Around a fire, in the dark, all truths can be told, and heard, in safety.

I pulled on my woolen stockings, thick petticoats, my warmest shawl, and went down to poke up the kitchen fire. I stood watching wisps of steam rise from the fragrant cauldron, and felt myself turn inward. The world could go away, and we would heal.

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I AM THE RESURRECTION

November 1773

A hammering on the door roused Roger just before dawn. Next to him, Brianna made an inarticulate noise that experience interpreted as a statement that if he didn't get up and answer the door, she would—but he'd regret it, and so would the unfortunate person on the other side.

Resigned, he flung back the quilt and ran a hand through his tangled hair. The air struck cold on his bare legs, and there was an icy breath of snow in the air.

"Next time I marry someone, I'll pick a lass who wakes up cheerful in the morning," he said to the hunched form beneath the bedclothes.

"You do that," said a muffled voice from under the pillow—whose indistinct nature did nothing to disguise its hostile intonation.

The hammering was repeated, and Jemmy—who *did* wake up cheerful in the mornings—popped up in his trundle, looking like a redheaded dandelion gone to seed.

"Somebody's knocking," he informed Roger.

"Oh, are they? Mmphm." Repressing an urge to groan, he rose and went to unbolt the door.

Hiram Crombie stood outside, looking more dour than usual in the milky half-light. Evidently not a happy riser, either, Roger reflected.

"My wife's auld mither's passed i' the night," he informed Roger without preamble.

"Passed what?" asked Jemmy with interest, poking his disheveled head out from behind Roger's leg. He rubbed one eye with a fist, and yawned widely. "Mr. Stornaway passed a stone—he showed it to me and Germain."

"Mr. Crombie's mother-in-law has died," Roger said, putting a quelling hand on Jem's head, with an apologetic cough toward Crombie. "I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Crombie."

"Aye." Mr. Crombie appeared indifferent to condolence. "Murdo Lindsay says as ye ken a bit of Scripture for the burying. The wife's wonderin' would ye maybe come and say a word at the grave?"

"Murdo said … oh!" The Dutch family, that was it. Jamie had forced him to speak at the graves. "Aye, of course." He cleared his throat by reflex; his voice was desperately hoarse—as usual in the mornings, until he'd had a cup of something hot. No wonder Crombie was looking dubious.

"Of course," he repeated more strongly. "Is there … er … anything we can do to help?"

Crombie made a small negative gesture.

"The women will have her laid out by now, I expect," he said, with the briefest of glances at the mound Brianna made in the bed. "We'll start the diggin' after breakfast. With luck, we'll have her under before snow falls." He lifted a sharp chin toward an opaque sky the soft gray of Adso's belly fur, then nodded, turned on his heel, and left without further congenialities.

"Daddy—look!" Roger looked down to see Jem, fingers hooked in the corners of his mouth, pulled down to simulate the inverted "U" of Hiram Crombie's customary expression. Small red brows wrinkled in a ferocious scowl, making the resemblance startling. Surprised into laughter, Roger gasped and choked, then coughed until he doubled over, wheezing.

"Are you all right?" Brianna had unearthed herself and was sitting up in bed, squint-eyed with sleep, but looking concerned.

"Aye, fine." The words came out in a thready wheeze, nearly soundless. He took a breath and hawked deeply, expectorating a repellent glob into his hand, for lack of a handkerchief.

"Eew!" said the tender wife of his bosom, recoiling.

"Lemme see, Daddy!" said his son and heir, jostling for a look. "Eeew!"

Roger stepped outside and wiped his hand in the wet grass by the door. It was cold out, so early, but Crombie was undoubtedly right; snow was on the way again. The air had that soft, muffled feel to it.

"So old Mrs. Wilson is dead?" Brianna had come out after him, a shawl wrapped round her shoulders. "That's too bad. Imagine coming so far, and then dying in a strange place, before you've even had time to settle."

"Well, she had her family with her, at least. I expect she wouldna have wanted to be left alone to die in Scotland."

"Mm." Bree brushed strands of hair off her cheeks; she'd put her hair into a thick plait for sleeping, but a good bit of it had escaped from captivity and was waving up round her face in the cold, humid air. "Should I go up there, do you think?"

"Pay our respects? He said they've laid the old lady out already."

She snorted, white wisps of breath from her nostrils momentarily making him think of dragons.

"It can't be later than seven A.M.; it's still bloody dark out! And I don't believe for a minute that his wife and sister have been laying out the old lady by candlelight. Hiram would balk at the expense of the extra candle, for one thing. No, he felt itchy about asking a favor, so he was trying to get under your skin about your wife being a lazy slattern."

That was perceptive, Roger thought, amused—particularly as she hadn't seen Crombie's eloquent glance at her recumbent form.

"What's a slattern?" Jemmy inquired, picking up instantly on anything vaguely improper-sounding.

"That's a lady who's no lady," Roger informed him. "And a bad housekeeper, to boot."

"That's one of the words that Mrs. Bug will wash out your mouth with soap if she hears you say it," amended his wife with ungrammatical acuity.

Roger was still attired in nothing but a nightshirt, and his legs and feet were freezing. Jem was hopping around barefoot, too, but without the slightest sign of being cold.

"Mummy is not one," Roger said firmly, taking Jem's hand. "Come on, chum, let's nip up to the privy while Mummy makes breakfast."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Brianna said, yawning. "I'll take up a jar of honey or something to the Crombies later."

"I go, too," Jemmy announced promptly.

Brianna hesitated for a moment, then looked at Roger and raised her brows. Jem had never seen a dead person.

Roger lifted one shoulder. It would have been a peaceful death, and it was, God knew, a fact of life on the mountain. He didn't suppose that seeing Mrs. Wilson's body would give the child nightmares—though knowing Jem, it *was* quite likely to lead to a number of loud and embarrassing public questions. A bit of preparatory explanation might not be out of place, he reflected.

"Sure," he told Jem. "But first we have to go up to the Big House after breakfast, and borrow a Bible from Grandda."

* * *

He found Jamie at breakfast, the warm oatmeal smell of fresh parritch wrapping him like a blanket as he stepped into the kitchen. Before he could explain his errand, Mrs. Bug had sat him down with a bowl of his own, a jug of honey, a plate of savory fried bacon, hot toast dripping butter, and a fresh cup of something dark and fragrant that looked like coffee. Jem was next to him, already smeared with honey and buttered to the ears. For a traitorous instant, he wondered whether Brianna was perhaps a bit of a sluggard, though certainly never a slattern.

Then he glanced across the table at Claire, uncombed hair standing on end as she blinked sleepily at him over the toast, and generously concluded that it probably wasn't a conscious choice on Bree's part, but rather the influence of genetics.

Claire roused at once, though, when he explained his errand, between bites of bacon and toast.

"Old Mrs. Wilson?" she asked with interest. "What did she die of, did Mr. Crombie say?"

Roger shook his head, swallowing oatmeal.

"Only that she'd passed in the night. I suppose they found her dead. Her heart, maybe—she must have been at least eighty."

"She was about five years older than I am," Claire said dryly. "She told me."

"Oh. Mmphm." Clearing his throat hurt, and he took a sip of the hot, dark stuff in his cup. It was a brew of roasted chicory and acorns, but not that bad.

"I hope ye didna tell her how old *you* are, Sassenach." Jamie reached across and snared the last piece of toast. Mrs. Bug, ever-vigilant, whisked the plate away to refill it.

"I'm not that careless," Claire said, dabbing a forefinger delicately into a smear of honey and licking it. "They already think I've made some sort of pact with the devil; if I told them my age, they'd be sure of it."

Roger chuckled, but thought privately that she was right. The marks of her ordeal had nearly vanished, bruises faded and the bridge of her nose healed straight and clean. Even unkempt and puffy-eyed from sleep, she was more than handsome, with lovely skin, lushly thick curly hair, and an elegance of feature undreamt of among the Highland fisher-folk. To say nothing of the eyes, sherry-gold and startling.

Add to these natural gifts the twentieth-century practices of nutrition and hygiene—she had all of her teeth, white and straight—and she easily appeared a good twenty years younger than other women of her own age. He found that a comforting thought; perhaps Bree had inherited the art of aging beautifully from her mother, as well. He could always make his own breakfast, after all.

Jamie had finished his own meal and gone to fetch the Bible. He came back, laying it beside Roger's plate.

"We'll go up with ye to the burying," he said, nodding at the book. "Mrs. Bug—can ye maybe put up a wee basket for the Crombies?"

"Done it already," she informed him, and plunked a large basket on the table before him, covered with a napkin and bulging with goodies. "Ye'll take it, then? I must go tell Arch and fetch my good shawl, and we'll see ye at the graveside, aye?"

Brianna came in then, yawning but well-groomed, and set about making Jem presentable while Claire vanished to find cap and shawl. Roger picked up the Bible, intending to thumb through the Psalms for something suitably somber but uplifting.

"Maybe the Twenty-third?" he said, half to himself. "Nice and short. Always a classic. And it does mention death, at least."

"Are you going to give a eulogy?" Brianna asked, interested. "Or a sermon?"

"Oh, Christ, I hadn't thought of that," he said in dismay. He cleared his throat experimentally. "Is there more coffee?"

He'd been to a great many funerals in Inverness presided over by the Reverend, and was well aware that the paying customers considered such an event a dismal failure unless the preaching went on for at least half an hour. Granted, beggars couldn't be choosers, and the Crombies couldn't expect—

"Why do you have a Protestant Bible, Da?" Bree paused in the act of disentangling a piece of toast from Jemmy's hair, peering over Roger's shoulder.

Surprised, he shut the cover, but she was right; *King James Version,* it said, the letters of the inscription nearly worn away.

"It was given to me," Jamie said. The reply was casual, but Roger glanced up; there was something odd in Jamie's voice. Brianna heard it, too; she shot her father a brief, sharp look, but his face was tranquil as he took a final bite of bacon and wiped his lips.

"D'ye want a dram in your coffee, Roger Mac?" he said, nodding at Roger's cup, as though it were the most natural thing in the world to offer whisky with breakfast.

In fact, the notion sounded really appealing, given the immediate prospects, but Roger shook his head.

“No, thanks; I’ll do.”

“Are you sure?” Brianna transferred the sharp look to him. “Maybe you should. For your throat.”

“It’ll be fine,” he said shortly. He was worried about his voice himself; he didn’t need solicitude from the redheaded contingent, all three of whom were giving him thoughtful looks that he interpreted as casting extreme doubt upon his speaking abilities. Whisky might help his throat, but he doubted it would do much for his preaching—and the last thing he wanted was to show up at a funeral reeking of strong drink in front of a lot of strict teetotalers.

“Vinegar,” advised Mrs. Bug, bending to take away his plate. “Hot vinegar’s the thing. Cuts the phlegm, aye?”

“I’ll bet it would,” Roger said, smiling despite his misgivings. “But I think I won’t, Mrs. Bug, thanks.” He’d awakened with a slight sore throat, and hoped the consumption of breakfast would cure it. It hadn’t, and the thought of drinking hot vinegar made his tonsils seize up.

He held out his cup for more chicory coffee, instead, and set his mind to the task ahead.

“Now—does anyone know anything about old Mrs. Wilson?”

“She’s dead,” Jemmy piped up confidently. Everybody laughed, and Jem looked confused, but then joined the laughter, though plainly having not the slightest idea what was funny.

“Good start, sport.” Roger reached out and brushed crumbs from Jemmy’s shirtfront. “Might be a point, at that. The Reverend had a decent sermon on something in the Epistles—the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life. I heard him give it more than once. What d’ye think?” He raised a brow at Brianna, who frowned in thought and picked up the Bible.

“That would probably work. Does this thing have a concordance?”

“No.” Jamie put down his coffee cup. “It’s in Romans, chapter six, though.” Seeing the looks of surprise turned upon him, he flushed slightly, and jerked his head toward the Bible.

"I had that book in prison," he said. "I read it. Come along, *a bhailach,* are ye ready now?"

* * *

The weather was louring, clouds threatening anything from freezing rain to the first snow of the season, and occasional cold gusts of wind catching cloaks and skirts, bellying them out like sails. The men held tight to their hats, and the women huddled deep in their hoods, all walking with their heads down, like sheep pushing stubbornly into the wind.

"Great weather for a funeral," Brianna murmured, pulling her cloak tight around her after one such gust.

"Mmphm." Roger responded automatically, obviously unaware of what she'd said, but registering that she'd spoken. His brow was furrowed, and he seemed tight-lipped and pale. She put a hand on his arm, squeezing in reassurance, and he glanced at her with a faint smile, his face easing.

An unearthly wail cut through the air, and Brianna froze, clutching Roger's arm. It rose to a shriek, then broke in a series of short, jerky gulps, coming down a scale of sobs like a dead body rolling down a staircase.

Gooseflesh prickled down her spine and her stomach clenched. She glanced at Roger; he looked nearly as pale as she felt, though he pressed her hand reassuringly.

"That will be the *ban-treim,*" her father remarked calmly. "I didna ken there was one."

"Neither did I," said her mother. "Who do you suppose it is?" She had startled, too, at the sound of it, but now looked merely interested.

Roger had been holding his breath, too; he let it out now, with a small rattling sound, and cleared his throat.

"A mourning woman," he said. The words emerged thickly, and he cleared his throat again, much harder. "They, um, keen. After the coffin."

The voice rose again out of the wood, this time with a more deliberate sound. Brianna thought there were words in the wailing, but couldn't make them out. *Wendigo.* The word came unbidden into her mind, and she shivered convulsively. Jemmy whimpered, trying to burrow inside his grandfather's coat.

"It's nothing to fear, *a bhailach.*" He patted Jemmy on the back. Jem appeared unconvinced, and put his thumb in his mouth, huddling round-eyed into Jamie's chest as the wailing faded into moans.

"Well, come, then, we'll meet her, shall we?" Jamie turned aside and began making his way into the forest, toward the voice.

There was nothing to do but follow. Brianna squeezed Roger's arm, but left him, walking close to her father so Jemmy could see her and be reassured.

"It's okay, pal," she said softly. The weather was growing colder; her breath puffed out in wisps of white. The end of Jemmy's nose was red and his eyes seemed a little pink around the edges—was he catching a cold, too?

She put out a hand to touch his forehead, but just then the voice broke out afresh. This time, though, something seemed to have happened to it. It was a high, thready sound, not the robust keening they'd heard before. And uncertain—like an apprentice ghost, she thought in uneasy jest.

An apprentice it proved to be, though not a ghost. Her father ducked under a low pine and she followed him, emerging in a clearing facing two surprised women. Or rather, a woman and a teenaged girl, with shawls wrapped over their heads. She knew them, but what were their names?

"Maduinn mhath, maighistear," the older woman said, recovering from her surprise and dropping into a low curtsy to Jamie. Good morn to you, sir.

"And to you, my mistresses," he replied, also in Gaelic.

"Good morn, Mrs. Gwilty," Roger said in his soft, hoarse voice. "And to you, *a nighean,*" he added, bowing courteously to the girl. Olanna, that was it; Brianna recalled the round face, just like the "O" that began her name. She was Mrs. Gwilty's … daughter? Or her niece?

“Ach, bonny boy,” the girl crooned, reaching out a finger to touch Jem’s rounded cheek. He pulled back a little and sucked harder on his thumb, watching her suspiciously under the edge of his blue woolly bonnet.

The women spoke no English, but Brianna’s Gaelic was sufficient by now to allow her to follow the conversation, if not to join fluently in it. Mrs. Gwilty was, she explained, showing her niece the way of a proper *coronach.*

“And a fine job of work you will make of it between you, I’m sure,” Jamie said politely.

Mrs. Gwilty sniffed, and gave her niece a disparaging look.

“Mmphm,” she said. “A voice like a bat farting, but she is the only woman left of my family, and I shall not live forever.”

Roger made a small choking noise, which he hastily developed into a convincing cough. Olanna’s pleasant round face, already flushed from the cold, went a blotchy red, but she said nothing, merely cast her eyes down and huddled deeper into her shawl. It was a dark brown homespun, Brianna saw; Mrs. Gwilty’s was a fine wool, dyed black—and if it was a trifle frayed around the edges, she wore it still with the dignity of her profession.

“It is sorrowful we are for you,” Jamie said, in formal condolence. “She who is gone …?” He paused in delicate inquiry.

“My father’s sister,” answered Mrs. Gwilty promptly. “Woe, woe, that she should be buried among strangers.” She had a lean, underfed face, the spare flesh deeply hollowed and bruised-looking round dark eyes. She turned these deep-set eyes on Jemmy, who promptly grabbed the edge of his bonnet and pulled it down over his face. Seeing the dark, bottomless eyes swivel in her direction, Brianna was hard-pressed not to do the same.

“I hope—that her shade will find comfort. With—with your family being here,” Claire said, in her halting Gaelic. It sounded most peculiar in her mother’s English accent, and Brianna saw her father bite his lower lip in order not to smile.

“She will not lack company for long.” Olanna blurted it out, then, catching Jamie’s eye, went beet-red and buried her nose in her shawl.

This odd statement seemed to make sense to her father, who nodded.

"Och, so? Who is it ails?" He looked at her mother in question, but she shook her head slightly. If anyone was sick, they hadn't sought her help.

Mrs. Gwilty's long, seamed upper lip pressed down over dreadful teeth.

"Seaumais Buchan," she remarked with grim satisfaction. "He lies fevered and his chest will kill him before the week is out, but we've beaten him. A fortunate thing."

"What?" said Claire, frowning in bewilderment.

Mrs. Gwilty's eyes narrowed at her.

"The last person buried in a graveyard must stand watch over it, Sassenach," Jamie explained in English. "Until another comes to take his place."

Switching smoothly back to Gaelic, he said, "Fortunate is she, and the more fortunate, in having such *bean-treim* to follow her." He put a hand into his pocket and handed over a coin, which Mrs. Gwilty glanced at, then blinked and looked again.

"Ah," she said, gratified. "Well, we will do our best, the girl and I. Come then, *a nighean,* let me hear you."

Olanna, thus pressed to perform before company, looked terrified. Under her aunt's monitory eye, though, there was no escape. Closing her eyes, she inflated her chest, thrust back her shoulders, and emitted a piercing, "EEEEEEEEEEEEEeeeeeeeeeee EEEEEEeeeEEE-uh-Ee-uh-Ee-uh," before breaking off, gasping for breath.

Roger flinched as though the sound were bamboo splinters being shoved under his fingernails and Claire's mouth dropped open. Jemmy's shoulders were hunched up round his ears, and he clung to his grandfather's coat like a small blue bur. Even Jamie looked a little startled.

"Not bad," said Mrs. Gwilty judiciously. "Perhaps it will not be a complete disgrace. I am hearing that Hiram asked you to speak a word?" she added with a disparaging glance at Roger.

"He has," Roger replied, still hoarse, but as firmly as possible. "I am honored."

Mrs. Gwilty did not reply to this, but merely looked him up and down, then, shaking her head, turned her back and raised her arms.

"AaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAaaaaAAAAAAAaaaIIIIeeeeeeee," she wailed, in a voice that made Brianna feel ice crystals in her blood. "Woe, woe, wooooooooooooe! AAaayaaaAAaayaaaAAhaaaaahaaa! Woe is come to the house of Crombie—Woe!"

Dutifully turning her back on them, as well, Olanna joined in with a descant wail of her own. Claire rather untactfully but practically put her fingers in her ears.

"*How* much did you give them?" she asked Jamie in English.

Jamie's shoulders shook briefly, and he hastily ushered her away, a firm hand on her elbow.

Beside Brianna, Roger swallowed, the sound just audible under the noise.

"You should have had that drink," she said to him.

"I know," he said hoarsely, and sneezed.

* * *

"Have you even heard of Seaumais Buchan?" I asked Jamie, as we picked our way across the sodden earth of the Crombie's dooryard. "Who is he?"

"Oh, I've heard of him, aye," he replied, putting an arm round me to help swing me across a fetid puddle of what looked like goat urine. "Oof. God, you're a solid wee thing, Sassenach."

"That's the basket," I replied absently. "I believe Mrs. Bug's put lead shot in it. Or maybe only fruitcake. Who is he, then? One of the fisher-folk?"

"Aye. He's great-uncle to Maisie MacArdle, her who's marrit to him that was a boatbuilder. Ye recall her? Red hair and a verra long nose, six bairns."

"Vaguely. However do you remember these things?" I demanded, but he merely smiled, and offered me his arm. I took it, and we strode gravely through the mud and the scattered straw laid down across it, the laird and his lady come to the funeral.

The door of the cabin was open despite the cold, to let the spirit of the dead go out. Fortunately, it also let a little light come in, as the cabin was crudely built and had no windows. It was also completely packed with people, most of whom had not bathed any time in the preceding four months.

I was no stranger to claustrophobic cabins or unwashed bodies, though, and since I knew that one of the bodies present was probably clean but certainly dead, I had already begun breathing through my mouth by the time one of the Crombie daughters, shawled and red-eyed, invited us in.

Grannie Wilson was laid out on the table with a candle at her head, wrapped in the shroud she had no doubt woven as a new bride; the linen cloth was yellowed and creased with age, but clean and soft in the candlelight, embroidered on the edges with a simple pattern of vine leaves. It had been carefully kept, brought from Scotland at the cost of who knew what pains.

Jamie paused at the door, removing his hat, and murmured formal condolences, which the Crombies, male and female, accepted with nods and grunts, respectively. I handed over the basket of food and nodded back, with what I hoped was a suitable expression of dignified sympathy, keeping an eye on Jemmy.

Brianna had done her best to explain to him, but I had no idea what he might make of the situation—or the corpse. He had been persuaded with some difficulty to emerge from his bonnet, and was looking round now with interest, his cowlick standing on end.

“Is that the dead lady, Grandma?” he whispered loudly to me, pointing at the body.

“Yes, dear,” I said, with an uneasy glance at old Mrs. Wilson. She looked perfectly all right, though, done up properly in her best cap with a bandage under her jaw to keep her mouth closed, dry eyelids sealed against the glimmer of the candle. I didn’t think Jemmy had ever met the old lady in life; there was no real reason for him to be upset at seeing her dead—and he’d been taken hunting regularly since he could walk; he certainly understood the concept of death. Besides, a corpse was definitely anticlimactic, after our encounter with the *bean-treim.* Still …

"We'll pay our respects now, lad," Jamie said quietly to him, and set him on the floor. I caught Jamie's glance at the door, where Roger and Bree were murmuring condolences in their turn, and realized he had been waiting for them to catch up, so that they could watch him, and know what to do next.

He led Jemmy through the press of people, who gave way respectfully, and up to the table, where he laid his hand on the corpse's chest. Oh, so it was that sort of funeral.

At some Highland funerals, it was the custom for everyone to touch the body, so that the dead person should not haunt them. I doubted that Grannie Wilson would have any interest in haunting me, but care never hurt—and I did have an uneasy memory of a skull with silver fillings in its teeth, and my encounter with what might have been its possessor, seen by corpse-light on a black mountain night. Despite myself, I glanced at the candle, but it seemed a perfectly normal thing of brown beeswax, pleasantly fragrant and leaning a little crooked in its pottery candlestick.

Steeling myself, I leaned over and laid my own hand gently on the shroud. An earthenware saucer, holding a piece of bread and a heap of salt, sat on the dead woman's chest, and a small wooden bowl filled with dark liquid—wine?—sat beside her on the table. What with the good beeswax candle, the salt, and the *bean-treim,* it looked as though Hiram Crombie was trying to do right by his late mother-in-law—though I wouldn't put it past him to thriftily reuse the salt after the funeral.

Something seemed wrong, though; an air of uneasiness curled among the cracked boots and rag-wrapped feet of the crowd like the cold draft from the door. At first I had thought it might be due to our presence, but that wasn't it; there had been a brief exhalation of approval when Jamie approached the body.

Jamie whispered to Jemmy, then boosted him up, legs dangling, to touch the corpse. He showed no reluctance, and peered into the dead woman's waxen face with interest.

"What's that for?" he asked loudly, reaching for the bread. "Is she going to eat it?"

Jamie grabbed his wrist, and planted his hand firmly on the shroud instead.

"That's for the sin-eater, *a bhailach.* Leave it, aye?"

"What's a—"

"Later." No one argued with Jamie when he used that tone of voice, and Jemmy subsided, putting his thumb back in his mouth as Jamie set him down. Bree came up and scooped him into her arms, belatedly remembering to touch the corpse herself, and murmur, "God rest you."

Then Roger stepped forward, and there was a stir of interest among the crowd.

He looked pale, but composed. His face was lean and rather ascetic, usually saved from sternness by the gentleness of his eyes and a mobile mouth, ready to laugh. This was no time for laughter, though, and his eyes were bleak in the dim light.

He laid a hand on the dead woman's chest, and bowed his head. I wasn't sure whether he was praying for the repose of her soul, or for inspiration, but he stayed that way for more than minute. The crowd watched respectfully, with no sound save coughs and the clearing of throats. Roger wasn't the only one catching a cold, I thought—and thought suddenly again of Seaumais Buchan.

"He lies fevered and his chest will kill him before the week is out." So Mrs. Gwilty had said. Pneumonia, perhaps—or bronchitis, or even consumption. And no one had told me.

I felt a slight pang at that, equal parts annoyance, guilt, and unease. I knew the new tenants didn't yet trust me; I had thought that I should allow them to get used to me before I started dropping in on them at random. Many of them would never have seen an English person, before coming to the colonies—and I was well aware of their attitude toward both Sassenachs and Catholics.

But evidently there was now a man dying virtually on my doorstep—and I hadn't even known of his existence, let alone his illness.

Should I go to see him, as soon as the funeral was over? But where in bloody hell did the man live? It couldn't be very close; I *did* know all the fisher-folk who had settled down the mountain; the

MacArdles must be up across the ridge. I stole a look at the door, trying to judge how soon the threatening clouds would cut loose their burden of snow.

There were shufflings and the murmurs of low speech outside; more people had arrived, coming up from the nearby hollows, crowding round the door. I caught the words, *“dèan caithris,”* in a questioning tone, and suddenly realized what was odd about the present occasion.

There was no wake. Customarily, the body would have been washed and laid out, but then kept on display for a day or two, to allow everyone in the area time to come and pay their regards. Listening intently, I caught a distinct tone of disgruntlement and surprise—the neighbors thought this haste unseemly.

“Why isn’t there a wake?” I whispered to Jamie. He lifted one shoulder a fraction of an inch, but nodded toward the door, and the muffled sky beyond.

“There’s going to be a great deal of snow by nightfall, *a Sorcha,*” he said. “And likely to go on for days, by the looks of it. I wouldna want to be having to dig a grave and bury a coffin in the midst of that, myself. And should it snow for days, where are they to put the body in the meantime?”

“That’s true, *Mac Dubh,*” said Kenny Lindsay, overhearing. He glanced round at the people near us, and edged closer, lowering his voice. “But it’s true, too, as Hiram Crombie’s no owerfond of the auld bes—er, his good-mother.” He raised his chin a fraction, indicating the corpse. “Some say as he canna get the auld woman underground fast enough—before she changes her mind, aye?” He grinned briefly, and Jamie hid his own smile, looking down.

“Saves a bit on the food, too, I suppose.” Hiram’s reputation as a cheapskate was well-known—which was saying something, among the thrifty but hospitable Highlanders.

A fresh bustle was taking place outside, as new arrivals came. There was a sort of congestion at the door, as someone sought to press inside, though the house was filled shoulder to shoulder, with the only bit of open floor space left under the table on which Mrs. Wilson reposed.

The people near the door gave way reluctantly, and Mrs. Bug surged into the cabin, arrayed in her best cap and shawl, Arch at her shoulder.

"Ye forgot the whisky, sir," she informed Jamie, handing him a corked bottle. Looking round, she at once spotted the Crombies and bowed to them ceremoniously, murmuring sympathy. Bobbing upright, she set her cap straight and looked expectantly round. Clearly, the festivities could now commence.

Hiram Crombie glanced round, then nodded to Roger.

Roger drew himself up slightly, nodded back, and began. He spoke simply for a few minutes, generalities about the preciousness of life, the enormity of death, and the importance of kin and neighbors in facing such things. This all seemed to be going over well with the punters, who were nodding slightly in approval and seemed to be settling down in expectation of decent entertainment.

Roger paused to cough and blow his nose, then shifted into what appeared to be some version of the Presbyterian funeral service—or what he recalled of it, from his life with the Reverend Wakefield.

This too seemed to be acceptable. Bree seemed to relax a little, and put Jemmy down.

It was going well … and yet I was still conscious of a faint sense of uneasiness. Part of that, of course, was that I could see Roger. The growing warmth of the cabin was making his nose run; he kept his handkerchief in his hand, dabbing furtively and now and then stopping to blow his nose as discreetly as possible.

Phlegm, though, runs downhill. And as the congestion got worse, it began to affect his vulnerable throat. The choked note in his voice, always present, was getting noticeably worse. He was having to clear his throat repeatedly, in order to speak.

Beside me, Jemmy stirred restively, and from the corner of my eye, I saw Bree put a hand on his head to quiet him. He looked up at her, but her attention was fixed anxiously on Roger.

"We give thanks to God for the life of this woman," he said, and paused to clear his throat—again. I found myself doing it with him in sheer nervous sympathy.

"She is a servant of God, faithful and true, and now praises Him before His throne, with the sa—" I saw sudden doubt flicker across his face as to whether his present congregation countenanced the concept of saints, or would consider such a mention to be Romish heresy. He coughed, and resumed, "With the angels."

Evidently angels were innocuous; the faces around me looked somber, but unoffended. Exhaling visibly, Roger picked up the little green Bible and opened it at a marked page.

"Let us speak together a psalm in praise of Him who—" He glanced at the page and, too late, realized the difficulty of translating an English psalm into Gaelic on the wing.

He cleared his throat explosively, and half a dozen throats among the crowd echoed him in reflex. On my other side, Jamie murmured, "Oh, God," in heartfelt prayer.

Jemmy tugged at his mother's skirt, whispering something, but was peremptorily shushed. I could see Bree yearning toward Roger, body tensed in the urgent desire to help somehow, if only by mental telepathy.

With no alternative in sight, Roger began to read the psalm, haltingly. Half the crowd had taken him at his word when he invited them to "speak together," and were reciting the psalm from memory—several times faster than he could read.

I closed my eyes, unable to watch, but there was no way to avoid hearing, as the congregation ripped through the psalm and fell silent, waiting in dour patience for Roger to stumble his way to the end. Which he did, doggedly.

"Amen," said Jamie loudly. And alone. I opened my eyes to find everyone staring at us, with looks ranging from mild surprise to glowering hostility. Jamie took a deep breath and let it out, very slowly.

"Jesus. Christ," he said very softly.

A bead of sweat ran down Roger's cheek, and he wiped it away with the sleeve of his coat.

"Would anyone wish to say a few words regarding the deceased?" he asked, glancing from face to face. Silence and the whine of the wind answered him.

He cleared his throat, and someone snickered.

"Grannie—" whispered Jemmy, tugging on my skirt.

"Shh."

"But *Grandma*—" The sense of urgency in his voice made me turn and look down at him.

"Do you need to go to the privy?" I whispered, bending down to him. He shook his head, violently enough to make the heavy mop of red-gold hair flop to and fro on his forehead.

"O, God, our Heavenly Father, who art leading us through the changes of time to the rest and blessedness of eternity, be Thou near to us now, to comfort and to uphold."

I glanced up, to see that Roger had laid his hand once more on the corpse, evidently deciding to bring the proceedings to a close. From the relief evident in his face and voice, I thought he must be falling back on some accustomed prayer from the Book of Common Worship, familiar enough to him that he could manage it with fair fluency in Gaelic.

"Make us to know that Thy children are precious in Thy sight…." He stopped, visibly struggling; the muscles of his throat worked, trying vainly to clear the obstruction in silence, but it was no good.

"Err … HRRM!" A sound, not quite laughter, ran through the room, and Bree made a small rumbling noise in her own throat, like a volcano getting ready to spew lava.

"Grannie!"

"Shh!"

"… thy sight. That they … live evermore with Thee and that Thy mercy—"

"Grannie!"

Jemmy was wiggling as though a colony of ants had taken up residence in his breeches, an expression of agonized urgency on his face.

"I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord; he that believeth in Me, though he were dead … rr-hm … yet shall he live—" With the end in sight, Roger was making a gallant finish, forcing his voice past its limits, hoarser than ever and cracking on every other word, but firm and loud.

"Just a *minute,*" I hissed. "I'll take you out in a—"

"No, Grannie! *Look!*"

I followed his outthrust finger, and for a moment, thought he was pointing at his father. But he wasn't.

Old Mrs. Wilson had opened her eyes.

* * *

There was an instant's silence, as everyone's eyes fastened at once on Mrs. Wilson. Then there was a collective gasp, and an instinctive stepping back, with shrieks of dismay and cries of pain as toes were trodden on and people squashed against the unyielding rough logs of the walls.

Jamie grabbed Jemmy up off the floor in time to save his being crushed, inflated his lungs, and bellowed, *"Sheas!"* at the top of his voice. Such was his volume that the crowd did indeed freeze momentarily—long enough for him to thrust Jemmy into Brianna's arms and elbow his way toward the table.

Roger had got hold of the erstwhile corpse, and was lifting her into a sitting position, her hand feebly flapping at the bandage round her jaws. I pushed after Jamie, ruthlessly shoving people out of the way.

"Give her a bit of air, please," I said, raising my voice. The stunned silence was giving way to a rising murmur of excitement, but this quelled as I fumbled to untie the bandage. The room waited in quivering expectation as the corpse worked stiff jaws.

"Where am I?" she said in a quavering voice. Her gaze passed disbelievingly round the room, settling at last on her daughter's face.

"Mairi?" she said dubiously, and Mrs. Crombie rushed forward and fell on her knees, bursting into tears as she gripped her mother's hands.

"A Màthair! A Màthair!" she cried. The old woman set a trembling hand on her daughter's hair, looking as though she were not quite sure she was real.

I, meanwhile, had been doing my best to check the old lady's vital signs, which were not all that vital, but nonetheless fairly good for someone who had been dead a moment before. Respiration very shallow, labored, a color like week-old oatmeal, cold, clammy skin despite the heat in the room, and I couldn't find a pulse at all—though plainly she must have one. Mustn't she?

"How do you feel?" I asked.

She put a trembling hand to her belly.

"I do feel that wee bit poorly," she whispered.

I put my own hand on her abdomen, and felt it instantly. A pulse, where no pulse should be. It was irregular, stumbling, and bumping—but most assuredly there.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said. I didn't say it loudly, but Mrs. Crombie gasped, and I saw her apron twitch, as she doubtless made the horns beneath it.

I hadn't time to bother with apology, but stood and grabbed Roger by the sleeve, pulling him aside.

"She has an aortic aneurysm," I said to him very softly. "She must have been bleeding internally for some time, enough to make her lose consciousness and seem cold. It's going to rupture *very* soon, and then she'll die for real."

He swallowed audibly, his face very pale, but said only, "Do you know how long?"

I glanced at Mrs. Wilson; her face was the same gray as the snow-laden sky, and her eyes were going in and out of focus like the flickering of a candle in a wind.

"I see," Roger said, though I hadn't spoken. He took a deep breath and cleared his throat.

The crowd, which had been hissing amongst themselves like a flock of agitated geese, ceased at once. Every eye in the place was riveted on the tableau before them.

"This our sister has been restored to life, as we all shall be one day by the grace of God," Roger said softly. "It is a sign to us, of hope and faith. She will go soon again to the arms of the angels, but has come back to us for a moment, to bring us assurance of God's love." He paused a moment, obviously groping for something further to say. He cleared his throat and bent his head toward Mrs. Wilson's.

"Did you … wish to say anything, O, mother?" he whispered in Gaelic.

"Aye, I do." Mrs. Wilson seemed to be gaining strength—and with it, indignation. A faint pinkness showed in her waxy cheeks as she glared round at the crowd.

"What sort of wake is *this,* Hiram Crombie?" she demanded, fixing her son-in-law with a gimlet eye. "I see nay food laid out, nay drink—and what is this?" Her voice rose in a furious squeak, her eye having fallen on the plate of bread and salt, which Roger had hastily set aside when he lifted her.

"Why—" She looked wildly round at the assembled crowd, and the truth of it dawned upon her. Her sunken eyes bulged. "Why … ye shameless skinflint! This is nay wake at all! Ye've meant to bury me wi' nothing but a crust o' bread and a drap o' wine for the sin-eater, and a wonder ye spared *that*! Nay doot ye'll thieve the winding claes from my corpse to make cloots for your snotty-nosed bairns, and where's my good brooch I said I wanted to be buried with?" One scrawny hand closed on her shrunken bosom, catching a fistful of wilted linen.

"Mairi! My brooch!"

"Here it is, Mother, here it is!" Poor Mrs. Crombie, altogether undone, was fumbling in her pocket, sobbing and gasping. "I put it away to be safe—I meant to put it on ye before—before …" She came out with an ugly lump of garnets, which her mother snatched from her, cradling it against her breast, and glaring round with jealous suspicion. Clearly she suspected her neighbors of waiting the chance to steal it from her body; I heard an offended inhalation from the woman standing behind me, but had no time to turn and see who it was.

"Now, now," I said, using my best soothing bedside manner. "I'm sure everything will be all right." *Aside from the fact that you're going to die in the next few minutes, that is,* I thought, suppressing a hysterical urge to laugh inappropriately. Actually, it might be in the next few seconds, if her blood pressure rose any higher.

I had my fingers on the thumping big pulse in her abdomen that betrayed the fatal weakening of her abdominal aorta. It had to have begun to leak already, to make her lose consciousness to such a degree as to seem dead. Eventually, she would simply blow a gasket, and that would be it.

Roger and Jamie were both doing their best to soothe her, muttering in English and Gaelic and patting her comfortingly. She seemed to be responding to this treatment, though still breathing like a steam engine.

Jamie's production of the bottle of whisky from his pocket helped still further.

"Well, that's more like it!" Mrs. Wilson said, somewhat mollified, as he hastily pulled the cork and waved the bottle under her nose so she could appreciate the quality of it. "And ye've brought food, too?" Mrs. Bug had bustled her way to the front, basket held before her like a battering ram. "Hmph! I never thought I should live to see Papists kinder than my ain kin!" This last was directed at Hiram Crombie, who had so far been opening and closing his mouth, without finding anything whatever to say in reply to his mother-in-law's tirade.

"Why … why …" he stammered in outrage, torn between shock, obvious fury, and a need to justify himself before his neighbors. "Kinder than your ain kin! Why, have I not given ye a hame, these twenty years past? Fed and clothed ye as ye were my ain mither? B-borne your wicked tongue and foul t-tempers for *years,* and never —"

Jamie and Roger both leapt in to try to stifle him, but instead interrupted each other, and in the confusion, Hiram was allowed to go on speaking his mind, which he did. So did Mrs. Wilson, who was no slouch at invective, either.

The pulse in her belly was throbbing under my hand, and I was hard put to it to keep her from leaping off the table and dotting Hiram with the bottle of whisky. The neighbors were agog.

Roger took matters—and Mrs. Wilson—firmly into his own hands, seizing her by her scrawny shoulders.

"Mrs. Wilson," he said hoarsely, but loudly enough to drown Hiram's indignant rebuttal of Mrs. Wilson's most recent depiction of his character. "Mrs. Wilson!"

"Eh?" She paused for breath, blinking up at him in momentary confusion.

"Cease. And you, too!" He glared at Hiram, who was opening his mouth again. Hiram shut it.

"I'll no have this," Roger said, and thumped the Bible down on the table. "It's not fitting, and I'll not have it, d'ye hear me?" He glowered from one to the other of the combatants, black brows low and fierce.

The room was silent, bar Hiram's heavy breathing, Mrs. Crombie's small sobs, and Mrs. Wilson's faint, asthmatic wheeze.

"Now, then," Roger said, still glaring round to prevent any further interruptions. He put a hand over Mrs. Wilson's thin, age-spotted one.

"Mrs. Wilson—d'ye not ken that you stand before God this minute?" He darted a look at me, and I nodded; yes, she was definitely going to die. Her head was wobbling on her neck and the glow of anger fading from her eyes, even as he spoke.

"God is near to us," he said, lifting his head to address the congregation at large. He repeated this in Gaelic, and there was a sort of collective sigh. He narrowed his eyes at them.

"We will not profane this holy occasion with anger nor bitterness. Now—sister." He squeezed her hand gently. "Compose your soul. God will—"

But Mrs. Wilson was no longer listening. Her withered mouth dropped open in horror.

"The sin-eater!" she cried, looking wildly round. She grabbed the dish from the table next to her, showering salt down the front of her winding-sheet. "Where is the sin-eater?"

Hiram stiffened as though goosed with a red-hot poker, then whirled and fought his way toward the door, the crowd giving way before him. Murmurs of speculation rose in his wake, only to stop abruptly as a piercing wail rose from outside, another rising behind it as the first one fell.

An awed "oooh!" rose from the crowd, and Mrs. Wilson looked gratified, as the *bean-treim* started in to earn their money in earnest.

Then there was a stirring near the door, and the crowd parted like the Red Sea, leaving a narrow path to the table. Mrs. Wilson sat bolt upright, dead-white and barely breathing. The pulse in her abdomen skittered and jumped under my fingers. Roger and Jamie had hold of her arms, supporting her.

A complete hush had fallen over the room; the only sounds were the howling of the *bean-treim*—and slow, shuffling footsteps, soft on the ground outside, then suddenly louder on the boards of the floor. The sin-eater had arrived.

He was a tall man, or had been, once. It was impossible to tell his age; either years or illness had eaten away his flesh, so that his wide shoulders bowed and his spine had hunched, a gaunt head poking forward, crowned with a balding straggle of graying strands.

I glanced up at Jamie, eyebrows raised. I had never seen the man before. He shrugged slightly; he didn't know him, either. As the sin-eater came closer, I saw that his body was crooked; he seemed caved in on one side, ribs perhaps crushed by some accident.

Every eye was fixed on the man, but he met none of them, keeping his gaze focused on the floor. The path to the table was narrow, but the people shrank back as he passed, careful that he should not touch them. Only when he reached the table did he lift his head, and I saw that one eye was missing, evidently clawed away by a bear, judging from the welted mass of scar tissue.

The other one was working; he halted in surprise, seeing Mrs. Wilson, and glanced round, obviously unsure what to do next.

She wiggled one arm free of Roger's grip and pushed the dish containing the bread and salt toward him.

"Get on, then," she said, her voice high and a little frightened.

"But you're not dead." It was a soft, educated voice, betraying only puzzlement, but the crowd reacted as though it had been the hissing of a serpent, and recoiled further, if such a thing were possible.

"Well, what of it?" Agitation was making Mrs. Wilson tremble even more; I could feel a small constant vibration through the table.

"Ye've been paid to eat my sins—be after doing it, then!" A thought occurred to her and she jerked upright, squinting at her son-in-law. "Ye *did* pay him, Hiram?"

Hiram was still flushed from the previous exchanges, but went a sort of puce at this, and clutched his side—clutching at his purse, I thought, rather than his heart.

"Well, I'm no going to pay him *before* he's done the job," he snapped. "What sort of way is that to be carrying on?"

Seeing renewed riot about to break out, Jamie let go his hold on Mrs. Wilson and fumbled hastily in his sporran, emerging with a silver shilling, which he thrust across the table toward the sin-eater—though careful, I saw, not to touch the man.

"Now ye've been paid," he said gruffly, nodding to him. "Best be about your business, sir."

The man looked slowly round the room, and the intake of breath from the crowd was audible, even over the wails of "WOOOO OOOOOOOEEEE to the house of CROMMMMBIIIEEEEEE" going on outside.

He was standing no more than a foot away from me, close enough that I could smell the sweet-sour odor of him: ancient sweat and dirt in his rags, and something else, some faint aroma that spoke of pustulant sores and unhealed wounds. He turned his head and looked straight at me. It was a soft brown eye, amber in color, and startlingly like my own. Meeting his gaze gave me a queer feeling in the pit of the stomach, as though I looked for a moment into a distorting mirror, and saw that cruelly misshapen face replace my own.

He did not change expression, and yet I felt something nameless pass between us. Then he turned his head away, and reached out a long, weathered, very dirty hand to pick up the piece of bread.

A sort of sigh went through the room as he ate—slowly gumming the bread, for he had few teeth. I could feel Mrs. Wilson's pulse, much lighter now, and fast, like a hummingbird's. She hung nearly limp in the men's grasp, the withered lids of her eyes drooping as she watched.

He wrapped both hands around the cup of wine, as though it were a chalice, and drank it down, eyes closed. He set the empty cup down and looked at Mrs. Wilson, curiously. I supposed he never had met one of his clients alive before, and wondered how long he had fulfilled this strange office.

Mrs. Wilson stared into his eyes, face blank as a child's. Her abdominal pulse was skipping like a stone, a few light beats, a pause, then a thump that struck my palm like a blow, and back to its erratic jumps.

The sin-eater bowed to her, very slowly. Then he turned round, and scampered for the door, with amazing speed for such an infirm specimen.

Several of the boys and younger men near the door rushed out after him, yelling; one or two seized sticks of wood from the fire basket by the hearth. Others were torn; they glanced toward the open door, where shouts and the thumps of thrown stones mingled with the wailing of the *bean-treim*—but their eyes were drawn back ineluctably to Mrs. Wilson.

She looked … peaceful, was the only word. It was no surprise whatever to feel the pulse beneath my hand simply stop. Somewhere deeper, in my own depths, I felt the dizzying rush of the hemorrhage begin, a flooding warmth that pulled me into it, made black spots whirl before my eyes, and caused a ringing in my ears. I knew to all intents and purposes she had now died for good. I felt her go. And yet I heard her voice above the racket, very small but calm and clear.

"I forgive ye, Hiram," she said. "Ye've been a good lad."

My vision had gone dark, but I could still hear and sense things dimly. Something grasped me, pulled me away, and a moment later I came to myself, leaning against Jamie in a corner, his arms supporting me.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?" he was saying urgently, shaking me a little and patting my cheek.

The black-clad *bean-treim* had come as far as the door. I could see them outside, standing like twin pillars of darkness, falling snow beginning to whirl round them as the cold wind came inside, small hard dry flakes skittering and bouncing in its wake across the floor. The women's voices rose and fell, blending with the wind. By the table, Hiram Crombie was trying to fix his mother-in-law's garnet brooch to her shroud, though his hands shook and his narrow face was wet with tears.

"Yes," I said faintly, then "yes" a little stronger. "Everything is all right now."

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PART SIX

On the Mountain

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BIRD-SPRING

March 1774

It was spring, and the long months of desolation melted into running water, with streamlets pouring from every hill and miniature waterfalls leaping from stone to stone to stone.

The air was filled with the racket of birds, a cacophony of melody that replaced the lonely calling of geese passing by far overhead.

Birds go one by one in the winter, a single raven hunched brooding in a barren tree, an owl fluffed against the cold in the high, dark shadows of a barn. Or they go in flocks, a massed thunder of wings to bear them up and away, wheeling through the sky like handsful of pepper grains thrown aloft, calling their way in Vs of mournful courage toward the promise of a distant and problematic survival.

In winter, the raptors draw apart unto themselves; the songbirds flee away, all the color of the feathered world reduced to the brutal simplification of predator and prey, gray shadows passing overhead, with no more than a small bright drop of blood fallen back to earth here and there to mark the passing of life, leaving a drift of scattered feathers, borne on the wind.

But as spring blooms, the birds grow drunk with love and the bushes riot with their songs. Far, far into the night, darkness mutes but does not silence them, and small melodious conversations break out at all hours, invisible and strangely intimate in the dead of night, as though one overheard the lovemaking of strangers in the room next door.

I moved closer to Jamie, hearing the clear, sweet song of a thrush in the great red spruce that stood behind the house. It was still cold at night, but not with the bitter chill of winter; rather with the sweet fresh cold of thawing earth and springing leaves, a cold that sent the blood tingling and made warm bodies seek one another, nesting.

A rumbling snore echoed across the landing—another harbinger of spring. Major MacDonald, who had arrived mud-caked and wind-bitten the night before, bringing unwelcome news of the outside world.

Jamie stirred briefly at the sound, groaned, farted briefly, and lay still. He'd stayed up late, entertaining the Major—if entertainment was the word for it.

I could hear Lizzie and Mrs. Bug in the kitchen below, talking as they banged pots and slammed doors in hopes of rousing us. Breakfast smells began to rise up the stairs, enticing, the bitter smell of roasting chicory spicing the thick warmth of buttered porridge.

The sound of Jamie's breathing had changed, and I knew he was awake, though he still lay with his eyes closed. I didn't know whether this denoted an urge to continue the physical pleasure of sleep—or a marked disinclination to get up and deal with Major MacDonald.

He resolved this doubt at once by rolling over, enveloping me in his arms, and moving his lower body against mine in a manner that made it obvious that, while physical pleasure was what was on his mind, he was quite through sleeping.

He hadn't reached the point of coherent speech yet, though, and nuzzled my ear, making small interrogatory hums in his throat. Well, the Major was still asleep, and the coffee—such as it was—wouldn't be ready for a bit. I hummed back, reached to the bedside table for a bit of almond cream, and commenced a slow and pleasurable rummage through the layers of bedclothes and nightshirt to apply it.

Some small while later, snorts and thumps across the hall denoted the resurrection of Major MacDonald, and the delectable scents of frying ham and potatoes with onions had joined the throng of olfactory stimuli. The sweet smell of almond cream was stronger, though.

"Greased lightning," Jamie said with a drowsy air of satisfaction. He was still in bed, lying on his side to watch me dress.

"What?" I turned from my looking glass to eye him. "Who?"

"Me, I suppose. Or were ye not thunderstruck, there at the end?" He laughed, almost silently, rustling the bedclothes.

"Oh, you've been talking to Bree again," I said tolerantly. I turned back to the glass. "That particular figure of speech is a metaphor for extreme speed, not lubricated brilliance."

I smiled at him in the glass as I brushed knots out of my hair. He had unplaited it while I was anointing him, and subsequent exertions had caused it to explode. Come to think, it did faintly resemble the effects of electrocution.

"Well, I can be fast, too," he said judiciously, sitting up and rubbing a hand through his own hair. "But not first thing in the morning. There are worse ways to wake up, aye?"

"Yes, much worse." Sounds of hawking and spitting came from across the landing, followed by the distinctive sound of someone with very vigorous bladder function employing a chamber pot. "Is he staying long, did he say?"

Jamie shook his head. Rising slowly, he stretched himself like a cat and then came across in his shirt to put his arms around me. I hadn't yet poked up the fire, and the room was chilly; his body was pleasantly warm.

He rested his chin on top of my head, regarding our stacked reflections in the mirror.

"I'll have to go," he said softly. "Tomorrow, perhaps."

I stiffened a little, brush in hand.

"Where? To the Indians?"

He nodded, eyes on mine.

"MacDonald brought newspapers, wi' the text of letters from Governor Martin to various people—Tryon in New York, General Gage—asking help. He's losing his grip upon the colony—insofar as he ever had one—and is seriously thinking of arming the Indians. Though *that* bit of information hasna made it into the newspapers, and a good thing, too."

He released me, and reached for the drawer where his clean shirts and stockings stayed.

"That *is* a good thing," I said, bundling back my hair and hunting for a ribbon to tie it with. We'd seen few newspapers through the winter, but even so, the level of disagreement between the Governor and the Assembly was clear; he'd resorted to a practice of continuous proroguing, repeatedly dismissing the Assembly in order to prevent them passing legislation at odds with his desires.

I could well imagine what the public response would be to the revelation that he contemplated arming the Cherokee, Catawba, and Creek, and inciting them against his own people.

"I'm guessing that he isn't actually going to do that," I said, finding the blue ribbon I was looking for, "because if he had—does, I mean—the Revolution would have got going in North Carolina right now, rather than in Massachusetts or Philadelphia two years from now. But why on earth is he publishing these letters in the newspaper?"

Jamie laughed. He shook his head, pushing back the disheveled hair from his face.

"He's not. Evidently, the Governor's mail is being intercepted. He's no verra pleased about it, MacDonald says."

"I daresay not." Mail was notoriously insecure, and always had been. In fact, we had originally acquired Fergus when Jamie hired him as a pickpocket, in order to steal letters in Paris. "How is Fergus doing?" I asked.

Jamie made a small grimace, pulling on his stockings.

"Better, I think. Marsali says he's staying more to home, which is good. And he's earning a wee bit, teaching French to Hiram Crombie. But—"

"Hiram? *French?*"

"Oh, aye." He grinned at me. "Hiram's set upon the idea that he must go and preach to the Indians, and he thinks he'll be best equipped to manage if he's got some French as well as English. Ian's teaching him a bit of the Tsalagi, too, but there are so many Indian tongues, he'd never learn them all."

"Will wonders never cease," I murmured. "Do you think—"

I was interrupted at this point by Mrs. Bug bellowing up the stairs, "If Certain Persons are wantin' to let a good breakfast be spoilt, I'm sure they're welcome!"

Like clockwork, Major MacDonald's door popped open, and his feet clattered eagerly down the stairs.

"Ready?" I said to Jamie. He seized my hairbrush and tidied himself with a few licks, then came to open the door and bowed, ushering me ceremoniously out.

"What ye said, Sassenach," he said as he followed me down the stair. "About it starting in two years. It's already well begun. Ye know that, aye?"

"Oh, yes," I said, rather grimly. "But I don't want to think about it on an empty stomach."

* * *

Roger stood up straight, measuring. The edge of the kiln pit he stood in came just under his chin. Six feet would be just about at eye level; only a few more inches, then. That was heartening. Setting the shovel against the dirt wall, he stooped, grabbed a wooden bucket full of earth, and heaved it up over the rim.

"Dirt!" he yelled. There was no response to his shout. He rose on his toes, peering balefully round for his so-called assistants. Jemmy and Germain were meant to be taking it in turn to empty the buckets and pass them back down to him, but had a tendency to vanish abruptly.

"Dirt!" he shouted as loudly as he could. The wee buggers couldn't have gone far; it took him less than two minutes to fill a bucket.

This call was answered, but not by the boys. A cold shadow fell over him, and he squinted up to see the silhouette of his father-in-law, stooping to grab the handle of the bucket. Jamie strode two paces and flung the dirt onto the slowly mounting heap, then came back, hopping down into the pit to return it.

"A tidy wee hole ye have here," he said, turning round to survey it. "Ye could barbecue an ox in it."

"I'll need one. I'm starving." Roger wiped a sleeve across his forehead; the spring day was cool and crisp, but he was drenched with sweat.

Jamie had picked up his shovel and was examining the blade with interest.

"I've never seen the like. Is it the lass's work?"

"With a bit of help from Dai Jones, aye." It had taken roughly thirty seconds' work with an eighteenth-century shovel to convince Brianna that improvements could be made. It had taken three months to acquire a chunk of iron that could be shaped to her directions by the blacksmith and to persuade Dai Jones—who was Welsh and thus by definition stubborn—into doing it. The normal spade was made of wood, and looked like nothing so much as a roof shingle attached to a pole.

"May I try?" Enchanted, Jamie drove the pointed end of the new spade into the dirt at his feet.

"Be my guest."

Roger scrambled up out of the deep part of the pit into the shallower end of the kiln. Jamie stood in the part where the fire would go, according to Brianna, with a chimney to be raised over it. Items to be fired would sit in the longer, relatively shallow part of the pit and be covered over. After a week of shoveling, Roger was less inclined to think the distant possibility of plumbing was worth all the labor involved, but Bree wanted it—and like her father, Bree was difficult to resist, though their methods varied.

Jamie shoveled briskly, tossing spadesful of dirt into the bucket, with small exclamations of delight and admiration at the ease and speed with which dirt could be dug. Despite his dim view of the occupation, Roger felt a sense of pride in his wife's implement.

"First the wee matchsticks," Jamie said, making a joke of it, "now shovels. What will she think of next?"

“I’m afraid to ask,” Roger said, with a tinge of rue that made Jamie laugh.

The bucket filled, Roger picked it up and took it to empty, while Jamie filled the second. And without spoken agreement, they continued the job, Jamie digging, Roger carrying, finishing in what seemed no time at all.

Jamie climbed out of the pit and joined Roger on the edge, looking down at their handiwork in satisfaction.

“And if it doesna work well as a kiln,” Jamie observed, “she can make a root cellar of it.”

“Waste not, want not,” Roger agreed. They stood looking down into the hole, the breeze chilly through their damp shirts now that they’d stopped moving.

“D’ye think ye might go back, you and the lass?” Jamie said. He spoke so casually that Roger missed his meaning at first, not catching on until he saw his father-in-law’s face, set in the imperturbable calm that—he’d learned to his cost—generally covered some strong emotion.

“Back,” he repeated uncertainly. Surely he didn’t mean—but of course he did. “Through the stones, do you mean?”

Jamie nodded, seeming to find some fascination in the walls of the pit, where drying grass rootlets hung in tangles, and the jagged edges of stones protruded from the patchy damp dirt.

“I’ve thought of it,” Roger said, after a pause. “*We’ve* thought. But …” He let his voice trail off, finding no good way to explain.

Jamie nodded again, though, as if he had. He supposed Jamie and Claire must have discussed it, even as he and Bree had, playing over the pros and cons. The dangers of the passage—and he did not underestimate those dangers, the more so in light of what Claire had told him about Donner and his comrades; what if he made it through—and Bree and Jem didn’t? It didn’t bear thinking.

Beyond that, if they all survived the passage, was the pain of separation—and he would admit that it would be painful for him, as well. Whatever its limitations or inconveniences, the Ridge was home.

Against those considerations, though, stood the dangers of the present time, for the four horsemen of the apocalypse rode widely here; it was no trick to catch a glimpse of pestilence or famine from the corner of your eye. And the pale horse and its rider were inclined to show up unexpectedly—and often.

But that's what Jamie meant, of course, he realized belatedly.

"Because of the war, ye mean."

"The O'Brians," Jamie said quietly. "That will happen again, ken? Many times."

It was spring now, not autumn, but the cold wind that touched his bones was the same as the one that had blown brown and golden leaves across the face of the little girl. Roger had a sudden vision of the two of them, Jamie and himself, standing now at the edge of this cavernous hole, like bedraggled mourners at a graveside. He turned his back on the pit, looking instead into the budding green of the chestnut trees.

"Ye know," he said, after a moment's silence, "when I first learned what—what Claire is, what we are, all about it—I thought, 'How fascinating!' To actually see history in the making, I mean. In all honesty, I maybe came as much for that as for Bree. Then, I mean."

Jamie laughed shortly, turning round as well.

"Oh, aye, and is it? Fascinating?"

"More than I ever thought," Roger assured him, with extreme dryness. "But why are ye asking now? I told ye a year ago that we'd stay."

Jamie nodded, pursing his lips.

"Ye did. The thing is—I am thinking I must sell one or more of the gemstones."

That brought Roger up a bit. He'd not consciously thought it, of course—but the knowledge that the gems were there, in case of need … He hadn't realized what a sense of security that knowledge had held, until this moment.

"They're yours to sell," he replied, cautious. "Why now, though? Are things difficult?"

Jamie gave him an exceedingly wry look.

"Difficult," he repeated. "Aye, ye could say that." And proceeded to lay out the situation succinctly.

The marauders had destroyed not only a season's whisky in the making, but also the malting shed, only now rebuilding. That meant no surplus of the lovely drink this year to sell or trade for necessities. There were twenty-two more tenant families on the Ridge to be mindful of, most of them struggling with a place and a profession that they could never have imagined, trying merely to keep alive long enough to learn how to stay that way.

"And then," Jamie added grimly, "there's MacDonald—speak o' the devil."

The Major himself had come out onto the stoop, his red coat bright in the morning sun. He was dressed for travel, Roger saw, booted and spurred, and wearing his wig, laced hat in hand.

"A flying visit, I see."

Jamie made a small, uncouth noise.

"Long enough to tell me I must try to arrange the purchase of thirty muskets, with shot and powder—at my own expense, mind—to be repaid by the Crown, eventually," he added, in a cynic tone that made it obvious how remote he considered this eventuality to be.

"Thirty muskets." Roger contemplated that, pursing his own lips in a soundless whistle. Jamie had not been able even to afford to replace the rifle he had given Bird for his help in the matter of Brownsville.

Jamie shrugged.

"And then there are wee matters like the dowry I've promised Lizzie Wemyss—she'll be wed this summer. And Marsali's mother, Laoghaire—" He glanced warily at Roger, unsure how much he might know regarding Laoghaire. More than Jamie would be comfortable knowing, Roger thought, and tactfully kept his face blank.

"I owe a bit to her, for maintenance. We can live, aye, with what we've got—but for the rest … I must sell land, or the stones. And I willna give up the land." His fingers drummed restlessly against his thigh, then stopped, as he raised his hand to wave to the Major, who had just spotted them across the clearing.

"I see. Well, then …" Plainly, it had to be done; it was foolish to sit on a fortune in gems, merely because they might one day be needed for a far-fetched and risky purpose. Still, the notion made Roger feel slightly hollow, like rappelling down a cliff and having someone cut your safety line.

Jamie blew out his breath.

"Well, so. I'll send one wi' Bobby Higgins to his Lordship in Virginia. He'll get me a good price, at least."

"Aye, that's a—" Roger halted, his attention deflected by the scenario unfolding before him.

The Major, obviously well-breakfasted and cheerful, had come down the steps and was strolling toward them—oblivious of the white sow, who had emerged from her den beneath the foundation and was ambling along the side of the house, bent on her own breakfast. It would be a matter of seconds before she spotted the Major.

"Hoy!" Roger bellowed, and felt something tear in his throat. The pain was so sharp that it stopped him cold, and he clutched at his throat, struck suddenly mute.

" 'Ware the pig!" Jamie was shouting, waving and pointing. The Major thrust his head forward, hand behind his ear—then caught the repeated bellows of "Pig!" and looked wildly round, just in time to see the white sow break into a ponderous trot, scything her tusks from side to side.

He would have been best served by wheeling and sprinting back to the safety of the stoop, but instead panic struck him and he ran—away from the pig, coming straight for Jamie and Roger, who promptly ran in different directions.

Glancing back, Roger saw the Major gaining on the pig with long-legged leaps, his goal evidently the cabin. Between the Major and the cabin, though, lay the open hole of the groundhog kiln, masked by the heavy growth of long spring grass through which the Major bounded.

"Pit!" Roger shouted, only the word came out in a strangled croak. Nonetheless, MacDonald seemed to hear him, for a bright red face turned in his direction, eyes bulging. It must have sounded like "Pig!" for the Major glanced back over his shoulder then to see the sow trot faster, small pink eyes fixed on him with murderous intent.

The distraction proved nearly fatal, for the Major's spurs caught and tangled, and he sprawled headlong in the grass, losing his grip on the laced hat—which he had held throughout the chase—and sending it pinwheeling through the air.

Roger hesitated for an instant, but then ran back to help, with a smothered oath. He saw Jamie running back, too, spade held at the ready—though even a metal shovel seemed pitifully inadequate to deal with a five-hundred-pound hog.

MacDonald was already scrambling to his feet, though; before either of them could reach him, he took off running as though the devil himself were breathing on his coattails. Arms pumping and face set in puce determination, he ran for his life, bounding like a jackrabbit through the grass—and disappeared. One instant he was there, and the next he had vanished, as though by magic.

Jamie looked wide-eyed at Roger, then at the pig, who had stopped short on the far side of the kiln pit. Then, moving gingerly, one eye always on the pig, he sidled toward the pit, glancing sideways, as though afraid to see what lay at the bottom.

Roger moved to stand at Jamie's shoulder, looking down. Major MacDonald had fallen into the deeper hole at the end, where he lay curled up like a hedgehog, arms clasped protectively over his wig—which had remained in place by some miracle, though now much bespattered with dirt and bits of grass.

"MacDonald?" Jamie called down. "Are ye damaged, man?"

"Is she there?" quavered the Major, not emerging from his ball.

Roger glanced across the pit at the pig, now some distance away, snout down in the long grass.

"Er … aye, she is." To his surprise, his voice came easy, if a little hoarse. He cleared his throat and spoke a little louder. "Ye needna worry, though. She's busy eating your hat."

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THE GUN-SMITH

Jamie accompanied MacDonald as far as Coopersville, where he set the Major on the road back to Salisbury, equipped with food, a disreputable slouched hat against the weather, and a small bottle of whisky to fortify his bruised spirits. Then, with an internal sigh, he turned into the McGillivrays' place.

Robin was at work in his forge, surrounded by the smells of hot metal, wood shavings, and gun oil. A lanky young man with a hatchet face was working the leather bellows, though his dreamy expression showed a certain lack of attention to the job.

Robin caught the shadow of Jamie's entrance and glanced up, gave a quick nod, and returned to his work.

He was hammering bar iron into flat bands; the iron cylinder he meant to wrap them round to form a gun barrel was waiting, propped between two blocks. Jamie moved carefully out of range of flying sparks and sat down on a bucket to wait.

That was Senga's betrothed at the bellows … Heinrich. Heinrich Strasse. He picked the name unerringly out of the hundreds he carried in his mind, and along with it came automatically all he knew of young Heinrich's history, family, and connections, these appearing in his imagination round the boy's long, dreamy face in a constellation of social affinities, orderly and complex as the pattern of a snowflake.

He always saw people in this way, but seldom thought of it consciously. There was something about the shape of Strasse's face, though, that reinforced the mental imagery—the long axis of forehead, nose, and chin, emphasized by a horsey upper lip, deeply grooved, the horizontal axis shorter, but no less sharply defined by long, narrow eyes and flat dark brows above them.

He could see the boy's origins—the middle of nine children, but the eldest boy, son of an overbearing father and a mother who dealt with this by means of subterfuge and quiet malice—sprouting in a delicate array from the rather pointed top of his head, his religion—Lutheran, but slack about it—a lacy spray under an equally pointed chin, his relation with Robin—cordial, but wary, as befitted a new son-in-law who was also an apprentice—extending like a fanned spike from his right ear, that with Ute—a mix of terror and helpless abashment—from the left.

This notion entertained him very much, and he was obliged to look away, affecting interest in Robin's workbench, in order to keep from staring and rendering the lad uncomfortable.

The gunsmith was not tidy; scraps of wood and metal lay among a jumble of spikes, scribes, hammers, blocks of wood, bits of filthy garnet cloth and sticks of charcoal on the bench. A few papers were weighted down with a spoiled gunstock that had split in the making, their dirty edges fluttering in the hot breath of the forge. He would have taken no notice, save that he recognized the style of the drawing, would have known that boldness and delicacy of line anywhere.

Frowning, he rose and pulled the papers from under the gunstock. Drawings of a gun, executed from different angles—a rifle, there was the cutaway interior of the barrel, the grooves and landings clear—but most peculiar. One drawing showed it whole, reasonably familiar, bar the odd hornlike growths on the barrel. But the next … the gun seemed as though someone had broken it over his knee; it was snapped through, stock and barrel pointing downward in opposite directions, joined only by … what sort of hinge was that? He closed one eye, considering.

The cessation of clamor from the forge and the loud hiss of hot metal in the sump broke his fascination with the drawings and made him look up.

“Did your lass show ye those?” Robin asked, with a nod at the papers. He pulled the tail of his shirt up from behind his leather apron, and mopped steam from his sweating face, looking amused.

“No. What is she about? Is she wanting ye to make her a gun?” He relinquished the sheets to the gunsmith, who shuffled through them, sniffing with interest.

“Oh, she’s no way of paying for that, *Mac Dubh,* unless Roger Mac’s discovered a pot o’ fairy gold since last week. No, she’s only been telling me her notions of improvement in the art of riflery, asking what it might cost to make such a thing.” The cynic smile that had been lurking in the corner of Robin’s mouth broadened into a grin, and he shoved the papers back at Jamie. “I can tell she’s yours, *Mac Dubh.* What other lass would spend her time thinking of guns, rather than gowns and bairns?”

There was more than a little implied criticism in this remark—Brianna had undoubtedly been a good deal more forthright in manner than was becoming—but he let it pass for the moment. He needed Robin’s goodwill.

“Well, any woman has her fancies,” he observed mildly. “Even wee Lizzie, I suppose—but Manfred will see to that, I’m sure. He’ll be in Salisbury just now? Or Hillsboro?”

Robin McGillivray was by no means a stupid man. The abrupt transition of subject made him arch one brow, but he passed no remark. Instead, he sent Heinrich off to the house to fetch them some beer, waiting for the lad to disappear before turning back to Jamie, expectant.

“I need thirty muskets, Robin,” he said without preamble. “And I’ll need them quickly—within three months.”

The gunsmith’s face went comically blank with astonishment, but only for a moment. He blinked then, and closed his mouth with a snap, resuming his usual expression of sardonic good humor.

“Starting your own army, are ye, *Mac Dubh*?”

Jamie merely smiled at that without answering. If word got around that he meant to arm his tenantry and muster his own Committee of Safety in answer to Richard Brown's banditry, that would do nay harm and might do good. Letting word get out that the Governor was working secretly to arm the savages, in case he required to suppress an armed rising in the backcountry, and that he, Jamie Fraser, was the agent of such action—that was an excellent way to get himself killed and his house burnt to the ground, to say nothing of what other trouble might ensue.

"How many can ye find for me, Robin? And how fast?"

The gunsmith squinted, thinking, then darted a sideways glance at him.

"Cash?"

He nodded, seeing Robin's lips purse in a soundless whistle of astonishment. Robin kent as well as anyone that he had no money to speak of—let alone the small fortune required to assemble that many guns.

He could see the speculation in Robin's eyes, as to where he might be planning to acquire that sort of money—but the gunsmith said nothing aloud. McGillivray's upper teeth sank into his lower lip in concentration, then relaxed.

"I can find six, maybe seven, betwixt Salisbury and Salem. Brugge"—naming the Moravian gunsmith—"would do one or two, if he kent it was for you.…" Seeing the infinitesimal shake of Jamie's head he nodded in resignation. "Aye, well, maybe seven, then. And Manfred and I can manage maybe three more—it's only muskets you're wanting, nothing fancy?" He tilted his head toward Brianna's drawing with a small flash of his earlier humor.

"Nothing fancy," Jamie said, smiling. "That's ten, then." He waited. Robin sighed, settling himself.

"I'll ask about," he said. "But it's no an easy matter. Particularly if ye dinna mean your name to be heard in connection—and I gather ye don't."

"Ye're a man o' rare wit and discretion, Robin," Jamie assured him gravely, making him laugh. It was true, for all that; Robin McGillivray had fought beside him at Culloden, lived three years with him in Ardsmuir; Jamie would trust him with his life—and was. He began to wish the pig had eaten MacDonald after all, but put the unworthy thought from his mind and drank the beer Heinrich brought, chatting of inconsequence and trivia until it was polite to take his leave.

He had ridden Gideon, to bear MacDonald company on his horse, but meant to leave him in Dai Jones's barn. Through a complex bit of bargaining, Gideon would cover John Woolam's spotted mare—to be brought up when Woolam returned from Bear Creek—and when the harvest was in come autumn, Jamie would collect a hundredweight of barley, with a bottle of whisky to Dai for his assistance.

Exchanging a bit of conversation with Dai—he could never decide whether the blacksmith was truly a man of few words, or was it only that he despaired of making the Scots understand his Welsh singsong—Jamie slapped Gideon encouragingly on the neck and left him to eat grain and fettle his loins against the coming of the spotted mare.

Dai had offered him food, but he declined; he was peckish, but looked forward to the peace of the five-mile walk home. The day was fine and pale blue, with the spring leaves murmuring to themselves overhead, and a bit of solitude would be welcome.

The decision had been made when he asked Robin to find him guns. But the situation bore thought.

There were sixty-four villages of the Cherokee; each with its own headman, its own peace chief and war chief. Only five of those villages were within his power to influence—the three villages of the Snowbird people, and two that belonged to the Overhill Cherokee. Those, he thought, would follow the leaders of the Overhill, regardless of his words.

Roger Mac had known relatively little of the Cherokee, or what their role might be in the looming fight. He had been able to say only that the Cherokee had not acted *en masse;* some villages chose to fight, some did not—some fought for one side, some for another.

Well, so. It was not likely that anything he said or did would turn the tide of war, and that was a comfort. But he could not escape the knowledge that his own time to jump was coming. So far as anyone knew now, he was a loyal subject to His Majesty, a Tory beavering away in Geordie's interest, suborning savages and distributing guns with an eye to suppressing the riotous passions of Regulators, Whigs, and would-be republicans.

At some point, this facade must necessarily crumble to reveal him as a dyed-in-the-wool rebel and a traitor. But when? He wondered idly whether he might have a price on his head this time, and how much it would be.

It might be not so difficult, with the Scots. Grudge-bearing and hardheaded as they were, he was one of them, and personal liking might moderate the sense of outrage at his turning rebel, when the time came.

No, it was the Indians he worried over—for he came to them as the agent of the King. How suddenly to explain his change of heart? And further, do it in such a way that they might share it? Surely they would see this as treachery at worst, grossly suspicious behavior at best. He thought they would not kill him, but how in God's name to induce them to fall in with the cause of rebellion, when they enjoyed a stable and prosperous relation with His Majesty?

Oh, God, and there was John. What could he say to his friend, when the time came? Convince him by logic and rhetoric to change his coat as well? He hissed through his teeth and shook his head in consternation, trying—and failing utterly—to envision John Grey, lifelong soldier, ex-Royal Governor, that very soul of loyalty and honor, suddenly declaring himself for rebellion and republic.

He passed on, fretting in this fashion for some time, but gradually found the walking soothe his mind, and the peace of the day lighten his heart. There would be time before supper to take wee Jem fishing, he thought; the sun was bright, but there was a certain dampness to the air under the trees that was promising for a first hatch of flies on the water. He had a feeling in his bones that the trout would rise near sunset.

In this more pleasant frame of mind, he was glad to meet his daughter, some little way below the Ridge. His heart lifted at sight of her hair, streaming wanton down her back in ruddy glory.

"Ciamar a tha thu, a nighean?" he said, kissing her cheek in greeting.

"Tha mi gu math, mo athair," she said, and she smiled, but he noted a small frown that troubled the smooth flesh of her forehead like the hatch of mayfly on a trout pond.

"I've been waiting for you," she said, taking his arm. "I wanted to talk to you before you go to the Indians tomorrow." And there was that in her tone that drove all thought of fish from his mind upon the instant.

"Oh, aye?"

She nodded, but seemed to have some difficulty in finding words—an occurrence that alarmed him still further. But he could not help her, without some notion what it was about, and so kept pace with her, silent but encouraging. A mockingbird was busy nearby, practicing its repertoire of calls. It was the bird who lived in the red spruce behind the house; he knew because it paused now and then in the midst of its chatter and trilling to give a fine imitation of Adso the cat's midnight yowl.

"When you talked to Roger about the Indians," Brianna said finally, and turned her head to look at him, "did he mention something called the Trail of Tears?"

"No," he said, curious. "What is that?"

She grimaced, hunching her shoulders in a way that seemed disconcertingly familiar.

"I thought maybe he hadn't. He said he'd told you all he knew about the Indians and the Revolution—not that he knows all that much, it wasn't his specialty—but this happened—will happen later, after the Revolution. So he maybe didn't think it was important. Maybe it's not."

She hesitated, as though wanting him to tell her that it wasn't. He only waited, though, and she sighed, looking at her feet as she paced along. She was wearing sandals without stockings, and her long, bare toes were grimed with the soft dust of the wagon road. The sight of her feet always filled him with an odd mixture of pride at their elegant shape and a faint sense of shame at their size—but as he was responsible for both, he supposed he had no grounds for complaint.

"About sixty years from now," she said at last, eyes on the ground, "the American government will take the Cherokee from their land and move them. A long way—to a place called Oklahoma. It's a thousand miles, at least, and hundreds and hundreds of them will starve and die on the way. That's why they called it—will call it—the Trail of Tears."

He was impressed to hear that there should be a government capable of doing such a thing, and said so. She shot him an angry glance.

"They'll do it by cheating. They'll talk some of the Cherokee leaders into agreeing by promising them things and not keeping their bargain."

He shrugged.

"That's how most governments behave," he observed mildly. "Why are ye telling me this, lass? I will—thank God—be safely dead before any of it happens."

He saw a flicker cross her face at mention of his death, and was sorry to have caused her distress by his levity. Before he could apologize, though, she squared her shoulders and went on.

"I'm telling you because I thought you should know," she said. "Not all of the Cherokee went—some of them went farther up into the mountains and hid; the army didn't find them."

"Aye?"

She turned her head and gave him a look from those eyes that were his own, touching in their earnestness.

"Don't you see? Mama told you what would happen—about Culloden. You couldn't stop it, but you saved Lallybroch. And your men, your tenants. Because you knew."

"Oh, Christ," he said, realizing with a shock what she meant. Recollection washed through him in a flood, the terror and desperation and uncertainty of that time—the numb despair that had carried him through that last fatal day. "Ye want me to tell Bird."

She rubbed a hand over her face, and shook her head.

"I don't know. I don't know if you *should* tell him—or if you do, whether he'll listen. But Roger and I talked about it, after you asked him about the Indians. And I kept thinking about it … and, well, it just didn't seem *right,* to know and not do anything. So I thought I'd better tell you."

"Aye, I see," he said a little bleakly.

He had noticed before the inclination of persons with tender consciences to ease their discomfort by handing the necessity of taking action on to someone else, but forbore to mention it. She could hardly be telling Bird herself, after all.

As though the situation he faced with the Cherokee were not sufficiently difficult already, he thought wryly—now he must deal with saving unknown future generations of savages? The mockingbird zoomed past his ear, unnervingly close, clucking like a hen, of all things.

It was so incongruous that he laughed. And then realized that there was nothing else to do. Not now.

Brianna was looking at him curiously.

"What are you going to do?"

He stretched himself, slowly, luxuriously, feeling the muscles of his back pull upon his bones, feeling each of them, alive and solid. The sun was coming down the sky, supper was beginning to cook, and for now, for this one last night, he need do nothing. Not yet.

"I'm going fishing," he said, smiling at his lovely, unlikely, problematical daughter. "Fetch the wee lad, aye? I'll get the poles."

* * *

James Fraser, Esq. from Fraser's Ridge
To my Lord John Grey, Mount Josiah Plantation,
this 2nd day of April, Anno Domini 1774
My lord,

I depart in the morning to visit the Cherokee, and so leave this with my wife, to be entrusted to Mr. Higgins when he shall next arrive, to be delivered with its accompanying parcel into your hands.

I presume upon your kindness and your solicitude for my family in asking your favor to help in selling the object I entrust to you. I suspect that your connexions might enable you to obtain a better price than I might do myself—and to do so discreetly.

I shall hope upon my return to confide in you the reasons for my action, as well as certain philosophical reflections which you may find of interest. In the meantime, believe me ever

Your most affectionate friend
and humble servant,
J. Fraser

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DRESS REHEARSAL

Bobby Higgins looked uneasily at me over his mug of beer.

"Beg pardon, mum," he said. "But you wouldn't be a-thinking of practicing some type of physic upon me, would you? The worms are gone, I'm sure of it. And the—the other"—he blushed slightly and squirmed upon the bench—"that's quite all right, too. I've et so many beans, I fart quite regular, and not a touch of the fiery knives about it!"

Jamie had frequently remarked upon the transparency of my features, but this was surprising perspicacity on Bobby's part.

"I'm thrilled to hear it," I said, evading his question momentarily. "You look quite in the pink of health, Bobby."

He did; the hollow, wasted look had left him, and his flesh was firm and solid, his eyes bright. The blind one hadn't gone milky, nor did it wander perceptibly; he must have some residual ability to detect light and shape, which strengthened my original diagnosis of a partially detached retina.

He nodded warily, and took a sip of beer, still keeping his eyes fixed on me.

"I'm very well indeed, mum," he said.

"Splendid. You don't happen to know how much you weigh, do you, Bobby?"

The look of wariness vanished, replaced by modest pride.

"Happen I do, mum. I took some fleeces to the river port for his Lordship last month, and was a mercer there what had a scale for weighing out—tobacco or rice, or blocks of indigo as it might be. Some of us fellows got to wagering for sport what this or that might weigh, and … well, ten stone four it is, mum."

"Very nice," I said with approval. "Lord John's cook must be feeding you well." I thought he couldn't have weighed more than a hundred and ten pounds when I first saw him; a hundred and forty-four was still on the light side for a man of nearly six feet, but it was a major improvement. And a real stroke of luck, that he should have known his weight exactly.

Of course, if I didn't act fast, he might easily gain a stone or two; Mrs. Bug had set herself to outdo Lord John's Indian cook (of whom we had heard much), and to this end was shoveling eggs, onions, venison, and a slice of leftover pork pie onto Bobby's plate, to say nothing of the basket of fragrant muffins already in front of him.

Lizzie, seated beside me, took one of these and spread it with butter. I noted with approval that she, too, was looking healthier, delicately flushed—though I must remember to take a sample to check the malarial parasites in her blood. That would be an excellent thing to do while she was out. No way of getting an exact weight for her, unfortunately—but she couldn't weigh more than seven stone, small and light-boned as she was.

Now, Bree and Roger at the other end of the scale … Roger had to weigh at least a hundred and eighty-five; Bree probably one-fifty. I took a muffin myself, thinking how best to bring up my plan. Roger would do it if I asked, of course, but Bree … I'd have to be careful there. She'd had her tonsils out under ether at the age of ten, and hadn't liked the experience. If she found out what I was up to and began expressing her opinions freely, she might arouse alarm in the rest of my guinea pigs.

Enthused by my success at making ether, I had seriously underestimated the difficulty of inducing anyone to let me use it on them. Mr. Christie might well be an awkward bugger, as Jamie on occasion called him—but he was not alone in his resistance to the notion of being rendered suddenly unconscious.

I would have thought that the appeal of painlessness was universal—but not to people who had never experienced it. They had no context in which to place such a notion, and while they presumably didn't all think ether was a Papist plot, they did view an offer to remove pain from them as being in some way contrary to the divine vision of the universe.

Bobby and Lizzie, though, were sufficiently under my sway that I was fairly sure I could coax—or bully—them into a brief trial. If they then reported the experience in a positive light … but improved public relations was only the half of it.

The real necessity was to try my ether out on a variety of subjects, taking careful note of the results. The scare of Henri-Christian's birth had shown me how woefully unprepared I was. I needed to have some idea of how much to administer per unit of body weight, how long such-and-such a dose might last, and how deep the resulting stupor might be. The last thing I wanted was to be up to my elbows in someone's abdomen, only to have them come suddenly round with a shriek.

"You're doing it again, mum." Bobby's brow creased as he chewed slowly, eyes narrowed at me.

"What? What am I doing?" I feigned innocence, helping myself to a bit of the pork pie.

"Watching me. Same as a sparrer hawk watches a mouse, just afore she stoops. I'n't she?" he appealed to Lizzie.

"Aye, she is," Lizzie agreed, dimpling at me. "But it's only her way, ken. Ye'd make a big mouse, Bobby." Being Scottish, she pronounced it "moose," which made Bobby laugh and choke over his muffin.

Mrs. Bug paused to pound him helpfully on the back, leaving him purple and gasping.

"Well, wha's amiss wi' him, then?" she asked, coming round to squint critically at Bobby's face. "Ye've no got the shits again, have ye, lad?"

"Again?" I said.

"Oh, no, mum," he croaked. "Perish the thought! 'Twas only eating green apples, the once." He choked, coughed, and sat up straight, clearing his throat.

"Can we please not talk about me bowels, mum?" he asked plaintively. "Not over breakfast, at least?"

I could feel Lizzie vibrating with amusement next to me, but she kept her eyes demurely on her plate, not to embarrass him further.

"Certainly," I said, smiling. "I hope you'll be staying for a few days, Bobby?" He'd come the day before, bearing the usual assortment of letters and newspapers from Lord John—along with a package containing a marvelous present for Jemmy: a musical jack-in-the-box, sent specially from London by the good offices of Lord John's son, Willie.

"Oh, I s'all, mum, yes," he assured me, mouth full of muffin. "His Lordship said I was to see if Mr. Fraser had a letter for me to carry back, so I must wait for him, mustn't I?"

"Of course." Jamie and Ian had gone to the Cherokee a week before; it was likely to be another week before they returned. Plenty of time to make my experiments.

"Is there anything I might do, mum, in the way of service to you?" Bobby asked. "Seeing as I'm here, I mean, and Mr. Fraser and Mr. Ian not." There was a small tone of satisfaction in this; he got on all right with Ian, but there was no doubt that he preferred to have Lizzie's attention to himself.

"Why, yes," I said, scooping up a bit of porridge. "Now that you mention it, Bobby …"

By the time I had finished explaining, Bobby still looked healthy, but a good deal less in bloom.

"Put me asleep," he repeated uncertainly. He glanced at Lizzie, who looked a little uncertain, too, but who was much too used to being told to do unreasonable things to protest.

"You'll only be asleep for a moment," I assured him. "Likely you won't even notice."

His face expressed considerable skepticism, and I could see him shifting about for some excuse. I'd foreseen that ploy, though, and now played my trump card.

"It's not only me needing to judge the dose," I said. "I can't operate on someone and give the ether at the same time—or not easily. Malva Christie will be assisting me; she'll need the practice."

"Oh," Bobby said thoughtfully. "Miss Christie." A sort of soft, dreamy expression spread across his face. "Well. I s'ouldn't want to put Miss Christie out, of course."

Lizzie made one of those economical Scottish noises in the back of her throat, managing to convey scorn, derision, and abiding disapproval in the space of two glottal syllables.

Bobby looked up in inquiry, a bit of pie poised on his fork.

"Did you say something?"

"Who, me?" she said. "O' course not." She got up abruptly and, carrying her apron before her, neatly shook crumbs into the fire, and turned to me.

"When d'ye mean to do it?" she demanded, adding a belated, "ma'am."

"Tomorrow morning," I said. "It needs to be done on an empty stomach, so we'll do it first thing, before breakfast."

"Fine!" she said, and stamped out.

Bobby blinked after her, then turned to me, bewildered.

"Did I say something?"

Mrs. Bug's eye met mine in perfect understanding.

"Not a thing, lad," she said, depositing a fresh spatulaful of scrambled eggs onto his plate. "Eat up. Ye'll need your strength."

* * *

Brianna, clever with her hands, had made the mask to my specifications, woven of oak splits. It was simple enough, a sort of double cage, hinged so that the two halves of it swung apart for the insertion of a thick layer of cotton wool between them, and then back together, the whole thing shaped to fit like a catcher's mask over the patient's nose and mouth.

"Put enough ether on to dampen the cotton wool all through," I instructed Malva. "We'll want it to take effect quickly."

"Aye, ma'am. Oh, it does smell queer, doesn't it?" She sniffed cautiously, face turned half away as she dripped ether onto the mask.

"Yes. Do be careful not to breathe too much of it yourself," I said. "We don't want you falling over in the midst of an operation."

She laughed, but dutifully held the mask further away.

Lizzie had bravely offered to go first—with the clear intent of deflecting Bobby's attention from Malva to her. This was working; she lay in a languid pose on the table, cap off, and her soft, pale hair displayed to best advantage on the pillow. Bobby sat beside her, earnestly holding her hand.

"All right, then." I had a tiny minute-glass to hand, the best I could do by way of keeping accurate time. "Put it gently over her face. Lizzie, just breathe deeply, and count with me, one … two … goodness, that didn't take long, did it?"

She'd taken one long breath, rib cage rising high—and then gone limp as a dead flounder as the breath went out. I hastily flipped the glass, and came to take her pulse. All well there.

"Wait for a bit; you can feel it, when they start to come round, a sort of vibration in the flesh," I instructed Malva, keeping one eye on Lizzie and the other on the glass. "Put your hand on her shoulder.… There, do you feel it?"

Malva nodded, nearly trembling with excitement.

"Two or three drops then." She added these, her own breath held, and Lizzie relaxed again with a sigh like an escape of air from a punctured tire.

Bobby's blue eyes were absolutely round, but he clung fiercely to Lizzie's other hand.

I timed the period to arousal once or twice more, then let Malva put her under a little more deeply. I picked up the lancet I had ready, and pricked Lizzie's finger. Bobby gasped as the blood welled up, looking back and forth from the crimson drop to Lizzie's angelically peaceful face.

"Why, she don't feel it!" he exclaimed. "Look, she's never moved a muscle!"

"Exactly," I said, with a profound feeling of satisfaction. "She won't feel anything at all, until she comes round."

"Mrs. Fraser says we could cut someone quite open," Malva informed Bobby, self-importantly. "Slice into them, and get at what's ailing—and they'd never feel a thing!"

"Well, not until they woke up," I said, amused. "They'd feel it then, I'm afraid. But it really is quite a marvelous thing," I added more softly, looking down at Lizzie's unconscious face.

I let her stay under whilst I checked the fresh blood sample, then told Malva to take the mask off. Within a minute, Lizzie's eyelids began to flutter. She looked curiously round, then turned to me.

"When are ye going to start it, ma'am?"

Despite assurances from both Bobby and Malva that she had been to all appearances dead as a doornail for the last quarter hour, she refused to believe it, asserting indignantly that she couldn't have been—though at a loss to explain the prick on her finger and the slide of freshly smeared blood.

"You remember the mask on your face?" I asked. "And my telling you to take a deep breath?"

She nodded uncertainly.

"Aye, I do, then, and it felt for a moment as though I were choking—but then ye were all just staring down at me, next thing!"

"Well, I suppose the only way to convince her is to show her," I said, smiling at the three flushed young faces. "Bobby?"

Eager to demonstrate the truth of the matter to Lizzie, he hopped up on the table and laid himself down with a will, though the pulse in his slender throat was hammering as Malva dripped ether on the mask. He drew a deep, convulsive gasp the moment she put it on his face. Frowning a bit, he took another—one more—and went limp.

Lizzie clapped both hands to her mouth, staring.

"Jesus, Joseph, and Mary!" she exclaimed. Malva giggled, thrilled at the effect.

Lizzie looked at me, eyes wide, then back at Bobby. Stooping to his ear, she called his name, to no effect, then picked up his hand and wiggled it gingerly. His arm waggled limply, and she made a soft exclamation and set his hand down again. She looked quite agitated.

"Can he no wake up again?"

"Not until we take away the mask," Malva told her, rather smug.

"Yes, but you don't want to keep someone under longer than you need to," I added. "It's not good for them to be anesthetized too long."

Malva obediently brought Bobby back to the edge of consciousness and put him back under several times, while I made note of times and dosages. During the last of these notes, I glanced up, to see her looking down at Bobby with an intent sort of expression, seeming to concentrate on something. Lizzie had withdrawn to a corner of the surgery, plainly made uneasy by seeing Bobby unconscious, and sat on a stool, plaiting her hair and twisting it up under her cap.

I stood up and took the mask from Malva's hand, setting it aside.

"You did a wonderful job," I told her, speaking quietly. "Thank you."

She shook her head, face glowing.

"Oh, ma'am! It was … I've never seen the like. It's such a feeling, is it not? Like as we killed him, and brought him alive again." She spread her hands out, looking at them half-unconsciously, as though wondering how she had done such a marvel, then closed them into small fists, and smiled at me, conspiratorially.

"I think I see why my faither says it's devil's work. Were he to see what it's like"—she glanced at Bobby, who was beginning to stir—"he'd say no one but God has a right to do such things."

"Really," I said, rather dryly. From the gleam in her eye, her father's likely reaction to what we had been doing was one of the chief attractions of the experiment. For an instant, I rather pitied Tom Christie.

"Um … perhaps you'd better not tell your father, then," I suggested. She smiled, showing small, sharp white teeth, and rolled her eyes.

"Don't you think it, ma'am," she assured me. "He'd stop me coming, as quick as—"

Bobby opened his eyes, turned his head to one side, and threw up, putting a stop to the discussion. Lizzie gave a cry and hurried to his side, fussing over him, wiping his face and fetching him brandy to drink. Malva, looking slightly superior, stood aside and let her.

“Oh, that’s queer,” Bobby repeated, for perhaps the tenth time, rubbing a hand across his mouth. “I saw the most terrible thing—just for a moment, there—and then I felt sick, and here it was all over.”

“What sort of terrible thing?” Malva asked, interested. He glanced at her, looking wary and uncertain.

“I scarcely know, tell ’ee true, miss. Only as it was … dark, like. A form, as you might say; I thought ’twas a woman’s. But … terrible,” he finished, helpless.

Well, that was too bad. Hallucination wasn’t an uncommon side effect, but I hadn’t expected it with such a brief dose.

“Well, I imagine it was just a bit of nightmare,” I said soothingly. “You know, it’s a form of sleep, so it’s not surprising that you might get the odd bit of dreaming now and then.”

To my surprise, Lizzie shook her head at this.

“Oh, no, ma’am,” she said. “It’s no sleep at all. When ye sleep, ken, ye give your soul up to the angels’ keeping, so as no ghoulies shall come near. But this …” Frowning, she eyed the bottle of ether, now safely corked again, then looked at me.

“I did wonder,” she said, “where does your soul go?”

“Er …” I said. “Well, I should think it simply stays with your body. It must. I mean—you aren’t dead.”

Both Lizzie and Bobby were shaking their heads decidedly.

“No, it doesn’t,” Lizzie said. “When ye’re sleepin’, ye’re still *there.* When ye do *that*”—she gestured toward the mask, a faint uneasiness on her small features—“ye’re not.”

“That’s true, mum,” Bobby assured me. “You’re not.”

“D’ye think maybe ye go to limbo, wi’ the unbaptized babes and all?” Lizzie asked anxiously.

Malva gave an unladylike snort.

“Limbo’s no real place,” she said. “It’s only a notion thought up by the Pope.”

Lizzie’s mouth dropped open in shock at this blasphemy, but Bobby luckily distracted her by feeling dizzy and requiring to lie down.

Malva seemed inclined to go on with the argument, but beyond repeating, "The Pope …" once or twice, simply stood, swaying to and fro with her mouth open, blinking a little. I glanced at Lizzie, only to find her glassy-eyed as well. She gave an enormous yawn and blinked at me, eyes watering.

It occurred to me that I was beginning to feel a trifle lightheaded myself.

"Goodness!" I snatched the ether mask from Malva's hand, and guided her hastily to a stool. "Let me get rid of this, or we'll all be giddy."

I flipped open the mask, pulled the damp wad of cotton wool out of it, and carried it outside at arm's length. I'd opened both the surgery windows, to provide ventilation and save us all being gassed, but ether was insidious. Heavier than air, it tended to sink toward the floor of a room and accumulate there, unless there was a fan or some other device to remove it. I might have to operate in the open air, I thought, were I using it for any length of time.

I laid the cotton-wool pad on a stone to dry out, and came back, hoping that they were all too groggy now to continue their philosophical speculations. I didn't want them following *that* line of thought; let it get around the Ridge that ether separated people from their souls, and I'd never get anyone to let me use it on them, no matter how dire the situation.

"Well, thank you all for helping," I said, smiling as I entered the room, relieved to find them all looking reasonably alert. "You've done something very useful and valuable. You can all go along about your business now, though—I'll tidy up."

Malva and Lizzie hesitated for a moment, neither girl wanting to leave Bobby to the other, but under the impetus of my shooing, drifted toward the door.

"When are ye to be wed, Miss Wemyss?" Malva asked casually—and loudly enough for Bobby to hear—though she certainly knew; everyone on the Ridge did.

"In August," Lizzie replied coolly, lifting her small nose half an inch. "Right after the haying—*Miss* Christie." *And then I shall be Mrs. McGillivray,* her satisfied expression said. *And you*—Miss *Christie*—

without an admirer to your name. Not that Malva attracted no notice from young men; only that her father and brother were assiduous in keeping them away from her.

"I wish ye great joy of it," Malva said. She glanced at Bobby Higgins, then back at Lizzie, and smiled, demure beneath her starched white cap.

Bobby stayed sitting on the table for a moment, looking after the girls.

"Bobby," I said, struck by the deeply thoughtful expression on his face, "the figure you saw under the anesthetic—did you recognize it?"

He looked at me, then his eyes slid back to the empty doorway, as though unable to keep away.

"Oh, no, mum," he said, in such a tone of earnest conviction that I knew he lied. "Not at all!"

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DISPLACED PERSONS

They had stopped to water the horses by the edge of the small lake the Indians called Thick Rushes. It was a warm day, and they hobbled the horses, stripped, and waded into the water, spring-fed and gloriously cold. Cold enough to shock the senses and, for a moment at least, drive away Jamie's moody contemplation of the note MacDonald had delivered him from John Stuart, the Indian Superintendent of the Southern Department.

It had been complimentary enough, praising his celerity and enterprise in drawing the Snowbird Cherokee into the British sphere of influence—but had gone on to urge more vigorous involvement, pointing out Stuart's own coup in directing the choice of leaders among the Choctaws and the Chickasaw, at a congress he had himself convened two years before.

> … *The competition and anxiety of the candidates for medals and commissions was as great as can be imagined and equalled the struggles of the most aspiring and ambitious for honours and preferment in great states. I took every step to be informed of characters and filled the vacancies with the most worthy and likely to answer the purposes of maintaining order and the attachment of this nation to the British interest. I urge you to strive for similar good results to be achieved among the Cherokee.*

“Oh, aye,” he said aloud, popping up among the rushes and shaking water from his hair. “I’m to depose Tsisqua, nay doubt by assassination, and bribe them all to install Pipestone Carver”—the smallest and most self-effacing Indian Jamie had ever seen—“as peace chief. Heugh!” He sank again, in a rush of bubbles, entertaining himself by cursing Stuart’s presumption, watching his words rise up in wavering quicksilver balls, to disappear magically at the bright light of the surface.

He rose again, gasping, then gulped air and held his breath.

“What was that?” said a startled voice nearby. “Is it them?”

“No, no,” said another, low and urgent. “There are only two; I see them both, over there, do you see?”

He opened his mouth and breathed like a zephyr, striving to hear over the pounding of his heart.

He had understood them, but for an instant, could not put a name to their tongue. Indians, aye, but not Cherokee, they were … Tuscarora, that was it.

He hadn’t spoken with any Tuscarora for years; most of them had gone north in the wake of the measles epidemic that had destroyed so many—going to join their Mohawk “fathers” in the lands ruled by the Iroquois League.

These two were arguing in whispers, but near enough that he made out most of what they said; they were no more than a few feet from him, hidden by a thick growth of rushes and cattail plants that stood nearly as high as a man’s head.

Where was Ian? He could hear distant splashing, at the far end of the lake, and turning his head gently, saw from the corner of his eye that Ian and Rollo were sporting in the water, the dog submerged to his ruff, paddling to and fro. If one didn’t know—and the beast didn’t sense the intruders and bark—it looked very much like two men swimming.

The Indians had concluded that this was likely the case—two horses, thus two men, and both safely distant. With much creaking and rustling, they began to make their way stealthily in the direction of the horses.

Jamie was half-inclined to let them try to take Gideon and see how far they got with such an enterprise. But they might only make off with Ian's horse and the pack mule—and Claire would be fashit, did he let them take Clarence. Feeling himself very much at a disadvantage, he slithered naked through the reeds, grimacing at the rasp of them on his skin, and crawled up among the cattails, into the mud of the shore.

Had they the wit to look back, they must have seen the cattails shaking—and he hoped Ian *would* see—but they were intent on their errand. He could glimpse them now, skulking in the tall grass at the forest edge, glancing to and fro—but never in the right direction.

Only two, he was sure of that now. Young, from the way they moved, and unsure. He couldn't see if they were armed.

Slimed with mud, he crept further, sinking onto his belly in the rank grasses near the lake, squirming rapidly toward the shelter of a sumac bush. What he wanted was a club, and quickly.

In such circumstances, of course, nothing came to hand but twigs and long-rotted branches. For lack of better, he seized a good-sized stone, but then found what he wanted: a dogwood branch cracked by wind and hanging in reach, still attached to the tree. They were approaching the grazing horses now; Gideon saw them and lifted his head abruptly. He went on chewing, but his ears lay half back in patent suspicion. Clarence, the ever-sociable, took notice and raised his head, as well, ears twitching to alertness.

Jamie seized the chance, and as Clarence emitted a welcoming bray, he ripped the branch from the tree and charged the intruders, roaring, *"Tulach Ard!"* at the top of his voice.

Wide eyes met his, and one man bolted, long hair flying. The other followed, but limping badly, going down on one knee as something gave way. He was up again at once, but too slow; Jamie swept the branch at his legs with a two-handed fury that knocked him flat, and leapt on his back, driving a vicious knee into his kidney.

The man made a strangled noise and froze, paralyzed by pain. Jamie had dropped his rock—no, there it was. He snatched it up and thumped the man solidly behind the ear, for luck. Then he was off and running after the other, who had made for the wood but sheered off, blocked by a rock-bound streamlet in his path. Now the man was bounding through the sedges; Jamie saw him cast a terrified look toward the water, where Ian and Rollo were making their way toward him, swimming like beaver.

The Indian might have made it to the sanctuary of the forest, had one foot not suddenly sunk in soft mud. He staggered sideways, and Jamie was on him, feet sliding in the mud, grappling.

The man was young and wiry and fought like an eel. Jamie, with the advantage of size and weight, managed to push him over, and they fell together and rolled about in the sedges and mud, clawing and thumping. The Indian caught Jamie's long hair and yanked, bringing tears to his eyes; he punched the man hard in the ribs to make him let go, and when he did, butted him in the face.

Their foreheads met with a dull thunk, and blinding pain shot through his head. They fell apart, gasping, and Jamie rolled up onto his knees, head spinning and eyes watering, trying to see.

There was a blur of gray and a shriek of terror. Rollo gave one deep-chested, snarling bark, then settled into a rumbling, continuous growl. Jamie shut one eye, a hand to his throbbing forehead, and made out his opponent lying flat in the mud, Rollo poised over him, black lips drawn back to show all his teeth.

The splash of feet running through the shallows, and Ian was there, gasping for breath.

"Are ye all right, Uncle Jamie?"

He took his hand away and looked at his fingers. No blood, though he would have sworn his head was split open.

"No," he said, "but better than him. Oh, Jesus."

"Did ye kill the other one?"

"Probably not. Oh, God."

Lowering himself to his hands and knees, he crawled a short distance away and threw up. Behind him, he could hear Ian sharply demanding to know who the men were and whether there were others with them, in Cherokee.

"They're Tuscarora," he said. His head still throbbed, but he felt a little better.

“Oh, aye?” Ian was surprised, but at once shifted into the tongue of the Kahnyen’kehaka. The young captive, already terrorized by Rollo, looked as though he might die of fright, seeing Ian’s tattoos and hearing him speak Mohawk. Kahnyen’kehaka was of the same family as Tuscarora, and plainly the young man could make out what Ian said, for he replied, stammering with fear. They were alone. Was his brother dead?

Jamie rinsed his mouth with water, splashed it on his face. That was better, though a lump like a duck’s egg was swelling over his left eye.

“Brother?”

Yes, the young man said, his brother. If they did not mean to kill him now, might he go and see? His brother was wounded.

Ian glanced at Jamie for agreement, then called Rollo off with a word. The bedraggled captive struggled painfully to his feet, staggering, and set off back along the shore, followed by the dog and the two naked Scots.

The other man was indeed wounded; blood was seeping through a crude bandage round his leg. He had made the bandage of his shirt, and was bare-chested, scrawny, and starved-looking. Jamie glanced from one to the other; neither could be older than twenty, he thought, and likely younger than that, with their faces pinched by hunger and ill-usage, their clothes little more than rags.

The horses had moved off a little, nervous of the fighting, but the clothes the Scots had left hanging from the bushes were still there. Ian pulled on his breeches and went to fetch food and drink from the saddlebags, while Jamie dressed more slowly, interrogating the young man as the latter anxiously examined his brother.

They were Tuscarora, the young man confirmed. His name was a long one, meaning roughly “the gleam of light on water in a spring”; this was his brother, “the goose that encourages the leader when they fly,” more simply known as Goose.

“What happened to him?” Jamie pulled his shirt over his head and nodded—wincing at the movement—at the gash in Goose’s leg, quite obviously made by something like an ax.

Light on Water took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He had a substantial knot on his head, as well.

"Tsalagi," he said. "We were two score in number; the rest are dead, or taken. You will not give us to them, Lord? Please?"

"Tsalagi? Which?"

Light shook his head; he could not say. His band had chosen to stay when his village moved north, but they had not prospered; there were not enough men to defend a village and hunt, and without defenders, others stole their crops, took their women.

Growing poorer, they, too, had taken to stealing and to begging to survive through the winter. More had died of cold and sickness, and the remnants moved from place to place, now and then finding a place to settle for a few weeks, but then driven out by the much stronger Cherokee.

A few days past, they had been set upon by a party of Cherokee warriors, who had taken them by surprise, killed most of them, and taken some women.

"They took my wife," Light said, his voice unsteady. "We came to—to take her back."

"They will kill us, of course," said Goose weakly, but with a fair amount of cheerfulness. "But that doesn't signify."

"Of course not," Jamie said, smiling despite himself. "Do you know where they took her?"

The brothers knew the direction taken by the raiders, and had been following, to track them to their village. That way, they said, pointing toward a notch. Ian glanced at Jamie, and nodded.

"Bird," he said. "Or Fox, I should say," for Running Fox was war chief of the village; a good warrior, though somewhat lacking in imagination—a trait Bird possessed in quantity.

"Shall we help them, then?" Ian said in English. His feathery brows arched in question, but Jamie could see that it was a question in form only.

"Oh, aye, I expect we will." He rubbed gingerly at his forehead; the skin over the lump was already stretched and tender. "Let's eat first, though."

* * *

It was not a question of whether the thing might be done; only how. Jamie and Ian both dismissed out of hand any suggestion that the brothers might steal back Light's wife.

"They *will* kill ye," Ian assured them.

"We don't mind," Light said stoutly.

"Of course ye don't," said Jamie. "But what of your wife? She'd be left alone, then, and in no better case."

Goose nodded judiciously.

"He's right, you know," he said to his glowering brother.

"We could ask for her," Jamie suggested. "A wife for you, Ian. Bird thinks well of ye; he'd likely give her to you."

He was only half-joking. If no one had yet taken the young woman to wife, the person who had her as slave might be persuaded to give her to Ian, who was deeply respected.

Ian gave a perfunctory smile, but shook his head.

"Nay, we'd best ransom her. Or—" He looked consideringly at the two Indians, industriously eating their way through the remainder of the food in the saddlebags. "Might we ask Bird to adopt them?"

That was a thought, to be sure. For once they had got the young woman back, by whatever means, she and the brothers would be in the same dire case—wandering and hungry.

The brothers frowned, though, and shook their heads.

"Food is a good thing," Goose said, licking his fingers. "But we saw them kill our family, our friends. If we hadn't seen it ourselves, it would be possible. But—"

"Aye, I see," Jamie said, and was struck for an instant by mild astonishment that he *did* see; evidently, he had spent longer among the Indians than he supposed.

The brothers exchanged glances, obviously communicating something. Decision made, Light made a gesture of respect to Jamie.

"We are *your* slaves," he pointed out with some diffidence. "It is yours to decide what to do with us." He paused delicately, waiting.

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face, considering that perhaps he hadn't spent quite enough time with Indians after all. Ian didn't smile, but seemed to emit a low vibration of amusement.

MacDonald had told him stories of campaigns during the French and Indian War; soldiers who took Indian prisoners commonly either killed them for scalp money or sold them as slaves. Those campaigns lay a scant ten years in the past; the peace since had been frequently uneasy, and God knew the various Indians made slaves of their prisoners, unless they chose—for whatever inscrutable Indian motive—to adopt or kill them, instead.

Jamie had captured the two Tuscarora; ergo, by custom, they were now his slaves.

He understood quite well what Light was suggesting—that *he* adopt the brothers, and doubtless the young woman, too, once he'd rescued her—and how in God's name had he suddenly become responsible for doing that?

"Well, there's nay market for their scalps just now," Ian pointed out. "Though I suppose ye could *sell* the two of them to Bird. Though they're no worth a great deal, scrawny and ill-feckit as they are."

The brothers stared at him, impassive, awaiting his decision. Light belched suddenly, and looked surprised at the sound. Ian *did* laugh at that, a low creaking noise.

"Oh, I couldna do any such thing, and the three of ye ken that perfectly well," Jamie said crossly. "I should have hit ye harder and saved myself trouble," he said to Goose, who grinned at him, with gap-toothed good nature.

"Yes, Uncle," he said, bowing low in deep respect.

Jamie made a displeased sound in response, but the two Indians took no notice.

It would have to be the medals, then. MacDonald had brought him a chest bulging with medals, gilt buttons, cheap brass compasses, steel knife blades, and other bits of attractive rubbish. Since the chiefs derived their power from their popularity, and their popularity increased in direct proportion to their ability to give gifts, the British Indian agents exerted influence by distributing largesse to those chiefs who indicated a willingness to ally themselves to the Crown.

He’d brought only two small bags of such bribery; the rest left at home for future use. What he had on hand would, he was sure, be sufficient to ransom Mrs. Light, but to expend it all in such fashion would leave him empty-handed with respect to the other village chiefs—and that wouldn’t do.

Well, and he supposed he must send Ian back, then, to fetch more. But not until he’d arranged the ransom; he wanted Ian’s help in that matter.

“Fine, then,” he said, standing up. He fought off a wave of dizziness. “But I am *not* adopting them.” The last thing he needed just this minute was three more mouths to feed.

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SCOTCHEE

Arranging the ransom was, as he had supposed, a simple matter of bargaining. And in the end, Mrs. Light came fairly cheap, at the price of six medals, four knives, and a compass. Granted, he hadn't seen her until the conclusion of the dealing—if he had, he might have offered even less; she was a small, pockmarked lass of perhaps fourteen, with a slight walleye.

Still, he reflected, there was no accounting for taste, and both Light and Goose had been willing to die for her. Doubtless she had a kind heart, or some other excellent quality of character, such as a talent and affinity for bed.

He was quite shocked to find himself thinking such a thing, and looked at her more closely. It was in no way obvious—and yet, now that he *did* look—she did radiate that strange appeal, that remarkable gift, held by a few women, that bypassed such superficial appreciations as looks, age, or wit, and caused a man simply to wish to seize her and—

He choked the sprouting image off at the root. He'd known a few such women, most of them French. And had thought more than once that perhaps it was his own wife's French heritage that was responsible for her possession of that most desirable but very dangerous gift.

He could see Bird eyeing the girl thoughtfully, quite obviously regretting that he had let her go for so little. Fortunately, a distraction occurred to drive the matter from his attention—the return of a hunting party, bringing with them guests.

The guests were Cherokee of the Overhill Band, far from their home in the Tennessee mountains. And with them was a man Jamie had often heard of, but never met until this day—one Alexander Cameron, whom the Indians called "Scotchee."

A dark, weathered man of middle-age, Cameron was distinguishable from the Indians only by his heavy beard and the long, inquisitive shape of his nose. He had lived with the Cherokee since the age of fifteen, had a Cherokee wife, and was much esteemed among them. He was also an Indian agent, thick with John Stuart. And his presence here, two hundred miles from home, caused Jamie's own long, inquisitive nose to twitch with interest.

The interest was frankly mutual; Cameron examined him with deep-set eyes in which intelligence and wiliness showed in equal measure.

"The redheided Bear-Killer, och, och!" he exclaimed, shaking Jamie warmly by the hand, and then embracing him in the Indian fashion. "I've heard such tales of ye, ken, and fair dyin' to meet ye to see were they true."

"I doubt it," Jamie said. "The last one I heard myself, I'd done for three bears at once, killin' the last of them high in a tree, where he'd chased me after chewin' off my foot."

Despite himself, Cameron looked down at Jamie's feet, then looked up and hooted with laughter, all the lines of his face curving in such irresistible merriment that Jamie felt his own laughter bubble up.

It was not, of course, proper to speak of business yet awhile. The hunting party had brought down one of the woods buffaloes, and a great feast was preparing: the liver taken away to be singed and devoured at once, the strap of tender meat from the back roasted with whole onions, and the heart—so Ian told him—to be shared among the four of them: Jamie, Cameron, Bird, and Running Fox, a mark of honor.

After the liver had been eaten, they retired to Bird's house to drink beer for an hour or two, while the women made ready the rest of the food. And in the course of nature, he found himself outside, having a comfortable piss against a tree, when a quiet footfall came behind him, and Alexander Cameron stepped up alongside, undoing the fall of his breeches.

It seemed natural—though plainly Cameron had intended it—to walk about together for a bit then, the cool air of the evening a respite from the smoke inside the house, and speak of things of common interest—John Stuart, for one, and the ways and means of the Southern Department. Indians, for another; comparing the personalities and means of dealing with the various village chiefs, speculating as to who would make a leader, and whether there might be a great congress called within the year.

"Ye'll be wondering, I expect," Cameron said quite casually, "at my presence here?"

Jamie made a slight motion of the shoulders, admitting interest, but indicating a polite lack of inquisition into Cameron's affairs.

Cameron chuckled.

"Aye, well. It's no secret, to be sure. It's James Henderson, is what it is—ye'll ken the name, maybe?"

He did. Henderson had been Chief Justice of the Superior Court in North Carolina—until the Regulation had caused him to leave, climbing out the window of his courthouse and fleeing for his life from a mob bent on violence.

A wealthy man, and one with a due regard for the value of his skin, Henderson had retired from public life and set about increasing his fortune. To which end, he proposed now to buy an enormous tract of land from the Cherokee, this located in Tennessee, and establish townships there.

Jamie gave Cameron an eye, apprehending at once the complexity of the situation. For the one thing, the lands in question lay far, far inside the Treaty Line. For Henderson to instigate such dealings was an indication—had any been needed—of just how feeble the grasp of the Crown had grown of late. Plainly, Henderson thought nothing of flouting His Majesty's treaty, and expected no interference with his affairs as a result of doing so.

That was one thing. For another, though—the Cherokee held land in common, as all the Indians did. Leaders could and did sell land to whites, without such legal niceties as clear title, but were still subject to the *ex post facto* approval or disapproval of their people. Such approval would not affect the sale, which would be already accomplished, but could result in the fall of a leader, and in a good deal of trouble for the man who tried to take possession of land paid for in good faith—or what passed for good faith, in such dealings.

"John Stuart knows of this, of course," Jamie said, and Cameron nodded, with a small air of complacency.

"Not officially, mind," he said.

Naturally not. The Superintendent of Indian Affairs could hardly countenance such an arrangement officially. At the same time, it would be smiled on unofficially, as such a purchase could not help but further the department's goal of bringing the Indians further under the sway of British influence.

Jamie wondered idly whether Stuart profited in any personal way from the sale. Stuart had a good reputation and was not known to be corrupt—but he might well have a silent interest in the matter. Then again, he might have no financial interest himself, and be turning an officially blind eye to the arrangement only in furtherance of the department's purposes.

Cameron, though … He couldn't say, of course, but would be most surprised if Cameron had no finger in the pie.

He did not know where Cameron's natural interest lay, whether with the Indians among whom he lived or with the British to whom he had been born. He doubted that anyone did—perhaps not even Cameron. Regardless of his abiding interests, though, Cameron's immediate goals were clear. He wished the sale to be met with approval—or at least indifference—by the surrounding Cherokee, thus keeping his own pet chiefs in good odor with their followers, and allowing Henderson to go forward with his plans with no undue harassment by Indians in the area.

"I shall not, of course, say anything for a day or two," Cameron told him, and he nodded. There was a natural rhythm to such business. But of course, Cameron had told him now so that he might be of help when the subject arose in due course.

Cameron took it for granted that he *would* help. There was no explicit promise of a bit of Henderson's pie for himself, but no need; it was the sort of opportunity that was a perquisite of being an Indian agent—the reason that such appointments were considered plums.

Given what Jamie knew of the near future, he had neither expectation nor interest in Henderson's purchase—but the subject did give him a welcome opportunity for a useful *quid pro quo.*

He coughed gently.

"Ye ken the wee Tuscarora lassie I bought from Bird?"

Cameron laughed.

"Aye. And he's most perplexed what ye mean to do with her; he says ye willna take any of the lasses he sends to warm your bed. She's no so much to look at—but still …"

"Not that," Jamie assured him. "She's marrit, for the one thing. I brought two Tuscaroran lads with me; she belongs to one of them."

"Oh, aye?" Cameron's nose twitched with interest, scenting a story. Jamie had been waiting for this opportunity since the sight of Cameron first gave him the notion, and he told it well, with the satisfactory outcome that Cameron agreed to take the three displaced young Tuscaroras with him, and sponsor their adoption into the Overhill Band.

"It'll no be the first time," he told Jamie. "There are more and more of them—wee scraps of what were villages, even whole peoples—wandering about the country starved and wretched. Heard of the Dogash, have ye?"

"No."

"Nor are ye like to," Cameron said, shaking his head. "There's no but ten or so of them left. They came to us last winter; offered themselves as slaves, only so that they might survive the cold. No—dinna fash yourself, man," he assured Jamie, catching sight of Jamie's expression. "Your wee lads and the lass won't be slaves; my word on it."

Jamie nodded his thanks, pleased with the business. They had wandered some distance outside the village, and stood talking near the edge of a gorge, where the wood opened suddenly over a vista of mountain ranges, rolling away and away like furrows plowed in some endless field of the gods, their backs dark and brooding beneath a starlit sky.

"How can there ever be people enough to settle such a wilderness?" he said, moved suddenly by the sight of it. And yet the smell of woodsmoke and cooking meat hung heavy in the air. People did inhabit it, few and scattered as they were.

Cameron shook his head in contemplation.

"They come," he said, "and they keep on coming. My ain folk came from Scotland. You have," he added, teeth a brief gleam in his beard. "And dinna mean to go back, I'll warrant."

Jamie smiled at that, but made no answer, though a queer feeling rose in his wame at the thought. He did not mean to go back. Had said goodbye to Scotland at the rail of the *Artemis,* knowing full well it was likely his last sight of the place. And yet, the notion that he would never set foot there again had never fully settled on him 'til this moment.

Calls of "Scotchee, Scotchee" summoned them, and he turned to follow Cameron back to the village, conscious all the time of the glorious, terrifying emptiness behind him—and the more terrifying emptiness within.

* * *

They smoked that night, after feasting, in ceremonious observance of Jamie's bargain with Bird, in welcome to Cameron. When the pipe had gone twice around the fire, they began to tell stories.

Stories of raids, of battles. Exhausted from the day, head still throbbing, mellowed by food and spruce beer, and slightly intoxicated by the smoke, Jamie had meant only to listen. Perhaps it was the thought of Scotland, so casually evoked by Cameron's remark. But at some point, a memory had stirred, and when the next expectant silence fell, he was surprised to hear his own voice, telling them of Culloden.

"And there near a wall I saw a man I knew, named MacAllister, besieged by a horde of enemies. He fought with gun and sword, but both failed him—his blade was broken, his shield shattered upon his breast."

The fume of the pipe reached him and he raised it and drew deep, as though he drank the air of the moor, hazed with rain and the smoke of the day.

"Still they came, his enemies, to kill him, and he seized up a piece of metal, the tongue of a wagon, and with it, killed six"—he held up both hands, fingers stuck up in illustration—"six of them, before he was at last brought down."

Sounds of awe and tongue clicks of approval greeted this recounting.

"And you yourself, Bear-Killer, how many men did you kill in this battle?"

The smoke burned in his chest, behind his eyes, and for an instant he tasted the bitter smoke of cannon fire, not sweet tobacco. He saw—he *saw*—Alistair MacAllister, dead at his feet among the red-clothed bodies, the side of his head crushed in and the round curve of his shoulder shining solid through the cloth of the shirt, so wetly did it cling to him.

He was there, on the moor, the wet and cold no more than a shimmer on his skin, rain slick on his face, his own shirt sopping and steaming on him with the heat of his rage.

And then he no longer stood on Drumossie, and became aware a second too late of the indrawn breaths around him. He saw Robert Talltree's face, the wrinkles all turned up in astonishment, and only then looked down, to see all ten of his fingers flex and fold, and the four fingers of the right extend again, quite without his meaning it. The thumb wavered, indecisive. He watched this with fascination, then, coming finally to his wits, balled his right hand as well as he could and wrapped the left around it, as though to throttle the memory that had been thrust with such unnerving suddenness into the palm of his hand.

He looked up to see Talltree glance sharply at his face, and he saw the dark old eyes harden, then narrow under a frown—and then the old man took the pipe, drank deep, and blew the smoke across him, bowing forward. Talltree did this twice more, and a hum of hushed approval at the honor came from the clustered men.

He took the pipe and returned the honor of the gesture, then passed it to the next man, refusing to speak further.

They didn't push him to, seeming to recognize and respect the shock he felt.

Shock. Not even that. What he felt was the blankest astonishment. Cautiously, unwilling, he stole a keek at that picture of Alistair. God, it was there.

He realized that he was holding his breath, not wanting to breathe the reek of blood and spilled bowels. He breathed, soft smoke and a copper tang of seasoned bodies, and could have wept, swept with sudden longing for the cold, sharp air of the Highlands, pungent with the scents of peat and gorse.

Alexander Cameron said something to him, but he couldn't reply. Ian, seeing the difficulty, leaned forward to answer, and they all laughed. Ian gave him a curious look, but then turned back to the conversation, beginning a story of a famous game of lacrosse he had played among the Mohawk. Leaving Jamie to sit still, wreathed in the smoke.

Fourteen men. And he did not remember a single face. And that random thumb, hovering uncertainly. Whatever did he mean by that? That he had fought yet another, but not made certain of the fellow?

He was afraid even to think of the memory. Unsure what to do with it. But at the same time, conscious of a sense of awe. And despite everything, grateful to have this small thing back.

* * *

It was very late, and most of the men had gone to their own houses, or lay comfortably asleep around the fire. Ian had left the fire, but hadn't come back. Cameron was still there, smoking his own pipe now, though he shared this with Bird, taking turn and turn about.

"There is a thing I would tell you," Jamie said abruptly, in the midst of a drowsy silence. "Both of you." Bird raised his brows in slow question, drugged with tobacco.

He hadn't known he meant to say it. Had thought to wait, judge his time—if he spoke at all. Perhaps it was the closeness of the house, the dark intimacy of the fireside, or the intoxication of tobacco. Perhaps only the kinship of an exile for those who would suffer the same fate. But he'd spoken; had no choice now but to tell them what he knew.

"The women of my family are …" He groped, not knowing the Cherokee word. "Those who see in dreams what is to come." He darted a look at Cameron, who appeared to take this in his stride, for he nodded, and closed his eyes to draw smoke into his lungs.

"Have they the Sight, then?" he asked, mildly interested.

Jamie nodded; it was as good an explanation as any.

"They have seen a thing concerning the Tsalagi. Both my wife and my daughter have seen this thing."

Bird's attention sharpened, hearing this. Dreams were important; for more than one person to share a dream was extraordinary, and therefore most important.

"It grieves me to tell you," Jamie said, and meant it. "Sixty years from this time, the Tsalagi will be taken from their lands, removed to a new place. Many will die on this journey, so that the path they tread will be called …" He groped for the word for "tears," did not find it, and ended, "the trail where they wept."

Bird's lips pursed, as though to draw smoke, but the pipe fumed unnoticed in his hands.

"Who will do this?" he asked. "Who *can*?"

Jamie drew a deep breath; here was the difficulty. And yet—so much less difficult than he had thought, now that it came to the matter.

"It will be white men," he said. "But it will not be King George's men."

"The French?" Cameron spoke with a hint of incredulity, but frowned, nonetheless, trying to see how this might come to pass. "Or the Spanish, do they mean? The Spanish are a good deal closer—but none sae many." Spain still held the country south of Georgia, and parts of the Indies, but the English held Georgia firmly; there was little apparent chance of any northward movement by the Spaniards.

“No. Not Spanish, not French.” He could wish Ian had stayed, for more than one reason. But the lad had not, and so he would have to struggle with the Tsalagi, which was an interesting tongue, but one in which he could talk fluently only of solid things—and of a very limited future.

“What they tell me—what my women say—” He struggled to find sensible words. “A thing that they see in their dreams, this thing will come to pass, if it concerns many people. But they think it may *not* come to pass, if it concerns a few, or one.”

Bird blinked, confused—and no wonder. Grimly, Jamie tried again to explain.

“There are large things, and there are small things. A large thing is a thing like a great battle, or the raising up of a notable chief—though he is one man, he is raised up by the voices of many. If my women dream of these large things, then they will happen. But in any large thing, there are many people. Some say do this; others, do that.” He zigzagged his hand to and fro, and Bird nodded.

“So. If many people say, ‘Do *this*’ ”—he stabbed his fingers sharply to the left—“then this happens. But what of the people who said, ‘do that’?” And he jerked a thumb back the other way. “These people may choose a different way.”

Bird made the hm-hm-*hm!* sound he used when startled.

“So it may be that some will not go?” Cameron asked sharply. “They might escape?”

“I hope so,” Jamie said simply.

They sat in silence for a bit, each man staring into the fire, each seeing his own visions—of the future, or the past.

“This wife you have,” Bird said at last, deeply contemplative, “did you pay a great deal for her?”

“She cost me almost everything I had,” he said, with a wry tone that made the others laugh. “But worth it.”

* * *

It was very late when he went to the guesthouse; the moon had set, and the sky had that look of deep serenity, the stars singing to themselves in endless night. His body ached in every muscle, and he was so tired that he stumbled on the threshold. His instincts were still working, though, and he felt, rather than saw, someone move in the shadows of the sleeping-couch.

God, Bird was still at it. Well, tonight it wouldn't matter; he could lie naked with a covey of young women, and sleep sound. Too exhausted to be annoyed by her presence, he struggled for some polite acknowledgment of the woman. Then she stood up.

The firelight showed him an elderly woman, her hair in grizzled plaits, her dress of white buckskin decorated with paint and porcupine quills. He recognized Calls-in-the-Forest, dressed in her best. Bird's sense of humor had finally got completely out of hand; he had sent Jamie his mother.

All grasp of Tsalagi deserted him. He opened his mouth, but merely gaped at her. She smiled, very slightly, and held out her hand.

"Come and lie down, Bear-Killer," she said. Her voice was kind and gruff. "I've come to comb the snakes from your hair."

She drew him unresisting to the couch, and made him lie down with his head in her lap. Sure enough; she unplaited his hair and spread it out across her knees, her touch soothing to his throbbing head and the painful knot on his brow.

He had no idea how old she might be, but her fingers were muscular and tireless, making small, rhythmic circles in his scalp, on his temples, behind his ears, near to the bone at the base of his skull. She had thrown sweet grass and some other herb on the fire; the chimney hole was drawing well and he could see white smoke rising upward in a wavering pillar, very calm, but a sense of constant movement in it.

She was humming to herself, or rather whispering some song, the words too indistinct to make out. He watched the silent shapes stream upward in the smoke, and felt his body growing heavy, limbs filled with wet sand, his body a sandbag placed in the path of a flood.

“Talk, Bear-Killer,” she said very softly, breaking off her chant. She had a wooden comb in her hand; he felt the teeth of it caress his scalp, rounded with wear.

“I cannot call your words to me,” he said, searching for each word in Tsalagi, and thus speaking very slowly. She made a small snorting noise in reply.

“The words don’t matter, nor the tongue in which you speak,” she said. “Only talk. I will understand.”

And so he began haltingly to speak—in Gaelic, as it was the only tongue that didn’t seem to require any effort. He understood that he was to speak of what filled his heart, and so began with Scotland—and Culloden. Of grief. Of loss. Of fear.

And in the speaking turned from past to future, where he saw these three specters loom again, cold creatures coming toward him out of the fog, looking through their empty eyes.

Another stood among them—Jack Randall—confusingly on both sides of him. Those eyes were not empty, but alive, intent in a misty face. Had he killed the man, or not? If he had, did the ghost follow at his heels? Or if he had not, was it the thought of vengeance unsatisfied that haunted him, taunted him with its imperfect memory?

But in the speaking, he seemed somehow to rise a little way above his body, and see himself at rest, eyes open, fixed upward, his hair darkly flaming in a halo round his head, streaked with the silver of his age. And here he saw that he merely *was,* in a place between, apart. And quite alone. At peace.

“I hold to no evil in my heart,” he said, hearing his voice come slow, from a long way off. “This evil does not touch me. More may come, but not this. Not here. Not now.”

“I understand,” whispered the old woman, and went on combing his hair as the white smoke rose silent toward the hole to the sky.

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A TAINT IN THE BLOOD

June 1774

I sat back on my heels and stretched, tired but pleased. My back ached, my knees creaked like hinges, my fingernails were caked with dirt, and strands of hair stuck to my neck and cheeks—but the new crops of pole beans, onions, turnips, and radishes were planted, the cabbages weeded and culled, and a dozen large peanut bushes had been pulled up and hung to dry on the garden palisades, safe from marauding squirrels.

I glanced up at the sun; still above the chestnut trees. Time enough then before supper for a last chore or two. I stood up and surveyed my small kingdom, debating where best to spend my remaining time. Rooting up the catmint and lemon balm that threatened to engulf the far corner of the garden? Carting baskets of nicely rotted manure up from the heap behind the barn? No, that was man's work.

Herbs? My three French lavender bushes stood knee-high, thick with deep blue swabs on slender stalks, and the yarrow was well in bloom, with lacy umbels of white and pink and yellow. I rubbed a finger under my itching nose, trying to recall whether this was the proper phase of the moon in which to cut yarrow. Lavender and rosemary should be cut in the morning, though, when the volatile oils had risen with the sun; it wasn't as potent if taken later in the day.

Down with the mint, then. I reached for the hoe I had left leaning against the fence, saw a face leering through the palisades, and started back, my heart leaping into my throat.

"Oh!" My visitor had jumped back, too, equally startled. "*Bitte,* ma'am! Didn't mean to fright ye."

It was Manfred McGillivray, peeping shyly through the drooping vines of morning glory and wild yam. He'd come earlier in the day, bringing a canvas-wrapped bundle containing several muskets for Jamie.

"That's all right." I stooped to pick up the hoe I had dropped. "Are you looking for Lizzie? She's in—"

"Ach, no, ma'am. That is, I—do ye think I might have a word, ma'am?" he asked abruptly. "Alone, like?"

"Of course. Come along in; we can talk while I hoe."

He nodded, and went round to let himself in by the gate. What might he want with me? I wondered. He had on a coat and boots, both covered in dust, and his breeches were badly creased. He'd been riding some way, then, not just from his family's cabin—and he hadn't been into the house yet; Mrs. Bug would have dusted him off, forcibly.

"Where have you come from?" I asked, offering him the gourd dipper from my water bucket. He accepted it, drinking thirstily, then wiped his mouth politely on his sleeve.

"Thank ye, ma'am. I've been to Hillsboro, for to fetch the … er … the things for Mr. Fraser."

"Really? That seems a long way," I said mildly.

A look of profound uneasiness crossed his face. He was a nice-looking boy, tanned and handsome as a young faun under his crop of dark, curly hair, but he looked almost furtive now, glancing back over his shoulder toward the house, as though fearful of interruption.

"I … um … well, ma'am, that's to do, a bit, with what I meant to speak to ye about."

"Oh? Well …" I made a cordial gesture, indicating that he should feel free to unburden himself, and turned away to begin my hoeing, so that he might feel less self-conscious. I was beginning to suspect what he wanted to ask me, though I wasn't sure what Hillsboro had to do with it.

"It's … ah … well, it's to do with Mrs. Lizzie," he began, folding his hands behind him.

"Yes?" I said encouragingly, nearly sure that I was right in my suppositions. I glanced toward the western end of the garden, where the bees were buzzing happily among the tall yellow umbels of the *dauco* plants. Well, it was better than the eighteenth-century notion of condoms, at least.

"I can't marry her," he blurted.

"What?" I stopped hoeing and straightened up, staring at him. His lips were pressed tightly together, and I saw now that what I had taken for shyness had been his attempt to mask a deep unhappiness that now showed plainly in the lines of his face.

"You'd better come and sit down." I led him to the small bench Jamie had made me, set beneath the shade of a black gum tree that overhung the north side of the garden.

He sat, head drooping and hands trapped between his knees. I took off my broad-brimmed sun hat, wiped my face on my apron, and pinned up my hair more neatly, breathing in the cool freshness of the spruce and balsam trees that grew on the slope above.

"What is it?" I asked gently, seeing that he did not know how to start. "Are you afraid that perhaps you don't love her?"

He gave me a startled look, then turned his head back to the studied contemplation of his knees.

"Oh. No, ma'am. I mean—I don't, but that's no matter."

"It isn't?"

"No. I mean—I'm sure we *should* grow to be fond of one another, *meine Mutter* says so. And I like her well enough now, to be sure," he added hastily, as though fearing this might sound insulting. "Da says she's a tidy wee soul, and my sisters are verra fond of her indeed."

I made a noncommittal sound. I had had my doubts about this match to begin with, and it was beginning to sound as though they were justified.

"Is there … perhaps someone else?" I asked delicately.

Manfred shook his head slowly, and I heard him swallow hard.

"No, ma'am," he said in a low voice.

"You're sure?"

"Aye, ma'am." He drew a deep breath. "I mean—there was. But that's all done with now."

I was puzzled by this. If he had decided to renounce this mysterious other girl—whether out of fear of his mother, or for some other reason—then what was stopping him from going through with the marriage to Lizzie?

"The other girl—is she by chance from Hillsboro?" Things were coming a little clearer. When I had first met him and his family at the Gathering, his sisters had exchanged knowing glances at mention of Manfred's visits to Hillsboro. They had known about it then, even if Ute had not.

"Aye. That's why I went to Hillsboro—I mean, I had to go, for the … er … But I meant to see … Myra … and tell her that I would be married to Miss Wemyss and couldna come to see her anymore."

"Myra." So she had a name, at least. I sat back, tapping my foot meditatively. "You meant to—so you didn't see her, after all?"

He shook his head again, and I saw a tear drop and spread suddenly on the dusty homespun of his breeches.

"No, ma'am," he said, his voice half-choked. "I couldn't. She was dead."

"Oh, dear," I said softly. "Oh, I am so sorry." The tears were falling on his knees, making spots on the cloth, and his shoulders shook, but he didn't make a sound.

I reached out and gathered him into my arms, holding him tight against my shoulder. His hair was soft and springy and his skin flushed with heat against my neck. I felt helpless to deal with his grief; he was too old to comfort with mere touch, too young—perhaps—to find any solace in words. There was nothing I could do for the moment save hold him.

His arms went round my waist, though, and he clung to me for several minutes after his weeping was spent. I held him quietly, patting his back and keeping watch through the flickering green shadows of the vine-twined palisades, lest anyone else come looking for me in the garden.

At last he sighed, let go, and sat up. I groped for a handkerchief, and not finding one, pulled off my apron and handed it to him to wipe his face.

"You needn't marry right away," I said, when he seemed to have regained possession of himself. "It's only right that you should take a little time to—to heal. But we can find some excuse to put the wedding off; I'll speak to Jamie—"

But he was shaking his head, a look of sad determination taking the place of tears.

"No, ma'am," he said, low-voiced but definite. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Myra was a whore, ma'am. She died of the French disease."

He looked up at me then, and I saw the terror in his eyes, behind the grief.

"And I think I've got it."

* * *

"Ye're sure?" Jamie set down the hoof he had been trimming, and looked bleakly at Manfred.

"*I'm* sure," I said tartly. I had obliged Manfred to show me the evidence—in fact, I had taken scrapings from the lesion to examine microscopically—then took him straight to find Jamie, barely waiting for the boy to do up his breeches.

Jamie looked fixedly at Manfred, plainly trying to decide what to say. Manfred, purple-faced from the double stress of confession and examination, dropped his own eyes before this basilisk gaze, staring at a crescent of black hoof paring that lay on the ground.

"I'm that sorry, sir," he murmured. "I—I didna mean to …"

"I shouldna suppose anyone does," Jamie said. He breathed deeply and made a sort of subterranean growling noise that caused Manfred to hunch his shoulders and try to withdraw his head, turtlelike, into the safer confines of his clothing.

"He did do the right thing," I pointed out, trying to put the best face possible on the situation. "Now, I mean—telling the truth."

Jamie snorted.

"Well, he couldna be poxing wee Lizzie, now, could he? That's worse than only going wi' a whore."

"I suppose some men would just keep quiet about it, and hope for the best."

"Aye, some would." He narrowed his eyes at Manfred, evidently looking for overt indications that Manfred might be a villain of this description.

Gideon, who disliked having his feet messed about and was consequently in bad temper, stamped heavily, narrowly missing Jamie's own foot. He tossed his head, and emitted a rumbling noise that I thought was roughly the equivalent of Jamie's growl.

"Aye, well." Jamie left off glaring at Manfred, and grabbed Gideon's halter. "Go along to the house with him, Sassenach. I'll finish here, and then we'll have Joseph in and see what's to do."

"All right." I hesitated, unsure whether to speak in front of Manfred. I didn't want to raise his hopes too much, until I'd had a chance to look at the scrapings under the microscope.

The spirochetes of syphilis were very distinctive, but I didn't think I had a stain that would allow me to see them with a simple light microscope such as mine was. And while I thought my homemade penicillin could likely eliminate the infection, I would have no way of knowing for certain, unless I *could* see them, and then see that they had disappeared from his blood.

I contented myself with saying, "I have got penicillin, mind."

"I ken that well enough, Sassenach." Jamie switched his baleful look from Manfred to me. I'd saved his life with the penicillin—twice—but he hadn't enjoyed the process. With a Scottish noise of dismissal, he bent and picked up Gideon's enormous hoof again.

Manfred seemed a bit shell-shocked, and said nothing on the way to the house. He hesitated at the door to the surgery, glancing uneasily from the gleaming microscope to the open box of surgical tools, and then toward the covered bowls lined up on the counter, in which I grew my penicillin colonies.

“Come in,” I said, but was obliged to reach out and take him by the sleeve before he would step across the threshold. It occurred to me that he hadn’t been to the surgery before; it was a good five miles to the McGillivrays’ place, and *Frau* McGillivray was entirely capable of dealing with her family’s minor ills.

I wasn’t feeling terribly charitable toward Manfred at the moment, but gave him a stool and asked if he would like a cup of coffee. I thought he could probably use a stiff drink, if he was about to have an interview with Jamie and Joseph Wemyss, but supposed I had better keep him clear-headed.

“No, ma’am,” he said, and swallowed, white-faced. “I mean, thank ye, no.”

He looked extremely young, and very frightened.

“Roll up your sleeve then, please. I’m going to draw a bit of blood, but it won’t hurt much. How did you come to meet the, er, young lady? Myra, that was her name?”

“Aye, ma’am.” Tears welled in his eyes at her name; I suppose he really had loved her, poor boy—or thought he had.

He had met Myra in a tavern in Hillsboro. She had seemed kind, he said, and was very pretty, and when she asked the young gunsmith to buy her a glass of geneva, he had obliged, feeling dashing.

“So we drank a bit together, and she laughed at me, and …” He seemed rather at a loss to explain how matters had progressed from there, but he had waked up in her bed. That had sealed the matter, so far as he was concerned, and he had seized every excuse to go to Hillsboro thereafter.

“How long did this affair go on?” I asked, interested. Lacking a decent syringe for drawing blood, I’d merely pierced the vein inside his elbow with a fleam, and drained off the welling blood into a small vial.

For the better part of two years, apparently.

“I kent I couldna wed her,” he explained earnestly. “*Meine Mutter* would never …” He trailed off, assuming the look of a startled rabbit hearing hounds in its immediate vicinity. *“Gruss Gott!”* he said. “My mother!”

I'd been wondering about that particular aspect of the affair myself. Ute McGillivray wasn't going to be at all pleased to hear that her pride and joy, her only son, had contracted a disreputable disease, and furthermore, one which was about to lead to the breaking of his carefully engineered engagement and very likely to a scandal that the entire backcountry would hear about. The fact that it was generally a fatal disease would probably be a secondary concern.

"She'll kill me!" he said, sliding off his stool and rolling his sleeve down hastily.

"Probably not," I said mildly. "Though I suppose—"

At this fraught moment came the sound of the back door opening and voices in the kitchen. Manfred stiffened, dark curls quivering with alarm. Then heavy footsteps started down the hall toward the surgery, and he dived across the room, flung a leg across the windowsill, and was off, running like a deer for the trees.

"Come back here, you ass!" I bellowed through the open window.

"Which ass is that, Auntie?" I turned to see that the heavy footsteps belonged to Young Ian—heavy, because he was carrying Lizzie Wemyss in his arms.

"Lizzie! What's the matter? Here, put her on the table." I could see at once what the matter was: a return of the malarial fever. She was limp, but shivered nonetheless with chill, the contracting muscles shaking her like jelly.

"I found her in the dairy shed," Ian said, laying her gently on the table. "The deaf Beardsley came rushin' out as though the devil was chasing him, saw me, and dragged me in. She was on the floor, wi' the churn overturned beside her."

This was very worrying—she hadn't had an attack for some time, but for a second time, the attack had come upon her too suddenly for her to go for help, causing almost immediate collapse.

"Top shelf of the cupboard," I said to Ian, hastily rolling Lizzie on her side and undoing her laces. "That bluish jar—no, the big one."

He grabbed it without question, removing the lid as he brought it to me.

"Jesus, Auntie! What's that?" He wrinkled his nose at the smell from the ointment.

"Gallberries and cinchona bark in goose grease, among other things. Take some and start rubbing it into her feet."

Looking bemused, he gingerly scooped up a dollop of the purplish-gray cream and did as I said, Lizzie's small bare foot nearly disappearing between the large palms of his hands.

"Will she be all right, d'ye think, Auntie?" He glanced at her face, looking troubled. The look of her was enough to trouble anyone—the clammy color of whey, and the flesh gone slack so that her delicate cheeks juddered with the chills.

"Probably. Close your eyes, Ian." I'd got her clothes loosened, and now pulled off her gown, petticoats, pocket, and stays. I threw a ratty blanket over her before working the shift off over her head—she owned only two, and wouldn't want one spoiled with the reek of the ointment.

Ian had obediently closed his eyes, but was still rubbing the ointment methodically into her feet, a small frown drawing his brows together, the look of concern lending him for a moment a brief but startling resemblance to Jamie.

I drew the jar toward me, scooped up some ointment, and, reaching under the blanket, began to rub it into the thinner skin beneath her armpits, then over her back and belly. I could feel the outlines of her liver distinctly, a large, firm mass beneath her ribs. Swollen, and tender from the way she grimaced at my touch; there was some ongoing damage there, certainly.

"Can I open my eyes now?"

"Oh—yes, of course. Rub more up her legs, please, Ian." Shoving the jar back in his direction, I caught a glimpse of movement in the doorway. One of the Beardsley twins stood there, clinging to the jamb, dark eyes fixed on Lizzie. Kezzie, it must be; Ian had said "the deaf Beardsley" had come to fetch help.

"She'll be all right," I said to him, raising my voice, and he nodded once, then disappeared, with a single burning glance at Ian.

"Who was it ye were shouting at, Auntie Claire?" Ian looked up at me, clearly as much to preserve Lizzie's modesty as from courtesy to me; the blanket was turned back and his big hands were smoothing ointment into the skin above her knee, thumbs gently circling the small rounded curves of her patella, her skin so thin that the pearly bone seemed almost visible through it.

"Who—oh. Manfred McGillivray," I said, suddenly recollecting. "Damn! The blood!" I leapt up and wiped my hands hurriedly on my apron. Thank God, I'd corked the vial; the blood inside was still liquid. It wouldn't keep long, though.

"Do her hands and arms, would you please, Ian? I've got to manage this quickly."

He moved obligingly to do as I said, while I hastily spilled a drop of blood on each of several slides, dragging a clean slide across each one to make a smear. What sort of stain might work on spirochetes? No telling; I'd try them all.

I explained the matter disjointedly to Ian, as I pulled stain bottles out of the cupboard, made up the solutions, and set the slides to soak.

"The pox? Poor lad; he must be nearly mad wi' fright." He eased Lizzie's arm, gleaming with ointment, under the blanket and tucked it gently round her.

I was momentarily surprised at this show of sympathy, but then remembered. Ian had been exposed to syphilis some years before, after his abduction by Geillis Duncan; I hadn't been sure that he had the disease, but had dosed him with the last of my twentieth-century penicillin, just in case.

"Did ye not tell him ye could cure him, though, Auntie?"

"I hadn't the chance. Though I'm not absolutely sure that I can, to be honest." I sat down on a stool, and took Lizzie's other hand, feeling for her pulse.

"Ye're not?" His feathery brows went up at that. "Ye told me I was cured."

"You are," I assured him. "If you ever had the disease in the first place." I gave him a sharp look. "You've never had a sore on your prick, have you? Or anywhere else?"

He shook his head, mute, a dark wave of blood staining his lean cheeks.

"Good. But the penicillin I gave you—that was some that I'd brought from … well, from before. That was purified—very strong and certainly potent. I'm never sure, when I use this stuff"—I gestured at the culturing bowls on the counter—"whether it's strong enough to work, or even the right strain.…" I rubbed the back of my hand under my nose; the gallberry ointment, had a most *penetrating* smell.

"It doesn't always work." I had had more than one patient with an infection that didn't respond to one of my penicillin concoctions—though in those cases, I had often succeeded with another attempt. In a few instances, the person had recovered on his own before the second brew was ready. In one instance, the patient had died, despite applications of two different penicillin mixtures.

Ian nodded slowly, his eyes on Lizzie's face. The first bout of chills had spent itself and she lay quiet, the blanket barely moving over the slight round of her chest.

"If ye're no sure, then … ye'd not let him marry her, surely?"

"I don't know. Jamie said he'd speak to Mr. Wemyss, see what he thought of the matter."

I rose and took the first of the slides from its pinkish bath, shook off the clinging drops, and, wiping the bottom of the slide, placed it carefully on the platform of my microscope.

"What are ye looking for, Auntie?"

"Things called spirochetes. Those are the particular kind of germ that causes syphilis."

"Oh, aye." Despite the seriousness of the situation, I smiled, hearing the note of skepticism in his voice. I'd shown him microorganisms before, but—like Jamie—like almost everyone—he simply couldn't believe that something so nearly invisible was capable of harm. The only one who had seemed to accept the notion wholeheartedly was Malva Christie, and in her case, I thought the acceptance was due simply to her faith in me. If I told *her* something, she believed me; very refreshing, after years of assorted Scots looking at me with varying degrees of squiggle-eyed suspicion.

"Has he gone home, d'ye think? Manfred?"

"I don't know." I spoke absently, slowly moving the slide to and fro, searching. I could make out the red blood cells, pale pink discs that floated past my field of view, drifting lazily in the watery stain. No deadly spirals visible—but that didn't mean they weren't there, only that the stain I had used might not reveal them.

Lizzie stirred and moaned, and I looked round to see her eyes flutter open.

"There, lass," Ian said softly, and smiled at her. "Better, is it?"

"Is it?" she said faintly. Still, the corners of her mouth lifted slightly, and she put a hand out from under her blanket, groping. He took it in his, patting it.

"Manfred," she said, turning her head to and fro, eyes half-lidded. "Is Manfred here?"

"Um … no," I said, exchanging a quick glance of consternation with Ian. How much had she heard? "No, he was here, but he's—he's gone now."

"Oh." Seeming to lose interest, she closed her eyes again. Ian looked down at her, still stroking her hand. His face showed deep sympathy—with perhaps a tinge of calculation.

"Shall I maybe carry the lassie up to her bed?" he asked softly, as though she might be sleeping. "And then maybe go and find …?" He tilted his head toward the open window, raising one eyebrow.

"If you would, please, Ian." I hesitated, and his eyes met mine, deep hazel and soft with worry and the shadow of remembered pain. "She'll be all right," I said, trying to infuse a sense of certainty into the words.

"Aye, she will," he said firmly, and stooped to gather her up, tucking the blanket under her. "If I've anything to say about it."

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IN WHICH THINGS GANG AGLEY

Manfred McGillivray did not come back. Ian did, with a blackened eye, skinned knuckles, and the terse report that Manfred had declared a set intention of going off and hanging himself, and good riddance to the fornicating son of a bitch, and might his rotten bowels gush forth like Judas Iscariot's, the traitorous, stinking wee turd. He then stamped upstairs, to stand silent over Lizzie's bed for a time.

Hearing this, I hoped that Manfred's statement was merely the counsel of temporary despair—and cursed myself for not having told him at once and in the strongest terms that he could be cured, whether it was absolutely true or not. Surely he wouldn't …

Lizzie was half-conscious, prostrated with the burning fevers and shaking agues of malaria, and in no fit state to be told of her betrothed's desertion, nor the cause of it. I would have to make some delicate inquiries, though, so soon as she was fit, because there was the possibility that she and Manfred had anticipated their marriage vows, and if so …

"Well, there's the one thing about it," Jamie observed grimly. "The Beardsley twins were making ready to track our poxed lad down and castrate him, but now they've heard he means to hang himself, they've magnanimously decided that will do."

“Thank the Lord for small blessings,” I said, sinking down at the table. “They might really do it.” The Beardsleys, particularly Josiah, were excellent trackers—and not given to idle threats.

“Oh, they would,” Jamie assured me. “They were most seriously sharpening their knives when I found them at it and told them not to trouble themselves.”

I suppressed an involuntary smile at the image of the Beardsleys, bent side by side over a grindstone, their lean, dark faces set in identical scowls of vengeance, but the momentary flash of humor faded.

“Oh, God. We’ll have to tell the McGillivrays.”

Jamie nodded, looking pale at the thought, but pushed back his bench.

“I’d best go straightaway.”

“Not ’til ye’ve had a bite.” Mrs. Bug put a plate of food firmly in front of him. “Ye dinna want to be dealing wi’ Ute McGillivray on an empty stomach.”

Jamie hesitated, but evidently found her argument to have merit, for he picked up his fork and addressed himself to the ragoo’d pork with grim determination.

“Jamie …”

“Aye?”

“Perhaps you *should* let the Beardsleys track Manfred down. Not to hurt him, I don’t mean—but we need to find him. He *will* die of it, if he isn’t treated.”

He paused, a forkful of ragoo halfway to his mouth, and regarded me under lowered brows.

“Aye, and if they find him, he’ll die of *that,* Sassenach.” He shook his head, and the fork completed its journey. He chewed and swallowed, evidently completing his plan as he did so.

“Joseph’s in Bethabara, courting. He’ll have to be told, and by rights, I should fetch him to go with me to the McGillivrays’. But …” He hesitated, clearly envisioning Mr. Wemyss, that mildest and shyest of men, and no one’s notion of a useful ally. “No. I’ll go and tell Robin. May be as he’ll start searching for the lad himself—or Manfred may have thought better of it and run for home already.”

That was a cheering thought, and I saw him off with hope in mind. But he returned near midnight, grim-faced and silent, and I knew that Manfred had not come home.

"You told them both?" I asked, turning back the coverlet for him to crawl in beside me. He smelled of horse and night, cool and pungent.

"I asked Robin to walk outside wi' me, and told him. I hadna the nerve to tell Ute to her face," he admitted. He smiled at me, snuggling under the quilt. "Ye dinna think me too much a coward, I hope, Sassenach."

"No, indeed," I assured him, and leaned to blow out the candle. "Discretion is the better part of valor."

* * *

We were roused just before dawn by a thunderous pounding on the door. Rollo, who had been sleeping on the landing, shot down the stair, roaring threats. He was closely followed by Ian, who had been sitting up by Lizzie's bed, keeping watch while I slept. Jamie leapt out of bed and, seizing a loaded pistol from the top of the wardrobe, rushed to join the fray.

Shocked and dazed—I had been asleep for less than an hour—I sat up, heart pounding. Rollo stopped barking for a moment, and I heard Jamie shout, "Who is it?" through the door.

This query was answered by a renewed pounding that echoed up the stairwell and seemed to shake the house, accompanied by an upraised feminine voice that would have done credit to Wagner in one of his more robust moods. Ute McGillivray.

I began to struggle out of the bedclothes. Meanwhile, a confusion of voices, renewed barking, the grate of the bolt being lifted—and then more confused voices, all much louder. I ran to the window and looked out; Robin McGillivray was standing in the dooryard, having evidently just dismounted from one of a pair of mules.

He looked much older, and somehow deflated, as though the spirit had gone out of him, taking all his strength and leaving him flabby. He turned his head away from whatever riot was taking place on the stoop, closing his eyes. The sun was just up now, and the pure clear light showed up all the lines and hollows of exhaustion and a desperate unhappiness.

As though he sensed me looking at him, he opened his eyes and raised his face toward the window. He was red-eyed, disheveled. He saw me, but didn't respond to my tentative wave of greeting. Instead, he turned away, closing his eyes again, and stood, waiting.

The riot below had moved inside, and appeared to be progressing up the stairs, borne on a wave of Scottish expostulations and Germanic shrieks, punctuated by enthusiastic barking from Rollo, always willing to lend his efforts to further the festivities.

I seized my wrapper from its peg, but had barely got one arm into it before the door of the bedchamber was flung open, crashing into the wall so hard that it rebounded and hit her in the chest. Nothing daunted, she slammed it open again and advanced on me like a juggernaut, cap awry and eyes blazing.

"You! *Weibchen!* How you dare, such insult, such lies to say my son about! You I kill, I tear off your hair, *nighean na galladh!* You—"

She lunged at me and I flung myself sideways, narrowly avoiding her grab at my arm.

"Ute! *Frau* McGillivray! Listen to—"

The second grab was more successful; she got hold of the sleeve of my night rail and wrenched, dragging the garment off my shoulder with a rending noise of torn cloth, even as she clawed at my face with her free hand.

I jerked back, and screamed with all my strength, my nerves recalling for one dreadful instant a hand striking at my face, hands pulling at me.…

I struck at her, the strength of terror flooding through my limbs, screaming, screaming, some tiny remnant of rationality in my brain watching this, bemused, appalled—but completely unable to stop the animal panic, the unreasoning rage that geysered up from some deep and unsuspected well.

I hit out, hammering blindly, screaming—wondering even as I did so, why, why was I doing this?

An arm grabbed me round the waist and I was lifted off the ground. A fresh spurt of panic ripped through me, and then I found myself suddenly alone, untouched. I was standing in the corner by the wardrobe, swaying drunkenly, panting. Jamie stood in front of me, shoulders braced and elbows raised, shielding me.

He was talking, very calmly, but I had lost the capacity to make sense of words. I pressed my hands back against the wall, and felt some sense of comfort from its solid bulk.

My heart was still hammering in my ears, the sound of my own breathing scaring me, it was so like the gasping sound when Harley Boble had broken my nose. I shut my mouth hard, trying to stop. Holding my breath seemed to work, allowing only small inhalations through my now-functioning nose.

The movement of Ute's mouth caught my eye and I stared at it, trying to fix myself once more in time and space. I was hearing words, but couldn't quite make the jump of comprehension. I breathed, letting the words flow over me like water, taking emotion from them—anger, reason, protest, placation, shrillness, growling—but no explicit meaning.

Then I took a deep breath, wiped my face—I was surprised to find it wet—and suddenly everything snapped back to normal. I could hear, and understand.

Ute was staring at me, anger and dislike clear on her face, but muted by a lurking horror.

"You are mad," she said, nodding. "I see." She sounded almost calm at this point. "Well, then."

She turned to Jamie, automatically twisting up untidy handsful of grizzled blond hair, stuffing them under her enormous cap. The ribbon had been torn; a loop of it dangled absurdly over one eye.

"So, she is mad. I will say so, but still, my son—my son!—is gone. So." She stood heaving, surveying me, and shook her head, then turned again to Jamie.

"Salem is closed to you," she said curtly. "My family, those who know us—they will not trade with you. Nor anyone else I speak to, to tell them the wicked thing she has done." Her eye drifted back to me, a cold, gelid blue, and her lip curled in a heavy sneer under the loop of torn ribbon.

“You are shunned,” she said. “You do not exist, you.” She turned on her heel and walked out, forcing Ian and Rollo to sidestep hastily out of her way. Her footfalls echoed heavily on the stair, a ponderous, measured tread, like the tolling of a passing bell.

I saw the tension in Jamie’s shoulders relax, little by little. He was still wearing his nightshirt—there was a damp patch between his shoulder blades—and had the pistol still in his hand.

The front door boomed shut below. Everyone stood still, struck silent.

“You wouldn’t really have shot her, would you?” I asked, clearing my throat.

“What?” He turned, staring at me. Then he caught the direction of my glance, and looked at the pistol in his hand as though wondering where *that* had come from.

“Oh,” he said, “no,” and shook his head, reaching up to put it back on top of the wardrobe. “I forgot I had it. Though God kens well enough that I should *like* to shoot the besotted auld besom,” he added. “Are ye all right, Sassenach?”

He stooped to look at me, his eyes soft with worry.

“I’m all right. I don’t know what—but it’s all right. It’s gone now.”

“Ah,” he said softly, and looked away, lashes coming down to hide his eyes. Had he felt it, too, then? Found himself suddenly … back? I knew he had sometimes. Remembered waking from sleep in Paris to see him braced in an open window, pressing so hard against the frame that the muscles stood out in his arms, visible by moonlight.

“It’s all right,” I repeated, touching him, and he gave me a brief, shy smile.

“Ye should have bitten her,” Ian was saying earnestly to Rollo. “She’s got an arse the size of a hogshead of tobacco—how could ye miss?”

“Probably afraid of being poisoned,” I said, coming out of my corner. “Do you suppose she meant it—or no, she meant it, certainly. But do you suppose she can do it? Stop anyone trading with us, I mean."

"She can stop Robin," Jamie said, a certain grimness returning to his expression. "For the rest … we'll see."

Ian shook his head, frowning, and rubbed his knuckled fist gingerly against his thigh.

"I kent I should have broken Manfred's neck," he said with real regret. "We could ha' told *Frau* Ute he fell off a rock, and saved a deal of trouble."

"Manfred?" The small voice made everyone turn as one, to see who had spoken.

Lizzie stood in the doorway, thin and pale as a starveling ghost, her eyes huge and glassy with recent fever.

"What about Manfred?" she said. She swayed dangerously, and put out a hand to the jamb, to save herself falling. "What's happened to him?"

"Poxed and gone," Ian said curtly, drawing himself up. "Ye didna give him your maidenheid, I hope."

* * *

In the event, Ute McGillivray was not quite able to fulfill her threat—but she did enough damage. Manfred's dramatic disappearance, the breaking of his engagement to Lizzie, and the reason for it was a fearful scandal, and word of it spread from Hillsboro and Salisbury, where he had worked now and then as an itinerant gunsmith, to Salem and High Point.

But thanks to Ute's efforts, the story was even more confused than would be normal for such gossip; some said that he was poxed, others that I had maliciously and falsely accused him of being poxed, because of some fancied disagreement with his parents. Others, more kindly, did not believe Manfred was poxed, but said that doubtless I had been mistaken.

Those who believed him to be poxed were divided as to how he had achieved that condition, half of them convinced that he had got it from some whore, and a good many of the rest speculating that he had got it from poor Lizzie, whose reputation suffered terribly—

until Ian, Jamie, the Beardsley twins, and even Roger took to defending her honor with their fists, at which point people did not, of course, stop talking—but stopped talking where any of her champions might hear directly.

All of Ute's numerous relatives in and around Wachovia, Salem, Bethabara, and Bethania of course believed her version of the story, and tongues wagged busily. All of Salem did not cease trading with us—but many people did. And more than once, I had the unnerving experience of greeting Moravians I knew well, only to have them stare past me in stony silence, or turn their backs upon me. Often enough that I no longer went to Salem.

Lizzie, beyond a certain initial mortification, seemed not terribly upset at the rupture of her engagement. Bewildered, confused, and sorry—she said—for Manfred, but not desolated by his loss. And since she seldom left the Ridge anymore, she didn't hear what people said about her. What *did* trouble her was the loss of the McGillivrays—particularly Ute.

"D'ye see, ma'am," she told me wistfully, "I'd never had a mother, for my own died when I was born. And then *Mutti*—she asked me to call her so when I said I'd marry Manfred—she said I was her daughter, just like Hilda and Inga and Senga. She'd fuss over me, and bully me and laugh at me, just as she did them. And it was … just so *nice,* to have all that family. And now I've lost them."

Robin, who had been sincerely attached to her, had sent her a short, regretful note, sneaked out through the good offices of Ronnie Sinclair. But since Manfred's disappearance, neither Ute nor the girls had come to see her, nor sent a single word.

It was Joseph Wemyss, though, who was most visibly affected by the affair. He said nothing, plainly not wishing to make matters worse for Lizzie—but he drooped, like a flower deprived of rain. Beyond his pain for Lizzie, and his distress at the blackening of her reputation, he, too, missed the McGillivrays, missed the joy and comfort of suddenly being part of a large, exuberant family, after so many years of loneliness.

Worse, though, was that while Ute had not been able to carry out her threat entirely, she *had* been able to influence her near relatives—including Pastor Berrisch, and his sister, Monika, who, Jamie told me privately, had been forbidden to see or speak to Joseph again.

"The Pastor's sent her away to his wife's relatives in Halifax," he said, shaking his head sadly. "To forget."

"Oh, dear."

And of Manfred, there was no slightest trace. Jamie had sent word through all his usual avenues, but no one had seen him since his flight from the Ridge. I thought of him—and prayed for him—daily, haunted by pictures of him skulking in the woods alone, the deadly spirochetes multiplying in his blood day by day. Or, much worse, working his way to the Indies on some ship, pausing in every port to drown his sorrows in the arms of unsuspecting whores, to whom he would pass on the silent, fatal infection—and they, in turn …

Or sometimes, the nightmare image of a bundle of rotting clothes hanging from a tree limb, deep in the forest, with no mourners save the crows who came to pick the flesh from his bones. And despite everything, I could not find it in my heart to hate Ute McGillivray, who must be thinking the same thoughts.

The sole bright spot in this ruddy quagmire was that Thomas Christie, quite contrary to my expectations, had allowed Malva to continue to come to the surgery, his sole stipulation being that if I proposed to involve his daughter in any further use of the ether, he was to be told ahead of time.

"There." I stood back, gesturing to her to look through the eyepiece of the microscope. "Do you see them?"

Her lips pursed in silent fascination. It had taken no little effort to find a combination of staining and reflected sunlight that would reveal the spirochetes, but I had succeeded at last. They weren't strongly visible, but you could see them, if you knew what you were looking for—and despite my complete conviction in my original diagnosis, I was relieved to see them.

"Oh, yes! Wee spirals. I see them plain!" She looked up at me, blinking. "D'ye mean seriously to tell me that these bittie things are what's poxed Manfred?" She was too polite to express open skepticism, but I could see it in her eyes.

"I do indeed." I had explained the germ theory of disease a number of times, to a variety of disbelieving eighteenth-century listeners, and in the light of this experience had little expectation of finding a favorable reception. The normal response was either a blank stare, indulgent laughter, or a sniff of dismissal, and I was more or less expecting a polite version of one of these reactions from Malva.

To my surprise, though, she seemed to grasp the notion at once—or at least pretended to.

"Well, so." She put both hands on the counter and peered again at the spirochetes. "These wee beasties cause the syphilis, then. However do they do that? And why is it that the bittie things ye showed me from my teeth don't make me ill?"

I explained, as best I could, the notion of "good bugs" or "indifferent bugs" versus "bad bugs," which she seemed to grasp easily—but my explanation of cells, and the concept of the body being composed of these, left her frowning at the palm of her hand in confusion, trying to make out the individual cells. She shook off her doubt, though, and folding up her hand in her apron, returned to her questions.

Did the bugs cause all disease? The penicillin—why did it work on some of the germs, but not all? And how did the bugs get from one person to another?

"Some travel by air—that's why you must try to avoid people coughing or sneezing on you—and some by water—which is why you mustn't drink from a stream that someone's been using as a privy—and some … well, by other means." I didn't know how much she might know about sex in humans—she lived on a farm, clearly she knew how pigs, chickens, and horses behaved—and I was wary of enlightening her, lest her father hear about it. I rather thought he'd prefer her to be dealing with ether.

Naturally, she pounced on my evasion.

"Other means? What other means are there?" With an internal sigh, I told her.

"They do *what*?" she said, incredulous. "Men, I mean. Like an animal! Whyever would a woman let a man do that to her?"

"Well, they *are* animals, you know," I said, suppressing an urge to laugh. "So are women. As to why one would let them …" I rubbed my nose, looking for a tasteful way of putting it. She was moving rapidly ahead of me, though, putting two and two together.

"For money," she said, looking thunderstruck. "*That's* what a whore does! She lets them do such things to her for money."

"Well, yes—but women who aren't whores—"

"The bairns, aye, ye said." She nodded, but was plainly thinking of other things; her small, smooth forehead was wrinkled in concentration.

"How much money do they get?" she asked. "I should want a lot, I think, to let a man—"

"I don't know," I said, somewhat taken aback. "Different amounts, I expect. Depending."

"Depending … oh, if he was maybe ugly, ye mean, ye could make him pay more? Or if *she* were ugly …" She gave me a quick, interested look. "Bobby Higgins told me of a whore he kent in London, that her looks was spoilt by vitriol." She looked up at the cupboard where I kept the sulfuric acid under lock and key, and shivered, her delicate shoulders quivering with revulsion at the thought.

"Yes, he told me about her, too. Vitriol is what we call a caustic—a liquid that burns. That's why—"

But her mind had already returned to the subject of fascination.

"To think of Manfred McGillivray doing such a thing!" She turned round gray eyes on me. "Well, and Bobby. He must have been, mustn't he?"

"I do believe soldiers are inclined—"

"But the Bible," she said, squinting thoughtfully. "It says ye mustna be whoring after idols. Does that mean men went about sticking their pricks into—did the idols look like women, d'ye think?"

"I'm sure that's not what it means, no," I said hastily. "More a metaphor, you know. Er … lusting after something, I think it means, not, er …”

“Lust,” she said thoughtfully. “That’s to want something sinful bad, is it not?”

“Yes, rather.” Heat was wavering over my skin, dancing in tiny veils. I needed cool air, quickly, or I’d be flushed as a tomato and drenched with sweat. I rose to go out, but felt I really mustn’t leave her with the impression that sex had to do only with money or babies—even though it well might, for some women.

“There *is* another reason for intercourse, you know,” I said, speaking over my shoulder as I headed for the door. “When you love someone, you want to give them pleasure. And they want to do the same for you.”

“Pleasure?” Her voice rose behind me, incredulous. “Ye mean some women *like* it?”

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BEES AND SWITCHES

I was by no means spying. One of my hives had swarmed, and I was looking for the fugitive bees.

New swarms usually didn't travel far, and stopped frequently, often resting for hours in a tree fork or open log, where they formed a ball of humming conference. If they could be located before making up their collective mind about where to settle, they could often be persuaded into a temptingly empty basket hive, and thus hauled back into captivity.

The trouble with bees is that they don't leave footprints. Now I was casting to and fro on the mountainside, nearly a mile from the house, an empty basket hive slung on a rope over my shoulder, trying to follow Jamie's instructions regarding hunting, and think like a bee.

There were huge blooming patches of galax, fire-weed, and other wildflowers on the hillside far above me, but there was a very attractive dead snag—if one was a bee—poking out of the heavy growth some way below.

The basket hive was heavy, and the slope was steep. It was easier to go down than up. I hitched up the rope, which was beginning to rub the skin off my shoulder, and began sidling downward through sumac and hobble-bush, bracing my feet against rocks and grabbing at branches to keep from slipping.

Concentrating on my feet, I didn't take particular notice of where I was. I emerged into a gap in the bushes from which the roof of a cabin was visible, some distance below me. Whose was that? The Christies', I thought. I wiped a sleeve across the sweat dripping from the point of my chin; the day was warm, and I hadn't brought a canteen. Perhaps I would stop and ask for water on the way home.

Making my way at last to the snag, I was disappointed to find no sign of the swarm. I stood still, blotting sweat from my face and listening, in hopes of picking up the bees' telltale deep drone. I heard the hum and whine of assorted flying insects, and the genial racket of a flock of foraging pygmy nuthatches on the slope above—but no bees.

I sighed and turned to make my way around the snag, but then paused, my eye caught by a glimpse of white below.

Thomas Christie and Malva were in the small clearing at the back of their cabin. I had caught the flash of his shirt as he moved, but now he stood motionless, arms crossed.

His attention appeared to be fixed on his daughter, who was cutting branches from one of the mountain ash trees at the side of the clearing. What for? I wondered.

There seemed something very peculiar about the scene, though I couldn't think exactly what. Some attitude of body? Some air of tension between them?

Malva turned and walked toward her father, several long, slender branches in her hand. Her head was bent, her step dragging, and when she handed him the branches, I understood abruptly what was going on.

They were too far away for me to hear them, but he apparently said something to her, gesturing brusquely toward the stump they used as a chopping block. She knelt down by it, bent forward, and lifted up her skirts, exposing her bare buttocks.

Without hesitation, he raised the switches and slashed them hard across her rump, then whipped them back in the other direction, crisscrossing her flesh with vivid lines that I could see even at such a distance. He repeated this several times, whipping the springy twigs back and forth with a measured deliberation whose violence was the more shocking for its lack of apparent emotion.

It hadn't even occurred to me to look away. I stood stock-still in the shrubbery, too stunned even to brush away the gnats that swarmed around my face.

Christie had thrown down the switches, turned on his heel, and gone into the house before I could do more than blink. Malva sat back on her heels and shook down her skirts, smoothing the fabric gingerly over her bottom as she rose. She was red-faced, but not weeping or distraught.

She's used to it. The thought came unbidden. I hesitated, not knowing what to do. Before I could decide, Malva had settled her cap, turned, and walked into the woods with an air of determination —headed straight toward me.

I ducked behind a big tulip poplar, before I was even aware of making a decision. She wasn't injured, and I was sure she wouldn't like to know that anyone had seen the incident.

Malva passed within a few feet of me, puffing a little on the climb, and snorting through her nose and muttering in a way that made me think she was very angry, rather than upset.

I peered cautiously round the poplar, but caught no more than a glimpse of her cap, bobbing through the trees. There were no cabins up there, and she hadn't carried a basket or any tools for foraging. Perhaps she only wanted to be alone, to recover herself. No surprise, if so.

I waited until she was safely out of sight, then made my own way slowly down the slope. I didn't stop at the Christie cabin, thirsty as I was, and had quite lost interest in errant bees.

* * *

I met Jamie at a stiled fence, some little distance from home, in conversation with Hiram Crombie. I nodded in greeting, and waited in some impatience for Crombie to finish his business, so I could tell Jamie what I had just witnessed.

Luckily, Hiram showed no inclination to linger; I made him nervous.

I told Jamie at once what I had seen, and was annoyed to find that he didn't share my concern. If Tom Christie thought it necessary to whip his daughter, that was his affair.

"But he might be … it might be—perhaps it doesn't stop with a switching. Perhaps he does … other things to her."

He shot me a look of surprise.

"Tom? D'ye have any reason to think so?"

"No," I admitted reluctantly. The Christie ménage gave me an uncomfortable feeling, but that was likely only because I didn't get on with Tom. I wasn't so foolish as to think that a tendency toward Bible-thumping meant a person wouldn't engage in wickedness—but in all fairness, it didn't mean he *did,* either. "But surely he shouldn't be whipping her like that—at her age?"

He glanced at me in mild exasperation.

"Ye dinna understand a thing, do ye?" he said, echoing my thought exactly.

"I was about to say just that, to *you,*" I said, giving him look for look. He didn't look away, but held my gaze, his own slowly taking on a wry amusement.

"So it will be different?" he said. "In your world?" There was just enough edge in his voice to remind me forcibly that we were not in my world—nor ever would be. Sudden gooseflesh ran up my arm, lifting the fine blond hairs.

"A man wouldna beat a woman, then, in your time? Not even for good cause?"

And what was I to say to that? I couldn't lie, even if I wanted to; he knew my face much too well.

"Some do," I admitted. "But it's not the same. There—then, I mean—a man who beat his wife would be a criminal. But," I added in fairness, "a man who beat his wife then would most often be using his fists."

A look of astonished disgust crossed his face.

"What sort of man would do that?" he asked incredulously.

"A bad one."

"So I should think, Sassenach. And ye dinna think there's a difference?" he asked. "Ye'd see it the same, if I were to smash your face, rather than only take a tawse to your bum?"

Blood flared abruptly in my cheeks. He once *had* taken a strap to me, and I hadn't forgotten it. I had wanted to kill him at the time—and didn't feel kindly toward him at the memory. At the same time, I wasn't stupid enough to equate his actions with those of a modern-day wife-beater.

He glanced at me, raised one eyebrow, then understood what I was recalling. He grinned.

"Oh," he said.

"Oh, indeed," I said very cross. I had succeeded in putting that extremely humiliating episode out of mind, and didn't at all like having it recalled.

He, on the other hand, was plainly enjoying the recollection. He eyed me in a manner I found grossly insufferable, still grinning.

"God, ye screamed like a *ban-sidhe.*"

I began to feel a distinct throbbing of blood in my temples.

"I bloody well had cause to!"

"Oh, aye," he said, and the grin widened. "Ye did. Your own fault, mind," he added.

"*My* f—"

"It was," he said firmly.

"You apologized!" I said completely outraged. "You know you did!"

"No, I didn't. And it was still your fault to begin with," he said, with complete lack of logic. "Ye wouldna have got nearly such a wicked tanning, if ye'd only minded me in the first place, when I told ye to kneel and—"

"Minded you! You think I would have just meekly given in and let you—"

"I've never seen ye do *anything* meek, Sassenach." He took my arm to help me over the stile, but I jerked free, puffing with indignation.

"You beastly *Scot*!" I dropped the hive on the ground at his feet, picked up my skirts, and scrambled over the stile.

"Well, I havena done it again," he protested, behind me. "I promised, aye?"

I whirled round on the other side and glared at him.

"Only because I threatened to cut your heart out if you ever tried!"

"Well, even so. I *could* have—and ye ken that well, Sassenach. Aye?" He'd quit grinning, but there was a distinct glint in his eye.

I took several deep breaths, trying simultaneously to control my annoyance and think of some crushing rejoinder. I failed in both attempts, and with a briefly dignified "Hmph!" turned on my heel.

I heard the rustle of his kilt as he picked up the hive, hopped over the stile, and came after me, catching up within a stride or two. I didn't look at him; my cheeks were still flaming.

The infuriating fact was that I *did* know that. I remembered all too well. He had used his sword belt to such effect that I hadn't been able to sit comfortably for several days—and if he should ever decide to do it again, there was absolutely nothing to stop him.

I was, for the most part, able to ignore the fact that I was legally his property. That didn't alter the fact that it *was* a fact—and he knew it.

"What about Brianna?" I demanded. "Would you feel the same way about it, if young Roger suddenly decided to take his belt or a switch to your daughter?"

He appeared to find something amusing in the notion.

"I think he'd have the devil of a fight on his hands if he tried," he said. "That's a braw wee lassie, no? And she has your notions of what constitutes wifely obedience, I'm afraid. But then," he added, swinging the hive's rope across his shoulder, "ye never ken what goes on in a marriage, do ye? Perhaps she'd be pleased if he tried."

"Pleased?!" I gawked at him in astonishment. "How can you think that any woman would *ever*—"

"Oh, aye? What about my sister?"

I stopped dead in the middle of the path, staring at him.

"What *about* your sister? Surely you aren't telling me—"

"I am." The glint was back, but I didn't think he was joking.

"Ian *beat* her?"

"I do wish ye'd stop calling it that," he said mildly. "It sounds as though Ian took his fists to her, or blackened her eyes. I gave ye a decent skelping, but I didna bloody ye, for God's sake." His eyes flicked briefly toward my face; everything had healed, at least outwardly; the only trace left was a tiny scar through one eyebrow —invisible, unless one parted the hairs there and looked closely. "Neither would Ian."

I was completely flabbergasted to hear this. I had lived in close proximity with Ian and Jenny Murray for months at a time, and had never seen the slightest indication that he possessed a violent nature. For that matter, it was impossible to imagine anyone trying such a thing on Jenny Murray, who had—if such a thing was possible—an even stronger personality than her brother.

"Well, what *did* he do? And why?"

"Well, he'd only take his belt to her now and then," he said, "and only if she made him."

I took a deep breath.

"If she *made* him?" I asked calmly, under the circumstances.

"Well, ye ken Ian," he said, shrugging. "He's no the one to be doing that sort of thing unless Jenny deviled him into it."

"I never saw anything of that sort going on," I said, giving him a hard look.

"Well, she'd scarcely do it in front of ye, would she?"

"And she would, in front of *you*?"

"Well, not precisely, no," he admitted. "But I wasna often in the house, after Culloden. Now and then, though, I'd come down for a visit, and I'd see that she was … brewing for something." He rubbed his nose and squinted against the sun, searching for words. "She'd devil him," he said at last, shrugging. "Pick at him over nothing, make wee sarcastic remarks. She'd—" His face cleared a bit, as he came up with a suitable description. "She'd act like a spoilt wee lassie in need of the tawse."

I found this description completely incredible. Jenny Murray had a sharp tongue, and few inhibitions about using it on anyone, her husband included. Ian, the soul of good nature, merely laughed at her. But I simply couldn't countenance the notion of her behaving in the manner described.

"Well, so. I'd seen that a time or two, as I say. And Ian would give her an eye, but held his peace. But then the once, I was out hunting, near sunset, and took a small deer on the hill just behind the broch—ye ken the place?"

I nodded, still feeling stunned.

"It was close enough to carry the carcass to the house without help, so I brought it down to the smoke shed and hung it. There was no one about—I found out later the children had all gone to the market in Broch Mhorda, and the servants with them. So I thought the house was empty altogether, and stepped into the kitchen to find a bite and a cup of buttermilk before I left."

Thinking the house empty, he had been startled by noises in the bedchamber overhead.

"What sort of noises?" I asked, fascinated.

"Well … shrieks," he said, shrugging. "And giggling. A bit of shoving and banging, with a stool or some such falling over. If it weren't for the yaffling, I should have thought there were thieves in the house. But I kent it was Jenny's voice, and Ian's, and—" He broke off, his ears going pink at the memory.

"So then … there was a bit more—raised voices, like—and then the crack of a belt on a bum, and the sort of skelloch ye could hear across six fields."

He took a deep breath, shrugging.

"Well, I was taken back a bit, and couldna think what to do at once."

I nodded, understanding that, at least.

"I expect it would be a bit of an awkward situation, yes. It … er … went on, though?"

He nodded. His ears were a deep red by now, and his face flushed, though that might only be from heat.

"Aye, it did." He glanced at me. "Mind, Sassenach, if I'd thought he meant harm to her, I should have been up the stairs in an instant. But …" He brushed away an inquisitive bee, shaking his head. "There was—it felt—I canna even think how to say it. It wasna really that Jenny kept laughing, because she didna—but that I felt she wanted to. And Ian … well, Ian *was* laughing. Not out loud, I dinna mean; it was just … in his voice."

He blew out his breath, and swiped his knuckles along his jaw, wiping sweat.

"I stayed quite frozen there, wi' a bit of pie in my hand, listening. I came to myself only when the flies started lighting in my open mouth, and by that time, they'd … ah … they were … mmphm." He hunched his shoulders, as though his shirt were too tight.

"Making it up, were they?" I asked very dryly.

"I expect so," he replied, rather primly. "I left. Walked all the way to Foyne, and stayed the night with Grannie MacNab." Foyne was a tiny hamlet, some fifteen miles from Lallybroch.

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, I had to," he said logically. "I couldna ignore it, after all. It was either walk about and think of things, or else give in and abuse myself, and I couldna verra well do *that*—it was my own sister, after all."

"You mean to say you can't think and engage in sexual activity at the same time?" I asked, laughing.

"Of course not," he said—thus confirming a long-held private opinion of mine—and gave me a look as though I were crazy. "Can you?"

"I *can,* yes."

He raised one eyebrow, plainly unconvinced.

"Well, I'm not saying I *do,* always," I admitted, "but it's possible. Women are used to doing more than one thing at once—they have to, because of the children. Anyway, go back to Jenny and Ian. Why on earth—"

"Well, I did walk about and think of it," Jamie admitted. "I couldna seem to stop thinking of it, to be honest. Grannie MacNab could see I'd something on my mind, and pestered me over the supper until … ah … well, until I told her about it."

"Really. What did she say?" I asked, fascinated. I'd known Grannie MacNab, a sprightly old person with a highly forthright manner—and a lot of experience with human weakness.

"She cackled like thorns under a pot," he said, one side of his mouth turning up. "I thought she'd fall into the fire wi' merriment."

Recovered to some extent, though, the old lady had wiped her eyes and explained matters to him, kindly, as though addressing a simpleton.

"She said it was because of Ian's leg," Jamie said, glancing at me to see whether this made sense to me. "She said that such a thing would make no difference to Jenny, but it would to *him.* She said," he added, his color heightening, "that men havena got any idea what women think about bed, but they always think they have, so it causes trouble."

"I knew I liked Grannie MacNab," I murmured. "What else?"

"Well, so. She said it was likely that Jenny was only makin' it clear to Ian—and maybe to herself, as well—that she still thought he was a man, leg or no."

"What? Why?"

"Because, Sassenach," he said, very dryly indeed, "when ye're a man, a good bit of what ye have to do is to draw up lines and fight other folk who come over them. Your enemies, your tenants, your children—your wife. Ye canna always just strike them or take a strap to them, but when ye can, at least it's clear to everyone who's in charge."

"But that's perfectly—" I began, and then broke off, frowning as I considered this.

"And if ye're a man, you're in charge. It's you that keeps order, whether ye like it or not. It's true," he said, then touched my elbow as he nodded toward an opening in the wood. "I'm thirsty. Shall we stop a bit?"

I followed him up a narrow path through the wood to what we called the Green Spring—a bubbling flow of water over pale serpentine stone, set in a cool, shady bowl of surrounding moss. We knelt, splashed our faces, and drank, sighing with grateful relief. Jamie tipped a handful of water down inside his shirt, closing his eyes in bliss. I laughed at him, but unpinned my sweat-soaked kerchief and doused it in the spring, using it to wipe my neck and arms.

The walk to the spring had caused a break in the conversation, and I wasn't sure quite how—or whether—to resume it. Instead, I merely sat quietly in the shade, arms about my knees, idly wriggling my toes in the moss.

Jamie, too, seemed to feel no need of speech for the moment. He leaned comfortably back against a rock, the wet fabric of his shirt plastered to his chest, and we sat still, listening to the wood.

I wasn't sure what to say, but that didn't mean I had stopped thinking about the conversation. In an odd way, I thought I understood what Grannie MacNab had meant—though I wasn't quite sure I agreed with it.

I was thinking more about what Jamie had said, though, regarding a man's responsibility. Was it true? Perhaps it was, though I had never thought of it in that light before. It *was* true that he was a bulwark—not only for me, and for the family, but for the tenants, as well. Was that really how he did it, though? *"Draw up lines, and fight other folk who come over them"?* I rather thought it was.

There were lines between him and me, surely; I could have drawn them on the moss. Which was not to say we did not "come across" each other's lines—we did, frequently, and with varying results. I had my own defenses—and means of enforcement. But he had only beaten me once for crossing his lines, and that was early on. So, had he seen that as a necessary fight? I supposed he had; that was what he was telling me.

But he had been following his own train of thought, which was running on a different track.

"It's verra odd," he said thoughtfully. "Laoghaire drove me mad wi' great regularity, but it never once occurred to me to thrash her."

"Well, how very thoughtless of you," I said, drawing myself up. I disliked hearing him refer to Laoghaire, no matter what the context.

"Oh, it was," he replied seriously, taking no notice of my sarcasm. "I think it was that I didna care enough for her to think of it, let alone do it."

"You didn't care enough to beat her? Wasn't she the lucky one, then?"

He caught the tone of pique in my voice; his eyes sharpened and fixed on my face.

"Not to hurt her," he said. Some new thought came to him; I saw it cross his face.

He smiled a little, got up, and came toward me. He reached down and pulled me to my feet, then took hold of my wrist, which he lifted gently over my head and pinned against the trunk of the pine I had been sitting under, so that I was obliged to lean back flat against it.

"Not to hurt her," he said again, speaking softly. "To own her. I didna want to possess her. You, *mo nighean donn*—you, I would own."

"*Own* me?" I said. "And what, exactly, do you mean by that?"

"What I say." There was still a gleam of humor in his eyes, but his voice was serious. "Ye're mine, Sassenach. And I would do anything I thought I must to make that clear."

"Oh, indeed. Including beating me on a regular basis?"

"No, I wouldna do that." The corner of his mouth lifted slightly, and the pressure of his grip on my trapped wrist increased. His eyes were deep blue, an inch from mine. "I dinna need to—because I *could,* Sassenach—and ye ken that well."

I pulled against his grip, by sheer reflex. I remembered vividly that night in Doonesbury: the feeling of fighting him with all my strength—to no avail whatever. The horrifying feeling of being pinned to the bed, defenseless and exposed, realizing that he could do anything whatever that he liked to me—and would.

I squirmed violently, trying to escape the grip of memory, as much as his grasp on my flesh. I didn't succeed, but did turn my wrist so as to be able to sink my nails into his hand.

He didn't flinch or look away. His other hand touched me lightly—no more than a brush of my earlobe, but that was quite enough. He *could* touch me anywhere—in any way.

Evidently, women *are* capable of experiencing rational thought and sexual arousal simultaneously, because I appeared to be doing precisely that.

My brain was engaged in indignant rebuttal of all kinds of things, including at least half of everything he'd said in the course of the last few minutes.

At the same time, the other end of my spinal cord was not merely shamefully aroused at the thought of physical possession; it was bloody deliriously weak-kneed with desire at the notion, and was causing my hips to sway outward, brushing his.

He was still ignoring the dig of my nails. His other hand came up and took my free hand before I could do anything violent with it; he folded his fingers around mine and held them captive, down at my side.

"If ye asked me, Sassenach, to free ye—" he whispered, "d'ye think I'd do so?"

I took a deep breath; deep enough that my breasts brushed his chest, he stood so close, and realization welled up in me. I stood still, breathing, watching his eyes, and felt my agitation fade slowly away, mutating into a sense of conviction, heavy and warm in the pit of my belly.

I had thought my body swayed in answer to his—and it did. But his moved unconsciously with mine; the rhythm of the pulse I saw in his throat was the pounding of the heartbeat that echoed in my wrist, and the sway of his body followed mine, barely touching, moving scarcely more than the leaves above, sighing on the breeze.

"I wouldn't ask," I whispered. "I'd tell you. And you'd do it. You'd do as I said."

"Would I?" His grip on my wrist was still firm, and his face so close to mine that I felt his smile, rather than saw it.

"Yes," I said. I had stopped pulling at my trapped wrist; instead, I pulled my other hand from his—he made no move to stop me—and brushed a thumb from the lobe of his ear down the side of his neck. He took a short, sharp breath, and a tiny shudder ran through him, stippling his skin with goosebumps in the wake of my touch.

"Yes, you would," I said again very softly. "Because I own you, too … man. Don't I?"

His hand released its grip abruptly and slid upward, long fingers intertwining with mine, his palm large and warm and hard against my own.

“Oh, aye,” he said, just as softly. “Ye do.” He lowered his head the last half-inch and his lips brushed mine, whispering, so that I felt the words as much as heard them.

“And I ken that verra well indeed, *mo nighean donn.*”

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WOODEARS

Despite his dismissal of her worries, Jamie had promised his wife to look into the matter, and found opportunity to speak with Malva Christie a few days later.

Coming back from Kenny Lindsay’s place, he met a snake curled up in the dust of the path before him. It was a largish creature, but gaily striped—not one of the venomous vipers. Still, he couldn’t help it; snakes gave him the grue, and he did not wish to pick it up with his hands, nor yet to step over it. It might not be disposed to lunge up his kilt—but then again, it might. For its part, the snake remained stubbornly curled among the leaves, not budging in response to his “Shoo!” or the stamping of his foot.

He took a step to the side, found an alder, and cut a good stick from it, with which he firmly escorted the wee beastie off the path and into the wood. Affronted, the snake writhed off at a good rate of speed into a hobble-bush, and next thing, a loud shriek came from the other side of the bush.

He darted round it to find Malva Christie, making an urgent, though unsuccessful, effort to squash the agitated snake with a large basket.

“It’s all right, lass, let him go.” He seized her arm, causing a number of mushrooms to cascade out of her basket, and the snake decamped indignantly in search of quieter surroundings.

He crouched and scooped up the mushrooms for her, while she gasped and fanned herself with the end of her apron.

"Oh, thank ye, sir," she said, bosom heaving. "I'm that terrified o' snakes."

"Och, well, that's no but a wee king snake," he said, affecting nonchalance. "Great ratters—or so I'm told."

"Maybe so, but they've a wicked bite." She shuddered briefly.

"Ye've no been bitten, have ye?" He stood up and dumped a final handful of fungus into her basket, and she curtsied in thanks.

"No, sir." She straightened her cap "But Mr. Crombie was. Gully Dornan brought one of those things in a box, to Sunday meeting last, just for mischief, for he kent the text was *For they shall take up poisonous serpents and suffer no harm.* I think he meant to let it out in the midst of the prayin'." She grinned at the telling, clearly reliving the event.

"But Mr. Crombie saw him with the box, and took it from him, not knowing what was in it. Well, so—Gully was shaking of the box, to keep the snake awake, and when Mr. Crombie opened it, the snake came out like a jack-i'-the-box and bit Mr. Crombie on the lip."

Jamie couldn't help smiling in turn.

"Did it, then? I dinna recall hearing about that."

"Well, Mr. Crombie was that furious," she said, trying for tact. "I imagine no one wanted to spread the story, sir, for fear he'd maybe pop with rage."

"Aye, I see," he said dryly. "And that's why he wouldna come to have my wife see to the wound, I suppose."

"Oh, he wouldna do that, sir," she assured him, shaking her head. "Not if he was to have cut off his nose by mistake."

"No?"

She picked up the basket, glancing shyly up at him.

"Well … no. Some say may be as your wife's a witch, did ye ken that?"

He felt an unpleasant tightness in his wame, though he was not surprised to hear it.

"She is a Sassenach," he answered, calm. "Folk will always say such things of a stranger, especially a woman." He glanced sideways at her, but her eyes were modestly cast down to the contents of her basket. "Think so yourself, do ye?"

She looked up at that, gray eyes wide.

"Oh, no, sir! Never!"

She spoke with such earnestness that he smiled, despite the seriousness of his errand.

"Well, I suppose ye'd have noticed, so much time as ye spend in her surgery."

"Oh, I should wish nothing but to be just like her, sir!" she assured him, clutching the handle of her basket in worshipful enthusiasm. "She is so kind and lovely, and she kens so much! I want to know all she can teach me, sir."

"Aye, well. She's said often how good it is to have such a pupil as yourself, lass. Ye're a great help to her." He cleared his throat, wondering how best to work round from these cordialities to a rude inquiry as to whether her father was interfering with her. "Ah … your Da doesna mind that ye spend so much time with my wife?"

A cloud fell upon her countenance at that, and her long black lashes swept down, hiding the dove-gray eyes.

"Oh. Well. He … he doesna say I mustna go."

Jamie made a noncommittal sound in his throat, and gestured her ahead of him back to the path, where he strode along for a bit without further question, allowing her to regain her composure.

"What d'ye think your father will do," he inquired, swishing his stick casually through a patch of toadflax, "once ye've wed and left his house? Is there a woman he might consider? He'd need someone to do for him, I expect."

Her lips tightened at that, to his interest, and a faint flush rose in her cheeks.

"I dinna mean to be wed anytime soon, sir. We'll manage well enough."

Her answer was short enough to cause him to probe a bit.

"No? Surely ye've suitors, lass—the lads swoon after ye in droves; I've seen them."

The flush on her skin bloomed brighter.

"Please, sir, ye'll say no such thing to my faither!"

That rang a small alarm bell in him—but then, she might mean only that Tom Christie was a strict parent, vigilant of his daughter's virtue. And he would have been astonished to the marrow to learn that Christie was soft, indulgent, or in any way delinquent in such responsibilities.

"I shall not," he said mildly. "I was only teasin', lass. Is your father sae fierce, then?"

She did look at him then, very direct.

"Thought ye kent him, sir."

He burst out laughing at that, and after a moment's hesitation, she joined him, with a small titter like the sound of the wee birds in the trees above.

"I do," he said, recovering. "He's a good man, Tom—if a bit dour."

He looked to see the effect of this. Her face was still flushed, but there was a tiny residual smile on her lips. That was good.

"Well, so," he resumed casually, "have ye enough of the woodears there?" He nodded at her basket. "I saw a good many yesterday, up near the Green Spring."

"Oh, did ye?" She glanced up, interested. "Where?"

"I'm headed that way," he said "Come if ye like, I'll show ye."

They made their way along the Ridge, talking of inconsequent things. He led her now and then back to the subject of her father, and noted that she seemed to have no reservations concerning him —only a prudent regard for his foibles and temper.

"Your brother, then," he said thoughtfully, at one point. "Is he content, d'ye think? Or will he be wanting to leave, maybe go down to the coast? I ken he's no really a farmer at heart, is he?"

She snorted a bit, but shook her head.

"No, sir, that he's not."

"What did he do, then? I mean, he grew up on a plantation, did he not?"

"Oh, no, sir." She looked up at him, surprised. "He grew up in Edinburgh. We both did."

He was taken back a bit at that. It was true, both she and Allan had an educated accent, but he had thought it only that Christie was a schoolmaster, and strict of such things.

"How is that, lass? Tom said he'd married here, in the Colonies."

"Oh, so he did, sir," she assured him hastily. "But his wife was not a bond servant; she went back to Scotland."

"I see," he said mildly, seeing her face grow much pinker and her lips press tight. Tom had said his wife had died—well, and he supposed she had, but in Scotland, after she'd left him. Proud as Christie was, he could hardly wonder that the man hadn't confessed to his wife's desertion. But—

"Is it true, sir, that your grandsire was Lord Lovat? Him they called the Old Fox?"

"Oh, aye," he said, smiling. "I come from a long line of traitors, thieves, and bastards, ken?"

She laughed at that, and very prettily urged him to tell her more of his sordid family history—quite obviously, as a means of avoiding his asking more questions regarding hers.

The "but" lingered in his mind, though, even as they talked, with increasing desultoriness as they climbed through the dark, scented forest.

But. Tom Christie had been arrested two or three days after the Battle of Culloden, and imprisoned for the next ten years, before being transported to America. He did not know Malva's exact age, but he thought she must be eighteen or so—though she often seemed older, her manner was so poised.

She must have been conceived, then, quite soon after Christie's arrival in the Colonies. No great wonder, if the man had seized the first chance he had to marry, after living without a woman for so long. And then the wife had thought better of her bargain, and gone. Christie had told Roger Mac his wife had died of influenza—well, a man had his pride, and God knew Tom Christie had more than most.

But Allan Christie … where had *he* come from? The young man was somewhere in his twenties; it was possible that he had been conceived before Culloden. But if so—who was his mother?

"You and your brother," he said abruptly, at the next break in conversation. "Did ye have the same mother?"

"Yes, sir," she said, looking startled.

"Ah," he said, and let the subject drop. Well, now. So Christie had been wed before Culloden. And then the woman, whoever she was, had come to find him in the Colonies. That argued a high degree of determination and devotion, and made him regard Christie with a good deal more interest. But that devotion had not been proof against the hardships of the Colonies—or else she found Tom so changed by time and circumstance that the devotion had been drowned in disappointment, and she had left again.

He could see that, easily—and felt an unexpected bond of sympathy with Tom Christie. He recalled his own feelings, all too well, when Claire came back to find him. The disbelieving joy of her presence—and the bone-deep fear that she would not recognize the man she had known, in the man who stood before her.

Worse, if she had discovered something that made her flee—and well as he knew Claire, he still was not sure that she would have stayed, if he'd told her at once about his marriage to Laoghaire. For that matter, if Laoghaire hadn't shot him and nearly killed him, Claire might well have run away, and been lost for good. The thought of it was a black pit, gaping at his feet.

Of course, had she gone, he *would* have died, he reflected. And never come to this place and got his land, nor seen his daughter, nor held his grandson in his arms. Come to think, perhaps being nearly killed wasn't always a misfortune—so long as you didn't actually die of it.

"Does your arm trouble ye, sir?" He was jerked back from his thoughts to realize that he was standing like a fool, one hand clutching the spot on his upper arm where Laoghaire's pistol ball had gone through and Malva squinting at him in concern.

"Ah, no," he said hastily, dropping his hand. "A midgie bite. The bittie things are out early. Tell me"—he groped for some neutral topic of conversation—“d’ye like it here in the mountains?”

Inane as the question was, she appeared to consider it seriously.

“It’s lonely, sometimes,” she said, and glanced into the forest, where falling shafts of sunlight splintered on leaves and needles, shrubs and rocks, filling the air with a shattered green light. “But it *is* …” she groped for a word. “Pretty,” she said, with a small smile at him, acknowledging the inadequacy of the word.

They had reached the small clearing where the water bubbled out over a ledge of what his daughter said was serpentine—the rock whose soft green gave the spring its name; that, and the thick layer of vivid moss that grew around it.

He gestured to her to kneel and drink first. She did, cupping her hands to her face and closing her eyes in bliss at the taste of the cold, sweet water. She gulped, cupped her hands and drank again, almost greedily. She was very pretty herself, he thought in amusement, and the word was much more appropriate to the wee lassie, with that delicate chin and the lobes of her tender pink ears peeping from her cap, than to the spirit of the mountains. Her mother must have been lovely, he thought—and it was fortunate for the lass that she had not taken much of her father’s grim looks, save those gray eyes.

She sat back on her heels, breathing deep, and scooted to the side, nodding at him to kneel and take his turn. The day wasn’t hot, but it was a steep climb to the spring, and the cold water went down gratefully.

“I’ve never seen the Highlands,” Malva said, dabbing the end of her kerchief over her wet face. “Some say this place is like it, though. D’ye think so yourself, sir?”

He shook the water from his fingers and wiped the back of his hand across his mouth.

“Something like. Some parts. The Great Glen, and the forest—aye, that’s verra like this.” He pointed his chin up at the trees surrounding them, murmurous and resin-scented. “But there’s nay bracken here. And nay peat, of course. And nay heather; that’s the biggest difference.”

“Ye hear the stories—of men hiding in the heather. Did ye ever do so yourself, sir?” She dimpled slightly, and he didn’t know whether she meant to tease, or was only making conversation.

“Now and then,” he said, and smiled at her as he rose, brushing pine needles from his kilt. “Stalking the deer, aye? Here, I’ll show ye the woodears.”

The fungus grew in thick shelves at the foot of an oak, no more than ten feet from the spring. Some of the things had opened their gills already, begun to darken and curl; the ground nearby was scattered with the spores, a dark brown powder that lay upon the glossy crackle of last year’s dry leaves. The fresher fungi were still bright, though, deep orange and meaty.

He left her there with a cordial word, and went back down the narrow trail, wondering about the woman who had loved and left Tom Christie.

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THE VENOM OF THE NORTH WIND

July 1774

Brianna drove the sharp end of the spade into the muddy bank and pulled out a chunk of clay the color of chocolate fudge. She could have done without the reminder of food, she thought, flinging it aside into the current with a grunt. She hitched up her soggy shift and wiped a forearm across her brow. She hadn't eaten since mid-morning, and it was nearly teatime. Not that she meant to stop until supper. Roger was up the mountain, helping Amy McCallum rebuild her chimney stack, and the little boys had gone up to the Big House to be fed bread and butter and honey and generally spoiled by Mrs. Bug. She'd wait to eat; there was too much to do here.

"D'ye need help, lass?"

She squinted, shading her eyes against the sun. Her father was standing on the bank above, viewing her efforts with what looked like amusement.

"Do I *look* like I need help?" she asked irritably, swiping the back of a mud-streaked hand across her jaw.

"Ye do, aye."

He'd been fishing; barefoot and wet to mid-thigh. He laid his rod against a tree and swung the creel from his shoulder, woven reeds creaking with the weight of the catch. Then he grasped a sapling for balance, and started to edge down the slippery bank, bare toes squelching in the mud.

"Wait—take your shirt off!" She realized her mistake an instant too late. A startled look flitted across his face, only for a moment, and then was gone.

"I mean … the mud …" she said, knowing it was too late. "The washing."

"Oh, aye, to be sure." Without hesitation, he pulled the shirt over his head and turned his back to her, hunting for a convenient branch from which to hang it.

His scars were not really shocking. She'd glimpsed them before, imagined them many times, and the reality was much less vivid. The scars were old, a faint silvered net, moving easily over the shadows of his ribs as he reached upward. He moved naturally. Only the tension in his shoulders suggested otherwise.

Her hand closed involuntarily, feeling for an absent pencil, feeling the stroke of the line that would capture that tiny sense of unease, the jarring note that would draw the observer closer, closer still, wondering what it was about this scene of pastoral grace.…

Thou shalt not uncover thy father's nakedness, she thought, and spread her hand flat, pressing it hard against her thigh. But he had turned back and was coming down the bank, eyes on the tangled rushes and protruding stones underfoot.

He slid the last two feet and arrived beside her with a splash, arms flailing to keep his balance. She laughed, as he'd intended, and he smiled. She'd thought for an instant to speak of it, make some apology—but he would not meet her eyes.

"So, then, move it, or go round?" His attention focused on the boulder embedded in the bank, he leaned his weight against it and shoved experimentally.

"*Can* we move it, do you think?" She waded up beside him, retucking the hem of her shift, which she had pulled between her legs and fastened with a belt. "Going round would mean digging another ten feet of ditch."

"That much?" He glanced at her in surprise.

"Yes. I want to cut a notch here, to cut through to that bend—then I can put a small water-wheel here and get a good fall." She leaned past him, pointing downstream. "The next-best place would be down there—see where the banks rise?—but this is better."

"Aye, all right. Wait a bit, then." He made his way back to the bank, scrambled up, and disappeared into the wood, from whence he returned with several stout lengths of fresh oak sapling, still sporting the remnants of their glossy leaves.

"We dinna need to get it out of the creekbed, aye?" he asked. "Only move it a few feet, so ye can cut through the bank beyond it?"

"That's it." Rivulets of sweat, trapped by her thick eyebrows, ran tickling down the sides of her face. She'd been digging for the best part of an hour; her arms ached from heaving shovelsful of heavy mud, and her hands were blistered. With a sense of profound gratitude, she surrendered the spade and stepped back in the creek, stooping to splash cold water on her scratched arms and flushed face.

"Heavy work," her father observed, grunting a little as he briskly finished undermining the boulder. "Could ye not have asked Roger Mac to do it?"

"He's busy," she said, perceiving the shortness of her tone, but not inclined to disguise it.

Her father darted a sharp glance at her, but said no more, merely busying himself with the proper placement of his oak staves. Attracted like iron filings to the magnetism of their grandfather's presence, Jemmy and Germain appeared like magic, loudly wanting to help.

She'd asked them to help, and they'd helped—for a few minutes, before being drawn away by the glimpse of a porcupine high up in the trees. With Jamie in charge, of course, they leaped to the task, madly scooping dirt from the bank with flat bits of wood, giggling, pushing, getting in the way, and stuffing handsful of mud down the back of each other's breeches.

Jamie being Jamie, he ignored the nuisance, merely directing their efforts and finally ordering them out of the creek, so as not to be crushed.

"All right, lass," he said, turning to her. "Take a grip there." The boulder had been loosened from the confining clay, and now protruded from the bank, oak staves thrust into the mud beneath, sticking up on either side, and another behind.

She seized the one he indicated, while he took the other two.

"On the count of three … one … two … heave!"

Jem and Germain, perched above, chimed in, chanting "One … two … *heave*!" like a small Greek chorus. There was a splinter in her thumb and the wood rasped against the waterlogged creases of her skin, but she felt suddenly like laughing.

"One … two … *hea*—" With a sudden shift, a swirl of mud, and a cascade of loose dirt from the bank above, the boulder gave way, falling into the stream with a splash that soaked them both to the chest and made both little boys shriek with joy.

Jamie was grinning ear-to-ear and so was she, wet shift and muddy children notwithstanding. The boulder now lay near the opposite bank of the stream, and—just as she had calculated—the diverted current was already eating into the newly created hollow in the near bank, a strong eddy eating away the fine-grained clay in streams and spirals.

"See that?" She nodded at it, dabbing her mud-spattered face on the shoulder of her shift. "I don't know how far it will erode, but if I let it go for a day or two, there won't be much digging left to do."

"Ye kent that would happen?" Her father glanced at her, face alight, and laughed. "Why, ye clever, bonnie wee thing!"

The glow of recognized achievement did quite a bit to dampen her resentment of Roger's absence. The presence of a bottle of cider in Jamie's creel, keeping cold amongst the dead trout, did a lot more. They sat companionably on the bank, passing the bottle back and forth, admiring the industry of the new eddy pool at work.

"This looks like good clay," she observed, leaning forward to scoop a little of the wet stuff out of the crumbling bank. She squeezed it in her hand, letting grayish water run down her arm, and opened her hand to show him how it kept its shape, showing clearly the prints of her fingers.

“Good for your kiln?” he asked, peering dutifully at it.

“Worth a try.” She had made several less-than-successful experiments with the kiln so far, producing a succession of malformed plates and bowls, most of which had either exploded in the kiln or shattered immediately upon removal. One or two survivals, deformed and scorched round the edges, had been pressed into dubious service, but it was precious little reward for the effort of stoking the kiln and minding it for days.

What she needed was advice from someone who knew about kilns and making earthenware. But with the strained relations now existent between the Ridge and Salem, she couldn’t seek it. It had been awkward enough, her speaking directly to Brother Mordecai about his ceramic processes—a Popish woman, and speaking to a man she wasn’t married to, the scandal!

“Damn wee Manfred,” her father agreed, hearing her complaint. He’d heard it before, but didn’t mention it. He hesitated. “Would it maybe help was I to go and ask? A few o’ the Brethren will still speak to me, and it might be that they’d let me talk wi’ Mordecai. If ye were to tell me what it is ye need to know …? Ye could maybe write it down.”

“Oh, Da, I love you!” Grateful, she leaned to kiss him, and he laughed, clearly gratified to be doing her a service.

Elated, she took another drink of cider, and rosy visions of hardened clay pipes began to dance in her brain. She had a wooden cistern already built, with a lot of complaint and obstruction from Ronnie Sinclair. She needed help to heave that into place. Then, if she could get only twenty feet of reliable pipe …

“Mama, come *look*!” Jem’s impatient voice cut through the fog of calculation. With a mental sigh, she made a hasty note of where she had been, and pushed the process carefully into a corner of her mind, where it would perhaps helpfully ferment.

She handed the bottle back to her father, and made her way down the bank to where the boys squatted, expecting to be shown frog spawn, a drowned skunk, or some other wonder of nature appealing to small boys.

“What is it?” she called.

"Look, look!" Jemmy spotted her and popped upright, pointing to the rock at his feet.

They were standing on the Flat Rock, a prominent feature of the creek. As the name suggested, it was a flat shelf of granite, large enough for three men to occupy at once, undercut by the water so that it jutted out over the boiling stream. It was a favorite spot for fishing.

Someone had built a small fire; there was a blackened smudge on the rock, with what looked like the remnants of charred sticks in the center. It was much too small for a cooking fire, but still, she would have thought nothing of it. Her father was frowning at the fire site, though, in a way that made her walk out onto the rock and stand beside him, looking.

The objects in the ashes weren't sticks.

"Bones," she said at once, and squatted down to look closer. "What kind of animal are those from?" Even as she said it, her mind was analyzing and rejecting—squirrel, possum, rabbit, deer, pig—unable to make sense of the shapes.

"They're finger bones, lass," he said, lowering his voice as he glanced at Jemmy—who had lost interest in the fire and was now sliding down the muddy bank, to the further detriment of his breeches. "Dinna touch them," he added—unnecessarily, as she had drawn back her hand in instant revulsion.

"From a human, you mean?" Instinctively, she wiped her hand on the side of her thigh, though she had touched nothing.

He nodded, and squatted beside her, studying the charred remains. There were blackened lumps there, too—though she thought these were the remains of some plant material; one was greenish, maybe a stem of something, incompletely burned.

Jamie bent low, sniffing at the burned remains. Instinctively, Brianna drew a deep breath through her nose in imitation—then snorted, trying to get rid of the smell. It was disconcerting: a reek of char, overlaid with something bitter and chalky—and that in turn overlaid with a sort of pungent scent that reminded her of medicine.

"Where could they have come from?" she asked, also low-voiced—though Jemmy and Germain had begun pelting each other with mudballs, and wouldn't have noticed if she'd shouted.

"I havena noticed anyone missing a hand, have you?" Jamie glanced up, giving her a half-smile. She didn't return it.

"Not walking around, no. But if they aren't walking around—" She swallowed, trying to ignore the half-imagined taste of bitter herbs and burning. "Where's the rest? Of the body, I mean."

That word, "body," seemed to bring the whole thing into a new and nasty focus.

"Where's the rest of that finger, I wonder?" Jamie was frowning at the blackened smudge. He moved a knuckle toward it, and she saw what he had seen: a paler smudge within the circle of the fire, where part of the ashes had been swept away. There were three fingers, she saw, still swallowing repeatedly. Two were intact, the bones gray-white and spectral among the ashes. Two joints of the third were gone, though; only the slender last phalanx remained.

"An animal?" She glanced round for traces, but there were no pawprints on the surface of the rock—only the muddy smudges left by the little boys' bare feet.

Vague visions of cannibalism were beginning to stir queasily in the pit of her stomach, though she rejected the notion at once.

"You don't think Ian—" She stopped abruptly.

"Ian?" Her father looked up, astonished. "Why should Ian do such a thing?"

"I don't think he would," she said, taking hold of common sense. "Not at all. It was just a thought—I'd heard that the Iroquois sometimes … sometimes …" She nodded at the charred bones, unwilling to articulate the thought further. "Um … maybe a friend of Ian's? Uh … visiting?"

Jamie's face darkened a little, but he shook his head.

"Nay, there's the smell of the Highlands about this. The Iroquois will burn an enemy. Or cut bits off him, to be sure. But not like that." He pointed at the bones with his chin, in the Highland way. "This is a private business, ken? A witch—or one of their shamans, maybe—might do a thing like that; not a warrior."

"I haven't seen any Indians of any kind lately. Not on the Ridge. Have you?"

He looked at the burned smudge a moment longer, frowning, then shook his head.

"No, nor anyone missing a few fingers, either."

"You're *sure* they're human?" She studied the bones, trying for other possibilities. "Maybe from a small bear? Or a big coon?"

"Maybe," he said flatly, but she could tell he said it only for her sake. He was sure.

"Mama!" The patter of bare feet on the rock behind her was succeeded by a tug at her sleeve. "Mama, we're hungry!"

"Of course you are," she said, rising to meet the demand, but still gazing abstractedly at the charred remnants. "You haven't eaten in nearly an hour. What did you—" Her gaze drifted slowly from the fire to her son, then snapped abruptly, focusing on the two little boys, who stood grinning at her, covered from head to foot in mud.

"*Look* at you!" she said, dismay tempered by resignation. "How could you possibly get that filthy?"

"Oh, it's easy, lass," her father assured her, grinning as he rose to his feet. "Easy cured, too, though." He bent, and seizing Germain by the back of shirt and seat of breeks, heaved him neatly off the rock and into the pool below.

"Me, too, me, too! Me, too, Grandda!" Jemmy was dancing up and down in excitement, spattering clods of mud in all direction.

"Oh, aye. You, too." Jamie bent and grabbed Jem round the waist, launching him high into the air in a flutter of shirt before Brianna could cry out.

"He can't swim!"

This protest coincided with a huge splash, as Jem hit the water and promptly sank like a rock. She was striding toward the edge, prepared to dive in after him, when her father put a hand on her arm to stop her.

"Wait a bit," he said. "How will ye ken whether he swims or not, if ye dinna let him try?"

Germain was already arrowing his way toward shore, his sleek blond head dark with water. Jemmy popped up behind him, though, splashing and spluttering, and Germain dived, turned like an otter, and came up alongside.

"Kick!" he called to Jemmy, churning up a huge spray in illustration. "Go on your back!"

Jemmy ceased flailing, went on his back, and kicked madly. His hair was plastered over his face and the spray of his efforts must have obscured any remnants of vision—but he went on valiantly kicking, to encouraging whoops from Jamie and Germain.

The pool was no more than ten feet across, and he reached the shallows on the opposite bank within seconds, beaching among the rocks by virtue of crashing headfirst into one. He stopped, thrashing feebly in the shallows, then bounced to his feet, showering water, and shoved the wet hair out of his face. He looked amazed.

"I can swim!" he shouted. "Mama, I can *swim*!"

"That's wonderful!" she called, torn between sharing his ecstatic pride, the urge to rush home and tell Roger about it—and dire visions of Jemmy now leaping heedlessly into bottomless ponds and rock-jagged rapids, under the reckless delusion that he could indeed swim. But he'd gotten his feet wet, in no uncertain terms; there was no going back.

"Come here!" She bent toward him, clapping her hands. "Can you swim back to me? Come on, come here!"

He looked blankly at her for an instant, then around him at the rippling water of the pool. The blaze of excitement in his face died.

"I forget," he said, and his mouth curled down, fat with sudden woe. "I forget how!"

"Fall down and kick!" Germain bellowed helpfully, from his perch on the rock. "You can do it, *cousin*!"

Jemmy took one or two blundering steps into the water, but stopped, lip trembling, terror and confusion starting to overwhelm him.

"Stay there, *a chuisle*! I'm coming!" Jamie called, and dove cleanly into the pool, a long pale streak beneath the water, bubbles streaming from hair and breeks. He popped up in front of Jemmy in an explosion of breath and shook his head, flinging strands of wet red hair out of his face.

"Come along then, man," he said, scooting round on his knees in the shallows, so that his back was to Jemmy. He looked back, patting his own shoulder. “Take hold of me here, aye? We’ll swim back together.”

And they did, kicking and splashing in ungainly dog paddle, Jemmy’s shrieks of excitement echoed by Germain, who had leaped into the water to paddle alongside.

Hauled out onto the rock, the three of them lay puddled, gasping and laughing at her feet, water spreading in pools around them.

“Well, you are cleaner,” she said judiciously, moving her foot away from a spreading streamlet. “I’ll admit that much.”

“Of course we are.” Jamie sat up, wringing out the long tail of his hair. “It occurs to me, lass, that there’s maybe a better way to do what ye want.”

“What I w—oh. You mean the water?”

“Aye, that.” He sniffed, and rubbed the back of his hand under his nose. “I’ll show ye, if ye come up to the house after supper.”

“What’s that, Grandda?” Jemmy had got to his feet, wet hair standing up in red spikes, and was looking curiously at Jamie’s back. He put out a tentative finger and traced one of the long, curving scars.

“What? Oh … that.” Jamie’s face went quite blank for a moment. “It’s … ah …”

“Some bad people hurt Grandda once,” she interrupted firmly, bending down to pick Jemmy up. “But that was a long time ago. He’s all right now. You weigh a ton!”

“Papa says *Grandpère* is perhaps a silkie,” Germain remarked, viewing Jamie’s back with interest. “Like his papa before him. Did the bad people find you in your silkie skin, *Grandpère,* and try to cut it from you? He would then of course become a man again,” he explained matter-of-factly, looking up at Jemmy, “and could kill them with his sword.”

Jamie was staring at Germain. He blinked, and wiped his nose again.

“Oh,” he said. “Aye. Um. Aye, I expect that was the way of it. If your papa says so.”

“What’s a silkie?” asked Jemmy, bewildered but interested. He wiggled in Brianna’s arms, wanting to be put down, and she lowered him back to the rock.

"I don't know," Germain admitted. "But they have fur. What's a silkie, *Grandpère*?"

Jamie closed his eyes against the sinking sun, and rubbed a hand over his face, shaking his head a little. Brianna thought he was smiling, but couldn't tell for sure.

"Ah, well," he said, sitting up straighter, opening his eyes, and throwing back his wet hair. "A silkie is a creature who is a man upon the land, but becomes a seal within the sea. And a seal," he added, cutting off Jemmy, who had been opening his mouth to ask, "is a great sleek beastie that barks like a dog, is as big as an ox, and beautiful as the black of night. They live in the sea, but come out onto the rocks near the shore sometimes."

"Have you seen them, *Grandpère*?" Germain asked, eager.

"Oh, many a time," Jamie assured him. "There are a great many seals who live on the coasts of Scotland."

"Scotland," Jemmy echoed. His eyes were round.

"*Ma mère* says Scotland is a good place," Germain remarked. "She cries sometimes, when she talks of it. I am not so sure I would like it, though."

"Why not?" Brianna asked.

"It's full of giants and water horses and … things," Germain replied, frowning. "I don't want to meet any of those. And parritch, *Maman* says, but we have parritch here."

"So we have. And I expect it's time we were going home to eat some." Jamie got to his feet and stretched, groaning in the pleasure of it. The late-afternoon sun washed rock and water with a golden light, gleaming on the boys' cheeks and the bright hairs on her father's arms.

Jemmy stretched and groaned, too, in worshipful imitation, and Jamie laughed.

"Come on, wee fishie. D'ye want a ride home?" He bent so that Jemmy could scramble onto his back, then straightened up, settling the little boy's weight, and put out a hand to take Germain's.

Jamie saw her attention turn momentarily back toward the blackened smudge at the edge of the rock.

"Leave it, lass," he said quietly. "It's a charm of some kind. Ye dinna want to touch it."

Then he stepped off the rock and made for the trail, Jemmy on his back and Germain clutched firmly by the back of the neck, both boys giggling as they made their way through the slippery mud of the path.

Brianna retrieved her spade and Jamie's shirt from the creekbank, and caught the boys up on the trail to the Big House. A breeze had begun to breathe through the trees, chilly in the damp cloth of her shift, but the heat of walking was enough to keep her from being cold.

Germain was singing softly to himself, still hand-in-hand with his grandfather, his small blond head tilting back and forth like a metronome.

Jemmy sighed in exhausted bliss, legs wrapped round Jamie's middle, arms about his neck, and leaned his sun-reddened cheek against the scarred back. Then he thought of something, for he raised his head and kissed his grandfather with a loud smacking noise, between the shoulder blades.

Her father jerked, nearly dropping Jem, and made a high-pitched noise that made her laugh.

"Is that make it better?" Jem inquired seriously, pulling himself up and trying to look over Jamie's shoulder into his face.

"Oh. Aye, lad," his grandfather assured him, face twitching. "Much better."

The gnats and midges were out in force now. She beat a cloud of them away from her face, and slapped a mosquito that lit on Germain's neck.

"Ak!" he said, hunching his shoulders, but then resumed singing "Alouette," undisturbed.

Jemmy's shirt was thin, worn linen, cut down from one of Roger's old ones. The cloth had dried to the shape of his body, square-rumped and solid, the breadth of his small, tender shoulders echoing the wide set of the older, firmer ones he clung to. She glanced from the redheads to Germain, walking reed-thin and graceful through shadows and light, still singing, and thought how desperately beautiful men were.

"Who were the bad people, Grandda?" Jemmy asked drowsily, head nodding with the rhythm of Jamie's steps.

"Sassunaich," Jamie replied briefly. "English soldiers."

"English *canaille,*" Germain amplified, breaking off his song. "They are the ones who cut off my papa's hand, too."

"They were?" Jemmy's head lifted in momentary attention, then fell back between Jamie's shoulder blades with a thump that made his grandfather grunt. "Did you kill them with your sword, Grandda?"

"Some of them."

"I will kill the rest, when I am big," Germain declared. "If there are any left."

"I suppose there might be." Jamie hitched Jem's weight a little higher, letting go Germain's hand in order to hold Jemmy's slackening legs tight to his body.

"Me, too," Jemmy murmured, eyelids drooping. "I'll kill them, too."

At the fork in the trail, Jamie surrendered her son to her, sound asleep, and took back his shirt. He pulled it on, brushing disheveled hair out of his face as his head came through. He smiled at her, then leaned forward and kissed her forehead, gently, putting one hand on Jemmy's round, red head where it lay against her shoulder.

"Dinna fash yourself, lass," he said softly. "I'll speak to Mordecai. And your man. Take care of this one."

* * *

"This is a private business," her father had said. The general implication being that she should leave it alone. And she might have, save for a couple of things. One, that Roger had come home well after dark, whistling a song he said Amy McCallum had taught him. And two, that other offhand remark her father had made about the fire on the Flat Rock—that there was a smell of the Highlands about it.

Brianna had a very keen nose, and she smelled a rat. She also had recognized—belatedly—what had made Jamie say what he had. The odd smell of the fire, that tang of medicine—it was iodine; the smell of burned seaweed. She'd smelled a fire built of sea wrack on the shore near Ullapool, in her own time, when Roger had taken her up there for a picnic.

There was certainly seaweed on the coast, and it wasn't impossible that someone, sometime, had brought some inland. But it also wasn't impossible that some of the fisher-folk had brought bits of it from Scotland, in the way that some exiles might bring earth in jar, or a handful of pebbles to remind them of the land left behind.

A charm, her father had said. And the song Roger had learned from Amy McCallum was called "The Deasil Charm," he said.

All of which was no particular evidence of anything. Still, she mentioned the small fire and its contents to Mrs. Bug, just from curiosity. Mrs. Bug knew a good deal about Highland charms of all sorts.

Mrs. Bug frowned thoughtfully at her description, lips pursed.

"Bones, ye say? What sort—the bones of an animal, were they, or a man?"

Brianna felt as though someone had dropped a slug down her back.

"A man?"

"Oh, aye. There's some charms that take grave dust, ken, and some the dust of bones, or the ashes of a body." Evidently reminded by the mention of ashes, Mrs. Bug pulled a big pottery mixing bowl from the warm ashes of the hearth, and peered into it. The bread starter had died a few days before, and the bowl of flour, water, and honey had been set out in hopes of snaring a wild yeast from the passing air.

The round little Scotswoman frowned at the bowl, shook her head, and put it back with a brief muttered verse in Gaelic. Naturally, Brianna thought, slightly amused, there *would* be a prayer for catching yeast. Which patron saint was in charge of that?

"What ye said, though," Mrs. Bug said, returning both to her chopping of turnips and to the original subject of conversation.

"About it bein' on the Flat Rock. Seaweed, bones, and a flat rock. That's a love charm, lass. The one they call the Venom o' the North Wind."

"What a really peculiar name for a love charm," she said, staring at Mrs. Bug, who laughed.

"Och, now, do I remember it at all?" she asked rhetorically. She wiped her hands upon her apron, and folding them at her waist with a vaguely theatrical air, recited:

"A love charm for thee,
Water drawn through a straw,
The warmth of him thou lovest,
With love to draw on thee.

"Arise betimes on Lord's day,
To the flat rock of the shore
Take with thee the butterbur
And the foxglove.

"A small quantity of embers
In the skirt of thy kirtle,
A special handful of seaweed
In a wooden shovel.

"Three bones of an old man,
Newly torn from the grave,
Nine stalks of royal fern,
Newly trimmed with an ax.

"Burn them on a fire of faggots
And make them all into ashes;
Sprinkle in the fleshy breast of thy lover,
Against the venom of the north wind.

"Go round the rath of procreation,
The circuit of the five turns,

And I will vow and warrant thee
That man shall never leave thee.”

Mrs. Bug unfolded her hands and took another turnip, quartering it with neat, quick chops and tossing the pieces into the pot. “Ye’re not wanting such a thing yourself, I hope?”

“No,” Brianna murmured, feeling the small cold feeling continue down her back. “Do you think—would the fisher-folk use a charm like that?”

“Well, as to that, I canna say *what* they’d do—but surely a few would ken that charm; it’s weel enough known, though I havena kent anyone myself has done it. There are easier ways to make a lad fall in love wi’ ye, lass,” she added, pointing a stubby finger at Brianna in admonition. “Cook him up a nice plate o’ neeps boiled in milk and served wi’ butter, for one.”

“I’ll remember,” Brianna promised, smiling, and excused herself.

She had meant to go home; there were dozens of things needing to be done, from spinning yarn and weaving cloth, to plucking and drawing the half dozen dead geese she had shot and hung in the lean-to. But instead she found her footsteps turning up the hill, along the overgrown trail that led to the graveyard.

Surely it wasn’t Amy McCallum who’d made that charm, she thought. It would have taken her hours to walk down the mountain from her cabin, and her with a small baby to tend. But babies could be carried. And no one would know whether she had left her cabin, save perhaps Aidan—and Aidan didn’t talk to anyone but Roger, whom he worshipped.

The sun was nearly down, and the tiny cemetery had a melancholy look to it, long shadows from its sheltering trees slanting cold and dark across the needle-strewn ground and the small collection of crude markers, cairns, and wooden crosses. The pines and hemlocks murmured uneasily overhead in the rising breeze of evening.

The sense of cold had spread from her backbone, making a wide patch between her shoulder blades. Seeing the earth grubbed up beneath the wooden marker with *Ephraim* on it didn’t help.

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SHARP EDGES

He should have known better. *Did* know better. But what could he have done? Much more important, what was he to do now?

Roger made his way slowly up the mountainside, nearly oblivious to its beauty. Nearly, but not quite. Desolate in the bleakness of winter, the secluded notch where Amy McCallum's ramshackle cabin perched among the laurels was a blaze of color and life in spring and summer—so vivid that even his worry couldn't stop his noticing the blaze of pinks and reds, interrupted by soft patches of creamy dogwood and carpets of bluets, their tiny blue flowers nodding on slender stems above the torrent of the stream that bounded down beside the rocky trail.

They must have chosen the site in summer, he reflected cynically. It would have seemed charming then. He hadn't known Orem McCallum, but plainly the man hadn't been any more practical than his wife, or they would have realized the dangers of their remoteness.

The present situation wasn't Amy's fault, though; he shouldn't blame her for his own lack of judgment.

He didn't precisely blame himself, either—but he should have noticed sooner what was going on; what was being said.

"Everybody kens ye spend more time up at the notch wi' the widow McCallum than ye do with your own wife."

That's what Malva Christie had said, her little pointed chin raised in defiance. *"Tell my father, and I'll tell everyone I've seen you kiss Amy McCallum. They'll all believe me."*

He felt an echo of the astonishment he'd felt at her words—an astonishment succeeded by anger. At the girl and her silly threat, but much more at himself.

He'd been working at the whisky clearing and, heading back to the cabin for dinner, had rounded a turn in the trail and surprised the two of them, Malva and Bobby Higgins, locked in an embrace. They'd sprung apart like a pair of startled deer, eyes wide, so alarmed as to be funny.

He'd smiled, but before he could either apologize or fade tactfully into the underbrush, Malva had stepped up to him, eyes still wide, but blazing with determination.

"Tell my father," she'd said, *"and I'll tell everyone I've seen you kiss Amy McCallum."*

He'd been so taken aback by her words that he'd scarcely noticed Bobby, until the young soldier had put a hand on her arm, murmuring something to her, drawing her away. She'd turned reluctantly, with a last, wary, meaningful glance at Roger, and a parting shot that left him staggered.

"Everybody kens ye spend more time up at the notch wi' the widow McCallum than ye do with your own wife. They'll all believe me."

God damn it, they would, too, and it was his own bloody fault. Bar one or two sarcastic remarks, Bree hadn't protested his visits; she'd accepted—or seemed to—that *someone* had to go now and then to see the McCallums, make sure they had food and fire, provide a few moments' company, a small respite in the monotony of loneliness and labor.

He'd done such things often, going with the Reverend to call on the aged, the widowed, the ill of the congregation; take them food, stop for a bit to talk—to listen. It was just what you *did* for a neighbor, he told himself; a normal kindness.

But he should have taken more notice. Now he recalled Jamie's thoughtful glance over the supper table, the breath taken as though to say something, when Roger had asked Claire for a salve for wee

Orrie McCallum's rash—and then Claire's glance at Brianna, and Jamie's closing his mouth, whatever he'd thought of saying left unspoken.

"They'll all believe me." For the girl to have said that, there must have been talk already. Likely Jamie had heard it; he could only hope that Bree hadn't.

The crooked chimney came in sight above the laurels, the smoke a nearly transparent wisp that made the clear air above the rooftree seem to quiver, as though the cabin were enchanted, might vanish with a blink.

The worst of it was that he knew precisely how it had happened. He had a weakness for young mothers, a terrible tenderness toward them, a desire to take care of them. The fact that he knew exactly *why* he harbored such an urge—the memory of his own young mother, who had died saving his life during the Blitz—didn't help.

It was a tenderness that had nearly cost him his life at Alamance, when that bloody-minded fool William Buccleigh MacKenzie had mistaken Roger's concern for Morag MacKenzie for … well, all right, he'd kissed her, but only on the forehead, and for God's sake, she was his own many-times-great-grannie … and the thundering idiocy of nearly being killed by your own great-great-etc.-grandfather for molesting his wife … it had cost him his voice, and he should have learned his lesson, but he hadn't, not well enough.

Suddenly furious with himself—and with Malva Christie, the malicious little chit—he picked up a stone from the trail and flung it down the mountain, into the stream. It struck another in the water, bounced twice, and vanished into the rushing gurgle.

His visits to the McCallums had to stop, at once. He saw that clearly. Another way would have to be found for them … but he had to come once more, to explain. Amy would understand, he thought—but how to explain to Aidan what reputation was, and why gossip was a deadly sin, and why Roger couldn't come anymore to fish or show him how to build things.…

Cursing steadily under his breath, he made the last short, steep ascent and came into the ragged, overgrown little dooryard. Before he could call out to announce his presence, though, the door flew open.

"Roger Mac!" Amy McCallum half-fell down the step and into his arms, gasping and weeping. "Oh, you came, you came! I prayed for someone to come, but I didna think anyone would, in time, and he'd die, but ye've come, God be thankit!"

"What is it? What's wrong? Is wee Orrie taken sick?" He got hold of her arms, steadying her, and she shook her head, so violently that her cap slid half off.

"Aidan," she gasped. "It's Aidan."

* * *

Aidan McCallum lay doubled up on my surgery table, white as a sheet, making little gasping groans. My first hope—green apples or gooseberries—vanished with a closer look at him. I was fairly sure what I had here, but appendicitis shares symptoms with a number of other conditions. A classic case does, however, have one striking aspect.

"Can you unfold him, just for a moment?" I looked at his mother, hovering over him on the verge of tears, but it was Roger who nodded and came to put his hands on Aidan's knees and shoulders, gently persuading him to lie flat.

I put a thumb in his navel, my little finger on his right hipbone, and pressed his abdomen sharply with my middle finger, wondering for a second as I did so whether McBurney had yet discovered and named this diagnostic spot. Pain in McBurney's Spot was a specific diagnostic symptom for acute appendicitis. I pressed Aidan's stomach there, then I released the pressure, he screamed, arched up off the table, and doubled up like a jackknife.

A hot appendix for sure. I'd known I'd encounter one sometime. And with a mixed sense of dismay and excitement, I realized that the time had come for me finally to use the ether. No doubt about it, and no choice; if the appendix wasn't removed, it would rupture.

I glanced up; Roger was supporting little Mrs. McCallum with a hand under her elbow; she clutched the baby close to her chest, wrapped in its bundle. She'd need to stay; Aidan would need her.

"Roger—get Lizzie to come mind the baby, will you? And then run as fast as you can to the Christies'; I'll need Malva to come and help."

The most extraordinary expression flitted across his face; I couldn't interpret it, but it was gone in an instant, and I didn't have time to worry about it. He nodded and left without a word, and I turned my attention to Mrs. McCallum, asking her the questions I needed answered before I cut into her small son's belly.

* * *

It was Allan Christie who opened the door to Roger's brusque knock. A darker, leaner version of his owl-faced father, he blinked slowly at the question as to Malva's whereabouts.

"Why … she's gone to the stream," he said. "Gathering rushes, she said." He frowned. "Why do ye want her?"

"Mrs. Fraser needs her to come and help with—with something." Something moved inside; the back door opening. Tom Christie came in, a book in his hand, the page he'd been reading caught between two fingers.

"MacKenzie," he said, with a short jerk of the head in acknowledgment. "Did ye say Mrs. Fraser is wanting Malva? Why?" He frowned as well, the two Christies looking exactly like a pair of barn owls contemplating a questionable mouse. "Only that wee Aidan McCallum's taken badly, and she'd be glad of Malva's help. I'll go and find her."

Christie's frown deepened, and he opened his mouth to speak, but Roger had already turned, hurrying into the trees before either of them could stop him.

He found her fairly quickly, though every moment spent searching seemed an eternity. How long did it take an appendix to burst? She was knee-deep in the stream, skirts kirtled high and her rush basket floating beside her, tethered by an apron string. She didn't hear him at first, deafened by the flow of the water. When he called her name more loudly, her head jerked up in alarm, and she raised the rush knife, gripped tightly in her hand.

The look of alarm faded when she saw who it was, though she kept a wary eye on him—and a good grip on the knife, he saw. His summons was received with a flash of interest.

"The ether? Really, she's going to cut him?" she asked eagerly, wading toward him.

"Yes. Come on; I've already told your father Mrs. Fraser needs you. We needn't stop."

Her face changed at that.

"Ye told him?" Her brow creased for a moment. Then she bit her lip and shook her head.

"I can't," she said, raising her voice above the sound of the stream.

"Yes, ye can," he said, as encouragingly as possible, and stretched out a hand to help her. "Come on; I'll give ye a hand with your things."

She shook her head more decidedly, pink lower lip poking out a bit.

"No. My father—he'll no have it." She glanced in the direction of the cabin, and he turned to look, but it was all right; neither Allan nor Tom had followed him. Yet.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped into the icy creek, the stones rolling, hard and slippery under his feet. Malva's eyes widened and her mouth fell open as he bent and grabbed her basket, ripped it from her apron string, and tossed it onto the bank. Then he took the knife from her hand, thrust it through his belt, grabbed her round the waist, and picking her up, splashed ashore with her, disregarding the kicking and squealing.

"You're coming with me," he said, grunting as he set her down. "Ye want to walk, or do I carry you?"

He thought she seemed more intrigued than horrified at this proposal, but she shook her head again, backing away from him.

"I can't—truly! He'll—he'll beat me if he finds out I've been meddling wi' the ether."

That checked him momentarily. Would he? Perhaps. But Aidan's life was at stake.

"He won't find out, then," he said. "Or if he does, I'll see to it that he does ye no harm. Come, for God's sake—there's no time to be wasting!"

Her small pink mouth compressed itself in stubbornness. No time for scruples, then. He leaned down to bring his face close to hers and stared her in the eye.

"You'll come," he said, fists curling, "or I tell your father and your brother about you and Bobby Higgins. Say what ye like about me—I don't care. But if ye think your father would beat you for helping Mrs. Fraser, what's he likely to do if he hears ye've been snogging Bobby?"

He didn't know what the eighteenth-century equivalent of snogging was, but plainly she understood him. And if she'd been anywhere near his own size, she would have knocked him down, if he read the dangerous light in those big gray eyes correctly.

But she wasn't, and after an instant's consideration, she bent, dried her legs on her skirts, and shuffled hurriedly into her sandals.

"Leave it," she said briefly, seeing him stoop for the basket. "And give me back my knife."

It might have been simply an urge to keep some influence over her until she was safely in the surgery—surely he wasn't afraid of her. He put a hand to the knife at his belt, though, and said, "Later. When it's done."

She didn't bother arguing, but scampered up the bank ahead of him and headed for the Big House, the soles of her sandals flapping against her bare heels.

* * *

I had my fingers on the brachial pulse in Aidan's armpit, counting. His skin was very hot to the touch, maybe a temperature of 101, 102. The pulse was strong, though rapid … slowing as he went further under. I could feel Malva counting under her breath, so many drops of ether, so long a pause before the next … I lost my own count of the pulse, but it didn't matter; I was taking it into myself, feeling my own pulse begin to beat in the same rhythm, and it was normal, steady.

He was breathing well. The little abdomen rose and fell slightly under my hand, and I could feel the muscles relaxing by the moment, everything except the tense, distended belly, the visible ribs arching high above it as he breathed. I had the sudden illusion that I could push my hand straight through the wall of his abdomen and touch the swollen appendix, could see it in my mind, throbbing malignantly in the dark security of its sealed world. Time, then.

Mrs. McCallum made a small sound when I took up the scalpel, a louder one when I pressed it down into the pale flesh, still gleaming wet with the alcohol I'd swabbed it with, like a fish's belly yielding to the gutting knife.

The skin parted easily, blood welling in that odd, magical way, seeming to appear from nowhere. He had almost no fat beneath it; the muscles were right there, dark red, resilient to the touch. There were other people in the room; I felt them vaguely. I had no attention to spare, though. Every sense I had was focused on the small body under my hands. Someone stood at my shoulder, though —Bree?

"Give me a retractor—yes, that thing." Yes, it was Bree; a long-fingered hand, wet with disinfectant, picked up the claw-shaped thing and put it in my waiting left hand. I missed the services of a good surgical nurse, but we'd manage.

"Hold that, just there." I nosed the blade between the muscle fibers, splitting them easily, and then pinched up the thick soft gleam of the peritoneum, lifted it and sliced it.

His innards were very warm, sucking wet around two probing fingers. Soft squish of intestine, small half-firm lumps of matter felt through their walls, the brush of bone against my knuckle—he was so small, there wasn't much room to feel around. I had my eyes closed, concentrating on touch alone. The cecum *had* to be right under my fingers, that was the curve of the large intestine I could feel, inert but live, like a sleeping snake. Behind? Below? I probed carefully, opened my eyes, and peered closely into the wound. He wasn't bleeding badly, but the wound was still awash. Ought I take the time to cauterize the small bleeders? I glanced at Malva; she was frowning in concentration, her lips moving silently, counting—and she had one hand on the pulse in his neck, keeping track.

"Cautery iron—a small one." A moment's pause; with the flammability of ether in mind, I had doused the hearth and put the brazier across the hall, in Jamie's study. Bree was quick, though; I had it in my hand in seconds. A wisp of smoke rose from his belly and the sizzle of seared flesh struck into the thick warm smell of blood. I glanced up to hand the iron back to Bree, and saw Mrs. McCallum's face, all eyes, staring.

I blotted away the blood with a handful of lint, looked again—my fingers were still holding what I thought … all right.

"All right," I said out loud, triumphant. "Got you!" Very carefully, I hooked a finger under the curve of the cecum and pulled a section of it up through the wound, the inflamed appendix sticking out from it like an angry fat worm, purple with inflammation.

"Ligature."

I had it now. I could see the membrane down the side of the appendix and the blood vessels feeding it. Those had to be tied off first; then I could tie off the appendix itself and cut it away. Difficult only because of the small size, but no real problem …

The room was so still, I could hear the tiny hisses and pops from the charcoal in the brazier across the hall. Sweat was running down behind my ears, between my breasts, and I became dimly aware that my teeth were sunk in my lower lip.

"Forceps." I pulled the purse-string stitch tight, and taking the forceps, poked the tied-off stump of the appendix neatly up into the cecum. I pressed this firmly back into his belly and took a breath.

"How long, Malva?"

"A bit more than ten minutes, ma'am. He's all right." She took her eyes off the ether mask long enough to dart a quick smile at me, then took up the dropping bottle, lips resuming her silent count.

Closing up was quick. I painted the sutured wound with a thick layer of honey, wrapped a bandage tightly round his body, tucked warm blankets over him and breathed.

"Take off the mask," I said to Malva, straightening up. She made no reply, and I looked at her. She had raised the mask, was holding it in both hands before her, like a shield. But she wasn't watching Aidan anymore; her eyes were fixed on her father, standing rigid in the doorway.

* * *

Tom Christie looked back and forth from the small naked body on the table to his daughter. She took an uncertain step back, still clutching the ether mask. His head twisted, piercing me with a fierce gray look.

"What's to do here?" he demanded. "What are ye doing to that child?"

"Saving his life," I replied tartly. I was still vibrating from the intensity of the surgery, and in no mood for rannygazoo. "Did you want something?"

Christie's thin lips pressed tight, but before he could reply, his son, Allan, pushed his way past into the room, and reaching his sister in a couple of strides, grabbed her by the wrist.

"Come away, ye wee gomerel," he said roughly, jerking at her. "Ye've no business here."

"Let go of her." Roger spoke sharply, and took hold of Allan's shoulder, to pull him away. Allan whirled on his heel and punched Roger in the stomach, short and sharp. Roger made a hollow crowing noise, but didn't crumple. Instead, he slugged Allan Christie in the jaw. Allan reeled backward, knocking over the little table of instruments—blades and retractors clattered over the floor in a swash of falling metal, and the jar of catgut ligatures in alcohol smashed on the boards, spraying glass and liquid everywhere.

A soft thump from the floor made me look down. Amy McCallum, overcome by ether fumes and emotion, had passed out.

I hadn't time to do anything about that; Allan bounced back with a wild swing, Roger ducked, caught the rush of the younger Christie's body, and the two of them staggered backward, hit the sill, and fell out of the open window, entangled.

Tom Christie made a low growling noise and hurried toward the window. Malva, seizing her chance, ran out the door; I heard her footsteps pattering hastily down the hall toward the kitchen—and, presumably, the back door.

"What on *earth* …?" Bree said, looking at me.

"Don't look at me," I said, shaking my head. "I have *no* idea." Which was true; I did, however, have a sinking feeling that my involving Malva in the operation had a lot to do with it. Tom Christie and I had reached something like rapprochement, following my operation on his hand—but that didn't mean he had altered his views on the ungodliness of ether.

Bree drew herself abruptly upright, stiffening. A certain amount of grunting, gasping, and incoherent half-insults outside indicated that the fight was continuing—but Allan Christie's raised voice had just called Roger an adulterer.

Brianna glanced sharply at the huddled form of Amy McCallum, and I said a very bad word to myself. I'd heard a few sidelong remarks about Roger's visits to the McCallums—and Jamie had come close to saying something to Roger about it, but I had dissuaded him from interfering, telling him that I'd take up the matter tactfully with Bree. I hadn't had the chance, though, and now—

With a last unfriendly look at Amy McCallum, Bree strode out the door, plainly intending to take a hand in the fight. I clutched my brow and must have moaned, for Tom Christie turned sharply from the window.

"Are ye ill, mistress?"

"No," I said, a little wanly. "Just … look, Tom. I'm sorry if I've caused trouble, asking Malva to help me. She has a real gift for healing, I think—but I didn't mean to persuade her into doing something you didn't approve of."

He gave me a bleak look, which he then transferred to Aidan's slack body. The look sharpened suddenly.

"Is that child dead?" he asked.

"No, no," I said. "I gave him ether; he's just gone aslee—"

My voice dried in my throat, as I noticed that Aidan had chosen this inconvenient moment to stop breathing.

With an incoherent cry, I shoved Tom Christie out of the way and fell on Aidan, gluing my mouth over his and pressing the heel of my hand hard in the center of his chest.

The ether in his lungs flowed over my face as I took my mouth away, making my head swim. I gripped the edge of the table hard with my free hand, putting my mouth back on his. I could *not* black out, I couldn't.

My vision swam and the room seemed to be revolving slowly round me. I clung doggedly to consciousness, though, urgently blowing into his lungs, feeling the tiny chest under my hand rise gently, then fall.

It couldn't have been more than a minute, but a minute filled with nightmare, everything spinning round me, the feel of Aidan's flesh the only solid anchor in a whirl of chaos. Amy McCallum stirred on the floor beside me, rose swaying to her knees—then fell on me with a shriek, pulling at me, trying to get me off her son. I heard Tom Christie's voice, raised in command, trying to calm her; he must have pulled her away, for suddenly her grip on my leg was gone.

I blew into Aidan once more—and this time, the chest under my hand twitched. He coughed, choked, coughed again, and started simultaneously to breathe and to cry. I stood up, head spinning, and had to hold on to the table to avoid falling.

I saw a pair of figures before me, black, distorted, with gaping mouths that opened toward me, filled with sharp fangs. I blinked, staggering, and took deep gulps of air. Blinked again, and the figures resolved themselves into Tom Christie and Amy McCallum. He was holding her round the waist, keeping her back.

"It's all right," I said, my own voice sounding strange and far off. "He's all right. Let her come to him."

She flung herself at Aidan with a sob, pulling him into her arms. Tom Christie and I stood staring at each other over the wreckage. Outside, everything had gone quiet.

"Did ye just raise that child from the dead?" he asked. His voice was almost conversational, though his feathery brows arched high.

I wiped a hand across my mouth, still tasting the sickly sweetness of the ether.

"I suppose so," I said.

"Oh."

He stared at me, blank-faced. The room reeked of alcohol, and it seemed to sear my nasal lining. My eyes were watering a little; I wiped them on my apron. Finally, he nodded, as though to himself, and turned to go.

I had to see to Aidan and his mother. But I couldn't let him go without trying to mend things for Malva, so far as I could.

"Tom—Mr. Christie." I hurried after him, and caught him by the sleeve. He turned, surprised and frowning.

"Malva. It's my fault; I sent Roger to bring her. You won't—" I hesitated, but couldn't think of any tactful way to put it. "You won't punish her, will you?"

The frown deepened momentarily, then lifted. He shook his head, very slightly, and with a small bow, detached his sleeve from my hand.

"Your servant, Mrs. Fraser," he said quietly, and with a last glance at Aidan—presently demanding food—he left.

* * *

Brianna dabbed the wet corner of a handkerchief at Roger's lower lip, split on one side, swollen and bleeding from the impact of some part of Allan Christie.

"It's my fault," he said, for the third time. "I should have thought of something sensible to tell them."

"Shut up," she said, beginning to lose her precarious grip on her patience. "If you keep talking, it won't stop bleeding." It was the first thing she'd said to him since the fight.

With a mumbled apology, he took the handkerchief from her and pressed it to his mouth. Unable to keep still, though, he got up and went to the open door of the cabin, looking out.

"He's not still hanging around, is he? Allan?" She came to look over his shoulder. "If he is, leave him alone. I'll go—"

"No, he's not," Roger interrupted her. Hand still pressed to his mouth, he nodded toward the Big House, at the far end of the sloped clearing. "It's Tom."

Sure enough, Tom Christie was standing on the stoop. Just standing, apparently deep in thought. As they watched, he shook his head like a dog shedding water, and set off with decision in the direction of his own place.

"I'll go and talk to him." Roger tossed the handkerchief at the table.

"Oh, no, you won't." She grabbed him by the arm as he turned toward the door. "You stay out of it, Roger!"

"I'm not going to fight him," he said, patting her hand in what he plainly thought a reassuring manner. "But I've got to talk to him."

"No, you don't." She tightened her grip on his arm, and pulled, trying to bring him back to the hearth. "You'll just make it worse. Leave them alone."

"No, I won't," he said, irritation beginning to show on his face. "What do ye mean, I'll make it worse? What d'ye think I am?"

That wasn't a question she wanted to answer right this minute. Vibrating with emotion from the tension of Aidan's surgery, the explosion of the fight, and the niggling bur of Allan's shouted insult, she barely trusted herself to speak, let alone be tactful.

"Don't go," she repeated, forcing herself to lower her voice, speak calmly. "Everyone's upset. At least wait until they've settled down. Better yet, wait 'til Da comes back. He can—"

"Aye, he can do everything better than I can, I know that fine," Roger replied caustically. "But it's me that promised Malva she'd come to no harm. I'm going." He yanked at his sleeve, hard enough that she felt the underarm seam give way.

"Fine!" She let go, and slapped him hard on the arm. "Go! Take care of everybody in the world but your own family. Go! Bloody *go*!"

"What?" He stopped, scowling, caught between anger and puzzlement.

“You heard me! Go!” She stamped her foot, and the jar of *dauco* seeds, left too near the edge of the shelf, fell off and smashed on the floor, scattering tiny black seeds like pepper grains. “Now look what you’ve done!”

“What *I’ve*—”

“Never mind! Just never mind. Get out of here.” She was puffing like a grampus with the effort not to cry. Her cheeks were hot with blood and her eyeballs felt red, bloodshot, so hot that she felt she might sear him with a look—certainly she wished she could.

He hovered, clearly trying to decide whether to stay and conciliate his disgruntled wife, or rush off in chivalrous protection of Malva Christie. He took a hesitant step toward the door, and she dived for the broom, making stupid, high-pitched squeaks of incoherent rage as she swung it at his head.

He ducked, but she got him on the second swing, catching him across the ribs with a *thwack*. He jerked in surprise at the impact, but recovered fast enough to catch the broom on the next swing. He yanked it out of her hand, and with a grunt of effort, broke it over his knee with a splintering crack.

He threw the pieces clattering at her feet and glared at her, angry but self-possessed.

“What in the name of God is the matter with you?”

She drew up tall and glared back.

“What I said. If you’re spending so much time with Amy McCallum that it’s common talk you’re having an affair with her—”

“I’m *what*?” His voice broke with outrage, but there was a shifty look in his eyes that gave him away.

“So you’ve heard it, too—haven’t you?” She didn’t feel triumphant at having caught him out; more a sense of sick fury.

“You can’t possibly think that’s true, Bree,” he said, his voice pitched uncertainly between angry repudiation and pleading.

“I know it isn’t true,” she said, and was furious to hear her own voice as shaky and cracked as his was. “That’s not the effing *point,* Roger!”

“The point,” he repeated. His black brows were drawn down, his eyes sharp and dark beneath them.

“The point,” she said, gulping air, “is that you’re always *gone*. Malva Christie, Amy McCallum, Marsali, Lizzie—you even go help Ute McGillivray, for God’s sake!”

“Who else is to do it?” he asked sharply. “Your father or your cousin might, aye—but they’ve to be gone to the Indians. I’m here. And I’m not always gone,” he added, as an afterthought. “I’m home every night, am I not?”

She closed her eyes and clenched her fists, feeling the nails dig into her palms.

“You’ll help any woman but me,” she said, opening her eyes. “Why is that?”

He gave her a long, hard look, and she wondered for an instant whether there was such a thing as a black emerald.

“Maybe I didn’t think ye needed me,” he said. And turning on his heel, he left.

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THE CALLING

The water lay calm as melted silver, the only movement on it the shadows of the evening clouds. But the hatch was about to rise; you could feel it. Or perhaps, Roger thought, what he felt was the expectation in his father-in-law, crouched like a leopard on the bank of the trout pool, pole and fly at the ready for the first sign of a ripple.

“Like the pool at Bethesda,” he said, amused.

“Oh, aye?” Jamie answered, but didn’t look at him, his attention fixed on the water.

“The one where an angel would go down into the pool and trouble the water now and then. So everyone sat about waiting, so as to plunge in the minute the water began to stir.”

Jamie smiled, but still didn’t turn. Fishing was serious business.

That was good; he’d rather not have Jamie look at him. But he’d have to hurry if he meant to say something; Fraser was already paying out the line to make a practice cast or two.

“I think—” He stopped himself, correcting. “No, I don’t think. I know. I want—” His air ran out in a wheeze, annoying him; the last thing he wanted was to sound in any way doubtful about what he was saying. He took a huge breath, and the next words shot out as though fired from a pistol. “I mean to be a minister.”

Well, then. He’d said it out loud. He glanced upward, involuntarily, but sure enough, the sky hadn’t fallen. It was hazed and riffled with mare’s tails, but the blue calm of it showed through and the ghost of an early moon floated just above the mountain’s shoulder.

Jamie glanced thoughtfully at him, but didn’t seem shocked or taken aback. That was some small comfort, he supposed.

“A minister. A preacher, d’ye mean?”

“Well … aye. That, too.”

The admission disconcerted him. He supposed he *would* have to preach, though the mere notion of it was terrifying.

“That, *too*?” Fraser repeated, looking at him sideways.

“Aye. I mean—a minister does preach, of course.” Of course. What about? How? “But that’s not—I mean, that’s not the main thing. Not why I—I have to do it.” He was getting flustered, trying to explain clearly something that he could not even explain properly to himself.

He sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face.

“Aye, look. Ye recall Grannie Wilson’s funeral, of course. And the McCallums?”

Jamie merely nodded, but Roger thought perhaps a flicker of understanding showed in his eyes.

“I’ve done … a few things. A bit like that, when it was needed. And—” He twitched a hand, unsure even how to begin describing things like his meeting with Hermon Husband on the banks of the Alamance, or the conversations had with his dead father, late at night.

He sighed again, made to toss a pebble into the water, and stopped himself, just in time, when he saw Jamie’s hand tense round his fishing pole. He coughed, feeling the familiar choke and rasp in his throat, and closed his hand around the pebble.

“The preaching, aye, I suppose I’ll manage. But it’s the other things—oh, God, this sounds insane, and I do believe I may be. But it’s the burying and the christening and the—the—maybe just being able to *help,* even if it’s only by listening and praying.”

“Ye want to take care of them,” Jamie said softly, and it wasn’t a question, but rather an acceptance.

Roger laughed a little, unhappily, and closed his eyes against the sparkle of the sun off the water.

"I don't want to do it," he said. "It's the last thing I thought of, and me growing up in a minister's house. I mean, I ken what it's like. But someone *has* to do it, and I am thinking it's me."

Neither of them spoke for a bit. Roger opened his eyes and watched the water. Algae coated the rocks, wavering in the current like locks of mermaid's hair. Fraser stirred a little, drawing back his rod.

"Do Presbyterians believe in the sacraments, would ye say?"

"Yes," Roger said, surprised. "Of course we do. Have ye never—" Well, no. He supposed in fact Fraser never *had* spoken to anyone not a Catholic, regarding such matters. "We do," he repeated. He dipped a hand gently in the water, and wiped it across his brow, so the coolness ran down his face and down his neck inside his shirt.

"It's Holy Orders I mean, ken?" The drowned fly swam through the water, a tiny speck of red. "Will ye not need to be ordained?"

"Oh, I see. Aye, I would. There's a Presbyterian academy in Mecklenburg County. I'll go there and speak with them about it. Though I'm thinking it willna take such a time; I've the Greek and Latin already, and for what it's worth"—he smiled, despite himself—"I've a degree from Oxford University. Believe it or not, I was once thought an educated man."

Jamie's mouth twitched at the corner as he drew back his arm and snapped his wrist. The line sailed out, a lazy curve, and the fly settled. Roger blinked; sure enough—the surface of the pool was beginning to pucker and shiver, tiny ripples spreading out from the rising hatch of mayflies and damselflies.

"Have ye spoken to your wife about it?"

"No," he said, staring across the pool.

"Why not?" There was no tone of accusation in the question; more curiosity. Why, after all, should he have chosen to talk to his father-in-law first, rather than his wife?

Because you know what it is to be a man, he thought, *and she doesn't.* What he said, though, was another version of the truth.

"I don't want her to think me a coward."

Jamie made a small "hmph" noise, almost surprise, but didn't reply at once, concentrating on reeling in his line. He took the sodden fly from the hook, then hesitated over the collection on his hat, finally choosing a delicate green thing with a curving wisp of black feather.

"D'ye think she would?" Not waiting for an answer, Fraser stood and whipped the line up and back, sending the fly out to drift down over the center of the pool, lighting like a leaf on the water.

Roger watched as he brought it in, playing it over the water in a jerky dance. The Reverend had been a fisherman. All at once, he saw the Ness and its sparkling riffles, running clear brown over the rocks, Dad standing in his battered waders, reeling in his line. He was choked with longing. For Scotland. For his father. For one more day—just one—of peace.

The mountains and the green wood rose up mysterious and wild around them, and the hazy sky unfurled itself over the hollow like angel's wings, silent and sunlit. But not peaceful; never peace, not here.

"Do you believe us—Claire and Brianna and me—about the war that's coming?"

Jamie laughed shortly, gaze fixed on the water.

"I've eyes, man. It doesna take either prophet or witch to see it standing on the road."

"That," said Roger, giving him a curious look, "is a very odd way of putting it."

"Is it, so? Is that no what the Bible says? *When ye shall see the abomination of desolation, standing where it ought not, then let them in Judaea flee to the mountains?*"

Let him who readeth understand. Memory supplied the missing part of the verse, and Roger became aware, with a small sense of cold in the bone, that Jamie did indeed see it standing on the road, and recognized it. Nor was he using figures of speech; he was describing, precisely, what he saw—because he had seen it before.

The sound of small boys yelling in joy drifted across the water, and Fraser turned his head a little, listening. A faint smile touched his mouth, then he looked down into the moving water, seeming to grow still. The ropes of his hair stirred against the sunburned skin of his neck, in the same way that the leaves of the mountain ash moved above.

Roger wanted suddenly to ask Jamie whether he was afraid, but kept silence. He knew the answer, in any case.

It doesn't matter. He breathed deep, and felt the same answer, to the same question, asked of himself. It didn't seem to come from anywhere, but was just there inside him, as though he had been born with it, always known it.

It doesn't matter. You will do it anyway.

They stayed for some time in silence. Jamie cast twice more with the green fly, then shook his head and muttered something, reeled it in, changed it for a Dun Fly, and cast again. The little boys charged past on the other bank, naked as eels, giggling, and disappeared through the bushes.

Really odd, Roger thought. He felt all right. Still having not the slightest idea what he meant to do, exactly, still seeing the drifting cloud coming toward them, and now knowing much more about what lay within it. But still all right.

Jamie had a fish on the line. He brought it in fast, and jerked it shining and flapping onto the bank, where he killed it with a sharp blow on a rock before tucking it into his creel.

"D'ye mean to turn Quaker?" Jamie asked seriously.

"No." Roger was startled by the question. "Why do you ask that?"

Jamie made the odd little half-shrugging gesture that he sometimes used when uncomfortable about something, and didn't speak again until he'd made the new cast.

"Ye said ye didna want Brianna to think ye coward. I've fought by the side of a priest before." One side of his mouth turned up, wry. "Granted, he wasna much of a swordsman, the Monsignor, and he couldna hit the broad side of a barn wi' a pistol—but he was game enough."

"Oh." Roger scratched the side of his jaw. "Aye, I take your meaning. No, I can't fight with an army, I don't think." Saying it, he felt a sharp pang of regret. “But take up arms in defense of—of those who need it … I can square that with my conscience, aye.”

“That’s all right, then.”

Jamie reeled in the rest of the line, shook water from the fly, and stuck the hook back into his hat. Laying the line aside, he rummaged in the creel and pulled out a stoneware bottle. He sat down with a sigh, pulled the cork with his teeth, spat it into his hand, and offered Roger the bottle.

“It’s a thing Claire says to me, now and again,” he explained, and quoted: *“Malt does more than Milton can, to justify God’s ways to man.”*

Roger lifted an eyebrow.

“Ever read Milton?”

“A bit. She’s right about it.”

“Ye ken the next lines?” Roger lifted the bottle to his lips. *“Ale, man, ale’s the stuff to drink, For fellows whom it hurts to think.”*

A subterranean laugh moved through Fraser’s eyes.

“This must be whisky, then,” he said. “It only smells like beer.”

It was cool and dark and pleasantly bitter, and they passed the bottle to and fro, not saying much of anything, until the ale was gone. Jamie put the cork thriftily back in, and tucked the empty bottle away in the creel.

“Your wife,” he said thoughtfully, rising and hitching the strap of the creel onto his shoulder.

“Aye?” Roger picked up the battered hat, bestrewn with flies, and gave it to him. Jamie nodded thanks, and set it on his head.

“She has eyes, too.”

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52

M-I-C-

Fireflies lit the grass, the trees, and floated through the heavy air in a profusion of cool green sparks. One lighted on Brianna's knee; she watched it pulse, on-off, on-off, and listened to her husband telling her he meant to be a minister.

They were sitting on the stoop of their cabin as the dusk thickened into night. Across the big clearing, the whoops of small children at play sounded in the bushes, high and cheerful as hunting bats.

"You … uh … could say something," Roger suggested. His head was turned, looking at her. There was enough light yet to see his face, expectant, slightly anxious.

"Well … give me a minute. I sort of wasn't expecting this, you know?"

That was true, and it wasn't. Certainly, she hadn't consciously thought of such a thing, yet now that he'd stated his intentions—and he had, she thought; he wasn't asking her permission—she wasn't at all surprised. It was less a change than a recognition of something that had been there for some time—and in a way, it was a relief to see it and know it for what it was.

"Well," she said, after a long moment of consideration, "I think that's good."

"Ye do." The relief in his voice was palpable.

"Yes. If you're helping all these women because God told you to, that's better than doing it because you'd rather be with them than with me."

"Bree! Ye can't think that, that I—" He leaned closer, looking anxiously into her face. "Ye don't, do you?"

"Well, only sometimes," she admitted. "In my worse moments. Not most of the time." He looked so anxious that she reached up and cupped her hand to the long curve of his cheek; the stubble of his beard was invisible in this light, but she could feel it, soft and tickling against her palm.

"You're sure?" she said softly. He nodded, and she saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"I'm sure."

"Are you afraid?"

He smiled a little at that.

"Yeah."

"I'll help," she said firmly. "You tell me how, and I'll help."

He took a deep breath, his face lightening, though his smile was rueful.

"I don't know how," he said. "How to do it, I mean. Let alone what *you* might do. That's what scares me."

"Maybe not," she said. "But you've *been* doing it, anyway, haven't you? Do you need to do anything formal about this, though? Or can you just announce you're a minister, like those TV preachers, and start taking up the collection right away?"

He smiled at the joke, but answered seriously.

"Bloody Romanist. Ye always think no one else has any claim to sacraments. We do, though. I'm thinking I'll go to the Presbyterian Academy, see what I need to do about ordination. As for taking up the collection—I expect this means I'll never be rich."

"I sort of wasn't expecting that, anyway," she assured him gravely. "Don't worry; I didn't marry you for your money. If we need more, I'll make it."

"How?"

"I don't know. Not selling my body, probably. Not after what happened to Manfred."

“Don’t even joke about that,” he said. His hand came down over hers, large and warm.

Aidan McCallum’s high, piercing voice floated through the air, and a sudden thought struck her.

“Your—your, um, flock …” The word struck her funny bone, and she giggled, despite the seriousness of the question. “Will they mind that I’m a Catholic?” She turned to him suddenly, another thought coming rapidly in its wake. “You don’t—you aren’t asking me to convert?”

“No, I’m not,” he said quickly, firmly. “Not in a million years. As for what they might think—or say—” His face twitched, caught between dismay and determination. “If they’re not willing to accept it, well … they can just go to hell, that’s all.”

She burst out laughing, and he followed her, his laugh cracked, but without restraint.

“The Minister’s Cat is an irreverent cat,” she teased. “And how do you say *that* in Gaelic?”

“I’ve no idea. But the Minister’s Cat is a relieved cat,” he added, still smiling. “I didn’t know what ye might think about it.”

“I’m not totally sure what I *do* think about it,” she admitted. She squeezed his hand lightly. “But I see that you’re happy.”

“It shows?” He smiled, and the last of the evening light glowed briefly in his eyes, a deep and lambent green.

“It shows. You’re sort of … lighted up inside.” Her throat felt tight. “Roger—you won’t forget about me and Jem, will you? I don’t know that I can compete with God.”

He looked thunderstruck at that.

“No,” he said, his hand tightening on hers, hard enough to make her ring cut into her flesh. “Not ever.”

They sat silent for a little, the fireflies drifting down like slow green rain, their silent mating song lighting the darkening grass and trees. Roger’s face was fading as the light failed, though she still saw the line of his jaw, set in determination.

“I swear to ye, Bree,” he said. “Whatever I’m called to now—and God knows what that is—I was called to be your husband first. Your husband and the father of your bairns above all things—and that I always shall be. Whatever I may do, it will not ever be at the price of my family, I promise you."

"All I want," she said softly to the dark, "is for you to love me. Not because of what I can do or what I look like, or because I love you—just because I am."

"Perfect, unconditional love?" he said just as softly. "Some would tell ye only God can love that way—but I can try."

"Oh, I have faith in you," she said, and felt the glow of him reach her own heart.

"I hope ye always will," he said. He raised her hand to his lips, kissed her knuckles in formal salutation, his breath warm on her skin.

As though to test the resolution of his earlier declaration, Jem's voice rose and fell on the evening breeze, a small, urgent siren. "DadddeeeDaaaddeeeDAAADDDEEE …"

Roger sighed deeply, leaned over, and kissed her, a moment's soft, deep connection, then rose to deal with the emergency of the moment.

She sat for a bit, listening. The sound of male voices came from the far end of the clearing, high and low, demand and question, reassurance and excitement. No emergency; Jem wanted to be lifted into a tree too high for him to climb alone. Then laughter, mad rustling of leaves—oh, good grief, Roger was in the tree, too. They were all up there, hooting like owls.

"What are ye laughing at, *a nighean*?" Her father loomed out of the night, smelling of horses.

"Everything," she said, scooching over to make room for him to sit beside her. It was true. Everything seemed suddenly bright, the candlelight from the windows of the Big House, the fireflies in the grass, the glow of Roger's face when he told her his desire. She could still feel the touch of his mouth on hers; it fizzed in her blood.

Jamie reached up and fielded a passing firefly, holding it for a moment cupped in the dark hollow of his hand, where it flashed on and off, the cool light seeping through his fingers. Far off, she heard a brief snatch of her mother's voice, coming through an open window; Claire was singing "Clementine."

Now the boys—and Roger—were howling at the moon, though it was no more than a pale sickle on the horizon. She felt her father's body shake with silent laughter, too.

"It reminds me of Disneyland," she said on impulse.

"Oh, aye? Where's that?"

"It's an amusement park—for children," she added, knowing that while there were such things as amusement parks in places like London and Paris, these were purely adult places. No one ever thought of entertaining children now, beyond their own games and the occasional toy.

"Daddy and Mama took me there every summer," she said, slipping back without effort to the hot, bright days and warm California nights. "The trees all had little sparkling lights in them—the fireflies reminded me."

Jamie spread his palm; the firefly, suddenly free, pulsed to itself once or twice, then spread its wings with a tiny whir and lifted into the air, floating up and away.

"Dwelt a miner, forty-niner, and his daugh-ter, Clementine …"

"What was it like, then?" he asked curiously.

"Oh … it was wonderful." She smiled to herself, seeing the brilliant lights of Main Street, the music and mirrors and beautiful, beribboned horses of King Arthur's Carrousel. "There were … rides, we called them. A boat, where you could float through the jungle on a river, and see crocodiles and hippopotamuses and headhunters …"

"Headhunters?" he said, intrigued.

"Not real ones," she assured him. "It's all make-believe—but it's … well, it's a world to itself. When you're there, the real world sort of disappears; nothing bad can happen there. They call it 'The Happiest Place on Earth'—and for a little while, it really seems that way."

"Light she was, and like a fairy, and her shoes were number nine, Herring boxes without topses, sandals were for Clementine."

"And you'd hear music everywhere, all the time," she said, smiling. "Bands—groups of musicians playing instruments, horns and drums and things—would march up and down the streets, and play in pavilions.…"

"Aye, that happens in amusement parks. Or it did, the once I was in one." She could hear a smile in his voice, as well.

"Mm-hm. And there are cartoon characters—I told you about cartoons—walking around. You can go up and shake hands with Mickey Mouse, or—"

"With what?"

"Mickey Mouse." She laughed. "A big mouse, life-size—human-size, I mean. He wears gloves."

"A giant rat?" he said, sounding slightly stunned. "And they take the weans to play with it?"

"Not a rat, a mouse," she corrected him. "And it's really a person dressed up like a mouse."

"Oh, aye?" he said, not sounding terribly reassured.

"Yes. And an enormous carrousel with painted horses, and a railroad train that goes through the Rainbow Caverns, where there are big jewels sticking out of the walls, and colored streams with red and blue water … and orange-juice bars. Oh, orange-juice bars!" She moaned softly in ecstatic remembrance of the cold, tart, overwhelming sweetness.

"It was nice, then?" he said softly.

"Thou art lost and gone forever, Dreadful sor-ry … Clementine."

"Yes," she said, sighed, and was silent for a moment. Then she leaned her head against his shoulder, and wrapped her hand around his arm, big and solid.

"You know what?" she said, and he made a small interrogatory noise in reply.

"It *was* nice—it was great—but what I really, really loved about it was that when we were there, it was just the three of us, and everything was perfect. Mama wasn't worrying about her patients, Daddy wasn't working on a paper—they weren't ever silent or angry with each other. Both of them laughed—we all laughed, all the time … while we were there."

He made no reply, but tilted his head so it rested against hers. She sighed again, deeply.

"Jemmy won't get to go to Disneyland—but he'll have that. A family that laughs—and millions of little lights in the trees."

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PART SEVEN

Rolling Downhill

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53

PRINCIPLES

From Fraser's Ridge, North Carolina,
on the Third day of July, Anno Domini 1774,
James Fraser, Esq.
To his Lordship, John Grey, at Mount Josiah
Plantation, in the colony of Virginia
My Dear Friend,

I cannot begin to express our Gratitude for your kind Behavior in sending a Draft drawn upon your own Bank, as advance Payment against the eventual Sale of the Objects I confided to your disposition. Mr. Higgins, in delivering this Document, was of course most tactful—and yet, I gathered from his anxious Demeanor and his efforts at Discretion that you may perhaps believe us to be in dire Straits. I hasten to assure you that this is not the Case; we will do well enough, so far as Matters of Victuals, Clothes, and the Necessities of Life.

I said that I would tell you the Details of the Affair, and I see that I must, if only to disabuse you of the Vision of rampant Starvation among my family and tenants.

Beyond a small legal Obligation requiring Cash, I have a Matter of Business in Hand, involving the acquisition of a Number of Guns. I had been in Hopes of acquiring these through the good offices of a Friend, but find that this Arrangement will no longer answer; I must look further abroad.

I and my Family are invited to a Barbecue in honor of Miss Flora MacDonald, the Heroine of the Rising—you are familiar with the Lady, I believe? I recall your telling me once of your meeting with her in London, whilst she was imprisoned there—to take place next month at my aunt's Plantation, River Run. As this Affair will be attended by a great many Scots, some coming from considerable Distances, I am in Hopes that with Cash in Hand, I may make Arrangements to procure the requisite Weapons via other Avenues. In re which, should your own Connexions suggest any such useful Avenues, I should be grateful to hear of them.

I write quickly, as Mr. Higgins has other Errands, but my Daughter bids me send herewith a box of Matchsticks, her own Invention. She has schooled Mr. Higgins most carefully in their Use, so if he does not burst inadvertently into Flame on the way back, he will be able to demonstrate them to you.

Your humble and ob't. servant,
James Fraser

P.S. I require thirty Muskets, with as much Powder and Ammunition as may be possible. These need not be of the latest Manufacture, but must be well-kept and functional.

* * *

" 'Other avenues?' " I said, watching him sand the letter before folding it. "You mean smugglers? And if so, are you sure that Lord John will understand what you mean?"

"I do, and he will," Jamie assured me. "I ken a few smugglers myself, who bring things in through the Outer Banks. He'll know the ones who come through Roanoke, though—and there's more business there, because of the blockade in Massachusetts. Goods come in through Virginia, and go north overland."

He took a half-burned beeswax taper from the shelf and held it to the coals in the hearth, then dripped soft brown wax in a puddle over the seam of the letter. I leaned forward and pressed the back of my left hand into the warm wax, leaving the mark of my wedding ring in it.

"Damn Manfred McGillivray," he said, with no particular heat. "It will be three times the cost, and I must get them from a smuggler."

"Will you ask about him, though? At the barbecue, I mean?" Flora MacDonald, the woman who had saved Charles Stuart from the English after Culloden, dressing him in her maid's clothes and smuggling him to a rendezvous with the French on the Isle of Skye, was a living legend to the Scottish Highlanders, and her recent arrival in the colony was the subject of vast excitement, news of it coming even as far as the Ridge. Every well-known Scot in the Cape Fear valley—and a good many from farther away—would be present at the barbecue to be held in her honor. No better place to spread the word for a missing young man.

He glanced up at me, surprised.

"Of course I will, Sassenach. What d'ye think I am?"

"I think you're very kind," I said, kissing him on the forehead. "If a trifle reckless. And I notice you carefully didn't tell Lord John why you need thirty muskets."

He gave a small snort, and swept the grains of sand carefully off the table into the palm of his hand.

"I dinna ken for sure myself, Sassenach."

"Whatever do you mean by that?" I asked, surprised. "Do you not mean to give them to Bird, after all?"

He didn't answer at once, but the two stiff fingers of his right hand tapped gently on the tabletop. Then he shrugged, reached to the stack of journals and ledgers, and pulled out a paper, which he handed to me. A letter from John Ashe, who had been a fellow commander of militia during the War of the Regulation.

"The fourth paragraph," he said, seeing me frown at a recounting of the latest contretemps between the Governor and the Assembly. I obligingly skimmed down the page, to the indicated spot, and felt a small, premonitory shiver.

"A Continental Congress is proposed," I read, *"with delegates to be sent from each colony. The lower house of the Connecticut Assembly has*

moved already to propose such men, acting through Committees of Correspondence. Some gentlemen with whom you are well-acquainted propose that North Carolina shall do likewise, and will meet to accomplish the matter in mid-August. I could wish that you would join us, friend, for I am convinced that your heart and mind must lie with us in the matter of liberty; surely such a man as yourself is no friend to tyranny.

"Some gentlemen with whom you are well-acquainted," I repeated, putting down the letter. "Do you know who he means?"

"I could guess."

"Mid-August, he says. Before the barbecue, do you think, or after?"

"After. One of the others sent me the date of the meeting. It's to be in Halifax."

I put down the letter. The afternoon was still and hot, and the thin linen of my shift was damp, as were the palms of my hands.

"One of the others," I said. He shot me a quick glance, with a half-smile, and picked up the letter.

"In the Committee of Correspondence."

"Oh, naturally," I said. "You might have told me." Naturally, he would have found a means of inveigling himself into the North Carolina Committee of Correspondence—the center of political intrigue, where the seeds of rebellion were being sown—meanwhile holding a commission as Indian agent for the British Crown and ostensibly working to arm the Indians, in order to suppress precisely those seeds of rebellion.

"I am telling ye, Sassenach," he said. "This is the first time they've asked me to meet wi' them, even in private."

"I see," I said softly. "Will you go? Is it—is it time?" Time to make the leap, declare himself openly as a Whig, if not yet a rebel. Time to change his public allegiance, and risk the brand of treason. Again.

He sighed deeply and rubbed a hand through his hair. He'd been thinking; the short hairs of several tiny cowlicks were standing on end.

“I don’t know,” he said finally. “It’s two years yet, no? The fourth of July, 1776—that’s what Brianna said.”

“No,” I said. “It’s two years until they declare independence—but, Jamie, the fighting will have started already. That will be much too late.”

He stared at the letters on the desk, and nodded bleakly.

“Aye, it will have to be soon, then.”

“It would be likely safe enough,” I said hesitantly. “What you told me about Henderson buying land in Tennessee: if no one’s stopping him, I can’t see anyone in the government being agitated enough to come up here and try to force us out. And surely not if you were only known to have *met* with the local Whigs?”

He gave me a small, wry smile.

“It’s no the government I’m worrit by, Sassenach. It’s the folk nearby. It wasna the Governor who hanged the O’Brians and burnt their house, ken? Nor was it Richard Brown, nor Indians. That wasna done for the sake of law nor profit; it was done for hate, and verra likely by someone who knew them.”

That made a more pronounced chill skitter down my spine. There was a certain amount of political disagreement and discussion on the Ridge, all right, but it hadn’t reached the stage of fisticuffs yet, let alone burning and killing.

But it would.

I remembered, all too well. Bomb shelters and ration coupons, blackout wardens and the spirit of cooperation against a dreadful foe. And the stories from Germany, France. People reported on, denounced to the SS, dragged from their houses—others hidden in attics and barns, smuggled across borders.

In war, government and their armies were a threat, but it was so often the neighbors who damned or saved you.

“Who?” I said baldly.

“I could guess,” he said, with a shrug. “The McGillivrays? Richard Brown? Hodgepile’s friends—if he had any. The friends of any of the other men we killed? The Indian ye met—Donner?—if he’s still alive. Neil Forbes? He’s a grudge against Brianna, and she and Roger Mac would do well to remember it. Hiram Crombie and his lot?"

"Hiram?" I said dubiously. "Granted, he doesn't like you very much—and as for me—but …"

"Well, I do doubt it," he admitted. "But it's possible, aye? His people didna support the Jacobites at all; they'll no be pleased at an effort to overthrow the King from this side of the water, either."

I nodded. Crombie and the rest would of necessity have taken an oath of loyalty to King George, before being allowed to travel to America. Jamie had—of necessity—taken the same oath, as part of his pardon. And must—of an even greater necessity—break it. But when?

He'd stopped drumming his fingers; they rested on the letter before him.

"I do trust ye're right, Sassenach," he said.

"About what? What will happen? You know I am," I said, a little surprised. "Bree and Roger told you, too. Why?"

He rubbed a hand slowly through his hair.

"I've never fought for the sake of principle," he said, reflecting, and shook his head. "Only necessity. I wonder, would it be any better?"

He didn't sound upset, merely curious, in a detached sort of way. Still, I found this vaguely disturbing.

"But there is principle to it, this time," I protested. "In fact, it may be the first war ever fought over principle."

"Rather than something sordid like trade, or land?" Jamie suggested, raising one eyebrow.

"I don't say trade and land haven't anything to do with it," I replied, wondering precisely how I'd managed to become a defender of the American Revolution—an historical period I knew only from Brianna's school textbooks. "But it goes well beyond that, don't you think? *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.*"

"Who said that?" he asked, interested.

"Thomas Jefferson will say it—on behalf of the new republic. The Declaration of Independence, it's called. Will be called."

"All men," he repeated. "Does he mean Indians, as well, do ye think?"

"I can't say," I said, rather irritated at being forced into this position. "I haven't met him. If I do, I'll ask, shall I?"

"Never mind." He lifted his fingers in brief dismissal. "I'll ask him myself, and I have the opportunity. Meanwhile, I'll ask Brianna." He glanced at me. "Though as to principle, Sassenach—"

He leaned back in his chair, folded his arms over his chest, and closed his eyes.

"As long as but a hundred of us remain alive," he said precisely, *"never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom—for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself."*

"The Declaration of Arbroath," he said, opening his eyes. He gave me a lopsided smile. "Written some four hundred years ago. Speaking o' principles, aye?"

He stood up then, but still remained standing by the battered table he used as a desk, looking down at Ashe's letter.

"As for my own principles …" he said, as though to himself, but then looked at me, as though suddenly realizing that I was still there.

"Aye, I think I mean to give Bird the muskets," he said. "Though I may have cause to regret it, and I find them pointing at me, two or three years hence. But he shall have them, and do with them what seems best, to defend himself and his people."

"The price of honor, is it?"

He looked down at me, with the ghost of a smile.

"Call it blood money."

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54

FLORA MACDONALD'S BARBECUE

River Run Plantation
August 6, 1774

Whatever did one say to an icon? Or an icon's husband, for that matter?

"Oh, I shall faint, I know I shall." Rachel Campbell was fluttering her fan hard enough to create a perceptible breeze. "Whatever shall I say to her?"

" 'Good day, Mrs. MacDonald'?" suggested her husband, a faint smile lurking at the corner of his withered mouth.

Rachel hit him sharply with her fan, making him chuckle as he dodged away. For all he was thirty-five years her senior, Farquard Campbell had an easy, teasing way with his wife, quite at odds with his usual dignified demeanor.

"I shall faint," Rachel declared again, having evidently decided upon this as a definite social strategy.

"Well, ye must please yourself, of course, *a nighean,* but if ye do, it will have to be Mr. Fraser picking you up from the ground; my ancient limbs are scarcely equal to the task."

"Oh!" Rachel cast a quick glance at Jamie, who smiled at her, then hid her blushes behind her fan. While plainly fond of her own husband, she made no secret of her admiration for mine.

"Your humble servant, madam," Jamie gravely assured her, bowing.

She tittered. I shouldn't like to wrong the woman, but she definitely tittered. I caught Jamie's eye, and hid a smile behind my own fan.

"And what will *you* say to her, then, Mr. Fraser?"

Jamie pursed his lips and squinted thoughtfully at the brilliant sun streaming through the elm trees that edged the lawn at River Run.

"Oh, I suppose I might say that I'm glad the weather has kept fine for her. It was raining the last time we met."

Rachel's jaw dropped, and so did her fan, bouncing on the lawn. Her husband bent to pick it up for her, groaning audibly, but she had no attention to spare for him.

"You've *met* her?" she cried, eyes wide with excitement. "When? Where? With the prin—with *him*?"

"Ah, no," Jamie said, smiling. "On Skye. I'd gone wi' my father—a matter of sheep, it was. We chanced to meet Hugh MacDonald of Armadale in Portree—Miss Flora's stepfather, aye?—and he'd brought the lass into the town with him, for a treat."

"Oh!" Rachel was enchanted. "And was she beautiful and gracious as they say?"

Jamie frowned, considering.

"Well, no," he said. "But she'd a terrible grippe at the time, and no doubt would have looked much improved without the red nose. Gracious? Well, I wouldna say so, really. She snatched a bridie right out of my hand and ate it."

"And how old were you both at the time?" I asked, seeing Rachel's mouth sag in horror.

"Oh, six, maybe," he said cheerfully. "Or seven. I doubt I should remember, save I kicked her in the shin when she stole my bridie, and she pulled my hair."

Recovering somewhat from the shock, Rachel was pressing Jamie for further reminiscences, a pressure he was laughingly deflecting with jokes.

Of course, he had come prepared to this occasion; all over the grounds, there were stories being exchanged—humorous, admiring, longing—of the days before Culloden. Odd, that it should have been the defeat of Charles Stuart, and his ignominious flight, that made a heroine of Flora MacDonald and united these Highland exiles in a way that they could never have achieved—let alone sustained—had he actually won.

It struck me suddenly that Charlie was likely still alive, quietly drinking himself to death in Rome. In any real way, though, he was long since dead to these people who had loved or hated him. The amber of time had sealed him forever in that one defining moment of his life—*Bliadha Tearlach;* "Charlie's Year," it meant, and even now, I heard people call it that.

It was Flora's coming that was causing this flood of sentiment, of course. How strange for her, I thought, with a pang of sympathy—and for the first time, wondered what on earth I might say to her myself.

I had met famous people before—not the least of them the Bonnie Prince himself. But always before, I had met them when they—and I—were in the midst of their normal lives, not yet past the defining events that would make them famous, and thus still just people. Bar Louis—but then, he was a king. There are rules of etiquette for dealing with kings, since after all, no one ever does approach them as normal people. Not even when—

I snapped my own fan open, hot blood bursting through my face and body. I breathed deeply, trying not to fan quite as frantically as Rachel, but wanting to.

I had not once, in all the years since it happened, ever specifically recalled those two or three minutes of physical intimacy with Louis of France. Not deliberately, God knew, and not by accident, either.

Yet suddenly, the memory of it had touched me, as suddenly as a hand coming out of the crowd to seize my arm. Seize my arm, lift my skirts, and penetrate me in a way much more shockingly intrusive than the actual experience had been.

The air around me was suffused with the scent of roses, and I heard the creak of the dress cage as Louis's weight pressed upon it, and heard his sigh of pleasure. The room was dark, lit by one candle; it flickered at the edge of vision, then was blotted out by the man between my—

"Christ, Claire! Are ye all right?" I hadn't actually fallen down, thank God. I had reeled back against the wall of Hector Cameron's mausoleum, and Jamie, seeing me go, had leapt forward to catch hold of me.

"Let go," I said, breathless, but imperative. "Let go of me!"

He heard the note of terror in my voice, and slackened his grip, but couldn't bring himself to let go altogether, lest I fall. With the energy of sheer panic, I pulled myself upright, out of his grasp.

I still smelled roses. Not the cloying scent of rose oil—fresh roses. Then I came to myself, and realized that I was standing next to a huge yellow brier rose, trained to climb over the white marble of the mausoleum.

Knowing that the roses were real was comforting, but I felt as though I stood still on the edge of a vast abyss, alone, separate from every other soul in the universe. Jamie was close enough to touch, and yet it was as though he stood an immeasurable distance away.

Then he touched me and spoke my name, insistently, and just as suddenly as it had opened, the gap between us closed. I nearly fell into his arms.

"What is it, *a nighean*?" he whispered, holding me against his chest. "What's frightened ye?" His own heart was thumping under my ear; I'd scared him, too.

"Nothing," I said, and an overwhelming wave of relief went over me, at the realization that I was safely in the present; Louis had gone back into the shadows, an unpleasant but harmless memory once more. The staggering sense of violation, of loss and grief and isolation, had receded, no more than a shadow on my mind. Best of all, Jamie was there; solid and physical and smelling of sweat and whisky and horses … and *there.* I hadn't lost him.

Other people were clustering round, curious, solicitous. Rachel fanned me earnestly, and the breeze of it felt soothing; I was drenched with sweat, wisps of hair clinging damply to my neck.

"Quite all right," I murmured, suddenly self-conscious. "Just a bit faint … hot day …"

A chorus of offers to fetch me wine, a glass of syllabub, lemon shrub, a burned feather, were all trumped by Jamie's production of a flask of whisky from his sporran. It was the three-year-old stuff, from the sherry casks, and I felt a qualm as the scent of it reached me, remembering the night we had got drunk together after he had rescued me from Hodgepile and his men. God, was I about to be hurled back into *that* pit?

But I wasn't. The whisky was merely hot and consoling, and I felt better with the first sip.

Flashback. I'd heard colleagues talk about it, arguing as to whether this was the same phenomenon as shell shock, and if it was, whether it truly existed, or should be dismissed as simply "nerves."

I shuddered briefly, and took another sip. It most assuredly existed. I felt much better, but I had been shaken to the core, and my bones still felt watery. Beyond the faint echoes of the experience itself was a much more unsettling thought. It had happened once before, when Ute McGillivray attacked me. Was it likely to happen again?

"Shall I carry ye inside, Sassenach? Perhaps ye should lie down a bit."

Jamie had shooed away the well-wishers, had a slave fetch me a stool, and was now hovering over me like an anxious bumblebee.

"No, I'm all right now," I assured him. "Jamie …"

"Aye, lass?"

"You—when you—do you …"

I took a deep breath—and another sip of whisky—and tried again.

"Sometimes, I wake up during the night and see you—struggling—and I think it's with Jack Randall. Is it a dream that you have?"

He stared down at me for a moment, face blank, but trouble moving in his eyes. He glanced from side to side, but we were quite alone now.

"Why?" he asked, low-voiced.

"I need to know."

He took a breath, swallowed, and nodded.

"Aye. Sometimes it's dreams. That's … all right. I wake, and ken where I am, say a wee prayer, and … it's all right. But now and then—" He shut his eyes for a moment, then opened them. "I *am* awake. And yet I am there, with Jack Randall."

"Ah." I sighed, feeling at once terribly sad for him, and at the same time somewhat reassured. "Then I'm not losing my mind."

"Ye think so?" he said dryly. "Well, I'm that glad to hear it, Sassenach."

He stood very close, the cloth of his kilt brushing my arm, so that I should have him for support, if I suddenly went faint again. He looked searchingly at me, to be sure that I wasn't going to keel over, then touched my shoulder and with a brief "Sit still" went off.

Not far; just to the tables set up under the trees at the edge of the lawn. Ignoring the slaves arranging food for the barbecue, he leaned across a platter of boiled crayfish and picked up something from a tiny bowl. Then he was back, leaning down to take my hand. He rubbed his fingers together, and a pinch of salt sprinkled into my open palm.

"There," he whispered. "Keep it by ye, Sassenach. Whoever it is, he'll trouble ye no more."

I closed my hand over the damp grains, feeling absurdly comforted. Trust a Highlander to know precisely what to do about a case of daylight haunting! Salt, they said, kept a ghost in its grave. And if Louis was still alive, the other man, whoever he had been, that pressing weight in the dark, was surely dead.

There was a sudden rush of excitement, as a call came from the river—the boat had been sighted. As one, the crowd drew itself up on tiptoe, breathless with anticipation.

I smiled, but felt the giddy contagion of it touch me nonetheless. Then the pipes began to skirl, and my throat at once was tight with unshed tears.

Jamie's hand tightened on my shoulder, unconsciously, and I looked up to see him rub his knuckles hard across his upper lip, as he, too, turned toward the river.

I looked down, blinking to control myself, and as my vision cleared, I saw the grains of salt on the ground, carefully scattered before the gates of the mausoleum.

* * *

She was much smaller than I'd thought. Famous people always are. Everyone—dressed in their best, and an absolute sea of tartan—pressed close, awed past courtesy. I caught a glimpse of the top of her head, dark hair dressed high with white roses, and then it disappeared behind the thronged backs of well-wishers.

Her husband, Allan, was visible. A stoutly handsome man with gray-streaked black hair tied neatly back, he was standing—I assumed—behind her, bowing and smiling, acknowledging the flood of Gaelic compliment and welcome.

Despite myself, I felt the urge to rush forward and stare, with everyone else. I held firm, though. I was standing with Jocasta on the terrace; Mrs. MacDonald would come to us.

Sure enough; Jamie and Duncan were pushing their way firmly through the crowd, forming a flying wedge with Jocasta's black butler, Ulysses.

"That's really her?" Brianna murmured at my shoulder, eyes fixed with interest on the seething multitude, from which the men had now extracted the guest of honor, escorting her from the dock, up the lawn, toward the terrace. "She's smaller than I thought. Oh, it's too bad Roger isn't here—he'd just die to see her!" Roger was spending a month at the Presbyterian Academy at Charlotte, having his qualifications for ordination examined.

"He may get to see her another time," I murmured back. "I hear they've bought a plantation near Barbecue Creek, by Mount Pleasant." And they would stay in the colony for at least another year or two, but I didn't say that out loud; so far as the people here knew, the MacDonalds had immigrated permanently.

But I had seen the tall memorial stone on Skye—where Flora MacDonald had been born, and would someday die, disillusioned with America.

It wasn't the first time I'd met someone and known their fate, of course—but it was always unsettling. The crowd opened and she stepped out, small and pretty, laughing up at Jamie. He had a hand under her elbow, guiding her up onto the terrace, and made a gesture of introduction toward me.

She looked up, expectant, met my gaze dead on, and blinked, her smile momentarily fading. It was back in an instant, and she was bowing to me and I to her, but I did wonder what she had seen in my face?

But she turned at once to greet Jocasta, and introduce her grown daughters, Anne and Fanny, a son, a son-in-law, her husband—by the time she had accomplished the confusion of introduction, she was perfectly in command of herself, and greeted me with a charming, gentle smile.

"Mrs. Fraser! I am so much obliged to meet you at last. I have heard such stories of your kindness and skill, I confess I am in awe to be in your presence."

It was said with so much warmth and sincerity—she seizing me by the hands—that I found myself responding, in spite of a cynical wonder as to who she'd been talking to about me. My reputation in Cross Creek and Campbelton was notorious, but not universally lauded, by any means.

"I had the honor of Dr. Fentiman's acquaintance at the subscription ball held for us in Wilmington—so kind, so amazingly kind of everyone! We have been so well treated, since our arrival—and he was quite in raptures regarding your—"

I should have liked to hear what had enraptured Fentiman—our relations were still marked by a certain wariness, though we had reached a rapprochement—but at this point, her husband spoke in her ear, desiring her to come and meet Farquard Campbell and some other prominent gentlemen, and with a regretful grimace, she squeezed my hands and departed, the brilliant public smile back in place.

"Huh," Bree remarked, *sotto voce.* "Lucky for her she's still got most of her teeth."

That was in fact exactly what I'd been thinking, and I laughed, converting it into a hasty coughing fit as I saw Jocasta's head turn sharply toward us.

"So that's her." Young Ian had come up on my other side, and was watching the guest of honor with an expression of deep interest. He was dressed in kilt, waistcoat, and coat for the occasion, his brown hair done up in a proper queue, and he looked quite civilized, bar the tattoos that looped across his cheekbones and over the bridge of his nose.

"That's her," Jamie agreed. "*Fionnaghal*—the Fair One." There was a surprising note of nostalgia in his voice, and I glanced at him in surprise.

"Well, it's her proper name," he said mildly. "*Fionnaghal.* It's only the English call her Flora."

"Did you have a crush on her when you were little, Da?" Brianna asked, laughing.

"A what?"

"A *tendresse,*" I said, batting my eyelashes delicately at him over my fan.

"Och, dinna be daft!" he said. "I was seven years old, for God's sake!" Nonetheless, the tips of his ears had gone quite pink.

"I was in love when I was seven," Ian remarked, rather dreamily. "Wi' the cook. Did ye hear Ulysses say as she's brought a looking glass, Uncle? Given to her by Prince *Tearlach,* with his arms upon the back. Ulysses put it in the parlor, wi' two of the grooms to stand guard over it."

Sure enough, those people who weren't in the swirling crowd surrounding the MacDonalds were all pressing through the double doors into the house, forming a line of animated chatter down the hall to the parlor.

"Seaumais!"

Jocasta's imperious voice put a stop to the teasing. Jamie gave Brianna an austere look, and went to join her. Duncan was detained in conversation with a small knot of prominent men—I recognized Neil Forbes, the lawyer, as well as Cornelius Harnett and Colonel Moore—and Ulysses was nowhere in sight—most likely dealing with the backstage logistics of a barbecue for two hundred people—thus leaving Jocasta temporarily marooned. Her hand on Jamie's arm, she sailed off the terrace, heading for Allan MacDonald, who had become detached from his wife by the press of people round her, and was standing under a tree, looking vaguely affronted.

I watched them go across the lawn, amused by Jocasta's sense of theatrics. Her body servant, Phaedre, was dutifully following—and could plainly have guided her mistress. That wouldn't have had at all the same effect, though. The two of them together made heads turn—Jocasta tall and slender, graceful despite her age and striking with her white hair piled high and her blue silk gown, Jamie with his Viking height and crimson Fraser tartan, both with those bold MacKenzie bones and catlike grace.

"Colum and Dougal would be proud of their little sister," I said, shaking my head.

"Oh, aye?" Ian spoke absently, not attending. He was still watching Flora MacDonald, now accepting a bunch of flowers from one of Farquard Campbell's grandchildren, to general applause.

"Not jealous, are you, Mama?" Brianna teased, seeing me glance in the same direction.

"Certainly not," I said with a certain amount of complacence. "After all, I have all *my* teeth, too."

* * *

I had missed him in the initial crush, but Major MacDonald was among the revelers, looking very flash in a brilliantly scarlet uniform coat and a new hat, lavish with gold lace. He removed this object and bowed low to me, looking cheerful—no doubt because I was unaccompanied by livestock, Adso and the white sow being both safely on Fraser's Ridge.

"Your servant, mum," he said. "I saw that ye had a word with Miss Flora—so charming, is she not? And a canty, handsome woman, as well."

"Indeed she is," I agreed. "Do you know her, then?"

"Oh, aye," he said, a look of profound satisfaction spreading across his weathered face. "I should not dare to the presumption of friendship—but believe I may stake a modest claim to acquaintancy. I accompanied Mrs. MacDonald and her family from Wilmington, and have had the great honor to assist in settling them in their present situation."

"Did you really?" I gave him an interested eye. The Major wasn't the type to be awed by celebrity. He *was* the type to appreciate its uses. So was Governor Martin, evidently.

The Major was watching Flora MacDonald now with a proprietary eye, noting with approval the way in which people clustered round her.

"She has most graciously agreed to speak today," he told me, rocking back a little on his bootheels. "Where would be the best place, do you think, mum? From the terrace, as being the point of highest elevation? Or perhaps near the statue on the lawn, as being more central and allowing the crowd to surround her, thus increasing the chance of everyone hearing her remarks?"

"I think she'll have a sunstroke, if you put her out on the lawn in this weather," I said, tilting my own broad-brimmed straw hat to shade my nose. It was easily in the nineties, in terms both of temperature and humidity, and my thin petticoats clung soddenly to my lower limbs. "What sort of remarks is she going to make?"

"Just a brief address upon the subject of loyalty, mum," he said blandly. "Ah, there is your husband, talking to Kingsburgh; if you'll excuse me, mum?" Bowing, he straightened, put his hat back on, and strode down the lawn to join Jamie and Jocasta, who were still with Allan MacDonald—styled "Kingsburgh," in the Scottish fashion, for the name of his estate on Skye.

Food was beginning to be brought out: tureens of powsowdie and hotchpotch—and an enormous tub of soup à la Reine, a clear compliment to the guest of honor—platters of fried fish, fried chicken, fried rabbit; venison collops in red wine, smoked sausages, Forfar bridies, inky-pinky, roast turkeys, pigeon pie; dishes of colcannon, stovies, turnip purry, roasted apples stuffed with dried pumpkin, squash, corn, mushroom pasties; gigantic baskets overflowing with fresh baps, rolls, and other breads … all this, I was well aware, merely as prelude to the barbecue whose succulent aroma was drifting through the air: a number of hogs, three or four beeves, two deer, and, the *pièce de résistance,* a wood bison, acquired God knew how or where.

A hum of pleasant anticipation rose around me, as people began metaphorically to loosen their belts, squaring up to the tables with a firm determination to do their duty in honor of the occasion.

Jamie was still stuck fast to Mrs. MacDonald, I saw; he was helping her to a dish of what looked from the distance to be broccoli salad. He looked up and saw me, beckoned me to join them—but I shook my head, gesturing with my fan toward the buffet tables, where the guests were setting to in the businesslike manner of grasshoppers in a barley field. I didn't want to lose the opportunity of inquiring about Manfred McGillivray, before the stupor of satiety settled over the crowd.

I made my way purposefully into the fray, accepting tidbits offered to me by assorted servants and slaves, pausing to chat with any acquaintance I saw, particularly those from Hillsboro. Manfred had spent a great deal of time there, I knew, taking commissions for guns, delivering the finished products, and doing small jobs of repair. That was the most likely place for him to go, I thought. But no one I talked to had seen him, though most knew him.

"Nice lad," one gentleman told me, pausing momentarily in his potations. "And sore missed, too. Besides Robin, there's few gunsmiths closer than Virginia."

I knew that, and knowing, wondered whether Jamie was having any luck in locating the muskets he needed. Perhaps Lord John's smuggling connections would be necessary.

I accepted a small pie from a passing slave's tray, and wandered on, munching and chatting. There was much talk about a series of fiery articles that had appeared recently in the *Chronicle,* the local newspaper, whose proprietor, one Fogarty Simms, was spoken of with considerable sympathy.

"A rare plucked 'un, is Simms," said Mr. Goodwin, shaking his head. "But I doubt me he'll stand. I spoke with him last week, and he told me he's in some fear of his skin. There've been threats, aye?"

From the tone of the gathering, I assumed that Mr. Simms must be a Loyalist, and this appeared to be true, from the various accounts I was given. There was talk, apparently, of a rival paper setting up, this to support the Whiggish agenda, with its incautious talk of tyranny and the overthrow of the King. No one knew quite who was behind the new venture, but there was talk—and much indignation at the prospect—that a printer was to be brought down from the north, where folk were notably given to such perverse sentiments.

The general consensus was that such persons wanted their backsides kicked, to bring them to their senses.

I hadn't sat down to eat formally, but after an hour of moving slowly through fields of champing jaws and wandering herds of hors d'oeuvre trays, I felt as though I'd sat through a French royal banquet—those occasions lasting so long that chamber pots were discreetly placed beneath the guests' chairs, and where the occasional guest giving way and sliding beneath the table was discreetly ignored.

The present occasion was less formal, but not much less prolonged. After an hour's preliminary eating, the barbecue was raised steaming from the pits near the stable, and brought to the lawns on wooden trestles, mounted on the shoulders of slaves. The sight of immense sides of beef, pork, venison, and buffalo, gleaming with oil and vinegar and surrounded by the smaller charred carcasses of hundreds of pigeons and quail, was greeted with applause by the guests, all by this time drenched with the sweat of their efforts, but nothing daunted.

Jocasta, seated by her guest, looked deeply gratified by the sound of her hospitality being so warmly accepted, and leaned toward Duncan, smiling, putting a hand on his arm as she said something to him. Duncan had left off looking nervous—the effect of a quart or two of beer, followed by most of a bottle of whisky—and seemed to be enjoying himself, too. He smiled broadly at Jocasta, then essayed a remark to Mrs. MacDonald, who laughed at whatever he said.

I had to admire her; she was besieged on all sides by people wanting a word, but she kept her poise admirably, being kind and gracious to everyone—though this meant sitting sometimes for ten minutes, a forkful of food suspended in air as she listened to some interminable story. At least she was in the shade—and Phaedre, dressed in white muslin, stood dutifully behind her with a huge fan made of palmetto fronds, making a breeze and keeping off the flies.

"Lemon shrub, ma'am?" A wilting slave, gleaming with sweat, offered me yet another tray, and I took a glass. I was dripping with perspiration, my legs aching and my throat dried with talking. At this point, I didn't care what was in the glass, provided it was wet.

I changed my opinion instantly upon tasting it; it was lemon juice and barley water, and while it *was* wet, I was much more inclined to pour it down the neck of my gown than to drink it. I edged unobtrusively toward a laburnum bush, intending to pour the drink into it, but was forestalled by the appearance of Neil Forbes, who stepped out from behind it.

He was as startled to see me as I was to see him; he jerked back, and glanced hastily over his shoulder. I looked in the same direction, and caught sight of Robert Howe and Cornelius Harnett, making off in the opposite direction. Clearly, the three of them had been conferring secretly behind the laburnum bush.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said, with a short bow. "Your servant."

I curtsied in return, with a vague murmur of politeness. I would have slithered past him, but he leaned toward me, preventing my exit.

"I hear that your husband is collecting guns, Mrs. Fraser," he said, his voice at a low and rather unfriendly pitch.

"Oh, really?" I was holding an open fan, as was every other woman there. I waved it languidly before my nose, hiding most of my expression. "Who told you such a thing?"

"One of the gentlemen whom he approached to that end," Forbes said. The lawyer was large and somewhat overweight; the unhealthy shade of red in his cheeks might be due to that, rather than to displeasure. Then again …

"If I might impose so far upon your good nature, ma'am, I would suggest that you exert your influence upon him, so as to suggest that such a course is not the wisest?"

"To begin with," I said, taking a deep breath of hot, damp air, "just what course do you think he's embarked upon?"

"An unfortunate one, ma'am," he said. "Putting the best complexion upon the matter, I assume that the guns he seeks are intended to arm his own company of militia, which is legitimate, though disturbing; the desirability of that course would rest upon his later actions. But his relations with the Cherokee are well-known, and there are rumors about that the weapons are destined to end in the hands of the savages, to the end that they may turn upon His Majesty's subjects who presume to offer objection to the tyranny, abuse, and corruption so rife among the officials who govern—if so loose a word may be employed to describe their actions—this colony."

I gave him a long look over the edge of my fan.

"If I hadn't already known you were a lawyer," I remarked, "that speech would have done it. I *think* that you just said that you suspect my husband of wanting to give guns to the Indians, and you don't like that. On the other hand, if he's wanting to arm his own militia, that might be all right—providing that said militia acts according to *your* desires. Am I right?"

A flicker of amusement showed in his deep-set eyes, and he inclined his head toward me in acknowledgment.

"Your perception astounds me, ma'am," he said.

I nodded, and shut the fan.

"Right. And what *are* your desires, may I ask? I won't ask why you think Jamie ought to take heed of them."

He laughed, his heavy face, already flushed with the heat, going a deeper shade of red beneath his neat tie-wig.

"I desire justice, ma'am; the downfall of tyrants and the cause of liberty," he said. "As must any honest man."

… freedom alone—which any honest man surrenders only with his life. The line echoed in my head, and must have shown on my face, for he looked keenly at me.

"I esteem your husband deeply, ma'am," he said quietly. "You will tell him what I have said?" He bowed and turned away, not waiting for my nod.

He hadn't guarded his voice when speaking of tyrants and liberty; I saw heads nearby turn, and here and there, men drew together, murmuring as they watched him go.

Distracted, I took a mouthful of lemon shrub, and was then obliged to swallow the nasty stuff. I turned to find Jamie; he was still near Allan MacDonald, but had moved a little aside, and was in private conversation with Major MacDonald.

Things were moving faster than I had thought. I had thought republican sentiment was still a minority in this part of the colony, but for Forbes to speak so openly in a public gathering, it was obviously gaining ground.

I turned back to look after the lawyer, and saw two men confront him, their faces tight with anger and suspicion. I was too far away to hear what was said, but their postures and expressions were eloquent. Words were exchanged, growing in heat, and I glanced toward Jamie; the last time I had attended a barbecue like this at River Run, in the prelude to the War of the Regulation, there had been a fistfight on the lawn, and I rather thought such an occurrence might be about to happen again. Alcohol, heat, and politics made for explosions of temper in any gathering, let alone one composed largely of Highlanders.

Such an explosion might have happened—more men were gathering round Forbes and his two opponents, fists curling in readiness—had the boom of Jocasta's large gong not sounded from the terrace, making everyone look up in startlement.

The Major was standing on an upturned tobacco hogshead, hands raised in the air, beaming at the multitudes, face shining red with heat, beer, and enthusiasm.

"Ceud mile fàilte!" he called, and was greeted by enthusiastic applause. "And we wish a hundred thousand welcomes to our honored guests!" he continued in Gaelic, sweeping a hand toward the MacDonalds, who were now standing side by side near him,

nodding and smiling at the applause. From their demeanor, I rather thought they were accustomed to this sort of reception.

A few more introductory remarks—half-drowned in the enthusiastic cheers—and Jamie and Kingsburgh lifted Mrs. MacDonald carefully up onto the barrel, where she swayed a little, but regained her balance, grabbing the heads of both men for stability, and smiling at the laughter of the audience.

She beamed at the crowd, who beamed back, *en masse,* and immediately quieted themselves in order to hear her.

She had a clear, high voice, and was obviously accustomed to speaking in public—a most unusual attribute in a woman of the time. I was too far away to hear every word, but had no trouble picking up the gist of her speech.

After graciously thanking her hosts, the Scottish community who had welcomed her family so warmly and generously, and the guests, she commenced an earnest exhortation against what she called "factionalism," urging her hearers to join in suppressing this dangerous movement, which could not but cause great unrest, threatening the peace and prosperity that so many of them had achieved in this fair land, they having risked everything to attain it.

And she was, I realized with a small shock, exactly right. I'd heard Bree and Roger arguing the point—why any of the Highlanders, who had suffered so much under English rule, should have fought on the English side, as many of them eventually would.

"Because," Roger had said patiently, "they had something to lose, and damn little to gain. And—of all people—they knew exactly what it was like to fight *against* the English. Ye think folk who lived through Cumberland's cleansing of the Highlands, made it to America, and rebuilt their lives from nothing were eager to live through all that *again*?"

"But surely they'll want to fight for freedom," Bree had protested. He looked at her cynically.

"They *have* freedom, a great deal more than they've ever seen in Scotland. They risk losing it in the event of a war—and they know that very well. And then, of course," he'd added, "nearly all of them have sworn an oath of loyalty to the Crown. They'd not break it lightly, surely not for something that looked like one more wild-eyed—and doubtless short-lived—political upheaval. It's like—" His brow had furrowed as he looked for a suitable analogy.

"Like the Black Panthers, or the civil-rights movement. Anyone could see the idealistic point—but a lot of middle-class people found the whole thing threatening or frightening and just wished it would go away, so life could be peaceful."

The trouble, of course, was that life never *was* peaceful—and this particular wild-eyed movement wasn't *going* to go away. I could see Brianna on the far side of the crowd, eyes narrowed in thoughtful speculation as she listened to Flora MacDonald's high, clear voice, talking of the virtues of loyalty.

I heard a low sort of "Hmph!" just to the side, behind me, and turning, saw Neil Forbes, his heavy features set in disapproval. He had reinforcements now, I saw; three or four other gentlemen stood close beside him, glancing to and fro but trying not to look as though they were. Gauging the mood of the crowd, I thought they were outnumbered by roughly two hundred to one, and the two hundred were growing steadily more entrenched in their opinions as the drink took hold and the speech went on.

Looking away, I caught sight again of Brianna, and realized that she was now looking at Neil Forbes, too—and he was looking back. Both taller than the people around them, they stared at each other over the heads of the intervening crowd, he with animosity, she with aloofness. She had rejected his suit a few years before, and had done so without tact. Forbes certainly hadn't been in love with her—but he was a man with a fair degree of self-esteem, and not the sort to suffer such a public slight with philosophical resignation.

Brianna turned away, coolly, as though she had taken no notice of him, and spoke to the woman beside her. I heard him grunt again, say something in a low tone to his compatriots—and then the knot of them were leaving, rudely turning their backs on Mrs. MacDonald, who was still speaking.

Gasps and murmurs of indignation followed them, as they shoved their way through the thick-packed crowd, but no one offered to stop them, and the offense of their leaving was drowned by the outburst of prolonged applause that greeted the conclusion of the speech—this accompanied by the starting up of bagpipes, the random firing of pistols into the air, organized cheering of “Hip, hip, huzzay!” led by Major MacDonald, and such a general hullabaloo that no one would have noticed the arrival of an army, let alone the departure of a few disaffected Whigs.

I found Jamie in the shade of Hector’s mausoleum, combing out his hair with his fingers, preparatory to retying it.

“That went with a bang, didn’t it?” I asked.

“Several of them,” he said, keeping a wary eye on one obviously inebriated gentleman in the act of trying to reload his musket. “Watch that man, Sassenach.”

“He’s too late to shoot Neil Forbes. Did you see him leave?”

He nodded, deftly knotting the leather thong at his nape.

“He couldna have come much closer to an open declaration, save he’d got up on the barrel next to Fionnaghal.”

“And that would have made him an *excellent* target.” I squinted at the red-faced gentleman, presently spilling gunpowder on his shoes. “I don’t think he has any bullets.”

“Oh, well, then.” Jamie dismissed him with a wave of the hand. “Major MacDonald’s in rare form, no? He told me he’s arranged for Mrs. MacDonald to give such speeches here and there about the colony.”

“With himself as impresario, I take it.” I could just catch the gleam of MacDonald’s red coat among the press of well-wishers on the terrace.

“I daresay.” Jamie didn’t seem pleased at the prospect. In fact, he seemed rather sober, his face shadowed by dark thoughts. His mood would not be improved by hearing about my conversation with Neil Forbes, but I told him anyway.

“Well, it couldna be helped,” he said with a small shrug. “I’d hoped to keep the matter quiet, but wi’ things as they are wi’ Robin McGillivray, I’ve no real choice save to ask where I may, though that lets the matter be known. And talked about.” He moved again, restless.

“Are ye well, Sassenach?” he asked suddenly, looking at me.

"Yes. But *you* aren't. What is it?"

He smiled faintly.

"Och, it's nothing. Nothing I didna ken already. But it's different, no? Ye think ye're ready, and then ye meet it face to face, and would give anything to have it otherwise."

He looked out at the lawn, lifting his chin to point at the crowd. A sea of tartan flowed across the grass, the ladies' parasols raised against the sun, a field of brightly colored flowers. In the shade of the terrace, a piper played on, the sound of his *piobreachd* a thin, piercing descant to the hum of conversation.

"I kent I should have to stand one day against a good many of them, aye? To fight friends and kin. But then I found myself standing there, wi' Fionnaghal's hand upon my head like a blessing, face to face wi' them all, and watching her words fall upon them, see the resolve growing in them … and all of a sudden, it was as though a great blade had come down from heaven between them and me, to cleave us forever apart. The day is coming—and I can not stop it."

He swallowed, and looked down, away from me. I reached out to him, wanting to help, wanting to ease him—and knowing that I couldn't. It was, after all, by my doing that he found himself here, in this small Gethsemane.

Nonetheless, he took my hand, not looking at me, and squeezed it hard, so the bones pressed together.

"Lord, that this cup might pass from me?" I whispered.

He nodded, his gaze still resting on the ground, the fallen petals of the yellow roses. Then he looked at me, with a small smile but such pain in his eyes that I caught my breath, stricken to the heart.

Still, he smiled, and wiping his hand across his forehead, examined his wet fingers.

"Aye, well," he said. "It's only water, not blood. I'll live."

Perhaps you won't, I thought suddenly, appalled. To fight on the winning side was one thing; to survive, quite another.

He saw the look on my face, and released the pressure on my hand, thinking he was hurting me. He was, but not physically.

"But not my will be done, but Thine," he said very softly. "I chose my way when I wed ye, though I kent it not at the time. But I chose, and cannot now turn back, even if I would."

"Would you?" I looked into his eyes as I asked, and read the answer there. He shook his head.

"Would you? For you have chosen, as much as I."

I shook my head, as well, and felt the small relaxation of his body as his eyes met mine, clear now as the brilliant sky. For the space of a heartbeat, we stood alone together in the universe. Then a knot of chattering girls drifted within earshot, and I changed the subject to something safer.

"Have you heard anything about poor Manfred?"

"Poor Manfred, is it?" he gave me a cynical look.

"Well, he may be an immoral young hound, and have caused any amount of trouble—but that doesn't mean he ought to die for it."

He looked as though he might not be in complete agreement with this sentiment, but let the matter lie, saying merely that he'd asked, but so far without result.

"He'll turn up, though," he assured me. "Likely in the most inconvenient place."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! That I should live to see such a day! I thank ye, sir, thank ye indeed!" It was Mrs. Bug, flushed with heat, beer, and happiness, fanning herself fit to burst. Jamie smiled at her.

"So, were ye able to hear everything, then, *mo chridhe*?"

"Oh, indeed I was, sir!" she assured him fervently. "Every word! Arch found me a lovely place, just by one of they tubs o' wee flowers, where I could hear and not be trampled." She had nearly died of excitement when Jamie had offered to bring her down to the barbecue. Arch was coming, of course, and would go on to do errands in Cross Creek, but Mrs. Bug hadn't been off the Ridge since their arrival several years before.

Despite my disquiet over the profoundly Loyalist atmosphere that surrounded us, her bubbling delight was infectious, and I found myself smiling, Jamie and myself taking it in turns to answer her questions: she hadn't seen black slaves close-to before, and thought them exotically beautiful—did they cost a great deal? And must they be taught to wear clothes and speak properly? For she had heard that Africa was a heathen place where folk went entirely naked and killed one another with spears, like as one would do with a boar, and if one wanted to speak of naked, that statue of the soldier laddie on the lawn was shocking, did we not think? And him wi' not a stitch behind his shield! And whyever was that woman's heid at his feet? And had I looked—her hair was made to look as if 'twere snakes, of all horrid things! And who was Hector Cameron, whose tomb this was?—and made all of white marble, same as the tombs in Holyrood, imagine! Oh, Mrs. Innes's late husband? And when had she married Mr. Duncan, whom she had met, and such a sweet, kind-eyed man as he was, such a shame as he had lost his arm, was that in a battle of some type? And—oh, look! Mrs. MacDonald's husband—and a fine figure of man he was, too—was going to talk, as well!

Jamie gave the terrace a bleak look. Sure enough, Allan MacDonald was stepping up—merely onto a stool; no doubt the hogshead seemed extreme—and a number of people—far fewer than had attended his wife, but a respectable number—were clustering round attentively.

“Will ye no come and hear him?” Mrs. Bug was already in flight, hovering above the ground like a hummingbird.

“I'll hear well enough from here,” Jamie assured her. “You go along then, *a nighean.*”

She bumbled off, buzzing with excitement. Jamie gingerly touched both hands to his ears, testing to be sure they were still attached.

“It was kind of you to bring her,” I said, laughing. “The dear old thing probably hasn't had such fun in half a century.”

“No,” he said, grinning. “She likely—”

He stopped abruptly, frowning as he caught sight of something over my shoulder. I turned to look, but he was already moving past me, and I hurried to catch up.

It was Jocasta, white as milk, and disheveled in a way I had never seen her. She swayed unsteadily in the side doorway, and might have fallen, had Jamie not come up and taken quick hold of her, one arm about her waist to support her.

"Jesus, Auntie. What's amiss?" He spoke quietly, not to draw attention, and was moving her back inside the house even as he spoke.

"Oh, God, oh, merciful God, my head," she whispered, hand spread over her face like a spider, so that her fingers barely touched the skin, cupping her left eye. "My eye."

The linen blindfold that she wore in public was creased and blotched with moisture; tears were leaking out from under it, but she wasn't crying. Lacrimation: one eye was watering terribly. Both eyes were tearing, but much worse on the left; the edge of the linen was soaked, and wetness shone on that cheek.

"I need to look at her eye," I said to Jamie, touching his elbow, and looking round in vain for any of the servants. "Get her to her sitting room." That was closest, and all the guests were either outside or traipsing through the parlor to see the Prince's looking glass.

"No!" It was almost a scream. "No, not there!"

Jamie glanced at me, one brow raised in puzzlement, but spoke soothingly to her.

"Nay, Auntie, it's all right. I'll bring ye to your own chamber. Come, then." He stooped, and lifted her in his arms as though she were a child, her silk skirts falling over his arm with the sound of rushing water.

"Take her; I'll be right there." I'd spotted the slave named Angelina passing through the far end of the hall, and hurried to catch her up. I gave my orders, then rushed back toward the stairs—pausing momentarily to glance into the small sitting room as I did so.

There was no one there, though the presence of scattered punch cups and the strong scent of pipe tobacco indicated that Jocasta had likely been holding court there earlier. Her workbasket stood open, some half-knitted garment dragged out and left to dangle carelessly down the side like a dead rabbit.

Children perhaps, I thought; several balls of thread had been pulled out, too, and lay scattered on the parquet floor, trailing their colors. I hesitated—but instinct was too much for me, and I hastily scooped up the balls of thread and dropped them back into the workbasket. I stuffed the knitting in on top, but jerked my hand back with an exclamation.

A small gash on the side of my thumb was welling blood. I put it in my mouth and sucked hard to apply pressure to the wound; meanwhile, I groped more cautiously in the depths of the basket with my other hand, to see what had cut me.

A knife, small but businesslike. Likely used to cut embroidery threads; there was a tooled-leather sheath for it, loose in the bottom of the basket. I slipped the knife back into its sheath, seized the needle case I'd come for, and closed the folding tabletop of the workbasket before hurrying for the stairs.

Allan MacDonald had finished his brief speech; there was a loud clatter of applause outside, with shouts and whoops of Gaelic approval.

"Bloody Scots," I muttered under my breath. "Don't they *ever* learn?"

But I hadn't time to consider the implications of the MacDonalds' rabble-rousing. By the time I reached the top of the stair, one slave was close behind me, puffing under the weight of my medicine box, and another was at the bottom, starting more cautiously up with a pan of hot water from the kitchen.

Jocasta was bent double in her big chair, moaning, lips pressed into invisibility. Her cap had come off and both hands moved restlessly to and fro through her disordered hair, as though looking helplessly for something to seize. Jamie was stroking her back, murmuring to her in Gaelic; he looked up with obvious relief as I came in.

I had long suspected that the cause of Jocasta's blindness was glaucoma—rising pressure inside the eyeball that if untreated eventually damages the optic nerve. Now I was quite sure of it. More than that, I knew what form of the disease she had; she was plainly having an acute attack of closed-angle glaucoma, the most dangerous type.

There was no treatment for glaucoma now; the condition itself wouldn't be recognized for some time. Even if there had been, it was far too late; her blindness was permanent. There was, however, something I could do about the immediate situation—and I was afraid I'd have to.

"Put some of this to steep," I said to Angelina, grabbing the jar of goldenseal from my box and thrusting it into her hands. "And you"—I turned to the other slave, a man whose name I didn't know—"set the water to boil again, fetch me some clean rags, and put them in the water."

Even as I talked, I'd got out the tiny spirit lamp I carried in my case. The fire had been allowed to burn down on the hearth, but there were still live coals; I bent and lit the wick, then opened the needle case I'd taken from the sitting room and abstracted the largest needle in it, a three-inch length of steel, used for mending carpets.

"You aren't …" Jamie began, then broke off, swallowing.

"I have to," I said briefly. "There's nothing else. Hold her hands."

He was nearly as pale as Jocasta, but he nodded and took hold of the clutching fingers, pulling her hands gently away from her head.

I lifted away the linen bandage. The left eye bulged noticeably beneath its lid, vividly bloodshot. Tears welled up round it and overflowed in a constant stream. I could *feel* the pressure inside the eyeball, even without touching it, and clenched my teeth in revulsion.

No help for it. With a quick prayer to Saint Clare—who was, after all, patroness of sore eyes, as well as my own patron saint—I ran the needle through the flame of the lamp, poured pure alcohol onto a rag, and wiped the soot from the needle.

Swallowing a sudden excess of saliva, I spread the eyelids of the affected eye apart with one hand, commended my soul to God, and shoved the needle hard into the sclera of the eye, near the edge of the iris.

There was a cough and a splattering on the floor nearby, and the stink of vomit, but I had no attention to spare. I withdrew the needle carefully, though as fast as I could. Jocasta had stiffened abruptly, frozen stiff, hands clawed over Jamie's. She didn't move at all, but made small, shocked panting sounds, as though afraid to move enough even to breathe.

There was a trickle of fluid from the eye, vitreous humor, faintly cloudy, just thick enough to be distinguishable as it flowed sluggishly across the wet surface of the sclera. I was still holding the eyelids apart; I plucked a rag from the goldenseal tea with my free hand, squeezed out the excess liquid, careless of where it went, and touched it gently to her face. Jocasta gasped at the touch of the warmth on her skin, pulled her hands free, and grasped at it.

I let go then, and allowed her to seize the warm rag, pressing it against her closed left eye, the heat of it some relief.

Light feet pounded up the stairs again, and down the hall; Angelina, panting, a handful of salt clutched to her bosom, a spoon in her other hand. I brushed the salt from her damp palm into the pan of warm water, and set her to stir it while it dissolved.

"Did you bring laudanum?" I asked her quietly. Jocasta was lying back in her chair, eyes closed—but rigid as a statue, her eyelids squeezing tight, fists clenched in knots on her knees.

"I couldna find the laudanum, missus," Angelina murmured to me, with a frightened glance at Jocasta. "I dinna ken who could be takin' it—hain't nobody got the key but Mr. Ulysses and Miz Cameron herself."

"Ulysses let you into the simples closet, then—so he knows that Mrs. Cameron is ill?"

She nodded vigorously, setting the ribbon on her cap a-flutter.

"Oh, yes, missus! He be bleezin', if he find out and I hain't told him. He say come fetch him quick, she want him—otherwise, I tell Miz Cameron she hain't to worry none, he take care every single thing."

Jocasta let out a long sigh at this, her clenched fists relaxing a little.

"God bless the man," she murmured, eyes closed. "He *will* take care of everything. I should be lost without him. Lost."

Her white hair was soaked at the temples, and sweat dripped from the ends of the tendrils that lay over her shoulder, making spots on the dark blue silk of her gown.

Angelina unlaced Jocasta's gown and stays and got them off. Then I had Jamie lay her down on the bed in her shift, with a thick layer of towels tucked round her head. I filled one of my rattlesnake syringes with the warm salt water, and with Jamie gingerly holding the lids of her eye apart, I was able to gently irrigate the eye, in hopes of perhaps preventing infection to the puncture wound. The wound itself showed as a tiny scarlet spot on the sclera, a small conjunctival bleb above it. Jamie couldn't look at it without blinking, I saw, and smiled at him.

"She'll be all right," I said. "You can go, if you like."

Jamie nodded, turning to go, but Jocasta's hand shot out to stop him.

"No, be staying, *a chuisle*—if ye will." This last was strictly for form's sake; she had him clutched by the sleeve, hard enough to turn her fingers white.

"Aye, Auntie, of course," he said mildly, and put his hand over hers, squeezing in reassurance. Still, she didn't let go until he had sat down beside her.

"Who else is there?" she asked, turning her head fretfully from side to side, trying to hear the telltale sounds of breathing and movement that would inform her. "Have the slaves gone?"

"Yes, they've gone back to help with the serving," I told her. "It's only me and Jamie left."

She closed her eyes and drew a deep, shuddering breath, only then beginning to relax a little.

"Good. I must tell ye a thing, Nephew, and no one else must hear. Niece"—she lifted a long white hand toward me—"go and be seeing as we're truly alone."

I went obediently to look out into the hall. No one was visible, though there were voices coming from a room down the hall—laughter, and tremendous rustlings and thumpings, as young women chattered and rearranged their hair and clothing. I pulled my head back in and closed the door, and the sounds from the rest of the house receded at once, muffled into a distant rumble.

"What is it, then, Auntie?" Jamie was still holding her hand, one big thumb gently stroking the back of it, over and over, in the soothing rhythm I'd seen him use on skittish animals. It was less effective on his aunt than on the average horse or dog, though.

"It was him. He's here!"

"Who's here, Auntie?"

"I don't know!" Her eyes rolled desperately to and fro, as though in a vain attempt to see through not only darkness, but walls, as well.

Jamie raised his brows at me, but he could see as well as I that she wasn't raving, incoherent as she sounded. She realized what she sounded like; I could see the effort in her face as she pulled herself together.

"He's come for the gold," she said, lowering her voice. "The Frenchman's gold."

"Oh, aye?" Jamie said cautiously. He darted a glance at me, one eyebrow raised, but I shook my head. She wasn't having hallucinations.

Jocasta sighed with impatience and shook her head, then stopped abruptly, with a muffled "Och!" of pain, putting both hands to her head as though to keep it on her shoulders.

She breathed deeply for a moment or two, her lips pressed tight together. Then she slowly lowered her hands.

"It started last night," she said. "The pain in my eye."

She'd waked in the night to a throbbing in her eye, a dull pain that spread slowly to the side of her head.

"It's come before, ken," she explained. She had pushed herself up to a sitting position now, and was beginning to look a little better, though she still held the warm cloth to her eye. "It began when I started to lose my sight. Sometimes it would be one eye, sometimes both. But I kent what was coming."

But Jocasta MacKenzie Cameron Innes was not a woman to allow mere bodily indisposition to interfere with her plans, let alone interrupt what promised to be the most scintillating social affair in Cross Creek's history.

"I was that disgusted," she said. "And here Miss Flora MacDonald coming!"

But the arrangements had all been made; the barbecued carcasses were roasting in their pits, hogsheads of ale and beer stood ready by the stables, and the air was full of the fragrance of hot bread and beans from the cookhouse. The slaves were well-trained, and she had full faith that Ulysses would manage everything. All she must do, she'd thought, was to stay on her feet.

"I didna want to take opium or laudanum," she explained. "Or I'd fall asleep for sure. So I made do wi' the whisky."

She was a tall woman, and thoroughly accustomed to an intake of liquor that would have felled a modern man. By the time the MacDonalds arrived, she'd had the better part of a bottle—but the pain was getting worse.

"And then my eye began to water so fierce, everyone would ha' seen something was wrong, and I didna want *that.* So I came into my sitting room; I'd taken care to put a wee bottle of laudanum in my workbasket, in case the whisky should be not enough.

"Folk were swarming thick as lice outside, trying to catch a glimpse or a word with Miss MacDonald, but the sitting room was deserted, so far as I could tell, what wi' my head pounding and my eye fit to explode." She said this last quite casually, but I saw Jamie flinch, the memory of what I'd done with the needle obviously still fresh. He swallowed and wiped his knuckles hard across his mouth.

Jocasta had quickly abstracted the bottle of laudanum, swallowed a few gulps, and then sat for a moment, waiting for it to take effect.

"I dinna ken if ye've ever had the stuff, Nephew, but it gives ye an odd feeling, as though ye might be starting to dissolve at the edges. Take a drop too much, and ye begin to see things that aren't there—blind or not—and hear them, too."

Between the effects of laudanum and liquor and the noise of the crowd outside, she hadn't noticed footsteps, and when the voice spoke near her, she'd thought for a moment that it was a hallucination.

" 'So here ye are, lass,' he said," she quoted, and her face, already pale, blanched further at the memory. *" 'Remember me, do ye?' "*

"I take it ye did, Aunt?" Jamie asked dryly.

"I did," she replied just as dryly. "I'd heard that voice twice before. Once at the Gathering where your daughter was wed—and once more than twenty years ago, in an inn near Coigach, in Scotland."

She lowered the wet cloth from her face and put it unerringly back into the bowl of warm water. Her eyes were red and swollen, raw against the pale skin, and looking terribly vulnerable in their blindness—but she had command of herself once more.

"Aye, I did ken him," she repeated.

She had recognized the voice at once as one known—but for a moment, could not place it. Then realization had struck her, and she had clutched the arm of her chair for support.

"Who are ye?" she'd demanded, with what force she could summon. Her heart was pounding in time to the throbbing in her head and eye, and her senses swimming in whisky and laudanum. Perhaps it was the laudanum that seemed to transform the sound of the crowd outside into the sound of a nearby sea, the noise of a slave's footsteps in the hall to the thump of the landlord's clogs on the stairs of the inn.

"I was there. Truly there." Despite the sweat that still ran down her face, I saw gooseflesh pebble the pale skin of her shoulders. "In the inn at Coigach. I smelt the sea, and I heard the men—Hector and Dougal—I could *hear* them! Arguing together, somewhere behind me. And the man wi' the mask—I could *see* him," she said, and a ripple went up the back of my own neck as she turned her blind eyes toward me. She spoke with such conviction that for an instant, it seemed she *did* see.

"Standing at the foot of the stair, just as he'd been twenty-five years ago, a knife in his hand and his eyes upon me through the holes in his mask."

And, “Ye ken well enough who I am, lass,” he’d said, and she had seemed to see his smile, though dimly she had known she only heard it in his voice; she’d never seen his face, even when she had her sight.

She was sitting up, half doubled over, arms crossed over her breast as though in self-defense and her white hair wild and tangled down her back.

“He’s come back,” she said, and shook with a sudden convulsive shudder. “He’s come for the gold—and when he finds it, he will kill me.”

Jamie laid a hand on her arm, in an attempt to calm her.

“No one will kill ye while I’m here, Aunt,” he said. “So this man came to ye in your sitting room, and ye kent him from his voice. What else did he say to ye?”

She was still shivering, but not so badly. I thought it was as much reaction to massive amounts of laudanum and whisky as from fear.

She shook her head in the effort of recollection.

“He said—he said he had come to take the gold to its rightful owner. That we’d held it in trust, and while he didna grudge me what we’d spent of it, Hector and me—it wasna mine, had never been mine. I should tell him where it was, and he would see to the rest. And then he put his hand on me.” She ceased clutching herself, and held out one arm toward Jamie. “On my wrist. D’ye see the marks there? D’ye see them, Nephew?” She sounded anxious, and it occurred to me suddenly that she might doubt the existence of the visitor herself.

“Aye, Auntie,” Jamie said softly, touching her wrist. “There are marks.”

There were; three purplish smudges, small ovals where fingers had gripped.

“He squeezed, and then twisted my wrist so hard I thought it had snapped. Then he let go, but he didna step back. He stayed over me, and I could feel the heat of his breath and the stink of tobacco on my face.”

I had hold of her other wrist, feeling the pulse beat there. It was strong and rapid, but every once in a while would skip a beat. Hardly surprising. I did wonder how often she took laudanum—and how much.

“So I reached down into my workbasket, took my wee knife from its sheath, and went for his balls,” she concluded.

Taken by surprise, Jamie laughed.

“Did ye get him?”

“Yes, she did,” I said, before Jocasta could answer. “I saw dried blood on the knife.”

“Well, that will teach him to terrorize a helpless blind woman, won’t it?” Jamie patted her hand. “Ye did well, Auntie. Did he go, then?”

“He did.” The recounting of her success had steadied her a lot; she pulled her hand from my grip, in order to push herself up straighter against the pillows. She pulled away the towel still draped around her neck, and dropped it on the floor with a brief grimace of distaste.

Seeing that she was plainly feeling better, Jamie glanced at me, then rose to his feet.

“I’ll go and see is anyone limping about the place, then.” At the door, he paused, though, turning back to Jocasta.

“Auntie. Ye said ye’d met this fellow *twice* before? At the inn in Coigach where the men brought the gold ashore—and at the Gathering four years ago?”

She nodded, brushing back the damp hair from her face.

“I did. ’Twas on the last day. He came into my tent, while I was alone. I kent someone was there, though he didna speak at first, and I asked who was it? He gave a bit of a laugh, then, and said, ‘It’s true what they said, then—you’re blind entirely?’ ”

She had stood up, facing the invisible visitor, recognizing the voice, but not quite knowing yet why.

“ ‘So ye dinna ken me, Mrs. Cameron? I was a friend to your husband—though it’s been a good many years since last we met. On the coast of Scotland—on a moonlicht nicht.’ ”

She licked dry lips at the memory.

"So then it came to me, all on the sudden. And I said, 'Blind I may be, but I ken ye well, sir. What d'ye want?' But he was gone. And the next instant, I heard Phaedre and Ulysses talking as they came toward the tent; he'd seen them, and fled away. I asked them, but they'd been ta'en up wi' their arguing, and hadna seen him leave. I kept someone by me all the time, then, until we left—and he didna come near me again. Until now."

Jamie frowned and rubbed a knuckle slowly down the long, straight bridge of his nose.

"Why did ye not tell me then?"

A trace of humor touched her ravaged face, and she wrapped her fingers round her injured wrist.

"I thought I was imagining things."

* * *

Phaedre had found the bottle of laudanum where Jocasta had dropped it, under her chair in the sitting room. Likewise, a trail of tiny blood spots that I had missed in my hurry. These disappeared before reaching the door, though; whatever wound Jocasta had inflicted on the intruder had been minor.

Duncan, summoned discreetly, had hurried in to comfort Jocasta—only to be sent directly out again, with instructions to see to the guests; neither injury nor illness was going to mar such an occasion!

Ulysses met with a slightly more cordial reception. In fact, Jocasta sent for him. Peering into her room to check on her, I found him sitting by the bed, holding his mistress's hand, with such an expression of gentleness on his usually impassive face that I was quite moved by it, and stepped quietly back into the hall, not to disturb them. He saw me, though, and nodded.

They were talking in low voices, his head in its stiff white wig bending toward hers. He seemed to be arguing with her, in a most respectful fashion; she shook her head, and gave a small cry of pain. His hand tightened on hers, and I saw that he had taken off his white gloves; her hand lay long and frail, pallid in his powerful dark grasp.

She breathed deeply, steadying herself. Then she said something definite, squeezed his hand, and lay back. He rose, and stood for a moment beside the bed, looking down at her. Then he drew himself up, and taking his gloves from his pocket, came out into the hall.

"If you will fetch your husband, Mrs. Fraser?" he said, low-voiced. "My mistress wishes me to tell him something."

* * *

The party was still in full swing, but had shifted to a lower, digestive sort of gear. People greeted Jamie or me as we followed Ulysses into the house, but no one stopped us.

He led us downstairs to his butler's pantry, a tiny room that lay off the winter kitchen, its shelves crammed with silver ornaments, bottles of polish, vinegar, blacking, and bluing, a housewife with needles, pins, and threads, small tools for mending, and what looked like a substantial private stock of brandy, whisky, and assorted cordials.

He removed these from their shelf, and reaching back into the empty space where they had stood, pressed upon the wood of the wall with both white-gloved hands. Something clicked, and a small panel slid aside with a soft rasping sound.

He stood aside, silently inviting Jamie to look. Jamie raised one eyebrow and leaned forward, peering into the recess. It was dark and shadowy in the butler's pantry, with only a dim light filtering in from the high basement windows that ran around the top of the kitchen walls.

"It's empty," he said.

"Yes, sir. It should not be." Ulysses's voice was low and respectful, but firm.

"What *was* there?" I asked, glancing out of the pantry to be sure we were not overheard. The kitchen looked as though a bomb had gone off in it, but only a scullion was there, a half-witted boy who was washing pots, singing softly to himself.

"Part of an ingot of gold," Ulysses replied softly.

The French gold Hector Cameron had brought away from Scotland, ten thousand pounds in bullion, cast in ingots and marked with the royal fleur-de-lis, was the foundation of River Run's wealth. But it would not do, of course, for that fact to be known. First Hector, and then, after Hector's death, Ulysses, had taken one of the gold bars and scraped bits of the soft yellow metal into a small, anonymous heap. This could then be taken to the river warehouses —or for additional safety, sometimes as far as the coastal towns of Edenton, Wilmington, or New Bern—and there carefully changed, in small amounts that would cause no comment, into cash or warehouse certificates, which could safely be used anywhere.

"There was about half of the ingot left," Ulysses said, nodding toward the cavity in the wall. "I found it gone a few months ago. Since then, of course, I have contrived a new hiding place."

Jamie looked into the empty cavity, then turned to Ulysses.

"The rest?"

"Safe enough, last time I checked, sir." The bulk of the gold was concealed inside Hector Cameron's mausoleum, hidden in a coffin and guarded, presumably, by his spirit. One or two of the slaves besides Ulysses might know about it, but the very lively fear of ghosts was enough to keep everyone away. I remembered the line of salt spread on the ground in front of the mausoleum, and shivered a little, in spite of the stifling heat in the basement.

"I could not, of course, make shift to look today," the butler added.

"No, of course not. Duncan knows?" Jamie nodded toward the recess, and Ulysses nodded.

"The thief might have been anyone. So many people come to this house.…" The butler's massive shoulders moved in a small shrug. "But now that this man from the sea has come again—it puts a different face upon the matter, does it not, sir?"

"Aye, it does." Jamie contemplated the matter for a moment, tapping two fingers softly against his leg.

"Well, then. Ye'll need to stay for a bit, Sassenach, will ye not? To look after my aunt's eye?"

I nodded. Provided no infection resulted from my crude intervention, there was little or nothing I could do for the eye itself.

But it should be watched, kept clean and irrigated, until I could be sure it was healed.

"We'll stay, then, for a bit," he said, turning to Ulysses. "I'll send the Bugs back to the Ridge, to mind things and see to the haying. We'll stay, and watch."

* * *

The house was full of guests, but I slept in Jocasta's dressing room, so that I might keep an eye on her. The easing of pressure in her eye had relieved the excruciating pain, and she had fallen soundly asleep, her vital signs reassuring enough that I felt I could sleep, too.

Knowing I had a patient, though, I slept lightly, waking at intervals to tiptoe into her room. Duncan was sleeping on a pallet at the foot of her bed, dead to the world from the exhaustions of the day. I could hear his heavy breathing, as I lit a taper from the hearth and came to stand by the bed.

Jocasta was still soundly asleep, lying on her back, arms crossed gracefully over the coverlet and her head thrown back, sternly long-nosed and aristocratic as the tomb figures in the chapel of St. Denys. All she wanted was a crown, and a small dog of some kind crouched at her feet.

I smiled at the thought, thinking as I did how odd it was: Jamie slept in exactly that fashion, lying flat on his back, hands crossed, straight as an arrow. Brianna didn't; she was a wild sleeper, and had been from a child. Like me.

The thought gave me a small, unexpected feeling of pleasure. I knew I had given her some parts of me, of course, but she resembled Jamie so strongly, it was always something of a surprise to notice one.

I blew out the taper, but didn't at once return to bed. I had taken Phaedre's cot in the dressing room, but it was a hot, airless little space. The hot day and the consumption of alcohol had left me cotton-mouthed, with a vague headache; I picked up the carafe from Jocasta's bedside, but it was empty.

No need to relight the taper; one of the sconces in the hallway was still burning, and a dim glow outlined the door. I pushed it open quietly and looked out. The corridor was lined with bodies—servants sleeping by the doors of the bedrooms—and the air throbbed gently with the snoring and heavy breathing of a great many people sunk in slumber of varying degrees.

At the end of the corridor, though, one pale figure stood upright, looking out through the tall casement window toward the river.

She must have heard me, but didn't turn around. I came to stand beside her, looking out. Phaedre was undressed to her shift, her hair free of its cloth and falling in a soft thick mass around her shoulders. Rare for a slave to have such hair, I thought; most women kept their hair very short under turban or headcloth, lacking both time and tools for dressing it. But Phaedre was a body servant; she would have some leisure—and a comb, at least.

"Would you like your bed back?" I asked, low-voiced. "I'll be up for a while—and can sleep on the divan."

She glanced at me, and shook her head.

"Oh, no, ma'am," she said softly. "Thankee kindly; I ain't sleepy." She saw the carafe I carried, and reached for it. "I fetch you some water, ma'am?"

"No, no, I'll do it. I'd like the air." Still, I stood beside her, looking out.

It was a beautiful night, thick with stars that hung low and bright over the river, a faint silver thread that wound its way through the dark. There was a moon, a slender sickle, riding low on its way below the curve of the earth, and one or two small campfires burned in the trees beside the river.

The window was open, and bugs were swarming in; a small cloud of them danced around the candle in the sconce behind us, and tiny winged things brushed my face and arms. Crickets sang, so many of them that their song was a high, constant sound, like a bow drawn over violin strings.

Phaedre moved to shut it—to sleep with a window open was considered most unhealthy, and likely *was,* given the various mosquito-borne diseases in this swampish atmosphere.

"I thought I heard something. Out there," she said, nodding toward the dark below.

"Oh? Probably my husband," I said. "Or Ulysses."

"Ulysses?" she said, looking startled.

Jamie, Ian, and Ulysses had organized a system of patrol, and were doubtless out somewhere in the night, gliding round the house and keeping an eye on Hector's mausoleum, just in case. Knowing nothing of the disappearing gold nor Jocasta's mysterious visitor, though, Phaedre wouldn't be aware of the increased vigilance, save in the indirect way in which slaves always knew things—the instinct that had doubtless roused her to look out the window.

"They're just keeping an eye out," I said, as reassuringly as I could. "With so many people here, you know." The MacDonalds had gone to Farquard Campbell's plantation to spend the night, and a goodly number of guests had gone with them, but there were still a lot of people on the premises.

She nodded, but looked troubled.

"It just feel like something ain't right," she said. "Don't know what 'tis."

"Your mistress's eye—" I began, but she shook her head.

"No. No. I don't know, but there something in the air; I be feelin' it. Not just tonight, I don't mean—something goin' on. Something coming." She looked at me, helpless to express what she meant, but her mood communicated itself to me.

It might be in part simply the heightened emotions of the oncoming conflict. One could in fact feel that in the air. But there might be something else, too—something subterranean, barely sensed, but there, like the dim form of a sea serpent, glimpsed for only a moment, then gone, and so put down to legend.

"My grannie, she taken from Africa," Phaedre said softly, staring out at the night. "She talk to the bones. Say they tell her when bad things comin'."

"Really?" In such an atmosphere, quiet save the night sounds, so many souls adrift around us, there seemed nothing unreal about such a statement. "Did she teach you to … talk to bones?"

She shook her head, but the corner of her mouth tucked in, a small, secret expression, and I thought she might know more about it than she was willing to say.

One unwelcome thought had occurred to me. I didn't see how Stephen Bonnet could be connected to present events—surely he was not the man who had spoken to Jocasta out of her past, and just as surely, stealthy theft was not his style. But he did have some reason to believe there might be gold somewhere at River Run—and from what Roger had told us of Phaedre's encounter with the big Irishman in Cross Creek …

"The Irishman you met, when you were out with Jemmy," I said, changing my grip on the slick surface of the carafe, "have you ever seen him again?"

She looked surprised at that; clearly Bonnet was the farthest thing from her mind.

"No, ma'am," she said. "Ain't seen him again, ever." She thought for a moment, big eyes hooded. She was the color of strong coffee with a dash of cream, and her hair—there had been a white man in her family tree at some time, I thought.

"No, ma'am," she repeated softly, and turned her troubled gaze back to the quiet night and the sinking moon. "All I know—something ain't right."

Out by the stables, a rooster began to crow, the sound out of place and eerie in the dark.

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WENDIGO

August 20, 1774

The light in the morning room was perfect.

“We began with this room,” Jocasta had told her great-niece, raising her face to the sun that poured through the open double doors to the terrace, lids closed over her blind eyes. “I wanted a room to paint in, and chose this spot, where the light would come in, bright as crystal in the morning, like still water in the afternoon. And then we built the house around it.” The old woman’s hands, still long-fingered and strong, touched the easel, the pigment pots, the brushes, with affectionate regret, as she might caress the statue of a long-dead lover—a passion recalled, but accepted as forever gone.

And Brianna, sketching block and pencil in hand, had drawn as quickly, as covertly as she could, to catch that fleeting expression of grief outlived.

That sketch lay with the others in the bottom of her box, against the day when she might try it in more finished form, try to catch that merciless light, and the deep-carved lines of her aunt’s face, strong bones stark in the sun she could not see.

For now, though, the painting at hand was a matter of business, rather than love or art. Nothing suspicious had happened since Flora MacDonald’s barbecue, but her parents meant to stay for a little longer, just in case. With Roger still in Charlotte—he had written to her; the letter was secreted in the bottom of her box, with the private sketches—there was no reason why she shouldn't stay, too. Hearing of her continued presence, two or three of Jocasta's acquaintances, wealthy planters, had commissioned portraits of themselves or their families; a welcome source of income.

"I will never understand how ye do that," Ian said, shaking his head at the canvas on her easel. "It's wonderful."

In all honesty, she didn't understand how she did it, either; it didn't seem necessary. She'd said as much in answer to similar compliments before, though, and realized that such an answer generally struck the hearer either as false modesty or as condescension.

She smiled at him, instead, letting the glow of pleasure she felt show in her face.

"When I was little, my father would take me walking on the Common, and we'd see an old man there often, painting with an easel. I used to make Daddy stop so I could watch, and he and the old man would chat. I mostly just stared, but once I got up the nerve to ask him how he did that and he looked down at me and smiled, and said, 'The only trick, sweetie, is to see what you're looking at.' "

Ian looked from her to the picture, then back, as though comparing the portrait with the hand that had made it.

"Your father," he said, interested. He lowered his voice, glancing toward the door into the hallway. There were voices, but not close. "Ye dinna mean Uncle Jamie?"

"No." She felt the familiar small ache at the thought of her first father, but put it aside. She didn't mind telling Ian about him—but not here, with slaves all over the place and a constant flow of visitors who might pop in at any moment.

"Look." She glanced over her shoulder to be sure no one was near, but the slaves were talking loudly in the foyer, arguing over a misplaced boot scraper. She lifted the cover of the small compartment that held spare brushes, and reached under the strip of felt that lined it.

“What do you think?” She held the pair of miniatures out for his inspection, one in either palm.

The look of expectation on his face changed to outright fascination, and he reached slowly for one of the tiny paintings.

“I will be damned,” he said. It was the one of her mother, her hair long and curling loose on bare shoulders, the small firm chin raised with an authority that belied the generous curve of the mouth above.

“The eyes—I don’t think those are quite right,” she said, peering into his hand. “Working so small … I couldn’t get the color, exactly. Da’s were much easier.”

Blues just *were* easier. A tiny dab of cobalt, highlighted with white and that faint green shadow that intensified the blue while vanishing itself … well, and that was Da, too. Strong, vivid, and straightforward.

To get a brown with true depth and subtlety, though, let alone something that even approximated the smoky topaz of her mother’s eyes—always clear, but changing like the light on a peat-brown trout stream—that needed more underpainting than was really possible in the tiny space of a miniature. She’d have to try again sometime, with a larger portrait.

“Are they like, do you think?”

“They’re wonderful.” Ian looked from one to the other, then he put the portrait of Claire gently back into its place. “Have your parents seen them yet?”

“No. I wanted to be sure they were right, before I showed them to anybody. But if they are—I’m thinking I can show them to the people who come to sit, and maybe get commissions for more miniatures. Those I could work on at home, on the Ridge; all I’d need is my paint box and the little ivory discs. I could do the painting from the sketches; I wouldn’t need the sitter to keep coming.”

She made a brief, explanatory gesture toward the large canvas she was working on, which showed Farquard Campbell, looking rather like a stuffed ferret in his best suit, surrounded by numerous children and grandchildren, most of these mere whitish blobs at the moment. Her strategy was to have their mothers drag the small ones in one at a time, to have each child's limbs and features hastily sketched into the appropriate blob before natural wriggliness or tantrums obtruded.

Ian glanced at the canvas, but his attention returned to the miniatures of her parents. He stood looking at them, a slight smile on his long, half-homely face. Then, feeling her eyes on him, he glanced up, alarmed.

"Oh, no, ye don't!"

"Oh, come on, Ian, let me just sketch you," she coaxed. "It won't hurt, you know."

"Och, that's what you think," he countered, backing away as though the pencil she had taken up might be a weapon. "The Kahnyen'kehaka think to have a likeness of someone gives ye power over them. That's why the medicine society wear false faces—so the demons causing the illness willna have their true likeness and willna ken who to hurt, aye?"

This was said in such a serious tone that she squinted at him, to see whether he was joking. He didn't seem to be.

"Mmm. Ian—Mama explained to you about germs, didn't she?"

"Aye, she did, o' course," he said, in a tone exhibiting no conviction at all. "She showed me things swimmin' about, and said they were livin' in my teeth!" His face showed momentary repugnance at the notion, but he left the matter to return to the subject at hand.

"There was a traveling Frenchman came to the village once, a natural philosopher—he'd drawings he'd made of birds and animals, and that astonished them—but then he made the mistake of offering to make a likeness of the war chief's wife. I barely got him out in one piece."

"But you aren't a Mohawk," she said patiently, "and if you were—you're not afraid of me having power over you, are you?"

He turned his head and gave her a sudden queer look that went through her like a knife through butter.

"No," he said. "No, of course not." But his voice had little more conviction than when discussing germs.

Still, he moved to the stool she kept for sitters, set in good light from the open doors that led to the terrace, and sat down, chin lifted and jaw set like one about to be heroically executed.

Suppressing a smile, she took up the sketching block and drew as quickly as she could, lest he change his mind. He was a difficult subject; his features lacked the solid, clear-cut bone structure that both her parents and Roger had. And yet it was in no way a soft face, even discounting the stippled tattoos that curved from the bridge of his nose across his cheeks.

Young and fresh, and yet the firmness of his mouth—it was slightly crooked, she saw with interest; how had she never noticed that before?—belonged to someone much older, bracketed by lines that would cut much deeper with age, but were already firmly entrenched.

The eyes … she despaired of getting those right. Large and hazel, they were his one claim to beauty, and yet, beautiful was the last thing you would call them. Like most eyes, they weren't one color at all, but many—the colors of autumn, dark wet earth and crackling oak leaves, and the touch of setting sun on dry grass.

The color was a challenge, but one she could meet. The expression, though—it changed in an instant from something so guilelessly amiable as to seem almost half-witted to something you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley.

The expression at present was somewhere between these two extremes, but shifted suddenly toward the latter as his attention focused on the open doors behind her, and the terrace beyond.

She glanced over her shoulder, startled. Someone was there; she saw the edge of his—or her—shadow, but the person who threw it was keeping out of sight. Whoever it was began to whistle, a tentative, breathy sound.

For an instant, everything was normal. Then the world shifted. The intruder was whistling "Yellow Submarine."

All the blood rushed from her head, and she swayed, grabbing the edge of an occasional table to keep from falling. Dimly, she sensed Ian rising like a cat from his stool, seizing one of her palette knives, and sliding noiselessly out of the room into the hallway.

Her hands had gone cold and numb; so had her lips. She tried to whistle a phrase in reply, but nothing but a little air emerged. Straightening up, she took hold of herself, and sang the last few words instead. She could barely manage the tune, but there was no doubt of the words.

Dead silence from the terrace; the whistling had stopped.

"Who are you?" she said clearly. "Come in."

The shadow lengthened slowly, showing a head like a lion's, light shining through the curls, glowing on the terrace stones. The head itself poked cautiously into sight around the corner of the door. It was an Indian, she saw, with astonishment, though his dress was mostly European—and ragged—bar a wampum necklet. He was lean and dirty, with close-set eyes, which were fixed on her with eagerness and something like avidity.

"You alone, man?" he asked, in a hoarse whisper. "Thought I heard voices."

"You can see I am. Who on earth are you?"

"Ah … Wendigo. Wendigo Donner. Your name's Fraser, right?" He had edged all the way into the room now, though still glancing warily from side to side.

"My maiden name, yes. Are you—" She stopped, not sure how to ask.

"Yeah," he said softly, looking her up and down in a casual way that no man of the eighteenth century would have employed to a lady. "So are you, aren't you? You're her daughter, you have to be." He spoke with a certain intensity, moving closer.

She didn't think he meant her harm; he was just very interested. Ian didn't wait to see, though; there was a brief darkening of the light from the door, and then he had Donner from behind, the Indian's squawk of alarm choked off by the arm across his throat, the point of the palette knife jabbing him under the ear.

"Who are ye, arsebite, and what d'ye want?" Ian demanded, tightening the arm across Donner's throat. The Indian's eyes bulged, and he made small mewling noises.

"How do you expect him to answer you, if you're choking him?" This appeal to reason caused Ian to relax his grip, albeit reluctantly.

Donner coughed, rubbing his throat ostentatiously, and shot Ian a resentful look.

"No need for that, man, I wasn't doin' nothin' to her." Donner's eyes went from her to Ian and back. He jerked his head toward Ian. "Is he …?"

"No, but he knows. Sit down. You met my mother when she—when she was kidnapped, didn't you?"

Ian's feathery brows shot up at this, and he took a firmer grip on the palette knife, which was flexible but had a definite point.

"Yeah." Donner lowered himself gingerly onto the stool, keeping a wary eye on Ian. "Man, they nearly got me. Your mother, she told me her old man was gnarly and I didn't want to be there when he showed up, but I didn't believe her. Almost, I didn't. But when I heard those drums, man, I bugged out, and a damn good thing I did, too." He swallowed, looking pale. "I went back, in the morning. Jeez, man."

Ian said something under his breath, in what Brianna thought was Mohawk. It sounded unfriendly in the extreme, and Donner evidently discerned enough of the meaning to make him scoot his stool a little farther away, hunching his shoulders.

"Hey, man, I didn't do nothin' to her, okay?" He looked pleadingly at Brianna. "I didn't! I was gonna help her get away—ask her, she'll tell you! Only Fraser and his guys showed up before I could. Christ, why would I hurt her? She's the first one I found back here—I needed her!"

"The first one?" Ian said, frowning. "The first—"

"The first … traveler, he means," Brianna said. Her heart was beating fast. "What did you need her for?"

"To tell me how to get—back." He swallowed again, his hand going to the wampum ornament around his neck. "You—did you come through, or were you born here? I'm figuring you came through," he added, not waiting for an answer. "They don't grow 'em as big as you now. Little bitty girls. Me, I like a big woman." He smiled, in what he plainly intended to be an ingratiating manner.

"I came," Brianna said shortly. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Trying to get close enough to talk to your mother." He glanced uneasily over his shoulder; there were slaves in the kitchen garden, their voices audible. "I hid out with the Cherokee for a while, then I figured to come down and talk to her at Fraser's Ridge when it was safe, but the old lady there told me you were all down here. Heck of a long way to walk," he added, looking vaguely resentful.

"But then that big black dude ran me off twice, when I tried to get in before. Guess I didn't meet the dress code." His face flickered, not quite managing a smile.

"I been sneaking around for the last three days, trying to catch a glimpse of her, find her alone outside. But I saw her talking to you, out on the terrace, and heard you call her Mama. Seeing how big you are, I figured you must be … well, I figured if you didn't pick up on the song, no harm done, huh?"

"So ye want to go back where ye came from, do ye?" Ian asked. Plainly he thought this was an excellent idea.

"Oh, yeah," Donner said fervently. "*Oh,* yeah!"

"Where did you come through?" Brianna asked. The shock of his appearance was fading, subsumed by curiosity. "In Scotland?"

"No, is that where you did it?" he asked eagerly. Scarcely waiting for her nod, he went on. "Your mother said she came and then went back and came again. Can you-all go back and forth, like, you know, a revolving door?"

Brianna shook her head violently, shuddering in recollection.

"God, no. It's horrible, and it's so dangerous, even with a gemstone."

"Gemstone?" He pounced on that. "You gotta have a gemstone to do it?"

"Not absolutely, but it seems to be some protection. And it may be that there's some way to use gemstones to—to steer, sort of, but we don't really know about that." She hesitated, wanting to ask more questions, but wanting still more to fetch Claire. "Ian—could you go get Mama? I think she's in the kitchen garden with Phaedre."

Her cousin gave the visitor a flat, narrow look, and shook his head.

"I'll not leave ye alone wi' this fellow. You go; I'll watch him."

She would have argued, but long experience with Scottish males had taught her to recognize intractable stubbornness when she saw it. Besides, Donner's eyes were fixed on her in a way that made her slightly uncomfortable—he was looking at her hand, she realized, at the cabochon ruby in her ring. She was reasonably sure she could fight him off, if necessary, but still …

"I'll be right back," she said, hastily stabbing a neglected brush into the pot of turps. "Don't go anywhere!"

* * *

I was shocked, but less so than I might have been. I had felt that Donner was alive. Hoped he was, in spite of everything. Still, seeing him face to face, sitting in Jocasta's morning room, struck me dumb. He was talking when I came in, but stopped when he saw me. He didn't stand up, naturally, nor yet offer any observations on my survival; just nodded at me, and resumed what he'd been saying.

"To stop whitey. Save our lands, save our people."

"But you came to the wrong time," Brianna pointed out. "You were too late."

Donner gave her a blank look.

"No, I didn't—1766, that's when I was supposed to come, and that's when I came." He pounded the heel of his hand violently against the side of his head. "Crap! What was *wrong* with me?"

"Congenital stupidity?" I suggested politely, having regained my voice. "That, or hallucinogenic drugs."

The blank look flickered a little, and Donner's mouth twitched.

"Oh. Yeah, man. There was some of that."

"But if you came to 1766—and meant to"—Bree objected—"what about Robert Springer—Otter-Tooth? According to the story Mama heard about him, he meant to warn the native tribes against white men and prevent them colonizing the place. Only he arrived too *late* to do that—and even so, he must have arrived forty or fifty years before you did!"

"That wasn't the plan, man!" Donner burst out. He stood up, rubbing both hands violently through his hair in agitation, making it stand out like a bramble bush. "Jeez, no!"

"Oh, it wasn't? What the bloody hell *was* the plan, then?" I demanded. "You did have one."

"Yeah. Yeah, we did." He dropped his hands, glancing round as though fearing to be overheard. He licked his lips.

"Bob did want to do what you said—only the rest said, nah, that wouldn't work. Too many different groups, too much pressure to trade with the whiteys … just no way it would fly, you know? We couldn't stop it all, just maybe make it better."

The official plan of the group had been somewhat less ambitious in scope. The travelers would arrive in the 1760s, and over the course of the next ten years, in the confusion and reshuffling, the movement of tribes and villages attendant upon the end of the French and Indian War, would infiltrate themselves into various Indian groups along the Treaty Line in the Colonies and up into the Canadian territories.

They would then use such persuasive powers as they had gained to sway the Indian nations to fight on the British side in the oncoming Revolution, with the intent of insuring a British victory.

"See, the English, they act like the Indians are sovereign nations," he explained, with a glibness suggesting this was a theory learned by rote. "They won, they'd go on doing trade and like that, which is okay, but they wouldn't be trying to push the Indians back and stomp 'em out. The colonists"—he waved scornfully toward the open door—"greedy sons o' bitches been shoving their way into Indian lands for the last hundred years; *they* ain't going to stop."

Bree raised her brows, but I could see that she found the notion intriguing. Evidently, it wasn't quite as insane as it sounded.

"How could you think you'd succeed?" I demanded. "Only a few men to—oh, my God," I said, seeing his face change. "Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ—you weren't the only ones, were you?"

Donner shook his head, wordless.

"How many?" Ian asked. He sounded calm, but I could see that his hands were clenched on his knees.

"I dunno." Donner sat down abruptly, slumping into himself like a bag of grain. "There were like, two or three hundred in the group.

But most of ’em couldn’t hear the stones.” His head lifted a little, and he glanced at Brianna. “Can you?”

She nodded, ruddy brows drawn together.

“But you think there were more … travelers … than you and your friends?”

Donner shrugged, helpless.

“I got the idea there were, yeah. But Raymond said only five at a time could pass through. So we trained in, like, cells of five. We kept it secret; nobody in the big group knew who could travel and who couldn’t, and Raymond was the only one who knew all of ’em.”

I had to ask.

“What did Raymond look like?” A possibility had been stirring in the back of my mind, ever since I’d heard that name.

Donner blinked, having not expected that question.

“Jeez, I dunno,” he said helplessly “Short dude, I think. White hair. Wore it long, like we all did.” He raked a hand through his knotted locks in illustration, brows furrowed in the search for memory.

“A rather … wide … forehead?” I knew I oughtn’t to prompt him, but couldn’t help myself, and drew both index fingers across my own brow in illustration.

He stared at me in confusion for a moment.

“Man, I don’t remember,” he said, shaking his head helplessly. “It was a long time ago. How would I remember something like that?”

I sighed.

“Well, tell me what happened, when you came through the stones.”

Donner licked his lips, blinking in the effort of recall. It wasn’t just native stupidity, I saw; he didn’t like thinking about it.

“Yeah. Well, there were five of us, like I said. Me, and Rob, and Jeremy and Atta. Oh, and Jojo. We came through on the island, and —”

“What island?” Brianna, Ian, and I all chorused together.

“Ocracoke,” he said, looking surprised. “It’s the northmost portal in the Bermuda Triangle group. We wanted to be as close as we could get to—"

"The Ber—" Brianna and I began, but broke off, looking at each other.

"You know where a number of these portals are?" I said, striving for calm.

"How many are there?" Brianna chimed in, not waiting for his answer.

The answer, in any event, was confused—no surprise there. Raymond had told them that there were many such places in the world, but that they tended to occur in groups. There was such a group in the Caribbean, another in the Northeast, near the Canadian border. Another in the Southwestern desert—Arizona, he thought, and down through Mexico. Northern Britain and the coast of France, as far as the tip of the Iberian peninsula. Probably more, but that's all he'd mentioned.

Not all of the portals were marked with stone circles, though those in places where people had lived for a long time tended to be.

"Raymond said those were safer," he said, shrugging. "I dunno why."

The spot on Ocracoke hadn't been bounded by a full circle of stones, though it *was* marked. Four stones, he said. One of them had marks on it Raymond said were African—maybe made by slaves.

"It's kind of in the water," he said, shrugging. "A little stream runs through it, I mean. Ray said he didn't know about water, whether that made any difference, but he thought it might. But we didn't know what *kind* of difference. You guys know?"

Brianna and I shook our heads, round-eyed as a pair of owls. Ian's brow, already furrowed, drew further down at this, though. Had he heard something, during his time with Geillis Duncan?

The five of them—and Raymond—had driven as far as they could; the road that led down the Outer Banks was a poor one, which tended to wash away in storms, and they were obliged to leave the car several miles away from the spot, struggling through the scrub pines of the coastal forest and patches of unexpected quicksand. It was late fall—

“Samhain,” Brianna said softly, but softly enough that Donner was not distracted from the flow of his story.

Late fall, he said, and the weather was bad. It had been raining for days, and the footing was uncertain, slippery and boggy by turns. The wind was high, and the storm surge pounded the beaches; they could hear it, even in the secluded spot where the portal lay.

“We were all scared—maybe all but Rob—but it was way exciting, man,” he said, beginning to show a glimmer of enthusiasm. “The trees were just about layin’ down flat, and the sky, it was green. The wind was so bad, you could taste salt, all the time, because little bits of ocean were flying through the air, mixed with the rain. We were, like, soaked through to our choners.”

“Your what?” Ian said, frowning.

“Underpants—you know, drawers. Smallclothes,” Brianna said, flapping an impatient hand. “Go on.”

Once arrived at the place, Raymond had checked them all, to see that they carried the few necessities they might need—tinderboxes, tobacco, a little money of the time—and then given each one a wampum necklet, and a small leather pouch, which he said was an amulet of ceremonial herbs.

“Oh, you know about that,” he said, seeing the expression on my face. “What kind did you use?”

“I didn’t,” I said, not wanting him to wander from his story. “Go on. How did you plan to hit the right time?”

“Oh. Well.” He sighed, hunching on his stool. “We didn’t. Ray said it would be just about two hundred years, give or take a couple. It wasn’t like we could steer—that’s what I was hoping you guys would know. How to get to a specific time. ’Cuz, boy, I’d sure like to go back and get there *before* I got messed up with Ray and them.”

They had, at Raymond’s direction, walked a pattern among the stones, chanting words. Donner had no idea what the words meant, nor even what the language was. At the conclusion of the pattern, though, they had walked single file toward the stone with African markings, passing carefully to the left of it.

“And, like—pow!” He smacked a fist into the palm of his other hand. “First guy in line—he’s *gone,* man! We were just freaked out. I mean, that’s what was s’posed to happen, but … gone,” he repeated, shaking his head. “Just … *gone.*”

Agog at this evidence of effectiveness, they had repeated the pattern and the chant, and at each repetition, the first man to pass the stone had vanished. Donner had been the fourth.

“Oh, God,” he said, going pale at the memory. “Oh, God, I never felt anything like that before and I hope I never do again.”

“The amulet—the pouch you had,” Brianna said, ignoring his pallor. Her own face was intense, blazing with interest. “What happened to that?”

“I dunno. I maybe dropped it, maybe it went someplace else. I passed out, and when I came to, it wasn’t with me.” The day was warm and close, but he began to shiver. “Jojo. He was with me. Only he was dead.”

That statement struck me like a knife blow, just under the ribs. Geillis Duncan’s notebooks had held lists of people found near stone circles—some alive, some dead. I hadn’t needed anything to tell me that the journey through the stones was a perilous passage—but this reminder made me feel weak in the knees, and I sat down on Jocasta’s tufted ottoman.

“The others,” I said, trying to keep my voice steady. “Did they …”

He shook his head. He was still clammy and shivering, but sweat glazed his face; he looked very unwell.

“Never saw ’em again,” he said.

He didn’t know what had killed Jojo; didn’t pause to look, though he had a vague notion that there might have been burn marks on his shirt. Finding his friend dead, and none of the others nearby, he had stumbled off in a panic through scrub forest and salt marsh, collapsing after several hours of wandering, lying in the sand dunes among stiff grass all night. He had starved for three days, found and eaten a nest of turtle eggs, eventually made his way to the mainland on a stolen canoe, and thereafter had drifted haplessly, working here and there at menial jobs, seeking refuge in drink when he could afford it, falling into company with Hodgepile and his gang a year or so past.

The wampum necklets, he said, were to allow the conspirators to identify each other should they meet at some point—but he had never seen anybody else wearing one.

Brianna wasn't paying attention to this rambling part of the story, though; she had jumped ahead.

"Do you think Otter-Tooth—Springer—screwed up your group by deliberately trying to go to a different time?"

He looked at her, mouth hanging open a little.

"I never thoughta that. He went first. He went first," he repeated, in a wondering sort of way.

Brianna began to ask another question, but was interrupted by the sound of voices in the hall, coming toward the morning room. Donner was on his feet in an instant, eyes wide with alarm.

"Crap," he said. "It's him. You gotta help me!"

Before I could inquire exactly why he thought so, or who "him" was, the austere form of Ulysses appeared in the doorway.

"You," he said to the cowering Donner, in awful tones. "Did I not tell you to begone, sirrah? How dare you to enter Mrs. Innes's house and pester her relations?"

He stepped aside, then, with a nod to whomever stood beside him, and a small, round, cross-looking gentleman in a rumpled suit peered in.

"That's him," he said, pointing an accusatory finger. "That's the blackguard what stole my purse at Jacobs's ordinary this morning! Took it right out my pocket whilst I was eatin' ham for breakfast!"

"It wasn't me!" Donner made a poor attempt at a show of outrage, but guilt was written all over his face, and when Ulysses seized him by the scruff of the neck and unceremoniously rummaged his clothing, the purse was discovered, to the outspoken gratification of the owner.

"Thief!" he cried, shaking his fist. "I been a-following of you all the morning. Damn' tick-bellied, louse-ridden, dog-eatin' savage—oh, I do beg pardon, ladies," he added, bowing to me and Brianna as an afterthought before resuming his denunciation of Donner.

Brianna glanced at me, eyebrows raised, but I shrugged. There was no way of preserving Donner from the righteous wrath of his victim, even had I really wanted to. At the gentleman's behest, Ulysses summoned a pair of grooms and a set of manacles—the sight of which made Brianna grow somewhat pale—and Donner was marched off, protesting that he hadn't done it, he'd been framed, wasn't him, he was a friend of the ladies, really, man, ask 'em! … to be conveyed to the gaol in Cross Creek.

There was a deep silence in the wake of his removal. At last, Ian shook his head as though trying to rid himself of flies, and putting down the palette knife at last, picked up the sketching block, where Brianna had made Donner try to draw the pattern he said the men had walked. A hopeless scrawl of circles and squiggles, it looked like one of Jemmy's drawings.

"What kind of name is Weddigo?" Ian asked, putting it down.

Brianna had been clutching her pencil so tightly that her knuckles were white. She unfolded her hand and put it down, and I saw that her hands were shaking slightly.

"Wendigo," she said. "It's an Ojibway cannibal spirit that lives in the wood. It howls in storms and eats people."

Ian gave her a long look.

"Nice fellow," he said.

"Wasn't he, just." I felt more than a little shaken myself. Apart from the shock of Donner's appearance and revelations, and then his arrest, small jolts of memory—vivid images of my first meeting with him—kept shooting uncontrollably through my mind, despite my efforts to shut them out. I could taste blood in my mouth, and the stink of unwashed men drowned the scent of flowers from the terrace.

"I suppose it's what one would call a *nom de guerre,*" I said, with an attempt at nonchalance. "He can't have been christened that, surely."

"Are you all right, Mama?" Bree was frowning at me. "Shall I get something? A glass of water?"

"Whisky," Ian and I said in unison, and I laughed, despite the shakiness. By the time it arrived, I was in command of myself again.

“What do you think will happen to him, Ulysses?” I asked, as he held the tray for me. The butler’s stolidly handsome face showed nothing beyond a mild distaste for the recent visitor; I saw him frown at the scumbled bits of dirt that Donner’s shoes had left on the parquet floor.

“I suppose they will hang him,” he said. “Mr. Townsend—that was the gentleman’s name—had ten pound in the purse he stole.” More than enough to merit hanging. The eighteenth century took a dim view of thievery; as little as a pound could incur a capital sentence.

“Good,” said Ian, with obvious approval.

I felt a small lurch of the stomach. I disliked Donner, distrusted him, and to be honest, really didn’t feel that his death would be a great loss to humanity, by and large. But he was a fellow traveler; did that impose any obligation on our part to help him? More importantly, perhaps—did he have any more information that he hadn’t told us yet?

“Mr. Townsend has gone to Campbelton,” the butler added, offering the tray to Ian. “To ask Mr. Farquard to attend to the case promptly, as he is bound for Halifax, and wishes to give his witness at once.” Farquard Campbell was a justice of the peace—and likely the only thing approaching a judge within the county, since the Circuit Court had ceased to operate.

“They won’t hang him before tomorrow, though, I don’t suppose,” Brianna said. She didn’t normally drink whisky, but had taken a glass now; the encounter had shaken her, too. I saw she had turned the ring around upon her finger, rubbing the big ruby absentmindedly with her thumb.

“No,” said Ian, looking at her suspiciously. “Ye dinna mean to—” He glanced at me. “No!” he said in horror at the indecision he saw on my face. “Yon fellow’s a thief and a blackguard, and if ye didna see him burning and killing wi’ your own eyes, Auntie, ye ken well enough he did it. For God’s sake, let them hang him and have done!”

“Well …” I said, wavering. The sound of footsteps and voices in the hall saved me answering. Jamie and Duncan had been in Cross

Creek; now they were back. I felt an overwhelming flood of relief at sight of Jamie, who loomed up in the doorway, sunburned and ruddy, dusty from riding.

“Hang who?” he inquired cheerfully.

* * *

Jamie’s opinion was the same as Ian’s; let them hang Donner, and good riddance. He was reluctantly persuaded that either Brianna or I must talk to the man at least once more, though, to be sure there was nothing further he could tell us.

“I’ll speak to the gaoler,” he said without enthusiasm. “Mind, though”—he pointed a monitory finger at me—“neither of ye is to go anywhere near the man, save Ian or I am with ye.”

“What do you think he’d do?” Brianna was ruffled, annoyed at his tone. “He’s about half my size, for heaven’s sake!”

“And a rattlesnake is smaller yet,” her father replied. “Ye wouldna walk into a room with one of those, only because ye outweigh him, I hope?”

Ian snickered at that, and Brianna gave him an elbow, hard in the ribs.

“Anyway,” Jamie said, ignoring them, “I’ve a bit of news. And a letter from Roger Mac,” he said. He pulled it out of his shirt, smiling at Bree. “If ye’re no too distracted to read it?”

She lit up like a candle and grabbed it. Ian made a teasing snatch at it, and she slapped his hand away, laughing, and ran out of the room to read it in privacy.

“What sort of news?” I asked. Ulysses had left the tray and decanter; I poured a tot into my empty glass and gave it to Jamie.

“Someone’s seen Manfred McGillivray,” he replied. *“Slàinte.”* He drained the glass, looking contented.

“Oh, aye? Where?” Ian looked less than pleased at this news. For myself, I was thrilled.

“In a brothel, where else?”

Unfortunately, his informant had not been able to supply the exact location of said brothel—having likely been too drunk at the time to know precisely where he was, as Jamie cynically observed—

but had been reasonably sure that it was in Cross Creek or Campbelton. Also unfortunately, the sighting was several weeks old. Manfred might well have moved on.

"It's a start, though," I said, hopeful. Penicillin was effective, even against more advanced cases of syphilis, and I had some brewing in the winter kitchen, even now. "I'll go with you, when you go to the gaol. Then after we've spoken with Donner, we can go look for the brothel."

Jamie's look of contentment lessened appreciably.

"What? Why?"

"I dinna think Manfred would be still there, Auntie," Ian said, patently amused. "I doubt he'd have the money, for one thing."

"Oh, ha ha," I said. "He might have said where he was staying, mightn't he? Besides, I want to know whether he was showing any symptoms." In my own time, it might be ten, twenty, or even thirty years after the appearance of the initial chancre before further syphilitic symptoms developed; in this time, though, syphilis was a much more fulminant disease—a victim could die within a year of infection. And Manfred had been gone for more than three months; God knew how long since he had first contracted the infection.

Jamie looked distinctly unenthused about the idea of searching for brothels; Ian seemed rather more interested.

"I'll help look," he volunteered. "Fergus can come, too; he kens a great deal about whores—they'd likely talk to him."

"Fergus? Fergus is here?"

"He is," Jamie said. "That was the other bit of news. He's payin' his respects to my aunt at the moment."

"Why is he here, though?"

"Well, ye heard the talk at the barbecue, aye? About Mr. Simms, the printer, and his troubles? It seems they've got worse, and he thinks of selling up, before someone burns his shop to the ground and him in it. It struck me that perhaps it would suit Fergus and Marsali, better than the farming. So I sent word for him to come down, and maybe have a word wi' Simms."

"That's a brilliant idea!" I said. "Only … what would Fergus use for money to buy it?"

Jamie coughed and looked evasive.

“Aye, well. I imagine some sort of bargain might be struck. Particularly if Simms is anxious to sell up.”

“All right,” I said, resigned. “I don’t suppose I want to know the gory details. But Ian—” I turned to him, fixing him with a beady eye. “Far be it from me to offer you moral advice. But you are *not*—repeat, not—to be questioning whores in any deeply personal manner. Do I make myself clear?”

“Auntie!” he said, pretending shock. “The idea!” But a broad grin spread across his tattooed face.

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TAR AND FEATHERS

In the event, I let Jamie go alone to the gaol to make arrangements for seeing Donner. He had assured me that this would be simpler without my presence, and I had several errands in Cross Creek. Besides the usual salt, sugar, pins, and other household goods needing replenishment, I urgently needed more cinchona bark for Lizzie. The gallberry ointment worked to treat malarial attacks, but was not nearly so effective as Jesuit bark in preventing them.

The British trade restrictions were having their effect, though. There was, of course, no tea to be found—I had expected that; there had been none for nearly a year—but neither was there any sugar, save at an exorbitant price, and steel pins were not to be found at all.

Salt, I could get. With a pound of this in my basket, I made my way up from the docks. The day was hot and humid; away from the slight breeze off the river, the air was motionless and thick as treacle. The salt had solidified in its burlap bags, and the merchant had had to chip off lumps of it with a chisel.

I wondered how Ian and Fergus were coming with their researches; I had a scheme in mind regarding the brothel and its inhabitants, but first, we had to find it.

I hadn't mentioned the idea to Jamie. If anything came of it, that would be time enough. A side street offered shade, in the form of a number of large elms that had been planted so as to overhang the street. I stepped into the welcome shadow of one of these, and found myself at the edge of the fashionable district—about ten houses, all told—of Cross Creek. From where I stood, I could see Dr. Fentiman's fairly modest abode, distinguished by a small hanging shingle decorated with a caduceus. The doctor was not in when I called, but his servant, a neat, plain young woman with badly crossed eyes, admitted me and showed me to the consulting room.

This was a surprisingly cool and pleasant room, with large windows and a worn canvas cloth on the floor, painted in blue and yellow chequers, and furnished with a desk, two comfortable chairs, and a chaise longue on which patients might recline for examination. He had a microscope standing on the desk, through which I peered with interest. It was a fine one, though not quite so good as my own, I thought with some complacency.

I was possessed of a strong curiosity about the rest of his equipment, and was debating with myself as to whether it would be an abuse of the doctor's hospitality to snoop through his cupboards, when the doctor himself arrived, borne on the wings of brandywine.

He was humming a little tune to himself, and carrying his hat under one arm, his battered medical case in the crook of the other. Seeing me, he dropped these carelessly on the floor and hastened to grasp me by the hand, beaming. He bowed over my hand and pressed moistly fervent lips to my knuckles.

"Mrs. Fraser! My dear lady, I am so pleased to see you! You are in no physical distress, I trust?"

I was in some danger of being overwhelmed by the fumes of alcohol on his breath, but kept as cordial a countenance as possible, unobtrusively wiping my hand upon my gown, whilst assuring him that I was entirely well, as were all the members of my immediate family.

"Oh, splendid, splendid," he said, plumping down quite suddenly upon a stool and giving me an enormous grin, revealing tobacco-stained molars. His oversize wig had slid round sideways, causing him to peer out from under it like a dormouse under a tea cozy, but he seemed not to have noticed. "Splendid, splendid, splendid."

I took his rather vague wave as invitation and sat down, as well. I had brought a small present in order to sweeten the good doctor, and now removed this from my basket—though in all truth, I rather thought he was so well-marinated as to require little more attention before I broached the subject of my errand.

He was, however, thrilled with my gift—a gouged-out eyeball, which Young Ian had thoughtfully picked up for me following a fight in Yanceyville, hastily preserved in spirits of wine. Having heard something of Doctor Fentiman's tastes, I thought he might appreciate it. He did, and went on saying, "Splendid!" at some length.

Eventually trailing off, he blinked, held the jar up to the light, and turned it round, viewing it with great admiration.

"Splendid," he said once more. "It will have a most particularly honorable place in my collection, I do assure you, Mrs. Fraser!"

"You have a collection?" I said, affecting great interest. I'd heard about his collection.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes! Would you care to see it?"

There was no possibility of refusal; he was already up and staggering toward a door at the back of his study. This proved to lead into a large closet, the shelves of which held thirty or forty glass containers, filled with alcoholic spirits—and a number of objects which could indeed be described as "interesting."

These ranged from the merely grotesque to the truly startling. One by one, he brought out a big toe sporting a wart the size and color of an edible mushroom, a preserved tongue which had been split—apparently during the owner's lifetime, as the two halves were quite healed—a cat with six legs, a grossly malformed brain ("Removed from a hanged murderer," as he proudly informed me. "I shouldn't wonder," I murmured in reply, thinking of Donner and wondering what *his* brain might look like), and several infants, presumably stillborn, and exhibiting assorted atrocious deformities.

"Now, *this,*" he said, lifting down a large glass cylinder in trembling hands, "is quite the prize of my collection. There is a most distinguished physician in Germany, a *Herr Doktor* Blumenbach, who has a world-renowned collection of skulls, and he has been pursuing me—nay, absolutely *pestering* me, I assure you!—in an effort to persuade me to part with it.”

“This” was the defleshed skulls and spinal column of a double-headed infant. It was, in fact, fascinating. It was also something that would cause any woman of childbearing age to swear off sex immediately.

Grisly as the doctor’s collection was, though, it offered me an excellent opportunity for approaching my true errand.

“That is truly amazing,” I said, leaning forward as though to examine the empty orbits of the floating skulls. They were separate and complete, I saw; it was the spinal cord that had divided, so that the skulls hung side by side in the fluid, ghostly white and leaning toward each other so that the rounded heads touched gently, as though sharing some secret, only separating when a movement of the jar caused them momentarily to float apart. “I wonder what causes such a phenomenon?”

“Oh, doubtless some dreadful shock to the mother,” Doctor Fentiman assured me. “Women in an expectant condition are fearfully vulnerable to any sort of excitement or distress, you know. They must be kept quite sequestered and confined, well away from any injurious influences.”

“I daresay,” I murmured. “But you know, some malformations—that one, for instance?—I believe are the result of syphilis in the mother.”

It was; I recognized the typical malformed jaw, the narrow skull, and the caved-in appearance of the nose. This child had been preserved with flesh intact, and lay curled placidly in its bottle. By the size and lack of hair, it had likely been premature; I hoped for its own sake that it had not been born alive.

“Shiphi—syphilis,” the doctor repeated, swaying a little. “Oh, yes. Yes, yes. I got that particular little creature from a, um …” It occurred to him belatedly that syphilis was perhaps not a topic suitable to discuss with a lady. Murderer’s brains and two-headed children, yes, but not venereal disease. There was a jar in the closet that I was reasonably sure contained the scrotum of a Negro male who had suffered from elephantiasis; I noticed he hadn't shown me *that* one.

"From a prostitute?" I inquired sympathetically. "Yes, I suppose such misfortunes must be common among such women."

To my annoyance, he slithered away from the desired topic.

"No, no. In fact—" He darted a look over his shoulder, as though fearing to be overheard, then leaned near me and whispered hoarsely, "I received that specimen from a colleague in London, some years ago. It is reputed to be the child of a foreign nobleman!"

"Oh, dear," I said, taken aback. "How … interesting."

At this rather inconvenient point, the servant came in with tea—or rather, with a revolting concoction of roasted acorns and chamomile, stewed in water—and the conversation turned ineluctably toward social trivia. I was afraid that the tea might sober him up before I could inveigle him back in the right direction, but luckily the tea tray also included a decanter of fine claret, which I dispensed liberally.

I had a fresh try at drawing him back into medical subjects, by leaning over to admire the jars left out on his desk. The one nearest me contained the hand of a person who had had such an advanced case of Dupuytren's contracture as to render the appendage little more than a knot of constricted fingers. I wished Tom Christie could see it. He had avoided me since his surgery, but so far as I knew, his hand was still functional.

"Isn't it remarkable, the variety of conditions that the human body displays?" I said.

He shook his head. He had discovered the state of his wig and turned it round; his wizened countenance beneath it looked like that of a solemn chimpanzee—bar the flush of broken capillaries that lit his nose like a beacon.

"Remarkable," he echoed. "And yet, what is quite as remarkable is the resilience a body may show in the face of quite terrible injury."

That was true, but it wasn't at all the line I wished to work upon.

"Yes, quite. But—"

"I am very sorry not to be able to show you one specimen—it would have been a notable addition to my collection, I assure you! But alas, the gentleman insisted upon taking it with him."

"He—what?" Well, after all, I had in my time presented various children with their appendixes or tonsils in a bottle, following surgery. I supposed it wasn't entirely unreasonable for someone to wish to retain an amputated limb.

"Yes, most astonishing." He took a meditative sip of claret. "A testicle, it was—I trust you will pardon my mentioning it," he added belatedly. He hesitated for an instant, but in the end, simply couldn't resist describing the occurrence. "The gentleman had suffered a wound to the scrotum, a most unfortunate accident."

"Most," I said, feeling a sudden tingle at the base of my spine. Was this Jocasta's mysterious visitor? I had been keeping off the claret, in the interests of a clear head, but now poured a tot, feeling it needed. "Did he say how this unfortunate incident transpired?"

"Oh, yes. A hunting accident, he said. But they all say that, don't they?" He twinkled at me, the end of his nose bright red. "I expect it was a *duello.* The work of a jealous rival, perhaps!"

"Perhaps." A *duello*? I thought. But most duels of the time were fought with pistols, not swords. It really was good claret, and I felt a little steadier. "You—er—removed the testicle?" He must have, if he had been contemplating adding it to his ghastly collection.

"Yes," he said, and was not too far gone to give a small sympathetic shudder at the memory. "The gun-shot had been seriously neglected; he said it had occurred some days previous. I was obliged to remove the injured testicle, but fortunately preserved the other."

"I'm sure he was pleased about that." *Gun-shot? Surely not,* I was thinking. *It can't be* … and yet … "Did this happen quite recently?"

"Mmm, no." He tilted back in his chair, eyes crossing slightly with the effort of recall. "It was in the spring, two years ago—May? Perhaps May."

"Was the gentleman named Bonnet, by chance?" I was surprised that my voice sounded quite casual. "I believe I had heard that a Stephen Bonnet was involved in some such … accident."

"Well, you know, he would not give his name. Often patients will not, if the injury is one that might cause public embarrassment. I do not insist in such cases."

"But you do remember him." I found that I was sitting on the edge of my chair, claret cup clenched in my fist. With a little effort, I set it down.

"Mm-hmm." Damn, he was getting sleepy; I could see his lids begin to droop. "A tall gentleman, well-dressed. He had a … a most beautiful *horse*.…"

"A bit more tea, Doctor Fentiman?" I urged a fresh cup upon him, willing him to stay awake. "Do tell me more about it. The surgery must have been quite delicate?"

In fact, men never like to hear that the removal of testicles is a simple matter, but it is. Though I would admit that the fact of the patient's being conscious during the whole procedure had likely added to the difficulty.

Fentiman regained a bit of his animation, telling me about it.

"… and the ball had gone straight *through* the testicle; it had left the most perfect hole.… You could look quite through it, I assure you." Plainly he regretted the loss of this interesting specimen, and it was with some difficulty that I got him to tell me what had become of the gentleman to whom it belonged.

"Well, that was odd. It was the horse, you see …" he said vaguely. "Lovely animal … long hair, like a woman's, so unusual …"

A Friesian horse. The doctor had recalled that the planter Phillip Wylie was fond of such horses, and had said as much to his patient, suggesting that as the man had no money—and would not be capable of riding comfortably for some time, in any case—he might think of selling his animal to Wylie. The man had agreed to this, and had requested the doctor to make inquiry of Wylie, who was in town for the Court Sessions.

Doctor Fentiman had obligingly gone out to do so, leaving his patient cozily tucked up on the chaise with a draught of tincture of laudanum.

Phillip Wylie had professed himself most interested in the horse ("Yes, I'll wager he was," I said, but the doctor didn't notice), and had hastened round to see it. The horse was present, but the patient was not, having absconded on foot in the doctor's absence—taking with him half a dozen silver spoons, an enameled snuffbox, the bottle of laudanum, and six shillings, which happened to be all the money the doctor had in the house.

"I cannot imagine how he managed it," Fentiman said, eyes quite round at the thought. "In such condition!" To his credit, he appeared more distressed at the notion of his patient's condition than his own loss. He was a terrible drunkard, Fentiman, I thought; I'd never seen him completely sober—but not a bad doctor.

"Still," he added philosophically, "all's well as ends well, is it not, my dear lady?"

By which he meant that Phillip Wylie had purchased the horse from him for a price sufficient to more than compensate for his losses, and leave him with a tidy profit.

"Quite," I said, wondering just how Jamie would take this news. He had won the stallion—for it must of course be Lucas—from Phillip Wylie in the course of an acrimonious card game at River Run, only to have the horse stolen by Stephen Bonnet a few hours later.

On the whole, I expected that Jamie would be pleased that the stallion was back in good hands, even if they weren't his. As for the news about Bonnet … *"A bad penny always turns up,"* had been his cynical opinion, expressed when Bonnet's body had failed to be discovered after Brianna had shot him.

Fentiman was openly yawning by now. He blinked, eyes watering, patted about his person in search of a handkerchief, then bent to rummage in his case, which he had dropped on the floor near his chair.

I had pulled out my own handkerchief and leaned across to hand it to him, when I saw them in the open case.

"What are those?" I asked, pointing. I could see what they were, of course; what I wanted to know was where he'd got them. They were syringes, two of them, lovely little syringes, made of brass. Each one was composed of two bits: a plunger with curled handles, and a cylindrical barrel, drawn out at the narrowed end into a very long, blunt-tipped needle.

"I—why—that is … ah …" He was terribly taken aback, and stammered like a schoolboy caught sneaking cigarettes behind the toilets. Then something occurred to him, and he relaxed.

"Ears," he declared, in ringing tones. "For cleansing ears. Yes, that is what they are, indubitably. Ear clysters!"

"Oh, are they really?" I picked one up; he tried to stop me, but his reflexes were delayed, and he succeeded only in grabbing at the ruffle of my sleeve.

"How ingenious," I said, working the plunger. It was a little stiff, but not bad at all—particularly not when the alternative was a makeshift hypodermic composed of a leather tube with a rattlesnake's fang attached. Of course a blunt tip wouldn't do, but it would be a simple matter to cut it to a sharp angle. "Where did you get them? I should like very much to order one myself."

He stared at me in abject horror, jaw agape.

"I—er—I really do not think …" he protested feebly. Just then, in a perfect miracle of bad timing, his housemaid appeared in the doorway.

"Mr. Brennan's come; it's his wife's time," she said briefly.

"Oh!" Doctor Fentiman leapt to his feet, slammed shut his case, and snatched it up.

"My apologies, dear Mrs. Fraser … must go … matter of great urgency—so pleasant to have seen you!" He rushed out, case clutched to his bosom, stepping on his hat in his haste.

The maid picked up the crushed chapeau with an air of resignation, and punched it indifferently back into shape.

"Will you be wanting to leave now, ma'am?" she inquired, with an intonation making it clear that I ought to be leaving, whether I wanted to or not.

"I will," I said, rising. "But tell me"—I held out the brass syringe on the palm of my hand—"do you know what this is, and where Doctor Fentiman got it?"

It was difficult to tell in which direction she was looking, but she bent her head as though to examine it, with no more interest than had it been a two-day old smelt offered her for sale in the market.

"Oh, that. Aye, ma'am, it's a penis syringe. I b'lieve he had it sent him from Philadelphia."

"A, um, penis syringe. I see," I said, blinking a little.

"Yes, ma'am. It's for treating of the drip, or the clap. The doctor does a deal of business for the men what goes to Mrs. Silvie's."

I took a deep breath.

"Mrs. Silvie's. Ah. And would you know where Mrs. Silvie's … establishment is?"

"Behind Silas Jameson's ordinary," she replied, giving me for the first time a faintly curious look, as though wondering what sort of blockhead didn't know *that.* "Will you be needing anything else, ma'am?"

"Oh, no," I said. "That will do nicely, thank you!" I made to hand her back the penis syringe, but then was struck by impulse. The doctor had two, after all.

"Give you a shilling for it," I said, meeting the eye that seemed most likely to be pointed in my direction.

"Done," she said promptly. She paused for a moment, then added, "If you're going to use it on your man, best be sure he's dead drunk first."

* * *

My primary mission was thus accomplished, but now I had a new possibility to explore, before mounting an assault on Mrs. Silvie's house of ill-repute.

I had planned to visit a glassmaker and attempt to explain by means of drawings how to make the barrel and plunger for a hypodermic syringe, leaving up to Bree the problem of making a hollow needle and attaching it. Unfortunately, while the single glassblower operating in Cross Creek was capable of producing any manner of everyday bottles, jugs, and cups, a glance at his stock had made it obvious that my requirements were well beyond his capabilities.

But now I needn't worry about that! While metal syringes lacked some desirable qualities of glass, they also had an undeniable advantage, insofar as they wouldn't break—and while a disposable needle was nice, I could simply sterilize the entire item after each use.

Doctor Fentiman's syringes had very thick, blunt-tipped needle ends. It would be necessary to heat them, and draw the tips out much further in order to narrow them. But any idiot with a forge could do that, I thought. Then to cut the brass tip at an angle and file the point smooth enough to puncture skin cleanly … child's play, I thought blithely, and narrowly refrained from skipping down the sandy walk. Now, all I required was a good stock of cinchona bark.

My hopes of obtaining the bark were dashed, though, as soon as I turned into the main street and glimpsed Mr. Bogues's apothecary's shop. The door stood open, letting in flies, and the usually immaculate stoop was marred with such a multitude of muddy footprints as to suggest that some hostile army had descended upon the shop.

The impression of sacking and looting was furthered by the scene inside; most of the shelves were empty, scattered with remnants of dried leaf and broken pottery. The Bogueses' ten-year-old daughter, Miranda, stood mournful watch over a small collection of jars and bottles and an empty tortoiseshell.

"Miranda!" I said. "Whatever has happened?"

She brightened at sight of me, small pink mouth momentarily reversing its downward droop.

"Mrs. Fraser! D'you want some horehound? We've nearly a pound of that left—and it's cheap, only three farthings the ounce."

"I'll have an ounce," I said, though in fact I had plenty growing in my own garden. "Where are your parents?"

The mouth went down again, and the lower lip quivered.

"Mama's in the back, packing. And Papa's gone to sell Jack to Mr. Raintree."

Jack was the apothecary's wagon horse, and Miranda's particular pet. I bit the inside of my lip.

"Mr. Raintree's a very kind man," I said, striving for what comfort there might be. "And he has a nice pasture for his horses, and a warm stable; I think Jack might be happy there. He'll have friends."

She nodded, mouth pinched tight, but two fat tears escaped to roll down her cheeks.

With a quick glance behind me, to assure that no one was coming in, I stepped round the counter, sat down on an upturned keg, and drew her onto my lap, where she melted at once, clinging to me and crying, though making an obvious effort not to be heard in the living quarters behind the shop.

I patted her and made small soothing noises, feeling an unease beyond mere sympathy for the girl. Clearly the Bogueses were selling up. Why?

So infrequently as I came down the mountain, I had no idea what Ralston Bogues's politics might be these days. Not being Scottish, he hadn't come to the barbecue in Flora MacDonald's honor. The shop had always been prosperous, though, and the family decently off, judging by the children's clothes—Miranda and her two little brothers always had shoes. The Bogueses had lived here all of Miranda's life, at least, and likely longer. For them to be leaving in this manner meant that something serious had happened—or was about to.

"Do you know where you're going?" I asked Miranda, who was now sitting on my knee, sniffing and wiping her face on my apron. "Perhaps Mr. Raintree can write to you, to tell you how Jack is faring."

She looked a little more hopeful at that.

"Can he send a letter to England, do you think? It's a terrible long way."

England? It *was* serious.

"Oh, I should think so," I said, tucking wisps of hair back under her cap. "Mr. Fraser writes a letter every night, to his sister in Scotland—and that's much further away even than England!"

"Oh. Well." Looking happier, she scrambled off my lap and smoothed down her dress. "Can I write to Jack, do you think?"

"I'm sure Mr. Raintree will read the letter to him if you do," I assured her. "Can you write well, then?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," she said earnestly. "Papa says I read and write better than he ever did when he was my age. *And* in Latin. He taught me to read all the names of the simples, so I could fetch him what he wanted—see that one?" She pointed with some pride to a large china apothecary's jar, elegantly decorated with blue and gold scrolls. "*Electuary Limonensis.* And that one is *Ipecacuanha*!"

I admired her prowess, thinking that at least I now knew her father's politics. The Bogueses must be Loyalists, if they were returning to England. I would be sorry to see them go, but knowing what I knew of the immediate future, I was glad that they would be safe. At least Ralston would likely have got a decent price for his shop; a short time hence, Loyalists would have their property confiscated, and be lucky to escape arrest—or worse.

"Randy? Have you seen Georgie's shoe? I've found one under the chest, but—oh, Mrs. Fraser! Your pardon, ma'am, I didn't know anyone was here." Melanie Bogues's sharp glance took in my position behind the counter, her daughter's pink-rimmed eyes, and the damp spots on my apron, but she said nothing, merely patting Miranda's shoulder as she passed.

"Miranda tells me you're leaving for England," I said, rising and moving unobtrusively out from behind the counter. "We'll be sorry to see you go."

"That's kind of you, Mrs. Fraser." She smiled unhappily. "We're sorry to go, as well. And I'm not looking forward to the voyage, I can tell you!" She spoke with the heartfelt emotion of someone who had made such a voyage before and would strongly prefer to be boiled alive before doing it again.

I sympathized very much, having done it myself. Doing it with three children, two of them boys under five … the imagination boggled.

I wanted to ask her what had caused them to make such a drastic decision, but couldn't think how to broach the matter in front of Miranda. Something had happened; that was clear. Melanie was jumpy as a rabbit, and somewhat more harried than even packing up a household containing three children might account for.

She kept darting glances over her shoulder, as though fearing something sneaking up on her.

"Is Mr. Bogues—" I began, but was interrupted by a shadow falling across the stoop. Melanie started, hand to her chest, and I whirled round to see who had come.

The doorway was filled by a short, stocky woman, dressed in a very odd combination of garments. For an instant, I thought she was an Indian, for she wore no cap, and her dark hair was braided—but then she came into the shop, and I saw that she was white. Or rather, pink; her heavy face was flushed with sunburn and the tip of her pug nose was bright red.

"Which one of you is Claire Fraser?" she demanded, looking from me to Melanie Bogues.

"I am," I said, repressing an instinctive urge to take a step backward. Her manner wasn't threatening, but she radiated such an air of physical power that I found her rather intimidating. "Who are you?" I spoke from astonishment, rather than rudeness, and she did not seem offended.

"Jezebel Hatfield Morton," she said, squinting intently at me. "Some geezer at the docks tellt me that you was headin' here." In marked contrast to Melanie Bogue's soft English accent, she had the rough speech I associated with people who had been in the backcountry for three or four generations, speaking to no one in the meantime save raccoons, possums, and one another.

"Er … yes," I said, seeing no point in denying it. "Did you need help of some kind?"

She didn't look it; had she been any healthier, she would have burst the seams of the man's shirt she was wearing. Melanie and Miranda were staring at her, wide-eyed. Whatever danger Melanie had been afraid of, it wasn't Miss Morton.

"Not to say help," she said, moving further into the shop. She tilted her head to one side, examining me with what looked like fascination. "I was thinkin' you might know where'bouts that skunk Isaiah Morton be, though."

My mouth dropped open, and I shut it quickly. Not Miss Morton, then—*Mrs.* Morton. The *first* Mrs. Isaiah Morton, that is. Isaiah

Morton had fought with Jamie's militia company in the War of the Regulation, and he had mentioned his first wife—breaking out in a cold sweat as he did so.

"I … ah … believe he's working somewhere upcountry," I said. "Guilford? Or was it Paleyville?"

Actually, it was Hillsboro, but that scarcely mattered, since at the moment, he wasn't *in* Hillsboro. He was, in fact, in Cross Creek, come to take delivery of a shipment of barrels for his employer, a brewster. I'd seen him at the cooper's shop barely an hour earlier, in company with the *second* Mrs. Morton and their infant daughter. Jezebel Hatfield Morton did not look like the sort of person to be civilized about such things.

She made a low noise in her throat, indicative of disgust.

"He's a dang slippery little weasel. But I'll kotch up to him yet, don't you trouble none about that." She spoke with a casual assurance that boded ill for Isaiah.

I thought silence was the wiser course, but couldn't stop myself asking, "Why do you want him?" Isaiah possessed a certain uncouth amiability, but viewed objectively, he scarcely seemed the sort to inflame one woman, let alone two.

"Want him?" She looked amused at the thought, and rubbed a solid fist under her reddened nose. "I don't want him. But ain't no man runs out on *me* for some whey-faced trollop. Once I kotch up to him, I mean to stave his head in and nail his fly-bit hide to my door."

Spoken by another person, this statement might have passed for rhetoric. As spoken by the lady in question, it was an unequivocal declaration of intent. Miranda's eyes were round as a frog's, and her mother's nearly so.

Jezebel H. Morton squinted at me, and scratched thoughtfully beneath one massive breast, leaving the fabric of her shirt pasted damply to her flesh.

"I heerd tell as how you saved the little toad-sucker's life at Alamance. That true?"

"Er … yes." I eyed her warily, watching for any offensive movement. She was blocking the door; if she made for me, I would dive across the counter and dash through the door into the Bogueses' living quarters.

She was wearing a large pig-sticker of a knife, unsheathed. This was thrust through a knotted wampum belt that was doing double duty, holding up a kilted mass of what I thought might originally have been red flannel petticoats, hacked off at the knee. Her very solid legs were bare, as were her feet. She had a pistol and powder horn slung from the belt, as well, but made no move to reach for any of her weapons, thank God.

"Too bad," she said dispassionately. "But then, if he'd died, I'd not have the fun of killin' him, so I s'pose it's as well. Don't worry me none; if'n I don't find him, one of my brothers will."

Business apparently disposed of for the moment, she relaxed a bit, and looked around, noticing for the first time the empty shelves.

"What-all's goin' on here?" she demanded, looking interested.

"We're selling up," Melanie murmured, attempting to shove Miranda safely behind her. "Going to England."

"That so?" Jezebel looked mildly interested. "What happened? They kill your man? Or tar and feather him?"

Melanie went white.

"No," she whispered. Her throat moved as she swallowed, and her frightened gaze went toward the door. So that was the threat. I felt suddenly cold, in spite of the sweltering heat.

"Oh? Well, if you care whether they do, maybe you best move on down to Center Street," she suggested helpfully. "They're fixin' to make roast chicken out of *somebody,* sure as God made little green apples. You can smell hot tar all over town, and they's a boiling of folks comin' forth from the taverns."

Melanie and Miranda uttered twin shrieks, and ran for the door, shoving past the unflappable Jezebel. I was moving rapidly in the same direction, and narrowly avoided a collision, as Ralston Bogues stepped through the door, just in time to catch his hysterical wife.

"Randy, you go mind your brothers," he said calmly. "Be still, Mellie, it's all right."

"Tar," she panted, clutching him. "She said—she said—"

"Not me," he said, and I saw that his hair dripped and his face shone pale through its sweat. "They're not after me. Not yet. It's the printer."

Gently, he disengaged his wife's hands from his arm, and stepped round the counter, casting a brief glance of curiosity at Jezebel.

"Take the children, go to Ferguson's," he said, and pulled a fowling piece from its hiding place beneath the counter. "I'll come so soon as I may." He reached into a drawer for the powder horn and cartridge box.

"Ralston!" Melanie spoke in a whisper, glancing after Miranda's retreating back, but the entreaty was no less urgent for its lack of volume. "Where are you going?"

One side of his mouth twitched, but he didn't reply.

"Go to Ferguson's," he repeated, eyes fixed on the cartridge in his hand.

"No! No, don't go! Come with us, come with me!" She seized his arm, frantic.

He shook her off, and went doggedly about the business of loading the gun.

"Go, Mellie."

"I will not!" Urgent, she turned to me. "Mrs. Fraser, tell him! Please, tell him it's a waste—a terrible waste! He mustn't go."

I opened my mouth, unsure what to say to either of them, but had no chance to decide.

"I don't imagine Mistress Fraser will think it a waste, Mellie," Ralston Bogues said, eyes still on his hands. He slung the strap of the cartridge box over his shoulder and cocked the gun. "Her husband is holding them off right now—by himself."

He looked up at me then, nodded once, and was gone.

* * *

Jezebel was right: you *could* smell tar all over town. This was by no means unusual in the summertime, especially near the warehouse docks, but the hot thick reek now took on an atmosphere of threat, burning in my nostrils. Tar—and fear—aside, I was gasping from the effort to keep up with Ralston Bogues, who was not precisely running, but was moving as fast as it was possible to go without breaking into a lope.

Jezebel had been right about the people boiling out of taverns, too; the corner of Center Street was choked with an excited crowd. Mostly men, I saw, though there were a few women of the coarser type among them, fishwives and bond servants.

The apothecary hesitated when he saw them. A few faces turned toward him; one or two plucked at their neighbors' sleeves, pointing—and with not very friendly expressions on their faces.

"Get away, Bogues!" one man yelled. "It's not your business—not yet!"

Another stooped, picked up a stone, and hurled it. It clacked harmlessly on the wooden walk, a few feet short of Bogues, but it drew more attention. Bits of the crowd were beginning to turn, surging slowly in our direction.

"Papa!" said a small, breathless voice behind me. I turned to see Miranda, cap lost and pigtails unraveling down her back, her face the color of beetroot from running.

There wasn't time to think about it. I picked her up and swung her off her feet, toward her father. Taken off guard, he dropped the gun and caught her under the arms.

A man lunged forward, reaching for the gun, but I swooped down and got it first. I backed away from him, clutching it to my chest, daring him with my eyes.

I didn't know him, but he knew me; his eyes flicked over me, hesitating, then he glanced back over his shoulder. I could hear Jamie's voice, and a lot of others, all trying to shout each other down. The breath was still whistling in my chest; I couldn't make out any words. The tone of it was argument, though; confrontation, not bloodshed. The man wavered, glanced at me, away—then turned and shoved his way back into the gathering crowd.

Bogues had had the sense to keep hold of his daughter, who had her arms wrapped tightly round his neck, face buried in his shirt. He darted his eyes at me, and made a small gesture, as though to take back the gun. I shook my head and held it tighter. The stock was warm and slick in my hands.

"Take Miranda home," I said. "I'll—do something."

It was loaded and primed. One shot. The best I could do with that was to create a momentary distraction—but that *might* help.

I pushed my way through the crowd, the gun pointed carefully down not to spill the powder, half-hidden in my skirts. The smell of tar was suddenly much stronger. A cauldron of the stuff lay overturned in front of the printer's shop, a black sticky puddle smoking and reeking in the sun.

Glowing embers and blackened chunks of charcoal were scattered across the street, under everyone's feet; a solid citizen whom I recognized as Mr. Townsend was kicking the bejesus out of a hastily built fire, thwarting the attempts of a couple of young men to rebuild it.

I looked for Jamie and found him precisely where Ralston Bogues had said he was—in front of the door to the printer's shop, clutching a tar-smeared broom and with the light of battle in his eye.

"That your man?" Jezebel Morton had caught up, and was peering interestedly over my shoulder. "Big 'un, ain't he?"

Tar was spattered all over the front of the shop—and Jamie. A large glob was stuck in his hair, and I could see the flesh of his arm reddened where a long string of hot tar had struck. Despite this, he was grinning. Two more tar-daubed brooms lay on the ground nearby, one broken—almost certainly over someone's head. At least for the moment, he was having fun.

I didn't at once see the printer, Fogarty Simms. Then a frightened face showed briefly at the window, but ducked out of sight as a rock flung from the crowd crashed into the window frame, cracking the glass.

"Come out, Simms, you slinkin' coward!" bellowed a man nearby. "Or shall we smoke you out?"

"Smoke him! Smoke him!" Enthusiastic shouts came from the crowd, and a young man near me bent, scrabbling after a burning brand scattered from the fire. I stamped viciously on his hand as he grasped it.

"Jesus *God*!" He let go and fell to his knees, clutching his hand between his thighs, open-mouthed and gasping with pain. "Oh, oh, Jesus!"

I edged away, shouldering my way through the press. Could I get near enough to give Jamie the gun? Or would that make matters worse?

"Get away from the door, Fraser! We've no quarrel with you!"

I recognized that cultivated voice; it was Neil Forbes, the lawyer. He wasn't dressed in his usual natty suiting, though; he wore rough homespun. So it wasn't an impromptu attack—he'd come prepared for dirty work.

"Hey! You speak for yourself, Forbes! *I've* a quarrel with him!" That was a burly man in a butcher's apron, red-faced and indignant, sporting a swollen and empurpled eye. "Look what he did to me!" He waved a meaty hand at the eye, then at the front of his clothing, where a tar-clotted broom had quite evidently caught him square in the chest. He shook a massive fist at Jamie. "You'll pay for this, Fraser!"

"Aye, but I'll pay ye in the same coin, Buchan!" Jamie feinted, broom held like a lance. Buchan yelped and skittered backward, face comically alarmed, and the crowd burst into laughter.

"Come back, man! Ye want to play savage, ye'll need a bit more paint!" Buchan had turned to flee, but was blocked by the crowd. Jamie lunged with the broom, smudging him neatly on the seat of his breeches. Buchan leaped in panic at the jab, causing more laughter and hoots of derision as he shoved and stumbled out of range.

"The rest of ye want to play savage, too, do ye?" Jamie shouted. He swiped his broom through the steaming puddle and swung it hard in a wide arc before him. Droplets of hot tar flew through the air, and men yelled and pushed to get out of the way, stepping on each other and knocking each other down.

I was shoved to one side and fetched up hard against a barrel standing in the street. I would have fallen, save for Jezebel, who caught me by the arm and hauled me up, with no apparent effort.

"Yon feller's right rumbustious," she said with approval, eyes fixed on Jamie. "I could admire me a man like that!"

"Yes," I said, nursing a bruised elbow. "So could I. Sometimes."

Such sentiments appeared not to be universal.

"Give him up, Fraser, or wear feathers with him! Frigging Tories!"

The shout came from behind me, and I turned to see that the speaker had come prepared; he clutched a feather pillow in one hand, the end of it already ripped open, so that down feathers flew in spurts with each gesture.

"Tar and feather 'em all!"

I turned again at the shout from above, and looked up in time to see a young man fling wide the shutters in the upper story of the house on the other side of the street. He was trying to stuff a feather bed through the window but was being substantially impeded in this endeavor by the housewife whose property it was. This lady had leaped on his back and was beating him about the head with a spurtle, uttering shrieks of condemnation.

A young man near me started clucking like a chicken, flapping his elbows—to the intense amusement of his friends, who all began to do it, too, drowning out any attempts at reason—not that there was much of that.

A chant started up at the far side of the street.

"Tory, Tory, Tory!"

The tenor of the situation was changing, and not for the better. I half-lifted the fowling piece, unsure what to do, but knowing that I must do *something.* Another moment, and they'd rush him.

"Give me the gun, Auntie," said a soft voice at my shoulder, and I whirled round to find Young Ian there, breathing hard. I gave it to him without the slightest hesitation.

"Reste d'retour!" Jamie shouted in French. "*Oui, le tout!* Stay back, all of you!" He might have been shouting at the crowd, but he was looking at Ian.

What the devil did he—then I caught sight of Fergus, elbowing viciously to keep his place near the front of the crowd. Young Ian, who had been about to raise the gun, hesitated, holding it close.

"He's right, stay back!" I said urgently. "Don't fire, not yet." I saw now that a hasty shot might do more harm than good. Look at Bobby Higgins and the Boston Massacre. I didn't want any massacres taking place in Cross Creek—particularly not with Jamie at the center of them.

"I won't—but I'm no going to let them take him, either," Ian muttered. "If they go for him—" He broke off, but his jaw was set, and I could smell the sharp scent of his sweat, even above the reek of tar.

A momentary distraction had intervened, thank God. Yells from above made half the crowd turn to see what was happening.

Another man—evidently the householder—had popped up in the window above, jerking the first man back and punching him. Then the struggling pair disappeared from view, and within a few seconds, the sounds of altercation ceased and the woman's shrieks died away, leaving the feather bed hanging in limp anticlimax, half in and half out of the window.

The chant of "Tory Tory Tory!" had died out during the fascination with the conflict overhead, but was now starting up again, punctuated by bellows for the printer to come out and give himself up.

"Come out, Simms!" Forbes bellowed. I saw that he had equipped himself with a fresh broom, and was edging closer to the print shop's door. Jamie saw him, too, and I saw his mouth twist with derision.

Silas Jameson, the proprietor of a local ordinary, was behind Forbes, crouched like a wrestler, his broad face wreathed in a vicious grin.

"Come out, Simms!" he echoed. "What kind of man takes shelter beneath a Scotsman's skirts, eh?"

Jameson's voice was loud enough that everyone heard that, and most laughed—including Jamie.

"A wise one!" Jamie shouted back, and shook the end of his plaid at Jameson. "This tartan's sheltered many a poor lad in its time!"

“And many a lassie, too, I’ll wager!” shouted some ribald soul in the crowd.

“What, d’ye think I’ve your wife under my plaid?” Jamie was breathing hard, shirt and hair pasted to him with sweat, but still grinning as he seized the hem of his kilt. “Ye want to come and have a look for her, then?”

“Is there room under there for me, too?” called one of the fishwives promptly.

Laughter rolled through the crowd. Fickle as any mob, their mood was changing back from threat to entertainment. I took a deep, trembling breath, feeling sweat roll down between my breasts. He was managing them, but he was walking a razor’s edge.

If he’d made up his mind to protect Simms—and he had—then no power on earth would make him give the printer up. If the mob wanted Simms—and they did—they’d have to go through Jamie. And they *would,* I thought, any minute.

“Come out, Simms!” yelled a voice from the Scottish Lowlands. “Ye canny be hidin’ up Fraser’s backside all day!”

“Better a printer up my arse than a lawyer!” Jamie shouted back, waving his broom at Forbes in illustration. “They’re smaller, aye?”

That made them roar; Forbes was a beefily substantial sort, while Fogarty Simms was a pinched starveling of a man. Forbes went very red in the face, and I saw sly looks being cast in his direction. Forbes was in his forties, never married, and there was talk …

“I wouldna have a lawyer up my backside at all,” Jamie was shouting happily, poking at Forbes with his broom. “He’d steal your shite and charge ye for a clyster!”

Forbes’s mouth opened, and his face went purple. He backed up a step, and seemed to be shouting back, but no one could hear his response, drowned as it was by the roar of laughter from the crowd.

“And then he’d sell it back to ye for night soil!” Jamie bellowed, the instant he could be heard. Neatly reversing his broom, he jabbed Forbes in the belly with the handle.

The crowd whooped in glee, and Forbes, no kind of a fighter, lost his head and charged Jamie, his own broom held like a shovel.

Jamie, who had quite obviously been waiting for some such injudicious move, stepped aside like a dancer, tripped Forbes, and smacked him across the shoulders with the tar-smeared broom, sending him sprawling into the cooling tar puddle, to the raucous delight of the whole street.

"Here, Auntie, hold this!" The fowling piece was thrust suddenly back into my hands.

"What?" Completely taken aback, I whirled round to see Ian moving fast behind the crowd, beckoning to Fergus. In seconds, unnoticed by the crowd—whose attention was riveted on the fallen Forbes—they had reached the house where the feather bed hung from the window.

Ian stooped and cupped his hands; as though they had rehearsed it for years, Fergus stepped into this improvised stirrup and launched himself upward, swiping at the feather bed with his hook. It caught; he dangled for a moment, grabbing frantically with his sound hand at the hook, to keep it from coming off.

Ian sprang upward and seized Fergus round the waist, yanking downward. Then the fabric of the bed gave way under their combined weight, Fergus and Ian tumbled to the ground, and a perfect cascade of goose feathers poured out on top of them, only to be caught at once by the thick, damp air and whirled up into a delirious snowstorm that filled the street and plastered the surprised mob with clumps of sticky down.

The air seemed filled with feathers; they were everywhere, tickling eyes and nose and throat, sticking to hair and clothes and lashes. I wiped a bit of down from a watering eye and stepped hastily back, away from the half-blind people staggering near me, yelling and bumping into one another.

I had been watching Fergus and Ian, but when the featherstorm struck, I—unlike everyone else in the street—looked back at the print shop, in time to see Jamie reach through the door, seize Fogarty Simms by the arm, and snatch him out of the shop like a winkle on a pin.

Jamie gave Simms a shove that sent him staggering, then whirled back to snatch up his broom and cover the printer's escape.

Ralston Bogues, who had been lurking in the shadow of a tree, popped out, a club in his hand, and ran after Simms to protect him, glancing back and brandishing the club to discourage pursuers.

This action had not gone totally unnoticed; though most of the men were distracted, batting and clawing at the bewildering cloud of feathers that surrounded them, a few had seen what was going on, and raised a halloo, yelping like hounds as they tried to push through the crowd in pursuit of the fleeing printer.

If ever there was a moment … I'd shoot above their heads and they'd duck, giving Simms time to get away. I raised the gun with decision, reaching for the trigger.

The fowling piece was snatched from my grasp so deftly that I didn't realize for an instant that it was gone, but stood staring in disbelief at my empty hands. Then a bellow came from behind me, loud enough to stun everyone nearby into silence.

"Isaiah Morton! You gonna *die,* boy!"

The fowling piece went off by my ear with a deafening *bwoom!* and a cloud of soot that blinded me. Choking and coughing, I scrubbed at my face with my apron, recovering sight in time to see the short, pudgy figure of Isaiah Morton a block away, running as fast as his legs would carry him. Jezebel Hatfield Morton was after him in an instant, ruthlessly flattening anyone in her way. She leapt nimbly over a besmeared and befeathered Forbes, who was still on his hands and knees, looking dazed, then pushed through the remnants of the mob and hared down the street, short flannel petticoats flying, moving at a surprising rate of speed for someone of her build. Morton careened round a corner and disappeared, implacable Fury close on his tail.

I felt a trifle dazed myself. My ears were still ringing, but I looked up at a touch on my arm.

Jamie was squinting down at me, one eye closed, as though unsure he was seeing what he thought he was seeing. He was saying something I couldn't make out, but the gestures he was making toward my face—coupled with a telltale twitching of the corner of his mouth—made his probable meaning *quite* clear.

"Ha," I said coldly, my own voice sounding tinny and far off. I swiped at my face again with the apron. "*You* should talk!"

He looked like a piebald snowman, with black splotches of tar on his shirt, and clumps of white goose down clinging to his brows, his hair, and the stubble of his beard. He said something else, but I couldn't hear him clearly. I shook my head and twisted a finger in my ear, indicating temporary deafness.

He smiled, took me by the shoulders, and leaned his head forward until his forehead met mine with a small *thunk!* I could feel him trembling slightly, but wasn't sure whether it was laughter or exhaustion. Then he straightened up, kissed my forehead, and took me by the arm.

Neil Forbes sat in the middle of the street, legs splayed and careful hair disheveled. He was black with tar from the shoulder to the knee on one side. He'd lost a shoe, and helpful parties were trying to pick the feathers off him. Jamie led me in a wide circle round him, nodding pleasantly as we passed.

Forbes looked up, glowering, and said something muffled, heavy face twisting in dislike. On the whole, I thought it was just as well I couldn't hear him.

* * *

Ian and Fergus had gone off with the majority of the rioters, no doubt to commit mayhem elsewhere. Jamie and I retired to the Sycamore, an inn on River Street, to seek refreshment and make repairs. Jamie's hilarity gradually subsided as I picked tar and feathers off him, but was significantly quenched by hearing an account of my visit to Dr. Fentiman.

"Ye do *what* with it?" Jamie had flinched slightly during my recounting of the tale of Stephen Bonnet's testicle. When I reached a description of the penis syringes, he crossed his legs involuntarily.

"Well, you work the needlelike bit down in, of course, and then flush a solution of something like mercuric chloride through the urethra, I suppose."

"Through the, er …"

"Do you want me to show you?" I inquired. "I left my basket at the Bogueses', but I can get it, and—"

"No." He leaned forward and planted his elbows firmly on his knees. "D'ye suppose it burns much?"

"I can't think it's at all pleasant."

He shuddered briefly.

"No, I shouldna think so."

"I don't think it's really effective, either," I added thoughtfully. "Pity to go through something like that, and not be cured. Don't you think?"

He was watching me with the apprehensive air of a man who has just realized that the suspicious-looking parcel sitting next to him is ticking.

"What—" he began, and I hurried to finish.

"So you won't mind going round to Mrs. Sylvie's and making the arrangements for me to treat the girls, will you?"

"Who is Mrs. Sylvie?" he asked suspiciously.

"The owner of the local brothel," I said, taking a deep breath. "Dr. Fentiman's maid told me about her. Now, I realize that there might be more than one brothel in town, but I think that Mrs. Sylvie must certainly know the competition, if there is any, so she can tell you—"

Jamie drew a hand down over his face, pulling down his lower eyelids so that the bloodshot appearance of his eyes was particularly emphasized.

"A brothel," he repeated. "Ye want me to go to a brothel."

"Well, I'll go with you if you like, of course," I said. "Though I think you might manage better alone. I'd do it myself," I added, with some asperity, "but I think they might not pay any attention to me."

He closed one eye, regarding me through the other, which looked as though it had been sandpapered.

"Oh, I rather think they would," he said. "So this is what ye had in mind when ye insisted on coming to town with me, is it?" He sounded a trifle bitter.

“Well … yes,” I admitted. “Though I really did need cinchona bark. Besides,” I added logically, “if I hadn’t come, you wouldn’t have found out about Bonnet. Or Lucas, for that matter.”

He said something in Gaelic, which I interpreted roughly as an indication that he could have lived quite happily in ignorance of either party.

“Besides, you’re quite accustomed to brothels,” I pointed out. “You had a room in one, in Edinburgh!”

“Aye, I did,” he agreed. “But I wasna marrit, then—or rather I was, but I—aye, well, I mean it quite suited me, at the time, to have folk think that I—” He broke off and looked at me pleadingly. “Sassenach, d’ye honestly want everyone in Cross Creek to think that I—”

“Well, they won’t think that if I go with you, will they?”

“Oh, God.”

At this point, he dropped his head into his hands and massaged his scalp vigorously, presumably under the impression that this would help him figure out some means of thwarting me.

“Where is your sense of compassion for your fellow man?” I demanded. “You wouldn’t want some hapless fellow to be facing a session with Dr. Fentiman’s syringe, just because you—”

“As long as I’m no required to face it myself,” he assured me, raising his head, “my fellow man is welcome to the wages of sin, and serve him just right, too.”

“Well, I’m rather inclined to agree,” I admitted. “But it isn’t only them. It’s the women. Not just the whores; what about all the wives—*and* the children—of the men who get infected? You can’t let all of them die of the pox, if they can be saved, surely?”

He had by this time assumed the aspect of a hunted animal, and this line of reasoning did not improve it.

“But—the penicillin doesna always work,” he pointed out. “What if it doesna work on the whores?”

“It’s a possibility,” I admitted. “But between trying something that might not work—and not trying at all …” Seeing him still looking squiggle-eyed, I dropped the appeal to reason and resorted to my best weapon.

“What about Young Ian?”

“What about him?” he replied warily, but I could see that my words had caused an instant vision to spring up in his mind. Ian was not a stranger to brothels—thanks to Jamie, inadvertent and involuntary as the introduction had been.

“He’s a good lad, Ian,” he said, stoutly. “He wouldna …”

“He might,” I said. “And you know it.”

I had no idea of the shape of Young Ian’s private life—if he had one. But he was twenty-one, unattached, and so far as I could see, a completely healthy young male of the species. Hence …

I could see Jamie coming reluctantly to the same conclusions. He had been a virgin when I married him, at the age of twenty-three. Young Ian, owing to factors beyond everyone’s control, had been introduced to the ways of the flesh at a substantially earlier age. And that particular innocence could not be regained.

“Mmphm,” he said.

He picked up the towel, rubbed his hair ferociously with it, then flung it aside, and gathered back the thick, damp tail, reaching for a thong to bind it.

“If it were done when ’tis done, ’twere well it were done quickly,” I said, watching with approval. “I think I’d best come, too, though. Let me fetch my box.”

He made no response to this, merely setting grimly about the task of making himself presentable. Luckily he hadn’t been wearing his coat or waistcoat during the contretemps in the street, so was able to cover the worst of the damage to his shirt.

“Sassenach,” he said, and I turned to find him regarding me with a bloodshot glint.

“Yes?”

“Ye’ll pay for this.”

* * *

Mrs. Sylvie’s establishment was a perfectly ordinary-looking two-storied house, small and rather shabby. Its shingles were curling up at the ends, giving it a slight air of disheveled surprise, like a woman taken unawares with her hair just out of rollers.

Jamie made disapproving Scottish noises in his throat at sight of the sagging stoop and overgrown yard, but I assumed that this was merely his way of covering discomfiture.

I was not quite sure what I had been expecting Mrs. Sylvie to be—the only madam of my acquaintance having been a rather elegant French émigré in Edinburgh—but the proprietor of Cross Creek's most popular bawdy house was a woman of about twenty-five, with a face as plain as piecrust, and extremely prominent ears.

In fact, I had momentarily assumed her to be the maid, and only Jamie's greeting her politely as "Mrs. Sylvie" informed me that the madam herself had answered the door. I gave Jamie a sideways look, wondering just how he came to be acquainted with her, but then looked again and realized that he had noted the good quality of her gown and the large brooch upon her bosom.

She looked from him to me, and frowned.

"May we come in?" I said, and did so, not waiting for an answer.

"I'm Mrs. Fraser, and this is my husband," I said, gesturing toward Jamie, who was looking pink around the ears already.

"Oh?" Mrs. Sylvie said warily. "Well, it'll be a pound extra, if it's the two of you."

"I beg your—oh!" Hot blood flooded my face as I belatedly grasped her meaning. Jamie had got it instantly, and was the color of beetroot.

"It's quite all right," she assured me. "Not the usual, to be sure, but Dottie wouldn't mind a bit, she being summat partial to women, you see."

Jamie made a low growling noise, indicating that this was my idea and it was up to me to be carrying it out.

"I'm afraid we didn't make ourselves clear," I said, as charmingly as possible. "We … er … we merely wish to interview your—" I stopped, groping for an appropriate word. Not "employees," surely.

"Girls," Jamie put in tersely.

"Um, yes. Girls."

"Oh, you do." Her small bright eyes darted back and forth between us. "Methody, are you? Or Bright Light Baptists? Well, that'll be *two* pound, then. For the nuisance."

Jamie laughed.

"Cheap at the price," he observed. "Or is that per girl?"

Mrs. Sylvie's mouth twitched a little.

"Oh, per girl, to be sure."

"Two pound per soul? Aye, well, who would put a price on salvation?" He was openly teasing now, and she—having plainly made out that we were neither potential clients nor door-to-door missionaries—was amused, but taking care not to seem so.

"I would," she replied dryly. "A whore knows the price of everything but the value of nothing—or so I've been told."

Jamie nodded at this.

"Aye. What's the price of one of your girls' lives, then, Mrs. Sylvie?"

The look of amusement vanished from her eyes, leaving them just as bright, but fiercely wary.

"Do you threaten me, sir?" She drew herself up tall, and put her hand on a bell that stood on the table near the door. "I have protection, sir, I assure you. You would be well-advised to leave at once."

"If I wished to damage ye, woman, I should scarcely bring my wife along to watch," Jamie said mildly. "I'm no so much a pervert as all that."

Her hand, tight on the bell's handle, relaxed a bit.

"You'd be surprised," she said. "Mind," she said, pointing a finger at him, "I don't deal in such things—never think it—but I've seen them."

"So have I," said Jamie, the teasing tone gone from his voice. "Tell me, have ye maybe heard of a Scotsman called *Mac Dubh*?"

Her face changed at that; clearly she had. I was bewildered, but had the sense to keep quiet.

"I have," she said. Her gaze had sharpened. "That was you, was it?"

He bowed gravely.

Mrs. Sylvie's mouth pursed briefly, then she seemed to notice me again.

"Did he tell you?" she asked.

“I doubt it,” I said, giving him an eye. He sedulously avoided my glance.

Mrs. Sylvie uttered a short laugh.

“One of my girls went with a man to the Toad”—naming a low sort of dive near the river, called the Toad and Spoon—“and he dealt badly with her. Then dragged her out to the taproom and offered her to the men there. She said she knew she was dead—you know it is possible to be raped to death?” This last was addressed to me, in a tone that mingled aloofness with challenge.

“I do,” I said, very shortly. A brief qualm ran through me and my palms began to sweat.

“A big Scotchman was there, though, and he took issue with the proposal, apparently. It was him alone, though, against a mob—”

“Your specialty,” I said to Jamie, under my breath, and he coughed.

“—but he suggested that they deal cards for the girl. Played a game of brag, and won.”

“Really?” I said politely. Cheating at cards was another of his specialties, but one I tried to discourage his using, convinced that it would get him killed one day. No wonder he hadn’t told me about this particular adventure.

“So he picked up Alice, wrapped her in his plaid, and brought her home—left her at the door.”

She looked at Jamie with grudging admiration.

“So. Have you come to claim a debt, then? You have my thanks, for what they may be worth.”

“A great deal, madam,” he said quietly. “But no. We’ve come to try to save your girls from worse than drunken raparees.”

Her thin brows arched high in question.

“From the pox,” I said baldly. Her mouth fell open.

For all her relative youth, Mrs. Sylvie was a hard customer, and no easy sell. While fear of the pox was a constant factor in the life of a whore, talk of spirochetes cut no ice with her, and my proposition that I inject her staff—there were only three girls, it appeared—with penicillin met with a firm refusal.

Jamie allowed the wrangling to go on until it became clear we had reached a stone wall. Then he came in on a different tack.

"My wife isna proposing such a course only from the goodness of her heart, ken?" he said. By now, we had been invited to sit, in a neat little parlor adorned with gingham curtains, and he leaned forward gingerly, so as not to strain the joints of the delicate chair he was sitting on.

"The son of a friend came to my wife, saying he'd contracted the syphilis from a whore in Hillsboro. She saw the sore; there is no question but that the lad is poxed. He panicked, though, before she was able to treat him, and ran. We have been looking for him ever since—and heard just yesterday that he had been seen here, in your establishment."

Mrs. Sylvie lost control of her face for an instant. It was back in a moment, but there was no mistaking the look of horror.

"Who?" she said hoarsely. "A Scotch lad? What did he look like?"

Jamie exchanged a brief, quizzical glance with me, and described Manfred McGillivray. By the time he had finished, the young madam's face was white as a sheet.

"I had him," she said. "Twice. Oh, Jesus." She took a couple of deep breaths, though, and rallied.

"He was clean, though! I made him show me—I always do."

I explained that while the chancre healed, the disease remained in the blood, only to emerge later. After all, had she not known of whores who contracted syphilis, without any exhibition of a previous sore?

"Yes, of course—but they can't have taken proper care," she said, jaw set stubbornly. "I always do, and my girls, too. I insist upon it."

I could see denial setting in. Rather than admit she might be harboring a deadly infection, she would insist it was not possible, and within moments would have talked herself into believing it and would throw us out.

Jamie could see it, too.

"Mrs. Sylvie," he said, interrupting her flow of justifications. She looked at him, blinking.

"Have ye a deck of cards in the house?"

"What? I—yes, of course."

"Bring them, then," he said with a smile. "Gleek, loo, or brag, your choice."

She gave him a long, hard look, her mouth pressed tight. Then it relaxed a little.

"Honest cards?" she asked, and a small gleam showed in her eye. "And for what stakes?"

"Honest cards," he assured her. "If I win, my wife injects the lot of ye."

"And if you lose?"

"A cask of my best whisky."

She hesitated a moment longer, eyeing him narrowly, estimating the odds. There was still a blob of tar in his hair, and feathers on his coat, but his eyes were deep blue and guileless. She sighed, and put out a hand.

"Done," she said.

* * *

"Did you cheat?" I asked, grasping his arm to keep from stumbling. It was well after dark by now, and the streets of Cross Creek were not lighted, save by starlight.

"Didna have to," he said, and yawned hugely. "She may be a good whore, but she's no hand at cards. She should have chosen loo; that's mostly luck, while brag takes skill. Easier to cheat at loo, though," he added, blinking.

"What, exactly, constitutes a good whore?" I asked curiously. I had never considered the question of qualifications anent that profession, but supposed there must be some, beyond possession of the requisite anatomy and a willingness to make it available.

He laughed at that, but scratched his head, considering.

"Well, it helps if she has a genuine liking for men, but doesna take them verra serious. And if she likes to go to bed, that's as well, too. Ouch." I had stepped on a rock, and tightening my grip on his arm, had got him on the patch of skin burned by tar earlier in the day.

"Oh, sorry. Is it bad? I have a bit of balm I can put on it, when we get to the inn."

"Och, no. Just blisters; it will bide." He rubbed his arm gingerly, but shrugged off the discomfort, and taking me by the elbow, led me round the corner, toward the main street. We had decided earlier that since we might be late, we would stay at McLanahan's King's Inn, rather than make the long drive back to River Run.

The smell of hot tar still permeated this end of town, and the evening breeze swirled feathers into small drifts at the side of the road; now and then, a down feather floated past my ear like a slow-moving moth.

"I wonder, are they still picking the feathers off Neil Forbes?" Jamie said, a grin in his voice.

"Maybe his wife will just put a bolster cover on him and use him as a pillow," I suggested. "No, wait, he hasn't got a wife. They'll have to—"

"Call him a rooster, and put him out in the yard to serve the hens," Jamie suggested, giggling. "He's a fine cock-a-doodle, if no much in the way of a cock."

He wasn't drunk—we had drunk weak coffee with Mrs. Sylvie, after the injections—but he was desperately tired; we both were, and suddenly in the state of exhaustion where the lamest joke seems immensely funny, and we staggered, bumping together and laughing at worse and worse jokes until our eyes teared.

"What's that?" Jamie said suddenly, drawing a deep, startled breath through his nose. "What's burning?"

Something substantial; there was a glow in the sky, visible over the roofs of the nearby houses, and the sharp scent of burning wood suddenly overlaid the thicker smell of hot tar. Jamie ran toward the corner of the street, with me hot on his heels.

It was Mr. Simms's print shop; well ablaze. Evidently his political enemies, balked of their prey, had decided to vent their animosity on his premises.

A knot of men was milling in the street, much as they had earlier in the day. Again, there were calls of "Tory!" and a few were brandishing torches. More men were running down the street toward the scene of the fire, shouting. I caught a bellow of "Goddamn Whigs!" and then the two groups collided in a flurry of shoving and punching.

Jamie grabbed my arm and propelled me back the way we had come, out of sight around the corner. My heart was pounding, and I was short of breath; we ducked under a tree and stood panting.

"Well," I said, after a short silence, filled with the shouts of the riot, "I suppose Fergus will have to find a different occupation. There's an apothecary's shop going cheap, I know."

Jamie made a small sound, not quite a laugh.

"He'd do better to go into partnership wi' Mrs. Sylvie," he said. "There's a business not subject to politics. Come on, Sassenach—we'll go the long way round."

When at length we reached the inn, we found Young Ian fidgeting on the porch, watching out for us.

"Where in the name of Bride have you *been*?" he demanded severely, in a manner that made me think suddenly of his mother. "We've been combin' the town for ye, Uncle Jamie, and Fergus sure ye'd been caught up in the collieshangie yonder and maimed or killed." He nodded toward the print shop; the blaze was beginning to die, though there was still enough light from it to see his face, set in a disapproving frown.

"We've been doing good deeds," Jamie assured him piously. "Visiting the sick, as Christ commands us."

"Oh, aye?" Ian responded, with considerable cynicism. "He said ye should visit those in prison, too. Too bad ye didna start wi' that."

"What? Why?"

"Yon bugger Donner's escaped, that's for why," Ian informed him, seeming to take a grim pleasure in imparting bad news. "During the fight this afternoon. The gaoler came to join in the fun, and left the door on the latch; the bugger just walked out and awa'."

Jamie inhaled deeply, then let his breath out slowly, coughing slightly from the smoke.

"Aye, well," he said. "So we're down by one print shop and one thief—but four whores to the good. D'ye think that a fair exchange, Sassenach?"

"Whores?" Ian exclaimed, startled. "What whores?"

"Mrs. Sylvie's," I said, peering at him. He looked shifty, though perhaps it was only the light. "Ian! You didn't!"

"Well, of course he did, Sassenach," Jamie said, resigned. "Look at him." A guilty expression was spreading over Ian's features like an oil slick on water, easy to make out, even by the flickering, ruddy light of the dying fire.

"I found out about Manfred," Ian offered hastily. "He went downriver, meaning to find a ship in Wilmington."

"Yes, we found that out, too," I said a little testily. "Who was it? Mrs. Sylvie or one of the girls?"

His large Adam's apple bobbed nervously.

"Mrs. Sylvie," he said in a low voice.

"Right," I said. "Fortunately, I have some penicillin left—and a nice, dull syringe. Inside with you, Ian, you abandoned wretch, and down with your breeks."

Mrs. McLanahan, emerging onto the porch to inquire whether we would like a bit of late supper, overheard this and gave me a startled look, but I was well past caring.

Sometime later, we lay at last in the haven of a clean bed, safe from the upheavals and turmoils of the day. I had pried the window open, and the faintest of breezes disturbed the heaviness of the thick, hot air. Several soft gray flecks drifted in, feathers or bits of ash, spiraling like snowflakes toward the floor.

Jamie's arm lay across me, and I could make out the soft, glaucous shapes of the blisters that covered most of his forearm. The air was harsh with burning, but the smell of tar lay like an abiding threat beneath. The men who had burned Simms's shop—and come so close to burning Simms, and likely Jamie, as well—were rebels in the making, men who would be called patriots.

"I can hear ye thinking, Sassenach," he said. He sounded peaceful, on the verge of sleep. "What is it?"

“I was thinking of tar and feathers,” I said softly, and very gently touched his arm. “Jamie—it’s time.”

“I know,” he answered just as softly.

Some men went by in the street outside, singing drunkenly, with torches; the flickering light flowed across the ceiling and was gone. I could feel Jamie watch it go, listening to the raucous voices as they faded down the street, but he said nothing, and after a bit, the big body that cradled me began to relax, sinking once again toward sleep.

“What are you thinking?” I whispered, not sure whether he could still hear me. He could.

“I was thinking that ye’d make a really good whore, Sassenach, were ye at all promiscuous,” he replied drowsily.

“What?” I said, quite startled.

“But I’m glad ye’re not,” he added, and began to snore.

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THE MINISTER'S RETURN

September 4, 1774

Roger steered clear of Coopersville on his way home. It wasn't that he feared Ute McGillivray's wrath, but he didn't want to tarnish the happiness of his homecoming with coldness nor confrontation. Instead, he took the long way round, winding his way gradually up the steep slope toward the Ridge, pushing through overgrown parts where the forest had taken back the path, and fording small streams.

His mule splashed out of the last of these at the base of the trail, shaking itself and scattering droplets from its belly. Pausing to wipe sweat from his face, he spotted a movement on a large stone by the bank. Aidan, fishing, affecting not to have seen him.

Roger reined Clarence up alongside and watched for a moment, saying nothing. Then he asked, "Are they biting well?"

"Tolerable," Aidan replied, squinting hard at his line. Then he looked up, a huge grin splitting his face from ear to ear, and flinging down his pole, sprang up, reaching with both hands, so that Roger could grasp his skinny wrists and swing him up onto the saddle in front of him.

"Ye're back!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms about Roger and burying his face happily in Roger's chest. "I waited for ye. Are ye a real minister now, then?"

"Amost. How'd ye know I'd be along today?"

Aidan shrugged. “I’ve been waitin’ the best part of a week, have I no?” He looked up into Roger’s face, round-eyed and quizzical. “Ye dinna look any different.”

“I’m not,” Roger assured him, smiling. “How’s the belly?”

“Prime. Ye want to see my scar?” He leaned back, pulling up his ratty shirttail to display a neat red four-inch weal across the pallid skin.

“Well done,” Roger approved. “Taking care of your Mam and wee Orrie, then, now ye’re mended, I suppose.”

“Oh, aye.” Aidan puffed his narrow chest. “I brought home *six* trout for supper last night, and the biggest one the size of me arm!” He stuck out a forearm in illustration.

“Ah, get on wi’ ye.”

“I *did,* then!” Aidan said indignantly, then twigged that he was being teased, and grinned.

Clarence was becoming restive, wanting home, and turned in little circles, stamping his feet and twitching at the reins.

“Best go. Ye want to ride up wi’ me?”

Aidan looked tempted, but shook his head.

“Nah, then. I promised Mrs. Ogilvie as I should come tell her, the minute ye came.”

Roger was surprised at that.

“Oh, aye? Why’s that?”

“She’s had a wean last week, what she wants ye to baptize.”

“Oh?” His heart rose a little at that, and the bubble of happiness he carried inside him seemed to expand a little. His first christening! Or rather—his first official baptism, he thought, with a small pang at the memory of the small O’Brian girl he had buried without a name. He wouldn’t be able to do it until after his ordination, but it was something to look forward to.

“Tell her I’ll be glad to christen the wean,” he said, lowering Aidan to the ground. “Have her send to tell me when. And dinna forget your wee fish!” he called.

Aidan grabbed up his pole and the string of silvery fish—none of them longer than the length of a hand—and plunged off into the wood, leaving Roger to turn Clarence’s head toward home.

He smelled smoke from a good way down the trail. Stronger than chimney smoke. With all the talk he had heard on his way, regarding the recent events in Cross Creek, he couldn't help a small feeling of uneasiness, and urged Clarence on with a nudge of the heels. Clarence, scenting home even through the smoke, took the hint with alacrity, and trotted briskly up the steep incline.

The smell of smoke grew stronger, mixed with an odd musty sort of scent that seemed vaguely familiar. A visible haze grew among the trees, and when they burst out of the undergrowth into the clearing, he was nearly standing in his stirrups with agitation.

The cabin stood, weathered and solid, and relief dropped him back in the saddle with a force that made Clarence grunt in protest. Smoke rose around the house in thick swirls, though, and the figure of Brianna, swathed like a Muslim with a scarf around her head and face, was dimly visible in the midst of it. He dismounted, took a breath to call out to her, and immediately suffered a coughing fit. The damned groundhog kiln was open, belching smoke like hell's chimney, and now he recognized the musty scent—scorched earth.

"Roger! Roger!" She'd seen him, and came running, skirts and scarf ends flying, leaping a stack of cut turves like a mountain goat to hurl herself into his arms.

He grabbed her and held on, thinking that nothing in life had ever felt better than the solid weight of her against him and the taste of her mouth, in spite of the fact that she'd plainly eaten onions for lunch.

She emerged beaming and wet-eyed from the embrace, long enough to say, "I love you!" then grabbed his face and kissed him again. "I missed you. When did you shave last? I love you."

"Four days ago, when I left Charlotte. I love you, too. Is everything all right?"

"Sure. Well, actually no. Jemmy fell out of a tree and knocked out a tooth, but it was a baby tooth and Mama says she doesn't think it will hurt the permanent one coming in. And Ian got exposed to syphilis, maybe, and we're all disgusted with him, and Da was nearly tarred and feathered in Cross Creek, and we met Flora MacDonald, and Mama stuck a needle in Aunt Jocasta's eye, and—"

“Eugh!” Roger said in instinctive revulsion. “Why?”

“So it wouldn’t burst. And I got paid six pounds in painting commissions!” she concluded triumphantly. “I bought some fine wire and silk to make paper screens with, and enough wool for a winter cloak for you. It’s green. The biggest thing, though, is we met another—well, I’ll tell you about that later; it’s complicated. How did it go with the Presbyterians? Is it all right? Are you a minister?”

He shook his head, trying to decide which part of this cataract to respond to, and ended up choosing the last bit, only because he could remember it.

“Sort of. Have you been taking lessons in incoherence from Mrs. Bug?”

“How can you be sort of a minister? Wait—tell me in a minute, I have to open it up some more.”

With that, she was flitting back across the broken ground toward the gaping hole of the kiln. The tall clay-brick chimney stack rose at one end, looking like a headstone. The scorched turves that had covered it in operation were scattered round it, and the general impression was that of an enormous, smoking grave from which something large, hot, and doubtless demonic had just arisen. Had he been Catholic, he would have crossed himself.

As it was, he advanced carefully toward the edge, where Brianna was kneeling, reaching across with her shovel to remove another layer of turves from the willow-work frame that arched across the top of the pit.

Looking down through a roiling haze of smoke, he could see irregularly shaped objects, lying on the earthen shelves that lined the pit. A few he could make out as being bowls or platters. Most of them, though, were vaguely tubular objects, two or three feet long, tapered and rounded at one end, the other slightly flared. They were a dark pinkish color, streaked and darkened with smoke, and looked like nothing so much as a collection of giant barbecued phalluses, a notion that he found nearly as disturbing as the story of Jocasta’s eyeball.

“Pipes,” Brianna said proudly, pointing her shovel at one of these objects. “For water. Look—they’re perfect! Or they will be, if they don’t crack while they’re cooling.”

“Terrific,” Roger said, with a decent show of enthusiasm. “Hey—I brought ye a present.” Reaching into the side pocket of his coat, he brought out an orange, which she seized with a cry of delight, though she paused for an instant before digging her thumb into the peel.

“No, you eat it; I’ve got another for Jem,” he assured her.

“I love you,” she said again, fervently, juice running down her chin. “What about the Presbyterians? What did they say?”

“Oh. Well, basically, it’s all right. I have got the university degree, and enough Greek and Latin to impress them. The Hebrew was a bit lacking, but if I mug that up in the meantime—Reverend Caldwell gave me a book.” He patted the side of his coat.

“Yes, I can just see you preaching in Hebrew to the Crombies and Buchanans,” she said grinning. “So? What else?”

There was a fleck of orange pulp stuck to her lip, and he bent on impulse and kissed it off, the tiny burst of sweetness rich and tart on his tongue.

“Well, they examined me as to doctrine and understanding, and we talked a great deal; prayed together for discernment.” He felt somewhat shy talking to her about it. It had been a remarkable experience, like returning to a home he’d never known he’d missed. To confess his calling had been joyful; to do it among people who understood and shared it …

“So I’m provisionally a minister of the Word,” he said, looking down at the toes of his boots. “I’ll need to be ordained before I can administer sacraments like marriage and baptism, but that will have to wait until there’a Presbytery Session held somewhere. In the meantime, I can preach, teach, and bury.”

She was looking at him, smiling, but a little wistfully.

“You’re happy?” she said, and he nodded, unable to speak for a moment.

“Very happy,” he said at last, his voice hardly audible.

“Good,” she said softly, and smiled a little more genuinely. “I understand. So now you’re sort of handfast with God, is that it?”

He laughed, and felt his throat ease. God, he'd have to do something about that; he couldn't be preaching drunk every Sunday. Talk of giving scandal to the faithful …

"Aye, that's it. But I'm properly married to *you*—I'll not forget it."

"See that you don't." Her smile now was wholehearted. "Since we *are* married …" She gave him a very direct look, one that went through him like a mild electric shock. "Jem's at Marsali's, playing with Germain. And I've never made love to a minister before. It seems kind of wicked and depraved, don't you think?"

He took a deep breath, but it didn't help; he still felt giddy and light-headed, doubtless from the smoke.

"Behold, thou art fair, my beloved, yea, pleasant," he said, *"and our bed is green. The joints of thy thighs are like jewels, the work of the hands of a cunning workman. Thy navel is like a round goblet, which wanteth not liquor: thy belly is like an heap of wheat set about with lilies."* He reached out and touched her, gently.

"Thy two breasts are like two young roes that are twins."

"They are?"

"It's in the Bible," he assured her gravely. "It must be so, aye?"

"Tell me more about my navel," she said, but before he could, he saw a small form bounding out of the woods and haring toward them. Aidan, now fishless and panting.

"Mrs. Ogil … vie says … come *now*!" he blurted. He gasped a little, recovering enough breath for the rest of the message. "The wean—she's poorly, and they want her christened, in case she should die."

Roger clapped a hand to his other side; *The Book of Common Worship* that they'd given him in Charlotte was a small, reassuring weight in his pocket.

"Can you?" Brianna was looking at him worriedly. "Catholics can—I mean, a lay person can baptize somebody if it's an emergency."

"Yes, in that case—yes," he said, more breathless than he'd been a moment before. He glanced at Brianna, smudged with soot and dirt, her garments reeking of smoke and baked clay rather than myrrh and aloes.

"D'ye want to come?" He urgently wanted her to say yes.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," she assured him, and discarding the filthy scarf, shook out her hair, bright as banners on the wind.

* * *

It was the Ogilvies' first child, a tiny girl whom Brianna—with the experience of long motherhood—diagnosed as suffering from a vicious colic, but basically in good health. The frighteningly young parents—they both looked about fifteen—were pathetically grateful for everything: Brianna's reassurances and advice, her offer to have Claire visit (for they were much too scared to think of approaching the laird's wife themselves, leave alone the stories they had heard of her) with medicine and food, and most of all, for Roger's coming to baptize the baby.

That a real minister—for they could not be convinced otherwise—should appear in this wilderness, and condescend to come confer the blessing of God upon their child—they were overwhelmed by their good fortune.

Roger and Brianna stayed for some time, and left as the sun was going down, glowing with the faintly self-conscious pleasure of doing good.

"Poor things," Brianna said, voice trembling between sympathy and amusement.

"Poor wee things," Roger agreed, sharing her sentiments. The christening had gone beautifully; even the screaming, purple-faced infant had suspended operations long enough for him to pour the water on her bald head and claim heaven's protection for her soul. He felt the greatest joy in it, and immense humility at having been allowed to perform the ceremony. There was only the one thing—and his feelings were still confused between embarrassed pride and deep dismay.

"Her name—" Brianna said, and stopped, shaking her head.

“I tried to stop them,” he said, trying to control his voice. “I did *try*—you’re my witness. Elizabeth, I said. Mairi. Elspeth, perhaps. You heard me!”

“Oh, now,” she said, and her voice trembled. “I think Rogerina is a perfectly *beautiful* name.” Then she lost control, sat down in the grass, and laughed like a hyena.

“Oh, God, the poor wee lassie,” he said, trying—and failing—not to laugh himself. “I’ve heard of Thomasina, and even Jamesina, but … oh, God.”

“Maybe they’ll call her Ina for short,” Brianna suggested, snuffling and wiping her face on her apron. “Or they can spell it backward—Aniregor—and call her Annie.”

“Oh, *you’re* a great comfort,” Roger said dryly, and reached down to haul her to her feet.

She leaned against him and put her arms round him, still vibrating with laughter. She smelled of oranges and burning, and the light of the setting sun rippled in her hair.

Finally, she stopped, and lifted her head from his shoulder.

“I am my beloved’s, and my beloved is mine,” she said, and kissed him. “You did good, Reverend. Let’s go home.”

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PART EIGHT

The Call

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LOVE ONE ANOTHER

Roger took the deepest breath he could, and shouted as loudly as he could. Which was not very damn loud. Again. And again.

It hurt. It was aggravating, too; the feeble, choked sound of it made him want to shut up and never open his mouth again. He breathed, shut his eyes, and screamed with all his might, or tried to.

A searing flash of pain shot down inside his throat on the right, and he broke off, gasping. All right. He breathed gingerly for a moment, swallowing, then did it again.

Jesus, that hurt.

He rubbed a sleeve across his watering eyes and braced himself for another go. As he inflated his chest, fists curling, he heard voices, and let the breath out.

The voices were calling to each other, not far from him, but the wind was away and he couldn't make out the words. Likely hunters, though. It was a fine fall day, with air like blue wine and the forest restless with dappled light.

The leaves had just begun to turn, but some were already falling, a silent, constant flicker at the edge of vision. Any movement could look like game in such surroundings, he knew that well. He drew breath to call out, hesitated, and said, “Shit,” under his breath. Great. He'd rather be shot in mistake for a deer than embarrass himself by calling out.

"Ass," he said to himself, drew breath, and shouted, "Halloooo!" at the top of his voice—reedy and without volume as it was. Again. Again. And yet again. By the fifth time, he was beginning to think he'd rather be shot than go on trying to make them hear him, but at last a faint "Halloooo!" drifted back to him on the crisp, light air.

He stopped, relieved, and coughed, surprised not to be bringing up blood; his throat felt like raw meat. But he essayed a quick hum, then, cautiously, a rising arpeggio. An octave. Just barely, and it was a strain that sent shooting pains through his larynx—but a full octave. The first time he'd managed that much of a range in pitch since the injury.

Encouraged by this small evidence of progress, he greeted the hunters cheerfully when they came in view: Allan Christie and Ian Murray, both with long rifles in hand.

"Preacher MacKenzie!" Allan greeted him, grinning, like an incongruously friendly owl. "What are you doing out here all on your owney-o? Rehearsing your first sermon?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Roger said pleasantly. It was true, in a way—and there was no other good explanation for what he was doing out in the woods by himself, lacking weapons, snare, or fishing pole.

"Well, best make it good," Allan said, wagging his head. "Everyone will be coming. Da's had Malva hard at it from dawn to dusk, sweeping and cleaning."

"Ah? Well, do tell her I appreciate it, will ye?" After a good deal of thought, he'd asked Thomas Christie whether the Sunday services might be held in the schoolmaster's home. It was no more than a rude cabin, like most on the Ridge, but since lessons were held there, the main room was somewhat more commodious than the average. And while Jamie Fraser would certainly have allowed the use of the Big House, Roger felt that his congregation—what a daunting word—might well be uneasy at holding their services in the house of a Papist, accommodating and tolerant though said Papist might be.

"Ye're coming, are ye not?" Allan was asking Ian. Ian looked surprised at the invitation, and rubbed an uncertain knuckle beneath his nose.

"Och, well, but I was baptized Romish, eh?"

"Well, ye're a Christian, at least?" Allan said with some impatience. "Or no? Some folk do say as how ye turned pagan, with the Indians, and didna turn back."

"Do they?" Ian spoke mildly, but Roger saw his face tighten a little at that. He noticed with interest that Ian didn't answer the question, though, instead asking him, "Will your wife come to hear ye, cousin?"

"She will," he said, mentally crossing his fingers against the day, "and wee Jem, too."

"How's this?" Bree had asked him, fixing him with a look of rapt intensity, chin slightly lifted, lips just a fraction of an inch apart. *"Jackie Kennedy. That about right, do you think, or shall I aim for Queen Elizabeth reviewing the troops?"* Her lips compressed, the chin drew in a bit, and her mobile face altered from rapt attention to dignified approbation.

"Oh, Mrs. Kennedy, by all means," he'd assured her. He'd be pleased if she kept a straight face, let alone anyone else's.

"Aye, well, I'll come along then—if ye dinna think anyone would take it amiss," Ian added formally to Allan, who dismissed the notion with a hospitable flap of the hand.

"Oh, everyone will be there," he repeated. The notion made Roger's stomach contract slightly.

"Out after deer, are ye?" he asked with a nod toward the rifles, in hopes of turning the conversation toward something other than his own impending debut as a preacher.

"Aye," Allan answered, "but then we heard a painter screech, off this way." He nodded, indicating the wood just around them. "Ian said if there's a painter about, the deer will be long gone."

Roger shot a narrow glance at Ian, whose unnaturally blank expression told him more than he wanted to know. Allan Christie, born and raised in Edinburgh, *might* not know a panther's scream from a man's, but Ian most assuredly did.

"Too bad if it's frightened away the game," he said, lifting one brow at Ian. "Come on, then; I'll walk back with ye."

* * *

He'd chosen "Love thy neighbor as thyself" as the text for his first sermon. "An oldie but a goodie," as he'd told Brianna, causing her to fizz slightly. And having heard at least a hundred variations on that theme, he was reasonably sure of having sufficient material to go on for the requisite thirty or forty minutes.

A standard church service was a great deal longer—several readings of psalms, discussion of the lesson of the day, intercessions for members of the congregation—but his voice wouldn't take that yet. He was going to have to work up to the full-bore service, which could easily run three hours. He'd arrange with Tom Christie, who was an elder, to do the readings and the earliest prayers, to start with. Then they'd see how things went.

Brianna was sitting modestly off to one side now, watching him—not like Jackie Kennedy, thank God, but with a hidden smile that warmed her eyes whenever he met her gaze.

He'd brought notes, in case he should dry up or inspiration fail, but found that he didn't need them. He'd had a moment's breathlessness, when Tom Christie, who had read the lesson, snapped shut his Bible and looked significantly at him—but once launched, he felt quite at home; it was a lot like lecturing at university, though God knew the congregation was more attentive by far than his university students usually were. They didn't interrupt with questions or argue with him, either—at least not while he was talking.

He was intensely conscious for the first few moments of his surroundings: the faint fug of bodies and last night's fried onions in the air, the scuffed boards of the floor, scrubbed and smelling of lye soap, and the close press of people, ranged on benches, but so many that they crammed into every bit of standing space, as well. Within a few minutes, though, he lost all sense of anything beyond the faces in front of him.

Allan Christie hadn't exaggerated; everyone had come. It was nearly as crowded as it had been during his last public appearance, presiding at old Mrs. Wilson's untimely resurrection.

He wondered how much that occasion had to do with his present popularity. A few people were watching him covertly, with a faint air of expectation, as though he might turn water into wine for an encore, but for the most part, they appeared satisfied with the preaching. His voice was hoarse, but loud enough, thank God.

He believed in what he was saying; after the start he found himself talking more easily, and without the need of concentrating on his speech was able to glance from one person to another, making it seem he spoke to each one personally—meanwhile making fleeting observations in the back of his mind.

Marsali and Fergus hadn't come—no surprise there—but Germain was present; he sat with Jem and Aidan McCallum next to Brianna. All three boys had poked each other excitedly and pointed at him when he began to speak, but Brianna had quelled this behavior with some muttered threat of sufficient force to reduce them to simple squirming. Aidan's mother sat on his other side, looking at Roger with a sort of open adoration that made him uneasy.

The Christies had the place of honor in the center of the first bench: Malva Christie, demure in a lacy cap, her brother sitting protectively on one side, her father on the other, apparently unaware of the occasional looks shot her way by some of the young men.

Rather to Roger's surprise, Jamie and Claire had come, as well, though they stood at the very back. His father-in-law was calmly impassive, but Claire's face was an open book; she clearly found the proceedings amusing.

"… and if we are truly considering the love of Christ as it is …" It was instinct, honed by innumerable lectures, that made him aware that something was amiss. There was some slight disturbance in the far corner, where several half-grown lads had congregated. A couple of the numerous McAfee boys, and Jacky Lachlan, widely known as a limb of Satan.

No more than a nudge, the glint of an eye, some sense of subterranean excitement. But he sensed it, and kept glancing back at that corner with a narrowed eye, in hopes of keeping them subdued.

And so happened to be looking when the serpent slithered out between Mrs. Crombie’s shoes. It was a largish king snake, brightly striped with red, yellow, and black, and it seemed fairly calm, all things considered.

“Now, ye may say, ‘Who’s my neighbor, then?’ And a good question, coming to live in a place where half the folk ye meet are strangers—and plenty of them more than a bit strange, too.”

A titter of appreciation ran through the congregation at that. The snake was casting about in a leisurely sort of way, head raised and tongue flickering with interest as it tested the air. It must be a tame snake; it wasn’t bothered by the crush of people.

The reverse was not true; snakes were rare in Scotland, and most of the immigrants were nervous of them. Beyond the natural association with the devil, most folk couldn’t or wouldn’t distinguish a poison snake from any other, since the only Scottish snake, the adder, *was* venomous. They’d have fits, Roger thought grimly, were they to look down and see what was gliding silently along the floorboards by their feet.

A strangled giggle, cut short, rose from the corner of guilty parties, and several heads in the congregation turned, uttering a censorious “Shoosh!” in unison.

“… when I was hungry, ye gave me to eat; when I was thirsty, ye gave me to drink. And who d’ye ken here who would ever turn away even … even a Sassenach, say, who came to your door hungry?”

A ripple of amusement, and slightly scandalized glances at Claire, who was rather pink, but with suppressed laughter, he thought, not offense.

A quick glance down; the snake, having paused for a rest, was on the move again, snooving its way gently round the end of a bench. A sudden movement caught Roger’s eye; Jamie had seen the snake, and jerked. Now he was standing rigid, eyeing it as though it were a bomb.

Roger had been sending up brief prayers, in the interstices of his sermon, suggesting that heavenly benevolence might see fit to shoo the snake quietly out the open door at the back. He intensified these prayers, at the same time unobtrusively unbuttoning his coat to allow for freer action.

If the damned thing came toward the front of the room instead of the back, he'd have to dive forward and try to catch it before it got out in full sight of everyone. That would cause a disturbance, but nothing to what might happen if …

"… now ye'll have noticed what Jesus said, when He spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well …"

The snake was still wrapped halfway round the bench leg, making up its mind. It was no more than three feet from his father-in-law. Jamie was watching it like a hawk, and a visible gloss of sweat had appeared on his brow. Roger was aware that his father-in-law had a fixed dislike of snakes—and no wonder, given that a big rattler had nearly killed him three years before.

Too far now for Roger to reach the thing; there were three benches of bodies between him and the snake. Bree, who could have dealt with it, was right away on the far side of the room. No help for it, he decided, with an inward sigh of resignation. He'd have to stop the proceedings, and in a very calm voice, call upon someone dependable—who? He cast hastily round, and spotted Ian Murray, who was within reach, thank God, to grasp the thing and take it out.

He was opening his mouth to do just this, in fact, when the snake, bored with the scenery in its view, slid rapidly round the bench and headed straight along the back row.

Roger's eye was on the snake, so he was as surprised as anyone—including the snake, no doubt—when Jamie suddenly stooped and snatched it from the floor, whipping the startled serpent under his plaid.

Jamie was a large man, and the stir of his movement made several people look over their shoulders to see what had happened. He shifted, coughed, and endeavored to look passionately interested in Roger's sermon. Seeing that there was nothing to look at, everyone turned back, settling themselves more comfortably.

"… Now, we come across the Samaritans again, do we not, in the story of the Good Samaritan? Ye'll most of ye ken that one, but for the weans who may not have heard it yet—" Roger smiled at Jem, Germain, and Aidan, who all wriggled like worms and made small, ecstatic squeaks at the thrill of being singled out.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Jamie, standing frozen and pale as his best linen sark. Something was moving about inside said sark, and the barest hint of bright scales showed in his clenched hand—the snake was evidently trying to escape up his arm, being restrained from popping through the neck of the shirt only by Jamie's desperate grip on its tail.

Jamie was sweating badly; so was Roger. He saw Brianna frown a little at him.

"… and so the Samaritan told the innkeeper to mind the poor fellow, bind up his wounds, and feed him, and he'd stop to settle the account on his way back from his business. So …"

Roger saw Claire lean close to Jamie, whispering something. His father-in-law shook his head. At a guess, Claire had noticed the snake—she could scarcely fail to—and was urging Jamie to go outside with it, but Jamie was nobly refusing, not wanting to further disrupt the sermon, as he couldn't go out without pushing past a number of other standees.

Roger paused to wipe his face with the large handkerchief Brianna had provided for the purpose, and under cover of this, saw Claire reach into the slit of her skirt and draw out a large calico pocket.

She appeared to be arguing with Jamie in a whisper; he was shaking his head, looking like the Spartan with the fox at his vitals.

Then the snake's head appeared suddenly under Jamie's chin, tongue flicking, and Jamie's eyes went wide. Claire stood instantly on tiptoe, seized it by the neck, and whipping the astonished reptile out of her husband's shirt like a length of rope, crammed the writhing ball headfirst into her pocket and jerked shut the drawstring.

"Praise the Lord!" Roger blurted, to which the congregation obligingly chorused "Amen!" though looking a little puzzled at the interjection.

The man next to Claire, who had witnessed this rapid sequence of events, stared at her bug-eyed. She stuffed the pocket—now heaving with marked agitation—back into her skirt, dropped her shawl over it, and giving the gentleman beside her a “What are *you* looking at, mate?” sort of stare, faced front and adopted a look of pious concentration.

Roger made it somehow to the end, sufficiently relieved at having the snake in custody that even leading the final hymn—an interminable back-and-forth “line hymn” in which he was obliged to chant each line, this echoed by the congregation—didn’t disconcert him too much, though he had almost no voice left and what there was creaked like an unoiled hinge.

His shirt was clinging to him and the cool air outside was a balm as he stood shaking hands, bowing, accepting the kind words of his flock.

“A grand sermon, Mr. MacKenzie, grand!” Mrs. Gwilty assured him. She nudged the wizened gentleman who accompanied her, who might be either her husband or her father-in-law. “Was it no the grand sermon, then, Mr. Gwilty?”

“Mmphm,” said the wizened gentleman judiciously. “No bad, no bad. Bit short, and ye left out the fine story aboot the harlot, but nay doot ye’ll get the way of it in time.”

“Nay doubt,” Roger said, nodding and smiling, wondering, *What harlot?* “Thank ye for coming.”

“Oh, wouldna have missed it for the world,” the next lady informed him. “Though the singing wasna quite what one might have hoped for, was it?”

“No, I’m afraid not. Perhaps next time—”

“I never did care for Psalm 109, it’s that dreary. Next time, perhaps ye’ll give us one o’ the mair sprightly ones, aye?”

“Aye, I expect—”

“DaddyDaddyDaddy!” Jem cannoned into his legs, clutching him affectionately round the thighs and nearly knocking him over.

“Nice job,” said Brianna, looking amused. “What was going on in the back of the room? You kept looking back there, but I couldn’t see anything, and—”

“Fine sermon, sir, fine sermon!” The older Mr. Ogilvie bowed to him, then walked off, his wife’s hand in his arm, saying to her, “The puir lad canna carry a tune in his shoe, but the preaching wasna sae bad, all things considered."

Germain and Aidan joined Jemmy, all trying to hug him at once, and he did his best to encompass them, smile at everyone, and nod agreeably to suggestions that he speak louder, preach in the Gaelic, refrain from Latin (what Latin?) and Popish references, try to look more sober, try to look happier, try not to twitch, and put in more stories.

Jamie came out, and gravely shook his hand.

"Verra nice," he said.

"Thanks." Roger struggled to find words. "You—well. Thanks," he repeated.

"Greater love hath no man," Claire observed, smiling at him from behind Jamie's elbow. The wind lifted her shawl, and he could see the side of her skirt moving oddly.

Jamie made a small amused sound.

"Mmphm. Ye might drop by, maybe, and have a word wi' Rab McAfee and Isaiah Lachlan—perhaps a short sermon on the text, *'He who loveth his son chasteneth him betimes?' "*

"McAfee and Lachlan. Aye, I'll do that." Or perhaps he'd just get the McAfees and Jacky Lachlan alone and see to the chastening himself.

He saw off the last of the congregation, took his leave of Tom Christie and his family with thanks, and headed for home and luncheon, his own family in tow. Normally, there would be another service in the afternoon, but he wasn't up to that yet.

Old Mrs. Abernathy was a little way before them on the path, being assisted by her friend, the slightly less-ancient Mrs. Coinneach.

"A nice-looking lad," Mrs. Abernathy was remarking, her cracked old voice floating back on the crisp fall air. "But nervous, och! Sweating rivers, did ye see?"

"Aye, well, shy, I suppose," Mrs. Coinneach replied comfortably. "I expect he'll settle, though, in time."

* * *

Roger lay in bed, savoring the lingering sense of the day's accomplishments, the relief of disasters averted, and the sight of his wife, the light from the embers glowing through the thin linen of her shift as she knelt by the hearth, touching her skin and the ends of her hair with light, so that she looked illuminated from within.

The fire banked for the night, she rose and peered at Jemmy, curled up in his trundle and looking deceptively angelic, before coming to bed.

"You look contemplative," she said, smiling as she climbed onto the mattress. "What are you thinking about?"

"Trying to think what on earth I might have said that Mr. MacNeill could possibly have thought was Latin, let alone a Catholic reference," he replied, companionably making room for her.

"You didn't start singing 'Ave Maria' or anything," she assured him. "I would have noticed."

"Mm," he said, and coughed. "Don't mention the singing, aye?"

"It'll get better," she said firmly, and turned, pushing and squirming, to make a nest for herself. The mattress was stuffed with wool, much more comfortable—and a hell of a lot quieter—than corn shucks, but very prone to lumps and odd hollows.

"Aye, maybe," he said, though thinking, *Maybe. But it will never be what it was.* No point in thinking of that, though; he'd grieved as much as he meant to. It was time to make the best of things and get on.

Comfortable at last, she turned to him, sighing in contentment as her body seemed to melt momentarily and remold itself around him—one of her many small, miraculous talents. She had put her hair in a thick plait for sleeping, and he ran his hand down its length, recalling the snake with a brief shudder. He wondered what Claire had done with it. Likely set it free in her garden to eat mice, pragmatist that she was.

"Did you figure out which harlot story it was you left out?" Brianna murmured, moving her hips against his in a casual but definitely nonaccidental sort of way.

"No. There are a terrible lot of harlots in the Bible." He took the tip of her ear very gently between his teeth and she drew a deep, sudden breath.

“Whassa harlot?” said a small, sleepy voice from the trundle.

“Go to sleep, mate—I’ll tell ye in the morning,” Roger called, and slid a hand down over Brianna’s very round, very solid, very warm hip.

Jemmy would almost certainly be asleep in seconds, but they contented themselves with small, secret touches beneath the bedclothes, waiting to be sure he was *soundly* asleep. He slept like the dead, once firmly in dreamland, but had more than once roused from the drowsy foreshore at very awkward moments, disturbed by his parents’ unseemly noises.

“Is it like you thought it would be?” Bree asked, putting a thoughtful thumb on his nipple and rotating it.

“Is what—oh, the preaching. Well, bar the snake …”

“Not just that—the whole thing. Do you think …” Her eyes searched his, and he tried to keep his mind on what she was saying, rather than what she was doing.

“Ah …” His hand clamped over hers, and he took a deep breath. “Yeah. Ye mean am I still sure? I am; I wouldna have done such a thing if I weren’t.”

“Dad—Daddy—always said it was a great blessing to have a calling, to *know* that you were meant to be something in particular. Do you think you’ve always had a—a calling?”

“Well, for a time, I had the fixed notion that I was meant to be a deep-sea diver,” he said. “Don’t laugh; I mean it. What about you?”

“Me?” She looked surprised, then pursed her lips, thinking. “Well, I went to a Catholic school, so we were all urged to think about becoming priests or nuns—but I was pretty sure I didn’t have a religious vocation.”

“Thank God,” he said, with a fervency that made her laugh.

“And then for quite a while, I thought I should be a historian—that I wanted to be one. And it *was* interesting,” she said slowly. “I could do it. But—what I really wanted was to build things. To make things.” She pulled her hand out from under his and waggled her fingers, long and graceful. “But I don’t know that that’s a calling, really.”

"Do ye not think motherhood is a calling, of sorts?" He was on delicate ground here. She was several days late, but neither of them had mentioned it—or was going to, yet.

She cast a quick glance over her shoulder at the trundle bed, and made a small grimace, whose import he couldn't read.

"Can you call something that's accidental for most people a calling?" she asked. "I don't mean it isn't important—but shouldn't there be some choice involved?"

Choice. Well, Jem had been thoroughly an accident, but this one—if there was one—they'd chosen, all right.

"I don't know." He smoothed the long rope of her braid against her spine, and she pressed closer in reflex. He thought she felt somehow riper than usual; something about the feel of her breasts. Softer. Bigger.

"Jem's asleep," she said softly, and he heard the surprisingly deep, slow breathing from the trundle. She put her hand back on his chest, the other somewhat lower.

A little later, drifting toward dreamland himself, he heard her say something, and tried to rouse enough to ask her what it was, but managed only a small interrogative "Mm?"

"I've always thought I *do* have a calling," she repeated, looking upward at the shadows in the beamed ceiling. "Something I was meant to do. But I don't know yet what it is."

"Well, ye definitely weren't meant to be a nun," he said drowsily. "Beyond that—I couldna say."

* * *

The man's face was in darkness. He saw an eye, a wet shine, and his heart beat in fear. The bodhrana were talking.

There was wood in his hand, a tipper, a club—it seemed to change in size, immense, yet he handled it lightly, part of his hand, it beat the drumhead, beat in the head of the man whose eyes turned toward him, shining with terror.

Some animal was with him, something large and half-seen, brushing eager past his thighs into the dark, urgent for blood, and he after it, hunting.

The club came down, and down, and upanddown, upanddown, upanddown with the waggle of his wrist, the bodhran live and talking in his bones, the thud that shivered through his arm, a skull breaking inward with a wet, soft sound.

Joined for that instant, joined closer than man and wife, hearts one, terror and bloodlust both yielding to that soft, wet thud and the empty night. The body fell, and he felt it go away from him, a rending loss, felt earth and pine needles rough against his cheek as he fell.

The eyes shone wet and empty, and the face slack-lipped in firelight, one he knew, but he knew not the name of the dead, and the animal was breathing in the night behind him, hot breath on his nape. Everything was burning: grass, trees, sky.

The bodhrana were talking in his bones, but he could not make it out what they said, and he beat the ground, the soft limp body, the burning tree in a rage that made sparks fly, to make the drums leave his blood, speak clearly. Then the tipper flew free, his hand struck the tree and burst into flame.

He woke with his hand on fire, gasping. He brought his knuckles to his mouth by instinct, tasting silver blood. His heart was hammering so that he could scarcely breathe, and he fought the notion, trying to slow his heart, keep breathing, keep panic at bay, stop his throat closing up and strangling him.

The pain in his hand helped, distracting him from the thought of suffocation. He'd thrown a punch in his sleep, and hit the log wall of the cabin square. Jesus, it felt like his knuckles had burst. He pressed the heel of his other hand against them, hard, gritting his teeth.

Rolled onto his side and saw the wet shine of eyes in the ghost of firelight and would have screamed, if he'd had any breath.

"Are you all right, Roger?" Brianna whispered, voice urgent. Her hand touched his shoulder, his back, the curve of his brow, quickly seeking injury.

"Yeah," he said, fighting for breath. "Bad … dream." He wasn't dreaming of suffocation; his chest was tight, every breath a conscious effort.

She threw back the covers and rose in a rustle of sheets, pulling him up.

"Sit up," she said, low-voiced. "Wake all the way up. Breathe slow; I'll make you some tea—well, something hot, at least."

He hadn't any breath to protest. The scar on his throat was a vise. The first agony in his hand had subsided; now it began to throb in time to his heart—fine, that was all he needed. He fought back the dream, the sense of drums beating in his bones, and in the struggle, found his breath start to ease. By the time Brianna brought him a mug of hot water poured over something foul-smelling, he was breathing almost normally.

He declined to drink whatever it was, whereupon she thriftily used it to bathe his scraped knuckles instead.

"Do you want to tell me about the dream?" She was heavy-eyed, still yearning for sleep, but willing to listen.

He hesitated, but he could feel the dream hovering in the night-still air, just behind him; to keep silent and lie back in the dark was to invite its return. And perhaps she should know what the dream had told him.

"It was a muddle, but to do with the fight—when we went to bring Claire back. The man—the one I killed—" The word stuck in his throat like a bur, but he got it out. "I was smashing in his head, and he fell, and I saw his face again. And suddenly I realized I'd seen him before; I—I know who he was." The faint horror of knowing the man showed in his voice, and her heavy lashes rose, her eyes suddenly alert.

Her hand covered his injured knuckles, lightly, questioning.

"Do ye recall a wretched little thieftaker named Harley Boble? We met him, just the once, at the Gathering at Mount Helicon."

"I remember. Him? You're sure? It was dark, you said, and all confused—"

"I'm sure. I didn't know, when I hit him, but I saw his face when he fell—the grass was on fire, I saw it clearly—and I saw it again, just now, in the dream, and the name was in my mind when I woke up." He flexed his hand slowly, grimacing. "It seems a lot worse, somehow, to kill someone ye know." And the knowledge of having killed a stranger was quite bad enough. It obliged him to think of himself as one capable of murder.

“Well, you *didn’t* know him, at the time,” she pointed out. “Didn’t recognize him, I mean.”

“No, that’s true.” It was, but didn’t help. The fire was smoored for the night, and the room was chilly; he noticed the gooseflesh on her bare forearms, the gold hairs rising. “You’re cold; let’s go back to bed.”

The bed still held a faint warmth, and it was unutterable comfort to have her curl close to his back, the heat of her body penetrating his bone-deep chill. His hand still throbbed, but the pain had dulled to a negligible ache. Her arm settled firmly round him, a loose fist curled under his chin. He bent his head to kiss her own knuckles, smooth and hard and round, felt her warm breath on his neck, and had the oddest momentary recollection of the animal in his dream.

“Bree … I did *mean* to kill him.”

“I know,” she said softly, and tightened her arm around him, as though to save him falling.

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FROGGY GOES A-COURTING

From Lord John Grey
Mount Josiah Plantation
My dear Friend,

I write in some Perturbation of Spirit.

You will recall Mr. Josiah Quincy, I am sure. I should not have provided him with a Letter of Introduction to you, had I had any Notion of the eventual Outcome of his Efforts. For I am sure that it is by his Action that your Name is associated with the so-called Committee of Correspondence in North Carolina. A Friend, knowing of my Acquaintance with you, showed me a Missive yesterday, purporting to originate from this Body, and containing a List of its presumed Recipients. Your Name was among these, and the Sight of it in such Company caused me such Concern as to compel me to write at once to inform you of the Matter.

I should have burned the Missive at once, was it not apparent that it was only one of several Copies. The Others are doubtless in transit through various of the Colonies. You must move at once to disassociate yourself from any such Body, and take Pains that your Name does not appear in Future in such Contexts.

For be warned: the Mail is not safe. I have received more than one official Document—even some bearing royal Seals!—that not only show Signs of having been opened, but that in some Cases are blatantly marked with the Initials or Signatures of those Men *who have intercepted and inspected them. Such Inspection may be imposed either by Whig or Tory, there is no telling, and I hear that Governor Martin himself is now having his Mail directed to his Brother in New York, thus to be brought to him by private Messenger—one of these was a recent Guest at my table—as he cannot trust its secure Delivery within North Carolina.*

I can only hope that no incriminating Document containing your Name falls into the Hands of Persons with the Power to arrest or instigate other Proceedings against the Speakers of such Sedition as appears in it. I apologize most sincerely, if my Inadvertence in introducing Mr. Quincy should in any way have endangered or inconvenienced you, and I will, I assure you, lend my every Effort to correct the Situation so far as may be in my Power.

Meanwhile, I offer you the Services of Mr. Higgins, should you require secure Delivery of any Document, not merely Letters addressed to myself. He is completely trustworthy, and I will send him regularly to you, in case you may require him.

Still, I am in Hopes that the Situation overall may yet be retrieved. I think those Hotheads who urge Rebellion must be for the most Part ignorant of the Nature of War, or surely they would not risk its Terrors and Hardships, nor yet think lightly of shedding Blood or the Sacrifice of their own Lives for the sake of so Small a Disagreement with their Parent.

Feeling in London at present is that the Matter will amount to no more than "a few bloody Noses," as Lord North puts it, and I trust it may be so.

This News has also a personal Aspect; my son William has purchased a Lieutenant's Commission, and will join his Regiment almost immediately. I am of course proud of him—and yet, knowing the Dangers and Hardships of a Soldier's Life, I confess that I should have preferred him to adopt another Course, either devoting himself to the Conduct of his considerable Estates, or, if he felt this too tame a Life, perhaps entering the Realm of Politics or Commerce—for he has much natural Ability to add to the

Power of his Resources, and might well achieve some Influence in such Spheres.

Those Resources are of course still within my Control, until William shall attain his Majority. But I could not gainsay him, so exigent was his Desire—and so vivid my Memories of myself at that Age, and my Determination to serve. It may be that he will have his Fill of Soldiering quickly, and adopt another Course. And I will admit that the military Life has many Virtues to recommend it, stern as these Virtues may sometimes be.

On a less alarming Note—

I find myself returned unexpectedly to the Role of Diplomat. Not, I hasten to add, on behalf of His Majesty, but rather on behalf of Robert Higgins, who begs that I will employ what small Influence I possess in advancing his Prospects for Marriage.

I have found Mr. Higgins a good and faithful Servant, and am pleased to offer what Assistance I may; I hope you will find yourself similarly disposed, for as you will see, your Advice and Counsel is most urgently desired and, in fact, quite indispensable.

There is some small Delicacy involved in this Matter, and upon this Point, I would beg your Consideration; your Discretion I of course trust implicitly. It would appear that Mr. Higgins has formed some Attachment to two young Ladies, both resident on Fraser's Ridge. I have pointed out to him the Difficulty of fighting on two Fronts, as it were, and advised him to concentrate his Forces so as to provide the best chance of Success in his Attack upon a single Object—with, perhaps, the Possibility of falling back to regroup, should his initial Essay fail.

The two Ladies in question are Miss Wemyss and Miss Christie, both possessed of Beauty and Charm in Abundance, according to Mr. Higgins, who is most eloquent in their Praises. Pressed to choose between them, Mr. Higgins protested that he could not—but after some little Discussion on the matter, has at length settled upon Miss Wemyss as his first Choice.

This is a practical Decision, and the Reasons for his Choice concern not only the Lady's undoubted Attractions, but a more mundane Consideration: viz, *that the Lady and her Father are* *both Bond Servants, indentured to you. I am, by Reason of Mr. Higgins's devoted Service, offering to purchase both Indentures, should this be agreeable to you, upon Miss Wemyss's Agreement to wed Mr. Higgins.*

I should not wish to deprive you thus of two valued Servants, but Mr. Higgins feels that Miss Wemyss will not wish to leave her Father. By the same Token, he hopes that my offering to free Father and Daughter from Servitude (for I have agreed that I would do so, provided that Mr. Higgins's Employment with me shall continue) would be sufficient Inducement to overcome any Objections which Mr. Wemyss might present on Account of Mr. Higgins's lack of Connexions and personal Property, or such other small Impediments to the Marriage as might present themselves.

I collect that Miss Christie, while equally attractive, has a Father who may be somewhat more difficult of Persuasion, and her social Situation is somewhat higher than that of Miss Wemyss. Still, should Miss Wemyss or her father decline Mr. Higgins's Offer, I will do my Best, with your Assistance, to devise some Inducement that might appeal to Mr. Christie.

What think you of this Plan of Attack? I beg you to consider the Prospects carefully, and if you feel that the Proposal might be received favorably, to broach the Matter to Mr. Wemyss and his Daughter—if possible, with such Discretion as not to prejudice a secondary Expedition, should that prove necessary.

Mr. Higgins is most sensible of his inferior Position, viewed as a potential Groom, and thus most conscious of the Favor he seeks, as is

Your most humble and obedient
Servant,
John Grey

"*… such other small Impediments to the Marriage as might present themselves,*" I read, over Jamie's shoulder. "Like being a convicted murderer with a brand on his cheek, no family, and no money, do you think he means?"

“Aye, like that,” Jamie agreed, straightening out the sheets of paper and tapping the edges straight. He was clearly amused by Lord John’s letter, but his brows had drawn together, though I didn’t know whether this was a sign of concern over Lord John’s news about Willie, or merely concentration on the delicate question of Bobby Higgins’s proposal.

The latter, evidently, for he glanced upward, toward the room that Lizzie and her father shared. No sound of movement came through the ceiling, though I’d seen Joseph go upstairs a little earlier.

“Asleep?” Jamie asked, eyebrows raised. He looked involuntarily at the window. It was mid-afternoon, and the yard was cheerfully awash in mellow light.

“Common symptom of depression,” I said, with a small shrug. Mr. Wemyss had taken the dissolution of Lizzie’s betrothal hard—much more so than had his daughter. Frail-looking to begin with, he had noticeably lost weight, and had withdrawn into himself, speaking only when spoken to, and becoming increasingly hard to rouse from sleep in the mornings.

Jamie struggled momentarily with the concept of depression, then dismissed it with a brief shake of the head. He tapped the stiff fingers of his right hand thoughtfully on the table.

“What d’ye think, Sassenach?”

“Bobby’s a lovely young man,” I said dubiously. “And Lizzie obviously likes him.”

“And if the Wemysses were still indentured, Bobby’s proposal would likely have some appeal,” Jamie agreed. “But they’re not.” He had given Joseph Wemyss his papers of indenture some years earlier, and Brianna had hastily freed Lizzie from her own bond nearly as soon as it was made. That was not a matter of public knowledge, though, since Joseph’s presumed status as a bondsman protected him from service in the militia. Likewise, as a bondmaid, Lizzie benefited from Jamie’s overt protection, as she was considered his property; no one would dare to trouble her or treat her with open disrespect.

“Perhaps he’d be willing to engage them as paid servants,” I suggested. “Their combined salary would likely be a good deal less than the price of two indentures.” We paid Joseph, but his salary was only three pounds a year, though with room, board, and clothing supplied.

“I will suggest as much,” Jamie said, but with an air of dubiousness. “But I’ll have to speak with Joseph.” He glanced upward once more, and shook his head.

“Speaking of Malva …” I said, glancing across the hall and lowering my voice. She was in the surgery, straining liquid from the bowls of mold that provided our supply of penicillin. I had promised to send more to Mrs. Sylvie, with a syringe; I hoped she would use it.

“Do you think Tom Christie would be receptive, if Joseph isn’t? I think both girls are rather partial to Bobby.”

Jamie made a mildly derisive noise at the thought.

“Tom Christie marry his daughter to a murderer, and a penniless murderer at that? John Grey doesna ken the man at all, or he wouldna be suggesting such a thing. Christie’s proud as Nebuchadnezzar, if not more so.”

“Oh, as proud as all that, is he?” I said, amused despite myself. “Who do you think he *would* find suitable, here in the wilderness?”

Jamie lifted one shoulder in a shrug.

“He hasna honored me with his confidences in the matter,” he said dryly. “Though he doesna let his daughter walk out wi’ any of the young lads hereabouts; I imagine none seems worthy to him. I shouldna be surprised at all, if he were to contrive some means of sending her to Edenton or New Bern to make a match, and he can contrive a way to do it. Roger Mac says he’s mentioned such a course.”

“Really? He’s getting quite thick with Roger these days, isn’t he?”

A reluctant smile crossed his face at that.

“Aye, well. Roger Mac takes the welfare of his flock to heart—with an eye to his own, nay doubt.”

“Whatever do you mean by that?”

He eyed me for a moment, evidently judging my capacity for keeping secrets.

"Mmphm. Well, ye mustna mention it to Brianna, but Roger Mac has it in mind to make a match between Tom Christie and Amy McCallum."

I blinked, but then considered. It wasn't really a bad idea, though not one that would have occurred to me. Granted, Tom was likely more than twenty-five years older than Amy McCallum, but he was still healthy and strong enough to provide for her and her sons. And she plainly needed a provider. Whether she and Malva could share a house was another question; Malva had had the running of her father's house since she could manage it. She was amiable, certainly, but I rather thought she had as much pride as her father, and wouldn't take kindly to being supplanted.

"Mmm," I said dubiously. "Perhaps. What do you mean about Roger's own welfare, though?"

Jamie raised one thick eyebrow.

"Have ye not seen the way the widow McCallum looks at him?"

"No," I said, taken aback. "Have you?"

He nodded.

"I have, and so has Brianna. She bides her time for the moment—but mark my words, Sassenach: if wee Roger doesna see the widow safely marrit soon, he'll find hell nay hotter than his own hearth."

"Oh, now. Roger isn't looking *back* at Mrs. McCallum, is he?" I demanded.

"No, he is not," Jamie said judiciously, "and that's why he's still in possession of his balls. But if ye think my daughter is one to stand—"

We had been speaking in low voices and, at the sound of the surgery door opening, stopped abruptly. Malva poked her head into the study, her cheeks flushed and wispy tendrils of dark hair floating round her face. She looked like a Dresden figurine, despite the stains on her apron, and I saw Jamie smile at her look of eager freshness.

"Please, Mrs. Fraser, I've strained off all the liquid and bottled it—ye did say that we must feed the slops left over to the pig at once … did ye mean the big white sow that lives under the house?" She looked rather doubtful at the prospect, and no wonder.

"I'll come and do it," I said, rising. "Thank you, dear. You go along to the kitchen and ask Mrs. Bug for a bit of bread and honey before you go home, why don't you?"

She curtsied and went off toward the kitchen; I could hear Young Ian's voice, teasing Mrs. Bug, and saw Malva stop for an instant to pat her cap, twirl a wisp of hair around her finger to make it curl against her cheek, and straighten her slender back before going in.

"Well, Tom Christie may propose all he likes," I murmured to Jamie, who had come out into the hall with me and seen her go, "but yours isn't the only daughter with a mind of her own and strong opinions."

He gave a small, dismissive grunt and went back to his study, while I continued across the hall, to find a large basin of soggy garbage, the remnants of the latest batch of penicillin-making, neatly collected and standing on the counter.

Opening the window at the side of the house, I peered out and down. Four feet below was the mound of dirt that marked the white sow's den beneath the foundation.

"Pig?" I said, leaning out. "Are you at home?" The chestnuts were ripe and falling from the trees; she might well be out in the wood, gorging herself on chestnut mast. But no; there were hoofmarks in the soft soil, leading in, and the sound of stertorous breathing was audible below.

"Pig!" I said, louder and more peremptorily. Hearing the stirring and scraping of an enormous bulk beneath the floorboards, I leaned out and dropped the wooden basin neatly into the soft dirt, spilling only a little of its contents.

The thump of its landing was followed at once by the protrusion of an immense white-bristled head, equipped with a large and snuffling pink nose, and followed by shoulders the width of a hogshead of tobacco. With eager grunts, the rest of the sow's great body followed, and she fell upon the treat at once, curly tail coiled tightly with delight.

"Yes, well, just you remember who's the source from whom all blessing flows," I told her, and withdrew, taking pains to shut the window. The sill showed considerable splintering and gouging—the result of leaving the slop basin too long on the counter; the sow was an impatient sort, who was quite willing to try to come into the house and claim her due, if it wasn't forthcoming promptly enough to suit.

While partly occupied with the pig, my mind had not yet left the question of Bobby Higgins's proposal, with all its potential complications. To say nothing of Malva. Granted, she was undoubtedly sensible of Bobby's blue eyes; he was a very handsome young man. But she wasn't insensible to Young Ian's charms, either, less striking as they might be.

And what would Tom Christie's opinion of Ian as a son-in-law be, I wondered. He wasn't *quite* penniless; he had ten acres of mostly uncleared land, though no income to speak of. Were tribal tattoos more socially acceptable than a murderer's brand? Probably—but then, Bobby was a Protestant, while Ian was at least nominally Catholic.

Still, he was Jamie's nephew—a fact that might cut both ways. Christie was intensely jealous of Jamie; I knew that. Would he see an alliance between his family and ours as a benefit, or as something to be avoided at all costs?

Of course, if Roger succeeded in getting him to marry Amy McCallum, that might distract his mind a bit. Brianna hadn't said anything to me about the widow—but now that I thought back, I realized that the fact that she hadn't said *anything* might be an indication of suppressed feeling.

I could hear voices and laughter from the kitchen; obviously, everyone was having fun. I thought to go and join them, but glancing into Jamie's study, saw that he was standing by his desk, hands clasped behind him, looking down at Lord John's letter, a small frown of abstraction on his face.

His thoughts weren't with his daughter, I thought, with a small, queer pang—but with his son.

I came into the study and put my arm round his back, leaning my head against his shoulder.

"Have you thought, perhaps, of trying to convince Lord John?" I said, a little hesitantly. "That the Americans may possibly have a point, I mean—convert him to your way of thinking." Lord John himself would not be fighting in the coming conflict; Willie well might, and on the wrong side. Granted, fighting on either side was likely to be as dangerous—but the fact remained that the Americans would win, and the only conceivable way of swaying Willie was through his putative father, whose opinions he respected.

Jamie snorted, but put an arm around me.

"John? D'ye recall what I told ye about Highlanders, when Arch Bug came to me wi' his wee ax?"

"They live by their oath; they will die by it, too."

I shivered a little, and pressed closer, finding some comfort in his solidness. He was right; I had seen it myself, that brutal tribal fealty—and yet it was so hard to grasp, even when I saw it right under my nose.

"I remember," I said.

He nodded at the letter, his eyes still fixed on it.

"He is the same. Not all Englishmen are—but he is." He looked down at me, ruefulness tinged with begrudging respect. "He is the King's man. It wouldna matter if the Angel Gabriel appeared before him and told him what will pass; he wouldna abandon his oath."

"Do you think so?" I said, emboldened. "I'm not so sure."

His brows went up in surprise, and I went on, hesitating as I groped for words.

"It's—I do know what you mean; he's an honorable man. But that's just it. I don't think he *is* sworn to the King—not in the same way Colum's men swore to him, nor the way your men from Lallybroch swore to you. What matters to him—what he'd sell his life for—it's honor."

"Well, aye—it is," he said slowly, brows knit in concentration. "But for a soldier, such as he is, honor lies in his duty, no? And that comes from his fealty to the King, surely?"

I straightened and rubbed a finger beneath my nose, trying to put into words what I thought.

"Yes, but that's not quite what I mean. It's the *idea* that matters to him. He follows an ideal, not a man. Of all the people you know, he may be the only one who *would* understand—this will be a war fought about ideals; maybe the first."

He closed one eye and regarded me quizzically out of the other.

"Ye've been talking to Roger Mac. Ye'll never have thought that on your own, Sassenach."

"I gather you have, too," I said, not bothering to refute the implied insult. Besides, he was right. "So you understand?"

He made a small Scottish noise, indicating dubious agreement.

"I did ask him what about the Crusades, did he not think that was fought for an ideal? And he was obliged to admit that ideals were involved, at least—though even there he said it was money and politics, and I said it always was, and surely it would be now, as well. But, aye, I understand," he added hastily, seeing my nostrils flare. "But with regard to John Grey—"

"With regard to John Grey," I said, "you do have a chance of convincing him, because he's both rational and idealistic. You'd have to convince him that honor doesn't lie in following the King—but in the ideal of freedom. But it's possible."

He made another Scottish noise, this one deep-chested and filled with uneasy doubt. And finally, I realized.

"*You* aren't doing it for the sake of ideals, are you? Not for the sake of—of liberty. Freedom, self-determination, all that."

He shook his head.

"No," he said softly. "Nor yet for the sake of being on the winning side—for once. Though I expect that will be a novel experience." He gave me a sudden rueful smile, and, caught by surprise, I laughed.

"Why, then?" I asked, more gently.

"For you," he said without hesitation. "For Brianna and the wee lad. For my family. For the future. And if that is not an ideal, I've never heard of one."

* * *

Jamie did his best in the office of ambassador, but the effect of Bobby's brand proved insuperable. While admitting that Bobby was a nice young man, Mr. Wemyss was unable to countenance the notion of marrying his daughter to a murderer, no matter what the circumstances that had led to his conviction.

"Folk would take against him, sir, ye ken that fine," he said, shaking his head in response to Jamie's arguments. "They dinna stop to ask the why and wherefore, if a man's condemned. His eye—he did nothing, I am sure, to provoke such a savage attack. How could I expose my dear Elizabeth to the possibility of such reprisals? Even if she should escape herself, what of her fate—and that of her children—if he is knocked over in the street one day?" He wrung his hands at the thought.

"And if he should one day lose his Lordship's patronage, he could not look for decent employment elsewhere, not with yon mark of shame upon his face. They would be beggared. I have been left in such straits myself, sir—and would not for the world risk my daughter's sharing such a fate again."

Jamie rubbed a hand over his face.

"Aye. I understand, Joseph. A pity, but I canna say as ye're wrong. For what the observation be worth, I dinna believe that Lord John would cast him off, though."

Mr. Wemyss merely shook his head, looking pale and unhappy.

"Well, then." Jamie pushed himself back from his desk. "I'll have him in, and ye can give him your decision." I rose, as well, and Mr. Wemyss sprang up in panic.

"Oh, sir! Ye will not leave me alone with him!"

"Well, I scarcely think he'll try to knock ye down or pull your nose, Joseph," Jamie said mildly.

"No," Mr. Wemyss said dubiously. "Nooo … I suppose not. But still, I should take it *very* kindly if you would—would remain while I speak with him? And you, Mrs. Fraser?" He turned pleading eyes upon me. I looked at Jamie, who nodded in resignation.

"All right," he said. "I'll go and fetch him, then."

* * *

“I am sorry, sir.” Joseph Wemyss was nearly as unhappy as Bobby Higgins. Small in stature and shy in manner, he was unaccustomed to conducting interviews, and kept glancing at Jamie for moral support, before returning his attention to his daughter’s importunate suitor.

“I *am* sorry,” he repeated, meeting Bobby’s eyes with a sort of helpless sincerity. “I like ye, young man, and so does Elizabeth, I am sure. But her welfare, her happiness, is my responsibility. And I cannot think … I really do not suppose …”

“I should be kind to her,” Bobby said anxiously. “You know I should, zur. She should have a new gown once a year, and I should sell anything I have to keep her in shoes!” He, too, glanced at Jamie, presumably in hopes of reinforcement.

“I’m sure Mr. Wemyss has the highest regard for your intentions, Bobby,” Jamie said as gently as possible. “But he’s right, aye? It is his duty to make the best match he can for wee Lizzie. And perhaps …”

Bobby swallowed hard. He had groomed himself to the nines for this interview, and wore a starched neckcloth that threatened to choke him, with his livery coat, a pair of clean woolen breeches, and a pair of carefully preserved silk stockings, neatly darned in only a few places.

“I know I ha’n’t got a great deal of money,” he said. “Nor property. But I have got a good situation, zur! Lord John pays me ten pound a year, and has been so kind as to say I may build a small cottage on his grounds, and ’til it is ready, we might have quarters in his house.”

“Aye, so ye said.” Mr. Wemyss looked increasingly wretched. He kept looking away from Bobby, perhaps in part from natural shyness and unwillingness to refuse him eye-to-eye—but also, I was sure, to avoid seeming to look at the brand upon his cheek.

The discussion went on for a bit, but to no effect, as Mr. Wemyss could not bring himself to tell Bobby the real reason for his refusal.

“I—I—well, I will think further.” Mr. Wemyss, unable to bear the tension any longer, got abruptly to his feet and nearly ran out of the room—forcing himself to a stop at the door, though, to turn and say, “Mind, I do not think I shall change my mind!” before disappearing.

Bobby looked after him, nonplused, then turned to Jamie.

“Have I hopes, zur? I know you will be honest.”

It was a pathetic plea, and Jamie himself glanced away from those large blue eyes.

“I do not think so,” he said. It was said kindly, but definitely, and Bobby sagged a little. He had slicked down his wavy hair with water; now dried, tiny curls were popping up from the thick mass, and he looked absurdly like a newborn lamb that has just had its tail docked, shocked and dismayed.

“Does she—do ye know, zur, or ma’am”—turning to me—“are Miss Elizabeth’s affections given elsewhere? For if that was to be the case, sure I would bide. But if not …” He hesitated, glancing toward the door where Joseph had so abruptly disappeared.

“D’ye think I might have some chance of overcoming her father’s objections? Perhaps—perhaps if I was to find some way of coming by a bit o’ money … or if it was to be a question of religion …” He looked a little pale at this, but squared his shoulders resolutely. “I—I think I should be willing to be baptized Romish and he required it. I meant to tell him so, but forgot. Would ye maybe say so to him, zur?”

“Aye … aye, I will,” Jamie said reluctantly. “Ye’ve quite made up your mind as it’s Lizzie, then, have ye? Not Malva?”

Bobby was taken back by that.

“Well, to be honest, zur—I’m that fond of them both, I’m sure I should be happy with either one. But—well, truth to tell, I be mortal feared of Mr. Christie,” he confessed, blushing. “And I think he don’t like you, zur, while Mr. Wemyss does. If you could … speak for me, zur? Please?”

In the end, even Jamie was not proof against this guileless begging.

“I’ll try,” he conceded. “But I promise ye nothing, Bobby. How long will ye stay now, before ye go back to Lord John?”

"His Lordship's given me a week for my wooing, zur," Bobby said, looking much happier. "But I suppose ye'll be going yourself tomorrow or next day?"

Jamie looked surprised.

"Going where?"

Bobby looked surprised in turn.

"Why … I don't rightly know, zur. But I thought *you* must."

After a bit more cross-talk, we succeeded in disentangling the tale. He had, it seemed, fallen in with a small group of travelers on the road, farmers driving a herd of pigs to market. Given the nature of pigs as traveling companions, he hadn't stayed with them for more than one night, but over supper, in the course of casual talk, had heard them make reference to a meeting of sorts and speculate as to who might come to it.

"Your name was mentioned, zur—'James Fraser,' they said, and they mentioned the Ridge, too, so as I was sure 'twas you they meant."

"What sort of meeting was it?" I asked curiously. "And where?"

He shrugged, helpless.

"Took no notice, ma'am. Only they said 'twas Monday next."

Neither did he recall the names of his hosts, having been too much occupied in trying to eat without being overcome by the presence of the pigs. He was plainly too occupied at the moment with the results of his unsuccessful courtship to give much mind to the details, and after a few questions and confused answers, Jamie sent him off.

"Have you any idea—" I began, but then saw that his brows were furrowed; he obviously did.

"The meeting to choose delegates for a Continental Congress," he said. "It must be that."

He had had word after Flora MacDonald's barbecue that the initial meeting place and time were to be abandoned, the organizers fearing interference. A new place and time would be established, John Ashe had told him—word would be sent.

But that was before the contretemps in downtown Cross Creek.

"I suppose a note might have gone astray," I suggested, but the suggestion was a feeble one.

"One might," he agreed. "Not six."

"Six?"

"When I heard nothing, I wrote myself, to the six men I know personally within the Committee of Correspondence. No answer from any of them." His stiff finger tapped once against his leg, but he noticed, and stilled it.

"They don't trust you," I said, after a moment's silence, and he shook his head.

"Little wonder, I suppose, after I rescued Simms and tarred Neil Forbes in the public street." Despite himself, a small smile flitted across his face at the memory. "And poor wee Bobby didna help, I expect; he would have told them he carried letters betwixt me and Lord John."

That was probably true. Friendly and garrulous, Bobby *was* capable of keeping a confidence—but only if you told him explicitly which confidence to keep. Otherwise, anyone who shared a meal with him would know all his business by the time the pudding came.

"Can you do anything else to find out? Where the meeting is, I mean?"

He blew out his breath in mild frustration.

"Aye, maybe. But if I did, and went there—there's a great chance they would put me out. If not worse. I think the risk of such a breach isna worth it." He glanced at me, with a wry expression. "I suppose I should have let them roast the printer."

I disregarded that, and came to stand beside him.

"You'll think of something else," I said, trying to be encouraging.

The big hour candle stood on his desk, half-burned, and he touched it. No one seemed ever to notice that the candle was never consumed.

"Perhaps …" he said meditatively. "I may find a way. Though I should hate to take another for the purpose."

Another gem, he meant.

I swallowed a small lump in my throat at the thought. There were two left. One each, if Roger, or Bree, and Jemmy—but I choked that thought off firmly.

"What does it profit a man to gain the world," I quoted, "if he lose his soul? It won't do us any good to be secretly rich, if *you* get tarred and feathered." I didn't like that thought any better, but it wasn't one I could avoid.

He glanced at his forearm; he had rolled up his sleeves for writing, and the fading burn still showed, a faint pink track among the sunbleached hairs. He sighed, went round his desk, and picked a quill from the jar.

"Aye. Perhaps I'd best write a few more letters."

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THE PALE HORSEMAN RIDES

On the Twentieth of September, Roger preached a sermon on the text, *God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty.* On the twenty-first of September, one of those weak things set out to prove the point.

Padraic and Hortense MacNeill and their children hadn't come to church. They always did, and their absence aroused comment—enough that Roger asked Brianna next morning if she might walk round and visit, to see that there was nothing wrong.

"I'd go myself," he said, scraping the bottom of his porridge bowl, "but I've promised to ride with John MacAfee and his father to Brownsville; he means to offer for a girl there."

"Does he mean you to make them handfast on the spot if she says yes?" I asked. "Or are you just there to keep assorted Browns from assassinating him?" There had been no open violence since we had returned Lionel Brown's body, but there were occasional small clashes, when a party from Brownsville happened to meet men from the Ridge now and then in public.

"The latter," Roger said with a small grimace. "Though I've some hopes that a marriage or two betwixt the Ridge and Brownsville might help to mend matters, over time."

Jamie, reading a newspaper from the most recent batch, looked up at that.

"Oh, aye? Well, it's a thought. Doesna always work out just so, though." He smiled. "My uncle Colum thought to mend just such a matter wi' the Grants, by marrying my mother to the Grant. Unfortunately," he added, turning over a page, "my mother wasna inclined to cooperate. She snubbed Malcolm Grant, stabbed my uncle Dougal, and eloped wi' my father, instead."

"Really?" Brianna hadn't heard that particular story; she looked enchanted. Roger gave her a sidelong glance, and coughed, ostentatiously removing the sharp knife with which she'd been cutting up sausages.

"Well, be that as it may," he said, pushing back from the table, knife in hand. "If ye wouldn't mind having a look-in on Padraic's family, just to see they're all right?"

In the event, Lizzie and I came along with Brianna, meaning to call on Marsali and Fergus, whose cabin was a little way beyond the MacNeills'. We met Marsali on the way, though, coming back from the whisky spring, and so there were four of us when we came to the MacNeills' cabin.

"Why are there so many flies, of a sudden?" Lizzie slapped at a large bluebottle that had landed on her arm, then waved at two more, circling round her face.

"Something's dead nearby," Marsali said, lifting her nose to sniff the air. "In the wood, maybe. Hear the crows?"

There were crows, cawing in the treetops nearby; looking up, I saw more circling, black spots against the brilliant sky.

"Not in the wood," Bree said, her voice suddenly strained. She was looking toward the cabin. The door was tightly shut, and a mass of flies milled over the hide-covered window. "Hurry."

The smell in the cabin was unspeakable. I saw the girls gasp and clamp their mouths tight shut, as the door swung open. Unfortunately, it was necessary to breathe. I did so, very shallowly, as I moved across the dark room and ripped down the hide that had been tightly nailed across the window.

"Leave the door open," I said, ignoring a faint moan of complaint from the bed at the influx of light. "Lizzie—go and start a smudge fire near the door and another outside the window. Start it with grass and kindling, then add something—damp wood, moss, wet leaves—to make it smoke."

Flies had begun to come in within seconds of my opening the window, and were whizzing past my face—deerflies, bluebottles, gnats. Drawn by the smell, they had been clustered on the sun-warmed logs outside, seeking entrance, avid for food, desperate to lay their eggs.

The room would be a buzzing hell in minutes—but we needed light and air, and would just have to deal with the flies as best we might. I pulled off my kerchief and folded it into a makeshift flyswatter, slapping to and fro with it as I turned to the bed.

Hortense and the two children were there. All naked, their pallid limbs glimmering with the sweat of the sealed cabin. They were clammy white where the sunlight struck, legs and bodies streaked with reddish-brown. I hoped that it was only diarrhea, and not blood.

Someone had moaned; someone moved. Not dead then, thank God. The bedcoverings had been thrown to the floor in a tangled heap—that was fortunate, as they were still mostly clean. I thought we had better burn the straw mattress, as soon as we got them off it.

"Do *not* put your fingers in your mouth," I murmured to Bree, as we began to work, sorting the feebly twitching heap of humanity into its component parts.

"You have *got* to be kidding," she said, speaking through her teeth while smiling at a pale-faced child of five or six, who lay half-curled in the exhausted aftermath of a diarrhetic attack. She worked her hands under the little girl's armpits. "Come on, lovey, let me lift you."

The child was too weak to make any protest at being moved; her arms and legs hung limp as string. Her sister's state was even more alarming; no more than a year old, the baby didn't move at all, and her eyes were sunk deep, a sign of severe dehydration. I picked up the tiny hand and gently pinched the skin between thumb and forefinger. It stayed for a moment, a tiny peak of grayish skin, then slowly, slowly, began to disappear.

“Bloody fucking hell,” I said softly to myself and bent swiftly to listen, hand on the child’s chest. She wasn’t dead—I could barely feel the bump of her heart—but wasn’t far from it. If she were too far gone to suck or drink, there was nothing that would save her.

Even as the thought passed through my mind, I was rising, looking about the cabin. No water; a hollowed gourd lay on its side by the bed, empty. How long had they been like this, with nothing to drink?

“Bree,” I said, my voice level but urgent. “Go and get some water—quickly.”

She had laid the older child on the floor, and was wiping the filth from her body; she glanced up, though, and the sight of my face made her drop the rag she was using and stand up at once. She grabbed the kettle I thrust into her hand and vanished; I heard her footsteps, running across the dooryard.

The flies were settling on Hortense’s face; I flapped the kerchief close to shoo them away. The cloth skimmed her nose, but her slack features barely twitched. She was breathing; I could see her belly, distended with gas, moving slightly.

Where was Padraic? Hunting, perhaps.

I caught a whiff of something under the overwhelming stench of voided bowels and leaned over, sniffing. A sweet, pungently fermented scent, like rotted apples. I put a hand under Hortense’s shoulder and pulled, rolling her toward me. There was a bottle—empty—under her body. A whiff of it was enough to tell me what it had contained.

“Bloody, bloody fucking hell,” I said, under my breath. Desperately ill and with no water to hand, she had drunk applejack, either to quench her thirst or to soothe the pain of the cramps. A logical thing to do—save that alcohol was a diuretic. It would leach even more water from a body that was already seriously dehydrated, to say nothing of further irritating a gastrointestinal tract that scarcely needed it.

Bloody Christ, had she given it to the children, too?

I stooped to the elder child. She was limp as a ragdoll, head lolling on her shoulders, but there was still some resilience to her flesh. A pinch of the hand; the skin stayed peaked, but returned to normal faster than the baby's had.

Her eyes had opened when I pinched her hand. That was good. I smiled at her, and brushed the gathering flies away from her half-open mouth. The soft pink membranes were dry and sticky-looking.

"Hallo, darling," I said softly. "Don't worry now. I'm here."

And was that going to help? I wondered. Damn it all; if only I had been a day earlier!

I heard Bree's hurrying steps and met her at the door.

"I need—" I began, but she interrupted me.

"Mr. MacNeill's in the woods!" she said. "I found him on the way to the spring. He's—"

The kettle in her hands was still empty. I seized it with a cry of exasperation.

"Water! I need water!"

"But I—Mr. MacNeill, he's—"

I thrust the kettle back into her hands and shoved past her.

"I'll find him," I said. "Get water! Give it to them—the baby first! Make Lizzie help you—the fires can wait! Run!"

I heard the flies first, a buzzing noise that made my skin crawl with revulsion. Out in the open, they had found him quickly, attracted by the smell. I took a hasty gulp of air and shoved through the buckbrush to where Padraic lay, collapsed in the grass beneath a sycamore.

He wasn't dead. I saw that at once; the flies were a cloud, not a blanket—hovering, lighting, flicking away again as he twitched.

He lay curled on the ground, wearing only a shirt, a water jug lying near his head. I knelt by him, peering as I touched him. His shirt and legs were stained, as was the grass where he lay. The excrement was very watery—most had soaked into the soil by now—but there was some solid matter. He'd been stricken later than Hortense and the children, then; his guts hadn't been griping long, or there would be mostly water, tinged with blood.

"Padraic?"

"Mrs. Claire, thank the Lord ye've come." His voice was so hoarse I could scarcely make out words. "My bairnies. Have ye got my bairnies safe?”

He raised himself on one elbow, shaking, sweat plastering strands of gray hair to his cheeks. His eyes cracked open, trying to see me, but they were swelled to mere slits by the bites of deerflies.

“I have them.” I put a hand on him at once, squeezing to force reassurance into him. “Lie down, Padraic. Wait a moment while I tend them, then I’ll see to you.” He was very ill, but not in immediate danger; the children were.

“Dinna mind me,” Padraic muttered. “Dinna … mind …” He swayed, brushed at the flies that crawled on his face and chest, then groaned as cramp seized his belly again, doubling as though some massive hand had crushed him in its grip.

I was already running back to the house. There were splashes of water in the dust of the path—good, Brianna had come this way, hurrying.

Amoebic dysentery? Food poisoning? Typhoid? Typhus? Cholera—please God, not that. All of those, and a lot more, were currently lumped together simply as “the bloody flux” in this time, and for obvious reasons. Not that it mattered in the short term.

The immediate danger of all the diarrhetic diseases was simple dehydration. In the effort to expel whatever microbial invader was irritating the gut, the gastrointestinal tract simply flushed itself repeatedly, depleting the body of the water necessary to circulate blood, to eliminate wastes, to cool the body by means of sweat, to maintain the brain and membranes—the water necessary to maintain *life.*

If one could keep a patient sufficiently hydrated by means of intravenous saline and glucose infusions, then the gut would, most likely, heal itself eventually and the patient would recover. Without intravenous intervention, the only possibility was to administer fluids by mouth, or rectum as quickly and as constantly as possible, for as long as it took. If one could.

If the patient couldn’t keep down even water—I didn’t think the MacNeills were vomiting; I didn’t recall *that* smell among the others in the cabin. Probably not cholera, then; that was something.

Brianna sat on the floor by the elder child, the little girl's head in her lap, pressing a cup against her mouth. Lizzie knelt by the hearth, face red with exertion as she kindled the fire. The flies were settling on the motionless body of the woman on the bed, and Marsali crouched over the limp form of the baby on her lap, frantically trying to rouse it to drink.

Spilled water streaked her skirt. I could see the tiny head lolled back on her lap, water dribbling down a slack and horribly flattened cheek.

"She can't," Marsali was saying, over and over. "She can't, she can't!"

Disregarding my own advice about fingers, I ruthlessly thrust an index finger into the baby's mouth, prodding the palate for a gag reflex. It was there; the baby choked on the water in its mouth and gasped, and I felt the tongue close hard against my finger for an instant.

Sucking. She was an infant, still breastfed—and suckling is the first of the instincts for survival. I whirled to look at the woman, but a glance at her flat breasts and sunken nipples was enough; even so, I grabbed one breast, squeezing my fingers toward the nipple. Again, again—no, no droplets of milk showed on the brownish nipples, and the breast tissue was flabby in my hand. No water, no milk.

Marsali, grasping what I was about, seized the neck of her blouse and ripped it down, pressing the child to her own bared breast. The tiny legs were limp against her dress, toes bruised and curled like wilted petals.

I was tipping back Hortense's face, dribbling water into her open mouth. From the corner of my eye, I saw Marsali rhythmically squeezing her breast with one hand, an urgent massage to make the milk let down, even as my own fingers moved in an echo of the motion, massaging the unconscious woman's throat, urging her to swallow.

Her flesh was slick with sweat, but most of it was mine. Trickles of perspiration were running down my back, tickling between my buttocks. I could smell myself, a strange metallic scent, like hot copper.

The throat moved in sudden peristalsis, and I took my hand away. Hortense choked and coughed, then her head rolled to the side and her stomach heaved, sending its meager contents rocketing back up. I wiped the trace of vomit from her lips, and pressed the cup to her mouth again. Her lips didn't move; the water filled her mouth and dribbled down her face and neck.

Among the buzzing of the flies, I heard Lizzie's voice behind me, calm but abstracted, as though she spoke from a long way off.

"Can ye stop cursing, ma'am? It's only that the weans can hear ye."

I jerked round at her, only then realizing that I had in fact been repeating "Bloody fucking *hell*!" out loud, over and over as I worked.

"Yes," I said. "Sorry." And turned back to Hortense.

I got some water down her now and then, but not enough. Not nearly enough, given that her bowels were still trying to rid themselves of whatever troubled them. Bloody flux.

Lizzie was praying.

"Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee …"

Brianna was murmuring something under her breath, urgent sounds of maternal encouragement.

"Blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus …"

My thumb was on the pulse of the carotid artery. I felt it bump, skip, and go on, jerking along like a cart with a missing wheel. Her heart was beginning to fail, arrhythmic.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God …"

I slammed my fist down on the center of her chest, and then again, and again, hard enough that the bed and the pale splayed body quivered under the blows. Flies rose in alarm from the soaked straw, buzzing.

"Oh, no," said Marsali softly behind me. "Oh, no, no, please." I had heard that tone of disbelief before, of protest and appeal denied—and knew what had happened.

"Pray for us sinners …"

As though she, too, had heard, Hortense's head rolled suddenly to one side, and her eyes sprang open, staring toward the place where Marsali sat, though I thought she saw nothing. Then the eyes closed and she doubled suddenly, onto one side, legs drawn up nearly to her chin. Her head wrenched back, body tight in spasm, and then she suddenly relaxed. She would not let her child go alone. Bloody flux.

'Now and at the hour of our death, amen. Hail Mary, full of grace …"

Lizzie's soft voice went on mechanically, repeating her words of prayer as mindlessly as I had said mine earlier. I held Hortense's wrist, checking for the pulse, but it was mere formality. Marsali curled over the tiny body in grief, rocking it against her breast. Milk dripped from the swollen nipple, coming slowly, then faster, falling like white rain on the small still face, futilely eager to nourish and sustain.

The air was still stifling, still thick with odor and flies and the sound of Lizzie's prayers—but the cabin seemed empty, and curiously silent.

There was a shuffling noise outside; the sound of something being dragged, a grunt of pain and dreadful exertion. Then the soft sound of falling, a gasp of breath. Padraic had made it back to his own doorstep. Brianna looked to the door, but she still held the older girl in her arms, still alive.

I set down the limp hand that I held, carefully, and went to help.

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A NOISOME PESTILENCE

The days were growing shorter, but light still came early. The windows at the front of the house faced east, and the rising sun glowed on the scrubbed white oak of my surgery floor. I could see the brilliant bar of light advancing across the hand-hewn boards; had I had an actual timepiece, I could have calibrated the floor like a sundial, marking the seams between the boards in minutes.

As it was, I marked them in heartbeats, waiting through the moments until the sun should have reached the counter where my microscope stood ready, slides and beaker beside it.

I heard soft footsteps in the corridor, and Jamie pushed the door open with his shoulder, a pewter mug of something hot held in each hand, wrapped with rags against the heat.

"Ciamar a tha thu, mo chridhe," he said softly, and handed one to me, brushing a kiss across my forehead. "How is it, then?"

"It could be worse." I gave him a smile of gratitude, though it was interrupted by a yawn. I didn't need to tell him that Padraic and his elder daughter still lived; he would have known at once by my face if anything dire had happened. In fact, bar any complications, I thought both would recover; I had stayed with them all night, rousing them hourly to drink a concoction of honeyed water, mixed with a little salt, alternating with a strong infusion of peppermint leaf and dogwood bark to calm the bowels.

I lifted the mug—goosefoot tea—closing my eyes as I inhaled the faint, bitter perfume, and feeling the tight muscles of my neck and shoulders relax in anticipation.

He had seen me twist my head to ease my neck; Jamie's hand came down on my nape, large and wonderfully warm from holding the hot tea. I gave a small moan of ecstasy at the touch, and he laughed low in his throat, massaging my sore muscles.

"Should ye not be abed, Sassenach? Ye'll not have slept at all the night."

"Oh, I did … a bit." I had dozed fitfully, sitting up by the open window, roused periodically by the startling touch on my face of the moths that flew in, drawn to the light of my candle. Mrs. Bug had come at dawn, though, fresh and starched, ready to take over the heavy nursing.

"I'll go lie down in a bit," I promised. "But I wanted to have a quick look first." I waved vaguely toward my microscope, which stood assembled and ready on the table. Next to it were several small glass bottles, plugged with twists of cloth, each containing a brownish liquid. Jamie frowned at them.

"Look? At what?" he said. He lifted his long, straight nose, sniffing suspiciously. "Is that shit?"

"Yes, it is," I said, not bothering to stifle a jaw-cracking yawn. I had—as discreetly as possible—collected samples from Hortense and the baby and, later, from my living patients, as well. Jamie eyed them.

"Exactly *what,*" he inquired cautiously, "are ye looking for?"

"Well, I don't know," I admitted. "And in fact, I may not find anything—or anything I can recognize. But it's possible that it was either an amoeba or a bacillus that made the MacNeills sick—and I think I *would* recognize an amoeba; they're quite big. Relatively speaking," I added hastily.

"Oh, aye?" His ruddy brows drew together, then lifted. "Why?"

That was a better question than he knew.

"Well, partly for the sake of curiosity," I admitted. "But also, if I do find a causative organism that I can recognize, I'll know a bit more about the disease—how long it lasts, for instance, and whether there are any complications to look out for specially. And how contagious it is."

He glanced at me, cup half-raised to his mouth.

"Is it one *you* can catch?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Though I'm fairly sure it is. I've been vaccinated against typhus and typhoid—but this doesn't look like either one of those. And there are no vaccines for dysentery or *Giardia* poisoning."

The brows drew together and stayed that way, knotted as he sipped his tea. His fingers gave my neck a final squeeze and dropped away.

I sipped cautiously at my own tea, sighing in pleasure as it gently scalded my throat and ran hot and comforting down into my stomach. Jamie lounged on his stool, long legs thrust out. He glanced down into the steaming cup between his hands.

"D'ye think this tea is hot, Sassenach?" he asked.

I raised my own brows at that. Both cups were still wrapped in rags, and I could feel the heat seeping through to my palms.

"I do," I said. "Why?"

He lifted the mug and took a mouthful of tea, which he held for a moment before swallowing; I could see the long muscles move in his throat.

"Brianna came into the kitchen whilst I was brewing the pot," he said. "She took down the basin, and the pannikin of soap—and then she took a dipper of water steaming from the kettle, and poured it over her hands, one and then the other." He paused a moment. "The water was boiling when I took it off the fire a moment before."

The mouthful of tea I had taken went down crooked, and I coughed.

"Did she burn herself?" I said, when I had got my breath back.

"She did," he said, rather grimly. "She scrubbed herself from fingertips to elbows, and I saw the blister on the side of her hand where the water fell." He paused for a moment, and his eyes met mine over the mugs, dark blue with worry.

I took another sip of my un-honeyed tea. The room was cool enough, just past dawn, that my hot breath made tiny wisps of steam as I sighed.

"Padraic's baby died in Marsali's arms," I said quietly. "She held the other child. She knows it's contagious." And knowing, could not touch or pick up her own child without doing her best to wash away her fear.

Jamie moved uneasily.

"Aye," he began. "But still …"

"It's different," I said, and put a hand on his wrist, as much for my own comfort as his.

The transient coolness of the morning air touched face and mind alike, dispelling the warm tangle of dreams. The grass and trees were still lit with a chilly dawn glow, blue-shadowed and mysterious, and Jamie seemed a solid point of reference, fixed in the shifting light.

"Different," I repeated. "For her, I mean." I took a breath of the sweet morning air, smelling of wet grass and morning glories.

"I was born at the end of a war—the Great War, they called it, because the world had never seen anything like it. I told you about it." My voice held a slight question, and he nodded, eyes fixed on mine, listening.

"The year after I was born," I said, "there was a great epidemic of influenza. All over the world. People died in hundreds and thousands; whole villages disappeared in the space of a week. And then came the other, my war."

The words were quite unconscious, but hearing them, I felt the corner of my mouth twitch with irony. Jamie saw it and a faint smile touched his own lips. He knew what I meant—that odd sense of pride that comes of living through a terrible conflict, leaving one with a peculiar feeling of possession. His wrist turned, his fingers wrapping tight around my own.

"And she has never seen plague or war," he said, beginning to understand. "Never?" His voice held something odd. Nearly incomprehensible, to a man born a warrior, brought up to fight as soon as he could lift a sword; born to the idea that he must—he would—defend himself and his family by violence. An incomprehensible notion—but a rather wonderful one.

“Only as pictures. Films, I mean. Television.” That one he would never understand, and I could not explain. The way in which such pictures focused on war itself; bombs and planes and submarines, and the thrilling urgency of blood shed on purpose; a sense of nobility in deliberate death.

He knew what battlefields were really like—battlefields, and what came after them.

“The men who fought in those wars—and the women—they didn’t die of the killing, most of them. They died like this—” A lift of my mug toward the open window, toward the peaceful mountains, the distant hollow where Padraic MacNeill’s cabin lay hidden. “They died of illness and neglect, because there wasn’t any way to stop it.”

“I have seen that,” he said softly, with a glance at the stoppered bottles. “Plague and ague run rampant in a city, half a regiment dead of flux.”

“Of course you have.”

Butterflies were rising among the flowers in the dooryard, cabbage whites and sulfur yellows, here and there the great, lazy sail of a late tiger swallowtail out of the shadow of the wood. My thumb still rested on his wrist, feeling his heartbeat, slow and powerful.

“Brianna was born seven years after penicillin came into common use. She was born in America—not this one”—I nodded toward the window again—“but *that* one, that will be. There, it isn’t usual for lots of people to die of contagious illness.” I glanced at him. The light had reached his waist, and glowed on the metal cup in his hand.

“Do you remember the first person you knew of who had died?”

His face went blank with surprise, then sharpened, thinking. After a moment, he shook his head.

“My brother was the first who was important, but I kent others before him, surely.”

“I can’t remember, either.” My parents, of course; their deaths had been personal—but born in England, I had lived in the shadow of cenotaphs and memorials, and people just beyond the bounds of my own family died regularly; I had a sudden vivid memory, of my father putting on a homburg and dark coat to go to the baker's wife's funeral. Mrs. Briggs, her name had been. But she hadn't been the first; I knew already about death and funerals. How old had I been then—four, perhaps?

I was very tired. My eyes felt grainy from lack of sleep, and the delicate early light was brightening to full sun.

"I think Frank's was the first death Brianna ever experienced personally. Maybe there were others; I can't be sure. But the point is —"

"I see the point." He reached to take the empty cup from my hand, and set it on the counter, then drained his own and set it down, too.

"But it's no herself she fears for, aye?" he asked, his eyes penetrating. "It's the wean."

I nodded. She would have known, of course, in an academic sort of way, that such things were possible. But to have a child die suddenly before you, from something like a simple case of diarrhea …

"She's a good mother," I said, and yawned suddenly. She was. But it would never have struck her in any visceral way that something so negligible as a germ could suddenly snatch away her child. Not until yesterday.

Jamie stood up suddenly, and pulled me to my feet.

"Go to bed, Sassenach," he said. "That will wait." He nodded at the microscope. "I've never known shit spoil with keeping."

I laughed, and collapsed slowly against him, my cheek pressed against his chest.

"Maybe you're right." Still, I didn't push away. He held me, and we watched the sunlight grow, creeping slowly up the wall.

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AMOEBA

I turned the mirror of the microscope a fraction of an inch further, to get as much light as I could.

“There.” I stepped back, motioning Malva to come and look. “Do you see it? The big, clear thing in the middle, lobed, with the little flecks in it?”

She frowned, squinting one-eyed into the ocular, then drew in her breath in a gasp of triumph.

“I see it plain! Like a currant pudding someone’s dropped on the floor, no?”

“That’s it,” I said, smiling at her description in spite of the general seriousness of our investigation. “It’s an amoeba—one of the bigger sorts of microorganisms. And I very much think it’s our villain.”

We were looking at slides made from the stool samples I had retrieved from all the sick so far—for Padraic’s family was not the only one affected. There were three families with at least one person ill with a vicious bloody flux—and in all of the samples I had looked at so far, I had found this amoebic stranger.

“Is it really?” Malva had looked up when I spoke, but now returned to the eyepiece, absorbed. “However can something so small cause such *a stramash* in something so big as a person?”

“Well, there *is* an explanation,” I said, swishing another slide gently through the dye bath and setting it to dry. “But it would take me a bit of time to tell you, all about cells—you remember, I showed you the cells from the lining of your mouth?”

She nodded, frowning slightly, and ran her tongue along inside her cheek.

“Well, the body makes all kinds of different cells, and there are special kinds of cells whose business it is to fight bacteria—the small, roundish sorts of things, you remember those?” I gestured at the slide, which being fecal matter, had the usual vast quantities of *Escherichia coli* and the like.

“But there are millions of different sorts, and sometimes a microorganism comes along that the special cells aren’t able to deal with. You know—I showed you the *Plasmodium* in Lizzie’s blood?” I nodded toward the stoppered vial on the counter; I had taken blood from Lizzie only a day or two before, and shown the malarial parasites in the cells to Malva. “And I do think that this amoeba of ours may well be one like that.”

“Oh, well. Will we give the sick folk the penicillin, then?” I smiled a little at the eager “we,” though there was little enough to smile at in the situation overall.

“No, I’m afraid penicillin isn’t effective against amoebic dysentery—that’s what you call a very bad flux, a dysentery. No, I’m afraid we’ve nothing much to be going on with save herbs.” I opened the cupboard and ran an eye over the ranks of bottles and gauze-wrapped bundles, puzzling.

“Wormwood, for a start.” I took the jar down and handed it to Malva, who had come to stand beside me, looking with interest into the mysteries of the cupboard. “Garlic, that’s generally useful for infections of the digestive tract—but it makes quite a good poultice for skin things, as well.”

“What about onions? My grannie would steam an onion, and put it to my ear, when I was a wee bairn and had the earache. It smelt something dreadful, but it did work!”

“It can’t hurt. Run out to the pantry, then, and fetch … oh, three big ones, and several heads of garlic.”

“Oh, at once, ma’am!” She set down the wormwood and dashed out, sandals flapping. I turned back to the shelves, trying to calm my own sense of urgency.

I was torn between the urge to be with the sick, nursing them, and the need to make medicines that *might* be of help. But there were other people who could do the nursing, and no one but me who knew enough to try to compound an antiparasitic remedy.

Wormwood, garlic … agrimony. And gentian. Anything with a very high content of copper or sulfur—oh, rhubarb. We were past the growing season, but I'd had a fine crop and had put up several dozen bottles of the boiled pulp and syrup, as Mrs. Bug liked it for pies, and it provided some vitamin C for the winter months. That would make a splendid base for the medicine. Add perhaps slippery elm, for its soothing effects on the intestinal tract—though such effects were likely to be so slight as to be unnoticeable against the ravages of such a virulent onslaught.

I began pounding wormwood and agrimony in my mortar, meanwhile wondering where the bloody hell the thing had come from. Amoebic dysentery was normally a disease of the tropics, though God knew, I'd seen any number of peculiar tropical diseases on the coast, brought in with the slave and sugar trade from the Indies—and not a few further inland, too, since any such disease that wasn't instantly fatal tended to become chronic and move along with its victim.

It wasn't impossible that one of the fisher-folk had contracted it during the journey from the coast, and while being one of the fortunate persons who suffered only a mild infection, was now carrying the encysted form of the amoeba around in his or her digestive tract, all ready to shed infective cysts right and left.

Why this sudden outbreak? Dysentery was almost always spread via contaminated food or water. What—

"Here, ma'am." Malva was back, breathless from her hurry, several large brown onions in hand, crackling and glossy, and a dozen garlic heads bundled in her apron. I set her to slicing them up, and had the happy inspiration of telling her to stew them in honey. I didn't know whether the antibacterial effect of honey would be likewise effective against an amoeba, but it couldn't hurt—and might conceivably make the mixture a little more palatable; it was shaping up to be more than a trifle eye-watering, between the onions, the garlic, and the rhubarb.

“Phew! What are you guys *doing* in here?” I looked up from my macerating to see Brianna in the door, looking deeply suspicious, nose wrinkled against the smell.

“Oh. Well …” I’d become habituated to it myself, but in fact, the air in the surgery was fairly thick with the smell of fecal samples, now augmented by waves of onion fumes. Malva looked up, eyes streaming, and sniffed, wiping her nose on her apron.

“We’re magking bedicine,” she informed Bree, with considerable dignity.

“Is anyone else fallen sick?” I asked anxiously, but she shook her head and edged into the room, fastidiously avoiding the counter where I had been making slides of fecal material.

“No, not that I’ve heard. I took some food over to the McLachlans’ this morning, and they said only the two little ones had it. Mrs. Coinneach said she’d had diarrhea a couple of days ago, but not bad, and she’s all right now.”

“They’re giving the little ones honey water?”

She nodded, a small frown between her eyebrows.

“I saw them. They look pretty sick, but nothing like the MacNeills.” She looked rather sick herself, at the memory, but shook it off, turning to the high cupboard.

“Can I borrow a little sulfuric acid, Mama?” She’d brought an earthenware cup with her, and the sight of it made me laugh.

“Ordinary people borrow a cup of sugar,” I told her, nodding at it. “Of course. Be careful with it, though—you’d best put it in one of those vials with a waxed cork. You do *not* want to chance tripping and spilling it.”

“I definitely don’t,” she assured me. “I only need a few drops, though; I’m going to dilute it down pretty far. I’m making paper.”

“Paper?” Malva blinked, red-eyed, and sniffed. “How?”

“Well, you squish up anything fibrous you can get your hands on,” Bree told her, making squishing motions with both hands in illustrations. “Old bits of used paper, old rags of cloth, bits of yarn or thread, some of the softer sorts of leaves or flowers. Then you soak the mash for days and days in water and—if you happen to have some—dilute sulfuric acid.” One long finger tapped the square bottle affectionately.

“Then once the mash is all digested down to a sort of pulp, you can spread a thin layer of it on screens, press out the water, let it dry, and hey-presto, paper!”

I could see Malva mouthing “hey-presto” to herself, and turned away a little, so she couldn’t see me smile. Brianna uncorked the big square bottle of acid and, very carefully, poured a few drops into her cup. Immediately, the hot smell of sulfur rose like a demon amidst the miasma of feces and onions.

Malva stiffened, eyes still streaming but wide.

“What is that?” she said.

“Sulfuric acid,” Bree said, looking at her curiously.

“Vitriol,” I amended. “Have you seen—er, smelled it before?”

She nodded, put the sliced onions into a pot, and put the lid neatly on.

“Aye, I have.” She came to look at the green glass bottle, dabbing at her eyes. “My mother—she died when I was young—she had some of that. I remember the smell of it, and how she’d say as I mustn’t touch it, ever. Brimstone, folk called the smell—a whiff o’ brimstone.”

“Really? I wonder what she used it for.” I *did* wonder, and with a certain sense of unease. An alchemist or an apothecary might have the stuff; the only reason that I knew of for a common citizen to keep it was as a means of aggression—to throw at someone.

But Malva only shook her head, and turning, went back to the onions and garlic. I’d caught the look on her face, though; a queer expression of hostility and longing that rang a small, unsuspected bell somewhere inside me.

Longing for a mother long dead—and the fury of a small girl, abandoned. Bewildered and alone.

“What?” Brianna was watching *my* face, frowning slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I said, and put a hand on her arm, just to feel the strength and joy of her presence, the years of her growth. Tears stung my eyes, but that could be put down to onions. “Nothing at all.”

* * *

I was getting terribly tired of funerals. This was the third, in as many days. We had buried Hortense and the baby together, then the older Mrs. Ogilvie. Now it was another child, one of Mrs. MacAfee’s twins. The other twin, a boy, stood by his sister’s grave, in a shock so profound that he looked like a walking ghost himself, though the disease hadn’t touched him.

We were later than intended—the coffin hadn’t been quite ready—and the night was rising around us. All the gold of the autumn leaves had faded into ash, and white mist was curling through the dark wet trunks of the pines. One could hardly imagine a more desolate scene—and yet it was in a way more fitting than the bright sunshine and fresh breeze that had blown when we buried Hortense and little Angelica.

“The Lord is my shepherd. He leadeth me beside—” Roger’s voice cracked painfully, but no one seemed to notice. He struggled for a moment, swallowing hard, and went on, doggedly. He held the little green Bible in his hands, but wasn’t looking at it; he was speaking from memory, and his eyes went from Mr. MacDuff, standing alone, for his wife and his sister were both sick, to the little boy beside him—a little boy about Jemmy’s age.

“Though I walk … though I walk through the valley of death, I shall … shall fear no evil—” His voice was trembling audibly, and I saw that tears were running down his face. I looked for Bree; she was standing a little way behind the mourners, Jem half-swaddled in the folds of her dark cloak. The hood of it was drawn up, but her face was visible, pale in the gloaming, Our Lady of Sorrows.

Even Major MacDonald’s red coat was muted, charcoal-gray in the last vestiges of light. He had arrived in the afternoon, and helped to carry up the little coffin; he stood now, hat somberly tucked beneath his arm, wigged head bowed, his face invisible. He, too, had a child—a daughter, somewhere back in Scotland with her mother.

I swayed a little, and felt Jamie's hand under my elbow. I had been without sleep for most of the last three days, and had taken precious little food. I didn't feel either hungry or tired, though; I felt remote and unreal, as though the wind blew through me.

The father uttered a cry of inconsolable grief, and sank suddenly down upon the heap of dirt thrown up by the grave. I felt Jamie's muscles contract in instinctive compassion toward him, and pulled away a little, murmuring, "Go."

I saw him cross swiftly to Mr. MacAfee, bend to whisper to him, put an arm around him. Roger had stopped talking.

My thoughts would not obey me. Try as I might to fix them on the proceedings, they strayed away. My arms ached; I had been pounding herbs, lifting patients, carrying water … I felt as though I were doing all these things over and over, could feel the repetitive thud of pestle in mortar, the dragging weight of fainting bodies. I was seeing in vivid memory the slides of *Entameba,* greedy pseudopodia flowing in slow-motion appetite. Water, I heard water flowing; it lived in water, though only the cystic form was infective. It was passed on by means of water. I thought that very clearly.

Then I was lying on the ground, with no memory of falling, no memory of ever being upright, the smell of fresh, damp dirt and fresh, damp wood strong in my nose, and a vague thought of worms. There was a flutter of motion before my eyes; the small green Bible had fallen and lay on the dirt in front of my face, the wind turning over its pages, one by one by one in a ghostly game of *sortes Virgilianae*—where would it stop? I wondered dimly.

There were hands and voices, but I could not pay attention. A great amoeba floated majestically in darkness before me, pseudopodia flowing slowly, slowly, in welcoming embrace.

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MOMENT OF DECISION

Fever rolled across my mind like a thunderstorm, jagged forks of pain crackling through my body in bursts of brilliance, each a lightning bolt that glowed for a vivid moment along some nerve or plexus, lighting up the hidden hollows of my joints, burning down the length of muscle fibers. A merciless brilliance, it struck again, and again, the fiery sword of a destroying angel who gave no quarter.

I seldom knew whether my eyes were open or closed, nor whether I woke or slept. I saw nothing but a roiling gray, turbulent and shot with red. The redness pulsed in veins and patches, shrouded in the cloud. I seized upon one crimson vein and followed its path, clinging to the track of its sullen glow amid the buffeting of thunder. The thunder grew louder as I penetrated deeper and deeper into the murk that boiled around me, becoming hideously regular, like the beating of a kettledrum, so that my ears rang with it, and I felt myself a hollow skin, tight-stretched, vibrating with each crash of sound.

The source of it was now before me, throbbing so loudly that I felt I must shout, only to hear some other sound—but though I felt my lips draw back and my throat swell with effort, I heard nothing but the pounding. In desperation, I thrust my hands—if they were my hands—through the misty gray and seized some warm, moist object, very slippery, that throbbed, convulsing in my hands.

I looked down and knew it all at once to be my own heart.

I dropped it in horror, and it crawled away in a trail of reddish slime, shuddering with effort, the valves all opening and closing like the mouths of suffocating fish, each popping open with a hollow click, closing again with a small, meaty thud.

Faces sometimes appeared in the clouds. Some seemed familiar, though I could put no name to them. Others were the faces of strangers, the half-seen, unknown faces that flit sometimes through the mind on the verge of sleep. These looked at me with curiosity or indifference—then turned away.

The others, the ones I knew, bore looks of sympathy or worry; they would seek to fix my gaze with theirs, but my glance slid guiltily off, giddily away, unable to gain traction. Their lips moved, and I knew they spoke to me, but I heard nothing, their words drowned by the silent thunder of my storm.

* * *

I felt quite odd—but, for the first time in uncountable days, not ill. The fever clouds had rolled back; still grumbling softly somewhere near, but for the moment, gone from sight. My eyes were clear; I could see the raw wood in the beams overhead.

In fact, I saw the wood with such clarity that I was struck with awe at the beauty of it. The loops and whorls of the polished grain seemed at once static and alive with grace, the colors of it shimmering with smoke and the essence of the earth, so that I could see how the beam was transformed and yet held still the spirit of the tree.

I was so entranced by this that I reached out my hand to touch it—and did. My fingers brushed the wood with delight at the cool surface and the grooves of the axmarks, wing-shaped and regular as a flight of geese along the beam. I could hear the beating of powerful wings, and at the same time, feel the flex and swing of my shoulders, the vibration of joy through my forearms as the ax fell on the wood. As I explored this fascinating sensation, it occurred to me, dimly, that the beam was eight feet above the bed.

I turned—with no sense whatever of effort—and saw that I lay upon the bed below.

I lay on my back, the quilts rumpled and scattered, as though I had tried at some point to throw them off but lacked the strength to do so. The air in the room was strangely still, and the blocks of color in the fabric glowed through it like jewels at the bottom of the sea, rich but muted.

By contrast, my skin was the color of pearls, bloodless pale and shimmering. And then I saw that this was because I was so thin that the skin of face and limb pressed hard upon the bone, and it was the gleam of bone and cartilage below that gave that luster to my face, smooth hardness shining through transparent skin.

And such bones as they were! I was filled with wonder at the marvel of their shaping. My eyes followed the delicacy of the arching ribs, the heartbreaking beauty of the sculptured skull with a sense of awed astonishment.

My hair was tumbled, matted, and snarled … and yet I felt myself drawn to it, tracing its curves with eye and … finger? For I had no consciousness of moving, and yet I felt the softness of the strands, the cool silk of brown and the springing vibrancy of silver, heard the hairs chime softly past each other, a rustle of notes cascading like a harp's.

My God, I said, and heard the words, though no sound stirred the air, *you are so lovely!*

My eyes were open. I looked deep and met a gaze of amber and soft gold. The eyes looked through me, to something far beyond—and yet they saw me, too. I saw the pupils dilate slightly, and felt the warmth of their darkness embrace me with knowledge and acceptance. *Yes,* said those knowing eyes. *I know you. Let us go.* I felt a sense of great peace, and the air around me stirred, like wind rushing through feathers.

Then some sound turned me toward the window and I saw the man who stood there. I had no name for him, and yet I loved him. He stood with his back turned to the bed, arms braced on the sill, and his head sunk on his chest, so the dawn light glowed red on his hair and traced his arms with gold. A spasm of grief shook him; I felt it, like the temblors of a distant quake.

Someone moved near him. A dark-haired woman, a girl. She came close, touched his back, murmuring something to him. I saw the way she looked at him, the tender inclination of her head, the intimacy of her body swaying toward him.

No, I thought, with great calm. *That won't do.*

I looked once more at myself lying on the bed, and with a feeling that was at once firm decision and incalculable regret, I took another breath.

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I AM THE RESURRECTION, PART 2

I still slept for long periods, waking only briefly to take nourishment. Now the fever dreams were gone, though, and sleep was a lake of deep black water, where I breathed oblivion and drifted past the waving waterweed, mindless as a fish.

I would float sometimes just below the surface, aware of people and things in the air-breathing world, but incapable of joining them. Voices spoke near me, muffled and meaningless. Now and then some phrase would penetrate the clear liquid around me and float into my head, where it would hang like a tiny jellyfish, round and transparent, yet pulsating with some mysterious inner meaning, its words a drifting net.

Each phrase hung for a time in my purview, folding and unfolding in its curious rhythms, and then drifted quietly up and away, leaving silence.

And in between the small jellyfish came open spaces of clear water, some filled with radiant light, some the darkness of utter peace. I drifted upward and downward, suspended between the surface and the depths, at the whim of unknown currents.

“Physician, look.” Fizz. A stirring there, some dormant spore of consciousness, disturbed by carbonation, splits and blooms. Then a stab as sharp as metal, *Who is calling me?* “Physician, look.”

I opened my eyes.

It was no great shock, for the room was filled with twilight, still light, like being underwater, and I had no sense of disruption.

"O Lord Jesus Christ, Thou great Physician: Look with Thy gracious favor upon this Thy servant; give wisdom and discretion to those who minister to her in her sickness; bless all the means used for her recovery …"

The words flowed past me in a whispering stream, cool on my skin. There was a man before me, dark head bent over a book. The light in the room embraced him and he seemed part of it.

"Stretch forth Thy hand," he whispered to the pages, in a voice that cracked and broke, "and according to Thy will, restore her to health and strength, that she may live to praise Thee for Thy goodness and Thy grace; to the glory of Thy holy name. Amen."

"Roger?" I said, groping for his name. My own voice was hoarse from disuse; speaking was an intolerable effort.

His eyes were closed in prayer; they sprang open, unbelieving, and I thought how vivid they were, the green of wet serpentine and summer leaves.

"Claire?" His voice cracked like a teenaged boy's, and he dropped the book.

"I don't know," I said, feeling the dreamlike sense of submergence threatening to engulf me again. "Am I?"

* * *

I could lift a hand for a moment or two, but was too weak even to lift my head, let alone sit up. Roger helpfully dragged me semi-upright against piled pillows, and put his hand at the back of my head to prevent wobbling, holding a cup of water to my dry lips. It was the odd feel of his hand on the bare skin of my neck that began a dim process of realization. Then I felt the warmth of his hand, vivid and immediate, at the back of my head, and jerked like a gaffed salmon, sending the cup flying.

"What? What?" I spluttered, clutching my head, too shocked to formulate a complete sentence, and oblivious to the cold water soaking through the sheets. "WHAT?!"

Roger looked nearly as shocked as I felt. He swallowed, searching for words. “I … I … I thought you knew,” he stammered, voice breaking. “Didn’t you …? I mean … I thought … look, it’ll grow!”

I could feel my mouth working, vainly trying different shapes that might approximate words, but there was no connection between tongue and brain—there was room for nothing but the realization that the accustomed soft, heavy weight of my hair was gone, replaced by a fuzz of bristles.

“Malva and Mrs. Bug cut it off, day before yesterday,” Roger said, all in a rush. “They—we weren’t here, Bree nor I, we wouldn’t have let them, of course we wouldn’t—but they thought it’s what you do for someone with a terrible fever, it *is* what people do now. Bree was furious with them, but they thought—they truly thought they were helping save your life—oh, God, Claire, don’t look like that, please!”

His face had disappeared in a starburst of light, a curtain of shimmering water suddenly coming down to protect me from the gaze of the world.

I wasn’t conscious of crying, at all. Grief simply burst from me, like wine spraying from a wineskin stabbed with a knife. Purple-red as bone marrow, splattering and dripping everywhere.

“I’ll fetch Jamie!” he croaked.

“NO!” I seized him by the sleeve, with more strength than I would have imagined I possessed. “God, no! I don’t want him to see me like this!”

His momentary silence told me, but I kept stubborn hold of his sleeve, unable to think how else to prevent the unthinkable. I blinked, water sliding over my face like a stream over rock, and Roger wavered once more into visibility, blurred around the edges.

“He’s … er … he’s seen you,” Roger said gruffly. He looked down, not wanting to meet my eyes. “It. Already. I mean—” He waved a hand vaguely in the vicinity of his own black locks. “He saw it.”

“He did?” This was nearly as much a shock as the initial discovery. “What—what did he say?”

He took a deep breath and looked back up, like someone fearing to see a Gorgon. Or the anti-Gorgon, I thought bitterly.

"He didn't say anything," Roger said quite gently, and put a hand on my arm. "He—he just cried."

I was still crying, too, but in a more orthodox fashion now. Less of the gasping note. The sense of bone-deep cold had passed, and my limbs felt warm now, though I still felt a disconcertingly chilly breeze on my scalp. My heart was slowing again, and a faint sense that I was standing outside my body came over me.

Shock? I thought, dimly surprised as the word formed itself in my mind, rubbery and melting. I supposed that one *could* suffer true physical shock as the result of emotional wounds—of course one could, I knew that.…

"Claire!" I became aware that Roger was calling my name with increasing urgency, and shaking my arm. With immense effort, I brought my eyes to focus on him. He was looking truly alarmed, and I wondered, vaguely, whether I had started to die again. But no—it was too late for that.

"What?"

He sighed—with relief, I thought.

"You looked funny for a moment." His voice was cracked and husky; he sounded as though it hurt him to talk. "I thought—d'ye want another drink of water?"

The suggestion seemed so incongruous that I nearly laughed. But I *was* terribly thirsty—and all at once, a cup of cold water seemed the most desirable thing in the world.

"Yes." The tears continued to flow down my face, but now seemed almost soothing. I made no attempt to stop them—that seemed much too difficult—but blotted my face with a corner of the damp sheet.

It was beginning to dawn on me that I might not have made the wisest—or at least not the easiest—choice, when I decided not to die. Things outside the limits and concerns of my own body were starting to come back. Troubles, difficulties, dangers … sorrow. Dark, frightening things, like a swarm of bats. I didn't want to look too closely at the images that lay in a disorderly pile at the bottom of my brain—things I had jettisoned in the struggle to stay afloat.

But if I had come back, I had come back to be what I was—and I was a doctor.

"The … sickness." I blotted the last of the tears and let Roger wrap his hands around mine, helping me to hold the new cup. "Is it still—?"

"No." He spoke gently, and guided the rim of the cup to my lips. What was it? I wondered vaguely. Water, but with something in it—mint and something stronger, more bitter … angelica?

"It's stopped." Roger held the cup, letting me sip slowly. "No one's fallen sick in the last week."

"A week?" I bobbled the cup, spilling a little down my chin. "How long have I—"

"Just about that." He cleared his throat. Roger's eyes were intent on the cup; he skimmed a thumb lightly along my chin, removing the drops I had spilled. "You were among the last to fall sick."

I took a long breath, then drank a bit more. The liquid had a soft, sweet taste, too, floating over the bitter tang … honey. My mind located the word and I felt a sense of relief at having located this small missing piece of reality.

I knew from his manner that some of the sick had died, but asked no more for the moment. Deciding to live was one thing. Rejoining the world of the living was a struggle that would take strength I didn't have right now. I had pulled up my roots, and lay like a wilted plant; sinking them back into the earth was beyond me for the moment.

The knowledge that people I knew—perhaps had loved—had died seemed an equal grief to the loss of my hair—and either was more than I could cope with.

I drank two further cups of honey-sweetened water, despite the underlying bitterness, then lay back with a sigh, my stomach feeling like a small, cold balloon.

"Ye want to take a bit of rest," Roger advised me, putting down the cup on the table. "I'll fetch Brianna, aye? But you sleep if ye want to."

I hadn't strength to nod, but managed a twitch of the lips that seemed to pass muster as a smile. I reached up a trembling hand and brushed it gingerly over the top of my shorn head. Roger flinched, very slightly.

He rose, and I saw how thin and strained he looked—he would have been helping tend the sick all week, I supposed, not only me. And bury the dead. He was licensed to conduct funerals.

"Roger?" It was a terrible effort to speak; so terribly hard to find the words, separate them from the tangle in my head. "Have you eaten anything recently?"

His face changed then, a look of relief lightening the lines of strain and worry.

"No," he said, cleared his throat again, and smiled. "Not since last night."

"Oh. Well," I said, and lifted one hand, heavy as lead. "Do. Get something. Won't you?"

"Yes," he said. "I will." Instead of leaving, though, he hesitated, then took several rapid strides back, bent over the bed, and seizing my face between his palms, kissed me on the forehead.

"You're beautiful," he said fiercely, and with a final squeeze of my cheeks, left.

"What?" I said faintly, but the only answer was the bellying of the curtain as the breeze came in, scented with apples.

* * *

In point of fact, I looked like a skeleton with a particularly unflattering crew cut, as I learned when I finally gained sufficient strength as to force Jamie to bring me a looking glass.

"I dinna suppose ye'd think of wearing a cap?" he suggested, diffidently fingering a muslin specimen that Marsali had brought me. "Only until it grows out a bit?"

"I don't suppose I bloody would."

I had some difficulty in saying this, shocked as I was by the horrifying vision in the glass. In fact, I had a strong impulse to seize the cap from his hands, put it on and pull it down to my shoulders.

I had rejected earlier offers of a cap from Mrs. Bug—who had been volubly congratulating herself on my survival as the obvious result of her fever treatment—and from Marsali, Malva, and every other woman who'd come to visit me.

This was simple contrariness on my part; the sight of my unrestrained hair outraged their Scottish sense of what was proper in a woman, and they'd been trying—with varying degrees of subtlety—to force me into a cap for years. I was damned if I'd let circumstance accomplish it for them.

Having now seen myself in a mirror, I felt somewhat less adamant about it. And my scalped head did feel a bit chilly. On the other hand, I realized that if I were to give in, Jamie would be terribly alarmed—and I thought I'd frightened him quite enough, judging by the hollow look of his face and the deep smudges under his eyes.

As it was, his face had lightened considerably when I rejected the cap he was holding, and he tossed it aside.

I carefully turned the looking glass over and set it on the counterpane, repressing a sigh.

"Always good for a laugh, I suppose, seeing the expressions on people's faces when they catch sight of me."

Jamie glanced at me, the corner of his mouth twitching.

"Ye're verra beautiful, Sassenach," he said gently. Then he burst out laughing, snorting through his nose and wheezing. I raised one eyebrow at him, picked up the glass and looked again—which made him laugh harder.

I leaned back against the pillows, feeling a bit better. The fever had quite gone, but I still felt wraithlike and weak, barely able to sit up unassisted, and I fell asleep almost without warning, after the least exertion.

Jamie, still snorting, took my hand, raised it to his mouth, and kissed it. The sudden warm immediacy of the touch rippled the fair hairs of my forearm, and my fingers closed involuntarily on his.

"I love you," he said very softly, his shoulders still trembling with laughter.

"Oh," I said, suddenly feeling quite a lot better. "Well, then. I love you, too. And it *will* grow, after all."

"So it will." He kissed my hand again, and set it gently on the quilt. "Have ye eaten?"

"A bit," I said, with what forbearance I could muster. "I'll have more later."

I had realized many years before why "patients" are called that; it's because a sick person is generally incapacitated, and thus obliged to put up with any amount of harassment and annoyance from persons who are *not* sick.

The fever had broken and I had regained consciousness two days before; since then, the invariable response of everyone who saw me was to gasp at my appearance, urge me to wear a cap—and then try to force food down my throat. Jamie, more sensitive to my tones of voice than were Mrs. Bug, Malva, Brianna, or Marsali, wisely desisted after a quick glance at the tray by the bed to see that I actually *had* eaten something.

"Tell me what's happened," I said, settling and bracing myself. "Who's been ill? How are they? And who—" I cleared my throat. "Who's died?"

He narrowed his eyes at me, obviously trying to guess whether I would faint, die, or leap out of bed if he told me.

"Ye're sure ye feel well enough, Sassenach?" he asked dubiously. "It's news that wilna spoil with keeping."

"No, but I have to hear sooner or later, don't I? And knowing is better than worrying about what I *don't* know."

He nodded, taking the point, and took a deep breath.

"Aye, then. Padraic and his daughter are well on the mend. Evan—he's lost his youngest, wee Bobby, and Grace is still ill, but Hugh and Caitlin didna fall sick at all." He swallowed, and went on. "Three of the fisher-folk have died; there's maybe a dozen still ailing, but most are on the mend." He knit his brows, considering. "And then there's Tom Christie. He's still bad, I hear."

"Is he? Malva didn't mention it." But then, Malva had refused to tell me anything when I'd asked earlier, insisting that I must just rest, and not worry myself.

“What about Allan?”

“No, he’s fine,” Jamie assured me.

“How long has Tom been sick?”

“I dinna ken. The lass can tell ye.”

I nodded—a mistake, as the light-headedness had not left me yet, and I was obliged to shut my eyes and let my head fall back, illuminated patterns flashing behind my lids.

“That’s very odd,” I said, a little breathlessly, hearing Jamie start up in response to my small collapse. “When I close my eyes, often I see stars—but not like stars in the sky. They look just like the stars on the lining of a doll’s suitcase—a portmanteau, I mean—that I had as a child. Why do you suppose that is?”

“I havena got the slightest idea.” There was a rustle as he sat back down on the stool. “Ye’re no still delirious, are ye?” he asked dryly.

“Shouldn’t think so. *Was* I delirious?” Breathing deeply and carefully, I opened my eyes and gave him my best attempt at a smile.

“Ye were.”

“Do I want to know what I said?”

The corner of his mouth twitched.

“Probably not, but I may tell ye sometime, anyway.”

I considered closing my eyes and floating off to sleep, rather than contemplate future embarrassments, but rallied. If I was going to live—and I was—I needed to gather up the strands of life that tethered me to the earth, and reattach them.

“Bree’s family, and Marsali’s—they’re all right?” I asked only for form’s sake; both Bree and Marsali had come to hover anxiously over my prostrate form, and while neither one would tell me anything they thought might upset me in my weakened condition, I was reasonably sure that neither one could have kept it secret if the children were seriously ill.

“Aye,” he said slowly, “aye, they’re fine.”

“What?” I said, picking up the hesitation in his voice.

“They’re fine,” he repeated quickly. “None of them has fallen ill at all.”

I gave him a cold look, though careful not to move too much while doing it.

"You may as well tell me," I said. "I'll get it out of Mrs. Bug if you don't."

As though mention of her name had invoked her, I heard the distinctive thump of Mrs. Bug's clogs on the stair, approaching. She was moving more slowly than usual, and with a care suggesting that she was laden with something.

This proved to be true; she negotiated sideways through the door, beaming, a loaded tray in one hand, the other wrapped round Henri-Christian, who clung to her, monkeylike.

"I've brought ye a wee bit to eat, *a leannan,*" she said briskly, nudging the barely touched bowl of parritch and plate of cold toast aside to make room for the fresh provisions. "Ye're no catching, are ye?"

Barely waiting for my shake of the head, she leaned over the bed and gently decanted Henri-Christian into my arms. Undiscriminatingly friendly as always, he butted his head under my chin, nuzzled into my chest, and began mouthing my knuckles, his sharp little baby teeth making small dents in my skin.

"Hallo, what's happened here?" I frowned, smoothing the soft brown licks of baby hair off his rounded brow, where the yellowing stain of an ugly bruise showed at his hairline.

"The spawn of the de'il tried to kill the poor wean," Mrs. Bug informed me, mouth pulled tight. "And would have done, too, save for Roger Mac, bless him."

"Oh? Which spawn was this?" I asked, familiar with Mrs. Bug's methods of description.

"Some of the fishers' weans," Jamie said. He put out a finger and touched Henri-Christian's nose, snatched it away as the baby grabbed for it, then touched his nose again. Henri-Christian giggled and grabbed his own nose, entranced by the game.

"The wicked creatures tried to drown him," Mrs. Bug amplified. "Stole the puir wee laddie in his basket and set him adrift in the creek!"

“I shouldna think they meant to drown him,” Jamie said mildly, still absorbed in the game. “If so, they wouldna have troubled wi’ the basket, surely.”

“Hmph!” was Mrs. Bug’s response to this piece of logic. “They didna mean to do him any good,” she added darkly.

I had been taking a quick inventory of Henri-Christian’s physique, finding several more healing bruises, a small scabbed cut on one heel, and a scraped knee.

“Well, you’ve been bumped about a bit, haven’t you?” I said to him.

“Ump. Heeheehee!” said Henri-Christian, vastly entertained by my explorations.

“Roger saved him?” I asked, glancing up at Jamie.

He nodded, one side of his mouth turning up a little.

“Aye. I didna ken what was going on, ’til wee Joanie rushed up to me, shouting as they’d taken her brother—but I got there in time to see the end of the matter.”

The boys had set the baby’s basket afloat in the trout pool, a wide, deep spot in the creek, where the water was fairly quiet. Made of stoutly woven reeds, the basket had floated—long enough for the current to push it toward the outfall from the pool, where the water ran swiftly through a stretch of rocks, before plunging over a three-foot fall, down into a tumbling churn of water and boulders.

Roger had been building a rail fence, within earshot of the creek. Hearing boys shouting and Félicité’s steam-whistle shrieks, he had dropped the rail he was holding and rushed down the hill, thinking that she was being tormented.

Instead, he had burst from the trees just in time to see Henri-Christian, in his basket, tip slowly over the edge of the outfall and start bumping crazily from rock to rock, spinning in the current and taking on water.

Running down the bank and launching himself in a flat dive, Roger had landed full-length in the creek just below the fall, in time for Henri-Christian, bawling with terror, to drop from his sodden basket, plummet down the fall, and land on Roger, who grabbed him.

"I was just in time to see it," Jamie informed me, grinning at the memory. "And then to see Roger Mac rise out o' the water like a triton, wi' duckweed streaming from his hair, blood runnin' from his nose, and the wee lad clutched tight in his arms. A terrible sight, he was."

The miscreant boys had followed the basket's career, yelling along the banks, but were now struck dumb. One of them moved to flee, the others starting up like a flight of pigeons, but Roger had pointed an awful finger at them and bellowed, *"Sheas!"* in a voice loud enough to be heard over the racket of the creek.

Such was the force of his presence, they *did* stay, frozen in terror.

Holding them with his glare, Roger had waded almost to the shore. There, he squatted and cupped a handful of water, which he poured over the head of the shrieking baby—who promptly quit shrieking.

"I baptize thee, Henri-Christian," Roger had bellowed, in his hoarse, cracked voice. "In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost! D'ye hear me, wee bastards? His name is *Christian*! He belongs to the Lord! Trouble him again, ye lot of scabs, and Satan will pop up and drag ye straight down screaming—TO HELL!"

He stabbed an accusing finger once more at the boys, who this time did break and run, scampering wildly into the brush, pushing and falling in their urge to escape.

"Oh, dear," I said, torn between laughter and dismay. I looked down at Henri-Christian, who had lately discovered the joys of thumb-sucking and was absorbed in further study of the art. "That must have been impressive."

"It impressed *me,* to be sure," Jamie said, still grinning. "I'd no notion Roger Mac had it in him to preach hellfire and damnation like that. The lad's a great roar to him, cracked voice and all. He'd have a good audience, did he do it for a Gathering, aye?"

"Well, that explains what happened to his voice," I said. "I wondered. Do you think it *was* only mischief, though? Them putting the baby in the creek?"

"Oh, it was mischief, sure enough," he said, and cupped a big hand gently round Henri-Christian's head. "Not just boys' mischief, though."

Jamie had caught one of the fleeing boys as they hurtled past him, grabbing him by the neck and quite literally scaring the piss out of the lad. Walking the boy firmly into the wood, he'd pinned him hard against a tree and demanded to know the meaning of this attempted murder.

Trembling and blubbering, the boy had tried to excuse it, saying that they hadn't meant any harm to the wean, truly! They'd only wanted to see him float—for their parents all said he was demon-born, and everyone kent that those born of Satan floated, because the water would reject their wickedness. They'd taken the baby in his basket and put that into the water, because they were afraid to touch him, fearing his flesh would burn them.

"I told him I'd burn him myself," Jamie said with a certain grimness, "and did." He'd then dismissed the smarting lad, with instructions to go home, change his breeks, and inform his confederates that they were expected in Jamie's study before supper to receive their own share of retribution—or else Himself would be coming round to their houses after supper, to thrash them before their parents' eyes.

"Did they come?" I asked, fascinated.

He gave me a look of surprise.

"Of course. They took their medicine, and then we went to the kitchen and had bread and honey. I'd told Marsali to bring the wee lad, and after we'd eaten, I took him on my knee, and had them all come and touch him, just to see."

He smiled lopsidedly.

"One of the lads asked me was it true, what Mr. Roger said, about the wean belonging to the Lord? I told him I certainly wouldna argue with Mr. Roger about that—but whoever else he belonged to, Henri-Christian belongs to me, as well, and best they should remember it."

His finger trailed slowly down Henri-Christian's round, smooth cheek. The baby was nearly asleep now, heavy eyelids closing, a tiny, glistening thumb half in, half out of his mouth.

"I'm sorry I missed that," I said softly, so as not to wake him. He'd grown much warmer, as sleeping babies did, and heavy in the curve of my arm. Jamie saw that I was having difficulty holding him, and took him from me, handing him back to Mrs. Bug, who had been bustling quietly round the room, tidying, all the while listening with approval to Jamie's account.

"Oh, 'twas something to see," she assured me in a whisper, patting Henri-Christian's back as she took him. "And the lads all poking their fingers out to touch the bairnie's wee belly, gingerlike, as if they meant to prod a hot potato, and him squirmin' and giggling like a worm wi' the fits. The wicked little gomerels' eyes were big as sixpences!"

"I imagine they were," I said, amused.

"On the other hand," I remarked *sotto voce* to Jamie as she left with the baby, "if their parents think he's demon-born, and you're his grandfather …"

"Well, you're his grannie, Sassenach," Jamie said dryly. "It might be you. But aye, I'd prefer not to have them dwell on that aspect of the matter."

"No," I agreed. "Though—do any of them know, do you think, that Marsali isn't your daughter by blood? They must know about Fergus."

"It wouldna much matter," he said. "They think wee Henri's a changeling, in any case."

"How do you know that?"

"People talk," he said briefly. "Are ye feeling well in yourself, Sassenach?"

Relieved of the baby's weight, I had put back the covers a bit to let in air. Jamie stared at me in disapproval.

"Christ, I can count all your ribs! Right through your shift!"

"Enjoy the experience while you can," I advised him tartly, though I felt a sharp pang of hurt. He seemed to sense this, for he took my hand, tracing the lines of the deep blue veins that ran across the back of it.

"Dinna fash yourself, Sassenach," he said, more gently. "I didna mean it that way. Here, Mrs. Bug's brought ye something tasty, I expect." He lifted the lid off a small covered dish, frowned at the substance in it, then stuck a cautious finger in and licked it.

"Maple pudding," he announced, looking happy.

"Oh?" I had no appetite at all yet, but maple pudding sounded at least innocuous, and I made no objection as he scooped up a spoonful, guiding it toward my mouth with the concentration of a man flying an airliner.

"I *can* feed myself, you kn—" He slipped the spoon between my lips, and I resignedly sucked the pudding off it. Amazing revelations of creamy sweetness immediately exploded in my mouth, and I closed my eyes in minor ecstasy, recalling.

"Oh, God," I said. "I'd forgotten what good food tastes like."

"I *knew* ye hadn't been eating," he said with satisfaction. "Here, have more."

I insisted upon taking the spoon myself, and managed half the dish; Jamie ate the other half, at my urging.

"You may not be as thin as I am," I said, turning my hand over and grimacing at the sight of my protruding wrist bones, "but you haven't been eating a lot, either."

"I suppose not." He scraped the spoon carefully round the bowl, retrieving the last bits of pudding, and sucked the spoon clean. "It's been … busy."

I watched him narrowly. He was being patently cheerful, but my rusty sensibilities were beginning to come back. For some unknowable span of time, I'd had neither energy nor attention for anything that lay outside the fever-racked shell of my body; now I was seeing the small familiarities of Jamie's body, voice and manner, and becoming reattuned to him, like a slack violin string being tightened in the presence of a tuning fork.

I could feel the vibration of some strain in him, and I was beginning to think it wasn't all due to my recent near-demise.

"What?" I said.

"What?" He raised his eyebrows in question, but I knew him too well for that. The question alone gave me confidence that I was right.

"What aren't you telling me?" I asked, with what patience I could muster. "Is it Brown again? Have you got news of Stephen Bonnet? Or Donner? Or has the white sow eaten one of the children and choked to death?"

That made him smile, at least, though only for a moment.

"Not that," he said. "She went for MacDonald, when he called a few days ago, but he made it onto the porch in time. Verra agile the Major is, for a man of his age."

"He's younger than you are," I objected.

"Well, I'm agile, too," he said logically. "The sow hasna got me yet, has she?"

I felt a qualm of unease at his mention of the Major, but it wasn't news of political unrest or military rumblings that was troubling Jamie; he would have told me that at once. I narrowed my eyes at him again, but didn't speak.

He sighed deeply.

"I am thinking I must send them away," he said quietly, and took my hand again.

"Send who away?"

"Fergus and Marsali and the weans."

I felt a sharp, sudden jolt, as though someone had struck me just below the breastbone, and found it suddenly difficult to draw breath.

"What? Why? And—and *where*?" I managed to ask.

He rubbed his thumb lightly over my knuckles, back and forth, his eyes focused on the small motion.

"Fergus tried to kill himself, three days ago," he said very quietly.

My hand gripped his convulsively.

"Holy God," I whispered. He nodded, and I saw that he was unable to speak for the moment; his teeth were set in his lower lip.

Now it was I who took his hand in both of mine, feeling coldness seep through my flesh. I wanted to deny it, reject the notion utterly—but couldn't. It sat there between us, an ugly thing like a poisonous toad that neither of us wished to touch.

"How?" I said at last. My voice seemed to echo in the room. I wanted to say, "Are you *sure*?" but I knew he was.

"With a knife," he replied literally. The corner of his mouth twitched again, but not with humor. "He said he would have hanged himself, but he couldna tie the rope with one hand. Lucky, that."

The pudding had formed a small, hard ball, like rubber, that lay in the bottom of my stomach.

"You … found him? Or was it Marsali?"

He shook his head.

"She doesna ken. Or rather, I expect she does, but she's no admitting it—to either of them."

"He can't have been badly wounded, then, or she'd have to know for sure." My chest still hurt, but the words were coming more easily.

"No. I saw him go past, whilst I was scraping a deer's hide up on the hill. He didna see me, and I didna call out—I dinna ken what it was that struck me queer about him … but something did. I went on wi' my work for a bit—I didna want to go far from the house, in case—but it niggled at me." He let go of my hand and rubbed his knuckles underneath his nose.

"I couldna seem to let go of the thought that something was amiss, and finally I put down my work and went after him, thinking myself all kinds of a fool for it."

Fergus had headed over the end of the Ridge, and down the wooded slope that led to the White Spring. This was the most remote and secluded of the three springs on the Ridge, called "white" because of the large pale boulder that stood near the head of the pool.

Jamie had come down through the trees in time to see Fergus lie down by the spring, sleeve rolled up and coat folded beneath his head, and submerge his handless left arm in the water.

"I should maybe ha' shouted then," he said, rubbing a distracted hand through his hair. "But I couldna really believe it, ken?"

Then Fergus had taken a small boning knife in his right hand, reached down into the pool, and neatly opened the veins of his left elbow, blood blooming in a soft, dark cloud around the whiteness of his arm.

"I shouted *then,*" Jamie said. He closed his eyes, and scrubbed his hands hard over his face, as though trying to erase the memory of it.

He had run down the hill, grabbed Fergus, jerked him to his feet, and hit him.

"You *hit* him?"

"I did," he said shortly. "He's lucky I didna break his neck, the wee bastard." Color had begun to rise in his face as he talked, and he pressed his lips tight together.

"Was this after the boys took Henri-Christian?" I asked, my memory of the conversation in the stable with Fergus vividly in mind. "I mean—"

"Aye, I ken what ye mean," he interrupted. "And it was the day after the lads put Henri-Christian in the creek, aye. It wasna only that, though—not only all the trouble over the wee laddie being a dwarf, I mean." He glanced at me, his face troubled.

"We talked. After I'd bound up his arm and brought him round. He said he'd been thinking of it for some time; the thing wi' the bairn only pushed him into it."

"But … how *could* he?" I said, distressed. "To leave Marsali, and the children—how?"

Jamie looked down, hands braced on his knees, and sighed. The window was open, and a soft breeze came in, lifting the hairs on the crown of his head like tiny flames.

"He thought they would do better without him," he said flatly. "If he was dead, Marsali could wed again—find a man who could care for her and the weans. Provide for them. Protect wee Henri."

"He thinks—thought—he couldn't?"

Jamie glanced sharply at me.

"Sassenach," he said, "he kens damn well he can't."

I drew breath to protest this, but bit my lip instead, finding no immediate rebuttal.

Jamie stood up and moved restlessly about the room, picking things up and putting them down.

"Would you do such a thing?" I asked, after a bit. "In the same circumstances, I mean."

He paused for a moment, his back to me, hand on my hairbrush.

"No," he said softly. "But it's a hard thing for a man to live with."

"Well, I see that …" I began, slowly, but he swung round to face me. His own face was strained, filled with a weariness that had little to do with lack of sleep.

"No, Sassenach," he said. "Ye don't." He spoke gently, but with such a tone of despair in his voice that tears came to my eyes.

It was as much sheer physical weakness as emotional distress, but I knew that if I gave way to it, the end would be complete soggy disintegration, and no one needed that just now. I bit my lip hard and wiped my eyes with the edge of the sheet.

I heard the thump as he knelt down beside me, and I reached out blindly for him, pulling his head against my breast. He put his arms round me and sighed deeply, his breath warm on my skin through the linen of my shift. I stroked his hair with one trembling hand, and felt him give way suddenly, all the tension going out of him like water running from a jug.

I had the oddest feeling, then—as though the strength he had clung to had now been let go … and was flowing into me. My tenuous grip on my own body firmed as I held his, and my heart ceased wavering, taking up instead its normal solid, tireless beating.

The tears had retreated, though they were precariously near the surface. I traced the lines of his face with my fingers, ruddy bronze and lined with sun and care; the high forehead with its thick auburn brows, and the broad planes of his cheek, the long straight nose, straight as a blade. The closed eyes, slanted and mysterious with those odd lashes of his, blond at the root, so deep an auburn at the tips as to seem almost black.

"Don't you know?" I said very softly, tracing the small, neat line of his ear. Tiny, stiff blond hairs sprouted in a tiny whorl from the tagus, tickling my finger. "Don't *any* of you know? That it's *you.* Not what you can give, or do, or provide. Just you."

He took a deep, shuddering breath, and nodded, though he didn't open his eyes.

"I know. I said that to him, to Fergus," he said very softly. "Or at least I think I did. I said a terrible lot of things."

They had knelt together by the spring, embracing, wet with blood and water, locked together as though he could hold Fergus to the earth, to his family, by force of will alone, and he had no notion at all what he had said, lost in the passion of the moment—until the end.

"You must continue, for their sakes—though you would not for your own," he had whispered, Fergus's face pressed into his shoulder, the black hair wet with sweat and water, cold against his cheek. *"Tu comprends, mon enfant, mon fils? Comprends-tu?"*

I felt his throat move as he swallowed.

"See, I kent ye were dying," he said very softly. "I was sure ye'd be gone when I came back to the house, and I should be alone. I wasna speaking to Fergus then, I think, so much as to myself."

He raised his head then, and looked at me through a blur of tears and laughter.

"Oh, God, Claire," he said, "I would have been so angry, if ye'd died and left me!"

I wanted to laugh or cry, or both, myself—and had I still harbored regrets regarding the loss of eternal peace, I would have surrendered them now without hesitation.

"I didn't," I said, and touched his lip. "I won't. Or at least I'll try not." I slid my hand behind his head and drew him back to me. He was a good deal larger and heavier than Henri-Christian, but I felt I could hold him forever, if necessary.

It was early afternoon, and the light just beginning to shift, slanting in through the tops of the west-facing windows so that the room filled with a clean, bright light that glowed on Jamie's hair and the worn creamy linen of his shirt. I could feel the knobs at the top of his spine, and the yielding flesh in the narrow channel between shoulder blade and backbone.

"Where will you send them?" I asked, and tried to smooth the whorled hair of the cowlick on his crown.

“To Cross Creek, maybe—or to Wilmington,” he replied. His eyes were half-closed, watching the shadows of leaves flicker on the side of the armoire he had built me. “Wherever seems best for the printing trade.”

He shifted a little, tightening his grip on my buttocks, then frowned.

“Christ, Sassenach, ye havena got any bum left at all!”

“Well, never mind,” I said with resignation. “I’m sure *that* will grow back soon enough.”

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MOMENT OF DECLARATION

Jamie met them near Woolam's Mill, five men on horseback. Two were strangers; two were men from Salisbury that he knew—ex-Regulators named Green and Wherry; avid Whigs. The last was Richard Brown, whose face was cold, save for his eyes.

He silently cursed his love of conversation. If not for that, he would have parted from MacDonald as usual, at Coopersville. But they had been talking of poetry—poetry, for God's sake!—and amusing each other in declamation. Now here he stood in the empty road, holding two horses, while MacDonald, whose guts were in disagreement with him, busied himself deep in the wood.

Amos Green tipped him a nod, and would have passed, but Kitman Wherry reined up; the strangers did likewise, staring curiously.

"Where are Thou bound, friend James?" Wherry, a Quaker, asked pleasantly. "Does Thee come to the meeting at Halifax? For Thee are welcome to ride with us, and that be so."

Halifax. He felt a trickle of sweat run down the crease of his back. The meeting of the Committee of Correspondence to elect delegates to the Continental Congress.

"I am seeing a friend upon his road," he replied courteously, with a nod toward MacDonald's horse. "I will follow, though; perhaps I shall catch ye up along the way." *Fat chance of that,* he thought, carefully not looking at Brown.

"I'd not be so sure of your welcome, Mr. Fraser." Green spoke civilly enough, but with a certain coldness in his manner that made Wherry glance at him in surprise. "Not after what happened in Cross Creek."

"Oh? And would ye see an innocent man burnt alive, or tarred and feathered?" The last thing he wished was an argument, but something must be said.

One of the strangers spat in the road.

"Not so innocent, if that's Fogarty Simms you're speakin' of. Little Tory pissant," he added as an afterthought.

"That's the fellow," Green said, and spat in agreement. "The committee in Cross Creek set out to teach him a lesson; seems Mr. Fraser here was in disagreement. Quite a scene it was, from what I hear," he drawled, leaning back a little in his saddle to survey Jamie from his superior height. "Like I said, Mr. Fraser—you ain't all that popular, right this minute."

Wherry was frowning, glancing to and fro between Jamie and Green. "To save a man from tar and feathers, no matter what his politics, seems no more than common humanity," he said sharply.

Brown laughed unpleasantly.

"Might seem so to you, I reckon. Not to other folk. You know a man by the company he keeps. And beyond that, there's your auntie, eh?" he said, redirecting his speech to Jamie. "And the famous Mrs. MacDonald. I read that speech she gave—in the final edition of Simms's newspaper," he added, repeating the unpleasant laugh.

"My aunt's guests have naught to do wi' me," Jamie said, striving for simple matter-of-factness.

"No? How 'bout your aunt's husband—your uncle, would he be?"

"Duncan?" His incredulity plainly showed in his voice, for the strangers exchanged glances, and their manner relaxed a little. "No, he's my aunt's fourth husband—and a friend. Why d'ye speak of him?"

"Why, Duncan Innes is cheek-by-jowl with Farquard Campbell, and a good many other Loyalists. The two of 'em have been putting money enough to float a ship into pamphlets preachin' reconciliation with Mother England. Surprised you didn't know that, Mr. Fraser."

Jamie was not merely surprised but thunderstruck at this revelation, but hid it.

"A man's opinions are his own," he said with a shrug. "Duncan must do as he likes, and I shall do the same."

Wherry was nodding agreement with this, but the others were regarding him with expressions ranging from skepticism to hostility.

Wherry was not unaware of his companions' responses.

"What *is* thy opinion, then, friend?" he asked politely.

Well, he'd known it was coming. Had now and then tried to imagine the circumstances of his declaration, in situations ranging from the vaingloriously heroic to the openly dangerous, but as usual in such matters, God's sense of humor trumped all imagination. And so he found himself taking that final step into irrevocable and public commitment to the rebel cause—just incidentally being required to ally himself with a deadly enemy in the process—standing alone in a dusty road, with a uniformed officer of the Crown squatting in the bushes directly behind him, breeches round his ankles.

"I am for liberty," he said, in a tone indicating mild astonishment that there could be any question regarding his position.

"Are you so?" Green looked hard at him, then lifted his chin in the direction of MacDonald's horse, where MacDonald's regimental sword hung from the saddle, gilt and tassels gleaming in the sun. "How come you to be in company with a redcoat, then?"

"He is a friend," Jamie replied evenly.

"A redcoat?" One of the strangers reared back in his saddle as though stung by a bee. "How come redcoats *here*?" The man sounded flabbergasted, and looked hastily to and fro, as though expecting a company of the creatures to burst from the wood, muskets firing.

"Only the one, so far as I know," Brown assured him. "Name's MacDonald. He's not a real soldier; retired on half-pay, works for the Governor."

His companion didn't seem noticeably reassured.

"What are you doing with this MacDonald?" he demanded of Jamie.

"As I said—he is a friend." The attitude of the men had changed in an instant, from skepticism and mild hostility to open offense.

"He's the Governor's spy, is what he is," Green declared flatly.

This was no more than the truth, and Jamie was reasonably sure that half the backcountry knew it; MacDonald made no effort to hide either his appearance nor his errands. To deny the fact was to ask them to believe Jamie a dunce, duplicitous, or both.

There was a stirring among the men now, glances exchanged, and the smallest of motions, hands touching knife hilts and pistol grips.

Very fine, Jamie thought. Not satisfied with the irony of the situation, God had now decided that he should fight to the death against the allies he had declared himself to moments earlier, in defense of an officer of the Crown he had just declared himself against.

As his son-in-law was fond of remarking—great.

"Bring him out," Brown ordered, nudging his horse to the forefront. "We'll see what he has to say for himself, this friend of yours."

"And then might be we'll learn him a lesson he can carry back to the Governor, eh?" One of the strangers took off his hat and tucked it carefully beneath the edge of his saddle, preparing.

"Wait!" Wherry drew himself up, trying to quell them with a hand, though Jamie could have told him he was several minutes past the point where such an attempt might have had any effect. "You cannot lay violent hands upon—"

"Can't we, though?" Brown grinned like a death's head, eyes fixed on Jamie, and began to undo the leather quirt coiled and fastened to his saddle. "No tar to hand, alas. But a good beating, say, and send 'em both squealing home to the Governor stark naked—that'd answer."

The second stranger laughed, and spat again, so the gob landed juicily at Jamie's feet.

"Aye, that'll do. Hear you held off a mob by yourself in Cross Creek, Fraser—only five to two now, how you like them odds?"

Jamie liked them fine. Dropping the reins he held, he turned and flung himself between the two horses, screeching and slapping hard at their flanks, then dived headlong into the brush at the roadside, scrabbling through roots and stones on hands and knees as fast as he could.

Behind him, the horses were rearing and wheeling, whinnying loudly and spreading confusion and fright through the other men's mounts; he could hear cries of anger and alarm, as they tried to gain control of the plunging horses.

He slid down a short slope, dirt and uprooted plants spraying up around his feet, lost his balance and fell at the bottom, bounded up and dashed into an oak copse, where he plastered himself behind a screen of saplings, breathing hard.

Someone had had wit—or fury—enough to jump off his horse and follow on foot; he could hear crashing and cursing near at hand, over the fainter cries of the commotion on the road. Glancing cautiously through the leaves, he saw Richard Brown, disheveled and hatless, looking wildly round, pistol in hand.

Any thought he might have had of confrontation vanished; he was unarmed, save a small knife in his stocking, and it was clear to him that Brown would shoot him instantly, claiming self-defense when the others eventually caught up.

Up the slope, toward the road, he caught a glimpse of red. Brown, turning in the same direction, saw it, too, and fired. Whereupon Donald MacDonald, having thoughtfully hung up his coat in a tree, stepped out of cover behind Richard Brown in his shirtsleeves, and hit Brown over the head with a solid length of tree branch.

Brown fell on his knees, momentarily stunned, and Jamie slipped out of the copse, beckoning to MacDonald, who ran heavily to meet him. Together they made their way deeper into the forest, waiting by a stream until prolonged silence from the road indicated that it might be safe to go back for a look.

The men were gone. So was MacDonald's horse. Gideon, the whites of his eyes showing and ears laid flat, rolled back his upper lip and squealed fiercely at them, big yellow teeth bared and slobber flying. Brown and company had wisely thought twice about stealing a rabid horse, but had tied him up to a tree and managed to spoil his harness, which hung in bits around his neck. MacDonald's sword lay in the dust, torn from its scabbard, blade broken in two.

MacDonald picked up the pieces, viewed them for a moment, then, shaking his head, tucked them through his belt.

"D'ye think Jones could mend it?" he asked. "Or better to go down to Salisbury?"

"Wilmington or New Bern," Jamie said, wiping a hand across his mouth. "Dai Jones hasna the skill to mend a sword, but ye'll find few friends in Salisbury, from what I hear." Salisbury had been at the heart of the Regulation, and antigovernment sentiment still ran high there. His own heart had gone back to its usual way of beating, but he still felt weak-kneed in the aftermath of flight and anger.

MacDonald nodded bleakly, then glanced at Gideon.

"Is yon thing safe to ride?"

"No."

In Gideon's present state of agitation, Jamie wouldn't risk riding him alone, let alone double-mounted and with no bridle. They'd left the rope on his saddle, at least. He got a loop over the stallion's head without being bitten, and they set off without comment, returning to the Ridge on foot.

"Verra unfortunate," MacDonald observed thoughtfully at one point. "That they should have met us together. D'ye think it's dished your chances of worming your way into their councils? I should give my left ball to have an eye and an ear in that meeting they spoke of, I'll tell ye that for nothing!"

With a dim sense of wonder, Jamie realized that having made his momentous declaration, overheard by the man whose cause he sought to betray, and then nearly killed by the new allies whose side he sought to uphold—neither side had believed him.

"D'ye ever wonder what it sounds like when God laughs, Donald?" he asked thoughtfully.

MacDonald pursed his lips and glanced at the horizon, where dark clouds swelled just beyond the shoulder of the mountain.

“Like thunder, I imagine,” he said. “D’ye not think so?”

Jamie shook his head.

“No. I think it’s a verra small, wee sound indeed.”

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THE DARK RISES

I heard all the sounds of the household below, and the rumble of Jamie's voice outside, and felt entirely peaceful. I was watching the sun shift and glow on the yellowing chestnut trees outside, when the sound of feet came marching up the stairs, steady and determined.

The door flung open and Brianna came in, wind-tousled and bright-faced, wearing a steely expression. She halted at the foot of my bed, leveled a long forefinger at me, and said, "You are not allowed to die."

"Oh?" I said, blinking. "I didn't think I was going to."

"You tried!" she said, accusing. "You know you did!"

"Well, not to say tried, exactly …" I began weakly. If I hadn't exactly tried to die, though, it was true that I hadn't quite tried not to, and I must have looked guilty, for her eyes narrowed into blue slits.

"Don't you dare do that again!" she said, and wheeling in a sweep of blue cloak, stomped out, pausing at the door to say, "BecauseIloveyouandIcan'tdowithoutyou," in a strangled voice, before running down the stairs.

"I love you too, darling!" I called, the always-ready tears coming to my eyes, but there was no reply, save the sound of the front door closing.

Adso, drowsing in a puddle of sun on the counterpane at my feet, opened his eyes a fraction of an inch at the noise, then sank his head back into his shoulders, purring louder.

I lay back on the pillow, feeling a good deal less peaceful, but somewhat more alive. A moment later, I sat up, put back the quilts, and swung my legs out of bed. Adso abruptly quit purring. "Don't worry," I told him. "I'm not going to keel over; your supply of milk and scraps is perfectly safe. Keep the bed warm for me."

I had been up, of course, and even allowed on short, intensely supervised excursions outside. But no one had let me try to go anywhere alone since before I fell ill, and I was reasonably sure they wouldn't let me do it now.

I therefore stole downstairs in stockinged feet, shoes in hand, and instead of going through the front door, whose hinges squeaked, or through the kitchen, where Mrs. Bug was working, I slipped into my surgery, opened the window, and—having checked to be sure the white sow was not hanging about below—climbed carefully out.

I felt quite giddy at my escape, a rush of spirits that sustained me for a little way down the path. Thereafter, I was obliged to stop every few hundred feet, sit down, and gasp a bit while my legs recovered their strength. I persevered, though, and at last came to the Christie cabin.

No one was in sight, nor was there any response to my tentative "Hallo!", but when I knocked at the door, I heard Tom Christie's voice, gruff and dispirited, bid me enter.

He was at the table, writing, but from the looks of him, ought still to have been in bed. His eyes widened in surprise at sight of me, and he hastily tried to straighten the grubby shawl round his shoulders.

"Mrs. Fraser! Are you—that is—what in the name of God …" Deprived of speech, he pointed at me, eyes round as saucers. I had taken off my broad-brimmed hat when I entered, forgetting momentarily that I looked like nothing so much as an excited bottle brush.

"Oh," I said, passing a self-conscious hand over my head. "That. You ought to be pleased; I'm not going about outraging the public by a wanton display of my flowing locks."

"You look like a convict," he said bluntly. "Sit down."

I did, being rather in need of the stool he offered me, owing to the exertions of the walk.

"How are you?" I inquired, peering at him. The light in the cabin was very bad; he had been writing with a candle, and had put it out upon my appearance.

"How am I?" He seemed both astonished and rather put out at the inquiry. "You have walked all the way here, in a dangerously enfeebled condition, to ask after my health?"

"If you care to put it that way," I replied, rather nettled by that "dangerously enfeebled." "I don't suppose you would care to step out into the light, so that I can get a decent look at you, would you?"

He drew the ends of the shawl protectively across his chest.

"Why?" He frowned at me, peaked brows drawing together so that he looked like an irritable owl.

"Because I want to know a few things regarding your state of health," I replied patiently, "and examining you is likely the best way of finding them out, since you don't seem able to tell me anything."

"You are most unaccountable, madam!"

"No, I am a doctor," I countered. "And I want to know—" A brief wave of giddiness came over me, and I leaned on the table, holding on 'til it passed.

"You are insane," he stated, having scrutinized me for a moment. "You are also still ill, I believe. Stay there; I shall call my son to go and fetch your husband."

I flapped a hand at him and took a deep breath. My heart was racing, and I was a trifle pale and sweaty, but essentially all right.

"The fact of the matter, Mr. Christie, is that while I've certainly *been* ill, I wasn't ill with the same sickness that's been afflicting people on the Ridge—and from what Malva was able to tell me, I don't think you were, either."

He had risen to go and call Allan; at this, he froze, staring at me with his mouth open. Then he slowly lowered himself back into his chair.

"What do you mean?"

Having finally got his attention, I was pleased to lay out the facts before him; I had them neatly to hand, having given them considerable thought over the last few days.

While several families on the Ridge had suffered the depredations of amoebic dysentery, I hadn't. I had had a dangerously high fever, accompanied by dreadful headache and—so far as I could tell from Malva's excited account—convulsions. But it certainly wasn't dysentery.

"Are you certain of this?" He was twiddling his discarded quill, frowning.

"It's rather hard to mistake bloody flux for headache and fever," I said tartly. "Now—did you have flux?"

He hesitated a moment, but curiosity got the better of him.

"No," he said. "It was as you say—a headache fit to split the skull, and fever. A terrible weakness, and … and extraordinarily unpleasant dreams. I had no notion that it was not the same illness afflicting the others."

"No reason you should, I suppose. You didn't see any of them. Unless—did Malva describe the illness to you?" I asked only from curiosity, but he shook his head.

"I do not wish to hear of such things; she does not tell me. Still, why have you come?" He tilted his head to one side, narrowing his eyes. "What difference does it make whether you and I suffered an ague, rather than a flux? Or anyone else, for that matter?" He seemed rather agitated, and got up, moving about the cabin in an unfocused, bumbling sort of way, quite unlike his usual decisive movements.

I sighed, rubbing a hand over my forehead. I'd got the basic information I came for; explaining why I'd wanted it was going to be uphill work. I had enough trouble getting Jamie, Young Ian, and Malva to accept the germ theory of disease, and that was with the evidence visible through a microscope to hand.

"Disease is catching," I said a little tiredly. "It passes from one person to another—sometimes directly, sometimes by means of food or water shared between a sick person and a healthy one. All of the people who had the flux lived near a particular small spring; I have some reason to think that it was the water of that spring that carried the amoeba—that made them ill.

"You and I, though—I haven't seen you in weeks. Nor have I been near anyone else who's had the ague. How is it that we should both fall ill of the same thing?"

He stared at me, baffled and still frowning.

"I do not see why two persons cannot fall ill without seeing each other. Certainly I have known such illnesses as you describe: gaol fever, for instance, spreads in close quarters—but surely not all illnesses behave in the same fashion?"

"No, they don't," I admitted. I wasn't in a fit state to try to get across the basic notions of epidemiology or public health, either. "It's possible, for instance, for some diseases to be spread by mosquitoes. Malaria, for one." Some forms of viral meningitis, for another—my best guess as to the illness I'd just recovered from.

"Do you recall being bitten by a mosquito any time recently?"

He stared at me, then uttered a brief sort of bark I took for laughter.

"My dear woman, everyone in this festering climate is bitten repeatedly during the hot weather." He scratched at his beard, as though by reflex.

That was true. Everyone but me and Roger. Now and then, some desperate insect would have a go, but for the most part, we escaped unbitten, even when there were absolute plagues of the creatures and everyone around us was scratching. As a theory, I suspected that blood-drinking mosquitoes had evolved so closely with mankind through the years that Roger and I simply didn't smell right to them, having come from too far away in time. Brianna and Jemmy, who shared my genetic material but also Jamie's, were bitten, but not as frequently as most people.

I didn't recall having been bitten any time recently, but it was possible that I had been and had simply been too busy to notice.

"Why does it matter?" Christie asked, seeming now merely baffled.

"I don't know. I just—need to find things out." I'd also needed both to get away from the house and to make some move to reclaim my life by the most direct means I knew—the practice of medicine. But that wasn't anything I meant to share with Tom Christie.

"Hmph," he said. He stood looking down at me, frowning and undecided, then suddenly extended a hand—the one I had operated on, I saw; the "Z" of the incision had faded to a healthy pale pink, and the fingers lay straight.

"Come outside, then," he said, resigned. "I will see you home, and if ye insist upon asking intrusive and bothersome questions regarding my health along the way, I suppose I cannot stop you."

Startled, I took his hand, and found his grip solid and steady, despite the haggard look of his face and the slump of his shoulders.

"You needn't walk me home," I protested. "You ought to be in bed, by the looks of you!"

"So should you," he said, leading me to the door with a hand beneath my elbow. "But if ye choose to risk your health and your life by undertaking such inappropriate exertion—why, so can I. Though you must," he added sternly, "put on your hat before we go."

* * *

We made it back to the house, stopping frequently for rest, and arrived panting, dripping with sweat, and generally exhilarated by the adventure. No one had missed me, but Mr. Christie insisted upon delivering me inside, which meant that everyone observed my absence *ex post facto,* and in the irrational way of people, at once became very annoyed.

I was scolded by everyone in sight, including Young Ian, frog-marched upstairs virtually by the scruff of the neck, and thrust forcibly back into bed, where, I was given to understand, I should be lucky to be given bread and milk for my supper. The most annoying aspect of the whole situation was Thomas Christie, standing at the foot of the stairs with a mug of beer in his hand, watching as I was led off, and wearing the only grin I had ever seen on his hairy face.

"What in the name of God possessed ye, Sassenach?" Jamie jerked back the quilt and gestured peremptorily at the sheets.

"Well, I felt quite well, and—"

"Well! Ye're the color of bad buttermilk, and trembling so ye can scarcely—here, let me do that." Making snorting noises, he pushed my hands away from the laces of my petticoats, and had them off me in a trice.

"Have ye lost your mind?" he demanded. "And to sneak off like that without telling anyone, too! What if ye'd fallen? What if ye got ill again?"

"If I'd told anyone, they wouldn't have let me go out," I said mildly. "And I *am* a physician, you know. Surely I can judge my own state of health."

He gave me a look, strongly suggesting that he wouldn't trust me to judge a flower show, but merely gave a louder than usual snort in reply.

He then picked me up bodily, carried me to the bed, and placed me gently into it—but with enough demonstration of restrained strength as to let me know that he would have preferred to drop me from a height.

He then straightened up, giving me a baleful look.

"If ye didna look as though ye were about to faint, Sassenach, I swear I would turn ye over and smack your bum for ye."

"You can't," I said, rather faintly. "I haven't got one." I was in fact a little tired … well, to be honest, my heart was beating like a kettledrum, my ears were ringing, and if I didn't lie down flat at once, I likely *would* faint. I did lie down, and lay with my eyes closed, feeling the room spin gently round me, like a merry-go-round, complete with flashing lights and hurdy-gurdy music.

Through this confusion of sensations, I dimly sensed hands on my legs, then a pleasant coolness on my heated body. Then something warm and cloudlike enveloped my head, and I flailed my hands about wildly, trying to get it off before I smothered.

I emerged, blinking and panting, to discover that I was naked. I glanced at my pallid, sagging, skeletal remains, and snatched the sheet up over myself. Jamie was bending to collect my discarded gown, petticoat, and jacket from the floor, adding these to the shift he had folded over his arm. He picked up my shoes and stockings and added these to his bag.

"You," he said, pointing a long accusatory finger at me, "are going nowhere. You are not allowed to kill yourself, do I make myself clear?"

"Oh, so that's where Bree gets it," I murmured, trying to stop my head from swimming. I closed my eyes again.

"I seem to recall," I said, "a certain abbey in France. And a very stubborn young man in ill health. And his friend Murtagh, who took his clothes in order to prevent his getting up and wandering off before he was fit."

Silence. I opened one eye. He was standing stock still, the fading light from the window striking sparks in his hair.

"Whereupon," I said conversationally, "if memory serves, you promptly climbed out a window and decamped. Naked. In the middle of winter."

The stiff fingers of his right hand tapped twice against his leg.

"I was four-and-twenty," he said at last, sounding gruff. "I wasna meant to have any sense."

"I wouldn't argue with *that* for an instant," I assured him. I opened the other eye and fixed him with both. "But you do know why I did it. I had to."

He drew a very deep breath, sighed, and set down my clothes. He came and sat down on the bed beside me, making the wooden frame creak and groan beneath his weight.

He picked up my hand, and held it as though it were something precious and fragile. It was, too—or at least it *looked* fragile, a delicate construct of transparent skin and the shadow of the bones within it. He ran his thumb gently down the back of my hand, tracing the bones from phalange to ulna, and I felt an odd, small tingle of distant memory; the vision of my own bones, glowing blue through the skin, and Master Raymond's hands, cupping my inflamed and empty womb, saying to me through the mists of fever, "Call him. Call the red man."

"Jamie," I said very softly. Sunlight flashed on the metal of my silver wedding ring. He took hold of it between thumb and forefinger, and slid the little metal circlet gently up and down my finger, so loose that it didn't even catch on the bony knuckle.

"Be careful," I said. "I don't want to lose it."

"Ye won't." He folded my fingers closed, his own hand closing large and warm around mine.

He sat silent for a time, and we watched the bar of sun creep slowly across the counterpane. Adso had moved with it, to stay in its warmth, and the light tipped his fur with a soft silver glow, the fine hairs that edged his ears tiny and distinct.

"It's a great comfort," he said at last, "to see the sun come up and go down. When I dwelt in the cave, when I was in prison, it gave me hope, to see the light come and go, and know that the world went about its business."

He was looking out the window, toward the blue distance where the sky darkened toward infinity. His throat moved a little as he swallowed.

"It gives me the same feeling, Sassenach," he said, "to hear ye rustling about in your surgery, rattling things and swearin' to yourself." He turned his head, then, to look at me, and his eyes held the depths of the coming night.

"If ye were no longer there—or somewhere—" he said very softly, "then the sun would no longer come up or go down." He lifted my hand and kissed it, very gently. He laid it, closed around my ring, upon my chest, rose, and left.

* * *

I slept lightly now, no longer flung into the agitated world of fever dreams, nor sucked down into the deep well of oblivion as my body sought the healing of sleep. I didn't know what had wakened me, but I *was* awake, quite suddenly, alert and fresh-eyed, with no interval of drowsiness.

The shutters were closed, but the moon was full; soft light striped the bed. I ran a hand over the sheet beside me, lifted my hand far above my head. My arm was a slender pale stem, bloodless and fragile as a toadstool's stalk; my fingers flexed gently and spread, a web, a net to catch the dark.

I could hear Jamie breathing, in his accustomed spot on the floor beside the bed.

I brought my arm down, stroked my body lightly with both hands, assessing. A tiny swell of breast, ribs I could count, one, two, three, four, five, and the smooth concavity of my stomach, slung like a hammock between the uprights of my hipbones. Skin, and bones. Not much else.

"Claire?" There was a stirring in the dark beside the bed, and Jamie's head rose up, a presence more sensed than seen, so dark was the shadow there by contrast with the moonlight.

A large dark hand groped across the quilt, touched my hip.

"Are ye well, *a nighean*?" he whispered. "D'ye need anything?"

He was tired; his head lay on the bed beside me, his breath warm through my shift. If he hadn't been warm, his touch, his breath, perhaps I wouldn't have had the courage, but I felt cold and bodiless as the moonlight itself, and so I closed my spectral hand on his and whispered, "I need you."

He was quite still for a moment, slowly making sense of what I'd said.

"I'll not trouble your sleep?" he said, sounding doubtful. I pulled on his wrist in answer, and he came, rising up from the pool of dark on the floor, the thin lines of moonlight rippling over him like water.

"Kelpie," I said softly.

He snorted briefly in answer, and awkwardly, gingerly, eased himself beneath the quilt, the mattress giving under his weight.

We lay very shyly together, barely touching. He was breathing shallowly, clearly trying to make as little obtrusion of his presence as possible. Aside from a faint rustling of sheets, the house was silent.

Finally, I felt one large finger nudge gently against my thigh.

"I missed ye, Sassenach," he whispered.

I rolled onto my side facing him, and kissed his arm in answer. I wanted to move closer, lay my head in the curve of his shoulder, and lie in the circle of his arm—but the idea of my short, bristly hair against his skin kept me from it.

"I missed you, too," I said, into the dark solidness of his arm.

"Will I take ye, then?" he said softly. "D'ye want it, truly?" One hand caressed my arm; the other went downward, starting the slow, steady rhythm to ready himself.

"Let me," I whispered, stilling his hand with my own. "Lie still."

I made love to him at first like a sneak thief, hasty strokes and tiny kisses, stealing scent and touch and warmth and salty taste. Then he put a hand on the back of my neck, pressing me closer, deeper.

"Dinna hurry yourself, lass," he said in a hoarse whisper. "I'm no going anywhere."

I let a quiver of silent amusement pass through me and he drew in a deep, deep breath as I closed my teeth very gently round him and slid my hand up under the warm, musky weight of his balls.

Then I rose up over him, light-headed at the sudden movement, needing urgently. We both sighed deeply as it happened, and I felt the breath of his laughter on my breasts as I bent over him.

"I missed ye, Sassenach," he whispered again.

I was shy of his touching me, changed as I was, and leaned with my hands on his shoulders, keeping him from pulling me down to him. He didn't try, but slid his hand curled between us.

I felt a brief pang at the thought that the hair on my privates was longer than that on my head—but the thought was driven out by the slow pressure of the big knuckle pressing deep between my legs, rocking gently back and forth.

I seized his other hand and brought it to my mouth, sucked his fingers hard, one by one, and shuddered, gripping his hand with all my strength.

I was still gripping it sometime later, as I lay beside him. Or rather, holding it, admiring the unseen shapes of it, complex and graceful in the dark, and the hard, smooth layer of callus on palms and knuckles.

"I've the hands of a bricklayer," he said, laughing a little as I passed my lips lightly over the roughened knuckles and the still-sensitive tips of his long fingers.

"Calluses on a man's hands are deeply erotic," I assured him.

“Are they, so?” His free hand passed lightly over my shorn head and down the length of my back. I shivered and pressed closer to him, self-consciousness beginning to be forgotten. My own free hand roamed down the length of his body, toying with the soft, wiry bush of his hair, and the damply tender, half-hard cock.

He arched his back a little, then relaxed.

“Well, I’ll tell ye, Sassenach,” he said. “If I havena got calluses *there,* it’s no fault of yours, believe me.”

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THE LAST LAUGH

It was an old musket, made perhaps twenty years before, but well-kept. The stock was polished with wear, the wood beautiful to the touch, and the metal of the barrel mellow and clean.

Standing Bear clutched it in ecstasy, running awed fingers up and down the gleaming barrel, bringing them to his nose to sniff the intoxicating perfume of oil and powder, then beckoning his friends to come and smell it, too.

Five gentlemen had received muskets from the beneficent hand of Bird-who-sings-in-the-morning, and a sense of delight ran through the house, spreading in ripples through the village. Bird himself, with twenty-five muskets still to give, was drunk with the sense of inestimable wealth and power, and thus in a mood to welcome anyone and anything.

“This is Hiram Crombie,” Jamie said to Bird, in Tsalagi, indicating Mr. Crombie, who had stood by him, white-faced with nerves, throughout the preliminary talk, the presentation of the muskets, the summoning of the braves, and the general rejoicing over the guns. “He has come to offer his friendship, and to tell you stories of the Christ.”

“Oh, your Christ? The one who went to the lower world and came back? I always wondered, did he meet Sky-woman there, or Mole? I am fond of Mole; I would like to know what he said.” Bird touched the stone pendant at his neck, a small red carving of Mole, the guide to the underworld.

Mr. Crombie's brow was furrowed, but luckily he had not yet developed any sense of ease in Tsalagi; he was still in the stage of mentally translating each word into English, and Bird was a rapid speaker. And Ian had found no occasion to teach Hiram the word for Mole.

Jamie coughed.

"I am sure he will be happy to tell you all the stories he knows," he said. "Mr. Crombie," he said, switching momentarily to English, "Tsisqua offers you welcome."

Bird's wife Penstemon's nostrils flared delicately; Crombie was sweating with nervousness, and smelled like a goat. He bowed earnestly, and presented Bird with the good knife he had brought as a present, slowly reciting the complimentary speech he had committed to memory. Reasonably well, too, Jamie thought; he'd mispronounced only a couple of words.

"I come to b-bring you great joy," he finished, stammering and sweating.

Bird looked at Crombie—small, stringy, and dripping wet—for a long, inscrutable moment, then back at Jamie.

"You're a funny man, Bear-Killer," he said with resignation. "Let us eat!"

It was autumn; the harvest was in and the hunting was good. And so the Feast of the Guns was a notable occasion, with wapiti and venison and wild pig raised steaming from pits and roasted over roaring fires, with overflowing platters of maize and roasted squash and dishes of beans spiced with onion and coriander, dishes of pottage, and dozen upon dozen of small fish rolled in cornmeal, fried in bear grease, their flesh crisp and sweet.

Mr. Crombie, very stiff to begin with, began to unbend under the influence of food, spruce beer, and the flattering attention paid him. A certain amount of the attention, Jamie thought, was due to the fact that Ian, a wide grin on his face, stayed by his pupil for a time, prompting and correcting, 'til Hiram should feel more at ease in the tongue, and able to manage on his own. Ian was extremely popular, particularly with the young women of the village.

For himself, he enjoyed the feasting very much; relieved of responsibility, there was nothing to do save to talk and listen and eat—and in the morning he would go.

It was an odd feeling, and one he was not sure he had ever had before. He had had many leavetakings, most regretful—a few taken with a sense of relief—some that wrenched the heart from his chest and left him aching. Not tonight. Everything seemed strangely ceremonious, something consciously done for the last time, and yet there was no sadness in it.

Completion, he supposed, was the sense of it. He had done what he could do, and now must leave Bird and the others to make their own way. He might come again, but never again by duty, in his role as the agent of the King.

That was a peculiar thought in itself. He had never lived without the consciousness of allegiance—whether willing or not, witting or not—to a king, whether that be German Geordie's house or the Stuarts. And now he did.

For the first time, he had some glimmer of what his daughter and his wife had tried to tell him.

Hiram was trying to recite one of the psalms, he realized. He was doing a good job of it, because he had asked Ian to translate it, and had then carefully committed it to memory. However …

"Oil runs down over the head and the beard …"

Penstemon cast a wary glance at the small pot of melted bear grease that they were using as a condiment, and narrowed her eyes at Hiram, plainly intending to snatch the dish from him if he tried to pour it over his head.

"It's a story of his ancestors," Jamie said to her, with a brief shrug. "Not his own custom."

"Oh. Hm." She relaxed a little, though continuing to keep a close eye on Hiram. He was a guest, but not all guests could be trusted to behave well.

Hiram did nothing untoward, though, and with many protests of sufficiency, and awkward compliments toward his hosts, was persuaded to eat until his eyes bulged, which pleased them.

Ian would stay for a few days, to be sure that Hiram and Bird's people were in some sort of mutual accord. Jamie was not quite sure that Ian's sense of responsibility would overcome his sense of humor, though—in some ways, Ian's sense of humor tended toward the Indians'. A word from Jamie might therefore not come amiss, just by way of precaution.

"He has a wife," Jamie said to Bird, with a nod toward Hiram, now engaged in close discourse with two of the older men. "I think he would not welcome a young woman in his bed. He might be rude to her, not understanding the compliment."

"Don't worry," said Penstemon, overhearing this. She glanced at Hiram, and her lip curled with scorn. "Nobody would want a child from *him.* Now, a child from *you,* Bear-Killer …" She gave him a long look beneath her lashes, and he laughed, saluting her with a gesture of respect.

It was a perfect night, cold and crisp, and the door was left open that the air might come in. The smoke from the fire rose straight and white, streaming toward the hole above, its moving wraiths like spirits ascending in joy.

Everyone had eaten and drunk to the point of a pleasant stupor, and there was momentary silence and a pervading sense of peace and happiness.

"It is good for men to eat as brothers," Hiram observed to Standing Bear, in his halting Tsalagi. Or rather, tried to. And after all, Jamie reflected, feeling his ribs creak under the strain, it was really a very minor difference between "as brothers" and "their brothers."

Standing Bear gave Hiram a thoughtful look, and edged slightly farther away from him.

Bird observed this, and after a moment's silence, turned to Jamie.

"You're a very funny man, Bear-Killer," he repeated, shaking his head. "You win."

* * *

To Mr. John Stuart,
Superintendent of the Southern
Department of Indian Affairs
From Fraser’s Ridge,
on the First Day of November,
Anno Domini 1774,
James Fraser, Esq.
My dear sir,

This is to notify you of my Resignation as Indian Agent, as I find that my personal Convictions will no longer allow me to perform my Office on behalf of the Crown in good Conscience.

In thanks for your kind Attention and many Favors, and wishing you well in future, I remain

Your most humble Servant,
J. Fraser

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PART NINE

The Bones of Time

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SAVAGES

Only two left. The pool of liquid wax glowed with the light of the flaming wick above it, and the jewels slowly came into view, one green, one black, glowing with their own inner fire. Jamie dipped the feather end of a quill gently into the melted wax and scooped the emerald up, raising it into the light.

He dropped the hot stone into the handkerchief I held waiting, and I rubbed it quickly, to get off the wax before it should harden.

"Our reserves are getting rather low," I said, in uneasy jest. "Let's hope there aren't any more expensive emergencies."

"I shallna touch the black diamond, regardless," he said definitely, and blew out the wick. "That one is for you."

I stared at him.

"What do you mean by that?"

He shrugged a little, and reached to take the emerald in its handkerchief from me.

"If I should be killed," he said very matter-of-factly. "Ye'll take it and go. Back through the stones."

"Oh? I don't know that I would," I said. I didn't like talking about any contingency that involved Jamie's death, but there was no point in ignoring the possibilities. Battle, disease, imprisonment, accident, assassination …

"You and Bree were going about forbidding *me* to die," I said. "I'd do the same thing, if I had the faintest hope of your paying the least attention."

He smiled at that.

"I always mind your words, Sassenach," he assured me gravely. "But ye do tell me that man proposes and God disposes, and should He see fit to dispose of *me*—ye'll go back."

"Why would I?" I said, nettled—and unsettled. The memories of his sending me back through the stones on the eve of Culloden were not ones I ever wished to recall, and here he was, prying open the door to that tightly sealed chamber of my mind. "I'd stay with Bree and Roger, wouldn't I? Jem, Marsali and Fergus, Germain and Henri-Christian and the girls—everyone's here. What is there to go back to, after all?"

He took the stone from its cloth, turning it over between his fingers, and looked thoughtfully at me, as though making up his mind whether to tell me something. Small hairs began to prickle on the back of my neck.

"I dinna ken," he said at last, shaking his head. "But I've seen ye there."

The prickling ran straight down the back of my neck and down both arms.

"Seen me *where*?"

"There." He waved a hand in a vague gesture. "I dreamt of ye there. I dinna ken where it was; I only know it was *there*—in your proper time."

"How do you know that?" I demanded, my flesh creeping briskly. "What was I doing?"

His brow furrowed in the effort of recollection.

"I dinna recall, exactly," he said slowly. "But I knew it was *then,* by the light." His brow cleared suddenly. "That's it. Ye were sitting at a desk, with something in your hand, maybe writing. And there was light all round ye, shining on your face, on your hair. But it wasna candlelight, nor yet firelight or sunlight. And I recall thinking to myself as I saw ye, *Oh, so that's what electric light is like.*"

I stared at him, open-mouthed.

"How can you recognize something in a dream that you've never seen in real life?"

He seemed to find that funny.

"I dream of things I've not seen all the time, Sassenach—don't you?"

"Well," I said uncertainly. "Yes. Sometimes. Monsters, odd plants, I suppose. Peculiar landscapes. And certainly *people* that I don't know. But surely that's different? To see something you know about, but haven't seen?"

"Well, what I saw may not be what electric light *does* look like," he admitted, "but that's what I said to myself when I saw it. And I was quite sure that ye were in your own time.

"And after all," he added logically, "I dream of the past; why would I not dream of the future?"

There was no good answer to a thoroughly Celtic remark of that nature.

"Well, *you* would, I suppose," I said. I rubbed dubiously at my lower lip. "How old was I, in this dream of yours?"

He looked surprised, then uncertain, and peered closely at my face, as though trying to compare it with some mental vision.

"Well … I dinna ken," he said, sounding for the first time unsure. "I didna think anything about it—I didna notice that ye had white hair, or anything of the sort—it was just … you." He shrugged, baffled, then looked down at the stone in my hand.

"Does it feel warm to your touch, Sassenach?" he asked curiously.

"Of course it does," I said, rather crossly. "It's just come out of hot wax, for heaven's sake." And yet the emerald *did* seem to pulse gently in my hand, warm as my own blood and beating like a miniature heart. And when I handed it to him, I felt a small, peculiar reluctance—as though it did not want to leave me.

"Give it to MacDonald," I said, rubbing my palm against the side of my skirt. "I hear him outside, talking to Arch; he'll be wanting to be off."

* * *

MacDonald had come pelting up to the Ridge in the midst of a rainstorm the day before, weathered face nearly purple with cold, exertion, and excitement, to inform us that he had found a printing establishment for sale in New Bern.

"The owner has already left—somewhat involuntarily," he told us, dripping and steaming by the fire. "His friends seek to sell the premises and equipment promptly, before they might be seized or destroyed, and thus provide him with funds to reestablish himself in England."

By "somewhat involuntarily," it turned out, he meant that the print shop's owner was a Loyalist, who had been kidnapped off the street by the local Committee of Safety and shoved willy-nilly onto a ship departing for England. This form of impromptu deportation was becoming popular, and while it was more humane than tar and feathers, it did mean that the printer would arrive penniless in England, and owing money for his passage, to boot.

"I happened to meet wi' some of his friends in a tavern, tearin' their hair over his sad fate and drinking to his welfare—whereupon I told them that I might be able to put them in the way of an advantage," the Major said, swelling with satisfaction. "They were all ears, when I said that ye might—just might, mind—have ready cash."

"What makes ye think I do, Donald?" Jamie asked, one eyebrow cocked.

MacDonald looked surprised, then knowing. He winked and laid a finger beside his nose.

"I hear the odd bit, here and there. Word has it that ye've got a wee cache of gems—or so I hear, from a merchant in Edenton whose bank dealt wi' one."

Jamie and I exchanged looks.

"Bobby," I said, and he nodded in resignation.

"Well, as for me, mum's the word," MacDonald said, observing this. "Ye can rely upon my discretion, to be sure. And I doubt the matter's widely known. But then—a poor man doesna go about buying muskets by the dozen, now, does he?"

"Oh, he might," Jamie said, resigned. "Ye'd be surprised, Donald. But as it is … I imagine a bargain might be struck. What are the printer's friends asking—and will they offer insurance, in case of fire?"

* * *

MacDonald had been empowered to negotiate on behalf of the printer's friends—they being anxious to get the problematical real estate sold before some patriotic soul came and burned it down—and so the bargain was concluded on the spot. MacDonald was sent hurtling back down the mountain to change the emerald into money, conclude payment on the printer's shop, leaving the residue of the money with Fergus for ongoing expenses—and let it be known as quickly as possible in New Bern that the premises were shortly to be under new management.

"And if anyone asks about the politics of the new owner …" Jamie said. To which MacDonald merely nodded wisely, and laid his finger alongside his red-veined nose once more.

I was reasonably sure that Fergus had no personal politics to speak of; beyond his family, his sole allegiance was to Jamie. Once the bargain was made, though, and the frenzy of packing begun—Marsali and Fergus would have to leave at once, to have any chance of making it to New Bern before winter set in in earnest—Jamie had had a serious talk with Fergus.

"Now, it'll no be like it was in Edinburgh. There's no but one other printer in the town, and from what MacDonald says, he's an elderly gentleman, and sae much afraid o' the committee and the Governor both, he willna print a thing but books of sermons and handbills advertising horseraces."

"Très bon," said Fergus, looking even happier, if such a thing was possible. He'd been going about lit up like a Chinese lantern since hearing the news. "We will have all of the newspaper and broadsheet business, to say nothing of the printing of scandalous plays and pamphlets—there is nothing like sedition and unrest for the printing business, milord, you know that yourself."

"I do know that," Jamie said very dryly. "Which is why I mean to beat the need for care into your thick skull. I dinna wish to hear that ye've been hanged for treason, nor yet tarred-and-feathered for no being treasonous enough."

"Oh, la." Fergus waved an airy hook. "I know well enough how this game is played, milord."

Jamie nodded, still looking dubious.

"Aye, ye do. But it's been some years; ye may be out of practice. And ye'll not know who's who in New Bern; ye dinna want to find yourself buying meat from the man ye've savaged in the morning's paper, aye?"

"I'll mind that, Da." Marsali sat by the fire, nursing Henri-Christian, and taking close heed. If anything, she looked happier than Fergus, upon whom she looked adoringly. She switched the look of adoration to Jamie, and smiled. "We'll take good care, I promise."

Jamie's frown softened as he looked at her.

"I'll miss ye, lass," he said softly. Her look of happiness dimmed, but didn't go out entirely.

"I'll miss ye, too, Da. All of us will. And Germain doesna want to leave Jem, o' course. But …" Her eyes drifted back to Fergus, who was making a list of supplies, whistling "Alouette" under his breath, and she hugged Henri-Christian closer, making him kick his legs in protest.

"Aye, I know." Jamie coughed, to cover his emotion, and wiped a knuckle underneath his nose. "Now then, wee Fergus. Ye'll have a bit of money over; be sure to bribe the constable and the watch first of all. MacDonald's given me the names o' the Royal Council, and the chief Assemblymen—he'll be of help wi' the council, as he's the Governor's man. Be tactful, aye? But see he's taken care of; he's been a great help in the matter."

Fergus nodded, head bent over his paper.

"Paper, ink, lead, bribes, shammy leather, brushes," he said, writing busily, and resumed absently singing, *"Alouette, gentil alouette …"*

* * *

It was impossible to get a wagon up to the Ridge; the only approach was by the narrow trail that wound up the slope from Coopersville—one of the factors that had led to the development of that minor crossroads into a small hamlet, as itinerant peddlers and other travelers tended to stop there, making brief forays on foot upward into the mountain.

“Which is all very well for discouraging hostile invasion onto the Ridge,” I told Bree, panting as I set down a large canvas-wrapped bundle of candlesticks, chamber pots, and other small household belongings at the side of the trail. “But it unfortunately makes it rather difficult to get *off* the bloody Ridge, too.”

“I suppose it never occurred to Da that anyone would want to leave,” Bree said, grunting as she lowered her own burden—Marsali’s cauldron, packed with cheeses, sacks of flour, beans, and rice, plus a wooden box full of dried fish and a string bag of apples. “This thing weighs a *ton.*”

She turned and bellowed, “GERMAIN!” up the trail behind us. Dead silence. Germain and Jemmy were meant to be shepherding Mirabel the goat down to the wagon. They had left the cabin with us, but had been dropping steadily behind.

Neither a call nor a *mehhhh* came from the trail, but Mrs. Bug came into view, trundling slowly under the weight of Marsali’s spinning wheel, which she bore on her back, and holding Mirabel’s halter in one hand. Mirabel, a small, neat white goat with gray markings, blatted happily at sight of us.

“I found the puir wee lassie tethered to a bush,” Mrs. Bug said, setting down the spinning wheel with a wheeze and wiping her face with her apron. “No sign o’ the lads, the wicked wee creatures.”

Brianna made a low growling noise that boded ill for either Jemmy or Germain, if she caught them. Before she could stomp back up the trail, though, Roger and Young Ian came down, each carrying one end of Marsali’s loom, collapsed for the occasion into a large bundle of heavy timbers. Seeing the traffic jam in the road, though, they stopped, setting down their burden with sighs of relief.

“What’s amiss, then?” Roger asked, glancing from face to face, and settling on the goat with a frown. “Where are Jem and

Germain?"

"Dollars to donuts the little fiends are hiding somewhere," Bree said, smoothing tumbled red hair out of her face. Her plait had come undone, and straggling wisps of hair were sticking damply to her face. I was momentarily grateful for my short thicket of curls; no matter what it looked like, it was certainly convenient.

"Shall I go and look?" Ian asked, emerging from the wooden pudding basin he'd been carrying upside down on his head. "They'll no have gone far."

Sounds of hasty feet from below made everyone turn expectantly in that direction—but it was not the boys, but Marsali, breathless and wide-eyed.

"Henri-Christian," she gasped, her eyes flicking rapidly round the group. "Have ye got him, Mother Claire? Bree?"

"I thought *you* had him," Bree said, catching Marsali's sense of urgency.

"I did. Wee Aidan McCallum was minding him for me, whilst I loaded things into the wagon. But then I stopped to feed him"—a hand went briefly to her bosom—"and they were both vanished! I thought perhaps …" Her words died away as she began scanning the bushes along the trail, her cheeks flushed with exertion and annoyance.

"I'll strangle him," she said through gritted teeth. "And where's Germain, then?" she cried, catching sight of Mirabel, who had taken advantage of the stop to nibble tasty thistles by the path.

"This is beginning to have the look of a plan about it," Roger observed, obviously amused. Ian, too, seemed to be finding something funny in the situation, but vicious glares from the frazzled females present wiped the smirks off their faces.

"Yes, do go and find them, please," I said, seeing that Marsali was about to either burst into tears or go berserk and throw things.

"Aye, do," she said tersely. "And beat them, while ye're at it."

* * *

"Ye ken where they are?" Ian asked, shading his eyes to look up a trough of tumbled rock.

"Aye, likely. This way." Roger pushed through a tangle of yaupon and redbud, with Ian after him, and emerged onto the bank of the small creek that paralleled the trail here. Below, he caught a glimpse of Aidan's favorite fishing place near the ford, but there was no sign of life down there.

Instead, he turned upward, making his way through thick dry grass and loose rocks along the creekbank. Most of the leaves had fallen from the chestnuts and poplars, and lay in slippery mats of brown and gold underfoot.

Aidan had shown him the secret place some time ago; a shallow cave, barely three feet high, hidden at the top of a steep slope overgrown by a thicket of oak saplings. The oaks were bare now, and the cave's opening easily visible, if you knew to look for it. It was particularly noticeable at the moment, because smoke was coming out of it, slipping veil-like up the face of the rock above, leaving a sharp scent in the cold, dry air.

Ian raised one eyebrow. Roger nodded, and made his way up the slope, making no effort to be quiet about it. There was a mad scuffle of noises inside the cave, thumpings and low cries, and the veil of smoke wavered and stopped, replaced by a loud hiss and a puff of dark gray from the cave mouth as someone threw water on the fire.

Ian, meanwhile, had made his way silently up the side of the rockface above the cave, seeing a small crevice from which a tiny plume of smoke issued. Clinging one-handed to a dogwood that grew out of the rock, he leaned perilously out, and cupping a hand near his mouth, let out a frightful Mohawk scream, directed into the crevice.

Terror-stricken shrieks, much higher-pitched, issued from the cave, followed in short order by a tumble of little boys, pushing and tripping over each other in their haste.

"Ho, there!" Roger snagged his own offspring neatly by the collar as he rushed past. "The jig's up, mate."

Germain, with Henri-Christian's sturdy form clutched to his midsection, was attempting to escape down the slope, but Ian leapt past him, springing pantherlike down the rocks, and grabbed the baby from him, bringing him to a reluctant stop.

Only Aidan remained at large. Seeing his comrades in captivity, he hesitated at the edge of the slope, obviously wanting to flee, but nobly gave in, coming back with dragging step to share their fate.

“Right, lads; sorry, it’s not on.” Roger spoke with some sympathy; Jemmy had been upset for days at the prospect of Germain’s leaving.

“But we do not want to go, Uncle Roger,” Germain said, employing his most effective look of wide-eyed pleading. “We will stay here; we can live in the cave, and hunt for our food.”

“Aye, sir, and me and Jem, we’ll share our dinners wi’ them,” Aidan piped up in anxious support.

“I brought some of Mama’s matches, so they’ve got a fire to keep warm,” Jem chipped in eagerly, “and a loaf of bread, too!”

“So ye see, Uncle—” Germain spread his hands gracefully in demonstration, “we shall be no trouble to anyone!”

“Oh, nay trouble, is it?” Ian said, with no less sympathy. “Tell your mother that, aye?”

Germain put his hands behind him, clutching his buttocks protectively by reflex.

“And what were ye thinking, dragging your wee brother up here?” Roger said a little more severely. “He can barely walk yet! Two steps out of there”—he nodded at the cave—“and he’d be tumbling down the burn and his neck broken.”

“Oh, no, sir!” Germain said, shocked. He fumbled in his pocket and drew out a piece of string. “I should tie him up, when I was not there, so he shouldna wander or fall. But I couldna be leaving him; I promised *Maman,* when he was born, I said I would never leave him.”

Tears were beginning to trickle down Aidan’s thin cheeks. Henri-Christian, totally confused, began to howl in sympathy, which made Jem’s lower lip tremble, as well. He wriggled out of Roger’s grasp, ran to Germain, and clutched him passionately about the middle.

“Germain can’t go, Daddy, please don’t make him go!”

Roger rubbed his nose, exchanged brief looks with Ian, and sighed.

He sat down on a rock, and motioned to Ian, who was having a certain amount of difficulty in deciding which way up to hold Henri-Christian. Ian gave him the baby with a noticeable air of relief, and Henri-Christian, feeling the need of security, seized Roger's nose with one hand and his hair with the other.

"Look, *a bhailach,*" he said, detaching Henri-Christian's grasp with some difficulty. "Wee Henri-Christian needs his mother to feed him. He's barely got teeth, for God's sake—he canna be living up here in the wild, eating raw meat wi' you savages."

"He has too got teeth!" Aidan said stoutly, extending a bitten forefinger in proof. "Look!"

"He eats pap," Germain said, but with some uncertainty to his tone. "We would mash up biscuits for him with milk."

"Henri-Christian needs his mother," Roger repeated firmly, "and your mother needs *you.* Ye dinna expect her to manage a wagon and two mules *and* your sisters, all the way to New Bern alone, do ye?"

"But Papa can help," Germain protested. "The girls mind him, when they mind no one else!"

"Your papa's gone already," Ian informed him. "He's ridden ahead, to find a place for ye all to live, once ye've got there. Your mother's to follow on, wi' all your things. Roger Mac's right, *a bhailach*—your mother needs ye."

Germain's small face paled a little. He looked helplessly down at Jemmy, still clinging to him, then up the hill at Aidan, and gulped. The wind had come up, and blew his blond fringe back from his face, making him look very small and fragile.

"Well, then," he said, and stopped, swallowing. Very gently, he put his arms round Jemmy's shoulders and kissed the top of his round red head.

"I'll come back, cousin," he said. "And you will come and visit me by the sea. You'll come, too," he assured Aidan, looking up. Aidan sniffed, nodding, and made his way slowly down the slope.

Roger reached out a free hand and gently detached Jemmy. "Get on my back, *mo chuisle,*" he said. "It's a steep slope; I'll take ye down pick-a-back."

Not waiting to be asked, Ian leaned down and picked up Aidan, who wrapped his legs round Ian's middle, hiding his tear-streaked face in Ian's buckskin shirt.

"D'ye want to ride, too?" Roger asked Germain, standing up carefully under the weight of his double burden. "Ian can carry ye, if ye like."

Ian nodded and held out a hand, but Germain shook his head, blond hair flying.

"*Non,* Uncle Roger," he said, almost too softly to hear. "I'll walk." And turning round, began to make his way gingerly down the precipitous slope.

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A STAMPEDE OF BEAVERS

October 25, 1774

They had been walking for an hour before Brianna began to realize that they weren’t after game. They’d cut the trail of a small herd of deer, with droppings so fresh that the pellets were still patchy with moisture, but Ian ignored the sign, pushing up the slope in single-minded determination.

Rollo had come with them, but after several fruitless attempts to draw his master’s attention to promising scents, abandoned them in disgust and bounded off through the flurrying leaves to do his own hunting.

The climb was too steep to permit conversation, even had Ian seemed inclined. With a mental shrug, she followed, but kept gun in hand and an eye on the brush, just in case.

They had left the Ridge at dawn; it was well past noon when they paused at last, on the bank of some small and nameless stream. A wild grapevine wrapped itself round the trunk of a persimmon that overhung the bank; animals had taken most of the grapes, but a few bunches still hung out over the water, out of reach for any but the most daring of squirrels—or a tall woman.

She shucked her moccasins and waded into the stream, gasping at the icy shock of the water on her calves. The grapes were ripe to bursting, so purple as to be nearly black, and sticky with juice. The squirrels hadn't got to them, but the wasps had, and she kept a cautious eye on the dagger-bellied foragers as she twisted the tough stem of a particularly succulent bunch.

"So, do you want to tell me what we're really looking for?" she asked, back turned to her cousin.

"No," he said, a smile in his voice.

"Oh, a surprise, is it?" She popped the stem, and turned to toss the grapes to him.

He caught the bunch one-handed, and set them down on the bank beside the ragged knapsack in which he carried provisions.

"Something o' the sort."

"As long as we aren't just out for a walk, then." She twisted off another bunch, and sloshed ashore, to sit down beside him.

"No, not that." He flipped two grapes into his mouth, crushed them, and spat the skins and pips with the ease of long custom. She nibbled hers more daintily, biting one in half and flicking the seeds out with a fingernail.

"You ought to eat the skins, Ian; they have vitamins."

He raised one shoulder in skepticism, but said nothing. Both she and her mother had explained the concept of vitamins—numerous times—to little or no effect. Jamie and Ian had reluctantly been obliged to admit the existence of germs, because Claire could show them teeming seas of microorganisms in her microscope. Vitamins, however, were unfortunately invisible and thus could be safely ignored.

"Is it much farther, this surprise?" The grape skins were, in fact, very bitter. Her mouth puckered involuntarily as she bit into one. Ian, industriously eating and spitting, noticed and grinned at her.

"Aye, a bit farther."

She cast an eye at the horizon; the sun was coming down the sky. If they were to turn back now, it would be dark before they reached home.

"How *much* farther?" She spit the mangled grape skin into her palm and flicked it away into the grass.

Ian glanced at the sun, too, and pursed his lips.

"Well … I should think we'll reach it by midday tomorrow."

"We'll *what*? Ian!" He looked abashed, and ducked his head.

"I'm sorry, coz. I ken I should have told ye before—but I thought ye maybe wouldn't come, if I said how far."

A wasp lighted on the bunch of grapes in her hand, and she slapped it irritably away.

"You *know* I wouldn't. Ian, what were you thinking? Roger will have a fit!"

Her cousin seemed to find the notion funny; his mouth turned up at the corner.

"A fit? Roger Mac? I shouldna think so."

"Well, all right, he won't throw a fit—but he'll be worried. And Jemmy will miss me!"

"No, they'll be all right," Ian assured her. "I told Uncle Jamie we'd be gone three days, and he said he'd bring the wean up to the Big House. With your Mam and Lizzie and Mrs. Bug to fuss him, wee Jem won't even notice you're gone."

This was likely true, but did nothing to assuage her annoyance.

"You told *Da*? And he just said fine, and both of you thought it was perfectly all right to—to—lug me off into the woods for three days, without telling me what was going on? You—you—"

"High-handed, insufferable, beastly *Scots,*" Ian said, in such a perfect imitation of her mother's English accent that she burst out laughing, despite her annoyance.

"Yes," she said, wiping spluttered grape juice off her chin. "Exactly!"

He was still smiling, but his expression had changed; he wasn't teasing anymore.

"Brianna," he said softly, with that Highland lilt that made of her name something strange and graceful. "It's important, aye?"

He wasn't smiling at all now. His eyes were fixed on hers, warm, but serious. His hazel eyes were the only feature of any beauty about Ian Murray's face, but they held a gaze of such frank, sweet openness that you felt he had let you look inside his soul, just for an instant. She had had occasion before to wonder whether he was aware of this particular effect—but even if he was, it was difficult to resist.

"All right," she said, and waved away a circling wasp, still cross but resigned. "All *right*. But you still should have told me. And you won't tell me, even now?"

He shook his head, looking down at the grape he was thumbing loose from its stem.

"I can't," he said simply. He flipped the grape into his mouth and turned to open his bag—which, now that she noticed, bulged suspiciously. "D'ye want some bread, coz, or a bit of cheese?"

"No. Let's go." She stood up and brushed dead leaves from her breeches. "The sooner we get there, the sooner we'll be back."

* * *

They stopped an hour before sunset, while enough light remained to gather wood. The bulging knapsack had proved to contain two blankets, as well as food and a jug of beer—welcome, after the day's walking, which had been mostly uphill.

"Oh, this is a good batch," she said approvingly, sniffing at the neck of the jug after a long, aromatic, hop-edged swallow. "Who made it?"

"Lizzie. She caught the knack of it from *Frau* Ute. Before the … er … mphm." A delicate Scottish noise encompassed the painful circumstances surrounding the dissolution of Lizzie's betrothal.

"Mmm. That was too bad, wasn't it?" She lowered her lashes, watching him covertly to see whether he would say anything further about Lizzie. Lizzie and Ian had seemed fond of each other once—but first he had gone to the Iroquois, and then she had been engaged to Manfred McGillivray when he returned. Now that both of them were free once more …

He dismissed her comment about Lizzie with nothing more than a shrug of agreement, though, concentrating on the tedious process of fire-making. The day had been warm and an hour of daylight remained, but the shadows under the trees were already blue; the night would be chilly.

"I'm going to have a look at the stream," she announced, plucking a coiled line and hook from the small pile of effects Ian had unloaded from his bag. “It looked like there’s a trout pool just below the bend, and the flies will be rising.”

“Oh, aye.” He nodded, but paid her little attention, patiently scraping the pile of kindling a little higher before striking the next shower of sparks from his flint.

As she made her way around the bend of the little creek, she saw that it wasn’t merely a trout pool—it was a beaver pond. The humped mound of the lodge was reflected in still water, and on the far bank she could see the agitated judderings of a couple of willow saplings, evidently in the process of being consumed.

She moved slowly, a wary eye out. Beavers wouldn’t trouble her, but they *would* make a dash for the water if they saw her, not only splashing, but smacking the water with their tails in alarm. She’d heard it before; it was amazingly loud, sounding like a fusillade of gunshots, and guaranteed to scare every fish within miles into hiding.

Gnawed sticks littered the near bank, the white inner wood chiseled as neatly as any carpenter could do, but none was fresh, and she heard nothing nearby but the sigh of wind in the trees. Beavers were not stealthy; none was close.

With a cautious eye on the far bank, she baited the hook with a small chunk of cheese, whirled it slowly overhead, picked up speed as she let the line out, then let it fly. The hook landed with a small *plop!* in the middle of the pond, but the noise wasn’t sufficient to alarm the beavers; the willow saplings on the far bank continued to shake and heave under the assault of industrious teeth.

The evening hatch was rising, just as she’d told Ian. The air was soft, cool on her face, and the surface of the water dimpled and glimmered like gray silk shaken in light. Small clouds of gnats drifted in the still air under the trees, prey for the rising of the carnivorous caddis flies, stone flies, and damselflies breaking free of the surface, new-hatched and ravenous.

It was a pity that she hadn’t a casting rod or tied flies—but still worth a try. Caddis flies weren’t the only things that rose hungry at twilight, and voracious trout had been known to strike at almost anything that floated in front of them—her father had once taken one with a hook adorned with nothing more than a few knotted strands of his own bright hair.

That was a thought. She smiled to herself, brushing back a wisp of hair that had escaped from its plait, and began to draw the line slowly back toward shore. But there were likely more than trout here, and cheese was—

A strong tug came on the line, and she jerked in surprise. A snag? The line jerked back, and a thrill from the depths shot up her arm like electricity.

The next half hour passed without conscious thought, in the single-minded pursuit of finny prey. She was wet to mid-thigh, rashed with mosquito bites, and her wrist and shoulder ached, but she had three fat fish gleaming in the grass at her feet, a hunter's sense of profound satisfaction—and a few more crumbs of cheese left in her pocket.

She was drawing back her arm to throw the hook again, when a sudden chorus of squeaks and hisses shattered the evening calm, and a stampede of beavers broke from cover, trundling down the opposite bank of the pond like a platoon of small, furry tanks. She stared at them open-mouthed, and took a step back in reflex.

Then something big and dark appeared among the trees behind the beavers, and further reflex shot adrenaline through her limbs as she whirled to flee. She would have been into the trees and away in an instant, had she not stepped on one of her fish, which slid under her foot like greased butter and dumped her unceremoniously on her backside. From which position she was ideally placed to see Rollo race from the trees in a long, low streak and launch himself in an arching parabola from the top of the bank. Graceful as a comet, he soared through the air and landed in the pond among the beavers, with a splash like a fallen meteor.

* * *

Ian looked up at her, open-mouthed. Slowly, his eyes traveled from her dripping hair, over her sopping, mud-smeared clothes, and down to the fish—one slightly squashed—that dangled from a leather string in her hand.

“The fish put up a good fight, did they?” he asked, nodding at the string. The corners of his mouth began to twitch.

“Yes,” she said, and dropped them on the ground in front of him. “But not nearly as good a fight as the beavers.”

“Beavers,” he said. He rubbed a knuckle meditatively down the bridge of his long, bony nose. “Aye, I heard them slapping. Ye’ve been fighting beavers?”

“I’ve been rescuing your wretched *dog* from beavers,” she said, and sneezed. She sank to her knees in front of the new-made fire and closed her eyes in momentary bliss at the touch of heat on her shivering body.

“Oh, Rollo’s back, then? Rollo! Where are ye, hound?” The big dog slunk reluctantly out of the shrubbery, tail barely twitching in response to his master’s call.

“What’s this I hear about beavers, then, *a madadh*?” Ian said sternly. In response, Rollo shook himself, though no more than a fine mist of water droplets rose from his coat. He sighed, dropped to his belly, and put his nose morosely on his paws.

“Maybe he was only after fish, but the beavers didn’t see it that way. They ran from him on shore, but once he was in the water—” Brianna shook her head, and wrung out the soggy tail of her hunting shirt. “I tell you what, Ian—*you* clean those damn fish.”

He was already doing so, gutting one with a single neat slice up the belly and a scoop of the thumb. He tossed the entrails toward Rollo, who merely let out another sigh, and seemed to flatten against the dead leaves, ignoring the treat.

“He’s no hurt, is he?” Ian asked, frowning at his dog.

She glared at him.

“No, he isn’t. I expect he’s embarrassed. You could ask whether *I’m* hurt. Do you have any idea what kind of *teeth* beavers have?”

The light was nearly gone, but she could see his lean shoulders shaking.

“Aye,” he said, sounding rather strangled. “I have. They, um, didna bite ye, did they? I mean—I should think it would be noticeable, if ye’d been gnawed.” A small wheeze of amusement escaped him, and he tried to cover it with a cough.

“No,” she said, rather coldly. The fire was going well, but not nearly well enough. The evening breeze had come up, and was reaching through the soaked fabric of shirt and breeches to fondle her backside with ice-cold fingers.

“It wasn’t so much the teeth as the tails,” she said, shuffling round on her knees to present her back to the fire. She rubbed a hand gingerly over her right arm, where one of the muscular paddles had struck flat on her forearm, leaving a reddened bruise that stretched from wrist to elbow. For a few moments, she’d thought the bone was broken.

“It was like being hit with a baseball bat—er … with a club, I mean,” she amended. The beavers hadn’t attacked her directly, of course, but being in the water with a panicked wolf-dog and half a dozen sixty-pound rodents in a state of extreme agitation had been rather like walking through an automated car wash on foot—a maelstrom of blinding spray and thrashing objects. A chill struck her and she wrapped both arms around herself, shivering.

“Here, coz.” Ian stood up and skinned the buckskin shirt off over his head. “Put this on.”

She was much too cold and battered to refuse the offer. Retiring modestly behind a bush, she stripped off the wet things and emerged a moment later, clad in Ian’s buckskin, one of the blankets wrapped around her waist sarong-style.

“You don’t eat enough, Ian,” she said, sitting down by the fire again, and eyeing him critically. “All your ribs show.”

They did. He’d always been lean to the point of thinness, but in his younger years, his teenage scrawniness had seemed quite normal, merely the result of his bones outstripping the growth of the rest of him.

Now he had reached his full growth and had had a year or two to let his muscles catch up. They had—she could see every sinew in his arms and shoulders—but the knobs of his spine bulged against the tanned skin of his back, and she could see the shadows of his ribs like rippled sand underwater.

He raised a shoulder, but made no reply, intent on skewering the cleaned fish on peeled willow twigs for broiling.

"And you don't sleep very well, either." She narrowed her eyes at him across the fire. Even in this light, the shadows and hollows in his face were obvious, despite the distraction of the Mohawk tattoos that looped across his cheekbones. The shadows had been obvious to everyone for months; her mother had wanted to say something to Ian, but Jamie had told her to let the lad be; he would speak when he was ready.

"Oh, well enough," he murmured, not looking up.

Whether he was ready now or not, she couldn't say. But he'd brought her here. If he wasn't ready, he could bloody well get that way fast.

She had—of course—wondered all day about the mysterious goal of their journey, and why *she* was his necessary companion. For a matter of hunting, Ian would have taken one of the men; good as she was with a gun, several of the men on the Ridge were better, including her father. And any one of them would be better suited than she to something like digging out a bear's den or packing home meat or hides.

They were in the Cherokee lands at the moment; she knew Ian visited the Indians frequently, and was on good terms with several villages. But if it had been a matter of some formal arrangement to be made, surely he would have asked Jamie to accompany him, or Peter Bewlie, with his Cherokee wife to interpret.

"Ian," she said, with the tone in her voice that could bring almost any man up short. "Look at me."

His head jerked up, and he blinked at her.

"Ian," she said, a little more gently, "is this to do with your wife?"

He stayed frozen for a moment, eyes dark and unfathomable. Rollo, in the shadows behind him, suddenly raised his head and let out a small whine of inquiry. That seemed to rouse Ian; he blinked and looked down.

"Aye," he said, sounding quite matter-of-fact. "It is."

He adjusted the angle of the stick he had driven into the earth by the fire; the pale flesh of the fish curled and sizzled, browning on the green wood.

She waited for him to say more, but he didn't speak—just broke off the edge of a piece of half-cooked fish and held it out to the dog, clicking his tongue in invitation. Rollo rose and sniffed Ian's ear in concern, but then deigned to take the fish, and lay down again, licking the hot tidbit delicately before scooping it up with his tongue, gathering enough spirit then to engulf the discarded heads and fish guts as well.

Ian pursed his lips a little, and she could see the thoughts flickering half-formed across his face, before he made up his mind to speak.

"I did once think of marrying you, ye ken."

He gave her a quick, direct glance, and she felt an odd little jolt of realization. He'd thought about it, all right. And while she had no doubt that his offer then had been made from the purest of motives … he was a young man. She hadn't until this moment realized that he would of course have contemplated every detail of what that offer entailed.

His eyes held hers in wry acknowledgment of the fact that he had indeed imagined the physical details of sharing her bed—and had not found the prospect in any way objectionable. She resisted the impulse to blush and look away; that would discredit them both.

She was suddenly—and for the first time—aware of him *as* a man, rather than as an endearing young cousin. And aware of the heat of his body that had lingered in the soft buckskin when she pulled it on.

"It wouldn't have been the worst thing in the world," she said, striving to match his matter-of-fact tone. He laughed, and the stippled lines of his tattoos lost their grimness.

"No," he said. "Maybe not the best—that would be Roger Mac, aye? But I'm glad to hear I wouldna have been the worst, either. Better than Ronnie Sinclair, d'ye think? Or worse than Forbes the lawyer?"

"Ha, bloody ha." She refused to be discomposed by his teasing. "You would have been at least third on the list."

"Third?" That got his attention. "What? Who was second?" He actually seemed miffed at the notion that someone might precede him, and she laughed.

“Lord John Grey.”

“Oh? Oh, well. Aye, I suppose he’d do,” Ian admitted grudgingly. “Though of course, he—” He stopped abruptly, and darted a cautious look in her direction.

She felt an answering stab of caution. Did Ian know about John Grey’s private tastes? She thought he must, from the odd expression on his face—but if not, it was no place of hers to be revealing Lord John’s secrets.

“Have you met him?” she asked curiously. Ian had gone with her parents to rescue Roger from the Iroquois, before Lord John had appeared at her aunt’s plantation, where she had met the nobleman herself.

“Oh, aye.” He was still looking wary, though he had relaxed a little. “Some years ago. Him and his … son. Stepson, I mean. They came to the Ridge, traveling through to Virginia, and stopped a bit. I gave him the measle.” He grinned, quite suddenly. “Or at least he *had* the measle. Auntie Claire nursed him through it. Ye’ve met the man yourself, though?”

“Yes, at River Run. Ian, the fish is on fire.”

It was, and he snatched the stick from the flames with a small Gaelic exclamation, waving scorched fingers to cool them. Extinguished in the grass, the fish proved to be quite edible, if a little crispy round the edges, and a tolerably good supper, with the addition of bread and beer.

“Did ye meet Lord John’s son, then, at River Run?” he asked, resuming their conversation. “Willie, his name is. A nice wee lad. He fell into the privy,” he added thoughtfully.

“Fell in the privy?” she said, laughing. “He sounds like an idiot. Or was he just quite small?”

“No, a decent size for his age. And sensible enough, for an Englishman. See, it wasna quite his fault, ken. We were looking at a snake, and it came up the branch toward us, and … well, it was an accident,” he concluded, handing Rollo another piece of fish. “Ye’ve not seen the lad yourself, though?”

“No, and I think you are deliberately changing the subject.”

"Aye, I am. D'ye want a bit more beer?"

She raised an eyebrow at him—he needn't think he was going to escape that easily—but nodded, accepting the jug.

They were quiet for a bit, drinking beer and watching the last of the light fade into darkness as the stars came out. The scent of the pine trees strengthened, their sap warmed from the day, and in the distance she heard the occasional gunshot warning slap of a beaver's tail on the pond—evidently the beavers had posted sentries, in case she or Rollo should sneak back after dark, she thought wryly.

Ian had wrapped his own blanket round his shoulders against the growing chill, and was lying flat in the grass, staring upward into the vault of heaven overhead.

She didn't make any pretense of not watching him, and was quite sure he was aware of it. His face was quiet for the moment, minus its usual animation—but not guarded. He was thinking, and she was content to let him take his time; it was autumn now and night would be long enough for many things.

She wished she had thought to ask her mother more about the girl Ian called Emily—the Mohawk name was something multisyllabic and unpronounceable. Small, her mother had said. Pretty, in a neat, small-boned sort of way, and very clever.

Was she dead, Emily the small and clever? She thought not. She'd been in this time long enough to have seen many men deal with the death of wives. They showed loss and grief—but they didn't do what Ian had been doing.

Could he be taking her to *meet* Emily? That was a staggering thought, but one she rejected almost immediately. It would be a month's journey, at least, to reach the Mohawks' territory—probably more. But then …

"I wondered, ken?" he said suddenly, still looking up at the sky. "D'ye feel sometimes … wrong?" He glanced at her helplessly, not sure whether he'd said what he meant—but she understood him perfectly.

"Yes, all the time." She felt a sense of instant, unexpected relief at the admission. He saw the slump of her shoulders, and smiled a little, crookedly.

"Well … maybe not *all* the time," she amended. "When I'm out in the woods, alone, it's fine. Or with Roger, by ourselves. Though even then …" She saw Ian's eyebrow lift, and hurried to explain. "Not that. Not being with him. It's just that we … we talk about what was."

He gave her a look in which sympathy was mingled with interest. Plainly, he would like to know about "what was," but put that aside for the moment.

"The woods, aye?" he said. "I see that. When I'm awake, at least. Sleeping, though …" He turned his face back toward the empty sky and the brightening stars.

"Are you afraid—when the dark comes on?" She'd felt that now and then; a moment of deep fear at twilight—a sense of abandonment and elemental loneliness as night rose from the earth. A feeling that sometimes remained, even when she had gone inside the cabin, the bolted door secure behind her.

"No," he said, frowning a little at her. "You are?"

"Just a little," she said, waving it away. "Not all the time. Not now. But what is it about sleeping in the woods?"

He sat up, and rocked back a little, big hands linked around one knee, thinking.

"Aye, well …" he said slowly. "Sometimes I think of the auld tales—from Scotland, aye? And ones I've heard now and then, living wi' the Kahnyen'kehaka. About … things that may come upon a man while he sleeps. To lure away his soul."

"Things?" Despite the beauty of the stars and the peace of the evening, she felt something small and cold slide down her back. "*What* things?"

He took a deep breath and blew it out, brows puckered.

"Ye call them *sidhe* in the Gaelic. The Cherokee call them the Nunnahee. And the Mohawk have names for them, too—more than one. But when I heard Eats Turtles tell of them, I kent at once what they were. It's the same—the Old Folk."

"Fairies?" she said, and her incredulity must have been clear in her voice, for he glanced up sharply at her, a glint of irritation in his eyes.

"No, I ken what *you* mean by that—Roger Mac showed me the wee picture ye drew for Jem, all tiny things like dragonflies, prinking in the flowers.…" He made an uncouth noise in the back of his throat. "Nay. These things are …" He made a helpless gesture with one big hand, frowning at the grass.

"Vitamins," he said suddenly, looking up.

"Vitamins," she said, and rubbed a hand between her brows. It had been a long day; they had likely walked fifteen or twenty miles and fatigue had settled like water in her legs and back. The bruises from her battle with the beavers were beginning to throb.

"I see. Ian … are you sure that your head isn't still a bit cracked?" She said it lightly, but her real anxiety lest it be true must have shown in her voice, for he gave a low, rueful chuckle.

"No. Or at least—I dinna think so. I was only—well, d'ye see, it's like that. Ye canna see the vitamins, but you and Auntie Claire ken weel that they're there, and Uncle Jamie and I must take it on faith that ye're right about it. I ken as much about the—the Old Ones. Can ye no believe me about *that*?"

"Well, I—" She had begun to agree, for the sake of peace between them—but a feeling swept over her, sudden and cold as a cloud-shadow, that she wished to say nothing to acknowledge the notion. Not out loud. And not here.

"Oh," he said, catching sight of her face. "So ye *do* know."

"I don't *know,* no," she said. "But I don't know it's not, either. And I don't think it's a good idea to talk about things like that, in a wood at night, a million miles away from civilization. All right?"

He smiled a little at that, and nodded in acceptance.

"Aye. And it's no what I meant to say, really. It's more …" His feathery brows knitted in concentration. "When I was a bairn, I'd wake in my bed, and I'd ken at once where I was, aye? There was the window"—he flung out a hand—"and there was the basin and ewer on the table, wi' a blue band round the top, and *there*"—he pointed toward a laurel bush—"was the big bed where Janet and Michael were sleepin', and Jocky the dog at the bed fit, farting like a beetle, and the smell of peat smoke from the fire and … well, even if I should wake at midnight and the house all still around me, I should ken at once where I was."

She nodded, the memory of her own old room in the house on Furey Street rising around her, vivid as a vision in the smoke. The striped wool blanket, itchy under her chin, and the mattress with the indentation of her body in the middle, cupping her like a huge, warm hand. Angus, the stuffed Scottie with the ragged tam-o-shanter who shared her bed, and the comforting hum of her parents' conversation from the living room below, punctuated by the baritone sax of the theme music from *Perry Mason.*

Most of all, the sense of absolute security.

She had to close her eyes, and swallow twice before answering.

"Yes. I know what you mean."

"Aye. Well. For some time after I left home, I might find myself sleeping rough, wi' Uncle Jamie in the heather, or here and there in inns and pothouses. I'd wake wi' no notion where I was—and still, I'd ken I was in Scotland. It was all right." He paused, lower lip caught between his teeth as he struggled to find the right words.

"Then … things happened. I wasna in Scotland any longer, and home was … gone." His voice was soft, but she could hear the echo of loss in it.

"I would wake, with no idea where I might be—or who."

He was hunched over now, big hands hanging loose between his thighs as he gazed into the fire.

"But when I lay wi' Emily—from the first time. I knew. Kent who I was again." He looked up at her then, eyes dark and shadowed by loss. "My soul didna wander while I slept—when I slept wi' her."

"And now it does?" she asked quietly, after a moment.

He nodded, wordless. The wind whispered in the trees above. She tried to ignore it, obscurely afraid that if she listened closely, she might hear words.

"Ian," she said, and touched his arm, very lightly. "Is Emily dead?"

He sat quite still for a minute, then took a deep, shuddering breath, and shook his head.

"I dinna think so." He sounded very doubtful, though, and she could see the trouble in his face.

"Ian," she said very softly. "Come here."

He didn't move, but when she scooted close and put her arms around him, he didn't resist. She pulled him down with her, insisting that he lie beside her, his head pillowed in the curve between shoulder and breast, her arm around him.

Mother instinct, she thought, wryly amused. Whatever's wrong, the first thing you do is pick them up and cuddle them. And if they're too big to lift … and if his warm weight and the sound of his breathing in her ear kept the voices in the wind at bay, so much the better.

She had a fragmentary memory, a brief vivid image of her mother standing behind her father in the kitchen of their house in Boston. He lay back in a straight chair, his head against her mother's stomach, eyes closed in pain or exhaustion, as she rubbed his temples. What had it been? A headache? But her mother's face had been gentle, the lines of her own day's stress smoothed away by what she was doing.

"I feel a fool," Ian said, sounding shy—but didn't pull away.

"No, you don't."

He took a deep breath, squirmed a little, and settled cautiously into the grass, his body barely touching hers.

"Aye, well. I suppose not, then," he murmured. He relaxed by wary degrees, his head growing heavier on her shoulder, the muscles of his back yielding slowly, their tension subsiding under her hand. Very tentatively, as though expecting her to slap him away, he lifted one arm and laid it over her.

It seemed the wind had died. The firelight shone on his face, the dark dotted lines of his tattoos standing out against the young skin. His hair smelled of woodsmoke and dust, soft against her cheek.

"Tell me," she said.

He sighed, deeply.

"Not yet," he said. "When we get there, aye?"

He would not say more, and they lay together, quiet in the grass, and safe.

Brianna felt sleep come, the waves of it gentle, lifting her toward peace, and did not resist. The last thing she recalled was Ian's face, cheek heavy on her shoulder, his eyes still open, watching the fire.

* * *

Walking Elk was telling a story. It was one of his best stories, but Ian wasn't paying proper attention. He sat across the fire from Walking Elk, but it was the flames he was watching, not his friend's face.

Very odd, he thought. He'd been watching fires all his life, and never seen the woman in them, until these winter months. Of course, peat fires had no great flame to speak of, though they had a good heat and a lovely smell . . . oh. Aye, so she was *there, after all, the woman. He nodded slightly, smiling. Walking Elk took this as an expression of approval at his performance and became even more dramatic in his gestures, scowling horrendously and lurching to and fro with bared teeth, growling in illustration of the glutton he had carefully tracked to its lair.*

The noise distracted Ian from the fire, drawing his attention to the story again. Just in time, for Walking Elk had reached the climax, and the young men nudged each other in anticipation. Walking Elk was short and heavily built—not so much unlike a glutton himself, which made his imitations that much more entertaining.

He turned his head, wrinkling up his nose and growling through his teeth, as the glutton caught the hunter's scent. Then he changed in a flash, became the hunter, creeping carefully through the brush, pausing, squatting low—and springing upward with a sharp yelp, as his buttock encountered a thorny plant.

The men around the fire whooped as Walking Elk became the glutton, who looked at first astonished at the noise, and then thrilled to have seen its prey. It leaped from its lair, uttering growls and sharp yips of rage. The hunter fell back, horrified, and turned to run. Walking Elk's stubby legs churned the pounded earth of the longhouse, running in place. Then he threw up his arms and sprawled forward with a despairing "Ay-YIIIIII!" as the glutton struck him in the back.

The men shouted encouragement, slapping their palms on their thighs, as the beleaguered hunter managed to roll onto his back, thrashing and cursing, grappling with the glutton that sought to tear out his throat.

The firelight gleamed on the scars that decorated Walking Elk's chest and shoulders—thick white gouges that showed briefly at the gaping neck of his shirt as he writhed picturesquely, arms straining upward against his invisible enemy. Ian found himself leaning forward, his breath short and his own shoulders knotted with effort, though he knew what was coming next.

Walking Elk had done it many times, but it never failed. Ian had tried it himself, but couldn't do it at all. The hunter dug his heels and shoulders into the dirt, his body arched like a bow at full stretch. His legs trembled, his arms shook—surely they would give way at any moment. The men by the fire held their breath.

Then it came: a soft, sudden click. *Distinct and somehow muffled, it was exactly the sound made by the breaking of a neck. The snap of bone and ligament, muffled in flesh and fur. The hunter stayed arched a moment, unbelieving, and then slowly, slowly, lowered himself to the ground and sat up, staring at the body of his enemy, clutched limp in his hands.*

He cast up his eyes in prayerful thanks, then stopped, wrinkling his nose. He glanced down, face screwed into a grimace, and rubbed fastidiously at his leggings, soiled by the odorous voidings of the glutton. The hearth rocked with laughter.

A small bucket of spruce beer was making the rounds; Walking Elk beamed, his face shining with sweat, and accepted it. His short, thick throat worked industriously, sucking the sharp drink down as though it was water. He lowered the bucket at last and looked about in dreamy satisfaction.

"You, Wolf's Brother. Tell us a story!" He threw the half-empty bucket across the fire; Ian caught it, only sloshing a little over his wrist. He sucked the liquid from his sleeve, laughed, and shook his head. He took a quick mouthful of beer and passed the bucket to Sleeps with Snakes, beside him.

Eats Turtles, on his other side, poked Ian in the ribs, wanting him to talk, but he shook his head again and shrugged, jerking his chin toward Snake.

Snake, nothing loath, set the bucket neatly before him and leaned forward, the firelight dancing on his face as he began to talk. He was no *actor like Walking Elk, but he was an older man—perhaps thirty—and had traveled much in his youth. He had lived with the Assiniboin and the Cayuga, and had many stories from them, which he told with great skill—if less sweat.*

"Will you talk later, then?" Turtle said in Ian's ear. "I want to hear more tales of the great sea and the woman with green eyes."

Ian nodded, a little reluctant. He had been very drunk the first time, or he would never have spoken of Geillis Abernathy. It was only that they had been drinking trader's rum, and the spinning sensation it caused in his head was very like that caused by the stuff she'd *given him to drink, though the taste was different. That caused a giddiness that made his eyes blur, so candle flames streaked and ran like water, and the flames of the fire seemed to overflow and leap the hearthstones, glimmering all round her lavish room, small separate blazes springing up in all the rounded surfaces of silver and glass, gems and polished wood—flickering brightest behind green eyes.*

He glanced around. There were no shining surfaces here. Clay pots, rough firewood, and the smooth poles of bed frames, grinding stones and woven baskets; even the cloth and furs of their clothes were soft dull colors that drowned the light. It must have been only the memory of those times of light-glazed dizziness that had brought her to mind.

He seldom thought of the Mistress—that was how the slaves and the other boys spoke of her; she needed no more name than that, for no one could imagine another of her sort. He did not value his memories of her, but Uncle Jamie had told him not to hide from them, and he obeyed, finding it good counsel.

He stared intently into the fire, only half-hearing Snake's recounting of the story about Goose and how he had outwitted the Evil One to bring tobacco to the People and save Old Man's life. Was it her, then, the witch Geillis, that he saw in the fire?

He thought it was not. The woman in the fire gave him a warm feeling when he saw her that ran from his heated face down through his chest and curled up low and hot in his belly. The woman in the fire had no face; he saw her limbs, her curving back, a sweep of long, smooth hair, twisting toward him, gone in a flicker; he heard her laugh, soft and breathy, far away—and it was not Geillis Abernathy's laugh.

Still, Turtle's words had brought her to his mind, and he could see her there. He sighed to himself and thought what story he might tell, when it came his turn. Perhaps he would tell about Mrs. Abernathy's twin slaves, the huge black men who did her every bidding; he had once seen them kill a crocodile, and carry it up from the river between them to lay it at her feet.

He didn't mind so much. He had found—after that first drunken telling—that to speak of her in such a way caused him to think of her in the same way—as though she was a story, interesting but unreal. Perhaps she had happened, as perhaps Goose had brought tobacco to Old Man—but it did not seem so much as though she had happened to him.

And after all, he had no scars, like Walking Elk's, that would remind either his hearers or himself that he spoke truth.

In truth, he was growing bored with drinking and stories. The real truth was that he longed to escape to the furs and cool darkness of his bed platform, shed his clothes, and curl his hot nakedness around his wife. Her name meant "Works with Her Hands," but in the privacy of bed, he called her Emily.

Their time was growing short; in two moons more, she would leave, to go to the women's house, and he would not see her. Another moon before the child came, one more after that for cleansing … The thought of two months spent cold and alone, without her next to him at night, was enough to make him reach for the beer as it came around, and drink deep.

Only the bucket was empty. His friends giggled as he held it upside down above his open mouth, a single amber drop splattering on his surprised nose.

A small hand reached over his shoulder and took the bucket from his grasp, as its partner reached over his other shoulder, holding a full one.

He took the bucket and twisted, smiling up at her. Works with Her Hands smiled smugly back; it gave her great pleasure to anticipate his wants. She knelt behind him, the curve of her belly pressing warm against his back, and swatted away Turtle's hand as he reached for the beer.

"No, let my husband have it! He tells much better stories when he's drunk."

Turtle closed one eye, fixing her with the other. He was swaying slightly.

"Is it that he tells better stories when he's drunk?" he asked. "Or do we just think *they're better, because* we're *drunk?"*

Works with Her Hands ignored this philosophical inquiry and proceeded to make room for herself at the hearth, swinging her solid little bum deftly back and forth like a battering ram. She settled comfortably next to Ian, folding her arms atop her mound.

Other young women had come in with her, bringing more beer. They nudged their way in among the young men, murmuring, poking, and laughing. He'd been wrong, Ian thought, watching them. The firelight shone on their faces, glanced from their teeth, caught the moist shine of eyes and the soft dark flesh inside their mouths as they laughed. The fire gleamed on their faces more than it had ever shone from the crystal and silver of Rose Hall.

"So, husband," Emily said, lowering her eyelids demurely. "Tell us about this woman with green eyes."

He took a thoughtful swallow of beer, then another.

"Oh," he said. "She was a witch, and a very wicked woman—but she did make good beer."

Emily's eyes flew open wide, and everyone laughed. He looked into her eyes and saw it, clearly; the image of the fire behind him, tiny and perfect—welcoming him in.

"But not as good as yours," he said. He lifted the bucket in salute, and drank deep.

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EMILY

Brianna woke in the morning stiff and sore, but with one clear thought in mind. *Okay. I know who I am.* She had no clear idea *where* she was, but that didn't matter. She lay still for a moment, feeling oddly peaceful, despite the urge to get up and pee.

How long had it been, she wondered, since she *had* wakened alone and peaceful, with no company but her own thoughts? Really, not since she had stepped through the stones, she thought, in search of her family. And found them.

"In spades," she murmured, stretching gingerly. She groaned, staggered to her feet, and shuffled into the brush to pee and change back into her own clothes before returning to the blackened fire ring.

She unplaited her draggled hair, and began groggily combing her fingers through it. There was no sign of Ian or the dog nearby, but she wasn't concerned. The wood around her was filled with the racket of birds, but not alarm calls, just the daily business of flutter and feeding, a cheerful chatter that didn't alter when she rose. The birds had been watching her for hours; they weren't concerned, either.

She never woke easily, but the simple pleasure of not being dragged from sleep by the insistent demands of those who did made the morning air seem particularly sweet, in spite of the bitter tang of ashes from the dead fire.

Mostly awake, she wiped a handful of dew-wet poplar leaves over her face by way of a morning toilette, then squatted by the fire ring and began the chore of fire-starting. They had no coffee to boil, but Ian would be hunting. With luck, there'd be something to cook; they'd eaten everything in the knapsack, save a heel of bread.

"Heck with this," she muttered, whacking flint and steel together for the dozenth time, and seeing the spatter of sparks wink out without catching. If Ian had only told her they were camping, she would have brought her fire-striker, or some matches—though on second thought, she was not sure that would be safe. The things could easily burst into flame in her pocket.

"How did the Greeks do it?" she said aloud, scowling at the tiny mat of charred cloth on which she was attempting to catch a spark. "They must have had a way."

"The Greeks had what?"

Ian and Rollo were back, having captured, respectively, half a dozen yams and a blue-gray waterbird of some kind—a small heron? Rollo refused to allow her to look at it, and took his prey off to devour under a bush, its long, limp yellow legs dragging on the ground.

"The Greeks had what?" Ian repeated, turning out a pocket full of chestnuts, red-brown skins gleaming from the remnants of their prickly hulls.

"Had stuff called phosphorus. You ever heard of it?"

Ian looked blank, and shook his head.

"No. What is it?"

"Stuff," she said, finding no better word to hand. "Lord John sent me some, so I could make matches."

"Matches between whom?" Ian inquired, regarding her warily.

She stared at him for a moment, her morning-sodden mind making slow sense of the conversation.

"Oh," she said, having at last discovered the difficulty. "Not that kind of match. Those fire-starters I made. Phosphorus burns by itself. I'll show you, when we get home." She yawned, and gestured vaguely at the small pile of unlit kindling in the fire ring.

Ian made a tolerant Scottish noise and took up the flint and steel himself.

"I'll do it. Do the nuts, aye?"

"Okay. Here, you should put your shirt back on." Her own clothes had dried, and while she missed the comfort of Ian's buckskin, the worn thick wool of her fringed hunting shirt was warm and soft on her skin. It was a bright day, but chilly so early in the morning. Ian had discarded his blanket while starting the fire, and his bare shoulders were pebbled with gooseflesh.

He shook his head slightly, though, indicating that he'd put on his shirt in a bit. For now … his tongue stuck out of the corner of his mouth in concentration as he struck flint and steel again, then disappeared as he muttered something under his breath.

"What did you say?" She paused, a half-hulled nut in her fingers.

"Oh, it's no but a—" He'd struck once more and caught a spark, glowing like a tiny star on the square of char. Hastily, he touched a wisp of dry grass to it, then another, and as a tendril of smoke rose up, added a bark chip, more grass, a handful of chips, and finally a careful crisscross of pine twigs.

"No but a fire charm," he finished, grinning at her over the infant blaze that had sprung up before him.

She applauded briefly, then proceeded to cut the skin of the chestnut she was holding, crosswise, so it wouldn't burst in the fire.

"I haven't heard that one," she said. "Tell me the words."

"Oh." He didn't blush easily, but the skin of his throat darkened a little. "It's … it's no the Gaelic, that one. It's the Kahnyen'kehaka."

Her brows went up, as much at the easy sound of the word on his tongue as at what he'd said.

"Do you ever think in Mohawk, Ian?" she asked curiously.

He shot her a glance of surprise, almost, she thought, of fright.

"No," he said tersely, and rose off his heels. "I'll fetch a bit of wood."

"I have some," she said, holding him with a stare. She reached behind her and thrust a fallen pine bough into the kindling fire. The dry needles burst in a puff of sparks and were gone, but the ragged bark began to catch and burn at the edges.

"What is it?" she said. "What I said, about thinking in Mohawk?"

His lips pressed tight together, not wanting to answer.

"You asked me to come," she said, not sharp with him, but firm.

"So I did." He took a deep breath, then looked down at the yams he was burying in the heating ashes to bake.

She worked on the nuts slowly, watching him make up his mind. Loud chewing sounds and intermittent puffs of blue-gray feathers drifted out from under Rollo's bush, behind him.

"Did ye dream last night, Brianna?" he asked suddenly, his eyes still on what he was doing.

She wished he had brought something coffeelike to boil, but still, she was sufficiently awake by now as to be able to think and respond coherently.

"Yes," she said. "I dream a lot."

"Aye, I ken that. Roger Mac told me ye write them down sometimes."

"He did?" That was a jolt, and one bigger than a cup of coffee. She'd never *hidden* her dreambook from Roger, but they didn't really discuss it, either. How much of it had he read?

"He didna tell me anything about them," Ian assured her, catching the tone of her voice. "Only that ye wrote things down, sometimes. So I thought, maybe, those would be important."

"Only to me," she said, but cautiously. "Why …?"

"Well, d'ye see—the Kahnyen'kehaka set great store by dreams. More even than Highlanders." He glanced up with a brief smile, then back at the ashes where he had buried the yams. "What did ye dream of last night, then?"

"Birds," she said, trying to recall. "Lots of birds." Reasonable enough, she thought. The forest around her had been live with birdsong since well before dawn; of course it would seep into her dreams.

"Aye?" Ian seemed interested. "Were the birds alive, then?"

"Yes," she said, puzzled. "Why?"

He nodded, and picked up a chestnut to help her.

"That's good, to dream of live birds, especially if they sing. Dead birds are a bad thing, in a dream."

“They were definitely alive, and singing,” she assured him, with a glance up at the branch above him, where some bird with a bright yellow breast and black wings had lighted, viewing their breakfast preparations with interest.

“Did any of them talk to ye?”

She stared at him, but he was clearly serious. And after all, she thought, why *wouldn’t* a bird talk to you, in a dream?

She shook her head, though.

“No. They were—oh.” She laughed, unexpectedly recalling. “They were building a nest out of toilet paper. I dream about toilet paper all the time. That’s a thin, soft kind of paper that you use to wipe your, er, behind with,” she explained, seeing his incomprehension.

“Ye wipe your arse with *paper*?” He stared at her, jaw dropped in horror. “Jesus God, Brianna!”

“Well.” She rubbed a hand under her nose, trying not to laugh at his expression. He might well be horrified; there were no paper mills in the Colonies, and aside from tiny amounts of handmade paper such as she made herself, every sheet had to be imported from England. Paper was hoarded and treasured; her father, who wrote frequently to his sister in Scotland, would write a letter in the normal fashion—but then would turn the paper sideways, and write additional lines perpendicularly, to save space. Little wonder that Ian was shocked!

“It’s very cheap then,” she assured him. “Really.”

“Not as cheap as a cob o’ maize, I’ll warrant,” he said, narrow-eyed with suspicion.

“Believe it or not, most people then won’t have cornfields to hand,” she said, still amused. “And I tell you what, Ian—toilet paper is *much* nicer than a dry corncob.”

“ ‘Nicer,’ ” he muttered, obviously still shaken to the core. “Nicer. Jesus, Mary, and Bride!”

“You were asking me about dreams,” she reminded him. “Did you dream last night?”

“Oh. Ah … no.” He turned his attention from the scandalous notion of toilet paper with some difficulty. “Or at least if I did, I dinna recall it."

It came to her suddenly, looking at his hollowed face, that one reason for his sleeplessness might be that he was afraid of what dreams might come to him.

In fact, he seemed afraid now that she might press him on the subject. Not meeting her eye, he picked up the empty beer jug and clicked his tongue for Rollo, who followed him, blue-gray feathers sticking to his jaws.

She had cut the last of the chestnut skins and buried the gleaming marrons in the ashes to bake with the yams, by the time he came back.

"Just in time," she called, seeing him. "The yams are ready."

"Just in time, forbye," he answered, smiling. "See what I've got?"

What he had was a chunk of honeycomb, thieved from a bee tree and still chilled enough that the honey ran slow and thick, drizzled over the hot yams in glorious blobs of gold sweetness. Garnished with roasted, peeled, sweet chestnuts and washed down with cold creek water, she thought it was possibly the best breakfast she'd eaten since leaving her own time.

She said as much, and Ian lifted one feathery brow in derision.

"Oh, aye? And what would ye eat then that's better?"

"Oooh … chocolate donuts, maybe. Or hot chocolate, with marshmallows in it. I really miss chocolate." Though it was hard to miss it much at the moment, licking honey off her fingers.

"Och, get on wi' ye! I've had chocolate." He squinched his eyes and pinched his lips in exaggerated distaste. "Bitter, nasty stuff. Though they did charge a terrible lot of money just for a wee cup of it, in Edinburgh," he added practically, unsquinching.

She laughed.

"They put sugar in it, where I come from," she assured him. "It's sweet."

"Sugar in your chocolate? That's the most decadent thing I've ever heard of," he said severely. "Even worse than the arse-wiping paper, aye?" She saw the teasing glint in his eye, though, and merely snorted, nibbling the last shreds of orange yam flesh from the blackened skin.

"Someday I'll get hold of some chocolate, Ian," she said, discarding the limp peel and licking her fingers like a cat. "I'll put sugar in it and feed it to you, and see what you think then!"

It was his turn to snort, good-naturedly, but he made no further remarks, concentrating instead on licking his own hands clean.

Rollo had appropriated the remnants of honeycomb, and was noisily gnawing and slurping at the wax, with complete enjoyment.

"That dog must have the digestion of a crocodile," Brianna said, shaking her head. "Is there anything he won't eat?"

"Well, I've no tried him on nails, yet." Ian smiled briefly, but didn't take up the conversation. The unease that had lain upon him when he talked of dreams had disappeared over breakfast, but seemed now to have returned. The sun was well up, but he made no move to rise. He merely sat, arms wrapped about his knees, gazing thoughtfully into the fire as the rising sun stole the light from the flames.

In no great hurry to start moving herself, Brianna waited patiently, eyes fixed on him.

"And what would you eat for breakfast when you lived with the Mohawk, Ian?"

He looked at her then, and his mouth tucked in at one corner. Not a smile, but a wry acknowledgment. He sighed, and laid his head on his knees, face hidden. He sat slumped that way for a bit, then slowly straightened up.

"Well," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "It was to do wi' my brother-in-law. At least to start."

* * *

Ian Murray thought that before too long, he would be obliged to do something about his brother-in-law. Not that "brother-in-law" was precisely the word for it. Still, Sun Elk was the husband of Looking at the Sky, who was in turn the sister of his own wife. By the notions of the Kahnyen'kehaka this implied no relation between the men beyond that of clansmen, but Ian still thought of Sun Elk with the white part of his mind.

That was the secret part. His wife had English, but they did not speak it, even when most private. He spoke no word of Scots or English aloud, had heard not a syllable of either tongue in the year since he had chosen to stay, to become Kahnyen'kehaka. It was assumed he had forgotten what he had been. But each day he found some moment to himself, and, lest he lose the words, would silently name the objects around him, hearing their English names echo in the hidden white part of his mind.

Pot, he thought to himself, squinting at the blackened earthenware warming in the ashes. In fact he was not alone at the moment. He was, however, feeling distinctly alien.

Corn, he thought, leaning back against the polished tree trunk that formed one upright of the longhouse. Several clusters of dried maize hung above him, festively colored by comparison with the sacks of grain sold in Edinburgh—and yet *corn* nonetheless. *Onions,* he thought, eyes passing down the braided chain of yellow globes. *Bed. Furs. Fire.*

His wife leaned toward him, smiling, and the words ran suddenly together in his mind. *BlackravenblackhairshiningbreastbudsthighssoroundohyesohyesohEmily* …

She set a warm bowl in his hand, and the rich aroma of rabbit and corn and onion rose up into his nose. *Stew,* he thought, the slippery flow of words coming to a sudden halt as his mind focused on food. He smiled at her, and laid his hand over hers, holding it for a moment, small and sturdy under his, curved around the wooden bowl. Her smile deepened; then she pulled away, rising up to go and fetch more food.

He watched her go, appreciating the sway of her walk. Then his eye caught Sun Elk—watching, too, from the doorway of his own apartment.

Bastard, Ian thought, very clearly.

* * *

"See, we got on well enough to start," Ian explained. "He's a bonny man, for the most part, Sun Elk."

"For the most part," Brianna echoed. She sat still, watching him. "And which part was that?"

Ian rubbed a hand through his hair, making it stand up like the bushy quills on a porcupine.

"Well … the friend part. We *were* friends, to begin with, aye? Brothers, in fact; we were of the same clan."

"And you stopped being friends because of—of your wife?"

Ian sighed deeply.

"Well, ye see … the Kahnyen'kehaka, they've a notion of marriage that—it's like what ye see in the Highlands, often enough. That is, the parents have a good deal to do wi' arranging it. Often enough, they've watched the weans as they grew, and seen if maybe there was a lad and a lassie that seemed well-matched. And if they were—and if they came from the proper clans—now, that bit's different, see?" he added, breaking off.

"The clans?"

"Aye. In the Highlands, ye'd mostly marry within your own clan, save it was to make an alliance wi' another. Among the Iroquois nations, though, ye canna ever marry someone from your own clan, and ye can only marry someone from particular clans, not just any other."

"Mama said the Iroquois reminded her a lot of Highlanders," Brianna said, mildly amused. "Ruthless, but entertaining, was how she put it, I think. Bar some of the torturing, maybe, and the burning your enemies alive."

"Your mother's no heard some of Uncle Jamie's stories about his grandsire, then," he replied with a wry smile.

"What, Lord Lovat?"

"No, the other—*Seaumais Ruaidh*—Red Jacob, him Uncle Jamie's named for. A wicked auld bugger, my Mam always said; he'd put any Iroquois to shame for pure cruelty, from all I've heard of him." He dismissed this tangent with a wave of the hand, though, returning to his explanation.

"Well, so, when the Kahnyen'kehaka took me, and named me, I was adopted to the Wolf clan, aye?" he said, with an explanatory nod at Rollo, who had consumed the honeycomb, dead bees and all, and was now meditatively licking his paws.

"Very appropriate," she murmured. "What clan was Sun Elk?"

"Wolf, of course. And Emily's mother and grandmother and sisters were Turtle. But what I was saying—if a lad and lassie from properly different clans seemed maybe suited to each other, then the mothers would speak—they call all the aunties 'mother,' too," he added. "So there might be a good many mothers involved in the matter. But if all the mothers and grandmothers and aunties were to agree that it would be a good match …" He shrugged. "They'd marry."

Brianna rocked back a little, arms around her knees.

"But you didn't have a mother to speak for you."

"Well, I did wonder what my Mam would ha' said, if she'd been there," he said, and smiled, despite his seriousness.

Brianna, having met Ian's mother, laughed at the thought.

"Aunt Jenny would be a match for any Mohawk, male *or* female," she assured him. "But what happened, then?"

"I loved Emily," he said very simply. "And she loved me."

This state of affairs, which rapidly became apparent to everyone in the village, caused considerable public comment. Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa, Works with Her Hands, the girl Ian called Emily, had been widely expected to marry Sun Elk, who had been a visitor to her family's hearth since childhood.

"But there it was." Ian spread his hands and shrugged. "She loved me, and she said so."

When Ian had been taken into the Wolf clan, he had been given to foster parents, as well—the parents of the dead man in whose stead he had been adopted. His foster mother had been somewhat taken aback by the situation, but after discussing the matter with the other women of the Wolf clan, had gone to speak formally with Tewaktenyonh, Emily's grandmother—and the most influential woman in the village.

"And so we married." Dressed in their best, and accompanied by their parents, the two young people had sat together on a bench before the assembled people of the village, and exchanged baskets—his containing the furs of sable and beaver, and a good knife, symbolizing his willingness to hunt for her and protect her; hers filled with grain and fruit and vegetables, symbolizing her willingness to plant, gather, and provide for him.

"And four moons later," Ian added, "Sun Elk wed Looking at the Sky, Emily's sister."

Brianna raised one eyebrow.

"But …?"

"Aye, but."

* * *

Ian had the gun Jamie had left with him, a rare and valued item among the Indians, and he knew how to use it. He also knew how to track, to lie in ambush, to think like an animal—other things of value that Uncle Jamie had left with him.

In consequence, he was a good hunter, and rapidly gained respect for his ability to bring in meat. Sun Elk was a decent hunter—not the best, but capable. Many of the young men would joke and make remarks, denigrating each other's skills and making fun; he did it himself. Still, there was a tone to Sun Elk's jests to Ian that now and then made one of the other men glance sharply at him, then away with the faintest of shrugs.

He had been inclined to ignore the man. Then he had seen Sun Elk look at Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa, and everything became at once clear to him.

She had been going to the forest with some other girls, one day in late summer. They carried baskets for gathering; Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa had an ax through her belt. One of the other girls had asked her whether she meant to find wood for another bowl like the one she had made for her mother; Works With Her Hands had said—with a quick, warm look toward Ian, who lounged nearby with the other young men—that no, she wished to find a good red cedar, for wood to make a cradleboard.

The girls had giggled and embraced Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa; the young men had grinned and prodded Ian knowingly in the ribs. And Ian had caught a glimpse of Sun Elk's face, hot eyes fixed on Emily's straight back as she walked away.

Within one moon, Sun Elk had moved into the longhouse, husband to his wife's sister, Looking at the Sky. The sisters' compartments were across from each other; they shared a hearth. Ian had seldom seen Sun Elk look at Emily again—but he had seen him look carefully away, too many times.

"There is a person who desires you," he said to Emily one night. It was long past the hour of the wolf, deep night, and the longhouse slept around them. The child she carried obliged her to rise and make water; she had come back to their furs skin-chilled and with the fresh smell of pines in her hair.

"Oh? Well, why not? Everyone else is asleep." She had stretched luxuriously and kissed him, the small bulge of her belly smooth and hard against his.

"Not me. I mean—of course this person desires you, too!" he'd said hastily, as she drew back a bit, offended. He wrapped his arms about her in quick illustration. "I mean—there is someone else."

"Hmf." Her voice was muffled, her breath warm against his chest. "There are many who desire me. I am very, very good with my hands." She gave him a brief demonstration, and he gasped, causing her to chuckle with satisfaction.

Rollo, who had accompanied her outside, crawled under the bed platform and curled up in his accustomed spot, chewing noisily at an itching spot near his tail.

A little later, they lay with the furs thrown back. The hide that hung over their doorway was pulled back, so the heat of the fire could come in, and he could see the shine of light on the moist gold skin of her shoulder, where she lay turned away from him. She reached back and put one of her clever hands on his, took his palm, and pressed it against her belly. The child inside had begun to stir; he felt a soft, sudden push against his palm, and his breath stilled in his throat.

“You shouldn’t worry,” Emily said very softly. “This person desires only you.”

He had slept well.

In the morning, though, he had sat by the hearth eating cornmeal mush, and Sun Elk, who had already eaten, walked by. He stopped and looked down at Ian.

“This person dreamed about you, Wolf’s Brother.”

“Did you?” Ian said pleasantly. He felt the warmth rise up his throat, but kept his face relaxed. The Kahyen’kehaka set great store by dreams. A good dream would have everyone in the longhouse discussing it for days. The look on Sun Elk’s face didn’t indicate that his dream about Ian had been a good one.

“That dog—” He nodded at Rollo, who lay sprawled inconveniently in the doorway of Ian’s compartment, snoring. “I dreamed that it rose up over your couch, and seized you by the throat.”

That was a menacing dream. A Kahnyen’kehaka who believed such a dream might decide to kill the dog, lest it be a foretelling of ill fortune. But Ian was not—not quite—Kahnyen’kehaka.

Ian raised both brows, and went on eating. Sun Elk waited for a moment, but as Ian said nothing, eventually nodded and turned away.

“Ahkote’ohskennonton,” Ian said, calling his name. The man turned back, expectant.

“This person dreamed of you, too.” Sun Elk glanced sharply at him. Ian didn’t speak further, but let a slow and evil smile grow upon his face.

Sun Elk stared at him. He kept smiling. The other man turned away with a snort of disgust, but not before Ian had seen the faint look of unease in Sun Elk’s eyes.

* * *

“Well, so.” Ian took a deep breath. He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them. “Ye ken the child died, aye?”

He spoke with no emotion at all in his voice. It was that dry, controlled tone that seared her heart, and choked her so that she could do no more than nod in reply.

He couldn't keep it up, though. He opened his mouth as though to speak, but the big, bony hands clenched suddenly on his knees, and instead, he rose abruptly to his feet.

"Aye," he said. "Let's go. I'll—I'll tell ye the rest, walking."

And he did, his back resolutely turned, as he led her higher up the mountain, then across a narrow ridge, and down the path of a stream that fell in a series of small, enchanting waterfalls, each encircled with a mist of miniature rainbows.

Works with Her Hands had conceived again. That child was lost just after her belly began to swell with life.

"They say, the Kahnyen'kehaka," Ian explained, his voice muffled as he shoved his way through a screen of brilliant red creeper, "that for a woman to conceive, her husband's spirit does battle with hers, and must overcome it. If his spirit isna strong enough"—his voice came clear as he ripped a handful of creeper down, breaking the branch it hung from, and cast it viciously away—"then the child canna take root in the womb."

After this second loss, the Medicine Society had taken the two of them to a private hut, there to sing and beat drums and to dance in huge painted masks, meant to frighten away whatever evil entities might be hampering Ian's spirit—or unduly strengthening Emily's.

"I wanted to laugh, seeing the masks," Ian said. He didn't turn round; yellow leaves spangled the shoulders of his buckskin and stuck in his hair. "They call it the Funny-Face Society, too—and for a reason. Didna do it, though."

"I don't … suppose Em-Emily laughed." He was going so fast that she was pressed to keep up with him, though her legs were nearly as long as his own.

"No," he said, and uttered a short, bitter laugh himself. "She didna."

She had gone into the medicine hut beside him silent and gray, but had come out with a peaceful face, and reached for him in their bed that night with love. For three months, they had made love with tenderness and ardor. For another three, they had made love with a sense of increasing desperation.

“And then she missed her courses again.”

He had at once ceased his attentions, terrified of causing a further mishap. Emily had moved slowly and carefully, no longer going into the fields to work, but staying in the longhouse, working, always working, with her hands. Weaving, grinding, carving, boring beads of shell for wampum, hands moving ceaselessly, to compensate for the waiting stillness of her body.

“Her sister went to the fields. It’s the women who do, ken?” He paused to slash an outreaching brier with his knife, tossing the severed branch out of the way so it wouldn’t snap back and hit Brianna in the face.

“Looking at the Sky brought us food. All the women did, but her most of all. She was a sweet lass, Karònya.”

There was a slight catch in his voice at this, the first in his harsh recitation of facts.

“What happened to her?” Brianna hastened her step a little as they came out onto the top of a grass-covered bank, so that she drew up nearly even with him. He slowed a little, but didn’t turn to look at her—kept his face forward, chin raised as though confronting enemies.

“Taken.” Looking at the Sky had been in the habit of staying later in the fields than the other women, gathering extra corn or squash for her sister and Ian, though she had a child of her own by then. One evening, she did not return to the longhouse, and when the villagers had gone out to search for her, neither she nor the child was anywhere to be found. They had vanished, leaving only one pale moccasin behind, tangled in the squash vines at the edge of a field.

“Abenaki,” Ian said tersely. “We found the sign next day; it was full dark before we began to search in earnest.”

It had been a long night searching, followed by a week of the same—a week of growing fear and emptiness—and Ian had returned to his wife’s hearth at dawn on the seventh day, to learn that she had miscarried once more.

He paused. He was sweating freely from walking so fast, and wiped a sleeve across his chin. Brianna could feel the sweat trickling down her own back, dampening the hunting shirt, but disregarded it. She touched his back, very gently, but said nothing.

He heaved a deep sigh, almost of relief, she thought—perhaps that the dreadful tale was nearly done.

“We tried a bit longer,” he said, back to the matter-of-fact tone. “Emily and I. But the heart had gone out of her. She didna trust me any longer. And … Ahkote’ohskennonton was there. He ate at our hearth. And he watched her. She began to look back.”

Ian had been shaping wood for a bow one day, concentrating on the flow of the grain beneath his knife, trying to see those things in the swirls that Emily saw, to hear the voice of the tree, as she had told him. It wasn’t the tree that spoke behind him, though.

“Grandson,” said a dry old voice, lightly ironic.

He dropped the knife, narrowly missing his own foot, and swung round, bow in hand. Tewaktenyonh stood six feet away, one eyebrow lifted in amusement at having sneaked up on him unheard.

“Grandmother,” he said, and nodded in wry acknowledgment of her skill. Ancient she might be, but no one moved more softly. Hence her reputation; the children of the village lived in respectful dread of her, having heard that she could vanish into air, only to rematerialize in some distant spot, right before the guilty eyes of evil-doers.

“Come with me, Wolf’s Brother,” she said, and turned away, not waiting for his response. None was expected.

She was already out of sight by the time he had laid the half-made bow under a bush, taken up his fallen knife, and whistled for Rollo, but he caught her up with no difficulty.

She had led him away from the village, through the forest, to the head of a deer trail. There she had given him a bag of salt and an armlet of wampum and bade him go.

“And you went?” Brianna asked, after a long moment of silence. “Just—like that?”

“Just like that,” he said, and looked at her for the first time since they had left their campsite that morning. His face was gaunt, hollow with memories. Sweat gleamed on his cheekbones, but he was so pale that the dotted lines of his tattoos stood out sharp—perforations, lines along which his face might come apart.

She swallowed a few times before she could speak, but managed a tone much like his own when she did.

“Is it much farther?” she asked. “Where we’re going?”

“No,” he said softly. “We’re nearly there.” And turned to walk again before her.

* * *

Half an hour later, they had reached a place where the stream cut deep between its banks, widening into a small gorge. Silver birch and hobblebush grew thick, sprouting from the rocky walls, smooth-skinned roots twisting through the stones like fingers clawing at the earth.

The notion gave Brianna a slight prickle at the neck. The waterfalls were far above them now, and the noise of the water had lessened, the creek talking to itself as it purled over rocks and shushed through mats of cress and duckweed.

She thought the going might be easier above, on the lip of the gorge, but Ian led her down into it without hesitation, and she followed likewise, scrambling over the tumble of boulders and tree roots, hampered by her long gun. Rollo, scorning this clumsy exertion, plunged into the creek, which was several feet deep, and swam, ears clamped back against his head so that he looked like a giant otter.

Ian had recovered his self-possession in the concentration of navigating the rough ground. He paused now and then, reaching back to help her down a particularly tricky fall of rock, or over a tree uprooted in some recent flood—but he didn’t meet her eyes, and the shuttered planes of his face gave nothing away.

Her curiosity had reached fever pitch, but clearly he had done speaking for the moment. It was just past midday, but the light under the birches was a shadowed gold that made everything seem somehow hushed, almost enchanted. She could make no sensible guess as to the purpose of this expedition, in light of what Ian had told her—but the place was one where almost anything seemed possible.

She thought suddenly of her first father—of Frank Randall—and felt a small, remembered warmth at the thought. She would like so much to show him this place.

They had taken holidays often in the Adirondacks; different mountains, different trees—but something of the same hush and mystery in the shadowed glades and rushing water. Her mother had come sometimes, but more often it was just the two of them, hiking far up into the trees, not talking much, but sharing a deep content in the company of the sky.

Suddenly, the sound of the water rose again; there was another fall nearby.

"Just here, coz," Ian said softly, and beckoned her to follow with a turn of the head.

They stepped out from under the trees and she saw that the gorge dropped suddenly away, the water falling twenty feet or more into a pool below. Ian led her past the head of the falls; she could hear the water rushing past below, but the top of the bank was thick with sedges, and they had to push their way through, tramping down the yellowing stems of goldenrod and dodging the panicked whir of grasshoppers rocketing up underfoot.

"Look," Ian said, glancing back, and reached to part the screen of laurel in front of her.

"Wow!"

She recognized it immediately. There was no mistaking it, in spite of the fact that much of it was invisible, still buried in the crumbling bank on the far side of the gorge. Some recent flood had raised the level of the creek, undercutting the bank so that a huge block of stone and dirt had fallen away, revealing its buried mystery.

The raked arches of ribs rose huge from the dirt, and she had the impression of a scatter of things half-buried in the rubble at the foot of the bank: enormous things, knobbed and twisted. They might be bones or simply boulders—but it was the tusk that caught her eye, jutting from the bank in a massive curve, intensely familiar, and the more startling for its very familiarity.

"Ye ken it?" Ian asked eagerly, watching her face. "Ye've seen something like it?"

"Oh, yes," she said, and though the sun was warm on her back, she shivered, gooseflesh pebbling her forearms. Not from fear, but sheer awe at sight of it, and a kind of incredulous joy. "Oh, yes. I have."

"What?" Ian's voice was still pitched low, as though the creature might hear them. "What is it?"

"A mammoth," she said, and found that she was whispering, too. The sun had passed its zenith; already the bottom of the creekbed lay in shadow. Light struck the stained curve of ancient ivory, and threw the vault of the high-crowned skull that held it into sharp relief. The skull was fixed in the soil at a slight angle, the single visible tusk rising high, the eye socket black as mystery.

The shiver came again, and she hunched her shoulders. Easy to feel that it might at any moment wrench itself free of the clay and turn that massive head toward them, empty-eyed, clods of dirt raining from tusks and bony shoulders as it shook itself and began to walk, the ground vibrating as long toes struck and sank in the muddy soil.

"That's what it's called—mammoth? Aye, well … it *is* verra big." Ian's voice dispelled the illusion of incipient movement, and she was able finally to take her eyes off it—though she felt she must glance back, every second or so, to be sure it was still there.

"The Latin name is *Mammuthus,*" she said, clearing her throat. "There's a complete skeleton in a museum in New York. I've seen it often. And I've seen pictures of them in books." She glanced back at the creature in the bank.

"A museum? So it's not a thing ye've got where—when"—he stumbled a bit—"where ye come from? Not alive then, I mean?" He seemed rather disappointed.

She wanted to laugh at the picture of mammoths roaming Boston Common, or wallowing on the bank of the Cambridge River. In fact, she had a moment's pang of disappointment that they *hadn't* been there; it would have been so wonderful to see them.

"No," she said regretfully. "They all died thousands and thousands of years ago. When the ice came."

"Ice?" Ian was glancing back and forth between her and the mammoth, as though afraid one or the other might do something untoward.

"The Ice Age. The world got colder, and sheets of ice spread down from the north. A lot of animals went extinct—I mean, they couldn't find food, and all died."

Ian was pale with excitement.

"Aye. Aye, I've heard such stories."

"You have?" She was surprised at that.

"Aye. But ye say it's real." He swung his head to look at the mammoth's bones once more. "An animal, aye, like a bear or a possum?"

"Yes," she said, puzzled by his attitude, which seemed to alternate between eagerness and dismay. "Bigger, but yes. What else would it be?"

"Ah," he said, and took a deep breath. "Well, d'ye see, that's what I needed ye to tell me, coz. See, the Kahnyen'kehaka—they have stories of … things. Animals that are really spirits. And if ever I saw a thing that might *be* a spirit—" He was still looking at the skeleton, as though it might walk out of the earth, and she saw a slight shiver pass through him.

She couldn't prevent a similar shiver, looking at the massive creature. It towered above them, grim and awful, and only her knowledge of what it was kept her from wanting to cower and run.

"It's real," she repeated, as much to reassure herself as him. "And it's dead. *Really* dead."

"How d'ye know these things?" he asked, intently curious. "It's auld, ye say. You'd be much further away from—that"—he jerked his chin at the giant skeleton—"in your own time than we are now. How can ye ken more about it than folk do now?"

She shook her head, smiling a little, and helpless to explain.

"When did you find this, Ian?"

“Last month. I came up the gorge”—he gestured with his chin—“and there it was. I near beshit myself.”

“I can imagine,” she said, stifling an urge to laugh.

“Aye,” he said, not noticing her amusement in his desire to explain. “I should have been sure that it was Rawenniyo—a spirit, a god—save for the dog.”

Rollo had climbed out of the stream, and having shaken the water from his fur, was squirming on his back in a patch of crushed turtlehead, tail wagging in pleasure, and clearly oblivious to the silent giant in the cliff above.

“What do you mean? That Rollo wasn’t afraid of it?”

Ian nodded.

“Aye. He didna behave as though there were anything there at all. And yet …” He hesitated, darting a glance at her. “Sometimes, in the wood. He—he *sees* things. Things I canna see. Ken?”

“I ken,” she said, a ripple of unease returning. “Dogs do see … things.” She remembered her own dogs; in particular, Smoky, the big Newfoundland, who would sometimes in the evening suddenly raise his head, listening, hackles rising as his eyes followed … something … that passed through the room and disappeared.

He nodded, relieved that she knew what he was talking about.

“They do. I ran, when I saw that”—he nodded at the cliff—“and ducked behind a tree. But the dog went on about his business, paying it no mind. And so I thought, well, just maybe it’s no what I think, after all.”

“And what did you think?” she asked. “A Rawenniyo, you said?” As the excitement of seeing the mammoth began to recede, she remembered what they were theoretically doing here. “Ian—you said what you wanted to show me had to do with your wife. Is this—” She gestured toward the cliff, brows raised.

He didn’t answer directly, but tilted his head back, studying the jut of the giant tusks.

“I heard stories, now and then. Among the Mohawk, I mean. They’d speak of strange things that someone found, hunting. Spirits trapped in the rock, and how they came to be there. Evil things, for the most part. And I thought to myself, if that should be what this is …”

He broke off and turned to her, serious and intent.

“I needed ye to tell me, aye? Whether that’s what it is or no. Because if it was, then perhaps what I’ve been thinking is wrong.”

“It’s not,” she assured him. “But what on earth have you been thinking?”

“About God,” he said, surprising her again. He licked his lips, unsure how to go on.

“Yeksa’a—the child. I didna have her christened,” he said. “I couldna. Or perhaps I could—ye can do it yourself, ken, if there’s no priest. But I hadna the courage to try. I—never saw her. They’d wrapped her already.… They wouldna have liked it, if I’d tried to …” His voice died away.

“Yeksa’a,” she said softly. “Was that your—your daughter’s name?”

He shook his head, his mouth twisting wryly.

“It only means ‘wee girl.’ The Kahnyen’kehaka dinna give a name to a child when it’s born. Not until later. If …” His voice trailed off, and he cleared his throat. “If it lives. They wouldna think of naming a child unborn.”

“But you did?” she asked gently.

He raised his head and took a breath that had a damp sound to it, like wet bandages pulled from a fresh wound.

“Iseabaìl,” he said, and she knew it was the first—perhaps would be the only—time he’d spoken it aloud. “Had it been a son, I would ha’ called him Jamie.” He glanced at her, with the shadow of a smile. “Only in my head, ken.”

He let out all his breath then with a sigh and put his face down upon his knees, back hunched.

“What I am thinking,” he said after a moment, his voice much too controlled, “is this. Was it me?”

“Ian! You mean your fault that the baby died? How could it be?”

“I left,” he said simply, straightening up. “Turned away. Stopped being a Christian, being Scots. They took me to the stream, scrubbed me wi' sand to take away the white blood. They gave me my name —Okwaho'kenha—and said I was Mohawk. But I wasna, not really."

He sighed deeply again, and she put a hand on his back, feeling the bumps of his backbone press through the leather of his shirt. He didn't eat nearly enough, she thought.

"But I wasna what I had been, either," he went on, sounding almost matter-of-fact. "I tried to be what they wanted, ken? So I left off praying to God or the Virgin Mother, or Saint Bride. I listened to what Emily said, when she'd tell me about *her* gods, the spirits that dwell in the trees and all. And when I went to the sweat lodge wi' the men, or sat by the hearth and heard the stories … they seemed as real to me as Christ and His saints ever had."

He turned his head and looked up at her suddenly, half-bewildered, half-defiant.

"I am the Lord thy God," he said. *"Thou shalt have no other gods before me.* But I did, no? That's mortal sin, is it not?"

She wanted to say no, of course not. Or to protest weakly that she was not a priest, how could she say? But neither of those would do; he was not looking for easy reassurance, and a weak-minded abnegation of responsibility would not serve him.

She took a deep breath and blew it out. It had been a good many years since she'd been taught the Baltimore Catechism, but it wasn't the sort of thing you forget.

"The conditions of mortal sin are these," she said, reciting the words precisely from memory. "First, that the action be grievously wrong. Secondly, that you know the action is wrong. And thirdly—that you give full consent to it."

He was watching her intently.

"Well, it was wrong, and I suppose I kent that—aye, I *did* ken that. Especially—" His face darkened further, and she wondered what he was recalling.

"But … how should I serve a God who would take a child for her father's sins?" Without waiting for an answer, he glanced toward the cliff face, where the remains of the mammoth lay frozen in time. "Or was it them? Was it not my God at all, but the Iroquois spirits?

Did they ken I wasna really Mohawk—that I held back a part of myself from them?"

He looked back at her, dead serious.

"Gods are jealous, are they no?"

"Ian …" She swallowed, helpless. But she had to say something.

"What you did—or didn't do—that wasn't wrong, Ian," she said firmly. "Your daughter … she was half-Mohawk. It wasn't wrong to let her be buried according to her mother's ways. Your wife—Emily—she would have been terribly upset, wouldn't she, if you'd insisted on baptizing the baby?"

"Aye, maybe. But …" He closed his eyes, hands clenched hard into fists on his thighs. "Where is she, then?" he whispered, and she could see tears trembling on his lashes. "The others—they were never born; God will have them in His hand. But wee Iseabaìl—she'll not be in heaven, will she? I canna bear the thought that she—that she might be … lost, somewhere. Wandering."

"Ian …"

"I hear her, greeting. In the night." His breath was coming in deep, sobbing gasps. "I canna help, I canna find her!"

"Ian!" The tears were running down her own cheeks. She gripped his wrists fiercely, squeezed as hard as she could. "Ian, listen to me!"

He drew a deep, trembling breath, head bent. Then he nodded, very slightly.

She rose onto her knees and gathered him tight against her, his head cradled on her breasts. Her cheek pressed against the top of his head, his hair warm and springy against her mouth.

"Listen to me," she said softly. "I had another father. The man who raised me. He's dead now." For a long time now, the sense of desolation at his loss had been muted, softened by new love, distracted by new obligations. Now it swept over her, newly fresh, and sharp as a stab wound in its agony. "I know—I know he's in heaven."

Was he? Could he be dead and in heaven, if not yet born? And yet he was dead to her, and surely heaven took no heed of time.

She lifted her face toward the cliff, but spoke to neither bones nor God.

"Daddy," she said, and her voice broke on the word, but she held her cousin hard. "Daddy, I need you." Her voice sounded small, and pathetically unsure. But there was no other help to be had.

"I need you to find Ian's little girl," she said, as firmly as she could, trying to summon her father's face, to see him there among the shifting leaves at the clifftop. "Find her, please. Hold her in your arms, and make sure that she's safe. Take—please take care of her."

She stopped, feeling obscurely that she should say something else, something more ceremonious. Make the sign of the cross? Say "amen"?

"Thank you, Daddy," she said softly, and cried as though her father were newly dead, and she bereft, orphaned, lost, and crying in the night. Ian's arms were wrapped around her, and they clung tight together, squeezing hard, the warmth of the late sun heavy on their heads.

She stood still within his arms when she stopped crying, her head resting on his shoulder. He patted her back, very gently, but didn't push her away.

"Thank you," he whispered in her ear. "Are ye all right, Brianna?"

"Uh-huh." She straightened and stood away from him, swaying a little, as though she were drunk. She felt drunk, too, her bones gone soft and malleable, everything around her faintly out of focus, save for certain things that caught her eye: a brilliant patch of pink lady's slipper, a stone fallen from the cliff face, its surface streaked red with iron. Rollo, almost sitting on Ian's foot, big head pressed anxiously against his master's thigh.

"Are *you* all right, Ian?" she asked.

"I will be." His hand sought Rollo's head, and gave the pointed ears a cursory rub of reassurance. "Maybe. Just …"

"What?"

"Are ye … are ye sure, Brianna?"

She knew what he was asking; it was a question of faith. She drew herself up to her full height, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"I'm a Roman Catholic and I believe in vitamins," she declared stoutly. "And I knew my father. Of course I'm sure."

He took a deep, sighing breath and his shoulders slumped as he let it out. He nodded then, and the lines of his face relaxed a little.

She left him sitting on a rock, and made her way down to the stream to splash cold water on her face. The shadow of the cliff fell across the creek and the air was cold with the scents of earth and pine trees. In spite of the chill, she remained there for a while, on her knees.

She could still hear the voices murmuring in trees and water, but paid no attention to them. Whoever they were, they were no threat to her or hers—and not at odds with the presence that she felt so strongly nearby.

"I love you, Daddy," she whispered, closing her eyes, and felt at peace.

Ian must be better, too, she thought, when she made her way at length back through the rocks to where he sat. Rollo had left him to investigate a promising hole at the foot of a tree, and she knew the dog wouldn't have left Ian, had he considered his master to be in distress.

She was about to ask him whether their business here was complete, when he stood up, and she saw that it wasn't.

"Why I brought ye here," he said abruptly. "I wanted to know about that—" He nodded at the mammoth. "But I meant to ask ye a question. Advice, like."

"Advice? Ian, I can't give you any advice! How could I tell you what to do?"

"I think ye're maybe the only one who can," he said with a lopsided smile. "You're my family, you're a woman—and ye care for me. Yet ye ken more even than Uncle Jamie, perhaps, because of who—or what"—his mouth twisted a little—"ye are."

"I don't know more," she said, and looked up at the bones in the rock. "Only—different things."

"Aye," he said, and took a deep breath.

"Brianna," he said very softly. "We're no wed—we never shall be." He looked away for an instant, then back. "But if we *had* been marrit, I should have loved ye and cared for ye, so well as I could. I trust you, that ye'd have done the same by me. Am I right?"

"Oh, Ian." Her throat was still thick, raspy with grief; the words came out in a whisper. She touched his face, cool-skinned and bony, and traced the line of tattooed dots with a thumb. "I love you now."

"Aye, well," he said still softly. "I ken that." He lifted a hand and put it over her own, big and hard. He pressed her palm against his cheek for a moment, then his fingers closed over hers and he brought their linked hands down, but didn't let go.

"So tell me," he said, his eyes not leaving hers. "If ye love me, tell me what I shall do. Shall I go back?"

"Back," she repeated, searching his face. "Back to the Mohawk, you mean?"

He nodded.

"Back to Emily. She loved me," he said quietly. "I ken that. Did I do wrong, to let the old woman send me away? Ought I to go back, maybe fight for her, if I had to? Perhaps see if she would come away wi' me, back to the Ridge."

"Oh, Ian." She felt the same sense of helplessness as before, though this time it came without the burden of her own grief. But who was she to tell him anything? How could she be responsible for making that decision for him—for saying to him, stay, or go?

His eyes stayed steady on her face, though, and it came over her—she was his family. And so the responsibility lay in her hands, whether she felt adequate to it or not.

Her chest felt tight, as though she might burst if she took a deep breath. She took it anyway.

"Stay," she said.

He stood looking into her eyes for a long time, his own deep hazel, gold-flecked and serious.

"You could fight him—Ahk …" She fumbled for the syllables of the Mohawk name. "Sun Elk. But you can't fight her. If she's made up her mind that she doesn't want to be with you anymore … Ian, you can't change it."

He blinked, dark lashes cutting off his gaze, and kept his eyes closed, whether in acknowledgement or denial of what she'd said, she didn't know.

"But it's more than that," she said, her voice growing firmer. "It isn't only her, *or* him. Is it?"

"No," he said. His voice sounded distant, almost uncaring, but she knew it wasn't that.

"It's them," she said more softly. "All the mothers. The grandmothers. The women. The—the children." Clan and family and tribe and nation; custom, spirit, tradition—the strands that wrapped Works with Her Hands and held her to the earth, secure. And above all, children. Those loud small voices that drowned the voices of the wood, and kept a soul from wandering through the night.

No one knew the strength of such bonds better than one who had walked the earth without them, outcast and alone. She had, and he had, and they both knew the truth.

"It's them," he echoed softly, and opened his eyes. They were dark with loss, the color of shadows in the deepest wood. "And them." He turned his head, to look upward, into the trees beyond the creek, above the bones of the mammoth that lay trapped in the earth, stripped to the sky and mute to all prayer. He turned back, raised a hand, and touched her cheek.

"I'll stay, then."

* * *

They camped for the night on the far side of the beaver pond. The litter of wood chips and debarked saplings made good kindling for their fire.

There was little to eat; no more than a hatful of bitter fox-grapes and the heel of bread, so hard by now that it had to be dunked in water to chew. It didn't matter; neither one of them was hungry, and Rollo had disappeared to hunt for himself.

They sat silently, watching the fire die down. There was no need to keep it going; the night was not cold, and they would not linger in the morning—home was too near.

At last, Ian stirred a bit, and Brianna glanced at him.

"What was your father's name?" he asked very formally.

"Frank—er … Franklin. Franklin Wolverton Randall."

“An Englishman, then?”

“Very,” she said, smiling in spite of herself.

He nodded, murmuring “Franklin Wolverton Randall” to himself, as though to commit it to memory, then looked at her seriously.

“If ever I find myself in a church again, then, I shall light a candle to his memory.”

“I expect … he’d like that.”

He nodded, and leaned back, back braced against a longleaf pine. The ground nearby was littered with the cones; he picked up a handful and tossed them, one by one, into the fire.

“What about Lizzie?” she asked after a little while. “She’s always been fond of you.” To put it mildly: Lizzie had wilted and pined for weeks, when he had been lost to the Iroquois. “And now that she’s not marrying Manfred …”

He tilted back his head, eyes closed, and rested it against the trunk of the pine.

“I’ve thought of it,” he admitted.

“But …?”

“Aye, but.” He opened his eyes and gave her a wry look. “I’d ken where I was, if I woke beside her. But where I’d be is in bed wi’ my wee sister. I think I’m maybe not so desperate as that. Yet,” he added as an obvious afterthought.

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BLACK PUDDING

I was in the middle of a black pudding when Ronnie Sinclair appeared in the yard, carrying two small whisky casks. Several more were bound in a neatly corrugated cascade down his back, which made him look like some exotic form of caterpillar, balanced precariously upright in mid-pupation. It was a chilly day, but he was sweating freely from the long walk uphill—and cursing in similar vein.

“Why in the name of Bride did Himself build the frigging house up here in the godforsaken clouds?” he demanded without ceremony. “Why not where a bloody wagon could reach the yard?” He set the casks down carefully, then ducked his head through the straps of the harness to shed his wooden carapace. He sighed in relief, rubbing at his shoulders where the straps had dug.

I ignored the rhetorical questions, and kept stirring, tilting my head toward the house in invitation.

“There’s fresh coffee made,” I said. “And bannocks with honey, too.” My own stomach recoiled slightly at the thought of eating. Once spiced, stuffed, boiled, and fried, black pudding was delicious. The earlier stages, involving as they did arm-deep manipulations in a barrel of semi-coagulated pig’s blood, were substantially less appetizing.

Sinclair, though, looked happier at mention of food. He wiped a sleeve across his sweating forehead and nodded to me, turning toward the house. Then he stopped and turned back.

"Ah. I'd forgot, missus. I've a wee message for yourself, as well." He patted gingerly at his chest, then lower, probing around his ribs until he at length found what he was looking for and extracted it from the layers of his sweat-soaked clothing. He pulled out a damp wad of paper and held it out to me in expectation, ignoring the fact that my right arm was coated with blood nearly to the shoulder, and the left in scarcely better case.

"Put it in the kitchen, why don't you?" I suggested. "Himself's inside. I'll come as soon as I've got this lot sorted. Who—" I started to ask whom the letter was from, but tactfully altered this to, "Who gave it to you?" Ronnie couldn't read—though I saw no marks on the outside of the note, in any case.

"A tinker on his way to Belem's Creek handed it to me," he said. "He didna say who gave it him—only that it was for the healer."

He frowned at the wadded paper, but I saw his eyes slide sideways toward my legs. In spite of the chill, I was barefoot and stripped to my chemise and stays, no more than a smeared apron wrapped around my waist. Ronnie had been looking for a wife for some little time, and in consequence had formed the unconscious habit of appraising the physical attributes of every woman he encountered, without regard to age or availability. He noticed my noticing, and hastily jerked his gaze away.

"That was all?" I asked. "The healer? He didn't give my name?"

Sinclair rubbed a hand through thinning ginger hair, so two spikes stood up over his reddened ears, increasing his naturally sly, foxy look.

"Didna have to, did he?" Without further attempts at conversation, he disappeared into the house, in search of food and Jamie, leaving me to my sanguinary labors.

The worst part was cleaning the blood: swishing an arm through the dark, reeking depths of the barrel to collect the threads of fibrin that formed as the blood began to clot. These clung to my arm and could then be pulled out and rinsed away—repeatedly. At that, it was slightly less nasty than the job of washing out the intestines to be used for the sausage casings; Brianna and Lizzie were doing that, down at the creek.

I peered at the latest results; no fibers visible in the clear red liquid that dripped from my fingers. I dunked my arm again in the water cask that stood beside the blood barrel, balanced on boards laid across a pair of trestles under the big chestnut tree. Jamie and Roger and Arch Bug had dragged the pig—not the white sow, but one of her many offspring from a prior year—into the yard, clubbed it between the eyes with a maul, then swung it up into the branches, slit the throat, and let the blood drain into the barrel.

Roger and Arch had then taken the disemboweled carcass away to be scalded and the bristles scraped off; Jamie's presence was required to deal with Major MacDonald, who had appeared suddenly, puffing and wheezing from the climb up to the Ridge. Between the two, I thought Jamie would much have preferred to deal with the pig.

I finished washing my hands and arms—wasted labor, but necessary to my peace of mind—and dried off with a linen towel. I shoveled double handsful into the barrel from the waiting bowls of barley, oatmeal, and boiled rice, smiling slightly at memory of the Major's plum-red face, and Ronnie Sinclair's complaints. Himself had picked his building site on the Ridge with a great deal of forethought—precisely *because* of the difficulties involved in reaching it.

I ran my fingers through my hair, then took a deep breath and plunged my clean arm back into the barrel. The blood was cooling rapidly. Doused by the cereal, the smell was less immediate now than the metallic reek of fresh, hot blood. The mixture was still warm to the touch, though, and the grains made graceful swirls of white and brown, pale whirlpools drawn down into the blood as I stirred.

Ronnie was right; it hadn't been necessary to identify me further than "the healer." There wasn't another closer than Cross Creek, unless one counted the shamans among the Indians—which most Europeans wouldn't.

I wondered who had sent the note, and whether the matter was urgent. Probably not—at least it was not likely to be a matter of imminent childbirth or serious accident. Word of such events was likely to arrive in person, carried urgently by a friend or relative. A written message entrusted to a tinker couldn't be counted on to be delivered with any sort of promptitude; tinkers wandered or stayed, depending on what work they found.

For that matter, tinkers and tramps seldom came so far as the Ridge, though we had seen three within the last month. I didn't know whether that was the result of our growing population—Fraser's Ridge boasted nearly sixty families now, though the cabins were scattered over ten miles of forested mountain slopes—or something more sinister.

"It's one of the signs, Sassenach," Jamie had told me, frowning after the departing form of the last such temporary guest. "When there is war in the air, men take to the roads."

I thought he was right; I remembered wanderers on the Highland roads, carrying rumors of the Stuart Rising. It was as though the tremors of unrest jarred loose those who were not firmly attached to a place by love of land or family, and the swirling currents of dissension bore them onward, the first premonitory fragments of a slow-motion explosion that would shatter everything. I shivered, the light breeze touching cold through my shift.

The mass of gruel had reached the necessary consistency, something like a very thick, dark-red cream. I shook clumps of clotted grain from my fingers and reached with my clean left hand for the wooden bowl of minced and sauteed onions, standing ready. The strong smell of the onions overlaid the scent of butchery, pleasantly domestic.

The salt was ground, so was the pepper. All I needed now … as if on cue, Roger appeared around the corner of the house, a large basin in his hands, filled with fine-chopped pork fat.

"Just in time!" I said, and nodded toward the barrel. "No, don't dump it in, it has to be measured—roughly." I'd used ten double handsful of oatmeal, ten of rice, ten of barley. Half that total, then—fifteen. I shook back the hair from my eyes again, and carefully scooped up a double handful of the basin's content, dropping it into the barrel with a splat.

"All right, are you?" I asked. I gestured toward a stool with my chin, beginning to work the fat into the mixture with my fingers. Roger was still a trifle pale and tight around the mouth, but he gave me a wry smile as he sat.

"Fine."

"You didn't have to do it, you know."

"Yes, I did." The note of wryness in his voice deepened. "I only wish I'd done it better."

I shrugged, one-shouldered, and reached into the basin he held out for me.

"It takes practice."

Roger had volunteered to kill the pig. Jamie had simply handed him the maul and stood back. I had seen Jamie kill pigs before; he said a brief prayer, blessed the pig, then crushed the skull with one tremendous blow. It had taken Roger five tries, and the memory of the squealing raised gooseflesh on my shoulders even now. Afterward, he had set down the maul, gone behind a tree, and been violently sick.

I scooped another handful. The mix was thickening, developing a greasy feel.

"He should have shown you how."

"I shouldn't think there's anything technically difficult about it," Roger said dryly. "Straightforward enough, after all, to bash an animal on the head."

"Physically, perhaps," I agreed. I scooped more fat, working with both hands now. "There's a prayer for it, you know. For slaughtering an animal, I mean. Jamie should have told you."

He looked faintly startled.

"No, I didn't know." He smiled, a little better now. "Last rites for the pig, aye?"

"I don't think it's for the pig's benefit," I said tartly. We lapsed into silence for a few moments, as I creamed the rest of the fat into the grain mixture, pausing to flick away occasional bits of gristle. I could feel Roger's eyes on the barrel, watching the curious alchemy of cookery, that process of making the transfer of life from one being to another palatable.

"Highland drovers sometimes drain a cup or two of blood from one of their beasts, and mix it with oatmeal to eat on the road," I said. "Nutritious, I suppose, but less tasty."

Roger nodded, abstracted. He had set down the nearly empty basin and was cleaning dried blood from under his nails with the point of his dirk.

"Is it the same as the one for deer?" he asked. "The prayer. I've seen Jamie say that one, though I didn't catch all of the words."

"The gralloch prayer? I don't know. Why don't you ask him?"

Roger worked industriously on a thumbnail, eyes fixed on his hand.

"I wasn't sure if he thought it right for me to know it. Me not being a Catholic, I mean."

I looked down into the mixture, hiding a smile.

"I don't think it would make a difference. That particular prayer is a lot older than the Church of Rome, if I'm not mistaken."

A flicker of interest lit Roger's face, the buried scholar coming to the surface.

"I did think the Gaelic was a very old form—even older than what you hear these days—I mean … now." He flushed a little, realizing what he had said. I nodded, but didn't say anything.

I remembered what it was like, that feeling that one was living in an elaborate make-believe. The feeling that reality existed in another time, another place. I remembered, and with a small shock, realized that it *was* now only memory—for me, time had shifted, as though my illness had pushed me through some final barrier.

Now was my time, reality the scrape of wood and slick of grease beneath my fingers, the arc of the sun that set the rhythm of my days, the nearness of Jamie. It was the other world, of cars and ringing telephones, of alarm clocks and mortgages, that seemed unreal and remote, the stuff of dreams.

Neither Roger nor Bree had made that transition, though. I could see it in the way they behaved, hear it in the echoes of their private conversations. Likely it was because they had each other; they could keep the other time alive, a small shared world between them. For me, the change was easier. I had lived here before, had come this time on purpose, after all—and I had Jamie. No matter what I told him of the future, he could never see it as other than a fairy tale. Our small shared world was built of different things.

I worried now and then about Bree and Roger, though. It was dangerous to treat the past as they sometimes did—as picturesque or curious, a temporary condition that could be escaped. There was no escape for them—whether it was love or duty, Jemmy held them both, a small redheaded anchor to the present. Better—or safer, at least—if they could wholly accept this time as theirs.

"The Indians have it, too," I said to Roger. "The gralloch prayer, or something like it. That's why I said I thought it older than the Church."

He nodded, interested.

"I think that kind of thing is common to all primitive cultures—anyplace where men kill to eat."

Primitive cultures. I caught my lower lip between my teeth, forbearing to point out that primitive or not, if his family were to survive, he personally would very likely be obliged to kill for them. But then I caught sight of his hand, idly rubbing at the dried blood between his fingers. He knew that already. *"Yes, I did,"* he'd said, when I'd told him he need not.

He looked up then, caught my eye, and gave me a faint, tired smile. He understood.

"I think maybe … it's that killing without ceremony seems like murder," he said slowly. "If you have the ceremony—some sort of ritual that acknowledges your necessity …"

"Necessity—and also sacrifice." Jamie's voice came softly from behind me, startling me. I turned my head sharply. He was standing in the shadow of the big red spruce; I wondered how long he'd been there.

"Didn't hear you come out," I said, turning up my face to be kissed as he came to me. "Has the Major gone?"

"No," he said, and kissed my brow, one of the few clean spots left. "I've left him wi' Sinclair for a bit. He's exercised about the

Committee of Safety, aye?” He grimaced, then turned to Roger.

“Aye, ye’ve the right of it,” he said. “Killing’s never a pleasant business, but it’s needful. If ye must spill blood, though, it’s right to take it wi’ thanks.”

Roger nodded, glancing at the mixture I was working, up to my elbows in spilled blood.

“Ye’ll tell me the proper words for the next time, then?”

“Not too late for this time, is it?” I said. Both men looked slightly startled. I raised an eyebrow at Jamie, then Roger. “I did say it wasn’t for the pig.”

Jamie’s eyes met mine with a glint of humor, but he nodded gravely.

“Well enough.”

At my direction, he took up the heavy jar of spices: the ground mixture of mace and marjoram, sage and pepper, parsley and thyme. Roger held out his hands, cupped, and Jamie poured them full. Then Roger rubbed the herbs slowly between his palms, showering the dusty, greenish crumbs into the barrel, their pungent scent mingling with the smell of the blood, as Jamie spoke the words slowly, in an ancient tongue come down from the days of the Norsemen.

“Say it in English,” I said, seeing from Roger’s face that while he spoke the words, he did not recognize them all.

“O Lord, bless the blood and the flesh of this the creature that You gave me,” Jamie said softly. He scooped a pinch of the herbs himself, and rubbed them between thumb and forefinger, in a rain of fragrant dust.

“Created by Your hand as You created man,
Life given for life.
That me and mine may eat with thanks for the gift,
That me and mine may give thanks for Your own sacrifice of
blood and flesh,
Life given for life.”

The last crumbs of green and gray disappeared into the mixture under my hands, and the ritual of the sausage was complete.

* * *

"That was good of ye, Sassenach," Jamie said, drying my clean, wet hands and arms with the towel afterward. He nodded toward the corner of the house, where Roger had disappeared to help with the rest of the butchering, looking somewhat more peaceful. "I did think to tell him before, but I couldna see how to do it."

I smiled and moved close to him. It was a cold, windy day, and now that I had stopped working, the chill drove me closer to seek his warmth. He wrapped his arms around me, and I felt both the reassuring heat of his embrace, and the soft crackle of paper inside his shirt.

"What's that?"

"Oh, a bittie letter Sinclair's brought," he said, drawing back a bit to reach into his shirt. "I didna want to open it while Donald was there, and didna trust him not to be reading it when I went out."

"It's not your letter, anyway," I said, taking the smudged wad of paper from him. "It's mine."

"Oh, is it? Sinclair didna say, just handed it to me."

"He would!" Not unusually, Ronnie Sinclair viewed me—all women, for that matter—as simply a minor appendage of a husband. I rather pitied the woman he might eventually induce to marry him.

I unfolded the note with some difficulty; it had been worn so long next to sweaty skin that the edges had frayed and stuck together.

The message inside was brief and cryptic, but unsettling. It had been scratched into the paper with something like a sharpened stick, using an ink that looked disturbingly like dried blood, though it was more likely berry juice.

"What does it say, Sassenach?" Seeing me frowning at the paper, Jamie moved to the side to look. I held it out to him.

Far down, in one corner, scratched in faint and tiny letters, as though the sender had hoped by this means to escape notice, was the word “Faydree.” Above, in bolder scratchings, the message read

YU

CUM

* * *

“It must be her,” I said, shivering as I drew my shawl closer. It was cold in the surgery, despite the small brazier glowing in the corner, but Ronnie Sinclair and MacDonald were in the kitchen, drinking cider and waiting while the sausages boiled. I spread the note open on my surgery table, its minatory summons dark and peremptory above the timid signature. “Look. Who else could it be?”

“She canna write, surely?” Jamie objected. “Though I suppose it might be that someone wrote it for her,” he amended, frowning.

“No, she could have written this, I think.” Brianna and Roger had come into the surgery, too; Bree reached out and touched the ragged paper, one long finger gently tracing the staggered letters. “I taught her.”

“You did?” Jamie looked surprised. “When?”

“When I stayed at River Run. When you and Mama went to find Roger.” Her wide mouth pressed thin for a moment; it wasn’t an occasion she wished much to remember.

“I taught her the alphabet; I meant to teach her to read and write. We did all the letters—she knew how they sounded, and she could draw them. But then one day she said she couldn’t anymore, and she wouldn’t sit down with me.” She glanced up, a troubled frown between her thick, red brows. “I thought maybe Aunt Jocasta found out, and stopped her.”

“More likely Ulysses. Jocasta would have stopped *you,* lass.” Jamie’s frown matched hers as he glanced at me. “Ye do think it’s Phaedre, then? My aunt’s body slave?”

I shook my head, and bit one corner of my lip in doubt.

“The slaves at River Run do say her name like that—Faydree. And I certainly don’t know anyone else by that name.”

Jamie had questioned Ronnie Sinclair—casually, to give no occasion for alarm or gossip—but the cooper knew no more than he had told me: the note had been handed to him by a tinker, with the simple direction that it was "for the healer."

I leaned over the table, lifting a candle high to look at the note once more. The "F" of the signature had been made with a hesitant, repeated stroke—more than one try before the writer had committed herself to signing it. The more evidence, I thought, of its origin. I didn't know whether it was against the law in North Carolina to teach a slave to read or write, but it was certainly discouraged. While there were marked exceptions—slaves educated to their owners' ends, like Ulysses himself—it was on the whole a dangerous skill, and one a slave would go some way to conceal.

"She wouldn't have risked sending word like this, unless it was a serious matter," Roger said. He stood behind Bree, one hand on her shoulder, looking down at the note she held flattened on the table. "But what?"

"Have you heard from your aunt lately?" I asked Jamie, but I knew the answer before he shook his head. Any word from River Run that reached the Ridge would have been a matter of public knowledge within hours.

We had not gone to the Gathering at Mt. Helicon this year; there was too much to do on the Ridge and Jamie wished to avoid the heated politics involved. Still, Jocasta and Duncan had meant to be there. Anything wrong would surely have been a matter of general gossip, which would have reached us long since.

"So it is not only serious, but a private matter to the slave, too," Jamie said. "Otherwise, my aunt would have written, or Duncan sent word." His two stiff fingers tapped once, softly, against his thigh.

We stood around the table, staring at the note as though it were a small white slab of dynamite. The scent of boiling sausages filled the cold air, warm and comforting.

"Why you?" Roger asked, looking up at me. "Do you think it might be a medical matter? If she were ill, say—or pregnant?"

"Not illness," I said. "Too urgent." It was a week's ride to River Run at least—in good weather, and barring accident. Heaven knew how long it had taken the note to make its way up to Fraser's Ridge.

"But if she was pregnant? Maybe." Brianna pursed her lips, still frowning at the paper. "I think she thinks of Mama as a friend. She'd tell you before she'd tell Aunt Jocasta, I think."

I nodded, but reluctantly. Friendship was too strong a word; people situated as Phaedre and I could not be friends. Liking was constrained by too many things—suspicion, mistrust, the vast chasm of difference that slavery imposed.

And yet there was a certain feeling of sympathy between us, that much was true. I had worked with her, side by side, planting herbs and harvesting them, making simples for the stillroom, explaining their uses. We had buried a dead girl together and plotted to protect a runaway slave accused of her murder. She had a certain talent with the sick, did Phaedre, and some knowledge of herbs. Any minor matter, she could deal with herself. But something like an unexpected pregnancy …

"What does she think I could do, though, I wonder?" I was thinking out loud, and my fingertips felt cold in contemplation. An unexpected child born to a slave would be of no concern to an owner—to the contrary, it would be welcomed as additional property; but I had heard stories of slave women who killed a child at birth, rather than have the babe brought up in slavery. Phaedre was a house slave, though, well-treated, and Jocasta did not separate slave families, I knew that. If it were that, Phaedre's situation was surely not so dire—and yet, who was I to judge?

I blew out a cloud of smoky breath, uncertain.

"I just can't see why—I mean, she couldn't possibly expect that I'd help her to get rid of a child. And for anything else … why me? There are midwives and healers much closer. It just doesn't make sense."

"What if—" Brianna said, and stopped. She pursed her lips in speculation, looking from me to Jamie and back. "What if," she said carefully, "she was pregnant, but the father was … someone it shouldn't be?"

A wary but humorous speculation sprang up in Jamie's eyes, increasing the resemblance between him and Brianna.

"Who, lass?" he said. "Farquard Campbell?"

I laughed out loud at the thought, and Brianna snorted with mirth, white wisps of breath floating round her head. The notion of the very upright—and quite elderly—Farquard Campbell seducing a house slave was …

"Well, no," Brianna said. "Though he *does* have all those children. But I just thought suddenly—what if it was Duncan?"

Jamie cleared his throat, and avoided catching my eye. I bit my lip, feeling my face start to go red. Duncan had confessed his chronic impotence to Jamie before Duncan's wedding to Jocasta—but Brianna didn't know.

"Oh, I shouldna think it likely," Jamie said, sounding a trifle choked. He coughed, and fanned smoke from the brazier away from his face. "What gives ye that notion, lass?"

"Nothing about Duncan," she assured him. "But Aunt Jocasta *is*—well, old. And you know what men can be like."

"No, what?" asked Roger blandly, making me cough with the effort to suppress a laugh.

Jamie eyed her with a certain amount of cynicism.

"A good deal better than you do, *a nighean.* And while I wouldna wager much on some men, I think I should feel safe in laying odds that Duncan Innes isna the man to be breaking his marriage vows with his wife's black slave."

I made a small noise, and Roger lifted one eyebrow at me.

"Are you all right?"

"Fine," I said, sounding strangled. "Just—fine." I put a corner of the shawl over my no-doubt purple face and coughed ostentatiously. "It's … smoky in here, isn't it?"

"Maybe so," Brianna conceded, addressing Jamie. "It might not be that at all. It's just that Phaedre sent the note to 'the healer,' probably because she didn't want to use Mama's name, in case anybody saw the note before it got here. I just thought, maybe it wasn't really Mama she wants—maybe it's you."

That sobered both Jamie and me, and we glanced at each other. It was a definite possibility, and one that hadn't occurred to either of us.

"She couldn't send a note direct to you without rousing all kinds of curiosity," Bree went on, frowning at the note. "But she could say 'the healer' without putting a name on it. And she'd know that if Mama came, you'd probably come with her, at this time of year. Or if you didn't, Mama could send for you openly."

"It's a thought," Jamie said slowly. "But why in God's name might she want *me*?"

"Only one way to find out," said Roger, practical. He looked at Jamie. "Most of the outside work is done; the crops and the hay are in, the slaughtering's finished. We can manage here, if you want to go."

Jamie stood still for a moment, frowning in thought, then crossed to the window and raised the sash. A cold wind blew into the room, and Bree pinned the fluttering note to the table to keep it from taking wing. The coals in the small brazier smoked and flamed higher, and the bunches of dried herbs rustled uneasily overhead.

Jamie thrust his head out the window and breathed in deeply, eyes closed like one savoring the bouquet of fine wine.

"Cold and clear," he announced, drawing in his head and closing the window. "Clear weather for three days, at least. We could be off the mountain by that time, and we ride briskly." He smiled at me; the tip of his nose was red with the cold. "In the meantime, d'ye think those sausages are ready yet?"

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BETRAYALS

A slave I didn’t recognize opened the door to us, a broad-built woman in a yellow turban. She eyed us severely, but Jamie gave her no chance to speak, pushing rudely past her into the hall.

“He’s Mrs. Cameron’s nephew,” I felt obliged to explain to her, as I followed him.

“I can see *that,*” she muttered, in a lilt that came from Barbados. She glared after him, making it evident that she detected a family resemblance in terms of high-handedness, as well as physique.

“I’m his wife,” I added, overcoming the reflexive urge to shake her hand, and bowing slightly instead. “Claire Fraser. Nice to meet you.”

She blinked, disconcerted, but before she could reply, I had whisked past her, following Jamie toward the small drawing room where Jocasta was inclined to sit in the afternoons.

The door to the drawing room was closed, and as Jamie set his hand on the knob, a sharp yelp came from inside—the prelude to a barrage of frenzied barking as the door swung wide.

Stopped in his tracks, Jamie paused, hand on the door, frowning at the small brown bundle of fur that leaped to and fro at his feet, eyes bulging in hysteria as it barked its head off.

“What is *that*?” he said, edging his way into the room as the creature made abortive dashes at his boots, still yapping.

"It's a wee dog, what d'ye think?" Jocasta said acerbically. She lifted herself from her chair, frowning in the direction of the noise. "*Sheas,* Samson."

"Samson? Oh, to be sure. The hair." Smiling despite himself, Jamie squatted and extended a closed fist toward the dog. Throttling back to a low growl, the dog extended a suspicious nose toward his knuckles.

"Where's Delilah?" I asked, edging into the room behind him.

"Ah, ye've come, as well, Claire?" Jocasta's face swiveled in my direction, lit by a smile. "A rare treat, to have the both of ye. I dinna suppose Brianna or the bittie lad have come along—no, I would have heard them." Dismissing that, she sat down again, and waved toward the hearth.

"As for Delilah, the lazy creature's asleep by the fire; I can hear her snoring."

Delilah was a large whitish hound of indeterminate breed but plentiful skin; it drooped around her in folds of relaxation as she lay on her back, paws curled over a freckled belly. Hearing her name, she snorted briefly, opened one eye a crack, then closed it again.

"I see ye've had a few changes since I was last here," Jamie observed, rising to his feet. "Where is Duncan? And Ulysses?"

"Gone. Looking for Phaedre." Jocasta had lost weight; the high MacKenzie cheekbones stood out sharp, and her skin looked thin and creased.

"Looking for her?" Jamie glanced sharply at her. "What's become of the lass?"

"Run away." She spoke with her usual self-possession, but her voice was bleak.

"Run away? But—are you sure?" Her workbox had been upset, the contents spilled on the floor. I knelt and began to tidy the confusion, picking up the scattered reels of thread.

"Weel, she's gone," Jocasta said with some acerbity. "Either she's run, or someone's stolen her. And I canna think who would have the gall or the skill to snatch her from my house, and no one seeing."

I exchanged a quick glance with Jamie, who shook his head, frowning. Jocasta was rubbing a fold of her skirt between thumb and forefinger; I could see small worn spots in the nap of the fabric near her hand, where she had done it repeatedly. Jamie saw it, too.

"When did she go, Auntie?" he asked quietly.

"Four weeks past. Duncan and Ulysses have been gone for two."

That fitted well enough with the arrival of the note. No telling how long before her disappearance the note had actually been written, given the vagaries of delivery.

"I see Duncan took pains to leave ye some company," Jamie observed. Samson had abandoned his watchdog role, and was sniffing assiduously at Jamie's boots. Delilah rolled onto her side with a luxurious groan and opened two luminous brown eyes, through which she regarded me with utmost tranquillity.

"Oh, aye, they're that." Half-grudgingly, Jocasta leaned out from her chair and located the hound's head, scratching behind the long, floppy ears. "Though Duncan meant them for my protection, or so he said."

"A sensible precaution," Jamie said mildly. It was; we had had no further word of Stephen Bonnet, nor had Jocasta heard the voice of the masked man again. But lacking the concrete reassurance of a corpse, either one could presumably pop up at any time.

"Why would the lassie run, Aunt?" Jamie asked. His tone was still mild, but persistent.

Jocasta shook her head, lips compressed.

"I dinna ken at all, Nephew."

"Nothing's happened of late? Nothing out of the ordinary?" he pressed.

"Do ye not think I should have said at once?" she asked sharply. "No. I woke late one morning, and couldna hear her about my room. There was nay tea by my bed, and the fire had gone out; I could smell the ashes. I called for her, and there was no answer. Gone, she was—vanished without a trace." She tilted her head toward him with a grim sort of "so there" expression.

I raised a brow at Jamie and touched the pocket I wore at my waist, containing the note. Ought we to tell her?

He nodded, and I drew the note from my pocket, unfolding it on the arm of her chair, as he explained.

Jocasta's look of displeasure faded into one of puzzled astonishment.

"Whyever should she send for you, *a nighean*?" she asked, turning to me.

"I don't know—perhaps she was with child?" I suggested. "Or had contracted a—disease of some sort?" I didn't want to suggest syphilis openly, but it was a possibility. If Manfred had infected Mrs. Sylvie, and she had then passed the infection on to one or more of her customers in Cross Creek, who then had visited River Run … but that would mean, perhaps, that Phaedre had had some kind of relationship with a white man. *That* was something a slave woman would go to great lengths to keep secret.

Jocasta, no fool, was rapidly coming to similar conclusions, though her thoughts ran parallel to mine.

"A child, that would be no great matter," she said, flicking a hand. "But if she had a lover … aye," she said thoughtfully. "She might have gone off with a lover. But then, why send for you?"

Jamie was growing restive, impatient with so much unprovable speculation.

"Perhaps she might think ye meant to sell her, Aunt, if ye discovered such a thing?"

"To *sell* her?"

Jocasta broke out laughing. Not her usual social laughter, nor even the sound of genuine amusement; this was shocking—loud and crude, almost vicious in its hilarity. It was her brother Dougal's laugh, and the blood ran momentarily cold in my veins.

I glanced at Jamie, to find him looking down at her, face gone blank. Not in puzzlement; it was the mask he wore to hide strong feeling. So he'd heard that grisly echo, too.

She seemed unable to stop. Her hands clutched the carved arms of her chair and she leaned forward, face turning red, gasping for breath between those unnerving deep guffaws.

Delilah rolled onto her belly and uttered a low *"wuff"* of unease, looking anxiously round, unsure what the matter was, but convinced that something wasn't right. Samson had backed under the settee, growling.

Jamie reached out and took her by the shoulder—not gently.

"Be still, Aunt," he said. "Ye're frightening your wee dogs."

She stopped, abruptly. There was no sound but the faint wheeze of her breathing, nearly as unnerving as the laughter. She sat still, bolt upright in her chair, hands on the arms, the blood ebbing slowly from her face and her eyes gone dark and bright, fixed as though on something that only she could see.

"Sell her," she murmured, and her mouth creased as though the laughter were about to break out of her again. She didn't laugh, though, but stood up suddenly. Samson yapped once, in astonishment.

"Come with me."

She was through the door before either of us could say anything. Jamie lifted an eyebrow at me, but motioned me through the door before him.

She knew the house intimately; she made her way down the hall toward the door to the stables with no more than an occasional touch of the wall to keep her bearings, walking as fast as though she could see. Outside, though, she paused, feeling with one extended foot for the edge of the brick-laid path.

Jamie stepped up beside her and took her firmly by the elbow.

"Where d'ye wish to go?" he asked, a certain resignation in his tone.

"To the carriage barn." The peculiar laughter had left her, but her face was still flushed, her strong chin lifted with an air of defiance. Who was she defying? I wondered.

The carriage barn was shadowed and tranquil, dust motes drifting gold in the stir of air from the opened doors. A wagon, a carriage, a sledge, and the elegant two-wheeled trap sat like large, placid beasts on the straw-covered floor. I glanced at Jamie, whose mouth curled slightly as he looked at me; we had taken temporary refuge in that carriage, during the chaos of Jocasta's wedding to Duncan, almost four years before.

Jocasta paused in the doorway, one hand braced on the jamb and breathing deeply, as though orienting herself. She made no move to enter the barn herself, though, but instead nodded toward the depths of the building.

"Along the back wall, *an mhic mo peather*. There are boxes there; I want the large chest made of wickerwork, the one as high as your knee, with a rope tied round it."

I had not really noticed during our earlier excursion into the carriage barn, but the back wall was stacked high with boxes, crates, and bundles, piled two and three deep. With such explicit direction, though, Jamie made short work of finding the desired container, and dragged it out into the light, covered with dust and bits of straw.

"Shall I carry it into the house for ye, Auntie?" he asked, rubbing a finger under a twitching nose.

She shook her head, stooping and feeling for the knot of the rope that bound it.

"No. I shallna have it the house. I swore I should not."

"Let me." I laid a hand on hers to still her fumbling, then took charge of the knot myself. Whoever had tied it had been thorough, but not skilled; I had it loose within a minute, and the catch undone.

The wicker chest was filled with pictures. Bundles of loose drawings, done in pencil, ink, and charcoal, neatly tied with faded ribbons of colored silk. Several bound sketchbooks. And a number of paintings: a few large unframed squares, and two smaller boxes of miniatures, all framed, stacked on edge like a deck of cards.

I heard Jocasta sigh, above me, and looked up. She stood still, eyes closed, and I could tell that she was inhaling deeply, breathing in the smell of the pictures—the smell of oils and charcoal, gesso, paper, canvas, linseed and turpentine, a full-bodied ghost that floated out of its wicker casket, transparently vivid against the background scents of straw and dust, wood and wicker.

Her fingers curled, thumb rubbing against the tips of her other fingers, unconsciously rolling a brush between them. I had seen Bree do that, now and then, looking at something she wanted to paint. Jocasta sighed again, then opened her eyes and knelt down beside me, reaching in to run her fingers lightly over the cache of buried art, searching.

"The oils," she said. "Fetch those out."

I had already taken out the boxes of miniatures. Jamie squatted on the other side of the casket, lifting the bundles of loose drawings and the sketchbooks, so that I could pull out the larger oils, laid on edge along the side of the container.

"A portrait," she said, head on one side to listen to the flat, hollow sound as I laid each one against the side of the wicker box. "An old man."

It was plain which one she meant. Two of the large canvases were landscapes, three, portraits. I recognized Farquard Campbell, much younger than his present age, and what must be a self-portrait of Jocasta herself, done perhaps twenty years before. I had no time to look at these, though, interesting as they were.

The third portrait looked to have been done much more recently than the others, and showed the effects of Jocasta's failing eyesight.

The edges were blurred, the colors muddy, shapes just slightly distorted, so that the elderly gentleman who looked out of the clouded oil seemed somehow disturbing, as though he belonged to some race not quite human, in spite of the orthodoxy of his wig and high white stock.

He wore a black coat and waistcoat, old-fashioned in style, with the folds of a tartan plaid draped over his shoulder, caught up with a brooch whose golden gleam was echoed by the ornamental knurl atop the dirk the old man held, his fingers bent and gnarled with arthritis. I recognized that dirk.

"So that is Hector Cameron." Jamie recognized it, too. He looked at the painting with fascination.

Jocasta reached out a hand, touching the surface of the paint as though to identify it by touch.

"Aye, that's him," she said dryly. "Never saw him in life, did ye, Nephew?"

Jamie shook his head.

"Once perhaps—but I was nay more than a babe at the time." His gaze traced the old man's features with deep interest, as though looking for clues to Hector Cameron's character. Such clues were evident; the man's force of personality fairly vibrated from the canvas.

He had strong bones, the man in the portrait, though the flesh hung from them in the infirmity of age. The eyes were still sharp, but one was half-closed—it might have been only a drooping eyelid caused by a small stroke, but the impression was that of an habitual manner of looking at the world; one eye always narrowed in cynical appraisal.

Jocasta was searching through the contents of the chest, fingers darting lightly here and there, like hunting moths. She touched one box of miniatures, and lifted it with a small grunt of satisfaction.

She ran a finger slowly along the edge of each miniature, and I saw that the frames were patterned differently; squares and ovals, smooth gilded wood, tarnished silver laid in a rope border, another studded with tiny rosettes. She found one she recognized, and plucked it from the box, handing it absently to me as she went back to her search.

The miniature was also of Hector Cameron—but this portrait done many years before the other. Dark wavy hair lay loose on his shoulders, a small ornamental braid down one side sporting two grouse's feathers, in the ancient Highland style. The same solid bones were there, but the flesh was firm; he had been handsome, Hector Cameron.

It *was* an habitual expression; whether by inclination or accident of birth, the right eye was narrowed here, as well, though not as much as in the older portrait.

My scrutiny was interrupted by Jocasta, who laid a hand on my arm.

"Is this the lass?" she asked, thrusting another of the miniatures at me.

I took it, puzzled, and gasped when I turned it over. It was Phaedre, done when the girl was in her early teens. Her usual cap was missing; she wore a simple kerchief bound over her hair that threw the bones of her face into bold relief. Hector Cameron's bones.

Jocasta nudged the box of paintings with her foot.

“Give those to your daughter, Nephew. Tell her to paint them over—it would be shame to waste the canvas.” Without waiting for response, she set off back toward the house alone, hesitating only briefly at the fork in the path, steering by scent and memory.

* * *

There was a profound silence in the wake of Jocasta’s departure, broken only by the singing of a mockingbird in a nearby pine.

“I will be damned,” Jamie said at last, taking his eyes off the figure of his aunt as she vanished into the house, alone. He didn’t look shocked, so much as deeply bemused. “Did the girl know, d’ye think?”

“Almost certainly,” I said. “The slaves would surely have known; some must have been here when she was born; they’d have told her, if she wasn’t quick enough to have worked it out herself—and I certainly think she is.”

He nodded, and leaned back against the wall of the carriage house, looking meditatively down his long nose at the wicker chest of paintings. I felt a strong reluctance to go back to the house, myself. The buildings were beautiful, a mellow gold in the late-fall sun, and the grounds were peaceful, well-ordered. The sound of cheerful voices came from the kitchen garden, several horses grazed contentedly in the paddock nearby, and far away down the distant silver river, a small boat came down, a four-oared piretta, its oars stroking the surface, brisk and graceful as a water strider.

“Where every prospect pleases, and only man is vile,” I remarked. Jamie gave me a brief glance of incomprehension, then returned to his thoughts.

So Jocasta would by no means sell Phaedre, and thought Phaedre knew it. I wondered exactly why. Because she felt some duty to the girl, as the child of her husband? Or as a subtle form of revenge on that long-dead husband, keeping his illegitimate daughter as a slave, a body servant? I supposed that the two were not entirely exclusive, come to that—I had known Jocasta long enough to realize that her motives were rarely simple.

There was a chill in the air, with the sun low in the sky. I leaned against the carriage house beside Jamie, feeling the stored warmth of the sun soak from its bricks into my body, and wished that we could step into the old farm wagon and drive posthaste back to the Ridge, leaving River Run to deal with its own legacies of bitterness.

But the note was in my pocket, crackling when I moved. *YU CUM.* Not an appeal I could dismiss. But I *had* come—and now what?

Jamie straightened suddenly, looking toward the river. I looked, too, and saw that the boat had drawn into the dock there. A tall figure sprang up onto the dock, then turned to help another out of the boat. The second man was shorter, and moved in an odd fashion, off-kilter and out of rhythm.

"Duncan," I said at once, seeing this. "And Ulysses. They're back!"

"Aye," Jamie said, taking my arm and starting toward the house. "But they havena found her."

* * *

> *RUNAWAY or STOLEN on the 31st of October, a Negro Wench, twenty-two years of Age, above middling Height and comely in Appearance, with a Scar on the left Forearm in the shape of an Oval, caused by a Burn. Dressed in an indigo Gown, with a green-striped Apron, white Cap, brown Stockings, and leather Shoes. No missing Teeth. Known by the Name of "FAYDREE." Communicate Particulars to D. Innes, River Run Plantation, in the vicinity of Cross Creek. Substantial Reward will be paid for good Information.*

I smoothed the crumpled broadsheet, which also sported a crude drawing of Phaedre, looking vaguely cross-eyed. Duncan had emptied his pockets and dropped a handful of these sheets on the table in the hall when he had come in the afternoon before, exhausted and dispirited. They had, he said, posted the bills in every tavern and public house between Campbelton and Wilmington, making inquiries as they went—but to no avail. Phaedre had vanished like the dew.

"May I have the marmalade, please?" Jamie and I were taking breakfast alone, neither Jocasta nor Duncan having appeared this morning. I was enjoying it, despite the gloomy atmosphere. Breakfast at River Run was normally a lavish affair, extending even to a pot of real tea—Jocasta must be paying her pet smuggler an absolute fortune for it; there was none to be found between Virginia and Georgia, to the best of my knowledge.

Jamie was frowning at another of the broadsheets, deep in thought. He didn't take his eyes off it, but his hand roamed vaguely over the table, settled on the cream jug, and passed it across to me.

Ulysses, showing little sign of his long journey beyond a certain heaviness of the eyes, stepped silently forward, took the cream jug, replaced it neatly, and set the pot of marmalade beside my plate.

"Thank you," I said, and he graciously inclined his head.

"Will you require further bloaters, madam?" he inquired. "Or more ham?"

I shook my head, my mouth being full of toast, and he glided off, picking up a loaded tray by the door, this presumably intended for Jocasta, Duncan, or both.

Jamie watched him go, with a sort of abstracted expression.

"I have been thinking, Sassenach," he said.

"I would never have guessed it," I assured him. "About what?"

He looked momentarily surprised, but then smiled, realizing.

"Ye kent what I told ye, Sassenach, about Brianna and the widow McCallum? That she wouldna scruple long to act, if Roger Mac were to be taking heed where he shouldn't?"

"I do," I said.

He nodded, as though verifying something to himself.

"Well, the lass comes by it honestly enough. The MacKenzies of Leoch are proud as Lucifer, all of them, and black jealous with it. Ye dinna want to cross one—still less to betray one."

I regarded him warily over my cup of tea, wondering where this was leading.

“I thought their defining trait was charm, allied with cunning. And as for betrayal, both your uncles were past hands at it.”

“The two go together, do they not?” he asked, reaching across to dip a spoon in the marmalade. “Ye must beguile someone before ye can betray them, no? And I am inclined to think that a man who would betray is all the quicker to resent betrayal himself. Or a woman,” he added delicately.

“Oh, really,” I said, sipping with pleasure. “Jocasta, you mean.” Put in those terms, I could see it. The MacKenzies of Leoch had powerful personalities—I did wonder what Jamie’s maternal grandfather, the notorious Red Jacob, had been like—and I’d noted small commonalities of behavior between Jocasta and her elder brothers before.

Colum and Dougal had had an unshakable loyalty to each other—but to no one else. And Jocasta was essentially alone, separated from her family since her first marriage at fifteen. Being a woman, it was natural that the charm should be more apparent in her—but that didn’t mean the cunning wasn’t there. Nor yet the jealousy, I supposed.

“Well, plainly she knew that Hector betrayed her—and I do wonder whether she painted that portrait of Phaedre as a means of indicating to the world at large that she knew it, or merely as a private message to Hector—but what has that got to do with the present situation?”

He shook his head.

“Not Hector,” he said. “Duncan.”

I stared at him, absolutely open-mouthed. All other considerations aside, Duncan was impotent; he had told Jamie so, on the eve of his wedding to Jocasta. Jamie smiled crookedly, and reaching across the table, put a thumb under my chin and pushed my mouth gently shut.

“It’s a thought, Sassenach, is all I’m saying. But I think I must go and have a word wi’ the man. Will ye come?”

* * *

Duncan was in the small room he used as a private office, tucked away above the stables, along with the tiny rooms that housed the grooms and stable-lads. He was slumped in a chair, looking hopelessly at the untidy stacks of papers and undusted ledgers that had accumulated on every horizontal surface.

He looked desperately tired, and a great deal older than when I had last seen him, at Flora MacDonald's barbecue. His gray hair was thinning, and when he turned to greet us, the light of the sun shone across his face, and I saw the thin line of the harelip scar Roger had mentioned, hidden in the luxuriant growth of his mustache.

Something vital seemed to have gone out of him, and when Jamie delicately broached the subject upon which we had come, he made no attempt at all to deny it. In fact, he seemed glad, rather than otherwise, to have it out.

"Ye did lie wi' the lass, then, Duncan?" Jamie asked directly, wanting to have the fact established.

"Well, no," he said vaguely. "I should have liked to, o' course—but what wi' her sleeping in Jo's dressing room …" At this reference to his wife, his face flushed a deep, unhealthy red.

"I mean, ye've had carnal knowledge of the woman, have ye not?" Jamie said, keeping a grip on his patience.

"Oh, aye." He gulped. "Aye. I did."

"How?" I asked bluntly.

The flush deepened, to such a degree that I feared he might have an apoplexy on the spot. He breathed like a grampus for a bit, though, and finally, his complexion began to fade back to something like normal.

"She fed me," he said at last, rubbing a hand tiredly across his eyes. "Every day."

Jocasta rose late and breakfasted in her sitting room, attended by Ulysses, to make plans for the day. Duncan, who had risen before dawn every day of his life, usually in the expectation of a dry crust or at most, a bit of drammach—oatmeal mixed with water—woke now to find a steaming pot of tea beside his bed, accompanied by a bowl of creamy parritch, liberally garnished with honey and cream, toast drenched in butter, eggs fried with ham.

"Sometimes a wee fish, rolled in cornmeal, crisp and sweet," he added, with mournful reminiscence.

"Well, that's verra seductive, to be sure, Duncan," Jamie said, not without sympathy. "A man's vulnerable when he's hungry." He gave me a wry glance. "But still …"

Duncan had been grateful to Phaedre for her kindness, and had—being a man, after all—admired her beauty, though in a purely disinterested sort of way, he assured us.

"To be sure," Jamie said with marked skepticism. "What happened?"

Duncan had dropped the butter, was the answer, whilst struggling to butter his toast one-handed. Phaedre had hastened to retrieve the pieces of the fallen dish, and then hurried to fetch a cloth and wipe the streaks of butter from the floor—and then from Duncan's chest.

"Well, I was in my nightshirt," he murmured, starting to go red again. "And she was—she had—" His hand rose and made vague motions in the vicinity of his chest, which I took to indicate that Phaedre's bodice had displayed her bosom to particular advantage while in such close proximity to him.

"And?" Jamie prompted ruthlessly.

And, it appeared, Duncan's anatomy had taken note of the fact—a circumstance admitted with such strangulated modesty that we could barely hear him.

"But I thought you couldn't—" I began.

"Oh, I couldna," he assured me hastily. "Only at night, like, dreaming. But not waking, not since I had the accident. Perhaps it was being so early i' the morning; my cock thought I was still asleep."

Jamie made a low Scottish noise expressing considerable doubt as to this supposition, but urged Duncan to continue, with a certain amount of impatience.

Phaedre had taken notice in her turn, it transpired.

"She was only sorry for me," Duncan said frankly. "I could tell as much. But she put her hand on me, soft. So soft," he repeated, almost inaudibly.

He had been sitting on his bed—and had gone on sitting there in dumb amazement, as she took away the breakfast tray, lifted his nightshirt, climbed on the bed with her skirts neatly tucked above her round brown thighs, and with great tenderness and gentleness, had welcomed back his manhood.

"Once?" Jamie demanded. "Or did ye keep doing it?"

Duncan put his head in his hand, a fairly eloquent admission, under the circumstances.

"How long did this … er … liaison go on?" I asked more gently.

Two months, perhaps three. Not every day, he hastened to add—only now and then. And they had been very careful.

"I wouldna ever have wanted to shame Jo, ken," he said very earnestly. "And I kent weel I shouldna be doing it, 'twas a great sin, and yet I couldna keep from—" He broke, off, swallowing. "It's all my fault, what's happened, let the sin be on me! Och, my puir darling lass …"

He fell silent, shaking his head like an old, sad, flea-ridden dog. I felt terribly sorry for him, regardless of the morality of the situation. The collar of his shirt was turned awkwardly under, strands of his grizzled hair trapped beneath his coat; I gently pulled them out and straightened it, though he took no heed.

"D'ye think she's dead, Duncan?" Jamie asked quietly, and Duncan blanched, his skin going the same gray as his hair.

"I canna bring myself to think it, *Mac Dubh,*" he said, and his eyes filled with tears. "And—and yet …"

Jamie and I exchanged uneasy glances. And yet. Phaedre had taken no money when she disappeared. How could a female slave travel very far without detection, advertised and hunted, lacking a horse, money, or anything beyond a pair of leather shoes? A man might possibly make it to the mountains, and manage to survive in the woods, if he were tough and resourceful—but a girl? A house slave?

Someone had taken her—or else she was dead.

None of us wanted to voice that thought, though. Jamie heaved a great sigh, and taking a clean handkerchief from his sleeve, put it in Duncan's hand.

"I shall pray for her, Duncan—wherever she may be. And for you, *a charaid* … and for you."

Duncan nodded, not looking up, the handkerchief clutched tight. It was clear that any attempt at comfort would be futile, and so at last we left him sitting there, in his tiny, landlocked room, so far from the sea.

We made our way back slowly, not speaking, but holding hands, feeling the strong need to touch each other. The day was bright, but there was a storm coming up; ragged clouds were streaming in from the east, and the breeze came in gusts that whirled my skirts about like a twirling parasol.

The wind was less on the back terrace, sheltered as it was by its waist-high wall. Looking up from here, I could just see the window that Phaedre had been looking out of when I'd found her there, the night of the barbecue.

"She told me that something wasn't right," I said. "The night of Mrs. MacDonald's barbecue. Something was troubling her then."

Jamie shot me an interested glance.

"Oh, aye? But she didna mean Duncan, surely?" he objected.

"I know." I shrugged helplessly. "She didn't seem to know what was wrong herself—she just kept saying, 'Something ain't right.' "

Jamie took a deep breath and blew it out again, shaking his head.

"In a way, I suppose I hope that whatever it was, it had to do with her going. For if it wasna to do with her and Duncan …" He trailed off, but I had no difficulty in finishing the thought.

"Then it wasn't to do with your aunt, either," I said. "Jamie—do you really think Jocasta might have had her killed?"

It should have sounded ridiculous, spoken aloud like that. The horrible thing was that it didn't.

Jamie made that small, shrugging gesture he used when very uncomfortable about something, as though his coat was too tight.

"Had she her sight, I should think it—possible, at least," he said. "To be betrayed by Hector—and she blamed him already, for the death of her girls. So her daughters are dead, but there is Phaedre, alive, every day, a constant reminder of insult. And then to be betrayed yet again, by Duncan, *with* Hector's daughter?"

He rubbed a knuckle under his nose. "I should think any woman of spirit might be … moved."

"Yes," I said, imagining what I might think or feel under the same circumstances. "Certainly. But to murder—that *is* what we're talking about, isn't it? Couldn't she simply have sold the girl?"

"No," he said thoughtfully. "She couldn't. We made provision to safeguard her money when she wed—but not the property. Duncan is the owner of River Run—and all that goes with it."

"Including Phaedre." I felt hollow, and a little sick.

"As I said. Had she her sight, I shouldna be astonished at all by the thought. As it is …"

"Ulysses," I said, with certainty, and he nodded reluctantly. Ulysses was not only Jocasta's eyes, but her hands, as well. I didn't think he would have killed Phaedre at his mistress's command—but if Jocasta had poisoned the girl, for instance, Ulysses might certainly have helped to dispose of the body.

I felt an odd air of unreality—even with what I knew of the MacKenzie family, calmly discussing the possibility of Jamie's aged aunt having murdered someone … and yet … I *did* know the MacKenzies.

"*If* my aunt had any hand at all in the matter," Jamie said. "After all, Duncan said they were discreet. And it may be the lass was taken off—perhaps by the man my aunt recalls from Coigach. It could be he'd think Phaedre might help him to the gold, no?"

That was a somewhat happier thought. And it *did* fit with Phaedre's premonition—if that's what it was—which had occurred the same day that the man from Coigach came.

"I suppose all we *can* do is pray for her, poor thing," I said. "I don't suppose there's a patron saint of abducted persons, is there?"

"Saint Dagobert," he replied promptly, causing me to stare at him.

"You're making that up."

"Indeed I am not," he said with dignity. "Saint Athelais is another one—and perhaps better, now I think. She was a young

Roman lass, who was abducted by the Emperor Justinian, who wished to have his way wi' her, and she vowed to chastity. But she escaped and went off to live with her uncle in Benevento."

"Good for her. And Saint Dagobert?"

"A king of some sort—Frankish? Anyway, his guardian took against him as a child, and had him kidnapped away to England, so the guardian's son might reign instead."

"Where do you learn these things?" I demanded.

"From Brother Polycarp, at the Abbey of St. Anne," he said, the corner of his mouth tucking back in a smile. "When I couldna sleep, he'd come and tell me stories of the saints, hours on end. It didna always put me to sleep, but after an hour or so of hearing about holy martyrs having their breasts amputated or being flogged wi' iron hooks, I'd close my eyes and make a decent pretense of it."

Jamie took my cap off and set it on the ledge. The air blew through my inch of hair, ruffling it like meadow grass, and he smiled as he looked at me.

"Ye look like a boy, Sassenach," he said. "Though damned if I've ever seen a lad with an arse like yours."

"Thanks so much," I said, absurdly pleased. I had eaten like a horse in the last two months, slept well and deeply through the nights, and knew I was much improved in looks, hair notwithstanding. Never hurt to hear it, though.

"I want ye verra much, *mo nighean donn,*" he said softly, and curled his fingers round my wrist, letting the pads rest gently on my pulse.

"So the MacKenzies of Leoch are all prone to black jealousy," I said. I could feel my pulse, steady under his fingers. "Charming, cunning, and given to betrayal." I touched his lip, ran my thumb lightly along it, the tiny prickles of beard pleasant to the touch. "All of them?"

He looked down, fixing me suddenly with a dark blue gaze in which humor and ruefulness were mingled with a good many other things I couldn't read.

"Ye think I am not?" he said, and smiled a little sadly. "God and Mary bless ye, Sassenach." And bent to kiss me.

* * *

We could not tarry at River Run. The fields down here on the piedmont had long since been harvested and turned under, the remnants of dried stalks flecking the fresh dark earth; snow would fly soon in the mountains.

We had discussed the matter round and round—but came to no useful conclusion. There was nothing further we could do to help Phaedre—except to pray. Beyond that, though … there was Duncan to think of.

For it had occurred to both of us that if Jocasta *had* found out about his liaison with Phaedre, her wrath was not likely to be limited to the slave girl. She might bide her time—but she would not forget the injury. I'd never met a Scot who *would.*

We took our leave of Jocasta after breakfast the next day, finding her in her private parlor, embroidering a table runner. The basket of silk threads sat in her lap, the colors carefully arrayed in a spiral, so that she could choose the one she wanted by touch, and the finished linen fell to one side, five feet of cloth edged with an intricate design of apples, leaves, and vines—or no, I realized, when I picked up the end of the cloth to admire it. Not vines. Black-eyed serpents, coiling slyly, slithering, green and scaly. Here and there one gaped to show its fangs, guarding scattered red fruit.

"Garden of Eden," she explained to me, rubbing the design lightly betwixt her fingers.

"How beautiful," I said, wondering how long she'd been working on it. Had she begun it before Phaedre's disappearance?

A bit of casual talk, and then Josh the groom appeared to say that our horses were ready. Jamie nodded, dismissing him, and stood.

"Aunt," he said to Jocasta matter-of-factly, "I should take it verra much amiss were any harm to come to Duncan."

She stiffened, fingers halting in their work.

"Why should any harm come to him?" she asked, lifting her chin.

Jamie didn't reply at once, but stood regarding her, not without sympathy. Then he leaned down, so that she could feel his presence close, his mouth near her ear.

"I know, Aunt," he said softly. "And if ye dinna wish anyone else to share that knowledge … then I think I shall find Duncan in good health when I return."

She sat as though turned to salt. Jamie stood up, nodding toward the door, and we took our leave. I glanced back from the hallway, and saw her still sitting like a statue, face as white as the linen in her hands and the little balls of colored thread all fallen from her lap, unraveling across the polished floor.

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DOUBLE-DEALING

With Marsali gone, the whisky-making became more difficult. Among us, Bree and Mrs. Bug and I had managed to get off one more malting before the weather became too cold and rainy, but it was a near thing, and it was with great relief that I saw the last of the malted grain safely decanted into the still. Once set to ferment, the stuff became Jamie's responsibility, as he trusted no one else with the delicate job of judging taste and proof.

The fire beneath the still had to be kept at exactly the right level, though, to keep fermentation going without killing the mash, then raised for the distillings once fermentation was complete. This meant that he lived—and slept—beside the still for the few days necessary for each batch to come off. I generally brought him supper and stayed until the dark came, but it was lonely without him in my bed, and I was more than pleased when we poured the last of the new making into casks.

"Oh, that smells good." I sniffed beatifically at the inside of an empty cask; it was one of the special casks Jamie had obtained through one of Lord John's shipping friends—charred inside like a normal whisky cask, but previously used to store sherry. The sweet mellow ghost of the sherry mingled with the faint scent of char and the hot, raw reek of the new whisky were together enough to make my head spin pleasantly.

"Aye, it's a small batch, but no bad," Jamie agreed, inhaling the aroma like a perfume connoisseur. He lifted his head and eyed the sky overhead; the wind was coming up strong, and thick clouds were racing past, dark-bellied and threatening.

"There's only the three casks," he said. "If ye think ye might manage one, Sassenach, I'll take the others. I should like to have them safe, rather than dig them out of a snowbank next week."

A half-mile walk in a roaring wind, carrying or rolling a six-gallon cask, was no joke, but he was right about the snow. It wasn't quite cold enough for snow yet, but it would be soon. I sighed, but nodded, and between us, we managed to lug the casks slowly up to the whisky cache, hidden among rocks and ragged grapevines.

I had quite regained my strength, but even so, every muscle I had was trembling and jerking in protest by the time we had finished, and I made no objection at all when Jamie made me sit down to rest before heading back to the house.

"What do you plan to do with these?" I asked, nodding back toward the cache. "Keep, or sell?"

He wiped a flying strand of hair out of his face, squinting against a blast of flying dust and dead leaves.

"I'll have to sell one, for the spring seed. We'll keep one to age—and I think perhaps I can put the last to good purpose. If Bobby Higgins comes again before the snow, I shall send a half-dozen bottles to Ashe, Harnett, Howe, and a few others—a wee token of my abiding esteem, aye?" He grinned wryly at me.

"Well, I've heard of worse bona fides," I said, amused. It had taken him a good deal of work to worm his way back into the good graces of the North Carolina Committee of Correspondence, but several members had begun answering his letters again—cautiously, but with respect.

"I shouldna think anything important will happen over the winter," he said thoughtfully, rubbing his cold-reddened nose.

"Likely not." Massachusetts, where most of the uproar had been taking place, was now occupied by a General Gage, and the latest we had heard was that he had fortified Boston Neck, the narrow spit of land that connects the city to the mainland—which meant that Boston was now cut off from the rest of the colony, and under seige.

I felt a small pang, thinking of it; I had lived in Boston for nearly twenty years, and was fond of the city—though I knew I would not recognize it now.

"John Hancock—he's a merchant there—is heading the Committee of Safety, Ashe says. They've voted to recruit twelve thousand militia, and are looking to purchase five *thousand* muskets—with the trouble I had to find thirty, good luck to them, is all I can say."

I laughed, but before I could reply, Jamie stiffened.

"What's that?" His head turned sharply, and he laid a hand on my arm. Silenced abruptly, I held my breath, listening. The wind stirred the drying leaves of wild grapevines with a papery rustle behind me, and in the distance a murder of crows passed, squabbling in shrill cries.

Then I heard it, too: a small, desolate, and very human sound. Jamie was already on his feet, making his way with care between the fallen rocks. He ducked beneath the lintel made by a leaning slab of granite, and I made to follow him. He stopped abruptly, nearly making me run into him.

"Joseph?" he said incredulously.

I peered around him as best I could. To my equal astonishment, it *was* Mr. Wemyss, sitting hunched on a boulder, a stone jug between his bony knees. He'd been crying; his nose and eyes were red, making him look even more like a white mouse than usual. He was also extremely drunk.

"Oh," he said, blinking in dismay at us. "Oh."

"Are ye … quite well, Joseph?" Jamie came closer, extending a hand gingerly, as though afraid that Mr. Wemyss might crack into pieces if touched.

This instinct was sound; when he touched the little man, Mr. Wemyss's face crumpled like paper, and his thin shoulders began to shake uncontrollably.

"I am so sorry, sir," he kept saying, quite dissolved in tears. "I'm *so* sorry!"

Jamie gave me a "do something, Sassenach" look of appeal, and I knelt swiftly, putting my arms round Mr. Wemyss's shoulders, patting his slender back.

"Now, now," I said, giving Jamie a "now *what*?" sort of look over Mr. Wemyss's matchstick shoulder in return. "I'm sure it will be all right."

"Oh, no," he said, hiccuping. "Oh, no, it can't." He turned a face streaming with woe toward Jamie. "I can't bear it, sir, truly I can't."

Mr. Wemyss's bones felt thin and brittle, and he was shivering. He was wearing only a thin shirt and breeches, and the wind was beginning to whine through the rocks. Clouds thickened overhead, and the light went from the little hollow, suddenly, as though a blackout curtain had been dropped.

Jamie unfastened his own cloak and wrapped it rather awkwardly round Mr. Wemyss, then lowered himself carefully onto another boulder.

"Tell me the trouble, Joseph," he said quite gently. "Is someone dead, then?"

Mr. Wemyss sank his face into his hands, head shaking to and fro like a metronome. He muttered something, which I understood to be "Better if she were."

"Lizzie?" I asked, exchanging a puzzled glance with Jamie. "Is it Lizzie you mean?" She'd been perfectly all right at breakfast; what on earth—

"First Manfred McGillivray," Mr. Wemyss said, raising his face from his hands, "and then Higgins. As though a degenerate and a murderer were not bad enough—now this!"

Jamie's brows shot up and he looked at me. I shrugged slightly. The gravel was jabbing sharply into my knees; I rose stiffly and brushed it away.

"Are you saying that Lizzie is, er … in love with someone … unsuitable?" I asked carefully.

Mr. Wemyss shuddered.

"Unsuitable," he said, in a hollow tone. "Jesus Christ. Unsuitable!"

I'd never heard Mr. Wemyss blaspheme before; it was unsettling.

He turned wild eyes on me, looking like a crazed sparrow, huddled in the depths of Jamie's cloak.

"I gave up everything for her!" he said. "I sold myself—and gladly!—to save her from dishonor. I left home, left Scotland, knowing I should never see it more, that I should leave my bones in the soil of the strangers. And yet I've said nay word of reproach to her, my dear wee lassie, for how should it be her fault? And now …" He turned a hollow, haunted gaze on Jamie.

"My God, my God. What shall I do?" he whispered. A blast of wind thundered through the rocks and whipped the cloak around him, momentarily obliterating him in a shroud of gray, as though distress had quite engulfed him.

I kept tight hold of my own cloak, to prevent it being torn off me; the wind was strong enough that I nearly lost my footing. Jamie squinted against the spray of dust and fine gravel that blasted us, setting his teeth in discomfort. He wrapped his arms around himself, shivering.

"Is the lass with child, then, Joseph?" he said, obviously wanting to get to the bottom of things and go home.

Mr. Wemyss's head popped out of the folds of cloak, fair hair tousled into broomstraw. Blinking reddened eyes, he nodded, then excavated the jug and, raising it in trembling hands, took several gulps. I saw the single "X" marked on the jug; with his characteristic modesty, he had taken a jug of the raw new whisky, not the cask-aged higher quality.

Jamie sighed, reached out a hand, and taking the jug from him, took a healthy gulp himself.

"Who?" he said, handing it back. "Is it my nephew?"

Mr. Wemyss stared at him, owl-eyed.

"Your nephew?"

"Ian Murray," I put in helpfully. "Tall brown-haired lad? Tattoos?"

Jamie gave me a look suggesting that I was perhaps not being quite so helpful as I thought, but Mr. Wemyss went on looking blank.

"Ian Murray?" Then the name appeared to penetrate through the alcoholic fog. "Oh. No. Christ, if it were! I should bless the lad," he said fervently.

I exchanged another look with Jamie. This looked like being serious.

"Joseph," he said with just a touch of menace. "It's cold." He wiped his nose on the back of his hand. "Who's debauched your daughter? Give me his name, and I'll see him wed to her in the morning or dead at her feet, whichever ye like. But let's do it inside by the fire, aye?"

"Beardsley," Mr. Wemyss said, in a tone suggesting visions of utter despair.

"Beardsley?" Jamie repeated. He raised one eyebrow at me. It wasn't what I would have expected—but hearing it came as no great shock, either.

"Which Beardsley was it?" he asked, with relative patience. "Jo? Or Kezzie?"

Mr. Wemyss heaved a sigh that came from the bottoms of his feet.

"She doesn't know," he said flatly.

"Christ," said Jamie involuntarily. He reached for the whisky again, and drank heavily.

"Ahem," I said, giving him a meaningful look as he lowered the jug. He surrendered it to me without comment, and straightened himself on his boulder, shirt plastered against his chest by the wind, his hair whipped loose behind him.

"Well, then," he said firmly. "We'll have the two of them in, and find out the truth of it."

"No," said Mr. Wemyss, "we won't. They don't know, either."

I had just taken a mouthful of raw spirit. At this, I choked, spluttering whisky down my chin.

"They *what*?" I croaked, wiping my face with a corner of my cloak. "You mean … *both* of them?"

Mr. Wemyss looked at me. Instead of replying, though, he blinked once. Then his eyes rolled up into his head and he fell headlong off the boulder, poleaxed.

* * *

I managed to restore Mr. Wemyss to semiconsciousness, but not to the point of his being able to walk. Jamie was therefore obliged to carry the little man slung across his shoulders like a deer carcass; no mean feat, considering the broken ground that lay between the whisky cache and the new malting floor, and the wind that pelted us with bits of gravel, leaves, and flying pinecones. Clouds had boiled up over the shoulder of the mountain, dark and dirty as laundry suds, and were spreading rapidly across the sky. We were going to get drenched, if we didn't hurry.

The going became easier once we reached the trail to the house, but Jamie's temper was not improved by Mr. Wemyss's suddenly coming to at this point and vomiting down the front of his shirt. After a hasty attempt at swabbing off the mess, we reorganized our strategy, and made our way with Mr. Wemyss precariously balanced between us, each firmly gripping one elbow as he slipped and stumbled, his spindly knees giving way at unexpected moments, like Pinocchio with his strings cut.

Jamie was talking to himself volubly in Gaelic under his breath during this phase of the journey, but desisted abruptly when we came into the dooryard. One of the Beardsley twins was there, catching chickens for Mrs. Bug before the storm; he had two of them, held upside down by the legs like an ungainly bouquet of brown and yellow. He stopped when he saw us, and stared curiously at Mr. Wemyss.

"What—" began the boy. He got no further. Jamie dropped Mr. Wemyss's arm, took two strides, and punched the Beardsley twin in the stomach with sufficient force that he doubled over, dropped the chickens, staggered back, and fell down. The chickens flapped off in a cloud of scattered feathers, squawking.

The boy writhed about on the ground, mouth opening and closing in a vain search for air, but Jamie paid no attention. He stooped, seized the lad by the hair, and spoke loudly and directly into his ear—in case it was Kezzie, I supposed.

"Fetch your brother. To my study. Now."

Mr. Wemyss had been watching this interesting tableau, one arm draped across my shoulders for support and his mouth hanging open. It continued to hang open as he turned his head, following Jamie as he strode back toward us. He blinked, though, and shut it, as Jamie seized his other arm and, removing him neatly from me, propelled him into the house without a backward glance.

I gazed reproachfully at the Beardsley on the ground.

"How *could* you?" I said.

He made soundless goldfish mouths at me, his eyes completely round, then managed a long *heeeeee* sound of inhalation, his face dark purple.

"Jo? What's the matter, are ye hurt?" Lizzie came out of the trees, a pair of chickens clutched by the legs in either hand. She was frowning worriedly at—well, I supposed it *was* Jo; if anyone could tell the difference, it would surely be Lizzie.

"No, he's not hurt," I assured her. "Yet." I pointed a monitory finger at her. "You, young lady, go and put those chickens in their coop and then—" I hesitated, glancing at the boy on the ground, who had recovered enough breath to gasp and was gingerly sitting up. I didn't want to bring her into my surgery, not if Jamie and Mr. Wemyss were going to be eviscerating the Beardsleys right across the hall.

"I'll go with you," I decided hastily, gesturing her away from Jo. "Shoo."

"But—" She cast a bewildered glance at Jo—yes, it was Jo; he ran a hand through his hair to get it out of his face, and I saw the scarred thumb.

"He's fine," I said, turning her toward the chicken coop with a firm hand on her shoulder. "Go."

I glanced back, to see that Jo Beardsley had made it to his feet and, with a hand pressed to his tender middle, was making off toward the stable, presumably to fetch his twin as ordered.

I glanced back at Lizzie, giving her a narrow eye. If Mr. Wemyss had the right end of the stick and she *was* pregnant, she was evidently one of those fortunate persons who doesn't suffer from morning sickness or the usual digestive symptoms of early pregnancy; she was, in fact, very healthy-looking.

That in itself should have alerted me, I supposed, pale and greenstick as she normally was. Now that I looked carefully, there seemed to be a soft pink glow about her, and her pale blond hair was shiny where it peeped out under her cap.

"How far along are you?" I asked, holding back a branch for her. She gave me a quick look, gulped visibly, then ducked under the branch.

"About four months gone, I think," she said meekly, not looking at me. "Um … Da told ye, did he?"

"Yes. Your poor father," I said severely. "Is he right? *Both* of the Beardsleys?"

She hunched her shoulders a little, head bowed, but nodded, almost imperceptibly.

"What—what will Himself do to them?" she asked, her voice small and tremulous.

"I really don't know." I doubted that Jamie himself had formed any specific notions—though he *had* mentioned having the miscreant responsible for Lizzie's pregnancy dead at her feet if her father wished it.

Now that I thought, the alternative—having her wed by morning—was likely to be somewhat more problematic than simply killing the twins would be.

"I don't know," I repeated. We had reached the coop, a stoutly built edifice that sheltered under a spreading maple. Several of the hens, slightly less stupid than their sisters, were roosting like huge, ripe fruits in the lower branches, heads buried in their feathers.

I pulled open the door, releasing a gust of ripe ammonia from the dark interior, and holding my breath against the stink, pulled the hens from the tree and tossed them brusquely inside. Lizzie ran into the woods nearby, snatching chickens out from under bushes and rushing back to shove them in. Large drops were beginning to plummet from the clouds, heavy as pebbles, making small, audible splats as they struck the leaves above.

“Hurry!” I slammed the door behind the last of the squawking chickens, threw the latch, and seized Lizzie by the arm. Borne on a whoosh of wind, we ran for the house, skirts whirling up round us like pigeons’ wings.

The summer kitchen was nearest; we burst through the door just as the rain came down with a roar, a solid sheet of water that struck the tin roof with a sound like anvils falling.

We stood panting inside. Lizzie’s cap had come off in flight, and her plait had come undone, so that her hair straggled over her shoulders in strands of shining, creamy blond; a noticeable change from the wispy, flyaway look she usually shared with her father. If I had seen her without her cap, I should have known at once. I took time to recover my breath, trying to decide what on earth to say to her.

She was making a great to-do over tidying herself, panting and pulling at her bodice, smoothing her skirts—all the while trying not to meet my eye.

Well, there was one question that had been niggling at me since Mr. Wemyss’s shocking revelation; best to get that one out of the way at once. The initial roar of the rain had slackened to a regular drumbeat; it was loud, but conversation was at least possible.

“Lizzie.” She looked up from her skirt-settling, slightly startled. “Tell me the truth,” I said. I put my hands on either side of her face, looking earnestly into her pale blue eyes. “Was it rape?”

She blinked, the look of absolute amazement that suffused her features more eloquent than any spoken denial could have been.

“Oh, no, ma’am!” she said just as earnestly. “Ye couldna think Jo or Kezzie would do such a thing?” Her small pink lips twitched slightly. “What, did ye think they maybe took it in turns to hold me down?”

“No,” I said tartly, releasing her. “But I thought I’d best ask, just in case.”

I hadn’t really thought so. But the Beardsleys were such an odd mix of the civil and the feral that it was impossible to say definitely *what* they might or might not do.

"But it *was* … er … both of them? That's what your father said. Poor man," I added, with a tone of some reproach.

"Oh." She cast down her pale lashes, pretending to find a loose thread on her skirt. "Ummm … well, aye, it was. I do feel something terrible about shaming Da so. And it wasna really that we did it a-purpose …"

"Elizabeth Wemyss," I said, with no little asperity, "rape aside—and we've ruled that out—it is not possible to engage in sexual relations with two men without meaning to. One, maybe, but not two. Come to that …" I hesitated, but vulgar curiosity was simply too much. "Both at *once*?"

She did look shocked at that, which was something of a relief.

"Oh, no, ma'am! It was … I mean, I didna ken that it …" She trailed off, quite pink in the face.

I pulled two stools out from under the table and pushed one toward her.

"Sit down," I said, "and tell me about it. We aren't going anywhere for a bit," I added, glancing through the half-open door at the downpour outside. A silver haze rose knee-high over the yard, as the raindrops struck the grass in small explosions of mist, and the sharp smell of it washed through the room.

Lizzie hesitated, but took the stool; I could see her making up her mind to it that there was really nothing to do now but explain—assuming that the situation *could* be explained.

"You, um, said you didn't know," I said, trying to offer her an opening. "You mean—you thought it was only one twin, but they, er, fooled you?"

"Well, aye," she said, and took a huge breath of the chilly air. "Something like that. See, 'twas when you and Himself went to Bethabara for the new goat. Mrs. Bug was down wi' the lumbago, and it was only me and Da in the house—but then he went down to Woolam's for to fetch the flour, and so it was just me."

"To Bethabara? That was six months ago! And you're four months gone—you mean all this time you've been—well, never mind. What happened, then?"

"The fever," she said simply. "It came back."

She had been gathering firewood when the first malarial chill struck her. Recognizing it for what it was, she had dropped the wood and tried to reach the house, only to fall halfway there, her muscles going slack as string.

"I lay upon the ground," she explained, "and I could feel the fever comin' for me. It's like a great beast, aye? I can feel it seize me in its jaws and bite—'tis like my blood runs hot and then cold, and the teeth of it sink into my bones. I can feel it set in then, to try to break them in twa, and suck the marrow." She shuddered in memory.

One of the Beardsleys—she thought it was Kezzie, but had been in no state of mind to ask—had discovered her lying in a disheveled heap in the dooryard. He'd run to fetch his brother, and the two of them had raised her, carried her between them into the house, and fetched her upstairs to her bed.

"My teeth were clackin' so hard together I thought they'd break, surely, but I told them to fetch the ointment, wi' the gallberries, the ointment ye'd made."

They had rummaged through the surgery cupboard until they found it, and then, frantic as she burned hotter and hotter, had stripped off her shoes and stockings and begun to rub the ointment into her hands and feet.

"I told them—I told them they must rub it all over," she said, her cheeks going a deep peony. She looked down, fiddling with a strand of hair. "I was—well, I was quite oot my mind wi' the fever, ma'am, truly I was. But I kent I needed my medicine bad."

I nodded, beginning to understand. I didn't blame her; I'd seen the malaria overpower her. And so far as that went, she'd done the right thing; she did need the medicine, and couldn't have managed to apply it herself.

Frantic, the two boys had done as she'd said, got her clothes awkwardly off, and rubbed the ointment thoroughly into every inch of her naked body.

"I was goin' in and oot a bit," she explained, "wi' the fever dreams walkin' oot my heid and about the room, so it's all a bit mixed, what I recall. But I do think one o' the lads said to the other as he was getting the ointment all over, and would spoil his shirt, best take it off.”

“I see,” I said, seeing vividly. “And then …”

And then she had quite lost track of what was happening, save that whenever she drifted to the surface of the fever, the boys were still there, talking to her and each other, the murmur of their voices a small anchor to reality and their hands never leaving her, stroking and smoothing and the sharp smell of gallberries cutting through the woodsmoke from the hearth and the scent of beeswax from the candle.

“I felt … safe,” she said, struggling to express it. “I dinna remember much in particular, only opening my eyes once and seein’ his chest right before my face, and the dark curlies all round his paps, and them wee and brown and wrinkled, like raisins.” She turned her face to me, eyes still rounded at the memory. “I can still see that, like as it was right in front o’ me this minute. That’s queer, no?”

“Yes,” I agreed, though in fact it was not; there was something about high fever that blurred reality but at the same time could sear certain images so deeply into the mind that they never left. “And then …?”

Then she had begun to shake violently with chills, which neither more quilts nor a hot stone at her feet had helped. And so one of the boys, in desperation, had crawled under the quilts beside her and held her against him, trying to drive out the cold from her bones with his own heat—which, I thought cynically, must have been considerable, at that point.

“I dinna ken which it was, or if it was the same one all night, or if they changed now and then, but whenever I woke, he was there, wi’ his arms about me. And sometimes he’d put back the blanket and rub more ointment down my back and, and, round …” She stumbled, blushing. “But when I woke in the morning, the fever was gone, like it always is on the second day.”

She looked at me, pleading for understanding.

“D’ye ken how that is, ma’am, when a great fever’s broken? ’Tis the same every time, so I’m thinking it may be so for everyone. But it's … peaceful. Your limbs are sae heavy ye canna think of moving, but ye dinna much care. And everything ye see—all the wee things ye take nay notice of day by day—ye notice, and they're beautiful," she said simply. "I think sometimes that will be how it is when I'm dead. I shall just wake, and everything will be like that, peaceful and beautiful—save I shall be able to move."

"But you woke this time, and couldn't," I said. "And the boy—whichever it was—he was still there, with you?"

"It was Jo," she said, nodding. "He spoke to me, but I didna pay much mind to what he said, and I dinna think he did, either."

She bit her lower lip momentarily, the small teeth sharp and white.

"I—I hadna done it before, ma'am. But I came close, a time or two wi' Manfred. And closer still wi' Bobby Higgins. But Jo hadna ever even kissed a lass, nor his brother had, either. So ye see, 'twas really my fault, for I kent well enough what was happening, but … we were both slippery wi' the ointment, still, and naked under the quilts, and it … happened."

I nodded, understanding precisely and in detail.

"Yes, I can see how it happened, all right. But then it … er … went on happening, I suppose?"

Her lips pursed up and she went very pink again.

"Well … aye. It did. It—it feels sae *nice,* ma'am," she whispered, leaning a little toward me as though imparting an important secret.

I rubbed a knuckle hard across my lips.

"Um, yes. Quite. But—"

The Beardsleys had washed the sheets at her direction, and there were no incriminating traces left by the time her father returned, two days later. The gallberries had done their work, and while she was still weak and tired, she told Mr. Wemyss only that she had had a mild attack.

Meanwhile, she met with Jo at every opportunity, in the deep summer grass behind the dairy shed, in the fresh straw in the stable—and when it rained, now and then on the porch of the Beardsleys' cabin.

"I wouldna do it inside, for the stink o' the hides," she explained. "But we put an old quilt on the porch, so as I shouldna have splinters in my backside, and the rain comin' down just a foot away …" She looked wistfully through the open door, where the rain had softened into a steady whisper, the needles trembling on the pine trees as it fell.

"And what about Kezzie? Where was he, while all this was going on?" I asked.

"Ah. Well, Kezzie," she said, taking a deep breath.

They had made love in the stable, and Jo had left her lying on her cloak in the straw, watching as he rose and dressed himself. Then he had kissed her and turned to the door. Seeing that he had forgotten his canteen, she called softly after him.

"And he didna answer, nor turn round," she said. "And it came to me sudden, as he didna hear me."

"Oh, I see," I said softly. "You, um, couldn't tell the difference?"

She gave me a direct blue look.

"I can *now,*" she said.

In the beginning, though, sex was so new—and the brothers both sufficiently inexperienced—that she hadn't noticed any differences.

"How long …?" I asked. "I mean, do you have any idea when they, er …?"

"Not for certain," she admitted. "But if I was to guess about it, I think the first time it was Jo—no, I ken for sure that was Jo, for I saw his thumb—but the second time, it was likely Kezzie. They share, ken?"

They *did* share—everything. And so it was the most natural thing in the world—to all three of them, evidently—that Jo should wish his brother to share in this new marvel.

"I ken it seems … strange," she said, shrugging a little. "And I suppose I ought to have said something, or done something—but I couldna think what. And really"—she raised her eyes to me, helpless—"it didna seem *wrong* at all. They're different, aye, but at the same time, they're sae close to each other … well, it's just as if I was touching the one lad, and talking to him—only he's got the twa bodies."

"Twa bodies," I said, a little bleakly. "Well, yes. There's just the difficulty, you see, the two bodies part." I eyed her closely. Despite the history of malaria and her fine-boned build, she had definitely filled out; she had a plump little bosom swelling over the edge of her bodice, and, while she was sitting on it so I couldn't tell for sure, very likely a bottom to match. The only real wonder was that it had taken her three months to fall pregnant.

As though reading my mind, she said, "I took the seeds, aye? The ones you and Miss Bree take. I had a store put by, from when I was betrothed to Manfred; Miss Bree gave me them. I meant to gather more, but I didna always remember, and—" She shrugged again, putting her hands across her belly.

"Whereupon you proceeded to say nothing," I observed. "Did your father find out by accident?"

"No, I told him," she said. "I thought I best had, before I began to show. Jo and Kezzie came with me."

This explained Mr. Wemyss's resort to strong drink, all right. Perhaps we should have brought the jug back with us.

"Your poor father," I said again, but abstractedly. "Had the three of you worked out any sort of plan?"

"Well, no," she admitted. "I hadna told the lads I was in a family way 'til this morning, either. They seemed taken back a bit," she added, biting her lip again.

"I daresay." I glanced outside; it was still raining, but the downpour had slackened momentarily, dimpling the puddles on the path. I rubbed a hand over my face, feeling suddenly rather tired.

"Which one will you choose?" I asked.

She gave me a sudden, startled look, the blood draining from her cheeks.

"You can't have them both, you know," I said gently. "It doesn't work that way."

"Why?" she said, trying for boldness—but her voice trembled. "It's no harming anyone. And it's no one's business but ours."

I began to feel the need of a stiff drink myself.

"Hoho," I said. "Try telling your father that. Or Mr. Fraser. In a big city, perhaps you could get away with it. But here? Everything that happens is everybody's business, and you know it. Hiram Crombie would stone you for fornication as soon as look at you, if he found out about it." Without waiting for a reply, I got to my feet.

"Now, then. We'll go back to the house and see whether they're both still alive. Mr. Fraser may have taken matters into his own hands, and solved the problem for you."

* * *

The twins were still alive, but didn't look as though they were particularly glad of the fact. They sat shoulder to shoulder in the center of Jamie's study, pressed together as though trying to reunite into a single being.

Their heads jerked toward the door in unison, looks of alarm and concern mingling with joy at seeing Lizzie. I had her by the arm, but when she saw the twins, she pulled loose and hurried to them with a small exclamation, putting an arm about each boy's neck to draw him to her bosom.

I saw that one of the boys had a fresh black eye, just beginning to puff and swell; I supposed it must be Kezzie, though I didn't know whether this was Jamie's notion of fairness, or merely a convenient means of ensuring that he could tell which twin was which while talking to them.

Mr. Wemyss was also alive, though he didn't look any more pleased about it than the Beardsleys. He was red-eyed, pale, and still slightly green about the gills, but was at least upright and reasonably sober, seated beside Jamie's table. There was a cup of chicory coffee in front of him—I could smell it—but it seemed so far untouched.

Lizzie knelt on the floor, still clinging to the boys, the three heads drawn together like the lobes of a clover leaf as they murmured to one another.

"Are ye hurt?" she was saying, and "Are ye all right?" they were asking, an absolute tangle of hands and arms meanwhile searching, patting, stroking, and embracing. They reminded me of nothing so much as a tenderly solicitous octopus.

I glanced at Jamie, who was viewing this behavior with a jaundiced eye. Mr. Wemyss emitted a low moan, and buried his head in his hands.

Jamie cleared his throat with a low Scottish noise of infinite menace, and the proceedings in the middle of the room stopped as though hit with some sort of paralyzing death ray. Very slowly, Lizzie turned her head to look at him, chin held high, her arms still locked protectively about the Beardsleys' necks.

"Sit down, lass," Jamie said with relative mildness, nodding toward an empty stool.

Lizzie rose, and turned, her eyes still fixed on him. She made no move to take the offered stool, though. Instead, she walked deliberately round behind the twins and stood between them, putting her hands upon their shoulders.

"I'll stand, sir," she said, her voice high and thin with fear, but filled with determination. Like clockwork, each twin reached up and grasped the hand upon his shoulder, their faces assuming similar expressions of mingled apprehension and steadfastness.

Jamie wisely decided not to make an issue of it, instead nodding to me in an offhand way. I took the stool myself, surprisingly glad to sit down.

"The lads and I have been talking wi' your father," he said, addressing Lizzie. "I take it it's true, what ye told your Da? Ye are with child, and ye dinna ken which is the father?"

Lizzie opened her mouth, but no words came out. Instead, she bobbed her head in an awkward nod.

"Aye. Well, then, ye'll need to be wed, and the sooner the better," he said, in a matter-of-fact tone of voice. "The lads couldna quite decide which of them it should be, so it's up to you, lass. Which one?"

All six hands tightened in a flash of white knuckles. It was really quite fascinating—and I couldn't help feeling sorry for the three of them.

"I can't," Lizzie whispered. Then she cleared her throat and tried again. "I can't," she repeated more strongly. "I don't—I don't want to choose. I love them both."

Jamie looked down at his clasped hands for a moment, lips pursing as he thought. Then he raised his head and looked at her, very levelly. I saw her draw herself upright, lips pressed together, trembling but resolute, determined to defy him.

Then, with truly diabolical timing, Jamie turned to Mr. Wemyss.

"Joseph?" he said mildly.

Mr. Wemyss had been sitting transfixed, eyes on his daughter, pale hands wrapped round his coffee cup. He didn't hesitate, though, or even blink.

"Elizabeth," he said, his voice very soft, "do you love *me*?"

Her facade of defiance broke like a dropped egg, tears welling from her eyes.

"Oh, Da!" she said. She let go the twins and ran to her father, who stood up in time to clasp her tightly in his arms, cheek pressed to her hair. She clung to him, sobbing, and I heard a brief sigh from one of the twins, though I couldn't tell which one.

Mr. Wemyss swayed gently with her, patting and soothing her, his murmured words indistinguishable from her sobs and broken utterances.

Jamie was watching the twins—not without sympathy. Their hands were knotted together, and Kezzie's teeth were fixed in his lower lip.

Lizzie separated herself from her father, sniffling and groping vaguely for a handkerchief. I pulled one from my pocket, got up, and gave it to her. She blew her nose hard, and wiped her eyes, trying not to look at Jamie; she knew very well where the danger lay.

It was, however, a fairly small room, and Jamie was not a person who could be easily ignored, even in a large one. Unlike my surgery, the windows of the study were small and placed high in the wall, which gave the room under normal circumstances a pleasant dim coziness. At the moment, with the rain still coming down outside, a gray light filled the room and the air was chill.

"It's no a matter of whom ye love, now, lass," Jamie said very gently. "Not even your father." He nodded toward her stomach.

"Ye've a child in your belly. Nothing else matters, but to do right by it. And that doesna mean painting its mother a whore, aye?"

Her cheeks flamed, a patchy crimson.

"I'm not a whore!"

"I didna say ye were," Jamie replied calmly. "But others will, and it gets around what ye've been up to, lass. Spreading your legs for two men, and married to neither of them? And now with a wean, and ye canna name its father?"

She looked angrily away from him—and saw her own father, head bowed, his own cheeks darkening in shame. She made a small, heartbroken sound, and buried her face in her hands.

The twins stirred uneasily, glancing at each other, and Jo got his feet under him to rise—then caught a look of wounded reproach from Mr. Wemyss, and changed his mind.

Jamie sighed heavily and rubbed a knuckle down the bridge of his nose. He stood then, stooped to the hearth, and pulled two straws from the basket of kindling. Holding these in his fist, he held them out to the twins.

"Short straw weds her," he said with resignation.

The twins gaped at him, open-mouthed. Then Kezzie swallowed visibly, closed his eyes, and plucked a straw, gingerly, as though it might be attached to something explosive. Jo kept his eyes open, but didn't look at the straw he'd drawn; his eyes were fixed on Lizzie.

Everyone seemed to exhale at once, looking at the straws.

"Verra well, then. Stand up," Jamie said to Kezzie, who held the short one. Looking dazed, he did so.

"Take her hand," Jamie told him patiently. "Now, d'ye swear before these witnesses"—he nodded at me and Mr. Wemyss—"that ye take Elizabeth Wemyss as your wife?"

Kezzie nodded, then cleared his throat and drew himself up.

"I do, so," he said firmly.

"And do you, ye wee besom, accept Keziah—ye *are* Keziah?" he asked, squinting dubiously at the twin. "Aye, all right, Keziah. Ye'll take him as your husband?"

"Aye," Lizzie said, sounding hopelessly confused.

"Good," Jamie said briskly. "You're handfast. Directly we find a priest, we'll have it properly blessed, but ye're married." He looked at Jo, who had risen to his feet.

"And you," he said firmly, "ye'll leave. Tonight. Ye'll not come back 'til the child is born."

Jo was white to the lips, but nodded. He had both hands pressed to his body—not where Jamie had hit him, but higher, over his heart. I felt a sharp answering pain in the same place, seeing his face.

"Well, then." Jamie took a deep breath, his shoulders slumping a little. "Joseph—have ye still got the marriage contract ye drew for your daughter and young McGillivray? Fetch it out, aye, and we'll change the name."

Looking like a snail poking its head out after a thunderstorm, Mr. Wemyss nodded cautiously. He looked at Lizzie, still standing hand-in-hand with her new bridegroom, the two of them resembling Lot and Mrs. Lot, respectively. Mr. Wemyss patted her softly on the shoulder, and hurried out, his feet tapping on the stairs.

"You'll need a fresh candle, won't you?" I said to Jamie, tilting my head meaningfully toward Lizzie and the twins. The stub in his candlestick had half an inch to go, but I thought it only decent to give them a few moments of privacy.

"Oh? Oh, aye," he said, catching my meaning. He coughed. "I'll, ah, come and get it."

The moment we entered my surgery, he closed the door, leaned against it, and let his head fall, shaking it.

"Oh, God," he said.

"Poor things," I said, with some sympathy. "I mean—you do have to feel sorry for them."

"I do?" He sniffed at his shirt, which had dried but still had a distinct stain of vomit down the front, then straightened up, stretching 'til his back creaked. "Aye, I suppose I do," he admitted. "But—oh, God! Did she tell ye how it happened?"

"Yes. I'll tell you the gory details later." I heard Mr. Wemyss's feet coming down the stairs. I took down a fresh pair of candles from the array that hung near the ceiling and held them out, stretching the long wick that joined them. “Do you have a knife handy?”

His hand went automatically to his waist, but he wasn’t wearing his dirk.

“No. There’s a penknife on my desk, though.”

He opened the door just as Mr. Wemyss reached the office. Mr. Wemyss’s exclamation of shock reached me simultaneously with the smell of blood.

Jamie pushed Mr. Wemyss unceremoniously aside, and I rushed in after him, heart in my throat.

The three of them were standing by the desk, close together. A spray of fresh blood stained the desk, and Kezzie was holding my bloodied handkerchief wrapped round his hand. He looked up at Jamie, his face ghostly in the guttering light. His teeth were gritted tight together, but he managed a smile.

A small movement caught my eye, and I saw Jo, carefully holding the blade of Jamie’s penknife over the candle flame. Acting as though no one was there, he took his brother’s hand, pulled off the handkerchief, and pressed the hot metal against the raw oval of the wound on Kezzie’s thumb.

Mr. Wemyss made a small choking noise, and the smell of seared flesh mixed with the scent of rain. Kezzie drew breath deeply, then let it out, and smiled crookedly at Jo.

“Godspeed, Brother,” he said, his voice a little loud and flat.

“Much happiness to you, Brother,” Jo said—in the same voice.

Lizzie stood between them, small and disheveled, her reddened eyes fixed on Jamie. And smiled.

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SO ROMANTIC

Brianna drove the little car slowly up the slope of the quilt over Roger's leg, across his stomach, and into the center of his chest, where he captured both the car and her hand, giving her a wry grin.

"That's a really good car," she said, pulling her hand loose and rolling comfortably onto her side beside him. "All four wheels turn. What kind is it? A Morris Minor, like that little orange thing you had in Scotland? That was the cutest thing I ever saw, but I never understood how you managed to squeeze into it."

"With talcum powder," he assured her. He lifted the toy and set a front wheel spinning with a flick of his thumb. "Aye, it *is* a good one, isn't it? It isn't really meant to be a particular model, but I suppose I was remembering that Ford Mustang of yours. Remember driving down out of the mountains that time?" His eyes softened with memory, the green of them nearly black in the dim light of the banked fire.

"I do. I nearly drove off the road when you kissed me at eighty-five miles per hour."

She moved closer to him by reflex, nudging him with a knee. He rolled obligingly to face her, and kissed her again, meanwhile running the car swiftly backward down the length of her spine and over the curve of her buttocks. She yelped and squirmed against him, trying to escape the tickling wheels, then punched him in the ribs.

“Cut that out!”

“I thought ye found speed erotic. Vroom,” he murmured, steering the toy up her arm—and suddenly down the neck of her shift. She grabbed for the car, but he snatched it away, then plunged his hand under the covers, running the wheels down her thigh—then madly up again.

A furious wrestling match for possession of the car ensued, which ended with both of them on the floor in a tangle of bedding and nightclothes, gasping for breath and helpless with giggling.

“Ssh! You’ll wake up Jemmy!” She heaved and wriggled, trying to get out from under Roger’s weight. Secure in his fifty pounds’ advantage, he merely relaxed on top of her, pinning her to the floor.

“You couldn’t wake him with cannon fire,” Roger said, with a certainty born of experience. It was true; once past the stage of waking to be fed every few hours, Jem had always slept like a particularly comatose log.

She subsided, puffing hair out of her eyes and biding her time.

“Do you think you’ll ever go anywhere at eighty-five miles per hour again?”

“Only if I fall off the edge of a very deep gorge. Ye’re naked, did ye know that?”

“Well, so are you!”

“Aye, but I started out that way. Where’s the car?”

“I have no idea,” she lied. It was, in fact, under the small of her back, and very uncomfortable, but she wasn’t about to give him any further advantages. “What do you want it for?”

“Oh, I was going to explore the terrain a bit,” he said, raising himself on one elbow and walking his fingers slowly across the upper slope of one breast. “I suppose I could do it on foot, though. Takes more time, but ye do enjoy the scenery more. They say.”

“Mmm.” He could hold her down with his weight, but couldn’t restrain her arms. She extended one index finger, and placed the nail of it precisely on his nipple, making him breathe in deeply. “Did you have a long journey in mind?” She glanced at the small shelf near the bed, where she kept her contraceptive materials.

"Long enough." He followed her glance, then looked back to meet her eyes, a question in his own.

She wriggled to make herself more comfortable, unobtrusively dislodging the miniature car.

"They say a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step," she said, and raising her head, put her mouth on his nipple, and closed her teeth gently. A moment later, she let go.

"Be quiet," she said reproachfully. "You'll wake up Jemmy."

* * *

"Where are your scissors? I'm cutting it off."

"I'm not telling you. I like it long." She pushed the soft dark hair back from his face and kissed the end of his nose, which appeared to disconcert him slightly. He smiled, though, and kissed her briefly back before sitting up, swiping the hair out of his face with one hand.

"That can't be comfortable," he said, eyeing the cradle. "Surely I should move him to his own bed?"

Brianna glanced up at the cradle from her position on the floor. Jemmy, aged four, had long since graduated to a trundle bed, but now and then insisted upon sleeping in his cradle for old times' sake, wedging himself stubbornly into it, despite the fact that he couldn't get all four limbs and his head inside at once. He was invisible at the moment, save for two chubby bare legs sticking straight up in the air at one end.

He was getting so big, she thought. He couldn't quite read yet, but knew all his letters, and could count to a hundred and write his name. And he knew how to load a gun; his grandfather had taught him.

"Do we tell him?" she asked suddenly. "And if so, when?"

Roger must have been thinking something along the same lines, for he appeared to understand exactly what she meant.

"Christ, how do you tell a kid something like that?" he said. He rose and picked up a handful of bedding, shaking it in apparent hopes of finding the leather string with which he bound his hair.

“Wouldn’t you tell a kid if he were adopted?” she objected, sitting up and running both hands through her own bountiful hair. “Or if there’s some family scandal, like his father’s not dead, he’s in prison? If you tell them early, it doesn’t mean all that much to them, I don’t think; they’re comfortable with it as they get older. If they find out later, it’s a shock.”

He gave her a wry, sidelong look. “You’d know.”

“So would you.” She spoke dryly, but she felt the echo of it, even now. Disbelief, anger, denial—and then the sudden collapse of her world as she began, against her will, to believe. The sense of hollowness and abandonment—and the sense of black rage and betrayal at discovering how much of what she had taken for granted was a lie.

“At least for you, it wasn’t a choice,” she said, squirming into a more comfortable position against the edge of the bed. “Nobody knew about you; nobody *could* have told you what you were—but didn’t.”

“Oh, and ye think they should have told you about the time travel early on? Your parents?” He lifted one black brow, cynically amused. “I can see the notes coming home from your school—*Brianna has a most creative imagination, but should be encouraged to recognize situations where it is not appropriate to employ it.*”

“Ha.” She kicked away the remaining tangle of clothes and bedding. “I went to a Catholic school. The nuns would have called it lying, and put a stop to it, period. Where’s my shift?” She had wriggled completely out of it in the struggle, and while she was still warm from their struggle, she felt uncomfortably exposed, even in the dim shadows of the room.

“Here it is.” He plucked a wad of linen from the mess and shook it out. “Do you?” he repeated, looking up at her with one brow raised.

“Think they should have told me? Yes. And no,” she admitted reluctantly. She reached for the shift and pulled it over her head. “I mean—I see why they didn’t. Daddy didn’t believe it, to start with. And what he *did* believe … well, whatever it was, he did ask Mama to let me think he was my real father. She gave him her word; I guess I don’t think she should have broken it, no.” To the best of her knowledge, her mother had broken her word only once—unwillingly, but to staggering effect.

She smoothed the worn linen over her body and fished for the ends of the drawstring that gathered the neck. She was covered now, but felt just as much exposed as if she were still naked. Roger was sitting on the mattress, methodically shaking out the blankets, but his eyes were still fixed on her, green and questioning.

“It was still a lie,” she burst out. “I had a right to know!”

He nodded slowly.

“Mmphm.” He picked up a rope of twisted sheet and began unwinding it. “Aye, well. I can see telling a kid he’s adopted or his dad’s in prison. This is maybe more along the lines of telling a kid his father murdered his mother when he found her screwing the postie and six good friends in the kitchen, though. Maybe it doesn’t mean that much to him if you tell him early on—but it’s definitely going to get the attention of his friends when he starts telling *them.*”

She bit her lip, feeling unexpectedly cross and prickly. She hadn’t thought her own feelings were still so near the surface, and didn’t like either the fact that they were—or that Roger could see that they were.

“Well … yes.” She glanced at the cradle. Jem had moved; he was curled up like a hedgehog now, with his face pressed to his knees, and nothing visible save the curve of his bottom under his nightshirt, rising over the edge of the cradle like the moon rising above the horizon. “You’re right. We’d have to wait until he’s old enough to realize that he can’t tell people; that it’s a secret.”

The leather thong fell out of a shaken quilt. He bent to pick it up, dark hair falling round his face.

“Would ye want to tell Jem someday that I’m not his real father?” he asked quietly, not looking at her.

“Roger!” All her crossness disappeared in a flood of panic. “I wouldn’t do that in a hundred million years! Even if I thought it was true,” she added hastily, “and I don’t. Roger, I don’t! I know you’re his father.” She sat down beside him, gripping his arm urgently. He smiled, a little crookedly, and patted her hand—but he wouldn’t meet her eyes. He waited a moment, then moved, gently disengaging himself in order to tie up his hair.

"What ye said, though. Has he not got a right to know who he is?"

"That's not—it's different." It was; and yet it wasn't. The act that had resulted in her own conception hadn't been rape—but it had been just as unintended. On the other hand, there had been no doubt, either: both—well, all three—of her parents had known that she was Jamie Fraser's child, beyond doubt.

With Jem … she looked again at the cradle, instinctively wanting to find some stamp, some undeniable clue to his paternity. But he looked like her, and like her father, in terms both of coloring and feature. He was big for his age, long-limbed and broad-backed—but so were both of the men who might have fathered him. And both, damn them, had green eyes.

"I'm not telling him that," she said firmly. "Not ever, and neither are you. You *are* his father, in any way that matters. And there wouldn't be any good reason for him to even know that Stephen Bonnet exists."

"Save that he *does* exist," Roger pointed out. "And *he* thinks the wean is his. What if they should meet someday? When Jem's older, I mean."

She had not grown up with the habit of crossing herself at moments of stress as her father and cousin did—but she did it now, making him laugh.

"I am not being funny," she said, sitting up straight. "It's not happening. And if it did—if I ever saw Stephen Bonnet anywhere near my child, I'd … well, next time, I'll aim higher, that's all."

"Ye're determined to give the lad a good story for his classmates, aren't you?" He spoke lightly, teasing, and she relaxed a little, hoping that she had succeeded in easing any doubt he might have about what she might tell Jemmy regarding his paternity.

"Okay, but he does have to know the rest, sooner or later. I don't want him to find out by accident."

"You didna find out by accident. Your mother *did* tell you." *And look where we are now.* That bit went unspoken, but rang loud inside her head, as he gave her a long, straight look.

If she hadn't felt compelled to come back, go through the stones to find her real father—none of them would be here now. They'd be safe in the twentieth century, perhaps in Scotland, perhaps in America—but in a place where children didn't die of diarrhea and sudden fevers.

In a place where sudden danger didn't lurk behind every tree and war wasn't hiding under the bushes. A place where Roger's voice still sang pure and strong.

But maybe—just maybe—she wouldn't have Jem.

"I'm sorry," she said, feeling choked. "I know it's my fault—all of it. If I hadn't come back …" She reached out, tentatively, and touched the ragged scar that circled his throat. He caught her hand and pulled it down.

"Christ," he said softly, "if I could have gone anywhere to find either of my parents—including hell—Brianna, I would have done it." He looked up, his eyes bright green, and squeezed her hand hard. "If there's anyone in this world who understands that, hen, it's me."

She squeezed back with both hands, hard. Relief that he didn't blame her loosened the cords of her body, but sorrow for his own losses—and hers—still filled throat and chest, heavy as wet feathers, and it hurt to breathe.

Jemmy stirred, rose suddenly upright, then fell back, still sound asleep, so that one arm flopped out of the cradle, limp as a noodle. She'd frozen at his sudden movement, but now relaxed and rose to try to tuck the arm back in. Before she could reach the cradle, though, a knock came at the door.

Roger grabbed hastily for his shirt with one hand, his knife with the other.

"Who is it?" she called, heart thumping. People didn't pay calls after dark, save in emergency.

"It's me, Miss Bree," said Lizzie's voice through the wood. "Can we come in, please?" She sounded excited, but not alarmed. Brianna waited to be sure that Roger was decently covered, then lifted the heavy bolt.

Her first thought was that Lizzie looked excited, too; the little bondmaid's cheeks were flushed as apples, the color visible even in the darkness of the stoop.

"We" was herself and the two Beardsleys, who bowed and nodded, murmuring apologies for the lateness of the hour.

"Not at all," Brianna said automatically, glancing around for a shawl. Not only was her linen shift thin and ratty, it had an incriminating stain on the front. "Er, come in!"

Roger came forward to greet the unexpected guests, magnificently disregarding the fact that he was wearing nothing but a shirt, and she scuttled hastily into the dark corner behind her loom, groping for the ancient shawl she kept there as comfort for her legs while working.

Safely wrapped in this, she kicked a log to break the fire, and stooped to light a candle from the fiery coals. In the wavering glow of the candlelight, she could see that the Beardsleys were dressed with unaccustomed neatness, their hair combed and firmly plaited, each with a clean shirt and a leather vest; they didn't own coats. Lizzie was dressed in her best, too—in fact, she was wearing the pale peach woolen dress they had made for her wedding.

Something was up, and it was fairly obvious what, as Lizzie buzzed earnestly into Roger's ear.

"Ye want me to *marry* you?" Roger said, in tones of astonishment. He glanced from one twin to the other. "Er … to whom?"

"Aye, sir." Lizzie bobbed a respectful curtsey. "It's me and Jo, sir, if ye'd be sae kind. Kezzie's come to be witness."

Roger rubbed a hand over his face, looking baffled.

"Well … but …" He gave Brianna a pleading look.

"Are you in trouble, Lizzie?" Brianna asked directly, lighting a second candle and putting it in the sconce by the door. With more light, she could see that Lizzie's eyelids were reddened and swollen, as though she had been crying—though her attitude was one of excited determination, rather than fear.

"Not to say trouble, exactly. But I—I'm wi' child, aye." Lizzie crossed her hands on her belly, protective. "We—we wanted to be marrit, before I tell anyone."

"Oh. Well …" Roger gave Jo a disapproving look, but appeared no more than half-convinced. "But your father—won't he—"

"Da would want us to be marrit by a priest," Lizzie explained earnestly. "And so we will be. But ye ken, sir, it'll be months—maybe years—before we can find one." She cast down her eyes, blushing. "I—I should like to be marrit, with proper words, ken, before the babe comes."

"Yes," he said, eyes drawn ineluctably to Lizzie's midsection. "I grasp that. But I dinna quite understand the rush, if ye take my meaning. I mean, ye won't be noticeably more pregnant tomorrow than ye are tonight. Or next week."

Jo and Kezzie exchanged glances over Lizzie's head. Then Jo put his hand on Lizzie's waist and drew her gently to him.

"Sir. It's only—we want to do right by each other. But we'd like it to be private, see? Just me and Lizzie, and my brother."

"Just us," Kezzie echoed, drawing close. He looked earnestly at Roger. "Please, sir?" He seemed to have injured his hand somehow; there was a handkerchief wound round it.

Brianna found the three of them touching almost beyond bearing; they were so innocent, and so young, the three scrubbed faces turned earnestly up to Roger in supplication. She moved closer and touched Roger's arm, warm through the cloth of his sleeve.

"Do it for them," she said softly. "Please? It's not a marriage, exactly—but you can make them handfast"

"Aye, well, but they ought to be counseled … her father …" His protests trailed off as he glanced from her toward the trio, and she could see that he was as much touched by their innocence as she was. And, she thought, privately amused, he was also very much drawn by the thought of performing his first wedding, unorthodox as it might be. The circumstances would be romantic and memorable, here in the quiet of the night, vows exchanged by the light of fire and candle, with the memory of their own lovemaking warm in the shadows and the sleeping child a silent witness, both blessing and promise for the new marriage to be made.

Roger sighed deeply, then smiled at her in resignation, and turned away.

“Aye, all right, then. Let me put my breeches on, though; I’m not conducting my first wedding bare-arsed.”

* * *

Roger held a spoon of marmalade over his slice of toast, staring at me.

“They *what*?” he said, in a strangled tone.

“Oh, she *didn’t*!” Bree clapped a hand to her mouth, eyes wide above it, removing it at once to ask, “*Both* of them?”

“Evidently so,” I said, suppressing a most disgraceful urge to laugh. “You really married her to Jo last night?”

“God help me, I did,” Roger muttered. Looking thoroughly rattled, he put the spoon in his coffee cup and stirred mechanically. “But she’s handfast with Kezzie, too?”

“Before witnesses,” I assured him, with a wary glance at Mr. Wemyss, who was sitting across the breakfast table, mouth open and apparently turned to stone.

“Do you think—” Bree said to me, “I mean—both of them at *once*?”

“Er, she said not,” I replied, cutting my eyes toward Mr. Wemyss as an indication that perhaps this was not a suitable question to be considering in his presence, fascinating as it was.

“Oh, God,” Mr. Wemyss said, in a voice from the sepulchre. “She is damned.”

“Holy Mary, Mother of God.” Mrs. Bug, saucer-eyed, crossed herself. “May Christ have mercy!”

Roger took a gulp of his coffee, choked, and put it down, spluttering. Brianna pounded him helpfully on the back, but he motioned her away, eyes watering, and pulled himself together.

“Now, it’s maybe not so bad as it seems,” he said to Mr. Wemyss, trying to find a bright side to look on. “I mean, one could maybe make a case that the twins are one soul that God’s put into two bodies for purposes of His own.”

“Aye, but—two bodies!” Mrs. Bug said. “Do ye think—both at *once*?”

“I don’t know,” I said, giving up. “But I imagine—” I glanced at the window, where the snow whispered at the closed shutter. It had begun to snow heavily the night before, a thick, wet snow; by now, there was nearly a foot of it on the ground, and I was reasonably sure that everyone at the table was imagining exactly what I was: a vision of Lizzie and the Beardsley twins, tucked up cozily in a warm bed of furs by a blazing fire, enjoying their honeymoon.

“Well, I don’t suppose there’s actually much anybody can *do* about it,” Bree said practically. “If we say anything in public, the Presbyterians will probably stone Lizzie as a Papist whore, and—”

Mr. Wemyss made a sound like a stepped-on pig’s bladder.

“Certainly no one will say anything.” Roger fixed Mrs. Bug with a hard look. “Will they?”

“Well, I’ll have to tell Arch, mind, or I’ll burst,” she said frankly. “But no one else. Silent as the grave, I swear it, de’il take me if I lie.” She put both hands over her mouth in illustration, and Roger nodded.

“I suppose,” he said dubiously, “that the marriage I performed isna actually valid as such. But then—”

“It’s certainly as valid as the handfasting Jamie did,” I said. “And besides, I think it’s too late to force her to choose. Once Kezzie’s thumb heals, no one will be able to tell …”

“Except Lizzie, probably,” Bree said. She licked a smear of honey from the corner of her mouth, regarding Roger thoughtfully. “I wonder what it would be like if there were two of you?”

“We’d both of us be thoroughly bamboozled,” he assured her. “Mrs. Bug—is there any more coffee?”

“Who’s bamboozled?” The kitchen door opened in a swirl of snow and frigid air, and Jamie came in with Jem, both fresh from a visit to the privy, ruddy-faced, their hair and lashes thick with melting snowflakes.

“You, for one. You’ve just been done in the eye by a nineteen-year-old bigamist,” I informed him.

“What’s a bigamiss?” Jem inquired.

"A very large young lady," Roger said, taking a piece of buttered toast and thrusting it into Jem's mouth. "Here. Why don't ye take that, and …" His voice died away as he realized that he couldn't send Jem outside.

"Lizzie and the twins came round to Roger's last night, and he married her to Jo," I told Jamie. He blinked, water from the melting snow on his lashes running down his face.

"I will be damned," he said. He took a long breath, then realized he was still covered with snow, and went to shake himself at the hearth, bits of snow falling into the fire with a sputter and hiss.

"Well," he said, coming back to the table and sitting down beside me, "at least your grandson will have a name, Joseph. It's Beardsley, either way."

This ridiculous observation seemed actually to comfort Mr. Wemyss a bit; a small bit of color came back to his cheeks, and he allowed Mrs. Bug to put a fresh bannock on his plate.

"Aye, I suppose that's something," he said. "And I really cannot see—"

"Come *look,*" Jemmy was saying, tugging impatiently on Bree's arm. "Come see, Mama!"

"See what?"

"I wrote my name! Grandda showed me!"

"Oh, you did? Well, good for you!" Brianna beamed at him, then her brow furrowed. "What—just now?"

"Yes! Come see afore it's covered up!"

She looked at Jamie under lowered brows.

"Da, you *didn't.*"

He took a piece of fresh toast from the platter, and spread it neatly with butter.

"Aye, well," he said, "there's got to be *some* advantage still to being a man, even if no one pays a bit of heed to what ye say. Will ye pass the marmalade, Roger Mac?"

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LICE

Jem put his elbows on the table, chin on his fists, following the path of the spoon through the batter with the intent expression of a lion watching an appetizing wildebeest on its way to the water hole.

“Don’t even think about it,” I said, with a glance at his grubby fingers. “They’ll be done in a few minutes; you can have one then.”

“But I like ’em raw, Grandma,” he protested. He widened his dark-blue eyes in wordless pleading.

“You oughtn’t to eat raw things,” I said sternly. “They can make you sick.”

“You do, Grandma.” He poked a finger at my mouth, where a smudge of brownish batter remained. I cleared my throat and wiped the incriminating evidence on a towel.

“You’ll spoil your supper,” I said, but with the acuity of any jungle beast, he sensed the weakening of his prey.

“Promise I won’t. I’ll eat everything!” he said, already reaching for the spoon.

“Yes, that’s what I’m afraid of,” I said, relinquishing it with some reluctance. “Just a taste, now—leave some for your daddy and grandda.”

He nodded, wordless, and licked the spoon with a long, slow swipe of the tongue, closing his eyes in ecstasy.

I found another spoon and set about dropping the cookies onto the tin sheets I used for baking. We ended in a dead heat, the sheets full and the bowl quite empty, just as footsteps came down the hallway toward the door. Recognizing Brianna's tread, I snatched the empty spoon from Jemmy and rubbed a quick towel across his smudgy mouth.

Bree stopped in the doorway, her smile turning to a look of suspicion.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Making molasses cookies," I said, lifting the sheets in evidence, before sliding them into the brick oven set in the wall of the fireplace. "Jemmy's been helping me."

One neat red brow arched upward. She glanced from me to Jemmy, who was wearing a look of sublimely unnatural innocence. I gathered my own expression was no more convincing.

"So I see," she said dryly. "How much batter did you eat, Jem?"

"Who, me?" Jemmy said, eyes going wide.

"Mmm." She leaned forward, and picked a speck out of his wavy red hair. "What's this, then?"

He frowned at it, crossing his eyes slightly in the attempt to focus.

"A real big louse?" he suggested brightly. "Reckon I got it from Rabbie McLeod."

"Rabbie McLeod?" I said, uneasily aware that Rabbie had been curled up on the kitchen settle a few days ago, his unruly black curls flowing into Jemmy's bright locks as the boys slept, waiting for their fathers. I recalled thinking at the time how charming the little boys looked, curled up head to head, their faces soft with dreaming.

"Has Rabbie got lice?" Bree demanded, flicking the bit of batter away from her as though it were indeed a loathsome insect.

"Oh, aye, he's crawlin'," Jemmy assured her cheerfully. "His Mam says she's gonna get his daddy's razor and shave off ever bit of his hair, him and his brothers and his daddy and his uncle Rufe too. She says they got lice hoppin' all over their bed. She's tired of bein' ate up alive." Quite casually, he lifted a hand to his head and scratched, fingers raking through his hair in a characteristic gesture I had seen all too often before.

Bree and I exchanged a brief look of horror, then she seized Jemmy by the shoulders, dragging him over to the window.

"Come here!"

Sure enough. Exposed to the brilliant light bouncing off the snow, the tender skin behind his ears and on the back of his neck showed the characteristic pinkness caused by scratching for lice, and a quick inspection of his head revealed the worst: tiny nits clinging to the base of the hairs, and a few reddish-brown adult lice, half the size of rice grains, who scrambled madly away into the thickets. Bree caught one and cracked it between her thumbnails, tossing the remains into the fire.

"Eugh!" She rubbed her hands on her skirt, then pulled off the ribbon that tied back her hair, scratching vigorously. "Have I got them?" she asked anxiously, thrusting the crown of her head toward me.

I ruffled quickly through the thick mass of auburn and cinnamon, looking for the telltale whitish nits, then stepped back, bending my own head.

"No, have I?"

The backdoor opened, and Jamie stepped in, looking only mildly surprised to find Brianna picking through my hair like a crazed baboon. Then his head jerked up, sniffing the air.

"Is something burning?"

"I got 'em, Grandda!"

The exclamation reached me together with the scent of singeing molasses. I jerked upright and banged my head on the edge of the dish shelf, hard enough to make me see stars.

These cleared just in time for me to see Jemmy, standing on tiptoe as he reached into the smoking oven in the wall of the hearth, well over his head. His eyes were squinched shut with concentration, his face turned away from the waves of heat coming off the brick, and he had a towel wound clumsily round the groping hand.

Jamie reached the boy with two strides, jerking him back by the collar. He reached into the oven bare-handed and yanked out a tin sheet of smoking cookies, flinging the hot sheet away with such force that it struck the wall. Small brown disks flew off and scattered over the floor.

Adso, who had been perched in the window, helping with the louse hunt, saw what looked like prey and pounced fiercely on a fleeing cookie, which promptly burned his paws. Uttering a startled yowl, he dropped it and raced under the settle.

Jamie, shaking his scorched fingers and making extremely vulgar remarks in Gaelic, had seized a stick of kindling in his other hand and was poking into the oven, trying to extract the remaining cookie-sheet amid clouds of smoke.

“What’s going—hey!”

“Jemmy!”

Roger’s cry coincided with Bree’s. Coming in on Jamie’s heels, Roger’s expression of bewilderment had changed at once to alarm at sight of his offspring crouched on the floor, industriously collecting cookies, and oblivious of the fact that his trailing towel was smoldering in the ashes of the cookfire.

Roger lunged for Jemmy, colliding with Bree on the same course. The two of them cannoned into Jamie, who had just maneuvered the second sheet of cookies to the edge of the oven. He reeled, staggering off balance, and the sheet clanged into the hearth, scattering lumps of smoking, molasses-scented charcoal. The cauldron, knocked askew, swung and shifted perilously on its hook, splashing soup into the coals and sending up clouds of hissing, savory steam.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or run out of the door, but settled for snatching up the towel, which had burst into flames, and beating it out on the stone-flagged hearth.

I stood up, panting, to find that my family had now managed to extricate itself from the fireplace. Roger had a squirming Jemmy in a death grip against his chest, while Bree frisked the child for burns, flames, and broken bones. Jamie, looking rather annoyed, was sucking on a blistered finger, waving smoke away from his face with his free hand.

“Cold water,” I said, addressing the most immediate exigency. I grasped Jamie by the arm, pulled the finger out of his mouth, and stabbed it into the washbowl.

“Is Jemmy all right?” I asked, turning to the Happy Families tableau by the window. “Yes, I see he is. Do put him down, Roger, the child has lice.”

Roger dropped Jemmy like a hot potato, and—in the usual adult reaction to hearing the word “lice”—scratched himself. Jemmy, unaffected by the recent commotion, sat down on the floor and began to eat one of the cookies he had kept clutched in his hand throughout.

“You’ll spoil your—” Brianna began automatically, then caught sight of the spilled cauldron and the puddled hearth, glanced at me, and shrugged. “Got any more cookies?” she asked Jemmy. Mouth full, he nodded, reached into his shirt, and handed her one. She viewed it critically, but took a bite anyway.

“Not bad,” she said, through crumbs. “Hm?” She held the remnant out to Roger, who wolfed it one-handed, using the other to poke through Jemmy’s hair.

“It’s going round,” he said. “At least, we saw half a dozen lads near Sinclair’s, all shaved like convicts. Shall we have to shave your head, then?” he asked, smiling at Jemmy and ruffling the boy’s hair.

The boy’s face lighted up at the suggestion.

“Will I be bald like Grandma?”

“Yes, even balder,” I assured him tartly. I had in fact got a good two-inch crop at the moment, though the curliness made it look shorter, little waves and swirls hugging the curves of my skull.

“Shave his *head*?” Brianna looked aghast. She turned to me. “Isn’t there any other good way to get rid of lice?”

I looked consideringly at Jemmy’s head. He had the same thick, slightly wavy hair as his mother and grandfather. I glanced at Jamie, who grinned at me, one hand in the washbowl. He knew from experience just how long it took to nit-comb that sort of hair; I’d done it for him many times. He shook his head.

“Shave him,” he said. “Ye’ll not get a lad that size to sit still long enough to comb.”

“We *could* use lard,” I suggested dubiously. “You plaster his head with lard or bear grease and leave it for a few days. It suffocates the lice. Or at least you hope so."

"Ack." Brianna viewed her son's head with disfavor, obviously envisioning the havoc he could wreak on clothes and linens, if allowed to roam at large while plastered with lard.

"Vinegar and a fine-comb will get out the big ones," I said, coming to peer down at the fine white line of the parting through Jemmy's ruddy hair. "It doesn't get the nits, though; you have to scrape those off with your fingernails—or else wait 'til they hatch and comb them out."

"Shave him," Roger said, shaking his head. "Ye never get all the nits; you have to do it over again every few days, and if ye miss a few that grow big enough to hop …" He grinned and flicked a cookie crumb off his thumbnail; it bounced off Bree's skirt and she slapped it away, glowering at Roger.

"You're a big help!" She bit her lip, frowning, then nodded reluctantly. "All right, then, I suppose there's no help for it."

"It will grow back," I assured her.

Jamie went upstairs to fetch his razor; I went to the surgery to get my surgical scissors and a bottle of oil of lavender for Jamie's burned finger. By the time I came back, Bree and Roger had their heads together over what looked like a newspaper.

"What's that?" I asked, coming to peer over Brianna's shoulder.

"Fergus's maiden effort." Roger smiled up at me, and moved the paper so I could see. "He sent it up with a trader who left it at Sinclair's for Jamie."

"Really? That's wonderful!"

I craned my neck to see, and a small thrill went through me at sight of the bold headline across the top of the page:

THE NEW BERN UNION

Then I looked closer.

"Onion?" I said, blinking. "*The Onion*?"

"Well, he explains that," Roger said, pointing to an ornately embellished *Remarks by the Proprietor* in the center of the page, the legend upheld by a couple of floating cherubim. "It's to do with onions having layers—complexity, you see—and the … er”—his finger ran down the line—*“the Pungency and Savor of the Reasoned Discourse always to be exercised herein for the compleat Information and Amusement of our Purchasers and Readers.”*

“I notice he makes a distinction between purchasers and readers,” I remarked. “Very French of him!”

“Well, yes,” Roger agreed. “There’s a distinctly Gallic tone to some of the pieces, but you can see that Marsali must have had a hand in it—and, of course, most of the advertisements were written by the people who placed them.” He pointed to one small item, headed, *Lost, a hat. If found in good condition, please return to the subscriber, S. Gowdy, New Bern. If not in good condition, wear it yourself.*

Jamie arrived with his razor in time to hear this, and joined in the laughter. He poked a finger down the page, at another item.

“Aye, that’s good, but I think the ‘Poet’s Corner’ is maybe my favorite. Fergus couldna have done it, I dinna think; he’s no ear for rhyme at all—was it Marsali, d’ye think, or someone else?”

“Read it out loud,” Brianna said, reluctantly relinquishing the paper to Roger. “I’d better clip Jemmy before he gets away and spreads lice all over Fraser’s Ridge.”

Once resigned to the prospect, Brianna didn’t hesitate, but tied a dishcloth round Jemmy’s neck and set to with the scissors in a determined fashion that sent strands of red-gold and auburn falling to the floor like shimmering rain. Meanwhile, Roger read out, with dramatic flourishes,

“On the late Act against retailing
Spirituous Liquors, etc.—
Tell me—can it be understood,
This Act intends the Publick Good?
No truly; I deny it:
For if, as all allow, ’tis best,
Of Evils Two, to chose the least,
Then my Opinion’s right.
Suppose on Search—it should appear,

Ten Bunters dy'd in every year—
"—By drinking to Excess
Should thousands innocent be led
Into Despair, and lose their Bread,
Such folly to redress?
I'd not be thought t'encourage sin,
Or be an Advocate of Gin;
But humbly do conceive,
This scheme, tho' drawn with nicest care
Don't with Almighty Justice square
If Scriptures we believe
When Sodom's Sin for Vengeance call'd
Ten righteous had its Doom forestall'd
And mov'd e'en God to Pity.
But now Ten bare-fac'd Debauchees
Some private Epicures displease,
And ruin half a City."

"I'd not be thought t'encourage sin/Or be an Advocate of Gin," Bree repeated, giggling. "You notice he—or she—doesn't mention whisky. What's a Bunter, though? Oops, hold still, baby!"

"A harlot," Jamie said absently, stropping his razor while still reading over Roger's shoulder.

"What's a harlot?" Jemmy asked, his radar naturally picking up the single indelicate word in the conversation. "Is it Richie's sister?"

Richard Woolam's sister Charlotte was a most attractive young person; she was also a most devout Quaker. Jamie exchanged glances with Roger, and coughed.

"No, I shouldna think it, lad," he said. "And for God's sake, don't say so, either! Here, are ye ready to be shaved?" Not waiting for an answer, he picked up the shaving brush and lathered Jemmy's polled head, to the accompaniment of delighted squeals.

"Barber, barber, shave a pig," Bree said, watching. "How many hairs to make a wig?"

"Lots," I replied, sweeping up the drifts of fallen hair and throwing them into the fire, hopefully to the destruction of all resident lice. It *was* rather a pity; Jemmy's hair was beautiful. Still, it would grow again—and the clipping showed off the lovely shape of his head, roundly pleasing as a cantaloupe.

Jamie hummed tunelessly under his breath, drawing the razor over the skin of his grandson's head with as much delicacy as if he had been shaving a honeybee.

Jemmy turned his head slightly, and I caught my breath, struck by a fleeting memory—Jamie, his hair clipped short against his skull in Paris, readying himself to meet Jack Randall; readying himself to kill—or be killed. Then Jemmy turned again, squirming on his stool, and the vision vanished—to be replaced by something else.

"Whatever is that?" I leaned forward to look, as Jamie drew his razor down with a flourish and flicked away the last dollop of lather into the fire.

"What?" Bree leaned in beside me, and her eyes widened at sight of the small brown blotch. It was about the size of a farthing, quite round, just above the hairline toward the back of his head, behind the left ear.

"What is it?" she asked, frowning. She touched it gently, but Jemmy scarcely noticed; he was squirming even more, wanting to get down.

"I'm fairly sure it's all right," I assured her, after a quick inspection. "It looks like what's called a nevus—it's something like a flat mole, usually quite harmless."

"But where did it come from? He wasn't born with it, I know!" she protested.

"Babies very seldom have any sort of mole," I explained, untying my dishcloth from round Jemmy's neck. "All right, yes, you're done! Go and be good now—we'll have supper as soon as I can manage. No," I added, turning back to Bree, "moles usually start to develop around three years of age—though of course people can get more as they grow older."

Freed from restraint, Jemmy was rubbing his naked head with both hands, looking pleased and chanting, "Char-lotte the Har-lot, Char-lotte the Har-lot," quietly under his breath.

"You're sure it's all right?" Brianna was still frowning, worried. "It isn't dangerous?"

"Oh, aye, it's nothing," Roger assured her, glancing up from the newspaper. "I've had one just like that myself, ever since I was a kid. Just … here." His face changed abruptly as he spoke, and his hand rose, very slowly, to rest on the back of his head—just above the hairline, behind the left ear.

He looked at me, and I saw his throat move as he swallowed, the jagged rope scar dark against the sudden paleness of his skin. The down hairs rose silently on my arms.

"Yes," I said, answering the look, and hoping my voice didn't shake too noticeably. "That sort of mark is … often hereditary."

Jamie said nothing, but his hand closed on mine, squeezing tight.

Jemmy was on his hands and knees now, trying to coax Adso out from under the settle. His neck was small and fragile, and his shaven head looked unearthly white and shockingly naked, like a mushroom poking out of the earth. Roger's eyes rested on it for a moment; then he turned to Bree.

"I do believe perhaps I've picked up a few lice myself," he said, his voice just a tiny bit too loud. He reached up, pulled off the thong that bound his thick black hair, and scratched his head vigorously with both hands. Then he picked up the scissors, smiling, and held them out to her. "Like father, like son, I suppose. Give us a hand here, aye?"

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PART TEN

Where’s Perry Mason When You Need Him?

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DANGEROUS CORRESPONDENCE

From Mount Josiah Plantation in the Colony of Virginia,
Lord John Grey to Mr. James Fraser, Esq.,
Fraser's Ridge, North Carolina,
upon the Sixth of March, Anno Domini 1775
Dear Mr. Fraser—

What in the Name of God are you about? I have known you in the course of our long Acquaintance to be many Things—Intemperate and Stubborn being two of them—but have always known you for a Man of Intelligence and Honor.

Yet despite explicit Warnings, I find your Name upon more than one List of suspected Traitors and Seditionists, associated with illegal Assemblies, and thus subject to Arrest. The Fact that you are still at Liberty, my Friend, reflects nothing more than the Lack of Troops at present available in North Carolina—and that may change rapidly. Josiah Martin has implored London for Help, and it will be forthcoming, I assure you.

Was Gage not more than sufficiently occupied in Boston, and Lord Dunsmore's Virginia troops still in process of Assembly, the Army would be upon you within a few Months. Do not delude yourself; the King may be misguided in his Actions, but the Government perceives—if belatedly—the Level of Turmoil in the

Colonies, and is moving as rapidly as may be to suppress it, before greater Harm can ensue.

Whatever else you may be, you are no Fool, and so I must assume you realize the Consequences of your Actions. But I would be less than a Friend did I not put the Case to you bluntly: you expose your Family to the utmost Danger by your Actions, and you put your own Head in a Noose.

For the Sake of whatever Affection you may yet bear me, and for the Sake of those dear Connexions between your Family and myself—I beg you to renounce these most dangerous Associations while there is still Time.

John

I read the letter through, then looked up at Jamie. He was sitting at his desk, papers strewn in every direction, scattered with the small brown fragments of broken sealing wax. Bobby Higgins had brought a good many letters, newspapers, and packages—Jamie had put off reading Lord John's letter 'til the last.

"He's very much afraid for you," I said, putting the single sheet of paper down on top of the rest.

Jamie nodded.

"For a man of his parts to refer to the King's actions as possibly 'misguided' is verra close to treason, Sassenach," he observed, though I *thought* he was joking.

"These lists he mentions—do you know anything about that?"

He shrugged at that, and poked through one of the untidy piles with a forefinger, pulling out a smeared sheet that had obviously been dropped in a puddle at some point.

"Like that, I suppose," he said, handing it over. It was unsigned, and nearly illegible, a misspelt and vicious denunciation of various *Outrages and Debached Persons*—here listed—whose speech, action, and appearance was a threat to all who valued peace and prosperity. These, the writer felt, should be *shown whats what,* presumably by being beaten, skinned alive, *rold in bolling Tar and* *plac'd on a Rail,* or in particularly pernicious cases, *Hanged outright from there own Rooftrees.*

"Where did you pick *that* up?" I dropped it on the desk, using two fingers.

"In Campbelton. Someone sent it to Farquard, as Justice of the Peace. He gave it to me, because my name is on it."

"It is?" I squinted at the straggling letters. "Oh, so it is. *J. Frayzer.* You're sure it's you? There are quite a few Frasers, after all, and not a few named John, James, Jacob, or Joseph."

"Relatively few who could be described as a *Red-haired dejenerate Pox-ridden Usuring Son of a Bitch who skulks in Brothels when not drunk and comitting Riot in the Street,* I imagine."

"Oh, I missed that part."

"It's in the exposition at the bottom." He gave the paper a brief, indifferent glance. "I think Buchan the butcher wrote it, myself."

"Always assuming that 'usuring' is a word, I don't see where he gets that bit; you haven't any money to lend."

"I wouldna suppose a basis in truth is strictly required, under the circumstances, Sassenach," he said very dryly. "And thanks to MacDonald and wee Bobby, there are a good many folk who think I *do* have money—and if I am not inclined to lend it to them, why then, plainly it's a matter of my having put my fortune all in the hands of Jews and Whig speculators, as I am intent upon ruining trade for my own profit."

"What?"

"That was a somewhat more literary effort," he said, shuffling through the pile and pulling out an elegant parchment sheet, done in a copperplate hand. This one had been sent to a newspaper in Hillsboro, and was signed, *A Friend to Justice;* and while it didn't name Jamie, it was clear who the subject of the denunciation was.

"It's the hair," I said, looking critically at him. "If you wore a wig, they'd have a much harder time of it."

He lifted one shoulder in a sardonic shrug. The commonly held view of red hair as an indicator of low character and moral coarseness, if not outright demonic possession, was by no means limited to anonymous ill-wishers. The knowledge of that view—

together with personal disinclination—had quite a bit to do with the fact that he never *did* wear either wig or powder, even in situations where a proper gentleman would.

Without asking, I reached for a stack of the papers and began to leaf through them. He made no move to stop me, but sat quietly watching, listening to the thrum of the rain.

A heavy spring storm was washing down outside, and the air was cold and damp, thick with the green scents of the forest insinuating themselves through the crevices of door and window. I sometimes had the sudden feeling, hearing the wind coming through the trees, that the wilderness outside meant to come in, march through the house, and obliterate it, erasing all trace of us.

The letters were a mixed bag. Some were from the members of the North Carolina Committee of Correspondence, with bits of news, most of it from the north. Continental Association Committees had sprung up in New Hampshire and New Jersey, these bodies now beginning to virtually take over the functions of government, as the royal governors lost their grip on assemblies, courts, and Customs, the remnants of organization falling ever deeper into disarray.

Boston was still occupied by Gage's troops, and some of the letters continued the appeals for food and supplies to be sent to the succor of her citizens—we had sent two hundredweight of barley during the winter, which one of the Woolams had undertaken to get into the city, along with three wagonloads of other foodstuffs contributed by the inhabitants of the Ridge.

Jamie had picked up his quill, and was writing something, slowly, to accommodate the stiffness of his hand.

Next up was a note from Daniel Putnam, circulated through Massachusetts, noting the rising of militia companies in the countryside, and asking for arms and powder. It was signed by a dozen other men, each one bearing witness to the truth of the situation in his own township.

A Second Continental Congress was proposed, to meet in Philadelphia, the date yet undecided.

Georgia had formed a Provincial Congress, but as the Loyalist letter-writer—plainly assuming Jamie to be like-minded—

triumphantly noted, *There is no Sense of Grievance toward Great Britain here, as elsewhere; Loyalist Sentiment is so strong that only five Parishes of twelve have sent anyone to this upstart and illegal Congress.*

A much-bedraggled copy of the *Massachusetts Gazette,* dated February 6, containing a letter, circled in ink and titled *The Rule of Law and the Rule of Men.* It was signed *Novanglus*—which I took to be a sort of hog-Latin for "new Englishman"—and to be a response to previous letters by a Tory who signed himself *Massachusettensis,* of all things.

I had no idea who Massachusettensis might be, but I recognized a few phrases from Novanglus's letter, from long-ago bits of Bree's schoolwork—John Adams, in good form.

"A government of laws, not of men," I murmured. "What sort of pen name would you use, if you were going to write this sort of thing?" Glancing up, I caught sight of him, looking sheepish to a degree.

"You've been doing it *already*?"

"Well, just the odd bittie letter here or there," he said defensively. "No pamphlets."

"Who are you?"

He shrugged, deprecating.

"*Scotus Americanus,* but only 'til I think of something better. There are a few others using that name, that I ken."

"Well, that's something. The King will have a harder time picking you out of the crowd." Muttering "Massachusettensis" to myself, I picked up the next document.

A note from John Stuart, much affronted by Jamie's abrupt resignation, noting that the *most illegal and prodigal Congress, as they call it* of Massachusetts had formally invited the Stockbridge Indians to enlist in the service of the colony, and informing Jamie that should any of the Cherokee follow suit, he, John Stuart, would take the greatest pleasure in personally ensuring that he, Jamie Fraser, was hanged for treason.

"And I don't suppose John Stuart even knows you have red hair," I observed, laying it aside. I felt a trifle shaky, in spite of my attempts to joke about it. Seeing it all laid out in black and white solidified the clouds that had been gathering round us, and I felt the first chilling drop of icy rain on my skin, despite the woolen shawl around my shoulders.

There was no hearth in the study; only a small brazier that we used for heat. It was burning now in the corner, and Jamie rose, picked up a stack of letters, and began to feed them to the fire, one by one.

I had a sudden rush of déjà vu, and saw him standing by the hearth in the drawing room of his cousin Jared's house in Paris, feeding letters to the fire. The stolen letters of Jacobite conspirators, rising in white puffs of smoke, the gathering clouds of a storm long past.

I remembered what Fergus had said, in answer to Jamie's instructions: *"I remember how this game is played."* So did I, and spicules of ice began to form in my blood.

Jamie dropped the last flaming fragment into the brazier, then sanded the page he had been writing, shook the sand off, and handed it to me. He had used one of the sheets of the special paper Bree had made by pressing a digested pulp of rags and plant matter between silk screens. It was thicker than the usual, with a soft, glossy texture, and she had mixed berries and tiny leaves into the pulp, so that here and there a small red stain spread like blood beneath the shadow of a leaf's silhouette.

From Fraser's Ridge, in the Colony of North Carolina,
this 16th day of March, Anno Domini 1775,
James Fraser to Lord John Grey, of Mount Josiah Plantation,
in the Colony of Virginia

My dear John—

It is too late.

Our continued Correspondence cannot but prove a Danger to you, but it is with the greatest Regret that I sever this Link between us.

Believe me ever

Your most humble and
affectionate Friend,

I read it in silence, and handed it back. As he poked about in search of the sealing wax, I noticed a small wrapped parcel on the corner of his desk that had been hidden by the drifts of paper.

"What's this?" I picked it up; it was amazingly heavy for its size.

"A present from his Lordship, for wee Jemmy." He lit the beeswax taper from the brazier and held it over the seam of the folded letter. "A set of lead soldiers, Bobby says."

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THE EIGHTEENTH OF APRIL

Roger came awake quite suddenly, with no notion what had wakened him. It was full dark, but the air had the still, inward feel of the small hours; the world holding its breath, before dawn comes on a rising wind.

He turned his head on the pillow and saw that Brianna was awake, too; she lay looking upward, and he caught the brief flicker of her eyelids as she blinked.

He moved a hand to touch her, and hers closed over it. An adjuration to silence? He lay very still, listening, but heard nothing. An ember broke in the hearth with a muffled crack and her hand tightened. Jemmy flung himself over in bed with a rustle of quilts, let out a small yelp, and fell silent. The night was undisturbed.

"What is it?" he said, low-voiced.

She didn't turn to look at him; her eyes were fixed now on the window, a dark gray rectangle, barely visible.

"Yesterday was the eighteenth of April," she said. "It's here." Her voice was calm, but there was something in it that made him move closer, so they lay side by side, touching from shoulder to foot.

Somewhere to the north of them, men were gathering in the cold spring night. Eight hundred British troops, groaning and cursing as they dressed by candlelight. Those who had gone to bed rousing to the beat of the drum passing by the houses and warehouses and churches where they quartered, those who hadn't, stumbling from dice and drink, the warm hearths of taverns, the warm arms of women, hunting lost boots and seizing weapons, turning out by twos and threes and fours, clanking and mumbling through the streets of frozen mud to the muster point.

"I grew up in Boston," she said, her voice softly conversational. "Every kid in Boston learned that poem, somewhere along the line. I learned it in fifth grade."

"Listen, my children, and you shall hear/Of the midnight ride of Paul Revere." Roger smiled, envisioning her in the uniform of Saint Finbar's parochial school, blue overall jumper, white blouse, and knee socks. He'd seen her fifth-grade school photograph once; she looked like a small, fierce, disheveled tiger that some maniac had dressed in doll's clothes.

"That's the one. *On the eighteenth of April, in Seventy-five/Hardly a man is now alive/Who remembers that famous day and year.*"

"Hardly a man," Roger echoed softly. Someone—who? A householder, eavesdropping on the British commanders quartered in his house? A barmaid, bringing mugs of pokered hot rum to a couple of sergeants? There was no keeping of secrets, not with eight hundred men on the move. It was all a matter of time. Someone had sent word from the occupied city, word that the British meant to seize the stored arms and powder in Concord, and at the same time, arrest Hancock and Samuel Adams—the founder of the Committee of Safety, the inflammatory speaker, the leaders of *this treasonous rebellion*—reported to be in Lexington.

Eight hundred men to capture two? Good odds. And a silversmith and his friends, alarmed at the news, had set out into that cold night. Bree continued:

"He said to his friend, 'If the British march
By land or sea from the town tonight,
Hang a lantern aloft in the belfry arch
Of the North Church tower as a signal light—
One if by land, and two if by sea;
And I on the opposite shore will be,
Ready to ride and spread the alarm

Through every Middlesex village and farm,
For the country folk to be up and to arm.' "

"They don't write poems like *that* anymore," Roger said. But in spite of his cynicism, he couldn't bloody help seeing it: the steam of a horse's breath, white in darkness, and across the black water, the tiny star of a lantern, high above the sleeping town. And then another.

"What happened next?" he said.

"Then he said 'Good-night!' and with muffled oar
Silently rowed to the Charlestown shore,
Just as the moon rose over the bay,
Where swinging wide at her moorings lay
The Somerset, British man-of-war;
A phantom ship, with each mast and spar
Across the moon like a prison bar,
And a huge black hulk, that was magnified
By its own reflection in the tide."

"Well, that's not too bad," he said judiciously. "I like the bit about the *Somerset.* Rather a painterly description."

"Shut up." She kicked him, though without real violence. "It goes on about his friend, who *wanders and watches, with eager ears*—" Roger snorted, and she kicked him again. *"Till in the silence around him he hears/The muster of men at the barrack door/The sound of arms, and the tramp of feet/And the measured tread of the grenadiers/Marching down to their boats on the shore."*

He had visited her in Boston in the spring. In mid-April, the trees would have no more than a haze of green, their branches still mostly bare against pale skies. The nights were still frigid, but the cold was somehow touched with life, a freshness moving through the icy air.

"Then there's a boring part about the friend climbing the stairs of the church tower, but I like the next verse." Her voice, already soft, dropped a little, whispering.

"Beneath, in the churchyard, lay the dead,
In their night encampment on the hill,
Wrapped in silence so deep and still
That he could hear, like a sentinel's tread,
The watchful night-wind, as it went
Creeping along from tent to tent,
And seeming to whisper, 'All is well!'
A moment only he feels the spell
Of the place and the hour, and the secret dread
Of the lonely belfry and the dead;
For suddenly all his thoughts are bent
On a shadowy something far away,
Where the river widens to meet the bay—
A line of black that bends and floats
On the rising tide like a bridge of boats."

"Then there's a lot of stuff with old Paul killing time waiting for the signal," she said, abandoning the dramatic whisper for a more normal tone of voice. "But it finally shows up, and then …

"A hurry of hoofs in a village street,
A shape in the moonlight, a bulk in the dark,
And beneath, from the pebbles, in passing, a spark
Struck out by a steed flying fearless and fleet;
That was all! And yet, through the gloom and the light,
The fate of a nation was riding that night;
And the spark struck out by that steed, in his flight,
Kindled the land into flame with its heat."

"That's actually pretty good." His hand curved over her thigh, just above the knee, in case she might kick him again, but she didn't. "Do you remember the rest?"

"So he goes along by the Mystic River," Brianna said, ignoring him, "and then there are three verses, as he passes through the townships:

"It was twelve by the village clock
When he crossed the bridge into Medford town.
He heard the crowing of the cock,
"And the barking of the farmer's dog,
And felt the damp of the river fog,
That rises after the sun goes down.

"It was one by the village clock,
When he galloped into Lexington.
He saw the gilded weathercock
Swim in the moonlight as he passed,
And the meeting-house windows, blank and bare,
Gaze at him with a spectral glare,
As if they already stood aghast
At the bloody work they would look upon.

"*It was two by the village clock*—and yes, I hear the clock chiming in the first lines, be quiet!" He had in fact drawn breath, but not to interrupt, only because he'd suddenly realized he'd been holding it. "*It was two by the village clock,"* she repeated,

"When he came to the bridge in Concord town.
He heard the bleating of the flock,
And the twitter of birds among the trees,
And felt the breath of the morning breeze
Blowing over the meadow brown.
And one was safe and asleep in his bed
Who at the bridge would be first to fall,
Who that day would be lying dead,
Pierced by a British musket ball.

"You know the rest." She stopped abruptly, her hand tight on his.

From one moment to the next, the character of the night had changed. The stillness of the small hours had ceased, and a breath of wind moved through the trees outside. All of a sudden, the night was alive again, but dying now, rushing toward dawn.

If not actively twittering, the birds were wakeful; something called, over and over, in the nearby wood, high and sweet. And above the stale, heavy scent of the fire, he breathed the wild clean air of morning, and felt his heart beat with sudden urgency.

“Tell me the rest,” he whispered.

He saw the shadows of men in the trees, the stealthy knocking on doors, the low-voiced, excited conferences—and all the while, the light growing in the east. The lap of water and creak of oars, the sound of restless kine lowing to be milked, and on the rising breeze the smell of men, stale with sleep and empty of food, harsh with black powder and the scent of steel.

And without thinking, pulled his hand from his wife’s grasp, rolled over her, and pulling up the shift from her thighs, took her hard and fast, in vicarious sharing of that mindless urge to spawn that attended the imminent presence of death.

Lay on her trembling, the sweat drying on his back in the breeze from the window, heart thumping in his ears. For the one, he thought. The one who would be the first to fall. The poor sod who maybe hadn’t swived his wife in the dark and taken the chance to leave her with child, because he had no notion what was coming with the dawn. This dawn.

Brianna lay still under him; he could feel the rise and fall of her breath, powerful ribs that lifted even under his weight.

“You know the rest,” she whispered.

“Bree,” he said very softly. “I would sell my soul to be there now.”

“Shh,” she said, but her hand rose, and settled on his back in what might be benediction. They lay still, watching the light grow by degrees, keeping silence.

* * *

This silence was broken a quarter of an hour later, by the sound of rushing footsteps and a pounding at the door. Jemmy popped out of his blankets like a cuckoo from a clock, eyes round, and Roger heaved himself up, hurriedly brushing down his nightshirt.

It was one of the Beardsleys, face pinched and white in the gray light. He paid no attention to Roger, but cried out to Brianna, “Lizzie’s having the baby, come quick!”, before dashing off in the direction of the Big House, where the figure of his brother could be seen gesticulating wildly on the porch.

Brianna flung on her clothes and burst out of the cabin, leaving Roger to deal with Jemmy. She met her mother, similarly disheveled but with a neatly packed medical kit slung over her shoulder, hurrying toward the narrow path that led past spring house and stable, into the distant woods where the Beardsleys’ cabin lay.

“She should have come down last week,” Claire gasped. “I told her …”

“So did I. She said …” Brianna gave up the attempt to speak. The Beardsley twins had long outdistanced them, sprinting through the wood like deer, whooping and yelling—whether from sheer excitement at their impending fatherhood, or to let Lizzie know help was on the way, she couldn’t tell.

Claire had worried about Lizzie’s malaria, she knew. And yet the yellow shadow that so often hung over her erstwhile bondmaid had all but disappeared during her pregnancy; Lizzie bloomed.

Nonetheless, Brianna felt her stomach clench in fear as they came into sight of the Beardsleys’ cabin. The hides had been moved outside, stacked round the tiny house like a barricade, and the smell of them gave her a moment’s terrible vision of the MacNeills’ cabin, filled with death.

The door hung open, though, and there were no flies. She forced herself to hang back an instant, to let Claire go in first, but hurried in on her heels—to find that they were too late.

Lizzie sat up in a blood-smeared bower of furs, blinking with amazed stupefaction at a small, round, blood-smeared baby, who was regarding her with the exact same expression of open-mouthed astonishment.

Jo and Kezzie were clutching each other, too excited and afraid to speak. From the corner of her eye, Brianna saw their mouths opening and closing in syncopation, and wanted to laugh, but instead followed her mother to the bedside.

"He just popped out!" Lizzie was saying, glancing momentarily at Claire, but then jerking her fascinated gaze back to the baby, as though she expected him—yes, it was a him, Brianna saw—to disappear as suddenly as he had arrived.

"My back hurt something dreadful, all last night, so I couldna sleep, and the lads took it in turns to rub me, but it didna really help, and then when I got up to go to the privy this morning, all the water burst forth from betwixt my legs—just as ye said it would, ma'am!" she said to Claire. "And so I said to Jo and Kezzie they must run fetch ye, but I didna ken quite what to do next. So I set about to mix up batter for to make hoecake for breakfast"—she waved at the table, where a bowl of flour sat with a jug of milk and two eggs—"and next thing, I had this terrible urge to—to—" She blushed, a deep, becoming peony color.

"Well, I couldna even reach the chamber-pot. I just squatted there by the table, and—and—pop! There he was, right on the ground beneath me!"

Claire had picked the new arrival up, and was cooing reassurances to him, while deftly checking whatever it was one checked about new babies. Lizzie had made a blanket in preparation, carefully knitted of lamb's wool, dyed with indigo. Claire glanced at the pristine blanket, then pulled a length of stained, soft flannel from her kit. Wrapping the baby in it, she handed him to Brianna.

"Hold him a moment while I deal with the cord, will you, darling?" she said, pulling scissors and thread from her kit. "Then you can clean him off a bit—there's a bottle of oil in here—while I take care of Lizzie. And you lot," she added, glancing sternly at the Beardsleys, "go outside."

The baby moved suddenly inside his wrappings, startling Brianna with the sudden vivid recollection of tiny, solid limbs pushing from inside: a kick to the liver, the liquid swell and shift as head or buttocks pressed up in a hard, smooth curve beneath her ribs.

"Hallo, little guy," she said softly, cuddling him against her shoulder. He smelled strongly and strangely of the sea, she thought, and oddly fresh against the acrid pungency of the hides outside.

“Ooh!” Lizzie gave a startled squeal, as Claire kneaded her belly, and there was a juicy, slithering sort of sound. Brianna remembered that vividly, too; the placenta, that liverish, slippery afterthought of birth, almost soothing as it passed over the much-abused tissues with a sense of peaceful completion. All over, and the stunned mind began to comprehend survival.

There was a gasp from the doorway, and she looked up to see the Beardsleys, side by side and saucer-eyed.

“Shoo!” she said firmly, and flipped a hand at them. They promptly disappeared, leaving her to the entertaining task of cleaning and oiling the flailing limbs and creased body. He was a small baby, but round: round-faced, very round-eyed for a newborn—he hadn’t cried at all, but was plainly awake and alert—and with a round little belly, from which the stump of his umbilical cord protruded, dark purple and fresh.

His look of astonishment had not faded; he goggled up at her, solemn as a fish, though she could feel the huge smile on her own face.

“You are so cute!” she told him. He smacked his lips in a thoughtful sort of way, and crinkled his brow.

“He’s hungry!” she called over her shoulder. “Are you ready?”

“Ready?” Lizzie croaked. “Mother of God, how can ye be ready for something like *this*?”, which made Claire and Brianna both laugh like loons.

Nonetheless, Lizzie reached for the little blue-wrapped bundle and put it uncertainly to her breast. There was a certain amount of fumbling and increasingly anxious grunts from the baby, but at last a suitable connection was established, making Lizzie utter a brief shriek of surprise, and everyone breathed a sigh of relief.

At this point, Brianna became aware that there had been conversation going on outside for some time—a mutter of male voices, deliberately pitched low, in a confusion of speculation and puzzlement.

“I imagine you can let them in now. Then put the griddle in the fire, if you would.” Claire, beaming fondly at mother and child, was mixing the neglected batter.

Brianna poked her head out of the cabin door, to find Jo, Kezzie, her own father, Roger, and Jemmy, clustered in a knot a little distance away. They all glanced up when they saw her, with expressions ranging from vaguely shamefaced pride to simple excitement.

"Mama! Is the baby here?" Jem rushed up, pushing to get past her into the cabin, and she grabbed him by the collar.

"Yes. You can come see him, but you have to be quiet. He's very new, and you don't want to scare him, all right?"

"Him?" one of the Beardsleys asked, excited. "It's a boy?"

"I told ye so!" his brother said, nudging him in the ribs. "I said I saw a wee prick!"

"You don't say things like 'prick' in front of ladies," Jem informed him severely, turning to frown at him. "And Mama says be quiet!"

"Oh," said the Beardsley twin, abashed. "Oh, aye, to be sure."

Moving with an exaggerated caution that made her want to laugh, the twins tiptoed into the cabin, followed by Jem, Jamie's hand firm on his shoulder, and Roger.

"Is Lizzie all right?" he asked softly, pausing to kiss her briefly in passing.

"A little overwhelmed, I think, but fine."

Lizzie was in fact sitting up, soft blond hair now combed and shining around her shoulders, glowing with happiness at Jo and Kezzie, who knelt at her bedside, grinning like apes.

"May the blessing of Bride and of Columba be on you, young woman," Jamie said formally in Gaelic, bowing to her, "and may the love of Christ sustain you always in your motherhood. May milk spring from your breasts like water from the rock and may you rest secure in the arms of your"—he coughed briefly, glancing at the Beardsleys—"husband."

"If you can't say 'prick,' why can you say 'breasts'?" Jemmy inquired, interested.

"Ye can't, unless it's a prayer," his father informed him. "Grandda was giving Lizzie a blessing."

"Oh. Are there any prayers with pricks in them?"

"I'm sure there are," Roger replied, carefully avoiding Brianna's eye, "but ye don't say them out loud. Why don't ye go and help Grannie with the breakfast?"

The iron griddle was sizzling with fat, and the fragrant smell of fresh batter filled the room as Claire began to pour spoonfuls onto the hot metal.

Jamie and Roger, having presented their compliments to Lizzie, had stepped back a bit, to give the little family a moment to themselves—though the cabin was so small, there was barely room for everyone to fit inside.

"You are so beautiful," Jo—or possibly Kezzie—whispered, touching her hair with an awed forefinger. "Ye look like the new moon, Lizzie."

"Did it hurt ye very much, sweetheart?" murmured Kezzie—or maybe Jo—stroking the back of her hand.

"Not so much," she said, stroking Kezzie's hand, then lifting her palm to cup Jo's cheek. "Look. Is he no the bonniest wee creature ye've ever seen?" The baby had drunk his fill and fallen asleep; he let go the nipple with an audible *pop!* and rolled back in his mother's arm like a dormouse, mouth a little open.

The twins made identical soft sounds of awe, and looked doe-eyed at their—well, what else could one say? Brianna thought—their son.

"Oh, such dear wee fingers!" Kezzie—or Jo—breathed, touching the little pink fist with a dirty forefinger.

"Is he all there?" Jo—or Kezzie—asked. "Ye've looked?"

"I have," Lizzie assured him. "Here—d'ye want to hold him?" Not pausing for assent, she put the bundle into his arms. Whichever twin it was looked at once thrilled and terrified, and glanced wildly at his brother for support.

Brianna, enjoying the tableau, felt Roger close behind her.

"Aren't they sweet?" she whispered, reaching back for his hand.

"Oh, aye," he said, a smile in his voice. "Enough to make ye want another, isn't it?"

It was an innocent remark; she could tell he had meant nothing by it—but he heard the echo, even as she did, and coughed, letting go her hand.

"Here—that's for Lizzie." Claire was handing a plate of fragrant cakes, drizzled with butter and honey, to Jem. "Is anyone else hungry?"

The general stampede in response to this enabled Brianna to hide her feelings, but they were still there—and painfully clear, if still tangled.

Yes, she *did* want another baby, thank you, she thought fiercely at Roger's oblivious back. In the instant of holding the newborn child, she wanted it with a yearning of flesh that surpassed hunger or thirst. And she would have loved to blame him for the fact that it hadn't happened yet.

It had taken a true leap of faith, across the vertiginous abyss of knowledge, for her to put aside her *dauco* seeds, those fragile pellets of protection. But she'd done it. And nothing. Lately, she'd been thinking uneasily of what Ian had told her about his wife and their struggles to conceive. True, she had suffered no miscarriage, and was profoundly grateful for that. But the part he had told her, where their lovemaking became more mechanical and desperate—*that* was beginning to loom like a specter in the distance. It hadn't gotten that bad yet—but more often than not, she turned into Roger's arms, thinking, *Now? Will it be this time?* But it never was.

The twins were becoming more comfortable with their offspring, their dark heads pressed close together, tracing the chubby outlines of his sleeping features and wondering aloud who he most resembled, of all idiotic things.

Lizzie was single-mindedly devouring her second plate of hoecakes, accompanied by grilled sausages. The smell was wonderful, but Brianna wasn't hungry.

It was a good thing that they knew for sure, she told herself, watching Roger take his turn to hold the baby, his dark, lean face softening. If there had still been any doubt that Jemmy was Roger's child, he would have blamed himself as Ian did, thought there was something wrong with him. As it was …

Had something happened to *her*? she wondered uneasily. Had Jemmy's birth damaged something?

Jamie was holding the new baby now, one big hand cradling the round little head, smiling down with that look of soft affection so peculiar—and endearing—to men. She did long to see that look on Roger's face, holding his own newborn child.

"Mr. Fraser." Lizzie, filled at last with sausages, put aside her empty plate and leaned forward, looking earnestly up at Jamie. "My father. Does—does he know?" She couldn't help glancing at the empty doorway behind him.

Jamie looked momentarily disconcerted.

"Ah," he said, and handed the baby carefully to Roger, clearly taking advantage of the pause to try to think of some less-hurtful way to phrase the truth.

"Aye, he kens the babe was on the way," he said carefully. "I told him."

And he had not come. Lizzie's lips pressed together, and a shadow of unhappiness crossed the new-moon glow of her face.

"Had we—had I—one of us—best go and tell him, sir?" one of the twins asked hesitantly. "That the child's here, I mean, and … and that Lizzie's all right."

Jamie hesitated, clearly uncertain whether that would be a good idea or not. Mr. Wemyss, pale and ill-looking, had not referred to his daughter, his putative sons-in-law, or his theoretical grandchild since the imbroglio surrounding Lizzie's multiple weddings. Now that the grandchild was a concrete fact, though …

"Whatever he thinks he *ought* to do," Claire said, her face slightly troubled, "he'll *want* to know that they're all right, surely."

"Oh, aye," Jamie agreed. He glanced dubiously at the twins. "I'm just no entirely sure it should be Jo or Kezzie to tell him, though."

The twins exchanged a long glance, in which some decision seemed to be reached.

"It should, sir," one of them said firmly, turning to Jamie. "The baby's ourn, but it's his blood, too. That's a link between us; he'll know that."

"We don't want him to be crosswise with Lizzie, sir," his brother said, more soft-spoken. "It hurts her. Might be the baby would … ease things, d'ye think?"

Jamie's face betrayed nothing other than a studied attention to the matter at hand, but Brianna saw him dart a quick glance at Roger before returning his gaze to the bundle in Roger's arm, and she hid a smile. He had certainly not forgotten his own acrimonious first response to Roger, but it had been Roger's claiming of Jem that had established the first—and very fragile—link in the chain of acceptance that she thought now bound Roger nearly as close to Jamie's heart as she herself.

"Aye, then," Jamie said, still reluctant. He very much disliked being involved in this situation, she could tell—but hadn't yet succeeded in figuring out any way of dealing with it. "Go and tell him. Just the one of ye, though! And should he come, t'other of ye keep well out of his sight, d'ye hear me?"

"Oh, aye, sir," both of them assured him in unison. Jo—or Kezzie—frowned a little at the bundle, and hesitantly extended his arms. "Should I—"

"No, don't." Lizzie was sitting bolt upright, her arms braced to keep her weight off her tender nether parts. Her small fair brow was set in a frown of determination. "Tell him we're well, aye. But if he wants to see the bairn—he'll come, and welcome. But if he'll no set foot upon my threshold … well, then, he's no welcome to see his grandson. Tell him," she repeated, easing herself back upon her pillows.

"Now give my bairnie to me." She held out her arms, and clutched the sleeping baby to her, closing her eyes against any possibility of argument or reproach.

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THE UNIVERSAL BROTHERHOOD OF MAN

Brianna lifted the waxed cloth covering one of the big earthenware basins, and sniffed, taking pleasure in the musty, turned-earth smell. She stirred the pale mess with a stick, lifting it out periodically in order to assess the texture of the pulp that dripped from it.

Not bad. Another day, and it would be dissolved enough to press. She considered whether to add more of the dilute sulfuric acid solution, but decided against it, and instead reached into the bowl at her side, filled with the limp petals of dogwood and redbud flowers gathered for her by Jemmy and Aidan. She scattered a handful of these delicately over the grayish pulp, stirred them in, then covered the bowl again. By tomorrow, they'd be no more than faint outlines, but still visible as shadows in the finished sheets of paper.

"I'd always heard that paper mills stank." Roger made his way through the bushes toward her. "Perhaps they use something else in the making?"

"Be glad I'm not tanning hides," she advised him. "Ian says the Indian women use dog turds for that."

"So do European tanners; they just call the stuff 'pure.' "

"Pure what?"

"Pure dog turds, I suppose," he said with a shrug. "How's it going?"

Coming up beside her, he looked with interest at her own small paper factory: a dozen big, fired-clay basins, each filled with scraps of used paper, worn-out scraps of silk and cotton, flax fibers, the soft pith of cattail reeds, and anything else she could get her hands on that might be useful, torn to shreds or ground small in a quern. She'd dug out a small seep, and laid one of her broken water pipes as a catch basin, to provide a convenient water supply; nearby, she'd built a platform of stone and wood, on which stood the framed silk screens in which she pressed the pulp.

There was a dead moth floating in the next bowl, and he reached to take it out, but she waved him away.

"Bugs drown in it all the time, but as long as they're soft-bodied, it's okay. Enough sulfuric acid"—she nodded at the bottle, stoppered with a bit of rag—"and they all just become part of the pulp: moths, butterflies, ants, gnats, lacewings … wings are the only things that won't dissolve all the way. Lacewings look sort of pretty embedded in the paper, but not roaches." She fished one of these out of a bowl and flicked it away into the bushes, then added a little more water from the gourd dipper, stirring.

"I'm not surprised. I stamped on one of them this morning; he flattened out, then popped back up and strolled off, smirking." He paused a moment; he wanted to ask her something, she could tell, and she made an interrogative hum to encourage him.

"I was only wondering—would ye mind taking Jem up to the Big House after supper? Perhaps the two of ye spending the night?"

She looked at him in astonishment.

"What are you planning to do? Throw a stag party for Gordon Lindsay?" Gordon, a shy boy of about seventeen, was betrothed to a Quaker girl from Woolam's Mill; he'd been round the day before to "thig"—beg small bits of household goods in preparation for his marriage.

"No girls popping out of cakes," he assured her, "but it's definitely men only. It's the first meeting of the Fraser's Ridge Lodge."

"Lodge … what, Freemasons?" She squinted dubiously at him, but he nodded. The breeze had come up, and it whipped his black hair up on end; he smoothed it back with one hand.

"Neutral ground," he explained. "I didna want to suggest holding meetings in either the Big House or Tom Christie's place—not wanting to favor either side, ye might say."

She nodded, seeing that.

"Okay. But why Freemasons?" She knew nothing whatever about Freemasons, save that they were some sort of secret society and that Catholics weren't allowed to join.

She mentioned this particular point to Roger, who laughed.

"True," he said "The Pope forbade it about forty years ago."

"Why? What does the Pope have against Freemasons?" she asked, interested.

"It's rather a powerful body. A good many men of power and influence belong—and it crosses international lines. I imagine the Pope's actual concern is competition in terms of power-broking—though if I recall aright, his stated reason was that Freemasonry is too much like a religion itself. Oh, that, and they worship the Devil."

He laughed.

"Ye did know your father started a Lodge at Ardsmuir, in the prison there?"

"Maybe he mentioned it; I don't remember."

"I did bring up the Catholic thing with him. He gave me one of those looks of his and said, 'Aye, well, the Pope wasna in Ardsmuir Prison, and I was.' "

"Sounds reasonable to me," she said, amused. "But then, I'm not the Pope. Did he say why? Da, I mean, not the Pope."

"Sure—as a means of uniting the Catholics and Protestants imprisoned together. One of the principles of Freemasonry being the universal brotherhood of man, aye? And another being that ye don't talk religion or politics in Lodge."

"Oh, you don't? What do you do in Lodge, then?"

"I can't tell you. Not worshipping the Devil, though."

She raised her eyebrows at him, and he shrugged.

"I can't," he repeated. "When ye join, you take an oath not to talk outside the Lodge about what's done there."

She was mildly miffed at that, but dismissed it, going back to add more water to one bowl. It looked as though someone had thrown up in it, she thought critically, and reached for the acid bottle.

"Sounds pretty fishy to me," she remarked. "And kind of silly. Isn't there something about secret handshakes, that sort of thing?"

He merely smiled, not bothered by her tone.

"I'm not saying there isn't a bit of stage business involved. It's more or less medieval in origin, and it's kept quite a bit of the original trappings—rather like the Catholic Church."

"Point taken," she said dryly, picking up a ready bowl of pulp. "Okay. So, is it Da's idea to start a Lodge here?"

"No, mine." His voice lost its humorous tone, and she looked at him sharply.

"I need a way to give them common ground, Bree," he said. "The women have it—the fishers' wives sew and spin and knit and quilt wi' the others, and if they privately think you or your mother or Mrs. Bug are heretics damned to hell, or goddamned Whigs, or whatever, it seems to make no great difference. But not the men."

She thought of saying something about the relative intelligence and common sense of the two sexes, but feeling that this might be counterproductive just at the moment, nodded understanding. Besides, he obviously had no notion of the kind of gossip that went on in sewing circles.

"Hold that screen steady, will you?"

He obligingly grasped the wooden frame, pulling taut the edges of the finely drawn wire threaded through it, as instructed.

"So," she said, spooning the thin gruel of the pulp onto the silk, "do you want me to provide milk and cookies for this affair tonight?"

She spoke with considerable irony, and he smiled across the screen at her.

"That'd be nice, aye."

"I was joking!"

"I wasn't." He was still smiling, but with complete seriousness behind his eyes, and she realized suddenly that this wasn't a whim.

With an odd small twist of the heart, she saw her father standing there.

One had known the care of other men from his earliest years, a part of the duty of his birthright; the other had come to it later, but both felt that burden to be the will of God, she had no doubt at all—both accepted that duty without question, would honor it, or die in trying. She only hoped it wouldn't come to that—for either of them.

"Give me one of your hairs," she said, looking down to hide what she felt.

"Why?" he asked, but was plucking a strand from his head even as he spoke.

"The paper. The pulp shouldn't be spread any thicker than a hair." She laid the black thread at the edge of the silk screen, then spread the creamy liquid thin and thinner, so it flowed past the hair but did not cover it. It flowed with the liquid, a sinuous dark line through the white, like the tiny crack on the surface of her heart.

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ALARMS

L'OIGNON–INTELLIGENCER

A MARRIAGE IS ANNOUNCED. The NEW BERN INTELLIGENCER, founded by Jno. Robinson, has ceased publication with the removal of its founder to Great Britain, but we assure its Customers that this Newspaper shall not vanish altogether, as its Premises, Stock, and Subscription Lists have been acquired by the Proprietors of THE ONION, that esteemed, popular, and Preeminent Journal. The New Periodical, Much Improved and Expanded, will henceforth appear as the L'OIGNON–INTELLIGENCER, distributed upon a Weekly Basis, with Extra Editions as events demand, these provided at a modest cost of One Penny….

To Mr. and Mrs. James Fraser, of the Ridge,
North Carolina, from Mr. and Mrs. Fergus Fraser,
Thorpe Street, New Bern
Dear Father and Mother Claire:

I write to acquaint you with the latest Change in our Fortunes. Mr. Robinson, who had owned the other Newspaper in the town, found himself removed to Great Britain. Literally removed, as some Persons unknown, disguised as Savages, invaded his Shop in the early Hours of the Morning, and pulled him from his Bed, *hurrying him to the Harbor and there thrusting him aboard a Ship, clad only in his Nightclothes and Cap.*

The Captain promptly cast off his Tethers and made Sail, leaving the Town in some Uproar, as you may imagine.

Within a Day of Mr. Robinson's abrupt Departure, though, we were visited by two separate Parties (I cannot write their Names, being discreet as you will appreciate). One of these was a Member of the local Committee of Safety—which everyone knows was behind Mr. Robinson's Removal, but no one says so. He was civil in his Speech, but his manner was not so much. He wished, he said, to assure himself that Fergus did not share the Willfully Wrongheaded Sentiments so oft expressed by Mr. Robinson, regarding recent Events and Particulars.

Fergus told him with a very straight face that he would not chuse to share so much as a Glass of Wine with Mr. Robinson (which he could not, Mr. Robinson being Methody and against Drink), and the Gentleman took this to mean what he wished, and went away satisfied, and gave Fergus a Purse of Money.

Next thing comes another Gentleman, fat and most Important in the Affairs of the Town, and a Member of the Royal Council, though I did not know it at the time. His Errand was the Same—or rather, the Opposite: he wished to inquire whether Fergus was inclined to acquire Mr. Robinson's Assets, so to continue his work on behalf of the King—that being the printing of some Letters, and the Suppression of Others.

Fergus says to this Gentleman, most grave, that he has always found Much to admire in Mr. Robinson (chiefly his horse, which is gray and very amiable, and the curious Buckles on his Shoes), but adding that we have barely Means to buy Ink and Paper, and so he feared we must resign ourselves to the Acquisition of Mr. Robinson's Shop by a Person of no great Sensitivity in Politickal Matters.

I was myself in Terror, a State not improved when the Gentleman uttered a Laugh and took a fat Purse from his Pocket, remarking that one must not "spoil the ship for a happeny's worth of tar." He seemed to think this most amusing, and laughed quite *immoderate, then patted Henri-Christian on the Head and went away.*

So our Prospects are at once enlarged and alarming. I am fair sleepless, thinking on the Future, but Fergus is so much Improved in Spirits that I cannot regret it.

Pray for us, as we pray for you always, my Dear Parents.

Your Obedient and Loving
Daughter,
Marsali

"You taught him well," I remarked, trying to keep my voice casual.

"Evidently so." Jamie looked slightly worried, but much more amused. "Dinna fash yourself over it, Sassenach. Fergus has some skill at this game."

"It is not a game," I said, with enough vehemence that he looked at me in surprise.

"It's not," I repeated, a little more calmly.

He raised his brows at me, and pulling a small sheaf of papers from the mess on his desk, handed them across.

WEDNESDAY MORNING
NEAR 10 OF THE CLOCK—WATERTOWN

To all the friends of American liberty be it known that this morning before break of day, a brigade, consisting of about 1,000 to 1,200 men landed at Phip's Farm at Cambridge and marched to Lexington, where they found a company of our colony militia in arms, upon whom they fired without any provocation and killed six men and wounded four others. By an express from Boston, we find another brigade are now upon their march from Boston supposed to be about 1,000. The Bearer, Israel Bissell, is charged to alarm the country quite to Connecticut and all persons are desired to furnish him with fresh horses as they may be needed. I have spoken with several persons who have seen the *dead and wounded. Pray let the delegates from this colony to Connecticut see this.*

J. Palmer, one of the Committee
of Safety.

They know Col. Foster of Brookfield one of the Delegates.

Beneath this message was a list of signatures, though most were done in the same handwriting. The first read *A true copy taken from the original per order of the Committee of Correspondence for Worcester—April 19, 1775. Attest. Nathan Baldwin, Town Clerk.* All the others were preceded by similar statements.

"I will be damned," I said. "It's the Lexington Alarm." I glanced up at Jamie, wide-eyed. "Where did you get it?"

"One of Colonel Ashe's men brought it." He shuffled to the end of the last sheet, pointing out John Ashe's endorsement. "What is the Lexington Alarm?"

"That." I looked at it with fascination. "After the battle at Lexington, General Palmer—he's a general of militia—wrote this and sent it through the countryside by an express rider, to bear witness to what had happened; to notify the militias nearby that the war had started.

"Men along the way took copies of it, endorsed them to swear that they were true copies, and sent the message along to other townships and villages; there were probably hundreds of copies made at the time, and quite a few survived. Frank had one that someone gave him as a present. He kept it in a frame, in the front hall of our house in Boston."

Then a quite extraordinary shudder went through me, as I realized that the familiar letter I was looking at had in fact been written only a week or two before—not two hundred years.

Jamie was looking a little pale, too.

"This—it's what Brianna told me would happen," he said, a tone of wonder in his voice. "Upon the nineteenth of April, a fight in Lexington—the start of the war." He looked straight at me, and I saw that his eyes were dark, with a combination of awe and excitement.

"I did believe ye, Sassenach," he said. "But …"

He didn't finish the sentence, but sat down, reaching for his quill. With slow deliberation, he signed his name at the foot of the page.

"Ye'll make me a fair copy, Sassenach?" he said. "I'll send it on."

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THE WORLD TURNED UPSIDE DOWN

Colonel Ashe's man had also brought word of a congress to be held in Mecklenberg County, to take place in mid-May, with the intent to declare the county's official independence from the King of England.

Aware of the fact that he was still viewed with skepticism by not a few leaders of what had now suddenly become "the rebellion," despite the stout personal support of John Ashe and a few other friends, Jamie made up his mind to attend this congress and speak openly in support of the measure.

Roger, absolutely blazing with suppressed excitement at this, his first chance to witness recorded history in the making, was to go with him.

A few days before their scheduled departure, though, everyone's attention was distracted from the prospect of history by the more immediate present: the entire Christie family arrived suddenly at the front door, soon after breakfast.

Something had happened; Allan Christie was flushed with agitation, Tom grim and gray as an old wolf. Malva had clearly been crying, and her face went red and white by turns. I greeted her, but she looked away from me, lips trembling, as Jamie invited them into his study, gesturing them to sit.

"What is it, Tom?" He glanced briefly at Malva—plainly she was the focus of this family emergency—but gave his attention to Tom, as patriarch.

Tom Christie's mouth was pressed so tight that it was barely visible in the depths of his neatly clipped beard.

"My daughter finds herself with child," he said abruptly.

"Oh?" Jamie cast another brief glance at Malva—who stood with capped head bowed, looking down at her clasped hands—then looked at me with a raised eyebrow. "Ah. Well … there's a good bit of it going about, to be sure," he said, and smiled kindly, in an effort to ease the Christies, all of whom were quivering like beads on a tight-pulled wire.

I was myself less than startled to hear the news, though naturally concerned. Malva had always attracted a great deal of attention from young men, and while both her brother and father had been vigilant in preventing any open courting, the only way of keeping young men away altogether would have been to lock her in a dungeon.

Who had the successful suitor been? I wondered. Obadiah Henderson? Bobby, perhaps? One of the McMurchie brothers? Not—please God—both of them, I hoped. All of these—and not a few others—had been obvious in their admiration.

Tom Christie received Jamie's attempt at pleasantry with stony silence, though Allan made a poor attempt at a smile. He was nearly as pale as his sister.

Jamie coughed.

"Well, so. Is there some way in which I might help, then, Tom?"

"She says," Christie began gruffly, with a piercing look at his daughter, "that she will not name the man, save in your presence." He turned the look on Jamie, thick with dislike.

"In my presence?" Jamie coughed again, clearly embarrassed at the obvious implication—that Malva thought her male relatives would either beat her or proceed to do violence upon her lover, unless the presence of the landlord constrained them. Personally, I thought that particular fear was probably well founded, and gave Tom Christie a narrow look of my own. Had he already tried, and failed, to beat the truth out of her?

Malva was not making any attempt at divulging the name of the father of her child, Jamie's presence notwithstanding. She merely pleated her apron between her fingers, over and over, eyes fixed on her hands.

I cleared my throat delicately.

"How—um—how far gone are you, my dear?"

She didn't answer directly, but pressed both hands, shaking, against her apron front, smoothing down the cloth so that the round bulge of her pregnancy was suddenly visible, smooth and melonlike, surprisingly large. Six months, perhaps; I was startled. Clearly, she'd delayed telling her father for as long as she possibly could—and hidden it well.

The silence was well beyond awkward. Allan shifted uncomfortably on his stool, and leaned forward to murmur reassuringly to his sister.

"It'll be all right, Mallie," he whispered. "Ye've got to say, though."

She took a huge gulp of air at that, and raised her head. Her eyes were reddened, but still very beautiful, and wide with apprehension.

"Oh, sir," she said, but then stopped dead.

Jamie was by now looking nearly as uncomfortable as the Christies, but did his best to keep his air of kindness.

"Will ye not tell me, then, lass?" he said, as gently as possible. "I promise ye'll not suffer for it."

Tom Christie made an irritable noise, like some beast of prey disturbed at its meal, and Malva went very pale indeed, but her eyes stayed fixed on Jamie.

"Oh, sir," she said, and her voice was small but clear as a bell, ringing with reproach. "Oh, sir, how can ye say that to me, when ye ken the truth as well as I do?" Before anyone could react to that, she turned to her father, and lifting a hand, pointed directly at Jamie.

"It was him," she said.

* * *

I have never been so grateful for anything in life as for the fact that I was looking at Jamie's face when she said it. He had no warning, no chance to control his features—and he didn't. His face showed neither anger nor fear, denial or surprise; nothing save the open-mouthed blankness of absolute incomprehension.

"What?" he said, and blinked, once. Then realization flooded into his face.

"WHAT?" he said, in a tone that should have knocked the little trollop flat on her lying little bottom.

She blinked then, and cast down her eyes, the very picture of virtue shamed. She turned, as though unable to bear his gaze, and stretched out a tremulous hand toward me.

"I'm *so* sorry, Mrs. Fraser," she whispered, tears trembling becomingly on her lashes. "He—we—we didna mean to hurt ye."

I watched with interest from somewhere outside my body, as my arm lifted and drew back, and felt a sense of vague approval as my hand struck her cheek with enough force that she stumbled backward, tripped over a stool, and fell, her petticoats tumbled up to her waist in a froth of linen, wool-stockinged legs sticking absurdly up in the air.

"Can't say the same, I'm afraid." I hadn't even thought of saying anything, and was surprised to feel the words in my mouth, cool and round as river stones.

Suddenly, I was back in my body. I felt as though my stays had tightened during my temporary absence; my ribs ached with the effort to breathe. Liquid surged in every direction; blood and lymph, sweat and tears—if I did draw breath, my skin would give way and let it all spurt out, like the contents of a ripe tomato, thrown against a wall.

I had no bones. But I had will. That alone held me upright and saw me out the door. I didn't see the corridor or realize that I had pushed open the front door of the house; all I saw was a sudden blaze of light and a blur of green in the dooryard and then I was running, running as though all the demons of hell coursed at my heels.

In fact, no one pursued me. And yet I ran, plunging off the trail and into the wood, feet sliding in the layers of slippery needles down the runnels between stones, half-falling down the slope of the hill, caroming painfully off fallen logs, wrenching free of thorns and brush.

I arrived breathless at the bottom of a hill and found myself in a dark, small hollow walled by the towering black-green of rhododendrons. I paused, gasping for breath, then sat down abruptly. I felt myself wobble, and let go, ending on my back among the dusty layers of leathery mountain laurel leaves.

A faint thought echoed in my mind, under the sound of my gasping breath. *The guilty flee, where no man pursues.* But *I* surely wasn't guilty. Nor was Jamie; I knew that. Knew it.

But Malva was certainly pregnant. Someone was guilty.

My eyes were blurred from running and the sunlight starred into fractured slabs and streaks of color—dark blue, light blue, white and gray, pinwheels of green and gold as the cloudy sky and the mountainside spun round and round above me.

I blinked hard, unshed tears sliding down my temples.

"Bloody, bloody, fucking hell," I said very softly. "Now what?"

* * *

Jamie stooped without thought, seized the girl by the elbows, and hauled her unceremoniously to her feet. Her one cheek bore a crimson patch where Claire had struck her, and for an instant, he had a strong urge to give her one to match on the other side.

He hadn't the chance either to quell that desire or to execute it; a hand seized his shoulder to yank him round, and it was reflex alone that made him dodge aside as Allan Christie's fist glanced off the side of his head, catching him painfully on the tip of the ear. He pushed the young man hard in the chest with both hands, then hooked a heel behind his calf as he staggered, and Allan dropped on his backside with a thud that shook the room.

Jamie stepped back, a hand to his throbbing ear, and glared at Tom Christie, who was standing staring at him like Lot's wife.

Jamie's free left hand was clenched in a fist, and he raised it a little, in invitation. Christie's eyes narrowed further, but he made no move toward Jamie.

"Get up," Christie said to his son. "And keep your fists to yourself. There's nay need for that now."

"Isn't there?" cried the lad, scrambling to his feet. "He's made a whore of your daughter, and you'll let him stand? Well, and ye'll play coward, auld man, I'll not!"

He lunged at Jamie, wild-eyed, hands grabbing for his throat. Jamie stepped to the side, shifted weight back on one leg, and hooked the lad in the liver with a vicious left that drove his wame into his backbone and doubled him over with a *whoof.* Allan stared up at him, open-mouthed and the whites of his eyes showing all round, then subsided onto his knees with a thud, mouth opening and closing like a fish's.

It might have been comical under other circumstances, but Jamie felt no disposition to laugh. He wasted no more time on either of the men, but swung round on Malva.

"So, what mischief is this ye're about, *nighean na galladh*?" he said to her. It was a serious insult, and Tom Christie knew what it meant, Gaelic or not; Jamie could see Christie stiffen, in the corner of his eye.

The girl herself was already in tears, and burst into sobs at this.

"How can ye speak to me so?" she wailed, and clutched her apron to her face. "How can ye be so cruel?"

"Oh, for God's sake," he said crossly. He shoved a stool in her direction. "Sit, ye wee loon, and we'll hear the truth of whatever ye think ye're up to. Mr. Christie?" He glanced at Tom, nodded toward another stool, and went to take his own chair, ignoring Allan, who had collapsed onto the floor and was curled up on his side like a kitten, holding his belly.

"Sir?"

Mrs. Bug, hearing the racket, had come out from her kitchen, and was standing in the doorway, eyes wide under her cap.

"Will ye … be needin' anything, sir?" she asked, making no pretense of not staring from Malva, red-faced and sobbing on her stool, to Allan, white and gasping on the floor.

Jamie thought that he needed a strong dram—or maybe two—but that would have to wait.

"I thank ye, Mrs. Bug," he said politely, "but no. We'll bide." He lifted his fingers in dismissal, and she faded reluctantly from view. She hadn't gone far, though, he knew, just round the edge of the door.

He rubbed a hand over his face, wondering what it was about young girls these days. It was a full moon tonight; perhaps they truly did run lunatic.

On the other hand, the wee bitch had undoubtedly been playing the loon with *someone;* with her apron up like that, the bairn was showing plainly, a hard round swell like a calabash under her thin petticoat.

"How long?" he asked Christie, with a nod toward her.

"Six months gone," Christie said, and sank reluctantly onto the offered stool. He was dour as Jamie had ever seen him, but in control of himself, that was something.

"It was when the sickness came late last summer; when I was here, helping to nurse his wife!" Malva burst out, lowering her apron and staring reproachfully at her father, full lip a-tremble. "And not just the once, either!" She switched her gaze back to Jamie, wet-eyed and pleading. "Tell them, sir, please—tell them the truth!"

"Oh, I mean to," he said, giving her a black look. "And ye'll do the same, lass, I assure ye."

The shock of it was beginning to fade, and while his sense of irritation remained—in fact, it was growing by the moment—he was beginning to think, and furiously.

She was pregnant by someone grossly unsuitable; that much was clear. Who? Christ, he wished Claire had stayed; she listened to the gossip on the Ridge and she took interest in the lass; she'd know which young men were likely prospects. He'd seldom noticed young Malva particularly himself, save she was always about, helping Claire.

"The first time was when Herself was so ill as we despaired of her life," Malva said, snapping him back to attention. "I told ye, Faither. It wasna rape—only Himself being off his heid wi' the sorrow of it, and me, as well." She blinked, a pearly tear sliding down the unmarked cheek. “I came down from her room late at night, to find him in here, sitting in the dark, and grieving. I felt so sorry for him.…” Her voice shook, and she stopped, swallowing.

“I asked could I fetch him a wee bite, maybe something to drink—but he’d drink taken already, there was whisky in a glass before him.…”

“And I said no, thank ye kindly, and that I’d be alone,” Jamie broke in, feeling the blood begin to surge in his temples at her recounting. “Ye left.”

“No, I didn’t.” She shook her head; the cap had come half off when she fell and she hadn’t settled it again; dark tendrils of hair hung down, framing her face. “Or rather, ye did say that to me, that ye’d be alone. But I couldn’t bear to see ye in such straits, and—I know ’twas forward and unseemly, but I did pity ye so much!” she burst out, looking up and then immediately dropping her gaze again.

“I … I came and touched him,” she whispered, so low that he had trouble hearing her. “Put my hand on his shoulder, like, only to comfort him. But he turned then, and put his arms round me, all of a sudden and grasped me to him. And—and then …” She gulped, audibly.

“He … he took me. Just … there.” The toe of one small buskin stretched out, pointing delicately at the rag rug just in front of the table. Where there was, in fact, a small and ancient brown stain, which might have been blood. It *was* blood—Jemmy’s, left when the wee lad had tripped on the rug and bumped his nose so it bled.

He opened his mouth to speak, but was so choked by outraged amazement that nothing emerged but a sort of gasp.

“So ye’ve not the balls to deny it, eh?” Young Allan had recovered his breath; he was swaying on his knees, hair hanging in his face, and glaring. “Balls enough to do it, though!”

Jamie gave Allan a quelling look, but didn’t bother replying to him. He turned his attention instead to Tom Christie.

“Is she mad?” he inquired. “Or only clever?”

Christie’s face might have been carved in stone, save for the pouchy flesh quivering beneath his eyes, and the eyes themselves, bloodshot and narrowed.

“She’s not mad,” Christie said.

“A clever liar, then.” Jamie narrowed his own eyes at her. “Clever enough to ken no one would believe a tale of rape.”

Her mouth opened in horror.

“Oh, no, sir,” she said, and shook her head so hard the dark curls danced by her ears. “I should *never* say such a thing of ye, never!” She swallowed, and timidly raised her eyes to meet his—swollen with weeping, but a soft dove gray, guileless with innocence.

“Ye needed comfort,” she said, softly but clearly. “I gave it ye.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose hard betwixt thumb and forefinger, hoping the sensation would wake him from what was plainly nightmare. This failing to occur, he sighed and looked at Tom Christie.

“She’s with child by someone, and not by me,” he said bluntly. “Who might it have been?”

“It *was* you!” the girl protested, letting her apron fall as she sat bolt upright on her stool. “There’s no one else!”

Christie’s eyes slid reluctantly toward his daughter, then came back to meet Jamie’s. They were the same dove gray, but they’d never possessed any trace of either guilelessness or innocence.

“I know of no one,” he said. He took a deep breath, squaring his stocky shoulders. “She says it wasn’t just the once. That ye had her a dozen times or more.” His voice was nearly colorless, but not from lack of feeling, rather, from the grip he had upon his feelings.

“Then she’s lied a dozen times or more,” Jamie said, keeping his own voice under as much control as Christie’s.

“Ye know I have not! Your wife believes me,” Malva said, and a steely note had entered her voice. She lifted a hand to her cheek, where the flaming color had subsided but where the print of Claire’s fingers was still clear, livid in outline.

“My wife has better sense,” he said coldly, but was conscious all the same of a sinking sensation at the mention of Claire. Any woman might find such an accusation shock enough to make her flee—but he did wish that she’d stayed. Her presence, stoutly denying any misbehavior by him and personally rebuking Malva's lies, would have helped.

"Does she?" The vivid color had faded from the girl's face altogether, but she had stopped weeping. She was white-faced, her eyes huge and brilliant. "Well, I've sense, as well, sir. Sense enough to prove what I say."

"Oh, aye?" he said skeptically. "How?"

"I've seen the scars on your naked body; I can describe them."

That declaration brought everyone up short. There was silence for a moment, broken by Allan Christie's grunt of satisfaction. He rose to his feet, one hand still pressed to his middle, but an unpleasant smile upon his face.

"So, then?" he said. "Nay answer to that one, have ye?"

Irritation had long since given way to a monstrous anger. Under that, though, was the barest thread of something he would not—not yet—call fear.

"I dinna put my scars on display," he said mildly, "but there are a number of folk who've seen them, nonetheless. I havena lain with any of *them,* either."

"Aye, folk speak sometimes of the scars on your back," Malva shot back. "And everyone kens the great ugly one up your leg, that ye took at Culloden. But what of the crescent-shaped one across your ribs? Or the wee one on your left hurdie?" She reached a hand behind her, cupping her own buttock in illustration.

"Not in the center, quite—a bit down, on the outer side. About the size of a farthing." She didn't smile, but something like triumph blazed in her eyes.

"I havena got—" he began, but then stopped, appalled. Christ, he did. A spider's bite, taken in the Indies, that festered for a week, made an abscess, then burst, to his great relief. Once healed, he'd never thought of it again—but it was there.

Too late. They'd seen the realization cross his face.

Tom Christie closed his eyes, jaw working under his beard. Allan grunted again with satisfaction, and crossed his arms.

"Want to show us she's wrong?" the young man inquired sarcastically. "Take down your breeks, and gie us a look at your backside, then!"

With a good deal of effort, he kept himself from telling Allan Christie what he could do with his own backside. He took a long, slow breath, hoping that by the time he let it out again, some useful thought would have come to him.

It didn't. Tom Christie opened his eyes with a sigh.

"So," he said flatly. "I suppose ye'll not intend to put aside your wife and marry her?"

"I should never do such a thing!" The suggestion filled him with fury—and something like panic at the mere notion of being without Claire.

"Then we'll draw a contract." Christie rubbed a hand over his face, shoulders slumped with exhaustion and distaste. "Maintenance for her and the bairn. Formal acknowledgment of the child's rights as one of your heirs. Ye can decide, I suppose, if ye wish to take it for your wife to rear, but that—"

"Get out." He rose, very slowly, and leaned forward, hands on the table, eyes fixed on Christie's. "Take your daughter and leave my house."

Christie stopped speaking and looked at him, black-browed. The girl had started grieving again, making whimpering noises into her apron. He'd the odd feeling that time had stopped, somehow; they would all just be trapped here forever, himself and Christie staring each other down like dogs, unable to look down but knowing that the floor of the room had vanished beneath their feet and they hung suspended over some dreadful abyss, in the endless moment before the fall.

It was Allan Christie who broke it, of course. The movement of the young man's hand going to his knife freed Jamie's gaze from Christie's, and his fingers tightened, digging into the wood of the table. An instant before, he'd felt bodiless; now blood hammered in his temples and pulsed through his limbs and his muscles trembled with an urgent need to damage Allan Christie. And wring his sister's neck to stop her noise, as well.

Allan Christie's face was black with anger, but he'd sense enough—barely, Jamie thought—not to draw the knife.

"I should like nothing better, wee man, than to gie ye your heid in your hands to play with," he said softly. "Leave now, before I do it."

Young Christie licked his lips and tensed himself, knucklebones going white on the hilt—but his eyes wavered. He glanced at his father, who sat like a stone, grim-jowled and square. The light had changed; it shone from the side and through the grizzled tufts of Christie's beard, so his own scar showed, a thin pink rope that curled like a snake above his jaw.

Christie straightened slowly, pushing himself up with his hands on his thighs, then shook his head suddenly like a dog shaking off water and stood up. He gripped Malva by the arm, lifted her from her stool, and pushed her before him, weeping and stumbling on the way out.

Allan followed them, making occasion to brush so near to Jamie as he left that Jamie could smell the younger man's stink, ripe with fury. Young Christie cast a single angry glance back over his shoulder, hand still on his knife—but left. Their tread in the hall made the floorboards tremble under Jamie's feet, and then came the heavy slam of the door.

He looked down, then, vaguely surprised to see the battered surface of his table and his own hands still flattened there as if they'd grown to it. He straightened up and his fingers curled, the stiff joints painful as they made themselves into fists. He was drenched with sweat.

Lighter footsteps came down the hall then, and Mrs. Bug came in with a tray. She set it down before him, curtsied to him, and went out. The single crystal goblet that he owned was stood on it, and the decanter that held the good whisky.

He felt obscurely that he wanted to laugh, but couldn't quite remember how it was done. The light touched the decanter and the drink within glowed like a chrysoberyl. He touched the glass gently in acknowledgment of Mrs. Bug's loyalty, but that would have to wait. The Devil was loose in the world and there'd be hell to pay, surely. Before he did aught else, he must find Claire.

* * *

After a time, the drifting clouds boiled up into thunderheads, and a cold breeze moved over the top of the hollow, shaking the laurels overhead with a rattling like dry bones. Very slowly, I got to my feet and began to climb.

I had no sure destination in mind; didn't care, really, if I were wet or not. I only knew that I couldn't go back to the house. As it was, I came to the trail that led to the White Spring, just as rain began to fall. Huge drops splattered on the leaves of pokeweed and burdock, and the firs and pines let go their long-held breath in a fragrant sigh.

The patter of drops on leaves and branches was punctuated by the muffled thud of heavier drops striking deep into soft earth—hail was coming with the rain, and suddenly there were tiny white particles of ice bouncing crazily on the packed needles, peppering my face and neck with stinging cold.

I ran, then, and took shelter beneath the drooping branches of a balsam fir that overhung the spring. The hail pocked the water and made it dance, but melted on impact, disappearing at once into the dark water. I sat still, arms wrapped around myself against the chill, shivering.

You could almost understand, said the part of my mind that had begun talking somewhere on the journey up the hill. *Everyone thought you were dying—including you. You know what happens … you've seen it.* People under the terrible strain of grief, those dealing with the presence of overwhelming death—I'd seen it. It was a natural seeking of solace; an attempt to hide, only for a moment, to deny death's coldness by taking comfort in the simple warmth of bodily contact.

"But he didn't," I said stubbornly, out loud. "If he *had,* and that was it—I could forgive him. But God damn it, he *didn't*!"

My subconscious subsided in the face of this certainty, but I was aware of subterranean stirrings—not suspicions, nothing strong enough to be called doubts. Only small, cool observations that poked their heads above the surface of my own dark well like spring peepers, high, thin pipings that were barely audible individually but that together might eventually form a racket of sound to shake the night.

You're an old woman.

See how the veins stand out on your hands.

The flesh has fallen away from your bones; your breasts sag.

If he were desperate, needing comfort …

He might reject her, but could never turn away from a child of his blood.

I closed my eyes and fought a rising sense of nausea. The hail had passed, succeeded by heavy rain, and cold steam began to rise from the ground, vapor drifting upward, disappearing like ghosts into the downpour.

"No," I said aloud. "No!"

I felt as though I had swallowed several large rocks, jagged and dirt-covered. It wasn't just the thought that Jamie might—but that Malva *had* most certainly betrayed me. Had betrayed me if it were true—and still more, if it were not.

My apprentice. My daughter of the heart.

I was safe from the rain, but the air was thick with water; my garments grew damp and hung heavy on me, clammy on my skin. Through the rain, I could see the big white stone that stood at the head of the spring, that gave the pool its name. Here it was that Jamie had shed his blood in sacrifice, and dashed it on that rock, asking the help of the kinsman he had slain. And here it was that Fergus had lain down, opening his veins in despair for his son, his blood blooming dark in the silent water.

And I began to realize why I had come here, why the place had called me. It was a place to meet oneself, and find truth.

The rain passed, and the clouds broke. Slowly, the light began to fade.

* * *

It was nearly dark when he came. The trees were moving, restless with twilight and whispering among themselves; I didn't hear his footsteps on the sodden trail. He was just there, suddenly, at the edge of the clearing.

He stood searching; I saw his head lift when he saw me, and then he strode round the pool and ducked under the overhanging branches of my shelter. He'd been out for some time, I saw; his coat was wet and the cloth of his shirt plastered to his chest with rain and sweat. He'd brought a cloak with him, bundled under his arm, and he unfolded this and wrapped it round my shoulders. I let him.

He sat quite close to me then, arms wrapped about his knees, and stared into the darkening pool of the spring. The light had reached that point of beauty, just before all color fades, and the hairs of his eyebrows arched auburn and perfect over the solid ridges of his brows, each hair distinct, like the shorter, darker hairs of his sprouting beard.

He breathed long and deep, as though he had been walking for some time, and rubbed away a drop of moisture that dripped from the end of his nose. Once or twice, he took a shorter breath, as though about to say something, but didn't.

The birds had come out briefly after the rain. Now they were going to their rest, cheeping softly in the trees.

"I *do* hope you were planning to say something," I said finally, politely. "Because if you don't, I'll probably start screaming, and I might not be able to stop."

He made a sound somewhere between amusement and dismay, and sank his face into the palms of his hands. He stayed that way for a moment, then rubbed his hands hard over his face and sat up, sighing.

"I have been thinking all the time I was searching for ye, Sassenach, what in God's name I should say when I found ye. I thought of one thing and another—and … there seemed nothing whatever I *could* say." He sounded helpless.

"How is that?" I asked, a distinct edge in my voice. "I could think of a few things to say, I daresay."

He sighed, and made a brief gesture of frustration.

"What? To say I was sorry—that's not right. I *am* sorry, but to say so—it sounds as though I've done something to be sorry for, and that I have not. But I thought to start off so would make ye maybe think …" He glanced at me. I was keeping a tight grip on both my face and my emotions, but he knew me very well. The instant he'd said, "I'm sorry," my stomach had plunged toward my feet.

He looked away.

"There's naught I can say," he said quietly, "that doesna sound as though I try to defend or excuse myself. And I willna do that."

I made a small sound, as though someone had punched me in the stomach, and he glanced sharply at me.

"I won't do it!" he said fiercely. "There is no way to deny such a charge that doesna carry the stink of doubt about it. And nothing I can say to you that doesna sound like some groveling apology for—for—well, I willna apologize for something I havena done, and if I did, ye'd only doubt me more."

I was beginning to breathe a little easier.

"You don't seem to have a lot of faith in my faith in *you*."

He gave me a wary look.

"If I hadna got quite a lot of it, Sassenach, I wouldna be here."

He watched me for a moment, then reached out and touched my hand. My fingers turned at once and curved to meet his, and our hands clasped tight. His fingers were big and cold and he held mine so tightly that I thought my bones would break.

He took a deep breath, almost a sob, and his shoulders, tight in his sodden coat, relaxed all at once.

"Ye didna think it true?" he asked. "Ye ran away."

"It *was* a shock," I said. And I'd thought, dimly, that if I stayed, I might just kill her.

"Aye, it was," he said very dryly. "I expect I might have run away myself—if I could."

A small twinge of guilt was added to the overload of emotions; I supposed my hasty exit couldn't have helped the situation. He didn't reproach me, though, but merely said again, "Ye didna think it true, though?"

"I don't."

"Ye don't." His eyes searched mine. "But ye did?"

“No.” I pulled the cloak closer round me, settling it on my shoulders. “I didn’t. But I didn’t know why.”

“And now ye do.”

I took a deep, deep breath of my own and let it go, then turned to face him, straight on.

“Jamie Fraser,” I said, with great deliberation. “If you could do such a thing as that—and I don’t mean lying with a woman, I mean doing it and lying to *me* about it—then everything I’ve done and everything I’ve been—my whole life—has been a lie. And I am not prepared to admit such a thing.”

That surprised him a little; it was nearly dark now, but I saw his eyebrows rise.

“What d’ye mean by that, Sassenach?”

I waved a hand up the trail, where the house lay invisible above us, then toward the spring, where the white stone stood, a blur in the dark.

“I don’t belong here,” I said softly. “Brianna, Roger … they don’t belong here. Jemmy shouldn’t be here; he should be watching cartoons on television, drawing pictures of cars and airplanes with crayons—not learning to shoot a gun as big as he is and cut the entrails from a deer.”

I lifted my face and closed my eyes, feeling the damp settle on my skin, heavy on my lashes.

“But we *are* here, all of us. And we’re here because I loved you, more than the life that was mine. Because I believed you loved me the same way.”

I took a deep breath, so that my voice wouldn’t tremble, opened my eyes and turned to him.

“Will you tell me that’s not true?”

“No,” he said after a moment, so softly I could barely hear him. His hand tightened harder on mine. “No, I willna tell ye that. Not ever, Claire.”

“Well, then,” I said, and felt the anxiety and fury and fear of the afternoon run out of me like water. I rested my head on his shoulder, and breathed the rain and sweat on his skin. He smelled acrid, pungent with the musk of fear and curdled anger.

It was entirely dark by now. I could hear sounds in the distance, Mrs. Bug calling to Arch from the stable where she'd been milking the goats, and his cracked old voice hallooing back. A bat flittered past, silent and hunting.

"Claire?" Jamie said softly.

"Hm?"

"I've got to tell ye something."

I froze. After a moment, I carefully detached myself from him and sat upright.

"Don't do that," I said. "It makes me feel as though I've been punched in the stomach."

"I'm sorry."

I wrapped my arms around myself, trying to swallow the sudden feeling of nausea.

"You said you wouldn't start off by saying you were sorry, because it felt as though there must be something to be sorry for."

"I did," he said, and sighed.

I felt the movement between us as the two stiff fingers of his right hand thrummed against his leg.

"There isna any good way," he said finally, "of telling your wife ye've lain wi' someone else. No matter what the circumstances. There's just not."

I felt suddenly dizzy, and short of breath. I closed my eyes momentarily. He didn't mean Malva; he'd made that clear.

"Who?" I said as evenly as possible. "And when?"

He stirred uneasily.

"Oh. Well … when ye … when ye were … gone, to be sure."

I managed to take a short breath.

"Who?" I said.

"Just the once," he said. "I mean—I hadna the slightest intention of—"

"Who?"

He sighed, and rubbed hard at the back of his neck.

"Christ. The last thing I want is to upset ye, Sassenach, by sounding as though it—but I dinna want to malign the puir woman by makin' it seem that she was—"

"WHO?" I roared, seizing him by the arm.

"Jesus!" he said, thoroughly startled. "Mary MacNab."

"Who?" I said again, blankly this time.

"Mary MacNab," he repeated, and sighed. "Can ye let go, Sassenach? I think ye've drawn blood."

I had, my fingernails digging hard enough into his wrist as to pierce the skin. I flung his hand away, and folded my own into fists, wrapping my arms around my body by way of stopping myself from strangling him.

"Who. The. Hell. Is. Mary. MacNab?" I said, through my teeth. My face was hot, but cold sweat prickled along my jaw and rolled down my ribs.

"Ye ken her, Sassenach. She was wife to Rab—him that died when his house was burnt. They had the one bairn, Rabbie; he was stable-lad at Lallybroch when—"

"Mary MacNab. *Her?*" I could hear the astonishment in my own voice. I did recall Mary MacNab—barely. She'd come to be a maid at Lallybroch after the death of her nasty husband; a small, wiry woman, worn with work and hardship, who seldom spoke, but went about her business like a shadow, never more than half-noticed in the rowdy chaos of life at Lallybroch.

"I scarcely noticed her," I said, trying—and failing—to remember whether she had been there on my last visit. "But I gather you *did?*"

"No," he said, and sighed. "Not like ye mean, Sassenach."

"Don't call me that," I said, my voice sounding low and venomous to my own ears.

He made a Scottish noise in his throat, of frustrated resignation, rubbing his wrist.

"Aye. Well, see, 'twas the night before I gave myself up to the English—"

"You never told me that!"

"Never told ye what?" He sounded confused.

"That you gave yourself up to the English. We thought you'd been captured."

"I was," he said briefly. "But by arrangement, for the price on my head." He flipped a hand, dismissing the matter. "It wasna important."

"They might have hanged you!" *And a good thing, too,* said the small, furiously hurt voice inside.

"No, they wouldn't." A faint tinge of amusement showed in his voice. "Ye'd told me so, Sass—mmphm. I didna really care, though, if they did."

I had no idea what he meant by saying I'd told him so, but *I* certainly didn't care at the moment.

"Forget that," I said tersely. "I want to know—"

"About Mary. Aye, I ken." He rubbed a hand slowly through his hair. "Aye, well. She came to me, the night before I—I went. I was in the cave, ken, near Lallybroch, and she brought me supper. And then she … stayed."

I bit my tongue, not to interrupt. I could feel him gathering his thoughts, searching for words.

"I tried to send her away," he said at last. "She … well, what she said to me …" He glanced at me; I saw the movement of his head. "She said she'd seen me with ye, Claire—and that she kent the look of a true love when she saw it, for all she'd not had one herself. And that it wasna in her mind to make me betray that. But she would give me … some small thing. That's what she said to me," he said, and his voice had grown husky, *" 'some small thing, that maybe ye can use.' "*

"It was—I mean, it wasna …" He stopped, and made that odd shrugging motion of his, as though his shirt were tight across his shoulders. He bowed his head for a moment on his knees, hands linked round them.

"She gave me tenderness," he said finally, so softly that I barely heard him. "I—I hope I gave her the same."

My throat and chest were too tight to speak, and tears prickled behind my eyes. I remembered, quite suddenly, what he had said to me the night I mended Tom Christie's hand, about the Sacred Heart —*"so wanting—and no one to touch him."* And he had lived in a cave for seven years, alone.

There was no more than a foot of space between us, but it seemed an unbridgeable gulf.

I reached across it and laid my hand on his, the tips of my fingers on his big, weathered knuckles. I took a breath, then two, trying to steady my voice, but it cracked and broke, nonetheless.

"You gave her … tenderness. I know you did."

He turned to me, suddenly, and my face was pressed into his coat, the cloth of it damp and rough on my skin, my tears blooming in tiny warm patches that vanished at once into the chill of the fabric.

"Oh, Claire," he whispered into my hair. I reached up, and could feel wetness on his cheeks. "She said—she wished to keep ye alive for me. And she meant it; she didna mean to take anything for herself."

I cried then, holding nothing back. For empty years, yearning for the touch of a hand. Hollow years, lying beside a man I had betrayed, for whom I had no tenderness. For the terrors and doubts and griefs of the day. Cried for him and me and for Mary MacNab, who knew what loneliness was—and what love was, as well.

"I would have told ye, before," he whispered, patting my back as though I were a small child. "But it was … it was the once." He shrugged a little, helpless. "And I couldna think how. How to say it, that ye'd understand."

I sobbed, gulped air, and finally sat up, wiping my face carelessly on a fold of my skirt.

"I understand," I said. My voice was thick and clogged, but fairly steady now. "I do."

And I did. Not only about Mary MacNab and what she had done—but why he'd told me now. There was no need; I would never have known. No need but the need for absolute honesty between us—and that I must know it was there.

I had believed him, about Malva. But now I had not only certainty of mind—but peace of heart.

We sat close together, the folds of my cloak and skirts flowing over his legs, his simple presence a comfort. Somewhere nearby, a very early cricket began to chirp.

"The rain's past, then," I said, hearing it. He nodded, with a small sound of assent.

"What shall we do?" I said at last. My voice sounded calm.

"Find out the truth—if I can."

Neither of us mentioned the possibility that he might not. I shifted, gathering the folds of my cloak.

"Will we go home, then?"

It was too dark to see now, but I felt him nod as he got to his feet, putting down a hand to help me.

"Aye, we will."

* * *

The house was empty when we returned, though Mrs. Bug had left a covered dish of shepherd's pie on the table, the floor swept, and the fire neatly smoored. I took off my wet cloak and hung it on the peg, but then stood, unsure quite what to do next, as though I stood in a stranger's house, in a country where I did not know the custom.

Jamie seemed to feel the same way—though after a moment, he stirred, fetched down the candlestick from the shelf over the hearth, and lit it with a spill from the fire. The wavering glow seemed only to emphasize the odd, echoing quality of the room, and he stood holding it for a minute, at a loss, before finally setting it down with a thump in the middle of the table.

"Are ye hungry, S … Sassenach?" He had begun to speak by habit, but then interrupted himself, looking up to be sure the name was once more allowed. I did my best to smile at him, though I could feel the corners of my mouth tremble.

"No. Are you?"

He shook his head, silent, and dropped his hand from the dish. Looking round for something else to do, he took up the poker and stirred the coals, breaking up the blackened embers and sending a swirl of sparks and soot up the chimney and out onto the hearth. It would ruin the fire, which would need to be rebuilt before bed, but I said nothing—he knew that.

"It feels like a death in the family," I said at last. "As though something terrible has happened, and this is the shocked bit, before you begin to send round and tell all the neighbors."

He gave a small, rueful laugh, and put the poker down.

"We'll not need to. They'll all ken well enough by daybreak what's happened."

Rousing at last from my immobility, I shook out my damp skirts and came to stand beside him by the fire. The heat of it seared at once through the wet cloth; it should have been comforting, but there was an icy weight in my abdomen that wouldn't melt. I put a hand on his arm, needing the touch of him.

"No one will believe it," I said. He put a hand over mine, and smiled a little, his eyes closed, but shook his head.

"They'll all believe it, Claire," he said softly. "I'm sorry."

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81

BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

"It isn't freaking true!"

"No, of course not." Roger watched his wife warily; she was exhibiting the general symptoms of a large explosive device with an unstable timing mechanism, and he had the distinct feeling that it was dangerous to be in her vicinity.

"That little *bitch*! I want to just grab her and choke the truth out of her!" Her hand closed convulsively on the neck of the syrup bottle, and he reached to take it from her before she should break it.

"I understand the impulse," he said, "but on the whole—better not."

She glared at him, but relinquished the bottle.

"Can't *you* do something?" she said.

He'd been asking himself that since he'd heard the news of Malva's accusation.

"I don't know," he said. "But I thought I'd go and talk to the Christies, at least. And if I can get Malva alone, I will." Thinking of his last tête-à-tête with Malva Christie, though, he had an uneasy feeling that she wouldn't be easily shaken from her story.

Brianna sat down, scowling at her plate of buckwheat cakes, and began slathering them with butter. Her fury was beginning to give way to rational thought; he could see ideas darting behind her eyes.

"If you can get her to admit that it's not true," she said slowly, "that's good. If not, though—the next best thing is to find out who's been with her. If some guy will admit in public that he *could* be the father—that would cast a lot of doubt on her story, at least."

"True." Roger poured syrup sparingly over his own cakes, even in the midst of uncertainty and anxiety enjoying the thick dark smell of it and the anticipation of rare sweetness. "Though there would still be those who'd be convinced Jamie's guilty. Here."

"I saw her kissing Obadiah Henderson in the woods," Bree said, accepting the bottle. "Late last fall." She shuddered fastidiously. "If it was him, no wonder she doesn't want to say."

Roger eyed her curiously. He knew Obadiah, who was large and uncouth, but not at all bad looking and not stupid. Some women would consider him a decent match; he had fifteen acres, which he farmed competently, and was a good hunter. He'd never seen Bree so much as speak to the man, though.

"Can you think of anybody else?" she asked, still frowning.

"Well … Bobby Higgins," he replied, still wary. "The Beardsley twins used to eye her now and then, but of course …" He had a nasty feeling that this line of inquiry was going to culminate in her adjuring *him* to go and ask awkward questions of any putative fathers—a process that struck him as likely being both pointless and dangerous.

"Why?" she demanded, cutting viciously into her stack of pancakes. "Why would she *do* it? Mama's always been so kind to her!"

"One of two reasons," Roger replied, and paused for a moment, closing his eyes, the better to savor the decadence of melted butter and velvet-smooth maple syrup on fresh, hot buckwheat. He swallowed, and reluctantly opened his eyes.

"Either the real father is someone she doesn't want to marry—for whatever reason—or she's decided to try to get hold of your father's money or property, by getting him to settle a sum on her or, failing that, on the child."

"Or both. I mean, she doesn't want to marry whoever it is, *and* wants Da's money—not that he has any."

"Or both," he agreed.

They ate in silence for a few minutes, forks scraping on the wooden plates, each absorbed in thought. Jem had spent the night at the Big House; in the wake of Lizzie's marriage, Roger had suggested that Amy McCallum take over Lizzie's work as housemaid, and since she and Aidan had moved in, Jem spent even more time over there, finding solace for the loss of Germain in Aidan's companionship.

"It isn't true," she repeated stubbornly. "Da simply *wouldn't* …" But he saw the faint doubt at the back of her eyes—and a slight glaze of panic at the thought.

"No, he wouldn't," he said firmly. "Brianna—you can't possibly think there's any truth to it?"

"No, of course not!" But she spoke too loudly, too definitely. He laid down his fork and looked at her levelly.

"What's the matter? Do ye know something?"

"Nothing." She chased the last bite of pancake round her plate, speared and ate it.

He made a skeptical sound, and she frowned at the sticky puddle left on her plate. She always poured too much honey or syrup; he, more sparing, always ended with a clean plate.

"I don't," she said. She bit her lower lip, though, and put the tip of her finger into the puddle of syrup. "It's only …"

"What?"

"Not Da," she said slowly. She put the tip of her finger in her mouth and sucked the syrup off. "And I don't *know* for sure about Daddy. It's only—looking back at things I didn't understand at the time—now I see—" She stopped abruptly, and closed her eyes, then opened them, fixing him directly.

"I was looking through his wallet one day. Not snooping, just having fun, taking all the cards and things out and putting them back. There was a note tucked away, between the dollar bills. It was asking him to meet somebody for lunch—"

"Innocent enough."

"It started out with *Darling—,* and it wasn't my mother's handwriting," she said tersely.

"Ah," he said, and after a moment, "how old were you?"

"Eleven." She drew small patterns on the plate with the tip of her finger. "I just put the note back and kind of blotted it out of my mind. I didn't want to think about it—and I don't think I ever did, from that day to this. There were a few other things, things I saw and didn't understand—it was mostly the way things were between them, my parents … Every now and then, *something* would happen, and I never knew what, but I always knew something was really wrong."

She trailed off, sighed deeply, and wiped her finger on her napkin.

"Bree," he said gently. "Jamie's an honorable man, and he loves your mother deeply."

"Well, see, that's the thing," she said softly. "I would have sworn Daddy was, too. And did."

* * *

It wasn't impossible. The thought kept returning, to niggle Roger uncomfortably, like a pebble in his shoe. Jamie Fraser *was* an honorable man, he *was* deeply uxorious—and he had been in the depths of despair and exhaustion during Claire's illness. Roger had feared for him nearly as much as for Claire; he'd gone hollow-eyed and grim-jawed through the hot, endless days of reeking death, not eating, not sleeping, held together by nothing more than will.

Roger had tried to speak to him then, of God and eternity, reconcile him with what seemed the inevitable, only to be repulsed with a hot-eyed fury at the mere idea that God might think to take his wife—this followed by complete despair as Claire lapsed into a stupor near death. It wasn't impossible that the offer of a moment's physical comfort, made in that void of desolation, had gone further than either party intended.

But it was early May now, and Malva Christie was six months gone with child. Which meant that she'd got that way in November. The crisis of Claire's illness had been in late September; he remembered vividly the smell of burnt-over fields in the room when she'd wakened from what looked like certain death, her eyes huge and lambent, startlingly beautiful in a face like an androgynous angel's.

Right, then, it frigging *was* impossible. No man was perfect, and any man might yield in extremis—once. But not repeatedly. And not Jamie Fraser. Malva Christie was a liar.

Feeling more settled in mind, Roger made his way down the creekside toward the Christies' cabin.

Can't you do something? Brianna had asked him, anguished. Damn little, he thought, but he had to try. It was Friday; he could—and would—preach an ear-blistering sermon on the evils of gossip, come Sunday. Knowing what he did of human nature, though, any benefit derived from that was likely to be short-lived.

Beyond that—well, Lodge meeting was Wednesday night. It had been going really well, and he hated to jeopardize the fragile amity of the newborn Lodge by risking unpleasantness at a meeting … but if there was a chance of it helping … would it be useful to encourage both Jamie and the two Christie men to attend? It would get the matter out in the open, and no matter how bad, open public knowledge was always better than the festering weed of whispered scandal. He thought Tom Christie would observe the proprieties and be civil, notwithstanding the delicacy of the situation—but he wasn't all that sure of Allan. The son shared his father's features and his sense of self-righteousness, but lacked Tom's iron will and self-control.

But now he was at the cabin, which seemed deserted. He heard the sound of an ax, though, the slow *klop!* of kindling being split, and went round to the back.

It was Malva, who turned at his greeting, her face wary. There were lavender smudges beneath her eyes, he saw, and the bloom of her skin was clouded. Guilty conscience, he hoped, as he greeted her cordially.

"If ye've come to try to get me to take it back, I won't," she said flatly, ignoring his greeting.

"I came to ask if ye wanted someone to talk to," he said. That surprised her; she set down the ax, and wiped her face with her apron.

"To talk to?" she said slowly, eyeing him. "What about?"

He shrugged and offered her a very slight smile.

"Anything ye like." He let his accent relax, broadening toward her own Edinburgh tinge. "I doubt ye've been able to talk to anyone of late, save your Da and brother—and they might not be able to listen just the noo."

A matching small smile flitted across her features, and disappeared.

"No, they don't listen," she said. "But it's all right; I've naught much to say, ken? I'm a hoor; what else is there?"

"I dinna think ye're a hoor," Roger said quietly.

"Oh, ye don't?" She rocked back a little on her heels, surveying him mockingly. "What else would ye call a woman that spreads her legs for a marrit man? Adulteress, of course—but hoor, as well, or so I'm told."

He thought she meant to shock him with deliberate coarseness. She did, rather, but he kept it to himself.

"Mistaken, maybe. Jesus didna speak harshly to the woman who *was* a harlot; it's no my business to be doing it to someone who isn't."

"And if ye've come to quote the Bible to me, save your breath to cool your parritch with," she said, a look of distaste pulling down the delicate corners of her mouth. "I've heard a deal more of it than I care to."

That, he reflected, was probably true. Tom Christie was the sort who knew a verse—or ten—for every occasion, and if he didn't beat his daughter physically, had almost certainly been doing it verbally.

Not sure what to say next, he held out his hand.

"If ye'll give me the hatchet, I'll do the rest."

One eyebrow raised, she put it into his hand and stepped back. He put up a chunk of kindling and split it clean in two, stooped for another. She watched for a moment, then sat down, slowly, on a smaller stump.

The mountain spring was still cool, touched with the last winter breath of the high snows, but the work warmed him. He didn't by any means forget she was there, but he kept his eyes on the wood, the bright grain of the fresh-split stick, the tug of it as he pulled the ax blade free, and found his thoughts move back to his conversation with Bree.

So Frank Randall had been—perhaps—unfaithful to his wife, on occasion. In all justice, Roger wasn't sure he could be blamed, knowing the circumstances of the case. Claire had disappeared completely, without trace, leaving Frank to hunt desperately, to mourn, and then, at last, to begin to put the pieces of his life back together and move on. Whereupon the missing wife pops back up, distraught, mistreated—and pregnant by another man.

Whereupon Frank Randall, whether from a sense of honor, of love, or simply of—what? curiosity?—had taken her back. He recalled Claire's telling them the story, and it was clear that she hadn't particularly *wanted* to be taken back. It must have been damned clear to Frank Randall, too.

Little wonder, then, if outrage and rejection had led him occasionally—and little wonder, too, that the echoes of the hidden conflicts between her parents had reached Brianna, like seismic disturbances that travel through miles of earth and stone, jolts from an upwelling of magma, miles deep beneath the crust.

And little wonder, he realized with a sense of revelation, that she'd been so upset by his friendship with Amy McCallum.

He realized, quite suddenly, that Malva Christie was crying. Silently, without covering her face. Tears ran down her cheeks and her shoulders quivered, but her lower lip was caught hard between her teeth; she made no sound.

He cast down the ax and went to her. Put an arm gently round her shoulders, and cradled her capped head, patting her.

"Hey," he said softly. "Don't worry, aye? It's going to be all right."

She shook her head, and the tears washed down her face.

"Can't be," she whispered. "Can't be."

Beneath his pity for her, Roger was aware of a sense of growing hope. Whatever reluctance he might have to exploit her desperation was well overcome by a determination to get to the bottom of her trouble. Mostly for the sake of Jamie and his family—but for her own, as well.

He mustn't push too hard, though, mustn't rush. She had to trust him.

So he patted her, rubbed her back as he did for Jem when he woke with nightmare, said small soothing things, all meaningless, and felt her begin to yield. Yield, but in a strangely physical fashion, as though her flesh were somehow opening, blossoming slowly under his touch.

Strange, and at the same time, oddly familiar. He'd felt it now and then with Bree, when he'd turned to her in the dark, when she hadn't time to think but responded to him with her body alone. The physical recollection jarred him, and he drew back a little. He meant to say something to Malva, but the sound of a footfall interrupted him, and he looked up to see Allan Christie coming toward him out of the trees, fast, with a face like black thunder.

"Get away from her!"

He straightened, heart pounding as he realized quite suddenly what this might look like.

"What d'ye mean, slinkin' round like a rat after a rind o' cheese?" Allan cried. "D'ye think since she's shamed, she's meat for any whoreson bastard that cares to take her?"

"I came to offer counsel," Roger said as coolly as he could manage. "And comfort, if I might."

"Oh, aye." Allan Christie's face was flushed, the tufts of his hair standing on end like the bristles on a hog about to charge. "Comfort me with apples and stay me with raisins, is it? Ye can stick your comfort straight up your arse, MacKenzie, and your goddamned stiff prick, too!"

Allan's hands were clenched at his sides, trembling with rage.

"Ye're no better than your wicked good-father—or perhaps"—he rounded suddenly on Malva, who had stopped crying, but was sitting white-faced and frozen on her stump—"perhaps it was him, too? Is that it, ye wee bitch, did ye take them both? Answer me!" His hand shot out to slap her, and Roger caught his wrist by reflex.

Roger was so angry that he could barely speak. Christie was strong, but Roger was bigger; he would have broken the young man's wrist, if he could. As it was, he dug his fingers hard into the space between the bones, and was gratified to see Christie's eyes pop and water from the pain of it.

"Ye'll not speak to your sister that way," he said, not loudly, but very clearly. "Nor to me." He shifted his grip suddenly and bent Christie's wrist sharply backward. "D'ye hear me?"

Allan's face went white and the breath hissed out of him. He didn't answer, but managed to nod. Roger released his hold, almost flinging the younger man's wrist away, with a sudden feeling of revulsion.

"I do not wish to hear that ye've abused your sister in any way," he said, as evenly as he could. "If I do—ye'll regret it. Good day, Mr. Christie. Miss Christie," he added, with a brief bow to Malva. She didn't respond, only stared at him from eyes gray as storm clouds, huge with shock. The memory of them followed him as he strode from the clearing and plunged into the darkness of the wood, wondering whether he'd made things better, or much, much worse.

* * *

The next meeting of the Fraser's Ridge Lodge was on Wednesday. Brianna went as usual to the Big House, taking Jemmy and her workbasket, and was surprised to find Bobby Higgins seated at the table, finishing his supper.

"Miss Brianna!" He half-rose at sight of her, beaming, but she waved him back to his seat, and slid into the bench opposite.

"Bobby! How nice to see you again! We thought—well, we thought you wouldn't come again."

He nodded, looking rueful.

"Aye, happen I might not, at least not for a bit. But his Lordship had some things, things come in from England, and he says to me as I shall bring 'em." He ran a piece of bread carefully round the inside of his bowl, sopping up the last of Mrs. Bug's chicken gravy.

"And then … well, I did wish to come on my own account. For to see Miss Christie, aye?"

“Oh.” She glanced up and caught Mrs. Bug’s eye. The older woman rolled her eyes, helpless, and shook her head. “Um. Yes, Malva. Er … is my mother upstairs, Mrs. Bug?”

“Nay, *a nighean.* She was called to Mr. MacNeill; he’s bad wi’ the pleurisy.” Barely pausing for breath, she whipped off her apron and hung it on its hook, reaching for her cloak with the other hand. “I’ll be along, then, *a leannan;* Arch will be wanting his supper. If there’s aught wanting, Amy’s about.” And with the briefest of farewells, she vanished, leaving Bobby staring after her in puzzlement at this uncharacteristic behavior.

“Is something amiss?” he asked, turning back to Brianna with a small frown.

“Ahh … well.” With a few uncharitable thoughts toward Mrs. Bug, Brianna girded up her loins and told him, grimacing inwardly at the sight of his sweet young face as it turned white and rigid in the firelight.

She couldn’t bring herself to mention Malva’s accusation, only told him that the girl was with child. He’d hear about Jamie, soon enough, but please God, not from her.

“I see, miss. Aye … I see.” He sat for a moment, staring at the bit of bread in his hand. Then he dropped it into his bowl, rose suddenly, and rushed outside; she heard him retching into the blackberry bushes outside the back door. He didn’t come back.

It was a long evening. Her mother was plainly spending the night with Mr. MacNeill and his pleurisy. Amy McCallum came down for a little while, and they made awkward conversation over their sewing, but then the maid escaped upstairs. Aidan and Jemmy, allowed to stay up late and play, wore themselves out and fell asleep on the settle.

She fidgeted, abandoned her sewing, and paced up and down, waiting for Lodge to finish. She wanted her own bed, her own house; her parents’ kitchen, normally so welcoming, seemed strange and uncomfortable, and she a stranger in it.

At long, long last, she heard footsteps and the creak of the door, and Roger came in, looking bothered.

“There you are,” she said with relief. “How was Lodge? Did the Christies come?”

He shook his head.

“No. It … went all right, I suppose. A bit of awkwardness, of course, but your father carried it off as well as anyone might, in the circumstances.”

She grimaced, imagining it.

“Where is he?”

“He said he thought he’d go and walk by himself for a bit—maybe do a little night fishing.” Roger put his arms round her and hugged her close, sighing. “Did ye hear the ruckus?”

“No! What happened?”

“Well, we’d just had a wee blether on the universal nature of brotherly love, when a clishmaclaver broke out, over by your kiln. Well, so, everyone streamed out to see what was to do, and here’s your cousin Ian and wee Bobby Higgins, rolling in the dirt and trying to kill each other.”

“Oh, dear.” She felt a spasm of guilt. Probably someone had told Bobby everything, and he had gone in search of Jamie, meeting Ian instead, and thrown Malva’s accusations of Jamie at him. If she’d told him herself …

“What happened?”

“Well, Ian’s bloody dog took a hand, for the one thing—or a paw. Your father barely stopped him tearing out Bobby’s throat, but it did stop the fight. We dragged them apart, then, and Ian tore free and loped off into the woods, with the dog beside him. Bobby’s … well, I cleaned him up a bit, then gave him Jemmy’s trundle for the night,” he said apologetically. “He said he couldna stay up here—” He looked round at the shadowed kitchen; she’d already smoored the fire and carried the little boys up to bed; the room was empty, lit only by a faint hearth glow.

“I’m sorry. Will ye sleep here, then?”

She shook her head emphatically.

“Bobby or no Bobby, I want to go home.”

“Aye, all right. You go on, then; I’ll fetch Amy down to bar the door.”

“No, that’s okay,” she said quickly. “I’ll get her.” And before he could protest, she was down the hall and up the stair, the empty house strange and silent below.

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NOT THE END OF THE WORLD

There is a great deal of satisfaction in wresting weeds out of the earth. Backbreaking and endless as the chore may be, there is a tiny but unassailable sense of triumph in it, feeling the soil give suddenly, yielding the stubborn root, and the foe lying defeated in your hand.

It had rained recently and the earth was soft. I ripped and tore with ferocious concentration; dandelions, fireweed, rhododendron sprouts, bunchgrass, muhly, smartweed, and the creeping mallow known locally as “cheese.” Paused for an instant, narrow-eyed at a bull thistle, and prised it from the ground with a vicious stab of my pruning knife.

The grapevines that ran up the palisades had just begun their spring rush, and sprouts and ruffles of a delicate green tinged with rust cascaded from the woody stems, eager tendrils curling like my own new-grown hair—God damn her, she’d taken my hair on purpose to disfigure me! The shade they cast provided refuge for immense bushy growths of the pernicious thing I called “jewelweed,” not knowing its real name, for the tiny white flowers that winked like diamond clusters in the feathery green fronds. It was likely a fennel of some sort, but formed neither a useful bulb nor edible seeds; pretty, but useless—and thus the sort of thing that spreads like wildfire.

There was a small swishing sound, and a ball of rags came to rest by my foot. This was followed immediately by the rush of a much larger body, and Rollo swept past me, snatching the ball adroitly and galloping away, the wind of his passage stirring my skirts. Startled, I looked up, to see him bounding toward Ian, who'd come soft-footed into the garden.

He made a small gesture of apology, but I sat back on my heels and smiled at him, making an effort to quell the vicious sentiments surging to and fro in my bosom.

Evidently, the quelling wasn't all that successful, for I saw him frown a little, and hesitate, looking at my face.

"Did you want something, Ian?" I said shortly, dropping the facade of welcome. "If that hound of yours knocks over one of my hives, I'll make a rug of him."

"Rollo!" Ian snapped his fingers at the dog, who leapt gracefully over the row of bee gums and basket hives that sat at the far end of the garden, trotted up to his master, dropped the ball at his feet, and stood genially panting, yellow wolf-eyes fixed with apparent interest on me.

Ian scooped up the ball, and turning, flung it out through the open gate, Rollo after it like the tail of a comet.

"I did want to ask ye something, Auntie," he said, turning back to me. "It would wait, though."

"No, that's all right. Now's as good a time as any." Getting awkwardly to my feet, I waved him to the little bench Jamie had made for me in a shady nook beneath a flowering dogwood that overhung the corner of the garden.

"So?" I settled myself beside him, brushing crumbs of dirt from the bottom of my skirt.

"Mmphm. Well …" He stared at his hands, linked over his knee, big-knuckled and bony. "I … ah …"

"You haven't been exposed to syphilis again, have you?" I asked, with a vivid memory of my last interview with an awkward young man in this garden. "Because if you have, Ian, I swear I will use Dr. Fentiman's syringe on you and I won't be gentle with it. You—"

“No, no!” he said hastily. “No, of course not, Auntie. It’s about—about Malva Christie.” He tensed as he said it, in case I should lunge for the pruning knife, but I merely drew a deep breath and let it out again, slowly.

“What about her?” I said, my voice deliberately even.

“Well … no really her, exactly. More what she said—about Uncle Jamie.” He stopped, swallowing, and I drew another slow breath. Disturbed as I was by the situation myself, I’d scarcely thought about its impact on anyone else. But Ian had idolized Jamie from the time he was a tiny boy; I could well imagine that the widespread suggestions that Jamie might have feet of clay were deeply upsetting to him.

“Ian, you mustn’t worry yourself.” I put a consoling hand—dirt-stained as it was—on his arm. “It will … work itself out, somehow. Such things always do.” They did—generally with the maximum of uproar and catastrophe. And if Malva’s child should by some horrid cosmic joke be born with red hair … I closed my eyes for a moment, feeling a wave of dizziness.

“Aye, I suppose they will,” Ian said, sounding uncertain in the extreme. “It’s only—what they’re sayin’, about Uncle Jamie. Even his own Ardsmuir men, folk that should know better! That he must have—well, I’ll no repeat any of it, Auntie—but … I canna bear to hear it!”

His long, homely face was twisted with unhappiness, and it suddenly occurred to me that he might be having his own doubts about the matter.

“Ian,” I said, with as much firmness as I could muster, “Malva’s child could not possibly be Jamie’s. You do believe that, don’t you?”

He nodded, very slowly, but wouldn’t meet my eyes.

“I do,” he said softly, and then swallowed hard. “But, Auntie … it could be mine.”

A bee had lighted on my arm. I stared at it, seeing the veins in its glassy wings, the dust of yellow pollen that clung to the minuscule hairs of its legs and abdomen, the gentle pulsing of its body as it breathed.

“Oh, Ian,” I said as softly as he’d spoken himself. “Oh, Ian.”

He was strung tight as a marionette, but when I spoke, a little of the tension left the arm under my hand, and I saw that he had closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Auntie," he whispered.

Wordless, I patted his arm. The bee flew off, and I wished passionately that I could exchange places with it. It would be so wonderful, simply to be about the business of gathering, single-minded in the sun.

Another bee lighted on Ian's collar, and he brushed it absently away.

"Well, so," he said, taking a deep breath and turning his head to look at me. "What must I do, Auntie?"

His eyes were dark with misery and worry—and something very like fear, I thought.

"Do?" I said, sounding as blank as I felt. "Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ, Ian."

I hadn't meant to make him smile, and he didn't, but he did seem to relax very slightly.

"Aye, I've done it already," he said, very rueful. "But—it's done, Auntie. How can I mend it?"

I rubbed my brow, trying to think. Rollo had brought back his ball, but seeing that Ian was in no mood to play, dropped it by his feet and leaned against his leg, panting.

"Malva," I said finally. "Did she tell you? Before, I mean."

"Ye think I scorned her, and that's what made her accuse Uncle Jamie?" He gave me a wry look, absently scratching Rollo's ruff. "Well, I wouldna blame ye if ye did, Auntie, but no. She said not a word to me about the matter. If she had, I should ha' marrit her at once."

The hurdle of confession overcome, he was talking more easily now.

"You didn't think of marrying her *first*?" I said, with perhaps a slight tinge of acerbity.

"Ah … no," he said, very sheepish. "It wasna precisely a matter of—well, I wasna thinking at all, Auntie. I was drunk. The first time, anyway," he added as an afterthought.

"The first—? How many—No, don't tell me. I don't want to know the gory details." I shut him up with a brusque gesture, and sat up straight, struck by a thought. "Bobby Higgins. Was that—"

He nodded, lowering his lashes so I couldn't see his eyes. The blood had come up under his tan.

"Aye. That was why—I mean, I didna really wish to marry her, to begin with, but still, I would have asked, after we … but I put it off a bit, and—" He scrubbed a hand across his face, helpless. "Well, I didna want her to wife, but I couldna keep from wanting her, nonetheless, and I ken well enough how awful it must seem—but I've got to tell the truth, Auntie, and that's it." He took a gulp of air, and continued.

"I'd—wait for her. In the woods, when she came to gather. She'd not speak when she saw me, only smile, and raise her skirts a bit, then turn quick and run and … God, I should be after her like a dog after a bitch in heat," he said bitterly. "But then one day I came late, and she wasna there where we usually met. But I heard her laughing, far off, and when I went to see …"

He twisted his hands hard enough to dislocate a finger, grimacing, and Rollo whined softly.

"Let us just say that yon bairn might well be Bobby Higgins's, too," he said, biting off the words.

I felt suddenly exhausted, as I had when recovering from my illness, as though it was too much effort even to breathe. I leaned back against the palisades, feeling the cool papery rustle of grape leaves against my neck, fanning softly over my heated cheeks.

Ian bent forward, head in his hands, the dappled green shadows playing over him.

"What shall I do?" he asked at last, voice muffled. He sounded as tired as I felt. "I dinna mind saying that I—that the child might be mine. But would it help, d'ye think?"

"No," I said bleakly. "It wouldn't." Public opinion would not be changed in the slightest; everyone would simply assume that Ian was lying for his uncle's sake. Even if he were to marry the girl, it wouldn't—

A thought struck me and I pulled myself upright again.

"You said you didn't want to marry her, even before you knew about Bobby. Why?" I asked curiously.

He lifted his head from his hands with a helpless gesture.

"I dinna ken how to say it. She was—well, she was bonnie enough, aye, and a proper spirit to her, as well. But she … I dinna ken, Auntie. It was only that I always had the feeling, lying wi' her—that I dare not fall asleep."

I stared at him.

"Well, that would be off-putting, I imagine."

He had dismissed that, though, and was frowning, digging the heel of his moccasin into the soil.

"There's no means of telling which of two men has fathered a bairn, is there?" he asked abruptly. "Only—if it's mine, I should want it. I would wed her for the child's sake, no matter what else. If it's mine."

Bree had told me the bare bones of his history; I knew about his Mohawk wife, Emily, and the death of his daughter, and I felt the small presence of my own first child, Faith, stillborn but always with me.

"Oh, Ian," I said softly, and touched his hair. "You might be able to tell, by the way the child looked—but probably not, or not right away."

He nodded, and sighed. After a moment, he said, "If I say it's mine, and I wed her—folk might still talk, but after a time …" His voice died away. True, talk might eventually die down. But there would still be those who thought Jamie responsible, others who would call Malva a whore, a liar, or both—which she bloody well *was,* I reminded myself, but not a nice thing to hear about one's wife. And what might Ian's life be like, married under such circumstances, to a woman he could not trust and—I thought—did not especially like?

"Well," I said, rising to my feet and stretching, "don't do anything drastic just yet awhile. Let me talk with Jamie; you don't mind if I tell him?"

"I wish ye would, Auntie. I dinna think I could face him, myself." He still sat on the bench, bony shoulders slumped. Rollo lay on the ground at his feet, the big wolf head resting on Ian's moccasined foot. Moved with pity, I put my arms round Ian, and he leaned his head against me, simply, like a child.

"It isn't the end of the world," I said.

The sun was touching the edge of the mountain, and the sky burned red and gold, the light of it falling in blazing bars through the palisades.

"No," he said, but there was no conviction in his voice.

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DECLARATIONS

Charlotte, Mecklenberg County
May 20, 1775

The one thing Roger had not envisioned about the making of history was the sheer amount of alcohol involved. He should have, he thought; if there was anything a career in academia had taught him, it was that almost all worthwhile business was conducted in the pub.

The public houses, taverns, ordinaries, and pothouses in Charlotte were doing a roaring business, as delegates, spectators, and hangers-on seethed through them, men of Loyalist sentiments collecting in the King's Arms, those of rabidly opposing views in the Blue Boar, with shifting currents of the unallied and undecided eddying to and fro, purling through the Goose and Oyster, Thomas's ordinary, the Groats, Simon's, Buchanan's, Mueller's, and two or three nameless places that barely qualified as shebeens.

Jamie visited all of them. And drank in all of them, sharing beer, ale, rum punch, shandy, cordial, porter, stout, cider, brandywine, persimmon beer, rhubarb wine, blackberry wine, cherry bounce, perry, merry brew, and scrumpy. Not all of them were alcoholic, but the great majority were.

Roger confined himself largely to beer, and found himself glad of his restraint, when he happened to meet with Davy Caldwell in the street, turning from a fruiterer's stall with a handful of early apricots.

"Mr. MacKenzie!" Caldwell cried, his face lighting with welcome. "I had nay thought to meet you here, but what blessing that I have!"

"Blessing indeed," Roger said, shaking the minister's hand with cordial fervor. Caldwell had married him and Brianna, and had examined him at the Presbyterian Academy regarding his own calling, some months before. "How d'ye do, Mr. Caldwell?"

"Och, for myself, well enough—but my heart misgives me for the fate of my poor brethren!" Caldwell shook his head in dismay, gesturing at a group of men crowding into Simon's ordinary, laughing and talking. "What is to come of this, I ask ye, Mr. MacKenzie—what's to come?"

Roger was, for an unbalanced instant, tempted to tell him what was to come of it, exactly. As it was, though, he gestured to Jamie—who had been stopped by an acquaintance in the street—to go along without him, and turned away to walk a bit with Caldwell.

"Have ye come for the conference, then, Mr. Caldwell?" he asked.

"I have that, Mr. MacKenzie, I have that. Little hope have I that my words will make the slightest difference, but it is my duty to speak as I find, and so I shall."

What Davy Caldwell found was a shocking condition of human slothfulness, for which he blamed the entire current situation, convinced that unreflective apathy and "a stupid concern with personal comfort" on the part of the colonists both tempted and provoked the exercise of tyrannical powers on the part of Crown and Parliament.

"It's a point, sure," Roger said, aware that Caldwell's impassioned gestures were attracting a certain amount of notice, even amongst the crowds in the street, most of them reasonably argumentative themselves.

"A point!" Caldwell cried. "Aye, it is, and *the* point entirely. The ignorance, disregard of moral obligation, and the supreme love of ease of the groveling sluggard corresponds exactly—exactly!—with a tyrant's appetite and cynicism."

He glowered at one gentleman who had subsided against the side of a house, taking a brief respite from the noonday heat with his hat over his face.

"The spirit of God must redeem the slothful, fill the human frame with activity, poise, and libertarian consciousness!"

Roger wondered, rather, whether Caldwell would view the escalating war as the result of God's intervention—but upon reflection, thought that he likely would. Caldwell was a thinker, but a staunch Presbyterian, and thus a believer in predestination.

"The slothful encourage and facilitate oppression," Caldwell explained, with a scornful gesture toward a family of tinkers enjoying an alfresco luncheon in the yard of a house. "Their own shame and sinking spirits, their own pitiful compliance and submission—these become self-made chains of slavery!"

"Oh, aye," Roger said, and coughed. Caldwell was a famous preacher, and rather inclined to want to keep in practice. "Will ye take a whet, Mr. Caldwell?" It was a warm day, and Caldwell's rather round, cherubic face was becoming very red.

They went into Thomas's ordinary, a fairly respectable house, and sat down with tankards of the house beer—for Caldwell, like most, did not regard beer as being in any way "drink," like rum or whisky. What else, after all, would one drink? Milk?

Out of the sun, and with a cooling draught to hand, Davy Caldwell became less heated in his expressions, as well as his countenance.

"Praise God for the fortune of meeting ye here, Mr. MacKenzie," he said, breathing deep after lowering his tankard. "I had sent a letter, but doubtless ye will have left home before it could come. I wished to inform ye of the gladsome news—there is to be a Presbytery."

Roger felt a sudden leap of the heart.

"When? And where?"

"Edenton, early next month. The Reverend Doctor McCorkle is coming from Philadelphia. He'll remain for a time, before departing on his further journey—he is going to the Indies, to encourage the efforts of the church there. I am, of course, presuming to know your mind—I apologize for the forwardness of my address, Mr. MacKenzie—but is it still your desire to seek ordination?"

"With all my heart."

Caldwell beamed, and grasped him strongly by the hand.

"Give ye joy of it, dear man—great joy."

He then plunged into a close description of McCorkle, whom he had met in Scotland, and speculations regarding the state of religion in the colony—he spoke of Methodism with some respect, but considered the New Light Baptists "somewhat unregulated" in their effusions of worship, though doubtless well-meaning—and surely sincere belief was an improvement over unbelief, whatever the form it might take. In due course, though, he came back round to their present circumstances.

"Ye've come with your father-in-law, have ye?" he asked. "I thought I saw him, in the road."

"I have, and ye did," Roger assured him, fumbling in his pocket for a coin. The pocket itself was full of coiled horsehair; with his academic experience as guide, he had made provision against possible boredom by bringing the makings of a new fishing line.

"Ah." Caldwell looked at him keenly. "I've heard things of late—is it true, he's turned Whig?"

"He is a firm friend to liberty," Roger said, cautious, and took a breath. "As am I." He'd not had occasion to say it out loud before; it gave him a small, breathless feeling, just under the breastbone.

"Aha, aha, very good! I had heard of it, as I say—and yet there are a great many who say otherwise: that he is a Tory, a Loyalist like his relations, and that this protestation of support for the independency movement is but a ruse." It wasn't phrased as a question, but Caldwell's bushy eyebrow, cocked like a swell's hat, made it clear that it was.

"Jamie Fraser is an honest man," Roger said, and drained his tankard. "And an honorable one," he added, setting it down. "And speaking of the same, I think I must go and find him."

Caldwell glanced around; there was an air of restlessness around them, of men calling their accounts and settling up. The official meeting of the convention was to begin at two o'clock, at

MacIntyre's farmhouse. It was past noon now, delegates, speakers, and spectators would be slowly gathering, girding themselves for an afternoon of conflict and decision. The breathless feeling came back.

"Aye, then. Give him my regards, if ye will—though perhaps I may see him myself. And may the Holy Spirit penetrate the encrustations of habit and lethargy, and convert the souls and rouse the consciences of those who gather here today!"

"Amen," said Roger, smiling in spite of the glances from the men —and not a few women—around them.

He found Jamie in the Blue Boar, in the company of a number of men in whom the Holy Spirit had already been hard at work on the encrustations, judging from the volume. The chatter near the door died away, though, as he made his way through the room—not in cause of his own presence, but because there was something more interesting going on near the center.

To wit: Jamie Fraser and Neil Forbes, both red with heat, passion, and a gallon or two of mixed spirits, head to head over a table, and hissing like snakes in the Gaelic.

Only a few of the spectators were Gaelic speakers; these were hastily translating the high points of the dialogue for the rest of the crowd.

Gaelic insult was an art, and one at which his father-in-law excelled, though Roger was obliged to admit that the lawyer was no slouch at it, himself. The translations rendered by the onlookers fell far short of the original; nonetheless, the taproom was rapt, with occasional admiring whistles or whoops from the spectators, or laughter as a particularly pungent point was made.

Having missed the beginning, Roger had no idea how the conflict had begun, but so far into it as they were, the exchange was focused on cowardice and arrogance, Jamie's remarks aimed at Forbes's leading the attack on Fogarty Simms as a low-minded and cowardly attempt to make himself look the big man at the price of a defenseless man's life, Forbes—shifting into English here, as he realized that they had become the cynosure of the room—taking the view that Jamie's presence here was an unwarrantable affront to those who truly held the ideals of liberty and justice, as everyone knew he was in truth the King's man, but he, the puffed-up cock o' the walk, thought that he could pull the wool over everyone's eyes long enough to betray the whole boiling, but if he, Fraser, thought he, Forbes, was fool enough to be gulled by antic tricks in the public street and a lot of talk with nay more substance than the shrieking of gulls, he, Fraser, had best think again!

Jamie slapped a hand flat on the table, making it boom like a drum, and rattling the cups. He rose, glaring down at Forbes.

"Do ye libel my honor, sir?" he cried, also shifting to English. "For if ye do, let us go out, and we shall settle the matter at once, yea or nay!"

Sweat was streaming down Forbes's broad, flushed face, and his eyes were gleaming with anger, but even overheated as he was, Roger saw belated caution pluck at his sleeve. Roger hadn't seen the fight in Cross Creek, but Ian had told him the details, meanwhile laughing his head off. The last thing Neil Forbes could desire was a duel.

"Have ye honor to libel, sir?" Forbes demanded, standing in turn, and drawing himself up as though about to address the jury. "Ye come here acting the great one, carousing and showing away like a sailor come ashore with prize money in his pocket—but have we any evidence that your words are more than puffery? Puffery, I say, sir!"

Jamie stood, both hands braced on the tabletop, surveying Forbes through narrowed eyes. Roger had once seen that expression focused on himself. It had been followed rapidly by the sort of mayhem customary in a Glasgow pub on Saturday night—only more so. The only thing to be thankful for was that Forbes had clearly not heard any whiff of Malva Christie's accusation, or there would be blood on the floor already.

Jamie straightened slowly, and his left hand went toward his waist. There were gasps, and Forbes paled. But Jamie had reached for his sporran, not his dirk, and plunged his hand inside.

"As to that … *sir* …" he said in a low, even voice that carried through the room, "I have made myself clear. I am for liberty, and to that end, I pledge my name, my fortune"—here he withdrew his hand from his sporran and slammed it on the table; a small purse, two golden guineas, and a jewel—“and my sacred honor.”

The room was silent, all eyes focused on the black diamond, which shimmered with a baleful light. Jamie paused for the space of three heartbeats, then drew breath.

“Is there any man here who gives me the lie?” he said. It was ostensibly addressed to the room at large, but his eyes were fixed on Forbes. The lawyer had gone a mottled red and gray, like a bad oyster, but said nothing.

Jamie paused again, looked once round the room, then picked up purse, money, and jewel, and stalked out the door. Outside, the town clock chimed two, the strokes slow and heavy in the humid air.

* * *

L’OIGNON–INTELLIGENCER

Upon the 20th of this month, a Congress met in Charlotte, composed of Delegates from Mecklenberg County, for the purpose of discussion upon the issue of current Relations with Great Britain. After due Deliberation, a Declaration was proposed and accepted, whose Provisions are Herewith Shown:

1. *That whosoever directly or indirectly abetted or in any way, form or manner countenanced to unchartered & dangerous invasion of our rights as claimed by G. Britain is an enemy to this County—to America & to the inherent & inaliable rights of man.*

2. *We the Citizens of Mecklenburg County do hereby desolve the political bands which have connected us to the Mother Country & hereby absolve ourselves from all allegiance to the British crown & abjure all political connection, contract or association with that nation who have wantonly trampled on our rights & liberties & inhumanely shed the innocent blood of American patriots at Lexington.*

3. *We do hereby declare ourselves a free and independent people—are & of right ought to be a sovereign & self-governing association, under the controul of no power other than that of our God & the general government of the congress, to the maintainence of which independence civil & religious we solemnly pledge to each other our mutual cooperation, our lives, our fortunes & our most sacred honor.*

4. *As we now acknowledge the existence & controul of no law or legal officers, civil or military, within this County, we do hereby ordain & adopt as a rule of life, all, each & every of our former laws—wherein nevertheless the crown of Great Britain never can be considered as holding rights, privileges, immunities, or authority therein.*

5. *It is also further decreed that all, each & every military officer in this County is hereby reinstated in his former command & authority, he acting conformably to these regulations. And that every member present of this delegation shall henceforth be a civil officer, viz. a Justice of the peace in the character of a "Committee-man" to issue process, hear & determine all matters of controversy according to sd. adopted laws—to preserve peace, union & harmony in sd. County & to use every exertion to spread the love of country & fire of freedom throughout America until a more general & organized government be established in this province. A selection from the members present shall constitute a Committee of public safety for sd. County.*

6. *That a copy of these resolutions be transmitted by express to the President of the Continental Congress assembled in Philadelphia, to be laid before that body.*

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AMONG THE LETTUCES

Some idiot—or child—had left the gate of my garden open. I hurried up the path, hoping that it hadn't been that way for long. If it had been open overnight, the deer would have eaten every lettuce, onion, and bulb plant in the plot, to say nothing of ruining the—

I jerked, letting out a small cry. Something like a red-hot hat pin had stabbed me in the neck, and I smacked the place by reflex. An electric jab in the temple made my vision go white, then blur with water, and a fiery stab in the crook of my elbow—bees.

I blundered off the path, suddenly aware that the air was full of them, frenzied and stinging. I plunged through the brush, barely able to see for the watering of my eyes, aware too late of the low-pitched thrum of a hive at war.

Bear! God damn it, a bear had got in! In the half-second between the first sting and the next, I had glimpsed one of the bee gums lying on its side in the dirt just inside the gate, combs and honey spilling out of it like entrails.

I ducked under branches and flung myself into a patch of pokeweed, gasping and cursing incoherently. The sting on my neck throbbed viciously, and the one on my temple was already puffing up, pulling at the eyelid on that side. I felt something crawling on my ankle, and batted it away by reflex before it could sting.

I wiped tears away, blinking. A few bees sailed past through the yellow-flowered stems above me, aggressive as Spitfires. I crawled a little farther, trying at once to get away, slap at my hair, and shake out my skirts, lest any more of them be trapped in my clothes.

I was breathing like a steam engine, shaking with adrenaline and fury.

"Bloody hell … frigging bear … God damn it …"

My strong impulse was to rush in screaming and flapping my skirts, in hopes of panicking the bear. An equally strong impulse of self-preservation overcame it.

I scrambled to my feet, and keeping low in case of enraged bees, thrust my way through the brush uphill, meaning to circle the garden and come down on the other side, away from the ravaged hives. I could get back to the path that way and down to the house, where I could recruit help—preferably armed—to drive away the monster before it destroyed the rest of the hives.

No point in keeping quiet, and I crashed through bushes and stumbled over logs, panting with rage. I tried to see the bear, but the growth of grapevines over the palisades was too thick to show me anything but rustling leaves and sun shadows. The side of my face felt as though it were on fire, and jolts of pain shot through the trigeminal nerve with each heartbeat, making the muscles twitch and the eye water terribly.

I reached the path just below the spot where the first bee had stung me—my gardening basket lay where I'd dropped it, tools spilled out. I grabbed the knife I used for everything from pruning to digging roots; it was a stout thing, with a six-inch blade, and while it might not impress the bear, I felt better for having it.

I glanced at the open gate, ready to run—but saw nothing. The ruined hive lay just as I'd seen it, the wax combs broken and squashed, the smell of honey thick in the air. But the combs were not scattered; shattered pillars of wax still stuck to the exposed wooden base of the hive.

A bee zoomed menacingly past my ear and I ducked, but didn't run. It was quiet. I tried to stop panting, trying to hear over the thunder of my own racing pulse. Bears weren't quiet; they didn't need to be. I should hear snufflings and gulping noises, at least—rustlings of broken foliage, the lap of a long tongue. I didn't.

Cautiously, I moved sideways up the path, a step at a time, ready to run. There was a good-size oak, about twenty feet away. Could I make that, if the bear popped out?

I listened as hard as I could, but heard nothing beyond the soft rustle of the grapevines and the sound of angry bees, now dropped to a whining hum as they gathered thick on the remnants of their combs.

It was gone. Had to be. Still wary, I edged closer, knife in hand.

I smelled the blood and saw her in the same instant. She was lying in the salad bed, her skirt flown out like some gigantic, rusty flower blooming amid the young lettuces.

I was kneeling by her, with no memory of reaching her, and the flesh of her arm was warm when I grasped her wrist—such small, fragile bones—but slack, there was no pulse—*Of course not,* said the cold small watcher inside, *her throat is cut, there's blood everywhere, but you can see the artery isn't pumping; she's dead.*

Malva's gray eyes were open, blank with surprise, and her cap had fallen off. I clutched her wrist harder, as though I must be able to find the buried pulse, to find some trace of life … and did. The bulge of her belly moved, very slightly, and I dropped the flaccid arm at once and seized my knife, scrabbling for the hem of her skirt.

I acted without thought, without fear, without doubt—there wasn't anything but the knife and the pressure, the flesh parting and the faint possibility, the panic of absolute *need* …

I slit the belly from navel to pubis, pushing hard through slack muscle, nicked the womb but no matter, cut quick but careful through the wall of the womb, dropped the knife, and thrust my hands into the depths of Malva Christie, still blood-warm, and seized the child, cupping, turning, wrenching hard in my frenzy to pull it free, bring it out from sure death, bring it into the air, help it breathe.… Malva's body flopped and heaved as I jerked, limp limbs flailing with the force of my yanking.

It came free with the suddenness of birth, and I was swiping blood and mucus from the tiny sealed face, blowing into its lungs, gently, gently, you have to blow gently, the alveoli of the lungs are like cobwebs, so small, compressing its chest, no more than a hand's span, two fingers pressing, no more, and felt the tiny spring of it, delicate as a watch spring, felt the movement, small squirms, a faint instinctive struggling—and felt it fade, that flicker, that tiny spark of life, cried out in anguish and clutched the tiny, doll-like body to my breast, still warm, still warm.

"Don't go," I said, "don't go, don't go, please don't go." But the vibrancy faded, a small blue glow that seemed to light the palms of my hands for an instant, then dwindle like a candle flame, to the coal of a smoldering wick, to the faintest trace of brightness—then everything was dark.

I was still sitting in the brilliant sun, crying and blood-soaked, the body of the little boy in my lap, the butchered corpse of my Malva beside me, when they found me.

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THE STOLEN BRIDE

A week passed after Malva’s death, and there was no slightest hint of who had killed her. Whispering, sidelong glances, and a palpable fog of suspicion hung about the Ridge, but despite Jamie’s every effort, no one could be located who knew—or would say—anything at all useful.

I could see the tension and frustration building up in Jamie, day by day, and knew it must find an outlet. I had no idea what he might do, though.

After breakfast on the Wednesday, Jamie stood glowering at the window in his study, then slammed down his fist on the table, with a suddenness that made me jump.

“I have reached the mortal limit of endurance,” he informed me. “One moment more of this, and I shall run mad. I must do something, and I will.” Without waiting for any response to this statement, he strode to the office door, flung it open, and bellowed, “Joseph!” into the hall.

Mr. Wemyss appeared out of the kitchen, where he had been sweeping the chimney at Mrs. Bug’s direction, looking startled, pale, soot-smudged, and generally unkempt.

Jamie ignored the black footprints on the study floor—he had burned the rug—and fixed Mr. Wemyss with a commanding gaze.

“D’ye want that woman?” he demanded.

"Woman?" Mr. Wemyss was understandably bewildered. "What—oh. Are you—might you be referring to Fraulein Berrisch?"

"Who else? D'ye want her?" Jamie repeated.

It had plainly been a long time since anyone had asked Mr. Wemyss what he wanted, and it took him some time to gather his wits from the shock of it.

Brutal prodding by Jamie forced him past deprecating murmurs about the Fraulein's friends no doubt being the best judge of her happiness, his own unsuitability, poverty, and general unworthiness as a husband, and into—at long last—a reckless admission that, well, if the Fraulein should not be terribly averse to the prospect, perhaps … well … in a word …

"Aye, sir," he said, looking terrified at his own boldness. "I do. Very much!" he blurted.

"Good." Jamie nodded, pleased. "We'll go and get her, then."

Mr. Wemyss was open-mouthed with astonishment; so was I. Jamie swung round to me, issuing orders with the confidence and *joie de vivre* of a sea-captain with a fat prize in view.

"Go and find Young Ian for me, will ye, Sassenach? And tell Mrs. Bug to put up food, enough for a week's travel for four men. And then fetch Roger Mac; we'll need a minister."

He rubbed his hands together in satisfaction, then clapped Mr. Wemyss on the shoulder, causing a small puff of soot to rise from his clothes.

"Go fettle yourself, Joseph," he said. "And comb your hair. We're going to go and steal ye a bride."

* * *

"… and put a pistol to his breest, his breest," Young Ian chanted, "Marry me, marry me, minister, or else I'll be your priest, your priest—or else I'll be your priest!"

"Of course," Roger said, dropping the song, in which a bold young man named Willie rides with his friends to abduct and forcibly marry a young woman who proves bolder yet, "we'll hope ye prove a wee bit more capable than Willie upon the night, aye, Joseph?"

Mr. Wemyss, scrubbed, dressed, and fairly vibrating with excitement, gave him a glance of complete incomprehension. Roger grinned, tightening the strap of his saddlebag.

"Young Willie obliges a minister to marry him to the young woman at gunpoint," he explained to Mr. Wemyss, "but then, when he takes his stolen bride to bed, she'll have none of him—and his best efforts will not avail to force her."

"And so return me, Willie, to my hame, as virgin as I came, I came—as virgin as I came!" Ian caroled.

"Now, mind," Roger said warningly to Jamie, who was heaving his own saddlebags over Gideon's back. "If the Fraulein is at all unwilling …"

"What, unwilling to be wed to Joseph?" Jamie clapped Mr. Wemyss on the back, then bent to give him a foot up and fairly heaved the smaller man into the saddle. "I canna see any woman of sense turning from such an opportunity, can you, *a charaid*?"

He took a quick look round the clearing, to see all was well, then ran up the steps and kissed me in quick farewell, before running down again to mount Gideon, who for once seemed amenable and made no effort to bite him.

"Keep well, *mo nighean donn,*" he said, smiling into my eyes. And then they were gone, thundering out of the clearing like a gang of Highland raiders, Ian's ear-splitting whoops ringing from the trees.

* * *

Oddly enough, the departure of the men seemed to ease things slightly. The talk, of course, went merrily on—but without Jamie or Ian there to serve as a lightning-rod, it merely crackled to and fro like St. Elmo's fire; spitting, fizzing, and making everyone's hair stand on end, but essentially a harmless phenomenon, unless touched directly.

The house felt less an embattled fortress, and more the eye of a storm.

Also, with Mr. Wemyss out of the house, Lizzie came to visit, bringing little Rodney Joseph, as the baby was called—Roger having set his face firmly against the young fathers' enthusiastic suggestions of Tilgath-pileser and Ichabod. Wee Rogerina had come out of it all right, being now commonly known as Rory, but Roger declined entirely to hear of a child being christened anything that might result in his being known to the world at large as Icky.

Rodney seemed a very congenial child, in part because he had never quite lost that air of round-eyed astonishment that made him seem agog to hear what you had to say. Lizzie's astonishment at his birth had mutated into an enchantment that might have completely eclipsed Jo and Kezzie, were it not for the fact that they shared it.

Either one of them would—unless forcibly stopped—spend half an hour discussing Rodney's bowel habits with the intensity heretofore reserved for new snares and the peculiar things found inside the stomachs of animals they had killed. Pigs, it seemed, really would eat anything; so would Rodney.

A few days after the men's departure on their bride-stealing expedition, Brianna had come up from her cabin with Jemmy to visit, and Lizzie likewise had brought Rodney. The two of them joined Amy McCallum and me in the kitchen, where we were spending a pleasant evening sewing by the light of the fire, admiring Rodney, keeping a negligent eye on Jemmy and Aidan—and after a certain amount of cautious exploration, devoting ourselves wholeheartedly to a rundown of the male population of the Ridge, viewed in the light of suspects.

I, of course, had a more personal and painful interest in the topic, but all three of the young women were solidly on the side of justice—i.e., the side that refused even to contemplate the notion that either Jamie or I might have had anything to do with the murder of Malva Christie.

For myself, I found such open speculation rather a comfort. I had, of course, been engaging in private conjecture nonstop—and an exhausting business it was, too. Not only was it unpleasant to visualize every man I knew in the role of cold-blooded murderer—the process obliged me continuously to reimagine the murder itself, and relive the moment when I had found her.

"I'd really hate to think it might have been Bobby," Bree said, frowning as she pushed a wooden darning egg into the heel of a sock. “He seems just such a nice boy.”

Lizzie drew down her chin at this, pursing her lips.

“Oh, aye, he’s a sweet lad,” she said. “But what ye might call warm-blooded.”

All of us looked at her.

“Well,” she said mildly, “I didna let him, but he tried hard enough. And when I said no, he did go off and kick a tree.”

“My husband would do that sometimes, if I refused him,” Amy said, thoughtful. “But I’m sure he wouldna have cut my throat.”

“Well, but Malva didn’t refuse whoever it was,” Bree pointed out, squinting as she threaded her darning needle. “That was the problem. He killed her because she was pregnant, and he was afraid she’d tell everyone.”

“Ho!” Lizzie said, triumphant. “Well, then—it canna have been Bobby at all, can it? For when my Da turned him awa’—” A brief shadow crossed her face at mention of her father, who still had not spoken a word to her nor acknowledged the birth of little Rodney. “Did he not think of speiring for Malva Christie? Ian said he meant to. And if she were with child by him—well, then, her father would be obliged to agree, would he not?”

Amy nodded, finding this convincing, but Bree had objections.

“Yes—but she was insisting that it *wasn’t* his baby. And he threw up in the blackberry bushes when he heard that she was”—her lips compressed momentarily—“well, he wasn’t happy at all. So he might have killed her out of jealousy, don’t you think?”

Lizzie and Amy hmm’d dubiously at this—both of them were fond of Bobby—but were obliged to admit the possibility.

“What I wonder about,” I said a little hesitantly, “is the older men. The married ones. Everyone knows about the young men who were interested in her—but I’ve certainly seen more than one married man glance at her in passing.”

“I nominate Hiram Crombie,” Bree said at once, stabbing her needle into the heel of the sock. Everyone laughed, but she shook her head.

“No, I’m serious. It’s always the really religious, very uptight ones that turn out to have secret drawers full of women’s underwear, and slink around molesting choirboys."

Amy's jaw dropped.

"Drawers full of women's underwear?" she said. "What … shifts and stays? Whatever would he do wi' them?"

Brianna flushed at that, having forgotten her audience. She coughed, but there was no good way out.

"Er … well. I was thinking more of French women's underwear," she said weakly. "Um … lacy sorts of things."

"Oh, French," Lizzie said, nodding wisely. Everyone knew about the notorious reputation of French ladies—though I doubted that any woman on Fraser's Ridge save myself had ever seen one. In the interests of covering Bree's lapse, though, I obligingly told them about La Nestlé, the King of France's mistress, who had had her nipples pierced and appeared at court with her breasts exposed, sporting gold hoops through them.

"Another few months o' this," Lizzie said darkly, looking down at Rodney, who was nursing fiercely at her breast, tiny fists clenched with effort, "and I shall be able to do the same. I'll tell Jo and Kezzie to fetch me back some hoops when they sell their hides, aye?"

In the midst of the laughter at this, the sound of a knock at the front door passed unnoticed—or would have, if not for Jemmy and Aidan, who had been playing in Jamie's study, rushing into the kitchen to tell us about it.

"I'll get it." Bree set down her darning, but I was already on my feet.

"No, I'll go." I waved her back, picked up a candlestick, and went down the dark hallway, heart beating fast. Visitors after dark were almost always an emergency of one kind or another.

So was this one, though not any kind I might have expected. For a moment, I didn't even recognize the tall woman who stood swaying on the stoop, white-faced and gaunt. Then she whispered, "Frau Fraser? I may—may I komm?" and fell into my arms.

The noise of it brought all the young women rushing to help, and we had Monika Berrisch—for it was indeed Mr. Wemyss's putative bride—laid on the settle, covered with quilts, and plied with hot toddy in nothing flat.

She recovered quickly—there was nothing wrong with her, really, save exhaustion and hunger—she said she hadn't eaten in three days—and within a short time, was able to sit up eating soup, and explain her astonishing presence.

"It wass my husband's sister," she said, closing her eyes in momentary bliss at the aroma of split-pea soup with ham. "She did not want me, effer, and when her husband had the bad accident and lost his wagon, so there was not so much money to keep us all, she did not want me more."

She had, she said, yearned for Joseph, but had not had either the strength nor yet the means to withstand her family's opposition and insist upon returning to him.

"Oh?" Lizzie was examining her in a close, but not unfriendly manner. "What happpened, then?"

Fraulein Berrisch turned large, gentle eyes on her.

"I could not bear it more," she said simply. "I wish so much to be with Joseph. My husband's sister, she wish me to be gone, so she will give a small bit of money. So I came," she concluded, with a shrug, and took another small, greedy spoonful of soup.

"You … walked?" Brianna said. "From Halifax?"

Fraulein Berrisch nodded, licking the spoon, and put out a foot from under the quilts. Her shoes had worn entirely through at the sole; she had wrapped them with random scraps of leather and strips of fabric torn from her shift, so her feet looked like bundles of filthy rags.

"Elizabeth," she said, looking earnestly at Lizzie. "I hope you do not mind I komm. Your father—he is hier? I hope so much he does not mind, too."

"Umm, no," I said, exchanging a glance with Lizzie. "He isn't here—but I'm sure that he'll be delighted to see you!"

"Oh?" Her gaunt face, which had shown alarm at hearing that Mr. Wemyss was not here, grew radiant when we told her where he was.

“Oh,” she breathed, clasping the spoon to her bosom as though it were Mr. Wemyss’s head. “Oh, *mein Kavalier*!” Beaming with joy, she looked round at all of us—and for the first time, noticed Rodney, snoozing in his basket at Lizzie’s feet.

“But who is this?” she cried, and leaned forward to look at him. Not quite asleep, Rodney opened round, dark eyes and regarded her with a solemn, sleepy interest.

“This is my wee bairnie. Rodney Joseph, he’s called—for my Da, ken?” Lizzie hoisted him out of his basket, chubby knees pulled up under his chin, and laid him gently in Monika’s arms.

She cooed over him in German, face alight.

“Granny lust,” Bree muttered to me, out of the side of her mouth, and I felt laughter bubble up under my stays. I hadn’t laughed since before Malva’s death, and found it balm to the spirit.

Lizzie was explaining earnestly to Monika the estrangement resulting from her unorthodox marriage, to which Monika was nodding, clicking her tongue in sympathetic understanding—and I did wonder how much of it she grasped—and talking baby-talk to Rodney all at once.

“Fat chance of Mr. Wemyss staying estranged,” I said out of the side of my own mouth. “Keep his new wife from her new grandson? Ha!”

“Yes, what’s a little matter of dual sons-in-law?” Bree agreed.

Amy was regarding the tender scene with a slight sense of wistfulness. She reached out and put an arm round Aidan’s skinny shoulders.

“Well, they do say, the more, the merrier,” she said.

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PRIORITIES

Three shirts, an extra pair of decent breeches, two pair of stockings, one lisle, one silk—wait, where were the silk ones?

Brianna stepped to the door and called to her husband, who was industriously laying segments of clay pipe into the trench he had dug, assisted by Jemmy and Aidan.

“Roger! What have you done with your silk stockings?”

He paused, frowning, and rubbed his head. Then, handing the shovel to Aidan, he came across to the house, leaping over the open trench.

“I wore them last Sunday to preach, no?” he asked, reaching her. “What did I … oh.”

“Oh?” she said suspiciously, seeing his face change from puzzlement to guilt. “What’s ‘oh’?”

“Ahh … well, you’d stayed to home with Jem and his stomachache”—a tactically helpful ailment, greatly exaggerated in order to keep her from having to sit through two hours of staring and whispering—“so when Jocky Abernathy asked me would I care to go fishing with him …”

“Roger MacKenzie,” she said, fixing him with a look of wrath, “if you put your good silk stockings in a creel full of smelly fish and forgot them—”

“I’ll just nip up to the house and borrow a pair from your Da, shall I?” he said hurriedly. “I’m sure mine will turn up, somewhere.”

"So will your head," she said. "Probably under a rock!"

That made him laugh, which was not what she had intended, but which had the effect of easing her temper.

"I'm sorry," he said, leaning forward to kiss her forehead. "It's probably Freudian."

"Oh? And what does leaving your stockings wrapped around a dead trout symbolize?" she demanded.

"Generalized guilt and divided loyalties, I imagine," he said, still joking, but not so much. "Bree—I've been thinking. I really don't think I should go. I don't need to—"

"Yes, you do," she said, as firmly as possible. "Da says so, Mama says so, *and so do I.*"

"Oh, well, then." He smiled, but she could see the uneasiness under his humor—the more so because she shared it. Malva Christie's murder had caused an uproar on the Ridge—alarm, hysteria, suspicion, and finger-pointing in every direction. Several young men—Bobby Higgins among them—had simply disappeared from the Ridge, whether from a sense of guilt, or merely from a sense of self-preservation.

There had been accusations enough to go around; even she herself had come in for her share of gossip and suspicion, some of her unguarded remarks about Malva Christie having been repeated. But by far the greatest weight of suspicion rested squarely on her parents.

Both of them were doing their best to go about their daily business, grimly ignoring the gossip and the pointed looks—but it was getting harder; anyone could see that.

Roger had gone at once to visit the Christies—had gone every day since Malva's death save for his hasty expedition to Halifax—had buried the girl with simplicity and tears—and had since worn himself out with being reasonable and soothing and firm to everyone else on the Ridge. He had immediately put aside his plan to go to Edenton for ordination, but Jamie, hearing of it, had insisted.

"You've done everything here you could possibly do," Brianna said, for the hundredth time. "There's nothing else you can do to help—and it might be years before you have another chance."

She knew how urgently he wished to be ordained, and would have done anything to further that wish. For herself, she wished that she could see it; but without a great deal of talk, they had agreed that it was best for her and Jem to go to River Run, and wait there for Roger to make the trip to Edenton and then return. It couldn't do a candidate for ordination any good to turn up with a Catholic wife and child.

The guilt of leaving, though, with her parents standing in the eye of the whirlwind …

"You have to go," she repeated. "But maybe I—"

He stopped her with a look.

"No, we've done that." His argument was that her presence couldn't affect public opinion, which was probably true. She realized that his real reason—shared by her parents—was a desire to get her and Jem away from the situation on the Ridge, out of the uproar and safe, preferably before Jem realized that a good many of the neighbors thought that one, if not both, of his grandparents was a cold-blooded murderer.

And, to her private shame, she was eager to go.

Someone had killed Malva—and her baby. Every time she thought of it, the possibilities swam before her, the litany of names. And every time, she was forced to see her cousin's name among them. Ian had not run away, and she couldn't—could *not*—think that it had been him. And yet every day she was obliged to see Ian, and to contemplate the possibility.

She stood staring into the bag she was packing, folding and refolding the shirt in her hands, looking for reasons to go, reasons to stay—and knowing that no reason had any power at all, not now.

A dull *thunk!* from outside jerked her from her mire of indecision.

"What—" She reached the door in two steps, fast enough to see Jem and Aidan disappearing into the woods like a pair of rabbits. On the edge of the trench lay the cracked pieces of the pipe segment they had just dropped.

“You little *snot*-rags!” she bellowed, and grabbed for a broom—intending what she didn’t know, but violence seemed the only outlet for the frustration that had just erupted like a volcano, searing through her.

“Bree,” Roger said softly, and put a hand on her back. “It’s not important.”

She jerked away and rounded on him, the blood roaring in her ears.

“Do you have any idea how long it takes to make one of those? How many firings it takes to get one that’s not cracked? How—”

“Yes, I do know,” he said, his voice level. “And it’s still not important.”

She stood trembling, breathing hard. Very gently, he reached out and took the broom from her, standing it neatly back in its place.

“I need—to go,” she said, when she could form words again, and he nodded, his eyes tinged with the sadness he had carried ever since the day of Malva’s death.

“Aye, ye do,” he said quietly.

He came behind her, put his arms around her, his chin resting on her shoulder, and gradually she stopped shaking. Across the clearing, she saw Mrs. Bug come down the path from the garden with an apron full of cabbages and carrots; Claire had not set foot in her garden since …

“Will they be all right?”

“We’ll pray that they will,” he said, and tightened his arms around her. She was comforted by his touch, and didn’t notice until later that he had not in fact reassured her that they would.

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JUSTICE IS MINE, SAYETH THE LORD

I poked at the last package from Lord John, trying to work up enough enthusiasm to open it. It was a small wooden crate; perhaps more vitriol. I supposed I should make a fresh batch of ether—but then, what was the point? People had stopped coming to my surgery, even for the treatment of minor cuts and bruises, let alone the odd appendectomy.

I ran a finger through the dust on the counter, and thought that I should at least take care of that; Mrs. Bug kept the rest of the house spotless, but wouldn't come into the surgery. I added dusting to the long list of things that I should do, but made no move to go and find a dust cloth.

Sighing, I got up and went across the hall. Jamie was sitting at his desk, twiddling a quill and staring at a half-finished letter. He put down the quill when he saw me, smiling.

"How is it, Sassenach?"

"All right," I said, and he nodded, accepting it at face value. His face showed the lines of strain, and I knew that he was no more all right than I was. "I haven't seen Ian all day. Did he say he was going?" To the Cherokee, I meant. Little wonder if he wanted to get away from the Ridge; I thought it had taken a good deal of fortitude for him to stay as long as he had, bearing the stares and murmurs—and the outright accusations.

Jamie nodded again, and dropped the quill back into its jar.

"Aye, I told him to go. No purpose to him staying any longer; there'd only be more fights." Ian didn't say anything about the fights, but had more than once turned up to supper with the marks of battle on him.

"Right. Well, I'd better tell Mrs. Bug before she starts the supper." Still, I made no motion to get up, finding some small sense of comfort in Jamie's presence, some surcease from the constant memory of the small, bloody weight in my lap, inert as a lump of meat—and the sight of Malva's eyes, so surprised.

I heard horses in the yard, several of them. I glanced at Jamie, who shook his head, brows raised, then rose to go and meet the visitors, whoever they were. I followed him down the hall, wiping my hands on my apron and mentally revising the supper menu to accommodate what sounded like at least a dozen guests, from the whickering and murmuring I heard in the dooryard.

Jamie opened the door, and stopped dead. I looked over his shoulder, and felt terror seize me. Horsemen, black against the sinking sun, and in that moment, I was back in the whisky clearing, damp with sweat and clad in nothing but my shift. Jamie heard my gasp, and put back a hand, to keep me away.

"What d'ye want, Brown?" he said, sounding most unfriendly.

"We've come for your wife," said Richard Brown. There was an unmistakable note of gloating in his voice, and hearing it, the down hairs on my body rippled with cold, and black spots floated in my field of vision. I stepped back, hardly feeling my feet, and took hold of the doorjamb to my surgery, clinging to it for support.

"Well, ye can just be on your way, then," Jamie replied, with the same unfriendly tone. "Ye've nothing to do with my wife, nor she with you."

"Ah, now, there you're wrong, *Mister* Fraser." My vision had cleared, and I saw him urge his horse up closer to the stoop. He leaned down, peering through the door, and evidently saw me, for he smiled, in a most unpleasant fashion.

"We've come to arrest your wife, for the dastard crime of murder."

Jamie's hand tensed where he gripped the door, and he drew himself slowly to his fullest height, seeming to expand as he did so.

"Ye'll leave my land, sir," he said, and his voice had dropped to a level just above the rustlings of horses and harness. "And ye'll go now."

I felt, rather than heard, footsteps behind me. Mrs. Bug, coming to see what was afoot.

"Bride save us," she whispered, seeing the men. Then she was gone, running back through the house, light-footed as a deer. I should follow her, I knew, escape through the back door, run up into the forest, hide. But my limbs were frozen. I could barely breathe, let alone move.

And Richard Brown was looking at me over Jamie's shoulder, open dislike mingling with triumph.

"Oh, we'll leave," he said, straightening up. "Hand her over, and we'll be gone. Vanished like the morning dew," he said, and laughed. Dimly, I wondered whether he was drunk.

"By what right do you come here?" Jamie demanded. His left hand rose, rested on the hilt of his dirk in plain threat. The sight of it galvanized me, finally, and I stumbled down the hall, toward the kitchen where the guns were kept.

"… Committee of Safety." I caught those words in Brown's voice, raised in threat, and then was through into the kitchen. I grabbed the fowling piece from its hooks above the hearth, and wrenching open the drawer of the sideboard, hastily bundled the three pistols there into the large pockets of my surgical apron, made to hold instruments while I worked.

My hands were shaking. I hesitated—the pistols were primed and loaded; Jamie checked them every night—should I take the shot pouch, the powder horn? No time. I heard Jamie's voice and Richard Brown's, shouting now at the front of the house.

The sound of the back door opening jerked my head up, and I saw an unfamiliar man pause in the doorway, looking round. He saw me and started toward me, grinning, hand out to seize my arm.

I lifted a pistol from my apron and shot him, point-blank. The grin didn't leave his face, but took on a slightly puzzled air. He blinked once or twice, then put a hand to his side, where a reddening spot was beginning to spread on his shirt. He looked at his blood-smeared fingers, and his jaw dropped.

"Well, goddamn!" he said. "You shot me!"

"I did," I said, breathless. "And I'll bloody do it again, if you don't get out of here!" I dropped the empty pistol on the floor with a crash, and scrabbled one-handed in my apron pocket for another, still holding the fowling piece in a death grip.

He didn't wait to see if I meant it, but whirled and crashed into the door frame, then stumbled through it, leaving a smear of blood on the wood.

Wisps of black-powder smoke floated in the air, mingling oddly with the scent of roasting fish, and I thought for an instant that I might throw up, but managed despite my nausea to set down the fowling piece for a moment and bar the door, my hands shaking so that it took several tries.

Sudden sounds from the front of the house drove nerves and everything else from my mind, and I was running down the hall, gun in hand, before I had made a conscious decision to move, the heavy pistols in my apron banging against my thighs.

They'd dragged Jamie off the porch; I caught a brief glimpse of him in the midst of a surging melee of bodies. They'd stopped shouting. There wasn't any noise at all, save for small grunts and the impact of flesh, the scuffling of myriad feet in the dust. It was deadly earnest, that struggle, and I knew at once that they meant to kill him.

I leveled the fowling piece at the edge of the crowd farthest from Jamie, and pulled the trigger. The crash of the gun and the startled screams seemed to come together, and the scene before me flew apart, the knot of men dissolving, peppered with bird shot. Jamie had kept hold of his dirk; with a little room around him now, I saw him drive it into one man's side, wrench it back and lash sideways in the same motion, scoring a bloody furrow across the forehead of a man who had fallen back a little.

Then I caught a glimpse of metal to one side and by reflex shrieked "DUCK!" an instant before Brown's pistol fired. There was a small *tchoong* past my ear, and I realized, in a very calm sort of way, that Brown had fired at me, not Jamie.

Jamie had, however, ducked. So had everyone else in the yard, and men were now scrambling to their feet, confused, the impetus of the attack dispersed. Jamie had dived toward the porch; he was up and stumbling toward me, striking viciously with the hilt of his dirk at a man who grabbed at his sleeve, so the man fell back with a cry.

We might have rehearsed it a dozen times. He took the steps of the porch in one leap and flung himself into me, carrying us both through the door, then spun on his heel and slammed the door, throwing himself against it and holding it against the frenzied impact of bodies for the instant it took me to drop the fowling piece, seize the bolt, and lift it into place.

It fell into its hooks with a thunk.

The door vibrated to the blows of fists and shoulders, and the shouting had started up again, but with a different sound. No gloating, no taunting. Cursing still, but with a set, malign intent.

Neither of us paused to listen.

“I barred the kitchen door,” I gasped, and Jamie nodded, diving into my surgery to secure the bolts of the inside shutters there. I heard the crash of breaking glass in the surgery behind me as I ran into his study; the windows there were smaller, and not glass, placed high in the wall. I slammed the shutters to and bolted them, then ran back into the suddenly darkened hallway to find the gun.

Jamie had it already; he was in the kitchen, grabbing things, and as I started toward the kitchen door, he came out of it, hung about with shot pouches, powder horns, and the like, fowling piece in his hand, and with a jerk of the head, motioned me before him up the stairs.

The rooms above were still filled with light; it was like bursting up from underwater, and I gulped the light as though it were air, dazzled and eyes watering as I rushed to bolt the shutters in the boxroom and Amy McCallum’s room. I didn’t know where Amy and her sons were; I could only be grateful that they weren’t in the house at the moment.

I ran into the bedroom, gasping. Jamie was kneeling by the window, methodically loading guns and saying something under his breath in Gaelic—prayer or cursing, I couldn't tell.

I didn't ask if he was hurt. His face was bruised, his lip was split, and blood had run down his chin onto his shirt, he was covered with dirt and what I assumed to be smears of other peoples' blood, and the ear on the side closest me was swollen. But he was steady in his movements, and anything short of a fractured skull would have to wait.

"They mean to kill us," I said, and didn't mean it as a question.

He nodded, eyes on his work, then handed me a spare pistol to load.

"Aye, they do. Good job the weans are all safe away, isn't it?" He smiled at me suddenly, bloody-toothed and fierce, and I felt steadier than I had for a long time.

He'd left one side of the shutter ajar. I moved carefully back behind him and peered out, the loaded pistol primed and in my hand.

"No bodies lying in the dooryard," I reported. "I suppose you didn't kill any of them."

"Not for want of trying," he replied. "God, what I'd give for a rifle!" He rose cautiously to his knees, the barrel of the fowling piece protruding over the sill, and surveyed the state of the attack.

They had withdrawn for the moment; a small group was visible under the chestnut trees at the far side of the clearing, and they'd taken the horses down toward Bree and Roger's cabin, safely out of range of flying bullets. Brown and his minions were clearly planning what to do next.

"What do you suppose they would have done, if I'd agreed to go with them?" I could feel my heart again, at least. It was going a mile a minute, but I could breathe, and some feeling was coming back into my extremities.

"I should never ha' let ye go," he replied shortly.

"And quite possibly Richard Brown knows that," I said. He nodded; he'd been thinking along the same lines. Brown had never intended actually to arrest me; only to provoke an incident in which we could both be killed under circumstances dubious enough as to prevent wholesale retaliation by Jamie's tenants.

"Mrs. Bug got out, did she?" he asked.

"Yes. If they didn't catch her outside the house." I narrowed my eyes against the brilliant afternoon sun, searching for a short, broad figure in skirts among the group by the chestnut trees, but I saw only men.

Jamie nodded again, hissing gently through his back teeth as he swiveled the gun barrel slowly through an arc that covered the dooryard.

"We'll see, then" was all he said. "Come that wee bit closer, man," he murmured, as one man started cautiously across the yard toward the house. "One shot; that's all I ask. Here, Sassenach, take this." He pushed the fowling piece into my hands, and selected his favorite of the pistols, a long-barreled Highland dag with a scroll butt.

The man—it was Richard Brown, I saw—stopped some distance away, pulled a handkerchief from the waist of his breeches, and waved it slowly overhead. Jamie snorted briefly, but let him come on.

"Fraser!" he called, coming to a stop at a distance of forty yards or so. "Fraser! D'ye hear me?"

Jamie sighted carefully and fired. The ball struck the ground a few feet in front of Brown, raising a sudden puff of dust from the path, and Brown leapt in the air as though stung by a bee.

"What's the matter with you?" he yelled indignantly. "Have ye never heard of a flag o' truce, you horse-stealin' Scotcher?"

"If I wanted ye dead, Brown, ye'd be coolin' this minute!" Jamie shouted back. "Speak your piece." What he did want was plain: he wanted them wary of coming closer to the house; it was impossible to hit anything accurately with a pistol at forty yards, and not that easy with a musket.

"You know what I want!" Brown called. He took off his hat, wiping sweat and dirt from his face. "I want that goddamn murderous witch of yours."

The answer to that was another carefully aimed pistol ball. Brown jumped again, but not so high.

"Look you," he tried again, with a conciliating note in his voice. "We ain't going to hurt her. We mean to take her to Hillsboro for trial. A fair trial. That's all."

Jamie handed me the second pistol to reload, took another, and fired.

You had to give Brown credit for persistence, I thought. Of course, it had probably dawned on him that Jamie either couldn't or wouldn't actually hit him, and he doggedly stood his ground through two more shots, yelling that they meant to take me to Hillsboro, and surely to God if I were innocent, Jamie should *want* a trial, shouldn't he?

It was hot upstairs, and sweat was trickling down between my breasts. I blotted the fabric of my shift against my chest.

With no answer save the whine of pistol balls, Brown threw up his hands in exaggerated pantomime of a reasonable man tried beyond endurance, and stamped back to his men beneath the chestnut trees. Nothing had changed, but seeing the narrow back of him made me breathe a little easier.

Jamie was still crouched in the window, pistol at the ready, but seeing Brown go back, he relaxed and sat back on his heels, sighing.

"Is there water, Sassenach?"

"Yes." The bedroom ewer was full; I poured him a cup and he drank it thirstily. We had food, water, and a fair amount of shot and powder. I did not, however, foresee a long siege ahead.

"What do you suppose they'll do?" I didn't go near the window, but by standing to one side, I could see them clearly, gathered in conference under the trees. The air was still and heavy, and the leaves above them hung like damp rags.

Jamie came to stand behind me, dabbing at his lip with the tail of his shirt.

"Fire the house as soon as it's dark, I suppose," he said matter-of-factly. "I would. Though I suppose they might try draggin' Gideon out and threatening to put a ball through his head, and I didna give ye up." He seemed to think this last was a joke, but I failed to see the humor in it.

He saw my face and put a hand behind my back, drawing me close for a moment. The air was hot and sticky, and we were both wringing wet, but the nearness of him was a comfort, nonetheless.

"So," I said, taking a deep breath. "It all depends on whether Mrs. Bug got away—and who she's told."

"She'll ha' gone for Arch, first thing." Jamie patted me gently, and sat down on the bed. "If he's to home, he'll run for Kenny Lindsay; he's nearest. After that …" He shrugged, and closed his eyes, and I saw that his face was pale under the sunburn and the smears of dirt and blood.

"Jamie—are you hurt?"

He opened his eyes and gave me a small, one-sided smile, trying not to stretch his torn lip.

"No, I've broken my bloody finger again, is all." He raised a shoulder in deprecation, but let me lift his right hand to look.

It was a clean break; that was all that could be said for it. The fourth finger was stiff, the joints fused from being so badly broken long ago, in Wentworth Prison. He couldn't bend it, and it therefore stuck out awkwardly; this wasn't the first time he'd snapped it.

He swallowed as I felt gently for the break, and closed his eyes again, sweating.

"There's laudanum in the surgery," I said. "Or whisky." I knew he would refuse, though, and he did.

"I'll want a clear head," he said, "whatever happens." He opened his eyes and gave me the ghost of a smile. The room was sweltering and airless, despite the open shutter. The sun was more than halfway down the sky, and the first shadows were gathering in the corners of the room.

I went down to the surgery to fetch a splint and bandage; it wouldn't help a lot, but it was something to do.

The surgery was dark, with the shutters closed, but with the windows broken, air came through them, making the room seem oddly exposed and vulnerable. I walked in like a mouse, quiet, stopping abruptly, listening for danger, whiskers twitching. Everything was quiet, though.

"*Too* quiet," I said aloud, and laughed. Moving with purpose and ignoring the noise, I set my feet down firmly and opened cupboard doors with abandon, banging instruments and rattling bottles as I looked out what I needed.

I stopped into the kitchen before returning upstairs. Partly to reassure myself that the back door *was* firmly bolted, and partly to see what bits of food Mrs. Bug might have left out. He hadn't said so, but I knew the pain of the broken finger was making Jamie mildly nauseated—and in him, food generally quelled that sort of disturbance, and made him feel more settled.

The cauldron was still over the coals, but the fire, untended, had burned down so far that the soup had luckily not boiled away. I poked up the embers and put on three sticks of fat pine, as much by way of thumbing my nose at the besiegers outside as from the long-ingrained habit of never letting a fire die. Let them see the spray of sparks from the chimney, I thought, and imagine us sitting peacefully down to eat by our hearth. Or better yet, imagine us sitting by the blazing fire, melting lead and molding bullets.

In this defiant frame of mind, I went back upstairs, equipped with medical supplies, an alfresco lunch, and a large bottle of black ale. I couldn't help but notice, though, the echo of my footsteps on the stair, and the silence that settled quickly back into place behind me, like water when one steps out of it.

I heard a shot, just as I approached the head of the stair, and took the last steps so fast that I tripped and would have fallen headlong, save for reeling into the wall.

Jamie appeared from Mr. Wemyss's room, fowling piece in hand, looking startled.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

"Yes," I said crossly, wiping spilled soup off my hand with my apron. "What in the name of God are you shooting at?"

"Nothing. I only wanted to make the point that the back of the house is nay safer than the front, if they thought of creeping up that way. Just to ensure that they *do* wait for dark to fall."

I bound up his finger, which seemed to help a little. The food, as I'd hoped, helped considerably more. He ate like a wolf, and rather to my surprise, so did I.

"The condemned ate a hearty meal," I observed, picking up crumbs of bread and cheese. "I'd always thought being in danger of death would make one too nervous to eat, but apparently not."

He shook his head, took a swallow of ale, and passed me the bottle.

"A friend once told me, 'The body has nay conscience.' I dinna ken that that's entirely so—but it is true that the body doesna generally admit the possibility of nonexistence. And if ye exist—well, ye need food, that's all." He grinned one-sided at me, and tearing the last of the sweet rolls in half, gave one to me.

I took it, but didn't eat it immediately. There was no sound outside, save the buzzing of cicadas, though the air had a sultry thickness to it that often presaged rain. It was early in the summer for storms, but one could only hope.

"You've thought of it, too, haven't you?" I said quietly.

He made no pretense of misunderstanding me.

"Well, it *is* the twenty-first o' the month," he said.

"It's *June,* for heaven's sake! And the wrong year, as well. That newspaper clipping said January, of 1776!" I was absurdly indignant, as though I had somehow been cheated.

He found that funny.

"I was a printer myself, Sassenach," he said, laughing through a mouthful of sweet roll. "Ye dinna want to believe everything ye read in the newspapers, aye?"

When I looked out again, only a few men were visible under the chestnut trees. One of them saw my movement; he waved his arm slowly to and fro above his head—then drew the edge of his hand flat across his throat.

The sun was just above the treetops; two hours, perhaps, to nightfall. Two hours surely was enough time for Mrs. Bug to have summoned help, though—always assuming she had found anyone who would come. Arch might have gone to Cross Creek—he went once a month; Kenny might be hunting. As for the newer tenants … without Roger to keep them in order, their suspicion and dislike of me had become blatant. I had the feeling that they might come if summoned—but only to cheer as I was dragged away.

If anyone *did* come—what then? I didn't want to be dragged away, much less shot or burnt alive in the ashes of my house—but I didn't want anyone else injured or killed in an effort to prevent it, either.

"Come away from the window, Sassenach," Jamie said. He held out a hand to me, and I went, sitting on the bed beside him. I felt all at once exhausted, the adrenaline of emergency having burned away, leaving my muscles feeling like heat-softened rubber.

"Lie down, *a Sorcha,*" he said softly. "Lay your head in my lap."

Hot as it was, I did so, finding it a comfort to stretch out, even more to hear his heart, thumping slow and solid above my ear, and feel his hand, light on my head.

All the weapons were laid out, ranged on the floor beside the window, all loaded, primed, and ready for use. He'd taken his sword down from the armoire; it stood by the door, a last resort.

"There's nothing we can do now, is there?" I said after a little. "Nothing but wait."

His fingers moved idly through the damp curls of my hair; it fell to just above my shoulders now, long enough—barely—to tie back or pin up.

"Well, we might say an Act of Contrition," he said. "We did that, always, the night before a battle. Just in case," he added, smiling down at me.

"All right," I said after a pause. "Just in case."

I reached up and his good hand closed round mine.

"Mon Dieu, je regrette …" he began, and I remembered that he said this prayer in French, harking back to those days as a mercenary in France; how often had he said it then, a necessary precaution, cleansing the soul at night in expectation of the possibility of death in the morning?

I said it, too, in English, and we fell silent. The cicadas had stopped. Far, far away, I thought I heard a sound that might be thunder.

“Do you know,” I said after a long while, “I’m sorry for a great many things and people. Rupert, Murtagh, Dougal … Frank. Malva,” I added softly, with a catch in my throat. “But speaking only for myself …” I cleared my throat.

“I don’t regret anything,” I said, watching the shadows creep in from the corners of the room. “Not one bloody thing.”

“Nor do I, *mo nighean donn,*” he said, and his fingers stilled, warm against my skin. “Nor do I.”

* * *

I woke from a doze with the smell of smoke in my nostrils. Being in a state of grace is all very well, but I imagine even Joan of Arc had qualms when they lit the first brand. I sat bolt upright, heart pounding, to see Jamie at the window.

It wasn’t quite dark yet; streaks of orange and gold and rose lit the sky to the west, and touched his face with a fiery light. He looked long-nosed and fierce, the lines of strain cut deep.

“Folk are coming,” he said. His voice was matter-of-fact, but his good hand was clenched hard round the edge of the shutter, as though he would have liked to slam and bolt it.

I came to stand by him, combing my fingers hastily through my hair. I could still make out figures under the chestnut trees, though they now were no more than silhouettes. They’d built a bonfire there, at the far edge of the dooryard; that’s what I’d smelled. There were more people coming into the dooryard, though; I was sure I made out the squat figure of Mrs. Bug among them. The sound of voices floated up, but they weren’t talking loudly enough to make out words.

“Will ye plait my hair, Sassenach? I canna manage, wi’ this.” He gave his broken finger a cursory glance.

I lit a candle, and he moved a stool to the window, so he could keep watch while I combed his hair and braided it into a tight, thick queue, which I clubbed at the base of his neck and tied with a neat black ribbon.

I knew his reasons were twofold: not only to appear well-groomed and gentlemanly, but to be ready to fight if he had to. I was less worried about someone seizing me by the hair as I attempted to cleave them in half with a sword, but supposed that if this were my last appearance as the lady of the Ridge, I should not appear unkempt.

I heard him mutter something under his breath, as I brushed my own hair by candlelight, and turned on my stool to look at him.

"Hiram's come," he informed me. "I hear his voice. That's good."

"If you say so," I said dubiously, recollecting Hiram Crombie's denunciations in church a week before—thinly veiled remarks clearly aimed at us. Roger hadn't mentioned them; Amy McCallum had told me.

Jamie turned his head to look at me, and smiled, an expression of extraordinary sweetness coming over his face.

"Ye're verra lovely, Sassenach," he said as though surprised. "But, aye, it's good. Whatever he thinks, he wouldna countenance Brown hanging us in the dooryard, nor yet setting the house afire to drive us out."

There were more voices outside; the crowd was growing quickly.

"Mr. Fraser!"

He took a deep breath, took the candle from the table, and threw open the shutter, holding the candle near his face so they could see him.

It was almost full dark, but several of the crowd were holding torches, which gave me uneasy visions of the mob coming to burn Dr. Frankenstein's monster—but did at least allow me to make out the faces below. There were at least thirty men—and not a few women—there, in addition to Brown and his thugs. Hiram Crombie was indeed there, standing beside Richard Brown, and looking like something out of the Old Testament.

"We require ye to come down, Mr. Fraser," he called. "And your wife—if ye please."

I caught sight of Mrs. Bug, plump and clearly terrified, her face streaked with tears. Then Jamie closed the shutters, gently, and offered me his arm.

* * *

Jamie had worn both dirk and sword, and had not changed his clothes. He stood on the porch, bloodstained and battered, and dared them to harm us further.

“Ye’ll take my wife over my dead body,” he said, raising his powerful voice enough to be heard across the clearing. I was rather afraid they would. He’d been right—so far—about Hiram not countenancing lynching, but it was clear that public opinion was not in our favor.

“Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live!” someone shouted from the back of the crowd, and a stone whistled through the air, bouncing off the front of the house with a sharp report, like a gunshot. It struck no more than a foot from my head, and I flinched, instantly regretting it.

Angry murmurs had risen from the moment Jamie had opened the door, and this encouraged them. There were shouts of “Murderers!” and “Heartless! Heartless!” and a number of Gaelic insults that I didn’t try to understand.

“If she didn’t do it, *breugaire,* who did?” someone bellowed. “Liar” it meant.

The man Jamie had slashed across the face with his dirk was in the forefront of the crowd; the open wound gaped, still oozing, and his face was a mask of dried blood.

“If ’twasn’t her, ’twas him!” he shouted, pointing at Jamie. *“Fear-siûrsachd!”* Lecher.

There was an ugly rumble of agreement at that, and I saw Jamie shift his weight and set his hand to his sword, ready to draw if they charged him.

“Be still!” Hiram’s voice was rather shrill, but penetrating. “Be still, I tell ye!” He pushed Brown aside and came up the steps, very deliberately. At the top, he gave me a look of revulsion, but then turned to the crowd.

“Justice!” one of Brown’s men yelled, before he could speak. “We want justice!”

“Aye, we do!” Hiram shouted back. “And justice we shall have, for the puir raped lass and her bairn unborn!”

A satisfied growl greeted this, and icy terror ran down my legs, so that I feared my knees would give way.

"Justice! Justice!" Various people were taking up the chant, but Hiram stopped them, raising both hands as though he were bloody Moses parting the Red Sea.

"*Justice is mine,* sayeth the Lord," Jamie remarked, in a voice just loud enough to be generally heard. Hiram, who had evidently been about to say the same thing, gave him a furious look, but couldn't very well contradict him.

"And justice you'll have, Mister Fraser!" Brown said very loudly. He lifted his face, narrow-eyed and malicious with triumph. "I wish to take her for trial. Anyone accused is entitled to that, nay? If she is innocent—if *you* are innocent—how can you refuse?"

"Certainly a point," Hiram observed, very dry. "If your wife be clean o' the crime, she's naught to fear. How say ye, sir?"

"I say that should I surrender her to the hands of this man, she willna live to stand a trial," Jamie replied hotly. "He holds me to blame for the death of his brother—and some of ye here will ken well enough the truth o' *that* affair!" he added, lifting his chin to the crowd.

Here and there, heads nodded—but they were few. No more than a dozen of his Ardsmuir men had been on the expedition that rescued me; in the wake of gossip following it, many of the new tenants would have known only that I had been abducted, assaulted in some scandalous fashion, and that men had died on my account. The mind of the times being what it was, I was well aware that an obscure sense of blame attached to the victim of any sexual crime—unless the woman died, in which case she became at once a spotless angel.

"He will slaughter her out of hand, for the sake of revenge upon me," Jamie said, raising his voice. He changed abruptly to Gaelic, pointing at Brown. "Look at yon man, and see the truth of the matter writ upon his face! He has no more to do with justice than with honor, and he would not recognize honor by the smell of its arse!"

That made a few of them laugh, in sheer surprise. Brown, disconcerted, looked round to see what they were laughing at, which made more of them laugh.

The mood of the assembly was still against us, but they were not yet with Brown—who was, after all, a stranger. Hiram's narrow brow creased in consideration.

"What would ye offer by way of guarantee for the woman's safety?" Hiram asked Brown.

"A dozen hogsheads of beer and three dozen prime hides," Brown replied promptly. "Four dozen!" His eagerness gleamed in his eyes, and it was all he could do to keep his voice from shaking with the lust to take me. I had a sudden, unpleasant conviction that while my death was his ultimate goal, he didn't intend that it should be a quick one, unless circumstances demanded it.

"It would be worth far more than that to ye, *breugaire,* to have your revenge upon me with her death," Jamie said evenly.

Hiram glanced from one to the other, unsure what to do. I looked out into the crowd, keeping my face impassive. In truth, it was not difficult to do; I felt completely numb.

There were a few friendly faces, glancing anxiously to Jamie, to see what to do. Kenny and his brothers, Murdo and Evan, stood in a tight group, hands on their dirks and faces set. I didn't know whether Richard Brown had chosen his timing, or merely been lucky. Ian was gone, hunting with his Cherokee friends. Arch was plainly gone, as well, or he would be visible—Arch and his ax would be uncommonly handy just now, I thought.

Fergus and Marsali were gone—they, too, would have helped to stem the tide. But the most important absence was Roger's. He alone had been keeping the Presbyterians more or less under control since the day of Malva's accusation, or at least keeping a lid on the simmering pot of gossip and animosity. He might have cowed them now—had he been here.

The conversation had devolved from high drama to a three-way wrangle among Jamie, Brown, and Hiram, the former two adamant in their positions, and poor Hiram, quite unsuited to the task, trying to adjudicate. Insofar as I had feelings to spare, I felt rather sorry for him.

"Take him!" a voice called suddenly. Allan Christie pushed his way to the front of the crowd, and pointed at Jamie. His voice trembled and broke with emotion. "It's him debauched my sister, him that kilt her! If ye'll put someone to the trial, take him!"

There was a subterranean rumble of agreement at that, and I saw John MacNeill and young Hugh Abernathy draw close together, glancing uneasily from Jamie to the three Lindsay brothers, and back again.

"Nay, it's her!" a woman's voice called in contradiction, high and shrill. One of the fishers' wives; she stabbed a finger at me, face pinched with malevolence. "A man might kill a lass he'd got wi' child—but no man would do sich wickedness as to steal a babe unborn frae the womb! No but a witch would do that—and she found wi' the puir wee corpse in her hands!"

A higher susurrus of condemnation greeted that. The men might possibly give me the benefit of doubt—no woman would.

"By the name of the Almighty!" Hiram was losing his grip on the situation, and becoming panicky. The situation was perilously close to degenerating into riot; anyone could feel the currents of hysteria and violence in the air. He cast his eyes up to heaven, looking for inspiration—and found some.

"Take them both!" he said suddenly. He looked at Brown, then Jamie. "Take them both," he repeated, testing the notion and finding it good. "Ye'll go along, to see that nay harm comes to your wife," he said reasonably to Jamie. "And if it should be proved that she is innocent …" His voice died away on that, as it dawned on him that what he was saying was that if I were proven innocent, Jamie must be guilty, and what a good idea it would be to have him on the spot to be hanged instead.

"She is innocent; so am I." Jamie spoke without heat, doggedly repeating it. He had no real hope of convincing anyone; the only doubt among the crowd was whether he or I was the guilty party—or whether we had plotted together to destroy Malva Christie.

He turned suddenly to face the crowd, and cried out to them in Gaelic.

"If you will deliver us into the stranger's hand, then our blood be upon your heads, and you will answer for our lives upon the Day of Judgment!"

A sudden hush fell on the crowd at that. Men glanced uncertainly at their neighbors, measured Brown and his cohort with doubtful eyes.

They were known to the community, but strangers—Sassenachs—in the Scottish sense. So was I, and a witch, to boot. Lecher, rapist, and Papist murderer he might be—but Jamie at least was not a stranger.

The man I had shot was grinning at me evilly over Brown's shoulder; evidently, I had no more than grazed him, worse luck. I gave him stare for stare, sweat gathering between my breasts, moisture slick and hot beneath the veil of my hair.

A murmur was rising among the crowd; argument and disputation, and I could see the Ardsmuir men begin to make their way slowly toward the porch, pushing through the mob. Kenny Lindsay's eyes were fixed on Jamie's face, and I felt Jamie take a deep breath beside me.

They would fight for him, if he called them. But there were too few of them, and poorly armed, by contrast with Brown's mob. They would not win—and there were women and children in the crowd. To call his men would provoke only bloody riot, and leave the deaths of innocents upon his conscience. That was not a burden he could bear; not now.

I saw him come to this conclusion, and his mouth tighten. I had no idea what he might be about to do, but he was forestalled. There was a disturbance at the edge of the crowd; people turned to look, then froze, stricken silent.

Thomas Christie came through the crowd; in spite of the darkness and wavering torchlight, I knew at once it was him. He walked like an old man, hunched and halting, looking at no one. The crowd gave way before him at once, deeply respectful of his grief.

The grief was plainly marked on his face. He had let his beard and hair go untrimmed, uncombed, and both were matted. His eyes were pouched and bloodshot, the lines from nose to mouth black furrows through his beard. His eyes were alive, though, alert and intelligent. He walked through the crowd, past his son, as though he were alone, and came up the steps onto the porch.

“I will go with them to Hillsboro,” he said quietly to Hiram Crombie. “Let them both be taken, if ye will—but I will travel with them, as surety that no further evil may be done. Surely justice is mine, if it be anyone’s.”

Brown looked much taken aback by this declaration; plainly it wasn’t what he’d had in mind at all. But the crowd was in instant sympathy, murmuring agreement at the proposed solution. Everyone had the greatest compassion and respect for Tom Christie in the wake of his daughter’s murder, and the general feeling seemed to be that this gesture was one of the greatest magnanimity.

It was, too, as he had in all likelihood just saved our lives—at least for the moment. From the look in his eye, Jamie would strongly have preferred simply to take his chances on killing Richard Brown, but realized that beggars could not be choosers, and acquiesced as gracefully as possible, with a nod of the head.

Christie’s gaze rested on me for a moment, then turned to Jamie.

“If it will suit your convenience, Mr. Fraser, perhaps we will leave in the morning? There is no reason why you and your wife should not rest in your own beds.”

Jamie bowed to him.

“I thank ye, sir,” he said with great formality. Christie nodded back, then turned and went back down the steps, completely ignoring Richard Brown, who was looking at once irritated and confounded.

I saw Kenny Lindsay close his eyes, shoulders slumping in relief. Then Jamie put his hand under my elbow, and we turned, going into our house for what might be the final night spent under its roof.

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IN THE WAKE OF SCANDAL

The rain that had threatened arrived in the night, and the day dawned gray, bleak, and wet. Mrs. Bug was in a similar state, sniffling into her apron and repeating over and over, “Oh, if only Arch had been here! But I couldna find anyone save Kenny Lindsay, and by the time he’d run for MacNeill and Abernathy—”

“Dinna fash yourself for it, *a leannan,*” Jamie said, and kissed her affectionately on the brow. “It may be for the best. No one was damaged, the house is still standing”—he cast a wistful eye toward the rafters, every beam shaped by his own hand—“and it may be we’ll have this wretched matter settled soon, God willing.”

“God willing,” she echoed fervently, crossing herself. She sniffed and wiped her eyes. “And I’ve packed a wee bit of food, that ye shouldna starve on the way, sir.”

Richard Brown and his men had sheltered under the trees as best they could; no one had offered them hospitality, which was as damning an indication of their unpopularity as could be imagined, Highland standards being what they were in such matters. And as clear an indication of our own unpopularity, that Brown should be permitted to take us into custody.

In consequence, Brown’s men were soaking wet, ill-fed, sleepless, and short-tempered. I hadn’t slept, either, but I was at least full of breakfast, warm, and—for the moment—dry, which made me feel a little better, though my heart felt hollow and my bones filled with lead as we reached the head of the trail and I looked back across the clearing at the house, with Mrs. Bug standing waving on the porch. I waved back, and then my horse plunged into the darkness of the dripping trees.

It was a grim journey, and silent for the most part. Jamie and I rode close together, but couldn't speak of anything important, in hearing of Brown's men. As for Richard Brown, he was seriously out of countenance.

It was reasonably clear that he had never intended to take me anywhere for trial, but had merely seized upon the pretext as a means of revenging himself on Jamie for Lionel's death—and God knew what he would have done, I reflected, had he known what had really happened to his brother, and Mrs. Bug there within arm's length of him. With Tom Christie along, though, there was nothing he could do; he was obliged to take us to Hillsboro, and he did so with bad grace.

Tom Christie rode like a man in a dream—a bad dream—his face closed and inward-looking, speaking to no one.

The man Jamie had slashed was not there; I supposed he had gone home to Brownsville. The gentleman I had shot was still with us, though.

I couldn't tell how bad the wound was, nor yet whether the bullet had gone into him or merely grazed his side. He wasn't incapacitated, but it was plain from the way he hunched to one side, his face contorting now and then, that he was in pain.

I hesitated for some time. I had brought a small medical kit with me, as well as saddlebags and bedroll. Under the circumstances, I felt relatively little sense of compassion for the man. On the other hand, instinct was strong—and as I said to Jamie in an undertone when we stopped to make camp for the evening, it wouldn't help matters if he died of infection.

I steeled myself to offer to examine and dress the wound, as soon as the opportunity should occur. The man—his name seemed to be Ezra, though under the circumstances, no formal introductions had been made—was in charge of distributing bowls of food at supper, and I waited under the pine where Jamie and I had taken shelter, intending to speak kindly to him when he brought our food.

He came over, a bowl in each hand, shoulders hunched under a leather coat against the rain. Before I could speak, though, he grinned nastily, spat thickly in one bowl, and handed it to me. The other he dropped at Jamie's feet, spattering his legs with dried-venison stew.

"Oops," he said mildly, and turned on his heel.

Jamie contracted sharply, like a big snake coiling, but I got hold of his arm before he could strike.

"Never mind," I said, and raising my voice just a little, said, "Let him rot."

The man's head snapped round, wide-eyed.

"Let him rot," I repeated, staring at him. I'd seen the flush of fever in his face when he came near, and smelled the faint sweet scent of pus.

Ezra looked completely taken back. He hurried back to the sputtering fire, and refused to look in my direction.

I was still holding the bowl he'd given me, and was startled to have it taken from my hand. Tom Christie threw the contents of the bowl into a bush, and handed me his own, then turned away without speaking.

"But—" I started after him, meaning to give it back. We wouldn't starve, thanks to Mrs. Bug's "wee bit of food," which filled one entire saddlebag. Jamie's hand on my arm stopped me, though.

"Eat it, Sassenach," he said softly. "It's kindly meant."

More than kind, I thought. I was aware of hostile eyes upon me, from the group around the fire. My throat was tight, and I had no appetite, but I took my spoon from my pocket and ate.

Beneath a nearby hemlock tree, Tom Christie had wrapped himself in a blanket and lain down alone, his hat pulled down over his face.

* * *

It rained all the way to Salisbury. We found shelter in an inn there, and seldom had a fire seemed so welcome. Jamie had brought what cash we had, and in consequence, we could afford a room to ourselves. Brown posted a guard on the stair, but that was merely for show; after all, where would we go?

I stood in front of the fire in my shift, my wet cloak and gown spread over a bench to dry.

"You know," I observed, "Richard Brown hasn't thought this out at all." Not surprising, that, since he hadn't actually intended to take me or us to trial. "Who, exactly, does he mean to hand us over to?"

"The sheriff of the county," Jamie replied, untying his hair and shaking it out over the hearth, so that droplets of water sizzled and popped in the fire. "Or failing that, a justice of the peace, perhaps."

"Yes, but what then? He's got no evidence—no witnesses. How can there be any semblance of a trial?"

Jamie looked at me curiously.

"Ye've never been tried for anything, have ye, Sassenach?"

"You know I haven't."

He nodded.

"I have. For treason."

"Yes? And what happened?"

He ran a hand through his damp hair, considering.

"They made me stand up, and asked my name. I gave it, the judge muttered to his friend for a bit, and then he said, 'Condemned. Imprisonment for life. Put him in irons.' And they took me out to the courtyard and had a blacksmith hammer fetters onto my wrists. The next day we began walking to Ardsmuir."

"They made you *walk* there? From Inverness?"

"I wasna in any great hurry, Sassenach."

I took a deep breath, trying to stem the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"I see. Well … but surely—wouldn't m-murder"—I could just about say it without stammering, but not quite, yet—"be a matter for a jury trial?"

"It might, and certainly I shall insist upon it—if things go so far. Mr. Brown seems to think they may; he's telling everyone in the taproom the story, making us out to be monsters of depravity.

Which I must say is no great feat," he added ruefully, "considering the circumstances."

I pressed my lips tight together, to avoid giving a hasty answer. I knew he knew that I had had no choice—he knew that I knew he had had nothing to do with Malva in the first place—but I could not help but feel a sense of blame in both directions, for this desperate muddle in which we found ourselves. Both for what had happened afterward, and for Malva's death itself—though God knew I would give anything to have her alive again.

He was right about Brown, I realized. Cold and wet, I'd paid little attention to the noises from the taproom below, but I could hear Brown's voice, echoing up the chimney, and from the random words that came through, it was apparent that he was doing exactly what Jamie said—blackening our characters, making it out that he and his Committee of Safety had undertaken the ignoble but necessary job of apprehending us and committing us to justice. And, just incidentally, carefully prejudicing any potential jury members by making sure the story spread abroad in all its scandalous detail.

"Is there anything to be done?" I asked, having listened to as much of this nonsense as I could stomach.

He nodded, and pulled a clean shirt from his saddlebag.

"Go down for supper, and look as little like depraved murderers as possible, *a nighean.*"

"Right," I said, and with a sigh, withdrew the ribbon-trimmed cap I had packed.

* * *

I shouldn't have been surprised. I had lived long enough to have a fairly cynical view of human nature—and lived long enough in this time to know how directly public opinion expressed itself. And yet I was still shocked, when the first stone hit me in the thigh.

We were some distance south of Hillsboro. The weather continued wet, the roads muddy, and the travel difficult. I think Richard Brown would have been pleased to relinquish us to the sheriff of Rowan county—if such a person had been available. The office, he was informed, was currently unfilled, the last occupant having decamped hurriedly overnight and no one yet found willing to replace him.

A matter of politics, I gathered, the recent sheriff having leaned toward independency, whilst the majority of persons in the county were still strongly Loyalist. I didn't learn the specifics of the incident that had triggered the recent sheriff's hasty departure, but the taverns and inns near Hillsboro were buzzing like hornets' nests in the wake of it.

The Circuit Court had ceased to meet some months before, Brown was informed, the justices who attended it feeling it too dangerous to appear in the present unsettled state of things. The sole justice of the peace he was able to discover felt similarly, and declined point-blank to take custody of us, informing Brown that it was more than his life was worth, to be involved in anything even faintly controversial at the moment.

"But it's nothing to do with politics!" Brown had shouted at him, frustrated. "It's murder, for God's sake—black murder!"

"Anything and everything's political these days, sir," the JP, one Harvey Mickelgrass, informed him sadly, shaking his head. "I should not venture to address even a case of drunk and disorderly, for fear of having my house pulled down around my ears and my wife left widowed. The sheriff attempted to sell his office, but could find no one willing to purchase it. No, sir—you will have to go elsewhere."

Brown would by no means take us to Cross Creek or Campbelton, where Jocasta Cameron's influence was strong, and where the local justice was her good friend, Farquard Campbell. And so we headed south, toward Wilmington.

Brown's men were disedified; they had expected a simple lynching and house-burning, perhaps the odd bit of looting—not this long-drawn-out and tedious plodding from place to place. Their spirits were further lowered when Ezra, who had been clinging to his horse in a dogged daze of fever, fell suddenly into the road and was picked up dead.

I didn't ask to examine the body—and wouldn't have been given leave in any case—but I rather thought from the lolling looks of him that he had simply lost consciousness, tumbled off, and broken his neck.

Not a few of the others cast looks of open fear toward me in the wake of this occurrence, though, and their sense of enthusiasm for the venture diminished visibly.

Richard Brown was not deterred; he would, I was sure, have shot us without mercy long since, had it not been for Tom Christie, silent and gray as the morning fog on the roads. He said little, and that little confined to necessities. I should have thought him moving mechanically, in the numb haze of grief—had I not turned one evening as we camped by the road, to see his eyes fixed upon me, with a look of such naked anguish in them that I glanced hastily away, only to see Jamie, sitting beside me, watching Tom Christie with a very thoughtful expression.

For the most part, though, he kept his face impassive—what could be seen of it, under the shade of his leather slouch hat. And Richard Brown, prevented by Christie's presence from doing us active harm, took every opportunity to spread his version of the tale of Malva's murder—perhaps as much to harrow Tom Christie in the hearing of it, over and over again, as for its effect on our reputations.

At any rate, I should not have been surprised when they stoned us, in a small, nameless hamlet south of Hillsboro—but I was. A young boy had seen us on the road, stared as we rode by—then vanished like a fox, scampering down a bank with the news. And ten minutes later, we rode around a bend in the road and into a fusillade of stones and shrieks.

One struck my mare on the shoulder and she shied violently. I kept my seat narrowly, but was off-balance; another hit me in the thigh, and another high in the chest, knocking the breath from me, and when one more bounced painfully off my head, I lost my grip on the reins, and as the horse, panicked, curvetted and spun, I flew off, landing on the ground with a bone-shaking thud.

I should have been terrified; in fact, I was furious. The stone that had hit me in the head had glanced off—thanks to the thickness of my hair and the cap I wore—but with the infuriating sting of a slap or a pinch, rather than true impact. I was on my feet by reflex, staggering, but caught sight of a jeering boy on the bank above me, hooting and dancing in triumph. I lunged, caught him by the foot and jerked.

He yelped, slipped, and fell on top of me. We crashed to the ground together, and rolled in a tangle of skirts and cloak. I was older, heavier, and completely berserk. All the fear, misery, and uncertainty of the last weeks came to an instant boil, and I punched his sneering face, twice, as hard as I could. I felt something crack in my hand, and pain shot up my arm.

He bellowed, and wriggled to escape—he was smaller than I was, but strong with panic. I struggled to keep a grip on him, got him by the hair—he struck out at me, flailing, and knocked off my cap, getting one hand in my hair and yanking hard.

The pain reignited my fury and I jammed a knee into him, anywhere I could, again, and once more, blindly seeking his soft parts. His mouth opened in a soundless "O" and his eyes bulged; his fingers relaxed and let go of my hair, and I reared up over him and slapped him as hard as I possibly could.

A big rock struck my shoulder with a numbing blow and I was knocked sideways by the impact. I tried to hit him again, but couldn't lift my arm. Panting and sobbing, he writhed free of my cloak and scrambled away on hands and knees, nose bleeding. I whirled on my knees to look after him, and looked straight into the eyes of a young man, his face intent and blazing with excitement, rock at the ready.

It hit me in the cheekbone and I swayed, my vision gone blurry. Then something very large hit me from behind, and I found myself flat on my face, pressed into the ground, the weight of a body on top of mine. It was Jamie; I could tell by the breathless "Holy Mother." His body jerked as the stones hit him; I could hear the horrifying thud of them into his flesh.

There was a lot of shouting going on. I heard Tom Christie's hoarse voice, then the firing of a single shot. More yelling, but of a different character. One or two soft thumps, stones striking earth nearby, a last grunt from Jamie as one slammed into him.

We lay pressed flat for a few moments, and I became aware of the uncomfortably spiky plant squashed under my cheek, the scent of its leaves harsh and bitter in my nose.

Then Jamie sat up, slowly, drawing in his breath with a catch, and I rose in turn on a shaky arm, nearly falling. My cheek was puffed and my hand and shoulder throbbed, but I had no attention to spare for that.

“Are you all right?” Jamie had got halfway to his feet, then sat down again, suddenly. He was pale, and a trickle of blood ran down the side of his face from a cut in his scalp, but he nodded, a hand pressed to his side.

“Aye, fine,” he said, but with a breathlessness that told me he likely had cracked ribs. “Ye’re all right, Sassenach?”

“Fine.” I managed to get to my feet, trembling. Brown’s men were scattered, some chasing the horses who had fled in the melee, others cursing, gathering up scattered bits of belongings from the road. Tom Christie was vomiting into the bushes by the road. Richard Brown stood under a tree, watching, his face white. He glanced at me sharply, then away.

We stopped at no more taverns on the way.

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A MOONLICHT FLICHT

“When ye go to hit someone, Sassenach, ye want to do it in the soft parts. Faces have too many bones. And then there’s the teeth to be thinkin’ of.”

Jamie spread her fingers, gently pressing the scraped, swollen knuckles, and air hissed between her own teeth.

“Thanks so much for the advice. And you’ve broken your hand *how* many times, hitting people?”

He wanted to laugh; the vision of her pounding that wee boy in a fury of berserk rage, hair flying in the wind and a look of blood in her eye, was one he would treasure. He didn’t, though.

“Your hand’s not broken, *a nighean.*” He curled her fingers, cupping her loose fist with both of his.

“How would you know?” she snapped. “*I’m* the doctor here.”

He stopped trying to hide his smile.

“If it were broken,” he said, “ye’d be white and puking, not red-faced and crankit.”

“Crankit, my arse!” She pulled her hand free, glaring at him as she nursed it against her bosom. She was in fact only slightly flushed, and most attractive, with her hair curling out in a wild mass round her head. One of Brown’s men had picked up her fallen cap after the attack, timidly offering it to her. Enraged, she had snatched it from him and stuffed it violently into a saddlebag.

“Are ye hungry, lass?”

“Yes,” she admitted grudgingly, as aware as he was that folk with broken bones generally had little appetite immediately, though they ate amazingly, once the pain had backed a bit.

He rummaged in the saddlebag, blessing Mrs. Bug as he came out with a handful of dried apricots and a large wrapped wedge of goat’s cheese. Brown’s men were cooking something over their fire, but he and Claire had not touched any food but their own, not since the first night.

How much longer might this farce go on? he wondered, breaking off a bit of cheese and handing it to his wife. They had food for perhaps a week, with care. Long enough, maybe, to reach the coast, and the weather held good. And what then?

It had been plain to him from the first that Brown had no plan, and was attempting to deal with a situation that had been out of his control since the first moment. Brown had ambition, greed, and a respectable sense of revenge, but almost no capacity of forethought, that much was clear.

Now, here he was, saddled with the two of them, forced to travel on and on, the unwelcome responsibility dragging like a worn-out shoe tied to a dog’s tail. And Brown the hindered dog, snarling and turning in circles, snapping at the thing that hampered him, and biting his own tail in consequence. Half his men had been wounded by the flung stones. Jamie thoughtfully touched a large, painful bruise on the point of his elbow.

He himself had had no choice; now Brown hadn’t, either. His men were growing restive; they had crops to tend, and hadn’t bargained for what they must see now as a fool’s errand.

It would be a simple matter to escape by himself. But then what? He could not leave Claire in Brown’s hands, and even were he able to get her safe away, they could not return to the Ridge with matters as they were; to do so would be to find themselves straight back in the pot.

He sighed, then caught his breath and let it out gingerly. He didn’t think his ribs were cracked, but they hurt.

“Ye’ve a bit of ointment, I expect?” he said, nodding at the bag that held her bits of medicine.

"Yes, of course." She swallowed her bite of cheese, reaching for the bag. "I'll put some on that cut on your head."

He let her do that, but then insisted upon anointing her hand in turn. She objected, insisting that she was perfectly fine, needed no such thing, they should save the ointment in case of future need—and yet she let him take her hand and smooth the sweet-smelling cream into her knuckles, the small fine bones of her hand hard under his fingers.

She so hated being helpless in any way—but the armor of righteous fury was wearing off, and while she kept a fierce face for Brown and the rest, he knew she was afraid. Not without reason, either.

Brown was uneasy, unable to settle. He moved to and fro, talking aimlessly with one man or another, needlessly checking the hobbled horses, pouring a cup of chicory coffee and holding it undrunk until it grew cold, then flinging it into the weeds. And all the time, his restless gaze returned to them.

Brown was hasty, impetuous, and half-baked. He was not entirely stupid, Jamie thought. And clearly he had realized that his strategy of spreading gossip and scandal concerning his prisoners in order to endanger them had severe defects, so long as he was himself obliged to continue in close proximity to said prisoners.

Their simple meal finished, Jamie lay down, carefully, and Claire curled herself into him spoonwise, wanting comfort.

Fighting was an exhausting business, and so was fear; she was asleep in moments. Jamie felt the pull of sleep, but would not yield to it yet. He occupied himself instead in reciting some of the poems Brianna had told him—he quite liked the one about the silversmith in Boston, riding to spread the alarm to Lexington, which he considered a handsome piece.

The company was beginning to settle for the night. Brown was still a-fidget, sitting staring darkly at the ground, then leaping to his feet to stride up and down. By contrast, Christie had barely stirred, though he made no move to go to bed. He sat on a rock, his supper barely touched.

A flicker of movement near Christie's boot; a wee small mouse, making feints toward the neglected plate that sat on the ground, filled with bounty.

It had occurred to Jamie a couple of days before, in the vague way that one recognizes a fact unconsciously known for some time, that Tom Christie was in love with his wife.

Poor bugger, he thought. Surely Christie did not believe that Claire had had aught to do with the death of his daughter; if so, he would not be here. Did he think that Jamie, though …?

He lay in the shelter of the darkness, watching the fire play across Christie's haggard features, his eyes half-hooded, giving no hint of his thoughts. There were men who could be read like books; Tom Christie wasn't one of them. But if ever he had seen a man being eaten alive before his eyes …

Was it the fate of his daughter, alone—or also the desperate need of a woman? He'd seen that need before, that gnawing at the soul, and knew it personally. Or *did* Christie think that Claire had killed wee Malva, or been in some way involved? There would be a quandary for an honorable man.

The need of a woman … the thought brought him back to the moment, and the awareness that the sounds he had been listening for in the wood behind him were now there. He had known for the past two days that they were followed, but last night they had camped in an open meadow, with no cover at all.

Moving slowly, but with no attempt at furtiveness, he rose, covered Claire with his cloak, and stepped into the wood, like one called by nature.

The moon was pale and hunchbacked and there was little light beneath the trees. He closed his eyes to damp the fire shadow and opened them again to the dark world, that place of shapes that lacked dimension and air that held spirits.

It was no spirit that stepped out from behind the blur of a pine tree, though.

"Blessed Michael defend us," he said softly.

"The blessed host of angels and archangels be with ye, Uncle," said Ian, in the same soft tone. "Though I am thinking that a few thrones and dominations wouldna come amiss, either."

"Well, I wouldna argue, if Divine Intervention chose to take a hand," Jamie said, heartened most amazingly by his nephew's presence. "I'm sure I've no notion how else we shall escape this foolish coil."

Ian grunted at that; Jamie saw his nephew's head turn, checking the faint glow of the camp. Without discussion, they moved further into the wood.

"I canna be gone for long, without they come after me," he said. "First, then—is all well wi' the Ridge?"

Ian lifted a shoulder.

"There's talk," he said, the tone of his voice indicating that "talk" covered everything from auld wives' gossip to the sort of insult that must be settled by violence. "No one killed yet, though. What shall I do, Uncle Jamie?"

"Richard Brown. He's thinking, and God only kens what *that* will lead to."

"He thinks too much; such men are dangerous," Ian said, and laughed. Jamie, who had never known his nephew to read a book willingly, gave him a look of disbelief, but dismissed questions in favor of the pressing concerns of the moment.

"Aye, he is," he said dryly. "He's been spreading the story in pothouses and inns as we go—at a guess, in hopes of rousing public indignation to the point that some poor fool of a constable can be pushed into taking us off his hands, or better yet, that a mob might be stirred up to seize us and hang us out of hand, thus resolving his difficulty."

"Oh, aye? Well, if that's what he had in mind, Uncle, it's working. Ye wouldna countenance some of the things I've heard, following in your tracks."

"I know." Jamie stretched gently, easing his painful ribs. It was only the mercy of God that it hadn't been worse—that, and Claire's rage, which had interrupted the attack, as everyone stopped to watch the engrossing spectacle of her hatcheling her assailant like a bundle of flax.

"It's come home to him, though, that if ye mean to pin a target on someone, it's wise to step away smartly thereafter. He's thinking, as I say. Should he go off, then, or send someone …"

"I'll follow, aye, and see what's to do."

He sensed rather than saw Ian's nod; they stood in black shadow, the faint haze of moonlight like fog in the space between the trees. The lad moved, as though to go, then hesitated.

"Ye're sure, Uncle, as it wouldna be better to wait a bit, then creep away? There's nay bracken, but there's decent cover in the hills nearby; we could be safe hidden by dawn."

It was a great temptation. He felt the pull of the dark wild forest, above all, the lure of freedom. If he could but walk away into the greenwood, and stay there … But he shook his head.

"It wouldna do, Ian," he said, though he let regret show in his voice. "We should be fugitives, then—and doubtless wi' a price on our heads. With the countryside already roused against us—broadsides, posted bills? The public would do Brown's work for him, promptly. And then, to run would seem an admission of guilt, forbye."

Ian sighed, but nodded agreement.

"Well, then," he said. He stepped forward and embraced Jamie, squeezing hard for an instant, and then was gone.

Jamie let out a long, tentative breath against the pain of his injured ribs.

"God go with ye, Ian," he said to the dark, and turned back.

When he lay down again beside his wife, the camp was silent. The men lay like logs, wrapped in their blankets. Two figures, though, remained by the embers of the dying fire: Richard Brown and Thomas Christie, each alone on a rock with his thoughts.

Ought he to wake Claire, tell her? He considered for a moment, his cheek against the warm softness of her hair, and reluctantly decided no. It might hearten her a little to know of Ian's presence—but he dare not risk rousing Brown's suspicion; and if Brown were to perceive by any change in Claire's mood or face that something had happened … no, best not. At least not yet.

He glanced along the ground at Christie’s feet, and saw the faint pale scurry of movement in the dark; the mouse had brought friends to share her feast.

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FORTY-SIX BEANS TO THE GOOD

At dawn, Richard Brown was gone. The rest of the men seemed grim, but resigned, and under the command of a squatty, morose sort of fellow named Oakes, we resumed our push south.

Something had changed in the night; Jamie had lost a little of the tension that had infused him since our departure from the Ridge. Stiff, sore, and disheartened as I was, I found this change some comfort, though wondering what had caused it. Was it the same thing that had caused Richard Brown to leave on his mysterious errand?

Jamie said nothing, though, beyond inquiring after my hand—which was tender, and so stiff that I couldn't immediately flex my fingers. He continued to keep a watchful eye on our companions, but the lessening of tension had affected them, too; I began to lose my fear that they might suddenly lose patience and string us up, Tom Christie's dour presence notwithstanding.

As though in accord with this more relaxed atmosphere, the weather suddenly cleared, which heartened everyone further. It would have been stretching things to say that there was any sense of rapprochement, but without Richard Brown's constant malevolence, the other men at least became occasionally civil. And as it always did, the tedium and hardships of travel wore everyone down, so that we rolled down the rutted roads like a pack of marbles, occasionally caroming off one another, dusty, silent, and united in exhaustion, if nothing else, by the end of each day.

This neutral state of affairs changed abruptly in Brunswick. For a day or two before, Oakes had been plainly anticipating something, and when we reached the first houses, I could see him beginning to draw great breaths of relief.

It was therefore no surprise when we stopped to refresh ourselves at a pothouse on the edge of the tiny, half-abandoned settlement, to find Richard Brown awaiting us. It *was* a surprise when, without more than a murmured word from Brown, Oakes and two others suddenly seized Jamie, knocking the cup of water from his hand and slamming him against the wall of the building.

I dropped my own cup and flung myself toward them, but Richard Brown grabbed my arm in a viselike grip and dragged me toward the horses.

“Let go! What are you doing? Let go, I say!” I kicked him, and had a good go at scratching out his eyes, but he got hold of both my wrists, and shouted for one of the other men to help. Between the two of them, they got me—still screaming at the top of my lungs—on a horse in front of another of Brown’s men. There was a deal of shouting from Jamie’s direction, and general hubbub, as a few people came out of the pothouse, staring. None of them seemed disposed to interfere with a large group of armed men, though.

Tom Christie was shouting protests; I glimpsed him hammering on the back of one man, but to no avail. The man behind me wrapped an arm round my middle and jerked it tight, knocking out what breath I had left.

Then we were thundering down the road, Brunswick—and Jamie—disappearing in the dust.

My furious protests, demands, and questions brought no response, of course, beyond an order to be quiet, this accompanied by another warning squeeze of the restraining arm around me.

Shaking with rage and terror, I subsided, and at that point, saw that Tom Christie was still with us, looking shaken and disturbed.

“Tom!” I shouted. “Tom, go back! Don’t let them kill him! Please!”

He looked in my direction, startled, rose in his stirrups, and looked back toward Brunswick, then turned toward Richard Brown, shouting something.

Brown shook his head, reined his mount in so that Christie could come up alongside, and leaning over, yelled something at him that must have passed for explanation. Christie clearly didn't like the situation, but after a few impassioned exchanges, he subsided, scowling, and dropped back. He pulled his horse's head aside and circled back to come within speaking distance of me.

"They will not kill nor harm him," he said, raising his voice to be heard over the rumble of hooves and rattle of harness. "Brown's word of honor upon it, he says."

"And you *believe* him, for God's sake?"

He looked disconcerted at that, glanced again at Brown, who had spurred up to ride ahead, then back at Brunswick. Indecision played across his features, but then his lips firmed and he shook his head.

"It will be all right," he said. But he would not meet my eyes, and in spite of my continued entreaties to him to go back, to stop them, he slackened his pace, falling back so that I couldn't see him anymore.

My throat was raw from screaming, and my stomach hurt, bruised and clenched in a knot of fear. Our speed had slowed, now that we had left Brunswick behind, and I concentrated on breathing; I wouldn't speak until I was sure I could do so without my voice trembling.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked finally. I sat stiff in the saddle, enduring an unwanted intimacy with the man behind me.

"New Bern," he said, with a note of grim satisfaction. "And then, thank God, we'll be shut of you at last."

* * *

The journey to New Bern passed in a blur of fear, agitation, and physical discomfort. While I did wonder what was about to happen to me, all such speculations were drowned by my anxiety about Jamie.

Tom Christie was plainly my only hope of finding out anything, but he avoided me, keeping his distance—and I found *that* as alarming as anything else. He was clearly troubled, even more so than he had been since Malva's death, but he no longer bore a look of dull suffering; he was actively agitated. I was terribly afraid that he knew or suspected Jamie was dead, but would not admit it—either to me, or to himself.

All of the men clearly shared my captor's urge to be rid of me as soon as possible; we stopped only briefly, when absolutely necessary for the horses to rest. I was offered food, but could not eat. By the time we reached New Bern, I was completely drained from the sheer physical exertion of the ride, but much more so from the constant strain of apprehension.

Most of the men remained at a tavern on the outskirts of the town; Brown and one of the other men took me through the streets, accompanied by a silent Tom Christie, arriving at last at a large house of whitewashed brick. The home, as Brown informed me with a sense of lively pleasure, of Sheriff Tolliver—also, the town gaol.

The sheriff, a darkly handsome sort, viewed me with a sort of interested speculation, mingled with a growing disgust as he heard the crime of which I was accused. I made no attempt at rebuttal or defense; the room was going in and out of focus, and all my attention was required to keep my knees from giving way.

I barely heard most of the exchange between Brown and the sheriff. At the last, though, just before I was led away into the house, I found Tom Christie suddenly beside me.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said, very low. "Believe me, he is safe. I would not have his death on my conscience—nor yours." He was looking at me directly, for the first time in … days? weeks? … and I found the intensity of his gray eyes both disconcerting and oddly comforting.

"Trust in God," he whispered. "He will deliver the righteous out of all his dangers." And with a sudden hard and unexpected squeeze of my hand, he was gone.

* * *

As eighteenth-century gaols went, it could have been worse. The women's quarters consisted of a small room at the back of the sheriff's house, which had likely been a storeroom of sorts originally. The walls were roughly plastered, though some escape-minded former occupant had chipped away a large chunk of the plaster, before discovering that beneath it lay a layer of lath, and beneath *that* an impenetrable wall of baked-clay brick, which confronted me at once with its bland impenetrability when the door was opened.

There was no window, but an oil dip burned on a ledge by the door, casting a faint circle of light that illuminated the daunting bare patch of brick, but left the corners of the room in deep shadow. I couldn't see the night-soil bucket, but knew there was one; the thick, acrid tang of it stung my nose, and I automatically began breathing through my mouth as the sheriff pushed me into the room.

The door closed firmly behind me, and a key grated in the lock.

There was a single, narrow bedstead in the shadows, occupied by a large lump under a threadbare blanket. The lump took its time, but eventually stirred and sat up, resolving itself into a small, plump woman, capless and frowsy with sleep, who sat blinking at me like a dormouse.

"Ermp," she said, and rubbed her eyes with her fists, like a small child.

"So sorry to disturb you," I said politely. My heart had slowed a bit by now, though I was still shaking and short of breath. I pressed my hands flat against the door to stop them trembling.

"Think nothing of it," she said, and yawned suddenly, like a hippopotamus, showing me a set of worn but serviceable molars. Blinking and smacking her lips absently, she reached down beside her, pulled out a battered pair of spectacles, and set them firmly on her nose.

Her eyes were blue, and hugely magnified by the lenses, enormous with curiosity.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Claire Fraser," I said, watching her narrowly, in case she too might already have heard all about my supposed crime. The bruise on my breast left by the stone that had struck me was still visible, beginning to yellow above the edge of my gown.

"Oh?" She squinted, as though trying to place me, but evidently failed, for she shrugged away the effort. "Got any money?"

"A bit." Jamie had forced me to take almost all the money—not a great deal, but there was a small weight of coin at the bottom of each of the pockets tied around my waist, and a couple of proclamation notes tucked inside my stays.

The woman was a good deal shorter than I, and pillowy in aspect, with large, drooping breasts and several comfortable rolls corrugating her uncorseted middle; she was in her shift, with her gown and stays hung from a nail in the wall. She seemed harmless—and I began to breathe a little more easily, beginning to grasp the fact that at least I was safe for the moment, no longer in danger of sudden, random violence.

The other prisoner made no offensive moves toward me, but hopped down off the bed, bare feet thumping softly in what I realized now was a matted layer of moldy straw.

"Well, call the old bizzom and send for some Holland, then, why don't you?" she suggested cheerfully.

"The . . who?"

Instead of answering, she trundled to the door and banged on it, shouting, "Mrs. Tolliver! Mrs. Tolliver!"

The door opened almost immediately, revealing a tall, thin woman, looking like an annoyed stork.

"Really, Mrs. Ferguson," she said. "You are the most dreadful nuisance. I was just coming to pay my respects to Mrs. Fraser, in any case." She turned her back on Mrs. Ferguson with magisterial dignity and inclined her head a bare inch toward me.

"Mrs. Fraser. I am Mrs. Tolliver."

I had a split second in which to decide how to react, and chose the prudent—if galling—course of genteel submission, bowing to her as though she were the Governor's lady.

"Mrs. Tolliver," I murmured, careful not to meet her eyes. "How kind of you."

She twitched, sharp-eyed, like a bird spotting the stealthy progress of a worm through the grass—but I had firm control of my features by now, and she relaxed, detecting no sarcasm.

"You are welcome," she said with chilly courtesy. "I am to see to your welfare, and acquaint you with our custom. You will receive one meal each day, unless you wish to send to the ordinary for more—at your own expense. I will bring you a basin for washing once each day. You'll carry your own slops. And—"

"Oh, stuff your custom, Maisie," said Mrs. Ferguson, butting into Mrs. Tolliver's set speech with the comfortable assumption of long acquaintance. "She's got some money. Fetch us a bottle of geneva, there's a good girl, and then if you must, you can tell her what's what."

Mrs. Tolliver's narrow face tightened in disapproval, but her eyes twitched toward me, bright in the dim light of the rush dip. I ventured a hesitant gesture toward my pocket, and her lower lip sucked in. She glanced over her shoulder, then took a quick step toward me.

"A shilling, then," she whispered, hand held open between us. I dropped the coin into her palm, and it disappeared at once beneath her apron.

"You've missed supper," she announced in her normal disapproving tones, stepping backward. "However, as you've just come, I shall make an allowance and bring you something."

"How kind of you," I said again.

The door closed firmly behind her, shutting out light and air, and the key turned in the lock.

The sound of it set off a tiny spark of panic, and I stamped on it hard. I felt like a dried skin, stuffed to the eyeballs with the tinder of fear, uncertainty, and loss. It would take no more than a spark to ignite that and burn me to ashes—and neither I nor Jamie could afford that.

"She drinks?" I asked, turning back to my new roommate with an assumption of coolness.

"Do you know anyone who doesn't, given the chance?" Mrs. Ferguson asked reasonably. She scratched her ribs. "Fraser, she said. You aren't the—"

"I am," I said, rather rudely. "I don't want to talk about it."

Her eyebrows shot up, but she nodded equably.

"Just as you like," she said. "Any good at cards?"

"Loo or whist?" I asked warily.

"Know a game called brag?"

"No." Jamie and Brianna played it now and then, but I had never acquainted myself with the rules.

"That's all right; I'll teach you." Reaching under the mattress, she pulled out a rather limp deck of pasteboards and fanned them expertly, waving them gently under her nose as she smiled at me.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You're in here for cheating at cards?"

"Cheat? Me? Not a bit of it," she said, evidently unoffended. "Forgery."

Rather to my own surprise, I laughed. I was still feeling shaky, but Mrs. Ferguson was definitely proving a welcome distraction.

"How long have you been in here?" I asked.

She scratched at her head, realized that she wasn't wearing a cap, and turned to pull one out of the rumpled bedding.

"Oh—a month, just about." Putting on the crumpled cap, she nodded at the doorpost beside me. Turning to look, I saw that it was crosshatched with dozens of small nicks, some old and dark with dirt, some freshly scratched, showing raw yellow wood. The sight of the marks made my stomach plunge again, but I took a deep breath and turned my back on them.

"Have you had a trial yet?"

She shook her head, light glinting off her spectacles.

"No, praise God. I hear from Maisie that the court's shut down; all the justices gone into hiding. Hasn't been anybody tried in the last two months."

This was not good news. Evidently the thought showed on my face, for she leaned forward and patted my arm sympathetically.

"I wouldn't be in a hurry, dearie. Not in your shoes, I wouldn't. If they've not tried you, they can't hang you. And while I have met those as say the waiting's like to kill them, I've not seen anybody die of it. And I *have* seen them die at the end of a rope. Nasty business, that is."

She spoke almost negligently, but her own hand rose, as though by itself, and touched the soft white flesh of her neck. She swallowed, the tiny bump of her Adam's apple bobbing.

I swallowed, too, an unpleasantly constricted feeling in my own throat.

"But I'm innocent," I said, wondering even as I said it how I could sound so uncertain.

" 'Course you are," she said stoutly, giving my arm a squeeze. "You stick to it, dearie—don't you let 'em bully-whack you into admitting the least little thing!"

"I won't," I assured her dryly.

"One of these days, a mob's like to come *here,*" she said, nodding. "String up the sheriff, if he don't look sharp. He's not popular, Tolliver."

"I can't imagine why not—a charming fellow like that." I wasn't sure how I felt about the prospect of a mob storming the house. Stringing up Sheriff Tolliver was all very well, so far as that went—but with the memory of the hostile crowds in Salisbury and Hillsboro fresh in mind, I wasn't sure at all that they'd stop with the sheriff. Dying at the hands of a lynch mob wasn't at all preferable to the slower sort of judicial murder I likely faced. Though I supposed there was always a possibility of escaping in the riot.

And go where, if you did? I wondered.

With no good answer to that question, I shoved it to the back of my mind and turned my attention back to Mrs. Ferguson, who was still holding out the cards invitingly.

"All right," I said. "But not for money."

"Oh, no," Mrs. Ferguson assured me. "Perish the thought. But we must have some sort of stake to make it interesting. We'll play for beans, shall we?" She set down the cards, and digging under the pillow, withdrew a small pouch, from which she poured a handful of small white beans.

"Splendid," I said. "And when we're finished, we'll plant them, shall we, and hope for a giant beanstalk to spring up and burst through the roof, so we can escape up it."

She burst into giggles at that, which somehow made me feel very slightly better.

"From your mouth to God's ear, dearie!" she said. "I'll deal first, shall I?"

* * *

Brag appeared to be a form of poker. And while I had lived with a cardsharp long enough to know one when I saw one, Mrs. Ferguson appeared to be playing honestly—for the moment. I was forty-six beans to the good, by the time Mrs. Tolliver returned.

The door opened without ceremony, and she came in, holding a three-legged stool and a chunk of bread. This latter appeared to be both my supper and her ostensible excuse for visiting the cell, for she shoved it at me with a loud, "This will have to keep you 'til tomorrow, Mrs. Fraser!"

"Thank you," I said mildly. It was fresh, and appeared to have been hastily dragged through bacon drippings, in lieu of butter. I bit into it without hesitation, having sufficiently recovered from shock now as to feel very hungry indeed.

Mrs. Tolliver, glancing over her shoulder to be sure the coast was clear, shut the door quietly, put down the stool, and drew a squat bottle from her pocket, blue glass and filled with some clear liquid.

She pulled the cork from it, tilted it, and drank deeply, her long, lean throat moving convulsively.

Mrs. Ferguson said nothing, but watched the process with a sort of analytic attention, light glinting from her spectacles, as though comparing Mrs. Tolliver's behavior with that of previous occasions.

Mrs. Tolliver lowered the bottle and stood for a moment grasping it, then handed it abruptly to me and sat down suddenly on the stool, breathing heavily.

I wiped the neck of the bottle as inconspicuously as possible on my sleeve, then took a token sip. It was gin, all right—heavily flavored with juniper berries to hide the poor quality, but powerfully alcoholic.

Mrs. Ferguson took a healthy guzzle in her turn, and so we continued, passing the bottle from hand to hand, exchanging small cordialities with it. Her first thirst slaked, Mrs. Tolliver became almost affable, her frosty manner thawing substantially. Even so, I waited until the bottle was nearly empty before asking the question foremost in my mind.

"Mrs. Tolliver, the men who brought me—did you happen to hear them say anything about my husband?"

She put a fist to her mouth to stifle a belch.

"Say anything?"

"About where he is," I amended.

She blinked a little, looking blank.

"I didn't hear," she said. "But I suppose they may have told Tolly."

Mrs. Ferguson handed down the bottle to her—we were sitting side by side on the bed, that being the only place to sit in the small room—nearly falling off the bed in the process.

"S'pose you could ask him, could you, Maisie?" she said.

An uneasy look came into Mrs. Tolliver's eyes, glazed as they were.

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "He doesn't talk to me about such things. Not my business."

I exchanged a glance with Mrs. Ferguson, and she shook her head slightly; best not to press the matter now.

Worried as I was, I found it difficult to abandon the subject, but plainly there was nothing to be done. I gathered what shreds of patience I had, estimating how many bottles of gin I could afford before my money ran out—and what I might accomplish with them.

* * *

I lay still that night, breathing the damp, thick air with its scents of mold and urine. I could smell Sadie Ferguson next to me, too: a faint miasma of stale sweat, overlaid with a strong perfume of gin. I tried to close my eyes, but every time I did, small waves of claustrophobia washed over me; I could feel the sweating plaster walls draw closer, and gripped my fists in the cloth of the mattress ticking, to keep from throwing myself at the locked door. I had a nasty vision of myself, pounding and shrieking, my nails torn and bloody from clawing at the unyielding wood, my cries unheard in the darkness—and no one ever coming.

I thought it a distinct possibility. I had heard more from Mrs. Ferguson regarding Sheriff Tolliver's unpopularity. If he were to be attacked and dragged from his home by a mob—or to lose his nerve and run—the chances of him or his wife remembering the prisoners were remote.

A mob might find us—and kill us, in the madness of the moment. Or not find us, and fire the house. The storeroom was clay brick, but the adjoining kitchen was timber; damp or not, the place would burn like a torch, leaving nothing but that bloody brick wall standing.

I took an especially deep breath, smell notwithstanding, exhaled, and shut my eyes with decision.

Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. That had been one of Frank's favorite expressions, and by and large, a good sentiment.

Depends a bit on the day, though, doesn't it? I thought in his direction.

Does it? You tell me. The thought was there, vivid enough that I might have heard it—or only imagined it. If I had imagined it, though, I had imagined also a tone of dry amusement that was particularly Frank's.

Fine, I thought. *Reduced to having philosophical arguments with a ghost. It's been a worse day than I thought.*

Imagination or not, the thought had succeeded in wrenching my attention off the single-minded track of worry. I felt a sense of invitation—or temptation, perhaps. The urge to talk to him. The need to escape into conversation, even if one-sided … and imaginary.

No. I won't use you that way, I thought, a little sadly. *Not right that I should only think of you when I need distraction, and not for your own sake.*

And do you never think of me, for my own sake? The question floated in the darkness of my eyelids. I could see his face, quite clearly, the lines of it curved in humor, one dark eyebrow raised. I was dimly surprised; it had been so long since I thought of him in any focused way that I should have long since forgotten exactly what he looked like. But I hadn't.

And I suppose that's the answer to your question, then, I thought silently to him. *Good night, Frank.*

I turned onto my side, facing the door. I felt a little calmer now. I could just make out the outlines of the door, and being able to see it lessened that feeling of being buried alive.

I closed my eyes again, and tried to concentrate on the processes of my own body. That often helped, bringing me a sense of quiet, listening to the purling of blood through my vessels and the subterranean gurglings of organs all carrying peacefully on without the slightest need of my conscious direction. Rather like sitting in the garden, listening to the bees hum in their hives—

I stopped *that* thought in its tracks, feeling my heart jolt in memory, electric as a bee sting.

I thought quite fiercely about my heart, the physical organ, its thick soft chambers and delicate valves—but what I felt was a soreness there. There were hollow places in my heart.

Jamie. A gaping, echoing hollow, cold and deep as the crevasse of a glacier. Bree. Jemmy. Roger. And Malva, like a tiny, deep-drilled sore, an ulcer that wouldn't heal.

I had managed so far to ignore the rustlings and heavy breathings of my companion. I couldn't ignore the hand that brushed my neck, then slipped down my chest and rested lightly, cupped around my breast.

I stopped breathing. Then, very slowly, exhaled. Entirely without my intent, my breast settled into her cupped palm. I felt a touch on my back; a thumb, gently tracing the groove of my spine through my shift.

I understood the need of human comfort, the sheer hunger for touch. I had taken it, often, and given it, part of the fragile web of humanity, constantly torn, constantly made new. But there was that in Sadie Ferguson's touch that spoke of more than simple warmth, or the need of company in the dark.

I took hold of her hand, and lifting it from my breast, squeezed the fingers gently shut, and put it firmly away from me, folded back against her own bosom.

"No," I said softly.

She hesitated, moved her hips so that her body curved behind me, thighs warm and round against mine, offering encompassment and refuge.

"No one would know," she whispered, still hopeful. "I could make you forget—for a bit." Her hand stroked my hip, gentle, insinuating.

If she could, I thought wryly, I might be tempted. But that pathway was not one I could take.

"No," I said more firmly, and shifted, rolling onto my back, as far away as I could get—which was roughly an inch and a half. "I'm sorry—but no."

She was silent for a moment, then sighed heavily.

"Oh, well. Perhaps a bit later."

"No!"

The noises from the kitchen had ceased, and the house settled into silence. It wasn't the silence of the mountains, though, that cradle of boughs and whispering winds and the vast deep of the starry sky. It was the silence of a town, disturbed by smoke and the fogged dim glow of hearth and candle; filled with slumbering thoughts unleashed from waking reason, roaming and uneasy in the dark.

"Could I hold you?" she asked wistfully, and her fingers brushed my cheek. "Only that."

"No," I said again. But I reached for her hand, and held it. And so we fell asleep, hands chastely—and firmly—linked between us.

* * *

We were roused by what I thought at first was the wind, moaning in the chimney whose back bulged into our cubbyhole. The moaning grew louder, though, broke into a full-throated scream, then stopped abruptly.

“Ye gods and little fishes!” Sadie Ferguson sat up, eyes wide and blinking, groping for her spectacles. “What was that?”

“A woman in labor,” I said, having heard that particular pattern of sounds fairly often. The moaning was starting up again. “And *very* near her time.” I slid off the bed and shook my shoes, dislodging a small roach and a couple of silverfish who had taken shelter in the toes.

We sat for nearly an hour, listening to the alternate moaning and screaming.

“Shouldn’t it stop?” Sadie said, swallowing nervously. “Shouldn’t the child be birthed by now?”

“Perhaps,” I said absently. “Some babies take longer than others.” I had my ear pressed to the door, trying to make out what was going on on the other side. The woman, whoever she was, was in the kitchen, and no more than ten feet away from me. I heard Maisie Tolliver’s voice now and then, muffled and sounding doubtful. But for the most part, only the rhythmic panting, moaning, and screaming.

Another hour of it, and my nerves were becoming frayed. Sadie was on the bed, the pillow pressed down hard over her head, in hopes of blocking the noise.

Enough of this, I thought, and when next I heard Mrs. Tolliver’s voice, I banged on the door with the heel of my shoe, shouting, “Mrs. Tolliver!” as loudly as I could, to be heard over the noise.

She did hear me, and after a moment, the key grated in the lock and a wave of light and air fell into the cell. I was momentarily blinded by the daylight, but blinked and made out the shape of a woman on her hands and knees by the hearth, facing me. She was black, bathed in sweat, and, raising her head, howled like a wolf. Mrs. Tolliver started as though someone had run a pin into her from behind.

“Excuse me,” I said, pushing past her. She made no move to stop me, and I caught a strong blast of juniper-scented gin fumes as I brushed by her.

The black woman sank down on her elbows, panting, her uncovered rear in the air. Her belly hung like a ripe guava, pale in the sweat-soaked shift that clung to it.

I asked sharp questions in the brief interval before the next howl, and ascertained that this was her fourth child and that she had been laboring since her water had broken the night before. Mrs. Tolliver contributed the information that she was also a prisoner, and a slave. I might have guessed that, from the purplish weals on her back and buttocks.

Mrs. Tolliver was of little other use, swaying glassy-eyed over me, but had managed to provide a small pile of rags and a basin of water, which I used to mop the woman's sweating face. Sadie Ferguson poked her bespectacled nose cautiously out of the cell, but drew back hastily when the next howl broke forth.

It was a breech birth, which accounted for the difficulty, and the next quarter-hour was hair-raising for all concerned. At length, though, I eased a small baby into the world, feet first, slimy, motionless, and the most unearthly shade of pale blue.

"Oh," said Mrs. Tolliver, sounding disappointed. "It's dead."

"Good," said the mother, in a hoarse, deep voice, and closed her eyes.

"Damned if he is," I said, and turned the child hastily facedown, tapping its back. No movement, and I brought the sealed, waxy face to my own, covered nose and mouth with my own mouth, and sucked hard, then turned my head to spit away the mucus and fluid. Face slimy and the taste of silver in my mouth, I blew gently into him, paused, holding him, limp and slippery as a fresh fish, blew—and saw his eyes open, a deeper blue than his skin, vaguely interested.

He took a startled, gasping breath and I laughed, a sudden wellspring of joy bubbling up from my depths. The nightmare memory of another child, a flicker of life blinking out between my hand, faded away. This child was well and truly lit, burning like a candle with a soft, clear flame.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Tolliver, again. She leaned forward to look, and an enormous smile spread across her face. "Oh, oh!"

The baby started crying. I cut the cord, wrapped him in some of the rags, and with some reservation, handed him to Mrs. Tolliver, hoping she wouldn't drop him in the fire. Then I turned my attention to the mother, who was drinking thirstily from the basin, water spilling down her front and soaking the already wet shift further.

She lay back and allowed me to tend her, but without speaking, rolling her eyes occasionally toward the child with a brooding, hostile look.

I heard footsteps coming through the house, and the sheriff appeared, looking surprised.

"Oh, Tolly!" Mrs. Tolliver, smeared with birth fluids and reeking of gin, turned to him happily, holding out the baby to him. "Look, Tolly, it's alive!"

The sheriff looked quite taken aback, and his brow furrowed as he looked at his wife, but then he seemed to catch the scent of her happiness, above the gin. He leaned forward and touched the little bundle gently, his stern face relaxing.

"That's good, Maisie," he said. "Hallo, little fellow." He caught sight of me, then, kneeling on the hearth, doing my best to clean up with a rag and what was left of the water.

"Mrs. Fraser brought the child," Mrs. Tolliver explained eagerly. "It was laid catty-wumpus, but she brought it so cleverly, and made it breathe—we thought 'twas dead, it was so still, but it wasn't! Isn't that wonderful, Tolly?"

"Wonderful," the sheriff repeated a little bleakly. He gave me a hard look, then transferred the same look to the new mother, who gazed back with a sullen indifference. He beckoned me to my feet, then, and with a curt bow, gestured me back into the cell and shut the door.

Only then did I recall what it was he thought I'd done. Little wonder if my juxtaposition with a newborn child made him a trifle nervous, I supposed. I was wet and filthy, and the cell seemed particularly hot and airless. Nonetheless, the miracle of birth was still tingling through my synapses, and I sat down on the bed, still smiling, a wet rag in my hand.

Sadie was regarding me with respect, mingled with a slight revulsion.

“That’s the messiest business I ever did see,” she said. “Heavens above, is it always like that?”

“More or less. Haven’t you ever seen a child born? You’ve never had one yourself?” I asked curiously. She shook her head vigorously, and made the sign of the horns, which made me laugh, giddy as I was.

“Had I ever been disposed to let a man near me, the thought of *that* would dissuade me,” she assured me fervently.

“Oh, yes?” I said, belatedly recalling her overtures of the night before. It *wasn’t* merely comfort she’d been offering, then. “And what about *Mister* Ferguson?”

She gave me a demure look, blinking through her spectacles.

“Oh, he was a farmer—*much* older than I. Dead of the pleurisy, these five years gone.”

And totally fictitious, I was inclined to think. But a widow had a great deal more freedom than did a maid or a wife, and if ever I saw a woman capable of taking care of herself …

I had been paying no attention to the sounds in the kitchen, but at this point, there was a heavy crash and the sheriff’s voice, cursing. No sound of the child or Mrs. Tolliver.

“Taking the black bitch back to her quarters,” Sadie said, with such a hostile intonation that I glanced at her in amazement.

“Didn’t you know?” she said, seeing my surprise. “She’s killed her babies. They can hang her, now she’s borne this one.”

“Oh,” I said a little blankly. “No. I didn’t know.” The noises in the kitchen receded, and I sat staring at the rush dip, the sense of life still moving in my hands.

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A REASONABLY NEAT SCHEME

Water lapped just under Jamie's ear, the mere sound of it making him feel queasy. The reek of decaying mud and dead fish didn't help, nor did the dunt he'd taken when he fell against the wall.

He shifted, trying to find some position that would ease head, stomach, or both. They'd trussed him like a boiled fowl, but he managed with some effort to roll onto his side and bring his knees up, which helped a bit.

He was in a dilapidated boat shed of some sort; he'd seen it in the last of the twilight, when they'd brought him down to the shore—he'd thought at first they meant to drown him—and carried him inside, dropping him on the floor like a sack of flour.

"Hurry up, Ian," he muttered, shifting again, in increasing discomfort. "I'm a great deal too old for this sort of nonsense."

He could only hope his nephew had been close enough when Brown moved to have been able to follow, and to have some notion where he was now; certainly the lad would be looking. The shore where the shed stood was open, no cover, but there was plenty among the brush below Fort Johnston, standing on the headland a little way above him.

The back of his head throbbed dully, giving him a nasty taste in the back of the mouth, and a disquieting echo of the shattering headaches he used to suffer in the wake of an ax wound that had cracked his skull, many years before. He was shocked at how easily the recollection of those headaches came back; it had happened a lifetime ago, and he had thought even the memory of it dead and buried. His skull clearly had a much more vivid memory of its own, though, and was determined to make him sick by way of revenge for his forgetfulness.

The moon was up, and bright; the light shone soft through the cracks between the crude boards of the wall. Dim as it was, it seemed to shift, wavering in a disturbingly qualmish fashion, and he shut his eyes, concentrating grimly on what he might do to Richard Brown, and he got the man alone someday.

Where in the name of Michael and all the saints had he taken Claire, and why? Jamie's only comfort was that Tom Christie had gone with them. He was fairly sure that Christie wouldn't let them kill her—and if Jamie could find him, he would lead him to her.

A sound reached him above the nauseating lapping of the tide. Faint whistling—then singing. He could just make out the words, and smiled a little, in spite of everything. *"Marry me, marry me, minister—or else I'll be your priest, your priest—or else I'll be your priest."*

He shouted, though it hurt his head, and within a few moments, Ian, the dear wee lad, was beside him, cutting through the ropes. He rolled over, unable for a moment to make his cramped muscles work, then managed to get his hands under him and rise enough to vomit.

"All right, Uncle Jamie?" Ian sounded vaguely amused, damn him.

"I'll do. D'ye ken where Claire is?" He got to his feet, swaying, and was fumbling at his breeches; his fingers felt like sausages, and the broken one was throbbing, the pins and needles of returning circulation stabbing through the jagged ends of bone. All discomfort was forgotten for an instant, though, in the rush of overwhelming relief.

"Jesus, Uncle Jamie," Ian said, impressed. "Aye, I do. They've taken her to New Bern. There's a sheriff there that Forbes says might take her."

“Forbes?” He swung round in his astonishment, and nearly fell, saving himself with a hand on the creaking wood wall. “Neil Forbes?”

“The very same.” Ian caught him with a hand beneath his elbow to steady him; the flimsy board had cracked under his weight. “Brown went here and there and talked to this one and that—but it was Forbes he did business with at last, in Cross Creek.”

“Ye heard what they said?”

“I heard.” Ian’s voice was casual, but with an underlying excitement—and no little pride in his accomplishment.

Brown’s aim was simple at this point—to rid himself of the encumbrance the Frasers had become. He knew of Forbes and his relations with Jamie, owing to all the gossip after the tar incident in the summer of last year, and the confrontation at Mecklenberg in May. And so he offered to hand the two of them over to Forbes, for what use the lawyer might make of the situation.

“So he strode to and fro a bit, thinking—Forbes, I mean—they were in his warehouse, ken, by the river, and me hiding behind the barrels o’ tar. And then he laughs, as though he’s just thought of something clever.”

Forbes’s suggestion was that Brown’s men should take Jamie, suitably bound, to a small landing that he owned, near Brunswick. From there, he would be taken onto a ship headed for England, and thus safely removed from interference in the affairs of either Forbes or Brown—and, incidentally, rendered unable to defend his wife.

Claire, meanwhile, should be committed to the mercies of the law. If she were to be found guilty, well, that would be the end of her. If not, the scandal attendant upon a trial would both occupy the attention of anyone connected to her and destroy any influence they might have—thus leaving Fraser’s Ridge ripe for the pickings, and Neil Forbes a clear field toward claiming leadership of the Scottish Whigs in the colony.

Jamie listened to this in silence, torn between anger and a reluctant admiration.

“A reasonably neat scheme,” he said. He was feeling steadier now, the queasiness disappearing with the cleansing flow of anger through his blood.

"Oh, it gets better, Uncle," Ian assured him. "Ye recall a gentleman named Stephen Bonnet?"

"I do. What about him?"

"It's Mr. Bonnet's ship, Uncle, that's to take ye to England." Amusement was beginning to show in his nephew's voice again. "It seems Lawyer Forbes has had a verra profitable partnership with Bonnet for some time—him and some merchant friends in Wilmington. They've shares in both the ship and its cargoes. And since the English blockade, the profits have been greater still; I take it that our Mr. Bonnet is a most experienced smuggler."

Jamie said something extremely foul in French, and went quickly to look out of the shed. The water lay calm and beautiful, a moon path stretching silver out to sea. There was a ship out there; small and black and perfect as a spider on a sheet of paper. Bonnet's?

"Christ," he said. "When will they come in, d'ye think?"

"I dinna ken," Ian said, sounding unsure for the first time. "Is the tide coming in, would ye say, Uncle? Or going out?"

Jamie glanced down at the water rippling under the boathouse, as though it might offer some clue.

"How would I know, for God's sake? And what difference would it make?" He rubbed a hand hard over his face, trying to think. They'd taken his dirk, of course. He had a *sgian dhu,* carried in his stocking, but somehow doubted that its three-inch blade would offer much help in the present situation.

"What have ye got by way of weapons, Ian? Ye dinna have your bow with ye, I don't suppose?"

Ian shook his head regretfully. He had joined Jamie in the door of the boathouse, and the moon showed the hunger in his face as he eyed the ship.

"I've two decent knives, a dirk, and a pistol. There's my rifle, but I left it with the horse." He jerked his head toward the dark line of the distant wood. "Shall I fetch it? They might see me."

Jamie thought for a moment, tapping his fingers against the jamb of the door, 'til the pain of the broken one made him stop. The urge to lie in wait for Bonnet and take him was a physical thing; he understood Ian's hunger, and shared it. But his rational mind was busy reckoning the odds, and would insist upon presenting them, little as the vengefully animal part of him wished to know them.

There was not yet any sign of a boat coming from the ship. Always assuming that the ship out there was indeed Bonnet's—and that, they didn't know for sure—it might still be hours before anyone came to fetch him away. And when they did, what odds that Bonnet himself would come? He was the ship's captain; would he come on such an errand, or send minions?

With a rifle, if Bonnet *were* in the boat, Jamie would wager any amount that he could shoot the man from ambush. If he were in the boat. If he were recognizable in the dark. And while he could hit him, he might not kill him.

If Bonnet were not in the boat, though … then it would be a matter of waiting 'til the boat came close enough, leaping aboard, and overpowering whoever was aboard—how many would come on such an errand? Two, three, four? They must all be killed or disabled, and then it would be a matter of rowing the damn boat back out to the ship—where all aboard would doubtless have noticed the stramash taking place on shore, and be prepared either to drop a cannonball through the bottom of the boat or to wait for them to haul alongside and then pick them off from the rail with small-arms fire, like sitting ducks.

And if they should somehow succeed in getting aboard without notice—then searching the goddamn ship for Bonnet himself, hunting him down, and killing him, without attracting undue notice from the crew …

This laborious analysis ran through his mind in the time it took to breathe, and was as quickly dismissed. If they were to be captured or killed, Claire would be alone and defenseless. He could not risk it. Still, he thought, trying to comfort himself, he could find Forbes—and would, when the time came.

"Aye, well, then," he said, and turned away with a sigh. "Have ye but the one horse, Ian?"

“Aye,” Ian said with a matching sigh. “But I ken where we can maybe steal another.”

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AMANUENSIS

Two days passed. Hot, damp days in the sweltering dark, and I could feel various kinds of mold, fungus, and rot trying to take hold in my crevices—to say nothing of the omnivorous, omnipresent cockroaches, who seemed determined to nibble my eyebrows the moment the light was put out. The leather of my shoes was clammy and limp, my hair hung lank and dirty, and—like Sadie Ferguson—I took to spending most of my time in my shift.

When Mrs. Tolliver appeared and ordered us to come assist with the washing, therefore, we abandoned the latest game of loo—she was winning—and nearly pushed each other over in our haste to oblige.

It was much hotter in the yard, with the laundry fire roaring, and quite as damp as it had been in the cell, with the thick clouds of moisture boiling off the big kettle of clothes and plastering strands of hair to our faces. Our shifts already clung to our bodies, the grubby linen almost transparent with sweat—laundry was heavy work. There were, however, no bugs, and if the sun shone blinding, and fierce enough to redden my nose and arms—well, it shone, and that was something to be grateful for.

I asked Mrs. Tolliver about my erstwhile patient and her child, but she merely pressed her lips tight and shook her head, looking pinched and severe. The sheriff had been absent the night before; there had been no sound of his booming voice in the kitchen. And from the green-gilled looks of Maisie Tolliver herself, I diagnosed a long and solitary night with the gin bottle, followed by a fairly ghastly dawn.

"You'll feel much better if you sit in the shade and sip … water," I said. "Lots of water." Tea or coffee would be better, but these substances were more costly than gold in the colony, and I doubted a sheriff's wife would have any. "If you have any ipecacuanha … or perhaps some mint …"

"I thank you for your valuable opinion, Mrs. Fraser!" she snapped, though she swayed, rather, and her cheeks were pale and glossy with sweat.

I shrugged, and bent my attention to the task of levering a wad of sopping, steaming clothes from the filthy suds with a five-foot wooden laundry spoon, so worn with use that my sweaty hands slipped on the smooth wood.

We got the lot laboriously washed, rinsed, scaldingly wrung, and hung upon a line to dry, then sank gasping into the thin line of shade afforded by the side of the house, and took turns passing a tin dipper back and forth, gulping lukewarm water from the well bucket. Mrs. Tolliver, disregarding her elevated social position, sat down, too, very suddenly.

I turned to offer her the dipper, only to see her eyes roll back into her head. She didn't so much fall as dissolve backward, subsiding slowly into a heap of damp, checked gingham.

"Is she dead?" Sadie Ferguson inquired with interest. She glanced to and fro, obviously estimating the chances of making a run for it.

"No. Bad hangover, possibly aggravated by a slight case of sunstroke." I'd got hold of her pulse, which was light and fast, but quite steady. I was myself debating the wisdom of abandoning Mrs. Tolliver to the dangers of aspirating her own vomit and absconding, even barefoot and in my shift, but was forestalled by male voices coming round the corner of the house.

Two men—one was Tolliver's constable, whom I'd seen briefly when Brown's men had delivered me to the gaol. The other was a stranger, very well dressed, with silver coat buttons and a silk waistcoat, rather the worse for sweat stains. This gentleman, a heavyset sort of about forty, frowned at the scene of dissipation before him.

“Are these the prisoners?” he asked in tones of distaste.

“Aye, sir,” the constable said. “Leastwise, the two in their shifts is. ’Tother one’s the sheriff’s wife.”

Silver Buttons’s nostrils pinched in briefly in receipt of this intelligence, then flared.

“Which is the midwife?”

“That would be me,” I said, straightening up and trying for an air of dignity. “I am Mrs. Fraser.”

“Are you,” he said, his tone indicating that I might have said I was Queen Charlotte, for all it mattered to him. He looked me up and down in a disparaging fashion, shook his head, then turned to the sweating constable.

“What is she charged with?”

The constable, a rather dim young man, pursed his lips at this, looking dubiously back and forth between us.

“Ahh … well, one of ’em’s a forger,” he said, “and ’tother’s a murderess. But as to which bein’ which …”

“I’m the murderess,” Sadie said bravely, adding loyally, “She’s a very fine midwife!” I looked at her in surprise, but she shook her head slightly and compressed her lips, adjuring me to keep quiet.

“Oh. Hmm. All right, then. Have you a gown … madam?” At my nod, he said briefly, “Get dressed,” and turned to the constable, taking out a vast silk handkerchief from his pocket, with which to wipe his broad pink face. “I’ll take her, then. You’ll tell Mr. Tolliver.”

“I will, sir,” the constable assured him, more or less bowing and scraping. He glanced down at the unconscious form of Mrs. Tolliver, then frowned at Sadie.

“You, there. Take her inside and see to her. Hop!”

“Oh, yes, sir,” Sadie said, and gravely pushed up her sweat-fogged spectacles with one forefinger. “Right away, sir!”

I had no opportunity to speak with Sadie, and barely time enough to struggle into my bedraggled gown and stays and seize my small bag before being escorted into a carriage—rather bedraggled itself, but once of good quality.

“Would you mind telling me who you are, and where you’re taking me?” I inquired, after we had rattled through two or three cross streets, my companion gazing out the window with an abstracted sort of frown.

My question roused him, and he blinked at me, only then seeming to realize that I was not in fact an inanimate object.

“Oh. Beg pardon, madam. We are going to the Governor’s Palace. Have you not a cap?”

“No.”

He grimaced, as though he’d expected nothing else, and resumed his private thoughts.

They’d finished the place, and very nicely, too. William Tryon, the previous governor, had built the Governor’s Palace, but had been sent to New York before construction had been finished. Now the enormous brick edifice with its graceful spreading wings was complete, even to the lawns and ivy beds that lined the drive, though the stately trees that would eventually surround it were mere saplings. The carriage pulled up on the drive, but we did not—of course—enter by the imposing front entrance, but rather scuttled round the back and down the stairs to the servants’ quarters in the basement.

Here I was hastily shoved into a maid’s room, handed a comb, basin, and ewer, and a borrowed cap, and urged to make myself look less like a slattern, as quickly as possible.

My guide—Mr. Webb was his name, as I learned from the cook’s respectful greeting to him—waited with obvious impatience while I made my hasty ablutions, then grasped my arm and urged me upstairs. We ascended by a narrow back stair to the second floor, where a very young and frightened-looking maidservant was waiting.

“Oh, you’ve come, sir, at last!” She bobbed a curtsy to Mr. Webb, giving me a curious glance. “Is this the midwife?”

“Yes. Mrs. Fraser—Dilman.” He nodded at the girl, giving only her surname, the English fashion for house servants. She curtsied to me in turn, then beckoned me toward a door that stood ajar.

The room was large and gracious, furnished with a canopied bed, a walnut commode, armoire, and armchair, though the air of elegant refinement was somewhat impaired by a heap of mending, a ratty sewing basket overturned and spilling its threads, and a basket of children's toys. In the bed was a large mound, which—given the evidence to hand—I rather supposed must be Mrs. Martin, the Governor's wife.

This proved to be the case when Dilman curtsied again, murmuring my name to her. She was round—very round, given her advanced state of pregnancy—with a small, sharp nose and a nearsighted way of peering that reminded me irresistibly of Beatrix Potter's Mrs. Tiggy-Winkle. In terms of personality, not quite so much.

"Who the devil is this?" she demanded, poking a frowsy, capped head out of the bedclothes.

"Midwife, mum," Dilman said, bobbing again. "Have you slept well, mum?"

"Of course not," Mrs. Martin said crossly. "This beastly child's kicked my liver black and blue, I've puked all night, I've sweated through my sheets, and I have a shaking ague. I was told there was no midwife to be found within the county." She gave me a dyspeptic look. "Where did you discover this person, the local prison?"

"Actually, yes," I said, unslinging my bag from my shoulder. "How far gone are you, how long have you been ill, and when's the last time you moved your bowels?"

She looked marginally more interested, and waved Dilman out of the room.

"What did she say your name was?"

"Fraser. Are you experiencing any symptoms of early labor? Cramping? Bleeding? Intermittent pain in the back?"

She gave me a sideways look, but did begin to answer my questions. From which, in the fullness of time, I eventually was able to diagnose an acute case of food poisoning, likely caused by a leftover slice of oyster pie, consumed—with quite a lot of other edibles—in a fit of pregnancy-induced greed the day before.

"I have not an ague?" She withdrew the tongue she had allowed me to inspect, frowning.

"You have not. Not yet, anyway," honesty compelled me to add. It was no wonder she thought she had; I had learned in the course of the examination that a particularly virulent sort of fever was abroad in the town—and in the palace. The Governor's secretary had died of it two days before, and Dilman was the only upstairs servant still on her feet.

I got her out of bed, and helped her to the armchair, where she subsided, looking like a squashed cream cake. The room was hot and stuffy, and I opened the window in hopes of a breeze.

"God's teeth, Mrs. Fraser, do you mean to kill me?" She clutched her wrapper tight around her belly, hunching her shoulders as though I had admitted a howling blizzard.

"Probably not."

"But the miasma!" She waved a hand at the window, scandalized. In all truth, mosquitoes *were* a danger. But it was still several hours 'til sunset, when they would begin to rise.

"We'll close it in a bit. For the moment, you need air. And possibly something light. Could you stomach a bit of dry toast, do you think?"

She thought that one over, tasting the corners of her mouth with a tentative tongue tip.

"Perhaps," she decided. "And a cup of tea. Dilman!"

Dilman dismissed to fetch the tea and toast—how long was it since I had even seen real tea? I wondered—I settled down to take a more complete medical history.

How many earlier pregnancies? Six, but a shadow crossed her face, and I saw her glance involuntarily at a wooden puppet, lying near the hearth.

"Are your children in the palace?" I asked, curious. I had heard no sign of any children, and even in a place the size of the palace, it would be difficult to hide six of them.

"No," she said with a sigh, and put her hands on her belly, holding it almost absently. "We sent the girls to my sister in New Jersey, a few weeks ago."

A few more questions, and the tea and toast arrived. I left her to eat it in peace, and went to shake out the damp, crumpled bedclothes.

"Is it true?" Mrs. Martin asked suddenly, startling me.

"Is what true?"

"They say you murdered your husband's pregnant young mistress, and cut the baby from her womb. Did you?"

I put the heel of my hand against my brow and pressed, closing my eyes. How on earth had she heard that? When I thought I could speak, I lowered my hands and opened my eyes.

"She wasn't his mistress, and I didn't kill her. As for the rest—yes, I did," I said as calmly as I could.

She stared at me for a moment, her mouth hanging open. Then she shut it with a snap and crossed her forearms over her belly.

"Trust George Webb to choose me a proper midwife!" she said—and much to my surprise, began to laugh. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"I would assume not," I said with extreme dryness. "I didn't tell him. Who told you?"

"Oh, you are quite notorious, Mrs. Fraser," she assured me. "Everyone has been talking of it. George has no time for gossip, but even he must have heard of it. He has no memory for names, though. I do."

A little color was coming back into her face. She took another nibble of toast, chewed, and swallowed gingerly.

"I was not sure that it was you, though," she admitted. "Not until I asked." She closed her eyes, grimacing doubtfully, but evidently the toast hit bottom, for she opened them and resumed her nibbling.

"So now that you *do* know …?" I asked delicately.

"I don't know. I've never known a murderess before." She swallowed the last of the toast and licked the tips of her fingers before wiping them on the napkin.

"I am *not* a murderess," I said.

"Well, of course you'd say so," she agreed. She took up the cup of tea, surveying me over it with interest. "You don't look depraved—though I must say, you don't look quite respectable, either." She raised the fragrant cup and drank, with a look of bliss that made me conscious that I hadn't eaten anything since the rather meager bowl of unsalted, unbuttered porridge provided for breakfast by Mrs. Tolliver.

"I'll have to think about it," Mrs. Martin said, setting down her cup with a clink. "Take that back to the kitchen," she said, waving at the tray, "and have them send me up some soup, and perhaps a few sandwiches. I do believe my appetite has come back!"

* * *

Well, now bloody what? I had been whisked so abruptly from gaol to palace that I felt like a sailor decanted onto land after months at sea, staggering and off-balance. I went obediently down to the kitchen, as instructed, obtained a tray—with a most delectable-smelling bowl of soup—and took it back to Mrs. Martin, walking like an automaton. By the time she dismissed me, my brain had begun to function again, if not yet at full capacity.

I was in New Bern. And, thanks be to God and Sadie Ferguson, out of Sheriff Tolliver's noisome gaol. Fergus and Marsali were in New Bern. Ergo, the obvious—in fact, the only—thing to do was plainly to escape and find my way to them. They could help me to find Jamie. I clung firmly to Tom Christie's promise that Jamie wasn't dead and to the notion that he *was* findable, because nothing else was tolerable.

Escaping from the Governor's Palace, though, proved more difficult than I had anticipated. There were guards posted at all the doors, and my attempt to talk my way past one of them failed utterly, leading to the abrupt appearance of Mr. Webb, who took me by the arm and escorted me firmly up the stairs to a hot, stuffy little garret, where he locked me in.

It was better than the gaol, but that was all that could be said for it. There was a cot, a chamber pot, a basin, ewer, and chest of drawers, the latter containing meager bits of clothing. The room showed signs of recent occupancy—but not immediately recent. A film of fine summer dust lay over everything, and while the ewer was full of water, it had obviously been there for some time; a number of moths and other small insects had drowned in it, and a film of the same fine dust floated on the surface.

There was also a small window, painted shut, but determined banging and heaving got it open, and I breathed a heady lungful of hot, muggy air.

I stripped off, removed the dead moths from the pitcher, and washed, a blissful experience that made me feel immensely better, after the last week of unalloyed grime, sweat, and filth. After a moment's hesitation, I helped myself to a worn linen shift from the chest of drawers, unable to bear the thought of putting my own filthy, sweat-soaked chemise back on.

I could do only so much without soap or shampoo, but even so, felt much improved, and stood by the window, combing out my wet hair—there had been a wooden comb on the chest, though no looking glass—and surveying what I could see from my perch.

There were more guards, posted round the edge of the property. Was that usual? I wondered. I thought perhaps it was not; they seemed uneasy, and very alert; I saw one challenge a man who approached the gate, presenting his weapon in rather belligerent fashion. The man seemed startled and backed up, then turned and walked away fast, glancing backward as he went.

There were a number of uniformed guards—I thought they were perhaps Marines, though I wasn't sufficiently familiar with uniforms as to be sure of it—clustered round six cannon, these situated on a slight rise before the palace, commanding the town and the harbor's edge.

There were two nonuniformed men among them; leaning out a bit, I made out the tall, heavyset figure of Mr. Webb, and a shorter man beside him. The shorter man was strolling along the line of cannon, hands folded beneath his coattails, and the Marines, or whatever they were, were saluting him. At a guess, this was the Governor, then: Josiah Martin.

I watched for a little while, but nothing of interest happened, and I found myself overwhelmed with sudden sleepiness, borne down by the strains of the last month and the hot, still air that seemed to press upon me like a hand.

I lay down on the cot in my borrowed shift, and fell instantly asleep.

* * *

I slept until the middle of the night, when I was again called to attend Mrs. Martin, who seemed to be having a relapse of her digestive difficulties. A slightly pudgy, long-nosed man in nightshirt and cap lurked in the doorway with a candle, looking worried; I took this to be the Governor. He looked hard at me, but made no move to interfere, and I had no time to take much notice of him. By the time the crisis had passed, the Governor—if indeed it was he—had disappeared. The patient now safely asleep, I lay down like a dog on the rug beside her bed, with a rolled-up petticoat as pillow, and went thankfully back to sleep.

It was full daylight when I woke again, and the fire was out. Mrs. Martin was out of bed, calling fretfully into the passage for Dilman.

"Wretched girl," she said, turning back as I got awkwardly to my feet. "Got the ague, I suppose, like the rest. Or run away."

I gathered that while several servants were down with the fever, a good many of the others had simply decamped out of fear of contagion.

"You're quite sure I have not got the tertian ague, Mrs. Fraser?" Mrs. Martin squinted at herself in her looking glass, putting out her tongue and surveying it critically. "I do believe I look yellow."

In fact, her complexion was a soft English pink, though rather pale from throwing up.

"Keep off the cream cakes and oyster pie in hot weather, don't eat anything larger than your head at one sitting, and you should be quite all right," I said, suppressing a yawn. I caught a look at myself in the glass, over her shoulder, and shuddered. I was nearly as pale as she was, with dark circles under my eyes, and my hair … well, it was almost clean, that was all that could be said for it.

"I should be let blood," Mrs. Martin declared. "That is the proper treatment for a plethory; dear Dr. Sibelius always says so. Three or four ounces, perhaps, to be followed by the black draught. Dr.

Sibelius says he finds the black-draught answer very well in such cases.” She moved to an armchair and reclined, her belly bulging under her wrapper. She pulled up the sleeve of the wrapper, extending her arm in languorous fashion. “There is a fleam and bowl in the top left drawer, Mrs. Fraser. If you would oblige me?”

The mere thought of letting blood first thing in the morning was enough to make *me* want to vomit. As for Dr. Sibelius’s black draught, that was laudanum—an alcoholic tincture of opium, and not *my* treatment of choice for a pregnant woman.

The subsequent acrimonious discussion over the virtues of blood-letting—and I began to think, from the anticipatory gleam in her eye, that the thrill of having a vein opened by a murderess was what she actually desired—was interrupted by the unceremonious entry of Mr. Webb.

“Do I disturb you, mum? My apologies.” He bowed perfunctorily to Mrs. Martin, then turned to me. “You—put on your cap and come with me.”

I did so without protest, leaving Mrs. Martin indignantly unperforated.

Webb ushered me down the gleamingly polished front stair this time, and into a large, gracious, book-lined room. The Governor, now properly wigged, powdered, and elegantly suited, was seated behind a desk overflowing with papers, dockets, scattered quills, blotters, sand-shakers, sealing wax, and all the other impedimenta of an eighteenth-century bureaucrat. He looked hot, bothered, and quite as indignant as his wife.

“What, Webb?” he demanded, scowling at me. “I need a secretary, and you bring me a midwife?”

“She’s a forger,” Webb said baldly. That stopped whatever complaint the Governor had been going to bring forth. He paused, mouth slightly open, still frowning at me.

“Oh,” he said in an altered tone. “Indeed.”

“*Accused* of forgery,” I said politely. “I haven’t been tried, let alone convicted, you know.”

The Governor’s eyebrows went up, hearing my educated accent.

"Indeed," he said again, more slowly. He looked me up and down, squinting dubiously. "Where on earth did you get her, Webb?"

"From the gaol." Webb cast me an indifferent glance, as though I might be some unprepossessing yet useful bit of furniture, like a chamber pot. "When I made inquiries for a midwife, someone told me that this woman had done prodigies with a slave, another prisoner, having a difficult lying-in. And as the matter was urgent, and no other cunning woman to be found …" He shrugged, with a faint grimace.

"Hmmmm." The Governor pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve and dabbed thoughtfully at the plump flesh beneath his chin. "Can you write a fair hand?"

I supposed it would be a poor forger who couldn't, but contented myself with saying, "Yes." Fortunately, it was true; in my own time, I had scribbled ball-point prescriptions with the best of them, but now I had trained myself to write clearly with a quill, so that my medical records and case notes should be legible, for the benefit of whoever should read them after me. Once again, I felt a sharp pang at the thought of Malva—but there was no time to think of her.

Still eyeing me speculatively, the Governor nodded toward a straight-backed chair and a smaller desk at the side of the room.

"Sit." He rose, scrabbled among the papers on his desk, and deposited one in front of me. "Let me see you make a fair copy of that, if you please."

It was a brief letter to the Royal Council, outlining the Governor's concerns regarding recent threats to that body, and postponing the next scheduled meeting of the council. I chose a quill from the cut-glass holder on the desk, found a silver penknife by it, trimmed the quill to my liking, uncorked the inkwell, and set about the business, deeply aware of the scrutiny of the two men.

I didn't know how long my imposture might hold up—Mrs. Governor could blow the gaff at any time—but for the nonce, I thought I probably had a better chance of escape as an accused forger than as an accused murderer.

The Governor took my finished copy, surveyed it, and laid it on the desk with a small grunt of satisfaction.

"Good enough," he said. "Make eight further copies of that, and then you can go on with these." Turning back to his own desk, he shuffled together a large sheaf of correspondence, which he deposited in front of me.

The two men—I had no notion of Webb's office, but he was obviously the Governor's close friend—returned to a discussion of current business, ignoring me completely.

I went about my assigned task mechanically, finding the scratch of the quill, the ritual of sanding, blotting, shaking, soothing. Copying occupied a very small part of my mind; the rest was free to worry about Jamie, and to think how best to engineer an escape.

I could—and doubtless should—make an excuse after a bit to go and see how Mrs. Martin did. If I could make shift to do so unaccompanied, I would have a few moments of unobserved freedom, during which to make a surreptitious dash for the nearest exit. So far, though, every door I'd seen had been guarded. The Governor's Palace had a very well-stocked simples closet, alas; it would be hard to invent a need for anything from an apothecary—and even then, unlikely that they'd let me go alone to fetch it.

Waiting for nightfall seemed the best notion; at least if I did get out of the palace, I would have several hours before my absence was noted. If they locked me in again, though …

I scratched away assiduously, turning over various unsatisfactory plans, and trying very hard not to envision Jamie's body turning slowly in the wind, hanging from a tree in some lonely hollow. Christie had given me his word; I clung to that, having nothing else to cling to.

Webb and the Governor murmured together, but their talk was of things I had no notion of, and for the most part, it washed over me like the sound of the sea, meaningless and soothing. After some time, though, Webb came over to instruct me in the sealing and direction of those letters to be sent. I thought of asking why he didn't lend a hand himself in this clerical emergency, but then saw his hands—both badly twisted with arthritis.

"You write a very fair hand, Mrs. Fraser," he unbent enough to say, at one point, and gave me a brief, wintry smile. "It is unfortunate that you should have been the forger, rather than the murderess."

"Why?" I asked, rather astonished at that.

"Why, you are plainly literate," he said, surprised in turn at my astonishment. "If convicted of murder, you could plead benefit of clergy, and be let off with a public whipping and branding in the face. Forgery, though—" He shook his head, pursing his lips. "Capital crime, no pardon possible. If convicted of forgery, Mrs. Fraser, I am afraid you must be hanged."

My feelings of gratitude toward Sadie Ferguson underwent an abrupt reappraisal.

"Indeed," I said as coolly as possible, though my heart had given a convulsive leap and was now trying to burrow out of my chest. "Well, we'll hope that justice is served then, and I am released, won't we?"

He made a choked sound that I thought passed for a laugh.

"To be sure. If only for the Governor's sake."

After that, we resumed work silently. The gilded clock behind me struck noon, and as though summoned by the sound, a servant whom I took to be the butler came in, to inquire whether the Governor would receive a delegation of the town's citizens?

The Governor's mouth compressed a bit, but he nodded in resignation, and a group of six or seven men came in, all attired in their best coats, but plainly tradesmen, rather than merchants or lawyers. None I recognized, thank God.

"We have come, sir," said one, who introduced himself as George Herbert, "to ask the meaning of this movement of the cannon."

Webb, sitting next to me, stiffened a little, but the Governor seemed to have been prepared for this.

"The cannon?" he said with every evidence of innocent surprise. "Why—the mountings are being repaired. We shall fire a royal salute—as usual—in honor of the Queen's birthday, later in the month. Upon inspecting the cannon in anticipation of this, though, it was discovered that the wood of the caissons had rotted away in spots. Firing the cannon is of course impossible until repairs shall be effected. Would you wish to inspect the mountings for yourself, sir?"

He half-rose from his seat as he said this, as though personally to escort them outside, but spoke with such a tinge of irony to his courtesy that they flushed and muttered refusals.

There was a bit more back and forth, in the name of courtesy, but the delegation then left, exhibiting only marginally less suspicion than that with which they'd come in. Webb closed his eyes and exhaled audibly, as the door closed behind them.

"God damn them," said the Governor very softly. I didn't think he meant it to be heard, and pretended I hadn't, busying myself with the papers and keeping my head lowered.

Webb got up and went to the window that overlooked the lawn, presumably to assure himself that the cannon were where he thought they should be. By craning a bit, I could see past him; sure enough, the six cannon had been removed from their mountings and lay on the grass, harmless logs of bronze.

From the subsequent conversation—salted with strong remarks regarding rebellious dogs who had the temerity to put the question to a Royal Governor as though he were a bootblack, by God!—I gathered that in fact, the cannon had been removed because of a very real fear that the townspeople might seize them and turn them upon the palace itself.

It dawned on me, listening to all this, that things had gone further and moved faster than I had expected. It was mid-July, but of 1775—nearly a year before a larger and more forceful version of the Mecklenberg Declaration would flower into an official declaration of independence for the united colonies. And yet here was a Royal Governor, in obvious fear of open revolt.

If what we had seen on our journey south from the Ridge had not been enough to convince me that war was now upon us, a day spent with Governor Martin left no doubt.

I did go up in the afternoon—accompanied by the watchful Webb, alas—to check my patient, and to make inquiries regarding anyone else who might be ill. Mrs. Martin was torpid and low in spirits, complaining of the heat and the pestilential, wretched climate, missing her daughters, and suffering severely from a lack of personal service, having been obliged to brush her own hair in the absence of Dilman, who had vanished. She was, however, in good health, as I was able to report to the Governor, who asked me of it upon my return.

“Would she stand a journey, do you think?” he asked, frowning a bit.

I considered for a moment, then nodded.

“I think so. She’s a bit wobbly, still, from the digestive upset—but she should be quite well again by tomorrow. I see no difficulties with the pregnancy—tell me, had she any trouble with previous confinements?”

The Governor’s face flushed rosily at that, but he shook his head.

“I thank you, Mrs. Fraser,” he said with a slight inclination of the head. “You will excuse me, George—I must go and speak to Betsy.”

“Is he thinking of sending his wife away?” I asked Webb, in the wake of the Governor’s departure. Despite the heat, a small qualm of uneasiness stirred beneath my skin.

For once, Webb seemed quite human; he was frowning after the Governor, and nodded absently.

“He has family in New York and New Jersey. She’ll be safe there, with the girls. Her three daughters,” he explained, catching my eye.

“Three? She said she’d had six—ah.” I stopped abruptly. She said she had borne six children, not that she had six living children.

“They have lost three small sons to the fevers here,” Webb said, still looking after his friend. He shook his head, sighing. “It hasn’t been a fortunate place for them.”

He seemed then to recover himself, and the man disappeared back behind the mask of the chilly bureaucrat. He handed me another sheaf of papers, and went out, not bothering to bow.

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IN WHICH I IMPERSONATE A LADY

I ate supper alone in my room; the cook seemed still to be functioning, at least, though the atmosphere of disorder in the house was a palpable thing. I could feel the uneasiness, bordering on panic—and had the thought that it wasn't fear of fever or ague that had caused the servants to leave, but more likely that sense of self-preservation that causes rats to flee a sinking ship.

From my tiny window, I could see a small portion of the town, apparently serene in the gathering twilight. The light was very different here from that in the mountains—a flat, dimensionless light that limned the houses and the fishing boats in the harbor with a hard-edged clarity, but faded into a haze that hid the farther shore completely, so that I looked beyond the immediate prospect into featureless infinity.

I shook off the notion, and took from my pocket the ink, quill, and paper I had abstracted from the library earlier. I had no idea whether or how I might get a note out of the palace—but I did have a little money, still, and if the opportunity offered …

I wrote quickly to Fergus and Marsali, telling them briefly what had happened, urging Fergus to make inquiries for Jamie in Brunswick and Wilmington.

I thought myself that if Jamie *was* alive, that he was most likely in the Wilmington gaol. Brunswick was a tiny settlement, dominated by the looming presence of the log-built Fort Johnston, but the fort was a militia garrison; there would be no good reason to take Jamie there—though if they *had* … the fort was under the command of a Captain Collet, a Swiss emigrant who knew him. At least he would be safe there.

Who else did he know? He had a good many acquaintances on the coast, from the days of the Regulation. John Ashe, for one; they had marched side by side to Alamance, and Ashe's company had camped next to ours every night; we had entertained him at our campfire many times. And Ashe was from Wilmington.

I had just finished a brief plea to John Ashe, when I heard footsteps coming down the hallway toward my room. I folded it hastily, not worrying about smearing, and thrust it with the other note into my pocket. There was no time to do anything with the contraband ink and paper, save push it under the bed.

It was Webb, of course, my customary jailer. Evidently, I was now considered the general dogsbody of the establishment; I was escorted to Mrs. Martin's room and desired to pack her things.

I might have expected complaint or hysteria, but in fact, she was not only dressed but pale-faced and composed, directing and even assisting the process with a sense of clear-minded order.

The reason for her self-possession was the Governor, who came in midway through the packing, his face drawn with worry. She went at once to him, and put her hands affectionately on his shoulders.

"Poor Jo," she said softly. "Have you had any supper?"

"No. It doesn't matter. I'll have a bite later." He kissed her briefly on the forehead, his look of worry lightening a little as he looked at her. "You're quite well now, Betsy? You're sure of it?" I realized suddenly that he was Irish—Anglo-Irish, at least; he had no hint of an accent, but his unguarded speech held a faint lilt.

"Entirely recovered," she assured him. She took his hand and pressed it to her bulge, smiling. "See how he kicks?"

He smiled back, raised her hand to his lips, and kissed it.

"I'll miss you, darling," she said very softly. "You will take very great care?"

He blinked rapidly, and looked down, swallowing.

"Of course," he said gruffly. "Dear Betsy. You know I could not bear to part with you, unless—"

"I do know. That's why I fear so greatly for you. I—" At this point, she looked up, and realized suddenly that I was there. "Mrs. Fraser," she said in quite a different tone. "Go down to the kitchen, please, and have a tray prepared for the Governor. You may take it to the library."

I bobbed slightly, and went. Was this the chance I had been waiting for?

The halls and stairway were deserted, lit only by flickering tin sconces—burning fish oil, by the smell. The brick-walled kitchen was, course, in the basement, and the eerie silence in what should ordinarily be a hive of activity made the unlighted kitchen stairway seem like the descent into a dungeon.

There was no light in the kitchen now save the hearth fire, burning low—but it *was* burning, three servants clustered near it despite the smothering heat. They turned at my footsteps, startled and faceless in silhouette. With steam rising from the cauldron behind them, I had the momentary delusion that I was facing Macbeth's three witches, met in dreadful prophecy.

"Double, double, toil and trouble," I said pleasantly, though my heart beat a little faster as I approached them. "Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

"Toil and trouble, *that* be right," said a soft female voice, and laughed. Closer now, I could see that they had appeared faceless in the shadows because they were all black; slaves, likely, and thus unable to flee the house.

Unable also to carry a message for me. Still, it never hurt to be friendly, and I smiled at them.

They smiled shyly back, looking at me with curiosity. I had not seen any of them before—nor they me, though "downstairs" being what it was, I thought it likely they knew who I was.

"Governor be sendin' his lady away?" asked the one who had laughed, moving to fetch down a tray from a shelf in response to my request for something light.

"Yes," I said. I realized the value of gossip as currency, and related everything that I decently could, as the three of them moved efficiently about, dark as shadows, their darting hands slicing, spreading, arranging.

Molly, the cook, shook her head, her white cap like a sunset cloud in the fire's glow.

"Bad times, bad times," she said, clicking her tongue, and the other two murmured assent. I thought, from their attitude, that they liked the Governor—but then, as slaves, their fate was inextricably linked with his, regardless of their feelings.

It occurred to me, as we chatted, that even if they could not reasonably flee the house altogether, they might at least leave the premises now and again; someone had to do the marketing, and there seemed to be no one else left. In fact, this proved to be the case; Sukie, the one who had laughed, went out to buy fish and fresh vegetables in the mornings, and tactfully approached, was not averse to delivering my notes to the printshop—she said she knew where it was, the place with all the books in the window—for a small consideration.

She tucked away the paper and money in her bosom, giving me a knowing look, and winked. God knew what she thought it was, but I winked back, and hefting the loaded tray, made my way back up into the fishy-smelling realms of light.

I found the Governor alone in the library, burning papers. He nodded absently at the tray I set on the desk, but did not touch it. I wasn't sure what to do, and after a moment's awkward standing about, sat down at my accustomed place.

The Governor thrust a final sheaf of documents into the fire, then stood looking bleakly after them, as they blackened and curled. The room had cooled a little, with the setting sun, but the windows were tightly shut—of course—and rivulets of condensing moisture rolled down the ornamental panes of glass. Blotting a similar condensation from my cheeks and nose, I got up and threw open the window closest to me, drawing in a deep gulp of the evening air, cloyingly warm, but fresh, and sweet with honeysuckle and roses from the garden, undercut with dankness from the distant shore.

Woodsmoke, too; there were fires burning outside. The soldiers who guarded the palace had watch fires burning, evenly spaced around the perimeter of the grounds. Well, that would help with the mosquitoes—and we would not be completely surprised, if an attack should come.

The Governor came to stand behind me. I expected him to tell me to shut the window, but he merely stood, looking out across his lawns and the long, graveled drive. The moon had risen, and the dismounted cannon were dimly visible, lying in the shadows like dead men in a row.

After a moment, the Governor moved back to his desk, and calling me over, handed me a sheaf of official correspondence for copying, another for sorting and filing. He left the window open; I thought that he wished to hear, if anything should happen.

I wondered where the omnipresent Webb was. There was no sound from elsewhere in the Palace; presumably Mrs. Martin had finished her packing alone, and gone to bed.

We worked on, through the intermittent chiming of the clock, the Governor getting up now and then to commit another batch of papers to the fire, taking my copies and bundling them into large leather folders that he bound with tape, stacking them on his desk. He had taken off his wig; his hair was brown, short but curly—rather like my own had been, after the fever. Now and then he paused, head turned, listening.

I had faced a mob, and knew what he was listening for. I didn't know what to hope for, at this point, or to fear. And so I worked on, welcoming the work for the numbing distraction it was, though my hand had grown desperately cramped, and I had to pause every few moments to rub it.

The Governor was writing now; he shifted in his chair, grimacing with discomfort in spite of the cushion. Mrs. Martin had told me that he suffered from a fistula. I doubted very much that he'd let me treat it.

He eased himself onto one buttock, and rubbed a hand down his face. It was late, and he was plainly tired, as well as uncomfortable. I was tired, too, stifling yawns that threatened to dislocate my jaw and left my eyes watering. He kept doggedly working, though, with occasional glances at the door. Who was he expecting?

The window at my back was still open, and the soft air caressed me, warm as blood, but moving enough to stir the wisps of hair on my neck and make the candle flame waver wildly. It bent to one side and flickered, as though it would go out, and the Governor reached quickly to shelter it with a cupped hand.

The breeze passed and the air fell still again, save for the sound of crickets outside. The Governor's attention seemed focused on the paper before him, but suddenly his head turned sharply, as though he had seen something dart past the open door.

He looked for a moment, then blinked, rubbed his eyes, and returned his attention to the paper. But he couldn't keep it there. He glanced again at the empty doorway—I couldn't help looking, too—then back, blinking.

"Did you … see someone pass, Mrs. Fraser?" he asked.

"No, sir," I said, nobly swallowing a yawn.

"Ah." Seeming somehow disappointed, he took up his quill, but didn't write anything, just held it between his fingers, as though he had forgotten it was there.

"Were you expecting anyone, Your Excellency?" I asked politely, and his head jerked up, surprised to be directly addressed.

"Oh. No. That is …" His voice died away as he glanced once more at the doorway that led to the back of the house.

"My son," he said. "Our darling Sam. He—died here, you know—late last year. Only eight years old. Sometimes … sometimes I think I see him," he ended quietly, and bent his head once more over his paper, lips pressed tight.

I moved impulsively, meaning to touch his hand, but his tight-lipped air prevented me.

"I am sorry," I said quietly, instead. He didn't speak, but gave one quick, short nod of acknowledgment, not raising his head. His lips tightened further, and he went back to his writing, as did I.

A little later, the clock struck the hour, then two. It had a soft, sweet chime, and the Governor stopped to listen, a distant look in his eyes.

"So late," he said, as the last chime died away. "I have kept you intolerably late, Mrs. Fraser. Forgive me." He motioned to me to leave the papers I was working on, and I rose, stiff and aching from sitting so long.

I shook my skirts into some order and turned to go, realizing only then that he had made no move to put away his ink and quills.

"You should go to bed, too, you know," I said to him, turning and pausing at the door.

The palace was still. Even the crickets had ceased, and only the soft snore of a sleeping soldier in the hall disturbed the quiet.

"Yes," he said, and gave me a small, tired smile. "Soon." He shifted his weight to the other buttock, and picked up his quill, bending his head once more over the papers.

* * *

No one woke me in the morning, and the sun was well up when I stirred on my own. Listening to the silence, I had a momentary fear that everyone had decamped in the night, leaving me locked in to starve. I rose hastily, though, and looked out. The red-coated soldiers were still patrolling the grounds, just as usual. I could see small groups of citizens outside the perimeter, mostly strolling past in twos or threes, but sometimes stopping to stare at the palace.

Then I began to hear small thumps and homely noises on the floor below, and felt relieved; I was not entirely abandoned. I was, however, extremely hungry by the time the butler came to let me out.

He brought me to Mrs. Martin's bedchamber, but to my surprise it was empty. He left me there, and within a few moments, Merilee, one of the kitchen slaves, came in, looking apprehensive at being in this unfamiliar part of the house.

"Whatever is going on?" I asked her. "Where is Mrs. Martin, do you know?"

"Well, I know *that,*" she said, in a dubious tone indicating that it was the only thing she *did* know for certain. "She lef' just afore dawn this mornin'. That Mr. Webb, he took her away, secret-like, in a wagon with her boxes."

I nodded, perplexed. It was reasonable that she should have left quietly; I imagined the Governor didn't want to give any indication that he felt threatened, for fear of provoking exactly the violence he feared.

"But if Mrs. Martin is gone," I said, "why am I here? Why are *you* here?"

"Oh. Well, I know that, too," Merilee said, gaining a bit of confidence. "I s'posed to hep you dress, ma'am."

"But I don't need any …" I began, and then saw the garments laid out on the bed: one of Mrs. Martin's day gowns, a pretty printed floral cotton, done in the newly popular "polonaise" fashion, complete with voluminous petticoats, silk stockings, and a large straw hat to shade the face.

Evidently, I was meant to impersonate the Governor's wife. There was no real point in protesting; I could hear the Governor and the butler talking in the hall, and after all—if it got me out of the palace, so much the better.

I was only two or three inches taller than Mrs. Martin, and my lack of a bulge made the gown hang lower. There was no hope of my fitting into any of her shoes, but my own were not completely disreputable, in spite of all my adventures since leaving home. Merilee cleaned them and rubbed them with a bit of grease to make the leather shine; they were at least not so crude as to draw attention immediately.

With the broad-brimmed hat slanting forward to hide my face, and my hair twisted up and firmly pinned under a cap beneath it, I was probably a reasonable approximation, at least to people who did not know Mrs. Martin well. The Governor frowned when he saw me, and walked slowly round me, tugging here and there to adjust the fit, but then nodded, and with a small bow, offered me his arm.

"Your servant, mum," he said politely. And with me slumping slightly to disguise my height, we went out the front door, to find the Governor's carriage waiting in the drive.

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ABSQUATULATION

Jamie Fraser observed the quantity and quality of books in the window of the printshop—*F. Fraser, Proprietor*—and allowed himself a momentary sense of pride in Fergus; the establishment, though small, was apparently thriving. Time, however, was pressing, and he pushed through the door without stopping to read the titles.

A small bell over the door rang at his entrance, and Germain popped up behind the counter like an ink-smeared jack-in-the-box, emitting a whoop of joy at sight of his grandfather and his uncle Ian.

"Grandpère, Grandpère!" he shouted, then dived under the flap in the counter, clutching Jamie about the hips in ecstasy. He'd grown; the top of his head now reached Jamie's lower ribs. Jamie ruffled the shiny blond hair gently, then detached Germain and told him to fetch his father.

No need; aroused by the shouting, the whole family came boiling out from the living quarters behind the shop, exclaiming, yelling, squealing, and generally carrying on like a pack of wolves, as Ian pointed out to them, Henri-Christian riding on his shoulders in red-faced triumph, clinging to his hair.

"What has happened, milord? Why are you here?" Fergus disengaged Jamie easily from the riot and drew him aside, into the alcove where the more expensive books were kept—and those not suitable for public display.

He could see from the look on Fergus's face that some news had come down from the mountains; while surprised to see him, Fergus was not astonished, and his pleasure covered a worried mind. He explained the matter as quickly as he could, stumbling now and then over his words from haste and weariness; one of the horses had broken down some forty miles from town, and unable to find another, they had walked for two nights and a day, taking it in turns to ride, the other trotting alongside, clinging to the stirrup leathers.

Fergus listened with attention, wiping his mouth with the handkerchief he had taken from his collar; they had arrived in the middle of dinner.

"The sheriff—that would be Mr. Tolliver," he said. "I know him. Shall we—"

Jamie made an abrupt gesture, cutting him short.

"We went there to begin with," he said. They had found the sheriff gone, and no one in the house save a very drunken woman with a face like a discontented bird, collapsed and snoring on the settle with a small Negro baby clutched in her arms.

He had taken the baby and thrust it into Ian's arms, bidding him grimly to mind it while he sobered the woman enough to talk. He had then dragged her out into the yard and poured buckets of well water over her until she gasped and blinked, then dragged her dripping and stumbling back into the house, where he obliged her to drink water poured over the black, burned dregs of chicory coffee he had found in the pot. She had vomited profusely and disgustingly, but regained some vague sense of language.

"At first, all she could say was that all of the female prisoners were gone—run off or hanged." He said nothing of the fright that had lanced through his belly at that last. He had shaken the woman thoroughly, though, demanding particulars, and eventually, after further applications of water and vile coffee, got them.

"A man came, the day before yesterday, and took her away. That was all she knew—or all she remembered. I made her tell me what she could of how he looked—it wasna Brown, nor yet Neil Forbes."

"I see." Fergus glanced behind him; his family were all gathered round Ian, pestering and caressing him. Marsali, though, was looking toward the alcove, worry on her face, obviously wanting to come and join the conversation, but detained by Joan, who was tugging on her skirt.

"Who would take her, I wonder?"

"Joanie, *a chuisle,* will ye not leave go? Help Félicité for a moment, aye?"

"But, Mama—"

"Not *now*. In a moment, aye?"

"I dinna ken," Jamie said, the frustration of helplessness welling up like black bile at the back of his throat. A sudden, more horrible thought struck him. "God, d'ye suppose it might have been Stephen Bonnet?"

The woman's slurred description had not sounded like the pirate—but she had been far from certain in it. Could Forbes have learned of his own escape, and determined simply to reverse the roles in the drama he had conceived—deport Claire forcibly to England, and try to pin the guilt of Malva Christie's death to Jamie's coat?

He found it hard to breathe, and had to force air into his chest. If Forbes had given Claire to Bonnet, he would slit the lawyer from wishbone to cock, rip the guts from his belly, and strangle him with them. And the same for the Irishman, once he laid hands upon him.

"Papi, Pa-pee …" Joan's singsong voice penetrated dimly through the red cloud that filled his head.

"What, *chérie*?" Fergus lifted her with the ease of long practice, balancing her fat little bottom on his left arm, to leave his right hand free.

She put her arms round his neck and hissed something into his ear.

"Oh, did you?" he said, plainly abstracted. "*Très bien.* Where did you put it, *chérie*?"

"With the naughty-lady pictures."

She pointed at the upper shelf, where several volumes lay, leather-bound but discreetly untitled. Glancing in the direction she indicated, Jamie saw a smudged paper sticking out from between two of the books.

Fergus clicked his tongue in displeasure, and smacked her lightly on the bottom with his good hand.

"You know you are not to climb up there!"

Jamie reached over and pulled the paper out. And felt all the blood leave his head, at sight of the familiar writing on it.

"What?" Fergus, alarmed at his appearance, set Joanie down. "Sit, milord! Run, *chérie,* get the smelling bottle."

Jamie waved a hand, speechless, trying to indicate that he was all right, and succeeded at last in finding his tongue.

"She's in the Governor's Palace," he said. "Christ be thanked, she's safe."

Seeing a stool pushed under the shelf, he pulled it out and sat on it, feeling exhaustion pulse through the quivering muscles of thigh and calf, ignoring the confusion of question and explanation, how Joanie had found the note pushed under the door—anonymous submissions to the newspaper often were delivered in this fashion, and the children knew they were to bring such things to their father's attention.…

Fergus read the note, his dark eyes assuming the expression of interested intent that he always had when contemplating the abstraction of something difficult and valuable.

"Well, that is good," he said. "We will go and fetch her. But I think first you must eat a little, milord."

He wished to refuse, to say that there was not a moment to be lost, that he could eat nothing in any case; his wame was knotted, hurting him.

But Marsali was already hurrying the girls back to the kitchen, calling out things about hot coffee and bread, and Ian following her, Henri-Christian still wrapped lovingly about his ears, Germain yapping eagerly at his heels. And he knew that should it come to a fight, he had nothing left to fight with. Then the succulent sizzle and scent of eggs frying in butter reached him, and he was up and moving toward the back, like iron drawn by a magnet.

Over their hasty meal, various plans were offered and rejected. At length, he reluctantly accepted Fergus's suggestion that either Fergus or Ian should go openly to the palace, asking to see Claire, saying that he was a kinsman, wishing to assure himself of her welfare.

"They have no reason to deny her presence, after all," Fergus said, shrugging. "If we can see her, so much the better; but even if not, we will learn whether she is still there, and perhaps where she is likely to be within the palace."

Fergus clearly wished to undertake the errand, but yielded when Ian pointed out that Fergus was widely known in New Bern, and it might be suspected that he was merely hunting scandal for the newspaper.

"For I am pained to say, milord," Fergus said apologetically, "that the matter—the crime—is known here already. There are broadsheets … the usual nonsense. *L'Oignon* was obliged to print something regarding the matter, of course, to keep our countenance, but we did so in a most repressive fashion, mentioning only the bald facts of the matter." His long, mobile mouth compressed briefly, in illustration of the repressive nature of his article, and Jamie smiled faintly.

"Aye, I see," he said. He pushed back from the table, pleased to feel some strength returned to his limbs, and heartened anew by food, coffee, and the comforting knowledge of Claire's whereabouts. "Well, then, Ian, comb your hair. Ye dinna want the Governor to think ye a savage."

* * *

Jamie insisted upon going with Ian, despite the danger of being recognized. His nephew eyed him narrowly.

"Ye're no going to do anything foolish, Uncle Jamie?"

"When was the last time ye kent me to do anything foolish?"

Ian gave him an old-fashioned look, held up one hand, and began to fold the fingers down, one by one.

"Oh, well, let me reckon, then … Simms the printer? Tarring Forbes? Roger Mac told me what ye did in Mecklenberg. And then there was—"

"Ye would have let them kill wee Fogarty?" Jamie inquired. "And if we're mentioning fools, who was it got his arse pricked for wallowing in mortal sin with—"

"What I mean is," Ian said severely, "ye're no going to walk into the Governor's Palace and try to take her by force, no matter what happens. Ye'll wait quietly wi' your hat on until I come back, and then we'll see, aye?"

Jamie pulled down the brim of his hat, a floppy, weathered felt affair such as a pig farmer might wear, with his hair tucked up beneath it.

"What makes ye think I wouldn't?" he asked, as much from curiosity as natural contention.

"The look on your face," Ian replied briefly. "I want her back as much as you do, Uncle Jamie—well," he amended, with a wry grin, "perhaps not *quite* sae much—but I mean to have her back, nonetheless. You"—he poked his uncle emphatically in the chest—"bide your time."

And leaving Jamie standing under a heat-stricken elm, he strode purposefully toward the gates of the palace.

Jamie took several deep breaths, trying to maintain a sense of annoyance with Ian as an antidote to the anxiety that wrapped itself round his chest like a snake. As the annoyance had been purely manufactured, it evaporated like steam from a kettle, leaving the anxiety squirming and writhing.

Ian had reached the gate, and was in palaver with the guard who stood there, musket at the ready. Jamie could see the man shaking his head emphatically.

This was nonsense, he thought. The need of her was a physical thing, like the thirst of a sailor becalmed for weeks on the sea. He'd felt that need before, often, often, in their years apart. But why now? She was safe; he knew where she was—was it only the exhaustion of the past weeks and days, or perhaps the weakness of creeping age that made his bones ache, as though she had in fact been torn from his body, as God had made Eve from Adam's rib?

Ian was arguing, making persuasive gestures toward the guard. The sound of wheels on gravel drew his attention from them; a carriage was coming down the drive, a small open conveyance with two people and a driver, drawn by a team of nice dark bays.

The guard had pushed Ian back with the barrel of his musket, gesturing him to keep away while the guard and his fellow opened the gates. The carriage rattled through without stopping, turned into the street, and came past him.

He had never seen Josiah Martin, but thought the plump, self-important-looking gentleman must surely be the—His eye caught the merest glimpse of the woman, and his heart clenched like a fist. Without an instant's thought, he was pelting after the carriage, as hard as he could run.

In his prime, he could not have outrun a team of horses. Even so, he came within a few feet of the carriage, would have called, but had no breath, no sight, and then his foot struck a misplaced cobble and he fell headlong.

He lay stunned and breathless, vision dark and his lungs afire, hearing only the receding clatter of hooves and carriage wheels, until a strong hand seized his arm and jerked.

"We'll avoid notice, he says," Ian muttered, bending to get his shoulder under Jamie's arm. "Your hat's flown off, did ye notice *that*? Nay, of course not, nor the whole street staring, ye crack-brained gomerel. God, ye weigh as much as a three-year bullock!"

"Ian," he said, and paused to gulp for breath.

"Aye?"

"Ye sound like your mother. Stop." Another gulp of air. "And let go my arm; I can walk."

Ian gave a snort that sounded even more like Jenny, but did stop, and did let go. Jamie picked up his fallen hat and limped toward the printshop, Ian following in urgent silence through the staring streets.

* * *

Safely away from the palace, we trotted sedately through the streets of New Bern, provoking only mild interest from the citizenry, some of whom waved, a few of whom called out vaguely hostile things, most of whom simply stared. At the edge of town, the groom turned the team onto the main road, and we bowled pleasantly along, apparently bound for an outing in the countryside, an illusion bolstered by the wicker picnic hamper visible behind us.

Once past the congestion of heavy wagons, cattle, sheep, and the other traffic of commerce, though, the groom whipped up, and we were flying again.

“Where are we going?” I shouted over the noise of the team, holding on to my hat to prevent it blowing off. I had thought we were merely providing a diversion, so that no one would notice Mrs. Martin’s quiet removal until she was safely out of the colony. Evidently, though, we were *not* merely out for a picnic.

“Brunswick!” the Governor shouted back.

“Where?”

“Brunswick,” he repeated. He looked grim, and grimmer still as he cast a last look back toward New Bern. “God damn them,” he said, though I was sure he meant this observation only for himself. He turned round then, and settled himself, leaning slightly forward, as though to speed the carriage, and said no more.

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THE *CRUIZER*

I woke every morning, just before dawn. Worn out from worry and the Governor's late hours, I slept like the dead, through all the thumps and rattlings and bell-ringings of the watch, shouts from boats nearby, occasional musket-fire from the shore, and the whine of the offshore wind as it passed through the rigging. But in that moment before the light, the silence woke me.

Today? was the single thought in my mind, and I seemed to hang bodiless for a moment, just above my pallet beneath the forecastle. Then I drew breath, heard my heart beating, and felt the gentle heave of the deck beneath me. Would turn my face to the shore, watching, as the light began to touch the waves and reach toward land. We had first gone to Fort Johnston, but had stayed there barely long enough for the Governor to meet with local Loyalists who had assured him how unsafe it was, before retreating further.

We had been aboard His Majesty's sloop *Cruizer* for nearly a week, anchored off Brunswick. Lacking any troops save the Marines aboard the sloop, Governor Martin was unable to seize back control of his colony, and was reduced to writing frenzied letters, attempting to keep up some semblance of a government in exile.

Lacking anyone else to fill the office, I remained in my role as *ad hoc* secretary, though I had moved up from mere copyist to amanuensis, taking down some letters by dictation when Martin grew too tired to write himself. And cut off from land and information alike, I spent every spare moment watching the shore.

Today, a boat was coming, out of the fading dark.

One of the watch hailed it, and an answering "halloo" came up, in tones of such agitation that I sat up abruptly, groping for my stays.

Today, there would be news.

The messenger was already in the Governor's cabin, and one of the Marines barred my way—but the door was open, and the man's voice clearly audible.

"Ashe's done it, sir, he's moving against the fort!"

"Well, God damn him for a treasonous dog!"

There was a sound of footsteps, and the Marine stepped hastily out of the way, just in time to avoid the Governor, who came popping out of his cabin like a jack out of the box, still attired in a billowing nightshirt and minus his wig. He seized the ladder and scampered up it like a monkey, affording me an unwanted view from below of his chubby bare buttocks. The Marine caught my eye and quickly averted his own gaze.

"What are they doing? Do you see them?"

"Not yet." The messenger, a middle-aged man in the dress of a farmer, had followed the Governor up the ladder; their voices floated down from the rail.

"Colonel Ashe ordered all the ships in Wilmington Harbor to take on troops yesterday and float them down to Brunswick. They were mustering just outside the town this morning; I heard the roll calls whilst I was doing the morning milking—nigh onto five hundred men, they must have. When I saw that, sir, I slipped away down to the shore and found a boat. Thought you ought to know, Your Excellence." The man's voice had lost its agitation now, and taken on a rather self-righteous tone.

"Oh, yes? And what do you expect me to do about it?" The Governor sounded distinctly cranky.

"How should I know?" said the messenger, replying in like vein. "*I* ain't the Governor, now, am I?"

The Governor's response to this was drowned out by the striking of the ship's bell. As it died away, he strode past the companionway, and looking down, saw me below.

"Oh, Mrs. Fraser. Will you fetch me some tea from the galley?"

I hadn't much choice, though I would have preferred to stay and eavesdrop. The galley fire had been banked for the night in its small iron pot, and the cook was still abed. By the time I had poked up the fire, boiled water, brewed a pot of tea, and assembled a tray with teapot, cup, saucer, milk, and toast, butter, biscuits, and jam, the Governor's informant had gone; I saw his boat heading for the shore, a dark arrowhead against the slowly brightening surface of the sea.

I paused for a moment on deck and rested my tea tray on the rail, looking inland. It was just light now, and Fort Johnston was visible, a blocky log building that stood exposed on top of a low rise, surrounded by a cluster of houses and outbuildings. There was a fair amount of activity around it; men were coming and going like a trail of ants. Nothing that looked like an imminent invasion, though. Either the commander, Captain Collet, had decided to evacuate—or Ashe's men had not yet begun their march from Brunswick.

Had John Ashe received my message? If he had … would he have acted? It wouldn't have been a popular thing to do; I couldn't blame him if he had decided that he simply couldn't afford to be seen aiding a man widely suspected of being a Loyalist—let alone one accused of such a hideous crime.

He might have, though. With the Governor marooned at sea, the Council disbanded, and the court system evaporated, there was no effective law in the colony now—save for the militias. If Ashe chose to storm the Wilmington jail and remove Jamie, he would have faced precious little opposition.

And if he had … if Jamie were free, he would be looking for me. And surely he would hear quickly where I was. If John Ashe came to Brunswick and Jamie were free, he would surely come with Ashe's men. I looked toward shore, seeking movement, but saw only a boy driving a cow desultorily along the road to Brunswick. But the shadows of the night were still cold around my feet; it was barely dawn.

I took a deep breath, and noticed the aromatic scent of the tea, mixed with the shore's morning breath—the smell of tide flats and piney scrub. I hadn't drunk tea in months, if not years. Thoughtfully, I poured a cup, and sipped it slowly, watching the shore.

* * *

When I arrived in the surgeon's cabin, which the Governor had taken for his office, he was dressed, and alone.

"Mrs. Fraser." He nodded briefly to me, scarcely looking up. "I am obliged. Will you write, please?"

He had been writing himself, already; quills and sand and blotter were scattered about the desk, and the inkwell stood open. I picked out a decent quill and a sheet of paper, and began to write as per his dictation, with a sense of growing curiosity.

The note—dictated between bites of toast—was to a General Hugh MacDonald, and referred to the General's safe arrival upon the mainland with a Colonel McLeod. Receipt of the General's report was acknowledged, and request made for continuing information. Mention was also made of the Governor's request for support—which I knew about—and assurances he had received regarding the arrival of that support, which I didn't.

"Enclosure, a letter of credit—no, wait." The Governor darted a look in the direction of the shore—to no particular avail, as the surgeon's cabin boasted no porthole—and scowled in concentration. Evidently, it had occurred to him that in light of recent events, a letter of credit issued by the Governor's office was possibly worth less than one of Mrs. Ferguson's forgeries.

"Enclosure, twenty shillings," he amended with a sigh. "If you will make the fair copy at once, Mrs. Fraser? These, you may do at your leisure." He pushed across an untidy stack of notes, done in his own crabbed hand.

He got up then, groaning as he stretched, and went up, no doubt to peer over the railing at the fort again.

I made the copy, sanded it, and set it aside, wondering who on earth *this* MacDonald was, and what he was doing? Unless Major MacDonald had undergone a change of name and an extraordinary promotion of late, it couldn't be he. And from the tone of the Governor's remarks, it appeared that General MacDonald and his friend McLeod were traveling alone—and on some particular mission.

I flipped quickly through the waiting stack of notes, but saw nothing else of interest; just the usual administrative trivia. The Governor had left his writing desk on the table, but it was closed. I debated trying to pick the lock and rummage through his private correspondence, but there were too many people about: seamen, Marines, ship's boys, visitors—the place was seething.

There was a sense of nervous tension aboard, as well. I'd noticed many times before how a sense of danger communicates itself among people in a confined setting: hospital emergency room, surgical suite, train car, ship; urgency flashes from one person to the next without speech, like the impulse down a neuron's axon to the dendrites of another. I didn't know whether anyone beyond the Governor and myself knew about John Ashe's movements yet—but the *Cruizer* knew that something was up.

The sense of nervous anticipation was affecting me, too. I was fidgeting, toe tapping absently, fingers moving restlessly up and down the shaft of the quill, unable to concentrate enough to write with it.

I stood up, with no idea what I meant to do; only the fixed notion that I would suffocate with impatience if I stayed below any longer.

On the shelf beside the door to the cabin stood the usual half-tidy clutter of shipboard, jammed behind a rail: a candlestick, extra candles, a tinderbox, a broken pipe, a bottle with a twist of flax stopping it, a bit of wood that someone had tried to carve and made a mess of. And a box.

The *Cruizer* had no surgeon aboard. And surgeons tended to take their personal implements with them, unless they died. This must be a kit belonging to the ship itself.

I glanced out the door; there were voices nearby, but no one in sight. I hastily flipped open the box, wrinkling my nose at the scent of dried blood and stale tobacco. There wasn't much there, and what there was was thrown in higgledy-piggledy, rusted, crusted, and of little use. A tin of Blue Pills, so labeled, and a bottle, not labeled, but recognizable, of black draught—laudanum, that is. A dried-up sponge and a sticky cloth stained with something yellow. And the one thing certain to be in any surgeon's kit of the times—blades.

There were footsteps coming down the companionway, and I heard the Governor's voice, talking to someone. Without pausing to consider the wisdom of my conduct, I grabbed a small jointing knife and thrust it down the front of my stays.

I slammed shut the lid of the box. There was no time to sit down again, though, before the Governor arrived, with another visitor in tow.

My heart was hammering in my throat. I pressed my palms, damp with sweat, against my skirt, and nodded to the new arrival, who was regarding me, open-mouthed, behind the Governor.

"Major MacDonald," I said, hoping that my voice wouldn't tremble. "Fancy meeting *you* here!"

* * *

MacDonald's mouth snapped shut and he drew himself more firmly upright.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said, bowing warily. "Your servant, mum."

"You know her?" Governor Martin glanced from MacDonald to me and back, frowning.

"We've met," I said, nodding politely. It had occurred to me that it might not profit either of us for the Governor to think there was some connection between us—if indeed there was one.

The same thought had clearly struck MacDonald; his face betrayed nothing beyond faint courtesy, though I could see the thoughts darting to and fro behind his eyes like a swarm of gnats. I was entertaining a similar swarm, myself—and knowing that my own face was naturally revealing, I cast down my eyes demurely, and murmuring an excuse about refreshment, made off toward the galley.

I threaded my way through clumps of seamen and Marines, mechanically acknowledging their salutes, mind working furiously.

How? How was I going to speak to MacDonald alone? I *had* to find out what he knew about Jamie—if anything. Would he tell me, if he did know anything? But yes, I thought, he would; soldier he might be, but MacDonald was also a confirmed gossip—and he was plainly dying of curiosity at the sight of me.

The cook, a chubby young free black named Tinsdale, who wore his hair in three stubby braids that stuck out of his head like the horns of a triceratops, was at work in the galley, dreamily toasting bread over the fire.

"Oh, hullo," he said amiably, seeing me. He waved the toasting fork. "Want a bit of toast, Mrs. Fraser? Or is it the hot water, again?"

"Love some toast," I said, seized by inspiration. "But the Governor has company; he wants coffee sent. And if you have a few of those nice almond biscuits to go with it …"

Armed with a loaded coffee tray, I made my way toward the surgeon's cabin a few minutes later, heart pounding. The door was open for air; evidently it wasn't a secret meeting.

They were huddled together over the small desk, the Governor frowning at a wad of papers, these clearly having traveled some distance in MacDonald's dispatch case, judging from the creases and stains upon them. They appeared to be letters, written in a variety of hands and inks.

"Oh, coffee," the Governor said, looking up. He seemed vaguely pleased, plainly not recalling that he hadn't ordered any. "Splendid. Thank you, Mrs. Fraser."

MacDonald hastily picked up the papers, making room for me to set the tray down on the desk. The Governor had one in his hand; he kept hold of this, and I caught a quick glimpse of it as I bent to place the tray in front of him. It was a list of some sort—names on one side, numbers beside them.

I managed to knock a spoon to the floor, enabling a better look as I stooped for it. *H. Bethune, Cook's Creek, 14. Jno. McManus, Boone, 3. F. Campbell, Campbelton, 24?*

I darted a look at MacDonald, who had his eyes fixed on me. I dropped the spoon on the desk, then took a hasty step back, so that I stood directly behind the Governor. I pointed a finger at MacDonald, then in rapid succession clutched my throat, tongue protruding, grabbed my stomach with crossed forearms, then jabbed the finger again at him, then at myself, all the while giving him a monitory stare.

MacDonald viewed this pantomime with subdued fascination, but—with a veiled glance at the Governor, who was stirring his coffee with one hand, frowning at the paper he held in the other—gave me a tiny nod.

"How many can you be quite sure of?" the Governor was saying, as I curtsied and backed out.

"Oh, at least five hundred men, sir, even now," MacDonald replied confidently. "A great many more to come, as word spreads. Ye should see the enthusiasm with which the General has been received so far! I cannot speak for the Germans, of course, but depend upon it, sir, we shall have all the Highlanders of the backcountry, and not a few of the Scotch–Irish, too."

"God knows I hope you are right," the Governor said, sounding hopeful, but still dubious. "Where is the General now?"

I would have liked to hear the answer to that—and a good many other things—but the drum was beating overhead for mess, and thundering feet were already pounding down the decks and companionways. I couldn't lurk about eavesdropping in plain sight of the mess, so was obliged to go back up top, hoping that MacDonald had indeed got my message.

The captain of the *Cruizer* was standing by the rail, his first mate beside him, both scanning the shore with their telescopes.

"Is anything happening?" I could see more activity near the fort, people coming and going—but the shore road was still empty.

"Can't say, ma'am." Captain Follard shook his head, then lowered the telescope and shut it, reluctantly, as though afraid something might happen if he didn't keep his eyes fixed on the shore. The first mate didn't move, still squinting fixedly toward the fort on its bluff.

I remained there by his side, staring silently toward the shore. The tide shifted; I had been on the ship long enough to feel it, a barely perceptible pause, the sea taking breath as the invisible moon yielded its pull.

There is a tide in the affairs of men.… Surely Shakespeare had stood upon a deck, at least once, and felt that same faint shift, deep in the flesh. A professor had told me once, in medical school, that the Polynesian seafarers dared their vast journeys through the trackless sea because they had learned to sense the currents of the ocean, the shifts of wind and tide, registering these changes with that most delicate of instruments—their testicles.

It didn't take a scrotum to feel the currents that were swirling round us now, I reflected, with a sideways glance at the first mate's securely fastened white breeches. I could feel them in the pit of my stomach, in the damp of my palms, in the tenseness of the muscles at the back of my neck. The mate had lowered his telescope, but still looked toward the shore, almost absently, his hands resting on the rail.

It occurred to me suddenly that if something drastic were to happen on land, the *Cruizer* would at once lift sail and head out to sea, carrying the Governor to safety—and me farther from Jamie. Where on earth might we end up? Charlestown? Boston? Either was as likely. And no one on that seething shore would have any notion where we had gone.

I'd met displaced persons during the war—my war. Driven or taken from their homes, their families scattered, their cities destroyed, they thronged refugee camps, stood in lines besieging embassies and aid stations, asking, always asking for the names of the vanished, describing the faces of the loved and lost, grasping at any scrap of information that might lead them back to whatever might be left. Or, failing that, preserve for a moment longer what they had once been.

The day was warm, even on the water, and my clothes clung to me with humid damp, but my muscles convulsed and my hands on the rail shook with sudden chill.

I might have seen them all for the last time, not knowing it: Jamie, Bree, Jemmy, Roger, Ian. That's how it happened: I had not even said goodbye to Frank, had had no faintest inkling when he left that last night that I would never see him alive again. What if—

But no, I thought, steadying myself with a tighter grip on the wooden rail. We would find each other again. We had a place to return to. Home. And if I remained alive—as I most firmly intended to do—I *would* go back home.

The mate had shut his telescope and left; I hadn't noticed his departure, absorbed in morbid thoughts, and was quite startled when Major MacDonald hove to alongside me.

"Too bad the *Cruizer* has nay long-range guns," he said with a nod at the fort. " 'Twould put a crimp in the plans o' those wee heathen, eh?"

"Whatever those plans might be," I replied. "And speaking of plans—"

"I've a kind of a griping in the wame," he interrupted blandly. "The Governor suggested that ye might possibly have some sort of medicine to soothe it."

"Did he indeed?" I said. "Well, come down to the galley; I'll brew you a cup of something that will set you right, I expect."

* * *

"Did ye ken, he thought ye were a forger?" MacDonald, hands wrapped around a mug of tea, jerked his head in the direction of the main cabin. The Governor was nowhere in sight, and the cabin's door closed.

"I did, yes. Does he know better now?" I asked with a sense of resignation.

"Well, aye." MacDonald looked apologetic. "I supposed he knew already, or I wouldna have said. Though if I hadn't," he added, "he would have kent it sooner or later. The story's spread all the way to Edenton by now, and the broadsheets …"

I flapped a hand, dismissing this.

"Have you seen Jamie?"

"I have not." He glanced at me, curiosity warring with wariness. "I'd heard … aye, well, I've heard a great many things, and all different. But the meat of the matter is that ye've both been arrested, aye? For the murder of Miss Christie."

I nodded briefly. I wondered whether one day I would grow used to that word. The sound of it was still like a punch in the stomach, short and brutal.

"Need I tell you that there is no truth to it?" I said bluntly.

"Not the slightest need, mum," he assured me, with a fair assumption of confidence. But I sensed the hesitation in him, and saw the sideways glance, curious and somehow avid. Perhaps one day I'd get used to that, too.

My hands were cold; I wrapped them round my own mug, taking what comfort I could in its heat.

"I need to get word to my husband," I said. "Do you know where he is?"

MacDonald's pale blue eyes were fixed on my face, his own showing no more now than courteous attention.

"No, mum. But you do, I assume?"

I gave him a sharp look.

"Don't be coy," I advised him shortly. "You know as well as I do what's going on on shore—probably much better."

"Coy." His thin lips pursed in brief amusement. "I dinna believe anyone's called me that before. Aye, I know. And so?"

"I think that he *may* be in Wilmington. I tried to send word to John Ashe, and asked him to get Jamie out of the gaol in Wilmington, if possible—if he was there—and to tell him where I was. But I don't know—" I waved a hand in frustration toward the shore.

He nodded, native caution at odds with his obvious desire to ask me for the gory details of Malva's death.

"I shall be going back through Wilmington. I'll make such inquiries as may be possible. If I find Mr. Fraser—shall I tell him anything, beyond your present situation?"

I hesitated, thinking. I had been holding a constant conversation with Jamie, ever since they took him away from me. But none of what I said to him in the wide black nights or the lonely dawns seemed appropriate to confide to MacDonald. And yet … I couldn't forgo the opportunity; God knew when I might have another.

"Tell him that I love him," I said softly, my eyes on the tabletop. "I always will."

MacDonald made a small sound that made me look up at him.

"Even though he—" he began, then stopped himself.

"He didn't kill her," I said sharply. "And neither did I. I told you so."

"Of course not," he said hurriedly. "No one could imagine … I only meant … but of course, a man's but a man, and … mmphm." He broke off and looked away, the color high in his face.

"He didn't do that, either," I said through my teeth.

There was a marked silence, during which we avoided each other's gaze.

"Is General MacDonald a kinsman of yours?" I asked abruptly, needing either to change the course of the conversation or to leave.

The Major glanced up, surprised—and relieved.

"Aye, a distant cousin. The Governor's mentioned him?"

"Yes," I said. It was the truth, after all; Martin simply hadn't mentioned the General to *me*. "You're, um, assisting him, are you? It sounded as though you've been having some success."

Relieved to have escaped the social awkwardness of dealing with the question as to whether I were a murderess, and Jamie only a philanderer, or he a murderer and I his scorned and deluded dupe, MacDonald was only too eager to take the offered bait.

"Great success, indeed," he said heartily. "I've gathered pledges from many of the most prominent men in the colony; they stand ready to do the Governor's bidding at the slightest word!"

Jno. McManus, Boone, 3. Prominent men. I happened to know Jonathan McManus, whose gangrenous toes I had removed the winter before. He likely *was* the most prominent man in Boone, if by that, MacDonald meant that the other twenty inhabitants all knew him for a drunkard and a thief. It was also probably true that he had three men who would go to fight with him if called: his one-legged brother and his two feeble-minded sons. I took a sip of tea to hide my expression. Still, MacDonald had Farquard Campbell on his list; had Farquard really made a formal commitment?

“I gather the General is not presently anywhere near Brunswick, though,” I said, “given the, er, present circumstances?” If he was, the Governor would be much less nervous than he was.

MacDonald shook his head.

“No. But he is not ready to muster his forces yet; he and McLeod do but discover the readiness of the Highlanders to rise. They will not call muster until the ships come.”

“Ships?” I blurted. “What ships?”

He knew he oughtn’t to speak further, but couldn’t resist. I saw it in his eyes; after all, what danger could there be in telling me?

“The Governor has asked for aid from the Crown in subduing the factionalism and unrest that runs rampant in the colony. And has received assurances that it will be forthcoming—should he be able to raise enough support on the ground to reinforce the government troops who will arrive by ship.

“That is the plan, ye see,” he went on, warming to it. “We are notified”—*Oh, “we” indeed,* I thought—“that my Lord Cornwallis begins to gather troops in Ireland, who will take ship shortly. They should arrive in the early autumn, and join wi’ the General’s militia. Between Cornwallis on the coast and the General comin’ doon frae the hills—” He closed thumb and fingers in a pinching movement. “They’ll crush the Whiggish whoresons like a pack o’ lice!”

“Will they?” I said, endeavoring to sound impressed. Possibly they would; I had no idea, nor did I much care, being in no position to see far beyond the present moment. If I ever got off this frigging boat and out of the shadow of a noose, I’d worry about it.

The sound of the main cabin’s door opening made me look up. The Governor was closing it behind him. Turning, he saw us, and came to inquire as to MacDonald’s presumed indisposition.

“Oh, I am a great deal better,” the Major assured him, hand pressed to the waistcoat of his uniform. He belched in illustration. “Mrs. Fraser is a capital hand at such things. Capital!”

"Oh, good," Martin said. He seemed a trifle less harassed than he had earlier. "You will be wanting to go back, then." He signaled to the Marine standing at the foot of the companionway, who knuckled his forehead in acknowledgment and disappeared up the ladder.

"The boat will be ready for you in a few minutes' time." With a nod at MacDonald's half-drunk tea, and a punctilious bow to me, the Governor turned and went into the surgeon's cabin, where I could see him standing beside the desk, frowning at the heap of crumpled papers.

MacDonald hastily swallowed the rest of his tea, and with a lift of the eyebrows, invited me to accompany him to the upper deck. We were standing on deck, waiting as a local fishing boat made its way out to the *Cruizer* from shore, when he suddenly laid a hand on my arm.

This startled me; MacDonald was not a casual toucher.

"I will do my utmost to discover your husband's whereabouts, mum," he said. "It occurs to me, though—" He hesitated, eyes on my face.

"What?" I said cautiously.

"I said I had heard considerable speculation?" he said delicately. "Regarding … erm … the unfortunate demise of Miss Christie. Would it not be … desirable … that I know the truth of the matter, so that I might put any ill-natured rumors firmly to rest, should I encounter them?"

I was torn between anger and laughter. I should have known that curiosity would be too much for him. But he was right; given the rumors I had heard—and I knew they were but a fraction of those circulating—the truth was certainly more desirable. On the other hand, I was entirely sure that the telling of the truth would do nothing to quell the rumors.

And still. The urge to be justified was a strong one; I understood those poor wretches who cried their innocence from the gallows—and I bloody hoped I wasn't going to be one.

"Fine," I said crisply. The first mate was back by the rail, keeping an eye on the fort, and within earshot, but I supposed it didn't matter whether he heard.

"The truth is this: Malva Christie was got with child by *someone,* but rather than name the real father, insisted that it was my husband. I know this to be false," I added, fixing him with a gimlet stare. He nodded, mouth a little open.

"A few days later, I went out to tend my garden and found the little—Miss Christie lying in my lettuce patch with her throat freshly cut. I thought … there was some chance that I might save her unborn child.…" Despite my assumption of bravado, my voice trembled a little. I stopped, clearing my throat. "I couldn't. The child was born dead."

Much better not to say *how* it was born; that weltering image of severed flesh and dirt-smeared blade was not one I wished the Major to have in mind, if it could be prevented. I had told no one—not even Jamie—about the faint flicker of life, that tingle that I still held secret in the palms of my hands. To say that the child had been born alive was to arouse immediate suspicion that I had killed it, and I knew as much. Some would think that anyway; Mrs. Martin plainly had.

MacDonald's hand was still resting on my arm, his gaze on my face. For once, I blessed the transparency of my countenance; no one watching my face ever doubted what I said.

"I see," he said quietly, and gently squeezed my arm.

I took a deep breath, and told him the rest—circumstantial details might convince some hearers.

"You know that there were bee gums at the edge of my garden? The murderer kicked two of them over in fleeing; he must have been stung several times—I was, when I came into the garden. Jamie—Jamie had no stings. It wasn't him." And under the circumstances, I had not been able to find out which man—or woman? For the first time, it occurred to me that it could have been a woman—*had* been stung.

At this, he gave a deep "hum!" of interest. He stood for a moment in contemplation, then shook his head, as though waking from a dream, and let go my arm.

"I thank ye, mum, for telling me," he said formally, and bowed to me. "Be assured, I will speak in your behalf, whenever the occasion shall arise."

"I appreciate that, Major." My voice was husky, and I swallowed. I hadn't realized how much it would hurt to speak of.

The wind stirred around us, and the reefed sails rustled in their ropes overhead. A shout from below announced the presence of the boat that would carry MacDonald back to the shore.

He bowed low over my hand, breath warm on my knuckles. For an instant, my fingers tightened on his; I was surprisingly reluctant to let him go. But let him go I did, and watched him all the way to the shore; a diminishing silhouette against the brightness of the water, back straight with resolution. He didn't look back.

The mate moved at the rail, sighing, and I glanced at him, then at the fort.

"What are they doing?" I asked. Some of the antlike forms seemed to be dropping lines from the walls to their fellows on the ground; I saw the ropes, fine as spiderwebs from this distance.

"I do believe the fort's commander is preparing to remove the cannon, madam," he said, snapping shut his brass telescope with a click. "If you will excuse me, I need to go inform the captain."

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GUNPOWDER, TREASON, AND PLOT

If the governor's attitude toward me was altered by the news that I was not in fact a forger but rather a notorious—if merely accused—murderess, I had no opportunity to find out. He, like the rest of the officers and half the men aboard, rushed to the rail, and the rest of the day passed in a flurry of observation, speculation, and largely fruitless activity.

The lookout at the masthead called down periodic observations—men were leaving the fort, carrying things … the fort's weaponry, it looked like.

"Are they Collet's men?" the Governor bellowed, shading his eyes to look aloft.

"Can't say, sir," came the unhelpful reply from above.

At last, the *Cruizer*'s two launches were sent ashore, with orders to collect what information they could. They came back several hours later, with the news that Collet had abandoned the fort, in the face of threats, but had taken pains to remove the guns and powder, lest these fall into rebel hands.

No, sir, they had not spoken with Colonel Collet, who was—by rumor—on his way upriver with his militia forces. They had sent two men down the road toward Wilmington; it was true that a large force was gathering in the fields outside the town, under Colonels Robert Howe and John Ashe, but no word of what was planned.

“No word of what’s planned, God’s ballocks!” muttered the Governor, having been ceremoniously informed of this by Captain Follard. “They mean to burn the fort, what else would Ashe be planning, for the love of Jesus?”

His instincts were quite sound; just before sunset, the scent of smoke came across the water, and we could just make out the antlike scurrying of men, piling heaps of flammable debris around the base of the fort. It was a simple, square building, made of logs. And despite the dampness of the humid air, it *would* burn, eventually.

It took them no little time to get the fire going, though, with neither powder nor oil to hasten its burning; as night fell, we could clearly see flaming torches, streaming in the breeze as they were carried to and fro, passed from hand to hand, dipping to touch off a pile of kindling, coming back a few minutes later, as the kindling went out.

Around nine o’clock, someone found a few barrels of turpentine, and the blaze took a sudden, lethal hold of the fort’s log walls. Sheets of wavering flame rose pure and brilliant, orange and crimson billows against the night-black sky, and we heard scraps of cheering and snatches of ribald song, borne with the smell of smoke and the tang of turpentine on the offshore breeze.

“At least we needn’t worry about the mosquitoes,” I observed, waving a cloud of whitish smoke away from my face.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fraser,” said the Governor. “I had not considered that particular positive aspect of the matter.” He spoke with some bitterness, his fists resting impotently on the rail.

I took the hint, and said no more. For myself, the leaping flames and the column of smoke that rose wavering toward the stars were cause for celebration. Not for any benefit that the burning of Fort Johnston might be to the rebel cause—but because Jamie might be there, by one of the campfires that had sprung up on the shore below the fort.

And if he was … he would come tomorrow.

* * *

He did. I was awake well before dawn—in fact, I had not slept—and standing at the rail. There was little of the usual boat traffic this morning, in the wake of the fort's burning; the bitter smell of wood ash mingled with the marshy smell of the nearby mud flats, and the water was still and oily-looking. It was a gray day, heavily overcast, and a deep bank of haze hung over the water, hiding the shore.

I kept watching, though, and when a small boat came out of the haze, I knew at once that it was Jamie. He was alone.

I watched the long, smooth reach of his arms and the pull of the oars, and felt a sudden deep, calm happiness. I had no notion what might happen—and all the horror and anger connected with Malva's death still lurked at the back of my mind, a great dark shape under very thin ice. But he was *there.* Near enough now to see his face, as he looked back over his shoulder toward the ship.

I lifted a hand to wave; his eyes were already fixed on me. He didn't stop rowing, but turned round and came on. I stood clinging to the rail, waiting.

The rowboat passed out of sight for a moment, under the lee of the *Cruizer,* and I heard the watch hail him, the deep half-audible answer, and felt something that had been knotted inside me for a long time let go at the sound of his voice.

I stood rooted, though, not able to move. Then there were footsteps on deck, and a murmur of voices—someone going to fetch the Governor—and I turned blindly, into Jamie's arms.

"Knew you'd come," I whispered into the linen of his shirt. He reeked of fire: smoke and pinesap and scorched cloth, and the bitter tang of turpentine. Reeked of stale sweat and horses, the weariness of a man who has not slept, who has labored all night, the faint yeasty smell of long hunger.

He held me close, ribs and breath and warmth and muscle, then put me away from him a little and looked down into my face. He had been smiling since I saw him. It lit his eyes, and without a word, he pulled the cap off my head and threw it over the rail. He ran his hands through my hair, fluffing it out into abandon, then cupped my head in his hands and kissed me, fingers digging into my scalp. He had a three-day beard, which rasped my skin like sandpaper, and his mouth was home and safety.

Somewhere behind him, one of the Marines coughed, and said loudly, “You wished to see the Governor, I believe, sir?”

He let go, slowly, and turned.

“I do indeed,” he said, and put out a hand to me. “Sassenach?”

I took it, and followed the Marine, heading for the companionway. I glanced back over the rail, to see my cap bobbing in the swell, puffed with air and tranquil as a jellyfish.

The momentary illusion of peace vanished directly, though, once we were below.

The Governor had been up most of the night, as well, and didn’t look much better than Jamie, though he was not, of course, besmeared with soot. He was, however, unshaven, bloodshot, and in no mood to be trifled with.

“Mr. Fraser,” he said with a short nod. “You are James Fraser, I collect? And you dwell in the mountain backcountry?”

“I am the Fraser, of Fraser’s Ridge,” Jamie said courteously. “And I have come for my wife.”

“Oh, have you.” The Governor gave him a sour look and sat down, gesturing indifferently at a stool. “I regret to inform you, sir, that your wife is a prisoner of the Crown. Though perhaps you were aware of this?”

Jamie ignored this bit of sarcasm and took the proffered seat.

“In fact, she is not,” he said. “It is true, is it not, that you have declared martial law upon the colony of North Carolina?”

“It is,” Martin said shortly. This was rather a sore point, since while he *had* declared martial law, he was in no position actually to enforce it, but was obliged to float impotently offshore, fuming, until and unless England chose to send him reinforcements.

“Then in fact, all customary legal usage is suspended,” Jamie pointed out. “You alone have control over the custody and disposition of any prisoners—and my wife has in fact been in your custody for some little time. Ye therefore have also the power to release her.”

"Hm," said the Governor. Plainly he hadn't thought of that, and wasn't sure of its ramifications. At the same time, the notion that he was in control of anything at all at the moment was likely soothing to his inflamed spirits.

"She has not been committed for trial, and in fact, there has been no evidence whatever adduced against her," Jamie said firmly.

I found myself uttering a silent prayer of thanks that I had told MacDonald the gory details *after* his visit with the Governor—it might not be what a modern court called evidence, but being found with a knife in my hand and two warm, bloody corpses was very damned circumstantial.

"She is accused, but there is no merit to the charge. Surely, having had her acquaintance for even so short a time as you have, ye will have drawn your own conclusions as to her character?" Not waiting for an answer to this, he pressed on.

"When accusation was made, we did not resist the attempt to bring my wife—or myself, for I also have been accused in the matter—to trial. What better indication is there that we should hold such conviction of her innocence as to wish for a speedy trial to establish it?"

The Governor had narrowed his eyes, and appeared to be thinking intently.

"Your arguments are not entirely lacking in virtue, sir," he said at last, with formal courtesy. "However, I understand that the crime of which your wife stands accused was a most heinous one. For me to release her must necessarily cause public outcry—and I have had rather enough of public unrest," he added, with a bleak look at the scorched cuffs of Jamie's coat.

Jamie took a deep breath and had another go.

"I quite understand Your Excellency's reservations," he said. "Perhaps some … surety might be offered, which would overcome them?"

Martin sat bolt upright in his chair, receding jaw thrust out.

"What do you suggest, sir? Have you the impertinence, the—the—unspeakable bloody face to try to *bribe* me?" He slapped both hands down on the desk and glared from Jamie to me and back. “God damn it, I should hang the two of you, out of hand!”

“Very nice, Mr. Ohnat,” I muttered to Jamie under my breath. “At least we’re already married.”

“Oh, ah,” he replied, giving me a brief glance of incomprehension before returning his attention to the Governor, who was muttering “Swing them from the bloody yardarm … the infernal cheek of it, the creatures!”

“I had no such intent, sir.” Jamie kept his voice level, his eyes direct. “What I offer is a bond, against my wife’s appearance in court to answer the charge against her. When she does so appear, it would be returned to me.”

Before the Governor could respond to this, he reached into his pocket and withdrew something small and dark, which he set on the desk. The black diamond.

The sight of it stopped Martin in mid-sentence. He blinked, once, his long-nosed face going almost comically blank. He rubbed a finger slowly across his upper lip, considering.

Having seen a great deal of the Governor’s private correspondence and accounts by now, I was well aware that he had few private means, and was obliged to live far beyond his modest income in order to maintain the appearances necessary for a Royal Governor.

The Governor in turn was well aware that in the current state of unrest, there was little chance of my being brought to trial in any sort of timely manner. It could be months—and possibly years—before the court system was restored to anything like routine function. And for however long it took, he would have the diamond. He couldn’t in honor simply sell the thing—but could most assuredly borrow a substantial sum against it, in the reasonable expectation that he might redeem it later.

I saw his eyes flicker toward the sooty marks on Jamie’s coat, narrowing in speculation. There was also a good possibility of Jamie’s being killed or arrested for treason—and I saw the impulse to do just that pop momentarily into his mind—which would leave the diamond perhaps in legal limbo, but certainly in Martin's possession. I had to force myself to keep on breathing.

But he wasn't stupid, Martin—nor was he venal. With a small sigh, he pushed the stone back toward Jamie.

"No, sir," he said, though his voice had now lost its earlier outrage. "I will not accept this as bond for your wife. But the notion of surety …" His gaze went to the stack of papers on his desk, and returned to Jamie.

"I will make you a proposition, sir," he said abruptly. "I have an action in train, an operation by which I hope to raise a considerable body of the Scottish Highlanders, who will march from the backcountry to the coast, there to meet with troops sent from England, and in the process, to subdue the countryside on behalf of the King."

He paused for breath, eyeing Jamie closely to assess the effect of his speech. I was standing close behind Jamie, and couldn't see his face, but didn't need to. Bree, joking, called it his "brag face"; no one looking at him would ever know whether he held four aces, a full house, or a pair of threes. I was betting on the pair of threes, myself—but Martin didn't know him nearly as well as I did.

"General Hugh MacDonald and a Colonel Donald McLeod came into the colony some time ago, and have been traversing the countryside, rallying support—which they have gained in gratifying numbers, I am pleased to say." His fingers drummed briefly on the letters, then stopped abruptly as he leaned forward.

"What I propose, then, sir, is this: you will return to the backcountry, and gather such men as you can. You will then report to General MacDonald and commit your troops to his campaign. When I receive word from MacDonald that you have arrived—with, let us say, two hundred men—then, sir, I will release your wife to you."

My pulse was beating fast, and so was Major's; I could see it throbbing in his neck. Definitely a pair of threes. Obviously, MacDonald hadn't had time to tell the Governor—or hadn't known—just how widespread and acrimonious the response had been to Malva Christie's death. There were still men on the Ridge who would follow Jamie, I was sure—but many more who would not, or who would, but only if he repudiated me.

I was trying to think logically about the situation, as a means of distracting myself from the crushing disappointment of realizing that the Governor was not going to let me go. Jamie must go without me, leave me here. For an overwhelming instant, I thought I could not bear it; I would run mad, scream and leap across the desk to claw Josiah Martin's eyes out.

He glanced up, caught a glimpse of my face, and started back, half-rising from his chair.

Jamie put back a hand and gripped my forearm, hard.

"Be still, *a nighean,*" he said softly.

I had been holding my breath without realizing it. Now I let it out in a gasp, and made myself breathe slowly.

Just as slowly, the Governor—a wary gaze still fixed on me—lowered himself back into his seat. Clearly, the accusation against me had just become a lot more likely, in his mind. *Fine,* I thought fiercely, to keep from crying. *See how easily you sleep, with me never more than a few feet away from you.*

Jamie drew a long, deep breath, and his shoulders squared beneath his tattered coat.

"You will give me leave, sir, to consider your proposal," he said formally, and letting go of my arm, rose to his feet.

"Do not despair, *mo chridhe,*" he said to me in Gaelic. "I will see you when the morning comes."

He lifted my hand to his lips and kissed it, then, with the barest of nods to the Governor, strode out, without looking back.

There was an instant's silence in the cabin, and I heard his feet going away, climbing the ladder of the companionway. I didn't pause to consider, but reached down into my stays and withdrew the small knife I had taken from the surgeon's kit.

I jabbed it down with all my strength, so that it stuck in the wood of the desk and stood there, quivering before the Governor's astonished eyes.

"You fucking *bastard,*" I said evenly, and left.

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FOR THE SAKE OF ONE WHO IS

I was waiting at the rail again before dawn the next day. The smell of ashes was strong and acrid on the wind, but the smoke had gone. An early-morning haze still shrouded the shore, though, and I felt a small thrill of *déjà vu,* mingled with hope, as I saw the small boat come out of the mist, pulling slowly toward the ship.

As it grew closer, though, my hands tightened on the rail. It wasn't Jamie. For a few moments, I tried to convince myself that it was, that he had merely changed his coat—but with each stroke of the oars, it became more certain. I closed my eyes, stinging with tears, all the while telling myself that it was absurd to be so upset; it meant nothing.

Jamie would be here; he'd said so. The fact that someone else was coming early to the ship had nothing to do with him or me.

It did, though. Opening my eyes and wiping them on my wrist, I looked again at the rowboat, and felt a start of disbelief. It couldn't be. It was, though. He looked up at the watch's hail, and saw me at the rail. Our eyes met for an instant, then he bowed his head, reaching to the oars. Tom Christie.

The Governor was not amused at being roused from his bed at dawn for the third day running; I could hear him below, ordering one of the Marines to tell the fellow, whoever he was, to wait to a more reasonable hour—this followed by a peremptory slam of the cabin door.

I was not amused, either, and in no mood to wait. The Marine at the head of the companionway refused to allow me below, though. Heart pounding, then, I turned and made my way to the stern, where they had put Christie to wait the Governor's pleasure.

The Marine there hesitated, but after all, there were no orders to prevent me speaking with visitors; he let me pass.

"Mr. Christie." He was standing at the rail, staring back at the coast, but turned at my words.

"Mrs. Fraser." He was very pale; his grizzled beard stood out nearly black. He had trimmed it, though, and his hair, as well. While he still looked like a lightning-blasted tree, there was life in his eyes once more when he looked at me.

"My husband—" I began, but he cut me off.

"He is well. He awaits you on the shore; you will see him presently."

"Oh?" The boil of fear and fury inside me reduced itself slightly, as though someone had turned down the flame, but a sense of impatience was still steaming. "Well, what in bloody hell is going on, will you tell me that?"

He looked at me for a long moment in silence, then licked his lips briefly, and turned to look over the rail at the smooth gray swell. He glanced back at me and drew a deep breath, obviously bracing himself for something.

"I have come to confess to the murder of my daughter."

I simply stared at him, unable to make sense of his words. Then I assembled them into a sentence, read it from the tablet of my mind, and finally grasped it.

"No, you haven't," I said.

The faintest shadow of a smile seemed to stir in his beard, though it vanished almost before I had seen it.

"You remain contrary, I see," he said dryly.

"Never mind what I remain," I said, rather rudely. "Are you insane? Or is this Jamie's latest plan? Because if so—"

He stopped me with a hand on my wrist; I started at the touch, not expecting it.

"It is the truth," he said very softly. "And I will swear to it by the Holy Scriptures."

I stood looking at him, not moving. He looked back, directly, and I realized suddenly how seldom he had ever met my eyes; all through our acquaintance, he had glanced away, avoided my gaze, as though he sought to escape any real acknowledgment of me, even when obliged to speak to me.

Now that was gone, and the look in his eyes was nothing I had ever seen before. The lines of pain and suffering cut deep around them, and the lids were heavy with sorrow—but the eyes themselves were deep and calm as the sea beneath us. That sense he had carried through our nightmare journey south, that atmosphere of mute horror, numb pain, had left him, replaced by resolve and something else—something that burned, far down in his depths.

"Why?" I said at last, and he let go his grip on my wrist, stepping back a pace.

"D'ye remember once"—from the reminiscent tone of his voice, it might have been decades before—"ye asked me, did I think ye a witch?"

"I remember," I replied guardedly. "You said—" Now I remembered that conversation, all right, and something small and icy fluttered at the base of my spine. "You said that you believed in witches, all right—but you didn't think I was one."

He nodded, dark gray eyes fixed on me. I wondered whether he was about to revise that opinion, but apparently not.

"I believe in witches," he said with complete matter-of-fact seriousness. "For I've kent them. The girl was one, as was her mother before her." The icy flutter grew stronger.

"The girl," I said. "You mean your daughter? Malva?"

He shook his head a little, and his eyes took on a darker hue. "No daughter of mine," he said.

"Not—not yours? But—her eyes. She had your eyes." I heard myself say it, and could have bitten my tongue. He only smiled, though, grimly.

"And my brother's." He turned to the rail, put his hands on it, and looked across the stretch of sea, toward land. "Edgar was his name. When the Rising came, and I declared for the Stuarts, he would have none of it, saying 'twas folly. He begged me not to go." He shook his head slowly, seeing something in memory, that I knew was not the wooded shore.

"I thought—well, it doesna matter what I thought, but I went. And asked him, would he mind my wife, and the wee lad." He drew a deep breath, let it slowly out. "And he did."

"I see," I said very quietly. He turned his head sharply at the tone of my voice, gray eyes piercing.

"It was not his fault! Mona was a witch—an enchantress." His lips compressed at the expression on my face. "Ye don't believe me, I see. It is the truth; more than once, I caught her at it—working her charms, observing times—I came once to the roof o' the house at midnight, searching for her. I saw her there, stark naked and staring at the stars, standing in the center of a pentacle she'd drawn wi' the blood of a strangled dove, and her hair flying loose, mad in the wind."

"Her hair," I said, looking for some thread to grasp in this, and suddenly realizing. "She had hair like mine, didn't she?"

He nodded, looking away, and I saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"She was … what she was," he said softly. "I tried to save her—by prayer, by love. I could not."

"What happened to her?" I asked, keeping my voice as low as his. With the wind as it was, there was little chance of our being overheard here, but this was not the sort of thing I thought anyone should hear.

He sighed, and swallowed again.

"She was hangit," he said, sounding almost matter-of-fact about it. "For the murder of my brother."

This, it seemed, had happened while Tom was imprisoned at Ardsmuir; she had sent him word, before her execution, telling him of Malva's birth, and that she was confiding care of the children to Edgar's wife.

"I suppose she thought that funny," he said, sounding abstracted. "She'd the oddest sense of humor, Mona had."

I felt cold, beyond the chill of the early-morning breeze, and hugged my elbows.

"But you got them back—Allan and Malva."

He nodded; he had been transported, but had the good fortune to have his indenture bought by a kind and wealthy man, who had given him the money for the children's passage to the Colonies. But then both his employer and the wife he had taken here had died in an epidemic of the yellow fever, and casting about for some new opportunity, he had heard of Jamie Fraser's settling in North Carolina and that he would help those men he had known in Ardsmuir to land of their own.

"I would to God I had cut my own throat before I came," he said, turning back abruptly to me. "Believe me in that."

He seemed entirely sincere. I didn't know what to say in response, but he seemed to require none, and went on.

"The girl … she was nay more than five years old when I first saw her, but already she had it—the same slyness, the charm—the same darkness of soul."

He had tried to the best of his ability to save Malva, as well—to beat the wickedness out of her, to constrain the streak of wildness, above all, to keep her from working her wiles upon men.

"Her mither had that, too." His lips tightened at the thought. "Any man. It was the curse of Lilith that they had, the both of them."

I felt a hollowness in the pit of my stomach, as he came back now to the matter of Malva.

"But she was with child …" I said.

His face paled further, but his voice was firm.

"Aye, she was. I do not think it wrong to prevent yet another witch from entering the world."

Seeing my face, he went on before I could interrupt.

"Ye ken she tried to kill ye? You and me, both."

"What do you mean? Tried to kill me, how?"

"When ye told her about the invisible things, the—the germs. She took great interest in that. She told me, when I caught her wi' the bones."

"What bones?" I asked, a sliver of ice running down my back.

"The bones she took from Ephraim's grave, to work her charms upon your husband. She didna use them all, and I found them in her workbasket later. I beat her, badly, and she told me then."

Accustomed to wander alone in the woods in search of food plants and herbs, she had been doing so during the height of the dysentery epidemic. And in her wanderings, had come upon the isolated cabin of the sin-eater, that strange, damaged man. She had found him near death, burning with fever and sunk in coma, and while she stood there undecided whether to run for help, or only run, he had in fact died.

Whereupon, seized by inspiration—and bearing my careful teachings in mind—she had taken mucus and blood from the body and put it into a little bottle with a bit of broth from the kettle on the hearth, nurturing it inside her stays with the warmth of her own body.

And had slipped a few drops of this deadly infusion into my food, and that of her father, in the hope that if we fell sick, our deaths would be seen as no more than a part of the sickness that plagued the Ridge.

My lips felt stiff and bloodless.

"You're sure of this?" I whispered. He nodded, making no effort to convince me, and that alone gave me conviction that he spoke the truth.

"She wanted—Jamie?" I asked.

He closed his eyes for a moment; the sun was coming up, and while the brilliance of it was behind us, the gleam off the water was bright as silver plate.

"She … wanted," he said at last. "She lusted. Lusted for wealth, for position, for what she saw as freedom, not seeing it as license—never seeing!" He spoke with sudden violence, and I thought it was not Malva alone who had never seen things as he did.

But she had wanted Jamie, whether for himself or only for his property. And when her love charm failed, and the epidemic of sickness came, had taken a more direct way toward what she wanted. I could not yet find a way to grasp that—and yet I knew it was true.

And then, finding herself inconveniently with child, she had come up with a new scheme.

"Do you know who the father really was?" I asked, my throat tightening again—I thought it always would—at the memory of the sunlit garden and the two neat, small bodies, ruined and wasted. Such a waste.

He shook his head, but would not look at me, and I knew that he had some idea, at least. He would not tell me, though, and I supposed it didn't matter just now. And the Governor would be up soon, ready to receive him.

He, too, heard the stirrings down below, and took a deep breath.

"I could not let her destroy so many lives; could not let her go on. For she was a witch, make no mistake; that she failed to kill either you or me was no more than luck. She would have killed someone, before she finished. Perhaps you, if your husband clung to you. Perhaps him, in the hope of inheriting his property for the child." He took a ragged, painful breath.

"She was not born of my loins, and yet—she was my daughter, my blood. I could not … could not allow … I was responsible." He stopped, unable to finish. In this, I thought, he told the truth. And yet …

"Thomas," I said firmly, "this is twaddle, and you know it."

He looked at me, surprised, and I saw that tears stood in his eyes. He blinked them back and answered fiercely.

"Say you so? You know nothing, nothing!"

He saw me flinch, and looked down. Then, awkwardly, he reached out and took my hand. I felt the scars of the surgery I had done, the flexible strength of his gripping fingers.

"I have waited all my life, in a search …" He waved his free hand vaguely, then closed his fingers, as though grasping the thought, and continued more surely, “No. In hope. In hope of a thing I could not name, but that I knew must exist.”

His eyes searched my face, intent, as though he memorized my features. I raised a hand, uncomfortable under this scrutiny, intending, I suppose, to tidy my mad hair—but he caught my hand and held it, surprising me.

“Leave it,” he said.

Standing with both hands in his, I had no choice.

“Thomas,” I said, uncertain. “Mr. Christie …”

“I became convinced that it was God I sought. Perhaps it was. But God is not flesh and blood, and the love of God alone could not sustain me.

“I have written down my confession.” He let go, and poked a hand into his pocket, fumbling a little, and pulled out a folded paper, which he clutched in his short, solid fingers.

“I have sworn here that it was I who killed my daughter, for the shame she had brought upon me by her wantonness.” He spoke firmly enough, but I could see the working of his throat above the wilted stock.

“You didn’t,” I said positively. “I know you didn’t.”

He blinked, gazing at me.

“No,” he said, quite matter-of-fact. “But perhaps I should have.

“I have written a copy of this confession,” he said, tucking the document back into his coat, “and have left it with the newspaper in New Bern. They will publish it. The Governor will accept it—how can he not?—and you will go free.”

Those last four words struck me dumb. He was still gripping my right hand; his thumb stroked gently over my knuckles. I wanted to pull away, but forced myself to keep still, compelled by the look in his eyes, clear gray and naked now, without disguise.

“I have yearned always,” he said softly, “for love given and returned; have spent my life in the attempt to give my love to those who were not worthy of it. Allow me this: to give my life for the sake of one who is.”

I felt as though someone had knocked the wind from me. I hadn’t any breath, but struggled to form words.

“Mr. Chr—Tom,” I said. “You mustn’t. Your life has—has value. You can’t throw it away like this!”

He nodded, patient.

“I know that. If it did not, this would not matter.”

Feet were coming up the companionway, and I heard the Governor’s voice below, in cheerful conversation with the Captain of Marines.

“Thomas! Don’t do this!”

He only looked at me, and smiled—had I ever seen him smile?—but did not speak. He raised my hand and bent over it; I felt the prickle of his beard and the warmth of his breath, the softness of his lips.

“I am your servant, madam,” he said very softly. He squeezed my hand and released it, then turned and glanced toward the shore. A small boat was coming, dark against the glitter of the silver sea. “Your husband is coming for you. *Adieu,* Mrs. Fraser.”

He turned and walked away, back steady in spite of the swell that rose and fell beneath us.

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PART ELEVEN

In the Day of Vengeance

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TO KEEP A GHOST AT BAY

Jamie groaned, stretched, and sat down heavily on the bed.

"I feel as though someone's stepped on my cock."

"Oh?" I opened one eye to look at him. "Who?"

He gave me a bloodshot look.

"I dinna ken, but it feels as though it was someone heavy."

"Lie down," I said, yawning. "We haven't got to leave right away; you can rest a bit more."

He shook his head.

"Nay, I want to be home. We've been gone too long as it is." Nonetheless, he didn't get up and finish dressing, but continued to sit on the swaybacked inn bed in his shirt, big hands hanging idle between his thighs.

He looked tired to death, in spite of just having risen, and no wonder. I didn't think he could have slept at all for several days, what with his search for me, the burning of Fort Johnston, and the events attending my release from the *Cruizer*. Remembering, I felt a pall settle over my own spirits, in spite of the joy in which I had wakened, realizing that I was free, on land, and with Jamie.

"Lie down," I repeated. I rolled toward him, and put a hand on his back. "It's barely dawn. At least wait for breakfast; you can't travel without rest *or* food."

He glanced at the window, still shuttered; the cracks had begun to pale with the growing light, but I was right; there was no sound below of fires being stoked or pots banged in preparation. Capitulating suddenly, he collapsed slowly sideways, unable to repress a sigh as his head settled back on the pillow.

He didn't protest when I flung the ratty quilt over him, nor yet when I curved my body to fit round him, wrapping an arm about his waist and laying my cheek against his back. He still smelled of smoke, though both of us had washed hastily the night before, before falling into bed and a dearly bought oblivion.

I could feel how tired he was. My own joints still ached with fatigue—and from the lumps in the flattened, wool-stuffed mattress. Ian had been waiting with horses when we came ashore, and we had ridden as far as we could before darkness fell, finally fetching up at a ramshackle inn in the middle of nowhere, a crude roadside accommodation for wagoneers on their way to the coast.

"Malcolm," he'd said, with the slightest of hesitations, when the innkeeper had asked his name. "Alexander Malcolm."

"And Murray," Ian had said, yawning and scratching his ribs. "John Murray."

The innkeeper had nodded, not particularly caring. There was no reason why he should associate three nondescript, bedraggled travelers with a notorious case of murder—and yet I had felt panic well up under my diaphragm when he glanced at me.

I had sensed Jamie's hesitation in giving the name, his distaste for reassuming one of the many aliases he had once lived under. More than most men, he valued his name—I only hoped that given time, it would once more *have* value.

Roger might help. He would be a full-fledged minister by now, I thought, smiling at the thought. He had a true gift for soothing the divisions among the inhabitants of the Ridge, easing acrimony—and having the additional authority of being an ordained minister, his influence would be increased.

It would be good to have him back. And to see Bree and Jemmy again—I had a moment's longing for them, though we would see them soon; we meant to go through Cross Creek and collect them on the way. But of course, neither Bree nor Roger had any notion what had happened in the last three weeks—nor what life might now be like, in the wake of it.

The birds were in full voice in the trees outside; after the constant screeching of gulls and terns that formed the background of life on the *Cruizer,* the sound of them was tender, a homely conversation that made me long suddenly for the Ridge. I understood Jamie's strong urge to be home—even knowing that what we would find there was not the same life we had left. The Christies would be gone, for one thing.

I hadn't had the chance to ask Jamie about the circumstances of my rescue; I had finally been put ashore just before sunset, and we had ridden off at once, Jamie wanting to put as much distance as possible between me and Governor Martin—and, perhaps, Tom Christie.

"Jamie," I said softly, my breath warm in the folds of his shirt. "Did you make him do it? Tom?"

"No." His voice was soft, too. "He came to Fergus's printshop, the day after ye left the palace. He'd heard that the gaol had burned —"

I sat up in bed, shocked.

"What? Sheriff Tolliver's house? No one told me that!"

He rolled onto his back, looking up at me.

"I dinna suppose anyone ye've spoken to in the last week or two would know," he said mildly. "No one was killed, Sassenach—I asked."

"You're sure of it?" I asked with uneasy thoughts of Sadie Ferguson. "How did it happen? A mob?"

"No," he said, yawning. "From what I hear, Mrs. Tolliver got stinking drunk, stoked her laundry fire too high, then lay down in the shade and fell asleep. The wood collapsed, the embers set fire to the grass, it spread to the house, and …" He flipped a hand in dismissal. "The neighbor smelt smoke, though, and rushed over in time to drag Mrs. Tolliver and the bairn safe away. He said there was no one else in the place."

"Oh. Well …" I let him persuade me to lie down again, my head resting in the hollow of his shoulder. I couldn't feel strange with him, not after spending the night pressed close against him in the narrow bed, each of us aware of the other's every small movement. Still, I was very conscious of him.

And he of me; his arm was round me, his fingers unconsciously exploring the length of my back, lightly reading the shapes of me like braille as he talked.

"So, then, Tom. He kent about *L'Onion,* of course, and so went there, when he found ye'd disappeared from the gaol. By then, of course, ye'd gone from the palace, as well—it had taken him some time to part company wi' Richard Brown, without rousing their suspicions.

"But he found us there, and he told me what he meant to do." His fingers stroked the back of my neck, and I felt the tightness there begin to relax. "I told him to bide; I should have a go at getting ye back on my own—but if I could not …"

"So you know he didn't do it." I spoke with certainty. "Did he tell you he had?"

"He only said that he had kept silent while there was any chance of ye being tried and acquitted—but that had ye ever seemed in urgent danger, then he'd meant to speak up at once; that's why he insisted upon coming with us. I, ah, didna wish to ask him questions," he said delicately.

"But he didn't do it." I prodded, insistent. "Jamie, you *know* he didn't!"

I felt the rise of his chest under my cheek as he breathed.

"I know," he said softly.

We were silent for a bit. There was a sudden, muffled rapping outside, and I jerked—but it was only a woodpecker, hunting insects in the wormy timbers of the inn.

"Will they hang him, do you think?" I asked at last, staring up at the splintered beams above.

"I expect they will, aye." His fingers had resumed their half-unconscious motion, smoothing strands of my hair behind my ear. I lay still, listening to the slow thump of his heart, not wanting to ask what came next. But I had to.

"Jamie—tell me that he didn't do it—that he didn't make that confession—for me. Please." I didn't think I could bear that, not on top of everything else.

His fingers stilled, just touching my ear.

"He loves you. Ye ken that, aye?" He spoke very quietly; I heard the reverberation of the words in his chest, as much as the words themselves.

"He said he did." I felt a tightness in the throat, recalling that very direct gray look. Tom Christie was a man who said what he meant, and meant what he said—a man like Jamie, in that regard at least.

Jamie was quiet for what seemed a long time. Then he sighed, and turned his head so his cheek rested against my hair; I heard the faint rasp of his whiskers.

"Sassenach—I would have done the same, and counted my life well lost, if it saved ye. If he feels the same, then ye've done nay wrong to him, to take your life from his hand."

"Oh, dear," I said. "Oh, dear." I didn't want to think of any of it—not Tom's clear gray look and the calling of gulls, not the lines of affliction that carved his face into pieces, not the thought of what he had suffered, in loss, in guilt, in suspicion—in fear. Nor did I want to think of Malva, going unwitting to that death among the lettuces, her son heavy and peaceful in her womb. Nor the dark rusty blood drying in gouts and splashes among the leaves of the grapevines.

Above all, I didn't want to think that I had had any part in this tragedy—but that was inescapable.

I swallowed, hard.

"Jamie—can it ever be made right?"

He held my hand now, in his other hand, stroking his thumb gently back and forth under my fingers.

"The lass is dead, *mo chridhe.*"

I closed my hand on his thumb, stilling it.

"Yes, and someone killed her—and it wasn't Tom. Oh, God, Jamie—who? Who was it?"

"I dinna ken," he said, and his eyes grew deep with sadness. "She was a lass who craved love, I think—and took it. But she didna ken how to give it back again."

I took a deep breath and asked the question that had lain unspoken between us since the murder.

"You don't think it was Ian?"

He nearly smiled at that.

"If it had been, *a nighean,* we'd know. Ian could kill; he couldna let you or me suffer for it."

I sighed, shifting my shoulders to ease the knot between them. He was right, and I felt comforted, on Ian's account—and still more guilty, on Tom Christie's.

"The man who fathered her child—if that wasn't Ian, and I so hope it wasn't—or someone who wanted her and killed her from jealousy when he found she was pregnant—"

"Or someone already wed. Or a woman, Sassenach."

That stopped me cold. "A woman?"

"She took love," he repeated, and shook his head. "What makes ye think it was only the young men she took it from?"

I closed my eyes, envisioning the possibilities. If she had had an affair with a married man—and they had looked at her, too, only more discreetly—yes, he might have killed her to keep it undiscovered. Or a scorned wife … I had a brief, shocking glimpse of Murdina Bug, face contorted with effort as she pressed the pillow over Lionel Brown's face. Arch? God, no. Once again, with a sense of utter hopelessness, I turned away from the question, seeing in mind the myriad faces of Fraser's Ridge—one of them hiding a murderer's soul.

"No, I know it can't be fixed for them—not Malva, or Tom. Or—or even Allan." For the first time, I spared a thought for Tom's son, so suddenly bereft of his family and in such dreadful circumstances. "But the rest …" The Ridge, I meant. Home. The life we had had. Us.

It had grown warm under the quilt, lying together—too warm, and I felt the heat of a hot flush wash over me. I sat up abruptly, throwing off the quilt, and leaned forward, lifting the hair off my neck in hopes of an instant's coolness.

"Stand up, Sassenach."

Jamie rolled out of bed, stood up, and took me by the hand, pulling me to my feet. Sweat had already broken out on my body like dew, and my cheeks were flushed. He bent and, taking the hem of my shift in both hands, stripped it off over my head.

He smiled faintly, looking at me, then bent and blew softly over my breasts. The coolness was a tiny but blessed relief, and my nipples rose in silent gratitude.

He opened the shutters for more air, then stepped back and pulled off his own shirt. Day had broken fully now, and the flood of pure morning light glimmered on the lines of his pale torso, on the silver web of his scars, the red-gold dusting of hair on his arms and legs, the rust and silver hairs of his sprouting beard. Likewise on the darkly suffused flesh of his genitals in their morning state, standing stiff against his belly and gone the deep, soft color one would find in the heart of a shadowed rose.

"As to putting things right," he said, "I canna say—though I mean to try." His eyes moved over me—stark naked, slightly salt-encrusted, and noticeably grimy about the feet and ankles. He smiled. "Shall we make a start, Sassenach?"

"You're so tired you can barely stand up," I protested. "Um—with certain exceptions," I added, glancing down. It was true; there were dark hollows under his eyes, and while the lines of his body were still long and graceful, they were also eloquent of deep fatigue. I felt as though I'd been run over by a steamroller myself, and *I* hadn't been up all night burning down forts.

"Well, seeing as we've a bed to hand, I didna plan to stand up for it," he replied. "Mind, I may never get back on my feet again, but I think I might be able to stay awake for the next ten minutes or so, at least. Ye can pinch me if I fall asleep," he suggested, smiling.

I rolled my eyes at him, but didn't argue. I lay down upon the grubby but now-cool sheets, and with a small tremor in the pit of my stomach, opened my legs for him.

We made love like people underwater, heavy-limbed and slow. Mute, able to speak only through crude pantomime. We had barely touched one another in this way since Malva's death—and the thought of her was still with us.

And not only her. For a time, I tried to focus only on Jamie, fixing my attention on the small intimacies of his body, so well known—the tiny white cicatrice of the triangular scar at his throat, the whorls of auburn hair and the sunburned skin beneath—but I was so tired that my mind refused to cooperate, and persisted in showing me instead random bits of memory or, even more disturbing, imagination.

"It's no good," I said. My eyes were shut tight, and I was clinging to the bedclothes with both hands, sheets knotted in my fingers. "I can't."

He made a small sound of surprise, but at once rolled away, leaving me damp and trembling.

"What is it, *a nighean*?" he said softly. He didn't touch me, but lay close.

"I don't know," I said, close to panic. "I keep seeing—I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Jamie. I see other people; it's like I'm making love to other m-men."

"Oh, aye?" He sounded cautious, but not upset. There was a whish of fabric, and he drew the sheet up over me. That helped a little, but not much. My heart was pounding hard in my chest, I felt dizzy and couldn't seem to take a full breath; my throat kept closing.

Bolus hystericus, I thought, quite calmly. *Do stop, Beauchamp.* Easier said than done, but I did stop worrying that I was having a heart attack.

"Ah …" Jamie's voice was cautious. "Who? Hodgepile and—"

"No!" My stomach clenched in revulsion at the thought. I swallowed. "No, I—I hadn't even thought of that."

He lay quietly beside me, breathing. I felt as though I were literally coming apart.

"Who is it that ye see, Claire?" he whispered. "Can ye tell me?"

"Frank," I said, fast, before I could change my mind. "And Tom. And—and Malva." My chest heaved, and I felt that I would never have air enough to breathe again.

"I could—all of a sudden, I could feel them all," I blurted. "Touching me. Wanting to come in." I rolled over, burying my face in the pillow, as though I could seal out everything.

Jamie was silent for a long time. Had I hurt him? I was sorry that I'd told him—but I had no defenses anymore. I could not lie, even for the best of reasons; there was simply no place to go, nowhere to hide. I felt beset by whispering ghosts, their loss, their need, their desperate love pulling me apart. Apart from Jamie, apart from myself.

My entire body was clenched and rigid, trying to keep from dissolution, and my face was pushed so deep into the pillow, trying to escape, that I felt I might suffocate, and was obliged to turn my head, gasping for breath.

"Claire." Jamie's voice was soft, but I felt his breath on my face and my eyes popped open. His eyes were soft, too, shadowed with sorrow. Very slowly, he lifted a hand and touched my lips.

"Tom," I blurted. "I feel as though he's already dead, because of me, and it's so terrible. I can't bear it, Jamie, I really can't!"

"I know." He moved his hand, hesitated. "Can ye bear it if I touch ye?"

"I don't know." I swallowed the lump in my throat. "Try it and see."

That made him smile, though I'd spoken with complete seriousness. He put his hand gently on my shoulder and turned me, then gathered me against him, moving slowly, so that I might pull back. I didn't.

I sank into him, and clung to him as though he was a floating spar, the only thing keeping me from drowning. He was.

He held me close and stroked my hair for a long time.

"Can ye weep for them, *mo nighean donn*?" he whispered into my hair at last. "Let them come in."

The mere idea made me go rigid with panic again. "I can't."

"Weep for them," he whispered, and his voice opened me deeper than his cock. "Ye canna hold a ghost at bay."

"I can't. I'm afraid," I said, but I was already shaking with grief, tears wet on my face. "I can't!"

And yet I did. Gave up the struggle and opened myself, to memory and sorrow. Sobbed as though my heart would break—and let it break, for them, and all I could not save.

“Let them come, and grieve them, Claire,” he whispered. “And when they’ve gone, I’ll take ye home.”

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OLD MASTER

River Run

It had rained hard the night before, and while the sun had come out bright and hot, the ground was soggy and steam seemed to rise from it, adding to the thickness of the air. Brianna had put her hair up, to keep it off her neck, but wisps escaped constantly, clinging damply to forehead and cheeks, always in her eyes. She wiped a strand away crossly with the back of her hand; her fingers were smeared with the pigment she was grinding—and the humidity wasn't doing *that* any good, making the powder clump and cling to the sides of the mortar.

She needed it, though; she had a new commission, due to start this afternoon.

Jem was hanging round, too, bored and poking his fingers into everything. He was singing to himself, half under his breath; she paid no attention, until she happened to catch a few words.

"*What* did you say?" she asked, rounding on him incredulously. He couldn't have been singing "Folsom Prison Blues"—could he?

He blinked at her, lowered his chin to his chest, and said—in the deepest voice he could produce—"Hello. I'm Johnny Cash."

She narrowly stopped herself laughing out loud, feeling her cheeks go pink with the effort of containment.

"Where did you get that?" she asked, though she knew perfectly well. There was only one place he *could* have gotten it, and her heart rose up at the thought.

"Daddy," he said logically.

"Has Daddy been singing?" she asked, trying to sound casual. He had to have been. And, just as obviously, had to have been trying Claire's advice, to shift the register of his voice so as to loosen his frozen vocal cords.

"Uh-huh. Daddy sings a lot. He teached me the song about Sunday morning, and the one about Tom Dooley, and … and lots," he ended, rather at a loss.

"Did he? Well, that's—put that down!" she said, as he idly picked up an open pouch of rose madder.

"Oops." He looked guiltily at the blob of paint that had erupted from the leather pouch and landed on his shirt, then at her, and made a tentative move toward the door.

"Oops, he says," she said darkly. "Don't you move!" Snaking out a hand, she grabbed him by the collar and applied a turpentine-soaked rag vigorously to the front of his shirt, succeeding only in producing a large pink blotch rather than a vivid red line.

Jem was silent during this ordeal, head bobbing as she pulled him to and fro, swabbing.

"What are you doing in here, anyway?" she demanded crossly. "Didn't I tell you to go find something to do?" There was no shortage of things to do at River Run, after all.

He hung his head and muttered something, in which she made out the word "scared."

"Scared? Of what?" A little more gently, she pulled the shirt off over his head.

"The ghost."

"What ghost?" she asked warily, not sure yet how to handle this. She was aware that all of the slaves at River Run believed implicitly in ghosts, simply as a fact of life. So did virtually all of the Scottish settlers in Cross Creek, Campbelton, and the Ridge. And the Germans from Salem and Bethania. So, for that matter, did her own father.

She could not simply inform Jem that there was no such thing as a ghost—particularly as she was not entirely convinced of that herself.

"*Maighistear àrsaidh*'s ghost," he said, looking up at her for the first time, his dark blue eyes troubled. "Josh says he's been walkin'."

Something skittered down her back like a centipede. *Maighistear àrsaidh* was Old Master—Hector Cameron. Involuntarily, she glanced toward the window. They were in the small room above the stable block where she did the messier bits of paint preparation, and Hector Cameron's white marble mausoleum was clearly visible from here, gleaming like a tooth at the side of the lawn below.

"What makes Josh say that, I wonder?" she said, stalling for time. Her first impulse was to observe that ghosts didn't walk in broad daylight—but the obvious corollary to that was that they *did* walk by night, and the last thing she wanted to do was give Jem nightmares.

"He says Angelina saw him, night before last. A *big* ol' ghost," he said, stretching up, hands clawed, and widening his eyes in obvious imitation of Josh's account.

"Yeah? What was he doing?" She kept her tone light, only mildly interested, and it seemed to be working; Jem was more interested than scared, for the moment.

"Walkin'," Jem said with a small shrug. What else did ghosts do, after all?

"Was he smoking a pipe?" She'd caught sight of a tall gentleman strolling under the trees on the lawn below, and had an idea.

Jem looked somewhat taken aback at the notion of a pipe-smoking ghost.

"I dunno," he said dubiously. "Do ghosts smoke pipes?"

"I sort of doubt it," she said. "But Mr. Buchanan does. See him down there on the lawn?" She moved aside, gesturing toward the window with her chin, and Jem rose up on his toes to look out over the sill. Mr. Buchanan, an acquaintance of Duncan's who was staying at the house, was in fact smoking a pipe at this very moment; the faint aroma of his tobacco reached them through the open window.

"I think probably Angelina saw Mr. Buchanan walking around in the dark," she said. "Maybe he was in his nightshirt, going out to the necessary, and she just saw the white and *thought* he was a ghost."

Jem giggled at the thought. He seemed willing to be reassured, but hunched his skinny shoulders, peering closely at Mr. Buchanan.

"Josh says Angelina says the ghost was comin' out of old Mr. Hector's tomb," he said.

"I expect Mr. Buchanan just walked round it, and she saw him coming along the side, and *thought* he was coming out of it," she said, carefully avoiding any question as to why a middle-aged Scottish gentleman should be walking round tombs in his nightshirt; obviously, that wasn't a notion that struck Jemmy as odd.

It did occur to her to ask just what Angelina was doing outside in the middle of the night seeing ghosts, but on second thought, better not. The most likely reason for a maid's stealing out at night wasn't something a boy of Jemmy's age needed to hear about, either.

Her lips tightened a little at the thought of Malva Christie, who had perhaps gone to a rendezvous of her own in Claire's garden. Who? she wondered for the thousandth time, even as she automatically crossed herself, with a brief prayer for the repose of Malva's soul. Who had it been? If ever there were a ghost that should walk …

A small shiver passed over her, but that in turn gave her a new idea.

"I think it was Mr. Buchanan Angelina saw," she said firmly. "But if you ever *should* be afraid of ghosts—or anything else—you just make the Sign of the Cross, and say a quick prayer to your guardian angel."

The words gave her a slight sense of dizziness—perhaps it was *déjà vu.* She thought that someone—her mother? her father?—had said exactly that to her, sometime in the distant past of her childhood. What she had been afraid of? She no longer remembered that, but did remember the sense of security that the prayer had given her.

Jem frowned uncertainly at that; he knew the Sign of the Cross, but wasn't so sure about the angel prayer. She rehearsed it with him, feeling slightly guilty as she did so.

It was only a matter of time before he did something overtly Catholic—like make the Sign of the Cross—in front of someone who mattered to Roger. For the most part, people either assumed that the minister's wife was Protestant, as well—or knew the truth, but were in no position to make a fuss about it. She was aware of a certain amount of muttering amongst Roger's flock, particularly in the wake of Malva's death and the talk about her parents—she felt her lips press tight again, and consciously relaxed them—but Roger steadfastly refused to hear any such remarks.

She felt a deep pang of longing for Roger, even with the worrying thought of potential religious complications fresh in her mind. He'd written; Elder McCorkle had been delayed, but should be in Edenton within the week. A week more, maybe, before the Presbytery Session convened—and then he'd be coming to River Run for her and Jem.

He was so happy at the thought of his ordination; surely once he *was* ordained, they couldn't defrock him—if that's what happened to miscreant ministers—for having a Catholic wife, could they?

Would she convert, if she had to, for Roger to be what he so clearly wanted—and needed—to be? The thought made her feel hollow, and she put her arms round Jemmy for reassurance. His skin was damp and still baby-soft, but she could feel the hardness of his bones pressing through, giving promise of a size that would likely one day match his father and grandfather. His father—there was a small, glowing thought that calmed all her anxieties, and even soothed the ache of missing Roger.

Jemmy's hair had long since grown again, but she kissed the spot behind his left ear where the hidden mark was, making him hunch his shoulders and giggle at the tickle of her breath on his neck.

She sent him off then, to take the paint-stained shirt to Matilda the laundress to see what might be done, and went back to her grinding.

The mineral smell of the malachite in her mortar seemed vaguely wrong; she lifted it and sniffed, even as she did so aware that that was ridiculous: ground stone couldn't go bad. Maybe the mixture of turpentine and the fumes from Mr. Buchanan's pipe was affecting her sense of smell. She shook her head, and scraped the soft green powder carefully out into a vial, to be mixed with walnut oil or used in an egg tempera later.

She cast an appraising eye over the selection of boxes and pouches—some supplied by Aunt Jocasta, others courtesy of John Grey, sent specially from London—and the vials and drying trays of the pigments she'd ground herself, to see what else might be needed.

This afternoon, she'd only be making preliminary sketches—the commission was for a portrait of Mr. Forbes's ancient mother—but she might have only a week or two to finish the job before Roger's return; she couldn't waste—

A wave of dizziness made her sit down suddenly, and black spots flickered through her vision. She put her head between her knees, breathing deep. That didn't help; the air was raw with turps, and thick with the meaty, decaying animal smells of the stables below.

She lifted her head, and grabbed for the edge of the table. Her insides seemed to have turned abruptly to a liquid substance that shifted with her movement like water in a bowl, sloshing from belly to throat and back, leaving the bitter yellow smell of bile at the back of her nose.

"Oh, God."

The liquid in her belly rushed up her throat, and she had barely time to seize the washbasin from the table and dump the water on the floor before her stomach turned inside out in the frantic effort to empty itself.

She set the basin down, very carefully, and sat panting, staring at the wet blotch on the floor, as the world beneath her shifted on its axis and settled at a new, uneasy angle.

"Congratulations, Roger," she said out loud, her voice sounding faint and uncertain in the close, damp air. "I *think* you're going to be a daddy. Again."

* * *

She sat still for some time, cautiously exploring the sensations of her body, looking for certainty. She hadn't been sick with Jemmy—but she remembered the oddly altered quality of her senses; that odd state called synesthesia, where sight, smell, taste, and even sometimes hearing occasionally and weirdly took on characteristics of each other.

It had gone away as abruptly as it had happened; the tang of Mr. Buchanan's tobacco was much stronger, but now it was only the mellow burning of cured leaves, not a mottled green-brown thing that writhed through her sinuses and rattled the membranes of her brain like a tin roof in a hailstorm.

She had been concentrating so hard on her bodily sensations and what they might or might not mean that she hadn't really noticed the voices in the next room. That was Duncan's modest lair, where he kept the ledgers and accounts of the estate and—she thought—went to hide, when the grandeur of the house became too much for him.

Mr. Buchanan was in there with Duncan now, and what had started out as a genial thrum of conversation was now showing signs of strain. She got up, relieved to feel only a slight residual clamminess now, and picked up the basin. She had the natural human inclinations toward eavesdropping, but lately, she had been careful not to hear anything but what she must.

Duncan and her aunt Jocasta were stout Loyalists, and nothing she could say by way of tactful urging or logical argument would sway them. She had overheard more than one of Duncan's private conversations with local Tories that made her heart go small with apprehension, knowing as she did what would be the outcome of the present events.

Here in the piedmont, in the heart of the Cape Fear country, most of the solid citizens *were* Loyalists, convinced that the violence taking place to the north was an overblown rumpus that might be unnecessary, and if it was not, had little to do with them—and that what was most needed here was a firm hand to rein in the wild-eyed

Whigs, before their excesses provoked a ruinous retaliation. Knowing that exactly such a ruinous retaliation was coming—and to people she liked, or even loved—gave her what her father called the grue: a cold sense of oppressive horror, coiling through the blood.

"When, then?" Buchanan's voice came clearly as she opened the door, sounding impatient. "They will not wait, Duncan. I must have the money by Wednesday week, or Dunkling will sell the arms elsewhere; ye ken it's a seller's market the noo. For gold, he'll wait—but not for long."

"Aye, I ken that fine, Sawny." Duncan sounded impatient—and very uneasy, Brianna thought. "If it can be done, it will be."

"IF?" Buchanan cried. "What is this 'if'? 'Til now, it's been, oh, aye, Sawny, nay difficulty, to be sure, Sawny, tell Dunkling it's on, oh, of *course,* Sawny—"

"I said, Alexander, that if it can be done, it will." Duncan's voice was low, but suddenly had a note of steel in it that she had never heard before.

Buchanan said something rude in the Gaelic, and suddenly the door of Duncan's office burst open and the man himself popped out, in so great a huff that he barely saw her, and gave her no more than a brusque nod in passing.

Which was just as well, she thought, since she was standing there holding a bowl full of vomit.

Before she could move to dispose of it, Duncan came out in turn. He looked hot, cross—and extremely worried. He did, however, notice her.

"How d'ye fare, lass?" he asked, squinting at her. "Ye're that bit green; have ye eaten aught amiss?"

"I think so. But I'm all right now," she said, hastily turning to put the basin back in the room behind her. She set it on the floor and closed the door on it. "Are you, er, all right, Duncan?"

He hesitated for an instant, but whatever was bothering him was too overwhelming to keep it bottled up. He glanced about, but none of the slaves was up here at this time of day. He leaned close, nonetheless, and lowered his voice.

"Have ye by chance … seen anything peculiar, *a nighean*?"

“Peculiar, how?”

He rubbed a knuckle under his drooping mustache, and glanced round once more.

“Near Hector Cameron’s tomb, say?” he asked, his voice pitched only just above a whisper.

Her diaphragm, still sore from vomiting, contracted sharply at that, and she put a hand to her middle.

“Ye have, then?” Duncan’s expression sharpened.

“Not me,” she said, and explained about Jemmy, Angelina, and the supposed ghost.

“I thought perhaps it was Mr. Buchanan,” she finished, nodding toward the stair down which Alexander Buchanan had vanished.

“Now, there’s a thought,” Duncan muttered, rubbing distractedly at his grizzled temple. “But no … surely not. He couldna—but it’s a thought.” Brianna thought that he looked very slightly more hopeful.

“Duncan—can you tell me what’s wrong?”

He took a deep breath, shaking his head—not in refusal, but in perplexity—and let it out again, his shoulders slumping.

“The gold,” he said simply. “It’s gone.”

* * *

Seven thousand pounds in gold bullion was a substantial amount, in all senses of the word. She had no idea how much such a sum might weigh, but it had completely lined Jocasta’s coffin, standing chastely next to Hector Cameron’s in the family mausoleum.

“What do you mean ‘gone’?” she blurted. “*All* of it?”

Duncan clutched her arm, features contorted in the urge to shush her.

“Aye, all of it,” he said, looking round yet again. “For God’s sake, lass, keep your voice down!”

“When did it go? Or rather,” she amended, “when you did find it gone?”

“Last night.” He looked round yet again, and jerked his chin toward his office. “Come in, lass; I’ll tell ye about it.”

Duncan's agitation subsided a little as he told her the story; by the time he had finished, he had regained a certain amount of outward calm.

The seven thousand pounds was what was left of the original ten thousand, which in turn was one-third of the thirty thousand sent—too late, but sent nonetheless—from Louis of France in support of Charles Stuart's doomed attempt on the thrones of England and Scotland.

"Hector was careful, aye?" Duncan explained. "He lived as a rich man, but always within such means as a place like this"—he waved his one hand around, indicating the grounds and messuages of River Run—"might provide. He spent a thousand pound acquiring the land and building the house, then over the years, another thousand in slaves, cattle, and the like. And a thousand pound he put to the bankers—Jo said he couldna bear the thought of all that money sitting, earning nay interest"—he gave her a small, wry smile—"though he was too clever to attract attention by putting it all out. I suppose he meant, maybe, to invest the rest, a bit at a time—but he died before that was done."

Leaving Jocasta as a very wealthy widow—but even more cautious than her husband had been about attracting undue attention. And so the gold had sat, safe in its hiding place, save for the one ingot being gradually whittled away and disposed of by Ulysses. Which had disappeared, she remembered with a qualm. *Someone* knew there was gold here.

Perhaps whoever had taken that ingot had guessed that there was more—and hunted, quietly, patiently, until they found it.

But now—

"Ye'll have heard about General MacDonald?"

She'd heard the name frequently of late, in conversation—he was a Scottish general, more or less retired, she'd assumed—who had been staying here and there, the guest of various prominent families. She *hadn't* heard of his purpose, though.

"He means to raise men—three thousand, four—among the Highlanders, to march to the coast. The Governor's sent for aid; troopships are coming. So the General's men will come down through the Cape Fear valley"—he made a graceful swooping gesture with his hand—"meet the Governor and his troops—and pincer the rebel militias that are a-building."

"And you meant to give him the gold—or no," she corrected herself. "You meant to give him arms and powder."

He nodded and chewed his mustaches, looking unhappy.

"A man named Dunkling; Alexander knows him. Lord Dunsmore is gathering a great store of powder and arms in Virginia, and Dunkling is one of his lieutenants—and willing to give up some of that store, in return for gold."

"Which is now gone." She took a deep breath, feeling sweat trickle down between her breasts, further dampening her shift.

"Which is now gone," he agreed bleakly. "And I'm left to wonder what about this ghost of wee Jem's, aye?"

Ghost, indeed. For someone to have entered a place like River Run, teeming with people, and to have moved several hundred pounds by weight of gold, completely unnoticed …

The sound of feet on the stairs caused Duncan to jerk his head sharply toward the door, but it was only Josh, one of the black grooms, his hat in his hand.

"Best we be going, Miss Bree," he said, bowing respectfully. "If ye be wanting the light, like?"

For her drawings, he meant. It was a good hour's trip into Cross Creek to lawyer Forbes's house, and the sun was rising fast toward noon.

She glanced at her green-smeared fingers, and recalled the hair straggling untidily down from its makeshift bun; she'd have to tidy herself a bit first.

"Go, lass." Duncan waved her toward the door, his lean face still creased with worry but lightened a little by having shared it.

She kissed him affectionately on the forehead and went down after Josh. She *was* worried, and not only about missing gold and prowling ghosts. General MacDonald, indeed. For if he meant to raise fighting men among the Highlanders, one of the natural places for him to go was to her father.

As Roger had noted to her sometime earlier, *“Jamie can walk the tightrope between Whigs and Tories better than any man I know—but when push comes to shove … he’ll have to jump.”*

The push had come at Mecklenberg. But shove, she thought, was named MacDonald.

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A TRIP TO THE SEASIDE

Neil Forbes, thinking it prudent to be absent from his usual haunts for a time, had removed to Edenton, with the excuse of taking his aged mother to visit her even more aged sister. He had enjoyed the long journey, in spite of his mother's complaints about the clouds of dust raised by another carriage that preceded them.

He had been loath to sacrifice his sight of that carriage—a small, well-sprung affair, whose windows were sealed and heavily curtained. But he had always been a devoted son, and at the next post stop, he went to speak to the driver. The other coach obligingly dropped back, following them at a convenient distance.

"Whatever are ye lookin' at, Neil?" his mother demanded, looking up from fastening her favorite garnet brooch. "That's the third time ye've had a peek out thon window."

"Not a thing, Mam," he said, inhaling deeply. "Only taking pleasure in the day. Such beautiful weather, is it not?"

Mrs. Forbes sniffed, but obligingly settled her spectacles on her nose and leaned to peer out.

"Aye, weel, it's fair enough," she admitted dubiously. "Hot, though, and damp enough to wring buckets from your shirt."

"Never mind, *a leannan,*" he said, patting her black-clad shoulder. "We'll be in Edenton afore ye know. It'll be cooler there. Nothing like a sea-breeze, so they say, to put the roses in your cheeks!"

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NIGHTWATCH

Edenton

The Reverend McMillan’s house was on the water. A blessing in the hot, muggy weather. The offshore breeze in the evening swept everything away—heat, hearth smoke, mosquitoes. The men sat on the big porch after supper, smoking their pipes and enjoying the respite.

Roger’s enjoyment was spiced by the guilty awareness that Mrs. Reverend McMillan and her three daughters were sweating to and fro, washing dishes, clearing away, sweeping floors, boiling up the leftover ham bones from supper with lentils for tomorrow’s soup, putting children to bed, and generally slaving away in the stuffy, sweltering confines of the house. At home, he would have felt obliged to help with such work, or face Brianna’s wrath; here, such an offer would have been received with drop-jawed incredulity, followed by deep suspicion. Instead, he sat peacefully in the cool evening breeze, watching fishing boats come in across the water of the sound and sipping something that passed for coffee, engaged in pleasant male conversation.

There was, he thought, occasionally something to be said for the eighteenth-century model of sexual roles.

They were talking over the news from the south: the flight of Governor Martin from New Bern, the burning of Fort Johnston. The political climate of Edenton was strongly Whiggish, and the company was largely clerical—the Reverend Doctor McCorkle, his secretary Warren Lee, the Reverend Jay McMillan, Reverend Patrick Dugan, and four "inquirers" awaiting ordination besides Roger—but there were still currents of political disagreement flowing beneath the outwardly cordial surface of the conversation.

Roger himself said little; he didn't wish to offend McMillan's hospitality by contributing to any argument—and something inside him wished for quiet, to contemplate tomorrow.

Then the conversation took a new turn, though, and he found himself paying rapt attention. The Continental Congress had met in Philadelphia two months before, and given General Washington command of the Continental army. Warren Lee had been in Philadelphia at the time, and was giving the company a vivid account of the battle at Breed's Hill, at which he had been present.

"General Putnam, he brought up wagonloads of dirt and brush, to the neck of the Charlestown peninsula—you said you knew it, sir?" he asked, courteously turning toward Roger. "Well, Colonel Prescott, he's there already, with two militia comp'nies from Massachusetts, and parts of another from Connecticut—was mebbe a thousand men in all, and dear Lord, was they a stench from the camps!"

His soft Southern accent—Lee was a Virginian—held a slight touch of amusement, but this faded as he went on.

"General Ward, he'd give orders to fortify this one hill, Bunker Hill, they call it, for an old redoubt atop. But Colonel Prescott, he goes up it and don't care so much for the looks, him and Mr. Gridley, the engineer. So they leave a detachment there, and go on to Breed's Hill, what they think is maybe better to the purpose, bein' closer to the harbor.

"Now, this is all at night, mind. I was with one of the Massachusetts companies, and we marched right smart, then spent the whole night through, 'twixt midnight and dawn, diggin' trenches and raising up six-foot walls about the perimeter.

"Come the dawn, and we skulked down behind our fortifications, and just in time, too, for there's a British ship in the harbor—the

Lively, they said—and she opens fire the minute the sun's up. Looked right pretty, for the fog was still on the water and the cannon lit it up in red flashes. Did no harm, though; most all the balls fell short into the harbor—did see one whaleboat at the docks hit, though; stove it like kindling. The crew, they'd hopped out like fleas when the *Lively* took to firing. From where I was, I could just see 'em, hoppin' up and down on the dock, a-shakin' their fists—then the *Lively* let off another broadside, and they all fell flat or run like rabbits."

The light was nearly gone, and Lee's young face invisible in the shadows, but the amusement in his voice made a small rumble of laughter run among the other men.

"They was some firin' from a little battery up on Copp's Hill, and one or two of the other ships, they let off a pop or two, but they could see 'twan't no earthly use and ceased. Then come in some fellows from New Hampshire to join up with us, and that was purely heartening. But General Putnam, he sends a good many men back to work on the fortifications at Bunker, and the New Hampshire folk, they're crouched way down on the left, where they's got no cover beyond rail fences stuffed with mown grass. Lookin' at 'em down there, I was pleased as punch to have four feet of solid earthwork in front of me, I tell you, gentlemen."

The British troops had set out across the Charles River, bold as brass under the midday sun, with the warships behind them and the batteries on shore all providing covering fire.

"We didn't fire back, of course. Had no cannon," Lee said with an audible shrug.

Roger, listening intently, couldn't keep from asking a question at this point.

"Is it true that Colonel Stark said, 'Don't fire until you see the whites of their eyes'?"

Lee coughed discreetly.

"Well, sir. I couldn't say for sure as no one said that, but I didn't hear it myself. Mind, I *did* hear one colonel call out, 'Any whoreson fool wastes his powder afore the bastards are close enough to kill is gonna get his musket shoved up his arse butt-first!' "

The assembly erupted into laughter. An inquiry from Mrs. McMillan, who had come out to offer further refreshment, as to the source of this merriment shut them all up sharp, though, and they listened with a fair assumption of sober attention to the rest of Lee's account.

"Well, so, then, on they come, and I will say 'twas a daunting sight. They'd several regiments, and all in their different colors, fusiliers and grenadiers, Royal Marines, and a proper boiling of light infantry, all comin' on over the ground like a horde of ants, and just as mean.

"I wouldn't make great claim to bravery myself, gentlemen, but I would say the fellows standin' with me had some nerve. We did let 'em come, and the first ranks weren't no more than ten feet away when our volley cut into them.

"They rallied, came back on, and we cut them down again—like ninepins. And the officers—there was a powerful lot of the officers went; they were on their horses, see? I—I shot one such. He keeled over, but he didn't fall off—his horse carried him away. Kind of lolling, with his head loose. But he didn't fall."

Lee's voice had lost some of its color, and Roger saw the burly form of the Reverend Doctor McCorkle lean toward his secretary, touching his shoulder.

"They rallied a third time, and came on. And … we were most of us out of ammunition. They came on over the earthworks and through the fences. With their bayonets fixed."

Roger was sitting on the steps of the porch, Lee above him and several feet away, but could hear the young man swallow.

"We fell back. That's how they say it. We ran, is what we did. So'd they."

He swallowed again.

"A bayonet—it makes a terrible sound, goin' into a man. Just—terrible. I can't say how it is, describe it properly. Heard it, though, and more'n once. Was a good many run straight through the body that day—skewered and then the steel pulled out, and they left to die on the ground, floppin' like fish."

Roger had seen—handled—eighteenth-century bayonets, often. A seventeen-inch triangular blade, heavy and brutal, with a blood groove down one side. He thought, quite suddenly, of the furrowed scar that ran up Jamie Fraser's thigh, and rose to his feet. Murmuring a brief excuse, he left the porch, and walked down the shore, pausing only for a moment to shed his shoes and stockings.

The tide was going out; sand and shingle were wet and cool under his bare feet. The breeze rattled faintly among palmetto leaves behind him, and a line of pelicans flew down the shore, solemn against the last of the light. He walked a little way into the surf, small rippling waves that tugged at his heels, sucking the sand away beneath him, making him shift and sway to keep his balance.

Far out on the water of Albemarle Sound, he could see lights; fishing boats, with small fires built in sandboxes aboard, to light the torches the fishermen swung over the side. These seemed to float in the air, swinging to and fro, their reflections in the water winking slowly in and out like fireflies.

The stars were coming out. He stood looking up, trying to empty his mind, his heart, open himself to the love of God.

Tomorrow, he would be a minister. *Thou art a priest forever,* said the ordination service, quoting from the Bible, *after the order of Melchizedek.*

"Are you afraid?" Brianna had asked him, when he'd told her.

"Yeah," he said softly, aloud.

He stood until the tide left him, then followed it, walking into the water, wanting the rhythmic touch of the waves.

"Will you do it anyway?"

"Yeah," he said, more softly still. He had no idea what he was agreeing to, but said it, anyway. Far down the beach behind him, the breeze brought him now and then a snatch of laughter, a few words from the Reverend McMillan's porch. They had moved on, then, from the talk of war and death.

Had any of them ever killed a man? Lee, perhaps. The Reverend Doctor McCorkle? He snorted a little at the thought, but did not dismiss it. He turned and walked a little further, until the only sounds were those of the waves and the offshore wind.

Soul-searching. It was what squires used to do, he thought, smiling a little wryly at the thought. The night before he became a knight, a young man would keep vigil in church or chapel, watching through the dark hours, lighted only by the glow of a sanctuary lamp, praying.

For what? he wondered. Purity of mind, singleness of purpose. Courage? Or perhaps forgiveness?

He hadn't meant to kill Randall Lillington; that had been almost accident, and what wasn't had been self-defense. But he had been hunting when he did it, had gone out looking for Stephen Bonnet, meaning to kill him in cold blood. And Harley Boble; he could still see the shine of the thieftaker's eyes, feel the echo of the blow, the shards of the man's skull reverberating through the bones of his own arm. He'd meant that, yes. Could have stopped. Didn't.

Tomorrow, he would swear before God that he believed in the doctrine of predestination, that he had been meant to do what he had done. Perhaps.

Maybe I don't believe that, so much, he thought, doubt stealing in. *But maybe I do. Christ—oh, sorry—*he apologized mentally*—can I be a proper minister, with doubts? I think everyone's got them, but if I've got too many—maybe ye'd best let me know now, before it's too late.*

His feet had gone numb, and the sky was ablaze with a glory of stars, thick in the black velvet night. He heard the crunch of footsteps among the shingle and the sea wrack nearby.

It was Warren Lee—tall and gangly by starlight, the Reverend Doctor McCorkle's secretary, erstwhile militiaman.

"Thought I'd take a bit of air," Lee said, his voice hardly audible above the hiss of the sea.

"Aye, well, there's a lot of it, and it's free," Roger said as amiably as he could. Lee chuckled briefly in response, but luckily didn't seem disposed to talk.

They stood for some time, watching the fishing boats. Then, by unspoken consent, turned to go back. The house was dark, the porch deserted. A single candle burned in the window, though, lighting them home.

“That officer, the one I shot,” Lee blurted suddenly. “I pray for him. Every night.”

Lee shut up abruptly, embarrassed. Roger breathed slow and deep, feeling the jerk of his own heart. Had he ever prayed for Lillington, or Boble?

“I will, too,” he said.

“Thank you,” said Lee very softly, and side by side, they made their way back up the beach, pausing to pick up their shoes, going back barefooted, sand drying on their feet.

They had sat down on the steps to brush it off before going in, when the door behind them opened.

“Mr. MacKenzie?” said the Reverend McMillan, and something in his voice pulled Roger to his feet, heart pounding. “You have a visitor.”

He saw the tall silhouette behind McMillan, and knew, even before Jamie Fraser’s pale, fierce face appeared, eyes black in the candlelight.

“He’s taken Brianna,” Jamie said without preamble. “Ye’ll come.”

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Anemone

Feet trampled back and forth overhead, and she could hear voices, but most of the words were too muffled to make out. There was a chorus of jovial shouts on the side nearest shore, and cordial feminine shrieks in reply.

The cabin had a wide, paned window—did you call it a window on a ship, she wondered, or had it some special nautical name?—that ran behind the bunk, raked back with the angle of the stern. It was made in small, thick panes, set in leading. No hope there of escape, but it did offer the possibility of air, and perhaps information regarding their whereabouts.

Repressing a qualm of nauseated distaste, she clambered across the stained and rumpled sheets of the bed. She pressed close to the window and pushed her face into one of the open panes, taking deep breaths to dispel the aromas of the cabin, though the smell of the harbor was no great improvement, rife as it was with the smell of dead fish, sewage, and baking mud.

She could see a small dock, and moving figures on it. A fire was burning on the shore outside a low, whitewashed building roofed with palmetto leaves. It was too dark to see what, if anything, lay beyond the building. There must be at least a small town, though, judging from the noise of the people on the dock.

There were voices outside the cabin door, coming closer. "… meet him on Ocracoke, the dark o' the moon," said one, to which the other replied in an indistinct mumble, before the door flew open.

"Care to join the party, sweetheart? Or have ye started without me?"

She whirled on her knees, heart hammering in her throat. Stephen Bonnet stood inside the door to the cabin, a bottle in one hand and a slight smile on his face. She took a deep breath to quell the shock, and nearly gagged on the stale scent of sex that wafted from the sheets under her knees. She scrambled off the bed, heedless of her clothes, and felt a rip at the waist as her knee caught in her skirt.

"Where are we?" she demanded. Her voice sounded shrill, panicked to her own ears.

"On the *Anemone,*" he said patiently, still smiling.

"You know that isn't what I mean!" The neck of her gown and chemise had torn in the struggle when the men pulled her from her horse, and most of one breast was exposed; she put up a hand, pushing the fabric back in place.

"Do I?" He set the bottle on the desk, and reached to unfasten the stock from his neck. "Ah, that's better." He rubbed at the dark red line across his throat, and she had a sudden, piercing vision of Roger's throat, with its ragged scar.

"I wish to know what this town is called," she said, deepening her voice and fixing him with a gimlet eye. She didn't expect that what worked on her father's tenants would work on him, but the assumption of an air of command helped to steady her a bit.

"Well, that's an easily gratified wish, to be sure." He waved a casual hand toward the shore. "Roanoke." He shucked his coat, tossing it carelessly over the stool. The linen of his shirt was crumpled, and clung damply to his chest and shoulders.

"Ye'd best take off the gown, darlin'; it's hot."

He reached for the strings that tied his shirt, and she moved abruptly away from the bed, glancing round the cabin, searching the shadows for something that could be used as a weapon. Stool, lamp, logbook, bottle … there. A piece of wood showed among the rubble on the desk, the blunt end of a marlinespike.

He frowned, attention fastened momentarily on a knot in the string. She took two long steps and seized the marlinespike, yanking it off the desk in a shower of rubbish and clanging oddments.

“Stand back.” She held the thing like a baseball bat, gripped in both hands. Sweat streamed down the hollow of her back, but her hands felt cold and her face went hot and cold and hot again, ripples of heat and terror rolling down her skin.

Bonnet looked at her as though she had gone mad.

“Whatever will ye be after doing with that, woman?” He left off fiddling with his shirt and took a step toward her. She took one back, raising the club.

“Don’t fucking touch me!”

He stared at her, eyes fixed wide, pale green and unblinking above a small, odd smile. Still smiling, he took another step toward her. Then another, and the fear boiled off in a surge of rage. Her shoulders bunched and lifted, ready.

“I mean it! Stand back or I’ll kill you. I’ll know who this baby’s father is, if I die for it!”

He had raised a hand, as though to grasp the club and jerk it away from her, but at this, he stopped abruptly.

“Baby? You are with child?”

She swallowed, her breath still thick in her throat. The blood hammered in her ears, and the smooth wood was slick with sweat from her palms. She tightened her grip, trying to keep the rage alive, but it was already dying.

“Yes. I think so. I’ll know for sure in two weeks.”

His sandy eyebrows lifted.

“Hm!” With a short grunt, he stepped back, surveying her with interest. Slowly, his eyes traveled over her, appraising her one bared breast.

The sudden spurt of rage had drained away, leaving her breathless and empty-bellied. She kept hold of the marlinespike, but her wrists quivered, and she lowered it.

“Is that the way of it, then?”

He leaned forward and reached out, quite without lascivious intent now. Startled, she froze for an instant, and he weighed the breast in one hand, kneading thoughtfully, as though it were a grapefruit he meant to buy at market. She gasped and hit at him one-handed with the club, but she had lost what readiness she had, and the blow bounced off his shoulder, rocking him but having little other effect. He grunted and stepped back, rubbing at his shoulder.

"Could be. Well, then." He frowned, and tugged at the front of his breeches, adjusting himself without the slightest embarrassment. "Lucky we're in port, I suppose."

She made no sense whatever of this remark, but didn't care; apparently he had changed his mind upon hearing her revelation, and the feeling of relief made her knees go weak and her skin prickle with sweat. She sat down, quite suddenly, upon the stool, the club clanking to the floor beside her.

Bonnet had put his head out into the corridor, and was bellowing for someone named Orden. Whoever Orden was, he didn't come into the cabin, but within a few moments, a voice mumbled interrogatively outside.

"Fetch me down a whore from the docks," Bonnet said, in the casual tone of one ordering a fresh pint of bitter. "Clean, mind, and fairly young."

He shut the door then, and turned to the table, scrabbling through the debris until he unearthed a pewter cup. He poured a drink, quaffed half of it, and then—seeming belatedly to realize that she was still there—offered her the bottle with a vague "Eh?" of invitation.

She shook her head, wordless. A faint hope had sprung up in the back of her mind. He did have some faint streak of gallantry, or at least decency; he had come back to rescue her from the burning warehouse, and he had left her the stone for what he assumed to be his child. Now he had abandoned his advances, upon hearing that she was with child again. Perhaps he would let her go, then, particularly if she was of no immediate use to him.

"So … you don't want me?" she said, edging her feet under her, ready to leap up and run, as soon as the door opened to admit her replacement. She hoped she *could* run; her knees were still trembling with reaction.

Bonnet glanced at her, surprised.

"I've split your quim once already, sweetheart," he said, and grinned. "I recall the red hair—a lovely sight, sure—but it wasn't so memorable an experience otherwise that I can't be waitin' to repeat it. Time enough, darlin', time enough." He chucked her negligently under the chin, and gulped more of his drink. "For now, though, LeRoi's needing a bit of a gallop."

"Why am I here?" she demanded.

Distracted, he pulled once more at the crotch of his breeches, quite unself-conscious of her presence.

"Here? Why, because a gentleman paid me to take ye to London-town, darlin'. Didn't ye know?"

She felt as though someone had hit her in the stomach, and sat down on the bed, folding her arms protectively across her midsection.

"What gentleman? And for God's sake—why?"

He considered for a moment, but evidently concluded that there was no reason not to tell her.

"A man named Forbes," he said, and threw back the rest of his drink. "Know him, do you?"

"I most certainly do," she said, amazement vying with fury. "That bloody *bastard*!" So they were Forbes's men, the masked bandits that had stopped her and Josh, dragged them from their horses, and shoved them both into a sealed carriage, bumping over unseen roads for days on end, until they reached the coast, and then been pulled out, disheveled and reeking, and bundled aboard the ship.

"Where's Joshua?" she asked abruptly. "The young black man who was with me?"

"Was there?" Bonnet looked quizzical. "If they brought him aboard, I imagine they've put him in the hold with the other cargo. A bonus, I suppose," he added, and laughed.

Her fury at Forbes had been tinged with relief at finding out he was the motive behind her abduction; Forbes might be a low-down, sneaking scoundrel, but he wouldn't be intending to murder her.

That laugh of Stephen Bonnet's, though, made a cold qualm run through her, and she felt suddenly light-headed.

"What do you mean, a bonus?"

Bonnet scratched his cheek, gooseberry eyes roaming over her in approval.

"Oh, well, then. Mr. Forbes only wanted ye out of the way, he said. Whatever did ye do to the man, darlin'? But he's paid your fare already, and I've the impression that he's no great interest in where ye end up."

"Where I end up?" Her mouth had been dry; now saliva was pouring from her membranes, and she had to swallow repeatedly.

"Well, after all, darlin', why bother takin' ye all the way to London, where ye'd be of no particular use to anyone? Besides, it rains quite a bit in London; I'm sure ye wouldn't like it."

Before she could draw breath to ask any more questions, the door opened, and a young woman slid through, closing it behind her.

She was likely in her twenties, though with a missing molar that showed when she smiled. She was plump and plain-faced, brown-haired, and clean by local standards, though the scent of her sweat and waves of freshly applied cheap cologne wafted across the cabin, making Brianna want to throw up again.

"Hallo, Stephen," the newcomer said, standing on tiptoe to kiss Bonnet's cheek. "Give us a drink to be starting with, eh?"

Bonnet grabbed her, gave her a deep and lingering kiss, then let her go and reached for the bottle.

Coming down onto her heels, she looked at Brianna with detached professional interest, then back at Bonnet, and scratched at her neck.

"You'll have the two of us, Stephen, or shall it be me and her to start? It's a quid more, either way."

Bonnet didn't bother answering, but thrust the bottle into her hand, whipped off the kerchief that hid the swell of her heavy breasts, and began at once to undo his flies. He dropped the breeches on the floor, and without ado, seized the woman by the hips and pressed her against the door.

Guzzling from the bottle she held in one hand, the young woman snatched up her skirts with the other, whisking skirt and petticoat out of the way with a practiced motion that bared her to the waist. Brianna caught a glimpse of sturdy thighs and a patch of dark hair, before they were obscured by Bonnet's buttocks, blond-furred and clenched with effort.

She turned her head away, cheeks burning, but morbid fascination compelled her to glance back. The whore was standing balanced on her toes, squatting slightly to accommodate him, gazing placidly over his shoulder as he thrust and grunted. One hand still held the bottle; the other stroked Bonnet's shoulders in a practiced way. She caught Brianna's eye on her, and winked, still saying, "Ooh, yes … oh, YES! That's good, love, so good …" in her client's ear.

The cabin door quivered with each meaty thump of the whore's backside, and Brianna could hear laughter in the corridor outside, both male and female; evidently Orden had brought back enough to supply crew as well as captain.

Bonnet heaved and grunted for a minute or two, then gave a loud groan, his movements suddenly jerky and uncoordinated. The whore put a helpful hand on his buttocks and pulled him close, then relaxed her grip as his body went limp, leaning heavily against her. She supported him for a moment, patting his back matter-of-factly, like a mother burping a baby, then pushed him off.

His face and neck were flushed dark red, and he was breathing heavily. He nodded to the whore, and stooped, fumbling for his breeches. He stood up with them and waved toward the littered desk.

"Help yourself to your pay, darlin', but give me back the bottle, aye?"

The whore pouted slightly, but took a final deep gulp of the liquor and handed him the bottle, now no more than a quarter full. She pulled a wadded cloth from the pocket at her waist and clapped it between her thighs, then shook down her skirts and minced across to the desk, poking delicately among the litter for scattered coins, which she picked out with two fingers, dropping them one by one into the depths of her pocket.

Bonnet, clothed once more, went out without a backward glance at the two women. The air in the cabin was hot and thick with the scent of sex, and Brianna felt her stomach clench. Not with revulsion, but with panic. The strong male reek had triggered an instinctive flush of response that tingled across her breasts and gripped her inwardly; for a brief, disorienting moment, she felt Roger's skin, slick with sweat against her own, and her breasts tingled, swollen and wanting.

She pressed both lips and legs tight together, and curled her hands into fists, breathing shallowly. The last thing she could stand right now, she thought—the *very* last thing—was to think of Roger and sex, while anywhere within miles of Stephen Bonnet. She resolutely pushed the thought aside, and edged closer to the whore, searching for some remark with which to open conversation.

The whore sensed the movement, and glanced at Brianna, taking in both the torn dress and its quality, but then dismissed her in favor of finding more coins. Once she had her pay, the woman would leave, going back to the docks. It was a chance to get word to Roger and her parents. Not much, perhaps, but a chance.

"You … um … know him well?" she said.

The whore glanced at her, eyebrows lifted.

"Who? Oh, Stephen? Aye, he's a good 'un, Stephen." She shrugged. "Don't take more than two or three minutes, no bones about the money, never wants nothin' but a simple swive. He's rough now and then, but he don't hit unless you cross him, and no one's fool enough to do that. Not more than once, anyroad." Her gaze lingered for a moment on Brianna's torn dress, one brow lifting sardonically.

"I'll remember that," Brianna said dryly, and pulled the edge of her ripped chemise up higher. She glimpsed a glass bottle amid the rubble on the desk, filled with a clear liquid, containing a small round object. She leaned closer to look at it, frowning. It couldn't be … but it was. A round, fleshy object, rather like a hard-boiled egg, a pinkish-gray in color—with a neat round hole drilled completely through it.

She crossed herself, feeling faint.

"I was that surprised," the whore went on, eyeing Brianna with open curiosity. "He's never had two girls together, so far as I know, and he's not one as wants someone to watch while he's at his pleasure."

"I'm not—" Brianna began, but then stopped, not wanting to offend the woman.

"Not a whore?" The young woman grinned broadly, exposing the black gap of her missing tooth. "I might ha' guessed as much, chickie. Not as it would make no never mind to Stephen. He sows as he likes, and I can see as how he might like you. Most men would." She looked at Brianna with dispassionate assessment, nodding at her disheveled hair, flushed face, and tidy figure.

"I expect they like you, too," Brianna said politely, with a faint feeling of surreality. "Er … what's your name?"

"Hepzibah," the woman said with an air of pride. "Or Eppie, for short, like." There were coins still on the desk, but the whore left them alone. Bonnet might be generous, but evidently the whore didn't want to take advantage of him—more likely a sign of fear than of friendship, Brianna thought. She took a deep breath and pressed on.

"What a lovely name. Pleased to meet you, Eppie." She held out a hand. "My name is Brianna Fraser MacKenzie." She gave all three names, hoping the whore would remember at least one of them.

The woman glanced at the extended hand in puzzlement, then gingerly shook it, dropping it like a dead fish. She pulled up her skirt, and began to clean herself with the rag, fastidiously wiping away all trace of the recent encounter.

Brianna leaned closer, bracing herself against the odors of the stained rag, the woman's body, and the hot smell of liquor on her breath.

"Stephen Bonnet kidnapped me," she said.

"Oh, aye?" said the whore, indifferent. "Well, he takes as he likes, does Stephen."

"I want to get away," Brianna said, keeping her voice low, with a glance at the cabin door. She could hear the sound of feet on the deck overhead, and hoped voices wouldn't carry through the heavy planks.

Eppie wadded up the rag and dropped it on the desk. She rummaged in her pocket, coming out with a small bottle stoppered with a plug of wax. She still held her skirts up, and Brianna could see the silvery streaks of stretch marks across her plump belly.

"Well, give him what he wants, then," the whore advised, taking out the plug and pouring a bit of the bottle's contents—a surprisingly mild scent of rosewater—into her hand. "Chances are he'll tire of ye in a few days and put ye ashore." She wiped the rosewater lavishly over her pubic hair, then sniffed critically at her hand and made a face.

"No. I mean, that's not what he kidnapped me for. I don't think," she added.

Eppie recorked the bottle, and dropped both it and the rag into her pocket.

"Oh, he means to ransom you?" Eppie eyed her with a little more interest. "Still, I've never known scruples interfere with the man's appetite. He'd take a virgin's maidenhead and sell her back to her father before her belly started swelling." She pursed her lips, a belated thought coming to her.

"So how did you talk him out of havin' you, then?"

Brianna put a hand on her stomach.

"I told him I was pregnant. That stopped him. I wouldn't have thought—a man like that—but it did. Perhaps he's better than you think?" she asked with a wisp of hope.

Eppie laughed at that, small eyes squeezing half-shut with hilarity at the thought.

"Stephen? God, no!" She sniffed with amusement, and smoothed down her skirts.

"No," she went on, more matter-of-factly, "best story you could tell, though, if you don't want him at you. He called me down to him once, then put me off when he saw I'd a cake in the oven—when I joked him about it, he said he'd once taken a whore with her belly the size of a cannonball, and right in the midst of it, she give a groan and the blood come spurting out of her fit to drench the room. Put him right off, he said, and no wonder. Left our Stephen with a horror of swiving girls what are up the spout. He's takin' no chances, see."

"I see." A trickle of sweat ran down Brianna's cheek, and she wiped it away with the back of her hand. Her mouth felt dry, and she sucked the inside of her cheek for moisture. "The woman—what happened to her?"

Hepzibah looked blank for a moment.

"Oh, the whore? Why, she died, of course, poor cow. Stephen said as how he was struggling to get into his wet breeches, all soused with blood like they were, and he looked up and saw her layin' still as stone on the floor, but with her belly still wriggling and twitching like a bag full o' snakes. Said it come to him sudden that the babe meant to come out and take its revenge on him, and he fled the house right then in his shirt, leavin' his breeches behind."

She chortled at this amusing vision, then snorted and settled herself, brushing down her skirts. "But then, Stephen's Irish," she added tolerantly. "They take morbid fancies, the Irish, especially when they're gone in drink." The tip of her tongue came out and passed reminiscently over her lower lip, tasting the lingering traces of Bonnet's liquor.

Brianna leaned closer, holding out her hand.

"Look."

Hepzibah glanced into her hand, then looked again, riveted. The thick gold band with its big cabochon ruby winked and glowed in the lantern light.

"I'll give it to you," Brianna said, lowering her voice, "if you'll do something for me."

The whore licked her lips again, a sudden look of alertness coming into her heavy face.

"Aye? Do what?"

"Get word to my husband. He's in Edenton, at the Reverend McMillan's house—anyone will know where it is. Tell him where I am, and tell him—" She hesitated. What should she say? There was no telling how long the *Anemone* would stay here, or where Bonnet would choose to go next. The only clue she had was what she had overheard in his conversation with his mate, just before he came in.

"Tell them I think he has a hiding place on Ocracoke. He means to rendezvous with someone there at the dark of the moon. Tell him that."

Hepzibah cast an uneasy glance at the cabin door, but it stayed shut. She looked back at the ring, longing for it warring in her face with an obvious fear of Bonnet.

"He won't know," Brianna urged. "He won't find out. And my father will reward you."

"He's a rich man, then, your father?" Brianna saw the look of calculation in the whore's eyes, and felt a moment's misgiving—what if she should simply take the ring and betray her to Bonnet? Still, she hadn't taken more money than her due; perhaps she was honest. And there was no choice, after all.

"Very rich," she said firmly. "His name is Jamie Fraser. My aunt is rich, too. She has a plantation called River Run, just above Cross Creek in North Carolina. Ask for Mrs. Innes—Jocasta Cameron Innes. Yes, if you don't find Ro—my husband, send word there."

"River Run." Hepzibah repeated it obediently, eyes still fixed on the ring.

Brianna twisted it off and dropped it into the whore's palm before she could change her mind. The woman's hand closed tight around it.

"My father's name is Jamie Fraser; my husband is Roger MacKenzie," she repeated. "At the Reverend McMillan's house. Can you remember?"

"Fraser and MacKenzie," Hepzibah repeated uncertainly. "Oh, aye, to be sure." She was already moving toward the door.

"Please," Brianna said urgently.

The whore nodded but without looking at her, then sidled through the door, shutting it behind her.

The ship creaked and swayed underfoot, and she heard the rattle of wind through the trees on the shore, over the shouts of drunken men. Her knees gave way then and she sat down on the bed, careless of the sheets.

* * *

They left with the tide; she heard the anchor chain rumble and felt the ship quicken, taking life as her sails took wind. Glued to the window, she watched the dark green mass of Roanoke recede. A hundred years before, the first English colony had landed here—and disappeared without trace. The governor of the colony, returning from England with supplies, had found everyone gone, leaving no clue save the word “Croatan” carved into the trunk of a tree.

She wasn’t even leaving that much. Heartsick, she watched until the island sank into the sea.

No one came for some hours. Empty-bellied, she grew nauseated, and threw up in the chamber pot. She could not bear the thought of lying down on those revolting sheets, but instead pulled them off, remade the bed with only the quilts, and lay down.

The windows were open, and the fresh air of the sea stirred her hair and lifted the clamminess from her skin, making her feel a little better. She was unbearably conscious of her womb, a small, heavy, tender weight, and what was likely happening inside it: that orderly dance of dividing cells, a sort of peaceful violence, implacably wresting lives and wrenching hearts.

When had it happened? She tried to think back, remember. It might have been the night before Roger left for Edenton. He had been excited, almost exalted, and they had made love with lingering joy, spiced by longing, for they both knew the morrow would bring separation. She had fallen asleep in his arms, feeling loved.

But then she had waked alone, in the middle of the night, to find him sitting by the window, bathed in the light of a gibbous moon. She had been reluctant to disturb his private contemplation, but he had turned, feeling her eyes on him, and something in his look had made her get out of bed and go to him, taking his head against her bosom, holding him.

He had risen then, laid her on the floor, and had her again, wordless and urgent.

Catholic that she was, she had found it terribly erotic, the notion of seducing a priest on the eve of his ordination, stealing him—if only for a moment—from God.

She swallowed, hands clasped over her belly. *Be careful what you pray for.* The nuns at school had always told the children that.

The wind was growing cold, chilling her, and she pulled the edge of one quilt—the cleanest—over her. Then, concentrating fiercely, she began very carefully to pray.

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PUT TO THE QUESTION

Neil Forbes sat in the parlor of the King's Inn, enjoying a glass of hard cider and the feeling that all was right with the world. He had had a most fruitful meeting with Samuel Iredell and his friend, two of the most prominent rebel leaders in Edenton—and an even more fruitful meeting with Gilbert Butler and William Lyons, local smugglers.

He had a great fondness for jewels, and in private celebration of his elegant disposal of the threat of Jamie Fraser, he had bought a new stickpin, topped with a beautiful ruby. He contemplated this with quiet satisfaction, noting the lovely shadows that the stone cast on the silk of his ruffle.

His mother was safely planted at her sister's house, he had an appointment for luncheon with a local lady, and an hour to spare beforehand. Perhaps a stroll to stimulate appetite; it was a beautiful day.

He had in fact pushed back his chair and begun to rise when a large hand planted itself in the center of his chest and shoved him back into it.

"What—?" He looked up in indignation—and took great care to keep that expression on his face, despite a sudden deep qualm. A tall, dark man was standing over him, wearing a most unfriendly expression. MacKenzie, the chit's husband.

"How dare you, sir?" he said, belligerent. "I must demand apology!"

"You demand what ye like," MacKenzie said. He was pale under his tan, and grim. "Where is my wife?"

"How should I know?" Forbes's heart was beating fast, but with glee as much as trepidation. He lifted his chin and made to rise. "You will excuse me, sir."

A hand on his arm stopped him, and he turned, looking into the face of Fraser's nephew, Ian Murray. Murray smiled, and Forbes's sense of self-satisfaction diminished slightly. They said the boy had lived with the Mohawk, become one of them—that he dwelt with a vicious wolf who spoke to him and obeyed his commands, that he had cut a man's heart out and eaten it in some heathen ritual.

Looking at the lad's homely face and disheveled dress, though, Forbes was not impressed.

"Remove your hand from my person, sir," he said with dignity, straightening in his chair.

"No, I think I won't," Murray said. The hand tightened on his arm like the bite of a horse, and Forbes's mouth opened, though he made no sound.

"What have ye done with my cousin?" Murray said.

"I? Why, I—I have nothing whatever to do with Mrs. MacKenzie. Let go, God damn you!"

The grip relaxed, and he sat breathing heavily. MacKenzie had pulled up a chair to face him and sat down.

Forbes smoothed the sleeve of his coat, avoiding MacKenzie's stare and thinking rapidly. How had they found out? Or had they? Perhaps they were only trying a venture, with no sure knowledge.

"I am grieved to hear that any misfortune might have befallen Mrs. MacKenzie," he said politely. "Am I to take it that you have somehow misplaced her?"

MacKenzie looked him up and down for a moment without answering, then made a small sound of contempt.

"I heard ye speak in Mecklenberg," he said, his tone conversational. "Very glib ye were. A great deal about justice, I heard, and protection of our wives and children. Such eloquence."

"Fine talk," Ian Murray put in, "for a man who would abduct a helpless woman." He was still crouching on the floor like a savage, but had moved round a little, so as to stare directly into Forbes's face. The lawyer found it slightly unnerving, and chose instead to meet MacKenzie's eyes, man to man.

"I regret your misfortune extremely, sir," he said, striving for a tone of concern. "I should be pleased to help, in any way possible, of course. But I do not—"

"Where is Stephen Bonnet?"

The question struck Forbes like a blow to the liver. He gaped for a moment, thinking that he had made a mistake in choosing MacKenzie to look at; that flat green gaze was like a snake's.

"Who is Stephen Bonnet?" he asked, licking his lips. His lips were dry, but the rest of him was heavily bedewed; he could feel sweat pooling in the creases of his neck, soaking the cambric of his shirt beneath his oxters.

"I heard ye, ken," Murray remarked pleasantly. "When ye made the bargain wi' Richard Brown. In your warehouse, it was."

Forbes's head snapped round. He was so shocked that it was a moment before he realized that Murray was holding a knife, laid casually across his knee.

"What? You say—what? I tell you, sir, you are mistaken—mistaken!" He half-rose, stammering. MacKenzie shot to his feet and seized him by the shirtfront, twisting.

"No, sir," he said very softly, his face so close that Forbes felt the heat of his breath. "It is yourself has been mistaken. Most grievously mistaken, in choosing my wife to serve your wicked ends."

There was a ripping sound as the fine cambric tore. MacKenzie shoved him back violently into the chair, then leaned forward, seizing his neckcloth in a grip that threatened to choke him on the spot. His mouth opened, gasping, and black spots flickered in his vision—but not sufficiently as to obscure those brilliant, cold green eyes.

"Where has he taken her?"

Forbes gripped the arms of his chair, breathing heavily.

"I know nothing about your wife," he said, his voice pitched low and venomous. "And as for grievous error, sir, you are in the process of committing one. How dare you assault me? I shall prefer charges, I do assure you!"

"Oh, assault, forbye," Murray said, scoffing. "We havena done any such thing. Yet." He sat back on his haunches, tapping the knife thoughtfully against his thumbnail and regarding Forbes with an air of estimation, like one planning to carve a suckling pig on a platter.

Forbes set his jaw and glared up at MacKenzie, who was still standing, looming over him.

"This is a public place," he pointed out. "You cannot harm me without notice being taken." He glanced behind MacKenzie, hoping that someone would come into the parlor and interrupt this grossly uncomfortable tête-à-tête, but it was a quiet morning, and all the chambermaids and ostlers inconveniently about their duties elsewhere.

"Do we care if anyone notices, *a charaid*?" Murray inquired, glancing up at MacKenzie.

"Not really." Nonetheless, MacKenzie resumed his seat and resumed his stare. "We can wait a bit, though." He glanced at the case clock by the mantel, its pendulum moving with a serene tick-tock. "It won't be long."

Belatedly, it occurred to Forbes to wonder where Jamie Fraser was.

* * *

Elspeth Forbes was rocking gently on the veranda of her sister's house, enjoying the coolness of the morning air, when a visitor was announced.

"Why, Mr. Fraser!" she exclaimed, sitting up. "What brings ye to Edenton? Is it Neil ye're in search of? He's gone to—"

"Ah, no, Mistress Forbes." He swept her a low bow, the morning sun gleaming off his hair as though it were bronze metal. "It is yourself I've come for."

"Oh? Oh!" She sat up in her chair, hastily brushing away crumbs of toast on her sleeve, and hoping her cap was on straight. "Why, sir, what could ye possibly want with an old woman?”

He smiled—such a nice-looking lad he was, so fine in his gray coatie, and that look of mischief in his eyes—and leaned close to whisper in her ear.

“I’ve come to steal ye away, Mistress.”

“Och, awa’ with ye!” She flapped a hand at him, laughing, and he took it, kissing her knuckles.

“I shallna take ‘no’ for answer, now,” he assured her, and gestured toward the edge of the porch, where he had left a large, promising-looking basket, covered with a checkered cloth. “I’ve a mind to eat my luncheon in the country, under a tree. I’ve the very tree in mind—a braw, fine tree—but it’s a poor meal, taken without company.”

“Surely to goodness ye could find better company than mine, lad,” she said, thoroughly charmed. “And where’s your dear wife, then?”

“Ah, she’s left me,” he said, affecting sorrow. “Here’s me, with a wonderful picnic planned, and her off to a birthing. So I said to myself, well, Jamie, it’s shame to waste such a feast—who might be at liberty to share it with ye? And what should I see next but your most elegant self, taking your ease. An answer to prayer, it was; surely ye wouldna go against heavenly guidance, Mistress Forbes?”

“Hmph,” she said, trying not to laugh at him. “Och, well. If it’s a matter of wasting …”

Before she could say more, he had stooped down and plucked her from her chair, lifting her in his arms. She whooped with surprise.

“If it’s a proper abduction, I must carry ye away, aye?” he said, smiling down at her.

To her mortification, the sound she made could be called nothing but a giggle. He seemed not to mind, though, and bending to sweep up the basket in one strong hand, carried her like a bit of thistledown out to his carriage.

“You cannot keep me prisoner here! Let me pass, or I will shout for help!”

They had, in fact, held him for more than an hour, blocking all attempts on his part to rise and leave. He was right, though, Roger thought; traffic was beginning to pick up in the street outside, and he could hear—as could Forbes—the noises of a maid setting out the tables for dinner in the next room.

He glanced at Ian. They had discussed it; if word hadn’t come within an hour, they would have to try to remove Forbes from the inn, take him to a more private place. That could be a dicey business; the lawyer was intimidated, but stubborn as a ball bearing. And he *would* call for help.

Ian pursed his lips thoughtfully, and drew the knife he had been playing with down the side of his breeches, polishing the blade.

“Mr. MacKenzie?” A small boy had popped up beside him like a mushroom, dirt-smeared and round-faced.

“I am,” he said, a wave of thankfulness washing through him. “Have ye got something for me?”

“Aye, sir.” The urchin handed over a small twist of paper, accepted a coin in return, and was gone, in spite of Forbes’s call of “Wait, boy!”

The lawyer had half-risen from his seat in agitation. Roger made a sharp move toward him, though, and he sank back at once, not waiting to be pushed. Good, Roger thought grimly, he was learning.

Undoing the twist of paper, he found himself holding a large brooch in the shape of a bunch of flowers, done in garnets and silver. It was a good piece of workmanship, but rather ugly. Its impression on Forbes, though, was substantial.

“You wouldn’t. He wouldn’t.” The lawyer was staring at the brooch in Roger’s hand, his heavy face gone pale.

“Oh, I expect he would, if ye mean Uncle Jamie,” Ian Murray said. “He’s fond of his daughter, aye?”

“Nonsense.” The lawyer was making a game attempt to bluff it out, but he couldn’t keep his eyes off the brooch. “Fraser is a gentleman.”

“He’s a Highlander,” Roger said brutally. “Like your father, aye?” He’d heard stories about the elder Forbes, who by all accounts had escaped Scotland just ahead of the hangsman.

Forbes chewed his lower lip.

“He would not harm an old woman,” he said, with as much bravado as he could summon.

“Would he not?” Ian’s sketchy brows lifted. “Aye, perhaps not. He might just send her awa’, though—to Canada, maybe? Ye seem to ken him fair weel, Mr. Forbes. What d’ye think?”

The lawyer drummed his fingers on the arm of the chair, breathing through his teeth, evidently reviewing what he knew of Jamie Fraser’s character and reputation.

“All right,” he said suddenly. “All right!”

Roger felt the tension running through him snap like a cut wire. He’d been strung like a puppet since Jamie had come to fetch him last night.

“Where?” he said, feeling breathless. “Where is she?”

“She’s safe,” Forbes said hoarsely. “I wouldn’t have her harmed.” He looked up, wild-eyed. “For God’s sake, I wouldn’t harm her!”

“Where?” Roger clamped the brooch tight, not caring that its edges cut into his hand. “Where is she?”

The lawyer sagged like a half-filled bag of meal.

“Aboard a ship called *Anemone*, Captain Bonnet.” He swallowed hard, unable to keep his eyes away from the brooch. “She—I told—they are bound for England. But she is safe, I tell you!”

Shock tightened Roger’s grip, and he felt the sudden slick of blood on his fingers. He flung the brooch onto the floor, wiping his hand on his breeches, struggling for words. The shock had tightened his throat, as well; he felt as though he were strangling.

Seeing his trouble, Ian stood abruptly and pressed his knife against the lawyer’s throat.

“When did they sail?”

“I—I—” The lawyer’s mouth opened and closed at random, and he looked helplessly from Ian to Roger, eyes bulging.

“Where?” Roger forced the word past the blockage in his throat, and Forbes flinched at the sound.

“She—she was put aboard here. In Edenton. Two—two days ago.”

Roger nodded abruptly. Safe, he said. In Bonnet’s hands. Two days, in Bonnet’s hands. But he had sailed with Bonnet, he thought, trying to steady himself, keep a grip on his rationality. He knew how the man worked. Bonnet was a smuggler; he would not sail for England without a full cargo. He might—*might*—be going down the coast, picking up small shipments before turning to the open sea and the long voyage for England.

And if not—he might still be caught, with a fast ship.

No time to be lost; people on the docks might know where the *Anemone* was headed next. He turned and took a step toward the door. Then a red wave washed through him and he whirled back, smashing his fist into Forbes’s face with the full weight of his body behind it.

The lawyer gave a high-pitched scream, and clutched both hands to his nose. All noises in the inn and in the street seemed to stop; the world hung suspended. Roger took a short, deep breath, rubbing his knuckles, and nodded once more.

“Come on,” he said to Ian.

“Oh, aye.”

Roger was halfway to the door when he realized that Ian was not with him. He looked back, and was just in time to see his cousin-by-marriage take Forbes gently by one ear and cut it off.

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SLEEPING WITH A SHARK

Stephen Bonnet was as good as his word—if that's how one would describe it. He made no sexual advances toward her, but did insist that she share his bed.

"I like a warm body in the night," he said. "And I think ye might prefer my bed to the cargo hold, sweetheart."

She would most emphatically have preferred the cargo hold, though her explorations—once free of land, she was allowed out of the cabin—had revealed the hold as a dark and comfortless hole, in which several hapless slaves were chained among a collection of boxes and barrels, in constant danger of being crushed should the cargo shift.

"Where are we going, miss? And what will happen when we get there?" Josh spoke in Gaelic, his handsome face small and frightened in the shadows of the hold.

"I think we're going to Ocracoke," she said in the same language. "Beyond that—I don't know. Do you still have your rosary?"

"Oh, yes, miss." He touched his chest, where the crucifix hung. "It's the only thing that keeps me from despair."

"Good. Keep praying." She glanced at the other slaves: two women, two men, all with slender bodies and delicate, fine-boned faces. She had brought food for Josh from her own supper, but had nothing to offer them, and was troubled.

"Do they feed you down here?"

“Yes, miss. Fairly well,” he assured her.

“Do they”—she moved her chin a little, delicately indicating the other slaves—“know anything? About where we’re going?”

“I don’t know, miss. I can’t talk to them. They’re African—Fulani, I can see that from the way they look, but that’s all I know.”

“I see. Well …” She hesitated, eager to be out of the dark, clammy hold, but reluctant to leave the young groom there.

“You go along, miss,” he said quietly in English, seeing her doubt. “I be fine. We all be fine.” He touched his rosary, and did his best to give her a smile, though it wavered round the edges. “Holy Mother see us safe.”

Having no words of comfort to impart, she nodded, and climbed the ladder into the sunlight, feeling five sets of eyes upon her.

Bonnet, thank God, spent most of his time on deck during the day. She could see him now, coming down the rigging like a nimble ape.

She stood very still, no movement save the brush of windblown hair, of skirts against her frozen limbs. He was as sensitive to the movements of her body as was Roger—but in his own way. The way of a shark, signaled to and drawn by the flappings of its prey.

She had spent one night in his bed so far, sleepless. He had pulled her casually against himself, said, “Good night, darlin’,” and fallen instantly asleep. Whenever she had tried to move, to extricate herself from his grip, though, he had shifted, moving with her, to keep her firmly by him.

She was obliged to an unwelcome intimacy with his body, an acquaintance that awoke memories she had with great difficulty put away—the feel of his knee pushing her thighs apart, the rough joviality of his touch between her legs, the sun-bleached blond hairs that curled crisply on his thighs and forearms, the unwashed, musky male smell of him. The mocking presence of LeRoi, rising at intervals during the night, pressed in firm and mindless hunger against her buttocks.

She had a moment of intense thankfulness, both for her present pregnancy—for she was in no doubt of it now—and for her certain knowledge that Stephen Bonnet had not fathered Jemmy.

He dropped from the rigging with a thud, saw her, and smiled. He said nothing, but squeezed her bottom familiarly as he passed, making her clench her teeth and cling to the rail.

Ocracoke, at the dark of the moon. She looked up into the brilliant sky, wheeling with clouds of terns and gulls; they could not be far offshore. How long, for God's sake, 'til the dark of the moon?

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THE PRODIGAL

They had no trouble in finding persons familiar with *Anemone* and her captain. Stephen Bonnet was well-known on the Edenton docks, though his reputation varied, depending on his associations. An honest captain was the usual opinion, but hard in his dealings. A blockade runner, a smuggler, said others—and whether that was good or bad depended on the politics of the person saying it. He'd get you anything, they said—for a price.

Pirate, said a few. But those few spoke in low tones, looking frequently over their shoulders, and strongly desired not to be quoted.

The *Anemone* had left quite openly, with a homely cargo of rice and fifty barrels of smoked fish. Roger had found one man who recalled seeing the young woman go aboard with one of Bonnet's hands: "Great huge doxy, with flaming hair a-loose, flowing down to her arse," the man had said, smacking his lips. "Mr. Bonnet's a good-size man himself, though; expect he can handle her."

Only Ian's hand on his arm had stopped him hitting the man.

What they had not yet found was anyone who knew for sure where *Anemone* was headed.

"London, I think," said the harbormaster, dubious. "But not directly; he's not yet got a full cargo. Likely he'll be going down the coast, trading here and there—perhaps sail for Europe from Charlestown. But then again," the man added, rubbing his chin, "could be he's bound for New England. Terrible risky business, getting anything into Boston these days—but well worth it if you do. Rice and smoked fish like to be worth their weight in gold up there, if you can get it ashore without the navy's warships blowing you out of the water."

Jamie, looking a little pale, thanked the man. Roger, unable to speak for the knot in his throat, merely nodded, and followed his father-in-law out of the harbormaster's office, back into the sun of the docks.

"Now what?" Ian asked, stifling a belch. He had been trawling through the dockside taverns, buying beer for casual laborers who might have helped load *Anemone,* or who might have spoken with her hands regarding her destination.

"The best I can think of is maybe for you and Roger Mac to take ship down the coast," Jamie said, frowning at the masts of the sloops and packet boats rocking at anchor. "Claire and I could go up, toward Boston."

Roger nodded, still unable to speak. It was far from being a good plan, particularly in light of the disruption the undeclared war was having on shipping—but the need of doing *something* was acute. He felt as though the marrow of his bones was burning; only movement would quench it.

To hire a small ship—even a fishing smack—or take passage on a packet boat, though, was expensive business.

"Aye, well." Jamie curled his hand in his pocket, where the black diamond still lay. "I'll go and see Judge Iredell; he can maybe put me in touch with an honest banker who'll advance me money against the sale of the stone. Let's go and tell Claire what's to do, first."

As they turned off the docks, though, a voice hailed Roger.

"Mr. MacKenzie!"

He turned, to find the Reverend Doctor McCorkle, his secretary, and the Reverend McMillan, carrying bags, all staring at him.

There was a brief scuffle of introduction—they had of course met Jamie when he came to fetch Roger, but not Ian—and then a slightly awkward pause.

"You—" Roger cleared his throat, addressing the elder. "You are leaving, then, sir? For the Indies?"

McCorkle nodded, his large, kindly face set in concern.

"I am, sir. I regret so much that I must go—and that you were not able to—well." Both McCorkle and the Reverend McMillan had tried to persuade him to return to them the day before, to take his place at the service of ordination. But he could not. Could not spare hours to such a thing, could not possibly engage himself to undertake the commitment with anything less than a single mind—and while his mind was in fact single just now, it was not toward God. There was room in his heart just now for only one thing—Brianna.

"Well, doubtless it is God's will," McCorkle said with a sigh. "Your wife, Mr. MacKenzie? There is no word of her?"

He shook his head, and muttered acknowledgment of their concern, their promises to pray for him and for the safe return of his wife.He was too much worried to find this much solace, yet still, he was touched by their kindness, and parted from them with many good wishes in both directions.

Roger, Jamie, and Ian walked silently back toward the inn where they had left Claire.

"Just by way of curiosity, Ian, what did ye do with Forbes's ear?" Jamie asked, breaking the silence as they turned into the wide street where the inn was.

"Oh, I have it safe, Uncle," Ian assured him, patting the small leather pouch at his belt.

"What in the name of G—" Roger stopped abruptly, then resumed. "What d'ye mean to do with it?"

"Keep it with me until we find my cousin," Ian said, seeming surprised that this was not obvious. "It will help."

"It will?"

Ian nodded, serious.

"When ye set about a difficult quest—if ye're Kahnyen'kehaka, I mean—ye generally go aside for a time, to fast and pray for guidance. We havena time to be doing that now, of course. But often, while ye're doing that, ye choose a talisman—or to be right about it, it chooses you—” He sounded completely matter-of-fact about this procedure, Roger noted.

“And ye carry it with ye through the quest, to keep the attention of the spirits upon your desire and ensure your success.”

“I see.” Jamie rubbed the bridge of his nose. He appeared—like Roger—to be wondering what the Mohawk spirits might make of Neil Forbes’s ear. It would, probably, ensure their attention, at least. “The ear … did ye pack it in salt, I hope?”

Ian shook his head.

“Nay, I smoked it over the kitchen fire at the inn last night. Dinna fash yourself, Uncle Jamie; it will keep.”

Roger found a perverse sort of comfort in this conversation. Between the prayers of the Presbyterian clergy and the support of the Mohawk spirits, perhaps they had a chance—but it was the presence of his two kinsmen, stalwart and determined on either side of him, that kept him in hope. They would not give up until Brianna was found, no matter what it took.

He swallowed the lump in his throat for the thousandth time since hearing the news, thinking of Jemmy. The little boy was safe at River Run—but how could he tell Jem that his mother was gone? Well … he wouldn’t, that was all. They’d find her.

In this mood of resolution, he led the way through the door of the Brewster, only to be hailed again.

“Roger!”

This time, it was Claire’s voice, sharp with excitement. He turned at once, to see her rising from a bench in the taproom. Seated across the table from her were a plump young woman and a slightly built young man with a cap of tightly curled black hair. Manfred McGillivray.

* * *

“I saw ye before, sir, two days ago.” Manfred bobbed his head apologetically toward Jamie. “I … er … well, I hid myself, sir, and I do regret it. But of course, I’d no way of knowing, until Eppie came back from Roanoke and showed me the ring.…”

The ring lay on the table, its cabochon ruby casting a tiny, calm pool of ruddy light on the boards. Roger picked it up and turned it in his fingers. He barely heard the explanations—that Manfred lived with the whore, who made periodic expeditions to the ports near Edenton, and upon seeing the ring had overcome his sense of shame and come to find Jamie—too much overcome by this small, hard, tangible evidence of Brianna.

Roger closed his fingers over it, finding the warmth of it a comfort, and came to himself in time to hear Hepzibah say earnestly, "Ocracoke, sir. At the dark of the moon." She coughed modestly, ducking her head. "The lady did say, sir, as you might feel some gratitude for the news of her whereabouts.…"

"Ye'll be paid, and paid well," Jamie assured her, though he was clearly giving her no more than a fraction of his attention. "The dark of the moon," he said, turning to Ian. "Ten days?"

Ian nodded, his face shining with excitement.

"Aye, about that. She didna ken whereabouts on Ocracoke Island this was?" he asked the whore.

Eppie shook her head.

"Nay, sir. I ken Stephen's got a house there, a large one, hidden in the trees, but that's all."

"We'll find it." Roger's own voice surprised him; he hadn't meant to speak aloud.

Manfred had been looking uneasy throughout. He leaned forward, putting his hand on top of Eppie's.

"Sir—when ye do find it … ye'll not say to anybody, will ye, about Eppie telling ye? Mr. Bonnet's a dangerous man, and I wouldna have her imperiled from him." He glanced at the young woman, who blushed and smiled at him.

"No, we won't say anything about her," Claire assured him. She had been scrutinizing both Manfred and Hepzibah carefully while they talked, and now leaned across the table to touch Manfred's forehead, which showed a stippling of some sort of rash. "Speaking of peril … she's in a great deal more danger from *you,* young man, than from Stephen Bonnet. Did you tell her?"

Manfred went a little paler, and for the first time, Roger noticed that the young man looked truly ill, his face thin and deeply lined.

“I did, *Frau* Fraser. From the first.”

“Oh, about the pox?” Hepzibah affected nonchalance, though Roger could see her hand tighten on Manfred’s. “Aye, he did tell me. But I says to him as it makes no difference. I daresay I’ve had a few men what are poxed before, not knowing. If I should get it … well. God’s will, innit?”

“No,” Roger said to her quite gently. “It isn’t. But you’ll go with Mrs. Claire, you and Manfred both, and do exactly what she tells you. Ye’ll be all right, and so will he. Won’t they?” he asked, turning to Claire, suddenly a little uncertain.

“Yes, they will,” she said dryly. “Fortunately, I have quite a bit of penicillin with me.”

Manfred’s face was a study in confusion.

“But—do ye mean, *meine Frau,* that ye can—can *cure* it?”

“That is exactly what I mean,” Claire assured him, “as I tried to tell you before you ran away.”

His mouth hung open, and he blinked. Then he turned to Hepzibah, who was staring at him in puzzlement.

“*Liebchen!* I can go home! *We* can go home,” he amended quickly, seeing her face change. “We will be married. We will go home,” he repeated, in the tones of one seeing a beatific vision but not quite trusting in its reality yet.

Eppie was frowning in uncertainty.

“I’m a whore, Freddie,” she pointed out. “And from the stories you tell about your mother …”

“I rather think that *Frau* Ute will be so happy to have Manfred back that she won’t be disposed to ask too many questions,” Claire said, with a glance at Jamie. “The Prodigal Son, you know?”

“Ye won’t need to be a whore any longer,” Manfred assured her. “I’m a gunsmith; I’ll earn a good living. Now that I know I *shall* be living!” His thin face was suddenly suffused with joy, and he flung his arms around Eppie and kissed her.

“Oh,” she said, flustered, but looking pleased. “Well. Hm. This … er … this penny—?” She looked inquiringly at Claire.

“The sooner, the better,” Claire said, standing up. “Come with me.” Her own face was a little flushed, Roger saw, and she put out a quick hand to Jamie, who took it and pressed it hard.

“We’ll go and see to things,” he said, glancing at Ian and Roger in turn. “With luck, we’ll sail this evening.”

“Oh!” Eppie had already stood up to follow Claire, but at this reminder of their business, she turned to Jamie, a hand to her mouth. “Oh. I’ve thought of the one more thing.” Her pleasant round face was puckered in concentration. “There are wild horses that run near the house. On Ocracoke. I heard Stephen speak o’ them once.” She looked from one man to the other. “Might that help?”

“It might,” Roger said. “Thank you—and God bless you.”

It wasn’t until they were outside, heading for the docks again, that he realized the ring was still clutched tight in his hand. What was it Ian had said?

“Ye choose a talisman—or to be right about it, it chooses you.”

His hands were slightly bigger than Brianna’s, but he pushed the ring onto his finger, and closed his hand around it.

* * *

She woke from a damp and restless sleep, mother-sense at once aroused. She was halfway out of bed, moving by instinct toward Jemmy’s trundle, when a hand grabbed her wrist, a convulsive grip like the bite of a crocodile.

She jerked back, groggy and alarmed. The sound of footsteps came to her from the deck overhead and she realized belatedly that the sound of distress that had wakened her had not come from Jemmy, but from the darkness at her side.

“Don’t go,” he whispered, and the fingers dug deep into the soft flesh of her inner wrist.

Unable to wrench free, she reached out with the other hand, to push him away. She touched damp hair, hot skin—and a trickle of wetness, cool and surprising on her fingers.

“What is it?” she whispered back, and leaned toward him by instinct. She reached again, touched his head, smoothed his hair—

all the things she had waked prepared to do. She felt her hand rest on him and thought to stop, but did not. It was as though the spurt of maternal comfort, once called forth, could not be pressed back into her, no more than the spurt of breast milk summoned by an infant's cry could be recalled to its source.

"Are you all right?" She kept her voice low, and as impersonal as the words allowed. She lifted her hand, and he moved, rolling toward her, pressing his head hard against the curve of her thigh.

"Don't go," he said again, and caught his breath in what might have been a sob. His voice was low and rough, but not as she had ever heard it before.

"I'm here." Her trapped wrist was growing numb. She laid her free hand on his shoulder, hoping he would let go if she seemed willing to stay.

He did relax his grip, but only to reach out and seize her by the waist, pulling her back into bed. She went, because there was no choice, and lay in silence, Bonnet's breathing harsh and warm on the back of her neck.

At length, he let go and rolled onto his back with a sigh, allowing her to move. She rolled onto her own back, cautious, trying to keep a few inches between them. Moonlight came through the stern windows in a silver flood, and she could see the silhouette of his face, catch the glint of light from forehead and cheek as he turned his head.

"Bad dream?" she ventured. She'd meant to sound sarcastic, but her own heart was still tripping fast from the alarm of the awakening, and the words had a tentative sound.

"Aye, aye," he said with a shuddering sigh. "The same. It comes to me over and over again, see? Ye'd think I'd know what it was about and wake, but I never do. Not 'til the waters close over my head." He rubbed a hand under his nose, sniffing like a child.

"Oh." She didn't want to ask for details, didn't want to encourage any further sense of intimacy. What she wanted, though, had nothing much to do with things anymore.

"Since I was a lad, I've dreamed of drowning," he said, and his voice, normally so assured, was unsteady. "The sea comes in, and I cannot move—not at all. The tide's risin', and I know it will kill me, but there's no way to move." His hand clutched the sheet convulsively, pulling it away from her.

"It's gray water, full of mud, and there are blind things swimmin' in it. They're waitin' on the sea to finish its business wit' me, see—and then they've business of their own."

She could hear the horror of it in his voice, and was torn between wanting to edge farther away from him and the ingrained habit of offering comfort.

"It was only a dream," she said at last, staring up at the boards of the deck, no more than three feet above her head. If only *this* were a dream!

"Ah, no," he said, and his voice had dropped to little more than a whisper in the darkness beside her. "Ah, no. It's the sea herself. Callin' me, see?"

Quite suddenly, he rolled toward her, seizing her and pressing her hard against him. She gasped, stiffening, and he pressed harder, responding, sharklike, to her struggles.

To her own horror, she felt LeRoi rising, and forced herself to be still. Panic and the need to escape his dream might all too easily make him forget his aversion to having sex with pregnant women, and that was the very last thing, the *very* last thing …

"Sshh," she said firmly, and clutched him round the head, forcing his face down into her shoulder, patting him, stroking his back. "Shh. It will be all right. It was only a dream. I won't let it hurt you—I won't let anything hurt you. Hush, hush now."

She went on patting him, her eyes closed, trying to imagine herself holding Jemmy after such a nightmare, quiet in their cabin, the hearth fire low, Jem's little body relaxing in trust, the sweet little-boy smell of his hair near her face.…

"I won't let you drown," she whispered. "I promise. I won't let you drown."

She said it over and over, and slowly, slowly, his breathing eased, and his grip on her slackened as sleep overcame him. Still she repeated it, a soft, hypnotic murmur, her words half-lost in the sound of water, hissing past the side of the ship, and she spoke no longer to the man beside her, but to the slumbering child within.

“I won’t let anything hurt you. *Nothing* will hurt you. I promise.”

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RENDEZVOUS

Roger paused to wipe the sweat out of his eyes. He'd tied a folded kerchief round his head, but the humidity in the thick growth of the tidal forest was so high that sweat formed in his eye sockets, stinging and blurring his vision.

From a taproom in Edenton, the knowledge that Bonnet was—or would be—on Ocracoke had seemed all heady conviction; the search narrowed suddenly to one tiny sandbar, versus the millions of other places the pirate could have been; how difficult could it be? Once *on* the bloody sandbar, the perspective had altered. The frigging island was narrow, but several miles long, with large patches of scrub forest, and most of its coastline fraught with hidden bars and dangerous eddies.

The skipper of the fishing boat they'd hired had got them there in good time; then they'd spent two days sailing up and down the length of the damn thing, looking for possible landing spots, likely pirate hideouts, and herds of wild horses. So far, none of these had appeared.

Having spent long enough retching over the side—Claire hadn't brought her acupuncture needles, having not foreseen the need of them—Jamie had insisted upon being put ashore. He would walk the length of the island, he said, keeping an eye out for anything untoward. They could pick him up at sundown.

"And what if you run smack into Stephen Bonnet, all on your own?" Claire had demanded, when he refused to allow her to accompany him.

"I'd rather be run through than puke to death," was Jamie's elegant reply, "and besides, Sassenach, I need ye to stay here and make sure yon misbegotten son of a—of a captain doesna sail away without us, aye?"

So they had rowed him ashore and left him, watching as he strode away, staggering only slightly, into the thicket of scrub pines and palmetto.

Another day of frustration, spent sailing slowly up and down the coast, seeing nothing but the occasional ramshackle fishing shack, and Roger and Ian had begun to see the wisdom of Jamie's approach, as well.

"See yon houses?" Ian pointed at a tiny cluster of shacks on the shore.

"If ye want to call them that, yes." Roger shaded his hand over his eyes to look, but the shacks looked deserted.

"If they can get boats off there, we can get one on. Let's go ashore and see will the folk there tell us anything."

Leaving Claire glowering behind them, they had rowed ashore to make inquiries—to no avail. The only inhabitants of the tiny settlement were a few women and children, all of whom heard the name "Bonnet" and scuttled into their homes like clams digging into the sand.

Still, having felt solid ground under their feet, they were less than eager to admit defeat and go back to the fishing shack. "Let's have a look, then," Ian had said, gazing thoughtfully into the sun-striped forest. "We'll crisscross, aye?" He drew a quick series of X's in the sand in illustration. "We'll cover more ground, and meet up every so often. Whoever reaches the shore first each time will wait on the other."

Roger had nodded agreement, and with a cheery wave at the fishing boat and the small, indignant figure on its bow, had turned inland.

It was hot and still under the pines, and his progress was impaired by all sorts of low bushes, creepers, patches of sandburs and other stickery things. The going was a little easier near the shore, as the forest thinned and gave way to stretches of coarse sea oats, with dozens of tiny crabs that scuttled out of his way—or occasionally crunched under his feet.

Still, it was a relief to move, to feel that somehow he was doing something, was making progress toward finding Bree—though he admitted to himself that he wasn't sure exactly what they were looking for. Was she here? Had Bonnet arrived on the island already? Or would he be coming in a day or two, at the dark of the moon, as Hepzibah had said?

Despite the worry, the heat, and the millions of gnats and mosquitoes—they didn't bite, for the most part, but insisted upon crawling into his ears, eyes, nose, and mouth—he smiled at the thought of Manfred. He'd been praying for the boy ever since his disappearance from the Ridge, that he might be restored to his family. Granted, to find him firmly attached to an ex-prostitute was likely not quite the answer to prayer that Ute McGillivray had been hoping for, but he'd learned before that God had His own methods.

Lord, let her be safe. He didn't care how that prayer was answered, provided only that it was. *Let me have her back, please.*

It was well past mid-afternoon, and his clothes stuck to him with sweat, when he came to one of the dozens of small tidal inlets that cut into the island like the holes in Swiss cheese. It was too wide to leap across, so he made his way down the sandy bank and into the water. It was deeper than he'd thought—he was up to his neck by mid-channel, and had to swim a few strokes before he found solid footing on the other side.

The water pulled at him, rushing toward the sea; the tide had begun to turn. Likely the inlet would be much shallower when the tide was out—but he thought a boat could make it up the inlet easily, with the tide coming in.

That was promising. Encouraged, he crawled out on the far side and began to follow the channel inland. Within minutes, he heard a sound in the distance and stopped dead, listening.

Horses. He would swear it was the sound of neighing, though so far away he couldn't be sure of it. He turned in a circle, trying to locate it, but the sound had vanished. Still, it seemed a sign, and he pushed on with renewed vigor, frightening a family of raccoons washing their meal in the water of the channel.

But then the inlet began to narrow, the water level dropping to no more than a foot—and then less, only a few inches of water running clear over dusky sand. He was loath to give up, though, and shoved his way under a low canopy of pine and twisted scrub oak. Then he stopped dead, skin tingling from scalp to sole.

Four of them. Crude stone pillars, pale in the shadow of the trees. One stood actually in the channel itself, tilted drunkenly by the action of the water. Another, on the bank, had carvings on its face, abstract symbols that he didn't recognize. He stood frozen, as though they were live things that might see him if he moved.

It seemed abnormally silent; even the insects seemed temporarily to have deserted him. He had no doubt that this was the circle the man Donner had described to Brianna. Here, the five men had chanted, walked their pattern, and turned, passing to the left of the inscribed stone. And here at least one of them had died. A profound shiver ran through him, despite the oppressive heat.

He moved at last, very carefully, backing away, as though the stones might wake, but did not turn his back on them until he was a good distance away—so far away that the stones were lost to sight, buried in the heavy growth. Then he turned and walked back toward the sea, fast, and then faster, 'til the breath burned in his throat, feeling as though invisible eyes bored into his back.

* * *

I sat in the shade of the forecastle, sipping cool beer and watching the shore. Just like bloody men, I thought, frowning at the tranquil stretch of sand. Charge in pigheaded, leaving the women to mind the store. Still … I wasn't so sure that I would have wanted to slog the length of the beastly island on foot myself. By repute, Blackbeard and a number of his confederates had used the place as a lair, and the reason why was obvious. A less hospitable shore I'd seldom seen.

The chance of finding anything in that secretive, wooded place by randomly poking into holes was low. Still, sitting on my bum in a boat while Brianna was dealing with Stephen Bonnet was making me twitch with anxiety and the urgent desire to *do* something.

But there was nothing *to* do, and the afternoon wore slowly away. I watched the shore steadily; now and then, I would see Roger or Ian pop out of the undergrowth, then the two of them would confer briefly before popping back in. Now and then, I looked to the north—but there was no sign of Jamie.

Captain Roarke, who *was* in fact a misbegotten son of a poxed whore, as he cheerfully admitted himself, sat down with me for a time and accepted a bottle of beer. I congratulated myself on my forethought in having brought a few dozen, a few of which I'd put over the side in a net to keep cool; the beer was doing a lot to soothe my impatience, though my stomach was still knotted with worry.

"None o' your men are what ye might call sailing men, are they?" Captain Roarke observed, after a thoughtful silence.

"Well, Mr. MacKenzie's spent a bit of time on fishing boats in Scotland," I said, dropping an empty bottle into the net. "But I wouldn't say he's an able seaman, no."

"Ah." He drank a bit more.

"All right," I said finally. "Why?"

He lowered his bottle and belched loudly, then blinked.

"Oh. Well, ma'am—I believe I did hear one o' the young men say as how there was a rondayvooz to occur, at dark o' moon?"

"Yes," I said a little guardedly. We had told the captain as little as possible, not knowing whether he might have some association with Bonnet. "The dark of the moon is tomorrow night, isn't it?"

"It is," he agreed. "But what I mean to say is—when one says 'dark o' moon,' most likely one *does* mean nighttime, aye?" He peered into the empty neck of his bottle, then lifted it and blew thoughtfully across it, making a deep *woooog* sound.

I took the hint and handed him another.

"Thank you kindly, ma'am," he said, looking happy. "See, the tide turns about half-eleven, this time o' month—and it's going *out,*" he added with emphasis.

I gave him a blank look.

"Well, if you look careful, ma'am, you'll see the tide is half out now"—he pointed toward the south—"yet there's middling deep water close to shore all along o' here. Come the nighttime, though, it won't be."

"Yes?" I was still missing his point, but he was patient.

"Well, with the tide out, it's easier to see the bars and inlets, sure—and were you coming in with a boat with a shallow draft, that would be the time to choose. But was the rondayvooz to be with something bigger, maybe anything that draws more than four feet … well, then." He took a gulp, and pointed the bottom of his bottle toward a spot far down the shore. "The water there is deep, ma'am—see the color of it? Was I a ship of any size, that would be the safest place to anchor, when the tide is on the ebb."

I regarded the spot he'd indicated. The water *was* distinctly darker there, a deeper blue-gray than the waves surrounding it.

"You could have told us that earlier," I said with a certain note of reproach.

"So I could, ma'am," he agreed cordially, "save for not knowin' as you'd like to hear it." He got up then and wandered toward the stern, an empty bottle in hand, absently going *woog-woog-woog,* like a distant foghorn.

As the sun sank into the sea, Roger and Ian appeared on the shore, and Captain Roarke's hand, Moses, rowed ashore to fetch them off. Then we hoisted sail and made our way slowly up the coast of Ocracoke, until we found Jamie, waving from a tiny spit of sand.

Anchored offshore for the night, we exchanged notes of our findings—or lack of them. All the men were drained, exhausted from heat and searching and with little appetite for supper, despite their exertions. Roger, in particular, looked drawn and pale, and said almost nothing.

The last sliver of the waning moon rose in the sky. With a minimum of conversation, the men took their blankets and lay down on deck, asleep within minutes.

Quantities of beer notwithstanding, I was wide awake. I sat beside Jamie, my own blanket wrapped about my shoulders against the coolness of the night wind, watching the low black mystery of the island. The anchorage Captain Roarke had pointed out to me was invisible in the darkness. Would we know, I wondered, if a ship were to come tomorrow night?

* * *

In fact, it came that night. I woke in the very early morning, dreaming of corpses. I sat up, heart pounding, to see Roarke and Moses at the rail, and a dreadful smell in the air. It wasn't a smell one would ever forget, and when I got to my feet and went to the rail to look, I was not at all surprised to hear Roarke murmur, "Slaver," nodding toward the south.

The ship was anchored half a mile or so away, its masts black against the paling sky. Not a huge ship, but definitely too big to make its way into the small channels of the island. I watched a long time, joined by Jamie, Roger, and Ian as they woke—but no boats were lowered.

"What d'ye suppose it's doing there?" Ian said. He spoke in a low voice; the slave ship made everyone nervous.

Roarke shook his head; he didn't like it, either.

"Damned if I know," he said. "Wouldn't expect such a thing in such a place. Not at all."

Jamie rubbed a hand across his unshaven chin. He hadn't shaved in days, and, green-faced and hollow-eyed beneath the stubble—he'd vomited over the rail within minutes of rising, though the swell was very gentle—looked even more disreputable than Roarke himself.

"Can ye lay us alongside her, Mr. Roarke?" he said, eyes on the slave ship. Roger glanced at him sharply.

"Ye don't suppose Brianna's aboard?"

"If she is, we'll find out. If she's not—we'll maybe find out who yon ship has come to see."

It was full daylight by the time we came along the ship, and there were a number of hands on deck, all of whom peered curiously down over the rail at us.

Roarke hallooed up, asking permission to come aboard. There was no immediate response to this, but after a few minutes, a large man with an air of authority and an ill-tempered face appeared.

"What d'ye want?" he called down.

"To come aboard," Roarke bellowed back.

"No. Shove off."

"We are in search of a young woman!" Roger called up. "We should like to ask you a few questions!"

"Any young women on this ship are mine," the captain—if that's what he was—said definitely. "Bugger off, I said." He turned and gestured to his hands, who scattered at once, reappearing in moments with muskets.

Roger cupped his hands to his mouth.

"BRIANNA!" he bellowed. "BRIANNAAAA!"

One man raised his gun and fired, the ball whistling safely over our heads, and ripping through the mainsail.

"Oi!" shouted Roarke, incensed. "What's the matter of you?"

The only answer to this was a fusillade of further shots, followed by the opening of the port lids nearest us, and the sudden appearance of the long black noses of several cannon, along with a more intense gust of stink.

"Jesus God," said Roarke, astonished. "Well, if that's how you feel about—well, God damn you!" he shouted, brandishing a fist. "God damn you, I say!"

Moses, less interested in rhetoric, had made sail with the first shot and was already at the tiller; we slid past the slave ship and into clean water within moments.

"Well, *something's* going on," I remarked, looking back at the ship. "Whether it's to do with Bonnet or not."

Roger was clinging to the rail, his knuckles white.

“It is,” Jamie said. He wiped a hand across his mouth, and grimaced. “Can ye keep in sight of her, but out of range, Mr. Roarke?” A fresh wave of the smell of sewage, corruption, and hopelessness hit us, and he turned the color of rancid suet. “And maybe upwind, too?”

We were obliged to sail well out into the ocean and tack to and fro in order to meet these various conditions, but at length had beaten our way back and anchored a safe distance away, the slave ship barely visible. Here we lay through the rest of the day, taking it in turns to keep an eye on the strange ship through Captain Roarke’s telescope.

Nothing happened, though; no boats came from the ship, nor from the shore. And as we all sat silent on deck, watching the stars come out in a moonless sky, the ship was swallowed by the dark.

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THE DARK OF THE MOON

They anchored long before dawn, and a small boat took them ashore.

“Where is *this*?” she asked, voice rusty with disuse—Bonnet had wakened her in the dark. They had made three stops along the way, at nameless coves where mysterious men came out of the shrubbery, rolling barrels or carrying bales, but she had not been taken off at any of them. This was a long, low island, thick with scrub forest and hazy with mist, looking haunted under a dying moon.

“Ocracoke,” he answered, leaning forward to peer into the fog. “A bit farther to port, Denys.” The seaman at the oars leaned harder to the side, and the nose of the boat turned slowly, drawing nearer to the shore.

It was cold on the water; she was grateful for the thick cloak he had wrapped around her before handing her into the boat. Even so, the chill of the night and the open sea had little to do with the small, constant shiver that made her hands tremble and numbed her feet and fingers.

Soft murmurs between the pirates, further direction. Bonnet jumped off into waist-deep, muddy water, and waded into the shadows, pushing aside the heavy growth so that the water of the hidden inlet showed suddenly, a smooth dark gleam before them. The boat nosed its way under the overhanging trees, then paused, so that Bonnet could pull himself over the gunwales, splashing and dripping.

A shattering cry sounded near them, so close that she jerked, heart pounding, before realizing that it was only a bird somewhere in the swamp around them. Otherwise, the night was quiet, save for the muted, regular splash of the oars.

They had put Josh and the Fulani men into the boat, too; Josh sat at her feet, a hunched black form. He was shivering; she could feel it. Disengaging a fold of the cloak, she put it over him, and put a hand on his shoulder under it, meaning to give him what encouragement she could. A hand rose and settled softly over hers, squeezing, and thus linked, they sailed slowly into the dark unknown beneath the dripping trees.

The sky was lightening by the time the boat reached a small landing, and streaks of rose-tinted cloud reached across the horizon. Bonnet hopped out, and reached down to take her hand. Reluctantly, she let go of Josh, and stood up.

There was a house, half-hidden in the trees. Made of gray clapboards, it seemed to sink into the remnants of fog, as though it weren't quite real and might disappear at any moment.

The wind-borne stink, though, was real enough. She'd never smelled it before herself, but had heard her mother's vivid description of it, and recognized it instantly—the smell of a slaver, anchored offshore. Josh recognized it, too; she heard his sudden gasp, and then a hasty murmur—he was saying the Hail Mary in Gaelic, as fast as he could.

"Take these to the barracoon," Bonnet said to the seaman, pushing Josh in his direction and waving at the Fulani. "Then go back to the ship. Tell Mr. Orden we sail for England in four days' time; he'll see to the rest of the provisioning. Come for me Saturday, an hour before high tide."

"Josh!" She called after him, and he looked back, eyes white with fear, but the seaman hustled him along, and Bonnet dragged her in the other direction, up the path toward the house.

"Wait! Where is he taking him? What are you going to do with him?" She dug her feet into the mud, and grabbed hold of a mangrove, refusing to move.

"Sell him, what else?" Bonnet was matter-of-fact about that, and also about her refusal to move. "Come along, darlin'. Ye know I can make ye, and ye know ye won't like it if I do." He reached out, flipped back the edge of her cloak, and pinched her nipple, hard, in illustration.

Burning with anger, she snatched the cloak back and wrapped it tight around her, as though that might soothe the pain. He had already turned, and was making his way up the path, quite certain that she would follow. To her everlasting shame, she did.

* * *

The door was opened by a black man, nearly as tall as Bonnet himself, and even wider through the chest and shoulder. A thick vertical scar between his eyes ran nearly from his hairline to the bridge of his nose, but it had the clean look of a deliberate tribal scar, not the result of accident.

"Emmanuel, me man!" Bonnet greeted the man cheerfully, and pushed Brianna ahead of him into the house. "Look what the cat dragged in, will ya?"

The black man looked her up and down with an expression of doubt.

"She damn tall," he said, in a voice that held an African lilt. He took her by the shoulder and turned her round, running a hand down her back and cupping her buttocks briefly through the cloak. "Nice fat arse, though," he admitted grudgingly.

"Isn't it, though? Well, be seeing to her, then come tell me how it is here. The hold's near full—oh, and I've picked up four—no, five—more blacks. The men can go to Captain Jackson, but the women—ah, now, those are somethin' special." He winked at Emmanuel. "Twins."

The black man's face went rigid.

"Twins?" he said in a tone of horror. "You bring them in the house?"

"I will," Bonnet said firmly. "Fulani, and gorgeous things they are, too. No English, no training—but they'll go for fancies, sure.

Speakin' of which, have we word from *Signor* Ricasoli?"

Emmanuel nodded, though his brow was furrowed; the scar pulled the frown lines into a deep "V."

"He be here on Thursday. *Monsieur* Houvener comes then, too. Mister Howard be here tomorrow, though."

"Splendid. I'm wanting me breakfast now—and I imagine you're hungry as well, aren't ye, darlin'?" he asked, turning to Brianna.

She nodded, torn between fear, outrage, and morning sickness. She had to eat something, and fast.

"Fine, then. Take her somewhere"—he flipped a hand toward the ceiling, indicating rooms upstairs—"and feed her. I'll eat in me office; come find me there."

Without acknowledgment of the order, Emmanuel clamped a hand like a vise on the back of her neck, and shoved her toward the stairs.

* * *

The butler—if one could describe something like Emmanuel with such a domestic term—pushed her into a small room and shut the door behind her. It was furnished, but sparsely: a bed frame with a bare mattress, one woolen blanket, and a chamber pot. She made use of the latter object with relief, then made a rapid reconnaissance of the room itself.

There was only one window, a small one, set with metal bars. There was no glass, only inside shutters, and the breath of sea and scrub forest filled the room, vying with dust and the stale smell of the stained mattress. Emmanuel might be a factotum, but he wasn't much of a housekeeper, she thought, trying to keep her spirits up.

A familiar sound came to her, and she craned her neck to see. Not much was visible from the window—only the white crushed shells and sandy mud that surrounded the house, and the tops of stunted pines. If she pressed her face to the side of the window, though, she could see a small slice of a distant beach, with white breakers rolling in. As she watched, three horses galloped across it, vanishing out of her view—but with the wind-borne sound of neighing, then came five more, and then another group of seven or eight. Wild horses, the descendants of Spanish ponies left here a century ago.

The sight of them charmed her, and she watched for a long time, hoping they would come back, but they didn't; only a flight of pelicans passed by, and a few gulls, diving for fish.

The sight of the horses had made her feel less alone for a few moments, but no less empty. She had been in the room for half an hour, at least, and there were no sounds of footsteps in the hall outside, bringing food. Cautiously, she tried the door, and was surprised to find it unlocked.

There *were* sounds downstairs; someone was here. And the warm, grainy aromas of porridge and baking bread were faint in the air.

Swallowing to keep her stomach down, she moved soft-footed through the house and down the stairs. There were male voices in a room at the front of the house—Bonnet and Emmanuel. The sound of them made her diaphragm tighten, but the door was closed, and she tiptoed past.

The kitchen was a cookshack, a separate small building outside, connected to the house by a short breezeway and surrounded by a fenced yard that also enclosed the back of the house. She gave the fence—very tall, and spiked—a glance, but first things first: she had to have food.

There was someone in the kitchen; she could hear the movements of pots, and a woman's voice, muttering something. The smell of food was strong enough to lean against. She pushed open the door and went in, pausing to let the cook see her. Then she saw the cook.

She was so battered by circumstance at this point that she only blinked, certain she was seeing things.

"Phaedre?" she said uncertainly.

The girl swung around, wide-eyed and open-mouthed with shock.

"Oh, sweet Jesus!" She glanced wildly behind Brianna, then, seeing that she was alone, grabbed Brianna's arm and pulled her out into the yard.

“What you doing here?” she demanded, sounding fierce. “How do you come to be *here*?”

“Stephen Bonnet,” Brianna said briefly. “How on earth did you—did he kidnap you? From River Run?” She couldn’t think how—or why—but everything from the moment she had learned she was pregnant had had the surreal feel of hallucination, and how much of this was due to pregnancy alone she had no real idea.

Phaedre was shaking her head, though.

“No, miss. That Bonnet, he got me a month ago. From a man name Butler,” she added, mouth twisting in an expression that made clear her loathing of Butler.

The name seemed vaguely familiar to Brianna. She thought it was the name of a smuggler; she had never met him, but had heard the name now and then. He wasn’t the smuggler who provided her aunt with tea and other contraband luxuries, though—she *had* met that man, a disconcertingly effete and dainty gentleman named Wilbraham Jones.

“I don’t understand. But—wait, is there anything to eat?” she asked, the floor of her stomach dropping suddenly.

“Oh. Surely. You wait here.” Phaedre vanished back into the kitchen, light-footed, and was back in an instant with half a loaf of bread and a crock of butter.

“Thank you.” She grabbed the bread and ate some hastily, not bothering to butter it, then put down her head between her knees and breathed for a few minutes, until the nausea subsided.

“Sorry,” she said, raising her head at last. “I’m pregnant.”

Phaedre nodded, plainly unsurprised.

“Who by?” she asked.

“My husband,” Brianna answered. She’d spoken tartly, but then realized, with a small lurch of her unsettled innards, that it could so easily be otherwise. Phaedre had been gone from River Run for months—God only knew what had happened to her in that span of time.

“He’s not had you long, then.” Phaedre glanced at the house.

“No. You said a month—have you tried to get away?”

"Once." The girl's mouth twisted again. "You see that man Emmanuel?"

Brianna nodded.

"He an Ibo. Track a haunt through a cypress swamp, and make it sorry when he catch it." She wrapped her arms around herself, though the day was warm.

The yard was fenced with eight-foot pointed pine stakes, laced with rope. She might get over them, with a foot up from Phaedre … but then she saw the shadow of a man pass by on the other side, a gun across his shoulder.

She would have guessed as much, had she been capable of organized thought. This was Bonnet's hideaway—and judging from the piles of boxes, bundles, and casks stacked haphazardly in the yard, it was also where he kept valuable cargo before selling it. Naturally, it would be guarded.

A faint breeze wafted through the pickets of the fence, carrying the same vile stench she had smelled when they came ashore. She took another quick bite of bread, forcing it down as ballast for her queasy stomach.

Phaedre's nostrils flared, then pinched at the reek.

"Be a slave ship, anchored past the breakers," she said very quietly, and swallowed. "Captain come in yesterday, see if Mr. Bonnet have something for him, but he ain't back yet. Captain Jackson say he come again tomorrow."

Brianna could feel Phaedre's fear, like a pale yellow miasma wavering over her skin, and took another bite of bread.

"He won't—he wouldn't sell you to this Jackson?" She wouldn't put anything at all past Bonnet. But she did by now understand things about slavery. Phaedre was a prime item: light-skinned, young, and pretty—and trained as a body servant. Bonnet could get a very good price for her almost anywhere, and from what little she knew of slavers, they dealt in raw slaves from Africa.

Phaedre shook her head, her lips gone pale.

"I don't think so. He say I'm what he call a 'fancy.' That's why he's kept me so long; he got some men he know, come up from the

Indies this week. Planters." She swallowed again, looking ill. "They buy pretty women."

The bread Brianna had eaten melted suddenly into a soggy, slimy mass in her stomach, and with a certain feeling of fatality, she got up and took a few steps away before throwing up over a bale of raw cotton.

Stephen Bonnet's voice echoed in her head, cheerfully jovial.

"Why bother takin' ye all the way to London, where ye'd be of no particular use to anyone? Besides, it rains quite a bit in London; I'm sure ye wouldn't like it."

"They buy pretty women," she whispered, leaning against the palisades, waiting for the sense of clamminess to fade. But *white* women?

Why not? said the coldly logical part of her brain. Women are property, black or white. If you can be owned, you can be sold. She herself had owned Lizzie, for a time.

She wiped her sleeve over her mouth, and went back to Phaedre, who was sitting on a roll of copper, her fine-boned face thin and drawn with worry.

"Josh—he took Josh, too. When we came ashore, he told them to take Josh to the barracoon."

"Joshua?" Phaedre sat up straight, eyes huge. "Joshua, Miss Jo's groom? He's *here*?"

"Yes. Where's the barracoon, do you know?"

Phaedre had hopped to her feet and was striding to and fro, agitated.

"I ain't knowing for sure. I cook up food for the slaves there, but be one of the seamen takes it. Can't be far from the house, though."

"Is it a big one?"

Phaedre shook her head emphatically at that.

"No'm. Mr. Bonnet, he ain't really in the slaving business. He pick up a few, here and there—and then he got his 'fancies' "—she grimaced at that—"but can't be more'n a dozen here, amount of food they eat. Three girls in the house—five, counting they Fulani he say he's bringing."

Feeling better, Brianna began to cast about the yard, searching for anything that might be of use. It was a hodgepodge of valuable things—everything from bolts of Chinese silk, wrapped in linen and oiled cloth, and crates of porcelain dishes, to rolls of copper, casks of brandy, bottles of wine packed in straw, and chests of tea. She opened one of these, breathing in the soft perfume of the leaves and finding it wonderfully soothing to her internal distress. She'd give almost anything for a hot cup of tea just now.

Even more interesting, though, were a number of small barrels, thick-walled and tightly sealed, containing gunpowder.

"If only I had a few matches," she muttered to herself, looking at them longingly. "Or even a striker." But fire was fire, and there was certainly one in the kitchen. She looked at the house carefully, thinking exactly where to place the barrels—but she couldn't blow the place up, not with the other slaves inside, and not without knowing what she'd do next.

The sound of the door opening galvanized her; by the time Emmanuel looked out, she had jumped away from the gunpowder, and was examining an enormous box enclosing a grandfather clock, the gilded face—decorated with three animated sailing ships on a sea of silver—peeping out behind the protective laths nailed over it.

"You, girl," he said to Brianna, and jerked his chin. "You come wash yourself." He gave Phaedre a hard look—Brianna saw that she wouldn't meet his eyes, but hastily began to pick up sticks of kindling from the ground.

The hand clamped hard on her neck again, and she was marched ignominiously back into the house.

* * *

This time, Emmanuel *did* lock the door. He brought her a basin and ewer, a towel, and a clean shift. Much, much later, he came back, bringing a tray of food. But he ignored all questions, and locked the door again upon leaving.

She pulled the bed over to the window and knelt on it, elbows wedged between the bars. There was nothing to do but think—and that was something she would as soon put off a little longer. She watched the forest and the distant beach, the shadows of the scrub pines creeping over the sand, the oldest of sundials, marking the snaillike progress of the hours.

After a long time, her knees grew numb and her elbows hurt, and she spread the cloak over the nasty mattress, trying not to consider the various stains on it, nor the smell. Lying on her side, she watched the sky through the window, the infinitesimal changes of the light from one moment to the next, and considered in detail the specific pigments and the exact brushstrokes she would use to paint it. Then she got up and began pacing to and fro, counting her steps, estimating distance.

The room was about eight feet by ten; 5,280 feet in a mile. Five hundred and twenty-eight laps. She really hoped Bonnet's office was underneath her.

Nothing, though, was enough, and as the room darkened and she reached two miles, she found Roger in her mind—where he had been all along, unacknowledged.

She sank down on the bed, hot from the exercise, and watched the last of the flaming color fade from the sky.

Had he been ordained, as he wanted so much? He had been worried about the question of predestination, not sure that he could take the Holy Orders he desired, if he were not able to subscribe wholeheartedly to that notion—well, *she* called it a notion; to Presbyterians, it was dogma. She smiled wryly, thinking of Hiram Crombie.

Ian had told her about Crombie earnestly attempting to explain the doctrine of predestination to the Cherokee. Most of them had listened politely, then ignored him. Bird's wife, Penstemon, though, had been interested by the argument, and followed Crombie about during the day, playfully pushing him, then crying out, 'Did your God know I would do *that*? How could he know that—*I* didn't know I would do that!', or in more thoughtful mood, trying to get him to explain how the idea of predestination might work in terms of gambling—like most of the Indians, Penstemon would bet on almost anything.

She thought Penstemon had probably had a lot to do with the shortness of Crombie's initial visit to the Indians. She had to give him credit, though: he'd gone back. And back again. He believed in what he was doing.

As did Roger. Damn, she thought wearily, there he was again, those soft moss-green eyes of his dark with thought, running a finger slowly down the bridge of his nose.

"Does it really matter?" she'd said at last, tiring of the discussion of predestination, and privately pleased that Catholics weren't required to believe any such thing and were content to let God work in mysterious ways. "Doesn't it matter more that you can help people, that you can offer comfort?"

They'd been in bed, the candle extinguished, talking by the glow of the hearth. She could feel the shift of his body as he moved, his hand playing with a strand of her hair as he considered.

"I don't know," he'd said at last. He'd smiled a little then, looking up at her.

"Do ye not think any time-traveler must be a bit of a theologian, though?"

She'd taken a deep, martyred breath, and he'd laughed then, and let it go, kissing her instead and descending to far earthier matters.

He'd been right, though. No one who had traveled through the stones could help asking it: why me? And who would answer that question, if not God?

Why me? And the ones who didn't make it—why them? She felt a small chill, thinking of those. The anonymous bodies, listed in Geillis Duncan's notebook; Donner's companions, dead on arrival. And speaking of Geillis Duncan … the thought came to her suddenly; the witch had died *here,* out of her own time.

Putting metaphysics aside and looking at the matter purely in terms of science—and it *must* have a scientific basis, she argued stubbornly, it wasn't magic, no matter what Geilie Duncan had thought—the laws of thermodynamics held that neither mass nor energy could be created nor destroyed. Only changed.

Changed how, though? Did movement through time constitute change? A mosquito whined past her ear, and she flapped her hand to drive it away.

You could go both ways; they knew that for a fact. The obvious implication—which neither Roger nor her mother had mentioned, so perhaps they hadn't seen it—was that one could go into the future from a starting point, rather than only into the past and back.

So perhaps if someone traveled to the past and died there, as Geillis Duncan and Otter-Tooth had both demonstrably done … perhaps that must be balanced by someone traveling to the future and dying *there*?

She closed her eyes, unable—or unwilling—to follow that train of thought any further. Far in the distance, she heard the sound of the surf, pounding on the sand, and thought of the slave ship. Then she realized that the smell of it was *here,* and rising suddenly, went to the window. She could just see the far end of the path that led to the house; as she watched, a big man in a dark-blue coat and hat stumped rapidly out of the trees, followed by two others, shabbily dressed. *Sailors,* she thought, seeing the roll of their gait.

This must be Captain Jackson, then, come to conduct his business with Bonnet.

"Oh, Josh," she said out loud, and had to sit down on the bed, a wave of faintness washing over her.

Who had it been? One of the Saint Theresas—Theresa of Avila? Who'd said in exasperation to God, *"Well, if this is how You treat Your friends, no wonder You have so few of them!"*

* * *

She had fallen asleep thinking of Roger. She waked in the morning thinking of the baby.

For once, the nausea and the odd sense of dislocation were absent. All she felt was a deep peace, and a sense of … curiosity?

Are you there? she thought, hands across her womb. Nothing so definite as an answer; but knowledge was there, as sure as the beating of her own heart.

Good, she thought, and fell asleep again.

Noises from below awakened her sometime later. She sat up suddenly, hearing loud voices raised, then swayed, feeling faint, and lay down again. The nausea had returned, but if she closed her eyes and kept very still, it lay dormant, like a sleeping snake.

The voices continued, rising and falling, with the occasional loud thud for punctuation, as though a fist had struck a wall or table. After a few minutes, though, the voices ceased, and she heard nothing further until light footsteps came to her door. The lock rattled, and Phaedre came in, with a tray of food.

She sat up, trying not to breathe; the smell of anything fried …

“What’s going on down there?” she asked.

Phaedre pulled a face.

“That Emmanuel, he’s not best pleased with they Fulani women. Ibo, they think twins are bad, bad luck—any woman bear twins, she take them out in the forest, leave them there to die. Emmanuel want to send the Fulani off with Captain Jackson first thing, get them out the house, but Mr. Bonnet, he say he waiting on the gentlemen from the Indies, get a lots better price.”

“Gentlemen from the Indies—what gentlemen?”

Phaedre lifted her shoulders.

“I ain’t knowing. Gentlemen he think he sell things to. Sugar planters, I reckon. You eat that; I be back later.”

Phaedre turned to go, but Brianna suddenly called after her.

“Wait! You didn’t tell me yesterday—who took you from River Run?”

The girl turned back, looking reluctant.

“Mr. Ulysses.”

“Ulysses?” Brianna said, disbelieving. Phaedre heard the doubt in her voice, and gave her a flat, angry look.

“What, you don’t believe me?”

“No, no,” Brianna hastily assured her. “I do believe you. Only—why?”

Phaedre breathed in deeply through her nose.

“Because I am one damn stupid nigger,” she said bitterly. “My mama told me, she say never, ever cross Ulysses. But did I listen?”

“Cross him,” Brianna said warily. “How did you cross him?” She gestured to the bed, inviting Phaedre to sit down. The girl hesitated for a moment, but then did, smoothing a hand over the white cloth tied round her head, over and over, while she searched for words.

"Mr. Duncan," she said at last, and her face softened a little. "He a nice, nice man. You know he never been with a woman? He got kicked by a horse when he young, hurt his balls, think he can't do nothing that way."

Brianna nodded; she'd heard something of Duncan's trouble from her mother.

"Well," Phaedre said with a sigh. "He wrong about that." She glanced at Brianna, to see how she might take this admission. "He wasn't meaning no harm, and nor was I. It just—happened." She shrugged. "But Ulysses, he find it out; he find out every single thing goes on at River Run, sooner or later. Maybe one of the girls told him, maybe some other way, but he knew. And he told me that ain't right, I put a stop to it this minute."

"But you didn't?" Brianna guessed.

Phaedre shook her head slowly, lips pushed out.

"Told him I'd stop when Mr. Duncan didn't want to no more—not *his* business. See, I thought Mr. Duncan, he the master. Ain't true, though; Ulysses be the master at River Run."

"So he—he took you away—sold you?—to stop you sleeping with Duncan?" Why would he care? she wondered. Was he afraid Jocasta would discover the affair and be hurt?

"No, he sell me because I told him if he don't leave me and Mr. Duncan be, then I tell about him and Miss Jo."

"Him and …" Brianna blinked, not believing what she was hearing. Phaedre looked at her, and gave a small, ironic smile.

"He share Miss Jo's bed these twenty years and more. Since before Old Master die, my mama said. Every slave there knows it; ain't one stupid enough to say so to his face, 'cept me."

Brianna knew she was gaping like a goldfish, but couldn't help it. A hundred tiny things she'd seen at River Run, myriad small intimacies between her aunt and the butler, suddenly took on new significance. No wonder her aunt had gone to such lengths to get him back after the death of Lieutenant Wolff. And no wonder, either, that Ulysses had taken instant action. Phaedre might have been believed, or not; the mere accusation would have destroyed him.

Phaedre sighed, and rubbed a hand over her face.

"He ain't waste no time. That very night, he and Mr. Jones come take me from my bed, wrap me up tight in a blanket, and carry me away in a wagon. Mr. Jones, he say he ain't no slaver, but he do it as a favor for Mr. Ulysses. So he don't keep me; he take me way downriver, though, sell me in Wilmington to a man what owns an ordinary. That's not too bad, but then a couple months later, Mr. Jones comes and takes me back—Wilmington's not far enough away to suit Ulysses. So he give me to Mr. Butler, and Mr. Butler, he take me to Edenton."

She looked down, pleating the quilt between long, graceful fingers. Her lips were tight, and her face slightly flushed. Brianna forbore to ask what she had done for Butler in Edenton, thinking that she had likely been employed in a brothel.

"And … er … Stephen Bonnet found you there?" she hazarded.

Phaedre nodded, not looking up.

"Won me in a card game," she said succinctly. She stood up. "I got to go; I had me enough of crossing black men—ain't risking no more beatings from that Emmanuel."

Brianna was beginning to emerge from the shock of hearing about Ulysses and her aunt. A sudden thought occurred to her, and she jumped out of bed, hurrying to catch Phaedre before she reached the door.

"Wait, wait! Just one more thing—do you—do the slaves at River Run—know anything about the gold?"

"What, in Old Master's tomb? Surely." Phaedre's face expressed a cynical surprise that there could be any doubt about it. "Ain't nobody touch it, though. Everybody know there a curse on it."

"Do you know anything about its disappearing?"

Phaedre's face went blank.

"Disappearing?"

"Oh, wait—no, you wouldn't know; you … left, long before it disappeared. I just wondered, you know, whether maybe Ulysses had something to do with that."

Phaedre shook her head.

"I don't know nothing about that. But I ain't put one thing past Ulysses, curse or no." There was a sound of heavy footsteps on the stair, and she paled. Without a word or gesture of farewell, she slipped out the door and closed it; Brianna heard the frantic fumbling of the key on the other side, and then the click of the closing lock.

* * *

Emmanuel, silent as a lizard, brought her a dress in the afternoon. It was too short by a good bit, and too tight in the bosom, but a heavy blue watered silk, and well-made. It had plainly been worn before; there were sweat stains on it and it smelled—of fear, she thought, repressing a shudder as she struggled into it.

She was sweating herself as Emmanuel led her downstairs, though a pleasant breeze swept through the open windows, stirring the curtains. The house was very simple, for the most part, with bare wooden floors and little more than stools and bed frames by way of furniture. The room downstairs to which Emmanuel showed her was such a contrast that it might have belonged to a different house entirely.

Rich Turkey rugs covered the floor in a overlapping riot of color, and the furniture, while of several different styles, was all heavy and elaborate, carved wood and silk upholstery. Silver and crystal glittered from every available surface, and a chandelier—much too large for the room—hung with crystal pendants sprayed the room with tiny rainbows. It was a pirate's idea of a rich man's room—lavish abundance, displayed with no sense of style or taste.

The rich man seated by the window appeared not to mind his surroundings, though. A thin man in a wig, with a prominent Adam's apple, he looked to be in his thirties, though his skin was lined and yellowed by some tropical disease. He glanced sharply at the door as she entered, then rose to his feet.

Bonnet had been entertaining his guest; there were glasses and a decanter on the table, and the smell of brandy was sweet and heavy in the air. Brianna felt her stomach shift queasily, and wondered what they'd do if she were to vomit on the Turkey rug.

"There ye are, darlin'," Bonnet said, coming to take her by the hand. She pulled it away from him, but he affected not to notice, and instead pushed her toward the thin man, a hand in the small of her back. "Come and make your bob to Mr. Howard, sweetheart."

She drew herself to her full height—she was a good four inches taller than Mr. Howard, whose eyes widened at sight of her—and glowered down at him.

"I am being held against my will, Mr. Howard. My husband and my father will—ow!" Bonnet had gripped her wrist and twisted it, hard.

"Lovely, is she not?" he said conversationally, as though she had not spoken.

"Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. Very *tall,* though …" Howard walked round her, examining her dubiously. "And red hair, Mr. Bonnet? I do really prefer blond."

"Oh, do you indeed, you little pissant!" she snapped, in spite of Bonnet's grip on her arm. "Where do you get off, preferring things?" With a wrench, she pulled away from Bonnet and rounded on Howard.

"Now, look," she said, trying to sound reasonable—he was blinking at her in a faintly bewildered fashion—"I am a woman of good—of *excellent*—family, and I have been kidnapped. My father's name is James Fraser, my husband is Roger MacKenzie, and my aunt is Mrs. Hector Cameron, of River Run Plantation."

"Is she really of good family?" Howard addressed this question to Bonnet, appearing to be more interested.

Bonnet bowed slightly in affirmation.

"Oh, indeed she is, sir. The finest blood!"

"Hmmm. And good health, I see." Howard had resumed his examination, leaning close to peer at her. "Has she bred before?"

"Aye, sir, a healthy son."

"Good teeth?" Howard rose on his toes, looking inquisitive, and Bonnet obligingly yanked one arm behind her back to hold her still, then took a handful of her hair and jerked her head back, making her gasp.

Howard took her chin in one hand and pried at the corner of her mouth with the other, poking experimentally at her molars.

"Very nice," he said approvingly. "And I will say the skin is very fine. But—"

She jerked her chin out of his grasp, and bit down as hard as she could on Howard's thumb, feeling the meat of it shift and tear between her molars with a sudden copper taste of blood.

He shrieked and struck at her; she let go and dodged, enough so his hand glanced off her cheek. Bonnet let go, and she took two fast steps back and fetched up hard against the wall.

"She's bitten me thumb off, the bitch!" Eyes watering in agony, Mr. Howard swayed to and fro, cradling his wounded hand against his chest. Fury flooded his face and he lunged toward her, free hand drawn back, but Bonnet seized him by the wrist and pulled him aside.

"Now then, sir," he said. "I cannot allow ye to damage her, sure. She's not yours yet, is she?"

"I don't care if she's mine or not," Howard cried, face suffused with blood. "I'll beat her to death!"

"Oh, no, surely ye don't mean that, Mr. Howard," Bonnet said, his voice jovially soothing. "A cruel waste that would be. Leave her to me, will ye, then?" Not waiting for an answer, he pulled Brianna after him, dragging her stumbling across the room, and thrust her toward the silent factotum, who had waited motionless by the door through the conversation.

"Take her out, Manny, and teach her her manners, will ye? And gag her before ye bring her back."

Emmanuel didn't smile, but a faint light seemed to burn in the black depths of his pupilless eyes. His fingers dug between the bones of her wrist and she gasped with pain, jerking in a vain attempt to free herself. With a single quick movement, the Ibo whirled her round and twisted up her arm behind her back, bending her half forward. Sharp pain shot up her arm as she felt her shoulder tendons begin to part. He pulled harder and a dark wave passed over her vision. Through it, she heard Bonnet's voice calling out behind them as Emmanuel propelled her through the door.

"Not in the face, mind, Manny, and no permanent marks."

* * *

Howard's voice had quite lost its choked note of fury. It was still choked, but with something more like awe.

"My God," he said. "Oh, my God."

"A charmin' sight, is it not?" Bonnet agreed cordially.

"Charming," Howard echoed. "Oh—the most charming thing I believe I have ever seen. Such a shade! Might I—" The hunger in his voice was evident, and Brianna felt the vibration of his footstep on the carpet, a split second before his hands clamped tight on her buttocks. She screamed behind the gag, but she was bent hard across the table, with the edge cutting into her diaphragm, and the sound came out as no more than a grunt. Howard laughed joyfully, and let go.

"Oh, look," he said, sounding enchanted. "Look, do you see? The most perfect print of my hands—so white on the crimson … she is so *hot* … oh, it's fading. Let me just—"

She clenched her legs tight together and stiffened as he fondled her naked privates, but then his touch was gone, and Bonnet had taken his hand off her neck, and was pulling his customer away from her.

"Ah, now, that's enough, sir. After all, she's not your property—not yet." Bonnet's tone was jovial, but firm. Howard's response was immediately to offer a sum that made her gasp behind the gag, but Bonnet only laughed.

"That's generous, sir, so it is, but 'twouldn't be fair on my other customers, would it, to be takin' your offer without letting them make their own? No, sir, I do appreciate it, but I mean to auction this one; I'm afraid ye'll needs be waiting on the day."

Howard was disposed to protest, to offer more—he was most urgently in earnest, he protested that he could not wait, was ravished by desire, a great deal too warm to abide delay … but Bonnet only demurred, and in a few moments had ushered him out of the room. Brianna heard his voice protesting, dying away as Emmanuel removed him.

She had stood up as soon as Bonnet took his hand off her neck, wriggling madly to shake her skirts down. Emmanuel had tied her hands behind her back, as well as gagging her. If he hadn't, she would have tried to kill Stephen Bonnet with her bare hands.

This thought must have been visible on her face, for Bonnet glanced at her, looked again, and laughed.

"Ye did amazing well, darlin'," he said, and leaning over, negligently pulled the gag down from her mouth. "That man will empty his purse for the chance to get his hands on your arse again."

"You God damn … you—" She shook with rage, and with the futility of finding any epithet that came close to being strong enough. "I will fucking *kill* you!"

He laughed again.

"Oh, now, sweetheart. For a sore arse? Consider it a repayment—in part—for my left ball." He chucked her under the chin, and went toward the table where the tray with the decanters stood. "Ye've earned a drink. Brandy or porter?"

She ignored the offer, trying to keep her rage in check. Her cheeks flamed with furious blood, and so did her outraged bottom.

"What do you mean, 'auction'?" she demanded.

"I should think that clear enough, sweetheart. Ye've heard the word, sure." Bonnet gave her a glance of mild amusement, and pouring himself a tot of brandy, drank it off in two swallows. "Hah." He exhaled, blinking, and shook his head.

"Hoo. I've two more customers in the market for someone like you, darlin'. They'll be here tomorrow or next day to be having a look. Then I'll ask for bids, and ye'll be off to the Indies by Friday, I expect."

He spoke casually, without the slightest hint of jeering. That, more than anything, made her insides waver. She was a matter of business, a piece of merchandise. To him, and to his goddamned bloody customers, too—Mr. Howard had made that clear. It didn't matter what she said; they weren't at all interested in who she was or what she might want.

Bonnet was watching her face, his pale green eyes assessing. *He* was interested, she realized, and her insides curled up into a knot.

"What did ye use on her, Manny?" he asked.

"A wooden spoon," the manservant said indifferently. "You said no marks."

Bonnet nodded, thoughtful.

"Nothing permanent, I said," he corrected. "We'll leave her as she is for Mr. Ricasoli, I think, but Mr. Houvener … well, we'll wait and see."

Emmanuel merely nodded, but his eyes rested on Brianna with sudden interest. Her stomach everted itself neatly and she vomited, absolutely ruining the fine silk dress.

* * *

The sound of high-pitched whinnying reached her; wild horses, rioting down the beach. If this were a romance novel, she thought grimly, she'd make a rope from the bedclothes, let herself down from the window, find the horse herd, and, by exercising her mystical skills with horses, persuade one of them to carry her to safety.

As it was, there were no bedclothes—only a ratty mattress made of ticking stuffed with sea grass—and as for getting within a mile of wild horses … She would have given a lot for Gideon, and felt tears prickle at thought of him.

"Oh, now you *are* losing your mind," she said aloud, wiping her eyes. "Crying over a horse." Especially *that* horse. That was so much better than thinking of Roger, though—or Jem. No, she absolutely could *not* think about Jemmy, nor the possibility of his growing up without her, without knowing why she had abandoned him. Or the new one … and what life might be like for the child of a slave.

But she was thinking of them, and the thought was enough to overcome her momentary despair.

All right, then. She was getting out of here. Preferably before Mr. Ricasoli and Mr. Houvener, whoever they were, turned up. For the thousandth time, she moved restlessly around the room, forcing herself to move slowly, look at what was there.

Damn little, and what there was, stoutly built, was the discouraging answer. She'd been given food, water for washing, a linen towel, and a hairbrush with which to tidy herself. She picked it up, assessing its potential as a weapon, then threw it down again.

The chimney stack rose through this room, but there was no open hearth. She thumped the bricks experimentally, and pried at the mortar with the end of the spoon they'd given her to eat with. She found one place where the mortar was cracked enough to pry, but a quarter of an hour's trying managed to dislodge only a few inches of mortar; the brick itself stayed firmly in place. Given a month or so, that might be worth a try—though the chances of someone her size managing to squeeze up an eighteenth-century flue …

It was getting up to rain; she heard the excited rattle of the palmetto leaves as the wind came through, sharp with the smell of rain. It was not quite sunset, but the clouds had darkened the sky so the room seemed dim. She had no candle; no one expected her to read or sew.

She threw her weight against the bars of the window for the dozenth time, and for the dozenth time found them solidly set and unyielding. Again, in a month, she might contrive to sharpen the spoon's end by grinding it against the chimney bricks, then use it as a chisel to chip away enough of the frame to dislodge one or two bars. But she didn't have a month.

They'd taken away the fouled dress, and left her in shift and stays. Well, that was something. She pulled off the stays, and by picking at the ends of the stitching, extracted the busk—a flat, twelve-inch strip of ivory that ran from sternum to navel. A better weapon than a hairbrush, she thought. She took it over to the chimney, and began to rasp the end against the brick, sharpening its point.

Could she stab someone with it? *Oh, yes,* she thought fiercely. *And please let it be Emmanuel.*

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DAMN TALL

Roger waited in the cover of the thick bayberry bushes near the shore; a little way beyond, Ian and Jamie lay likewise in wait.

The second ship had arrived in the morning, coming to anchor a fastidious distance beyond the slaver. Sloshing nets over the side of Roarke's ship in the guise of fishermen, they had been able to watch as first the captain of the slaver went ashore, and then, an hour later, a boat from the second ship was lowered and rowed ashore, with two men—and a small chest—in it.

"A gentleman," Claire had reported, scanning them through the telescope. "Wig, nicely dressed. The other man's a servant of some kind—is the gentleman one of Bonnet's customers, do you think?"

"I do," Jamie had said, watching the boat pull to the shore. "Take us a bit to the north, if ye please, Mr. Roarke; we'll go ashore."

The three of them had landed half a mile from the beach and worked their way down through the wood, then took up their positions in the shrubbery and settled down to wait. The sun was hot, but so close to the shore, there was a fresh breeze, and it was not uncomfortable in the shade, bar the insects. For the hundredth time, Roger brushed away something crawling on his neck.

The waiting was making him jumpy. His skin itched with salt, and the scent of the tidal forest, with its peculiar mix of aromatic pine and distant seaweed, the crunch of shell and needle beneath his feet, brought back to him in vivid detail the day he had killed Lillington.

He had gone then—as now—with the intent of killing Stephen Bonnet. But the elusive pirate had been warned, and an ambush laid. It had been by the will of God—and the skill of Jamie Fraser—that he hadn't left his own carcass in a similar forest, bones scattered by wild pigs, bleaching among the gleam of dry needles and the white of empty shells.

His throat was tight again, but he couldn't shout or sing to loosen it.

He should pray, he thought, but could not. Even the constant litany that had echoed through his heart since the night he had learned she was gone—*Lord, that she might be safe*—even that small petition had somehow dried up. His present thought—*Lord, that I might kill him*—he couldn't voice that, even to himself.

The deliberate intent and desire to murder—surely he couldn't expect such a prayer to be heard.

For a moment, he envied Jamie and Ian their faith in gods of wrath and vengeance. While Roarke and Moses had brought the fishing boat in, he had heard Jamie murmur to Claire and take her hands in his. And heard her then bless him in the Gaelic, with the invocation to Michael of the red domain, the blessing of a warrior on his way to battle.

Ian had merely sat, cross-legged and silent, watching the shore draw nearer, his face remote. If he prayed, there was no telling to whom. When they landed, though, he had paused on the bank of one of the myriad inlets, and scooping up mud in his fingers, had carefully painted his face, drawing a line from forehead to chin, then four parallel streaks across his left cheek, a thick dark circle around his right eye. It was remarkably unsettling.

Quite obviously, neither of them had the slightest qualms about the business, nor the least hesitation in asking God to aid their efforts. He envied them.

And sat in stubborn silence, the gates of heaven closed against him, his hand on the hilt of his knife and a loaded pistol in his belt, planning murder.

A little past noon, the burly captain of the slaver came back, footsteps crunching indifferently on the layer of dried pine needles. They let him pass, waiting.

Late in the afternoon, it began to rain.

* * *

She had dozed off again, from sheer boredom. It began to rain; the sound roused her briefly, then drove her more deeply into slumber, drops pattering softly on the palmetto thatch above. She woke abruptly when one of the drops fell cold on her face, followed quickly by a few of its fellows.

She jerked upright, blinking with momentary disorientation. She rubbed a hand over her face and looked up; there was a small wet patch on the plaster ceiling, surrounded by a much larger stain from previous leaks, and drops were forming in its center like magic, each perfect bead falling one after another after another to splat on the mattress ticking.

She got up to push the bed out from under the leak, and then stopped. Slowly she straightened up, and put up a hand to the wet patch. The ceiling was a normal one for the time, less than seven feet; she could reach it easily.

"She damn tall," she said aloud. "Damn right she is."

She put her hand flat on the wet patch and pushed as hard as she could. The wet plaster gave way at once, and so did the rotten laths behind it. She jerked back her hand, scratching her arm on the jagged edges of lath, and a small cascade of dirty water, centipedes, mouse droppings, and fragments of palmetto leaf poured in through the hole she'd made.

She wiped her hand on her shift, reached up, seized the edge of the hole, and pulled, ripping down chunks of lath and plaster, until she'd made a hole that would accommodate her head and shoulders.

"Okay," she whispered to the baby, or herself. She glanced around the room, put on her stays over her shift, then tucked the sharpened busk down the front.

Then, standing on the bed, she took a deep breath, shoved her steepled hands upward as though about to dive, and grabbed for anything solid enough to provide leverage. Little by little, she hauled herself, sweating and grunting, up into the steaming thatch of sharp-edged leaves, teeth gritted and eyes closed against the dirt and dead insects.

Her head thrust into moist open air and she gasped for breath. She had an elbow hooked over a beam and, using that for leverage, pulled farther up. Her legs kicked vainly in empty air, trying to propel her upward, and she felt the wrench of shoulder muscles, but sheer desperation propelled her upward—that, and the nightmare vision of Emmanuel coming into the room and seeing the bottom half of her hanging out of the ceiling.

With a rending shower of leaves, she hauled herself out, to lie flat on the rain-wet thatch of the roof. The rain was still coming down heavily, and she was soaked in moments. A little way away, she saw some sort of structure sticking up amid the palmetto leaves of the thatch, and wriggled her way cautiously toward it, constantly fearful lest the roof give way beneath her weight, probing with hands and elbows for the firmness of the roof beams below the thatched leaves.

The structure proved to be a small platform, firmly set on the beams, with a railing on one side. She scrambled onto this and crouched, panting. It was still raining onshore, but out to sea, the sky was mostly clear, and the setting sun behind her spilled a burnt, bloody orange over sky and water through black streaks of shattered cloud. It looked like the end of the world, she thought, her ribs heaving against the lacing of her stays.

From the vantage point of the roof, she could see over the scrub forest; the slice of beach she had glimpsed from her window was clearly visible—and beyond it, two ships, lying close offshore.

Two boats were pulled up on shore, though well separated from each other—probably one from each ship, she thought. One of the ships must be the slaver, the other likely Howard's. A wash of humiliated rage ran over her—she was surprised that the rain didn't steam off her skin. There was no time to dwell on that, though.

Voices came faintly through the patter of rain, and she ducked down, then realized that no one was likely to look up and see her.

Raising her head to peer through the railing, she saw figures come out of the trees onto the beach—a single file of chained men, with two or three guards.

"Josh!" She strained her eyes to see, but in the eerie twilight, the figures were no more than silhouettes. She thought she made out the tall, slender figures of the two Fulani men—perhaps the shorter one behind them was Josh, but she couldn't tell.

Her fingers curled tight around the railing, impotent. She couldn't help, she knew it, but to be obliged simply to watch … As she watched, a thin scream came from the beach, and a smaller figure ran out of the wood, skirts flying. The guards turned, startled; one of them seized Phaedre—it had to be her; Brianna could hear her screaming "Josh! Josh!", the sound of it harsh as the cry of a distant gull.

She was struggling with the guard—some of the chained men turned abruptly, lunging at the other. A struggling knot of men fell to the sand. Someone was running toward them from the boat, something in his hand …

The vibration in her feet jerked her attention from the scene on the beach.

"Crap!" she said involuntarily. Emmanuel's head poked up over the edge of the roof, staring in disbelief. Then his face contorted, and he heaved himself up—there must be a ladder attached to the side of the house, she thought, well, of course there would be, you wouldn't have a lookout platform and no way to get up to it.…

While her mind was busying itself with *that* nonsense, her body was taking more concrete steps. She had drawn the sharpened busk and was crouched against the platform, hand low as Ian had taught her.

Emmanuel made a derisive face at the thing in her hand and grabbed at her.

* * *

They could hear the gentleman coming well before they saw him. He was singing softly to himself, a French air of some kind. He was alone; the servant must have gone back to the ship while they were making their way through the woods.

Roger got softly to his feet, crouched behind his chosen bush. His limbs were stiff, and he stretched inconspicuously.

As the gentleman drew even with him, Jamie stepped out into the path in front of him. The man—a small, foppish-looking sort—uttered a girlish shriek of alarm. Before he could flee, though, Jamie had stepped forward and grasped his arm, smiling pleasantly.

"Your servant, sir," he said courteously. "Have ye been calling upon Mr. Bonnet, by chance?"

The man blinked at him, confused.

"Bonnet? Why, why … yes."

Roger felt a tightness in his chest ease suddenly. *Thank God.* They'd found the right place.

"Who are you, sir?" the small man was demanding, trying to draw his forearm out of Jamie's grip, to no avail.

There was no need to keep hidden now; Roger and Ian stepped out of the bushes, and the gentleman gasped at sight of Ian in his war paint, then glanced wildly back and forth between Jamie and Roger.

Evidently settling on Roger as the most civilized-looking person present, the gentleman appealed to him.

"I beg you, sir—who are you, and what do you want?"

"We are in search of an abducted young woman," Roger said. "A very tall young woman with red hair. Have you—" Before he could finish, he saw the man's eyes dilate with panic. Jamie saw it, too, and twisted the man's wrist, sending him to his knees, mouth awry with pain.

"I think, sir," Jamie said, with impeccable courtesy, holding tight, "we must oblige you to tell us what ye know."

* * *

She couldn't let him get hold of her. That was her only conscious thought. He grabbed at her weaponless arm and she yanked free, skin slippery with rain, and struck at him in the same motion. The point of the busk skidded up his arm, leaving a reddening furrow, but he ignored this and lunged at her. She fell backward over the railing, landing awkwardly on her hands and knees in the leaves, but he hadn't got her; he'd fallen on his own knees on the platform, with a thud that shook the whole roof.

She scrabbled madly to the edge of the roof, hands and knees poking randomly through the thatch, and threw her legs over the edge into space, kicking frantically for the rungs of the ladder.

He was after her, had her wrist in a grip like an eel's bite, was hauling her back onto the roof. She drew back her free hand and lashed him hard across the face with the busk. He roared and his grip loosened; she wrenched free and dropped.

She hit the sand flat on her back with a bone-shaking *thump!* and lay paralyzed, unable to breathe, the rain pelting down on her face. A hoot of triumph came from the roof, and then a growl of exasperated dismay. He thought he'd killed her.

Great, she thought muzzily. *Keep thinking that.* The shock of impact was beginning to wear off, her diaphragm lurched into motion, and glorious air rushed into her lungs. Could she move?

She didn't know, and didn't dare to try. Through rain-clotted lashes, she saw Emmanuel's bulk ease over the edge of the roof, foot groping for the crude ladder rungs she could now see, nailed to the wall.

She'd lost the busk when she fell, but saw it gleaming dully, a foot from her head. With Emmanuel's back momentarily turned, she whipped her hand up and grabbed it, then lay still, playing possum.

* * *

They had nearly reached the house when sounds from the nearby forest stopped them. Roger froze, then ducked off the path. Jamie and Ian had already melted into the wood. The sounds weren't coming from the path, though, but from somewhere off to the left—voices, men's voices, shouting orders, and the shuffling of feet, the clink of chains.

A thrill of panic shot through him. Were they taking her away? He was already soaked with rain, but felt the bloom of cold sweat over his body, colder than the rain.

Howard, the man they'd apprehended in the wood, had assured them Brianna was safe in the house, but what would he know? He listened, straining his ears for the sound of a woman's voice, and heard it, a high, thin scream.

He jerked toward it, only to find Jamie beside him, gripping his arm.

"That's not Brianna," his father-in-law said urgently. "Ian will go. You and I—for the house!"

There was no time for argument. The sounds of violence on the beach came faintly—shouts and cries—but Jamie was right, that voice wasn't Brianna's. Ian was running toward the beach, making no effort now to be silent.

An instant's hesitation, instinct urging him to go after Ian, then Roger was on the path, following Jamie toward the house at the run.

* * *

Emmanuel bent over her; she felt his bulk and lunged upward like a striking snake, sharpened busk like a fang. She'd aimed for his head, hoping for eye or throat, but counting at least on his jerking reflexively back, putting him at a disadvantage.

He jerked, all right, up and away, but was much faster than she'd thought. She struck with all her force, and the sharpened busk drove under his arm with a rubbery shock. He froze for a moment, mouth open in incredulity, looking at the ivory rod that stuck out of his armpit. Then he wrenched it out, and lunged for her with an outraged bellow.

She was already on her feet, though, and running for the woods. From somewhere ahead, she heard more yelling—and a bloodcurdling scream. Another, and then more, these coming from the front of the house.

Dazed and terrified, she kept running, her mind only slowly grasping that some of the screams had words.

"Casteal DHUUUUUUUIN!"

Da, she thought, in absolute astonishment, then tripped over a branch on the ground and fell arse over teakettle, landing in a disheveled heap.

She struggled to her feet, thinking absurdly, *This* can't *be good for the baby,* and groping for another weapon.

Her fingers were trembling, wouldn't work. She scrabbled the ground, vainly. Then Emmanuel popped up beside her like the Demon King, grabbing her arm with a gloating, *"HA!"*

The shock made her sway, her vision going gray at the edges. She could still hear bloodcurdling screams on the distant beach, but no more yelling at the house. Emmanuel was saying something, full of satisfaction and threat, but she wasn't listening.

There seemed to be something wrong with his face; it went in and out of focus, and she blinked hard, shaking her head to clear her sight. It wasn't her eyes, though—it was him. His face melted slowly from bare-toothed menace to a look of faint astonishment. He frowned, lips pursing so she saw the pink lining of his mouth, and blinked two or three times. Then he made a small choked noise, put a hand to his chest, and dropped to his knees, still gripping her arm.

He fell over, and she landed on top of him. She pulled away—his fingers came away easily, all their strength suddenly gone—and stumbled to her feet, panting and shaking.

Emmanuel was lying on his back, legs bent under him at what would have been an excruciating angle, had he been alive. She gulped for air, trembling, afraid to believe it. But he *was* dead; there was no mistaking the look of it.

Her breath was coming better now, and she began to be conscious of the cuts and bruises on her bare feet. She still felt stunned, unable to decide what to do next.

The decision was made for her in the next instant, as Stephen Bonnet came dashing toward her through the wood.

* * *

She jerked to instant alertness, and spun on her heel to flee. She made it no more than six paces before he had an arm about her throat, dragging her off her feet.

“Hush, now, darlin’,” he said in her ear, sounding breathless. He was hot, and his stubble rasped her cheek. “I mean ye no harm. I’ll leave ye safe on the shore. But ye’re the only thing I’ve got right now will keep your men from killin’ me.”

He ignored the body of Emmanuel entirely. The heavy forearm left her throat and he grabbed her arm, trying to drag her in the direction away from the beach—evidently, he meant to make for the hidden inlet on the opposite side of the island, where they had landed the day before. “Move, darlin’. Now.”

“Let go!” She dug her feet in hard, yanking on her trapped arm. “I’m not going anywhere with you. HELP!” she shrieked as loudly as she could. “HELP! ROGER!”

He looked startled, and raised his free arm to wipe the streaming rain out of his eyes. There was something in his hand; the last of the light gleamed orange on glass. Holy Lord, he’d brought his testicle.

“Bree! Brianna! Where are you?” Roger’s voice, frantic, and a jolt of adrenaline shot through her at the sound, giving her the strength to jerk her arm from Bonnet’s grasp.

“Here! Here I am! Roger!” she shouted at the top of her voice.

Bonnet glanced over his shoulder; the bushes were shaking, two men at least coming through them. He wasted no time, but darted into the forest, bending low to avoid a branch, and was gone.

In the next instant, Roger crashed out of the brush and seized her, crushing her against him.

“You’re all right? Has he hurt you?” He’d dropped his knife, and held her by the arms, eyes trying to look everywhere at once—her face, her body, into her eyes.…

“I’m fine,” she said, feeling dizzy. “Roger, I’m—”

“Where has he gone?” It was her father, soaking wet and grim as death, dirk in his hand.

“That—” She turned to point, but he was already gone, running wolflike. She saw the marks of Bonnet’s passage now, the scuffed footmarks clear in the muddy sand. Before she could turn round again, Roger was after him.

“Wait!” she shrieked, but no answer came save the rapidly receding rustle of brush as heavy bodies flung themselves heedlessly through.

She stood still for a moment, head hanging as she breathed. The rain was pooling in the sockets of Emmanuel's open eyes; the orange light glowed in them, making them look like the eyes of a Japanese movie monster.

That random thought passed across her mind, then vanished, leaving her blank and numb. She wasn't sure what to do at this point. There were no sounds from the beach anymore; the noises of Bonnet's flight had long since faded.

The rain was still falling, but the last of the sun shone through the wood, the long rays nearly horizontal, filling the space between the shadows with an odd, shifting light that seemed to waver as she watched, as though the world around her were about to disappear.

In the midst of it, dreamlike, she saw the women appear, the Fulani twins. They turned the identical faces of fawns to her, huge eyes black with fear, and ran into the wood. She called out to them, but they disappeared. Feeling unutterably tired, she trudged after them.

She didn't find them. Nor was there a sign of anyone else. The light began to die, and she turned back, limping, toward the house. She ached everywhere, and began to suffer from the illusion that there was no one left in the world but her. Nothing but the burning light, fading to ashes moment by moment.

Then she remembered the baby in her womb, and felt better. No matter what, she wasn't alone. Nonetheless, she gave a wide berth to the place where she thought Emmanuel's body lay. She had meant to circle back toward the house, but went too far. As she turned to go back, she caught a glimpse of them, standing together in the shelter of the trees on the other side of a stream.

The wild horses, tranquil as the trees around them, flanks gleaming bay and chestnut and black with the wet. They raised their heads, scenting her, but didn't run, only stood regarding her with big, gentle eyes.

* * *

The rain had stopped when she reached the house. Ian sat on the stoop, wringing water out of his long hair.

"You have mud on your face, Ian," she said, sinking down beside him.

"Oh, have I?" he said, giving her a half-smile. "How is it, then, coz?"

"Oh. I'm … I think I'm fine. What—?" She gestured at his shirt, stained with watery blood. Something seemed to have hit him in the face; besides the smudges of mud, his nose was puffed, there was a swelling just above his brow, and his clothes were torn, as well as wet.

He drew a deep, deep breath and sighed, as though he were as tired as she was.

"I got back the wee black lass," he said. "Phaedre."

That pierced the dreamlike fugue that filled her mind, but only a little.

"Phaedre," she said, the name feeling like that of someone she had once known, long ago. "Is she all right? Where—"

"In there." Ian nodded back toward the house, and she became aware that what she had thought the sound of the sea was in fact someone weeping, the small sobs of someone who has already wept herself to exhaustion, but cannot stop.

"Nay, leave her to herself, coz." Ian's hand on her arm stopped her from rising. "Ye canna help."

"But—"

He stopped her, reaching into his shirt. From around his neck, he took a battered wooden rosary, and handed it to her.

"She'll maybe want this—later. I picked it up from the sand, after the ship … left."

For the first time since her escape, the nausea was back, a sense of vertigo that threatened to pull her down into blackness.

"Josh," she whispered. Ian nodded silently, though it hadn't been a question.

"I'm sorry, coz," he said very softly.

* * *

It was nearly dark when Roger appeared at the edge of the wood. She hadn't been worrying, only because she was in a state of shock too deep even to think of what was happening. At sight of him, though, she was on her feet and flying toward him, all the fears she had suppressed erupting at last into tears, running down her face like the rain.

"Da," she said, choking and sniffling into his wet shirt. "He's—is he—"

"He's all right. Bree—can ye come with me? Are ye strong enough—just for a bit?"

Gulping and wiping her nose on the soggy arm of her shift, she nodded, and leaning on his arm, limped into the darkness under the trees.

Bonnet was lying against a tree, head lolling to one side. There was blood on his face, running down onto his shirt. She felt no sense of victory at sight of him, only an infinitely weary distaste.

Her father was standing silently under the same tree. When he saw her, he stepped forward and folded her wordlessly into his arms. She closed her eyes for one blissful moment, wanting nothing more than to abandon everything, let him pick her up like a child and carry her home. But they had brought her here for a reason; with immense effort, she lifted her head and looked at Bonnet.

Did they want congratulations? she wondered fuzzily. But then she remembered what Roger had told her, describing her father leading her mother through the scene of butchery, making her look, so that she would know her tormentors were dead.

"Okay," she said, swaying a little. "All right, I mean. I—I see. He's dead."

"Well … no. Actually, he isn't." Roger's voice held an odd note of strain, and he coughed, with a look that shot daggers at her father.

"D'ye want him dead, lass?" Her father touched her shoulder, gently. "It is your right."

"Do I—" She looked wildly from one to the other of the grave, shadowed faces, then at Bonnet, realizing for the first time that blood *was* running down his face. Dead men, as her mother had often explained, don't bleed.

They had found Bonnet, Jamie said, run him to earth like a fox, and set about him. It had been an ugly fight, close-to, with knives, as their pistols were useless in the wet. Knowing that he fought for his life, Bonnet had struck viciously—there was a red-stained gash in the shoulder of Jamie's coat, a scratch high on Roger's throat, where a knife blade had passed within a fraction of slashing his jugular. But Bonnet had fought to escape, and not to kill—retreating into a space between trees where only one could come at him, he had grappled with Jamie, thrown him off, then bolted.

Roger had given chase, and boiling with adrenaline, had thrown himself at Bonnet bodily, knocking the pirate headfirst into the tree he now lay against.

"So there he lies," Jamie said, giving Bonnet a bleak eye. "I had hoped he'd broken his neck, but no such thing, alas."

"But he is unconscious," Roger said, and swallowed.

She understood, and in her present mood, this particular male quirk of honor seemed reasonable. To kill a man in fair fight—or even an unfair fight—was one thing; to cut his throat while he lay unconscious at your feet was another.

But she hadn't understood at all. Her father wiped his dirk on his breeches and handed it to her, hilt first.

"What … me?" She was too shocked even to feel astonishment. The knife was heavy in her hand.

"If ye wish it," her father said, with grave courtesy. "If not, Roger Mac or I will do it. But it is your choice, *a nighean.*"

Now she understood Roger's look—they had been arguing about it, before he had come to fetch her. And she understood exactly why her father offered her the choice. Whether it was vengeance or forgiveness, she held the man's life in her hand. She took a deep breath, the awareness that it would not be vengeance coming over her with something like relief.

"Brianna," Roger said softly, touching her arm. "Say the word if ye'll have him dead; I'll do it."

She nodded, and took a deep breath. She could hear the savage longing in his voice—he did. She could hear the choked sound of his voice in memory, too, when he had told her of killing Boble—when he woke from dreams of it, drenched in sweat.

She glanced at her father's face, nearly drowned in shadow. Her mother had said only a little of the violent dreams that haunted him since Culloden—but that little was enough. She could hardly ask her father to do this—to spare Roger what he suffered himself.

Jamie raised his head, feeling her eyes on him, and met her gaze, straight on. Jamie Fraser had never turned from a fight he saw as his—but this was not his fight, and he knew it. She had a sudden flash of awareness; it wasn't Roger's fight, either, though he would take the weight of it from her shoulders, and gladly.

"If you—if *we*—if we don't kill him here and now—" Her chest was tight, and she stopped for breath. "What will we do with him?"

"Take him to Wilmington," her father said matter-of-factly. "The Committee of Safety there is strong, and they know him for a pirate; they'll deal with him by law—or what passes for it now."

They'd hang him; he would be just as dead—but his blood wouldn't be on Roger's hands, or in his heart.

The light was gone. Bonnet was no more than a lumpen shape, dark against the sandy ground. He might die of his wounds, she thought, and dimly hoped so—it would save trouble. But if they took him to her mother, Claire would be compelled to try to save him. *She* never turned from a fight that was hers, either, Brianna thought wryly, and was surprised to feel a small lightening of spirit at the thought.

"Let him live to be hanged, then," she said quietly, and touched Roger's arm. "Not for his sake. For yours and mine. For your baby."

For an instant, she was sorry that she'd told him now, in the night-dark wood. She would so much have liked to see his face.

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ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT

FROM *L'Oignon–Intelligencer, September 25, 1775*

A ROYAL PROCLAMATION—

A Proclamation was issued in London upon the 23rd of August, in which His Majesty George III proclaims the American Colonies to be "in a State of open and avowed Rebellion."

"NOTHING BUT OUR OWN EXERTIONS MAY DEFEAT THE MINISTERIAL SENTENCE OF DEATH OR ABJECT SUBMISSION"—The Continental Congress in Philadelphia has now rejected the Objectionable Proposals put forth by Lord North, intended to promote the Object of Reconciliation. The Delegates to this Congress state unequivocally the Right of the American Colonies to raise Appropriations and to have a say in the Disbursement of Same. The Statement of the Delegates reads in Part: "As the British Ministry has pursued its Ends and prosecuted Hostilities with great Armaments and Cruelty, can the World be deceived into an Opinion that we are Unreasonable, or can it hesitate to believe with us that Nothing but our own Exertions may defeat the Ministerial Sentence of Death or Abject Submission?"

A FALCON STOOPS BUT IS DEPRIVED OF HER PREY—Upon the 9th of August, HMS Falcon, *commanded by Captain John Linzee, gave Chase to two American Schooners, returning from the West Indies to Salem, Massachusetts. One Schooner was captured by Captain Linzee, who then pursued the other into Gloucester Harbor. Troops upon the Shore fired upon the* Falcon, *which did return this Fire, but was then forced to withdraw, losing both Schooners, two Barges, and Thirty-Five Men.*

A NOTORIOUS PIRATE CONDEM'D—One Stephen Bonnet, known as a Pirate and Infamous Smuggler, was tryed before the Wilmington Committee of Safety, and upon Testimony of his Crimes having been presented by a Number of Persons, was convicted of them and sentenced to Death by Drowning.

AN ALARM is raised regarding prowling Bands of Negroes, who have despoiled a number of Farms near Wilmington and Brunswick. Unarmed save for Clubs, the Ruffians have stolen Livestock, Food, and four Hogsheads of Rum.

CONGRESS CONCEIVES A PLAN FOR CURRENCY REDEMPTION—Two Million Spanish Dollars in Bills of Credit now issue forth from the Presses, with One Million Dollars more authorized by Congress, which now announces a Plan for the Redemption of this Currency, viz., *that each Colony must assume Responsibility for its Portion of the Debt and must redeem the Same in four Installments, these to be paid upon the last Day of November in the Years 1779, 1780, 1781, and 1782.…*

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THE SMELL OF LIGHT

October 2, 1775

It was not thinkable to return Phaedre to River Run, even though she technically remained the property of Duncan Cameron. We had discussed the matter at some length, and finally decided not to tell Jocasta that her slave had been recovered, though we did send brief word with Ian, when he went to collect Jemmy, telling of Brianna's safe return and regretting the loss of Joshua—omitting a good bit of detail regarding the whole affair.

"Should we tell them about Neil Forbes?" I'd asked, but Jamie had shaken his head.

"Forbes willna trouble any member of my family again," he said definitely. "And to tell my aunt or Duncan about it … I think Duncan has sufficient trouble on his hands; he'd feel obliged to take issue wi' Forbes, and that's a stramash he doesna need to start just now. As for my aunt …" He didn't complete the statement, but the bleakness of his countenance spoke well enough. The MacKenzies of Leoch were a vengeful lot, and neither he nor I would put it past Jocasta to invite Neil Forbes to dinner and poison him.

"Always assuming that Mr. Forbes is accepting dinner invitations these days," I joked uneasily. "Do you know what Ian did with the … er …"

“He said he was going to feed it to his dog,” Jamie replied thoughtfully. “But I dinna ken was he serious or not.”

Phaedre had been a good deal shocked, both by her experiences and by the loss of Josh, and Brianna insisted that we bring her back to the Ridge with us to recover, until we could find a reasonable place for her.

“We have to get Aunt Jocasta to free her,” Bree had argued.

“I think that willna be difficult,” Jamie had assured her with a certain grimness. “Not knowing what we know. But wait a bit, until we find a place for the lass—then I’ll see to it.”

As it was, that particular matter took care of itself with stunning abruptness.

I opened the door to a knock one afternoon in October, to find three weary horses and a pack mule in the dooryard, and Jocasta, Duncan, and the black butler Ulysses standing on the stoop.

The sight of them was so utterly incongruous that I merely stood there gaping at them, until Jocasta said acerbically, “Weel, lass, d’ye mean us to stand here until we’re melted away like sugar in a dish o’ tea?”

It was in fact raining quite hard, and I stepped back so quickly to let them in that I trod on Adso’s paw. He uttered a piercing yowl, which brought Jamie out of his study, Mrs. Bug and Amy from the kitchen—and Phaedre out of the surgery, where she had been grinding herbs for me.

“Phaedre!” Duncan’s jaw dropped, and he took two steps toward her. He stopped abruptly, just before taking her into his arms, but his face suffused with joy.

“Phaedre?” said Jocasta, sounding utterly astounded. Her face had gone quite blank with shock.

Ulysses said nothing, but the look on *his* face was one of unalloyed horror. Within a second, it was gone, replaced by his usual austere expression of dignity, but I’d seen it—and kept a narrow eye on him during the ensuing confusion of exclamations and embarrassments.

Finally, I got them all out of the front hall. Jocasta suffered a diplomatic headache—though seeing her drawn face, I thought it wasn’t entirely feigned—and was escorted upstairs by Amy, who put her to bed with a cold compress. Mrs. Bug went back to the kitchen, excitedly revising the supper menu. Phaedre, looking frightened, disappeared, doubtless to take refuge in Brianna’s cabin and tell her all about the unexpected arrival—which meant there would be another three for supper.

Ulysses went to deal with the horses, leaving Duncan at last alone to explain matters to Jamie in the study.

“We are emigrating to Canada,” he said, closing his eyes and inhaling the aroma of the glass of whisky in his hand as though it were smelling salts. He looked like he needed them; he was gaunt, and his face was nearly as gray as his hair.

“Canada?” Jamie said, as surprised as I was. “For God’s sake, Duncan, what have ye been doing?”

Duncan smiled wearily, opening his eyes.

“More what I didna do, *Mac Dubh,*” he said. Brianna had told us about the disappearance of the secret hoard of gold, and had mentioned something about Duncan’s dealings with Lord Dunsmore in Virginia, but had been vague about it—understandably so, as she had been kidnapped a few hours afterward, and had no details.

“I should never ha’ believed matters could come to such a pass—nor sae quickly,” he said, shaking his head. Loyalists had gone suddenly from being a majority in the piedmont to being a threatened and frightened minority. Some folk had been literally chased from their homes, to take refuge skulking in swamps and woods; others had been beaten and badly injured.

“Even Farquard Campbell,” Duncan said, and rubbed a hand tiredly over his face. “The Committee of Safety called him before them, on charges of being loyal to the Crown, and threatened to confiscate his plantation. He put up a great deal of money, pledged as surety for his good behavior, and they let him go—but it was a near thing.”

Near enough to have frightened Duncan badly. The debacle of the promised guns and powder had deprived him of any influence with the local Loyalists and left him completely isolated, vulnerable to the next wave of hostilities—which any fool could see would not be long in coming.

He had therefore moved swiftly to sell River Run at a decent price, before it was seized. He had kept one or two warehouses on the river and a few other assets, but had disposed of the plantation, slaves, and livestock, and proposed to remove at once with his wife to Canada, as many other Loyalists were doing.

"Hamish MacKenzie is there, ken," he explained. "He and some others from Leoch settled in Nova Scotia, when they left Scotland in the wake of Culloden. He's Jocasta's nephew, and we've money enough—" He glanced vaguely toward the hall, where Ulysses had dumped the saddlebags. "He'll help us to find a place."

He smiled crookedly.

"And if things shouldna turn out well … they do say the fishing's good."

Jamie smiled at the feeble joke, and poured him more whisky, but he shook his head when he came to join me in the surgery, before dinner.

"They mean to travel overland to Virginia, and with luck take ship there for Nova Scotia. They can perhaps get out of Newport News; it's a small port, and the British blockade isna tight there—or so Duncan hopes."

"Oh, dear." It would be a grueling journey—and Jocasta was not a young woman. And the state of her eye … I was not fond of Jocasta, in light of what we had learned about her recently, but to think of her ripped from her home, forced to emigrate while suffering excruciating pain—well, it caused one to think there might be such a thing as divine retribution, after all.

I lowered my voice, looking over my shoulder to be sure Duncan had in fact gone upstairs. "What about Ulysses? And Phaedre?"

Jamie's lips pressed tight.

"Ah. Well, as to the lass—I asked Duncan to sell her to me. I shall set her free as quickly as I can; perhaps send her to Fergus, in New Bern. He agreed at once, and wrote out a bill of sale on the spot." He nodded toward his office. "As for Ulysses …" His face was grim. "I think that matter will adjust itself, Sassenach."

Mrs. Bug came bustling down the hall to announce that the supper was served, and I had no chance to ask him what he meant by that remark.

* * *

I squeezed out the poultice of witch hazel and Carolina allspice, and laid it gently over Jocasta's eyes. I'd already given her willow-bark tea for the pain, and the poultice would do nothing for the underlying glaucoma—but it would be soothing, at least, and it was a relief to both patient and physician to be able to offer something, even though that might be the merest palliative.

"Will ye have a keek in my saddlebags, lass?" she asked, stretching a little to ease herself on the bed. "There's a bittie parcel in there of an herb ye might find of interest."

I found it immediately—by smell.

"Where on earth did you get that?" I asked, halfway amused.

"Farquard Campbell," she replied matter-of-factly. "When ye told me what the difficulty was with my eyes, I asked Fentiman if he kent anything that might be of help, and he told me that he'd heard somewhere that hemp might be of use. Farquard Campbell has a field of it under cultivation, so I thought I might as well try it. It does seem to help. Would ye put it in my hand, please, niece?"

Fascinated, I put the parcel of hemp and the little stack of papers down on the table beside her, and guided her hand to it. Rolling carefully onto her side to prevent the poultice falling off, she took a good pinch of aromatic herb, sprinkled it down the center of the paper, and rolled as tidy a joint as I had ever seen in Boston.

Without comment, I held the candle flame for her to light it, and she eased herself back on the pillow, nostrils flaring as she took a deep lungful of smoke.

She smoked in silence for some time, and I busied myself in putting things away, not wanting to leave her lest she fall asleep and set the bed on fire—she was clearly exhausted, and relaxing further by the moment.

The pungent, heady smell of the smoke brought back instant, though fragmentary memories. Several of the younger medical students had smoked it on weekends, and would come to the hospital with the scent of it in their clothes. Some of the people brought into the emergency room had reeked of it. Now and then, I'd smelled the faintest hint of it on Brianna—but never inquired.

I hadn't ever tried it, myself, but now found the smell of the fragrant smoke rather soothing. Rather *too* soothing, and I went and sat down by the window, open a crack to admit fresh air.

It had been raining off and on all day, and the air was sharp with ozone and tree resins, welcomely cold against my face.

"Ye know, don't you?" Jocasta's voice came softly from behind me. I looked round; she hadn't moved, but lay like a tomb figure on the bed, straight as a die. The poultice bandage over her eyes made her look like the image of Justice—ironic, that, I thought.

"I know," I said, matching her own calm tone. "Not very fair to Duncan, was it?"

"No." The word drifted out with the smoke, almost soundless. She lifted the cigarette lazily and drew air through it, making the end glow red. I kept a narrow eye, but she seemed to have a feel for the ash, tapping it now and then into the saucer base of the candlestick.

"He knows, too," she said, almost casually. "About Phaedre. I told him, finally, to stop him searching for her. I am sure he knows about Ulysses, too—but he doesna speak of it."

She reached out, unerring, and tapped the ash neatly from the joint.

"I told him I wouldna blame him if he left me, ken." Her voice was very soft, nearly without emotion. "He wept, but then he stopped, and said to me that he had said, 'For better or for worse'—and so had I, had I not? I said I had, and he said, 'Well, then.' And here we are." She shrugged a little, settling herself more comfortably, and fell silent, smoking.

I turned my face again to the window and leaned my forehead against the frame. Below, I saw a sudden spill of light as the door opened, and a dark figure came quickly out. The door closed, and I lost sight of him in the darkness for an instant; then my eyes adapted and I saw him again, just before he vanished on the path to the barn.

"He's gone, isn't he?" Startled, I turned round to look at her, realizing that she must have heard the closing of the door below.

"Ulysses? Yes, I think so."

She was still for quite a while, the cigarette burning unregarded in her hand. Just before I thought I must rise and take it from her, she lifted it again to her lips.

"His true name was Joseph," she said softly, releasing the smoke. Wisps of it swirled slowly in a cloud around her head. "So appropriate, I always thought—for he was sold into slavery by his own people."

"Have you ever seen his face?" I asked suddenly. She shook her head, and ground out the last of the cigarette.

"Nay, but I kent him always," she said very softly. "He smelled of light."

* * *

Jamie Fraser sat patiently in the darkness of his barn. It was a small one, with stallage for only half a dozen animals, but soundly built. Rain beat solidly on the roof, and wind whined like a *ban-sidhe* round the corners, but not a drip came through the shingled roof, and the air inside was warm with the heat of somnolent beasts. Even Gideon was a-nod over his manger, half-chewed hay hanging from the corner of his mouth.

It was past midnight now, and he had been waiting for more than two hours, the pistol loaded and primed, resting on his knee.

There it was; above the rain, he heard the soft grunt of someone pushing at the door, and the rumble as it slid open, admitting a breath of cold rain to mingle with the warmer scents of hay and manure.

He sat still, not moving.

He could see a tall form pause against the lighter black of the rain-drenched night, waiting for his eyes to adapt to the dark within, then throw his weight against the heavy door to open it enough to slip inside.

The man had brought a dark-lantern, not trusting that he could find the necessary bits of harness and apply them in the dark. He drew back the slide and turned the lantern slowly, letting the shaft of light travel over the stalls, one by one. The three horses Jocasta had brought were here, but done in. Jamie heard the man click his tongue softly in consideration, turning the light back and forth between the mare, Jerusha, and Gideon.

Making up his mind, Ulysses set the lantern on the floor, and made to pull the pin fastening the door to Gideon's stall.

"It would serve ye right, and I let ye take him," Jamie said conversationally.

The butler let out a sharp yelp and whirled round, glaring, his fists clenched. He couldn't see Jamie in the dark, but the evidence of his ears caught up with him a second later, and he breathed deeply and lowered his fists, realizing who it was.

"Mr. Fraser," he said. His eyes were live in the lantern light, and watchful. "You took me by surprise."

"Well, I did intend to," Jamie replied equably. "Ye mean to be off, I suppose."

He could see thoughts flit through the butler's eyes, quick as dragonflies, wondering, calculating. But Ulysses was no fool, and came to the correct conclusion.

"The girl's told you, then," he said, quite calmly. "Shall you kill me—for your aunt's honor?" Had that last been said with any trace of a sneer, Jamie might have killed him indeed—he'd been of two minds on the matter while he waited. But it was said simply, and Jamie's finger eased on the trigger.

"If I were a younger man, I would," he said, matching Ulysses's tone. *And if I did not have a wife and daughter who once called a black man friend.*

"As it is," he went on, lowering the pistol, "I try not to kill these days unless I must." *Or until I must.* "Do ye offer me denial? For I think there can be nay defense."

The butler shook his head slightly. The light gleamed on his skin, dark, with a reddish undertone that made him look as though carved from aged cinnabar.

"I loved her," he said softly, and spread his hands. "Kill me." He was dressed for traveling, in cloak and hat, with a pouch and canteen hung at his belt, but no knife. Slaves, even trusted ones, dared not go armed.

Curiosity warred with distaste, and—as usual in such warfare—curiosity won.

"Phaedre said ye lay with my aunt, even before her husband died. Is that true?"

"It is," Ulysses said softly, his expression unreadable. "I do not justify it. I cannot. But I loved her, and if I must die for that …"

Jamie believed the man; his sincerity was evident in voice and gesture. And knowing his aunt as he did, he was less inclined to blame Ulysses than the world at large would be. At the same time, he was not letting down his guard; Ulysses was good-size, and quick. And a man who thought he had nothing to lose was very dangerous indeed.

"Where did ye mean to go?" he asked with a nod toward the horses.

"Virginia," the black man replied with a barely perceptible hesitation. "Lord Dunsmore has offered freedom to any slave who will join his army."

He hadn't meant to ask, though it was a question that had raised itself in his mind from the moment he heard Phaedre's story. With this opening, though, he could not resist.

"Why did she not free you?" he asked. "After Hector Cameron died?"

"She did" was the surprising answer. The butler touched the breast of his coat. "She wrote the papers of manumission nearly twenty years ago—she said she could not bear to think that I came to her bed only because I must. But a request for manumission must be approved by the Assembly, you know. And if I had been openly freed, I could not have stayed to serve her as I did." That was true enough; a freed slave was compelled to leave the colony within ten days or risk being enslaved again, by anyone who chose to take him; the vision of large gangs of free Negroes roaming the countryside was one that made the Council and Assembly shit themselves with fear.

The butler looked down for a moment, eyes hooded against the light.

"I could choose Jo—or freedom. I chose her."

"Aye, verra romantic," Jamie said with extreme dryness—though in fact, he was not unaffected by the statement. Jocasta MacKenzie had married for duty, and duty again—and he thought she had had little happiness in any of her marriages until finding some measure of contentment with Duncan. He was shocked at her choice, disapproving of her adultery, and very angry indeed at her deception of Duncan, but some part of him—the MacKenzie part, doubtless—could not but admire her boldness in taking happiness where she could.

He sighed deeply. The rain was easing now; the thundering on the roof had dwindled to a soft pattering.

"Well, then. I have one question more."

Ulysses inclined his head gravely, in a gesture Jamie had seen a thousand times. *At your service, sir,* it said—and *that* was done with more irony than there was in anything the man had said.

"Where is the gold?"

Ulysses's head jerked up, eyes wide with startlement. For the first time, Jamie felt a shred of doubt.

"You think *I* took it?" the butler said incredulously. But then his mouth twisted to one side. "I suppose you would, after all." He rubbed a hand under his nose, looking worried and unhappy—as well he might, Jamie reflected.

They stood regarding each other in silence for some time, at an impasse. Jamie did not have the feeling that the other was attempting to deceive him—and God knew the man was good at *that,* he thought cynically.

At last, Ulysses heaved his wide shoulders, and let them drop in helplessness.

"I cannot prove that I did not," he said. "I can offer nothing save my word of honor—and I am not entitled to have such a thing." For the first time, bitterness rang in his voice.

Jamie suddenly felt very tired. The horses and mules had long since gone back to their drowse, and he wanted nothing so much as his own bed, and his wife beside him. He also wanted Ulysses to be gone, long before Duncan discovered his perfidy. And while Ulysses was patently the most obvious person to have taken the gold, the fact remained that he could have taken it anytime in the last twenty years, with a good deal less danger. Why now?

"Will ye swear on my aunt's head?" he asked abruptly. Ulysses's eyes were sharp, shining in the lantern light, but steady.

"Yes," he said at last, quietly. "I do so swear."

Jamie was about to dismiss him, when one last thought occurred to him.

"Do you have children?" he asked.

Indecision crossed the chiseled face; surprise and wariness, mingled with something else.

"None I would claim," he said at last, and Jamie saw what it was—scorn, mixed with shame. His jaw tensed, and his chin rose slightly. "Why do you ask me that?"

Jamie met his gaze for a moment, thinking of Brianna growing heavy with child.

"Because," he said at last, "it is only the hope of betterment for my children, and theirs, that gives me the courage to do what must be done here." Ulysses's face had gone blank; it gleamed black and impassive in the light.

"If you have no stake in the future, you have no reason to suffer for it. Such children as you may have—"

"They are slaves, born of slave women. What can they be, to me?" Ulysses's hands were clenched, pressed against his thighs.

"Then go," Jamie said softly, and stood aside, gesturing toward the door with the barrel of his pistol. "Die free, at least."

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JANUARY TWENTY-FIRST

January 21, 1776

January 21 was the coldest day of the year. Snow had fallen a few days before, but now the air was like cut crystal, the dawn sky so pale it looked white, and the packed snow chirped like crickets under our boots. Snow, snow-shrouded trees, the icicles that hung from the eaves of the house—the whole world seemed blue with cold. All of the stock had been put up the night before in stable or barn, with the exception of the white sow, who appeared to be hibernating under the house.

I peered dubiously at the small, melted hole in the crust of snow that marked the sow's entrance; long, stertorous snores were audible inside, and a faint warmth emanated from the hole.

"Come along, *mo nighean.* Yon creature wouldna notice if the house fell down atop her." Jamie had come down from feeding the animals in the stable, and was hovering impatiently behind me, chafing his hands in the big blue mittens Bree had knitted for him.

"What, not even if it was on fire?" I said, thinking of Lamb's "Essay on Roast Pork." But I turned obligingly to follow him down the trampled path past the side of the house, then slowly, slipping on the icy patches, across the wide clearing toward Bree and Roger's cabin.

“Ye’re sure the hearth fire’s out?” Jamie asked, for the third time. His breath wreathed round his head like a veil as he looked over his shoulder at me. He had lost his woolen cap hunting, and instead had a woolly white muffler wrapped around his ears and tied on top of his head, the long ends flopping, which made him look absurdly like an enormous rabbit.

“It is,” I assured him, suppressing an urge to laugh at sight of him. His long nose was pink with cold, and twitched suspiciously, and I buried my face in my own muffler, making small snorting noises that emerged as puffs of white, like a steam engine.

“And the bedroom candle? The wee lamp in your surgery?”

“Yes,” I assured him, emerging from the depths of the muffler. My eyes were watering and I would have liked to wipe them, but I had a huge bundle in one arm and a covered basket hung on the other. This contained Adso, who had been forcibly removed from the house, and wasn’t pleased about it; small growls emerged from the basket, and it swayed and thumped against my leg.

“And the rush dip in the pantry, and the candle in the wall sconce in the hall, and the brazier in your office, and the fish-oil lantern you use in the stables. I went over the whole house with a nit comb. Not a spark anywhere.”

“Well enough, then,” he said—but couldn’t help an uneasy glance backward at the house. I looked, too; it looked cold and forlorn, the white of its boards rather grimy against the pristine snow.

“It won’t be an accident,” I said. “Not unless the white sow is playing with matches in her den.”

That made him smile, in spite of the circumstances. Frankly, at the moment, the circumstances struck me as slightly absurd; the whole world seemed deserted, frozen solid and immobile under a winter sky. Nothing seemed less likely than that cataclysm could descend to destroy the house by fire. Still … better safe than sorry. And as Jamie had remarked more than once during the years since Roger and Bree had brought word of that sinister newspaper clipping, “If ye ken the house is meant to burn down on a certain day, why would ye be standing in it?”

So we weren't standing in it. Mrs. Bug had been told to stay at home, and Amy McCallum and her two little boys were already at Brianna's cabin—puzzled, but obliging. If Himself said that no one was to set foot in the house until dawn tomorrow … well, then, there was nothing more to be said, was there?

Ian had been up since before dawn, chopping kindling and hauling in firewood from the shed; everyone would be snug and warm.

Jamie himself had been up all night, tending stock, dispersing his armory—there was not a grain of gunpowder anywhere in the house, either—and prowling restlessly upstairs and down, alert to every cracking ember on a hearth, every burning candle flame, any faint noise without that might portend the approach of an enemy. The only thing he hadn't done was to sit on the roof with a wet sack, keeping a suspicious eye out for lightning—and that, only because it had been a cloudless night, the stars immense and bright overhead, burning in the frozen void.

I hadn't slept a great deal, either, disturbed equally by Jamie's prowling and by vivid dreams of conflagration.

The only conflagration visible, though, was the one sending a welcome shower of smoke and sparks from Brianna's chimney, and we opened the door to the grateful warmth of a roaring hearth and a number of bodies.

Aidan and Orrie, roused in the dark and dragged through the cold, had promptly crawled into Jemmy's trundle, and the three little boys were sound asleep, curled up like hedgehogs beneath their quilt. Amy was helping Bree with the breakfast; savory smells of porridge and bacon rose from the hearth.

"Is all well, ma'am?" Amy hurried over to take the big bundle I had brought—this contained my medical chest, the more scarce and valuable herbs from my surgery—and the sealed jar with the latest shipment of white phosphorus that Lord John had sent as a farewell present to Brianna.

"It is," I assured her, setting Adso's basket on the floor. I yawned, and eyed the bed wistfully, but set about to stow my chest in the lean-to pantry, where the children wouldn't get into it. I put the phosphorus on the highest shelf, well back from the edge, and moved a large cheese in front of it, just in case.

Jamie had divested himself of cloak and rabbit ears, and handing Roger the fowling piece, shot pouch, and powder horn he'd carried, was stamping snow from his boots. I saw him glance round the cabin, counting heads, then, at last, draw a small breath, nodding to himself. All safe, so far.

The morning passed peacefully. Breakfast eaten and cleared away, Amy, Bree, and I settled down by the fire with an enormous heap of mending. Adso, tail still twitching with indignation, had taken up a place on a high shelf, from whence he glared at Rollo, who had taken over the trundle bed when the boys got out of it.

Aidan and Jemmy, each now the proud possessor of *two* vrooms, drove them over hearthstones, under the bed, and through our feet, but for the most part, refrained from punching each other or stepping on Orrie, who was sitting placidly under the table gnawing on a piece of toast. Jamie, Roger, and Ian took turns going outside to pace back and forth and stare at the Big House, deserted in the shelter of the snow-dusted spruce.

As Roger came back from one of these expeditions, Brianna looked up suddenly from the sock she was darning.

"What?" he said, seeing her face.

"Oh." She had paused, needle halfway through the sock, and now looked down, completing her stitch. "Nothing. Just a—just a thought."

The tone of her voice made Jamie, who had been frowning his way through a battered copy of *Evelina,* look up.

"What sort of thought was that, *a nighean*?" he asked, his radar quite as good as Roger's.

"Er … well." She bit her lower lip, but then blurted, "What if it's *this* house?"

That froze everyone except the little boys, who continued crawling industriously around the room and over bed and table, screeching and vrooming.

"It could be, couldn't it?" Bree looked round, from rooftree to hearth. "All the—the prophecy said"—with an awkward nod toward

Amy McCallum—“was *the home of James Fraser* would burn. But this was your home, to start with. And it’s not like there’s a street address. It just said, *On Fraser’s Ridge.*”

Everyone stared at her, and she flushed deeply, dropping her eyes to the sock.

“I mean … it’s not like they—er, prophecies—like they’re always accurate, is it? They might have got the details wrong.”

Amy nodded seriously; evidently, vagueness in the matter of detail was an accepted characteristic of prophecies.

Roger cleared his throat explosively; Jamie and Ian exchanged glances, then looked at the fire, leaping on the hearth and the towering stack of bone-dry firewood next to it, the overflowing kindling basket … Everyone’s eyes turned expectantly to Jamie, whose face was a study in conflicting emotions.

“I suppose,” he said slowly, “we could remove to Arch’s place.”

I began to count on my fingers: “You, me, Roger, Bree, Ian, Amy, Aidan, Orrie, Jemmy—plus Mr. and Mrs. Bug—is eleven people. In a one-room cabin that measures eight feet by ten?” I closed my fists and stared at him. “No one would have to set the place on fire; half of us would be sitting in the hearth already, well alight.”

“Mmphm. Well, then … the Christie place is empty.”

Amy’s eyes went round with horror, and everyone looked automatically away from everyone else. Jamie took a deep breath and let it out, audibly.

“Perhaps we’ll just be … very careful,” I suggested. Everyone exhaled slightly, and we resumed our occupations, though without our former sense of snug safety.

Dinner passed without incident, but in midafternoon, a knock came on the door. Amy screamed, and Brianna dropped the shirt she was mending into the fire. Ian leaped to his feet and jerked the door open, and Rollo, jerked out of a doze, charged past him, roaring.

Jamie and Roger struck the doorway—and each other—simultaneously, stuck for an instant, and fell through. All the little boys shrieked and ran to their respective mothers, who were frantically beating at the smoldering shirt as though it were a live snake.

I had leaped to my feet, but was pressed against the wall, unable to get past Bree and Amy. Adso, startled by the racket and by my popping up beside him, hissed and took a swipe at me, narrowly missing my eye.

A number of oaths in a mixture of languages were coming from the dooryard, accompanied by a series of sharp barks from Rollo. Everyone sounded thoroughly annoyed, but there were no sounds of conflict. I edged my way delicately past the knot of mothers and sons, and peered out.

Major MacDonald, wet to the eyebrows and covered in clumps of snow and dirty slush, was gesticulating with some energy at Jamie, while Ian rebuked Rollo, and Roger—from the look on his face—was trying very hard not to burst out laughing.

Jamie, compelled by his own sense of propriety, but eyeing the Major with deep suspicion, invited him in. The inside of the cabin smelled of burned fabric, but at least the riot had calmed down, and the Major greeted us all with a fair assumption of cordiality. There was a lot of fuss, getting him stripped of his soaking-wet clothes, dried off, and—for lack of any better alternative—temporarily swathed in Roger's spare shirt and breeches, in which he appeared to be drowning, as he was a good six inches shorter than Roger.

Food and whisky having been ceremonially offered and accepted, the household fixed the Major with a collective eye and waited to hear what had brought him to the mountains in the dead of winter.

Jamie exchanged a brief glance with me, indicating that he could hazard a guess. So could I.

"I have come, sir," MacDonald said formally, hitching up the shirt to keep it from sliding off his shoulder, "to offer ye command of a company of militia, under the orders of General Hugh MacDonald. The General's troops are gathering, even as we speak, and will undertake their march to Wilmington at the end of the month."

I felt a deep qualm of apprehension at that. I was accustomed to MacDonald's chronic optimism and tendency to overstatement, but there was nothing of exaggeration in this statement. Did that mean that the help Governor Martin had requested, the troops from Ireland, would be landing soon, to meet General MacDonald's troops at the coast?

"The General's troops," Jamie said, poking up the fire. He and MacDonald had taken over the fireside, with Roger and Ian ranged on either side of them, like firedogs. Bree, Amy, and I repaired to the bed, where we perched like a row of roosting hens, watching the conversation with a mingling of interest and alarm, while the little boys retired under the table.

"How many men does he have, would ye say, Donald?"

I saw MacDonald hesitate, torn between truth and desire. He coughed, though, and said matter-of-factly, "He had a few more than a thousand when I left him. Ye ken weel, though—once we begin to move, others will come to join us. Many others. The more particularly," he added pointedly, "if such gentlemen as yourself are in command."

Jamie didn't reply to that at once. Meditatively, he shoved a burning wood fragment back into the fire with his foot.

"Powder and shot?" he asked. "Arms?"

"Aye, well; we'd a bit of a disappointment there." MacDonald took a sip of his whisky. "Duncan Innes had promised us a great deal in that way—but in the end, he was obliged to renege upon his promise." The Major's lips pressed tight, and I thought from the expression on his face that perhaps Duncan had not been overreacting in his decision to move to Canada.

"Still," MacDonald continued more cheerfully, "we are not destitute in that regard. And those gallant gentlemen who have flocked to our cause—and who *will* come to join us—bring with them both their own weapons and their courage. You, of all people, must appreciate the force of the Hieland charge!"

Jamie looked up at that, and regarded MacDonald for a long moment before replying.

"Aye, well. Ye were behind the cannon at Culloden, Donald. I was in front of them. With a sword in my hand." He took up his own glass and drained it, then got up and moved to pour another, leaving MacDonald to recover his countenance.

“*Touché,* Major,” Brianna murmured under her breath. I didn’t think Jamie had ever before referred to the fact that the Major had fought with the government forces during the Rising—but I wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t forgotten.

With a brief nod to the company, Jamie stepped outside—ostensibly to visit the privy, more likely to check on the well-being of the house. Still more likely to give MacDonald a little breathing room.

Roger, with the courtesy of a host—and the suppressed keenness of a historian—was asking MacDonald questions regarding the General and his activities. Ian, impassive and watchful, sat by his feet, one hand toying with Rollo’s ruff.

“The General’s rather elderly for such a campaign, surely?” Roger took another stick of wood and pushed it into the fire. “Especially a winter campaign.”

“He has the odd wee spell of catarrh,” MacDonald admitted, offhand. “But who doesna, in this climate? And Donald McLeod, his lieutenant, is a man of vigor. I assure ye, sir, should the General be at any point indisposed, Colonel McLeod is more than capable of leading the troops to victory!”

He went on at some length about the virtues—both personal and military—of Donald McLeod. I ceased listening, my attention distracted by a stealthy movement on the shelf above his head. Adso.

MacDonald’s red coat was spread over the back of a chair to dry, steaming in the heat. His wig, damp and disheveled from Rollo’s attack, hung on the cloak peg above it. I got up hastily and possessed myself of the wig, receiving a look of puzzlement from the Major, and one of green-eyed hostility from Adso, who plainly considered it low of me to hog this desirable prey for myself.

“Er … I’ll just … um … put it somewhere safe, shall I?” Clutching the damp mass of horsehair to my bosom, I sidled outside and round to the pantry, where I tucked the wig safely away behind the cheese with the phosphorus.

Coming out, I met Jamie, red-nosed with cold, coming back from a reconnaissance of the Big House.

"All's well," he assured me. He glanced up at the chimney above us, spuming clouds of thick gray smoke. "Ye dinna suppose the lass might be right, do ye?" He sounded as though he were joking, but he wasn't.

"God knows. *How* long 'til tomorrow's dawn?" The shadows were already falling long, violet and chill across the snow.

"Too long." He had violet shadows in his face, too, from one sleepless night; this would be another. He hugged me against himself for a moment, though, warm in spite of the fact that he wore nothing over his shirt but the rough jacket in which he did chores.

"Ye dinna suppose MacDonald will come back and fire the house, if I refuse him, do ye?" he asked, releasing me with a fair attempt at a smile.

"What do you mean *'if'*?" I demanded, but he was already on his way back in.

MacDonald stood up in respect when Jamie came in, waiting until he was seated again before taking his own stool.

"Have ye had a moment, then, to think on my offer, Mr. Fraser?" he asked formally. "Your presence would be of the greatest value—and valued greatly by General MacDonald and the Governor, as well as myself."

Jamie sat silent for a moment, looking into the fire.

"It grieves me, Donald, that we should find ourselves so opposed," he said at last, looking up. "Ye canna be in ignorance, though, of my position in this matter. I have declared myself."

MacDonald nodded, lips tightening a little.

"I ken what ye've done. But it is not too late for remedy. Ye've done nothing yet that is irrevocable—and a man may surely admit mistake."

Jamie's mouth twitched a little.

"Oh, aye, Donald. Might you admit your own mistake, then, and join the cause of liberty?"

MacDonald drew himself up.

"It may please ye to tease, Mr. Fraser," he said, obviously keeping a grip on his temper, "but my offer is made in earnest."

"I know that, Major. My apologies for undue levity. And also for the fact that I must make ye a poor reward of your efforts, coming so far in bitter weather."

"Ye refuse, then?" Red smudges burned on MacDonald's cheeks, and his pale blue eyes had gone the color of the winter sky. "Ye will abandon your kin, your ain folk? Ye would betray your blood, as well as your oath?"

Jamie had opened his mouth to reply, but stopped at this. I could feel something going on inside him. Shock, at this blunt—and very accurate—accusation? Hesitation? He had never discussed the situation in those terms, but he must have grasped them. Most of the Highlanders in the colony either had joined the Loyalist side already—like Duncan and Jocasta—or likely would.

His declaration had cut him off from a great many friends—and might well cut him off from the remnants of his family in the New World, as well. Now MacDonald was holding out the apple of temptation, the call of clan and blood.

But he had had years to think of it, to ready himself.

"I have said what I must, Donald," he said quietly. "I have pledged myself and my house to what I believe is right. I cannot do otherwise."

MacDonald sat for a moment, looking at him narrowly. Then, without a word, he stood and pulled Roger's shirt off over his head. His torso was pale and lean, but with a slight middle-aged softness round the waist, and bore several white scars, the marks of bullet wounds and sabre cuts.

"You don't mean to go, surely, Major? It's freezing out, and nearly dark!" I came to stand by Jamie, and Roger and Bree rose, too, adding their protestations to mine. MacDonald, though, was obdurate, merely shaking his head as he pulled on his own damp clothing, fastening his coat with difficulty, as the buttonholes were stiff with damp.

"I will not take hospitality from the hand of a traitor, mum," he said very quietly, and bowed to me. He straightened then, and met Jamie's eye, man to man.

“We shall not meet again as friends, Mr. Fraser,” he said. “I regret it.”

“Then let us hope we do not meet again at all, Major,” Jamie said. “I too regret it.”

MacDonald bowed again, to the rest of the company, and clapped his hat on his head. His expression changed as he did so and felt the damp coldness of it on his bare head.

“Oh, your wig! Just a moment, Major—I’ll fetch it.” I rushed out and round to the pantry—just in time to hear a crash as something fell inside. I jerked open the door, left ajar from my last visit, and Adso streaked past me, the Major’s wig in his mouth. Inside, the lean-to was in brilliant blue flames.

* * *

I had initially wondered how I would keep awake all night. In the event, it wasn’t difficult at all. In the aftermath of the blaze, I wasn’t sure I’d ever sleep again.

It could have been much worse; Major MacDonald, in spite of now being a sworn enemy, had come nobly to our aid, rushing out and flinging his still-wet cloak over the blaze, thus preventing the total destruction of the pantry—and, doubtless, the cabin. The cloak had not put out the fire entirely, though, and quenching the flames that sprang up here and there had entailed a great deal of excitement and rushing about, in the course of which Orrie McCallum was misplaced, toddled off, and fell into the groundhog kiln, where he was found—many frantic minutes later—by Rollo.

He was fished out undamaged, but the hullabaloo caused Brianna to have what she thought was premature labor. Fortunately, this proved to be merely a bad case of hiccups, caused by the combination of nervous strain and eating excessive quantities of sauerkraut and dried-apple pie, for which she had conceived a recent craving.

“Flammable, she said.” Jamie looked at the charred remains of the pantry floor, then at Brianna, who had, in spite of my recommendation that she lie down, come out to see what could be salvaged from the smoking remains. He shook his head. "It's a miracle that ye've not burnt the place to ashes long since, lass."

She emitted a smothered "hic!" and glowered at him, one hand on her bulging stomach.

"*Me?* You'd better not be try—hic!—ing to make out that this is *my*—hic!—fault. Did *I* put the Major's—hic!—wig next to the—"

"BOO!" Roger bellowed, darting a hand at her face.

She shrieked, and hit him. Jemmy and Aidan, running out to see what the commotion was about, started dancing round her, ecstatically shouting, "Boo! Boo!" like a gang of miniature lunatic ghosts.

Bree, her eyes gleaming dangerously, bent and scooped up a handful of snow. In an instant, she had molded it into a ball, which she flung at her husband's head with deadly accuracy. It struck him right between the eyes, exploding in a shower that left white granules clinging to his eyebrows and melting globs of snow running down his cheeks.

"What?" he said incredulously. "What's that for? I was only trying to—hey!" He ducked the next one, only to be pelted round the knees and waist by handsful of snow lobbed at short range by Jemmy and Aidan, quite berserk by now.

Modestly accepting thanks for his action earlier, the Major had been persuaded—not least by the fact that it was now full dark and beginning to snow again—to accept the hospitality of the cabin, with the understanding that it was Roger, not Jamie, who was offering it. Watching his hosts whooping and hiccing as they plastered one another with snow, he looked as though he might be having second thoughts about being so fine as to refuse to dine with a traitor, but he rather stiffly bowed in response when Jamie and I bade him farewell, then trudged into the cabin, the muddy shreds that Adso had left of his wig clasped in his hand.

It seemed extremely—and most gratefully—quiet as we made our way through the falling snow toward our own house, alone. The sky had gone a pinkish lavender, and the flakes floated down around us, supernatural in their silence.

The house loomed before us, its quiet bulk somehow welcoming, in spite of the darkened windows. Snow was swirling across the porch in little eddies, piling in drifts on the sills.

“I suppose it would be harder for a fire to start if it’s snowing—wouldn’t you think?”

Jamie bent to unlock the front door.

“I dinna much mind if the place bursts into flame by spontaneous combustion, Sassenach, provided I have my supper first.”

“A cold supper, were you thinking?” I asked dubiously.

“I was not,” he said firmly. “I mean to light a roaring fire in the kitchen hearth, fry up a dozen eggs in butter, and eat them all, then lay ye down on the hearth rug and roger ye ’til you—is that all right?” he inquired, noticing my look.

“ ’Til I what?” I asked, fascinated by his description of the evening’s program.

“ ’Til ye burst into flame and take me with ye, I suppose,” he said, and stooping, swooped me up into his arms and carried me across the darkened threshold.

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OATHBREAKER

February 2, 1776

He called them all together, and they came. The Jacobites of Ardsmuir, the fishermen from Thurso, the outcasts and opportunists who had come to settle on the Ridge over the last six years. He had called for the men, and most came alone, making their way through the dripping woods, slipping on mossy rocks and muddy trails. Some of the wives came, as well, though, curious, wary, though they hung modestly back and allowed Claire to shepherd them into the house one by one.

The men stood in the dooryard, and he regretted that; the memory of the last time they had gathered here was much too fresh in everyone's mind. But there was no choice about it; there were too many to fit in the house. And it was broad day, now, not night—though he saw more than one man turn his head sharply to glance at the chestnut trees, as though he saw the ghost of Thomas Christie there, poised once more to walk through the crowd.

He crossed himself, and said a hasty prayer, as he always did when he thought of Tom Christie, then stepped out on the porch. They had been talking together—awkwardly, but with a fair assumption of ease—but the talk died abruptly when he appeared.

"I have received word summoning me to Wilmington," he said to them without preamble. "I go to join the militias there, and I will take with me such men as will come willingly."

They gaped at him like sheep disturbed at grazing. He had a moment's unsettling impulse to laugh, but it passed at once.

"We will go as militia, but I do not command your service." Privately, he doubted that he *could* command more than a handful of them now, but as well to put a good face on it.

Most were still blinking at him, but one or two had got a grip on themselves.

"You declare yourself a rebel, *Mac Dubh*?" That was Murdo, bless him. Loyal as a dog, but slow of thought. He needed things to be put in the simplest of terms, but once grasped, he would deal with them tenaciously.

"Aye, Murdo, I do. I am a rebel. So will any man be who marches with me."

That caused a fair degree of murmuring, glances of doubt. Here and there in the crowd, he heard the word "oath," and steeled himself for the obvious question.

He was taken aback by the man who asked it, though. Arch Bug drew himself up, tall and stern.

"Ye swore an oath to the King, *Seaumais mac Brian,*" he said, his voice unexpectedly sharp. "So did we all."

There was a murmur of agreement at this, and faces turned to him, frowning, uneasy. He took a deep breath, and felt his stomach knot. Even now, knowing what he knew, and knowing too the immorality of a forced oath, to break his sworn word openly made him feel that he had stepped on a step that wasn't there.

"So did we all," he agreed. "But it was an oath forced upon us as captives, not one given as men of honor."

This was patently true; still, it was an oath, and Highlanders did not take any oath lightly. *May I die and be buried far from my kin* … Oath or no, he thought grimly, that fate would likely be theirs.

"But an oath nonetheless, sir," said Hiram Crombie, lips drawn tight. "We have sworn before God. Do you ask us to put aside such a thing?" Several of the Presbyterians murmured acquiescence, drawing closer to Crombie in show of support.

He took another deep breath, feeling his belly tighten.

"I ask nothing." And knowing full well what he did, despising himself in a way for doing it—he fell back upon the ancient weapons of rhetoric and idealism.

"I said that the oath of loyalty to the King was an oath extorted, not given. Such an oath is without power, for no man swears freely, save he is free himself."

No one shouted disagreement, so he went on, voice pitched to carry, but not shouting.

"Ye'll ken the Declaration of Arbroath, will ye? Four hundred years since, it was our sires, our grandsires, who put their hands to these words: … *for as long as but a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be brought under English rule."* He stopped to steady his voice, then went on. *"It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom—for that alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself."*

He stopped dead then. Not for its effect on the men to whom he spoke, but because of the words themselves—for in speaking them, he had found himself unexpectedly face to face with his own conscience.

To this point, he had been dubious about the justifications of the revolution, and more so of its ends; he had been compelled to the rebel stand because of what Claire, Brianna, and Roger Mac had told him. But in the speaking of the ancient words, he found the conviction he thought he pretended—and was stricken by the thought that he did indeed go to fight for something more than the welfare of his own people.

And ye'll end up just as dead in the end, he thought, resigned. *I dinna expect it hurts less, to ken it's for good cause—but maybe so.*

"I shall leave in a week," he said quietly, and left them staring after him.

* * *

He had expected his Ardsmuir men to come: the three Lindsay brothers, Hugh Abernathy, Padraic MacNeill, and the rest. Not expected, but gladly welcomed, were Robin McGillivray and his son, Manfred.

Ute McGillivray had forgiven him, he saw, with a certain sense of amusement. Besides Robin and Freddie, fifteen men from near Salem had come, all relatives of the redoubtable *frau*.

A great surprise, though, was Hiram Crombie, who alone of the fisher-folk had decided to join him.

"I have prayed on the matter," Hiram informed him, managing to look more piously sour than usual, "and I believe ye're right about the oath. I expect ye'll have us all hangit and burned oot of our homes—but I'll come, nonetheless."

The rest—with great mutterings and agitated debate—had not. He didn't blame them. Having survived the aftermath of Culloden, the perilous voyage to the colonies, and the hardship of exile, the very last thing a sensible person could wish was to take up arms against the King.

The greatest surprise, though, awaited him as his small company rode out of Cooperville and turned into the road that led south.

A company of men, some forty strong, was waiting at the crossroad. He drew near warily, and a single man spurred out of the crowd and drew up with him—Richard Brown, pale-faced and grim.

"I hear you go to Wilmington," Brown said without preamble. "If so be as it's agreeable, my men and I will ride with you." He coughed, and added, "Under your command, to be sure."

Behind him, he heard a small "hmph!" from Claire, and suppressed a smile. He was quite aware of the phalanx of narrowed eyes at his back. He caught Roger Mac's eye, and his son-in-law gave a small nod. War made strange bedfellows; Roger Mac knew that as well as he did—and for himself, he had fought with worse than Brown, during the Rising.

"Be welcome, then," he said, and bowed from his saddle. "You and your men."

* * *

We met another militia company near a place called Moore's Creek, and camped with them under the longleaf pines. There had been a bad ice storm the day before, and the ground was thick with fallen branches, some as large around as my waist. It made the going more difficult, but had its advantages, so far as making campfires went.

I was throwing a hastily assembled bucket of ingredients into the kettle for stew—scraps of ham, with bones, beans, rice, onions, carrots, crumbled stale biscuit—and listening to the other militia commander, Robert Borthy, who was telling Jamie—with considerable levity—about the state of the Emigrant Highland Regiment, as our opponents were formally known.

"There can't be more than five or six hundred, all told," he was saying with amused derision. "Old MacDonald and his aides have been tryin' to scoop 'em up from the countryside for months, and I gather the effort has been akin to scoopin' water with a sieve."

On one occasion, Alexander McLean, one of the general's aides, had set up a rendezvous point, calling upon all the Highlanders and Scotch–Irish in the neighborhood to assemble—cannily providing a hogshead of liquor as inducement. Some five hundred men had in fact shown up—but as soon as the liquor was drunk, they had melted away again, leaving McLean alone, and completely lost.

"The poor man wandered about for nearly two days, lookin' for the road, before someone took pity on him and led him back to civilization." Borthy, a hearty backwoods soul with a thick brown beard, grinned widely at the tale, and accepted a cup of ale with due thanks before going on.

"God knows where the rest of 'em are now. I hear tell that what troops Old MacDonald has are mostly brand-new emigrants—the Governor made 'em swear to take up arms to defend the colony before he'd grant them land. Most of them poor sods are fresh off the boat from Scotland—they don't know north from south, let alone just where they are."

"Oh, I ken where they are, even if they don't." Ian came into the firelight, grubby but cheerful. He had been riding dispatches back and forth among the various militia companies converging on Wilmington, and his statement caused a rush of general interest.

"Where?" Richard Brown leaned forward into the firelight, narrow face keen and foxy.

“They’re comin’ down Negro Head Point Road, marching like a proper regiment,” Ian said, sinking onto a hastily offered log with a small groan. “Is there anything hot to drink, Auntie? I’m frozen and parched, both.”

There was a nasty sort of dark liquid, called “coffee” for courtesy’s sake, and made from boiling burned acorns. I rather dubiously poured him a cup, but he consumed it with every evidence of enjoyment, meanwhile recounting the results of his expeditions.

“They meant to circle round to the west, but Colonel Howe’s men got there first, and cut them off. So then they went across, meaning to take the ford—but Colonel Moore put his men to the quick-step and marched all night to forestall them.”

“They made no move to engage either Howe or Moore?” Jamie asked, frowning. Ian shook his head, and gulped the rest of his acorn coffee.

“Wouldna come close. Colonel Moore says they dinna mean to engage until they reach Wilmington—they’re expecting reinforcement there.”

I exchanged a glance with Jamie. The expected reinforcement was presumably the British regular troops, promised by General Gage. But a rider from Brunswick we had met the day before had told us that no ships had arrived when *he* left the coast, four days before. If there was reinforcement awaiting them, it would have to come from the local Loyalists—and from the various rumors and reports we’d heard so far, the local Loyalists were a weak reed on which to lean.

“Well, so. They’re cut off on either side, aye? Straight down the road is where they’re headed—they might reach the bridge late tomorrow.”

“How far is it, Ian?” Jamie asked, squinting through the vista of longleaf pines. The trees were very tall, and the grassland under them wide open—very reasonable for riding.

“Maybe half a day on horseback.”

“Aye, then.” Jamie relaxed a little, and reached for his own cup of the vile brew. “We’ve time to sleep first, then.”

* * *

We reached the bridge at Moore’s Creek by midday the next day, and joined the company commanded by Richard Caswell, who greeted Jamie with pleasure.

The Highland regiment was nowhere in sight—but dispatch riders arrived regularly, reporting their steady movement down Negro Head Point Road—a wide wagon thoroughfare that led directly to the solid plank bridge that crossed the Widow Moore’s Creek.

Jamie, Caswell, and several of the other commanders were walking up and down the bank, pointing at the bridge and up and down the shore. The creek ran through a stretch of treacherous, swampy ground, with cypress trees stretching up from water and mud. The creek itself deepened as it narrowed, though—a plumb line that some curious soul dropped into the water off the bridge said it was fifteen feet deep at that point—and the bridge was the only feasible place for an army of any size to cross.

Which did a great deal to explain Jamie’s silence over supper. He had helped to throw up a small earthwork on the far side of the creek, and his hands were smeared with dirt—and grease.

“They’ve cannon,” he said quietly, seeing me eye the smudges on his hands. He wiped them absently on his breeks, much the worse for wear. “Two small guns from the town—but cannon, nonetheless.” He looked toward the bridge, and grimaced slightly.

I knew what he was thinking—and why.

Ye were behind the cannon at Culloden, Donald, he had said to the Major. *I was in front of them. With a sword in my hand.* Swords were the Highlanders’ natural weapons—and for most, likely their only weapons. From all we had heard, General MacDonald had managed to assemble only a small quantity of muskets and powder; most of his troops were armed with broadswords and targes. And they were marching straight into ambush.

“Oh, Christ,” Jamie said, so softly I could barely hear him. “The poor wee fools. The poor gallant wee fools.”

* * *

Matters became still worse—or much better, depending on your viewpoint—as dusk fell. The temperature had risen since the ice storm, but the ground was sodden; moisture rose from it during the day, but then as night came on, condensed into a fog so thick that even the campfires were barely visible, each one glowing like a sullen coal in the mist.

Excitement was passing through the militia like a mosquito-borne fever, as the new conditions gave rise to new plans.

“Now,” Ian said softly, appearing like a ghost out of the fog beside Jamie. “Caswell’s ready.”

Such supplies as we had were already packed; carrying guns, powder, and food, eight hundred men, together with an uncounted quantity of camp-followers like myself, stole quietly through the mist toward the bridge, leaving the campfires burning behind us.

I wasn’t sure exactly where MacDonald’s troops were just now—they might be still on the wagon road, or might have cautiously detoured, coming down to the edge of the swamp to reconnoiter. Good luck to them in *that* case, I thought. My own insides were tight with tension as I stepped carefully across the bridge; it was silly to tiptoe, but I felt a reluctance to put my feet down firmly—the fog and silence compelled a sense of secrecy and furtiveness.

I stubbed a toe against an uneven plank and lurched forward, but Roger, walking beside me, caught me by the arm and set me upright. I squeezed his arm, and he smiled a little, his face barely visible through the mist, though he was no more than a foot away.

He knew quite as well as Jamie and the rest did what was coming. Nonetheless, I sensed a strong excitement in him, mingled with dread. It was, after all, to be his first battle.

On the other side, we dispersed to make fresh camps on the hill above the circular earthwork the men had thrown up a hundred yards from the creek. I passed close enough to the guns to see their elongated snouts, poking inquisitively through the mist: Mother Covington and her daughter, the men called the two cannon—I wondered idly which was which, and who the original Mother Covington might have been. A redoubtable lady, I assumed—or possibly the proprietor of the local brothel.

Firewood was easy to find; the ice storm had extended to the pines near the creek, too. It was, however, bloody damp, and damned if I was going to spend an hour on my knees with a tinderbox. Luckily, no one could see *what* I was doing in this pea-soup fog, and I stealthily removed a small tin of Brianna's matches from my pocket.

As I was blowing on the kindling, I heard a series of odd, rending screeches from the direction of the bridge, and knelt upright, staring down the hill. I couldn't see anything, of course, but realized almost at once that it was the sound of nails giving way as planks were pried up—they were dismantling the bridge.

It seemed a long time before Jamie came to find me. He refused food, but sat against a tree and beckoned to me. I sat down between his knees and leaned back against him, grateful for his warmth; the night was cold, with a damp that crept into every crevice and chilled the marrow.

"Surely they'll see that the bridge is out?" I said, after a long silence filled with the myriad noises of the men working below.

"Not if the fog lasts 'til morning—and it will." Jamie sounded resigned, but he seemed more peaceful than he had earlier. We sat quietly together for some time, watching the play of flames on the fog—an eerie sight, as the fire seemed to shimmer and merge with the mist, the flames stretching strangely up and up, disappearing into the swirl of white.

"D'ye believe in ghosts, Sassenach?" Jamie asked suddenly.

"Er … well, not to put too fine a point on it, yes," I said. He knew I did, because I'd told him about my meeting with the Indian whose face was painted black. I knew he did, too—he was a Highlander. "Why, have you seen one?"

He shook his head, wrapping his arms more securely around me.

"Not to say 'seen,' " he said, sounding thoughtful. "But I will be damned if he's no there."

"Who?" I said, rather startled at this.

"Murtagh," he said, surprising me further. He shifted more comfortably, resettling me against him. "Ever since the fog came in, I've had the most peculiar sense of him, just by me."

“Really?” This was fascinating, but made me thoroughly uneasy. Murtagh, Jamie’s godfather, had died at Culloden, and—so far as I knew—hadn’t been going about manifesting himself since. I didn’t doubt his presence; Murtagh’s had been an extremely strong—if dour—personality, and if Jamie said he was there, he very likely was. What made me uneasy was the contemplation of just *why* he might be there.

I concentrated for a time, but got no sense of the tough little Scotsman myself. Evidently, he was only interested in Jamie. *That* frightened me.

While the conclusion of the morrow’s battle was a foregone one, a battle was a battle, and men might be killed on the winning side, as well. Murtagh had been Jamie’s godfather, and took his duty to Jamie seriously. I sincerely hoped he hadn’t had word that Jamie was about to be killed, and shown up to conduct him to heaven—visions on the eve of battle were a fairly common occurrence in Highland lore, but Jamie did say he hadn’t *seen* Murtagh. That was something, I supposed.

“He, um, hasn’t *said* anything to you, has he?”

Jamie shook his head, seeming unfazed by this ghostly visitation.

“Nay, he’s just … there.” He seemed, in fact, to find this “thereness” a comfort, and so I didn’t voice my own doubts and fears. I had them, nonetheless, and spent the rest of the short night pressed close against my husband, as though daring Murtagh or anyone else to take him from me.

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THE GHOSTS OF CULLODEN

Come dawn, Roger stood behind the low earthwork by his father-in-law, musket in hand, straining his eyes to peer into the mist. The sounds of an army came to him clearly; sound carried through fog. The measured tramp of feet, though they were not marching in any sort of unison. The clank of metal and rustle of cloth. Voices—the shouts of officers, he thought, beginning to rally their troops.

They would by now have found the deserted campfires; they'd know that the enemy now lay across the creek.

The smell of tallow was strong in the air; Alexander Lillington's men had greased the support timbers, after the planks had been removed. He'd been grasping his gun for hours, it seemed, and yet the metal was still cold in his hand—his fingers were stiff.

"D'ye hear the shouting?" Jamie nodded toward the mist that hid the far bank. The wind had changed; no more than disconnected Gaelic phrases came from beyond the ghostly cypress trunks, and I made no sense of them. Jamie did.

"Whoever's leading them—I think it's McLeod, by the voice—he means to charge the creek," he said.

"But that's suicide!" Roger blurted. "Surely they know—surely someone's seen the bridge?"

"They are Highlanders," Jamie said, still softly, eyes on the ramrod he pulled from its rest. "They will follow the man to whom they vow loyalty, even though he leads them to their death."

Ian was nearby; he glanced quickly toward Roger, then over his shoulder, where Kenny and Murdo Lindsay stood with Ronnie Sinclair and the McGillivrays. They stood in a casual knot, but every hand touched a musket or rifle, and their eyes darted toward Jamie every few seconds.

They had joined Colonel Lillington's men on this side of the creek; Lillington was passing to and fro through the men, eyes darting back and forth, assessing readiness.

Lillington stopped abruptly at sight of Jamie, and Roger felt a nervous qualm in the pit of his stomach. Randall Lillington had been a second cousin of the Colonel's.

Alexander Lillington wasn't a man to hide his thoughts; it had quite evidently dawned on him that his own men were forty feet away and that Jamie's men stood between him and them. His eyes darted toward the mist, where Donald McLeod's bellowing was being answered by increasing roars from the Highlanders with him, then back at Jamie.

"What does he say?" Lillington demanded, rising on his toes and frowning toward the far bank, as though concentration might yield him meaning.

"He says to them that courage will carry the day." Jamie glanced toward the crest of the rise behind them. Mother Covington's long black snout was just visible through the mist. *"Would that it could,"* he added quietly in Gaelic.

Alexander Lillington reached out suddenly and grabbed Jamie's wrist.

"And you, sir?" he said, suspicion open in eyes and voice. "Are you not a Highlander, as well?"

Lillington's other hand was on the pistol in his belt. Roger felt the casual talk among the men behind him stop, and glanced back. All Jamie's men were watching, with expressions of great interest but no particular alarm. Evidently, they felt Jamie could deal with Lillington by himself.

"I ask you, sir—to whom is your loyalty?"

"Where do I stand, sir?" Jamie said with elaborate politeness. "On this side of the creek, or on that?"

A few men grinned at that, but forbore to laugh; the question of loyalty was a raw one still, and no man would risk it unnecessarily.

Lillington's grip on his wrist relaxed, but did not yet let go, though he acknowledged Jamie's statement with a nod.

"Well enough. But how are we to know that you do not mean to turn and fall upon us in battle? For you *are* a Highlander, are you not? And your men?"

"I am a Highlander," Jamie said bleakly. He glanced once more at the far bank, where occasional glimpses of tartan showed through the mist, and then back. The shouting echoed from the fog. "And I am the sire of Americans." He pulled his wrist from Lillington's grasp.

"And I give ye leave, sir," he continued evenly, lifting his rifle and standing it on its butt, "to stand behind me and thrust your sword through my heart if I fire amiss."

With that, he turned his back on Lillington and loaded his gun, ramming ball, powder, and patch with great precision.

A voice bellowed from the fog, and a hundred other throats took up the cry in Gaelic. *"KING GEORGE AND BROADSWORDS!"*

The last Highland charge had begun.

* * *

They burst out of the mist a hundred feet from the bridge, howling, and his heart jumped in his chest. For an instant—an instant only—he felt he ran with them, and the wind of it snapped in his shirt, cold on his body.

But he stood stock-still, Murtagh beside him, looking cynically on. Roger Mac coughed, and Jamie raised the rifle to his shoulder, waiting.

"Fire!" The volley struck them just before they reached the gutted bridge; half a dozen fell in the road, but the others came on. Then the cannon fired from the hill above, one and then the other, and the concussion of their discharge was like a shove against his back.

He had fired with the volley, aiming above their heads. Now swung the rifle down and pulled the ramrod. There was screaming on both sides, the shriek of wounded and the stronger bellowing of battle.

"A righ! A righ!" The King! The King!

McLeod was at the bridge; he'd been hit, there was blood on his coat, but he brandished sword and targe, and ran onto the bridge, stabbing his sword into the wood to anchor himself.

The cannon spoke again, but were aimed too high; most of the Highlanders had crowded down to the banks of the creek—some were in the water, clinging to the bridge supports, inching across. More were on the timbers, slipping, using their swords like McLeod to keep their balance.

"Fire!" and he fired, powder smoke blending with the fog. The cannon had the range, they spoke one-two, and he felt the blast push against him, felt as though the shot had torn through him. Most of those on the bridge were in the water now, more threw themselves flat upon the timbers, trying to wriggle their way across, only to be picked off by the muskets, every man firing at will from the redoubt.

He loaded, and fired.

There he is, said a voice, dispassionate; he had no notion was it his, or Murtagh's.

McLeod was dead, his body floating in the creek for an instant before the weight of the black water pulled him down. Many men were struggling in that water—the creek was deep here, and mortal cold. Few Highlanders could swim.

He glimpsed Allan MacDonald, Flora's husband, pale and staring in the crowd on the shore.

Major Donald MacDonald floundered, rising halfway in the water. His wig was gone and his head showed bare and wounded, blood running from his scalp down over his face. His teeth were bared, clenched in agony or ferocity, there was no telling which. Another shot struck him and he fell with a splash—but rose again, slow, slow, and then pitched forward into water too deep to stand, but rose yet again, splashing frantically, spraying blood from his shattered mouth in the effort to breathe.

Let it be you, then, lad, said the dispassionate voice. He raised his rifle and shot MacDonald cleanly through the throat. He fell backward and sank at once.

* * *

It was over in minutes, the fog thick with powder smoke, the black creek choked with the dying and dead.

"King George and broadswords, eh?" said Caswell, bleakly surveying the damage. "Broadswords against cannon. Poor buggers."

On the other side, all was confusion. Those who had not fallen at the bridge were in flight. Already, men on this side of the creek were carrying the timbers down to repair the bridge. Those who were running wouldn't get far.

He should go, too, summon his men to help in pursuit. But he stood as though turned to stone, the cold wind singing in his ears.

* * *

Jack Randall stood still. His sword was in his hand, but he made no effort to raise it. Only stood there, that odd smile on his lips, dark eyes burning in Jamie's own.

If he had been able to break that gaze … but he couldn't, and so caught the blur of movement behind Randall. Murtagh, running, bounding tussocks like a sheep. And the glint of his godfather's blade—had he seen that, or only imagined it? No matter; he'd known without doubt from the cock of Murtagh's arm, and seen before it happened the murderous strike come upward toward the Captain's red-clad back.

But Randall spun, warned maybe by some change in his eyes, the sob of Murtagh's breath—or only by a soldier's instinct. Too late to avoid the thrust, but soon enough that the dirk missed its fatal aim into the kidney. Randall had grunted with the blow—Christ, he could hear it—and jerked aside staggering, but turning as he fell, grasping Murtagh's wrist, dragging him down in a shower of spray from the wet gorse they fell through.

They had rolled away into a hollow, locked together, struggling, and he had flung himself through the clinging plants in pursuit, some weapon—what, what had he held?—in his fist.

But the feel of it faded against his skin; he felt the weight of the thing in his hand, but there was no shape of hilt or trigger to remind him, and it was gone again.

Leaving him with that one image: Murtagh. Murtagh, teeth clenched and bared as he struck. Murtagh, running, coming to save him.

* * *

He became slowly aware again of where he was. There was a hand on his arm—Roger Mac, white-faced, but steady.

"I am going to see to them," Roger Mac said, with a brief nod toward the creek. "You're all right, yourself?"

"Aye, of course," he said, though with the feeling he so often had in waking from a dream—as though he were not in fact quite real.

Roger Mac nodded and turned to walk away. Then suddenly turned back, and laying his hand once more on Jamie's arm, said very quietly, *"Ego te absolvo."* Then turned again and went resolutely to tend the dying and bless the dead.

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AMANDA

FROM *L'Oignon–Intelligencer, May 15, 1776*

INDEPENDENCE!!

In the Wake of the famous Victory at Moore's Creek Bridge, the Fourth Provincial Congress of North Carolina has voted to adopt the Halifax Resolves. These Resolutions authorize Delegates to the Continental Congress to concur with the other Delegates of the other Colonies in declaring Independency and forming foreign Alliances, reserving to this Colony the sole and exclusive Right of forming a Constitution and Laws for this Colony, and by Passage of the Halifax Resolves, North Carolina thus becomes the first Colony officially to indorse Independency.

THE FIRST SHIP of a Fleet commanded by Sir Peter Parker has arrived at the Mouth of the Cape Fear River, upon the eighteenth of April. The Fleet consists of nine Ships in total, and is bringing British Troops to pacify and unite the Colony, by the Word of Governor Josiah Martin.

STOLEN: Goods amounting to twenty-six Pounds, ten Shillings and Fourpence in Total, abstracted from the Warehouse of Mr. Neil Forbes on Water Street. Thieves broke a Hole in the Back of the Warehouse during the Night of May twelfth, and carried the

Goods away by means of a Wagon. Two Men, one White, one Black, were seen driving a Wagon away with a Team of bay Mules. Any Word pertaining to this atrocious Crime will be generously Rewarded. Apply to W. Jones, in care of the Gull and Oyster on the Market Square.

BORN, to Captain Roger MacKenzie of Fraser's Ridge and his lady, a girl, on the twenty-first of April. Child and Mother are reported in good Health, the Child's name given as Amanda Claire Hope MacKenzie.

Roger had never felt so terrified as he did when his newborn daughter was placed in his arms for the first time. Minutes old, skin tender and perfect as an orchid's, she was so delicate he feared he would leave fingerprints on her—but so alluring that he had to touch her, drawing the back of his knuckle gently, so gently, down the perfect curve of her fat little cheek, stroking the black cobweb silk of her hair with an unbelieving forefinger.

"She looks like you." Brianna, sweaty, disheveled, deflated—and so beautiful he could scarcely bear to look at her—lay back against the pillows with a grin that came and went like the Cheshire Cat's—never entirely absent, even though it faded now and then from tiredness.

"Does she?" He studied the tiny face with complete absorption. Not for any sign of himself—only because he couldn't take his eyes off her.

He had come to know her intimately, through the months of being roused suddenly by pokes and kicks, of watching the liquid heave of Brianna's belly, of feeling the little one swell and retreat under his hands as he lay behind his wife, cupping her stomach and making jokes.

But he'd known her as Little Otto, the private name they'd used for the unborn child. Otto had had a distinct personality—and for a moment, he felt a ridiculous pang of loss, realizing that Otto was gone. This tiny, exquisite being was someone entirely new.

"Is she Marjorie, do you think?" Bree was lifting her head, peering at the blanket-wrapped bundle. They'd discussed names for months, making lists, arguing, making fun of each other's choices, choosing ridiculous things like Montgomery or Agatha. At last, tentatively, they'd decided that if it was a boy, the name might be Michael; if a girl, Marjorie, after Roger's mother.

His daughter opened her eyes quite suddenly and looked at him. Her eyes were slanted; he wondered if they would stay that way, like her mother's. A sort of soft, middle blue, like the sky in mid-morning—nothing remarkable, at a glance, but when you looked straight into it … vast, illimitable.

"No," he said softly, staring into those eyes. Could she see him yet? he wondered.

"No," he said again. "Her name's Amanda."

* * *

I hadn't said anything to begin with. It was a common thing in newborns—especially babies born a bit early, as Amanda had been—nothing to worry about.

The ductus arteriosus is a small blood vessel that in the fetus joins the aorta to the pulmonary artery. Babies have lungs, of course, but prior to birth don't use them; all their oxygen comes from the placenta, via the umbilical cord. Ergo, no need for blood to be circulated to the lungs, save to nourish the developing tissue—and so the ductus arteriosus bypasses the pulmonary circulation.

At birth, though, the baby takes its first breath, and oxygen sensors in this small vessel cause it to contract—and close permanently. With the ductus arteriosus closed, blood heads out from the heart to the lungs, picks up oxygen, and comes back to be pumped out to the rest of the body. A neat and elegant system—save that it doesn't always work properly.

The ductus arteriosus doesn't always close. If it doesn't, blood still does go to the lungs, of course—but the bypass is still there. Too much blood goes to the lungs, in some cases, and floods them. The lungs swell, become congested, and with diverted blood flow to the body, there are problems with oxygenation—which can become acute.

I moved my stethoscope over the tiny chest, ear pressed to it, listening intently. It was my best stethoscope, a model from the nineteenth century called a Pinard—a bell with a flattened disc at one end, to which I pressed my ear. I had one carved of wood; this one was made of pewter; Brianna had sand-cast it for me.

In fact, though, the murmur was so distinct that I felt as though I barely needed a stethoscope. Not a click or a misplaced beat, not a too-long pause or a leaky swish—there were any number of unusual sounds a heart could make, and auscultation was the first step of diagnosis. Atrial defects, ventral defects, malformed valves—all have specific murmurs, some occurring between beats, some blending with the heart sounds.

When the ductus arteriosus fails to close, it's said to be "patent"—open. A patent ductus arteriosus makes a continuous shushing murmur, soft, but audible with a little concentration, particularly in the supraclavicular and cervical regions.

For the hundredth time in two days, I bent close, ear pressed to the Pinard as I moved it over Amanda's neck and chest, hoping against hope that the sound would have disappeared.

It hadn't.

"Turn your head, lovey, yes, that's right.…" I breathed, delicately turning her head away from me, Pinard pressed to the side of her neck. It was hard to get the stethoscope close to her fat little neck … there. The murmur increased. Amanda made a little breathy noise that sounded like a giggle. I brought her head back the other way—the sound decreased.

"Oh, bloody hell," I said softly, so as not to scare her. I put down the Pinard and picked her up, cradling her against my shoulder. We were alone; Brianna had gone up to my room for a nap, and everyone else was out.

I carried her to the surgery window and looked out; it was a beautiful day in the mountain spring. The wrens were nesting under the eaves again; I could hear them above me, rustling round with sticks, conversing in small, clear chirps.

"Bird," I said, my lips close to her tiny seashell of an ear. "Noisy bird." She squirmed lazily, and farted in reply.

"Right," I said, smiling despite myself. I held her out a little, so I could look into her face—lovely, perfect—but not as fat as it had been when she was born a week before.

It was perfectly normal for babies to lose a little weight at first, I told myself. It was.

A patent ductus arteriosus may have no symptoms, beyond that odd, continuous murmur. But it may. A bad one deprives the child of needed oxygen; the main symptoms are pulmonary—wheezing; rapid, shallow breathing; bad color—and failure to thrive, because of the energy burned up in the effort to get enough oxygen.

"Just let Grannie have a little listen again," I said, laying her down on the quilt I'd spread over the surgery table. She gurgled and kicked as I picked up the Pinard and placed it on her chest again, moving it over neck, shoulder, arm …

"Oh, Jesus," I whispered, closing my eyes. "Don't let it be bad." But the sound of the murmur seemed to grow louder, drowning my prayers.

I opened my eyes to see Brianna, standing in the doorway.

* * *

"I knew there was *something* wrong," she said steadily, wiping Mandy's bottom with a damp rag before rediapering her. "She doesn't nurse like Jemmy did. She acts hungry, but she'll only nurse for a few minutes before she falls asleep. Then she wakes up and fusses again a few minutes later."

She sat down and offered Mandy a breast, as though in illustration of the difficulty. Sure enough, the baby latched on with every evidence of starvation. As she nursed, I picked up one of the tiny fists, unfolding her fingers. The minute nails were faintly tinged with blue.

"So," Brianna said calmly, "what happens now?"

"I don't know." This was the usual answer in most cases, truth be told—but it was always unsatisfactory, and clearly not less so now. "Sometimes there are no symptoms, or only very minor ones," I said, trying for amendment. “If the opening is very large, and you have pulmonary symptoms—and we have—then … she *might* be all right, only not thriving—not growing properly, because of the feeding difficulties. Or”—I took a deep breath, steeling myself—“she could develop heart failure. Or pulmonary hypertension—that’s a very high blood pressure in the lungs—”

“I know what it is,” Bree said, her voice tight. “Or?”

“Or infective endocarditis. Or—not.”

“Will she die?” she asked bluntly, looking up at me. Her jaw was set, but I saw the way she held Amanda closer, waiting for an answer. I could give her nothing but the truth.

“Probably.” The word hung in the air between us, hideous.

“I can’t say for sure, but—”

“Probably,” Brianna echoed, and I nodded, turning away, unable to look at her face. Without such modern assistances as an echocardiogram, I of course couldn’t judge the extent of the problem. But I had not only the evidence of my eyes and ears, but what I had felt passing from her skin to mine—that sense of not-rightness, that eerie conviction that comes now and then.

“Can you fix it?” I heard the tremor in Brianna’s voice, and went at once to put my arms around her. Her head was bent over Amanda, and I saw the tears fall, one, then another, darkening the wispy curls on top of the baby’s head.

“No,” I whispered, holding them both. Despair washed over me, but I tightened my hold, as though I could keep time and blood both at bay. “No, I can’t.”

* * *

“Well, there’s no choice, is there?” Roger felt preternaturally calm, recognizing it as the artificial calm produced by shock but wishing to cling to it as long as possible. “You’ve got to go.”

Brianna leveled a look at him, but didn’t reply. Her hand roamed over the baby, sleeping in her lap, smoothing the woolly blanket over and over again.

Claire had explained it all to him, more than once, patiently, seeing that he could not take it in. He still did not believe it—but the sight of those tiny fingernails, turning blue as Amanda strove to suck, had sunk into him like an owl's talons.

It was, she had said, a simple operation—in a modern operating room.

"You can't …?" he'd asked, with a vague motion toward her surgery. "With the ether?"

She'd closed her eyes and shaken her head, looking nearly as ill as he felt.

"No. I can do very simple things—hernias, appendixes, tonsils—and even those are a risk. But something so invasive, on such a tiny body … no," she repeated, and he saw resignation in her face when she met his eyes. "No. If she's to live—you have to take her back."

And so they had begun to discuss the unthinkable. Because there *were* choices—and decisions to be made. But the unalterable basic fact was clear. Amanda must go through the stones—if she could.

* * *

Jamie Fraser took his father's ruby ring, and held it over the face of his granddaughter. Amanda's eyes fixed on it at once, and she stuck out her tongue with interest. He smiled, despite the heaviness of his heart, and lowered the ring for her to grab at.

"She likes that well enough," he said, skillfully removing it from her grip before she could get it into her mouth. "Let's try the other."

The other was Claire's amulet—the tiny, battered leather pouch given to her by an Indian wisewoman years before. It contained assorted bits and bobs, herbs, he thought, and feathers, perhaps the tiny bones of a bat. But in among them was a lump of stone—nothing much to look at, but a true gemstone, a raw sapphire.

Amanda turned her head at once, more interested in the pouch than she had been in the shiny ring. She made cooing noises and batted wildly with both hands, trying to reach it.

Brianna took a deep, half-strangled breath.

"Maybe," she said, in the voice of one who fears as much as hopes. "But we can't tell for sure. What if I—take her, and I go through, but she can't?"

They all looked at one another in silence, envisioning the possibility.

"You'd come back," Roger said gruffly, and put a hand on Bree's shoulder. "You'd come right back."

The tension in her body eased a little at his touch. "I'd try," she said, and attempted a smile.

Jamie cleared his throat.

"Is wee Jem about?"

Of course he was; he never went far from home or Brianna these days, seeming to sense that something was wrong. He was retrieved from Jamie's study, where he had been spelling out words in—

"Jesus Christ on a piece of toast!" his grandmother blurted, snatching the book from him. "Jamie! How *could* you?"

Jamie felt a deep blush rise over him. How could he, indeed? He'd taken the battered copy of *Fanny Hill* in trade, part of a parcel of used books bought from a tinker. He hadn't looked at the books before buying them, and when he did come to look them over … Well, it was quite against his instincts to throw away a book—any book.

"What's P-H-A-L-L-U-S?" Jemmy was asking his father.

"Another word for prick," Roger said briefly. "Don't bloody use it. Listen—can ye hear anything, when ye listen to that stone?" He indicated Jamie's ring lying on the table. Jem's face lighted at sight of it.

"Sure," he said.

"What, from there?" Brianna said, incredulous. Jem looked around the circle of parents and grandparents, surprised at their interest. "Sure," he repeated. "It sings."

"Do ye think wee Mandy can hear it sing, too?" Jamie asked carefully. His heart was beating heavily, afraid to know, either way.

Jemmy picked up the ring and leaned over Mandy's basket, holding it directly over her face. She kicked energetically and made noises—but whether because of the ring, or merely at the sight of her brother …

"She can hear it," Jem said, smiling into his sister's face.

"How do you know?" Claire asked, curious. Jem looked up at her, surprised.

"She says so."

* * *

Nothing was settled. At the same time, everything was settled. I was in no doubt as to what my ears and my fingers told me—Amanda's condition was slowly worsening. Very slowly—it might take a year, two years, before serious damage began to show—but it was coming.

Jem might be right; he might not be. But we had to proceed on the assumption that he was.

There were arguments, discussions—tears. Not yet any decision as to who should attempt the journey through the stones. Brianna and Amanda must go; that was certain. But ought Roger to go with them? Or Jemmy?

"I will not let you go without me," Roger said through his teeth.

"I don't *want* to go without you!" Bree cried, looking exasperated. "But how can we leave Jemmy here, without us? And how can we make him go? A baby—we think that can work, because of the legends, but Jem—how will he make it? We can't let him risk being killed!"

I looked at the stones on the table—Jamie's ring, my pouch with the sapphire.

"I think," I said carefully, "that we need to find two more stones. Just in case."

And so, in late June, we came down from the mountain, into turmoil.

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PART TWELVE

Time Will Not Be Ours Forever

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NOSEPICKER

July 4, 1776

It was close and hot in the Inn room, but I couldn't go out; little Amanda had finally fussed herself to sleep—she had a rash on her bottom, poor thing—and was curled in her basket, tiny thumb in her mouth and a frown on her face.

I unfolded the gauze mosquito netting and draped it carefully over the basket, then opened the window. The air outside was hot, too, but fresh, and moving. I pulled off my cap—without it, Mandy was fond of clutching my hair in both her hands and yanking; she had an amazing amount of strength, for a child with a heart defect. For the millionth time, I wondered whether I could have been wrong.

But I wasn't. She was asleep now, with the delicate rose bloom of a healthy baby on her cheeks; awake and kicking, that soft flush faded, and an equally beautiful but unearthly blue tinge showed now and then in her lips, in the beds of her tiny nails. She was still lively—but tiny. Bree and Roger were both large people; Jemmy had put on weight like a small hippopotamus through his first several years of life. Mandy weighed scarcely more than she had at birth.

No, I wasn't wrong. I moved her basket to the table, where the warm breeze could play over her, and sat down beside it, laying my fingers gently on her chest.

I could feel it. Just as I had in the beginning, but stronger now that I knew what it was. If I had had a proper operating suite, the blood transfusions, the calibrated and carefully administered anesthesia, the oxygen mask, the swift, trained nurses … No surgery on the heart is a minor thing, and surgery on an infant is always a great risk—but I could have done it. Could feel in the tips of my fingers exactly what needed to be done, could see in the back of my eyes the heart, smaller than my fist, the slippery, pumping, rubbery muscle and the blood washing through the ductus arteriosus, a small vessel, no bigger than an eighth of an inch in circumference. A small nick in the axillary vessel, a quick ligation of the ductus itself with a number-8 silk ligature. Done.

I knew. But knowledge is not, alas, always power. Nor is desire. It wouldn't be me who would save this precious granddaughter.

Would anyone? I wondered, giving way momentarily to the dark thoughts I fought to keep at bay when anyone else was near. Jemmy might not be right. Any baby might grab at a brightly colored shiny thing like a ruby ring—but then I remembered her cooing, batting at my decrepit leather amulet pouch with the raw sapphire inside.

Perhaps. I didn't want to think about the dangers of the passage—or the certainty of permanent separation, no matter whether the journey through the stones was successful or not.

There were noises outside; I looked toward the harbor, and saw the masts of a large ship, far out to sea. Another, still farther out. My heart skipped a beat.

They were oceangoing ships, not the little packet boats and fishing smacks that sailed up and down the coast. Could they be part of the fleet, sent in answer to Governor Martin's plea for help to suppress, subdue, and reclaim the colony? The first ship of that fleet had arrived at Cape Fear in late April—but the troops it carried had been lying low, waiting for the rest.

I watched for some time, but the ships didn't come in closer. Perhaps they were hanging off, waiting for the rest of the fleet? Perhaps they weren't British ships at all, but Americans, escaping the British blockade of New England by sailing south.

I was distracted from my thoughts by the clumping of male feet on the stairs, accompanied by snorts and that peculiarly Scottish sort of giggling usually depicted in print—but by no means adequately—as "Heuch, heuch, heuch!"

It was clearly Jamie and Ian, though I couldn't understand what was giving rise to so much hilarity, since when last seen they had been bound for the docks, charged with dispatching a shipment of tobacco leaves, obtaining pepper, salt, sugar, cinnamon—if findable—and pins—somewhat rarer than cinnamon—for Mrs. Bug, and procuring a large fish of some edible sort for our supper.

They'd got the fish, at least: a large king mackerel. Jamie was carrying it by the tail, whatever it had been wrapped in having evidently been lost in some accident. His queue had come undone, so that long red strands frayed out over the shoulder of his coat, which in turn had a sleeve half wrenched off, a fold of white shirt protruding through the torn seam. He was covered with dust, as was the fish, and while the latter's eyes both bulged accusingly, one of his own was swollen nearly shut.

"Oh, God," I said, burying my face in one hand. I looked up at him through splayed fingers. "Don't tell me. Neil Forbes?"

"Ach, no," he said, dropping the fish with a splat on the table in front of me. "A wee difference of opinion wi' the Wilmington Chowder and Marching Society."

"A difference of opinion," I repeated.

"Aye, they thought they'd throw us in the harbor, and we thought they wouldn't." He slung a chair round with his boot and sat down on it backward, arms crossed on its back. He looked indecently cheerful, face flushed with sun and laughter.

"I don't want to know," I said, though of course I did. I glanced at Ian, who was still sniggering quietly to himself, and observed that while he was slightly less battered than Jamie, he had one forefinger lodged in his nose up to the knuckle.

"Have you got a bloody nose, Ian?"

He shook his head, still giggling. "No, Auntie. Some o' the Society do, though."

"Well, why have you got your finger up your nose, then? Have you picked up a tick or something?"

"No, he's keepin' his brains from falling out," Jamie said, and went off into another fit. I glanced at the basket, but Mandy slept peacefully on, quite used to racket.

"Well, maybe you'd best stick both your own fingers up your nose, then," I suggested. "Keep you out of trouble for a moment or two, at least." I tilted up Jamie's chin to get a better look at the eye. "You hit someone with that fish, didn't you?"

The giggling had died down to a subterranean vibration between them, but threatened at this to break out anew.

"Gilbert Butler," Jamie said with a masterful effort at self-control. "Smack across the face. Sent him straight across the quay and into the water."

Ian's shoulders shook with remembered ecstasy.

"Bride, what a splash! Oh, it was a braw fight, Auntie! I thought I'd broke my hand on a fellow's jaw, but it's all right now the deadness has worn off. Just a bit numb and tingly." He wiggled the free fingers of his hand at me in illustration, wincing only slightly as he did so.

"Do take your finger out of your nose, Ian," I said, anxiety over their condition fading into annoyance at how they'd got that way. "You look like a half-wit."

For some reason, they both found that hysterically funny and laughed like loons. Ian did, however, eventually withdraw the finger, with an expression of wary cautiousness, as though he truly expected his brains to follow in its wake. Nothing did emerge, though, not even the ordinary bits of unsavory excreta one might expect from such a maneuver.

Ian looked puzzled, then mildly alarmed. He sniffed, prodding experimentally at his nose, then stuck the finger back into his nostril, rooting vigorously.

Jamie went on grinning, but his amusement began to fade as Ian's explorations became more frantic.

"What? Ye've not lost it, have ye, lad?"

Ian shook his head, frowning.

"Nay, I feel it. It's …" He stopped, giving Jamie a panic-stricken look over the embedded finger. "It's stuck, Uncle Jamie! I canna get it out!"

Jamie was on his feet at once. He pulled the finger from its resting-place with a moist, sucking noise, then tilted back Ian's head, peering urgently up his nose with his one good eye.

"Bring a light, Sassenach, will ye?"

There was a candlestick on the table, but I knew from experience that the only likely effect of using a candle to look up someone's nose was to set their nose hairs on fire. Instead, I bent and pulled my medical kit out from under the settle where I had stowed it.

"I'll get it," I said, with the confidence of one who has removed everything from cherry pits to live insects from the nasal cavities of small children. I drew out my longest pair of thin forceps, and clicked the slender blades together in token of assurance. "Whatever it is. Just keep quite still, Ian."

The whites of Ian's eyes showed briefly in alarm as he looked at the shining metal of the forceps, and he looked pleadingly at Jamie.

"Wait. I've a better idea." Jamie laid a quelling hand on my arm for an instant, then disappeared out the door. He thundered downstairs, and I heard a sudden burst of laughter from below, as the door to the taproom opened. The sound was as suddenly cut off as the door closed, like the valve on a faucet.

"Are you all right, Ian?" There was a smear of red on his upper lip; his nose *was* beginning to bleed, aggravated by his jabbings and pokings.

"Well, I do hope so, Auntie." His original jubilation was beginning to be replaced by a certain expression of worry. "Ye dinna think I can have pushed it into my brain, do ye?"

"I think it very unlikely. What on earth—"

But the door below had opened and closed again, spilling another brief spurt of talk and laughter into the stairwell. Jamie took the stairs two at a time and popped back into the room, smelling of hot bread and ale, and holding a small, battered snuffbox in his hand.

Ian seized on this with gratitude and, sprinkling a quick pinch of black, dusty grains on the back of his hand, hastily inhaled it.

For an instant, all three of us held breathless—and then it came, a sneeze of gargantuan proportions that rocked Ian's body back on its stool, even as his head flew forward—and a small, hard object struck the table with a *ping!* and bounced off into the hearth.

Ian went on sneezing, in a fusillade of hapless snorts and explosions, but Jamie and I were both on our knees, scrabbling in the ashes, heedless of filth.

"I've got it! I think," I added, sitting back on my heels and peering at the handful of ashes I held, in the midst of which was a small, round, dust-covered object.

"Aye, that's it." Jamie seized my neglected forceps from the table, plucked the object delicately from my hand, and dropped it into my glass of water. A delicate plume of ash and soot floated up through the water to form a dusty gray film on the surface. Below, the object glittered up at us, serene and glowing, its beauty at last revealed. A faceted clear stone, the color of golden sherry, half the size of my thumbnail.

"Chrysoberyl," Jamie said softly, a hand on my back. He looked at Mandy's basket, the silky black curls lifting gently in the breeze. "D'ye think it will serve?"

Ian, still wheezing and watery-eyed, and with a red-stained handkerchief pressed to his much-abused proboscis, came to look over my other shoulder.

"Half-wit, is it?" he said in tones of deep satisfaction. "Ha!"

"Wherever did you get that? Or rather," I corrected myself, "who did you steal it from?"

"Neil Forbes." Jamie picked the gem up, turning it gently over in his fingers. "There were a good deal more o' the Chowder Society than there were of us, so we ran down the street and round the corner, down between the warehouses there."

"I kent Forbes's place, aye, because I'd been there before," Ian put in. One of Mandy's feet was sticking up out of the basket; he touched the sole of it with a fingertip, and smiled to see her toes extend in reflex. "There was a great hole in the back where someone had broken down the wall, just covered over with a sheet of canvas, nailed over it, like. So we pulled it loose and ducked inside."

Where they had found themselves standing next to the small enclosed space Forbes used for an office—and for the moment, deserted.

"It was sitting in a bittie wee box on the desk," Ian said, coming to look proprietorially at the chrysoberyl. "Just sitting there! I'd just picked it up to look at, when we hear the watchman coming. So—" He shrugged and smiled at me, happiness momentarily transforming his homely features.

"And you think the watchman won't tell him you were there?" I asked skeptically. The two of them could scarcely be more conspicuous.

"Oh, I imagine he will." Jamie bent over Mandy's basket, holding the chrysoberyl between thumb and forefinger. "Look what Grandda and Uncle Ian have brought ye, *a muirninn,*" he said softly.

"We decided that it was a small enough ransom to pay for what he did to Brianna," Ian said, sobering somewhat. "I expect Mr. Forbes may feel it reasonable, too. And if not—" He smiled again, though not with happiness, and put his hand to his knife. "He's got another ear, after all."

Very slowly, a tiny fist rose through the netting, fingers flexing as they grasped at the stone.

"Is she still asleep?" I whispered. Jamie nodded, and gently withdrew the stone.

On the far side of the table, the fish stared austerely at the ceiling, ignoring everything.

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THE NINTH EARL OF ELLESMERE

July 9, 1776

“The water won’t be cold.”

She’d spoken automatically, without thinking.

“I shouldn’t think that will matter much.” A nerve jumped in Roger’s cheek, and he turned away abruptly. She reached out, touching him delicately, as though he were a bomb that might explode if jarred. He glanced at her, hesitated, then took the hand she offered him, with a small, crooked smile.

“Sorry,” he said.

“I’m sorry, too,” she said softly. They stood close together, fingers knotted, watching the tide recede across the narrow beach, a fraction of an inch uncovered with each lap of the tiny waves.

The flats were gray and bleak in the evening light, pebble-strewn and rust-stained from the peaty waters of the river. With the tide going out, the harbor water was brown and feculent, the stain reaching past the ships at anchor, nearly to the open sea. When it turned, the clear gray water of the ocean would flow in, sweeping up the Cape Fear, obliterating the mudflats and everything on them.

“Over there,” she said, still softly, though there was no one near enough to hear them. She tilted her head, indicating a group of weathered mooring posts driven deep into the mud. A skiff was tied to one; two of the pirettas, the four-oared “dragonflies” that plied the harbor, to another.

“You’re sure?” He shifted his weight, glancing up and down the shore.

The narrow beach fell away into cold pebbles, exposed and gleaming with the leaving of the tide. Small crabs skittered hastily among them, not to waste a moment’s gleaning.

“I’m sure. People in the Blue Boar were talking about it. A traveler asked where, and Mrs. Smoots said it was the old mooring posts, near the warehouses.” A torn flounder lay dead among the rocks, white flesh washed clean and bloodless. The small busy claws picked and shredded, tiny maws gaped and gulped, pinching at morsels. She felt her gorge rise at the sight, and swallowed hard. It wouldn’t matter what came after; she knew that. But still …

Roger nodded absently. His eyes narrowed against the harbor wind, calculating distances.

“There’ll be quite a crowd, I expect.”

There already was one; the turn of the tide wouldn’t be for an hour or more, but people were drifting down to the harbor in twos and threes and fours, standing in the lee of the chandlery to smoke their pipes, sitting on the barrels of salt fish to talk and gesture. Mrs. Smoots had been right; several were pointing out the mooring posts to their less knowledgeable companions.

Roger shook his head.

“It’ll have to be from that side; the best view is from there.” He nodded across the inner arc of the harbor toward the three ships that rocked at the main quay. “From one of the ships? What do you think?”

Brianna fumbled in the pocket tied at her waist, and pulled out her small brass telescope. She frowned in concentration, lips pursed as she surveyed the ships—a fishing ketch, Mr. Chester’s brig, and a larger ship, part of the British fleet, that had come in in the early afternoon.

“Whoa, Nellie,” she murmured, arresting the sweep of her gaze as the pale blotch of a head filled the lens. “Is that who I think … hot dog, it is!” A tiny flame of delight flared in her bosom, warming her.

“Is who?” Roger squinted, straining to see unaided.

“It’s John! Lord John!”

“Lord John Grey? You’re sure?”

“Yes! On the brig—he must have come down from Virginia. Woops, he’s gone now—but he’s there, I saw him!” She turned to Roger, excited, folding her telescope as she gripped him by the arm.

“Come on! Let’s go and find him. He’ll help.”

Roger followed, though with considerably less enthusiasm.

“You’re going to tell him? Do you think that’s wise?”

“No, but it doesn’t matter. He knows me.”

Roger looked sharply at her, but the dark look on his face thawed into a reluctant smile.

“You mean he knows better than to try stopping you doing whatever you’ve made up your bloody-minded mind to do?”

She smiled back at him, thanking him with her eyes. He didn’t like it—in fact, he hated it, and she didn’t blame him—but he wouldn’t try to stop her, either. He knew her, too.

“Yes. Come on, before he disappears!”

It was a slow slog round the curve of the harbor, pushing through the knots of gathering sightseers. Outside The Breakers, the crowd grew abruptly thicker. A cluster of red-coated soldiers stood and sat in disarray on the pavement, seabags and chests scattered round them, their number too great to fit inside the tavern. Ale pots and pints of cider were being passed from hand to hand from the interior of the public house, slopping freely on the heads of those over whom they passed.

A sergeant, harrassed but competent, was leaning against the timbered wall of the inn, riffling through a sheaf of papers, issuing orders and eating a meat pie, simultaneously. Brianna wrinkled her nose as they stepped carefully through the obstacle course of scattered men and luggage; a reek of seasickness and unclean flesh rose from the serried ranks.

A few onlookers muttered under their breath at sight of the soldiers; several more cheered and waved as they passed, to receive genial shouts in return. Newly liberated from the bowels of the *Scorpion,* the soldiers were too thrilled with their freedom and the taste of fresh food and drink to care who did or said anything whatever.

Roger stepped in front of her, thrusting a way through the crowd with shoulders and elbows. Appreciative shouts and whistles rose from the soldiers as they saw her, but she kept her head down, eyes fixed on Roger's feet as he shoved ahead.

She heaved a sigh of relief as they emerged from the press at the head of the quay. The soldiers' equipment was being unloaded from the *Scorpion* at the far side of the dock, but there was little foot traffic near the brig. She paused, looking to and fro for a glimpse of Lord John's distinctive fair head.

"There he is!" Roger tugged at her arm, and she swung in the direction he was pointing, only to collide heavily with him as he stepped abruptly back.

"What—" she began crossly, but then stopped, feeling as though she had been punched in the chest.

"Who in God's holy name is *that*?" Roger spoke softly, echoing her thoughts.

Lord John Grey stood near the far end of the quay, in animated conversation with one of the red-coated soldiers. An officer; gold braid gleamed on his shoulder and he carried a laced tricorne beneath one arm. It wasn't the man's uniform that caught her attention, though.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," she whispered, feeling numb around the lips.

He was tall—very tall—with a breadth of shoulder and a stretch of white-stockinged calf that were attracting admiring glances from a cluster of oyster girls. It was something more than height or build that made gooseflesh ripple down the length of her spine, though; it was the fact of his carriage, his outline, a cock of the head and an air of physical self-confidence that drew eyes like a magnet.

"It's Da," she said, knowing even as she spoke that this was ridiculous. Even had Jamie Fraser for some unimaginable reason chosen to disguise himself in a soldier's uniform and come down to the docks, this man was different. As he turned to look at something across the harbor, she saw that he *was* different—lean, like her father, and muscular, but still with the slenderness of boyishness. Graceful—like Jamie—but with the slight hesitancy of teenaged awkwardness not long past.

He turned further, backlit by the glow of light off the water, and she felt her knees go weak. A long, straight nose, rising to a high forehead … the sudden curve of a broad Viking cheekbone … Roger gripped her tightly by the arm, but his attention was as riveted on the young man as hers was.

"I … will … be … damned," he said.

She gulped air, trying to get enough breath.

"You and me both. *And* him."

"Him?"

"Him, him, *and* him!" Lord John, the mysterious young soldier—and most of all, her father. "Come on." She pulled free and strode down the quay, feeling oddly disembodied, as though she watched herself from a distance.

It was like watching herself come toward a fun-house mirror, seeing herself—her face, her height, her gestures—suddenly transposed inside a red coat and doeskin breeches. His hair was dark, chestnut-brown, not red, but it was thick like hers, with the same slight wave to it, the same cowlick that lifted it off his brow.

Lord John turned his head slightly, and caught sight of her. His eyes bulged and a look of absolute horror blanched his features. He made a feeble flapping motion with one hand, trying to stop her coming nearer, but he might as well have tried to stop the Cornish Express.

"Hello there!" she said brightly. "Fancy meeting *you* here, Lord John!"

Lord John made a faint quacking noise, like a stepped-on duck, but she wasn't paying attention. The young man turned to face her, smiling cordially.

Holy God, he had her father's eyes, too. Dark-lashed, and so young the skin near them was fresh and clear, completely unlined—but the same slanted blue Fraser cat eyes. Just like hers.

Her heart was hammering so hard in her chest she was sure they could hear it. The young man seemed to find nothing amiss, though; he bowed to her, smiling, but very correct.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said. He glanced at Lord John, plainly expecting an introduction.

Lord John pulled himself together with an obvious effort, and made her a leg.

"My dear. How … delightful to encounter you again. I had no idea.…"

Yeah, I bet you didn't, she thought, but went on smiling pleasantly. She could feel Roger beside her, nodding and saying something in response to his Lordship's greeting, trying his best not to stare.

"My son," Lord John was saying. "William, Lord Ellesmere." He eyed her narrowly, as though daring her to say anything. "Might I present Mr. Roger MacKenzie, William? And his wife."

"Sir. Mrs. MacKenzie." The young man took her hand before she realized what he meant to do, and bowed low over it, planting a small formal kiss upon her knuckles.

She nearly gasped at the unexpected touch of his breath on her skin, but instead gripped his hand, much harder than she'd meant to. He looked momentarily disconcerted, but extricated himself with reasonable grace. He was much younger than she'd thought at first glance; it was the uniform and the air of self-possession that made him seem older. He was looking at her with a slight frown on his clear-cut features, as though trying to place her.

"I think …" he began, hesitant. "Have we met, Mrs. MacKenzie?"

"No," she said, astonished to hear her voice emerge sounding normal. "No, I'm afraid not. I would have remembered." She darted a daggerlike glance at Lord John, who had gone slightly green around the gills.

Lord John had been a soldier, too, though. He pulled himself together with a visible effort, putting a hand on William's arm.

"You'd best go and see to your men, William," he said. "Shall we dine together later?"

“I am engaged to the Colonel for supper, Father,” William said. “But I am sure he would not object, was you to join us. It may be quite late, though,” he added. “I understand there is to be an execution in the morning, and my troops are asked to be at the ready, in case of disturbance in the town. It will take some time to settle and organize everything.”

“Disturbance.” Lord John was eyeing her over William’s shoulder. “Is a disturbance expected, then?”

William shrugged.

“I cannot say, Papa. Apparently it is not a political matter, though, but only a pirate. I shouldn’t think there would be any trouble.”

“These days everything is a political matter, Willie,” his father said, rather sharply. “Never forget that. And it’s always wiser to expect trouble than to meet it unprepared.”

The young man flushed slightly, but kept his countenance.

“Quite,” he said in clipped tones. “I am sure you have a familiarity with the local conditions which I lack. I am obliged to you for your advice, Father.” He relaxed slightly, and turned to bow to Brianna.

“Pleased to have your acquaintance, Mrs. MacKenzie. Your servant, sir.” He nodded to Roger, turned, and strode off down the quay, adjusting his tricorne to the proper angle of authority.

Brianna inhaled deeply, hoping that by the time she let her breath out, she would have words to go with it. Lord John beat her to it.

“Yes,” he said simply. “Of course he is.”

Amid the logjam of thoughts, reactions, and emotions that clogged her brain, she seized on the one that seemed momentarily most important.

“Does my mother know?”

“Does Jamie know?” Roger asked at the same instant. She looked at him in surprise, and he raised one eyebrow at her. Yes, a man could certainly father a child without realizing it. He had.

Lord John sighed. With William’s departure, he had relaxed somewhat, and the natural color was coming back to his face. He had been a soldier long enough to recognize the inevitable when he saw it.

"They both know, yes."

"How old is he?" Roger asked abruptly. Lord John shot him a sharp glance.

"Eighteen. And to save your counting backward, it was 1758. In a place called Helwater, in the Lake District."

Brianna took another breath, finding this one came a little easier.

"Okay. So it—he—it was before my mother … came back."

"Yes. From France, supposedly. Where, I gather, you were born and raised." He gave her a gimlet look; he knew she spoke no more than bastard French.

She could feel the blood rushing to her face.

"This is no time for secrets," she said. "If you want to know about my mother and me, I'll tell you—but *you're* going to tell me about *him.*" She jerked her head angrily backward, toward the tavern. "About my brother!"

Lord John pursed his lips, regarding her through narrowed eyes as he thought. Finally he nodded.

"I see no help for it. One thing, though—are your parents here, in Wilmington?"

"Yes. In fact …" She looked upward, trying to make out the position of the sun through the thin coastal haze. It hung just above the horizon, a disc of burning gold. "We were going to meet them for supper."

"Here?"

"Yes."

Lord John swung round to Roger.

"Mr. MacKenzie. You will very much oblige me, sir, if you will go at once to find your father-in-law, and apprise him of the presence of the ninth Earl of Ellesmere. Tell him that I trust his good judgment will dictate an immediate removal from Wilmington upon receipt of this news."

Roger stared at him for a moment, brows quirked in interest.

"The Earl of Ellesmere? How the hell did he manage that?"

Lord John had recovered all his natural color, and a bit more. He was distinctly pink in the face.

"Never mind! Will you go? Jamie must leave the town, at once, before they meet by inadvertence—or before someone sees the two of them separately and begins to speculate aloud."

"I doubt Jamie will leave," Roger said, looking at Lord John with a certain degree of speculation himself. "Not before tomorrow, in any case."

"Why not?" Lord John demanded, looking from one to the other. "Why are you all here in the first place? It isn't the exe—oh, good Lord, don't tell me." He clapped a hand to his face, and dragged it slowly down, glaring through his fingers with the expression of a man tried beyond bearing.

Brianna bit her lower lip. When she spotted Lord John, she had been not only pleased but relieved of a small bit of her burden of worry, counting on him to help in her plan. With this new complication, though, she felt torn in two, unable to cope with either situation, or even to think about them coherently. She looked over at Roger, seeking advice.

He met her eyes in one of those long, unspoken marital exchanges. Then he nodded, making the decision for her.

"I'll go find Jamie. You have a bit of a chat with his Lordship, eh?"

He bent and kissed her, hard, then turned and strode away down the dock, walking in a way that made people draw unconsciously aside, avoiding the touch of his garments.

Lord John had closed his eyes, and appeared to be praying—presumably for strength. She gripped him by the arm and his eyes sprang open, startled as though he had been bitten by a horse.

"Is it as striking as I think?" she said. "Him and me?" The word felt funny on her tongue. *Him.*

Lord John looked at her, fair brow furrowed in troubled concentration as he searched her face, feature by feature.

"I think so," he said slowly. "To me, certainly. To a casual observer, perhaps much less so. There is the difference of coloring, to be sure, and of sex; his uniform … but, my dear, you know that your own appearance is so striking—" So freakish, he meant. She sighed, taking his meaning.

"People stare at me anyway," she finished for him. She pulled down the brim of her hat, drawing it far enough forward to hide not only hair but face, as well, and glowered at him from its shadow. "Then we'd better go where no one who knows him will see me, hadn't we?"

* * *

The quay and the market streets were thronged. Every public house in town—and not a few private ones—would soon be full of quartered soldiers. Her father and Jem were with Alexander Lillington, her mother and Mandy at Dr. Fentiman's, both places centers of business and gossip, and she had declared that she possessed no intention of going near either parent in any case—not until she knew all there was to know. Lord John thought that might be rather more than he was himself prepared to tell her, but this was not a time for quibbles.

Still, the exigencies of privacy left them a choice of graveyard or the deserted racetrack, and Brianna said—a marked edge in her voice—that under the circumstances, she wanted no heavy-handed reminders of mortality.

"These mortal circumstances," he said carefully, leading her around a large puddle. "You refer to tomorrow's execution? It *is* Stephen Bonnet, I collect?"

"Yes," she said, distracted. "That can wait, though. You aren't engaged for supper, are you?"

"No. But—"

"William," she said, eyes on her shoes as they paced slowly round the sandy oval. "William, ninth Earl of Ellesmere, you said?"

"William Clarence Henry George," Lord John agreed. "Viscount Ashness, Master of Helwater, Baron Derwent, and, yes, ninth Earl of Ellesmere."

She pursed her lips.

"Which would sort of indicate that the world at large thinks his father is somebody else. Not Jamie Fraser, I mean."

“*Was* somebody else,” he corrected. “One Ludovic, eighth Earl of Ellesmere, to be precise. I understand that the eighth earl unfortunately died on the day his … er … his heir was born.”

“Died of what? Shock?” She was clearly in a dangerous mood; he was interested to note both her father’s manner of controlled ferocity and her mother’s sharp tongue at work—the combination was both fascinating and alarming. He hadn’t any intention of allowing her to run this interview on her own terms, though.

“Gunshot,” he said with affected cheerfulness. “Your father shot him.”

She made a small choking noise and stopped dead.

“That is not, by the way, common knowledge,” he said, affecting not to notice her reaction. “The coroner’s court returned a verdict of death by misadventure—which was not incorrect, I believe.”

“Not incorrect,” she murmured, sounding a trifle dazed. “I guess being shot is pretty misadventurous, all right.”

“Of course there was talk,” he said, offhanded, taking her arm and urging her forward again. “But the only witness, aside from William’s grandparents, was an Irish coachman, who was rather quickly pensioned off to County Sligo, following the incident. The child’s mother having also died that day, gossip was inclined to consider his lordship’s death as—”

“His mother’s dead, too?” She didn’t stop this time, but turned to give him a penetrating glance from those deep blue eyes. Lord John had had sufficient practice in withstanding Fraser cat looks, though, and was not discomposed.

“Her name was Geneva Dunsany. She died shortly after William’s birth—of an entirely natural hemorrhage,” he assured her.

“Entirely natural,” she muttered, half under her breath. She shot him another look. “This Geneva—she was married to the earl? When she and Da …” The words seemed to stick in her throat; he could see doubt and repugnance struggling with her memories of William’s undeniable face—and her knowledge of her father’s character.

“He has not told me, and I would in no circumstance ask him,” he said firmly. She gave him another of those looks, which he returned with interest. “Whatever the nature of Jamie’s relations with Geneva Dunsany, I cannot conceive of his committing an act of such dishonor as to deceive another man in his marriage.”

She relaxed fractionally, though her grip on his arm remained.

“Neither can I,” she said, rather grudgingly. “But—” Her lips compressed, relaxed. “Was he in love with her, do you think?” she blurted.

What startled him was not the question, but the realization that it had never once occurred to him to ask it—certainly not of Jamie, but not even of himself. Why not? he wondered. He had no right to jealousy, and if he was fool enough to suffer it, it would have been considerably *ex post facto* in the case of Geneva Dunsany; he had had no inkling of William’s origins until several years after the girl’s death.

“I have no idea,” he said shortly.

Brianna’s fingers drummed restlessly on his arm; she would have pulled free, but he put a hand on hers to still her.

“Damn,” she muttered, but ceased fidgeting, and walked on, matching the length of his shorter stride. Weeds had sprung up in the oval, were sprouting through the sand of the track. She kicked at a clump of wild rye grass, sending a spray of dry seeds flying.

“If they were in love, why didn’t he marry her?” she asked at last.

He laughed, in sheer incredulity at the notion.

“Marry her! My dear girl, he was the family groom!”

A look of puzzlement flashed in her eye—he would have sworn that if she had spoken, the word would have been *“So?”*

“Where in the name of God were you raised?” he demanded, stopping dead.

He could see things moving in her eyes; she had Jamie’s trick of keeping her face a mask, but her mother’s transparency still shone from within. He saw the decision in her eyes, a moment before the slow smile touched her lips.

“Boston,” she said. “I’m an American. But you knew I was a barbarian already, didn’t you?”

He grunted in response.

“That does go some distance toward explaining your remarkably republican attitudes,” he replied very dryly. “Though I would strongly suggest that you disguise these dangerous sentiments, for the sake of your family. Your father is in sufficient trouble on his own account. However, you may accept my assurance that it would not be possible for the daughter of a baronet to marry a groom, no matter how exigent the nature of their emotions.”

Her turn to grunt at that; a highly expressive, if totally unfeminine sound. He sighed, and took her hand again, tucking it in the curve of his elbow for safekeeping.

“He was a paroled prisoner, too—a Jacobite, a traitor. Believe me, marriage would not have occurred to either of them.”

The damp air was misting on her skin, clinging to the down hairs on her cheeks.

“But that was in another country,” she quoted softly. *“And besides, the wench is dead.”*

“Very true,” he said quietly.

They scuffed silently through the damp sand for a few moments, each alone in thought. At last Brianna heaved a sigh, deep enough that he felt as well as heard it.

“Well, she’s dead, anyway, and the earl—do you know *why* Da killed him? Did he tell you that?”

“Your father has never spoken of the matter—of Geneva, of the earl, or even directly of William’s parentage—to me.” He spoke precisely, eyes fixed on a pair of gulls probing the sand near a clump of saw grass. “But I know, yes.”

He glanced at her.

“William is *my* son, after all. In the sense of common usage, at least.” In a great deal more than that, but that was not a matter he chose to discuss with Jamie’s daughter.

Her eyebrows rose.

“Yes. How did that happen?”

“As I told you, both of William’s parents—his putative parents—died on the day of his birth. His father—the earl, I mean—had no close kin, so the boy was left to the guardianship of his grandfather, Lord Dunsany. Geneva’s sister, Isobel, became William’s mother in all but fact. And I—” He shrugged, nonchalant. “I married Isobel. I became William’s guardian, with Dunsany’s consent, and he has regarded me as his stepfather since he was six years old—he is my son.”

“You? You *married*?” She was goggling down at him, with an air of incredulity that he found offensive.

“You have the most peculiar notions concerning marriage,” he said crossly. “It was an eminently suitable match.”

One red eyebrow went up in a gesture that was Jamie to the life.

“Did your wife think so?” she asked, in an uncanny echo of her mother’s voice, asking the same question. When her mother had asked it, he had been nonplussed. This time, he was prepared.

“That,” he said tersely, “was in another country. And Isobel …” As he had hoped, that silenced her.

A fire was burning at the far end of the sandy oval, where travelers had made a rough camp. People come downriver to see the execution, he wondered? Men seeking to enlist in the rebel militias? A figure moved, dimly seen through the haze of smoke, and he turned, leading Brianna back along the way they had come. This conversation was sufficiently awkward, without the risk of interruption.

“You asked about Ellesmere,” he said, taking control of the conversation once more. “The story given to the coroner’s court by Lord Dunsany was that Ellesmere had been showing him a new pistol, which discharged by accident. It was the sort of story that is told in order to be disbelieved—giving the impression that in reality the earl had shot himself, doubtless from grief at the death of his wife, but that the Dunsanys wished to avoid the stigma of suicide, for the sake of the child. The coroner naturally perceived both the falsity of the story and the wisdom of allowing it to stand.”

“That’s not what I asked,” she said, a noticeable edge in her voice. “I asked why my father shot him.”

He sighed. She could have found gainful employment with the Spanish Inquisition, he thought ruefully; no chance of escape or evasion.

"I understand that his Lordship, apprehending that the newborn infant was in fact not of his blood, intended to expunge the stain upon his honor by dropping the child out of the window, onto the slates in the courtyard thirty feet below," he said bluntly.

Her face had paled perceptibly.

"How did he find out?" she demanded. "And if Da was a groom, why was he there? Did the earl know he was—responsible?" She shuddered, plainly envisioning a scene in which Jamie was summoned to the earl's presence, to witness the death of his illegitimate offspring before facing a similar fate himself. John had no difficulty in discerning her imagination; he had envisioned such a scene himself, more than once.

"An acute choice of words," he replied dryly. "Jamie Fraser is 'responsible' for more than any man I know. As to the rest, I have no idea. I know the essentials of what happened, because Isobel knew; her mother was present and presumably told her only the briefest outline of the incident."

"Huh." She kicked a small stone, deliberately. It skittered across the packed sand in front of her, ending a few feet away. "And you never asked Da about it?"

The stone lay in his line of march; he kicked it neatly as he walked, rolling it back into her path.

"I have never spoken to your father regarding Geneva, Ellesmere, or William himself—save to inform him of my marriage to Isobel and to assure him that I would fulfill my responsibilities as William's guardian to the best of my ability."

She set her foot on the stone, driving it into the soft sand, and stopped.

"You never said *anything* to him? What did he say to you?" she demanded.

"Nothing." He returned her stare.

"Why did you marry Isobel?"

He sighed, but there was no point in evasion.

"In order to take care of William."

The thick red brows nearly touched her hairline.

"So you got married, in spite of—I mean, you turned your whole life upside down, just to take care of Jamie Fraser's illegitimate son? And neither one of you ever *talked* about it?"

"No," he said, baffled. "Of course not."

Slowly, the brows came down again, and she shook her head.

"Men," she said cryptically. She glanced back toward the town. The air was calm, and a haze from the chimneys of Wilmington lay heavy above the trees. No roofs showed; it might have been a dragon that lay sleeping on the shore, for all that could be seen. The low, rumbling noise was not a reptilian snore, though; a small but constant stream of people had been passing by the track, headed for the town, and the reverberations of an increasing crowd were clearly audible, whenever the wind was right.

"It's nearly dark. I have to go back." She turned toward the lane that led into town, and he followed, relieved for the moment, but under no illusion that the inquisition was over.

She had only one more question, though.

"When are you going to tell him?" she asked, turning to look at him as she reached the edge of the trees.

"Tell who what?" he replied, startled.

"Him." She frowned at him, irritated. "William. My brother." The irritation faded as she tasted the word. She was still pale, but a sort of excitement had begun to glow beneath her skin. Lord John felt as though he had eaten something that violently disagreed with him. A cold sweat broke out along his jaw, and his guts clenched into fistlike knots. His knees turned to water.

"Are you quite mad?" He grasped at her arm, as much to keep from stumbling as to prevent her going off.

"I gather he doesn't know who his father really is," she said with a bit of asperity. "Given that you and Da never talked to each other about it, you probably didn't see any point talking to *him,* either. But he's grown up now—he has a right to know, surely."

Lord John closed his eyes with a low moan.

"Are you all right?" she asked. He felt her bending close to inspect him. "You don't look very good."

"Sit." He sat himself, back to a tree, and pulled her down beside him on the ground. He breathed deeply, keeping his eyes closed while his mind raced. Surely she was joking? Surely not, his cynically observant self assured him. She had a marked sense of humor, but it wasn't in evidence at the moment.

She couldn't. He couldn't let her. It was inconceivable that she—but how could he stop her? If she wouldn't listen to him, perhaps Jamie or her mother …

A hand touched his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," she said softly. "I didn't stop to think."

Relief filled him. He felt his bowels begin to uncramp, and opened his eyes to see her gazing at him with a peculiar sort of limpid sympathy that he didn't understand at all. His bowels promptly convulsed again, making him fear that he was about to suffer an embarrassing attack of flatulence on the spot.

His bowels had read her better than he had.

"I should have thought," she reproached herself. "I should have known how you'd feel about it. You said it yourself—he's *your* son. You've raised him all this time, I can see how much you love him. It must make you feel terrible to think of William finding out about Da and maybe blaming you for not telling him sooner." Her hand was massaging his collarbone in what he assumed was meant to be a soothing gesture. If that was her intent, the movement had singularly failed.

"But—" he began, but she had taken his hand in both hers and was squeezing it earnestly, her blue eyes shimmering with tears.

"He won't," she assured him. "William would never stop loving you. Believe me. It was the same for me—when I found out about Da. I didn't want to believe it at first; I *had* a father, and I loved him, and I didn't want another one. But then I met Da, and it was—he was … who he is—" She shrugged slightly, and lifted one hand to wipe her eyes on the lace at her wrist.

"But I haven't forgotten my other father," she said very softly. "I never will. Never."

Touched despite the general seriousness of the situation, Lord John cleared his throat.

"Yes. Well. I am sure your sentiments do you great credit, my dear. And while I hope that I likewise enjoy William's affectionate regard at present and will continue to do so in future, that is really not the point I was endeavoring to make."

"It's not?" She looked up, wide-eyed, tears clumping her lashes into dark spikes. She was really a lovely young woman, and he felt a small twinge of tenderness.

"No," he said, quite gently under the circumstances. "Look, my love. I told you who William is—or who he thinks he is."

"Viscount Whatnot, you mean?"

He sighed deeply.

"Quite. The five people who know of his true parentage have expended considerable effort for the last eighteeen years, to the end that no one—William included—should ever have cause to doubt that he *is* the ninth Earl of Ellesmere."

She looked down at that, her thick brows knitted, lips compressed. Christ, he hoped that her husband had succeeded in locating Jamie Fraser in time. Jamie Fraser was the only person who had a hope of being more effectually stubborn than his daughter.

"You don't understand," she said finally. She looked up, and he saw that she had come to some decision.

"We're leaving," she said abruptly. "Roger and I and the—the children."

"Oh?" he said cautiously. This might be good news—on several counts. "Where do you propose to go? Will you remove to England? Or Scotland? If England or Canada, I have several social connexions who might be of—"

"No. Not there. Not anywhere you have 'connexions.' " She smiled painfully at him, then swallowed before continuing.

"But you see—we'll be gone. For—for good. I won't—I don't think I'll ever see you again." That realization had just dawned on her; he saw it on her face, and despite the strength of the pang it gave him, he was deeply moved by her obvious distress at the thought.

"I will miss you very much, Brianna," he said gently. He had been a soldier most of his life, and then a diplomat. He had learned to live with separation and absence, with the occasional death of friends left behind. But the notion of never seeing this odd girl again caused him a most unexpected degree of grief. Almost, he thought with surprise, as though she were his own daughter.

But he had a son, as well, and her next words snapped him back to full alertness.

“So you see,” she said, leaning toward him with an intentness that he would otherwise have found charming, “I have to talk to William, and tell him. We’ll never have another chance.” Then her face changed, and she put a hand to her bosom.

“I have to go,” she said abruptly. “Mandy—Amanda, my daughter—she needs to be fed.”

And with that, she was up and gone, scudding across the sand of the racetrack like a storm cloud, leaving the threat of destruction and upheaval in her wake.

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SURELY JUSTICE AND MERCY SHALL FOLLOW ME

July 10, 1776

The tide turned from the EBB just before five o’clock in the morning. The sky was fully light, a clear pale color without clouds, and the mudflats beyond the quay stretched gray and shining, their smoothness marred here and there by weed and stubborn sea grass, sprouting from the mud like clumps of hair.

Everyone rose with the dawn; there were plenty of people on the quay to see the small procession go out, two officers from the Wilmington Committee of Safety, a representative from the Merchants Association, a minister carrying a Bible, and the prisoner, a tall, wide-shouldered figure, walking bare-headed across the stinking mud. Behind them all came a slave, carrying the ropes.

“I don’t want to watch this,” Brianna said under her breath. She was very pale, her arms folded over her middle as though she had a stomachache.

“Let’s go, then.” Roger took her arm, but she pulled back.

“No. I have to.”

She dropped her arms and stood straight, watching. People around them were jostling for a better view, jeering and catcalling so loudly that whatever was said out there was inaudible. It didn’t take long. The slave, a big man, grabbed the mooring post and shook it, testing for steadfastness. Then stood back, while the two officers backed Stephen Bonnet up to the stake and wrapped his body with rope from chest to knees. The bastard wasn't going anywhere.

Roger thought he should be searching his heart for compassion, praying for the man. He couldn't. Tried to ask forgiveness, and couldn't do that, either. Something like a ball of worms churned in his belly. He felt as though he were himself tied to a stake, waiting to drown.

The black-coated minister leaned close, his hair whipping in the early morning breeze, mouth moving. Roger didn't think that Bonnet made any reply, but couldn't tell for sure. After a few moments, the men doffed their hats, stood while the minister prayed, then put them on again and headed back toward shore, their boots squelching, ankle-deep in the sandy mud.

The moment the officials had disappeared, a stream of people poured out onto the mud: sightseers, hopping children—and a man with a notebook and pencil, who Roger recognized as Amos Crupp, the current proprietor of the *Wilmington Gazette.*

"Well, that'll be a scoop, won't it?" Roger muttered. No matter what Bonnet actually said—or didn't—there would undoubtedly be a broadsheet hawked through the streets tomorrow, containing either a lurid confession or mawkish reports of remorse—perhaps both.

"Okay, I *really* can't watch this." Abruptly, Brianna turned, taking his arm.

She made it past the row of warehouses before turning abruptly to him, burying her face in his chest and bursting into tears.

"Ssh. It's okay—it's going to be all right." He patted her, tried to infuse some conviction into the words, but his own throat had a lump in it the size of a lemon. He finally took her by the shoulders and held her away from him, so that he could look into her eyes.

"Ye don't have to do it," he said.

She stopped crying and sniffed, wiping her nose on her sleeve like Jemmy—but wouldn't meet his eyes.

"It's—I'm okay It's not even *him.* It's just—just everything. M-Mandy"—her voice wavered on the word—"and meeting my brother—Oh, Roger, if I can't tell him, he'll never know, and I'll never see him or Lord John again. Or Mama—" Fresh tears overwhelmed her, welling up in her eyes, but she gulped and swallowed, forcing them back.

"It's not him," she said in a choked, exhausted voice.

"Maybe it's not," he said softly. "But ye still don't have to do it." His stomach still churned, and his hands felt shaky, but resolution filled him.

"I should have killed him on Ocracoke," she said, closing her eyes and brushing back strands of loosened hair. The sun was higher now, and bright. "I was a coward. I th-thought it would be easier to let—let the law do it." She opened her eyes, and now did meet his gaze, her eyes reddened but clear. "I can't let it happen this way, even if I hadn't given my word."

Roger understood that; he felt the terror of the tide coming in, that inexorable creep of water, rising in his bones. It would be nearly nine hours before the water reached Bonnet's chin; he was a tall man.

"I'll do it," he said very firmly.

She made a small attempt at a smile, but abandoned it.

"No," she said. "You won't." She looked—and sounded—absolutely drained; neither of them had slept much the night before. But she also sounded determined, and he recognized Jamie Fraser's stubborn blood.

Well, what the hell—he had some of that blood, too.

"I told ye," he said. "What your father said, that time. *'It is myself who kills for her.'* If it has to be done"—and he was obliged to agree with her; he couldn't stand it, either—"then I'll do it."

She was getting a grip on herself. She wiped her face with a fold of her skirt, and took a deep breath before meeting his eyes again. Hers were deep and vivid blue, much darker than the sky.

"You told me. And you told me why he said that, too—what he said to Arch Bug: *'There is a vow upon her.'* She's a doctor; she doesn't kill people."

The hell she doesn't, Roger thought, but better judgment prevented his saying so. Before he could think of something more tactful, she went on, placing her hands flat on his chest.

"You have one, too," she said. That stopped him cold.

"No, I haven't."

"Oh, yes, you do." She was quietly emphatic. "Maybe it isn't official yet—but it doesn't need to be. Maybe it doesn't even have words, the vow that you took—but you did it, and I know it."

He couldn't deny it, and was moved that she *did* know it.

"Aye, well …" He put his hands over hers, clasping her long, strong fingers. "And I made one to you, too, when I told ye. I said I would never put God before my—my love for you." Love. He couldn't believe that he was discussing such a thing in terms of love. And yet, he had the queerest feeling that that was exactly how she saw it.

"I don't have that sort of vow," she said firmly, and pulled her hands out of his. "And I gave my word."

She had gone with Jamie after dark the night before, to the place where the pirate was being held. Roger had no idea what sort of bribery or force of personality had been employed, but they had been admitted. Jamie had brought her back to their room very late, white-faced, with a sheaf of papers that she handed over to her father. Affidavits, she said; sworn statements of Stephen Bonnet's business dealings with various merchants up and down the coast.

Roger had given Jamie a murderous look, and got the same back, with interest. *This is war,* Fraser's narrowed eyes had said. *And I will use any weapon I can.* But all he had said was, "Good night, then, *a nighean,*" and touched her hair with tenderness before departing.

Brianna had sat down with Mandy and nursed her, eyes closed, refusing to speak. After a time, her face eased from its white, strained lines, and she burped the baby and laid her sleeping in her basket. Then she came to bed, and made love to him with a silent fierceness that surprised him. But not as much as she surprised him now.

"And there's one other thing," she said, sober and slightly sad. "I'm the only person in the world for whom this isn't murder."

With that, she turned and walked away fast, toward the inn where Mandy waited to be fed. Out on the mudflats, he could still hear the sound of excited voices, raucous as gulls.

* * *

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Roger helped his wife into a small rowboat, tied to the quay near the row of warehouses. The tide had been coming in all day; the water was more than five feet deep. Out in the midst of the shining gray stood the cluster of mooring posts—and the small dark head of the pirate.

Brianna was remote as a pagan statue, her face expressionless. She lifted her skirts to step into the boat, and sat down, the weight in her pocket clunking against the wooden slat as she did so.

Roger took up the oars and rowed, heading toward the posts. They would arouse no particular interest; boats had been going out ever since noon, carrying sightseers who wished to look upon the condemned man's face, shout taunts, or clip a strand of his hair for a souvenir.

He couldn't see where he was going; Brianna directed him left or right with a silent tilt of her head. She could see; she sat straight and tall, her right hand hidden in her skirt.

Then she lifted her left hand suddenly, and Roger lay on the oars, digging with one to slew the tiny craft around.

Bonnet's lips were cracked, his face chapped and crusted with salt, his lids so reddened that he could barely open his eyes. But his head lifted as they drew near, and Roger saw a man ravished, helpless and dreading a coming embrace—so much that he half welcomes its seductive touch, yielding his flesh to cold fingers and the overwhelming kiss that steals his breath.

"Ye've left it late enough, darlin'," he said to Brianna, and the cracked lips parted in a grin that split them and left blood on his teeth. "I knew ye'd come, though."

Roger paddled with one oar, working the boat close, then closer. He was looking over his shoulder when Brianna drew the gilt-handled pistol from her pocket, and put the barrel to Stephen Bonnet's ear.

"Go with God, Stephen," she said clearly, in Gaelic, and pulled the trigger. Then she dropped the gun into the water and turned round to face her husband.

"Take us home," she said.

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REGRET

Lord John stepped into his room at the inn, and was surprised—astonished, in fact—to discover that he had a visitor.

"John." Jamie Fraser turned from the window, and gave him a small smile.

"Jamie." He returned it, trying to control the sudden sense of elation he felt. He had used Jamie Fraser's Christian name perhaps three times in the last twenty-five years; the intimacy of it was exhilarating, but he mustn't let it show.

"Will I order us refreshment?" he asked politely. Jamie had not moved from the window; he glanced out, then back at John and shook his head, still smiling faintly.

"I thank ye, no. We are enemies, are we not?"

"We find ourselves regrettably upon opposing sides of what I trust will be a short-lived conflict," Lord John corrected.

Fraser looked down at him, with an odd, regretful sort of expression.

"Not short," he said. "But regrettable, aye."

"Indeed." Lord John cleared his throat, and moved to the window, careful not to brush against his visitor. He looked out, and saw the likely reason for Fraser's visit.

"Ah," he said, seeing Brianna Fraser MacKenzie on the wooden sidewalk below. "Oh!" he said, in a different tone. For William

Clarence Henry George Ransom, ninth Earl of Ellesmere, had just come out of the inn and bowed to her.

“Sweet Jesus,” he said, apprehension making his scalp prickle. “Will she tell him?”

Fraser shook his head, his eyes on the two young people below.

“She will not,” he said quietly. “She gave me her word.”

Relief coursed through his veins like water.

“Thank you,” he said. Fraser shrugged slightly, dismissing it. It was, after all, what he desired, as well—or so Lord John assumed.

The two of them were talking together—William said something and Brianna laughed, throwing back her hair. Jamie watched in fascination. Dear God, they were alike! The small tricks of expression, of posture, of gesture … It must be apparent to the most casual observer. In fact, he saw a couple pass them and the woman smile, pleased at the sight of the handsome matched pair.

“She will not tell him,” Lord John repeated, somewhat dismayed by the sight. “But she displays herself to him. Will he not—but no. I don’t suppose he will.”

“I hope not,” Jamie said, eyes still fixed on them. “But if he does—he still will not *know.* And she insisted she must see him once more—that was the price of her silence.”

John nodded, silent. Brianna’s husband was coming now, their little boy held by one hand, his hair as vivid as his mother’s in the bright summer sun. He held a baby in the crook of his arm—Brianna took it from him, turning back the blanket to display the child to William, who inspected it with every indication of politeness.

He realized suddenly that every fragment of Fraser’s being was focused on the scene outside. Of course; he had not seen Willie since the boy was twelve. And to see the two together—his daughter and the son he could never speak to or acknowledge. He would have touched Fraser, put a hand on his arm in sympathy, but knowing the probable effect of his touch, forbore to do it.

“I have come,” Fraser said suddenly, “to ask a favor of you.”

“I am your servant, sir,” Lord John said, terribly pleased, but taking refuge in formality.

“Not for myself,” Fraser said with a glance at him. “For Brianna.”

"My pleasure will be the greater," John assured him. "I am exceeding fond of your daughter, her temperamental resemblances to her sire notwithstanding."

The corner of Fraser's mouth lifted, and he returned his gaze to the scene below.

"Indeed," he said. "Well, then. I canna tell ye why I require this—but I need a jewel."

"A jewel?" Lord John's voice sounded blank, even to his own ears. "What sort of jewel?"

"Any sort." Fraser shrugged, impatient. "It doesna matter—so long as it should be some precious gem. I once gave ye such a stone—" His mouth twitched at that; he had handed over the stone, a sapphire, under duress, as a prisoner of the Crown. "Though I dinna suppose ye'd have that by ye, still."

In point of fact, he did. That particular sapphire had traveled with him for the last twenty-five years, and was at this moment in the pocket of his waistcoat.

He glanced at his left hand, which bore a broad gold band, set with a brilliant, faceted sapphire. Hector's ring. Given to him by his first lover at the age of sixteen. Hector had died at Culloden—the day after John had met James Fraser, in the dark of a Scottish mountain pass.

Without hesitation, but with some difficulty—the ring had been worn a long time, and had sunk a little way into the flesh of his finger—he twisted it off and dropped it into Jamie's hand.

Fraser's brows rose in astonishment.

"This? Are ye sur—"

"Take it." He reached out then, and closed Jamie's fingers around it with his own. The contact was fleeting, but his hand tingled, and he closed his own fist, hoping to keep the sensation.

"Thank you," Jamie said again, quietly.

"It is—my very great pleasure." The party below was breaking up—Brianna was taking her leave, the baby held in her arms, her husband and son already halfway down the walk. William bowed, hat off, the shape of his chestnut head so perfectly echoing that of the red—

Suddenly, Lord John could not bear to see them part. He wished to keep that, too—the sight of them together. He closed his eyes and stood, hands on the sill, feeling the movement of the breeze past his face. Something touched his shoulder, very briefly, and he felt a sense of movement in the air beside him.

When he opened his eyes again, all three of them were gone.

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LOTH TO DEPART

September 1776

Roger was laying the last of the water pipes when Aidan and Jemmy popped up beside him, sudden as a pair of jack-in-the-boxes.

"Daddy, Daddy, Bobby's here!"

"What, Bobby Higgins?" Roger straightened up, feeling his back muscles protest, and looked toward the Big House, but saw no sign of a horse. "Where is he?"

"He went up to the graveyard," Aidan said, looking important. "D'ye think he's gone to look for the ghost?"

"I doubt it," Roger said calmly. "What ghost?"

"Malva Christie's," Aidan said promptly. "She walks. Everybody says so." He spoke bravely, but wrapped his arms about himself. Jemmy, who plainly hadn't heard that bit of news before, looked wide-eyed.

"Why does she walk? Where's she going?"

"Because she was murrrrderrred, silly," Aidan said. "Folk what are murdered always walk. They're lookin' for the one who killed them."

"Nonsense," Roger said firmly, seeing the uneasy look on Jemmy's face. Jem had known Malva Christie was dead, of course; he'd gone to her funeral, along with all the other children on the

Ridge. But he and Brianna had simply told the boy that Malva had died, not that she had been murdered.

Well, Roger thought grimly, little hope of keeping something like that secret. He hoped Jem wouldn't have nightmares.

"Malva's not walking about looking for anyone," he said, with as much conviction as he could infuse into his voice. "Her soul is in heaven with Jesus, where she's happy and peaceful—and her body … well, when people die, they don't need their bodies anymore, and so we bury them, and there they stay, all tidy in their graves, until the Last Day."

Aidan looked patently unconvinced by this.

"Joey McLaughlin saw her, two weeks ago Friday," he said, bobbing up and down on his toes. "A-flittin' through the wood, he said, all dressed in black—and howlin' most mournful!"

Jemmy was beginning to look truly upset. Roger laid down the spade, and picked Jem up in his arms.

"I expect Joey McLaughlin was a bit the worse for a dram too much," he said. Both boys were entirely familiar with the concept of drunkenness. "If it was flitting through the wood howling, it was most likely Rollo he saw. Come on, though, we'll go find Bobby, and ye'll see Malva's grave for yourselves."

He put out a hand to Aidan, who took it happily and chattered like a magpie all the way up the hill.

And what was Aidan going to do, when he left? he wondered. The idea of leaving, at first so abrupt as to seem completely unreal, unthinkable, had been filtering into his consciousness, day by day. As he worked at the chores, dug the trenches for Brianna's water pipes, carried hay, chopped wood, he would try to think: "Not much longer." And yet it seemed impossible that one day he would not be on the Ridge, would not push open the door to the cabin and find Brianna involved in some fiendish experiment on the kitchen table, Jem and Aidan madly vrooming around her feet.

The feeling of unreality was even more pronounced when he preached of a Sunday or went round as minister—if yet without portfolio—to visit the sick or counsel the troubled. Looking into all those faces—attentive, excited, bored, dour, or preoccupied—he simply couldn't believe that he meant to go, callously to abandon them all. How would he tell them? he wondered, with a sort of anguish at the thought. Especially the ones he felt most responsible for—Aidan and his mother.

He'd prayed about it, looking for strength, for guidance.

And yet … and yet the vision of Amanda's tiny blue fingernails, the faint wheeze of her breathing, never left him. And the looming stones by the creek on Ocracoke seemed to grow nearer, more solid, day by day.

Bobby Higgins was indeed in the graveyard, his horse tethered under the pines. He was sitting by Malva's grave, head bowed in contemplation, though he looked up at once when Roger and the boys appeared. He looked pale and somber, but scrambled to his feet and shook Roger's hand.

"I'm glad to see ye back, Bobby. Here, you lot go and play, aye?" He set Jemmy down, and was pleased to see that after one suspicious glance at Malva's grave—adorned with a wilted bunch of wildflowers—Jemmy went off quite happily with Aidan to hunt for squirrels and chipmunks in the wood.

"I—er—wasn't expecting to see you again," he added a little awkwardly. Bobby looked down, slowly dusting pine needles from his breeches.

"Well, zur … the fact of the matter is, I've come to stay. If so be as that's agreeable," he added hastily.

"To stay? But—of course it's fine," Roger said, recovering from his surprise. "Have you—that is—you've not had a falling-out with his Lordship, I hope?"

Bobby looked astonished at the thought, and shook his head decidedly.

"Oh, no, zur! His Lordship's been proper kind to me, ever since he took me on." He hesitated, biting his lower lip. "It's only—well, ye see, zur, there's a deal of folk what come to stay with his Lordship these days. Politicals, and—and army folk."

Despite himself, he touched the brand on his cheek, which had faded now to a pinkish scar but was still apparent—and always would be. Roger understood.

"You weren't comfortable there any longer, I suppose?"

"That's it, zur." Bobby gave him a grateful look. "Time was, 'twas just his Lordship and me and Manoke the cook. Sometimes a guest would come for dinner or to stay a few days, but 'twas all easy and what ye might call simple. When I went for to run messages or errands for his Lordship, folk would stare, but only for the first time or two; after that, they'd be used to this"—he touched his face again—"and it was all right. But now …" He trailed off unhappily, leaving Roger to imagine the probable response of British army officers, starched, polished, and either openly disapproving of this blot on the service—or painfully polite.

"His Lordship saw the difficulty; he's good that way. And he said as how he would miss me, but if I chose to seek my fortune elsewhere, he would give me ten pounds and his best wishes."

Roger whistled respectfully. Ten pounds was a very respectable sum. Not a fortune, but quite enough to set Bobby on his road.

"Very nice," he said. "Did he know ye meant to come here?"

Bobby shook his head.

"I wasn't sure myself," he admitted. "Once, I should—" He cut himself off abruptly, with a glance at Malva's grave, then turned back to Roger, clearing his throat.

"I thought I best talk to Mr. Fraser, before I was to make up my mind. Could be there's naught for me here any longer, either." This was phrased as a statement, but the question was clear. Everyone on the Ridge knew Bobby and accepted him; that wasn't the difficulty. But with Lizzie married and Malva gone … Bobby wanted a wife.

"Oh … I think ye might find yourself welcome," Roger said with a thoughtful look at Aidan, hanging upside down by his knees from a tree branch, while Jemmy pegged pinecones at him. A most peculiar feeling went through him—something between gratitude and jealousy—but he pushed the latter feeling firmly down.

"Aidan!" he shouted. "Jem! Time to go!" And turned casually back to Bobby, saying, "I think ye'll maybe not have met Aidan's mother, Amy McCallum—a young widow, aye, with a house and a bit of land. She's come to work at the Big House; if ye'll come sit down to supper there …"

* * *

"I've thought of it now and then," Jamie admitted. "Wondered, ye ken? What if I could? How would it be?"

He glanced at Brianna, smiling, but a little helpless, and shrugged.

"What d'ye think, lass? What should I do there? How would it be?"

"Well, it—" she began, and stopped, trying to envision him in that world—behind the wheel of a car? Going to an office, in a three-piece suit? That idea was so ludicrous, she laughed. Or sitting in a darkened theater, watching Godzilla films with Jem and Roger?

"What's Jamie spelled backward?" she asked.

"Eimaj, I suppose," he replied, bewildered. "Why?"

"I think you'd do fine," she said, smiling. "Never mind. You'd—well, I suppose you could … publish newspapers. The printing presses are bigger and faster, and it takes a lot more people to gather the news, but otherwise—I don't think it's so different then from what it is now. You know how to do that."

He nodded, a crease of concentration forming between the thick brows that were so like hers.

"I suppose so," he said a little dubiously. "Could I be a farmer, d'ye think? Surely folk still eat; someone must feed them."

"You could." She looked round, taking fresh note of all the homely details of the place: the chickens scratching peaceably in the dirt; the soft, weathered boards of the stable; the thrown-up dirt near the foundation of the house where the white pig had burrowed in. "There are people then who still farm just this way; small places, way up in the mountains. It's a hard life—" She saw him smile, and laughed in return. "All right, it's not any harder than it is now—but it's a lot easier in the cities."

She paused, thinking.

"You wouldn't have to fight," she said finally.

He seemed surprised at that.

"No? But ye did say there are wars."

“There certainly are,” she said, needles of ice piercing her belly, as the images pierced her mind: fields of poppies, fields of white crosses—a man on fire, a naked child running with burned skin, the contorted face of a man in the instant before the bullet entered his brain. “But—but then it’s only the young men who fight. And not all of them; only some.”

“Mmphm.” He thought for a bit, his brow furrowed, then looked up searching her face.

“This world of yours, this America,” he said finally, matter-of-factly. “The freedom that ye go to. There will be a fearful price to be paid. Will it be worth it, do ye think?”

It was her turn then to be silent and think. At last she put her hand on his arm—solid, warm, steady as iron.

“Almost nothing would be worth losing you,” she whispered. “But maybe that comes close.”

* * *

As the world turns toward winter and the nights grow long, people begin to wake in the dark. Lying in bed too long cramps the limbs, and dreams dreamt too long turn inward on themselves, grotesque as a Mandarin’s fingernails. By and large, the human body isn’t adapted for more than seven or eight hours’ sleep—but what happens when the nights are longer than that?

What happens is the second sleep. You fall asleep from tiredness, soon after dark—but then wake again, rising toward the surface of your dreams like a trout coming up to feed. And should your sleeping partner also wake then—and people who have slept together for a good many years know at once when each other wakes—you have a small, private place to share, deep in the night. A place in which to rise, to stretch, to bring a juicy apple back to bed, to share slice by slice, fingers brushing lips. To have the luxury of conversation, uninterrupted by the business of the day. To make love slowly in the light of an autumn moon.

And then, to lie close, and let a lover’s dreams caress your skin as you begin to sink once more beneath the waves of consciousness, blissful in the knowledge that dawn is far off—that’s second sleep.

I came very slowly to the surface of my first sleep, to find that the highly erotic dream I had been having had some basis in reality.

"I'd never thought myself the sort who'd molest a corpse, Sassenach." Jamie's voice tickled the tender flesh below my ear, murmuring. "But I will say the notion has more appeal than I'd thought."

I wasn't sufficiently coherent as to respond to this, but thrust my hips back toward him in a fashion that he seemed to find as eloquent an invitation as one written in calligraphy on parchment. He took a deep breath, a firm grip on my buttocks, and brought me to an awakening that could be called rude in several senses of the word.

I squirmed like a worm impaled on a fish-hook, making small urgent noises that he interpreted correctly, rolling me onto my face and proceeding to leave me in no doubt that I was not merely alive and awake, but functioning.

I emerged at length from a nest of flattened pillows, damp, gasping, quivering in every engorged and slippery nerve-ending, and thoroughly awake.

"What brought that on?" I inquired. He hadn't pulled away; we lay still joined, washed in the light of a big golden half-moon, riding low in the sky above the chestnut trees. He made a small sound, partly amusement, partly dismay.

"I canna look at ye asleep without wanting to wake ye, Sassenach." His hand cupped my breast, gently now. "I suppose I find myself lonely without ye."

There was an odd note in his voice, and I turned my head toward him, but couldn't see him in the dark behind me. Instead, I put back a hand and touched the leg still wrapped halfway over mine. Even relaxed, it was hard, the long groove of the muscle graceful under my fingers.

"I'm here," I said, and his arm tightened suddenly round me.

* * *

I heard the breath catch in his throat, and my hand tightened on his thigh.

"What is it?" I said.

He drew breath, but didn't answer at once. I felt him draw back a little, and fumble under the pillow. Then his hand came round me again, but this time seeking the hand that lay on his leg. His fingers curled into mine, and I felt a small, hard, roundish object thrust into my hand.

I heard him swallow.

The stone, whatever it was, seemed slightly warm to the touch. I ran a thumb slowly over it; a raw stone of some kind, but big, the size of one of my finger-joints.

"Jamie …" I said, feeling my throat close.

"I love you," he said, so softly that I barely heard him, close as we were.

I lay still for a moment, feeling the stone grow warmer in the palm of my hand. Surely it was imagination that made it seem to throb in time with my heart. Where on earth had he gotten it?

Then I moved—not suddenly, but with deliberation, my body sliding slowly free of his. I rose, feeling light-headed, and crossed the room. Pushed open the window to feel the sharp touch of the autumn wind on my naked bed-warm skin, and drawing back my arm, hurled the tiny object into the night.

Then I came back to bed, saw his hair a dark mass on the pillow, and the shine of his eyes in the moonlight.

"I love you," I whispered, and slid under the sheet beside him, putting my arms around him, hugging him close, warmer than the stone—so much warmer—and his heart beat with mine.

"I'm none so brave as I was before, ken?" he said very softly. "Not brave enough to live without ye anymore."

But brave enough to try.

I drew his head down to me, stroking the tumble of his hair, coarse and smooth at once, live beneath my fingers.

"Lay your head, man," I said softly. "It's a long time 'til dawn."

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IF ONLY FOR MYSELF

The sky was a flat, leaden color, threatening rain, and the wind gusted through the palmettos, rattling the leaves like sabers. Down in the depths of the tidal forest, the four stones loomed beside the creek.

“I am the wife of the laird of Balnain,” Brianna whispered, next to me. “The faeries have stolen me over again.” She was white to the lips, Amanda clutched close to her breast.

We had made our farewells—we had been saying farewell, I thought, since the day I pressed the stethoscope to Mandy’s heart. But Brianna turned and flung herself—baby and all—at Jamie, who pressed her so tight against his heart, I thought one of them must break.

Then she was flying at me, a cloud of cloak and loosened hair, and her face was cold against mine, her tears and mine mingling on my skin.

“I love you, Mama! I love you!” she said in desperation, then turned and, without looking back, began to walk the pattern Donner had described, quietly chanting under her breath. A circle right, between two stones, a circle left, and back through the center—and then to the left of the largest stone.

I had been expecting it; when she began to walk the pattern, I had run away from the stones, stopping at what I thought a safe distance. It wasn’t. The sound of them—a roar, this time, instead of a shriek—thundered through me, stopping my breath and nearly my heart. Pain froze in a band round my chest and I dropped to my knees, swaying and helpless.

They were gone. I could see Jamie and Roger running to check—terrified of finding bodies, at once desolate and elated to find none. I couldn't see well—my vision swam, flickering in and out—but didn't need to. I knew they were gone, from the hole in my heart.

* * *

"Two down," Roger whispered. His voice was no more than a faint rasp, and he cleared his throat, hard. "Jeremiah." He looked down at Jem, who blinked and sniffed, and drew himself up tall at the sound of his formal name.

"Ye ken what we're about now, aye?" Jemmy nodded, though he flicked a scared glance toward the towering stone where his mother and his baby sister had just vanished. He swallowed hard, and wiped the tears off his cheeks.

"Well, then." Roger reached out a hand and rested it gently on Jemmy's head. "Know this, *mo mac*—I shall love ye all my life, and never forget ye. But this is a terrible thing we're doing, and ye need not come with me. Ye can stay with your grandda and grannie Claire; it will be all right."

"Won't I—won't I see Mama again?" Jemmy's eyes were huge, and he couldn't keep from looking at the stone.

"I don't know," Roger said, and I could see the tears he was fighting himself, and hear them in his thickened voice. He didn't know whether he would ever see Brianna again himself, or baby Mandy. "Probably … probably not."

Jamie looked down at Jem, who was clinging to his hand, looking back and forth between father and grandfather, confusion, fright, and longing in his face.

"If one day, *a bhailach,*" Jamie said conversationally, "ye should meet a verra large mouse named Michael—ye'll tell him your grandsire sends his regards." He opened his hand, then, letting go, and nodded toward Roger.

Jem stood staring for a moment, then dug in his feet and sprinted toward Roger, sand spurting from under his shoes. He leaped into his father's arms, clutching him around the neck, and with a final glance backward, Roger turned and stepped behind the stone, and the inside of my head exploded in fire.

Unimaginable time later, I came slowly back, coming down from the clouds in fragments, like hailstones. And found myself lying with my head in Jamie's lap. And heard him saying softly, to himself or to me, "For your sake, I will continue—though for mine alone … I would not."

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ACROSS THE ABYSS

Three nights later, I woke from a restless sleep in an inn in Wilmington, my throat parched as the salt bacon I had eaten in the dinner stew. Sitting up to find water, I found that I was alone—the moonlight through the window shone white on the vacant pillow beside me.

I found Jamie outside, behind the inn, his nightshirt a pale blotch in the darkness of the innyard. He was sitting on the ground with his back against a chopping block, arms wrapped about his knees.

He didn't speak as I came toward him, but turned his head, body shifting in a silent welcome. I sat down on the chopping block behind him, and he leaned his head back against my thigh, with a long, deep sigh.

"Couldn't sleep?" I touched him gently, smoothing back the hair from his face. He slept with it unbound, and it fell thick and wild about his shoulders, tangled from bed.

"Nay, I slept," he said quietly. His eyes were open, looking up at the great gold moon, three-quarters full over the aspens near the inn. "I had a dream."

"A nightmare?" He had them seldom anymore, but they did come sometimes: the bloody memories of Culloden, of futile death and slaughter; prison dreams of hunger and confinement—and sometimes, very rarely, Jack Randall returned to him in sleep, with loving cruelty. Such dreams would always drive him from his bed to walk to and fro for hours, until exhaustion cleansed him of their visions. But he had not dreamed that way since Moore's Creek Bridge.

"No," he said, sounding half-surprised. "Not at all. I dreamed of her—of our lassie—and the bairns."

My heart gave an odd little hop, the consequence of startlement and what might almost have been envy.

"You dreamed about Brianna and the children? What happened?"

He smiled, face tranquil and abstracted in the moonlight, as though he still saw some part of the dream before him.

"It is all right," he said. "They are safe. I saw them in a town—it seemed like Inverness, but it was different, somehow. They walked up the step of a house—Roger Mac was with them," he added, offhand. "They knocked at the door, and a wee brown-haired woman opened to them. She laughed wi' joy to see them, and brought them in, and they went down a hallway, wi' strange things like bowls hanging from the ceiling.

"Then they were in a room, wi' sofas and chairs, and the room had great windows all down one wall, from the floor to the ceiling, and the afternoon sun was streaming in, setting Brianna's hair to fire, and makin' wee Mandy cry when it got in her eyes."

"Did … did any of them call the brown-haired woman by name?" I asked, my heart beating in a queer, fast way.

He frowned, moonlight making a cross of light over nose and brows.

"Aye, they did," he said. "I canna just—oh, aye; Roger Mac called her Fiona."

"Did he?" I said. My hands rested on his shoulder, and my mouth was a hundred times drier than it had been when I woke up. The night was chilly, but not enough to account for the temperature of my hands.

I had told Jamie any amount of things about my own time over the years of our marriage. About trains and planes and automobiles and wars and indoor plumbing. But I was nearly sure that I had never told him what the study looked like in the manse where Roger had grown up with his adoptive father.

The room with the window wall, made to accommodate the Reverend’s painting hobby. The manse with its long hallway, furnished with old-fashioned light fixtures, shaped like hanging bowls. And I knew I had never told him about the Reverend’s last housekeeper, a girl with dark, curly hair, called Fiona.

“Were they happy?” I asked at last, very quietly.

“Aye. Brianna and the lad—they had some shadows to their faces, but I could see they were glad nonetheless. They all sat down to eat—Brianna and her lad close together, leaning on each other—and wee Jem stuffed his face wi’ cakes and cream.” He smiled at the picture, teeth a brief gleam in the darkness.

“Oh—at the last, just before I woke … wee Jem was messin’ about, picking things up and putting them down as he does. There was a … thing . . on the table. I couldna say what it was; I’ve never seen the like.”

He held his hands about six inches apart, frowning at them. “It was maybe this wide, and just a bit longer—something like a box, maybe, only sort of … humped.”

“Humped?” I said, puzzled as to what this could be.

“Aye, and it had a thing on top like a wee club, only wi’ a knob to each end, and the club was tied to the box wi’ a sort of black cord, curled up on itself like a piggie’s tail. Jem saw it, and he reached out his hand, and said, ‘I want to talk to Grandda.’ And then I woke.”

He leaned his head back farther, so as to look up into my face.

“Would ye ken what a thing like that might be, Sassenach? It was like nothing I’ve ever seen.”

The autumn wind came rustling down from the hill, dry leaves hurrying in its wake, quick and light as the footsteps of a ghost, and I felt the hair rise on nape and forearms.

“Yes, I know,” I said. “I’ve told you about them, I know.” I didn’t think, though, that I had ever described one to him, in more than general terms. I cleared my throat.

“It’s called a telephone.”

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THE GUARDIAN

It was November; there were no flowers. But the holly bushes gleamed dark green, and the berries had begun to ripen. I cut a small bunch, careful of the prickles, added a tender branch of spruce for fragrance, and climbed the steep trail to the tiny graveyard.

I went every week, to leave some small token on Malva's grave, and say a prayer. She and her child had not been buried with a cairn—her father hadn't wanted such a pagan custom—but people came and left pebbles there by way of remembrance. It gave me some small comfort to see them; there were others who remembered her.

I stopped abruptly at the head of the trail; someone was kneeling by her grave—a young man. I caught the murmur of his voice, low and conversational, and would have turned about to go, save that he raised his head, and the wind caught his hair, short and tufted, like an owl's feathers. Allan Christie.

He saw me, too, and stiffened. There was nothing to do but go and speak to him, though, and so I went.

"Mr. Christie," I said, the words feeling strange in my mouth. That was what I had called his father. "I'm sorry for your loss."

He stared up at me blankly; then some sort of awareness seemed to stir in his eyes. Gray eyes, rimmed with black lashes, so much like those of his father and sister. Bloodshot with weeping and lack of sleep, judging from the shocking smudges under them.

“Aye,” he said. “My loss. Aye.”

I stepped around him to lay down my evergreen bouquet, and with a small spurt of alarm, saw that there was a pistol on the ground beside him, cocked and primed.

“Where have you been?” I said as casually as possible, under the circumstances. “We’ve missed you.”

He shrugged, as though it really didn’t matter where he’d been—perhaps it didn’t. He wasn’t looking at me anymore, but at the stone we’d placed at the head of her grave.

“Places,” he said vaguely. “But I had to come back.” He turned away a little, plainly indicating that he wanted me to leave. Instead, I pulled up my skirts and knelt gingerly beside him. I didn’t *think* he’d blow his brains out in front of me. I had no idea what to do, other than to try to make him talk to me and hope that someone else would come along.

“We’re glad to have you home,” I said, trying for an easy, conversational note.

“Aye,” he said vaguely. And again, his eyes going to the headstone, “I had to come back.” His hand wandered toward the pistol, and I seized it, startling him.

“I know you loved your sister very much,” I said. “It—it was a terrible shock to you, I know.” What, what did one say? There were things one might say to a person contemplating suicide, I knew, but what?

“Your life has value.” I’d said that to Tom Christie, who had only replied, *“If it did not, this would not matter.”* But how should I convince his son of that?

“Your father loved you both,” I said, wondering as I said it whether he knew what his father had done. His fingers were very cold, and I wrapped both my hands round his, trying to offer him a little warmth, hoping that the human contact would help.

“Not as I loved her,” he said softly, not looking at me. “I loved her all her life, from the time she was born and they gave her me to hold. There was nay other, for either of us. Faither was gone to prison, and then my mither—ah, Mither.” His lips pulled back, as though to laugh, but there was no sound.

"I know about your mother," I said. "Your father told me."

"Did he?" His head jerked up to look at me, eyes clear and hard. "Did he tell ye they took me and Malva to her execution?"

"I—no. I don't think he knew, did he?" My stomach clenched.

"He did. I told him, later, when he sent for us, brought us here. He said that was good, we'd seen with our own eyes the ends of wickedness. He bade me remember the lesson—and so I did," he added more quietly.

"How—how old were you?" I asked, horrified.

"Ten. Malva was nay more than two; she'd no idea what was happening. She cried out for her Mam when they brought Mither out to the hangsman, and kicked and screamed, reaching out for her."

He swallowed, and turned his head away.

"I tried to take her, to push her head into my bosom, so she shouldna see—but they wouldna let me have her. They held her wee head and made her watch, and Auntie Darla saying in her ear that this was what happened to witches, and pinching her legs 'til she shrieked. We lived with Auntie Darla for six years after that," he said, his face remote.

"She wasna best pleased about it, but she said she kent her Christian duty. The auld besom barely fed us, and 'twas me took care of Malva."

He was silent for a bit, and so was I, thinking the best—the only—thing I could offer him now was the chance to speak. He pulled his hand from mine, leaned over, and touched the gravestone. It was no more than a lump of granite, but someone had gone to the trouble to carve her name on it—only the one word, MALVA , in crude block letters. It reminded me of the memorials that dotted Culloden, the clanstones, each with a single name.

"She was perfect," he whispered. His finger traced its way over the stone, delicate, as though he touched her flesh. "So perfect. Her wee privates looked like a flower's bud, and her skin sae fresh and soft…."

A sense of coldness grew in the pit of my stomach. Did he mean … yes, of course he did. A sense of inevitable despair began to grow within me.

"She was mine," he said, and looking up to see my eye upon him, repeated it more loudly. "She was mine!"

He looked down, then, at the grave, and his mouth turned in upon itself, in grief and anger.

"The auld man never knew—never guessed what we were to each other."

Didn't he? I thought. Tom Christie might have confessed to the crime to save one he loved—but he loved more than one. Having lost a daughter—or rather, a niece—would he not do all he could to save the son who was the last remnant of his blood?

"You killed her," I said quietly. I was in no doubt, and he showed no surprise.

"He would ha' sold her away, given her to some clod of a farmer." Allan's fist clenched on his thigh. "I thought of that, as she grew older, and sometimes when I would lie with her, I couldna bear the thought, and would slap her face, only from the rage of thinking of it."

He drew a deep, ragged breath.

"It wasna her fault, none of it. But I thought it was. And then I caught her wi' that soldier, and again, wi' filthy wee Henderson. I beat her for it, but she cried out that she couldna help it—she was with child."

"Yours?"

He nodded, slowly.

"I never thought of it. I should, of course. But I never did. She was always wee Malva, see, a bittie wee lass. I saw her breasts swell, aye, and the hair come out to mar her sweet flesh—but I just never thought …

He shook his head, unable to deal with the thought, even now.

"She said she must marry—and there must be reason for her husband to think the child his, whoever she wed. If she couldna make the soldier wed her, then it must be another. So she took as many lovers as she might, quickly.

"I put a stop to that, though," he assured me, a faintly nauseating tone of self-righteousness in his voice. "I told her I wouldna have it—I would think of another way."

"And so you put her up to saying the child was Jamie's." My horror at the story and my anger at what he had done to us was subsumed by a flood of sorrow. *Oh, Malva,* I thought in despair. *Oh, my darling Malva. Why didn't you tell me?* But of course she wouldn't have told me. Her only confidant was Allan.

He nodded, and reached out to touch the stone again. A gust of wind quivered through the holly, stirring the stiff leaves.

"It would explain the bairn, see, but she wouldna have to wed anyone. I thought—Himself would give her money to go away, and I would go with her. We could go to Canada, perhaps, or to the Indies." His voice sounded dreamy, as though he envisioned some idyllic life, where no one knew.

"But why did you kill her?" I burst out. "What made you *do* that?" The sorrow and the senselessness were overwhelming; I clenched my hands in my apron, not to batter him.

"I had to," he said heavily. "She said she couldna go through with it." He blinked, looking down, and I saw that his eyes were heavy with tears.

"She said—she loved you," he said, low-voiced and thick. "She couldna hurt ye so. She meant to tell the truth. No matter what I said to her, she just kept saying that—she loved ye, and she'd tell."

He closed his eyes, shoulders slumping. Two tears ran down his cheeks.

"Why, hinny?" he cried, crossing his arms over his belly in a spasm of grief. "Why did ye make me do it? Ye shouldna have loved anyone but me."

He sobbed then, like a child, and curled into himself, weeping. I was weeping, too, for the loss and the pointlessness, for the utter, terrible *waste* of it all. But I reached out and took the gun from the ground. Hands shaking, I dumped out the priming pan, and shook the ball from the barrel, then put the pistol in the pocket of my apron.

"Leave," I said, my voice half-choked. "Go away again, Allan. There are too many people dead."

He was too grief-stricken to hear me; I shook him by the shoulder and said it again, more strongly.

"You can't kill yourself. I forbid it, do you hear?"

"And who are you to say?" he cried, turning on me. His face was contorted with anguish. "I cannot live, I cannot!"

But Tom Christie had given up his life for his son, as well as for me; I couldn't let that sacrifice go for naught.

"You must," I said, and stood up, feeling light-headed, unsure whether my knees would hold me. "Do you hear me? You must!"

He looked up, eyes burning through the tears, but didn't speak. There was a keening whine like the hum of a mosquito, and a soft, sudden thump. He didn't change expression, but his eyes slowly died. He stayed on his knees for a moment, but bowed then forward, like a flower nodding on its stem, so I saw the arrow protruding from the center of his back. He coughed, once, sputtering blood, and fell sideways, curled on his sister's grave. His legs jerked spasmodically, grotesquely froglike. Then he lay still.

I stood stupidly staring at him for some immeasurable span of time, becoming only gradually aware that Ian had walked out of the wood and stood beside me, bow over his shoulder. Rollo nosed curiously at the body, whining.

"He's right, Auntie," Ian said quietly. "He can't."

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RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Old Grannie Abernathy looked at least a hundred and two. She admitted—under pressure—to ninety-one. She was nearly blind and nearly deaf, curled up like a pretzel from osteoporosis, and with skin gone so fragile that the merest scrape tore it like paper.

"I'm nay more than a bag o' bones," she said every time I saw her, shaking a head that trembled with palsy. "But at least I've still got maist o' my teeth!"

For a wonder, she had; I thought that was the only reason she had made it this far—unlike many people half her age, she wasn't reduced to living on porridge, but could still stomach meat and greens. Perhaps it was improved nutrition that kept her going—perhaps it was mere stubbornness. Her married name was Abernathy, but she had, she confided, been born a Fraser.

Smiling at the thought, I finished wrapping the bandage about her sticklike shin. Her legs and feet had almost no flesh upon them, and felt hard and cold as wood. She'd knocked her shin against the leg of the table and taken off a strip of skin the width of a finger; such a minor injury that a younger person would think nothing of it—but her family worried over her, and had sent for me.

"It will be slow healing, but if you keep it clean—for God's sake, do *not* let her put hog fat on it!—I think it will be all right." The younger Mrs. Abernathy, known as Young Grannie—herself about seventy—gave me a sharp eye at that; like her mother-in-law, she put a good deal of faith in hog fat and turpentine as cure-alls, but nodded grudgingly. Her daughter, whose high-flown name of Arabella had been shortened to the cozier Grannie Belly, grinned at me behind Young Grannie's back. She had been less fortunate in the way of teeth—her smile showed significant gaps—but was cheerful and good-natured.

"Willie B.," she instructed a teenaged grandson, "just be steppin' doon to the root cellar, and bringing up a wee sack of turnips for Herself."

I made the usual protestations, but all parties concerned were comfortably aware of the proper protocol in such matters, and within a few minutes, I was on my way home, the richer by five pounds of turnips.

They were welcome. I had forced myself to go back to my garden in the spring after Malva's death—I had to; sentiment was all very well, but we had to eat. The subsequent disturbances of life and my prolonged absences, though, had resulted in dreadful neglect of the autumn crop. Despite Mrs. Bug's best efforts, the turnips had all succumbed to thrips and black rot.

Our supplies in general were sadly depleted. With Jamie and Ian gone so frequently, not there to harvest or hunt, and without Bree and Roger, the grain crops had been half of their usual yield, and only a pitiful single haunch of venison hung in the smoking shed. We needed nearly all the grain for our own use; there was none to trade or sell, and only a scant few bags of barleycorn sat under canvas near the malting shed—where they were likely to rot, I thought grimly, as no one had had time to see to the malting of a fresh batch before the cold weather set in.

Mrs. Bug was slowly rebuilding her flock of chickens, after a disastrous attack by a fox that got into the henhouse—but it was slow going, and we got only the occasional egg for breakfast, grudgingly spared.

On the other hand, I reflected more cheerfully, we *did* have ham. Lots of ham. Likewise, immense quantities of bacon, headcheese, pork chops, tenderloin … to say nothing of suet and rendered fat.

The thought led me back to hog fat, and to the crowded, overflowingly familiar coziness of the Abernathys' cluster of cabins—and by contrast, to thought of the dreadful emptiness at the Big House.

In a place with so many people, how could the loss of only four be so important? I had to stop and lean against a tree, let the sorrow wash through me, making no attempt to stop it. I'd learned. *"Ye canna hold a ghost at bay,"* Jamie had told me. *"Let them in."*

I let them in—I could never keep them out. And took what small comfort I could in hoping—no, I didn't hope, I told myself fiercely, I *knew*—that they were not ghosts in fact. Not dead, but only … elsewhere.

After a few moments, the overwhelming grief began to recede, going slowly as the ebbing tide. Sometimes it uncovered treasure: small forgotten images of Jemmy's face, smeared with honey, Brianna's laughter, Roger's hands, deft with a knife, carving one of the little cars—the house was still littered with them—then leaning to spear a muffin from a passing plate. And if to look at these caused fresh pain, at least I had them, and could keep them in my heart, knowing that in the fullness of time, they would bring consolation.

I breathed, and felt the tightness in my chest and throat ease. Amanda was not the only one who might benefit from modern surgery, I thought. I couldn't tell what might be done for Roger's vocal cords, but maybe … and yet, his voice now was good. Full and resonant, if rough. Perhaps he would choose to keep it as it was—he'd fought for it, and earned it.

The tree I leaned against was a pine; the needles swayed softly above me, then settled, as though in agreement. I had to go; it was late in the day and the air was growing colder.

Wiping my eyes, I settled the hood of my cloak and went on. It was a long walk from the Abernathys'—I should really have ridden Clarence, but he'd come up lame the day before, and I'd let him rest. I'd have to hurry, though, if I was to reach home before dark.

I cast a wary eye upward, judging the clouds, which had that soft, uniform gray of coming snow. The air was cold and thick with moisture; when the temperature dropped at nightfall, snow would fall.

The sky was still light, but only just, as I came down past the springhouse and into the backyard. Light enough to tell me that something was wrong, though—the back door stood open.

That set off alarm bells, and I turned to run back into the woods. I turned, and ran smack into a man who had come out of the trees behind me.

"Who the hell are you?" I demanded, stepping hastily back.

"Don't worry about that, Mrs.," he said, and grabbing me by the arm, yelled toward the house, "Hey, Donner! I got her!"

* * *

Whatever Wendigo Donner been doing for the last year, it hadn't been profitable, by the looks of him. Never a natty dresser at the best of times, he was now so ragged that his coat was literally falling apart, and a slice of stringy buttock showed through a rent in his breeches. His mane of hair was greasy and matted, and he stank.

"Where are they?" he demanded hoarsely.

"Where are what?" I swung round to face his companion, who seemed in slightly better condition. "And where are my housemaid and her sons?" We were standing in the kitchen, and the hearth fire was out; Mrs. Bug hadn't come that morning, and wherever Amy and the boys were, they'd been gone for some time.

"Dunno." The man shrugged, indifferent. "Wasn't nobody to home when we came."

"Where are the jewels?" Donner grabbed at my arm, jerking me round to face him. His eyes were sunk in his head, and his grip was hot; he was burning with fever.

"I haven't got any," I said shortly. "You're ill. You should—"

"You do! I know you do! Everybody knows!"

That gave me momentary pause. Gossip being what it was, everybody likely *thought* they knew that Jamie had a small cache of jewels. Small wonder if word of this hypothetical treasure had reached Donner—and little likelihood that I could convince him otherwise. I had no choice but to try, though.

“They’re gone,” I said simply.

Something flickered in his eyes at that.

“How?” he said.

I raised an eyebrow in the direction of his accomplice. Did he want the man to know?

“Go find Richie and Jed,” Donner said briefly to the thug, who shrugged and went out. Richie and Jed? How on earth many people had he brought? Past the first shock of seeing him, I now became aware that there were thumping feet upstairs, and the sound of cupboard doors being banged impatiently down the hall.

“My surgery! Get them out of there!” I dove for the door to the hallway, intending to perform this office myself, but Donner grabbed at my cloak to stop me.

I was bloody tired of being manhandled, and I wasn’t afraid of this miserable excuse for a human being.

“Let go!” I snapped, and kicked him briskly in the kneecap to emphasize the point. He yelped, but let go; I could hear him cursing behind me as I rushed through the door and down the hall.

Papers and books had been flung out into the hallway from Jamie’s office, and a puddle of ink had been poured over them. The explanation of the ink was apparent when I saw the thug rifling my surgery—he had a big blot of ink on the front of his shirt, where he had apparently sequestered the stolen pewter inkwell.

“What are you *doing,* you nitwit?” I said. The thug, a boy of sixteen or so, blinked at me, mouth open. He had one of Mr. Blogweather’s perfect glass globes in his hand; at this, he grinned maliciously and let it drop to the floor, where it shattered into a spray of fragments. One of the flying shards lanced through his cheek, slicing it open; he didn’t feel it, until the blood began to well. Then he put a hand to the wound, frowning in puzzlement, and bellowed in fright at the blood on his hand.

“Crap,” said Donner, behind me. He put his arms around me, and dragged me after him back to the kitchen.

“Look,” he said urgently, releasing me. “All I want is two. You can keep the rest. I gotta have one to pay these guys, and one to—to travel with.”

"But it's true," I insisted, knowing that he wouldn't believe me. "We haven't got any. My daughter and her family—they've gone. Gone back. They used all we had. There aren't any more."

He stared at me, disbelief plain in his burning eyes.

"Yes, there are," he said positively. "There have to be. I gotta get out of here!"

"Why?"

"Never you mind. I gotta go, and quick." He swallowed, eyes darting around the kitchen, as though the gems might be sitting casually on the sideboard. "Where are they?"

A hideous crash from the surgery, followed by an outbreak of shouted curses, prevented any reply I might have made. I moved by reflex toward the door, but Donner moved in front of me.

I was infuriated at this invasion, and beginning to be alarmed. While I'd never seen any indication of violence from Donner, I wasn't so sure about the men he'd brought with him. They *might* eventually give up and leave, when it became apparent that there were in fact no gems on the premises—or they might try to beat the location of said gems out of me.

I pulled my cloak more tightly around myself and sat down on a bench, trying to think calmly.

"Look," I said to Donner. "You've taken the house apart—" A crash from upstairs shook the house, and I jumped. My God, it sounded as though they'd tipped over the wardrobe. "You've taken the house apart," I repeated, through gritted teeth, "and you haven't found anything. Wouldn't I give them to you, if I had any, to save you wrecking the place?"

"No, I don't reckon you would. I wouldn't, if I was you." He rubbed a hand across his mouth. "*You* know what's going on—the war and all." He shook his head in confusion. "I didn't know it would be this way. Swear to God, half the people I meet don't know which way is up anymore. I thought it'd be like, you know, redcoats and all, and you just keep away from anybody in a uniform, keep away from the battles, and it'd be fine. But I haven't seen a redcoat *anywhere,* and people—you know, just plain old *people*—they're shooting each other and running around burning up each other's houses…."

He closed his eyes for a minute. His cheeks went from red one moment to white the next; I could see he was very ill. I could hear him, too; the breath rattled wetly in his chest, and he wheezed faintly. If he fainted, how would I get rid of his companions?

"Anyway," he said, opening his eyes. "I'm going. Going back. I don't care what things are like then; it's a hell of a lot better'n here."

"What about the Indians?" I inquired, with no more than a touch of sarcasm. "Leaving them to their own devices, are you?"

"Yeah," he said, missing the sarcasm. "Tell you the truth, I'm not so keen on Indians anymore, either." He rubbed absently at his upper chest, and I saw a large, puckered scar through a rent in his shirt.

"Man," he said, longing clear in his voice, "what I wouldn't give for a cold Bud and a baseball game on TV." Then his wandering attention snapped back to me. "So," he said in a halfway reasonable tone, "I need those diamonds. Or whatever. Hand 'em over and we'll leave."

I had been turning over various schemes for getting rid of them, to no particular avail, and was getting more uneasy by the moment. We had very little worth stealing, and from the looks of the rifled sideboard, they'd already got what there was—including, I realized, with a fresh stab of alarm, the pistols and powder. Before too much longer, they'd grow impatient.

Someone might come—Amy and the boys were likely at Brianna's cabin, which they were in process of moving into; they could come back at any moment. Someone could come looking for Jamie or myself—though the chances of that receded by the moment, with the dying light. Even if someone did, though, the effect was likely to be disastrous.

Then I heard voices on the front porch, and the stamping of feet, and leapt to my own feet, my heart in my mouth.

"Would you quit doin' that?" Donner said irritably. "You're the jumpiest twat I ever saw."

I ignored him, having recognized one of the voices. Sure enough, in the next moment, two of the thugs, brandishing pistols, shoved Jamie into the kitchen.

He was wary and disheveled, but his eyes went immediately to me, running up and down my body to assure himself that I was all right.

“I’m fine,” I said briefly. “These idiots think we have gemstones, and they want them.”

“So they said.” He straightened himself, shrugging to settle the coat on his shoulders, and glanced at the cupboards, hanging open, and the despoiled sideboard. Even the pie hutch had been overturned, and the remains of a raisin pie lay squashed on the floor, marked with a large heelprint. “I gather they’ve looked.”

“Look, mate,” said one of the thugs, reasonably, “all we want’s the swag. Just tell us where it is, and we go, no ’arm done, eh?”

Jamie rubbed the bridge of his nose, eyeing the man who’d spoken.

“I imagine my wife has told ye that we have no gems?”

“Well, she would, wouldn’t she?” the thug said tolerantly. “Women, you know.” He seemed to feel that now Jamie had showed up, they could get on with things in a more businesslike fashion, man-to-man.

Jamie sighed and sat down.

“Why d’ye think I’ve got any?” he inquired, rather mildly. “I have had, I admit—but no longer. They’ve been sold.”

“Where’s the money, then?” The second thug was obviously quite willing to settle for that, no matter what Donner thought.

“Spent,” Jamie said briefly. “I’m a colonel of militia—surely ye ken that much? It’s an expensive business, provisioning a militia company. Food, guns, powder, shoes—it adds up, aye? Why, the cost in shoe leather alone—and then, to say nothing of shoon for the horses! Wagons, too; ye wouldna believe the scandalous cost of wagons.…”

One of the thugs was frowning, but half-nodding, following this reasonable exegesis. Donner and his other companion were noticeably agitated, though.

"Shut up about the damn wagons," Donner said rudely, and bending, he snatched up one of Mrs. Bug's butcher knives from the floor. "Now, look," he said, scowling and trying to look menacing. "I've *had* it with the stalling around. You tell me where they are, or —or I'll—I'll cut her! Yeah, I'll cut her throat. Swear I will." With this, he clutched me by the shoulder and put the knife to my throat.

It had become clear to me some little time ago that Jamie *was* stalling for time, which meant that he expected something to happen. Which in turn meant he was expecting someone to come. That was reassuring, but I did think the apparent nonchalance of his demeanor in the face of my theoretically impending demise was perhaps carrying things a trifle too far.

"Oh," he said, scratching at the side of his neck. "Well, I wouldna do that, if I were you. She's the one who kens where the gems are, aye?"

"I *what*?" I cried indignantly.

"She is?" One of the other thugs brightened at that.

"Oh, aye," Jamie assured him. "Last time I went out wi' the militia, she hid them. Wouldna tell me where she'd put them."

"Wait—I thought you said you sold 'em and spent the money," Donner said, plainly confused.

"I was lying," Jamie explained, patient.

"Oh."

"But if ye're going to kill my wife, well, then, of course that alters the case."

"Oh," said Donner, looking somewhat happier. "Yeah. Exactly!"

"I believe we havena been introduced, sir," Jamie said politely, extending a hand. "I am James Fraser. And you are …?"

Donner hesitated for a minute, unsure what to do with the knife in his right hand, but then shifted it awkwardly to his left and leaned forward to shake Jamie's hand briefly.

"Wendigo Donner," he said. "Okay, now we're getting somewhere."

I made a rude noise, but it was drowned by a series of crashes and the sound of breaking glass from the surgery. The lout in there must be clearing the shelves wholesale, flinging bottles and jars on the floor. I grasped Donner's hand and pulled the knife away from my throat, then sprang to my feet, in much the same state of insane fury in which I had once torched a field full of grasshoppers.

This time, it was Jamie who seized me around the middle as I darted toward the door, swinging me half off my feet.

"Let go! I'll frigging *kill* him!" I said, kicking madly.

"Well, wait just a bit about that, Sassenach," he said, low-voiced, and lugged me back to the table, where he sat down with his arms wrapped around me, holding me firmly pinned on his lap. Further sounds of depredation came down the hall—the splintering of wood and crunch of glass under a bootheel. Evidently, the young lout had given up searching for anything and was simply destroying for the fun of it.

I took a deep breath, preparatory to emitting a scream of frustration, but stopped.

"Jeez," Donner said, wrinkling his nose. "What's that smell? Somebody cut one?" He looked accusingly at me, but I paid no attention. It was ether, heavy and sickly sweet.

Jamie stiffened slightly. He knew what it was, too, and essentially what it did.

Then he took a deep breath and carefully moved me off his lap, setting me on the bench beside him. I saw his eyes go to the knife sagging in Donner's hand, and heard what his keener ears had already picked up. Someone was coming.

He moved a little forward, getting his feet under him to spring, and flicked his eyes toward the cold hearth, where a heavy Dutch oven was sitting in the ashes. I nodded, very briefly, and as the back door opened, made a lunge across the kitchen.

Donner, with unexpected swiftness, stuck out a leg and tripped me. I fell headlong and slid, fetching up against the settle with a head-ringing thump. I groaned and lay still for a few moments, eyes closed, feeling all at once that I was much too old for this sort of carry-on. I opened my eyes reluctantly, and very stiffly got to my feet, to find the kitchen now full of people.

Donner's original sidekick had returned with two others, presumably Richie and Jed, and with them, the Bugs, Murdina looking alarmed, and Arch, coldly furious.

"A leannan!" Mrs. Bug cried, rushing toward me. "Are ye hurt, then?"

"No, no," I said, still rather dazed. "Just let me … sit down for a moment." I looked at Donner, but he no longer held his knife. He had been frowning at the floor—evidently he had dropped it when he tripped me—but his head jerked up at sight of the newcomers.

"What? Did you find anything?" he asked eagerly, for both Richie and Jed were beaming with self-importance.

"Sure did," one of them assured him. "Looka here!" He was holding Mrs. Bug's workbag, and at this, he upended it and shook the contents out onto the table, where a mass of woolly knitting landed with a massive *thunk!* Eager hands pawed the wool away, revealing an eight-inch-long ingot of gold, the metal shaved away at one end, and stamped in the center with the royal French fleur-de-lis.

Stunned silence followed the appearance of this apparition. Even Jamie looked completely nonplussed.

Mrs. Bug had been pale when they came in; now she had gone the color of chalk, and her lips had disappeared. Arch's eyes went straight to Jamie's, dark and defiant.

The only person unimpressed by sight of the glowing metal was Donner.

"Well, neato-mosquito," he said. "What about the jewels? Keep your eye on the goal here, people!"

His accomplices, however, had lost interest in theoretical jewels, with solid gold actually in hand, and were simultaneously discussing the possibility of more and squabbling over who should have custody of the present ingot.

My own head was spinning: from the blow, from the sudden appearance of the ingot and its revelations regarding the Bugs—and particularly from the fumes of ether, which were getting notably stronger. No one in the kitchen had noticed, but all sound from the surgery had ceased; the young lout in there had undoubtedly passed out.

The bottle of ether had been nearly full; enough to anesthetize a dozen elephants, I thought dizzily—or a houseful of people. Already, I could see Donner struggling to keep his head upright. A few minutes more, and all the thugs would likely have subsided into a state of innocuous desuetude—but so would we.

Ether is heavier than air; the stuff would sink to the floor, where it would gradually rise in a pool around our knees. I stood up, taking a quick breath from the presumably purer air higher up. I had to get the window open.

Jamie and Arch were speaking Gaelic to each other, much too fast for me to follow, even had my head been in normal working order. Donner was frowning at them, mouth open as though he meant to tell them to stop but couldn't quite find the words.

I fumbled with the catch of the inside shutters, having to concentrate very hard in order to make my fingers work. Finally, the latch flipped free and I swung the shutter open—revealing the leering face of an unfamiliar Indian in the twilight outside the window.

I shrieked and staggered back. Next thing, the back door sprang open and a squat bearded figure rushed in, bellowing in some incomprehensible tongue, followed by Ian, who was followed by yet another strange Indian, screaming and laying about himself with something—tomahawk? club? I couldn't get my eyes to focus well enough to tell.

All was pandemonium, seen through glazed eyes. I clutched the windowsill to keep from sinking to the floor, but couldn't summon the presence of mind to open the damn window. Everyone was struggling and fighting, but the inhabitants of the kitchen were doing it in slow motion, yelling and staggering like drunks. As I watched, my mouth hanging unbecomingly open, Jamie painstakingly drew Donner's knife out from under his buttocks, brought it up in a slow, graceful arc, and buried it under Donner's breastbone.

Something flew past my ear and crashed through the window, destroying what was probably the only intact pane of glass left in the house.

I breathed in deep gulps of fresh air, trying to clear my head, and made frantic waving motions with my hands, shouting—or trying to shout—"Get out! Get out!"

Mrs. Bug was trying to do just that, crawling on hands and knees toward the half-open door. Arch hit the wall and slid slowly down beside her, face gone blank. Donner had fallen face forward over the table, his blood dripping nastily onto the floorboards, and another thug was lying in the extinct hearth, his skull crushed. Jamie was still upright, swaying, and the squat bearded figure was standing beside him, shaking his head and looking confused as the fumes began to affect him.

"What's going on?" I heard him ask.

The kitchen was nearly dark now, the figures swaying like fronds of kelp in some underwater forest.

I closed my eyes for a second. When I opened them again, Ian was saying, "Wait, I'll light a candle." He had one of Brianna's matches in his hand, the tin in the other.

"IAN!" I shrieked, and then he struck the match.

There was a soft *whoof!* noise, then a louder *whoomp!* as the ether in the surgery ignited, and suddenly we were standing in a pool of fire. For a fraction of a second, I felt nothing, and then a burst of searing heat. Jamie seized my arm and hurled me toward the door; I staggered out, fell into the blackberry bushes, and rolled through them, thrashing and flailing at my smoking skirts.

Panicked and still uncoordinated from the ether, I struggled with the strings of my apron, finally managing to rip loose the strings and wriggle out of it. My linen petticoats were singed, but not charred. I crouched panting in the dead weeds of the dooryard, unable to do anything for the moment but breathe. The smell of smoke was strong and pungent.

Mrs. Bug was on the back porch on her knees, jerking off her cap, which was on fire.

Men erupted through the back door, beating at their clothes and hair. Rollo was in the yard, barking hysterically, and on the other side of the house, I could hear the screams of frightened horses. Someone had got Arch Bug out—he was stretched at full length in the dead grass, most of his hair and eyebrows gone, but evidently still alive.

My legs were red and blistered, but I wasn't badly burned—thank God for layers of linen and cotton, which burn slowly, I thought groggily. Had I been wearing something modern like rayon, I should have gone up like a torch.

The thought made me look back toward the house. It was full dark by now, and all the windows on the lower floor were alight. Flame danced in the open door. The place looked like an immense jack-o'-lantern.

"Ye're Mistress Fraser, I suppose?" The squat, bearded person bent over me, speaking in a soft Scottish burr.

"Yes," I said, coming gradually to myself. "Who are you, and where's Jamie?"

"Here, Sassenach." Jamie stumbled out of the dark and sat down heavily beside me. He waved a hand at the Scotsman. "May I present Mr. Alexander Cameron, known more generally as Scotchee?"

"Your servant, ma'am," he said politely.

I was feeling gingerly at my hair. Clumps of it had been singed to crispy thread, but at least I still had some.

I felt, rather than saw, Jamie look up at the house. I followed the direction of his glance, and saw a dark figure at the window upstairs, framed in the dim glow from the burning downstairs. He shouted something in the incomprehensible tongue, and began throwing things out of the window.

"Who's *that*?" I asked, feeling more than slightly surreal.

"Oh." Jamie rubbed at his face. "That would be Goose."

"Of course it would," I said, nodding. "He'll be a cooked goose, if he stays in there." This struck me as wildly hilarious, and I doubled up in laughter.

Evidently, it wasn't quite as witty as I'd thought; no one else seemed to think it funny. Jamie stood up and shouted something at the dark figure, who waved nonchalantly and turned back into the room.

“There’s a ladder in the barn,” Jamie said calmly to Scotchee, and they moved off into the darkness.

The house burned fairly slowly for a while; there weren’t a lot of easily flammable objects down below, bar the books and papers in Jamie’s study. A tall figure belted out of the back door, shirt pulled up over his nose with one hand, the tail of his shirt held up with the other to form a bag.

Ian came to a stop beside me, dropped to his knees, gasping, and let down his shirttail, releasing a pile of small objects.

“That’s all I could get, I’m afraid, Auntie.” He coughed a few times, waving his hand in front of his face. “D’ye ken what happened?”

“It’s not important,” I said. The heat was becoming more intense, and I struggled to my knees. “Come on; we’ll need to get Arch further away.”

The effects of the ether had mostly worn off, but I was still conscious of a strong sense of unreality. I hadn’t anything but cold well water with which to treat burns, but bathed Arch’s neck and hands, which had been badly blistered. Mrs. Bug’s hair had been singed, but she, like me, had been largely protected by her heavy skirts.

Neither she nor Arch said a word.

Amy McCallum came running up, face pale in the fiery glow; I told her to take the Bugs to Brianna’s cabin—hers now—and for God’s sake, keep the little boys safe away. She nodded and went, she and Mrs. Bug supporting Arch’s tall form between them.

No one made any effort to bring out the bodies of Donner and his companions.

I could see when the fire took hold in the stairwell; there was a sudden strong glow in the upstairs windows, and shortly thereafter, I could see flames in the heart of the house.

Snow began to fall, in thick, heavy, silent flakes. Within half an hour, the ground, trees, and bushes were dusted with white. The flames glowed red and gold, and the white snow reflected a soft reddish glow; the whole clearing seemed filled with the light of the fire.

Somewhere around midnight, the roof fell in, with a crash of glowing timbers and a tremendous shower of sparks that fountained high into the night. The sight was so beautiful that everyone watching went “Oooooh!” in involuntary awe.

Jamie’s arm tightened round me. We could not look away.

“What’s the date today?” I asked suddenly.

He frowned for a moment, thinking, then said, “December twenty-first.”

“And we aren’t dead, either. Bloody newspapers,” I said. “They never get *anything* right.”

For some reason, he thought *that* was very funny indeed, and laughed until he had to sit down on the ground.

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PROPERTY OF THE KING

We spent the remainder of the night sleeping—or at least horizontal—on the floor of the cabin, with the Bugs, Goose and his brother, Light—who confused me initially by referring to themselves as Jamie's "sons"—Scotchee, and Ian. On their way to visit Bird's village, the Indians—for Alexander Cameron was as much an Indian as the others, I thought—had met Jamie and Ian, hunting, and accepted Jamie's hospitality.

"Though it was a warmer welcome than we expected, Bear-Killer!" Goose said, laughing.

They did not ask who Donner was, nor make any reference to the men whose bodies burned in the funeral pyre of the house—only asked awed questions about the ether, and shook their heads in amazement, watching the fire.

For Jamie's part, I noticed that he did not ask why they were going to Bird's village—and concluded that he did not want to hear that some of the Cherokee had decided to support the King. He listened to the talk, but said little, spending his time fingering through the pile of objects saved from the fire. There was little of value there—a few scorched, loose pages from my casebook, some pewter spoons, a bullet mold. But when he fell asleep at last next to me, I saw that his fist was closed around something, and peering closely in the dark, made out the protruding head of the little cherrywood snake.

I woke just past dawn to find Aidan peering down at me, Adso in his arms.

"I found your wee cheetie in my bed," Aidan whispered. "D'ye want him?"

I was about to refuse, but then saw the look in Adso's eye. He was very tolerant of small children normally, but Aidan was holding him round the middle like a bag of laundry, his back legs dangling ludicrously.

"Yes," I said, my voice hoarse from smoke. "Here—I'll take him."

I sat up, but having accepted the cat, saw that most of the household was still asleep, rolled in blankets on the floor. Two notable exceptions: Jamie and Arch Bug were missing. I got up, and borrowing Amy's cloak from beside the door, went out.

The snow had stopped during the night, but there were two or three inches on the ground. I put Adso down under the eaves, where the ground was clear, and then—with a deep breath to steady myself—turned to look at the house.

Steam rose from the charred remains, which stood inkblot black and stark against the white-furred trees behind it. Only about half the house had burned completely; the west wall was still standing, as were the stone chimney stacks. The rest was a mass of charred timbers and mounded ash, already turning gray. The upper story was completely gone, and as for my surgery …

I turned away, hearing voices behind the house. Jamie and Arch were in the woodshed, but the door was open; I could see them inside, face to face. Jamie saw me hovering, and beckoned me in with a nod.

"Good morning, Arch," I said, peering at our erstwhile factor. "How are you?"

"I've been better, *a nighean,* thank ye kindly," he said, and coughed. His voice was little more than a harsh whisper, damaged by smoke, and there were enormous, fluid-filled blisters on both hands and face. Bar the loss of his hair and eyebrows, though, I thought he was otherwise all right.

"Arch was just about to explain this to me, Sassenach." Jamie pointed a toe at the gleaming metal of the gold ingot lying in the sawdust and wood chips at his feet. “Were ye not, Arch?”

His voice was outwardly pleasant, but I heard the steel in it as clearly as Arch did. Arch Bug was no pushover, though, eyebrows or no eyebrows.

“I owe ye nay explanations of anything, *Seaumais mac Brian,*” he said with equal pleasantness.

“I give ye the chance of explanation, man, not the choice.” He’d dropped the pleasant tone. Jamie was smudged with soot, and scorched round the edges, but his eyebrows were intact and being put to good use. He turned to me, gesturing to the gold.

“Ye’ve seen it before, aye?”

“Of course.” The last time I’d seen it, it had been gleaming in the lantern light, packed solid with its fellows in the bottom of a coffin in Hector Cameron’s mausoleum, but the shape of the ingots and the fleur-de-lis stamp were unmistakable. “Unless Louis of France has been sending someone else vast quantities of gold, it’s part of Jocasta’s hoard.”

“That it is not, and never was,” Arch corrected me firmly.

“Aye?” Jamie cocked a thick brow at him. “To whom does it belong, then, if not to Jocasta Cameron? D’ye claim it as your own?”

“I do not.” He hesitated, but the urge to speak was powerful. “It is the property of the King,” he said, and his old mouth closed tight on the last word.

“What, the King of—oh,” I said, realizing at long last. “*That* king.”

“Le roi, c’est mort,” Jamie said softly, as though to himself, but Arch turned fiercely to him.

“Is Scotland dead?”

Jamie drew breath, but didn’t speak at once. Instead, he gestured me to a seat on the stack of chopped cordwood, and nodded at Arch to take another, before sitting down beside me.

“Scotland will die when her last son does, *a charaid,*” he said, and waved a hand toward the door, taking in the mountains and hollows around us—and all the people therein. “How many are here? How many will be? Scotland lives—but not in Italy.” In Rome, he meant, where Charles Stuart eked out what remained to him of a life, drowning his disappointed dreams of a crown in drink.

Arch narrowed his eyes at this, but kept a stubborn silence.

“Ye were the third man, were ye not?” Jamie asked, disregarding this. “When the gold was brought ashore from France. Dougal MacKenzie took one-third, and Hector Cameron another. I couldna say what Dougal did with his—gave it to Charles Stuart, most likely, and may God have mercy on his soul for that. You were tacksman to Malcolm Grant; he sent ye, did he not? You took one-third of the gold on his behalf. Did ye give it to him?”

Arch nodded, slowly.

“It was given in trust,” he said, and his voice cracked. He cleared his throat and spat, the mucus tinged with black. “To me, and then to the Grant—who should have given it in turn to the King’s son.”

“Did he?” Jamie asked, interested. “Or did he think, like Hector Cameron, that it was too late?”

It had been; the cause was already lost at that point—no gold could have made a difference. Arch’s lips pressed so tightly together as almost to be invisible.

“He did what he did,” he said shortly. “What he thought right. That money was spent for the welfare of the clan. But Hector Cameron was a traitor, and his wife with him.”

“It was you who spoke to Jocasta in her tent,” I said suddenly, realizing. “At the Gathering where you met Jamie. You’d come there to find her, hadn’t you?”

Arch seemed surprised that I had spoken, but inclined his head an inch or so in acknowledgment. I wondered whether he had accepted—had sought?—a place with Jamie on account of his relationship with Jocasta.

“And that”—I poked a toe at the shaved ingot—“you found in Jocasta’s house, when you went with Roger and Duncan to bring back the fisher-folk.” Proof—if he had needed it—that Jocasta did indeed still have Hector’s share of the French gold.

“What I am wondering, myself,” Jamie said, rubbing a finger down the long, straight bridge of his nose, “is how the devil ye found the rest of it, and then got it away.”

Arch's lips pursed for a moment, then reluctantly unsealed themselves.

" 'Twas no great feat. I saw the salt at Hector's tomb—the way the black slaves kept awa'. If he didna rest easy, it was nay wonder—but where would the gold better be, save wi' him?" A wintry light shone in his faded eyes. "I kent Hector Cameron, a bit. He wasna the man to give up anything, only by reason of bein' dead."

Arch made frequent trips to Cross Creek as factor, to buy and trade. He was not usually a guest at River Run, but had been there often enough to be familiar with the property. If anyone saw a figure near the mausoleum at night—well, everyone knew that Hector Cameron's ghost "walked," confined to one spot only by the lines of salt; no one would ever go close enough to investigate.

And so he had simply abstracted one ingot on each trip—and not on every trip—eventually removing the whole hoard, before Duncan Innes discovered the loss.

"I shouldna have kept out that first ingot, I see that," he said, ruefully nodding at it. "At the first, though, I thought we might have need of it—Murdina and I. And then, when she was obliged to kill yon Brown—"

Jamie's head jerked up, and we both stared at him. He coughed.

"The wicked creature grew well enough to poke about the cabin when she was oot; he found that"—he nodded again at the ingot—"in her workbag, where she'd hidden it. He couldna ken, of course, what it was—but he kent well enough that ragged folk such as we ought not to have such a thing." His thin mouth pressed tight again, and I remembered that he had been chief tacksman for the Grant of clan Grant—a man of worth. Once.

"He asked about it, and she wouldna tell him anything, of course. But then, when he made his way to your house, she feared he would tell what he'd seen. And so she made an end to him."

It was said calmly; after all, what else could she do? Not for the first time, I wondered just what other things the Bugs had done—or been forced to do—in the years after Culloden.

"Well, ye kept the gold out of King George's hands, at least," Jamie said, a certain note of bleakness in his voice. I thought he was thinking of the battle at Moore’s Creek Bridge. If Hugh MacDonald had had that gold, with which to buy powder and arms, the victory there would not have been so easily won. Nor would the Highlanders have been slaughtered—again—charging sword in hand into the mouths of cannon.

“Arch,” I said, when the silence threatened to become oppressive, “*what,* exactly, did you plan to do with it?”

He blinked at that, and looked down at the ingot.

“I … I meant at first only to see if it was true what I’d heard—that Hector Cameron had taken his part of the gold away with him, used it for his own ends. Then I found Hector dead, but ’twas clear from the way his wife lived that he had indeed taken it. So I wondered—was there any left?”

One hand crept up, massaging his withered throat.

“To tell ye the truth, mistress—I wished mostly to take it back from Jocasta Cameron. Having done that, though …” His voice died away, but then he shook himself.

“I am a man of my word, *Seaumais mac Brian.* I swore an oath to my chief—and kept it, ’til he died. I swore my oath to the King across the water”—James Stuart, he meant—“but he is dead, now, too. And then—I swore loyalty to George of England when I came upon this shore. So tell me now where my duty lies?”

“Ye swore an oath to me, too, *Archibald mac Donagh,*” Jamie said.

Arch smiled at that, a wry expression, but a smile nonetheless.

“And by reason of that oath, ye’re still alive, *Seaumais mac Brian,*” he said. “I could have killed ye last night in your sleep and been well awa’.”

Jamie’s mouth twisted in a look that expressed considerable doubt of this statement, but he forbore to contradict.

“You are free of your oath to me,” he said formally in Gaelic. “Take your life from my hand.” And inclining his head toward the ingot, said, “Take that—and go.”

Arch regarded him for a moment, unblinking. Then stooped, picked up the ingot, and went.

"You didn't ask him where the gold is now," I observed, watching the tall old man make his way round the cabin to rouse his wife.

"Ye think he would ha' told me?" He stood up then, and stretched himself. Then he shook himself like a dog, and went to stand in the doorway of the shed, arms braced in the door frame, looking out. It was beginning to snow again.

"I see it's not only the Frasers who are stubborn as rocks," I said, coming to stand beside him. "Scotland lives, all right." That made him laugh.

He put one arm around me, and I rested my head on his shoulder.

"Your hair smells of smoke, Sassenach," he said softly.

"Everything smells of smoke," I replied just as softly.

The burned ruins of the house were still too warm for snow to stick, but that would pass. If it went on snowing, by tomorrow the house would be obliterated, white as the rocks and trees. We, too—eventually.

I thought of Jocasta and Duncan, gone to the safety of Canada, the welcome of kinfolk. Where would the Bugs go—back to Scotland? For an instant, I longed to go, too. Away from loss and desolation. Home.

But then I remembered.

"So long as one hundred of us remain alive …," I quoted.

Jamie tilted his head against mine for a moment, then raised it and turned to look down at me.

"And when ye go to a sick man's bed, Sassenach—to a wounding or a birth—how is it, then, that ye can rise from your own bed, even from mortal weariness, and go in the dark, alone? Why is it that ye willna wait, that ye dinna say no, ever? Why is it that ye willna forbear, even when ye know the case to be hopeless?"

"I can't." I kept my gaze on the ruin of the house, its ashes growing cold before my eyes. I knew what he meant, the unwelcome truth he would force me to speak—but the truth lay between us, and must be told. "I cannot … can *not* … admit … that there is anything to do but win."

He cupped my chin and tilted my face upward, so that I was obliged to meet his eyes. His own face was worn with tiredness, the lines cut deep by eyes and mouth, but the eyes themselves were clear, cool, and fathomless as the waters of a hidden spring.

"Nor can I," he said.

"I know."

"Ye can at least promise me the victory," he said, but his voice held the whisper of a question.

"Yes," I said, and touched his face. I sounded choked, and my vision blurred. "Yes, I can promise that. This time." No mention made of what that promise spared, of the things I could not guarantee. Not life, not safety. Not home, nor family; not law nor legacy. Just the one thing—or maybe two.

"The victory," I said. "And that I will be with you 'til the end."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Snowflakes pelted down, melting as they struck his face, sticking for an instant, white on his lashes. Then he opened his eyes and looked at me.

"That is enough," he said softly. "I ask no more."

He reached forward then and took me in his arms, held me close for a moment, the breath of snow and ashes cold around us. Then he kissed me, released me, and I took a deep breath of cold air, harsh with the scent of burning. I brushed a floating smut off my arm.

"Well … good. *Bloody* good. Er …" I hesitated. "What do you suggest we do next?"

He stood looking at the charred ruin, eyes narrowed, then lifted his shoulders and let them fall.

"I think," he said slowly, "we shall go—" He stopped suddenly, frowning. "What in God's name …?"

Something was moving at the side of the house. I blinked away the snowflakes, standing on tiptoe to see better.

"Oh, it *can't* be!" I said—but it was. With a tremendous upheaval of snow, dirt, and charred wood, the white sow thrust her way into daylight. Fully emerged, she shook her massive shoulders, then, pink snout twitching irritably, moved purposefully off toward the wood. A moment later, a smaller version likewise emerged—and another, and another … and eight half-grown piglets, some white, some spotted, and one as black as the timbers of the house, trotted off in a line, following their mother.

"Scotland lives," I said again, giggling uncontrollably. "Er—where did you say we were going?"

"To Scotland," he said as though this were obvious. "To fetch my printing press."

He was still looking at the house, but his eyes were fixed somewhere beyond the ashes, far beyond the present moment. An owl hooted deep in the distant wood, startled from its sleep. He stood silent for a bit, then shook off his reverie, and smiled at me, snow melting in his hair.

"And then," he said simply, "we shall come back to fight."

He took my hand and turned away from the house, toward the barn where the horses stood waiting, patient in the cold.

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EPILOGUE I
LALLYBROCH

The penlight's beam moved slowly across the heavy oak rafter, paused at a suspicious hole, then passed on. The heavyset man wore a frown of scrupulous concentration, lips pursed like one momentarily expecting some unpleasant surprise.

Brianna stood beside him, looking up at the shadowed recesses of the ceiling in the entry hall, wearing a similar frown of concentration. She would not recognize woodworm or termites unless a rafter actually fell on her, she thought, but it seemed polite to behave as though she were paying attention.

In fact, only half her attention was focused on the heavyset gentleman's murmured remarks to his helot, a small young woman in an overall too big for her, with pink streaks in her hair. The other half was focused on the noises from upstairs, where the children were theoretically playing hide 'n seek among the jumble of packing boxes. Fiona had brought over her brood of three small fiends, and then craftily abandoned them, running off to do an errand of some sort, promising to return by teatime.

Brianna glanced at her wristwatch, still surprised at seeing it there. Half an hour yet to go. If they could avoid bloodshed until—

A piercing scream from upstairs made her grimace. The helot, less hardened, dropped her clipboard with a yelp.

"MAMA!" Jem, in tattling mode.

"WHAT?" she roared in answer. "I'm BUSY!"

"But Mama! Mandy *hit* me!" came an indignant report from the top of the stairs. Looking up, she could see the top of his head, the light from the window glowing on his hair.

"She did? Well—"

“With a *stick*!”

“What sort of—”

“On *purpose*!”

“Well, I don’t think—”

“AND …”—a pause before the damning denouement—“SHE DIDN’T SAY SHE WAS SORRY!”

The builder and his helot had given up looking for woodworm, in favor of following this gripping narrative, and now both of them looked at Brianna, doubtless in expectation of some Solomonic decree.

Brianna closed her eyes momentarily.

“MANDY,” she bellowed. “Say you’re sorry!”

“Non’t!” came a high-pitched refusal from above.

“Aye, ye will!” came Jem’s voice, followed by scuffling. Brianna headed for the stair, blood in her eye. Just as she set her foot on the tread, Jem uttered a piercing squeal.

“She BIT me!”

“Jeremiah MacKenzie, don’t you *dare* bite her back!” she shouted. “Both of you stop it this instant!”

Jem thrust a disheveled head through the banister, hair sticking up on end. He was wearing bright blue eye shadow, and someone had applied pink lipstick in a crude mouth-shape from one ear to the other.

“She’s a feisty wee baggage,” he ferociously informed the fascinated spectators below. “My grandda said so.”

Brianna wasn’t sure whether to laugh, cry, or utter a loud shriek, but with a hasty wave at the builder and his assistant, she ran up the stairs to sort them out.

The sorting took rather more time than expected, since she discovered in the process that Fiona’s three little girls, so notably quiet during the latest squabble, had been quiet because—having decorated Jem, Mandy, and themselves—they were busily engaged in painting faces on the bathroom walls with Brianna’s new makeup.

Coming back down a quarter of an hour later, she discovered the builder sitting peaceably on an upturned coal scuttle, having his tea break, while the helot wandered open-mouthed about the entry hall, a half-eaten scone in one hand.

“All those kids yours?” she asked Brianna, with a sympathetic quirk of one pierced brow.

“No, thank God. Does everything look all right down here?”

“Touch o’ damp,” the builder said cheerfully. “Only to be expected, though, old place like this. When’s it built, then, hen, d’ye know?”

“1721, thickie,” the helot said, with comfortable scorn. “Did ye not see it carved in the lintel, there, where we came in?”

“Nah, then, is it?” The builder looked interested, but not enough to get up and look for himself. “Cost a fortune to put back in shape, won’t it?” He nodded at the wall, where one of the oak panels showed the damage of boots and sabers, crisscrossed with slashes whose rawness had darkened with the years, but still showed clear.

“No, we won’t fix that,” Brianna said, a lump in her throat. “That was done right after the ’45. It’ll stay that way.” *We keep it so,* her uncle had told her, *to remember always what the English are.*

“Oh, historic-like. Right you are, then,” the builder said, nodding wisely. “Americans don’t often mind about the history so much, do they? Wanting all mod cons, electric cookers, effing automatic thisses and thats. Central heating!”

“I’ll settle for toilets that flush,” she assured him. “That, and hot water. Speaking of which, will you have a look at the boiler? It’s in a shed in the yard, and it’s fifty years old if it’s a day. And we’ll want to replace the geyser in the upstairs bath, too.”

“Oh, aye.” The builder brushed crumbs from his shirt, corked his Thermos flask, and rose ponderously to his feet. “Come on, Angie, let’s have a look, then.”

Brianna hovered suspiciously at the foot of the stair, listening for any sounds of riot before following, but all was well above; she could hear the crash of building blocks, evidently being thrown at the walls, but no yells of outrage. She turned to follow, just in time to see the builder, who had paused to look up at the lintel.

“The ’45, eh? Ever think what it’d be like?” he was saying. “If Bonnie Prince Charlie had won, I mean.”

"Oh, in your dreams, Stan! He'd never a chance, bloody Eyetalian ponce."

"Naw, naw, he'd have done it, sure, was it no for the effing Campbells. Traitors, aye? To a man. And a woman, too, I expect," he added, laughing—from which Brianna gathered that the helot's last name was very likely Campbell.

They passed on toward the shed, their argument growing more heated, but she stopped, not wanting to go after them until she had herself under control.

Oh, God, she prayed passionately, *oh, God—that they might be safe! Please, please, let them be safe.* It didn't matter how ridiculous it might be to pray for the safety of people who had been—who had to be—dead for more than two hundred years. It was the only thing she could do, and did it several times each day, whenever she thought of them. Much more often, now that they had come to Lallybroch.

She blinked back tears, and saw Roger's Mini Cooper come down the winding drive. The backseat was piled high with boxes; he was finally clearing out the last bits of rubbish from the Reverend's garage, salvaging those items that might have value to someone—a dismayingly high proportion of the contents.

"Just in time," she said, a little shaky, as he came up the walk smiling, a large box under his arm. She still found him startling with short hair. "Ten minutes more, and I'd kill somebody, for sure. Probably Fiona, for starters."

"Oh, aye?" He bent and kissed her with particular enthusiasm, indicating that he probably hadn't heard what she'd said. "I've got something."

"So I see. What—"

"Damned if I know."

The box he laid on the ancient dining table was wood, as well; a sizable casket made of maple, darkened by years, soot, and handling, but with the workmanship still apparent to her practiced eye. It was beautifully made, the joints perfectly dovetailed, with a sliding top—but the top didn't slide, having been at some point sealed with a thick bead of what looked like melted beeswax, gone black with age.

The most striking thing about it, though, was the top. Burned into the wood was a name: *Jeremiah Alexander Ian Fraser MacKenzie.*

She felt a clenching in her lower belly at the sight of it, and glanced up at Roger, who was tense with some suppressed feeling; she could feel it vibrating through him.

"What?" she whispered. "Who *is* that?"

Roger shook his head, and pulled a filthy envelope from his pocket.

"This was with it, taped to the side. It's the Reverend's handwriting, one of the little notes he'd sometimes put with something to explain its significance, just in case. But I can't say this is an explanation, exactly."

The note was brief, stating merely that the box had come from a defunct banking house in Edinburgh. Instructions had been stored with the box, stating that it was not to be opened, save by the person whose name was inscribed thereon. The original instructions had perished, but were passed on verbally by the person from whom he obtained the box.

"And who was *that*?" she asked.

"No idea. Do you have a knife?"

"Do I have a knife," she muttered, digging in the pocket of her jeans. "Do I ever *not* have a knife?"

"That was a rhetorical question," he said, kissing her hand and taking the bright red Swiss Army knife she offered him.

The beeswax cracked and split away easily; the lid of the box, though, was unwilling to yield after so many years. It took both of them—one clutching the box, the other pushing and pulling on the lid—but finally, it came free with a small squealing noise.

The ghost of a scent floated out; something indistinguishable, but plantlike in origin.

"Mama," she said involuntarily. Roger glanced at her, startled, but she gestured at him urgently to go on. He reached carefully into the box and removed its contents: a stack of letters, folded and sealed with wax, two books—and a small snake made of cherrywood, heavily polished by long handling.

She made a small, inarticulate sound and seized the top letter, pressing it so hard against her chest that the paper crackled and the wax seal split and fell away. The thick, soft paper, whose fibers showed the faint stains of what had once been flowers.

Tears were falling down her face, and Roger was saying something, but she didn't attend the words, and the children were making an uproar upstairs, the builders were still arguing outside, and the only thing in the world she could see were the faded words on the page, written in a sprawling, difficult hand.

December 31, 1776

My dear daughter,

As you will see if ever you receive this, we are alive.…

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EPILOGUE II
THE DEVIL IS IN THE DETAILS

"What's this, then?" Amos Crupp squinted at the page laid out in the bed of the press, reading it backward with the ease of long experience.

"It is with grief that the news is received of the deaths by fire … Where'd that come from?"

"Note from a subscriber," said Sampson, his new printer's devil, shrugging as he inked the plate. "Good for a bit of filler, there, I thought; General Washington's address to the troops run short of the page."

"Hmph. I s'pose. Very old news, though," Crupp said, glancing at the date. "January?"

"Well, no," the devil admitted, heaving down on the lever that lowered the page onto the plate of inked type. The press sprang up again, the letters wet and black on the paper, and he picked the sheet off with nimble fingertips, hanging it up to dry. " 'Twas December, by the notice. But I'd set the page in Baskerville twelve-point, and the slugs for November and December are missing in that font. Not room to do it in separate letters, and not worth the labor to reset the whole page."

"To be sure," said Amos, losing interest in the matter, as he perused the last paragraphs of Washington's speech. "Scarcely signifies, anyway. After all, they're all dead, aren't they?"

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This Book is Dedicated to

* * *

CHARLES DICKENS
ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
DOROTHY L. SAYERS
JOHN D. MACDONALD
and
P. G. WODEHOUSE

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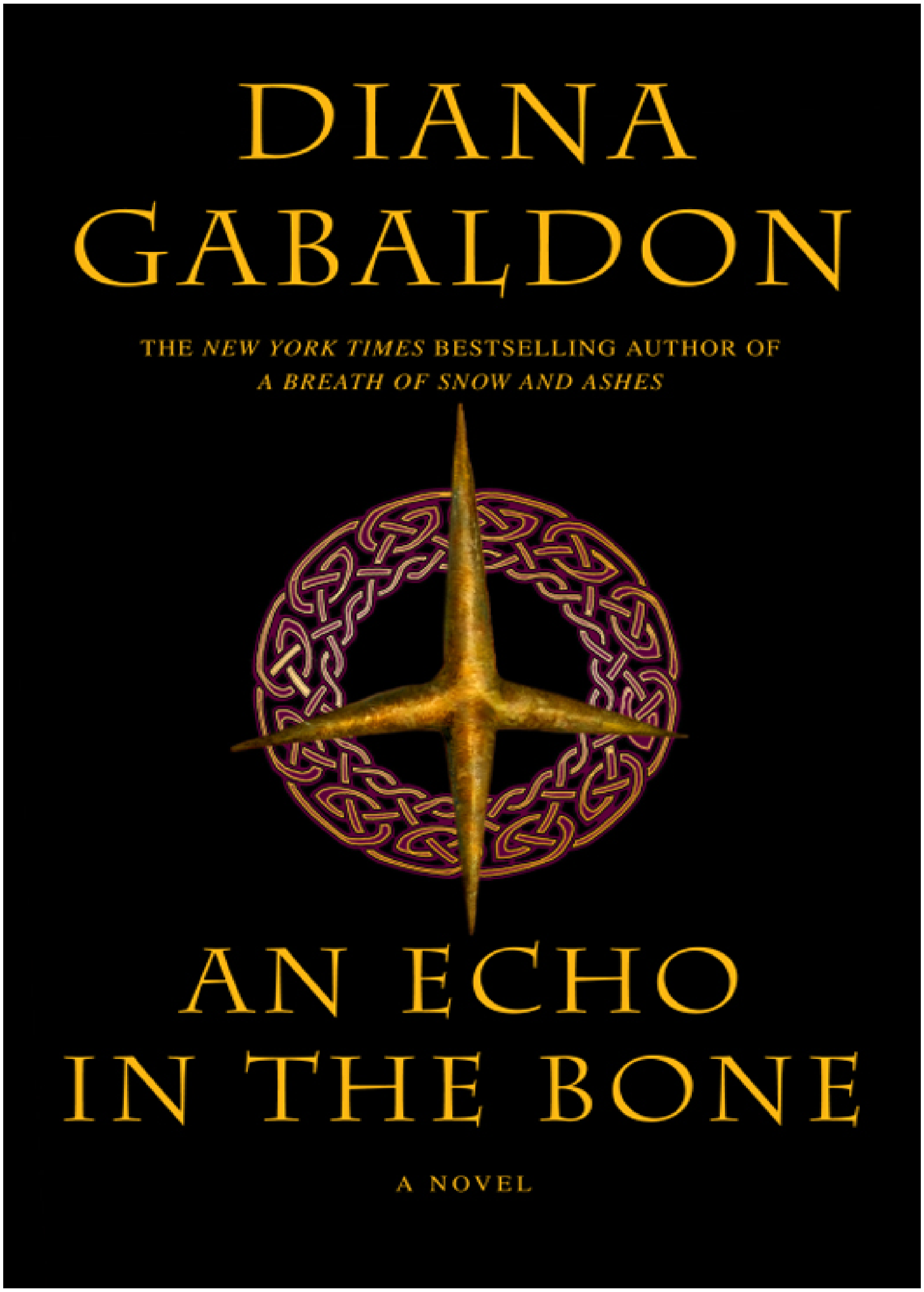
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A NOVEL

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AN ECHO
IN THE BONE

A NOVEL

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PROLOGUE

The body is amazingly plastic. The spirit, even more so. But there are some things you don't come back from. Say ye so, *a nighean*? True, the body's easily maimed, and the spirit can be crippled—yet there's that in a man that is never destroyed.

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PART ONE

A Troubling of the Waters

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1

SOMETIMES THEY’RE REALLY DEAD

Wilmington, colony of North Carolina
July 1776

The pirate’s head had disappeared. William heard the speculations from a group of idlers on the quay nearby, wondering whether it would be seen again.

“Na, him be gone for good,” said a ragged man of mixed blood, shaking his head. “De ally-gator don’ take him, de water will.”

A backwoodsman shifted his tobacco and spat into the water in disagreement.

“No, he’s good for another day—two, maybe. Them gristly bits what holds the head on, they dry out in the sun. Tighten up like iron. Seen it many a time with deer carcasses.”

William saw Mrs. MacKenzie glance quickly at the harbor, then away. She looked pale, he thought, and maneuvered himself slightly so as to block her view of the men and the brown flood of high tide, though since it *was* high, the corpse tied to its stake was naturally not visible. The stake was, though—a stark reminder of the price of crime. The pirate had been staked to drown on the mudflats several days before, the persistence of his decaying corpse an ongoing topic of public conversation.

“Jem!” Mr. MacKenzie called sharply, and lunged past William in pursuit of his son. The little boy, red-haired like his mother, had wandered away to listen to the men’s talk, and was now leaning perilously out over the water, clinging to a bollard in an attempt to see the dead pirate.

Mr. MacKenzie snatched the boy by the collar, pulled him in, and swept him up in his arms, though the boy struggled, craning back toward the swampish harbor.

"I want to see the wallygator eat the pirate, Daddy!"

The idlers laughed, and even MacKenzie smiled a little, though the smile disappeared when he glanced at his wife. He was at her side in an instant, one hand beneath her elbow.

"I think we must be going," MacKenzie said, shifting his son's weight in order better to support his wife, whose distress was apparent. "Lieutenant Ransom—Lord Ellesmere, I mean"—he corrected with an apologetic smile at William—"will have other engagements, I'm sure."

This was true; William was engaged to meet his father for supper. Still, his father had arranged to meet him at the tavern just across the quay; there was no risk of missing him. William said as much, and urged them to stay, for he was enjoying their company—Mrs. MacKenzie's, particularly—but she smiled regretfully, though her color was better, and patted the capped head of the baby in her arms.

"No, we do have to be going." She glanced at her son, still struggling to get down, and William saw her eyes flicker toward the harbor and the stark pole that stood above the flood. She resolutely looked away, fixing her eyes upon William's face instead. "The baby's waking up; she'll be wanting food. It was so lovely to meet you, though. I wish we might talk longer." She said this with the greatest sincerity, and touched his arm lightly, giving him a pleasant sensation in the pit of the stomach.

The idlers were now placing wagers on the reappearance of the drowned pirate, though by the looks of things, none of them had two groats to rub together.

"Two to one he's still there when the tide goes out."

"Five to one the body's still there, but the head's gone. I don't care what you say about the gristly bits, Lem, that there head was just a-hangin' by a thread when this last tide come in. Next un'll take it, sure."

Hoping to drown this conversation out, William embarked on an elaborate farewell, going so far as to kiss Mrs. MacKenzie's hand with his best court manner—and, seized by inspiration, kissed the baby girl's hand, too, making them all laugh. Mr. MacKenzie gave him rather an odd look, but didn't seem offended, and shook his hand in a most republican manner—playing out the joke by setting down his son and making the little boy shake hands as well.

"Have you kilt anybody?" the boy inquired with interest, looking at William's dress sword.

"No, not yet," William replied, smiling.

"My grandsire's kilt two dozen men!"

"Jemmy!" Both parents spoke at once, and the little boy's shoulders went up around his ears.

"Well, he *has!*"

"I'm sure he is a bold and bloody man, your grandsire," William assured the little boy gravely. "The King always has need of such men."

"My grandda says the King can kiss his arse," the boy replied matter-of-factly.

"JEMMY!"

Mr. MacKenzie clapped a hand over his outspoken offspring's mouth.

"You *know* your grandda didn't say that!" Mrs. MacKenzie said. The little boy nodded agreeably, and his father removed the muffling hand.

"No. Grannie did, though."

"Well, that's somewhat more likely," Mr. MacKenzie murmured, obviously trying not to laugh. "But we still don't say things like that to soldiers—they work for the King."

"Oh," said Jemmy, clearly losing interest. "Is the tide going out now?" he asked hopefully, craning his neck toward the harbor once more.

"No," Mr. MacKenzie said firmly. "Not for hours. You'll be in bed."

Mrs. MacKenzie smiled at William in apology, her cheeks charmingly flushed with embarrassment, and the family took its leave with some haste, leaving William struggling between laughter and dismay.

“Oy, Ransom!”

He turned at his name, to find Harry Dobson and Colin Osborn, two second lieutenants from his regiment, evidently escaped from duty and eager to sample the fleshpots of Wilmington—such as they were.

“Who’s that?” Dobson looked after the departing group, interested.

“A Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie. Friends of my father’s.”

“Oh, married, is she?” Dobson sucked in his cheeks, still watching the woman. “Well, make it a bit harder, I suppose, but what’s life without a challenge?”

“Challenge?” William gave his diminutive friend a jaundiced look. “Her husband’s roughly three times your size, if you hadn’t noticed.”

Osborn laughed, going red in the face.

“She’s *twice* his size! She’d crush you, Dobby.”

“And what makes you think I mean to be on the bottom?” Dobson inquired with dignity. Osborn hooted.

“What’s this obsession of yours with giantesses?” William demanded. He glanced at the little family, now nearly out of sight at the end of the street. “That woman’s nearly as tall as I am!”

“Oh, rub it in, why don’t you?” Osborn, who was taller than Dobson’s five feet, but still a head shorter than William, aimed a mock kick at his knee. William dodged it and cuffed Osborn, who ducked and shoved him into Dobson.

“Gennelmen!” The menacing cockney tones of Sergeant Cutter brought them up sharp. They might outrank the sergeant, but not one of them would have the nerve to point this out. The entire battalion went in fear of Sergeant Cutter, who was older than God and approximately Dobson’s height, but who contained within his diminutive physique the sheer fury of a full-sized volcano on the boil.

“Sergeant!” Lieutenant William Ransom, Earl of Ellesmere and senior of the group, drew himself up straight, chin pressed back into his stock. Osborn and Dobson hastily followed his lead, quaking in their boots.

Cutter strode back and forth in front of them, in the manner of a stalking leopard. You could just see the lashing tail and the preliminary licking of chops, William thought. Waiting for the bite was almost worse than getting it in the arse.

“And where’s your troops, then?” Cutter snarled. *“Sirs?”*

Osborn and Dobson at once began sputtering explanations, but Lieutenant Ransom—for once—walked on the side of the angels.

“My men are guarding the Governor’s Palace, under Lieutenant Colson. I’m given leave, Sergeant, to dine with my father,” he said respectfully. “By Sir Peter.”

Sir Peter Packer’s was a name to conjure with, and Cutter abated in mid-spew. Rather to William’s surprise, though, it wasn’t Sir Peter’s name that had produced this reaction.

“Your father?” Cutter said, squinting. “That’s Lord John Grey, is it?”

“Er … yes,” William replied cautiously. “Do you … know him?”

Before Cutter could reply, the door of a nearby tavern opened, and William’s father came out. William smiled in delight at this timely appearance, but quickly erased the smile as the sergeant’s gimlet gaze fixed on him.

“Don’t you be a-grinnin’ at *me* like an ’airy ape,” the sergeant began, in dangerous tones, but was interrupted by Lord John’s clapping him familiarly on the shoulder—something none of the three young lieutenants would have done if offered significant money.

“Cutter!” Lord John said, smiling warmly. “I heard those dulcet tones and said to myself, why damn me if it isn’t Sergeant Aloysius Cutter! There can’t be another man alive who sounds so much like a bulldog that’s swallowed a cat and lived to tell about it.”

“Aloysius?” Dobson mouthed at William, but William merely grunted briefly in response, unable to shrug, as his father had now turned his attention in his direction.

"William," he said, with a cordial nod. "How very punctual you are. My apologies for being so late; I was detained." Before William could say anything or introduce the others, though, Lord John had embarked upon a lengthy reminiscence with Sergeant Cutter, reliving high old times on the Plains of Abraham with General Wolfe.

This allowed the three young officers to relax slightly, which, in Dobson's case, meant a return to his earlier train of thought.

"You said that red-haired poppet's a friend of your father's?" he whispered to William. "Find out from him where she's staying, eh?"

"Idiot," hissed Osborn. "She isn't even pretty! She's long-nosed as—as—as Willie!"

"Didn't see as high as her face," Dobson said, smirking. "Her tits were right at eye-level, though, and *those* …"

"Ass!"

"Shh!" Osborn stamped on Dobson's foot to shut him up as Lord John turned back to the young men.

"Will you introduce me to your friends, William?" Lord John inquired politely. Rather red in the face—he had reason to know that his father had acute hearing, despite his artillery experiences—William did so, and Osborn and Dobson both bowed, looking rather awed. They hadn't realized who his father was, and William was at once proud that they were impressed, and mildly dismayed that they'd discovered Lord John's identity—it would be all over the battalion before supper tomorrow. Not that Sir Peter didn't know, of course, but—

He gathered his wits, realizing that his father was taking leave for them both, and returned Sergeant Cutter's salute, hastily but in good form, before hurrying after his father, leaving Dobby and Osborn to their fate.

"I saw you speaking to Mr. and Mrs. MacKenzie," Lord John said casually. "I trust they are well?" He glanced down the quay, but the MacKenzies had long since disappeared from view.

"Seemed so," Willie said. He was *not* going to ask where they stayed, but the impression the young woman had made on him lingered. He couldn't say if she was pretty or not; her eyes had struck him, though—a wonderful deep blue with long auburn lashes, and fixed on him with a flattering intensity that had warmed the cockles of his heart. Grotesquely tall, of course, but—what was he thinking? The woman was married—with children! And red-haired, to boot.

“You’ve—er—known them long?” he asked, thinking of the startlingly perverse political sentiments that evidently flourished in the family.

“Quite some time. She is the daughter of one of my oldest friends, Mr. James Fraser. Do you recall him, by chance?”

William frowned, not placing the name—his father had thousands of friends, how should he …

“Oh!” he said. “Not an English friend, you don’t mean. Was it not a Mr. Fraser that we visited in the mountains, that time when you fell sick of the—of the measle?” The bottom of his stomach dropped a little, remembering the sheer terror of that time. He had traveled through the mountains in a daze of misery; his mother had died only a month before. Then Lord John had caught the measle, and William had been sure that his father was about to die likewise, leaving him completely alone in the wilderness. There hadn’t been room for anything in his mind but fear and grief, and he retained only a jumble of confused impressions from the visit. He had some dim recollection that Mr. Fraser had taken him fishing and been kind to him.

“Yes,” his father said, with a sidelong smile. “I’m touched, Willie. I should have thought you might recall that visit more because of your own misadventure than mine.”

“Mis—” Memory rushed over him, succeeded by a flood of heat, hotter than the humid summer air. “Thanks very much! I’d managed to expunge that from my memory, until you mentioned it!”

His father was laughing, and making no attempt to hide it. In fact, he was convulsed.

“I’m sorry, Willie,” he said, gasping and wiping his eyes with a corner of his handkerchief. “I can’t help it; it was the most—the most—oh, God, I’ll never forget what you looked like when we pulled you out of that privy!”

“You *know* it was an accident,” William said stiffly. His cheeks burned with remembered mortification. At least Fraser’s daughter hadn’t been present to witness his humiliation at the time.

“Yes, of course. But—” His father pressed the handkerchief to his mouth, his shoulders shaking silently.

“Feel free to stop cackling at any point,” William said coldly. “Where the devil are we going, anyway?” They’d reached the end of the quay, and his father was leading them—still snorting like a grampus—into one of the quiet, tree-lined streets, away from the taverns and inns near the harbor.

“We’re dining with a Captain Richardson,” his father said, controlling himself with an obvious effort. He coughed, blew his nose, and put away the handkerchief. “At the house of a Mr. Bell.”

Mr. Bell’s house was whitewashed, neat, and prosperous, without being ostentatious. Captain Richardson gave much the same sort of impression: of middle age, well-groomed and well-tailored, but without any notable style, and with a face you couldn’t pick out of a crowd two minutes after seeing it.

The two Misses Bell made a much stronger impression, particularly the younger, Miriam, who had honey-colored curls peeping out of her cap, and big, round eyes that remained fixed on William throughout dinner. She was seated too far away for him to be able to converse with her directly, but he fancied that the language of the eyes was sufficient to indicate to her that the fascination was mutual, and if an opportunity for more personal communication should offer later …? A smile, and a demure lowering of honey-colored lashes, followed by a quick glance toward a door that stood open to the side porch, for air. He smiled back.

“Do you think so, William?” his father said, loudly enough to indicate that it was the second time of asking.

“Oh, certainly. Um … think what?” he asked, since it was after all Papa, and not his commander. His father gave him the look that meant he would have rolled his eyes had they not been in public, but replied patiently.

“Mr. Bell was asking whether Sir Peter intends to remain long in Wilmington.” Mr. Bell, at the head of the table, bowed graciously—

though William observed a certain narrowing of his eyes in Miriam's direction. Perhaps he'd best come back to call tomorrow, he thought, when Mr. Bell might be at his place of business.

"Oh. I believe we'll remain here for only a short time, sir," he said respectfully to Mr. Bell. "I collect that the chief trouble is in the backcountry, and so we will no doubt move to suppress it without delay."

Mr. Bell looked pleased, though from the corner of his eye, William saw Miriam pout prettily at the suggestion of his imminent departure.

"Good, good," Bell said jovially. "No doubt hundreds of Loyalists will flock to join you along your march."

"Doubtless so, sir," William murmured, taking another spoonful of soup. He doubted that Mr. Bell would be among them. Not really the marching type, to look at. And not that the assistance of a lot of untrained provincials armed with shovels would be helpful in any case, but he could hardly say so.

William, trying to see Miriam without looking directly at her, instead intercepted the flicker of a glance that traveled between his father and Captain Richardson, and for the first time, began to wonder. His father had distinctly said they were dining with Captain Richardson—meaning that a meeting with the captain was the point of the evening. Why?

Then he caught a look from Miss Lillian Bell, who was seated across from him, next his father, and ceased thinking about Captain Richardson. Dark-eyed, taller and more slender than her sister—but really quite a handsome girl, now he noticed.

Still, when Mrs. Bell and her daughters rose and the men retired to the porch after dinner, William was not surprised to find himself at one end with Captain Richardson, while his father engaged Mr. Bell at the other in a spirited discussion of tar prices. Papa could talk to anyone about anything.

"I have a proposition to put before you, Lieutenant," Richardson said, after the usual cordialities had been exchanged.

"Yes, sir," William said respectfully. His curiosity had begun to rise. Richardson was a captain of light dragoons, but not presently with his regiment; that much he had revealed over dinner, saying casually that he was on detached duty. Detached to do what?

"I do not know how much your father has told you regarding my mission?"

"Nothing, sir."

"Ah. I am charged with the gathering of intelligence in the Southern Department. Not that I am in command of such operations, you understand"—the captain smiled modestly—"but a small part of them."

"I … appreciate the great value of such operations, sir," William said, groping for diplomacy, "but I—for myself, that is to say—"

"You have no interest in spying. No, of course not." It was dark on the porch, but the dryness of the captain's tone was evident. "Few men who regard themselves as soldiers do."

"I meant no offense, sir."

"None taken. I am not, however, recruiting you as a spy—that is a delicate occupation, and one involving some danger—but rather as a messenger. Though should you find opportunity to act the intelligencer along your way … well, that would be an additional contribution, and much appreciated."

William felt the blood rise in his face at the implication that he was capable neither of delicacy nor danger, but kept his temper, saying only, "Oh?"

The captain, it seemed, had gathered significant information regarding local conditions in the Carolinas, and now required to send this to the commander of the Northern Department—General Howe, presently in Halifax.

"I will of course be sending more than one messenger," Richardson said. "It is naturally somewhat quicker by ship—but I desire to have at least one messenger travel overland, both for safety's sake and for the sake of making observations *en route*. Your father speaks very highly of your abilities, Lieutenant"—did he detect a hint of amusement in that dry-as-sawdust voice?—"and I collect that you have traveled extensively in North Carolina and Virginia. That is a valuable attribute. You will appreciate that I do not wish my messenger to disappear into the Dismal Swamp, never to be seen again.”

“Ha-ha,” said William, politely, perceiving this to be meant as a jest. Clearly, Captain Richardson had never been near the Great Dismal; William had, though he didn’t think anyone in his right mind would go that way a-purpose, save to hunt.

He also had severe doubts regarding Richardson’s suggestion—though even as he told himself that he shouldn’t consider leaving his men, his regiment … he was already seeing a romantic vision of himself, alone in the vast wilderness, bearing important news through storm and danger.

More of a consideration, though, was what he might expect at the other end of the journey.

Richardson anticipated his question, answering before he could speak.

“Once in the north, you would—it being agreeable—join General Howe’s staff.”

Well, now, he thought. Here was the apple, and a juicy red one, too. He was aware that Richardson meant “it being agreeable” to General Howe, rather than to William—but he had some confidence in his own capabilities, and rather thought he might prove himself useful.

He had been in North Carolina only a few days, but that was quite long enough for him to have made an accurate assessment of the relative chances for advancement between the Northern Department and the Southern. The entire Continental army was with Washington in the north; the southern rebellion appeared to consist of troublesome pockets of backwoodsmen and impromptu militia—hardly a threat. And as for the relative status of Sir Peter and General Howe as commanders …

“I would like to think on your offer, if I might, Captain,” he said, hoping eagerness didn’t show in his voice. “May I give my answer tomorrow?”

“Certainly. I imagine you will wish to discuss the prospects with your father—you may do so.”

The captain then deliberately changed the subject, and within a few moments, Lord John and Mr. Bell had joined them, the conversation becoming general.

William paid little heed to what was said, his own attention distracted by the sight of two slender white figures that hovered ghostlike among the bushes at the outer edge of the yard. Two capped white heads drew together, then apart. Now and then, one turned briefly toward the porch in what looked like speculation.

“ ‘And for his vesture, they cast lots,’ ” his father murmured, shaking his head.

“Eh?”

“Never mind.” His father smiled, and turned toward Captain Richardson, who had just said something about the weather.

Fireflies lit the yard, drifting like green sparks among the damp, lush growth of plants. It was good to see fireflies again; he had missed them, in England—and that peculiar softness of the southern air that molded his linen to his body and made the blood throb in his fingertips. Crickets were chirping all around them, and for an instant, their song seemed to drown out everything save the sound of his pulse.

“Coffee’s ready, gen’mun.” The soft voice of the Bells’ slave cut through the small ferment of his blood, though, and he went in with the other men, with no more than a glance toward the yard. The white figures had disappeared, but a sense of promise lingered in the soft, warm air.

An hour later, he found himself walking back toward his billet, thoughts in a pleasant muddle, his father strolling silent by his side.

Miss Lillian Bell had granted him a kiss among the fireflies at the end of the evening, chaste and fleeting, but upon the lips, and the thick summer air seemed to taste of coffee and ripe strawberries, despite the pervasive dank smell of the harbor.

“Captain Richardson told me of the proposal he made to you,” Lord John said casually. “Are you inclined?”

“Don’t know,” William replied, with equal casualness. “I should miss my men, of course, but …” Mrs. Bell had pressed him to come to tea, later in the week.

“Little permanence in a military life,” his father said, with a brief shake of the head. “I did warn you.”

William gave a brief grunt of assent, not really listening.

“A good opportunity for advancement,” his father was saying, adding offhandedly, “though of course there is some danger to the proposition.”

“What?” William scoffed, hearing this. “Riding from Wilmington to take ship at New York? There’s a road, nearly all the way!”

“And quite a number of Continentals on it,” Lord John pointed out. “General Washington’s entire army lies this side of Philadelphia, if the news I hear be correct.”

William shrugged.

“Richardson said he wanted me because I knew the country. I can make my way well enough without roads.”

“Are you sure? You have not been in Virginia for nearly four years.”

The dubious tone of this annoyed William.

“Do you think me incapable of finding my way?”

“No, not at all,” his father said, still with that note of doubt in his voice. “But there is no little *risk* to this proposition; I should not like to see you undertake it without due thought.”

“Well, I *have* thought,” said William, stung. “I’ll do it.”

Lord John walked in silence for a few steps, then nodded, reluctantly.

“It’s your decision, Willie,” he said softly. “I should be personally obliged if you would take care, though.”

William’s annoyance melted at once.

“Course I will,” he said gruffly. They walked on beneath the dark canopy of maple and hickory, not talking, close enough that their shoulders brushed now and then.

At the inn, William bade Lord John good night, but didn’t return at once to his own lodgings. Instead, he wandered out along the quay, restless, unready for sleep.

The tide had turned and was well out, he saw; the smell of dead fish and decaying seaweed was stronger, though a smooth sheet of water still covered the mudflats, quiet in the light of a quarter-moon.

It took a moment to locate the stake. For an instant, he thought it had gone, but no—there it was, a thin dark line against the glimmer of the water. Empty.

The stake no longer stood upright, but leaned sharply, as though about to fall, and a thin loop of rope trailed from it, floating like a hangman's noose on the waning tide. William was conscious of some visceral uneasiness; the tide alone would not have taken the whole body. Some said there were crocodiles or alligators here, though he had not yet seen one himself. He glanced down involuntarily, as though one of these reptiles might suddenly lunge from the water at his feet. The air was still warm, but a small shiver went through him.

He shook this off, and turned away toward his lodgings. There would be a day or two before he must go, he thought, and wondered whether he might see the blue-eyed Mrs. MacKenzie again before he left.

* * *

Lord John lingered for a moment on the porch of the inn, watching his son vanish into the shadows under the trees. He had some qualms; the matter had been arranged with more haste than he would have liked—but he did have confidence in William's abilities. And while the arrangement clearly had its risks, that was the nature of a soldier's life. Some situations were riskier than others, though.

He hesitated, hearing the buzz of talk from the taproom inside, but he had had enough of company for the night, and the thought of tossing to and fro under the low ceiling of his room, stifling in the day's trapped heat, determined him to walk about until bodily exhaustion should ensure sleep.

It wasn't just the heat, he reflected, stepping off the porch and setting off in the opposite direction to the one Willie had taken. He knew himself well enough to realize that even the apparent success of his plan would not prevent his lying awake, worrying at it like a dog with a bone, testing for weaknesses, seeking for ways of improvement. After all, William would not depart immediately; there was a little time to consider, to make alterations, should that be necessary.

General Howe, for instance. Had that been the best choice? Perhaps Clinton … but no. Henry Clinton was a fussy old woman, unwilling to stir a foot without orders in triplicate.

The Howe brothers—one a general, one an admiral—were famously uncouth, both having the manners, aspect, and general aroma of boars in rut. Neither of them was stupid, though—God knew they weren't timid—and Grey thought Willie fully capable of surviving rough manners and harsh words. And a commander given to spitting on the floor—Richard Howe had once spat on Grey himself, though this was largely accidental, the wind having changed unexpectedly—was possibly easier for a young subaltern to deal with than the quirks of some other military gentlemen of Grey's acquaintance.

Though even the most peculiar of the brotherhood of the blade was preferable to the diplomats. He wondered idly what the term of venery might be for a collection of diplomats. If writers formed the brotherhood of the quill, and a group of foxes be termed a skulk … a stab of diplomats, perhaps? Brothers of the stiletto? No, he decided. Much too direct. An opiate of diplomats, more like. Brotherhood of the boring. Though the ones who were not boring could be dangerous, on occasion.

Sir George Germain was one of the rarer sorts: boring *and* dangerous.

He walked up and down the streets of the town for some time, in hopes of exhausting himself before going back to his small, stuffy room. The sky was low and sullen, with heat lightning flickering among the clouds, and the atmosphere was damp as a bath sponge. He should have been in Albany by now—no less humid and bug-ridden, but somewhat cooler, and near the sweet dark forests of the Adirondacks.

Still, he didn't regret his hasty journey to Wilmington. Willie was sorted; that was the important thing. And Willie's sister, Brianna—

he stopped dead for a moment, eyes closed, reliving the moment of transcendence and heartbreak he had experienced that afternoon, seeing the two of them together for what would be their only meeting, ever. He'd scarcely been able to breathe, his eyes fixed on the two tall figures, those handsome, bold faces, so alike—and both so like the man who had stood beside him, unmoving, but by contrast with Grey, taking in great tearing gulps of air, as though he feared he might never breathe again.

Grey rubbed idly at his left ring finger, not yet accustomed to finding it bare. He and Jamie Fraser had done the best they could to safeguard those they loved, and despite his melancholy, he was comforted at the thought that they were united in that kinship of responsibility.

Would he ever meet Brianna Fraser MacKenzie again? he wondered. She had said not—and seemed as saddened by that fact as he was.

"God bless you, child," he murmured, shaking his head as he turned back toward the harbor. He would miss her very much—but as with Willie, his relief that she would soon be out of Wilmington and out of danger overwhelmed his personal sense of loss.

He glanced involuntarily at the water as he came out onto the quay, and drew a deep sigh of relief at seeing the empty stake, aslant in the tide. He hadn't understood her reasons for doing what she'd done, but he'd known her father—and her brother, for that matter—far too long to mistake the stubborn conviction he'd seen in those catlike blue eyes. So he'd got her the small boat she'd asked for, and stood on the quay with his heart in his throat, ready to create a distraction if needed, as her husband had rowed her out toward the bound pirate.

He'd seen men die in great numbers, usually unwillingly, occasionally with resignation. He'd never seen one go with such passionate gratitude in his eyes. Grey had no more than a passing acquaintance with Roger MacKenzie, but suspected him to be a remarkable man, having not only survived marriage to that fabulous and dangerous creature but actually having sired children upon her.

He shook his head and turned, heading back toward the inn. He could safely wait another two weeks, he thought, before replying to Germain's letter—which he had deftly magicked out of the diplomatic pouch when he'd seen William's name upon it—at which time he could truthfully say that, alas, by the time the letter had been received, Lord Ellesmere was somewhere in the wilderness between North Carolina and New York, and thus could not be informed that he was recalled to England, though he (Grey) was positive that Ellesmere would greatly regret the loss of his opportunity to join Sir George's staff, when he learned of it—several months hence. Too bad.

He began to whistle "Lillibulero," and strode back to the inn in good spirits.

He paused in the taproom, and asked for a bottle of wine to be sent up—only to be informed by the barmaid that "the gentleman" had already taken a bottle upstairs with him.

"And two glasses," she added, dimpling at him. "So I don't s'pose he meant to drink it all himself."

Grey felt something like a centipede skitter up his spine.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "Did you say that there is a gentleman in my room?"

"Yes, sir," she assured him. "He said as he's an old friend of yours.… Now, he did tell me his name …" Her brow furrowed for an instant, then cleared. "Bow-shaw, he said, or summat of the kind. Frenchy kind of name," she clarified. "And a Frenchy kind of gentleman, too. Will you be wanting food at all, sir?"

"No, I thank you." He waved her off, and went up the stairs, thinking rapidly whether he had left anything in his room that he shouldn't have.

A Frenchman, named Bow-shaw … *Beauchamp*. The name flashed in his mind like the flicker of heat lightning. He stopped dead for an instant in the middle of the staircase, then resumed his climb, more slowly.

Surely not … but who else might it be? When he had ceased active service, some years before, he had begun diplomatic life as a member of England's Black Chamber, that shadowy organization of persons charged with the interception and decoding of official diplomatic mail—and much less official messages—that flowed between the governments of Europe. Every one of those governments possessed its own Black Chamber, and it was not unusual for the inhabitants of one such chamber to be aware of their opposite numbers—never met, but known by their signatures, their initials, their unsigned marginal notes.

Beauchamp had been one of the most active French agents; Grey had run across his trail several times in the intervening years, even though his own days in the Black Chamber were well behind him. If he knew Beauchamp by name, it was entirely reasonable that the man knew him as well—but their invisible association had been years ago. They had never met in person, and for such a meeting to occur *here* … He touched the secret pocket in his coat, and was reassured by the muffled crackle of paper.

He hesitated at the top of the stair, but there was no point in furtiveness; clearly, he was expected. With a firm step, he walked down the hall and turned the white china knob of his door, the porcelain smooth and cool beneath his fingers.

A wave of heat engulfed him and he gasped for air, involuntarily. Just as well, as it prevented his uttering the blasphemy that had sprung to his lips.

The gentleman occupying the room's only chair was indeed "Frenchy"—his very well-cut suit set off by cascades of snowy lace at throat and cuff, his shoes buckled with a silver that matched the hair at his temples.

"Mr. Beauchamp," Grey said, and slowly closed the door behind him. His damp linen clung to him, and he could feel his pulse thumping in his own temples. "I fear you take me at something of a disadvantage."

Perseverance Wainwright smiled, very slightly.

"I'm glad to see you, John," he said.

* * *

Grey bit his tongue to forestall anything injudicious—which description covered just about anything he might say, he thought, with the exception of "Good evening."

"Good evening," he said. He lifted an eyebrow in question. "*Monsieur* Beauchamp?"

"Oh, yes." Percy got his feet under him, making to rise, but Grey waved him back and turned to fetch a stool, hoping the seconds gained by the movement would allow him to regain his composure. Finding that they didn't, he took another moment to open the window, and stood for a couple of lungfuls of the thick, dank air, before turning back and taking his own seat.

"How did that happen?" he asked, affecting casualness. "Beauchamp, I mean. Or is it merely a *nom de guerre*?"

"Oh, no." Percy took up his lace-trimmed handkerchief and dabbed sweat delicately from his hairline—which was beginning to recede, Grey noted. "I married one of the sisters of the Baron Amandine. The family name is Beauchamp; I adopted it. The relationship provided a certain *entrée* to political circles, from which …" He shrugged charmingly and made a graceful gesture that encompassed his career in the Black Chamber—and doubtless elsewhere, Grey thought grimly.

"My congratulations on your marriage," Grey said, not bothering to keep the irony out of his voice. "Which one are you sleeping with, the baron or his sister?"

Percy looked amused.

"Both, on occasion."

"Together?"

The smile widened. His teeth were still good, Grey saw, though somewhat stained by wine.

"Occasionally. Though Cecile—my wife—really prefers the attentions of her cousin Lucianne, and I myself prefer the attentions of the sub-gardener. Lovely man named Emile; he reminds me of you … in your younger years. Slender, blond, muscular, and brutal."

To his dismay, Grey found that he wanted to laugh.

"It sounds extremely French," he said dryly, instead. "I'm sure it suits you. What do you want?"

“More a matter of what *you* want, I think.” Percy had not yet drunk any of the wine; he took up the bottle and poured carefully, red liquid purling dark against the glasses. “Or perhaps I should say—what England wants.” He held out a glass to Grey, smiling. “For one can hardly separate your interests from those of your country, can one? In fact, I confess that you have always seemed to me to *be* England, John.”

Grey wished to forbid him the use of his Christian name, but to do so would merely emphasize the memory of their intimacy—which was, of course, what Percy intended. He chose to ignore it, and took a sip of his wine, which was good. He wondered whether he was paying for it—and if so, how.

“What England wants,” he repeated, skeptical. “And what is your impression of what England wants?”

Percy took a swallow of the wine and held it in his mouth, evidently savoring it, before finally swallowing.

“Hardly a secret, my dear, is it?”

Grey sighed, and stared pointedly at him.

“You’ve seen this ‘Declaration of Independency’ issued by the so-called Continental Congress?” Percy asked. He turned and, reaching into a leather bag he had slung over the back of the chair, withdrew a folded sheaf of papers, which he handed to Grey.

Grey had not in fact seen the document in question, though he’d certainly heard about it. It had been printed only two weeks previous, in Philadelphia, yet copies had spread like wind-borne weeds through the Colonies. Raising a brow at Percy, he unfolded the paper and skimmed it rapidly.

“The King is a tyrant?” he said, half-laughing at the outrageousness of some of the document’s more extreme sentiments. He folded the sheets back together and tossed them on the table.

“And if I am England, I suppose you are the embodiment of France, for the purposes of this conversation?”

“I represent certain interests there,” Percy replied blandly. “And in Canada.”

That rang small alarm bells. Grey had fought in Canada with Wolfe, and was well aware that while the French had lost much of their North American holdings in that war, they remained ferociously entrenched in the northern regions, from the Ohio Valley to Quebec. Close enough to cause trouble now? He thought not—but wouldn't put anything past the French. Or Percy.

"England wants a quick end to this nonsense, plainly." A long, knob-jointed hand waved toward the paper. "The Continental army—so-called—is a flimsy association of men with no experience and conflicting notions. What if I were prepared to provide you with information that might be used to … separate one of Washington's chief officers from his allegiance?"

"What if you were?" Grey replied, making no effort to conceal the skepticism in his voice. "How would this benefit France—or your own interests, which I take leave to think are possibly not entirely identical?"

"I see that time has not softened your natural cynicism, John. One of your less attractive traits—I don't know whether I ever mentioned that to you."

Grey widened his stare slightly, and Percy sighed.

"Land, then," he said. "The Northwest Territory. We want it back."

Grey uttered a short laugh.

"I daresay you do." The territory in question, a large tract northwest of the Ohio River Valley, had been ceded to Great Britain from France at the end of the French and Indian War. Britain had not occupied the territory, though, and had prevented the colonists' expansion into it, owing to armed resistance from the natives and the ongoing negotiation of treaties with them. The colonists weren't pleased about it, he understood. Grey had encountered some of said natives himself, and was inclined to think the British government's position both reasonable and honorable.

"French traders had extensive ties with the aboriginals in that area; you have none."

"The fur-trading merchants being some of the … interests … you represent?"

Percy smiled openly at that.

"Not the major interests. But some."

Grey didn't bother asking why Percy was approaching him—an ostensibly retired diplomat of no particular influence—in the matter. Percy knew the power of Grey's family and connections from the days of their personal association—and "Monsieur Beauchamp" knew a great deal more about his present personal connections from the nexus of information that fed the Black Chambers of Europe. Grey could not act in the matter, of course. But he was well placed to bring the offer quietly to the attention of those who could.

He felt as though every hair on his body was standing on end like an insect's antennae, alert for danger.

"We would require something more than the suggestion, of course," he said, very cool. "The name of the officer in question, for example."

"Not mine to share, at the moment. But once a negotiation in good faith is opened …"

Grey was already wondering to whom he should take this offer. *Not* Sir George Germain. Lord North's office? That could wait, though.

"And your personal interests?" he asked, with an edge. He knew Percy Wainwright well enough to know that there would be some aspect of the affair to Percy's personal benefit.

"Ah, that." Percy sipped at his wine, then lowered the glass and gazed limpidly at Grey across it. "Very simple, really. I am commissioned to find a man. Do you know a Scottish gentleman named James Fraser?"

Grey felt the stem of his glass crack. He went on holding it, though, and sipped the wine carefully, thanking God, firstly, that he had never told Percy Jamie Fraser's name and, secondly, that Fraser had left Wilmington that afternoon.

"No," he said calmly. "What do you want with this Mr. Fraser?"

Percy shrugged, and smiled.

"Only a question or two."

Grey could feel blood seeping from his lacerated palm. Holding the cracked glass carefully together, he drank the rest of his wine. Percy was quiet, drinking with him.

“My condolences upon the loss of your wife,” Percy said quietly. “I know that she—”

“You know nothing,” Grey said roughly. He leaned over and set the broken glass on the table; the bowl rolled crazily, the lees of wine washing the glass. “Not one thing. About my wife, *or* about me.”

Percy lifted his shoulders in the faintest of Gallic shrugs. *As you like,* it said. And yet his eyes—they were still beautiful, damn him, dark and soft—rested on Grey with what seemed a genuine sympathy.

Grey sighed. Doubtless it *was* genuine. Percy could not be trusted—not ever—but what he’d done had been done from weakness, not from malice, or even lack of feeling.

“What do you want?” he repeated.

“Your son—” Percy began, and Grey turned suddenly on him. He gripped Percy’s shoulder, hard enough that the man gave a little gasp and stiffened. Grey leaned down, looking into Wainwright’s—sorry, *Beauchamp’s*—face, so close that he felt the warmth of the man’s breath on his cheek and smelled his cologne. He was getting blood on Wainwright’s coat.

“The last time I saw you,” Grey said, very quietly, “I came within an inch of putting a bullet through your head. Don’t give me cause to regret my restraint.”

He let go and stood up.

“Stay away from my son—stay away from me. And if you will take a well-meant bit of advice—go back to France. Quickly.”

Turning on his heel, he went out, shutting the door firmly behind him. He was halfway down the street before he realized that he had left Percy in his own room.

“The devil with it,” he muttered, and stamped off to beg a billet for the night from Sergeant Cutter. In the morning, he would make sure that the Fraser family and William were all safely out of Wilmington.

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2

AND SOMETIMES THEY AREN'T

Lallybroch
Inverness-shire, Scotland
September 1980

"We are alive," Brianna MacKenzie repeated, her voice tremulous. She looked up at Roger, the paper pressed to her chest with both hands. Her face streamed with tears, but a glorious light glowed in her blue eyes. "Alive!"

"Let me see." His heart was hammering so hard in his chest that he could barely hear his own words. He reached out a hand, and reluctantly she surrendered the paper to him, coming at once to press herself against him, clinging to his arm as he read, unable to take her eyes off the bit of ancient paper.

It was pleasantly rough under his fingers, handmade paper with the ghosts of leaves and flowers pressed into its fibers. Yellowed with age, but still tough and surprisingly flexible. Bree had made it herself—more than two hundred years before.

Roger became aware that his hands were trembling, the paper shaking so that the sprawling, difficult hand was hard to read, faded as the ink was.

December 31, 1776

My dear daughter,

> *As you will see if ever you receive this, we are alive …*

His own eyes blurred, and he wiped the back of his hand across them, even as he told himself that it didn't matter, for they were surely dead now, Jamie Fraser and his wife, Claire—but he felt such joy at those words on the page that it was as though the two of them stood smiling before him.

It *was* the two of them, too, he discovered. While the letter began in Jamie's hand—and voice—the second page took up in Claire's crisply slanted writing.

> *Your father's hand won't stand much more. And it's a bloody long story. He's been chopping wood all day, and can barely uncurl his fingers—but he insisted on telling you himself that we haven't—yet—been burnt to ashes. Not but what we may be at any moment; there are fourteen people crammed into the old cabin, and I'm writing this more or less sitting in the hearth, with old Grannie MacLeod wheezing away on her pallet by my feet so that if she suddenly begins to die, I can pour more whisky down her throat.*

"My God, I can *hear* her," he said, amazed.

"So can I." Tears were still coursing down Bree's face, but it was a sun-shower; she wiped at them, laughing and sniffing. "Read more. Why are they in our cabin? What's happened to the Big House?"

Roger ran his finger down the page to find his place and resumed reading.

"Oh, Jesus!" he said.

> *You recall that idiot, Donner?*

Gooseflesh ran up his arms at the name. A time-traveler, Donner. And one of the most feckless individuals he'd ever met or heard of—but nonetheless dangerous for that.

> *Well, he surpassed himself by getting together a gang of thugs from Brownsville to come and steal the treasure in gems he'd convinced them we had. Only we hadn't, of course.*

They hadn't—because he, Brianna, Jemmy, and Amanda had taken the small hoard of remaining gemstones to safeguard their flight through the stones.

> *They held us hostage and rubbished the house, damn them—breaking, amongst other things, the carboy of ether in my surgery. The fumes nearly gassed all of us on the spot …*

He read rapidly through the rest of the letter, Brianna peering over his shoulder and making small squeaks of alarm and dismay. Finished, he laid the pages down and turned to her, his insides quivering.

"So *you* did it," he said, aware that he shouldn't say it, but unable not to, unable not to snort with laughter. "You and your bloody matches—*you* burned the house down!"

Her face was a study, features shifting between horror, indignation—and, yes, a hysterical hilarity that matched his own.

"Oh, it was not! It was Mama's ether. Any kind of spark could have set off the explosion—"

"But it wasn't any kind of spark," Roger pointed out. "Your cousin Ian lit one of your matches."

"Well, so it was Ian's fault, then!"

"No, it was you and your mother. Scientific women," Roger said, shaking his head. "The eighteenth century is lucky to have survived you."

She huffed a little.

"Well, the whole thing would never have happened if it weren't for that bozo Donner!"

"True," Roger conceded. "But he was a troublemaker from the future, too, wasn't he? Though admittedly neither a woman nor very scientific."

"Hmph." She took the letter, handling it gently, but unable to forbear rubbing the pages between her fingers. "Well, *he* didn't survive the eighteenth century, did he?" Her eyes were downcast, their lids still reddened.

"You aren't feeling *sorry* for him, are you?" Roger demanded, incredulous.

She shook her head, but her fingers still moved lightly over the thick, soft page.

"Not … *him*, so much. It's just—the idea of anybody dying like that. Alone, I mean. So far from home."

No, it wasn't Donner she was thinking of. He put an arm round her and laid his head against her own. She smelled of Prell shampoo and fresh cabbages; she'd been in the kailyard. The words on the page faded and strengthened with the dip of the pen that had written them, but nonetheless were sharp and clear—a surgeon's writing.

"She isn't alone," he whispered, and putting out a finger, traced the postscript, again in Jamie's sprawling hand. "Neither of them is. And whether they've a roof above their heads or not—both of them are home."

* * *

I put by the letter. Time enough to finish it later, I thought. I'd been working on it as time allowed over the last few days; not as though there was any rush to catch the outgoing mail, after all. I smiled a little at that, and folded the sheets carefully, putting them in my new workbag for safekeeping. I wiped the quill and put it aside, then rubbed my aching fingers, savoring for a little longer the sweet sense of connection the writing gave me. I could write much more easily than Jamie could, but flesh and blood had its limits, and it had been a very long day.

I looked over at the pallet on the far side of the fire, as I had been doing every few minutes, but she was still quiet. I could hear her breath, a wheezing gurgle that came at intervals so long that I could swear she had died between each one. She hadn't, though, and from my estimation wouldn't for a while. I was hoping that she would, before my limited supply of laudanum gave out.

I didn't know how old she was; she looked a hundred or so, but might be younger than I. Her two grandsons, boys in their teens, had brought her in two days before. They had been traveling down from the mountains, meaning to take their grandmother to relatives in Cross Creek before heading to Wilmington to join the militia there, but the grandmother had "been took bad," as they put it, and someone had told them there was a conjure-woman on the Ridge nearby. So they had brought her to me.

Grannie MacLeod—I had no other name for her; the boys had not thought to tell me before departing, and she was in no condition to do so herself—almost certainly was in the terminal stages of a cancer of some kind. Her flesh had wasted, her face pinched with pain even while unconscious, and I could see it in the grayness of her skin.

The fire was burning low; I should stir it, and add another stick of pine. Jamie's head was resting against my knee, though. Could I reach the woodpile without disturbing him? I put a light hand on his shoulder for balance and stretched, just getting my fingers on the end of a small log. I wiggled this gently free, teeth set in my lower lip, and managed by leaning to poke it into the hearth, breaking up the drifts of red-black embers and raising clouds of sparks.

Jamie stirred under my hand and murmured something unintelligible, but when I thrust the log into the freshened fire and sat back in my chair, he sighed, resettled himself, and fell back into sleep.

I glanced at the door, listening, but heard nothing save the rustle of trees in the wind. Of course, I thought, I *would* hear nothing, given that it was Young Ian I was waiting for.

He and Jamie had been taking it in turns to watch, hiding in the trees above the burnt ruins of the Big House. Ian had been out for more than two hours; it was nearly time for him to come in for food and a turn at the fire.

“Someone’s been trying to kill the white sow,” he’d announced at breakfast three days ago, looking bemused.

“What?” I handed him a bowl of porridge, garnished with a lump of melting butter and a drizzle of honey—luckily my kegs of honey and boxes of honeycomb had been in the springhouse when the fire happened. “Are you sure?”

He nodded, taking the bowl and inhaling its steam in beatific fashion.

“Aye, she’s got a slash in her flank. Not deep, and it’s healing, Auntie,” he added, with a nod in my direction, evidently feeling that I would regard the sow’s medical well-being with the same interest as that of any other resident of the Ridge.

“Oh? Good,” I said—though there was precious little I could have done if she weren’t healing. I could—and did—doctor horses, cows, goats, stoats, and even the occasional non-laying chicken, but that particular pig was on her own.

Amy Higgins crossed herself at mention of the sow.

“Likely ’twas a bear,” she said. “Nothing else would dare. Aidan, mind what Mr. Ian says, here! Dinna be wandering far from the place, and mind your brother outside.”

“Bears sleep in winter, Mam,” Aidan said absently. His attention was fixed on a new top that Bobby, his new stepfather, had carved for him, and which he hadn’t yet got to spin properly. Giving it a cross-eyed glare, he set it gingerly on the table, held the string for a breathless moment, and yanked. The top shot across the table, ricocheted off the honey jar with a sharp *crack!*, and headed for the milk at a high rate of speed.

Ian reached out and snatched the top in the nick of time. Chewing toast, he motioned to Aidan for the string, rewound it, and with a practiced flick of the wrist, sent the top whizzing straight down the center of the table. Aidan watched it, openmouthed, then dived under the table as the top fell off the end.

“No, it wasna an animal,” Ian said, finally succeeding in swallowing. “It was a clean slash. Someone went for her wi’ a knife or a sword.”

Jamie looked up from the burnt piece of toast he had been examining.

"Did ye find his body?"

Ian grinned briefly, but shook his head.

"Nay, if she killed him, she ate him—and I didna find any leavings."

"Pigs are messy eaters," Jamie observed. He essayed a cautious bite of the burnt toast, grimaced, and ate it anyway.

"An Indian, d'ye think?" Bobby asked. Little Orrie was struggling to get down from Bobby's lap; his new stepfather obligingly set him down in his favorite spot under the table.

Jamie and Ian exchanged glances, and I felt a slight stirring of the hair at the back of my neck.

"No," Ian answered. "The Cherokee near here all ken her weel, and wouldna touch her with a ten-foot pole. They think she's a demon, aye?"

"And traveling Indians from the north would have arrows or tomahawks," Jamie finished.

"Ye're sure it wasna a panther?" Amy asked, dubious. "They hunt in the winter, no?"

"They do," Jamie assured her. "I saw pug-marks up by the Green Spring yesterday. D'ye hear me there?" he said, bending to speak to the boys under the table. "Go canny, aye?

"But no," he added, straightening up. "Ian kens the difference between claw marks and a knife slash, I think." He gave Ian a grin. Ian politely refrained from rolling his eyes, and merely nodded, eyes fixed dubiously on the toast basket.

No one suggested that any resident of the Ridge or from Brownsville might have been hunting the white sow. The local Presbyterians would not have seen eye-to-eye with the Cherokee on any other spiritual matter you might name, but they were in decided agreement on the sow's demonic character.

Personally, I wasn't sure they weren't right. The thing had survived even the burning of the Big House unscathed, emerging from her den beneath its foundations amid a shower of burnt wood, followed by her latest litter of half-grown piglets.

"Moby Dick!" I now said aloud, inspired.

Rollo raised his head with a startled "Wuff?," gave me a yellow-eyed look and laid it down again, sighing.

"Dick who?" said Jamie, drowsy. He sat up, stretching and groaning, then rubbed a hand over his face and blinked at me.

"I just thought what it is that sow reminds me of," I explained. "Long story. About a whale. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"If I live that long," he said, with a yawn that nearly dislocated his jaw. "Where's the whisky—or d'ye need it for yon poor woman?" He nodded at Grannie MacLeod's blanket-wrapped form.

"Not yet. Here." I bent and rummaged in the basket beneath my chair, coming up with a corked bottle.

He pulled the cork and drank, the color gradually coming back to his face. Between spending his days hunting or chopping wood and half the nights lurking in a freezing forest, even Jamie's great vitality was showing signs of flagging.

"How long will you keep this up?" I asked, low-voiced so as not to rouse the Higginses—Bobby, Amy, the two little boys, and Amy's two sisters-in-law from her first marriage, who had come for the wedding held a few days before, accompanied by a total of five children under the age of ten—all asleep in the small bedroom. The departure of the MacLeod boys had eased the congestion in the cabin slightly, but with Jamie, me, Ian, Ian's dog, Rollo, and the old woman sleeping on the floor of the main room, and such possessions as we had managed to salvage from the fire stacked round the walls, I sometimes felt a distinct surge of claustrophobia. Little wonder if Jamie and Ian were patrolling the woods, as much to get a breath of air as from a conviction that there was something out there.

"No much longer," he assured me, shuddering slightly as a large swallow of whisky went down. "If we dinna see anything tonight, we'll—" He broke off, his head turning abruptly toward the door.

I hadn't heard anything, but saw the latch move, and an instant later, a freezing gust of air rolled into the room, poking frigid fingers under my skirts and stirring up a shower of sparks from the fire.

I hastily seized a rag and beat these out before they could set Grannie MacLeod's hair or bedding on fire. By the time I had the fire back under control, Jamie was putting pistol, shot bag, and powder horn on his belt, talking low-voiced with Ian by the door. Ian himself was red-cheeked with cold and clearly excited about something. Rollo was up, too, nosing at Ian's legs, tail wagging in anticipation of an icy adventure.

"Best ye stay, *a cù,"* Ian told him, rubbing his ears with cold fingers. *"Sheas."*

Rollo made a disgruntled noise in his throat and tried to push past Ian, but was deftly blocked by a leg. Jamie turned, shrugging on his coat, bent, and kissed me hastily.

"Bolt the door, *a nighean,"* he whispered. "Dinna open to anyone save me or Ian."

"What—" I began, but they were gone.

* * *

The night was cold and pure. Jamie breathed deep and shivered, letting the cold enter him, strip away the warmth of wife, the smoke and smell of his hearth. Ice crystals shimmered in his lungs, sharp in his blood. He turned his head to and fro like a wolf scenting, breathing the night. There was little wind, but the air moved from the east, bringing the bitter smell of ashes from the ruins of the Big House … and a faint tang he thought was blood.

He looked to his nephew, question in the cock of his head, and saw Ian nod, dark against the lavender glow of the sky.

"There's a dead pig, just beyond Auntie's garden," the lad said, low-voiced.

"Oh, aye? Not the white sow, ye don't mean?" His heart misgave him for an instant at the thought, and he wondered whether he'd mourn the thing or dance on its bones. But no. Ian shook his head, the movement felt rather than seen.

"Nay, not that wily beast. A young one, maybe last year's farrowing. Someone's butchered it, but taken nay more than a collop or two from the haunch. And a good bit of what they *did* take, they scattered in chunks down the trail.”

Jamie glanced round, surprised.

“What?”

Ian shrugged.

“Aye. One more thing, Uncle. ’Twas killed and butchered with an ax.”

The ice crystals in his blood solidified with a suddenness that nearly stopped his heart.

“Jesus,” he said, but it was not so much shock as it was unwilling admission of something he had known for a long time. “It’s him, then.”

“Aye.” Both of them had known it, though neither one had been willing to speak of it. Without consultation, they moved away from the cabin, into the trees.

“Aye, well.” Jamie took a long, deep breath and sighed, the mist of it white in the darkness. He’d hoped the man had taken his gold and his wife and left the Ridge—but it had never been more than a hope. Arch Bug was a Grant by blood, and clan Grant were a vengeful lot.

The Frasers of Glenhelm had caught Arch Bug on their lands some fifty years before, and given him the choice: lose an eye or the first two fingers of his right hand. The man had come to terms with his crippled hand, turning from the bow he could no longer draw to the use of an ax, which he wielded and threw with a skill equal to any Mohawk’s, despite his age.

What he had not come to terms with was the loss of the Stuart cause and the loss of the Jacobite gold, sent too late from France, rescued—or stolen, depending on your view of things—by Hector Cameron, who had brought one third of it to North Carolina, this share then stolen—or retrieved—from Cameron’s widow in turn by Arch Bug.

Nor had Arch Bug come to terms with Jamie Fraser.

“Is it threat, d’ye think?” Ian asked. They had moved away from the cabin, but kept to the trees, circling the large clearing where the

Big House had been. The chimney and half a wall still stood, charred and bleak against the dirty snow.

"I canna think so. If it was threat he meant, why wait until now?" Still, he gave silent thanks that his daughter and her weans were safely gone. There were worse threats than a dead pig, and he thought Arch Bug would not hesitate to make them.

"Perhaps he left," Ian suggested. "To see his wife settled, and he's only now come back."

It was a reasonable thought—if there was one thing in the world Arch Bug loved, it was his wife, Murdina, his helpmate of more than fifty years.

"Perhaps," Jamie said. *And yet …* And yet he'd felt eyes on his back more than once in the weeks since the Bugs had left. Felt silence in the forest that was not the silence of the trees and rocks.

He didn't ask whether Ian had looked for the ax-wielder's track; if one could be found, Ian would have found it. But it hadn't snowed in more than a week, and what was left on the ground was patchy and trodden by the feet of innumerable people. He looked up at the sky; snow again, and soon.

He made his way up a small outcrop, careful among the ice; the snow was melting in the day, but the water froze again at night, hanging from the cabin's eaves and from every branch in glittering icicles that filled the forest with the light of blue dawn, then dripped gold and diamonds in the rising sun. Now they were colorless, tinkling like glass as his sleeve brushed the twigs of an ice-covered bush. He stopped, crouching at the top of the outcrop, looking down across the clearing.

All right. The certainty that Arch Bug was here had set off a chain of half-conscious deductions, the conclusion of which now floated to the top of his mind.

"He'd come again for one of two reasons," he said to Ian. "To do me harm—or to get the gold. All of it."

He'd given Bug a chunk of gold when he'd sent the man and his wife away, upon the discovery of the Bugs' treachery. Half a French ingot, it would have allowed an elderly couple to live the rest of their lives in modest comfort. But Arch Bug was not a modest man.

He'd once been tacksman to the Grant of Grant, and while he'd hidden his pride for a time, it was not the nature of pride to stay buried.

Ian glanced at him, interested.

"All of it," he repeated. "So ye think he hid it here—but somewhere he couldna get it easily when ye made him go."

Jamie lifted one shoulder, watching the clearing. With the house now gone, he could see the steep trail that led up behind it, toward the place where his wife's garden had once stood, safe behind its deer-proof palisades. Some of the palisades still stood, black against the patchy snow. He would make her a new garden one day, God willing.

"If his purpose was only harm, he's had the chance." He could see the butchered pig from here, a dark shape on the path, shadowed by a wide pool of blood.

He pushed away a sudden thought of Malva Christie, and forced himself back to his reasoning.

"Aye, he's hidden it here," he repeated, more confident now. "If he had it all, he'd be long gone. He's been waiting, trying for a way to get to it. But he hasna been able to do it secretly—so now he's trying something else."

"Aye, but what? That—" Ian nodded toward the amorphous shape on the path. "I thought it might be a snare or a trap of some kind, but it's not. I looked."

"A lure, maybe?" The smell of blood was evident even to him; it would be a plain call to any predator. Even as he thought this, his eye caught movement near the pig, and he put a hand on Ian's arm.

A tentative flicker of movement, then a small, sinuous shape darted in, disappearing behind the pig's body.

"Fox," both men said together, then laughed, quietly.

"There's that panther in the wood above the Green Spring," Ian said dubiously. "I saw the tracks yesterday. Can he mean to draw it wi' the pig, in hopes that we should rush out to deal with it and he could reach the gold whilst we were occupied?"

Jamie frowned at that, and glanced toward the cabin. True, a panther might draw the men out—but not the women and children.

And where might he have put the gold in such a densely inhabited space? His eye fell on the long, humped shape of Brianna's kiln, lying some way from the cabin, unused since her departure, and a spurt of excitement drew him upright. That would be—but no; Arch had stolen the gold from Jocasta Cameron one bar at a time, conveying it secretly to the Ridge, and had begun his theft long before Brianna had gone. But maybe …

Ian stiffened suddenly, and Jamie turned his head sharp to see what the matter was. He couldn't see anything, but then caught the sound that Ian had heard. A deep, piggish grunt, a rustle, a crack. Then there was a visible stirring among the blackened timbers of the ruined house, and a great light dawned.

"Jesus!" he said, and gripped Ian's arm so tightly that his nephew yelped, startled. "It's under the Big House!"

The white sow emerged from her den beneath the ruins, a massive cream-colored blotch upon the night, and stood swaying her head to and fro, scenting the air. Then she began to move, a ponderous menace surging purposefully up the hill.

Jamie wanted to laugh at the sheer beauty of it.

Arch Bug had cannily hidden his gold beneath the foundations of the Big House, choosing his times when the sow was out about her business. No one would have dreamed of invading the sow's domain; she was the perfect guardian—and doubtless he'd meant to retrieve the gold in the same way when he was ready to go: carefully, one ingot at a time.

But then the house had burned, the timbers collapsing into the foundation, rendering the gold unreachable without a great deal of work and trouble—which would certainly draw attention. It was only now, when the men had cleared away most of the rubble—and spread soot and charcoal all over the clearing in the process—that anyone might be able to reach something hidden under it without attracting notice.

But it was winter, and the white sow, while not hibernating like a bear, kept strictly to her cozy den—save when there was something to eat.

Ian made a small exclamation of disgust, hearing slobbering and crunching from the path.

"Pigs havena got much delicacy of feeling," Jamie murmured. "If it's dead, they'll eat it."

"Aye, but it's likely her own offspring!"

"She eats her young alive now and then; I doubt she'd boggle at eating them dead."

"Hst!"

He hushed at once, eyes fixed on the blackened smear that had once been the finest house in the county. Sure enough, a dark figure emerged from behind the springhouse, sidling cautiously on the slippery path. The pig, busy with her grisly feast, ignored the man, who seemed to be clad in a dark cloak and carrying something like a sack.

* * *

I didn't bolt the door at once, but stepped out to breathe fresh air for a moment, shutting Rollo in behind me. Within moments, Jamie and Ian had vanished into the trees. I glanced uneasily round the clearing, looked across to the black mass of the forest, but could see nothing amiss. Nothing moved, and the night was soundless; I wondered what Ian might have found. Unfamiliar tracks, perhaps? That would account for his sense of urgency; it was clearly about to snow.

No moon was visible, but the sky was a deep pinkish gray, and the ground, though trodden and patchy, was still covered with old snow. The result was a strange, milky glow in which objects seemed to float as though painted on glass, dimensionless and dim. The burnt remains of the Big House stood at the far side of the clearing, no more at this distance than a smudge, as though a giant, sooty thumb had pressed down there. I could feel the heaviness of impending snow in the air, hear it in the muffled sough of the pines.

The MacLeod boys had come over the mountain with their grandmother; they'd said it was very hard going through the high passes. Another big storm would likely seal us in until March or even April.

Thus reminded of my patient, I took one last look round the clearing and set my hand on the latch. Rollo was whining, scratching at the door, and I pushed a knee unceremoniously into his face as I opened it.

"Stay, dog," I said. "Don't worry, they'll be back soon." He made a high, anxious noise in his throat, and cast to and fro, nudging at my legs, seeking to get out.

"No," I said, pushing him away in order to bolt the door. The bolt dropped into place with a reassuring *thunk*, and I turned toward the fire, rubbing my hands. Rollo put back his head and gave a low, mournful howl that raised the hair on the back of my neck.

"What?" I said, alarmed. "Hush!" The noise had made one of the small children in the bedroom wake and cry; I heard rustling bedclothes and sleepy maternal murmurs, and I knelt quickly and grabbed Rollo's muzzle before he could howl again.

"Shhhhh," I said, and looked to see whether the sound had disturbed Grannie MacLeod. She lay still, waxen-faced, her eyes closed. I waited, automatically counting the seconds before the next shallow rise of her chest.

… *six* … *seven* … "Oh, bloody hell," I said, realizing.

Hastily crossing myself, I shuffled over to her on my knees, but closer inspection told me nothing I hadn't seen already. Self-effacing to the last, she had seized my moment of distraction to die inconspicuously.

Rollo was shifting to and fro, no longer howling, but uneasy. I laid a hand gently on the sunken chest. Not seeking diagnosis or offering aid, not any longer. Just … a necessary acknowledgment of the passing of a woman whose first name I didn't know.

"Well … God rest your soul, poor thing," I said softly, and sat back on my heels, trying to think what to do next.

Proper Highland protocol held that the door must be opened at once after a death, to allow the soul to leave. I rubbed a knuckle dubiously over my lips; might the soul have made a quick dash when I opened the door to come in? Probably not.

One would think that in a climate as inhospitable as Scotland's, there would be a bit of climatological leeway in such matters, but I knew that wasn't the case. Rain, snow, sleet, wind—Highlanders always *did* open the door and leave it open for hours, both eager to free the departing soul and anxious lest the spirit, impeded in its exit, might turn and take up permanent residence as a ghost. Most crofts were too small to make that a tolerable prospect.

Little Orrie was awake now; I could hear him singing happily to himself, a song consisting of his stepfather's name.

"Baaaaah-by, baaah-by, BAAAH-by …"

I heard a low, sleepy chuckle, and Bobby's murmur in reply.

"There's my wee man. You need the pot, *acooshla*?" The Gaelic endearment—*a chuisle*, "my heart's blood"—made me smile, both at the word and at the oddness of it in Bobby's Dorset accent. Rollo made an uneasy noise in his throat, though, bringing back to me the need for some action.

If the Higginses and in-laws rose in a few hours to discover a corpse on the floor, they'd all be disturbed, their sense of rightness affronted—and agitated at thought of a dead stranger possibly clinging to their hearth. A very bad omen for the new marriage and the new year. At the same time, her presence was undeniably agitating Rollo, and the prospect of his rousing them all in the next few moments was agitating me.

"Right," I said under my breath. "Come on, dog." There were, as always, bits of harness needing mending on a peg near the door. I disentangled a sound length of rein and fashioned a makeshift come-along with which I lassoed Rollo. He was more than happy to go outside with me, lunging ahead as I opened the door, though somewhat less delighted to be dragged to the lean-to pantry, where I wrapped the makeshift leash hastily round a shelf upright, before returning to the cabin for Grannie MacLeod's body.

I looked about carefully before venturing out again, Jamie's admonitions in mind, but the night was as still as a church; even the trees had fallen silent.

The poor woman couldn't weigh more than seventy pounds, I thought; her collarbones poked through her skin, and her fingers were frail as dried twigs. Still, seventy pounds of literal dead weight was a bit more than I could manage to lift, and I was obliged to unfold the blanket wrapped round her and use it as an impromptu sledge, on which I dragged her outside, murmuring mingled prayers and apologies under my breath.

Despite the cold, I was panting and damp with sweat by the time I'd got her into the pantry.

"Well, at least your soul's had plenty of time to make a getaway," I muttered, kneeling to check the body before resettling it in its hasty shroud. "And I shouldn't imagine you want to hang about haunting a pantry, in any case."

Her eyelids were not quite closed, a sliver of white showing, as though she had tried to open them for one last glimpse of the world—or perhaps in search of a familiar face.

"Benedicite," I whispered, and gently shut her eyes, wondering as I did so whether one day some stranger might do the same for me. The odds of it were good. Unless …

Jamie had declared his intention to return to Scotland, fetch his printing press, and then come back to fight. *But what*, said a small, cowardly voice inside me, *if we didn't come back?* What if we went to Lallybroch and stayed there?

Even as I thought of that prospect—with its rosy visions of being enfolded by family, able to live in peace, to grow slowly old without the constant fear of disruption, starvation, and violence—I knew it wouldn't work.

I didn't know whether Thomas Wolfe had been right about not being able to go home again—well, I *wouldn't* know about that, I thought, a little bitterly; I hadn't had one to go back to—but I did know Jamie. Idealism quite aside—and he did have some, though of a very pragmatic sort—the simple fact was that he was a proper man, and thus required to have proper work. Not just labor; not just making a living. Work. I understood the difference.

And while I was sure that Jamie's family would receive him with joy—the nature of my own reception was in somewhat more doubt, but I supposed they wouldn't actually call the priest and try to have me exorcised—the fact was that Jamie was no longer laird of Lallybroch, and never would be.

" '… and his place shall know him no more,' " I murmured, wiping the old woman's intimate parts—surprisingly unwithered; perhaps she had been younger than I thought—with a damp cloth. She hadn't eaten anything in days; even the relaxation of death hadn't had much effect—but anyone deserved to go clean to their grave.

I paused. That was a thought. Would we be able to bury her? Or might she just rest peacefully under the huckleberry jam and the sacks of dried beans until spring?

I tidied her clothes, breathing out, openmouthed, trying to judge the temperature from the steam of my breath. This would be only the second major snowfall of the winter, and we had not yet had a really hard freeze; that usually happened in mid to late January. If the ground had not yet frozen, we could probably bury her—provided the men were willing to shovel away the snow.

Rollo had lain down, resigned, while I went about my business, but at this point, his head jerked upright, ears pointed.

"What?" I said, startled, and turned round on my knees to look out the open pantry door. "What's happening?"

* * *

"Shall we take him now?" Ian murmured. He had his bow over one shoulder; he let his arm fall, and the bow dropped silently into his hand, ready.

"No. Let him find it first." Jamie spoke slowly, trying to make up his mind what was right to do with the man, so suddenly reappeared before him.

Not kill him; he and his wife had made a good deal of trouble with their treachery, aye, but hadn't intended harm to his family—not to start, at least. Was Arch Bug even truly a thief, by his own lights? Surely Jamie's aunt Jocasta had no greater—if no lesser—claim to the gold than he did.

He sighed and put a hand to his belt, where his dirk and pistol hung. Still, he couldn't allow Bug to make off with the gold, nor could he merely drive him off and leave him free to make more trouble. As to what in God's name to do with him once caught … it would be like having a snake in a sack. But naught to do now save catch him, and worry later what to do with the sack. Perhaps some bargain might be struck …

The figure had reached the black smear of the foundations and was climbing awkwardly among the stones and the charred timbers that remained, the dark cloak lifting and billowing as the air shifted.

Snow began to fall, sudden and silent, big, lazy flakes that seemed not so much to fall from the sky as simply to appear, whirling out of the air. They brushed his face and stuck thick in his lashes; he wiped them away, and motioned to Ian.

"Go behind," he whispered. "If he runs, send a shaft past his nose to stop him. And keep well back, aye?"

"You keep well back, Uncle," Ian whispered back. "If ye get within decent pistol shot o' the man, he can brain ye with his ax. And I'm no going to explain *that* to Auntie Claire."

Jamie snorted briefly and nudged Ian away. He loaded and primed his pistol, then walked firmly out through the falling snow toward the ruin of his house.

He'd seen Arch fell a turkey with his ax at twenty feet. And it was true that most pistols weren't accurate at much more than that. But he didn't mean to shoot the man, after all. He drew the pistol, holding it clear in his hand.

"Arch!" he called. The figure had its back to him, bent over as it rooted about in the ashes. At his call, it seemed to stiffen, still crouched.

"Arch Bug!" he shouted. "Come out o' there, man. I'd speak with ye!"

In answer, the figure drew itself up abruptly, turned, and a spurt of flame lit the falling snow. In the same instant, the flame seared his thigh, and he staggered.

He was conscious mostly of surprise; he'd never known Arch Bug to use a pistol, and was impressed that he could aim so well with his left—

He'd gone to one knee in the snow, but even as he brought his own weapon up to bear, he realized two things: the black figure was aiming a second pistol at him—but not with the left hand. Which meant—

"Jesus! Ian!" But Ian had seen him fall, and seen the second pistol, too. Jamie didn't hear the arrow's flight, above the rush of wind and snow; it appeared as though by magic, stuck in the figure's back. The figure went straight and stiff, then fell in a heap. Almost before it hit the ground, he was running, hobbling, his right leg buckling under him with every step.

"God, no, God, no," he was saying, and it sounded like someone else's voice.

A voice came through snow and night, calling out in desperation. Then Rollo was bounding past him, a blur—who had let him out?—and a rifle cracked from the trees. Ian bellowed, somewhere near, calling the dog, but Jamie had no time to look, was scrambling heedless over the blackened stones, slipping on the skim of fresh snow, stumbling, his leg was cold and hot at once, but no matter, oh, *God*, please, no …

He reached the black figure and flung himself on his knees beside it, grappling. He knew at once; he'd known from the moment he realized the pistol had been held in her right hand. Arch, with his missing fingers, couldn't fire a pistol right-handed. But, oh, God, no …

He'd got her over, feeling the short, heavy body limp and unwieldy as a fresh-killed deer. Pushed back the hood of the cloak, and passed his hand, gentle, helpless, over the soft round face of Murdina Bug. She breathed against his hand—perhaps … but he felt the shaft of the arrow, too, against his hand. It had come through her neck, and her breath bubbled wet; his hand was wet, too, and warm.

"Arch?" she said hoarsely. "I want Arch." And died.

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3

LIFE FOR LIFE

I took Jamie into the pantry. It was dark, and cold, particularly for a man with no breeches on, but I didn't want to risk any of the Higginses being wakened. God, not now. They'd all erupt from their sanctum like a flight of panicked quail—and I quailed myself at thought of having to deal with them before I had to. It would be sufficiently horrible to tell them what had happened by daylight; I couldn't face the prospect now.

For lack of any better alternative, Jamie and Ian had laid Mrs. Bug in the pantry alongside Grannie MacLeod, tucked under the lowest shelf, her cloak drawn up over her face. I could see her feet sticking out, with their cracked, worn boots and striped stockings. I had a sudden vision of the Wicked Witch of the West, and clapped a hand to my mouth before anything truly hysterical could escape.

Jamie turned his head toward me, but his gaze was inward, his face haggard, deep-lined in the glow of the candle he carried.

"Eh?" he said vaguely.

"Nothing," I said, my voice trembling. "Nothing at all. Sit—sit down." I put down the stool and my medical kit, took the candle and tin of hot water from him, and tried to think of absolutely nothing but the job before me. Not feet. Not, for God's sake, Arch Bug.

Jamie had a blanket wrapped round his shoulders, but his legs were necessarily bare, and I could feel the hairs bristling with gooseflesh as my hand brushed them. The bottom of his shirt was soaked with half-dried blood; it stuck to his leg, but he made no sound when I pulled it loose and nudged his legs apart.

He had been moving like a man in a bad dream, but the approach of a lighted candle to his balls roused him.

“Ye’ll take care wi’ that candle, Sassenach, aye?” he said, putting a protective hand over his genitals.

Seeing his point, I gave him the candle to hold, and with a brief admonition to beware of dripping hot wax, returned to my inspection.

The wound was oozing blood, but plainly minor, and I plunged a cloth into the hot water and began to work. His flesh was chilled, and the cold damped even the pungent odors of the pantry, but I could still smell him, his usual dry musk tainted with blood and frantic sweat.

It was a deep gouge that ran four inches through the flesh of his thigh, high up. Clean, though.

“A John Wayne special,” I said, trying for a light, dry tone. Jamie’s eyes, which had been fixed on the candle flame, changed focus and fixed on me.

“What?” he said hoarsely.

“Nothing serious,” I said. “The ball just grazed you. You may walk a little oddly for a day or two, but the hero lives to fight another day.” The ball had in fact gone between his legs, deeply creasing the inside of his thigh, near both to his testicles and his femoral artery. One inch to the right, and he’d be dead. One inch higher …

“Not a great help, Sassenach,” he said, but the ghost of a smile touched his eyes.

“No,” I agreed. “But some?”

“Some,” he said, and briefly touched my face. His hand was very cold, and trembled; hot wax ran over the knuckles of his other hand, but he didn’t seem to feel it. I took the candlestick gently from him and set it on the shelf.

I could feel the grief and self-reproach coming off him in waves, and fought to keep it at bay. I couldn’t help him if I gave in to the enormity of the situation. I wasn’t sure I could help him in any case, but I’d try.

“Oh, Jesus,” he said, so softly I barely heard him. “Why did I not let him take it? What did it matter?” He struck a fist on his knee, soundless. *“God,* why did I not just let him take it!?”

“You didn’t know who it was, or what they meant to do,” I said, just as softly, putting a hand on his shoulder. “It was an accident.” His muscles were bunched, hard with anguish. I felt it, too, a hard knot of protest and denial—*No, it* can’t *be true, it can’t have happened!*—in my throat, but there was work to be done. I’d deal with the inescapable later.

He put a hand over his face, shaking his head slowly to and fro, and neither spoke nor moved while I finished the cleaning and bandaging of the wound.

“Can ye do aught for Ian?” he said, when I’d finished. He took his hand away and looked up at me as I stood, his face drawn in exhausted misery, but calm again. “He’s …” He swallowed, and glanced at the door. “He’s badly, Sassenach.”

I glanced at the whisky I’d brought: a quarter of a bottle. Jamie followed the direction of my gaze and shook his head.

“Not enough.”

“You drink it, then.” He shook his head, but I put the bottle in his hand and pressed his fingers round it.

“Orders,” I said, soft but very firm. “Shock.” He resisted, made to put the bottle back, and I tightened my hand on his.

“I *know,*” I said. “Jamie—I know. But you can’t give in. Not now.”

He looked up at me for a moment, but then he nodded, accepting it because he had to, the muscles of his arm relaxing. My own fingers were stiff, chilled from water and frigid air, but still warmer than his. I folded both hands round his free one, and held it, hard.

“There’s a reason why the hero never dies, you know,” I said, and attempted a smile, though my face felt stiff and false. “When the worst happens, someone still has to decide what to do. Go into the house now, and get warm.” I glanced out at the night, lavender-skied and wild with swirling snow. “I’ll … find Ian.”

* * *

Where would he have gone? Not far, not in this weather. Given his state of mind when he and Jamie had come back with Mrs. Bug's body, he *might,* I thought, simply have walked off into the woods, not caring where he went or what happened to him—but he'd had the dog with him. No matter what he felt like, he wouldn't take Rollo off into a howling blizzard.

And a blizzard was what it was shaping up to be. I made my way slowly uphill toward the outbuildings, sheltering my lantern under a fold of my cloak. It came to me suddenly to wonder whether Arch Bug might have taken shelter in the springhouse or the smoke shed. And … oh, God—did he *know?* I stopped dead on the path for an instant, letting the thickly falling snow settle like a veil on my head and shoulders.

I had been so shocked by what had happened that I hadn't thought to wonder whether Arch Bug knew that his wife was dead. Jamie said that he had called out, called for Arch to come, as soon as he realized—but there had been no answer. Perhaps Arch had suspected a trick; perhaps he had simply fled, seeing Jamie and Ian and assuming that they would certainly not harm his wife. In which case …

"Oh, *bloody* hell," I said under my breath, appalled. But there was nothing I could do about that. I hoped there was something I could do about Ian. I rubbed a forearm over my face, blinked snow from my lashes, and went on, slowly, the light from the lantern swallowed in the vortex of whirling snow. Were I to find Arch … My fingers clenched on the lantern's handle. I'd have to tell him, bring him back to the cabin, let him see … Oh, dear. If I came back with Arch, could Jamie and Ian occupy him long enough for me to remove Mrs. Bug from the pantry and display her in more seemly fashion? I hadn't had time to remove the jutting arrow or lay out the body decently. I dug the fingernails of my free hand into the palm, trying to get a grip of myself.

"Jesus, don't let me find him," I said under my breath. "Please don't let me find him."

But springhouse, smoke shed, and corncrib were all—thank God—empty, and no one could have hidden in the chicken coop without the chickens making a fuss about it; they were silent, sleeping out the storm. The sight of the coop brought Mrs. Bug suddenly to mind, though—the vision of her scattering corn from her apron, crooning to the silly things. She'd named them all. I didn't bloody care whether we were eating Isobeaìl or Alasdair for supper, but just at the moment, the fact that no one now would ever be able to tell one from another, or rejoice in the fact that Elspeth had hatched ten chicks, seemed unspeakably heartrending.

I found Ian at last in the barn, a dark form huddled in the straw by the feet of Clarence the mule, whose ears pricked up at my appearance. He brayed ecstatically at the prospect of more company, and the goats blatted hysterically, thinking I was a wolf. The horses, surprised, tossed their heads, snorting and nickering in question. Rollo, nestled in the hay next to his master, gave a short, sharp bark of displeasure at the racket.

"Ruddy Noah's Ark in here," I remarked, shaking snow off my cloak and hanging the lantern on a hook. "All we need is a pair of elephants. Hush, Clarence!"

Ian turned his face toward me, but I could see from his blank expression that he hadn't taken in what I'd said.

I squatted next to him and cupped a hand round his cheek; it was cold, bristled with young beard.

"It wasn't your fault," I said gently.

"I know," he said, and swallowed. "But I dinna see how I can live." He wasn't dramatic about it at all; his voice was simply bewildered. Rollo licked his hand, and his fingers sank into the dog's ruff, as though for support.

"What can I do, Auntie?" He looked at me, helpless. "There's nothing, is there? I canna take it back, or undo it. And yet I keep looking for some way that I can. Something I can do to make things right. But there's … nothing."

I sat down in the hay next to him and put an arm round his shoulder, pressing his head toward me. He came, reluctantly, though I felt small constant shudders of exhaustion and grief running through him like a chill.

"I loved her," he said, so low I could barely hear him. "She was like my grandmother. And I—"

"She loved you," I whispered. "She wouldn't blame you." I had been holding on to my own emotions like grim death, in order to do what had to be done. But now … Ian was right. There was nothing, and in sheer helplessness, tears began to roll down my face. I wasn't crying. Grief and shock simply overflowed; I could not contain them.

Whether he felt the tears on his skin or only the vibrations of my grief, I couldn't tell, but quite suddenly Ian gave way as well, and he wept in my arms, shaking.

I wished with all my heart that he was a small boy, and that the storm of grief could wash away his guilt and leave him cleansed, at peace. But he was far beyond such simple things; all I could do was hold him, and stroke his back, making small, helpless noises myself. Then Clarence offered his own support, breathing heavily on Ian's head and nibbling thoughtfully on a lock of his hair. Ian jerked away, slapping at the mule's nose.

"Och, awa' wi' ye!"

He choked, laughed in a shocked way, wept a little more, and then straightened up and wiped his nose on his sleeve. He sat still for a little while, gathering the pieces of himself, and I let him be.

"When I killed that man in Edinburgh," he said at last, his voice thick but controlled, "Uncle Jamie took me to confession, and told me the prayer that ye say when ye've killed someone. To commend them to God. Will ye say it with me, Auntie?"

I hadn't thought of—let alone said—"Soul Leading" in many years, and stumbled awkwardly through the words. Ian spoke it without hesitation, though, and I wondered how often he had used it through those years.

The words seemed puny and powerless, swallowed among the sounds of hay rustling and beasts chewing. But I felt a tiny bit of comfort for having said them. Perhaps it was only that the sense of reaching out to something larger than yourself gives you some feeling that there *is* something larger—and there really has to be, because plainly *you* aren't sufficient to the situation. I surely wasn't.

Ian sat for a time, eyes closed. Finally, he opened them and looked at me, his eyes black with knowledge, face very pale under the stubble of his beard.

"And then, he said, ye live with it," he said softly.

He rubbed a hand across his face.

"But I dinna think I can." It was a simple statement of fact, and scared me badly. I had no more tears, but felt as though I looked into a black, bottomless hole—and couldn't look away.

I drew a deep breath, trying to think of something to say, then pulled a handkerchief from my pocket and gave it to him.

"Are you breathing, Ian?"

His mouth twitched a little.

"Aye, I think so."

"That's all you have to do, for now." I got up, brushed hay from my skirts, and held out a hand to him. "Come along. We need to go back to the cabin before we're snowed in here."

The snow was thicker now, and a gust of wind put out the candle in my lantern. It didn't matter; I could have found the cabin blindfolded. Ian went ahead of me without comment, breaking a trail through the fresh-fallen snow. His head was bent against the storm, his narrow shoulders hunched.

I hoped the prayer had helped him, at least a little, and wondered whether the Mohawk had any better means of dealing with unjust death than did the Catholic Church.

Then I realized that I knew exactly what the Mohawk would do in such a case. So did Ian; he'd done it. I pulled the cloak tighter round me, feeling as though I had swallowed a large ball of ice.

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4

NOT YET AWHILE

After a good deal of discussion, the two corpses were carried gently outside and laid at the edge of the porch. There simply was no room to lay them out properly inside, and given the circumstances …

“We canna let auld Arch be in doubt any longer than he must,” Jamie had said, putting an end to the arguments. “If the body’s in plain sight, maybe he’ll come out and maybe he’ll not—but he’ll ken his wife’s dead.”

“He will,” Bobby Higgins said, with an uneasy look toward the trees. “And what d’ye think he’ll do then?”

Jamie stood for a moment, looking toward the wood, then shook his head.

“Grieve,” he said quietly. “And in the morning, we’ll see what’s to do.”

It wasn’t the normal sort of wake, but it was conducted with what ceremony we could manage. Amy had donated her own shroud—made after her first wedding, and carefully kept by—for Mrs. Bug, and Grannie MacLeod was clad in the remnants of my spare chemise and a couple of aprons, hastily stitched up into respectability. They were laid one on either side of the porch, foot to foot, with a small saucer of salt and a slice of bread on the chest of each corpse, though no sin-eater was available. I had packed a small clay firepot with coals and set this near the bodies, and it was agreed that we would all take it in turns through the night to sit over the deceased, as the porch would hold no more than two or three people.

"The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow/Gave the lustre of mid-day to objects below," I said softly. It did; the storm had blown over and the three-quarter moon cast a pure, cold light that made each snow-covered tree stand out, stark and delicate as a painting in Japanese ink. And in the distant ruins of the Big House, the jackstraw of charred timbers hid whatever lay below.

Jamie and I were taking the first watch. No one had argued when Jamie announced this. No one spoke of it, but the image of Arch Bug, lurking alone in the forest, was in everyone's mind.

"You think he's there?" I asked Jamie, low-voiced. I nodded toward the dark trees, peaceful in their own soft shrouds.

"If it were you lying here, *a nighean,"* Jamie said, looking down at the still white figures at the edge of the porch, "I should be beside ye, alive or dead. Come sit down."

I sat down beside him, the firepot close to our cloak-wrapped knees.

"Poor things," I said, after a bit. "It's a long way from Scotland."

"It is," he said, and took my hand. His fingers were no warmer than my own, but the size and strength of them were a comfort, nonetheless. "But they'll be buried amongst folk who ken their ways, if not among their own kin."

"True." Should Grannie MacLeod's grandsons ever come back, at least they would find a marker for her grave and know she had been treated with kindness. Mrs. Bug hadn't any kin, save Arch—no one to come and look for the grave marker. But she would be among people who'd known and loved her. What about Arch, though? If he had kin in Scotland, he'd never mentioned it. His wife had been everything to him, as he to her.

"You, um, don't think that Arch might … do away with himself?" I asked delicately. "Once he knows?"

Jamie shook his head, definite.

"No," he said. "It's not in him."

On one level, I was relieved to hear this. On a lower and less compassionate level, I couldn't help wondering uneasily just what a man of Arch's passions might do, stricken by this mortal blow, now bereft of the woman who had been his anchor and safe harbor for most of his life.

What *would* such a man do? I wondered. Run before the wind until he hit a reef and sank? Or tie his life to the makeshift anchor of fury, and take revenge as his new compass? I'd seen the guilt Jamie and Ian were bearing; how much more was Arch carrying? Could any man bear such guilt? Or must he turn it outward, as a matter of simple survival?

Jamie had said nothing about his own speculations, but I'd noticed that he had both pistol and dirk in his belt—and the pistol was loaded and primed; I could smell the whiff of black powder under the resinous breath of spruce and fir. Of course, it *might be* for driving off a roving wolf or foxes …

We sat in silence for a little while, watching the shifting glow of the coals in the firepot and the flicker of light in the folds of the shrouds.

"Ought we to pray, do you think?" I whispered.

"I havena given over praying since it happened, Sassenach."

"I know what you mean." I did—the passionate prayer that it might not be, and the desperate prayer for guidance thereafter; the need to do something, when nothing, really, could be done. And, of course, prayer for the repose of the recently departed. At least Grannie MacLeod had expected death—and welcomed it, I thought. Mrs. Bug, on the other hand, must have been terribly startled at being so suddenly dead. I had a disconcerting vision of her standing in the snow just off the porch, glaring at her corpse, hands on stout hips, lips pursed in annoyance at having been so rudely disembodied.

"It *was* rather a shock," I said apologetically to her shade.

"Aye, it was that."

Jamie reached into his cloak and drew out his flask. Uncorking this, he leaned forward and carefully poured a few drops of whisky on the head of each of the dead women, then lifted the flask in silent toast to Grannie MacLeod, then to Mrs. Bug.

"Murdina, wife of Archibald, ye were a great cook," he said simply. "I'll recall your biscuits all my life, and think of ye wi' my morning parritch."

"Amen," I said, my voice trembling between laughter and tears. I accepted the flask and took a sip; the whisky burned through the thickness in my throat, and I coughed.

"I know her receipt for piccalilli. That shouldn't be lost; I'll write it down."

The thought of writing reminded me quite suddenly of the unfinished letter, still folded up in my workbag. Jamie felt the slight stiffening of my posture and turned his head toward me in question.

"I was only thinking of that letter," I said, clearing my throat. "I mean, in spite of Roger and Bree knowing the house has burnt down, they'll be happy to hear that we're still alive—always supposing they do eventually get it."

Aware both of the precarious times and of the uncertain survival of historical documents, Jamie and Roger had worked out several schemes for the passage of information, ranging from the publication of coded messages in various newspapers to something elaborate involving the Church of Scotland and the Bank of England. All of these, of course, relied upon the basic fact of the MacKenzie family having made the passage through the stones safely and arrived in more or less the right time—but I was obliged for my own peace of mind to assume that they had.

"But I don't want to end it by having to tell them—about this." I nodded toward the shrouded figures. "They loved Mrs. Bug—and Bree would be so upset for Ian."

"Aye, ye're right," Jamie said thoughtfully. "And chances are that Roger Mac would think it all through and realize about Arch. Knowing, and not able to do anything about it … aye, they'd be worrit, 'til they found another letter telling them how it's all come out—and God knows how long it may be before it *has all* come out."

"And if they didn't *get* the next letter …" *Or if we didn't survive long enough to write it,* I thought.

"Aye, best not tell them. Not yet awhile."

I moved closer, leaning against him, and he put his arm round me. We sat quiet for a bit, still troubled and sorrowful, but comforted at thought of Roger, Bree, and the children.

I could hear sounds from the cabin behind me; everyone had been quiet, shocked—but normality was fast reasserting itself. Children couldn't be kept quiet long, and I could hear high-pitched questions, demands for food, the chatter of little ones excited at being up so late, their voices threading through the clanging and thumps of food preparation. There would be bannocks and pasties for the next part of the wake; Mrs. Bug would be pleased. A sudden shower of sparks flew from the chimney and fell all round the porch like falling stars, brilliant against the dark night and the white, fresh snow.

Jamie's arm tightened round me, and he made a small sound of pleasure at the sight.

"That—what ye said about the breast o' the new-fallen snow"—the word emerged as "breest" in his soft Highland lilt—"that's a poem, is it?"

"It is. Not really appropriate to a wake—it's a comic Christmas poem called 'A Visit from Saint Nicholas.' "

Jamie snorted, his breath white.

"I dinna think the word 'appropriate' has much to do wi' a proper wake, Sassenach. Give the mourners enough drink, and they'll be singing '*O thoir a-nall am Botul*' and the weans dancing ring-a-round-a-rosy in the dooryard by moonlight."

I didn't quite laugh, but could envision it, all too easily. There *was* enough to drink, too; there was a fresh tub of beer just brewed in the pantry, and Bobby had fetched down the emergency keg of whisky from its hiding place in the barn. I lifted Jamie's hand and kissed the cold knuckles. The shock and sense of dislocation had begun to fade with the growing awareness of the pulse of life behind us. The cabin was a small, vibrant island of life, afloat in the cold of the black and white night.

"No man is an island, entire of itself," Jamie said softly, picking up my unspoken thought.

"Now, that one *is* appropriate," I said, a little dryly. "Maybe too appropriate."

"Aye? How so?"

"Never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee? I never hear *No man is an island* without that last line tolling right behind

it.”

“Mmphm. Ken the whole of it, do ye?” Not waiting for my reply, he leaned forward and stirred the coals with a stick, sending up a tiny drift of silent sparks. “It isna really a poem, ken—or the man didna mean it to be one.”

“No?” I said, surprised. “What is it? Or was it?”

“A meditation—something atwixt a sermon and a prayer. John Donne wrote it as part of his ‘Devotions upon Emergent Occasions.’ That’s sufficiently appropriate, no?” he added, with a hint of wry humor.

“They don’t get much more emergent than this, no. What am I missing, then?”

“Mmm.” He pulled me closer, and bent his head to rest on mine. “Let me call what I can to mind. I’ll not have all of it, but there are bits that struck me, so I remember those.” I could hear his breathing, slow and easy, concentrating.

“All mankind is of one author,” he said slowly, “ *and is one volume. When one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated*. Then there are bits I havena got by heart, but I liked this one: *The bell doth toll for him that thinks it doth*”—and his hand squeezed mine gently—“*and though it intermit again, yet from that minute that that occasion wrought upon him, he is united to God.”*

“Hmm.” I thought about that for a bit. “You’re right; that’s less poetic, but a bit more … hopeful?”

I felt him smile.

“I’ve always found it so, aye.”

“Where did you get that?”

“John Grey lent me a wee book of Donne’s writing, when I was prisoner at Helwater. That was in it.”

“A very literate gentleman,” I said, somewhat piqued at this reminder of the substantial chunk of Jamie’s life that John Grey had shared and I had not—but grudgingly glad that he had had a friend through that time of trial. How often, I wondered suddenly, had Jamie heard that tolling bell?

I sat up, reached for the flask, and took a cleansing swallow. The smell of baking, of onion and simmered meat, was seeping through the door, and my stomach rumbled in an unseemly manner. Jamie didn't notice; he was squinting thoughtfully off toward the west, where the bulk of the mountain lay hidden by cloud.

"The MacLeod lads said the passes were already hip-deep in snow when they came down," he said. "If there's a foot of new snow on the ground here, there are three in the high passes. We're going nowhere 'til the spring thaw, Sassenach. Time enough to carve proper grave markers, at least," he added, with a glance at our quiet guests.

"You do still mean to go to Scotland, then?" He'd said so, after the Big House burned, but hadn't mentioned it since then. I wasn't sure whether he'd meant it or had merely been reacting to the pressure of events at the time.

"Aye, I do. We canna be staying here, I think," he said, with some regret. "Come the spring, the backcountry will be boiling again. We've come close enough to the fire." He lifted his chin in the direction of the Big House's charred remains. "I've no mind to be roasted, next time."

"Well … yes." He was right, I knew. We could build another house—but it was unlikely we would be allowed to live peaceably in it. Among other things, Jamie was—or at least had been—a colonel of militia. Short of physical incapacity or simple absence, he couldn't relinquish that responsibility. And sentiment in the mountains was by no means all in favor of rebellion. I knew a number of people who had been beaten, burnt out, and driven into the woods or swamps, or killed outright as the direct result of injudiciously expressed political sentiments.

The weather prevented our leaving, but it also put a stopper on the movement of militias—or roving bands of brigands. The thought of that sent a sudden bolt of cold through me, and I shivered.

"Shall ye go in, *a nighean*?" Jamie asked, noticing. "I can bear watch alone for a bit."

"Right. And we'll come out with the bannocks and honey and find you stretched out beside the old ladies with an ax in your head. I'm fine." I took another sip of whisky, and handed him the flask.

"We wouldn't necessarily have to go to Scotland, though," I said, watching him drink. "We could go to New Bern. You could join Fergus in the printing business there." That's what he'd said he meant to do: go to Scotland, fetch the printing press he had left in Edinburgh, then come back to join the fight, armed with lead in the form of type slugs, rather than musket balls. I wasn't sure which method might be the more dangerous.

"Ye dinna suppose your presence would stop Arch trying to brain me, if that's what he's got in mind?" Jamie smiled briefly at that, slanted eyes creasing into triangles. "No—Fergus has a right to put himself in danger, and he wants to. But I've no right to drag him and his family into my own."

"Which tells me all I need to know about what sort of printing you have in mind to do. And my presence might not stop Arch going for you, but I could at least shout 'Look out!' if I saw him creeping up behind you."

"I should always want ye at my back, Sassenach," he assured me gravely. "Ye kent already what I mean to do, surely?"

"Yes," I said with a sigh. "Occasionally I have the vain hope that I'm wrong about you—but I never am."

That made him laugh outright.

"No, ye're not," he agreed. "But ye're still here, aye?" He lifted the flask in salute to me, and drank from it. "Good to know someone will miss me, when I fall."

"I did not miss that 'when,' rather than 'if,' " I said coldly.

"It's always been 'when,' Sassenach," he said gently. "*Every chapter must be so translated*. Aye?"

I took a deep breath and watched it drift out in a plume of mist.

"I sincerely hope I'm not going to have to do it," I said, "but should the question arise—would you want to be buried here? Or taken back to Scotland?" I was thinking of a granite marriage stone in the graveyard at St. Kilda, with his name on it, and mine, too. The bloody thing had nearly given me heart failure when I saw it, and I wasn't sure I had forgiven Frank for it, even though it had accomplished what he'd meant it to.

Jamie made a small snorting noise, not quite a laugh.

"I shall be lucky to be buried at all, Sassenach. Much more likely I shall be drowned, burnt, or left to rot on some battlefield. Dinna fash yourself. If ye've got to dispose of my carcass, just leave it out for the crows."

"I'll make a note of that," I said.

"Will ye mind going to Scotland?" he asked, eyebrows raised.

I sighed. Despite my knowing that he wasn't going to lie under that particular gravestone, I couldn't quite rid myself of the notion that he would at some point die there.

"No. I'll mind leaving the mountains. I'll mind watching you turn green and puke your guts out on the ship, and I may well mind whatever happens on the way *to* said ship, but … Edinburgh and printing presses aside, you want to go to Lallybroch, don't you?"

He nodded, eyes on the glowing coals. The light from the firepot was faint but warm on the ruddy arch of his brows, a line of gilding down the long, straight bridge of his nose.

"I promised, aye?" he said simply. "I said I'd bring Young Ian back to his mother. And after this … best he goes."

I nodded silently. Three thousand miles of ocean might not be enough for Ian to escape his memories—but it couldn't hurt. And perhaps the joy of seeing his parents, his brothers and sisters, the Highlands … perhaps it would help heal him.

Jamie coughed, and rubbed a knuckle over his lips.

"There's the one other thing," he said, a little shy. "Another promise, ye might say."

"What's that?"

He turned his head then, and met my eyes, his own dark and serious.

"I've sworn to myself," he said, "that I shallna ever face my son across the barrel of a gun."

I took a deep breath and nodded. After a moment's silence, I looked up from my contemplation of the shrouded women.

"You didn't ask what I want done with *my* body." I'd meant it at least half in jest, to lighten his mood, but his fingers curled so abruptly over mine that I gasped.

“No,” he said softly. “And I never will.” He wasn’t looking at me but at the whiteness before us. “I canna think of ye dead, Claire. Anything else—but not that. I can’t.”

He stood abruptly. The rattle of wood, the clang of a falling pewter dish, and voices raised in adjuration inside saved me from reply. I simply nodded and let him lift me to my feet, as the door opened, spilling light.

* * *

The morning dawned clear and bright, with a scant foot of fresh snow on the ground. By noon, the icicles that hung from the cabin’s eaves had begun to loose their hold, dropping like random daggers with muffled, intermittent *thunks*. Jamie and Ian had gone up the hill to the small burying ground, with spades, to see whether the ground might be dug deep enough for two decent graves.

“Take Aidan and one or two of the other boys with you,” I’d said at breakfast. “They need to be gotten out from underfoot.” Jamie had given me a sharp glance, but nodded. He knew very well what I was thinking. If Arch Bug *didn’t yet* know that his wife was dead, he’d certainly start drawing conclusions if he saw a grave being dug.

“Best if he’ll come and speak to me,” Jamie had said quietly to me, under cover of the noise made by the boys readying themselves to go, their mothers packing lunch to be taken up the hill, and the smaller children playing ring-a-round-a-rosy in the back room.

“Yes,” I said, “and the boys won’t stop him doing that. But if he *doesn’t* choose to come out and speak to you …” Ian had told me that he’d heard a rifle fired during the encounter the night before; Arch Bug was no particular marksman, though, and would presumably hesitate to fire on a group that included young children.

Jamie had nodded, silent, and sent Aidan to fetch his two eldest cousins.

Bobby and Clarence the mule had gone up with the grave-digging party. There was a stock of freshly sawn pine boards at the site higher up on the mountainside, where Jamie had declared our new house would one day rise; if graves could be dug, Bobby would bring back some of the boards to make coffins.

From my viewpoint on the front porch, I could see Clarence now, heavily laden, but mincing downhill with ballerina grace, ears pointed delicately to either side as though to aid his balance. I caught a glimpse of Bobby walking on the far side of the mule, reaching up now and then to keep the load from slipping; he saw me and waved, smiling. The M branded on his cheek was visible even at this distance, livid against the cold-chapped ruddiness of his skin.

I waved back and turned in to the house, to tell the women that we would indeed have a funeral.

* * *

We made our way up the winding trail to the small graveyard next morning. The two old ladies, unlikely companions in death, lay side by side in their coffins on a sledge, pulled by Clarence and one of the McCallum women's mules, a little black jenny called Puddin'.

We were not dressed in our best; no one *had* a "best," with the exception of Amy McCallum Higgins, who had worn her lace-trimmed wedding kerchief as a sign of respect. We were mostly clean, though, and the adults at least were sober in aspect, and watchful. Very watchful.

"Which will be the new guardian, Mam?" Aidan asked his mother, eyeing the two coffins as the sledge creaked slowly uphill ahead of us. "Which died first?"

"Why … I dinna ken, Aidan," Amy replied, looking mildly taken aback. She frowned at the coffins, then glanced at me. "D'ye know that, Mrs. Fraser?"

The question hit me like a thrown pebble, and I blinked. I did know, of course, but—with some effort, I refrained from glancing into the trees that lined the trail. I had no idea exactly where Arch Bug was, but he was near; I had no doubt of that at all. And if he were near enough to overhear this conversation …

Highland superstition held that the last person to be buried in a graveyard became the guardian and must defend the souls who rested there from any evil, until another should die and take the guardian's place—whereupon the earlier guardian was released and might go on to heaven. I didn't think Arch would be at all happy about the notion of his wife trapped on earth to guard the graves of Presbyterians and sinners like Malva Christie.

I felt a small chill in the heart at thought of Malva—who was, now I thought of it, presumably the graveyard's present guardian. "Presumably," because while other people had died on the Ridge since her own death, she was the last to have been buried in the graveyard proper. Her brother, Allan, was buried nearby, a little way into the forest, in a secret, unmarked grave; I didn't know whether that was near enough to count. And her father …

I coughed into my fist, and clearing my throat said, "Oh, Mrs. MacLeod. She was dead when we came back to the cabin with Mrs. Bug." Which was strictly true; the fact that she'd been dead when I *left* the cabin seemed better suppressed.

I had been looking at Amy when I spoke. I turned my head back to the trail, and there he was, right in front of me. Arch Bug, in his rusty black cloak, white head bared and bent, following the sledge through the snow, slow as an earthbound raven. A faint shudder ran through the mourners.

He turned his head then, and saw me.

"Will ye sing, Mrs. Fraser?" he asked, his voice quiet and courtly. "I'd have her taken to her rest wi' the proper observances."

"I—yes, of course." Enormously flustered, I groped for something suitable. I simply wasn't up to the challenge of composing a proper *caithris*, a lament for the dead—let alone providing the formal wailing that a truly first-class Highland funeral would have.

I settled hastily for a Gaelic psalm that Roger had taught me, *"Is e Dia fèin a's buachaill dhomh."* It was a line chant, each line meant to be sung by a precentor, then echoed line by line by the congregation. It was simple, though, and while my voice seemed thin and insubstantial on the mountainside, those around me were able to take it up, and by the time we reached the burying ground, we had achieved a respectable level of fervor and volume.

The sledge stopped at the edge of the pine-circled clearing. A few wooden crosses and cairns were visible through the half-melted snow, and the two fresh graves gaped in the center, muddy and brutal. The sight of them stopped the singing as abruptly as a pail of cold water.

The sun shone pale and bright through the trees, and there was a gang of nuthatches conversing in the branches at the edge of the clearing, incongruously cheerful. Jamie had been leading the mules, and had not glanced back at Arch's appearance. Now, though, he turned to Arch and with a small gesture at the nearer coffin, asked in a low voice, "Will ye look upon your wife once more?"

It was only as Arch nodded and moved to the side of the sledge, that I realized that while the men had nailed down the lid of Mrs. MacLeod's coffin, they had left Mrs. Bug's lying loose. Bobby and Ian lifted it off, their eyes on the ground.

Arch had unbound his hair as a sign of grief; I had never seen it loose before. It was thin, pure white, and wavered about his face like wisps of smoke as he bent and gently lifted the shroud from Murdina's face.

I swallowed hard, clenching my hands. I'd removed the arrow—not a pleasant business—and had then wrapped her throat carefully in a clean bandage before combing her hair. She looked all right, though terribly unfamiliar; I didn't think I'd ever seen her without her cap, and the bandage across her full throat gave her the sternly formal air of a Presbyterian minister. I saw Arch flinch, just slightly, and his own throat move. He got control of his face almost at once, but I saw the lines that ran from nose to chin like gullies through wet clay, and the way in which he opened and closed his hands, over and over, seeking a grip on something that wasn't there.

He gazed into the coffin for a long moment, then reached into his sporran and drew out something. I saw when he put back his cloak that his belt was empty; he had come without weapons.

The thing in his hand was small and glittering. He leaned down and tried to fix it to the shroud, but could not, with his missing fingers. He fumbled, said something under his breath in Gaelic, then looked up at me, with something near panic in his eyes. I went at once to him, and took the thing from his hand.

It was a brooch, a small, beautifully made thing in the shape of a flying swallow. Made of gold, and very new-looking. I took it from him and, turning back the shroud, pinned it to Mrs. Bug's kerchief. I'd never seen the brooch before, either on Mrs. Bug or among her things, and it came to me that Arch had likely had it made from the gold he had taken from Jocasta Cameron—perhaps when he began to take the ingots, one by one; perhaps later. A promise made to his wife—that their years of penury and dependence were over. Well … indeed they were. I glanced at Arch, and at his nod, pulled the shroud gently up over his wife's cold face.

I put out a hand impulsively to touch him, take his arm, but he drew away and stood back, watching impassively as Bobby nailed down the lid. At one point, his gaze rose and passed slowly over Jamie, then Ian, in turn.

I pressed my lips tight, glancing at Jamie as I came back to his side, seeing the trouble etched so plainly on his face. So much guilt! Not that there wasn't enough and to spare—and plainly enough, Arch felt his own. Did it not occur to any of them that Mrs. Bug had had something to do with this, herself? Had she not fired at Jamie … but people didn't always behave intelligently, or well, and did the fact that someone had contributed to their own demise lessen the tragedy of it?

I caught sight of the small boulder that marked the grave of Malva and her son, only the top of it visible through the snow—rounded, wet, and dark, like the crowning of a baby's head at birth.

Rest in peace, I thought, and felt a small easing of the tension I'd been under for the last two days. *You can go now*.

It occurred to me that whatever I'd told Amy and Aidan, it didn't alter the truth of which woman really *had* died first. Still, considering Mrs. Bug's personality, I rather thought she might enjoy being in charge, clucking and fussing after the resident souls like her flock of much-loved chickens, banishing evil spirits with a sharp word and a brandished sausage.

That thought got me through the brief reading from the Bible, the prayers, the tears—from the women and the children, most of whom had no idea why they were crying—the removal of the coffins from the sledge, and a rather disjoint recitation of the Lord's Prayer. I missed Roger very much—his sense of calm order and genuine compassion in the conducting of a funeral. And he would, perhaps, have known what to say in eulogy of Murdina Bug. As it was, no one spoke when the prayer concluded, and there was a long, awkward pause, people shifting uneasily from foot to foot—we were standing in a foot of snow, and the women's petticoats were wet to the knee.

I saw Jamie shift his shoulders, as though his coat was too tight, and glance at the sledge, where the shovels lay under a blanket. Before he could signal Ian and Bobby, though, Ian drew a deep, gasping breath and stepped forward.

He came to the side of Mrs. Bug's waiting coffin, opposite the bereaved husband, and stopped, plainly wanting to speak. Arch ignored him for a long moment, staring down into the hole, but finally raised his face, impassive. Waiting.

"It was by my hand that this"—Ian swallowed—"that this woman of great worth has died. I didna take her life by malice, or of purpose, and it is sorrow to me. But she died by my hand."

Rollo whined softly by Ian's side, feeling his master's distress, but Ian laid a hand on his head, and he stilled. Ian drew the knife from his belt and laid it on the coffin in front of Arch Bug, then straightened and looked him in the eye.

"Ye swore once to my uncle, in a time of great wrong, and offered life for life, for this woman. I swear by my iron, and I offer the same." His lips pressed together for an instant, and his throat moved, his eyes dark and sober. "I think ye maybe didna mean it, sir—but I do."

I found that I was holding my breath, and forced myself to breathe. Was this Jamie's plan? I wondered. Ian plainly meant what he said. Still, the chances of Arch accepting that offer on the spot and cutting Ian's throat in front of a dozen witnesses were slim, no matter how exigent his feelings. But if he publicly declined the offer

—then the possibility of a more formal and less bloody recompense was opened, yet young Ian would be relieved of at least a measure of his guilt. Bloody Highlander, I thought, glancing up at Jamie—not without a certain admiration.

I could feel small jolts of energy running through him, though, every few seconds, each one suppressed. He wouldn't interfere with Ian's attempt at atonement—but neither would he see him injured, if by chance old Arch *did* opt for blood. And evidently he thought it a possibility. I glanced at Arch, and thought so, too.

The old man looked at Ian for a moment, heavy brows wild with curling iron-gray old-man hairs—and the eyes beneath them iron-gray, too, and cold as steel.

"Too easy, boy," he said at last, in a voice like rusty iron.

He looked down at Rollo, who was standing next to Ian, ears pricked and wolf eyes wary.

"Will ye give me your hound to kill?"

Ian's mask broke in an instant, shock and horror making him suddenly young. I heard him gulp air and steady himself, but his voice was cracked in reply.

"No," he said. "He's done nothing. It's my—my crime, not his."

Arch smiled then, very slightly, though it did not touch his eyes.

"Aye. Ye see, then. And he's no but a flea-ridden beast. Not a wife." "Wife" was spoken in barely a whisper. His throat worked as he cleared it. Then he looked carefully from Ian to Jamie, and then at me.

"Not a wife," he said softly. I'd thought my blood ran cold already; that froze my heart.

In no hurry, Arch turned his gaze deliberately upon each man in turn; Jamie, then Ian, whom he regarded for an instant that seemed a lifetime.

"When you've something worth taking, boy—you'll see me again," he said quietly, then turned upon his heel and walked into the trees.

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5

MORALITY FOR TIME-TRAVELERS

There was an electric desk lamp in his study, but Roger often preferred to work by candlelight in the evening. He took a match from the box, and struck it with one soft scratch. After Claire’s letter, he didn’t think he’d ever light a match again without thinking of her story of the burning of the Big House. God, he wished he’d been there.

The match flame shrank as he touched it to the wick, and the translucent wax of the candle went a dim, unearthly blue for an instant, then brightened into its normal glow. He glanced at Mandy, singing to a collection of stuffed toys on the sofa; she’d had her bath and was meant to be keeping out of trouble while Jem had his. Keeping one eye on her, he sat down at his desk and opened his notebook.

He’d begun it half as a joke. The other half as the only thing he could think of to combat paralyzing fear.

“You can teach kids not to cross the street alone,” Bree had pointed out. “Surely you can teach them to stay the heck away from standing stones.”

He’d agreed, but with substantial mental reservations. Small kids, yes; you could brainwash them into not sticking forks in the electric outlets. But as they became teenagers, with all that inchoate yearning for self-discovery and things unknown? He recalled his own teenaged self much too vividly. Tell a teenaged boy not to stick forks in the outlet, and he’d be off rifling the silverware drawer the minute your back was turned. Girls might be different, but he doubted it.

He glanced again at the sofa, where Amanda was now lying on her back, legs thrust into the air and a large, ratty-looking stuffed bear balanced on her feet, to which she was singing “Frère Jacques.” Mandy had been so young that she wouldn’t remember. Jem would. He did; Roger could tell, when the little boy woke up from nightmares, eyes huge and staring at nothing, and could not describe his dream. Thank God, it didn’t happen often.

He still broke out in a cold sweat whenever he remembered it himself. That last passage. He’d clutched Jemmy to his chest and stepped into … God, there was no name for it, because humanity at large had never experienced it, and lucky for them they hadn’t. It wasn’t even *like* anything to which it could be compared.

None of the senses worked there—and at the same time, all of them did, in such a state of hypersensitivity that you’d die of it if it lasted any longer than it did. A howling void, where sound seemed to batter you, pulsing through your body, trying to separate each cell from the next. Absolute blindness, but the blindness of looking into the sun. And the impact of … bodies? Ghosts? Unseen others who brushed past like moth wings or seemed to hurtle right through you in a colliding thump of entangling bones. A constant sense of screaming.

Did it smell? He paused, frowning, trying to remember. Yes, it damned well did. And oddly enough, it was a describable smell: the scent of air burnt by lightning—ozone.

It smells strongly of ozone, he wrote, feeling remarkably relieved to have even this small foothold of reference to the normal world.

This relief disappeared in the next instant, as he returned to the struggle of memory.

He’d felt as though nothing save his own will held them together, nothing but raw determination to survive held *him* together. Knowing what to expect hadn’t helped in the slightest; it was different—and much worse—than his previous experiences.

He did know not to look at them. The ghosts, if that’s what they were. “Look” wasn’t the right word … pay attention to them? Again, there wasn't a word, and he sighed in exasperation.

"Sonnez le matines, sonnez le matines …"

"Din dan don," he sang softly with her chorus. *"Din dan don."*

He tapped the pen on the paper for a minute, thinking, then shook his head and bent over the paper again, trying to explain his first attempt, the occasion on which he'd come within … moments? inches? Some unthinkably small degree of separation of meeting his father—and destruction.

I think you cannot cross your own lifeline, he wrote slowly. Both Bree and Claire—the scientific women—had assured him that two objects cannot exist in the same space, whether said objects were subatomic particles or elephants. That being true, it would explain why one couldn't exist twice in the same time period, he supposed.

He assumed it was that phenomenon that had come so close to killing him on his first attempt. He had been thinking of his father when he entered the stones, and—presumably—of his father as he, Roger, had known him. Which was, of course, during the period of his own life.

He tapped the pen on the page again, thinking, but could not bring himself just now to write about that encounter. Later. Instead, he flipped back to the rudimentary outline in the front of the book.

A Practical Guide for Time-Travelers

I. Physical Phenomena

- *A. Known Locations (Ley Lines?)*
- *B. Genetic Inheritance*
- *C. Mortality*
- *D. The Influence and Properties of Gemstones*
- *E. Blood?*

He'd scratched through that last one, but hesitated, looking at it. Did he have an obligation to tell everything he knew, believed, or suspected? Claire thought that the notion of a blood sacrifice being required or useful was nonsense—a pagan superstition without real validity. She might be right; she was the scientist, after all. But he had the uneasy memory of the night Geillis Duncan had gone through the stones.

Long blond hair, flying in the rising wind of a fire, the whipping locks silhouetted for an instant against the face of a standing stone. The gagging scent of petrol mingled with roasting flesh, and the log that was not a log lying charred in the center of the circle. And Geillis Duncan had gone too far.

"It's always two hundred years, in the old fairy tales," Claire had told him. Literal fairy tales; stories of people stolen by the fairies, "taken through the stones" of faerie hills. *It was a time, two hundred years ago*, such tales often began. Or the people were returned to their own place—but two hundred years past the time they had left. Two hundred years.

Claire, Bree, himself—each time they had traveled, the span of time was the same: two hundred and two years, close enough to the two hundred years of the ancient tales. But Geillis Duncan had gone too far.

With great reluctance, he slowly wrote *Blood* again, and added a parenthetical *(Fire??)*, but nothing beneath it. Not now; later.

For reassurance, he glanced at the spot on the bookshelf where the letter lay, weighted down by a small snake carved of cherrywood. *We are alive* ….

He wanted suddenly to go and fetch the wooden box, pull out the other letters, rip them open and read. Curiosity, sure, but something more—wanting to touch them, Claire and Jamie, press the evidence of their lives against his face, his heart, erase the space and time between them.

He forced back the impulse, though. They'd decided—or rather, Bree had, and they were her parents.

"I don't want to read them all at once," she'd said, turning over the contents of the box with long, gentle fingers. "It's … it's like once I've read them all, then they'll be … *really* gone."

He'd understood. As long as one letter remained unread, they *were* alive. In spite of his historian's curiosity, he shared her sentiment. Besides …

Brianna’s parents had not written those letters as journal entries, meant for the eventual eyes of a vaguely imagined posterity. They’d been written with the definite and specific intent of communication —with Bree, with *him*. Which meant that they might well contain unsettling things; both his in-laws had a talent for such revelation.

Despite himself, he rose, took down the letter and unfolded it, and read the postscript once more, just to assure himself he hadn’t been imagining it.

He hadn’t. With the word “blood” ringing faintly in his ears, he sat back down. *An Italian gentleman*. That was Charles Stuart; couldn’t be anyone else. Christ. After staring off into space for a bit —Mandy had now started in on “Jingle Bells”—he shook himself, flipped over a few pages and started in again, doggedly.

> *II. Morality*
>
> *A. Murder and Wrongful Death*
>
> *Naturally, we assume that the killing of someone for any reason short of self-defense, the protection of another, or the legitimate use of force in wartime is completely indefensible.*

He looked at that for a moment, muttered, “Pompous ass,” and ripped the page out of the notebook, crumpling it.

Ignoring Mandy’s warbling rendition of *“Gingle bells, Bamman smells, Wobin waid enegg!”* he scooped up the notebook and stomped across the hall to Brianna’s study.

“Who am I to be gassing on about morality?” he demanded. She looked up from a sheet showing the disassembled components of a hydroelectric turbine, with the rather blank look that indicated she was aware of being spoken to, but had not detached her mind sufficiently from the subject matter as to realize who was speaking or what they were saying. Familiar with this phenomenon, he waited with mild impatience for her mind to let go of the turbine and focus on him.

“… gassing on …?” she said, frowning. She blinked at him and her gaze sharpened. “Who are you gassing on to?”

"Well …" He lifted the scribbled notebook, feeling suddenly shy. "The kids, sort of."

"You're supposed to gas on to your kids about morality," she said reasonably. "You're their father; it's your job."

"Oh," he said, rather at a loss. "But—I've *done* a lot of the things I'm telling them not to." *Blood.* Yeah, maybe it was protection of another. Maybe it wasn't.

She raised a thick, ruddy brow at him.

"You never heard of benign hypocrisy? I thought they teach you stuff like that when you go to minister school. Since you mention gassing away about morality. That's a minister's job, too, isn't it?"

She stared at him, blue-eyed and waiting. He took a good, deep breath. Trust Bree, he thought wryly, to walk straight up to the elephant in the room and grab it by the trunk. She hadn't said a word since their return about his near-ordination, or what he proposed to do now about his calling. Not a word, during their year in America, Mandy's surgery, their decision to move to Scotland, the months of renovation after they'd bought Lallybroch—not until he'd opened the door. Once opened, of course, she'd walked straight through it, knocked him over, and planted a foot on his chest.

"Yeah," he said evenly. "It is," and stared back.

"Okay." She smiled, very gently, at him. "So what's the problem?"

"Bree," he said, and felt his heart stick in his scarred throat. "If I knew, I'd tell you."

She stood up then and put her hand on his arm, but before either of them could say more, the thump of small, bare feet came hop-skipping down the hall, and Jem's voice came from the door of Roger's study, saying, "Daddy?"

"Here, pal," he called back, but Brianna was already moving toward the door. Following, he found Jem—in his blue Superman pajamas, wet hair standing up in spikes—standing by his desk, examining the letter with interest.

"What's this?" he asked.

"Wassis?" Mandy echoed faithfully, rushing over and scrambling up on the chair to see.

"It's a letter from your grandda," Brianna replied, not missing a beat. She put a hand casually on the letter, obscuring most of the postscript, and pointed with the other at the last paragraph. "He sent you a kiss. See there?"

A huge smile lighted Jem's face.

"He said he wouldn't forget," he said, contented.

"Kissy, Grandda," Mandy exclaimed, and bending forward so her mass of black curls fell over her face, planted a loud, "MWAH!" on the letter.

Caught between horror and laughter, Bree snatched it up and wiped the moisture off it—but the paper, old as it was, was tough. "No harm done," she said, and handed the letter casually to Roger. "Come on, what story are we reading tonight?"

"Aminal Nursy Tales!"

"An-i-mal," Jem said, bending down to speak distinctly into his sister's face. "An-i-mal Nur-ser-y Tales."

"Okay," she said amiably. "Me first!" and scampered madly out the door, giggling, followed by her brother in hot pursuit. Brianna took three seconds to seize Roger by the ears and kiss him firmly on the mouth, then released him and set off after their offspring.

Feeling happier, he sat down, listening to the uproar of toothbrushing and face-washing above. Sighing, he put the notebook back in the drawer. Plenty of time, he thought. Years before it might be needed. Years and years.

He folded up the letter with care, and standing on tiptoe, put it on the highest shelf of the bookcase, moving the little snake to guard it. He blew out the candle then, and went to join his family.

* * *

> *Postscriptum: I see I am to have the last Word—a rare Treat to a Man living in a House that contains (at last count) eight Women. We propose to leave the Ridge so soon as the Climate thaws, and to go to Scotland, there to procure my printing Press, and return with it. Travel in these times is uncertain, and I cannot predict when—or if*

—it will be possible to write again. (Nor do I know whether you will receive this Letter at all, but I proceed in necessary Faith that you will.)

I wished to tell you of the Disposition of the Property which was once held in trust by the Camerons for an Italian Gentleman. I think it unwise to carry this with us, and have therefore removed it to a Place of safety. Jem knows the Place. If you should at some Time have need of this Property, tell him the Spaniard guards it. If so, be sure to have it blessed by a Priest; there is Blood upon it.

Sometimes I wish that I might see the Future; much more often, I give thanks to God that I cannot. But I will always see your Faces. Kiss the Children for me.

Your loving father,
JF

* * *

The children washed, toothbrushed, kissed, and put to bed, their parents returned to the library, a dram of whisky, and the letter.

“An Italian gentleman?” Bree looked at Roger, one brow raised in a way that brought Jamie Fraser so immediately to mind that Roger glanced involuntarily at the sheet of paper. “Does he mean—”

“Charles Stuart? He can’t mean anyone else.”

She picked the letter up and read the postscript for perhaps the dozenth time.

“And if he *does mean* Charles Stuart, then the property …”

“He’s found the gold. And Jem knows where it is?” Roger couldn’t help this last taking on the tone of a question, as he cast his eyes toward the ceiling, above which his children were presumably asleep, wrapped in virtue and cartoon pajamas.

Bree frowned.

“Does he? That isn’t exactly what Da said—and if he *did know* … that’s an awfully big secret to ask an eight-year-old boy to keep.”

“True.” Eight or not, Jem was very good at keeping secrets, Roger thought. But Bree was right—her father would never burden anyone with dangerous information, let alone his beloved grandson. Certainly not without a good reason, and his postscript made it clear that this information was provided only as a contingency in case of need.

"You're right. Jem doesn't know anything about the gold—just about this Spaniard, whatever that may be. He's never mentioned anything like that to you?"

She shook her head, then turned as a sudden puff of wind from the open window blew through the curtains, breathing immanent rain. Bree got up and went hastily to close it, then trotted upstairs to close the windows there, waving at Roger to see to those on the ground floor. Lallybroch was a large house, and unusually well provided with windows—the children kept trying to count them, but never came up with the same number twice.

Roger supposed he could go and count them himself one day and settle the matter, but was reluctant to do this. The house, like most old houses, had a distinct personality. Lallybroch was welcoming, all right; large and gracious, comfortably rather than grandly built, with the echoes of generations murmuring in its walls. But it was a place that had its secrets, too, no doubt of that. And hiding the number of its windows was quite in keeping with the sense he had of the house as being rather playful.

The windows in the kitchen—now equipped with modern refrigerator, Aga cooker, and decent plumbing, but still with its ancient granite counters stained with the juice of currants, the blood of game and poultry—were all closed, but he went through it nonetheless, and through the scullery. The light in the back hall was off, but he could see the grating in the floor near the wall that gave air to the priest's hole below.

His father-in-law had hidden there briefly, during the days after the Rising, before being imprisoned at Ardsmuir. Roger had gone down there once—also briefly—when they had bought the house, and had come up out of the dank, fetid little space with a complete understanding of why Jamie Fraser had chosen to live in a wilderness on a remote mountaintop, where there was no constraint in any direction.

Years of hiding, of duress, of imprisonment … Jamie Fraser was not a political creature, and he knew better than most what the true cost of war was, whatever its presumed purpose. But Roger had seen his father-in-law now and then rub absently at his wrists, where the marks of fetters had long since faded—but the memory of their weight had not. Roger had not the slightest doubt that Jamie Fraser would live free, or die. And wished for an instant, with a longing that gnawed his bones, that he might be there, to fight by his father-in-law's side.

The rain had started; he could hear the patter of it on the slate roofs of the outbuildings, then the rush as it came on in earnest, wrapping the house in mist and water.

"For ourselves … and our posterity," he said aloud, but quietly.

It was a bargain made between men—unspoken, but understood completely. Nothing mattered but that the family be preserved, the children protected. And whether the cost of it was paid in blood, sweat, or soul—it would be paid.

"Oidche mhath," he said, with a brief nod in the direction of the priest's hole. Good night, then.

He stood a moment longer in the old kitchen, though, feeling the embrace of the house, its solid protection against the storm. The kitchen had always been the heart of the house, he thought, and found the warmth of the cooker as much a comfort as the fire on the now-empty hearth had once been.

He met Brianna at the foot of the stairs; she'd changed for bed—as opposed to sleep. The air in the house was always cool, and the temperature had dropped several degrees with the onset of rain. She wasn't wearing her woolies, though; rather, a thin nightgown of white cotton, deceptively innocent-looking, with a small red ribbon threaded through it. The white cloth clung to the shape of her breasts like cloud to a mountain peak.

He said as much, and she laughed—but made no objection when he cupped his hands around them, her nipples against his palms round as beach pebbles through the thin cloth.

"Upstairs?" she whispered, and leaning in, ran the tip of her tongue along his lower lip.

“No,” he said, and kissed her solidly, quelling the tickle of the touch. “In the kitchen. We haven’t done it there, yet.”

He had her, bent over the ancient counter with its mysterious stains, the sound of her small grunts a punctuation to the rush of wind and rain on the ancient shutters. Felt her shiver and liquefy and let go, too, his knees trembling with it, so he fell slowly forward, clutched her by the shoulders, his face pressed into the shampoo-fragrant waves of her hair, the old granite smooth and cool beneath his cheek. His heart was beating slow and hard, steady as a bass drum.

He was naked, and a cold draft from somewhere raised gooseflesh down his back and legs. Brianna felt him shiver and turned her face to his.

“Cold?” she whispered. She wasn’t; she glowed like a live coal, and he wanted nothing more than to slide into bed beside her and ride out the storm in snug warmth.

“I’m fine.” He bent and scooped up the clothes he had thrown on the floor. “Let’s go to bed.”

The rain was louder upstairs.

“Oh, the animals went in two by two,” Bree sang softly, as they climbed the stairs, *“the elephants and the kangaroos …”*

Roger smiled. You *could* imagine the house an ark, floating on a roaring world of water—but all snug within. Two by two—two parents, two kids … maybe more, someday. There was plenty of room, after all.

With the lamp put out and the beating of rain on the shutters, Roger lingered on the edge of sleep, reluctant to surrender the pleasure of the moment.

“We won’t ask him, will we?” Bree whispered. Her voice was drowsy, her soft weight warm all down the side of his body. “Jem?”

“Oh? No. Of course not. No need.”

He felt the prick of curiosity—who was the Spaniard? And the notion of buried treasure was always a lure—but they didn’t need it; they had enough money for the present. Always assuming the gold was still wherever Jamie had put it, which was a long shot in itself.

Nor had he forgotten the last injunction of Jamie’s postscript.

Have it blessed by a priest; there is blood upon it. The words melted as he thought them, and what he saw on the inside of his eyelids was not gold ingots but the old granite counter in the kitchen, dark stains sunk so far into the stone as to have become part of it, ineradicable by the most vigorous scrubbing, let alone an invocation.

But it didn't matter. The Spaniard, whoever he was, could keep his gold. The family was safe.

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PART TWO

Blood, Sweat, and Pickles

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6

LONG ISLAND

On July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed in Philadelphia.

On July 24, Lieutenant General Sir William Howe arrived on Staten Island, where he set up field headquarters at the Rose and Crown Tavern in New Dorp.

On August 13, Lieutenant General George Washington arrived in New York to reinforce the fortifications of the city, which the Americans held.

On August 21, William Ransom, Lieutenant Lord Ellesmere, arrived at the Rose and Crown in New Dorp, reporting—somewhat late—for duty as the newest and most junior member of General Howe's staff.

On August 22 …

* * *

Lieutenant Edward Markham, Marquis of Clarewell, peered searchingly into William's face, offering him an unappetizingly close view of a juicy pimple—just ready to burst—on the former's forehead.

"You all right, Ellesmere?"

"Fine." William managed the word between clenched teeth.

"Only, you look rather … green." Clarewell, looking concerned, reached into his pocket. "Want a suck of my pickle?"

William just about made it to the rail in time. There was a certain amount of jocularity going on behind him regarding Clarewell's pickle, who might suck it, and how much its owner would be obliged to pay for said service. This, interspersed with Clarewell's protestations that his aged grandmother swore by a sour pickle for the prevention of seasickness, and plainly it worked, for look at him, solid as a rock …

William blinked watering eyes and fixed his vision on the approaching shore. The water wasn't particularly rough, though the weather was brewing, no doubt about it. It didn't matter, though; even the gentlest of up-and-down motions on water, the briefest of journeys, and his stomach promptly tried to turn itself inside out. Every damned time!

It was still trying, but as there was nothing left in it, he could pretend it wasn't. He wiped his mouth, feeling clammy despite the heat of the day, and straightened his shoulders.

They would drop anchor any minute; time he was going below and badgering the companies under his command into some kind of order before they went into the boats. He risked a brief glance over the rail, and saw the *River* and the *Phoenix* just astern. The *Phoenix* was Admiral Howe's flagship, and his brother the general was aboard. Would they have to wait, bobbing like corks on the increasingly choppy waves, until General Howe and Captain Pickering, his aide-de-camp, got ashore? God, he hoped not.

In the event, the men were allowed to disembark at once. "With ALL POSSIBLE SPEED, gennelmun!" Sergeant Cutter informed them at the top of his voice. "We're going to catch the rebel whoresons on the 'op, so we are! And WOE BETIDE any man what I see lollygaggin'! YOU, there …!" He strode off, forceful as a plug of black tobacco, to apply the spurs to a delinquent second lieutenant, leaving William feeling somewhat better. Surely nothing truly terrible could happen in a world containing Sergeant Cutter.

He followed his men down the ladder and into the boats, forgetting his stomach entirely in the rush of excitement. His first real battle was waiting to be fought, somewhere on the plains of Long Island.

* * *

Eighty-eight Frigates. That's what he'd heard Admiral Howe had brought, and he didn't doubt it. A forest of sails filled Gravesend Bay, and the water was choked with small boats, ferrying troops ashore. William was half choked himself, with anticipation. He could feel it gathering among the men, as the corporals collected their companies from the boats and marched off in good order, making room for the next wave of arrivals.

The officers' horses were being swum ashore, rather than rowed, the distance not being great. William ducked aside as one big bay surged up out of the surf nearby and shook himself in a shower of salt spray that drenched everyone within ten feet. The stable-lad clinging to his bridle looked like a drowned rat, but shook himself off likewise and grinned at William, his face blanched with cold but vivid with excitement.

William had a horse, too—somewhere. Captain Griswold, a senior member of Howe's staff, was lending him a mount, there having been no time to organize anything else. He supposed whoever was minding the horse would find him, though he didn't see how.

Organized confusion reigned. The shore here was a tidal flat, and coveys of red coats swarmed amongst the sea wrack like flocks of shorebirds, the bellowing of sergeants a counterpoint to the shrieking of gulls overhead.

With some difficulty, as he'd been introduced to the corporals only that morning and did not have their faces firmly fixed in memory yet, William located his four companies and marched them up the shore into sand dunes thick with some sort of wiry grass. It was a hot day, sweltering in heavy uniform and full equipment, and he let the men take their ease, drink water or beer from their canteens, eat a bit of cheese and biscuit. They'd be on the move soon.

Where? That was the question preying on his mind at the moment. A hasty staff meeting the night before—his first—had reiterated the basics of the invasion plan. From Gravesend Bay, half the army would march inland, turning north toward the Brooklyn Heights, where the rebel forces were thought to be entrenched. The remainder of the troops would spread outward along the shore to Montauk, forming a line of defense that could move inward across Long Island, forcing the rebels back into a net, if necessary.

William wanted, with an intensity that knotted his spine, to be in the vanguard, attacking. Realistically, he knew it wasn't likely. He was completely unfamiliar with his troops, and not impressed with their looks. No sensible commander would put such companies in the front line—unless to serve as cannon fodder. That thought gave him pause for a moment, but only a moment.

Howe wasn't a waster of men; he was known to be cautious, sometimes to a fault. His father had told him that. Lord John hadn't mentioned that that consideration was the major reason for his consent to William's joining Howe's staff, but William knew it anyway. He didn't care; he'd calculated that his chances of seeing significant action were still a great deal better with Howe than fiddling about in the North Carolina swamps with Sir Peter Packer.

And after all … he turned slowly, side to side. The sea was a mass of British ships, the land before him crawling with soldiers. He would never have admitted aloud to being impressed by the sight—but his stock was tight across his throat. He realized he was holding his breath and consciously let it go.

The artillery was coming ashore, floating perilously on flat-bottomed barges, manned by swearing soldiers. The limbers, the caissons, and the draft horses and oxen needed to drag them were splashing up the beach in a thrashing, sand-spattered herd, neighing and lowing in protest, having come ashore farther south. It was the biggest army he had ever seen.

"Sir, sir!" He looked down to see a short private soldier, perhaps no older than William himself, plump-cheeked and anxious.

“Yes?”

“Your spontoon, sir. And your horse has come,” the private added, gesturing at the rangy light bay gelding whose reins he held. “Captain Griswold’s compliments, sir.”

William took the spontoon, seven feet long, its burnished steel head gleaming dully even under the clouded sky, and felt the weight of it thrill through his arm.

“Thank you. And you are …?”

“Oh. Perkins, sir.” The private hastily knuckled his brow in salute. “Third company, sir; the Hackers, they call us.”

“Do they? Well, we will hope to give you plenty of opportunity to justify your name.” Perkins looked blank.

“Thank you, Perkins,” William said, gesturing the private off.

He took the bridle of the horse, joy rising in his heart. It was the biggest army he’d ever seen. And he was part of it.

* * *

He was luckier than he’d thought he might be, if not as lucky as he’d hoped. His companies were to be in the second wave, following up the vanguard of foot, guarding the artillery. Not a guarantee of action, but a good chance nonetheless, if the Americans were half the fighters they were reputed to be.

It was past noon before he lifted his spontoon into the air and shouted, “Forward, march!” The brewing weather had broken in a spattering rain, a welcome relief from the heat.

Beyond the shore, a fringe of woods gave way to a broad and beautiful plain. Waving grasses lay before them, flecked with wildflowers, the colors rich in the dim, rainy light. Far ahead, he could see flights of birds—doves? quail? too far to see—rising into the air despite the rain, as the marching soldiers drove them from their cover.

His own companies marched close to the center of the advancing line, snaking in orderly columns behind him, and he directed a grateful thought toward General Howe. As a junior staff officer, he should by rights have been delegated to messenger duty, scampering to and fro among the companies on the field, relaying orders from Howe's headquarters, carrying information to and from the two other generals, Sir Henry Clinton and Lord Cornwallis.

Given his late arrival, though, he knew none of the other officers or the army's disposition; he was completely ignorant of who was whom, let alone where they should be at any moment. He would be useless as a messenger. General Howe, somehow finding a moment in the bustle of the oncoming invasion, had not only welcomed him with great courtesy but had offered him the choice: accompany Captain Griswold, serving in such manner as the captain might direct—or take command of a few companies orphaned of their own lieutenant, who had fallen ill of the ague.

He had jumped at the chance, and now sat proud in his saddle, his spontoon resting in its loop, leading men to war. He shifted a little, enjoying the feel of the new red wool coat on his shoulders, the orderly club of the queued pigtail on his neck, the stiff leather stock about his throat, and the small weight of his officer's gorget, that tiny silver remnant of Roman armor. He'd not worn uniform for nearly two months and, rain-damp or not, felt its resumption to be a glorious apotheosis.

A company of light horse traveled near them; he heard the shout of their officer and saw them draw ahead and turn toward a distant copse of wood. Had they seen something?

No. A tremendous cloud of blackbirds exploded from the copse, in a chatter so great that many of the horses shied and spooked. The horse soldiers foraged about, weaving through the trees with sabers drawn, slashing at branches, but just for show. If anyone had been hiding there, they had gone, and the light horse rode back to rejoin the advance, catcalling each other.

He relaxed back into his saddle, releasing his grip on the spontoon.

No Americans in sight—but they wouldn't be. He'd seen and heard enough in his intelligencing to know that only real Continentals were likely to fight in an organized fashion. He'd seen militia drilling in village squares, shared food with men who belonged to such militias. None of them were soldiers—seen in groups drilling, they were laughable, barely able to march in a line, let alone in step—but nearly all were skilled hunters, and he'd seen too many of them shoot wild geese and turkey on the fly to share the common contempt of most British soldiers.

No, if there were Americans nearby, the first warning of it was likely to be men falling dead. He signaled to Perkins, had him convey orders to the corporals, to keep the men alert, weapons loaded and primed. He saw one corporal's shoulders stiffen at receipt of this message, which he plainly considered an insult—but the man did it nonetheless, and William's sense of tension eased a bit.

His thoughts returned to his recent journey, and he wondered when—and where—he might meet with Captain Richardson, to turn over the results of his intelligencing.

He had committed most of his observations to memory while on the road, writing down only what he must, and that coded in a small copy of the New Testament that his grandmother had given him. It was still in the pocket of his civilian coat, back on Staten Island. Now that he was safely returned to the bosom of the army, perhaps he ought to write up his observations, in proper reports? He could—

Something raised him in his stirrups, just in time to catch the flash and crack of musket fire from the woods on the left.

"Hold!" he shouted, seeing his men start to lower their weapons. "Wait!"

It was too far, and there was another column of infantry, closer to the wood. These swung into firing order and loosed a volley into the woods; the first rank knelt and the second fired over their heads. Return fire came from the wood; he saw one or two men fall, others stagger, but the line pulled together.

Another two volleys, the sparks of returning fire, but more sporadic—from the corner of his eye, he saw movement and whirled in his saddle, to see a gang of woodsmen in hunting shirts running from the far side of the copse.

The company in front of him saw them, too. A shout from their sergeant, and they fixed bayonets and ran, though it was plain to

William that they'd never catch the fleeing woodsmen.

This sort of random skirmishing kept up all afternoon, as the army pressed on. The fallen were picked up and carried to the rear, but they were few. One of William's companies was fired upon at one point, and he felt godlike as he gave the order to attack and they poured into the wood like a stream of angry hornets, bayonets fixed, managing to kill one rebel, whose body they dragged out onto the plain. The corporal suggested hanging it from a tree as discouragement to the other rebels, but William firmly declined this suggestion as not honorable and made them lay the man at the edge of the wood, where he could be found by his friends.

Toward evening, orders came along the line of march, from General Clinton. They would not stop to make camp. A brief pause for cold rations, and then press on.

There were murmurs of surprise in the ranks, but no grumbling. They'd come to fight, and the march resumed with a greater sense of urgency.

It was raining sporadically, and the harassment from skirmishers faded with the sullen light. It was not cold, and despite the growing soddenness of his garments, William preferred the chill and damp to the sultry oppression of the day before. At least the rain dampened the spirits of his horse, which was a good thing; it was a nervous, skittish creature, and he had cause to doubt Captain Griswold's goodwill in lending it to him. Worn down by the long day, though, the gelding ceased shying at windblown branches and jerking at the reins, and plodded onward with its ears falling sideways in tired resignation.

It wasn't bad for the first several hours of the night march. After midnight, though, the strain of exertion and sleeplessness began to tell on the men. Soldiers began to stumble and slow, and a sense of the vast expanse of dark and effort between themselves and dawn settled upon them.

William called Perkins up beside him. The soft-cheeked private showed up yawning and blinking, and paced beside him, a hand on William's stirrup leather as William explained what he wanted.

“Sing?” Perkins said doubtfully. “Well, I s’pose I can sing, yes, sir. Nobbut hymns, though.”

“Not quite what I had in mind,” William said. “Go and ask Sergeant … Millikin, is it? The Irishman? Anything he likes, so long as it’s loud and lively.” After all, they weren’t trying to hide their presence; the Americans knew exactly where they were.

“Yes, sir,” Perkins said dubiously, and let go the stirrup, fading at once into the night. William rode for some minutes, then heard Patrick Millikin’s very loud Irish voice lifted in a very bawdy song. There was a ripple of laughter through the men, and by the time he reached the first chorus, a few had joined in. Two more verses and they were all roaring lustily along, William included.

They couldn’t keep it up for hours while marching at speed with full equipment, of course, but by the time they had exhausted their favorite songs and grown breathless, everyone was awake and optimistic once more.

Just before dawn, William smelled the sea and the rank mud scent of a marsh in the rain. The men, already wet, began to splash through a number of tiny tidal inlets and creeks.

A few minutes later, the boom of cannon broke the night, and marsh birds rose into the lightening sky with shrieks of alarm.

* * *

Over the course of the next two days, William never had any idea where he was. Names such as “Jamaica Pass,” “Flatbush,” and “Gowanus Creek” occurred now and then in the dispatches and hasty messages that passed through the army, but they might as well have said “Jupiter” or “the backside of the moon” for all the meaning they had.

He did see Continentals, at last. Hordes of them, swarming out of the marshes. The first few clashes were fierce, but William’s companies were held to the rear, supporting; only once were they close enough to fire, in order to repulse an oncoming group of Americans.

Nonetheless, he was in a constant state of excitement, trying to hear and see everything at once, intoxicated by the smell of powder smoke, even as his flesh quivered at the report of cannon. When the firing ceased at sunset, he took a little biscuit and cheese, but without tasting it, and slept only briefly, from sheer exhaustion.

In late afternoon of the second day, they found themselves some little way behind a large stone farmhouse that the British and some Hessian troops had taken over as an artillery emplacement; the barrels of cannon protruded from the upper windows, shining wet with the constant rain.

Wet powder was a problem now; the cartridges were all right, but if the powder poured into priming pans was left more than a few minutes, it began to cake and go dead. The order to load, then, had to be delayed until the last possible moment before firing; William found himself grinding his teeth in anxiety as to when the order should be given.

On the other hand, sometimes there was no doubt at all. With hoarse shouts, a number of Americans charged out of the trees near the front of the house and made for the doors and windows. Musket fire from the troops inside got several of them, but some made it as far as the house itself, where they began to clamber into the shattered windows. William automatically reined up and rode to the right, far enough to get a look at the rear of the house. Sure enough, a larger group was already at it, a number of them climbing the wall by means of the ivy that covered the back of the house.

“That way!” he bellowed, wheeling his horse around and waving his spontoon. “Olson, Jeffries, the back! Load and fire as soon as you’re in range!”

Two of his companies ran, ripping the ends of cartridges with their teeth, but a party of green-coated Hessians was there before him, seizing Americans by the legs and pulling them from the ivy to club them on the ground.

He reined round and dashed the other way, to see what was happening in front, and came in sight just in time to see a British artilleryman fly out of one of the open upper windows. The man landed on the ground, one leg bent under him, and lay screaming.

One of William's men, close enough, darted forward and grabbed the man's shoulders, only to be shot by someone within the house. He crumpled and fell, his hat rolling off into the bushes.

They spent the rest of that day at the stone farmhouse; four times, the Americans made forays—twice, they succeeded in overcoming the inhabitants and briefly seizing the guns, but both times were overrun by fresh waves of British troops and evicted or killed. William never got closer than two hundred yards or so to the house itself, but once managed to interpose one of his companies between the house and a surge of desperate Americans dressed like Indians and yelling like banshees. One of them raised a long rifle and fired directly at him, but missed. He drew his sword, intending to ride the man down, but a shot from somewhere struck the man and sent him rolling down the face of a small hillock.

William urged his mount closer, to see whether the man was dead or not—the man's companions had already fled round the far corner of the house, pursued by British troops. The gelding wasn't having any; trained to the sound of musket fire, it found artillery unnerving, and the cannon happening to speak at this particular moment, the gelding laid its ears flat back and bolted.

William had his sword still in hand, the reins loosely wrapped round his other hand; the sudden jolt unseated him, and the horse whipped to the left, jerking his right foot from the stirrup and pitching him off. He had barely presence of mind to let go of the sword as he fell, and landed on one shoulder, rolling.

Simultaneously thanking God that his left foot hadn't been trapped in its stirrup and cursing the horse, he scrambled up onto hands and knees, smeared with grass and mud, heart in his mouth.

The guns in the house had stopped; the Americans must be in there again, engaged in hand-to-hand fighting with the gun crews. He spat out mud, and began to make a cautious withdrawal; he thought he was in range of the upper windows.

To his left, though, he caught sight of the American who had tried to shoot him, still lying in the wet grass. With a wary glance at the house, he crawled to the man, who was lying on his face, unmoving. He wanted to see the man's face, for what reason he couldn't have said. He rose on his knees and took the man by both shoulders, pulling him over.

The man was clearly dead, shot through the head. Mouth and eyes sagged half open and his body felt strange, heavy and flopping. He wore a militia uniform of sorts; William saw the wooden buttons, with “PUT” burnt into them. That meant something, but his dazed mind made no sense of it. Gently laying the man back in the grass, he rose and went to fetch his sword. His knees felt peculiar.

Halfway to the spot where his sword lay, he stopped, turned round, and came back. Kneeling down, cold-fingered and hollow-bellied, he closed the man’s dead eyes against the rain.

* * *

They made camp that night, to the pleasure of the men. Camp kitchens were dug, the cook wagons brought up, and the scent of roasting meat and fresh bread filled the damp air. William had just sat down to eat when Perkins, that harbinger of doom, appeared apologetically at his side with a message: report to General Howe’s field headquarters at once. Snatching a loaf of bread and a steaming chunk of roast pork to put in it, he went, chewing.

He found the three generals and all of their staff officers gathered together, deep in a discussion of the day’s results. The generals sat at a small table thick with dispatches and hastily drawn maps. William found a place among the staff officers, standing respectfully back against the walls of the big tent.

Sir Henry was arguing for an attack on the Brooklyn Heights, come morning.

“We could dislodge them easily,” Clinton said, waving a hand at the dispatches. “They’ve lost half their men, if not more—and weren’t such a lot of ’em to start with.”

“Not easily,” said my lord Cornwallis, pursing fat lips. “You saw them fight. Yes, we could get them out of there—but at some cost. What say you, sir?” he added, turning deferentially to Howe.

Howe’s lips all but disappeared, only a white line marking their former existence.

"I can't afford another victory like the last one," he snapped. "Or if I could, I don't want it." His eyes left the table and passed over the juniors standing against the wall. "I lost every man on my staff at that damned hill in Boston," he said, more quietly. "Twenty-eight of them. Every one." His eyes lingered on William, the youngest of the junior officers present, and he shook his head, as though to himself, and turned back to Sir Henry.

"Stop the fighting," he said.

Sir Henry wasn't pleased, William could see that, but he merely nodded.

"Offer them terms?"

"No," Howe said shortly. "They've lost nearly half their men, as you said. No one but a madman would go on fighting without cause. They—you, sir. Did you have an observation to make?"

With a start, William realized that Howe was addressing this remark to him; those round eyes were boring into his chest like bird shot.

"I—" he began, but then caught himself and drew up straight. "Yes, sir. It's General Putnam in command. There at the creek. He's … perhaps not a madman, sir," he added carefully, "but he has the name of a stubborn man."

Howe paused, eyes narrowed.

"A stubborn man," he repeated. "Yes. I should say he is."

"He was one of the commanders at Breed's Hill, wasn't he?" objected Lord Cornwallis. "The Americans ran fast enough away from *there*."

"Yes, but—" William stopped dead, paralyzed by the fixed joint stares of three generals. Howe motioned him impatiently to go on.

"With respect, my lord," he said, and was glad that his voice didn't shake, "I … hear that the Americans did not run in Boston until they had exhausted every scrap of ammunition. I think … that is not the case, here. And with regard to General Putnam—there was no one behind him at Breed's Hill."

"And you think that there is now." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir." William tried not to look pointedly at the stack of dispatches on Sir William's table. "I'm sure of it, sir. I think nearly all of the Continentals are on the island, sir." He tried not to make that sound like a question; he'd heard as much from a passing major the day before, but it might not be true. "If Putnam's in command here—"

"How do you know it's Putnam, Lieutenant?" Clinton interrupted, giving William the fish-eye.

"I am lately come from an—an intelligencing expedition, sir, which took me through Connecticut. I heard there, from many people, that militia were gathering to accompany General Putnam, who was to join with General Washington's forces near New York. And I saw a button on one of the rebel dead near the creek this afternoon, sir, with 'PUT' carved on it. That's what they call him, sir—General Putnam: 'Old Put.' "

General Howe straightened himself before Clinton or Cornwallis could interject anything further.

"A stubborn man," he repeated. "Well, perhaps he is. Nonetheless … suspend the fighting. He is in an untenable position, and must know it. Give him a chance to think it over—to consult with Washington if he likes. Washington is perhaps a more sensible commander. And if we might gain the surrender of the whole Continental army without further bloodshed … I think it worth the risk, gentlemen. But we will not offer terms."

Which meant that if the Americans saw sense, it would be an unconditional surrender. And if they didn't? William had heard stories about the fight at Breed's Hill—granted, stories told by Americans, and therefore he took them with several grains of salt. But by account, the rebels there had taken the nails from the fencing of their fortifications—from the very heels of their shoes—and fired them at the British when their shot ran out. They had retreated only when reduced to throwing stones.

"But if Putnam's expecting reinforcement from Washington, he'll only sit and wait," Clinton said, frowning. "And then we'll have the whole boiling of them. Had we best not—"

"That's not what he meant," Howe interruputed. "Was it, Ellesmere? When you said there was no one behind him at Breed's Hill?"

“No, sir,” William said, grateful. “I meant … he has something to protect. Behind him. I don’t think he’s waiting for the rest of the army to come to his aid. I think he’s covering their retreat.”

Lord Cornwallis’s hooped brows shot up at that. Clinton scowled at William, who recalled too late that Clinton had been the field commander at the Pyrrhic victory of Breed’s Hill and was likely sensitive on the subject of Israel Putnam.

“And why are we soliciting the advice of a boy still wet behind the—have you ever even seen combat, sir?” he demanded of William, who flushed hotly.

“I’d be fighting now, sir,” he said, “were I not detained here!”

Lord Cornwallis laughed, and a brief smile flitted across Howe’s face.

“We shall make certain to have you properly blooded, Lieutenant,” he said dryly. “But not today. Captain Ramsay?” He motioned to one of the senior staff, a short man with very square shoulders, who stepped forward and saluted. “Take Ellesmere here and have him tell you the results of his … intelligencing. Convey to me anything which strikes you as being of interest. In the meantime”—he turned back to his two generals—“suspend hostilities until further notice.”

* * *

William heard no more of the generals’ deliberations, he being led away by Captain Ramsay.

Had he spoken too much out of turn? he wondered. Granted, General Howe had asked him a direct question; he had had to answer. But to put forward his paltry month’s intelligencing, against the combined knowledge of so many experienced senior officers …

He said something of his doubts to Captain Ramsay, who seemed a quiet sort but friendly enough.

“Oh, you hadn’t any choice but to speak up,” Ramsay assured him. “Still …”

William dodged round a pile of mule droppings in order to keep up with Ramsay.

“Still?” he asked.

Ramsay didn’t answer for a bit, but led the way through the encampment, down neat aisles of canvas tents, waving now and then at men round a fire who called out to him.

At last, they arrived at Ramsay’s own tent, and he held back the flap for William, gesturing him in.

“Heard of a lady called Cassandra?” Ramsay said at last. “Some sort of Greek, I think. Not very popular.”

* * *

The army slept soundly after its exertions, and so did William.

“Your tea, sir?”

He blinked, disoriented and still wrapped in dreams of walking through the Duke of Devonshire’s private zoo, hand in hand with an orangutan. But it was Private Perkins’s round and anxious face, rather than the orangutan’s, that greeted him.

“What?” he said stupidly. Perkins seemed to swim in a sort of haze, but this was not dispelled by blinking, and when he sat up to take the steaming cup, he discovered the cause of it was that the air itself was permeated with a heavy mist.

All sound was muffled; while the normal noises of a camp rising were to be heard, they sounded far away, subdued. No surprise, then, when he poked his head out of his tent a few minutes later, to find the ground blanketed with a drifting fog that had crept in from the marshes.

It didn’t matter much. The army was going nowhere. A dispatch from Howe’s headquarters had made the suspension of hostilities official; there was nothing to do but wait for the Americans to see sense and surrender.

The army stretched, yawned, and sought distraction. William was engaged in a hot game of hazard with Corporals Yarnell and Jeffries when Perkins came up again, breathless.

“Colonel Spencer’s compliments, sir, and you’re to report to General Clinton.”

“Yes? What for?” William demanded. Perkins looked baffled; it hadn’t occurred to him to ask the messenger what for.

“Just … I suppose he wants you,” he said, in an effort to be helpful.

“Thank you very much, Private Perkins,” William said, with a sarcasm wasted on Perkins, who beamed in relief and retired without being dismissed.

“Perkins!” he bellowed, and the private turned, round face startled. “Which way?”

“What? Er … what, sir, I mean?”

“In which direction does General Clinton’s headquarters lie?” William asked, with elaborate patience.

“Oh! The hussar … he came from …” Perkins rotated slowly, like a weather vane, frowning in concentration. “That way!” He pointed. “I could see that bit of hillock behind him.” The fog was still thick near the ground, but the crests of hills and tall trees were now and then visible, and William had no difficulty in spotting the hillock to which Perkins referred; it had an odd lumpy look to it.

“Thank you, Perkins. Dismissed,” he added quickly, before Perkins could make off again. He watched the private disappear into the shifting mass of fog and bodies, then shook his head and went to hand command over to Corporal Evans.

The gelding didn’t like the fog. William didn’t like it, either. Fog gave him an uneasy feeling, as though someone was breathing on the back of his neck.

This was a sea fog, though: heavy, dank, and cold, but not smothering. It thinned and thickened, with a sense of movement to it. He could see a few feet before him, and could just make out the dim shape of the hillock Perkins had indicated, though the top kept appearing and disappearing like some fantastic conjuration in a fairy tale.

What might Sir Henry want with him? he wondered. And was it only him who’d been sent for, or was this a meeting called to apprise the line officers of some change of strategy?

Maybe Putnam’s men had surrendered. They should, certainly; they had no hope of victory in the circumstances, and that must be plain to them.

But he supposed Putnam would need, perhaps, to consult with Washington. During the fighting at the old stone farmhouse, he'd seen a small group of horsemen on the crest of a distant hill, an unfamiliar flag fluttering amongst them; someone at the time had pointed at it and said, "That's him there, Washington. Shame we've not got a twenty-four in place—teach him to gawk!" and laughed.

Sense said they'd surrender. But he had an uneasy feeling that had nothing to do with the fog. During his month on the road, he'd had occasion to listen to a good many Americans. Most were uneasy themselves, not wanting conflict with England, particularly not wanting to be anywhere near armed strife—a very sensible conclusion. But the ones who *were* decided on revolt … were very decided indeed.

Maybe Ramsay had conveyed some of this to the generals; he hadn't seemed at all impressed by any of William's information, let alone his opinions, but perhaps—

The horse stumbled, and he lurched in his saddle, accidentally jerking the reins. The horse, annoyed, whipped round its head and bit him, big teeth scraping on his boot.

"Bastard!" He smacked the horse across the nose with the ends of the reins, and hauled the gelding's head round forcibly, until the rolling eyes and curled lip were nearly in his lap. Then, his point made, he slowly released the pressure. The horse snorted and shook his mane violently, but resumed progress without further argument.

He seemed to have been riding for some time. But time as well as distance was deceiving in fog. He glanced up at the hillock that was his goal, only to discover that it had vanished again. Well, doubtless it would come back.

Only it didn't.

The fog continued to shift around him, and he heard the dripping of moisture from the leaves of the trees that seemed to come suddenly out of the mist at him and as suddenly retreat again. But the hillock stayed stubbornly invisible.

It occurred to him that he hadn't heard any sounds of men for some time now.

He should have.

If he were approaching Clinton's headquarters, he should not only be hearing all the normal camp sounds, he should have encountered any number of men, horses, campfires, wagons, tents …

There was no noise anywhere near him, save the rushing of water. He'd bloody bypassed the camp.

"Damn you, Perkins," he said under his breath.

He drew up for a moment and checked the priming of his pistol, sniffing at the powder in the pan; it smelled different when the damp got at it. Still all right, he thought; it smelled hot and nose-prickling, not so much of the rotten-egg scent of sulfur as wet powder had.

He kept the pistol in his hand, though so far he'd seen nothing threatening. The fog was too heavy to see more than a few feet in front of him, though; someone could come out of it suddenly, and he'd have to decide on the instant whether to shoot them or not.

It was quiet; their own artillery was silent; there was no random musket fire like the day before. The enemy was in retreat; no doubt about that. But if he should stumble across a stray Continental, lost in the fog like himself, ought he to shoot? The thought made his hands sweat, but he thought he must; the Continental would likely have no hesitation about shooting *him,* the instant he saw the red uniform.

He was somewhat more worried about the humiliation of being shot by his own troops than about the actual prospect of death, but was not entirely oblivious to the risk of that, either.

The bloody fog had got thicker, if anything. He looked in vain for the sun, to give some sense of direction, but the sky was invisible.

He fought back the small quiver of panic that tickled his tailbone. Right, there were 34,000 British troops on this bloody island; he had to be within pistol shot of any number of them at this moment. *And you only need be in pistol shot of one American,* he reminded himself, grimly pushing through a growth of larches.

He heard rustlings and the cracking of branches nearby; the wood was inhabited, no doubt about it. But by whom?

The British troops wouldn't be moving in this fog, that was one thing. Curse Perkins! If he heard movement, then, as of a body of men, he'd stop and stay hidden. And otherwise … all he could hope to do was to run across a body of troops, or to hear something unmistakably military in nature—shouted orders, perhaps …

He rode on slowly for some time, and finally put the pistol away, finding the weight of it wearisome. God, how long had he been out? An hour? Two? Ought he to turn around? But he had no way of knowing what "around" was—he might be traveling in circles; the ground all looked the same, a gray blur of trees and rocks and grasses. Yesterday, he'd spent every minute keyed to fever pitch, ready for the attack. Today, his enthusiasm for fighting had ebbed substantially.

Someone stepped out in front of him and the horse reared, so abruptly that William had only the vaguest impression of the man. Enough to know he wasn't wearing a British uniform, though, and he would have snatched his pistol out, were both hands not occupied in trying to control the horse.

The horse, having given way to hysteria, crow-hopped in mad circles, jarring William to the spine with each landing. His surroundings spun past in a blur of gray and green, but he was half conscious of voices, whooping in what might be either derision or encouragement.

After what seemed an age, but must be only half a minute or so, William succeeded in bringing the bloody creature to a standstill, panting and blowing, still flinging its head around, the whites of its eyes showing, gleaming wet.

"You fucking piece of cat's meat!" William said to it, hauling its head round. The horse's breath sank damp and hot through the doeskin of his breeches, and its sides heaved under him.

"Not the best-tempered horse I ever seen," a voice agreed, and a hand came up, seizing the bridle. "Healthy-looking, though."

William got a glimpse of a man in hunting dress, stout and swarthy—and then someone else seized him round the waist from behind and hauled him bodily off the horse.

He hit the ground hard and flat on his back, knocking out his wind, but tried valiantly to get to his pistol. A knee pressed into his chest, and a large hand wrestled the pistol out of his grip. A bearded face grinned down at him.

"Not very sociable," the man said, reproving. "Thought you-all was meant to be civilized, you British."

"You let him get up and at you, Harry, I imagine he'd civilize you, all right." This was another man, shorter and slightly built, with a soft, educated voice like a schoolmaster, who peered over the shoulder of the man kneeling on William's chest. "You could let him breathe, though, I suppose."

The pressure on William's chest relaxed, and he got a whisper of air into his lungs. This was promptly driven out again when the man who had held him down punched him in the stomach. Hands promptly began to rifle his pockets, and his gorget was jerked off over his head, painfully scraping the underside of his nose. Someone reached round him and unbuckled his belt, neatly removing it with a whistle of pleasure at the equipment attached.

"Very nice," said the second man, approving. He glanced down at William, lying on the ground and gasping like a landed fish. "I thank you, sir; we're much obliged. All right, Allan?" he called, turning toward the man holding the horse.

"Aye, I've got 'im," said a nasal Scottish voice. "Let's be off!"

The men moved away, and for an instant, William thought they had left. Then a meaty hand seized his shoulder and flipped him over. He writhed up onto his knees by sheer will, and the same hand seized his pigtail and jerked his head back, exposing his throat. He caught the gleam of a knife, and the man's broad grin, but had neither breath nor time for prayers or curses.

The knife slashed down, and he felt a yank at the back of his head that brought water to his eyes. The man grunted, displeased, and hacked twice more, finally coming away triumphant, William's pigtail held up in a ham-sized hand.

"Souvenir," he said to William, grinning, and whirling on his heel, made off after his friends. The horse's whinny drifted back to William through the fog, mocking.

* * *

He wished, urgently, that he had managed to kill at least one of them. But they'd taken him as easily as a child, plucked him like a goose and left him lying on the ground like a fucking turd! His rage was so overwhelming that he had to stop and punch a tree trunk. The pain of that left him gasping, still murderous but breathless.

He clutched the injured hand between his thighs, hissing between his teeth until the pain abated. Shock was mingling with fury; he felt more disoriented than ever, his head spinning. Chest heaving, he reached behind his head with his sound hand, feeling the bristly stumpage left there—and overcome with fresh rage, kicked the tree with all his strength.

He limped round in circles, swearing, then finally collapsed onto a rock and put his head down on his knees, panting.

Gradually, his breath slowed, and his ability to think rationally began to return.

Right. He was still lost in the wilds of Long Island, only now minus horse, food, or weapons. Or hair. *That* made him sit up straight, fists clenched, and he fought back the fury, with some difficulty. Right. He hadn't time to be angry now. If he ever laid eyes on Harry, Allan, or the little man with the educated voice … well, time enough for that when it happened.

For now, the important thing was to locate some part of the army. His impulse was to desert on the spot, take ship to France, and never come back, leaving the army to presume that he'd been killed. But he couldn't do that for assorted reasons, not least his father—who'd probably prefer that he *was* killed than run cravenly away.

No help for it. He rose resignedly to his feet, trying to feel grateful that the bandits had at least left him his coat. The fog was lifting a little here and there, but still lay damp and chilly on the ground. Not that he was troubled by that; his own blood was still boiling.

He glared round at the shadowy shapes of rocks and trees. They looked just like all the other fucking rocks and trees he'd encountered in the course of this misbegotten day.

“Right,” he said aloud, and stabbed a finger into the air, turning as he did so. “Eeny-meeny-miney-mo, catch a Frenchy by the toe, if he’s squealing—oh, the hell with it.”

Limping slightly, he set off. He had no idea where he was going, but he had to move, or burst.

He entertained himself for some little time in reimagining the recent encounter, with satisfying visions of himself seizing the fat man named Harry and wringing his nose into bloody pulp before smashing his head on a rock. Grabbing the knife away from him and gutting that supercilious little bastard … ripping his lungs out … there was a thing called the “blood eagle” that the savage German tribes used to do, slitting a man’s back and dragging out his lungs through the slits, so they flapped like wings as he died …

Gradually, he grew calmer, only because it was impossible to sustain such a level of fury.

His foot felt better; his knuckles were skinned, but not throbbing as much, and his fantasies of revenge began to seem faintly absurd to him. Was that what the fury of battle was like? he wondered. Did you want not just to shoot and stab because it was your duty to kill, but did you *like* it? Want it like wanting a woman? And did you feel like a fool after doing it?

He’d thought about killing in battle. Not all the time, but on and off. He’d made a great effort to visualize it when he’d made up his mind to join the army. And he did realize that there might be regret attached to the act.

His father had told him, baldly and with no effort at self-justification, about the circumstances under which he had killed his first man. Not in battle, but following one. The point-blank execution of a Scot, wounded and left on the field at Culloden.

“Under orders,” his father had said. “No quarter to be given; those were our written orders, signed by Cumberland.” His father’s eyes had been fixed on his bookshelves during the telling, but at this point he’d looked at William directly.

“Orders,” he repeated. “You follow orders, of course; you have to. But there will be times when you have no orders, or find yourself in a situation which has changed suddenly. And there will be times—

there *will* be times, William—when your own honor dictates that you cannot follow an order. In such circumstances, you must follow your own judgment, and be prepared to live with the consequences."

William had nodded, solemn. He'd just brought his commission papers for his father to look over, Lord John's signature being required as his guardian. He'd regarded the signing as a mere formality, though; he hadn't been expecting either a confession or a sermon—if that's what this was.

"I shouldn't have done it," his father had said abruptly. "I shouldn't have shot him."

"But—your orders—"

"They didn't affect me, not directly. I hadn't yet got my commission; I'd gone with my brother on campaign, but I wasn't a soldier yet; I wasn't under the army's authority. I could have refused."

"If you had, wouldn't someone else have shot him?" William asked practically.

His father smiled, but without humor.

"Yes, they would. But that's not the point. And it's true that it never occurred to me that I had a choice in the matter—but that *is* the point. You always have a choice, William. Do remember that, will you?"

Without waiting for an answer, he'd leaned forward and plucked a quill from the blue-and-white Chinese jar on his desk, and flipped open his rock-crystal inkwell.

"You're sure?" he'd said, looking seriously at William, and at the latter's nod, signed his name with a flourish. Then had looked up and smiled.

"I'm proud of you, William," he'd said quietly. "I always will be."

William sighed. He didn't doubt that his father would always love him, but as for making him proud … this particular expedition did not seem likely to cover him in glory. He'd be lucky to get back to his own troops before someone noticed how long he'd been gone and raised the alarm. God, how ignominious, to get lost and robbed, as his first notable act!

Still, better than having his first notable act being killed by bandits.

He continued to make his way cautiously through the fog-draped woods. The footing wasn't bad, though there were boggy places where the rain had pooled in low spots. Once, he heard the ragged crack of musket fire and hurried toward it, but it stopped before he came in sight of whoever had been firing.

He trudged grimly along, wondering just how long it might take to traverse the whole of the bloody island on foot, and how close he was to having done so? The ground had risen sharply; he was climbing now, sweat running freely down his face. He fancied the fog was thinning as he climbed, and sure enough, at one point he emerged onto a small rocky promontory and had a brief glimpse of the ground below—completely covered in swirling gray fog. The sight gave him vertigo, and he was obliged to sit down on a rock for a few moments with his eyes closed before continuing.

Twice, he heard the sound of men and horses, but the sound was subtly wrong; the voices didn't have the rhythms of the army, and he turned away, edging cautiously in the opposite direction.

He found the ground change abruptly, becoming a sort of scrub forest, full of stunted trees poking from a light-colored soil that scrunched under his boots. Then he heard water—waves lapping on a beach. The sea! Well, thank God for that, he thought, and hastened his steps toward the sound.

As he made his way toward the sound of the waves, though, he suddenly perceived other sounds.

Boats. The grating of hulls—more than one—on gravel, the clank of oarlocks, splashing. And voices. Hushed voices, but agitated. Bloody hell! He ducked under the limb of a runty pine, hoping for a break in the drifting fog.

A sudden movement sent him lunging sideways, hand reaching for his pistol. He barely remembered that the pistol was gone, before realizing that his adversary was a great blue heron, which eyed him with a yellow glare before launching itself skyward in a clatter of affront. A cry of alarm came from the bushes, no more than ten feet away, together with the boom of a musket, and the heron exploded in a shower of feathers, directly over his head. He felt drops of the bird's blood, much warmer than the cold sweat on his face, and sat down very suddenly, black spots dizzy before his eyes.

He didn't dare move, let alone call out. There was a whisper of voices from the bushes, but not loud enough that he could make out any words. After a few moments, though, he heard a stealthy rustling that moved gradually away. Making as little noise as possible, he rolled onto hands and knees and crawled for some distance in the other direction, until he felt it safe to rise to his feet again.

He thought he still heard voices. He crept closer, moving slowly, his heart thumping. He smelled tobacco, and froze.

Nothing moved near him, though—he could still hear the voices, but they were a good way distant. He sniffed, cautiously, but the scent had vanished; perhaps he was imagining things. He moved on, toward the sounds.

He could hear them clearly now. Urgent, low-voiced calls, the rattle of oarlocks and the splash of feet in the surf. The shuffle and murmur of men, blending—almost—with the susurrus of sea and grass. He cast one last desperate glance at the sky, but the sun was still invisible. He *had* to be on the western side of the island; he was sure of it. Almost sure of it. And if he was …

If he was, the sounds he was hearing had to be those of American troops, fleeing the island for Manhattan.

"Don't. Stir." The whisper behind him coincided exactly with the pressure of a gun's barrel, jammed hard enough into his kidney as to freeze him where he stood. It withdrew for an instant and returned, rammed home with a force that blurred his eyes. He made a guttural sound and arched his back, but before he could speak, someone with horny hands had seized his wrists and jerked them back.

"No need," said the voice, deep, cracked, and querulous. "Stand aside and I'll shoot him."

"No, 'ee won't," said another, just as deep but less annoyed. " 'e's nobbut a youngun. And pretty, too." One of the horny hands stroked his cheek and he stiffened, but whoever it was had already bound his hands tight.

“And if ’ee meant to shoot ’im, you’m ’ve done it already, sister,” the voice added. “Turn y’self, boy.”

Slowly, he turned round, to see that he had been captured by a pair of old women, short and squat as trolls. One of them, the one with the gun, was smoking a pipe; it was her tobacco he’d smelled. Seeing the shock and disgust on his features, she lifted one corner of a seamed mouth while keeping a firm grip on the pipestem with the stumps of brown-stained teeth.

“ ’andsome is as ’andsome does,” she observed, looking him up and down. “Still, no need to waste shot.”

“Madam,” he said, collecting himself and trying for charm. “I believe you mistake me. I am a soldier of the King, and—”

Both of them burst into laughter, creaking like a pair of rusty hinges.

“Wouldn’t never’ve guessed,” the pipe-smoker said, grinning round the stem of her pipe. “Thought ’ee was a jakesman, sure!”

“Hush up, sonny,” her sister interrupted his further attempt to speak. “We bain’t going to harm ’ee, so long as ’ee stands still and keeps mum.” She eyed him, taking in the damage.

“Been in the wars, have ’ee?” she said, not without sympathy. Not waiting for an answer, she pushed him down onto a rock, this liberally crusted with mussels and dripping weed, from which he deduced his closeness to the shore.

He didn’t speak. Not for fear of the old women, but because there was nothing to say.

He sat, listening to the sounds of the exodus. No idea how many men might be involved, as he had no notion how long it had been going on. Nothing useful was said; there were only the breathless half-heard exchanges of men working, the mutter of waiting, here and there the sort of muffled laughter born of nervousness.

The fog was lifting off the water. He could see them now—not more than a hundred yards away, a tiny fleet of rowboats, dories, here and there a fishing ketch, moving slowly to and fro across water smooth as glass—and a steadily dwindling crowd of men on shore, keeping their hands on their guns, glancing continually over their shoulders, alert for pursuit.

Little did they know, he reflected bitterly.

At the moment, he had no concern for his own future; the humiliation of being an impotent witness as the entire American army escaped under his nose—and the further thought of being obliged to return and recount this occurrence to General Howe—was so galling that he didn't care whether the old women had it in mind to cook and eat him.

Focused as he was on the scene on the beach, it didn't occur to him at once that if he could now see the Americans, he was himself visible to them. In fact, so intent were the Continentals and militiamen on their retreat that none of them *did* notice him, until one man turned away from the retreat, seeming to search the upper reaches of the shore for something.

The man stiffened, then, with a brief glance back at his oblivious companions, came purposefully up across the shingle, eyes fixed on William.

"What's this, Mother?" he asked. He was dressed in the uniform of a Continental officer, built short and wide, much like the two women, but a good deal bigger, and while his face was outwardly calm, there were calculations going on behind his bloodshot eyes.

"Been fishing," said the pipe-smoker. "Caught this wee redfish, but we think we'll throw 'im back."

"Aye? Maybe not just yet."

William had stiffened with the man's appearance, and stared up at him, keeping his own face as grim as possible.

The man glanced up at the shredding fog behind William.

"More like you at home, are there, boy?"

William sat silent. The man sighed, drew back his fist, and hit William in the stomach. He doubled up, fell off the rock, and lay retching on the sand. The man grasped him by the collar and hauled him up, as though he weighed nothing.

"Answer me, lad. I haven't much time, and 'ee don't want me to be hasty in my asking." He spoke mildly, but touched the knife at his belt.

William wiped his mouth, as well as he could, on his shoulder and faced the man, eyes burning. *All right*, he thought, and felt a certain calmness descend on him. *If this is where I die, at least I'll die for something.* The thought was almost a relief.

The pipe-smoker's sister put paid to the dramatics, though, poking his interrogator in the ribs with her musket.

"If there was more, sister and I'd'a heard 'em long since," she said, mildly disgusted. "They ain't quiet, sojers."

"True, that," the pipe-smoker agreed, and paused to remove her pipe long enough to spit. "This 'un's only lost, 'ee can see as much. 'Ee can see he won't talk to 'ee, either." She grinned familiarly at William, displaying one remaining yellow dogtooth. "Rather die than speak, eh, lad?"

William inclined his head a stiff inch, and the women giggled. No other word for it: *they giggled* at him.

"Get on with 'ee," the aunt told the man, waving a hand at the beach behind him. "They'll leave without 'ee."

The man didn't look at her—didn't take his eyes off William's. After a moment, though, he nodded briefly and turned on his heel.

William felt one of the women behind him; something sharp touched his wrist, and the twine they'd bound him with parted. He wanted to rub his wrists, but didn't.

"Go, boy," the pipe-smoker said, almost gently. "Before someun else sees 'ee and gets ideas."

He left.

At the top of the beach, he paused and looked back. The old women had vanished, but the man was sitting in the stern of a rowboat, drawing rapidly away from the shore, now nearly empty. The man was staring at him.

William turned away. The sun was finally visible, a pale orange circle burning through the haze. It was coming down the sky now, early afternoon. He turned inland and struck southwest, but felt eyes on his back for a long time after the shore had fallen out of sight behind him.

His stomach was sore, and the only thought in his mind was what Captain Ramsay had said to him. *Heard of a lady called Cassandra?*

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7

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Lallybroch
Inverness-shire, Scotland
September 1980

Not all of the letters were dated, but some were. Bree sorted gingerly through the half-dozen on top, and with a sense of being poised at the top of a roller coaster, chose one with *2 March,* A.D. *1777 written* across the flap.

"I think this one's next." She had trouble taking a full breath. "It's—thin. Short."

It was, no more than a page and a half, but the reason for its brevity was clear; her father had written the whole of it. His awkward, determined writing wrung her heart.

"We are never letting a teacher try to make Jemmy write with his right hand," she said fiercely to Roger. "Never!"

"Right," he said, surprised and a little amused at her outburst. "Or left, if you prefer."

2 March, Anno Domini 1777
Fraser's Ridge, colony of North Carolina

My dearest daughter—

We prepare now to remove to Scotland. Not forever, or even for long. My Life—our Lives—lie here in America.

And in all Honesty, I should greatly prefer to be stung to Death by Hornets than set foot on board another Ship; I try not to dwell upon the Prospect. But there are two chief Concerns which compel me to this Decision.

Had I not the Gift of Knowledge that you and your Mother and Roger Mac have brought me, I would likely think—as the great Majority of People in the Colony do think—that the Continental Congress will not last six Months, and Washington's Army less than that. I have spoken myself with a man from Cross Creek, who was discharged (honourably) from the Continental army on account of a festering Wound in the Arm—your Mother has of course dealt with this; he screamed a great Deal and I was pressed into service to sit upon him—who tells me that Washington has no more than a few thousand regular Soldiers, all very poor in Equipment, Clothes, and Arms, and all owed Money, which they are unlikely to receive. Most of his men are Militia, enlisted on short Contracts of two or three Months, and already melting away, needing to return Home for the Planting.

But I do know. At the same Time, I cannot be sure how the Things that I know will come about. Am I meant to be in some Way Part of this? Should I hold back, will that somehow damage or prevent the Success of our Desires? I often wish I could discuss these Questions with your Husband, though Presbyterian that he is, I think he would find them even more unsettling than I do. And in the end, it does not matter. I am what God has made me, and must deal with the Times in which He has placed me.

While I have not yet lost the Faculties of Sight or Hearing, nor even Control of my Bowels, I am not a young Man. I have a Sword, and a Rifle, and can use them both—but I also have a printing Press, and can use that to much greater Effect; it does not escape me that one can *wield Sword or Musket only upon one Enemy at a time, while Words may be employed upon any Number.*

Your Mother—doubtless contemplating the Prospect of my being seasick for several Weeks in her immediate Vicinity—suggests that I might enter Business with Fergus, making use of L'Oignon's Press, rather than travel to Scotland to retrieve my own.

I considered this, but I cannot in Conscience expose Fergus and his Family to Danger by making use of their Press for such Purposes as I intend. Theirs is one of only a few Presses in operation between Charleston and Norfolk; even were I to do my Printing with the utmost Secrecy, Suspicion would focus upon them in short order—New Bern is a Hotbed of Loyalist Sentiment, and the Origins of my pamphleteering would become known almost immediately.

Beyond Consideration for Fergus and his Family, I think there may be some Benefit in visiting Edinburgh in order to retrieve my own Press. I had a varied Acquaintance there; some may have escaped Prison or the Noose.

The second—and most important—Consideration that compels me to Scotland, though, is your Cousin Ian. Years ago, I swore to his Mother—upon the Memory of our own Mother—that I would bring him Home to her, and this I mean to do, though the Man I bring back to Lallybroch is not the Lad who left there. God alone knows what they will make of each other, Ian and Lallybroch—and God has a most peculiar Sense of Humor. But if he is to go back at all, it must be now.

The Snow is melting; Water drips from the Eaves all Day, and Icicles reach from the Roof of the Cabin nearly to the Ground by Morning. Within a few Weeks, the Roads will be clear enough for Travel. It seems strange to ask that you pray for the Safety of a Voyage which will have been long completed by the Time you learn of it—-for good or ill—but I ask it, nonetheless. Tell Roger Mac that I *think God takes no account of Time. And kiss the Children for me.*

Your most affectionate Father,
JF

Roger sat back a little, eyebrows raised, and glanced at her.

"The French Connection, you think?"

"The *what*?" She frowned over his shoulder, saw where his finger marked the text. "Where he's talking about his friends in Edinburgh?"

"Aye. Were not a good many of his Edinburgh acquaintances smugglers?"

"That's what Mama said."

"Hence the remark about nooses. And where were they smuggling things *from*, mostly?"

Her stomach gave a small hop.

"Oh, you're kidding. You think he's planning to mess with French smugglers?"

"Well, not smugglers, necessarily; he apparently knew a good many seditionists, thieves, and prostitutes, too." Roger smiled briefly, but then grew serious again.

"But I told him as much as I knew about the shape of the Revolution—admittedly, not a lot of detail, it not being my period—and I certainly told him how important France would be to the Americans. I'm just thinking"—he paused, a little awkwardly, then looked up at her—"he isn't going to Scotland to avoid the fighting; he's pretty clear about that."

"So you think he might be looking for political connections?" she asked slowly. "Not just grabbing his printing press, dropping Ian off at Lallybroch, and beating it back to America?"

She found the idea something of a relief. The notion of her parents intriguing in Edinburgh and Paris was much less hair-raising than her visions of them in the midst of explosions and battlefields. And it *would* be both of them, she realized. Where her father went, her mother would be, too.

Roger shrugged.

"That offhand remark about being what God made him. Ye ken what he means by that?"

"A bloody man," she said softly, and moved closer to Roger, putting a hand on his shoulder as though to ensure that he wouldn't suddenly vanish. "He told me he was a bloody man. That he'd seldom chosen to fight, but knew he was born to do it."

"Aye, that," Roger said, just as softly. "But he's no longer the young laird who took up his sword and led thirty crofters to a doomed battle—and took them home again. He knows a lot more now, about what one man can do. I think he means to do it."

"I think so, too." Her throat felt tight, but as much with pride as fear.

Roger reached up and put his hand over hers, squeezing.

"I remember …" he said slowly. "A thing your mother said, telling us about—about when she came back, and how she became a doctor. A thing your—Frank—that he said to her. Something about it being bloody inconvenient to the people round her, but a great blessing that she knew what it was she was meant to be. He was right about that, I think. And Jamie does know."

She nodded. She probably shouldn't say it, she thought. But she couldn't hold the words back any longer.

"Do *you* know?"

He was silent for a long time, looking at the pages on the table, but at last shook his head, the motion so small that she felt rather than saw it.

"I used to," he said quietly, and let go of her hand.

* * *

Her first impulse was to punch him in the back of the neck; her second was to seize him by the shoulders, bend down with her eyeballs an inch from his, and say—calmly, but distinctly—"What the hell do you mean by *that*?"

She refrained from doing either, only because both were likely to lead to a prolonged conversation of a sort deeply inappropriate for children, and both the kids were in the hall a few feet from the study door; she could hear them talking.

"See that?" Jemmy was saying.

"Un-huh."

"Bad people came here, a long time ago, looking for Grandda. Bad *English* people. They did that."

Roger's head turned as he caught what Jemmy was saying, and he caught Brianna's eye, with a half smile.

"Bad Engwish!" Mandy repeated obligingly. "Make 'em cwean it up!"

In spite of her annoyance, Brianna couldn't help sharing Roger's smile, though she felt a small shimmer in the pit of her stomach, recalling her uncle Ian—so calm, so kind a man—showing her the saber slashes in the wooden paneling of the hall and telling her, "We keep it so, to show the children—and tell them, this is what the English are." There had been steel in his voice—and hearing a faint, absurdly childish echo of it in Jemmy's voice, she had her first doubts regarding the wisdom of keeping this particular family tradition.

"Did you tell him about it?" she asked Roger, as the children's voices moved away toward the kitchen. "I didn't."

"Annie'd told him part of it; I thought I'd best tell him the rest." He raised his eyebrows. "Should I have told him to ask you?"

"Oh. No. No," she repeated, dubiously. "But—should we be teaching him to hate English people?"

Roger smiled at that.

" 'Hate' might be pitching it a bit strong. And he did say *bad* English people. They *were* bad English people who did that. Besides, if he's going to grow up in the Highlands, he'll likely hear a few barbed remarks regarding Sassenachs—he'll balance those against his memories of your mother; your da always called her 'Sassenach,' after all."

He glanced at the letter on the table, caught a glimpse of the wall clock, and rose abruptly.

"Christ, I'm late. I'll stop at the bank whilst I'm in town—need anything from the Farm and Household?"

"Yes," she said dryly, "a new pump for the milk separator."

"Right," he said, and kissing her hastily, went out, one arm already into his jacket.

She opened her mouth to call after him that she'd been joking, but on second thought closed it. The Farm and Household Stores just *might* have a pump for a milk separator. A large, bewilderingly crowded building on the edge of Inverness, the Farm and Household supplied just about anything a farm might need, including pitchforks, rubber fire buckets, baling wire, and washing machines, as well as crockery, jars for canning, and not a few mysterious implements whose use she could only guess at.

She stuck her head into the corridor, but the kids were in the kitchen with Annie MacDonald, the hired girl; laughter and the wire *clong!* of the ancient toaster—it had come with the house—floated past the ratty green baize door, along with the enticing scent of hot buttered toast. The smell and the laughter drew her like a magnet, and the warmth of home flowed over her, golden as honey.

She paused to fold up the letter, though, before going to join them, and the memory of Roger's last remark tightened her mouth.

"I used to."

Snorting ferociously, she tucked the letter back into the box and went out into the hall, only to be arrested by sight of a large envelope on the table near the door, where the daily mail—and the contents of Roger's and Jemmy's pockets—were daily unloaded. She grabbed the envelope out of the pile of circulars, pebbles, pencil stubs, links of bicycle chain, and … was that a dead mouse? It was; flattened and dried, but adorned with a stiff loop of pink tail. She picked it up gingerly and, with the envelope clasped against her breast, made her way toward tea and toast.

In all honesty, she thought, Roger wasn't the only one keeping things to himself. The difference was, she planned to tell him what she was thinking—once it was settled.

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8

SPRING THAW

Fraser's Ridge, colony of North Carolina
March 1777

One thing about a devastating fire, I reflected. It did make packing easier. At present, I owned one gown, one shift, three petticoats—one woolen, two muslin—two pairs of stockings (I'd been wearing one pair when the house burned; the other had been carelessly left drying on a bush a few weeks before the fire and was discovered later, weathered but still wearable), a shawl, and a pair of shoes. Jamie had procured a horrible cloak for me somewhere—I didn't know where, and didn't want to ask. Made of thick wool the color of leprosy, it smelled as though someone had died in it and lain undiscovered for a couple of days. I'd boiled it with lye soap, but the ghost of its previous occupant lingered.

Still, I wouldn't freeze.

My medical kit was nearly as simple to pack. With a regretful sigh for the ashes of my beautiful apothecary's chest, with its elegant tools and numerous bottles, I turned over the pile of salvaged remnants from my surgery. The dented barrel of my microscope. Three singed ceramic jars, one missing its lid, one cracked. A large tin of goose grease mixed with camphor—now nearly empty after a winter of catarrhs and coughs. A handful of singed pages, ripped from the casebook started by Daniel Rawlings and continued by myself—though my spirits were lifted a bit by the discovery that the salvaged pages included one bearing Dr. Rawlings's special receipt for Bowel-Bind.

It was the only one of his receipts I'd found effective, and while I'd long since committed the actual formula to memory, having it to hand kept my sense of him alive. I'd never met Daniel Rawlings in life, but he'd been my friend since the day Jamie gave me his chest and casebook. I folded the paper carefully and tucked it into my pocket.

Most of my herbs and compounded medications had perished in the flames, along with the earthenware jars, the glass vials, the large bowls in which I incubated penicillin broth, and my surgical saws. I still had one scalpel and the darkened blade of a small amputation saw; the handle had been charred, but Jamie could make me a new one.

The residents of the Ridge had been generous—as generous as people who had virtually nothing themselves could be at the tail end of winter. We had food for the journey, and many of the women had brought me bits of their household simples; I had small jars of lavender, rosemary, comfrey, and mustard seed, two precious steel needles, a small skein of silk thread to use for sutures and dental floss (though I didn't mention that last use to the ladies, who would have been deeply affronted by the notion), and a very small stock of bandages and gauze for dressings.

One thing I had in abundance, though, was alcohol. The corncrib had been spared from the flames, and so had the still. Since there was more than enough grain for both animals and household, Jamie had thriftily transformed the rest into a very raw—but potent—liquor, which we would take along to trade for necessary goods along the way. One small cask had been kept for my especial use, though; I'd carefully painted the legend *Sauerkraut* on the side, to discourage theft on the road.

"And what if we should be set upon by illiterate banditti?" Jamie had asked, amused by this.

"Thought of that," I informed him, displaying a small corked bottle full of cloudy liquid. *"Eau de sauerkraut.* I'll pour it on the cask at first sight of anyone suspicious."

"I suppose we'd best hope they're not German bandits, then."

"Have you ever met a German bandit?" I asked. With the exception of the occasional drunkard or wife-beater, almost all the Germans we knew were honest, hardworking, and virtuous to a fault. Not all that surprising, given that so many of them had come to the colony as part of a religious movement.

"Not as such," he admitted. "But ye mind the Muellers, aye? And what they did to your friends. They wouldna have called themselves bandits, but the Tuscarora likely didna make the same distinction."

That was no more than the truth, and a cold thumb pressed the base of my skull. The Muellers, German neighbors, had had a beloved daughter and her newborn child die of measles, and had blamed the nearby Indians for the infection. Deranged by grief, old *Herr* Mueller had led a party of his sons and sons-in-law to take revenge—and scalps. My viscera still remembered the shock of seeing my friend Nayawenne's white-streaked hair spill out of a bundle into my lap.

"Is my hair turning white, do you think?" I said abruptly. He raised his eyebrows, but bent forward and peered at the top of my head, fingering gently through my hair.

"There's maybe one hair in fifty that's gone white. One in five-and-twenty is silver. Why?"

"I suppose I have a little time, then. Nayawenne …" I hadn't spoken her name aloud in several years, and found an odd comfort in the speaking, as though it had conjured her. "She told me that I'd come into my full power when my hair turned white."

"Now there's a fearsome thought," he said, grinning.

"No doubt. Since it hasn't happened yet, though, I suppose if we stumble into a nest of sauerkraut thieves on the road, I'll have to defend my cask with my scalpel," I said.

He gave me a slightly queer look at this, but then laughed and shook his head.

His own packing was a little more involved. He and Young Ian had removed the gold from the house's foundation the night after Mrs. Bug's funeral—a delicate process preceded by my putting out a large slop basin of stale bread soaked in corn liquor, then calling

"Sooo-eeee!" at the top of my lungs from the head of the garden path.

A moment of silence, and then the white sow emerged from her den, a pale blotch against the smoke-stained rocks of the foundation. I knew exactly what she was, but the sight of that white, rapidly moving form still made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. It had come on to snow—one of the reasons for Jamie's decision to act at once—and she came through the whirl of big, soft flakes with a velocity that made her seem like the spirit of the storm itself, leading the wind.

For an instant, I thought she was going to charge me; I saw her head swing toward me and caught the loud snuff as she took my scent—but she scented the food as well, and swerved away. An instant later, the ungodly sounds of a pig in ecstasy floated through the hush of the snow, and Jamie and Ian hurried out of the trees to begin their work.

It took more than two weeks to move the gold; they worked only at night, and only when fresh snow was either falling or about to fall, to cover their tracks. Meantime, they took it in turn to guard the remains of the Big House, keeping an eye peeled for any sign of Arch Bug.

"Do you think he still cares about the gold?" I'd asked Jamie in the midst of this endeavor, chafing his hands to get enough heat into them for him to hold his spoon. He'd come in for breakfast, frozen and exhausted after a long night spent walking round and round the burnt house to keep his blood flowing.

"He's no much else left to care about, has he?" He spoke softly, to avoid waking the Higgins family. "Other than Ian."

I shivered, as much from thought of old Arch, living wraithlike in the forest, surviving on the heat of his hatred, as from the cold that had come in with Jamie. He'd let his beard grow for warmth—all the men did in winter, on the mountain—and ice glimmered in his whiskers and frosted his brows.

"You look like Old Man Winter himself," I whispered, bringing him a bowl of hot porridge.

“I feel like it,” he replied hoarsely. He passed the bowl under his nose, inhaling the steam and closing his eyes beatifically. “Pass the whisky, aye?”

“You’re proposing to pour it on your porridge? It’s got butter and salt on, already.” Nonetheless, I passed him the bottle from its shelf over the hearth.

“Nay, I’m going to thaw my wame enough to eat it. I’m solid ice from the neck down.”

No one had seen hide nor hair of Arch Bug—not even an errant track in the snow—since his appearance at the funeral. He might be denned up for the winter, snug in some refuge. He might have gone away to the Indian villages. He might be dead, and I rather hoped he was, uncharitable as the thought might be.

I mentioned this, and Jamie shook his head. The ice in his hair had melted now, and the firelight glimmered like diamonds on the water droplets in his beard.

“If he’s dead, and we never learn of it, Ian willna have a moment’s peace—ever. D’ye want him to be looking over his shoulder at his wedding, afraid of a bullet through his wife’s heart as she speaks her vows? Or wed with a family, fearing each day to leave his house and his bairns, for fear of what he might come back to?”

“I’m impressed at the scope and morbidity of your imagination—but you’re right. All right, I don’t hope he’s dead—not unless we find his body.”

But no one did find his body, and the gold was moved, bit by bit, to its new hiding place.

That had taken a bit of thought and considerable private discussion between Jamie and Ian. Not the whisky cave. Very few people knew about that—but some did. Joseph Wemyss, his daughter, Lizzie, and her two husbands—I marveled, rather, that I’d got to the point where I could think about Lizzie and the Beardsleys without boggling—all knew, of necessity, and Bobby and Amy Higgins would need to be shown its location before we left, as they would be making whisky themselves in our absence. Arch Bug had not been told of the cave’s location—but very likely knew it.

Jamie was adamant that no one should know even of the gold's existence on the Ridge, let alone its location.

"Let even a rumor of it get out, and everyone here is in danger," he'd said. "Ye ken what happened when yon Donner told folk we had jewels here."

I kent, all right. I still woke up in the midst of nightmares, hearing the muffled *whumph!* of exploding ether fumes, hearing the crash of glass and smashing wood as the raiders wrecked the house.

In some of these dreams, I ran fruitlessly to and fro, trying to rescue someone—who?—but met always by locked doors, blank walls, or rooms engulfed in flame. In others, I stood rooted, unable to move a muscle, as fire crawled up the walls, fed with delicate greed on the clothes of bodies at my feet, burst through a corpse's hair, caught in my skirts and swarmed upward, wrapping my legs in a blazing web.

I still felt overpowering sadness—and a deep, cleansing rage—when I looked at the sooty smudge in the clearing that had once been my home, but I always had to go out in the morning after one of these dreams and look at it nonetheless: walk round the cold ruins and smell the taint of dead ash, in order to quench the flames that burned behind my eyes.

"Right," I said, and pulled my shawl tighter round me. We were standing by the springhouse, looking down on the ruins as we talked, and the chill was seeping into my bones. "So … where, then?"

"The Spaniard's Cave," he said, and I blinked at him.

"The what?"

"I'll show ye, *a nighean,"* he said, grinning at me. "When the snow melts."

* * *

Spring had sprung, and the creek was rising. Swelled by melting snow and fed by hundreds of tiny waterfalls that trickled and leapt down the mountain's face, it roared past my feet, exuberant with spray. I could feel it cold on my face, and knew that I'd be wet to the knees within minutes, but it didn't matter. The fresh green of arrowhead and pickerelweed rimmed the banks, some plants dragged out of the soil by the rising water and whirled downstream, more hanging on by their roots for dear life, leaves trailing in the racing wash. Dark mats of cress swirled under the water, close by the sheltering banks. And fresh greens were what I wanted.

My gathering basket was half full of fiddleheads and ramp shoots. A nice big lot of tender new cress, crisp and cold from the stream, would top off the winter's vitamin C deficiency very well. I took off my shoes and stockings, and after a moment's hesitation, took off my gown and shawl as well and hung them over a tree branch. The air was chilly in the shade of the silver birches that overhung the creek here, and I shivered a bit but ignored the cold, kirtling up my shift before wading into the stream.

That cold was harder to ignore. I gasped, and nearly dropped the basket, but found my footing among the slippery rocks and made my way toward the nearest mat of tempting dark green. Within seconds, my legs were numb, and I'd lost any sense of cold in the enthusiasm of forager's frenzy and salad hunger.

A good deal of our stored food had been saved from the fire, as it was kept in the outbuildings: the springhouse, corncrib, and smoking shed. The root cellar had been destroyed, though, and with it not only the carrots, onions, garlic, and potatoes but most of my carefully gathered stock of dried apples and wild yams, and the big hanging clusters of raisins, all meant to keep us from the ravages of scurvy. The herbs, of course, had gone up in smoke, along with the rest of my surgery. True, a large quantity of pumpkins and squashes had escaped, these having been piled in the barn, but one grows tired of squash pie and succotash after a couple of months—well, after a couple of days, speaking personally.

Not for the first time, I mourned Mrs. Bug's abilities as a cook, though of course I did miss her for her own sake. Amy McCallum Higgins had been raised in a crofter's cottage in the Highlands of Scotland and was, as she put it, "a good plain cook." Essentially, that meant she could bake bannocks, boil porridge, and fry fish simultaneously, without burning any of it. No mean feat, but a trifle monotonous, in terms of diet.

My own pièce de résistance was stew—which, lacking onions, garlic, carrots, and potatoes, had devolved into a sort of pottage consisting of venison or turkey stewed with cracked corn, barley, and possibly chunks of stale bread. Ian, surprisingly, had turned out to be a passable cook; the succotash and squash pie were his contributions to the communal menu. I did wonder who had taught him to make them, but thought it wiser not to ask.

So far no one had starved, nor yet lost any teeth, but by mid-March, I would have been willing to wade neck-deep in freezing torrents in order to acquire something both edible and green.

Ian had, thank goodness, gone on breathing. And after a week or so had ceased acting quite so shell-shocked, eventually regaining something like his normal manner. But I noticed Jamie's eyes follow him now and then, and Rollo had taken to sleeping with his head on Ian's chest, a new habit. I wondered whether he really sensed the pain in Ian's heart, or whether it was simply a response to the cramped sleeping conditions in the cabin.

I stretched my back, hearing the small pops between my vertebrae. Now that the snowmelt had come, I could hardly wait for our departure. I would miss the Ridge and everyone on it—well, almost everyone. Possibly not Hiram Crombie, so much. Or the Chisholms, or—I short-circuited this list before it became uncharitable.

"On the *other* hand," I said firmly to myself, "think of beds."

Granted, we would be spending a good many nights on the road, sleeping rough—but eventually we would reach civilization. Inns. With food. And beds. I closed my eyes momentarily, envisioning the absolute bliss of a mattress. I didn't even aspire to a feather bed; anything that promised more than an inch of padding between myself and the floor would be paradise. And, of course, if it came with a modicum of privacy—even better.

Jamie and I had not been completely celibate since December. Lust aside—and it wasn't—we needed the comfort and warmth of each other's body. Still, covert congress under a quilt, with Rollo's yellow eyes fixed upon us from two feet away, was less than ideal, even assuming that Young Ian was invariably asleep, which I didn't think he was, though he was sufficiently tactful as to pretend.

A hideous shriek split the air, and I jerked, dropping the basket. I flung myself after it, barely snatching the handle before it was whirled away on the flood, and stood up dripping and trembling, heart hammering as I waited to see whether the scream would be repeated.

It was—followed in short order by an equally piercing screech, but one deeper in timbre and recognizable to my well-trained ears as the sort of noise made by a Scottish Highlander suddenly immersed in freezing water. Fainter, higher-pitched shrieks, and a breathless "Fook!" spoken in a Dorset accent indicated that the gentlemen of the household were taking their spring bath.

I wrang out the hem of my shift and, snatching my shawl from the branch where I'd left it, slipped on my shoes and made my way in the direction of the bellowing.

There are few things more enjoyable than sitting in relative warmth and comfort while watching fellow human beings soused in cold water. If said human beings present a complete review of the nude male form, so much the better. I threaded my way through a small growth of fresh-budding river willows, found a conveniently screened rock in the sun, and spread out the damp skirt of my shift, enjoying the warmth on my shoulders, the sharp scent of the fuzzy catkins, and the sight before me.

Jamie was standing in the pool, nearly shoulder-deep, his hair slicked back like a russet seal. Bobby stood on the bank, and picking up Aidan with a grunt, threw him to Jamie in a pinwheel of flailing limbs and piercing shrieks of delighted fright.

"Me-me-me-*me*!" Orrie was dancing around his stepfather's legs, his chubby bottom bouncing up and down among the reeds like a little pink balloon.

Bobby laughed, bent, and hoisted him up, holding him for a moment high overhead as he squealed like a seared pig, then flung him in a shallow arc out over the pool.

He hit the water with a tremendous splash and Jamie grabbed him, laughing, and pulled him to the surface, whence he emerged with a look of openmouthed stupefaction that made them all hoot like gibbons. Aidan and Rollo were both dog-paddling round in circles by now, shouting and barking.

I looked across to the opposite side of the pool and saw Ian rush naked down the small hill and leap like a salmon into the pool, uttering one of his best Mohawk war cries. This was cut off abruptly by the cold water, and he vanished with scarcely a splash.

I waited—as did the others—for him to pop back up, but he didn't. Jamie looked suspiciously behind him, in case of a sneak attack, but an instant later Ian shot out of the water directly in front of Bobby with a bloodcurdling yell, grabbed him by the leg, and yanked him in.

Matters thereafter became generally chaotic, with a great deal of promiscuous splashing, yelling, hooting, and jumping off of rocks, which gave me the opportunity to reflect on just how delightful naked men are. Not that I hadn't seen a good many of them in my time, but aside from Frank and Jamie, most men I'd seen undressed usually had been either ill or injured, and were encountered in such circumstances as to prevent a leisurely appreciation of their finer attributes.

From Orrie's chubbiness and Aidan's spidery winter-white limbs to Bobby's skinny, pale torso and neat little flat behind, the McCallum-Higginses were as entertaining to watch as a cageful of monkeys.

Ian and Jamie were something different—baboons, perhaps, or mandrills. They didn't really resemble each other in any attribute other than height, and yet were plainly cut from the same cloth. Watching Jamie squatting on a rock above the pool, thighs tensing for a leap, I could easily see him preparing to attack a leopard, while Ian stretched himself glistening in the sun, warming his dangly bits while keeping an alert watch for intruders. All they needed were purple bottoms, and they could have walked straight onto the African veldt, no questions asked.

They were all lovely, in their wildly various ways, but it was Jamie my gaze returned to, over and over again. He was battered and scarred, his muscles roped and knotted, and age had grooved the hollows between them. The thick welt of the bayonet scar writhed up his thigh, wide and ugly, while the thinner white line of the scar left by a rattlesnake's bite was nearly invisible, clouded by the thick fuzz of his body hair, this beginning to dry now and stand out from his skin in a cloud of reddish-gold. The scimitar-shaped sword cut across his ribs had healed well, too, no more than a hair-thin white line by now.

He turned round and bent to pick up a cake of soap from the rock, and my insides turned over. It wasn't purple but could not otherwise have been improved on, being high, round, delicately dusted with red-gold, and with a delightful muscular concavity to the sides. His balls, just visible from behind, *were* purple with the cold, and gave me a strong urge to creep up behind him and cup them in my rock-warmed hands.

I wondered whether the resultant standing broad-jump would enable him to clear the pool.

I had not, in fact, seen him naked—or even substantially undressed—in several months.

But now … I threw back my head, closing my eyes against the brilliant spring sun, enjoying the tickle of my own fresh-washed hair against my shoulder blades. The snow was gone, the weather was good—and the whole outdoors beckoned invitingly, filled with places where privacy could be assured, bar the odd skunk.

* * *

I left the men dripping and sunning themselves on the rocks, and went to retrieve my clothes. I didn't put these on, though. Instead, I went quickly up to the springhouse, where I submerged my basket of greens in the cool water—if I took it to the cabin, Amy would seize them and boil them into submission—and left my gown, stays, and stockings rolled up on the shelf where the cheeses were stacked. Then I went back toward the stream.

The splashing and shouting had ceased. Instead, I heard low-voiced singing, coming along the trail. It was Bobby, carrying Orrie, sound asleep after his exertions. Aidan, groggy with cleanliness and warmth, ambled slowly beside his stepfather, dark head tilting to and fro to the rhythm of the song.

It was a lovely Gaelic lullaby; Amy must have taught it to Bobby. I did wonder if she'd told him what the words meant.

S'iomadh oidhche fhliuch is thioram
Sìde nan seachd sian
Gheibheadh Griogal dhomhsa creagan
Ris an gabhainn dìon.

(Many a night, wet and dry
Even in the worst of weather
Gregor would find a little rock for me
Beside which I could shelter.)

Òbhan, òbhan òbhan ìri
Òbhan ìri ò!
Òbhan, òbhan òbhan ìri
'S mòr mo mhulad's mòr.

(Woe is me, woe is me
Woe is me, great indeed is my sorrow.)

I smiled to see them, though with a catch in my throat. I remembered Jamie carrying Jem back from swimming, the summer before, and Roger singing to Mandy in the night, his harsh, cracked voice little more than a whisper—but music, all the same.

I nodded to Bobby, who smiled and nodded back, though without interrupting his song. He raised his brows and jerked a thumb over his shoulder and uphill, presumably indicating where Jamie had gone. He betrayed no surprise at seeing me in shift and shawl—doubtless he thought I was bound for the stream to wash, as well, inspired by the singular warmth of the day.

Eudail mhòir a shluagh an domhain
Dhòirt iad d' fhuil an dè
'S chuir iad do cheann air stob daraich
Tacan beag bhod chrè.

(Great sweetheart of all people of the world
They poured your blood yesterday
And they put your head on an oak stick
A short distance from your body.)

Òbhan, òbhan òbhan ìri
Òbhan ìri ò!
Òbhan, òbhan òbhan ìri
'S mòr mo mhulad 's mòr.

(Woe is me, woe is me
Woe is me, great indeed is my sorrow.)

I waved briefly and turned up the side trail that led to the upper clearing. "New House," everyone called it, though the only indications that there might someday *be* a house there were a stack of felled logs and a number of pegs driven into the ground, with strings tied between them. These were meant to mark the placement and dimensions of the house Jamie intended to build in replacement of the Big House—when we came back.

He'd been moving the pegs, I saw. The wide front room was now wider, and the back room intended for my surgery had developed a growth of some sort, perhaps a separate stillroom.

The architect was sitting on a log, surveying his kingdom, stark naked.

"Expecting me, were you?" I asked, taking off my shawl and hanging it on a convenient branch.

"I was." He smiled, and scratched his chest. "I thought the sight of my naked backside would likely inflame ye. Or was it maybe Bobby's?"

"Bobby hasn't got one. Do you know, you haven't got a single gray hair below the neck? Why is that, I wonder?"

He glanced down, inspecting himself, but it was true. There were only a few strands of silver among the fiery mass of his hair, though his beard—the winter growth tediously and painfully removed a few days before—was heavily frosted with white. But the hair on his chest was still a dark auburn, and that below a fluffy mass of vivid ginger.

He combed his fingers thoughtfully through the exuberant foliage, looking down.

"I think it's hiding," he remarked, and glanced up at me, one eyebrow raised. "Want to come and help me hunt for it?"

I came round in front of him and obligingly knelt down. The object in question was in fact quite visible, though admittedly looking rather shell-shocked by the recent immersion, and a most interesting shade of pale blue.

"Well," I said, after a moment's contemplation. "Great oaks from tiny acorns grow. Or so I'm told."

A shiver ran through him at the warmth of my mouth and I lifted my hands involuntarily, cradling his balls.

"Holy God," he said, and his hands rested lightly on my head in benediction.

"What did ye say?" he asked, a moment later.

"I said," I said, coming up momentarily for air, "I find the gooseflesh rather erotic."

"There's more where that came from," he assured me. "Take your shift off, Sassenach. I havena seen ye naked in nearly four months."

"Well … no, you haven't," I agreed, hesitating. "And I'm not sure I want you to."

One eyebrow went up.

"Whyever not?"

"Because I've been indoors for weeks on end without sun or exercise to speak of. I probably look like one of those grubs you find under rocks—fat, white, and squidgy."

"Squidgy?" he repeated, breaking into a grin.

"Squidgy," I said with dignity, wrapping my arms around myself.

He pursed his lips and exhaled slowly, eyeing me with his head on one side.

"I like it when ye're fat, but I ken quite well that ye're not," he said, "because I've felt your ribs when I put my arms about you, each night since the end of January. As for white—ye've been white all the time I've known ye; it's no likely to come a great shock to me. As for the squidgy part"—he extended one hand and wiggled the fingers beckoningly at me—"I think I might enjoy that."

"Hmm," I said, still hesitant. He sighed.

"Sassenach," he said, "I said I havena seen ye naked in four months. That means if ye take your shift off now, ye'll be the best thing I've seen in four months. And at my age, I dinna think I remember farther back than that."

I laughed, and without further ado, stood up and pulled the ribbon tie at the neck of my shift. Wriggling, I let it fall in a puddle round my feet.

He closed his eyes. Then breathed deep and opened them again.

"I'm blinded," he said softly, and held out a hand to me.

"Blinded as in sun bouncing off a vast expanse of snow?" I asked dubiously. "Or as in coming face to face with a gorgon?"

"Seeing a gorgon turns ye to stone, not strikes ye blind," he informed me. "Though come to think"—he prodded himself with an experimental forefinger—"I may turn to stone yet. Will ye come here, for God's sake?"

I came.

* * *

I fell asleep in the warmth of Jamie's body, and woke some time later, snugly wrapped in his plaid. I stretched, alarming a squirrel overhead, who ran out on a limb to get a better view. Evidently he didn't like what he saw, and began scolding and chattering.

"Oh, hush," I said, yawning, and sat up. The squirrel took exception to this gesture and began having hysterics, but I ignored him. To my surprise, Jamie was gone.

I thought he'd likely just stepped into the wood to relieve himself, but a quick glance round didn't discover him, and when I scrambled to my feet, the plaid clutched to me, I saw no sign of him.

I hadn't heard anything; surely if someone had come, I would have wakened—or Jamie would have wakened me. I listened carefully, but—the squirrel having now gone about its own business—heard nothing beyond the normal sounds of a forest waking to spring: the murmur and rush of wind through new-leafed trees, punctuated by the occasional crack of a falling branch, or the rattle of last year's pinecones and chestnut hulls bouncing through the canopy; the call of a distant jay, the conversation of a gang of pygmy nuthatches foraging in the long grass nearby, the rustle of a hungry vole in the winter's dead leaves.

The jay was still calling; another had joined it now, shrill with alarm. Perhaps that was where Jamie had gone.

I unwound myself from the plaid and pulled on my shift and shoes. It was getting on for evening; we—or I, at least—had slept a long time. It was still warm in the sun, but the shadows under the trees were cold, and I put on my shawl and bundled up Jamie's plaid into my arms—likely he'd want it.

I followed the calling of the jays uphill, away from the clearing. There was a pair nesting near the White Spring; I'd seen them building the nest only two days before.

It wasn't far from the house site at all, though that particular spring always had the air of being remote from everything. It lay in the center of a small grove of white ash and hemlock, and was shielded on the east by a jagged outcropping of lichen-covered rock. All water has a sense of life about it, and a mountain spring carries a particular sense of quiet joy, rising pure from the heart of the earth. The White Spring, so called for the big pale boulder that stood guardian over its pool, had something more—a sense of inviolate peace.

The closer I came to it, the surer I was that that was where I'd find Jamie.

"There's something there that listens," he'd told Brianna once, quite casually. "Ye see such pools in the Highlands; they're called saints' pools—folk say the saint lives by the pool and listens to their prayers."

"And what saint lives by the White Spring?" she'd asked, cynical. "Saint Killian?"

"Why him?"

"Patron saint of gout, rheumatism, and whitewashers."

He'd laughed at that, shaking his head.

"Whatever it is that lives in such water is older than the notion of saints," he assured her. "But it listens."

I walked softly, approaching the spring. The jays had fallen silent now.

He was there, sitting on a rock by the water, wearing only his shirt. I saw why the jays had gone about their business—he was still as the white boulder itself, his eyes closed, hands turned upward on his knees, loosely cupped, inviting grace.

I stopped at once when I saw him. I had seen him pray here once before—when he'd asked Dougal MacKenzie for help in battle. I didn't know who he was talking to just now, but it wasn't a conversation I wished to intrude upon.

I ought to leave, I supposed—but aside from the fear that I might disturb him by an inadvertent noise, I didn't want to go. Most of the spring lay in shadow, but fingers of light came down through the trees, stroking him. The air was thick with pollen, and the light was filled with motes of gold. It struck answering glints from the crown of his head, the smooth high arch of his foot, the blade of his nose, the bones of his face. He might have grown there, part of earth and stone and water, might have been himself the spirit of the spring.

I didn't feel unwelcome. The peace of the place reached out to touch me gently, slow my heart.

Was that what he sought here, I wondered? Was he drawing the peace of the mountain into himself, to remember, to sustain him during the months—the years, perhaps—of coming exile?

I would remember.

The light began to go, brightness falling from the air. He stirred, finally, lifting his head a little.

"Let me be enough," he said quietly.

I started at the sound of his voice, but he hadn't been speaking to me.

He opened his eyes and rose then, quiet as he'd sat, and came past the stream, long feet bare and silent on the layers of damp leaves. As he came past the outcropping of rock, he saw me and smiled, reaching out to take the plaid I held out to him, wordless. He said nothing, but took my cold hand in his large warm one and we turned toward home, walking together in the mountain's peace.

* * *

A few days later, he came to find me. I was foraging along the creek bank for leeches, which had begun to emerge from their winter's hibernation, ravenous for blood. They were simple to catch; I merely waded slowly through the water near shore.

At first, the thought of acting as live bait for the leeches was repellent, but after all, that was how I usually obtained leeches—by letting Jamie, Ian, Bobby, or any of a dozen young males wade through the streams and pick them off. And once you got used to the sight of the creatures, slowly engorging with your blood, it wasn't all that bad.

"I have to let them have enough blood to sustain themselves," I explained, grimacing as I eased a thumbnail under the sucker of a leech in order to dislodge it, "but not enough that they'll be comatose, or they won't be of any use."

"A matter of nice judgment," Jamie agreed, as I dropped the leech into a jar filled with water and duckweed. "When ye've done feeding your wee pets, then, come along and I'll show ye the Spaniard's Cave."

It was no little distance. Perhaps four miles from the Ridge, through cold, muddy creeks and up steep slopes, then through a crack in a granite cliff face that made me feel as though I were being entombed alive, only to emerge into a wilderness of jutting boulders, smothered in nets of wild grape.

"We found it, Jem and I, out hunting one day," Jamie explained, lifting a curtain of leaves for me to pass beneath. The vines snaked over the rocks, thick as a man's forearm and knotted with age, the rusty-green leaves of spring not yet quite covering them. "It was a secret between us. We agreed we'd tell no one else—not even his parents."

"Nor me," I said, but wasn't offended. I heard the loss in his voice at the mention of Jem.

The entrance to the cave was a crack in the ground, over which Jamie had pushed a large, flat rock. He slid this back with some effort, and I bent over cautiously, experiencing a brief clench of the innards at the faint sound of moving air through the fissure. The surface air was warm, though; the cave was drawing, not blowing.

I remembered all too well the cave at Abandawe, that had seemed to breathe around us, and it took some force of will to follow Jamie as he disappeared into the earth. There was a rough wooden ladder—new, I saw, but replacing a much older one that had fallen to pieces; some bits of rotted wood were still in place, dangling from the rock on rusted iron spikes.

It could have been no more than ten or twelve feet to the bottom, but the neck of the cave was narrow, and the descent seemed endless. At last I reached the bottom, though, and saw that the cave had opened out, like the bottom of a flask. Jamie was crouched to one side; I saw him draw out a small bottle and smelled the sharp scent of turpentine.

He'd brought a torch, a pine knot with a head dipped in tar and wrapped with a rag. He soaked the rag with turpentine, then drew the fire-starter Bree had made for him. A shower of sparks lit his face, intent and ruddy. Twice more, and the torch caught, the flame bursting through the flammable cloth and catching the tar.

He lifted the torch, and gestured toward the floor behind me. I turned and nearly jumped out of my skin.

The Spaniard leaned against the wall, bony legs stretched out, skull fallen forward as if in a doze. Tufts of reddish, faded hair still clung here and there, but the skin had gone entirely. His hands and feet were mostly gone, too, the small bones carried away by rodents. No large animals had been able to get at him, though, and while the torso and long bones showed signs of nibbling, they were largely intact; the swell of the rib cage poked through a tissue of cloth so faded that there was no telling what color it had ever been.

He *was* a Spaniard, too. A crested metal helmet, red with rust, lay by him, along with an iron breastplate and a knife.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I whispered. Jamie crossed himself, and knelt by the skeleton.

"I've no notion how long he's been here," he said, also low-voiced. "We didna find anything with him save the armor and that." He pointed to the gravel just in front of the pelvis. I leaned closer to look; a small crucifix, probably silver, now tarnished black, and a few inches away, a tiny triangular shape, also black.

"A rosary?" I asked, and Jamie nodded.

"I expect he was wearing it about his neck. It must have been made of wood and string, and when it rotted, the metal bits fell. That"—his finger gently touched the little triangle—"says *Nr. Sra. Ang.* on the one side—*Nuestra Señora de los Angeles,* I think it means, 'Our Lady of the Angels.' There's a wee picture of the Blessed Virgin on the other side."

I crossed myself by reflex.

"Was Jemmy scared?" I asked, after a moment's respectful silence.

"I was," Jamie said dryly. "It was dark when I came down the shaft, and I nearly stepped on this fellow. I thought he was alive, and the shock of it liked to stop my heart."

He'd cried out in alarm, and Jemmy, left aboveground with strict instructions not to move from the spot, had promptly scrambled into the hole, losing his grip of the broken ladder halfway down and landing feetfirst on his grandfather.

"I heard him scrabbling and looked up, just in time to have him plunge out of the heavens and strike me in the breast like a cannonball." Jamie rubbed the left side of his chest with rueful amusement. "If I hadn't looked up, he'd have broken my neck—and he'd never have got out, by himself."

And we'd never have known what happened to either one of you. I swallowed, dry-mouthed at the thought. And yet … on any given day, something just as random might happen. To anyone.

"A wonder neither one of you broke anything," I said instead, and gestured toward the skeleton. "What do you think happened to this gentleman?" *His people never knew*.

Jamie shook his head.

"I dinna ken. He wasna expecting an enemy, because he wasna wearing his armor."

"You don't think he fell in and couldn't get out?" I squatted by the skeleton, tracing the tibia of the left leg. The bone was dried and cracked, gnawed at the end by small sharp teeth—but I could see what might be a greenstick fracture of the bone. Or might just be the cracking of age.

Jamie shrugged, glancing up.

"I shouldna think so. He was a good bit shorter than I am, but I think the original ladder must have been here when he died—for if someone built the ladder later, why would they leave this gentleman here at the bottom of it? And even with a broken leg, he should have been able to climb it."

"Hmm. He might have died of a fever, I suppose. That would account for his taking off his breastplate and helmet." Though I personally would have taken them off at the first opportunity; depending on the season, he must either have been boiled alive or suffered severely from mildew, semi-enclosed in metal.

"Mmphm."

I glanced up at this sound, which indicated dubious acceptance of my reasoning but disagreement with my conclusion.

"You think he was killed?"

He shrugged.

"He has armor—but nay weapon save a wee knife. And ye can see he was right-handed, but the knife's lying to his left."

The skeleton *had* been right-handed; the bones of the right arm were noticeably thicker, even by the flicker of torchlight. Possibly a swordsman? I wondered.

"I kent a good many Spanish soldiers in the Indies, Sassenach. All of them fair bristled wi' swords and spears and pistols. If this man died of a fever, his companions might take his arms—but they'd take the armor, too, *and* the knife. Why leave it?"

“But by that token,” I objected, “why did whoever killed him—if he was killed—leave the armor and the knife?”

“As for the armor—they didna want it. It wouldna be particularly useful to anyone other than a soldier. As for the knife—because it was sticking in him?” Jamie suggested. “And it’s no a very good knife to begin with.”

“Very logical,” I said, swallowing again. “Putting aside the question of how he died—what in God’s name was he doing in the mountains of North Carolina in the first place?”

“The Spanish sent explorers up as far as Virginia, fifty or sixty years ago,” he informed me. “The swamps discouraged them, though.”

“I can see why. But why … *this*?” I stood up, waving a hand to encompass the cave and its ladder. He didn’t reply, but took my arm and lifted his torch, turning me to the side of the cave opposite the ladder. Well above my head, I saw another small fissure in the rock, black in the torchlight, barely wide enough for a man to wriggle through.

“There’s a smaller cave through there,” he said, nodding upward. “And when I put Jem up to look, he told me there were marks in the dust—square marks, as though heavy boxes had sat there.”

Which is why, when the need to hide treasure had occurred to him, so had thought of the Spaniard’s Cave.

“We’ll bring the last of the gold tonight,” he said, “and pile rocks to hide the opening up there. Then we’ll leave the *señor* here to his rest.”

I was obliged to admit that the cave made as suitable a resting place as any. And the Spanish soldier’s presence would likely discourage anyone who stumbled on the cave from further investigation, both Indians and settlers having a distinct aversion to ghosts. For that matter, so did Highlanders, and I turned curiously to Jamie.

“You and Jem—you weren’t troubled about being haunted by him?”

“Nay, we said the proper prayer for the repose of his soul, when I sealed the cave, and scattered salt around it.”

That made me smile.

"You know the proper prayer for every occasion, don't you?"

He smiled faintly in return, and rubbed the head of the torch in the damp gravel to extinguish it. A faint shaft of light from above glowed on the crown of his head.

"There's always a prayer, *a nighean*, even if it's only *A Dhia, cuidich mi." Oh, God—help me*.

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9

A KNIFE THAT KNOWS MY HAND

Not all the gold rested with the Spaniard. Two of my petticoats had an extra turnup in the hem, with shavings of gold evenly distributed in tiny pockets, and my large pocket itself had several ounces of gold stitched into the seam at the bottom. Jamie and Ian each carried a small amount in his sporran. And each of them would carry two substantial shot pouches on his belt. We had retired, the three of us, to the New House clearing, to make the shot in private.

"Now, ye'll no forget which side to load from, aye?" Jamie dropped a fresh musket ball out of the mold, glowing like a miniature sunrise, into the pot of grease and soot.

"As long as ye dinna take my shot bag in mistake, no," Ian said caustically. He was making lead shot, dropping the hot fresh balls into a hollow lined with moist leaves, where they smoked and steamed in the crisp spring evening.

Rollo, lying nearby, sneezed as a wisp of smoke drifted past his nose, and snorted explosively. Ian glanced at him with a smile.

"Will ye like chasing the red deer through the heather, *a cù*?" he asked. "Ye'll need to keep off the sheep, though, or someone's like to shoot ye for a wolf."

Rollo sighed and let his eyes go to drowsy slits.

"Thinking what ye'll say to your mam when ye see her?" Jamie asked, squinting against the smoke of the fire as he held the ladle of gold shavings over the flame.

"Tryin' not to think too much," Ian replied frankly. "I get a queer feeling in my wame when I think of Lallybroch."

"Good queer or bad queer?" I asked, gingerly scooping the cooled gold balls out of the grease with a wooden spoon and dropping them into the shot pouches.

Ian frowned, eyes fixed on his ladle as the lead went suddenly from crumpled blobs to a quivering puddle.

"Both, I think. Brianna told me once about a book she'd read in school that said ye can't go home again. I think that's maybe true—but I want to," he added softly, eyes still on his work. The melted lead hissed into the mold.

I looked away from the wistfulness in his face, and found Jamie looking at me, his gaze quizzical, eyes soft with sympathy. I looked away from him, too, and rose to my feet, groaning slightly as my knee joint cracked.

"Yes, well," I said briskly. "I suppose it depends on what you think home is, doesn't it? It isn't always a place, you know."

"Aye, that's true." Ian held the bullet mold for an instant, letting it cool. "But even when it's a person—ye can't always go back, aye? Or maybe ye can," he added, his mouth quirking a little as he glanced up at Jamie, and then at me.

"I think ye'll find your parents much as ye left them," Jamie said dryly, choosing to ignore Ian's reference. "You may come as a greater shock to them."

Ian glanced down at himself and smiled.

"Got a bit taller," he said.

I gave a brief snort of amusement. He'd been fifteen when he'd left Scotland—a tall, scrawny gowk of a boy. He *was* a couple of inches taller now. He was also lean and hard as a strip of dried rawhide, and normally tanned to much the same color, though the winter had bleached him, making the tattooed dots that ran in semicircles across his cheekbones stand out more vividly.

"You remember that other line I told you?" I asked him. "When we came back to Lallybroch from Edinburgh, after I … found Jamie again. *Home is where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.*"

Ian raised a brow, looked from me to Jamie, and shook his head.

"Nay wonder ye're sae fond of her, Uncle. She must be a rare comfort to ye."

"Well," Jamie said, his eyes fixed on his work, "she keeps takin' me in—so I suppose she must be home."

* * *

The work finished, Ian and Rollo took the filled shot pouches back to the cabin, while Jamie stamped out the fire and I packed up the paraphernalia of bullet-making. It was growing late, and the air—already so fresh it tickled the lungs—acquired that extra edge of cool liveliness that caressed the skin as well, the breath of spring moving restless over the earth.

I stood for a moment, enjoying it. The work had been close, and hot, despite being done in the open, and the cold breeze that lifted the hair off my neck was delightful.

"Have ye got a penny, *a nighean*?" said Jamie, next to me.

"A what?"

"Well, any sort of money will do."

"I don't *think* so, but …" I rummaged in the pocket tied at my waist, which by this point in our preparations held nearly as large a collection of improbabilities as did Jamie's sporran. Among hanks of thread, twists of paper containing seeds or dried herbs, needles stuck through bits of leather, a small jar full of sutures, a woodpecker's black-and-white-spotted feather, a chunk of white chalk, and half a biscuit, which I had evidently been interrupted while eating, I did in fact discover a grubby half-shilling, covered in lint and biscuit crumbs.

"That do you?" I asked, wiping it off and handing it over.

"It will," he said, and held out something toward me. My hand closed automatically over what turned out to be the handle of a knife, and I nearly dropped it in surprise.

"Ye must always give money for a new blade," he explained, half smiling. "So it kens ye for its owner, and willna turn on ye."

"Its owner?" The sun was touching the edge of the Ridge, but there was still plenty of light, and I looked at my new acquisition. It was a slender blade, but sturdy, single-edged and beautifully honed; the cutting edge shone silver in the dying sun. The hilt was made from a deer's antler, smooth and warm in my hand—and had been carved with two small depressions, these just fitting my grip. Plainly it was my knife.

"Thank you," I said, admiring it. "But—"

"Ye'll feel safer if ye have it by you," he said, matter-of-fact. "Oh—just the one more thing. Give it here."

I handed it back, puzzled, and was startled to see him draw the blade lightly across the ball of his thumb. Blood welled up from the shallow cut, and he wiped it on his breeches and stuck his thumb in his mouth, handing me back the knife.

"Ye blood a blade, so it knows its purpose," he explained, taking the wounded digit out of his mouth.

The hilt of the knife was still warm in my hand, but a small chill went through me. With rare exceptions, Jamie wasn't given to purely romantic gestures. If he gave me a knife, he thought I'd need it. And not for digging up roots and hacking tree bark, either. Know its purpose, indeed.

"It fits my hand," I said, looking down and stroking the small groove that fit my thumb. "How did you know to make it so exactly?"

He laughed at that.

"I've had your hand round my cock often enough to know the measure of your grip, Sassenach," he assured me.

I snorted briefly in response to this, but turned the blade and pricked the end of my own thumb with the point. It was amazingly sharp; I scarcely felt it, but a bead of dark-red blood welled up at once. I put the knife into my belt, took his hand, and pressed my thumb to his.

"Blood of my blood," I said.

I didn't make romantic gestures, either.

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10

FIRESHIP

New York
August 1776

In fact, William's news of the Americans' escape was received much better than he had expected. With the intoxicating feeling that they had the enemy cornered, Howe's army moved with remarkable speed. The admiral's fleet was still in Gravesend Bay; within a day, thousands of men were marched hastily to the shore and reembarked for the quick crossing to Manhattan; by sunset of the next day, armed companies began the attack upon New York—only to discover the trenches empty, the fortifications abandoned.

While something of a disappointment to William, who had hoped for a chance of direct and physical revenge, this development pleased General Howe inordinately. He moved, with his staff, into a large mansion called Beekman House and set about solidifying his hold upon the colony. There was a certain amount of chafing among senior officers in favor of running the Americans to ground—certainly William favored that notion—but General Howe was of the opinion that defeat and attrition would shred Washington's remaining forces, and the winter would finish them off.

"And meanwhile," said Lieutenant Anthony Fortnum, looking round the stifling attic to which the three most junior staff officers had been consigned, "we are an army of occupation. Which means, I think, that we are entitled to the pleasures of the post, are we not?"

“And what would those be?” William inquired, looking in vain for a spot in which to put the weathered portmanteau that presently contained most of his worldly goods.

“Well, women,” Fortnum said consideringly. “Certainly women. And surely New York has fleshpots?”

“I didn’t see any on the way in,” Ralph Jocelyn said dubiously. “And I looked!”

“Not hard enough,” Fortnum said firmly. “I feel sure there must be fleshpots.”

“There’s beer,” William suggested. “Decent public house called Fraunces Tavern, just off Water Street. I had a good pint there on the way in.”

“Has to be something closer than that,” Jocelyn objected. “I’m not walking miles in this heat!” Beekman House had a pleasant situation, with spacious grounds and clean air—but was a good way outside the city.

“Seek and ye shall find, my brothers.” Fortnum twisted a side-curl into place and slung his coat over one shoulder. “Coming, Ellesmere?”

“No, not just now. I’ve letters to write. If you find any fleshpots, I shall expect a written report. In triplicate, mind.”

Left momentarily to his own devices, he dropped his bag on the floor and took out the small sheaf of letters Captain Griswold had handed him.

There were five of them; three with his stepfather’s smiling half-moon seal—Lord John wrote to him promptly on the fifteenth of every month, though at other times, as well—one from his uncle Hal, and he grinned at sight of that; Uncle Hal’s missives were occasionally confusing, but invariably entertaining—and one in an unfamiliar but feminine-looking hand, with a plain seal.

Curious, he broke the seal and opened the letter to discover two closely written sheets from his cousin Dottie. His eyebrows went up at that; Dottie had never written to him before.

They stayed up as he perused the letter.

“I will be damned,” he said aloud.

“Why?” asked Fortnum, who had come back to retrieve his hat. “Bad news from home?”

“What? Oh. No. No,” he repeated, returning to the first page of the letter. “Just … interesting.”

Folding up the letter, he put it inside his coat, safely away from Fortnum’s interested gaze, and took up Uncle Hal’s note, with its crested ducal seal. Fortnum’s eyes widened at sight of that, but he said nothing.

William coughed and broke the seal. As usual, the note occupied less than a page and included neither salutation nor closing, Uncle Hal’s opinion being that since the letter had a direction upon it, the intended recipient was obvious, the seal indicated plainly who had written it, and he did not waste his time in writing to fools.

> *Adam is posted to New York under Sir Henry Clinton. Minnie has given him some obnoxiously cumbersome Things for you. Dottie sends her Love, which takes up much less room.*
>
> *John says you are doing something for Captain Richardson. I know Richardson and I think you shouldn’t.*
>
> *Give Colonel Spencer my regards, and don’t play Cards with him.*

Uncle Hal, William reflected, could cram more information—cryptic as it often was—into fewer words than anyone he knew. He did wonder whether Colonel Spencer cheated at cards or was simply very good or very lucky. Uncle Hal had doubtless omitted purposely to say, because if it had been one of the latter alternatives, William would have been tempted to try his skill—dangerous as he knew it was to win consistently against a superior officer. Once or twice, though … No, Uncle Hal was a very good cardsman himself, and if he was warning William off, prudence suggested he take the warning. Perhaps Colonel Spencer was both honest and an indifferent player but a man to take offense—and revenge—if beaten too often.

Uncle Hal was a cunning old devil, William thought, not without admiration.

Which was what worried him, rather, about that second paragraph. *I know Richardson* … In this instance, he understood quite well why Uncle Hal had omitted the particulars; mail might be read by anyone, and a letter with the Duke of Pardloe's crest might attract attention. Granted, the seal didn't seem to have been tampered with, but he'd seen his own father remove and replace seals with the greatest dexterity and a hot knife, and was under no illusions on that score.

That didn't stop him from wondering just *what* Uncle Hal knew about Captain Richardson and why he was suggesting that William stop his intelligencing—for evidently Papa had told Uncle Hal what he was doing.

Further food for thought—if Papa had told his brother what William was doing, then Uncle Hal would have told Papa what he knew about Captain Richardson, if there was anything to the captain's discredit. And if he had done that—

He put by Uncle Hal's note and ripped open the first of his father's letters. No, nothing about Richardson.… The second? Again no. In the third, a veiled reference to intelligencing, but only a wish for his safety and an oblique remark about his posture.

A tall man is always notable in company; the more so if his glance be direct and his dress neat.

William smiled at that. Westminster, where he'd gone to school, held its classes in one large room, this divided by a hanging curtain into the upper and lower classes, but there were boys of all ages being taught together, and William had quickly learned when—and how—to be either inconspicuous or outstanding, depending upon the immediate company.

Well, then. Whatever Uncle Hal knew about Richardson, it wasn't something that troubled Papa. Of course, he reminded himself, it needn't be anything discreditable. The Duke of Pardloe was fearless on his own behalf, but tended to excessive caution with regard to his family. Perhaps he only thought Richardson reckless; if that was the case, Papa would presumably trust to William's own good sense, and thus not mention it.

The attic was stifling; sweat was running down William's face and wilting his shirt. Fortnum had gone out again, leaving the end of his cot tilted up at an absurd angle over his protruding trunk. It did leave just enough floor space vacant as to allow William to stand up and walk to the door, though, and he made his escape into the outer air with a sense of relief. The air outside was hot and humid, but at least it was moving. He put his hat on his head and set off to find out just where his cousin Adam was billeted. *Obnoxiously cumbersome* sounded promising.

As he pressed through a crowd of farm wives headed for the market square, though, he felt the crackle of the letter in his coat, and remembered Adam's sister.

Dottie sends her love, which takes up much less room. Uncle Hal was cunning, William thought, but the cunningest of devils has the occasional blind spot.

* * *

Obnoxiously cumbersome fulfilled its promise: a book, a bottle of excellent Spanish sherry, a quart of olives to accompany it, and three pairs of new silk stockings.

"I am awash in stockings," his cousin Adam assured William, when the latter tried to share this bounty. "Mother buys them by the gross and dispatches them by every carrier, I think. You're lucky she didn't think to send you fresh drawers; I get a pair in every diplomatic pouch, and if you don't think *that's* an awkward thing to explain to Sir Henry … Wouldn't say no to a glass of your sherry, though."

William was not entirely sure his cousin was joking about the drawers; Adam had a grave mien that served him well in relations with senior officers, and had also the Grey family trick of saying the most outrageous things with a perfectly straight face. William laughed, nonetheless, and called downstairs for a pair of glasses.

One of Adam's friends brought three, helpfully staying to assist with disposal of the sherry. Another friend appeared, apparently out of the woodwork—it was very good sherry—and produced a half bottle of porter from his chest to add to the festivities. With the inevitability of such gatherings, both bottles and friends multiplied, until every surface in Adam's room—admittedly a small one—was occupied by one or the other.

William had generously made free with his olives, as well as the sherry, and toward the bottom of the bottle raised a glass to his aunt for her generous gifts, not omitting to mention the silk stockings.

"Though I rather think your mother was not responsible for the book?" he said to Adam, lowering his empty glass with an explosion of breath.

Adam broke into a fit of the giggles, his usual gravity quite dissolved in a quart of rum punch.

"No," he said, "nor Papa, neither. That was my own contribution to the cause of cutlural, culshural, I mean, advanshment in the colonies."

"A signal service to the sensibilities of civilized man," William assured him gravely, showing off his own ability to hold his liquor and manage his tongue, no matter how many slippery esses might throw themselves in his way.

A general cry of "What book? What book? Let us see this famous book!" resulting, he was obliged to produce the prize of his collection of gifts—a copy of Mr. Harris's famous *List of Covent Garden Ladies,* this being a lavishly descriptive catalog of the charms, specialities, price, and availability of the best whores to be found in London.

Its appearance was greeted with cries of rapture, and following a brief struggle over possession of the volume, William rescued it before it should be torn to pieces, but allowed himself to be induced to read some of the passages aloud, his dramatic rendering being greeted by wolflike howls of enthusiasm and hails of olive pits.

Reading is of course dry work, and further refreshment was called for and consumed. He could not have said who first suggested that the party should constitute itself an expeditionary force for the purpose of compiling a similar list for New York. Whoever first bruited the suggestion, though, was roundly seconded and hailed in bumpers of rum punch—the bottles having all been drained by now.

And so it fell out that he found himself wandering in a spirituous haze through narrow streets whose darkness was punctuated by the pinpricks of candlelit windows and the occasional hanging lantern at a crossroad. No one appeared to have any direction in mind, and yet the whole body advanced insensibly as one, drawn by some subtle emanation.

"Like dogs following a bitch in heat," he observed, and was surprised to receive a buffet and shout of approbation from one of Adam's friends—he hadn't realized that he'd spoken aloud. And yet he had been correct, for eventually they came to an alley down which two or three lanterns hung, sheathed in red muslin so the light spilled in a bloody glow across the doorways—all welcomingly ajar. Whoops greeted the sight, and the body of would-be investigators advanced a-purpose, pausing only for a brief argument in the center of the street regarding the choice of establishment in which to begin their researches.

William himself took little part in the argument; the air was close, muggy, and fetid with the stench of cattle and sewage, and he was suddenly aware that one of the olives he had consumed had quite possibly been a wrong 'un. He was sweating heavily and unctuously, and his wet linen clung to him with a clasping insistence that terrified him with the thought that he might not be able to get his breeches down in time, should his inward disturbance move suddenly southward.

He forced a smile, and with a vague swing of the arm, indicated to Adam that he might proceed as he liked—William would venture a bit farther.

This he did, leaving the moil of riotous young officers behind him, and staggered past the last of the red lanterns. He was looking rather desperately for some semblance of seclusion in which to be sick, but finding nothing to his purpose, at length stumbled to a halt and vomited profusely in a doorway—whereupon, to his horror, the door swung open, revealing a highly indignant householder, who did not wait for explanations, apologies, or offers of recompense, but seized a cudgel of some kind from behind his door and, bellowing incomprehensible oaths in what might be German, chased William down the alleyway.

What with one thing and another, it was some time of wandering through pig yards, shacks, and ill-smelling wharves before he found his way back to the proper district, there to find his cousin Adam going up and down the street, banging on doors and hallooing loudly in search of him.

"Don't knock on that one!" he said in alarm, seeing Adam about to attack the door of the cudgel-wielding German. Adam swung about in relieved surprise.

"There you are! All right, old man?"

"Oh, yes. Fine." He felt somewhat pale and clammy, despite the sweltering heat of the summer night, but the acute inner distress had purged itself, and had the salutary side effect of sobering him in the process.

"Thought you'd been robbed or murdered in an alleyway. I'd never be able to look Uncle John in the face, was I to have to tell him I'd got you done in."

They were walking down the alley, back toward the red lanterns. All of the young men had disappeared into one or another of the establishments, though the sounds of revelry and banging from within suggested that their high spirits had not abated, but merely been relocated.

"Did you find yourself decently accommodated?" Adam asked. He jerked his chin in the direction from which William had come.

"Oh, fine. You?"

"Well, she wouldn't rate more nor a paragraph in Harris, but not bad for a sinkhole like New York," Adam said judiciously. His stock was hanging loose round his neck, and as they passed the faint glow of a window, William saw that one of the silver buttons of his cousin's coat was missing. "Swear I've seen a couple of these whores in camp, though."

"Sir Henry send you out to make a census, did he? Or do you just spend so much time with the camp followers you know them all by

—”

He was interrupted by a change in the noise coming from one of the houses down the street. Shouting, but not of the genially drunken sort evident heretofore. This was ugly shouting, a male voice in a rage and the shrieks of a woman.

The cousins exchanged glances, then started as one toward the racket.

This had increased as they hurried toward its source, and as they came even with the farthest house, a number of half-dressed soldiers spilled out into the alleyway, followed by a burly lieutenant to whom William had been introduced during the party in Adam’s room, but whose name he did not recall, dragging a half-naked whore by one arm.

The lieutenant had lost both coat and wig; his dark hair was polled close and grew low on his brow, which, together with his thick-shouldered build, gave him the look of a bull about to charge. In fact, he did, turning and ramming a shoulder into the woman he’d dragged out, slamming her into the wall of the house. He was roaring drunk, and bellowing incoherent profanities.

“Fireship.”

William didn’t see who’d spoken the word, but it was taken up in excited murmurs, and something ugly ran through the men in the alley.

“Fireship! She’s a fireship!”

Several women had gathered in the doorway. The light behind them was too dim to show their faces, but they were clearly frightened, huddling together. One called out, tentative, stretching out an arm, but the others pulled her back. The black-haired lieutenant took no notice; he was battering the whore, punching her repeatedly in the stomach and breasts.

“Hoy, fellow!”

William started forward, shouting, but several hands grasped his arms, preventing him.

“Fireship!” The men were beginning to chant it, with each blow of the lieutenant’s fists.

A fireship was a poxed whore, and as the lieutenant left off his bashing and hauled the woman under the light of the red lantern, William could see that indeed she was; the rash across her face was plain.

"Rodham! Rodham!" Adam was shouting the lieutenant's name, trying to break through the crush of men, but they moved together, pushing him back, and the chant of "Fireship!" got louder.

Shrieks came from the whores in the doorway, and they crammed back as Rodham flung the woman down on the doorstep. William lunged and succeeded in breaking through the press, but before he could reach the lieutenant, Rodham had seized the lantern and, dashing it against the front of the house, flung blazing oil over the whore.

He fell back then, panting, eyes wide and staring as though in disbelief, as the woman leapt to her feet, arms windmilling in panic as the flames caught her hair, her gauzy shift. Within seconds, she was wrapped in fire, screaming in a high, thin voice that cut through the confusion of noise in the street and ran straight into William's brain.

The men fell back as she staggered toward them, lurching, hands reaching—whether in a futile plea for help or in the desire to immolate them, as well, he couldn't tell. He stood rooted to the spot, his body clenched with the need to do something, the impossibility of doing anything, the overwhelming sense of disaster. An insistent pain in his arm made him glance mechanically aside, to find Adam beside him, fingers digging hard into the muscle of his forearm.

"Let's go," Adam whispered, his face white and sweating. "For God's sake, let's go!"

The door of the whorehouse had slammed shut. The burning woman fell against it, hands pressed against the wood. The appetizing smell of roasting meat filled the close, hot confines of the alley, and William felt his gorge rise once more.

"God curse you! May your goddamned pricks all rot and fall off!" The scream came from a window above; William's head jerked up and he saw a woman shaking a fist at the men below. There was a rumble from the men, and one shouted something foul in reply; another bent and seized a cobblestone and rising, flung it hard. It bounced against the front of the house below the window, and fell back, striking one of the soldiers, who cursed and shoved the man who'd thrown it.

The burning woman had sunk down by the door; the flames had made a charred spot on it. She was still making a faint keening noise, but had ceased to move.

Suddenly William lost his mind and, grabbing the man who had thrown the stone, took him by the neck and cracked his head against the doorpost of the house. The man stiffened and slumped, his knees giving way, and sat in the street, moaning.

"Get out!" William bellowed. "All of you! Leave!" Fists clenched, he turned on the black-haired lieutenant, who, his rage all vanished, was standing motionless, staring at the woman on the stoop. Her skirts had vanished; a pair of blackened legs twitched feebly in the shadow.

William reached the man in one stride and took him by the front of his shirt, yanking him round.

"Go," he said, in a dangerous voice. "Leave. Now!"

He released the man, who blinked, swallowed, and, turning, walked like an automaton into the dark.

Panting, William turned on the rest of them, but they had lost the thirst for violence as quickly as it had come upon them. There were a few glances toward the woman—she had gone still now—and shufflings, incoherent murmurs. None of them would meet another's eye.

He was vaguely conscious of Adam by his side, trembling with shock but solidly beside him. He put a hand on his smaller cousin's shoulder and held on, trembling himself, as the men melted away. The man sitting in the street got slowly to his hands and feet, half-rose, and lurched after his companions, caroming off the fronts of houses as he made his way into the dark.

The alley fell quiet. The fire had gone out. The other red lanterns in the street had been extinguished. He felt as though he had grown to the spot, would stand in this hateful place forever—but Adam moved a little, and his hand fell from his cousin’s shoulder and he found that his feet would carry him.

They turned away, and walked in silence back through the dark streets. They came by a sentry point, where soldiers on guard were standing round a fire, keeping casual watch. They were to keep order in the occupied city, the guards. The sentries glanced at them, but did not stop them.

In the light of the fire, he saw the tracks of wetness on Adam’s face and realized that his cousin was crying.

So was he.

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11

TRANSVERSE LIE

Fraser’s Ridge
March 1777

The world was dripping. Freshets leapt down the mountain, grass and leaves were wet with dew, and the shingles steamed in the morning sun. Our preparations were made and the passes were clear. There remained only one more thing to do before we could leave.

“Today, d’ye think?” Jamie asked hopefully. He was not a man made for peaceful contemplation; once a course of action was decided upon, he wanted to be acting. Babies, unfortunately, are completely indifferent to both convenience and impatience.

“Maybe,” I said, trying to keep a grip on my own patience. “Maybe not.”

“I saw her last week, and she looked then as though she was goin’ to explode any minute, Auntie,” Ian remarked, handing Rollo the last bite of his muffin. “Ken those mushrooms? The big round ones? Ye touch one and *poof!”* He flicked his fingers, scattering muffin crumbs. “Like that.”

“She’s only having the one, no?” Jamie asked me, frowning.

“I told you—six times so far—I think so. I bloody *hope* so,” I added, repressing an urge to cross myself. “But you can’t always tell.”

“Twins run in families,” Ian put in helpfully.

Jamie did cross himself.

"I've heard only one heartbeat," I said, keeping a grip on my temper, "and I've been listening for months."

"Can ye not count the bits that stick out?" Ian inquired. "If it seemed to have six legs, I mean …"

"Easier said than done." I could, of course, make out the general aspect of the child—a head was reasonably easy to feel, and so were buttocks; arms and legs a bit more problematical. That was what was disturbing me at the moment.

I'd been checking Lizzie once a week for the past month—and had been going up to her cabin every other day for the last week, though it was a long walk. The child—and I did *think* there was only one—seemed very large; the fundus of the uterus was a good bit higher than I thought it should be. And while babies frequently changed position in the weeks prior to birth, this one had remained in a transverse lie—wedged sideways—for a worryingly long time.

The fact was that without a hospital, operating facilities, or anesthesia, my ability to deal with an unorthodox delivery was severely limited. *Sans* surgical intervention, with a transverse lie, a midwife had four alternatives: let the woman die after days of agonizing labor; let the woman die after doing a cesarean section without benefit of anesthesia or asepsis—but possibly save the baby; possibly save the mother by killing the child in the womb and then removing it in bits (Daniel Rawlings had had several pages in his book—illustrated—describing this procedure), or attempting an internal version, trying to turn the baby into a position in which it might be delivered.

While superficially the most attractive option, that last one could easily be as dangerous as the others, resulting in the deaths of mother *and* child.

I'd tried an external version the week before, and managed—with difficulty—to induce the child to turn head-down. Two days later, it had turned right back, evidently liking its supine position. It might turn again by itself before labor started—and it might not.

Experience being what it was, I normally managed to distinguish between intelligent planning for contingencies and useless worrying over things that might not happen, thus allowing myself to sleep at night. I'd lain awake into the small hours every night for the last week, though, envisioning the possibility that the child wouldn't turn in time, and running through that short, grim list of alternatives in futile search for one more choice.

If I had ether … but what I'd had had gone when the house burned.

Kill Lizzie, in order to save the new child? No. If it came to that, better to kill the child *in utero,* and leave Rodney with a mother, Jo and Kezzie with their wife. But the thought of crushing the skull of a full-term child, healthy, ready to be born … or decapitating it with a loop of sharp wire—

"Are ye no hungry this morning, Auntie?"

"Er … no. Thank you, Ian."

"Ye look a bit pale, Sassenach. Are ye sickening for something?"

"No!" I got up hastily before they could ask any more questions—there was absolutely no point in anyone but me being terrorized by what I was thinking—and went out to fetch a bucket of water from the well.

Amy was outside; she had started a fire going under the big laundry kettle, and was chivying Aidan and Orrie, who were scrambling round to fetch wood, pausing periodically to throw mud at each other.

"Are ye wanting water, *a bhana-mhaighstir*?" she asked, seeing the bucket in my hand. "Aidan will fetch it down for ye."

"No, that's all right," I assured her. "I wanted a bit of air. It's so nice out in the mornings now." It was; still chilly until the sun got high, but fresh, and dizzy with the scents of grass, resin-fat buds, and early catkins.

I took my bucket up to the well, filled it, and made my way down the path again, slowly, looking at things as you do when you know you might not see them again for a long time. If ever.

Things had changed drastically on the Ridge already, with the coming of violence, the disruptions of the war, the destruction of the Big House. They'd change a great deal more, with Jamie and me both gone.

Who would be the natural leader? Hiram Crombie was the *de facto* head of the Presbyterian fisher-folk who had come from Thurso—but he was a rigid, humorless man, much more likely to cause friction with the rest of the community than to maintain order and foster cooperation.

Bobby? After considerable thought, Jamie had appointed him factor, with the responsibility of overseeing our property—or what was left of it. But aside from his natural capabilities or lack thereof, Bobby was a young man. He—along with many of the other men on the Ridge—could so easily be swept up in the coming storm, taken away and obliged to serve in one of the militias. Not the Crown's forces, though; he had been a British soldier, stationed in Boston seven years before, where he and several of his fellows had been menaced by a mob of several hundred irate Bostonians. In fear for their lives, the soldiers had loaded their muskets and leveled them at the crowd. Stones and clubs were thrown, shots were fired—by whom, no one could establish; I had never asked Bobby—and men had died.

Bobby's life had been spared at the subsequent trial, but he bore a brand on his cheek—"M," for "Murder." I had no idea of his politics—he never spoke of such things—but he would never fight with the British army again.

I pushed open the door to the cabin, my equanimity somewhat restored.

Jamie and Ian were now arguing as to whether the new child would be a sister or brother to little Rodney or a half sibling.

"Well, no way of telling, is there?" Ian said. "Nobody kens whether Jo or Kezzie fathered wee Rodney, and the same for this bairn. If Jo is Rodney's father, and Kezzie this one's—"

"It doesn't really matter," I interrupted, pouring water from the bucket into the cauldron. "Jo and Kezzie are identical twins. That means their … er … their sperm is identical, as well." That was oversimplifying matters, but it was much too early in the day to try to explain reproductive meiosis and recombinant DNA. "If the mother is the same—and she is—and the father is genetically the same—and they are—any children born would be full sisters or brothers to each other."

"Their spunk's the same, too?" Ian demanded, incredulous. "How can ye tell? Did ye *look*?" he added, giving me a look of horrified curiosity.

"I did not," I said severely. "I didn't have to. I know these things."

"Oh, aye," he said, nodding with respect. "Of course ye would. I forget sometimes what ye are, Auntie Claire."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that, exactly, but it didn't seem necessary either to inquire or to explain that my knowledge of the Beardsleys' intimate processes was academic, rather than supernatural.

"But it *is* Kezzie that's this one's father, no?" Jamie put in, frowning. "I sent Jo away; it's Kezzie she's been living with this past year."

Ian gave him a pitying look.

"Ye think he went? Jo?"

"I've not seen him," Jamie said, but the thick red brows drew together.

"Well, ye wouldn't," Ian conceded. "They'll ha' been gey careful about it, not wantin' to cross ye. Ye never do see more than one of them—at a time," he added, offhanded.

We both stared at him. He looked up from the chunk of bacon in his hand and raised his brows.

"I ken these things, aye?" he said blandly.

* * *

After supper, the household shifted and settled for the night. All the Higginses retired to the back bedroom, where they shared the single bedstead.

Obsessively, I opened my midwifery bundle and laid out the kit, checking everything over once more. Scissors, white thread for the cord. Clean cloths, rinsed many times to remove all trace of lye soap, scalded and dried. A large square of waxed canvas, to waterproof the mattress. A small bottle of alcohol, diluted fifty percent with sterile water. A small bag containing several twists of washed—but not boiled—wool. A rolled-up sheet of parchment, to serve in lieu of my stethoscope, which had perished in the fire. A knife. And a length of thin wire, sharpened at one end, coiled up like a snake.

I hadn't eaten much at dinner—or all day—but had a constant sense of rising bile at the back of my throat. I swallowed and wrapped the kit up again, tying the twine firmly round it.

I felt Jamie's eyes on me and looked up. He said nothing, but smiled a little, warmth in his eyes, and I felt a momentary easing—then a fresh clenching, as I wondered what he would think, if worst came to worst, and I had to—but he'd seen that twist of fear in my face. With his eyes still on mine, he quietly took his rosary from his sporran, and began silently to tell the beads, the worn wood sliding slowly through his fingers.

* * *

Two nights later, I came instantly awake at the sound of feet on the path outside and was on my own feet, pulling on my clothes, before Jo's knock sounded on the door. Jamie let him in; I heard them murmuring together as I burrowed under the settle for my kit. Jo sounded excited, a little worried—but not panicked. That was good; if Lizzie had been frightened or in serious trouble, he would have sensed it at once—the twins were nearly as sensitive to her moods and welfare as they were to each other's.

"Shall I come?" Jamie whispered, looming up beside me.

"No," I whispered back, touching him for strength. "Go back to sleep. I'll send, if I need you."

He was tousled from sleep, the embers of the fire making shadows in his hair, but his eyes were alert. He nodded and kissed my forehead, but instead of stepping back, he laid his hand on my head and whispered, "O blessed Michael of the Red Domain …" in Gaelic, then touched my cheek in farewell.

"I'll see ye in the morning then, Sassenach," he said, and pushed me gently toward the door.

To my surprise, it was snowing outside. The sky was gray and full of light and the air alive with huge, whirling flakes that brushed my face, melting instantly on my skin. It was a spring storm; I could see the flakes settle briefly on the grass stems, then vanish. There would likely be no trace of snow by morning, but the night was filled with its mystery. I turned to look back, but could not see the cabin behind us—only the shapes of trees half shrouded, uncertain in the pearl-gray light. The path before us looked likewise unreal, the trace disappearing into strange trees and unknown shadows.

I felt weirdly disembodied, caught between past and future, nothing visible save the whirling white silence that surrounded me. And yet I felt calmer than I had in many days. I felt the weight of Jamie's hand on my head, with its whispered blessing. *O blessed Michael of the Red Domain …*

It was the blessing given to a warrior going out to battle. I had given it to him, more than once. He'd never done such a thing before, and I had no idea what had made him do it now—but the words glowed in my heart, a small shield against the dangers ahead.

The snow covered the ground now in a thin blanket that hid dark earth and sprouting growth. Jo's feet left crisp black prints that I followed upward, the needles of fir and balsam brushing cold and fragrant against my skirt, as I listened to a vibrant silence that rang like a bell.

If ever there were a night when angels walked, I prayed it might be this one.

* * *

It was nearly an hour's walk to the Beardsley cabin, in daylight and good weather. Fear hastened my footsteps, though, and Jo—I thought it was Jo, by his voice, was hard-pressed to keep up with me.

"How long has she been at it?" I asked. You could never tell, but Lizzie's first labor had been fast; she'd delivered little Rodney quite alone and without incident. I didn't think we were going to be that lucky tonight, though my mind couldn't help hopefully envisioning an arrival at the cabin to find Lizzie already holding the new baby, safely popped out without difficulty.

“Not long,” he panted. “Her waters came all of a sudden, when we were all abed, and she said I best come fetch you at once.”

I tried not to notice that “all abed”—after all, he and/or Kezzie might have slept on the floor—but the Beardsley *ménage* was the literal personification of double entendre; nobody who knew the truth could think of them without thinking of …

I didn’t bother asking how long he and Kezzie had both been living at the cabin; from what Ian had said, they’d likely both been there all the time. Given the normal conditions of life in the backcountry, no one would have blinked at the notion of a man and his wife living with his brother. And so far as the general population of the Ridge was aware, Lizzie was married to Kezzie. She was. She was also married to Jo, as the result of a set of machinations that still caused me to marvel, but the Bearsdley household kept that fact quiet, on Jamie’s orders.

“Her pap’ll be there,” Jo said, breath pluming white as he pulled alongside me where the trail opened out. “And Auntie Monika. Kezzie went to fetch ’em.”

“You left Lizzie *alone*?”

His shoulders hunched defensively, uncomfortable.

“She said to,” he said simply.

I didn’t bother replying, but hastened my step, until a stitch in my side made me slow a little. If Lizzie hadn’t already given birth and hemorrhaged or had some other disaster while alone, it might be a help to have “Auntie Monika”—Mr. Wemyss’s second wife—to hand. Monika Berrisch Wemyss was a German lady, of limited and eccentric English but boundless courage and common sense.

Mr. Wemyss had his share of courage, too, though it was a quiet sort. He was waiting for us on the porch, with Kezzie, and it was clear that Mr. Wemyss was supporting his son-in-law, rather than the reverse. Kezzie was openly wringing his hands and jigging from foot to foot, while Mr. Wemyss’s slight figure bent consolingly toward him, a hand on his arm. I caught low murmurs, and then they saw us and turned toward us, sudden hope in the straightening of their bodies.

A long, low howl came from the cabin, and all the men stiffened as though it had been a wolf springing out of the dark at them.

"Well, she sounds all right," I said mildly, and all of them exhaled at once, audibly. I wanted to laugh, but thought better not, and pushed open the door.

"Ugh," said Lizzie, looking up from the bed. "Oh, it's you, ma'am. Thank the Lord!"

"Gott bedanket, aye," agreed Auntie Monika, tranquilly. She was on her hands and knees, sponging the floor with a wad of cloth. "Not so long now, I hope."

"I hope not, too," said Lizzie, grimacing. "GAAAAARRRRRGH!" Her face convulsed into a rictus and went bright red, and her swollen body arched backward. She looked more like someone in the grip of tetanus than an expectant mother, but luckily the spasm was short-lived, and she collapsed into a limp heap, panting.

"It wasna like this, last time," she complained, opening one eye as I palpated her abdomen.

"It's never the same," I said absently. One quick glance had made my heart leap; the child was no longer sideways. On the other hand … it wasn't neatly head-down, either. It wasn't moving—babies generally didn't, during labor—and while I thought I had located the head up under Lizzie's ribs, I wasn't at all sure of the disposition of the rest.

"Let me just have a look here …" She was naked, wrapped in a quilt. Her wet shift was hanging over the back of a chair, steaming in front of the fire. The bed wasn't soaked, though, and I deduced that she'd felt the rupturing of her membranes and made it to a standing position before her water broke.

I'd been afraid to look, and let my breath out in audible relief. The chief fear with a breech presentation was that part of the umbilical cord would prolapse when the membranes ruptured, the loop then being squeezed between the pelvis and some part of the fetus. All clear, though, and a quick feel indicated that the cervix was very nearly effaced.

The only thing to do now was to wait and see what came out first. I undid my bundle, and—shoving the coil of sharpened wire hastily under a packet of cloths—spread out the waxed canvas, hoicking Lizzie onto it with Auntie Monika's help.

Monika blinked and glanced at the trundle where little Rodney was snoring when Lizzie let out another of those unearthly howls. She looked to me for reassurance that nothing was wrong, then took hold of Lizzie's hands, murmuring softly to her in German while she grunted and wheezed.

The door creaked gently, and I looked round to see one of the Beardsleys peering in, his face showing a mixture of fear and hope.

"Is it here?" he whispered hoarsely.

"NO!" bellowed Lizzie, sitting bolt upright. "Get your neb out of my sight, or I'll twist your wee ballocks off! All four o' them!"

The door promptly closed, and Lizzie subsided, puffing.

"I hate them," she said through clenched teeth. "I want them to die!"

"Mmm-hmm," I said sympathetically. "Well, I'm sure they're suffering, at least."

"Good." She went from fury to pathos in a split second, tears welling in her eyes. "Am I going to die?"

"No," I said, as reassuringly as possible.

"EEEAAAAARRRRRRGGGGG!"

*"Gruss Gott,"*Auntie Monika said, crossing herself. *"Ist gut?"*

"Ja,"I said, still reassuring. "I don't suppose there are any scissors …?"

"Oh, *ja,"* she replied, reaching for her bag. She produced a tiny pair of very worn but once-gilded embroidery scissors. "Dese you need?"

"Danke."

"BLOOOOOORRRRRGGGG!"

Monika and I both looked at Lizzie.

"Don't overdo it," I said. "They're frightened, but they aren't idiots. Besides, you'll scare your father. *And* Rodney," I added, with a glance at the little heap of bedclothes in the trundle bed.

She subsided, panting, but managed a nod and the ghost of a smile.

Matters proceeded fairly rapidly thereafter; she *was* fast. I checked her pulse, then her cervix, and felt my own heart rate double as I touched what was plainly a tiny foot, on its way out. Could I get the other one?

I glanced at Monika, with an eye to size and strength. She was tough as whipcord, I knew, but not that large. Lizzie, on the other hand, was the size of—well, Ian had not been exaggerating when he thought it might be twins.

The creeping thought that it still *might be* twins made the hair on the back of my neck stand up, despite the humid warmth of the cabin.

No, I said firmly to myself. *It isn't; you know it isn't. One is going to be bad enough.*

"We're going to need one of the men, to help hold her shoulders up," I said to Monika. "Get one of the twins, will you?"

"Both," Lizzie gasped, as Monika turned toward the door.

"One will be—"

"Both! Nnnnnngggg …"

"Both," I said to Monika, who nodded in a matter-of-fact manner.

The twins came in on a rush of cold air, their faces identical ruddy masks of alarm and excitement. Without my saying anything to them, they came at once to Lizzie, like a pair of iron filings to a magnet. She had struggled into a sitting position, and one of them knelt behind her, his hands gently kneading her shoulders as they relaxed from the last spasm. His brother sat beside her, a supportive arm round what used to be her waist, his other hand smoothing back the sweat-soaked hair from her brow.

I tried to arrange the quilt round her, over her protruding belly, but she pushed it away, hot and fretful. The cabin was filled with moist heat, from the steaming cauldron and the sweat of effort. Well, presumably the twins were somewhat more familiar with her anatomy than I was, I reflected, and handed the wadded quilt to Auntie Monika. Modesty had no place in childbirth.

I knelt in front of her, scissors in hand, and snipped the episiotomy quickly, feeling a tiny spray of warm blood across my hand. I seldom needed to do one for a routine birth, but for this, I was going to need room to maneuver. I pressed one of my clean cloths to the cut, but the amount of bleeding was negligible, and the insides of her thighs were streaked with bloody show in any case.

It *was* a foot; I could see the toes, long ones, like a frog's, and glanced automatically at Lizzie's bare feet, planted solidly on the floor to either side of me. No, hers were short and compact; it must be the twins' influence.

The humid, swampish scent of birth waters, sweat, and blood rose like fog from Lizzie's body, and I felt my own sweat running down my sides. I groped upward, hooked a finger round the heel, and brought the foot down, feeling the life in the child move in its flesh, though the baby itself was not moving, helpless in the grip of birth.

The other one, I needed the other one. Feeling urgently through the belly wall between one contraction and the next, I slid my other hand up the emergent leg, found the tiny curve of the buttock. Switched hands hastily and, with my eyes closed, found the curve of the flexed thigh. Bloody hell, it seemed to have its knee tucked up under its chin … felt the yielding stiffness of tiny, cartilaginous bones, solid in the squish of fluid, the stretch of muscle … got a finger, two fingers, circling the other ankle, and—snarling, "Brace her! Hold her!" as Lizzie's back arched and her bottom scooted toward me—brought the second foot down.

I sat back, eyes open and breathing hard, though it hadn't been a physical strain. The little froggy feet twitched once, then drooped, as the legs came into view with the next push.

"Once more, sweetheart," I whispered, a hand on Lizzie's straining thigh. "Give us one more like that."

A growl from the depths of the earth as Lizzie reached that point where a woman no longer cares whether she lives, dies, or splits apart, and the child's lower body slid slowly into view, the umbilicus pulsing like a thick purple worm looped across the belly. My eyes were fixed on that, thinking, *Thank God, thank God,* when I became aware of Auntie Monika, peering intently over my shoulder.

“Ist das balls?” she said, puzzled, pointing at the child’s genitals.

I hadn’t spared time to look, concerned as I was with the cord, but I glanced down and smiled.

“No. *Ist eine Mädchen,”* I said. The baby’s sex was edematous; it did look much like a little boy’s equipment, the clitoris protruding from swollen labia, but wasn’t.

“What? What is it?” One of the Beardsleys was asking, leaning down to look.

“You haff a leedle girl,” Auntie Monika told him, beaming up.

“A girl?” the other Beardsley gasped. “Lizzie, we have a daughter!”

“Will you fucking *shut up?!*?” Lizzie snarled. “NNNNNNNGGGGG!”

At this point, Rodney woke up and sat bolt upright, openmouthed and wide-eyed. Auntie Monika was on her feet at once, scooping him out of his bed before he could start to scream.

Rodney’s sister was inching reluctantly into the world, shoved by each contraction. I was counting in my head, *One hippopotamus, two hippopotamus* … From the appearance of the umbilicus to successful delivery of the mouth and the first breath, we could afford no more than four minutes before brain damage from lack of oxygen began to occur. But I couldn’t pull and risk damage to the neck and head.

“Push, sweetheart,” I said, bracing my hands on both Lizzie’s knees, my voice calm. “Hard, now.”

Thirty-four hippopotamus, thirty-five …

All we needed now was for the chin to hang up on the pelvic bone. When the contraction eased, I slid my fingers hastily up onto the child’s face, and got two fingers over the upper maxilla. I felt the next contraction coming, and gritted my teeth as the force of it crushed my hand between the bones of the pelvis and the baby’s skull, but didn’t pull back, fearful of losing my traction.

Sixty-two hippopotamus …

Relaxation, and I drew down, slowly, slowly, pulling the child’s head forward, easing the chin past the rim of the pelvis …

Eighty-nine hippopotamus, ninety hippopotamus …

The child was hanging from Lizzie's body, bloody-blue and shining in the firelight, swaying in the shadow of her thighs like the clapper of a bell—or a body from a gibbet, and I pushed that thought away …

"Should not we take …?" Auntie Monika whispered to me, Rodney clutched to her breast.

One hundred.

"No," I said. "Don't touch it—her. Not yet." Gravity was slowly helping the delivery. Pulling would injure the neck, and if the head were to stick …

One hundred ten hippo—that was a lot of hippopotami, I thought, abstractedly envisaging herds of them marching down to the hollow, there they will wallow, in mud, glooooorious …

"Now," I said, poised to swab the mouth and nose as they emerged—but Lizzie hadn't waited for prompting, and with a long deep sigh and an audible *pop!*, the head delivered all at once, and the baby fell into my hands like a ripe fruit.

* * *

I dipped a little more water from the steaming cauldron into the washing bowl and added cold water from the bucket. The warmth of it stung my hands; the skin between my knuckles was cracked from the long winter and the constant use of dilute alcohol for sterilization. I'd just finished stitching Lizzie up and cleaning her, and the blood floated away from my hands, dark swirls in the water.

Behind me, Lizzie was tucked up neatly in bed, clad in one of the twins' shirts, her own shift being not yet dried. She was laughing with the euphoria of birth and survival, the twins on either side of her, fussing over her, murmuring admiration and relief, one tucking back her loose, damp fair hair, the other softly kissing her neck.

"Are you fevered, my lover?" one asked, a tinge of concern in his voice. That made me turn round to look; Lizzie suffered from malaria, and while she hadn't had an attack in some time, perhaps the stress of birth …

"No," she said, and kissed Jo or Kezzie on the forehead. "I'm only flushed from bein' happy." Kezzie or Jo beamed at her in adoration, while his brother took up the neck-kissing duties on the other side.

Auntie Monika coughed. She'd wiped down the baby with a damp cloth and some wisps of the wool I'd brought—soft and oily with lanolin—and had it now swaddled in a blanket. Rodney had got bored with the proceedings long since and gone to sleep on the floor by the wood-basket, a thumb in his mouth.

"Your *vater*, Lizzie," she said, a slight hint of reproof in her voice. "He vill cold begetting. *Und die Mädel* he vant see, *mit you*, but maybe not so much *mit der* …" She managed to incline her head toward the bed, while simultaneously modestly averting her eyes from the frolicsome trio on it. Mr. Wemyss and his sons-in-law had had a gingerly reconciliation after the birth of Rodney, but best not to press things.

Her words galvanized the twins, who hopped to their feet, one stooping to scoop up Rodney, whom he handled with casual affection, the other rushing for the door to retrieve Mr. Wemyss, forgotten on the porch in the excitement.

While slightly blue round the edges, relief made his thin face glow as though lit from within. He smiled with heartfelt joy at Monika, sparing a brief glance and a ginger pat for the swaddled bundle—but his attention was all for Lizzie, and hers for him.

"Your hands are frozen, Da," she said, giggling a little, but tightening her grip as he made to pull away. "No, stay; I'm warm enough. Come sit by me and say good e'en to your wee granddaughter." Her voice rang with a shy pride, as she reached out a hand to Auntie Monika.

Monika set the baby gently in Lizzie's arms, and stood with a hand on Mr. Wemyss's shoulder, her own weathered face soft with something much deeper than affection. Not for the first time, I was surprised—and vaguely abashed that I should be surprised—by the depth of her love for the frail, quiet little man.

"Oh," Mr. Wemyss said softly. His finger touched the baby's cheek; I could hear her making small smacking noises. She'd been shocked by the trauma of birth and not interested in the breast at first, but plainly was beginning to change her mind.

"She'll be hungry." A rustle of bedclothes as Lizzie took up the baby and put her to the breast with practiced hands.

"What will ye call her, *a leannan*?" Mr. Wemyss asked.

"I hadna really thought of a girl's name," Lizzie answered. "She was so big, I thought sure she was a—ow!" She laughed, a low, sweet sound. "I'd forgot how greedy a newborn wean is. Ooh! There, *a chuisle*, aye, that's better …"

I reached for the sack of wool, to rub my own raw hands with one of the soft, oily wisps, and happened to see the twins, standing back out of the way, side by side, their eyes fixed on Lizzie and their daughter, and each wearing a look that echoed Auntie Monika's. Not taking his eyes away, the Beardsley holding little Rodney bent his head and kissed the top of the little boy's round head.

So much love in one small place. I turned away, my own eyes misty. Did it matter, really, how unorthodox the marriage at the center of this odd family was? Well, it would to Hiram Crombie, I reflected. The leader of the rock-ribbed Presbyterian immigrants from Thurso, he'd want Lizzie, Jo, and Kezzie stoned, at the least—together with the sinful fruit of their loins.

No chance of that happening, so long as Jamie was on the Ridge—but with him gone? I slowly cleaned blood from under my nails, hoping that Ian was right about the Beardsleys' capacity for discretion—and deception.

Distracted by these musings, I hadn't noticed Auntie Monika, who had come quietly up beside me.

"Danke," she said softly, laying a gnarled hand on my arm.

"Gern geschehen." I put my hand over hers and squeezed gently. "You were a great help—thank you."

She still smiled, but a line of worry bisected her forehead.

"Not so much. But I am afraid, *ja?"* She glanced over her shoulder at the bed, then back at me. "What happens, next time, you are not *hier?* Dey don't stop, you know," she added, discreetly making a circle of thumb and forefinger and running the middle finger of the other hand into it in a most indiscreet illustration of exactly what she meant.

I converted a laugh hastily into a coughing fit, which fortunately went ignored by the relevant parties, though Mr. Wemyss glanced over his shoulder in mild concern.

"You'll be here," I told her, recovering. She looked horrified.

"Me? *Nein,"* she said, shaking her head. *"Das reicht nicht.* Me—" She poked herself in her meager chest, seeing that I hadn't understood. "I … am not enough."

I took a deep breath, knowing that she was right. And yet …

"You'll have to be," I said, very softly.

She blinked once, her large, wise brown eyes fixed on mine. Then slowly nodded, accepting.

"Mein Gott, hilf mir," she said.

* * *

Jamie hadn't been able to go back to sleep. He had trouble sleeping these days, in any case, and often lay awake late, watching the fading glow of embers in the hearth and turning things over in his mind, or seeking wisdom in the shadows of the rafters overhead. If he did fall asleep easily, he often came awake later, sudden and sweating. He knew what caused that, though, and what to do about it.

Most of his strategies for reaching slumber involved Claire—talking to her, making love to her—or only looking at her while she slept, finding solace in the solid long curve of her collarbone, or the heartbreaking shape of her closed eyelids, letting sleep steal upon him from her peaceful warmth.

But Claire, of course, was gone.

Half an hour of saying the rosary convinced him that he had done as much in that direction as was necessary or desirable for the sake of Lizzie and her impending child. Saying the rosary for penance—aye, he saw the point of that, particularly if you had to say it on your knees. Or to quiet one's mind, fortify the soul, or seek the insight of meditation on sacred topics, aye, that, too. But not for petition. If he were God, or even the Blessed Virgin, who was renowned for patience, he thought he would find it tedious to listen to more than a decade or so of someone saying please about something over and over, and surely there was no point to boring a person whose aid you sought?

Now, the Gaelic prayers seemed much more useful to the purpose, being as they were concentrated upon a specific request or blessing, and more pleasing both in rhythm and variety. If you asked him, not that anyone was likely to.

Moire gheal is Bhride;
Mar a rug Anna Moire,
Mar a rug Moire Criosda,
Mar a rug Eile Eoin Baistidh
Gun mhar-bhith dha dhi,
Cuidich i na 'h asaid,
Cuidich i a Bhride!

Mar a gheineadh Criosd am Moire
Comhliont air gach laimh,
Cobhair i a mise, mhoime,
An gein a thoir bho 'n chnaimh;
'S mar a chomhn thu Oigh an t-solais,
Gun or, gun odh, gun ni,
Comhn i 's mor a th' othrais,
Comhn i a Bhride!

he murmured as he climbed.

Mary fair and Bride;
As Anna bore Mary,
As Mary bore Christ,
As Eile bore John the Baptist
Without flaw in him,
Aid thou her in her unbearing,
Aid her, O Bride!

As Christ was conceived of Mary
Full perfect on every hand,
Assist thou me, foster mother,
The conception to bring from the bone;
And as thou didst aid the Virgin of joy,
Without gold, without corn, without kine,
Aid thou her, great is her sickness, Aid her, O Bride!

He'd left the cabin, unable to bear its smothering confines, and wandered in a contemplative fashion through the Ridge in the falling snow, ticking through mental lists. But the fact was that all his preparation was done, bar the packing of the horses and mules, and without really thinking about it, he found that he was making his way up the trail toward the Beardsley place. The snow had ceased to fall now, but the sky stretched gray and gentle overhead, and cold white lay calm upon the trees and stilled the rush of wind.

Sanctuary, he thought. It wasn't, of course—there was no safe place in time of war—but the feel of the mountain night reminded him of the feel of churches: a great peace, waiting.

Notre Dame in Paris … St. Giles' in Edinburgh. Tiny stone churches in the Highlands, where he'd sometimes gone in his years of hiding, when he thought it safe. He crossed himself, remembering that; the plain stones, often nothing more than a wooden altar inside—and yet the relief of entering, sitting on the floor if there was no bench, just sitting, and knowing himself to be not alone. Sanctuary.

Whether the thought of churches or of Claire reminded him, he remembered another church—the one they had married in, and he grinned to himself at the memory of that. Not a peaceful waiting, no. He could still feel the thunder of his heart against his ribs as he'd stepped inside, the reek of his sweat—he'd smelled like a rutting goat, and hoped she didn't notice—the inability to draw a full breath. And the feel of her hand in his, her fingers small and freezing cold, clutching at him for support.

Sanctuary. They'd been that for each other then—and were so now. *Blood of my blood*. The tiny cut had healed, but he rubbed the ball of his thumb, smiling at the matter-of-fact way she'd said it.

He came in sight of the cabin, and saw Joseph Wemyss waiting on the porch, hunched and stamping his feet against the cold. He was about to hail Joseph, when the door suddenly opened and one of the Beardsley twins—Christ, what were *they* doing in there?—reached out and seized his father-in-law by the arm, nearly pulling him off his feet in his excitement.

It *was* excitement, too, not grief or alarm; he'd seen the boy's face clearly in the glow of the firelight. He let out the breath he hadn't realized he was holding, white in the dark. The child was come, then, and both it and Lizzie had survived.

He relaxed against a tree, touching the rosary around his neck.

"Moran taing," he said softly, in brief but heartfelt thanks. Someone in the cabin had put more wood on the fire; a shower of sparks flew up from the chimney, lighting the snow in red and gold and hissing black where cinders fell.

Yet man is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward. He'd read that line of Job many times in prison, and made no great sense of it. Upward-flying sparks caused no trouble, by and large, unless you had very dry shingles; it was the ones that spat straight out of the hearth that might set your house on fire. Or if the writer had meant only that it was the nature of man to be in trouble—as plainly it was, if his own experience was aught to go by—then he was making a comparison of inevitability, saying that sparks always flew upward—which anyone who'd ever watched a fire for long could tell you they didn't.

Still, who was he to be criticizing the Bible's logic, when he ought to be repeating psalms of praise and gratitude? He tried to think of one, but was too content to think of more than odd bits and pieces.

He realized with a small shock that he was entirely happy. The safe birth of the child was a great thing in itself, to be sure—but it also meant that Claire had come safe through her trial, and that he and she were now free. They might leave the Ridge, knowing they had done all that could be done for the folk who remained.

Aye, there was always a sadness in leaving home—but in this case, it might be argued that their home had left *them*, when the house burned, and in any case, it was overbalanced by his rising sense of anticipation. Free and away, Claire by his side, no daily chores to do, no petty squabbles to settle, no widows and orphans to provide for—well, that was an unworthy thought, doubtless, and yet …

War was a terrible thing, and this one would be, too—but it was undeniably exciting, and the blood stirred in him from scalp to soles.

“Moran taing,” he said again, in heartfelt gratitude.

A short time later, the door of the cabin opened again, spilling light, and Claire came out, pulling up the hood of her cloak, her basket over her arm. Voices followed her, and bodies crowded the door. She turned to wave farewell to them, and he heard her laugh; the sound of it sent a small thrill of pleasure through him.

The door closed and she came down the path in the gray-lit dark; he could see that she staggered just a little, from weariness, and yet there was an air of something about her—he thought it might be the same euphoria that lifted him.

“Like the sparks that fly upward,” he murmured to himself, and smiling, stepped out to greet her.

She wasn’t startled, but turned at once and came toward him, seeming almost to float on the snow.

“It’s well, then,” he said, and she sighed and came into his arms, solid and warm within the cold folds of her cloak. He reached inside it, drew her close, inside the wool of his own big cloak.

“I need you, please,” she whispered, her mouth against his, and without reply he took her up in his arms—Christ, she was right, that cloak stank of dead meat; had the man who sold it to him used it to haul a butchered deer in from the forest?—and kissed her deep, then put her down and led her down the hill, the light snow seeming to melt away from their feet as they walked.

It seemed to take no time at all to reach the barn; they spoke a little on the trail, but he could not have said what they talked about. It only mattered to be with each other.

It wasn’t precisely cozy inside the barn, but not freezing, either. Welcoming, he thought, with the pleasant warm smell of the beasts in the dark. The weird gray light of the sky filtered in, just a bit, so you could see the hunched shapes of horses and mules dozing in their stalls. And there was dry straw to lie on, for all it was old and a trifle musty.

It was too cold to undress, but he laid his cloak in the straw, her upon it, and lay upon her, both of them shivering as they kissed, so their teeth clacked together and they drew back, snorting.

"This is silly," she said, "I can see my breath—*and* yours. It's cold enough to blow smoke rings. We'll freeze."

"No, we won't. Ken the way the Indians make fire?"

"What, rubbing a dry stick on a …"

"Aye, friction." He'd got her petticoats up; her thigh was smooth and cold under his hand. "I see it's no going to be dry, though—Christ, Sassenach, what have ye been about?" He had her firmly in the palm of his hand, warm and soft and juicy, and she squealed at the chill of his touch, loud enough that one of the mules let out a startled wheeze. She wriggled, just enough to make him take his hand out from between her legs and insert something else, quick.

"Ye're going to rouse the whole barn," he observed, breathless. God, the enveloping shock of the heat of her made him giddy.

She ran her cold hands up under his shirt and pinched both his nipples, hard, and he yelped, then laughed.

"Do that again," he said, and bending, stuck his tongue in her cold ear for the pleasure of hearing her shriek. She wriggled and arched her back, but didn't—he noticed—actually turn her head away. He took her earlobe gently between his teeth and began to worry it, rogering her slowly and laughing to himself at the noises she made.

It had been a long time of making silent love.

Her hands were busy at his back; he'd only let down the flap of his breeks and pulled his shirttail up out of the way, but she'd got the shirt out at the back now, and shoved both hands down his breeks and got his hurdies in a good two-handed grip. She pulled him in tight, digging in her nails, and he took her meaning. He let go her ear, rose on his hands, and rode her solid, the straw a-rustle round them like the crackle of burning.

He wanted simply to let go at once, spill himself and fall on her, hold her to his body and smell her hair in a doze of warmth and joy. A dim sense of obligation reminded him that she'd asked him for this, she'd needed it. He couldn't go and leave her wanting.

He closed his eyes and slowed himself, lowered himself onto her so her body strained and rose along his length, the cloth of their clothes rasping and bunching up between them. He got a hand down under her, cupped her bare bum, and slid his fingers into the straining warm crease of her buttocks. Slid one a little farther, and she gasped. Her hips rose, trying to get away, but he laughed deep in his throat and didn't let her. Wiggled the finger.

"Do that again," he whispered in her ear. "Make that noise again for me."

She made a better one, one he'd never heard before, and jerked under him, quivering and whimpering.

He pulled out the finger and guddled her, light and quick, all along the slick deep parts, feeling his own cock under his fingers, big and slippery, stretching her …

He made a terrible noise himself—like a dying cow—but was too happy to be shamed.

"Ye're no verra peaceful, Sassenach," he murmured a moment later, breathing in the smell of musk and new life. "But I like ye fine."

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12

ENOUGH

I took my leave, starting from the springhouse. Stood inside for a moment, listening to the trickle of the water in its stone channel, breathing the cold, fresh smell of the place, with its faint sweet scents of milk and butter. Coming out, I turned left, passing the weathered palisades of my garden, covered with the tattered, rattling remnants of gourd vines. I paused, hesitating; I hadn't set foot in the garden since the day that Malva and her child had died there. I set my hands on two of the wooden stakes, leaning to look between them.

I was glad I hadn't looked before; I couldn't have borne to see it in its winter desolation, the ragged stems blackened and stiff, the rags of leaves rotted into the ground. It was still a sight to strike a pang to a gardener's heart, but no longer desolate. Fresh green sprouted everywhere, spangled with tiny flowers; the kindness of spring laying garlands over winter's bones. Granted, half the green things growing were grass and weeds; by summer, the woods would have reclaimed the garden, smothering the stunted sproutings of cabbages and onions. Amy had made a new vegetable patch near the old cabin; neither she nor anyone else on the Ridge would set foot here.

Something stirred in the grass, and I saw a small gopher snake slide through, hunting. The sight of something live comforted me, little as I cared for snakes, and I smiled as I lifted my eyes and saw that bees were humming to and fro from one of the old bee gums that still stood at the foot of the garden.

I looked last at the spot where I had planted salad greens; that's where she had died. In memory, I'd always seen the spreading blood, imagined it still there, a permanent stain soaked dark into the earth among the churned wreckage of uprooted lettuces and wilting leaves. But it was gone; nothing marked the spot save a fairy ring of mushrooms, tiny white heads poking out of the wild grass.

"I will arise and go now," I said softly, *"and go to Innisfree, and a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made; nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honeybee, and live alone in the bee-loud glade."* I paused for a moment, and as I turned away, added in a whisper, *"And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow."*

I made my way briskly down the path then; no need to apostrophize the ruins of the house, nor yet the white sow. I'd remember *them* without effort. As for the corncrib and hen coop—if you've seen one, you've seen them all.

I could see the little gathering of horses, mules, and people moving in the slow chaos of imminent departure in front of the cabin. I wasn't quite ready yet for goodbyes, though, and stepped into the wood to pull myself together.

The grass was long beside the trail, soft and feathery against the hem of my weighted skirts. Something heavier than grass brushed them, and I looked down to see Adso. I'd been looking for him most of yesterday; typical of him to show up at the last minute.

"So there you are," I said, accusing. He looked at me with his huge calm eyes of celadon green, and licked a paw. On impulse, I scooped him up and held him against me, feeling the rumble of his purr and the soft, thick fur of his silvery belly.

He'd be all right; I knew that. The woods were his private game preserve, and Amy Higgins liked him and had promised me to see him right for milk and a warm spot by the fire in bad weather. I knew that.

"Go on, then," I said, and set him on the ground. He stood for a moment, tail waving slowly, head raised in search of food or interesting smells, then stepped into the grass and vanished.

I bent, very slowly, arms crossed, and shook, weeping silently, violently.

I cried until my throat hurt and I couldn't breathe, then sat in the grass, curled into myself like a dried leaf, tears that I couldn't stop dropping on my knees like the first fat drops of a coming storm. Oh, God. It was only the beginning.

I rubbed my hands hard over my eyes, smearing the wetness, trying to scrub away grief. A soft cloth touched my face, and I looked up, sniffing, to find Jamie kneeling in front of me, handkerchief in hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, very softly.

"It's not—don't worry, I'm … He's only a cat," I said, and a small fresh grief tightened like a band round my chest.

"Aye, I know." He moved beside me and put an arm round my shoulders, pulling my head to his chest, while he gently wiped my face. "But ye couldna weep for the bairns. Or the house. Or your wee garden. Or the poor dead lass and her bairn. But if ye weep for your cheetie, ye know ye can stop."

"How do you know that?" My voice was thick, but the band round my chest was not quite so tight.

He made a small, rueful sound.

"Because I canna weep for those things, either, Sassenach. And I havena got a cat."

I sniffled, wiped my face one last time, and blew my nose before giving him back the handkerchief, which he stuffed into his sporran without grimace or thought.

Lord, he'd said. *Let me be enough.* That prayer had lodged in my heart like an arrow when I'd heard it and thought he asked for help in doing what had to be done. But that wasn't what he'd meant at all—and the realization of what he *had* meant split my heart in two.

I took his face between my hands, and wished so much that I had his own gift, the ability to say what lay in my heart, in such a way that he would know. But I hadn't.

"Jamie," I said at last. "Oh, Jamie. You're … everything. Always."

An hour later, we left the Ridge.

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13

UNREST

Ian lay down with a sack of rice under his head for a pillow. It was hard, but he liked the whisper of the small grains when he turned his head and the faint starched smell of it. Rollo rooted under the plaid with his snout, snorting as he worked his way close against Ian's body, ending with his nose cozily buried in Ian's armpit. Ian scratched the dog's ears gently, then lay back, watching the stars.

It was a sliver moon, thin as a nail paring, and the stars were big and brilliant in the purple-black of the sky. He traced the constellations overhead. Would he see the same stars in Scotland? he wondered. He'd not paid much mind to the stars when he was home in the Highlands, and you couldn't see stars at all in Edinburgh, for the smoke of the reeking lums.

His aunt and uncle lay on the other side of the smoored fire, close enough together as to look like one log, sharing warmth. He saw the blankets twitch, settle, twitch again, and then a stillness, waiting. He heard a whisper, too low to make out the words but the intent behind them clear enough.

He kept his breathing regular, a little louder than usual. A moment, and then the stealthy movements began again. It was hard to fool Uncle Jamie, but there are times when a man wants to be fooled.

His hand rested gently on the dog's head, and Rollo sighed, the huge body going limp, warm and heavy against him. If not for the dog, he would never be able to sleep out of doors. Not that he ever slept soundly, or for long—but at least he could surrender now and then to bodily need, trusting that Rollo would hear any footstep long before he did.

"Ye're safe enough," his uncle Jamie had told him, their first night on the road. He'd been unable to fall asleep then for nerviness, even with Rollo's head on his chest, and had got up to sit by the fire, poking sticks into the embers until the flames rose up into the night, pure and vivid.

He was well aware that he was perfectly visible to anyone who might be watching, but there was nothing to be done about that. And if he had a target painted on his chest, lighting it up wouldn't make a deal of difference.

Rollo, lying watchful beside the growing fire, had lifted his big head suddenly, but only turned it toward a faint sound in the dark. That meant someone familiar, and Ian wasn't bothered, nor yet surprised when his uncle came out of the wood where he'd gone to relieve himself and sat down beside him.

"He doesna want ye dead, ken," Uncle Jamie had said without preamble. "You're safe enough."

"I dinna ken if I want to be safe," he'd blurted, and his uncle had glanced at him, his face troubled—but not surprised. Uncle Jamie had only nodded, though.

He knew what his uncle meant; Arch Bug didn't want him to die, because that would end his guilt, and thus his suffering. Ian had looked into those ancient eyes, the whites of them yellowed and threaded with red, watering with cold and grief, and seen something there that had frozen the core of his soul. No, Arch Bug wouldn't kill him—yet.

His uncle was staring into the fire, the light of it warm on the broad bones of his face, and the sight gave Ian both comfort and panic.

Does it not occur to you? he'd thought, anguished, but did not say. *He said he'd take what I love. And there ye sit beside me, clear as day*.

The first time the thought had come to him, he'd pushed it away; old Arch owed Uncle Jamie, for what he'd done for the Bugs, and he was a man to acknowledge a debt—though perhaps more ready to claim one. And he had nay doubt Bug respected his uncle as a man, too. For a time, that had seemed to settle the matter.

But other thoughts had come to him, uneasy, many-legged things that crept out of the sleepless nights since he'd killed Murdina Bug.

Arch was an old man. Tough as a fire-hardened spear, and twice as dangerous—but old. He'd fought at Sheriffmuir; he had to be rising eighty. Revenge might keep him alive for a time, but all flesh came to an end. He might well think that he hadn't time to wait for Ian to acquire "something worth taking." If he meant to keep his threat, he'd need to act soon.

Ian could hear the subtle shifts and rustlings from the other side of the fire, and swallowed, his mouth dry. Old Arch might try to take his aunt, for surely Ian loved her, and she would be much easier to kill than Uncle Jamie. But no—Arch might be half crazed with grief and rage, but he wasn't insane. He'd know that to touch Auntie Claire—without killing Uncle Jamie at the same time—would be suicide.

Maybe he wouldn't care. That was another thought that walked over his belly with small, cold feet.

He should leave them; he knew that. He'd meant to—he still meant to. Wait 'til they'd fallen asleep, then rise and steal away. They'd be safe then.

But his heart had failed him, that first night. He'd been trying to gather his courage, there by the fire, to go—but his uncle had forestalled him, coming out of the wood and sitting by him, silent but companionable, until Ian had felt able to lie down again.

Tomorrow, he'd thought. After all, there was no sign of Arch Bug; hadn't been, since his wife's funeral. *And maybe he's dead.* He *was* an old man, and alone.

And there was the consideration that if he left without a word, Uncle Jamie would come after him. He'd made it clear that Ian was going back to Scotland, whether he did it willingly or tied in a sack. Ian grinned, despite his thoughts, and Rollo made a small grunt as the chest under him moved in a silent laugh.

He'd barely spared a thought for Scotland and what might await him there.

Perhaps it was the noises from the other side of the fire that made him think it—a sudden high-pitched intake of breath and the deep twin sighs that followed it, his familiarity providing a vivid physical memory of the action that had caused that sigh—but he wondered suddenly whether he might find a wife in Scotland.

He couldn't. Could he? Would Bug be able to follow him so far? *Maybe he's already dead*, he thought again, and shifted a bit. Rollo grumbled in his throat but, recognizing the signs, shuffled off him and curled up a little distance away.

His family would be there. Surrounded by the Murrays, surely he—and a wife—would be safe. It was simple to lurk and steal through the dense woods here in the mountains—not nearly so simple in the Highlands, where every eye was sharp and no stranger passed unnoticed.

He didn't know quite what his mother would do when she saw him—but once she got used to it, maybe she could think of a girl who wouldn't be too frightened of him.

A suck of breath and a sound not quite a moan from his uncle—he did that when she put her mouth on his nipple; Ian had seen her do it once or twice, by the glow of embers from the cabin's hearth, her eyes closed, a quick wet gleam of teeth, and her hair falling back from naked shoulders in a cloud of light and shadow.

He put a hand on his cock, tempted. He had a private collection of images that he cherished for the purpose—and not a few of them were of his cousin, though it shamed him a little. She was Roger Mac's wife, after all. But he'd thought at one point that he'd need to marry her himself, and while terrified at the prospect—he'd been only seventeen and she considerably older—had been emboldened at the thought of having her to bed.

He'd watched her close for several days, seeing her arse round and solid, the dark shadow of her red-haired quim under the thin muslin of her shift when she went to bathe, imagining the thrill of seeing it plain on the night when she'd lie down and open her legs for him.

What was he doing? He couldn't be thinking of Brianna like that, not lying a dozen feet from her father!

He grimaced and squinched his eyes tight shut, hand slowing as he summoned up a different image from his private library. Not the witch—not tonight. Her memory aroused him with great urgency, often painfully, but was tinged with a sense of helplessness. Malva … No, he was afraid to summon her; he often thought her spirit was not yet so very far away.

Wee Mary. Aye, her. His hand settled at once into its rhythm and he sighed, escaping with relief to the small pink breasts and encouraging smile of the first lass he'd ever lain with.

Hovering moments later on the edge of a dream of a wee blond girl who was his wife, he thought drowsily, *Aye, maybe he's already dead.*

Rollo made a deep, dissentient noise in his throat, and rolled over with his paws in the air.

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14

DELICATE MATTERS

London
November 1776

There were many compensations to growing older, Lord John thought. Wisdom, perspective, position in life, the sense of accomplishment, of time well spent, a richness of affection for friends and family … and the fact that he needn't keep his back pressed against a wall when talking to Lord George Germain. While both his looking glass and his valet assured him that he continued to be presentable, he was at least twenty years too old to appeal to the secretary of state, who liked them young and tender-skinned.

The clerk who had shown him in met this description, being equipped also with long dark lashes and a soft pout. Grey spared him no more than a glance; his own tastes were harder-edged.

It was not early—knowing Germain's habits, he had waited until one o'clock—but the man still showed the effects of a long night. Deep blue pouches cupped eyes like soft-boiled eggs, which surveyed Grey with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Still, Germain made an effort at courtesy, bidding Grey sit and sending the doe-eyed clerk for brandy and biscuits.

Grey seldom took strong drink before teatime, and wanted a clear head now. He therefore barely sipped his own brandy, excellent though it was, but Germain dipped the famous Sackville nose—sharply protrusive as a letter opener—into his glass, inhaled deeply, then drained it and poured another. The liquid appeared to have some restorative effect, for he emerged from his second glass looking somewhat happier and inquired of Grey how he did.

"Very well, I thank you," Grey said politely. "I have recently returned from America, and have brought you several letters from mutual acquaintances there."

"Oh, have you?" Germain brightened a bit. "Kind of you, Grey. Decent voyage, was it?"

"Tolerable." In fact, it had been miserable; they had run a gauntlet of storms across the Atlantic, pitching and yawing without cease for days on end, to the point that Grey had wished fervently for the ship to sink, just to put an end to it all. But he did not want to waste time on trivial chat.

"I had a rather remarkable encounter, just before leaving the colony of North Carolina," he said, judging that Germain was now sufficiently alert as to listen. "Allow me to tell you about it."

Germain was both vain and petty, and had brought the art of political vagueness to a fine point—but could apply himself to a matter when he wished, which was largely when he perceived some benefit to himself in a situation. The mention of the Northwest Territory focused his attention admirably.

"You did not speak to this Beauchamp further?" A third glass of brandy sat by Germain's elbow, half drunk.

"No. He had delivered his message; there was nothing to be gained by further conversation, as plainly he has no power to act upon his own. And had he intended to divulge the identity of his principals, he would have done so."

Germain picked up his glass, but did not drink, instead turning it in his hands as an aid to thought. It was plain, not faceted, and smeared with fingerprints and the smudges of Germain's mouth.

"Is the man familiar to you? Why did he seek you out, in particular?" *No, not stupid*, Grey thought.

"I had encountered him many years ago," he replied equably. "In the course of my work with Colonel Bowles."

Nothing on earth would compel Grey to reveal Percy's true identity to Germain; Percy had been—well, still *was*—stepbrother to himself and Hal, and only good fortune and Grey's own determination had prevented an almighty scandal at the time of Percy's presumed death. Some scandals dimmed with time—that one wouldn't.

Germain's plucked eyebrow flickered at mention of Bowles, who had headed England's Black Chamber for many years.

"A spy?" Mild distaste showed in his voice; spies were vulgar necessities; not something a gentleman would touch with his bare hands.

"At one time, perhaps. Apparently he has risen in the world." He picked up his own glass, took a healthy mouthful—it was very good brandy, after all—then set it down and stood up to take his leave. He knew better than to prod Germain. Leave the matter in the secretary's lap, and trust to his own self-interest to pursue it.

Grey left Germain sitting back in his chair, staring contemplatively into his empty glass, and took his cloak from the soft-lipped clerk, whose hand brushed his in passing.

* * *

Not, he reflected, pulling the cloak around him and tugging down his hat against the rising wind, that he proposed to leave the matter to Germain's capricious sense of responsibility. Germain was secretary of state for America, true—but this was not a matter that concerned only America. There were two other secretaries of state in Lord North's cabinet—one for the Northern Department, that being all of Europe, and another for the Southern Department, this constituting the rest of the world. He would have preferred not to deal with Lord Germain at all. However, both protocol and politics prevented him from going straight to Lord North, which had been his first impulse. He'd give Germain a day's head start, then call upon the Southern secretary, Thomas Thynne, Viscount Weymouth, with the invidious Mr. Beauchamp's proposal. The Southern secretary was charged with dealing with the Catholic countries of Europe, thus matters with a French connection were his concern as well.

If both men chose to take up the matter, it would certainly come to Lord North's attention—and North, or one of his ministers, would come to Grey.

A storm was rolling up the Thames; he could see billows of black cloud, fuming as though to unleash their fury directly upon the Houses of Parliament.

"A bit of thunder and lightning would do them good," he murmured balefully, and hailed a cab, as the first thick drops began to fall.

The rain was pelting down in sheets by the time he arrived at the Beefsteak, and he was nearly drenched in the three paces from curb to doorway.

Mr. Bodley, the elderly steward, received him as though he had come in the day before, rather than some eighteen months.

"Turtle soup with sherry tonight, my lord," he informed Grey, gesturing to a minion to take Grey's damp hat and cloak. "Very warming to the stomach. Followed by a nice lamb cutlet with new potatoes?"

"The very thing, Mr. Bodley," Grey replied, smiling. He took his place in the dining room, soothed by its good fire and cool white napery. As he leaned back to allow Mr. Bodley to tuck the napkin under his chin, though, he noted a new addition to the room's decoration.

"Who is that?" he asked, startled. The painting, prominently displayed upon the wall opposite, showed a stately Indian, festooned in ostrich plumes and embroidered draperies. It looked distinctly odd, set as it was among the staid portraits of several distinguished—and mostly deceased—members.

"Oh, that is Mr. Brant, of course," Mr. Bodley said, with an air of mild reproof. "Mr. Joseph Brant. Mr. Pitt brought him to dine last year, when he was in London."

"Brant?"

Mr. Bodley's brows rose. Like most Londoners, he assumed that everyone who had been in America must of necessity know every other person there.

"He is a Mohawk chief, I believe," he said, pronouncing the word "Mohawk" carefully. "He has been to visit the King, you know!"

"Indeed," Grey murmured. He wondered whether the King or the Indian had been more impressed.

Mr. Bodley withdrew, presumably to fetch the soup, but returned within moments to lay a letter upon the cloth before Grey.

"This was sent for you in care of the secretary, sir."

"Oh? Thank you, Mr. Bodley." Grey took it up, recognizing his son's hand immediately, and suffering a mild drop of the stomach in consequence. What had Willie not wanted to send in care either of his grandmother or of Hal?

Something he didn't want to risk either of them reading. His mind supplied the logical answer at once, and he took up his fish knife to open the letter with due trepidation.

Was it Richardson? Hal disliked the man, and hadn't approved at all of William's working for him, though he had nothing concrete to adduce against him. Perhaps he should have been more cautious about setting William on that particular path, knowing what he did about the black world of intelligencing. Still, it had been imperative to get Willie away from North Carolina, before he came face-to-face with either Jamie Fraser or Percy so-called Beauchamp.

And you did have to let a son go, to make his own way in the world, no matter what it cost you; Hal had told him that, more than once. Three times, to be exact, he thought with a smile—every time one of Hal's boys had taken up his commission.

He unfolded the letter with caution, as though it might explode. It was penned with a care that he found instantly sinister; Willie was normally legible, but not above the odd blot.

To Lord John Grey
The Society for Appreciation of the English Beefsteak
From Lieutenant William Lord Ellesmere
7 September, 1776
Long Island
The Royal Colony of New York

> *Dear Father,*
> *I have a Matter of some delicacy to confide.*

Well, there was a sentence to chill the blood of any parent, Grey thought. Had Willie got a young woman with child, gambled and lost substantial property, contracted a venereal complaint, challenged someone or been challenged to a duel? Or—had he encountered something sinister in the course of his intelligencing, on his way to General Howe? He reached for the wine, and took a prophylactic swallow before returning, thus braced, to the letter. Nothing could have prepared him for the next sentence, though.

> *I am in love with Lady Dorothea.*

Grey choked, spluttering wine over his hand, but waved off the steward hastening toward him with a towel, instead wiping his hand on his breeches as he hastily scanned the rest of the page.

> *We have both been conscious of a growing Attraction for some time, but I hesitated to make any Declaration, knowing that I was soon to depart for America. However, we discovered ourselves unexpectedly alone in the Garden at Lady Belvedere's Ball, the Week before I left, and the beauty of the Setting, the romantic sense of the Evening, and the intoxicating nearness of the Lady overpowered my Judgment.*

"Oh, Jesus," Lord John said aloud. "Tell me you didn't deflower her under a bush, for God's sake!"

He caught the interested gaze of a nearby diner, and with a brief cough, returned to the letter.

> *I blush with Shame to admit that my Feelings overcame me, to an Extent that I hesitate to commit to Paper. I apologized, of course, not that there could be any sufficient Apology for such dishonourable Conduct. Lady Dorothea was both generous in her Forgiveness and*

> *vehement in her Insistence that I must not—as I was at first inclined—to go at once to her Father.*

"Very sensible of you, Dottie," Grey murmured, envisioning all too well the response of his brother to any such revelation. He could only hope that Willie was blushing over some indiscretion a good deal short of …

> *I intended to ask you to speak to Uncle Hal for me next Year, when I should return Home and be able to formally request Lady Dorothea's Hand in Marriage. However, I have just learned that she has received another Offer, from Viscount Maxwell, and that Uncle Hal is seriously considering this.*
>
> *I would not besmirch the lady's Honour in any Way, but under the Circumstances, clearly she cannot marry Maxwell.*

You mean Maxwell would discover that she's not a virgin, Grey thought grimly, *and come barreling round the morning after the wedding night to tell Hal so*. He rubbed a hand hard over his face and went on.

> *Words cannot convey my Remorse at my actions, Father, and I cannot bring myself to ask a Forgiveness I do not deserve, for so grievously disappointing you. Not for my Sake, but for hers, I beg that you will speak to the Duke. I hope that he can be persuaded to entertain my Suit and allow us to be affianced, without the Necessity of making such explicit Discoveries to him as might distress the Lady.*
>
> *Your most humble Prodigal, William*

He sank back in the chair and closed his eyes. The first shock was beginning to dissipate, and his mind come to grips with the problem.

It should be possible. There would be no bar to a marriage between William and Dottie. While titularly cousins, there were no blood ties between them; William was his son in all ways that mattered, but not by blood. And while Maxwell was young, wealthy, and very suitable, William was an earl in his own right, as well as heir to Dunsany's baronetcy, and far from poor.

No, that part was all right. And Minnie liked William very much. Hal and the boys … well, provided they never got wind of William's behavior, they should be agreeable. On the other hand, should any of them discover it, William would be lucky to escape with being horsewhipped and having every bone in his body broken. So would Grey.

Hal would be very much surprised, of course—the cousins had seen a good deal of each other during Willie's time in London, but William had never spoken of Dottie in a way that would have indicated …

He picked up the letter and read it over again. And again. Set it down and gazed at it for several minutes with narrowed eyes, thinking.

"I'm damned if I believe it," he said aloud, at last. "What the devil are you up to, Willie?"

He crumpled the letter, and taking a candlestick from a nearby table with a nod of apology, set fire to the missive. The steward, observing this, instantly produced a small china dish, into which Grey dropped the flaming paper, and together they watched the writing blacken into ash.

"Your soup, my lord," said Mr. Bodley, and waving the smoke of conflagration gently away with a napkin, placed a steaming plate before him.

* * *

William being out of reach, the obvious course of action must be to go and confront his partner in crime—whatever sort of crime it was. The more he considered, the more convinced he became that whatever complicity lay between William, Ninth Earl of Ellesmere, and Lady Dorothea Jacqueline Benedicta Grey, it was not the complicity either of love or guilty passion.

How was he to speak to Dottie, though, without exciting the notice of either of her parents? He could not hang about in the street until both Hal and Minnie went somewhere, hopefully leaving Dottie alone. Even if he managed to catch her somehow alone at home and interview her privately, the servants would certainly mention that he had done so, and Hal—who had a sense of protective alertness regarding his daughter akin to that of a large mastiff regarding its favorite bone—would be round promptly to find out why.

He declined the doorman's offer to secure him a carriage, and walked back to his mother's house, pondering ways and means. He could invite Dottie to dine with him … but it would be very unusual for such an invitation not to include Minnie. Likewise, were he to invite her to a play or opera; he often escorted the women, as Hal could not sit still long enough to hear an entire opera, and considered most plays to be tedious twaddle.

His way lay through Covent Garden, and he skipped nimbly out of the way of a swash of water, flung from a bucket to wash the slimy cabbage leaves and rotten apples from the cobbles by a fruiterer's stall. In summer, wilted blooms littered the pavement; before dawn, the fresh flowers would come in by cart from the countryside, and fill the square with scent and freshness. In autumn, the place held a ripely decadent smell of squashed fruit, decaying meat, and broken vegetables that was the signature to the changing of the guard in Covent Garden.

During the day, vendors shouted their wares, haggled, fought pitched battles with one another, fought off thieves and pickpockets, and shambled off at nightfall to spend half their profits in the taverns in Tavistock and Brydges streets. With the shades of evening drawing nigh, the whores claimed the Garden for their own.

The sight of a couple of these, arrived early and trolling hopefully for customers among the home-going vendors, distracted him momentarily from his familial quandary and returned his thoughts to the earlier events of his day.

The entrance to Brydges Street lay before him; he could just see the genteel house that stood near the far end, set back a little in elegant discretion. That was a thought; whores knew a great deal—and could find out more, with suitable inducement. He was tempted to go and call upon Nessie now, if only for the pleasure her company gave him. But no—not yet.

He needed to find out what was already known about Percy Beauchamp in more official circles, before he started his own hounds in pursuit of that rabbit. And before he saw Hal.

It was too late in the day to make official calls. He'd send a note, though, making an appointment—and in the morning, would visit the Black Chamber.

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15

THE BLACK CHAMBER

Grey wondered what romantic soul had originally christened the Black Chamber—or whether it was in fact a romantic designation. Perhaps the spies of an earlier day had been consigned to a windowless hole under the stairs at Whitehall, and the name was purely descriptive. These days, the Black Chamber designated a class of employment rather than a specific location.

All the capitals of Europe—and not a few lesser cities—had Black Chambers, these being the centers wherein mail intercepted *en route* or by spies or simply removed from diplomatic pouches was inspected, decoded with varying degrees of success, and then sent to whichever person or agency had need of the information thus derived. England's Black Chamber had employed four gentlemen—not counting clerks and office boys—when Grey had labored there. There were more of them now, distributed in random holes and corners in the buildings down Pall Mall, but the main center of such operations was still in Buckingham Palace.

Not in any of the beautifully equipped areas that served the Royal Family or their secretaries, ladies' maids, housekeepers, butlers, or other upper servants—but still, within the palace precincts.

Grey passed the guard at the back gate with a nod—he'd worn his uniform, with the lieutenant-colonel's insignia, to facilitate entry—and made his way down a shabby, ill-lit corridor whose scent of ancient floor polish and ghosts of boiled cabbage and burnt tea cake gave him a pleasant *frisson* of nostalgia. The third door on the left stood ajar, and he entered without knocking.

He was expected. Arthur Norrington greeted him without rising, and motioned him to a chair.

He'd known Norrington for years, though they were not particular friends, and found it comforting that the man seemed not to have changed at all in the years since their last meeting. Arthur was a large, soft man, whose large, slightly protruding eyes and thick lips gave him the mien of a turbot on ice: dignified and faintly reproachful.

"I appreciate your help, Arthur," Grey said, and as he sat, deposited on the corner of the desk a small wrapped parcel. "A small token of that appreciation," he added, waving a hand at it.

Norrington raised one thin brow and took the package, which he unwrapped with greedy fingers.

"Oh!" he said, with unfeigned delight. He turned the tiny ivory carving over gently in his large, soft hands, bringing it close to his face to see the details, entranced. "Tsuji?"

Grey shrugged, pleased with the effect of his gift. He knew nothing of *netsuke* himself, but knew a man who dealt in ivory miniatures from China and Japan. He had been surprised at the delicacy and artistry of the tiny thing, which showed a half-clothed woman engaged in a very athletic form of sexual congress with a naked obese gentleman with his hair in a topknot.

"I'm afraid it has no provenance," he said apologetically, but Norrington waved that aside, eyes still fixed on the new treasure. After a moment, he sighed happily, then tucked the thing away in the inner pocket of his coat.

"Thank you, my lord," he said. "As for the subject of your own inquiry, I am afraid that we have relatively little material available regarding your mysterious Mr. Beauchamp." He nodded at the desk, where a battered, anonymous leather folder reposed. Grey could see that there was something bulky inside—something not paper; the folder was pierced, and a small piece of twine ran through it, fastening the object in place.

"You surprise me, Mr. Norrington," he said politely, and reached for the folder. "Still, let me see what you do have, and perhaps—"

Norrington pressed his fingers flat against the file and frowned for a moment, trying to convey the impression that official secrets could not be imparted to just *anyone*. Grey smiled at him.

“Come off it, Arthur,” he said. “If you want to know what *I* know about our mysterious Mr. Beauchamp—and I assure you, you do—you’ll show me every word you have about him.”

Norrington relaxed a little, letting his fingers slide back—though still with a show of reluctance. Cocking one eyebrow, Grey picked up the leather folder and opened it. The bulky object was revealed to be a small cloth bag; beyond that, there were only a few sheets of paper. Grey sighed.

“Poor protocol, Arthur,” he said reprovingly. “There are snowdrifts of paper involving Beauchamp—cross-referenced to that name, too. Granted, he hasn’t been active in years, but someone ought to have looked.”

“We did,” Norrington said, an odd note in his voice that made Grey look sharply up. “Old Crabbot remembered the name, and we looked. The files are gone.”

The skin across Grey’s shoulders tightened, as though he’d been struck with a lash.

“That *is* odd,” he said calmly. “Well, then …” He bent his head over the folder, though it took a moment to subdue his racing thoughts enough to see what he was looking at. No sooner had his eyes focused on the page than the name “Fraser” leapt out of it, nearly stopping his heart.

Not Jamie Fraser, though. He breathed slowly, turned the page, read the next, turned back. There were four letters in all, only one completely decoded, though another had been started; it bore someone’s tentative notes in the margin. His lips tightened; he had been a good decoder in his day, but had been absent from the field of battle far too long to have any notion of the current common idioms in use by the French, let alone the idiosyncratic terms an individual spy might use—and these letters were the work of at least two different hands; so much was clear.

“I’ve looked them over,” Norrington said, and Grey looked up to find Arthur’s protruding hazel eyes fixed on him like a toad eyeing a juicy fly. “I haven’t *officially* decoded them yet, but I’ve a good general idea what they say.”

Well, he’d already decided that it had to be done, and he’d come prepared to tell Arthur, who was the most discreet of his old Black Chamber contacts.

“Beauchamp is one Percival Wainwright,” he said bluntly, wondering even as he said it, why he kept the secret of Percival’s real name. “He’s a British subject—was an army officer, arrested for the crime of sodomy but never tried. It was thought that he’d died in Newgate awaiting trial, but”—he smoothed the letters and closed the folder over them—“evidently not.”

Arthur’s plump lips rounded in a soundless “O.”

Grey wondered for an instant if he could leave it there—but no. Arthur was persistent as a dachshund digging into a badger sett, and if he discovered the rest of it on his own, he would at once suspect Grey of withholding much more.

“He’s also my stepbrother,” Grey said, as casually as possible, and laid the folder on Arthur’s desk. “I saw him in North Carolina.”

Arthur’s mouth sagged for an instant. He firmed it up at once, blinking.

“I see,” he said. “Well, then … I see.”

“Yes, you do,” Grey said dryly. “You see exactly why I must know the contents of these letters”—he nodded at the folder—“as soon as possible.”

Arthur nodded, compressing his lips, and settled himself, taking the letters into his hands. Once determined to be serious, there was no nonsense about him.

“Most of what I could decode seems to deal with matters of shipping,” he said. “Contacts in the West Indies, cargoes to be delivered—simple smuggling, though on a fairly large scale. One reference to a banker in Edinburgh; I couldn’t make out his connection exactly. But three of the letters mentioned the same name *en clair*—you will have seen that, of course.”

Grey didn’t bother denying it.

“Someone in France wants very much to find a man named Claudel Fraser,” Arthur said, and raised one brow. “Any idea who that is?”

“No,” Grey said, though he certainly had the glimmer of an idea. “Any idea *who* it is that wants to find him—or why?”

Norrington shook his head.

“No idea why,” he said frankly. “As to who, though—I think it may be a French nobleman.” He opened the folder again and, from the little bag attached to it, carefully removed two wax seals, one cracked almost in half, the other largely intact. Both showed a martlet against a rising sun.

“Haven’t found anyone yet who recognized it,” Norrington said, poking one of the seals gently with a podgy forefinger. “Do you, by chance?”

“No,” Grey said, his throat gone suddenly dry. “But you might look into one Baron Amandine. Wainwright mentioned that name to me as—a personal connexion of his.”

“Amandine?” Norrington looked puzzled. “Never heard of him.”

“Neither has anyone else.” Grey sighed and rose to his feet. “I begin to wonder whether he exists.”

* * *

He was still wondering, as he made his way to Hal’s house. The Baron Amandine might or might not exist; if he did, he might be only a front, disguising the interest of someone much more prominent. If he didn’t … matters became simultaneously more confusing and simpler of approach; with no way of knowing who was behind the matter, Percy Wainwright was the only possible avenue of approach.

None of Norrington’s letters had mentioned the Northwest Territory nor held any hint of the proposition Percy had put before him. That was not surprising, though; it would have been extremely dangerous to put such information on paper, though he had certainly known spies do such things before. If Amandine did exist, and was directly involved, apparently he was both sensible and cautious.

Well, Hal would have to be told about Percy, in any case. Perhaps he would know something regarding Amandine, or could find out; Hal had a number of friends in France.

The thought of what Hal must be told reminded him abruptly of William's letter, which he had nearly forgotten in the intrigues of the morning. He breathed strongly through his nose at the thought. No. He wasn't mentioning *that* to his brother until he'd had a chance to speak to Dottie, alone. Perhaps he could contrive a private word with her, arrange to meet later.

Dottie proved not to be at home, though, when Grey arrived at Argus House.

"She's at one of Miss Brierley's musical afternoons," his sister-in-law Minnie informed him, when he inquired politely how his niece and goddaughter did. "She's very sociable these days. She'll be sorry to have missed you, though." She stood on tiptoe and kissed him, beaming. "It's good to see you again, John."

"And you, Minnie," he said, meaning it. "Is Hal at home?"

She rolled her eyes expressively at the ceiling.

"He's been at home for a week, with the gout. Another week, and I shall put poison in his soup."

"Ah." That reinforced his decision not to speak to Hal of William's letter. Hal in good spirits was a prospect that daunted hardened soldiers and lifetime politicians; Hal in ill health … Presumably that was why Dottie had had the good sense to absent herself.

Well, it wasn't as though his news would improve Hal's mood in any case, he thought. He pushed open the door to Hal's study with due caution, though; his brother had been known to throw things when peevish—and nothing peeved him more than bodily indisposition.

As it was, Hal was asleep, slumped in his chair before the fire, his bandaged foot on a stool. The smell of some strong and acrid medicine floated in the air, overlying the scents of burning wood, melted tallow, and stale bread. A congealed plate of soup sat upon a tray at Hal's side, untasted. Perhaps Minnie had made her threat explicit, Grey thought with a smile. Aside from himself and their mother, Minnie was likely the only other person in the world who was never afraid of Hal.

He sat down quietly, wondering whether to wake his brother. Hal looked ill and tired, much thinner than usual—and Hal was normally lean to start with. He could not look less than elegant, even clad in breeches and a worn linen shirt, bare-legged, and with a ratty shawl draped about his shoulders, but the lines of a life spent fighting were eloquent in his face.

Grey's heart contracted with a sudden, unexpected tenderness, and he wondered whether, after all, he should trouble Hal with his news. But he couldn't risk Hal being confronted unexpectedly with the tidings of Percy's untimely resurrection; he would have to be warned.

Before he could make up his mind whether to go away and come back, though, Hal's eyes opened abruptly. They were clear and alert, the same light blue as Grey's own, with no sign of drowsiness or distraction.

"You're back," Hal said, and smiled with great affection. "Pour me a brandy."

"Minnie says you have the gout," Grey said, with a glance at Hal's foot. "Don't the quacks say you ought not to take strong drink, with the gout?" Nonetheless, he rose to his feet.

"They do," Hal said, pulling himself upright in his chair and grimacing as the movement jarred his foot. "But from the look of you, you're about to tell me something that means I'll need it. Best bring the decanter."

* * *

It was several hours before he left Argus House—declining Minnie's invitation to stay for supper—and the weather had deterioriated substantially. There was autumn chill in the air; a gusty wind was getting up, and he could taste salt in the air—the traces of sea fog drifting toward shore. It would be a good night to stay indoors.

Minnie had apologized for not being able to offer her coach, as Dottie had gone off to her afternoon *salon* in it. He had assured her that walking suited him, assisting him to think. It did, but the whoosh of wind flapping the skirts of his coat and threatening to carry away his hat was a distraction, and he was beginning to regret the coach, when he suddenly saw the equipage itself, waiting in the drive of one of the big houses near the Alexandra Gate, the horses blanketed against the wind.

He turned in at the gate and, hearing a cry of "Uncle John!" looked toward the house and was in time to see his niece, Dottie, bearing down on him like a ship under full sail—literally. She wore a plum silk mantua and a rose-pink cloak and, with the wind behind her, billowed alarmingly. In fact, she scudded toward him with such velocity that he was obliged to catch her in his arms in order to halt her forward progress.

"Are you a virgin?" he demanded without preamble.

Her eyes widened, and without the least hesitation, she wrested one arm free and slapped his cheek.

"What?" she said.

"My apologies. That was a trifle abrupt, wasn't it?" He glanced at her waiting coach—and the driver, looking rigidly ahead—and, calling to the driver to wait, took her by the arm and turned her in the direction of the park.

"Where are we going?"

"Just for a little walk. I have a few questions to ask you, and they aren't the sort that I wish to have overheard—nor do you, I assure you."

Her eyes widened still further, but she didn't argue; merely clapped a hand to her saucy little hat and came with him, her skirts foaming in the wind.

Weather and passersby prevented his asking any of the questions he had in mind until after they had made their way well into the park and found themselves in a more or less deserted path that led through a small topiary garden, where evergreen bushes and trees had been clipped into fanciful shapes.

The wind had dropped momentarily, though the sky was darkening. Dottie pulled to a halt in the shelter of a topiary lion and said, "Uncle John. *What* is this taradiddle about?"

Dottie had her mother's autumn-leaf coloring, with hair the color of ripened wheat and cheeks with the perpetual faint flush of rose hips. But where Minnie's face was pretty and gently appealing, Dottie's was underlain by Hal's fine bones and embroidered with his dark lashes; her beauty had a dangerous edge to it.

The edge was uppermost in the look she turned on her uncle, and he thought that, in fact, if Willie *was* enamored of her, it was perhaps not surprising. *If he* was.

"I had a letter from William, intimating that he had—if not actually forced his attentions upon you—behaved in a manner unbecoming a gentleman. Is it true?"

Her mouth fell open in undissimulated horror.

"He told you *what?*"

Well, that relieved his mind of one burden. She was likely still a virgin, and he needn't have William shipped off to China to avoid her brothers.

"It was, as I say, an intimation. He didn't provide me with details. Come, let us walk before we freeze." He took her by the arm and guided her up one of the paths that led to a small oratory. Here they took shelter in the vestibule, overlooked only by a stained-glass window of St. Barbara, carrying her severed breasts on a platter. Grey affected to study this elevating image, allowing Dottie a moment to settle her wind-flustered garments—and decide what she was going to tell him.

"Well," she began, turning to him with her chin raised, "it's true that we—well, that I let him kiss me."

"Oh? Where? I mean"—he added hastily, seeing the momentary shock in her eye—and *that* was interesting, for would a completely inexperienced young lady realize that it was possible to be kissed elsewhere than on lips or hand?—"in what geographical location?"

The flush in her cheeks deepened, for she realized as well as he what she had just given away, but she met his eye directly.

"In Lady Windermere's garden. We'd both come to her musicale, and the supper wasn't ready, so William invited me to walk outside with him for a bit, and—I did. It was *such* a beautiful evening," she added ingenuously.

"Yes, he noted that, as well. I had not previously realized the intoxicant properties of good weather."

She gave him a slight glare.

"Well, anyway, we're in love! Did he say *that*, at least?"

"Yes, he did," Grey replied. "He began with a statement to that effect, in fact, before going on to make his scandalous confessions regarding your virtue."

Her eyes widened.

"He—what, exactly, did he say?" she demanded.

"Enough to persuade me—he hoped—to go at once to your father and put before him the desirability of William's suit for your hand."

"Oh." She drew a deep breath at that, as though relieved, and looked away for a moment. "Well. Are you going to, then?" she asked, swiveling big blue eyes back in his direction. "Or have you already?" she added, with an air of hopefulness.

"No, I have said nothing to your father regarding William's letter. For one thing, I thought I had best speak to *you* first, and see whether you were in such agreement with William's sentiments as he appears to think."

She blinked, then gave him one of her radiant smiles.

"That was *very* considerate of you, Uncle John. Many men wouldn't bother with the woman's opinion of the situation—but you've always been *so* thoughtful. Mother cannot say enough good things about your kindness."

"Don't over-egg the pudding, Dottie," he said tolerantly. "So you say that you are willing to marry William?"

"Willing?" she cried. "Why, I desire it more than anything!"

He gave her a long, level look, and while she continued to meet his eye, the blood rose precipitously in her throat and cheeks.

"Oh, yes?" he said, allowing all the skepticism he felt to show in his voice. "Why?"

She blinked twice, very fast.

"Why?"

"Why?" he repeated patiently. "What is there in William's character—or appearance, I suppose," he added fairly, for young women had no great reputation as judges of character, "that so attracts you as to desire marriage to him? And hasty marriage at that."

He could just about see one or both of them developing an attraction—but what was the hurry? Even if William feared Hal's deciding to allow Viscount Maxwell's suit, Dottie herself could not possibly be under the illusion that her doting father would force her to marry anyone she did not want to.

"Well, we are in love, of course!" she said, though with a rather uncertain note in her voice for such a theoretically fervent declaration. "As for his—his *character* … why, Uncle, you are his own father; surely you cannot be in ignorance of his … his … intelligence!" She came up with the word triumphantly. "His kindness, his good humor …" she was picking up speed now, "… his gentleness …"

Now it was Lord John's turn to blink. William was undoubtedly intelligent, good-humored, and reasonably kind, but "gentle" was not the word that sprang immediately to mind with regard to him. On the other hand, the hole in the paneling of his mother's dining room, through which William had inadvertently thrown a companion during a tea party, had still not been repaired, and this image was fresh in Grey's mind. Probably Willie behaved more circumspectly in Dottie's company, but still …

"He is the very model of a gentleman!" she declaimed with enthusiasm, having now got the bit well between her teeth. "And his appearance—well, of course he is admired by every woman I know! So tall, so imposing a figure …"

He noticed, with an air of clinical detachment, that while she touched on several of William's notable characteristics, she did not at any point mention his eyes. Aside from his height—which could scarcely escape notice—his eyes were probably his most striking feature, being a deep and brilliant blue, and unusually shaped, with a catlike slant. They were, in fact, Jamie Fraser's eyes, and they gave John a faint, passing clench of the heart whenever Willie looked at him with a certain expression.

Willie knew the effect his eyes had on young women excellently well—and had no hesitation in making the most of it. Had he been gazing longingly into Dottie's own eyes, she would have been transfixed, whether she loved him or not. And that touching account of rapture in the garden … Following a musicale, or during a ball, and at Lady Belvedere's or at Lady Windermere's …

He had been so occupied by his own thoughts that he did not realize for a moment that she had stopped talking.

"I beg your pardon," he said, with great courtesy. "And I thank you for the encomia regarding William's character, which cannot fail to warm a father's heart. Still—what is the urgency in arranging a marriage? William will be sent home in a year or two, surely."

"He might be killed!" she said, and there was in her voice a sudden note of real fear, so real that his attention sharpened. She swallowed visibly, a hand going to her throat.

"I couldn't bear it," she said, her voice suddenly small. "If he were killed, and we'd never … never had a chance to …" She looked up at him, her eyes brilliant with emotion, and put her hand pleadingly on his arm.

"I have to," she said. "Really, Uncle John. I must, and I cannot wait. I want to go to America and be married."

His mouth fell open. Wanting to be married was one thing, but *this* …!

"You cannot possibly be serious," he said. "You cannot think that your parents—your father, in particular—would ever countenance such a thing."

"He would," she countered. "If *you* put the matter to him properly. He values your opinion more than anyone's," she went on persuasively, squeezing a little. "And you, of all people, must understand the horror I feel at the thought that something might … happen to William before I see him again."

Indeed, he thought, the only thing weighing in her favor was the feeling of desolation that the mention of William's possible death caused in his own heart. Yes, he *could be* killed. Any man might be, in time of war, and most particularly a soldier. That was one of the risks you took—and he could not in conscience have prevented William taking it, even though the mere thought of William blown to pieces by cannon fire or shot through the head or dying in agony of the flux …

He swallowed, dry-mouthed, and with some effort shoved those pusillanimous images firmly back into the locked mental closet in which he normally kept them confined.

He took a long breath.

“Dorothea,” he said firmly. “I *will* discover what you’re up to.”

She looked at him for a long, thoughtful moment, as though estimating the chances. The corner of her mouth rose insensibly as her eyes narrowed, and he saw the response on her face, as clearly as if she’d said it aloud.

No. I don’t think so.

The expression was no more than a flicker, though, and her face resumed its air of indignation mingled with pleading.

“Uncle John! How dare you accuse me and William—your own son!—of, of … what *are* you accusing us of?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

“Well, then! *Will* you speak to Papa for us? For me? Please? Today?”

Dottie was a born flirt; as she spoke, she leaned toward him, so that he could smell the fragrance of violets in her hair, and twined her fingers charmingly in the lapels of his coat.

“I can’t,” he said, striving to extricate himself. “Not just now. I’ve already given him one bad shock today; another might finish him off.”

“Tomorrow, then,” she coaxed.

“Dottie.” He took her hands in his, and was rather touched to find them cold and trembling. She *did* mean it—or mean something, at least.

“Dottie,” he repeated, more gently. “Even if your father were disposed to send you to America to be married—and I cannot think that anything less exigent than your being with child would compel it—there is no possibility of sailing before April. There is therefore no need to harry Hal into an early grave by telling him any of this, at least not until he has recovered from his current indisposition.”

She wasn't pleased, but was obliged to admit the force of his reasoning.

"Besides," he added, letting go of her hands, "campaigning ceases in winter; you know that. The fighting will stop soon, and William will be relatively safe. You need have no fears for him." *Other than accident, flux, ague, blood poisoning, griping belly, tavern brawls, and ten or fifteen other life-threatening possibilities,* he added privately to himself.

"But—" she began, but stopped, and sighed. "Yes, I suppose you're right. But … you *will* speak to Papa soon, won't you, Uncle John?"

He sighed in turn, but smiled at her nonetheless.

"I will, if that is what you truly desire." A gust of wind hit the oratory and the stained-glass image of St. Barbara shivered in its leaded frame. A rush of sudden rain rattled across the roof slates, and he drew his cloak around him.

"Stay here," he advised his niece. "I'll fetch the coach round to the road."

As he made his way against the wind, one hand on his hat to prevent it taking flight, he recalled with some unease his own words to her: *I cannot think that anything less exigent than your being with child would compel it.*

She wouldn't. Would she? No, he assured himself. Become pregnant by someone in order to convince her father to allow her to marry someone else? Fat chance; Hal would have her married to the guilty party before she could say "cat." Unless, of course, she chose someone impossible to do the deed: a married man, say, or—But this was nonsense! What would William say, were she to arrive in America, pregnant by another man?

No. Not even Brianna Fraser MacKenzie—the most hair-raisingly pragmatic woman he had ever known—would have done something like that. He smiled a little to himself at thought of the formidable Mrs. MacKenzie, recalling her attempt at blackmailing *him* into marriage—while pregnant by someone who was definitely not him. He'd always wondered if the child was in fact her husband's. Perhaps *she* would. But not Dottie.

Surely not.

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16

UNARMED CONFLICT

Inverness, Scotland
October 1980

The *old* high Church of St. Stephen's stood serene on the bank of the Ness, the weathered stones in its kirkyard a testament to righteous peace. Roger was aware of the serenity—but none of it was for him.

His blood was still throbbing in his temples, and the collar of his shirt was damp from exertion, chilly though the day was. He'd walked from the High Street car park, at a ferocious pace that seemed to eat the distance in seconds.

She'd called him a coward, by God. She'd called him a lot of other things, too, but that was the one that stung—and she knew it.

The fight had started after supper the day before, when she'd put a crusted pot into the old stone sink, turned to him, drawn a deep breath, and informed him that she had an interview for a job at the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board.

"Job?" he'd said stupidly.

"Job," she'd repeated, narrowing her eyes at him.

He *had* been swift enough to suppress the automatic "But you've got a job" that had sprung to his lips, substituting a rather mild—he thought—"Why?"

Never one for quiet diplomacy, she'd fixed him with a stare and said, "Because one of us needs to work, and if isn't going to be you, it'll have to be me."

"What do you mean, 'needs to work'?" he'd asked—damn it, she was right, he *was* a coward, because he knew goddamned well what she meant by it. "We've money enough for a time."

"For a time," she agreed. "A year or two—maybe more, if we're careful. And you think we should just sit on our asses until the money runs out, and then what? *Then* you start thinking about what you ought to be doing?"

"I've been thinking," he said through his teeth. True, that; he'd been doing little else for months. There was the book, of course; he was writing down all the songs he'd committed to memory in the eighteenth century with commentary—but that was hardly a job in itself, nor would it earn much money. Mostly thinking.

"Yeah? So have I." She turned her back on him, turning on the tap, either to drown out whatever he might say next, or just in order to get a grip on herself. The water ceased, and she turned round again.

"Look," she said, trying to sound reasonable. "I can't wait much longer. I can't stay out of the field for years and years and just walk back into it anytime. It's been nearly a year since the last consulting job I did—I can't wait any longer."

"You never said you meant to go back to work full-time." She'd done a couple of small jobs in Boston—brief consulting projects, once Mandy was out of the hospital and all right. Joe Abernathy had got them for her.

"Look, man," Joe had said confidentially to Roger, "she's antsy. I know that girl; she needs to *move*. She's been focused on the baby day and night, probably since she was born, been cooped up with doctors, hospitals, clingy kids for weeks now. She's gotta get out of her own head."

And I don't? Roger had thought—but couldn't say so.

An elderly man in a flat cap was weeding round one of the gravestones, a limp mass of uprooted greenery lying on the ground beside him. He'd been watching Roger as he hesitated near the wall, and nodded to him in a friendly way, but didn't speak.

She was a mother, he'd wanted to say. Wanted to say something about the closeness between her and the kids, the way they needed her, like they needed air and food and water. He was now and then jealous over not being needed in the same primal way; how could she deny that gift?

Well, he'd *tried* to say something of the kind. The result had been what might be expected by lighting a match in a mine filled with gas.

He turned abruptly and walked out of the kirkyard. He couldn't speak to the rector right this minute—couldn't speak at all, come to that; he'd have to cool down first, get his voice back.

He turned left and went down along Huntly Street, seeing the facade of St. Mary's across the river from the corner of his eye; the only Catholic church in Inverness.

During one of the earlier, more rational parts of the fight, she'd made an effort. Asked if it was her fault.

"Is it me?" she'd asked seriously. "Being a Catholic, I mean. I know—I know that makes it more complicated." Her lips twitched. "Jem told me about Mrs. Ogilvy."

He hadn't felt at all like laughing, but couldn't help a brief smile at the memory. He'd been out by the barn, shoveling well-rotted manure into a wheelbarrow to spread on the kailyard, Jem assisting with his own small spade.

"Sixteen tons and what do you get?" Roger had sung—if the sort of hoarse croaking he produced could be called that.

"Another day older and deeper in shit!" Jem bellowed, doing his best to pitch his voice down into Tennessee Ernie Ford range, but then losing control in a glissando of giggles.

It was at this unfortunate moment that he'd turned round to find that they had visitors: Mrs. Ogilvy and Mrs. MacNeil, pillars of the Ladies' Altar and Tea Society at the Free North Church in Inverness. He knew them—and he knew just what they were doing here, too.

"We've come to call upon your good wife, Mr. MacKenzie," Mrs. MacNeil said, smiling with pursed lips. He wasn't sure whether the expression was meant to indicate inner reservations, or whether it was merely that she feared her ill-fitting false teeth might fall out if she opened her mouth more than a quarter of an inch.

"Ah. She'll be away to the town just now, I'm afraid." He'd wiped his hand on his jeans, thinking to offer it, but looked at it, thought better of it, and nodded to them instead. "But please to come in. Will I have the girl make tea?"

They shook their heads in unison.

"We havena seen your wife in kirk as yet, Mr. MacKenzie." Mrs. Ogilvy fixed him with a fishy eye.

Well, he'd been expecting that one. He could buy a little time by saying, ach, the baby'd been ailing—but no point; the nettle would have to be grasped sooner or later.

"No," he said pleasantly, though his shoulders stiffened by reflex. "She's a Catholic. She'll be to the Mass at St. Mary's of a Sunday."

Mrs. Ogilvy's square face sagged into a momentary oval of astonishment.

"Your wife's a Papist?" she said, giving him a chance to correct the clearly insane thing he'd just said.

"She is, aye. Born one." He shrugged lightly.

There had been relatively little conversation following this revelation. Just a glance at Jem, a sharp question about whether he went to Sunday school, an intake of breath at the answer, and a gimlet-eyed stare at Roger before they took their leave.

Do you want me to convert? Bree had demanded, in the course of the argument. And it had been a demand, not an offer.

He'd wanted suddenly and fiercely to ask her to do just that—only to see if she would, for love of him. But religious conscience would never let him do such a thing; still less, his conscience as her lover. Her husband.

Huntly Street turned suddenly into Bank Street, and the foot traffic of the shopping precinct disappeared. He passed the small memorial garden, put up to commemorate the service of nurses during World War II, and thought—as he always did—of Claire, though this time with less than the usual admiration he had for her.

And what would you *say?* he thought. He knew damned well what she'd say—or at least, whose side she'd be on, in this. *She* hadn't hung about being a full-time mum, had she? She'd gone to medical school when Bree was seven. And Bree's dad, Frank Randall, had taken up the slack, whether he wanted to or not. He slowed his step briefly, realizing. No wonder, then, if Bree was thinking …

He passed the Free North Church and half-smiled at it, thinking of Mrs. Ogilvy and Mrs. MacNeil. They'd be back, he knew, if he didn't do something about it. He knew their brand of determined kindliness. Dear God, if they heard that Bree had gone to work and—to their way of thinking—abandoned him with two small children, they'd be running shepherd's pies and hot stovies out to him in relays. That mightn't be such a bad thing, he thought, meditatively licking his lips—save that they'd stay to poke their noses into the workings of his household, and letting them into Brianna's kitchen would be not merely playing with dynamite but deliberately throwing a bottle of nitroglycerin into the midst of his marriage.

"Catholics don't believe in divorce," Bree had informed him once. "We *do* believe in murder. There's always Confession, after all."

On the far shore was the only Anglican church in Inverness, St. Andrew's. One Catholic church, one Anglican church—and no fewer than six Presbyterian churches, all standing foursquare by the river, in the space of less than a quarter mile. Tell you all you needed to know, he thought, about the basic character of Inverness. And he *had* told Bree—though without, he admitted, mentioning his own crisis of faith.

She hadn't asked. He'd give her that. He'd come within a hair of ordination in North Carolina—and in the traumatic aftermath of that interruption, with Mandy's birth, the disintegration of the Ridge's community, the decision to risk the passage through the stones … no one had mentioned it. Likewise, when they'd come back, the immediate demands of taking care of Mandy's heart and then assembling some kind of life … the question of his ministry had been ignored.

He thought Brianna hadn't mentioned it because she wasn't sure how he meant to handle it and didn't want to seem to push him in either direction—if her being a Catholic made his being a Presbyterian minister in Inverness more complicated, he couldn't ignore the fact that his being a minister would cause major complications in her life, and she'd know that.

The upshot was that neither of them had talked about it when working out the details of their return.

They'd worked out the practicalities as best they could. He couldn't go back to Oxford—not without a truly elaborate cover story.

"You just can't drop in and out of academia," he'd explained to Bree and to Joe Abernathy, the doctor who had been Claire's longtime friend before her own departure to the past. "You can go on a sabbatical, true—or even an extended leave. But you have to have a stated purpose and something to show for your absence when you come back, in terms of published research."

"You could write a killer book about the Regulation, though," Joe Abernathy had observed. "Or the run-up to the Revolution in the South."

"I could," he admitted. "But not a respectable scholarly one." He'd smiled wryly, feeling a slight itch in the joints of his fingers. He *could* write a book—one that no one else could write. But not as a historian.

"No sources," he'd explained, with a nod at the shelves in Joe's study, where they were holding the first of several councils of war. "If I wrote a book as a historian, I'd need to provide sources for all the information—and for most of the unique situations I could describe, I'm sure nothing was ever recorded. 'Eyewitness testimony of author' wouldn't go over well with a university press, I assure you. I'd have to do it as a novel." That idea actually held some small appeal—but wouldn't impress the colleges of Oxford.

Scotland, though …

People didn't appear in Inverness—or anywhere else in the Highlands—unremarked. But Roger wasn't an "incomer." He'd grown up in the manse in Inverness, and there were still a good many people who had known him as an adult. And with an American wife and children to explain his absence …

"See, folk there don't really care what it is you were doing when you were away," he explained. "They only care about what you do when you're there."

He'd reached the Islands of the Ness by now. A small, quiet park set on small islets that lay only a few feet off the river's bank, it had packed-dirt paths, big trees, and little traffic at this time of day. He wandered the paths, trying to empty his mind, let it be filled only with the sound of the rushing water, the quietness of the overcast sky.

He reached the end of the island and stood for a time, half-seeing the debris left in the branches of the bushes that edged the water—wodges of dead leaves, birds' feathers, fish bones, the odd cigarette packet, deposited by the passage of high water.

He had, of course, been thinking of himself. What *he'd be* doing, what folk would think about *him*. Why had it never occurred to him to wonder what Brianna intended doing, if they went to Scotland?

Well, that was obvious—if stupid—in retrospect. On the Ridge, Bree had done … well, a bit more than the usual woman there did, true—one couldn't overlook the buffalo-hunting, turkey-shooting, goddess-huntress, pirate-killing side of her—but also what the usual woman did. Mind her family, feed, clothe, comfort—or occasionally smack—them. And with Mandy sick, and Brianna grieving the loss of her parents, the question of working at anything had been irrelevant. Nothing could have separated her from her daughter.

But Mandy was well now—hair-raisingly healthy, as the trail of destruction that followed her testified. The painstaking details of reestablishing their identities in the twentieth century had been accomplished, the purchase of Lallybroch made from the bank that owned it, the physical removal to Scotland accomplished, Jem settled—more or less—into the village school nearby, and a nice girl from the same village engaged to come clear up and help look after Mandy.

And now Brianna was going to work.

Roger was going to hell. Metaphorically, if not literally.

* * *

Brianna couldn't say she hadn't been warned. It was a man's world she was walking into.

A rough job it had been, a tough undertaking—the toughest, digging the tunnels that carried the miles of cable from the turbines of the hydroelectric plants. "Tunnel tigers," they'd called the men who dug them, many of them Polish and Irish immigrants who'd come for a job in the 1950s.

She'd read about them, seen pictures of them, grimy-faced and white-eyed as coal miners, in the Hydro Electric authority office—the walls were covered with them, documentation of Scotland's proudest modern achievement. *What had been Scotland's proudest ancient achievement?* she wondered. *The kilt?* She'd suppressed a laugh at the thought, but evidently it made her look pleasant, because Mr. Campbell, the personnel manager, had smiled kindly at her.

"You're in luck, lass; we've an opening at Pitlochry, starting in a month," he'd said.

"That's wonderful." She had a folder in her lap, containing her credentials. He didn't ask to see it, which rather surprised her, but she set it on the desk before him, flipping it open. "Here are my … er …?" He was staring at the curriculum vitae on top, his mouth hanging open far enough for her to see the steel fillings in his back teeth.

He shut his mouth, glanced up at her in astonishment, then looked back at the folder, slowly lifting the CV as though afraid there might be something even more shocking underneath.

"I think I have all the qualifications," she said, restraining the nervous urge to clench her fingers in the fabric of her skirt. "To be a plant inspector, I mean." She knew damned well she did. She had the qualifications to *build* a freaking hydroelectric station, let alone inspect one.

"Inspector …" he said faintly. Then he coughed, and flushed a bit. Heavy smoker; she could smell the fug of tobacco that clung to his clothes.

"I'm afraid there's been a bit of a misunderstanding, my dear," he said. "It's a secretary we're needing at Pitlochry."

“Perhaps you do,” she said, giving in to the cloth-clenching urge. “But the advertisement I replied to was for plant inspector, and that’s the position I’m applying for.”

“But … my dear …” He was shaking his head, clearly appalled. “You’re a woman!”

“I am,” she said, and any of a hundred men who’d known her father would have picked up the ring of steel in her voice and given in on the spot. Mr. Campbell unfortunately hadn’t known Jamie Fraser—but was about to be enlightened. “Would you care to explain to me exactly which aspects of plant inspection require a penis?”

His eyes bulged and he turned the shade of a turkey’s wattles in courting season.

“That—you—that is—” With evident effort, he mastered himself enough to speak courteously, though the shock was still plain on his blunt features.

“Mrs. MacKenzie. I’m not unfamiliar with the notion of women’s liberation, aye? I’ve daughters of my own.” *And none of them would have said something like* that *to me,* his raised brow said. “It’s not that I think ye’d be incompetent.” He glanced at the open folder, raised both brows briefly, then shut it firmly. “It’s the—the work environment. It wouldn’t be suitable for a woman.”

“Why not?”

He was recovering his aplomb by now.

“The conditions are often physically rough—and to be honest, Mrs. MacKenzie, so are the men you would encounter. The company cannot in good conscience—or as a matter of good business—risk your safety.”

“You employ men who would be likely to assault a woman?”

“No! We—”

“You have plants that are physically dangerous? Then you *do* need an inspector, don’t you?”

“The legalities—”

“I’m well up on the regulations pertaining to hydroelectric plants,” she said firmly, and reaching into her bag, produced the printed booklet of regulations—obviously well thumbed—supplied by the Highlands and Islands Development Board. “I can spot problems, and I can tell you how to rectify them promptly—and as economically as possible.”

Mr. Campbell was looking deeply unhappy.

“And I hear that you haven’t had many applicants for this position,” she finished. “None, to be exact.”

“The men …”

“Men?” she said, and allowed the smallest edge of amusement to tinge the word. “I’ve worked with men before. I get on with them well.”

She looked at him, not saying anything. *I know what it’s like to kill a man,* she thought. *I know just how easy it is. And you don’t.* She was not aware of having changed expression, but Campbell lost a bit of his high color and looked away. She wondered for a split second whether Roger would look away, if he saw that knowledge in her eyes. But this was no time to think of things like that.

“Why don’t you show me one of the work sites?” she said gently. “Then we’ll talk some more.”

* * *

In the eighteenth century, St. Stephen’s had been used as a temporary prison for captured Jacobites. Two of them had been executed in the graveyard, by some accounts. It wasn’t the worst thing to have as your last sight of earth, he supposed: the wide river and the vast sky, both flowing to the sea. They carried an abiding sense of peace, wind and cloud and water did, despite their constant movement.

“If ever you find yourself in the midst of paradox, you can be sure you stand on the edge of truth,” his adoptive father had told him once. *“You may not know what it* is, *mind,” he’d added* with a smile. *“But it’s there.”*

The rector at St. Stephen’s, Dr. Weatherspoon, had had a few aphorisms to share, too.

“When God closes a door, he opens a window.” Yeah. The problem was that this particular window opened off the tenth story, and he

wasn’t so sure God supplied parachutes.

“Do You?” he asked, looking up at the drifting sky over Inverness.

“Beg pardon?” said the startled sexton, popping up from the gravestone behind which he’d been working.

“Sorry.” Roger flapped a hand, embarrassed. “Just … talking to myself.”

The elderly man nodded understandingly. “Aye, aye. Nay bother, then. It’s when ye start getting answers ye should worry.” Chuckling hoarsely, he descended back out of sight.

Roger made his way down from the high graveyard to street level, walking slowly back to the car park. Well, he’d taken the first step. Well past the time he should have done—Bree was right, to a degree; he *had* been a coward—but he had done it.

The difficulty wasn’t resolved as yet, but it had been a great comfort, only being able to lay it out for someone who understood and sympathized.

“I’ll pray for you,” Dr. Weatherspoon had said, shaking his hand in parting. That was a comfort, too.

He started up the dank concrete steps of the car park, fumbling in his pocket for the keys. Couldn’t say he was entirely at peace with himself, just yet—but he felt a lot more peaceable toward Bree. Now he could go home and tell her …

No, damn it. He couldn’t, not yet. He had to check.

He didn’t have to check; he knew he was right. But he had to have it in his hands, had to be able to show Bree.

Turning abruptly on his heel, he strode past a puzzled car-park attendant coming up behind him, took the stairs two at a time, and walked up Huntly Street as though he trod on red-hot coals. He stopped briefly at the Fox, digging in his pocket for coins, and rang through from the call box to Lallybroch. Annie answered the phone with her customary rudeness, saying “Yiss?” with such abruptness that it emerged as little more than an interrogatory hiss.

He didn’t bother rebuking her phone manners.

“It’s Roger. Tell the Missus I’m going down to Oxford to look something up. I’ll spend the night.”

“Mmphm,” she said, and hung up.

* * *

She wanted to hit Roger over the head with a blunt object. Something like a champagne bottle, maybe.

"He went *where?*" she asked, though she'd heard Annie MacDonald clearly. Annie lifted both narrow shoulders to the level of her ears, indicating that she understood the rhetorical nature of the question.

"To Oxford," she said. "To *England*." The tone of her voice underlined the sheer outrageousness of Roger's action. He hadn't simply gone to look up something in an old book—which would have been strange enough, though to be sure himself was a scholar and they'd do anything—but had abandoned his wife and children without notice and hied away to a foreign country!

"Himself did say as he'd come home tomorrow," Annie added, with great dubiousness. She picked up the bottle of champagne in its carrier bag, gingerly, as though it might explode. "Ought I put this to the ice, d'ye think?"

"To the—oh, no, don't put it in the freezer. Just in the fridge. Thank you, Annie."

Annie disappeared into the kitchen, and Brianna stood in the drafty hall for a moment, trying to get her feelings firmly under control before going to find Jem and Mandy. Kids being kids, they had ultra-sensitive radar concerning their parents. They already knew something was the matter between her and Roger; having their father suddenly disappear was *not* calculated to give them a feeling of cozy security. Had he even said goodbye to them? Assured *them* he'd be back? No, of course not.

"Bloody selfish, self-centered …" she muttered. Unable to find a satisfying noun with which to complete this, she said, "rat-fink *bastard!*" and then snorted with reluctant laughter. Not merely at the silliness of the insult, but with a wry acknowledgment that she'd got what she wanted. Both ways.

Granted, he couldn't have stopped her going for the job—and once he got past the dislocations involved, she thought he'd be all right with it.

"Men hate things to change," her mother had once casually told her. *"Unless it's their idea, of course. But you can make them think it* is *their idea, sometimes."*

Maybe she should have been less direct about it; tried to get Roger to feel that at least he had something to say about her going to work, even if not to think it was his idea—*that* would have been pushing it. She'd been in no mood to be devious, though. Or even diplomatic.

As for what she'd done to *him* … well, she'd put up with his immobility for as long as she could, and then she'd pushed him off a cliff. Deliberately.

"And I don't feel the least bit guilty about it!" she said to the coatrack.

She hung up her coat slowly, taking a little extra time to check the pockets for used tissues and crumpled receipts.

So, had he gone off out of pique—to get back at her for going back to work? Or out of anger at her having called him a coward? He hadn't liked that one bit; his eyes had gone dark and he'd nearly lost his voice—strong emotion choked him, quite literally, freezing his larynx. She'd done it on purpose, though. She knew where Roger's soft spots were—just as he knew hers.

Her lips tightened at that, just as her fingers closed on something hard in the inner pocket of her jacket. A weathered shell, turreted and smooth, worn white by sun and water. Roger had picked it up on the shingle by Loch Ness and handed it to her.

"To live in," he'd said, smiling, but given away by the gruffness of his damaged voice. "When ye need a hiding place."

She closed her fingers gently over the shell, and sighed.

Roger wasn't petty. Ever. He wouldn't go off to Oxford—a reluctant bubble of amusement floated up at the thought of Annie's shocked description: *to England!*—just to worry her.

So he'd gone for some specific reason, doubtless something jarred loose by their fight—and *that* worried her a bit.

He'd been wrestling with things since they came back. So had she, of course: Mandy's illness, decisions about where to live, all the petty details of relocating a family in both space and time—they'd done all that together. But there were things he wrestled with alone.

She'd grown up an only child, just as he had; she knew how it was, how you live in your own head a lot. But damn him, whatever he was living with in his head was eating him up before her eyes, and if he wouldn't tell her what it was, it was either something he considered too private to share—which bugged her, but she could live with it—or it was something he thought too disturbing or too dangerous to share, and she wasn't bloody *having* that.

Her fingers had clenched round the shell, and she deliberately loosened them, trying to calm down.

She could hear the kids upstairs, in Jem's room. He was reading something to Mandy—*The Gingerbread Man*, she thought. She couldn't hear the words, but could tell by the rhythm, counterpointed by Mandy's excited shouts of "Wun! Wun!"

No point in interrupting them. Time enough later to tell them Daddy'd be away overnight. Maybe they wouldn't be bothered, if she was matter-of-fact about it; he'd never left them since they'd come back, but when they lived on the Ridge, he was often gone with Jamie or Ian, hunting. Mandy wouldn't remember that, but Jem …

She'd meant to go into her study, but found herself drifting across the hall, through the open door to Roger's. It was the old speak-a-word room of the house; the room where her uncle Ian had run the affairs of the estate for years—her father for a short time before that, and her grandfather before him.

And now it was Roger's. He'd asked if she wanted the room, but she'd said no. She liked the little sitting room across the hall, with its sunny window and the shadows of the ancient yellow rose that flagged that side of the house with its color and scent. Aside from that, though, she just felt that this room was a man's place, with its clean, scuffed wooden floor and comfortably battered shelves.

Roger had managed to find one of the old farm ledgers, from 1776; it sat on an upper shelf, its worn cloth binding sheltering the patient, careful minutiae of life on a Highland farm: *one-quarter pound of silver fir seed, a he-goat for breeding, six rabbits, thirty-weight* *of seed potatoes* … had her uncle written it? She didn't know, had never seen a sample of his writing.

She wondered, with an odd little quiver of the insides, if her parents had made it back to Scotland—back *here*. Had seen Ian and Jenny again; if her father had sat—*would* sit?—here in this room, at home once more, talking over the matters of Lallybroch with Ian. And her mother? From the little Claire had said about it, she hadn't parted from Jenny on the best of terms, and Brianna knew her mother felt sad about that; once, they had been close friends. Maybe things could be mended—maybe they *had* been mended.

She glanced at the wooden box, safe on its high shelf beside the ledger, the little cherrywood snake curved in front of it. On impulse, she took the snake down, finding some comfort in the sleek curve of the body and the comical look of its face, peering back over its nonexistent shoulder. She smiled back at it, involuntarily.

"Thanks, Uncle Willie," she said softly, out loud, and felt an extraordinary shiver run through her. Not fear, or cold—a kind of delight, but a quiet kind. Recognition.

She'd seen that snake so often—on the Ridge, and now here, where it had first been made—that she never thought of its maker, her father's older brother, dead at the age of eleven. But he was here, too, in the work of his hands, in the rooms that had known him. When she'd visited Lallybroch before—in the eighteenth century—there had been a painting of him on the upstairs landing, a small, sturdy red-haired boy, standing with a hand on the shoulder of his baby brother, blue-eyed and serious.

Where is that now? she wondered. And the other paintings done by her grandmother? There was the one self-portrait, which had made it somehow to the National Portrait Gallery—she must be sure to take the kids down to London to see it, when they were a little older—but the others? There had been one of a very young Jenny Murray feeding a tame pheasant who had her uncle Ian's soft brown eyes, and she smiled at the memory.

It had been the right thing. Coming here, bringing the kids … home. It didn't matter if it took a little doing for her and

Roger to find their places. Though maybe she shouldn't speak for Roger, she thought with a grimace.

She looked up at the box again. She wished her parents were here —either of them—so she could tell them about Roger, ask their opinion. Not that she wanted advice, so much.… What she wanted, if she was honest, she thought, was a reassurance that she'd done the right thing.

With a heightened flush in her cheeks, she reached up with both hands and brought down the box, feeling guilty for not waiting to share the next letter with Roger. But … she wanted her mother just now. She took the first letter on top that bore her mother's writing on the outside.

Offices of L'Oignon, New Bern, North Carolina April 12, 1777

Dear Bree (and Roger and Jem and Mandy, of course),

We've made it to New Bern, without major incident. Yes, I hear you thinking, Major? And it is true that we were held up by a pair of would-be bandits on the road south of Boone. Given that they were probably nine and eleven respectively, and armed solely with an ancient wheel-lock musket that would have blown them both to bits had they been able to fire it, though, we weren't in any marked danger.

Rollo leapt out of the wagon and knocked one of them flat, whereupon his brother dropped the gun and legged it. Your cousin Ian ran him down, though, hauling him back by the scruff of the neck.

It took your father some time to get anything sensible out of them, but a little food worked wonders. They said their names are Herman and—no, really—Vermin. Their parents died during the winter—their father went hunting *and didn't come back, the mother died giving birth, and the baby died a day later, as the two boys had no way to feed it. They know of no people on their father's side, but they said their mother's family name was Kuykendall. Luckily, your father knows a Kuykendall family, near Bailey Camp, and so Ian took the little vagabonds off to find the Kuykendalls and see if they could be settled. If not, I suppose he'll bring them along to New Bern, and we'll try to apprentice them somewhere, or perhaps take them with us to Wilmington and find them a berth as cabin boys.*

Fergus and Marsali and the children seem all to be doing very well, both physically—bar a family tendency to enlarged adenoids and the biggest wart I've ever seen on Germain's left elbow—and financially.

Aside from the Wilmington Gazette, L'Oignon is the only regular newspaper in the colony, and Fergus thus gets a great deal of business. Add in the printing and sale of books and pamphlets, and he's doing very well indeed. The family now owns two milch goats, a flock of chickens, a pig, and three mules, counting Clarence, whom we are bequeathing to them on our way to Scotland.

Conditions and uncertainties being what they are [meaning, Brianna thought, that you don't know who might read this letter, or when] I'd better not be specific about what he's printing, besides newspapers. L'Oignon itself is carefully evenhanded, printing rabid denunciations by both Loyalists and those less loyal, and publishing satirical poetry by our good friend "Anonymous," lampooning both sides of the present political conflict. I've seldom seen Fergus so happy.

War agrees with some men, and Fergus, rather oddly, is one of them. Your cousin Ian is another, though in his case, I think perhaps it keeps him from thinking too much.

I do wonder what his mother will make of him. But knowing her as I do, my guess is that after the first shock *has passed, she'll begin the work of finding him a wife. Jenny is a very perceptive woman, all things said—and just as stubborn as your father. I do hope he remembers that.*

Speaking of your father, he's out and about a good deal with Fergus, doing bits of "business" (unspecified, which means he's probably doing something that would turn my hair white—or whiter—to know about) and inquiring among the merchants for a possible ship—though I think our chances of finding one will be better in Wilmington, where we'll go as soon as Ian joins us.

Meanwhile, I've set up my shingle—literally. It's tacked to the front of Fergus's printshop, and says, TEETH PULLED, RASHES, PHLEGM, AND THE AGUE CURED, this being Marsali's work. She wanted to add a line about the pox, but both Fergus and I dissuaded her—he from a fear that it would lower the tone of his establishment, self from a certain morbid attachment to truth in advertising, as there is in fact nothing I can presently do about any condition they call the pox. Phlegm … well, there's always something you can do about phlegm, even if it's nothing more than a cup of hot tea (these days, that's hot water over sassafras root, catnip, or lemon balm) with a dram in it.

I called on Dr. Fentiman in Cross Creek on our way, and was able to buy several necessary instruments and a few medicines from him to refurbish my kit (this at the cost of a bottle of whisky and of being forced to admire the latest addition to his ghastly collection of pickled curiosities—no, you don't want to know; you really don't. A good thing he can't see Germain's wart, or he'd be down to New Bern in a flash, sneaking round the printshop with an amputation saw).

I still lack a pair of good surgical scissors, but Fergus knows a silversmith called Stephen Moray in Wilmington who he says could make a pair to my specifications. For *the moment, I occupy myself largely in the pulling of teeth, as the barber who used to do it was drowned last November, having fallen into the harbor while drunk.*

With all my love,
Mama

P.S. Speaking of the Wilmington Gazette, your father has it in mind to call there and see if he can find out just who left that blasted notice about the fire. Though I suppose I oughtn't to complain; if you hadn't found it, you might never have come back. And while there are a lot of things I wish hadn't happened as a result of your coming—I can't ever regret that you know your father, and he you.

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17

WEE DEMONS

It wasn't much different than any of the deer trails they'd come across; in fact, it had doubtless begun as one of them. But there was something about this particular trace that said "people" to Ian, and he'd been so long accustomed to such judgments that he seldom registered them consciously. He didn't now, but gave Clarence's leading rein a twitch, turning his own horse's head aside.

"Why're we stoppin'?" Herman asked suspiciously. "Ain't nothin' here."

"There's someone living up there." Ian jerked his chin toward the wooded slope. "The trail's not wide enough for horses; we'll tie up here, and walk."

Herman and Vermin exchanged a wordless glance of deep skepticism, but slid off the mule and trudged after Ian, up the trail.

He was beginning to have his doubts; no one he'd spoken to in the last week knew of any Kuykendalls in the area, and he couldn't take too much more time about the matter. He might have to bring the wee savages down to New Bern with him, after all, and he had no notion how they'd take to the suggestion.

He had no notion how they took much of anything, come to that. They were not so much shy as secretive, whispering together behind him as they rode, then shutting up like clams the minute he looked at them, regarding him with carefully bland faces, behind which he plainly saw any amount of reckoning going on. What the devil were they plotting?

If they meant to run from him, he thought he might not make any monstrous great effort to chase them down. If, on the other hand, they meant to steal Clarence and the horse while he slept, that was another matter.

The cabin was there, a curl of smoke coming from its chimney; Herman turned a look of surprise on him, and he smiled at the boy.

"Told ye," he said, and hallooed.

The door creaked open, and the barrel of a musket poked out of it. This was not an uncommon response to strangers in the far backcountry, and Ian was not put off by it. He raised his voice and stated his business, pushing Herman and Vermin in front of him as evidence of his *bona fides*.

The gun wasn't withdrawn, but lifted in a significant manner. Obeying instinct, Ian flung himself flat, yanking the boys down with him, as the shot roared overhead. A woman's voice yelled something strident in a foreign tongue. He didn't understand the words, but took the meaning clearly, and pulling the little boys to their feet, ushered them hastily back down the trail.

"Ain't gonna live with *her*," Vermin informed him, focusing a narrow glare of dislike over his shoulder. "Tell you that for free."

"No, ye're not," Ian agreed. "Keep moving, aye?" For Vermin had stopped dead.

"Gotta shit."

"Oh, aye? Well, be quick about it." He turned away, having discovered early on that the boys had an exaggerated requirement for privacy in such matters.

Herman had gone on already; the tangled mess of his dirty-blond hair was just visible, some twenty yards down the slope. Ian had suggested that the boys might cut, if not comb, their hair, and maybe wash their faces, as a gesture of civility toward any relations who might be faced with the prospect of taking them in, but this suggestion had been rejected with vehemence. Fortunately he was not responsible for forcing the wee buggers to wash—and to be fair, he thought washing would make little difference to their smell, given the state of their clothes, which they had plainly been living in for some months. He did make them sleep on the other side of the fire from himself and Rollo at night, in hopes of limiting his exposure to the lice both of them crawled with.

Could the notable infestation he sported possibly be where the younger boy's parents had acquired his name? he wondered. Or had they no notion of its meaning and had only picked it to rhyme with his elder brother's?

Clarence's earsplitting bray pulled him abruptly from his thoughts. He lengthened his stride, berating himself for having left his own gun in its saddle loop. He hadn't wanted to approach the house armed, but—

A shriek from below sent him dodging off the path, into the trees. Another shriek was cut off suddenly, and he scrambled down the slope, as quickly as he might without making a racket. Panther? A bear? Nay, Clarence would be bellowing like a grampus, if it was that; instead, he was gurgling and wheezing like he did when he spotted—

Someone he knew.

Ian stopped dead, behind a screen of poplars, his heart cold in his chest.

Arch Bug turned his head, hearing the noise, faint as it was.

"Come on out, lad," he called. "I see ye there."

Plainly he did; the ancient eyes were looking straight at him, and Ian came slowly out of the trees.

Arch had taken the gun from the horse; it was slung across his shoulder. He had an arm crooked round Herman's throat, and the little boy's face was bright red from the choking; his feet kicked like a dying rabbit's, a few inches off the ground.

"Where's the gold?" Arch said, without preamble. His white hair was neatly bound up, and he seemed, so far as Ian could see, to have taken no harm from the winter. Must have found folk to bide with. *Where?* he wondered. *Brownsville, maybe?* Bloody dangerous, if he'd told the Browns about the gold—but he thought old Arch was too downy a bird to talk in such company.

"Where ye'll never find it," Ian said bluntly. He was thinking furiously. He'd a knife in his belt—but it was a good deal too far to throw it, and if he missed …

“What d’ye want wi’ that wean?” he asked, moving a little closer. “He’s naught to do wi’ you.”

“No, but he seems somewhat to do wi’ *you*.” Herman was making rasping squeaks, and his feet, while still kicking, were slowing.

“No, he’s naught to me, either,” Ian said, striving for casualness. “I’m only helping him to find his people. Ye plan to cut his throat if I dinna tell ye where the gold is? Go ahead; I’m no telling ye.”

He didn’t see Arch pull the knife, but it was there, suddenly, in his right hand, held awkwardly because of the missing fingers, but doubtless useful enough.

“All right,” Arch said calmly, and put the point of the knife under Herman’s chin.

A scream burst from behind Ian, and Vermin half-ran, half-fell down the last few feet of the trail. Arch Bug looked up, startled, and Ian crouched to rush him, but was forestalled by Vermin.

The little boy rushed at Arch Bug and gave him a tremendous kick in the shin, shouting, “You bad old man! You let her go right now!”

Arch seemed as startled by the speech as by the kick, but didn’t let go.

“Her?” he said, and looked down at the child in his grasp, who promptly turned her—her?—head and bit him fiercely in the wrist. Ian, seizing the moment, lunged at him, but was impeded by Vermin, who had now seized Arch by the thigh and was clinging like grim death, trying to punch the old man in the balls with one small clenched fist.

With a ferocious grunt, Arch jerked the little girl—if that’s what she was—up and flung her staggering into Ian. He then brought one big fist down on top of Vermin’s head, stunning him. He shook the child off his leg, kicked the boy in the ribs as he staggered back, then turned and ran.

“Trudy, Trudy!” Herman ran for his—no, her—brother, who was lying in the leaf mold, mouth opening and closing like a landed trout.

Ian hesitated, wanting to pursue Arch, worried that Vermin might be badly hurt—but Arch was already gone, vanished into the wood. Gritting his teeth, he crouched and passed his hands rapidly over

Vermin. No blood, and the wean was getting back his breath now, gulping and wheezing like a leaky bellows.

“Trudy?” Ian said to Herman, who was clinging tightly to Vermin’s neck. Not waiting for an answer, he pulled up Vermin’s ragged shirt, pulled out the waistband of his too-big breeches, and peeked inside. He let go hastily.

Herman leapt up, eyes bugged and hands clasped protectively over her—yes, her!—crotch.

“No!” she said. “I won’t let you stick your nasty prick in me!”

“Ye couldna pay me to,” Ian assured her. “If this is Trudy”—he nodded at Vermin, who had rolled up onto his—no, her—hands and knees and was vomiting into the grass—“what the devil’s *your* name?”

“Hermione,” the lassie said, sullen. “She’s Ermintrude.”

Ian ran a hand over his face, trying to adjust to this information. Now he looked … well, no, they still looked like filthy wee demons rather than little girls, their slitted eyes burning through the greasy, matted underbrush of their hair. They’d have to have their heads shaved, he supposed, and hoped he was nowhere in the neighborhood when it was done.

“Aye,” he said, for lack of anything sensible. “Well, then.”

“You’ve got gold?” said Ermintrude, having stopped her retching. She sat up, wiped a small hand over her mouth, and spat expertly. “Where?”

“If I wouldna tell him, why would I tell you? And ye can just forget *that* notion right now,” he assured her, seeing her eyes dart to the knife in his belt.

Damn. What was he to do now? He pushed away the shock of Arch Bug’s appearance—time to think of that later—and ran a hand slowly through his hair, considering. The fact that they were girls didn’t change anything, really, but the fact that they knew he had gold hidden did. He didn’t dare leave them with anyone now, because if he did …

“If you leave us, we’ll tell about the gold,” Hermione said promptly. “We don’t want to live in a stinky cabin. We want to go to London.”

"What?" He stared at her, incredulous. "What d'ye ken of London, for God's sake?"

"Our mam came from there," Herman—no, Hermione—said, and bit her lip to stop it trembling at mention of her mother. It was the first time she *had* spoken of her mother, Ian noted with interest. Let alone displayed any sign of vulnerability. "She told us about it."

"Mmphm. And why would I no just kill ye myself?" he demanded, exasperated. To his astonishment, Herman smiled at him, the first halfway-pleasant expression he'd ever seen on her face.

"The dog likes you," she said. "He wouldn't like you if you killed people."

"That's all you know," he muttered, and stood up. Rollo, who had been off about his own business, chose this opportune moment to saunter out of the underbrush, sniffing busily.

"And where were *you* when I needed ye?" Ian demanded. Rollo smelled carefully round the spot where Arch Bug had stood, then lifted his leg and urinated on a bush.

"Would that bad old man have killed Hermie?" the little one asked suddenly, as he boosted her onto the mule behind her sister.

"No," he said, with certainty. But as he swung up into his own saddle, he wondered. He had the very uncomfortable feeling that Arch Bug understood the nature of guilt much too well. Enough to kill an innocent child, only because her death would make Ian feel guilty for it? And Ian would; Arch knew that.

"No," he repeated more strongly. Arch Bug was both vengeful and vindictive—and had a right to be, he'd admit that. But Ian had nay grounds to think the man a monster.

Still, he made the little girls ride in front of him, until they made camp that night.

* * *

There was no further sign of Arch Bug, though Ian felt now and then the crawling sensation of being watched, when they camped. Was the man following him? Very likely he was, Ian thought—for surely it wasn't accident that had made him appear so suddenly.

So. He'd gone back to the ruins of the Big House, then, thinking to retrieve the gold after Uncle Jamie had left, only to find it gone. He wondered briefly whether Arch had managed to kill the white sow, but dismissed that notion; his uncle said the creature was plainly from the infernal regions and thus indestructible, and he was himself inclined to believe it.

He glanced at Rollo, who was dozing by his feet, but the dog gave no sign that anyone was near, though his ears were half cocked. Ian relaxed a little, though he kept the knife on his person, even while sleeping.

Not entirely in respect of Arch Bug, marauders, or wild beasts, either. He looked across the fire, to where Hermione and Trudy lay rolled up together in his blank—only they weren't. The blanket was cunningly wadded so as to appear to contain bodies, but a gust of wind had pulled a corner loose, and he could see that it lay flat.

He closed his eyes in exasperation, then opened them and glanced down at the dog.

"Why did ye no say something?" he demanded. "Surely ye saw them leave!"

"We ain't gone," said a gruff, small voice behind him, and he whirled to find the two of them crouched on either side of his open saddlebag, busily rifling it for food.

"We 'uz hungry," said Trudy, matter-of-factly stuffing the remains of a journeycake into her face.

"I fed ye!" He'd shot a few quail and baked them in mud. Granted, it wasn't a feast, but—

"We's *still* hungry," Hermione said, with impeccable logic. She licked her fingers and burped.

"Have ye drunk all the beer?" he demanded, snatching up a stone bottle rolling near her feet.

"Mmm-hmm," she said dreamily, and sat down, quite suddenly.

"Ye canna be thieving food," he said severely, taking the depleted saddlebag from Trudy. "If ye eat it all now, we'll be starving before I get ye to—wherever we're going," he ended, rather weakly.

"If we don't eat it, we'll starve now," Trudy said logically. "Best starve later."

"Where *are* we going?" Hermione was swaying gently to and fro, like a small filthy flower in the wind.

"To Cross Creek," he said. "It's the first good-sized town we'll come to, and I ken folk there." Whether he knew anyone who might be of help in this present circumstance … too bad about his great-auntie Jocasta. Were she still at River Run, he could easily have left the girls there, but as it was, Jocasta and her husband, Duncan, had immigrated to Nova Scotia. There was Jocasta's body slave, Phaedre … He thought she was employed as a barmaid in Wilmington. But, no, she couldn't—

"Is it as big as London?" Hermione collapsed gently onto her back and lay with her arms spread out. Rollo got up and came and sniffed her; she giggled—the first innocent sound he'd heard from her.

"You all right, Hermie?" Trudy scampered over to her sister and squatted next to her in concern. Rollo, having smelled Hermione thoroughly, turned his attention to Trudy, who merely pushed aside his inquisitive nose. Hermione was now humming tunelessly to herself.

"She's fine," Ian said, after a quick glance. "She's no but a bit drunk. It'll pass."

"Oh." Reassured, Trudy sat down next to her sister, hugging her knees. "Pap used to get drunk. He hollered and broke things, though."

"Did he?"

"Uh-huh. He broke my mam's nose once."

"Oh," Ian said, having no idea how to answer this. "Too bad."

"You think he's dead?"

"I hope so."

"Me, too," she said, satisfied. She yawned hugely—he could smell her rotting teeth from where he sat—and then curled herself on the ground, cuddling close to Hermione.

Sighing, Ian got up and fetched the blanket, and covered them both, tucking it gently round their small, limp bodies.

Now what? He wondered. The recent exchange was the closest thing he'd had yet to an actual conversation with the girls, and he was under no illusions that their brief foray into amiability would last past daylight. Where would he find someone willing and able to deal with them?

A tiny snore, like the buzzing of a bee's wings, came from the blanket, and he smiled involuntarily. Wee Mandy, Bree's daughter, had made a noise like that when she slept.

He'd held Mandy, sleeping, now and then—once for more than an hour, not wanting to surrender the tiny, warm weight, watching the flicker of the pulse in her throat. Imagining, with longing and a pain tempered by distance, his own daughter. Stillborn, her face a mystery to him. Yeksa'a, the Mohawk had called her—"little girl," too young to have a name. But she did have a name. Iseabaìl. That's what he'd called her.

He wrapped himself in the ragged plaid Uncle Jamie had given him when he'd chosen to be a Mohawk and lay down by the fire.

Pray. That's what his uncle, his parents, would have advised. He was unsure who to pray to, really, or what to say. Should he speak to Christ, or His mother, or perhaps one of the saints? The spirit of the red cedar that stood sentinel beyond the fire, or the life that moved in the wood, whispering on the night breeze?

"A Dhia," he whispered at last to the open sky, *"cuidich mi,"* and slept.

Whether it was God or the night itself who answered him, at dawn he woke with a notion.

* * *

He'd been expecting the walleyed maid, but Mrs. Sylvie came to the door herself. She recalled him; he saw a flicker of recognition and—he thought—pleasure in her eyes, though it didn't go so far as a smile, of course.

"Mr. Murray," she said, cool and calm. She looked down then, and lost a trifle of her composure. She pushed the wire-rimmed spectacles up on her nose for a better look at what accompanied him, then raised her head and fixed him with suspicion.

"What's this?"

He'd been expecting this reaction and was ready for it. Without answering, he held up the fat wee pouch he'd made ready and shook it, so she could hear the metal clink inside.

Her face changed at that, and she stood back to let them in, though she went on looking wary.

Not so wary as the little heathens—he still had trouble thinking of them as girls—who hung back until he took them each by a scrawny neck and propelled them firmly into Mrs. Sylvie's parlor. They sat—under compulsion—but looked as though they had something in mind, and he kept a beady gaze on them, even as he talked with the proprietor of the establishment.

"Maids?" she said, in open disbelief, looking at the girls. He'd washed them *in* their clothes—forcibly, and had several bites to show for it, though luckily none had festered yet—but there had been nothing to do about their hair save chop it off, and he wasn't about to come near either one with a knife, for fear of injuring them or himself in the subsequent struggle. They sat and glared through the mats of their hair like gargoyles, red-eyed and malignant.

"Well, they dinna want to be whores," he said mildly. "And I dinna want them to be, either. Not that I've any objection to the profession personally," he added for the sake of politeness.

A muscle twitched by her mouth and she shot him a sharp glance—tinged with amusement—through her spectacles.

"I'm glad to hear it," she said dryly. And dropped her eyes to his feet and raised them slowly, almost appraisingly, up the length of his body in a way that made him feel suddenly as though he'd been dipped in hot water. The eyes came to rest on his face again, and the look of amusement had intensified considerably.

He coughed, recollecting—with a mixture of embarrassment and lust—a number of interesting images from their encounter more than two years before. Outwardly, she was a plain woman past thirty, her face and manner much more those of an autocratic nun than a whore. Beneath the unassuming calico gown and muslin apron, though … she gave fair value, did Mistress Sylvie.

"I'm no asking as a favor, aye?" he said, and nodded at the pouch, which he had put down on the table by his chair. "I had it in mind to apprentice them, maybe?"

"Apprentice girls. In a brothel." She didn't make it a question, but her mouth twitched again.

"Ye could start them as maids—surely ye've cleaning to be done? Chamber pots to be emptied, and the like? And then if they should be clever enough"—he shot them a narrow glance of his own, and Hermione stuck out her tongue at him—"ye could maybe train them up to be cooks. Or sempstresses. Ye must need a deal of mending done, aye? Torn sheets and the like?"

"Torn shifts, more like," she said, very dryly. Her eyes flickered toward the ceiling, where a sound of rhythmic squeaking indicated the presence of a paying customer.

The girls had sidled off their stools and were prowling the parlor like wild cats, nosing things and bristling with caution. He realized suddenly that they'd never seen a town, let alone a civilized person's house.

Mrs. Sylvie leaned forward and picked up the pouch, her eyes widening in surprise at the weight of it. She opened it and poured a handful of greasy black shot into her hand, glancing sharply up from it to him. He didn't speak, but smiled and, reaching forward, took one of the balls from the palm of her hand, dug his thumbnail hard into it, and dropped it back into her hand, the scored line glinting bright gold amid the darkness.

She pursed her lips, weighing the bag again.

"All of it?" It was, he'd estimated, more than fifty pounds' worth of gold: half what he'd been carrying.

He made a long reach and took a china ornament out of Hermione's hands.

"It'll no be an easy job," he said. "Ye'll earn it, I think."

"I think so, too," she said, watching Trudy, who—with extreme nonchalance—had lowered her breeches and was relieving herself in a corner of the hearth. The secret of their sex revealed, the girls had quite abandoned their requirements of privacy.

Mrs. Sylvie rang her silver bell, and both girls turned toward the sound in surprise.

"Why me?" she asked.

"I couldna think of anyone else who might be able to deal with them," Ian said simply.

"I'm *very* flattered."

"Ye should be," he said, smiling. "Have we a bargain, then?"

She drew a deep breath, eyeing the girls, who had their heads together, whispering, as they viewed her with the deepest suspicion. She let it out again, shaking her head.

"I think it's likely a bad bargain—but times are hard."

"What, in your business? I should think the demand must be fairly constant." He'd meant to joke, but she rounded on him, eyes narrowing.

"Oh, the customers are ready enough to knock on my door, no matter what," she said. "But they've no money these days—no one does. I'll take a chicken or a flitch of bacon—but half of them haven't got so much as that. They'll pay with proclamation money, or Continentals, or scrip from a militia unit—want to guess how much any of those are worth in the market?"

"Aye, I—" But she was steaming like a kettle, and turned on him, hissing.

"Or they don't pay at all. When times are fair, so are men, mostly. But pinch them a bit, and they stop seeing just why they need to pay for their pleasure—after all, what does it cost *me?* And I cannot refuse, or they will simply take what they want and then burn my house or hurt us for my temerity. You see that, I suppose?"

The bitterness in her voice stung like a nettle, and he abruptly abandoned a half-formed impulse to propose that they seal their bargain in a personal way.

"I see that," he replied, as evenly as he could. "Is such a thing not always a risk of your profession, though? And ye've prospered so far, aye?"

Her mouth compressed for an instant.

"I had a … patron. A gentleman who offered me protection."

"In return for …?"

A hot flush rose in her thin cheeks.

"None of your business, sir."

"Is it not?" He nodded at the pouch in her hand. "If I'm placing my—these—well, them"—he gestured at the girls, now fingering the fabric of a curtain—"with you, surely I am entitled to ask whether I might be placing them in danger by doing so?"

"They're girls," she replied briefly. "They were born in danger and will live their lives in that condition, regardless of circumstance." But her hand had tightened on the pouch, knuckles white. He was that bit impressed that she was so honest, given that she plainly did need the money badly. In spite of her bitterness, though, he was rather enjoying the joust.

"D'ye think life's no dangerous for a man, then?" he asked, and without pausing, "What happened to your pimp?"

The blood washed abruptly from her face, leaving it white as bleached bone. Her eyes flashed in it like sparks.

"He was my brother," she said, and her voice dropped to a furious whisper. "The Sons of Liberty tarred and feathered him and left him on my doorstep to die. Now, sir—have you any further questions regarding my affairs, or is our business *done?*"

Before he could make shift to find any response at all to this, the door opened and a young woman came in. He felt a visceral shock at seeing her, and the edges of his vision went white. Then the room steadied round him and he found he could draw breath again.

It wasn't Emily. The young woman—looking curiously from him to the little savages wrapped in the curtains—was part-Indian, small and gracefully built, with Emily's long, thick, raven's-wing hair flowing loose down her back. With Emily's broad cheekbones and delicate round chin. But she wasn't Emily.

Thank God, he thought, but at the same time suffered a hollowness of the wame. He felt as though the sight of her had been a cannonball that had struck him and, having passed straight through his body, left a gaping hole in its wake.

Mrs. Sylvie was giving the Indian girl brisk instructions, pointing at Hermione and Trudy. The girl's black brows rose briefly, but she nodded, and smiling at the girls, invited them to accompany her to the kitchen for some food.

The little girls promptly disentangled themselves from the curtains; it had been a long time since breakfast, and he'd had nothing for them then save a bit of drammach and some jerked bear meat, hard as shoe leather.

They followed the Indian girl to the door of the room, sparing him not a glance. At the door, though, Hermione turned, and hitching up her baggy-seated breeches, fixed him with a glare and pointed a long, skinny finger of accusation at him.

"If we turns out to be whores after all, you fucker, I'm gonna hunt you down, cut your balls off, and stuff 'em up your arse."

He took his leave with what dignity he could, the peals of Mrs. Sylvie's laughter ringing in his ears.

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PULLING TEETH

New Bern, colony of North Carolina
April 1777

I hated pulling teeth. the figure of speech that likens something of extreme difficulty to pulling teeth is not hyperbole. Even in the best of situations—a large person with a big mouth and a placid temperament, the affected tooth one of those toward the front of the mouth and in the upper jaw (less in the way of roots and much easier of access)—it was a messy, slippery, bone-crack business. And underlying the sheer physical unpleasantness of the job was usually an inescapable feeling of depression at the probable outcome.

It was necessary—beyond the pain of an abscessed tooth, a bad abscess could release bacteria into the bloodstream, causing septicemia and even death—but to remove a tooth, with no good means of replacing it, was to compromise not merely the patient's appearance but also the function and structure of the mouth. A missing tooth allowed all those near it to shift out of place, altering the bite and making chewing much less efficient. Which in turn affected the patient's nutrition, general health, and prospects for a long and happy life.

Not, I reflected grimly, changing position yet again in hopes of gaining a view of the tooth I was after, that even the removal of several teeth would greatly damage the dentition of the poor little girl whose mouth I was working on.

She couldn’t be more than eight or nine, with a narrow jaw and a pronounced overbite. Her canine baby teeth had not fallen out on time, and the permanent ones had come in behind them, giving her a sinister double-fanged appearance. This was aggravated by the unusual narrowness of her upper jaw, which had forced the two emergent front incisors to buckle inward, turning toward each other in such a way that the front surfaces of each tooth almost touched each other.

I touched the abscessed upper molar and she jerked against the straps that bound her to the chair, letting out a shriek that ran under my fingernails like a bamboo splinter.

“Give her a bit more, please, Ian.” I straightened up, feeling as though my lower back had been squeezed in a vise; I’d been working for several hours in the front room of Fergus’s printshop, and had a small bowl full of bloodstained teeth at my elbow and a rapt crowd outside the window to show for it.

Ian made a dubious Scottish noise, but picked up the bottle of whisky and made an encouraging clucking noise toward the little girl, who screamed again at sight of his tattooed face and clamped her mouth shut. The girl’s mother, out of patience, slapped her briskly, snatched the bottle from Ian’s hand, and inserting it into her daughter’s mouth, upended it, pinching the girl’s nose shut with the other hand.

The child’s eyes went round as pennies and an explosion of whisky droplets sprayed from the corners of her mouth—but her scrawny little neck bobbed convulsively as she swallowed, nonetheless.

“I really think that’s enough,” I said, rather alarmed at the quantity of whisky the child was swallowing. It was very bad whisky, acquired locally, and while Jamie and Ian had both tasted it and, after some discussion, decided that it probably wouldn’t make anyone go blind, I had reservations about using it in any great amount.

“Hmm,” said the mother, examining her daughter critically, but not removing the bottle. “That’ll do it, I suppose.”

The child's eyes had rolled back in her head, and the straining little body suddenly relaxed, falling limp against the chair. The mother removed the whisky bottle, wiped the mouth of it tidily on her apron, and handed it back to Ian with a nod.

I hastily examined her pulse and breathing, but she seemed in reasonably good shape—so far, at least.

"Carpe diem," I muttered, grabbing my tooth pliers. "Or perhaps I mean *carpe vinorum?* Watch to see she keeps breathing, Ian."

Ian laughed and tilted the bottle, wetting a tiny swab of clean cloth with whisky for the mopping up.

"I think ye'll have time to take more than the one tooth, Auntie, if ye want. Ye could likely pull every tooth in the poor lassie's head and she wouldna twitch."

"It's a thought," I said, turning the child's head. "Can you bring the mirror, Ian?"

I had a tiny square of looking glass which could, with luck, be used to direct sunlight into a patient's mouth. And there was sunlight streaming through the window in abundance, warm and bright. Unfortunately, there were any number of curious heads pressed against the window, too, which kept moving into the path of the sun, frustrating Ian's attempts to beam sunlight where I needed it.

"Marsali!" I called, a thumb on the girl's pulse, just in case.

"Aye?" She came through from the back room where she'd been cleaning—or, rather, dirtying—type, wiping inky hands on a rag. "D'ye need Henri-Christian again?"

"If you—or he—don't mind."

"Not him," she assured me. "Likes nothing better, the wee praise-hog. Joanie! Félicité! Come fetch the wean, will ye? He's wanted out front."

Félicité and Joan—aka the hell-kittens, as Jamie called them—came eagerly; they enjoyed Henri-Christian's performances nearly as much as he did.

"Come on, Bubbles!" Joanie called, holding open the door to the kitchen. Henri-Christian came scampering out, rolling from side to side on short, bowed legs, ruddy face beaming.

"Hoopla, hoopla, hoopla!" he shouted, making for the door.

"Put his hat on him!" Marsali called. "The wind will get in his ears."

It was a bright day, but *was* windy, and Henri-Christian had a tendency to ear infection. He had a woolen hat that tied under the chin, though, knitted in blue and white stripes and decorated with a row of red bobbles—Brianna had made it for him, and the sight of it squeezed my heart a little, warmth and pain together.

The girls each took him by a hand—Félicité stretching up at the last moment to grab an old slouch hat of her father's from the peg, to put out for coins—and went out, to cheers and whistles from the crowd. Through the window, I could see Joanie clearing the books displayed on the table outside, and Félicité hoisting Henri-Christian up in their stead. He spread his stubby, powerful arms, beaming, and bowed in accomplished fashion to one side and the other. Then he bent, put his hands on the tabletop, and, with a remarkable degree of controlled grace, stood on his head.

I didn't wait to watch the rest of his show—it was mostly simple dancing and kicks, interspersed with somersaults and headstands, but made enchanting by his dwarfed stature and vivid personality. He had shifted the crowd away from the window momentarily, though, which was what I wanted.

"Now, Ian," I said, and went back to work. With the flickering light from the mirror, it was a little easier to see what I was doing, and I got to grips with the tooth almost at once. This was the tricky part, though; the tooth was badly cracked, and there was a good chance that it might fracture when I twisted it, rather than draw cleanly. And if that should happen …

But it didn't. There was a small, muffled *crack!* as the roots of the tooth parted from the jawbone, and I was holding the tiny white thing, intact.

The child's mother, who had been watching intently, sighed and relaxed a little. The little girl sighed, too, and settled in the chair. I checked again, but her pulse was fine, though her breathing was shallow. She'd likely sleep for—

A thought struck me.

“You know,” I said to the mother, a little hesitantly, “I *could* draw one or two more teeth without hurting her. See …” I moved aside, motioning her to look. “These”—I touched the overdue baby canines—“ought to be drawn at once, to let the teeth behind take their places. And you see these front teeth, of course.… Well, I’ve taken the upper bicuspid molar on the left; if I were to take the same tooth on the right, I *think* that perhaps her teeth would shift a bit, to fill the empty space. And if you could persuade her to press with her tongue against those front teeth, whenever she thought of it …” It wasn’t orthodontia by any means, and it did carry some increased risk of infection, but I was sorely tempted. The poor child looked like a cannibal bat.

“Hmmmm,” said the mother, frowning into her daughter’s mouth. “How much will you give me for them?”

“How much … you want me to pay *you*?”

“They’re fine, sound teeth,” the mother replied promptly. “The tooth-drawer down to the harbor ’ud give me a shilling apiece. And Glory’ll need the money for her dowry.”

“Her dowry?” I repeated, surprised. The mother shrugged.

“No one’s likely to take the poor creature for her looks, now, are they?”

I was obliged to admit that this was likely true; her deplorable dentition quite aside, calling the child homely would be a compliment.

“Marsali,” I called. “Have you got four shillings?” The gold in my hem swung heavily round my feet, but I couldn’t make use of it in this situation.

Marsali turned from the window, where she’d been keeping an eye on Henri-Christian and the girls, startled.

“Not cash money, no.”

“It’s all right, Auntie. I’ve some money.” Ian put down the mirror and dug in his sporran, emerging with a handful of coins. “Mind,” he said, fixing the woman with a hard eye, “ye’d no get more nor thruppence each for sound teeth—and likely no but a penny for a child’s.”

The woman, nothing daunted, looked down her nose at him.

"There speaks a grasping Scotchman," she said. "For all you're tattooed like a savage. Sixpence each, then, you penny-pinching miser!"

Ian grinned at her, displaying his own fine teeth, which, if not entirely straight, were in excellent condition.

"Going to carry the wean down to the quay and let yon butcher rip her mouth to shreds?" he inquired pleasantly. "She'll be awake by then, ken. And screaming. Three."

"Ian!" I said.

"Well, I'm no going to let her cheat ye, Auntie. Bad enough she's wantin' ye to draw the lassie's teeth for nothing, let alone pay for the honor!"

Emboldened by my intervention, the woman stuck out her chin and repeated, "Sixpence!"

Marsali, attracted by the altercation, came to peer into the girl's mouth.

"Ye'll not find that one a husband for less than ten pound," she informed the woman bluntly. "Not lookin' like that. A man would be feart of bein' bitten when he kissed her. Ian's right. In fact, ye should be payin' double for it."

"Ye agreed to pay when ye came in, no?" Ian pressed. "Tuppence to have the tooth drawn—and my aunt made ye a bargain at that, out of pity for the wean."

"Bloodsuckers!" the woman exclaimed. "It's true what they say—you Scots 'ud take the pennies from a dead man's eyes!"

Plainly this wasn't going to be settled in a hurry; I could feel both Ian and Marsali settling down to an enjoyable session of tag-team haggling. I sighed and took the mirror out of Ian's hand. I wouldn't need it for the canines, and perhaps by the time I got to the other bicuspid, he'd be paying attention again.

In fact, the canines were simple; baby teeth, almost without roots, and ready to fall—I could probably have tweaked them out with my fingers. One quick twist each and they were out, the gums barely bleeding. Pleased, I dabbed the sites with a whisky-soaked swab, then considered the bicuspid.

It was on the other side of the mouth, which meant that by tilting the girl's head back, I could get a bit of light without using the mirror. I took Ian's hand—he was so engaged in argument that he barely noticed—and put it on the girl's head to hold it back and steady, then carefully insinuated my pliers.

A shadow crossed my light, vanished—then came back, blocking it utterly. I turned in annoyance, to find a rather elegant-looking gentleman peering through the window, a look of interest on his face.

I scowled at him and motioned him aside. He blinked at me, but then nodded apology and stepped aside. Not waiting for any further interruption, I crouched, got hold of the tooth, and twisted it free with a lucky wrench.

Humming with satisfaction, I dribbled whisky over the bleeding hole, then tilted her head to the other side and pressed a swab gently over the gum, to help drain the abscess. Felt a sudden extra slackness in the wobbly little neck and froze.

Ian felt it, too; he broke off in the middle of a sentence and shot me a startled look.

"Untie her," I said. "Quick."

He had her loosed in an instant, and I seized her under the arms and laid her on the floor, her head flopping like a rag doll's. Ignoring startled exclamations from Marsali and the girl's mother, I tilted back her head, swiped the swab out of her mouth, and, pinching shut her nose with my fingers, sealed my mouth to hers and started resuscitation.

It was like blowing up a small, tough balloon: reluctance, resistance, then, finally, a rise of the chest. But chests don't yield like rubber; the blowing didn't get easier.

I had the fingers of my other hand on her neck, feeling desperately for a carotid pulse. There … Was it?… Yes, it was! Her heart was still beating, though faintly.

Breathe. Pause. Breathe. Pause … I felt the tiny gush of exhalation, and then the narrow chest moved by itself. I waited, blood pounding in my ears, but it didn't move again. Breathe. Pause. Breathe …

Again the chest moved, and this time continued to rise and fall under its own power. I sat up on my heels, my own breath coming fast and a cold sweat misting my face.

The girl's mother was staring down at me, her mouth half open. I noted dimly that her own dentition wasn't bad; God knew what her husband looked like.

"She's—is she …?" the woman asked, blinking and glancing back and forth between me and her daughter.

"She's fine," I said flatly. I stood up slowly, feeling light-headed. "She can't go until the whisky's worn off, though; I think she'll be all right, but she might stop breathing again. Someone needs to watch her 'til she wakes. Marsali …?"

"Aye, I'll put her in the trundle," Marsali said, coming to look. "Oh, there ye are, Joanie—will ye come and keep an eye on this poor wean for a bit? She needs to lie down on your bed."

The children had come in, red-cheeked and giggling, with a hatful of small coins and buttons, but seeing the girl on the floor, hurried over to look, too.

"Hoopla," Henri-Christian remarked, impressed.

"Is she deid?" Félicité asked, more practically.

"If she was, *Maman* wouldna be asking me to watch her," Joanie pointed out. "She's no going to sick up in my bed, is she?"

"I'll put a towel down," Marsali promised, squatting to scoop the little girl up. Ian beat her to it, lifting the child gently.

"We'll just charge ye tuppence, then," he said to the mother. "But we'll give ye all the teeth for free, aye?"

Looking stunned, she nodded, then followed the crowd into the back of the house. I heard the thunder of multiple feet going up the stairs, but didn't follow; my own legs had gone to water, and I sat down quite suddenly.

"Are you all right, *madame*?" I looked up to find the elegant stranger inside the shop, looking curiously at me.

I picked up the half-empty bottle of whisky and took a substantial swallow. It burned like brimstone and tasted like charred bones. I made wheezing noises and my eyes watered, but I didn't actually cough.

“Fine,” I said hoarsely. “Perfectly fine.” I cleared my throat and wiped my eyes on my sleeve. “Can I help you?”

A faint look of amusement crossed his features.

“I do not require to have a tooth drawn, which is probably good luck for both of us. However—may I?” He withdrew a slim silver flask from his pocket and handed it to me, then sat down. “I think it’s perhaps a little more fortifying than … that.” He nodded at the uncorked whisky bottle, his nose wrinkling a little.

I uncorked the flask, and the full-bodied scent of very good brandy floated out like a genie.

“Thank you,” I said briefly, and drank, closing my eyes. “Very much indeed,” I added a moment later, opening them. Fortifying, indeed. Warmth collected in my center and purled like smoke through my limbs.

“My pleasure, *madame,”* he said, and smiled. He was undeniably a dandy, and a rich one, too, with a good deal of lace about his person, gilt buttons on his waistcoat, a powdered wig, and two black silk beauty patches on his face—a star beside his left brow, and a rearing horse on his right cheek. Not a getup one saw often in North Carolina, especially not these days.

Despite the encrustations, he was a handsome man, I thought, perhaps forty or so, with soft dark eyes that glinted with humor, and a delicate, sensitive face. His English was very good, though it carried a distinct Parisian accent.

“Have I the honor of addressing Mrs. Fraser?” he asked. I saw his eyes pass over my scandalously bare head, but he politely made no comment.

“Well, you have,” I said dubiously. “But I may not be the one you want. My daughter-in-law is Mrs. Fraser, too; she and her husband own this shop. So if you were wanting something printed—”

“Mrs. James Fraser?”

I paused instinctively, but there wasn’t much alternative to answering.

“I am, yes. Is it my husband you want?” I asked warily. People wanted Jamie for a lot of things, and it wasn’t always desirable that they find him.

He smiled, eyes crinkling pleasantly.

"It is indeed, Mrs. Fraser. The captain of my ship said that Mr. Fraser had come to speak with him this morning, seeking passage."

My heart gave a sharp leap at this.

"Oh! You have a ship, Mr.…?"

"Beauchamp," he said, and, picking up my hand, kissed it gracefully. "Percival Beauchamp, at your service, *madame*. I do—she is called *Huntress*."

I actually thought my heart had stopped for a moment, but it hadn't, and resumed beating with a noticeable thump.

"Beauchamp," I said. "Beechum?" He'd pronounced it in the French way, but at this, he nodded, smile growing wider.

"Yes, the English say it that way. You said your daughter-in-law … so the Mr. Fraser who owns this shop is your husband's son?"

"Yes," I said again, but automatically. *Don't be silly*, I scolded myself. *It isn't an uncommon name. Likely he hasn't anything at all to do with your family!* And yet—a French-English connection. I knew my father's family had come from France to England sometime in the eighteenth century—but that was all I knew about them. I stared at him in fascination. Was there anything familiar about his face, anything I could match with my faint recollections of my parents, the stronger ones of my uncle?

He had pale skin, like mine, but then, most upper-class people did, they taking great pains to shelter their faces from the sun. His eyes were much darker than mine, and beautiful, but shaped differently, rounder. The brows—had my uncle Lamb's brows had that shape, heavy near the nose, trailing off in a graceful arch …?

Absorbed in this tantalizing puzzle, I'd missed what he was saying.

"I beg your pardon?"

"The little boy," he repeated, with a nod toward the door through which the children had disappeared. "He was shouting, 'Hoopla!' As French street performers do. Has the family a French connection of some kind?"

Belated alarms began to go off, and unease rippled the hairs on my forearms.

"No," I said, trying to iron my face into a politely quizzical expression. "Likely he's just heard it from someone. There was a small troupe of French acrobats who passed through the Carolinas last year."

"Ah, doubtless that's it." He leaned forward a little, dark eyes intent. "Did you see them yourself?"

"No. My husband and I … don't live here," I ended hurriedly. I'd been about to tell him where we *did* live, but I didn't know how much—if anything—he knew about Fergus's circumstances. He sat back, pursing his lips a little in disappointment.

"Ah, too bad. I thought perhaps the gentleman I am in search of might have belonged to this troupe. Though I suppose you would not have known their names, even had you seen them," he added as an afterthought.

"You're looking for someone? A Frenchman?" I lifted the bowl of bloodstained teeth and began to pick through it, affecting nonchalance.

"A man named Claudel. He was born in Paris—in a brothel," he added, with a faint air of apology for using such an indelicate term in my presence. "He would be in his early forties now—forty-one or -two, perhaps."

"Paris," I repeated, listening for Marsali's footfalls on the stair. "What leads you to suppose that he's in North Carolina?"

He lifted one shoulder in a graceful shrug.

"He may well not be. I do know that roughly thirty years ago, he was taken from the brothel by a Scotsman, and that this man was described as of striking appearance, very tall, with brilliant red hair. Beyond that, I encountered a morass of possibilities …" He smiled wryly. "Fraser was described to me variously as a wine merchant, a Jacobite, a Loyalist, a traitor, a spy, an aristocrat, a farmer, an importer—or a smuggler; the terms are interchangeable—with connections reaching from a convent to the Royal court."

Which was, I thought, an extremely accurate portrait of Jamie. Though I could see why it hadn't been much help in finding him. On the other hand … here Beauchamp was.

"I did discover a wine merchant named Michael Murray, who, upon hearing this description, told me that it resembled his uncle, one James Fraser, who had emigrated to America more than ten years ago." The dark eyes were less humorous now, fixed intently upon me.

"When I inquired about the child Claudel, though, Monsieur Murray professed complete ignorance of such a person. In rather vehement terms."

"Oh?" I said, and picked up a large molar with serious caries, squinting at it. Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ. I knew Michael only by name; one of Young Ian's elder brothers, he had been born after my departure and had already gone to France by the time I returned to Lallybroch—there to be educated and taken into the wine business with Jared Fraser, an elderly and childless cousin of Jamie's. Michael had, of course, grown up with Fergus at Lallybroch and knew bloody well what his original name was. And apparently had detected or suspected something in this stranger's demeanor that had alarmed him.

"Do you mean to say that you came all the way to America, knowing nothing except a man's name and that he has red hair?" I asked, trying to seem mildly incredulous. "Goodness—you must have considerable interest in finding this Claudel!"

"Oh, I do, *madame*." He looked at me, smiling faintly, head on one side. "Tell me, Mrs. Fraser—has your husband red hair?"

"Yes," I said. There was no point in denying it, since anyone in New Bern would tell him so—and likely had already, I reflected. "So do any number of his relations—and about half the population of the Scottish Highlands." This was a wild overstatement, but I was reasonably sure that Mr. Beauchamp hadn't been combing the Highlands personally, either.

I could hear voices upstairs; Marsali might be coming down any minute, and I didn't want her walking into the midst of this particular conversation.

"Well," I said, and got to my feet in a decided manner. "I'm sure you'll be wanting to talk to my husband—and he to you. He's gone on an errand, though, and won't be back until sometime tomorrow. Are you staying somewhere in the town?"

"The King's Inn," he said, rising, as well. "If you will tell your husband to find me there, *madame?* I thank you." Bending low, he took my hand and kissed it again, then smiled at me and backed out of the shop, leaving a scent of bergamot and hyssop mingled with the ghost of good brandy.

* * *

A good many merchants and businessmen had left New Bern, owing to the chaotic state of politics; with no civil authority, public life had come to a standstill, bar the simplest of market transactions, and many people—of both Loyalist and rebel sympathies—had left the colony out of fear of violence. There were only two good inns in New Bern these days; the King's Inn was one, and the Wilsey Arms the other. Luckily, Jamie and I had a room in the latter.

"Will you go and talk to him?" I had just finished telling Jamie about the visit of Monsieur Beauchamp—an account that had left him with a deep crease of concern between his brows.

"Christ. How did he find out all that?"

"He must have begun with a knowledge that Fergus was at that brothel, and started his inquiries there. I imagine it wouldn't have been difficult to find someone who'd seen you there, or heard about the incident. You're rather memorable, after all." Despite my own agitation, I smiled at the memory of Jamie, aged twenty-five, who had taken temporary refuge in the brothel in question armed—quite coincidentally—with a large sausage, and then escaped through a window, accompanied by a ten-year-old pickpocket and sometime child-whore named Claudel.

He shrugged, looking mildly embarrassed.

"Well, aye, perhaps. But to discover quite so much …" He scratched his head, thinking. "As to speaking with him—not before I speak to Fergus. I think we might want to know a bit more about this Monsieur Beauchamp, before we make him a present of ourselves."

"I'd like to know a bit more about him, too," I said. "I did wonder whether … Well, it's a remote possibility, the name isn't all that uncommon—but I did wonder whether he might be connected in some way with a branch of my family. They *were* in France in the eighteenth century, I know that much. But not much more."

He smiled at me.

"And what would ye do, Sassnenach, if I discover that he's really your six-times-great-grandfather?"

"I—" I stopped abruptly because, in fact, I didn't know *what* I'd do in such a circumstance. "Well … probably nothing," I admitted. "And we probably can't find that out for sure in any case, since I don't recall—if I ever knew—what my six-times-great-grandfather's first name was. I just—would be interested to know more, that's all," I finished, feeling mildly defensive.

"Well, of course ye would," he said, matter-of-fact. "But not if my asking might put Fergus in any danger, would ye?"

"Oh, no! Of course not. But do you—"

I was interrupted by a soft knock on the door that struck me dumb. I raised my brows at Jamie, who hesitated a moment, but then shrugged and went to open it.

Small as the room was, I could see the door from where I sat; to my surprise, it was filled with what appeared to be a deputation of women—the corridor was a sea of white caps, floating in the dimness like jellyfish.

"Mr. Fraser?" One of the caps bobbed briefly. "I am—my name is Abigail Bell. My daughters"—she turned, and I caught a glimpse of a strained white face—"Lillian and Miriam." The other two caps—yes, there were only three, after all—bobbed in turn. "May we speak with you?"

Jamie bowed and ushered them into the room, raising his eyebrows at me as he followed them in.

"My wife," he said, nodding as I rose, murmuring pleasantries. There was only the bed and one stool, so we all remained standing, awkwardly smiling and bobbing at one another.

Mrs. Bell was short and rather stout, and had probably once been as pretty as her daughters. Her once-plump cheeks now sagged, though, as though she had lost weight suddenly, and her skin was creased with worry. Her daughters looked worried, too; one was twisting her hands in her apron, and the other kept stealing glances at Jamie from downcast eyes, as though afraid he might do something violent if gazed at too directly.

"I beg your pardon, sir, for coming to you in this bold way." Mrs. Bell's lips were trembling; she had to stop and compress them briefly before continuing. "I—I hear that you are looking for a ship bound to Scotland."

Jamie nodded warily, plainly wondering where this woman had learned of it. He'd said everyone in the town would know within a day or two—evidently he'd been right about that.

"Do ye ken someone with such a voyage in view?" he asked politely.

"No. Not exactly. I … that is … perhaps—it is my husband," she blurted, but the speaking of the word made her voice break, and she clapped a handful of apron to her mouth. One of the daughters, a dark-haired girl, took her mother gently by the elbow and drew her aside, standing up bravely to face the fearsome Mr. Fraser herself.

"My father is in Scotland, Mr. Fraser," she said. "My mother is in hopes that you might find him, when you go there, and assist him to return to us."

"Ah," Jamie said. "And your father would be …?"

"Oh! Mr. Richard Bell, sir, of Wilmington." She curtsied hastily, as though further politeness would help to make her case. "He is—he *was*—"

"He *is*!" her sister hissed, low-voiced but emphatic, and the first sister, the dark one, gave her a glare.

"My father was a merchant in Wilmington, Mr. Fraser. He had considerable business interests, and in the course of his business he … had reason to have contact with various British officers, who came to him for supplies. It was entirely a matter of business!" she assured him.

"But business in these dreadful times is never only business." Mrs. Bell had got hold of herself, and came to stand shoulder to shoulder with her daughter. “They said—my husband’s enemies—they put it about that he was a Loyalist.”

“Only because he was,” put in the second sister. This one—fair-haired and blue-eyed—wasn’t trembling; she faced Jamie with a lifted chin and blazing eyes. “My father was true to his King! I for one do not think that is something to be excused and apologized for! Nor do I think it right to pretend otherwise, only to get the help of a man who has broken every oath—”

“Oh, *Miriam*!” said her sister, exasperated. “Could you not keep quiet for one *second?* Now you’ve spoilt everything!”

“I haven’t,” Miriam snapped. “Or if I have, it wasn’t ever going to work in the first place! Why should someone like him hel—”

“Yes, it would! Mr. Forbes said—”

“Oh, bother Mr. Forbes! What would *he* know?”

Mrs. Bell moaned softly into her apron.

“Why did your father go to Scotland?” Jamie asked, cutting through the confusion.

Taken by surprise, Miriam Bell actually answered him.

“He didn’t *go* to Scotland. He was abducted in the street and thrust onto a ship bound for Southampton.”

“By whom?” I asked, wiggling my way through the obstructing forest of skirts on my way to the door. “And why?”

I stuck my head out into the corridor and gestured to the boy cleaning boots on the landing that he should go down to the taproom and bring up a jug of wine. Given the apparent state of the Bells, I thought something to restore the social amenities might be a good idea.

I popped back inside in time to hear Miss Lillian Bell explaining that they didn’t actually know who had abducted her father.

“Or not by name, at least,” she said, face flushed with fury at the telling. “The villains wore hoods over their heads. But it was the Sons of Liberty, I know it!”

“Yes, it was,” Miss Miriam said decidedly. “Father had had threats from them—notes pinned to the door, a dead fish wrapped in a bit of red flannel and left upon the porch to make a stink. That sort of thing.”

The matter had gone beyond threats at the end of the previous August. Mr. Bell had been on his way to his warehouse, when a group of hooded men had rushed out from an alleyway, seized him, and carried him down the quay, then flung him bodily aboard a ship that had just cast off its hawser, sails filling as it drew slowly away.

I had heard of troublesome Loyalists being summarily "deported" in this manner, but hadn't run into an actual occurrence of the practice before.

"If the ship was bound for England," I inquired, "how did he end up in Scotland?"

There was a certain amount of confusion as all three Bells tried to explain at once what had happened, but Miriam won out once again.

"He arrived in England penniless, of course, with no more than the clothes on his back, and owing money for food and passage on the ship. But the ship's captain had befriended him, and took him from Southampton to London, where my father knew some men with whom he had done business in the past. One of these advanced him a sum to cover his indebtedness to the captain, and promised him passage to Georgia, if he would oversee the cargo on a voyage from Edinburgh to the Indies, thence to America.

"So he traveled to Edinburgh under the auspices of his patron, only to discover there that the intended cargo to be picked up in the Indies was a shipload of Negroes."

"My husband is an abolitionist, Mr. Fraser," Mrs. Bell put in, with timid pride. "He said he could not countenance slavery, nor assist in its practice, no matter what the cost to himself."

"And Mr. Forbes told us what you had done for that woman—Mrs. Cameron's body slave," Lillian put in, anxious-faced. "So we thought … even if you were …" She trailed off, embarrassed.

"An oath-breaking rebel, aye," Jamie said dryly. "I see. Mr. Forbes—this would be … Neil Forbes, the lawyer?" He sounded faintly incredulous, and with good reason.

Some years before, Forbes had been a suitor for Brianna's hand—encouraged by Jocasta Cameron, Jamie's aunt. Bree had rejected him, none too gently, and he had taken his revenge some time later by having her abducted by a notorious pirate. A very messy state of affairs had ensued, involving Jamie's reciprocal abduction of Forbes's elderly mother—the old lady had loved the adventure—and the cutting off of Forbes's ear by Young Ian. Time might have healed his external wounds, but I couldn't imagine anyone less likely to have been singing Jamie's praises.

"Yes," said Miriam, but I didn't miss the uncertain look that passed between Mrs. Bell and Lillian.

"What, exactly, did Mr. Forbes say about me?" Jamie asked. All three of them went pale, and his eyebrows went up.

"What?" he repeated, with a definite edge. He said it directly to Mrs. Bell, whom he had instantly identified as the weakest link in the family chain.

"He said what a good thing it was that you were dead," that lady replied faintly. Whereupon her eyes rolled up into her head and she slumped to the floor like a bag of barleycorn.

* * *

Fortunately, I had got a bottle of spirits of ammonia from Dr. Fentiman. This roused Mrs. Bell promptly into a sneezing fit, and her daughters helped her, gasping and choking, onto the bed. The wine fortunately arriving at this juncture, I served liberal helpings to everyone in sight, reserving a sizable mugful for myself.

"Now, then," Jamie said, giving the women the sort of slow, penetrating look intended to cause miscreants to go weak in the knees and confess everything, "tell me where ye heard Mr. Forbes say about my being dead."

Miss Lillian, settled on the bed with a protective hand on her mother's shoulder, spoke up.

"I heard him. In Symond's ordinary. While we were still in Wilmington—before we came here to live with Aunt Burton. I'd gone to get a pitcher of hot cider—it was sometime in February; it was still very cold out. Anyway, the woman—Faydree, she's called—she works there, and went to draw and heat the cider for me. Mr. Forbes came in while I was there, and spoke to me. He knew about

Father, and was sympathetic, asking how we were managing … then Faydree came out with the pitcher, and he saw her."

Forbes had, of course, recognized Phaedre, whom he'd seen many times at River Run, Jocasta's plantation. Expressing great surprise at her presence, he had inquired for an explanation and received a suitably modified version of the truth—in which Phaedre had apparently made much of Jamie's kindness in securing her freedom.

I gurgled briefly in my mug at this. Phaedre knew exactly what had happened to Neil Forbes's ear. She was a very quiet, soft-spoken person, Phaedre, but not above sticking pins in people she didn't like—and I knew she didn't like Neil Forbes.

"Mr. Forbes was rather flushed—perhaps it was from the cold," Lillian said tactfully, "and he said, yes, he understood that Mr. Fraser had always had a great regard for Negroes.… I'm afraid he said that rather nastily," she added, with an apologetic look at Jamie. "And then he laughed, though he tried to pretend he was coughing, and said what a pity it was that you and your family had all been burnt to cinders, and no doubt there would be great lamentations in the slave quarter."

Jamie, who had been taking a swallow of wine, choked.

"Why did he think that?" I demanded. "Did he say?"

Lillian nodded earnestly.

"Yes, ma'am. Faydree asked him that, too—I think she thought he was only saying it to upset her—and he said he'd read it in the newspaper."

"The *Wilmington Gazette*," Miriam put in, plainly not liking her sister to be hogging the limelight. "We don't read newspapers, of course, and since Daddy … well, we seldom have callers anymore." She glanced down involuntarily, her hand automatically pulling her neat apron straight, to hide a large patch on her skirt. The Bells were tidy and well-groomed, and their clothes had originally been of good quality but were growing noticeably threadbare round the hems and sleeves. I imagined that Mr. Bell's business affairs must have been substantially impaired, both by his absence and by the interference of war.

“My daughter had told me about the meeting.” Mrs. Bell had recovered herself so far as to sit up, her cup of wine clasped carefully in both hands. “So when my neighbor told me last night that he had met you by the docks … well, I didn’t know quite what to think, but supposed there had been a stupid mistake of some kind—really, you cannot believe anything you read these days, the newspapers are grown quite wild. And my neighbor mentioned that you were seeking passage to Scotland. So we began to think …” Her voice trailed off, and she dipped her face toward her wine cup, embarrassed.

Jamie rubbed a finger down his nose, thinking.

“Aye, well,” he said slowly. “It’s true that I mean to go to Scotland. And of course I should be pleased to inquire after your husband and assist him if I can. But I’ve no immediate prospect of obtaining passage. The blockade—”

“But we can get you a ship!” Lillian interrupted eagerly. “That’s the point!”

“We think we can get you *to* a ship,” Miriam corrected. She gave Jamie a considering, narrow-eyed sort of look, judging his character. He smiled faintly at her, acknowledging the scrutiny, and after a moment she returned the smile, grudging.

“You remind me of someone,” she said. Evidently, whoever it was, it was someone she liked, though, for she nodded to her mother, giving permission. Mrs. Bell sighed, her shoulders slumping a little in relief.

“I do still have friends,” she said, with a tinge of defiance. “In spite of … everything.”

Among these friends was a man named DeLancey Hall, who owned a fishing ketch, and—like half the town, probably—augmented his income with the odd bit of smuggling.

Hall had told Mrs. Bell that he expected the arrival of a ship from England, coming into Wilmington sometime within the next week or so—always assuming that it hadn’t been seized or sunk *en route*. As both ship and cargo were the property of one of the local Sons of Liberty, it could not venture into the Wilmington harbor, where two British warships were still crouched. It would, therefore, lurk just outside the harbor, where assorted small local craft would make rendezvous with it, unloading the cargo for surreptitious transport to shore. After which, the ship would sail north to New Haven, there to retrieve a cargo.

"And then will sail for Edinburgh!" Lillian put in, her face bright with hope.

"My father's kinsman there is named Andrew Bell," Miriam put in, lifting her chin a little. "He is very well known, I believe. He is a printer, and—"

"Wee Andy Bell?" Jamie's face had lighted up. "Him who printed the great encyclopedia?"

"The very man," Mrs. Bell said, surprised. "You do not mean to say you know him, Mr. Fraser?"

Jamie actually laughed, startling the Bells.

"Many's the evening I've passed in a tavern wi' Andy Bell," he assured them. "In fact, he's the man I mean to see in Scotland, for he's got my printing press, safe in his shop. Or at least I hope he does," he added, though his cheerfulness was unimpaired.

This news—along with a fresh round of wine—heartened the Bell women to an amazing extent, and when they left us at last, they were flushed with animation and chattering amongst themselves like a flock of amiable magpies. I glanced out the window and saw them making their way down the street, clustered together in hopeful excitement, staggering into the street occasionally from the effects of wine and emotion.

"We don't only sing but we dance just as good as we walk," I murmured, watching them go.

Jamie gave me a startled look.

"Archie Bell and the Drells," I explained. "Never mind. Do you think it's safe? This ship?"

"God, no." He shuddered, and kissed the top of my head. "Put aside the question of storms, woodworm, bad caulking, warped timbers, and the like, there's the English warships in the harbor, privateers outside the harbor—"

"I didn't mean that," I interrupted. "That's more or less par for the course, isn't it? I meant the owner—and this DeLancey Hall. Mrs.

Bell thinks she knows what their politics are, but …” But the thought of delivering ourselves—and our gold—so completely into the hands of unknown persons was unsettling.

“But,” he agreed. “Aye, I mean to go and speak to Mr. Hall first thing tomorrow morning. And maybe Monsieur Beauchamp, as well. For now, though—” He ran a hand lightly down my back and cupped my bottom. “Ian and the dog willna be back for an hour, at least. Will ye have another glass of wine?”

* * *

He looked like a Frenchman, Jamie thought. Which was to say, thoroughly out of place in New Bern. Beauchamp had just come out of Thorogood Northrup’s warehouse and stood in casual conversation with Northrup himself, the breeze off the water fluttering the silk ribbon that tied back his dark hair. Elegant, Claire had described him as, and he was that: not—not quite—foppish, but dressed with taste and expense. A good deal of expense, he thought.

“He looks like a Frenchman,” Fergus observed, echoing his thoughts. They were seated next to the window in the Whinbush, a middling tavern that catered to the needs of fishermen and warehouse laborers, and whose atmosphere was composed of equal parts beer, sweat, tobacco, tar, and aged fish guts.

“Is that his ship?” Fergus asked, a frown creasing his brow as he nodded toward the very trim black-and-yellow sloop that rocked gently at anchor, some distance out.

“It’s the ship he travels in. Couldna say whether he owns it. Ye dinna ken his face, though?”

Fergus leaned into the window, nearly flattening his own face against the wavery panes in an attempt to get a better look at Monsieur Beauchamp.

Jamie, beer in hand, studied Fergus’s face in turn. Despite having lived in Scotland since the age of ten, and in America for the last ten years or more, Fergus himself still looked French, he thought. It was something more than a matter of feature; something in the bone itself, perhaps.

The bones of Fergus's face were pronounced, with a jaw sharp enough to cut paper, an imperiously beaked nose, and eye sockets set deep under the ridges of a high brow. The thick dark hair brushed back from that brow was threaded with gray, and it gave Jamie a queer moment to see that; he carried within himself a permanent image of Fergus as the ten-year-old orphaned pickpocket he had rescued from a Paris brothel, and that image sat oddly on the gaunt, handsome face before him.

"No," Fergus said at last, sitting back on the bench and shaking his head. "I have never seen him."

Fergus's deep-set dark eyes were alive with interest and speculation. "No one else in the town knows him, either. Though I *have* heard that he had made inquiries for this Claudel Fraser"—his nostrils flared with amusement; Claudel was his own birth name, and the only one he had, though Jamie thought likely no one had ever used it outside Paris or anytime in the last thirty years—"in Halifax and Edenton, as well."

Jamie opened his mouth to observe that he hoped Fergus had been careful in his inquiries, but thought better of it, and drank his beer instead. Fergus hadn't been surviving as a printer in these troublous times by having a lack of discretion.

"Does he remind ye of anyone?" he asked instead. Fergus gave him a brief look of surprise, but returned to his neck-craning before settling back, shaking his head.

"No. Should he?"

"I dinna think so." He didn't, but was glad of Fergus's corroboration. Claire had told him her thought—that the man might be some relation of hers, perhaps a direct ancestor. She had tried to be casual about it, dismiss the idea even as she spoke it, but he'd seen the eager light in her eyes and been touched. The fact that she had no family or close kin in her own time had always struck him as a dreadful thing, even while he realized that it had much to do with her devotion to him.

He'd looked as carefully as he could, with that in mind, but saw nothing in Beauchamp's face or carriage that reminded him much of Claire—let alone Fergus.

He didn't think *that* thought—that Beauchamp might be some actual relation to himself—had crossed Fergus's mind. Jamie was reasonably sure that Fergus thought of the Frasers of Lallybroch as his only family, other than Marsali and the children, whom he loved with all the fervor of his passionate nature.

Beauchamp was taking his leave of Northrup now, with a very Parisian bow, accompanied by a graceful flutter of his silk handkerchief. Fortuitous that the man had happened to step out of the warehouse just in front of them, Jamie thought. They'd planned to go and have a keek at him later in the day, but his timely appearance saved them having to go and look for him.

"It's a good ship," Fergus observed, his attention deflected to the sloop called *Huntress*. He glanced back at Jamie, considering. "You're sure you do not wish to investigate the possibility of passage with Monsieur Beauchamp?"

"Aye, I'm sure," Jamie said dryly. "Put myself and my wife in the power of a man I dinna ken and whose motives are suspect, in a wee boat on a wide sea? Even a man who didna suffer from seasickness might boggle at that prospect, no?"

Fergus's face split in a grin.

"Milady proposes to stick you full of needles again?"

"She does," Jamie replied, rather crossly. He hated being stabbed repeatedly, and disliked being obliged to appear in public—even within the limited confines of a ship—bristling with spines like some outlandish porcupine. The only thing that would make him do it was the sure knowledge that if he didn't, he'd be puking his guts out for days on end.

Fergus didn't notice his discontent, though; he was leaning into the window again.

"Nom d'nom …" he said softly, with such an expression of apprehension that Jamie turned on the bench at once to look.

Beauchamp had proceeded some way down the street, but was still in sight. He had come to a stop, though, and appeared to be executing a sort of ungainly jig. This was sufficiently odd, but what was more disturbing was that Fergus's son Germain was crouched in the street directly in front of the man, and seemed to be hopping to and fro in the manner of an agitated toad.

These peculiar gyrations continued for a few seconds longer and then came to an end, Beauchamp now standing still, but waving his arms in expostulation, while Germain seemed to be groveling in front of the man. The boy stood up, though, tucking something into his shirt, and after a few moments' conversation, Beauchamp laughed and put out his hand. They exchanged a brief bow and handshake, and Germain came down the street toward the Whinbush while Beauchamp continued on his course.

Germain came in and, spotting them, slid onto the bench beside his father, looking pleased with himself.

"I've met that man," he said without preamble. "The man who wants Papa."

"Aye, we saw," Jamie said, brows raised. "What the devil were ye doing with him?"

"Well, I saw him coming, but I did not think he would stop and talk to me if I only shouted at him. So I tossed Simon and Peter into his path."

"Who—" Jamie began, but Germain was already groping within the depths of his shirt. Before Jamie could finish the sentence, the boy had produced two sizable frogs, one green and one a sort of vile yellow color, who huddled together on the bare boards of the table, goggling in a nervous manner.

Fergus cuffed Germain round the ear.

"Take those accursed creatures off the table, before we are thrown out of here. No wonder you are covered in warts, consorting with *les grenouilles*!"

"Grandmère told me to," Germain protested, nonetheless scooping up his pets and returning them to captivity.

"She did?" Jamie was not usually startled anymore by his wife's cures, but this seemed odd, even by her standards.

"Well, she said there was nothing to do for the wart on my elbow except rub it with a dead frog and bury it—the frog, I mean—at a crossroads at midnight."

"Oh. I think she might possibly have been being facetious. What did the Frenchman say to ye, then?"

Germain looked up, wide-eyed and interested.

"Oh, he's not a Frenchman, *Grandpère*."

A brief pulse of astonishment went through him.

"He's not? Ye're sure?"

"Oh, aye. He cursed most blasphemous when Simon landed on his shoe—but not the way Papa does." Germain aimed a bland look at his father, who looked disposed to cuff him again, but desisted at Jamie's gesture. "He is an Englishman. I'm sure."

"He cursed *in* English?" Jamie asked. It was true; Frenchmen often invoked vegetables when cursing, not infrequently mingled with sacred references. English cursing generally had nothing to do with saints, sacraments, or cucumbers, but dealt with God, whores, or excrement.

"He did. But I cannot say *what* he said, or Papa will be offended. He has very pure ears, Papa," Germain added, with a smirk at his father.

"Leave off deviling your father and tell me what else the man said."

"Aye, well," Germain said obligingly. "When he saw it was no but a pair o' wee froggies, he laughed and asked me was I taking them home for my dinner. I said no, they were my pets, and asked him was it his ship out there, because everyone said so and it was a bonny thing, no? I was making out to be simple, aye?" he explained, in case his grandfather might not have grasped the stratagem.

Jamie suppressed a smile.

"Verra clever," he said dryly. "What else?"

"He said no, the ship is not his but belongs to a great nobleman in France. And I of course said, oh, who was that? And he said it is the Baron Amandine."

Jamie exchanged looks with Fergus, who looked surprised and raised one shoulder in a shrug.

"I asked then how long he might remain, for I should like to bring my brother down to see the ship. And he says he will sail tomorrow on the evening tide, and asked me—but he was joking, I could tell—

if I wished to come and be a cabin boy on the voyage. I told him no, my frogs suffer from seasickness—like my grandfather.” He turned the smirk on Jamie, who eyed him severely.

“Has your father taught ye *‘Ne petez pas plus haute que votre cul’*?”

“Mama will wash your mouth out with soap if you say things like that,” Germain informed him virtuously. “Do you want me to pick his pocket? I saw him go into the inn on Cherry Street. I could—”

“You could not,” Fergus said hastily. “And do not say such things where people can hear. Your mother will assassinate both of us.”

Jamie felt a cold prickle at the back of his neck, and glanced hastily round to make sure that no one *had* heard.

“Ye’ve been teaching him to—”

Fergus looked mildly shifty.

“I thought it a pity that the skills should be lost. It is a family legacy, you might say. I do not let him steal things, of course. We put them back.”

“We’ll have a word in private later, I think,” Jamie said, giving the pair of them a look full of menace. Christ, if Germain had been caught at it … He’d best put the fear of God into the two of them before they both ended up pilloried, if not hanged from a tree outright for theft.

“What about the man you were actually *sent to* find?” Fergus asked his son, seizing the chance of deflecting Jamie’s ire.

“I found him,” Germain said, and nodded toward the door. “There he is.”

* * *

Delancey Hall was a small, neat man, with the quiet, nose-twitching manner of a church mouse. Anything less like a smuggler to look at could scarcely have been imagined—which, Jamie thought, was likely a valuable attribute in that line of business.

“A shipper of dry goods” was the way Hall discreetly described his business. “I facilitate the finding of ships for specific cargoes. Which is no easy matter these days, gentlemen, as you may well suppose.”

"I do indeed." Jamie smiled at the man. "I have nay cargo to ship, but I am in hopes that ye might know of a situation that would suit. Myself, my wife, and my nephew seek passage to Edinburgh." His hand was under the table, in his sporran. He had taken some of the gold spheres and flattened them with a hammer, into irregular disks. He took three of these and, moving only slightly, placed them on Hall's lap.

The man didn't change expression in the slightest, but Jamie felt the hand dart out and seize the disks, weigh them for an instant, and then vanish into his pocket.

"I think that might be possible," he said blandly. "I know a captain departing from Wilmington in about two weeks' time, who might be induced to carry passengers—for a consideration."

Sometime later, they walked back toward the printshop, Jamie and Fergus together, discussing the probabilities of Hall's being able to produce a ship. Germain wandered dreamily in front of them, zigzagging to and fro in response to whatever was going on inside his remarkably fertile brain.

Jamie's own brain was more than occupied. Baron Amandine. He knew the name, but had no face to go with it, nor did he recall the context in *which* he knew it. Only that he had encountered it at some point, in Paris. But when? When he had attended the *université* there … or later, when he and Claire—yes. That was it; he'd heard the name at court. But no matter how he cudgeled his brain, it would give up no further information.

"D'ye want me to speak to this Beauchamp?" Jamie asked abruptly. "I could perhaps find out what he means toward you."

Fergus's mouth drew in a bit, then relaxed as he shook his head.

"No," he said. "I said I had heard this man had made inquiries concerning me in Edenton?"

"Ye're sure it *is* you?" Not that the ground in North Carolina crawled with Claudels, but still …

"I think so, yes." Fergus spoke very softly, with an eye on Germain, who had started emitting soft croaks, evidently conversing with the frogs in his shirt. "The person who told me of this said that man had not only a name, but a small information, of sorts. That the

Claudel Fraser he sought had been taken from Paris by a tall red-haired Scotsman. Named James Fraser. So I think you cannot speak to him, no."

"Not without exciting his attention, no," Jamie agreed. "But … we dinna ken what his purpose is, but it may be something of great advantage to ye, aye? How likely is it that someone in France would go to the trouble and expense of sending someone like him to do ye harm, when they could be content just to leave ye be in America?" He hesitated. "Perhaps … the Baron Amandine is some relation to ye?"

The notion seemed the stuff of romances, and likely the sheerest moonshine. But at the same time, Jamie was at a loss to think of some sensible reason for a French nobleman to be hunting a brothel-born bastard across two continents.

Fergus nodded, but didn't reply at once. He was wearing his hook today, rather than the bran-stuffed glove he wore for formal occasions, and delicately scratched his nose with the tip before answering.

"For a long time," he said at last, "when I was small, I pretended to myself that I was the bastard of some great man. All orphans do this, I think," he added dispassionately. "It makes life easier to bear, to pretend that it will not always be as it is, that someone will come and restore you to your rightful place in the world."

He shrugged.

"Then I grew older, and knew this was not true. No one would come to rescue me. But then—" He turned his head and gave Jamie a smile of surpassing sweetness.

"Then I grew older still, and discovered that, after all, it was true. I *am* the son of a great man."

The hook touched Jamie's hand, hard and capable.

"I wish for nothing more."

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AE FOND KISS

Wilmington, colony of North Carolina
April 18, 1777

The headquarters of the *Wilmington Gazette* were easy to find. The embers had cooled, but the all-too-familiar reek of burning was still thick in the air. A roughly dressed gentleman in a slouch hat was poking through the charred timbers in a dubious way, but left off at Jamie's hailing him and made his way out of the wreckage, lifting his feet high in ginger avoidance.

"Are ye the proprietor of the newspaper, sir?" Jamie asked, extending a hand to help him over a pile of half-burnt books that sprawled over the threshold. "My sympathies, if so."

"Oh, no," the man replied, wiping smudges of soot from his fingers onto a large, filthy handkerchief, which he then passed to Jamie. "Amos Crupp, he'd be the printer. He's gone, though—lit out when they burnt the shop. I'm Herbert Longfield; I own the land. Did own the shop," he added, with a rueful glance behind him. "You wouldn't be a salvor, would you? Got a nice lump of iron, there."

Fergus and Marsali's printing press was now evidently the sole press in operation between Charleston and Newport. The *Gazette's* press stood twisted and blackened amid the wreckage: still recognizable, but beyond salvage as anything save scrap.

"How long ago did it happen?" I asked.

"Night before last. Just after midnight. It was well a-gone before the bucket brigade could get started."

"An accident with the furnace?" Jamie asked. He bent and picked up one of the scattered pamphlets.

Longfield laughed cynically.

"Not from around here, are you? You said you were looking for Amos?" He glanced warily from Jamie to me and back again. He wasn't likely to confide anything to strangers of unknown political affiliations.

"James Fraser," Jamie said, reaching out to shake his hand firmly. "My wife, Claire. Who was it? The Sons of Liberty?"

Longfield's eyebrows arched high.

"You really aren't from around here." He smiled, but not happily. "Amos was with the Sons. Not quite one of 'em, maybe, but of their mind. I told him to walk a narrow road with what he wrote and what he printed in the paper, and he mostly tried. But these days, it doesn't take much. A whisper of treason, and a man's beaten half to death in the street, tarred and feathered, burnt out—killed, even."

He eyed Jamie consideringly.

"So you didn't know Amos. May I ask what your business with him was?"

"I had a question regarding a bit of news that was published in the *Gazette*. Ye say Crupp's gone. D'ye ken where I might find him? I mean him nay ill," he added.

Mr. Longfield glanced thoughtfully at me, apparently gauging the prospects that a man bound on political violence would bring his wife along. I smiled, trying to look as respectably charming as possible, and he smiled uncertainly back. He had a long upper lip that gave him the aspect of a rather worried camel, this being substantially enhanced by his eccentric dentition.

"No, I don't," he said, turning back to Jamie with the air of a man making up his mind. "He did have a business partner, though, and a devil. Might be that one of them would know what you're looking for?"

Now it was Jamie's turn to size up Longfield. He made his own mind up in an instant, and handed the pamphlet to me.

"It might be. A small item of news regarding a house fire in the mountains was published last year. I wish to discover who might have given that item to the newspaper.”

Longfield frowned, puzzled, and scratched at his long upper lip, leaving a smudge of soot.

“I don’t recall that, myself. But then—well, I tell you what, sir. I was bound to see George Humphries—that’s Amos’s business partner—after looking over the premises …” He looked over his shoulder, grimacing. “Why don’t you come along with me and ask your question?”

“That’s most obliging of ye, sir.” Jamie flicked an eyebrow at me, as a signal that I was no longer required for window dressing and thus might go about my own business. I wished Mr. Longfield good day, accordingly, and went to forage in the fleshpots of Wilmington.

Business here was somewhat better than it was in New Bern. Wilmington had a deepwater harbor, and while the English blockade had of necessity affected importing and exporting, local boats and coastal packets still came into the port. Wilmington also was substantially larger and still boasted a thriving market in the town square, where I spent a pleasant hour collecting herbs and picking up local gossip, before acquiring a cheese roll for my lunch, whereupon I wandered down to the harbor to eat it.

I strolled casually along, hoping to spot the vessel that might be carrying us to Scotland, but saw nothing at anchor that looked in any way large enough for such a voyage. But of course—DeLancey Hall had said that we would need to embark on a small ship, perhaps his own fishing ketch, and slip out of the harbor to rendezvous with the larger ship at sea.

I sat down on a bollard to eat, drawing a small crowd of interested seagulls, who floated down like overweight snowflakes to surround me.

“Think again, mate,” I said, pointing a monitory finger at one particularly intransigent specimen, who was sidling toward my feet, eyeing my basket. “It’s *my* lunch.” I still had the half-burnt pamphlet Jamie had handed me; I flapped it vigorously at the gulls, who whirled up in a screech of alarm but then resettled round me, at a slightly more respectful distance, beady eyes all focused on the roll in my hand.

“Ha,” I said to them, and moved the basket behind my feet, just in case. I kept a good grip on my roll and one eye on the gulls. The other was free to survey the harbor. A British man-of-war was anchored a little way out, and the sight of the Union Jack flying from its bow gave me a peculiarly paradoxical feeling of pride and unease.

The pride was reflexive. I’d been an Englishwoman all my life. I’d served Great Britain in hospitals, on battlefields—in duty and with honor—and I’d seen many of my countrymen and women fall in that same service. While the Union Jack I saw now was slightly different in design to the one I’d lived with, it was identifiably the same flag, and I felt the same instinctive lift of the heart at sight of it.

At the same time, I was all too aware of the menace that that flag now posed to me and mine. The ship’s upper gunports were open; evidently some drill was being conducted, for I saw the cannon rolled rapidly in and out, in succession, blunt snouts poking out, then drawing in, like the heads of pugnacious gophers. There had been *two* men-of-war in the harbor the day before; the other had gone … where? On a particular mission—or merely cruising restlessly up and down outside the harbor mouth, ready to board, seize, fire upon, or sink any ship that looked suspicious?

I couldn’t think of anything that would look more suspicious than the ship belonging to Mr. Hall’s smuggling friend.

I thought again of the mysterious Mr. Beauchamp. France was still neutral; we would be a good deal safer in a ship flying French colors. Safer from the depredations of the British Navy, at least. As for Beauchamp’s own motives … I reluctantly accepted Fergus’s desire to have nothing to do with the man, but still wondered what on earth Beauchamp’s interest in Fergus could be.

I also still wondered whether he might have any connection to my own family of Beauchamps, but there was no way of knowing; Uncle Lamb had done a rudimentary family genealogy, I knew—mostly for my sake—but I’d paid no attention to it. Where was it now? I wondered. He’d given it to me and Frank when we married, neatly typed up and put in a manila folder.

Perhaps I'd mention Mr. Beauchamp in my next letter to Brianna. She'd have all our old family records—the boxes of ancient income-tax forms, the collections of her own schoolwork and art projects.… I smiled at the memory of the clay dinosaur she'd made at the age of eight, a toothy creature leaning drunkenly to one side, a small cylindrical object hanging from its jaws.

"That's a mammal he's eating," she had informed me.

"What happened to the mammal's legs?" I'd asked.

"They fell off when the dinosaur stepped on it."

The memory had distracted me for a moment, and a bold gull swooped low and struck my hand, knocking the last remnant of my roll to the ground, where it was instantly engulfed by a shrieking crowd of its fellows.

I said a bad word—the gull had left a bleeding scratch across the back of my hand—and, picking up the pamphlet, flung it into the midst of the scrabbling birds. It hit one of them in the head, and the bird rolled over in a mad flutter of wings and pages that dispersed the mob, who all flapped off, yelling gull curses, leaving not a crumb behind.

"Ha," I said again, with a certain grim satisfaction. With some obscure twentieth-century inhibition against littering—certainly no such notions existed here—I retrieved the pamphlet, which had come apart into several pieces, and tidied them back into a rough rectangle.

An Examination of Mercy, it was titled, with a subtitle reading, *Thoughts upon the Nature of Divine Compassion, its Manifestation within the Human Bosom, and the Instruction of its Inspiration to the Improvement of the Individual and Mankind*. Possibly not one of Mr. Crupp's bestselling titles, I thought, stuffing it into the end of my basket.

Which led me to another thought. I wondered whether Roger would see it in an archive someday. I rather thought he might.

Did that mean that we—or I—ought to be doing things on purpose to ensure our appearance in said record? Given that most of the things that made the press in any era were war, crime, tragedy, and other hideous disasters, I rather thought not. My few brushes with notoriety had not been pleasant, and the last thing I wanted Roger to find was a report of my being hanged for bank robbery, executed for witchcraft, or having been pecked to death by vengeful gulls.

No, I concluded. I'd best just tell Bree about Mr. Beauchamp and the Beauchamp family genealogy, and if Roger wanted to poke about in *that*, well and good. Granted, I'd never know if he found Mr. Percival in the list, but if so, Jem and Mandy would have a little further knowledge of their family tree.

Now, where was it, that folder? The last time I'd seen it, it had been in Frank's office, sitting on his filing cabinet. I remembered it distinctly, because Uncle Lamb had rather whimsically drawn what I assumed to be the family coat of—

"I beg your pardon, madam," a deep voice said respectfully behind me. "I see that you—"

Jarred abruptly from my memory, I turned blankly toward the voice, thinking vaguely that I knew—

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" I blurted, leaping to my feet. "You!"

I took a step backward, stumbled over the basket, and nearly fell into the harbor, saved only by Tom Christie's instinctive grab for my arm.

He jerked me away from the edge of the quay and I fell against his chest. He recoiled as though I were made of molten metal, then seized me in his arms, pressed me hard against himself, and kissed me with passionate abandon.

He broke off, peered into my face, and gasped, "You're dead!"

"Well, no," I said, stunned into apology.

"I beg—I beg your pardon," he managed, letting his arms drop. "I—I—I—" He looked white as a ghost, and I rather thought *he* might fall into the harbor. I doubted that I looked much better, but I did at least have my feet under me.

"You'd better sit down," I said.

"I—not here," he said abruptly.

He was right. The quay was a *very* public place, and our little *rencontre* had attracted considerable notice. A couple of idlers were staring openly, nudging each other, and we were collecting slightly less-obvious glances from the traffic of merchants, seamen, and dock laborers going about their business. I was beginning to recover from the shock, enough to think.

"You have a room? Oh, no—that won't do, will it?" I could imagine all too well what sorts of stories would be flying round town within minutes of our leaving the docks; if we left and repaired to Mr. Christie's—I couldn't think of him presently as anything but "Mr. Christie"—room …

"The ordinary," I said firmly. "Come on."

* * *

It was only a few minutes' walk to Symonds' ordinary, and we passed those minutes in total silence. I stole occasional glances at him, though, both to assure myself that he *wasn't* a ghost and to assess his current situation.

The latter seemed tolerable; he was decently dressed in a dark gray suit, with clean linen, and if he was not fashionable—I bit my lip at the thought of Tom Christie being fashionable—he was at least not shabby.

Otherwise, he looked very much as I'd last seen him—well, no, I corrected myself. He actually looked much better. I'd last seen him in the extremity of exhausted grief, shredded by the tragedy of his daughter's death and its subsequent complications. My last sight of him had been on the *Cruizer*, the British ship on which Governor Martin had taken refuge when he was driven out of the colony, almost two years ago.

At that point, Mr. Christie had declared, first, his intent to confess to the murder of his daughter—of which I was accused—secondly, his love for me, and thirdly, his intent to be executed in my place. All of which made his sudden resurrection not merely surprising but more than slightly awkward.

Adding to the awkwardness was the question as to what—if anything—he knew about the fate of his son, Allan, who *had* been responsible for Malva Christie's death. The circumstances were nothing that any father ought to have to hear, and panic gripped me at the thought that I might have to tell him.

I glanced at him again. His face was deeply lined, but he was neither gaunt nor overtly haunted. He wore no wig, though his wiry salt-and-pepper hair was close-clipped as always, matching his neatly trimmed beard. My face tingled, and I barely kept myself from scrubbing my hand across my mouth to erase the feeling. He was clearly disturbed—well, so was I—but had got himself back under control, and opened the door of the ordinary for me with impeccable courtesy. Only the twitch of a muscle beside his left eye betrayed him.

I felt as though my entire body was twitching, but Phaedre, serving in the taproom, glanced at me with no more than mild interest and a cordial nod. Of course, she'd never met Thomas Christie, and while she'd doubtless heard about the scandal following my arrest, she wouldn't connect the gentleman accompanying me with it.

We found a table by the window in the dining room, and sat down.

"I thought you were dead," I said abruptly. "What did you mean, you thought *I* was dead?"

He opened his mouth to answer but was interrupted by Phaedre, who came to serve us, smiling pleasantly.

"I get you something, sir, ma'am? You wanting food? We've a nice ham today, roast taters, and Mrs. Symonds's special mustard 'n raisin sauce to go along of it."

"No," Mr. Christie said. "I—just a cup of cider, if ye please."

"Whisky," I said. "A lot of it."

Mr. Christie looked scandalized, but Phaedre only laughed and whisked off, the grace of her movement attracting the quiet admiration of most of the male patrons.

"Ye haven't changed," he observed. His eyes traveled over me, intense, taking in every detail of my appearance. "I ought to have known ye by your hair."

His voice was disapproving, but tinged with a reluctant amusement; he had always been vociferous in his disapproval of my refusal to wear a cap or otherwise restrain my hair. “Wanton,” he’d called it.

“Yes, you should,” I said, reaching up to smooth the hair in question, which was considerably the worse for recent encounters. “You didn’t recognize me ’til I turned round, though, did you? What made you speak to me?”

He hesitated, but then nodded toward my basket, which I’d set on the floor beside my chair.

“I saw that ye had one of my tracts.”

“What?” I said blankly, but looked where he was looking and saw the singed pamphlet on *Divine Compassion* sticking out from under a cabbage. I reached down and pulled it out, only now noticing the author: *by Mr. T. W. Christie, MA, University of Edinburgh*.

“What does the ‘W’ stand for?” I asked, laying it down.

He blinked.

“Warren,” he replied rather gruffly. “Where in God’s name did ye come from?”

“My father always claimed he’d found me under a cabbage leaf in the garden,” I replied flippantly. “Or did you mean today? If so—the King’s Arms.”

He was beginning to look a little less shocked, his normal irritation at my lack of womanly decorum drawing his face back into its usual stern lines.

“Don’t be facetious. I was told that ye were dead,” he said, accusingly. “You and your entire family were burnt up in a fire.”

Phaedre, delivering the drinks, glanced at me, eyebrows raised.

“She ain’t looking too crispy round the edges, sir, if you pardon my mention of it.”

“Thank ye for the observation,” he said between his teeth. Phaedre exchanged a glance of amusement with me, and went off again, shaking her head.

“Who told you that?”

“A man named McCreary.”

I must have looked blank, for he added, “from Brownsville. I met him here—in Wilmington, I mean—in late January. He had just come down from the mountain, he said, and told me of the fire. *Was* there a fire?"

"Well, yes, there was," I said slowly, wondering whether—and how much—to tell him of the truth of *that*. Very little, in a public place, I decided. "Maybe it was Mr. McCreary, then, who placed the notice of the fire in the newspaper—but he can't have." The original notice had appeared in 1776, Roger had said—nearly a year before the fire.

"I placed it," Christie said. Now it was my turn to blink.

"You what? When?" I took a good-sized mouthful of whisky, feeling that I needed it more than ever.

"Directly I heard of it. Or—well, no," he corrected. "A few days thereafter. I … was very much distressed at the news," he added, lowering his eyes and looking away from me for the first time since we'd sat down.

"Ah. I'm sorry," I said, lowering my own voice, and feeling rather apologetic—though why I should feel apologetic for not having been burnt up …

He cleared his throat.

"Yes. Well. It, er, seemed to me that some … something should be done. Some formal observance of your—your passing." He looked up then, gray eyes direct. "I could not abide the thought that you—all of you," he added, but it was clearly an afterthought, "should simply vanish from the earth, with no formal marking of the—the event."

He took a deep breath, and a tentative sip of the cider.

"Even if a proper funeral had been held, there would be no point in my returning to Fraser's Ridge, even if I—well. I could not. So I thought I would at least make a record of the event here. After all," he added more softly, looking away again, "I could not lay flowers on your grave."

The whisky had steadied me a bit, but also rasped my throat and made it difficult to talk when hampered by emotion. I reached out and touched his hand briefly, then cleared my throat, finding momentarily neutral ground.

"Your hand," I said. "How is it?"

He looked up, surprised, but the taut lines of his face relaxed a bit.

"Very well, I thank you. See?" He turned over his right hand, displaying a large Z-shaped scar upon the palm, well healed but still pink.

"Let me see."

His hand was cold. With an assumption of casualness, I took it in mine, turning it, bending the fingers to assess their flexibility and degree of movement. He was right: it *was* doing well; the movement was nearly normal.

"I—did the exercises you set me," he blurted. "I do them every day."

I looked up to find him regarding me with a sort of anguished solemnity, his cheeks now flushed above his beard, and realized that this ground was not nearly so neutral as I'd thought. Before I could let go his hand, it turned in mine, covering my fingers—not tightly, but sufficiently that I couldn't free myself without a noticeable effort.

"Your husband." He stopped dead, having obviously not thought of Jamie at all to this point. "He is alive, too?"

"Er, yes."

To his credit, he didn't grimace at this news, but nodded, exhaling.

"I am—glad to hear it."

He sat in silence for a moment, looking at his undrunk cider. He was still holding my hand. Without looking up, he said in a low voice, "Does he … know? What I—how I—I did not tell him the reason for my confession. Did you?"

"You mean your"—I groped for some suitable way of putting it—"your, um, very gallant feelings toward me? Well, yes, he does; he was very sympathetic toward you. He knowing from experience what it's like to be in love with me, I mean," I added tartly.

He almost laughed at that, which gave me an opportunity to extricate my fingers. He did not, I noticed, inform me that he *wasn't* in love with me any longer. Oh, dear.

“Well, anyway, we aren’t dead,” I said, clearing my throat again. “What about you? Last time I saw you …”

“Ah.” He looked less than happy, but gathered himself, changing gears, and nodded. “Your rather hasty departure from the *Cruizer* left Gover nor Martin without an amanuensis. Discovering that I was to some degree literate”—his mouth twisted a little—“and could write a fair hand, thanks to your ministrations, he had me removed from the brig.”

I wasn’t surprised at that. Driven completely out of his colony, Governor Martin was obliged to conduct his business from the tiny captain’s cabin of the British ship on which he had taken refuge. Such business perforce consisted entirely of letters—all of which must be not only composed, drafted, and fair-copied but then reproduced several times each. A copy was required first for the governor’s own official correspondence files, then for each person or entity having some interest in the subject of the letter, and, finally, several additional copies of any letters going to England or Europe must be made, because they would be sent by different ships, in hopes that at least one copy would make it through, should the others be sunk, seized by pirates or privateers, or otherwise lost in transit.

My hand ached at the mere memory of it. The exigencies of bureaucracy in a time before the magic of Xerox had kept me from rotting in a cell; no wonder they had freed Tom Christie from durance vile as well.

“You see?” I said, rather pleased. “If I hadn’t fixed your hand, he’d likely have had you either executed on the spot or at least sent back to shore and immured in some dungeon.”

“I am duly grateful,” he said, with extreme dryness. “I was not, at the time.”

Christie had spent several months as *de facto* secretary to the governor. In late November, though, a ship had arrived from England, bearing orders to the governor—essentially ordering him to subdue the colony, though offering no troops, armament, or useful suggestions as to how this might be managed—and an official secretary.

"At this point, the governor was faced with the prospect of disposing of me. We had … become acquainted, working in such close quarters …"

"And as you were no longer quite an anonymous murderer, he didn't want to yank the quill out of your hand and hang you from the yardarm," I finished for him. "Yes, he's actually rather a kind man."

"He is," Christie said thoughtfully. "He has not had an easy time of it, poor fellow."

I nodded. "He told you about his little boys?"

"Aye, he did." His lips compressed—not out of anger, but to control his own emotion. Martin and his wife had lost three small sons, one after another, to the plagues and fevers of the colony; small wonder if hearing of the governor's pain had reopened Tom Christie's own wounds. He shook his head a little, though, and returned to the subject of his deliverance.

"I had … told him a bit about … about my daughter." He picked up the barely touched cup of cider and drank half of it off at a swallow, as if dying of thirst. "I admitted privately to him that my confession had been false—though I stated also that I was certain of your innocence," he assured me. "And if you should ever be arrested again for the crime, my confession would stand."

"Thank you for that," I said, and wondered with still greater uneasiness whether he knew who *had* killed Malva. He had to have suspected, I thought—but that was a long way from having to know, let alone having to know why. And no one knew where Allan was now—save me, Jamie, and Young Ian.

Governor Martin had received this admission with some relief, and decided that the only thing to do in the circumstances was to put Christie ashore, there to be dealt with by the civil authorities.

"There *aren't* any civil authorities anymore," I said. "Are there?"

He shook his head.

"None capable of dealing with such a matter. There are still gaols and sheriffs, but neither courts nor magistrates. Under the circumstances"—he almost smiled, dour though the expression was

—"I thought it a waste of time to try to find someone to whom to surrender myself."

"But you said you had sent a copy of your confession to the newspaper," I said. "Weren't you, er, received coldly by the people in New Bern?"

"By the grace of divine Providence, the newspaper there had ceased its operations before my confession was received by them, the printer being a Loyalist. I believe Mr. Ashe and his friends called upon him, and he wisely decided to find another mode of business."

"Very wise," I said dryly. John Ashe was a friend of Jamie's, a leading light of the local Sons of Liberty, and the man who had instigated the burning of Fort Johnston and effectively driven Governor Martin into the sea.

"There was some gossip," he said, looking away again, "but it was overwhelmed by the rush of public events. No one quite knew what had happened on Fraser's Ridge, and after a time it became fixed in everyone's mind simply that some personal tragedy had befallen me. People came to regard me with a sort of … sympathy." His mouth twisted; he wasn't the sort to receive sympathy with any graciousness.

"You seem to be thriving," I said, with a nod at his suit. "Or at least you aren't sleeping in the gutter and living off discarded fish heads from the docks. I had no idea that the tract-writing business was profitable."

He'd gone back to his normal color during the previous conversation, but flushed up again at this—with annoyance, this time.

"It isn't," he snapped. "I take pupils. And I—I preach of a Sunday."

"I can't imagine anyone better for the job," I said, amused. "You've always had a talent for telling everyone what's wrong with them in Biblical terms. Have you become a clergyman, then?"

His color grew deeper, but he choked down his choler and answered me evenly.

"I was nearly destitute upon my arrival here. Fish heads, as you say—and the occasional bit of bread or soup given by a New Light congregation. I came in order to eat, but remained for the service out of courtesy. I thus heard a sermon given by the Reverend Peterson. It—remained with me. I sought him out, and we … spoke. One thing led to another.” He glanced up at me, his eyes fierce. “The Lord does answer prayer, ye know.”

“What had you prayed for?” I asked, intrigued.

That took him back a bit, though it had been an innocent question, asked from simple curiosity.

“I—I—” He broke off and stared at me, frowning. “You are a most uncomfortable woman!”

“You wouldn’t be the first person to think so,” I assured him. “And I don’t mean to pry. I just … wondered.”

I could see the urge to get up and leave warring with the compulsion to bear witness to whatever had happened to him. But he was a stubborn man, and he stayed put.

“I … asked why,” he said at last, very evenly. “That’s all.”

“Well, it worked for Job,” I observed. He looked startled, and I nearly laughed; he was always startled at the revelation that anyone other than himself had read the Bible. He got a grip, though, and glowered at me in something more like his usual fashion.

“And now you are here,” he said, making it sound like an accusation. “I suppose your husband has formed a militia—or joined one. I have had enough of war. I am surprised that your husband has not.”

“I don’t think it’s precisely a taste for war,” I said. I spoke with an edge, but something in him compelled me to add, “It’s that he feels he was born to it.”

Something flickered deep in Tom Christie’s eyes—surprise? Acknowledgment?

“He is,” he said quietly. “But surely—” He didn’t finish the thought, but instead asked abruptly, “What are you doing here, though? In Wilmington?”

“Looking for a ship,” I said. “We’re going to Scotland.”

I’d always had a talent for startling him, but this one took the biscuit. He had lifted his mug to drink, but upon hearing my declaration, abruptly spewed cider across the table. The subsequent choking and wheezing attracted a good bit of attention, and I sat back, trying to look less conspicuous.

"Er … we'll be going to Edinburgh, for my husband's printing press," I said. "Is there anyone you'd like me to see for you? Deliver a message, I mean? You have a brother there, I think you said."

His head shot up and he glared at me, eyes streaming. I felt a spasm of horror at the sudden recollection and could have bitten my tongue off at the root. His brother had had an affair with Tom's wife while Tom was imprisoned in the Highlands after the Rising, and his wife had then poisoned his brother and subsequently been executed for witchcraft.

"I'm so sorry," I said, low-voiced. "Forgive me, please. I didn't—"

He seized my hand in both of his, so hard and so abruptly that I gasped, and a few heads turned curiously in our direction. He paid no attention, but leaned toward me across the table.

"Listen to me," he said, low and fierce. "I have loved three women. One was a witch and a whore, the second only a whore. Ye well may be a witch yourself, but it makes nay whit o' difference. The love of you has led me to my salvation, and to what I thought was my peace, once I thought ye dead."

He stared at me and shook his head slowly, his mouth going tight for a moment in the seam of his beard.

"And here you are."

"Er … yes." I felt once more as though I should apologize for not being dead, but didn't.

He drew a deep breath and let it out in a sigh.

"I shall have no peace while ye live, woman."

Then he lifted my hand and kissed it, stood up, and walked away.

"Mind," he said, turning at the door to look back at me over his shoulder, "I dinna say I regret it."

I picked up the glass of whisky and drained it.

* * *

I went about the rest of my errands in a daze—not entirely induced by whisky. I hadn't any idea what to think of the resurrection of

Tom Christie, but was thoroughly unsettled by it. Still, there seemed nothing, really, to *do* about him, and so I went on to the shop of Stephen Moray, a silversmith from Fife, to commission a pair of surgical scissors. Luckily, he proved an intelligent man, who appeared to understand both my specifications and the purpose behind them, and promised to have the scissors made within three days. Heartened by this, I ventured a slightly more problematic commission.

“Needles?” Moray knit his white brows in puzzlement. “Ye dinna require a silversmith for—”

“Not sewing needles. These are longer, quite thin, and without an eye. They have a medical purpose. And I should like you to make them from this.”

His eyes went wide as I laid what appeared to be a gold nugget the size of a walnut on the counter. It was in fact a bit of one of the French ingots, hacked off and hammered into a lump, then rubbed with dirt by way of disguise.

“My husband won it in a card game,” I said, with the tone of mingled pride and apology that seemed appropriate to such an admission. I didn’t want anyone thinking that there was gold on Fraser’s Ridge—in any form. Boosting Jamie’s reputation as a card player wasn’t likely to do any harm; he was already well known—if not quite notorious—for his abilities in that line.

Moray frowned a bit over the written specifications for the acupuncture needles, but agreed to make them. Luckily, he appeared never to have heard of voodoo dolls, or I might have had a bit more trouble.

With the visit to the silversmith and a quick trip through the market square for spring onions, cheese, peppermint leaves, and anything else available in the herbal line, it was late afternoon before I came back to the King’s Arms.

Jamie was playing cards in the taproom, with Young Ian watching over his shoulder, but he saw me come in and, giving over his hand to Ian, came to take my basket, following me up the stairs to our room.

I turned round inside the door, but before I could speak, he said, “I know Tom Christie’s alive. I met him in the street.”

“He kissed me,” I blurted.

“Aye, I heard,” he said, eyeing me with what might have been amusement. For some reason, I found that very annoying. He saw *that*, and the amusement deepened.

“Like it, did ye?”

“It wasn’t funny!”

The amusement didn’t go away, but it retreated a bit.

“Did ye like it?” he repeated, but now there was curiosity in his voice, rather than teasing.

“No.” I turned away abruptly. “That—I hadn’t time to … to think about it.”

Without warning, he put a hand behind my neck and kissed me briefly. And by simple reflex, I slapped him. Not hard—I’d tried to pull back even as I struck—and clearly I hadn’t hurt him. I was as surprised and discomfited as though I’d knocked him flat.

“Doesna take much thought, does it?” he said lightly, and stepped back, surveying me with interest.

“I’m sorry,” I said, feeling simultaneously mortified and angry—and angrier still in that I didn’t understand why I *was* angry in the slightest. “I didn’t mean to—I’m sorry.”

He tilted his head to one side, eyeing me.

“Had I better go and kill him?”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.” I fidgeted, untying my pocket, not wanting to meet his eyes. I was prickly, discomfited, irritated—and the more discomfited by not really knowing *why*.

“It was an honest question, Sassenach,” he said quietly. “Not a serious one, maybe—but honest. I think ye maybe owe me an honest answer.”

“Of course I don’t want you to kill him!”

“D’ye want me to tell you why ye slapped me, instead?”

“Why—” I stood with my mouth open for a second, then closed it. “Yes. I do.”

“I touched ye against your will,” he said, his eyes intent on mine. “Didn’t I?”

"You did," I said, and breathed a little easier. "And so did Tom Christie. And, no, I *didn't like* it."

"But not on Tom's account," he finished. "Poor fellow."

"He wouldn't want your sympathy," I said tartly, and he smiled.

"He would not. But he's got it, nonetheless. Still, I'm glad of it," he added.

"Glad of what? That he's alive—or—surely not that he thinks he's in love with me?" I said, incredulous.

"Dinna belittle his feelings, Sassenach," he said, more quietly. "He's laid down his life for ye once. I'd trust him to do it again."

"I didn't want him to do it the first time!"

"You're bothered," he said, in a tone of clinical interest.

"Yes, I am bloody bothered!" I said. "And"—the thought struck me and I gave him a hard look—"so are you." I recalled suddenly that he'd said he'd met Tom Christie in the street. What had Tom said to him?

He tilted his head in mild negation, but didn't deny it.

"I willna say I *like* Thomas Christie," he said consideringly, "but I respect him. And I *am* verra much pleased to find him alive. Ye didna do wrong to grieve him, Sassenach," he said gently. "I did, too."

"I hadn't even thought of that." In the shock of seeing him, I hadn't remembered, but I'd wept for him—and for his children. "I don't regret it, though."

"Good. The thing about Tom Christie," he went on, "is that he wants ye. Badly. But he doesna ken a thing about you."

"And you do." I left it somewhere between question and challenge, and he smiled. He turned and shot the bolt on the door, then crossed the room and drew the calico curtain on the one small window, casting the room into a pleasant blue dimness.

"Oh, I've need and want in plenty—but I've knowing, too." He was standing very close, close enough that I had to look up to him. "I've never kissed ye without knowing who ye were—and that's a thing poor Tom will never know." God, what *had* Tom told him?

My pulse, which had been jumping up and down, settled down to a quick, light thump, discernible in my fingertips.

"You didn't know a thing about me when you married me."

His hand closed gently on my behind.

"No?"

"Besides that, I mean!"

He made a small Scottish sound in his throat, not quite a chuckle.

"Aye, well, it's a wise man who kens what he doesna know—and I learn fast, *a nighean*."

He drew me gently close then, and kissed me—with thought and tenderness, with knowing—and with my full consent. It didn't obliterate my memory of Tom Christie's impassioned, blundering embrace, and I thought it wasn't meant to; it was meant to show me the difference.

"You *can't* be jealous," I said, a moment later.

"I can," he said, not joking.

"You can't possibly think—"

"I don't."

"Well, then—"

"Well, then." His eyes were dark as seawater in the dimness, but the expression in them was entirely readable, and my heart beat faster. "I ken what ye feel for Tom Christie—and he told me plain what he feels for you. Surely ye ken that love's nothing to do wi' logic, Sassenach?"

Knowing a rhetorical question when I heard one, I didn't bother answering that, but instead reached out and tidily unbuttoned his shirt. There was nothing I could reasonably say about Tom Christie's feelings, but I had another language in which to express my own. His heart was beating fast; I could feel it as though I held it in my hand. Mine was, too, but I breathed deep and took comfort in the warm familiarity of his body, the soft crispness of the cinnamon-colored hairs of his chest, and the gooseflesh that raised them under my fingers. While I was thus engaged, he slid his fingers into my hair, separating a lock which he viewed appraisingly.

"It's not gone white yet. I suppose I've a little time, then, before ye get too dangerous for me to bed."

"Dangerous, forsooth," I said, setting to work on the buttons of his breeks. I wished he had on his kilt. "Exactly what do you think I might do to you in bed?”

He scratched his chest consideringly, and rubbed absently at the tiny knot of scar tissue where he’d cut Jack Randall’s brand from his flesh.

“Well, so far, ye’ve clawed me, bitten me, stabbed me—more than once—and—”

“I have not stabbed you!”

“Ye did, too,” he informed me. “Ye stabbed me in the backside wi’ your nasty wee needle spikes—fifteen times! I counted—and then a dozen times or more in the leg with a rattlesnake’s fang.”

“I was saving your bloody life!”

“I didna say otherwise, did I? Ye’re no going to deny ye enjoyed it, though, are ye?”

“Well … not the rattlesnake fang, so much. As for the hypodermic …” My mouth twitched, despite myself. “You deserved it.”

He gave me a look of profound cynicism.

“Do nay harm, is it?”

“Besides, you were counting what I’d done to you in bed,” I said, neatly returning to the point. “You can’t count the shots.”

“I was in bed!”

“I wasn’t!”

“Aye, ye took unfair advantage,” he said, nodding. “I wouldna hold that against ye, though.”

He’d got my jacket off and was busily untying my laces, head bent in absorption.

“How’d you like it if *I* were jealous?” I asked the crown of his head.

“I’d like that fine,” he replied, breath warm on my exposed flesh. “And ye were. Of Laoghaire.” He looked up, grinning, eyebrow raised. “Maybe ye still are?”

I slapped him again, and this time I meant it. He could have stopped me but didn’t.

“Aye, that’s what I thought,” he said, wiping a watering eye. “Will ye come to bed wi’ me, then? It’ll be just us,” he added.

* * *

It was late when I woke; the room was dark, though a slice of fading sky showed at the top of the curtain. The fire hadn't yet been lit and the room was chilly, but it was warm and cozy under the quilts, snug against Jamie's body. He had turned onto his side, and I curled spoonlike against his back and put my arm over him, feeling the gentle rise and fall of his breath.

It *had* been just us. I'd worried, at the start, that the memory of Tom Christie and his awkward passion might fall between us—but Jamie, evidently thinking the same thing and determined to avoid any echo of Tom's embrace that might remind me, had started at the other end, kissing my toes.

Given the size of the room and the fact that the bed was jammed tightly into one end of it, he had been obliged to straddle me in order to do this, and the combination of having my feet nibbled and the view from directly behind and beneath a naked Scotsman had been sufficient to remove anything else from my head.

Warm, safe, and calm now, I could think about the earlier encounter without feeling threatened, though. And I *had* felt threatened. Jamie had seen that. *D'ye want me to tell you why ye slapped me?… I touched ye against your will.*

He was right; it was one of the minor aftereffects of what had happened to me when I had been abducted. Crowds of men made me nervous with no cause, and being grabbed unexpectedly made me recoil and jerk away in panic. Why hadn't I seen that?

Because I didn't want to think about it, that's why. I still didn't. What good would thinking do? Let things heal on their own, if they would.

But even things that heal leave scars. The evidence of that was literally in front of my face—pressed against it, in fact.

The scars on Jamie's back had faded into a pale spiderweb, with only a slight raised bit here or there, ridged under my fingers when we made love, like barbed wire beneath his skin. I remembered Tom Christie taunting him about them once, and my jaw tightened.

I laid a hand softly on his back, tracing one pale loop with my thumb. He twitched in his sleep and I stilled, hand flat.

What might be coming? I wondered. For him. For me. I heard Tom Christie's sarcastic voice: *I have had enough of war. I am surprised that your husband has not.*

"Well enough for *you,*" I muttered under my breath. "Coward." Tom Christie had been imprisoned as a Jacobite—which he was, but not a soldier. He'd been a commissary supply officer in Charles Stuart's army. He'd risked his wealth and his position—and lost both—but not his life or body.

Still, Jamie did respect him—which meant something, Jamie being no mean judge of character. And I knew enough from watching Roger to realize that becoming a clergyman was not the easy path that some people thought it. Roger was not a coward, either, and I wondered how he would find his path in the future?

I turned over, restless. Supper was being prepared; I could smell the rich, saltwater smell of fried oysters from the kitchen below, borne on a wave of woodsmoke and roasting potatoes.

Jamie stirred a little and rolled onto his back, but didn't wake. Time enough. He was dreaming; I could see the movement of his eyes, twitching beneath sealed lids, and the momentary tightening of his lips.

His body tightened, too, suddenly hard beside me, and I jerked back, startled. He growled low in his throat, and his body arched with effort. He was making strangled noises, whether shouting or screaming in his dream I didn't know, and didn't wait to find out.

"Jamie—wake up!" I said sharply. I didn't touch him—I knew better than to do that while he was in the grip of a violent dream; he'd nearly broken my nose once or twice. "Wake up!"

He gasped, caught his breath, and opened unfocused eyes. Plainly he didn't know where he was, and I spoke to him more gently, repeating his name, reassuring him that he was all right. He blinked, swallowed heavily, then turned his head and saw me.

"Claire," I said helpfully, seeing him groping for my name.

"Good," he said hoarsely. He closed his eyes, shook his head, and then opened them again. "All right, Sassenach?"

"Yes. You?"

He nodded, closing his eyes again briefly.

"Aye, fine. I was dreaming about the house burning. Fighting." He sniffed. "Is something burning?"

"Supper, at a guess." The savory smells from below had in fact been interrupted by the acrid stench of smoke and scorched food. "I think the stewpot boiled over."

"Perhaps we'll eat elsewhere tonight."

"Phaedre said Mrs. Symonds had baked ham with mustard and raisin sauce at noon. There might be some left. Are you all right?" I asked again. The room was cold, but his face and breast were sheened with sweat.

"Oh, aye," he replied, sitting up and rubbing his hands vigorously through his hair. "That sort of dream, I can live with." He shoved his hair out of his face and smiled at me. "Ye look like a milkweed puff, Sassenach. Were ye sleeping restless, too?"

"No," I told him, getting up and pulling my shift on before groping for my hairbrush. "It was the restless part *before* we fell asleep. Or do you not remember that bit?"

He laughed, wiped his face, and got up to use the chamber pot, then pulled his shirt on.

"What about the other dreams?" I asked abruptly.

"What?" He emerged from the shirt, looking quizzical.

"You said, 'That sort of dream, I can live with.' What about the ones you can't live with?"

I saw the lines of his face shiver like the surface of water when you've thrown a pebble into it, and on impulse, reached out and clutched his wrist.

"Don't hide," I said softly. I held his eyes with mine, keeping him from raising his mask. "Trust me."

He did look away then, but only to gather himself; he didn't hide. When he glanced back at me, it was all still there in his eyes—confusion, embarrassment, humiliation, and the vestiges of a pain long suppressed.

"I dream … sometimes …" he said haltingly, "about things that were done to me against my will." He breathed through his nose, deep, exasperated. “And I wake from it with a cockstand and my balls throbbing and I want to go and kill someone, starting with myself,” he ended in a rush, grimacing.

“It doesna happen often,” he added, giving me a brief, direct look. “And I never … I would never turn to you in the wake of such a thing. Ye should know that.”

I tightened my grip on his wrist. I wanted to say, *“You could—I wouldn’t mind,”* for that was the truth, and once I would have said it without hesitation. But I knew a great deal more now, and had it been me, had I ever dreamed of Harley Boble or the heavy, soft-bodied man and wakened from it aroused—and thank *God* I never had—no, the last thing I would ever have done would be to take that feeling and turn to Jamie, or use his body to purge it.

“Thank you,” I said instead, quietly. “For telling me,” I added. “And for the knife.”

He nodded, and turned to pick up his breeks.

“I like ham,” he said.

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20

I REGRET …

Long Island, colony of New York
September 1776

William wished he could speak to his father. It wasn't, he assured himself, that he wanted Lord John to exert any influence; certainly not. He just wanted a bit of practical advice. Lord John had returned to England, though, and William was on his own.

Well, not precisely on his own. He was at the moment in charge of a detachment of soldiers guarding a customs checkpoint on the edge of Long Island. He slapped viciously at a mosquito that lighted on his wrist, and, for once, obliterated it. He wished he could do the same to Clarewell.

Lieutenant Edward Markham, Marquis of Clarewell. Otherwise known—to William and a couple of his more intimate friends—as Chinless Ned, or the Ponce. William swatted at a crawling sensation on his own prominent jaw, noticed that two of his men had momentarily disappeared, and stalked toward the wagon they had been inspecting, bellowing their names.

Private Welch appeared from behind the wagon like a jack-in-the-box, looking startled and wiping his mouth. William leaned forward, sniffed his breath, and said briefly, "Charges. Where's Launfal?"

In the wagon, hastily concluding a bargain with the wagon's owner for three bottles of the contraband brandywine that gentleman was seeking to illicitly import. William, grimly slapping at the man-eating hordes of mosquitoes that swarmed out of the nearby marshes, arrested the wagoneer, summoned the other three men of his detail, and told them off to escort the smuggler, Welch, and Launfal to the sergeant. He took up a musket then and stood in the middle of the road, alone and ferocious, his attitude daring anyone to try to pass.

Ironically, though the road had been busy all morning, no one did try for some time, giving him opportunity to refocus his bad temper on the thought of Clarewell.

Heir of a *very* influential family, and one with intimate ties to Lord North, Chinless Ned had arrived in New York a week before William and likewise been placed on Howe's staff, where he had nestled cozily into the woodwork, smarming round General Howe—who, to his credit, tended to blink and stare hard at the Ponce, as though trying to remember who the devil he was—and Captain Pickering, the general's chief aide-de-camp, a vain man, and one much more susceptible to Ned's enthusiastic arse-creeping.

As a result, Chinless had been routinely bagging the choicer assignments, riding with the general on short exploratory expeditions, attending him in meetings with Indian dignitaries and the like, while William and several other junior officers were left to shuffle papers and kick their heels. Hard cheese, after the freedoms and excitements of intelligencing.

He could have stood the constraints of life in quarters and army bureaucracy. His father had schooled him thoroughly in the necessity of restraint in trying circumstances, the withstanding of boredom, the handling of dolts, and the art of icy politeness as a weapon. Someone lacking William's strength of character, though, had snapped one day and, unable to resist the possibilities for caricature conjured up by a contemplation of Ned's profile, had drawn a cartoon of Captain Pickering with his breeches round his ankles, engaged in lecturing the junior staff and apparently ignorant of the Ponce, emergent headfirst and smirking from Pickering's arse.

William had not drawn this bit of diversion—though he rather wished he had—but had been discovered laughing at it by Ned himself, who—in a rare show of manliness—had punched William in the nose. The resultant brawl had cleared the junior officers' quarters, broken a few inconsequent items of furniture, and resulted in William, dripping blood onto his shirtfront, standing to attention in front of a cold-eyed Captain Pickering, the scurrilous cartoon laid out in evidence on the desk.

William had, of course, denied authorship of the thing but declined to identify the artist. He'd used the icy-politeness thing, which had worked to the extent that Pickering had not in fact sent William to the stockade. Merely to Long Island.

"Frigging fart-catcher," he muttered, glaring at an approaching milkmaid with such ferocity that she stopped dead, then edged past him, eyeing him with a wide-eyed alarm that suggested she thought he might explode. He bared his teeth at her, and she emitted a startled squeak and scuttled off so fast that some of her milk slopped out of the buckets she carried on a yoke across her shoulders.

That made him repentant; he wished he could follow her and apologize. But he couldn't; a pair of drovers were coming down the road toward him, bringing in a herd of pigs. William took one look at the oncoming mass of heaving, squealing, spotted hog flesh, tatter-eared and mud-besmeared, and hopped nimbly up onto the bucket that served as his command post. The drovers waved gaily at him, shouting what might be either greetings or insults—he wasn't sure they were even speaking English, and didn't care to find out.

The pigs passed, leaving him amid a sea of hoof-churned mud, liberally scattered with fresh droppings. He slapped at the cloud of mosquitoes that had regathered inquisitively round his head, and thought that he'd had just about enough. He'd been on Long Island for two weeks—which was thirteen and a half days too long. Not quite long enough yet to make him apologize to either Chinless or the captain, though.

"Lickspittle," he muttered.

He did have an alternative. And the longer he spent out here with the mosquitoes, the more attractive it began to look.

It was far too long a ride from his customs outpost to headquarters to make the journey twice each day. In consequence, he'd been temporarily billeted on a man called Culper and his two sisters. Culper wasn't best pleased; his left eye began to twitch whenever he saw William, but the two elderly ladies made much of him, and he returned the favor when he could, bringing them the odd confiscated ham or flask of cambric. He'd come in the night before with a flitch of good bacon, to have Miss Abigail Culper inform him in a whisper that he had a visitor.

"Out a-smoking in the yard," she'd said, inclining her bonneted head toward the side of the house. "Sister wouldn't let him smoke in the house, I'm afraid."

He'd expected to find one of his friends, come to bear him company or perhaps with news of an official pardon that would bring him back from exile on Long Island. Instead, he'd found Captain Richardson, pipe in hand, meditatively watching the Culpers' rooster tread a hen.

"Pleasures of a bucolic life," the captain remarked, as the rooster fell off backward. The cock staggered to his feet and crowed in disheveled triumph, while the hen shook her feathers into order and resumed pecking as though nothing had happened. "Very quiet out here, is it not?"

"Oh, yes," William said. "Your servant, sir."

In fact, it was not. Miss Beulah Culper kept a half-dozen goats, who blatted day and night, though Miss Beulah assured William that they served to keep thieves out of the corncrib. One of the creatures at this point gave a wild braying laugh from its pen, causing Captain Richardson to drop his tobacco pouch. Several more of the goats commenced to utter loud *mehs*, as though jeering.

William bent and picked the pouch up, keeping his face tactfully blank, though his heart was pounding. Richardson hadn't come all the way out to Long Island simply to pass the time.

"Christ," Richardson muttered, with a look at the goats. He shook his head, and gestured toward the road. "Will you walk a bit with me, Lieutenant?"

William would, gladly.

"I heard a bit regarding your present situation." Richardson smiled. "I'll have a word with Captain Pickering, if you like."

"That's very kind of you, sir," William said. "But I'm afraid I can't apologize for something I haven't done."

Richardson waved his pipe, dismissing it. “Pickering’s got a short temper, but he doesn’t hold a grudge. I’ll see to it.”

“Thank you, sir.” *And what do you want in return? William* thought.

“There is a Captain Randall-Isaacs,” Richardson said casually, “who is traveling within the month to Canada, where he has some military business to transact. While there, though, it is possible that he will meet with … a certain person who may provide the army with valuable information. I have some reason to suppose that this person has little English, though—and Captain Randall-Isaacs, alas, has no French. A traveling companion fluent in that language might be … useful.”

William nodded, but asked no questions. Time enough for that, if he decided to accept Richardson’s commission.

They exchanged commonplaces for the remainder of the walk back, whereupon Richardson politely declined Miss Beulah’s invitation to take supper, and left with a reiterated promise to speak to Captain Pickering.

Should he do it? William wondered later, listening to Abel Culper’s wheezing snores below. The moon was full, and while the loft had no windows, he could feel its pull; he never could sleep when the moon was full.

Ought he to hang on in New York, in hopes either of improving his position, or at least of eventually seeing some action? Or cut his losses and take Richardson’s new commission?

His father would doubtless advise the former course of action; an officer’s best chance of advancement and notice lay in distinguishing himself in battle, not in the shady—and vaguely disreputable—realm of intelligencing. Still … the routine and constraints of the army chafed, rather, after his weeks of freedom. And he *had* been useful, he knew.

What difference could one lieutenant make, buried under the crushing weight of the ranks above him, perhaps given command of his own companies but still obliged to follow orders, never allowed to act according to his own judgment.… He grinned up at the rafters, dimly visible a foot above his face, thinking what his uncle Hal might have to say regarding the judgment of junior officers.

But Uncle Hal was much more than simply a career soldier; he cared passionately for his regiment: its welfare, its honor, the men under his command. William had not really thought beyond the immediate future in terms of his own career with the army. The American campaign wouldn't last long; what next?

He was rich—or would be, when he achieved his majority, and that wasn't far off, though it seemed like one of those pictures his father was fond of, with a vanishing perspective that led the eye into an impossible infinity. But when he *did* have his money, he could buy a better commission where he liked—perhaps a captaincy in the Lancers.… It wouldn't matter whether he'd done anything to distinguish himself in New York.

His father—William could hear him now, and put the pillow over his face to drown him out—would tell him that reputation depended often on the smallest of actions, the daily decisions made with honor and responsibility, not the huge drama of heroic battles. William was not interested in daily responsibility.

It was, however, much too hot to stay under the pillow, and he threw it off onto the floor with an irritable grunt.

"No," he said aloud to Lord John. "I'm going to Canada," and flopped back into his damp and lumpy bed, shutting eyes and ears against any further wise counsel.

* * *

A week later, the nights had grown chilly enough to make William welcome Miss Beulah's hearth and her oyster stew—and, thank God, cold enough to discourage the damned mosquitoes. The days were still very warm, though, and William found it almost a pleasure when his detail was told off to comb the shore in search of a supposed smuggler's cache that Captain Hanks had caught wind of.

"A cache of what?" Perkins asked, mouth hanging half open as usual.

"Lobsters," William answered flippantly, but relented at Perkins's look of confusion. "I don't know, but you'll probably recognize it if you find it. Don't drink it, though—come fetch me."

Smugglers' boats brought almost everything into Long Island, but the odds of the current rumor concerning a cache of bed linens or boxes of Dutch platters were low. Might be brandy, might be ale, but almost certainly something drinkable; liquor was by far the most profitable contraband. William sorted the men into pairs and sent them off, watching until they were a decent distance away before heaving a deep sigh and leaning back against a tree.

Such trees as grew near the shore here were runty twisted pines, but the sea wind moved pleasantly among their needles, soughing in his ears with a soothing rush. He sighed again, this time in pleasure, remembering just how much he liked solitude; he hadn't had any in a month. If he took Richardson's offer, though … Well, there'd be Randall-Isaacs, of course, but still—weeks on the road, free of the army constraints of duty and routine. Silence in which to think. No more Perkins!

He wondered idly whether he might be able to sneak into the junior officers' quarters and pound Chinless to a pulp before vanishing into the wilderness like a red Indian. Need he wear a disguise? Not if he waited 'til after dark, he decided. Ned might suspect, but couldn't prove anything if he couldn't see William's face. Was it cowardly to attack Ned in his sleep, though? Well, that was all right; he'd douse Chinless with the contents of his chamber pot to wake him up before setting in.

A tern swept by within inches of his head, startling him out of these enjoyable cogitations. His movement in turn startled the bird, which let out an indignant shriek at finding him not edible after all and sailed off over the water. He scooped up a pinecone and flung it at the bird, missing by a mile, but not caring. He'd send a note to Richardson this very evening, saying yes. The thought of it made his heart beat faster, and a sense of exhilaration filled him, buoyant as the tern's drift upon the air.

He rubbed sand off his fingers onto his breeches, then stiffened, seeing movement on the water. A sloop was tacking to and fro, just offshore. Then he relaxed, recognizing it—that villain Rogers.

"And what are *you* after, I should like to know?" he muttered. He stepped out onto the sandy edge of the shore and stood amid the marram grass, fists on his hips, letting his uniform be seen—just in case Rogers had somehow missed the sight of William's men strung all down the shore, reddish dots crawling over the sandy dunes like bedbugs. If Rogers had heard about the smuggler's cache, too, William meant to make sure Rogers knew that William's soldiers had rights over it.

Robert Rogers was a shady character who'd come slinking into New York a few months before and somehow wangled a major's commission from General Howe and a sloop from his brother, the admiral. Said he was an Indian fighter, and was fond of dressing up as an Indian himself. Effective, though: he'd recruited men enough to form ten companies of nattily uniformed rangers, but Rogers continued to prowl the coastline in his sloop with a small company of men as disreputable-looking as he was, looking for recruits, spies, smugglers, and—William was convinced—anything that wasn't nailed down.

The sloop came in a little closer, and he saw Rogers on deck: a dark-skinned man in his late forties, seamed and battered-looking, with an evil cast to his brow. He spotted William, though, and waved genially. William raised a civil hand in reply; if his men found anything, he might need Rogers to carry the booty back to the New York side—accompanied by a guard to keep it from disappearing *en route*.

There were a lot of stories about Rogers—some plainly put about by Rogers himself. But so far as William knew, the man's chief qualification was that he had at one point attempted to pay his respects to General Washington, who not only declined to receive him but had him slung unceremoniously out of the Continentals' camp and refused further entry. William considered this evidence of good judgment on the part of the Virginian.

Now what? The sloop had dropped her sails, and was putting out a small boat. It was Rogers, rowing over on his own. William's wariness was roused at once. Still, he waded in and grabbed the gunwale, helping Rogers to drag the boat up onto the sand.

"Well met, Lieutenant!" Rogers grinned at him, gap-toothed but self-confident. William saluted him briefly and formally.

“Major.”

“Your fellows looking for a cache of French wine, by chance?”

Damn, he’d already found it!

“We had word of smuggling activities taking place in this vicinity,” William said stiffly. “We are investigating.”

“ ’Course you are,” Rogers agreed amiably. “Save you a bit of time? Try up the other way …” He turned, lifting his chin toward a cluster of dilapidated fishing shacks a quarter mile in the distance. “It’s—”

“We did,” William interrupted.

“It’s buried in the sand behind the shacks,” Rogers finished, ignoring the interruption.

“Much obliged, Major,” William said, with as much cordiality as he could manage.

“Saw two fellows a-burying it last evening,” Rogers explained. “But I don’t think they’ve come back for it yet.”

“You’re keeping an eye on this stretch of shore, I see,” William observed. “Anything in particular you’re looking for? Sir,” he added.

Rogers smiled.

“Since you mention it, *sir*, I am. There’s a fellow walking round asking questions of a damnable inquisitive sort, and I should very much like to talk to him. If might be as you or your men should spot the man …?”

“Certainly, sir. Do you know his name, or his appearance?”

“Both, as it happens,” Rogers replied promptly. “Tall fellow, with scars upon his face from a gunpowder explosion. You’d know him if you saw him. A rebel, from a rebel family in Connecticut—Hale is his name.”

William experienced a sharp jolt to the midsection.

“Oh, you *have* seen him?” Rogers spoke mildly, but his dark eyes had sharpened. William felt a stab of annoyance that his face should be so readable, but inclined his head.

“He passed the customs point yesterday. Very voluble fellow,” he added, trying to recall the details of the man. He’d noticed the scars: faded welts that mottled the man’s cheeks and forehead. “Nervous; he was sweating and his voice shook—the private who stopped him thought he had tobacco or something else concealed, and made him turn out his pockets, but he hadn't any contraband." William closed his eyes, frowning in the effort of recall. "He had papers.… I saw them." He'd seen them, all right, but had not had the chance to examine them himself, as he'd been concerned with a merchant bringing in a cartload of cheeses, bound—he said—for the British commissary. By the time he'd done with that, the man had been waved on.

"The man who spoke with him …" Rogers was peering down the shore toward the desultory searchers in the distance. "Which is he?"

"A private soldier named Hudson. I'll call him for you if you like," William offered. "But I doubt he can tell you much about the papers; he can't read."

Rogers looked vexed at this, but nodded for William to call Hudson anyway. Thus summoned, Hudson verified William's account of the matter, but could recall nothing regarding the papers, save that one of the sheets had had some numbers written upon it. "And a drawing, I think," he added. "Didn't notice what it was, though, sir, I'm afraid."

"Numbers, eh? Good, good," Rogers said, all but rubbing his hands together. "And did he say whence he was bound?"

"To visit a friend, sir, as lived near Flushing." Hudson was respectful, but looked curiously at the ranger; Rogers was barefoot and dressed in a pair of ratty linen breeches with a short waistcoat made of muskrat fur. "I didn't ask the friend's name, sir. Didn't know as it might be important."

"Oh, I doubt it is, Private. Doubt the friend exists at all." Rogers chuckled, seeming delighted at the news. He stared into the hazy distance, eyes narrowed as though he might distinguish the spy among the dunes, and nodded slowly in satisfaction.

"Very good," he said softly, as though to himself, and was turning to go when William stopped him with a word.

"My thanks for the information regarding the smuggler's cache, sir." Perkins had overseen the digging whilst William and Rogers were interviewing Hudson, and was now chivying a small group of soldiers along, several sand-caked casks rolling bumpily down the dunes before them. One of the casks hit a hard spot in the sand, bounced into the air, and landed hard, rolling off at a crazy angle, pursued with whoops by the soldiers.

William flinched slightly, seeing this. If the wine survived its rescue, it wouldn't be drinkable for a fortnight. Not that that was likely to stop anyone trying.

"I should like to request permission to bring the seized contraband aboard your sloop for transport," he said formally to Rogers. "I will accompany and deliver it myself, of course."

"Oh, of course." Rogers seemed amused, but nodded agreement. He scratched his nose, considering something. "We shan't be sailing back until tomorrow—d'you want to come along of us tonight? You might be of help, as you've actually seen the fellow we're after."

William's heart leapt with excitement. Miss Beulah's stew paled in comparison with the prospect of hunting a dangerous spy. And being in at the capture could do nothing but good to his reputation, even if the major share of the credit was Rogers's.

"I should be more than pleased to assist you in any way, sir!"

Rogers grinned, then eyed him up and down.

"Good. But you can't go spy-catching like that, Lieutenant. Come aboard, and we'll fit you out proper."

* * *

William proved to be six inches taller than the tallest of Rogers's crew, and thus ended up awkwardly attired in a flapping shirt of rough linen—the tails left out by necessity, to disguise the fact that the top buttons of his flies were left undone—and canvas breeches that threatened to emasculate him should he make any sudden moves. These could not be buckled, of course, and William elected to emulate Rogers and go barefoot, rather than suffer the indignity of striped stockings that left his knees and four inches of hairy shin exposed between stocking-top and breeches.

The sloop had sailed to Flushing, where Rogers, William, and four men disembarked. Rogers maintained an informal recruiting office here, in the back room of a merchant's shop in the high road of the village. He vanished into this establishment momentarily, returning with the satisfactory news that Hale had not been seen in Flushing and was likely therefore stopping at one of the two taverns to be found at Elmsford, two or three miles from the village.

The men accordingly walked in that direction, dividing for the sake of caution into smaller groups, so that William found himself walking with Rogers, a ragged shawl slung round his shoulders against the evening chill. He had not shaved, of course, and fancied that he looked a proper companion for the ranger, who had added a slouch hat with a dried flying fish stuck through the brim to his costume.

"Do we pose as oystermen, or carters, perhaps?" William asked. Roger grunted in brief amusement and shook his head.

"You'd not pass for either, should anyone hear you talk. Nay, lad, keep your mouth shut, save to put something in it. The boys and I 'ull manage the business. All you need do is nod, if you spot Hale."

The wind had come onshore and blew the scent of cold marshes toward them, spiced with a distant hint of chimney smoke. No habitation was yet in sight, and the fading landscape was desolate around them. The cold, sandy dirt of the road was soothing to his bare feet, though, and he did not find the bleakness of their surroundings depressing in the least; he was too eager at thought of what lay ahead.

Rogers was silent for the most part, pacing with his head down against the cold breeze. After a bit, though, he said casually, "I carried Captain Richardson over from New York. And back."

William thought momentarily of saying, *"Captain Richardson?"* in tones of polite ignorance, but realized in time that this wouldn't do.

"Did you?" he said instead, and kept his own silence. Rogers laughed.

"Fly cove, aren't you? Perhaps he's right, then, choosing you."

"He told you that he had chosen me for … something?"

"Good lad. Never give anything away for free—but sometimes it pays to oil the wheels a bit. Nay, Richardson's a downy bird—he said not a word about you. But I know who he is, and what he does.

And I know where I left him. He wasn't calling upon the Culpers, I'll warrant that."

William made an indeterminate sound of interest in his throat. Plainly, Rogers meant to say something. Let him say, then.

"How old are you, lad?"

"Nineteen," William said, with an edge. "Why?"

Rogers shrugged, his outline little more than a shadow among many in the gathering dusk.

"Old enough to risk your neck on purpose, then. But you might want to think twice before saying yes to whatever Richardson's suggesting to you."

"Assuming that he did indeed suggest something—again, why?"

Rogers touched his back, urging him forward.

"You're about to see that for yourself, lad. Come on."

* * *

The warm smoky light of the tavern and the smell of food embraced William. He had not been really conscious of cold, dark, or hunger, his mind intent on the adventure at hand. Now, though, he drew a long, lingering breath, filled with the scent of fresh bread and roast chicken, and felt like an insensible corpse, newly roused from the grave and restored to full life upon the day of Resurrection.

The next breath stopped dead in his throat, though, and his heart gave a tremendous squeeze that sent a surge of blood through his body. Rogers, next to him, made a low warning hum in his throat, and glanced casually round the room as he led the way to a table.

The man, the spy, was sitting near the fire, eating chicken and chatting with a couple of farmers. Most of the men in the tavern had glanced at the door when the newcomers appeared—more than one of them blinked at William—but the spy was so absorbed in his food and conversation that he didn't even look up.

William had taken little notice of the man when first seen, but would have known him again at once. He was not so tall as William himself, but several inches more than the average, and striking in appearance, with flax-blond hair and a high forehead, this displaying the flash-mark scars of the gunpowder accident Rogers had mentioned. He had a round, broad-brimmed hat, which lay on the table beside his plate, and wore an unremarkable plain brown suit.

Not in uniform … William swallowed heavily, not entirely in respect of his hunger and the smell of food.

Rogers sat down at the next table, motioning William to a stool across from him, and raised his brows in question. William nodded silently, but didn't look again in Hale's direction.

The landlord brought them food and beer, and William devoted himself to eating, glad that he was not required to join in conversation. Hale himself was relaxed and voluble, telling his companions that he was a Dutch schoolmaster from New York.

"Conditions there are so unsettled, though," he said, shaking his head, "that the majority of my students have gone—fled with their families to relatives in Connecticut or New Jersey. I might suppose similar—or perhaps worse—conditions obtain here?"

One of the men at his table merely grunted, but the other blew out his lips with a derisive sound.

"You might say so. Goddam lobsterbacks seize everything as hasn't been buried. Tory, Whig, or rebel, makes no goddam difference to those greedy bastards. Speak a word of protest, and you're like to be struck over the head or dragged off to the goddam stockade, so as to make it easier for 'em. Why, one hulking brute stopped me at the customs point last week, and took my whole load of apple cider and the goddam wagon to boot! He—"

William choked on a bite of bread, but didn't dare cough. Christ, he hadn't recognized the man—the man's back was to him—but he recalled the apple cider well enough. Hulking brute?

He reached for his beer and gulped, trying to dislodge the chunk of bread; it didn't work and he coughed silently, feeling his face go purple and seeing Rogers frowning at him in consternation. He gestured feebly at the cider farmer, struck himself in the chest, and, rising, made his way out of the room as quietly as possible. His disguise, excellent as it was, would in no way conceal his essential hulkingness, and if the man were to recognize him as a British soldier, bang went the whole enterprise.

He managed not to breathe until he was safely outside, where he coughed until he thought the bottom of his stomach might force its way out of his mouth. At last he stopped, though, and leaned against the side of the tavern, taking long, gasping breaths. He wished he'd had the presence of mind to bring some beer with him, instead of the chicken leg he held.

The last of Rogers's men had come along the road, and with a baffled glance at William, went inside. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and, straightening up, crept round the side of the building until he reached a window.

The new arrivals were taking up their own spot, near to Hale's table. Standing carefully to one side to save being spotted, he saw that Rogers had now insinuated himself into conversation with Hale and the two farmers, and appeared to be telling them a joke. The apple-cider fellow hooted and pounded the table at the end; Hale made an attempt at a grin, but looked frankly shocked; the jest must have been indelicate.

Rogers leaned back, casually including the whole table with the sweep of a hand, and said something that had them nodding and murmuring agreement. Then he leaned forward, intent, to ask Hale something.

William could catch only snatches of the conversation, above the general noise of the tavern and the whistling of the cold wind past his ears. So far as he could gather, Rogers was professing to be a rebel, his own men nodding agreement from their table, gathering closer to form a secretive knot of conversation about Hale. Hale looked intent, excited, and very earnest. He might easily have been a schoolmaster, William thought—though Rogers had said he was a captain in the Continental army. William shook his head; Hale didn't look any sort of a soldier.

At the same time, he hardly looked the part of a spy, either. He was noticeable, with his fair good looks, his flash-scarred face, his … height.

William felt a small, cold lump in the pit of his stomach. Christ. Was that what Rogers had meant? Saying that there was something William should be warned of, with regard to Captain Richardson's errands, and that he would see for himself, tonight?

William was quite accustomed both to his own height and to people's automatic responses to it; he quite liked being looked up to. But on his first errand for Captain Richardson, it had never struck him for a moment that folk might recall him on account of it—or that they could describe him with the greatest of ease. Hulking brute was no compliment, but it *was* unmistakable.

With a sense of incredulity, he heard Hale not only reveal his own name and the fact that he held rebel sympathies, but also confide that he was making observations regarding the strength of the British presence—this followed by an earnest inquiry as to whether the fellows he spoke with might have noticed any redcoated soldiers in the vicinity?

William was so shocked by this recklessness that he put his eye to the edge of the window frame, in time to see Rogers glance round the room in exaggerated caution before leaning in confidentially, tapping Hale upon the forearm, and saying, "Why, now, sir, I have, indeed I have, but you must be more wary of what you say in a public place. Why, anyone at all might hear you!"

"Pshaw," said Hale, laughing. "I am among friends here. Have we not all just drunk to General Washington and to the King's confusion?" Sobering, but still eager, he pushed his hat aside and waved to the landlord for more beer. "Come, have another, sir, and tell me what you have seen."

William had a sudden overwhelming impulse to shout, *"Shut your mouth, you ninnyhammer!" or* to throw something at Hale through the window. But it was far too late, even could he actually have done it. The chicken leg he had been eating was still in his hand; noticing, he tossed it away. His stomach was knotted, and there was a taste of sick at the back of his throat, though his blood still boiled with excitement.

Hale was making still more damaging admissions, to the admiring encouragements and patriotic shouts of Rogers's men, all of whom were playing out their parts admirably, he had to admit. How long would Rogers let it go on? Would they take him here, in the tavern? Probably not—some others of those present were doubtless rebel sympathizers, who might be moved to intervene on Hale's behalf, did Rogers go to arrest him in their midst.

Rogers appeared in no hurry. Nearly half an hour of tedious raillery followed, Rogers giving what appeared to be small admissions, Hale making much larger ones in return, his slab-sided cheeks glowing with beer and excitement over the information he was gaining. William's legs, feet, hands, and face were numb, and his shoulders ached with tension. A crunching sound nearby distracted him from his close attendance on the scene within, and he glanced down, suddenly aware of a penetrating aroma that had somehow insinuated itself without his cognizance.

"Christ!" He jerked back, nearly putting his elbow through the window, and fell into the wall of the tavern with a heavy thump. The skunk, disturbed in its enjoyment of the discarded chicken leg, instantly elevated its tail, the white stripe making the movement clearly visible. William froze.

"What was that?" someone said inside, and he heard the scrape of a bench being pushed back. Holding his breath, he edged one foot to the side, only to be frozen in place again by a faint thumping noise and the quivering of the white stripe. Damn, the thing was stamping its feet. An indication of imminent attack, he'd been told—and told by people whose sorry condition made it apparent that they spoke from experience.

Feet were coming toward the door, someone coming to investigate. Christ, if they found him eavesdropping outside … He gritted his teeth, nerving himself to what duty told him must be a self-sacrificial lunge out of sight—but if he did, what then? He could not rejoin Rogers and the others, reeking of skunk. But if—

The opening of the door put paid to all speculations. William lunged for the corner of the building by simple reflex. The skunk also acted by reflex—but, startled by the opening of the door, apparently adjusted its aim in consequence. William tripped over a branch and sprawled at full length into a heap of discarded rubbish, hearing a full-throated shriek behind him as the night was made hideous.

William coughed, choked, and tried to stop breathing long enough to get out of range. He gasped from necessity, though, and his lungs were filled with a substance that went so far beyond the concept of smell as to require a completely new sensory description. Gagging and spluttering, eyes burning and watering from the assault, he stumbled into the darkness on the other side of the road, from which vantage point he witnessed the skunk making off in a huff and the skunk's victim collapsed in a heap on the tavern's step, making noises of extreme distress.

William hoped it wasn't Hale. Beyond the practical difficulties involved in arresting and transporting a man who had suffered such an assault, simple humanity compelled one to think that hanging the victim would be adding insult to injury.

It wasn't Hale. He saw the flaxen hair shining in the torchlight among the heads that were thrust out in inquiry, only to be drawn hastily back again.

Voices reached him, discussing how best to proceed. Vinegar, it was agreed, was needed, and in quantity. The victim had by now sufficiently recovered himself as to crawl off into the weeds, from which the sounds of violent retching proceeded. This, added to the mephitis still tainting the atmosphere, caused a number of other gentlemen to vomit, as well, and William felt his own gorge rise, but controlled it by vicious nose-pinching.

He was nearly chilled through, though thankfully aired out, by the time the victim's friends saw him off—driving him like a cow along the road, as no one would touch him—and the tavern emptied, no one having further appetite for either food or drink in such an atmosphere. He could hear the landlord cursing to himself as he leaned out to take down the torch that burned beside the hanging sign and plunge it, sizzling, into the rain barrel.

Hale bade a general good night, his educated voice distinctive in the dark, and set off along the road toward Flushing, where doubtless he meant to seek a bed. Rogers—William knew him by the fur waistcoat, identifiable even by starlight—lingered near the road, silently collecting his men about him as the crowd departed. Only when everyone was out of sight did William venture to join them.

“Yes?” Rogers said, seeing him. “All present, then. Let’s go.” And they moved off, a silent pack coursing down the road, intent upon the track of their unknowing prey.

* * *

They saw the flames from the water. The city was burning, mostly the district near the East River, but the wind was up, and the fire was spreading. There was much excited speculation among Rogers’s men; had rebel sympathizers fired the city?

“Just as likely drunken soldiers,” Rogers said, his voice grimly dispassionate. William felt queasy, seeing the red glow in the sky. The prisoner was silent.

They found General Howe—eventually—in his headquarters at Beekman House outside the city, red-eyed from smoke, lack of sleep, and a rage that was buried bone-deep. It stayed buried, though, for the moment. He summoned Rogers and the prisoner into the library where he had his office, and—after one brief, astonished look at William’s attire—sent him to his bed.

Fortnum was in the attic, watching the city burn from the window. There was nothing to be done about it. William came to stand beside him. He felt strangely empty, somehow unreal. Chilled, though the floor was warm under his bare feet.

An occasional fountain of sparks shot up now and then, as the flames struck something particularly flammable, but from such a distance there was really little to be seen but the bloody glow against the sky.

“They’ll blame us, you know,” Fortnum said after a bit.

* * *

The air was still thick with smoke at noon the next day.

He couldn’t take his eyes off Hale’s hands. They had clenched involuntarily as a private soldier tied them, though he had put them behind his back with no protest. Now his fingers were clasped tight together, so hard that the knuckles had gone white.

Surely the flesh protested, William thought, even if the mind had resigned itself. His own flesh was protesting simply being here, his skin twitching like a horse plagued by flies, his bowels cramping and loosening in horrid sympathy—they said a hanged man's bowels gave way; would Hale's? Blood washed through his face at the thought, and he looked at the ground.

Voices made him look up again. Captain Moore had just asked Hale whether he wished to make any remarks. Hale nodded; evidently he had been prepared for this.

William felt that he should himself have been prepared by now; Hale had spent the last two hours in Captain Moore's tent, writing notes to be delivered to his family, while the men assembled for the hasty execution shifted their weight from foot to foot, waiting. He wasn't prepared at all.

Why was it different? He'd seen men die, some horribly. But this preliminary courtesy, this formality, this … obscene *civility*, all conducted with the certain knowledge of imminent and shameful death. Deliberation. The awful deliberation, that was it.

"At last!" Clarewell muttered in his ear. "Bloody get on with it; I'm starving."

A young black man named Billy Richmond, a private soldier whom William knew casually, was sent up the ladder to tie the rope to the tree. He came down now, nodding to the officer.

Now Hale was mounting the ladder, the sergeant major steadying him. The noose was round his neck, a thick rope, new-looking. Didn't they say new ropes stretched? But it was a high ladder …

William was sweating like a pig, though the day was mild. He mustn't close his eyes or look away. Not with Clarewell watching.

He tightened the muscles of his throat and concentrated again on Hale's hands. The fingers were twisting, helplessly, though the man's face was calm. They were leaving faint damp marks on the skirt of his coat.

A grunt of effort and a grating noise; the ladder was pulled away, and there was a startled *whoof!* from Hale as he dropped. Whether it was the newness of the rope or something else, his neck did not break cleanly.

He'd refused the hood, and so the spectators were obliged to watch his face for the quarter of an hour it took him to die. William stifled a horrific urge to laugh from pure nerves, seeing the pale blue eyes bulge to bursting point, the tongue thrust out. So surprised. He looked so surprised.

There was only a small group of men assembled for the execution. He saw Richardson a little way away, watching with a look of remote abstraction. As though aware of his glance, Richardson looked sharply up at him. William looked away.

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THE MINISTER’S CAT

Lallybroch
October 1980

She was up early, before the children, though she knew this was foolish—whatever Roger had gone to Oxford for, it would take him a good four or five hours to drive there, and the same back. Even if he had left at dawn—and he might not be able to, if he hadn’t arrived in time to do whatever it was the day before—he couldn’t be home before midday at the earliest. But she’d slept restlessly, dreaming one of those monotonous and inescapably unpleasant dreams, this one featuring the sight and sound of the tide coming in, lapping wave by lapping wave by lapping … and wakened at first light feeling dizzy and unwell.

It had occurred to her for one nightmare instant that she might be pregnant—but she’d sat up abruptly in bed, and the world had settled at once into place around her. None of that sense of having shoved one foot through the looking glass that early pregnancy entails. She set one foot cautiously out of bed, and the world—and her stomach—stayed steady. Good, then.

Still, the feeling of unease—whether from the dream, Roger’s absence, or the specter of pregnancy—stayed with her, and she went about the daily business of the household with a distracted mind.

She was sorting socks toward midday when she became aware that things were quiet. Quiet in a way that made the hair rise on the back of her neck.

"Jem?" she called. "Mandy?"

Total silence. She stepped out of the laundry, listening for the usual thumps, bangings, and screeches from above, but there was not the slightest sound of trampling feet, toppling blocks, or the high-pitched voices of sibling warfare.

"Jem!" she shouted. "Where are you?"

No reply. The last time this had happened, two days before, she'd discovered her alarm clock in the bottom of the bathtub, neatly disassembled into its component parts, and both children at the far end of the garden, glowing with unnatural innocence.

"*I* didn't do it!" Jem had declared virtuously, hauled into the house and faced with the evidence. "And Mandy's too little."

"Too widdle," Mandy had agreed, nodding her mop of black curls so ferociously as to obscure her face.

"Well, I don't think Daddy did it," Bree said, raising a stern brow. "And I'm sure it wasn't Annie Mac. Which doesn't leave very many suspects, does it?"

"Shussspects, shussspects," Mandy said happily, enchanted by the new word.

Jem shook his head in resigned fashion, viewing the scattered gears and dismembered hands.

"We must have got piskies, Mama."

"Pishkies, pishkies," Mandy chirped, pulling her skirt up over her head and yanking at her frilly underpants. "Needa go pishkie, Mama!"

In the midst of the urgency occasioned by this statement, Jem had faded artfully, not to be seen again until dinner, by which time the affair of the alarm clock had been superseded by the usual fierce rush of daily events, not to be recalled until bedtime, when Roger remarked the absence of the alarm clock.

"Jem doesn't usually lie," Roger had said thoughtfully, having been shown the small pottery bowl now containing the clock's remains.

Bree, brushing out her hair for bed, gave him a jaundiced look.

"Oh, you think we have pixies, too?"

"Piskies," he said absently, stirring the small pile of gears in the bowl with a finger.

"What? You mean they really are called 'piskies' here? I thought Jem was just mispronouncing it."

"Well, no—'pisky' is Cornish; they're called pixies in other parts of the West Country, though."

"What are they called in Scotland?"

"We haven't really got any. Scotland's got its fair share of the fairy folk," he said, scooping up a handful of clock innards and letting them tinkle musically back into the bowl. "But Scots tend toward the grimmer manifestations of the supernatural—water horses, *ban-sidhe,* blue hags, and the Nuckelavee, aye? Piskies are a wee bit frivolous for Scotland. We have got brownies, mind," he added, taking the brush from her hand, "but they're more of a household help, not mischief-makers like piskies. Can ye put the clock back together?"

"Sure—if the piskies didn't lose any of the parts. What on earth is a Nuckelavee?"

"It's from the Orkneys. Nothing ye want to hear about just before bed," he assured her. And, bending, breathed very softly on her neck, just below the earlobe.

The faint tingle engendered by the memory of what had happened after that momentarily overlaid her suspicions of what the children might be up to, but the sensation faded, to be replaced by increasing worry.

There was no sign of either Jem or Mandy anywhere in the house. Annie MacDonald didn't come on Saturdays, and the kitchen … At first glance, it seemed undisturbed, but she was familiar with Jem's methods.

Sure enough, the packet of chocolate biscuits was missing, as was a bottle of lemon squash, though everything else in the cupboard was in perfect order—and the cupboard was six feet off the ground. Jem showed great promise as a cat burglar, she thought. At least he'd have a career if he got chucked out of school for good one of these days after telling his classmates something especially picturesque he'd picked up in the eighteenth century.

The missing food allayed her uneasiness. If they'd taken a picnic, they were outside, and while they might be anywhere within a half mile of the house—Mandy wouldn't walk farther than that—chances were they wouldn't have gone far before sitting down to eat biscuits.

It was a beautiful fall day, and despite the need to track down her miscreants, she was glad to be out in the sun and breeze. Socks could wait. And so could turning the vegetable beds. And speaking to the plumber about the geyser in the upstairs bath. And …

"It doesna matter how many things ye do on a farm, there's always more than ye can *do. A wonder the place doesna rise up about my ears and swallow me, like Jonah and the whale."*

For an instant, she heard her father's voice, full of exasperated resignation at encountering another unexpected chore. She glanced round at him, smiling, then stopped, realization and longing sweeping over her in waves.

"Oh, Da," she said softly. She walked on, more slowly, suddenly seeing not the albatross of a big, semi-decayed house, but the living organism that was Lallybroch, and all those of her blood who had been part of it—who still were.

The Frasers and Murrays who had put their own sweat and blood and tears into its buildings and soil, woven their lives into its land. Uncle Ian, Aunt Jenny—the swarm of cousins she had known so briefly. Young Ian. All of them dead now … but, curiously enough, not gone.

"Not gone at all," she said aloud, and found comfort in the words. She'd reached the back gate of the kailyard and paused, glancing up the hill toward the ancient broch that gave the place its name; the burying ground was up on that same hill, most of its stones so weathered that the names and their dates were indecipherable, the stones themselves mostly obliterated by creeping gorse and sweet broom. And amidst the splashes of gray, black-green, and brilliant yellow were two small moving splotches of red and blue.

The pathway was badly overgrown; brambles ripped at her jeans. She found the children on hands and knees, following a trail of ants—who were in turn following a trail of cookie crumbs, carefully placed so as to lead the ants through an obstacle course of sticks and pebbles.

"Look, Mama!" Jem barely glanced up at her, absorbed in the sight before him. He pointed at the ground, where he had sunk an old teacup into the dirt and filled it with water. A black glob of ants, lured to their doom by chocolate crumbs, were struggling in the midst of it.

"Jem! That's mean! You mustn't drown ants—unless they're in the house," she added, with vivid memories of a recent infestation in the pantry.

"They're not drowning, Mama. Look—see what they do?"

She crouched beside him, looking closer, and saw that, in fact, the ants weren't drowning. Single ants that had fallen in struggled madly toward the center, where a large mass of ants clung together, making a ball that floated, barely denting the surface. The ants in the ball were moving, slowly, so that they changed places constantly, and while one or two near the edge of the mass were motionless, possibly dead, the majority were clearly in no immediate danger of drowning, supported by the bodies of their fellows. And the mass itself was gradually drawing closer to the rim of the cup, propelled by the movements of the ants in it.

"That's really cool," she said, fascinated, and sat beside him for some time, watching the ants, before finally decreeing mercy and making him scoop the ball of ants out on a leaf, where once laid on the ground, they scattered and at once went back to their business.

"Do you think they do it on purpose?" she asked Jem. "Cluster together like that, I mean. Or are they just looking for anything to hang on to?"

"Dinna ken," he said, shrugging. "I'll look in my ant book and see does it say."

She gathered up the remnants of the picnic, leaving one or two biscuit fragments for the ants, who had, she felt, earned them. Mandy had wandered off while she and Jem watched the ants in the teacup, and was presently squatting in the shade of a bush some way uphill, engaged in animated conversation with an invisible companion.

“Mandy wanted to talk to Grandda,” Jem said matter-of-factly. “That’s why we came up here.”

“Oh?” she said slowly. “Why is here a good place to talk to him?”

Jem looked surprised, and glanced toward the weathered, tipsy stones of the burying ground.

“Isn’t he here?”

Something much too powerful to be called a shiver shot up her spine. It was as much Jem’s matter-of-factness as the possibility that it might be true that took her breath away.

“I—don’t know,” she said. “I suppose he could be.” While she tried not to think too much about the fact that her parents were now dead, she had somehow vaguely assumed that they would have been buried in North Carolina—or somewhere else in the Colonies, if war had taken them away from the Ridge.

But she remembered the letters suddenly. He’d said he meant to come back to Scotland. And Jamie Fraser being a determined man, more than likely he’d done just that. Had he never left again? And if he hadn’t—was her mother here, too?

Without really meaning to, she found herself making her way upward, past the foot of the old broch and through the stones of the burying ground. She’d come up here once, with her aunt Jenny. It had been early evening, with a breeze whispering in the grass, and an air of peace upon the hillside. Jenny had shown her the graves of her grandparents, Brian and Ellen, together under a marriage stone; yes, she could still make out the curve of it, overgrown and mossy as it was, the names weathered away. And the child who had died with Ellen was buried with her—her third son. Robert, Jenny said; her father, Brian, had insisted he be baptized, and her wee dead brother’s name was Robert.

She was standing among the stones now; so many of them. A good many of the later ones were still readable, these with dates in the late 1800s. Murrays and McLachlan’s and McLean’s, for the most part. Here and there the odd Fraser or MacKenzie.

The earlier ones, though, were all too weathered to read, no more than the shadows of letters showing through the black stains of lichen and the soft, obliterating moss. There, next to Ellen’s grave, was the tiny square stone for Caitlin Maisri Murray, Jenny and Ian's sixth child, who had lived only a day or so. Jenny had shown Brianna the stone, stooping to run a gentle hand across the letters and laying a yellow rose from the path beside it. There had been a small cairn there, too—pebbles left by those who visited the grave. The cairn had been scattered long since, but Brianna stooped and found a pebble now and placed it by the little stone.

There was another, she saw, beside it. Another small stone, as for a child. Not quite as weathered, but plainly almost as old. Only two words on it, she thought, and, closing her eyes, ran her fingers slowly over the stone, feeling out the shallow, broken lines. There was an "E" in the first line. A "Y," she thought, in the second. And maybe a "K."

What sort of Highland name begins with "Y"? she thought, puzzled. *There's McKay, but that's in the wrong order …*

"You—er—don't know which grave might be Grandda's, do you?" she asked Jem hesitantly. She was almost afraid to hear the answer.

"No." He looked surprised, and glanced where she was looking, toward the assemblage of stones. Obviously he hadn't connected their presence with his grandfather. "He just said he'd like to be buried here, and if I came here, I should leave him a stane. So I did." His accent slid naturally into the word, and she heard her father's voice again, distinctly, but this time smiled a little.

"Where?"

"Up there. He likes to be up high, ken? Where he can see," Jem said casually, pointing up the hill. Just beyond the shadow of the broch, she could see the traces of something not quite a trail through a mass of gorse, heather, and broken rock. And poking out of the mass at the crest of the hill, a big, lumpy boulder, on whose shoulder sat a tiny pyramid of pebbles, barely visible.

"Did you leave all those today?"

"No, I put one whenever I come. That's what ye're meant to do, aye?"

There was a small lump in her throat, but she swallowed it and smiled. "Aye, it is. I'll go up and leave one, too."

Mandy was now sitting on one of the fallen gravestones, laying out burdock leaves as plates around the dirty teacup, which she had unearthed and set in the middle. She was chatting to the guests at her invisible tea party, politely animated. There was no need to disturb her, Brianna decided, and followed Jem up the rocky trail—the last of the journey accomplished on hands and knees, owing to the steepness.

It was windy, so near the crest of the hill, and they weren't much bothered by the midgies. Damp with perspiration, she added her own pebble ceremoniously to the wee cairn, and sat down for a moment to enjoy the view. Most of Lallybroch was visible from here, as was the road that led to the highway. She looked that way, but no sign yet of Roger's bright-orange Morris Mini. She sighed and looked away.

It was nice, up so high. Quiet, with just the sigh of the cool wind and the buzz of bees busy working in the yellow blossoms. No wonder her father liked—

"Jem." He was slumped comfortably against the rock, looking out over the surrounding hills.

"Aye?"

She hesitated, but had to ask.

"You … can't *see* your grandda, can you?"

He shot her a startled blue look.

"No. He's dead."

"Oh," she said, at once relieved and slightly disappointed. "I know. I … just wondered."

"I think maybe Mandy can," Jem said, nodding toward his sister, a bright red blot on the landscape below. "But ye can't really tell. Babies talk to lots of people ye can't see," he added tolerantly. "Grannie says so."

She didn't know whether to wish he would stop referring to his grandparents in the present tense or not. It was more than slightly unnerving, but he had said he couldn't see Jamie. She didn't want to ask whether he could see Claire—she supposed not—but she felt her parents close, whenever Jem or Mandy mentioned them, and she certainly wanted Jem and Mandy to feel close to them, as well.

She and Roger had explained things to the kids as well as such things could be explained. And evidently her father had had his own private talk with Jem; a good thing, she thought. Jamie's blend of devout Catholicism and matter-of-fact Highland acceptance of life, death, and things not seen was probably a lot better suited to explaining things like how you could be dead on one side of the stones, but—

"He said he'd look after us. Grandda," he added, turning to look at her.

She bit her tongue. No, he was not reading her mind, she told herself firmly. They'd just been talking of Jamie, after all, and Jem had chosen this particular place in which to pay his respects. So it was only natural that his grandfather would be still in his mind.

"Of course he will," she said, and put a hand on his square shoulder, massaging the knobby bones at the base of his neck with her thumb. He giggled and ducked out from under her hand, then hopped suddenly down the trail, sliding on his bottom partway, to the detriment of his jeans.

She paused for a last look round before following him, and noticed the jumble of rock on top of a hill a quarter mile or so away. A jumble of rock was exactly what one might expect to see on any Highland hilltop—but there was something slightly different about this particular assortment of stones. She shaded her eyes with her hand, squinting. She might be wrong—but she was an engineer; she knew the look of a thing built by men.

An Iron Age fortress, maybe? she thought, intrigued. There were layered stones at the bottom of that heap, she'd swear it. A foundation, perhaps. She'd have to climb up there one of these days for a closer look—maybe tomorrow, if Roger … Again, she glanced at the road, and again found it empty.

Mandy had grown tired of her tea party and was ready to go home. Holding her daughter firmly by one hand and the teacup in the other, Brianna made her way down the hill toward the big white-harled house, its windows fresh-washed and glinting companionably.

Had Annie done that? she wondered. She hadn’t noticed, and surely window-washing on that scale would have entailed a good bit of fuss and bother. But then, she’d been distracted, what with the anticipations and apprehensions of the new job. Her heart gave a small hop at the thought that on Monday she would fit back one more piece of who she’d once been, one more stone in the foundation of who she now was.

“Maybe the piskies did it,” she said aloud, and laughed.

“Piskies diddit,” Mandy echoed happily.

Jem had nearly reached the bottom, and turned, impatient, waiting for them.

“Jem,” she said, the thought occurring as they came even with him. “Do you know what a Nuckelavee is?”

Jem’s eyes went huge, and he clapped his hands over Mandy’s ears. Something with a hundred cold tiny feet skittered up Brianna’s back.

“Aye,” he said, his voice small and breathless.

“Who told you about it?” she asked, keeping her voice calm. She’d *kill* Annie MacDonald, she thought.

But Jem’s eyes slid sideways, as he glanced involuntarily over her shoulder, up at the broch.

“He did,” he whispered.

“He?”she said sharply, and grabbed Mandy by the arm as the little girl wiggled free and turned furiously on her brother. “*Don’t* kick your brother, Mandy! Who do you mean, Jemmy?”

Jem’s lower teeth caught his lip.

“Him,” he blurted. “The Nuckelavee.”

* * *

“The creature’s home was in the sea, but it ventured upon land to feast upon humans. The Nuckelavee rode a horse on land, and its horse was sometimes indistinguishable from its own body. Its head was ten times larger than that of a man, and its mouth thrust out like a pig’s, with a wide, gaping maw. The creature had no skin, and its yellow veins, muscle structure, and sinews could clearly be seen, covered in a red slimy film.

The creature was armed with venomous breath and great strength. It did, however, have one weakness: an aversion to freshwater. The horse on which it rode is described as having one red eye, a mouth the size of a whale's, and flappers like fins around its forelegs."

"Ick!" Brianna put down the book—one of Roger's collection of Scottish folklore—and stared at Jem. "You saw one of these? Up by the broch?"

Her son shifted from foot to foot. "Well, he said he was. He said if I didna clear straight off, he'd change into himself, and I didna want to see *that,* so I cleared."

"Neither would I." Brianna's heart began to slow down a little. All right. He'd met a man, then, not a monster. Not that she'd actually believed … but the fact that someone had been hanging around the broch was worrying enough.

"What did he look like, this man?"

"Well … big," Jem said dubiously. Given that Jem was not quite nine, most men would be.

"As big as Daddy?"

"Maybe."

Further catechism elicited relatively few details; Jem knew what a Nuckelavee was—he'd read most of the more sensational items in Roger's collection—and had been so terrified at meeting someone who might at any moment shed his skin and eat him that his impressions of the man were sparse. Tall, with a short beard, hair that wasn't very dark, and clothes "like Mr. MacNeil wears." Working clothes, then, like a farmer.

"Why didn't you tell me or Daddy about him?"

Jem looked about to cry.

"He said he'd come back and eat Mandy if I did."

"Oh." She put an arm around him and pulled him to her. "I see. Don't be afraid, honey. It's all right." He was trembling now, as much with relief as with memory, and she stroked his bright hair, soothing him. A tramp, most likely. Camping in the broch? Likely he was gone by now—so far as she could tell from Jem's story, it had been more than a week since he had seen the man—but …

"Jem," she said slowly. "Why did you and Mandy go up there today? Weren't you afraid the man would be there?"

He looked up at her, surprised, and shook his head, red hair flying.

"Nay, I cleared, but I hid and watched him. He went away to the west. That's where he lives."

"He said so?"

"No. But things like that all live in the west." He pointed at the book. "When they go away to the west, they dinna come back. And I've not seen him again; I watched, to be sure."

She nearly laughed, but was still too worried. It was true; a good many Highland fairy tales did end with some supernatural creature going away to the west, or into the rocks or the water where they lived. And of course they didn't come back, since the story was over.

"He was just a nasty tramp," she said firmly, and patted Jem's back before releasing him. "Don't worry about him."

"Sure?" he said, obviously wanting to believe her, but not quite ready to relax into security.

"Sure," she said firmly.

"Okay." He heaved a deep sigh and pushed away from her. "Besides," he added, looking happier, "Grandda wouldn't let him eat Mandy or me. I should have thought o' that."

* * *

It was nearly sunset by the time she heard the chugging of Roger's car on the farm road. She rushed outside, and he'd barely got out of the car before she flung herself into his arms.

He didn't waste time with questions. He embraced her passionately and kissed her in a way that made it clear that their argument was over; the details of mutual apology could wait. For an instant, she allowed herself to let go of everything, feeling weightless in his arms, breathing the scents of petrol and dust and libraries full of old books that overlay his natural smell, that indefinable faint musk of sun-warmed skin, even when he hadn't been in the sun.

“They say women can’t really identify their husbands by smell,” she remarked, reluctantly coming back to earth. “I don’t believe it. I could pick you out of King’s Cross tube station in the pitch-dark.”

“I did have a bath this morning, aye?”

“Yes, and you stayed in college, because I can smell the horrible industrial-strength soap they use there,” she said, wrinkling her nose. “I’m surprised it doesn’t take your skin off. And you had black pudding for your breakfast. With fried tomato.”

“Right, Lassie,” he said, smiling. “Or do I mean Rin-Tin-Tin? Saved any small children or tracked any robbers to their lairs today, have ye?”

“Well, yes. Sort of.” She glanced up at the hill behind the house, where the broch’s shadow had grown long and black. “But I thought I’d better wait until the sheriff came back from town before I went any further.”

* * *

Armed with a stout blackthorn walking stick and an electric torch, Roger approached the broch, angry but cautious. It wasn’t likely the man was armed, if he was still there, but Brianna was at the kitchen door, the telephone—at the full stretch of its long cord—beside her, and two nines already dialed. She’d wanted to come with him, but he’d convinced her that one of them had to stay with the kids. Still, it would have been a comfort to have her at his back; she was a tall, muscular woman, and not one to shrink from physical violence.

The door of the broch hung askew; the ancient leather hinges had long since rotted away and been replaced with cheap iron, which had rusted in turn. The door was still attached to its frame, but barely. He lifted the latch and maneuvered the heavy, splintering wood inward, pulling it away from the floor so it swung without scraping.

There was still plenty of light outside; it wouldn’t be full dark for half an hour yet. Inside the broch, though, it was black as a well. He shone his torch on the floor and saw fresh drag marks in the dirt that crusted the stone floor. Aye, someone had been here, then. Jem might be able to move the door, but the kids weren't allowed to go in the broch without an adult, and Jem swore he hadn't.

"Halloooo!" he shouted, and was answered by a startled movement somewhere far above. He gripped his stick in reflex, but recognized the flutter and rustle for what it was almost at once. Bats, hanging up under the conical roof. He flashed his light round the ground floor and saw a few stained and crumpled newspapers by the wall. He picked one up and smelled it: old, but the scent of fish and vinegar was still discernible.

He hadn't thought Jem was making up the Nuckelavee story, but this evidence of recent human occupation renewed his anger. That someone should not only come and lurk on his property, but threaten his son … He almost hoped the fellow was still here. He wanted a word.

He wasn't, though. No one with sense would have gone to the upper floors of the broch; the boards were half rotted, and as his eyes adjusted, he could see the gaping holes, a faint light coming through them from the slit windows higher up. Roger heard nothing, but an urge to be certain propelled him up the narrow stone stair that spiraled round the inside of the tower, testing each step for loose stones before trusting his weight to it.

He disturbed a quantity of pigeons on the top floor, who panicked and whirled round the inside of the tower like a feathery tornado, shedding down feathers and droppings, before finding their way out of the windows. He pressed himself against the wall, heart pounding as they battered blindly past his face. Something—a rat, a mouse, a vole—ran over his foot, and he jerked convulsively, nearly losing his torch.

The broch was alive, all right; the bats up above were shifting around, uneasy at all the racket below. But no sign of an intruder, human or not.

Coming down, he put his head out to signal to Bree that all was well, then closed the door and made his way down to the house, brushing dirt and pigeon feathers off his clothes.

"I'll put a new hasp and a padlock on that door," he told Brianna, lounging against the old stone sink as she started the supper.

"Though I doubt he'll be back. Likely just a traveler."

"From the Orkneys, do you think?" She was reassured, he could tell, but there was still a line of worry between her brows. "You said that's where they have stories about the Nuckelavee."

He shrugged.

"Possible. But ye find the stories written down; the Nuckelavee's not so popular as kelpies or fairies, but anyone might come across him in print. What's that?" She had opened the refrigerator to get the butter out, and he'd glimpsed the bottle of champagne on the shelf, its foiled label gleaming.

"Oh, that." She looked at him, ready to smile, but with a certain apprehension in her eyes. "I, um, got the job. I thought we might … celebrate?" The tentative question smote him to the heart, and he smacked himself on the forehead.

"Christ, I forgot to ask! That's great, Bree! I knew ye would, mind," he said, smiling with every bit of warmth and conviction he could muster. "Never a doubt."

He could see the tension leave her body as her face lit up, and felt a certain peace descend on him, as well. This pleasant feeling lasted through the rib-cracking hug she gave him and the very nice kiss that followed, but was obliterated when she stepped back and, taking up a saucepan, asked with elaborate casualness, "So … did you find what you were looking for in Oxford?"

"Yeah." It came out in a gruff croak; he cleared his throat and tried again. "Yeah, more or less. Look—can the supper wait a bit, d'ye think? I think I'd have more appetite if I tell ye first."

"Sure," she said slowly, putting down the saucepan. Her eyes were fixed on him, interested, maybe a bit fearful. "I fed the kids before you got home. If you're not starving …"

He was; he hadn't stopped for lunch on the way back and his stomach was flapping, but it didn't matter. He reached out a hand to her.

"Come on out. The evening's fine." And if she took it badly, there were no saucepans out of doors.

* * *

"I went round to Old St. Stephen's," he said abruptly, as soon as they'd left the house. "To talk to Dr. Weatherspoon; he's rector there. He was a friend of the Reverend's—he's known me since I was a lad."

Her hand had tightened on his arm as he spoke. He risked a glance at her and saw her looking anxious but hopeful.

"And …?" she said, tentative.

"Well … the upshot of it is I've got a job, too." He smiled, self-conscious. "Assistant choirmaster."

That, of course, hadn't been what she was expecting at all, and she blinked. Then her eyes went to his throat. He knew fine what she was thinking.

"Are you going to wear that*?"* she had asked, hesitant, the first time they prepared to go into Inverness for shopping.

"I was, aye. Why, have I got a spot?" He'd craned to look over the shoulder of his white shirt. No surprise if he had. Mandy had rushed in from her play to greet him, plastering his legs with sandy hugs. He'd dusted her off a bit before lifting her for a proper kiss, but …

"Not that," Bree had said, her lips compressing for a minute. *"It's just … What will you say about …"* She made a throat-cutting gesture.

His hand had gone to the open collar of his shirt, where the rope scar made a curving line, distinct to the touch, like a chain of tiny pebbles under the skin. It had faded somewhat, but was still very visible.

"Nothing."

Her brows rose, and he'd given her a lopsided smile.

"But what will they be thinking?"

"I suppose they'll just assume I'm into autoerotic asphyxiation and went a bit too far one day."

Familiar as he was with the rural Highlands, he imagined that was the least of what they would think. Externally proper his putative congregation might be—but no one could imagine more lurid depravity than a devout Scottish Presbyterian.

"Did … er … did you tell Dr. Weatherspoon … What *did* you tell him?" she asked now, after a moment's consideration. "I mean—he had to have noticed."

"Oh, aye. He noticed. I didn't say anything, though, and neither did he."

"Look, Bree," he'd told her on that first day, *"it's a straight choice. We tell everyone the absolute truth, or we tell them nothing—or as close to nothing as possible—and let them think what they like. Concocting a story won't work, will it? Too many ways to trip up."*

She hadn't liked it; he could still see the way her eyes had drawn down at the corners. But he was right, and she knew it. Decision had spread across her face, and she'd nodded, her shoulders squaring.

They'd had to do a certain amount of lying, of course, in order to legalize the existence of Jem and Mandy. But it was the late seventies; communes abounded in the States, and impromptu bands of "travelers," as they called themselves, drifted to and fro across Europe in cavalcades of rusted buses and clapped-out vans. They had brought very little through the stones with them, bar the children themselves—but among the tiny hoard Brianna had tucked into her pockets and down her stays were two handwritten birth certificates, attested by one Claire Beauchamp Randall, MD, attending physician.

"It's the proper form for a home birth," Claire had said, making the loops of her signature with care. *"And I* am*—or I was,"* she'd corrected, with a wry twist of the mouth, *"a registered physician, licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts."*

"Assistant choirmaster," Bree said now, eyeing him.

He drew a deep breath; the evening air *was* fine, clear and soft, if beginning to be populated by midgies. He waved a cloud of them away from his face, and grasped the nettle.

"I didn't go for a job, mind. I went to … to get my mind clear. About being a minister."

She stopped dead at that.

"And …?" she prompted.

"Come on." He pulled her gently into motion once more. "We'll be eaten alive if we stand here."

They strolled through the kailyard and out past the barn, walking along the path that led by the back pasture. He'd already milked the two cows, Milly and Blossom, and they'd settled for the night, big humped dark shapes in the grass, peacefully chewing their cuds.

"I told you about the Westminster Confession, aye?" This was the Presbyterian equivalent to the Catholics' Nicene Creed—their statement of officially accepted doctrine.

"Uh-huh."

"Well, see, to be a Presbyterian minister, I'd need to be able to swear that I accepted everything in the Westminster Confession. I did, when I—well, before." He'd come so close, he thought. He'd been on the eve of ordination as a minister when fate had intervened, in the person of Stephen Bonnet. Roger had been compelled to drop everything, to find and rescue Brianna from the pirate's lair on Ocracoke. Not that he regretted doing it, mind.… She paced beside him, red and long-limbed, graceful as a tiger, and the thought that she might so easily have vanished from his life forever—and that he'd never have known his daughter …

He coughed and cleared his throat, abstractedly touching the scar.

"Maybe I still do. But I'm not sure. And I have to be."

"What changed?" she asked curiously. "What could you accept then that you can't now?"

What changed? he thought wryly. *Good question.*

"Predestination," he said. "In a manner of speaking." There was still enough light that he saw a look of mildly derisive amusement flicker across her face, though whether simply from the ironic juxtaposition of question and answer or from the concept itself, he didn't know. They'd never argued questions of faith—they were more than cautious with each other on *those* grounds—but they were at least familiar with the general shape of each other's beliefs.

He'd explained the idea of predestination in simple terms: not some inescapable fate ordained by God, nor yet the notion that God had laid out each person's life in great detail before his or her birth—though not a few Presbyterians saw it just that way. It had to do with salvation and the notion that God chose a pathway that led to that salvation.

“For some people,” she’d said skeptically. “And He chooses to damn the rest?”

A lot of people thought *that*, too, and it had taken better minds than his to argue their way past that impression.

“There are whole books written about it, but the basic idea is that salvation’s not just the result of our choice—God acts first. Extending the invitation, ye might say, and giving us an opportunity to respond. But we’ve still got free choice. And really,” he added quickly, “the only thing that’s not optional—to be a Presbyterian—is a belief in Jesus Christ. I’ve still got that.”

“Good,” she said. “But to be a minister …?”

“Yeah, probably. And—well, here.” He reached abruptly into his pocket and handed her the folded photocopy.

“I thought I’d best not steal the book,” he said, trying for levity. “In case I *do* decide to be minister, I mean. Bad example for the flock.”

“Ho-ho,” she said absently, reading. She looked up, one eyebrow quirked.

“It’s different, isn’t it?” he said, the breathless feeling back beneath his diaphragm.

“It’s …” Her eyes shot back to the document, and a frown creased her brow. She looked up at him a moment later, pale and swallowing. “Different. The date’s different.”

He felt a slight easing of the tension that had wound him up for the last twenty-four hours. He wasn’t losing his mind, then. He put out a hand, and she gave him back the copy of the clipping from the *Wilmington Gazette*—the death notice for the Frasers of the Ridge.

“It’s only the date,” he said, running a thumb beneath the blurred type of the words. “The text—I think that’s the same. Is it what you remember?” She’d found the same information, looking for her family in the past—it was what had propelled her through the stones, and him after her. *And that*, he thought, *has made all the difference. Thank you, Robert Frost.*

She’d pressed against him, to read it over again. Once, and twice, and once more for good measure, before she nodded.

"Only the date," she said, and he heard the same breathlessness in her voice. "It … changed."

"Good," he said, his voice sounding queer and gruff. "When I started wondering … I had to go and see, before I talked to you about it. Just to check—because the clipping I'd seen in a book, that couldn't be right."

She nodded, still a little pale.

"If I … if I went back to the archive in Boston where I found that newspaper—would it have changed, too, do you think?"

"Yeah, I do."

She was silent for a long moment, looking at the paper in his hand. Then she looked at him, intent.

"You said, when you started wondering. What made you start wondering?"

"Your mother."

* * *

It had been a couple of months before they left the Ridge. Unable to sleep one night, he'd gone out into the woods and, roaming restlessly to and fro, had encountered Claire, kneeling in a hollow full of white flowers, their shapes like a mist around her.

He'd just sat down then and watched her at her gathering, as she broke stems and stripped leaves into her basket. She wasn't touching the flowers, he saw, but pulling up something that grew beneath them.

"You need to gather these at night," she remarked to him after a little. "Preferably at the dark of the moon."

"I shouldn't have expected—" he began, but broke off abruptly.

She laughed, a small fizzing sound of amusement.

"You wouldn't have expected that I should put stock in such superstitions?" she asked. "Wait, young Roger. When you've lived as long as I, you may begin to regard superstitions yourself. As for this one …" Her hand moved, a pale blur in the darkness, and broke a stem with a soft, juicy snap. A pungent aroma suddenly filled the air, sharp and plangent through the softer aroma of the flowers.

"Insects come and lay their eggs on the leaves of some plants, do you see? The plants secrete certain rather strong-smelling substances in order to repel the bugs, and the concentration of these substances is highest when the need is greatest. As it happens, those insecticidal substances happen also to have quite powerful medicinal properties, and the chief thing that troubles this particular sort of plant"—she brushed a feathery stem under his nose, fresh and damp—"is the larvae of moths."

"Ergo, it has more of the substance late at night, because that's when the caterpillars feed?"

"Got it." The stem was withdrawn, the plant thrust into her bag with a rustle of muslin, and her head bent as she felt about for more. "And some plants are fertilized by moths. Those, of course …"

"Bloom at night."

"Most plants, though, are troubled by daylight insects, and so they begin to secrete their useful compounds at dawn; the concentration rises as the day waxes—but then, when the sun gets too hot, some of the oils will begin to vaporize from the leaves, and the plant will stop producing them. So most of the very aromatic plants, you pick in late morning. And so the shamans and the herbalists tell their apprentices to take one plant in the dark of the moon and another at midday—thus making it a superstition, hmm?" Her voice was rather dry, but still amused.

Roger sat back on his heels, watching her grope about. Now that his eyes were accustomed, he could make out her shape with ease, though the details of her face were still hidden.

She worked for a time, and then sat back on her heels and stretched; he heard the creak of her back.

"I saw him once, you know." Her voice was muffled; she had turned away from him, probing under the drooping branches of a rhododendron.

"Saw him? Who?"

"The King." She found something; he heard the rustle of leaves as she tugged at it, and the snap of the breaking stem.

"He came to Pembroke Hospital, to visit the soldiers there. He came and spoke separately to us—the nurses and doctors. He was a quiet man, very dignified, but warm in his manner. I couldn't tell you a thing that he said. But it was … remarkably inspiring. Just that he was there, you know."

"Mmphm." Was it the onset of war, he wondered, making her recall such things?

"A journalist asked the Queen if she would be taking her children and evacuating to the country—so many were, you know."

"I know." Roger saw suddenly in his mind's eye a pair of children: a boy and a girl, thin-faced and silent, huddling near each other beside a familiar hearth. "We had two of them—at our house in Inverness. How odd, I hadn't remembered them at all until just now."

She wasn't paying attention, though.

"She said—and I may not have the quote exactly right, but this is the gist of it—'Well, the children can't leave me, and I can't leave the King—and of course the king won't leave.' When was your father killed, Roger?"

Whatever he'd been expecting her to say, it wasn't that. For an instant, the question seemed so incongruous as not to be comprehensible.

"What?" But he *had* heard her, and shaking his head to dispel a feeling of surreality, he answered, "October 1941. I'm not sure I remember the exact date—no, I do, the Reverend had it written on his genealogy. The thirty-first of October, 1941. Why?" *"Why in God's name,"* he wanted to say, but he'd been trying to control the impulse toward casual blasphemy. He choked off the stronger impulse to escape into random thought and repeated, very calmly, "Why?"

"You said he'd been shot down in Germany, didn't you?"

"Over the Channel on his way to Germany. So I was told." He could just make out her features in the moonlight, but couldn't read her expression.

"Who told you? Do you remember?"

"The Reverend, I suppose. Or I suppose it might have been my mother." The sense of unreality was wearing off, and he was beginning to feel angry. "Does it matter?"

"Probably not. When we first met you—Frank and I, in Inverness—the Reverend said then that your father had been shot down over the Channel."

"Yes? Well …" *So what?* was unspoken, but she plainly picked it up, for there was a small snort of not-quite laughter from the rhododendrons.

"You're right, it doesn't matter. But—both you and the Reverend mentioned that he was a Spitfire pilot. Is that correct?"

"Yes." Roger wasn't sure why, but he was beginning to have an uneasy sense at the back of his neck, as though something might be standing behind him. He coughed, making an excuse to turn his head, but glimpsed nothing behind him but the black-and-white forest, smudged by moonlight.

"I do know that for sure," he said, feeling oddly defensive. "My mother had a photograph of him with his plane. *Rag Doll,* the plane was called; the name was painted on the nose, with a crude picture of a dolly in a red dress, with black curls." He did know that for sure. He'd slept with the picture under his pillow for a long time after his mother was killed—the studio portrait of his mother was too big, and he worried that someone would notice it missing.

"Rag Doll," he repeated, suddenly struck by something.

"What? What is it?"

He waved a hand, awkward.

"It—nothing. I—I just realized that 'Rag Doll' was probably what my father called my mother. A nickname, you know? I saw a few of his letters to her; they were usually addressed to *Dolly*. And just now, thinking of the black curls—my mother's portrait … Mandy. Mandy's got my mother's hair."

"Oh, good," Claire said dryly. "I'd hate to think I was entirely responsible for it. Do tell her that, when she's older, will you? Girls with very curly hair invariably hate it—at least in the early years, when they want to look like everyone else."

Despite his preoccupation, he heard the small note of desolation in her voice, and reached for her hand, disregarding the fact that she still held a plant in it.

"I'll tell her," he said softly. "I'll tell her everything. Don't ever think we'd let the kids forget you."

She squeezed his hand, hard, and the fragrant white flowers spilled over the darkness of her skirt.

"Thank you," she whispered. He heard her sniff a little, and she wiped the back of her other hand swiftly across her eyes.

"Thanks," she said again, more strongly, and straightened herself. "It *is* important. To remember. If I didn't know that, I wouldn't tell you."

"Tell me … what?"

Her hands, small and hard and smelling of medicine, wrapped his.

"I don't know what happened to your father," she said. "But it wasn't what they told you."

* * *

"I was *there*, Roger," she repeated, patient. "I read the papers—I nursed airmen; I talked to them. I saw the planes. Spitfires were small, light planes, meant for defense. They never crossed the Channel; they hadn't the range to go from England into Europe and back, though they were used there later."

"But …" Whatever argument he'd meant to make—blown off course, miscalculation—faded. The hairs had risen on his forearms without his noticing.

"Of course, things happen," she said, as though able to read his thoughts. "Accounts get garbled, too, over time and distance. Whoever told your mother might have been mistaken; she might have said something that the Reverend misconstrued. All those things are possible. But during the War, I had letters from Frank—he wrote as often as he could, up until they recruited him into MI6. After that, I often wouldn't hear anything for months. But just before that, he wrote to me, and mentioned—just as casual chat, you know—that he'd run into something strange in the reports he was handling. A Spitfire had gone down, crashed—not shot down, they thought it must have been an engine failure—in Northumbria, and while it hadn't burned, for a wonder—there was no sign of the pilot. None. And he did mention the name of the pilot, because he thought Jeremiah rather an appropriately doomed sort of name."

"Jerry," Roger said, his lips feeling numb. "My mother always called him Jerry."

"Yes," she said softly. "And there are circles of standing stones scattered all over Northumbria."

"Near where the plane—"

"I don't know." He saw the slight movement as she shrugged, helpless.

He closed his eyes and breathed deep, the air thick with the scent from the broken stems.

"And you're telling me now because we're going back," he said, very calmly.

"I've been arguing with myself for weeks," she said, sounding apologetic. "It was only a month or so ago that I remembered. I don't often think about the—my—past, but what with everything …" She waved a hand, encompassing their imminent departure and the intense discussions surrounding it. "I was just thinking of the War—I wonder if anyone who was in it ever thinks of it without a capital 'W'—and telling Jamie about it."

It was Jamie who had asked her about Frank. Wanted to know what role he had played in the war.

"He's curious about Frank," she said abruptly.

"I would be, too, under the circumstances," Roger had replied dryly. "Was Frank not curious about him?"

That seemed to unsettle her, and she'd not replied directly but had pulled the conversation firmly back on track—if you could use such a word for such a conversation, he thought.

"Anyway," she said, "it was that that reminded me of Frank's letters. And I was trying to recall the things he'd written me about, when suddenly I remembered that one phrase—about Jeremiah being a name with a certain doom about it." He heard her sigh.

"I wasn't sure … but I talked to Jamie, and he said I should tell you. He says he thinks you've a right to know—and that you'd do the right thing with the knowledge."

"I'm flattered," he said. More like flattened.

* * *

"So that's it." The evening stars had begun to come out, faint over the mountains. Not as brilliant as the stars had been on the Ridge, where the mountain night came down like black velvet. They'd come back to the house by now, but lingered in the dooryard, talking.

"I'd thought about it, now and again: how does the time-traveling fit into God's plan? Can things be changed? *Ought* they be changed? Your parents—they tried to change history, tried damned hard, and couldn't do it. I'd thought that was all there was to it—and from a Presbyterian point of view." He let a little humor show in his voice. "It was a comfort, almost, to think that it *couldn't* change. It shouldn't be able to be changed. Ye know: *God's in His heaven, all's right with the world* sort of thing."

"But." Bree was holding the folded photocopy; she waved it at a passing moth, a tiny white blur.

"But," he agreed. "Proof that things *can* be changed."

"I talked to Mama a little bit about it," Bree said, after a moment's thought. "She laughed."

"Did she?" Roger said dryly, and got the breath of a laugh from Bree in answer.

"Not like she thought it was funny," she assured him. "I'd asked her if she thought it was possible for a traveler to change things, change the future, and she told me it was, obviously—because she changed the future every time she kept someone from dying who would have died if she hadn't been there. Some of them went on to have children they wouldn't have had, and who knew what those children would do, that they wouldn't have done if they hadn't … and *that* was when she laughed and said it was a good thing Catholics believed in Mystery and didn't insist on trying to figure out exactly *how* God worked, like Protestants do."

"Well, I don't know that I'd say—oh, was she talking about me?"

"Probably. I didn't ask."

Now it was his turn to laugh, though it hurt his throat to do it.

“Proof,” she said thoughtfully. She was sitting on the bench near the front door, folding the photocopy in long, nervously deft fingers. “I don’t know. *Is* it proof?”

“Maybe not up to your rigorous engineering standards,” he said. “But I do remember—and so do you. If it was only me, then, yeah, I’d think it was just my mind going. But I’ve got a little more faith in *your* mental processes. Are you making a paper airplane out of that?”

“No, it’s—whoa. Mandy.” She was up and moving before he’d quite registered the wail from the nursery upstairs, and had vanished into the house a moment later, leaving him to lock up below. They didn’t usually bother locking the doors—no one did, in the Highlands—but tonight …

His heart rate surged as a long gray shadow shot out across the path in front of him. Then dropped as he smiled. Wee Adso, out for a prowl. A neighbor boy had come round with a basket of kittens a few months before, looking for homes for them, and Bree had taken the gray one, a green-eyed ringer for her mother’s cat, and given it the same name. If they got a watchdog, would they name it Rollo? he wondered.

“Chat a Mhinister …” he said. *The minister’s cat is a hunting cat.*

“Good hunting, then,” he added to the tail disappearing under the hydrangea bush, and bent to retrieve the half-folded paper from the path where Brianna had dropped it.

No, it wasn’t a paper airplane. What was it? A paper hat? No telling, and he tucked it into his shirt pocket and went in.

He found Bree and Mandy in the front parlor, in front of a freshly made fire. Mandy, comforted and given milk, had half-dozed off again already in Bree’s arms; she blinked sleepily at him, sucking on a thumb.

“Aye, what’s the trouble, then, *a leannan*?” he asked her softly, pushing tumbled curls out of her eyes.

“Bad dream,” Bree said, her voice carefully casual. “A naughty thing outside, trying to get in her window.”

He and Brianna had been sitting below that very window at the time, but he glanced reflexively at the window beside him, which reflected only the domestic scene of which he was a part. The man in the glass looked wary, shoulders hunched in readiness to lunge at something. He got up and drew the curtains.

"Here," he said abruptly, sitting down and reaching for Mandy. She came into his arms with the slow amiability of a tree sloth, sticking her wet thumb in his ear in the process.

Bree went to fetch them cups of cocoa, returning with a rattle of crockery, the scent of hot milk and chocolate, and the look of someone who's been thinking what to say about a difficult matter.

"Did you … I mean, given the nature of the, er, difficulty … did you maybe think of asking God?" she said, diffident. "Directly?"

"Yeah, I did think of that," he assured her, torn between annoyance and amusement at the question. "And yes, I did ask—a number of times. Especially on the way to Oxford. Where I found that." He nodded at the bit of paper. "What is it, by the way? The shape, I mean."

"Oh." She picked it up and made the last few folds, quick and sure, then held it out on the palm of her hand. He frowned at it for a moment, then realized what it was. A Chinese fortune-teller, kids called them; there were four pockets showing, and you put your fingers in them and could open the thing in different combinations as questions were asked, so as to show the different answers—*Yes, No, Sometimes, Always*—written on the flaps inside.

"Very appropriate," he said.

They fell silent for a moment, drinking cocoa in a silence that balanced precariously on the edge of question.

"The Westminster Confession also says, *God alone is Lord of the conscience*. I'll make my peace with it," he said quietly, at last, "or I won't. I said to Dr. Weatherspoon that it seemed a bit odd, having an assistant choirmaster who couldn't sing—he just smiled and said he was wanting me to take the job so as to keep me in the fold while I thought things over, as he put it. Probably afraid I'd jump ship else, and go over to Rome," he added, as a feeble joke.

"That's good," she said softly, not looking up from the depths of the cocoa she wasn't drinking.

More silence. And the shade of Jerry MacKenzie, RAF, came and sat down by the fire in his fleece-lined leather flight jacket, watching the play of light in his granddaughter's ink-black hair.

"So you—" He could hear the little pop as her tongue parted from her dry mouth. "You're going to look? See if you can find out where your father went? Where he might … be?"

Where he might be. Here, there, then, now? His heart gave a sudden convulsive lurch, thinking of the tramp who'd stayed in the broch. God … no. It couldn't be. No reason to think it, none. Only wanting.

He'd thought about it a lot, on the way to Oxford, between the praying. What he'd say, what he'd ask, if he had the chance. He wanted to ask everything, say everything—but there really was only the one thing to say to his father, and that thing was snoring in his arms like a drunken bumblebee.

"No." Mandy squirmed in her sleep, emitted a small burp, and settled back against his chest. He didn't look up, but kept his eyes fixed in the dark labyrinth of her curls. "I couldn't risk my own kids losing their father." His voice had nearly disappeared; he felt his vocal cords grinding like gears to force the words out.

"It's too important. You don't forget having a dad."

Bree's eyes slid sideways, the blue of them no more than a spark in the firelight.

"I thought … you were so young. You do remember your father?"

Roger shook his head, the chambers of his heart clenching hard, grasping emptiness.

"No," he said softly, and bent his head, breathing in the scent of his daughter's hair. "I remember yours."

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FLUTTERBY

Wilmington, colony of North Carolina
May 3, 1777

I could see at once that Jamie had been dreaming again. His face had an unfocused, inward look, as though he were seeing something other than the fried black pudding on his plate.

Seeing him like this gave me an urgent desire to ask what he had seen—quelled at once, for fear that if I asked too soon, he might lose some part of the dream. It also, truth be told, knotted me with envy. I would have given anything to see what he saw, whether it was real or not. That hardly mattered—it was connection, and the severed nerve ends that had joined me to my vanished family sparked and burned like shorted-out electrical cables when I saw that look on his face.

I couldn't stand not to know what he had dreamed, though in the usual manner of dreams, it was seldom straightforward.

"You've been dreaming of them, haven't you?" I said, when the serving maid had gone out. We'd risen late, tired from the long ride to Wilmington the day before, and were the only diners in the inn's small front room.

He glanced at me and nodded slowly, a small frown between his brows. *That made* me uneasy; the occasional dreams he had of Bree or the children normally left him peaceful and happy.

"What?" I demanded. "What happened?"

He shrugged, still frowning.

"Nothing, Sassenach. I saw Jem and the wee lass—" A smile came over his face at that. "God, she's a feisty wee baggage! She minds me o' you, Sassenach."

This was a dubious compliment as phrased, but I felt a deep glow at the thought. I'd spent hours looking at Mandy and Jem, memorizing every small feature and gesture, trying to extrapolate, imagine what they would look like as they grew—and I was almost sure that Mandy had my mouth. I knew for a fact that she had the shape of my eyes—and my hair, poor child, for all it was inky black.

"What were they doing?"

He rubbed a finger between his brows as though his forehead itched.

"They were outside," he said slowly. "Jem told her to do something and she kicked him in the shin and ran away from him, so he chased her. I think it was spring." He smiled, eyes fixed on whatever he'd seen in his dream. "I mind the wee flowers, caught in her hair, and lying in drifts across the stones."

"What stones?" I asked sharply.

"Oh. The gravestones," he answered, readily enough. "That's it—they were playing among the stones on the hill behind Lallybroch."

I sighed happily. This was the third dream that he'd had, seeing them at Lallybroch. It might be only wishful thinking, but I knew it made him as happy as it made me, to feel that they had made a home there.

"They could be," I said. "Roger went there—when we were looking for you. He said the place was standing vacant, for sale. Bree would have money; they might have bought it. They *could* be there!" I'd told him that before, but he nodded, pleased.

"Aye, they could be," he said, his eyes still soft with his memory of the children on the hill, chasing through the long grass and the worn gray stones that marked his family's rest.

"A flutterby came with them," he said suddenly. "I'd forgot that. A blue one."

"Blue? Are there blue butterflies in Scotland?" I frowned, trying to remember. Such butterflies as I'd ever noticed had tended to be white or yellow, I thought.

Jamie gave me a look of mild exasperation.

"It's a dream, Sassenach. I could have flutterbys wi' tartan wings, and I liked."

I laughed, but refused to be distracted.

"Right. What was it that bothered you, though?"

He glanced curiously at me.

"How did ye ken I was troubled?"

I looked at him down my nose—or as much down my nose as was possible, given the disparity of height.

"You may not have a glass face, but I *have* been married to you for thirty-odd years."

He let the fact that I hadn't actually been *with* him for twenty of those years pass without comment, and only smiled.

"Aye. Well, it wasna anything, really. Only that they went into the broch."

"The broch?" I said uncertainly. The ancient tower for which Lallybroch was named did stand on the hill behind the house, its shadow passing daily through the burying ground like the stately march of a giant sundial. Jamie and I had gone up there often of an evening in our early days at Lallybroch, to sit on the bench that stood against the broch's wall and be away from the hubbub of the house, enjoying the peaceful sight of the estate and its grounds spread white and green below us, soft with twilight.

The small frown was back between his brows.

"The broch," he repeated, and looked at me, helpless. "I dinna ken what it was. Only that I didna want them to go in. It … felt as though there was something inside. Waiting. And I didna like it at all."

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PART THREE

Privateer

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23

CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE FRONT

October 3, 1776
Ellesmere
to Lady Dorothea Grey

Dear Coz—

I write in haste to catch the Courier. I am embarked upon a brief Journey in company with another Officer, on behalf of Captain Richardson, and do not know for certain what my Whereabouts may be for the immediate Future. You may write to me in care of your Brother Adam; I will endeavor to keep in Correspondence with him.

I have executed your Commission to the best of my Ability, and will persevere in your Service. Give my Father and yours my best Regards and Respects, as well as my continuing Affection, and do not omit to keep a large Part of this last Quantity for yourself.

Your most obedient,
William

* * *

October 3, 1776
Ellesmere to Lord John Grey

Dear Father,

After due Thought, I have decided to accept Captain Richardson's Proposal that I accompany a senior Officer on a Mission to Quebec, acting as Interpreter for him, my French being thought adequate to the Purpose. General Howe is agreeable.

I have not yet met Captain Randall-Isaacs, but will join him in Albany next Week. I do not know when we may return, and cannot say what Opportunities there may be to write, but I will do so when I can, and in the meantime beg that you will think fondly of

Your son,
William

* * *

Late October 1776
Quebec

William wasn't sure quite what to make of Captain Denys Randall-Isaacs. On the surface, he was just the sort of genial, unremarkable fellow you found in any regiment: about thirty, decent with cards, ready with a joke, good-looking in a dark sort of way, open-faced, and reliable. He was a very pleasant traveling companion, too, with a fund of entertaining stories for the road and a thoroughgoing knowledge of bawdy songs and poems of the lower sort.

What he didn't do was talk about himself. Which, in William's experience, was what most people did best—or at least most frequently.

He'd tried a little tentative prodding, offering the rather dramatic story of his own birth, and receiving in turn a few spare facts: Randall-Isaacs's own father, an officer of dragoons, had died in the Highlands campaign before Denys's birth, and his mother had remarried a year later.

"My stepfather is a Jew," he'd told William. "A rich one," he'd added, with a wry smile.

William had nodded, amiable.

"Better than a poor one," he'd said, and left it at that. It wasn't much, as facts went, but it did go some way to explain why Randall-Isaacs was working for Richardson rather than pursuing fame and glory with the Lancers or the Welch Fusiliers. Money would buy a commission, but it would not ensure a warm reception in a regiment nor the sorts of opportunity that family connections and the influence spoken of delicately as "interest" would.

It occurred—fleetingly—to William to wonder just why he was turning his back on his own substantial connections and opportunities in order to engage in Captain Richardson's shadowy ventures, but he dismissed that consideration as a matter for later contemplation.

"Amazing," Denys murmured, looking up. They had reined in their horses on the road that led up from the bank of the St. Lawrence to the citadel of Quebec; from here, they could see the steep cliff face that Wolfe's troops had climbed, seventeen years before, to capture the citadel—and Quebec—from the French.

"My father made that climb," William said, trying to sound casual.

Randall-Isaacs's head swiveled toward him in astonishment. "He did? Lord John, you mean—he fought on the Plains of Abraham with Wolfe?"

"Yes." William eyed the cliff with respect. It was thick with saplings, but the underlying rock was crumbling shale; he could see the jagged dark fissures and quadrangular cracks through the leaves. The notion of scaling that height in the dark, and not only climbing it, but hauling all the artillery up the cliff-side with them …!

"He said the battle was over almost as soon as it started—only the one great volley—but the climb to the battlefield was the worst thing he'd ever done."

Randall-Isaacs grunted respectfully, and paused for a moment before gathering his reins.

"You said your father knows Sir Guy?" he said. "Doubtless he'll appreciate hearing the story."

William glanced at his companion. Actually, he *hadn't* said that Lord John knew Sir Guy Carleton, the commander in chief for North

America—though he did. His father knew everyone. And with that simple thought, he realized suddenly what his true function on this expedition was. He was Randall-Isaacs's calling card.

It was true that he spoke French very well—languages came easy to him—and that Randall-Isaacs's French was rudimentary. Richardson had likely been telling the truth about that bit; always best to have an interpreter you can trust. But while Randall-Isaacs had exhibited a flattering interest in William, William became aware *ex post facto* that Randall-Isaacs was much more specifically interested in Lord John: the highlights of his military career, where he had been posted, whom he had served with or under, who he knew.

It had happened twice already. They'd called upon the commanders of Fort Saint-Jean and Fort Chambly, and in both instances Randall-Isaacs had presented their credentials, mentioning casually that William was the son of Lord John Grey. Whereupon the official welcome had warmed at once into a long, late evening of reminiscence and conversation, fueled by good brandy. During which—William now realized—he and the commanders had done all the talking. And Randall-Isaacs had sat listening, his handsome, high-colored face aglow with a flattering interest.

Huh, William thought to himself. Having worked it out, he wasn't sure how he felt about it. On the one hand, he was pleased with himself for having smoked what was going on. On the other, he was less pleased to think that he was desirable mainly for his connections, rather than his own virtues.

Well, it was useful, if humbling, to know. What he *didn't* know was exactly what Randall-Isaacs's role was. Was he only gathering information for Richardson? Or had he other business, unspoken? Often enough, Randall-Isaacs had left him to his own devices, saying casually that he had a private errand for which he thought his own French adequate.

They were—according to the very limited instruction Captain Richardson had given him—assessing the sentiments of the French *habitants* and English settlers in Quebec, with an eye to future support in case of incursion by the American rebels or attempted threats and seductions by the Continental Congress.

These sentiments so far seemed clear, if not what he might have expected. The French settlers in the area were in sympathy with Sir Guy, who—as governor general of North America—had passed the Quebec Act, which legalized Catholicism and protected the French Catholics' trade. The English were disgruntled by the same act, for obvious reasons, and had declined *en masse* to answer Sir Guy's calls for militia assistance during the American attack on the city during the previous winter.

"They must have been insane," he remarked to Randall-Isaacs, as they crossed the open plain before the citadel. "The Americans who tried it on here last year, I mean."

They'd reached the top of the cliff now, and the citadel rose from the plain before them, peaceful and solid—very solid—in the autumn sun. The day was warm and beautiful, and the air was alive with the rich, earthy smells of the river and forest. He'd never seen such a forest. The trees that edged the plain and grew all along the banks of the St. Lawrence grew impenetrably thick, now blazing with gold and crimson. Seen against the darkness of the water and the impossible deep blue of the vast October sky, the whole of it gave him the dreamlike feeling of riding through a medieval painting, glowing with gold leaf and burning with a sense of otherworldly fervor.

But beyond the beauty of it, he felt the savagery of the place. Felt it with a clarity that made his bones feel transparent. The days were still warm, but the chill of winter was a sharp tooth that bit harder with each day's twilight, and it took very little imagination for him to see this plain as it would be a few weeks from now, cloaked in bitter ice, whitely inhospitable to all life. With a ride of two hundred miles behind him, and an immediate understanding of the problems of supply for two riders on the rugged journey north in *good* weather, combined with what he knew of the rigors of supplying an army in bad weather …

"If they weren't insane, they wouldn't be doing what they *are* doing." Randall-Isaacs interrupted his thoughts, he, too, drawing up for a moment to look over the prospect with a soldier's eye. "It was Colonel Arnold who led them here, though. That man is certainly insane. But a damned good soldier." Admiration showed in his voice, and William glanced curiously at him.

"Know him, do you?" he asked casually, and Randall-Isaacs laughed.

"Not to speak to," he replied. "Come on." He spurred up, and they turned toward the citadel gate. He wore an amused, half-contemptuous expression, though, as if dwelling on a memory, and after a few moments, he spoke again.

"He might have done it. Arnold, I mean; taken the city. Sir Guy hadn't any troops to speak of, and had Arnold got here when he planned to, and with the powder and shot he needed … well, it would have been a different story. But he chose the wrong man to ask directions of."

"What do you mean by that?"

Randall-Isaacs looked suddenly wary, but then seemed to shrug internally, as though to say, *"What does it matter?"* He was in good humor, already looking forward to a hot dinner, a soft bed, and clean linen, after weeks of camping in the dark forests.

"He couldn't make it overland," he said. "Seeking a way to carry an army and its necessities north by water, Arnold had gone looking for someone who had made the hazardous trip and knew the rivers and portages," Randall-Isaacs said. "He'd found one, too—Samuel Goodwin."

"But it never occurred to him that Goodwin might be a Loyalist." Randall-Isaacs shook his head at this naïveté. "Goodwin came to me and asked what he should do. So I told him, and he gave Arnold his maps—carefully rewritten to serve their purpose."

And serve their purpose they had. By misstating distances, removing landmarks, indicating passages where there were none, and providing maps that were pure figments of imagination, Mr. Goodwin's guidance succeeded in luring Arnold's force deep into the wilderness, obliging them to carry their ships and supplies overland for days on end, and eventually delaying them so badly that the winter caught them, well short of Quebec City.

Randall-Isaacs laughed, though there was a tinge of regret about it, William thought.

"I was amazed when they told me he'd made it after all. Aside from everything else, he'd been swindled by the carpenters who made his ships—I do believe that was sheer incompetence, not politics, though these days it's sometimes hard to tell. Made with green timbers and badly fitted. More than half of them came apart and sank within days of launching.

"It had to have been sheer hell," Randall-Isaacs said, as though to himself. He pulled himself up straight then, shaking his head.

"But they followed him. All his men. Only one company turned back. Starving, half naked, freezing … they followed him," he repeated, marveling. He glanced sideways at William, smiling. "Think your men would follow you, Lieutenant? In such conditions?"

"I hope I should have better sense than to lead them into such conditions," William replied dryly. "What happened to Arnold in the end? Was he captured?"

"No," Randall-Isaacs said thoughtfully, lifting a hand to wave at the guards by the citadel gate. "No, he wasn't. As to what's happened to him now, God only knows. Or God and Sir Guy. I'm hoping the latter can tell us."

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JOYEUX NÖEL

London
December 24, 1776

Most prosperous madams were stout creatures, Lord John reflected. Whether it was only the satisfaction of appetites denied in their early years, or was a shield against the possibility of a return to the lower stations of their trade, almost all of them were well armored in flesh.

Not Nessie. He could see the shadow of her body through the thin muslin of her shift—he had inadvertently roused her from her bed—as she stood before the fire to pull on her bed-sacque. She bore not an ounce more upon her scrawny frame than she had when he'd first met her, then aged—she'd said—fourteen, though he'd suspected at the time that she might be eleven. That would make her thirty-odd. She still looked fourteen. He smiled at the notion, and she smiled back, tying her gown. The smile aged her a bit, for there were gaps among her teeth, and the remainder showed black at the root. If she was not stout, it was because she lacked the capacity to become so; she adored sugar, and would eat an entire box of candied violets or Turkish Delight in minutes, compensating for the starvation of her youth in the Scottish Highlands. He'd brought her a pound of sugar plums.

"Think I'm that cheap, do ye?" she said, raising a brow as she took the prettily wrapped box from him.

“Never,” he assured her. “That is merely by way of apology for having disturbed your rest.” That was improvisation; he had in fact expected to find her at work, it being past ten o’clock at night.

“Aye, well, it *is* Christmas Eve,” she said, answering his unasked question. “Any man wi’ a home to go to’s in it.” She yawned, pulled off her nightcap, and fluffed her fingers through the wild mass of curly dark hair.

“Yet you seem to have some custom,” he observed. Distant singing came from two floors below, and the parlor had seemed well populated when he passed.

“Och, aye. The desperate ones. I leave them to Maybelle to deal with; dinna like to see them, poor creatures. Pitiful. They dinna really want a woman, the ones who come on Christmas Eve—only a fire to sit by, and folk to sit with.” She waved a hand and sat down, greedily pulling the bow from her present.

“Let me wish you a happy Christmas, then,” he said, watching her with amused affection. She popped one of the sweetmeats into her mouth, closed her eyes, and sighed in ecstasy.

“Mmp,” she said, not pausing to swallow before inserting and masticating another. From the cordial intonation of this remark, he assumed her to be returning the sentiment.

He’d known it was Christmas Eve, of course, but had somehow put the knowledge of it out of his head during the long, cold hours of the day. It had poured all day, driving needles of freezing rain, augmented now and then by irritable bursts of hail, and he’d been chilled through since just before dawn, when Minnie’s footman had roused him with the summons to Argus House.

Nessie’s room was small but elegant, and smelled comfortably of sleep. Her bed was vast, hung with woolen bed curtains done in the very fashionable pink and black “Queen Charlotte” checks. Tired, cold, and hungry as he was, he felt the pull of that warm, inviting cavern, with its mounds of goose-down pillows, quilts, and clean, soft sheets. What would she think, he wondered, if he asked to share her bed for the night?

“A fire to sit by, and folk to sit with.” Well, he had that, at least for the moment.

Grey became aware of a low buzzing noise, something like a trapped bluebottle flinging itself against a windowpane. Glancing toward the sound, he perceived that what he had thought to be merely a heap of rumpled bedclothes in fact contained a body; the elaborately passementeried tassel of a nightcap trailed across the pillow.

"That's no but Rab," said an amused Scottish voice, and he turned to find her grinning at him. "Fancy it three ways, do ye?"

He realized, even as he blushed, that he liked her not only for herself, or for her skill as an intelligence agent, but because she had an unexcelled ability to disconcert him. He thought she did not know the shape of his own desires exactly, but she'd been a whore since childhood and likely had a shrewd apprehension of almost anyone's desires, whether conscious or not.

"Oh, I think not," he said politely. "I shouldn't wish to disturb your husband." He tried not to think of Rab MacNab's brutal hands and solid thighs; Rab had been a chairman, before his marriage to Nessie and the success of the brothel they owned. Surely he didn't also …?

"Ye couldna wake yon wee oaf wi' cannon fire," she said, with an affectionate glance into the bed. She got up, though, and pulled the curtains across, muffling the snoring.

"Speak o' cannon," she added, bending to peer at Grey as she returned to her seat, "ye look as though ye've been in the wars yourself. Here, have a dram, and I'll ring for a bit of hot supper." She nodded at the decanter and glasses that stood on the elbow table and reached for the bell rope.

"No, I thank you. I haven't much time. But I will take a drop to keep the cold out, thank you."

The whisky—she drank nothing else, scorning gin as a beggar's drink and regarding wine as good but insufficient to its purpose—warmed him, and his wet coat had begun to steam in the fire's heat.

"Ye've not much time," she said. "Why's that, then?"

"I'm bound for France," he said. "In the morning."

Her eyebrows shot up, and she put another comfit in her mouth.

" 'Oo 'don me tkp Kismus wi yrfmily?"

"Don't talk with your mouth full, my dear," he said, smiling nonetheless. "My brother suffered a bad attack last night. His heart, the quack says, but I doubt he really knows. The usual Christmas dinner is likely to be somewhat less of an occasion than usual, though."

"I'm that sorry to hear," Nessie said, more clearly. She wiped sugar from the corner of her mouth, brow puckered with a troubled frown. "His lordship's a fine man."

"Yes, he—" He stopped, staring at her. "You've *met* my brother?"

Nessie dimpled demurely at him.

"Discretion is a madam's most val-u-able stock in trade," she chanted, clearly parroting the wisdom of a former employer.

"Says the woman who's spying for me." He was trying to envision Hal … or perhaps *not* to envision Hal … for surely he wouldn't … to spare Minnie his demands, perhaps? But he'd thought …

"Aye, well, spying's no the same as idle gossip, now, is it? I want tea, even if you don't. Talking's thirsty work." She rang the bell for the porter, then turned back, one eyebrow raised. "Your brother's dying, and ye're goin' to France? Must be summat urgent, then."

"He's not dying," Grey said sharply. The thought of it split the carpet at his feet, a grinning abyss waiting to pull him in. He looked determinedly away from it.

"He … had a shock. Word was brought that his youngest son was wounded in America and has been captured."

Her eyes widened at that, and she clutched the dressing gown closer to her nonexistent breasts.

"The youngest. That would be … Henry, no?"

"It would. And how the *devil* do you know that?" he demanded, agitation making his voice harsh. A gap-toothed smile glimmered at him, but then went away as she saw the depth of his distress.

"One of his lordship's footmen is a regular," she said simply. "Thursdays; it's his night off."

"Oh." He sat still, hands on his knees, trying to bring his thoughts—and his feelings—under some kind of control. "It—I see."

"It's late in the year to be getting messages from America, no?" She glanced at the window, which was covered in layers of red velvet and lace that were unable to keep out the sound of lashing rain. “Did a late ship come in?”

“Yes. Blown off course and limped in to Brest with a wounded mainmast. The message was brought overland.”

“And is it Brest ye’re going to, then?”

“It is not.”

A soft scratching came at the door before she could ask anything further, and she went to let in the porter, who had—without being asked, Grey noted—brought up a tray laden with tea things, including a thickly iced cake.

He turned it over in his mind. Could he tell her? But she hadn’t been joking about discretion, he knew. In her own way, she kept secrets as much—and as well—as he did.

“It’s about William,” he said, as she shut the door and turned back to him.

* * *

He knew dawn was near, from the ache in his bones and the faint chime of his pocket watch. There was no sign of it in the sky. Clouds the color of chimney sweepings brushed the rooves of London, and the streets were blacker than they had been at midnight, all lanterns having been long since extinguished, all hearth fires burnt low.

He’d been up all night. There were things he must do; he ought to go home and sleep for a few hours before catching the Dover coach. He couldn’t go without seeing Hal once more, though. Just to assure himself.

There were lights in the windows of Argus House. Even with the drapes drawn, a faint gleam showed on the wet cobbles outside. It was snowing thickly, but wasn’t yet sticking to the ground. There was a good chance that the coach would be detained—was sure to be slow, bogged down on the miry roads.

Speaking of coaches—his heart gave a sickly leap at the sight of a battered-looking carriage standing in the porte cochere, which he thought belonged to the doctor.

His thump at the door was answered at once by a half-dressed footman, nightshirt tucked hastily into his breeches. The man's anxious face relaxed a little when he recognized Grey.

"The duke—"

"Took bad in the night, my lord, but easier now," the man—Arthur, that was his name—interrupted him, stepping back to let him in and taking the cloak from his shoulders, shaking off the snow.

He nodded and made for the stair, not waiting to be shown up. He met the doctor coming down—a thin gray man, marked by his black ill-smelling coat and the bag in his hand.

"How is he?" he demanded, seizing the man by the sleeve as he reached the landing. The doctor drew back, affronted, but then saw his face in the glow from the sconce and, recognizing his resemblance to Hal, settled his ruffled feathers.

"Somewhat better, my lord. I have let him blood, three ounces, and his breathing is grown easier."

Grey let go the sleeve and bounded up the stairs, his own chest tight. The door to Hal's suite of rooms stood open and he went in at once, startling a maid who was carrying out a chamber pot, lidded and then delicately draped with a cloth handsomely embroidered with large, brilliant flowers. He brushed past her with a nod of apology and went into Hal's bedroom.

Hal was sitting up against the bolster, pillows wedged behind him; he looked nearly dead. Minnie was beside him, her pleasant round face gaunt with anxiety and sleeplessness.

"I see you even shit with style, Your Grace," Grey remarked, sitting down on the other side of the bed.

Hal opened one gray lid and eyed him. The face might be that of a skeleton, but the pale, sharp eye was the living Hal, and Grey felt his chest flood with relief.

"Oh, the cloth?" Hal said, weakly but clearly. "That's Dottie. She will not go out, even though I assured her that if I thought I was going to die, I should certainly wait for her return to do it." He paused to breathe, with a faint wheezing note, then coughed and went on: "She is not the sort, thank God, to indulge in pieties, she has no musical talent, and her vitality is such that she is a menace to the kitchen staff. So Minnie set her to needlework, as some outlet for her formidable energies. She takes after Mother, you know."

"I *am* sorry, John," Minnie said apologetically to him. "I sent her to bed, but I saw that her candle is still lit. I believe she is at work this moment on a pair of carpet slippers for you."

Grey thought carpet slippers were likely innocuous, whatever motif she had chosen, and said so.

"So long as she isn't embroidering a pair of drawers for me. The knotwork, you know …"

That made Hal laugh, which in turn made him cough alarmingly, though it brought a little color back into his face.

"So you aren't dying?" Grey asked.

"No," Hal said shortly.

"Good," said Grey, smiling at his brother. "Don't."

Hal blinked, and then, recalling the occasion on which he had said exactly that to Grey, smiled back.

"Do my best," he said dryly, and then, turning, laid an affectionate hand on Minnie's. "My dear …"

"I'll have some tea brought up," she said, rising at once. "And a good hot breakfast," she added, after a scrutinizing look at Grey. She closed the door delicately behind her.

"What is it?" Hal hitched himself higher on the pillow, disregarding the bloodstained cloth wrapped round one forearm. "You have news?"

"Very little. But a great number of alarming questions."

The news of Henry's capture had been enclosed as a note for Hal inside a letter to himself, from one of his contacts in the intelligencing world, and carried an answer to his inquiries regarding the known French connections of one Percival Beauchamp. He hadn't wanted to discuss that with Hal until he'd seen Nessie, though—and Hal had been in no condition for such discussions, anyway.

"No known connections between Beauchamp and Vergennes"—naming the French foreign minister—"but he has been seen often in company with Beaumarchais."

That provoked another coughing fit.

"Little fucking wonder," Hal observed hoarsely, upon his recovery. "A mutual interest in hunting, no doubt?" That last was a sarcastic reference, both to Percy's disinclination for blood sports and to Beaumarchais's title of "Lieutenant General of Hunting," bestowed upon him some years previous by the late king.

"And," Grey went on, ignoring this, "with one Silas Deane."

Hal frowned. "Who?"

"An American merchant. In Paris on behalf of the American Congress. He skulks round Beaumarchais, rather. And *he's* been seen speaking with Vergennes."

"Oh, him." Hal flapped a hand. "Heard of him. Vaguely."

"Have you heard of a business called *Rodrigue Hortalez et Cie*?"

"No. Sounds Spanish, doesn't it?"

"Or Portuguese. My informant had nothing but the name and a rumor that Beaumarchais has something to do with it."

Hal grunted and lay back.

"Beaumarchais has his fingers in any number of pies. Makes watches, for God's sake, as though writing plays weren't bad enough. Has Beauchamp anything to do with this company?"

"Not known. It's all vague associations at this point, nothing more. I asked for everything that could be turned up that had anything—anything not generally known, I mean—to do with Beauchamp or the Americans; this is what came back."

Hal's slender fingers played restless scales on the coverlet.

"Does your informant know what this Spanish company does?"

"Trade, what else?" Grey replied ironically, and Hal snorted.

"If they were bankers, as well, I'd think you might have something."

"I might, at that. But the only way to find out, I think, is to go and poke at things with a sharp stick. I'm taking the coach to Dover in"—he squinted at the carriage clock on the mantel, obscured by the gloom—"three hours."

"Ah."

The voice was noncommittal, but Grey knew his brother very well indeed.

"I'll be back from France by the end of March at the latest," he said, adding gently, "I shall be on the first ship that sails for the Colonies in the new year, Hal. And I'll bring Henry back." *Alive or dead.* Neither of them spoke the words; they didn't need to.

"I'll be here when you do," Hal said at last, quietly.

Grey put his hand over his brother's, which turned at once to take his. It might look frail, but he was heartened at the determined strength in Hal's grasp. They sat in silence, hands linked, until the door opened and Arthur—now fully dressed—sidled in with a tray the size of a card table, laden with bacon, sausages, kidneys, kippers, shirred eggs in butter, grilled mushrooms and tomatoes, toast, jam, marmalade, a huge pot of fragrantly steaming tea, bowls of sugar and milk—and a covered dish which he set ceremoniously before Hal, this proving to be filled with a sort of nasty thin gruel.

Arthur bowed and went out, leaving Grey wondering whether he was the footman who went to Nessie's house on Thursdays. He turned back to find Hal helping himself liberally to Grey's kidneys.

"Aren't you meant to be eating your slop?" Grey inquired.

"Don't tell me *you're* determined to hasten me into my grave, too," Hal said, closing his eyes in brief rapture as he chewed. "How the devil anyone expects me to recover, fed on things like rusks and gruel …" Huffing, he speared another kidney.

"Is it really your heart, do you think?" Grey asked.

Hal shook his head.

"I really don't think so," he said, his tone detached. "I listened to it, you know, after the first attack. Whanging away just as usual." He paused to prod himself experimentally in the chest, fork suspended in the air. "It doesn't hurt there. Surely it would, wouldn't it?"

Grey shrugged.

"What sort of attack was it, then?"

Hal swallowed the last of the kidney and reached for a slice of buttered toast, taking up the marmalade knife in his other hand.

"Couldn't breathe," he said casually. "Turned blue, that kind of thing."

"Oh. Well, then."

"I feel quite well, just now," Hal said, sounding mildly surprised.

"Do you?" Grey said, smiling. He had a moment's reservation, but after all … he was going abroad, and unexpected things not only could happen but often did. Best not leave the matter hanging, just in case something un toward befell either one of them before they met again.

"Well, then … if you're sure that a minor shock will not shuffle off your mortal coil, allow me to tell you something."

His news regarding the *tendresse* existing between Dottie and William made Hal blink and stop eating momentarily, but after a moment's contemplation he nodded and resumed chewing.

"All right," he said.

"All *right*?" Grey echoed. "You have no objections?"

"Hardly sit well with you if I did, would it?"

"If you expect me to believe that a concern for my feelings would in any way affect your own actions, your illness *has* severely damaged you."

Hal grinned briefly, and drank tea.

"No," he said, setting down the empty cup. "Not that. It's just—" He leaned back, hands clasped over his—very slightly—protruding belly, and gave Grey a straight look. "I *could* die. Don't mean to; don't think I will. But I could. I'd die easier if I knew she was settled with someone who'd protect her and look after her properly."

"I'm flattered that you think William would," Grey said dryly, though he was in fact immensely pleased.

"Of course he would," Hal said, matter-of-fact. "He's your son, isn't he?"

A church bell began to ring, somewhere in the distance, reminding Grey.

"Oh!" he said. "Happy Christmas!"

Hal looked equally surprised, but then smiled.

"The same to you."

Grey was still filled with Christmas feeling when he set off for Dover—literally, as the pockets of his greatcoat were jammed with sweetmeats and small gifts and he carried under his arm a wrapped parcel containing the infamous carpet slippers, these lavishly embellished with lily pads and green frogs done in crewelwork. He had hugged Dottie when she gave them to him, managing to whisper in her ear that her job was done. She had kissed him with such vigor that he could still feel it on his cheek and rubbed absently at the spot.

He must write to William at once—though in fact there was no particular hurry, as a letter could not be carried any faster than he would go himself. He'd meant what he'd told Hal; as soon as a ship could set sail in the spring, he'd be on it. He only hoped he'd be in time.

And not only for Henry.

The roads were quite as bad as he'd expected, and the Calais ferry was worse, but he was oblivious to the cold and discomfort of the journey. With his anxiety for Hal somewhat allayed, he was free to think about what Nessie had told him—a bit of information he'd thought of mentioning to Hal but hadn't, not wanting to burden his brother's mind, in case it might hamper his recovery.

"Your Frenchman didn't come *here*," Nessie had told him, licking sugar off her fingers. "But he went to Jackson's regular, when he was in town. He's gone off now, though; back to France, they say."

"Jackson's," he'd said slowly, wondering. He didn't patronize bawdy houses himself—bar Nessie's establishment—but he certainly knew about Jackson's and had been there once or twice with friends. A flash house, offering music on the ground floor, gaming on the first floor, and more private diversions higher up. Very popular with mid-echelon army officers. But not, he was certain, a place catering to Percy Beauchamp's particular tastes.

"I see," he'd said, calmly drinking tea, feeling his heart beat in his ears. "And have you ever come across an officer named Randall-Isaacs?" That was the part of his letter he hadn't told Hal; Denys Randall-Isaacs was an army officer known to frequent Beauchamp's company, both in France and in London, his informant had said—and the name had gone straight through Grey's heart like an icicle.

It *might* be no more than coincidence that a man known to associate with Percy Beauchamp had taken William on an intelligencing expedition to Quebec—but damned if he thought it was.

Nessie had lifted her head abruptly at the name "Randall-Isaacs," like a dog hearing the rustle of something in the brush.

"Aye, I have," she said slowly. There was a blob of fine sugar on her lower lip; he wished to wipe it off for her, and in other circumstances would have. "Or heard of him. He's a Jew, they say."

"A Jew?" That startled him. "Surely not." A Jew would never be allowed to take a commission in the army or navy, no more than a Catholic.

Nessie arched a dark brow at him.

"Perhaps he doesna want anyone to know," she said, and, licking her lips like a cat, tidied away the blob of sugar. "But if not, he ought to stay awa' from kittle-hoosies, that's all I can say!" She laughed heartily, then sobered, hunching her bed-sacque over her shoulders and staring at him, dark-eyed in the firelight.

"He's got summat to do wi' your wee lad, the Frenchie, too," she said. "For it was a girl from Jackson's told me about the Jewish cove and what a shock it was to her when he took his breeches off. She said she wouldn't've, only his friend the Frenchie was there, too, wanting to watch, and when he—the Frenchie, I mean—saw she was put off, he offered her double, so she did it. She said when ye came right down to it"—and here she grinned lewdly at him, the tip of her tongue resting against the front teeth she still had—"it was nicer than some."

"Nicer than some," he muttered distractedly to himself, only half-noticing the wary glance cast toward him by the only other ferry passenger hardy enough to stay abovedecks. "Bloody *hell*!"

The snow was falling thickly over the Channel, and now swept nearly horizontal as the howling wind changed direction and the ship gave a sickening lurch. The other man shook himself and went below, leaving Grey to eat brandied peaches with his fingers from a jar in his pocket and stare bleakly at the oncoming coast of France, visible only in glimpses through low-lying clouds.

* * *

December 24, 1776
Quebec City

Dear Papa—

I write you from a Convent. Not, I hasten to explain, one of the Covent Garden variety, but a real Roman Convent, run by Ursuline Nuns.

Captain Randall-Isaacs and I arrived at the Citadel in late October, intending to call upon Sir Guy and discover his Opinion of the local Sympathies regarding the American Insurrection, only to be told that Sir Guy had marched to Fort Saint-Jean, to deal personally with an Outbreak of said Insurrection, this being a Sea Battle (or so I suppose I must call it), which took place upon Lake Champlain, this a narrow Body connecting with Lake George, which perhaps you will know from your own Time here.

I was much in favor of going to join Sir Guy, but Captain Randall-Isaacs was reluctant in consideration of the Distance involved and the Time of Year. In Fact his Judgment was proved sound, as the next Day brought freezing Rain, this giving way shortly to a howling Blizzard, so fierce as to darken the Sky so that you could not tell Day from Night, and which buried the World in Snow and Ice within Hours. Seeing this Spectacle of Nature, I will admit that my Disappointment at missing an Opportunity to join Sir Guy was substantially allayed.

As it was, I should have been too late in any Case, as the Engagement had already taken place, upon the 1st October. We did not learn the Particulars until mid-November, when some Hessian Officers from Baron von Riedesel's Regiment arrived at the Citadel with News of it.

Most likely you will have heard more official and direct Descriptions of the Engagement by the Time you receive this Letter, but there may be some Details of interest omitted from the official Versions—and to be frank, the Composition of such an Account is the only Employment available to me at present, as I have declined a kind Invitation from the Mother Superior to attend the Mass they hold at midnight tonight in observance of Christmas. (The Bells of the city's Churches ring every quarter Hour, marking time through the Day and Night. The convent's Chapel lies directly beyond the Wall of the Guesthouse in which I am lodged upon the highest Floor, and the Bell is perhaps twenty Feet from my Head when I lie in Bed. I can thus inform you faithfully that it is now 9:15 p.m.)

To particulars, then: Sir Guy was alarmed by the attempted Invasion of Quebec last Year, even though it ended in abject Failure, and had thus determined to increase his Hold upon the upper Hudson, this being the only possible Avenue by which further Trouble could come, the Difficulties of land Travel being so exigent as to prevent any but the most determined (I have a small Jar of spirits of Wine with which to present you, this containing a Deerfly measuring nearly two Inches in Length, as well as a Quantity of very large Ticks, these removed from my Person with the assistance of Honey, which smothers them if applied liberally, causing them to loose their Grip).

While the Invasion of last Winter did not succeed, Colonel Arnold's Men determined to deny Sir Guy Access to the Lakes, and thus sank or burned all the Ships at Fort Saint-Jean as they withdrew, as well as burning the Sawmill and the Fort itself.

Sir Guy had therefore requisitioned collapsible Ships to be sent to him from England (I wish I had seen these!) and, ten of them arriving, went down to St. John to oversee their assembly upon the upper Richelieu River. Meanwhile, Colonel Arnold (who seems an amazing, *industrious Fellow, if half what I hear of him is true) had been madly building his own Fleet of ramshackle Galleys and hog-beamed Sloops.*

Not content with his Prodigies of collapsibility, Sir Guy also had the Indefatigable, a Frigate of some 180 tonnes (some Argument between my informants as to the number of Guns she carries; after a second Bottle of the convent's Claret [the Nuns make it themselves, and from the Shade of the priest's Nose, no little of it gets consumed here, too], Consensus was reached, with "a bloody Lot, mate," always allowing for Errors of Translation, being the final Number), taken apart, hauled to the River, and there reassembled.

Colonel Arnold apparently decided that to wait any longer was to lose what Advantage of Initiative he might possess, and sallied out from his Hiding place at Valcour Island on 30 September. By Report, he had fifteen Craft, to Sir Guy's twenty-five, these former all hastily built, unseaworthy, and manned by Landsmen who did not know a Binnacle from a Bunion—the American Navy, in all its glory!

Still, I must not laugh too much. The more I hear of Colonel Arnold (and I hear a great Deal about him, here in Quebec), the more I think he must be a Gentleman of Gall and Kidney, as Grandpapa Sir George is wont to say; I should like to meet him one day.

There is Singing outside; the habitants are coming to the Cathedral nearby. I don't know the Music, and it's too far to make out the Words, but I can see the Glow of Torches from my Eyrie. The Bells say it is ten o'clock.

(The Mother Superior says that she knows you, by the way—Soeur Immaculata is her Name. I should scarcely have been startled by this; told her that you know the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Pope, by which she professed to be much impressed, and begs you will convey her most humble Obeisance to His Holiness when next you

see him. She kindly asked me to Dinner, and told me Stories of the taking of the Citadel in '59, and how you quartered a number of Highlanders upon the Convent. How shocked the Sisters all were by their bare Legs, and sought a Requisition of Canvas that they might make the men Trousers. My Uniform has suffered noticeably through the last few Weeks of Travel, but I am still decently covered below the Waist, I am relieved to say. So was Mother Superior, no doubt!)

I return to my Account of the Battle: Sir Guy's Fleet sailed south, intending to reach and recapture Crown Point, then Ticonderoga. As they passed Valcour Island, though, two of Arnold's Ships sprang out upon them, firing in challenge. These then attempted to withdraw, but one (Royal Savage, they said) could not make Way against the Headwinds, and ran aground. Several British Gunboats swarmed her and captured a few Men, but were forced to withdraw under heavy Fire from the Americans—though not omitting to set Fire to the Royal Savage as they did so.

A great deal of Maneuvering then ensued in the Strait, and the Battle began in earnest about Midday, the Carleton and Inflexible bearing most of the Brunt of the Action, along with the Gunboats. Arnold's Revenge and Philadelphia were badly hit by Broadsides, and the Philadelphia sank near Evening.

The Carleton continued firing until a fortunate Shot from the Americans severed the Line to her Anchor, causing her to drift. She was heavily attacked and a number of her Men killed or injured, the Butcher's Bill including her Captain, a Lieutenant James Dacres (I have an uneasy feeling that I have met him, perhaps at a Dance last Season) and the senior Officers. One of her Midshipmen took Command and carried her to Safety. They said it was Edward Pellew—and I know I have met him, once or twice, at Boodles with Uncle Harry.

To resume: Another lucky Shot struck the Magazine of a Gunboat and blew it up, but meanwhile, the Inflexible was finally brought into play and battered the American Boats with her heavy Guns. The smaller of Sir Guy's Craft landed Indians meanwhile upon the Shores of Valcour Island and the Shore of the Lake, thus cutting off this Avenue of Escape, and the Remnants of Arnold's Fleet were thus obliged to retreat down the Lake.

They succeeded in slipping past Sir Guy, the Night being foggy, and took Refuge at Schuyler Island, some miles south. Sir Guy's Fleet pursued them, though, and was able to draw within Sight of them the next Day, Arnold's Boats being much hampered by Leakage, Damage, and the Weather, which had turned to heavy Rain and high Wind. The Washington was caught, attacked, and forced to strike her Colors, her Crew of more than a hundred Men being captured. The rest of Arnold's Fleet, though, managed to get through to Buttonmold Bay, where, I understand, the Waters are too shallow to allow Sir Guy's Ships to follow.

There Arnold beached, stripped, and set afire most of his Craft—their Flags still flying, as a Mark of Defiance, the Germans said; they were amused by this, but admired it. Colonel Arnold (or must we now call him Admiral Arnold?) personally set Fire to the Congress, this being his Flagship, and set off Overland, narrowly escaping the Indians who had been set to prevent him. His troops did reach Crown Point, but did not linger there, pausing only to destroy the Fort before withdrawing to Ticonderoga.

Sir Guy did not march his Prisoners back to Quebec, but returned them to Ticonderoga under a Flag of Truce—a very pretty Gesture, much admired by my Informants.

10:30. Did you see the aurora borealis when you were here, or was it too early in the Year? It is a most remarkable Sight. Snow has fallen all Day, but ceased near Sunset and the Sky has cleared. From my Window, I see a northern Exposure, and there is presently an *amazing shimmer that fills the whole Sky, waves of pale blue and some green—though I have seen it to be red sometimes—that swirl like Drops of Ink spilt in Water and stirred. I cannot hear it at present, because of the Singing—someone is Playing a Fiddle in the Distance; it is a very sweet and piercing Tune—but when I have seen the Phenomenon outside the City, in the Woods, there is often a most peculiar Sound, or Sounds, that accompany it. Sometimes a sort of faint Whistling, as of Wind around a Building, though there is no Movement of the Air; sometimes a strange, high, hissing Noise, interrupted now and then by a Fusillade of Clicks and Cracklings, as though a Horde of Crickets were advancing upon the Listener through dry Leaves—though by the time the Aurora begins to be seen, the Cold has long since killed all Insects (and good riddance! We applied an Ointment used by the local Indians, which was of some help against stinging Flies and Mosquitoes, but does nothing to discourage the inquisitiveness of Earwigs, Roaches, and Spiders).*

We had a Guide for our Journey between St. John and Quebec, a Man of mixed Blood (he had a most remarkable Head of Hair, thick and curly as Sheep's Wool and the color of Cinnamon Bark) who told us that some of the native People think that the Sky is a Dome, separating Earth from Heaven, but that there are Holes in the Dome, and that the Lights of the Aurora are the Torches of Heaven, sent out to guide the Spirits of the Dead through the Holes.

But I see I have yet to finish my Account, though it is only to add that following the Battle, Sir Guy withdrew to winter Quarters in St. John, and likely will not return to Quebec until the Spring.

So now I come to the true Point of my letter. I rose Yesterday to discover Captain Randall-Isaacs had decamped during the Night, leaving me with a brief Note *stating that he had urgent Business, had enjoyed my Company and valuable Assistance, and that I was to remain here until either his Return or the arrival of new Orders.*

The Snow is deep, more may come at any Moment, and Business must be urgent indeed which could compel a man to venture any Distance. I am of course somewhat disturbed at Captain Randall-Isaacs's abrupt Departure, curious as to what might have happened to cause it, and somewhat anxious as to his Welfare. This does not seem a Situation in which I would be justified in ignoring my Orders, however, and so … I wait.

11:30. I stopped writing for some little time, to stand and watch the Sky. The Lights of the Aurora come and go, but I think they have gone altogether now; the Sky is black, the Stars bright but tiny by contrast with the vanished brilliance of the Lights. There is a vast Emptiness in the Sky that one seldom senses in a City. Despite the Clangor of the Bells, the Bonfires in the Square, and the Singing of People—there is a Procession of some kind going on—I can feel the great Silence beyond it.

The Nuns are going in to their Chapel. I leaned out of my Window just now to watch them hurrying along, two by two like a marching Column, their dark Gowns and Cloaks making them look like small Pieces of the Night, drifting among the Stars of their Torches. (I have been writing a long Time, you must forgive the Fancies of an exhausted Brain.)

This is the first Christmas I have spent with no Sight of Home or Family. The First of many, no doubt.

I think of you often, Papa, and hope you are well and looking forward to roast Goose tomorrow with Grandmama and Grandpapa Sir George. Give my Love to them, please, and to Uncle Hal and his family. (And to my Dottie, especially.)

A very merry Christmas from your Son, William

PostScriptum: 2:00 a.m. I went down after all, and stood at the Back of the Chapel. It was somewhat Popish, and there was a great Deal of Incense, but I said a Prayer for Mother Geneva and for Mama Isobel. When I emerged from the Chapel, I saw that the Lights have come back. Now they are blue.

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THE BOSOM OF THE DEEP

May 15, 1777

My dears,

> *I hate Boats. I despise them with the utmost Fiber of my Being. And yet I find myself once more launched upon the dreadful Bosom of the Sea, aboard a Craft known as the Tranquil Teal, from which Absurdity you may deduce the grim Whimsy of her Captain. This Gentleman is a Smuggler of mixed Race, evil Countenance, and low Humor, who tells me, straight-faced, that his name is Trustworthy Roberts.*

Jamie paused to dip his quill, glanced at the receding shore of North Carolina, and, observing it to rise and fall in an unsettling manner, fixed his eyes at once upon the page he had tacked to his lap desk to prevent its being borne away by the stiff breeze that filled the sails above his head.

We are in good Health, he wrote slowly. Putting aside the notion of seasickness, upon which he did not propose to dwell. Ought he to tell them about Fergus? he wondered.

"Feeling all right?"

He looked up to see Claire, bending to peer at him with that look of intent but cautious curiosity she reserved for people who might at any moment vomit, spurt blood, or die. He'd already done the first two, as a result of her having accidentally put one of her needles into a small blood vessel in his scalp, but hoped she didn't distinguish any further signs of his impending demise.

"Well enough." He didn't want even to think about his stomach, for fear of inciting it, and changed the subject in order to avoid further discussion. "Shall I tell Brianna and Roger Mac about Fergus?"

"How much ink have you got?" she asked, with a sidelong smile. "Yes, of course you should. They'll be very interested. And it will distract you," she added, squinting slightly at him. "You're still rather green."

"Aye, thanks."

She laughed with the cheerful callousness of the good sailor, kissed the top of his head—avoiding the four needles protruding from his forehead—and went to stand by the rail, watching the wavering land recede from view.

He averted his gaze from this distressing prospect, and returned to his letter.

> *Fergus and his family are also well, but I must tell you of a puzzling occurrence. A man who calls himself Percival Beauchamp …*

It took him most of a page to describe Beauchamp and his baffling interest. He glanced up at Claire, wondering whether he should also include the possibility of Beauchamp's relationship to her family, but decided against it. His daughter certainly knew her mother's maiden name and would notice it at once. He had no further useful information to provide in that respect—and his hand was beginning to ache.

Claire was still at the rail, one hand on it for balance, her face dreaming.

She had tied back the mass of her hair with ribbon, but the wind was whipping strands of it out, and with hair and skirts and shawl streaming back, the cloth of her gown molded to what was still a very fine bosom, he thought she looked like a ship's figurehead, graceful and fierce, a protective spirit against the dangers of the deep.

He found that thought obscurely comforting, and returned to his composition in better heart, despite the disturbing content he had now to confide.

> *Fergus elected not to speak with Monsieur Beauchamp, which I thought wise, and so we presumed this to be the end of the Matter.*
>
> *While we were in Wilmington, though, I went down to the Docks one Evening to meet Mr. DeLancey Hall, our Liaison with Captain Roberts. Owing to the Presence of an English Man-of-war in the Harbor, the Arrangement was that we should repair discreetly aboard Mr. Hall's fishing Ketch, which would transport us outwith the Harbor, whence we should rendezvous with the Teal, Captain Roberts disliking close Proximity to the British navy. (This is a fairly universal Response on the part of private and merchant Captains, owing both to the prevalence of Contraband aboard most Ships and to the Navy's rapacious Attitude toward the Ships' Crews, who are routinely abducted—pressed, they call it—and to all Intents and Purposes, enslaved for Life, save they are willing to risk Hanging for Desertion.)*
>
> *I had brought with me some minor Items of Luggage, intending under the Pretext of taking these aboard to inspect both the Ketch and Mr. Hall more closely before entrusting our Lives to either. The Ketch was not at Anchor, though, and Mr. Hall did not appear for some Time, so that I began to worry lest I had mistaken his Instructions or that he had run afoul either of His Majesty's Navy or some fellow Rapscallion or Privateer.*
>
> *I waited until it had grown Dark, and was on the point of returning to our Inn, when I saw a small Boat come into the Harbor with a blue Lantern at its Tail. This was Mr. Hall's Signal, and the Boat was his Ketch, which I assisted*

him to tie up to the Quay. He told me that he had some News, and we repaired to a local Tavern, where he said that he had been in New Bern the Day before, and there found the Town in an Uproar, owing to an infamous Assault upon the Printer, Mr. Fraser.

By report, he—Fergus—was making his Rounds of Delivery, and had just got down from the Mule Cart when someone sprang upon him from behind, thrusting a Sack over his Head, and someone else attempted at the same Time to seize his Hands, presumably with the Intent of binding them. Fergus naturally resisted these Attempts with some Vigor, and according to Mr. Hall's Story, succeeded in wounding one Assailant with his Hook, there being a certain Amount of Blood to substantiate this Assumption. The wounded Man fell back with a Scream and uttered loud Oaths (I should have been interested to know the content of said Oaths, in order to know whether the Speaker might be French or English, but this Information was not included), whereupon Clarence (who you will remember, I think) became excited and apparently bit the second Assailant, this Man and Fergus having fallen against the Mule in their Struggle. The second Man was discouraged by this vigorous Intervention, but the first returned to the Fray at this Point, and Fergus—still blinded by the Sack but bellowing for Help—grappled with him, striking at him again with his Hook. Some Reports (says Mr. Hall) claim that the Villain wrenched the Hook from Fergus's Wrist, while others claim that Fergus succeeded in striking him again but that the Hook became entangled in the Villain's Clothing and was pulled off in the Struggle.

In any Event, people in Thompson's Ordinary heard the Stramash and rushed out, whereupon the Villains fled, leaving Fergus somewhat bruised and most indignant at the loss of his Hook, but otherwise unharmed, for which

God and St. Dismas (he being Fergus's particular Patron) be thanked.

I questioned Mr. Hall as closely as I could, but there was little more to be learned. He said that public Opinion was divided, with many saying that this was an attempted Deportation and the Sons of Liberty were to blame for the attack, while some members of the Sons of Liberty indignantly denied this Accusation, claiming that it was the work of Loyalists incensed over Fergus's printing of a particularly inflammatory Speech by Patrick Henry, and the Abduction was a Prelude to Tar and Feathers. Apparently Fergus has been so successful in avoiding the Appearance of taking Sides in the Conflict that both Sides are equally likely to have taken Offense and decided to eliminate his Influence.

This is, of course, possible. But with the Presence and Behavior of Monsieur Beauchamp in Mind, I think a third Explanation is more likely. Fergus declined to speak with him, but it would not have required a great deal of further Inquiry for him to learn that despite his Name and Scottish Wife, Fergus is a Frenchman. Surely most of the Inhabitants of New Bern know this, and someone could easily have told him.

I confess myself to be at a Loss as to why Beauchamp should wish to abduct Fergus, rather than simply come and confront him in Person to inquire whether he might be the Person for whom the Gentleman claimed to be searching. I must assume that he does not mean Fergus immediate Harm, for if he did, it would be a fairly simple Matter to have arranged to have him killed; there are a great many Men of no Attachment and mean Character drifting through the Colony these Days.

The Occurrence is worrying, but there is little I can do about it in my present abject Position. I have sent Fergus a Letter—ostensibly regarding the Specifications of a printing Job—which lets him know that I have placed a Sum with

> *a Goldsmith in Wilmington, which he may draw upon in case of Need. I had discussed with him the Dangers of his present Position, not knowing at the Time how dangerous they might actually be, and he agreed that there might be some Advantage to his Family's Safety in his moving to a City where public Opinion is more strongly aligned with his own Inclinations. This latest Incident may compel his Decision, the more particularly as Proximity to ourselves is no longer a Consideration.*

He had to stop again, as pain was radiating through his hand and up his wrist. He stretched the fingers, stifling a groan; a hot wire seemed to stab from his fourth finger up his forearm in brief electric jolts.

He was more than worried for Fergus and his family. If Beauchamp had tried once, he would try again. But why?

Perhaps the fact of Fergus's being French was not sufficient evidence that he was the Claudel Fraser that Beauchamp sought, and he proposed to satisfy himself upon this point in privacy, by whatever means came to hand? Possible, but that argued a coldness of purpose that disturbed Jamie more than he had wished to say in his letter.

And in fairness, he must admit that the notion of the attack having been executed by persons of inflamed political sensibility was a distinct possibility, and perhaps of a higher probability than the sinister designs of Monsieur Beauchamp, which were both romantical and theoretical to a high degree.

"But I havena lived this long without knowing the smell of a rat when I see one," he muttered, still rubbing his hand.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" said his personal figurehead, appearing suddenly beside him with an expression of marked concern. "Your hand!"

"Aye?" He looked down at it, cross with discomfort. "What's amiss? All my fingers are still attached to it."

"That's the most that could be said for it. It looks like the Gordian knot." She knelt down beside him and took the hand into hers, massaging it in a forceful way that was doubtless helpful but so immediately painful that it made his eyes water. He closed them, breathing slowly through clenched teeth.

She was scolding him for writing too much at once. What was the hurry, after all?

"It will be days before we reach Connecticut, and then *months* on the way to Scotland. You could write one sentence per day and quote the whole Book of Psalms along the way."

"I wanted to," he said.

She said something derogatory under her breath, in which the words "Scot" and "pigheaded" featured, but he chose to take no notice. He *had* wanted to; it clarified his thoughts to put them down in black and white, and it was to some degree a relief to express them on paper, rather than to have the worry clogged up in his head like mud in mangrove roots.

And beyond that—not that he required an excuse, he thought, narrowing his eyes at the top of his wife's bent head—seeing the shore of North Carolina drop away had made him lonely for his daughter and Roger Mac, and he'd wanted the sense of connection that writing to them gave him.

"Do you think you will see them?" Fergus had asked him that, soon before they took leave of each other. *"Perhaps you will go to France." So* far as Fergus and Marsali and the folk on the Ridge were concerned, Brianna and Roger Mac had gone to France to escape the oncoming war.

"No," he'd said, hoping the bleakness of his heart didn't show in his voice. "I doubt we shall ever see them again."

Fergus's strong right hand had tightened on his forearm, then relaxed.

"Life is long," he said quietly.

"Aye," he'd answered, but thought, *No one's life is that long.*

His hand was growing easier now; while she still massaged it, the motion no longer hurt so much.

"I miss them, too," she said quietly, and kissed his knuckles. "Give me the letter; I'll finish it."

* * *

Your father's hand won't stand any more today. There is one notable thing about this ship, beyond the captain's name. I was down in the hold earlier in the day, and saw a good number of boxes, all stenciled with the name "Arnold" and "New Haven, Connecticut." I said to the hand (whose name is a very pedestrian John Smith, though no doubt to make up for this distressing lack of distinction he has three gold earrings in one ear and two in the other. He told me that each one represents his survival from the sinking of a ship. I am hoping that your father doesn't know this) that Mr. Arnold must be a very successful merchant. Mr. Smith laughed and said that, in fact, Mr. Benedict Arnold is a colonel in the Continental army, and a very gallant officer he is, too. The boxes are bound for delivery to his sister, Miss Hannah Arnold, who minds both his three small sons and his importing and dry-goods store in Connecticut, while he is about the business of the war.

I must say that a goose walked across my grave when I heard that. I've met men whose history I knew before—and at least one of those I knew to carry a doom with him. You don't get used to the feeling, though. I looked at those boxes and wondered—ought I to write to Miss Hannah? Get off the ship in New Haven and go to see her? And tell her what, exactly?

All our experience to date suggests that there is absolutely nothing I could do to alter what's going to happen. And looking at the situation objectively, I don't see any way … and yet. And yet!

And yet, I've come close to so many people whose actions have a noticeable effect, whether or not they end up making history as such. How can it not be so? your father says. Everyone's actions have some effect upon the future. And plainly he's right. And yet, to brush so close to *a name like Benedict Arnold gives one a right turn, as Captain Roberts is fond of saying. (No doubt a situation that gave one a left turn would be very shocking indeed.)*

Well. Returning tangentially to the original subject of this letter, the mysterious Monsieur Beauchamp. If your father's—Frank's, I mean—if you still have the boxes of papers and books from his home office, and a free moment, you might go through them and see if you find an old manila folder in there, with a coat of arms drawn on it in colored pencil. I think that it's azure and gold, and I recall that it has martlets on it. With luck, it still contains the Beauchamp family genealogy that my uncle Lamb wrote up for me, lo these many years ago.

You might just have a look and see whether the incumbent of the name in 1777 was perhaps a Percival. For the sake of curiosity.

The wind's come up a bit, and the water's getting rough. Your father has gone rather pale and clammy, like fish bait; I'll close and take him down below for a nice quiet vomit and a nap, I think.

All my love,
Mama

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26

STAG AT BAY

Roger blew thoughtfully across the mouth of an empty stout bottle, making a low, throaty moan. Close. A little deeper, though … and of course it lacked that hungry sound, that growling note. But the pitch … He got up and rummaged in the refrigerator, finding what he was looking for behind a heel of cheese and six margarine tubs full of God knew what; he'd lay odds it wasn't margarine.

There was no more than an inch or so of champagne left in the bottle—a remnant of their celebratory dinner the week before, in honor of Bree's new job. Someone had thriftily covered the neck of the bottle with tinfoil, but the wine had of course gone flat. He went to pour it out in the sink, but a lifetime of Scottish thrift was not so easily dismissed. With no more than an instant's hesitation, he drank the rest of the champagne, lowering the empty bottle to see Annie MacDonald holding Amanda by the hand and staring at him.

"Well, at least ye're no puttin' it on your cornflakes yet," she said, edging past him. "Here, pet, up ye go." She hoisted Mandy into her booster seat and went out, shaking her head over her employer's low moral character.

"Gimme, Daddy!" Mandy reached for the bottle, attracted by the shiny label. With the statutory parental pause as he mentally ran through potential scenarios of destruction, he instead gave her his glass of milk and hooted across the champagne bottle's fluted lip, producing a deep, melodious tone. Yes, that was it—something close to the F below middle C.

“Do again, Daddy!” Mandy was charmed. Feeling mildly self-conscious, he hooted again, making her fall about in a cascade of giggles. He picked up the stout bottle and blew across that one, then alternated, working up a two-note variation to the rhythm of “Mary Had a Little Lamb.”

Attracted by the hooting and Mandy’s ecstatic shrieks, Brianna appeared in the doorway, a bright blue plastic hard hat in her hand.

“Planning to start your own jug band?” she asked.

“Already got one,” he replied, and having decided that the worst thing Mandy could do with the champagne bottle was drop it onto the rug, handed it to her and stepped out into the hall with Brianna, where he pulled her close and kissed her deeply, the baize door swinging shut with a cushioned *foosh*.

“Champagne for breakfast?” she broke the kiss long enough to ask, then returned for more, tasting him.

“Needed the bottle,” he mumbled, tasting back. She’d had porridge with butter and honey for breakfast, and her mouth was sweet, turning the champagne bitter on the edges of his tongue. The hall was chilly, but she was warm as toast under her fleece jumper. His fingers lingered just under the edge of it, on the bare soft skin at the small of her back.

“Ye’ll have a good day, aye?” he whispered. He fought the urge to slide his fingers down the back of her jeans; not respectful to be fingering the arse of a brand-new inspector of the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board. “You’re bringing the hat home, after?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Thought ye might wear it in bed.” He took it from her hand and set it gently on her head. It made her eyes go navy blue. “Wear it, and I’ll tell ye what I wanted with the champagne bottle.”

“Oh, now there’s an offer I can’t re—” The navy-blue eyes slid suddenly sideways, and Roger glanced in that direction, to see Annie at the end of the hall, broom and dustpan in hand and an expression of deep interest on her narrow face.

“Yeah. Ah … have a good day,” Roger said, letting go hastily.

“You, too.” Face twitching, Brianna took him firmly by the shoulders and kissed him, before striding down the hall and past a round-eyed Annie, whom she airily wished good day in the Gaelic.

A sudden crash came from the kitchen. He turned automatically toward the baize door, though less than half his attention was on the incipient disaster. The greater part was focused on the sudden realization that his wife appeared to have departed for work wearing no knickers.

* * *

Mandy had, God knew how, managed to throw the champagne bottle through the window and was standing on the table, reaching for the jagged edge of the pane, when Roger rushed in.

“Mandy!” He grabbed her, swung her off the table, and in the same motion smacked her bottom once. She emitted an ear-piercing howl, and he carried her out under his arm, passing Annie Mac, who stood in the doorway with mouth and eyes all round as “O”s.

“See to the glass, aye?” he said.

He felt guilty as hell; what had he been thinking, handing her the bottle? Let alone leaving her by herself with it!

He also felt a certain irritation with Annie Mac—after all, she was employed to watch the children—but fairness made him admit that he ought to have made sure she’d come back to watch Mandy before he left. The irritation extended to Bree, as well, prancing off to her new job, expecting him to mind the household.

He recognized that the irritation was only his attempt to escape the guilt, though, and did his best to put it aside while soothing Mandy, having a wee chat about not standing on tables, not throwing things in the house, not touching sharp things, calling for a grown-up if she needed help—fat chance, he thought, with a wry inward smile; Mandy was the most independent three-year-old he’d ever seen. Which was saying something, considering that he’d also seen Jem at that age.

One thing about Amanda: she didn’t hold a grudge. Five minutes after being smacked and scolded, she was giggling and begging him to play dollies with her.

“Daddy’s got to work this morning,” he said, but bent so she could scramble onto his shoulders. “Come on, we’ll find Annie Mac; you and the dollies can maybe help her get the pantry sorted.”

Leaving Mandy and Annie Mac happily working in the pantry, supervised by an assortment of scabby-looking dolls and grubby stuffed animals, he went back to his office and got out the notebook into which he was transcribing the songs he’d so painstakingly committed to memory. He had an appointment later in the week to talk with Siegfried MacLeod, the choirmaster at St. Stephen’s, and had it in mind to present him with a copy of some of the rarer songs, by way of creating goodwill.

He thought he might need it. Dr. Weatherspoon had been reassuring, saying that MacLeod would be delighted to have help, especially with the children’s choir, but Roger had spent enough time in academic circles, Masonic lodges, and eighteenth-century taverns to know how local politics worked. MacLeod might well resent having an outsider—so to speak—foisted on him without warning.

And there was the delicate issue of a choirmaster who couldn’t sing. He touched his throat, with its pebbled scar.

He’d seen two specialists, one in Boston, another in London. Both of them had said the same thing. There was a possibility that surgery might improve his voice, by removing some of the scarring in his larynx. There was an equal possibility that the surgery might further damage—or completely destroy—his voice.

“Surgery on the vocal cords is a delicate business,” one of the doctors had said to him, shaking his head. “Normally, we don’t risk it unless there’s a dire necessity, such as a cancerous growth, a congenital malformation that’s preventing any useful speech—or a strong professional reason. A well-known singer with nodules, for instance; in that case, the desire to restore the voice might be sufficient motive to risk surgery—though in such cases, there usually isn’t a major risk of rendering the person permanently mute. In your case …”

He pressed two fingers against his throat and hummed, feeling the reassuring vibration. No. He remembered all too well what it felt like to be unable to speak. He'd been convinced at the time that he'd never speak—let alone sing—again; the memory of that despair made him sweat. Never speak to his children, to Bree? No, he wasn't risking that.

Dr. Weatherspoon's eyes had lingered on his throat with interest, but he hadn't said anything. MacLeod might be less tactful.

Whom the Lord loveth, he chasteneth. Weatherspoon—to his credit—hadn't said that in the course of their discussion. It had, however, been the quotation chosen for that week's Bible group; it had been printed on their flyer, which was sitting on the rector's desk. And in Roger's hypersensitive frame of mind at the time, everything looked like a message.

"Well, if that's what Ye've got in mind, I appreciate the compliment," he said out loud. "Be all right with me if I wasn't Your favorite just this week, though."

It was said half jokingly, but there was no denying the anger behind it. Resentment at having to prove himself—*to* himself—one more time. He'd had to do it physically last time. Now to do it again, spiritually, in this slippery, less straightforward world? He'd been willing, hadn't he?

"You asked. Since when do Ye not take yes for an answer? Am I missing something here?"

Bree had thought so; the height of their quarrel came back to him now, making him flush with shame.

"You had—I *thought you* had," she'd corrected, "a vocation. Maybe that's not what Protestants call it, but that's what it *is,* isn't it? You told me that God spoke to you." Her eyes were intent on his, unswerving, and so penetrating that he wanted to look away—but didn't.

"Do you think God changes His mind?" she asked more quietly, and laid her hand on his arm, squeezing. "Or do you think you were mistaken?"

"No," he'd said, in instant reflex. "No, when something like that happens … well, when it *did* happen, I wasn't in any doubt."

"Are you now?"

"You sound like your mother. Making a diagnosis." He'd meant it as a joke, but it wasn't. Bree resembled her father physically to such a degree that he seldom saw Claire in her, but the calm ruthlessness in her questions was Claire Beauchamp to the life. So was the slight arch of one brow, waiting for an answer. He took a deep breath. "I don't know."

"Yes, you do."

Anger bubbled up, sudden and bright, and he'd jerked his arm away from her grasp.

"Where in hell do you get off telling me what I know?"

She widened her stare. "I'm *married to* you."

"You think that entitles you to try to read my mind?"

"I think that entitles me to worry about you!"

"Well, don't!"

They'd made it up, of course. Kissed—well, a bit more than that—and forgiven each other. Forgiving, of course, didn't mean forgetting.

"Yes, you do."

Did he know?

"Yes," he said defiantly to the broch, visible from his window. "Yes, I damned well do!" What to do about it: that was the difficulty.

Was he perhaps meant to be a minister but not a Presbyterian? Become a nondenominational, an evangelical … a *Catholic?* The thought was so disturbing, he was obliged to get up and walk to and fro for a bit. It wasn't that he had anything against Catholics—well, bar the reflexes inbred by a life spent as a Protestant in the Highlands—but he just couldn't see it. "Going over to Rome" was how Mrs. Ogilvy and Mrs. MacNeil and all the rest of them would see it ("Going straight to the Bad Place" being the unspoken implication); his defection would be discussed in tones of low horror for … well, for years. He grinned reluctantly at the thought.

Well, and besides, he couldn't be a Catholic priest, now, could he? Not with Bree and the kids. That made him feel a little calmer, and he sat down again. No. He'd have to trust that God—through the agency of Dr. Weatherspoon—proposed to show him the way through this particular thorny passage of his life. And if He did … well, was that not evidence of predestination in itself?

Roger groaned, thrust the whole thing out of his head, and immersed himself doggedly in his notebook.

Some of the songs and poems he'd written down were well-known: selections from his previous life, traditional songs he'd sung as a performer. Many of the rare ones, he'd acquired during the eighteenth century, from Scottish immigrants, travelers, peddlers, and seamen. And some he'd unearthed from the trove of boxes the Reverend had left behind. The garage of the old manse had been filled with them, and he and Bree had made no more than a dent in it. Pure luck that he'd run across the wooden box of letters so soon after their return.

He glanced up at it, tempted. He couldn't read the letters without Bree; that wouldn't be right. But the two books—they'd looked briefly at the books when they found the box, but had been concerned mostly with the letters and with finding out what had happened to Claire and Jamie. Feeling like Jem absconding with a packet of chocolate biscuits, he brought the box down carefully—it was very heavy—and set it on the desk, rummaging carefully down under the letters.

The books were small, the largest what was called a crown octavo volume, about five by seven inches. It was a common size, from a time when paper was expensive and difficult to get. The smaller was likely a crown sixteenmo, only about four by five inches. He smiled briefly, thinking of Ian Murray; Brianna had told him her cousin's scandalized response to her description of toilet paper. He might never wipe his arse again without a feeling of extravagance.

The small one was carefully bound in blue-dyed calfskin, with gilt-edged pages; an expensive, beautiful book. *Pocket Principles of Health*, it was entitled, by *C. E. B. F. Fraser, M.D.* A limited edition, produced by *A. Bell, Printer, Edinburgh*.

That gave him a small thrill. So they'd made it to Scotland, under the care of Captain Trustworthy Roberts. Or at least he supposed they must—though the scholar in him cautioned that this wasn't proof; it was always possible that the manuscript had somehow made it to Scotland, without necessarily being carried in person by the author.

Had they come here? he wondered. He looked around the worn, comfortable room, easily envisioning Jamie at the big old desk by the window, going through the farm ledgers with his brother-in-law. If the kitchen was the heart of the house—and it was—this room had likely always been its brain.

Moved by impulse, he opened the book and nearly choked. The frontispiece, in customary eighteenth-century style, showed an engraving of the author. A medical man, in a neat tiewig and black coat, with a high black stock. From above which his mother-in-law's face looked serenely out at him.

He laughed out loud, causing Annie Mac to peer cautiously in at him, in case he might be having a fit of some kind, as well as talking to himself. He waved her off and shut the door before returning to the book.

It was her, all right. The wide-spaced eyes under dark brows, the graceful firm bones of cheek, temple, and jaw. Whoever had done the engraving had not got her mouth quite right; it had a sterner shape here, and a good thing, too—no man had lips like hers.

How old …? He checked the date of printing: MDCCLXXVIII. 1778. Not much older than when he'd last seen her, then—and looking still a good deal younger than he knew her to be.

Was there a picture of Jamie in the other …? He seized it and flipped it open. Sure enough, another steel-point engraving, though this was a more homely drawing. His father-in-law sat in a wing chair, his hair tied simply back, a plaid draped over the chair behind him, and a book open upon his knee. He was reading to a small child sitting upon his other knee—a little girl with dark curly hair. She was turned away, absorbed in the story. Of course—the engraver couldn't have known what Mandy's face would look like.

Grandfather Tales, the book was titled, with the subtitle, "Stories from the Highlands of Scotland and the Backcountry of the Carolinas," by *James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser*. Again, printed by *A. Bell, Edinburgh*, in the same year. The dedication said simply, *For my grandchildren*.

Claire’s portrait had made him laugh; this one moved him almost to tears, and he closed the book gently.

Such faith they had had. To create, to hoard, to send these things, these fragile documents, down through the years, with only the hope that they would survive and reach those for whom they were intended. Faith that Mandy would be here to read them one day. He swallowed, the lump in his throat painful.

How had they managed it? Well, they did say faith moved mountains, even if his own seemed presently not adequate to flatten a molehill.

“Jesus,” he muttered, not sure if this was simple frustration or a prayer for assistance.

A flicker of motion through the window distracted him from the paper, and he glanced up to see Jem coming out of the kitchen door at the far end of the house. He was red in the face, small shoulders hunched, and had a large string bag in one hand, through which Roger could see a bottle of lemon squash, a loaf of bread, and a few other foodlike bulges. Startled, Roger looked at the clock on the mantel, thinking he had lost complete track of time—but he hadn’t. It was just on one o’clock.

“What the—” Shoving the paper aside, he got up and made for the back of the house, emerging just in time to see Jem’s small figure, clad in windcheater and jeans—he wasn’t allowed to wear jeans to school—making its way across the hayfield.

Roger could have caught him up easily, but instead slowed his pace, following at a distance.

Plainly Jem wasn’t ill—so likely something drastic had happened at school. Had the school sent him home, or had he simply left on his own? No one had called, but it was just past the school’s dinner hour; if Jem had seized the opportunity to run for it, it was possible they hadn’t yet missed him. It was nearly two miles to walk, but that was nothing to Jem.

Jem had got to the stile in the drystone dyke that walled the field, hopped over, and was making determinedly across a pasture full of sheep. Where was he heading?

“And what the bloody hell did you do this time?” Roger muttered to himself.

Jem had been in the village school at Broch Mordha for only a couple of months—his first experience with twentieth-century education. After their return, Roger had tutored Jem at home in Boston, while Bree was with Mandy during her recovery from the surgery that had saved her life. With Mandy safe home again, they’d had to decide what to do next.

It was mostly Jem that had made them go to Scotland rather than stay in Boston, though Bree had wanted that anyway.

“It’s their heritage,” she’d argued. “Jem and Mandy are Scots on both sides, after all. I want to keep that for them.” And the connection with their grandfather; that went without saying.

He’d agreed, and agreed also that Jem would likely be less conspicuous in Scotland—despite exposure to television and months in the United States, he still spoke with a strong Highland lilt that would make him a marked man in a Boston elementary school. On the other hand, as Roger observed privately, Jem was the sort of person who drew attention, no matter what.

Still, there was no question that life on Lallybroch and in a small Highland school were a great deal more like what Jem had been accustomed to in North Carolina—though given the natural flexibility of kids, he thought he’d adapt pretty well to wherever he found himself.

As to his own prospects in Scotland … he’d kept quiet about that.

Jem had reached the end of the pasture and shooed off a group of sheep that were blocking the gate that led to the road. A black ram lowered its head and menaced him, but Jem wasn’t bothered about sheep; he shouted and swung his bag, and the ram, startled, backed up sharply, making Roger smile.

He had no qualms about Jem’s intelligence—well, he did, but not about its lack. Much more about what kind of trouble it could lead him into. School wasn’t simple for anyone, let alone a new school. And a school in which one stuck out, for any reason … Roger remembered his own school in Inverness, where he was peculiar first for having no real parents, and then as the minister’s adopted son. After a few miserable weeks of being poked, taunted, and having his lunch stolen, he'd started hitting back. And while that had led to a certain amount of difficulty with the teachers, it had eventually taken care of the problem.

Had Jem been fighting? He hadn't seen any blood, but he might not have been close enough. He'd be surprised if it was that, though.

There'd been an incident the week before, when Jem had noticed a large rat scurrying into a hole under the school's foundation. He had brought a bit of twine with him next day, set a snare just before going in to the first lesson, and gone out at the recess to retrieve his prey, which he had then proceeded to skin in a businesslike manner, to the admiration of his male classmates and the horror of the girls. His teacher hadn't been best pleased, either; Miss Glendenning was a city woman from Aberdeen.

Still, it was a Highland village school, and most of the students came from the nearby farms and crofts. Their fathers fished and hunted—and they certainly understood about rats. The principal, Mr. Menzies, had congratulated Jem on his cunning, but told him not to do it again at school. He had let Jem keep the skin, though; Roger had nailed it ceremoniously to the door of the toolshed.

Jem didn't trouble opening the pasture gate; just ducked between the bars, dragging the bag after him.

Was he making for the main road, planning to hitchhike? Roger put on a bit of speed, dodging black sheep droppings and kneeing his way through a cluster of grazing ewes, who gave way in indignation, uttering sharp *baahs*.

No, Jem had turned the other way. Where the devil could he be going? The dirt lane that led to the main road in one direction led absolutely nowhere in the other—it petered out where the land rose into steep, rocky hills.

And that, evidently, was where Jem was headed—for the hills. He turned out of the lane and began climbing, his small form almost obscured by the luxuriant growth of bracken and the drooping branches of rowan trees on the lower slopes. Evidently he was taking to the heather, in the time-honored manner of Highland outlaws.

It was the thought of Highland outlaws that made the penny drop. Jem was heading for the Dunbonnet's cave.

Jamie Fraser had lived there for seven years after the catastrophe of Culloden, almost within sight of his home but hidden from Cumberland's soldiers—and protected by his tenants, who never used his name aloud but called him "the Dunbonnet," for the color of the knitted Highland bonnet he wore to conceal his fiery hair.

That same hair flashed like a beacon, halfway up the slope, before disappearing again behind a rock.

Realizing that, red hair or no, he could easily lose Jem in the rugged landscape, Roger lengthened his stride. Ought he to call out? He knew approximately where the cave was—Brianna had described its location to him—but he hadn't yet been up there himself. It occurred to him to wonder how Jem knew where it was. Perhaps he didn't and was searching for it.

Still, he didn't call, but started up the hill himself. Now he came to look, he could see the narrow path of a deer trail through the growth and the partial print of a small sneaker in the mud of it. He relaxed a little at the sight, and slowed down. He wouldn't lose Jem now.

It was quiet on the hillside, but the air was moving, restless in the rowan trees.

The heather was a haze of rich purple in the hollows of the soaring rock above him. He caught the tang of something on the wind and turned after it, curious. Another flash of red: a stag, splendidly antlered and reeking of rut, ten paces from him on the slope below. He froze, but the deer's head came up, wide black nostrils flaring to scent the air.

He realized suddenly that his hand was pressed against his belt, where he'd once carried a skinning knife, and his muscles were tensed, ready to rush down and cut the deer's throat, once the hunter's shot took it down. He could all but feel the tough hairy skin, the pop of the windpipe, and the gush of hot, reeking blood over his hands, see the long yellow teeth exposed, slimed with the green of the deer's last meal.

The stag belled, a guttural, echoing roar, his challenge to any other stag within hearing. For the space of a breath, Roger expected one of Ian's arrows to whir out of the rowans behind the deer or the echo of Jamie's rifle to crack the air. Then he shook himself back into his skin and, bending, picked up a stone to throw—but the deer had heard him and was off, with a crash that took it rattling into the dry bracken.

He stood still, smelling his own sweat, still dislocated. But it wasn't the North Carolina mountains, and the knife in his pocket was meant for cutting twine and opening beer bottles.

His heart was pounding, but he turned back to the trail, still fitting himself back into time and place. Surely it got easier with practice? They'd been back well more than a year now, and still he woke sometimes at night with no notion where or when he was—or, worse, stepped through some momentary wormhole into the past while still awake.

The kids, being kids, hadn't seemed to suffer much from that sense of being … otherwhere. Mandy, of course, had been too young and too sick to remember anything, either of her life in North Carolina or the trip through the stones. Jem remembered. But Jem—he'd taken one look at the automobiles on the road they'd reached half an hour after their emergence from the stones on Ocracoke and stood transfixed, a huge grin spreading across his face as the cars whizzed past him.

"Vroom," he'd said contentedly to himself, the trauma of separation and time travel—Roger had himself barely been able to walk, feeling that he had left a major and irretrievable piece of himself trapped in the stones—apparently forgotten.

A kindly motorist had stopped for them, sympathized with their story of a boating accident, and driven them to the village, where a collect phone call to Joe Abernathy had sorted out the immediate contingencies of money, clothes, a room, and food. Jem had sat on Roger's knee, gazing open-mouthed out the window as they drove up the narrow road, the wind from the open window fluttering his soft, bright hair.

Couldn't wait to do it again. And once they'd got settled at Lallybroch, had pestered Roger into letting him drive the Morris Mini round the farm tracks, sitting in Roger's lap, small hands clenching the steering wheel in glee.

Roger smiled wryly to himself; he supposed he was lucky Jem had decided to abscond on foot this time—another year or two, and he'd likely be tall enough to reach the pedals. He'd best start hiding the car keys.

He was high above the farm now, and slowed to look up the slope. Brianna had said the cave was on the south face of the hill, about forty feet above a large whitish boulder known locally as "Leap o' the Cask." So known because the Dunbonnet's servant, bringing ale to the hidden laird, had encountered a group of British soldiers and, refusing to give them the cask he carried, had had his hand cut off—

"Oh, Jesus," Roger whispered. "Fergus. Oh, God, Fergus." Could see at once the laughing, fine-boned face, dark eyes snapping with amusement as he lifted a flapping fish with the hook he wore in place of his missing left hand—and the vision of a small, limp hand, lying bloody on the path before him.

Because it was here. Right here. Turning, he saw the rock, big and rough, bearing silent, stolid witness to horror and despair—and to the sudden grip of the past that took him by the throat, fierce as the bite of a noose.

He coughed hard, trying to open his throat, and heard the hoarse eerie bell of another stag, close above him on the slope but still invisible.

He ducked off the trail, flattening himself against the rock. Surely to God he hadn't sounded bad enough that the stag had taken him for a rival? No—more likely it was coming down in challenge to the one he'd seen a few moments before.

Sure enough; an instant later a big stag came down from above, picking its way almost daintily through heather and rocks. It was a fine animal, but was already showing the strain of rutting season, its ribs shadowed under the thick coat and the flesh of its face sunk in, eyes red with sleeplessness and lust.

It saw him; the big head swiveled in his direction, and he saw the rolling, bloodshot eyes fix on him. It wasn't afraid of him, though; likely had no room in its brain for anything save fighting and copulation. It stretched its neck in his direction and belled at him, eyes showing white with the effort.

"Look, mate, you want her, you can have her." He backed slowly away, but the deer followed him, menacing him with lowered antlers. Alarmed, he spread his arms, waved and shouted at the deer; normally that would have sent it bounding away. Red deer in rut weren't normal; the thing lowered its head and charged him.

Roger dodged aside and threw himself flat at the base of the rock. He was wedged as tightly next the rock's face as he could get, in hopes of keeping the maddened stag from trampling him. It stumbled to a stop a few feet from him, thrashing at the heather with its antlers and breathing like a bellows—but then it heard the blatting of the challenger below, and jerked its head up.

Another roar from below, and the new stag turned on its haunches and bounded clear over the trail, the sound of its hell-bent passage down the slope marked by the crunch of breaking heather and the rattle of stones spurned by its hooves.

Roger scrambled to his feet, adrenaline running through his veins like quicksilver. He hadn't realized the red deer were at it up here, or he'd not have been wasting time strolling along maundering about the past. He needed to find Jem *now*, before the boy ran afoul of one of the things.

He could hear the roars and clashing of the two below, fighting it out for control of a harem of hinds, though they were out of sight from where he stood.

"Jem!" he bellowed, not caring whether he sounded like a rutting deer or a bull elephant. "Jem! Where are you? Answer me this minute!"

"I'm up here, Da." Jemmy's voice came from above him, a little tremulous, and he whirled to see Jem sitting on the Leap o' the Cask, string bag clutched to his chest.

"Right, you. Down. Now." Relief fought with annoyance but edged it out. He reached up, and Jem slid down the rock, landing heavily in his father's arms.

Roger grunted and set him down, then leaned down to pick up the string bag, which had fallen to the ground. In addition to bread and lemon squash, he saw, it held several apples, a large chunk of cheese, and a packet of chocolate biscuits.

"Planning to stay for a while, were ye?" he asked. Jemmy flushed and looked away.

Roger turned and looked up the slope.

"Up there, is it? Your grandda's cave?" He couldn't see a thing; the slope was a jumble of rock and heather, liberally splotched with scrubby gorse bushes and the odd sprout of rowan and alder.

"Aye. Just there." Jemmy pointed up the slope. "See, where that witch tree's leaning?"

He saw the rowan—a full-grown tree, gnarled with age; surely it couldn't have been there since Jamie's time, could it?—but still saw no sign of the cave's opening. The sounds of combat from below had ceased; he glanced round in case the loser should be coming back this way, but evidently not.

"Show me," he said.

Jem, who had been looking deeply uneasy, relaxed a little at this and, turning, scrambled up the slope, Roger at his heels.

You could be right next to the cave's opening and never see it. It was screened by an outcrop of rock and a heavy growth of gorse; you couldn't see the narrow opening at all unless you were standing in front of it.

A cool breath came out of the cave, moist on his face. He knelt down to peer in; couldn't see more than a few feet inside, but it wasn't inviting.

"Be cold to sleep in there," he said. He glanced at Jem, and motioned to a nearby rock.

"Want to sit down and tell me what happened at school?"

Jem swallowed and shifted from foot to foot.

"No."

"Sit down." He didn't raise his voice, but made it evident he expected to be obeyed. Jem didn't quite sit down but edged backward, leaning against the rocky outcrop that hid the cave mouth. He wouldn't look up.

"I got the strap," Jem muttered, chin buried in his chest.

"Oh?" Roger kept his voice casual. "Well, that's a bugger. I got it once or twice, when I was at school. Didn't like it."

Jem's head jerked up, eyes wide.

"Aye? What for, then?"

"Fighting, mostly," Roger said. He supposed he oughtn't to be telling the boy that—bad example—but it was the truth. And if fighting was Jem's problem …

"That what happened today?" He'd looked Jem over briefly when he sat down, and gave him a closer look now. Jem seemed undamaged, but when he turned his head away, Roger could see that something had happened to his ear. It was a deep crimson, the lobe of it nearly purple. He suppressed an exclamation at sight of it and merely repeated, "What happened?"

"Jacky McEnroe said if ye heard I'd got the strap, ye'd give me another whipping when I got home." Jem swallowed, but now looked at his father directly. "Will you?"

"I don't know. I hope I won't have to."

He'd tawsed Jemmy once—he'd had to—and neither of them wanted to repeat the experience. He reached out and touched Jem's flaming ear gently.

"Tell me what happened, son."

Jem took a deep breath, blowing out his cheeks, then deflated into resignation.

"Aye. Well, it started when Jimmy Glasscock said Mam and me and Mandy were all goin' to burn in hell."

"Yeah?" Roger wasn't all that surprised; Scottish Presbyterians weren't known for their religious flexibility, and the breed hadn't altered all that much in two hundred years. Manners might keep most of them from telling their papist acquaintance they were going straight to hell—but most of them likely thought it.

"Well, ye know what to do about that, though, don't you?" Jem had heard similar sentiments expressed on the Ridge—though generally more quietly, Jamie Fraser being who he was. Still, they'd talked about it, and Jem was well prepared to answer that particular conversational gambit.

“Oh, aye.” Jem shrugged, looking down at his shoes again. “Just say, ‘Aye, fine, I’ll see ye there, then.’ I did.”

“And?”

Deep sigh.

“I said it in the *Gàidhlig*.”

Roger scratched behind his ear, puzzled. Gaelic was disappearing in the Highlands, but was still common enough that you heard it once in a while in the pub or the post office. No doubt a few of Jem’s classmates had heard it from their grans, but even if they didn’t understand what he’d said …?

“And?” he repeated.

“And Miss Glendenning grabbed me by the ear and like to tore it off.” A flush was rising in Jemmy’s cheeks at the memory. “She shook me, Da!”

“By the ear?” Roger felt an answering flush in his own cheeks.

“Yes!” Tears of humiliation and anger were welling in Jem’s eyes, but he dashed them away with a sleeve and pounded his fist on his leg. “She said, ‘We—do—not—speak—like—THAT! We—speak—ENGLISH!’ ” His voice was some octaves higher than the redoubtable Miss Glendenning’s, but his mimicry made the ferocity of her attack more than evident.

“And then she took a strap to you?” Roger asked incredulously.

Jem shook his head, and wiped his nose on his sleeve.

“No,” he said. “That was Mr. Menzies.”

“What? Why? Here.” He handed Jem a crumpled paper handkerchief from his pocket, and waited while the boy blew his nose.

“Well … I was already fussed wi’ Jimmy, and when she grabbed me like that, it hurt bad. And … well, my dander got up,” he said, giving Roger a blue-eyed look of burning righteousness that was so much his grandfather that Roger nearly smiled, despite the situation.

“And ye said something else to her, did ye?”

“Aye.” Jem dropped his eyes, rubbing the toe of his sneaker in the dirt. “Miss Glendenning doesna like the *Gàidhlig,* but she doesn’t know any, either. Mr. Menzies does.”

“Oh, God.”

Drawn by the shouting, Mr. Menzies had emerged onto the play yard just in time to hear Jem giving Miss Glendenning the benefit of some of his grandfather’s best Gaelic curses, at the top of his lungs.

“So he made me bend over a chair and gave me three good ones, then sent me to the cloakroom to stay ’til school was out.”

“Only you didn’t stay there.”

Jem shook his head, bright hair flying.

Roger bent and picked up the string bag, fighting back outrage, dismay, laughter, and a throat-clutching sympathy. On second thought, he let a bit of the sympathy show.

“Running away from home, were ye?”

“No.” Jem looked up at him, surprised. “I didna want to go to school tomorrow, though. Not and have Jimmy laugh at me. So I thought to stay up here ’til the weekend, and maybe by Monday, things would get sorted. Miss Glendenning might die,” he added hopefully.

“And maybe your mam and I would be so worried by the time ye came down, ye’d get off without a second whipping?”

Jem’s deep-blue eyes widened in surprise.

“Och, no. Mam would give me laldy if I just went off wi’ no word. I put a note on my bed. Said I was living rough a day or two.” He said this with perfect matter-of-factness. Then he wiggled his shoulders and stood up, sighing.

“Can we get it over and go home?” he asked, his voice trembling only a little. “I’m hungry.”

“I’m not going to whip you,” Roger assured him. He reached out an arm and gathered Jemmy to him. “Come here, pal.”

Jemmy’s brave facade gave way at that, and he melted into Roger’s arms, crying a little in relief but letting himself be comforted, cuddling like a puppy against his father’s shoulder, trusting Da to make it all right. *And his da bloody would,* Roger promised silently. No matter if he had to strangle Miss Glendenning with his bare hands.

"Why is it bad to speak *Gàidhlig*, Da?" he murmured, worn out by so much emotion. "I didna mean to do anything bad."

"It's not," Roger whispered, smoothing the silky hair behind Jem's ear. "Dinna fash yourself. Mam and I will get it sorted. I promise. And ye haven't got to go to school tomorrow."

Jem sighed at that, going inert as a bag of grain. Then he lifted his head and gave a small giggle.

"D'ye think Mam will give Mr. Menzies laldy?"

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TUNNEL TIGERS

Brianna's first intimation of disaster was the slice of light on the track, shrinking to nothing in the split second it took for the enormous doors to swing shut, echoing behind her with a boom that seemed to shiver the air in the tunnel.

She said something that she would have washed Jem's mouth out for saying, and said it with heartfelt fury—but said it also under her breath, having realized in the instant that it took the doors to close what was happening.

She couldn't see a thing save the swirls of color that were her retinas' response to sudden dark, but she was only ten feet or so inside the tunnel and could still hear the sound of the bolts sliding home; they were worked by big wheels on the outside of the steel doors and made a grinding sound like bones being chewed. She turned carefully, took five steps, and put out her hands. Yes, there were the doors; big, solid, made of steel, and now solidly locked. She could hear the sound of laughter outside.

Giggling, she thought with furious contempt. *Like little boys!*

Little boys, indeed. She took a few deep breaths, fighting off both anger and panic. Now that the dazzle of the darkness had faded, she could see the thin line of light that bisected the fifteen-foot doors. A man-height shadow interrupted the light but was jerked away, to the accompaniment of whispers and more giggling. Someone trying to peek in, the idiot. Good luck to him, seeing anything in *here*. Aside from the hair of light between the doors, the hydroelectric tunnel under Loch Errochty was dark as the pits of hell.

At least she could use that hair of light for orientation. Still breathing with deliberation, she made her way—stepping carefully; she didn't want to amuse the baboons outside any more than necessary by stumbling and falling noisily—to the metal box on the left wall where the power switches that controlled the tunnel lighting were located.

She found the box and was momentarily panicked to find it locked, before recalling that she had the key; it was on the big jangle of grubby keys that Mr. Campbell had given her, each one dangling a worn paper tag with its function written on. Of course, she couldn't *read* the bloody tags—and frigging Andy Davies had casually borrowed the flashlight that should have been in her belt, on the pretext of looking under the truck for an oil leak.

They'd planned it pretty well, she thought grimly, trying one key, then the next, fumbling and scratching to insert the tip in the tiny invisible slot. All three of them were clearly in on it: Andy, Craig McCarty, and Rob Cameron.

She was of an orderly mind, and when she'd tried each key in careful turn with no result, didn't try them again. She knew they'd thought of that one, too; Craig had taken the keys from her to unlock the toolbox in the panel truck, and returned them with a bow of exaggerated gallantry.

They'd stared at her—naturally—when she was introduced to them as the new safety inspector, though she supposed they'd already been informed she was that shocking thing, a woman. Rob Cameron, a handsome young man who clearly fancied himself, had looked her frankly up and down before extending his hand with a smile. She'd returned the slow up-and-down before taking it, and the other two had laughed. So had Rob, to his credit.

She hadn't sensed any hostility from them on the drive to Loch Errochty, and she thought she'd have seen it if it had been there. This was just a stupid joke. Probably.

In all honesty, the doors closing behind her had *not* been her first intimation that something was up, she thought grimly. She'd been a mother much too long to miss the looks of secretive delight or preternatural innocence that marked the face of a male up to mischief, and such looks had been all over the faces of her maintenance and repair team, if she'd spared the attention to look at them. Her mind had been only half on her job, though; the other half had been in the eighteenth century, worried for Fergus and Marsali, but encouraged by the vision of her parents and Ian safely bound at last for Scotland.

But whatever was going on—*had* gone on, she corrected herself firmly—in the past, she had other things to worry about in the here and now.

What did they expect her to do? she wondered. Scream? Cry? Beat on the doors and beg to be let out?

She walked quietly back to the door and pressed her ear to the crack, in time to hear the roar of the truck's engine starting up and the spurt of gravel from its wheels as it turned up the service road.

"You bloody *bastards*!" she said out loud. What did they mean by this? Since she hadn't satisfied them by shrieking and crying, they'd decided simply to leave her entombed for a while? Come back later in hopes of finding her in shards—or, better yet, red-faced with fury? Or—more-sinister thought—did they mean to go back to the Hydro Electric Board office, innocent looks on their faces, and tell Mr. Campbell that his new inspector simply hadn't shown up for work this morning?

She breathed out through her nose, slow, deliberate.

Right. She'd eviscerate them when the opportunity offered. But what to do just now?

She turned away from the power box, looking into the utter black. She hadn't been in this particular tunnel before, though she'd seen one like it during her tour with Mr. Campbell. It was one of the original tunnels of the hydroelectric project, dug by hand with pick and shovel by the "hydro boys" back in the 1950s. It ran nearly a mile through the mountain and under part of the flooded valley that now held the greatly expanded Loch Errochty, and a toylike electric train ran on its track down the center of the tunnel.

Originally, the train had carried the workmen, the "tunnel tigers," to the work face and back; now reduced to only an engine, it served the occasional hydroelectric workers checking the huge cables that ran along the tunnel's walls or servicing the tremendous turbines at the foot of the dam, far off at the other end of the tunnel.

Which was, it occurred to her, what Rob, Andy, and Craig were meant to be doing. Lifting one of the massive turbines and replacing its damaged blade.

She pressed her back against the tunnel wall, hands flat on the rough rock, and thought. That's where they'd gone, then. It made no difference, but she closed her eyes to improve her concentration and summoned up the pages of the massive binder—presently on the seat of the vanished truck—that contained the structural and engineering details of all the hydroelectric stations under her purview.

She'd looked at the diagrams for this one last night and again, hastily, while brushing her teeth this morning. The tunnel led *to* the dam, and had obviously been used in the construction of the lower levels of that dam. How low? If the tunnel joined at the level of the turbine chamber itself, it would have been walled off. But if it joined at the level of the servicing chamber above—a huge room equipped with the multi-ton ceiling cranes needed to lift the turbines from their nests—then there would still be a door; there would have been no need to seal it off, with no water on the other side.

Try as she might, she couldn't bring the diagrams to mind in sufficient detail to be sure there was an opening into the dam at the far end of the tunnel—but it would be simple enough to find out.

* * *

She'd seen the train, in that brief moment before the doors closed; it didn't take much fumbling round to get into the open cab of the tiny engine. Now, had those clowns taken the key to the engine, too? Ha. There was no key; it worked by a switch on the console. She flipped it, and a red button glowed with sudden triumph as she felt the hum of electricity run through the track beneath.

The train couldn't have been simpler to run. It had a single lever, which you pushed forward or back, depending on which direction you meant to go. She shoved it gently forward, and felt air move past her face as the train moved silently off into the bowels of the earth.

She had to go slowly. The tiny red button shed a comforting glow over her hands, but did nothing to pierce the darkness ahead, and she had no idea where or how much the track curved. Neither did she want to hit the end of the track at a high rate of speed and derail the engine. It felt as though she was inching through the dark, but it was much better than walking, feeling her way over a mile of tunnel lined with high-voltage cables.

It hit her in the dark. For a split second, she thought someone had laid a live cable on the track. In the next instant, a sound that wasn't a sound thrummed through her, plucking every nerve in her body, making her vision go white. And then her hand brushed rock and she realized that she had fallen across the console, was hanging halfway out of the tiny, trundling engine, was about to fall out into darkness.

Head spinning, she managed to grab the edge of the console and pull herself back into the cab. Flipped the switch with one shaking hand and half-fell to the floor, where she curled up, gripping her knees, her breath a whimpering in the dark.

"Holy God," she whispered. "Oh, Blessed Mother. Oh, Jesus."

She could feel it out there. Still feel it. It didn't make a sound now, but she felt its nearness and couldn't stop trembling.

She sat still for a long time, head on her knees, until rational thought began to come back.

She couldn't be mistaken. She'd passed through time twice, and *knew* the feeling. But this hadn't been nearly so shocking. Her skin still prickled and her nerves jumped and her inner ears rang as though she'd thrust her head into a hive of hornets—but she felt solid. She felt as though a red-hot wire had sliced her in two, but she hadn't had the horrible sense of being disassembled, turned physically inside out.

A terrible thought sent her surging to her feet, clinging to the console. Had she jumped? Was she somewhere—some*when*—else?

But the metal console was cool and solid under her hands, the smell of damp rock and cable insulation unchanged.

"No," she whispered, and flicked the power light for reassurance. It came on, and the train, still in gear, gave a sudden lurch. Hastily, she throttled back the speed to less than a crawl.

She couldn't have jumped into the past. Small objects in direct contact with a traveler's person seemed to move with them, but an entire train and its track was surely pushing it. "Besides," she said out loud, "if you'd gone more than twenty-five years or so into the past, the tunnel wouldn't *be* here. You'd be inside … solid rock." Her gorge rose suddenly, and she threw up.

The sense of … it … was receding, though. It—whatever it was—was behind her. Well, that settled it, she thought, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. There bloody well *had* to be a door at the far end, because there was no way she was going back the way she'd come.

There was a door. A plain, ordinary, industrial metal door. And a padlock, unlocked, hanging from an open hasp. She could smell WD-40; someone had oiled the hinges, very recently, and the door swung open easily when she turned the knob. She felt suddenly like Alice, after falling down the White Rabbit's hole. A really mad Alice.

A steep flight of steps lay on the other side of the door, dimly lit—and at the top was another metal door, edged with light. She could hear the rumble and the metallic whine of a ceiling crane in operation.

Her breath was coming fast, and not from the effort of climbing the stairs. What would she find on the other side? It was the servicing chamber inside the dam; she knew that much. But would she find Thursday on the other side? The *same* Thursday she'd had when the tunnel doors had closed behind her?

She gritted her teeth and opened the door. Rob Cameron was waiting, lounging back against the wall, lit cigarette in hand. He broke into an enormous grin at sight of her, dropped the butt, and stepped on it.

"Knew ye'd make it, hen," he said. Across the room, Andy and Craig turned from their work and applauded.

“Buy ye a pint after work, then, lass,” Andy called.

“Two!” shouted Craig.

She could still taste bile at the back of her throat. She gave Rob Cameron the sort of look she’d given Mr. Campbell.

“Don’t,” she said evenly, “call me hen.”

His good-looking face twitched and he tugged at his forelock with mock subservience.

“Anything you say, boss,” he said.

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HILLTOPS

It was nearly seven by the time he heard Brianna’s car in the drive. The kids had had their supper, but came swarming out to her, clinging to her legs as though she’d just come back from darkest Africa or the North Pole.

It was some time before the kids were settled for the night and Bree had time to give her undivided attention to him. He didn’t mind. “Are you starving?” she said. “I can fix—”

He interrupted her, taking her by the hand and drawing her into his office, where he carefully closed and locked the door. She was standing there, hair half matted from her hard hat, grimy from spending the day in the bowels of the earth. She smelled of earth. Also engine grease, cigarette smoke, sweat, and … beer?

“I’ve a lot to tell you,” he said. “And I know ye’ve a lot to tell me. But first … could ye just slip off your jeans, maybe, sit on the desk, and spread your legs?”

Her eyes went perfectly round.

“Yes,” she said mildly. “I could do that.”

* * *

Roger had often wondered whether it was true what they said about redheaded people being more volatile than the usual—or whether it was just that their emotions showed so suddenly and alarmingly on their skins. Both, he thought.

Maybe he should have waited ’til she’d got her clothes on before telling her about Miss Glendenning. If he had, though, he’d have missed the remarkable sight of his wife, naked and flushed with fury from the navel upward.

“That bloody old besom! If she thinks she can get away with—”

“She can’t,” he interrupted firmly. “Of course she can’t.”

“You bet she can’t! I’ll go down there first thing tomorrow and—”

“Well, maybe not.”

She stopped and looked at him, one eye narrowed.

“Maybe not *what*?”

“Maybe not you.” He fastened his own jeans, and picked hers up. “I was thinking it might be best if I go.”

She frowned, turning that one over.

“Not that I think ye’d lose your temper and set about the old bitch,” he added, smiling, “but you have got your job to go to, aye?”

“Hmmm,” she said, seeming skeptical of his ability to adequately impress Miss Glendenning with the magnitude of her crime.

“And if ye *did lose* the heid and nut the woman, I’d hate to have to explain to the kids why we were visiting Mummy in jail.”

That made her laugh, and he relaxed a little. He really didn’t *think* she’d resort to physical violence, but then, she hadn’t seen Jemmy’s ear right after he’d come home. He’d had a strong urge himself to go straight down to the school and show the woman what it felt like, but he was in better command of himself now.

“So what *do* you mean to say to her?” She fished her brassiere out from under the desk, giving him a succulent view of her rear aspect, as she hadn’t put the jeans on yet.

“Nothing. I’ll speak to the principal. *He* can have a word with her.”

“Well, that might be better,” she said slowly. “We don’t want Miss Glendenning to take it out on Jemmy.”

“Right.” The beautiful flush was fading. Her hard hat had rolled off under the chair; he picked it up and set it on her head again. “So—how was work today? And why don’t ye wear knickers to work?” he asked, suddenly remembering.

To his startlement, the flush roared back like a brushfire.

"I got out of the habit in the eighteenth century," she snapped, plainly taking the huff. "I only wear knickers for ceremonial purposes anymore. What did you think, I was planning to seduce Mr. Campbell?"

"Well, not if he's anything like you described him, no," he said mildly. "I just noticed when ye left this morning, and wondered."

"Oh." She was still ruffled, he could see that and wondered why. He was about to ask again about her day when she took the hat off and eyed him speculatively.

"You said if I wore the hat, you'd tell me what you were doing with that champagne bottle. Other than giving it to Mandy to throw through the window," she added, with a tinge of wifely censoriousness. "What were you *thinking,* Roger?"

"Well, in all honesty, I was thinking about your arse," he said. "But it never occurred to me that she'd throw the thing. Or that she *could* throw it like that."

"Did you ask her why she did it?"

He stopped, nonplused.

"It hadn't occurred to me that she'd have a reason," he confessed. "I snatched her off the table as she was about to pitch face-first into the broken window, and I was so frightened that I just picked her up and smacked her bum."

"I don't think she'd do something like that for no reason," Bree said meditatively. She'd put aside the hard hat and was scooping herself into her brassiere, a spectacle Roger found diverting under just about any circumstances.

It wasn't until they'd gone back to the kitchen for their own late supper that he remembered to ask again how her workday had gone.

"Not bad," she said, with a good assumption of casualness. Not so good as to convince him, but good enough that he thought better of prodding, and instead asked, "Ceremonial purposes?"

A broad grin spread across her face.

"You know. For you."

"Me?"

"Yes, you and your fetish for women's lacy underthings."

"What—you mean you only wear knickers for—"

"For you to take off, of course."

There was no telling where the conversation might have gone from this point, but it was interrupted by a loud wail from above, and Bree disappeared hastily in the direction of the stairs, leaving Roger to contemplate this latest revelation.

He'd got the bacon fried and the tinned beans simmering by the time she reappeared, a small frown between her brows.

"Bad dream," she said, in answer to his lifted brow. "The same one."

"The bad thing trying to get in her window again?"

She nodded and took the saucepan of beans he handed her, though she didn't move immediately to serve out the food.

"I asked her why she threw the bottle."

"Aye?"

Brianna took the bean spoon, holding it like a weapon.

"She said she saw him outside the window."

"Him? The—"

"The Nuckelavee."

* * *

In the morning, the broch was just as it had been the last time he'd looked. Dark. Quiet, save for the rustling of the doves overhead. He'd taken away the rubbish; no new fish papers had come. *Swept and garnished*, he thought. Waiting for the occupation of whatever roaming spirit might happen by?

He shook that thought off and closed the door firmly. He'd get new hinges and a padlock for it, next time he passed by the Farm and Household Stores.

Had Mandy really seen someone? And if she had, was it the same tramp who had frightened Jem? The idea of someone hanging round, spying on his family, made something hard and black curl through his chest, like a sharp-pointed iron spring. He stood for a moment, narrowly surveying the house, the grounds, for any trace of an intruder. Anywhere a man might hide. He'd already searched the barn and the other outbuildings.

The Dunbonnet's cave? The thought—with his memory of Jem standing right by the mouth of the cave—chilled him. Well, he'd soon find out, he thought grimly, and with a last glance at Annie MacDonald and Mandy, peacefully hanging out the family washing in the yard below, he set off.

He kept a sharp ear out today. He heard the echo of the red stags belling, still hard at it, and once saw a small herd of hinds in the distance, but luckily met no lust-crazed males. No lurking tramps, either.

It took him some time of casting about to find the cave's entrance, even though he'd been there only the day before. He made a good bit of noise, approaching, but stood outside and called, "Hallo, the cave!" just in case. No answer.

He approached the entrance from the side, pressing back the covering gorse with a forearm, ready in case the tramp might be lurking inside—but he could tell as soon as the damp breath of the place touched his face that it was unoccupied.

Nonetheless, he poked his head in, then swung himself down into the cave itself. It was dry, for a cave in the Highlands, which was not saying all that much. Cold as a tomb, though. It was no wonder Highlanders had a reputation for toughness; anyone who wasn't would have succumbed to starvation or pneumonia in short order.

Despite the chill of the place, he stood for a minute, imagining his father-in-law here. It was empty and cold, but oddly peaceful, he thought. No sense of foreboding. In fact, he felt … welcomed, and the notion made the hairs prickle on his arms.

"Grant, Lord, that they may be safe," he said quietly, his hand resting on the stone at the entrance. Then he climbed out, into the sun's warm benediction.

That strange sense of welcome, of having been somehow acknowledged, remained with him.

"Well, what now, *athair-céile*?" he said aloud, half joking. "Anyplace else I should look?"

Even as he said it, he realized that he *was* looking. On the top of the next small hill was the heap of stones Brianna had told him about. Human-made, she'd said, and thought it might be an Iron Age fort. There didn't look to be enough of whatever it was standing to offer shelter to anyone, but out of sheer restlessness, he made his way down through the tumble of rock and heather, splashed through a tiny burn that gurgled through the rock at the foot of the hill, and toiled his way up to the heap of ancient rubble.

It *was* ancient—but not as old as the Iron Age. What he found looked like the ruins of a small chapel; a stone on the ground had a cross chiseled crudely into it, and he saw what looked like the weathered fragments of a stone statue, scattered by the entrance. There was more of it than he'd thought from a distance; one wall still reached as high as his waist, and there were parts of two more. The roof had long since fallen in and disappeared, but a length of the rooftree was still there, the wood gone hard as metal.

Wiping sweat from the back of his neck, he stooped and picked up the statue's head. Very old. Celtic, Pictish? Not enough left to tell even the statue's intended gender.

He passed a thumb gently over the statue's sightless eyes, then set the head carefully atop the half wall; there was a depression there, as though there might once have been a niche in the wall.

"Okay," he said, feeling awkward. "See you later, then." And, turning, made his way down the rough hill toward home, still with that odd sense of being accompanied on his way.

The Bible says, "Seek, and ye shall find," he thought. And said aloud to the vibrant air, "But there's no guarantee about *what* you'll find, is there?"

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CONVERSATION WITH A HEADMASTER

After a peaceful lunch with Mandy, who seemed to have forgotten all about her nightmares, he dressed with some care for his interview with the headmaster of Jem's school.

Mr. Menzies was a surprise; Roger hadn't thought to ask Bree what the man was like, and had been expecting something squat, middle-aged, and authoritarian, along the lines of his own headmaster at school. Instead, Menzies was close to Roger's own age, a slender, pale-skinned man with spectacles and what looked like a humorous eye behind them. Roger didn't miss the firm set of the mouth, though, and thought he'd been right to keep Bree from coming.

"Lionel Menzies," the headmaster said, smiling. He had a solid handshake and a friendly air, and Roger found himself revising his strategy.

"Roger MacKenzie." He let go and took the proffered seat, across the desk from Menzies. "Jem's—Jeremiah's—dad."

"Oh, aye, of course. I rather thought I might see you or your wife, when Jem didn't turn up at school this morning." Menzies leaned back a little, folding his hands. "Before we go very far … could I just ask exactly what Jem told ye about what happened?"

Roger's opinion of the man rose a grudging notch.

"He said that his teacher heard him say something to another lad in the Gaelic, whereupon she grabbed him by the ear and shook him. That made him mad and he called her names—also in Gaelic—for which you belted him." He'd spotted the strap itself, hung up inconspicuously—but still quite visible—on the wall beside a filing cabinet.

Menzies's eyebrows rose behind his spectacles.

"Is that not what happened?" Roger asked, wondering for the first time whether Jem had lied or omitted something even more horrible from his account.

"No, that's what happened," Menzies said. "I've just never heard a parent give such a concise account. Generally speaking, it's a half hour of prologue, dissociated trivia, contumely, and contradiction—that's if both parents come—and personal attacks before I can make out precisely what the trouble is. Thank you." He smiled, and quite involuntarily, Roger smiled back.

"I was sorry to have to do it," Menzies went on, not pausing for reply. "I like Jem. He's clever, hardworking—and really funny."

"He is that," Roger said. "But—"

"But I hadn't a choice, really," Menzies interrupted firmly. "If none of the other students had known what he was saying, we might have done with a simple apology. But—did he tell ye what it was he said?"

"Not in detail, no." Roger hadn't inquired; he'd heard Jamie Fraser curse someone in Gaelic only three or four times—but it was a memorable experience, and Jem had an excellent memory.

"Well, I won't, either, then, unless you insist. But the thing is, while only a few of the kids on the play yard likely understood him, they would tell—well, they have told, in fact—all their friends exactly what he said. And they know I understood it, too. I've got to support the authority of my teachers; if there's no respect for the staff, the whole place goes to hell.… Did your wife tell me ye'd taught yourself? At Oxford, I think she said? That's very impressive."

"That was some years ago, and I was only a junior don, but yes. And I hear what you're saying, though I unfortunately had to keep order and respect without the threat of physical force." Not that he wouldn't have loved to be able to punch one or two of his Oxford second-year students in the nose …

Menzies eyed him with a slight twinkle.

"I'd say your presence was likely adequate," he said. "And given that you're twice my size, I'm pleased to hear that you're not inclined to use force."

"Some of your other parents are?" Roger asked, raising his own brows.

"Well, none of the fathers has actually struck me, no, though it's been threatened once or twice. Did have one mother come in with the family shotgun, though." Menzies inclined his head at the wall behind him, and looking up, Roger saw a spray of black pockmarks in the plaster, mostly—but not entirely—covered by a framed map of Africa.

"Fired over your head, at least," Roger said dryly, and Menzies laughed.

"Well, no," he said, deprecating. "I asked her please to set it down carefully, and she did, but not carefully enough. Caught the trigger somehow and *blam!* The poor woman was really unnerved—though not quite as much as I was."

"You're bloody good, mate," Roger said, smiling in acknowledgment of Menzies's skill in handling difficult parents—including Roger—but leaning forward a little to indicate that he meant to take control of the conversation. "But I'm not—not yet, anyway—complaining about your belting Jem. It's what led to that."

Menzies drew breath and nodded, setting his elbows on the desk and steepling his hands.

"Aye, right."

"I understand the need to support your teachers," Roger said, and set his own hands on the desk. "But that woman nearly tore my son's ear off, and evidently for no crime greater than saying a few words—not cursing, just words—in the *Gàidhlig*."

Menzies eyes sharpened, catching the accent.

"Ah, you've got it, then. Wondered, ken, was it you or your wife had it."

"You make it sound like a disease. My wife's an American—surely ye noticed?"

Menzies gave him an amused look—no one failed to notice Brianna—but said only, “Aye, I noticed. She told me her da was Scots, though, and a Highlander. You speak it at home?”

“No, not much. Jem got it from his grandda. He’s … no longer with us,” he added.

Menzies nodded.

“Ah,” he said softly. “Aye, I had it from my grandparents, as well—my mam’s folk. Dead, too, now. They were from Skye.” The usual implied question hovered, and Roger answered it.

“I was born in Kyle of Lochalsh, but I grew up mostly in Inverness. Picked up most of my own Gaelic on the fishing boats in the Minch.” And in the mountains of North Carolina.

Menzies nodded again, for the first time looking down at his hands rather than at Roger.

“Been on a fishing boat in the last twenty years?”

“No, thank God.”

Menzies smiled briefly, but didn’t look up.

“No. You won’t find much of the Gaelic there these days. Spanish, Polish, Estonian … quite a bit of those, but not the Gaelic. Your wife said ye’d spent a number of years in America, so you’ll maybe not have noticed, but it’s not much spoken in public anymore.”

“To be honest, I hadn’t paid it much mind—not ’til now.”

Menzies nodded again, as though to himself, then took off his spectacles and rubbed at the marks they’d left on the bridge of his nose. His eyes were pale blue and seemed suddenly vulnerable, without the protection of his glasses.

“It’s been on the decline for a number of years. Much more so for the last ten, fifteen years. The Highlands are suddenly part of the UK—or at least the rest of the UK says so—in a way they’ve never been before, and keeping a separate language is seen as not only old-fashioned but outright destructive.

“It’s no what you’d call a written policy, to stamp it out, but the use of Gaelic is strongly … discouraged … in schools. Mind”—he raised a hand to forestall Roger’s response—“they couldn’t get away with that if the parents protested, but they don’t. Most of them are eager for their kids to be part of the modern world, speak good

English, get good jobs, fit in elsewhere, be able to leave the Highlands … Not so much for them here, is there, save the North Sea?”

“The parents …”

“If they’ve learnt the Gaelic from their own parents, they deliberately don’t teach it to their kids. And if they haven’t got it, they certainly make no effort to learn. It’s seen as backward, ignorant. Very much a mark of the lower classes.”

“Barbarous, in fact,” Roger said, with an edge. “The barbarous Erse?”

Menzies recognized Samuel Johnson’s dismissive description of the tongue spoken by his eighteenth-century Highland hosts, and the brief, rueful smile lit his face again.

“Exactly. There’s a great deal of prejudice—much of it outspoken—against …”

“Teuchters?” “Teuchter” was a Lowland Scots term for someone in the Gaeltacht, the Gaelic-speaking Highlands, and in cultural terms the general equivalent of “hillbilly” or “trailer trash.”

“Oh, ye do know, then.”

“Something.” It was true; even as recently as the sixties, Gaelic speakers had been viewed with a certain derision and public dismissiveness, but this … Roger cleared his throat.

“Regardless, Mr. Menzies,” he said, coming down a bit on the “Mr.,” “I object very much to my son’s teacher not only disciplining him for speaking Gaelic but actually assaulting him for doing so.”

“I share your concern, Mr. MacKenzie,” Menzies said, looking up and meeting his eyes in a way that made it seem as though he truly did. “I’ve had a wee word with Miss Glendenning, and I think it won’t happen again.”

Roger held his gaze for moment, wanting to say all sorts of things but realizing that Menzies was not responsible for most of them.

“If it does,” he said evenly, “I won’t come back with a shotgun—but I will come back with the sheriff. And a newspaper photographer, to document Miss Glendenning being taken off in handcuffs.”

Menzies blinked once and put his spectacles back on.

“You’re sure ye wouldn’t rather send your wife round with the family shotgun?” he asked wistfully, and Roger laughed, despite himself.

“Fine, then.” Menzies pushed back his chair and stood up. “I’ll see ye out; I’ve got to lock up. We’ll see Jem on the Monday, then, will we?”

“He’ll be here. With or without handcuffs.”

Menzies laughed.

“Well, he needn’t worry about his reception. Since the Gaelic-speaking kids *did* tell their friends what it was he said, and he took his belting without a squeak, I think his entire form now regards him as Robin Hood or Billy Jack.”

“Oh, God.”

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SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE NIGHT

May 19, 1777

The shark was easily twelve feet long, a dark, sinuous shape keeping pace with the ship, barely visible through the storm-stirred gray waters. It had appeared abruptly just before noon, startling me badly when I looked over the rail and saw its fin cut the surface.

"What's amiss with its head?" Jamie, appearing in response to my startled cry, frowned into the dark water. "It has a growth of some sort."

"I think it's what they call a hammerhead." I clung tight to the railing, slippery with spray. The head *did look* misshapen: a queer, clumsy, blunt thing at the end of such a sinisterly graceful body. As we watched, though, the shark came closer to the surface and rolled, bringing one fleshy stalk and its distant cold eye momentarily clear of the water.

Jamie made a sound of horrified disgust.

"They normally look like that," I informed him.

"Why?"

"I suppose God was feeling bored one day." That made him laugh, and I viewed him with approval. His color was high and healthy, and he'd eaten breakfast with such appetite that I'd felt I could dispense with the acupuncture needles.

"What's the strangest thing you've ever seen? An animal, I mean. A non-human animal," I added, thinking of Dr. Fentiman's ghastly collection of pickled deformities and "natural curiosities."

"Strange by itself? Not deformed, I mean, but as God meant it to be?" He squinted into the sea, thinking, then grinned. "The mandrill in Louis of France's zoo. Or … well, no. Maybe a rhinoceros, though I havena seen one of those in the flesh. Does that count?"

"Let's say something you've seen in the flesh," I said, thinking of a few pictorial animals I'd seen in this time that appeared to have been deeply affected by the artist's imagination. "You thought the mandrill was stranger than the orangutan?" I recalled his fascination with the orangutan, a solemn-faced young animal who had seemed equally fascinated by *him*, this leading to a number of jokes regarding the origins of red hair on the part of the Duc d'Orleans, who'd been present.

"Nay, I've seen a good many people who looked stranger than the orangutan," he said. The wind had shifted, yanking auburn lashings of hair out of his ribbon. He turned to face into the breeze and smoothed them back, sobering a little. "I felt sorry for the creature; it seemed to ken it was alone and might never see another of its kind again."

"Maybe it *did think* you were one of its kind," I suggested. "It seemed to like you."

"It was a sweet wee thing," he agreed. "When I gave it an orange, it took the fruit from my hand like a Christian, verra mannerly. Do ye suppose …" His voice died away, his eyes going vague.

"Do I suppose …?"

"Oh. I was only thinking"—he glanced quickly over his shoulder, but we were out of earshot of the sailors—"what Roger Mac said about France being important to the Revolution. I thought I should ask about, when we're in Edinburgh. See whether there might be any of the folk I knew who had fingers in France …" He lifted one shoulder.

"You aren't actually thinking of *going* to France, are you?" I asked, suddenly wary.

"No, no," he said hurriedly. "I only happened to think—if by some chance we did, might the orangutan still be there? It's been a great while, but I dinna ken how long they live."

"Not quite as long as people, I don't think, but they *can* live to a great age, if they're well cared for," I said dubiously. The doubt was not all on the orangutan's account. Go back to the French court? The mere thought made my stomach flip-flop.

"He's dead, ken," Jamie said quietly. He turned his head to look at me, eyes steady. "Louis."

"Is he?" I said blankly. "I … when?"

He ducked his head and made a small noise that might have been a laugh.

"He died three years ago, Sassenach," he said dryly. "It *was* in the papers. Though I grant ye, the *Wilmington Gazette* didna make a great deal of the matter."

"I didn't notice." I glanced down at the shark, still patiently keeping company with the ship. My heart, after the initial leap of surprise, had relaxed. My general reaction, in fact, was thankfulness—and that in itself surprised me, rather.

I'd come to terms with my memory of sharing Louis's bed—for the ten minutes it had taken—long since, and Jamie and I had long since come to terms with each other, turning to each other in the wake of the loss of our first daughter, Faith, and all the terrible things that had happened in France before the Rising.

It wasn't that hearing of Louis's death made any real difference at all—but still, I had a feeling of relief, as though some tiresome bit of music that had been playing in the far distance had finally come to a graceful end, and now the silence of peace sang to me in the wind.

"God rest his soul," I said, rather belatedly. Jamie smiled, and laid his hand over mine.

"*Fois shìorruidh thoir dha,"* he echoed. God rest his soul. "Makes ye wonder, ken? How it might be for a king, to come before God and answer for your life. Might it be a great deal worse, I mean, having to answer for all the folk under your care?"

"Do you think he would?" I asked, intrigued—and rather uneasy at the thought. I hadn't known Louis in any intimate way—bar the obvious, and that seemed less intimate than a handshake; he'd never even met my eyes—but he hadn't seemed like a man consumed by care for his subjects. "Can a person really be held to account for the welfare of a whole kingdom? Not just his own peccadilloes, you think?"

He considered that seriously, the stiff fingers of his right hand tapping slowly on the slippery rail.

"I think so," he said. "Ye'd answer for what ye'd done to your family, no? Say ye'd done ill by your children, abandoned them or left them to starve. Surely that would weigh against your soul, for you're responsible for them. If you're born a king, then ye're given responsibility for your subjects. If ye do ill by them, then—"

"Well, but where does that stop?" I protested. "Suppose you do well by one person and badly by another? Suppose you have people under your care—so to speak—and their needs are in opposition to one another? What do you say to that?"

He broke into a smile.

"I'd say I'm verra glad I'm not God and havena got to try to reckon such things."

I was silent for a moment, imagining Louis standing before God, trying to explain those ten minutes with me. I was sure he'd thought he had a right—kings, after all, were kings—but on the other hand, both the seventh and the ninth commandments were fairly explicit and didn't seem to have any clauses exempting royalty.

"If you were there," I said impulsively, "in heaven, watching that judgment—would you forgive him? I would."

"Who?" he said, surprised. "Louis?" I nodded, and he frowned, rubbing a finger slowly down the bridge of his nose. Then he sighed and nodded.

"Aye, I would. Wouldna mind watching him squirm a bit first, mind," he added, darkly. "A wee pitchfork in the arse would be fine."

I laughed at that, but before I could say anything further, we were interrupted by a shout of "Sail, ho!" from above. While we'd been alone the instant before, this advice caused sailors to pop out of hatches and companionways like weevils out of a ship's biscuit, swarming up into the rigging to see what was up.

I strained my eyes, but nothing was immediately visible. Young Ian, though, had gone aloft with the others, and now landed on the deck beside us with a thump. He was flushed with wind and excitement.

"A smallish ship, but she's got guns," he told Jamie. "And she's flying the Union flag."

"She's a naval cutter," said Captain Roberts, who had appeared on my other side and was peering grimly through his telescope. "Shit."

Jamie's hand went to his dirk, unconsciously checking, and he looked over the captain's shoulder, eyes narrowed against the wind. I could see the sail now, coming up rapidly to starboard.

"Can we outrun her, Cap'n?" The first mate had joined the crowd at the rail, watching the oncoming ship. She did have guns; six, that I could see—and there were men behind them.

The captain pondered, absently clicking his glass open and shut, then glanced up into the rigging, presumably estimating the chances of our putting on enough sail to outdistance the pursuer. The mainmast was cracked; he'd been intending to replace it in New Haven.

"No," he said gloomily. "The main'll be away, if there's any strain put on her." He shut the telescope with a decisive *click* and stowed it away in his pocket. "Have to brass it out, best we can."

I wondered just how much of Captain Roberts's cargo was contraband. His taciturn face didn't give anything away, but there was a distinct air of uneasiness among the hands, which grew noticeably as the cutter drew alongside, hailing.

Roberts gave the terse order to heave to, and the sails loosened, the ship slowing. I could see seamen at the guns and rail of the cutter; glancing sideways at Jamie, I saw that he was counting them and glanced back.

"I make it sixteen," Ian said, low-voiced.

"Undermanned, God damn it," said the captain. He looked at Ian, estimating his size, and shook his head. "They'll likely mean to press what they can out of us. Sorry, lad."

The rather formless alarm I'd felt at the cutter's approach sharpened abruptly at this—and sharpened still further as I saw Roberts glance appraisingly at Jamie.

"You don't think they—" I began.

“Shame you shaved this morning, Mr. Fraser,” Roberts observed to Jamie, ignoring me. “Takes twenty years off your age. And you look a damned sight healthier than men half your age.”

“I’m obliged to ye for the compliment, sir,” Jamie replied dryly, one eye on the railing, where the cocked hat of the cutter’s captain had suddenly poked up like an ill-omened mushroom. He unbuckled his belt, slid the dirk’s scabbard free, and handed it to me.

“Keep that for me, Sassenach,” he said under his breath, buckling his belt again.

The cutter’s captain, a squat middle-aged man with a sullen brow and a pair of much-mended breeches, took a quick, piercing look around the deck when he came aboard, nodded to himself as though his worst suspicions had been confirmed, then shouted back over his shoulder for six men to follow.

“Search the hold,” he said to his minions. “You know what to look for.”

“What sort of way is this to carry on?” Captain Roberts demanded angrily. “You’ve no right to search my ship! What do you lot think you are, a raft of bloody pirates?”

“Do I look like a pirate?” The cutter’s captain looked more pleased than insulted by the idea.

“Well, you can’t be a naval captain, I’m sure,” Roberts said coldly. “A nice, gentlemanlike set of individuals, I’ve always found His Majesty’s navy. Not the sort to board a respectable merchant without leave, let alone without proper introduction.”

The cutter’s captain appeared to find this funny. He took off his hat and bowed—to me.

“Allow me, mum,” he said. “Captain Worth Stebbings, your most humble.” He straightened up, clapping on his hat, and nodded to his lieutenant. “Go through the holds like a dose of salts. And you—” He tapped Roberts on the chest with a forefinger. “Get all your men on deck, front and center, cully. *All* of them, mind. If I have to drag them up here, I won’t be best pleased, I warn you.”

Tremendous bangings and rumblings from below ensued, with seamen popping up periodically to relay news of their findings to Captain Stebbings, who lounged by the rail, watching as the men of the *Teal* were rounded up and herded together on deck—Ian and Jamie among them.

"Here, now!" Captain Roberts was game, I'd give him that. "Mr. Fraser and his nephew aren't crew; they're paying passengers! You've no call to molest free men, about their lawful business. And no right to press my crew, either!"

"They're British subjects," Stebbings informed him briefly. "I've every right. Or do you all claim to be *Americans?*" He leered briefly at that; if the ship could be considered a rebel vessel, he could simply take the whole thing as a prize, crew and all.

A mutter at this ran through the men on deck, and I saw more than one of the hands' eyes dart to the belaying pins along the rail. Stebbings saw it, too, and called over the rail for four more men to be brought aboard—with arms.

Sixteen minus six minus four is six, I thought, and edged a little closer to the rail to peer into the cutter rocking in the swell a little way below and tethered by a line to the *Teal. If the sixteen doesn't include Captain Stebbings. If it does …*

One man was at the helm, this being not a wheel but a sort of sticklike arrangement poking up through the deck. Two more were manning a gun, a long brass thing on the bow, pointed at the *Teal*'s side. Where were the others? Two on deck. The others perhaps below.

Captain Roberts was still haranguing Stebbings behind me, but the cutter's crew were bumping barrels and bundles over the deck, calling for a rope to lower away to the cutter. I looked back to find Stebbings walking along the row of crewmen, indicating his choices to four burly men who followed him. These jerked his choices out of line and set about tying them together, a line running from ankle to ankle. Three men had already been chosen, John Smith among them, looking white-faced and tense. My heart jumped at sight of him, then nearly stopped altogether as Stebbings came to Ian, who looked down at him impassively.

"Likely, likely," Stebbings said with approval. "A cross-grained son of a bitch, by the looks of you, but we'll soon knock sense into you. Take him!"

I saw the muscles swell in Ian's forearms as his fists clenched, but the pressgang was armed, two with pistols drawn, and he stepped forward, though with an evil look that would have given a wiser man pause. I had already observed that Captain Stebbings was not a wise man.

Stebbings took two more, then paused at Jamie, looking him up and down. Jamie's face was carefully blank. And slightly green; the wind was still up, and with no forward way on the ship, she was rising and falling heavily, with a lurch that would have disconcerted a much better sailor than he was.

"Nice big 'un, sir," said one of the press-gang, with approval.

"Trifle elderly," Stebbings said dubiously. "And I don't much like the look on his face."

"I dinna care much for the look of yours," Jamie said pleasantly. He straightened, squaring his shoulders, and looked down his long, straight nose at Stebbings. "If I didna ken ye for an arrant coward by your actions, sir, I should know ye for a fig-licker and a fopdoodle by your foolish wee face."

Stebbings's maligned face went blank with astonishment, then darkened with rage. One or two of the press-gang grinned behind his back, though hastily erasing these expressions as he whirled round.

"Take him," he growled to the press-gang, shouldering his way toward the booty collected by the rail. "And see that you drop him a few times on the way."

I was frozen in shock. Clearly Jamie couldn't let them press Ian and take him away, but surely he couldn't mean to abandon me in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, either.

Not even with his dirk thrust into the pocket tied beneath my skirt, and my own knife in its sheath around my thigh.

Captain Roberts had watched this little performance openmouthed, though whether with respect or astonishment, I couldn't tell. He was a short man, rather tubby, and clearly not constructed for physical confrontation, but he set his jaw and stamped up to Stebbings, seizing him by the sleeve.

The crew ushered their captives over the rail.

There wasn't time to think of anything better.

I seized the rail and more or less rolled over it, skirts flying. I hung by my hands for a terrifying instant, feeling my fingers slide across the wet wood, groping with my toes for the rope ladder the cutter's crew had thrown over the rail. A roll of the ship threw me hard against the side, I lost my grip, plunged several feet, and caught the ladder, just above the cutter's deck.

The rope had burned through my right hand, and it felt as though I'd lost all the skin off my palm, but there was no time to trouble about that now. Any minute, one of the cutter's crew would see me, and—

Timing my jump to the next heave of the cutter's deck, I let go and landed like a bag of rocks. A sharp pain shot up the inside of my right knee, but I staggered to my feet, lurching to and fro with the roll of the deck, and lunged toward the companionway.

"Here! You! What you doing?" One of the gunners had seen me and was gaping at me, clearly unable to decide whether to come down and deal with me or stay with his gun. His partner looked over his shoulder at me and bellowed at the first man to stay put, it wasn't but monkey business of some sort, he said. *"Stay put, God damn your eyes!"*

I ignored them, my heart pounding so hard I could scarcely breathe. What now? What next? Jamie and Ian had disappeared.

"Jamie!" I shouted, as loudly as I could. "I'm here!" And then ran toward the line that held the cutter to the *Teal,* jerking up my skirt as I ran. I did this only because my skirts had twisted in my undignified descent, and I couldn't find the slit to reach through in order to get at the knife in its sheath on my thigh, but the action itself seemed to disconcert the helmsman, who had turned at my shout.

He gawped like a goldfish, but had sufficient presence of mind as to keep his hand on the tiller. I got my own hands on the line and dug my knife into the knot, using it to pry the tight coils loose.

Roberts and his crew, bless them, were making a terrible racket on the *Teal* above, quite drowning out the shouts of the helm and gunners. One of these, with a desperate glance toward the deck of the *Teal* above, finally made up his mind and came toward me, jumping down from the bow.

What wouldn't I give for a pistol just now? I thought grimly. But a knife was what I had, and I jerked it out of the half-loosened knot and drove it into the man's chest as hard as I could. His eyes went round, and I felt the knife strike bone and twist in my hand, skipping through the flesh. He shrieked and fell backward, landing on deck in a thump and nearly—but not quite—taking my knife with him.

"Sorry," I gasped, and, panting, resumed work on the knot, the fractious rope now smeared with blood. There were noises coming from the companionway now. Jamie and Ian might not be armed, but my guess was that that wouldn't matter a lot, in close quarters.

The rope slid reluctantly free. I jerked the last coil loose and it fell, slapping against the *Teal*'s side. At once, the current began to carry the boats apart, the smaller cutter sliding past the big sloop. We weren't moving quickly at all, but the optical illusion of speed made me stagger, gripping at the rail for balance.

The wounded gunner had got onto his feet and was advancing on me, staggering but furious. He was bleeding, but not heavily, and was by no means disabled. I stepped quickly sideways and glancing at the companionway, was relieved beyond measure to see Jamie coming out of it.

He reached me in three strides.

"Quick, my dirk!"

I stared blankly at him for a moment, but then remembered, and with no more than minimum fumbling, managed to get at my pocket. I jerked at the hilt of the dirk, but it was tangled in the fabric. Jamie seized it, ripped it free—tearing both the pocket and the waistband of my skirt in the process—whirled, and charged back into the bowels of the ship. Leaving me facing a wounded gunner, an unwounded gunner now making his way cautiously down from his station, and the helmsman, who was yelling hysterically for someone to do something to some sort of sail.

I swallowed and took a good hold on the knife.

“Stand back,” I said, in as loud and commanding a voice as I could manage. Given my shortness of breath, the wind, and the prevailing noise, I doubt they heard me. On the other hand, I doubted that it would have made a difference if they had. I yanked my sagging skirt up with one hand, crouched, and lifted the knife in a determined manner, meant to indicate that I knew what to do with it. I did.

Waves of heat were going over my skin and I felt perspiration prickle my scalp, drying at once in the cold wind. The panic had gone, though; my mind felt very clear and very remote.

You aren’t going to touch me was the only thing in my mind. The man I had wounded was cautious, hanging back. The other gunner saw nothing but a woman and didn’t bother to arm himself, simply reaching for me with angry contempt. I saw the knife move upward, fast, and arc as though moving by itself, the shimmer of it dulled with blood as I slashed him across the forehead.

Blood poured down over his face, blinding him, and he gave a strangled yell of hurt and astonishment and backed away, both hands pressed to his face.

I hesitated for a moment, not quite sure what to do next, the blood still pounding through my temples. The ship was drifting, rising and falling on the waves; I felt the gold-laden hem of my skirt scrape across the boards, and jerked the torn waistband up again, feeling irritated.

Then I saw a belaying pin stuck into its hole in the railing, a line wrapped round it. I walked over and, poking the knife down the bodkin of my stays for lack of any better place to put it, took hold of the pin with both hands and jerked it free. Holding it like a short baseball bat, I shifted back on one heel and brought it down with as much force as I could on the head of the man whose face I’d slashed. The wooden pin bounced off his skull with a hollow ringing noise, and he staggered away, caroming off the mast.

The helmsman at this point had had enough. Leaving his helm to mind itself, he scrambled up out of his station and made for me like an angry monkey, all reaching limbs and bared teeth. I tried to hit him with the pin, but I’d lost my grip when I struck the gunner, and it slipped out of my hand, rolling away down the heaving deck as the helmsman flung himself on me.

He was small and thin, but his weight bore me back and we lurched together toward the rail; my back struck it and all my breath rushed out in a whoosh, the impact a solid bar of shock across my kidneys. This transformed within seconds to live agony, and I writhed under him, sliding downward. He came with me, grappling for my throat with a single-minded purpose. I flailed at him, my arms, my hands striking windmill-like at his head, the bones of his skull bruising me.

The wind was roaring in my ears; I heard nothing but breathless cursing, harsh gasps that might be mine or his, and then he knocked my hands away and grabbed me by the neck, one-handed, his thumb digging hard up under my jaw.

It hurt and I tried to knee him, but my legs were swaddled in my skirt and pinned beneath his weight. My vision went dark, with little bursts of gold light going off in the blackness, tiny fireworks heralding my death. Someone was making little mewling noises, and I realized dimly that it must be me. The grip on my neck tightened, and the flashing lights faded into black.

* * *

I woke with a confused sense of being simultaneously terrified and rocked in a cradle. My throat hurt, and when I tried to swallow, the resultant pain made me choke.

“Ye’re all right, Sassenach.” Jamie’s soft voice came out of the surrounding gloom—where *was I?*—and his hand squeezed my forearm, reassuring.

“I’ll … take your … word for it,” I croaked, the effort making my eyes water. I coughed. It hurt, but seemed to help a little. “What …?”

“Have a bit of water, *a nighean*.” A big hand cradled my head, lifting it a bit, and the mouth of a canteen pressed against my lip. Swallowing the water hurt, too, but I didn’t care; my lips and throat were parched, and tasted of salt.

My eyes were beginning to accustom themselves to the darkness. I could see Jamie's form, hunched under a low ceiling, and the shape of rafters—no, timbers—overhead. A strong smell of tar and bilges. Ship. Of course, we were in a ship. But *which* ship?

"Where …?" I whispered, waving a hand.

"I havena got the slightest idea," he said, sounding rather irritable. "The *Teal*'s people are managing the sails—I hope—and Ian's holding a pistol on one o' the naval folk to make him steer, but for all I ken, the man's taking us straight out to sea."

"I meant … what … ship." Though his remarks had made that clear enough; we must be on the naval cutter.

"They said the name of it's the *Pitt*."

"How very appropriate." I looked glassily around the murky surroundings, and my sense of reality suffered another jolt as I saw a huge mottled bundle of some kind, apparently hanging in the dim air a few feet beyond Jamie. I sat up abruptly—or tried to, only at this point realizing that I was in a hammock.

Jamie seized me by the waist with a cry of alarm, in time to save me pitching out on my head, and as I steadied, clutching him, I realized that the thing I had taken as an enormous cocoon was in fact a man, lying in another hammock suspended from the rafters, but trussed up in it like a spider's dinner and gagged. His face pressed against the mesh, glaring at me.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt …," I croaked, and lay back, breathing heavily.

"D'ye want to rest a bit, Sassenach, or shall I set ye on your feet?" Jamie asked, clearly edgy. "I dinna want to leave Ian on his own too long."

"No," I said, struggling upright once more. "Help me out, please." The room—cabin, whatever it was—spun round me, as well as heaving up and down, and I was obliged to cling to Jamie with my eyes closed for a moment, until my internal gyroscope took hold.

"Captain Roberts?" I asked. "The *Teal*?"

"God knows," Jamie said tersely. "We ran for it as quick as I could set the men to sailing this thing. For all I ken, they're on our tail, but I couldna see anything when I looked astern."

I was beginning to feel steadier, though the blood still throbbed painfully in my throat and temples with each heartbeat, and I could feel the tender patches of bruising on my elbows and shoulders, and a vivid band across my back, where I'd fallen against the rail.

"We've shut most of the crew up in the hold," Jamie said, with a nod at the man in the hammock, "save this fellow. I didna ken whether ye might want to look at him first. In the medical way, I mean," he added, seeing my momentary incomprehension. "Though I dinna think he's hurt badly."

I approached the fellow in the hammock and saw that it was the helmsman who had tried to throttle me. There was a large lump visible on his forehead, and he had the beginnings of a monstrous black eye, but from what I could see, leaning close in the dim light, his pupils were the same size and—allowing for the rag stuffed into his mouth—his breath was coming regularly. Probably not badly hurt, then. I stood for a moment staring at him. It was difficult to tell—the only light belowdecks came from a prism embedded in the deck above—but I thought that perhaps what I had taken for a glare was really just a look of desperation.

"Do you need to have a pee?" I inquired politely.

The man and Jamie made nearly identical noises, though in the first case it was a groan of need, and in Jamie's, of exasperation.

"For God's sake!" he said, grabbing my arm as I started to reach for the man. "I'll deal with him. Go upstairs." It was apparent from his much-tried tone that he had just about reached the last-straw stage, and there was no point in arguing with him. I left, making my ginger way up the companionway ladder to the accompaniment of a lot of Gaelic muttering that I didn't try to translate.

The belting wind above was enough to make me sway alarmingly as it caught my skirts, but I seized a line and held on, letting the fresh air clear my head before I felt steady enough to go aft. There I found Ian, as advertised, sitting on a barrel, a loaded pistol held negligently atop one knee, evidently engaged in amiable discourse with the sailor at the helm.

"Auntie Claire! All right, are ye?" he asked, jumping up and gesturing me toward his barrel.

“Fine,” I said, taking it. I didn’t think I had torn anything in my knee, but it felt a little wobbly. “Claire Fraser,” I said, nodding politely to the gentleman at the helm, who was black and bore facial tattoos of an elaborate sort, though from the neck down he was dressed in ordinary sailor’s slops.

“Guinea Dick,” he said, with a broad grin that displayed—no doubt about it—filed teeth. “Youah sahvint, Mum!”

I regarded him openmouthed for a moment, but then regained some semblance of self-possession and smiled at him.

“I see His Majesty takes his seamen where he can get them,” I murmured to Ian.

“He does for a fact. Mr. Dick here was pressed out of a Guinea pirate, who took him from a slave ship, who in turn took him from a barracoon on the Guinea coast. I’m no so sure whether he thinks His Majesty’s accommodations are an improvement—but he says he’s got nay particular reservation about going along of us.”

“Is your trust upon him?” I asked, in halting Gaelic.

Ian gave me a mildly scandalized look.

“Of course not,” he replied in the same language. “And you will oblige me by not going too close to him, wife of my mother’s brother. He says to me that he does not eat human flesh, but this is no surety that he is safe.”

“Right,” I said, returning to English. “What happened to—”

Before I could complete my question, a loud thump on deck made me turn, to see John Smith—he of the five gold earrings—who had dropped out of the rigging. He, too, smiled when he saw me, though his face was strained.

“Well enough so far,” he said to Ian, and touched his forelock to me. “You all right, ma’am?”

“Yes.” I looked aft, but saw nothing save tumbling waves. The same in all the other directions, as well. “Er … do you happen to know where we’re going, Mr. Smith?”

He looked a trifle surprised at that.

“Why, no, ma’am. The captain hasn’t said.”

“The cap—”

"That would be Uncle Jamie," Ian said, sounding amused. "Puking his guts out below, is he?"

"Not when last seen." I began to have an uneasy feeling at the base of my spine. "Do you mean to tell me that *no* one aboard this ship has any idea where—or even which way—we're heading?"

An eloquent silence greeted this question.

I coughed.

"The, um, gunner. Not the one with the slashed forehead—the other one. Where is he, do you know?"

Ian turned and looked at the water.

"Oh," I said. There was a large splotch of blood on the deck where the man had fallen when I stabbed him. "Oh," I said again.

"Och, which reminds me, Auntie. I found this lyin' on the deck." Ian took my knife from his belt and handed it to me. It had been cleaned, I saw.

"Thank you." I slipped it back through the slit of my petticoats and found the scabbard, still fastened round my thigh, though someone had removed my torn skirt and pocket. With thought for the gold in the hem, I hoped it was Jamie. I felt rather peculiar, as though my bones were filled with air. I coughed and swallowed again, massaging my bruised throat, then returned to my earlier point.

"So *no* one knows which way we're heading?"

John Smith smiled a little.

"Well, we're not a-heading out to sea, ma'am, if that's what you were fearing."

"I was, actually. How do you know?"

All three of them smiled at that.

"Him sun over dere," Mr. Dick said, shrugging a shoulder at the object in question. He nodded in the same direction. "So him land over dere, too."

"Ah." Well, that was comforting, to be sure. And in fact, since "him sun" *was* over there—that is, sinking rapidly in the west—that meant we were in fact headed north.

Jamie joined the party at this point, looking pale.

"Captain Fraser," Smith said respectfully.

"Mister Smith."

"Orders, Cap'n?"

Jamie stared at him bleakly.

"I'll be pleased if we don't sink. Can ye manage that?"

Mr. Smith didn't bother hiding his grin.

"If we don't hit another ship or a whale, sir, I think we'll stay afloat."

"Good. Kindly don't." Jamie wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and straightened up. "Is there a port we might reach within the next day or so? The helmsman says there's food and water enough for three days, but the less of it we need, the happier I'll be."

Smith turned to squint toward the invisible land, the setting sun glinting off his earrings.

"Well, we're past Norfolk," he said, thoughtful. "The next big regular port would be New York."

Jamie gave him a jaundiced look.

"Is the British navy not anchored in New York?"

Mr. Smith coughed.

"I b'lieve they were, last I heard. 'Course, they might have moved."

"I was more in mind of a small port," Jamie said. "Verra small."

"Where the arrival of a royal naval cutter will make the maximum impression on the citizenry?" I inquired. I sympathized with his strong desire to set foot on land as soon as possible, but the question was—what then?

The enormity of our position was only now beginning to dawn on me. We had gone in the space of an hour from passengers on the way to Scotland to fugitives, on the way to God knew where.

Jamie closed his eyes and drew a long, deep breath. There was a heavy swell, and he was looking green again, I saw. And, with a pang of uneasiness, realized that I had lost my acupuncture needles, left behind in my hasty exodus from the *Teal.*

"What about Rhode Island, or New Haven, Connecticut?" I asked. "New Haven is where the *Teal* was going, anyway—and I think we're much less likely to run into Loyalists or British troops in either of those ports."

Jamie nodded, eyes still closed, grimacing at the movement.

"Aye, maybe."

"Not Rhode Island," Smith objected. "The British sailed into Newport in December, and the American navy—what there is of it—is blockaded inside Providence. They might not fire on us, if we come a-sailing into Newport with the British colors flying"—he gestured at the mast, where the Union Jack still fluttered—"but the reception once ashore might be warmer than we might find comfortable."

Jamie had cracked one eye open and was regarding Smith consideringly.

"I take it ye've no Loyalist leanings yourself, Mr. Smith? For if ye had, nothing simpler than to tell me to land at Newport; I'd not have known any better."

"No, sir." Smith tugged at one of his earrings. "Mind, I'm not a Separatist, neither. But I have got a marked disinclination to be sunk again. Reckon I've just about used up my luck in that direction."

Jamie nodded, looking ill.

"New Haven, then," he said, and I felt a small thump of uneasy excitement. Might I meet with Hannah Arnold, after all? Or—and there was an uneasier notion still—Colonel Arnold himself? I supposed he must visit his family once in a while.

A certain amount of technical discussion, involving a lot of shouting to and fro between deck and rigging, ensued, regarding navigation: Jamie knew how to use both a sextant and an astrolabe—the former was actually available—but had no idea how to apply the results to the sailing of a ship. The impressed hands from the *Teal* were more or less agreeable to sailing the ship wherever we cared to take her, as their only immediate alternative was being arrested, tried, and executed for involuntary piracy, but while all were good able seamen, none of them possessed anything in the way of navigational skills.

This left us with the alternative strategies of interviewing the captive seamen in the hold, discovering whether any of them could sail the ship, and if so, offering such inducements in the way of violence or gold as might compel him to do so, or sailing within sight of land and hugging the coast, which was slower, much more dangerous in terms of encountering either sandbanks or British men of war, and uncertain, insofar as none of the *Teal* hands presently with us had ever seen the port of New Haven before.

Having nothing useful to contribute to this discussion, I went to stand by the rail, watching the sun come down the sky and wondering how likely we were to run aground in the dark, without the sun to steer by?

The thought was cold, but the wind was colder. I had been wearing only a light jacket when I made my abrupt exit from the *Teal*, and without my woolen overskirt, the sea wind was cutting through my clothes like a knife. That unfortunate imagery reminded me of the dead gunner, and, steeling myself, I glanced over my shoulder toward the dark bloodstain on deck.

As I did so, my eye caught the flicker of a movement from the helm, and I opened my mouth to call out. I hadn't managed a sound, but Jamie happened to be looking in my direction and whatever was showing on my face was enough. He turned and threw himself without hesitation at Guinea Dick, who had produced a knife from somewhere about his person and was preparing to plunge it into Ian's negligently turned back.

Ian whirled round at the noise, saw what was up, and, thrusting the pistol into Mr. Smith's surprised hands, flung himself on the thrashing ball of humanity rolling round under the swinging helm. Fallen off her steerage, the ship slowed, her sails slackening, and she began to roll alarmingly.

I took two steps across the slanting deck and plucked the pistol neatly out of Mr. Smith's hand. He looked at me, blinking in bewilderment.

"It's not that I don't trust you," I said apologetically. "It's just that I can't take the chance. All things considered." Calmly—all things considered—I checked the pistol's priming—it was primed and cocked; a wonder it hadn't gone off by itself, with all this rough handling—and aimed it at the center of the melee, waiting to see who might emerge from it.

Mr. Smith looked back and forth, from me to the fight, and then backed slowly away, hands delicately raised.

"I'll … just … be up top," he said. "If wanted."

The outcome had been a foregone conclusion, but Mr. Dick had acquitted himself nobly as a British seaman. Ian rose slowly, swearing and pressing his forearm against his shirt, where a jagged wound left red blotches.

"The treacherous bugger *bit* me!" he said, furious. "Goddamned cannibal heathen!" He kicked his erstwhile foe, who grunted at the impact but remained inert, and then seized the swinging helm with an angry oath. He moved this slowly to and fro, seeking direction, and the ship steadied, her head turning into the wind as her sails filled again.

Jamie rolled off the supine body of Mr. Dick and sat on the deck beside him, head hanging, panting for breath. I lowered the gun and uncocked it.

"All right?" I asked him, for form's sake. I felt very calm, in a remote, strange sort of way.

"Tryin' to recall how many lives I've got left," he said, between gasps.

"Four, I think. Or five. Surely you don't consider this a near-miss, do you?" I glanced at Mr. Dick, whose face was considerably the worse for wear. Jamie himself had a large red patch down the side of his face that would undoubtedly be black and blue within hours, and was holding his middle, but seemed otherwise undamaged.

"Does nearly dyin' of seasickness count?"

"No." With a wary eye on the fallen helmsman, I squatted beside Jamie and peered at him. The red light of the sinking sun bathed the deck, making it impossible to judge his color, even had the color of his skin made this easy. Jamie held out a hand, and I gave him the pistol, which he tucked into his belt. Where, I saw, he had restored his dirk and its scabbard.

"Did you not have time to draw that?" I asked, nodding at it.

"Didna want to kill him. He's no dead, is he?" With a noticeable effort, he rolled onto hands and knees and breathed for a moment before thrusting himself to his feet.

"No. He'll come round in a minute or two." I looked toward Ian, whose face was averted but whose body language was eloquent. His stiff shoulders, suffused back of neck, and bulging forearms conveyed fury and shame, which were understandable, but there was a droop to his spine that spoke of desolation. I wondered at that last, until a thought occurred to me, and that odd sense of calm vanished abruptly in a burst of horror as I realized what must have made him drop his guard.

"Rollo!" I whispered, clutching Jamie's arm. He looked up, startled, saw Ian, and exchanged appalled glances with me.

"Oh, God," he said softly.

The acupuncture needles were not the only things of value left behind aboard the *Teal*.

Rollo had been Ian's closest companion for years. The immense byproduct of a casual encounter between an Irish wolfhound and a wolf, he terrified the hands on the *Teal* to such an extent that Ian had shut him in the cabin; otherwise, chances were that he would have taken the throat out of Captain Stebbings when the sailors seized Ian. What would he do when he realized that Ian was gone? And what would Captain Stebbings, his men, or the crew of the *Teal do* to him in response?

"Jesus. They'll shoot the dog and drop him overboard," Jamie said, voicing my thought, and crossed himself.

I thought of the hammerhead again, and a violent shudder ran through me. Jamie squeezed my hand tightly.

"Oh, God," he said again, very quietly. He stood thinking for a moment, then shook himself, rather like Rollo shaking water from his fur, and let go my hand.

"I'll have to speak to the crew, and we must feed them—and the sailors in the hold. Will ye go below, Sassenach, and see what ye can do wi' the galley? I'll just … have a word with Ian first." I saw his throat move as he glanced at Ian, standing stiff as a wooden Indian at the helm, the dying light harsh on his tearless face.

I nodded, and made my way unsteadily to the black, gaping hole of the companionway, and the descent into darkness.

* * *

The galley was no more than a four-by-four space belowdecks at the end of the mess, with a sort of low brick altar containing the fire, several cupboards on the bulkhead, and a hanging rack of coppers, pot-lifters, rags, and other bits of kitchen impedimenta. No problem in spotting it; there was still a sullen red glow from the galley fire, where—thank God!—a few embers still lived.

There was a sandbox, a coal box, and a basket of kindling, tidied under the tiny countertop, and I set at once to coaxing the fire back into life. A cauldron hung over the fire; some of the contents had slopped over the side as a result of the ship's rolling, partially extinguishing the fire and leaving gummy streaks down the side of the cauldron. Luck again, I thought. Had the slop not put the fire mostly out, the contents of the pot would long since have boiled dry and burned, leaving me with the job of starting some kind of supper from scratch.

Perhaps literally from scratch. There were several stacked cages of chickens near the galley; they'd been dozing in the warm darkness but roused at my movement, fluttering, muttering, and jerking their silly heads to and fro in agitated inquiry, beady eyes blinking redly at me through the wooden lattice.

I wondered whether there might be other livestock aboard, but if there was, it wasn't living in the galley, thank goodness. I stirred the pot, which seemed to contain a glutinous sort of stew, and then began to look for bread. There would be some sort of farinaceous substance, I knew; sailors lived on either hardtack—the very aptly named unleavened ship's biscuit—or soft tack, this being any kind of leavened bread, though the term "soft" was often relative. Still, they would have bread. Where …?

I found it at last: hard round brown loaves in a netting bag hung from a hook in a dark corner. To keep it from rats, I supposed, and glanced narrowly around the floor, just in case. There should be flour, as well, I thought—oh, of course. It would be in the hold, along with the other ship's stores. And the disgruntled remnants of the original crew. Well, we'd worry about them later. There was enough here to feed everyone aboard supper. I'd worry about breakfast later, too.

The exertion of building up the fire and searching the galley and mess warmed me and distracted me from my bruises. The sense of chilled disbelief that had attended me ever since I went over the *Teal*'s rail began to dissipate.

This wasn't entirely a good thing. As I began to emerge from my state of stunned shock, I also began to apprehend the true dimensions of the current situation. We were no longer headed for Scotland and the dangers of the Atlantic, but were under way to an unknown destination in an unfamiliar craft with an inexperienced, panic-stricken crew. And we had, in fact, just committed piracy on the high seas, as well as whatever crimes were involved in resisting impressment and assaulting His Majesty's navy. And murder. I swallowed, my throat still tender, and my skin prickled despite the warmth of the fire.

The jar of the knife hitting bone still reverberated in the bones of my own hand and forearm. How could I have killed him? I knew I hadn't penetrated his chest cavity, couldn't possibly have struck the large vessels of the neck.… Shock, of course … but could shock alone …?

I couldn't think about the dead gunner just now, and pushed the thought of him firmly away. Later, I told myself. I would come to terms with it—it had been self-defense, after all—and I would pray for his soul, but later. Not now.

Not that the other things presenting themselves to me as I worked were much more appealing. Ian and Rollo—no, I couldn't think about that, either.

I scraped the bottom of the pot determinedly with a big wooden spoon. The stew was a little scorched at the bottom, but still edible. There were bones in it, and it was thick and gummy, with lumps. Gagging slightly, I filled a smaller pot from a water butt and hung it to boil.

Navigation. I settled on that as a topic for worry, on grounds that while it was deeply concerning, it lacked the emotional aspects of some of the other things on my mental agenda. How full was the moon? I tried to recall what it had looked like the night before, from the deck of the *Teal*. I hadn't really noticed, so it wasn't near the full; the full moon rising out of the sea is breathtaking, with that shining path across the water that makes you feel how simple it would be to step over the rail and walk straight on, into that peaceful radiance.

No, no peaceful radiance last night. I'd gone up to the ship's head, though, quite late, instead of using a chamber pot, because I'd wanted air. It had been dark on deck, and I'd paused for a moment by the rail, because there was phosphorescence in the long, rolling waves, a beautiful eerie glimmer of green light under the water, and the wake of the ship plowed a glowing furrow through the sea.

Dark moon, then, I decided, or a sliver, which would amount to the same thing. We couldn't come close into shore by night, then. I didn't know how far north we were—maybe John Smith did?—but was aware that the coastline of the Chesapeake involved all kinds of channels, sandbars, tide flats, and ship traffic. Wait, though, Smith had said we'd passed Norfolk …

"Well, bloody hell!" I said exasperated. "Where *is* Norfolk?" I knew where it was in relation to Highway I-64, but had no notion whatever what the blasted place looked like from the ocean.

And if we were obliged to stand far out from land during the night, what was to keep us from drifting *very* far out to sea?

"Well, on the good side, we needn't trouble about running out of gas," I said encouragingly to myself. Food and water … well, not yet, at least.

I seemed to be running out of good impersonal worrying material. What about Jamie's seasickness? Or any other medical catastrophe that might occur aboard? Yes, that was a good one. I had no herbs, no needles, no sutures, no bandages, no instruments—I was for the moment completely without any practical medicine at all, save boiling water and what skill might be contained in my two hands.

"I suppose I could reduce a dislocation or put my thumb on a spurting artery," I said aloud, "but that's about it."

"Uhh …" said a deeply uncertain voice behind me, and I spun round, inadvertently spattering stew from my ladle.

"Oh. Mr. Smith."

"Didn't mean to take you unawares, ma'am." He sidled into the light like a wary spider, keeping a cautious distance from me. " 'Specially not as I saw your nephew hand you back that knife of yours." He smiled a little, to indicate that this was a joke, but he was plainly uneasy. "You … um … were right handy with it, I must say."

"Yes," I said flatly, picking up a rag to mop the splatters. "I've had practice."

This led to a marked silence. After a moment or two, he coughed.

"Mr. Fraser sent me to ask—in a gingerly sort of way—whether there might be anything to eat soon?"

I gave a grudging snort of laughter at that.

"Was the 'gingerly' his idea or yours?"

"His," he replied promptly.

"You can tell him the food is ready, whenever anyone likes to come and eat it. Oh—Mr. Smith?"

He turned back at once, earrings swinging.

"I only wondered—what do the men … well, they must be very upset, of course, but what do the hands from the *Teal* feel about … er … recent developments? If you happen to know, that is," I added.

"I know. Mr. Fraser asked me that, not ten minutes ago," he said, looking mildly amused. "We been a-talking, up in the tops, as you may imagine, ma'am."

"Oh, I do."

"Well, we're much relieved not to be pressed, of course. Was that to happen, likely none of us would see home nor family again for years. To say nothing of being forced maybe to fight our own countrymen." He scratched at his chin; like all the men, he was becoming bristly and piratical-looking. "On t'other hand, though … well, you must allow of our situation at the moment being not all our friends might wish. Perilous, I mean to say, and us now minus our pay and our clothes, to boot."

"Yes, I can see that. From your point of view, what might be the most desirable outcome of our situation?"

"Make land as near to New Haven as we can get, but not in the harbor. Run her aground on a gravel bar and set her afire," he replied promptly. "Take her boat ashore, then run like the dickens."

"Would you burn the ship with the sailors in the hold?" I asked, as a matter of curiosity. To my relief, he appeared shocked at the suggestion.

"Oh, no, ma'am! Might be as Mr. Fraser would want to turn them over to the Continentals to use for exchange, maybe, but we wouldn't mind was they to be set free, either."

"That's very magnanimous of you," I assured him gravely. "And I'm sure Mr. Fraser is very grateful for your recommendations. Do you, er, know where the Continental army *is* just now?"

"Somewhere in New Jersey is what I heard," he replied, with a brief smile. "I don't suppose they'd be that hard to find, though, if you wanted 'em."

Aside from the royal navy, the last thing I personally wanted to see was the Continental army, even at a distance. New Jersey seemed safely remote, though.

I sent him to rummage the crew's quarters for utensils—each man would have his own mess kid and spoon—and set about the tricky task of lighting the two lamps that hung over the mess table, in hopes that we might see what we were eating.

Having got a closer look at the stew, I changed my mind about the desirability of more illumination, but considering how much trouble it had been to light the lamps, wasn't disposed to blow them out, either.

All in all, the meal wasn't bad. Though it likely wouldn't have mattered if I'd fed them raw grits and fish heads; the men were famished. They devoured the food like a horde of cheerful locusts, their spirits remarkably high, considering our situation. Not for the first time, I marveled at the ability of men to function capably in the midst of uncertainty and danger.

Part of it, of course, was Jamie. One couldn't overlook the irony of someone who hated the sea and ships as he did suddenly becoming the *de facto* captain of a naval cutter, but while he might loathe ships, he did in fact know more or less how one was run—and he had the knack of calm in the face of chaos, as well as a natural sense of command.

If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you … I thought, watching him talk calmly and sensibly to the men.

Pure adrenaline had kept me going until now, but, now out of immediate danger, it was fading fast. Between fatigue, worry, and a bruised throat, I was able to eat only a bite or two of the stew. My other bruises had begun to throb, and my knee still felt tender. I was taking a morbid inventory of physical damage when I saw Jamie's eyes fixed on me.

"Ye need food, Sassenach," he said mildly. "Eat." I opened my mouth to say that I wasn't hungry, but thought better of it. The last thing he needed was to worry about me.

"Aye, aye, Captain," I said, and resignedly picked up my spoon.

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31

A GUIDED TOUR THROUGH THE CHAMBERS OF THE HEART

I should be going to sleep. God knew I needed sleep. And there would be precious little of it until we reached New Haven. *If we ever do,* the back of my mind commented skeptically, but I ignored this remark as unhelpful to the current situation.

I longed to plunge into sleep, as much to escape the fears and uncertainties of my mind as to restore my much abused flesh. I was so tired, though, that mind and body had begun to separate.

It was a familiar phenomenon. Doctors, soldiers, and mothers encounter it routinely; I had, any number of times. Unable to respond to an immediate emergency while clouded by fatigue, the mind simply withdraws a little, separating itself fastidiously from the body's overwhelming self-centered needs. From this clinical distance, it can direct things, bypassing emotions, pain, and tiredness, making necessary decisions, cold-bloodedly overruling the mindless body's needs for food, water, sleep, love, grief, pushing it past its fail-safe points.

Why emotions? I wondered dimly. Surely emotion was a function of the mind. And yet it seemed so deeply rooted in the flesh that this abdication of the mind always suppressed emotion, too.

The body resents this abdication, I think. Ignored and abused, it will not easily let the mind return. Often, the separation persists until one is finally allowed to sleep. With the body absorbed in its quiet intensities of regeneration, the mind settles cautiously back into the turbulent flesh, feeling its delicate way through the twisting passages of dreams, making peace. And you wake once more whole.

But not yet. I had the feeling that something remained to be done but no idea what. I had fed the men, sent food to the prisoners, checked the wounded … reloaded all the pistols … cleaned the stewpot … My slowing mind went blank.

I set my hands on the table, fingertips feeling out the grain of the wood as though the tiny ridges, worn smooth by years of service, might be the map that would enable me to find my way to sleep.

I could see myself in the eye of the mind, sitting there. Slender, nearly scrawny; the edge of my radius showed sharp against the skin of my forearm. I'd got thinner than I realized, over the last few weeks of traveling. Round-shouldered with fatigue. Hair a bushy, tangled mass of writhing strands, streaked with silver and white, a dozen shades of dark and light. It reminded me of something Jamie had told me, some expression the Cherokee had … combing snakes from the hair, that was it. To relieve the mind of worry, anger, fear, possession by demons—that was to comb the snakes from your hair. Very apt.

I did not, of course, possess a comb at the moment. I'd had one in my pocket, but had lost it in the struggle.

My mind felt like a balloon, tugging stubbornly at its tether. I wouldn't let it go, though; I was suddenly and irrationally afraid that it might not come back at all.

Instead, I focused my attention fiercely on small physical details: the weight of the chicken stew and bread in my belly; the smell of the oil in the lamps, hot and fishy. The thump of feet on the deck above, and the song of the wind. The hiss of water down the sides of the ship.

The feel of a blade in flesh. Not the power of purpose, the guided destruction of surgery, damage done in order to heal. A panicked stab, the jump and stutter of a blade striking bone unexpected, the wild careen of an uncontrolled knife. And the wide dark stain on the deck, fresh-wet and smelling of iron.

"I didn't mean it," I whispered aloud. "Oh, God. I didn't mean it."

Quite without warning, I began to cry. No sobbing, no throat-gripping spasms. Water simply welled in my eyes and flowed down my cheeks, slow as cold honey. A quiet acknowledgment of despair as things spiraled slowly out of control.

“What is it, lass?” Jamie’s voice came softly from the door.

“I’m so tired,” I said thickly. “So tired.”

The bench creaked under his weight as he sat beside me, and a filthy handkerchief dabbed gently at my cheeks. He put an arm round me and whispered to me in Gaelic, the soothing endearments one makes to a startled animal. I turned my cheek into his shirt and closed my eyes. The tears were still running down my face, but I was beginning to feel better; still weary unto death, but not utterly destroyed.

“I wish I hadn’t killed that man,” I whispered. His fingers had been smoothing the hair behind my ear; they paused for a moment, then resumed.

“Ye didna kill anyone,” he said, sounding surprised. “Was that what’s been troubling ye, Sassenach?”

“Among other things, yes.” I sat up, wiping my nose on my sleeve, and stared at him. “I didn’t kill the gunner? Are you sure?”

His mouth drew up in what might have been a smile, if it were a shade less grim.

“I’m sure. I killed him, *a nighean*.”

“You—oh.” I sniffed, and looked at him closely. “You aren’t saying that to make me feel better.”

“I am not.” The smile faded. “I wish I hadna killed him, either. No much choice about it, though.” He reached out and pushed a lock of hair behind my ear with a forefinger. “Dinna fash yourself about it, Sassenach. I can stand it.”

I was crying again—but this time with feeling. I wept with pain and with sorrow, certainly with fear. But the pain and sorrow were for Jamie and the man he had no choice but to kill, and that made all the difference.

After a bit, the storm subsided, leaving me limp but whole. The buzzing sense of detachment had gone. Jamie had turned round on the bench, his back against the table as he held me on his lap, and we sat in peaceful silence for a bit, watching the glow of the fading coals in the galley fire and the wisps of steam rising from the cauldron of hot water. *I should put something on to cook through the night,* I thought drowsily. I glanced at the cages, where the chickens had settled themselves to sleep, with no more than an occasional brief cluck of startlement as one roused from whatever chickens dream about.

No, I couldn't bring myself to kill a hen tonight. The men would have to do with whatever came to hand in the morning.

Jamie had also noticed the chickens, though to different effect.

"D'ye recall Mrs. Bug's chickens?" he said, with a rueful humor. "Wee Jem and Roger Mac?"

"Oh, God. Poor Mrs. Bug."

Jem, aged five or so, had been entrusted with the daily chore of counting the hens to be sure they had all returned to their coop at night. After which, of course, the door was fastened securely, to keep out foxes, badgers, or other chicken-loving predators. Only Jem had forgotten. Just once, but once was enough. A fox had got into the hen coop, and the carnage had been terrible.

It's all rot to say that man is the only creature who kills for pleasure. Possibly they learned it from men, but all the dog family do it, too—foxes, wolves, and theoretically domesticated dogs, as well. The walls of the hen coop had been plastered with blood and feathers.

"Oh, my bairnies!" Mrs. Baird kept saying, tears rolling down her cheeks like beads. "Oh, my puir wee bairnies!"

Jem, called into the kitchen, couldn't look.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, eyes on the floor. "I'm really sorry."

"Well, and so ye should be," Roger had said to him. "But sorry's no going to help much, is it?"

Jemmy shook his head, mute, and tears welled in his eyes.

Roger cleared his throat, with a noise of gruff menace.

"Well, here it is, then. If ye're old enough to be trusted with a job, ye're old enough to take the consequences of breaking that trust. D'ye understand me?"

It was rather obvious that he didn't, but he bobbed his head earnestly, sniffling.

Roger took in a deep breath through his nose.

"I mean," he said, "I'm going to whip you."

Jem's small, round face went quite blank. He blinked and looked at his mother, openmouthed.

Brianna made a small movement toward him, but Jamie's hand closed on her arm, stopping her.

Without looking at Bree, Roger put a hand on Jem's shoulder and turned him firmly toward the door.

"Right, mate. Out." He pointed toward the door. "Up to the stable and wait for me."

Jemmy gulped audibly. He'd gone a sickly gray when Mrs. Bug brought in the first feathery corpse, and subsequent events had not improved his color.

I thought he might throw up, but he didn't. He'd stopped crying and didn't start again, but seemed to shrink into himself, shoulders hunching.

"Go," said Roger, and he went.

As Jemmy trudged out, head hanging, he looked so exactly like a prisoner headed for execution that I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. I caught Brianna's eye and saw that she was struggling with a similar feeling; she looked distressed, but her mouth twitched at the corner, and she looked hastily away.

Roger heaved an explosive sigh and made to follow, squaring his shoulders.

"Christ," he muttered.

Jamie had been standing silent in the corner, watching the exchange, though not without sympathy. He moved just slightly, and Roger glanced at him. He coughed.

"Mmphm. I ken it's the first time—but I think ye'd best make it hard," he said softly. "The poor wee lad feels terrible."

Brianna cut her eyes at him, surprised, but Roger nodded, the grim line of his mouth relaxing a little. He followed Jem out, unbuckling his belt as he left.

The three of us stood awkwardly round the kitchen, not quite sure what to do next. Brianna drew herself up with a sigh rather like Roger's, shook herself like a dog, and reached for one of the dead chickens.

"Can we eat them?"

I prodded one of the hens experimentally; the flesh moved under the skin, limp and wobbly, but the skin hadn't yet begun to separate. I picked the rooster up and sniffed; there was a sharp tang of dried blood and the musty scent of dribbled feces, but no sweet smell of rot.

"I think so, if they're thoroughly cooked. The feathers won't be much good, but we can stew some, and boil the rest for broth and fricassee."

Jamie went to fetch onions, garlic, and carrots from the root cellar, while Mrs. Bug retired to lie down and Brianna and I began the messy job of plucking and gutting the victims. We didn't say much, beyond brief murmured queries and answers about the job at hand. When Jamie came back, though, Bree looked up at him as he set the basket of vegetables on the table beside her.

"It will help?" she asked seriously. "Really?"

He'd nodded. "Ye feel badly when ye've done something wrong, and want to put it right, aye? But there's no means to put something like that right again." He gestured toward the pile of dead chickens. Flies were beginning to gather, crawling over the soft feathers.

"The best ye can do is feel ye've paid for it."

A faint shriek reached us through the window. Brianna had started instinctively at the sound, but then shook her head slightly and reached for a chicken, waving away the flies.

"I remember," I now said softly. "So does Jemmy, I'm sure."

Jamie made a small sound of amusement, then lapsed into silence. I could feel his heart beating against my back, slow and steady.

* * *

We kept watch at two-hour intervals all night, making sure that either Jamie, Ian, or myself was awake. John Smith seemed solid—

but there was always the possibility that someone from the *Teal* might take it into his head to liberate the sailors in the hold, thinking that might save them from being hanged as pirates later.

I managed the midnight watch well enough, but rousing at dawn was a struggle. I fought my way up out of a deep well lined with soft black wool, an aching fatigue clinging to my bruised and creaking limbs.

Jamie had promptly fallen into the blanket-lined hammock, directly I was out of it, and despite the urgent reflexive desire to tip him out and climb back in myself, I smiled a little. Either he had complete trust in my ability to keep watch, or he was about to die from fatigue and seasickness. Or both, I reflected, picking up the sea officer's cloak he'd just discarded. That was one thing gained from the present situation: I'd left the horrid dead leper's cloak aboard the *Teal*. This one was a vast improvement, being made of new dark-blue thick wool, lined with scarlet silk, and still holding a good deal of Jamie's body heat.

I pulled it close around me, stroked his head to see if he would smile in his sleep—he did, just a twitch of the mouth—and made my way to the galley, yawning.

Another small benefit: a canister of good Darjeeling tea in the cupboard. I'd built up the fire under the cauldron of water when I came to bed; it was hot clear through now, and I dipped out a cup, using what was obviously the captain's private china, painted with violets.

I carried this above, and after an official stroll round the decks, eyeing the two hands on duty—Mr. Smith had the helm—I stood by the rail to drink my fragrant booty, watching the dawn come up out of the sea.

If one were in the mood to count blessings—and, oddly enough, I seemed to be—here was another one. I had seen dawnings in warm seas that came like the bloom of some tremendous flower, a great, slow unfurling of heat and light. This was a northern sunrise, like the slow opening of a bivalve's shell—cold and delicate, the sky shimmering nacre over a soft gray sea. There was something intimate about it, I thought, as though it presaged a day of secrets.

Just as I was getting well stuck into the poetic thoughts, they were interrupted by a shout of “Sail, ho!” from directly above me. Captain Stebbings’s violet-painted china cup shattered on the deck, and I whirled to see the tip of a white triangle on the horizon behind us, growing larger by the second.

* * *

The next few moments were filled with low comedy, as I rushed into the captain’s cabin so flustered and out of breath that I was unable to do more than gasp, “Ho!… s’l … Ho!” like a demented Santa Claus. Jamie, who could spring to instant wakefulness out of a deep sleep, did so. He also attempted to spring out of bed, forgetting in the stress of the moment that he was in a hammock. By the time he picked himself up, swearing, from the floor, feet were thundering on the deck as the rest of the *Teal*’s hands sprang more adroitly from their own hammocks and ran to see what was up.

“Is it the *Teal*?” I asked John Smith, straining my eyes to see. “Can you tell?”

“Yes,” he said absently, squinting at the sail. “Or no, rather. I can tell, and she isn’t. She’s got three masts.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” At this distance, the approaching ship looked like a wavering cloud scudding toward us over the water; I couldn’t make out her hull at all yet.

“We don’t need to run from her, do we?” I asked Jamie, who had rooted out a spyglass from Stebbings’s desk and was examining our pursuer with a deep frown. He lowered the glass at this, shaking his head.

“It doesna matter whether we need to or not; we’d no stand a chance.” He passed the glass to Smith, who clapped it to his eye, muttering, “Colors … she’s got no colors flying—”

Jamie’s head jerked sharply up and around at that, and I realized abruptly that the *Pitt was* still flying the Union Jack.

“That’s good, don’t you think?” I asked. “They won’t trouble a naval ship, surely.”

Jamie and John Smith both looked exceedingly dubious at this piece of logic.

"If they come within hailing distance, they'll likely notice something's fishy and it ain't a whale," Smith said. He glanced sideways at Jamie. "Still … would you maybe think of puttin' on the captain's coat? It might help—at a distance."

"If they get close enough for it to matter, it willna matter anyway," Jamie said, looking grim.

Still, he disappeared, pausing briefly to retch over the rail, and returned moments later looking splendid—if you stood well back and squinted—in Captain Stebbings's uniform. As Stebbings was perhaps a foot shorter than Jamie and a good deal larger round the middle, the coat strained across the shoulders and flapped around the waist, both sleeves and breeches showed a much greater expanse of shirtsleeve and stocking than was usual, and the breeches had been cinched up in folds with Jamie's sword belt in order not to fall off. He was now sporting the captain's sword, I saw, *and* a pair of loaded pistols, as well as his own dirk.

Ian's brows went up at sight of his uncle thus attired, but Jamie glared at him, and Ian said nothing, though his expression lightened for the first time since we had met the *Pitt*.

"Not so bad," Mr. Smith said, encouraging. "Might's well try to brass it out, eh? Nothing to be lost, after all."

"Mmphm."

"*The boy stood on the burning deck, whence all but he had fled,"* I said, causing Jamie to switch the glare to me.

Having seen Guinea Dick, I wasn't worried about Ian's passing muster as a hand in the royal navy, tattoos and all. The rest of the *Teal*'s hands were fairly unexceptionable. We might just get away with it.

The oncoming ship was close enough now for me to see her figurehead, a black-haired female who seemed to be clutching a—

"Is that really a snake she's holding?" I asked dubiously. Ian leaned forward, squinting over my shoulder.

"It's got fangs."

"So's the ship, lad." John Smith nodded at the vessel, and at this point I saw that indeed it did: the long snouts of two small brass guns protruded from the bow, and as the wind drove her toward us at a slight angle, I could also see that she had gunports. They might or might not be real; merchantmen sometimes painted their sides with false gunports, to discourage interference.

The bow chasers were real, though. One of them fired, a puff of white smoke and a small ball that splashed into the water near us.

"Is that courteous?" Jamie asked dubiously. "Does he mean to signal us?"

Evidently not; both bow chasers spoke together, and a ball tore through one of the sails overhead, leaving a large hole with singed edges. We gaped at it.

"What does he think he's about, firing on a King's ship?" Smith demanded indignantly.

"He thinks he's a bloody privateer, and he means to take us, is what," Jamie said, recovering from his shock and hastily disrobing. "Strike the colors, for God's sake!"

Smith glanced uneasily between Jamie and the oncoming ship. Men were visible at the railings. Armed men.

"They have cannon and muskets, Mr. Smith," Jamie said, throwing his coat overboard with a heave that sent it spiraling out onto the waves. "I'm no going to try to fight them for His Majesty's ship. Run down that flag!"

Mr. Smith bolted, and began rooting among the myriad lines for the one connected to the Union Jack. Another boom came from the bow chasers, though this time a lucky roll of the sea carried us into a trough and both balls passed over us.

The colors came rattling down, to land in an ignominious heap on the deck. I had a moment's scandalized, reflexive impulse to rush over and pick them up, but stopped myself.

"Now what?" I asked, an uneasy eye on the ship. It was near enough that I could make out the shapes of the gunners, who were definitely reloading the brass bow chasers and re-aiming them. And the men at the railings behind them were indeed bristling with armament; I thought I made out swords and cutlasses, as well as muskets and pistols.

The gunners had paused; someone was pointing over the railing, turning to call to someone behind him. Shading my eyes with my hand, I saw the captain's coat, afloat on the rising swell. That appeared to have baffled the privateer; I saw a man hop up onto the bow and stare toward us.

What now? I wondered. Privateers could be anything from professional captains sailing under a letter of marque from one government or another to out-and-out pirates. If the vessel on our tail was the former, chances were that we would fare all right as passengers. If the latter, they could easily cut our throats and throw us into the sea.

The man in the bow shouted something to his men and hopped down. The ship had hauled her wind for a moment; now the bow turned and the sails filled with an audible thump of wind.

"She's going to ram us," Smith said, his tone one of blank disbelief.

I was sure he was right. The figurehead was close enough that I could see the snake grasped in the woman's hand, pressed against her bare breast. Such is the nature of shock that I was conscious of my mind idly considering whether the ship was more likely named *Cleopatra* or *Asp*, when it passed us in a foaming rush and the air shattered in a crash of searing metal.

The world dissolved and I was lying flat, my face pressed into ground that smelled of butchery, deafened and straining for my life to hear the scream of the next mortar round, the one that would strike us dead center.

Something heavy had fallen on me, and I struggled mindlessly to get out from under it, to get to my feet and run, run anywhere, anywhere away … away …

I gradually realized from the feel of my throat that I was making whimpering noises and that the surface under my flattened cheek was salt-sticky board, not blood-soaked mud. The weight on my back moved suddenly of its own volition, as Jamie rolled off, rising to his knees.

"Jesus *Christ*!" he shouted in fury. "What's *wrong* wi' you!?"

The only answer to this was a single boom, this coming evidently from a gun at the stern of the other ship, which had passed us.

I stood up, trembling, but so far past simple fright that I noticed with a purely detached sort of interest that there was a leg lying on the deck a few feet away. It was barefooted, clad in the torn-off leg of a pair of canvas breeches. There was a good deal of blood spattered here and there.

"Holy God, holy GOD," someone kept saying. I glanced incuriously to the side and saw Mr. Smith, staring upward with a look of horror.

I looked, too. The top of the single mast was gone, and the remains of sails and rigging sagged in a tattered, smoking mass over half the deck. Evidently the privateer's gunports were *not* just for show.

Dazed as I was, I hadn't even begun to ask myself why they'd done this. Jamie wasn't wasting any time asking questions, either. He seized Mr. Smith by the arm.

"Bloody hell! The wicked *nàmhaid are* comin' back!"

They were. The other ship had been moving too fast, I belatedly realized. She'd shot past as she unleashed her broadside, but likely only one of the heavy cannonballs had actually hit us, taking out the mast and the unfortunate Teal who'd been in the rigging.

The rest of the Teals were now on deck, shouting questions. The only answer was dealt by the privateer, who was now describing a wide circle, only too clearly meaning to come back and finish what she'd started.

I saw Ian glance sharply at the *Pitt's* cannon—but that was plainly futile. Even if the *Teal*'s men included some with gunnery experience, there was no possibility of them being able to man the guns on the spur of the moment.

The privateer had completed her circle. She was coming back. All over the *Pitt's* deck, men were shouting, waving their arms, crashing into one another as they stumbled toward the rail.

"We surrender, you filthy buggers!" one of them screamed. "Are you *deaf?!"*

Evidently so; a stray waft of wind brought me the sulfurous smell of slow match, and I could see muskets being brought to bear on us. A few of the men near me lost their heads and rushed belowdecks. I found myself thinking that perhaps that was not such a bad idea.

Jamie had been waving and shouting beside me. Suddenly he was gone, though, and I turned to see him running across the deck. He whipped his shirt off over his head and leapt up onto our bow chaser, a gleaming brass gun called a long nine.

He waved the shirt in a huge, fluttering white arc, his free hand clamped on Ian's shoulder for balance. That caused confusion for a moment; the crackle of firing stopped, though the sloop continued her deadly circle. Jamie waved the shirt again, to and fro. Surely they must see him!

The wind was toward us; I could hear the rumble of the guns running out again, and the blood froze in my chest.

"They're going to sink us!" Mr. Smith shrieked, and this was echoed in cries of terror from some of the other men.

The smell of black powder came to us on the wind, sharp and acrid. There were shouts from the men in the rigging, half of them now desperately waving their shirts, as well. I saw Jamie pause for an instant, swallow, then bend down and say something to Ian. He squeezed Ian's shoulder hard, then lowered himself on hands and knees to the gun.

Ian shot past me, nearly knocking me over in his haste.

"Where are you going?" I cried.

"To let the prisoners out! They'll drown if we sink!" he called over his shoulder, disappearing into the companionway.

I turned back to the oncoming ship, to find that Jamie had not come down off the gun, as I'd thought. Instead, he had scrambled round so his back was to the oncoming sloop.

Braced against the wind, arms spread for balance, and knees gripping the brass of the gun for all he was worth, he stretched to his full height, arms out, displaying his bare back—and the web of scars on it, these gone red with the blanching of his skin in the cold wind.

The oncoming ship had slowed, maneuvering to slide alongside us and blast us out of the water with a final broadside. I could see the heads of men poking up over her rail, leaning out from her rigging, all craning in curiosity. But not firing.

I suddenly felt my heart beating with huge, painful thumps, as though it had actually stopped for a minute and now, reminded of its duty, was trying to make up for lost time.

The side of the sloop loomed above us, and the deck fell into deep, cold shadow. So close, I could hear the talk of the gun crews, puzzled, questioning; hear the deep clink and rattle of shot in its racks, the creak of the gun carriages. I couldn't look up, didn't dare to move.

"Who *are* you?" said a nasal, very American voice from above. It sounded deeply suspicious and very annoyed.

"If ye mean the ship, she's called the *Pitt*." Jamie had got down from the gun and stood beside me, half naked and so pebbled with gooseflesh that the hairs stood out from his body like copper wires. He was shaking, though whether from terror, rage, or simply from cold, I didn't know. His voice didn't shake, though; it was filled with fury.

"If ye mean me, I am Colonel James Fraser, of the North Carolina militia."

A momentary silence, as the master of the privateer digested that.

"Where's Captain Stebbings?" the voice asked. The suspicion in it was undiminished, but the annoyance had waned a bit.

"It's a bloody long story," Jamie said, sounding cross. "But he's no aboard. If ye want to come over and look for him, do so. D'ye mind if I put my shirt back on?"

A pause, a murmur, and the clicks of hammers being eased. At this point, I unfroze enough to look up. The rail was a-bristle with the barrels of muskets and pistols, but most of these had been withdrawn and were now pointing harmlessly upward, while their owners pressed forward to gawk over the rail.

"Just a minute. Turn about," the voice said.

Jamie drew a deep breath in through his nose, but did so. He glanced at me, briefly, then stood with his head up, jaw clenched, and eyes fixed on the mast, around which the prisoners from the hold were now assembled, under Ian's eye. They looked completely baffled, gaping up at the privateer, then looking wildly round the deck before spotting Jamie, half naked and glaring like a basilisk. Had I not begun to worry that I was having a heart attack, I would have found it funny.

"Deserter from the British army, were you?" said the voice from the sloop, sounding interested. Jamie turned round, preserving the glare.

"I am not," he said shortly. "I am a free man—and always have been."

"Have you, then?" The voice was beginning to sound amused. "All right. Put your shirt on, and come aboard."

I could barely breathe and was bathed in cold sweat, but my heart began to beat more reasonably.

Jamie, now clothed, took my arm.

"My wife and nephew are coming with me," he called, and without waiting for assent from the sloop, seized me by the waist and lifted me to stand on the *Pitt's* rail, from where I could grab the rope ladder that the sloop's crew had thrown down. He was taking no chances on being separated from either me or Ian again.

The ship was rolling in the swell, and I had to cling tightly to the ladder with my eyes closed for a moment, as dizziness swept over me. I felt nauseated as well as dizzy, but surely that was only a reaction to shock. With my eyes closed, my stomach settled a little, and I was able to set my foot on the next rung.

"Sail, ho!"

Tilting my head far back, I could just see the waving arm of the man above. I turned to look, the ladder twisting under me, and saw the sail approaching. On the deck above, the nasal voice was shouting orders, and bare feet drummed on the wood as the crew ran for their stations.

Jamie was on the rail of the *Pitt*, gripping me by the waist to save me falling.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," he said, in tones of utter astonishment, and I looked over my shoulder to see him turned to watch the oncoming ship. “It’s the bloody *Teal.”*

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A tall, very thin man with gray hair, a prominent Adam’s apple, and piercing ice-blue eyes met us at the top of the ladder.

“Captain Asa Hickman,” he barked at me, and then instantly switched his attention to Jamie. “What’s that ship? And where’s Stebbings?”

Ian scrambled over the rail behind me, looking anxiously back over his shoulder.

“I’d pull that ladder up if I were you,” he said briefly to one of the sailors.

I glanced down at the deck of the *Pitt*, where a milling confusion of men was swarming toward the rail, pushing and shoving. There was a good deal of arm-waving and shouting, the naval seamen and the pressed men trying to put their cases, but Captain Hickman wasn’t in the mood.

“Pull it up,” he said to the sailor, and, “Come with me,” to Jamie. He stalked off along the deck, not waiting for an answer and not turning to see whether he was followed. Jamie gave the sailors surrounding us a narrow look but apparently decided they were safe enough, and, with a terse “Look after your auntie” to Ian, went off after Hickman.

Ian was not paying attention to anything save the oncoming *Teal.*

“Jesus,” he whispered, eyes fixed on the sail. “D’ye think he’s all right?”

“Rollo? I certainly hope so.” My face was cold; colder than just from the ocean spray; my lips had gone numb. And there were small flashing lights at the edges of my sight. “Ian,” I said, as calmly as possible. “I think I’m going to faint.”

The pressure in my chest seemed to rise, choking me. I forced a cough and felt a momentary easing. Dear God, *was* I having a heart attack? Pain in left arm? No. Pain in jaw? Yes, but I was clenching my teeth, no wonder.… I didn’t feel myself fall, but felt the pressure of hands as someone caught and lowered me to the deck. My eyes were open, I thought, but I couldn't see anything. Dimly, it occurred to me that I might be dying, but I rejected that notion out of hand. No, I bloody *wasn't.* I couldn't. But there was an odd sort of gray swirling mist approaching me.

"Ian," I said—or thought I said. I felt very calm. "Ian, just in case—tell Jamie that I love him." Everything did not go black, rather to my surprise, but the mist reached me, and I felt gently enveloped in a peaceful gray cloud. All the pressure, the choking, the pain had eased. I could have floated, happily mindless, in the gray mist, save that I could not be sure I'd really spoken, and the need to convey the message niggled like a cocklebur in the sole of a foot.

"Tell Jamie," I kept saying to a misty Ian. "Tell Jamie that I love him."

"Open your eyes and tell me yourself, Sassenach," said a deep, urgent voice somewhere close.

I tried opening my eyes and found that I could. Apparently I had not died after all. I essayed a cautious breath and found that my chest moved easily. My hair was damp, and I was lying on something hard, covered by a blanket. Jamie's face swam above me, then steadied as I blinked.

"Tell me," he repeated, smiling a little, though anxiety creased the skin beside his eyes.

"Tell you … oh! I love you. Where …?" Memory of recent events flooded in upon me, and I sat up abruptly. "The *Teal?* What—"

"I havena got the slightest idea. When did ye last have anything to eat, Sassenach?"

"I don't remember. Last night. What do you mean, you haven't the slightest idea? Is it still *there?*"

"Oh, aye," he said, with a certain grimness. "It is. It fired two shots at us a few minutes gone—though I suppose ye couldna hear them."

"It fired shots at—" I rubbed a hand over my face, pleased to find that I could now feel my lips, and that normal warmth had returned to my skin. "Do I look gray and sweaty?" I asked Jamie. "Are my lips blue?"

He looked startled at that, but bent to peer closely at my mouth.

“No,” he said positively, straightening up after a thorough inspection. Then he bent and quickly kissed them, putting a seal on my state of pinkness. “I love ye, too,” he whispered. “I’m glad ye’re no dead. Yet,” he added in a normal tone of voice, straightening up as an unmistakable cannon shot came from somewhere at a distance.

“I assume Captain Stebbings has taken over the *Teal?”* I asked. “Captain Roberts wouldn’t be going around taking potshots at strange ships, I don’t think. But why is Stebbings firing at us, I wonder? Why isn’t he trying to board the *Pitt* and take her back? It’s his for the taking now.”

My symptoms had all but disappeared by now, and I felt quite clearheaded. Sitting up, I discovered that I had been laid out on a pair of large, flat-topped chests in what appeared to be a small hold; there was a latticed hatch cover overhead, through which I caught the fluttering shadows of moving sails, and the walls were stacked with a miscellaneous assortment of barrels, bundles, and boxes. The air was thick with the smells of tar, copper, cloth, gunpowder, and … coffee? I sniffed more deeply, feeling stronger by the moment. Yes, coffee!

The sound of another muffled cannon-shot came through the walls, muffled by distance, and a small visceral quiver ran through me. The notion of being trapped in the hold of a ship that might at any moment be sunk was enough to overcome even the smell of coffee.

Jamie had turned in response to the shot, too, half rising. Before I could stand and suggest that we go above, and quickly, there was a shift in the light, and a round, bristly head poked through the hatchway.

“Is the lady summat recovered?” a young boy asked politely. “Cap’n says if she’s dead, you’re no longer needed here, and he desires you to come above and speak to him prompt, sir.”

“And if I’m not dead?” I inquired, trying to straighten out my petticoats, which were wet round the hems, damp through, and hopelessly rumpled. Drat. Now I had left my gold-weighted skirt and pocket aboard the *Pitt*. At this rate, I'd be lucky to arrive on dry land in my chemise and stays.

The boy—at second glance, he was likely twelve or so, though he looked much younger—smiled at this.

"In that case, he offered to come and drop you overboard himself, ma'am, in hopes of concentrating your husband's mind. Cap'n Hickman's a bit hasty in his speech," he added, with an apologetic grimace. "He doesn't mean much by it. Usually."

"I'll come with you." I stood up without losing my balance, but did accept Jamie's arm. We made our way through the ship, led by our new acquaintance, who helpfully informed me that his name was Abram Zenn ("My pa being a reading man, and much taken by Mr. Johnson's Dictionary, he was tickled by the thought of me being A through Zed, you see"), that he was the ship's boy (the ship's name *was* in fact *Asp*, which pleased me), and that the reason for Captain Hickman's present agitation was a longstanding grievance against the navy's Captain Stebbings: "which there's been more than one run-in betwixt the two, and Cap'n Hickman's sworn that there won't be but one more."

"I gather Captain Stebbings is of like mind?" Jamie asked dryly, to which Abram nodded vigorous assent.

"Fellow in a tavern in Roanoke told me Cap'n Stebbings was drinking there and said to the assembled as how he meant to hang Cap'n Hickman from his own yardarm, and leave him for the gulls to peck his eyes. They would, too," he added darkly, with a glance at the seabirds wheeling over the ocean nearby. "They're wicked buggers, gulls."

Further interesting tidbits were curtailed by our arrival in Captain Hickman's inner sanctum, a cramped stern cabin, as crammed with cargo as the hold had been. Ian was there, doing his impression of a captured Mohawk about to be burned at the stake, from which I deduced that he hadn't taken to Captain Hickman. The feeling seemed to be mutual, judging from the hectic patches of color burning in the latter's rawboned cheeks.

"Ah," Hickman said shortly, seeing us. "Glad to see you've not departed this life yet, ma'am. Be a sad loss to your husband, such a devoted woman." There was a sarcastic intonation to this last that made me wonder uncomfortably just how many times I'd told Ian to relay my love to Jamie and just how many people had heard me doing it, but Jamie simply ignored the comment, showing me to a seat on the captain's unmade bed before turning to deal with the man himself.

"I'm told that the *Teal is* firing at us," he observed mildly. "Does this occasion ye no concern, sir?"

"Not yet it doesn't." Hickman spared a negligent glance at his stern windows, half of them covered with deadlights, presumably because of broken glass; a good many of the panes were shattered. "He's just firing in hopes of a lucky shot. We've got the weather gauge on him, and will likely keep it for the next couple of hours."

"I see," said Jamie, with a convincing attitude of knowing what this meant.

"Captain Hickman is debating in his mind whether to engage the *Teal* in action, Uncle," Ian put in tactfully, "or whether to run. Having the weather gauge is a matter of maneuverability, and thus gives him somewhat more latitude in the matter than the *Teal* has presently, I think."

"Heard the one about *He who fights and runs away, lives to fight another day?*" Hickman said, giving Ian a glare. "If I can sink him, I will. If I can shoot him on his own quarterdeck and take the ship, I'll like that better, but I'll settle for sending him to the bottom if I have to. But I won't let him sink *me*, not today."

"Why not today?" I asked. "Rather than any other day, I mean?"

Hickman looked surprised; he had obviously assumed I was purely ornamental.

"Because I have an important cargo to deliver, ma'am. One that I daren't risk. Not unless I could get my hands on that rat Stebbings without taking any great chances," he added broodingly.

"I gather that your assumption that Captain Stebbings was aboard accounts for your most determined attempt to sink the *Pitt*?" Jamie asked. The ceiling of the cabin was so low that he, Ian, and Hickman were all obliged to converse in a crouching position, like a convention of chimpanzees. There was really nowhere to sit other than the bed, and kneeling on the floor would of course lack the requisite dignity for a meeting of gentlemen.

"It was, sir, and I'm obliged to you for stopping me in time. Perhaps we may share a jar, when there's more leisure, and you can tell me what happened to your back."

"Perhaps not," Jamie said politely. "I gather further that we are under sail. Where is the *Pitt* presently?"

"Adrift, about two miles off the larboard quarter. If I *can* deal with Stebbings," and Hickman's eyes fairly glowed red at the prospect, "I'll come back and take her, too."

"If there's anyone left alive on board to sail her," Ian said. "There was a fair-sized riot on her deck, when last I saw it. What might predispose ye to take on the *Teal*, sir?" he asked, raising his voice. "My uncle and I can give ye information regarding her guns and crew—and even if Stebbings has taken the ship, I doubt but he'll have a job to fight her. He's got no more than ten men of his own, and Captain Roberts and his crew will want nay part of an engagement, I'm sure."

Jamie gave Ian a narrow look.

"Ye ken they've likely killed him already."

Ian didn't resemble Jamie at all, but the look of implacable stubbornness on his face was one I knew intimately.

"Aye, maybe. Would ye leave *me* behind, if ye only thought I *might* be dead?"

I could see Jamie open his mouth to say, "*He's a dog.*" But he didn't. He closed his eyes and sighed, obviously contemplating the prospect of instigating a sea battle—and incidentally risking all of our lives six ways from Sunday, to say nothing of the lives of the men aboard the *Teal*—for the sake of an aging dog, who might be already dead, if not devoured by a shark. Then he opened them and nodded.

"Aye, all right." He straightened, as much as was possible in the cramped cabin, and turned to Hickman. "My nephew's particular friend is aboard the *Teal* and likely in danger. I ken that's no concern of yours, but it explains our own interest. As for yours … in addition to Captain Stebbings, there is a cargo aboard the *Teal* in which ye may have an interest, as well—six cases of rifles."

Ian and I both gasped. Hickman straightened up abruptly, cracking his head on a timber.

"Ow! Holy Moses. You're sure of that?"

"I am. And I imagine the Continental army might make use of them?"

I thought that was treading on dangerous ground; after all, the fact that Hickman had a strong animus toward Captain Stebbings didn't necessarily mean he was an American patriot. From the little I'd seen of him, Captain Stebbings looked entirely capable of inspiring purely personal animus, quite separate from any political considerations.

But Hickman made no denial; in fact, he'd barely noticed Jamie's remark, inflamed by mention of the rifles. Was it true? I wondered. But Jamie had spoken with complete certainty. I cast my mind back over the contents of the *Teal*'s hold, looking for anything …

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said. "The boxes bound for New Haven?" I barely kept myself from blurting out Hannah Arnold's name, realizing just in time that *if* Hickman was indeed a patriot—for it did occur to me that he might merely be a businessman, as willing to sell to either side—he might well recognize the name and realize that these rifles were almost certainly already intended to reach the Continentals via Colonel Arnold.

Jamie nodded, watching Hickman, who was gazing at a small barometer on the wall as though it were a crystal ball. Whatever it told him seemed to be favorable, for Hickman nodded once, then dashed out of the cabin as though his breeches were on fire.

"Where's he gone?" Ian demanded, staring after him.

"To check the wind, I imagine," I said, proud of knowing something. "To make certain he still has the weather gauge."

Jamie was rifling Hickman's desk, and emerged at this point with a rather wizened apple, which he tossed into my lap. "Eat that, Sassenach. What the devil *is* a weather gauge?"

"Ah. Well, there you have me," I admitted. "But it has to do with wind, and it seems to be important." I sniffed the apple; it had plainly seen better days, but still held a faint, sweet smell that suddenly raised the ghost of my vanished appetite. I took a cautious bite and felt saliva flood my mouth. I ate it in two more bites, ravenous.

Captain Hickman's high nasal voice came piercingly from the deck. I couldn't hear what he said, but the response was immediate; feet thumped to and fro on deck, and the ship shifted suddenly, turning as her sails were adjusted. The chime and grunt of shot being lifted and the rumble of gun carriages echoed through the ship. Apparently, the weather gauge was still ours.

I could see a fierce excitement light Ian's face and rejoiced to see it, but couldn't help voicing a qualm or two.

"You haven't any hesitation about this?" I said to Jamie. "I mean—after all, he *is* a dog."

He gave me an eye and a moody shrug.

"Aye, well. I've known battles fought for worse reasons. And since this time yesterday, I've committed piracy, mutiny, and murder. I may as well add treason and make a day of it."

"Besides, Auntie," Ian said reprovingly, "he's a *good* dog."

* * *

Weather gauge or no, it took an endless time of cautious maneuvering before the ships drew within what seemed a dangerous distance of each other. The sun was no more than a handsbreadth above the horizon by now, the sails were beginning to glow a baleful red, and my chastely pristine dawn looked like ending in a wallowing sea of blood.

The *Teal* was cruising gently, no more than half her canvas set, less than half a mile away. Captain Hickman stood on the *Asp's* deck, hands clenched on the rail as though it were Stebbings's throat, wearing the look of a greyhound just before the rabbit is released.

"Time you went below, ma'am," Hickman said, not looking at me. "Matters will be hotting up directly here." His hands flexed once in anticipation.

I didn't argue. The tension on deck was so thick I could smell it, testosterone spiced with brimstone and black powder. Men being the remarkable creatures that they are, everyone seemed cheerful.

I paused to kiss Jamie—a gesture he returned with a gusto that left my lower lip throbbing slightly—resolutely ignoring the possibility that the next time I saw him, it might be in separate pieces. I'd faced that possibility a number of times before, and while it didn't get less daunting with practice, I had got better at ignoring it.

Or at least I thought I had. Sitting in the main hold in near-total darkness, smelling the low-tide reek of the bilges and listening to what I was sure were rats rustling in the chains, I had a harder time ignoring the sounds from above: the rumbling of gun carriages. The *Asp* had only four guns to a side, but they were twelve-pounders: heavy armament for a coastal schooner. The *Teal*, equipped as an oceangoing merchantman who might have to fight off all manner of menace, fought eight to a side, sixteen-pounders, with two carronades on the upper deck, plus two bow chasers and a stern gun.

"She'd run from a man-o'-war," Abram explained to me, he having asked me to describe the *Teal*'s armament. "And she wouldn't be likely to try to seize or sink another vessel, so she wouldn't ship tremendous hardware, even was she built for it, and I doubt she is. Now, I doubt as well that Captain Stebbings can man even a whole side to good effect, though, so we mustn't be downhearted." He spoke with great confidence, which I found amusing and also oddly reassuring. He seemed to realize this, for he leaned forward and patted my hand gently.

"Now, you needn't fret, ma'am," he said. "Mr. Fraser said to me I must be sure to let no harm come to you, and I shall not—be sure of that."

"Thank you," I said gravely. Not wanting either to laugh or to cry, I cleared my throat instead and asked, "Do you know what caused the trouble between Captain Hickman and Captain Stebbings?"

"Oh, yes, ma'am," he replied promptly. "Captain Stebbings has been a plague on the district for some years, stopping ships what he hasn't any right to search, taking off legal goods what he says are contraband—and we take leave to doubt that any of it ever sees the inside of a Customs warehouse!" he added, obviously quoting something he'd heard more than once. "But it was what happened with the *Annabelle*, really."

The *Annabelle* was a large ketch, owned by Captain Hickman's brother. The *Pitt* had stopped her and attempted to press men from her crew. Theo Hickman had protested, resistance had broken out, and Stebbings had ordered his men to fire into the *Annabelle,* killing three crewmen—Theo Hickman among them.

There had been considerable public outcry over this, and an effort was made to bring Captain Stebbings to justice for his deeds. The captain had insisted that no local court had the right to try him for anything, though; if anyone wished to bring an action against him, it must be done in an English court. And the local justices had agreed with this.

"Was this before war was declared last year?" I asked curiously. "For if after—"

"Well before," young Zenn admitted. "Still," he added with righteous indignation, "they are cowardly dogs and ought be tarred and feathered, the lot of them, and Stebbings, too!"

"No doubt," I said. "Do you think—"

But I had no opportunity to explore his opinions further, for at this point the ship gave a violent lurch, throwing us both onto the damp floorboards, and the sound of a violent and prolonged explosion shattered the air around us.

I couldn't at first tell which ship had fired—but an instant later, the *Asp's* guns spoke overhead, and I knew the first broadside had been from the *Teal.*

The *Asp's* reply was ragged, the guns along her starboard side going off at more or less random intervals overhead, punctuated by the flat bangs of small-arms fire.

I resisted Abram's gallant attempts to throw his meager body protectively on top of mine and, rolling over, got up onto my hands and knees, listening intently. There was a lot of shouting, none of it comprehensible, though the shooting had stopped. We appeared not to be leaking water, so far as I could tell, so presumably we had not been struck below the waterline.

"They can't have given up, surely?" Abram said, scrambling to his feet. He sounded disappointed.

"I doubt it." I got to my own feet, bracing a hand against a large barrel. The main hold was quite as crowded as the forward one, though with bulkier items; there was barely room for Abram and me to worm our way between the netted bulk of crates and tiers of casks—some of which smelled strongly of beer. The ship was heeling to one side now. We must be coming about—probably to try again. The wheels of the gun carriages ground on the deck above; yes, they were reloading. Had anyone yet been hurt? I wondered. And what the devil was I going to do about it if they had?

The sound of a single cannon-shot came from overhead.

"The dog must be fleeing," Abram whispered. "We're chasing him down."

There was a long period of relative silence, during which I thought the ship was tacking but couldn't really tell. Maybe Hickman *was* pursuing the *Teal*.

Sudden yelling from overhead, with a sound of surprised alarm, and the ship heaved violently, flinging us to the floor once again. This time I landed on top. I delicately removed my knee from Abram's stomach and helped him to sit up, gasping like a landed fish.

"What—" he wheezed, but got no further. There was a hideous jolt that knocked us both flat again, followed at once by a grinding, rending noise of squealing timbers. It sounded as though the ship was coming apart around us, and I had no doubt that it was.

Shrieking like banshees and the thunder of feet on deck.

"We're being boarded!" I could hear Abram swallow, and my hand went to the slit in my petticoat, touching my knife for courage. If—

"No," I whispered, straining my eyes up into darkness as though that would help me hear better. "No. We're boarding *them*." For the pounding feet above had vanished.

The yelling hadn’t; even muffled by distance, I could hear the note of insanity in it, the clear joy of the berserker. I thought I could make out Jamie’s Highland screech, but that was likely imagination; they all sounded equally demented.

“Our Father, who art in heaven … Our Father, who art in heaven …” Abram was whispering to himself in the dark, but had stuck on the first line.

I clenched my fists and closed my eyes in reflex, screwing up my face as though by sheer force of will I could help.

Neither of us could.

It was an age of muffled noises, occasional shots, thuds and bangs, grunting and shouting. And then silence.

I could just see Abram’s head turn toward me, questioning. I squeezed his hand.

And then a ship’s gun went off with a crash that echoed across the deck above, and a shock wave thrummed through the air of the hold, hard enough that my ears popped. Another followed, I felt rather than heard a *thunk*, and then the floor heaved and tilted, and the ship’s timbers reverberated with an odd, deep *bwong*. I shook my head hard, swallowing, trying to force air through my Eustachian tubes. They popped again, finally, and I heard feet on the side of the ship. More than one pair. Moving slowly.

I leapt to my feet, grabbed Abram, and hauled him bodily up, propelling him toward the ladder. I could hear water. Not racing along the ship’s sides; a gushing noise, as of water gurgling into the hold.

The hatchway had been closed overhead but not battened down, and I knocked it loose with a desperate bang of both hands, nearly losing my balance and plunging into darkness but luckily sustained by Abram Zenn, who planted a small but solid shoulder under my buttocks by way of support.

“Thank you, Mr. Zenn,” I said, and, reaching behind me, pulled him up the ladder into the light.

There was blood on the deck; that was the first thing I saw. Wounded men, too—but not Jamie. He was the second thing I saw, leaning heavily over the remains of a shattered rail with several other men. I hurried to see what they were looking at, and saw the *Teal* a few hundred yards away.

Her sails were fluttering wildly, and her masts seemed oddly tilted. Then I realized that the ship herself was tilted, the bow raised half out of the water.

"Rot me," said Abram, in tones of amazement. "She's run onto rocks."

"So have we, son, but not so bad," said Hickman, glancing aside at the cabin boy's voice. "Is there water in the hold, Abram?"

"There is," I replied before Abram, lost in contemplation of the wounded *Teal*, could gather his wits to answer. "Have you any medical instruments aboard, Captain Hickman?"

"Have I what?" he blinked at me, distracted. "This is no time for—why?"

"I'm a surgeon, sir," I said, "and you need me."

* * *

Within a quarter hour, I found myself back in the small forward cargo hold where I had roused from my fainting spell a few hours earlier, this being now designated as the sick bay.

The *Asp* did not travel with a surgeon, but had a small store of medicinals: a half-full bottle of laudanum, a fleam and bleeding bowl, a large pair of tweezers, a jar of dead and desiccated leeches, two rusty amputation saws, a broken tenaculum, a bag of lint for packing wounds, and a huge jar of camphorated grease.

I was strongly tempted to drink the laudanum myself, but duty called. I tied back my hair and began poking about among the cargo, in search of anything useful. Mr. Smith and Ian had rowed across to the *Teal* in hopes of retrieving my own kit, but given the amount of damage I could see in the area where our cabin had been, I didn't have much hope. A lucky shot from the *Asp* had holed the

Teal below the waterline; had she not run aground, she would likely have sunk sooner or later.

I'd done a rapid triage on deck; one man killed outright, several minor injuries, three serious but not instantly life-threatening. There were likely more on the *Teal;* from what the men said, the ships had exchanged broadsides at a distance of no more than a few yards. A quick and bloody little action.

A few minutes after the conclusion, the *Pitt* had limped into sight, her contentiously mixed crew having evidently come to a sufficient accommodation as to allow her to sail, and she was now occupied in ferrying the wounded. I heard the faint shout of her bosun's hail over the whine of the wind above.

"Incoming," I murmured, and, picking up the smaller of the amputation saws, prepared for my own quick and bloody action.

* * *

"You have guns," I pointed out to Abram Zenn, who was rigging a couple of hanging lanterns for me, the sun having now almost set. "Presumably this means that Captain Hickman was prepared to use them. Didn't he think there might be a possibility of casualties?"

Abram shrugged apologetically.

"It's our first voyage as a letter of marque, ma'am. We'll do better next time, I'm sure."

"Your first? What sort of—how long has Captain Hickman been sailing?" I demanded. I was ruthlessly rummaging the cargo by now, and was pleased to find a chest that held lengths of printed calico.

Abram frowned at the wick he was trimming, thinking.

"Well," he said slowly, "he had a fishing boat for some time, out of Marblehead. Him—he, I mean—and his brother owned it together. But after his brother ran afoul of Captain Stebbings, he went to work for Emmanuel Bailey, as first mate on one of his—Mr. Bailey's, I mean—ships. Mr. Bailey's a Jew," he explained, seeing my raised eyebrow. "Owns a bank in Philadelphia and three ships as sail regularly to the West Indies. He owns this ship, too, and it's him who got the letter of marque from the Congress for Captain Hickman, when the war was announced."

"I see," I said, more than slightly taken aback. "But this is Captain Hickman's first cruise as captain of a sloop?"

"Yes, ma'am. But privateers don't usually have a supercargo, do you see," he said earnestly. "It would be the supercargo's job to provision the ship and see to such things as the medical supplies."

"And you know this because—how long have *you* been sailing?" I asked curiously, liberating a bottle of what looked like very expensive brandy, to use as antiseptic.

"Oh, since I was eight years old, ma'am," he said. He stood a-tiptoe to hang the lantern, which cast a warm, reassuring glow over my impromptu operating theater. "I've six elder brothers, and the oldest runs the farm, with his sons. The others … well, one's a shipwright in Newport News, and he got to talking with a captain one day and mentioned me, and next thing I know, I'm one of the cabin boys on the *Antioch*, her being an Indiaman. I went back with the captain to London, and we sailed to Calcutta the very day after." He came down onto his heels and smiled at me. "I've been a-sea ever since, ma'am. I find it suits me."

"That's very good," I said. "Your parents—are they still alive?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. My mother died birthing me, and my pa when I was seven." He seemed untroubled by this. But after all, I reflected, ripping calico into bandage lengths, that was half his lifetime ago.

"Well, I hope the sea will continue to suit you," I said. "Do you have any doubts, though—after today?"

He thought about that, his earnest young face furrowed in the lantern shadows.

"No," he said slowly, and looked up at me, his eyes serious—and not nearly so young as they had been a few hours ago. "I knew when I signed on with Captain Hickman that there might be fighting." His lips tightened, perhaps to keep them from quivering. "I don't mind killing a man, if I have to."

"Not now … you don't," said one of the wounded men, very softly. He was lying in the shadows, stretched across two crates of English china, breathing slowly.

“No, not now, you don’t,” I agreed dryly. “You might want to speak to my nephew or my husband about it, though, when things have settled a bit.”

I thought that would be the end of it, but Abram followed me as I laid out my rudimentary tools and set about such sterilization as could be managed, splashing out brandy with abandon, ’til the hold smelled like a distillery—this to the scandalization of the wounded men, who thought it waste to use good drink so. The galley fire had been put out during the battle, though; it would be some time before I had hot water.

“Are you a patriot, ma’am? If you don’t mind me asking,” he added, blushing with awkwardness.

The question took me back a bit. The straightforward answer would be “Yes, of course.” Jamie was, after all, a rebel, so declared by his own hand. And while he had made the original declaration out of simple necessity, I thought necessity had now become conviction. But me? Certainly I had been, once.

“Yes,” I said—I couldn’t very well say anything else. “Plainly you are, Abram. Why?”

“Why?” He seemed staggered that I would ask, and stood blinking at me over the top of the lantern he held.

“Tell me later,” I suggested, taking the lantern. I’d done what I could on deck; the wounded who needed further attention were being brought down. It was no time for political discussion. Or so I thought.

Abram bravely settled down to help me and did fairly well, though he had to stop now and then to vomit into a bucket. After the second occurrence of this, he took to asking questions of the wounded—those in any condition to answer. I didn’t know whether this was simple curiosity or an attempt to distract himself from what I was doing.

“What do you think of the Revolution, sir?” he earnestly asked one grizzled seaman from the *Pitt with* a crushed foot. The man gave him a distinctly jaundiced look but replied, probably in order to distract himself.

"Bloody waste of time," he said gruffly, digging his fingers into the edge of the chest he sat on. "Better to be fighting the frogs than Englishmen. What's to be gained by it? Dear Lord," he said under his breath, going pale.

"Give him something to bite on, Abram, will you?" I said, busy picking shattered bits of bone out of the wreckage and wondering whether he might do better with a swift amputation. Perhaps less risk of infection, and he would always walk with a painful limp in any case, but still, I hated to …

"No, that's all right, mum," he said, sucking in a breath. "What do *you* think of it, then, youngster?"

"I think it is right and necessary, sir," Abram replied stoutly. "The King is a tyrant, and tyranny must be resisted by all proper men."

"What?" said the seaman, shocked. "The King, a tyrant? Who says such a naughty thing?"

"Why … Mr. Jefferson. And—and all of us! We all think so," Abram said, taken aback at such vehement disagreement.

"Well, then, you're all a pack of bleedin' fools—saving your presence, mum," he added, with a nod to me. He got a look at his foot and swayed a bit, closing his eyes, but asked, "You don't think such a silly thing, do you, mum? You ought to talk sense into your boy here."

"Talk sense?" cried Abram, roused. "You think it sense that we may not speak or write as we wish?"

The seaman opened one eye.

"Of course that's sense," he said, with an evident attempt to be reasonable. "You get silly buggers—your pardon, mum—a-saying all kinds of things regardless, stirrin' folk up to no good end, and what's it lead to? Riot, that's what, and what you may call disorderliness, with folk having their houses burnt and being knocked down in the street. Ever hear of the Cutter riots, boy?"

Abram rather obviously had not, but countered with a vigorous denunciation of the Intolerable Acts, which caused Mr. Ormiston—we had got onto personal terms by now—to scoff loudly and recount the privations Londoners endured by comparison with the luxury enjoyed by the ungrateful colonists.

“Ungrateful!” Abram said, his face congested. “And what should we be grateful for, then? For having soldiers foisted upon us?”

“Oh, foisted, is it?” cried Mr. Ormiston in righteous indignation. “Such a word! And if it means what I think it does, young man, you should get down on your knees and thank God for such foistingness! Who do you think saved you all from being scalped by red Indians or overrun by the French? And who do you think paid for it all, eh?”

This shrewd riposte drew cheers—and not a few jeers—from the waiting men, who had all been drawn into the discussion by now.

“That is absolute … desolute … *stultiloquy*,” began Abram, puffing up his insignificant chest like a scrawny pigeon, but he was interrupted by the entrance of Mr. Smith, a canvas bag in hand and an apologetic look on his face.

“I’m afraid your cabin was all ahoo, ma’am,” he said. “But I picked up what bits was scattered on the floor, in case they—”

“Jonah Marsden!” Mr. Ormiston, on the verge of standing up, plumped back onto the chest, openmouthed. “Bless me if it isn’t!”

“Who?” I asked, startled.

“Jonah—well, ’tisn’t his real name, what was it … oh, Bill, I think it was, but we took to calling him Jonah, owing to him being sunk so many times.”

“Now, Joe.” Mr. Smith—or Mr. Marsden—was backing toward the door, smiling nervously. “That was all a long time ago, and—”

“Not so long as all that.” Mr. Ormiston got ponderously to his feet, balancing with one hand on a stack of herring barrels so as not to put weight on his bandaged foot. “Not so long as would make the navy forget you, you filthy deserter!”

Mr. Smith disappeared abruptly up the ladder, pushing past two seamen attempting to come down these, handling a third like a side of beef between them. Muttering curses, they dropped him on the deck in front of me with a thud and stood back, gasping. It was Captain Stebbings.

“ ’e’s not dead,” one of them informed me helpfully.

“Oh, good,” I said. My tone of voice might have left something to be desired, for the captain opened one eye and glared at me.

"You're leaving me … to be butchered … by this bitch?" he said hoarsely, between labored gasps. "I'd ra-rather die honhonorablblbl …" The sentiment gurgled off into a bubbling noise that made me rip open his smoke-stained, blood-soaked second-best coat and shirt. Sure enough, there was a neat round hole in his right breast and the nasty wet slurp of a sucking chest wound coming from it.

I said a very bad word, and the two men who had brought him to me shuffled and muttered. I said it again, louder, and, seizing Stebbings's hand, slapped it over the hole.

"Hold that there, if you want a chance at an honorable death," I said to him. "You!" I shouted at one of the men trying to edge away. "Bring me some oil from the galley. Now! And *you*—" My voice caught the other, who jerked guiltily to a halt. "Sailcloth and tar. Fast as you can!"

"Don't talk," I advised Stebbings, who seemed inclined to make remarks. "You have a collapsed lung, and either I get it reinflated or you die like a dog, right here."

"Hg," he said, which I took for assent. His hand was a nice meaty one, and doing a reasonably good job of sealing the hole for the moment. The trouble was that he undoubtedly had not only a hole in his chest but a hole in the lung, too. I had to provide a seal for the external hole so air couldn't get into the chest and keep the lung compressed, but had also to make sure there was a way for air from the pleural space around the lung to make an exit. As it was, every time he exhaled, air from the injured lung went straight into that space, making the problem worse.

He might also be drowning in his own blood, but there wasn't a hell of a lot I could do about that, so I wouldn't worry about it.

"On the good side," I told him, "it was a bullet, and not shrapnel or a splinter. One thing about red-hot iron: it sterilizes the wound. Lift your hand for a moment, please. Breathe out." I grabbed his hand myself and lifted it for the count of two while he exhaled, then slapped it back over the wound. It made a squelching sound, owing to the blood. It was a lot of blood for a hole like that, but he wasn't coughing or spitting blood.… Where—oh.

"Is this blood yours or someone else's?" I demanded, pointing at it.

His eyes were half shut, but at this he turned his head and bared his bad teeth at me in a wolf's grin.

"Your … husband's," he said in a hoarse whisper.

"Wanker," I said crossly, lifting his hand again. "Breathe out." The men had seen me dealing with Stebbings; there were other casualties from the *Teal* coming or being carried along, but most of them seemed ambulatory. I gave cursory directions to the able-bodied with them, regarding the application of pressure to wounds or the placement of broken limbs so as to avoid further injury.

It seemed an age before the oil and cloth arrived, and I had sufficient time to wonder where Jamie and Ian were, but the first-aid supplies came at last. I ripped off a patch of sailcloth with my knife, tore a longish strip of calico to use as field dressing, then pushed Stebbings's hand away, wiped off the blood with a fold of my petticoat, sloshed lamp oil over his chest and the sailcloth patch, then pressed the cloth down to form a rudimentary seal, putting his hand back over it in such a way that one end of the patch remained free, while I wound the improvised field dressing round his torso.

"All right," I said. "I'll need to stick the patch down with tar for a better seal, but it will take a little time to warm that. You can go and be doing that now," I advised the sailor who had brought the oil, who was once again trying to execute a quiet sneak. I scooted round to view the casualties squatting or sprawling on the deck. "Right. Who's dying?"

For a wonder, only two of the men brought in from the *Teal* were dead, one with hideous head wounds from flying splinters and grapeshot, the other exsanguinated as a result of losing half his left leg, probably to a cannonball.

Might have saved that one, I thought, but the moment's regret was subsumed in the needs of the next moment.

Not all that bad, I thought, working my way quickly down the line on my knees, doing a hasty triage and issuing instructions to my unwilling assistants. Splinter wounds, two grazed by musket balls, one with half an ear torn off, one with an embedded ball in the thigh, but nowhere near the femoral artery, thank God …

Bangings and shufflings were coming from the lower hold, where repairs were being effected. As I worked, I pieced together the actions of the battle from the remarks passed by the wounded men awaiting my attention.

Following a ragged exchange of broadsides, which had brought down the *Teal*'s cracked mainmast and holed the *Asp* above the waterline, the *Teal*—opinions differed on whether Captain Roberts had done it a-purpose or not—had veered sharply toward the *Asp*, scraping the side of the ship and bringing the two vessels railing to railing.

It seemed inconceivable that Stebbings had intended to board the *Asp*, with so few dependable men as he had; if it had been deliberate, he might have meant to ram us. I glanced down, but the captain's eyes were closed, and he was a nasty color. I lifted his hand and heard a small hiss of air, then placed it back on his chest and went on with my work. Plainly he was in no shape to set the record straight regarding his intentions.

Whatever they had been, Captain Hickman had forestalled them, leaping over the *Teal*'s rail with a shriek, followed by a swarm of Asps. They had cut their way across the deck without much resistance, though the men from the *Pitt* had gathered together around Stebbings near the helm and fought ferociously. It was clear that the Asps must win the day, though—and then the *Teal* had struck heavily aground, throwing everyone flat on deck.

Convinced that the ship was about to sink, everyone who could move did, boarders and defenders together going back over the rail onto the *Asp*—which sheered abruptly away, with some benighted defender who remained on the *Teal* sending a last shot or two after her, only to scrape her own bottom on a gravel bar.

"Not to worry, ma'am," one of the men assured me. "She'll swim directly the tide comes in."

The noises from below began to diminish, and I looked over my shoulder every few moments, in hopes of seeing Jamie or Ian.

I was examining one poor fellow who'd taken a splinter in one eyeball, when his other eye suddenly widened in horror, and I turned to find Rollo panting and dripping by my side, enormous teeth exposed in a grin that put Stebbings's feeble attempt to shame.

"Dog!" I cried, delighted. I couldn't hug him—well, I wouldn't, really—but looked quickly round for Ian, who was limping in my direction, sopping wet, too, but with a matching grin.

"We fell into the water," he said hoarsely, squatting on the deck beside me. A small puddle formed under him.

"So I see. Breathe deeply for me," I said to the man with the splinter in his eye. "One … yes, that's right … two … yes …" As he exhaled, I took hold of the splinter and pulled, hard. It slid free, followed by a gush of vitreous humor and blood that made me grit my teeth and made Ian retch. Not a lot of blood, though. *If it hasn't gone through the orbit, I might be able to stave off infection by removing the eyeball and packing the socket. That'll have to wait, though.* I slashed a ribbon of cloth from the man's shirttail, folded it hastily into a wad, soaked it in brandy, pressed it to the ruined eye, and made him hold it firmly in place. He did, though he groaned and swayed alarmingly, and I feared he might fall over.

"Where's your uncle?" I asked Ian, with a gnawing sense that I didn't want to hear the answer.

"Right there," Ian said, nodding to one side. I swung round, one hand still bracing the shoulder of the one-eyed man, to see Jamie coming down the ladder, in heated argument with Captain Hickman, who was following him. Jamie's shirt was soaked with blood, and he was holding a wad of something likewise blood-soaked against his shoulder with one hand. Possibly Stebbings hadn't been merely trying to aggravate me. Jamie wasn't falling down, though, and while he was white, he was also furious. I was reasonably sure he wouldn't die while angry and seized another strip of sailcloth to stabilize a compound fracture of the arm.

"Dog!" said Hickman, coming to a stop beside the supine Stebbings. He didn't say it with the same intonation I had used, though, and Stebbings opened one eye.

"Dog, yourself," he said thickly.

"Dog, dog, dog! Fucking dog!" Hickman added for good measure, and aimed a kick at Stebbings's side. I grabbed for his foot and managed to shove him off balance, so that he lurched sideways. Jamie caught him, grunting with pain, but Hickman struggled upright, pushing Jamie away.

"Ye canna murder the man in cold blood!"

"Can, too," Hickman replied promptly. "Watch me!" He drew an enormous horse pistol out of a ratty leather holster and cocked it. Jamie took it by the barrel and plucked it neatly out of his hand, leaving him flexing his fingers and looking surprised.

"Surely, sir," Jamie said, striving for reasonableness, "ye canna mean to kill a wounded enemy—one in uniform, taken under his own flag, and a man who has surrendered himself to ye. That couldna be condoned by any honorable man."

Hickman drew himself up, going puce.

"Are you impugning my honor, sir?"

I saw the muscles in Jamie's neck and shoulders tense, but before he could speak, Ian stepped up beside him, shoulder to shoulder.

"Aye, he is. So am I."

Rollo, his fur still sticking up in wet spikes, growled and rolled back his black lips, showing most of his teeth in token of his support of this opinion.

Hickman glanced from Ian's scowling, tattooed visage, to Rollo's impressive carnassials, and back to Jamie, who had uncocked the pistol and put it in his own belt. He breathed heavily.

"On your head be it, then," he said abruptly, and turned away.

Captain Stebbings was breathing heavily, too, a wet, nasty sound. He was white to the lips, and the lips themselves were blue. Still, he was conscious. His eyes had been fixed on Hickman throughout the conversation and followed him now as he left the cabin. When the door had closed behind Hickman, Stebbings relaxed a little, shifting his gaze to Jamie.

"Might've … saved yourself … the trouble," he wheezed. "But you have … my thanks. For what …" He gave a strangled cough, pressed a hand hard against his chest, and shook his head, grimacing. "… what they're worth," he managed.

He closed his eyes, breathing slowly and painfully—but still, breathing. I rose stiffly to my feet and at last had a moment to look at my husband.

"No but a wee cut," he assured me, in answer to my look of suspicious inquiry. "I'll do for now."

"Is all of that blood yours?" He glanced down at the shirt pasted to his ribs and lifted the non-wounded shoulder dismissively.

"I've enough left to be going on with." He smiled at me, then glanced around the deck. "I see ye've got matters well in hand here. I'll have Smith bring ye a bit of food, aye? It's going to rain soon."

It was; the smell of the oncoming storm swept through the hold, fresh and tingling with ozone, lifting the hair off my damp neck.

"Possibly not Smith," I said. "And where are you going?" I asked, seeing him turn away.

"I need to speak wi' Captain Hickman and Captain Roberts," he said, with a certain grimness. He glanced upward, and the matted hair behind his ears stirred in the breeze. "I dinna think we're going to Scotland in the *Teal*, but damned if I ken where we *are* going."

* * *

The ship eventually grew quiet—or as quiet as a large object composed of creaking boards, flapping canvas, and that eerie hum made by taut rigging can get. The tide had come in, and the ship did swim; we were moving north again, under light sail.

I had seen off the last of the casualties; only Captain Stebbings remained, laid on a crude pallet behind a chest of smuggled tea. He was still breathing, and not in terrible discomfort, I thought, but his condition was much too precarious for me to let him out of my sight.

By some miracle, the bullet seemed to have seared its way into his lung, rather than simply severing blood vessels in its wake. That didn't mean he wasn't bleeding into his lung, but if so, it was a slow seep; I would long since have known about it, otherwise. He must have been shot at close range, I thought sleepily. The ball had still been red-hot when it struck him.

I had sent Abram to bed. I should lie down myself, for tiredness dragged at my shoulders and had settled in aching lumps at the base of my spine. Not yet, though.

Jamie had not yet come back. I knew he would come to find me when he'd finished his summit meeting with Hickman and Roberts. And there were a few preparations still to be made, just in case.

In the course of Jamie's earlier rummaging through Hickman's desk in search of food, I'd noticed a bundle of fresh goose quills. I'd sent Abram to beg a couple of these and to bring me the largest sailmaker's needle to be found—and a couple of wing bones discarded from the chicken stew aboard the *Pitt*.

I chopped off the ends of a slender bone, looked to be sure the marrow had all been leached out by cooking, then shaped one end into a careful point, using the ship's carpenter's small sharpening stone for the purpose. The quill was easier; the tip had already been cut to a point for writing; all I had to do was to cut off the barbs, then submerge quill, bone, and needle in a shallow dish of brandy. That would do, then.

The smell of the brandy rose sweet and heavy in the air, competing with the tar, turpentine, tobacco, and the salt-soaked old timbers of the ship. It did at least partially obliterate the scents of blood and fecal matter left by my patients.

I'd discovered a case of bottled Meursault wine in the cargo, and now thoughtfully extracted a bottle, adding it to the half bottle of brandy and a stack of clean calico bandages and dressings. Sitting down on a keg of tar, I leaned back against a big hogshead of tobacco, yawning and wondering idly why it was called that. It did not appear to be shaped like a hog's head, certainly not like the head of any hog *I* knew.

I dismissed that thought and closed my eyes. I could feel my pulse throbbing in fingertips and eyelids. I didn't sleep, but I slowly descended into a sort of half consciousness, dimly aware of the sough of water past the ship's sides, the louder sigh of Stebbings's breath, the unhurried bellows of my own lungs, and the slow, placid thumping of my heart.

It seemed years since the terrors and uproar of the afternoon, and from the distance imposed by fatigue and intensity, my worry that I might have been having a heart attack seemed ridiculous. Was it, though? It wasn't impossible. Surely it had been nothing more than panic and hyperventilation—ridiculous in themselves, but not threatening. Still …

I put two fingers on my chest and waited for the pulsing in my fingertips to equalize with the pulsing of my heart. Slowly, almost dreaming, I began to pass through my body, from crown to toes, feeling my way through the long quiet passages of veins, the deep violet color of the sky just before night. Nearby I saw the brightness of arteries, wide and fierce with crimson life. Entered into the chambers of my heart and felt enclosed, the thick walls moving in a solid, comforting, unending, uninterrupted rhythm. No, no damage, not to the heart nor to its valves.

I felt my digestive tract, tightly knotted up under my diaphragm for hours, relax and settle with a grateful gurgle, and a sense of well-being flowed down like warm honey through limbs and spine.

"I dinna ken what ye're doing, Sassenach," a soft voice said nearby. "But ye look well content."

I opened my eyes and sat up. Jamie came down the ladder, moving carefully, and sat down.

He was very pale, and his shoulders were slumped with exhaustion. He smiled faintly at me, though, and his eyes were clear. My heart, solid and reliable as I just proved it to be, warmed and softened as though it had been made of butter.

"How do you—" I began, but he raised a hand, stopping me.

"I'll do," he said, with a glance at the pallet where the recumbent Stebbings lay, breathing shallowly and audibly. "Is he asleep?"

"I hope so. And you *should* be," I observed. "Let me tend you so you can lie down."

"It's no verra bad," he said, gingerly picking at the wad of crusty fabric tucked inside his shirt. "But it could use a stitch or two, I suppose."

"I suppose so, too," I said, eyeing the brown stains down the right side of his shirt. Given his customary inclination to understatement, he likely had a gaping slash down his breast. At least it would be easy to get at, unlike the awkward wound suffered by one of the *Pitt's* sailors, who had somehow been struck just behind the scrotum by a pellet of grapeshot. I thought it must have struck something else first and bounced upward, for it luckily hadn't penetrated deeply, but was flattened as a sixpence when I got it out. I'd given it to him as a souvenir.

Abram had brought a can of fresh hot water just before he left. I put a finger into it and was pleased to find it still warm.

"Right," I said, with a nod at the bottles on the chest. "Do you want brandy, or wine, before we start?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, and he reached for the wine bottle.

"Let me keep the illusion of civilization for a wee bit longer."

"Oh, I think that's reasonably civilized stuff," I said. "I haven't a cork screw, though."

He read the label, and his eyebrows rose.

"No matter. Is there something to pour it into?"

"Just here." I pulled a small, elegant wooden box out of a nest of straw inside a packing case and opened it triumphantly to display a Chinese porcelain tea set, gilt-edged and decorated with tiny red and blue turtles, all looking inscrutably Asiatic, swimming through a forest of gold chrysanthemums.

Jamie laughed—no more than a breath, but definitely laughter—and, scoring the neck of the bottle with the point of his dirk, knocked it neatly off against the rim of a tobacco hogshead. He poured the wine carefully into the two cups I'd set out, nodding at the vivid turtles.

"The wee blue one there reminds me of Mr. Willoughby, aye?"

I laughed myself, then glanced guiltily at Stebbings's feet—all that was showing of him at the moment. I'd taken his boots off, and the loose toes of his grimy stockings drooped comically over his feet. The feet didn't twitch, though, and the slow, labored breathing went on as before.

"I haven't thought of Mr. Willoughby in years," I observed, lifting my cup in toast. "Here's to absent friends."

Jamie replied briefly in Chinese and touched the rim of his own cup to mine with a faint *tink!*

“You remember how to speak Chinese?” I asked, intrigued, but he shook his head.

“No much. I havena had occasion to speak it since I last saw him.” He breathed in the bouquet of the wine, closing his eyes. “That seems a verra long time ago.”

“Long ago and far away.” The wine smelled warmly of almonds and apples, and was dry but full-bodied, clinging richly to the palate. Jamaica, to be exact, and more than ten years ago. “Time flies when you’re having fun. Do you think he’s still alive—Mr. Willoughby?”

He considered that, sipping.

“Aye, I do. A man who escaped from a Chinese emperor and sailed halfway round the world to keep his balls is one wi’ a good deal of determination.”

He seemed disinclined to reminisce further about auld acquaintance, though, and I let him drink in silence, feeling the night settle comfortably around us with the gentle rise and fall of the ship. After his second cup of wine, I peeled his crusty shirt off and gingerly lifted the blood-caked wad of handkerchief that he’d used to stanch the wound.

Rather to my surprise, he was right: the wound was small, and wouldn’t need more than two or three stitches to put right. A blade had gone in deep, just under his collarbone, and ripped a triangular flap of flesh coming out.

“Is this all your blood?” I asked, puzzled, lifting the discarded shirt.

“Nay, I’ve got a bit left,” he said, eyes creasing at me over the teacup. “Not much, mind.”

“You know quite well what I mean,” I said severely.

“Aye, it’s mine.” He drained his cup and reached for the bottle.

“But from such a small … oh, dear God.” I felt slightly faint. I could see the tender blue line of his subclavian vein, passing just under the collarbone and running directly above the clotted gape of the wound.

“Aye, I was surprised,” he said casually, cradling the delicate china in both big hands. “When he jerked the blade out, the blood sprayed out like a fountain and soaked us both. I’ve never seen it do like that before.”

“You have probably not had anyone nick your subclavian artery before,” I said, with what attempt at calm I could muster. I cast a sideways glance at the wound. It *had* clotted; the edges of the flap had turned blue and the sliced flesh beneath was nearly black with dried blood. No oozing, let alone an arterial spray. The blade had thrust up from below, missing the vein and just piercing the artery behind it.

I took a long, deep breath, trying with no success whatever not to imagine what would have happened had the blade gone the barest fraction of an inch deeper, or what might have happened, had Jamie not had a handkerchief and the knowledge and opportunity to use pressure on the wound.

Belatedly, I realized what he’d said: *“The blood sprayed out like a fountain and soaked us both.*” And when I’d asked Stebbings whether it was his own blood soaking his shirt, he’d leered and said, *“Your husband’s.”* I’d thought he was only being unpleasant, but—

“Was it Captain Stebbings who stabbed you?”

“Mmphm.” He made a brief affirmative noise as he shifted his weight, leaning back to let me get at the wound. He drained the cup again and set it down, looking resigned. “I was surprised he managed it. I thought I’d dropped him, but he hit the floor and came up wi’ a knife in his hand, the wee bugger.”

“You shot him?”

He blinked at my tone of voice.

“Aye, of course.”

I couldn’t think of any bad words sufficient as to encompass the situation and, muttering “Jesus H. Roosevelt *Christ*!” under my breath, set about swabbing and suturing.

“Now, listen to me,” I said, in my best military surgeon’s voice. “So far as I can tell, it was a very small nick, and you managed to stop the bleeding long enough for a clot to form. But that clot is *all* that is keeping you from bleeding to death. Do you understand me?”

This was not completely true—or it wouldn't be, once I'd stitched the supporting flesh back into place—but this was no time to give him a loophole.

He looked at me for a long moment, quite expressionless.

"I do."

"That means," I emphasized, stabbing the needle into his flesh with sufficient force that he yelped, "you must *not* use your right arm for at least the next forty-eight hours. You must not haul on ropes, you must not climb rigging, you must not punch people, you must not so much as scratch your arse with your right hand, do you hear me?"

"I expect the whole ship hears ye," he muttered, but glanced down his cheek, trying to see his collarbone. "I generally scratch my arse wi' my left hand, anyway."

Captain Stebbings had definitely heard us; a low chuckle came from behind the tea chest, followed by a rumbling cough and a faint wheeze of amusement.

"And," I continued, drawing the thread through the skin, "you may *not* get angry."

His breath drew in with a hiss.

"Why not?"

"Because it will make your heart beat harder, thus raising your blood pressure, which will—"

"Blow me up like a bottle of beer that's been corked too long?"

"Much the same. Now—"

Whatever I had been going to say vanished from my mind in the next instant as Stebbings's breathing suddenly changed. I dropped the needle and, turning, seized the dish. I shoved the tea chest aside, putting the dish on it, and fell to my knees next to Stebbings's body.

His lips and eyelids were blue, and the rest of his face was the color of putty. He was making a horrid gasping noise, his mouth gaping wide, gulping air that wasn't helping.

There were luckily well-known bad words for *this* situation, and I used a few of them, swiftly turning back the blanket and digging my fingers into his pudgy side in search of ribs. He squirmed and emitted a high, ludicrous *heeheehee,* which made Jamie—the needle still swinging by its thread from his collarbone—give a nervous laugh in response.

“This is no time to be ticklish,” I said crossly. “Jamie—take one of those quills and slide the needle inside.” While he did this, I rapidly swabbed Stebbings’s skin with a brandy-soaked wad of cloth, then took the quill-and-needle in one hand, the brandy bottle in the other, and drove the quill point-first into the second intercostal space, like hammering in a nail. I felt the subterranean *pop* as it went through the cartilage into the pleural space.

He made a high *eeeeeee* sound at that, but it wasn’t laughter. I’d cut the quill a little shorter than the needle, but the needle had sunk in when I’d hit it. I had a moment of panic, trying to get hold of the needle with my fingernails to pull it out, but finally managed. Stale-smelling blood and fluid sprayed out through the hollow quill, but only for a moment, then diminished to a faint hiss of air.

“Breathe slowly,” I said more quietly. “*Both* of you.”

I was watching the quill anxiously, looking for any further drainage of blood—plainly, if he was bleeding heavily into the lung, there was almost nothing I could do—but I was seeing only the light seepage from the puncture wound, a red smear on the outside of the quill.

“Sit down,” I said to Jamie, who did, ending cross-legged on the floor beside me.

Stebbings was looking better; the lung had at least partially inflated, and he was white now, his lips pale, but pale pink. The hissing from the hollow quill died to a sigh, and I put my finger over the open end of it.

“Ideally,” I said in a conversational tone, “I’d be able to run a length of tubing from your chest into a jar of water. That way the air around your lung could escape, but air couldn’t get back in. As I haven’t got anything tubelike that’s longer than a few inches, that’s not going to work.” I rose up on my knees, motioning to Jamie.

“Come here and put your finger over the end of this quill. If he starts suffocating again, take it off for a moment, until the air stops hissing out.”

He couldn't conveniently reach Stebbings with his left hand; with a sidelong glance at me, he reached slowly out with his right and stoppered the quill with his thumb.

I got to my feet, groaning, and went to rummage the cargo again. It might have to be tar. I'd tacked the oiled patch to his chest on three sides with warm tar, and there was plenty left. Not ideal; I likely couldn't get it out again in a hurry. Would a small plug of wet fabric be better?

In one of Hannah Arnold's chests, though, I found treasure: a small collection of dried herbs in jars—including one of powdered gum arabic. The herbs were interesting and useful in themselves, being plainly imported: cinchona bark—I must try to send that back to North Carolina for Lizzie, if we ever got off this horrible tub—mandrake, and ginger, things that never grew in the Colonies. Having them to hand made me feel suddenly rich. Stebbings groaned behind me, and I heard the scuff of fabric and a soft hiss as Jamie took his thumb away for a moment.

Not even the riches of the fabled East would do Stebbings much good. I opened the jar of gum arabic and, scooping out a bit into the palm of my hand, dribbled water into it and set about fashioning the resultant gooey ball into a roughly cylindrical plug, which I wrapped in a scrap of yellow calico printed with honeybees, finishing it off with a neat twist at the top. This accomplished to my satisfaction, I came back and, without comment, pulled the hollow quill—already showing signs of cracking from the working of Stebbings's rib muscles—out of its hole and wriggled the sturdier—and larger—hollow chicken bone into its place.

He didn't laugh this time, either. I plugged the end of the bone neatly and, kneeling in front of Jamie, resumed my stitching on his collarbone.

I felt perfectly clearheaded—but in that oddly surreal way that is an indication of total exhaustion. I'd done what had to be done, but I knew I couldn't stay upright much longer.

"What does Captain Hickman have to say?" I asked, much more by way of distracting both of us than because I really wanted to know.

“A great number of things, as ye might imagine.” He took a deep breath and fixed his eyes on a huge turtle shell that had been wedged in among the boxes. “Discarding the purely personal opinions and a certain amount of excessive language, though … we’re bound up the Hudson. For Fort Ticonderoga.”

“We … what?” I frowned at the needle pushed halfway through the skin. “Why?”

His hands were braced on the deck, fingers pressing into the boards so hard the nails were white.

“That’s where he was bound when the complications occurred, and that’s where he means to go. He’s a gentleman of verra fixed views, I find.”

A loud snort came from behind the tea chest.

“I did notice something of the sort.” I tied the last suture and clipped the thread neatly with my knife. “Did you say something, Captain Stebbings?”

The snort was repeated, more loudly, but without emendation.

“Can’t he be convinced to put us ashore?”

Jamie’s fingers hovered over the fresh stitching, obviously wanting to rub the stinging site, but I pushed them away.

“Aye, well … there are further complications, Sassenach.”

“Do tell,” I murmured, standing up and stretching. “Oh, God, my back. What *sort* of complications? Do you want some tea?”

“Only if there’s a good deal of whisky in it.” He leaned his head back against the bulkhead, closing his eyes. There was a hint of color in his cheeks, though his forehead shone with sweat.

“Brandy do you?” I needed tea—minus alcohol—badly myself, and headed for the ladder, not waiting for his nod. I saw him reach for the wine bottle as I set foot on the lowest rung.

There was a brisk wind blowing up above; it swirled the long cloak out around me as I emerged from the depths, and whooshed up my petticoats in a most revivifying fashion. It revivified Mr. Smith—or, rather, Mr. Marsden—too, who blinked and looked hastily away.

“Evening, ma’am,” he said politely, when I’d got my assorted garments back under control. “The colonel doing well, I hope?”

“Yes, he’s—” I broke off and gave him a sharp look. “The colonel?” I had a slight sinking sensation.

“Yes’m. He’s a militia colonel, isn’t he?”

“He *was*,” I said with emphasis.

Smith’s face broke into a smile.

“No *was* about it, ma’am,” he said. “He’s done us the honor to take command of a company—Fraser’s Irregulars, we’re to be called.”

“How apt,” I said. “What the devil—how did this happen?”

He tugged nervously at one of his earrings, seeing that I perhaps wasn’t as pleased by the news as might be hoped.

“Ah. Well, to tell the truth, ma’am, I’m afraid it was my fault.” He ducked his head, abashed. “One of the hands aboard the *Pitt* recognized me, and when he told the captain who I was …”

The revelation of Mr. Marsden’s real name—in combination with his adornments—had caused considerable uproar among the motley crew presently on board the *Asp*. Sufficiently so that he had been in some danger of being thrown overboard or set adrift in a boat. After a certain amount of acrimonious discussion, Jamie had suggested that perhaps Mr. Marsden could be persuaded to change his profession and become a soldier—for a number of the hands aboard the *Asp* had already proposed to leave her and join the Continental forces at Ticonderoga, portaging the goods and weapons across to Lake Champlain and then remaining as militia volunteers.

This found general approbation—though a few disgruntled persons were still heard to mutter that a Jonah was a Jonah, didn’t matter if he was a sailor or not. “That being why I thought I best make myself scarce below, if you see what I mean, ma’am,” Mr. Marsden concluded.

It also solved the problem of what to do with the imprisoned hands from the *Pitt* and the displaced seamen from the *Teal;* those who preferred joining the American militia would be allowed to do so, while those British seamen who preferred the prospect of life as prisoners of war could be accommodated in this desire at Fort Ticonderoga. About half the men from the *Teal* had expressed a decided preference for employment on land, after their recent seagoing adventures, and they also would join the Irregulars.

"I see," I said, rubbing two fingers between my brows. "Well, if you'll excuse me, Mr.… Marsden, I must be going and making a cup of tea. With a lot of brandy in it."

* * *

The tea heartened me, sufficiently to send Abram—found drowsing by the galley fire in spite of having been ordered to bed—to take some to Jamie and Captain Stebbings while I made the rounds of my other patients. They were mostly as comfortable as might be expected—that is, not very, but stoic about it, and in no need of exigent medical intervention.

The temporary strength lent me by tea and brandy had mostly ebbed by the time I made my way back down the ladder into the hold, though, and my foot slipped off the final rung, causing me to drop heavily onto the deck, with a thump that elicited a startled cry from Stebbings, followed by a groan. Waving away Jamie's raised brow, I hurried over to check the patient.

He was very hot to the touch, his full face flushed, and a nearly full cup of tea lay discarded near him.

"I tried to make him drink, but he said he couldna swallow more than a mouthful." Jamie had followed me, and spoke softly behind me.

I bent and placed my ear near Stebbings's chest, auscultating as best I could through the layer of blubber covering it. The chicken-bone tube, momentarily unplugged, gave only a modest hiss of air and no more than a trace of blood.

"So far as I can tell, the lung's expanded at least partially," I said, addressing Stebbings for form's sake, though he merely stared at me, glassy-eyed. "And I think the bullet must have cauterized a good deal of the damage; otherwise, I think we'd be seeing much more alarming symptoms." Otherwise, he'd be dead by now, but I thought it more tactful not to say so. He might easily be dead soon, in any case, from fever, but I didn't say that, either.

I persuaded him to drink some water and sponged his head and torso with more of it. The hatch cover had been left off, and it was reasonably cool in the hold, though the air didn't move much down below. Still, I saw no benefit in taking him into the wind on deck, and the less he was moved, the better.

"Is that … my … cloak?" he asked suddenly, opening one eye.

"Er … probably," I replied, disconcerted. "Do you want it back?"

He made a brief grimace and shook his head, then lay back, eyes closed, breathing shallowly.

Jamie was propped against the tea chest, head back, eyes closed, and breathing heavily. Feeling me sit down beside him, though, he raised his head and opened his eyes.

"Ye look as though ye're about to fall over, Sassenach," he said softly. "Lie down, aye? I'll mind the captain."

I saw his point. In fact, I saw two of them—and him. I blinked and shook my head, momentarily reuniting the two Jamies, but there was no denying that he was right. I'd lost touch with my body again, but my mind, instead of sticking to the job, had simply wandered off somewhere in a daze. I rubbed my hands hard over my face, but it didn't help appreciably.

"I'll have to sleep," I explained to the men, all four of them now watching me with the perfect wide-eyed attention of barn owls. "If you feel the pressure building up again—and I think it will," I said to Stebbings, "pull the plug out of the tube until it eases, then put it back. If either of you think you're dying, wake me up."

With no further ado, and feeling as though I were watching myself doing it, I eased down onto the planking, put my head on a fold of Stebbings's cloak, and fell asleep.

* * *

I woke an unaccountable time later and lay for some minutes lacking coherent thought, my mind rising and falling with the movement of the deck beneath me. At some point, I began to distinguish the murmur of men's voices from the shush and bang of seagoing noises.

I had fallen so deeply into oblivion that the events prior to my falling asleep took a moment to recall, but the voices brought them back. Wounds, the reek of brandy, the rip of sailcloth tearing, rough in my hands, and the smell of the dye in the bright, wet calico. Jamie's bloody shirt. The sucking sound of the hole in Stebbings's chest. The memory of that would have brought me upright at once, but I had stiffened from lying on the boards. A sharp twinge of agony lanced from my right knee to my groin, and the muscles of my back and arms hurt amazingly. Before I could stretch them enough to struggle to my feet, I heard the captain's voice.

"Call Hickman." Stebbings's voice was hoarse and low, but definite. "I'd rather be shot than do this anymore."

I didn't think he was joking. Neither did Jamie.

"I dinna blame ye," he said. His voice was soft but serious, as definite as Stebbings's.

My eyes were beginning to focus again, as the paralyzing ache in my muscles eased a little. From where I lay, I could see Stebbings from the knees down and most of Jamie, sitting beside him, head bowed on his own knees, tall form slumped against the tea chest.

There was a pause, and then Stebbings said, "You don't, eh? Good. Go get Hickman."

"Why?" Jamie asked, after what seemed an equal pause for thought—or perhaps only to gather strength to answer. He didn't lift his head; he sounded almost drugged with fatigue. "Nay need to rouse the man from his bed, is there? If ye want to die, just pull that thing out of your chest."

Stebbings made some sort of noise. It might have started as a laugh, a groan, or an angry retort, but ended in a hiss of air between clenched teeth. My body tensed. Had he actually tried to pull it out?

No. I heard the heavy movement of his body, saw his feet curl briefly as he sought a more comfortable position, and heard Jamie's grunt as he leaned over to help.

"Someone … might as well get … satisfaction from me … dying," he wheezed.

"I put yon hole in ye," Jamie pointed out. He straightened up and stretched with painful care. "It wouldna please me overmuch to watch ye die from it." I thought he must be well past the point of exhaustion, and plainly he was as stiff as I was. I must get up, make him go lie down. But he was still talking to Stebbings, sounding unconcerned, like a man discussing an abstruse point of natural philosophy.

"As for satisfying Captain Hickman—d'ye feel some sense of obligation toward him?"

"I don't." That one came out short and sharp, though succeeded by a deep gasp for air.

"It's a clean death," Stebbings managed after a few more breaths. "Quick."

"Aye, that's what I thought," Jamie said, sounding drowsy. "When it was me."

Stebbings gave a grunt that might have been interrogative. Jamie sighed. After a moment, I heard the rustle of cloth and saw him move his left leg, groaning as he did so, and turn back the cloth of his kilt.

"See that?" His finger ran slowly up the length of his thigh, from just above the knee, almost to the groin.

Stebbings gave a slightly more interested grunt, this one definitely questioning. The drooping toes of his socks moved as his feet twitched.

"Bayonet," Jamie said, casually flipping his kilt back over the twisting, runneled scar. "I lay for two days after, wi' the fever eating me alive. My leg swelled, and it stank. And when the English officer came to blow our brains out, I was pleased enough."

A brief silence.

"Culloden?" Stebbings asked. His voice was still hoarse, and I could hear the fever in it, but there was interest there now, too. "Heard … about it."

Jamie said nothing in response but yawned suddenly, not bothering to smother it, and rubbed his hands slowly over his face. I could hear the soft rasp of beard stubble.

Silence, but the quality of it had changed. I could feel Stebbings's anger, his pain and fright—but there was a faint sense of amusement in his labored breath.

“Going to … make me … ask?”

Jamie shook his head.

“Too long a story, and one I dinna care to tell. Leave it that I wanted him to shoot me, verra badly, and the bastard wouldna do it.”

The air in the little hold was stale but uneasy, filled with the shifting scents of blood and luxury, of industry and illness. I breathed in, gently, deep, and could smell the tang of the men’s bodies, a sharp copper savage smell, bitter with effort and exhaustion. Women never smelled like that, I thought, even in extremity.

“Revenge, then, is it?” Stebbings asked after a bit. His restless feet had stilled. His dirty stockings drooped and his voice was tired.

Jamie’s shoulders moved, slowly, as he sighed, and his own voice was nearly as tired as Stebbings’s.

“No,” he said, very softly. “Call it payment of a debt.”

A debt? I thought. To whom? To the Lord Melton who had declined to kill him, out of honor, who had instead sent him home from Culloden, hidden in a wagon filled with hay? To his sister, who had refused to let him die, who had dragged him back to life by sheer strength of will? Or to those who had died when he had not?

I had stretched myself enough now to be able to rise, but didn’t, yet. There was no urgency. The men were silent, their breathing part of the breathing of the ship, the sigh of the sea outside.

It came to me, quiet but sure, that I knew. I had glimpsed the abyss often, over someone’s shoulder as they stood on the edge, looking down. But I had looked once, too. I knew the vastness and the lure of it, the offer of surcease.

I knew they were standing now, side by side and each alone, looking down.

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PART FOUR

Conjunction

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32

A FLURRY OF SUSPICION

Lord John Grey to Mr. Arthur Norrington
4 February 1777
(Cipher 158)

My dear Norrington,

Pursuant to our conversation, I have made certain discoveries which I think it prudent to confide.

I paid a visit to France at the end of the year and, while there, visited the Baron Amandine. I stayed with the baron for several days, in fact, and had conversation of him on a number of occasions. I have reason to believe that Beauchamp is indeed concerned in the matter we discussed and has formed an attachment to Beaumarchais, who is thus likely similarly involved. I think Amandine is not himself concerned but that Beauchamp may use him as a front of some kind.

I requested an audience with Beaumarchais, but was denied. As he would normally have received me, I think I have poked a stick into some nest. It would be useful to watch that quarter.

Be also alert to any mention in the French correspondence of a company called Rodrigue Hortalez et

Cie (I beg you will speak with the person handling the Spanish correspondence, as well). I cannot discover anything amiss, but neither can I discover anything solid regarding them, such as the names of the directors, and that in itself strikes me as suspicious.

If your duty allow, I should be pleased to hear of anything you learn concerning these matters.

Your servant, sir,
Lord John Grey

Postscriptum: If you can tell me, who is presently in charge of the American Department, with regard to correspondence?

* * *

Lord John Grey to Harold, Duke of Pardloe
4 February 1777
(family cipher)

Hal—

I saw Amandine. Wainwright does live at the manor house—a place called Trois Flèches—and does maintain an unwholesome relationship with the baron. I met the baron's sister, Wainwright's wife. She certainly knows of the link between her brother and her husband, but does not admit it openly. Beyond that, she appears to know nothing whatever. I have seldom met a more stupid woman. She is openly lewd in manner and a very bad cardplayer. So is the baron, by which token I am convinced that he does know something of Wainwright's political machinations; he behaved shiftily when I steered the conversation in that direction, and I am sure he is not *schooled in the art of misdirection. He is not stupid, though. Even if he were, he will certainly have told Wainwright of my visit. I have alerted Norrington to watch for any activity on that front.*

Knowing what I do of Wainwright's abilities and connexions (or rather, the lack of them), I cannot quite fathom his involvement. Granted, if the French government does have such schemes in mind as he indicated, they would hardly make open communication regarding them, and sending someone like Wainwright to speak to someone like me might be considered sufficiently sub rosa. Certainly such an approach has the benefit of being deniable. And yet something seems wrong in this, in a way I cannot yet define.

I will be with you soon, and hope by then to be in possession of some definite information regarding one Captain Ezekiel Richardson, likewise one Captain Denys Randall-Isaacs. Should you be able to investigate either of these names through your own connexions, you would greatly oblige

Your most affectionate brother,
John

Postscriptum: I trust your health is mending.

* * *

Harold, Duke of Pardloe, to Lord John Grey
6 March 1777
Bath
(family cipher)

I'm not dead. Wish I were. Bath is vile. I am daily wrapped in canvas and carried off like a parcel to be sunk in boiling water that smells of rotten eggs, then hauled out *and forced to drink it, but Minnie says she will divorce me by petition in the House of Lords on the grounds of insanity caused by immoral acts if I don't submit. I doubt this, but here I am.*

Denys Randall-Isaacs is the son of a Englishwoman named Mary Hawkins and a British army officer: one Jonathan Wolverton Randall, captain of dragoons, deceased, killed at Culloden. The mother is still alive and married to a Jew named Robert Isaacs, a merchant in Bristol. He's still alive, too, and has a half interest in a warehouse in Brest. Denys is one of your damned politicals, got ties to Germain, but I can't find out more than that without being too overt for your tastes. Can't find out anything in bloody Bath.

Don't know much about Richardson, but will find out directly. Sent letters to some people in America. Yes, I am discreet, thank you, and so are they.

John Burgoyne is here, taking the cure. Very cock-a-hoop, as Germain has approved his scheme to invade from Canada. I have mentioned William to him, as his French and German are good and Burgoyne is to have a number of Brunswickers. Still, tell Willie to be careful; Burgoyne seems to think he is to be commander-in-chief of the army in America—a notion that I daresay will come as rather a surprise both to Guy Carleton and Dick Howe.

Trois Flèches. Three arrows. Who is the third?

* * *

London
March 26, 1777
The Society for the Appreciation of the
English Beefsteak, a Gentleman's Club

"Who is the third?" Grey repeated in astonishment, staring at the note he had just opened.

"The third what?" Harry Quarry handed his sopping cloak to the steward and sank heavily into the chair beside Grey's, sighing with relief as he held his hands out to the fire. "God's teeth, I'm frozen solid. You're going to Southampton in *this*?" He flung one big cold-blanched hand at the window, which framed a dismal prospect of icy sleet, driven almost horizontal by the wind.

"Not 'til tomorrow. It may have cleared by then."

Harry gave the window a look of deep suspicion and shook his head. "Not a chance. Steward!"

Mr. Bodley was already tottering toward them under the weight of a tea tray laden with seedcake, sponge cake, strawberry jam, marmalade, hot buttered crumpets in a basket wrapped in white linen, scones, clotted cream, almond biscuits, sardines on toast, a pot of beans baked with bacon and onion, a plate of sliced ham with gherkins, a bottle of brandy with two glasses, and—perhaps as an afterthought—a steaming teapot with two china cups and saucers alongside.

"Ah!" said Harry, looking happier. "I see you expected me."

Grey smiled. If not on campaign or called away by duty, Harry Quarry invariably entered the Beefsteak at four-thirty on a Wednesday.

"I thought you'd need sustenance, with Hal on the sick list." Harry was one of the two regimental colonels—as distinct from Hal, who was Colonel of the Regiment, it being his own regiment. Not all colonels took an active hand in the operations of their regiments, but Hal did.

"Malingering bugger," Harry said, reaching for the brandy. "How is he?"

"Quite his usual self, to judge from his correspondence." Grey handed Quarry the unfolded letter, which the latter read with a burgeoning grin.

"Aye, Minnie will have him sorted like a hand of whist." He put down the letter, nodding at it as he raised his glass. "Who's Richardson and why do you want to know about him?"

"Ezekiel Richardson, Captain. Lancers, but detached for intelligence work."

"Oh, intelligence laddie, eh? One of your Black Chamber lot?" Quarry wrinkled his nose, though it was not clear whether this was a response to the notion of intelligence laddies or the presence of a dish of grated horseradish accompanying the sardines.

"No, I don't know the man well personally," Grey admitted, and felt the same pang of deep unease that had been afflicting him with increased frequency ever since his receipt of William's letter from Quebec a week before. "I had been introduced to him by Sir George, who knew his father, but we didn't talk much on that occasion. I had heard a few things to his credit—in a quiet sort of way—"

"That being, I suppose, the only way one wants to hear anything about a man in that line of business. Huuuuuh!" Harry drew a tremendous gasp of air through his open mouth and up into his sinuses, by the sound of it, then coughed once or twice, eyes watering, and shook his head in admiration. "Fresh horseradish," he croaked, taking another large spoonful. "Very … huuuuuuh … fresh."

"Quite. Anyway, I met him again in North Carolina, we talked a bit more, and he asked my permission to approach William with a proposition regarding intelligencing."

Quarry stopped, a slice of sardine-laden toast halfway to his mouth.

"You don't mean to say you've let him lure Willie off into the weeds?"

"That was certainly not my intent," Grey said, nettled. "I had some reason to feel that the suggestion would be good for Willie; for one thing, it would get him out of North Carolina and end with him attached to Howe's staff."

Quarry nodded, masticating with care, and swallowed thickly.

"Aye, right. But now you have doubts?"

"I do. The more so because I can find very few people who actually know Richardson well. Everyone who recommended him to me in the first place did so by reason of someone else's recommendation, it seems. Except for Sir George Stanley, who is presently in Spain with my mother, and old Nigel Bruce, who's rather inconveniently died in the meantime."

“Thoughtless.”

“Yes. I imagine I could root out more information, had I time, but I haven’t. Dottie and I sail day after tomorrow. Weather permitting,” he added, with a glance at the window.

“Ah, this would be where I come in,” Harry observed, without animus. “What shall I do with any information I find? Tell Hal, or send it to you?”

“Tell Hal,” Grey said with a sigh. “God knows what the post may be like in America, even with the Congress sitting in Philadelphia. If anything seems urgent, Hal can expedite matters here far more easily than I can there.”

Quarry nodded and refilled Grey’s glass. “You’re not eating,” he observed.

“I lunched late.” Quite late. In fact, he hadn’t had luncheon yet. He took a scone and spread it desultorily with jam.

“And Denys Wossname?” Quarry asked, flicking the letter with a pickle fork. “Shall I inquire about him, too?”

“By all means. Though I may make better progress with him on the American end of the matter. That’s at least where he was last seen.” He took a bite of scone, observing that it had achieved that delicate balance between crumbliness and half-set mortar that is the ideal of every scone, and felt some stirrings of appetite return. He wondered whether he should put Harry onto the worthy Jew with the warehouse in Brest, but decided not. The question of French connections was more than delicate, and while Harry was thorough, he was not subtle.

“Right, then.” Harry selected a slice of sponge cake, topped it with two almond biscuits and a dollop of clotted cream, and inserted the whole into his mouth. Where did he put it? Grey wondered. Harry was thickset and burly, but never stout. No doubt he sweated it off during energetic exercise in brothels, that being his favorite sport despite advancing age.

How old was Harry? he wondered suddenly. A few years older than Grey, a few years younger than Hal. He’d never thought about it, no more than he had with reference to Hal. The two of them had always seemed immortal; he had never once contemplated a future lacking either one of them. But the skull beneath Harry's wig was nearly hairless now—he had, in his usual way, removed it to scratch his head at some point and set it casually back without regard to straightness—and the joints of his fingers were swollen, though he handled his teacup with his usual delicacy.

Grey felt of a sudden his own mortality, in the stiffening of a thumb, the twinge of a knee. Most of all, in the fear that he might not be there to protect William, while he was still needed.

"Eh?" said Harry, raising a brow at whatever showed on Grey's face. "What?"

Grey smiled and shook his head, taking up his brandy glass once more.

"Timor mortis conturbat me," he said.

"Ah," said Quarry thoughtfully, and raised his own. "I'll drink to that."

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33

THE PLOT THICKENS

28 February,* A.D. *1777
London

Major General John Burgoyne,
to Sir George Germain
… I do not conceive any expedition from the sea can be so formidable to the enemy, or so effectual to close the war, as an invasion from Canada by Ticonderoga.

April 4, 1777
on board HMS Tartar

He'd told Dottie that the *Tartar* was only a twenty-eight-gun frigate and that she must therefore be modest in her packing. Even so, he was surprised to see the single trunk—granted, a large one—two portmanteaux, and a bag of needlework that comprised her entire luggage.

"What, not a single flowered mantua?" he teased. "William won't know you."

"Bosh," she replied with her father's talent for succinct clarity. But she smiled a little—she was very pale, and he hoped it wasn't incipient seasickness—and he squeezed her hand and went on holding it all the time until the last dark sliver of England sank into the sea.

He was still amazed that she'd managed it. Hal must be more frail than he'd let on, to be bamboozled into allowing his daughter to take ship for America, even under Grey's protection and for the laudable purpose of nursing her wounded brother. Minnie, of course, would not be parted from Hal for a moment, though naturally worried sick for her son. But that she had uttered no word of protest at this adventure …

"Your mother's in on it, is she?" he asked casually, provoking a startled look through a veil of windblown hair.

"On what?" Dottie pawed at the blond spiderweb of her hair, escaped *en masse* from the inconsequent snood in which she'd bound it and dancing over her head like flames. "Oh, help!"

He captured her hair, smoothing it tight to her head with both hands, then gathering it at her neck, where he plaited it expertly, to the admiration of a passing seaman, clubbed it, and tied it up with the velvet ribbon that was all that remained from the wreck of her snood.

"On what, forsooth," he told the back of her head, as he finished the job. "On whatever the dreadful enterprise is on which you've embarked."

She turned round and faced him, her stare direct.

"If you want to describe rescuing Henry as a dreadful enterprise, I agree entirely," she said with dignity. "But my mother would naturally do anything she could to get him back. So would you, presumably, or you wouldn't be here." And without waiting for a reply, she turned smartly on her heel and made for the companionway, leaving him speechless.

One of the first ships of the spring had brought a letter with further word of Henry. He was still alive, thank God, but had been badly wounded: shot in the abdomen, and very ill in consequence through the brutal winter. He had survived, though, and been moved to Philadelphia with a number of other British prisoners. The letter had been written by a fellow officer there, another prisoner, but Henry had managed to scribble a few words of love to his family at the bottom and sign his name; the memory of that straggling scrawl ate at John's heart.

He was encouraged somewhat by the fact that it *was* Philadelphia, though. He had met a prominent Philadelphian while he was in

France and had formed an immediate liking for him that he thought was returned; there might be something of use in the acquaintance. He grinned involuntarily, recalling the instant of his meeting with the American gentleman.

He hadn't paused long in Paris, only long enough to make inquiries after Percival Beauchamp, who was not there. Retired to his home in the country for the winter, he was told. The Beauchamp family's main estate, a place called *Trois Flèches*, near Compiègne. And so he had bought a fur-lined hat and a pair of seaboots, wrapped himself in his warmest cloak, hired a horse, and set grimly off into the teeth of a howling gale.

Arriving mud-caked and frozen, he had been greeted with suspicion, but the quality of his accoutrements and his title had gained him entrance, and he had been shown to a well-appointed parlor—with, thank God, an excellent fire—to await the baron's pleasure.

He'd formed an expectation of the Baron Amandine on the basis of Percy's remarks, though he thought Percy had likely been practicing upon him. He also knew how futile it was to theorize in advance of observation, but it was inhuman not to imagine.

In terms of imagining, he'd done a good job of not thinking of Percy during the last … was it eighteen years, nineteen? But once it became obvious that thinking of him was now a professional as well as a personal necessity, he was both surprised and disconcerted to find just how much he remembered. He knew what Percy liked and therefore had evolved a mental picture of Amandine in accordance.

The reality was different. The baron was an older man, perhaps a few years Grey's senior, short and rather plump, with an open, pleasant face. Well dressed, but without ostentation. He greeted Grey with great courtesy. But then he took Grey's hand, and a small electric shock ran through the Englishman. The baron's expression was civil, no more—but the eyes held a look of interest and avidity, and despite the baron's unprepossessing appearance, Grey's flesh answered the look.

Of course. Percy had told Amandine about him.

Surprised and wary, he gave the brief explanation he had prepared, only to be informed that, *hélas,* Monsieur Beauchamp was not at home but had gone with Monsieur Beaumarchais to hunt wolves in Alsace. Well, there was one supposition confirmed, Grey thought. But surely his lordship would condescend to accept the hospitality of *Trois Flèches,* for the night at least?

He accepted this invitation with many expressions of unworthy thanks, and having doffed his outer clothes and replaced his seaboots with Dottie's garish carpet slippers—which made Amandine blink, though he at once praised them exceedingly—he was propelled down a long corridor lined with portraits.

"We will take some refreshment in the library," Amandine was saying. "Plainly, you are perishing of cold and inanition. But if you do not mind, allow me to introduce you *en route* to my other guest; we will invite him to join us."

Grey had murmured acquiescence, distracted by the light pressure of Amandine's hand, which rested on his back—slightly lower than was usual.

"He is an American," the baron was saying, as they reached a door toward the end of the corridor, and his voice conveyed considerable in the way of amusement in that word. He had a most unusual voice—soft, warm, and somehow smoky, like oolong tea with a lot of sugar.

"He enjoys to spend some time each day in the solar," the baron went on, pushing open the door and gesturing Grey ahead of him. "He says it keeps him in a state of robust health."

Grey had been looking politely at the baron during this introduction, but now turned to speak to the American guest and so was introduced to Dr. Franklin, reclining comfortably in a padded chair, lit by a flood of sunlight, stark naked.

In the subsequent conversation—conducted with the greatest aplomb on the part of all parties—he learned that it was Dr. Franklin's invariant practice to bathe in air every day when possible, as skin breathed quite as much as did lungs, taking in air and releasing impurities; thus the ability of the body to defend itself from infection was substantially impaired if the skin were constantly suffocated in insanitary clothing.

Throughout the introductions and conversation, Grey was acutely aware of Amandine's eyes upon him, full of speculation and amusement, and of the cumbersome feel of his own insanitary clothing upon his doubtless suffocating skin.

It was an odd feeling, to meet a stranger and know that said stranger was already privy to his deepest secret, that he in fact—if Percy were not altogether lying, and Grey didn't think he had been—shared it. It gave him a feeling of danger and vertigo, as though he leaned out from some sharp precipice. It also bloody excited him, and *that* alarmed him very much.

The American (now speaking pleasantly about an unusual geological formation he had seen on his journey from Paris; had his lordship noticed it?) was an elderly man, and his body, while in fair condition aside from patches of some purplish eczema about the lower limbs, was not an object of sexual consideration. Nonetheless, Grey's flesh was tight on his bones, and not enough of his blood was in his head. He could feel Amandine's eyes on him, frankly evaluating him, and recalled all too clearly the exchange with Percy regarding Percy's wife and his brother-in-law the baron: *Both, on occasion. Together?* Had the baron's sister accompanied her husband, or was she perhaps at home? For one of the few times in his life, Grey wondered seriously whether he might be a pervert.

"Shall we join the good doctor in his beneficial practice, my lord?"

Grey jerked his eyes away from Franklin, to see the baron beginning to peel off his coat. Fortunately, before he could think of anything to say, Franklin rose, remarking that he felt he had had sufficient benefit for the day. "Though of course," he said, meeting Grey's eyes directly, with an expression of the deepest interest—and not a little amusement, too, "you must not allow my departure to prevent your own indulgence, *messieurs*."

The baron, impeccably polite, at once resumed his coat, and saying he would join them for *un aperitif* in the library, disappeared into the corridor.

Franklin had a silk dressing gown; Grey held it for him, watching the white, slightly sagging—but remarkably firm and unwrinkled—buttocks disappear as the American slowly worked his arms into the sleeves, remarking as he did so upon a touch of arthritis in his shoulder joints.

Turning and tying the sash, he fixed an open gray gaze upon Grey.

"Thank you, my lord," he said. "I take it you were not previously acquainted with Amandine?"

"No. I knew his … brother-in-law, Monsieur Beauchamp, some years ago. In England," he added, for no particular reason.

Something flickered in Franklin's eyes at the name "Beauchamp," causing Grey to ask, "You know him?"

"I know the name," Franklin replied equably. "Is Beauchamp an Englishman, then?"

A number of astonishing possibilities had flashed through Grey's mind at that simple remark *"I know the name,"* but an equally rapid evaluation of them decided him upon the truth as safest, and he merely said, "Yes," in a tone indicating that this was simple fact, no more.

Over the next few days, he and Franklin had had a number of interesting conversations, in which the name of Percy Beauchamp was conspicuous by its absence. When Franklin returned to Paris, though, Grey was left both with a genuine liking for the elderly gentleman—who upon learning that Grey was bound for the Colonies in the spring had insisted upon giving him letters of introduction to several friends there—and a conviction that Dr. Franklin knew precisely what Percy Beauchamp was and had been.

"Beg pardon, sir," said one of the *Tartar's* hands, elbowing Grey un-gently out of the way and breaking his reverie. He blinked, coming back to find that his ungloved hands had turned to ice in the wind and his cheeks were numb. Leaving the sailors to their freezing task, he went below, feeling a peculiar small and shameful warmth at the memory of his visit to *Trois Flèches*.

* * *

3 May, 1777
New York

Dear Papa,

I have just received your Letter about Cousin Henry, and hope very much that you will be able to discover his Whereabouts and obtain his Release. If I can hear Anything of him, I will do my best to let you know. Is there anyone to whom I should address Letters to you in the Colonies? (If I hear of no Alternative, I shall send them in care of Mr. Sanders in Philadelphia, with a Copy for Safety to Judge O'Keefe in Richmond.)

I hope you will excuse my own sad Delinquency in corresponding. It does not—alas—stem from any press of urgent Activity on my Part, but rather from ennui and lack of anything of Interest about which to write. After a tedious Winter immured in Quebec (though I did considerable Hunting, and shot a very vicious Thing called a Glutton), I finally received my new orders from General Howe's Aide-de-camp in late March, when some of Sir Guy's people came back to the Citadel, and I returned to New York in consequence of them.

I never received any Word from Captain Randall-Isaacs, nor have I been able to hear anything of him since my Return. I fear very much that he may have been lost in the Blizzard. If you know his people, perhaps you would send them a Note with my Hopes for his Survival? I would do so myself, save that I am not sure where to find them, nor how to phrase my Sentiments delicately, in case they are also in Doubt of his Fate, or worse, are not in Doubt. You will know what to say, though; you always do.

I was somewhat luckier in my own Travels, having suffered only minor Shipwreck on my way downriver (we came to Grief during the Portage at Ticonderoga, being *fired upon by a Party of American Sharpshooters from the Fort. No one was harmed, but the Canoes were peppered with Shot and some Holes were unfortunately not discovered before we put back into the Water, whereupon two of them sank abruptly), this followed by waist-deep Mud and the reemergence of carnivorous Insects when I took to the Roads. Since my Return, though, we have done little of interest, though there are constant rumors of what we may do. Finding that Inactivity chafes more in what you may call a civilized Setting (though none of the Girls in New York can dance at all), I volunteered to ride Dispatches, and have found some Relief in that.*

Yesterday, however, I received Orders sending me back to Canada, there to join General Burgoyne's Staff. Do I detect your fine Italian Hand in this, Papa? If so, thank you!

Also, I have seen Captain Richardson again; he came to my Rooms last Night. I had not seen him for nearly a Year, and was much surprised. He did not ask for an Account of our Journey into Quebec (not surprising, as the Information would be sadly out-of-date by now), and when I asked after Randall-Isaacs, only shook his Head and said he did not know.

He had heard I had an Errand to carry special Dispatches to Virginia, before going to Canada, and while of course Nothing must delay me in that Errand, had thought of asking me to do a small Service for him as I returned northward. Somewhat wary as a Result of my long Sojourn in the frozen North, I asked what this might be, and was told that it was no more than the Delivery of a cipher Message to a group of Loyalist gentlemen in Virginia, something that would be simple for me, owing to my Familiarity with the Terrain; the job would not delay me more than a Day or two, he assured me.

I said I would do it, but more because I should like to see some Parts of Virginia that I remember with fondness *than because I should like to oblige Captain Richardson. I am somewhat wary of him.*

Godspeed your travels, Papa, and please give my Love to my precious Dottie, whom I long to see. (Tell her I shot forty-two Ermine in Canada; she shall have a Cloak made of the Skins!)

Your most affectionate Reprobate,
William

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PSALMS, 30

October 6, 1980
Lallybroch

Brianna's arrangement with the Hydro Electric Board provided for her working three days a week doing site inspections, overseeing maintenance and repair operations as required, but allowed her to stay at home doing reports, forms, and other paperwork the other two days. She was trying to decipher Rob Cameron's notes regarding the power feed from the second turbine at Loch Errochty, which appeared to have been written with grease pencil on the remains of the bag that had held his lunch, when she became aware of sounds in the laird's study across the hall.

She'd been vaguely conscious of a low humming for some time, but insofar as she'd noticed the sound had put it down to a fly trapped by the window. The hum had now acquired words, though, and a fly would not have been singing *"The King of Love my Shepherd is,"* to the tune of "St. Columba."

She froze, realizing that she'd *recognized* the tune. The voice was rough as coarse-grit sandpaper, and it cracked now and then … but it went up and it went down, and it was, it *really* was, a song.

The song stopped abruptly in a fit of coughing, but after some heavy-duty throat-clearing and cautious humming, the voice started up again, this time using an old Scottish tune she thought was called "Crimond."

"The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want.
He makes me down to lie.
In pastures green; He leadeth me
The quiet waters by."

"The quiet waters by" was repeated once or twice in different keys, and then, with increased vigor, the hymn went on:

"My soul He doth restore again:
And me to walk doth make
Within the paths of righteousness,
Even for His Name's own sake."

She sat at her desk, shaking, tears running down her cheeks and a handkerchief pressed to her mouth so he wouldn't hear. "Thank you," she whispered into its folds. "Oh, thank you!"

The singing stopped, but the humming resumed, deep and contented. She got herself back under control and wiped the tears hastily away; it was nearly noon—he'd be coming in any time to ask if she was ready for lunch.

Roger had had considerable doubt about the assistant choirmaster's position—doubt he'd tried not to let her see, and doubt she'd shared until he came home to tell her he'd been given the Children's Choir as his main responsibility. Her own doubt had flown then; children were at once totally uninhibited about voicing the sorts of remarks regarding social oddity that their elders never would, and entirely accepting of such oddity, once they got used to it.

"How long did it take them to ask about your scar?" she'd asked, when he'd come home smiling from his first solo practice with the kids.

"I didn't time it, but maybe thirty seconds." He rubbed two fingers lightly over the ragged mark across his throat, but didn't stop smiling. *"Please, Mr. MacKenzie, what's happened to your neck? Was ye hangit?"*

"And what did you tell them?"

"Told them aye, I was hangit in America, but I lived, praise God. And a couple of them had elder siblings who'd seen *High Plains Drifter* and told them about it, so that raised my stock a good bit. I think they expect me to wear my six-guns to the next practice, though, now the secret's out." He gave her a Clint Eastwood one-eyed squint, which had made her burst out laughing.

She laughed now, remembering it, and just in time, for Roger stuck his head in, saying, "How many different versions of the Twenty-third Psalm would ye say there are, set to music?"

"Twenty-three?" she guessed, rising.

"Only six in the Presbyterian hymnal," he admitted, "but there are metrical settings for it—in English, I mean—that go back to 1546. There's one in the *Bay Psalm Book* and another in the old *Scottish Psalter*, and any number of others here and there. I've seen the Hebrew version, too, but I think I'd best not try that one on the St. Stephen's congregation. Do the Catholics have a musical setting?"

"Catholics have a musical setting for everything," she told him, lifting her nose to sniff for indications of lunch from the kitchen. "But psalms we usually sing to a chant setting. I know four different Gregorian chant forms," she informed him loftily, "but there are lots more."

"Yeah? Chant it for me," he demanded, and stopped dead in the corridor, while she hastily tried to recall the words to the Twenty-third Psalm. The simplest chant form came back automatically—she'd sung it so often in childhood that it was part of her bones.

"That's really something," he said, appreciative, when she'd finished. "Go through it a time or two with me later? I'd like to do it for the kids, just for them to hear. I think they could do Gregorian chant really well."

The kitchen door burst open and Mandy scampered out, clutching Mr. Polly, a stuffed creature who had started out life as a bird of some kind, but now resembled a grubby terry-cloth bag with wings.

"Soup, Mama!" she shouted. "Come eat soup!"

And soup they ate, Campbell's Chicken Noodle made from the can, and cheese sandwiches and pickles to fill the cracks. Annie MacDonald was not a fancy cook, but everything she made was edible, and that was saying a good deal, Brianna thought, with memories of other meals eaten around dying fires on soggy mountaintops or scraped as burnt offerings out of an ashy hearth. She cast a glance of deep affection at the gas-fired Aga cooker that kept the kitchen the coziest room in the house.

"Sing me, Daddy!" Mandy, teeth coated in cheese and mustard round her mouth, gave Roger an entreating grin.

Roger coughed on a crumb and cleared his throat.

"Oh, aye? Sing what?"

" 'Free Bly Mice'!"

"All right. Ye'll need to sing with me, though—keep me from getting off." He smiled at Mandy and beat time softly on the table with the handle of his spoon.

"Three blind mice …" he sang, and pointed the handle at Mandy, who drew a heroic breath and echoed, "Free, Bly, MICE!" at the top of her lungs—but with perfect rhythm. Roger raised his eyebrows at Bree and continued the song, in the same counterpoint fashion. After five or six rousing repetitions, Mandy tired of it, and, with a brief "M'scuse me," rose from the table and took off like a low-flying bumblebee, caroming off the doorjamb on her way out.

"Well, she's got a definite sense of rhythm," Roger said, wincing as a loud thud echoed back from the corridor, "if not of coordination. Be a little while before we know if she's got any pitch, though. Your da had a great sense of rhythm, but he couldn't hit the same note twice."

"That reminded me a bit of what you used to do on the Ridge," she said, on impulse. "Singing a line of a psalm and having the people answer it back."

His face changed a little at mention of that time. He'd come newly to his vocation then, and the certainty of it had transformed him. She'd never seen him so happy before—or since, and her heart turned over at the flash of longing she saw in his eyes.

He smiled, though, and, reaching out a napkin-covered finger, wiped a smear of mustard from beside her own mouth.

"Old-fashioned," he said. "Though they still do it that way—the line-singing in kirk—on the Isles, and maybe in the remoter bits of the Gaeltacht. The American Presbyterians won't have it, though."

"They won't?"

"It is proper to sing without parceling out the psalm line by line," he quoted. *"The practice of reading the psalm, line by line, was introduced in times of ignorance, when many in the congregation could not read; therefore, it is recommended that it be laid aside, so far as convenient.* That's from the Constitution of the American Presbyterian Church."

Oh, so you did think about being ordained while we were in Boston, she thought but didn't say aloud.

"Times of ignorance," she repeated, instead. "I'd like to know what Hiram Crombie would have had to say to that!"

He laughed, but shook his head.

"Well, it's true enough; most of the folk on the Ridge couldn't read. But I'd disagree with the notion that ye'd only sing the psalms that way because of ignorance, or a lack of books." He paused for thought, idly scraping up a stray noodle and eating it.

"Singing all together, that's grand, no doubt about it. But to do it in that back-and-forth way—I think there's maybe something about it that draws the people closer, makes them feel more involved in what they're singing, what's truly happening. Maybe it's only because they've got to concentrate harder to remember each line." He smiled briefly, and looked away.

Please! she thought passionately, whether to God, the Blessed Virgin, Roger's guardian angel, or all three. *You've got to let him find a way!*

"I … meant to ask ye something," he said, suddenly diffident.

"What's that?"

"Well … Jemmy. He *can* sing. Would ye—of course he'd go to Mass with you still—but would ye mind if he was to come along with me, as well? Only if he liked," he added hastily. "But I think he might enjoy being in the choir. And I'd … like him to see I have a job, too, I suppose," he added, with a half-rueful smile.

"He'd love that," Brianna said, remarking mentally to the heavenly host, *Well, that was fast!* Because she saw at once—and wondered whether Roger had, but she didn't think so—that this offered a graceful way by which she and Mandy could attend the

Presbyterian services, as well, without any overt conflict between their two faiths.

"Would you come with us to the early Mass at St. Mary's?" she asked. "Because then we could all just go across to St. Stephen's together and see you and Jem sing."

"Yes, of course."

He stopped, the sandwich halfway to his mouth, and smiled at her, his eyes green as moss.

"It's better, isn't it?" he said.

"Lots," she said.

* * *

Later in the afternoon, Roger called her across to the study. There was a map of Scotland laid on his desk, next to the open notebook in which he was compiling the thing they had taken to calling—with a jokiness that barely covered the aversion they felt in even talking about it—"The Hitchhiker's Guide," after the BBC radio comedy.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "But I thought we'd best do it before Jem comes home. If ye're going back to Loch Errochty tomorrow …" He put the point of his pencil on the blue blotch labeled *L.Errochty*. "You could maybe get an accurate bearing for the tunnel, if ye're not quite sure where it is. Or are you?"

She swallowed, feeling the remains of her cheese sandwich stir uneasily at the memory of the dark tunnel, the rocking of the little train, of passing through … it.

"I don't, but I have something better. Wait." She stepped across to her own office and brought back the binder of Loch Errochty's specs.

"Here are the drawings for the tunnel construction," she said, flipping the binder open and laying it on the desk. "I have the blueprints, too, but they're at the main office."

"No, this is great," he assured her, poring over the drawing. "All I really wanted is the compass orientation of the tunnel to the dam."

He glanced up at her. “Speaking of that—have ye been all across the dam itself?”

“Not all across,” she said slowly. “Just the east side of the servicing bay. But I don’t think—I mean, look.” She put a finger on the drawing. “I hit it somewhere in the middle of the tunnel, and the tunnel is nearly in a straight line with the dam. If it runs in a line—is that what you think it does?” she added, looking at him curiously. He shrugged.

“It’s a place to start. Though I suppose engineers would have a better-sounding word than ‘guess’?”

“Working hypothesis,” she said dryly. “Anyway, if it *does* run in a line, rather than just existing in random spots, I’d probably have felt it in the dam if it was there at all. But I could go back and check.” Even she could hear the reluctance in her voice; he certainly did, and ran a light hand down her back in reassurance.

“No. I’ll do it.”

“What?”

“I’ll do it,” he repeated mildly. “We’ll see if I feel it, too.”

“No!” She straightened up abruptly. “You can’t. You don’t—I mean, what if something … happens? You can’t take that kind of risk!”

He looked at her thoughtfully for a moment, and nodded.

“Aye, I suppose there’s something of a risk. But small. I’ve been all over the Highlands, ken, in my younger years. And now and again I’ve felt something queer pass through me. So have most folk who live here,” he added with a smile. “Queerness is part of the place, aye?”

“Yes,” she said, with a brief shudder at thought of water horses, *ban-sidhe*, and Nuckelavees. “But you know what sort of queerness this is—and you know damned well it can kill you, Roger!”

“Didn’t kill you,” he pointed out. “Didn’t kill us on Ocracoke.” He spoke lightly, but she could see the shadow of that journey on his face with the speaking. It hadn’t killed them—but it had come close.

“No. But—” She looked at him and had a deep, wrenching instant in which she experienced at once the feel of his long, warm body next to hers in bed, the sound of his deep, corncrake voice—and the cold silence of his absence. “No,” she said, and made it apparent by her tone that she was prepared to be as stubborn as necessary about it. He heard that and gave a mild snort.

“All right,” he said. “Let me just put it down, then.” Comparing drawing and map, he chose a spot on the map that might correspond roughly with the center of the tunnel and raised one dark eyebrow in question. She nodded, and he made a light pencil mark in the shape of a star.

There was a large, definite star, made in black ink, over the site of the stone circle on Craigh na Dun. Smaller ones in light pencil at the sites of other stone circles. Someday, they might have to visit those circles. But not yet. Not now.

“Ever been to Lewis?” Roger asked—casually, but not as though it were an idle question.

“No, why?” she said warily.

“The Outer Hebrides are part of the Gaeltacht,” he said. “They do the line-singing in the *Gàidhlig* on Lewis, and on Harris, too. Don’t know about Uist and Barra—they’re mostly Catholic—but maybe. I’m thinking I’d like to go and see what it’s like these days.”

She could see the Isle of Lewis on the map, shaped like a pancreas, off the west coast of Scotland. It was a large map. Large enough for her to see the small legend *Callanish Stones*, on the Isle of Lewis.

She exhaled slowly.

“Fine,” she said. “I’ll go with you.”

“Ye’ve got work, haven’t you?”

“I’ll take time off.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Brianna broke away first, glancing at the clock on the shelf.

“Jem’ll be home soon,” she said, the prosaic nature of daily life asserting itself. “I’d better start something for supper. Annie brought us a nice salmon that her husband took. Shall I marinate it and bake it, or would you like it grilled?”

He shook his head and, rising, began to fold the map away.

“I won’t be in to supper tonight. It’s lodge night.”

* * *

The provincial grand Masonic Lodge of Inverness-shire included a number of local lodges, two of them in Inverness. Roger had joined Number 6, the Old Inverness Lodge, in his early twenties, but had not set foot inside the building in fifteen years, and did so now with a mingled sense of wariness and anticipation.

It was, though, the Highlands—and home. The first person he saw upon walking in was Barney Gaugh, who had been the burly, smiling station agent when Roger had come to Inverness on the train, aged five, to live with his great-uncle. Mr. Gaugh had shrunk considerably, and his tobacco-stained teeth had long since been replaced by equally tobacco-stained dentures, but he recognized Roger at once and beamed in delight, seizing him by the arm and towing him into a group of other old men, half of whom likewise exclaimed over his return.

It was weird, he thought a bit later, as they settled to the business of the lodge, doing the routine rituals of the Scottish Rite. *Like a time warp*, he thought, and nearly laughed out loud.

There were differences, aye, but they were slight—and the *feeling* of it … He could close his eyes and, if he imagined the haze of stubbed-out cigarettes to be the smoke of a hearth, it could be the Crombies' cabin on the Ridge, where the lodge there had met. The close murmur of voices, line and response, and then the relaxation, the shifting of bodies, fetching of tea and coffee, as the evening became purely social.

There were a good many present—many more than he was used to—and he didn't at first notice Lionel Menzies. The headmaster was across the room, frowning in concentration, listening to something a tall bloke in shirtsleeves was saying to him, leaning close. Roger hesitated, not wanting to break in upon their conversation, but the man talking to Menzies glanced up, saw Roger, returned to his conversation—but then stopped abruptly, gaze jerking back to Roger. To his throat, specifically.

Everyone in lodge had stared at the scar, whether openly or covertly. He'd worn an open-collared shirt under his jacket; there was no point in trying to hide it. Better to get it over with. The stranger stared at the scar so openly, though, as almost to be offensive.

Menzies noticed his companion's inattention—he could hardly not—and, turning, saw Roger and broke into a smile.

"Mr. MacKenzie," he said.

"Roger," Roger said, smiling; first names were usual in lodge, when they weren't being formally "brother so-and-so." Menzies nodded and tilted his head, drawing his companion into introduction. "Rob Cameron, Roger MacKenzie. Rob's my cousin—Roger's one of my parents."

"I thought so," Cameron said, shaking him warmly by the hand. "Thought you must be the new choirmaster, I mean. My wee nephew's in your infants' choir—that'll be Bobby Hurragh. He told us all about ye over supper last week."

Roger had seen the private glance exchanged between the men as Menzies introduced him and thought that the headmaster must also have mentioned him to Cameron, likely telling him about his visit to the school following Jem's Gaelic incident. That didn't concern him at the moment, though.

"Rob Cameron," he repeated, giving the man's hand a slightly stronger squeeze than usual before releasing it, this causing him to look startled. "You work for the Hydro, do you?"

"Aye. What—"

"Ye'll ken my wife, I think." Roger bared his teeth in what might—or might not—be taken for a genial smile. "Brianna MacKenzie?"

Cameron's mouth opened, but no sound came out. He realized this and closed it abruptly, coughing.

"I—uh. Yeah. Sure."

Roger had sized the man up automatically as he'd grasped his hand, and knew if it came to a fight it'd be a short one. Evidently, Cameron knew it, too.

"She, uh …"

"She told me, aye."

"Hey, it was no but a wee joke, right?" Cameron eyed him warily, in case Roger meant to invite him to step outside.

"Rob?" said Menzies curiously. "What—"

"What's this, what's this?" cried old Barney, bustling up to them. "Nay politics in lodge, lad! Ye want to talk your SNP shite to brother Roger, take it roond to the pub later." Seizing Cameron by the elbow, Barney towed him off to another group across the room, where Cameron at once settled into conversation, with no more than a brief glance back at Roger.

"SNP shite?" Roger asked, brows raised at Menzies. The headmaster lifted one shoulder, smiling.

"Ken what auld Barney said. Nay politics in lodge!" It was a Masonic rule, one of the most basic—no discussion of religion or politics in lodge—and probably the reason Freemasonry had lasted as long as it had, Roger thought. He didn't care much about the Scottish National Party, but he did want to know about Cameron.

"Wouldn't dream of it," Roger said. "Our Rob's a political, though, is he?"

"My apologies, brother Roger," Menzies said. The look of humorous good nature hadn't deserted him, but he did look somewhat apologetic. "I didn't mean to expose your family's business, but I did tell my wife about Jem and Mrs. Glendenning, and women being what they are, and my wife's sister living next door to Rob, Rob got to hear about it. He was interested because of the *Gàidhlig,* aye? And he does get carried away a bit. But I'm sure he didn't mean to be seeming too familiar with your wife."

It dawned on Roger that Menzies had hold of the wrong end of the stick regarding Rob Cameron and Brianna, but he didn't mean to enlighten him. It wasn't only the women; gossip was a way of life in the Highlands, and if word got round about the trick Rob and his mates had played on Bree, it might cause more trouble for her at her work.

"Ah," he said, seeking for a way to steer the conversation away from Brianna. "Of course. The SNP's all for resurrecting the *Gàidhlig,* aren't they? Does Cameron have it himself?"

Menzies shook his head. "His parents were among those who didn't want their kids to speak it. Now, of course, he's keen to learn.

Speak of that—” He broke off abruptly, eyeing Roger with his head to one side. “I had a thought. After we spoke the other day.”

“Aye?”

“I wondered, just. Would ye maybe think of doing a wee class now and then? Maybe only for Jem’s form, maybe a presentation for the school as a whole, if you felt comfortable about it.”

“A class? What, in the *Gàidhlig*?”

“Yes. You know, very basic stuff, but maybe with a word or two about the history, maybe a bit of a song—Rob said ye’re choirmaster at St. Stephen’s?”

“Assistant,” Roger corrected. “And I don’t know about the singing. But the *Gàidhlig* … aye, maybe. I’ll think about it.”

* * *

He found Brianna waiting up, in his study, a letter from her parents’ box in her hand, unopened.

“We don’t have to read it tonight,” she said, putting it down, rising, and coming to kiss him. “I just felt like I wanted to be close to them. How was lodge?”

“Odd.” The business of the lodge was secret, of course, but he could tell her about Menzies and Cameron, and did.

“What’s the SNP?” she asked, frowning.

“The Scottish National Party.” He skinned out of his coat, and shivered. It was cold, and there was no fire in the study. “Came in during the late thirties, but didn’t get really going until quite recently. Elected eleven members to Parliament by 1974, though—respectable. As ye might gather from the name, their goal is Scottish independence.”

“Respectable,” she repeated, sounding dubious.

“Well, moderately. Like any party, they have their lunatic elements. For what it’s worth,” he added, “I don’t think Rob Cameron’s one of them. Just your average arsehole.”

That made her laugh, and the sound of it warmed him. So did her body, which she pressed against his, arms round his shoulders.

“That would be Rob,” she agreed.

“Menzies says he’s interested in the Gaelic, though. If I teach a class, I hope he doesn’t turn up in the front row.”

“Wait—what? Now you’re teaching Gaelic classes?”

“Well, maybe. We’ll see about it.” He found himself reluctant to think too much about Menzies’s suggestion. Maybe it was only the mention of singing. Croaking out a tune to guide the kids was one thing; singing alone in public—even if it was only schoolkids—was something else again.

“That can wait,” he said, and kissed her. “Let’s read your letter.”

* * *

June 2, 1777
Fort Ticonderoga

“Fort Ticonderoga?” Bree’s voice rose in astonishment, and she all but jerked the letter from Roger’s hands. “What on earth are they doing in Fort Ticonderoga?”

“I don’t know, but if ye’ll settle for a moment, we’ll maybe find out.”

She didn’t reply but came round the desk and leaned over, her chin propped on his shoulder, her hair brushing his cheek as she focused anxiously on the page.

“It’s okay,” he said, turning to kiss her cheek. “It’s your mum, and she’s in an especially parenthetical mood. She doesn’t normally do that unless she’s feeling happy.”

“Well, yes,” Bree murmured, frowning at the page, “but … Fort Ticonderoga?”

Dear Bree, et al—

As you’ve doubtless gathered from the heading of this letter, we are not (yet) in Scotland. We had a certain amount of difficulty on our voyage, involving a) the Royal navy, in the person of one Captain Stebbings, who attempted to press your father and your cousin Ian (it *didn't work); b) an American privateer (though her captain, one—and one of him is more than enough—Asa Hickman insists upon the more dignified "letter of marque" as the designation of his ship's mission, which is essentially piracy but executed under the authority of the Continental Congress); c) Rollo; and d) the gentleman I mentioned to you earlier, named (I thought) John Smith, but who turns out to be a deserter from the Royal navy named Bill (aka "Jonah," and I begin to think they are right) Marsden.*

Without going into the details of the whole blood-soaked farce, I will merely report that Jamie, Ian, the damned dog, and I are all fine. So far. I'm hoping this state of affairs continues for the next forty-two days, that being when your father's short-term militia contract expires. (Don't ask. Essentially, he was saving Mr. Marsden's neck, as well as providing for the welfare of a couple of dozen seamen inadvertently forced into piracy.) Once it does, we propose to leave promptly on whatever transport might be headed in the general direction of Europe, provided only that said transport is not captained by Asa Hickman. We may have to travel overland to Boston in order to do this, but so be it. (I suppose it would be interesting to see what Boston looks like these days. The Back Bay still being water and all, I mean. At least the Common will still be there, if sporting rather more cows than we were used to.)

The fort is under the command of one General Anthony Wayne, and I have the uncomfortable feeling that I have heard Roger mention this man, using the nickname "Mad Anthony." I'm hoping this designation either does or will refer to his conduct in battle, rather than in administration. So far he seems rational, if harried.

Being harried is rational, as he is expecting the more or less imminent arrival of the British army. Meanwhile, his chief engineer, a Mr. Jeduthan Baldwin (you'd like him, I *think. Very energetic fellow!), is building a Great Bridge, to connect the fort with the hill they call Mount Independence. Your father is commanding a crew of laborers at work on this bridge; I can see him just now, from my perch on one of the fort's demilune batteries. He stands out, rather, being not only twice the size of most of the men but one of the few wearing a shirt. Most of them in fact work naked, or wearing only a clout, because of the heat and wet. Given the mosquitoes, I think this is a mistake, but no one asked me.*

No one asked my opinion of the hygienic protocols involved in maintaining a proper sick bay and prisoner accommodations, either (we brought several British prisoners with us, including the aforementioned Captain Stebbings who should by all rights be dead, but somehow isn't), but I told them anyway. I am thus persona non grata with Lieutenant Stactoe, who thinks he is a surgeon but isn't, and therefore am prevented from treating the men under his care, most of whom will be dead within a month. Fortunately, no one cares if I treat the women, children, or prisoners, and so I am usefully occupied, there being a lot of them.

I have a distinct notion that Ticonderoga changed hands at some point, probably more than once, but have no idea who took it from whom, or when. This last point rather weighs upon my mind.

General Wayne has almost no regular troops. Jamie says the fort is seriously undermanned—and even I can see this; half the barracks are vacant—and while the occasional militia company comes in from New Hampshire or Connecticut, these normally enroll for only two or three months, as we did. Even so, the men often don't stay their full term; there is a constant melting away, and General Wayne complains—publicly—that he is reduced to (and I quote) "Negroes, Indians, and women." I told him that he could do worse.

Jamie says also that the fort lacks half its guns, these having been abstracted by a fat bookseller named Henry Fox, who took them two years ago and managed by some feat of persistence and engineering to get them all the way to Boston (Mr. Fox himself having to be conveyed in a cart along with them, he weighing in excess of three hundred pounds. One of the officers here, who accompanied that expedition, described it, to general hilarity), where they proved very useful indeed in getting rid of the British.

What's somewhat more worrying than these points is the existence of a small hill, directly across the water from us, and no great distance away. The Americans named it Mount Defiance when they took Ticonderoga away from the British in '75 (you remember Ethan Allen? "Surrender in the name of the Great Jehovah and the Continental Congress!" I hear that poor Mr. Allen is presently in England, being tried for treason, he having rather overreached himself by trying to take Montreal on the same terms), and that's rather apt—or would be, if the fort was capable of putting men and artillery on top of it. They aren't, and I think the fact that Mount Defiance commands the fort and is within cannon-shot of it probably will not be lost on the British army, if and when they get here.

On the good side, it is almost summer. The fish are jumping, and if there was any cotton, it would probably reach my waist. It rains frequently, and I've never seen so much vegetation in one place. (The air is so rich with oxygen, I occasionally think I will pass out, and am obliged to nip into the barracks for a restorative whiff of dirty laundry and chamber pots (though the local usage is "thunder-mug," and for good reason). Your cousin Ian takes foraging parties out every few days, Jamie and a number of the other men are accomplished fishermen, and we eat extremely well in consequence.

> *I won't go on at great length here, as I'm not sure when or where I'll be able to dispatch this letter via one or more of Jamie's several routes (we copy each letter, if there's time, and send multiple copies, since even normal correspondence is chancy these days). With luck, it will go with us to Edinburgh. In the meantime, we send you all our love. Jamie dreams now and then of the children; I wish I did.*
>
> *Mama*

Roger sat in silence for a moment, to be sure Bree had had time to finish reading the letter—though in fact she read much faster than he did; he thought she must be reading it twice. After a moment, she sighed through her nose in a troubled fashion and straightened up. He put up a hand and rested it on her waist, and she covered it with her own. Not mechanically; she gripped his fingers tightly—but absently. She was looking across at the bookshelves.

"Those are new, aren't they?" she asked quietly, lifting her chin toward the right-hand bay.

"Yeah. I sent to Boston for them. They came in a couple of days ago." The spines were new and shiny. History texts, dealing with the American Revolution. *Encyclopedia of the American Revolution*, by Mark M. Boatner III. *A Narrative of a Revolutionary Soldier*, by Joseph Plumb Martin.

"Do you want to know?" he asked. He nodded at the open box on the table before them, where a thick sheaf of letters still remained unopened, on top of the books. He hadn't yet brought himself to admit to Bree that he'd looked at the books. "I mean—we know they probably made it out of Ticonderoga all right. There are a lot more letters."

"We know one of them probably did," Bree said, eyeing the letters. "Unless … Ian knows, I mean. He could have …"

Roger pulled his hand back and reached with determination into the box. Bree drew in her breath, but he ignored it, taking a handful of letters from the box and flipping through them.

"Claire, Claire, Claire, Jamie, Claire, Jamie, Jamie, Claire, Jamie"—he stopped, blinking at a letter addressed in an unfamiliar hand—"maybe you're right about Ian; do you know what his handwriting looks like?"

She shook her head.

"I don't think I ever saw him write anything—though I suppose he *can* write," she added, dubious.

"Well …" Roger put down the folded sheet, and looked from the scatter of letters to the bookshelf and thence to her. She was slightly flushed. "What do you want to do?"

She considered, her eyes flicking to and from the bookshelves and the wooden box.

"The books," she said, decided, and strode across to the shelves. "Which one of these will tell us when Ticonderoga fell?"

* * *

George III, Rex Britannia
to Lord George Germain

… Burgoyne may command the corps to be sent from Canada to Albany …

As sickness and other contingencies must be expected, I should think not above 7,000 effectives can be spared over Lake Champlain, for it would be highly imprudent to run any risk in Canada … Indians must be employed.

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TICONDEROGA

June 12, 1777
Fort Ticonderoga

I found Jamie asleep, lying naked on the pallet in the tiny chamber that had been allotted to us. It was at the top of one of the stone-built barracks buildings, and thus hot as Hades by mid-afternoon. Still, we were rarely in it during the day, Jamie being out on the lake with the bridge builders, and I being in the hospital building or the family quarters—all of those being equally hot, of course.

By the same token, though, the stones held enough heat to keep us warm in the cool evenings—there was no fireplace—and it did have a small window. There was a good breeze off the water toward sunset, and for a few hours between, say, ten p.m. and two a.m., it was very pleasant. It was about eight now—still light out and still toasty in; sweat shone on Jamie's shoulders and darkened the hair at his temples to a deep bronze.

On the good side, our tiny attic was the only room at the top of the building and thus had some modicum of privacy. On the other hand, there were forty-eight stone steps up to our aerie, and water must be carried up and slops carried down them. I'd just hauled up a large bucket of water, and the half of it that hadn't spilled down the front of my dress weighed a ton. I put it down with a clunk that brought Jamie upright in an instant, blinking in the gloom.

"Oh, sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to wake you."

“No matter, Sassenach,” he said, and yawned immensely. He sat up, stretched, then scrubbed his hands through his damp, loose hair. “Have ye had supper?”

“Yes, I ate with the women. Have you?” He normally ate with his crew of laborers when they stopped work, but sometimes was summoned to dine with General St. Clair or the other militia officers, and these quasi-formal occasions took place much later.

“Mmm-hmm.” He lay back on the pallet and watched as I poured water into a tin washing bowl and dug out a tiny lump of lye soap. I stripped to my shift and began meticulously scrubbing, though the strong soap stung my already raw skin and the fumes of it were enough to make my eyes water.

I rinsed my hands and arms, tossed the water out the window—pausing briefly to shout, “Gardy-loo!” before doing so—and started over.

“Why are ye doing that?” Jamie asked curiously.

“Mrs. Wellman’s little boy has what I’m almost sure is the mumps. Or ought that to be *are* the mumps? I’ve never been sure whether it’s plural or not. In any case, I’m taking no chance on transmitting it to you.”

“Is it a terrible thing, mumps? I thought only weans got it.”

“Well, normally it *is* a child’s disease,” I said, wincing at the touch of the soap. “But when an adult gets it—particularly an adult male—it’s a more serious matter. It tends to settle in the testicles. And unless you *want* to have balls the size of muskmelons—”

“Are ye sure ye have enough soap there, Sassenach? I could go and find more.” He grinned at me, then sat up again and reached for the limp strip of linen that served us as a towel. “Here, *a nighean*, let me dry your hands.”

“In a minute.” I wriggled out of my stays, dropped my shift, and hung it on the hook by the door, then pulled my “home” shift over my head. It wasn’t quite as sanitary as having surgical scrubs to wear to work, but the fort absolutely crawled with diseases, and I’d do whatever I could to avoid bringing them back to Jamie. He’d run into enough of them in the open.

I splashed the last of the water over my face and arms, then sat down on the pallet beside Jamie, giving a small cry as my knee cracked painfully.

"God, your poor hands," he murmured, gently patting them with the towel, then swabbing my face. "And your nose is sunburnt, too, the wee thing."

"What about yours?" Callused as they normally were, his hands were still a mass of nicks, scraped knuckles, splinters, and blisters, but he dismissed that with a brief flick of one hand and lay back down again with a luxurious groan.

"Does your knee still hurt, Sassenach?" he asked, seeing me rub it. It hadn't ever quite recovered from being strained during our adventures on the *Pitt*, and climbing stairs provoked it.

"Oh, just part of the general decline," I said, trying to make a joke of it. I flexed my right arm, gingerly, feeling a twinge in the elbow. "Things don't bend quite so easily as they used to. And other things hurt. Sometimes I think I'm falling apart."

Jamie closed one eye and regarded me.

"I've felt like that since I was about twenty," he observed. "Ye get used to it." He stretched, making his spine give off a series of muffled pops, and held out a hand. "Come to bed, *a nighean*. Nothing hurts when ye love me."

He was right; nothing did.

* * *

I fell briefly asleep, but woke by instinct a couple of hours later to go and check the few patients who needed an eye kept on them. These included Captain Stebbings, who had—to my surprise—stoutly refused either to die or to be doctored by anyone but me. That hadn't gone over well with Lieutenant Stactoe or the other surgeons, but as Captain Stebbings's demand was backed up by the intimidating presence of Guinea Dick—pointed teeth, tattoos, and all—I remained his personal surgeon.

I found the captain mildly feverish and wheezing audibly, but asleep. Guinea Dick rose from his own pallet at the sound of my step, looking like a particularly fearsome manifestation of someone's nightmare.

"Has he eaten?" I asked softly, laying my hand lightly on Stebbings's wrist. The captain's tubby form had shrunk considerably; even in the gloom, I could easily see the ribs I'd once had to grope for.

"Him has little soup, ma'am," the African whispered, and moved a hand toward a bowl on the floor, covered with a handkerchief to keep out the roaches. "Like you say. I give him more when he wake to piss."

"Good." Stebbings's pulse was a little fast, but not alarming, and when I leaned over him and inhaled deeply, I detected no scent of gangrene. I'd been able to withdraw the tube from his chest two days before, and while there was a slight exudation of pus from the site, I thought it a local infection that would likely clear without assistance. It would have to; I had nothing to assist it.

There was almost no light in the hospital barracks, only a rush-dip near the door and what little illumination came from the fires in the courtyard. I couldn't judge of Stebbings's color, but I saw the flash of white as he half-opened his eyes. He grunted when he saw me, and closed them again.

"Good," I said again, and left him in the tender charge of Mr. Dick.

The Guinea man had been offered the chance to enlist in the Continental army but had refused, choosing to become a prisoner of war with Captain Stebbings, the wounded Mr. Ormiston, and a few other seamen from the *Pitt*.

"I am English, free man," he had said simply. "Prisoner maybe for a little, but free man. Seaman, but free man. American, maybe not free man."

Maybe not.

I left the hospital barracks, called in at the Wellmans' quarters to check on my case of mumps—uncomfortable, but not dangerous—and then strolled slowly across the courtyard under a rising moon. The evening breeze had died down, but the night air had some coolness in it, and moved by impulse, I climbed to the demilune battery that looked across the narrow end of Lake Champlain to Mount Defiance.

There were two guards, but both were fast asleep, reeking of liquor. It wasn't unusual. Morale at the fort was not high, and alcohol was easily available.

I stood by the wall, a hand on one of the guns, its metal still faintly warm from the day's heat. Would we get away, I wondered, before it was hot from being fired? Thirty-two days to go, and they couldn't go fast enough to suit me. Aside from the menace of the British, the fort festered and stank; it was like living in a cesspool, and I could only hope that Jamie, Ian, and I would leave it without having contracted some vile disease or having been assaulted by some drunken idiot.

I heard a faint step behind me and turned to see Ian himself, tall and slender in the glow of the fires below.

"Can I speak to ye, Auntie?"

"Of course," I said, wondering at this unaccustomed formality. I stood aside a little, and he came to stand beside me, looking down.

"Cousin Brianna would have a thing or two to say about that," he said, with a nod through the half-built bridge below. "So has Uncle Jamie."

"I know." Jamie had been saying it for the last two weeks—to the fort's new commander, Arthur St. Clair, to the other militia colonels, to the engineers, to anyone who would listen, and not a few who wouldn't. The folly of expending vast amounts of labor and material in building a bridge that could be easily destroyed by artillery on Mount Defiance was clear to everyone except those in command.

I sighed. It wasn't the first time I'd seen military blindness, and I was very much afraid it wouldn't be the last.

"Well, leaving that aside … what did you want to speak to me about, Ian?"

He took a deep breath and turned toward the moonlit vista over the lake.

"D'ye ken the Huron who came to the fort a wee while past?"

I did. Two weeks before, a party of Huron had visited the fort, and Ian had spent an evening smoking with them, listening to their stories. Some of these concerned the English General Burgoyne, whose hospitality they had previously enjoyed.

Burgoyne was actively soliciting the Indians of the Iroquois League, they said, spending a great deal of time and money in wooing them.

“He says his Indians are his secret weapon,” one of the Huron had said, laughing. “He will unleash them upon the Americans, to burn like lightning, and strike them all dead.”

Knowing what I did of Indians in general, I thought Burgoyne might be a trifle overoptimistic. Still, I preferred not to think what might happen if he *did* succeed in persuading any number of Indians to fight for him.

Ian was still staring at the distant hump of Mount Defiance, lost in thought.

“Be that as it may,” I said, calling the meeting to order. “Why are you telling me this, Ian? You should tell Jamie and St. Clair.”

“I did.” The cry of a loon came across the lake, surprisingly loud and eerie. They sounded like yodeling ghosts, particularly when more than one of them was at it.

“Yes? Well, then,” I said, slightly impatient. “What did you want to talk to me about?”

“Babies,” he said abruptly, straightening up and turning to face me.

“What?” I said, startled. He’d been quiet and moody ever since the Hurons’ visit, and I assumed that something they’d told him had caused it—but I couldn’t imagine what they might have said to him regarding babies.

“How they’re made,” he said doggedly, though his eyes slid away from mine. Had there been more light, I was sure I could have seen him blushing.

“Ian,” I said, after a brief pause. “I decline to believe that you don’t know how babies are made. What do you *really* want to know?”

He sighed, but at last he looked at me. His lips compressed for a moment, then he blurted, “I want to know why I canna make one.”

I rubbed a knuckle across my lips, disconcerted. I knew—Bree had told me—that he had had a stillborn daughter with his Mohawk wife, Emily, and that she had then miscarried at least twice. Also that it was this failure that had led to Ian's leaving the Mohawk at Snaketown and returning to us.

"Why do you think it might be you?" I asked bluntly. "Most men blame the woman when a child is stillborn or miscarried. So do most women, for that matter."

I had blamed both myself and Jamie.

He made a small Scottish noise in his throat, impatient.

"The Mohawk don't. They say when a man lies wi' a woman, his spirit does battle with hers. If he overcomes her, then the child is planted; if not, it doesna happen."

"Hmm," I said. "Well, that's one way of putting it. And I wouldn't say they're wrong, either. It *can* be something to do with either the man or the woman—or it may be something about them together."

"Aye." I heard him swallow before he went on. "One of the women wi' the Huron was Kahnyen'kehaka—a woman from Snaketown, and she kent me, from when I was there. And she said to me that Emily has a child. A live child."

He had been moving restlessly from foot to foot as he talked, cracking his knuckles. Now he stilled. The moon was well up and shone on his face, making hollows of his eyes.

"I've been thinking, Auntie," he said softly. "I've been thinking for a verra long time. About her. Emily. About Yeksa'a. The—my wee bairn." He stopped, big knuckles pressed hard into his thighs, but he gathered himself again and went on, more steadily.

"And just lately I have been thinking something else. If—*when,*" he corrected, with a glance over one shoulder, as though expecting Jamie to pop up through a trap, glaring, "we go to Scotland, I dinna ken how things might be. But if I—if I was to wed again, maybe, either there or here …" He looked up at me suddenly, his face old with sorrow but heartbreakingly young with hope and doubt.

"I couldna take a lass to wife if I kent that I should never give her live bairns."

He swallowed again, looking down.

"Could ye maybe … look at my parts, Auntie? To see if maybe there's aught amiss?" His hand went to his breechclout, and I stopped him with a hasty gesture.

"Perhaps that can wait a bit, Ian. Let me take a history first; then we'll see if I need to do an examination."

"Are ye sure?" He sounded surprised. "Uncle Jamie told me about the sperm ye showed him. I thought maybe mine might not be quite right in some way."

"Well, I'd need a microscope to see, in any case. And while there *are* such things as abnormal sperm, usually when that's the case, conception doesn't take place at all. And as I understand it, that wasn't the difficulty. Tell me—" I didn't want to ask, but there was no way round it. "Your daughter. Did you see her?"

The nuns had given me my stillborn daughter. "*It's better if you see,"* they had said, gently insistent.

He shook his head.

"Not to say so. I mean—I saw the wee bundle they'd made of her, wrapped in rabbit skin. They put it up high in the fork of a red cedar. I went there at night, for some time, just to … well. I did think of taking the bundle down, of unwrapping her, just to see her face. But it would ha' troubled Emily, so I didn't."

"I'm sure you're right. But did … oh, hell, Ian, I'm so sorry—but did your wife or any of the other women ever say that there was anything visibly wrong with the child? Was she … deformed in any way?"

He glanced at me, eyes wide with shock, and his lips moved soundlessly for a moment.

"No," he said at last, and there was both pain and relief in his voice. "No. I asked. Emily didna want to talk about her, about Iseabaìl—that's what I would ha' named her, Iseabaìl—" he explained, "but I asked and wouldna stop until she told me what the baby looked like.

"She was perfect," he said softly, looking down at the bridge, where a chain of lanterns glowed, reflected in the water. "Perfect."

So had Faith been. Perfect.

I put a hand on his forearm, ropy with hard muscle.

"That's good," I said quietly. "Very good. Tell me as much as you can, then, about what happened during the pregnancy. Did your wife have any bleeding between the time you knew she was pregnant and when she gave birth?"

Slowly I led him through the hope and fear, the desolation of each loss, such symptoms as he could remember, and what he knew of Emily's family; had there been stillbirths among her relations? Miscarriages?

The moon passed overhead and started down the sky. At last I stretched and shook myself.

"I can't be positive," I said. "But I think it's at least possible that the trouble was what we call an Rh problem."

"A what?" He was leaning against one of the big guns, and lifted his head at this.

There was no point in trying to explain blood groups, antigens, and antibodies. And it wasn't actually all that different from the Mohawk explanation of the problem, I thought.

"If a woman's blood is Rh-negative, and her husband's blood is Rh-positive," I explained, "then the child will be Rh-positive, because that's dominant—never mind what that means, but the child will be positive like the father. Sometimes the first pregnancy is all right, and you don't see a problem until the next time—sometimes it happens with the first. Essentially, the mother's body produces a substance that kills the child. *But*, if an Rh-negative woman should have a child by an Rh-negative man, then the fetus is always Rh-negative, too, and there's no problem. Since you say Emily has had a live birth, then it's possible that her new husband is Rh-negative, too." I knew absolutely nothing about the prevalence of Rhesus-negative blood type in Native Americans, but the theory did fit the evidence.

"And if that's so," I finished, "then you shouldn't have that problem with another woman—most European women are Rh-positive, though not all."

He stared at me for so long that I wondered whether he had understood what I'd said.

"Call it fate," I said gently, "or call it bad luck. But it wasn't your fault. Or hers." Not mine. Nor Jamie's.

He nodded, slowly, and leaning forward, laid his head on my shoulder for a moment.

"Thank ye, Auntie," he whispered, and lifting his head, kissed my cheek.

The next day, he was gone.

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THE GREAT DISMAL

June 21, 1777

William marveled at the road. True, there were only a few miles of it, but the miracle of being able to ride straight into the Great Dismal, through a place where he vividly recalled having had to swim his horse on a previous visit, all the while dodging snapping turtles and venomous snakes—the convenience of it was astonishing. The horse seemed of similar mind, picking up its feet in a lighthearted way, outpacing the clouds of tiny yellow horseflies that tried to swarm them, the insects' eyes glinting like tiny rainbows when they drew close.

"Enjoy it while you can," William advised the gelding, with a brief scratch of the mane. "Muddy going up ahead."

The road itself, while clear of the sweet gum saplings and straggling pines that crowded its edge, was muddy enough, in all truth. Nothing like the treacherous bogs and unexpected pools that lurked beyond the scrim of trees, though. He rose a little in the stirrups, peering ahead.

How far? he wondered. Dismal Town stood on the shore of Lake Drummond, which lay in the middle of the swamp. He had never come so far into the Great Dismal as he was now, though, and had no notion of its actual size.

The road didn't go so far as the lake, he knew that. But surely there was a trace to follow; those inhabitants of Dismal Town must come and go on occasion.

“Washington,” he repeated under his breath. “Washington, Cartwright, Harrington, Carver.” Those were the names he’d been given by Captain Richardson, of the Loyalist gentlemen from Dismal Town; he’d committed them to memory and punctiliously burned the sheet of paper containing them. Having done so, though, he was seized by irrational panic lest he forget the names, and had been repeating them to himself at intervals throughout the morning.

It was well past noon now, and the wispy clouds of the morning had been knitting themselves up into a low sky the color of dirty wool. He breathed in slowly, but the air didn’t have that prickling scent of impending downpour—yet. Besides the ripe reek of the swamp, rich with mud and rotting plants, he could smell his own skin, salty and rank. He’d washed his hands and head as he could but hadn’t changed nor washed his clothes in two weeks, and the rough hunting shirt and homespun breeches were beginning to itch considerably.

Though perhaps it wasn’t just dried sweat and dirt. He clawed viciously at a certain crawling sensation in his breeches. He’d swear he’d picked up a louse in the last tavern.

The louse, if there was one, wisely desisted, and the itch died. Relieved, William breathed deep and noticed that the swamp’s scents had grown more pungent, the sap of resinous trees rising in answer to the oncoming rain. The air had suddenly assumed a muffled quality that deadened sound. No birds sang now; it was as though he and the horse rode alone through a world wrapped in cotton wool.

William didn’t mind being alone. He’d grown up essentially alone, without brothers or sisters, and was content in his own company. Besides, solitude, he told himself, was good for thinking.

“Washington, Cartwright, Harrington, and Carver,” he chanted softly. But beyond the names, there was little to think of with regard to his present errand, and he found his thoughts turn in a more familiar direction.

What he thought of most frequently on the road was women, and he touched the pocket under the tail of his coat, reflective. The pocket would hold one small book; it had been a choice on this journey between the New Testament his grandmother had given him or his treasured copy of *Harris's List of Covent Garden Ladies*. No great contest.

When William was sixteen, his father had caught him and a friend engrossed in the pages of his friend's father's copy of Mr. Harris's notorious guide to the splendors of London's women of pleasure. Lord John had raised an eyebrow and flipped slowly through the book, pausing now and then to raise the other eyebrow. He had then closed the book, taken a deep breath, administered a brief lecture on the necessary respect due to the female sex, then told the boys to fetch their hats.

At a discreet and elegant house at the end of Brydges Street, they took tea with a beautifully gowned Scottish lady, a Mrs. McNab, who appeared to be on the friendliest of terms with his father. At the conclusion of the refreshment, Mrs. McNab had rung a small brass bell, and …

William shifted in his saddle, sighing. Her name had been Margery, and he had written a perfervid panegyric to her. Had been madly in love with her.

He'd gone back, after a fevered week of reckoning his accounts, with the fixed intent of proposing marriage. Mrs. McNab had greeted him kindly, listened to his stumbling professions with the most sympathetic attention, then told him that Margery would, she was sure, be pleased with his good opinion but was, alas, occupied just this minute. However, there was a sweet young lass named Peggy, just come from Devonshire, who seemed lonely and would doubtless be so pleased to have a bit of conversation whilst he was waiting to speak with Margery …

The realization that Margery was just that minute doing with someone else what she'd done with *him* was such a staggering blow that he'd sat staring openmouthed at Mrs. McNab, rousing only when Peggy came in, fresh-faced, blond, and smiling, and with the most remarkable—

"Ah!" William slapped at the back of his neck, stung by a horsefly, and swore.

The horse had slowed without his noticing, and now that he *did* notice …

He swore again, louder. The road had disappeared.

"How the bloody hell did *that* happen?" He'd spoken loudly, but his voice seemed small, muted by the staggered trees. The flies had followed him; one bit the horse, who snorted and shook his head violently.

"Come on, then," William said, more quietly. "Can't be far off, can it? We'll find it."

He reined the horse's head around, riding slowly in what he hoped was a wide semicircle that might cut the road. The ground was damp here, rumpled with tussocks of long, tangled grass, but not boggy. The horse's feet left deep curves where they struck in the mud, and thick flecks of matted mud and grass flew up, sticking to the horse's hocks and sides and William's boots.

He had been heading north-northwest.… He glanced instinctively at the sky, but no help to be found there. The uniform soft gray was altering, here and there a heavy-bellied cloud bulging through the muffling layer, sullen and murmurous. A faint rumble of thunder reached him, and he swore again.

His watch chimed softly, the sound strangely reassuring. He reined up for a moment, not wanting to risk dropping it in the mud, and fumbled it out of his watch pocket. Three o'clock.

"Not so bad," he said to the horse, encouraged. "Plenty of daylight left." Of course, this was a mere technicality, given the atmospheric conditions. It might as well have been the far side of twilight.

He looked up at the gathering clouds, calculating. No doubt about it: it was going to rain, and soon. Well, it wouldn't be the first time he and the horse had gotten wet. He sighed, dismounted, and unrolled his canvas bed-sack, part of his army equipment. He got up again and, with the canvas draped round his shoulders, his hat unlaced and pulled well down, resumed a dogged search for the road.

The first drops came pattering down, and a remarkable smell rose from the swamp in response. Earthy, rich, green, and … fecund, somehow, as though the swamp stretched itself, opening its body in lazy pleasure to the sky, releasing its scent like the perfume that wafts from an expensive whore's tumbling hair.

William reached by reflex for the book in his pocket, meaning to write down that poetic thought in the margins, but then shook his head, muttering, "Idiot," to himself.

He wasn't really worried. He had, as he'd told Captain Richardson, been in and out of the Great Dismal many times. Granted, he'd not been here by himself; he and his father had come now and then with a hunting party or with some of his father's Indian friends. And some years before. But—

"Shit!" he said. He'd pressed the horse through what he'd hoped was the thicket edging the road, only to find more thicket—dark clumps of hairy-barked juniper, aromatic as a glass of Holland gin in the rain. No room to turn. Muttering, he kneed the horse and pulled back, clicking his tongue.

Uneasily, he saw that the imprints of the horse's hooves were filling slowly with water. Not from the rain; the ground was wet. Very wet. He heard the sucking noise as the horse's back hooves struck bog, and by reflex he leaned forward, urgently kneeing the horse in the ribs.

Caught wrong-footed, the horse stumbled, caught himself—and then the horse's hind legs gave way suddenly, slipping in the mud, and he flung up his head, whinnying in surprise. William, taken equally unaware, bounced over his rolled bed-sack and fell off, landing with a splash.

He rose up like a scalded cat, panicked at the thought of being sucked down into one of the quaking bogs that lurked in the Great Dismal. He'd seen the skeleton of a deer caught in one once, nothing still visible save the antlered skull, half sunk and twisted to one side, its long yellow teeth showing in what he'd imagined to be a scream.

He splashed hastily toward a tussock, sprang atop it, and crouched there like the toad-king, heart hammering. His horse—was it trapped, had the bog got it?

The gelding was down, thrashing in the mud, whinnying in panic, muddy water flying in sheets from its struggles.

"Jesus." He clutched handsful of the rough grass, balanced precariously. Was it bog? Or only a slough?

Gritting his teeth, he stretched one long leg out, gingerly setting foot on the agitated surface. His boot pressed down … down … He pulled it hastily back, but it came readily, with a *ploop!* of mud and water. Again … yes, there was a bottom! All right, now the other … He stood up, arms waving storklike for balance, and …

"All right!" he said, breathless. A slough—no more, thank God!

He splashed toward the horse and snatched up the canvas bedsack, loosened in the fall. Flinging it over the horse's head, he wrapped it hastily round the animal's eyes. It was what you did for a horse too panicked to leave a burning barn; his father had shown him how when the barn at Mount Josiah had been struck by lightning one year.

Rather to his astonishment, it seemed to help. The horse was shaking its head to and fro but had quit churning its legs. He seized the bridle and blew into the horse's nostrils, talking calming nonsense.

The horse snorted, spraying him with droplets, but seemed to collect itself. He pulled its head up, and it rolled onto its chest with a great swash of muddy water, and in almost the same motion, surged heavily to its feet. It shook itself from head to tail, the canvas flapping loose and mud showering everything within ten feet of the animal.

William was much too happy to care. He seized the end of the canvas and pulled it off, then took hold of the bridle.

"Right," he said, breathless. "Let's get out of this."

The horse was not paying attention; its dish-faced head lifted suddenly, turned to the side.

"What—"

The huge nostrils flared red, and with an explosive grunt, the horse charged past him, jerking the reins from his hands and knocking him flat in the water—again.

"You frigging *bastard!* What the devil—" William stopped short, crouched in the mud. Something long, drab, and extremely fast passed less than two paces from him. Something big.

His head jerked round, but it was already gone, silent in pursuit of the blundering horse, whose panicked flight he could hear receding in the distance, punctuated by the crashing of broken brush and the occasional clang of shed equipment.

He swallowed. They hunted now and then together, he'd heard. Catamounts. In pairs.

The back of his neck prickled, and he turned his head as far as he could manage, afraid to move more for fear of drawing the attention of anything that might be lurking in the dark tangle of gum trees and underbrush behind him. No sound, save the increasing patter of raindrops on the swamp.

An egret burst white from the trees on the far side of the slough, nearly stopping his heart. He froze, breath held until he thought he'd suffocate in the effort to hear, but nothing happened, and at last he breathed and rose to his feet, the skirts of his coat plastered to his thighs, dripping.

He was standing in a peat bog; there was spongy vegetation under his feet, but the water rose up over the tops of his boots. He wasn't sinking, but he couldn't pull the boots out with his feet still in them and was obliged to draw his feet out one at a time, then wrench the boots free and squelch toward higher ground in his stockings, boots in his hands.

The sanctuary of a rotted log reached, he sat down to empty the water out of his boots, grimly reckoning his situation as he put them on again.

He was lost. In a swamp known to have devoured any number of people, both Indian and white. On foot, without food, fire, or any shelter beyond the flimsy protection offered by the canvas bedsack—this the standard army issue, a literal sack made of canvas with a slit in it, meant to be stuffed with straw or dry grass—both these substances conspicuously lacking in his present circumstances. All he possessed otherwise was the contents of his pockets, this consisting of a clasp knife, a lead pencil, a very soggy bit of bread and cheese, a filthy handkerchief, a few coins, his watch, and his book, also doubtless soaked. He reached to check, discovered that the watch had stopped and the book was gone, and swore, loudly.

That seemed to help a bit, so he did it again. The rain was falling heavily now, not that it mattered in the slightest, given his state. The louse in his breeches, evidently waking to discover its habitat flooded, set off on a determined march to discover drier quarters.

Muttering blasphemies, he stood up, draped the empty canvas over his head, and limped off in the direction in which his horse had departed, scratching.

* * *

He never found the horse. Either the catamount had killed it, somewhere out of sight, or it had escaped to wander alone through the swamp. He did find two items shed from its saddle: a small waxed packet containing tobacco, and a frying pan. Neither of these seemed immediately useful, but he was loath to part with any remnant of civilization.

Soaked to the skin and shivering under the scanty shelter of his canvas, he crouched among the roots of a sweet gum tree, watching lightning split the night sky. Each blue-white flash was blinding, even through closed eyelids, each jolt of thunder shaking air gone sharp as a knife with the acrid smell of lightning and burnt things.

He had grown almost accustomed to the cannonade when a tremendous blast knocked him flat and swept him skidding sideways through mud and rotted leaves. Choking and gasping, he sat up, swiping mud off his face. What the *devil* had happened? A sharp pain in his arm penetrated his confusion, and, looking down, he saw by the light of the lightning's flash that a splinter of wood, perhaps six inches long, was embedded in the flesh of his right forearm.

Glaring wildly round, he saw that the swamp near him was suddenly studded with splinters and chunks of fresh wood, and the smell of sap and heart-wood rose, piercing amid the hot, dancing scent of electricity.

There. Another flash, and he saw it. A hundred feet away, he had noted a huge bald cypress, thinking to use it as a landmark come dawn; it was by far the tallest tree within sight. No longer: the lightning showed him empty air where the towering trunk had been, another flash, the ragged spike of what was left.

Quivering and half deafened by the thunder, he pulled the splinter out of his arm and pressed the fabric of his shirt to the wound to stop it bleeding. It wasn't deep, but the shock of the explosion made his hand shake. He pulled his canvas tight round his shoulders against the driving rain, and curled up again among the sweet gum's roots.

Sometime in the night, the storm moved off, and with the cessation of the noise, he lapsed into an uneasy doze, from which he woke to find himself staring into the white nothingness of fog.

A coldness beyond the bone chill of dawn went through him. His childhood had been spent in the Lake District of England, and he'd known from his earliest memories that the coming of fog on the fells was a danger. Sheep were often lost in the fog, falling to their deaths, parted from the flock and killed by dogs or foxes, freezing, or simply disappearing. Men were sometimes lost in the fog, as well.

The dead came down with the fog, Nanny Elspeth said. He could see her, a spare old woman, straight-backed and fearless, standing at the nursery window, looking out at the drifting white. She'd said it quietly, as though to herself; he didn't think she'd realized he was there. When she did, she drew the curtain with a brisk snap and came to make his tea, saying nothing more.

He could do with a cup of hot tea, he thought, preferably with a great deal of whisky in it. Hot tea, hot buttered toast, jam sandwiches, and cake …

The thought of nursery teas recalled his wodge of soggy bread and cheese, and he drew this carefully out of his pocket, immeasurably heartened by its presence. He ate it slowly, savoring the tasteless mass as though it were a brandied peach, and felt very much better, despite the clammy touch of the fog on his face, the dripping of water from the ends of his hair, and the fact that he was still wet to the skin; his muscles ached from shivering all night.

He *had* had the presence of mind to set the frying pan out in the rain the night before, and thus had fresh water to drink, tasting deliciously of bacon fat.

“Not so bad,” he said aloud, wiping his mouth. “Yet.”

His voice sounded strange. Voices always did, in a fog.

He’d been lost in fog twice before, and he had no desire to repeat that experience, though repeat it he did, now and then, in nightmares. Stumbling blind through a white so thick he couldn’t see his own feet, hearing the voices of the dead.

He closed his eyes, preferring momentary darkness to the swirl of white, but could still feel its fingers, cold on his face.

He’d heard the voices then. He tried not to listen now.

He got to his feet, determined. He had to move. At the same time, to go wandering blind through bogs and clinging growth would be madness.

He tied the frying pan to his belt and, slinging the wet canvas over his shoulder, put out a hand and began to grope. Juniper wouldn’t do; the wood shredded under a knife, and the trees grew in such fashion that no branch ran straight for more than a few inches. Sweet gum or tupelo was better, but an alder would be best.

He found a small stand of alder saplings after an age of sidling cautiously through the mist, planting one foot at a time and waiting to see the effect, pausing whenever he hit a tree to press its leaves to his mouth and nose by way of identification.

Feeling about among the slender trunks, he picked one an inch or so in diameter and, planting his feet solidly, grasped the sapling with both hands and wrenched it up. It came, with a groan of yielding earth and a shower of leaves—and a heavy body slithered suddenly across his boot. He let out a cry and smashed the root end of his sapling down, but the snake had long since fled.

Sweating despite the chill, he undid the frying pan and used it to prod gingerly at the unseen ground. Eliciting no movement, and finding the surface relatively firm, he turned the pan over and sat upon it.

By bringing the wood close to his face, he could make out the movements of his hands sufficiently as to avoid cutting himself and, with a good deal of labor, managed to strip the sapling and trim it to a handy six-foot length. He then set about whittling the end to a sharpened point.

The Great Dismal was dangerous, but it teemed with game. That was the lure that drew hunters into its mysterious depths. William wasn't about to try to kill a bear, or even a deer, with a homemade spear. He was, however, reasonably adept at gigging frogs, or had been. A groom on his grandfather's estate had taught him long ago, he'd done it often with his father in Virginia, and while it wasn't a skill he'd found occasion to practice in the last few years in London, he felt sure that he hadn't forgotten.

He could hear the frogs all round him, cheerfully unimpressed by the fog.

"Brek-ek-ek-ex, co-ax, co-ax," he murmured. "Brek-ek-ek-ex co-ax!" The frogs seemed likewise unimpressed with quotations from Aristophanes.

"Right, you. Just wait," he said to them, testing his point with a thumb. Adequate. A gigging spear ideally would be trident-shaped.… Well, why not? He had time.

Biting his tongue with concentration, he set about to carve two additional sharpened twigs and notch them to join the main spear. He briefly considered twisting bits of juniper bark to make a binding, but rejected that notion in favor of unraveling a length of thread from the fringe of his shirt.

The swamp was sodden in the wake of the storm. He'd lost his tinderbox, but he doubted that even one of Jehovah's thunderbolts, such as he'd witnessed the night before, would ignite a fire here. On the other hand, by the time the sun came out and he eventually succeeded in catching a frog, he'd probably be desperate enough to eat it raw.

He paradoxically found this thought comforting. He wasn't going to starve, then, nor would he die of thirst—being in this swamp was like living in a sponge.

He had nothing so definite as a plan. Only the knowledge that the swamp was large but finite. That being so, once he had the sun to guide him and could be assured of not wandering in circles, he proposed to make his way in a straight line until he reached solid ground or the lake. If he found the lake … well, Dismal Town was built on its edge. He had only to walk round the circumference, and eventually he would find it.

So, provided that he took care with the quaking bogs, didn't fall prey to some large animal, wasn't bitten by a venomous snake, and didn't take a fever from putrid water or the swamp's miasma, everything would be all right.

He tested the binding, jabbing the spear gently into the mud, and found it secure. Nothing to do but wait, then, for the fog to lift.

The fog showed no disposition to lift. If anything, it was thicker; he could barely make out his fingers, held a few inches from his eyes. Sighing, he gathered his damp coat round him, settled the gig by his side, and wriggled his spine into a precarious rest against the remaining alders. He put his arms round his knees to hoard what little heat his body still held, and closed his eyes to block the whiteness.

The frogs were still at it. Now without distraction, though, he began to hear the other noises of the swamp. Most of the birds were silent, waiting out the fog as he was, but now and then the deep, startling boom of a bittern echoed through the fog. There were scurrying noises and splashings now and then—muskrat? he wondered.

A loud *plunk!* betokened a turtle dropping off a log into water. He preferred those sounds, because he knew what they were. More unnerving were the faint rustlings, which might be the rubbing of branches—though the air was too still, surely, for wind?—or the movement of something hunting. The shrill cry of something small, cut off abruptly. And the creakings and groanings of the swamp itself.

He'd heard the rocks talking to themselves on the fells at Helwater. The Lake District, his maternal grandparents' home. In the fog. He hadn't told anyone that.

He moved a little and felt something just below his jaw. Clapping a hand to the spot, he discovered a leech that had attached itself to his neck. Revolted, he ripped it loose and flung it as hard as he could into the fog. Patting himself all over with trembling hands, he settled back into his crouch, trying to repel the memories that came flooding in with the swirling mist. He'd heard his mother—his real mother—whisper to him, too. That was why he'd gone into the fog. They'd been picnicking on the fells, his grandparents and Mama Isobel and some friends, with a few servants. When the fog came down, sudden as it sometimes did, there was a general scurry to pack up the luncheon things, and he had been left by himself, watching the inexorable white wall roll silently toward him.

And he'd swear he'd heard a woman's whisper, too low to make out words but holding somehow a sense of longing, and he had known she spoke to him.

And he'd walked into the fog. For a few moments, he was fascinated by the movement of the water vapor near the ground, the way it flickered and shimmered and seemed alive. But then the fog grew thicker, and in moments he'd known he was lost.

He'd called out. First to the woman he thought must be his mother. *The dead come down in the fog.* That was nearly all he knew about his mother—that she was dead. She'd been no older than he was now when she died. He'd seen three paintings of her. They said he had her hair and her hand with a horse.

She'd answered him, he'd swear she'd answered him—but in a voice with no words. He'd felt the caress of cool fingers on his face, and he'd wandered on, entranced.

Then he fell, badly, tumbling over rocks into a small hollow, bruising himself and knocking out all his wind. The fog had billowed over him, marching past, urgent in its hurry to engulf things, as he lay stunned and breathless in the bottom of his small declivity. Then he began to hear the rocks murmur all around him, and he'd crawled, then run, as fast as he could, screaming. Fell again, got up and went on running.

Fell down, finally unable to go further, and huddled terrified and blind on the rough grass, surrounded by vast emptiness. Then he heard them calling out for him, voices he knew, and he tried to cry out in reply, but his throat was raw from screaming, and he made no more than desperate rasping noises, running toward where he thought the voices were. But sound moves in a fog, and nothing is as it seems: not sound, not time nor place.

Again and again and again, he ran toward the voices but fell over something, tripped and rolled down a slope, stumbled into rocky outcrops, found himself clinging to the edge of a scarp, the voices now behind him, fading into the fog, leaving him.

Mac had found him. A big hand had suddenly reached down and grabbed him, and the next minute he was lifted up, bruised and scraped and bleeding but clutched tight against the Scottish groom's rough shirt, strong arms holding him as though they'd never let him go.

He swallowed. When he had the nightmare, sometimes he woke with Mac holding him. Sometimes he didn't and woke in a cold sweat, unable to go back to sleep for fear of the waiting fog and the voices.

He froze now, hearing footsteps. Breathed cautiously—and smelled the unmistakable ripe smell of pig shit. He didn't move; wild pigs were dangerous if you startled them.

Snuffling noises, more footsteps, the rustle and shower of water drops as heavy bodies brushed the leaves of holly and yaupon bushes. Several of them, moving slowly but moving nonetheless. He sat up sharp, turning his head to and fro, trying to locate the sound exactly. Nothing could move with purpose in this fog—unless they were following a path.

The swamp was crisscrossed with game paths, made by the deer and used by everything from possums to black bears. These paths wound aimlessly, only two things certain about them: one, that they did lead to drinkable water, and two, that they did not lead into a quaking bog. Which, under the circumstances, was enough for William.

They'd said one other thing about his mother. *"Reckless,"* his grandmother had said sadly, shaking her head. *"She was always so reckless, so impulsive." And* her eyes had rested then on him, apprehensive. *And you're just like her*, said those anxious eyes. *God help us all.*

"Maybe I am," he said out loud, and, gripping his frog spear, stood up, defiant. "But *I'm* not dead. Not yet."

He knew that much. And that to stand still when lost was a good idea only if someone was looking for you.

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PURGATORY

At midday on the third day, he found the lake.

He'd come to it through a cathedral of towering bald cypress, their great buttressed trunks rising like pillars from the flooded ground. Half starved, light-headed from a rising fever, he walked slowly through calf-deep water.

The air was still; so was the water. The only movement was the slow drag of his feet and the buzzing insects that plagued him. His eyes were swollen from the bites of mosquitoes, and the louse had company in the form of chiggers and sand fleas. The darning needles that darted to and fro didn't bite like the hundreds of swarming tiny flies, but had their own form of torment—they made him glance at them, sunlight glinting gold and blue and red from their gauzy wings and shining bodies, dizzying in the light.

The smooth surface of the water reflected the trees standing in it so perfectly that he could not be sure quite where he himself was, balanced precariously between two looking-glass worlds. He kept losing his sense of up and down, the dizzying sight through the branches of the towering cypress above the same as that below. The trees loomed more than eighty feet over him, and the sight of drifting clouds seeming to sail straight through the gently stirring branches below gave him the constant queer sense that he was about to fall—up or down, he couldn't tell.

He'd pulled the cypress splinter from his arm and done his best to bleed the wound, but there were smaller slivers of wood left behind, trapped under the skin, and his arm was hot and throbbing. So was his head. The chill and fog had disappeared as though they had never existed, and he walked slowly through a world of heat and stillness that shimmered round the edges. The backs of his eyes burned.

If he kept his eyes fixed on the purling of water away from his boots, the V-shaped waves broke the disturbing reflection and kept him upright. But watching the dragonflies … That made him sway and lose his bearings, as they seemed not fixed in either air or water, but part of both.

A strange depression appeared in the water, a few inches from his right calf. He blinked, then saw the shadow, sensed the weight of the heavy body undulating through the water. An evil, pointed, triangular head.

He gulped air and stopped dead. The moccasin, by great good fortune, did not.

He watched it swim away, and wondered whether it might be fit to eat. No matter; he'd broken his frog spear, though he'd caught three frogs before the fragile binding gave way. Small ones. They hadn't tasted badly, despite the rubbery feel of the raw flesh. His stomach clenched, gnawing, and he fought the insane impulse to dive after the snake, seize it, and rip the flesh from its bones with his teeth.

Maybe he could catch a fish.

He stood still for several minutes, to be sure the snake had left. Then swallowed and took another step. And walked on, eyes fixed on the small waves his moving feet made, breaking the looking-glass water into fragments around him.

A short time later, though, the surface began to move, hundreds of tiny wavelets lapping against the gray-brown wood of the cypress trees, shimmering so that the dizzy swirl of trees and clouds disappeared. He lifted his head and saw the lake before him.

It was vast. Much bigger than he had thought it would be. Giant bald cypresses stood in the water, the stumps and carcasses of earlier progenitors bleaching in the sun among them. The far shore was dark, thick with tupelo, alder, and hobblebush. And the water itself seemed to stretch for miles before him, brown as tea with the infusions of the trees that grew in it.

Licking his lips, he bent and scooped up a handful of the brown water and drank, then drank again. It was fresh, a little bitter.

He wiped a wet hand across his face; the cool wetness made him shiver with a sudden chill.

"Right, then," he said, feeling breathless. He pushed ahead, the ground sloping away gradually beneath him, until he stood in the open water, the dense growth of the swamp behind him. Chills still swept him, but he ignored them.

Lake Drummond had been named for an early governor of North Carolina. A hunting party, including Governor William Drummond, had gone into the swamp. A week later, Drummond, the sole survivor, had staggered out, half dead from hunger and fever but with news of a huge, unsuspected lake in the midst of the Great Dismal.

William drew a long, shuddering breath. Well, nothing had eaten him yet. And he'd reached the lake. Which way was Dismal Town?

He scanned the shore slowly, looking for any trace of chimney smoke, any break in the dense growth that might betoken a settlement. Nothing.

With a sigh, he reached into his pocket and found a sixpence. He flipped it into the air and nearly missed catching it, fumbling wildly as it bounced off his slow fingers. *Got it, got it!* Tails. Left, then. He turned resolutely and set off.

His leg knocked against something in the water, and he glanced down, just in time to see the white flash of the moccasin's mouth as it rose up in the water and struck at his leg. Reflex alone jerked his foot up, and the snake's fangs stuck briefly in the leather of his boot top.

He yelled and shook his leg violently, dislodging the reptile, which flew off and landed with a splash. Nothing daunted, the thing turned round upon itself almost instantly and arrowed toward him through the water.

William ripped the frying pan from his belt and swung it with all his strength, scooping the snake from the water and lofting it into the air. He didn't wait to see where it landed, but turned and ran, splashing wildly toward the shore.

He rushed up into the growth of gum and juniper and paused, gasping for breath, relieved. The relief was short-lived. He did turn then, to look, and saw the snake, its brown skin gleaming like copper, slither its way up onto the bank in his wake and come undulating determinedly after him across the matted ground.

He let out a yelp and fled.

He ran blindly, feet squelching at every step, ricocheting off trees and through slapping branches, his legs seized by hobblebush and holly, through which he fought his way in a shower of leaves and torn-off twigs. He didn't look back, but wasn't really looking forward, either, and thus ran without warning slap into a man standing in his path.

The man let out a cry and went over backward, William atop him. He pushed himself up and found himself looking down into the face of an astonished Indian. Before he could apologize, someone else grabbed him by the arm and pulled him roughly upright.

It was another Indian, who said something to him, angry and interrogative.

He groped for any stray bit of trade talk, found nothing, and, pointing in the direction of the lake, gasped, "Snake!" The Indians evidently understood the word, though, for their faces changed at once to wariness, and they looked where he was pointing. In support of his story, the annoyed moccasin shot into sight, wriggling through the roots of a sweet gum.

The Indians both let out exclamations, and one of them seized a club from a sling at his back and struck at the snake. He missed, and the snake writhed up at once into a tight coil and struck at him. The snake missed, too, but not by much, and the Indian jerked back, dropping his club.

The other Indian said something in disgust. Taking his own club in hand, he began warily to circle the moccasin. The snake, further enraged by this persecution, spun upon its own contortious coils with a loud hiss and launched itself, spearlike, at the second Indian's foot. He let out a cry and leapt back, though he did keep hold of his club.

William, meanwhile, delighted not to be the focus of the snake's annoyance, had backed out of the way. Seeing the snake momentarily off balance, though—if snakes could be said to have any in the first place—he gripped his frying pan, swung it high, and brought it down, edge-on, with all his force.

Brought it down again, and again and again, his strength driven by panic. At last he stopped, breathing like a blacksmith's bellows, sweat pouring down his face and body. Swallowing, he lifted the frying pan gingerly, expecting to find the snake a bloody mince on the riven ground.

Nothing. He could smell the reptile—a low stench, like that of rotten cucumbers—but could see nothing. He squinted, trying to make sense of the mass of cut-up mud and leaves, then looked up at the Indians.

One of them shrugged. The other pointed off toward the lake and said something. Evidently, the snake had prudently decided that it was outnumbered and returned to its own pursuits.

William stood up awkwardly, frying pan in hand. The men all exchanged nervous smiles.

He was comfortable with Indians, generally; many of them crossed his land, and his father always made them welcome, smoking with them on the veranda, taking supper with them. He couldn't tell which people these two claimed—the faces had the look of some one of the Algonkian tribes, high-cheeked and bold, but surely this was far south of their usual hunting grounds?

The Indians were examining him in turn, and exchanged a glance that set something tingling at the base of his spine. One of them said something to the other, watching him sidelong to see whether he understood. The other smiled broadly at him, showing brown-stained teeth.

"Tobacco?" the Indian asked, extending a hand, palm upward.

William nodded, trying to slow his breathing, and reached slowly into his coat, right-handed, so as not to have to set down the frying pan in his left.

Likely these two knew the way out of the swamp; he should establish friendly relations, and then … He was trying to think logically, but his lower faculties were interfering. His lower faculties thought he should get the devil away from here, and now.

Coming out with the waxed parcel of tobacco, he threw it as hard as he could at the foremost Indian, who had started toward him, and ran.

A startled exclamation behind him, and then the sound of grunts and thumping feet. His lower faculties, thoroughly justified in their apprehensions, spurred him on, but he knew he couldn't keep it up for long; being chased by the snake had consumed most of what strength he had—and being obliged to run with an iron frying pan in one hand wasn't helping.

His best chance lay in outdistancing them sufficiently as to find a hiding place. With this thought in mind, he drove himself to greater exertions, dashing over open ground beneath a growth of gum trees, then swerving into a thicket of juniper, popping out again almost immediately onto a game trail. He hesitated for an instant—hide in the thicket?—but the urge to run was overwhelming, and he pounded down the narrow trail, vines and branches snatching at his clothes.

He heard the pigs in time, thank God. Startled snorts and grunts, and a great rustling of brush and sucking sounds, as a number of heavy bodies scrambled to their feet. He smelled warm mud and the reek of pig flesh; there must be a wallow round the curve of the path.

"Shit," he said under his breath, and leapt into the brush off the path. Jupiter, now what? Climb a tree? He was breathing hard, sweat running in his eyes.

All the trees nearby were juniper, some very large but dense and twisted, impossible to climb. He dodged round one and crouched behind it, trying to still his breathing.

His heart was hammering in his ears; he'd never hear pursuit. Something touched his hand, and he swung the frying pan by reflex, leaping to his feet.

The dog let out a surprised yelp as the pan glanced off its shoulder, then bared its teeth and growled at him.

“What the devil are you doing here?” William hissed at it. Bloody hell, the thing was the size of a small horse!

The dog’s hackles rose, making it look exactly like a wolf—Jesus, it couldn’t *be* a wolf, surely?—and it began to bark.

“Shut up, for God’s sake!” But it was too late; he could hear Indian voices, excited and quite near. “Stay,” he whispered, putting out a palm toward the dog as he edged backward. “Stay. Good dog.”

The dog did not stay, but followed him, continuing to growl and bark. The sound of this further disturbed the pigs; there was a thunder of hooves along the path and a surprised whoop from one of the Indians.

William caught a flicker of movement from the corner of his eye and whirled, weapon at the ready. A very tall Indian blinked at him. Hell, more of them.

“Leave off, dog,” said the Indian mildly, in a distinct Scots accent. William blinked in turn.

The dog did cease barking, though it continued to circle him, unnervingly close and growling all the time.

“Who—” William began, but was interrupted by the two original Indians, who at this point appeared suddenly out of the undergrowth. They came to an abrupt halt at sight of the newcomer—and cast a wary eye at the dog, who turned its attention on them, wrinkling back its muzzle and displaying an impressive array of gleaming teeth.

One of the original Indians said something sharp to the newcomer—thank God, they weren’t together. The tall Indian replied, in a distinctly unfriendly tone. William had no idea what he’d said, but it didn’t sit well with the other two. Their faces darkened, and one put a hand impulsively to his club. The dog made a sort of gurgling noise in its throat, and the hand fell at once.

The original Indians seemed disposed to argue, but the tall Indian cut them off, saying something peremptory and flipped a hand in an unmistakable “Be off with you” gesture. The other two exchanged glances, and William, straightening up, moved to stand by the side of the tall Indian and glowered at them. One of them gave him back the evil look, but his friend looked thoughtfully from the tall Indian to the dog and shook his head, the movement almost imperceptible. Without a further word, the two turned and left.

William's legs were shaking, waves of fever heat passing over him. Despite a disinclination to get any closer to the dog's level than necessary, he sat down on the ground. His fingers had gone stiff, he'd clutched the handle of the frying pan so hard. With some difficulty, he unbent them and set the thing down beside him.

"Thank you," he said, and wiped a sleeve across his sweating jaw. "You—speak English?"

"I've met Englishmen who'd say no, but I think ye'll maybe understand me, at least." The Indian sat down beside him, looking at him curiously.

"Christ," William said, "you aren't an Indian." *That* certainly wasn't an Algonkian face. Seen clearly now, the man was much younger than he'd thought, perhaps only a little older than himself, and plainly white, though his skin was sun-browned and he bore facial tattoos, a double line of dots that looped across his cheekbones. He was dressed in leather shirt and leggings, and wore a most incongruous red-and-black Scotchman's plaid over one shoulder.

"Aye, I am," the man said dryly. He raised his chin, indicating the direction taken by the departing Indians. "Where did ye meet wi' that lot?"

"By the lake. They asked for tobacco, and I—gave it to them. But then they chased me; I don't know why."

The man shrugged.

"They thought to take ye west and sell ye as a slave in the Shawnee lands." He smiled briefly. "They offered me half your price."

William took a deep breath.

"I thank you, then. That is—I suppose you haven't any intention of doing the same thing?"

The man didn't laugh aloud, but gave off a distinct sense of amusement.

"No. I'm no going west."

William began to feel a little easier, though the heat of his endeavors was beginning to give way to chills again. He wrapped his arms about his knees. His right arm was beginning to hurt again.

"You don't—do you suppose they might come back?"

"No," the man said, casually indifferent. "I told them to be gone."

William stared at him.

"And why do you think they'll do as you say?"

"Because they're Mingo," the man replied patiently, "and I'm Kahnyen'kehaka—a Mohawk. They're afraid of me."

William gave him a narrow look, but the man was not practicing upon him. He was nearly as tall as William himself, but thin as a coach whip, his dark-brown hair slicked back with bear grease. He looked competent, but not a person to inspire fear.

The man was studying him with an interest equal to his own. William coughed and cleared his throat, then extended a hand. "Your servant, sir. I'm William Ransom."

"Oh, I ken ye well enough," the man said, a rather odd note in his voice. He put out his own hand and shook William's firmly. "Ian Murray. We've met." His eyes traveled over William's torn, disheveled clothes, his scratched, sweating face, and his mud-caked boots. "Ye look a bit better than the last time I saw ye—but not much."

* * *

Murray lifted the camp kettle off the fire and set it on the ground. He laid the knife in the embers for a moment, then dipped the hot blade into the frying pan, now filled with water. The hot metal hissed and gave off clouds of steam.

"Ready?" he said.

"Yes."

William knelt down by a big poplar log and laid his injured arm flat on the wood. It was visibly swollen, the bulge of a large remnant splinter dark under his skin, the skin around it stretched and transparent with pus, painfully inflamed.

The Mohawk—he couldn't yet think of him as anything else, despite the name and accent—glanced at him across the log, eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Was that you I heard? Screamin', earlier?" He took hold of William's wrist.

"I shouted, yes," William said stiffly. "A snake struck at me."

"Oh." Murray's mouth twitched a little. "Ye scream like a lassie," he said, eyes returning to his work. The knife pressed down.

William made a deeply visceral noise.

"Aye, better," said Murray. He smiled briefly, as though to himself, and with a firm grip on William's wrist sliced cleanly through the skin beside the splinter, laying it open for six inches or so. Turning back the skin with the point of the knife, he flicked out the large splinter, then picked delicately at the smaller slivers the cypress shard had left behind.

Having removed as much as he could, he then wrapped a fold of his ragged plaid round the handle of the camp kettle, picked it up, and poured the steaming water into the open wound.

William made a much more visceral sound, this one accompanied by words.

Murray shook his head, and clicked his tongue in reproof.

"Aye, well. I suppose I'll have to keep ye from dying, because if ye do die, ye're bound to go to hell, usin' language like that."

"I don't propose to die," William said shortly. He was breathing hard, and mopped his brow with his free arm. He lifted the other gingerly and shook blood-tinged water from his fingertips, though the resulting sensation made him light-headed. He sat down on the log, rather suddenly.

"Put your heid atween your knees, if ye're giddy," Murray suggested.

"I am not giddy."

There was no response to this save the sound of chewing. While waiting for the kettle to boil, Murray had waded into the water and pulled several handsful of some strong-smelling herb that grew on the verge. He was in process now of chewing the leaves, spitting the resultant green wads into a square of cloth. Extracting a rather shriveled onion from the haversack he carried, he cut a generous slice from this and eyed it critically, but seemed to think it would pass without mastication. He added it to his packet, folding the cloth neatly over the contents.

This he placed over the wound and wrapped it in place with strips of cloth torn from William's shirttail.

Murray glanced up at him thoughtfully.

"I suppose ye're verra stubborn?"

William stared at the Scot, put out at this remark, though in fact he had been told repeatedly, by friends, relatives, and military superiors, that his intransigence would one day kill him. Surely it didn't show on his face!

"What the devil do you mean by that?"

"It wasna meant as an insult," Murray said mildly, and bent to tighten the knot of the impromptu bandage with his teeth. He turned away and spat out a few threads. "I hope ye are—because it'll be a good distance to find ye help, and if you're sufficiently stubborn as not to die on me, that would be good, I think."

"I said I don't propose to die," William assured him. "And I don't need help. Where—are we anywhere near Dismal Town?"

Murray pursed his lips.

"No," he said, and raised one brow. "Were ye bound there?"

William considered for an instant, but nodded. No harm in telling him that, surely.

Murray raised an eyebrow.

"Why?"

"I—have business with some gentlemen there." As he said this, William's heart gave a lurch. Christ, the book! He'd been so confounded by his various trials and adventures that the true importance of his loss had not even struck him.

Beyond its general entertainment value and its usefulness as palimpsest for his own meditations, the book was vital to his mission. It contained several carefully marked passages whose code gave him the names and locations of those men he was to visit—and, more importantly, what he was to tell them. He could recall a good many of the names, he thought, but for the rest …

His dismay was so great that it overshadowed the throbbing in his arm, and he stood up abruptly, seized by the urge to rush back into the Great Dismal and begin combing it, inch by inch, until he should recover the book.

"Are ye all right, man?" Murray had risen, too, and was looking at him with a combination of curiosity and concern.

"I—yes. Just—I thought of something, that's all."

"Well, think about it sitting down, aye? Ye're about to fall into the fire."

In fact, William's vision had gone bright, and pulsating dots of dark and light obscured most of Murray's face, though the look of alarm was still visible.

"I—yes, I will." He sat down even more abruptly than he'd risen, a heavy cold sweat sudden on his face. A hand on his good arm urged him to lie down, and he did, feeling dimly that it was preferable to fainting.

Murray made a Scottish noise of consternation and muttered something incomprehensible. William could feel the other man hovering over him, uncertain.

"I'm fine," he said—without opening his eyes. "I just … need to rest a bit."

"Mmphm."

William couldn't tell whether this particular noise was meant as acceptance or dismay, but Murray went away, coming back a moment later with a blanket, with which he covered William without comment. William made a feeble gesture of thanks, unable to speak, as his teeth had begun to chatter with a sudden chill.

His limbs had been aching for some time, but he had ignored it in the need to push on. Now the burden of it fell full on him, a bone-deep ache that made him want to moan aloud. To keep from it, he waited until the chill relaxed enough to let him speak, then called to Murray.

"You are familiar with Dismal Town yourself, sir? You've been there?"

"Now and again, aye." He could see Murray, a dark silhouette crouched by the fire, and hear the chink of metal on stone. "It's verra aptly named."

"Ha," William said weakly. "I daresay. And h-h-have you met a Mr. Washington, by chance?"

"Five or six of them. The general's got a good many cousins, aye?"

"The g-g—"

"General Washington. Ye've heard of him, maybe?" There was a distinct hint of amusement in the Scottish Mohawk's voice.

"I have, yes. But—surely that …" This made no sense. His voice trailed off, and he rallied, forcing his drifting thoughts back into coherence. "It is a Mr. Henry Washington. He is kin to the general, too?"

"So far as I ken, anyone named Washington within three hundred miles is kin to the general." Murray stooped to his bag, coming out with a large furry mass, a long, naked tail dangling from it. "Why?"

"I—nothing." The chill had eased, and he drew a grateful breath, the knotted muscles of his belly relaxing. But the faint threads of wariness were making themselves felt through puzzlement and the gathering fog of fever. "Someone told me that Mr. Henry Washington was a prominent Loyalist."

Murray turned toward him in astonishment.

"Who in Bride's name would tell ye that?"

"Plainly someone grossly mistaken." William pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. His wounded arm hurt. "What is that thing? Possum?"

"Muskrat. Dinna fash; it's fresh. I killed it just before I met ye."

"Oh. Good." He felt obscurely comforted and couldn't think why. Not the muskrat; he'd eaten muskrat often enough and found it tasty, though the fever had stolen his appetite. He felt weak with hunger, but had no desire to eat. Oh. No, it was the "dinna fash." Spoken with just that kindly, matter-of-fact intonation—Mac the groom had used to say that to him, often, whether the trouble was being thrown from his pony or not being allowed to ride into the town with his grandfather. *"Dinna fash; it will be all right."*

The ripping sound of skin parting from the underlying muscle made him momentarily dizzy and he closed his eyes.

"Ye've got a red beard."

Murray’s voice came to him, filled with surprise.

“You’ve only just now noticed that?” William said crossly, and opened his eyes. The color of his beard was an embarrassment to him; while the hair on his head, chest, and limbs was a decent sort of dark chestnut, that on his chin and privates was an unexpectedly vivid shade that mortified him. He shaved fastidiously, even on shipboard or on the road—but his razor, of course, had departed with the horse.

“Well, aye,” Murray said mildly. “I expect I was distracted earlier.” He fell silent, concentrating on his work, and William tried to relax his mind, hoping to sleep for a time. He was tired enough. Repeated images of the swamp played themselves out before his closed eyes, though, wearying him with visions that he could neither ignore nor dismiss.

Roots like the loops of snares, mud, rank brown dollops of cold pig shit, the turds uneasily humanlike … churned dead leaves …

Dead leaves floating on water like brown glass, reflections shattering around his shins … words in the water, the pages of his book, faint, mocking as they sank away …

Looking up, the sky as vertiginous as the lake, feeling that he might fall up as easily as down and drown in the water-clogged air … drowning in his sweat … a young woman licked the sweat from his cheek, tickling, her body heavy, hot, and cloying, so that he turned and twisted, but could not escape her oppressive attentions …

… sweat collecting behind his ears, thick and greasy in his hair … growing like fat slow pearls in the stubble of his vulgar beard … chilling on his skin, his clothes a dripping shroud … the woman was still there, dead now, dead weight on his chest, pinning him to the icy ground …

Fog and the creeping cold … white fingers prying into his eyes, his ears. He must keep his mouth shut or it would reach inside him … All white.

He curled into a ball, shaking.

William did at last fall deeper into a fitful sleep, from which he roused some time later, to the rich smell of roasted muskrat, and found the enormous dog lying pressed against him, snoring.

"Jesus," he said, with disconcerting recollections of the young woman in his dreams. He pushed feebly at the dog. "Where did *that* come from?"

"That's Rollo," Murray said reprovingly. "I made him lie wi' ye for a bit of heat; ye've got a shaking ague, if ye hadn't noticed."

"I had noticed that, yes." William struggled upright and made himself eat but was happy to lie down again, at a safe distance from the dog, who was now lying on his back, paws drooping, looking like nothing so much as a giant hairy dead insect. William passed a hand downward over his clammy face, trying to remove *that* disturbing image from his mind before it made its way into his fever dreams.

Night had come well on, and the sky opened overhead, clear and empty and vast, moonless but brilliant with distant stars. He thought of his father's father, dead long before his own birth, but a noted amateur astronomer. His father had often taken him—and sometimes his mother—to lie on the lawns at Helwater, to look up at the stars and name the constellations. It was a cold sight, that blue-black emptiness, and made his fevered blood tremble, but the stars were a comfort, nonetheless.

Murray was looking upward too, a look of distance on his tattooed face.

William lay back, half-propped against the log, trying to think. What was he to do next? He was still trying to absorb the news that Henry Washington and thus, presumably, the rest of his Dismal Town contacts were rebels. Was this odd Scottish Mohawk right in what he'd said? Or did he seek to mislead him, for some purpose of his own?

What would that be, though? Murray could have no notion who William was, beyond his name and his father's name. And Lord John had been a private citizen when they had met years before, on Fraser's Ridge. Murray could not tell, surely, that William was a soldier, let alone an intelligencer, and could not possibly know his mission.

And if he did not wish to mislead him and was correct in what he said … William swallowed, his mouth sticky and dry. Then he had had a narrow escape. What might have happened, had he walked into a nest of rebels, in such a remote place as Dismal Town, and blithely revealed himself and his purpose? *They'd hang you from the nearest tree*, his brain said coldly, *and toss your body into the swamp. What else?*

Which led to an even more uncomfortable thought: how could Captain Richardson have been so mistaken in his information?

He shook his head violently, trying to shake his thoughts into order, but the only result was to make him dizzy again. Murray's attention had been attracted by the motion, though; he looked in William's direction, and William spoke, on impulse.

"You are a Mohawk, you said."

"I am."

Seeing that tattooed face, the eyes dark in their sockets, William didn't doubt it.

"How did that come to be?" he asked hurriedly, lest Murray think he was casting aspersions on the other's truthfulness. Murray hesitated visibly, but did answer.

"I married a woman of the Kahnyen'kehaka. I was adopted into the Wolf clan of the people of Snaketown."

"Ah. Your … wife is …?"

"I am no longer wed." It wasn't said with any tone of hostility, but with a sort of bleak finality that put paid to any further conversation.

"I'm sorry," William said formally, and fell silent. The chills were coming back, and despite his reluctance, he slid down, drawing the blanket up around his ears, and huddled against the dog, who sighed deeply and released a burst of flatulence but didn't stir.

When the ague finally eased again, he lapsed back into dreams, these now violent and dreadful. His mind had taken hold somehow of Indians, and he was pursued by savages who turned into snakes, snakes who became tree roots that writhed through the crevices of his brain, bursting his skull, liberating further nests of snakes who coiled themselves into nooses …

He woke again, drenched in sweat and aching to the bones. He tried to rise but found his arms would not support him. Someone knelt by him—it was the Scot, the Mohawk … Murray. He located the name with something like relief, and with even more relief, realized that Murray was holding a canteen to his lips.

It was water from the lake; he recognized its odd, fresh-tasting bitterness, and drank thirstily.

"Thank you," he said hoarsely, and gave back the empty canteen. The water had given him strength enough to sit up. His head still swam with fever, but the dreams had retreated, at least for the moment. He imagined that they lurked just beyond the small ring of light cast by the fire, waiting, and determined that he would not sleep again—not at once.

The pain in his arm was worse: a hot, stretched feeling, and a throbbing that ran from fingertips to the middle of his upper arm. Anxious to keep both the pain and the night at bay, he had another try at conversation.

"I have heard that the Mohawk think it unmanly to show fear—that if captured and tortured by an enemy, they will not show any sign of distress. Is that true?"

"Ye try not to be in that position," Murray said, very dry. "Should it happen, though … ye must show your courage, that's all. Ye sing your death song and hope to die well. Is it different for a British soldier, then? Ye dinna want to die as a coward, do ye?"

William watched the flickering patterns behind his closed eyelids, hot and ever-changing, shifting with the fire.

"No," he admitted. "And it's not so different—the hoping to die well if you have to, I mean. But it's more likely to be a matter of just being shot or knocked on the head, isn't it, if you're a soldier—rather than being tortured to death by inches. Save you run afoul of a savage, I suppose. What—have you ever seen someone die like that?" he asked curiously, opening his eyes.

Murray reached out one long arm to turn the spit, not answering at once. The firelight showed his face, unreadable.

"Aye, I have," he said quietly, at last.

"What did they do to him?" He wasn't sure why he'd asked; perhaps only for distraction from the throbbing in his arm.

"Ye dinna want to know." This was said very definitely; Murray was not by any means teasing him into further inquiry. Nonetheless, it had the same effect; William's vague interest sharpened at once.

"Yes, I do."

Murray's lips tightened, but William knew a few things about extracting information by this time and was wise enough to preserve silence, merely keeping his eyes fixed on the other man.

"Skinned him," Murray said at last, and poked at the fire with a stick. "One of them. In bitty pieces. Thrust burning slivers of pitch pine into the raw places. Cut away his privates. Then built up the fire about his feet, to burn him before he could die of the shock. It … took some time."

"I daresay." William tried to conjure a picture of the proceedings—and succeeded much too well, turning away his eyes from the blackened muskrat carcass, stripped to bones.

He shut his eyes. His arm continued to throb with each beat of his heart, and he tried not to imagine the sensation of burning slivers being forced into his flesh.

Murray was silent; William couldn't even hear his breathing. But he knew, as surely as if he were inside the other's head, that he, too, was imagining the scene—though in his case, imagination was not necessary. He would be reliving it.

William shifted a little, sending a hot blaze of pain through his arm, and clenched his teeth, not to make any noise.

"Do the men—did *you*, I should say—think how you would do, yourself?" he asked quietly. "If you could stand it?"

"Every man thinks that." Murray got up abruptly and went to the far edge of the clearing. William heard him make water, but it was some minutes longer before he came back.

The dog wakened suddenly, head lifting, and wagged its huge tail slowly to and fro at sight of its master. Murray laughed softly and said something in an odd tongue—Mohawk? Erse?—to the dog, then bent and ripped a haunch from the muskrat's remains, tossing it to the beast. The animal rose like lightning, its teeth snapping shut on the carcass, then trotted happily to the far side of the fire and lay down, licking its prize.

Bereft of his bed companion, William lay down gingerly, head pillowed on his good arm, and watched as Murray cleaned his knife, scrubbing blood and grease from it with handfuls of grass.

"You said you sing your death song. What sort of song is that?"

Murray looked nonplused at that.

"I mean," William fumbled for clearer meaning, "what sort of thing would you—would one—say in a death song?"

"Oh." The Scotsman looked down at his hands, the long knobbed fingers rubbing slowly down the length of the blade. "I've only heard the one, mind. The other two I saw die that way—they were white men and didna have death songs, as such. The Indian—he was an Onondaga—he … well, there was a good deal in the beginning about who he was: a warrior of what people, I mean, and his clan, his family. Then quite a bit about how much he despised u—the folk who were about to kill him." Murray cleared his throat.

"A bit about what he'd done: his victories, valiant warriors he'd killed, and how they'd welcome him in death. Then … how he proposed to cross the …" He groped for a word. "… the—it—the way between here and what lies after death. The divide, I suppose ye'd say, though the word means something more like a chasm."

He was quiet for a moment, but not as though he had finished—more as though trying to recall something exactly. He straightened himself suddenly, took a deep breath, and with his eyes closed, began to recite something in what William supposed to be the Mohawk tongue. It was fascinating—a tattoo of "n"s and "r"s and "t"s, steady as a drumbeat.

"Then there was a bit where he went on about the nasty creatures he'd encounter on his way to paradise," Murray said, breaking off abruptly. "Things like flying heads, wi' teeth."

"Ew," said William, and Murray laughed, taken by surprise.

"Aye. I wouldna like to see one, myself."

William considered this for a moment.

"Do you compose your own death song ahead of time—in case of need, I mean? Or just trust to the, um, inspiration of the moment?"

Murray looked a little taken back by that. He blinked and looked aside.

"I … well … it's no usually talked about, ken? But aye—I did have a friend or two who told me a bit about what they'd thought of, should there ever be need."

"Hmm." William turned on his back, looking up at the stars. "Do you sing a death song only if you're being tortured to death? What if you're only ill but think you might die?"

Murray stopped what he was doing and peered toward him, suspicious.

"Ye're no dying, are ye?"

"No, just wondering," William assured him. He didn't *think* he was dying.

"Mmphm," the Scot said dubiously. "Aye, well. No, ye sing your death song if ye're sure ye're about to die; it doesna matter why."

"The more credit to you, though," William suggested, "if you do it whilst having burning splinters stuck into you?"

The Scot laughed out loud, and suddenly looked much less like an Indian. He rubbed his knuckles across his mouth.

"To be honest … the Onondaga … I didna think he did it so verra well," Murray blurted. "It doesna seem right to criticize, though. I mean, I canna say I'd do better—in the circumstances."

William laughed, too, but both men fell silent then. William supposed that Murray was, as he was, imagining himself in such case, tied to a stake, about to suffer appalling torture. He gazed up into the void above, tentatively composing a few lines: *I am William Clarence Henry George Ransom, Earl of* … No, he'd never liked his string of names. *I am William* … he thought muzzily. *William* … *James* … James was his secret name; he hadn't thought of it in years. Better than Clarence, though. *I am William*. What else was there to say? Not much, as yet. No, he'd better not die, not until he'd done something worth a proper death song.

Murray was silent, the fire reflected in his somber eyes. Watching him, William thought the Scottish Mohawk had had his own death song ready for some time. Shortly he fell asleep to the crackle of fire and the quiet crunching of bones, burning, but brave.

* * *

He was wandering through a haze of tortured dreams involving being chased by black serpents across an endless wobbling bridge over a bottomless chasm. Flying yellow heads with rainbow eyes attacked him in swarms, their tiny teeth, sharp as a mouse's, piercing his flesh. He waved an arm to beat them off, and the pain that shot through the arm at the motion roused him.

It was still dark, though the cool, live feel of the air told him the dawn was not far off. The touch of it on his face made him shiver, prompting another chill.

Someone said something that he didn't understand, and still entangled in the miasma of fever dreams, he thought it must be one of the serpents he'd been talking to earlier, before they started chasing him.

A hand touched his forehead, and a large thumb pried up one of his eyelids. An Indian's face floated in his sleep-bleared vision, looking quizzical.

He made an irritable noise and jerked his head away, blinking. The Indian said something, questioning, and a familiar voice replied. Who … Murray. The name seemed to have been floating by his elbow, and he recalled dimly that Murray himself had accompanied him in his dream, rebuking the serpents in a stern Scotch burr.

He wasn't speaking English now, though, nor even the peculiar Scotch tongue from the Highlands. William forced his head to turn, though his body was still convulsed with chill.

A number of Indians were crouched round the fire, squatting to keep their backsides from the dew-wet grass. One, two, three … six of them. Murray was sitting on the log with one of them, engaged in conversation.

No, seven. Another man, the one who had touched him, leaned over him, peering into his face.

"Think you're going to die?" the man asked, with a faint air of curiosity.

“No,” William said between clenched teeth. “Who the devil are you?”

The Indian seemed to think this an amusing question and called to his fellows, apparently repeating it. They all laughed, and Murray glanced in his direction, rising as he saw that William was awake.

“Kahnyen’kehaka,” the man looming over him said, and grinned. “Who the devil are *you*?”

“My kinsman,” Murray said shortly, before William could reply. He nudged the Indian aside and squatted beside William. “Still alive, then?”

“Evidently.” He scowled up at Murray. “Care to introduce me to your … friends?”

The first Indian went off into gales of laughter at this and apparently translated it to the two or three others who had come to peer interestedly at him. They thought it funny, too.

Murray seemed substantially less amused.

“My kinsmen,” he said dryly. “Some of them. D’ye need water?”

“You have a lot of kinsmen … cousin. Yes, if you please.”

He struggled upright, one-armed, reluctant to leave the clammy comfort of his dew-wet blanket but obeying an innate urge that told him he wanted to be on his feet. Murray seemed to know these Indians well, but kin or not, there was a certain tenseness to Murray’s mouth and shoulders. And it was plain enough that Murray had told them that William was his kinsman because if he hadn’t …

“Kahnyen’kehaka.” That’s what the Indian had said when asked who he was. It wasn’t his name, William realized suddenly. It was what he was. Murray had used the word yesterday, when he’d sent away the two Mingos.

“I’m Kahnyen’kehaka,” he’d said. *“A Mohawk. They’re afraid of me.”* He’d said it as a simple statement of fact, and William had not chosen to make an issue of it, circumstances being as they were. Seeing a number of what were plainly Mohawk together, he could appreciate the Mingos’ prudence. The Mohawk gave off an air of genial ferocity, this overlying a casual confidence entirely proper to men who were prepared to sing—however badly—whilst being emasculated and burnt alive.

Murray handed him a canteen, and he drank thirstily, then splashed a little water over his face. Feeling a bit better, he went for a piss, then walked to the fire and squatted between two of the braves, who eyed him with open curiosity.

Only the man who had pried his eyelid open seemed to speak English, but the rest nodded to him, reserved but friendly enough. William glanced across the fire and started back, nearly losing his balance. A long, tawny shape lay in the grass beyond the fire, the light gleaming on its flanks.

“It’s dead,” Murray said dryly, seeing his startlement. The Mohawk all laughed.

“Gathered that,” he replied, just as dryly, though his heart was still pounding from the shock. “Serve it right, if it’s the one that took my horse.” Now he came to look, he perceived other shapes beyond the fire. A small deer, a pig, a spotted cat, and two or three egrets, small white mounds in the dark grass. Well, that explained the Mohawks’ presence in the swamp: they’d come for the hunting, like everyone else.

Dawn was coming; the faint wind stirred the damp hair on his neck and brought him the tang of blood and musk from the animals. Both his mind and his tongue felt thick and slow, but he managed a few words of praise for the success of the hunters; he knew how to be polite. Murray, translating for him, looked surprised, though pleased, to discover that William had manners. William didn’t feel well enough to take offense.

Conversation became general then, accomplished for the most part in Mohawk. The Indians showed no particular interest in William, though the man beside him handed him a chunk of cold meat in a companionable fashion. He nodded thanks and made himself eat it, though he would as soon have forced down one of his shoe soles. He felt unwell and clammy, and when he had finished the meat, nodded politely to the Indian next him and went to lie down again, hoping he wouldn’t vomit.

Seeing this, Murray lifted his chin in William’s direction and said something to his friends in Mohawk, ending with a question of some kind.

The English-speaker, a short, thickset fellow in a checked wool shirt and buckskin trousers, shrugged in reply, then got up and came to bend over him again.

"Show me this arm," he said, and without waiting for William to comply, picked up his wrist and pulled up the sleeve of his shirt. William nearly passed out.

When the black spots stopped whirling in front of his eyes, he saw that Murray and two more Indians had come to join the first. All of them were looking at his exposed arm in open consternation. He didn't want to look, but risked a glance. His forearm was grotesquely swollen, nearly twice its normal size, and dark reddish streaks ran from under the tightly bandaged poultice, down his arm toward the wrist.

The English-speaker—what had Murray called him? *Glutton*, he thought, but why?—drew his knife and cut the bandage. Only with the removal of its constriction did William realize how uncomfortable the binding had been. He repressed the urge to rub his arm, feeling the pins and needles of returning circulation. Pins and needles, bloody hell. It felt as though his arm were engulfed by a mass of fire ants, all stinging.

"Shit," he said, through his teeth. All the Indians knew that word, evidently, for they all laughed, save Glutton and Murray, who were squinting at his arm.

Glutton—he didn't look fat, why was he called that?—poked gingerly at the arm, shook his head, and said something to Murray, then pointed off toward the west.

Murray rubbed a hand over his face, then shook his head violently, in the manner of a man shaking off fatigue or worry. Then he shrugged and asked something of the group at large. Nods and shrugs, and several of the men got up and went into the wood.

A number of questions revolved slowly through William's brain, round and bright like the metal globes of his grandfather's orrery in the library of the London house at Jermyn Street.

What are they doing?

What's happening?

Am I dying?

Am I dying like a British soldier?

Why did he … British soldier … His mind caught the tail of that one as it passed, pulling it down to look at more carefully. *"British soldier"*—who had said that? The answer spun slowly into view. Murray. When they'd talked in the night … what had Murray said?

"Is it different for a British soldier, then? Ye dinna want to die as a coward, do ye?"

"Not going to die at all," he muttered, but his mind ignored him, intent on tracking this small mystery. What had Murray meant by that? Had he been speaking theoretically? Or had he in fact recognized William *as* a British soldier?

Not possible, surely.

And what the devil had he said in reply? The sun was coming up, the dawning light bright enough to hurt his eyes, soft as it was. He squinted, concentrating.

"It's not so different—the hoping to die well if you have to," he'd said. So he'd answered as though he *was* a British soldier, damn him.

At the moment, he didn't really care whether he died well or like a dog.… Where was the—oh, there. Rollo sniffed at his arm, making a small whining noise in the back of his throat, then nosed at the wound and began to lick it. It felt most peculiar: painful, but weirdly soothing, and he made no move to drive the dog away.

What … oh, yes. He had simply replied, not noticing what Murray had said. But what if Murray *did* know who—or what—he was? A small stab of alarm pierced the muddle of his slowing thoughts. Had Murray been following him, before he came into the swamp? Seen him speaking to the man at the wilderness farm near the edge of the swamp, perhaps, and followed, ready to intercept him when the opportunity should offer? But if that were true …

What Murray had said about Henry Washington, about Dismal Town—was it a lie?

The stocky Indian knelt down beside him, nudging the dog away. William couldn't ask any of the questions clogging his brain.

"Why do they call you Glutton?" he asked instead, through the haze of hot pain.

The man grinned and pulled open the neck of his shirt, to display a mass of welted scars that covered neck and chest.

"Killed one," he said. "With my hands. My spirit animal now. You have one?"

"No."

The Indian looked reproving at this.

"You need one, you going to live through this. Pick one. Pick a strong one."

Muzzily obedient, William groped through random images of animals: pig … snake … deer … catamount … no, too rank, foul-smelling.

"Bear," he said, settling on that with a sense of certainty. Didn't get any stronger than a bear, did it?

"Bear," the Indian repeated, nodding. "Yes, that's good." He slit William's sleeve with his knife; the fabric would no longer fit easily over the swollen arm. Sunlight washed suddenly over him, glanced silver from the blade of his knife. He looked at William then and laughed.

"You got one red beard, Bear Cub, you know that?"

"I know that," William said, and shut his eyes against the spears of morning's light.

* * *

Glutton wanted the catamount's skin, but Murray, alarmed by William's condition, refused to wait for him to skin it. The upshot of the resulting argument was that William found himself occupying a hastily constructed travois, cheek by jowl with the dead cat, being dragged over rough terrain behind Murray's horse. Their destination, he was given to understand, was a small settlement some ten miles distant, which boasted a doctor.

Glutton and two of the other Mohawk came with them in order to show the way, leaving their other companions to continue hunting.

The catamount had been gutted, which William supposed might be better than not—the day was warm, and getting hot—but the scent of blood drew masses of flies, which feasted at their leisure, as the horse, burdened with the travois, could not go fast enough to outpace them. The flies hummed and buzzed and shrilled about his ears, setting his nerves on edge, and while most were interested in the cat, enough of them cared to try William for taste as sufficed to keep his mind off his arm.

When the Indians paused for urination and water, they hauled William to his feet—a relief, even wobbly as he was. Murray glanced at his fly-bitten, sunburned features, and reaching into a skin bag slung at his waist, pulled out a battered tin, which turned out to contain a highly malodorous ointment, with which he anointed William liberally.

"It's no but another five or six miles," he assured William, who hadn't asked.

"Oh, good," William said, with what vigor he could muster. "It's not hell after all, then—only purgatory. What's another thousand years?"

That made Murray laugh, though Glutton regarded him in puzzlement.

"Ye'll do," Murray said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Want to walk for a bit?"

"God, yes."

His head swam, his feet refused to point forward, and his knees seemed to bend in unwonted directions, but anything was better than another hour of communing with the flies that blanketed the catamount's glazed eyes and drying tongue. Provided with a stout stick cut from an oak sapling, he plodded doggedly behind the horse, alternately drenched with sweat and shaking with clammy chills, but determined to stay upright until and unless he actually fell down.

The ointment did keep the flies at bay—all the Indians were likewise smeared with it—and when not fighting the shaking, he lapsed into a sort of trance, concerned only with putting one foot before the other.

The Indians and Murray kept an eye on him for a time, but then, satisfied that he could remain upright, returned to their own conversations. He could not understand the two Mohawk-speakers, but Glutton appeared to be catechizing Murray closely concerning the nature of purgatory.

Murray was having some difficulty in explaining the concept, apparently owing to the Mohawk having no notion of sin, or of a God concerned with the wickedness of man.

"You're lucky you became Kahnyen'kehaka," Glutton said at last, shaking his head. "A spirit not satisfied with an evil man being dead but that wants to torture him after death? And Christians think we're cruel!"

"Aye, well," Murray replied, "but think. Say a man is a coward and hasna died well. Purgatory gives him a chance to prove his courage after all, no? And once he is proved a proper man, then the bridge is open to him, and he can pass through the clouds of terrible things unhindered to paradise."

"Hmm!" Glutton said, though he seemed still dubious. "I suppose if a man can stand to be tortured for hundreds of years … but how does he do this, if no body?"

"D'ye think a man needs a body to be tortured?" Murray asked this with a certain dryness, and Glutton grunted in what might be either agreement or amusement and dropped the subject.

They all walked in silence for some time, surrounded by birdcalls and the loud buzzing of flies. Preoccupied with the effort of remaining upright, William had fixed his attention on the back of Murray's head as a means of not veering off the trail and thus noticed when the Scot, who was leading the horse, slowed his pace a little.

He thought at first that this was on his account and was about to protest that he could keep up—for a little while, at least—but then saw Murray glance swiftly at the other Mohawk, who had drawn ahead, then turn to Glutton and ask something, in a voice too low for William to make out the words.

Glutton hunched his shoulders in reluctance, then let them fall, resigned. "Oh, I see," he said. "She's your purgatory, eh?"

Murray made a sound of reluctant amusement. "Does it matter? I asked if she's well."

Glutton sighed, shrugging one shoulder.

"Yes, well. She has a son. A daughter, too, I think. Her husband …"

"Aye?" Murray's voice had hardened in some fashion.

"You know Thayendanegea?"

"I do." Now Murray sounded curious. William was curious himself, in a vague, unfocused sort of way, and waited to hear who Thayendanegea might be and what he had to do with the woman who was—who had been—Murray's paramour? Oh, no.

"I am no longer wed." His wife, then. William felt a faint pang of sympathy, thinking of Margery. He had thought of her only casually, if at all, in the past four years, but suddenly her betrayal seemed tragedy. Images of her swam about him, fractured by a sense of grief. He felt moisture running down his face, didn't know if it was sweat or tears. The thought came to him, slowly, as from a great distance, that he must be off his head, but he had no notion what to do about it.

The flies weren't biting but were still buzzing in his ears. He listened to the hum with great concentration, convinced that the flies were trying to tell him something important. He listened with great attention, but could make out only nonsense syllables. "Shosha." "Nik." "Osonni." No, that was a word, he knew that one! White man, it meant white man—were they talking about him?

He pawed clumsily at his ear, brushing at the flies, and caught that word again: "purgatory."

For a time, he could not place the meaning of the word; it hung in front of him, covered with flies. Dimly, he perceived the horse's hindquarters, gleaming in the sun, the twin lines made in the dust by the—what was it? A thing made of—bed—no, canvas; he shook his head. It was his bedsack, wrapped about two trailing saplings, trailing … "travois," that was the word—yes. And the cat, there was a cat there, looking at him with eyes like rough amber, its head turned over its shoulder, openmouthed, its fangs showing.

Now the cat was talking to him, too.

"You mad, you know that?"

"I know that," he murmured. He didn't catch the cat's reply, growled in a Scottish accent.

He leaned closer, to hear. Felt as though he floated down, through air thick as water, toward that open mouth. Suddenly all sense of effort ceased; he was no longer moving but was supported somehow. Couldn’t see the cat … oh. He was lying facedown on the ground, grass and dirt beneath his cheek.

The cat’s voice floated back to him, angry but resigned.

“This purgatory of yours? You think you can get out walking backward?”

Well, no, William thought, feeling peaceful. That made no sense at all.

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PLAIN SPEECH

The young woman snicked the blades of her scissors in thoughtful fashion.

"Thee is sure?" she asked. "It seems shame, Friend William. Such a striking color!"

"I should think you'd consider it unseemly, Miss Hunter," William said, smiling. "I had always heard that Quakers think bright colors to be worldly." The only color in her own dress was a small bronzy-colored brooch that held her kerchief together. Everything else was shades of cream and butternut—though he thought these suited her.

She looked reprovingly at him.

"Immodest ornament in dress is hardly the same as grateful acceptance of the gifts God hath given. Do bluebirds pluck out their feathers, or roses fling away their petals?"

"I doubt that roses itch," he said, scratching at his chin. The notion of his beard as a gift of God was novel, but not sufficiently persuasive as to convince him to go about as a whiskeranto. Beyond its unfortunate color, it grew with vigor, but sparsely. He looked disapprovingly at the modest square of looking glass in his hand. He could do nothing about the peeling sunburn that patched his nose and cheeks, or the scabbed scrapes and scratches left by his adventures in the swamp—but the hideous copper curls that sprouted jauntily from his chin and plastered themselves like a disfiguring moss along his jaw—that, at least, could be amended at once.

"If you please?"

Her lips twitched, and she knelt down beside his stool, turning his head with a hand beneath his chin so as to take best advantage of the light from the window.

“Well, then,” she said, and laid the scissors cool against his face. “I’ll ask Denny to come and shave thee. I daresay I can cut thy beard without wounding thee, but”—her eyes narrowed and she leaned closer, snipping delicately round the curve of his chin—“I’ve not shaved anything more lively than a dead pig, myself.”

“Barber, barber,” he murmured, trying not to move his lips, “shave a pig. How ma—”

Her fingers pressed up under his chin, firmly shutting his mouth, but she made the small snorting sound that passed with her for laughter. *Snip, snip, snip*. The blades tickled pleasantly against his face, and the wiry hairs brushed his hands as they fell into the worn linen towel she’d placed across his lap.

He’d had no opportunity to study her face at such close range and took full advantage of the brief opportunity. Her eyes were almost brown and not quite green. He wished suddenly to kiss the end of her nose. He shut his eyes, instead, and breathed. She’d been milking a goat, he could tell.

“I can shave myself,” he said, when she lowered the scissors.

She raised her brows and glanced downward at his arm. “I should be surprised if thee can feed thyself yet, let alone shave.”

In all truth, he could barely lift his right arm, and she had been feeding him for the last two days. That being so, he thought better of telling her that he was in fact left-handed.

“It’s healing well,” he said, instead, and turned his arm so the light shone upon it. Dr. Hunter had removed the dressing only that morning, expressing gratification at the results. The wound was still red and puckered, the skin around it unpleasantly white and moist. It was, however, undoubtedly healing; the arm was no longer swollen, and the ominous red streaks had disappeared.

“Well,” she said consideringly, “it’s a fine scar, I think. Well knit, and rather pretty.”

“Pretty?” William echoed, looking skeptically at his arm. He’d heard men now and then describe a scar as “pretty,” but most commonly they meant one that had healed straight and clean and did not disfigure the bearer by passing through some significant feature. This one was jagged and sprawling, with a long tail leading toward his wrist. He had—he was told sometime after the fact—narrowly escaped loss of the arm: Dr. Hunter had grasped it and placed his amputation saw just above the wound, only to have the abscess that had formed below it burst in his hand. Seeing this, the doctor had hastily drained the wound, packed it with garlic and comfrey, and prayed—to good effect.

"It looks like an enormous star," Rachel Hunter said approvingly. "One of significance. A great comet, perhaps. Or the Star of Bethlehem, which led the Wise Men to the manger of Christ."

William turned his arm, considering. He thought it looked rather more like a bursting mortar shell, himself, but said merely, "Hmm!" in an encouraging manner. He wished to continue the conversation—she seldom lingered when she fed him, having much other work to do—and so lifted his newly shorn chin and gestured at the brooch she wore.

"That's pretty," he said. "Not too worldly?"

"No," she said tartly, putting a hand to the brooch. "It's made of my mother's hair. She died when I was born."

"Ah. I'm sorry," he said, and with a moment's hesitation added, "So did mine."

She stopped then and looked at him, and for a moment, he saw a flicker of something in her eyes that was more than the matter-of-fact attention she would give to a cow in calf or a dog that had eaten something that disagreed with it.

"I'm sorry, too," she said softly, then turned with decision. "I'll fetch my brother."

Her footsteps went down the narrow stair, quick and light. He picked up the ends of the towel and shook it out the window, scattering the ruddy hair clippings to the four winds, and good riddance. He might have grown a beard as a rudimentary disguise, had it been a decently sober brown. As it was, a full beard of that garish color would rivet the eye of everyone who saw him.

What to do now? he wondered. Surely he would be fit to leave by tomorrow.

His clothes were still wearable, if worse for wear; Miss Hunter had patched the tears in his breeches and coat. But he had no horse, no money save two sixpences that had been in his pocket, and had lost the book with the list of his contacts and their messages. He might recall a few of their names, but without the proper code words and signs …

He thought quite suddenly of Henry Washington, and that hazy half-remembered conversation with Ian Murray by the fire, before they had begun to speak of death songs. Washington, Cartwright, Harrington, and Carver. The chanted list returned to him, together with Murray's puzzled reply to his mention of Washington and Dismal Town.

He could not think of any reason why Murray should seek to mislead him on the matter. But if he was correct—was Captain Richardson grossly mistaken in his intelligence? That was possible, certainly. Even in as short a time as he had been in the Colonies, he had learned just how quickly loyalties could shift, with changing news of threat or opportunity.

But … said the small, cold voice of reason, and he felt its chilly touch on his neck. *If Captain Richardson was not mistaken … then he meant to send you to death or imprisonment*.

The sheer enormity of the idea dried his mouth, and he reached for the cup of herbal tea that Miss Hunter had brought him earlier. It tasted foul, but he scarcely noticed, clutching it as though it might be a talisman against the prospect he imagined.

No, he assured himself. It wasn't possible. His father knew Richardson. Surely if the captain were a traitor—what was he thinking? He gulped the tea, grimacing as he swallowed.

"No," he said aloud, "not possible. Or not likely," he added fairly. "Occam's razor."

The thought calmed him a little. He had learned the basic principles of logic at an early age and had found William of Occam a sound guide before. Was it more likely that Captain Richardson was a hidden traitor who had deliberately sent William into danger

—or that the captain had been misinformed or had simply made a mistake?

Come to that—what would be the point of it? William was under no delusions concerning his own importance in the scheme of things. Where would be the benefit to Richardson—or anyone else—in destroying a junior officer engaged in minor intelligencing?

Well, then. He relaxed a bit, and taking an unwary mouthful of the ghastly tea, choked on it and coughed, spraying tea everywhere. He was still wiping up the residue with his towel when Dr. Hunter came trotting briskly up the stair. Denzell Hunter was perhaps ten years his sister's senior, somewhere in his late twenties, small-boned and cheerful as a cock sparrow. He beamed at sight of William, plainly so delighted at his patient's recovery that William smiled warmly back.

"Sissy tells me thee requires to shave," the doctor said, setting down the shaving mug and brush he had brought. "Plainly, thee must be feeling well enough to contemplate a return to society—for the first thing any man does when free of social constraint is to let his beard grow. Has thee moved thy bowels as yet?"

"No, but I propose to do so almost at once," William assured him. "I am not, however, of a mind to venture out in public looking like a bandit—not even to the privy. I shouldn't wish to scandalize your neighbors."

Dr. Hunter laughed, and withdrawing a razor from one pocket and his silver-rimmed spectacles from another, set the latter firmly on his nose and picked up the shaving brush.

"Oh, Sissy and I are already a hissing and a byword," he assured William, leaning close to apply the lather. "Seeing banditti emerging from our privy would merely confirm the neighbors in their opinions."

"Really?" William spoke carefully, twisting his mouth so as to avoid having it inadvertently filled with soap. "Why?" He was surprised to hear this; once regaining his senses, he had asked where he was and learned that Oak Grove was a small Quaker settlement. He had thought Quakers in general to be most united in their religious sentiments—but then, he did not really know any Quakers.

Hunter heaved a deep sigh, and laying down the shaving brush, took up the razor in its stead.

"Oh, politics," he said, in an offhand tone, as of one wishing to dismiss a tiresome but trivial subject. "Tell me, Friend Ransom, is there someone to whom I might send, to tell them of thy mishap and delivery?" He paused in the shaving, to allow William to reply.

"No, I thank you, sir—I shall tell them myself," William said, smiling. "I am sure I will be able to leave by tomorrow—though I assure you that I will not forget your kindness and hospitality when I reach my … friends."

Denzell Hunter's brow furrowed a little, and his mouth compressed as he resumed the shaving, but he made no argument.

"I trust thee will forgive my inquisitiveness," he said after a moment, "but where does thee intend to go from here?"

William hesitated, not sure what to reply. He had in fact not decided exactly where to go, given the lamentable state of his finances. The best notion that had occurred to him was that he might head for Mount Josiah, his own plantation. He was not positive but thought he must be within forty or fifty miles of it—if the Hunters might give him a little food, he thought he could reach it within a few days, a week at most. And once there, he could reequip himself with clothes, a decent horse, arms, and money, and thus resume his journey.

It was a tempting prospect. To do that, though, was to reveal his presence in Virginia—and to cause considerable comment, as everyone in the county not only knew him but knew that he was a soldier. To turn up in the neighborhood dressed as he was …

"There are a few Catholics at Rosemount," Dr. Hunter observed with diffidence, wiping the razor on the much-abused towel. William glanced at him in surprise.

"Oh?" he said warily. Why the devil was Hunter telling him about Catholics?

"I beg pardon, Friend," the doctor apologized, seeing his reaction. "Thee had mentioned thy friends—I thought …"

"You thought I was—" Puzzlement was succeeded by a jolt of realization, and William slapped a hand in reflex against his chest, naturally finding nothing but the much-worn nightshirt he was wearing.

"Here it is." The doctor bent swiftly to open the blanket box at the foot of the bed and stood up, the wooden rosary swinging from one hand. "We had to remove it, of course, when we undressed thee, but Sissy put it safe away to keep for thee."

"We?" William said, seizing on this as a means of delaying inquiry. "You—and Miss Hunter—undressed me?"

"Well, there was no one else," the doctor said apologetically. "We were obliged to lay thee naked in the creek, in hopes of quelling thy fever—thee does not recall?"

He did—vaguely—but had assumed the memory of overwhelming cold and a sense of drowning to be more remnants of his fever dreams. Miss Hunter's presence had fortunately—or perhaps unfortunately—not formed part of those memories.

"I could not carry thee alone," the doctor was explaining earnestly. "And the neighbors—I did provide a towel for the preservation of thy modesty," he assured William hastily.

"What quarrel do your neighbors have with you?" William inquired curiously, reaching out to take the rosary from Hunter's hand. "I am not a Papist myself," he added offhandedly. "It is a … memento, given me by a friend."

"Oh." The doctor rubbed a finger across his lip, plainly disconcerted. "I see. I had thought—"

"The neighbors …?" William asked, and suppressing his embarrassment, hung the rosary once more around his neck. Perhaps the mistake over his religion was the basis of the neighbors' animus?

"Well, I daresay they would have helped to carry thee," Dr. Hunter admitted, "had there been time to go and fetch someone. The matter was urgent, though, and the nearest house is a goodly distance."

This left the question of the neighbors' attitude toward the Hunters unanswered, but it seemed unmannerly to press further. William merely nodded and stood up.

The floor tilted abruptly under him and white light flickered at the edge of his vision. He grabbed at the windowsill to keep from falling and came to his senses a moment later, bathed in sweat, with Dr. Hunter's surprisingly strong grip of his arm preventing his tumbling headfirst into the yard below.

"Not quite so fast, Friend Ransom," the doctor said gently, and, hauling him in, turned him back toward the bed. "Another day, perhaps, before thee stands alone. Thee has more phlegm than is useful to thee, I fear."

Mildly nauseated, William sat on the bed and allowed Dr. Hunter to wipe his face with the towel. Evidently he had a bit more time in which to decide where to go.

"How long, do you think, before I can walk a full day?"

Denzell Hunter gave him a considering look.

"Five days, perhaps—four, at the least," he said. "Thee is robust and full-blooded, else I would say a week."

William, feeling puny and pallid, nodded and lay down. The doctor stood frowning at him for a moment, though it did not seem that the frown was directed at him; it seemed rather an expression of some inner concern.

"How … far will thy travels take thee?" the doctor asked, choosing his words with apparent care.

"Quite some distance," William replied, with equal wariness. "I am headed … toward Canada," he said, suddenly realizing that to say more might imply more than he wished to give away regarding his reasons for travel. True, a man might have business in Canada without necessarily having dealings with the British army who occupied Quebec, but as the doctor had mentioned politics … best to be politic about the matter. And certainly he would not mention Mount Josiah. Whatever the Hunters' strained relations with their neighbors, news concerning their visitor might easily spread.

"Canada," the doctor repeated, as though to himself. Then his gaze returned to William. "Yes, that is some considerable distance. Luckily, I have killed a goat this morning; we will have meat. That will help to restore thy strength. I will bleed thee tomorrow, to restore some balance to thy humors, and then we shall see. For the moment …” He smiled and extended a hand. “Come. I’ll see thee safe to the privy.”

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A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE

There was a storm coming; William could feel it in the shifting of the air, see it in the racing cloud shadows that scudded across the worn floorboards. The heat and damp oppression of the summer day had lifted, and the restlessness of the air seemed to stir him, as well. Though still weak, he could not remain abed, and managed to get up, clinging to the washstand until the initial giddiness left him.

Left to himself, he then passed some time in walking from one side of the room to the other—a distance of ten feet or so—one hand pressed against the wall for balance. The effort drained and dizzied him, and now and then he was obliged to sit down on the floor, head hung between his knees, until the spots ceased to dance before his eyes.

It was on one of these occasions, while seated beneath the window, that he heard voices from the yard below. Miss Rachel Hunter's voice, surprised and questioning—a man's reply, low-voiced and husky. A familiar voice—Ian Murray!

He shot to his feet and just as quickly subsided back onto the floor, vision black and head swimming. He clenched his fists and panted, trying to will the blood to return to his head.

"He will live, then?" The voices were distant, half buried in the murmur of the chestnut trees near the house, but he caught that. He struggled up onto his knees and caught hold of the sill, blinking into the cloud-shattered brightness of the day.

Murray's tall figure was visible at the edge of the dooryard, gaunt in buckskins, the huge dog at his side. There was no sign of Glutton or the other Indians, but two horses were cropping grass in the lane behind Murray, reins dangling. Rachel Hunter was gesturing to the house, plainly inviting Murray to come in, but he shook his head. He reached into the bag at his waist and withdrew a small package of some sort, which he handed to the girl.

"Hoy!" William shouted—or tried to shout; he hadn't much breath—and waved his arms. The wind was rising with a shivering rush through the chestnut leaves, but the motion must have caught Murray's eye, for he glanced up, and seeing William in the window, smiled and lifted his own hand in greeting.

He made no move to enter the house, though. Instead, he picked up the reins of one horse and put them into Rachel Hunter's hand. Then, with a wave of farewell toward William's window, he swung himself up onto the other horse with an economical grace and rode away.

William's hands tightened on the sill, disappointment surging through him at seeing Murray vanish into the trees. Wait, though—Murray had left a horse. Rachel Hunter was leading it around the house, her apron and petticoats aswirl in the rising wind, one hand on her cap to keep it in place.

It must be for him, surely! Did Murray mean to come back for him, then? Or was he to follow? Heart thumping in his ears, William pulled on his patched breeches and the new stockings Rachel had knitted for him, and after a short struggle got his water-stiffened boots on over them. The effort left him trembling, but he stubbornly made his way downstairs, lurching, sweating, and slipping but arriving in the kitchen at the bottom in one piece.

The back door opened with a blast of wind and light, then slammed abruptly, jerked out of Rachel's hand. She turned, saw him, and yelped in startlement.

"Lord save us! What is thee doing down here?" She was panting with exertion and fright, and glared at him, tucking wisps of dark hair back under her cap.

"Didn't mean to startle you," William said in apology. "I wanted—I saw Mr. Murray leaving. I thought I might catch him up. Did he say where I was to meet him?"

“He did not. Sit, for heaven’s sake, before thee falls down.”

He didn’t want to. The desire to be out, to go, was overwhelming. But his knees were shaking, and if he didn’t sit down shortly … Reluctantly, he sat.

“What did he say?” he asked, and realizing suddenly that he was sitting in a lady’s presence, gestured at the other stool. “Sit, please. Tell me what he said.”

Rachel eyed him but sat, smoothing her windblown clothing back into place. The storm was rising; cloud shadows raced across the floor, across her face, and the air seemed to waver, as though the room were underwater.

“He asked after thy health, and when I told him thee was mending, he gave me the horse, saying it was for thee.” She hesitated for an instant, and William pushed.

“He gave you something else, did he not? I saw him give you a package of some kind.”

Her lips pressed together for an instant, but she nodded, and reaching into her pocket, handed him a small bundle, loosely wrapped in cloth.

He was eager to see what the packet contained—but not so eager that he did not notice the marks in the cloth, deep lines where string had once been tied round it. And tied very recently. He glanced up at Rachel Hunter, who looked away, chin high, but with color rising in her cheeks. He cocked an eyebrow at her, then bent his attention to the packet.

Opened, it contained a small sheaf of paper continentals; a worn pouch containing the sum of one guinea, three shillings, and tuppence in coin; a much-folded—and refolded, if he was any judge—letter; and another, smaller, bundle, this one still tied. Setting aside this and the money, he opened the letter.

Cousin,

I hope to find you in better health than when last seen. If so, I will leave a horse and some funds to assist your

> *travels. If not, I will leave the money, to pay either for medicine or your burial. The other thing is a gift from a friend whom the Indians call Bear-Killer. He hopes that you will wear it in good health. I wish you luck in your ventures.*
>
> *Your ob't. serv.,*
> *Ian Murray*

"Hmm!" William was baffled by this. Evidently Murray had business of his own and could not or did not wish to stay until William was able to travel. Though somewhat disappointed—he would have liked to talk further with Murray, now that his mind was clear again—he could see that it might be better that Murray did not mean them to travel together.

It dawned upon him that his immediate problem was solved; he now had the means to resume his mission—or as much of it as he could. He could at least reach General Howe's headquarters, make a report, and get new instructions.

It was remarkably generous of Murray; the horse had looked sound, and the money was more than enough to see him comfortably fed and lodged all the way to New York. He wondered where on earth Murray had got it; by his looks, the man hadn't a pot to piss in—though he had a good rifle, William reminded himself—and he was plainly educated, for he made a decent fist of writing. What could have caused the odd Scottish Indian to take such interest in him, though?

Bemused, he reached for the smaller bundle and untied the string. Unwrapped, the contents proved to be the claw of a large bear, pierced and strung on a leather thong. It was old; the edges were worn, and the knot in the leather had hardened so far that it would plainly never be untied again.

He stroked the claw with a thumb, tested the point. Well, the bear spirit had stood him in good stead so far. Smiling to himself, he put the thong over his head, leaving the claw to hang outside his shirt. Rachel Hunter stared at it, her face unreadable.

"You read my letter, Miss Hunter," William said reprovingly. "Very naughty of you!"

The flush rose higher in her cheeks, but she met his eye with a directness he was unaccustomed to find in a woman—with the marked exception of his paternal grandmother.

"Thy speech is far superior to thy clothes, Friend William—even were they new. And while thee has been in thy right mind for some days now, thee has not chosen to say what brought thee to the Great Dismal. It is not a place frequented by gentlemen."

"Oh, indeed it is, Miss Hunter. Many gentlemen of my acquaintance go there for the hunting, which is unexcelled. But naturally, one does not hunt wild boar or catamounts in one's best linen."

"Neither does one go hunting armed only with a frying pan, Friend William," she riposted. "And if thee is a gentleman in truth—where is thy home, pray?"

He fumbled for an instant, unable to recall at once his alter ego's particulars, and seized instead on the first city to come to his mind.

"Ah—Savannah. In the Carolinas," he added helpfully.

"I know where it is," she snapped. "And have heard men speak who come from there. Thee doesn't."

"Are you calling me a liar?" he said, amazed.

"I am."

"Oh." They sat gazing at each other in the half light of the gathering storm, each calculating. For an instant, he had the illusion that he was playing chess with his grandmother Benedicta.

"I am sorry for reading thy letter," she said abruptly. "It was not vulgar curiosity, I assure thee."

"What, then?" He smiled a little, to indicate that he bore no animus for her trespass. She didn't smile back, but looked at him narrowly—not in suspicion, but as though gauging him in some way. At last she sighed, though, and her shoulders slumped.

"I wished to know a little of thee, and of thy character. The companions who brought thee to us seem dangerous men. And thy cousin? If thee is one like them, then—" Her teeth fixed briefly in her upper lip, but she shook her head, as though to herself, and continued more firmly.

"We must leave here within a few days—my brother and myself. Thee told Denny that thee travels north; I wish that we may travel with thee, at least for a time."

Whatever he'd been expecting, it wasn't that. He blinked and said the first thing that came to his mind.

"Leave here? Why? The … er … the neighbors?"

She looked surprised at that.

"What?"

"I beg your pardon, ma'am. Your brother seemed to indicate that relations between your family and those who dwell nearby were … somewhat strained?"

"Oh." One corner of her mouth tucked back; he could not tell if this betokened distress or amusement—but rather thought it was the latter.

"I see," she said, and drummed her fingers thoughtfully on the table. "Yes, that's true, though it was not what I—well, and yet it has to do with the matter. I see I must tell thee everything, then. What does thee know about the Society of Friends?"

He knew only one family of Quakers, the Unwins. Mr. Unwin was a wealthy merchant who knew his father, and he had met the two daughters at a musicale once, but the conversation had not touched upon philosophy or religion.

"They—er, you—dislike conflict, I believe?" he answered cautiously.

That surprisingly made her laugh, and he felt pleasure at having removed the tiny furrow between her brows, if only temporarily.

"Violence," she corrected. "We thrive upon conflict, if it be verbal. And given the form of our worship—Denny says thee is not a Papist after all, yet I venture to suppose that thee have never attended a Quaker meeting?"

"The opportunity has not so far occurred, no."

"I thought not. Well, then." She eyed him consideringly. "We have preachers who will come to speak at meeting—but anyone may speak at meeting, upon any subject, if the spirit moves him or her to do so.”

“Her? Women speak in public, too?”

She gave him a withering look.

“I have a tongue, just as thee does.”

“I’d noticed,” he said, and smiled at her. “Continue, please.”

She leaned forward a little to do so but was interrupted by the crash of a shutter swinging back against the house, this followed by a spatter of rain, dashed hard across the window. Rachel sprang to her feet with a brief exclamation.

“I must get the chickens in! Close the shutters,” she ordered him, and dashed out.

Taken aback but amused, he did so, moving slowly. Going upstairs to fasten the upper shutters made him dizzy again, and he paused on the threshold of the bedroom, holding the doorjamb until his balance returned. There were two rooms upstairs: the bedroom at the front of the house, where they had put him, and a smaller room in the rear. The Hunters now shared this room; there was a truckle bed, a washstand with a silver candlestick upon it, and little else, save a row of pegs upon which hung the doctor’s spare shirt and breeches, a woolen shawl, and what must be Rachel Hunter’s go-to-meeting gown, a sober-looking garment dyed with indigo.

With rain and wind muffled by the shutters, the dim room seemed still now, and peaceful, a harbor from the storm. His heart had slowed from the exertion of climbing the stair, and he stood for a moment, enjoying the slightly illicit sense of trespass. No sound from below; Rachel must be still in pursuit of the chickens.

There was something faintly odd about the room, and it took him only a moment to decide what it was. The shabbiness and sparsity of the Hunters’ personal possessions argued poverty—yet these contrasted with the small signs of prosperity evident in the furnishings: the candlestick was silver, not plate or pewter, and the ewer and basin were not earthenware but good china, painted with sprawling blue chrysanthemums.

He lifted the skirt of the blue dress hanging on the peg, examining it curiously. Modesty was one thing; threadbareness was another.

The hem was worn nearly white, the indigo faded so that the folds of the skirt showed a fan-shaped pattern of light and dark. The Misses Unwin had dressed quietly, but their clothes were of the highest quality.

On sudden impulse, he brought the cloth to his face, breathing in. It smelled faintly still of indigo, and of grass and live things—and very perceptibly of a woman's body. The musk of it ran through him like the pleasure of good wine.

The sound of the door closing below made him drop the dress as though it had burst into flame, and he made for the stairs, heart hammering.

Rachel Hunter was shaking herself on the hearth, shedding drops of water from her apron, her cap wilted and soggy on her head. Not seeing him, she took this off, wrung it out with a mutter of impatience, and hung it on a nail hammered into the chimney breast.

Her hair fell down her back, wet-tailed and shining, dark against the pale cloth of her jacket.

"The chickens are all safe, I trust?" He spoke, because to watch her unawares with her hair down, the smell of her still vivid in his nose, seemed suddenly to be an unwarrantable intimacy.

She turned round, eyes wary, but made no immediate move to cover her hair.

"All but the one my brother calls the Great Whore of Babylon. No chicken possesses anything resembling intelligence, but that one is perverse beyond the usual."

"Perverse?" Evidently she perceived that he was contemplating the possibilities inherent in this description and finding them entertaining, for she snorted through her nose and bent to open the blanket chest.

"The creature is sitting twenty feet up in a pine tree, in the midst of a rainstorm. Perverse." She pulled out a linen towel and began to dry her hair with it.

The sound of the rain altered suddenly, hail rattling like tossed gravel against the shutters.

"Hmmph," said Rachel, with a dark look at the window. "I expect she will be knocked senseless by the hail and devoured by the first passing fox, and serve her right." She resumed drying her hair. "No great matter. I shall be pleased never to see any of those chickens again."

Seeing him still standing, she sat down, gesturing him to another stool.

"You did say that you and your brother proposed to leave this place and travel north," he reminded her, sitting down. "I collect the chickens will not make the journey with you?"

"No, and the Lord be praised. They are already sold, along with the house." Laying the crumpled towel aside, she groped in her pocket and withdrew a small comb carved from horn. "I did say I would tell thee why."

"I believe we had reached the point of learning that the matter has something to do with your meeting?"

She breathed deeply through her nose and nodded.

"I said that when a person is moved of the spirit, he speaks in meeting? Well, the spirit moved my brother. That is how we came to leave Philadelphia."

A meeting might be formed, she explained, wherever there were sufficient Friends of like mind. But in addition to these small local meetings, there were larger bodies, the Quarterly and Yearly Meetings, at which weighty matters of principle were discussed and actions affecting Quakers in general were decided upon.

"Philadelphia Yearly Meeting is the largest and most influential," she said. "Thee is right: the Friends eschew violence, and seek either to avoid it or to end it. And in this question of rebellion, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting thought and prayed upon the matter, and advised that the path of wisdom and peace plainly lay in reconciliation with the mother country."

"Indeed." William was interested. "So all of the Quakers in the Colonies are now Loyalists, do you mean?"

Her lips compressed for an instant.

"That is the advice of the Yearly Meeting. As I said, though, Friends are led of the spirit, and one must do as one is led to do."

"And your brother was led to speak in favor of rebellion?" William was amused, though wary; Dr. Hunter seemed an unlikely firebrand.

She dipped her head, not quite a nod.

"In favor of independency," she corrected.

"Surely there is something lacking in the logic of that distinction," William observed, raising one brow. "How might independency be achieved without the exercise of violence?"

"If thee thinks the spirit of God is necessarily logical, thee know Him better than I do." She ran a hand through the damp hair, flicking it over her shoulders with impatience.

"Denny said that it was made clear to him that liberty, whether that of the individual or of countries, is a gift of God, and that it was laid upon him that he must join in the fight to gain and preserve it. So we were put out of meeting," she ended abruptly.

It was dark in the room, with the shutters closed, but he could see her face by the dim glow from the smothered hearth. That last statement had moved her strongly; her mouth was pinched, and there was a brightness to her eyes that suggested she might weep, were she not determined not to.

"I collect this is a serious thing, to be put out of meeting?" he asked cautiously.

She nodded, looking away. She picked up the discarded damp towel, smoothed it slowly, and folded it, plainly choosing her words.

"I told thee that my mother died when I was born. My father died three years later—drowned in a flood. We were left with nothing, my brother and I. But the local meeting saw to it that we did not starve, that there was a roof—if one with holes—over our heads. There was a question in meeting, how Denny might be 'prenticed. I know he feared that he must become a drover or a cobbler—he lacks somewhat to be a blacksmith," she added, smiling a little despite her seriousness. "He would have done it, though—to keep me fed."

Luck had intervened, however. One of the Friends had taken it upon himself to try to trace any relatives of the orphaned Hunter children, and after a number of letters to and fro, had discovered a distant cousin, originally from Scotland but presently in London.

"John Hunter, bless his name. He is a famous physician, he and his elder brother, who is *accoucheur* to the Queen herself." Despite her egalitarian principles, Miss Hunter looked somewhat awed, and William nodded respectfully. "He inquired as to Denny's abilities, and hearing good report, made provision for Denny to remove to Philadelphia, to board there with a Quaker family and to go to the new medical college. And then he went so far as to have Denny go to London, to study there with himself!"

"Very good luck, indeed," William observed. "But what about you?"

"Oh. I—was taken in by a woman in the village," she said, with a quick casualness that did not deceive him. "But Denzell came back, and so of course I came to keep his house until he might wed."

She was pleating the towel between her fingers, looking down into her lap. There were small lights in her hair where the fire caught it, a hint of bronze in the dark brown locks.

"The woman—she was a goodly woman. She took care I should learn to keep a house, to cook, to sew. That I should … know what is needful for a woman to know." She glanced at him with that odd directness, her face sober.

"I think thee cannot understand," she said, "what it means to be put out of meeting."

"Something like being drummed out of one's regiment, I expect. Disgraceful and distressing."

Her eyes narrowed for a moment, but he had spoken seriously, and she saw that.

"A Friends' meeting is not only a fellowship of worship. It is … a community of mind, of heart. A larger family, in a way."

And for a young woman bereft of her own family?

"And to be put out, then … yes, I see," he said quietly.

There was a brief silence in the room then, broken only by the sound of the rain. He thought he heard a rooster crow, somewhere far off.

"Thy mother is dead, too, thee said." Rachel looked at him, dark eyes soft. "Does thy father live?"

He shook his head.

"You will think I am exceeding dramatic," he said. "It is the truth, though—my father also died upon the day of my birth."

She blinked at that.

"Truly. He was a good fifty years my mother's senior. When he heard that she was dead in ch—in childbirth, he suffered an apoplexy and died upon the spot." He was annoyed; he seldom stuttered anymore. She had not noticed, though.

"So thee is orphaned, too. I am sorry for thee," she said quietly.

He shrugged, feeling awkward.

"Well. I knew neither of my parents. And in fact, I did have parents. My mother's sister became my mother, in all respects—she's dead now, too—and her husband … I have always thought of him as my father, though he is not related to me by blood." It occurred to him that he was treading on dangerous ground here, talking too much about himself. He cleared his throat and endeavored to guide the conversation back to less personal matters.

"Your brother. How does he propose to … er … to implement this revelation of his?"

She sighed.

"This house—it belonged to a cousin of our mother's. He was a widower, and childless. He had willed the house to Denzell, though when he heard about our being put out of meeting, he wrote to say that he meant to alter his will. By happenstance, though, he caught a bad ague and died before he could do so. But all his neighbors knew, of course—about Denny—which is why …"

"I see." It seemed to William that while God might not be logical, He seemed to be taking a most particular interest in Denzell Hunter. He thought it might not be mannerly to say so, though, and inquired in a different direction.

"You said the house was sold. So your brother—"

"He has gone in to the town, to the courthouse, to sign the papers for the sale of the house and make arrangement for the goats, pigs, and chickens. As soon as that is done, we will … leave." She swallowed visibly. “Denny means to join the Continental army as a surgeon.”

“And you will go with him? As a camp follower?” William spoke with some disapproval; many soldiers’ wives—or concubines—did “follow the drum,” essentially joining the army with their husbands. He had not seen much of camp followers yet himself, as there had been none on the Long Island campaign—but he’d heard his father speak of such women now and then, mostly with pity. It wasn’t a life for a woman of refinement.

She lifted her chin, hearing his disapproval.

“Certainly.”

A long wooden pin lay on the table; she must have taken it from her hair when she removed her cap. Now she twisted her damp hair up into a knot and stabbed the pin decisively through it.

“So,” she said. “Will thee travel with us? Only so far as thee may be comfortable in doing so,” she added quickly.

He had been turning the notion over in the back of his mind all the while they had talked. Plainly, such an arrangement would have advantages for the Hunters—a larger group was always safer, and it was apparent to William that, his revelation notwithstanding, the doctor was not a natural warrior. It would, he thought, have some advantage to himself, as well. The Hunters knew something of the immediate countryside, which he did not, and a man traveling in a group—particularly a group including a woman—was much less noticeable, and much less suspicious, than one alone.

It dawned on him suddenly that if Hunter meant to join the Continental army, there might be excellent opportunity of getting close enough to Washington’s forces to gain valuable intelligence of them—something that would go a long way toward compensating for the loss of his book of contacts.

“Yes, certainly,” he said, and smiled at Miss Hunter. “An admirable suggestion!”

A flash of lightning stabbed suddenly through the slits of the shutters, and a clap of thunder crashed overhead, almost simultaneously. Both of them started violently at the noise.

William swallowed, feeling his ears still ring. The sharp scent of lightning burned the air.

“I do hope,” he said, “that that was a signal of approval.”

She didn’t laugh.

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THE BLESSING OF BRIDE AND OF MICHAEL

The Mohawk knew him as Thayendanegea—Two Wagers. To the English, he was Joseph Brant. Ian had heard much of the man when he dwelt among the Mohawk, by both his names, and had wondered more than once just how well Thayendanegea managed the treacherous ground between two worlds. Was it like the bridge? he thought suddenly. The slender bridge that lay between this world and the next, the air around it assailed by flying heads with rending teeth? Sometime he would like to sit by a fire with Joseph Brant and ask him.

He was going to Brant's house now—but not to speak with Brant. Glutton had told him that Sun Elk had left Snaketown to join Brant and that his wife had gone with him.

"They are in Unadilla," Glutton had said. "Probably still there. Thayendanegea fights with the English, you know. He's talking to the Loyalists up there, trying to get them to join him and his men. He calls them 'Brant's Volunteers.' " He spoke casually; Glutton was not interested in politics, though he would fight now and then, when the spirit moved him.

"Does he?" Ian said, just as casually. "Well, then."

He had no particular idea where Unadilla was, save that it was in the colony of New York, but that was no great difficulty. He set out next day at dawn, heading north.

He had no company save the dog and his thoughts, most of the time. At one point, though, he came to a summer camp of Mohawk and was welcomed there.

He sat with the men, talking. After a time, a young woman brought him a bowl of stew, and he ate it, barely noticing what was in it, though his belly seemed grateful for the warmth and stopped clenching itself.

He couldn't say what drew his eye, but he looked up from the men's talk to see the young woman who had brought him the stew sitting in the shadow just outside the fire, looking at him. She smiled, very slightly.

He chewed more slowly, the taste of the stew suddenly a savor in his mouth. Bear meat, rich with fat. Corn and beans, spiced with onions and garlic. Delicious. She tilted her head to one side; one dark brow rose, elegant, then she rose, too, as though lifted by her question.

Ian set down his bowl and belched politely, then got up and went outside, paying no attention to the knowing looks of the men with whom he'd been eating.

She was waiting, a pale blur in the shadow of a birch. They talked —he felt his mouth form words, felt the tickle of her speech in his ears, but was not really aware of what they said. He held the glow of his anger like a live coal in the palm of his hand, an ember smoking in his heart. He had no thought of her as water to his scorching, nor did he think to kindle her. There were flames behind his eyes, and he was mindless as fire is, devouring where there was fuel, dying where there was not.

He kissed her. She smelled of food, worked skins, and sun-warmed earth. No hint of wood, no tinge of blood. She was tall; he felt her breasts soft and pushing, dropped his hands to the curve of her hips.

She moved against him, solid, willing. Drew back, letting cool air touch his skin where she had been, and took him by the hand to lead him to her long-house. No one glanced at them as she took him into her bed and, in the half-dark warmth, turned to him, naked.

He'd thought it would be better if he couldn't see her face. Anonymous, quick, some pleasure for her, perhaps. Surcease, for him. For the few moments when he lost himself, at least.

But in the dark, she was Emily, and he fled from her bed in shame and anger, leaving astonishment behind.

* * *

For the next twelve days he walked, the dog by his side, and spoke to no one.

* * *

Thayendanegea's house stood by itself in large grounds, but near enough the village to be still part of it. The village was much as any other, save that many of the houses had two or three grindstones by the step; each woman ground meal for her family, rather than take it to a mill.

There were dogs in the street, dozing in the shadows of wagons and walls. Every one sat up, startled, when Rollo came within scenting distance. A few growled or barked, but none offered to fight.

The men were another matter. There were several men leaning on a fence, watching another with a horse in a field. All of them cast glances at him, half curious, half wary. He didn't know most of them. One of them, though, was a man named Eats Turtles, whom he had known in Snaketown. Another was Sun Elk.

Sun Elk blinked at him, startled as any of the dogs, and then stepped out into the road to face him.

"What are you doing here?"

He considered for a split second telling the truth—but it wasn't a truth that could be told quickly, if at all, and certainly not before strangers.

"None of your business," he answered calmly.

Sun Elk had spoken to him in Mohawk, and he'd answered in the same language. He saw eyebrows rise, and Turtle made to greet him, clearly hoping to avert whatever storm was in the offing by making it clear that Ian was Kahnyen'kehaka himself. He returned Turtle's greeting, and the others drew back a little, puzzled—and interested—but not hostile.

Sun Elk, on the other hand … Well, Ian hadn't expected the man to fall on his neck, after all. He'd hoped—insofar as he'd thought about Sun Elk, which was very little—that he'd be elsewhere, but here he was, and Ian smiled wryly to himself, thinking of old Grannie Wilson, who had once described her son-in-law, Hiram, as looking *"like he wouldn't give the road to a bear*."

It was an apt description, and Sun Elk's disposition was not improved either by Ian's reply nor by the subsequent smile.

"What do you want?" Sun Elk demanded.

"Nothing that's yours," Ian replied, as mildly as possible.

Sun Elk's eyes narrowed, but before he could say anything else, Turtle intervened, inviting Ian to come into his house, to eat, to drink.

He should. It wasn't polite to refuse. And he could ask, later, privately, where Emily was. But the need that had brought him over three hundred miles of wilderness acknowledged no requirements of civility. Neither would it brook delay.

Besides, he reflected, readying himself, he'd known it would come to this. No point in putting it off.

"I wish to speak with her who was once my wife," he said. "Where is she?"

Several of the men blinked at that, interested or taken back—but he saw Turtle's eyes flick toward the gates of the large house at the end of the road.

Sun Elk, to his credit, merely drew himself up and planted himself more solidly in the road, ready to defy *two* bears, if necessary. Rollo didn't care for this and lifted his lip in a growl that made one or two of the men step back sharply. Sun Elk, who had better reason than most of them to know just what Rollo was capable of, didn't move an inch.

"Do you mean to set your demon on me?" he asked.

“Of course not. *Sheas, a cù,”* he said quietly to Rollo. The dog stood his ground for a moment longer—just long enough to indicate that it was *his* idea—and then turned aside and lay down, though he kept up a low grumble, like distant thunder.

“I have not come to take her from you,” Ian said to Sun Elk. He’d meant to be conciliatory, but he hadn’t really expected it to work, and it didn’t.

“You think you *could?”*

“If I dinna want to, does it matter?” Ian said testily, lapsing into English.

“She wouldn’t go with you, even if you killed me!”

“How many times must I say that I dinna want to take her away from ye?”

Sun Elk stared at him for a minute, his eyes quite black.

“Often enough for your face to say the same thing,” he whispered, and clenched his fists.

An interested murmur rose from the other men, but there was an intangible drawing away. They wouldn’t interfere in a fight over a woman. That was a blessing, Ian thought vaguely, watching Sun Elk’s hands. The man was right-handed, he remembered that. There was a knife on his belt, but his hand wasn’t hovering near it.

Ian spread his own hands peaceably.

“I wish only to talk with her.”

“Why?” Sun Elk barked. He was close enough for Ian to feel the spray of spittle on his face, but he didn’t wipe it away. He didn’t back away, either, and dropped his hands.

“That’s between me and her,” he said quietly. “I daresay she’ll tell ye later.” The thought of it gave him a pang. The statement didn’t seem to reassure Sun Elk, who without warning hit him in the nose.

The crunch echoed through his upper teeth, and Sun Elk’s other fist struck him a glancing blow on the cheekbone. He shook his head to clear it, saw the blur of movement through watering eyes, and—more by good fortune than intent—kicked Sun Elk solidly in the crotch.

He stood breathing heavily, dripping blood on the roadway. Six pairs of eyes went from him to Sun Elk, curled in the dust and making small, urgent noises. Rollo got up, walked over to the fallen man, and smelled him with interest. All the eyes came back to Ian.

He made a small motion of the hand that brought Rollo to heel and walked up the road toward Brant's house, six pairs of eyes fixed on his back.

* * *

When the door opened, the young white woman who stood there gaped at him, eyes round as pennies. He'd been in the act of wiping his bloody nose with his shirttail. He completed this action and inclined his head civilly.

"Will ye be so good as to ask Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa if she will be pleased to speak wi' Ian Murray?"

The young woman blinked, twice. Then she nodded and swung the door to—pausing with it halfway shut, in order to look at him once more and assure herself that she'd really seen him.

Feeling strange, he stepped down into the garden. It was a formal English garden, with rosebushes and lavender and stone-flagged paths. The smell of it reminded him of Auntie Claire, and he wondered briefly whether Thayendanegea had brought back an English gardener from London.

There were two women at work in the garden, some distance away; one was a white woman, by the color of the hair beneath her cap, and in her middle years by the stoop of her shoulders—perhaps Brant's wife? he wondered. Was the young woman who had answered the door their daughter? The other woman was Indian, with her hair in a plait down her back but streaked with white. Neither one turned to look at him.

When he heard the click of the door latch behind him, he waited a moment before turning around, steeling himself against the disappointment of being told that she was not here—or, worse, that she had refused to see him.

But she was there. Emily. Small and straight, with her breasts showing round in the neck of a blue calico gown, her long hair bound up behind but uncovered. And her face fearful—but eager.

Her eyes lit with joy at the sight of him, and she took a step toward him.

He would have crushed her to him had she come to him, made any gesture inviting it. *And what then?* he wondered dimly, but it didn't matter; after that first impulsive movement toward him, she stopped and stood, her hands fluttering for an instant as though they would shape the air between them, but then folding tight before her, hidden in the folds of her skirt.

"Wolf's Brother," she said softly, in Mohawk. "My heart is warm to see you."

"Mine, too," he said in the same language.

"Have you come to speak with Thayendanegea?" she asked, tilting her head back toward the house.

"Perhaps later." Neither of them mentioned his nose, though from the throbbing, it was likely twice its normal size and there was blood all down the front of his shirt. He glanced around; there was a path that led away from the house, and he nodded at that. "Will you walk with me?"

She hesitated for a moment. The flame in her eyes had not gone out, but it burned lower now; there were other things there—caution, mild distress, and what he thought was pride. He was surprised that he should see them so clearly. It was as though she were made of glass.

"I—the children," she blurted, half turning toward the house.

"It doesna matter," he said. "I only—" A dribble of blood from one nostril stopped him, and he paused to wipe the back of his hand across his upper lip. He took the two steps necessary to bring them within touching distance, though he was careful not to touch her.

"I wished to say to you that I am sorry," he said formally, in Mohawk. "That I could not give you children. And that I am glad you have them."

A lovely warm flush rose in her cheeks, and he saw the pride in her overcome the distress.

"May I see them?" he asked, surprising himself as much as her.

She wavered for an instant, but then turned and went into the house. He sat on a stone wall, waiting, and she returned a few moments later with a small boy, maybe five years old, and a girl of three or so in short plaits, who looked gravely at him and sucked her fist.

Blood had run down the back of his throat; it felt raw and tasted of iron.

Now and then on his journey, he'd gone carefully over the explanation Auntie Claire had given him. Not with any notion of telling it to Emily; it could mean nothing to her—he barely understood it himself. Only, maybe, as some shield against this moment, seeing her with the children he could not give her.

"Call it fate," Claire had said, looking at him with a hawk's eye, the one that sees from far above, so far above, maybe, that what seems mercilessness is truly compassion. *"Or call it bad luck. But it wasn't your fault. Or hers."*

"Come here," he said in Mohawk, putting out a hand to the little boy. The boy glanced at his mother, but then came to him, looking up in curiosity to his face.

"I see you in his face," he said softly to her, speaking English. "And in his hands," he added in Mohawk, taking the child's hands—so amazingly small—in his own. It was true: the boy had her hands, fine-boned and supple; they curled up like sleeping mice in his palms, then the fingers sprang out like a spider's legs and the boy giggled. He laughed, too, closed his own hands swiftly on the boy's, like a bear gulping a pair of trout, making the child shriek, then let go.

"Are you happy?" he asked her.

"Yes," she said softly. She looked down, not meeting his eyes, and he knew it was because she would answer honestly but did not wish to see if her answer hurt him. He put a hand under her chin—her skin was so soft!—and lifted her face to him.

"Are you happy?" he asked again, and smiled a little as he said it.

"Yes," she said again. But then gave a small sigh, and her own hand touched his face at last, light as a moth's wing. "But sometimes I miss you, Ian." There was nothing wrong with her accent, but his Scots name sounded impossibly exotic on her tongue—it always had.

He felt a lump in his throat, but kept the faint smile on his face.

"I see you dinna ask me whether *I'm* happy," he said, and could have kicked himself.

She gave him a quick look, direct as a knife point.

"I have eyes," she said, very simply.

There was a silence between them. He looked away but could feel her there, breathing. Ripe. Soft. He felt her softening further, opening. She had been wise not to go into the garden with him. Here, with her son playing in the dirt near her feet, it was safe. For her, at least.

"Do you mean to stay?" she asked at last, and he shook his head.

"I am going to Scotland," he said.

"You will take a wife among your own people." There was relief in that, but regret, too.

"Are your people no longer my own?" he asked, with a flash of fierceness. "They washed the white blood from my body in the river —you were there."

"I was there."

She looked at him for a long time, searching his face. Likely enough that she would never see him again; did she seek to remember him, or was she looking for something in his features, he wondered?

The latter. She turned abruptly, raising a hand to him to wait, and disappeared into the house.

The little girl ran after her, not wanting to stay with the stranger, but the little boy lingered, interested.

"Are you Wolf's Brother?"

"I am, aye. And you?"

"They call me Digger." It was a child's sort of name, used for convenience until the person's real name should declare itself in some way. Ian nodded, and they remained a few minutes, looking each other over with interest, but with no sense of awkwardness between them.

"She who is mother's mother to my mother," Digger said quite suddenly. "She talked about you. To me."

"She did?" said Ian, startled. That would be Tewaktenyonh. A great woman, head of the Women's Council at Snaketown—and the person who had sent him away.

"Does Tewaktenyonh still live?" he asked, curious.

"Oh, yes. She's older than the mountains," the little boy answered seriously. "She has only two teeth left, but she still eats."

Ian smiled at that.

"Good. What did she say to you of me?"

The boy screwed up his face, recollecting the words.

"She said I was the child of your spirit but I should not say so to my father."

Ian felt the blow of that, harder than any the child's father had dealt him, and couldn't speak for a moment.

"Aye, I dinna think ye should say so, either," he said, when words returned to him. He repeated the sentiment in Mohawk, in case the boy might not have understood English, and the child nodded, tranquil.

"Will I be with you, sometime?" he asked, only vaguely interested in the answer. A lizard had come out onto the stone wall to bask, and his eyes were fixed on it.

Ian forced his own words to be casual.

"If I live."

The boy's eyes were narrowed, watching the lizard, and the tiny right hand twitched, just a little. The distance was too far, though; he knew it, and glanced at Ian, who was closer. Ian cut his eyes at the lizard without moving, then looked back at the boy and agreement sprang up between them. *Don't move*, his eyes warned, and the boy seemed to cease breathing.

It didn't do to think in such situations. Without pausing to draw breath, he snatched, and the lizard was in his hand, astonished and thrashing.

The little boy chortled and hopped up and down, clapping his hands with glee, then held them out for the lizard, which he received with the greatest concentration, folding his hands about it so that it might not escape.

"And what will ye do with him?" Ian asked, smiling.

The boy held the lizard up to his face, peering at it intently, and his brow furrowed in thought.

"I will name him," he said at last. "Then he will be mine and bless me when I see him again." He brought the lizard up, eyeball to eyeball, and each stared unblinking at the other.

"Your name is Bob," the boy declared at last in English, and with great ceremony set the lizard on the ground. Bob leapt from his hands and disappeared under a log.

"A verra good name," Ian said gravely. His bruised ribs hurt with the need not to laugh, but the urge vanished in the next moment, as the distant door opened and Emily came out, a bundle in her arms.

She came up to him and presented him with a child, swaddled and bound to a cradleboard, in much the same way he had presented the lizard to Digger.

"This is my second daughter," she said, shyly proud. "Will you choose her name?"

He was moved, and touched Emily's hand, very lightly, before taking the cradleboard onto his knee and looking searchingly into the tiny face. She could not have given him greater honor, this permanent mark of the feeling she had once held for him—still might hold for him.

But as he looked at the little girl—she regarded him with round, serious eyes, taking in this new manifestation of her personal landscape—a conviction took root in him. He didn't question it; it was simply there, and undeniable.

"Thank you," he said, and smiled at Emily with great affection. He laid his hand—huge, and rough with callus and the nicks of living—on the tiny, perfect, soft-haired head. "I will bless all your children wi' the blessings of Bride and of Michael." He lifted his hand then, and reaching out, drew Digger to him. "But this one is mine to name."

Her face went quite blank with astonishment, and she looked quickly from him to her son and back. She swallowed visibly, unsure—but it didn't matter; *he* was sure.

"Your name is Swiftest of Lizards," he said, in Mohawk. The Swiftest of Lizards thought for a minute, then nodded, pleased, and with a laugh of pure delight, darted away.

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SHELTER FROM THE STORM

Not for the first time, William was startled to realize the breadth of his father's acquaintance. In casual conversation as they rode, he had mentioned to Denzell Hunter that his father had once known a Dr. John Hunter—in fact, the association, involving an electric eel, an impromptu duel, and the implications of body-snatching, was part of the situation that had sent Lord John to Canada and the Plains of Abraham. Might this John Hunter perhaps be the beneficent relative that Miss Rachel had mentioned?

Denny Hunter had brightened at once.

"How remarkable! Yes, it must be the same. Particularly since thee mentions body-snatching in connection with him." He coughed, seeming a little embarrassed.

"It was a most … educational association," Hunter said. "Though a disturbing one, upon occasion." He glanced back at his sister, but Rachel was well behind them, her mule ambling and Rachel herself half asleep in the saddle, her head nodding like a sunflower's.

"Thee understands, Friend William," Hunter said, lowering his voice, "that in order to become skilled in the arts of surgery, it is necessary to learn how the human body is constructed and to understand its workings. Only so much can be learned from texts—and the texts upon which most medical men rely are … well, to be blunt about it, they are wrong."

"Oh, yes?" William was only half attending to the conversation. The other half of his mind was evenly divided among his assessment of the road, a hope that they might reach somewhere habitable in time to procure supper, and an appreciation of the slenderness of Rachel Hunter's neck on the rare occasions when she rode in front of him. He wanted to turn round and look at her again, but couldn't do it so soon, in all decency. Another few minutes …

"… Galen and Aesculapius. The common conception is—and has been for a very long time—that the ancient Greeks had written down everything known regarding the human body; there was no need to doubt these texts or to create mystery where there was none."

William grunted. "You should hear my uncle go on about ancient military texts. He's all for Caesar, who he says was a very decent general, but he takes leave to doubt that Herodotus ever saw a battlefield."

Hunter glanced at him in surprised interest. "Exactly what John Hunter said—in different terms—regarding Avicenna! 'The man's never seen a pregnant uterus in his life.' " He smacked a fist upon his pommel to emphasize the point, and his horse jerked its head, startled.

"Whoa, whoa," said Hunter, alarmed, sawing on the reins in a way calculated to have the horse rearing and pawing in moments. William leaned over and neatly took the reins out of Denzell's hands, giving them slack.

He was rather glad of the brief distraction, as it kept Hunter from discoursing further about uteruses. William was not at all sure what a uterus was, but if it got pregnant, it must have to do with a woman's privates, and that was not something he wished to discuss within the hearing of Miss Hunter.

"But you said your association with Dr. John Hunter was disturbing," he said, handing Hunter back the reins and hastening to change the subject before the doctor could think of something more embarrassing to mention. "Why was that?"

"Well … we—his students—learned the mysteries of the human body from … the human body."

William felt a slight clench of the belly.

"Dissection, you mean?"

“Yes.” Hunter glanced at him, concerned. “It is a distasteful prospect, I know—and yet, to see the marvelous fashion in which God has ordered things! The intricacies of a kidney, the amazing interior of a lung—William, I cannot tell thee what revelation it is!”

“Well … yes, I see it must be,” William said guardedly. Now he could reasonably glance back, and did so. Rachel had straightened, stretching her back, head tilted so that her straw hat fell back, the sun on her face, and he smiled. “You … er … where did you get the bodies to dissect?”

Dr. Hunter sighed.

“That was the disturbing aspect. Many were paupers from the workhouse or the street, and their deaths were most pitiable. But many were the bodies of executed criminals. And while I must be pleased that some good came of their deaths, I could not but be appalled at those deaths.”

“Why?” William asked, interested.

“Why?” Hunter blinked at him behind his spectacles, but then shook his head, as though shaking off flies. “But I forget thee is not one of us—your pardon. We do not condone violence, Friend William, and surely not killing.”

“Not even criminals? Murderers?”

Denzell’s lips compressed, and he looked unhappy, but shook his head.

“No. Let them be imprisoned or put to some useful labor. But for the state to commit murder in its turn is a dreadful violation of God’s commandment; it implicates all of us in the commission of this sin. Does thee not see?”

“I see that the state, as you call it, has responsibility for its subjects,” William said, rather nettled. “You expect constables and judges to see that you and your property are secure, don’t you? If the state has that responsibility, surely it must have the means of carrying it out.”

“I do not contest that—imprison criminals, if necessary, as I say. But the state has no right to kill people on my behalf!”

“Has it not?” William said dryly. “Have you any idea of the nature of some of the criminals who are executed? Of their crimes?”

“Has thee?” Hunter gave him a raised brow.

“I have, yes. The Governor of Newgate Prison is an acquaintance—another acquaintance—of my father’s; I have sat at table with him and heard stories that would take the curl out of your wig, Dr. Hunter. If you wore one,” he added.

Hunter responded to the jest with a fleeting smile.

“Call me by my name,” he said. “Thee knows we do not hold by titles. And I admit the truth of what thee says. I have heard—and seen—more terrible things than you have likely heard at your father’s table. But justice lies in God’s hand. To do violence—to take a life—is to violate God’s command and do grievous sin.”

“And if you are attacked, injured, you may not fight back?” William demanded. “You may not defend yourselves? Your families?”

“We rely upon the goodness and mercy of God,” Denzell said firmly. “And if we are killed, then we die in the firm expectation of God’s life and resurrection.”

They rode in silence for a moment before William said conversationally, “Or you rely upon the willingness of someone else to commit violence for you.”

Denzell drew a deep, instinctive breath, but thought better of whatever he had meant to say. They rode in silence for some time, and when they spoke again, it was of birds.

* * *

It was raining when they woke next day. Not a quick thundershower, here and gone, but a heavy, remorseless sort of rain that looked set to pour steadily all day. There was no point in staying where they were; the rocky overhang under which they had sheltered for the night lay directly exposed to the wind, and the rain had already dampened the firewood sufficiently as to cause their breakfast fire to yield much more smoke than heat.

Still coughing intermittently, William and Denny loaded the pack mule while Rachel bound up a bundle of the least-damp sticks in canvas. If they found shelter by nightfall, they might at least be able to start a fire to cook their supper, even if the rain continued.

There was little conversation. Even had they been so inclined, the rain beat so heavily upon trees and ground and upon their hats that anything said had to be half shouted to be heard.

In a state of sodden but dogged determination, they rode slowly north by northeast, Denny anxiously consulting his compass when they reached a crossroad.

“What think thee, Friend William?” Denny took off his spectacles and wiped them—to little effect—on the skirt of his coat. “Neither road runs precisely as we might wish, and Friend Lockett did not mention this crossroad in his instruction. That one”—he pointed at the road that crossed the one they were set upon—“appears to run north, while this one is due east. At the moment.” He glanced at William, his face oddly naked without his spectacles.

A farmer named Lockett and his wife had been their last contact with humanity, three days before. She had given them supper, sold them bread, eggs, and cheese, and her husband had set them on the road—toward Albany, he said; they should run across an indication of the Continental army somewhere between here and there. But he *hadn’t* mentioned a crossroad.

William gave the muddy ground a glance, but the crossroad itself lay in a low spot and was nothing more now than a small lake. No clues to traffic—but the road they were on seemed substantially wider than the smaller one crossing it.

“This one,” he said firmly, and nudged his horse squelching through the lake to the other side.

Now it was late afternoon, and he was beginning to be worried about his decision. Had they been upon the right road, they should—said Mr. Lockett—encounter a small hamlet called Johnson’s Ford by the end of the day. Of course, the rain had slowed them, he told himself. And while the countryside looked as vacant and writhingly verdant as ever, villages and farmsteads *did pop* up as suddenly as mushrooms after a heavy rain. In which case, they might encounter Johnson’s Ford at any moment.

“Maybe the place has dissolved.” Rachel leaned out from her saddle to call to him. Rachel had nearly dissolved herself, and he grinned, in spite of his worry. The rain had beaten the brim of her straw hat down, so that it hung limp as a duster around her head; she was obliged to lift the front of it in order to peer out, like a suspicious toad under a harrow. Her clothes were soaked through, as well, and as she was wearing three layers of everything, she resembled nothing so much as a large, untidy bale of wet laundry, forked steaming from the kettle.

Before he could reply to her, though, her brother sat up straight in his saddle, showering water in all directions, and pointed dramatically down the road.

“Look!”

William jerked his head round, assuming that their destination was in sight. It wasn’t, but the road was no longer empty. A man was walking briskly toward them through the mud, a split burlap sack shielding his head and shoulders from the rain. In the current state of desolation, anything human was a sight to gladden the eyes, and William spurred up a little to hail the fellow.

“Well met, young sir,” said the man, peering up at William from his burlap refuge. “Where ye bound, this dismal day?” He lifted a lip in ingratiation, showing a broken dogtooth, stained with tobacco.

“Johnson’s Ford. Are we headed aright?”

The man reared back, as though astonished.

“Johnson’s Ford, you say?”

“I do, yes,” William said, with a certain amount of testiness. He sympathized with the lack of company in rural parts and the subsequent impulse of the inhabitants to detain travelers as long as possible, but this was not the day for it. “Where is it?”

The man shook his head back and forth in slow dismay.

“ ’Fraid ye’ve missed your turn, sir. Ought to’ve gone left at the crossroads.”

Rachel made a small, pitiable sound at this. The light was already failing, shadow beginning to pool round the horses’ feet. It was several hours’ ride back to the crossroad; they could not hope to reach it before nightfall, let alone make their way to Johnson’s Ford.

The man plainly realized this, as well. He smiled happily at William, revealing a wide expanse of brown gum.

“If so be as you gennelmen’ll help me cotch my cow and drive ’er home, the wife’d be pleased to offer ye supper and a bed.”

There being no reasonable alternative, William accepted this suggestion with what grace he could, and leaving Rachel sheltering under a tree with the animals, he and Denny Hunter went to assist with the cow-cotching.

The cow in question, a rawboned shaggy beast with a wild eye, proved both elusive and obdurate, and it took the combined talents of all three men to capture it and drag it to the road. Soaked to the skin and thickly plastered with mud, the bedraggled party then followed Mr. Antioch Johnson—for so their host had introduced himself—through the gathering shades of night to a small ramshackle farmhouse.

The rain was still pelting down, though, and any roof was welcome, leaky or not.

Mrs. Johnson proved to be a ragged slattern of uncertain age, with even fewer teeth than her husband and a sullen disposition. She glared at the dripping guests and turned her back rudely upon them, but did produce wooden bowls of a vile, congealed stew—and there was fresh milk from the cow. William noticed that Rachel took but a single bite of the stew, turned pale, removed something from her mouth, and set down her spoon, after which she confined herself to the milk.

He himself was much too hungry either to taste the stew or care what was in it—and, fortunately, it was too dark to examine the contents of his bowl.

Denny was making an effort to be sociable, though he was swaying with weariness, answering Mr. Johnson’s unending questions about their origins, journey, destination, connections, news of the road, and opinions and news regarding the war. Rachel attempted a smile now and then, but her eyes kept passing uneasily around their surroundings, returning again and again to their hostess, who sat in the corner, her own eyes hooded, brooding over a fuming clay pipe that hung from a slack lower lip.

Belly full and with dry stockings, William felt the labors of the day begin to catch up to him. There was a decent fire in the hearth, and the leaping flames lulled him into a sort of trance, the voices of Denny and Mr. Johnson fading into a pleasant murmur. He might have fallen asleep right there, had the rustle of Rachel rising to her feet to visit the privy not broken the trance, reminding him that he should check the horses and mules. He'd rubbed them dry as well as he could and paid Mr. Johnson for hay, but there was no real barn to shelter them, only a crude roof of branches perched on spindly poles. He didn't want them standing all night in mud should the shelter be flooded.

It was still raining, but the air outside was clean and fresh, filled with the night scent of trees, grasses, and rushing water. After the fug indoors, William felt nearly light-headed with the fragrance. He ducked through the rain to the shelter, doing his best to keep the small torch he had brought alight, enjoying every breath.

The torch sputtered but kept burning, and he was glad to see that the shelter had not flooded; the horses and mules—and the wild-eyed cow—were all standing on damp straw, but not hock-deep in mud. The privy door creaked, and he saw Rachel's slender dark shape emerge. She saw the torch and came to join him, drawing her shawl about her against the rain.

"Are the beasts all right?" Raindrops sparkled in her damp hair, and he smiled at her.

"I expect their supper was better than ours."

She shuddered in recollection.

"I should much prefer to have eaten hay. Did thee *see* what was in —"

"No," he interrupted, "and I shall be much happier if you don't tell me."

She snorted, but desisted. He had no desire to go back into the fetid house at once, and Rachel seemed similarly disinclined, moving to scratch her mule's drooping ears.

"I do not like the way that woman looks at us," Rachel said after a moment, not looking at him. "She keeps staring at my shoes. As though she wonders whether they would fit her."

William glanced at Rachel's feet himself; her shoes were not in any way fashionable but were sturdy and well made, though also well worn and smeared with dried mud.

Rachel glanced uneasily at the house. "I will be pleased to leave here, even if it should still be raining in the morning."

"We'll leave," he assured her. "Without waiting for breakfast, if you prefer." He leaned against one of the upright poles that supported the shelter, feeling the mist of rain cool on his neck. The drowsiness had left him, though the tiredness had not, and he realized that he shared her sense of unease.

Mr. Johnson seemed amiable, if uncouth, but there was something almost too eager in his manner. He leaned forward avidly in conversation, eyes agleam, and his dirty hands were restless on his knees.

It might be only the natural loneliness of a man who lacked company—for surely the presence of the sullen Mrs. Johnson would be little consolation—but William's father had taught him to pay attention to his instincts, and he therefore did not try to argue himself out of them. Without comment or apology, he rummaged in the saddlebag hanging from the post and found the small dagger that he carried in his boot while riding.

Rachel's eyes followed it as he tucked it into the waist of his breeches and pulled his shirt loose to cover it. Her chin was puckered, but she didn't protest.

The torch was beginning to gutter, almost burned out. He held out his arm, and Rachel took it without protest, drawing close to him. He wanted to put his arm around her but contented himself with drawing in his elbow, finding the distant warmth of her body a comfort.

The bulk of the farmhouse was darker than the night, lacking either door or window at the back. They circled it in silence, rain thumping on their skulls, feet squelching on the sodden ground. Only a flicker of light showed through the shutters, the faintest indication of human tenancy. He heard Rachel swallow, and touched her hand lightly as he opened the door for her.

“Sleep well,” he whispered to her. “The dawn will come before you know it.”

* * *

It was the stew that saved his life. He slept almost at once, overcome by weariness, but found his sleep troubled by obnoxious dreams. He was walking down a hallway with a figured Turkey carpet, but realized after a time that what he had taken for twining patterns in the rug were in fact snakes, which raised their heads, swaying, at his approach. The snakes were slow-moving, and he was able to skip over them but lurched from side to side as a result, hitting the walls of the corridor, which seemed to be closing in upon him, narrowing the way.

Then he was enclosed so tightly that he must proceed sideways, the wall behind him scraping his back, the plaster surface before him so close that he could not bend his head to look down. He was worried about the snakes in the carpet, but couldn’t see them, and kicked out to the side with his feet, now and then hitting something heavy. Panicked, he felt one twine about his leg, then glide upward, wrapping round his body and burrowing its head through the front of his shirt, prodding him hard and painfully in the abdomen, looking for somewhere to bite.

He woke suddenly, panting and sweating, aware that the pain in his guts was real. It bit with a sharp cramp, and he pulled up his legs and rolled onto his side an instant before the ax struck the floorboards where his head had just been.

He let out a tremendous fart and rolled in blind panic toward the dark figure struggling to free the ax from the wood. He struck Johnson’s legs, grabbed them, and yanked. The man fell on him with a curse and grabbed him by the throat. William punched and thrashed at his opponent, but the hands on his throat clung like grim death, and his vision darkened and flashed with colored lights.

There was screaming going on somewhere nearby. More by instinct than plan, William suddenly lunged forward, striking Johnson in the face with his forehead. It hurt, but the death grip on his throat relaxed, and he wrenched loose and rolled over, scrambling to his feet.

The fire had died to embers, and there was no more than a faint glow of light in the room. A heaving mass of bodies in the corner was the source of the screaming, but nothing he could do about that.

Johnson had kicked the ax loose; William saw the dull gleam of its blade in the split second before Johnson seized it and swung it at his head. He ducked, rushed in, and managed to grab Johnson's wrist, pulling hard. The cheek of the falling ax blade struck his knee a paralyzing blow, and he crumpled, pulling Johnson down with him, but got the other knee up in time to keep from being flattened beneath the other man's body.

He jerked to the side, felt sudden heat at his back and the ping of sparks; they had rolled into the edge of the hearth. He reached back and seized a handful of hot embers, which he ground into Johnson's face, ignoring the searing pain in his palm.

Johnson fell back, clutching his face and making short *ah! ah!* noises, as though he had not breath to scream. The ax was dangling from one hand; he sensed William rise and swung it blindly, one-handed.

William grabbed the ax handle, jerked it from Johnson's grasp, took a good two-handed hold upon the throat of the handle, and brought the bit down on Johnson's head with a *choonk* like a kicked pumpkin. The impact vibrated through his hands and arms; he let go and stumbled backward.

His mouth was full of bile; saliva overflowed and he wiped a sleeve across his mouth. He was breathing like a bellows but could not seem to get any air in his lungs.

Johnson reeled toward him, arms outstretched, the ax sticking in his head. The handle quivered, turning to and fro like an insect's feeler. Slowly, horribly, Johnson's hands reached up to take hold of it.

William wanted to scream but didn't have the breath for it. Backing away in panic, he brushed a hand against his breeches and felt wetness there. He glanced down, fearing the worst, but saw instead the cloth dark with blood, and at the same time realized that there was a slight stinging sensation at the top of his thigh.

"Bloody … hell," he muttered, fumbling at his waist. He'd managed to stab himself with his own dagger, but it was still there, thank God. The feel of the hilt steadied him, and he pulled it out, still backing away as Johnson came toward him, making a sort of yowling noise, yanking at the ax handle.

The ax came loose, releasing a gush of blood that rolled down Johnson's face and splattered William's face and arms and chest. Johnson swung the ax with a huff of effort, but his movements were slow and clumsy. William ducked aside, farting with the movement but regaining his nerve.

He tightened his grip on the dagger and looked for a place to stick it. Round the back, his mind suggested. Johnson was dashing one forearm uselessly across his face, trying to clear his eyes, the ax held in the other hand, sweeping to and fro in wide, trembling swaths.

"William!" Surprised by the voice, he glanced aside and was nearly struck by the wavering blade.

"Shut up," he said crossly. "I'm busy."

"Yes, I see that," said Denny Hunter. "Let me help thee." He was white-faced and shaking nearly as much as Johnson, but stepped forward and, with a sudden lunge, seized the ax handle and pulled the implement out of Johnson's grasp. He stepped back and dropped it on the floor with a *thunk*, looking as though he might be sick at any moment.

"Thank you," said William. He stepped forward and drove the dagger upward under Johnson's ribs, into his heart. Johnson's eyes opened wide with the shock and stared directly into William's. They were gray-blue, with a scattering of gold and yellow flecks near the dark iris. William had never seen anything more beautiful and stood transfixed for an instant, until the feel of the pumping blood over his hand returned him to himself.

He jerked the knife free and stood back, letting the body fall. He was trembling all over and about to shit himself. He turned blindly and headed for the door, brushing past Denny, who said something that he didn't quite hear.

Shuddering and gasping in the privy, though, he thought the doctor had said, “Thee did not have to do that.”

Yes, he thought, *I did*, and bowed his head upon his knees, waiting for everything to abate.

* * *

William emerged at last from the privy, feeling clammy and rubber-limbed but less internally volatile. Denny Hunter rushed past him and into the structure, from which explosive noises and loud groans were immediately heard. Moving hastily away, he made his way through a spatter of rain toward the house.

Dawn was some way off, but the air had begun to stir, and the farmhouse stood out against the paling sky, black and skeletal. He entered, feeling very uncertain, to find Rachel, white as bone, standing guard with a broom over Mrs. Johnson, who was wrapped tightly in a filthy sheet, thrashing a bit and making peculiar hissing and spitting noises.

Her husband’s remains lay facedown by the hearth in a pool of congealing blood. He didn’t want to look at the body, but felt it would be somehow wrong not to, and went and stood by it for a moment, looking down. One of the Hunters had poked up the fire and added wood; there was warmth in the room, but he couldn’t feel it.

“He’s dead,” Rachel said, her voice colorless.

“Yes.” He didn’t know how he was meant to feel in such a situation and had no real idea how he *did* feel. He turned away, though, with a slight sense of relief, and came to look at the prisoner.

“Did she …?”

“She tried to cut Denny’s throat, but she stepped on my hand and woke me. I saw the knife and screamed, and he seized her, and …” She pulled a hand through her hair, and he saw that she had lost her cap, and the hair was loose and tangled.

“I sat on her,” she said, “and Denny rolled her up in the sheet. I don’t think she can speak,” Rachel added, as he stooped to look at the woman. “Her tongue is split.”

Mrs. Johnson, hearing this, thrust out her tongue in vindictive fashion and waggled the two halves of it independently at him. With the memory of the dream snakes vivid in his mind, he flinched in instinctive revulsion, but saw the look of satisfaction that crossed her face.

“If she can do that with her nasty tongue, she can talk,” he said, and, reaching down, took hold of the woman’s scrawny throat. “Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you, too.”

“Iss not my fault!” she said promptly, in such a rasping hiss that he nearly let go of her in shock. “He makess me help him.”

William glanced over his shoulder at the body on the hearth.

“Not anymore.” He tightened his grip, feeling the beat of her pulse against his thumb. “How many travelers have you killed, the two of you?”

She didn’t answer but stroked her upper lip lasciviously with her tongue, first one half and then the other. He let go her throat and slapped her hard across the face. Rachel gasped.

“Thee must not—”

“Oh, yes, I must.” He rubbed his hand against the side of his breeches, trying to get rid of the feel of the woman’s sweat, her slack skin, her bony throat. His other hand was beginning to throb painfully. He wanted suddenly to pick up the ax and smash her with it, over and over—crush her head, hack her to bits. His body trembled with the urge; she saw it in his eyes and stared back at him, eyes black and glittering.

“You don’t want me to kill her?” he asked Rachel.

“Thee must not,” she whispered. Very slowly, she reached for his burned hand, and, when he did not pull away, took it into hers. There was a roaring in his ears, and he felt dizzy.

“Thee is hurt,” she said softly. “Come outside. I will wash it.”

She led him out, half blind and stumbling, and made him sit on the chopping block while she brought a bucket of water from the trough. It had stopped raining, though the world dripped and the dawn air was moist and fresh in his chest.

Rachel bathed his hand in the cold water, and the burning eased a little. She touched his thigh, where the blood had dried in a long patch down his breeches, but let it go when he shook his head.

“I’ll bring thee whisky; there is some in Denny’s bag.” She stood up, but he grabbed her wrist with his good hand, holding hard.

“Rachel.” His own voice sounded odd to him, remote, as though someone else was speaking. “I’ve never killed anyone before. I don’t—I don’t quite know what to do about it.” He looked up at her, searching her face for understanding. “If it had been—I expected it to be in battle. That—I think I’d know how. How to feel, I mean. If it had been like that.”

She met his eyes, her face drawn in troubled thought. The light touched her, a pink softer than the sheen of pearls, and after a long time she touched his face, very gently.

“No,” she said. “Thee wouldn’t.”

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PART FIVE

To the Precipice

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CROSSROAD

William parted from the Hunters at a nameless crossroad somewhere in New Jersey. It was not politic for him to go further; their inquiries regarding the position of the Continental army were being greeted with increasing hostility, indicating that they were getting close. Neither rebel sympathizers nor Loyalists who feared reprisal from an army on their doorstep wished to say anything to mysterious travelers who might be spies or worse.

The Quakers would have an easier time of it without him. They were so plainly what they were and Denzell's intent to enlist as a surgeon both so simple and so admirable that, if they were alone, people would help them, he thought. Or at least receive their inquiries more kindly. With William, though …

Saying that he was a friend of the Hunters had been sufficient, earlier in the journey. Folk were curious about the little group, but not suspicious. As they drew farther into New Jersey, though, the agitation of the countryside increased markedly. Farms had been raided by foraging parties, both by Hessians from Howe's army, trying to lure Washington into open battle from his lurking place in the Watchung Mountains, and from the Continental army, desperate for supplies.

Farmhouses that would normally have welcomed strangers for the news they bore now repelled them with muskets and harsh words. Food was growing harder to find. Rachel's presence sometimes helped them get close enough to offer money—and William's small store of gold and silver was certainly helpful; Denzell had put most of the money from the sale of their house with a bank in Philadelphia to secure Rachel's future safety, and the paper money issued by the Congress was almost universally rejected.

There was no means by which William could masquerade as a Quaker, though. Beyond his inability to master plain speech, his size and bearing made people nervous—the more so as he, with the memories of Captain Nathan Hale vivid in his mind, would not say that he meant to enlist in the Continental army nor ask any questions that might later be presented as evidence of spying. His silence—perceived as menacing—also made people nervous.

He hadn't spoken to the Hunters regarding their parting, and both Denzell and Rachel had been careful not to ask about his own plans. Everyone knew the time had come, though; he could feel it in the air when he woke that morning. When Rachel handed him a chunk of bread for breakfast, her hand brushed his, and he nearly seized her fingers. She felt the strength of his stifled impulse and looked up, startled, directly into his eyes. More green than brown today, and he would have sent discretion to the devil and kissed her—he thought she would not have objected—had her brother not just then emerged from the bushes, buttoning his flies.

He chose the place, all of a sudden. Naught to be gained by delay, and maybe better to do it without thinking too much. He pulled his horse to a stop in the middle of the crossroad, startling Denzell, whose mare bridled and danced at the jerk on her reins.

"I will leave you here," William said abruptly, and more harshly than he had intended. "My way lies north"—he nodded in that direction, and thank God the sun was up so he could tell which way north was—"while I think that if you continue to the east, you will encounter some representatives of Mr. Washington's army. If …" He hesitated, but they should be warned. From what the farmers had said, it was plain that Howe had sent troops into the area.

"If you meet with British troops or Hessian mercenaries—do you speak German, by chance?"

Denzell shook his head, eyes wide behind his spectacles. "Only a little French."

“That’s good. Most Hessian officers have good French. If you meet with Hessians who don’t and they offer to molest you, say to them, ‘*Ich verlange, Euren Vorgcsctztcn zu sehen; ich bin mit seinem Freund bekannt?*’ That means, ‘I demand to see your officer; I know his friend.’ Say the same thing if you meet with British troops. In English, of course,” he added awkwardly.

A faint smile crossed Denzell’s face.

“I thank thee,” he said. “But if they do take us to an officer, and he demands to know the name of this theoretical friend?”

William smiled back.

“It won’t really matter. Once you’re in front of an officer, you will be safe. But as for a name—Harold Grey, Duke of Pardloe, Colonel of the Forty-sixth Foot.” Uncle Hal didn’t know everyone, as his own father did, but anyone in the military world would know *him*—or of him, at least.

He could see Denzell’s lips move silently, committing this to memory.

“And who is Friend Harold to thee, William?” Rachel had been regarding him narrowly beneath the sagging brim of her hat, and now pushed this back on her head to view him more directly.

He hesitated again, but after all, what did it matter now? He would never see the Hunters again. And while he knew that Quakers would not be impressed by worldly shows of rank and family, he still sat straighter in his saddle.

“Some kin to me,” he said casually, and, digging in his pocket, brought out the small purse the Scotsman Murray had given him. “Here. You will need this.”

“We will do well enough,” Denzell said, waving it away.

“So will I,” William said, and tossed the purse toward Rachel, who put up her hands in reflex and caught it, looking as much surprised by the fact that she had done so as by his own action. He smiled at her, too, his heart full.

“Fare thee well,” he said gruffly, then wheeled his horse and set off at a brisk trot, not looking back.

* * *

“Thee knows he is a British soldier?” Denny Hunter said quietly to his sister, watching William ride away. “Likely a deserter.”

“And if he is?”

“Violence follows such a man. Thee knows it. To remain long with such a man is a danger—not only to the body. But to the soul, as well.”

Rachel sat her mule in silence for a moment, watching the empty road. Insects buzzed loud in the trees.

“I think thee may be a hypocrite, Denzell Hunter,” she said evenly, and pulled her mule’s head around. “He saved my life *and* thine. Would thee prefer him to have held his hand and see me dead and butchered in that dreadful place?” She shuddered slightly in spite of the heat of the day.

“I would not,” her brother said soberly. “And I thank God that he was there to save thee. I am sinner enough to prefer thy life to the welfare of that young man’s soul—but not hypocrite enough to deny it, no.”

She snorted and, taking off her hat, waved away a gathering cloud of flies.

“I am honored. But as for thy talk of violent men and the danger of being in the vicinity of such men—is thee not taking me to join an army?”

He laughed ruefully.

“I am. Perhaps thee is right and I am a hypocrite. But, Rachel—” He leaned out and caught her mule’s bridle, keeping her from turning away. “Thee knows I would have no harm befall thee, either of body or soul. Say the word and I will find thee a place with Friends, where you may stay in safety. I am sure that the Lord has spoken to me, and I must follow my conscience. But there is no need for thee to follow it, too.”

She gave him a long, level look.

“And how does thee know that the Lord has not spoken to me, as well?”

His eyes twinkled behind his spectacles.

“I am happy for thee. What did He say?”

“He said, ‘Keep thy fat-headed brother from committing suicide, for I will require his blood at thy hand,’ ” she snapped, slapping his hand away from the bridle. “If we are going to join the army, Denny, let us go and find it.”

She kicked the mule viciously in the ribs. Its ears sprang straight up, and with a startled whoop from its rider, it shot down the road as though fired from a cannon.

* * *

William rode for some way, back particularly straight, showing excellent form in his horsemanship. After the road curved out of sight of the crossroad, he slowed and relaxed a bit. He was sorry to leave the Hunters, but already beginning to turn his thoughts ahead.

Burgoyne. He’d met General Burgoyne once, at a play. A play written by the general, no less. He didn’t recall anything about the play itself, as he’d been engaged in a flirtation of the eyes with a girl in the next box, but afterward he’d gone down with his father to congratulate the successful playwright, who was flushed and handsome with triumph and champagne.

“Gentleman Johnny” they called him in London. A light in London society’s firmament, in spite of the fact that he and his wife had some years before been obliged to flee to France to escape arrest for debt. No one held debt against a man, though; it was too common.

William was more puzzled by the fact that his uncle Hal seemed to like John Burgoyne. Uncle Hal had no time for plays, nor for the people who wrote them—though, come to think, he had the complete works of Aphra Behn on his shelves, and William’s father had once told him, in deepest secrecy, that his brother Hal had conceived a passionate attachment for Mrs. Behn following the death of his first wife and before his marriage to Aunt Minnie.

“Mrs. Behn was dead, you see,” his father had explained. “Safe.”

William had nodded, wishing to seem worldly and understanding, though in fact he had no real notion what his father meant by this. Safe? How, safe?

He shook his head. He didn't expect ever to understand Uncle Hal, and chances were that was best for both of them. His grandmother Benedicta was probably the only person who did. Thought of his uncle, though, led him to think of his cousin Henry, and his mouth tightened a little.

Word would have reached Adam, of course, but he likely could do nothing for his brother. Neither could William, whose duty called him north. Between his father and Uncle Hal, though, surely …

The horse threw up his head, snorting a little, and William looked ahead to see a man standing by the road, one arm raised to hail him.

He rode slowly, a sharp eye on the wood, lest the man have confederates hidden to waylay unwary travelers. The verge was open here, though, with a thick but spindly growth of saplings behind it; no one could hide in there.

"Good day to you, sir," he said, reining up a safe distance from the old man. For old he was; his face was seamed like a tin mine's slag heap, he leaned on a tall staff, and his hair was pure white, tied back in a plait.

"Well met," the old gentleman said. Gentleman for he stood proud, and his clothes were decent, and now William came to look, there was a good horse, too, hobbled and cropping grass some distance away. William relaxed a little.

"Where do you fare, sir?" he asked politely. The old man shrugged a little, easy.

"That may depend upon what you can tell me, young man." The old man was a Scot, though his English was good. "I am in search of a man called Ian Murray, whom I think you know?"

William was disconcerted by this; how did the old man know that? But he knew Murray; perhaps Murray had mentioned William to him. He replied cautiously, "I know him. But I am afraid I have no idea where he is."

"No?" The old man looked keenly at him. *As though he thinks I might lie to him,* William thought. *Suspicious old sod!*

"No," he repeated firmly. "I met him in the Great Dismal, some weeks ago, in company with some Mohawk. But I do not know where he might have gone since then.”

“Mohawk,” the old man repeated thoughtfully, and William saw the sunken eyes fasten on his chest, where the great bear claw rested outside his shirt. “Did you get that wee bawbee from the Mohawk, then?”

“No,” William replied stiffly, not knowing what a bawbee was, but thinking that it sounded in some way disparaging. “Mr. Murray brought it to me, from a—friend.”

“A friend.” The old man was frankly studying his face, in a way that made William uncomfortable and therefore angry. “What is your name, young man?”

“None of your business, sir,” William said, as courteously as possible, and gathered his reins. “Good day to you!”

The old man’s face tightened, as did his hand on the staff, and William turned sharply, lest the old bugger mean to try to strike him with it. He didn’t, but William noticed, with a small sense of shock, that two fingers of the hand that grasped the staff were missing.

He thought for a moment that the old man might mount and come after him, but when he glanced back, the man was still standing by the road, looking after him.

It made no real difference, but, moved by some obscure notion of avoiding notice, William put the bear’s claw inside his shirt, where it hung safely concealed next to his rosary.

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COUNTDOWN

Fort Ticonderoga
June 18, 1777

Dear Bree and Roger,

Twenty-three days and counting. I hope we'll be able to leave on schedule. Your cousin Ian left the fort a month ago, saying that he had a wee bit of business to take care of but would be back by the time Jamie's militia enlistment was up. Ian himself declined to enlist, being instead a volunteer forager, so he's not technically AWOL. Not that the fort's commander is really in a position to do anything about deserters, save hang them if they're silly enough to come back, and none of them do. I'm not sure what Ian's doing, but I have some hope that it may be good for him.

Speaking of the fort's commander, we have a new one. Great excitement! Colonel Wayne left a few weeks ago—doubtless sweating with relief as much as with the humidity—but we have come up in the world. The new commander is a major general, no less: one Arthur St. Clair, a genial and very handsome Scot, whose attractiveness is considerably enhanced by the pink sash he affects on formal occasions. (The nice thing about belonging to an ad hoc army is that one apparently gets to *design one's own uniform. None of this stuffy old British convention about regimentals.)*

General St. Clair comes with outriders: no fewer than three lesser generals, one of them French (your father says General Fermoy is rather fishy, militarily speaking), and about three thousand new recruits. This has substantially heartened everyone (though placing an ungodly strain on the latrine facilities. The lines are fifteen deep in the mornings at the pits, and there is a severe shortage of thunder mugs), and St. Clair made a nice speech, assuring us that the fort cannot possibly be taken now. Your father, who was standing next to the general at the time, said something under his breath in Gaelic at this point, but not very far under, and while I understand the general was born in Thurso, he conveniently affected not to understand.

The bridge-building between the fort and Mount Independence continues apace … and Mount Defiance continues to sit there across the water. An inoffensive little hill, to look at—but a good bit higher than the fort. Jamie had Mr. Marsden row across with a target—a four-foot square of wood, painted white—and set it up near the top of the hill, where it was plainly visible from the fort's batteries. He invited General Fermoy (he does not get a pink sash, despite being French) to come and try his hand at shooting with one of the new rifles (Jamie having thoughtfully abstracted several of these from the cargo of the Teal before patriotically donating the rest to the American cause). They blasted the target to bits, an act whose significance was not lost on General St. Clair, who came along to watch. I think General St. Clair will be almost as pleased as I will be when your father's enlistment is up.

The new influx has made things busier, of course. Most of the new recruits are reasonably healthy, for a wonder, but there are the usual minor accidents, cases of venereal *disease, and summer ague—enough that Major Thacher—he's the chief medical officer—has taken to turning a blind eye when I surreptitiously bind up a wound, though he draws the line at allowing me access to sharp instruments. Fortunately, I have a small knife with which to lance boils.*

I am also growing very short of useful herbs, since Ian's defection. He used to bring me things from his foraging expeditions, but it really isn't safe to venture out of the fort save in large bodies. Two men who went out hunting a few days ago were found murdered and scalped.

While my medical kit thus remains a little sparse, I have as some compensation acquired a ghoul. This is a Mrs. Raven from New Hampshire, whose husband is a militia officer. She's relatively young, in her thirties, but has never had children and thus has a lot of emotional energy to expend. She battens on the sick and dying, though I'm sure she considers herself to be sympathetic in the extreme. She revels in ghastly detail, which, while mildly repulsive in itself, does make her a competent aide, since she can be counted on not to faint while I set a compound fracture or amputate (quickly, before Major Thacher or his henchman, Lieutenant Stactoe, notices) a gangrenous digit, for fear of missing something. Granted, she does wail and carry on a bit, and is much given to clutching her rather flat chest and allowing her eyes to bulge while describing these adventures to other people afterward (she nearly prostrated herself from hyperventilation when they brought in the men who were scalped), but one takes what one can get in the way of help.

At the other end of the scale in terms of medical competence, though, the new influx of recruits has brought with it a young Quaker doctor named Denzell Hunter and his sister, Rachel. I haven't yet spoken to him personally, but from what I see, Dr. Hunter really is a doctor, and seems even to have some vague notion of germ theory, owing to his having trained with John Hunter, one of the *great men of medicine (on the chance that Roger will be reading this, I will refrain from telling you the manner in which John Hunter discovered how gonorrhea is transmitted—well, no, actually I won't: he stabbed himself in the penis with a lancet covered in pus from an infected victim and was deeply gratified with the results, according to Denny Hunter, who recounted this interesting incident to your father while bandaging his thumb, which got squashed between two rolling logs—don't worry, it isn't broken; just badly bruised). I'd love to see how Mrs. Raven would take this story, but I suppose propriety would prevent young Dr. Hunter telling her.*

You are, of course, minding the children's vaccination schedule.

With all my love,
Mama

* * *

Brianna had closed the book, but her hand kept returning involuntarily to the cover, as though she wished to open it again, in case it might say something different.

"What's twenty-three days past June eighteenth?" She should be able to reckon that—she could do things like that in her head—but nervousness had deprived her of the ability to compute.

"Thirty days hath September," Roger chanted quickly under his breath, rolling up his eyes to the ceiling, "April, June—right, June's got thirty days, so twelve days from the eighteenth to the thirtieth, and ten more makes it the tenth of July."

"Oh, dear Lord."

She'd read it three times, looking again wouldn't make a difference; still, she opened the book once more, to the page with John Burgoyne's portrait. A handsome man—"And doesn't he just know it, too!" she said aloud, making Roger frown at her in consternation—as painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds, he was in uniform, his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, standing against a dramatic backdrop of gathering storm clouds. And there it was on the next page, plain in black and white.

On the sixth of July, General Burgoyne attacked Fort Ticonderoga with a force of some 8,000 regulars, plus several German regiments under the Baron von Riedesel, and a number of Indians.

* * *

William found General Burgoyne and his army somewhat more easily than the Hunters had discovered General Washington's whereabouts. On the other hand, General Burgoyne was making no attempt to hide.

It was a lavish camp, by army standards. Neatly arranged rows of white canvas tents covered three fields and ran off into the woods. Making his way to the commander's tent to report, he spotted a pile of empty wine bottles near the general's tent that rose nearly to his knee. As he had not heard that the general was a notable souse, he assumed this largesse to be the result of an open-handed hospitality and a liking for company. A good sign in a commander, he thought.

A yawning servant was picking off the remnants of the lead seals, tossing the metal into a can, presumably to be melted for bullets. He gave William a sleepy, inquiring eye.

"I've come to report to General Burgoyne," William said, drawing himself up. The servant's eye traveled slowly up the length of his body, lingering with vague curiosity on his face and making him doubt the thoroughness of his morning shave.

"Dinner party with the brigadier and Colonel St. Leger last night," the servant said at last, and belched slightly. "Come back this afternoon. Meanwhile"—he stood slowly, wincing as though the movement hurt his head, and pointed—"the mess tent's over there."

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FRIENDS

Fort Ticonderoga
June 22, 1777

Much to my surprise, I found Captain Stebbings sitting up. White-faced, bathed in sweat, and swaying like a pendulum—but upright. Mr. Dick hovered over him, clucking with the tender anxiety of a hen with one chick.

"I see you're feeling better, Captain," I said, smiling at him. "Have you on your feet any day now, won't we?"

"Been … on my feet," he wheezed. "Think I might die."

"What?"

"Him be *walking!"* Mr. Dick assured me, torn between pride and dismay. "On my arm, but him walk, sure!"

I was on my knees, listening to lungs and heart through the wooden stethoscope Jamie had made for me. A pulse fit for an eight-cylinder race car, and a good bit of gurgling and wheezing, but nothing horribly alarming.

"Congratulations, Captain Stebbings!" I said, lowering the stethoscope and smiling at him. He still looked dreadful, but his breathing was beginning to slow. "You probably won't die today. What brought on this burst of ambition?"

"My … bosun," he managed, before a fit of coughing intervened.

"Joe Ormiston," Mr. Dick clarified, with a nod in my direction. "Him foot stink. The captain go see him."

“Mr. Ormiston. His foot stinks?” That sounded all sorts of alarm bells. For a wound in this particular setting to smell so notably as to draw attention was a very bad indication. I rose to my feet but was detained by Stebbings, who had taken a firm grip of my skirt.

“You—” he said, laboring for air. “You take care of him.”

He bared stained teeth at me in a grin.

“ ’S an order,” he wheezed. “Ma’am.”

“Aye, aye, Cap’n,” I said tartly, and made off for the hospital building, where the majority of the sick and wounded were housed.

“Mrs. Fraser! What’s amiss?” The eager cry came from Mrs. Raven, who was coming out of the commissary as I passed. She was tall and lean, with dark hair that perpetually straggled out from under her cap, which it was doing at the moment.

“I don’t know yet,” I said briefly, not stopping. “But it might be serious.”

“Oh!” she said, barely refraining from adding, “Goody!” Tucking her basket under her arm, she fell in beside me, firmly set to Do Good.

Invalid British prisoners were housed alongside the American sick in a long stone building lit by narrow, glassless windows and either freezing or stifling, depending on the weather. It was presently hot and humid outdoors—it was mid-afternoon—and entering the building was like being struck in the face with a hot, wet towel. A *dirty* hot, wet towel.

It wasn’t hard to find Mr. Ormiston; there was a knot of men standing round his cot. Lieutentant Stactoe was among them—that was bad—arguing with little Dr. Hunter—that was good—with a couple of other surgeons trying to put in their own opinions.

I knew without looking what they were arguing about; clearly Mr. Ormiston’s foot had taken a turn for the worse, and they intended to amputate it. In all probability, they were right. The argument would likely be about *where* to amputate, or who was to do it.

Mrs. Raven hung back, nervous at sight of the surgeons.

“Do you really think …” she began, but I paid her no attention. There are times for thinking, but this wasn’t one of them. Only action, and fast, decisive action at that, would serve. I took in a lungful of the thick air and stepped forward.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Hunter," I said, elbowing my way between the two militia surgeons and smiling at the young Quaker doctor. "Lieutenant Stactoe," I added as an afterthought, not to be overtly rude. I knelt beside the patient's cot, wiped my sweaty hand on my skirt, and took his.

"How are you, Mr. Ormiston? Captain Stebbings has sent me to take care of your foot."

"He *what*?" Lieutenant Stactoe began, in a peeved sort of voice. "Really, Mrs. Fraser, what can you possibly—"

"That's good, ma'am," Mr. Ormiston interrupted. "The captain said as how he'd send you; I was just a-telling these gentlemen here as they needn't be concerned, as I was sure *you'd* know the best way to do it."

And I'm sure they were pleased to hear that, I thought, but smiled at him and squeezed his hand. His pulse was fast and a little light, but regular. His hand, though, was very hot, and I wasn't even faintly surprised to see the reddish streaks of septicemia rising up his leg from the mangled foot.

They had unwrapped the foot, and Mr. Dick had unquestionably been right: him stank.

"Oh, my *God,"* said Mrs. Raven behind me, in complete sincerity.

Gangrene had set in; if the smell and tissue crepitation were not enough, the toes had begun to blacken already. I didn't waste time in being angry at Stactoe; given the original condition of the foot, and the treatment available, I might not have been able to save it, either. And the fact that gangrene was so clearly present was actually a help; there couldn't be any question that amputation was necessary. But in that case, I wondered, why were they arguing?

"I take it you agree that amputation is necessary, Mrs. Fraser?" the lieutenant said, with sarcastic courtesy. "As the patient's *physician?"* He had his instruments already laid out on cloth, I saw. Decently kept; not disgustingly filthy—but plainly not sterilized.

"Certainly," I said mildly. "I'm very sorry about it, Mr. Ormiston, but he's right. And you will feel much better with it off. Mrs. Raven, will you go and bring me a pan of boiling water?" I turned to Denzell Hunter, who, I saw, was holding Mr. Ormiston's other hand, plainly counting his pulse.

"Do you not agree, Dr. Hunter?"

"I do, yes," he said mildly. "We are in disagreement regarding the degree of amputation required, not its necessity. What is the boiling water for, Friend … Fraser, he said?"

"Claire," I said briefly. "Sterilization of the instruments. To prevent postoperative infection. As much as possible," I added honestly. Stactoe made a very disrespectful noise at this, but I ignored it. "What do you recommend, Dr. Hunter?"

"Denzell," he said, with a fleeting smile. "Friend Stactoe wishes to amputate below the knee—"

"Of course I do!" Stactoe said, furious. "I wish to preserve the knee joint, and there is no need to do it higher!"

"Oddly enough, I'm inclined to agree with you," I told him, but turned back to Denzell Hunter. "But you don't?"

He shook his head and pushed his spectacles up the bridge of his nose.

"We must do a mid-femoral amputation. The man has a popliteal aneurysm. That means—"

"I know what it means." I did, and was already feeling behind Mr. Ormiston's knee. He emitted a high-pitched giggle, stopped abruptly, and went red in the face with embarrassment. I smiled at him.

"Sorry, Mr. Ormiston," I said. "I won't tickle you again."

I wouldn't need to. I could feel the aneurysm plainly; it throbbed gently against my fingers, a big, hard swelling right in the hollow of the joint. He must have had it for some time; a wonder it hadn't burst during the sea battle or the arduous portage to Ticonderoga. In a modern operating room, it might be possible to do the lesser amputation and repair the aneurysm—but not here.

"You're right, Friend Denzell," I said, straightening up. "As soon as Mrs. Raven brings the hot water, we'll—" But the men weren't listening to me. They were staring at something behind me, and I turned to see Guinea Dick, stripped to a breechclout because of the heat and glistening with sweat, *all* his tattoos on display, advancing upon us with a black glass bottle held ceremoniously between his hands.

"Him captain send you grog, Joe," he said to Mr. Ormiston.

"Well, God bless the captain for a good un!" Mr. Ormiston said in heartfelt thanks. He took the bottle of rum, drew the cork with his teeth, and began to swallow with a single-minded determination.

Sloshing and splashing heralded Mrs. Raven's return with the water. Nearly every fire had a kettle on; finding boiling water was no difficulty. She had, bless her, also brought a bucket of cold water so that I could wash my hands without burning myself.

I took one of the short-bladed, brutal amputation knives, preparing to plunge it into the hot water, only to have it snatched from my hand by an outraged Lieutenant Stactoe.

"What are you doing, madam!" he exclaimed. "That is my best blade!"

"Yes, that's why I propose to use it," I said. "*After* I wash it."

Stactoe was a small man with close-cropped, bristly gray hair; he was also two or three inches shorter than I, as I discovered when I stood up and faced him, eyeball to eyeball. His face went a shade or two redder.

"You will ruin the temper of the metal, subjecting it to boiling water!"

"No," I said, keeping my own temper—for the moment. "Hot water will do nothing but clean it. And I will not use a dirty blade on this man."

"Oh, won't you?" Something like satisfaction glimmered in his eyes, and he clutched the blade protectively to his bosom. "Well, then. I suppose you'll have to leave the work to those who can do it, won't you?"

Guinea Dick, who had remained to watch after delivery of the bottle, had been following the progress of the argument with interest and, at this point, leaned over and plucked the knife from Stactoe's hand.

"Him captain says her does for Joe," he said calmly. "Her does."

Stactoe's mouth fell open in outrage at this gross insult to his rank, and he lunged at Dick, grabbing for the blade. Dick, with reflexes honed by tribal warfare and years of British seamanship, swung the blade at Stactoe with the obvious intent of removing his head. He would likely have succeeded, save for Denzell Hunter's equally good reflexes, which sent him leaping for Dick's arm. He missed but succeeded in knocking the big Guineaman into Stactoe. They clutched each other—Dick dropping the knife—and staggered to and fro for an instant before both overbalanced and crashed into Ormiston's cot, sending patient, rum bottle, hot water, Denzell Hunter, and the rest of the instruments sprawling across the stone floor with a clatter that stopped every conversation in the building.

"Oooh!" said Mrs. Raven, deliciously shocked. This was turning out even better than she had expected.

"Denny!" said an equally shocked voice behind me. "What does thee think thee is doing?"

"I am … assisting Friend Claire in her surgery," Denzell said with some dignity, sitting up and patting round the floor in search of his spectacles.

Rachel Hunter bent and picked up the errant spectacles, which had slid across the stones, and restored these firmly to her brother's face, while keeping a wary eye on Lieutenant Stactoe, who was slowly rising from the floor, much in the manner of a hot-air balloon, visibly swelling with rage.

"You," he said in a hoarse voice, and pointed a small, trembling finger at Dick. "I shall have you hanged for assaulting an officer. I shall have *you*, sir"—swinging the accusatory digit toward Denzell Hunter—"court-martialed and broke! As for you, *madam*—" He spat the word, but then stopped dead, momentarily unable to think of anything sufficiently terrible with which to threaten me. Then, "I shall ask your husband to beat you!" he said.

"Come 'n' tickle me, darlin'," a slurred voice said from the floor. I looked down, to see a leering Mr. Ormiston. He had kept hold of the rum bottle during the wreck, continued to employ it afterward, and, face suffused with rum, was now making random pawing motions in the vicinity of my knee.

Lieutenant Stactoe made a noise indicating that this was the frozen limit, if not well beyond, and, hastily bundling up his fallen instruments, he marched off, bristling with knives and saws, dropping occasional small objects in his wake.

“Did thee want me, Sissy?” Denzell Hunter had got to his feet by this time and was righting the fallen cot.

“Not so much me as Mrs. Brown,” his sister said, a dry note in her voice. “She says it is her time, and she wants thee. Right. Now.”

He snorted briefly, and glanced at me.

“Mrs. Brown is an hysteric, in the literal meaning of the term,” he said apologetically. “I think she cannot deliver for another month yet, but she suffers false labor on a regular basis.”

“I know her,” I said, suppressing a smile. “Better you than me, mate.” Mrs. Brown *was* an hysteric. Also the wife of a colonel of militia and therefore—she thought—well above the services of a mere midwife. Hearing that Dr. Denzell Hunter had worked with Dr. John Hunter, who was *accoucheur* to the *Queen!*—obviously, my services could be dispensed with.

“She is not bleeding, nor her water broke?” Denzell was asking his sister in a resigned voice. Guinea Dick, totally unperturbed by the recent conflict, had restored the bedding to the cot and now squatted, lifted all fifteen stone of Mr. Ormiston as if he were a feather bed, and deposited him and his bottle gently thereon.

“I think him ready,” he announced, after scrutinizing the patient, who was now lying back, eyes closed, happily murmuring, “Just a little lower, dear, aye, that’s it, tha’s it …”

Denzell looked helplessly from Mr. Ormiston to his sister to me.

“I will have to go to Mrs. Brown, though I think it not pressingly urgent. Can thee wait a little while and I will do this for thee?”

“Her does it,” said Dick, glowering.

“Yes, her does,” I assured him, tying back my hair. “But what her is going to do it *with* is another question. Have you any instruments that I might borrow, Dr.—er, Friend Denzell?”

He rubbed his forehead, thinking.

“I have a decent saw.” He smiled briefly. “And I do not mind if thee wishes to boil it. But no heavy blade. Shall I send Rachel to ask one of the other surgeons?”

Rachel’s face closed a bit at this suggestion, and I thought that perhaps Dr. Hunter was not all that popular with the other surgeons.

I eyed Mr. Ormiston’s very solid leg, estimating the thickness of flesh to be cut, and put a hand through the slit in my skirt to the sheath of my knife. It was a good, sturdy knife, and Jamie had just sharpened it for me. A curved blade would be better, but I thought the length was sufficient …

“No, don’t trouble. I think this will work. If you would find your brother’s saw, Miss—er, Rachel.” I smiled at her. “And, Mrs. Raven, I’m afraid the water’s gone, would you—”

“Oh, yes!” she cried, and seizing the pan, clattered off, kicking one of Lieutenant Stactoe’s oddments on the way.

A number of people had been watching the drama of Mr. Ormiston’s foot, fascinated. Now that the lieutenant was gone, they began to sidle nearer, looking fearfully at Guinea Dick, who grinned genially at them.

“Can Mrs. Brown wait a quarter of an hour?” I asked Denzell. “It will be a little easier if I have someone who knows what they’re doing to support the leg while I cut. Dick can restrain the patient.”

“A quarter of an hour?”

“Well, the actual amputation will take a little less than a minute, if I don’t encounter any difficulties. But I’ll need a bit of time to prepare, and I could use your help in ligating the severed blood vessels afterward. Where has the rum bottle gone, by the way?”

Denzell’s dark brows were almost touching his hairline, but he gestured to Mr. Ormiston, who had gone to sleep and was now snoring loudly, the rum bottle cradled in his arm.

“I don’t propose to drink it,” I said dryly, answering his expression. I pulled the bottle free and poured a little onto a clean rag, with which I began to swab Mr. Ormiston’s hairy thigh. The lieutenant had fortunately left his jar of sutures, and the oddment Mrs. Raven had kicked was a tenaculum. I would need it to seize the ends of severed arteries, which had an annoying tendency to pop back into the flesh and hide, squirting blood all the while.

“Ah,” said Denzell, still at a loss but game. “I see. Can I … help?”

"If I might borrow your belt for a ligature?"

"Oh, yes," he murmured, and unbuckled it without hesitation, looking interested. "I collect thee has done this before."

"Many times, unfortunately." I bent to check Mr. Ormiston's breathing, which was stertorous but not labored. He'd downed nearly half the bottle within five minutes. That was a dose that would likely kill someone less inured to rum than a British seaman, but his vital signs were reasonably good, fever notwithstanding. Drunkenness was not by any means the equivalent of anesthesia; the patient was stunned, not unconscious, and would certainly come to when I began cutting. It did allay fear, though, and might dull the immediate pain slightly. I wondered whether—and when—I might ever be able to make ether again.

There were two or three small tables in the long room, these heaped with bandages, lint, and other dressing materials. I chose a good supply of relatively clean materials and returned with them to the bedside just as Mrs. Raven—panting and red-faced, anxious lest she had missed anything—arrived, water bucket sloshing. A moment later, Rachel Hunter returned, similarly panting from her hurry, with her brother's saw.

"If you would not mind dousing the saw blade, Friend Denzell?" I said, tying a burlap sack round my waist to serve as an apron. Sweat was running down my back, tickling between my buttocks, and I tied a length of bandaging round my head bandanna-style, to keep the sweat from running into my eyes as I worked. "And scrub the stains there near the handle? Then my knife and that tenaculum, if you don't mind."

Looking bemused, he did, to interested murmurs from the crowd, who had plainly never witnessed such an outlandish proceeding, though Mr. Dick's savage presence was keeping them at a safe distance.

"Does thee suppose the lieutenant would indeed have our friend here hanged?" Denzell whispered to me, with a nod at Dick. "Or could, come to that?"

"I'm sure he'd love to, but I really don't think he can, no. Mr. Dick is an English prisoner. Can he have you court-martialed, do you think?”

“I suppose he might try,” Denzell said, seeming not perturbed at the prospect. “I enlisted, after all.”

“Did you?” That seemed odd, but he wasn’t the only Quaker I’d met on a battlefield, so to speak.

“Oh, yes. I think the army does not have so many surgeons that it can afford to hang one, though. And I doubt that being reduced in rank would much affect my expertise.” He smiled cheerfully at me. “Thee has no rank at all, if I am not mistaken, and yet I trust thee will manage.”

“God willing,” I said, and he nodded gravely.

“God willing,” he repeated, and handed me the knife, still hot from the boiling water.

“You might want to stand back a bit,” I said to the spectators. “It’s going to be messy.”

“Oh, dear, oh, dear,” said Mrs. Raven, with a tremulous gasp of anticipation. “How perfectly *ghastly!*”

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THREE ARROWS

Mottville, Pennsylvania
June 10, 1777

Grey sat up suddenly, narrowly avoiding cracking his head on the low beam that passed above his bed. His heart was pounding, his neck and temples wet with sweat, and he had no notion for a moment where he was.

"The third arrow," he said aloud, and shook his head, trying to match the words to the extraordinarily vivid dream from which he had so abruptly emerged.

Was it dream, memory, or something partaking of the nature of both? He had been standing in the main salon of *Trois Flèches*, looking at the very fine Stubbs hanging to the right of the baroque mantelpiece. The walls were crowded with pictures—hung above, below, crammed in without regard to subject or merit.

Was that how it had been? He remembered vaguely a sense of oppression at the abundance of ornament, but had the paintings truly crowded in so, portraits leering from above, below, faces in every direction?

In the dream, the Baron Amandine had stood to one side of him, the solid shoulder touching his; they were much of a height. The Baron was speaking of one of the paintings, but Grey could not remember what he was saying—something about the technique employed by the painter, perhaps.

On his other side stood Cecile Beauchamp, the baron's sister, standing equally close, a bare shoulder brushing Grey's. She wore powder in her hair and a perfume of jasmine; the baron, a feral cologne of bergamot and civet. He remembered—for surely dreams had no smell?—the mingling of the thick fragrances with the bitterness of wood ash in the stifling warmth of the room, and the faint feeling of nausea this mingling induced. Someone's hand had cupped one of his buttocks, squeezed it familiarly, and then commenced to stroke it in an insinuating fashion. He didn't know whose hand it was.

That hadn't been part of the dream.

He lay back slowly on his pillow, eyes closed, trying to recapture the images from his sleeping mind. The dream had changed after that to something erotic, someone's mouth on his highly responsive flesh; it was the sensations associated with this, in fact, that wakened him. He didn't know whose mouth it was, either. Dr. Franklin had been somewhere in this dream, as well; Grey recalled the white buttocks, slightly sagging, still firm, as the man walked down a corridor in front of him, long gray hair straggling down a bony back, loose rolls of skin around the waist, talking with complete unconcern about the pictures, which lined the walls of the corridor, as well. It was a vivid recollection, charged with feeling. Surely he hadn't—not with Franklin, even in a dream. But it was something to do with the paintings …

He tried to recall some of the paintings but was no longer sure what was real, what emerged from the bourne of dreams. There were landscapes … a thing purporting to be an Egyptian scene, though he took leave to doubt that the painter had ever set foot south of the Breton coast. The usual family portraits—

"Yes!" he sat up abruptly and this time *did smack* the crown of his head on the beam, hard enough that he saw stars and emitted a grunt of pain.

"Uncle John?" Dottie's voice came clearly from the other bed, startled, and a rustling of bedclothes from the floor indicated that her maid had likewise wakened. "What's happened?"

"Nothing, nothing. Go back to sleep." He swung his legs out of bed. "Just … going to the privy."

"Oh." Flouncings and mutterings from the floor, a sternly rebuking *shush!* from Dottie. He found the chamber door by feel, for the shutters had been put up and the room was black as sin, and made his way downstairs by the dim light from the banked fire in the inn's main room.

The air outside was fresh and cool, scented with something he didn't recognize but that tugged at his memory. It was a relief to let go the struggle with his obstinate dream and submerge himself in this purely sensory remembrance. It brought back long rides in Virginia, muddy roads, fresh leaves, the sense of a horse beneath him, the kick of a gun, the feel of a deer's blood spilling hot over his hand … of course, hunting with William.

He felt the immediacy of the wilderness wash over him, that strong, strange sense so peculiar to America: the sense of something waiting among the trees—not inimical, but not welcoming, either. He had loved those few years in Virginia, away from the intrigues of Europe, the constant sociality of London. Valued them mostly, though, for the closeness that had grown between him and his son in those years in the wilderness.

He had not yet seen fireflies on this journey. He glanced into the thick grass as he walked, but it was probably too late; fireflies came out mostly in the early evening. He looked forward to showing them to Dottie. William had been enchanted by his first sight of them when they came to live in Virginia—had caught them in his hand, cupping one gently and exclaiming as it lit the darkened hollow of his palm. Had greeted their return each summer with joy.

Relieved in body and at least superficially soothed in mind, he sat slowly down on the chopping block in the innyard, unwilling to return yet to the frowsy darkness above.

Where was Henry? he wondered. Where did he sleep tonight? Housed in some dungeon? No, the Colonies really had no such thing. Even common houses were remarkably comfortable and airy. Perhaps his nephew was held in a gaol, a barn, some cellar—and yet he had, so far as they knew, survived the winter in spite of what must be a serious wound. He would have had money, though; perhaps he had been able to pay for better housing, perhaps a doctor's care.

God willing, they would find him soon. They were no more than two days' ride from Philadelphia. And he had the letters of introduction Franklin had given him—Franklin again! Damn the man and his air-bathing. Though Grey had joined him in this process once, from curiosity, and found it oddly pleasant, if a little unnerving, to be sitting mother-naked in a room equipped with elegant furniture, potted plants in the corners, paintings on the—

No. No, there were no paintings in the solar at *Trois Flèches*, of course not.

There it was. The tail of his elusive dream, twitching tantalizingly at him from under a rock. He closed his eyes, filled his lungs with the scent of the summer night, and purposely forced his mind to go blank.

Trois Flèches. Three arrows. Who is the third? The words of Hal's letter appeared on the inside of his eyelids, sufficiently startling that he opened his eyes. Used as he was to Hal's oblique thought processes, he hadn't made much of this at the time. Evidently it had taken root in his subconscious, though, only to emerge in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere, out of the depths of an absurd dream. Why?

He rubbed gently at the crown of his head, which was sore from his collision with the beam, but not broken. His fingers unconsciously moved down, fingering the spot where Jamie Fraser's wife had covered the trephine hole in his skull with a silver sixpence hammered flat. She had stitched the skin over it quite cleverly and the hair had grown again, but it was easy to feel the small hard curve under it. He seldom noticed or thought of it save in cold weather, when the metal grew markedly cold and sometimes caused headache and made his nose run.

It had been cold, very cold, when he visited *Trois Flèches*. The thought floated through his head like a moth.

There were sounds behind the inn. The clop of hooves on packed dirt, the murmur of voices. He sat very still.

The moon was halfway down; it was late, but hours yet ’til dawn. No one should have business at this hour, save it was a dark business. The sort of business he had no desire to witness—let alone to be seen witnessing.

They were coming, though; he couldn’t move without being seen, and instead stilled even his breathing to the barest wisp of air.

Three men, quiet, purposeful, on horseback, one leading a laden mule. They passed no more than two paces from him, but he didn’t move, and the horses, if they sensed him, found him no threat. They turned onto the road that led to Philadelphia. Why this secrecy? he wondered—but didn’t waste time in much wondering. He had noticed it at once upon his return to North Carolina the year before: a morbid excitement, an uneasiness in the air itself. It was more pronounced here; he had been aware of it since they had landed.

People were wary in a way that they hadn’t been. *They don’t know who to trust*, he thought. *And so they trust no one*.

The thought of trust conjured an immediate and vivid recollection of Percy Wainwright. *If there is anyone in the world I trust less …*

And just like that, he had it. The picture of Percy, dark-eyed and smiling, thumb running over the surface of his wineglass as though he stroked Grey’s prick, saying casually, “*I married one of the sisters of the Baron Amandine …*”

“*One* of the sisters,” Grey whispered aloud, and the dream crystallized in his mind, the sense of cold from the stones of *Trois Flèches* so vivid that he shivered, though the night was not cold at all. Felt the warmth of those two lascivious, vicious bodies pressing on him from either side. And on the wall to one side, disregarded among the careless profusion, a small painting of three children, two girls, one boy, posed with a dog, and the outer wall of *Trois Flèches* recognizable behind them.

The second sister. The third arrow, whom Hal, with his unerring sense of oddity, had never seen but had noticed nonetheless.

The Beauchamps were a noble, ancient family—and like most such families, they referred often, if casually, to themselves. He had heard during his visit of the doings of cousins, uncles, aunts, distant connections … but never of the second sister.

She might have died in childhood, of course; such things were common. But in that case, why would Percy have said …?

Now his head *was* beginning to ache. With a sigh, he rose and went inside. He had no notion where or when—but he was going to have to speak to Percy again. He was appalled to find that the prospect did not alarm him.

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LEY LINES

Brianna paused by the fish-viewing chamber. It wasn't yet the breeding season, when—she'd been told—the great salmon swarmed through the chutes of the fish ladder that allowed them to climb the dam at Pitlochry, but now and then a silvery flash shot into view with heart-stopping suddenness, fighting strongly against the current for a moment before shooting up into the tube that led to the next stage of the ladder. The chamber itself was a small white housing let into the side of the fish ladder, with an algae-clouded window. She'd paused there to gather her thoughts—or, rather, to suppress some of them—before going in to the dam.

It was nonsense to worry about something that had already happened. And she did know that her parents were all right. Or at least, she amended, had made it out of Fort Ticonderoga; there were a good many letters left.

And she could at any moment *read* those letters, too, and find out. That was what made it so ridiculous. She supposed she wasn't really *worried*. Just … preoccupied. The letters were wonderful. But at the same time, she was only too aware of how much even the most complete letter must leave out. And according to Roger's book, General Burgoyne had left Canada in early June, his plan being to march south and join General Howe's troops, cutting the Colonies essentially in half. And on July 6, 1777, he had paused to attack Fort Ticonderoga. What—

"Coimhead air sin!" said a voice behind her. She jerked round, startled, to find Rob Cameron standing there, gesturing excitedly at

the fish-viewing window. She turned back just in time to see a tremendous silver fish, spotted dark over the back, give a great heave against the current before disappearing up the chute.

“Nach e sin an rud as brèagha a chunnaic thu riamh?”he said, the wonder of it still showing on his face. Is that not the most beautiful thing you’ve ever seen?

“Cha mhór!” she replied, wary, but unable not to smile in return. Almost.

His own smile remained but became more personal as he focused on her. “Ah, ye do have the *Gàidhlig!* My cousin said, but I didna quite believe it—you with your prah-pah Bah-ston accent,” he said, drawling the syllables in what he plainly thought *was* a Boston accent.

“Yeah, pahk yah cah in Hah-vahd Yahd,” she said, in a real—but exaggerated—one. He burst out laughing.

“How d’ye do that? Ye don’t speak *Gàidhlig* with that sort of accent. I mean—ye’ve got one, but it’s … different. More like ye’d hear on the Isles—Barra, maybe, or Uist.”

“My da was Scots,” she said. “I got it from him.”

That made him look at her afresh, as though she were a novel sort of fish he’d just pulled up on his hook.

“Yeah? From around here? What’s his name?”

“James Fraser,” she replied. Safe enough; there were dozens. “And was. He’s … gone.”

“Ach, too bad,” he said sympathetically, and briefly touched her arm. “Lost my dad last year. Tough, eh?”

“Yes,” she said briefly, and made to go past him. He turned at once and fell into step beside her.

“Ye’ve got wee ones, too, Roger said?” He felt her start of surprise, and smiled sideways at her. “Met him in lodge. Nice guy.”

“Yes, he is,” she said, guarded. Roger hadn’t mentioned meeting Rob, and she did wonder why not. Clearly he’d talked with Rob long enough for Rob to know that Roger was her husband and that they had children. Rob didn’t pursue the reference any further, though, instead stretching and throwing back his head.

“Gahhh … too nice a day to spend in a dam. Wish I could be on the water.” He nodded toward the tumbling river, where half a dozen be-wadered anglers stood among the waves with the predatory intentness of herons. “You or Roger fly-fish at all?”

“I have,” she said, and felt the memory of a casting rod whipping in her hands, sending a small thrill up the nerve endings. “You fish, then?”

“Aye, I’ve got a permission for Rothiemurchus.” He looked proud, as though this was something special, so she made approving noises. He glanced sideways at her, caramel-eyed and smiling. “If ever ye want to come out with your rod, just say the word. Boss.” He grinned suddenly at her, careless and charming, and went ahead of her into the dam office, whistling.

* * *

A ley line is an observed alignment between two geographical features of interest, usually an ancient monument or megalith. There are a number of theories about ley lines and considerable controversy as to whether they actually exist as a phenomenon, and not only as an artifact.

By that I mean that if you choose any two points that have interest for humans, there’s very likely to be a path that leads between them, no matter what those points are. There is a major roadway between London and Edinburgh, for instance, because people frequently want to go from one to the other, but this is not normally called a ley line. What people usually have in mind when using this term is an ancient pathway that leads, say, from a standing stone to an ancient abbey, which is itself likely built on a spot of much older worship.

Since there isn’t much objective evidence beyond the obvious existence of such lines, there’s a lot of guff talked about them. Some people think the lines have a magical or mystical significance. I don’t see any grounds for this *myself, and neither does your mother, who is a scientist. On the other hand, science changes its mind now and then, and what looks like magic may really have a scientific explanation (NB—put in footnote about Claire and the plant-harvesting).*

However, among the theories regarding ley lines, there is one that appears to have at least a possible physical basis. Perhaps you will already know what dowsers are, by the time you come to read this; I will take you out with one as soon as the opportunity occurs. Just in case, though—a dowser is a person who can detect the presence of water or sometimes bodies of metal underground, like the ore in mines. Some of them use a Y-forked stick, a metal rod, or some other object with which to "divine" the water; some merely sense it. The actual basis of this skill is not known; your mother says that Occam's razor would say that such people just recognize the type of geology that is most likely to harbor underground water. I've seen dowsers work, though, and am pretty sure there is more to it than that—especially in view of the theories I'm telling you here.

One theory of how dowsing works is that the water or metal has a magnetic current, to which the dowser is sensitive. Your mother says that the first part of this is true and that, furthermore, there are large bands of geomagnetic force in the earth's crust, which run in opposing directions all round the globe. Further, she tells me that these bands are detectible by objective measures but are not necessarily permanent; indeed, the earth undergoes occasional (every umpty-million years, I think; she didn't know the exact frequency) reversals of its geomagnetic force—nobody knows why, but the usual suspect is sunspots—with the poles exchanging places.

Another interesting bit of information is that homing pigeons (and quite possibly other sorts of birds) demonstrably do sense these geomagnetic lines, and use *them to navigate by, though no one yet has figured out quite how they do it.*

What we suspect—your mother and I—and I must emphasize that we may easily be wrong in this supposition—is that ley lines do exist, that they are (or correlate with) lines of geomagnetic force, and that where they cross or converge you get a spot where this magnetic force is … different, for lack of a better word. We think these convergences—or some of them—may be the places where it is possible for people who are sensitive to such forces (like pigeons, I suppose) to go from one time to another (that would be your mother and me, and you, Jem, and Mandy). If the person reading this is a child (or grandchildren) not yet born, then I don't know whether you will have this sensitivity, ability, what-you-may-call-it, but I assure you that it is real. Your grandmother speculated that it is a genetic trait, much like the ability to roll one's tongue; if you haven't got it, the "how" of it is simply incomprehensible, even though you can observe it in someone who does have the trait. If that's the case for you, I don't know whether to apologize or congratulate you, though I suppose it's no worse than the other things parents give their children, all unknowing, like crooked teeth or shortsightedness. We didn't do it on purpose, either way, please believe that.

Sorry, I've got off the track here. The basic point is that the ability to time-travel may be dependent on a genetic sensitivity to these … convergences? vortices?… of ley lines.

Owing to the peculiar geological history of the British Isles, you find a lot of ley lines here and, likewise, a great number of archaeological sites that seem to be linked by those lines. Your mother and I intend to note, so far as can be done without danger—and make no mistake about this; it is very dangerous—the occurrence of such sites as

> *might be portals. Obviously, there's no way of knowing for sure whether a specific site is a portal or not.* *
>
> **Footnote: Your mother says—well, she said quite a bit, in which I picked out the words "Unified Field Theory," which I gather is something that doesn't yet exist, but if it did, it would explain a hell of a lot of things, and among these might be an answer to why a convergence of geomagnetic lines might affect time in the spot where the convergence occurs. All I personally got from this explanation is the notion that space and time are occasionally the same thing, and gravity is somehow involved. This makes as much sense to me as anything else regarding this phenomenon.*
>
> *Footnote 2:*
>
> *The observation that sites seem to be "open" on the dates that correspond to the sun feasts and fire feasts of the ancient world (or at least more open than at other times) may—if this hypothesis is right—have something to do with the gravitational pull of the sun and moon. This seems reasonable, given that those bodies really do affect the behavior of the earth with respect to tides, weather, and the like—why not time vortices, too, after all?*

"Does that make sense?" Roger asked. "So far, at least?"

"Insofar as anything about it makes sense, yes." Despite the uneasiness that came over her whenever they discussed it, she couldn't help smiling at him; he looked so earnest. There was a blotch of ink on his cheek, and his black hair was ruffled up on one side.

"Professoring must be in the blood," she said, pulling a tissue out of her pocket, licking it in mother-cat fashion, and applying it to his face. "You know, there's this wonderful modern invention called a ballpoint …"

"Hate them," he said, closing his eyes and suffering himself to be tidied. "Besides, a fountain pen is a great luxury, compared to a quill."

"Well, that's true. Da always looked like an explosion in an ink factory when he'd been writing letters." Her eyes returned to the page, and she snorted briefly at the first footnote, making Roger smile.

"Is that a decent explanation?"

"Considering that this is meant for the kids, more than adequate," she assured him, lowering the page. "What goes in Footnote Two?"

"Ah." He leaned back in his chair, hands linked, looking uneasy. "That."

"Yes, that," she said, instantly alerted. "Is there something like an Exhibit A that's meant to go there?"

"Well, yes," he said reluctantly, and met her eyes. "Geillis Duncan's notebooks. Mrs. Graham's book would be Exhibit B. Your mother's explanation of planting superstitions is Footnote Four."

Brianna could feel the blood draining from her head and sat down, just in case.

"You're sure that's a good idea?" she asked, tentative. She didn't herself know where Geillis Duncan's notebooks *were*—and didn't want to. The little book that Fiona Graham, Mrs. Graham's granddaughter, had given them was safely tucked away in a safe-deposit box in the Royal Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Roger blew out his breath and shook his head.

"No, I'm not," he said frankly. "But look. We don't know how old the kids will be when they read this. Which reminds me—we need to make some kind of provision about it. Just in case something happens to us before they're old enough to be told … everything."

She felt as though a melting ice cube were sliding slowly down her back. He was right, though. They might both be killed in a car crash, like her mother's parents. Or the house might burn—

"Well, no," she said aloud, looking at the window behind Roger, which was set into a stone wall some eighteen inches thick. "I don't suppose *this* house will burn down."

That made him smile.

"No, not too worried about that. But the notebooks—aye, I know what ye mean. And I did think of maybe just going through them myself and sort of straining out the information—she did have quite a bit about which stone circles seemed to be active, and that's useful. Because reading the rest of it is …" He waved a hand in search of the right word.

"Creepy," she supplied.

"I was going to say like watching someone go slowly mad in front of you, but 'creepy' will do." He took the pages from her and tapped them together. "It's just an academic tic, I suppose. I don't feel right in suppressing an original source."

She gave a different snort, one indicating what she thought of Geillis Duncan as an original source of anything bar trouble. Still …

"I suppose you're right," she said reluctantly. "Maybe you could do a summary, though, and just mention where the notebooks are, in case someone down the line is *really* curious."

"Not a bad thought." He put the papers inside the notebook and rose, closing it as he did so. "I'll go down and get them, then, maybe when school's out. I could take Jem and show him the city; he's old enough to walk the Royal Mile, and he'd love the castle."

"Do *not* take him to the Edinburgh Dungeon!" she said at once, and he broke into a broad grin.

"What, ye don't think wax figures of people being tortured are educational? It's all historical, aye?"

"It would be a lot less horrible if it wasn't," she said, and, turning, caught sight of the wall clock. "Roger! Aren't you supposed to be doing your Gaelic class at the school at two o'clock?"

He glanced at the clock in disbelief, snatched up the pile of books and papers on his desk, and shot out of the room in a flurry of very eloquent Gaelic.

She went out into the hall to see him hastily kiss Mandy and charge for the door. Mandy stood in the open doorway, waving enthusiastically.

"Bye-bye, Daddy!" she cried. "Bwing me ice cweam!"

"If he forgets, we'll go into the village after supper and get some," Brianna promised, bending down to pick her daughter up. She stood there holding Mandy, watching Roger's ancient orange Morris cough, choke, shudder, and start up with a brief belch of blue smoke. She frowned slightly at the sight, thinking she must get him a set of new spark plugs, but waved as he leaned out at the corner of the drive, smiling back at them.

Mandy snuggled close, murmuring one of Roger's more picturesque Gaelic phrases, which she was obviously committing to memory, and Bree bent her head, inhaling the sweet scent of Johnson's baby shampoo and grubby child. No doubt it was the mention of Geillis Duncan that was making her feel still uneasy. The woman was well and truly dead, but after all … she was Roger's multiple great-grandmother. And perhaps the ability to travel through stone circles was not the only thing to be passed down through the blood.

Though surely some things were diluted by time. Roger, for instance, had nothing in common with William Buccleigh MacKenzie, Geillis's son by Dougal MacKenzie—and the man responsible for Roger's being hanged.

"Son of a witch," she said, under her breath. "I hope you rot in hell."

" 'At's a bad word, Mummy," Mandy said reprovingly.

* * *

It went better than he could have hoped. The schoolroom was crowded, with lots of kids, a number of parents, and even a few grandparents crammed in round the walls. He had that moment of light-headedness—not quite panic or stage fright, but a sense of looking into some vast canyon that he couldn't see the bottom of—that he was used to from his days as a performer. He took a deep breath, put down his stack of books and papers, smiled at them, and said, *"Feasgar math!"*

That's all it ever took; the first words spoken—or sung—and it was like taking hold of a live wire. A current sprang up between him and the audience, and the next words seemed to come from nowhere, flowing through him like the crash of water through one of Bree's giant turbines.

After a word or two of introduction, he started with the notion of Gaelic cursing, knowing why most of the kids had come. A few parents' brows shot up, but small, knowing smiles appeared on the faces of the grandparents.

"We haven't got bad words in the *Gàidhlig*, like there are in the English," he said, and grinned at the feisty-looking towhead in the second row, who had to be the wee Glasscock bugger who'd told Jemmy he was going to hell. "Sorry, Jimmy.

"Which is not to say ye can't give a good, strong opinion of someone," he went on, as soon as the laughter subsided. "But *Gàidhlig* cursing is a matter of art, not crudeness." That got a ripple of laughter from the old people, too, and several of the kids' heads turned toward their grandparents, amazed.

"For example, I once heard a farmer whose pig got into the mash tell her that he hoped her intestines would burst through her belly and be eaten by crows."

An impressed "Oo!" from the kids, and he smiled and went on, giving carefully edited versions of some of the more creative things he'd heard his father-in-law say on occasion. No need to add that, lack of bad words notwithstanding, it is indeed possible to call someone a "daughter of a bitch" when wishing to be seriously nasty. If the kids wanted to know what Jem had really said to Miss Glendenning, they'd have to ask him. If they hadn't already.

From there, he went to a more serious—but quick—description of the Gaeltacht, that area of Scotland where Gaelic was traditionally spoken, and told a few anecdotes of learning the Gaelic on herring boats in the Minch as a teenager—including the entire speech given by a particular Captain Taylor when a storm scoured out his favorite lobster hole and made away with all his pots (this piece of eloquence having been addressed, with shaken fist, to the sea, the heavens, the crew, and the lobsters). That one had them rolling again, and a couple of the old buggers in the back were grinning and muttering to one another, they having obviously encountered similar situations.

"But the *Gàidhlig* is a language," he said, when the laughter had died down once more. "And that means its primary use is for communication—people talking to one another. How many of you have ever heard line singing? Waulking songs?"

Murmurs of interest; some had, some hadn't. So he explained what waulking was: "The women all working together, pushing and pulling and kneading the wet wool cloth to make it tight and waterproof—because they didn't have macs or wellies in the auld days, and folk would need to be out of doors day and night, in all kinds of weather, tending their animals or their crofts." His voice was well warmed by now; he thought he could make it through a brief waulking song and, flipping open the folder, sang them the first verse and refrain, then got them to do it, as well. They got four verses, and then he could feel the strain starting to tell and brought it to a close.

"My gran used to sing that one," one of the mothers blurted impulsively, then blushed red as a beet as everyone looked at her.

"Is your gran still alive?" Roger asked, and at her abashed nod, said, "Well, then, have her teach it to you, and you can teach it to your kids. That kind of thing shouldn't be lost, aye?"

A small murmur of half-surprised agreement, and he smiled again and lifted the battered hymnbook he'd brought.

"Right. I mentioned the line singing, too. Ye'll still hear this of a Sunday in kirk out on the Isles. Go to Stornaway, for instance, and ye'll hear it. It's a way of singing the psalms that goes back to when folk hadn't many books—or maybe not so many of the congregation could read. So there'd be a precentor, whose job it was to sing the psalm, one line at a time, and then the congregation would sing it back to him. This book"—and he raised the hymnal—"belonged to my own father, the Reverend Wakefield; some of you might recall him. But originally it belonged to another clergyman, the Reverend Alexander Carmichael. Now he …" And he went on to tell them about the Reverend Carmichael, who had combed the Highlands and the Isles in the nineteenth century, talking with people, urging them to sing him their songs and tell him their ways, collecting "hymns, charms, and incantations" from the oral tradition wherever he could find them, and had published this great work of scholarship in several volumes, called the *Carmina Gadelica*.

He'd brought one volume of the *Gadelica* with him, and while he passed the ancient hymnal round the room, along with a booklet of waulking songs he'd put together, he read them one of the charms of the new moon, the Cud Chewing Charm, the Indigestion Spell, the Poem of the Beetle, and some bits from "The Speech of Birds."

Columba went out
An early mild morning;
He saw a white swan,
"Guile, guile,"
Down on the strand,
"Guile, guile,"
With a dirge of death,
"Guile, guile."

A white swan and she wounded, wounded,
A white swan and she bruised, bruised,
The white swan of the two visions,
"Guile, guile,"
The white swan of the two omens,
"Guile, guile,"
Life and death,
"Guile, guile,"
"Guile, guile."

When thy journey,
Swan of mourning?
Said Columba of love,
"Guile, guile,"
From Erin my swimming,
"Guile, guile,"
From the Fiann my wounding,
"Guile, guile,"
The sharp wound of my death,
"Guile, guile,"
"Guile, guile."

White swan of Erin,
A friend am I to the needy;
The eye of Christ be on thy wound,
"Guile, guile,"
The eye of affection and of mercy,
"Guile, guile,"
The eye of kindness and of love,
"Guile, guile,"

Making thee whole,
"Guile, guile,"
"Guile, guile."

Swan of Erin,
"Guile, guile,"
No harm shall touch thee,
"Guile, guile,"
Whole be thy wounds,
"Guile, guile."

Lady of the wave,
"Guile, guile,"
Lady of the dirge,
"Guile, guile,"
Lady of the melody,
"Guile, guile."

To Christ the glory,
"Guile, guile,"
To the Son of the Virgin,
"Guile, guile,"
To the great High-King,
"Guile, guile,"
To Him be thy song,
"Guile, guile,"
To Him be thy song,

"Guile, guile,"
"Guile guile!"

His throat hurt almost unbearably from doing the swan calls, from the soft moan of the wounded swan to the triumphant cry of the final words, and his voice cracked with it at the last, but triumphant it was, nonetheless, and the room erupted in applause.

Between soreness and emotion, he couldn't actually speak for a few moments, and instead bowed and smiled and bowed again, mutely handing the stack of books and folders to Jimmy Glasscock to be passed round, while the audience swarmed up to congratulate him.

"Man, that was *great*!" said a half-familiar voice, and he looked up to find that it was Rob Cameron wringing his hand, shining-eyed with enthusiasm. Roger's surprise must have shown on his face, for Rob bobbed his head toward the little boy at his side: Bobby Hurragh, whom Roger knew well from the choir. A heartbreakingly pure soprano, and a wee fiend if not carefully watched.

"I brought wee Bobby," Rob said, keeping—Roger noticed—a tight grip on the kid's hand. "My sister's had to work today and couldn't get off. She's a widow," he added, by way of explanation, both of the mother's absence and his own stepping in.

"Thanks," Roger managed to croak, but Cameron just wrung his hand again, and then gave way to the next well-wisher.

Among the mob was a middle-aged woman whom he didn't know but who recognized him.

"My husband and I saw you sing once, at the Inverness Games," she said, in an educated accent, "though you went by your late father's name then, did you not?"

"I did," he said, in the bullfrog croak that was as far as his voice was prepared to go just now. "Your—you have—a grandchild?" He waved vaguely at the buzzing swarm of kids milling round an elderly lady who, pink with pleasure, was explaining the pronunciation of some of the odd-looking Gaelic words in the storybook.

“Yes,” the woman said, but wouldn’t be distracted from her focus, which was the scar across his throat. “What happened?” she asked sympathetically. “Is it permanent?”

“Accident,” he said. “ ’Fraid so.”

Distress creased the corners of her eyes and she shook her head.

“Oh, *such* a loss,” she said. “Your voice was beautiful. I am so sorry.”

“Thanks,” he said, because it was all he could say, and she let him go then, to receive the praise of people who’d never heard him sing. Before.

Afterward, he thanked Lionel Menzies, who stood by the door to see people out, beaming like the ringmaster of a successful circus.

“It was wonderful,” Menzies said, clasping him warmly by the hand. “Even better than I’d hoped. Tell me, would ye think of doing it again?”

“Again?” He laughed, but broke off coughing in the middle. “I barely made it through this one.”

“Ach.” Menzies waved that off. “A dram’ll see your throat right. Come down the pub with me, why don’t you?”

Roger was about to refuse, but Menzies’s face shone with such pleasure that he changed his mind. The fact that he was wringing with sweat—performing always raised his body temperature by several degrees—and had a thirst fit for the Gobi Desert had nothing to do with it, of course.

“Just the one, then,” he said, and smiled.

As they crossed the parking lot, a battered small blue panel truck pulled up and Rob Cameron leaned out of the window, calling to them.

“Like it, did ye, Rob?” Menzies asked, still beaming.

“Loved it,” Cameron said, with every evidence of sincerity. “Two things, Rog—I wanted to ask, maybe, if ye’d let me see some of the old songs ye have; Siegfried MacLeod showed me the ones you did for him.”

Roger was a little taken aback, but pleased.

“Aye, sure,” he said. “Didn’t know you were a fan,” he joked.

“I love all the old stuff,” Cameron said, serious for once. “Really, I’d appreciate it.”

“Okay, then. Come on out to the house, maybe, next weekend?”

Rob grinned and saluted briefly.

“Wait—two things, ye said?” Menzies asked.

“Oh, aye.” Cameron reached over and picked up something from the seat between Bobby and him. “This was in with the Gaelic bits ye were handing round. It looked as though it was in there by mistake, though, so I took it out. Writing a novel, are ye?”

He handed out the black notebook, “The Hitchhiker’s Guide,” and Roger’s throat clenched as though he’d been garroted. He took the notebook, nodding speechlessly.

“Maybe ye’ll let me read it when it’s done,” Cameron said casually, putting his truck in gear. “I’m a great one for the science fiction.”

The truck pulled away, then stopped suddenly and reversed. Roger took a firmer grip on the notebook, but Rob didn’t look at it.

“Hey,” he said. “Forgot. Brianna said ye’ve got an old stone fort or some such on your place?”

Roger nodded, clearing his throat.

“I’ve got a friend, an archaeologist. Would ye mind, maybe, if he was to come and have a look at it sometime?”

“No,” Roger croaked, then cleared his throat again and said more firmly, “No, that’d be fine. Thanks.”

Rob grinned cheerfully at him and revved the engine.

“Nay bother, mate,” he said.

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HIGH PLACES

Rob's archaeologist friend, Michael Callahan, turned out to be a genial bloke in his fifties with thinning sandy hair, sunburned so badly and so often that his face looked like patchwork, dark freckles blotched among patches of raw pink skin. He ferreted about among the collapsed stones of the old church with every sign of interest, asking Roger's permission to dig a trench along the outside of one wall.

Rob, Brianna, and the kids all came up briefly to watch, but archaeological work is not a spectator sport, and when Jem and Mandy got bored, the lot of them went down to the house to make lunch, leaving Roger and Mike to their poking.

"I don't need you," Callahan said, glancing up at Roger after a bit. "If you've things to do."

There were always things to do—it was a farm, after all, if a small one—but Roger shook his head.

"I'm interested," he said. "If I won't be in your way …?"

"Not a bit of it," Callahan said cheerfully. "Come and help me lift this, then."

Callahan whistled through his teeth as he worked, occasionally muttering to himself, but for the most part made no comment on whatever he was looking at. Roger was called on now and then to help clear away rubble or hold an unstable stone while Callahan peered underneath it with a small torch, but for the most part Roger sat on the bit of uncollapsed wall, listening to the wind.

It was quiet on the hilltop, in the way that wild places are quiet, with a constant sense of unobtrusive movement, and it struck him odd that this should be so. Normally you didn't get that feeling in places where people had lived, and plainly people had been mucking about on this hilltop for a good long time, judging from the depth of Callahan's trench and the small whistles of interest he gave off now and then, like a marmoset.

Brianna brought them up sandwiches and lemonade and sat down beside Roger on the wall to eat.

"Rob gone off, then?" Roger asked, noticing that the truck was gone from the dooryard.

"Just to run some errands, he said. He said it didn't look as though Mike would be finished anytime soon," she said, with a glance at Callahan's trouser seat, this sticking out from a bush as he burrowed happily beneath it.

"Maybe not," Roger said, smiling, and leaning forward, kissed her lightly. She made a low, contented noise in her throat and stepped back, but kept hold of his hand for a moment.

"Rob asked about the old songs you did up for Sandy MacLeod," she said, with a sideways glance down toward the house. "Did you tell him he could see them?"

"Oh, aye, I'd forgot that. Sure. If I'm not down when he comes back, you can show him them. The originals are in my bottom file drawer, in a folder labeled *Cèolas*."

She nodded and went down, long sneakered feet sure as a deer's on the stony path, and her hair down her back in a tail the color of the same deer's pelt.

As the afternoon wore on, he found himself dropping into a state not far off trance, his mind moving sluggishly and his body not much faster, coming in leisurely fashion to lend a hand where wanted, exchanging the barest of words with Callahan, who seemed similarly bemused. The drifting haze of the morning had thickened, and the cool shadows amid the stones faded with the light. The air was cool with water on his skin, but there was no hint of rain. You could almost feel the stones rising up around you, he thought, coming back to what they once were.

There were comings and goings at the house below: the slam of doors, Brianna hanging out the family wash, the kids and a couple of wee lads from the next farm over who'd come to spend the night with Jem all racing through the kailyard and outbuildings, playing some kind of tag that involved a good deal of noise, their shrieks high and sharp as the cries of fishing ospreys. Once he glanced down and saw the Farm and Household truck, presumably come to deliver the pump for the cream separator, for Roger saw Brianna shepherding the driver into the barn, he unable to see around the large carton in his arms.

Around five, a fresh strong breeze came up, and the haze began to dissipate. As though this was a signal waking Callahan from his dream, the archaeologist straightened, stood a moment looking down at something, then nodded.

“Well, it may be an ancient site,” he said, climbing out of his trench and groaning as he leaned to and fro, stretching his back. “The structure's not, though. Likely built sometime in the last couple of hundred years, though whoever built it used much older stones in the construction. Probably brought them from somewhere else, though some may be from an earlier structure built on the spot.” He smiled at Roger. “Folk are thrifty in the Highlands; last week I saw a barn with an ancient Pictish stone used in the foundation and a floor made with bricks from a demolished public lavatory in Dornoch.”

Callahan looked out to the west, shading his eyes, where the haze now hung low over the distant shore.

“High places,” he said, matter-of-factly. “They always chose the high places, the old ones. Whether it was a fort or a place of worship, they always went up.”

“The old ones?” Roger asked, and felt a brief prickle of the hair on his nape. “Which old ones?”

Callahan laughed, shaking his head.

“Don't know. Picts, maybe—all we know about them is the bits of stonework they left here and there—or the folk who came before them. Sometimes you see a bit of something that you know was made—or at least placed—by men, but can't fit it into a known culture. The megaliths, for instance—the standing stones. Nobody knows who set those up or what for."

"Don't they," Roger murmured. "Can you tell what sort of ancient site this was? For war or worship, I mean?"

Callahan shook his head.

"Not from what's apparent on the surface, no. Maybe if we excavated the underlying site—but to be honest, I don't see anything that would make anyone really want to do that. There are hundreds of sites like this on high places, all through the British Isles and Brittany, too—old Celtic, many of them, Iron Age, lots much older." He picked up the battered saint's head, stroking it with a sort of affection.

"This lady's much more recent; maybe the thirteenth, fourteenth century. Maybe the family's patron saint, handed down over the years." He gave the head a brief, unself-conscious kiss and handed it gently to Roger.

"For what it's worth, though—and this isn't scientific, just what I think myself, having seen more than a few such places—if the modern structure was a chapel, then the ancient site beneath it was likely a place of worship, too. Folk in the Highlands are set in their ways. They may build a new barn every two or three hundred years—but chances are it'll be right where the last one stood."

Roger laughed.

"True enough. Our barn's still the original one—built in the early 1700s, along with the house. But I found the stones of an earlier croft buried when I dug up the stable floor to put in a new drain."

"The 1700s? Well, you'll not be needing a new roof for at least another hundred years, then."

It was nearly six but still full daylight. The haze had vanished in that mysterious way it sometimes did, and a pale sun had come out. Roger traced a small cross with his thumb on the statue's forehead and set the head gently in the niche that seemed made for it. They'd finished, but neither man made a move to leave just yet. There was a sense of comfort in each other's company, a sharing of the spell of the high place.

Down below, he saw Rob Cameron's battered truck parked in the dooryard and Rob himself sitting on the back stoop, Mandy, Jem, and Jem's friends leaning in on either side of him, evidently absorbed in the pages he held. What the devil was he doing?

"Is that singing I hear?" Callahan, who had been looking off to the north, turned half round, and as he did so, Roger heard it, too. Faint and sweet, no more than a thread of sound, but enough to pick up the tune of "Crimond."

The strength of the stab of jealousy that went through him took his breath, and he felt his throat close as though some strong hand choked him.

Jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire.

He closed his eyes for an instant, breathing slow and deep, and with a little effort, dredged up the first bit of that quotation: *Love is strong as death*.

He felt the choking sensation begin to ease and reason return. Of course Rob Cameron could sing; he was in the men's choir. Only make sense that if he saw the rudimentary musical settings Roger had noted for some of the old songs, he'd try to sing them. And kids—especially his kids—were attracted to music.

"Have you known Rob for long, then?" he asked, and was pleased to hear his voice sound normal.

"Oh, Rob?" Callahan considered. "Fifteen years, maybe … No, I tell a lie, more like twenty. He came along as a volunteer on a dig I had going on Shapinsay—that's one of the Orkneys—and he wasn't but a lad then, in his late teens, maybe." He gave Roger a mild, shrewd look. "Why?"

Roger shrugged.

"He works with my wife, for the Hydro Board. I don't know him much myself. Only met him recently, in lodge."

"Ah." Callahan watched the scene below for a moment, silent, then said, not looking at Roger, "He was married, to a French girl. Wife divorced him a couple of years ago, took their son back to France. He's not been happy."

"Ah." That explained Rob's attachment to his widowed sister's family, then, and his enjoyment of Jem and Mandy's company. He breathed once more, freely, and the small flame of jealousy flickered out.

As though this brief exchange had put a period to the day, they picked up the leavings from their lunch and Callahan's rucksack and came down the hill, companionable in silence.

* * *

"What's this?" There were two wineglasses set on the counter. "Are we celebrating something?"

"We are," Bree said firmly. "The children going to bed, for one thing."

"Oh, bad, were they?" He felt a small twinge of guilt—not very severe—for having spent the afternoon in the high, cool peace of the ruined chapel with Callahan rather than chivvying small mad things out of the kailyard.

"Just really energetic." She cast a suspicious glance toward the door to the hall, through which the muted roar of a television came from the big front parlor. "I *hope* they'll be too worn out to spend the night jumping on the beds. They've had enough pizza to put six grown men into a coma for a week."

He laughed at that—he'd eaten most of a full-sized pepperoni himself and was beginning to feel comfortably stuporous.

"What else?"

"Oh, what else are we celebrating?" She gave him a cat-in-the-cream look. "Well, as for me …"

"Yes?" he said, obliging.

"I've passed the provisional employment period; now I'm permanent, and they can't get rid of me, even if I wear perfume to work. And *you,*" she added, reaching into the drawer and placing an envelope in front of him, "are formally invited by the school board to do a reprise of your *Gàidhlig* triumph at five different schools next month!"

He felt a moment's shock, then a warm flood of something he couldn't quite identify, and realized with a greater shock that he was blushing.

“Really?”

“You don’t think I’d tease you about something like that?” Not waiting for an answer, she poured the wine, purple-rich and aromatic, and handed him a glass. He clinked it ceremoniously against her own.

“Here’s tae us. Wha’s like us?”

“Damned few,” she replied in broad Scots, “and they’re all deid.”

* * *

There was a certain amount of crashing upstairs after the children were sent to bed, but a brief appearance by Roger in the persona of Heavy Father put a stop to that, and the slumber party simmered down into storytelling and stifled giggles.

“Are they telling dirty jokes?” Bree asked, when he came back down.

“Very likely. Ought I make Mandy come down, do you think?”

She shook her head.

“She’s probably asleep already. And if not, the sort of jokes nine-year-old boys tell won’t warp her. She isn’t old enough to remember the punch lines.”

“That’s true.” Roger took up his refilled glass and sipped, the wine soft on his tongue and dense with the scents of black currant and black tea. “How old was Jem when he finally learned to tell jokes? You remember how he got the form of jokes but didn’t really understand the idea of content?”

“What’s the difference between a … a … a button and a sock?” she mimicked, catching Jem’s breathless excitement to a T. “A … BUFFALO! HAHAHAHAHA!”

Roger burst out laughing.

“Why are you laughing?” she demanded. Her eyes were growing heavy-lidded, and her lips were stained dark.

“Must be the way you tell it,” he said, and lifted his glass to her. “Cheers.”

“Slàinte.”

He closed his eyes, breathing the wine as much as drinking it. He was beginning to have the pleasant illusion that he could feel the heat of his wife's body, though she sat a few feet away. She seemed to emanate warmth, in slow, pulsing waves.

"What do they call it, how you find distant stars?"

"A telescope," she said. "You can't be drunk on half a bottle of wine, good as it is."

"No, that's not what I mean. There's a term for it—heat signature? Does that sound right?"

She closed one eye, considering, then shrugged.

"Maybe. Why?"

"You've got one."

She looked down at herself, squinting.

"Nope. Two. Definitely two."

He *wasn't* quite drunk, and neither was she, but whatever they were was a lot of fun.

"A heat signature," he said, and, reaching out, took hold of her hand. It was markedly warmer than his, and he was positive he could feel the heat of her fingers throb slowly, increasing and diminishing with her pulse. "I could pick you out of a crowd blindfolded; you glow in the dark."

She put aside her glass and slid out of her chair, coming to a stop kneeling between his knees, her body not quite touching his. She *did glow*. If he closed his eyes, he could just about see it through the white shirt she wore.

He tipped up his glass and drained it.

"Great wine. Where did ye get it?"

"I didn't. Rob brought it—a thank-you, he said, for letting him copy the songs."

"Nice guy," he said generously. At the moment, he actually thought so.

Brianna reached for the wine bottle and poured the last of it into Roger's glass. Then she sat back on her heels and looked at him owl-eyed, the empty bottle clutched to her chest.

"Hey. You owe me."

"Big-time," he assured her gravely, making her giggle.

"No," she said, recovering. "You said if I brought my hard hat home, you'd tell me what you were doing with that champagne bottle. All that hooting, I mean."

"Ah." He considered for a moment—there was a distinct possibility she'd hit him with the wine bottle if he told her, but then, a bargain was a bargain, after all—and the vision of her naked save for the hard hat, radiating heat in all directions, was enough to make a man cast caution to the winds.

"I was trying to see if I could get the exact pitch of the sounds ye make when we're making love and you're just about to … er … to … it's something between a growl and a really deep hum."

Her mouth opened slightly, and her eyes slightly more. The tip of her tongue was a dark, dark red.

"I think it's the F below middle C," he concluded hurriedly. She blinked.

"You're kidding."

"I am not." He picked up his half-full glass and tilted it gently, so the rim touched her lip. She closed her eyes and drank, slowly. He smoothed her hair behind her ear, his finger moving slowly down the length of her neck, watching her throat move as she swallowed, moved his fingertip along the strong arch of her collarbone.

"You're getting warmer," she whispered, not opening her eyes. "The second law of thermodynamics."

"What's that?" he said, his voice dropping, too.

"The entropy of an isolated system that is not in equilibrium tends to increase, reaching a maximum at equilibrium."

"Oh, aye?"

"Mmm-hmm. That's why a warm body loses heat to a colder one, until they're the same temperature."

"I knew there had to be a reason why that happened." All sounds from upstairs had ceased, and his voice sounded loud, even though he was whispering.

Her eyes opened suddenly, an inch from his, and her black-currant breath on his cheek was as warm as his skin. The bottle hit the parlor carpet with a soft thud.

“Want to try for E flat?”

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HENRY

June 14, 1777

He had forbidden Dottie to accompany him. He wasn't sure what he might find. In the event, though, he was surprised. The address to which he had been directed was in a modest street in Germantown, but the house was commodious and well kept, though not large.

He knocked at the door and was greeted by a pleasant-faced young African woman in neat calico, whose eyes widened at sight of him. He had thought best not to wear his uniform, though there were men in British uniform here and there in the streets—paroled prisoners, perhaps, or soldiers bearing official communications. Instead, he had put on a good suit of bottle-green, with his best waistcoat, this being gold China silk, embroidered with a number of fanciful butterflies. He smiled, and the woman smiled in turn and put a hand over her mouth to hide it.

"May I help you, sir?"

"Is your master at home?"

She laughed. Softly, and with real amusement.

"Bless you, sir, I have no master. The house is mine."

He blinked, disconcerted.

"Perhaps I have been misdirected. I am in search of a British soldier, Captain Viscount Asher—Henry Grey is his name. A British prisoner of war?"

She lowered her hand and stared at him, eyes wide. Then her smile returned, broad enough to show two gold-stuffed teeth at the back.

“Henry! Well, why didn’t you say so, sir? Come in, come in!”

And before he could put down his stick, he was whisked inside, up a narrow staircase, and into a neat small bedroom, where he discovered his nephew Henry, sprawled on his back and naked from the waist up, with a small, beaky-looking man in black poking at his belly—this crisscrossed with a number of violent-looking scars.

“I beg your pardon?” He peered over the beaky man’s shoulder and waved gingerly. “How do you do, Henry?”

Henry, whose eyes had been fastened on the ceiling in a tense sort of way, glanced at him, away, back, then sat up abruptly, this movement resulting in an exclamation of protest from the little beaky person and a cry of pain from Henry.

“Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God.” Henry doubled over, arms clutching his belly and his face clenched in pain. Grey seized him by the shoulders, seeking to ease him back.

“Henry, my dear. Do forgive me. I didn’t mean—”

“And who are you, sir?” the beaky man cried angrily, springing to his feet and facing Grey with clenched fists.

“I am his uncle,” Grey informed him shortly. “Who are you, sir? A doctor?”

The little man drew himself up with dignity.

“Why, no, sir. I am a dowser. Joseph Hunnicutt, sir, professional dowser.”

Henry was still bent double, gasping, but seemed to be getting a little of his breath back. Grey touched his bare back gently. The flesh was warm, a little sweaty, but didn’t seem fevered.

“I am sorry, Henry,” he said. “Will you survive, do you think?”

Henry, to his credit, managed a breathless grunt of laughter.

“It’ll do,” he got out. “Just … it takes … a minute.”

The pleasant-faced black woman was hovering at the door, a sharp eye on Grey.

“This man says he’s your uncle, Henry. Is that so?”

Henry nodded, panting a little. “Lord John … Grey. May I pre … sent Mrs. Mercy Wood … cock?”

Grey bowed punctiliously, feeling slightly ridiculous.

“Your servant, madam. And yours, Mr. Hunnicutt,” he added politely, bowing again.

“Might I ask,” he said, straightening up, “*why* there is a dowser poking you in the abdomen, Henry?”

“Why, to find the bit o’ metal what’s a-troubling the poor young man, o’ course,” said Mr. Hunnicutt, looking up his long nose—for he was shorter than Grey by several inches.

“I called for him, sir—your lordship, I mean.” Mrs. Woodcock had come into the room by this time, and was looking at him with a faint air of apology. “It’s only that the surgeons hadn’t any luck, and I was so afraid that they’d kill him next time.”

Henry had by now managed to unbend. Grey eased him slowly back until he lay against the pillow, pale and sweating.

“I couldn’t bear it again,” he said, closing his eyes briefly. “I can’t.”

With Henry’s stomach exposed to view and an opportunity to examine it at leisure, Grey could see the puckered scars of two bullet wounds and the longer, clean-edged scars made by a surgeon digging for metal. Three of them. Grey had five such scars himself, crisscrossing the left side of his chest, and he touched his nephew’s hand in sympathy.

“Is it truly necessary to remove the ball—or balls?” he asked, looking up at Mrs. Woodcock. “If he has survived so far, perhaps the ball is lodged in a place where—”

But Mrs. Woodcock shook her head decidedly.

“He can’t eat,” she said bluntly. “He can’t swallow a thing but soup, and none so much of that. He wasn’t but skin and bones when they brought him to me,” she said, gesturing at Henry. “And you can see, he’s not that much more now.”

He wasn’t. Henry took after his mother rather than Hal, being normally ruddy-cheeked and of a rather stocky build. There was no evidence of either trait at the moment; every rib showed plain, his belly was so sunken that the points of his hip bones poked up sharp through the linen sheet, and his face was approximately the same hue as said sheet, bar deep violet circles under the eyes.

“I see,” Grey said slowly. He glanced at Mr. Hunnicutt. “Have you managed to locate anything?”

“Well, I have,” the dowser said, and, leaning over Henry’s body, laid a long, thin finger gently on the young man’s belly. “One, at least. T’other, I’m not so sure of, just yet.”

“I told you, Mercy, it’s no good.” Henry’s eyes were still closed, but his hand rose a little and Mrs. Woodcock took it, with a naturalness that made Grey blink. “Even if he was sure—I can’t do it again. I’d rather die.” Weak as he was, he spoke with an absolute conviction, and Grey recognized the family stubbornness.

Mrs. Woodcock’s pretty face was creased in a worried frown. She seemed to feel Grey’s eyes upon her, for she looked briefly up at him. He didn’t change expression, and she lifted her chin a little, meeting his eyes with something not far from fierceness, still holding Henry’s hand.

Oh, like that, is it? Grey thought. *Well, well.*

He coughed, and Henry opened his eyes.

“Be that as it may, Henry,” he said, “you will oblige me by not dying before I can bring your sister to bid you farewell.”

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RESERVATIONS

July 1, 1777

The Indians worried him. General Burgoyne found them enchanting. But General Burgoyne wrote plays.

It is not, William wrote slowly in the letter to his father that he was composing, struggling to find form in words for his reservations, *that I think him a fantasist or suspect that he does not appreciate the essential nature of the Indians he deals with. He appreciates it very much. But I remember talking with Mr. Garrick once in London, and his reference to the playwright as a little god who directs the actions of his creations, exerting absolute control upon them. Mrs. Cowley argued with this, saying that it is delusion to assume that the creator controls his creations and that an attempt to exert such control while ignoring the true nature of those creations is doomed to failure*.

He stopped, biting his quill, feeling that he had come close to the heart of the matter but perhaps not quite reached it.

I think General Burgoyne does not quite apprehend the independence of mind and purpose that … No, that wasn't quite it. He drew a line through the sentence and dipped his quill for a fresh try. He turned a phrase over in his mind, rejected it, did the same with another, and at last abandoned the search for eloquence in favor of a simple unburdening of his mind. It was late, he'd walked nearly twenty miles in the course of the day, and he was sleepy.

He believes he can use the Indians as a tool, and I think he is wrong. He stared at the sentence for a bit, shook his head at its bluntness, but could think of nothing better and could waste no more time on the effort; the stub of his candle had almost burned out. Comforting himself with the idea that, after all, his father knew Indians—and probably General Burgoyne—much better than he did, he briskly signed, sanded, blotted, and sealed the letter, then fell into his bed and a dreamless sleep.

The sense of uneasiness regarding the Indians remained with him, though. He had no dislike of Indians; in fact, he enjoyed their company, and hunted now and again with some of them, or shared a companionable evening drinking beer and telling stories round their fires.

"The thing is," he said to Balcarres one evening, as they walked back from a particularly bibulous dinner that the general had held for his staff officers, "they don't read the Bible."

"Who don't? Hold up." Major Alexander Lindsay, Sixth Earl of Balcarres, put out a hand to ward off a passing tree and, clutching it one-handed to keep his balance, groped for his flies.

"Indians."

It was dark, but Sandy turned his head and William could just about see one eye shut slowly in the effort to fix the other on him. There had been a great deal of wine with dinner, and a number of ladies present, which added to the conviviality.

Balcarres concentrated on his pissing, then exhaled with relief and closed both eyes.

"No," he said. "They mostly don't." He seemed content to leave the matter there, but it had occurred to William—himself a little less organized in thought than usual—that perhaps he had failed to express himself completely.

"I mean," he said, swaying just a little as a gust of wind boomed down through the trees, "the centurion. You know, he says go and the fellow goeth. You tell an Indian go and maybe he goeth and maybe he damned well goeth not, depending how the prospect strikes him."

Balcarres was now concentrating on the effort of doing up his flies and didn't answer.

"I mean," William amplified, "they don't take orders."

“Oh. No. They don’t.”

“You give your Indians orders, though?” He’d meant to make it a statement, but it didn’t quite come out that way. Balcarres led a regiment of light infantry but also kept a large group of rangers, many of them Indians; he not infrequently dressed like one himself.

“But then, you’re a Scot.”

Balcarres had succeeded in doing up his flies and now stood in the center of the path, squinting at William.

“You’re drunk, Willie.” This was said with no tone of accusation; more with the pleased sense of one who has made a useful deduction.

“Yes. But I’ll be sober in the morning and you’ll *still* be a Scot.” This struck them both as hilarious and they staggered some distance together, repeating the jest at intervals and bumping into each other. By simple chance, they stumbled upon William’s tent first, and he invited Balcarres to join him in a glass of negus before bed.

“Sett … les the stomach,” he said, narrowly avoiding falling headfirst into his campaign chest as he groped for cups and bottles. “Makes you sleep better.”

Balcarres had succeeded in lighting the candle and sat holding it, blinking owl-eyed in its glow. He sipped the negus William handed to him carefully, eyes closed as though to savor it, then suddenly opened them.

“What’s being a Scot have to do with reading the Bible?” he demanded, this remark having evidently returned suddenly to his cognizance. “You calling me a heathen? My grandmother’s Scots and she reads the Bible all the time. I’ve read it myself. Bits of it,” he added, and gulped the rest of his glass.

William frowned, trying to remember what on earth …

“Oh,” he said. “Not the Bible. Indians. Stubborn buggers. Don’t goeth. Scots don’t goeth either when you tell them, or not all the time. I thought maybe that was why. Why they listen to you,” he added as an afterthought. “Your Indians.”

Balcarres thought that funny, too, but when he had at length stopped laughing, he shook his head slowly to and fro.

“It’s … you know a horse?”

“I know a lot of horses. Which one?”

Balcarres spit a small quantity of negus down his chin, but wiped it away.

“A horse,” he repeated, drying his hand on his breeches. “You can’t make a horse do anything. You see what he’s going to do and then you tell him to do that, and he thinks it’s your idea, so next time you tell him something, he’s more likely to do what you tell him.”

“Oh.” William considered this carefully. “Yes.” They drank for a bit in silence, mulling over this profundity. At last Balcarres looked up from a long contemplation of his glass.

“Who do you think has better tits?” he asked seriously. “Mrs. Lind or the baroness?”

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EXODUS

Fort Ticonderoga
June 27, 1777

Mrs. Raven was beginning to worry me. I found her waiting outside the barracks at dawn, looking as though she had slept in her clothes, eyes hollow but gleaming with intensity. She clung to me, close on my heels through the day, talking constantly, and her conversation, usually focused at least nominally on the patients we were seeing and the inescapable logistics of daily life in a fort, began to deviate from the narrow confines of the present.

At first, it was no more than an occasional reminiscence of her early married life in Boston; her first husband had been a fisherman, and she had kept two goats whose milk she sold in the streets. I didn't mind hearing about the goats, named Patsy and Petunia; I had known a few memorable goats myself, noticeably a billy goat named Hiram, whose broken leg I had set.

It wasn't that I was uninterested in her randomly dropped remarks about her first husband; they were, if anything, too interesting. The late Mr. Evans appeared to have been a violent drunkard on shore—which was far from unusual—with a penchant for cutting off the ears or noses of people who displeased him, which was a trifle more individualistic.

"He nailed the ears to the lintel of my goat shed," she said, in the tone one might use to describe one's breakfast. "Up high, so the goats couldn’t get at them. They shrivel up in the sun, you know, like dried mushrooms.”

“Ah,” I said. I thought of remarking that smoking a severed ear prevented that little problem, but thought better of it. I didn’t know whether Ian was still carrying a lawyer’s ear in his sporran, but I was reasonably sure he wouldn’t welcome Mrs. Raven’s eager interest in it, if so. Both he and Jamie made off when they saw her coming, as though she had the plague.

“They say the Indians cut pieces off their captives,” she said, her voice going low, as one imparting a secret. “The fingers first, one joint at a time.”

“How very revolting,” I said. “Do please go to the dispensary and get me a bag of fresh lint, would you?”

She went off obediently—she always did—but I thought I heard her talking to herself under her breath as she did so. As the days crept on and tension mounted in the fort, I became convinced of it.

Her conversational swings were getting wider—and wilder. Now she ranged from the distant past of her idealized childhood in Maryland to an equally distant future—a rather grisly one, in which we had all been either killed by the British army or captured by Indians, with consequences ranging from rape to dismemberment—these procedures often accomplished simultaneously, though I told her that most men had neither the necessary concentration nor yet the coordination for it. She was still capable of focusing on something directly in front of her, but not for long.

“Could you speak to her husband, do you think?” I asked Jamie, who had just come in at sunset to tell me that he’d seen her trudging in circles round and round the big cistern near the parade ground, counting under her breath.

“D’ye think he hasn’t noticed that his wife’s going mad?” he replied. “If he hasn’t, I think he’ll no appreciate being told. And if he has,” he added logically, “what d’ye expect him to do about it?”

There was in fact not much anyone could do about it, bar keep an eye on her and try to soothe her more vivid fancies—or at least keep her from talking about them to the more impressionable patients.

As the days went on, though, Mrs. Raven's eccentricities seemed not much more pronounced than the anxieties of most of the fort's inhabitants, particularly the women, who could do nothing but tend their children, wash the laundry—under heavy guard on the lakeshore, or in small mobs round the steaming cauldrons—and wait.

The woods were not safe; a few days before, two picket guards had been found no more than a mile from the fort, murdered and scalped. This grisly discovery had had the worst effect on Mrs. Raven, but I couldn't say that it did much for my own fortitude. I couldn't look out from the batteries with my earlier sense of pleasure in the endless miles of thick green; the very vigor of the forest itself seemed a threat now. I still wanted clean linen, but my skin tingled and crept whenever I left the fort.

"Thirteen days," I said, running a thumb down the doorpost of our sanctum. Jamie had, with no comment, cut a notch for each day of the enlistment period, slashing through each notch when he came to bed at night. "Did you notch the posts when you were in prison?"

"Not in Fort William or the Bastille," he said, considering. "Ardsmuir … aye, we did then. There wasna any sentence to keep track of, but … ye lose so much, so fast. It seemed important to keep a hold on something, even if it was only the day of the week."

He came to stand beside me, looking at the doorpost and its long line of neat notches.

"I think I might have been tempted to run," he said, very quietly. "If it weren't for Ian being gone."

It wasn't anything I hadn't thought—or been aware of him thinking. It was becoming more obvious by the second that the fort couldn't stand attack by the size of the force that was—indubitably—on its way. Scouts were coming in more frequently with reports on Burgoyne's army, and while they were whisked instantly into the commandant's office and just as hastily trundled out of the fort again, everyone knew within an hour what news they had brought—precious little so far, but that little, alarming. And yet Arthur St. Clair could not bring himself to order the evacuation of the fort.

“A blot on his record,” Jamie said, with an evenness that betrayed his anger. “He canna bear to have it said that he lost Ticonderoga.”

“But he will lose it,” I said. “He must, mustn’t he?”

“He will. But if he fights and loses it, that’s one thing. To fight and lose it to a superior force is honorable. To abandon it to the enemy without a fight? He canna reconcile himself to it. Though he’s no a wicked man,” he added thoughtfully. “I’ll talk to him again. We all will.”

“All” being the militia officers, who could afford to be outspoken. A number of the regular army officers shared the militia’s feelings, but discipline prevented most of them from speaking bluntly to St. Clair.

I didn’t think Arthur St. Clair was a wicked man, either—nor yet a stupid one. He knew—must know—what the cost of fighting would be. Or the cost of surrender.

“He’s waiting for Whitcomb, ken,” Jamie said conversationally. “Hoping he’ll tell him Burgoyne hasna got any artillery to speak of.” The fort could indeed hold out against standard siege tactics; forage and provisions had been coming in from the surrounding countryside in abundance, and Ticonderoga still had some artillery defenses and the small wooden fort on Mount Independence, as well as a substantial garrison decently supplied with muskets and powder. It could not hold out against major artillery placed on Mount Defiance, though. Jamie had been up there, and told me that the entire interior of the fort was visible—and thus subject to enfiladement at the enemy’s discretion.

“He can’t really think that, surely?”

“No, but until he knows for sure, he hasna got to make up his mind for sure, either. And none of the scouts has yet brought him anything certain.”

I sighed and pressed a hand to my bosom, blotting a tickle of sweat.

“I can’t sleep in there,” I said abruptly. “It’s like sleeping in hell.”

That took him by surprise and made him laugh.

“All right for you,” I said, rather cross. “You get to go sleep under canvas tomorrow.” Half the garrison was being moved to tents outside the fort, the better to be out and maneuverable, ready in case of Burgoyne’s approach.

The British were coming; how close they were, how many men they had, and how well armed they were was unknown.

Benjamin Whitcomb had gone to find out. Whitcomb was a lanky, pockmarked man in his thirties, one of the men known as the Long Hunters, men who could—and did—spend weeks in the wilderness, living off the land. Such men were not sociable, having no use for civilization, but they were valuable. Whitcomb was the best of St. Clair’s scouts; he had taken five men to go and find Burgoyne’s main force. I hoped they would return before the enlistment period was up; Jamie wanted to be gone—so did I, badly—but plainly we couldn’t go without Ian.

Jamie moved abruptly, turning and going back into our room.

“What do you need?” He was digging in the small blanket chest that contained our few spare clothes and the other oddments we’d picked up since coming to the fort.

“My kilt. If I’m going to make representations to St. Clair, I’d best be formal about it.”

I helped him to dress and brushed and plaited his hair for him. He had no proper coat, but he had clean linen, at least, and his dirk, and even in shirtsleeves he looked impressive.

“I haven’t seen you in your kilt in weeks,” I said, admiring him. “I’m sure you’ll make an impression on the general, even without a pink sash.”

He smiled and kissed me.

“It’ll do no good,” he said, “but it wouldna be right not to try.”

I walked with him across the parade ground to St. Clair’s house. There were thunderheads rising out on the lake, charcoal black against the blazing sky, and I could smell ozone in the air. It seemed a suitable portent.

* * *

Soon. Everything said, *Soon.* The fragmentary reports and rumors that flew like pigeons through the fort, the closeness of the sultry air, the occasional boom of cannon in the distance, fired for practice—we hoped it was only practice—from the distant picket position called the Old French Lines.

Everyone was restless, unable to sleep in the heat unless drunk. I wasn't drunk, and I was restless. Jamie had been gone for more than two hours, and I wanted him. Not because I cared what St. Clair had had to say to the militia. But between heat and exhaustion, we hadn't made love in more than a week, and I was beginning to suspect that time was growing short. If we were obliged either to fight or to flee in the next few days, heaven only knew how long it might be before we had a private moment again.

I had been strolling round the parade ground, keeping an eye on St. Clair's house, and when at last I saw him come out, I made my way toward him, walking slowly to allow him to take leave of the other officers who had come out with him. They stood for a moment close together, the slump of shoulders and angry tilt of heads telling me that the effect of their protests had been exactly what Jamie had predicted.

He walked slowly away, hands behind him, head bent in thought. I came quietly alongside and tucked my hand into the crook of his elbow, and he looked down at me, surprised but smiling.

"Ye're out late, Sassenach. Is aught amiss?"

"Not at all," I said. "It just seemed like a nice evening for a walk in a garden."

"In a garden," he repeated, giving me a sideways glance.

"The commandant's garden, to be exact," I said, and touched the pocket of my apron. "I, um, have the key." There were a number of small gardens inside the fort, most of them practical plots meant for the production of vegetables. The formal garden behind the commandant's quarters had been designed by the French many years before, though, and while it had since been neglected and overrun by the seeds of airborne weeds, it had one rather interesting aspect—a high wall surrounding it, with a gate that locked. I'd thoughtfully abstracted the key earlier in the day from General St. Clair's cook, who had come to me for a throat wash. I would put it back when I called on him the next day to check his sore throat.

"Ah," said Jamie thoughtfully, and turned obligingly back toward the commandant's house.

The gate was round the back, out of view, and we slipped hastily down the alley that led past the garden wall, while the guard outside St. Clair's house was talking to a passerby. I closed the gate quietly behind us, locked it, and pocketed the key, then went to Jamie's arms.

He kissed me slowly, then raised his head, eyeing me.

"I might need a bit of help, mind."

"That can be arranged," I assured him. I laid a hand on his knee, where the kilt had folded up, exposing flesh. I moved a thumb lightly, liking the soft, wiry feel of the hairs on his leg. "Um … did you have any particular sort of help in mind?"

I could smell him in spite of his careful washing, the dried sweat of his labor on his skin spiced with dust and wood chips. He'd taste of it, too, sweet and salt and musk.

I slid my hand up his thigh beneath the kilt, feeling him shift and flex, the sudden groove of muscle smooth beneath my fingers. To my surprise, though, he stopped me, grasping my hand through the fabric.

"Thought you wanted help," I said.

"Touch yourself, *a nighean,"* he said softly.

That was a trifle disconcerting, particularly given that we were standing in an overgrown garden no more than twenty feet from an alleyway much patronized by militiamen looking for a place to get quietly drunk. Still … I leaned back against the wall and obligingly pulled the shift above my knee. I held it there, gently stroking the skin of my inner thigh—which was, in fact, very soft. I drew the other hand up the line of my stays, to the top, where my breasts swelled out against the thin, damp cotton.

His eyes were heavy; he was still half drunk with fatigue but becoming more alert by the moment. He made a small interrogative sound.

"Ever hear the one about sauce for the gander?" I said, twiddling thoughtfully with the string that held the neckline of my shift.

“What?” That had brought him out of the haze; he was starkly awake, bloodshot eyes wide open.

“You heard me.”

“Ye want me to … to—”

“I do.”

“I couldna do that! In front of you?”

“If I can do it in front of *you*, you can certainly return the favor. Of course, if you’d rather I stopped …” I let my hand fall—slowly—from the string. Paused, thumb very lightly ticking to and fro, to and fro, over my breast like the hand of a metronome. I could feel my nipple, round and hard as a musket ball; it must be visible through the fabric, even in this light.

He swallowed; I heard it.

I smiled and let my hand fall farther, taking hold of the hem of my skirt. And paused, one eyebrow raised.

As though hypnotized, he reached down and took hold of the hem of his kilt.

“That’s a good lad,” I murmured, leaning back on one hand. I raised one knee and set my foot on the wall, letting the skirt fall away, baring my thigh. Reached down.

He said something under his breath in Gaelic. I couldn’t tell if it was an observation on the imminent prospect before him or whether he was commending his soul to God. In either case, he lifted his kilt.

“What do you mean, you need help?” I asked, eyeing him.

He made a small, urgent noise indicating that I should continue, so I did.

“What are you thinking?” I asked after a moment, fascinated.

“I’m not thinking.”

“Yes, you are; I can see it on your face.”

“Ye don’t want to know.” Sweat was beginning to gleam across his cheekbones, and his eyes had gone to slits.

“Oh, yes, I do—oh, wait. If you’re thinking about someone other than me, I *don’t want* to know.”

He opened his eyes at that, and fixed me with a look that ran straight up between my quivering legs. He didn’t stop.

“Oh,” I said, a little breathless myself. “Well … when you can talk again, I *do* want to know, then.”

He went on looking at me, with a gaze that now struck me as markedly akin to that of a wolf eyeing a fat sheep. I shifted a little against the wall and waved away a cloud of gnats. He was breathing fast, and I could smell his sweat, musky and acrid.

“You,” he said, and I saw his throat move as he swallowed. He crooked the index finger of his free hand at me.

“Come here.”

“I—”

“Now.”

Mesmerized, I slid away from the wall and took two steps toward him. Before I could say or do anything else, there was a flurry of kilt and a large, hot hand was gripping me by the scruff of the neck. Then I was lying on my back in long grass and wild tobacco, Jamie solidly inside me, and the hand was over my mouth—a good thing, I realized dimly, as there were voices coming toward us along the alley on the other side of the garden wall.

“Play wi’ fire and ye may get singed, Sassenach,” he whispered in my ear. He had me pinned like a butterfly and, with a solid grip on my wrists, kept me from moving, even though I was jerking and writhing under him, slippery and desperate. Very slowly, he lowered himself so his full weight rested on me.

“Ye want to know what I was thinking, do ye?” he murmured in my ear.

“Mmp!”

“Well, I’ll tell ye, *a nighean*, but—” He paused in order to lick my earlobe.

“NNG!”

The hand tightened warningly over my mouth. The voices were near enough to make out words now: a small party of young militiamen, half drunk and in search of whores. Jamie’s teeth closed delicately on my ear, and he began to nibble thoughtfully, his breath warm and tickling. I wriggled madly, but he wasn’t budging.

He gave the same thorough treatment to the other ear before the men had moved out of earshot, then kissed the end of my nose, taking his hand off my mouth at last.

"Ah. Now, where was I? Oh, aye—ye wanted to hear what I was thinking of."

"I've changed my mind." I was panting shallowly, as much from the weight on my chest as from desire. Both were considerable.

He made a Scottish noise indicating deep amusement and tightened his grip on my wrists.

"You started it, Sassenach—but I'll finish it." Whereupon he put his lips to my wet ear and told me in a slow whisper *exactly* what he'd been thinking. Not moving an inch while he did so, save to put his hand back over my mouth when I began to call him names.

Every muscle in my body was jumping like a snapped rubber band when he finally moved. In one sudden motion, he raised himself and slid back, then forward hard.

When I could see and hear again, I realized that he was laughing, still balanced above me.

"Put ye out of your misery, did I, Sassenach?"

"You …" I croaked. Words failed me, but two could play at this game. He hadn't moved, in part to torture me—but in equal part because he couldn't; not without ending it at once. I flexed my soft, slick muscles once around him, slowly, gently—then did it three times, fast. He made a gratifying noise and lost it, jerking and groaning, the pulse of it exciting an echo in my own flesh. Very slowly, he lowered himself, sighing like a deflated bladder, and lay beside me, breathing slowly, eyes closed.

"Now you can sleep," I said, stroking his hair. He smiled without opening his eyes, breathed deep, and his body relaxed, settling into the earth.

"And next time, you bloody Scot," I whispered in his ear, "I'll tell you what *I* was thinking."

"Oh, God," he said, and laughed without making a sound. "D'ye remember the first time I kissed ye, Sassenach?"

I lay there for some time, feeling the bloom of sweat on my skin and the reassuring weight of him curled asleep in the grass beside me, before I finally remembered.

"I said I was a virgin, not a monk. If I find I need help … I'll ask."

* * *

Ian Murray woke from a deep and dreamless sleep to the sound of a bugle. Rollo, lying close beside him, lurched upright with a startled, deep *WOOF!*, and glared round for the threat, hackles raised.

Ian scrambled up, as well, one hand on his knife, the other on the dog.

“Hush,” he said under his breath, and the dog relaxed fractionally, though he kept up a low, rolling growl, just below the range of human hearing—Ian felt it, a constant vibration in the huge body under his hand.

Now he was awake, he heard them easily. A subterranean stirring through the wood, as submerged—but quite as vibrant—as Rollo’s growl. A very large body of men, a camp, beginning to wake at no very great distance. How had he managed not to perceive them the night before? He sniffed, but the wind was wrong; he picked up no scent of smoke—though now he *saw* smoke, thin threads of it rising against the pale dawn sky. A lot of campfires. A very big camp.

He had been rolling up his blanket as he listened. There was nothing more to his own camp, and within seconds he had faded into the brush, blanket tied to his back and his rifle in hand, the dog huge and silent at his heel.

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THE BRITISH ARE COMING

Three Mile Point, New York Colony
July 3, 1777

The dark patch of sweat between Brigadier Fraser's broad shoulders had the shape of the Isle of Man on the map in the old schoolroom at home. Lieutenant Greenleaf's coat was entirely soaked with sweat, the body almost black, and only the faded sleeves showing red.

William's own coat was less faded—shamefully new and bright, in fact—but likewise clung to his back and shoulders, heavy with the humid exhalations of his body. His shirt was wringing; it had been stiff with salt when he put it on a few hours before, the constant sweating of the previous days' exertion crystallized in the linen, but the stiffness had washed away as the sun rose, borne on a flood of fresh sweat.

Looking up at the hill the brigadier proposed to climb, he had had some hope of coolness at the summit, but the exertion of the climb had canceled out any benefit of altitude. They had left camp just after dawn, the air then so delicious in its freshness that he'd longed to run naked through the woods like an Indian, catch fish from the lake, and eat a dozen of them for his breakfast, fried in cornmeal, fresh and hot.

This was Three Mile Point, so called because it was three miles south of the fort at Ticonderoga. The brigadier, leading the advance force, had staged his troops here and proposed to climb to a height with Lieutenant Greenleaf, an engineer, to survey the terrain before moving further.

William had been assigned to the brigadier a week earlier, to his pleasure. The brigadier was a friendly, sociable commander, but not in the same way as General Burgoyne. Though William would not have cared had the man been a tartar—he would be in the forward lines; that was all that mattered.

He was carrying some of the engineer's equipment, as well as a couple of canteens of water and the brigadier's dispatch box. He helped to set up the surveying tripod and obligingly held measuring rods at intervals, but at length it was done, everything recorded, and the brigadier, having conferred with Greenleaf at some length, sent the engineer back to camp.

The immediate business concluded, the brigadier seemed disinclined to descend at once, instead walking slowly about, appearing to enjoy the slight breeze, and then settling on a rock, uncorking his canteen with a sigh of pleasure.

"Sit, William," he said, motioning William to his own rock. They sat in silence for a bit, listening to the sounds of the forest.

"I know your father," the brigadier said suddenly, then smiled, a charming smile. "Everyone tells you that, I suppose."

"Well, yes, they do," William admitted. "Or if not him, my uncle."

General Fraser laughed. "A considerable burden of family history to be borne," he commiserated. "But I'm sure you bear it nobly."

William didn't know what to say and made a politely indeterminate noise in response. The brigadier laughed again and passed him the canteen. The water was so warm that he barely felt it pass down his throat, but it smelled fresh and he could feel it slake his thirst.

"We were together at the Plains of Abraham. Your father and I, I mean. Did he ever tell you about that night?"

"Not a great deal," William said, wondering if he was doomed to meet every soldier who had fought on that field with James Wolfe.

"We came down the river at night, you know. All of us petrified. Especially me." The brigadier looked out over the lake, shaking his head a little at the memory. “Such a river, the St. Lawrence. General Burgoyne mentioned that you had been in Canada. Did you see it?”

“Not a great deal, sir. I traveled overland for the most part on the way to Quebec, and then came down the Richelieu. My father told me about the St. Lawrence, though,” he felt obliged to add. “He said it was a noble river.”

“Did he tell you that I nearly broke his hand? He was next to me in the boat, and as I leaned out to call to the French sentry, hoping that my voice would not break, he gripped my hand to steady me. I felt his bones grinding, but under the circumstances didn’t really notice until I let go and heard him gasp.”

William saw the brigadier’s eyes drift to his own hands and the small ripple across his wide brow, not quite puzzlement but the look of someone trying unconsciously to fit memory to present circumstance. His father had long, slender, elegant hands with fine bones. William’s fingers were long, but his hands were vulgarly large, broad of palm and brute-knuckled.

“He—Lord John—he is my stepfather,” he blurted, then blushed painfully, embarrassed both by the admission and by whatever freak of mind had made him say it.

“Oh? Oh, yes,” the brigadier said vaguely. “Yes, of course.”

Had the brigadier thought he spoke from pride, pointing out the ancientness of his own bloodline?

The only comfort was that his face—the brigadier’s face, too—was so red from exertion that the blush could not show. The brigadier, as though responding to the thought of heat, struggled out of his coat, then unbuttoned his waistcoat and flapped it, nodding to William that he might do likewise—which he did, sighing with relief.

The conversation turned casually to other campaigns: those the brigadier had fought in, those William had (mostly) heard of. He became gradually aware that the brigadier was gauging him, weighing his experience and his manner. He was uncomfortably aware that the former was inglorious; was General Fraser aware of what had happened during the Battle of Long Island? Word did travel fast in the service.

Eventually, there was a pause in the conversation and they sat companionably in their shirtsleeves for a bit, listening to the soughing of the trees overhead. William wished to say something in his own defense but could think of no way to approach the matter gracefully. But if he did not speak, explain what had happened … well, there was no good explanation. He'd been a booby, that was all.

"General Howe speaks well of your intelligence and boldness, William," the brigadier said, as though continuing their earlier conversation, "though he said he thought you had not had opportunity as yet to show your talent for command."

"Ah … no, sir," William replied, sweating.

The brigadier smiled.

"Well, we must be sure to remedy that lack, must we not?" He stood up, groaning slightly as he stretched and shrugged his way back into his coat. "You'll dine with me later. We shall discuss it with Sir Francis."

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CONFLAGRATION

Fort Ticonderoga
July 1, 1777

Whitcomb had come back. With several British scalps, according to popular rumor. Having met Benjamin Whitcomb and one or two of the other Long Hunters, I was prepared to believe this. They spoke civilly enough, and they were far from the only men at the fort who dressed in rough leather and ragged homespun or whose skin shrank tight to raw bones. But they were the only men with the eyes of animals.

The next day, Jamie was called to the commandant's house and didn't come back until after dark.

A man was singing by one of the courtyard fires near St. Clair's quarters, and I was sitting on an empty salt-pork barrel listening, when I saw Jamie pass by on the far side of the fire, heading for our barracks. I rose quickly and caught him up.

"Come away," he said softly, and led me toward the commandant's garden. There was no echo of our last encounter in this garden, though I was terribly aware of his body, of the tension in it and the beating of his heart. Bad news, then.

"What's happened?" I asked, my voice low.

"Whitcomb caught a British regular and brought him in. He wouldna say anything, of course—but St. Clair was canny enough to put Andy Tracy in a cell with the man, saying he was accused of being a spy—that Tracy was a spy, I mean."

“That was bright,” I said with approval. Lieutenant Andrew Hodges Tracy was an Irishman, bluff and charming, a born liar—and if anyone could winkle information out of someone without the use of force, Tracy would have been my own first choice. “I take it he found out something?”

“He did. We also had in three British deserters—Germans. St. Clair wanted me to talk to them.”

Which he had. The information brought by the deserters might be suspect—save that it correlated with the information tricked from the captured British soldier. The solid information for which St. Clair had been waiting for the last three weeks.

General Carleton had remained in Canada with a small force; it was indeed General John Burgoyne, in charge of a large invasion army, who was heading toward the fort. He was reinforced by General von Riedesel, himself in command of seven Brunswick regiments, *plus* a light infantry battalion and four companies of dragoons. And his vanguard was less than four days’ march away.

“Not too good,” I observed, taking a deep breath.

“It is not,” he agreed. “Worse, Burgoyne has Simon Fraser as brigadier under him. He has the forward command.”

“A relative of yours?” That was a rhetorical question; no one with that name could possibly be anything else, and I saw the shadow of a smile cross Jamie’s face.

“He is,” he said dryly. “A second cousin, I think. And a verra bonny fighter.”

“Well, he would be, wouldn’t he? Is that the last of the bad news?”

He shook his head.

“Nay. The deserters said Burgoyne’s army is short of supplies. The dragoons are on foot, because they canna get fresh horses. Though I dinna ken whether they’ve eaten them or not.”

It was a hot, muggy night, but a shiver raised the hairs on my arms. I touched Jamie’s wrist and found the hairs there bristling, as well. *He’ll dream of Culloden tonight,* I thought abruptly. I dismissed that for the moment, though.

“I should think that would be good news. Why isn’t it?”

His wrist turned and his hand took mine, lacing our fingers tight together.

"Because they havena supplies enough to mount a siege. They'll need to overrun us and take us by force. And they verra likely can."

* * *

Three days later, the first British lookouts appeared on Mount Defiance.

* * *

The next day, anyone could see—and everyone *did* see—the beginnings of an artillery emplacement being built on Mount Defiance. Arthur St. Clair, bowing at last to the inevitable, gave word to begin the evacuation of Fort Ticonderoga.

Most of the garrison was to move to Mount Independence, taking with them all the most valuable supplies and ordnance. Some of the sheep and cattle must be slaughtered, the rest driven off into the woods. Some militia units were to leave through the woods and find the road to Hubbardton, where they would wait as reinforcements. Women, children, and invalids were to be dispatched down the lake by boat, with a light guard. It began in an orderly manner, with word sent out to bring everything that would float up to the lakeshore after dark, men collecting and checking their equipment, and orders sent out for the systematic destruction of everything that could not be carried away.

This was the usual procedure, to deny the enemy any use of supplies. In this instance, the matter was somewhat more pressing: the deserters had said that Burgoyne's army was running short of supplies already; denying him the facilities of Ticonderoga might bring him to a halt—or at least slow him down perceptibly, as his men would be obliged to forage and live off the country while they waited for supplies from Canada to follow him.

All of this—the packing, the loading, the slaughtering and livestock-driving, the destruction—must be accomplished clandestinely, under the very noses of the British. For if they saw that a retreat was imminent, they would fall on us like wolves, destroying the garrison as they left the safety of the fort.

Tremendous thunderheads boiled up over the lake in the afternoons, towering black things that rose miles high and full of lightning. Sometimes they broke after nightfall, pounding the lake, the mounts, the picket lines, and the fort with water that fell as though dumped from a bottomless bucket. Sometimes they only drifted past, grumbling and ominous.

Tonight the clouds were low and fierce, veined with lightning and blanketing the sky. Heat lightning throbbed through their bodies and crackled between them in bursts of sudden, silent conversation. And now and then a sudden fork shot blue-white and vivid to the ground with a crack of thunder that made everyone jump.

There was very little to pack. Just as well, as there was very little time in which to pack it. I could hear the flurry all through the barracks as I worked: people calling out in search of lost objects, mothers bellowing for lost children, and the shuffle and thunder of feet, steady as echoing rain in the wooden stairwells.

Outside, I could hear the agitated baaing of a number of sheep, disturbed at being turned out of their pens, and a sudden racket of shouting and mooing, as a panicked cow made a break for it. Not surprising; there was a strong smell of fresh blood in the air, from the slaughtering.

I had seen the garrison on parade, of course; I knew how many men there were. But to see three or four thousand people pushing and shoving, trying to accomplish unaccustomed tasks in a tearing hurry, was like watching a kicked-over anthill. I made my own way through the seething mass, clutching a flour sack with spare clothes, my few medical supplies, and a large chunk of ham I had acquired from a grateful patient, wrapped in my extra petticoat.

I would evacuate with the boat brigade, minding a group of invalids—but I didn’t mean to go without seeing Jamie.

My heart had been in my mouth for so long that I could barely speak. Not for the first time, I thought how convenient it was to have married a very tall man. It was always easy to pick Jamie out of a crowd, and I saw him within moments, standing on one of the demilune batteries. Some of his militiamen were with him, all looking downward. I assumed that the boat brigade must be forming below; that was heartening.

The prospect, once I reached the edge of the battery and could see, was considerably less heartening. The lakeshore below the fort looked like the return of a particularly disastrous fishing fleet. There *were* boats. All kinds of boats, from canoes and rowboats to dories and crude rafts. Some were dragged up onto the shore, others were evidently floating away, unmanned—I caught sight during a brief lightning flash of a few heads bobbing in the water as men and boys swam after them to fetch them back. There were few lights on the shore, for fear of giving away the plan of retreat, but here and there a torch burned, showing arguments and fistfights, and beyond the reach of torchlight, the ground seemed to heave and ripple in the dark, like a swarming carcass.

Jamie was shaking hands with Mr. Anderson, one of the *Teal*'s original hands, who had become his *de facto* corporal.

“Go with God,” he said. Mr. Anderson nodded and turned away, leading the small knot of militiamen. They passed me as I came up, and one or two nodded to me, their faces invisible in the shadow of their hats.

“Where are they going?” I asked Jamie.

“Toward Hubbardton,” he replied, his eyes still on the lakeshore below. “I told them it was their own choice, but I thought best they went sooner rather than later.” He lifted his chin toward the humped black shape of Mount Defiance, where the sparks of campfires glowed near the summit. “If they dinna ken what’s happening, it’s gross incompetence. Were I Simon Fraser, I should be on the march before first light.”

“You don’t mean to go with your men?” A spark of hope sprang up in my heart.

There was little light on the battery, only the reflected glow from the torches on the stairs and the bigger fires inside the fort. This was enough for me to see his face clearly, though, when he turned to look at me. It was somber, but there was an eagerness in the set of his mouth, and I recognized the look of a soldier ready to surge into action.

"No," he said. "I mean to go with you." He smiled suddenly, and I gripped his hand. "Ye dinna think I mean to leave ye to wander in the wilderness with a parcel o' diseased half-wits? Even if it does mean getting into a boat," he added with a touch of distaste.

I laughed despite myself.

"Not very kind," I said. "But not inaccurate, either, if you mean Mrs. Raven. You haven't seen her anywhere, have you?"

He shook his head. The wind had pulled half his hair loose from its thong, and he removed this now and placed it between his teeth, gathering up his hair in a heavy tail to rebind it.

Someone down the battery said something, sounding startled, and both Jamie and I jerked round to look. Mount Independence was on fire.

* * *

"Fire! fire!"

The screams brought people—already flustered and upset—rushing out of the barracks like coveys of flushed quail. The fire was just beneath the summit of Mount Independence, where General Fermoy had established an outpost with his men. A tongue of flame soared upward, steady as a candle taking breath. Then a gust of wind flattened it, and the flame squatted for a moment, as though someone had turned down the gas on a stove, before bursting out again in a much wider conflagration that lit up the mount, showing the tiny black shapes of what looked like hundreds of people in the act of striking tents and loading baggage, all silhouetted against the fire.

"It's Fermoy's quarters on fire," a soldier said beside me, disbelieving. "Isn't it?"

"It is," said Jamie on my other side, sounding grim. "And if we can see the retreat starting from here, Burgoyne's lookouts must surely see it, too."

And as simply as that, the rout began.

Had I ever doubted the existence of something like telepathy, this would have been enough to quell any reservations. The soldiers were already at breaking point from St. Clair's delay and the constant drum of rumors beating on stretched nerves. As the fire on Mount Independence spread, the conviction that the redcoats and the Indians would be upon us at once spread from mind to mind without the necessity for speech. Panic was loose, spreading its broad black wings over the fort, and the confusion at the water's edge was disintegrating into chaos before our eyes.

"Come, then," Jamie said. And before I knew it, I was being hustled down the narrow steps of the battery. A few wooden huts had been set on fire—these on purpose, to deprive the invaders of useful matériel—and the light from the flames lit up a scene from hell. Women dragging half-dressed children, screaming and trailing bedclothes, men throwing furniture from windows. A thunder mug crashed on the stones, sending shards of sharp pottery slicing across the legs of the people nearby.

A voice came breathless behind me. "A golden guinea says the silly French bugger set the house on fire himself."

"I'll gie ye nay odds on that one," Jamie replied briefly. "I only hope he went up with it."

A tremendous flash of lightning lit up the fort like day and screams rose from every part of it, only to be drowned almost instantly by the explosion of thunder. Predictably, half the people thought the wrath of God was about to be visited upon us—this, in spite of the fact that we had been having thunderstorms of similar ferocity for days, I thought crossly—while those of secular mind were still more panicked because the militia units on the outer lines were being lit up as they withdrew, in full sight of the British on Mount Defiance. Either way, it didn't help matters.

"I have to fetch my invalids!" I shouted into Jamie's ear. "You go and get the things from the barracks."

He shook his head. His flying loose hair was lit up by another lightning flash, and he looked like one of the principal demons himself.

"I'm no leaving you," he said, taking a firm clasp of my arm. "I might never find ye again."

"But—" My objection died as I looked. He was right. There were thousands of people running, pushing, or simply standing in place, too stunned to think what to do. If we were separated, he might *not* find me, and the thought of being alone in the woods below the fort—these infested with bloodthirsty Indians as well as redcoats—was not something I wanted to contemplate for more than ten seconds.

"Right," I said. "Come on, then."

The scene inside the hospital barracks was less frantic only because most of the patients were less capable of movement. They were, if anything, more agitated than the people outside, as they'd gleaned only the most fragmentary intelligence from people rushing in and out. Those with families were being dragged bodily from the building with barely enough time to seize their clothes; those without were in the spaces between cots, hopping on one foot to get into their breeches or staggering toward the door.

Captain Stebbings, of course, was not doing any of these things. He lay placidly on his cot, hands folded on his chest, observing the chaos with interest, a rush dip burning placidly on the wall above him.

"Mrs. Fraser!" He greeted me cheerfully. "I suppose I shall be a free man again shortly. Hope the army brings me some food; I think there's not much chance of supper here tonight."

"I suppose you will," I said, unable not to smile back at him. "You'll take care of the other British prisoners, will you? General St. Clair is leaving them behind."

He looked mildly offended at this.

"They're my men," he said.

"So they are." In fact, Guinea Dick, almost invisible against the stone wall in the dim light, was crouching beside the captain's bed, a stout walking stick in his hand—in order to fend off would-be looters, I supposed. Mr. Ormiston was sitting up on his own cot, pale-faced but excited, picking at the binding on his stump.

"They're really coming, are they, ma'am? The army?"

"Yes, they are. Now, you must take good care of your wound and keep it clean. It's healing well, but you mustn't put any strain at all on it for another month at least—and wait at least two months before you have a peg fitted. *Don't* let the army surgeons bleed you—you need all your strength."

He nodded, though I knew he'd be lining up for a fleam and a bleeding-bowl the moment a British surgeon showed up; he believed deeply in the virtues of being let blood and had been slightly mollified only by my having leeched his stump now and then.

I clasped his hand in farewell, and was turning to go when his own grip tightened.

"A moment, ma'am?" He let go my hand, fumbling at his neck, and withdrew something on a string. I could barely see it in the gloom, but he put it into my hand and I felt a metal disc, warm from his body.

"If happen you might see that boy Abram again, ma'am, I should take it kind if you'd give him that. That's my lucky piece, what I've carried for thirty-two years; you tell him it will keep him safe in time o' danger."

Jamie was looming up in the dark beside me, radiating impatience and agitation. He had a small group of invalids in tow, all clutching random possessions. I could hear Mrs. Raven's distinctive high-pitched voice in the distance, wailing. I thought she was calling my name. I ducked my head and put Mr. Ormiston's lucky piece around my neck.

"I'll tell him, Mr. Ormiston. Thank you."

* * *

Someone had set fire to Jeduthan Baldwin's elegant bridge. A pile of rubbish smoldered near one end, and I saw black devil shapes running to and fro along the span with chisels and pry bars, ripping up the planks and throwing them into the water.

Jamie shouldered a way through the mob, me behind him and our little band of women, children, and invalids scurrying at my heels like goslings, honking in agitation.

“Fraser! Colonel Fraser!” I turned at the shout, to see Jonah—Bill, I mean—Marsden running down the shore.

“I’ll come with you,” he said, breathless. “You’ll need someone can steer a boat.”

Jamie didn’t hesitate for more than a fraction of a second. He nodded, jerking his head toward the shore.

“Aye, run. I’ll bring them along as fast as I can.”

Mr. Marsden vanished into the dark.

“The rest of your men?” I said, coughing from the smoke.

He shrugged, a broad-shouldered silhouette against the black shimmer of the water.

“Gone.”

Hysterical screams came from the direction of the Old French Lines. These spread like wildfire through the woods and down the lakeshore, people shouting that the British were coming. Panic beating its wings. It was so strong a thing, that panic, that I felt a scream rise in my own throat. I throttled it and felt irrational anger in its place, displaced from myself to the fools behind me who were shrieking and would have scattered, had they been able to. But we were close upon the shore now, and people were pressing toward the boats in such numbers that they were capsizing some of the craft as they piled in, higgledy-piggledy.

I didn’t *think* the British were at hand—but I didn’t know. I knew that there had been more than one battle at Fort Ticonderoga … but when had they occurred? Was one of them going to be tonight? I didn’t know, and the sense of urgency propelled me to the shore, helping to support Mr. Wellman, who had contracted the mumps from his son, poor man, and was doing very badly in consequence.

Mr. Marsden, bless him, had commandeered a large canoe, which he had paddled a little way out from shore to prevent its being overrun. When he saw Jamie approaching, he came in, and we succeeded in getting a total of eighteen people—these including the Wellmans and Mrs. Raven, pale and staring as Ophelia—into it.

Jamie glanced quickly back at the fort. The main gates hung wide, and firelight shone out of them. Then he glanced up at the battery where he and I had stood a little while before.

“There are four men by the cannon trained on the bridge,” he said, his eyes still fixed on the red-bellied billows of smoke rising from the interior of the fort. “Volunteers. They’ll stay behind. The British—or some of them—will certainly come across the bridge. They can destroy almost everyone on the boom, and then flee—if they can.”

He turned away then, and his shoulders bunched and flexed as he dug the paddle hard.

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MOUNT INDEPENDENCE

Mid-afternoon, July 6

Brigadier Fraser's men advanced upon the picket fort at the top of the mount, the one the Americans ironically called "Independence." William led one of the forward parties and had his men fix their bayonets as they drew close. There was a deep silence, broken only by the snap of branches and shuffle of boots in the thick leaf mold, the stray clack of a cartridge box against musket butt. Was it a waiting silence, though?

The Americans could not fail to know they were coming. Did the rebels lie in ambush, ready to fire upon them from the crude but very solid fortification he could see through the trees?

He motioned to his men to stop some two hundred yards short of the summit, hoping to pick up some indication of the defenders, if defenders there were. His own company halted obediently, but there were men behind, and they began to push into and through his own company without regard, eager to storm the fort.

"Halt!" he shouted, aware as he did so that the sound of his voice presented almost as good a target to an American rifleman as would the sight of his red coat. Some of the men did halt but were at once dislodged by more behind them, and within seconds the whole of the hillside was a mass of red. They could not stop longer; they would be trampled. And if the defenders had meant to fire, they could not ask for a better opportunity—and yet the fort stayed silent.

"On!" William roared, throwing up his arm, and the men burst from the trees in a splendid charge, bayonets held ready.

The gates hung ajar, and the men charged straight in, heedless of danger—but danger there was none. William came in with his men, to find the place deserted. Not only abandoned, but evidently abandoned in an amazing hurry.

The defenders' personal belongings were strewn everywhere, as though dropped in flight: not only heavy things like cooking utensils, but clothes, shoes, books, blankets … even money, seemingly cast aside or dropped in panic. Much more to the point, so far as William was concerned, was the fact that the defenders had made no effort to blow up ammunition or powder that could not be carried away; there must be two hundredweight, stacked in kegs! Provisions, too, had been left behind, a welcome sight.

"Why did they not set fire to the place?" Lieutenant Hammond asked him, looking goggle-eyed round at the barracks, still fully furnished with beds, bedding, chamber pots—ready for the conquerors to move straight in to.

"God knows," William replied briefly, then lunged forward as he saw a private soldier come out of one of the rooms, festooned in a lacy shawl and with his arms full of shoes. "You, there! We'll have no looting, none! Do you hear me, sir?"

The private did and, dropping his armful of shoes, made off precipitately, lacy fringes flapping. A good many others were at it, too, though, and it was clear to William that he and Hammond would be unable to stop it. He shouted above the increasing din for an ensign and, seizing the man's dispatch box, scribbled a hasty note.

"Take that to General Fraser," he said thrusting it back at the ensign. "Fast as ever you can go!"

* * *

Dawn
July 7, 1777

"I will not have these horrid irregularities!" General Fraser's face was deeply creased, as much with rage as with fatigue. The small traveling clock in the general's tent showed just before five o'clock in the morning, and William had the oddly dreamy feeling that his head was floating somewhere over his left shoulder. "Looting, theft, rampant undiscipline—I will not have it, I say. Am I understood? All of you?"

The small, tired group of officers gave assent in a chorus of grunts. They had been up all night, chivvying their troops into some form of rough order, keeping back the rank and file from the worst excesses of looting, hurriedly surveying the abandoned outposts at the Old French Lines, and tallying the unexpected bounty of provisions and ammunition left for them by the fort's defenders—four of whom had been found when the fort was stormed, dead drunk by the side of a primed cannon, trained on the bridge below.

"Those men, the ones who were taken. Has anyone been able to talk with them as yet?"

"No, sir," Captain Hayes said, stifling a yawn. "Still dead to the world—very nearly dead for good, the surgeon said, though he thinks they'll survive."

"Shit themselves with fear," Hammond said softly to William. "Waiting all that time for us to come."

"More likely boredom," William murmured back without moving his mouth. Even so, he caught the brigadier's bloodshot eye and straightened up unconsciously.

"Well, it's not as though we need them to tell us much." General Fraser waved a hand to dispel a cloud of smoke that had drifted in, and coughed. William inhaled gently. There was a succulent scent embodied in that smoke, and his stomach coiled in anticipation. Ham? Sausage?

"I've sent word back to General Burgoyne that Ticonderoga is ours—again," the brigadier added, breaking into a grin at the hoarse cheer from the officers. "And to Colonel St. Leger. We shall leave a small garrison to take stock and tidy things up here, but the rest of us … Well, there are rebels to be caught, gentlemen. I cannot offer you much respite, but certainly there is time for a hearty breakfast. *Bon appetit!*”

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RETURN OF THE NATIVE

Night, July 7

Ian Murray passed into the fort without difficulty. There were rangers and Indians aplenty, mostly lounging against the buildings, many of them drunk, others poking through the deserted barracks, occasionally chased away by harassed-looking soldiers set to guard the fort's unexpected bounty.

There was no sign of slaughter, and he breathed easier. That had been his first fear, but while there was mess—and to spare—there was no blood and no smell of powder smoke. No shot had been fired here in the last day or so.

He had a thought and went toward the hospital barracks, largely ignored, as it held nothing anyone would want. The smells of urine, shit, and old blood had decreased; most of the patients must have gone with the retreating troops. There were a few people there, one in a green coat who he thought must be a surgeon, some plainly orderlies. As he watched, a pair of stretcher-bearers came out through the door, boots scraping as they negotiated the shallow stone steps. He leaned back into the concealment of the doorway, for following the stretcher was the tall form of Guinea Dick, his face split in a cannibal's grin.

Ian smiled himself, seeing it; Captain Stebbings still lived, then—and Guinea Dick was a free man. And here, Jesus, Mary, and Bride be thanked, came Mr. Ormiston behind him, stumping slowly on a pair of crutches, tenderly supported on either side by a pair of orderlies, the puny wee creatures dwarfed by the seaman's bulk. He could tell Auntie Claire, then—she'd be pleased to hear they were all right.

If he found Auntie Claire again—but he wasn't much worried, really. Uncle Jamie would see her safe, come hell, wildfire, or the entire British army. When or where he'd see them again was another matter, but he and Rollo moved much faster than any army could; he'd catch them up soon enough.

He waited, curious to see whether there was anyone else left in the hospital, but either there was not or they were to be left there for the nonce. Had the Hunters gone with St. Clair's troops? In a way, he hoped they had—even knowing that they would likely fare better with the British than on the run down the Hudson Valley with the refugees from Ticonderoga. As Quakers, he thought they would do well enough; the British probably woudn't molest them. But he thought he would like to see Rachel Hunter again sometime, and his chance of that was much better if she and her brother had gone with the rebels.

A little more poking about convinced him of two things: that the Hunters had indeed gone, and that the leaving of Ticonderoga had been accomplished in the midst of panic and disorder. Someone had set fire to the bridge below, but it had only partially burned, perhaps put out by a rainstorm. There was a great deal of debris on the lakeshore, suggesting a massive embarkation—automatically he glanced toward the lake, where he could plainly see two large ships, both flying the Union flag. From his current perch on the battery, he could see redcoats swarming over both Mount Defiance and Mount Independence, and knew a small, surprising flare of resentment against them.

"Well, you'll not keep it long," he said under his breath. He spoke in Gaelic, and a good thing, too, for a passing soldier glanced casually at him, as though feeling the stress of his regard. He looked away himself, turning his back on the fort.

There was nothing to do here, no one to wait for. He'd eat and pick up some provisions, then go fetch Rollo and be off. He could—

A shattering *whoom!* close at hand made him jerk round. To his right, one of the cannon was trained downward toward the bridge, and just behind it, openmouthed with shock, was a Huron man, swaying with drink.

There was a lot of shouting from below; the troops thought they were being fired on from the fort, though the shot had gone high, splashing harmlessly into the lake.

The Huron giggled.

“What did you do?” Ian asked, in an Algonkian tongue he thought the man would most likely know. Whether he understood or not, the man simply laughed harder, tears beginning to run down his face. He gestured to a smoking tub nearby; good Christ, the defenders had gone so fast, they had left a tub of slow match burning.

“Boom,” said the Huron, and gestured at a length of slow match, pulled from the tub and left draped on the stones like a glowing snake. “Boom,” he said again, nodding at the cannon, and laughed until he had to sit down.

Soldiers were running up to the battery, and the shouting from outside was equaled by that inside the fort. It was probably a good time to go.

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RETREAT

> *… we are pursuing the rebels, a great number of whom have taken to the lake in boats. The two sloops on the lake are following, but I am sending four companies down to the portage point, where I think the chance of capture is good.*
>
> *—Brigadier General Simon Fraser, to Major General J. Burgoyne*

July 8, 1777

William wished he hadn't accepted the brigadier's invitation to breakfast. If he had contented himself with the lean rations that were a lieutenant's lot, he would have been hungry, but happy. As it was, he was on the spot—blissfully filled to the eyes with fried sausage, buttered toast, and grits with honey, for which the brigadier had developed a fondness—when the message had come from General Burgoyne. He didn't even know what it had said; the brigadier had read it while sipping coffee, frowning slightly, then sighed and called for ink and quill.

"Want a ride this morning, William?" he'd asked, smiling across the table.

Which is how he'd come to be at General Burgoyne's field headquarters when the Indians had come in. Wyandot, one of the soldiers said; he wasn't familiar with them, though he had heard that they had a chief called Leatherlips, and he did wonder how that had come about. Perhaps the man was an indefatigable talker?

There were five of them, lean, wolfish-looking rascals. He couldn't have said what they wore or how they were armed; all his attention was focused on the pole that one of them carried, this decorated with scalps. Fresh scalps. White scalps. A musky smell of blood hung in the air, unpleasantly ripe, and flies moved with the Indians, buzzing loudly. The remains of William's lavish breakfast coagulated in a hard ball just under his ribs.

The Indians were looking for the paymaster; one of them was asking, in a surprisingly melodious English, where the paymaster was. So it was true, then. General Burgoyne had unleashed his Indians, sent them coursing through the woods like hunting dogs to fall upon the rebels and spread terror among them.

He did *not want* to look at the scalps but couldn't help it; his eyes followed them as the pole bobbed through a growing crowd of curious soldiers—some mildly horrified, some cheering. Jesus. Was that a *woman's* scalp? It had to be; a flowing mass of honey-colored hair, longer than any man would wear his hair, and shining as though its owner brushed it a hundred strokes every night, like his cousin Dottie said she did. It was not unlike Dottie's hair, though a little darker—

He turned away abruptly, hoping that he wouldn't be sick, but turned just as abruptly back when he heard the cry. He'd never heard a sound like that before—a shriek of such horror, such grief, that his heart froze in his chest.

"Jane! Jane!" A Welsh lieutenant he knew slightly, called David Jones, was forcing his way through the crowd, beating at the men with fists and elbows, lunging toward the surprised Indians, his face contorted with emotion.

"Oh, God," breathed a soldier near him. "His fiancée's called Jane. He can't mean—"

Jones threw himself at the pole, snatching at the fall of honey-colored hair, shrieking "JANE!" at the top of his lungs. The Indians, looking disconcerted, jerked the pole away. Jones flung himself on one of them, knocking the surprised Indian to the ground and hammering him with the strength of in sanity.

Men were pushing forward, grabbing at Jones—but not doing so with any great heart. Appalled looks were being shot at the Indians, who clustered together, eyes narrowed and hands at their tomahawks. The whole sense of the gathering had changed in an instant from approval to outrage, and the Indians plainly sensed it.

An officer William didn't know strode forward, daring the Indians with a hard eye, and tore the blond scalp from the pole. Then stood holding it, disconcerted, the mass of hair seeming alive in his hands, the long strands stirring, waving up around his fingers.

They had finally pulled Jones off the Indian; his friends were patting his shoulders, trying to urge him away, but he stood stock-still, tears rolling down his face and dripping from his chin. "Jane," he mouthed silently. He held out his hands, cupped and begging, and the officer who held the scalp placed it gently into them.

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WHILE STILL ALIVE

Lieutenant Stactoe was standing by one corpse, arrested. Very slowly, he squatted down, his eyes fixed on something, and as though by reflex covered his mouth with one hand.

I really didn't want to look.

He'd heard my footsteps, though, and took his hand away from his mouth. I could see the sweat trickling down his neck, the band of his shirt pasted to his skin, dark with it.

"Do you suppose that was done while he was still alive?" he asked, in an ordinary tone of voice.

Reluctantly, I looked over his shoulder.

"Yes," I said, my voice as unemotional as his. "It was."

"Oh," he said. He stood, contemplated the corpse for a moment, then walked away a few steps and threw up.

"Never mind," I said gently, and took him by the sleeve. "He's dead now. Come and help."

Many of the boats had gone astray, been captured before they reached the end of the lake; many more had been taken by British troops waiting at the portage point. Our canoe and several more had escaped, and we had made our way through the woods for a day and a night and most of another day before meeting with the main body of troops fleeing overland from the fort. I was beginning to think that those who were captured were the lucky ones.

I didn't know how long it had been since the small group we had just discovered was attacked by Indians. The bodies were not fresh.

* * *

Guards were posted at night. Those not on watch slept as though poleaxed, exhausted by a day of flight—if anything so cumbrous and labored could be described by such a graceful word. I woke just past dawn from dreams of Snow White trees, gape-mouthed and grasping, to find Jamie crouched beside me, a hand on my arm.

"Ye'd best come, *a nighean,"* he said softly.

Mrs. Raven had cut her throat with a penknife.

There wasn't time to dig a grave. I straightened her limbs and closed her eyes, and we piled rocks and branches over her before staggering back to the rut that passed for a road through the wilderness.

* * *

As darkness came up through the trees, we began to hear them. High ululating shrieks. Hunting wolves.

"March on, march on! Indians!" one of the militiamen shouted.

As if summoned by the shout, a bloodcurdling shriek wavered through the darkness nearby, and the stumbling retreat turned at once to headlong panic, men dropping their bundles and pushing one another out of the way in their haste to flee.

There were shrieks from the refugees, too, though these were quickly stifled.

"Off the road," Jamie said, low and fierce, and began pushing the slow and bewildered into the woods. "They may not know where we are. Yet."

And then again, they might.

"D'ye have your death song ready, Uncle?" Ian whispered. He had caught us up the day before, and now he and Jamie were pressed close on either side of me, where we had taken cover behind a huge fallen trunk.

"Oh, I'll sing them a death song, if it comes to that," Jamie muttered, half under his breath, and took out one of the pistols from his belt.

"You can't sing," I said. I hadn't meant to be funny—I was so frightened that I said by it reflex, the first thing that came into my mind—and he didn't laugh.

"That's true," he said. "Well, then."

He primed the pistol, closed the pan and thrust it into his belt.

"Dinna be afraid, *a nighean,"* Jamie whispered, and I saw his throat work as he swallowed. "I'll not let them take ye. Not alive." He touched the pistol at his belt.

I stared at him, then at the pistol. I hadn't thought it possible to be more afraid.

I felt suddenly as though my spinal cord had snapped; my limbs wouldn't move, and my bowels very literally turned to water. I understood in that moment exactly what had led Mrs. Raven to slash her own throat.

Ian whispered something to Jamie and slid away, silent as a shadow.

It occurred to me, belatedly, that by taking time to shoot me if we should be overrun, Jamie was very likely to fall alive into the hands of the Indians himself. And I was sufficiently terrorized that I couldn't tell him not to do it.

I took hold of my courage with both hands and swallowed hard.

"Go!" I said. "They won't—they probably won't harm women." My outer skirt hung in tatters, as did my jacket, and the whole ensemble was covered in mud, leaves, and the small bloody splotches of slow-moving mosquitoes—but I was still identifiably female.

"The devil I will," he said briefly.

"Uncle." Ian's voice came softly out of the darkness. "It's not Indians."

"What?" I made no sense of this, but Jamie straightened abruptly.

"It's a redcoat, running alongside us, shrieking like an Indian. Driving us."

Jamie swore under his breath. It was almost completely dark by now; I could see only a few vague shapes, presumably those of the people with us. I heard a whimper, almost underfoot, but when I looked, could see no one.

The shrieks came again, now from the other side. If the man was driving us—did he know we were there? If so, where did he mean to drive us? I could feel Jamie's indecision—which way? A second, perhaps two, and he took me by the arm, pulling me deeper into the wood.

We ran slap into a large group of refugees within minutes; they had stopped dead, too terrified to move in any direction. They huddled together, the women clutching their children, hands clasped tight over the little ones' mouths, breathing "Hush!" like the wind.

"Leave them," Jamie said in my ear, and tightened his grip on my arm. I turned to go with him, and suddenly a hand seized my other arm. I screamed, and everyone near erupted in screams by sheer reflex. Suddenly the wood around us was alive with moving forms and shouts.

The soldier—it was a British soldier; from so close I could see the buttons on his uniform and felt the thump of his cartridge box as it swung, striking me in the hip—leaned down to peer at me and grinned, his breath stale and scented with decay.

"Stand still, love," he said. "You're going nowhere now."

My heart was pounding so hard in my ears that it was a full minute before I realized that the grip on my other arm was gone. Jamie had vanished.

* * *

We were marched back up the road in a tight group, moving slowly through the night. They let us drink at a stream at daylight but kept us moving until the early afternoon, by which time even the most able-bodied were ready to drop.

We were herded, none too gently, into a field. Farmer's wife that I was, I winced to see the stalks—only weeks away from harvest—being trampled underfoot, the fragile gold of the wheat cut and mangled into black mud. There was a cabin among the trees at the far end of the field; I saw a girl run out onto the porch, clap a hand to her mouth in horror, and disappear back inside.

Three British officers came across the field, heading for the cabin, ignoring the seething mass of invalids, women, and children, all of whom were milling to and fro, with no idea what to do next. I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with the end of my kerchief, tucked it back into my bodice, and looked round for anyone who might be nominally in charge.

None of our own officers or able-bodied men seemed to have been captured; there had been only a couple of surgeons superintending the removal of the invalids, and I hadn't seen either one in two days. Neither one was here. *All right, then,* I thought grimly, and walked up to the nearest British soldier, who was surveying the chaos through narrowed eyes, musket in hand.

"We need water," I said to him without preamble. "There's a stream just beyond those trees. May I take three or four women to fetch back water for the sick and wounded?"

He was sweating, too; the faded red wool of his coat was black under the arms, and melted rice powder from his hair was rimed in the creases of his forehead. He grimaced, indicating that he didn't want to deal with me, but I simply stared at him, as close as I could get. He glanced around, in hopes of finding someone to send me to, but the three officers had disappeared into the cabin. He raised one shoulder in surrender, looking away.

"Aye, go on, then," he muttered, and turned his back, stalwartly guarding the road, along which new prisoners were still being herded.

A quick traverse of the field turned up three buckets and a like number of sensible women, worried but not hysterical. I sent them to the stream and began to quarter the field, making a quick assessment of the situation—as much in order to keep my own worry at bay as because there was no one else to do it.

Would we be kept here long? I wondered. If we would be held here for more than a few hours, sanitation trenches must be dug—but the soldiers would have the same need. I'd leave that for the army to deal with, then. Water was coming; we'd need to run relays to the stream nonstop for a bit. Shelter … I glanced at the sky; it was hazy but clear. Those who could move on their own were already helping to drag the desperately sick or wounded into the shade of the trees along one side of the field.

Where was Jamie? Had he got away safe?

Above the calls and anxious conversations, I heard now and then the whisper of distant thunder. The air clung to my skin, thick with humidity. They would have to move us somewhere—to the nearest settlement, wherever that might be—but it might take several days. I had no idea where we were.

Had he been captured, too? If so, would they take him to the same place they'd take the invalids?

Chances were that they would release the women, not wishing to feed them. The women would stay with their sick men, though—or most of them would—sharing whatever food was available.

I was walking slowly across the field, conducting a mental triage—the man on the stretcher there was going to die, probably before nightfall; I could hear the rales of his breathing from six feet away—when I caught sight of movement on the cabin's porch.

The family—two adult women, two teenagers, three children, and a baby in arms—was leaving, clutching baskets, blankets, and such bits of their household as could be carried. One of the officers was with them; he took them across the field and spoke with one of the guards, evidently instructing him to let the women pass. One of the women paused at the edge of the road and looked back—just once. The others went straight on, without a backward glance. Where were their men?

Where are mine?

"Hallo," I said, smiling at a man with a recently amputated leg. I didn't know his name but recognized his face; he was one of the few black men at Ticonderoga, a carpenter. I knelt down beside him. His bandages were awry, and the stump was leaking badly. "Bar the leg, how do you feel?" His skin was pale gray and clammy as a wet sheet, but he gave me a feeble grin in return.

"My left hand doesn't hurt much right now." He lifted it in illustration, but dropped it like a chunk of lead, lacking strength to hold it up.

"That's good," I said, sliding my fingers under his thigh to lift it. "Let me fix this for you—we'll have you some water in a minute."

"That'd be nice," he murmured, and shut his eyes against the sun.

The flapping end of the loose bandage was twisted up like a snake's tongue, stiff with dried blood, and the dressing awry. The dressing itself, a poultice of flaxseed and turpentine, was soggy, pink with leaking blood and lymph. No choice but to reuse it, though.

"What's your name?"

"Walter." His eyes were still closed, his breath coming in shallow gasps. So was mine; the thick, hot air was like a pressure bandage round my chest. "Walter … Woodcock."

"Pleased to know you, Walter. My name's Claire Fraser."

"Know you," he murmured. "You're Big Red's lady. He make it out of the fort?"

"Yes," I said, and blotted my face against my shoulder to keep the sweat out of my eyes. "He's all right."

Dear God, let him be all right.

The English officer was coming back toward the cabin, passing within a few feet of me. I glanced up, and my hands froze.

He was tall, slender but broad-shouldered, and I would have known that long stride, that unself-conscious grace, and that arrogant tilt of the head anywhere. He paused, frowning, and turned his head to survey the littered field. His nose was straight as a knife blade, just that tiny bit too long. I closed my eyes for an instant, dizzy, sure I was hallucinating—but opened them again at once, knowing that I wasn't.

"William Ransom?" I blurted, and his head jerked toward me, surprised. Blue eyes, dark blue, Fraser cat-eyes, narrowed to a slant against the sun.

"I, er, beg your pardon." *God, what did you speak to him for?* But I couldn't have helped it. My fingers were pressed against Walter's leg, holding the bandage; I could feel his femoral pulse against my fingertips, bumping as erratically as my own.

"Do I know you, ma'am?" William asked, with the shadow of a bow.

“Well, yes, you do,” I said, rather apologetically. “You stayed for a little time with my family, some years ago. A place called Fraser’s Ridge.”

His face changed at once at the name, and his gaze sharpened, focusing on me with interest.

“Why, yes,” he said slowly. “I recall. You are Mrs. Fraser, are you not?” I could see his thoughts working, and was fascinated; he hadn’t got Jamie’s way of hiding what he thought—or if he did, wasn’t using it. I could see him wondering—nice, well-mannered boy that he was—what the proper social response to this awkward situation might be, and—a quick glance over his shoulder at the cabin—how the demands of his duty might conflict with it.

His shoulders stiffened with decision, but before he could say anything, I leapt in.

“Do you think it might be possible to find some buckets for water? And bandages?” Most of the women had already torn strips from their petticoats to serve this function; much longer, and we’d all be half naked.

“Yes,” he said slowly, and glanced down at Walter, then toward the road. “Buckets, yes. There’s a surgeon with the division behind us; when I have a moment, I’ll send someone back with a request for bandages.”

“And food?” I asked hopefully. I hadn’t eaten more than a handful of half-ripe berries in nearly two days. I wasn’t suffering hunger pangs—my stomach was in knots—but I was having bouts of light-headedness, spots passing before my eyes. No one else was in much better case; we were going to lose a number of the invalids to the heat and simple weakness, if we weren’t given food and shelter soon.

He hesitated, and I saw his eyes flit over the field, obviously estimating numbers.

“That may be … our supply train is—” His lips firmed, and he shook his head. “I’ll see what can be done. Your servant, ma’am.” He bowed politely and turned away, striding toward the road. I watched him go, fascinated, the soggy dressing limp in my hand.

He was dark-haired, though the sun struck a gleam of red from the crown of his head; he wore no powder. His voice had deepened—well, of course it had; he'd been no more than twelve the last time I met him—and the sheer oddness of hearing Jamie speaking in a cultured English accent made me want to laugh, despite our precarious situation and my worry for Jamie and Ian. I shook my head and returned to the task at hand.

A British private arrived an hour after my conversation with Lieutenant Ransom, bearing four buckets, which he dropped unceremoniously at my side without remark before heading back to the road. Two hours later, a sweating orderly came trundling through the trampled wheat with two large haversacks filled with bandages. Interestingly enough, he headed directly for me, which made me wonder just how William had described me.

"Thank you." I took the sacks of bandages with gratitude. "Do you—do you think we might get some food soon?"

The orderly was looking over the field, grimacing. Of course—the invalids were likely about to become his responsibility. He turned back to me, though, civil but obviously very tired.

"I doubt it, ma'am. The supply train is two days behind us, and the troops are living off what they're carrying or what they find as they go." He nodded toward the road; on the other side, I could see a number of English soldiers making camp. "I'm sorry," he added formally, and turned to go.

"Oh." He stopped, and taking the strap of his canteen off, handed it to me. It was heavy and gurgled enticingly. "Lieutenant Ellesmere said I was to give you this." He smiled briefly, the lines of tiredness easing. "He said you looked hot."

"Lieutenant Ellesmere." That must be William's title, I realized. "Thank you. And please thank the lieutenant, if you see him." He was clearly on the point of departure, but I couldn't help asking, "How did you know who I was?"

His smile deepened as he glanced at my head.

"The lieutenant said you'd be the curly-wig giving orders like a sergeant-major." He looked round the field once more, shaking his head. "Good luck, ma'am."

* * *

Three men died before sunset. Walter Woodcock was still alive, but barely. We'd moved as many men as we could into the shade of the trees along the edge of the field, and I'd divided the seriously wounded into small groups, each allocated a bucket and two or three women or walking invalids to tend them. I'd also designated a latrine area and done my best to separate the infectious cases from those who were fevered from wounds or malaria. There were three suffering from what I hoped was only "summer ague," and one who I feared might have diphtheria. I sat beside him—a young wheelwright from New Jersey—checking the membranes of his throat at intervals, giving him as much water as he would take. Not from my canteen, though.

William Ransom, bless his soul, had filled his canteen with brandy.

I uncorked it and took a sparing sip. I'd poured out small cupfuls for each small group, adding each cupful to a bucket of water—but had kept a bit for my own use. It wasn't selfishness; for better or worse, I was in charge of the captives for the moment. I had to stay on my feet.

Or my bottom, as the case might be, I thought, leaning back against the bole of an oak tree. My feet ached all the way to my knees, my back and ribs twinged with each breath, and I had to close my eyes now and then to control the dizziness. But I was sitting still, for what seemed like the first time in several days.

The soldiers across the road were cooking their meager rations; my mouth watered and my stomach contracted painfully at the scent of roasting meat and flour. Mrs. Wellman's little boy was whining with hunger, his head laid on his mother's lap. She was stroking his hair mechanically, her eyes fixed on her husband's body, which lay a little way away. We had no sheet or blanket with which to shroud him, but someone had given her a handkerchief to cover his face. The flies were very bad.

The air had cooled, thank God, but was still heavy with the threat of rain; thunder was a constant faint rumble over the horizon and it would probably pour sometime during the night. I plucked the sweat-soaked fabric away from my chest; I doubted it would have time to dry before we were drenched with rain. I eyed the encampment across the road, with its lines of small tents and brush shelters, with envy. There was a slightly larger officers' tent as well, though several officers had taken up temporary quarters in the commandeered cabin.

I ought to go there, I thought. See the most senior officer present, and beg for food for the children, at least. When the shadow of that tall pine sapling touched my foot, I decided. Then I'd go. In the meantime, I uncorked the canteen and took another small swallow.

Movement caught my eye, and I looked up. The unmistakable figure of Lieutenant Ransom stalked out of the tents and came across the road. It lifted my heart a little to see him, though the sight of him renewed my worry for Jamie—and reminded me, with a small sharp pang, of Brianna. At least *she was* safe, I thought. Roger and Jemmy and Amanda, too. I repeated their names to myself as a small refrain of comfort, counting them like coins. Four of them safe.

William had undone his stock, and his hair was untidy, his coat stained with sweat and dirt. Evidently the pursuit was wearing on the British army, too.

He glanced round the field, spotted me, and turned purposefully in my direction. I got my feet under me, struggling upward against the press of gravity like a hippopotamus rising from a swamp.

I'd barely got to my feet and raised a hand to smooth my hair when someone else's hand poked me in the back. I started violently but luckily didn't scream.

"It's me, Auntie," Young Ian whispered from the shadows behind me. "Come with—oh, Jesus."

William had come within ten paces of me and, raising his head, had spied Ian. He leapt forward and grabbed me by the arm, yanking me away from the trees. I yelped, as Ian had an equally firm grip on the other arm and was yanking lustily in that direction.

"Let her go!" William barked.

"The devil I will," Ian replied hotly. *"You* let go!"

Mrs. Wellman's little son was on his feet, staring round-eyed and open-mouthed into the forest.

"Mama, Mama! *Indians!"*

Shrieks rose from the women near us, and everyone began a mad scramble away from the forest, leaving the wounded to their own devices.

"Ah, bugger!" Ian said, letting go in disgust. William didn't, jerking me with such force that I crashed into him, whereupon he promptly wrapped his arms about my waist and dragged me a little way into the field.

"Will ye bloody leave go of my auntie?" Ian said crossly, emerging from the trees.

"You!" said William. "What are you—well, never mind that. Your aunt, you say?" He looked down at me. "Are you? His aunt? Wait—no, of course you are."

"I am," I agreed, pushing at his arms. "Let go."

His grasp loosened a little, but he didn't release me.

"How many others are in there?" he demanded, lifting his chin toward the forest.

"If there were any others, ye'd be deid," Ian informed him. "It's just me. Give her to me."

"I can't do that." But there was an uncertain note in William's voice, and I felt his head turn, glancing toward the cabin. So far, no one had come out, but I could see some of the sentries near the road shifting to and fro, wondering what the matter was. The other captives had stopped running, but were quivering with incipient panic, eyes frantically searching the shadows among the trees.

I rapped William sharply on the wrist with my knuckles and he let go and took a step back. My head was spinning again—not least from the very peculiar sensation of being embraced by a total stranger whose body felt so familiar to me. He was thinner than Jamie, but—

"D'ye owe me a life or not?" Not waiting for an answer, Ian jerked a thumb at me. "Aye, then—it's hers."

"Hardly a question of her life," William said, rather crossly, with an awkward nod in my direction, acknowledging that I might have a possible interest in this discussion. “Surely you don’t suppose we kill women?”

“No,” Ian said evenly. “I dinna suppose it at all. I ken verra well that ye do.”

“We do?” William echoed. He looked surprised, but a sudden flush burned in his cheeks.

“You do,” I assured him. “General Howe hanged three women at the head of his army in New Jersey, as an example.”

He seemed completely nonplused by this.

“Well … but—they were spies!”

“You think I don’t look like a spy?” I inquired. “I’m much obliged for your good opinion, but I don’t know that General Burgoyne would share it.” There were, of course, a good many other women who’d died at the hands of the British army, if less officially, but this didn’t seem the moment to make an account of them.

“General Burgoyne is a gentleman,” William said stiffly. “So am I.”

“Good,” Ian said briefly. “Turn your back for thirty seconds, and we’ll trouble ye nay more.”

I don’t know whether he would have done it or not, but just then, Indian cries tore the air, coming from the far side of the road. Further frantic screams came from the captives, and I bit my own tongue in order not to scream, too. A tongue of fire shot up into the lavender sky from the top of the officers’ tent. As I gaped, two more flaming comets shot across the sky. It looked like the descent of the Holy Ghost, but before I could mention this interesting observation, Ian had seized my arm and jerked me nearly off my feet.

I managed to snatch up the canteen as we passed, on a dead run for the forest. Ian grabbed it from me, almost draggging me in his haste. Gunfire and screams were breaking out behind us, and the skin all down my back contracted in fear.

“This way.” I followed him without heed for anything underfoot, stumbling and twisting my ankles in the dusk as we threw ourselves headlong into the brush, expecting every moment to be shot in the back.

Such is the brain's capacity for self-amusement, I was able to imagine in vivid detail my wounding, capture, descent into infection and sepsis, and eventual lingering death—but not before being obliged to witness the capture and execution of both Jamie—I had recognized the source of the Indian screams and flaming arrows without difficulty—and Ian.

It was only as we slowed—perforce; I had such a stitch in my side that I could barely breathe—that I thought of other things. The sick and wounded I had left behind. The young wheelwright with the bright red throat. Walter Woodcock, teetering over the abyss.

You couldn't give any of them more than a hand to hold, I told myself fiercely, limping as I stumbled after Ian. It was true; I knew it was true. But I also knew that now and then a hand in the dark gave a sick man something to cling to, against the rushing wind of the dark angel. Sometimes it was enough; sometimes it wasn't. But the ache of those left behind dragged at me like a sea anchor, and I wasn't sure whether the wetness streaming down my cheeks was sweat or tears.

It was full dark now, and the boiling clouds covered the moon, allowing only fitful glimpses of its brilliant light. Ian had slowed still more, to let me keep up with him, and took my arm now and then to help me over rocks or across creeks.

"How … far?" I gasped, stopping once more for breath.

"Not much," Jamie's voice replied softly beside me. "Are ye all right, Sassenach?"

My heart gave a tremendous bump, then settled back in my chest as he groped for my hand, then gathered me briefly against himself. I had a moment of relief so profound that I thought my bones had dissolved.

"Yes," I said, into his chest, and with great effort lifted my head. "You?"

"Well enough now," he said, passing a hand over my head, touching my cheek. "Can ye walk just a bit further?"

I straightened, swaying a little. It had begun to rain; heavy drops plopped into my hair, cold and startling on my scalp.

"Ian—have you got that canteen?"

There was a soft *pop!* and Ian set the canteen in my hand. Very carefully, I tilted it into my mouth.

"Is that brandy?" Jamie said, sounding astonished.

"Mmm-hmm." I swallowed, as slowly as I could, and handed the canteen to him. There were a couple of swallows left.

"Where did ye get it?"

"Your son gave it to me," I said. "Where are we going?"

There was a long pause from the darkness, and then the sound of brandy being drunk.

"South," he said at last, and taking my hand, led me on into the wood, the rain whispering on the leaves all round us.

* * *

Soaked and shivering, we caught up to a militia unit just before dawn, and were nearly shot in mistake by a nervous sentry. By that point, I didn't really care. Being dead was immensely preferable to the prospect of taking one more step.

Our *bona fides* being established, Jamie disappeared briefly and came back with a blanket and three fresh corn dodgers. I inhaled my share of this ambrosia in four seconds flat, wrapped myself in the blanket, and lay down under a tree where the ground was damp but not soggy and so thick with dead leaves that it gave spongily beneath me.

"I'll be back in a bit, Sassenach," Jamie whispered, squatting beside me. "Dinna go anywhere, aye?"

"Don't worry—I'll be here. If I move a muscle before Christmas, it will be too soon." A faint warmth was already returning to my shivering muscles, and sleep was pulling me down with the inexorability of quicksand.

He gave the breath of a laugh, and reached out a hand, tucking the blanket in around my shoulders. The dawn light showed the deep lines that the night had carved in his face, the smudges of dirt and exhaustion that stained the strong bones. The wide mouth, compressed for so long, had relaxed now in the relief of momentary safety, looking oddly young and vulnerable.

“He looks like you,” I whispered. His hand stopped moving, still on my shoulder, and he looked down, long lashes hiding his eyes.

“I know,” he said, very softly. “Tell me of him. Later, when there’s time.” I heard his footsteps, a rustle in damp leaves, and fell asleep, a prayer for Walter Woodcock half finished in my mind.

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THE DESERTER GAME

The whore grunted through the rag clenched in her teeth.

"Nearly done," I murmured, and ran the backs of my knuckles gently down her calf by way of reassurance before returning to the debridement of the nasty wound in her foot. An officer's horse had stepped on her as they—and a number of other people and animals—had jostled to drink at a creek during the retreat. I could clearly see the print of the horseshoe nails, black in the red puffy flesh of her instep. The edge of the shoe itself, worn paper-thin and sharp as a knife, had made a deep, curved gash that ran across the metatarsals, vanishing between the fourth and fifth toes.

I'd been afraid I was going to have to remove the little toe—it seemed to be dangling by no more than a shred of skin—but when I examined the foot more closely, I discovered that all the bones were miraculously intact—as nearly as I could tell, without access to an X-ray machine.

The horse's hoof had driven her foot into the mud of the stream bank, she'd told me; that had likely saved the bones from being crushed. Now if I could manage to stem the infection and didn't have to amputate the foot, she might just be able to walk again normally. Maybe.

With a degree of cautious hope, I put down the scalpel and reached for a bottle of what I hoped was a penicillin-containing liquid brought with me from the fort. I'd salvaged the barrel optic of Dr. Rawlings's microscope from the house fire and found it very useful indeed for starting fires—but without the eyepiece, staging mechanism, or mirror, it was of limited use in determining the genus of microorganisms. I could be sure that what I'd grown and filtered was bread mold, all right—but beyond that …

Suppressing a sigh, I poured the liquid generously over the raw flesh I'd just exposed. It wasn't alcoholic, but the flesh *was* raw. The whore made a high-pitched noise through the cloth and breathed through her nose like a steam engine, but by the time I'd made a compress of lavender and comfrey and bound up the foot, she was calm, if flushed.

"There," I said, with a small pat to her leg. "I think that will do nicely now." I started to say automatically, "Keep it clean," but bit my tongue. She hadn't any shoes or stockings and was either walking daily through a wilderness of rocks, dirt, and streams, or living in a filthy camp littered with piles of dung, both human and animal. The bottoms of her feet were hard as horn and black as sin.

"Come and find me in a day or two," I said instead. *If you can*, I thought. "I'll check it and change the dressing." *If I can*, I thought, with a glance at the knapsack in the corner where I kept my dwindling stocks of medicaments.

"Thank 'ee kindly," the whore said, sitting up and putting her foot gingerly to the ground. Judging from the skin of her legs and feet, she was young, though you couldn't tell from her face. Her skin was weathered, lined with hunger and strain. Her cheekbones were sharp with hunger, and her mouth was drawn in on one side where the teeth were missing—lost to decay or knocked out by a customer or another whore.

"Will 'ee be here for a bit, think?" she asked. "I've a friend, like, got the itch."

"I'll be here for the night, at least," I assured her, suppressing a groan as I rose to my feet. "Send your friend; I'll see what I can do."

Our group of militia had met with others, forming a large body, and within a few days we began to cross paths with other rebel groups. We were running into fragments of General Schuyler's and General Arnold's armies, these also moving south down the Hudson Valley.

We were still moving all day but began to feel secure enough to sleep at night, and with food provided—irregularly, but still food—by the army, my strength began to return. The rain usually came at night, but today it had been raining at dawn, and we had been trudging through mud for hours before some shelter came in sight.

General Arnold's troops had stripped the farmstead and burnt the house. The barn was heavily charred down one side, but the fire had gone out before consuming the building.

A gust of wind blew through the barn, raising eddies of decayed straw and dirt, whipping our petticoats round our legs. The barn had originally had a plank floor; I could see the lines of the boards, embedded in the dirt. The foragers had taken them for firewood, but it had been too much trouble for them to knock down the barn, thank God.

Some of the refugees fleeing Ticonderoga had sought shelter here; more would be along before nightfall. A mother with two small, exhausted children slept curled by the far wall; her husband had settled them here and gone to look for food.

Pray ye that your flight be not in the winter, nor on the Sabbath day …

I followed the whore to the door and stood looking after her. The sun was touching the horizon now; perhaps an hour of light left, but the sunset breeze was already moving in the treetops, night's skirts rustling as she came. I shivered reflexively, though the day was still warm enough. The old barn was chilly, and the nights were beginning to bite. Any day, we would awake to frost on the ground.

And what then? said the small, apprehensive voice that lived in the pit of my stomach.

"Then I'll put on another pair of stockings," I muttered to it. "Hush up!"

A truly Christian person would doubtless have given the spare stockings to the barefoot whore, remarked the sanctimonious voice of my conscience.

"You hush up, too," I said. "Plenty of opportunity to be Christian later, if the urge should strike me." Half the people fleeing needed stockings, I dared say.

I wondered what I might be able to do for the whore's friend, if she did come. "The itch" might be anything from eczema or cowpox to gonorrhea—though given the woman's profession, something venereal was the best bet. Back in Boston, it would likely have been a simple yeast infection—oddly enough, I almost never saw those here, and speculated idly that it might be owing to the nearly universal lack of underclothes. So much for the advances of modernity!

I glanced at my knapsack again, calculating what I had left and how I might use it. A fair amount of bandages and lint. A pot of gentian ointment, good for scrapes and minor wounds, which occurred in abundance. A small stock of the most useful herbs for tincture and compress: lavender, comfrey, peppermint, mustard seed. By some miracle, I still had the box of cinchona bark I had acquired in New Bern—I thought of Tom Christie and crossed myself, but dismissed him from mind; there was nothing I could do about him and much too much to think of here. Two scalpels I had taken from Lieutenant Stactoe's body—he had succumbed to a fever on the road—and my silver surgical scissors. Jamie's gold acupuncture needles; those might be used to treat others, save that I had no idea how to place them for anything other than seasickness.

I could hear voices, parties of foragers moving through the trees, here and there someone calling out a name, searching for a friend or family member lost in transit. The refugees were beginning to settle for the night.

Sticks cracked near at hand, and a man came out of the woods. I didn't recognize him. One of the "greasy-stockinged knaves" from one of the militias, no doubt; he had a musket in one hand and a powder horn at his belt. Not much else. And yes, he was barefoot, though his feet were much too big to wear my stockings—a fact that I pointed out to my conscience, in case it should feel compelled to try to prod me into charitable behavior again.

He saw me in the door and raised a hand.

"You the conjure-woman?" he called.

"Yes." I'd given up trying to make people call me a doctor, let alone a physician.

"Met a whore with a mighty fine new bandage on her foot," the man said, giving me a smile. "She said as there's a conjure-woman up to the barn, has some medicines."

"Yes," I said again, giving him a quick once-over. I saw no obvious wound, and he wasn't sick—I could tell that from his color and the upright way he walked. Perhaps he had a wife or child, or a sick comrade.

"Hand 'em over to me now," he said, still smiling, and pointed the muzzle of the musket at me.

"What?" I said, surprised.

"Give me the medicines you've got." He made a small jabbing motion with the gun. "Could just shoot you and take 'em, but I ain't wanting to waste the powder."

I stood still and stared at him for a moment.

"What the devil do you want them for?" I'd been held up once before for drugs—in a Boston emergency room. A young addict, sweating and glassy-eyed, with a gun. I'd handed them over instantly. At the moment, I wasn't inclined.

He snorted and cocked his gun. Before I could even think about being scared, there was a sharp bang and the scent of powder smoke. The man looked terribly surprised, the musket sagging in his hands. Then he fell at my feet.

"Hold that, Sassenach." Jamie thrust the just-fired pistol into my hand, stooped, and took the body by the feet. He dragged it out of the barn into the rain. I swallowed, reached into my bag, and took out the extra stockings. I dropped these in the woman's lap, then went to set down the pistol and my sack by the wall. I was conscious of the eyes of the mother and her children on me—and saw them shift suddenly to the open door. I turned to see Jamie come in, soaked to the skin, his face drawn and set with fatigue.

He crossed the barn and sat down by me, laid his head on his knees, and closed his eyes.

"Thank you, sir," said the woman, very softly. "Ma'am."

I thought for a moment that he had fallen instantly asleep, for he didn't stir. After a moment, though, he said, in an equally soft voice, "Ye're welcome, ma'am."

I was more than pleased to find the Hunters when we reached the next village; they had been in one of the barges that had been captured early, but had succeeded in escaping by the simple expedient of walking into the woods after dark. As the soldiers who had captured them had not bothered to count their captives, no one noticed they had gone.

Overall, things were looking up somewhat. Food was becoming more abundant, and we were among regular Continentals. We were still only a few miles in front of Burgoyne's army, though, and the strain of the long retreat was telling. Desertion was frequent—though no one knew quite how frequent. Organization, discipline, and military structure were being restored as we came under the sway of the Continental army, but there were still men who could melt away unobtrusively.

It was Jamie who thought of the deserter game. Deserters would be welcomed into the British camps, fed, given clothes, and interrogated for information.

"So we'll give it to them, aye?" he said. "And it's only fair we take the same in return, is it not?"

Smiles began to grow on the faces of the officers to whom he was propounding this idea. And within a few days, carefully chosen "deserters" were making their way surreptitiously to the enemy camps and being taken before British officers, where they poured out the stories with which they'd been carefully prepared. And after a good supper, they would take the first opportunity to re-desert back to the American side—bringing with them useful information about the British forces pursuing us.

Ian dropped in to Indian camps now and then if it seemed safe, but didn't play this particular game; he was memorable. I thought Jamie would have liked to masquerade as a deserter—it would appeal to his sense of drama, as well as his sense of adventure, which was acute. His size and striking appearance put this notion out of consideration, though; the deserters must all be ordinary-looking men who were unlikely to be recognized later.

"Because sooner or later, the British are going to realize what's afoot. They're not fools. And they willna take it kindly when they do realize."

We had found shelter for the night in another barn—this one unburnt and still equipped with a few piles of musty hay, though the stock had long since vanished. We were alone, but probably wouldn't be for long. The interlude in the commandant's garden seemed as though it had taken place in someone else's life, but I laid my head on Jamie's shoulder, relaxing against his solid warmth.

"Do ye think maybe—"

Jamie stopped abruptly, his hand tightening on my leg. An instant later, I heard the stealthy rustling that had alerted him, and my mouth went dry. It might be anything from a prowling wolf to an Indian ambush—but whatever it was was sizable, and I fumbled—as silently as possible—for the pocket in which I had stowed the knife he'd given me.

Not a wolf; something passed the open door, a shadow the height of a man, and vanished. Jamie squeezed my thigh and then was gone, moving crouched through the empty barn without a sound. For an instant, I couldn't see him in the dark, but my eyes were well adapted, and I found him seconds later, a long dark shadow pressed against the wall, just inside the door.

The shadow outside had come back; I saw the brief silhouette of a head against the paler black of the night outside. I got my feet under me, skin prickling with fear. The door was the only egress; perhaps I should throw myself on the floor and roll up against the base of a wall. I might escape detection—or, with luck, be able to grab the ankles of an intruder, or stab him through the foot.

I was just about to implement this strategy when a tremulous whisper came out of the dark.

"Friend—Friend James?" it said, and I let out the breath I had been holding in a gasp.

"Is that you, Denzell?" I said, trying to sound normal.

"Claire!" He burst through the door in relief, promptly tripped over something, and fell headlong with a crash.

"Welcome back, Friend Hunter," Jamie said, the nervous urge to laugh evident in his voice. "Are ye hurt?" The long shadow detached itself from the wall and bent to help our visitor up.

"No. No, I don't think so. Though in fact I scarcely know … James, I did it!"

There was a momentary silence.

"How close, *a charaid*?" Jamie asked quietly. "And do they move?"

"No, thank the Lord." Denzell sat down abruptly beside me, and I could feel his trembling. "They're waiting for their wagons to come up. They daren't outrun their supply line too far, and they're having terrible trouble; we've made such a mess of the roads"—the pride in his voice was palpable—"and the rain's helped a great deal, too."

"D'ye ken how long it might be?"

I saw Denzell nod, eager.

"One of the sergeants said it might be two, even three days. He was telling some of the soldiers to be mindful of their flour and beer, as they wouldn't get any more until the wagons came."

Jamie exhaled, and I felt some of the tension leave him. Mine did, too, and I felt a passionate wave of thankfulness. There would be time to sleep. I had just begun to relax a little; now the tension flowed out of me like water, to such an extent that I barely noticed what else Denzell had to confide. I heard Jamie's voice, murmuring congratulations; he clapped Denzell on the shoulder, and slid out of the barn, no doubt to go pass on the information.

Denzell sat still, breathing audibly. I gathered what was left of my concentration and made an effort to be amiable.

"Did they feed you, Denzell?"

"Oh." Denzell's voice changed, and he began to fumble in his pocket. "Here. I brought this away for thee." He pushed something into my hands: a small squashed loaf, rather burnt about the edges—I could tell from the hard crust and the smell of ashes. My mouth began to water uncontrollably.

"Oh, no," I managed to say, trying to give it back. "You should—"

"They fed me," he assured me. "Stew, of a sort. I ate all I could. And I've another loaf in my pocket for my sister. They gave me the food," he assured me earnestly. "I didn't steal it."

"Thank you," I managed to say, and with the greatest self-control, tore the loaf in half and tucked one half in my pocket for Jamie. Then I crammed the remainder in my mouth and ripped at it like a wolf wrenching bloody mouthfuls from a carcass.

Denny's stomach echoed mine, rumbling with a series of great borborygmi.

"I thought you said you ate!" I said, accusing.

"I did. But the stew seems not inclined to lie quiet," he said, with a small, pained laugh. He bent forward, arms folded over his stomach. "I—um, don't s'pose that thee might have a bit of barley water or peppermint to hand, Friend Claire?"

"I do," I said, unspeakably relieved that I still had the remnants in my sack. I hadn't much left, but I did have peppermint. There was no hot water; I gave him a handful to chew, washed down with water from a canteen. He drank thirstily, burped, and then stopped, breathing in a way that told me just what was happening. I guided him hastily to the side and held his head while he vomited, losing peppermint and stew together.

"Food poisoning?" I asked, trying to feel his forehead, but he slid away from me, collapsing onto a heap of straw, his head on his knees.

"He said he'd hang me," he whispered suddenly.

"Who?"

"The English officer. A Captain Bradbury, I think his name was. Said he thought I was a-playing at spies and soldiers, and if I didn't confess at once, he'd hang me."

"But he didn't," I said softly, and put a hand on his arm.

He was trembling all over, and I saw a drop of sweat hanging from the tip of his chin, translucent in the dimness.

"I told him—told him he could, I s'posed. If he pleased. And I truly thought he would. But he didn't." His breath came thick, and I realized that he was crying, silently.

I put my arms around him, held him, making hushing noises, and after a little he stopped. He was quiet for a few minutes.

"I thought—I would be prepared to die," he said softly. "That I would go happy to the Lord, whenever He chose to call me. I am ashamed to find it untrue. I was so much afraid."

I took a long, deep breath, and sat back beside him.

"I always wondered about martyrs," I said. "No one ever said they weren't afraid. It's only that they were willing to go and do whatever they did in spite of it. You went."

"I did not set up to be a martyr," he said after a moment. He sounded so meek, I nearly laughed.

"I doubt very much that many people do," I said. "And I think a person who did would be very obnoxious indeed. It's late, Denzell, and your sister will be worried. And hungry."

* * *

It was an hour or more before Jamie came back. I was lying in the hay, my shawl pulled over me, but wasn't asleep. He crawled in beside me and lay down, sighing, putting an arm over me.

"Why him?" I asked after a moment, trying to keep my voice calm. It didn't work; Jamie was acutely sensitive to tones of voice—anyone's, but particularly mine. I saw his head turn sharply toward me, but he paused a moment in turn before answering.

"He wished to go," he said, doing much better with the approximation of calmness than I had. "And I thought he'd do well with it."

"Do *well?* He's no actor! You know he can't lie; he must have been stammering and tripping over his tongue! I'm astonished that they believed him—if they did," I added.

"Oh, they did, aye. D'ye think a real deserter wouldna be terrified, Sassenach?" he said, sounding faintly amused. "I meant him to go in sweating and stammering. Had I tried to give him lines to speak, they'd ha' shot him on the spot."

The thought of it made the bolus of bread rise in my throat. I forced it back down.

"Yes," I said, and took a few breaths, feeling cold sweat prickle over my own face, seeing little Denny Hunter, sweating and stammering before the cold eyes of a British officer.

"Yes," I said again. "But … couldn't someone else have done it? It's not just that Denny Hunter is a friend—he's a doctor. He's needed."

Jamie's head turned toward me again. The sky outside was beginning to lighten; I could see the outline of his face.

"Did ye not hear me say he wished to do it, Sassenach?" he asked. "I didna ask him. In fact, I tried to dissuade him—for the very reason ye said. But he wouldna hear it and only asked me to look after his sister, should he not come back."

Rachel. My stomach clenched afresh at mention of her.

"What can he have been *thinking*?"

Jamie sighed deeply and turned onto his back.

"He's a Quaker, Sassenach. But he's a man. If he was the sort of man who'd not fight for what he believes, he'd ha' stayed in his wee village and poulticed horses and looked after his sister. But he's not." He shook his head and looked at me.

"Would ye have had me stay at home, Sassenach? Turn back from the fight?"

"I would," I said, agitation fading into crossness. "In a heartbeat. I just know you aren't bloody *going* to, so what's the point?"

That made him laugh.

"So ye do understand," he said, and took my hand. "It's the same for Denzell Hunter, aye? If he's bound to risk his life, then it's my job to see he gets the most return from his gambling."

"Bearing in mind that the return of most gambling is a big, fat zero," I remarked, trying to repossess the hand. "Hasn't anyone ever told you that the house always wins?" He wasn't letting go, but had begun to run the ball of his thumb gently back and forth over the tips of my fingers.

"Aye, well. Ye reckon the odds and cut the cards, Sassenach. And it's not *all* luck, ken?" The light had grown, in that imperceptible predawn way. Nothing so blatant as a sunbeam; just a gradual emergence of objects as the shadows round them went from black to gray to blue.

His thumb slipped inside my hand, and I curled my fingers involuntarily over it.

“Why isn’t there a word that means the opposite of ‘fade’?” I asked, watching the lines of his face emerge from night’s shadow. I traced the shape of one rough brow with my thumb and felt the springy mat of his short beard against the palm of my hand, changing as I watched it from amorphous smudge to a distinction of tiny curls and wiry springs, a glowing mass of auburn, gold, and silver, vigorous against his weathered skin.

“I dinna suppose ye need one,” he said. “If ye mean the light.” He looked at me and smiled as I saw his eyes trace the outlines of my face. “If the light is fading, the night’s coming on—and when the light grows again, it’s the night that’s fading, aye?”

It was, too. We should sleep, but the army would be astir around us shortly.

“Why is it that women don’t make war, I wonder?”

“Ye’re no made for it, Sassenach.” His hand cupped my cheek, hard and rough. “And it wouldna be right; you women take so much more with ye, when ye go.”

“What do you mean by that?”

He made the small shrugging movement that meant he was looking for a word or a notion, an unconscious movement, as though his coat was too tight, though he wasn’t wearing one at the moment.

“When a man dies, it’s only him,” he said. “And one is much like another. Aye, a family needs a man, to feed them, protect them. But any decent man can do it. A woman …” His lips moved against my fingertips, a faint smile. “A woman takes life with her when she goes. A woman is … infinite possibility.”

“Idiot,” I said, very softly. “If you think one man is just like any other.”

We lay for a bit, watching the light grow.

“How many times have ye done it, Sassenach?” he asked suddenly. “Sat betwixt the dark and the dawn, and held a man’s fear in the palms of your hands?”

“Too many,” I said, but it wasn’t the truth, and he knew it. I heard his breath come, the faintest sound of humor, and he turned my hand palm up, his big thumb tracing the hills and valleys, joints and calluses, lifeline and heartline, and the smooth fleshy swell of the mount of Venus, where the faint scar of the letter “J” was still barely visible. I’d held him in my hand for the best part of my life.

“Part of the job,” I said, meaning no flippancy, and he did not take it that way.

“D’ye think I’m not afraid?” he asked quietly. “When I do my job?”

“Oh, you’re afraid,” I said. “But you do it anyway. You’re a frigging gambler—and the biggest gamble of all is a life, isn’t it? Maybe yours—maybe someone else’s.”

“Aye, well,” he said softly. “Ye’d know about that, I suppose.

“I’m the less bothered for myself,” he said thoughtfully. “Looking at it all in all, I mean, I’ve done the odd useful thing here and there. My children are grown; my grandchildren are thriving—that’s the most important thing, no?”

“It is,” I said. The sun was up; I heard a rooster crow, somewhere in the distance.

“Well, so. I canna say I’m so verra much afraid as I used to be. I shouldna like dying, of course—but there’d maybe be less regret in it. On the other hand”—one side of his mouth turned up as he looked at me—“while I’m maybe less afraid for myself, I’m that wee bit more reluctant to kill young men who’ve not yet lived their lives.” And that, I thought, was as close as I’d get to an apology for Denny Hunter.

“Going to assess the age of the people shooting at you, are you?” I asked, sitting up and beginning to brush hay out of my hair.

“Difficult,” he admitted.

“And I sincerely hope that you don’t propose to let some whippersnapper kill you, merely because they haven’t had such a full life as yours yet.”

He sat up, too, and faced me, serious, ends of hay bristling from hair and clothes.

“No,” he said. “I’ll kill them. I’ll just mind it more.”

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58

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Philadelphia
July 4, 1777

Grey had never been to Philadelphia before. Bar the streets, which were execrable, it seemed a pleasant city. Summer had graced the city’s trees with huge verdant crowns, and a walk left him lightly dusted with leaf fragments and the soles of his boots sticky with fallen sap. Perhaps it was the febrile temperature of the air that was responsible for Henry’s apparent state of mind, he thought darkly.

Not that he blamed his nephew. Mrs. Woodcock was lissome but rounded, with a lovely face and a warm character. *And* she had nursed him away from death’s door when the local prison officer had brought him to her, worried lest a potentially lucrative prisoner die before yielding a full harvest. That sort of thing formed a bond, he knew—though he had never, thank God, felt any sort of *tendresse* for any of the women who had attended him in ill health. Except for …

“Shit,” he said involuntarily, causing a clerical-looking gentleman to glare at him in passing.

He had clapped a mental teacup over the thought that had buzzed through his head like a meddlesome fly. Unable not to look at it, though, he cautiously lifted the cup and found Claire Fraser under it. He relaxed a little.

Certainly not a *tendresse*. On the other hand, he was damned if he could have said what it had been. A most peculiar sort of unsettling intimacy, at least—no doubt the result of her being Jamie Fraser's wife and her knowing what his own feelings for Jamie were. He dismissed Claire Fraser, and went back to worrying about his nephew.

Pleasant Mrs. Woodcock undeniably was, and just as undeniably rather too fond of Henry for a married woman—though her husband was a rebel, Henry had told him, and God knew when or whether he might return. Well enough; there was no danger of Henry losing his head and marrying her, at least. He could imagine the scandal, should Henry bring home a carpenter's widow, and she a sable enchantress, to boot. He grinned at the thought and felt more charitable toward Mercy Woodcock. She had, after all, saved Henry's life.

For now. The unwelcome thought buzzed in before he could clap the teacup over it. He couldn't avoid it for long; it kept coming back.

He understood Henry's reluctance to undergo another surgery. And there was the lingering fear that he might be too weak to withstand it. But at the same time, he could not be allowed to remain in his present state; he would simply dwindle and die, once illness and pain had drained the last of his vitality. Not even the fleshly attractions of Mrs. Woodcock would hold him, once that happened.

No, the surgery must be done, and soon. In Grey's conversations with Dr. Franklin, the old gentleman had made him acquainted with a friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, who he claimed was a most prodigious medical man. Dr. Franklin urged Grey to visit him, should he ever find himself in the city—had given Grey a letter of introduction, in fact. He was on his way to pre sent this, in hopes that Dr. Rush might either be practiced in surgery or be able to refer him to someone who was. Because, whether Henry wanted it or not, it had to be done. Grey could not take Henry home to England in his present state, and he had promised both Minnie and his brother that he would bring their youngest son back, were he still alive.

His foot slipped on a muddy cobble, and he let out a whoop and pitched sideways, arms pinwheeling for balance. He caught himself and shook his clothes back into order with a good assumption of dignity, ignoring the giggles of two milkmaids who had been watching.

Damn it all, she was back. Claire Fraser. Why?… Of course. The ether, as she called it. She'd asked him for a carboy of some sort of acid and had told him that she required it to make ether. Not as in the ethereal realm but a chemical substance that rendered people unconscious, so as to make surgery … painless.

He stopped dead in the middle of the street. Jamie had told him about his wife's experiments with the substance, with a full account of the amazing operation she had performed on a young boy, he rendered completely senseless as she opened his abdomen, removed an offending organ, and sewed him back together. After which the child was right as a grig, apparently.

He walked on more slowly, thinking furiously. Would she come? It was a laborious journey to almost anywhere from Fraser's Ridge. Not such a terrible trip from the mountain to the shore, though. It was summer, the weather was good; the journey could be made in less than two weeks. And if she would come to Wilmington, he could arrange for her to be brought to Philadelphia on whatever naval vessel was available—he knew people in the navy.

How long? How long might it take her—if she would come? More sobering thought: how long did Henry have?

He was pulled from these troubling reflections by what appeared to be a small riot proceeding down the street in his direction. A number of people, most of them drunken to judge by their behavior, which involved a good deal of shouting and pushing and waving of handkerchiefs. A young man was beating a drum, with much enthusiasm and no skill, and two children bore between them an outlandish banner, striped red and white but with no legend upon it.

He pressed back against a house, to give them room to pass. They did not pass, however, but instead hauled up before a house on the opposite side of the street and stood there shouting slogans in English and German. He caught the shout of "Liberty," and someone blew a cavalry charge upon a trumpet. And then he caught the shout of “Rush! Rush! Rush!”

Good God, it must be the house he was seeking, that of Dr. Rush. The mob seemed good-humored; he supposed they did not mean to drag the doctor out for a dose of tar and feathers, this being a notable form of public entertainment, or so he had been told. Cautiously, he approached and tapped a young woman on the shoulder.

“I beg your pardon.” He had to lean close and shout into her ear to be heard; she whirled and blinked in surprise, then caught sight of his butterfly waistcoat and broke into a broad smile. He smiled back.

“I am seeking Dr. Benjamin Rush,” he shouted. “Is this his house?”

“Yes, it is.” A young man beside the young woman heard him and turned, his eyebrows shooting up at sight of Grey. “You have business with Dr. Rush?”

“I have a letter of introduction to the doctor from a Dr. Franklin, a mutual—”

The young man’s face broke into a huge grin. Before he could say anything, though, the door of the house opened and a slender, well-dressed man in his thirties came out onto the stoop. There was a roar from the crowd, and the man, who must surely be Dr. Rush himself, held out his hands to them, laughing. The noise quieted for a moment, the man leaning out to talk with someone in the crowd. Then he ducked into the house, came out again with his coat on, came down the steps to a roar of applause, and the whole mob moved off again, banging and bugling with renewed fervor.

“Come along!” the young man bellowed in his ear. “There’ll be free beer!”

Which is how Lord John Grey found himself in the taproom of a prosperous tavern, celebrating the first anniversary of the publication of the Declaration of Independence. There were political speeches of an impassioned, if not very eloquent, variety, and it was in the course of these that Grey learned that Dr. Rush was not only a wealthy and influential rebel sympathizer but a prominent rebel himself; in fact, as he learned from his newfound friends, both Rush *and* Dr. Franklin turned out to have signed the seditious document in the first place.

Word spread through the people round them that Grey was a friend of Franklin's, and he was much hailed in consequence, eventually being conveyed by insensible degrees through the crowd until he found himself face-to-face with Benjamin Rush.

It wasn't the first time Grey had been in close proximity to a criminal, and he kept his composure. This was plainly not the time to lay his nephew's situation before Rush, and Grey contented himself with shaking the young doctor by the hand and mentioning his connection with Franklin. Rush was most cordial, and shouted over the noise that Grey must come to call at his house when they both should be at leisure, perhaps in the morning.

Grey expressed his great willingness to do so and retired gracefully through the crowd, hoping that the Crown would not manage to hang Rush before he had a chance to examine Henry.

A racket in the street outside put a momentary stop to the festivities. There was considerable shouting and the thump of projectiles striking the front of the building. One of these—which proved to be a large, muddy rock—struck and shattered a pane of the establishment's window, allowing the bellows of "Traitors! Renegados!" to be heard more clearly.

"Shut your face, lickspittle!" shouted someone inside the tavern. Globs of mud and more rocks were hurled, some of these coming through the open door and broken window, along with patriotic shouts of "God Save the King!"

"Geld the Royal Brute!" shouted Grey's earlier acquaintance in reply, and half the tavern rushed out into the street, some pausing to break legs from stools to assist in the political discussion which then ensued.

Grey was somewhat concerned lest Rush be set upon by the Loyalists in the street and attacked before he could be of use to Henry, but Rush and a few others whom he took to be prominent rebels, as well, hung back from the fray and, after taking brief counsel, elected to leave through the tavern's kitchen.

Grey found himself left in the company of a man from Norfolk named Paine, a malnourished, ill-dressed wretch, large of nose and vivid of personality, possessed of strong opinions on the subjects of liberty and democracy and a most remarkable command of epithet regarding the King. Finding conversation difficult, as he could not reasonably express any of his own contrary opinions on these subjects, Grey excused himself with the intention of following Rush and his friends out the back way.

The riot outside, having reached a brief crescendo, had proceeded to its natural conclusion with the flight of the Loyalists, and people now had begun to flow back into the tavern, borne on a tide of righteous indignation and self-congratulation. Among these was a tall, slender, dark man, who looked round from his conversation, met Grey's eye, and stopped dead.

Grey walked up to him, hoping that the beating of his heart was not audible above the fading noise in the street.

"Mr. Beauchamp," he said, and took Perseverance Wainwright by hand and wrist, in what might be taken for cordial greeting but was in reality firm detention. "A private word with you, sir?"

* * *

He would not bring Percy to the house he had taken for himself and Dottie. Dottie would not recognize him, for she had not even been born when Percy vanished from Grey's life; it was merely the operation of the instinct which would have prevented him giving a small child a venomous snake to play with.

Percy, whatever his motive, did not suggest taking Grey to *his* lodgings, probably didn't want Grey knowing where he was staying, in case he thought to abscond quietly. After a moment's indecision—for Grey did not yet know the city—Grey agreed to Percy's suggestion that they walk to the common called Southeast Square.

"It's a potter's field," Percy said, leading the way. "Where they bury strangers to the city."

"How appropriate," Grey said, but Percy either didn't hear or affected not to. It was some way, and they didn't talk much, the streets being full of people. Despite the holiday aspects and the striped banners hung here and there—they all seemed to have a field of stars, though he hadn't seen the same arrangement twice, and the stripes varied in size and color, some having red, white, and blue stripes, some only red and white—there was a frenetic air to the gaiety, and an edged sense of danger in the streets. Philadelphia might be the rebels' capital, but it was far from being a stronghold.

The common was quieter, as might be expected of a graveyard. At that, it was surprisingly pleasant. There were only a few wooden grave markers here and there, giving such details as were known about the person interred beneath them; no one would have gone to the expense of placing gravestones, though some charitable soul had erected a large stone cross upon a plinth in the center of the field. Without conference, they headed for this object, following the course of a small creek that ran through the common.

It had occurred to Grey that Percy might have suggested their destination in order to give himself time to think on the way. Well enough—he'd been thinking, too. So when Percy sat down upon the base of the plinth and turned to him with an air of expectation, he didn't bother with observations on the weather.

"Tell me about the Baron Amandine's second sister," he said, standing before Percy.

Percy blinked, startled, but then smiled.

"Really, John, you amaze me. Claude didn't tell you about Amelie, I'm sure."

Grey didn't reply to that, but folded his hands beneath the tail of his coat and waited. Percy thought for a moment, then shrugged.

"All right. She was Claude's older sister; my wife, Cecile, is the younger."

" 'Was,' " Grey repeated. "So she's dead."

"She's been dead for some forty years. Why are you interested in her?" Percy pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve to dab at his temples; the day was hot, and it had been a long walk; Grey's own shirt was damp.

"Where did she die?"

"In a brothel in Paris." That stopped Grey in his tracks. Percy saw it and gave a wry smile. "If you must know, John, I am looking for her son."

Grey stared at him for a moment, then slowly sat down beside him. The gray stone of the plinth was warm under his buttocks.

"All right," he said, after a moment. "Tell me, if you would be so good."

Percy gave him a sideways glance of amusement—full of wariness, but still amused.

"There are things I cannot tell you, John, as you must surely appreciate. By the way, I hear that there is a rather heated discussion taking place between the British secretaries of state as to which of them shall make an approach regarding my previous offer—and to whom, exactly, to make it. I suppose this is your doing? I thank you."

"Don't change the subject. I'm not asking you about your previous offer." *Not yet, anyway*. "I'm asking you about Amelie Beauchamp and her son. I cannot see how they may be connected with the other matter, so I assume they have some personal significance to you. Naturally, there are things you cannot tell me regarding the larger matter"—he bowed slightly—"but this mystery about the baron's sister seems somewhat more personal."

"It is." Percy was turning something over in his mind; Grey could see it working behind his eyes. The eyes were lined and a little pouched but the same as ever; a warm, lively brown, the color of sherry-sack. His fingers drummed briefly on the stone, then stopped, and he turned to Grey with an air of decision.

"Very well. Bulldog that you are, if I *don't* tell you, you will doubtless be following me all over Philadelphia, in an effort to discover my purpose in being here."

This was precisely what Grey intended doing in any case, but he made an indeterminate noise that might be taken as encouragement before asking, "What *is* your purpose in being here?"

"I'm looking for a printer named Fergus Fraser." Grey blinked at that; he hadn't been expecting any concrete answer.

"Who is …?"

Percy held up a hand, folding down the fingers as he spoke.

"He is, first, the son of one James Fraser, a notable ex-Jacobite and current rebel. He is, secondly, a printer, as indicated—and, I suspect, a rebel like his father. And, thirdly, I strongly suspect that he is the son of Amelie Beauchamp."

There were blue and red dragonflies hovering over the creek; Grey felt as though one of these insects had flown suddenly up his nose.

"You are telling me that James Fraser had an illegitimate son by a French whore? Who happened also to be the daughter of an ancient noble family?" Shock did not begin to describe his feelings, but he kept his tone light, and Percy laughed.

"No. The printer *is* Fraser's son, but is adopted. He took the boy from a brothel in Paris more than thirty years ago." A trickle of sweat ran down the side of Percy's neck, and he wiped it away. The warmth of the day had made his cologne blossom on his skin; Grey caught the hint of ambergris and carnation, spice and musk together.

"Amelie was, as I said, Claude's older sister. In her teens she was seduced by a much older man, a married nobleman, and got with child. The normal thing would have been for her simply to be married hastily off to a complaisant husband, but the nobleman's wife died quite suddenly, and Amelie made a fuss, insisting that since he was now free, he must marry *her*."

"He was not so inclined?"

"No. Claude's father was, though. I suppose he thought such a marriage would improve the family fortunes; the comte was a very wealthy man, and while not political, did have a certain … standing."

The old Baron Amandine had been willing to keep things quiet in the beginning, but as he began to see the possibilities of the situation, he became bolder and threatened all kinds of things, from a complaint to the King—for old Amandine was active at court, unlike his son—to a lawsuit for damages and an application to the Church for excommunication.

"Could he actually have done that?" Grey asked, fascinated despite his reservations about Percy's veracity. Percy smiled briefly.

"He could have complained to the King. In any case, he didn't get the chance. Amelie disappeared."

The girl had vanished from her home in the middle of one night, taking her jewels. It was thought that perhaps she had intended to run away to her lover, in the hope that he would give in and marry her, but the comte professed complete ignorance of the matter, and no one came forward to say that they had seen her, either leaving *Trois Flèches* or entering the Paris mansion of the Comte St. Germain.

"And you think she somehow ended in a Paris brothel?" Grey said incredulously. "How? And if so, how did you discover this?"

"I found her marriage lines."

"What?"

"A contract of marriage, between Amelie Elise LeVigne Beauchamp and Robert-Francoise Quesnay de St. Germain. Signed by both parties. And a priest. It was in the library at *Trois Flèches*, inside the family Bible. Claude and Cecile are not very religiously inclined, I'm afraid," Percy said, shaking his head.

"And you are?" That made Percy laugh; he knew that Grey knew precisely what his feelings regarding religion were.

"I was bored," he said without apology.

"Life at *Trois Flèches must* have been tedious indeed, if it forced you to read the Bible. Did the sub-gardener quit?"

"Did—oh, Emile." Percy grinned. "No, but he had a terrible bout of *la grippe* that month. Couldn't breathe through his nose at all, poor man."

Grey felt again a treacherous impulse to laugh, but restrained it, and Percy went on without a pause.

"I actually wasn't *reading* it; I have all of the most excessive damnations memorized, after all. I was interested in the cover."

"Heavily bejeweled, was it?" Grey asked dryly, and Percy gave him a look of mild offense.

"It has not *always* got to do with money, John, even for those of us not blessed with such substance as yourself."

"My apologies," said Grey. "Why the Bible, then?"

"I will have you know that I am a bookbinder of no mean repute," Percy said, preening a little. "I took it up in Italy as a means of making a living. After you so gallantly saved my life. Thank you for that, by the way," he said, with a direct look whose sudden seriousness made Grey look down to avoid his eyes.

"You're welcome," he said gruffly, and, bending, carefully induced a small green caterpillar that was inching its way across the polished toe of his boot to inch onto his finger.

"Anyway," Percy went on, not losing a beat, "I discovered this curious document. I had heard of the family scandal, of course, and recognized the names at once."

"You asked the present baron about it?"

"I did. What did you think of Claude, by the way?" Percy had always been like quicksilver, Grey thought, and he hadn't lost any of his mutability with age.

"Bad cardplayer. A wonderful voice, though—does he sing?"

"Indeed he does. And you're right about the cards. He can keep a secret, if he likes, but he can't lie at all. You'd be amazed at how powerful a thing perfect honesty is, in some circumstances," Percy added reflectively. "It almost makes me think there might be something in the Eighth Commandment."

Grey muttered something about "more honored in the breach," but then coughed and begged that Percy might continue.

"He didn't know about the marriage contract, I'm sure of it. He was genuinely staggered. And after a certain amount of hesitation—'bloody, bold, and resolute' may be your watchwords, John, but they are not his—he gave his consent for me to dig into the matter."

Grey ignored the implied flattery—if that's what it was, and he thought it was—and carefully deposited the caterpillar onto the leaves of what looked like an edible bush.

"You looked for the priest," he said with certainty.

Percy laughed with what sounded like genuine pleasure, and it occurred to Grey with a small shock that of course he knew Percy's mind, and Percy his; they had been conversing, through the veils of statecraft and secrecy, for many years. Of course, Percy had likely known to whom he was talking, and Grey hadn't.

"Yes, I did. He was dead—murdered. Killed in the street at night while hurrying to give the last rites to a dying parishioner, such a terrible thing. A week after the disappearance of Amelie Beauchamp."

This was beginning to rouse Grey's professional interest, though the private side of him was still more than wary.

"The next thing would have been the comte—but if he was capable of killing a priest to keep his secrets, it would have been dangerous to approach him directly," Grey said. "His servants, then?"

Percy nodded, mouth quirked at one corner in appreciation of Grey's acuity.

"The comte was dead, too—or he disappeared, at least; he had a reputation as a sorceror, oddly enough—and he died a good ten years after Amelie. But I looked for his old servants, yes. I found a few of them. For some people, it really *is* always about money, and the assistant coachman was one of those. Two days after Amelie disappeared, he delivered a carpet to a brothel near the Rue Fauborg. A very heavy carpet that had about it a smell of opium—which he recognized, because he had at one point transported a troupe of Chinese acrobats who came to entertain at a fete at the mansion."

"And so you went to the brothel. Where money …"

"They say water is the universal solvent," Percy said, shaking his head, "but it isn't. You could plunge a man into a barrel of freezing water and leave him for a week, and you would accomplish much less than you might with a modest quantity of gold."

Grey silently noted the adjective "freezing," and nodded to Percy to continue.

"It took some time, repeated visits, different attempts—the madam was a true professional, meaning that whoever had paid her predecessor had done so on a staggering scale, and her doorkeeper, while old enough, had had his tongue torn out at an early age; no help there. And of course none of the whores had been there when the infamous carpet was delivered, that being so long before."

He had, however, patiently traced the families of the present whores—for some occupations run in families—and managed after months of work to discover an old woman who had been employed at the brothel and who recognized the miniature of Amelie that he had brought from *Trois Flèches*.

The girl had indeed been brought to the brothel, in the middle stages of pregnancy. That had not mattered particularly; there were patrons with such tastes. A few months later, she had been delivered of a son. She had survived childbirth but died a year later, during a plague of influenza.

"And I could not *begin* to tell you the difficulties of finding out anything about a child born in a Paris brothel forty-odd years ago, my dear." Percy sighed, employing his handkerchief again.

"But your name is Perseverance," Grey noted with extreme dryness, and Percy glanced sharply at him.

"Do you know," he said lightly, "I believe you are the only person in the world who knows that?" And from the expression in his eyes, that was one too many.

"Your secret is safe with me," Grey said. "That one, at least. What about Denys Randall-Isaacs?"

It worked. Percy's face shimmered like a pool of quicksilver in the sun. In half a heartbeat, he had the perfect blankness back in place—but it was too late.

Grey laughed, though without humor, and stood up.

"Thank you, Perseverance," he said, and walked away through the grassy graves of the nameless poor.

That night, when his household was asleep, he took pen and ink to write to Arthur Norrington, to Harry Quarry, and to his brother. Toward dawn, he began, for the first time in two years, to write to Jamie Fraser.

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59

BATTLE OF BENNINGTON

General Burgoyne's camp
September 11, 1777

The smoke of burnt and burning fields hung over the camp, had done so for days. The Americans were still withdrawing, destroying the countryside in their wake.

William was with Sandy Lindsay, talking about the best way to cook a turkey—one of Lindsay's scouts having just brought him one—when the letter arrived. It was likely William's imagination that a dreadful silence fell upon the camp, the earth shook, and the veil of the temple was rent in twain. But it was very shortly apparent that something had happened, nonetheless.

There was a definite change in the air, something amiss in the rhythms of speech and movement among the men surrounding them. Balcarres felt it, too, and stopped in his examination of the turkey's outspread wing, looking at William with eyebrows raised.

"What?" said William.

"I don't know, but it isn't good." Balcarres thrust the limp turkey into his orderly's hands and, snatching up his hat, made for Burgoyne's tent, William on his heels.

They found Burgoyne tight-lipped and white with anger, his senior officers in clusters round him, speaking to one another in low, shocked voices.

Captain Sir Francis Clerke, the general's aide-de-camp, emerged from the press, head down and face shadowed. Balcarres caught at his elbow as he passed.

"Francis—what's happened?"

Captain Clerke was looking noticeably agitated. He glanced behind him into the tent, then stepped aside and moved out of earshot, taking Balcarres and William with him.

"Howe," he said. "He's not coming."

"Not coming?" William said stupidly. "But—is he not leaving New York after all?"

"He's leaving," Clerke said, his lips so tight it was a wonder he could speak at all. "To invade Pennsylvania."

"But—" Balcarres darted an appalled look toward the entrance to the tent, then back at Clerke.

"Exactly."

The true proportions of the disaster were revealing themselves to William. General Howe was not merely cocking a snook at General Burgoyne by ignoring his plan, which would be bad enough from Burgoyne's point of view. By choosing to march on Philadelphia rather than coming up the Hudson to join Burgoyne's troops, Howe had left Burgoyne essentially to his own devices, in terms of supply and reinforcement.

In other words, they were on their own, separated from their supply trains, with the disagreeable choice of continuing to pursue the retreating Americans through a wilderness from which all sustenance had been stripped—or turning round and marching ignominiously back to Canada, through a wilderness from which all sustenance had been stripped.

Balcarres had been expostulating along these lines to Sir Francis, who rubbed a hand over his face in frustration, shaking his head.

"I know," he said. "If you'll excuse me, my lords—"

"Where are you going?" William asked, and Clerke glanced at him.

"To tell Mrs. Lind," Clerke said. "I thought I'd best warn her." Mrs. Lind was the wife of the chief commisary officer. She was also General Burgoyne's mistress.

* * *

Whether Mrs. Lind had exerted her undeniable gifts to good effect, or whether the general's natural resiliency of character had asserted itself, the blow of Howe's letter was swiftly encompassed. *Whatever you want to say about him,* William wrote in his weekly letter to Lord John, *he knows the benefit of certain decision and swift action. We have resumed our pursuit of the Americans' chief body of troops with redoubled effort. Most of our horses have been abandoned, stolen, or eaten. I have quite worn through the soles of one pair of boots*.

In the meantime, we receive intelligence from one of the scouts to the effect that the town of Bennington, which is not too far distant, is being used as a gathering place for the American commissary. By report, it is lightly guarded, and so the General is sending Colonel Baum, one of the Hessians, with five hundred troops to capture these much-needed supplies. We leave in the morning.

Whether his drunken conversation with Balcarres was in part responsible, William never knew, but he had discovered that he was now spoken of as being "good with Indians." And whether it was owing to this dubious capacity or to the fact that he could speak basic German, he found himself on the morning of August 12 deputed to accompany Colonel Baum's foraging expedition, this including a number of dismounted Brunswick cavalry, two three-pounder artillery pieces, and a hundred Indians.

By report, the Americans were receiving cattle, funneled out of New England, these being collected in quantity in Bennington, as well as a considerable number of wagons, these full of corn, flour, and other necessaries.

It was, for a wonder, not raining when they set out, and that alone gave the expedition a feeling of optimism. Anticipation of food increased this sense significantly. Rations had been short for what seemed a very long time, though in fact it had been only a week or so. Still, more than a day spent marching without adequate food seems a long time, as William had good cause to know.

Many of the Indians were still mounted; they circled the main body of soldiers, riding ahead a little way to scout the road, coming back to offer guidance through or around places where the road—no more than a trace at the best of times—had given up the fight and been absorbed by the forest or drowned by one of the rain-swollen streams that leapt unexpectedly out of the hills. Bennington was near a river called the Walloomsac, and as they walked, William was discussing in a desultory way with one of the Hessian lieutenants whether it might be possible to load the stores onto rafts for transport to a rendezvous downstream.

This discussion was entirely theoretical, since neither of them knew where the Walloomsac went nor whether it was navigable to any extent, but it gave both men a chance to practice the other's language and so passed the time on a long, hot march.

"My father spent much time in Germany," William told Ober-Leftenant Gruenwald, in his careful, slow German. "He is of the food of Hanover very fond."

Gruenwald, from Hesse-Cassel, allowed himself a derisive twitch of the mustache at mention of Hanover, but contented himself with the observation that even a Hanoverian could roast a cow and perhaps boil some potatoes to accompany it. But his own mother made a dish from the flesh of swine and apples, beswimming in red wine and spiced with nutmeg and cinnamon, that made his mouth water only to remember.

Water was running down Gruenwald's face, sweat making tracks in the dust and dampening the collar of his light-blue coat. He took off his tall grenadier's headdress and wiped his head with a giant spotted kerchief, sodden from many earlier employments.

"I think we will maybe not find cinnamon today," Willie said. "Maybe a pig, though."

"If we do, I will him roast for you," Gruenwald assured him. "As for apples …" he tucked a hand into his tunic and withdrew a handful of small red crab apples, which he shared out with William. "I haff a bushel of these. I haff–"

Excited yips from an Indian riding back down the column interrupted him, and William looked up to see the rider throw back an arm, gesturing behind him and shouting, "River!"

The word enlivened the sagging columns, and William saw the cavalry—who had insisted upon wearing their high boots and their broadswords, in spite of their lack of horses, and had suffered in consequence—draw themselves up, clanking loudly with anticipation.

Another shout came from the forward line.

“Cow turds!”

That caused a general cheer and much laughter among the men, who hastened on with a quicker step. William saw Colonel Baum, who did still have a horse, turn out of the column and wait on the roadside, leaning down to speak briefly with the officers as they came past. William saw his aide lean close, pointing up a small hill opposite.

“What do you think—” he said, turning to Gruenwald, and was startled to find the ober-leftenant staring at him blank-faced, his jaw hanging open. The man’s hand loosened and fell to his side, and the mitred helmet fell and rolled away in the dust. William blinked and saw a thick worm of red snake its way slowly down from under Gruenwald’s dark hair.

Gruenwald sat down quite suddenly and fell backward in the road, his face gone a muddy white.

“Shit!” said William, and jerked suddenly to an awareness of what had just happened. *“Ambush!”* he bellowed at the top of his lungs. *“Das ist ein Überfall!!”*

There were shouts of alarm rising from the column, and the crack of sporadic firing from the woods. William grabbed Gruenwald under the arms and dragged him hastily into the shelter of a group of pine trees. The ober-leftenant was still alive, though his coat was wet with sweat and blood. William made sure the German’s pistol was loaded and in his hand before taking his own pistol and dashing toward Baum, who was standing in his stirrups, shrieking directions in high, shrill German.

He caught only a word here and there and looked urgently round, to see whether he could tell what the colonel’s orders were from the actions of the Hessians. He caught sight of a little group of scouts, running down the road toward him, and ran to meet them.

“Goddamned lot of rebels,” one scout gasped, out of breath, pointing behind him. “Coming.”

“Where? How far?” He felt as though he were about to run out of his skin, but forced himself to stand still, speak calmly, breathe.

A mile, maybe two. He did breathe then, and managed to ask how many there were. Maybe two hundred, maybe more. Armed with muskets, but no artillery.

“Right. Go back and keep an eye on them.” He turned back toward Colonel Baum, feeling the surface of the road strange under his feet, as though it wasn’t quite where he expected it to be.

* * *

They dug in, hastily but efficiently, entrenching themselves behind shallow earthworks and makeshift barricades of fallen trees. The guns were dragged up the small hill and aimed to cover the road. The rebels, of course, ignored the road, and swarmed in from both sides.

There might have been two hundred men in the first wave; it was impossible to count them as they darted through the heavy wood. William could see the flicker of movement and fired at it, but without any great hope of hitting anyone. The wave hesitated, but only for a moment.

Then a strong voice bellowed, somewhere behind the rebel front, “We take them now, or Molly Stark’s a widow tonight!”

“What?” said William, disbelieving. Whatever the man shouting had meant, his exhortation had a marked effect, for an enormous number of rebels came boiling out of the trees, headed at a mad run for the guns. The soldiers minding the guns promptly fled, and so did a good many of the others.

The rebels were making short work of the rest, and William had just settled down grimly to do what he could before they got him, when two Indians came springing over the rolling ground, seized him under the arms, and, yanking him to his feet, propelled him rapidly away.

Which was how Lieutenant Ellesmere found himself once more cast in the role of Cassandra, reporting the debacle at Bennington to

General Burgoyne. Men killed and wounded, guns lost—and not a single cow to be shown for it.

And I haven't yet killed a single rebel, either, he thought tiredly, making his way slowly back to his tent afterward. He thought he should regret that, but wasn't sure he did.

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Deserter Game, round II

Jamie had been bathing in the river, sluicing sweat and grime from his body, when he heard remarkably odd swearing in French. The words were French, but the sentiments expressed were definitely not. Curious, he clambered out of the water, dressed, and went down the bank a little way, where he discovered a young man waving his arms and gesturing in an agitated attempt to make himself understood to a bemused party of workmen. As half of them were Germans and the rest Americans from Virginia, his efforts to communicate with them in French had so far succeeded only in entertaining them.

Jamie had introduced himself and offered his services as interpreter. Which is how he had come to spend a good bit of each day with the young Polish engineer whose unpronounceable last name had quickly been shortened to "Kos."

He found Kos both intelligent and rather touching in his enthusiasm—and was himself interested in the fortifications Kościuszko (for he prided himself on being able to say it correctly) was building. Kos, for his part, was both grateful for the linguistic assistance and interested in the occasional observations and suggestions that Jamie was able to make, as the result of his conversations with Brianna.

Talking about vectors and stresses made him miss her almost unbearably but at the same time brought her somehow nearer to him, and he found himself spending more and more time with the young Pole, learning bits of his language and allowing Kos to practice what he fondly imagined to be English.

"What is it that brought ye here?" Jamie asked one day. In spite of the lack of pay, a remarkable number of European officers had come to join—or tried to join—the Continental army, evidently feeling that even if the prospects of plunder were limited, they could bamboozle the Congress into granting them rank as generals, which they could then parlay into further occupation back in Europe. Some of these dubious volunteers were actually of use, but he'd heard a good bit of muttering about those who weren't. Thinking of Matthias Fermoy, he was inclined to mutter a bit himself.

Kos wasn't one of these, though.

"Well, first, money," he said frankly, when asked how he had come to be in America. "My brother the manor in Poland has, but family no money, nothing for me. No girl look at me without money." He shrugged. "No place in Polish army, but I know how to build things, I come where things to build." He grinned. "Maybe girls, too. Girls with good family, good money."

"If ye came for money and girls, man, ye joined the wrong army," Jamie said dryly, and Kościuszko laughed.

"I say *first* money," he corrected. "I come to Philadelphia, read there *La Declaration*." He pronounced it in French, and bared his head in reverence at the name, clasping his sweat-stained hat to his breast. "This thing, this writing … I am ravish."

So ravished was he by the sentiments expressed in that noble document that he had at once sought out its author. While probably surprised by the sudden advent of a passionate young Pole in his midst, Thomas Jefferson had made him welcome, and the two men had spent most of a day deeply involved in the discussion of philosophy (in French), from which they had emerged fast friends.

"Great man," Kos assured Jamie solemnly, crossing himself before putting his hat back on. "God keep him safe."

"Dieu accorde-lui la sagesse," Jamie replied. *God grant him wisdom.* He thought that Jefferson would certainly be safe, as he was no soldier. Which reminded him uncomfortably of Benedict Arnold, but that was not a matter he could—or would—do anything about.

Kos had wiped a strand of stringy dark hair out of his mouth and shaken his head.

"Maybe wife, one day, if God wills. This—what we do here—more important than wife."

They returned to work, but Jamie found his mind dwelling with interest on the conversation. The notion that it was better to spend one's life in pursuit of a noble goal than merely to seek safety—he agreed with that entirely. But surely such purity of purpose was the province of men without families? A pardox there: a man who sought his own safety was a coward; a man who risked his family's safety was a poltroon, if not worse.

That led on to more rambling paths of thought and further interesting paradoxes: Do women hold back the evolution of such things as freedom and other social ideals, out of fear for themselves or their children? Or do they in fact inspire such things—and the risks required to reach them—by providing the things worth fighting for? Not merely fighting to defend, either, but to propel forward, for a man wanted more for his children than he would ever have.

He would have to ask Claire what she thought of this, though he smiled to think of some of the things she *might* think of it, particularly the part about whether women hindered social evolution by their nature. She'd told him something of her own experiences in the Great War—he couldn't think of it by any other name, though she told him there was another, earlier one by that name. She said disparaging things about heroes now and then, but only when he'd hurt himself; she knew fine what men were for.

Would he be here, in fact, if it weren't for her? Would he do this anyway, only for the sake of the ideals of the Revolution, if he were not assured of victory? He had to admit that only a madman, an idealist, or a truly desperate man would be here now. Any sane person who knew anything about armies would have shaken his head and turned away, appalled. He often felt appalled, himself.

But he would, in fact, do it—were he alone. A man's life had to have more purpose than only to feed himself each day. And this was a grand purpose—grander, maybe, than anyone else fighting for it knew. And if it took his own life in the doing … he wouldn't enjoy it, but he'd be comforted in the dying, knowing he'd helped. After all, it wasn't as though he would be leaving his wife helpless; unlike most wives, Claire would have a place to go if something befell him.

He was once more in the river, floating on his back and thinking along these lines, when he heard the gasp. It was a feminine gasp, and he put his feet down at once and stood up, wet hair streaming over his face. He shoved it back to find Rachel Hunter standing on the bank, both hands pressed over her eyes and every line of her body strained in an eloquence of distress.

"Did ye want me, Rachel?" he asked, wiping water out of his eyes in an effort to locate just where on the riverbank he had left his clothes. She gasped again and turned her face in his direction, hands still over her eyes.

"Friend James! Thy wife said I would find thee here. I beg pardon for—please! Come out at once!" Her anguish broke out and her hands dropped, though she kept her eyes tight shut as she reached out to him, pleading.

"What—"

"Denny! The British have him!"

Cold shot through his veins, much colder than the wind on his exposed wet skin.

"Where? How? Ye can look now," he added, hastily buttoning his breeches.

"He went with another man, posing as deserters." He was up the bank beside her, shirt over his arm, and saw that she had her brother's spectacles in the pocket of her apron; her hand kept going to them, clutching them. "I told him not to, I did!"

"I told him, too," Jamie said grimly. "Are ye sure, lass?"

She nodded, pale as a sheet and her eyes huge in her face, but not—not yet—weeping.

"The other man—he came back, just now, and ran to find me. He—it was ill-luck, he said; they were brought before a major, and it was the same man who had threatened to hang Denny when he did it last time! The other man ran for it and escaped, but they caught

Denny, and this time, this time …" She was gasping for breath and could barely speak for dread, he saw. He put a hand on her arm.

"Find the other man and send him to my tent, so he can tell me exactly where your brother is. I'll go to fetch Ian and we'll get him back." He squeezed her arm gently to make her look at him, and she did, though so distracted he thought she barely saw him.

"Dinna fash yourself. We'll get him back for ye," he repeated gently. "I swear it, by Christ and His Mother."

"Thee must not swear—oh, the devil with it!" she cried, then clapped a hand over her mouth. She shut her eyes, swallowed, and took it away again.

"Thank you," she said.

"Ye're welcome," he said, with an eye to the sinking sun. Did the British prefer to hang people at sunset or at dawn? "We'll get him back," he said once more, firmly. *Dead or alive.*

* * *

The camp's commanding officer had built a gibbet in the center of the camp. It was a crude affair of unbarked logs and rough timber, and from the holes and gouges round its nails, had been disassembled and moved several times. It looked effective, though, and the dangling noose gave Jamie a feeling of ice in his water.

"We've played the deserter game once too often," Jamie whispered to his nephew. "Or maybe three."

"D'ye think he's ever used it?" Ian murmured back, peering down at the sinister thing through their screen of oak saplings.

"He wouldna go to that much work only to scare someone."

It scared *him*, badly. He didn't point out to Ian the spot near the bottom of the main upright, where someone's—or someones'—desperately flailing feet had kicked away chunks of the bark. The makeshift gibbet wasn't high enough for the drop to break a man's neck; a man hanged on it would strangle slowly.

He touched his own neck in reflexive aversion, Roger Mac's mangled throat and its ugly raw scar clear in his mind. Even clearer was the memory of the grief that had overwhelmed him, coming to take down Roger Mac from the tree they'd hanged him on, knowing him dead and the world changed forever. It had been, too, though he hadn't died.

Well, it wasn't going to change for Rachel Hunter. They weren't too late, that was the important thing. He said as much to Ian, who didn't reply but gave him a brief glance of surprise.

How do you know? it said, plain as words. He lifted a shoulder and inclined his head toward a spot a little farther down the hill, where an outcrop of rock covered in moss and bearberry would give them cover. They moved off silently, keeping low, making their movements in the same slow rhythm to which the wood was moving. It was twilight and the world was full of shadows; it was no trick to be two more.

He knew they hadn't hanged Denny Hunter yet, because he'd seen men hanged. Execution left a stain upon the air and marked the souls of those who saw it.

The camp was quiet. Not literally—the soldiers were making considerable racket, and a good thing, too—but in terms of its spirit. There was neither a sense of dread oppression nor the sick excitement that sprang from the same source; you could feel such things. So Denny Hunter was either here, alive—or had been sent elsewhere. If he was here, where would he be?

Confined somehow, and under guard. This wasn't a permanent camp; there was no stockade. It was a big camp, though, and it took them some time to circle it, checking to see whether Hunter might be somewhere in the open, tied to a tree or shackled to a wagon. He was nowhere in sight, though. That left the tents.

There were four large ones, and one of these plainly housed the commissary; it stood apart and had a small cluster of wagons near it. It had also a constant stream of men going in and out, emerging with sacks of flour or dried peas. No meat, though he could smell cooking rabbit and squirrel from some of the campfires. The German deserters had been right, then; the army was living off the land, as well as it could.

"The commander's tent?" Ian whispered softly to him. It was plain to see, with its pennants and the knot of men who stood about just outside its entrance.

“I hope not.” Plainly they’d have taken Denny Hunter *to* the commander for interrogation. And if he were still in doubt as to Hunter’s *bona fides*, he might have kept the man close at hand for further questioning.

Had he already made up his mind on the matter, though—and Rachel had been convinced of it—he wouldn’t keep him. He would have been sent somewhere under guard to await his reckoning. Under guard and out of sight, though Jamie doubted the British commander feared a rescue attempt.

“Eeny-meeny-miney-mo,” he muttered under his breath, twitching a finger back and forth between the two remaining tents. A guard with a musket was standing more or less between them; no telling which he was set to guard. “That one.” He lifted his chin to the one on the right, but even as he did so felt Ian stiffen beside him.

“Nay,” Ian said softly, eyes riveted. “The other.”

There was something strange in Ian’s voice, and Jamie glanced at him in surprise, then down at the tent.

At first, his only thought was a fleeting sense of confusion. Then the world changed.

It was twilight, but they were by now no more than fifty yards away; there was no mistaking it. He hadn’t seen the boy since he was twelve, but he had memorized every moment they’d spent in each other’s presence: the way he carried himself, the quick, graceful movement—*that’s from his mother*, he thought in a daze of shock, seeing the tall young officer make a gesture of the hand that was Geneva Dunsany to the life—the shape of his back, his head and ears, though the slender shoulders had thickened to a man’s. *Mine*, he thought, with a surge of pride that shocked him nearly as much as William’s sudden appearance had. *They’re mine*.

Jarring as they were, these thoughts took less than half a second to dash through his head and out again. He breathed in, very slowly, and out again. Had Ian remembered William from their meeting seven years earlier? Or was the resemblance so instantly visible to a casual eye?

It didn’t matter now. The camp was beginning its supper preparations; within minutes everyone would be engrossed in the meal. It was better to move then, even without the cover of darkness.

“It has to be me, aye?” Ian gripped his wrist, compelling his attention. “D’ye want to make the diversion before or after?”

“After.” He’d been thinking, in the back of his mind, all the time they were creeping toward the camp, and now the decision lay ready, as though someone else had made it. “Best if we can get him away quiet. Try, and if things go wrong, screech.”

Ian nodded and, with no further conversation, dropped to his belly and began a stealthy worming through the brush. The evening was cool and pleasant after the heat of the day, but Jamie’s hands felt cold and he cupped them round the clay belly of the little firepot. He’d carried it from their own camp, feeding it bits of dry stick along the way. It was hissing softly to itself as it fed on a chunk of dried hickory, both the sight and the smell of it safely hidden in the haze of campfire smoke that drifted through the trees, dispelling the gnats and the bloodthirsty mosquitoes, thank God and His mother.

Wondering at his own twitching—it wasn’t like him—he touched his sporran, checking yet again that the cork had not come loose from the bottle of turpentine, even though he knew well it hadn’t; he’d smell it.

The arrows in his quiver shifted as he shifted his weight, the fletchings rustling. He was in easy bowshot of the commander’s tent, could have the canvas well alight in seconds if Ian screeched. If he didn’t …

He began to move again, eyes flitting over the ground, searching for a patch that would do. Dry grass there was in plenty, but it would go up too fast if that was all there was. He wanted a fast flame but a big one.

The soldiers would have already scavenged the nearby forest for firewood, but he spotted a fallen fir snag, too heavy to carry away. Foragers had snapped the lower branches off, but there were plenty left, thick with dried needles that the wind hadn’t taken yet. He moved back slowly, far enough out of sight that he could move quickly again, gathering armfuls of dry grass, bark scraped hasty from a log, anything that would kindle.

Flaming arrows in the commander's tent would compel instant attention, to be sure, but they would also cause widespread alarm; soldiers would boil out of the camp like hornets, looking for attackers. A grass fire, no. Such things were common, and while it would certainly create diversion, no one would be looking further once they'd seen it was nothing.

A few minutes and he had his diverson ready. So busy he'd been, he hadn't even taken thought to look again at his son.

"God damn ye for a liar, Jamie Fraser," he said under his breath, and looked.

William was gone.

* * *

The soldiers were at their supper; cheerful talk and the sounds of eating covered any small noises Ian made as he walked softly round the side of the left-hand tent. If someone saw him, he'd speak to them in Mohawk, claim to be a scout from Burgoyne's camp, come with information. By the time they got him in front of the commander, he'd either have thought of some good, picturesque information, or he'd scream and reckon to fight his way out while they were distracted by flaming arrows.

That wouldn't help Denny Hunter, though, and he was careful. There were pickets posted, but he and Uncle Jamie had watched long enough to see the pattern of them and spy the dead spot where a picket's vision was obstructed by the trees. He knew he couldn't be seen behind the tent, save someone heading for the woods for a piss stumbled over him.

There was a gap at the bottom of the tent and a candlestick lit inside; a spot in the canvas glowed dim in the twilight. He watched the gap and saw no shadow move. Right, then.

He lay down and inserted a cautious hand, feeling along the dirt floor, hoping no one inside stamped on his hand. If he could find a cot, he could squirm in and lie under it. If—something touched his hand and he bit his tongue, hard.

"Is thee a friend?" whispered Denny's voice. Ian could see the Quaker's shadow on the canvas, a squatting blur, and Denny's hand held his hard.

"Aye, it's me," he whispered back. "Keep quiet. Stand back."

Denny moved, and Ian heard the clink of metal. Dammit, the buggers had him in fetters. He compressed his lips and slid under the edge of the tent.

Denny greeted him silently, his face alight with hope and alarm. The little Quaker lifted his hands, nodded to his feet. Full irons. Christ, they *did* mean to hang him.

Ian leaned in close to whisper in Denny's ear.

"I go out before ye. Lie down there, easy as ye can, close as ye can." He jerked his chin at the back wall of the tent. "Dinna move yourself; I'll pull ye through." Then get Denny onto his shoulders like a dead fawn and head for the woods, hooting like an owl to let Uncle Jamie know it was time to set the fire.

It wasn't possible to move a man in chains in total silence, but with any luck at all, the scraping of spoons on mess kits and the soldiers' conversation would cover any stray clinking. He pulled the canvas out as far as he could, reached under, and took firm hold of Denny's shoulders. The wee bugger was heavier than he looked, but Ian got Denny's upper body mostly clear of the tent without too much trouble. Sweating, he scuttled to the side and reached in to take hold of Denny's ankles, wrapping the chain round his own wrist to take up the slack.

There was no sound, but Ian's head jerked up before his mind even told him that the air near him had moved in a way that meant someone was standing there.

"Hush!" he said by reflex, not knowing whether he was talking to Denny or to the tall soldier who had stepped out of the wood behind him.

"What the devil—" the soldier began, sounding startled. He didn't finish the question, but took three paces fast and grabbed Ian by the wrist.

“Who are you and what are you—Good God, where did *you* come from?” William the soldier stared into Ian’s face, and Ian thanked God briefly for the fact that his other wrist was immobilized by Denny’s chain, for otherwise William would be already dead. And he didn’t want to have to tell Uncle Jamie *that*.

“He has come to help me escape, Friend William,” Denny Hunter said mildly from the shadows on the ground behind Ian. “I would take it kindly if thee did not hinder him, though I will understand if thy duty compels thee.”

William’s head jerked, looked wildly round, then down. Had the circumstances been less dire, Ian would have laughed at the expressions—for there were a great number of them, run through in the course of a heartbeat—on it. William closed his eyes for an instant, then opened them again.

“Don’t tell me,” he said shortly. “I don’t want to know.” He squatted beside Ian and, between them, they had Denny out in a matter of seconds. Ian took a deep breath, put his hands to his mouth, and hooted, then paused a moment and did it once again. William stared at him in mingled puzzlement and anger. Then Ian ducked the point of his shoulder into Denny’s midriff and, with William heaving, got the doctor onto his shoulders with little more than a startled grunt and a slight clanking of fetters.

William’s hand closed on Ian’s forearm, and his head, a dark oval in the last traces of light, jerked toward the woods.

“Left,” he whispered. “There are latrine trenches on the right. Two pickets, a hundred yards out.” He squeezed hard and let go.

“May you be held in God’s light, Friend William.” Denny’s whisper came breathless by Ian’s ear, but Ian was already going and didn’t know whether William had heard. He supposed it didn’t matter.

A few moments later, he heard the first shouts of “Fire!” behind him in the camp.

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NO BETTER COMPANION THAN THE RIFLE

September 15, 1777

By early September, we had reached the main army, encamped on the Hudson near the village of Saratoga. General Horatio Gates was in command, and received the ragtag and bobtail refugees and random militia with pleasure. For once, the army was tolerably well supplied, and we were equipped with clothes, decent food—and the remarkable luxury of a small tent, in honor of Jamie's status as a colonel of militia, in spite of the fact that he had no men.

Knowing Jamie as I did, I was reasonably sure this would be a temporary state of affairs. For my part, I was delighted to have an actual cot to sleep on, a tiny table to eat from—and food to put on it on a fairly regular basis.

"I've brought ye a present, Sassenach." Jamie plumped the bag down on the table with a pleasantly meaty-sounding thump and a waft of fresh blood. My mouth began to water.

"What is it? Birds?" It wasn't ducks or geese; those had a distinctive scent about them, a musk of body oils, feathers, and decaying waterweeds. But partridges, say, or grouse … I swallowed heavily at the thought of pigeon pie.

"No, a book." He pulled a small package wrapped in tattered oilcloth from the bulging sack and proudly set it in my hands.

"A book?" I said blankly.

He nodded encouragingly.

"Aye. Words printed on paper, ye'll recall the sort of thing? I ken it's been a long time."

I gave him an eye and, attempting to ignore the rumbling of my stomach, opened the package. It was a well-worn pocket-sized copy of *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman—Vol. I*, and despite my disgruntlement at being presented with literature instead of food, I was interested. It *had* been a long time since I'd had a good book in my hands, and this was a story I'd heard of but never read.

"The owner must have been fond of it," I said, turning the little volume over gently. The spine was nearly worn through, and the edges of the leather cover were rubbed shiny. A rather nasty thought struck me.

"Jamie … you didn't … take this from a, er, a *body*, did you?" Stripping weapons, equipment, and usable clothing from fallen enemies was not considered looting; it was an unpleasant necessity. Still …

He shook his head, though, still rummaging in the bag.

"Nay, I found it at the edge of a wee creek. Dropped in flight, I expect."

Well, that was better, though I was sure the man who had dropped it would regret the loss of this treasured companion. I opened the book at random and squinted at the small type.

"Sassenach."

"Hmm?" I glanced up, jerked out of the text, to see Jamie regarding me with a mixture of sympathy and amusement.

"Ye need spectacles, don't ye?" he said. "I hadna realized."

"Nonsense!" I said, though my heart gave a small jump. "I see perfectly well."

"Oh, aye?" He moved beside me and took the book out of my hand. Opening it to the middle, he held it in front of me. "Read that."

I leaned backward, and he advanced in front of me.

"Stop that!" I said. "How do you expect me to read anything that close?"

“Stand still, then,” he said, and moved the book away from my face. “Can ye see the letters clear yet?”

“No,” I said crossly. “Farther. Farther. No, bloody farther!”

And at last was obliged to admit that I could not bring the letters into focus at a distance of nearer than about eighteen inches.

“Well, it’s *very* small type!” I said, flustered and discomfited. I had, of course, been aware that my eyesight was not so keen as it once had been, but to be so rudely confronted with the evidence that I was, if not blind as a bat, definitely in competition with moles in the farsight sweepstakes was a trifle upsetting.

“Twelve-point Caslon,” Jamie said, giving the text a professional glance. “I will say the leading’s terrible,” he added critically. “And the gutters are half what they should be. Even so—” He flipped the book shut and looked at me, one eyebrow raised. “Ye need spectacles, *a nighean*,” he repeated gently.

“Hmph!” I said. And on impulse picked up the book, opened it, and handed it to him. “So—read it yourself, why don’t you?”

Looking surprised and a little wary, he took the book and looked into it. Then extended his arm a little. And a little more. I watched, experiencing that same odd mix of amusement and sympathy, as he finally held the book nearly at arm’s length, and read, *“So that the life of a writer, whatever he might fancy to the contrary, was not so much a state of composition, as a state of warfare; and his probation in it, precisely that of any other man militant upon earth—both depending alike, not half so much upon the degrees of his WIT—as his RESISTANCE.”*

He closed it and looked at me, the edge of his mouth tucked back.

“Aye, well,” he said. “I can still shoot, at least.”

“And I can tell one herb from another by smell, I suppose,” I said, and laughed. “Just as well. I don’t suppose there’s a spectacle-maker this side of Philadelphia.”

“No, I suppose not,” he said ruefully. “When we get to Edinburgh, though, I ken just the man. I’ll buy ye a tortoiseshell pair for everyday, Sassenach, and a pair wi’ gold rims for Sundays.”

“Expect me to read the Bible with them, do you?” I inquired.

"Ah, no," he said, "that's just for show. After all"—he picked up my hand, which smelled of dill weed and coriander, and, lifting it to his mouth, ran the point of his tongue delicately down the lifeline in my palm—"the important things ye do by touch, aye?"

* * *

We were interrupted by a cough from the door of the tent, and I turned to see a large, bearlike man with long gray hair loose upon his shoulders. He had an amiable face with a scar through the upper lip and a mild but keen eye, which went at once to the bag on the table.

I stiffened a little; there were strict prohibitions against the looting of farms, and while Jamie had taken these particular hens scratching in the wild, there was no way of proving that, and this gentleman, while dressed in casual homespun and hunting shirt, bore himself with the unmistakable authority of an officer.

"You'd be Colonel Fraser?" he said, with a nod toward Jamie, and extended a hand. "Daniel Morgan."

I recognized the name, though the only thing I knew about Daniel Morgan—a footnote in Brianna's eighth-grade history book—was that he was a famous rifleman. This wasn't particularly useful; everyone knew that, and the camp had buzzed with interest when he had arrived at the end of August with a number of men.

He now glanced with interest at *me*, and then at the bag of chickens, flecked with incriminating tufts of feather.

"By your leave, ma'am," he said, and without waiting for my leave, picked up the sack and pulled out a dead chicken. The neck flopped limp, showing the large, bloody hole through its head where an eye—well, two eyes—had once been. His scarred mouth pursed in a soundless whistle and he looked sharply up at Jamie.

"You do that a-purpose?" he asked.

"I always shoot them through the eye," Jamie replied politely. "Dinna want to spoil the meat."

A slow grin spread over Colonel Morgan's face, and he nodded. "Come with me, Mr. Fraser. Bring your rifle."

* * *

We ate that night at Daniel Morgan's fire, and the company—filled with chicken stew—raised cups of beer and hooted to toast the addition of a new member to their elite corps. I hadn't had a chance of private conversation with Jamie since Morgan's abduction of him that afternoon, and rather wondered what he made of his apotheosis. But he seemed comfortable with the riflemen, though he glanced now and then at Morgan, with the look that meant he was still making up his mind.

For my part, I was extremely pleased. By their nature, riflemen fought from a distance—and often a distance much greater than a musket's range. They were also valuable, and commanders were not likely to risk them in close combat. No soldier was safe, but some occupations had a much higher rate of mortality—and while I accepted the fact that Jamie was a born gambler, I liked him to have the best odds possible.

Many of the riflemen were Long Hunters, others what they called "over-mountain men," and thus had no wives with them here. Some did, and I made instant acquaintance with the women by the simple expedient of admiring one young woman's baby.

"Mrs. Fraser?" one older lady said, coming to plump down on the log beside me. "Are you the conjure-woman?"

"I am," I said pleasantly. "They call me the White Witch." That reared them back a bit, but the forbidden has its own strong appeal—and after all, what could I do in the middle of military camp, surrounded by their husbands and sons, all armed to the teeth?

Within minutes, I was dispensing advice on everything from menstrual cramps to colic. I caught a glimpse of Jamie, grinning at sight of my popularity, and gave him a discreet wave before turning back to my audience.

The men, of course, continued drinking, with outbreaks of raucous laughter, then the fall of voices as one man took over a story, only to have the cycle repeat. At one point, though, the atmosphere changed, so abruptly that I broke off an intense discussion of diaper rash and looked over toward the fire.

Daniel Morgan was rising laboriously to his feet, and there was a distinct air of anticipation among the watching men. Was he about to make a speech, welcoming Jamie?

"Oh, dear Lord," said Mrs. Graham under her breath beside me. "He's a-doing it again."

I hadn't time to ask her *what he* was a-doing, before he a-did it.

He shambled to the center of the gathering, where he stood swaying like an old bear, his long gray hair wafting in the wind of the fire and his eyes creased with amiability. They were focused on Jamie, though, I saw.

"Got something to show you, Mr. Fraser," he said, loudly enough that the women who had still been talking stopped, every eye going to him. He took hold of the hem of his long woolen hunting shirt and pulled it off over his head. He dropped it on the ground, spread his arms like a ballet dancer, and stumped slowly round.

Everyone gasped, though from Mrs. Graham's remark, most of them must have seen it before. His back was ridged with scars from neck to waist. Old scars, to be sure—but there wasn't a square inch of unmarked skin on his back, massive as it was. Even I was shocked.

"The British did that," he said conversationally, turning back and dropping his arms. "Give me four hundred and ninety-nine lashes. I counted." The gathering erupted in laughter, and he grinned. "Was supposed to give me five hundred, but he missed one. I didn't point it out to him."

More laughter. Obviously, this was a frequent performance, but one that his audience loved. There were cheers and more toasts when he finished and went to sit beside Jamie, still naked to the waist, his shirt wadded casually in his hand.

Jamie's face gave nothing away—but I saw that his shoulders had relaxed. Evidently he had made up his mind about Dan Morgan.

* * *

Jamie lifted the lid of my small iron pot, with an expression somewhere between caution and hope.

“Not food,” I informed him, rather unnecessarily, as he was wheezing in the manner of one who has inadvertently inhaled horseradish into the sinuses.

“I should hope not,” he said, coughing and wiping his eyes. “Christ, Sassenach, that’s worse than usual. D’ye mean to poison someone?”

“Yes, *Plasmodium vivax*. Put the lid back on.” I was simmering a decoction of cinchona bark and gallberries, for the treatment of malarial cases.

“Have we *got* any food?” he asked plaintively, dropping the lid back in place.

“In fact we have.” I reached into the cloth-covered pail at my feet and triumphantly pulled out a meat pie, its crust golden and shimmering with lard.

His face assumed the expression of an Israelite beholding the promised land, and he held out his hands, receiving the pie with the reverence due a precious object, though this impression was dispelled in the next instant as he took a large bite out of it.

“Where did ye get it?” he asked, after a few moments of blissful mastication. “Are there more?”

“There are. A nice prostitute named Daisy brought them for me.”

He paused, examined the pie critically for signs of its provenance, then shrugged and took another bite.

“Do I want to know what it was ye did for her, Sassenach?”

“Well, probably not while you’re eating, no. Have you seen Ian?”

“No.” The response might have been abbreviated by the exigencies of eating pie, but I caught the slightest shiftiness in his manner and stopped, staring at him.

“Do you *know* where Ian is?”

“More or less.” He kept his eyes fixed firmly on the meat pie, thus confirming my suspicions.

“Do I want to know what he’s doing?”

“No, ye don’t,” he said definitely.

“Oh, God.”

* * *

Ian Murray, having carefully dressed his hair with bear grease and a pair of turkey feathers, removed his shirt, leaving this rolled up with his tattered plaid under a log, and told Rollo to guard it, then walked across a small stretch of open ground toward the British camp.

“Hold!”

He turned a face of bored impassivity toward the sentry who had hailed him. The sentry, a boy of fifteen or so, was holding a musket whose barrel shook noticeably. Ian hoped the numpty wouldn’t shoot him by accident.

“Scout,” he said succinctly, and walked past the sentry without a backward glance, though he felt a spider strolling to and fro between his shoulder blades. *Scout,* he thought, and felt a small bubble of laughter rise up. Well, it was the truth, after all.

He strolled through the camp in the same manner, ignoring the occasional stare—though most of those who noticed him merely glanced at him and then away.

Burgoyne’s headquarters was easy to spot, a large tent of green canvas that sprouted like a toadstool among the neat aisles of small white tents that housed the soldiers. It was some distance away—and he didn’t mean to get any closer just now—but he could glimpse the comings and goings of staff officers, messengers … and the occasional scout, though none of these was Indian.

The Indian camps were on the far side of the army encampment, scattered in the forest outside the neat military grid. He was not sure whether he might meet some of Thayendanegea’s people, who might in turn recognize him. This wouldn’t be a difficulty, as he had said nothing regarding politics during his ill-fated visit to Joseph Brant’s house; they would likely accept him on sight without any awkward questions.

If he were to encounter some of the Huron and Oneida that Burgoyne employed to harass the Continentals, that might be a wee bit touchier. He had complete confidence in his ability to impress them with his identity as a Mohawk—but if they were either too suspicious or too impressed, he wouldn’t learn much.

He had learned a few things simply from his walk through the camp. Morale was not high; there was rubbish between some of the tents, and most of the washerwomen among the camp followers were sitting in the grass drinking gin, their kettles cold and empty. Still, the atmosphere in general seemed subdued but resolute; some men were dicing and drinking, but more were melting lead and making musket balls, repairing or polishing their weapons.

Food was short; he could sense hunger in the air, even without seeing the line of men waiting outside the baker's tent. None of them looked at him; they were focused on the loaves that emerged—these broken in half before being handed out. Half rations, then; that was good.

None of this was important, though, and as for troop numbers and armament—these were well established by now. Uncle Jamie and Colonel Morgan and General Gates would like to know about the stores of powder and ammunition, but the artillery park and powder magazine would be well guarded, with no conceivable reason for an Indian scout to be nosing round there.

Something tugged at the corner of his vision and he glanced cautiously round, then hastily jerked his eyes forward, forcing himself to walk at the same pace. Jesus, it was the Englishman he'd saved from the swamp—the man who'd helped him get wee Denny free. And—

He clamped down on that thought. He kent it well enough; no one could look like that and *not* be. But he felt it dangerous even to acknowledge the thought to himself, lest it show somehow on his face.

He forced himself to breathe as usual and walk without concern, because a Mohawk scout would have none. Damn. He'd meant to spend the remaining hours of daylight with some of the Indians, picking up what information he could, and then after dark come quietly back into camp, stealing up within earshot of Burgoyne's tent. If yon wee lieutenant was wuthering round, though, it might be too dangerous to try. The last thing he wanted was to meet the man face-to-face.

“Hey!” The shout ran into his flesh like a sharp splinter. He recognized the voice, knew it was aimed at him, but didn’t turn round. Six paces, five, four, three … He reached the end of an alley of tents and sheared off to the right, out of sight.

“Hey!” The voice was closer, almost behind him, and he broke into a run, heading for the cover of the trees. Only one or two soldiers saw him; one started to his feet but then stood, uncertain what to do, and he pushed past the man and dived into the trees.

“Well, that’s torn it,” he muttered, crouched behind a brush shelter. The tall lieutenant was questioning the man he’d shoved past. Both of them were looking toward the wood, the soldier shaking his head and shrugging helplessly.

Christ, the wee loon was coming toward him! He turned and stepped silently through the trees, working his way deeper into the wood. He could hear the Englishman behind him, crashing and rustling like a bear just out of its den in the spring.

“Murray!” he was shouting. “Murray—is that you? Wait!”

“Wolf’s Brother! Is that you?”

Ian said something very blasphemous under his breath in Gaelic, and turned to see who had addressed him in Mohawk.

“It *is* you! Where’s your demon wolf? Did something finally eat it?” His old friend Glutton was beaming at him, adjusting his breechclout after having a piss.

“I hope something eats you,” Ian said to his friend, keeping his voice low. “I need to get away. There is an Englishman following me.”

Glutton’s face changed at once, though it didn’t lose either its smile or its eager expression. The wide grin widened further, and he jerked his head behind him, indicating the opening to a trail. Then his face went suddenly slack, and he staggered from one side to the other, lurching in the direction Ian had come.

Ian barely made it out of sight before the Englishman called William came rushing into the clearing, only to run slap into Glutton, who clutched him by the lapels of his coat, gazed up soulfully into his eyes, and said, “Whisky?”

"I haven't any whisky," William said, brusque but not impolite, and tried to detach Glutton. This proved a difficult proposition; Glutton was much more agile than his squat appearance suggested, and the instant a hand was removed from one spot, it clung limpetlike to another. To add to the performance, Glutton began to tell the lieutenant—in Mohawk—the story of the famous hunt that had given him his name, pausing periodically to shout, "WHISHKEE!" and fling his arms about the Englishman's body.

Ian spared no time to admire the Englishman's own facility with language, which was considerable, but made off as fast as possible, circling to the west. He couldn't go back through the camp. He might take refuge in one of the Indian camps, but it was possible that William would look for him there, once he'd escaped from Glutton.

"What the hell does he want with me?" he muttered, no longer bothering with silence but cleaving the brush with a minimum of breakage. William the lieutenant had to know he was a Continental, because of Denny Hunter and the deserter game. Yet he had not raised a general alarm upon seeing him—only called out in surprise, and then as one wanting conversation.

Well, maybe that was a trick. Wee William might be young, but he was not stupid. Couldn't be, considering who his fath—and the man *was* chasing him.

He could hear voices fading behind him—he thought that William had perhaps now recognized Glutton, in spite of the fact that he had been half dead with fever when they met. If so, he would know Glutton was his, Ian's, friend—and instantly detect the ruse. But it didn't matter; he was well into the wood by now. William would never catch him.

The smell of smoke and fresh meat caught his nose, and he turned, going downhill toward the bank of a small stream. There was a Mohawk camp there; he knew it at once.

He paused, though. The scent of it, the knowledge of it, had drawn him like a moth—but he mustn't enter. Not now. If William *had* recognized Glutton, the first place he would look for Ian was the Mohawks' camp. And if she should be there …

“You, *again*?” said an unpleasant Mohawk voice. “You don’t learn, do you?”

Actually, he did. He’d learned enough to hit first. He turned on his heel and swung from somewhere behind his knees, continuing up with all the power in his body. *“Aim to hit* through *the bugger’s face,”* Uncle Jamie had instructed him when he began to go about in Edinburgh alone. It was, as usual, good advice.

His knuckles burst with a crunch that shot blue lightning straight up his arm and into his neck and jaw—but Sun Elk flew backward two paces and crashed into a tree.

Ian stood panting and gently touching his knuckles, recalling too late that Uncle Jamie’s advice had begun with, *“Hit them in the soft parts if ye can.”* It didn’t matter; it was worth it. Sun Elk was moaning softly, his eyelids fluttering. Ian was debating the merits of saying something of a dismissive nature and walking grandly away, versus kicking him in the balls again before he could get up, when William the Englishman walked out from the trees.

He looked from Ian, still breathing as though he’d run a mile, to Sun Elk, who had rolled onto his hands and knees but didn’t seem to want to get up. Blood was dripping from his face onto the dead leaves. *Splat. Splat.*

“I have no wish to intrude upon a private affair,” William said politely. “But I would appreciate a word with you, Mr. Murray.” He turned, not waiting to see if Ian would come, and walked back into the trees.

Ian nodded, having no notion what to say, and followed the Englishman, cherishing in his heart the last faint *splat!* of Sun Elk’s blood.

The Englishman was leaning against a tree, watching the Mohawk camp by the stream below. A woman was stripping meat from a fresh deer’s carcass, hanging it to dry on a frame. She wasn’t Works With Her Hands.

William switched his dark-blue gaze to Ian, giving him an odd feeling. Ian already felt odd, though, so it didn’t really matter.

“I am not going to ask what you were doing in the camp.”

“Oh, aye?”

“No. I wished to thank you for the horse and money and to ask you whether you have seen Miss Hunter, since you so kindly left me in the keeping of her and her brother.”

“I have, aye.” The knuckles on his right hand were already puffed to twice their size and starting to throb. He’d go and see Rachel; she’d bandage them for him. The thought was so intoxicating that he didn’t at first realize that William was waiting—not all that patiently—for him to expound on his statement.

“Ah. Aye, the … er … the Hunters are wi’ the army. The … um … *other* army,” he said, a little awkwardly. “Her brother’s an army surgeon.”

William’s face didn’t change but seemed somehow to solidify. Ian watched it in fascination. He’d seen Uncle Jamie’s face do the exact same thing, many times, and knew what it meant.

“Here?” William said.

“Aye, here.” He inclined his head toward the American camp. “There, I mean.”

“I see,” William said calmly. “When you see her again, will you give her my kindest regards, then? And her brother, too, of course.”

“Oh … aye,” Ian said, thinking, *Like that, is it? Well, ye’re no going to see her yourself, and she’d have nothing to do wi’ a soldier anyway, so think again!* “Certainly,” he added, belatedly aware that his only value to William at this point lay in his supposed role as messenger to Rachel Hunter, and wondering just how much that was worth.

“Thank you.” William’s face had lost that look of iron; he was examining Ian carefully, and at last nodded.

“A life for a life, Mr. Murray,” he said quietly. “We’re quits. Don’t let me see you next time. I may not have a choice.”

He turned and left, the red of his uniform visible for some time through the trees.

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62

ONE JUST MAN

September 19, 1777

The sun rose invisible, to the sound of drums. Drums on both sides; we could hear the British reveille, and by the same token they must hear ours. The riflemen had had a brief skirmish with British troops two days before, and owing to the work of Ian and the other scouts, General Gates knew very well the size and disposition of Burgoyne's army. Kościuszko had chosen Bemis Heights for a defensive position; it was a high river bluff, with numerous small ravines down to the river, and his crews had labored like madmen for the last week with shovels and axes. The Americans were ready. More or less.

The women were not, of course, admitted to the councils of the generals. Jamie was, though, and thus I heard all about the argument between General Gates, who was in command, and General Arnold, who thought he should be. General Gates, who wanted to sit tight on Bemis Heights and wait for the British attack, versus General Arnold, who argued vehemently that the Americans must make the first move, forcing the British regulars to fight through the thickly wooded ravines, ruining their formations and making them vulnerable to the riflemen's sniper fire, falling back—if necessary—to the breastworks and entrenchments on the Heights.

"Arnold's won," Ian reported, popping briefly up out of the fog to snag a piece of toasted bread. "Uncle Jamie's away wi' the riflemen already. He says he'll see ye this evening, and in the meantime …"

He bent and gently kissed my cheek, then grinned impudently and vanished.

My own stomach was knotted, though with the pervasive excitement as much as with fear. The Americans were a ragged, motley lot, but they had had time to prepare, they knew what was coming, and they knew what was at stake. This battle would decide the campaign in the north. Either Burgoyne would overcome and march on, trapping George Washington's army near Philadelphia between his forces and General Howe's—or his army of invasion would be brought to a halt and knocked out of the war, in which case Gates's army could move south to reinforce Washington. The men all knew it, and the fog seemed electric with their anticipation.

By the sun, it was near ten o'clock when the fog lifted. The shots had begun some time earlier, brief, distant pings of rifle fire. Daniel Morgan's men were taking out the pickets, I thought—and knew from what Jamie had said the night before that they were meant to aim for the officers, to kill those soldiers wearing silver gorgets. I hadn't slept the night before, envisioning Lieutenant Ransom and the silver gorget at his throat. In fog, in the dust of battle, at a distance … I swallowed, but my throat stayed stubbornly closed; I couldn't even drink water.

Jamie had slept, with the stubborn concentration of a soldier, but had waked in the deep hours of the night, his shirt soaked with sweat in spite of the chill, trembling. I didn't ask what he had been dreaming about; I knew. I had got him a dry shirt and made him lie down again with his head in my lap, then stroked his head until he closed his eyes—but I thought he hadn't slept again.

It wasn't chilly now; the fog had burned away, and we heard sustained rattles of gunfire, patchy, but repeated volleys. Faint, distant shouting, but impossible to make out who was shouting what at whom. Then the sudden crash of a British fieldpiece, a resounding boom that struck the camp silent. A lull, and then full-scale battle broke out, shooting and screaming and the intermittent thud of cannon. Women huddled together or set about grimly packing up their belongings, in case we should have to flee.

About midday, a relative silence fell. Was it over? We waited. After a little, children began whining to be fed and a sort of tense normality descended—but nothing happened. We could hear moaning and calls for help from men wounded—but no wounded were brought in.

I was ready. I had a small mule-drawn wagon, equipped with bandages and medical equipment, and a small tent as well, which I could set up in case I needed to perform surgery in the rain. The mule was staked nearby, grazing placidly and ignoring both the tension and the occasional burst of musketry.

In the middle of the afternoon, hostilities broke out again, and this time the camp followers and cook wagons actually began to retreat. There was artillery on both sides, enough of it that the continuous cannonading rolled like thunder, and I saw a huge cloud of black powder smoke rise up from the bluff. It was not quite mushroom-shaped, but made me think nonetheless of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. I sharpened my knife and scalpels for the dozenth time.

* * *

It was near evening; the sun sank invisibly, staining the fog with a dull and sullen orange. The evening wind off the river was rising, lifting the fog from the ground and sending it scudding in billows and swirls.

Clouds of black powder smoke lay heavy in the hollows, lifting more slowly than the lighter shreds of mist and lending a suitable stink of brimstone to a scene that was—if not hellish—at least bloody eerie.

Here and there a space would suddenly be cleared, like a curtain pulled back to show the aftermath of battle. Small dark figures moved in the distance, darting and stooping, stopping suddenly, heads uplifted like baboons keeping watch for a leopard. Camp followers; the wives and whores of the soldiers, come like crows to scavenge the dead.

Children, too. Under a bush, a boy of nine or ten straddled the body of a red-coated soldier, smashing at the face with a heavy rock. I stopped, paralyzed at the sight, and saw the boy reach into the gaping, bloodied mouth and wrench out a tooth. He slipped the bloody prize into a bag that hung by his side, groped farther, tugging, and, finding no more teeth loose, picked up his rock in a businesslike way and went back to work.

I felt bile rise in my throat and hurried on, swallowing. I was no stranger to war, to death and wounds. But I had never been so near a battle before; I had never before come on a battlefield where the dead and wounded still lay, before the ministrations of medics and burial details.

There were calls for help and occasional moans or screams, ringing disembodied out of the mist, reminding me uncomfortably of Highland stories of the *urisge*, the doomed spirits of the glen. Like the heroes of such stories, I didn't stop to heed their call but pressed on, stumbling over small rises, slipping on damp grass.

I had seen photographs of the great battlefields, from the American Civil War to the beaches of Normandy. This was nothing like that—no churned earth, no heaps of tangled limbs. It was still, save for the noises of the scattered wounded and the voices of those calling, like me, for a missing friend or husband.

Shattered trees lay toppled by artillery; in this light, I might have thought the bodies turned into logs themselves, dark shapes lying long in the grass—save for the fact that some of them still moved. Here and there, a form stirred feebly, victim of war's sorcery, struggling against the enchantment of death.

I paused and shouted into the mist, calling his name. I heard answering calls, but none in his voice. Ahead of me lay a young man, arms outflung, a look of blank astonishment on his face, blood pooled round his upper body like a great halo. His lower half lay six feet away. I walked between the pieces, keeping my skirts close, nostrils pinched tight against the thick iron smell of blood.

The light was fading now, but I saw Jamie as soon as I came over the edge of the next rise. He was lying on his face in the hollow, one arm flung out, the other curled beneath him. The shoulders of his dark blue coat were nearly black with damp, and his legs thrown wide, booted heels askew.

The breath caught in my throat, and I ran down the slope toward him, heedless of grass clumps, mud, and brambles. As I got close, though, I saw a scuttling figure dart out from behind a nearby bush and dash toward him. It fell to its knees beside him and, without hesitation, grasped his hair and yanked his head to one side. Something glinted in the figure's hand, bright even in the dull light.

"Stop!" I shouted. "Drop it, you bastard!"

Startled, the figure looked up as I flung myself over the last yards of space. Narrow red-rimmed eyes glared up at me out of a round face streaked with soot and grime.

"Get off!" she snarled. "I found 'im first!" It was a knife in her hand; she made little jabbing motions at me, in an effort to drive me away.

I was too furious—and too afraid for Jamie—to be scared for myself.

"Let go of him! Touch him and I'll kill you!" I said. My fists were clenched, and I must have looked as though I meant it, for the woman flinched back, loosing her hold on Jamie's hair.

"He's mine," she said, thrusting her chin pugnaciously at me. "Go find yourself another."

Another form slipped out of the mist and materialized by her side. It was the boy I had seen earlier, filthy and scruffy as the woman herself. He had no knife but clutched a crude metal strip, cut from a canteen. The edge of it was dark, with rust or blood.

He glared at me. "He's ours, Mum said! Get on wi' yer! Scat!"

Not waiting to see whether I would or not, he flung a leg over Jamie's back, sat on him, and began to grope in the side pockets of his coat.

" 'E's still alive, Mum," he advised. "I can feel 'is 'eart beatin'. Best slit his throat quick; I don't think 'e's bad hurt."

I grabbed the boy by the collar and jerked him off Jamie's body, making him drop his weapon. He squealed and flailed at me with arms and elbows, but I kneed him in the rump, hard enough to jar his backbone, then got my elbow locked about his neck in a stranglehold, his skinny wrist vised in my other hand.

“Leave him go!” The woman’s eyes narrowed like a weasel’s, and her eye-teeth shone in a snarl.

I didn’t dare take my eyes away from the woman’s long enough to look at Jamie. I could see him, though, at the edge of my vision, head turned to the side, his neck gleaming white, exposed and vulnerable.

“Stand up and step back,” I said, “or I’ll choke him to death, I swear I will!”

She crouched over Jamie’s body, knife in hand, as she measured me, trying to make up her mind whether I meant it. I did.

The boy struggled and twisted in my grasp, his feet hammering against my shins. He was small for his age, and thin as a stick, but strong nonetheless; it was like wrestling an eel. I tightened my hold on his neck; he gurgled and quit struggling. His hair was thick with rancid grease and dirt, the smell of it rank in my nostrils.

Slowly, the woman stood up. She was much smaller than I, and scrawny with it—bony wrists stuck out of the ragged sleeves. I couldn’t guess her age—under the filth and the puffiness of malnutrition, she might have been anything from twenty to fifty.

“My man lies yonder, dead on the ground,” she said, jerking her head at the fog behind her. “ ’E hadn’t nothing but his musket, and the sergeant’ll take that back.”

Her eyes slid toward the distant wood, where the British troops had retreated. “I’ll find a man soon, but I’ve children to feed in the meantime—two besides the boy.” She licked her lips, and a coaxing note entered her voice. “You’re alone; you can manage better than we can. Let me have this one—there’s more over there.” She pointed with her chin toward the slope behind me, where the rebel dead and wounded lay.

My grasp must have loosened slightly as I listened, for the boy, who had hung quiescent in my grasp, made a sudden lunge and burst free, diving over Jamie’s body to roll at his mother’s feet.

He got up beside her, watching me with rat’s eyes, beady-bright and watchful. He bent and groped about in the grass, coming up with the makeshift dagger.

“Hold ’er off, Mum,” he said, his voice raspy from the choking. “I’ll take ’im.”

From the corner of my eye, I had caught the gleam of metal, half buried in the grass.

“Wait!” I said, and took a step back. “Don’t kill him. Don’t.” A step to the side, another back. “I’ll go, I’ll let you have him, but …” I lunged to the side and got my hand on the cold metal hilt.

I had picked up Jamie’s sword before. It was a cavalry sword, larger and heavier than the usual, but I didn’t notice now.

I snatched it up and swung it in a two-handed arc that ripped the air and left the metal ringing in my hands.

Mother and son jumped back, identical looks of ludicrous surprise on their round, grimy faces.

“Get away!” I said.

Her mouth opened, but she didn’t say anything.

“I’m sorry for your man,” I said. “But my man lies here. Get away, I said!” I raised the sword, and the woman stepped back hastily, dragging the boy by the arm.

She turned and went, muttering curses at me over her shoulder, but I paid no attention to what she said. The boy’s eyes stayed fixed on me as he went, dark coals in the dim light. He would know me again—and I him.

They vanished in the mist, and I lowered the sword, which suddenly weighed too much to hold. I dropped it on the grass and fell to my knees beside Jamie.

My own heart was pounding in my ears and my hands were shaking with reaction, as I groped for the pulse in his neck. I turned his head and could see it, throbbing steadily just below his jaw.

“Thank God!” I whispered to myself. “Oh, thank God!”

I ran my hands over him quickly, searching for injury before I moved him. I didn’t think the scavengers would come back; I could hear the voices of a group of men, distant on the ridge behind me—a rebel detail coming to fetch the wounded.

There was a large knot on his brow, already turning purple. Nothing else that I could see. The boy had been right, I thought, with gratitude; he wasn't badly hurt. Then I rolled him onto his back and saw his hand.

Highlanders were accustomed to fight with sword in one hand, targe in the other, the small leather shield used to deflect an opponent's blow. He hadn't had a targe.

The blade had struck him between the third and fourth fingers of his right hand and sliced through the hand itself, a deep, ugly wound that split his palm and the body of his hand, halfway to the wrist.

Despite the horrid look of the wound, there wasn't much blood; the hand had been curled under him, his weight acting as a pressure bandage. The front of his shirt was smeared with red, deeply stained over his heart. I ripped open his shirt and felt inside, to be sure that the blood was from his hand, but it was. His chest was cool and damp from the grass but unscathed, his nipples shrunken and stiff with chill.

"That … tickles," he said in a drowsy voice. He pawed awkwardly at his chest with his left hand, trying to brush my hand away.

"Sorry," I said, repressing the urge to laugh with the joy of seeing him alive and conscious. I got an arm behind his shoulders and helped him to sit up. He looked drunk, with one eye swollen half shut and grass in his hair. He acted drunk, too, swaying alarmingly from side to side.

"How do you feel?" I asked.

"Sick," he said succinctly. He leaned to the side and threw up.

I eased him back on the grass and wiped his mouth, then set about bandaging his hand.

"Someone will be here soon," I assured him. "We'll get you back to the wagon, and I can take care of this."

"Mmphm." He grunted slightly as I pulled the bandage tight. "What happened?"

"What happened?" I stopped what I was doing and stared at him. *"You're* asking *me*?"

"What happened in the battle, I mean," he said patiently, regarding me with his one good eye. "I know what happened to me—roughly," he added, wincing as he touched his forehead.

"Yes, roughly," I said rudely. "You got yourself chopped like a butchered hog, and your head half caved in. Being a sodding bloody hero again, that's what happened to you!"

"I wasna—" he began, but I interrupted, my relief over seeing him alive being rapidly succeeded by rage.

"You didn't have to go to Ticonderoga! You *shouldn't* have gone! Stick to the writing and the printing, you said. You weren't going to fight unless you had to, you said. Well, you *didn't* have to, but you did it anyway, you vain glorious, pigheaded, grandstanding Scot!"

"Grandstanding?" he inquired.

"You know just what I mean, because it's just what you did! You might have been killed!"

"Aye," he agreed ruefully. "I thought I was, when the dragoon came down on me. I screeched and scairt his horse, though," he added more cheerfully. "It reared up and got me in the face with its knee."

"Don't change the subject!" I snapped.

"Is the subject not that I'm not killed?" he asked, trying to raise one brow and failing, with another wince.

"No! The subject is your stupidity, your bloody selfish stubbornness!"

"Oh, that."

"Yes, that! You—you—oaf! How dare you do that to me? You think I haven't got anything better to do with my life than trot round after you, sticking pieces back on?" I was frankly shrieking at him by this time.

To my increased fury, he grinned at me, his expression made the more rakish by the half-closed eye.

"Ye'd have been a good fishwife, Sassenach," he observed. "Ye've the tongue for it."

"You shut up, you fucking bloody—"

"They'll hear you," he said mildly, with a wave toward the party of Continental soldiers making their way down the slope toward us.

"I don't care who hears me! If you weren't already hurt, I'd—I'd—"

"Be careful, Sassenach," he said, still grinning. "Ye dinna want to knock off any more pieces; ye'll only have to stick them back on, aye?"

"Don't bloody tempt me," I said through my teeth, with a glance at the sword I had dropped.

He saw it and reached for it, but couldn't quite manage. With an explosive snort, I leaned across his body and grabbed the hilt, putting it in his hand. I heard a shout from the men coming down the hill and turned to wave at them.

"Anyone hearing ye just now would likely think ye didna care for me owermuch, Sassenach," he said, behind me.

I turned to look down at him. The impudent grin was gone, but he was still smiling.

"Ye've the tongue of a venemous shrew," he said, "but you're a bonnie wee swordsman, Sassenach."

My mouth opened, but the words that had been so abundant a moment before had all evaporated like the rising mist.

He laid his good hand on my arm. "For now, *a nighean donn*—thank ye for my life."

I closed my mouth. The men had nearly reached us, rustling through the grass, their exclamations and chatter drowning out the ever-fainter moans of the wounded.

"You're welcome," I said.

* * *

"Hamburger," I said under my breath, but not far enough under. He raised an eyebrow at me.

"Chopped meat," I elaborated, and the eyebrow fell.

"Oh, aye, it is. Stopped a sword stroke wi' my hand. Too bad I didna have a targe; I could have turned the stroke, easy."

"Right." I swallowed. It wasn't the worst injury I'd seen, by a long shot, but it still made me slightly sick. The tip of his fourth finger had been sheared off cleanly, at an angle just below the nail. The stroke had sliced a strip of flesh from the inside of the finger and ripped down between the third and fourth fingers.

"You must have caught it near the hilt," I said, trying for calm. "Or it would have taken off the outside half of your hand."

"Mmphm." The hand didn't move as I prodded and poked, but there was sweat on his upper lip, and he couldn't keep back a brief grunt of pain.

"Sorry," I murmured automatically.

"It's all right," he said, just as automatically. He closed his eyes, then opened them.

"Take it off," he said suddenly.

"What?" I drew back and looked at him, startled.

He nodded at his hand.

"The finger. Take it off, Sassenach."

"I can't do that!" Even as I spoke, though, I knew that he was right. Aside from the injuries to the finger itself, the tendon was badly damaged; the chances of his ever being able to move the finger, let alone move it without pain, were infinitesimal.

"It's done me little good in the last twenty years," he said, looking at the mangled stump dispassionately, "and likely to do no better now. I've broken the damned thing half a dozen times, from its sticking out like it does. If ye take it off, it willna trouble me anymore, at least."

I wanted to argue, but there was no time; wounded men were beginning to drift up the slope toward the wagon. The men were militia, not regular army; if there was a regiment near, there might be a surgeon with them, but I was closer.

"Once a frigging hero, always a frigging hero," I muttered under my breath. I thrust a wad of lint into Jamie's bloody palm and wrapped a linen bandage swiftly around the hand. "Yes, I'll have to take it off, but later. Hold still."

"Ouch," he said mildly. "I did say I wasna a hero."

"If you aren't, it isn't for lack of trying," I said, yanking the linen knot tight with my teeth. "There, that will have to do for now; I'll see to it when I have time." I grabbed the wrapped hand and plunged it into the small basin of alcohol and water.

He went white as the alcohol seeped through the cloth and struck raw flesh. He inhaled sharply through his teeth, but didn't say anything more. I pointed peremptorily at the blanket I had spread on the ground, and he lay back obediently, curling up under the shelter of the wagon, bandaged fist cradled against his breast.

I rose from my knees, but hesitated for a moment. Then I knelt again and hastily kissed the back of his neck, brushing aside the queue of his hair, matted with half-dried mud and dead leaves. I could just see the curve of his cheek; it tightened briefly as he smiled and then relaxed.

Word had spread that the hospital wagon was there; there was already a straggling group of walking wounded awaiting attention, and I could see men carrying or half-dragging their injured companions toward the light of my lantern. It was going to be a busy evening.

Colonel Everett had promised me two assistants, but God knew where the colonel was at the moment. I took a moment to survey the gathering crowd and picked out a young man who had just deposited a wounded friend beneath a tree.

“You,” I said, tugging on his sleeve. “Are you afraid of blood?”

He looked momentarily startled, then grinned at me through a mask of mud and powder smoke. He was about my height, broad-shouldered and stocky, with a face that might have been called cherubic had it been less filthy.

“Only if it’s mine, ma’am, and so far it ain’t, Lord be praised.”

“Then come with me,” I said, smiling back. “You’re now a triage aide.”

“Say what? Hey, Harry!” he yelled to his friend. “I been promoted. Tell your mama next time you write, Lester done amounted to something, after all!” He swaggered after me, still grinning.

The grin rapidly faded into a look of frowning absorption as I led him quickly among the wounded, pointing out degrees of severity.

“Men pouring blood are the first priority,” I told him. I thrust an armful of linen bandages and a sack of lint into his hands. “Give them these—tell their friends to press the lint hard on the wounds or put a tourniquet round the limb above the wound. You know what a tourniquet is?”

"Oh, yes, ma'am," he assured me. "Put one on, too, when a panther clawed up my cousin Jess, down to Caroline County."

"Good. Don't spend time doing it yourself here unless you have to, though—let their friends do it. Now, broken bones can wait a bit—put them over there under that big beech tree. Head injuries and internal injuries that aren't bleeding, back there, by the chestnut tree, if they can be moved. If not, I'll go to them." I pointed behind me, then turned in a half circle, surveying the ground.

"If you see a couple of whole men, send them up to put up the hospital tent; it's to go in that flattish spot, there. And then a couple more, to dig a latrine trench … over there, I think."

"Yes, sir! Ma'am, I mean!" Lester bobbed his head and took a firm grip on his sack of lint. "I be right after it, ma'am. Though I wouldn't worry none about the latrines for a while," he added. "Most of these boys already done had the shit scairt out of 'em." He grinned and bobbed once more, then set out on his rounds.

He was right; the faint stink of feces hung in the air as it always did on battlefields, a low note amid the pungencies of blood and smoke.

With Lester sorting the wounded, I settled down to the work of repair, with my medicine box, suture bag, and bowl of alcohol set on the wagon's tailboard and a keg of alcohol for the patients to sit on—provided they could sit.

The worst of the casualties were bayonet wounds; luckily there had been no grapeshot, and the men hit by cannonballs were long past the point where I could help them. As I worked, I listened with half an ear to the conversation of the men awaiting attention.

"Wasn't that the damnedest thing ye ever saw? How many o' the buggers were there?" one man was asking his neighbor.

"Damned if I know," his friend replied, shaking his head. "For a space there, ever'thing I saw was red, and nothin' but. Then a cannon went off right close, and I didn't see nothin' but smoke for a good long time." He rubbed at his face; tears from watering eyes had made long streaks in the black soot that covered him from chest to forehead.

I glanced back at the wagon but couldn't see under it. I hoped shock and fatigue had enabled Jamie to sleep, in spite of his hand, but I doubted it.

Despite the fact that nearly everyone near me was wounded in some fashion, their spirits were high and the general mood was one of exuberant relief and exultation. Farther down the hill, in the mists near the river, I could hear whoops and shouts of victory and the undisciplined racket of fifes and drums, rattling and screeching in random exhilaration.

Among the noise, a nearer voice called out: a uniformed officer, on a bay horse.

"Anybody seen that big redheaded bastard who broke the charge?"

There was a murmur and a general looking around, but no one answered. The horseman dismounted and, wrapping his reins over a branch, made his way through the throng of wounded toward me.

"Whoever he is, I tell you, he's got balls the size of ten-pound shot," remarked the man whose cheek I was stitching.

"And a head of the same consistency," I murmured.

"Eh?" He glanced sideways at me in bewilderment.

"Nothing," I said. "Hold still just a moment longer; I'm nearly done."

* * *

It was a hellish night. Some of the wounded still lay in the ravines and hollows, as did all the dead. The wolves that came silently out of the wood did not distinguish between them, judging from the distant screams.

It was nearly dawn before I came back to the tent where Jamie lay. I lifted the flap quietly, so as not to disturb him, but he was already awake, lying curled on his side facing the flap, head resting on a folded blanket.

He smiled faintly when he saw me.

"A hard night, Sassenach?" he asked, his voice slightly hoarse from cold air and disuse. Mist seeped under the edge of the flap, tinted yellow by the lantern light.

"I've had worse." I smoothed the hair off his face, looking him over carefully. He was pale but not clammy. His face was drawn with pain, but his skin was cool to the touch—no trace of fever. "You haven't slept, have you? How do you feel?"

"A bit scairt," he said. "And a bit sick. But better now you're here." He gave me a one-sided grimace that was almost a smile.

I put a hand under his jaw, fingers pressed against the pulse in his neck. His heart bumped steadily under my fingertips, and I shivered briefly, remembering the woman in the field.

"You're chilled, Sassenach," he said, feeling it. "And tired, too. Go and sleep, aye? I'll do a bit longer."

I *was* tired. The adrenaline of the battle and the night's work was fading fast; fatigue was creeping down my spine and loosening my joints. But I had a good idea of what the hours of waiting had cost him already.

"It won't take long," I reassured him. "And it will be better to have it over. Then you can sleep easy."

He nodded, though he didn't look noticeably reassured. I unfolded the small worktable I had carried in from the operating tent and set it up in easy reach. Then I took out the precious bottle of laudanum and poured an inch of the dark, odorous liquid into a cup.

"Sip it slowly," I said, putting it into his left hand. I began to lay out the instruments I would need, making sure that everything lay orderly and to hand. I had thought of asking Lester to come and assist me, but he had been asleep on his feet, swaying drunkenly under the dim lanterns in the operating tent, and I had sent him off to find a blanket and a spot by the fire.

A small scalpel, freshly sharpened. The jar of alcohol, with the wet ligatures coiled inside like a nest of tiny vipers, each toothed with a small, curved needle. Another with the waxed dry ligatures for arterial compression. A bouquet of probes, their ends soaking in alcohol. Forceps. Long-handled retractors. The hooked tenaculum, for catching the ends of severed arteries.

The surgical scissors with their short, curved blades and the handles shaped to fit my grasp, made to my order by the silversmith

Stephen Moray. Or almost to my order. I had insisted that the scissors be as plain as possible, to make them easy to clean and disinfect. Stephen had obliged with a chaste and elegant design, but had not been able to resist one small flourish—one handle boasted a hooklike extension against which I could brace my little finger in order to exert more force, and this extrusion formed a smooth, lithe curve, flowering at the tip into a slender rosebud against a spray of leaves. The contrast between the heavy, vicious blades at one end and this delicate conceit at the other always made me smile when I lifted the scissors from their case.

Strips of cotton gauze and heavy linen, pads of lint, adhesive plasters stained red with the dragon's-blood juice that made them sticky. An open bowl of alcohol for disinfection as I worked, and the jars of cinchona bark, mashed garlic paste, and yarrow for dressing.

"There we are," I said with satisfaction, checking the array one last time. Everything must be ready, since I was working by myself; if I forgot something, no one would be at hand to fetch it for me.

"It seems a great deal o' preparation, for one measly finger," Jamie observed behind me.

I swung around to find him leaning on one elbow, watching, the cup of laudanum undrunk in his hand.

"Could ye not just whack it off wi' a wee knife and seal the wound with hot iron, like the regimental surgeons do?"

"I could, yes," I said dryly. "But fortunately I don't have to; we have enough time to do the job properly. That's why I made you wait."

"Mmphm." He surveyed the row of gleaming instruments without enthusiasm, and it was clear that he would much rather have had the business over and done with as quickly as possible. I realized that to him this looked like slow and ritualized torture, rather than sophisticated surgery.

"I mean to leave you with a working hand," I told him firmly. "No infection, no suppurating stump, no clumsy mutilation, and—God willing—no pain, once it heals."

His eyebrows went up at that. He had never mentioned it, but I was well aware that his right hand and its troublesome fourth finger had caused him intermittent pain for years, ever since it had been crushed at Wentworth Prison, when he was held prisoner there in the days before the Stuart Rising.

"A bargain's a bargain," I said, with a nod at the cup in his hand. "Drink it."

He lifted the cup and poked a long nose reluctantly over the rim, nostrils twitching at the sickly-sweet scent. He let the dark liquid touch the end of his tongue and made a face.

"It will make me sick."

"It will make you sleep."

"It gives me terrible dreams."

"As long as you don't chase rabbits in your sleep, it won't matter," I assured him. He laughed despite himself, but had one final try.

"It tastes like the stuff ye scrape out of horses' hooves."

"And when was the last time you licked a horse's hoof?" I demanded, hands on my hips. I gave him a medium-intensity glare, suitable for the intimidation of petty bureaucrats and low-level army officials.

He sighed.

"Ye mean it, aye?"

"I do."

"All right, then." With a reproachful look of long-suffering resignation, he threw back his head and tossed the contents of the cup down in one gulp.

A convulsive shudder racked him, and he made small choking noises.

"I did say to sip it," I observed mildly. "Vomit, and I'll make you lick it up off the floor."

Given the scuffled dirt and trampled grass underfoot, this was plainly an idle threat, but he pressed his lips and eyes tight shut and lay back on the pillow, breathing heavily and swallowing convulsively every few seconds. I brought up a low stool and sat down by the camp bed to wait.

"How do you feel?" I asked, a few minutes later.

"Dizzy," he replied. He cracked one eye open and viewed me through the narrow blue slit, then groaned and closed it. "As if I'm falling off a cliff. It's a verra unpleasant sensation, Sassenach."

"Try to think of something else for a minute," I suggested. "Something pleasant, to take your mind off it."

His brow furrowed for a moment, then relaxed.

"Stand up a moment, will ye?" he said. I obligingly stood, wondering what he wanted. He opened his eyes, reached out with his good hand, and took a firm grip of my buttock.

"There," he said. "That's the best thing I can think of. Having a good hold on your arse always makes me feel steady."

I laughed and moved a few inches closer to him, so his forehead pressed against my thighs.

"Well, it's a portable remedy, at least."

He closed his eyes then and held on tight, breathing slowly and deeply. The harsh lines of pain and exhaustion in his face began to soften as the drug took effect.

"Jamie," I said softly, after a minute. "I'm sorry about it."

He opened his eyes, looked upward, and smiled, giving me a slight squeeze.

"Aye, well," he said. His pupils had begun to shrink; his eyes were sea-deep and fathomless, as though he looked into a great distance.

"Tell me, Sassenach," he said, a moment later. "If someone stood a man before ye and told ye that if ye were to cut off your finger, the man would live, and if ye did not, he would die—would ye do it?"

"I don't know," I said, slightly startled. "If that was the choice, and no doubt about it, and he was a good man … yes, I suppose I would. I wouldn't like it a bit, though," I added practically, and his mouth curved in a smile.

"No," he said. His expression was growing soft and dreamy. "Did ye know," he said after a moment, "a colonel came to see me, whilst ye were at work wi' the wounded? Colonel Johnson; Micah Johnson, his name was."

"No; what did he say?"

His grip on my bottom was beginning to slacken; I put my own hand over his, to hold it in place.

"It was his company—in the fight. Part of Morgan's, and the rest of the regiment just over the hill, in the path of the British. If the charge had gone through, they'd ha' lost the company surely, he said, and God knows what might have become o' the rest." His soft Highland burr was growing broader, his eyes fixed on my skirt.

"So you saved them," I said gently. "How many men are there in a company?"

"Fifty," he said. "Though they wouldna all have been killed, I dinna suppose." His hand slipped; he caught it and took a fresh grip, chuckling slightly. I could feel his breath through my skirt, warm on my thighs.

"I was thinking it was like the Bible, aye?"

"Yes?" I pressed his hand against the curve of my hip, keeping it in place.

"That bit where Abraham is bargaining wi' the Lord for the Cities of the Plain. 'Wilt thou not destroy the city,' " he quoted, " 'for the sake of fifty just men?' And then Abraham does Him down, a bit at a time, from fifty to forty, and then to thirty, and twenty and ten."

His eyes were half closed, and his voice peaceful and unconcerned.

"I didna have time to inquire into the moral state of any o' the men in that company. But ye'd think there might be ten just men among them—good men?"

"I'm sure there are." His hand was heavy, his arm gone nearly limp.

"Or five. Or even one. One would be enough."

"I'm sure there's one."

"The apple-faced laddie that helped ye wi' the wounded—he's one?"

"Yes, he's one."

He sighed deeply, his eyes nearly shut.

"Tell him I dinna grudge him the finger, then," he said.

I held his good hand tightly for a minute. He was breathing slowly and deeply, his mouth gone slack in utter relaxation. I rolled him gently onto his back and laid the hand across his chest.

"Bloody man," I whispered. "I knew you'd make me cry."

* * *

The camp outside lay quiet, in the last moments of slumber before the rising sun should stir the men to movement. I could hear the occasional call of a picket and the murmur of conversation as two foragers passed close by my tent, bound for the woods to hunt. The campfires outside had burned to embers, but I had three lanterns, arranged to cast light without shadow.

I laid a thin square of soft pine across my lap as a working surface. Jamie lay facedown on the camp bed, head turned toward me so I could keep an eye on his color. He was solidly asleep; his breath came slow and he didn't flinch when I pressed the sharp tip of a probe against the back of his hand. All ready.

The hand was swollen, puffy, and discolored, the sword wound a thick black line against the sun-gold skin. I closed my eyes for a moment, holding his wrist, counting his pulse. *One-and-two-and-three-and-four …*

I seldom prayed consciously when preparing for surgery, but I did look for something—something I could not describe but always recognized: a certain quietness of soul, the detachment of mind in which I could balance on that knife-edge between ruthlessness and compassion, at once engaged in utmost intimacy with the body under my hands and capable of destroying what I touched in the name of healing.

One-and-two-and-three-and-four …

I realized with a start that my own heartbeat had slowed; the pulse in my fingertip matched that in Jamie's wrist, beat for beat, slow and strong. If I was waiting for a sign, I supposed that would do. *Ready, steady, go*, I thought, and picked up the scalpel.

A short horizontal incision over the fourth and fifth knuckles, then down, cutting the skin nearly to the wrist. I undermined the skin carefully with the scissors' tips, then pinned back the loose flap of skin with one of the long steel probes, digging it into the soft wood of the board.

I had a small bulb atomizer filled with a solution of distilled water and alcohol; sterility being impossible, I used this to lay a fine mist over the operating field and wash away the first welling of blood. Not too much; the vasoconstrictor I had given him was working, but the effect wouldn’t last long.

I gently nudged apart the muscle fibers—those that were still whole—to expose the bone and its overlying tendon, gleaming silver among the vivid colors of the body. The sword had cut the tendon nearly through, an inch above the carpal bones. I severed the few remaining fibers, and the hand twitched disconcertingly in reflex.

I bit my lip, but it was all right; aside from the hand, he hadn’t moved. He felt different; his flesh had more life than that of a man under ether or Pentothal. He was not anesthetized but only drugged into stupor; the feel of his flesh was resilient, not the pliant flaccidity I had been accustomed to in my days at the hospital in my own time. Still, it was a far cry—and an immeasurable relief—from the live and panicked convulsions that I had felt under my hands in the surgeon’s tent.

I brushed the cut tendon aside with the forceps. There was the deep branch of the ulnar nerve, a delicate thread of white myelin, with its tiny branches spreading into invisibility, deep in the tissues. Good, it was far enough toward the fifth finger that I could work without damage to the main nerve trunk.

You never knew; textbook illustrations were one thing, but the first thing any surgeon learned was that bodies were unnervingly unique. A stomach would be roughly where you expected it to be, but the nerves and blood vessels that supplied it might be anywhere in the general vicinity, and quite possibly varying in shape and number, as well.

But now I knew the secrets of this hand. I could see the engineering of it, the structures that gave it form and movement. There was the beautiful strong arch of the third metacarpal, and the delicacy of the web of blood vessels that supplied it. Blood welled, slow and vivid: deep red in the tiny pool of the open field; brilliant scarlet where it stained the chopped bone; a dark and royal blue in the tiny vein that pulsed below the joint; a crusty black at the edge of the original wound, where it had clotted.

I had known, without asking myself how, that the fourth metacarpal was shattered. It was; the blade had struck near the proximal end of the bone, splintering its tiny head near the center of the hand.

I would take that, too, then; the free chunks of bone would have to be removed in any case, to prevent them irritating the adjoining tissues. Removing the metacarpal would let the third and fifth fingers lie close together, in effect narrowing the hand and eliminating the awkward gap that would be left by the missing finger.

I pulled hard on the mangled finger, to open the articular space between the joints, then used the tip of the scalpel to sever the ligament. The cartilages separated with a tiny but audible *pop!* and Jamie jerked and groaned, his hand twisting in my grasp.

“Hush,” I whispered to him, holding tight. “Hush, it’s all right. I’m here, it’s all right.”

I could do nothing for the boys dying on the field, but here, for him, I could offer magic and know the spell would hold. He heard me, deep in troubled opium dreams; he frowned and muttered something unintelligible, then sighed deeply and relaxed, his wrist going once more limp under my hand.

Somewhere near at hand, a rooster crowed, and I glanced at the wall of the tent. It was noticeably lighter, and a faint dawn wind drifted through the slit behind me, cool on the back of my neck.

Detach the underlying muscle with as little damage as could be managed. Tie off the small digital artery and two other vessels that seemed large enough to bother with, sever the last few fibers and shreds of skin that held the finger, then lift it free, the dangling metacarpal surprisingly white and naked, like a rat’s tail.

It was a clean, neat job, but I felt a brief sense of sadness as I set the mangled piece of flesh aside. I had a fleeting vision of him holding newly born Jemmy, counting the tiny fingers and toes, delight and wonder on his face. His father had counted his fingers, too.

“It’s all right,” I whispered, as much to myself as to him. “It’s all right. It will heal.”

The rest was quick. Forceps to pluck out the tiny pieces of shattered bone. I debrided the wound as best I could, removing bits of grass and dirt, even a tiny swatch of fabric that had been driven into the flesh. Then no more than a matter of cleaning the ragged edge of the wound, snipping a small excess of skin, and suturing the incisions. A paste of garlic and white-oak leaves, mixed with alcohol and spread thickly over the hand, a padding of lint and gauze, and a tight bandage of linen and adhesive plasters, to reduce the swelling and encourage the third and fifth fingers to draw close together.

The sun was nearly up; the lantern overhead seemed dim and feeble. My eyes were burning from the close work and the smoke of fires. There were voices outside, the voices of officers moving among the men, rousing them to face the day—and the enemy?

I laid Jamie's hand on the cot, near his face. He was pale, but not excessively so, and his lips were a light rosy color, not blue. I dropped the instruments into a bucket of alcohol and water, suddenly too tired to clean them properly. I wrapped the discarded finger in a linen bandage, not quite sure what to do with it, and left it on the table.

"Rise and shine! Rise and shine!" came the sergeants' rhythmic cry from outside, punctuated by witty variations and crude responses from reluctant risers.

I didn't bother to undress; if there was fighting today, I would be roused soon enough. Not Jamie, though. I had nothing to worry about; no matter what happened, he wouldn't fight today.

I unpinned my hair and shook it down over my shoulders, sighing with relief at its looseness. Then I lay down on the cot beside him, close against him. He lay on his stomach; I could see the small, muscular swell of his buttocks, smooth under the blanket that covered him. On impulse, I laid my hand on his rump and squeezed.

"Sweet dreams," I said, and let the tiredness take me.

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SEPARATED FOREVER FROM MY FRIENDS AND KIN

Lieutenant Lord Ellesmere had finally killed a rebel. Several, he thought, though he could not be sure of those he'd shot at; some of them fell but might be only wounded. He was sure of the man who had attacked one of the British cannon, with a party of other rebels. He'd hacked that man half through the body with a cavalry saber, and he felt a strange numbness in his sword arm for several days after, this making him flex his left hand every few minutes to be sure he could still use it.

The numbness was not limited to his arm.

The days after the battle in the British camp were spent partially in the orderly retrieval of the wounded, the burial of the dead, and in regathering their forces. What forces remained to be gathered. Desertion was rife; there was a constant small stream of furtive departures—one day a whole company of Brunswickers defected.

He oversaw more than one burial detail, watching with set face as men—and boys—he knew were consigned to the earth. On the first couple of days, they hadn't buried the bodies deep enough, and were obliged to listen all night to the howling and snarling of wolves fighting over the carcasses they had dragged from the shallow graves. They reburied what was left the next day, deeper.

Fires burned every hundred yards around the camp at night, for American sharpshooters came close in the dark, taking out the pickets.

The days were blazingly hot, the nights miserably cold—and no one rested. Burgoyne had issued an order that *no officer nor soldier should ever sleep without his cloaths,* and William had not changed his linen in more than a week. It didn't matter what he smelled like; his own reek was undetectable. The men were obliged to be in the lines, with their arms, an hour before dawn, and to remain there until the sun had burned away the fog, to be sure the fog did not hide Americans ready to attack.

The daily bread allowance was cut. Salt pork and flour were running out, and the sutlers lacked tobacco and brandy, to the disgruntlement of the German troops. On the good side, the British defenses were in splendid order, with two large redoubts built and a thousand men sent out to cut trees to open fields of fire for the artillery. And Burgoyne had announced that General Clinton was expected within ten days, with a supporting force—and food, it was to be hoped. All they had to do was wait.

"The Jews wait the Messiah not more than we wait General Clinton," joked Ober-Leftenant Gruenwald, who had by some miracle survived his wound at Bennington.

"Ha-ha," said William.

* * *

The American camp was in good spirits, more than ready to finish the job they had started. Unfortunately, while the British camp was short of rations, the Americans were short of ammunition and powder. The result was a period of restless stasis, during which the Americans picked constantly at the periphery of the British camp but could make no real progress.

Ian Murray found this tedious in the extreme, and after a token foray in the fog had resulted in a careless companion's stepping on a discarded gun spike and puncturing his foot, he decided this was adequate excuse to pay a visit to the hospital tent where Rachel Hunter was assisting her brother.

The prospect so animated him, though, that he paid inadequate attention to his own footing in the fog and plunged headfirst into a ravine, striking his head a glancing blow on a rock. Thus it was that the two men limped into camp, supporting each other, and made their halting way to the hospital tent.

It was busy in the tent; this was not where the battle-wounded lay but where those with trivial afflictions came for treatment. Ian's head was not broken, but he was seeing two of everything, and closed one eye in hopes that this might help him spot Rachel.

"Ho ro," someone behind him said in open approval, *"mo nighean donn boidheach!"* For one head-spinning instant, he thought it was his uncle speaking and blinked stupidly, wondering why Uncle Jamie should be making flirtatious remarks to his aunt while she was working—but Auntie Claire wasn't here at all, his slow wits reminded him, so what …

One hand over his eye to keep it from falling out of his head, he turned carefully and saw a man in the opening of the tent.

The morning sun struck sparks from the man's hair, and Ian's mouth fell open, feeling that he had been struck in the pit of the stomach.

It wasn't Uncle Jamie, he could see that at once as the man came in, also helping a limping comrade. The face was wrong: red and weather-beaten, with cheerful, snub features; the hair was ginger, not rufous, and receded sharply from the man's temples. He was solidly built, not terribly tall, but the way he moved … like a catamount, even burdened with his friend, and for some reason Ian could not remove the lingering impression of Jamie Fraser.

The red-haired man was kilted; they both were. *Highlanders,* he thought, thoroughly fuddled. But he'd known that from the moment the man spoke.

"Có thu?" Ian asked abruptly. *Who are you?*

Hearing the Gaelic, the man looked at him, startled. He gave Ian a quick up-and-down, taking in his Mohawk dress, before answering.

"Is mise Seaumais Mac Choinnich à Boisdale," he answered, courteously enough. *"Có tha faighneachd?" I am Hamish MacKenzie, of Boisdale. Who asks?*

"Ian Murray," he replied, trying to focus his addled wits. The name sounded faintly familiar—but why would it not? He knew hundreds of MacKenzies. "My grandmother was a MacKenzie," he offered, in the usual way of establishing relations among strangers. "Ellen MacKenzie, of Leoch."

The man's eyes sprang wide

"Ellen, of Leoch?" cried the man, very excited. "Daughter of him they called Jacob Ruaidh?"

In his excitement, Hamish's grip had tightened on his friend, and the man gave a yelp. This attracted the attention of the young woman—the one Hamish had greeted as "O, beautiful nut-brown maiden"—and she came hurrying to see the matter.

She *was* nut brown, Ian saw; Rachel Hunter, tanned by the sun to the exact soft shade of a hickory nut, what showed of her hair beneath her kerchief the shade of walnut hulls, and he smiled at the thought. She saw him and narrowed her eyes.

"Well, and if thee is able to grin like an ape, thee is not much hurt. Why—" She stopped, astonished at the sight of Ian Murray locked in embrace with a kilted Highlander, who was weeping with joy. Ian was not weeping, but was undeniably pleased.

"Ye'll want to meet my uncle Jamie," he said, adroitly disentangling himself. "*Seaumais Ruaidh*, I think ye called him."

* * *

Jamie Fraser had his eyes shut, cautiously exploring the pain in his hand. It was sharp-edged, strong enough to make him queasy, but with that deep, grinding ache common to broken bones. Still, it was a healing ache. Claire spoke of bones knitting—and he'd often thought this was more than a metaphor; it sometimes felt that someone was indeed stabbing steel needles into the bone and forcing the shattered ends back into some pattern, heedless of how the flesh around them felt about it.

He should look at his hand, he knew that. He had to get used to it, after all. He'd had the one quick glance, and it had left him dizzy and on the point of vomiting out of sheer confoundment. He could not reconcile the sight, the feel of it, with the strong memory of how his hand *ought to* be.

He'd done it before, though, he reminded himself. He'd got used to the scars and the stiffness. And yet … he could remember how his young hand had felt, had looked, so easy, limber and painless, folded round the handle of a hoe, the hilt of a sword. Clutching a quill—well, no. He smiled ruefully to himself. That hadn't been either easy or limber, even with his fingers at their unmarred best.

Would he be able to write at all with his hand now? he wondered suddenly, and in curiosity flexed his hand a little. The pain made him gasp, but … his eyes were open, fixed on his hand. The disconcerting sight of his little finger pressed close to the middle one did make his belly clench, but … his fingers curled. It hurt like Christ crucified, but it was just pain; there was no pull, no stubborn hindrance from the frozen finger. It … worked.

"I mean to leave you with a working hand," He could hear Claire's voice, breathless but sure.

He smiled a little. It didn't do to argue with the woman over any matter medical.

* * *

I came into the tent to fetch my small cautery iron and found Jamie sitting on the cot, slowly flexing his injured hand and contemplating his severed finger, which lay on a box beside him. I had wrapped it hastily in a plaster bandage, and it looked like a mummified worm.

"Er," I said delicately. "I'll, um, dispose of that, shall I?"

"How?" He put out a tentative forefinger, touched it, then snatched back his hand as though the detached finger had moved suddenly. He made a small, nervous sound that wasn't quite a laugh.

"Burn it?" I suggested. That was the usual method for disposing of amputated limbs on battlefields, though I had never personally done it. The notion of building a funeral pyre for the cremation of a single finger seemed suddenly absurd—though no more so than the idea of simply tossing it into one of the cookfires and hoping no one noticed.

Jamie made a dubious noise in his throat, indicating that he wasn't keen on the idea.

"Well … I suppose you could smoke it," I said, with equal dubiety. "And keep it in your sporran as a souvenir. Like Young Ian did with Neil Forbes's ear. Has he still got that, do you know?"

"Aye, he does." Jamie's color was beginning to come back, as he regained his self-possession. "But, no, I dinna think I want to do that."

"I could pickle it in spirits of wine," I offered. That got the ghost of a smile.

"Ten to one, someone would drink it before the day was out, Sassenach." I thought that was generous odds, myself. More like a thousand to one. I managed to keep my medicinal alcohol mostly intact only by virtue of having one of Ian's more ferocious Indian acquaintances guard it, when I wasn't using it—and sleeping with the keg next to me at night.

"Well, I think that leaves burial as the only other option."

"Mmphm." That sound indicated agreement, but with reservations, and I glanced up at him.

"What?"

"Aye, well," he said, rather diffidently. "When wee Fergus lost his hand, we … well, it was Jenny's notion. But we held a bit of a funeral, ken?"

I bit my lip. "Well, why not? Will it be a family affair, or shall we invite everyone?"

Before he could answer this, I heard Ian's voice outside, talking to someone, and an instant later his disheveled head pushed through the flap. One of his eyes was black and swollen and there was a sizable lump on his head, but he was grinning from ear to ear.

"Uncle Jamie?" he said. "There's someone here to see ye."

* * *

"How is it that ye come to be here, *a charaid?"* Jamie asked, somewhere after the third bottle. We had had supper long since, and the campfire was burning low.

Hamish wiped his mouth and handed the new bottle back.

“Here,” he repeated. “Here in the wilderness, d’ye mean? Or here, fighting against the King?” He gave Jamie a direct blue look, so like one of Jamie’s own that Jamie smiled, recognizing it.

“Is the second of those questions the answer to the first?” he said, and Hamish gave him the shadow of a smile in return.

“Aye, that would be it. Ye were always quick as the hummingbird, *a Sheaumais*. In body *and* mind.” Seeing from my expression that I was perhaps not quite so swift in my perceptions, he turned to me.

“It was the King’s troops who killed my uncle, the King’s soldiers who killed the fighting men of the clan, who destroyed the land, who left the women and the bairns to starve—who battered down my home and exiled me, who killed half the people left to me with cold and hunger and the plagues of the wilderness.” He spoke quietly, but with a passion that burned in his eyes.

“I was eleven years old when they came to the castle and put us out. I turned twelve on the day that they made me swear my oath to the King—they said I was a man. And by the time we reached Nova Scotia … I was.”

He turned to Jamie.

“They made ye swear, too, *a Sheaumais*?”

“They did,” Jamie said softly. “A forced oath canna bind a man, though, or keep him from his knowledge of right.”

Hamish put out a hand, and Jamie gripped it, though they did not look at each other.

“No,” he said, with certainty. “That it cannot.”

Perhaps not; but I knew they were both thinking, as I was, of the language of that oath: *May I lie in an unconsecrated grave, separated forever from my friends and kin*. And both thinking—as I was—how great the odds were that that fate was exactly what would happen to them.

And to me.

I cleared my throat.

“But the others,” I said, impelled by the memory of so many I had known in North Carolina, and knowing the same was true of many in Canada. “The Highlanders who are Loyalists?”

“Aye, well,” Hamish said softly, and looked into the fire, the lines of his face cut deep by its glow. “They fought bravely, but the heart of them was killed. They want only peace now and to be left alone. But war doesna leave any alone, does it?” He looked suddenly at me, and for a startling instant I saw Dougal MacKenzie looking out of his eyes, that impatient, violent man who had hungered for war. Not waiting for an answer, he shrugged and went on.

“War’s found them again; they’ve nay choice but to fight. But anyone can see what a pitiful rabble the Continental army is—or was.” He lifted his head, nodding a little, as though to himself, at sight of the campfires, the tents, the vast cloud of starlit haze that hung above us, full of smoke and dust and the scent of guns and ordure. “They thought the rebels would be crushed, and quickly. Oath notwithstanding, who but a fool would join such risky business?”

A man who had had no chance to fight before, I thought.

He smiled crookedly at Jamie.

“I am surprised we were not crushed,” he said, sounding in fact faintly surprised. “Are ye not surprised as well, *a Sheaumais*?”

“Amazed,” Jamie said, a faint smile on his own face. “Glad of it, though. And glad of you … *a Sheaumais.”*

They talked through most of the night. When they lapsed into Gaelic, I got up, put a hand on Jamie’s shoulder in token of good night, and crawled into my blankets. Exhausted by the day’s work, I drifted into sleep at once, soothed by the sound of their quiet talk, like the sound of bees in the heather. The last thing I saw before sleep took me was Young Ian’s face across the fire, rapt at hearing of the Scotland that had vanished just as he himself was born.

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A GENTLEMAN CALLER

"Mrs. Fraser?" A pleasant masculine voice spoke behind me, and I turned to see a stocky, broad-shouldered officer in the doorway of my tent, in shirtsleeves and waistcoat, a box cradled in one arm.

"I am. May I help you?"

He didn't look sick; in fact, he was healthier-looking than most of the army, his face very weathered but well-fleshed and ruddy. He smiled, a sudden, charming smile that quite transformed his big beaky nose and heavy brows.

"I was in hopes that we might transact a little business, Mrs. Fraser." He raised one of the bushy brows and, at my gesture of invitation, came into the tent, ducking only a little.

"I suppose that depends what you're looking for," I said, with a curious look at his box. "If it's whisky, I can't give you that, I'm afraid." There was in fact a small keg of this valuable substance hidden under the table at the moment, along with a larger keg of my raw medicinal alcohol—and the smell of the latter was strong in the air, as I was steeping herbs in it. This gentleman was not the first to have been drawn by the scent—it attracted soldiers of all ranks like flies.

"Oh, no," he assured me, though casting an interested look at the table behind me, where I had several large jars in which I was growing what I hoped was penicillin. "I'm told, though, that you possess a stock of cinchona bark. Is that so?"

"Well, yes. Please, sit." I waved him to my patient stool and sat down myself, knee to knee. "Do you suffer from malaria?" I didn't think so—the whites of his eyes were clear; he wasn't jaundiced.

"No, may the Lord be thanked for His mercy. I have a gentleman in my command—a particular friend—who does, though, very badly, and our surgeon has no Jesuit bark. I hoped that you might be induced, perhaps, to make a trade …?"

He had laid the box on the table beside us, and at this flipped it open. It was divided into small compartments and contained a remarkable assortment of things: lace edging, silk ribbon, a pair of tortoiseshell hair combs, a small bag of salt, a pepperbox, an enameled snuffbox, a pewter brooch in the shape of a lily, several bright hanks of embroidery silk, a bundle of cinnamon sticks, and a number of small jars filled apparently with herbs. And a glass bottle, whose label read …

"Laudanum!" I exclaimed, reaching for it involuntarily. I stopped myself, but the officer gestured to me to go ahead, and I pulled it carefully from its resting place, drew the cork, and moved the bottle warily past my nose. The pungent, sickly-sweet scent of opium drifted out, a genie in a bottle. I cleared my throat and put the cork back in.

He was watching me with interest.

"I was not sure what might best suit you," he said, waving at the box's contents. "I used to run a store, you see—a great deal of apothecary's stuff, but luxurious dry goods in general. I learnt in the course of my business that it is always best to give the ladies a good deal of choice; they tend to be much more discriminating than do the gentlemen."

I gave him a sharp glance, but it wasn't flummery; he smiled at me again, and I thought that he was one of those unusual men—like Jamie—who actually liked women, beyond the obvious.

"I imagine we can accommodate each other, then," I said, returning the smile. "I ought not to ask, I suppose—I don't intend to hold you up; I'll give you what you need for your friend—but with thought of possible future trade, have you got more laudanum?"

He continued to smile, but his gaze sharpened—he had rather unusual eyes, that pale gray often described as "spit-colored."

"Why, yes," he said slowly. "I have quite a bit. Do you … require it regularly?"

It occurred to me that he was wondering whether I was an addict; it wasn't at all uncommon, in circles where laudanum was easily obtainable.

"I don't use it myself, no," I replied equably. "And I administer it to those in need with considerable caution. But relief of pain is one of the more important things I can offer some of the people who come to me—God knows I can't offer many of them cure."

His brows went up at that. "That's a rather remarkable statement. Most persons in your profession seem to promise cure to nearly everyone."

"How does that saying go? 'If wishes were horses, beggars might ride'?" I smiled, but without much humor. "Everyone wants a cure, and certainly there's no physician who doesn't want to give them one. But there are a lot of things beyond the power of any physician, and while you might not tell a patient that, it's as well to know your own limits."

"You think so?" He tilted his head, regarding me curiously. "Do you not think that the admission of such limits, *a priori*—and I do not mean only in the medical way, but in any arena of endeavor—that such an admission in itself *establishes limits?* That is, might that expectation prevent one from accomplishing all that is possible, because one assumes that something is *not* possible and therefore does not strive with all one's power to achieve it?"

I blinked at him, rather surprised.

"Well … yes," I said slowly. "If you put it that way, I rather think I agree with you. After all"—I waved a hand toward the tent flap, indicating the surrounding army—"if I didn't—*we* didn't—believe that one can accomplish things beyond all reasonable expectation, would my husband and I be *here*?"

He laughed at that.

"Brava, ma'am! Yes, an impartial observer would, I think, call this venture sheer madness. And they might be right," he added, with a rueful tilt of the head. "But they'll have to defeat us, nonetheless. We shan't give up."

I heard voices outside: Jamie, talking casually with someone, and in the next moment he had ducked inside the tent.

"Sassenach," he began, "can ye come and—" He stopped dead, seeing my visitor, and drew up a bit, with a formal bow. "Sir."

I glanced back at the visitor, surprised; Jamie's manner made it clear that this was a superior officer of some sort; I'd thought him perhaps a captain or a major. As for the officer himself, he nodded, friendly but reserved.

"Colonel. Your wife and I have been discussing the philosophy of endeavor. What do you say—does a wise man know his limits, or a bold one deny them? And which way do you declare yourself?"

Jamie looked mildly startled and glanced at me; I lifted one shoulder an inch.

"Ah, well," he said, switching his attention back to my visitor. "I've heard it said that a man's reach must exceed his grasp—or what's a heaven for?"

The officer stared at him for an instant, mouth open, then laughed with delight and slapped his knee.

"You and your wife are two of a kind, sir! *My* kind. That's splendid; do you recall where you heard it?"

Jamie did; he'd heard it from me, more than once over the years. He merely smiled and shrugged, though.

"A poet, I believe, but I've forgot the name."

"Well, a perfectly expressed sentiment, nonetheless, and I mean to go and try it on Granny directly—though I imagine he'll just blink stupidly at me through his spectacles and bleat about supplies. *There's* a man who knows his limits," he remarked to me, still good-humored but with a distinct edge in his voice. "Knows his own damnably low limits and won't let anyone else exceed them. A heaven's not for the likes of him."

That last remark went beyond edgy; the smile had faded from his face, and I glimpsed a hot anger at the back of his pale eyes. I had a moment of disquiet; "Granny" could only be General Gates, and this man was plainly a disaffected member of the high command. I sincerely hoped Robert Browning and I hadn't just landed Jamie in the middle of something.

"Well," I said, trying to make light of it, "they can't defeat you if you won't give up."

The shadow that had rested on his brow cleared and he smiled at me, merry-eyed once more.

"Oh, they'll never defeat me, Mrs. Fraser. Trust me!"

"I will," I assured him, turning to open one of my boxes. "Let me get the Jesuit bark for you … er …" I hesitated, not knowing his rank, and he noticed, clapping a hand to his forehead in apology.

"My apologies, Mrs. Fraser! What can you think of a man who bursts into your presence, rudely demanding medicaments and failing even to introduce himself properly?"

He took the small package of shredded bark from my hand, retaining the hand itself, and bowed low over it, gently kissing my knuckles.

"Major General Benedict Arnold. Your servant, ma'am."

* * *

Jamie looked after the departing general, a slight frown on his face. Then he glanced back at me and the frown disappeared instantly.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach? Ye look as though you're about to fall over."

"I might, at that," I said rather faintly, and groped for my stool. I sat on it and discovered the new bottle of laudanum on the table beside me. I picked it up, finding the solid weight of it a reassurance that I hadn't imagined the gentleman who'd just left us.

"I was mentally prepared to run into George Washington or Benjamin Franklin in person at some point," I said. "Even John Adams. But I didn't really expect *him* … and I *liked* him," I added ruefully.

Jamie's brows were still up, and he glanced at the bottle in my lap as though wondering whether I'd been having a nip.

"Why should ye not like—oh." His face changed. "Ye know something about him?"

"Yes, I do. And it's not something I want to know." I swallowed, feeling a little ill. "He's not a traitor yet—but he will be."

Jamie glanced back over his shoulder, to be sure we were not overheard, then came and sat on the patient's stool, taking my hands in his.

"Tell me," he said, low-voiced.

There were limits to what I *could* tell him—and, not for the first time, I regretted not having paid more attention to Bree's history homework, as that formed the nucleus of my specific knowledge regarding the American Revolution.

"He fought on our—on the American side for some time, and was a brilliant soldier, though I don't know any of the details of that. But at some point, he became disillusioned, decided to switch sides, and began making overtures to the British, using a man called John André as his go-between—André was captured and hanged, I know that much. But I think Arnold got away to England. For an American *general* to turn his coat … it was such a spectacular act of treason that the name 'Benedict Arnold' became a synonym for traitor. *Will* become, I mean. If someone commits some horrible act of betrayal, you call them 'a Benedict Arnold.' "

The sick feeling hadn't gone away. Somewhere—right this minute—one Major John André was happily going about his business, presumably without the slightest notion of what lay in his future.

"When?" Jamie's fingers pressing mine drew my attention away from Major André's impending doom and back to the more urgent matter.

"That's the problem," I said helplessly. "I don't know. Not yet—I *think* not yet."

Jamie thought for a moment, brows drawn down.

"I'll watch him, then," he said quietly.

"Don't," I said, by reflex. We stared at each other for a long moment, recalling Charles Stuart. It hadn't escaped either of us that attempting to interfere with history could have serious unintended consequences—if in fact it could be done at all. We had no notion what it was that might turn Arnold from patriot—which he certainly was at the moment—to the traitor he would be. Was his fight with Gates the niggling grain of sand that would form the heart of a treacherous pearl?

“You don’t know what small thing might affect someone’s mind,” I pointed out. “Look at Robert the Bruce and that spider.”

That made him smile.

“I’ll gang warily, Sassenach,” he said. “But I’ll watch him.”

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HAT TRICK

October 7, 1777

… Well, then, order on Morgan to begin the Game.
General Horatio Gates

On a quiet autumn morning, crisp and golden, a British deserter entered the American camp. Burgoyne was sending out a reconnaissance force, he said. Two thousand men, to test the strength of the American right wing.

"Granny Gates's eyes nearly popped through his spectacles," Jamie told me, hastily reloading his cartridge box. "And nay wonder."

General Arnold, present when the news came, urged Gates to send out a strong force against this foray. Gates, true to form, had been cautious, and when Arnold requested permission to go out and see for himself what the British were about, had given his subordinate a cold look and said, "I am afraid to trust you, Arnold."

"Matters rather went downhill from there," Jamie said, grimacing slightly. "The end of it all was that Gates said to him—and I quote ye exactly, Sassenach—'General Arnold, I have nothing for you to do. You have no business here.' "

I felt a chill that had nothing to do with the temperature of the morning air. Was this the moment? The thing that had—or would—turn Benedict Arnold against the cause he had fought for? Jamie saw what I was thinking, for he lifted one shoulder and said simply, "At least it's nothing to do wi' us this time."

"That *is* a comfort," I said, and meant it. "Take care, will you?"

"I will," he said, taking up his rifle.

This time, he was able to kiss me goodbye in person.

* * *

The British reconnaissance had a double purpose: not only to see exactly where the Americans were—for General Burgoyne had no real idea; American deserters had stopped coming in long since—but also to acquire much-needed forage for the remaining animals. Consequently, the leading companies stopped in a promising wheat field.

William sent his infantrymen to sit down in double rows among the standing grain, while the foragers began cutting the grain and loading it on horses. A lieutenant of dragoons, a black-headed Welshman named Absolute, waved from the other side of the field and called him to a game of hazard in his tent in the evening. He had just taken breath to call back when the man beside him let out a gasp and crumpled to the ground. He never heard the bullet, but ducked to the ground, calling out to his men.

Nothing further happened, though, and after a few moments they rose cautiously and went about their work. They began to see small parties of rebels, though, stealing through the trees, and William became conscious of a growing conviction that they were being surrounded. When he spoke of this to another officer, though, the man assured him that the rebels had decided to remain behind their defenses to be attacked.

They were soon undeceived on this point when, in mid-afternoon, a large body of Americans appeared in the woods on their left and heavy cannon opened up, slamming six-and twelve-pound balls that would have done great damage, were it not for the intervening trees.

The infantrymen scattered like quail, despite the calls of their officers. William caught sight of Absolute, pelting down the field through the wheat after a group of his men, and, turning, seized a corporal of one of his own companies.

"Gather them!" he said, and, not waiting for an answer, grabbed the bridle of one of the foragers' horses, a surprised-looking bay gelding. It was his intent to ride for the main camp for reinforcements, for plainly the Americans were out in force.

He never got there, for as he pulled the horse's head around, the brigadier rode onto the field.

* * *

Jamie Fraser crouched in the grove at the base of the wheat field with a group of Morgan's men, taking aim as he could. It was as hot a battle as he'd seen, and the smoke from the cannon in the wood drifted through the field in heavy, choking clouds. He saw the man on the horse, a high-ranking British officer, to judge from his braid. Two or three others, juniors, were near him, also on horseback, but he had eyes only for the one.

Grasshoppers flew out of the field like hailstones, panicked by the trampling feet; one struck him in the cheek, buzzing, and he slapped at it, heart thumping as though it had been a musket ball.

He knew the man, though only by his general's uniform. He had met Simon Fraser of Balnain two or three times, but when they both were lads in the Highlands—Simon was a few years younger, and Jamie's vague memories of a small, round, cheerful wee lad who trotted after the older boys, waving a shinty stick taller than himself, had nothing in common with the stout, solid man who rose now in his stirrups, calling out and brandishing his sword, attempting to rally his panicked troops by sheer force of personality.

The aides were urging their mounts round his, trying to shield him, plainly urging him to come away, but he ignored them. Jamie caught a white glimpse of a face turned toward the wood, then away—plainly they knew the trees were full of riflemen, or could be, and were trying to keep out of range.

"There he is!" It was Arnold, crashing his small brown mare regardless through the heavy brush, his face alight with savage glee.

"The generals!" he bellowed, rising in his own stirrups and throwing out an arm. "Shoot the generals, boys! Five dollars to the man who shoots yon fat bastard from his saddle!"

The random crack of rifle fire answered him at once. Jamie saw Daniel Morgan's head turn sharp, eyes fierce at Arnold's voice, and the rifleman started toward him, moving as fast as his rheumatism-crippled limbs would let him.

"Again! Try again!" Arnold smote a fist on his thigh, caught sight of Jamie watching him. "You—shoot him, can't you?"

Jamie shrugged and, lifting the rifle to his shoulder, aimed deliberately high and wide. The wind had turned and the smoke of the shot stung his eyes, but he saw one of the junior officers near Simon jump and clap a hand to his head, twisting in the saddle to see his hat roll away into the wheat.

He wanted to laugh, though his wame curled a bit, realizing that he had nearly shot the man through the head, entirely by accident. The young man—yes, he was young, tall, and thin—rose in his stirrups and shook a fist at the wood.

"You owe me a hat, sir!" he shouted.

Arnold's high, piercing laugh echoed through the wood, clear over the shouting, and the men with him hooted and screamed like crows.

"Come over here, younker, and I'll buy you two!" Arnold shouted back, then reined his horse in a restless circle, bellowing at the riflemen. "Damn your eyes for a crew of blind men, will nobody kill me that frigging general?"

One or two shots spattered through the branches, but most of the men had seen Daniel Morgan stumping toward Arnold like an animated tree, gnarled and implacable, and held their fire.

Arnold must have seen him, too, but ignored him. He jerked a pistol from his belt and fired sideways across his body at Fraser, though he could not hope to hit anything at that distance, and his horse startled at the noise, ears flat back. Morgan, who had nearly reached him, was obliged to jerk back to avoid being trampled; he stumbled, and fell flat.

Without an instant's hesitation, Arnold leapt off his horse and bent to raise the older man, apologizing with a completely sincere solicitude. Which, Jamie saw, was unappreciated by Morgan. He thought old Dan might just give Arnold one in the stones, rank and rheumatism notwithstanding.

The general's horse was trained to stand, but the unexpected shot over her ears had spooked her; she was dancing nervously, feet a-rattle in the drifts of dead leaves and eyes showing white.

Jamie seized the reins and pulled the mare's nose down, blowing into her nostrils to distract her. She whuffed and shook her head, but ceased to dance. He stroked her neck, clicking his tongue, and her ears rose a bit; his hand was bleeding again, he saw, but it was a slow seep through the bandage, not important. Over the solid curve of the mare's neck, he could see Morgan, upright now and violently rejecting Arnold's efforts to dust the leaf mold from his clothes.

"You are relieved of command, sir! How dare you to order my men?"

"Oh, fuck that for a game of soldiers!" Arnold said, impatient. "I'm a general. He's a general"—he jerked his head toward the distant figure on horseback—"and I want him dead. Time enough for politics when it's over—this is a fight, dammit!" Jamie caught a sudden strong whiff of rum, sweet and fierce under the smell of smoke and trampled wheat. Aye, well, perhaps that had somewhat to do with it—though from what he knew of Arnold, there was little enough to choose between the man stone sober and another raving with drink.

The wind came in gusts, hot past his ears, thick with smoke and random sounds: the rattle of muskets punctuated by the crash of artillery to the left, and through it the shouting of Simon Fraser and his juniors, calling the Hessians and English to rally, the grunts of impact and shrieks of pain from farther away, where the Hessians fought to break through General Enoch Poor's advancing men.

General Ebenezer Learned's column was pressing the Hessians from above; Jamie could see the knot of green German uniforms, struggling amid a surge of Continentals but being forced back from the edge of the field. Some were trying to break away, to head downfield toward General Fraser. A glimpse of motion drew his eye; the young man he had deprived of a hat was galloping up the field, bent low over his horse's neck, saber drawn.

The general had moved a little, away from the wood. He was nearly out of range for most of Morgan's men—but Jamie was well placed; he had a clear shot from here. He glanced down. He had dropped his rifle when he took the horse, but the gun was loaded; he had reloaded by reflex after his first shot. The half-empty cartridge was still folded in the hand that held the reins; priming would take but an instant.

"Sheas, a nighean," he murmured to the horse, and took a deep breath, trying to will himself to calm, will that calmness into the mare, though his hand was throbbing with the rush of his blood. *"Cha chluinn thu an còrr a chuireas eagal ort,"* he said, under his breath. *No more. Ye'll hear nay more to fright ye*.

He had not even thought about it when he'd fired to miss Fraser. He would kill any other man on the field—but not that one. Then he caught sight of the young soldier on the horse, coat bright red among the thrashing sea of green and blue and homespun, laying about him with his saber, and felt his mouth twitch. Not that one, either.

It seemed the young man was having a lucky day. He had cut through Learned's column at the gallop, taking most of the Continentals unaware, and those who saw him were too much occupied with fighting or unable to shoot him because they had discharged their weapons and were fixing bayonets.

Jamie stroked the horse absently, whistling gently through his teeth and watching. The young officer had reached the Hessians, had got the attention of some, and was now fighting his way back down the field, a stream of dark green coats in his wake, Hessians at the trot, making for the narrowing gap as Poor's men rushed in from the left.

Jamie was so much occupied by this entertaining spectacle that he had ignored the shouting match taking place between Dan Morgan and General Arnold. The sound of a whoop from overhead interrupted both.

“I got him, by Jaysus!”

Jamie looked up, startled, and saw Tim Murphy perched in the branches of an oak, grinning like a goblin, the barrel of his rifle snug in a fork. Jamie jerked his head round and saw Simon Fraser, slumped and swaying in his saddle, arms folded round his body.

Arnold let out a matching whoop, and Morgan glanced up at Murphy, nodding grudging approval.

“Good shot,” he called.

Simon Fraser was wobbling, about to fall—one of his aides reached for him, shouting desperately for help, another reined his horse to and fro, undecided where to go, what to do. Jamie clenched his fist, felt a jolt of pain shoot through his maimed hand, and stopped, palm flat on the saddle. Was Simon dead?

He couldn’t tell. The aides had overcome their panic; two of them rode close on either side, supporting the slumping figure, fighting to keep him in the saddle, heedless of the cheering from the wood.

He glanced up the field, searching for the young man with the saber. He couldn’t find him and felt a small stab of loss—then picked him up, engaged in a hand-to-hand with a mounted militia captain. No kind of finesse in that sort of fight; it was as much the horse as the man, and as he watched, the horses were forced apart by the crush of bodies round them. The British officer didn’t try to force his mount back; he had a goal in mind and shouted and gestured, urging on the small company of Hessians he had extracted from the melee above. Then he turned back toward the wood and saw what was happening, General Fraser’s horse being urged away, the general’s swaying body a splotch of red against the trampled wheat.

The young man stood in his stirrups for an instant, dropped, and spurred his horse toward the general, leaving his Hessians to follow as they might.

Jamie was close enough to see the darker crimson of the blood that soaked the middle of Simon Fraser’s body. If Simon wasn’t dead already, he thought, it wouldn’t be long. Grief and fury at the waste of it burned in his throat. Tears from the smoke were already running down his cheeks; he blinked and shook his head violently to clear his eyes.

A hand jerked the reins unceremoniously from his fingers, and Arnold's stocky body brushed him away from the mare in a gust of rum. Arnold swung up into the saddle, face red as the scarlet maple leaves with excitement and victory.

"Follow me, boys!" he shouted, and Jamie saw that the wood was aswarm with militia, companies Arnold had collected on his mad dash for the battlefield. "To the redoubt!"

The men cheered and rushed after him, breaking branches and stumbling in their eagerness.

"Follow that goddamned fool," Morgan said shortly, and Jamie glanced at him in surprise. Morgan scowled at Arnold's back.

"He'll be court-martialed, mark my words," the old rifleman said. "He'd best have a good witness. You're it, James. Go!"

Without a word, Jamie seized his rifle from the ground and set off at a run, leaving the wood with its gentle rain of gold and brown. Following Arnold's broad-shouldered whooping form, his waving hat. Into the wheat.

* * *

They did follow him. A bellowing horde, an armed rabble. Arnold was mounted, but his horse found it heavy going, and the men were not hard-pressed to keep up. Jamie saw the back of Arnold's blue coat blotched black with sweat, molded like a rind to the burly shoulders. One shot from the rear, the confusion of battle … But it was no more than a passing thought, gone in an instant.

Arnold was gone, too, with a whoop, spurring his mare up and around, past the redoubt. Jamie assumed he must be meaning to ride in from the rear—suicide, as the place was crawling with German grenadiers; he could see their mitred hats poking up above the walls of the redoubt. Perhaps Arnold meant to commit suicide—perhaps only to create a diversion for the men attacking the redoubt from the front, with his own death an acceptable price to be paid for it.

The redoubt itself stood fifteen feet high, a packed earthen wall with a palisade of logs built atop it—and between earth and palisade were abatis, logs sharpened to a point and flung down pointing outward.

Balls were spattering the field before the redoubt, and Jamie ran, dodging bullets he couldn't see.

He scrabbled with his feet, clawing for purchase on the logs of the abatis, got one hand through a gap and onto a log, but lost his grip on the flaking bark and fell back, landing bruisingly on his rifle and knocking out his wind. The man beside him fired up through the gap, and white smoke spurted over him, hiding him momentarily from the Hessian he'd glimpsed above. He rolled over and crawled fast away before the smoke could drift off or the fellow decide to drop a grenade through it.

"Get clear!" he shouted over his shoulder, but the man who'd fired was trying his own luck with a running jump. The grenade fell through the gap just as the man leapt upward. It caught him in the chest and went off.

Jamie rubbed his hand on his shirt, swallowing bile. The skin of his palm stung, scraped and full of bark splinters. Shards of metal and wood chips had exploded outward; something had struck Jamie in the face, and he felt the sting of his sweat and the warmth of blood running down his cheek. He could see the grenadier, a glimpse of green coat through the gap in the abatis. Quick, before he moved.

He grabbed a cartridge from his bag and ripped it with his teeth, counting. He could load a rifle in twelve seconds, he knew it, had timed it. *Nine* … *eight* … What was it Bree taught the weans, counting seconds? Hippopotami, aye. *Six hippopotami* … *five hippopotami* … He had an insane urge to laugh, seeing in his mind's eye a group of several hippopotami solemnly watching him and making critical remarks regarding his progress. *Two hippopotami* … He wasn't dead yet, so he pressed himself close up under the abatis, aimed the barrel through the gap, and fired at the smear of green that might be a fir tree but wasn't, since it screamed.

He slung the rifle onto his back and once more leaped, fingers digging desperately into the unpeeled log. They slipped, splinters running up under his nails, and pain shot through his hand like lightning but now he had his other hand up, grabbed his right wrist with his sound left hand, and locked his grip round the log. His feet slid on the loose-packed dirt, and for an instant he swung free, like a squirrel hanging from a tree branch. He pulled upward against his weight and felt something tear in his shoulder, but couldn't stop to favor it. A foot, he had his foot braced on the underside of the log now. A wild swing with his free leg and he was clinging like a sloth. Something chunked into the log he clung to; he felt the shiver through the wood.

"Hold on, Red!" someone screamed below him, and he froze. Another chunking sound and something came down on the wood an inch from his fingers—an ax? He didn't have time to be scared; the man below fired past his shoulder—he heard the ball whiz past, buzzing like an angry hornet—and he pulled himself toward the base of the log in a rush, hand over hand as fast as he could, worming his way between the logs, clothes ripping, and his joints, too.

There were two Hessians lying just above his gap, dead or wounded. Another, ten feet away, saw his head pop through and reached into his sack, teeth bared beneath a waxed mustache. A bloodcurdling yell came from behind the Hessian, though, and one of Morgan's men brought down a tomahawk on his skull.

He heard a noise and turned in time to see a corporal step on one of the Hessian bodies, which abruptly came to life, rolling up with musket in hand. The Hessian struck up with all his force, the blade of the bayonet ripping up through the corporal's breeches as he stumbled, tearing free in a spray of blood.

By reflex, Jamie seized his rifle by the barrel and swung it, the motion snapping through his shoulders, arms, and wrists as he tried to drive the butt through the man's head. The jolt of collision wrenched his arms, and he felt the bones of his neck pop and his sight go white. He shook his head to clear it and smeared sweat and blood from his eye sockets with the heel of his hand. Shit, he'd bent the rifle.

The Hessian was dead for good, a look of surprise on what was left of his face. The wounded corporal was crawling away, one leg of his breeches soaked with blood, his musket slung onto his back, his own bayonet blade in his hand. He glanced over his shoulder and, seeing Jamie, shouted, "Rifleman! Your back!"

He didn't turn to see what it was but dived headlong and to the side, rolling into leaves and trampled earth. Several bodies rolled over him in a grunting tangle and crashed against the palisades. He got up slowly, took one of the pistols from his belt, cocked it, and blew out the brains of a grenadier poised to throw one of his grenades over the edge.

A few more shots, groans, and thumps, and as quickly as that, the fight died down. The redoubt was littered with bodies—most of them green-clad. He caught a glimpse of Arnold's little mare, white-eyed and limping, riderless. Arnold was on the ground, struggling to stand.

Jamie felt nearly unable to stand himself; his knees had gone to water and his right hand was paralyzed, but he wobbled over to Arnold and half-fell down beside him. The general had been shot; his leg was all-over blood, and his face was white and clammy, his eyes half-closing from the shock. Jamie reached out and gripped Arnold's hand, calling his name to pull him back, thinking even as he did so that this was madness; he should slip his dirk into the man's ribs and spare both him and the victims of his treachery. But the choice was made and past before he had time to think about it. Arnold's hand tightened on his.

"Where?" Arnold whispered. His lips were blanched. "Where am I hit?"

"It's your leg, sir," Jamie said. "The same where ye were hit before."

Arnold's eyes opened and fixed upon his face.

"I wish it had been my heart," he whispered, and closed them again.

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66

DEATHBED

A British ensign came just after nightfall, under a flag of truce. General Gates sent him to our tent; Brigadier Simon Fraser had learned of Jamie's presence and wished to see him. "Before it's too late, sir," the ensign said, low-voiced. He was very young and looked shattered. "Will you come?"

Jamie was already rising, though it took him two tries to get up. He wasn't hurt, beyond a number of spectacular bruises and a sprained shoulder, but he hadn't had the strength even to eat when he staggered back after the battle. I'd washed his face for him and given him a glass of beer. He was still holding it, undrunk, and now set it down.

"My wife and I will come," he said hoarsely.

I reached for my cloak—and, just in case, my kit.

* * *

I needn't have bothered with the kit. General Fraser lay on a long dining table in the main room of a large log cabin—the Baroness von Riedesel's house, the little ensign had murmured—and it was apparent from a glance that he was beyond any aid I could offer. His broad face was almost bloodless in the candlelight, and his body was wrapped in bandages, these soaked with blood. Fresh blood, too; I saw the wet patches slowly spreading, darker than the patches of dried blood already there.

Absorbed by the dying man, I'd only dimly registered the presence of several other people in the room and had consciously noticed only two: the surgeons who stood near the bed, bloodstained and white-faced with fatigue. One of them darted a glance at me, then stiffened a little. His eyes narrowed, and he nudged his fellow, who looked up from his contemplation of General Fraser, frowning. He looked at me with no particular comprehension and went back to his fruitless meditation.

I gave the first surgeon a straight look, but without any hint of confrontation. I did not mean to intrude on his territory. There was nothing I could do here, nothing anyone could do, as the surgeons' exhausted attitudes clearly showed. The second man hadn't given up, and I admired him for it, but the scent of putrefaction in the air was unmistakable, and I could hear the general's breathing—long, stertorous sighs, with a nerve-wringing silence between them.

There was nothing I could do for General Fraser as a doctor, and there were people here who could offer better comfort than I could. Jamie, perhaps, among them.

"He hasn't long," I whispered to Jamie. "If there's anything you want to say to him …"

He nodded, swallowing, and went forward. A British colonel at the side of the impromptu deathbed narrowed his eyes but, at a murmur from another officer, stepped back a little so that Jamie could approach.

The room was small and very crowded. I kept back, trying to stay out of the way.

Jamie and the British officer murmured together for a moment. A young officer, no doubt the general's aide, knelt in the shadow on the far side of the table, holding the general's hand, his own head bowed in obvious distress. I pushed the cloak back over my shoulders. Cold as it was outside, the air inside was beastly hot, unhealthy and suffocating, as though the fever that was devouring General Fraser before our eyes had risen from the bed and spread through the cabin, unsatisfied with its meager prey. It was a miasma, thick with decaying bowels, stale sweat, and the taste of black powder that hung in the men's clothes.

Jamie bent, then knelt himself, to come closer to Fraser's ear. The general's eyes were closed, but he was conscious; I saw his face twitch at the sound of Jamie's voice. His head turned and his eyes opened, the dullness in them brightening momentarily in recognition.

"Ciamar a tha thu, a charaid?" Jamie asked softly. *How are you, cousin?*

The general's mouth twitched a little.

"Tha ana-cnàmhadh an Diabhail orm," he replied hoarsely. *"Feumaidh gun do dh'ìth mi rudegin nach robh dol leam." I have the devil of an indigestion. I must have eaten something that disagreed with me.*

The British officers stirred a little, hearing the Gaelic, and the young officer on the far side of the bed looked up, startled.

Not nearly as startled as I was.

The shadowed room seemed to shift around me, and I half-fell against the wall, pressing my hands against the wood in hopes of finding something solid to hold on to.

Sleeplessness and grief lined his face, and it was still grimed with smoke and blood, smeared racoonlike across his brow and cheekbones by a careless sleeve. None of that made the slightest difference. His hair was dark, his face narrower, but I would have known that long, straight nose and those slanted blue cat-eyes anywhere. He and Jamie knelt on either side of the general's deathbed, no more than five feet apart. Surely, no one could fail to see the resemblance, if …

"Ellesmere." A captain of infantry stepped forward and touched the young man's shoulder with a murmured word and a small jerk of the head, plainly telling him to leave the general's side, in order to give General Fraser a moment's privacy, should he desire it.

Don't look up! I thought as fiercely as I could in Jamie's direction. *For God's sake, don't look up!*

He didn't. Whether he had recognized the name or had caught a glimpse of that soot-smeared face across the bed, he kept his own head bent, his features hid in shadow, and leaned nearer, speaking very low to his cousin Simon.

The young man rose to his feet, slow as Dan Morgan on a cold morning. His shadow wavered on the rough-cut logs behind him, tall and spindly. He was paying no attention to Jamie; every fiber of his being was focused on the dying general.

“It is gladness to be seeing you once more on earth, *Seaumais mac Brian*,” Fraser whispered, bringing both his hands across with an effort to clasp Jamie’s. “I am content to die among my comrades, whom I love. But you will tell this to those of our blood in Scotland? Tell them …”

One of the other officers spoke to William, and he turned reluctantly away from the bedside, answering low-voiced. My fingers were damp with sweat, and I could feel beads of perspiration running down my neck. I wanted desperately to take off my cloak but feared to make any movement that might draw William’s attention to me and thus toward Jamie.

Jamie was still as a rabbit under a bush. I could see his shoulders tight under the damp-dark coat, his hands gripping the general’s, and only the flicker of the firelight on the ruddy crown of his head gave any illusion of movement.

“It shall be as you say, *Shimi mac Shimi.”* I could barely hear his whisper. “Lay your wish upon me; I will bear it.”

I heard a loud sniff beside me and glanced aside to see a small woman, dainty as a porcelain doll despite the hour and the circumstance. Her eyes shone with unshed tears; she turned her head to dab at them, saw me watching, and gave me a tremulous attempt at a smile.

“I am so glad that your husband is come, madam,” she whispered to me in a soft German accent. “It—it is a comfort, perhaps. That our dear friend shall have the solace of a kinsman by his side.”

Two of them, I thought, biting my tongue, and by an effort of will didn’t look in William’s direction. The awful thought came suddenly to me that William might recognize *me*, and make some effort to come and speak with me. Which might well mean disaster, if …

The baroness—for she must be von Riedesel’s wife—seemed to sway a little, though it might be only an effect of the shifting firelight and the press of bodies. I touched her arm.

"I need air," I whispered to her. "Come outside with me."

The surgeons were drifting back toward the bed, intent as vultures, and the Gaelic murmurings were broken suddenly by a terrible groan from Simon Fraser.

"Bring a candle!" one of the surgeons said sharply, moving quickly toward the bedside.

The baroness's eyes shut tight, and I saw her throat move as she swallowed. I took her hand and led her quickly out.

* * *

It wasn't long but seemed an age before the men came out, heads bowed.

There was a short, sharp argument outside the cabin, conducted in low voices by reason of respect for the dead, but nonetheless heated. Jamie kept to one side, with his hat on, pulled well down, but one of the British officers turned to him now and then, obviously requesting his opinion.

Lieutenant William Ransom, aka Lord Ellesmere, kept to himself, too, as befitted his relatively lowly rank in this company. He didn't join in the argument, seeming too much shocked by the death. I wondered whether he had seen anyone he knew die before—and then realized how idiotic that thought was.

But battlefield deaths, however violent, are not the same as the death of a friend. And from the looks of young William, Simon Fraser had been friend as well as commander to him.

Occupied by these surreptitious observations, I hadn't been paying more than the most cursory attention to the main point of argument—that being the immediate disposition of General Fraser's body—and none at all to the two medical men, who had come out of the cabin and now stood a little apart, murmuring to each other. From the corner of my eye, I saw one reach into his pocket and hand the other a twist of tobacco, wave off the other's thanks, then turn away. What he said, though, seized my attention as effectively as though his head had burst into flame.

"See you a bit later, then, Dr. Rawlings," he'd said.

“Dr. Rawlings?” I said by reflex, and the second doctor turned.

“Yes, ma’am?” he said politely, but with the air of an exhausted man struggling against an overwhelming urge to tell the world to go to hell. I recognized the impulse and sympathized—but having spoken, had no choice but to continue.

“I beg your pardon,” I said, flushing a little. “I just caught your name and was struck by it—I used to know a Dr. Rawlings.”

The effect of this casual remark was unexpected. His shoulders drew back abuptly and his dull gaze sharpened into eagerness.

“You did? Where?”

“Er …” I floundered for a moment, as in fact I had never actually met Daniel Rawlings—though I certainly felt I knew him—and temporized by saying, “His name was Daniel Rawlings. Would that perhaps be a relative of yours?”

His face lighted up and he seized me by the arm.

“Yes! Yes, he is my brother. Pray tell me, ma’am, do you know where he is?”

I had a nasty sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. I did in fact know exactly where Daniel Rawlings was, but the news wasn’t going to be welcome to his brother. There was no choice, though; I had to tell him.

“I’m terribly sorry to have to tell you that he’s dead,” I said, as gently as I could. I put my own hand over his and squeezed, my throat constricting again as the light in his eyes died.

He stood unmoving for the space of several breaths, his eyes focused somewhere beyond me. Slowly, they refocused on me and he took one more deep breath and firmed his mouth.

“I see. I … had feared that. How did he—how did it happen, do you know?”

“I do,” I said hurriedly, seeing Colonel Grant shift his weight in a manner indicating imminent departure. “But it’s—a long story.”

“Ah.” He caught the direction of my glance and turned his head. All the men were moving now, straightening their coats, putting on their hats as they exchanged a few final words.

“I’ll find you,” he said abruptly, turning back to me. “Your husband—he is the tall Scottish rebel, I think they said he is kin to the general?”

I saw his gaze flick momentarily toward something beyond me, and alarm pricked like needles in my skin. Rawlings’s brows were slightly knitted, and I knew, as clearly as if he had spoken, that the word “kin” had triggered some connection in his mind—and that he was looking at William.

“Yes. Colonel Fraser,” I said hurriedly, grasping him by the sleeve before he could look at Jamie and complete the thought that was forming.

I had been groping in my kit as we spoke and at this point found the folded square of paper I’d been looking for. I pulled it out and, unfolding it quickly, handed it to him. There was still room for doubt, after all.

“Is this your brother’s hand?”

He seized the paper from me and devoured the small, neat script with an expression in which eagerness, hope, and despair were mingled. He closed his eyes for an instant, then opened them, reading and rereading the receipt for Bowel-Bind as if it were Holy Writ.

“The page is burnt,” he said, touching the singed edge. His voice was husky. “Did Daniel … die in a fire?”

“No,” I said. There was no time; one of the British officers stood impatiently behind him, waiting. I touched the hand that held the page. “Keep that, please. And if you can manage to cross the lines—I suppose you can now—you’ll find me most easily in my tent, near the artillery park. They … er … they call me the White Witch,” I added diffidently. “Ask anyone.”

His bloodshot eyes widened at that, then narrowed as he examined me closely. But there was no time for further questions; the officer stepped forward and muttered something in Rawlings’s ear, with no more than a cursory glance in my direction.

“Yes,” Rawlings said. “Yes, certainly.” He bowed to me, deeply. “Your servant, madam. I am very much obliged to you. May I …?” He lifted the paper, and I nodded.

“Yes, of course, please keep it.”

The officer had turned, obviously intent on chivvying another errant member of his party, and with a brief glance at his back, Dr. Rawlings stepped close and touched my hand.

"I'll come," he said, low-voiced. "As soon as I may. Thank you." He looked up then at someone behind me, and I realized that Jamie had finished his business and come to fetch me.

He stepped forward and, with a brief nod to the doctor, took my hand.

"Where is your hat, Lieutenant Ransom?" The colonel spoke behind me, quietly reproving, and for the second time in five minutes I felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Not at the colonel's words but at the murmured reply.

"… rebel whoreson shot it off my head," said a voice. It was an English voice, young, hoarse with suppressed grief, and tinged with anger. Other than that—it was Jamie's voice, and Jamie's hand tightened so abruptly on mine that he nearly crushed my fingers.

We were at the trailhead that led upward from the river; two more steps would see us safely into the shelter of the fog-veiled trees. Instead of taking those two steps, Jamie stopped dead for the space of a heartbeat, then dropped my hand, turned on his heel, and, taking the hat off his head, strode over and thrust it into Lieutenant Ransom's hands.

"I believe I owe ye a hat, sir," he said politely, and turned away at once, leaving the young man blinking at the battered tricorne in his hands. Glancing back, I caught a glimpse of William's baffled face as he looked after Jamie, but Jamie was propelling me up the path as though Red Indians were at our heels, and a stand of fir saplings hid the lieutenant from view within seconds.

I could feel Jamie vibrating like a plucked violin string, and his breath was coming fast.

"Have you quite lost your mind?" I inquired conversationally.

"Very likely."

"What on earth—" I began, but he only shook his head and pulled me along, until we were well out of both sight and hearing of the cabin. A fallen log that had so far escaped the woodcutters lay half across the path, and Jamie sat down suddenly on this and put a shaking hand to his face.

"Are you all right? What on earth is the matter?" I sat beside him and put a hand on his back, beginning to be worried.

"I dinna ken whether to laugh or to weep, Sassenach," he said. He took his hand away from his face, and I saw that, in fact, he appeared to be doing both. His lashes were wet, but the corners of his mouth were twitching.

"I've lost a kinsman and found one, all in the same moment—and a moment later realize that for the second time in his life, I've come within an inch of shooting my son." He looked at me and shook his head, quite helpless between laughter and dismay.

"I shouldna have done it, I ken that. It's only—I thought all at once, *What if I dinna miss, a third time? And*—and I thought I must just … speak to him. As a man. In case it should be the only time, aye?"

* * *

Colonel Grant cast a curious look at the trailhead, where a trembling branch marked the passage of the rebel and his wife, then turned his gaze on the hat in William's hands.

"What the devil was that about?"

William cleared his throat. "Evidently, Colonel Fraser was the, um, rebel whoreson who deprived me of my hat during the battle yesterday," he said, hoping for a tone of dry detachment. "He has … recompensed me."

A hint of humor came into Grant's strained face.

"Really? Decent of him." He peered dubiously at the object in question. "Has it got lice, do you think?"

In another man, at another time, this might have been interpreted as calumny. But Grant, while more than ready to denigrate the Colonials' courage, abilities, and dispositions, clearly intended the question only as a practical discovery of fact; most of the English and Hessian troops were crawling with lice, and so were the officers.

William tilted the hat, scrutinizing it as well as the dim light allowed. The thing was warm in his hands, but nothing moved along the seams.

“Don’t think so.”

“Well, put it on, then, Captain Ransom. We must show a good example to the men, you know.”

William had in fact assumed the object, feeling slightly queer at the warmth of it on his head, before properly hearing what Grant had said.

“Captain …?” he said faintly.

“Congratulations,” Grant said, the ghost of a smile lightening the exhaustion on his face. “The brigadier …” He glanced back at the reeking, silent cabin, and the smile faded. “He wanted you made captain after Ticonderoga—should have been done then, but … well.” His lips thinned, but then relaxed. “General Burgoyne signed the order last night, after hearing several accounts of the battle. I gather that you distinguished yourself.”

William ducked his head awkwardly. His throat was thick and his eyes burned. He couldn’t remember what he’d done—only that he’d failed to save the brigadier.

“Thank you,” he managed, and could not keep from glancing back himself. They had left the door open. “Do you know—did he—no, it doesn’t matter.”

“Did he know?” Grant said gently. “I told him. I brought the order.”

Unable to speak, William bobbed his head. The hat, for a wonder, fit him, and stayed in place.

“God, it’s cold,” Grant said softly. He tugged his coat closer, glancing round at the dripping trees and the fog that lay thick among them. The others had gone back to their duties, leaving them alone. “What a desolate place. Terrible time of day, too.”

“Yes.” William felt a momentary relief at being able to admit his own sense of desolation—though the hour and the place had little to do with it. He swallowed, glancing back at the cabin. The open door bothered him; while the fog lay heavy as a feather bed on the forest, the mist near the cabin was rising, drifting around the windows, and he had the uneasy fancy that it was somehow … *coming* for the brigadier.

"I'll just … close that door, shall I?" He'd started for the cabin, but was arrested by Grant's gesture.

"No, don't."

William glanced at him in surprise, and the captain shrugged, trying to make light of it.

"The donor of your hat said we must leave it open. Some Highland fancy—something about the, um, soul requiring an exit," he said delicately. "And at least it's too bloody cold for the flies," he added, with no delicacy at all.

William's shriveled stomach clenched, and he swallowed the bitterness that rose in the back of his throat at the vision of swarming maggots.

"But surely we can't … How long?" he demanded.

"Not long," Grant assured him. "We're only waiting for a burial detail."

William stifled the protest that rose to his lips. Of course. What else could be done? And yet the memory of the trenches they had dug by the Heights, the dirt freckling his corporal's cold round cheeks … After the last ten days, he would have thought himself beyond sensitivity to such things. But the sounds of the wolves that came to eat the dying and the dead echoed suddenly in the hollow pit of his stomach.

With a muttered excuse, he stepped aside into the wet shrubbery and threw up, as quietly as he could. Wept a little, silent, then wiped his face with a handful of wet leaves and came back.

Grant tactfully affected to believe William had simply gone to relieve himself, and made no inquiries.

"An impressive gentleman," he remarked casually. "The general's kinsman, I mean. Wouldn't think they were related to look at, would you?"

Caught up in dying hope and tearing grief, William had barely noticed Colonel Fraser before the latter had so suddenly given him the hat—and been too startled to notice much about him then. He shook his head in agreement, though, having a vague recollection of a tall figure kneeling down by the bed, the firelight touching the crown of his head briefly with red.

"Looks more like you than like the brigadier," Grant added offhandedly, then laughed, a painful creak. "Sure you haven't a Scottish branch in your family?"

"No, Yorkshiremen back to the Flood on both sides, save one French great-grandmother," William replied, grateful for the momentary distraction of light conversation. "My stepfather's mother is half Scotch—that count, do you think?"

Whatever Grant might have said in reply was lost, as the sound of a doomed soul came down to them through the gloom. Both men froze, listening. The brigadier's piper was coming, with Balcarres and some of his rangers. The burial detail.

The sun had risen but was invisible, blocked by cloud and the canopy of trees. Grant's face was the same color as the fog, pale, sheened with moisture.

The sound seemed to come from a great distance and yet from the forest itself. Then wails and ululating shrieks joined the piper's lament—Balcarres and his Indians. Despite the chilling sounds, William was a little comforted; it would not be just a hasty field burial, undertaken without regard or respect.

"Sound like howling wolves, don't they?" muttered Grant. He ran a hand down his face, then fastidiously wiped his wet palm on his thigh.

"Yes, they do," said William. He took a firm stance and waited to receive the mourners, conscious all the time of the cabin at his back, its door standing silent, open to the mist.

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GREASIER THAN GREASE

I had always assumed that surrender was a fairly simple thing. Hand over your sword, shake hands, and march off—to parole, prison, or the next battle. I was disabused of this simpleminded assumption by Dr. Rawlings, who did indeed make his way across the lines two days later to speak to me about his brother. I'd told him everything I could, expressing my particular attachment to his brother's casebook, through which I felt I'd known Daniel Rawlings. The second Dr. Rawlings—his name was David, he said—was easy to talk to and lingered for a while, the conversation moving on to other subjects.

"Gracious, no," he said, when I'd mentioned my surprise that the ceremony of surrender had not occurred at once. "The terms of surrender must be negotiated first, you know—and that's a prickly business."

"Negotiated?" I said. "Does General Burgoyne have a *choice* in the matter?"

He seemed to find that funny.

"Oh, indeed he does," he assured me. "I happen to have seen the proposals which Major Kingston brought over this morning for General Gates's perusal. They begin with the rather firm statement, that having fought Gates twice, General Burgoyne is quite prepared to do it a third time. He's not, of course," the doctor added, "but it saves his face by allowing him to then note that he has of course noticed the rebels' superiority in numbers and thus feels justified in accepting surrender in order to save the lives of brave men upon honorable terms. By the way, the battle is not officially over yet," he added, with a faint air of apology. "General Burgoyne proposes a cessation of hostilities while negotiations are under way."

"Oh, really," I said, amused. "I wonder if General Gates is disposed to accept this at face value."

"No, he's not," said a dry Scottish voice, and Jamie ducked his head and came into the tent, followed by his cousin Hamish. "He read Burgoyne's proposal, then reached into his pocket and whipped out his own. He demands an unconditional surrender and requires both British and German troops to ground their arms in camp and march out as prisoners. The truce will last 'til sunset, at which time Burgoyne must make his reply. I thought Major Kingston would have an apoplexy on the spot."

"Is he bluffing, do you think?" I asked. Jamie made a small Scottish noise in his throat and cut his eyes at Dr. Rawlings, indicating that he thought this an improper thing to be discussing in front of the enemy. And given Dr. Rawlings's evident access to the British high command, perhaps he was right.

David Rawlings tactfully changed the subject, opening the lid of the case he had brought with him.

"Is this the same as the case you had, Mrs. Fraser?"

"Yes, it is." I had noticed it immediately but hadn't liked to stare at it. It was somewhat more battered than my case, and had a small brass nameplate attached to it, but was otherwise just the same.

"Well, I was in no real doubt as to my brother's fate," he said, with a small sigh, "but that settles the matter entirely. The cases were given to us by our father, himself a physician, when we entered practice."

I glanced at him, startled.

"You don't mean to tell me—were you twins?"

"We were, yes." He looked surprised that I hadn't known that.

"Identical?"

He smiled.

"Our mother could invariably tell us apart, but few other people could."

I stared at him, feeling an unusual warmth—almost embarrassment. I had, of course, built up a mental picture of Daniel Rawlings as I read his casebook entries. Suddenly meeting him face-to-face, as it were, gave me something of a turn.

Jamie was staring at me in bemusement, eyebrows raised. I coughed, blushing, and he shook his head slightly and, with another Scottish noise, picked up the deck of cards he'd come for and led Hamish out.

"I wonder—are you in need of anything particular in the medical line?" David Rawlings asked, blushing in turn. "I am quite short of medicinals, but I do have duplicates of some instruments—and quite a good selection of scalpels. I should be most honored if you would …"

"Oh." That was a gallant offer, and my embarrassment was at once submerged in a tide of acquisitiveness. "Would you perhaps have an extra pair of tweezers? Small forceps, I mean?"

"Oh, yes, of course." He pulled out the lower drawer, pushing a clutter of small instruments aside in search of the tweezers. As he did so, I caught sight of something unusual and pointed at it.

"What on earth is that?"

"It is called a jugum penis," Dr. Rawlings explained to me, his color increasing noticeably.

"It looks like a bear trap. What is it—it can't be a device for performing circumcision, surely?" I picked up the object, which caused Dr. Rawlings to gasp, and I eyed him curiously.

"It—er, please, dear lady …" He almost snatched the thing out of my hands, thrusting it back into his chest.

"What on earth is it for?" I asked, more amused than offended by his reaction. "Given the name, obviously—"

"It prevents nocturnal … er … tumescence." His face by this time was a dark, unhealthy sort of red, and he wouldn't meet my eye.

"Yes, I imagine it would do that." The object in question consisted of two concentric circles of metal, the outer one flexible, with overlapping ends, and a sort of key mechanism that enabled it to be tightened. The inner one was sawtoothed—much like a bear trap, as I'd said. Rather obviously, it was meant to be fastened round a limp penis—which would stay in that condition, if it knew what was good for it.

I coughed. “Um … *why*, precisely, is that desirable?”

His embarrassment faded slightly into shock.

“Why … it … the … the loss of the male essence is most debilitating. It drains the vitality and exposes a man to all manner of sickness, as well as grossly impairing his mental and spiritual faculties.”

“Just as well no one’s thought of mentioning that to my husband,” I said.

Rawlings gave me a completely scandalized look, but before the discussion could assume even more improper proportions, we were fortunately interrupted by a stir outside, and he took the opportunity to shut his case and tuck it hastily back under his arm before coming to join me at the tent’s entrance.

There was a small parade crossing the camp, a hundred feet away. A British major in dress uniform, blindfolded, and so red in the face I thought he might pop. He was being led by two Continental soldiers, and a fife player was following them at a semi-discreet distance, playing “Yankee Doodle.” Bearing in mind what Jamie had said about an apoplexy, I was in no doubt that this was the unfortunate Major Kingston who had been selected to deliver Burgoyne’s surrender proposals.

“Dear me,” murmured Dr. Rawlings, shaking his head at the sight. “I am afraid this process could take some time.”

* * *

It did. A week later, we were all still sitting there, as letters made their stately way once or twice a day between the two camps. There was a general air of relaxation in the American camp; I thought things were probably still a little tense across the way, but Dr. Rawlings had not come back, so general gossip was the only way of judging the progress—or lack of it—of the surrender negotiations. Evidently General Gates *had* been bluffing, and Burgoyne had been astute enough to realize it.

I was pleased to be in one place long enough to wash my clothes without risk of being shot, scalped, or otherwise molested. Beyond that, there were a good many casualties from the two battles who still required nursing.

I had been aware, in a vague sort of way, of a man lurking round the edges of our encampment. I'd seen him several times, but he had never come close enough to speak to me, and I'd put him down as likely suffering from some embarrassing ailment like clap or piles. It often took such men a good while to muster either the courage or the desperation to ask for help, and once they did, they'd still wait to speak to me privately.

The third or fourth time I noticed him, I tried to catch his eye, to induce him to come close enough so that I could arrange to examine him privately, but each time he slid away, eyes downcast, and disappeared into the anthill of seething militia, Continentals, and camp followers.

He reappeared quite suddenly toward sunset of the next day, while I was making a sort of pottage, using a bone—unidentifiable as to animal, but reasonably fresh, and with shreds of meat still clinging to it—given me by a patient, two wizened yams, a handful of grain, another handful of beans, and some stale bread.

"You are Mrs. Fraser?" he asked, in a surprisingly educated Lowland Scottish accent. Edinburgh, I thought, and had a faint pang at the memory of Tom Christie's similar speech. He had always insisted upon calling me "Mrs. Fraser," spoken in just that clipped, formal way.

Thoughts of Tom Christie vanished in the next instant, though.

"They call you the White Witch, do they not?" the man said, and smiled. It wasn't in any way a pleasant expression.

"Some do. What of it?" I said, taking a good grip on my spurtle and staring him down. He was tall and thin, narrow-faced and dark, dressed in the uniform of a Continental. Why had he not gone to his regimental surgeon, in preference to a witch? I wondered. Did he want a love philter? He scarcely seemed the type.

He laughed a little, and bowed.

"I wished only to be sure I had come to the right place, madam," he said. "I intended no offense."

"None taken." He was not doing anything noticeably threatening, other than perhaps standing too close to me, but I didn't like him. And my heart was beating faster than it ought.

"You evidently know my name," I said, striving for coolness. "What's yours, then?"

He smiled again, looking me over with a careful air that struck me as one inch short of insolence—and a short inch, at that.

"My name doesn't matter. Your husband is James Fraser?"

I had a sudden strong urge to dot him one with the spurtle but didn't; it might annoy him but wouldn't get rid of him. I didn't want to admit to Jamie's name and didn't bother asking myself why not. I simply said, "Excuse me," and, taking the camp kettle off the fire, set it on the ground and walked off.

He hadn't expected that and didn't follow me at once. I walked away fast, whisked round behind a small tent belonging to the New Hampshire militia and into a group of people gathered round another fire—militiamen, some with their wives. One or two looked surprised by my abrupt appearance, but all of them knew me and cordially made room, nodding and murmuring greetings.

I looked back from this refuge and could see the man, silhouetted by the sinking sun, standing by my own abandoned fire, the evening wind lifting wisps of his hair. It was no doubt my imagination that made me think he looked sinister.

"Who's that, Auntie? One of your rejected suitors?" Young Ian spoke by my ear, a grin in his voice.

"Certainly rejected," I said, keeping an eye on the man. I'd thought he might follow me, but he remained where he was, face turned in my direction. His face was a black oval, but I knew he was staring at me. "Where's your uncle, do you know?"

"Oh, aye. He and Cousin Hamish are takin' Colonel Martin's money at loo, over there." He jerked his chin in the direction of the Vermont militia encampment, where Colonel Martin's tent rose, recognizable by a large tear in the top, which had been patched with a piece of yellow calico.

“Is Hamish good at cards?” I asked curiously, glancing toward the tent.

“No, but Uncle Jamie is, and he kens when Hamish will do the wrong thing, which is almost as good as him doing the right thing, aye?”

“I’ll take your word for it. Do you know who that man is? The one standing by my fire?”

Ian squinted against the low sun, then suddenly frowned.

“No, but he’s just spat in your soup.”

“He *what*?!” I spun on my heel, in time to see the anonymous gentleman stalk away, back stiff. “Why, that bloody filthy *arsehole*!”

Ian cleared his throat and nudged me, indicating one of the militia wives, who was viewing me with considerable disapproval. I cleared my own throat, swallowed my further remarks on the subject, and gave her what I hoped was an apologetic smile. We were, after all, probably going to be obliged to beg her hospitality, if we were to get any supper now.

When I looked back at our own fire, the man was gone.

“Shall I tell ye something, Auntie?” Ian said, frowning thoughtfully at the empty shadows lengthening beneath the trees. “He’ll be back.”

* * *

Jamie and Hamish did not return for supper, leading me to suppose that the loo must be going well for them. Things were going reasonably well for me, too; Mrs. Kebbits, the militia wife, did feed Ian and myself, and very hospitably, with fresh corn dodgers and rabbit stew with onions. Best of all, my sinister visitor didn’t return.

Ian had gone off about his own business, Rollo at heel, so I banked the fire and prepared to set off for the hospital tents for evening rounds. Most of the severely injured had died within the first two or three days after the battle; of the rest, those who had wives, friends, or relatives to care for them had been taken off to their own camps. There were three dozen or so left, men on their own, with lingering but not immediately life-threatening injuries or illnesses.

I put on a second pair of stockings, wrapped my thick wool cloak around myself, and thanked God for the cold weather. A chill had struck in late September, setting the woods afire with a glory of red and gold, but also helpfully killing off the insects. The relief of camp life without flies was marvelous in itself—no surprise to me that flies had been one of the Ten Plagues of Egypt. The lice, alas, were still with us, but without flies, fleas, and mosquitoes, the threat of epidemic illness was tremendously decreased.

Still, every time I came near the hospital tent, I found myself sniffing the air, alert for the telltale fecal stench that might portend a sudden irruption of cholera, typhus, or the lesser evils of a salmonella outbreak. Tonight, though, I smelled nothing beyond the usual cesspit smell of the latrines, overlaid by the funk of unwashed bodies, filthy linens, and a lingering tang of old blood. Reassuringly familiar.

Three orderlies were playing cards under a canvas lean-to next to the biggest tent, their game lit by a rush dip whose flame rose and flickered in the evening wind. Their shadows swelled and shrank on the pale canvas, and I caught the sound of their laughter as I passed. That meant none of the regimental surgeons was about; just as well.

Most of them were simply grateful for whatever help was offered and thus left me to do what I would. There were always one or two who'd stand on their dignity and insist on their authority, though. Usually no more than a nuisance, but very dangerous in case of emergency.

No emergencies tonight, thank God. There were a number of tin candlesticks and stubs of varying lengths in a bowl outside the tent; I lit a candle from the fire and, ducking inside, made my way through the two large tents, checking vital signs, chatting with the men who were awake, and evaluating their condition.

Nothing very bad, but I had some concern for Corporal Jebediah Shoreditch, who had suffered three separate bayonet wounds during the storming of the great redoubt. By some miracle, none had hit any vital organs, and while the corporal was rather uncomfortable—

one thrust having plowed upward through his left buttock—he wasn't displaying any major signs of fever. There was some sign of infection in the buttock wound, though.

"I'm going to irrigate this," I told him, eyeing my half-full bottle of tincture of gentian. This was nearly the last of it, but with luck, there shouldn't be great need again until I was in a position to make more. "Wash it out, I mean, to rid you of the pus. How did it happen?" The irrigation wasn't going to be comfortable; better if he could be distracted a little by telling me the details.

"Wasn't retreatin', ma'am, and don't you think it," he assured me, taking a good grip on the edge of his pallet as I turned back the blanket and peeled away the crusty bits of a tar-and-turpentine dressing. "One o' them sneaky Hessian sons of bitches was a-playin' dead, and when I went to step over him, he come to life and reared up like a copperhead, bay'net in hand."

"Bayonet in *your* hand, you mean, Jeb," joked a friend who lay nearby.

"Nah, that was another un." Shoreditch shrugged off the joke with a casual glance at his right hand, wrapped in bandages. One of the Hessians had pinned his hand to the ground with a bayonet blade, he told me—whereupon Shoreditch had snatched up his fallen knife with his left hand and swiped it murderously across the Hessian's calves, felling him, and then had cut the Hessian's throat—disregarding a third attacker, whose thrust had removed the top part of his left ear.

"Somebody shot that un, Lord be praised, afore he could improve his aim. Speak of hands, Ma'am, is the colonel's hand a-doing well?" His forehead shone with sweat in the lantern light, and the tendons stood out in his forearms, but he spoke courteously.

"I think it must be," I said, pressing slowly on the plunger of my irrigating syringe. "He's been at cards with Colonel Martin since this afternoon—and if his hand was poor, he'd have come back by now."

Shoreditch and his friend both chuckled at this feeble pun, but he let go a long sigh when I took my hands away from the new dressing, and rested his forehead on the pallet for a moment before rolling painfully onto his good side.

“Thank you kindly, ma’am,” he said. His eyes passed with apparent casualness over the figures that moved to and fro in the darkness. “If you was to see Friend Hunter or Doc Tolliver, might you ask ’em to stop a moment?”

I raised a brow at this, but nodded and poured him a cup of ale; there was plenty now that the supply lines from the south had caught up, and it would do him no harm.

I did the same for his friend, a man from Pennsylvania named Neph Brewster, who was suffering from dysentery, though I added a small handful of Dr. Rawling’s Bowel-Bind mixture before handing over the cup.

“Jeb ain’t meanin’ no disrespect to you, ma’am,” Neph whispered, leaning confidentially close as he took the drink. “It’s only as he can’t shit ’thout help, and that ain’t somethin’ he wants to ask a lady. Mr. Denzell or the Doc don’t come by soon, I’ll help him, though.”

“Shall I fetch one of the orderlies?” I asked, surprised. “They’re just outside.”

“Oh, no, ma’am. Once the sun goes down, they figure as how they’re off duty. Won’t come in, save there’s a fight or the tent catches fire.”

“Hmm,” I said. Plainly attitudes among medical orderlies weren’t that different from one time to another.

“I’ll find one of the surgeons,” I assured him; Mr. Brewster was thin and yellow, and his hand shook so badly that I had to put my own fingers round his to help him drink. I doubted he could stand long enough to manage his own necessities, let alone help Corporal Shoreditch with his. Mr. Brewster was game, though.

“Shittin’ is somethin’ I can claim to have some skill at by now,” he said, grinning at me. He wiped his face with a trembling hand and paused between swallows to breathe heavily. “Ah … might you have a bit o’ cooking grease to hand, ma’am? My arsehole’s raw as a fresh-skinned rabbit. I can put it on myself—unless you’d *like* to help, o’ course.”

“I’ll mention it to Dr. Hunter,” I replied dryly. “I’m sure he’d be delighted.”

I finished my rounds quickly—most of the men were asleep—and went in search of Denny Hunter, who I found outside his own tent, bundled up against the cold with a muffler round his neck, dreamily listening to a ballad being sung at a nearby campfire.

"Who?" He came out of his trance at my appearance, though it took him a moment to return fully to earth. "Oh, Friend Jebediah, to be sure. Of course—I'll go at once."

"Have you got any goose or bear grease?"

Denny settled his spectacles more firmly on his nose, giving me a quizzical look.

"Friend Jebediah is not constipated, is he? I understood his difficulty to be more one of engineering than of physiology."

I laughed, and explained.

"Oh. Well. I do *have* some ointment," he said doubtfully. "But it is mentholated—for the treatment of grippe and pleurisy, thee knows. I fear that will do Friend Brewster's arse no favors."

"I fear not," I agreed. "Why don't you go and help Mr. Shoreditch, and I'll find a bit of plain grease and bring it along?"

Grease—any kind of grease—was a staple of cooking, and it took only two inquiries at campfires to procure a cup of it. It was, the donor informed me, rendered possum fat. "Greasier than grease," the lady assured me. "Tasty, too." This last characteristic was unlikely to be of much interest to Mr. Brewster—or at least I hoped not—but I thanked her effusively and set off through the darkness, back toward the small hospital tent.

At least I *intended* to head in that direction. The moon had not yet risen, though, and within a few minutes I found myself on a thickly wooded hillside that I didn't remember, stumbling over roots and fallen branches.

Muttering to myself, I turned left—surely that was … No, it wasn't. I stopped, cursing silently. I couldn't be lost; I was in the middle of a campground containing at least half the Continental army, to say nothing of dozens of militia companies. Exactly where I was on said campground, though … I could see the glimmer of several fires through the trees, but the configuration of them seemed unfamiliar. Disoriented, I turned the other way, straining my eyes in search of the patched roof of Colonel Martin's large tent, that being the biggest landmark likely to be visible in the darkness.

Something ran over my foot, and I jerked in reflex, slopping liquefied possum fat over my hand. I gritted my teeth and wiped it gingerly on my apron. Possum fat *is* extremely greasy, its major drawback as a general-purpose lubricant being that it smells like dead possum.

My heart was beating fast from the shock and gave a convulsive leap when an owl came out of the copse to my right, a piece of the night taking sudden silent flight a few feet from my face. Then a branch cracked suddenly, and I heard the movements of several men, murmuring together as they pushed through the undergrowth nearby.

I stood quite still, teeth set in my lower lip, and felt a wave of sudden, irrational terror.

It's all right! I told myself, furious. *It's only soldiers looking for a shortcut. No threat, no threat at all!*

Tell that to the Marines, my nervous system replied, at the sound of a muffled curse, the scuffle and crunch of dry leaves and breaking branches, and the sudden kicked-melon thump of a solid object meeting someone's head. A cry, the crash of a falling body, and hurried rustling as the thieves rifled their victim's pockets.

I couldn't move. I wanted desperately to run but was rooted to the spot; my legs simply wouldn't respond. It was exactly like a nightmare, with something terrible coming my way but no ability to move.

My mouth was open, and I was exerting all my strength to keep from screaming, while at the same time terrified that I *couldn't* scream. My own breathing was loud, echoing inside my head, and all of a sudden I felt my throat harsh with swallowed blood, my breath labored, nostrils blocked. And the weight on me, heavy, amorphous, crushing me into ground rough with stones and fallen pinecones. I felt hot breath in my ear.

There, now. I'm sorry, Martha, but you got to take it. I got to give it to you. Yeah, there … oh, Christ, there … there …

I didn't remember falling to the ground. I was curled into a ball, face pressed to my knees, shaking with rage and terror. Crashing in the brush nearby, several men passed within a few feet of me, laughing and joking.

And then some small fragment of my sanity spoke up in the recesses of my brain, cool as dammit, dispassionately remarking, *Oh, so* that's *a flashback. How interesting.*

"I'll show you interesting," I whispered—or thought I did. I don't believe I made a sound. I was fully dressed—swaddled against the cold—I could *feel* the cold on my face, but it made no difference. I was naked, felt cool air on my breasts, my thighs—between my thighs …

I clamped my legs together as tightly as I could and bit my lip as hard as I could. Now I really did taste blood. But the next thing didn't happen. I remembered it vividly. But it *was* a memory. It didn't happen again.

Very slowly, I came back. My lip hurt, and I was drooling blood; I could feel the gouge, a loose flap of flesh in my inner lip, and taste silver and copper, as though my mouth was filled with pennies.

I was breathing as though I'd run a mile, but I *could* breathe; my nose was clear, my throat soft and open, not bruised, not abraded. I was drenched in sweat, and my muscles hurt from being clenched so hard.

I could hear moaning in the brush to my left. *They didn't kill him, then,* I thought dimly. I supposed I should go and see, help him. I didn't want to, didn't want to touch a man, see a man, be anywhere near one. It didn't matter, though; I couldn't move.

I was no longer frozen in the grip of terror; I knew where I was, that I was safe—safe enough. But I couldn't move. I stayed crouched, sweating and trembling, and listened.

The man groaned a few times, then rolled slowly over, branches rustling.

"Oh, shit," he mumbled. He lay still, breathing heavily, then sat up abruptly, exclaiming, "Oh, *shit*!"—whether at the pain of the movement or the memory of the robbery, I didn't know. There was mumbled cursing, a sigh, silence … then a shriek of pure terror that hit my spinal cord like a jolt of electricity.

Mad scrambling sounds as the man scuffled to his feet—why, why, what was going on? Crashing and rattling of flight. Terror was infectious; I wanted to run, too, was on my feet, my heart in my mouth, but didn't know where to go. I couldn't hear anything above that idiot's crashing. What was bloody out there?

A faint rustle of dry leaves made me jerk my head round—and saved me by a split second from having a heart attack when Rollo thrust his wet nose into my hand.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" I exclaimed, relieved at the sound of my own voice. The sound of rustling footsteps came toward me through the leaves.

"Oh, there ye are, Auntie." A tall presence loomed up, no more than a shadow in the dark, and Young Ian touched my arm. "Are ye all right, Auntie?" There was an anxious tone in his voice, bless him.

"Yes," I said rather faintly, then with more conviction, "Yes. I am. I got turned about, in the dark."

"Oh." The tall figure relaxed. "I thought ye must have lost your way. Denny Hunter came and said ye'd gone off to find some grease but ye'd no come back, and he was worrit for ye. So Rollo and I came to find ye. Who was yon fellow that Rollo scared the bejesus out of?"

"I don't know." The mention of grease made me look for the cup of possum grease. It was on the ground, empty and clean. From the lapping noises, I deduced that Rollo, having finished off what was in the cup, was now tidily licking the dead leaves on which grease had spilled when I dropped it. Under the circumstances, I didn't feel I could really complain.

Ian bent and scooped up the cup.

"Come back to the fire, Auntie. I'll find some more grease."

I made no demur at this and followed him down off the hillside, paying no real attention to my surroundings. I was too occupied in rearranging my mental state, settling my feelings, and trying to regain some kind of equilibrium.

I'd heard the word "flashback" only briefly, in Boston in the sixties. We didn't call it flashback earlier, but I'd heard about it. And I'd seen it. Shell shock, they said in the First World War. Battle fatigue, in the Second. It's what happens when you live through things you shouldn't have been able to live through and can't reconcile that knowledge with the fact that you did.

Well, I did, I said defiantly to myself. *So you can just get used to it.* I wondered for an instant who I was talking to and—quite seriously—whether I was losing my mind.

I certainly remembered what had happened to me during my abduction years before. I'd have strongly preferred not to but knew enough about psychology not to try to suppress the memories. When they showed up, I looked carefully at them, doing deep-breathing exercises, then stuffed them back where they'd come from and went to find Jamie. After a time, I found that only certain details showed up vividly: the cup of a dead ear, purple in the dawn light, looking like an exotic fungus; the brilliant burst of light I'd seen when Harley Boble had broken my nose; the smell of corn on the breath of the teenaged idiot who'd tried to rape me. The soft, heavy weight of the man who did. The rest was a merciful blur.

I had nightmares, too, though Jamie generally woke at once when I began to make whimpering noises and grabbed me hard enough to shatter the dream, holding me against him and stroking my hair, my back, humming to me, half asleep himself, until I sank back into his peace and slept again. This was different.

* * *

Ian went from fire to fire in search of grease and at length obtained a small tin containing half an inch of goose grease mixed with comfrey. It was more than a bit rancid, but Denny Hunter had told him what it was for, and he didn't suppose the state of it mattered so much.

The state of his aunt concerned him somewhat more. He knew fine well why she sometimes twitched like a wee cricket or moaned in her sleep. He'd seen the state of her when they'd got her back from the bastards, and he knew the sort of things they'd done to her. Blood rose in him and the vessels at his temples swelled at memory of the fight when they'd taken her back.

She hadn't wished to take her own revenge, when they'd rescued her; he thought perhaps that had been a mistake, though he understood the part about her being a healer and sworn not to kill. The thing was, some men needed killing. The Church didn't admit that, save it was war. The Mohawk understood it fine. So did Uncle Jamie.

And the Quakers …

He groaned.

Out of the frying pan, into the fire. The instant he'd got the grease, his steps had turned, not toward the hospital tent where Denny almost surely was—but toward the Hunters' tent. He could pretend he was going to the hospital tent; the two were near enough together. But he'd never seen any point in lying to himself.

Not for the first time, he missed Brianna. He could say anything to her, and she to him—more, he thought, than she could sometimes say to Roger Mac.

Mechanically, he crossed himself, muttering, *"Gum biodh iad sabhailte, a Dhìa." That they might be safe, O God*.

For that matter, he wondered what Roger Mac might have counseled were he here. He was a quiet man, and a godly one, if a Presbyterian. But he'd been on that night's ride and joined in the work, and not a word said about it after.

Ian spared a moment's contemplation of Roger Mac's future congregation and what they'd think of that picture of their minister, but shook his head and went on. All these wonderings were only means to keep him from thinking what he'd say when he saw her, and that was pointless. He wanted only to say one thing to her, and that was the one thing he couldn't say, ever.

The tent flap was closed, but there was a candle burning within. He coughed politely outside, and Rollo, seeing where they were, wagged his tail and uttered a cordial *woof!*

The flap was thrust back at once, and Rachel stood there, mending in one hand, squinting into the dark but already smiling;

she'd heard the dog. She'd taken off her cap, and her hair was messed, coming down from its pins.

"Rollo!" she said, bending down to scratch his ears. "And I see thee've brought thy friend along, too."

Ian smiled, lifting the little tin.

"I brought some grease. My aunt said your brother needed it for his arsehole." An instant too late, he re-collected himself. "I mean—for *an* arsehole." Mortification flamed up his chest, but he was speaking to perhaps the only woman in camp who might take arseholes as a common topic of conversation. Well, the only one save his auntie, he amended. Or the whores, maybe.

"Oh, he'll be pleased; I thank thee."

She reached to take the tin from him, and her fingers brushed his. The tin box was smeared with the grease and slippery; it fell and both of them bent to retrieve it. She straightened first; her hair brushed his cheek, warm and smelling of her.

Without even thinking, he put both hands on her face and bent to her. Saw the flash and darkening of her eyes, and had one heartbeat, two, of perfect warm happiness, as his lips rested on hers, as his heart rested in her hands.

Then one of those hands cracked against his cheek, and he staggered back like a drunkard startled out of sleep.

"What does thee do?" she whispered. Her eyes wide as saucers, she had backed away, was pressed against the wall of the tent as though to fall through it. "Thee must not!"

He couldn't find the words to say. His languages boiled in his mind like stew, and he was mute. The first word to surface through the moil in his mind was the *Gàidhlig*, though.

"Mo chridhe," he said, and breathed for the first time since he'd touched her. Mohawk came next, deep and visceral. *I need you.* And tagging belatedly, English, the one best suited to apology. "I—I'm sorry."

She nodded, jerky as a puppet.

"Yes. I—yes."

He should leave; she was afraid. He knew that. But he knew something else, too. It wasn't him she was afraid of. Slowly, slowly, he put out a hand to her, the fingers moving without his will, slowly, as though to guddle a trout.

And by an expected miracle, but miracle nonetheless, her hand stole out toward his, trembling. He touched the tips of her fingers, found them cold. His own were warm, he would warm her.… In his mind, he felt the chill of her flesh against his own, noted the nipples hard against the cloth of her dress and felt the small round weight of her breasts, cold in his hands, the press of her thighs, chill and hard against his heat.

He was gripping her hand, drawing her back. And she was coming, boneless, helpless, drawn to his heat.

"Thee must not," she whispered, barely audible. "We must not."

It came to him dimly that of course he could not simply draw her to him, sink to the earth, push her garments out of the way, and have her, though every fiber of his being demanded that he do just that. Some faint memory of civilization asserted itself, though, and he grabbed for it. At the same time, with a terrible reluctance, he released her hand.

"No, of course," he said, in perfect English. "Of course we mustn't."

"I—thee—" She swallowed and ran the back of her hand across her lips. Not as though to wipe away his kiss, but in astonishment, he thought. "Does thee know—" She stopped dead, helpless, and stared at him.

"I'm not worried about whether ye love me," he said, and knew he spoke the truth. "Not now. I'm worried about whether ye might die because ye do."

"Thee has a cheek! I didn't say I loved thee."

He looked at her then, and something moved in his chest. It might have been laughter. It might not.

"A great deal better ye don't," he said softly. "I'm no a fool, and neither are you."

She made an impulsive gesture toward him, and he drew back, just a hair.

"I think ye'd best not touch me, lass," he said, still staring intently into her eyes, the color of cress under rushing water. "Because if ye do, I’ll take ye, here and now. And then it’s too late for us both, isn’t it?”

Her hand hung in the air, and while he could see her willing it, she could not draw it back.

He turned from her then and went out into the night, his skin so hot that the night air turned to steam as it touched him.

* * *

Rachel stood stock-still for a moment, listening to the pounding of her heart. Another regular sound began to intrude, a soft lapping noise, and she looked down, blinking, to see that Rollo had tidily polished off the last of the goose grease from the tin she had dropped and was now licking the empty tin.

“Oh, Lord,” she said, and put a hand over her mouth, afraid that if she laughed, it would erupt into hysterics. The dog looked up at her, his eyes yellow in the candlelight. He licked his lips, long tail waving gently.

“What am I to do?” she asked him. “Well enough for thee; thee can chase about after him all day, and share his bed at night, and not a word said.”

She sat down on the stool, her knees feeling weak, and took a grip of the thick fur that ruffed the dog’s neck.

“What does he mean?” she asked him. “ ‘I’m worried about whether ye might die because ye do?’ Does he think me one of those fools who pines and swoons and looks pale for love, like Abigail Miller? Not that she’d think of actually dying for anyone’s sake, let alone her poor husband’s.” She looked down at the dog and shook his ruff. “And what does he mean, kissing that chit—forgive my lack of charity, Lord, but there’s no good to be done by ignoring the truth—and not three hours later kissing me? Tell me that! What does he *mean* by it?”

She let go of the dog then. He licked her hand politely, then vanished silently through the tent flap, no doubt to convey her question to his annoying master.

She ought to be putting coffee on to boil and getting up some supper; Denny would be back soon from the hospital tent, hungry and cold. She continued to sit, though, staring at the candle flame, wondering whether she would feel it were she to pass her hand through it.

She doubted it. Her whole body had ignited when he'd touched her, sudden as a torch soaked in turpentine, and she was still afire. A wonder her shift did not burst into flames.

She knew what he was. He'd made no secret of it. A man who lived by violence, who carried it within him.

"And I used that when it suited me, didn't I?" she asked the candle. Not the act of a Friend. She had not been content to trust in God's mercy, not willing to accept His will. She'd not only connived at and encouraged violence, she'd put Ian Murray in gross danger of both soul and body. No, no good to be done by ignoring the truth.

"Though if it's truth we're speaking here," she said to the candle, still feeling defiant, "I bear witness that he did it for Denny, as much as for me."

"Who did what?" Her brother's bent head poked into the tent, and he straightened up, blinking at her.

"Will thee pray for me?" she asked abruptly. "I am in great danger."

Her brother stared at her, eyes unblinking behind his spectacles.

"Indeed thee is," he said slowly. "Though I am in doubt that prayer will aid thee much."

"What, has thee no faith left in God?" She spoke sharp, made still more anxious by the thought that her brother might have been overcome by the things he had seen in the last month. She feared they had shaken her own faith considerable but depended upon her brother's faith as she would on shield and buckler. If that were gone …

"Oh, endless faith in God," he said, and smiled. "In thee? Not quite so much." He took off his hat and hung it on the nail he had driven into the tent pole, and checked to be sure that the flap was closed and tied fast behind him.

"I heard heard wolves howling on my walk back," he remarked. "Closer than was comfortable." He sat down and looked directly at her.

"Ian Murray?" he asked bluntly.

"How did thee know that?" Her hands were trembling, and she wiped them irritably on her apron.

"I met his dog just now." He eyed her with interest. "What did he say to thee?"

"I—nothing."

Denny cocked one brow in disbelief, and she relented.

"Not much. He said—I was in love with him."

"Is thee?" Denny asked, sounding not at all surprised.

"How can I be in love with such a man?"

"If thee were not, I do not suppose thee would be asking me to pray for thee," he pointed out logically. "Thee would simply send him away. 'How' is probably not a question I am qualified to answer—though I imagine thee means it rhetorical, in any case."

She laughed, in spite of her agitation.

"No," she said, smoothing the apron over her knees. "I do *not* mean it rhetorical. More … well, would thee say that Job was being rhetorical when he asked the Lord what He was thinking? I mean it in that way."

"Questioning the Lord is an awkward business," her brother said thoughtfully. "Thee does get answers, but they are inclined to lead thee to strange places." He smiled at her again, but gently and with a depth of sympathy in his eyes that made her look away.

She sat pleating the cloth of the apron between her fingers, hearing the shouts and drunken singing that marked every night in camp. She wished to say that places didn't get much stranger than this—two Friends, in the midst of an army, and part of it—but it was indeed Denny's questioning of the Lord that had got them here, and she did not wish him to feel that she blamed him for it.

Instead, she looked up and asked earnestly, "Has thee ever been in love, Denny?"

"Oh," he said, and looked at his own hands, cupped on his knees. He still smiled, but it had altered, become inward, as though he saw something inside his head. “Yes. I suppose so.”

“In England?”

He nodded. “Yes. It—would not do, though.”

“She … was not a Friend?”

“No,” he said softly. “She was not.”

In a way, that was a relief; she had been fearing that he had fallen in love with a woman who would not leave England, but had felt obliged himself to return to America—for her sake. Insofar as her own feelings for Ian Murray were concerned, though, this did not augur well.

“I’m sorry about the grease,” she said abruptly.

He blinked.

“Grease?”

“For someone’s arsehole, Friend Murray said. The dog ate it.”

“The dog ate … oh, the dog ate the grease.” His mouth twitched, and he rubbed the thumb of his right hand slowly over his fingers. “That’s all right; I found some.”

“You’re hungry,” she said abruptly, and stood up. “Wash thy hands and I’ll put the coffee on.”

“That would be good. I thank thee, Rachel. Rachel …” He hesitated, but was not a man to avoid things. “Friend Murray said to thee that thee loves him—but not that he loves thee? That seems—a peculiar way of expression, does it not?”

“It does,” she said, in a tone indicating that she didn’t wish to discuss Ian Murray’s peculiarities. She was not about to try to explain to Denny that Ian Murray had not declared himself to her in words because he hadn’t needed to. The air around her still shimmered with the heat of his declaration. Though …

“Perhaps he did,” she said slowly. “He said *something to* me, but it wasn’t in English, and I didn’t understand. Does thee know what *‘mo cree-ga*’ might mean?”

Denny frowned for a moment, then his brow cleared.

“That would be the Highlander’s tongue, what they call the *Gàidhlig,* I think. No, I don’t know what it means—but I have heard Friend Jamie say that to his wife, in such circumstances as to make it evident that it is a term of deep … affection.” He coughed.

“Rachel—does thee wish me to speak to him?”

Her skin still burned, and her face felt as though it glowed with fever, but at this, a deep shard of ice seemed to pierce her heart.

“Speak to him,” she repeated, and swallowed. “And say … what?” She had found the coffeepot and the pouch of roasted acorns and chicory. She poured a handful of the blackened mixture into her mortar and commenced to pound it as though the cup were full of snakes.

Denny shrugged, watching her with interest.

“Thee will break that mortar,” he observed. “As to what I should say—why, thee must tell me, Rachel.” His eyes were still intent upon her, but serious now, with no hint of humor. “I will tell him to stay away and never to speak to thee again, if thee wishes it. Or if thee prefers, I can assure him that thy affection for him is only that of a friend and that he must refrain from further awkward declarations.”

She poured the grounds into the pot and then added water from the canteen she kept hanging on the tent pole.

“Are those the only alternatives you see?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

“Sissy,” he said, very gently, “thee cannot wed such a man and remain a Friend. No meeting would accept such a union. Thee knows that.” He waited a moment and added, “Thee did ask me to pray for thee.”

She didn’t answer or look at him but untied the tent flap and went out to put the coffeepot among the coals, pausing to poke up the fire and add more wood. The air glowed near the ground, lit by the smoke and fiery haze of thousands of small fires like hers. But the night above stretched black and clear and infinite, the stars burning with their own cold fire.

When she went back in, he was half under the bed, muttering.

“What?” she demanded, and he backed out, bringing with him the small crate that held their foodstuffs—save that it didn’t. Only a scattering of raw acorns and an apple, half-gnawed by mice, remained.

“*What*?” she repeated, shocked. “What has happened to the food?”

Denny was flushed and plainly angry, and rubbed his knuckles hard across his lips before replying.

"Some misbegotten son of a—of Belial … has slit the tent and taken it."

The resultant flood of fury at this news was almost welcome, for the distraction that it offered.

"Why, that—that—"

"Doubtless," Denny said, taking a deep breath and seeking to regain control of himself, "he was hungry. Poor soul," he added, with a distinct lack of charitable intonation.

"If so, he might have asked to be fed," she snapped. "He is a thief, plain and simple." She tapped a foot, fuming. "Well. I will go and beg some food myself, then. Watch the coffee."

"Thee need not go on my account," he protested, but it was a halfhearted protest; she knew he had not eaten since morning and was starved, and she said as much to him with a wide-eyed stare in his direction.

"The wolves …" he said, but she was already wrapping up her cloak and pulling on her cap.

"I'll take a torch," she assured him. "And it would be an unlucky wolf who made the mistake of crossing me in my present mood, I assure thee!" She seized her gathering bag and went out quickly, before he could ask her where she proposed to go.

* * *

She might have gone to a dozen different tents nearby. Puzzlement and suspicion of the Hunters had faded after Denny's adventures as a deserter, and Rachel herself had cordial relations with a number of the militia wives who camped near them.

She might have told herself that she hesitated to disturb these worthy women so late. Or that she wished to hear the latest news regarding the surrender—Friend Jamie was always privy to the negotiations and would tell her what he could. Or that she thought to consult Claire Fraser regarding a small but painful wart upon her great toe and might as well do this while seeking food, for the sake of convenience.

But she was an honest woman and told herself none of these things. She was walking toward the Frasers' camp as though drawn by a magnet, and the magnet's name was Ian Murray. She saw this clearly, thought her own behavior insane—and could no more do otherwise than she could change the color of her eyes.

What she meant to do, say, or even think if she *did* see him was unimaginable, but she walked on nonetheless, steady as though she went to market, the light of her torch a beacon upon the trampled dirt of her path, her own shadow following, huge and strange upon the pale canvas of the tents she passed.

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DESPOILER

I was tending the fire when I heard the sound of slow footsteps approaching. I turned, to see a massive shape between me and the moon, coming fast. I tried to run but couldn't make my legs obey me. As in all the best nightmares, I tried to scream, only to find it trapped in my throat. I choked, and it came out as a small, strangled "*eep*."

The monstrous shape—manlike, but humped and headless, grunting—stopped before me, and there was a short whoosh and a loud thump of something hitting the ground that sent the cold air rushing up under my skirt.

"I brought ye a present, Sassenach," Jamie said, grinning and wiping sweat from his jaw.

"A … present," I said faintly, looking at the enormous heap of … what?… he had dropped on the ground at my feet. Then the smell reached me.

"A buffalo robe!" I exclaimed. "Oh, Jamie! A real buffalo robe?"

Not much doubt of that. It was not—thank God—a fresh one, but the scent of its original owner was still perceptible, even in the cold. I fell to my knees, running my hands over it. It was well-cured, flexible, and relatively clean, the wool of it rough under my hands but free of mud, burrs, clumps of dung, and the other impedimenta that normally attended live buffalo. It was enormous. And warm. Wonderfully warm.

I sank my freezing hands into the depths of it, which still held Jamie's body heat.

"Oh," I breathed. "You won it?"

"I did," he said proudly. "From one of the British officers. A decent man at cards," he added fairly, "but no luck."

"You've been playing with British officers?" I cast an uneasy look in the direction of the British camp, though it wasn't visible from here.

"Just one. A Captain Mansel. He came wi' the latest reply from Burgoyne and was obliged to wait while Granny chews it over. He'll be lucky if he's not skinned to the bone before he goes back," he added callously. "Worse luck wi' cards I never saw."

I paid no attention, engrossed in examining the robe. "This is marvelous, Jamie! It's huge!"

It was. A good eight feet long, and wide enough that two people could lie cradled in its warmth—provided they didn't mind sleeping close. The thought of crawling into that enveloping shelter, warm and cozy, after so many nights shivering under threadbare blankets …

Jamie appeared to have been thinking along similar lines.

"Big enough for the two of us," he said, and touched my breast, very delicately.

"Oh, really?"

He leaned closer, and I caught his own scent above the gamy pong of the buffalo robe—dry leaves, and the bitterness of acorn coffee, laced with sweet brandy, top notes to the deep male scent of his skin.

"I could pick you out of a dozen men in a dark room," I said, closing my eyes and inhaling enjoyably.

"I daresay ye could; I havena bathed in a week." He put his hands on my shoulders and bent his head until our foreheads touched.

"I want to unlace the neck o' your shift," he whispered, "and suckle your breasts until ye curl up like a wee shrimp, wi' your knees in my balls. Then take ye fast and hard, and fall asleep wi' my head pillowed on your naked breasts. Really," he added, straightening up.

"Oh," I said. "What a good idea."

* * *

In favor as I was of the suggested program, I could see that Jamie required nourishment before executing anything of a further strenuous nature; I could hear his stomach rumbling from a yard away.

"Playing cards takes it out of you, does it?" I observed, watching him demolish three apples in six bites.

"Aye, it does," he said briefly. "Have we any bread?"

"No, but there's beer."

As though the word had evoked him, Young Ian materialized out of the gloom.

"Beer?" he said hopefully.

"Bread?" Jamie and I said together, sniffing like dogs. Wafting from Ian's clothes was a yeasty, half-burned fragrance, which proved to come from two small loaves in his pockets.

"Where did you get these, Ian?" I asked, handing him a canteen of beer.

He drank deep, then lowered the canteen and stared vacantly at me for a moment.

"Ah?" he said vaguely.

"Are you all right, Ian?" I peered at him in some concern, but he blinked, and intelligence returned momentarily to his face.

"Aye, Auntie, fine. I'll just … ah … oh, thank ye for the beer." He handed back the empty canteen, smiled at me as though I were a stranger, and wandered off into the darkness.

"Did you see that?" I turned to find Jamie absorbed in dabbing up bread crumbs from his lap with a moistened finger.

"No, what? Here, Sassenach." He handed me the second loaf.

"Ian acting like a half-wit. Here, you have half; you need it more than I do."

He didn't argue.

"He wasna bleeding or staggering, was he? Well, then, I suppose he's fallen in love wi' some poor lass."

"Oh? Well, that would fit the symptoms. But …" I nibbled the bread slowly, to make it last; it was crusty and fresh, clearly just out of the ashes. I'd seen young men in love, certainly, and Ian's behavior *did* fit the symptomology. But I hadn't seen it in Ian, not since … "I wonder who?"

"God knows. I hope it's no one of the whores." Jamie sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "Though maybe better that than someone else's wife."

"Oh, he wouldn't—" I began, but then saw the wry look on his face. "Oh, he *didn't*?"

"No, he didn't," Jamie said, "but a near thing—and no credit to the lady involved."

"Who?"

"Colonel Miller's lady."

"Dear me." Abigail Miller was a sprightly young blonde of twenty or so, and twenty or so years younger than her rather stout—and distinctly humorless—husband. "Just… *how* near a thing?"

"Near enough," Jamie said grimly. "She had him up against a tree, rubbing up to him like a wee cat in heat. Though I imagine her husband will ha' put a stop to her antics by now."

"He *saw* them?"

"Aye. He and I were walking together, came round a bush, and there they were. It was clear enough to me that it wasna the lad's idea—but he wasna resisting all that much, either."

Colonel Miller had frozen for an instant, then strode forward, gripped his startled wife by the arm, and with a murmured "Good day, sir" to Jamie, had dragged her off, squealing, in the direction of his camp.

"Jesus H.… when did this happen?" I demanded.

Jamie glanced at the rising moon, estimating.

"Oh, maybe five or six hours ago."

"And he's already managed to fall in love with someone *else*?"

He smiled at me.

"Ever heard of *coup de foudre*, Sassenach? It didna take me more than one good look at you."

"Hmm," I said, pleased.

* * *

With some effort, I heaved the heavy buffalo robe over the stack of cut fir branches that formed the foundation of our bed, spread our two blankets over the robe, then folded the whole thing over like a dumpling, creating a large, weatherproof, cozy pocket into which I inserted myself, shivering in my shift.

I left the tent flap open, watching Jamie as he drank coffee and talked with two militiamen who had come by to gossip.

As my feet thawed for the first time in a month, I relaxed into untrammeled bliss. Like most people obliged to live outdoors in the autumn, I normally slept in everything I owned. Women moving with the army would occasionally remove their stays—if it wasn't raining, you saw them hung to air from tree branches in the mornings sometimes, like huge, malodorous birds poised for flight—but most simply loosened the ties and lay down regardless. Stays are quite comfortable to wear while standing up, but leave a lot to be desired in terms of nightwear.

Tonight, with the prospect of warm, waterproof shelter at hand, I had actually gone so far as to take off not only my stays—rolled up under my head as a pillow—but also skirt, blouse, jacket, and kerchief, crawling into bed in nothing save my shift and stockings. I felt absolutely depraved.

I stretched luxuriously and ran my hands down the length of my body, then thoughtfully cupped my breasts, contemplating Jamie's proposed plan of action.

The warmth of the buffalo robe was making me deliciously drowsy. I thought I needn't struggle to stay awake; I could tell that Jamie wasn't in any mood to forbear waking me out of chivalrous regard for my rest.

Had the fortuitous acquisition of the buffalo robe inspired him? I wondered, thumb dreamily circling one nipple. Or had sexual desperation inspired him to bet on the thing? What with his injured hand, it had been … how many days? I was absently totting up the total in my mind when I heard the low murmur of a new voice by the fire, and sighed.

Ian. Not that I wasn't pleased to see him, but … oh, well. At least he hadn't turned up just as we were …

He was sitting on one of the stones near the fire, head bent. He took something from his sporran and rubbed it thoughtfully between his fingers as he talked. His long, homely face was worried—but bore an odd sort of glow.

How peculiar, I thought. I'd seen it before, that look. A sort of intent concentration on something wonderful, a marvelous secret held to himself.

It was a girl, I thought, both amused and touched. He'd looked just that way at Mary, the young prostitute who had been his first. And Emily?

Well, yes … I thought so, though in that instance his joy in her had been terribly shadowed by the knowledge of his impending separation from everyone and everything else he loved.

Cruimnich, Jamie had said to him, laying his own plaid over Ian's shoulders in farewell. *"Remember."* I had thought my heart would break, to leave him—I knew Jamie's had.

He was still wearing the same ragged plaid, pinned to the shoulder of his buckskins.

"Rachel *Hunter*?" Jamie said, loud enough for me to hear, and I jerked upright, startled.

"Rachel *Hunter*?" I echoed. "You're in love with Rachel?"

Ian looked at me, startled by my jack-in-the-box appearance.

"Oh, there ye are, Auntie. I wondered where ye'd got to," he said mildly.

"Rachel Hunter?" I repeated, not intending to let him elude the question.

"Well … aye. At least, I … well, aye. I am." The admission made the blood rise in his cheeks; I could see it even by firelight.

"The lad is thinking we'd maybe have a word wi' Denzell, Sassenach," Jamie explained. He looked amused, but slightly worried, as well.

"A word? What for?"

Ian looked up and glanced from one to the other of us. "It's only … Denny Hunter's no going to like it. But he thinks the world of Auntie Claire, and he respects you, of course, Uncle Jamie."

“Why would he not like it?” I asked. I had by now extracted myself from the robe and, wrapping my shawl round my shoulders, sat down on a rock beside him. My mind was racing. I liked Rachel Hunter very much. And I was *very* pleased—to say nothing of relieved—if Ian had at last found a decent woman to love. But …

Ian gave me a look.

“Surely ye’ve noticed that they’re Quaker, Auntie?”

“I did, yes,” I said, giving him back the look. “But—”

“And I’m not.”

“Yes, I’d noticed that, too. But—”

“She’d be put out of meeting, if she weds me. Most likely they both would. They’ve been put out once already for Denny’s going wi’ the army, and that was hard for her.”

“Oh,” said Jamie, pausing in the act of tearing off a bit of bread. He held it for a moment, frowning. “Aye, I suppose they would.” He put the bread into his mouth and chewed slowly, considering.

“Do you think she loves you, too, Ian?” I asked, as gently as possible.

Ian’s face was a study, torn between worry, alarm, and that inner glow that kept breaking through the clouds of distress.

“I—well … I think so. I hope so.”

“You haven’t *asked* her?”

“I … not exactly. I mean—we didna really *talk*, ken?”

Jamie swallowed his bread and coughed.

“Ian,” he said. “Tell me ye havena bedded Rachel Hunter.”

Ian gave him a look of affront. Jamie stared at him, brows raised. Ian dropped his gaze back to the object in his hands, rolling it between his palms like a ball of dough.

“No,” he muttered. “I wish I had, though.”

“What?”

“Well … if I had, then she’d have to wed me, no? I wish I’d thought of that—but no, I couldna; she said stop, and I did.” He swallowed, hard.

“Very gentlemanly of you,” I murmured, though in fact I rather saw his point. “And very intelligent of her.”

He sighed. “What am I to do, Uncle Jamie?”

"I don't suppose you could become a Quaker yourself?" I asked hesitantly.

Both Jamie and Ian looked at me. They didn't resemble each other in the slightest, but the look of ironic amusement on both faces was identical.

"I dinna ken very much about myself, Auntie," Ian said, with a painful half smile, "but I think I wasna born to be a Quaker."

"And I suppose you couldn't—no, of course not." The thought of professing a conversion that he didn't mean had plainly never entered his mind.

It struck me quite suddenly that, of all people, Ian would understand exactly what the cost to Rachel would be if her love for him severed her from her people. No wonder he hesitated at the thought of her paying such a price.

Always assuming, I reminded myself, that she *did* love him. I had better have a talk with Rachel first.

Ian was still turning something over in his hands. Looking closer, I saw that it was a small, darkened, leathery-looking object. Surely it wasn't—

"That isn't Neil Forbes's ear, is it?" I blurted.

"Mr. Fraser?"

The voice brought me up standing, hairs prickling at the back of my neck. Bloody hell, not *him* again? Sure enough, it was the Continental soldier, the despoiler of my soup. He came slowly into the circle of firelight, deep-set eyes fixed on Jamie.

"I am James Fraser, aye," Jamie said, setting down his cup and gesturing politely toward a vacant rock. "Will ye take a cup of coffee, sir? Or what passes for it?"

The man shook his head, not speaking. He was looking Jamie over appraisingly, like one about to buy a horse and not sure of its temper.

"Perhaps ye'd prefer a warm cup o' spittle?" Ian said, in an unfriendly tone. Jamie glanced at him, startled.

"Seo mac na muice a thàinig na bu thràithe gad shiubhal," Ian added. He didn't take his eyes off the stranger. *"Chan eil e ag iarraidh math*

dhut idir 'uncle.' This is the misbegotten son of a pig who came earlier in search of you. He means you no good, Uncle."

"Tapadh leat Iain. Cha robh fios air a bhith agam," Jamie answered in the same language, keeping his voice pleasantly relaxed. "Thank you, Ian. I should never have guessed. Have ye business with me, sir?" he asked, changing to English.

"I would speak with you, yes. In privacy," the man added, with a dismissive glance at Ian. Apparently I didn't count.

"This is my nephew," Jamie said, still courteous but wary. "Ye may speak in front of him."

"I fear ye may think differently, Mr. Fraser, when you hear what I've to say. And once said, such things cannot be unsaid. Leave, young man," he said, not bothering to look at Ian. "Or you will both regret it."

Both Jamie and Ian stiffened visibly. Then they moved, at nearly the same instant, bodies shifting subtly, their feet coming under them, shoulders squaring. Jamie gazed thoughtfully at the man for a moment, then inclined his head an inch toward Ian. Ian rose without a word and disappeared into the darkness.

The man stood waiting, until the sound of Ian's footsteps had faded and the night settled into silence around the tiny fire. Then he moved round the fire and sat down slowly, opposite Jamie, still maintaining that unnerving air of scrutiny. Well, it unnerved *me;* Jamie merely picked up his cup and drained it, calm as though he were sitting at his own kitchen table.

"If ye've aught to say to me, sir, say it. It's late, and I'm for my bed."

"A bed with your lovely wife in it, I daresay. Lucky man." I was beginning to dislike this gentleman intensely. Jamie ignored both the comment and the mocking tone in which it was spoken, leaning forward to pour the last of the coffee into his cup. I could smell the bitter tang of it, even over the scent the buffalo robe had left on my shift.

"Does the name of Willie Coulter recall itself to you?" the man asked abruptly.

"I've kent several men of that name and that ilk," Jamie replied. "Mostly in Scotland."

"Aye, it was in Scotland. On the day before the great slaughter at Culloden. But you had your own wee slaughter on that day, no?"

I had been racking my memory for any notion of a Willie Coulter. The mention of Culloden struck me like a fist in the stomach.

Jamie had been obliged to kill his uncle Dougal MacKenzie on that day. And there had been one witness to the deed besides me: a MacKenzie clansman named Willie Coulter. I had assumed him long dead, either at Culloden or in the difficulties that followed—and I was sure Jamie had thought likewise.

Our visitor rocked back a little on his rock, smiling sardonically.

"I was once overseer on a sugar plantation of some size, you see, on the island of Jamaica. We'd a dozen black slaves from Africa, but blacks of decent quality grow ever more expensive. And so the master sent me to market one day with a purse of silver, to look over a new crop of indentures—transported criminals, the most of them. From Scotland."

And among the two dozen men the overseer had culled from the ragged, scrawny, lice-ridden ranks was Willie Coulter. Captured after the battle, tried and condemned in quick order, and loaded onto a ship for the Indies within a month, never to see Scotland again.

I could just see the side of Jamie's face and saw a muscle jump in his jaw. Most of his Ardsmuir men had been similarly transported; only the interest of John Grey had saved him from the same fate, and he had distinctly mixed feelings about it, even so many years after the fact. He merely nodded, though, vaguely interested, as though listening to some traveler's tale in an inn.

"They all died within two weeks," the stranger said, his mouth twisting. "And so did the blacks. Bloody pricks brought some filthy fever with them from the ship. Lost me my position. But I did get one thing of value to take away with me. Willie Coulter's last words."

* * *

Jamie hadn't moved appreciably since Mr. X had sat down, but I could sense the tension thrumming through him; he was strung like a bow with the arrow nocked.

"What is it ye want?" he asked calmly, and leaned forward to pick up the tin mug of coffee, wrapped in rags.

"Mmphm." The man made a pleased sound in his throat and sat back a little, nodding.

"I kent ye for a sensible gentleman. I'm a modest man, sir—shall we say a hundred dollars? To show your good faith," he added, with a grin that displayed snaggled teeth discolored by snuff. "And to save ye the trouble of protest, I'll just mention that I ken ye've got it in your pocket. I happened to speak wi' the gentleman ye won it from this afternoon, aye?"

I blinked at that; evidently Jamie had had an extraordinary run of luck. At cards, at least.

"To show good faith," Jamie repeated. He looked at the cup in his hand, then at the Lowlander's grinning face, but evidently decided that the distance was too great to throw it at him. "And to be going on with …?"

"Ah, well. We can be discussing that later. I hear ye're a man of considerable substance, Colonel Fraser."

"And ye propose to batten on me like a leech, do ye?"

"Why, a bit of leeching does a man good, Colonel. Keeps the humors in balance." He leered at me. "I'm sure your good wife kens the wisdom of it."

"And what do you mean by *that*, you slimy little worm?" I said, standing up. Jamie might have decided against throwing a cup of coffee at him, but I was willing to have a try with the pot.

"Manners, woman," he said, giving me a censorious glance before shifting his gaze back to Jamie. "Do ye not beat her, man?"

I could see the tautness in Jamie's body subtly shifting; the bow was being drawn.

"Don't—" I began, turning to Jamie, but never got to finish. I saw the expression change on Jamie's face, saw him leap toward the man—and whirled just in time to see Ian materialize out of the darkness behind the blackmailer and put a sinewy arm round his throat.

I didn't see the knife. I didn't have to; I saw Ian's face, so intent as almost to be expressionless—and I saw the ex-overseer's face. His jaw dropped and the whites of his eyes showed, his back arching up in a futile attempt at escape.

Then Ian let go, and Jamie caught the man as he began to fall, his body gone suddenly and horribly limp.

"Jesus God!"

The exclamation came from directly behind me, and I whirled again, this time to see Colonel Martin and two of his aides, as drop-jawed as Mr. X had been a moment before.

Jamie glanced up at them, startled. Then in the next breath, he turned and said quietly over his shoulder, *"Ruith." Run.*

"Hi! Murder!" one of the aides shouted, springing forward. "Stop, villain!"

Ian had lost no time in taking Jamie's advice; I could see him darting toward the edge of the distant wood, but there was enough light from the many campfires to reveal his flight, and the shouts of Martin and his aides were rousing everyone in hearing; people were jumping up from their firesides, peering into the dark, shouting questions. Jamie dropped the overseer's body by the fire and ran after Ian.

The younger of the aides hurtled past me, legs churning in furious pursuit. Colonel Martin dashed after him, and I managed to stick out a foot and trip him. He went sprawling through the fire, sending a fountain of sparks and ashes into the night.

Leaving the second aide to beat out the flames, I picked up my shift and ran as fast as I could in the direction Ian and Jamie had taken.

The encampment looked like something from Dante's *Inferno*, black figures shouting against the glow of flames, pushing one another amid smoke and confusion, shouts of "Murder! Murder!" ringing from different directions as more people heard and took it up.

I had a stitch in my side but kept running, stumbling over rocks and hollows and trampled ground. Louder shouts from the left—I paused, panting, hand to my side, and saw Jamie's tall form jerking free of a couple of pursuers. He must mean to draw pursuit away from Ian—which meant … I turned and ran the other way.

Sure enough, I saw Ian, who had sensibly stopped running as soon as he saw Jamie take off, now walking at a good clip toward the wood.

"Murderer!" a voice shrieked behind me. It was Martin, blast him, somewhat scorched but undaunted. "Stop, Murray! Stop, I say!"

Hearing his name shouted, Ian began to run again, zigzagging around a campfire. As he passed in front of it, I saw the shadow at his heels—Rollo was with him.

Colonel Martin had drawn up even with me, and I saw with alarm that he had his pistol in hand.

"St—" I began, but before the word was out, I crashed headlong into someone and fell flat with them.

It was Rachel Hunter, wide-eyed and openmouthed. She scrambled to her feet and ran toward Ian, who had frozen when he saw her. Colonel Martin cocked his pistol and pointed it at Ian, and a second later Rollo leapt through the air and seized the colonel's arm in his jaws.

The pandemonium grew worse. There were bangs from two or three pistols, and Rollo dropped writhing to the ground with a yelp. Colonel Martin jerked back, cursing and clutching his injured wrist, and Jamie drew back and punched him in the belly. Ian was already rushing toward Rollo; Jamie grabbed the dog by two legs, and, between them, they made off into the darkness, followed by Rachel and me.

We made it to the edge of the wood, heaving and gasping, and I fell at once to my knees beside Rollo, feeling frantically over the huge shaggy body, hunting for the wound, for damage.

"He's not dead," I panted. "Shoulder … broken."

"Oh, God," Ian said, and I felt him turn to glance in the direction from which pursuit was surely headed. "Oh, Jesus." I heard tears in his voice, and he reached to his belt for his knife.

“What are you *doing*?!” I exclaimed. “He can be healed!”

“They’ll kill him,” he said, savage. “If I’m no there to stop them, they’ll kill him! Better I do it.”

“I—” Jamie began, but Rachel Hunter forestalled him, falling to her knees and grabbing Rollo by the scruff.

“I’ll mind thy dog for thee,” she said, breathless but certain. “Run!”

He took one last despairing look at her, then at Rollo. And he ran.

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TERMS OF SURRENDER

When the message came from General Gates in the morning, Jamie knew what it must be about. Ian had got clean away, and little surprise. He'd be in the wood or perhaps in an Indian camp; either way, no one would find him until he wished to be found.

The lad had been right, too; they *did* want to kill the dog, particularly Colonel Martin, and it had taken not only all Jamie's resources but the young Quaker lass's prostrating herself upon the hound's hairy carcass and declaring that they must kill her first.

That had taken Martin back a bit, but there was still considerable public opinion in favor of dragging her away and doing the dog in. Jamie had prepared himself to step in—but then Rachel's brother had come out of the dark like an avenging angel. Denny stood in front of her and denounced the crowd as cowards, recreants, and inhuman monsters who would seek to revenge themselves upon an innocent animal, to say nothing of their damnable injustice—yes, he'd really said "damnable," with the greatest spirit, and the memory of it made Jamie smile, even in the face of the upcoming interview—in driving a young man to exile and perdition out of their own suspicion and iniquity, and could they not seek to find within their own bowels the slightest spark of the divine compassion that was the God-given life of every man …

Jamie's arrival at Gates's headquarters cut short these enjoyable reminiscences, and he straightened himself, assuming the grim demeanor suitable to trying occasions.

Gates looked as though he had been severely tried himself—which he had, in all justice. The bland, round face never looked as though it had any bones, but now it sagged like a soft-boiled egg, and the small eyes behind the wire-rimmed spectacles were huge and bloodshot when they looked at Jamie.

“Sit down, Colonel,” Gates said, and pushed a glass and decanter toward him.

Jamie was dumbfounded. He’d had enough grim interviews with high-ranking officers to know that you didn’t start them out with a cordial dram. He accepted the drink, though, and sipped it cautiously.

Gates drained his own, much less cautiously, set it down, and sighed heavily.

“I require a favor of you, Colonel.”

“I shall be pleased, sir,” he replied, with still more caution. What could the fat bugger possibly want of him? If it was Ian’s whereabouts or an explanation of the murder, he could whistle for that and must know it. If not …

“The surrender negotiations are almost complete.” Gates gave a bleak glance to a thick stack of handwritten papers, perhaps drafts of the thing.

“Burgoyne’s troops are to march out of camp with the honors of war and ground arms at the bank of the Hudson at the command of their own officers. All officers will retain their swords and equipment, the soldiers, their knapsacks. The army is to march to Boston, where they will be properly fed and sheltered before embarking for England. The only condition imposed is that they are not to serve in North America again during the present war. Generous terms, I think you will agree, Colonel?”

“Verra generous, indeed, sir.” Surprisingly so. What had made a general who undeniably held the whip hand to the extent that Gates did offer such extraordinary terms?

Gates smiled sourly.

“I see you are surprised, Colonel. Perhaps you will be less so if I tell you that Sir Henry Clinton is heading north.” And Gates was in a rush to conclude the surrender and get rid of Burgoyne in order to have time to prepare for an attack from the south.

“Aye, sir, I see.”

“Yes, well.” Gates closed his eyes for an instant and sighed again, seeming exhausted. “There is one additional request from Burgoyne before he will aceept this arrangement.”

“Yes, sir?”

Gates’s eyes were open again and passed slowly over him.

“They tell me you are a cousin to Brigadier General Simon Fraser.”

“I am.”

“Good. Then I am sure you will have no objection to performing a small service for your country.”

A small service pertaining to Simon? Surely …

“He had at one time expressed a desire to several of his aides that, should he die abroad, they might bury him at once—which they did, in fact; they buried him in the Great Redoubt—but that when convenient, he wished to be taken back to Scotland, that he might lie at peace there.”

“Ye want me to take his body to Scotland?” Jamie blurted. He could not have been more astonished had Gates suddenly got up and danced a hornpipe on his desk. The general nodded, his amiability increasing.

“You are very quick, Colonel. Yes. That is Burgoyne’s final request. He says that the brigadier was much beloved by his men and that knowing his wish is fulfilled will reconcile them to marching away, as they will not feel they are abandoning his grave.”

This sounded thoroughly romantic, and quite like something Burgoyne might do, Jamie reflected. He had a reputation for dramatic gesture. And he was probably not wrong in his estimation of the feelings of the men who had served under Simon—he was a good fellow, Simon.

Only belatedly did it dawn on him that the final result of this request …

"Is … there some provision to be made for my reaching Scotland with the body, sir?" he asked delicately. "There is a blockade."

"You will be transported—with your wife and servants, if you like—on one of His Majesty's ships, and a sum will be provided you for transporting the coffin once it has come ashore in Scotland. Have I your agreement, Colonel Fraser?"

He was so stunned, he scarcely knew what he said in response, but evidently it was sufficient, for Gates smiled tiredly and dismissed him. He made his way back to his tent with his head in a whirl, wondering whether he could disguise Young Ian as his wife's maid, in the manner of Charles Stuart.

* * *

October 17, like all the days that had gone before it, dawned dark and foggy. In his tent, General Burgoyne dressed with particular care, in a gorgeous scarlet coat with gold braid and a hat decorated with plumes. William saw him, when he went with the other officers to Burgoyne's tent for their last, anguished meeting.

Baron von Riedesel spoke to them, too; he took all the regimental flags. He would give them to his wife, he said, to be sewn inside a pillow and taken secretly back to Brunswick.

William cared for none of this. He was conscious of deep sorrow, for he had never before left comrades on a battlefield and marched away. Some shame, but not much—the general was right in saying that they could not have mounted another attack without losing most of the army, so wretched was their condition.

They looked wretched now, lining up in silence, and yet when fife and drum began to play, each regiment in its turn followed the flying colors, heads high in their tattered uniforms—or whatever clothing they could find. The enemy had withdrawn on Gates's order, the general said. That was delicate, William thought numbly; the Americans would not be present to witness their humiliation.

Redcoats first, and then the German regiments: dragoons and grenadiers in blue, the green-clad infantry and artillery from Hesse-Cassel.

On the river flats, scores of horses lay dead, the stench adding to the somber horror of the occasion. The artillery parked their cannon here, and the infantry, rank by rank by unending rank, poured out their cartridge boxes and stacked their muskets. Some men were sufficiently furious as to smash the butts of their guns before throwing them on the piles; William saw a drummer put his foot through his drum before turning away. He was not furious, or horrified.

All he wanted now was to see his father again.

* * *

The continental troops and the militia marched to the meetinghouse at Saratoga and from there lined up along both sides of the river road. Some women came, watching from a distance. I could have stayed in camp, to see the historic ceremony of surrender between the two generals, but I followed the troops instead.

The sun had risen and the fog had fled, just as it had done every day for the last few weeks. There was a smell of smoke in the air, and the sky was the infinite deep blue of October.

Artillery and infantry stood along the road, evenly spaced, but that spacing was the only uniform thing about them. There was no common dress, and each man's equipment was distinctively his own, in form and how he held it—but each man held his musket, or his rifle, or stood beside his cannon.

They were a motley crew in every sense of the word, festooned with powder horns and shot bags, some wearing outlandish old-fashioned wigs. And they stood in grave silence, each man with his right foot forward, right hands on their guns, to watch the enemy march out, with the honors of war.

I stood in the wood, a little way behind Jamie, and I saw his shoulders stiffen a little. William walked past, tall and straight, his face the face of a man who is not really there. Jamie didn't dip his head or make any effort not to be seen—but I saw his head turn just slightly, following William out of sight in the company of his men.

And then his shoulders dropped just a little, as though a burden dropped from them.

Safe, that gesture said, though he still stood straight as the rifle beside him. *Thank God. He is safe*.

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SANCTUARY

Lallybroch

Roger could not have said quite what impelled him to do it, other than the sense of peace that hung about the place, but he had begun to rebuild the old chapel. By hand, and alone, one stone upon another.

He'd tried to explain it to Bree; she'd asked.

"It's *them,"* he said at last, helpless. "It's a sort of … I feel as though I need to connect with them, back there."

She took one of his hands in her own, spreading his fingers, and ran the ball of her thumb gently over his knuckles, down the length of his fingers, touching the scabs and grazes, the blackened nail where a stone had slipped and bruised it.

"Them," she repeated carefully. "You mean my parents."

"Yes, among other things." Not only with Jamie and Claire but with the life their family had built. With his own sense of himself as a man—protector, provider. And yet it was his bone-deep urge to protect that had led him to abandon all his Christian principles—on the eve of ordination, no less—and set out in pursuit of Stephen Bonnet.

"I suppose I'm hoping I can make sense of … things," he'd said, with a wry smile. "How to reconcile what I thought I knew then with what I think I am now."

"It's not Christian to want to save your wife from being raped and sold into slavery?" she inquired, a distinct edge in her voice.

"Because if it's not, I'm taking the kids and converting to Judaism or Shinto or something."

His smile had grown more genuine.

"I found something there." He fumbled for words.

"You lost a few things, too," she whispered. Not taking her eyes from his, she reached out, the tips of her fingers cool on his throat. The rope scar had faded somewhat but was still darkly visible; he made no effort to hide it. Sometimes when he spoke with people, he could see their eyes fix on it; given his height, it was not unusual for men to seem to be speaking directly *to* the scar, rather than to himself.

Found a sense of himself as a man, found what he thought was his calling. And that, he supposed, was what he was looking for under those piles of fallen stone, under the eyes of a blind saint.

Was God opening a door, showing him that he should be a teacher now? Was this, the Gaelic thing, what he was meant to do? He had plenty of room to ask questions, room and time and silence. Answers were scarce. He'd been at it most of the aftenoon; he was hot, exhausted, and ready for a beer.

Now his eye caught the edge of a shadow in the doorway, and he turned—Jem or maybe Brianna, come to fetch him home to tea. It was neither of them.

For a moment, he stared at the newcomer, searching his memory. Ragged jeans and sweatshirt, dirty-blond hair hacked off and tousled. Surely he knew the man; the broad-boned, handsome face was familiar, even under a thick layer of light-brown stubble.

"Can I help you?" Roger asked, taking a grip on the shovel he'd been using. The man wasn't threatening but was roughly dressed and dirty—a tramp, perhaps—and there was something indefinable about him that made Roger uneasy.

"It's a church, aye?" the man said, and grinned, though no hint of warmth touched his eyes. "Suppose I've come to claim sanctuary, then." He moved suddenly into the light, and Roger saw his eyes more clearly. Cold, and a deep, striking green.

"Sanctuary," William Buccleigh MacKenzie repeated. "And then, Minister dear, I want ye to tell me who ye are, who *I* am—and what in the name of God almighty *are* we?”

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Part Six

Coming Home

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A STATE OF CONFLICT

September 10, 1777

John Grey found himself wondering how many horns a dilemma could have. Two, he believed, was the standard number, but supposed that it was theoretically possible to encounter a more exotic form of dilemma—something like the four-horned sheep he had once seen in Spain.

The most pressing of the horns arrayed under him at present concerned Henry.

He'd written to Jamie Fraser, explaining Henry's state and asking whether Mrs. Fraser might see her way to come. He had, as delicately as possible, assured her of his willingness to bear all expenses of the journey, to expedite her travel in both directions by ship (with protection from the exigencies of warfare insofar as the royal navy could provide it), and to provide her with whatever materials and instruments she might require. Had even gone so far as to procure a quantity of vitriol, which he recalled her needing for the composition of her ether.

He had spent a good deal of time with quill suspended over the page, wondering whether to add anything regarding Fergus Fraser, the printer, and the incredible story Percy had told him. On the one hand, this might bring Jamie Fraser belting up from North Carolina to look into the matter, thus improving the chances of Mrs. Fraser coming, as well. On the other … he was more than reluctant to expose any matter having to do with Percy Beauchamp to Jamie

Fraser, for assorted reasons, both personal and professional. In the end, he had said nothing of it and made his appeal solely on behalf of Henry.

Grey had waited through an anxious month, watching his nephew suffer from heat and inanition. At the end of the month, the courier he had sent to take his letter to North Carolina returned, sweat-soaked, caked with mud, and with two bullet holes in his coat, to report that the Frasers had left Fraser's Ridge with the declared intent of removing to Scotland, though adding helpfully that this removal was presumed to be only in the nature of a visit, rather than a permanent emigration.

He had fetched a physician to visit Henry, of course, not waiting for Mrs. Fraser's reply. He had succeeded in introducing himself to Benjamin Rush and had that gentleman examine his nephew. Dr. Rush had been grave but encouraging, saying that he believed one of the musket balls, at least, had created scarring, this partially obstructing Henry's intestines and encouraging a localized pocket of sepsis, which caused his persistent fever. He had bled Henry and prescribed a febrifuge, but made the strongest representations to Grey that the situation was delicate and might worsen abruptly; only surgical intervention might effect a cure.

At the same time, he said that he did believe Henry to be strong enough to survive such surgery—though there was, of course, no certainty of a happy outcome. Grey had thanked Dr. Rush but had chosen to wait just a little while, in hopes of hearing from Mrs. Fraser.

He looked out the window of his rented house on Chestnut Street, watching brown and yellow leaves scour to and fro among the cobbles, driven by a random wind.

It was mid-September. The last ships would depart for England at the end of October, just ahead of the Atlantic gales. Ought he to try to get Henry on one of them?

He had made the acquaintance of the local American officer in charge of prisoners of war billeted in Philadelphia and made an application for parole. This had been granted without difficulty; captured officers were normally paroled, save there was something unusual or dangerous about them, and Henry plainly was unlikely to attempt escape, foment rebellion, or support insurrection in his present state.

But he had not yet managed to arrange to have Henry exchanged, which status would permit Grey to move him back to England. Always assuming that Henry's health would stand the journey, and that Henry himself would be willing to go. Which it likely wouldn't, and Henry wasn't, he being so much attached to Mrs. Woodcock. Grey was quite willing to take her to England, too, but she wouldn't consider leaving, as she had heard that her husband had been taken prisoner in New York.

Grey rubbed two fingers between his brows, sighing. Could he force Henry aboard a naval vessel against his will—drugged, perhaps?—thus breaking his parole, ruining his career, and endangering his life, on the supposition that Grey could find a surgeon in England more capable than Dr. Rush of dealing with the situation? The best that could be hoped from such a course of action was that Henry would survive the journey long enough to say goodbye to his parents.

But if he did *not* undertake this drastic step, he was left with the choice of forcing Henry to submit to a horrifying surgery that he feared desperately and which was very likely to kill him—or watching the boy die by inches. Because he *was* dying; Grey saw it plainly. Sheer stubbornness and Mrs. Woodcock's nursing were all that was keeping him alive.

The thought of having to write to Hal and Minnie and tell them … No. He stood up abruptly, unable to bear more indecision. He would call upon Dr. Rush at once and make arrangements—

The front door slammed open, admitting a blast of wind, dead leaves, and his niece, pale-faced and round-eyed.

"Dottie!" His first, heart-stopping fear was that she had rushed home to tell him that Henry had died, for she had gone to visit her brother as she usually did every afternoon.

"Soldiers!" she gasped, clutching him by the arm. "There are soldiers in the street. Riders. Someone said Howe's army is coming! Advancing on Philadelphia!"

* * *

Howe met Washington’s army at Brandywine Creek on September 11, some distance south of the city. Washington’s troops were driven back, but rallied to make a stand a few days later. A tremendous rainstorm arose in the midst of the battle, though, putting an end to hostilities and allowing Washington’s army to escape to Reading Furnace, leaving a small force behind under General Anthony Wayne at Paoli.

One of Howe’s commanders, Major General Lord Charles Grey—a distant cousin of Grey’s—attacked the Americans at Paoli at night, with orders to his troops to remove the flints from their muskets. This prevented discovery from the accidental discharge of a weapon, but also obliged the men to use bayonets. A number of Americans were bayoneted in their beds, their tents burned, a hundred or so made captive—and Howe marched into the city of Philadelphia, triumphant, on September 21.

Grey watched them, rank upon rank of redcoats, marching to drum music, from the porch of Mrs. Woodcock’s house. Dottie had feared that the rebels, forced to abandon the city, might fire the houses or kill their British prisoners outright.

“Nonsense,” Grey had said to this. “They are rebel Englishmen, not barbarians.” Nonetheless, he had put on his own uniform and his sword, tucked two pistols into his belt, and spent twenty-four hours sitting on the porch of Mrs. Woodcock’s house—with a lantern by night—coming down now and then to speak to any officer he knew who passed by, both to glean news of the situation and to ensure that the house remained unmolested.

The next day he returned to his own house, through streets of shuttered windows. Philadelphia was hostile, and so was the surrounding countryside. Still, the occupation of the city was peaceful—or as peaceful as a military occupation well can be. Congress had fled as Howe approached, and so had many of the more prominent rebels, including Dr. Benjamin Rush.

So had Percy Beauchamp.

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THE FEAST OF ALL SAINTS

Lallybroch
October 20, 1980

Brianna pressed the letter to her nose and inhaled deeply. So long after, she was sure it was imagination rather than odor, but still she sensed the faint aromas of smoke in the pages. Maybe it was memory as much as imagination; she knew what the air was like in an ordinary, full of the scents of hearthfire, roasting meat, and tobacco, with a mellow smell of beer beneath it all.

She felt silly smelling the letters in front of Roger but had developed the habit of sniffing them privately, when she read them over by herself. They'd opened this one the night before and had read it several times together, discussing it—but she'd got it out again now, wanting just to hold it privately and be alone with her parents for a bit.

Maybe the scent was really there. She'd noticed that you don't actually remember smells, not the same way you remember something you've seen. It's just that when you smell that smell again, you know what it is—and often it brings back a lot of other memories with it. And she was sitting here on a fall day, surrounded by the ripeness of apples and heather, the dust of ancient wood paneling, and the hollow smell of wet stone—Annie MacDonald had just mopped the hall—but she was seeing the front room of an eighteenth-century ordinary, and smelling smoke.

November 1, 1777
New York

Dear Bree, et al—

Do you remember the high school field trip when your economics class went to Wall Street? I am at the moment sitting in an ordinary at the foot of Wall Street, and neither a bull nor a bear to be seen, let alone a ticker-tape machine. No wall, either. A few goats, though, and a small cluster of men under a big leafless buttonwood tree, smoking pipes and conferring head-to-head. I can't tell whether they're Loyalists complaining, rebels plotting in public (which is, by the way, very much safer than doing it in private, though I do hope you won't need to make use of that bit of special knowledge), or simply merchants and traders—business is being done, I can tell that; hands shaken, bits of paper scribbled and exchanged. It's amazing how business thrives in wartime; I think it's because the normal rules—whatever they normally are—are suspended.

That's true of most human transactions, by the way. Hence the flowering of wartime romances and the founding of great fortunes in the wake of wars. It seems rather paradoxical—though maybe it's only logic (ask Roger whether there is such a thing as a logical paradox, will you?)—that a process so wasteful of lives and substance should then result in an explosion of babies and business.

Since I speak of war—we are all alive, and mostly intact. Your father was slightly wounded during the first battle at Saratoga (there were two, both very bloody), and I was obliged to remove the fourth finger of his right hand —the stiff one; you'll recall it. This was traumatic, of course (as much to me as to him, I think), but not *altogether a disaster. It's healed very well, and while the hand is still giving him a good bit of pain, it's much more flexible and I think will be more useful to him overall.*

We are—belatedly—about to take ship to Scotland, under rather peculiar circumstances. We are to sail tomorrow, on HMS Ariadne, accompanying the body of Brigadier General Simon Fraser. I met the brigadier very briefly before his death—he was dying at the time—but he was evidently a very good soldier and much beloved by his men. The British commander at Saratoga, John Burgoyne, asked as a sort of footnote to the surrender agreement that your father (he being a kinsman of the brigadier's and knowing where his family place in the Highlands is) take the body to Scotland, in accordance with the brigadier's wishes. This was unexpected, but rather fortuitous, to say the least. I can't think how we should have managed it otherwise, though your father says he would have thought of something.

The logistics of this expedition are a trifle delicate, as you might suppose. Mr. Kościuszko (known as "Kos" to his intimates, which includes your father—well, actually, he's known as "Kos" to everybody, because no one (other than your father) can pronounce his name, or cares to try. Your father's very fond of him and vice versa) offered his services, and with the aid of General Burgoyne's butler (doesn't everyone take their butler to war with them?), who supplied him with a great deal of lead foil from wine bottles (well, you really can't blame General Burgoyne if he's taken to drink, in the circumstances, though my general impression is that everyone on both sides drinks like a fish all of the time, regardless of the military situation of the moment), has produced a miracle of engineering: a lead-lined coffin (very necessary) on detachable wheels (also very necessary; the thing must weigh close to a ton—your father says no, it's only seven *or eight hundredweight, but as he hasn't tried to lift it, I don't see how he would know).*

General Fraser had been buried for a week or so and had to be exhumed for transport. It wasn't pleasant, but could have been worse. He had a number of Indian rangers, many of whom also esteemed him; some of these came to the unburying with a medicine person (I think it was a man but couldn't be sure; it was short and round and wore a bird mask), who incensed the remains heavily with burning sage and sweetgrass (not much help in terms of olfaction, but the smoke did draw a gentle veil over the more horrid aspects of the situation) and sang over him at some length. I should have liked to ask Ian what was being sung, but owing to an unpleasant set of circumstances that I won't go into here, he wasn't present.

I'll explain it all in a later letter; it's very complicated, and I must finish this before the sailing. The important points, in re Ian, are that he is in love with Rachel Hunter (who is a lovely young woman, and a Quaker, which presents some difficulties) and that he is technically a murderer and thus unable to appear in public in the vicinity of the Continental army. As a side result of the technical murder (a very unpleasant person, and no great loss to humanity, I assure you), Rollo was shot and injured (beyond the superficial bullet wound, he has a broken scapula; he should recover but can't be moved easily. Rachel is keeping him for Ian while we go to Scotland).

As the brigadier was known to be revered by his Indian associates, the Ariadne's captain was startled, but not overly disturbed, to be informed that the body is being accompanied not only by his close kinsman (and wife) but by a Mohawk who speaks little English (I should be more than surprised if anyone in the royal navy can tell the difference between Gaelic and Mohawk, come to that).

I hope this attempt is rather less eventful than our first voyage. If so, the next letter should be written in Scotland. Keep your fingers crossed.

All my love,
Mama

P.S. Your father insists upon adding a few words to this. This will be his first try at writing with his altered hand, and I would like to watch to see how it's working, but he instructs me firmly that he requires privacy. I don't know whether this is to do with his subject matter or simply with the fact that he doesn't want anyone to see him struggle. Both, probably.

The third page of the letter was markedly different. The writing was much larger than usual, and more sprawling. Still identifiably her father's hand, but the letters seemed looser, less jagged somehow. She felt her heart twist, not only from the thought of her father's mutilated hand, slowly drawing each letter—but for what he had thought it worth so much effort to write:

My Dearest,

Your Brother is alive, and unwounded. I saw him march out from Saratoga with his Troops, bound for Boston and eventually England. He will not fight again in this War. Deo gratias.

Your most loving Father,
JF

Postscriptum: It is the Feast of All Saints. Pray for me.

The nuns had always told them—and she'd told him. By saying an Our Father, a Hail Mary, and a Glory Be on the Feast of All Saints, you can obtain the release of a soul from purgatory.

"You bloody man," she muttered, sniffing ferociously and fumbling in her desk for a tissue. "I knew you'd make me cry. *Again.*"

* * *

"Brianna?"

Roger's voice came from the kitchen, surprising her. She hadn't expected him to come down from the chapel ruins for another hour or two, and she blew her nose hastily, calling, "Coming!" and hoping that the recent tears didn't show in her voice. It was only as she hit the corridor and saw him holding the green baize door to the kitchen half open that it occurred to her that there had been something odd about his voice, as well.

"What is it?" she said, hastening her step. "The kids—"

"They're fine," he interrupted. "I told Annie to take them down to the post office in the village for an ice cream." He stepped away from the door then and beckoned her to enter.

She stopped dead, just inside the door. A man was leaning back against the old stone sink, arms folded. He straightened up when he saw her and bowed, in a way that struck her as terribly odd and yet familiar. Before she could think why that should be, he straightened again and said, "Your servant, ma'am," in a soft Scottish voice.

She looked straight into eyes that were the twins of Roger's, then glanced wildly *at* Roger, just to be sure. Yes, they were.

"Who—"

"Allow me to introduce William Buccleigh MacKenzie," Roger said, a distinct edge in his voice. "Also known as the Nuckelavee."

For an instant, none of this made any sense whatever. Then things—astonishment, fury, disbelief—came flooding into her mind at such a rate that none of them could make it to her mouth, and she simply gaped at the man.

"I'll ask your pardon, ma'am, for frightening your weans," the man said. "I'd nay notion they were yours, for the one thing. I ken what weans are like, though, and I didna wish to be discovered before I'd made some sense of it all."

"All … *what*?" Brianna finally found a couple of words. The man smiled, very slightly.

"Aye, well. As to that, I think you and your husband may know better than I."

Brianna pulled out a chair and sat down rather abruptly, motioning to the man to do the same. As he came forward into the light from the window, she saw that there was a graze on his cheekbone—a prominent cheekbone, and one that with the modeling of his temple and eye socket seemed terribly familiar; the man himself seemed familiar. But of course he was, she thought dazedly.

"Does he know who he is?" she asked, turning to Roger. Who, now that she noticed, was nursing his right hand, which appeared to have blood on the knuckles. He nodded.

"I told him. Not sure he believes me, though."

The kitchen was its usual solid, homely place, peaceful with the autumn sun coming in and the blue-checkered dish towels hung on the Aga. But now it felt like the backside of Jupiter, and when she reached for the sugar bowl, she would not have been at all surprised to see her hand pass through it.

"I should be inclined to believe a good deal more today than I should have been three months ago," the man said, with a dry intonation that held some faint echo of her father's voice.

She shook her head violently, in hopes of clearing it, and said, "Would you like some coffee?" in a polite voice that could have belonged to a sitcom housewife.

His face lightened at that, and he smiled. His teeth were stained and a little crooked. *Well, of course they are*, she thought with remarkable lucidity. *No dentists to speak of in the eighteenth century*. The thought of the eighteenth century sent her surging to her feet.

"You!" she exclaimed. *"You* got Roger hanged!"

"I did," he said, not looking very perturbed. "Not that I meant to. And if he likes to strike me again for it, I'll let him. But—"

"That was for scaring the kids," Roger said with equal dryness. "The hanging … we'll maybe talk about that a bit later."

"Fine talk for a minister," the man said, looking faintly amused. "Not that most ministers go about interfering wi' a man's wife."

"I—" Roger began, but she interrupted him.

"*I'll* bloody hit you," Brianna said, glaring at the man. Who, to her annoyance, squinched his eyes shut and leaned forward, features clenched.

"All right," he said, through compressed lips. "Go ahead."

"Not in the face," Roger advised, surveying a bruised knuckle. "Make him stand up and go for his balls."

William Buccleigh's eyes popped open, and he looked reproachfully at Roger.

"D'ye think she needs advice?"

"I think *you* need a fat lip," she told him, but sat slowly down again, eyeing him. She took a breath down to her toenails and let it out.

"Right," she said, more or less calmly. "Start talking."

He nodded cautiously and touched the bruise on his cheekbone, wincing a little.

Son of a witch, she thought suddenly. *Does he know* that*?*

"Did ye not mention coffee?" he asked, sounding a little wistful. "I havena had real coffee in years."

* * *

He was fascinated by the Aga and pressed his backside against it, fairly shivering with delight.

"Oh, sweet Virgin," he breathed, eyes closed as he reveled in the heat. "Is it not the lovely thing."

The coffee he pronounced good in itself but rather feeble—reasonable, Brianna thought, knowing that such coffee as he was used to was boiled over a fire, often for several hours, rather than gently perked. He apologized for his manners, which were actually fine, saying that he hadn't eaten in some little while.

"How have ye been feeding yourself?" Roger asked, eyeing the steadily diminishing pile of peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches.

"Stole from cottages, to begin with," Buccleigh admitted frankly. "After a bit, I found my way to Inverness and was sittin' on the curb of the street, quite dazed by the huge great roaring things goin' by me—I'd seen the cars on the road north, of course, but it's different when they're whizzin' past your shins. Anyway, I'd sat down outside the High Street Church, for I knew that place, at least, and thought I'd go and ask the minister for a bite of bread when I'd got myself a bit more in hand. I was that wee bit rattled, ken," he said, leaning confidentially toward Brianna.

"I suppose so," she murmured, and lifted an eyebrow at Roger. "Old High St. Stephen's?"

"Aye, it was the High Church—meaning on the High Street, not Anglican—before it was Old, or joined congregations with St. Stephen's." He switched his attention to William Buccleigh. "Did ye, then? Speak to the minister? Dr. Weatherspoon?"

Buccleigh nodded, mouth full.

"He saw me sitting there and came out to me, the kind man. Asked was I in need, and when I assured him I was, he told me where to go for food and a bed, and I went there. An aid society, they called it, a charity, and it surely was."

The people who ran the aid society had given him clothes—"for what I had on was little more than rags"—and helped him to find a job doing rough labor for a dairy farm outside the town.

"So why are ye not on the dairy farm?" Roger asked, at the same moment that Brianna asked, "But how did you come to Scotland?" Their words colliding, they stopped, gesturing to each other to continue, but William Buccleigh waved a hand at them both and chewed rapidly for a moment, then swallowed several times and gulped more coffee.

"Mother of God, that stuff's tasty, but it sticks in your craw. Aye, ye want to know why I'm here in your kitchen eating your food and not dead in a creek in North Carolina."

"Since you mention it, yes," said Roger, leaning back in his chair. "Start with North Carolina, why don't you?"

Buccleigh nodded once more, leaned back in turn with his hands linked comfortably over his stomach, and began.

* * *

He’d been starved out of Scotland, like so many folk after Culloden, and had scraped together the money to emigrate with his wife and infant son.

“I know,” Roger said. “It was me you asked to save them, on the ship. The night the captain put the sick ones over the rail.”

Buccleigh looked up, startled, green eyes wide.

“Was it, then? I didna see ye at all, in the dark and me desperate. If I’d kent that …” He trailed off, then shook his head. “Well, what’s done is done.”

“It is,” Roger said. “I couldn’t see you in the dark, either. I only kent ye later, because of your wife and son, when I met them again at Alaman-k.” To his intense annoyance, the last sound caught in his throat with a glottal click. He cleared it and repeated evenly, “At Alamance.”

Buccleigh nodded slowly, eyes fastened with interest on Roger’s throat. Was that regret in his eyes? Probably not, Roger thought. He hadn’t thanked him for saving his wife and child, either.

“Aye. Well, I’d thought to take land and farm it, but … well, the long and the short of it was, I wasna much of a farmer. Nor a builder. Didna ken the first thing about the wilderness, not much more about crops. Not a hunter, either. We would ha’ starved, surely, had I not taken Morag and Jem—that’s my son’s name, too, is that not strange?—back down to the piedmont and scraped a little work on a wee turpentine plantation there.”

“Stranger than you know,” Bree said, half under her breath. And a little louder, “So?”

“So the fellow I worked for turned out for the Regulation, and those of us on the place went, too. I should have left Morag behind, but there was a fellow on the place who had a hot eye for her—he was the blacksmith and had but one leg, so he’d not be coming with us to the fight. I couldna leave her to him, so she and the wean came with me. Where the next fellow she meets is *you*,” he said pointedly.

“Did she not tell ye who I was?” Roger asked testily.

“Well, she did, then,” Buccleigh admitted. “She’d said about the ship and all, and said that was you. Even so,” he added, giving Roger a hard eye, “d’ye go about makin’ love to other men’s wives regular, or was it just Morag took your fancy?”

“Morag is my five—or maybe only four—times great-grandmother,” Roger said evenly. He fixed Buccleigh with a stare equal to the other man’s. “And since you asked me who ye are—you’re my grandda. Five or six times back. My son’s named Jeremiah after my da, who was named for his grandda—who was named *for your* son. I think,” he added. “I might be missing one or two Jeremiahs along the way.”

Buccleigh stared at him, stubbled face gone quite blank. He blinked once or twice, glanced at Brianna, who nodded, then returned his stare to Roger, carefully scrutinizing his face.

“Look at his eyes,” Brianna said helpfully. “Shall I bring you a mirror?”

Buccleigh’s mouth opened as though to answer, but he found no words and shook his head as though dislodging flies. He picked up his cup, stared into it for a moment as though astonished to find it empty, and set it down. Then looked at Brianna.

“Ye wouldna have anything in the house stronger than coffee, would ye, *a bhana-mhaighstir*?”

* * *

It took Roger a little rummaging in his study to find the genealogical table the Reverend had drawn up years before. While he was gone, Bree found the bottle of Oban and poured William Buccleigh a generous glass. With no hesitation, she poured for herself and Roger, as well, and put a jug of water on the table.

“Do you take a little water?” she asked politely. “Or do you like it neat?”

Rather to her surprise, he reached at once for the water and splashed a little into the whisky. He saw her expression and smiled.

“If it was the rotgut, I’d throw it down. Whisky worth drinking, a little water opens the flavor. But ye ken that, don’t ye? Ye’re no

Scots, though.”

“Yes, I am,” she said. “On my father’s side. His name is—was—James Fraser, of Lallybroch. They called him the Dunbonnet.”

He blinked, looked round the kitchen, then back at her.

“Are you … another, then?” he said. “Like your husband and me. Another of—whatever it is?”

“Whatever it is,” she agreed. “And yes. You knew my father?”

He shook his head, closing his eyes as he sipped, and took a moment to reply while the whisky made its way down.

“Dear Lord, that’s good,” he breathed, and opened his eyes. “Nay, I was born only a year or so before Culloden. I heard of the Dunbonnet, though, when I was a lad.”

“You said you weren’t much of a farmer,” Bree said curiously. “What did you do in Scotland, before you left?”

He took a deep breath and let it out through his nose, in just the way her father did. *A MacKenzie thing*, she thought, entertained.

“I was a lawyer,” he said abruptly, and picked up his glass.

“Well, there’s a useful profession,” Roger said, coming in in time to hear this. He eyed Buccleigh contemplatively, then shook his head and spread out the MacKenzie family tree on the tabletop.

“There you are,” he said, putting a finger on the relevant entry, then moved a finger down the page. “And there I am.” Buccleigh blinked at it, then bent closer to study it in silence. Brianna saw his throat move as he swallowed once or twice. His face was pale beneath the stubble when he looked up.

“Aye, those are my parents, my grandparents. And there’s wee Jem—my Jem—where he should be, right enough. I’ve another child, though,” he said suddenly, turning to Bree. “Or I think I have. Morag was breeding when I—when I—went.”

Roger sat down. His face had lost a little of the angry wariness, and he regarded William Buccleigh with what might be sympathy.

“Tell us that bit,” he suggested. “How you went.”

Buccleigh pushed across his empty whisky glass but didn’t wait for it to be refilled.

The owner of the plantation he’d worked on had been ruined in the wake of Alamance, gaoled for taking part in the Regulation and his property confiscated. The MacKenzies had drifted for a time, having no money and no home, no close kin who might help them.

Brianna exchanged a quick glance with Roger. Had Buccleigh known it, he was within a short distance of close kin—and wealthy kin, at that. Jocasta Cameron was Dougal MacKenzie's sister—this man's aunt. If he knew it.

She raised her brows in silent question to Roger, but he shook his head slightly. Let that wait.

At last, Buccleigh said, they'd made the decision to go back to Scotland. Morag had family there, a brother in Inverness who'd done well for himself, was a prosperous corn chandler. Morag had written to him, and he had urged them to come back, saying he would find a place for William in his business.

"At that point, I should ha' been glad of a place shoveling dung out of the holds of cattle ships," Buccleigh admitted with a sigh. "Ephraim—that's Morag's brother, Ephraim Gunn—said he thought he might have use for a clerk, though. And I *can* write a fair hand and do sums."

The lure of work—work that he was well equipped to do—and a place to live was strong enough to make the little family willing to embark once more on the perilous Atlantic voyage. Ephraim had sent a draft on his bank for their passage, and so they had come back, landing in Edinburgh, and from there had made their slow way north.

"By wagon, for the most part." Buccleigh was on his third glass of whisky, Brianna and Roger not so far behind. He poured a little water into his empty glass and swished it round his mouth before swallowing, to clear his throat, then coughed and went on.

"The wagon broke down—again—near the place they call Craigh na Dun. I'm thinking the two of ye will know it?" He glanced back and forth between them, and they nodded. "Aye. Well, Morag wasna feeling all that peart, and the bairn was peely-wally, too, so they lay down in the grass to sleep a bit whilst the wheel was mending. The drover had a mate and didna need my help, so I set off to stretch my legs."

"And you climbed the hill, to the stones," Brianna said, her own chest feeling tight at the thought.

"Do you know what date it was?" Roger broke in.

"Summer," William Buccleigh said slowly. "Near Midsummer Day, but I couldna swear to the day exactly. Why?"

"The summer solstice," Brianna said, and hiccuped slightly. "It's—we think it's open. The—whatever it is—on the sun feasts and the fire feasts."

The sound of a car coming down the drive came faintly to them, and all three looked up as though surprised in some furtive business.

"Annie and the kids. What are we going to do with him?" she asked Roger.

He glanced with narrowed eyes at Buccleigh for an instant, then made up his mind. "We'll need a bit of thought to explain ye," Roger said, rising. "Just for the moment, though—come with me, aye?"

Buccleigh stood at once and followed Roger into the scullery. She heard Buccleigh's voice rise in momentary astonishment, a brief mutter of explanation from Roger, then the grating noise as they moved the bench that hid the access panel covering the priest's hole.

Moving as if in a trance, Brianna rose hastily to clear and wash the three glasses, to put away the whisky and water. Hearing the knocker go against the front door, she jumped a little. Not the kids, after all. Who could that be?

She swept the family tree off the table and hurried down the hall, pausing to toss it onto Roger's desk as she made her way to the door.

How old is he? she thought abruptly, as she reached for the handle. *He looks to be in his late thirties, maybe, but—*

"Hi," said Rob Cameron, looking faintly alarmed at the look on her face. "Have I come at a bad time, then?"

* * *

Rob had come to bring back a book Roger had lent him and to deliver an invitation: would Jem like to come to the pictures with

Bobby on the Friday, then have a nice fish supper and spend the night?

"I'm sure he would," Brianna said. "But he's not—oh, there he is." Annie had just driven up, with a clashing of gears that made the engine die in the driveway. Brianna shuddered slightly, pleased that Annie hadn't taken *her* car.

By the time the kids had been extracted from the car, wiped off, and made to shake hands politely with Mr. Cameron, Roger had come out from the back of the house and was at once drawn into a conversation about his efforts on the chapel, which went on to such an extent that it became obvious that it was supper-time, and it would have been rude not to ask him to stay …

And so Brianna found herself scrambling eggs and heating beans and frying potatoes in a sort of daze, thinking of their uninvited guest under the scullery floor, who must be smelling the cooking and dying of hunger—and *what* on earth were they going to do with him?

All the time they ate, making pleasant conversation, herding the kids off to bed while Roger and Rob talked Pictish stones and archaeological excavations in the Orkneys, she found her mind dwelling on William Buccleigh MacKenzie.

The Orkneys, she thought. *Roger said the Nuckelavee is an Orkney ghoulie. Has he been in the Orkneys? When? And why the bloody hell was he hanging round our broch all this time? When he found what had happened, why didn't he just go right back? What is he* doing *here?*

By the time Rob took his leave—and another book—with profuse thanks for the food and a reminder of the movie date on Friday, she was prepared to haul William Buccleigh out of the priest's hole by the scruff of the neck, drive him straight to Craigh na Dun herself, and stuff him bodily into a stone.

But when he finally clambered out, moving slowly, white-faced and clearly hungry, she found her agitation lessening. Just a little. She made fresh eggs for him, quickly, and sat with him while Roger went round the house, checking doors and windows.

"Though I suppose we needn't worry so much about that," she observed caustically, "since you're *inside* now."

He looked up, tired but wary.

"I did say I was sorry," he said softly. "D'ye want me to go?"

"And where *would* you go, if I said yes?" she asked unkindly.

He turned his face toward the window over the kitchen sink. In the daylight, it looked out on peace, on the kailyard with its worn wooden gate and the pasture beyond. Now there was nothing out there but the black of a moonless Highland night. The sort of night when Christians stayed indoors and put holy water on the doorposts, because the things that walked the moors and the high places were not always holy.

He didn't say anything but swallowed, and she saw the fair hairs on his forearms rise.

"You don't have to go," she said, gruff. "We'll find you a bed. But tomorrow …"

He bobbed his head, not looking at her, and made to rise. She stopped him with a hand on his arm and he looked at her, startled, his eyes dark in the quiet light.

"Just tell me one thing now," she said. "Do you want to go back?"

"Oh, God, yes," he said, and turned his head away, but his voice was thick. "I want Morag. I want my wee lad."

She let go of his wrist and stood up, but another thought had occurred to her.

"How old are you?" she asked abruptly, and he shrugged, brushing the back of his wrist across his eyes.

"Eight and thirty," he said. "Why?"

"Just … curious," she said, and moved to turn the Aga's heat down to its nighttime setting. "Come with me; I'll make you a bed in the parlor. Tomorrow we'll—we'll see."

She led him down the hall past Roger's study, and in her stomach was a ball of ice. The light was on, and the family tree Roger had taken out to show William Buccleigh was still where she'd tossed it, on the desk. Had he seen the date? She thought not—or if he had, he hadn't noticed. The dates of birth and death weren't listed for everyone on that table—but they were for him. William Buccleigh MacKenzie had died, according to that table, at age thirty-eight.

He won't get back, she thought, and the ice rose up around her heart.

* * *

Loch Errochty lay dull as pewter under a lowering sky. They were standing on the footbridge across Alt Ruighe nan Saorach, the river that fed the loch, looking down to where the man-made loch spread itself between the smooth hills. Buck—he'd said that was what folk called him in America, and he'd got used to it—looked and looked, his face a study in amazement and dismay.

"Down there," he said softly, pointing. "See where that wee burn comes down into it? That's where my auntie Ross's house stood. About a hundred feet below the burn."

About thirty feet below the surface of the loch now.

"I imagine it's something of a wrench," Brianna said, not without sympathy. "To see things so changed."

"It is that." He glanced at her, those eyes, so unsettlingly like Roger's, quick in his face. "It's maybe more that so much *hasna* changed. Up there, aye?" He lifted his chin toward the distant mountains. "Just like they always were. And the wee birds in the grass, and the salmon jumping in the river. I could set foot on yon shore"—he nodded toward the end of the footbridge—"and feel as though I had walked there yesterday. I *did* walk there yesterday! And yet … all the people are gone.

"All of them," he ended softly. "Morag. My children. They're all dead. Unless I can go back."

She hadn't planned to ask him anything; better to wait until she and Roger could talk to him together in the evening after the kids were down. But the opportunity offered itself. Roger had driven Buck around the Highlands near Lallybroch, down the Great Glen along Loch Ness, and finally dropped him off at the Loch Errochty dam, where she was working today; she'd drive him back with her for supper.

They'd argued—in whispers—about it the night before. Not about what to say about him; he'd be Daddy's relative, come for a short visit. That was the truth, after all. But whether to take him into the tunnel. Roger had been in favor of this, she very much against, remembering the shock of the … timeline?… cutting through her like a sharpened wire. She still hadn't decided.

But now he'd brought up the subject of going back, on his own.

"When you came to yourself after you … came through, and realized what had happened," she asked curiously, "why didn't you go back into the circle right then?"

He shrugged.

"I did. Though I canna say that I realized straight off what *had* happened. I didna come to that for some days. But I kent something terrible had happened and the stones were to do wi' it. So I was wary of them, as I imagine ye can understand." He quirked an eyebrow at her, and she nodded reluctantly.

She *could* understand. She wouldn't go within a mile of a standing stone herself, unless it was to save some member of her family from a horrible fate. And even then she might think twice. She dismissed the thought, though, and returned to her interrogation.

"But you did go back, you said. What happened?"

He looked helplessly at her, spreading his hands.

"I dinna ken how to describe it to ye. Nothing like that's ever happened to me before."

"Try," she suggested, hardening her voice, and he sighed.

"Aye. Well, I walked up to the circle, and this time I could hear them—the stones. Talking to themselves, like, buzzing like a hive of bees, and with a sound in it made the hairs stand up on my nape."

He'd wanted to turn and run then, but with thought of Morag and Jemmy in his mind, had determined to push on. He'd walked into the center of the circle, where the sound assailed him from all sides.

"I thought I'd lose my mind from it," he said frankly. "Putting my fingers in my ears did nay good at all; it was inside me, like as if 'twas comin' from my bones. Was it like that for you?" he asked suddenly, peering at her curiously.

"Yes, it was," she answered shortly. "Or close enough. Go on. What did you do then?"

He'd seen the big cleft stone he'd gone through the first time and, taking as deep a breath as he could hold, had lunged through it.

"And ye can skin me for a liar if ye like," he assured her. "I canna for the life of me tell ye what happened next, but after it did, I was lyin' on the grass in the midst of the stones, and I was on fire."

She looked at him, startled.

"Literally? I mean, were your clothes burning, or was it just—"

"I ken what 'literally' means," he said, with an edge in his voice. "I may not be what you are, but I *was* educated."

"Sorry." She made a small apologetic nod and gestured to him to go on.

"Anyway, aye, I was *literally* on fire. My shirt was in flames. Here—" He unzipped his wind-cheater and fumbled with the buttons of Roger's blue cambric shirt, pulling the edges apart to show her the sprawling reddish mark of a healing burn on his chest. He would have buttoned it again at once, but she motioned him not to and bent to look closer. It seemed to be centered on his heart. Was that significant? she wondered.

"Thank you," she said, straightening up. "What—what were you thinking about when you went through?"

He stared at her.

"I was thinking I wanted to get back, what else?"

"Yes, of course. But were you thinking of someone in particular? Of Morag, I mean, or your Jem?"

The most extraordinary expression—shame? embarrassment?—crossed his face, and he looked away.

"I was," he said briefly, and she knew he lied but couldn't think why. He coughed and went on hurriedly.

"Well, so. I rolled upon the grass to put it out, and then I was sick. I lay there for a good while, not having the strength to rise. I dinna ken how long, but a long time. Ye ken what it's like here, close to Midsummer Day? That milky light when ye canna see the sun, but it's not really set?"

"The summer dim," she murmured. "Aye—I mean, yes, I know. So did you try again?"

It *was* shame now. The sun was low and the clouds glowed a dull orange that washed loch and hills and bridge in a sullen flush, but it was still possible to make out the darker flush that spread across his broad cheekbones.

"No," he muttered. "I was afraid."

Despite her distrust of him and her lingering anger over what he'd done to Roger, she felt an involuntary spurt of sympathy at the admission. After all, both she and Roger had *known*, more or less, what they were getting into. He hadn't expected what happened at all and still knew almost nothing.

"I would have been, too," she said. "Did you—"

A shout from behind interrupted her, and she turned to see Rob Cameron bounding along the riverbank. He waved and came up onto the bridge, puffing a little from the run.

"Hi, boss," he said, grinning at her. "Saw ye on my way out. If ye're off the clock, I thought would ye fancy a drink on the way home? And your friend, too, of course," he added, with a friendly nod toward William Buccleigh.

With that, of course, she had no alternative but to introduce them, passing Buck off with their agreed-on story: Roger's relative, staying with them, just in town briefly. She politely declined the offer of a drink, saying that she must get home for the kids' supper.

"Another time, then," Rob said lightly. "Nice to meet ye, pal." He bounded off again, light-footed as a gazelle, and she turned to find William Buccleigh looking after him with narrowed eye.

"What?" she demanded.

"Yon man's got a hot eye for you," he said abruptly, turning to her. "Does your husband know?"

"Don't be ridiculous," she said, just as abruptly. Her heart had sped up at his words, and she didn't like it. "I work with him. He's in the lodge with Roger, and they talk about old songs. That's all."

He made one of those Scottish noises that can convey all manner of indelicate meaning and shook his head.

"I may not be what you are," he repeated, smiling unpleasantly. "But I'm no a fool, either."

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ONE EWE LAMB RETURNS TO THE FOLD

November 24, 1777
Philadelphia

Lord John Grey desperately needed a valet. He had employed a person so described but found the man worse than useless, and a thief to boot. He had discovered the erstwhile valet slipping teaspoons down his breeches and had—after forcibly extracting the spoons—dismissed him. He should, he supposed, have had the man arrested, but really was not sure what the local constable would do if summoned by a British officer.

Most of the British prisoners of war had been taken out of the city as Howe's army advanced, the Americans wishing to keep them for exchange. Henry had not.

He brushed his own uniform, grimly considering. He wore it daily now, as protection for Dottie and Henry. He had not been an actively serving officer for years but, unlike most men in that position, had not resigned his lieutenant-colonel's commission, either. He wasn't sure what Hal would have done had he *tried* to resign, but since it was a commission in Hal's own regiment and Grey didn't need to sell it, the point was moot.

One of the buttons was loose. He took the hussif out of his kit, threaded a needle without squinting, and whipped the button tightly to the coat. The action gave him a small feeling of satisfaction, though acknowledging it made him admit just how little he felt he could control these days—so little that sewing on a button should seem cause for satisfaction.

He frowned at himself in the glass and twitched irritably at the gold lace on his coat, which was tarnished in places. He did know what to do about that, but damned if he was going to sit polishing it up with a lump of urine-soaked bread. Knowing General Sir William Howe as he did, he doubted that his own appearance would affect his reception, even should he roll up to Howe's headquarters in a sedan chair with his head wrapped in a Turkish turban. Howe frequently didn't bathe or change his linen for a month or more—and not only when in the field.

Still. It would have to be an army surgeon, and Grey wanted his pick of them. He grimaced at the thought. He had known too many army surgeons, some of them at unpleasantly close range. But Howe's army had come into the city in late September. It was mid-November now, the occupation was well established, and with it a general animus among the citizenry.

Those physicians of a rebellious bent had either left the city or would have nothing to do with a British officer. Those with Loyalist sympathies would have been more than happy to oblige him—he was invited to many parties given by the wealthy Loyalists of the city and had been introduced to two or three physicians there—but he had found none with any reputation for surgery. One dealt mostly with cases of venereal disease, another was an *accoucheur*, and the third was plainly a quacksalver of the worst sort.

So he was bound for Howe's headquarters, to beg assistance. He couldn't wait any longer; Henry had held his own and even seemed to gain a bit of strength with the cooling of the weather. Better it was done now, to give him a chance to heal a little before the winter came with its chill and the fetid squalor of closed houses.

Ready, he buckled on his sword and stepped out into the street. There was a soldier, half bowed under a heavy rucksack, walking slowly along the street toward him, looking at the houses. He barely glanced at the man as he came down the steps—but a glance was enough. He looked again, incredulous, and then ran down the street, heedless of hat, gold lace, sword, or dignity, and seized the tall young soldier in his arms.

"Willie!"

"Papa!"

His heart overflowed in a most remarkable way; he could seldom remember being so happy but did his best to contain it, not wanting to embarrass Willie with unmanly excesses of emotion. He didn't let go of his son but stood back a little, looking him up and down.

"You're … dirty," he said, unable to repress a large, foolish grin. "Very dirty indeed." He was. Also tattered and threadbare. He still wore his officer's gorget, but his stock was missing, as were several buttons, and one cuff of his coat was torn quite away.

"I have lice, too," Willie assured him, scratching. "Is there any food?"

"Yes, of course. Come in, come in." He took the rucksack off Willie's shoulder and beckoned him to follow. "Dottie!" he shouted up the stairs as he pushed open the door. "Dottie! Come down!"

"I *am* down," his niece said behind him, coming out of the day parlor, where she was accustomed to breakfast. She had a piece of buttered toast in her hand. "What do you—oh, *Willie*!"

Disregarding questions of filth and lice, William swept her up in his arms, and she dropped the toast on the carpet and squeezed him round the body, laughing and crying, until he protested that she had cracked all his ribs and he should never breathe easy again.

Grey stood watching this with the utmost benevolence, even though they had quite trampled the buttered toast into the rented carpet. They really *did* appear to love each other, he reflected. Maybe he'd been wrong. He coughed politely, which did not disentangle them but did at least make Dottie look blankly over her shoulder at him.

"I'll go and order some breakfast for William, shall I?" he said. "Take him into the parlor, why don't you, my dear, and give him a dish of tea."

"Tea," Willie breathed, his face assuming the beatific air of one beholding—or being told about—some prodigious miracle. "I haven't had tea in weeks. Months!"

Grey went out to the cookhouse, this standing at a little distance behind the house proper so that the latter should not be destroyed when—not if—something caught fire and burned the cookhouse to the ground. Appetizing smells of fried meat and stewed fruit and fresh bread floated out of this ramshackle structure.

He had employed Mrs. Figg, a nearly spherical black woman, as cook, on the assumption that she could not have gained such a figure without having both an appreciation of good food and the ability to cook it. In this assumption he had been proved right, and not even that lady's uncertain temperament and taste for foul language made him regret his decision, though it did make him approach her warily. Hearing his news, though, she obligingly put aside the game pie she was making in order to assemble a tea tray.

He waited to take this back himself, meaning to give William and Dottie a little time alone together. He wanted to hear everything—for of course everyone in Philadelphia knew about Burgoyne's disastrous meeting at Saratoga, but he particularly wanted to find out from William what John Burgoyne had known or understood beforehand. According to some of his military acquaintances, Sir George Germain had assured Burgoyne that his plan had been accepted and that Howe would march north to meet him, cutting the American colonies in half. According to others—several of Howe's staff among them—Howe had never been apprised of this plan in the first place, let alone consented to it.

Was this arrogance and presumptuousness on Burgoyne's part, obstinacy and pride on Howe's, idiocy and incompetence on Germain's—or some combination of all three? If pressed, he'd place his wager on this last possibility, but was curious to know how deeply Germain's office might have been involved. With Percy Beauchamp vanished from Philadelphia, leaving not a wrack behind, his further movements would have to be observed by someone else, and Arthur Norrington was likely to communicate his own findings to Germain rather than to Grey.

He carried the loaded tray carefully back, to find William on the sofa in his shirtsleeves drinking tea, his hair unbound and loose on his shoulders.

Dottie was sitting in the wing chair before the fire, holding her silver comb on her knee, and with a look on her face that nearly made Grey drop the tray. She turned a startled face on him as he came in, so blank that it was clear she barely saw him. Then something changed and her face altered, like one coming back in a twinkling from somewhere leagues away.

"Here," she said, rising at once and reaching for the tray. "Let me have that."

He did, covertly glancing between the two young people. Sure enough, Willie looked odd, too. Why? he wondered. They had been excited, thrilled, exuberantly affectionate with each other a few moments before. Now she was pale but trembling with an inner excitement that made the cups rattle in their saucers as she began to pour out tea. *He* was flushed where she was pale, but not—Grey was almost sure—with any sort of sexual excitement. He had the look of a man who … well, no. It *was* sexual excitement, he thought, intrigued—he had, after all, seen it often and was a keen observer of it in men—but it wasn't focused on Dottie. Not at all.

What the devil are they up to? he thought. He affected to ignore their distraction, though, and sat down to drink tea and hear Willie's experiences.

The telling calmed William a little. Grey watched William's face change as he talked, sometimes haltingly, and felt a deep pang at seeing it. Pride, yes, great pride; William was a man now, a soldier, and a good one. But Grey had also a lurking regret for the disappearance of the last traces of Willie's innocence; the briefest look at his eyes proved that had gone.

The accounts of battle, politics, Indians, all had the opposite effect on Dottie, he saw. Far from being calmed or happy, she grew more visibly agitated by the moment.

"I was about to go to visit Sir William, but I think I'll go see Henry first," Grey said at last, rising and brushing toast crumbs from the skirts of his coat. "Do you want to come with me, Willie? Or the both of you, for that matter? Or would you rather rest?"

They exchanged a look in which complicity and plotting were so evident that he blinked. Willie coughed and stood up, too.

"Yes, Papa. I do want to see Henry, of course. But Dottie has just been telling me how grave his state is—and about your intent to get an army surgeon to deal with it. I was … thinking … I know an army surgeon. A most excellent fellow. Very knowing, and wonderfully gentle in his manner—but quick as a snake with his blade," he hastened to add. His color had risen remarkably, saying this, and Grey viewed him with fascination.

"Really," Grey said slowly. "He sounds an answer to prayer. What is his name? I could ask Sir William—"

"Oh, he's not with Sir William," Willie said hastily.

"Oh, one of Burgoyne's men?" The paroled soldiers of Burgoyne's defeated army had all—with exceptions like William—marched to Boston, there to embark for England. "Well, I would of course like to have him, but I doubt we can send to Boston for him and have him come in a timely fashion, given the time of year and the likelihood —"

"No, he's not in Boston." Willie exchanged another of those looks with Dottie. She caught Grey watching them this time, went red as the roses on the teacups, and looked sedulously at her toes. Willie cleared his throat.

"In fact, he is a Continental surgeon. But Washington's army has gone into winter quarters at Valley Forge—that's no more than a day's ride. He will come if I go in person to ask him, I am sure of it."

"I see," Grey said, thinking rapidly. He was sure that he didn't see the half of it—whatever "it" was—but on the face of things, this did seem an answer to prayer. It would be a simple matter to ask Howe to arrange an escort and a flag of truce for Willie, as well as a guarantee of safe passage for the surgeon.

"All right," he said, making up his mind on the moment. "I'll speak to Sir William about it this afternoon."

Dottie and Willie gave identical sighs—of relief? *What the devil?* he thought yet again.

"Right, then," he said briskly. "Come to think, you'll wish to wash and change, Willie. I'll go to Howe's headquarters now, and we'll see Henry this afternoon. What is the name of this famous

Continental surgeon, that I may have Sir William write a pass for him?"

"Hunter," said Willie, and his sunburned face seemed to glow. "Denzell Hunter. Be sure to tell Sir William to write the pass for two; Dr. Hunter's sister is his nurse—he'll need her to come along and help."

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TWENTY-TWENTY

December 20, 1777
Edinburgh

The print on the page sprang into focus, clear and black, and I exclaimed in startlement.

“Ah, close, then?” Mr. Lewis, the spectacle-maker, twinkled at me over his own spectacles. “Try these.” He gently removed the trial spectacles from my nose and handed me another pair. I put them on, examined the page of the book before me, then looked up.

“I had no idea,” I said, amazed and delighted. It was like being reborn; everything was fresh, new, crisp, and vivid. I had suddenly reentered the half-forgotten world of fine print.

Jamie stood by the shop’s window, book in hand and a handsome pair of steel-rimmed square spectacles on his long nose. They gave him a most unaccustomed scholarly air, and he looked for a moment like a distinguished stranger, until he turned to look at me, his eyes slightly magnified behind the lenses. He shifted his gaze over the top of them and smiled at sight of me.

“I like those,” he said with approval. “The round ones suit your face, Sassenach.”

I had been so taken with the new detail of the world around me that it hadn’t even occurred to me to wonder what *I* looked like. Curious, I got up and came to peer into the small looking glass hung on the wall.

"Goodness," I said, recoiling slightly. Jamie laughed, and Mr. Lewis smiled indulgently.

"They are most becoming to you, ma'am," he said.

"Well, possibly," I said, warily examining the stranger's reflection in the glass. "It's just rather a shock." It wasn't really that I'd forgotten what I looked like. It was just that I hadn't thought about it in months, beyond putting on clean linen and not wearing gray, which tended to make me look as though I'd been inexpertly embalmed.

I had on brown today, an open jacket of brown velvet the color of ripe cattails, with a narrow grosgrain ribbon in gold down the edges, over my new gown—this a heavy coffee-colored silk with a close-fitted bodice and three lace-edged petticoats to show at the ankle. We would not be long in Edinburgh, owing to the exigencies of getting the brigadier to his final resting place and Jamie's eagerness to be away to the Highlands—but we did have business to conduct here. Jamie had said firmly that we could not appear as ragamuffins and had sent for a dressmaker and a tailor as soon as we reached our lodgings.

I stood back a little, preening. In all honesty, I was surprised to find how well I looked. During the long months of traveling, of retreat and battle with the Continental army, I had been reduced to my basic essence: survival and function. What I looked like would have been entirely irrelevant, even had I had a mirror.

In fact, I'd subconsciously expected to find a witch in the glass, a worn-looking woman with wild gray hair and a fierce expression. Possibly a long hair or two sprouting from the chin.

Instead … well, it was still recognizably me. My hair—uncapped but covered by a small, flat straw hat with a dainty bunch of cloth daisies on it—was tied up behind. But flattering small wisps curled round my temples, and my eyes were a bright clear amber behind the new spectacles, with a surprising look of guileless expectancy.

I had the lines and creases of my age, of course, but on the whole, my face had settled peaceably on my bones, rather than running away in jowls and wattles down my neck. And the bosom, with just a discreet shadow showing the swell of my breasts—the royal navy had fed us lavishly on the sea journey, and I had regained some of the weight I had lost during the long retreat from Ticonderoga.

"Well, not all that bad, really," I said, sounding so surprised that Jamie and Mr. Lewis both laughed. I took off the spectacles with considerable regret—Jamie's spectacles were simple steel-rimmed reading glasses, so could be taken at once, but my own pair would be ready, complete with gold rims, by the next afternoon, Mr. Lewis promised—and we left the shop to embark upon our next errand: Jamie's printing press.

* * *

"Where's Ian this morning?" I asked, as we made our way to Princes Street. He'd been gone when I awoke, leaving not a wrack behind, let alone any word of his whereabouts. "You don't suppose he's decided to run for it rather than go home?"

"If he has, I'll track him down and beat him to a pudding, and he kens that perfectly well," Jamie said absently, looking up across the park to the great bulk of the castle on its rock, then putting on his glasses—futiley—to see whether they made a difference. "Nay, I think he's likely gone to the brothel."

"At eleven o'clock in the morning?" I blurted.

"Well, there's nay rule about it," Jamie said mildly, taking off the glasses, wrapping them in his handkerchief, and putting them into his sporran. "I've been known to do it in the morning now and then. Though I doubt he's bent on carnal knowledge just this minute," he added. "I told him to go and see whether Madame Jeanne still owns the place, for if so, she'll be able to tell me more, in a shorter space of time, than anyone else in Edinburgh. If she's there, I'll go and see her in the afternoon."

"Ah," I said, not really liking the notion of his going round for a cozy tête-à-tête with the elegant Frenchwoman who had once been his partner in the whisky-smuggling business but admitting the economy of the proposal. "And where would Andy Bell be at ten o'clock in the morning, do you suppose?"

“In bed,” Jamie said promptly. “Sleeping,” he added with a grin, seeing the look on my face. “Printers are sociable creatures, as a rule, and they congregate in taverns of an evening. I’ve never known one to rise wi’ the lark, save he’s got bairns wi’ the colic.”

“You’re proposing to roust him out of bed?” I asked, stretching my step to keep up with him.

“No, we’ll find him at Mowbray’s at dinnertime,” he said. “He’s a graver—he needs *some* light to work by, so he rises by noon. And he eats at Mowbray’s most days. I only want to see whether his shop’s burnt down or not. And whether the wee bugger’s been using my press.”

“You make it sound as though he’s been using your wife,” I said, amused at the grim tone of this last.

He made a small Scottish noise acknowledging the presumed humor of this remark while simultaneously declining to share in it. I hadn’t realized that he felt so strongly about his printing press, but after all, he’d been separated from it for nearly twelve years. Little wonder if his lover’s heart was beginning to beat at thought of being reunited with it at last, I thought, privately entertained.

Then again, perhaps he *was* afraid Andy Bell’s shop had burned down. It wasn’t an idle fear. His own printer’s shop *had* burned down twelve years before; such establishments were particularly vulnerable to fire, owing both to the presence of a small open forge for melting and recasting type and to the quantities of paper, ink, and similar flammable substances kept on the premises.

My stomach growled softly at thought of a midday dinner at Mowbray’s; I had very pleasant memories of our last—and only—visit there, which had involved some excellent oyster stew and an even better chilled white wine, among other pleasures of the flesh.

It would be a little time ’til dinner, though; laborers might open their dinner pails at noon, but fashionable Edinburgh dined at the civilized hour of three o’clock. Possibly we could acquire a fresh bridie from a street vendor, I thought, hastening in Jamie’s wake. Just to tide us over.

Andrew Bell’s shop was, luckily, still standing. The door was closed against the draft, but a small bell rang over it to announce our presence, and a middle-aged gentleman in shirtsleeves and apron looked up from a basket of slugs he was sorting.

"A good morning to you, sir. Ma'am," he said cordially, nodding to us, and I saw at once that he was not a Scot. Or, rather, not born in Scotland, for his accent was the soft, slightly drawling English of the Southern colonies. Jamie heard it and smiled.

"Mr. Richard Bell?" he asked.

"I am," said the man, looking rather surprised.

"James Fraser, your servant, sir," Jamie said politely, bowing. "And may I present my wife, Claire."

"Your servant, sir." Mr. Bell bowed in return, looking rather bewildered but with perfect manners.

Jamie reached into the breast of his coat and withdrew a small bundle of letters, tied with a pink ribbon.

"I've brought ye word from your wife and daughters," he said simply, handing them over. "And I've come to see about sending ye home to them."

Mr. Bell's face went blank, and then all the blood drained out of it. I thought he was going to faint for a moment, but he didn't, merely grasping the edge of the counter for support.

"You-you—home?" he gasped. He had clutched the letters to his breast, and now brought them down, looking at them, his eyes welling. "How—how did she … My wife. Is she well?" he asked abruptly, jerking up his head to look at Jamie, sudden fear in his eyes. "Are they all right?"

"They were all bonny as doves when I saw them in Wilmingon," Jamie assured him. "Verra much desolated by your absence from them, but well in themselves."

Mr. Bell was trying desperately to control his face and his voice, and the effort reduced him to speechlessness. Jamie leaned over the counter and touched him gently on the arm.

"Go and read your letters, man," he suggested. "Our other business will wait."

Mr. Bell's mouth opened once or twice, soundless, then he nodded abruptly and, whirling round, blundered through the door that led to the back room.

I sighed, and Jamie glanced down at me, smiling.

"It's good when something comes right, isn't it?" I said.

"It's no made right yet," he said, "but it will be." He then pulled his new spectacles out of his sporran and, clapping them onto his nose, flipped up the counter flap and strode purposefully through.

"It *is* my press!" he exclaimed accusingly, circling the enormous thing like a hawk hovering over its prey.

"I'll take your word for it, but how can you tell?" I came cautiously after him, keeping back my skirts from the ink-stained press.

"Well, it's got my name on it, for the one thing," he said, stooping and pointing up at something under it. "Some of them, anyway." Leaning upside down and squinting, I made out *Alex. Malcolm* carved on the underside of a small beam.

"Apparently it still works all right," I observed, straightening up and looking round the room at the posters, ballads, and other examples of the printing and engraving arts displayed there.

"Mmphm." He tried the moving parts and examined the press minutely before reluctantly admitting that, in fact, it seemed in good condition. He still glowered, though.

"And I've been *paying* the wee bugger all these years, to keep it for me!" he muttered. He straightened up, looking balefully at the press. I had in the meantime been poking about the tables near the front wall, which held books and pamphlets for sale, and picked up one of the latter, which was titled at the top *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and below this, "Laudanum."

Tincture of opium, or liquid laudanum, otherwise called the thebaic tincture, is made as follows: take of prepared opium two ounces, of cinnamon and cloves, each one drachm, of white wine one pint, infuse them a week without heat, and then filter it through paper.

Opium at present is in great esteem, and is one of the most valuable of all the simple medicines. Applied externally, it is emollient, relaxing, and discutient, and greatly promotes suppuration: if long kept upon the skin, it takes off hair, and always occasions an itching; sometimes it exulcerates it, and raises little blisters, if applied to a tender part: sometimes, on external application, it allays pain, and even occasions *sleep: but it must by no means be applied to the head, especially to the sutures of the skull; for it has been known to have the most terrible effects in this application, and even bring death itself. Opium taken internally removes melancholy, eases pain, and disposes of sleep; in many cases removes hemorrhages, provokes sweating.*

A moderate dose is commonly under a grain …

"Do you know what 'discutient' means?" I asked Jamie, who was reading the type set up in the form on the press, frowning as he did so.

"I do. It means whatever ye're talking about can dissolve something. Why?"

"Ah. Perhaps that's why applying laudanum to the sutures of the skull is a bad idea."

He gave me a baffled look.

"Why would ye do that?"

"I haven't the faintest idea." I returned to the pamphlets, fascinated. One of them, titled "The Womb," had some very good engravings of a dissected female pelvis and internal organs, done from varying angles, as well as depictions of the fetus in various stages of development. If this was Mr. Bell's work, I thought, he was both a superb craftsman and a very diligent observer.

"Have you got a penny? I'd like to buy this."

Jamie dug into his sporran and laid a penny on the counter, glanced at the pamphlet in my hand, and recoiled.

"Mother of God," he said, crossing himself.

"Well, probably not," I said mildly. "Certainly *a* mother, though." Before he could reply to this, Richard Bell came out of the back room, red-eyed but composed, and seized Jamie by the hand.

"You cannot know what you have done for me, Mr. Fraser," he said earnestly. "If you can indeed help me to return to my family, I—I—well, in fact, I do not know what I could possibly do to show my gratitude, but be assured that I will bless your soul forever!"

"I'm much obliged to ye for the thought, sir," Jamie said to him, smiling. "It may be that ye can do me a small service, but if not, I shall still be most thankful for your blessings."

"If there is anything I can do, sir, anything at all!" Bell assured him fervently. Then a faint hesitation came over his face—possibly a recollection of whatever his wife had had to say about Jamie in her letter. "Anything short of … of treason, I should say."

"Och, no. Well short of treason," Jamie assured him, and we took our leave.

* * *

I took a spoonful of the oyster stew and closed my eyes in ecstasy. We had come a little early, in order to get a seat by the window overlooking the street, but Mowbray's had filled up fast, and the clishmaclaver of cutlery and conversation was almost deafening.

"You're sure he's not here?" I said, leaning across the table to make myself heard. Jamie shook his head, rolling a sip of the cold Moselle around his mouth with an expression of bliss.

"Ye'll ken well enough when he is," he said, swallowing it.

"All right. What sort of not-quite-treasonous thing are you planning to make poor Mr. Bell do in return for passage home?"

"I mean to send him home in charge of my printing press," he replied.

"What, entrust your precious darling to a virtual stranger?" I asked, amused. He gave me a mildly dirty look in return, but finished his bite of buttered roll before answering.

"I dinna expect him to be abusing her. He's no going to print a thousand-run of *Clarissa* on her aboard ship, after all."

"Oh, it's a her, is it?" I said, vastly entertained. "And what, may I ask, is her name?"

He flushed a little and looked away, taking particular care to coax a specially succulent oyster into his spoon, but finally muttered, "Bonnie," before gulping it.

I laughed, but before I could make further inquiries, a new noise intruded on the racket, and people began to put down their spoons and stand up, craning to see out of the windows.

*"That w*ill be Andy," Jamie told me.

I looked down into the street and saw a small knot of boys and idlers, clapping and cheering. Looking up the street to see what was coming, I beheld one of the biggest horses I had ever seen. It wasn't a draft horse but an enormously tall gelding, close to seventeen hands, so far as my inexpert eye could judge.

On top of it was a very small man, sitting up straight and regally ignoring the cheers of the crowd. He came to a stop directly below us and, turning round, removed a wooden square from the saddle behind him. He shook this out, revealing it to be a folding wooden ladder, and one of the street children ran forward to hold the foot of it while Mr. Bell—for it couldn't be anyone else—descended to the plaudits of passersby. He tossed a coin to the child who'd held the ladder, another to a lad who'd taken his horse's head, and disappeared from view.

A few moments later, he came through the door into the main dining room, taking off his cocked hat and bowing graciously to the calls of greeting from the diners. Jamie raised a hand, calling "Andy Bell!" in a resonant voice that cut through the thrum of talk, and the little man's head jerked in our direction, surprised. I watched with fascination as he came toward us, a slow grin spreading over his face.

I couldn't tell whether he had some form of dwarfism or had merely suffered badly from malnutrition and scoliosis in his youth, but his legs were short in proportion to his upper body, and his shoulders crooked; he barely topped four feet, and only the crown of his head—this covered by a very fashionable wig—showed as he passed between the tables.

These aspects of appearance faded into insignificance, though, as he drew close and I perceived his most striking attribute. Andrew Bell had the biggest nose I had ever seen, and in the course of an eventful life, I had seen a number of prize specimens. It began between his eyebrows, curved gently down for a short distance as though nature had intended him to have the profile of a Roman emperor. Something had gone amiss in the execution, though, and to this promising beginning, something that looked like a small potato had been affixed. Knobbly and red, it took the eye.

It took quite a few eyes; as he drew close to our table, a young lady nearby saw him, gasped audibly, and then clapped a hand over her mouth, this precaution being quite insufficient to quell her giggles.

Mr. Bell heard her, and without breaking his stride, he reached into his pocket, withdrew an immense papier-mâché nose decorated with purple stars, which he clapped over his own, and, fixing the young woman with an icy stare, passed by.

"My dear," Jamie said to me, grinning as he rose to his feet and extending a hand to the little engraver, "may I name my friend, Mr. Andrew Bell? My wife, Andy. Claire is her name."

"Charmed, madam," he said, removing the false nose and bowing low over my hand. "When did you acquire this rare creature, Jamie? And whatever would such a lovely lass want with a great, vulgar lout such as you, I wonder?"

"I lured her into marriage wi' descriptions of the beauties of my printing press," Jamie said dryly, sitting down and motioning to Andy Bell to join us.

"Ah," said Andy, with a sharp look at Jamie, who raised his brows and widened his eyes. "Hmm. I see ye've been by the shop, then." He nodded at my reticule, from which the top of the pamphlet I'd bought was protruding.

"We have," I said hastily, pulling out the pamphlet. I didn't *think* Jamie proposed to squash Andy Bell like a bug for having made free with his printing press, but his relationship with "Bonnie" was news to me, and I wasn't sure quite how deep his sense of affronted proprietorship went.

"This is remarkably fine work," I said to Mr. Bell, with complete sincerity. "Tell me, how many different specimens did you use?"

He blinked a little but answered readily, and we had a pleasant—if rather gruesome—conversation regarding the difficulties of dissection in warm weather and the effect of saline solution versus alcohol for preservation. This caused the people at the next table to end their meal rather hurriedly, casting veiled looks of horror as they left. Jamie leaned back in his chair, looking pleasant but fixing Andy Bell with an unwavering gaze.

The little engraver betrayed no particular discomfort under this basilisk stare and went on telling me about the response when he had published the bound edition of the *Encyclopedia*—-the King had somehow happened to see the plates of the "Womb" section and had ordered those pages to be torn out of the book, the ignorant German blatherskite!—but when the waiter came to take his order, he ordered both a very expensive wine and a large bottle of good whisky.

"What, whisky wi' the stew?" blurted the waiter, astonished.

"No," he said with a sigh, pushing back his wig. "Concubinage. If that's what ye call it when ye rent the services of a man's beloved."

The waiter shifted his look of astonishment to me, then went bright red and, choking slightly, backed away.

Jamie fixed a narrow eye on his friend, now buttering a roll with aplomb.

"It'll take more than whisky, Andy."

Andy Bell sighed and scratched his nose.

"Aye, then," he said. "Say on."

* * *

We found Ian waiting at the small hotel, chatting with a couple of draymen in the street. Seeing us, he took his leave—and a small package, thrust surreptitiously under his coat—and came in with us. It was teatime, and Jamie ordered it to be brought up to our rooms, for the sake of discretion.

We had lashed out, rather, in the matter of accommodations, and had taken a suite of rooms. The tea was now laid out in the parlor, an appetizing array of grilled finnan haddie, Scotch eggs, toast with marmalade, and scones with jam and clotted cream, accompanying an enormous pot of strong black tea. I inhaled the fragrant steam from the table and sighed with pleasure.

"It's going to be rather a wrench, going back to no tea," I observed, pouring out for everyone. "I don't suppose we'll get any in America for another, what—three or four years?"

"Oh, I wouldna say that," Jamie said judiciously. "Depends where we go back to, aye? Ye can get tea fine in places like Philadelphia or Charleston. Ye only need to ken a good smuggler or two, and if Captain Hickman's no been sunk or hanged by the time we go back …"

I put down my cup and stared at him.

"You don't mean you aren't planning to go ho—to go back to the Ridge?" I had a sudden empty feeling in the pit of my stomach, remembering our plans for the New House, the smell of balsam fir, and the quiet of the mountains. Did he really mean to move to Boston or Philadelphia?

"No," he said, surprised. "Of course we shall go back there. But if I mean to be in the printing trade, Sassenach, we shall need to be in a city for a time, no? Only 'til the war is over," he said, encouraging.

"Oh," I said in a small voice. "Yes. Of course." I drank tea, not tasting it. How could I have been so stupid? I had never once thought that, of course, a printing press would be pointless on Fraser's Ridge. In part, I supposed, I simply hadn't really believed he *would* get his press back, let alone thought ahead to the logical conclusion if he did.

But now he had his Bonnie back, and the future had suddenly acquired a disagreeable solidity. Not that cities didn't have considerable advantages, I told myself stoutly. I could finally acquire a decent set of medical instruments, replenish my medicines—why, I could even make penicillin and ether again! With a little better appetite, I took a Scotch egg.

"Speaking of smugglers," Jamie was saying to Ian, "what is it ye have in your coat? A present for one of the ladies at Madame Jeanne's?"

Ian gave his uncle a cold look and removed the small package from his pocket.

"A wee bit o' French lace. For my mam."

"Good lad," Jamie said with approval.

"What a sweet thought, Ian," I said. "Did you—I mean, was Madame Jeanne still *in situ?*"

He nodded, putting the package back into his coat.

“She is. And verra eager to renew her acquaintance wi’ *you*, Uncle,” he added, with a slightly malicious grin. “She asked would ye care to come round this evening for a bit of entertainment.”

Jamie’s nose twitched as he glanced at me.

“Oh, I think not, Ian. I’ll send a note saying we shall wait upon her tomorrow morning at eleven. Though ye’re free to take up her invitation yourself, of course.” It was clear that he was only teasing, but Ian shook his head.

“Nay, I wouldna go wi’ a whore. Not ’til it’s settled between Rachel and me,” he said seriously. “One way or the other. But I shallna take another woman to my bed until she tells me that I must.”

We both looked at him in some surprise across the teacups.

“You *do* mean it, then,” I said. “You feel … er … betrothed to her?”

“Well, of course he does, Sassenach,” Jamie said, reaching for another slice of toast. “He left her his dog.”

* * *

I rose late and leisurely next morning, and as Jamie and Ian were likely to be some time about their business, I dressed and went shopping. Edinburgh being a city of commerce, Jamie had been able to convert our stock of gold—still quite a lot of it left—to bank drafts and cash, as well as to make arrangements for deposition of the cache of letters we had accumulated since Fort Ticonderoga. He had left a fat purse for my use, and I proposed to spend the day shopping, as well as collecting my new spectacles.

It was with these perched proudly on my nose and a bag containing a selection of the best of the herbs and medicines available from Haugh’s Apothecary that I returned to Howard’s hotel at teatime, with a rare appetite.

My appetite received a slight check, though, when the hotel’s majordomo stepped out of his sanctum, wearing a slightly pained expression, and asked if he might have a word, madam?

"We do appreciate the honor of General Fraser's … presence," he said apologetically, conducting me to a small, cramped stairwell leading to the basement. "A great man, and a very fine warrior, and of course we are cognizant of the heroic nature of the … er … the manner of his death. It's only that … well, I hesitate to mention it, madam, but a coal-man this morning mentioned a … *smell.*"

This last word was so discreet that he fairly hissed it into my ear as he ushered me off the stair and into the Howard's coal cellar, where we had made arrangements for the general to repose in dignity until we left for the Highlands. The smell itself was not nearly so discreet, and I snatched a handkerchief from my pocket and clapped it to my nose. There was a small window high up in one wall, from which a dim, smeary light seeped into the basement. Beneath this was a wide chute, under which stood a small mountain of coal.

In solitary dignity, draped with a canvas, the general's coffin stood well apart, lit by a solemn beam from the tiny window. A beam that gleamed from the small puddle beneath the coffin. The general was leaking.

* * *

"And saw the skull beneath the skin," I quoted, tying a turpentine-soaked rag about my head, just under my nose, *"and breastless creatures under ground leaned backward with a lipless grin."*

"Apt," said Andy Bell, giving me a sideways glance. "Your own, is it?"

"No, a gentleman named Eliot," I told him. "As you say, though—apt."

Given the agitation of the hotel staff, I thought I had better take steps without waiting for Jamie and Ian to return, and after a moment's thought, had sent the bootboy on the run to inquire if Mr. Bell might like to come and observe something interesting in the medical line?

"The light's wretched," Bell said, standing on tiptoe to peer down into the coffin.

“I’ve called for a couple of lanterns,” I assured him. “And buckets.” “Aye, buckets,” he agreed, looking thoughtful. “What d’ye think, though, for what ye might call the longer term? It’ll be some days to get him intae the Highlands—maybe weeks, this time o’ year.”

“If we tidy things up a bit, I thought perhaps you would know a discreet blacksmith who might be able to come and patch the lining.” A seam in the lead foil lining the coffin had come apart, probably from the jostling involved in getting it from the ship, but it looked like a fairly simple repair—granted a blacksmith with a strong stomach and a low level of superstition regarding corpses.

“Mmm.” He had taken out a sketching block and was making preliminary drawings, light notwithstanding. He scratched his potatolike nose with the end of his silver pencil, thinking. “Could do that, aye. But there are other ways.”

“Well, we could boil him down to the bones, yes,” I said, a little testily. “Though I hate to think what the hotel would say if I asked for the lend of their laundry cauldrons.”

He laughed at that, to the undisguised horror of the footman who had appeared on the stairway, holding two lanterns.

“Ah, dinna fash yoursel’, sonny,” Andy Bell told him, taking the lanterns. “Naebody here but us ghouls.”

He grinned broadly at the sound of the footman taking the stairs three at a time, but then turned and eyed me speculatively.

“It’s a thought, aye? I could take him back tae my shop. Get him aff your hands, and naebody the wiser, sae heavy as your box there is. Mean to say, like, no one’s going to want to gaze upon the dear departed’s face once ye get him where he’s going, are they?”

I didn’t take offense at the suggestion, but shook my head.

“Putting aside the possibility of one or both of us being taken up as body snatchers, the poor man *is* my husband’s kinsman. And he didn’t want to be here in the first place.”

“Well, nae one does, surely?” Bell said, blinking. “No much help for it, though. *The skull beneath the skin*, as your man Eliot so movingly puts it.”

"I meant Edinburgh, not a coffin," I clarified. Fortunately, my purchases from Haugh's had included a large bottle of denatured alcohol, which I had brought down, discreetly wrapped in a rough apron procured from one of the housemaids. "He wanted to be buried in America."

"Really," Bell murmured. "Quaint notion. Ah, well. Two things I can think of, then. Repair the leak, and fill up the box wi' a gallon or twa o' cheap gin—well, it's cheaper than what ye've got there," he said, seeing my look. "Or … how long can ye stay in Edinburgh, do ye think?"

"We hadn't meant to stay longer than a week—but we might stretch it a day or two," I said cautiously, unbundling the bale of rags the majordomo had given me. "Why?"

He tilted his head back and forth, contemplating the remains by lantern light. An apt word, "remains."

"Maggots," he said succinctly. "They'll do a nice, clean job of it, but they do take time. Still, if we can take most o' the flesh off—hmm. Got a knife of any sort?" he asked.

I nodded, reaching into my pocket. Jamie had, after all, given me the knife because he thought I'd need it.

"Got maggots?" I said.

* * *

I dropped the misshapen ball of lead into a saucer. It clinked and rolled to a stop, and we all looked at it in silence.

"That's what killed him," I said at last. Jamie crossed himself and murmured something in Gaelic, and Ian nodded soberly. "God rest him."

I hadn't eaten much of the excellent tea; the smell of corruption lingered at the back of my throat, in spite of the turpentine and the virtual bath I had taken in alcohol, followed by a real bath in the hotel's tub with soap and water as hot as I could stand.

"So," I said, clearing my throat. "How was Madame Jeanne?"

Jamie looked up from the bullet, his face lightening.

"Oh, verra bonnie," he said, grinning. "She had a good bit to say about the state of things in France. And a certain amount to say about one Percival Beauchamp."

I sat up a little straighter.

"She *knows* him?"

"She does indeed. He calls at her establishment now and then—though not in the way of business. Or rather," he added, with a sidelong glance at Ian, "not in the way of her usual business."

"Smuggling?" I asked. "Or spying?"

"Possibly both, but if it's the latter, she wasna telling me about it. He brings in quite a bit of stuff from France, though. I was thinking that maybe Ian and I would go across, whilst the general's doing whatever he's doing—how long did wee Andy think it would take to make him decent?"

"Anything from three or four days to a week, depending on how, um, active the maggots are." Ian and Jamie both shuddered reflexively. "It's just the same thing that happens underground," I pointed out. "It will happen to all of *us*, eventually."

"Well, aye, it is," Jamie admitted, taking another scone and ladling quantities of cream onto it. "But it's generally done in decent privacy so ye havena got to think about it."

"The general is quite private," I assured him, with a shade of acerbity. "He's covered in a good layer of bran. No one will see a thing, unless they go poking about."

"Well, that's a thought, isn't it?" Ian chipped in, sticking a finger in the jam. "This is Edinburgh. The place has a terrible reputation for body snatching, because of all the doctors wanting them to cut up for study. Had ye best not put a guard on the general, just to be sure he makes it to the Highlands wi' all his pieces?" He stuck the finger in his mouth and raised his brows at me.

"Well, in fact, there *is* a guard," I admitted. "Andy Bell suggested it, for just that reason." I didn't add that Andy had made a bid for the general's body himself—nor that I had told Mr. Bell in no uncertain terms what would happen to him if the general turned up missing.

"Ye said Andy helped ye with the job?" Jamie asked curiously.

"He did. We got on extremely well. In fact …" I hadn't been going to mention the subject of our conversation until Jamie had had a pint or so of whisky, but the moment seemed opportune, so I plumped in.

"I was describing various things to him while we worked—interesting surgeries and medical trivia, you'll know the sort of things."

Ian murmured something under his breath about ghoulies of a feather, but I ignored him.

"Aye, so?" Jamie was looking wary; he knew something was coming but not what it was.

"Well," I said, taking a breath, "the long and the short of it is that he suggested I write a book. A medical book."

Jamie's eyebrows had risen slowly, but he nodded at me to go on.

"A sort of manual for regular people, not for doctors. With principles of proper hygiene and nutrition, and guides to the common sorts of illness, how to make up simple medicines, what to do for wounds and bad teeth—that sort of thing."

The brows were still up, but he kept nodding, finishing the last bite of scone. He swallowed.

"Aye, well, it sounds a good sort of book—and surely ye'd be the person to write it. Did he happen to 'suggest' how much he thought it might cost to have such a thing printed and bound?"

"Ah." I let out the breath I'd been holding. "He'll do three hundred copies, a maximum of a hundred fifty pages, buckram binding, *and* distribute them through his shop, in exchange for the twelve years' rent he owes you for your printing press."

Jamie's eyes bulged and his face went red.

"And he's throwing in the maggots for free. *And* the guard," I added hastily, shoving the port in front of him before he could speak. He seized the glass and downed it in a gulp.

"That wee grasper!" he said, when he could speak. "Ye didna sign anything, did ye?" he asked anxiously. I shook my head.

"I did tell him I thought you'd maybe want to bargain with him," I offered meekly.

"Oh." His color began to recede toward normal levels.

"I do want to," I said, looking down at my hands, clasped together in my lap.

"Ye'd never said anything about wanting to write a book before, Auntie," Ian said, curious.

"Well, I hadn't really thought about it," I said defensively. "And it would have been terribly difficult and expensive to do while we were living on the Ridge."

Jamie muttered, "Expensive," and poured another glass of port, which he drank more slowly, making occasional faces at the taste as he thought.

"Ye really want this, Sassenach?" he said at last, and at my nod, set down the glass with a sigh.

"All right," he said with resignation. "But ye're having a leather-bound special edition, too, wi' gilded end pages. And five hundred copies. I mean, ye'll want some to take back to America, won't you?" he added, seeing my stunned look.

"Oh. Yes. I would like that."

"Well, then." He picked up the bell and rang for the maid. "Tell the young woman to take away this wretched stuff and bring some decent whisky. We'll toast your book. And then I'll go and speak to the wicked wee man."

* * *

I had a fresh quire of good-quality paper. I had half a dozen sturdy goose quills, a silver penknife with which to sharpen them, and an inkwell provided by the hotel—rather battered but filled, the majordomo had assured me, with the very best iron-gall ink. Jamie and Ian had gone to France for a week, to look into various interesting leads given them by Madame Jeanne, leaving me to mind the general and commence my book. I had all the time and leisure I required.

I took a sheet of paper, pristine and creamy, placed it just so, and dipped my quill, excitement thrumming in my fingers.

I closed my eyes in reflex, then opened them again. Where ought I to begin?

Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end: then stop. The line from *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* drifted through my mind, and I smiled. Good advice, I supposed—but only if you happened to know where the beginning was, and I didn't quite.

I twiddled the quill a bit, thinking.

Perhaps I should have an outline? That seemed sensible—and a little less daunting than starting straight in to write. I lowered the quill and held it poised above the paper for a moment, then picked it up again. An outline would have a beginning, too, wouldn't it?

The ink was beginning to dry on the point. Rather crossly, I wiped it and was just about to dip it again, when the maid scratched discreetly at the door.

"Mrs. Fraser? There's a gentleman downstairs, askin' to see ye," she said. From her air of respect, I supposed it couldn't be Andy Bell. Besides, she likely would have said so if it was; everyone in Edinburgh knew Andy Bell.

"I'll come down," I said, rising. Perhaps my subconscious would come to some kind of conclusion regarding beginnings while I dealt with this gentleman, whomever he was.

Whomever he was, he *was* a gentleman, I saw that at once. He was also Percival Beauchamp.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said, his face lighting with a smile as he turned at the sound of my step. "Your servant, *madame*."

"Mr. Beauchamp," I said, allowing him to take my hand and raise it to his lips. An elegant person of the time would doubtless have said something like, *"I fear you take me at a disadvantage, sir,"* with anything between haughtiness and flirtation. Not being an elegant person of the time, I merely said, "What are *you* doing here?"

Mr. Beauchamp, on the other hand, had any amount of elegance.

"Looking for you, dear lady," he replied, and gave my hand a slight squeeze before releasing it. I repressed a reflexive urge to wipe it on my dress and nodded toward a pair of armchairs arranged by the window.

"Not that I'm not flattered," I said, arranging my skirts. "But don't you want my husband? Oh!" I said, another thought occurring. "Or did you want to consult me medically?"

His lips twitched as though he thought this an amusing notion, but he shook his head respectfully. “Your husband is in France—or so Jeanne LeGrand tells me. I came to speak to you.”

“Why?”

He lifted his smooth dark brows at that but didn’t answer at once, instead lifting a finger in a gesture to the hotel clerk to summon refreshment. I didn’t know if he was merely being polite or wanted the time to formulate his address, now that he’d seen me again. In any case, he took his time.

“I have a proposition for your husband, *madame*. I would have spoken with him,” he said, forestalling my question, “but he had left for France already when I learned he was in Edinburgh, and I, alas, must leave myself before he will return. I thought it better to speak directly with you, though, rather than to explain myself in a letter. There are things it’s wiser not to commit to writing, you know,” he added, with a sudden smile that made him very appealing.

“All right,” I said, settling myself. “Say on.”

* * *

I lifted the glass of brandy and took a sip, then raised it and looked critically through it.

“No, it’s just brandy,” I said. “Not opium.”

“I beg your pardon?” He looked involuntarily into his own glass, just in case, and I laughed.

“I mean,” I clarified, “that good as it is, it’s not nearly good enough to make me believe a story like that.”

He didn’t take offense but tilted his head to one side.

“Can you think of any reason why I should invent such a tale?”

“No,” I admitted, “but that doesn’t mean there isn’t one, does it?”

“What I have told you is not impossible, is it?”

I considered that one for a moment.

“Not *technically* impossible,” I conceded. “But certainly implausible.”

“Have you ever seen an ostrich?” he asked, and, without inquiring, poured more brandy into my glass.

"Yes. Why?"

"You must admit that ostriches are frankly implausible," he said. "But clearly not impossible."

"One to you," I conceded. "But I do think that Fergus being the lost heir to the Comte St. Germain's fortune is slightly more implausible than an ostrich. Particularly if you consider the part about the marriage license. I mean … a lost *legitimate* heir? It is France we're talking about, isn't it?"

He laughed at that. His face had flushed with brandy and amusement, and I could see how very attractive he must have been in his youth. He wasn't by any means bad-looking now, come to that.

"Do you mind my asking what you do for a living?" I asked curiously.

He was disconcerted by that and rubbed a hand over his jaw before answering, but met my eyes.

"I sleep with rich women," he said, and his voice held a faint but disturbing trace of bitterness.

"Well, I do hope you aren't regarding me in the light of a business opportunity. The gold-rimmed spectacles notwithstanding, I really haven't got any money."

He smiled and hid it in his brandy glass.

"No, but you would be a great deal more entertaining than the usual woman who does."

"I'm flattered," I said politely. We sipped brandy in silence for a bit, both thinking how to proceed. It was raining—naturally—and the patter of it on the street outside and the hiss of the fire beside us was soothing in the extreme. I felt oddly comfortable with him, but after all, I couldn't spend all day here; I had a book to write.

"All right," I said. "*Why* have you told me this story? Wait—there are two parts to that. One, why tell me rather than Fergus himself? And two, what is your personal interest in the situation, assuming it *is* true?"

"I did try to tell Mr. Fraser—Fergus Fraser, that is," he said slowly. "He declined to speak with me."

“Oh!” I said, recalling something. “Was it you who tried to abduct him, in North Carolina?”

“No, it wasn’t,” he said promptly, and with every evidence of sincerity. “I did hear about the occasion, but I don’t know who his assailant was. More than likely, it was someone he had annoyed with his work.” He shrugged that off and continued. “As for my personal interest … that runs along with the reason for my telling your husband—because I’m telling *you* only as your husband is unavailable.”

“And that would be?”

He glanced quickly round to see that we were not overheard. No one was near us, but he still lowered his voice.

“I—and the interests I represent in France—wish the rebellion in America to succeed.”

I didn’t know what I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t that, and I gawked at him.

“You expect me to believe you’re an American patriot?”

“Not at all,” he said. “I don’t care about politics in the slightest. I’m a man of business.” He eyed me assessingly. “Have you ever heard of a company called *Hortalez et Cie*?”

“No.”

“It is ostensibly an importing and exporting business, run out of Spain. What it actually is is a facade for the purpose of funneling money to the Americans, without visibly involving the French government. We have so far moved many thousands through it, mostly to buy arms and ammunition. *Madame* LeGrand mentioned the company to your husband but without telling him what it was. She left it to me to decide whether to reveal the true nature of *Hortalez* to him.”

“You’re a French intelligence agent—is that what you’re telling me?” I said, the penny dropping at last.

He bowed.

“But you aren’t French, I don’t think,” I added, looking hard at him. “You’re English.”

“I was.” He looked away. “I am a citizen of France now.”

He fell silent, and I leaned back a little in my chair, watching him—and wondering. Wondering both how much of this was true and, in a more distant way, whether he might conceivably be an ancestor of mine. Beauchamp was not an uncommon name, and there was no great physical resemblance between us. His hands were long-fingered and graceful, like mine, but the fingers were shaped differently. The ears? His were somewhat large, though delicately shaped. I really had no idea what my own ears looked like, but assumed that if they were noticeably large, Jamie would have mentioned it at some point.

"What is it that you want?" I asked quietly at last, and he looked up.

"Tell your husband what I have told you, if you please, *madame,"* he said, quite serious for once. "And suggest to him that it is not only in the best interests of his foster son to pursue this matter—but very much in the interests of America."

"How is that?"

He lifted one shoulder, slim and elegant.

"The Comte St. Germain had extensive land holdings in a part of America that is currently held by Great Britain. The French part of his estate—currently being squabbled over by a number of claimants—is extremely valuable. If Fergus Fraser can be proved to be Claudel Rakoczy—Rakoczy is the family name, you understand—and the heir to this fortune, he would be able to use it to help in financing the revolution. From what I know of him and his activities—and I know a good deal, by this time—I think he would be amenable to these aims. If the revolution is successful, then those who backed it would have substantial influence over whatever government is formed."

"And you could stop sleeping with rich women for money?"

A wry smile spread over his face.

"Precisely." He rose and bowed deeply to me. "A great pleasure to speak with you, *madame*."

He had almost reached the door when I called after him.

"Monsieur Beauchamp!"

“Yes?” He turned and looked back, a dark, slender man whose face was marked with humor—and with pain, I thought.

“Have you any children?”

He looked completely startled at that.

“I really don’t think so.”

“Oh,” I said. “I only wondered. Good day to you, sir.”

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SIC TRANSIT GLORIA MUNDI

The Scottish Highlands

It was a long walk from the farmhouse at Balnain. As it was early January in Scotland, it was also wet and cold. Very wet. And *very* cold. No snow—and I rather wished there had been, as it might have discouraged Hugh Fraser's insane notion—but it had been raining for days, in that dismal way that makes hearths smoke, and even clothes that have not been outside grow damp, and drives the chill so far into your bones that you think you'll never be warm again.

I'd come to this conviction myself some hours ago, but the only alternative to continuing to slog through the rain and mud was to lie down and die, and I hadn't quite reached that extremity. Yet.

The creaking of the wheels stopped abruptly, with that slushing sound that indicated they had sunk once more in the mud. Under his breath, Jamie said something grossly inappropriate to a funeral, and Ian smothered a laugh with a cough—which became real and went hoarsely on and on, sounding like the bark of a large, tired dog.

I took the flask of whisky out from under my cloak—I didn't think something with that kind of alcohol content would freeze, but I wasn't taking any chances—and handed it to Ian. He gulped, wheezed as though he'd been hit by a truck, coughed some more, and then handed the flask back, breathing hard, and nodded thanks. His nose was red and running.

So were all the noses around me. Some of them possibly from grief, though I suspected that either the weather or the catarrh was responsible for most of them. The men had all gathered without comment—they'd had practice—around the coffin and, with concerted heaving, managed to get it out of the ruts and onto a firmer section of road, this covered mostly in rocks.

"How long do you think it's been since Simon Fraser last came home?" I whispered to Jamie, as he came back to take his place beside me toward the end of the funeral procession. He shrugged and wiped his nose with a soggy handkerchief.

"Years. He wouldna really have had cause, would he?"

I supposed not. As a result of the wake held the night before at the farmhouse—a place a little smaller than Lallybroch but constructed on much the same lines—I now knew a great deal more about Simon Fraser's military career and exploits than I had before, but the eulogy hadn't included a timetable. If he'd fought everywhere they said he had, though, he would hardly have had time to change his socks between campaigns, let alone come home to Scotland. And the estate wasn't his, after all; he was the second youngest of nine children. His wife, the tiny *bainisq* trudging at the head of the procession on her brother-in-law Hugh's arm, had no household of her own, I gathered, and lived with Hugh's family, she having no children alive—or nearby, at least—to care for her.

I did wonder whether she was pleased that we'd brought him home. Would it not have been better just to know that he'd died abroad, doing his duty and doing it well, than to be presented with the dismayingly pitiful detritus of her husband, no matter how professionally packaged?

But she had seemed, if not happy, at least somewhat gratified at being the center of such a fuss. Her crumpled face had flushed and seemed to unfold a little during the festivities of the night, and now she walked on with no sign of flagging, doggedly stepping over the ruts made by her husband's coffin.

It was Hugh's fault. Simon's much elder brother and the owner of Balnain, he was a spindly little old man, barely taller than his widowed sister-in-law, and with romantic notions. It was his pronouncement that, instead of planting Simon decently in the family burying ground, the family's most gallant warrior should be interred in a place more suited to his honor and the reverence due him.

Bainisq, pronounced "bann-eeshg," meant a little old lady; was a little old man merely an "eeshg"? I wondered, looking at Hugh's back. I thought I wouldn't ask until we were back at the house—assuming we made it there by nightfall.

At long last, Corrimony hove into sight. According to Jamie, the name meant "a hollow in the moor," and it was. Within the cup-shaped hollow in the grass and heather rose a low dome; as we grew closer, I saw that it was made from thousands and thousands of small river rocks, most the size of a fist, some the size of a person's head. And around this dark gray rain-slicked cairn was a circle of standing stones.

I clutched Jamie's arm by reflex. He glanced at me in surprise, then realized what I was looking at and frowned.

"D'ye hear anything, Sassenach?" he murmured.

"Only the wind." This had been moaning along with the funeral procession, mostly drowning out the old man chanting the *coronach* before the coffin, but as we came out onto the open moor, it picked up speed and rose several tones in pitch, sending cloaks and coats and skirts flapping like ravens' wings.

I kept a cautious eye on the stones but sensed nothing as we drew to a halt before the cairn. It was a passage tomb, of the general kind they called a *clava* cairn; I had no notion what that signified, but Uncle Lamb had had photographs of many such sites. The passage was meant to orient with some astronomical object on some significant date. I glanced up at the leaden, weeping sky and decided that today was probably not the day, anyway.

"We dinna ken who was buried there," Hugh had explained to us the day before. "But clearly a great chieftain of some sort. Must ha' been, the terrible trouble it is to build a cairn like that!"

"Aye, to be sure," Jamie had said, adding delicately. "The great chieftain: he's no buried there anymore?"

"Oh, no," Hugh assured us. "The earth took him, long since. There's no but a wee stain of his bones there now. And ye needna be worrit about there being a curse upon the place, either."

"Oh, good," I murmured, but he paid no attention.

"Some lang nebbit opened the tomb a hundred years ago or more, so if there *was to* be a curse on it, it surely went off attached to him."

This was comforting, and in fact none of the people now standing about the cairn seemed at all put off or bothered by its proximity. Though it might just be that they had lived near it for so long that it had become no more than a feature of the landscape.

There was a certain amount of practical discussion, the men looking at the cairn and shaking their heads dubiously, gesturing in turn toward the open passage that led to the burial chamber, then toward the top of the cairn, where the stones had either been removed or had simply fallen in and been cleared away below. The women gravitated closer together, waiting. We had arrived in a fog of fatigue the day before, and while I had been introduced to all of them, I had trouble keeping the proper name attached to the proper face. In truth, their faces all looked similar—thin, worn, and pale, with a sense of chronic exhaustion about them, a tiredness much deeper than waking the dead would account for.

I had a sudden recollection of Mrs. Bug's funeral. Makeshift and hasty—and yet carried out with dignity and genuine sorrow on the part of the mourners. I thought these people had barely known Simon Fraser.

How much better to have regarded his own last wish as stated and left him on the battlefield with his fallen comrades, I thought. But whoever said funerals were for the benefit of the living had had the right of it.

The sense of failure and futility that had followed the defeat at Saratoga had made his own officers determined to accomplish *something,* to make a proper gesture toward a man they had loved and a warrior they honored. Perhaps they had wanted to send him home, too, because of their desire for their own homes.

The same sense of failure—plus a deadly streak of romanticism—had doubtless made General Burgoyne insist upon the gesture; I thought he likely felt his own honor required it. And then Hugh Fraser, reduced to a hand-to-mouth existence in the wake of Culloden and faced with the unexpected homecoming of his younger brother, unable to produce much in the way of a funeral, but deeply romantic himself … and the end of it this strange procession, bringing Simon Fraser to a home no longer his and a wife who was a stranger to him.

And his place will know him no more. The line came to mind as the men made their decision and began to dismount the coffin from its wheels. I had drawn closer, along with the other women, and found I was now standing within a foot or two of one of the standing stones that ringed the cairn. These were smaller than the stones on Craigh na Dun—no more than two or three feet high. Moved by sudden impulse, I reached out and touched it.

I hadn't expected anything to happen, and it very luckily didn't. Though had I suddenly vanished in the midst of the burial, it would have substantially enlivened the event.

No buzzing, no screaming, no sensation at all. It was just a rock. After all, I thought, there was no reason why *all* standing stones should be assumed to mark time portals. Presumably the ancient builders had used stones to mark any place of significance—and surely a cairn like this one must have been significant. I wondered what sort of man—or woman, perhaps?—had lain here, leaving no more than an echo of their bones, so much more fragile than the enduring rocks that sheltered them.

The coffin was lowered to the ground and—with much grunting and puffing—shoved through the passage into the burial chamber in the center of the tomb. There was a large flat slab of stone that lay against the cairn, this incised with strange cup-shaped marks, presumably made by the original builders. Four of the stronger men took hold of this and maneuvered it slowly over the top of the cairn, sealing the hole above the chamber.

It fell with a muffled thud that sent a few small rocks rolling down the sides of the cairn. The men came down then, and we all stood rather awkwardly round it, wondering what to do next.

There was no priest here. The funeral Mass for Simon had been said earlier, in a small, bare stone church, before the procession to this thoroughly pagan burial. Evidently, Hugh's researches hadn't discovered anything regarding rites for such things.

Just when it seemed that we would be obliged simply to turn round and slog our way back to the farmhouse, Ian coughed explosively and stepped forward.

The funeral procession was drab in the extreme, none of the bright tartans that had graced Highland ceremonies in the past. Even Jamie's appearance was subdued, cloaked, and his hair covered with a black slouch hat. The sole exception to the general somberness was Ian.

He had provoked stares when he'd come downstairs this morning, and the staring hadn't stopped. With good reason. He'd shaved most of his head and greased the remaining strip of hair into a stiff ridge down the middle of his scalp, to which he had attached a dangling ornament of turkey feathers with a pierced silver sixpence. He *was* wearing a cloak, but under it had put on his worn buckskins, with the blue-and-white wampum armlet his wife, Emily, had made for him.

Jamie had looked him slowly up and down when he appeared and nodded, one corner of his mouth turning up.

"It willna make a difference, aye?" he'd said quietly to Ian as we headed for the door. "They'll still ken ye for who ye are."

"Will they?" Ian had said, but then ducked out into the downpour without waiting for an answer.

Jamie had undoubtedly been right; the Indian finery was a dress rehearsal in preparation for his arrival at Lallybroch, for we were bound there directly, once Simon's body was decently disposed of and the farewell whisky had been drunk.

It had its uses now, though. Ian slowly removed his cloak and handed it to Jamie, then walked to the entrance of the passage and turned to face the mourners—who watched this apparition, bug-eyed. He spread his hands, palms upward, closed his eyes, put back his head so the rain ran down his face, and began to chant something in Mohawk. He was no singer, and his voice was so hoarse from his cold that many words broke or disappeared, but I caught Simon's name in the beginning. The general's death song. It didn't go on for long, but when he dropped his hands, the congregation uttered a deep, collective sigh.

Ian walked away, not looking back, and without a word the mourners followed. It was finished.

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BY THE WIND GRIEVED

The weather continued to be terrible, with fitful gusts of snow now added to the rain, and Hugh pressed us to stay, at least for another few days, until the sky should clear.

“It might well be Michaelmas before that happens,” Jamie said to him, smiling. “Nay, cousin, we’ll be off.”

And so we were, bundled in all the clothes we possessed. It took more than two days to reach Lallybroch, and we were obliged to shelter overnight in an abandoned croft, putting the horses in the cow byre next to us. There was no furniture nor peat for the hearth, and half the roof had gone, but the stone walls broke the wind.

“I miss my dog,” Ian grumbled, huddling under his cloak and pulling a blanket over his goose-pimpled head.

“Would he sit on your heid?” Jamie inquired, taking a firmer hold on me as the wind roared past our shelter and threatened to rip away the rest of the threadbare thatch overhead. “Ye should have thought about it being January, before ye shaved your scalp.”

“Well enough for you,” Ian replied, peering balefully out from under his blanket. “Ye’ve got Auntie Claire to keep warm with.”

“Well, ye might get a wife yourself one of these days. Is Rollo going to sleep with the both of ye when ye do?” Jamie inquired.

“Mmphm,” Ian said, and pulled the blanket down over his face, shivering.

I shivered, too, in spite of Jamie’s warmth, our combined cloaks, three woolen petticoats, and two pairs of stockings. I had been in a number of cold places in my life, but there’s something remarkably *penetrating* about the Scottish cold. In spite of my longing for a warm fire and the remembered coziness of Lallybroch, though, I was almost as uneasy about our approaching homecoming as Ian was—and Ian had been growing more like a cat on hot bricks, the farther we got into the Highlands. He twitched and muttered to himself now, thrashing in his blankets in the darkened confines of the shed.

I had wondered when we landed in Edinburgh whether we ought to send word of our arrival to Lallybroch. When I'd suggested this, though, Jamie laughed.

"D'ye think we stand the slightest chance of getting within ten miles o' the place without everyone hearing of it? Never fear, Sassenach," he'd assured me. "The minute we set foot in the Highlands, everyone from Loch Lomond to Inverness will know that Jamie Fraser's comin' home with his English witch, and a red Indian with him, to boot."

"English witch?" I said, not sure whether to be entertained or offended. "Did they call me that? When we were at Lallybroch?"

"Frequently to your face, Sassenach," he said dryly. "But ye didna have enough Gaelic then to know it. They didna mean it as an insult, *a nighean,"* he added more gently. "Nor will they now. It's only that Highlanders call a thing as they see it."

"Hmm," I said, a trifle taken back.

"They'll no be wrong, now, will they?" he'd asked, grinning.

"Are you implying that I *look* like a witch?"

"Well, not sae much just this minute," he said, narrowing one eye judiciously. "First thing in the morning, maybe—aye, that's a more fearsome prospect."

I hadn't a looking glass, not having thought to acquire one in Edinburgh. I did still have a comb, though, and snuggling now with my head beneath Jamie's chin, resolved to stop some way short of Lallybroch and employ it thoroughly, rain or no rain. Not, I thought, that it would likely make much difference whether I arrived looking like the Queen of England or like a dandelion gone to seed. It was Ian's homecoming that was important.

On the other hand … I wasn't sure quite what my own welcome might be. There was unfinished business, to put it mildly, between myself and Jenny Murray.

We had been good friends once. I hoped we might be again. But she had been the chief engineer of Jamie's marriage to Laoghaire MacKenzie. From the best of motives, no doubt; she'd worried for him, lonely and rootless on his return from captivity in England. And in all justice, she'd thought me dead.

What had she thought, I wondered, when I'd suddenly appeared again? That I had abandoned Jamie before Culloden and then had second thoughts? There hadn't been time for explanations and rapprochement—and there *had* been that very awkward moment when Laoghaire, summoned by Jenny, had showed up at Lallybroch, accompanied by her daughters, taking Jamie and me very much by surprise.

A bubble of laughter rose in my chest at thought of that encounter, though I certainly hadn't laughed at the time. Well, perhaps there would be time to talk now, once Jenny and Ian had recovered from the shock of their youngest son's homecoming.

I became aware, from subtle shiftings behind me, that while the horses were breathing heavily and peacefully in their byre and Ian had finally subsided into phlegm-rattling snores, I wasn't the only one still lying awake thinking of what might await us.

"You aren't asleep, either, are you?" I whispered to Jamie.

"No," he said softly, and shifted his weight again, gathering me more closely against him. "Thinking about the last time I came home. I had such fear—and a verra wee bit of hope. I imagine it's maybe like that for the lad now."

"And for you now?" I asked, folding my own hands over the arm that encircled me, feeling the solid, graceful bones of wrist and forearm, gently touching his maimed right hand. He sighed deeply.

"Dinna ken," he said. "But it'll be all right. You're with me, this time."

* * *

The wind dropped sometime in the night, and the day, by some miracle, dawned clear and bright. Still cold as a polar bear's bottom, but not raining. I thought that a good omen.

Nobody spoke as we cleared the last high pass that led to Lallybroch and saw the house below. I felt a loosening in my chest and only then realized how long I'd been holding my breath.

"It hasn't changed, has it?" I said, my breath white on the cold air.

"There's a new roof on the dovecote," Ian said. "And Mam's sheep pen is bigger." He was doing his best to sound nonchalant, but there was no mistaking the eagerness in his voice. He nudged his horse and pulled a little in front of us, the turkey feathers in his hair lifting on the breeze.

It was early afternoon, and the place was quiet; the morning chores had been done, the evening milking and supper-making not yet started. I didn't see anyone outside save a couple of big, shaggy Highland cattle munching hay in the near pasture, but the chimneys were smoking and the big white-harled farmhouse had its usual hospitable, settled air.

Would Bree and Roger ever go back here? I wondered suddenly. She'd mentioned it, when the notion of their leaving became fact and they had begun to plan.

"It's vacant," she'd said, eyes fixed on the twentieth-century-style shirt she was making. "For sale. Or it was, when Roger went there a few years—ago?" She looked up with a wry smile; it wasn't really possible to discuss time in any customary way. "I'd like the kids to live there, maybe. But we'll just have to see how … things work out."

She'd glanced then at Mandy, asleep in her cradle, faintly blue around the lips.

"It will work out fine," I'd said firmly. "Everything will be just fine."

Lord, I prayed now silently, *that they might be safe!*

Ian had swung off his horse and was waiting impatiently for us. As we dismounted, he headed for the door, but our arrival had been noted, and it swung wide before he could touch it.

Jenny stopped dead in the doorway. She blinked, once, and her head tilted slowly back as her eyes traveled up the long, buckskin-covered body, with its roped muscles and small scars, to the crested, feathered head with its tattooed face, so carefully expressionless—save for the eyes, whose hope and fear he could not hide, Mohawk or no.

Jenny's mouth twitched. Once … twice … then her face broke and she began to utter small, hysterical whoops that turned into unmistakable laughter. She gulped, whooped again, and laughed so hard that she staggered backward into the house and had to sit down on the bench in the hall, where she bent double with her arms wrapped round her middle and laughed until the sound gave out and her breath came in faint, wheezing gasps.

"Ian," she said at last, shaking her head. "Oh, God, Ian. My wee lad."

Ian looked entirely taken aback. He looked at Jamie, who shrugged, his own mouth twitching, then back at his mother.

She gulped for air, her chest heaving, then stood up, went to him, and wrapped her arms about him, her tear-streaked face pressed to his side. His arms went slowly, carefully around her, and he held her to him like something fragile, of immense value.

"Ian," she said again, and I saw her small, taut shoulders suddenly slump. "Oh, Ian. Thank God ye've come in time."

* * *

She was smaller than I had remembered, and thinner, her hair with a little more gray in it though still darkly vibrant—but the deep-blue cat-eyes were just the same, as was the natural air of command she shared with her brother.

"Leave the horses," she said briskly, wiping her eyes on the corner of her apron. "I'll have one o' the lads take care of them. Ye'll be frozen and starving—take off your things and come into the parlor." She glanced at me, with a brief look of curiosity and something else that I couldn't interpret—but didn't meet my eyes directly or say more than "Come," as she led the way to the parlor.

The house smelled familiar but strange, steeped in peat smoke and the scent of cooking; someone had just baked bread, and the yeasty smell floated down the hall from the kitchen. The hall itself was nearly as cold as the outdoors; all the rooms had their doors closed tight to keep in the heat from their fires, and a welcome wave of warmth eddied out when she opened the door to the parlor, turning to pull Ian in first.

"Ian," she said, in a tone I'd never heard her use before. "Ian, they've come. Your son's come home."

Ian the elder was sitting in a large armchair close to the fire, a warm rug over his legs. He struggled to his feet at once, a little unsteady on the wooden peg he wore in replacement of a leg lost in battle, and took a few steps toward us.

"Ian," Jamie said, his voice soft with shock. "God, Ian."

"Oh, aye," Ian said, his own voice wry. "Dinna fash; it's still me."

Phthisis, they called it. Or doctors did. It meant "wasting," in the Greek. Laymen called it by the blunter name "consumption," and the reason why was all too apparent. It consumed its victims, ate them alive. A wasting disease, and waste it did. Ate flesh and squandered life, profligate and cannibal.

I'd seen it many times in England of the thirties and forties, much more here in the past. But I'd never seen it carve the living flesh from the bones of someone I loved, and my heart went to water and drained from my chest.

Ian had always been whipcord thin, even in times of plenty. Sinewy and tough, his bones always near the surface of his skin, just as Young Ian's were. Now …

"I may cough, but I won't break," he assured Jamie, and, stepping forward, put his arms round Jamie's neck. Jamie enfolded him very gently, the gingerness of the embrace growing firmer as he found that Ian didn't break—and closed his eyes to keep the tears in check. His arms tightened, trying involuntarily to keep Ian from the abyss that all too plainly yawned at his feet.

I can count all my bones. The Biblical quote came unbidden to my mind. I quite literally *could;* the cloth of his shirt lay over ribs that showed so clearly that I could see the articulations where each one joined the protruding knobs of his backbone.

"How long?" I blurted, turning to Jenny, who was watching the men, her own eyes bright with unshed tears. "How long has he had it?"

She blinked once and swallowed.

"Years," she said, steadily enough. "He came back from the Tolbooth in Edinburgh with the cough, and it never left. It's got worse over the last year, though."

I nodded. A chronic case, then; that was something. The acute form—"galloping consumption," they called it—would have taken him in months.

She gave me back the question I had asked her, but with a different meaning.

"How long?" she said, so softly that I barely heard her.

"I don't know," I said, with equal softness. "But … not long."

She nodded; she had known this for a long time.

"Just as well ye came in time, then," she said, matter-of-fact.

Young Ian's eyes had been fixed on his father from the moment we entered the room. The shock showed plainly on his face, but he kept himself in hand.

"Da," he said, and his voice was so hoarse that the word emerged in a strangled croak. He cleared it viciously and repeated, "Da," coming forward. The elder Ian looked at his son, and his face lit with a joy so profound that it eclipsed the marks of illness and suffering.

"Oh, Ian," he said, holding out his arms. "My wee lad!"

* * *

It was the Highlands. And it was Ian and Jenny. Which meant that matters that might have been avoided out of confusion or delicacy were instead addressed forthrightly.

"I may die tomorrow, or not for a year," Ian said frankly, over jam bread and tea, hastily magicked out of the kitchen to sustain the weary travelers until supper should be ready. "I'm betting on three months, myself. Five to two, if anyone fancies a wager. Though I dinna ken how I'll collect my winnings." He grinned, the old Ian showing suddenly through his death's-head face.

There was a murmur of something not quite laughter among the adults. There were a great many people crammed into the parlor, for the announcement that had brought forth bread and jam had also caused every inhabitant of Lallybroch to come boiling out of its rooms and recesses, thundering down the stairs in their anxiety to greet and reclaim their prodigal. Young Ian had nearly been knocked flat and trampled by his family's affection, and this, coming on the heels of the shock of seeing his father, had stunned him into muteness, though he kept smiling, quite helpless in the face of a thousand questions and exclamations.

Jenny had rescued him at last from the maelstrom, taking him by the hand and pushing him firmly into the parlor with the elder Ian, then popping back out herself to quell the riot with a flashing eye and a firm word before ushering the rest of them in an orderly fashion.

Young Jamie—Ian and Jenny's eldest, and Jamie's namesake—now lived at Lallybroch with his wife and children, as did his sister, Maggie, and her two children, her husband being a soldier. Young Jamie was out on the estate, but the women came to sit with me. All of the children were clustered round Young Ian, staring and asking so many questions that they collided with one another, and pushed and shoved, arguing as to who asked what and who should be answered first.

The children had paid no attention to the elder Ian's remark. They already knew Grandda was dying, and the fact was of no interest by comparison with the fact of their fascinating new uncle. A tiny girl with her hair in stubby plaits sat in Young Ian's lap, tracing the lines of his tattoos with her fingers, now and then sticking one inadvertently in his mouth as he smiled and made hesitant answers to his inquisitive nieces and nephews.

"Ye could have written," Jamie said to Jenny, with an edge of reproach in his voice.

"I did," she said, with her own edge. "A year ago, when his flesh began to melt away and we kent it was more than a cough. I asked ye to send Young Ian then, if ye could."

"Ah," Jamie said, discomfited. "We must ha' left the Ridge before it came. But did I not write last April, to tell ye we were coming? I sent the letter from New Bern."

"If ye did, I never got it. Nay wonder, with the blockade; we see no more than half what we used to that's sent from America. And if ye left last March, it's been a long voyage, no?"

"A bit longer than I expected, aye," Jamie said dryly. "Things happened along the way."

"So I see." Without the least hesitation, she picked up his right hand and examined the scar and the close-set fingers with interest. She glanced at me, one eyebrow quirked, and I nodded.

"It—he was wounded, at Saratoga," I said, feeling oddly defensive. "I had to."

"It's a good job," she said, gently flexing his fingers. "Does it pain ye much, Jamie?"

"It aches in the cold. Nay bother otherwise, though."

"Whisky!" she exclaimed, sitting bolt upright. "Here ye are, frozen to the bone, and I've not thought—Robbie! Run and fetch down the special bottle from the shelf above the coppers." A gangling boy who had been hovering on the edge of the crowd round Young Ian gave his grandmother a reluctant glance, but then, catching the depth charge of her eye, shot out of the room to do her bidding.

The room was more than warm; with a peat fire simmering on the hearth and so many people talking, laughing, and exuding body heat, it was on the verge of tropical. But there was a deep chill around my heart whenever I looked at Ian.

He lay back in his chair now, still smiling. But exhaustion was evident in the slump of his bony shoulders, the droop of his eyelids, the clear effort it took to keep smiling.

I looked away and found Jenny looking at me. She glanced away at once, but I had seen speculation in her eyes, and doubt. Yes, we'd have to talk.

* * *

They slept warm that first night, tired to the point of collapse, close together and enfolded by Lallybroch. But Jamie heard the wind on the edge of waking. It had come back in the night, a cold moan around the eaves of the house.

He sat up in bed in the dark, hands wrapped around his knees, listening. The storm would be coming; he could hear snow in the wind.

Claire lay beside him, half curled in sleep, her hair a dark smudge across the white pillow. He listened to her breathe, thanking God for the sound, feeling guilt at the soft, unhindered flow of it. He'd been hearing Ian's cough all evening and gone to sleep with the sound of that labored breathing in his mind, if not his ears.

He'd managed from sheer exhaustion to put aside the matter of Ian's illness, but it was there with the waking, heavy as a stone in his chest.

Claire shifted in her sleep, turning half onto her back, and desire for her welled up in him like water. He hesitated, aching for Ian, guilty for what Ian had already lost and he still had, reluctant to wake her.

"I feel maybe like you did," he whispered to her, too low to wake her. "When ye came through the stones. Like the world is still there—but it's no the world ye had."

He'd swear she hadn't wakened, but a hand came out from the sheets, groping, and he took it. She sighed, long and sleep-laden, and pulled him down beside her. Took him in her arms and cradled him, warm on her soft breasts.

"You're the world I have," she murmured, and then her breathing changed, and she took him down with her into safety.

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MEMORARAE

They'd been eating breakfast in the kitchen, just the two Ians, for his father had waked coughing before dawn and fallen back into such a deep sleep afterward that his mother hadn't wanted to waken him, and he himself had been hunting over the hills with his brother and nephews all night. They had stopped on the way back at Kitty's house, and Young Jamie had declared they would stay to eat and sleep a bit, but Ian had been restless, wanting to come home, though he couldn't have said why.

Perhaps for this, he thought, watching his father shake salt over his porridge in the same way he'd seen him do it for fifteen years, before he'd left Scotland. He'd never once thought of it, in all his time away, but now that he saw it again, it was as though he'd never left, as though he'd spent every morning of his life here at this table, watching his father eat porridge.

He was possessed of a sudden desire to memorize this moment, to know and to sense every last thing about it, from the worn-smooth wood under his elbows to the stained granite of the countertop and the way the light fell through the tattered curtains at the window, lighting the bulge of muscle at the corner of his father's jaw as he chewed a bit of sausage.

The elder Ian glanced up suddenly, as though feeling his son's eyes on him.

"Shall we go out on the moor?" he said. "I've a fancy to see if the red deer are calving yet."

He was surprised at his father's strength. They walked for several miles, talking of nothing—and everything. He knew it was so they could grow easy with each other again and say the things that had to be said—but he dreaded the saying.

They stopped at last far up on a high stretch of moorland, where they could see the roll of the great smooth mountains and a few wee lochs, glittering like fish under a pale high sun. They found a saint's spring, a tiny pool with an ancient stone cross, and drank from the water, saying the prayer of respect for the saint, and then sat down to rest a little way beyond.

"It was a place like this where I died the first time," his father said casually, running a wet hand over his sweating face. He looked rosy and healthy, though so thin. That bothered Young Ian, knowing he was dying yet seeing him like this.

"Aye?" he said. "When was that, then?"

"Oh, in France. When I lost my leg." The elder Ian glanced down at his wooden peg, indifferent. "One minute I was standing up to fire my musket, and the next I was lyin' on my back. I didna even ken I'd been hit. Ye'd think ye'd notice being hit by a six-pound iron ball, wouldn't ye?"

His father grinned at him, and he smiled grudgingly back.

"I would. Surely ye thought *something* must ha' happened, though."

"Oh, aye, I did. And after a moment or two, it came to me that I must ha' been shot. But I couldna feel any pain at all."

"Well, that was good," Young Ian said encouragingly.

"I kent then I was dying, aye?" His father's eyes were on him but looked beyond him, at that far-off battlefield. "I wasna really bothered, though. And I wasna alone." His gaze focused then on his son, and he smiled a little. Reaching out, he took hold of Ian's hand—his own wasted to the bone, the joints of it swollen and knobbled, but the span of his grasp still as big as his son's.

"Ian," he said, and paused, his eyes crinkling. "D'ye ken how odd it is, to say someone's name when it's yours, as well? Ian," he repeated, more gently, "dinna fash. I wasna afraid then. I'm not afraid now."

I am, Ian thought, but he couldn't say that.

"Tell me about the dog," his father said then, smiling. And so he told his father about Rollo. About the sea battle where he'd thought Rollo drowned or dead, how it had all come about that they'd gone to Ticonderoga and been at the terrible battles of Saratoga.

And told him, without thinking about it, for thinking would have frozen the words in his throat, about Emily. About Iseabaìl. And about the Swiftest of Lizards.

"I—havena told anyone else about that," he said, suddenly shy. "About the wee lad, I mean."

His father breathed deep, looking happy. Then coughed, whipped out a handkerchief, and coughed some more, but eventually stopped. Ian tried not to look at the handkerchief, in case it should be stained with blood.

"Ye should—" the elder Ian croaked, then cleared his throat and spat into the handkerchief with a muffled grunt. "Ye should tell your mother," he said, his voice clear again. "She'd be happy to ken ye've got a son, no matter the circumstances."

"Aye, well. Maybe I will."

It was early for bugs, but the moor birds were out, poking about, taking flight past their heads and calling out in alarm. He listened to the sounds of home for a bit and then said, "Da. I've got to tell ye something bad."

And sitting by a saint's pool, in the peace of the early spring day, Ian told him what had happened to Murdina Bug.

His father listened with a grave attention, head bowed. Young Ian could see the heavy streaks of gray in his hair and found the sight both moving and paradoxically comforting. *At least he's lived a good life*, he thought. *But maybe Mrs. Bug did, too. Would I feel worse about it if she'd been a young girl?* He thought he would, but he felt badly enough as it was. A little better for the telling, though.

The elder Ian rocked back on his haunches, arms clasped about his good knee, thinking.

"It wasna your fault, of course," he said, with a sidelong look at his son. "D'ye ken that, in your heart?"

"No," Ian admitted. "But I'm trying."

His father smiled at that, but then grew grave again.

"Ye'll manage. If ye've lived with it this long, ye'll be all right in the end. But this matter of old Arch Bug, now. He must be as old as the hills, if he's the same one I kent—a tacksman for Malcolm Grant, he was."

"That's the man. I keep thinking that—he's old, he'll die—but what if he dies and I dinna ken he's dead?" He made a gesture of frustration. "I dinna want to kill the man, but how can I not, and him wandering about, set to do harm to Ra—to my—well, if I should ever have a wife …" He was floundering, and his father put a stop to it, grasping his arm.

"Who is she?" he asked, interest bright in his face. "Tell me about her."

And so he told about Rachel. He was surprised that there was so much to tell, in fact, considering that he'd known her only a few weeks and kissed her just the once.

His father sighed—he sighed all the time, it was the only way he got enough breath, but this one was a sigh of happiness.

"Ah, Ian," he said fondly. "I'm happy for ye. I canna say how happy. It's what your mother and I have prayed for, these many years, that ye'd have a good woman to love and a family by her."

"Well, it's soon to be speaking of my family," Young Ian pointed out. "Considering she's a Quaker and likely won't wed me. And considering I'm in Scotland and she's wi' the Continental army in America, probably bein' shot at or infected wi' plague right this minute."

He'd meant it seriously and was somewhat offended when his father laughed. But then the elder Ian leaned forward and said with utter seriousness, "Ye needna wait for me to die. Ye need to go and find your young woman."

"I canna—"

"Aye, ye can. Young Jamie's got Lallybroch, the girls are well wed, and Michael—" He grinned at the thought of Michael. "Michael will do well enough, I think. A man needs a wife, and a good one is the greatest gift God has for a man. I'd go much easier, *a bhailach,* if I kent ye were well fettled in that way."

“Aye, well,” Young Ian murmured. “Maybe so. But I’ll not go just yet.”

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OLD DEBTS

Jamie swallowed the last bite of porridge and took a deep breath, laying down his spoon.

"Jenny?"

"O' course there's more," she said, reaching for his bowl. Then she caught sight of his face and stopped, eyes narrowing. "Or is that not what ye had need of?"

"I wouldna say it's a need, precisely. But …" He glanced up at the ceiling to avoid her gaze and commended his soul to God. "What d'ye ken of Laoghaire MacKenzie?"

He risked a quick glance at his sister and saw that her eyes had gone round, bright with interest.

"Laoghaire, is it?" She sat back down and began to tap her fingers thoughtfully on the tabletop. Her hands were good for her age, he thought: work-worn, but the fingers still slim and lively.

"She's not wed," Jenny said. "But ye'll ken that, I imagine."

He nodded shortly.

"What is it ye want to know about her?"

"Well … how she fares, I suppose. And …"

"And who's sharing her bed?"

He gave his sister a look.

"Ye're a lewd woman, Janet Murray."

"Oh, aye? Well, awa' wi' ye, then, and ask the cat." Blue eyes just like his own glittered at him for an instant, and the dimple showed in her cheek. He knew that look and yielded with what grace was possible.

"D'ye know?"

"No," she said promptly.

He raised one brow in disbelief. "Oh, aye. Pull the other one."

She shook her head and ran a finger round the edge of the honey jar, wiping off a golden bead. "I swear on St. Fouthad's toenails."

He hadn't heard that one since he was ten and laughed out loud, despite the situation.

"Well, then, no more to be said, is there?" He leaned back in his chair, affecting indifference. She made a small huffing noise, got up, and began busily to clear the table. He watched her with narrowed eyes, not sure whether she was messing him about only for the sake of mischief—in which case, she'd yield in a moment—or whether there was something more to it.

"Why is it ye want to know?" she asked suddenly, eyes on the stack of sticky bowls. That brought him up short.

"I didna say I *did want* to know," he pointed out. "But since ye mentioned it—anyone would be curious, no?"

"They would," she agreed. She straightened up and looked at him, a long, searching sort of look that made him wonder whether he'd washed behind his ears.

"I *don't* know," she said at last. "And that's the truth. I only heard from her that once that I wrote ye."

Aye, and just why did ye write me about it? he wondered, but didn't say so out loud.

"Mmphm," he said. "And ye expect me to believe that ye left it there?"

* * *

He remembered it. Standing here in his old room at Lallybroch, the one he'd had as a boy, on the morning of his wedding to Laoghaire.

He'd had a new shirt for the occasion. There wasn't money for much beyond the barest essentials, and sometimes not that—but Jenny had contrived him a shirt; he suspected she'd sacrificed the best of her two shifts for it. He remembered shaving in the reflection in his washbasin, seeing the gaunt, stern face of a stranger emerge beneath his razor, thinking that he must remember to smile when he met Laoghaire. He didn't want to frighten her, and what he saw in the water was enough to frighten *him*.

He thought suddenly of sharing her bed. He resolutely put aside the thought of Claire's body—he had a great deal of practice in that—which caused him instead to think suddenly that it had been years—aye, years! He'd lain with a woman only twice in the last fifteen years, and it was five, six, maybe seven years since the last time.…

He'd suffered a moment's panic at the thought that he might find himself unable and touched his member gingerly through his kilt, only to find that it had already begun to stiffen at the mere thought of bedding.

He drew a deep breath, somewhat relieved. One less thing to worry over, then.

A brief sound from the door jerked his head round to see Jenny standing there, wearing an unreadable expression. He coughed and took his hand off his cock.

"Ye haven't got to do it, Jamie," she said quietly, eyes fixed on his. "If ye've thought better of it, tell me."

He'd nearly done it. But he could hear the house. There was a sense of bustle in it, a purpose and a happiness it had lacked for a very long time. It wasn't only his own happiness at stake here—it never had been.

"No," he'd said abruptly. "I'm fine." And smiled reassuringly at her.

As he went downstairs to meet Ian at the foot, though, he heard the rain on the windows and felt a sudden sense of drowning—an unwelcome recollection of his first wedding day and how they'd held each other up, he and Claire, both bleeding, both terrified.

"All right, then?" Ian had said to him, leaning in, low-voiced.

"Aye, fine," he replied, and was pleased at how calm his voice was.

Jenny's face appeared briefly round the door to the parlor. She looked worried, but relaxed when she saw him.

"It's all right, *mo nighean,"* Ian had assured her, grinning. "I've got a grip on him, in case he takes it into his head to bolt." Ian was in fact gripping his arm, rather to Jamie's surprise, but he didn't protest.

"Well, drag him in, then," his sister had said, very dry. "The priest's come."

He'd gone in with Ian, taken up his place beside Laoghaire in front of old Father McCarthy. She glanced up at him briefly, then away. Was she frightened? Her hand was cool in his but didn't shake. He squeezed her fingers gently and she turned her head, looking up at him then, directly. No, not fright, and not candle glow or starshine. There was gratitude in her gaze—and trust.

That trust had entered his heart, a small, soft weight that steadied him, restored at least a few of the severed roots that had held him to his place. He'd been grateful, too.

He turned at the sound of footsteps now and saw Claire coming along the hall. He smiled—noting that he'd done so without the slightest thought—and she came to him, taking his hand as she peered into the room.

"Yours, wasn't it? When you were young, I mean."

"Aye, it was."

"I thought Jenny told me so—when we came here the first time, I mean." Her mouth twisted a little. She and Jenny did speak now, of course, but it was a stilted kind of speaking, both of them overcareful, shy of saying too much or the wrong thing. Aye, well, he was afraid of saying too much or the wrong thing himself, but damned if he'd be a woman about it.

"I need to go and see Laoghaire," he said abruptly. "Will ye kill me if I do?"

She looked surprised. And then, damn her, amused.

"Are you asking my permission?"

"I am not," he said, feeling stiff and awkward. "I only—well, I thought I should tell ye, is all."

"Very considerate of you." She was still smiling, but the smile had taken on a certain wariness. "Would you … care to tell me *why* you want to go and see her?"

"I didna say I *want* to see her," he said, a noticeable edge in his voice. "I said I need to."

“Would it be presumptuous of me to ask why you need to see her?” Her eyes were just that bit wider and yellower than usual; he’d roused the hawk in her. He hadn’t meant to, at all, but he wavered for an instant, suddenly wanting to seek refuge from his own confusion in an almighty row. But he couldn’t in conscience do that. Still less could he explain the memory of Laoghaire’s face on their wedding day, the look of trust in her eyes, and the nagging feeling that he had betrayed that trust.

“Ye can ask me anything, Sassenach—and ye have,” he added pointedly. “I’d answer if I thought I could make sense.”

She made a small sniffing noise, not quite “Hmph!” but he took her meaning clear enough.

“If you only want to know who she’s sleeping with, there are probably less direct ways of finding out,” she said. Her voice was carefully level, but her pupils had dilated.

“I dinna care who she’s sleeping with!”

“Oh, yes, you do,” she said promptly.

“I don’t!”

“Liar, liar, pants on fire,” she said, and on the verge of an explosion, he burst out laughing instead. She looked momentarily taken back but then joined him, snorting with it and her nose going pink.

They stopped in seconds, abashed at being hilarious in a house that hadn’t known open laughter for too long—but were still smiling at each other.

“Come here,” he said softly, and held out a hand to her. She took it at once, her fingers warm and strong on his, and came to put her arms around him.

Her hair smelled different. Still fresh, and full of the scent of live green things, but different. Like the Highlands. Like heather, maybe.

“You do want to know who it is, you know,” she said, her voice warm and tickling through the fabric of his shirt. “Do you want me to tell you why?”

“Aye, I do, and no, I don’t,” he said, tightening his hold. “I ken well enough why, and I’m sure you and Jenny and every other woman in fifty miles thinks they do, too. But that's not why I need to see her."

She pushed a little way back then and brushed the falling curls out of her eyes to look up at him. She searched his face thoughtfully and nodded.

"Well, do give her my very best regards, then, won't you?"

"Why, ye vengeful wee creature. I'd never ha' thought it of ye!"

"Wouldn't you, indeed?" she said, dry as toast. He smiled down at her and ran a thumb gently down the side of her cheek.

"No," he said. "I wouldn't. Ye're no one to hold a grudge, Sassenach; ye never have been."

"Well, I'm not a Scot," she observed, smoothing back her hair. "It's not a matter of national pride, I mean." She put a hand on his chest before he could answer, and said, quite seriously, "She never made you laugh, did she?"

"I may have smiled once or twice," he said gravely. "But no."

"Well, just you remember that," she said, and with a swish of skirts, was off. He grinned like a fool and followed her.

When he reached the stairs, she was waiting, halfway down.

"One thing," she said, lifting a finger at him.

"Aye?"

"If you find out who she's sleeping with and don't tell me, I *will* kill you."

* * *

Balriggan was a small place, little more than ten acres, plus the house and outbuildings. Still, it was bonnie, a large gray stone cottage tucked into the curve of a hill, a bittie wee loch glimmering like a looking glass at its foot. The English had burned the fields and the barn during the Rising, but fields came back. Much more easily than the men who tilled them.

He rode slowly past the loch, thinking that this visit was a mistake. It was possible to leave things behind—places, people, memories—at least for a time. But places held tight to the things that had happened in them, and to come again to a place you had once lived was to be brought face-to-face with what you had done there and who you had been.

Balriggan, though … it hadn't been a bad place; he had loved the wee loch and the way it mirrored the sky, so still some mornings that you felt you might walk down into the clouds you saw reflected there, feeling their cold mist rise up about you, to wrap you in their drifting peace. Or in the summer evenings, when the surface glimmered in hundreds of overlapping rings as the hatch rose, the rhythm of it broken now and then by the sudden splash of a leaping salmon.

The road took him closer, and he saw the stony shallows where he'd shown wee Joan and Marsali how to guddle fish, all three of them so intent on their business they'd paid no heed to the midgies biting, and gone home wet to the waist and red with bites and sunburn, the wee maids skipping and swinging from his hands, gleeful in the sunset. He smiled just a little—then turned his horse's head away, up the hill to the house.

The place was shabby but in decent repair, he grudgingly noted. There was a saddle mule browsing in the paddock behind the house, elderly but sound-looking. Well enough. Laoghaire wasn't spending his money on follies or a coach-and-four, at least.

He set his hand on the gate and felt a twist go through his wame. The feel of the wood under his hand was eerily familiar; he'd lifted it without thinking, at the spot where it was always inclined to drag on the path. That twist corkscrewed its way up to his mouth as he recalled his last meeting with Ned Gowan, Laoghaire's lawyer. "*What does the bloody woman want, then?*" he'd demanded, exasperated. To which Ned had replied cheerfully, "*Your head, mounted above her gate*."

With a brief snort, he went through, closing the gate a bit harder than necessary, and glanced up at the house.

Movement took his eye. A man was sitting on the bench outside the cottage, staring at him over a bit of broken harness on his knee.

An ill-favored wee lad, Jamie thought, scrawny and narrow-faced as a ferret, with a walleye and a mouth that hung open as though in astonishment. Still, Jamie greeted the man pleasantly, asking was his mistress to home the day?

The lad—seen closer to, he must be in his thirties—blinked at him, then turned his head to bring his good eye to bear.

"Who're you, then?" he asked, sounding unfriendly.

"Fraser of Broch Tuarach," Jamie replied. It was a formal occasion, after all. "Is Mrs.—" He hesitated, not knowing how to refer to Laoghaire. His sister had said she persisted in calling herself "Mrs. Fraser," despite the scandal. He hadn't felt he could object—the fault of it being his and he being in America in any case—but damned if he'd call her that himself, even to her servant.

"Fetch your mistress, if ye please," he said shortly.

"What d'ye want wi' her?" The straight eye narrowed in suspicion.

He hadn't expected obstruction and was inclined to reply sharply, but reined himself in. The man clearly kent something of him, and it was as well if Laoghaire's servant was concerned for her welfare, even if the man's manner was crude.

"I wish to speak with her, if ye've no great objection," he said, with extreme politeness. "D'ye think ye might make shift to go and tell her so?"

The man made a rude sound in his throat but put aside the harness and stood up. Too late, Jamie saw that his spine was badly twisted and one leg shorter than the other. There was no way to apologize that would not make matters worse, though, and so he only nodded shortly and let the man lurch his way off into the house, thinking that it was just like Laoghaire to keep a lame servant for the express purpose of embarrassing him.

Then he shook himself in irritation, ashamed of his thought. What was it about him that a hapless woman such as Laoghaire MacKenzie should bring out every wicked, shameful trait he possessed? Not that his sister couldn't do it, too, he reflected ruefully. But Jenny would evoke some bit of bad temper or hasty language from him, fan the flames 'til he was roaring, and then extinguish him neatly with a word, as though she'd doused him with cold water.

“Go see her,” Jenny had said.

“All right, then,” he said belligerently. “I’m here.”

“I see that,” said a light, dry voice. “Why?”

He swung round to face Laoghaire, who was standing in the doorway, broom in hand, giving him a cool look.

He snatched off his hat and bowed to her.

“Good day to ye. I hope I see ye well the day.” Apparently so; her face was slightly flushed beneath a starched white kerch, blue eyes clear.

She looked him over, expressionless save for fair brows arched high.

“I heard ye were come home. Why are ye here?”

“To see how ye fare.”

Her brows rose that wee bit higher.

“Well enough. What d’ye want?”

He’d gone through it in his mind a hundred times but should have known that for the waste of effort it was. There were things that could be planned for, but none of them involved women.

“I’ve come to say sorry to ye,” he said bluntly. “I said it before, and ye shot me. D’ye want to listen this time?”

The brows came down. She glanced from him to the broom in her hand, as though estimating its usefulness as a weapon, then looked back at him and shrugged.

“Suit yourself. Will ye come in, then?” She jerked her head toward the house.

“It’s a fine day. Shall we walk in the garden?” He had no wish to enter the house, with its memories of tears and silences.

She regarded him for a moment or two, then nodded and turned toward the garden path, leaving him to follow if he would. He noticed that she kept a grip on the broom, though, and was not sure whether to be amused or offended.

They walked in silence through the kailyard and through a gate into the garden. It was a kitchen garden, made for utility, but it had a small orchard at the end of it, and there were flowers growing between the pea vines and onion beds. She’d always liked flowers; he remembered that with a small twist of the heart.

She'd put the broom over her shoulder, like a soldier carrying a rifle, and strolled beside him—in no hurry but not offering him an opening, either. He cleared his throat.

"I said I'd come to apologize."

"So ye did." She didn't turn to look at him but stopped and poked her toe at a curling potato vine.

"When we … wed," he said, trying to retrieve the careful speech he'd thought of. "I should not have asked ye. My heart was cold. I'd no right to offer ye a dead thing."

Her nostrils flared briefly, but she didn't look up. Just went on frowning at the potato vine, as though she suspected it might have bugs.

"I knew that," she said at last. "I did hope—" She broke off, lips pressing tight as she swallowed. "I did hope I might be of help to ye, though. Everyone could see ye needed a woman. Just not *me*, I suppose," she added bitterly.

Stung, he said the first thing that came to his tongue.

"I thought ye needed *me."*

She looked up then, her eyes gone bright. Christ, she was going to weep, he knew it. But she didn't.

"I'd weans to feed." Her voice was hard and flat and hit him like a slap on the cheek.

"So ye did," he said, keeping his temper. It was honest, at least. "They've grown now, though." *And* he'd found dowries for both Marsali and Joan, too, but he didn't suppose he'd be given any credit for that.

"So that's it," she said, her voice growing colder. "Ye think ye can talk your way out of paying me now, is that it?"

"No, that is *not it,* for God's sake!"

"Because," she said, ignoring his denial and swinging round to face him, bright-eyed, "ye can't. Ye shamed me before the whole parish, Jamie Fraser, luring me into a sinful match wi' you and then betraying me, laughin' at me behind your hand wi' your Sassenach whore!"

"I didna—"

"And now ye come back from America, fardeled up like an English popinjay"—her lip curled in scorn at his good ruffled shirt, which he'd worn to show her respect, God damn it!—"flauntin' your wealth and playin' the great yin wi' your ancient hussy foamin' in her silks and satins on your arm, is it? Well, I'll tell ye—" She swung the broom down from her shoulder and drove the handle of it violently into the ground. "Ye dinna understand one thing about me, and ye think ye can awe me into crawlin' away like a dyin' dog and troubling ye no more! Think again, that's all I'll say to ye—just think again!"

He snatched the purse out of his pocket and flung it at the door of the garden shed, where it struck with a boom and bounced off. He had just a moment to regret having brought a chunk of gold, and not coins that would jingle, before his temper flared.

"Aye, ye're right about *that*, at least! I dinna understand one thing about ye! I never have, try as I might!"

"Oh, try as ye might, is it?" she cried, ignoring the purse. "Ye never tried for an instant, Jamie Fraser! In fact—" Her face clenched up like a fist as she fought to keep her voice under control. "Ye never truly *looked* at me. Never—well, no, I suppose ye looked once. When I was sixteen." Her voice trembled on the word, and she looked away, jaw clamped tight. Then she looked back at him, eyes bright and tearless.

"Ye took a beating for me. At Leoch. D'ye recall that?"

For an instant, he didn't. Then he stopped, breathing heavily. His hand went instinctively to his jaw, and against his will he felt the ghost of a smile rise against the anger.

"Oh. Aye. Aye, I do." Angus Mhor had given him an easier time than he might have—but it was a fair beating, nonetheless. His ribs had ached for days.

She nodded, watching him. Her cheeks were splotched with red, but she'd calmed herself.

"I thought ye'd done it because ye loved me. I went on thinking that, ken, until well after we'd wed. But I was wrong, wasn't I?"

Bafflement must have showed on his face, for she made that small "Mph!" in her nose that meant she was aggravated. He knew her well enough to know *that,* at least.

"Ye pitied me," she said flatly. "I didna see that then. Ye pitied me at Leoch, not only later, when ye took me to wife. I thought ye loved me," she repeated, spacing the words as though speaking to a simpleton. "When Dougal made ye wed the Sassenach whore, I thought I'd die. But I thought maybe *you* felt like dyin', too—and it wasna like that at all, was it?"

"Ah … no," he said, feeling awkward and foolish. He'd seen nothing of her feelings then. Hadn't seen a thing but Claire. But of course Laoghaire had thought he loved her; she was sixteen. And would have known that his marriage to Claire was a forced one, never realizing that he was willing. Of course she'd thought she and he were star-crossed lovers. Except that he'd never looked at her again. He rubbed a hand over his face, feeling complete helplessness.

"Ye never told me that," he said finally, letting his hand drop.

"What good would it ha' done?" she said.

So there it was. She'd known—she must have known—by the time he married her what the truth of it was. But still, she must have hoped … Unable to find anything to say in reply, his mind took refuge in the irrelevant.

"Who was it?" he asked.

"Who?" Her brow furrowed in puzzlement.

"The lad. Your father wanted ye punished for wantonness, no? Who did ye play the loon with, then, when I took the beating for ye? I never thought to ask."

The red splotches on her cheeks grew deeper.

"No, ye never would, would ye?"

A barbed silence of accusation fell between them. He hadn't asked, then; he hadn't cared.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, at last. "Tell me, though. Who was it?" He hadn't cared then in the least but found himself curious now, if only as a way of not thinking of other things—or not saying them. They hadn't had the past she'd thought, but the past lay still between them, forming a tenuous connection.

Her lips thinned and he thought she wouldn't say, but then they parted, reluctant.

"John Robert MacLeod."

He frowned, at a loss for a moment, and then the name dropped into its proper place in memory and he stared at her.

"John Robert? What, him from Killiecrankie?"

"Aye," she said. "Him." Her mouth snapped shut on the word.

He hadn't known the man well at all, but John Robert MacLeod's reputation among young women had been the subject of a good deal of talk among the men-at-arms at Leoch in his brief time there. A sly, good-looking slink of a man, handsome and lean-jawed—and the fact that he'd a wife and weans at home in Killiecrankie seemed to hamper him not at all.

"Jesus!" he said, unable to stop himself. "Ye're lucky ye kept your maiden-heid!"

An ugly flush washed darkly over her from stays to cap, and his jaw dropped.

"Laoghaire MacKenzie! Ye werena such a wanton fool to let him take ye virgin to his bed!?"

"I didna ken he was marrit!" she cried, stamping her foot. "And it was after ye wed the Sassenach. I went to him for comfort."

"Oh, and he gave it ye, I'm sure!"

"Hush your gob!" she shrieked, and, picking up a stone watering pot from the bench by the shed, hurled it at his head. He hadn't expected that—Claire threw things at him frequently, but Laoghaire never had—and was nearly brained; it struck him in the shoulder as he ducked aside.

The watering pot was followed by a hail of other objects from the bench and a storm of incoherent language, all manner of unwomanly swearing, punctuated by shrieks like a teakettle. A pan of buttermilk hurtled toward him, missed its aim, but soaked him from chest to knees with curds and whey.

He was half laughing—from shock—when she suddenly seized a mattock from the shed wall and made for him. Seriously alarmed, he ducked and grabbed her wrist, twisting so she dropped the heavy tool with a thump. She let out a screech like a *ban-sidhe* and whipped her other hand across his face, half-blinding him with her nails. He snatched that wrist, too, and pressed her back into the wall of the shed, her still kicking at his shins, struggling and writhing against him like a snake.

"I'm sorry!" He was shouting in her ear to be heard above the noise she was making. "Sorry! D'ye hear me—I'm *sorry*!" The clishmaclaver stopped him hearing anything behind, though, and he had not the slightest warning when something monstrous struck him behind the ear and sent him staggering, lights flashing in his head.

He kept his grip on her wrists as he stumbled and fell, dragging her down atop him. He wrapped his arms tight round her, to keep her from clawing him again, and blinked, trying to clear his watering eyes.

"Free her, *MacIfrinn*!" The mattock chunked into the earth beside his head.

He flung himself over, Laoghaire still clutched to him, rolling madly through the beds. The sound of panting and uneven steps, and the mattock came down again, pinning his sleeve to the ground and scraping the flesh of his arm.

He jerked free, heedless of tearing skin and cloth, rolled away from Laoghaire, and sprang to his feet, then launched himself without pause at the weazened figure of Laoghaire's servant, who was in the act of raising the mattock above his head, narrow face contorted with effort.

He butted the man in the face with a crunch and bore him flat, punching him in the belly before they hit the ground. He scrambled atop the man and went on punching him, the violence some relief. The man was grunting, whimpering, and gurgling, and he'd drawn back his knee to give the bugger one in the balls to settle the matter when he became dimly aware of Laoghaire, screeching and beating at his head.

"Leave him alone!" she was shrieking, crying and slapping at him with her hands. "Leave him, leave him, for the love of Bride, don't hurt him!"

He stopped then, panting, feeling suddenly a terrible fool. Beating a scrawny cripple who meant only to protect his mistress from obvious attack, manhandling a woman like a street ruffian—*Christ*, what was the matter with him? He slid off the man, repressing an impulse to apologize, and got awkwardly to his feet, meaning to give the poor bugger a hand up, at least.

Before he could manage, though, Laoghaire fell to her knees beside the man, weeping and grappling at him, finally getting him partway sitting, his narrow head pressed to her soft round bosom, she heedless of the blood gushing from his smashed nose, petting and stroking him, murmuring his name. Joey, it seemed to be.

Jamie stood swaying a bit, staring at this demonstration. Blood was dripping from his fingers, and his arm was beginning to burn where the mattock had skinned it. He felt something stinging run into his eyes and, wiping it away, found that his forehead was bleeding; Joey the openmouthed had evidently inadvertently bitten him when he'd butted the man. He grimaced with disgust, feeling the tooth marks in his forehead, and groped for a handkerchief with which to stanch the blood.

Meanwhile, foggy as his head felt, matters on the ground in front of him were becoming clearer by the moment. A good mistress might try to comfort a wounded servant, but he'd yet to hear a woman call a servant *mo chridhe*. Let alone kiss him passionately on the mouth, getting her own face smeared with blood and snot in the process.

"Mmphm," he said.

Startled, Laoghaire turned a blood-smeared, tearstained face to him. She'd never looked lovelier.

"Him?" Jamie said incredulously, nodding toward the crumpled Joey. "Why, for God's sake?"

Laoghaire glared at him slit-eyed, crouched like a cat about to spring. She considered him for a moment, then slowly straightened her back, gathering Joey's head once more against her breast.

"Because he needs me," she said evenly. "And you, ye bastard, never did."

* * *

He left the horse to graze along the edge of the loch and, stripping off his clothes, walked into the water. The sky was overcast, and the loch was full of clouds.

The rocky bottom fell away and he let the gray cold water take him, his legs trailing loose behind, his small injuries chilling into numbness. He put his face under the water, eyes closed, to wash the cut on his head, and felt the bubbles of his breath soft and tickling over his shoulders.

He raised his head and began to swim, slowly, with no thought at all.

He lay on his back among the clouds, hair afloat like kelp, and stared up into the sky. A spatter of rain dimpled the water around him, then thickened. It was a soft rain, though; no feel of the drops striking him, only a sense of the loch and its clouds bathing his face, his body, washing away the blood and fret of the last little while.

Would he ever come back? he wondered.

The water filled his ears with its own rush, and he was comforted by the realization that, in fact, he had never left.

He turned at last and struck out for the shore, cutting smooth through the water. It was still raining, harder now, the drops a constant tapping on his bare shoulders as he swam. Still, the sinking sun shone under the clouds and lit Balriggan and its hill with a gentle glow.

He felt the bottom rise and put his feet down, then stood for a moment, waist-deep, looking at it for a bit.

“No,” he said softly, and felt remorse soften into regret and, at last, the absolution of resignation. “Ye’re right—I never did. I’m sorry.”

He walked out of the water then, and with a whistle to the horse, pulled the wet plaid over his shoulders and turned his face toward Lallybroch.

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THE CAVE

Useful herbs, I wrote, and paused—as usual—to consider. Writing with a quill caused one to be both more deliberate and more economical in writing than doing it with ballpoint or typewriter. Still, I thought, I'd best just make a list here and jot down notes regarding each herb as they came to me, then make a clean draft when I'd got it all straight and made sure to include everything, rather than try to do it all in a single run.

Lavender, peppermint, comfrey, I wrote without hesitation. *Calendula*, *feverfew, foxglove, meadow-sweet*. Then went back to add a large asterisk beside *foxglove* to remind me to add strong cautions about the use, as all parts of the plant were extremely poisonous in any but very small doses. I twiddled the quill, biting my lip in indecision. Ought it to mention that one at all, given that this was meant to be a useful medical guide for the common man, not for medical practitioners with experience in various medicaments? Because, really, you ought not dose *anyone* with foxglove unless you'd been trained … Best not. I crossed it out but then had second thoughts. Perhaps I'd better mention it, with a drawing, but also with a severe warning that it should be used *only* by a physician, in case someone had the bright idea of remedying Uncle Tophiger's dropsy permanently.…

A shadow fell across the floor in front of me and I looked up. Jamie was standing there with a most peculiar look on his face.

"What?" I said, startled. "Has something happened?"

"No," he said, and advancing into the study, leaned down and put his hands on the desk, bringing his face within a foot of mine.

"Have ye ever been in the slightest doubt that I need ye?" he demanded.

It took roughly half a second of thought to answer this.

"No," I replied promptly. "To the best of my knowledge, you needed me urgently the moment I saw you. And I haven't had reason to think you've got any more self-sufficient since. What on *earth* happened to your forehead? Those look like tooth—" He lunged across the desk and kissed me before I could finish the observation.

"Thank ye," he said fervently, and, un-lunging, whirled and went out, evidently in the highest of spirits.

"What's amiss wi' Uncle Jamie?" Ian demanded, coming in on Jamie's heels. He glanced back toward the open door into the hall, from the depths of which a loud, tuneless humming was coming, like that of a trapped bumblebee. "Is he drunk?"

"I don't think so," I said dubiously, running my tongue across my lips. "He didn't taste of anything alcoholic."

"Aye, well." Ian lifted a shoulder, dismissing his uncle's eccentricities. "I was just up beyond Broch Mordha, and Mr. MacAllister said to me that his wife's mother was taken bad in the night, and would ye maybe think of coming by, if it wasn't a trouble to ye?"

"No trouble at all," I assured him, rising with alacrity. "Just let me get my bag."

* * *

For all it was spring, a cold, treacherous season, the tenants and neighbors seemed remarkably healthy. With some caution, I had resumed my doctoring, tentatively offering advice and medicine where it might be accepted. After all, I was no longer the lady of Lallybroch, and many of the folk who'd known me before were now dead. Those who weren't seemed generally glad to see me, but there was a wariness in their eyes that hadn't been there before. It saddened me to see it, but I understood it, all too well.

I had left Lallybroch, left Himself. Left *them*. And while they affected to believe the story Jamie put about, about my having thought him dead and fled to France, they couldn't help but feel I had betrayed them by going. *I* felt I had betrayed them.

The easiness that had once existed between us was gone, and so I didn't routinely visit as I once had; I waited to be called. And in the meantime, when I *had* to get out of the house, I went foraging on my own or walked with Jamie—who also had to get out of the house now and then.

One day, when the weather was windy but fine, he took me farther than usual, saying that he would show me his cave, if I liked.

"I would, very much," I said. I put my hand above my eyes to shield them from the sun as I looked up a steep hill. "Is it up there?"

"Aye. Can ye see it?"

I shook my head. Aside from the big white rock the people called Leap o' the Cask, it could have been any Highland hillside, clustered with gorse, broom, and heather, what ground showed in between only rocks.

"Come on, then," Jamie said, and setting foot on an invisible foothold, smiled and reached a hand to help me up.

It was a hard climb, and I was panting and damp with perspiration by the time he pushed aside a screen of gorse to show me the narrow mouth of the cave.

* * *

"I want to go in."

"No, ye don't," he assured her. "It's cold and it's dirty."

She gave him an odd look and half a smile.

"I'd never have guessed," she said, very dry. "I still want to go in."

There was no point in arguing with her. He shrugged and took off his coat to save its getting filthy, hanging it on a rowan sapling that had sprouted near the entrance. He put up his hands to the stones on either side of the entrance, but then was unsure; was it there he had always grasped the stone, or not? *Christ, does it matter?* he chided himself, and, taking firm hold of the rock, stepped in and swung down.

It was just as cold as he'd known it would be. It was out of the wind, at least—not a biting cold, but a dank chill that sank through the skin and gnawed at the bone ends.

He turned and reached up his hands, and she leaned to him, tried to climb down, but lost her footing and half-fell, landing in his arms in a fluster of clothes and loose hair. He laughed and turned her round to look, but kept his arms around her. He was loath to surrender the warmth of her and held her like a shield against cold memory.

She was still, leaning back against him, only her head moving as she looked from one end of the cave to the other. It was barely eight feet long, but the far end was lost in shadow. She lifted her chin, seeing the soft black stains that coated the rock to one side by the entrance.

"That's where my fire was—when I dared have one." His voice sounded strange, small and muffled, and he cleared his throat.

"Where was your bed?"

"Just there by your left foot."

"Did you sleep with your head at this end?" She tapped her foot on the graveled dirt of the floor.

"Aye. I could see the stars, if the night was clear. I turned the other way if it rained." She heard the smile in his voice and put her hand along his thigh, squeezing.

"I hoped that," she said, her own voice a little choked. "When we learned about the Dunbonnet, and the cave … I thought about you, alone here—and I hoped you could see the stars at night."

"I could," he whispered, and bent his head to put his lips to her hair. The shawl she'd pulled over her head had slipped off, and her hair smelled of lemon balm and what she said was catmint.

She made a small *hmp* noise in her throat and folded her own arms over his, warming him through his shirt.

"I feel as though I've seen it before," she said, sounding a little surprised. "Though I suppose one cave probably looks a good deal like any other cave, unless you have stalactites hanging from the ceiling or mammoths painted on the walls."

"I've never had a talent for decoration," he said, and she *hmp'*ed again, amused. "As for being here … ye've been here many nights wi' me, Sassenach. You and the wee lass, both." *Though I didna ken then she was a lassie*, he added silently, remembering with a small odd pang that now and then he had sat there on the flat rock by the entrance, imagining sometimes a daughter warm in his arms, but now and then feeling a tiny son on his knee and pointing out the stars to travel by, explaining to him how the hunting was done and the prayer ye must say when ye killed for food.

But he'd told those things to Brianna later—and to Jem. The knowledge wouldn't be lost. Would it be of use, though? he wondered suddenly.

"Do folk still hunt?" he asked. "Then?"

"Oh, yes," she assured him. "Every fall, we'd have a rash of hunters coming in to the hospital—mostly idiots who'd got drunk and shot each other by mistake, though once I had a gentleman who'd been badly trampled by a deer he thought was dead."

He laughed, both shocked and comforted. The notion of hunting while drunken … though he'd seen fools do it. But at least men still did hunt. Jem would hunt.

"I'm sure Roger Mac wouldna let Jem take too much drink before hunting," he said. "Even if the other lads do."

Her head tilted a little to and fro, in the way it did when she was wondering whether to tell him something, and he tightened his arms a little.

"What?"

"I was just imagining a gang of second-graders having a tot of whisky all round before setting off home from school in the rain," she said, snorting briefly. "Children don't drink alcohol then—at all. Or at least they aren't meant to, and it's scandalous child neglect if they're allowed."

"Aye?" That seemed odd; he'd been given ale or beer with his food since … well, as far back as he recalled. And certainly a dram of whisky against the cold, or if his liver were chilled or he had the earache or … It was true, though, that Brianna made Jem drink milk, even after he was out of smocks.

The rattle of stones on the hillside below startled him, and he let go of Claire, turning toward the entrance. He doubted it was trouble but nonetheless motioned to her to stay, hoisting himself out of the cave mouth and reaching for his coat and the knife in its pocket even before he looked to see who had come.

There was a woman some way below, a tall figure in cloak and shawl, down by the big rock where Fergus had lost his hand. She was looking up, though, and saw him come out of the cave. She waved to him and beckoned, and with a quick glance round that assured him she was alone, he made his way half-sliding down the slope to the trail where she stood.

"Feasgar math," he greeted her, shrugging into the coat. She was fairly young, perhaps in her early twenties, but he didn't know her. Or thought he didn't, until she spoke.

"Ciamar a tha thu, mo athair," she said formally. *How do you do, Father?*

He blinked, startled, but then leaned forward, peering at her.

"Joanie?" he said, incredulous. "Wee Joanie?" Her long, rather solemn face broke into a smile at that, but it was brief.

"Ye know me, then?"

"Aye, I do, now I come to see—" He put out a hand, wanting to embrace her, but she stood a bit away from him, stiff, and he let the hand drop, clearing his throat to cover the moment. "It's been some time, lass. Ye've grown," he added lamely.

"Bairns mostly do," she said, dry. "Is it your wife ye've got with you? The first one, I mean."

"It is," he replied, the shock of her appearance replaced by wariness. He gave her a quick look-over, in case she might be armed, but couldn't tell; her cloak was wrapped round her against the wind.

"Perhaps ye'd summon her down," Joan suggested. "I should like to meet her."

He rather doubted that. Still, she seemed composed, and he could scarcely refuse to let her meet Claire, if she wished it. Claire would be watching; he turned and gestured toward the cave, beckoning her, then turned back to Joan.

"How d'ye come to be here, lass?" he asked, turning back to her. It was a good eight miles to Balriggan from here, and there was nothing near the cave to draw anyone.

"I was coming to Lallybroch to see ye—I missed your visit when ye came to the house," she added, with a brief flash of what might have been amusement. "But I saw you and … your wife … walking, so I came after ye."

It warmed him, to think she'd wanted to see him. At the same time, he was cautious. It had been twelve years, and she'd been a child when he left. And she'd spent those years with Laoghaire, doubtless hearing no good opinions of him in that time.

He looked searchingly into her face, seeing only the vaguest memory of the childish features he recalled. She was not beautiful, or even pretty, but had a certain dignity about her that was attractive; she met his gaze straight on, not seeming to care what he thought of what he saw. She had the shape of Laoghaire's eyes and nose, though little else from her mother, being tall, dark, and rawboned, heavy-browed, with a long, thin face and a mouth that was not much used to smiling, he thought.

He heard Claire making her way down the slope behind him and turned to help her, though keeping one eye on Joanie, just in case.

"Dinna fash," Joan said calmly behind him. "I dinna mean to shoot her."

"Och? Well, that's good." Discomposed, he tried to remember—had she been in the house when Laoghaire shot him? He thought not, though he'd been in no condition to notice. She'd certainly known about it, though.

Claire took his hand and hopped down onto the trail, not pausing to settle herself but coming forward at once and taking Joan's hands in both her own, smiling.

"I'm happy to meet you," she said, sounding as though she meant it. "Marsali said I was to give you this." And, leaning forward, she kissed Joan on the cheek.

For the first time, he saw the girl taken aback. She flushed and pulled her hands away, turning aside and rubbing a fold of her cloak under her nose as though taken by an itch, lest anyone see her eyes well up.

"I—thank you," she said, with a hasty dab at her eyes. "You—my sister's written of you." She cleared her throat and blinked hard, then stared at Claire with open interest—an interest that was being returned in full.

"Félicité looks like you," Claire said. "So does Henri-Christian, just a bit—but Félicité very much."

"Poor child," Joan murmured, but couldn't repress the smile that had lit her face at this.

Jamie coughed.

"Will ye not come down to the house, Joanie? Ye'd be welcome."

She shook her head.

"Later, maybe. I wanted to speak to ye, *mo athair*, where no one could hear. Save your wife," she added, with a glance at Claire. "As she's doubtless something to say on the matter."

That sounded mildly sinister, but then she added, "It's about my dowry."

"Oh, aye? Well, come away out o' the wind, at least." He led them toward the lee of the big rock, wondering what was afoot. Was the lass wanting to wed someone unsuitable and her mother was refusing to give her her dowry? Had something happened to the money? He doubted that; old Ned Gowan had devised the documents, and the money was safe in a bank in Inverness. And whatever he thought of Laoghaire, he was sure she'd never do anything to the hurt of her daughters.

A huge gust of wind came up the track, whirling up the women's petticoats like flying leaves and pelting them all with clouds of dust and dry heather. They darted into the shelter of the rock and stood smiling and laughing a little with the intoxication of the weather, brushing off the dirt and settling their clothes.

"So, then," Jamie said, before the good mood should have a chance to curdle on them, "who is it ye mean to wed?"

"Jesus Christ," Joan replied promptly.

He stared at her for a moment, until he became aware that his mouth was hanging open and closed it.

“You want to be a nun?” Claire’s brows were raised with interest. “Really?”

“I do. I’ve kent for a long time that I’ve a vocation, but …” She hesitated. “… it’s … complicated.”

“I daresay it is,” Jamie said, recovering himself somewhat. “Have ye spoken to anyone about it, lass? The priest? Your mother?”

Joan’s lips pressed into a thin line.

“Both of them,” she said shortly.

“And what did they say?” Claire asked. She was plainly fascinated, leaning back against the rock, combing back her hair with her fingers.

Joan snorted. “My mother says,” she said precisely, “that I’ve lost my mind from reading books—and that’s all *your* fault,” she added pointedly to Jamie, “for giving me the taste for it. She wants me to wed auld Geordie McCann, but I said I’d rather be dead in the ditch.”

“How old *is* auld Geordie McCann?” Claire inquired, and Joan blinked at her.

“Five-and-twenty or so,” she said. “What’s that to do with it?”

“Just curious,” Claire murmured, looking entertained. “There’s a young Geordie McCann, then?”

“Aye, his nephew. He’s three,” Joan added, in the interests of strict accuracy. “I dinna want to wed him, either.”

“And the priest?” Jamie intervened, before Claire could derail the discussion entirely.

Joan drew breath, seeming to grow taller and sterner with it.

“He says that it’s my duty to stay to hame and tend to my aged mother.”

“Who’s swiving Joey the hired man in the goat shed,” Jamie added helpfully. “Ye ken that, I suppose?” From the corner of his eye, he saw Claire’s face, which entertained him so much that he was obliged to turn away and not look at her. He lifted a hand behind his back, indicating that he’d tell her later.

“Not while I’m in the house, she doesn’t,” Joan said coldly. “Which is the only reason I *am* in the house, still. D’ye think my conscience will let me leave, knowing what they’ll be up to? This is the first time I’ve gone further than the kailyard in three months, and if it wasna sinful to place wagers, I’d bet ye my best shift they’re at it this minute, damning both their souls to hell.”

Jamie cleared his throat, trying—and failing—not to think of Joey and Laoghaire, wrapped in passionate embrace on her bed with the blue-and-gray quilt.

“Aye, well.” He could feel Claire’s eyes boring into the back of his neck and felt the blood rise there. “So. Ye want to go for a nun, but the priest says ye mustn’t, your mother willna give ye your dowry for it, and your conscience willna let ye do it anyway. Is that the state o’ things, would ye say?”

“Aye, it is,” Joan said, pleased with his concise summary.

“And, um, what is it that you’d like Jamie to do about it?” Claire inquired, coming round to stand by him. “Kill Joey?” She shot Jamie a sidelong yellow-eyed glance, full of wicked enjoyment at his discomfiture. He gave her a narrow look, and she grinned at him.

“Of course not!” Joan’s heavy brow drew down. “I want them to wed. Then they’d no be in a state of mortal sin every time I turned my back, *and* the priest couldna say I’ve to stay at home, not if my mother’s got a husband to care for her.”

Jamie rubbed a finger slowly up and down the bridge of his nose, trying to make out just how he was meant to induce two middle-aged reprobates to wed. By force? Hold a fowling piece on them? He could, he supposed, but … well, the more he thought of it, the better he liked the notion …

“Does he *want* to marry her, do you think?” Claire asked, surprising him. It hadn’t occurred to him to wonder that.

“Aye, he does,” Joan said, with obvious disapproval. “He’s always moaning on about it to me, how much he looooves her …” She rolled her eyes. “Not that I think he shouldna love her,” she hastened to add, seeing Jamie’s expression. “But he shouldna be telling *me* about it, now, should he?”

"Ah … no," he said, feeling mildly dazed. The wind was booming past the rock, and the whine of it in his ears was eating at him, making him feel suddenly as he used to in the cave, living in solitude for weeks, with no voice but the wind's to hear. He shook his head violently to clear it, forcing himself to focus on Joan's face, hear her words above the wind.

"She's willing, I think," Joan was saying, still frowning. "Though she doesna talk to me about it, thank Bride. She's fond of him, though; feeds him the choice bits and that."

"Well, then …" He brushed a flying strand of hair out of his mouth, feeling dizzy. "Why do they not marry?"

"Because of you," Claire said, sounding a trifle less amused. "And that's where I come into this, I suppose?"

"Because of—"

"The agreement you made with Laoghaire, when I … came back." Her attention was focused on Joan, but she came closer and touched his hand lightly, not looking at him. "You promised to support her—and find dowries for Joan and Marsali—but the support was to stop if she married again. That's it, isn't it?" she said to Joan, who nodded.

"She and Joey might make shift to scrape along," she said. "He does what he can, but … ye've seen him. If ye were to stop the money, though, she'd likely have to sell Balriggan to live—and that would break her heart," she added quietly, dropping her eyes for the first time.

An odd pain seized his heart—odd because it was not his own but he recognized it. It was sometime in the first weeks of their marriage, when he'd been digging new beds in the garden. Laoghaire had brought him out a mug of cool beer and stood while he drank it, then thanked him for the digging. He'd been surprised and laughed, saying why should she think to thank him for that?

"Because ye take care for my place," she'd said simply, "but ye don't try to take it from me." Then she'd taken the empty mug from him and gone back to the house.

And once, in bed—and he flushed at the thought, with Claire standing right by him—he'd asked her why she liked Balriggan so much; it wasna a family place, after all, nor remarkable in any way. And she'd sighed a little, pulled the quilt up to her chin, and said, "It's the first place I've felt safe." She wouldn't say more when he asked her, but only turned over and pretended to fall asleep.

"She'd rather lose Joey than Balriggan," Joan was saying to Claire. "But she doesna mean to lose *him*, either. So ye see the difficulty, aye?"

"I do, yes." Claire was looking sympathetic but shot him a glance indicating that this was—naturally—*his* problem. Of course it was, he thought, exasperated.

"I'll … do something," he said, having not the slightest notion what, but how could he refuse? God would probably strike him down for interfering with Joan's vocation, if his own sense of guilt didn't finish him off first.

"Oh, Da! *Thank* you!"

Joan's face broke into a sudden, dazzling smile, and she threw herself into his arms—he barely got them up in time to catch her; she was a very solid young woman. But he folded her into the embrace he'd wanted to give her on meeting and felt the odd pain ease, as this strange daughter fitted herself tidily into an empty spot in his heart he hadn't known was there.

The wind was still whipping by, and it might have been a speck of dust that made Claire's eyes glisten as she looked at him, smiling.

"Just the one thing," he said sternly, when Joan had released him and stood back.

"Anything," she said fervently.

"Ye'll pray for me, aye? When ye're a nun?"

"Every day," she assured him, "and twice on Sundays."

* * *

The sun was starting down the sky by now, but there was still some time to supper. I should, I supposed, be there to offer to help with the meal preparations; these were both enormous and laborious, with so many people coming and going, and Lallybroch could no longer afford the luxury of a cook. But even if Jenny was taken up with nursing Ian, Maggie and her young daughters and the two housemaids were more than capable of managing. I would only be in the way. Or so I told myself, well aware that there was always work for a spare pair of hands.

But I clambered down the stony hill behind Jamie and said nothing when he turned away from the trail to Lallybroch. We wandered down toward the little loch, well content.

"Perhaps I *did* have something to do wi' the books, aye?" Jamie said, after a bit. "I mean, I read to the wee maids in the evenings now and again. They'd sit on the settle with me, one on each side, wi' their heads against me, and it was—" He broke off with a glance at me and coughed, evidently worried that I might be offended at the idea that he'd ever enjoyed a moment in Laoghaire's house. I smiled and took his arm.

"I'm sure they loved it. But I really doubt that you read anything to Joan that made her want to become a nun."

"Aye, well," he said dubiously. "I did read to them out of the *Lives of the Saints*. Oh, and *Fox's Book of the Martyrs*, too, even though there's a good deal of it to do wi' Protestants, and Laoghaire said Protestants couldna be martyrs because they were wicked heretics, and I said bein' a heretic didna preclude being a martyr, and—" He grinned suddenly. "I think that might ha' been the closest thing we had to a decent conversation."

"Poor Laoghaire!" I said. "But putting her aside—and do let's—what do you think of Joan's quandary?"

He shook his head dubiously.

"Well, I can maybe bribe Laoghaire to marry yon wee cripple, but it would take a deal of money, since she'd want more than she gets from me now. I havena got that much left of the gold we brought, so it would need to wait until I can get back to the Ridge and extract some more, take that to a bank, arrange for a draft … I hate to think of Joan having to spend a year at home, trying to keep yon lust-crazed weasels apart."

"Lust-crazed weasels?" I said, entertained. "No, really. Did you see them at it?"

"Not exactly," he said, coughing. "Ye could see there was an attraction atween them, though. Here, let's go along the shore; I saw a curlew's nest the other day."

The wind had quieted and the sun was bright and warm—for the moment. I could see clouds lurking over the horizon, and doubtless it would be raining again by nightfall, but for the moment it was a lovely spring day, and we were both disposed to enjoy it. By unspoken consent, we put aside all disagreeable matters and talked of nothing in particular, only enjoying each other's company, until we reached a shallow, grass-covered mound where we could perch and enjoy the sun.

Jamie's mind seemed to return now and then to Laoghaire, though—I supposed he couldn't help it. I didn't really mind, as such comparisons as he made were entirely to my benefit.

"Had she been my first," he said thoughtfully at one point, "I think I might have a much different opinion of women in general."

"Well, you can't define all women in terms of what they're like—or what one of them is like—in bed," I objected. "I've known men who, well …"

"Men? Was Frank not your first?" he demanded, surprised.

I put a hand behind my head and regarded him.

"Would it matter if he wasn't?"

"Well …" Clearly taken aback by the possibility, he groped for an answer. "I suppose—" He broke off and eyed me, meditatively stroking one finger down the bridge of his nose. One corner of his mouth turned up. "I don't know."

I didn't know, myself. On the one hand, I rather enjoyed his shock at the notion—and at my age, I was not at all averse to feeling mildly wanton, if only in retrospect. On the other hand …

"Well, where do you get off, anyway, casting stones?"

"Ye were *my* first," he pointed out, with considerable asperity.

"So you *said*," I said, teasing. To my amusement, he flushed up like the rosy dawn.

"Ye didna believe me?" he said, his voice rising in spite of himself.

“Well, you did seem rather well informed, for a so-called virgin. To say nothing of … imaginative.”

“For God’s sake, Sassenach, I grew up on a farm! It’s a verra straightforward business, after all.” He looked me closely up and down, his gaze lingering at certain points of particular interest. “And as for imagining things … Christ, I’d spent months—years!—imagining!” A certain light filled his eyes, and I had the distinct impression that he hadn’t stopped imagining in the intervening years, not by any means.

“What are you thinking?” I asked, intrigued.

“I’m thinking that the water in the loch’s that wee bit chilly, but if it didna shrink my cock straight off, the feel of the heat when I plunged into ye … Of course,” he added practically, eyeing me as though estimating the effort involved in forcing me into the loch, “we wouldna need to do it *in* the water, unless ye liked; I could just dunk ye a few times, drag ye onto the shore, and—God, your arse looks fine, wi’ the wet linen of your shift clinging to it. It goes all transparent, and I can see the weight of your buttocks, like great smooth round melons—”

“I take it back—I don’t want to know what you’re thinking!”

“You asked,” he pointed out logically. “And I can see the sweet wee crease of your arse, too—and once I’ve got ye pinned under me and ye canna get away … d’ye want it lying on your back, Sassenach, or bent over on your knees, wi’ me behind? I could take a good hold either way, and—”

“I am not going into a freezing loch in order to gratify your perverted desires!”

“All right,” he said, grinning. Stretching himself out beside me, he reached round behind and took a generous handful. “Ye can gratify them here, if ye like, where it’s warm.”

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OENOMANCY

Lallybroch was a working farm. Nothing on a farm can stop for very long, even for grief. Which is how it came to be that I was the only person in the front of the house when the door opened in the middle of the afternoon.

I heard the sound and poked my head out of Ian's study to see who had come in. A strange young man was standing in the foyer, gazing round appraisingly. He heard my step and turned, looking at me curiously.

"Who are *you?"* we said simultaneously, and laughed.

"I'm Michael," he said, in a soft, husky voice with the trace of a French accent. "And ye'll be Uncle Jamie's faery-woman, I suppose."

He was examining me with frank interest, and I felt therefore free to do the same.

"Is that what the family's been calling me?" I asked, looking him over.

He was a slight man, lacking either Young Jamie's burly strength or Young Ian's wiry height. Michael was Janet's twin but did not resemble her at all, either. This was the son who had gone to France, to become a junior partner in Jared Fraser's wine business, Fraser *et Cie*. As he took off his traveling cloak, I saw that he was dressed very fashionably for the Highlands, though his suit was sober in both color and cut—and he wore a black crepe band around his upper arm.

"That, or the witch," he said, smiling faintly. "Depending whether it's Da or Mam who's talking."

“Indeed,” I said, with an edge—but couldn’t help smiling back. He was quiet but an engaging young man—well, relatively young. He must be near thirty, I thought.

“I’m sorry for your … loss,” I said, with a nod toward the crepe band. “May I ask—”

“My wife,” he said simply. “She died two weeks ago. I should have come sooner, else.”

That took me aback considerably.

“Oh. I … see. But your parents, your brothers and sisters—they don’t know this yet?”

He shook his head and came forward a little, so the light from the fanshaped window above the door fell on his face, and I saw the dark circles under his eyes and the marks of the bone-deep exhaustion that is grief’s only consolation.

“I am so sorry,” I said, and, moved by impulse, put my arms around him. He leaned toward me, under the same impulse. His body yielded for an instant to my touch, and there was an extraordinary moment in which I sensed the deep numbness within him, the unacknowledged war of acknowledgment and denial. He knew what had happened, what was happening—but could not feel it. Not yet.

“Oh, dear,” I said, stepping back from the brief embrace. I touched his cheek lightly, and he stared at me, blinking.

“I will be damned,” he said mildly. “They’re right.”

* * *

A door opened and closed above, I heard a foot on the stair—and an instant later, Lallybroch awoke to the knowledge that the last child had come home.

The swirl of women and children wafted us into the kitchen, where the men appeared, by ones and twos through the back door to embrace Michael or clap him on the shoulder.

There were outpourings of sympathy, the same questions and answers repeated several times—how had Michael’s wife, Lillie, died? She had died of the influenza; so had her grandmother; no, he himself had not caught it; her father sent his prayers and concerns for Michael's father—and eventually the preparations for washing and supper and the putting of children to bed began, and Michael slipped out of the maelstrom.

Coming out of the kitchen myself to fetch my shawl from the study, I saw him at the foot of the stair with Jenny, talking quietly. She touched his face, just as I had, asking him something in a low voice. He half-smiled, shook his head, and, squaring his shoulders, went upstairs alone to see Ian, who was feeling too poorly to come down to supper.

* * *

Alone among the Murrays, Michael had inherited the fugitive gene for red hair, and burned among his darker siblings like a coal. He had inherited an exact copy of his father's soft brown eyes, though. "And a good thing, too," Jenny said to me privately, "else his da would likely be sure I'd been at it wi' the goatherd, for God knows, he doesna look like anyone else in the family."

I'd mentioned this to Jamie, who looked surprised but then smiled.

"Aye. She wouldna ken it, for she never met Colum MacKenzie face-to-face."

"Colum? Are you sure?" I looked over my shoulder.

"Oh, aye. The coloring's different—but allowing for age and good health … There was a painting at Leoch, done of Colum when he was maybe fifteen, before his first fall. Recall it, do ye? It hung in the solar on the third floor."

I closed my eyes, frowning in concentration, trying to reconstruct the floor plan of the castle.

"Walk me there," I said. He made a small amused noise in his throat but took my hand, tracing a delicate line on my palm.

"Aye, here's the entrance, wi' the big double door. Ye'd cross the courtyard, once inside, and then …"

He walked me unerringly to the exact spot in my mind, and sure enough, there was a painting there of a young man with a thin, clever face and look of far-seeing in his eyes.

"Yes, I think you're right," I said, opening my eyes. "If he *is* as intelligent as Colum, then … I have to tell him."

Jamie's eyes, dark with thought, searched my face.

"We couldna change things, earlier," he said, a note of warning in my voice. "Ye likely canna change what's to come in France."

"Maybe not," I said. "But what I knew—what I told you, before Culloden. It didn't stop Charles Stuart, but *you* lived."

"Not on purpose," he said dryly.

"No, but your men lived, too—and that *was* on purpose. So maybe—just maybe—it *might* help. And I can't live with myself if I don't."

He nodded, sober.

"Aye, then. I'll call them."

* * *

The Cork eased free with a soft *pop!*, and Michael's face eased, too. He sniffed the darkened cork, then passed the bottle delicately under his nose, eyes half closing in appreciation.

"Well, what d'ye say, lad?" his father asked. "Will it poison us or no?"

He opened his eyes and gave his father a mildly dirty look.

"You said it was important, aye? So we'll have the negroamaro. From Apulia," he added, with a note of satisfaction, and turned to me. "Will that do, Aunt?"

"Er … certainly," I said, taken back somewhat. "Why ask me? You're the wine expert."

Michael glanced at me, surprised.

"Ian said—" he began, but stopped and smiled at me. "My apologies, Aunt. I must have misunderstood."

Everyone turned and looked at Young Ian, who reddened at this scrutiny.

"What exactly did ye say, Ian?" Young Jamie asked. Young Ian narrowed his eyes at his brother, who seemed to be finding something funny in the situation.

"I said," Young Ian replied, straightening himself defiantly, "that Auntie Claire had something of importance to say to Michael, and that he must listen, because she's a … a …"

"*Ban-sidhe*, he said," Michael ended helpfully. He didn't grin at me, but a deep humor glowed in his eyes, and for the first time I saw what Jamie had meant by comparing him to Colum MacKenzie. "I wasn't sure whether he meant that, Auntie, or if it's only you're a conjure-woman—or a witch."

Jenny gasped at the word, and even the elder Ian blinked. Both of them turned and looked at Young Ian, who hunched his shoulders defensively.

"Well, I dinna ken *exactly* what she is," he said. "But she's an Auld One, isn't she, Uncle Jamie?"

Something odd seemed to pass through the air of the room; a sudden live, fresh wind moaned down the chimney, exploding the banked fire and showering sparks and embers onto the hearth. Jenny got up with a small exclamation and beat them out with the broom.

Jamie was sitting beside me; he took my hand and fixed Michael with a firm sort of look.

"There's no real word for what she is—but she has knowledge of things that will come to pass. Listen to her."

That settled them all to attention, and I cleared my throat, deeply embarrassed by my role as prophet but obliged to speak nonetheless. For the first time, I had a sudden sense of kinship with some of the more reluctant Old Testament prophets. I thought I knew *just* what Jeremiah felt like when told to go and prophesy the destruction of Nineveh. I just hoped I'd get a better reception; I seemed to recall that the inhabitants of Nineveh had thrown him into a well.

"You'll know more than I do about the politics in France," I said, looking directly at Michael. "I can't tell you anything in terms of specific events for the next ten or fifteen years. But after that … things are going to go downhill fast. There's going to be a revolution. Inspired by the one that's happening now in America, but not the same. The King and Queen will be imprisoned with their family, and both of them will be beheaded."

A general gasp went up from the table, and Michael blinked.

"There will be a movement called the Terror, and people will be pulled out of their homes and denounced, all the aristocrats will either be killed or have to flee the country, and it won't be too good for rich people in general. Jared may be dead by then, but you won't be. And if you're half as talented as I think, you *will* be rich."

He snorted a little at that, and there was a breath of laughter in the room, but it didn't last long.

"They'll build a machine called the guillotine—perhaps it already exists, I don't know. It was originally made as a humane method of execution, I think, but it will be used so often that it will be a symbol of the Terror, and of the revolution in general. You *don't* want to be in France when that happens."

"I—how do ye know this?" Michael demanded. He looked pale and half belligerent. Well, here was the rub. I took a firm grip of Jamie's hand under the table and told them how I knew.

There was a dead silence. Only Young Ian didn't look dumbfounded—but he knew already, and more or less believed me. I could tell that most of those around the table didn't. At the same time, they couldn't really call me a liar.

"That's what I know," I said, speaking straight to Michael. "And that's how I know it. You have a few years to get ready. Move the business to Spain, or Portugal. Sell out and emigrate to America. Do anything you like—but don't stay in France for more than ten years more. That's all," I said abruptly. I got up and went out, leaving utter silence in my wake.

* * *

I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. I was in the hen coop, collecting eggs, when I heard the excited squawk and flutter of the hens outside that announced someone had come into their yard. I fixed the last hen with a steely glare that dared her to peck me, snatched an egg out from under her, and came out to see who was there.

It was Jenny, with an apronful of corn. That was odd; I knew the hens had already been fed, for I'd seen one of Maggie's daughters doing it an hour earlier.

She nodded to me and tossed the corn in handfuls. I tucked the last warm egg into my basket and waited. Obviously she wanted to talk to me and had made an excuse to do so in private. I had a deep feeling of foreboding.

Entirely justified, too, for she dropped the last handful of cracked corn and, with it, all pretense.

“I want to beg a favor,” she said to me, but she avoided my eye, and I could see the pulse in her temple going like a ticking clock.

“Jenny,” I said, helpless either to stop her or to answer her. “I know—”

“Will ye cure Ian?” she blurted, lifting her eyes to mine. I'd been right about what she meant to ask, but wrong about her emotion. Worry and fear lay behind her eyes, but there was no shyness, no embarrassment; she had the eyes of a hawk, and I knew she would rip my flesh like one if I denied her.

“Jenny,” I said again. “I can't.”

“Ye can't, or ye won't?” she said sharply.

“I *can't.* For God's sake, do you think I wouldn't have done it already if I had the power?”

“Ye might not, for the sake of the grudge ye hold against me. If that's it—I'll say I'm sorry, and I do mean it, though I meant what I did for the best.”

“You … what?” I was honestly confused, but this seemed to anger her.

“Dinna pretend ye've no notion what I mean! When ye came back before, and I sent for Laoghaire!”

“Oh.” I hadn't quite *forgotten* that, but it hadn't seemed important, in light of everything else. “That's … all right. I don't hold it against you. Why *did* you send for her, though?” I asked, both out of curiosity and in hopes of diffusing the intensity of her emotion a little. I'd seen a great number of people on the ragged edge of exhaustion, grief, and terror, and she was firmly in the grip of all three.

She made a jerky, impatient motion and seemed as though she would turn away but didn't.

"Jamie hadn't told ye about her, nor her about you. I could see why, maybe, but I kent if I brought her here, he'd have nay choice then but to take the bull by the horns and clear up the matter."

"She nearly cleared *him* up," I said, beginning to get somewhat hot myself. "She *shot him*, for God's sake!"

"Well, I didna give her the gun, did I?" she snapped. "I didna mean him to say whatever he said to her, nor her to take up a pistol and put a ball in him."

"No, but you told me to go away!"

"Why wouldn't I? Ye'd broken his heart once already, and I thought ye'd do it again! And you wi' the nerve to come prancing back here, fine and blooming, when we'd been … we'd been—it was that that gave Ian the cough!"

"That—"

"When they took him away and put him in the Tolbooth. But you werena here when that happened! Ye werena here when we starved and froze and feared for the lives of our men and our bairns! Not for any of it! You were in France, warm and safe!"

"I was in Boston, two hundred years from now, thinking Jamie was dead," I said coldly. "And I *can't help* Ian." I struggled to subdue my own feelings, uncorked with a rush by this ripping of scabs off the past, and found compassion in the look of her, her fine-boned face gaunt and harrowed with worry, her hands clenched so hard that the nails bit into the flesh.

"Jenny," I said more quietly. "Please believe me. If I could do anything for Ian, I'd give my soul to do it. But I'm not magic; I haven't any power. Only a little knowledge, and not enough. I'd give my *soul* to do it," I repeated, more strongly, leaning toward her. "But I can't. Jenny … I can't."

She stared at me in silence. A silence that lengthened past bearing, and finally I stepped around her and walked toward the house. She didn’t turn around, and I didn’t look back. But behind me, I heard her whisper.

“You have nay soul.”

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PURGATORY II

When Ian felt well enough, he came out walking with Jamie. Sometimes only as far as the yard or the barn, to lean on the fence and make remarks to Jenny's sheep. Sometimes he felt well enough to walk miles, which amazed—and alarmed—Jamie. Still, he thought, it was good to walk side by side through the moors and the forest and down beside the loch, not talking much but side by side. It didn't matter that they walked slowly; they always had, since Ian had come back from France with a wooden leg.

"I'm lookin' forward to having back my leg," Ian had remarked casually once, when they sat in the shelter of the big rock where Fergus had lost his hand, looking out over the small burn that ran down at the foot of the hill, watching for the stray flash of a leaping trout.

"Aye, that'll be good," Jamie had said, smiling a little—and a little wry about it, too, recalling when he'd waked after Culloden and thought his own leg missing. He'd been upset and tried to comfort himself with the thought that he'd get it back eventually, if he made it out of purgatory and into heaven. Of course, he'd thought he was dead, too, but that hadn't seemed nearly as bad as the imagined loss of his leg.

"I dinna suppose ye'll have to wait," he said idly, and Ian blinked at him.

"Wait for what?"

"Your leg." He realized suddenly that Ian had no notion what he'd been thinking, and hastened to explain.

“So I was only thinking, ye wouldna spend much time in purgatory—if at all—so ye’ll have it back soon.”

Ian grinned at him. “What makes ye sae sure I willna spend a thousand years in purgatory? I might be a terrible sinner, aye?”

“Well, aye, ye might be,” Jamie admitted. “Though if so, ye must think the devil of a lot of wicked thoughts, because if ye’d been *doing* anything, I’d know about it.”

“Oh, ye think so?” Ian seemed to find this funny. “Ye havena seen me in years. I might ha’ been doing anything, and ye’d never ken a thing about it!”

“Of course I would,” Jamie said logically. “Jenny would tell me. And ye dinna mean to suggest she wouldna ken if ye had a mistress and six bastard bairns, or ye’d taken to the highways and been robbing folk in a black silk mask?”

“Well, possibly she would,” Ian admitted. “Though come on, man, there’s nothing ye could call a highway within a hundred miles. And I’d freeze to death long before I came across anyone worth robbin’ in one o’ the passes.” He paused, eyes narrowed against the wind, contemplating the criminal possibilities open to him.

“I could ha’ been stealing cattle,” he offered. “Though there’re sae few beasts these days, the whole parish would ken it at once should one go missing. And I doubt I could hide it amongst Jenny’s sheep wi’ any hope of its not bein’ noticed.”

He thought further, chin in hand, then reluctantly shook his head.

“The sad truth is, Jamie, no one’s had a thing worth stealin’ in the Highlands these twenty years past. Nay, theft’s right out, I’m afraid. So is fornication, because Jenny would ha’ killed me already. What does that leave? There’s no really anything to covet.… I suppose lying and murder is all that’s left, and while I’ve met the odd man I would ha’ *liked* to kill, I never did.” He shook his head regretfully, and Jamie laughed.

“Oh, aye? Ye told me ye killed men in France.”

“Well, aye, I did, but that was a matter of war—or business,” he added fairly. “I was bein’ paid to kill them; I didna do it out o’ spite.”

“Well, then, I’m right,” Jamie pointed out. “Ye’ll sail straight through purgatory like a rising cloud, for I canna think of a single lie ye’ve ever told me.”

Ian smiled with great affection.

“Aye, well, I may ha’ told lies now and then, Jamie—but no, not to you.”

He looked down at the worn wooden peg stretched before him and scratched at the knee on that side.

“I wonder, will it feel different?”

“How could it not?”

“Well, the thing is,” Ian said, wiggling his sound foot to and fro, “I can still feel my missing foot. Always have been able to, ever since it went. Not all the time, mind,” he added, looking up. “But I do feel it. A verra strange thing. Do ye feel your finger?” he asked curiously, raising his chin at Jamie’s right hand.

“Well … aye, I do. Not all the time, but now and then—and the nasty thing is that even though it’s gone, it still *hurts* like damnation, which doesna seem really fair.”

He could have bitten his tongue at that, for here Ian was dying, and him complaining that the loss of his finger wasn’t fair. Ian wheezed with amusement, though, and leaned back, shaking his head.

“If life was fair, then what?”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching the wind move through the pines on the hillside opposite. Then Jamie reached into his sporran and brought out the tiny white-wrapped package. It was a bit grubby from being in his sporran but had been tidily preserved and tightly wrapped.

Ian eyed the little bundle in his palm.

“What’s this?”

“My finger,” Jamie said. “I—well … I wondered whether ye’d maybe not mind to have it buried with ye.”

Ian looked at him for a moment. Then his shoulders started to shake.

“God, don’t laugh!” Jamie said, alarmed. “I didna mean to make ye laugh! Christ, Jenny will kill me if ye cough up a lung and die out here!"

Ian *was* coughing, fits of it interspersed with long-drawn-out wheezes of laughter. Tears of mirth stood in his eyes, and he pressed both fists into his chest, struggling to breathe. At last, though, he left off and straightened slowly up, making a sound like a bellows. He sniffed deep and casually spat a glob of horrifying scarlet into the rocks.

"I'd rather die out here laughin' at you than in my bed wi' six priests say-in' prayers," he said. "Doubt I'll get the chance, though." He put out a hand, palm up. "Aye, give it here."

Jamie laid the little white-wrapped cylinder in his hand, and Ian tucked the finger casually into his own sporran.

"I'll keep it safe 'til ye catch me up."

* * *

He came down through the trees and made his way toward the edge of the moorland that lay below the cave. It was sharply cold, with a stiff breeze blowing, and the light changed over the land like the flicker of a bird's wings as the clouds slid overhead, long and fleeting. He'd picked up a deer trail through the heather earlier in the morning, but it had disappeared in a stony fall near a brae, and now he was coming back toward the house; he was behind the hill on which the broch stood, this side of it thick with a little wood of beech and pine. He'd not seen a deer or even a coney this morning, but wasn't bothered.

With so many in the house, they could use a deer, to be sure—but he was happy only to be out of the house, even if he came back with nothing.

He couldn't look at Ian without wanting to stare at his face, to commit him to memory, to impress these last bits of his brother-in-law upon his mind in the way that he recalled special vivid moments, there to be taken out and lived through again at need. But at the same time, he didn't *want to* remember Ian as he was now; much better to keep what he had of him: firelight on the side of Ian's face, laughing fit to burst as he'd forced Jamie's arm over in a wrestling match, his own wiry strength surprising them both. Ian's long, knob-jointed hands on the gralloch knife, the wrench and the hot metal smell of the blood that smeared his fingers, the look of his brown hair ruffling in the wind off the loch, the narrow back, bent and springy as a bow as he stooped to snatch one of his toddling bairns or grandchildren off their feet and throw them up giggling into the air.

It was good they'd come, he thought. Better than good that they'd brought the lad back in time to speak to his father as a man, to comfort Ian's mind and take his leave properly. But to live in the same house with a beloved brother dying by inches under your nose wore sadly on the nerves.

With so many women in the house, squabbling was inevitable. With so many of the women Frasers, it was like walking through a gunpowder mill with a lit candle. Everyone tried so hard to manage, to keep in countenance, to accommodate—but that only made it worse when some spark finally set the powder keg off. He wasn't only out hunting because they needed meat.

He spared a sympathetic thought for Claire. After Jenny's anguished request, Claire had taken to hiding in their room or in Ian's study—he had invited her to use it, and Jamie thought that aggravated Jenny still more—writing busily, making the book Andy Bell had put in her mind. She had great powers of concentration and could stay inside her mind for hours—but she had to come out to eat. And it was always there, the knowledge that Ian was dying, grinding like a quern, slow but relentless, wearing away the nerves.

Ian's nerves, too.

He and Ian had been walking—slowly—by the side of the loch two days before, when Ian stopped suddenly, curling in on himself like an autumn leaf. Jamie hurried to take him by the arm before he could fall, and he lowered him to the ground, finding a boulder to brace his back, pulling the shawl high around the wasted shoulders, looking for anything, anything at all he could do.

"What is it, *a charaid*?" he said, anxious, crouching beside his brother-in-law, his friend.

Ian was coughing, almost silently, his body shaking with the force of it. At last the spasm eased and he could draw breath, his face bright with the consumptive flush, that terrible illusion of health.

"It hurts, Jamie." The words were spoken simply, but Ian's eyelids were closed, as though he didn't want to look at Jamie while he spoke.

"I'll carry ye back. We'll get ye a bit of laudanum, maybe, and—"

Ian waved a hand, quelling his anxious promises. He breathed shallowly for a moment before shaking his head.

"Aye, my chest feels like there's a knife in it," he said finally. "But that's no what I meant. I'm no bothered so much about dying—but Christ, the slowness of it is killing me." He did open his eyes then, meeting Jamie's, and laughed as silently as he'd coughed, the barest breath of sound as his body shook with it.

"This dying hurts me, Dougal. I'd have it over." The words came into his mind as clearly as if they'd been spoken just now in front of him, rather than thirty years before in a dark church, ruined by cannon fire. Rupert had said that, dying slow. *"You're my chief, man,"* he'd said to Dougal, imploring. *"It's your job."* And Dougal MacKenzie had done what love and duty called for.

He had been holding Ian's hand, clasping hard, trying to force some notion of well-being from his own calloused palm into Ian's thin gray skin. His thumb slid upward now, pressing on the wrist where he had seen Claire grip, searching out the truth of a patient's health.

He felt the skin give, sliding across the bones of Ian's wrist. He thought suddenly of the blood vow given at his marriage, the sting of the blade and Claire's cold wrist pressed to his and the blood slick between them. Ian's wrist was cold, too, but not from fear.

He glanced at his own wrist, but there was no trace of a scar, either from vows or fetters; those wounds were fleeting, long-healed.

"D'ye remember when we gave each other blood for blood?" Ian's eyes were closed, but he smiled. Jamie's hand tightened on the bony wrist, a little startled but not truly surprised that Ian had reached into his mind and caught the echo of his thoughts.

"Aye, of course." He couldn't help a small smile of his own, a painful one.

They'd been eight years old, the two of them. Jamie's mother and her bairn had died the day before. The house had been full of mourners, his father dazed with shock. They had slipped out, he and Ian, scrambling up the hill behind the house, trying not to look at the fresh-dug grave by the broch. Into the wood, safe under the trees.

Had slowed then, wandering, come to a stop at last at the top of the high hill, where some old stone building that they called the fort had fallen down long ago. They'd sat on the rubble, wrapped in their plaids against the wind, not talking much.

"I thought I'd have a new brother," he'd said suddenly. "But I don't. It's just Jenny and me, still." In the years since, he'd succeeded in forgetting that small pain, the loss of his hoped-for brother, the boy who might have given him back a little of his love for his older brother, Willie, dead of the smallpox. He'd cherished that pain for a little, a flimsy shield against the enormity of knowing his mother gone forever.

Ian had sat thinking for a bit, then reached into his sporran and got out the wee knife his father had given him on his last birthday.

"I'll be your brother," he'd said, matter-of-fact, and cut across his thumb, hissing a little through his teeth.

He'd handed the knife to Jamie, who'd cut himself, surprised that it hurt so much, and then they'd pressed their thumbs together and sworn to be brothers always. And had been.

He took a deep breath, bracing himself against the nearness of death, the black finality.

"Ian. Shall I …" Ian's eyelids lifted, the soft brown of his gaze sharpening into clarity at what he heard in the thickness of Jamie's voice. Jamie cleared his throat hard and looked away, then looked back, feeling obscurely that to look away was cowardly.

"Will ye have me hasten ye?" he asked, very softly. Even as he spoke, the cold part of his mind sought the way. Not by the blade, no; it was quick and clean, a proper man's departure, but it would cause his sister and the weans grief; neither he nor Ian had the right to leave a final memory stained with blood.

Ian's grip neither slackened nor clung, but of a sudden Jamie felt the pulse he had looked for in vain, a small, steady throb against his own palm.

He hadn't looked away, but his eyes blurred, and he bent his head to hide the tears.

Claire … She would know how, but he couldn't ask her to do it. Her own vow kept her from it.

"No," Ian said. "Not yet, anyway." He'd smiled, eyes soft. "But I'm glad to ken ye'll do it if I need ye to, *mo brathair."*

The flicker of a movement stopped him in his tracks and jerked him instantly from his thoughts.

It hadn't seen him, though he was in sight. The wind was toward him, though, and the deer was busy, nibbling among the crusts of dry heather for sheltered bits of grass and softer moor plants. He waited, listening to the wind. Only the deer's head and shoulders were visible behind a gorse bush, though he thought from the size of the neck that it was a male.

He waited, feeling the way of it seep back into him. Hunting red deer on the moor was different from hunting in the forests of North Carolina. A slower thing altogether. The deer moved out a little from behind the gorse bush, intent on its feeding, and he began, by imperceptible degrees, to raise his rifle. He'd had a gunsmith in Edinburgh straighten the barrel for him but hadn't used it since; he hoped it would aim true.

Hadn't used it since he'd clouted the Hessian with it in the redoubt. He had a sudden, vivid recollection of Claire dropping the misshapen bullet that had killed Simon into the china plate, felt the chink and roll of it in his blood.

Another step, two; the deer had found something tasty and was tugging and chewing with great concentration. Like a thing completing itself, the muzzle of the rifle settled gently on its target. A big buck deer, and no more than a hundred yards. He could feel the big solid heart, pumping under his own ribs, pulsing in the tips of his fingers on the metal. The stock snugged hard into the hollow of his shoulder.

He was just beginning to squeeze the trigger when he heard the screams from the wood behind him. The gun went off, the shot went wild, the deer vanished with a crash of breaking heather, and the screams stopped.

He turned and strode fast into the woods, in the direction where he'd heard them, his heart pounding. Who? A woman, but who?

He found Jenny without much difficulty, standing frozen in the small clearing where he and she and Ian came when they were young, to share out stolen treats and play at knights and soldiers.

She'd been a good soldier.

Maybe she'd been waiting for him, having heard his gun. Maybe she just couldn't move. She stood straight-backed but empty-eyed and watched him come, her shawls wrapped like rusty armor round her.

"Are ye all right, lass?" he asked, setting down his rifle by the big pine where she'd read to him and Ian in the long summer nights when the sun barely set from dusk to dawn.

"Aye, fine," she said, her voice colorless.

"Aye, right," he said, sighing. Coming close, he insisted upon taking her hands in his; she didn't give them to him but didn't resist. "I heard ye scream."

"I didna mean anyone to hear."

"Of course ye didn't." He hesitated, wanting to ask again was she all right, but that was foolish. He knew fine well what the trouble was and why she needed to come and scream in the wood, where no one would hear her and ask stupidly was she all right.

"D'ye want me to go away?" he asked instead, and she grimaced, pulling at her hand, but he didn't let go.

"No. What difference does it make? What difference does anything make?" He heard the note of hysteria in her voice.

"At least … we brought the lad home in time," he said, for lack of anything else to offer her.

"Aye, ye did," she said, with an effort at self-control that shredded like old silk. "And ye brought your wife back, too."

“Ye blame me for bringing my wife?” he said, shocked. “Why, for God’s sake? Should ye no be happy she’s come back? Or d’ye—” He choked off the next words fast; he’d been about to demand whether she resented him still having a wife when she was about to lose her husband, and he couldn’t say *that.*

But that wasn’t what Jenny had meant, at all.

“Aye, she’s come back. But for what?” she cried. “What good is a faery-woman too coldhearted to lift a finger to save Ian?”

He was so staggered by this that he couldn’t do anything but repeat “Coldhearted? Claire?” in a dazed fashion.

“I asked, and she denied me.” His sister’s eyes were tearless, frantic with grief and urgency. “Can ye not make her help me, Jamie?”

The life in his sister, always bright and pulsing, thrummed under his fingers like chained lightning now. Better if she let it loose on him, he thought. She couldn’t hurt him.

“Mo pìuthar, she’d heal him if she could,” he said, as gently as possible without letting go of her. “She told me ye’d asked—and she wept in the telling. She loves Ian as much—”

“Don’t ye *dare* be telling me she loves my husband as much as I do!” she shouted, jerking her hands out of his with such violence that he was sure she meant to strike him. She did, slapping his face so hard that his eye watered on that side.

“I wasna going to tell ye that at all,” he said, keeping his temper. He touched the side of his face gingerly. “I was *going* to say that she loves him as much—”

He’d intended to say, “*as she loves me,”* but didn’t get that far. She kicked him in the shin hard enough to buckle his leg, and he stumbled, flailing to keep his balance, which gave her the opportunity to turn and fly down the hill like a witch on a broomstick, her skirts and shawls whirling out like a storm around her.

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DISPOSITIONS

Cleansing of wounds, I wrote carefully, and paused, marshaling my thoughts. Boiling water, clean rags, removal of foreign matter. Use of maggots on dead flesh (with a note of caution regarding blowfly and screwworm larvae? No, pointless; no one would be able to tell the difference without a magnifying glass). The stitching of wounds (sterilization of needle and thread). Useful poultices. Ought I to put in a separate section on the production and uses of penicillin?

I tapped the quill on the blotter, making tiny stars of ink, but finally decided against it. This was meant to be a useful guide for the common person. The common person was not equipped for the painstaking process of making penicillin, nor yet likely to have an injection apparatus—though I did think briefly of the penis syringe Dr. Fentiman had shown me, with a faint twinge of amusement.

That in turn made me think—briefly but vividly—of David Rawlings and his jugum penis. Did he really use it himself? I wondered, but hastily dismissed the vision conjured up by the thought and flipped over a few sheets, looking for my list of main topics.

Masturbation, I wrote thoughtfully. If some doctors discussed it in a negative light—and they most certainly did—I supposed there was no reason why I shouldn't give the opposing view—discreetly.

I found myself still making inky stars a few moments later, thoroughly distracted by the problem of talking discreetly about the benefits of masturbation. God, what if I said in print that women did it?

"They'd burn the whole printing, and likely Andy Bell's shop, too," I said aloud.

There was a sharp intake of breath, and I glanced up to see a woman standing in the door of the study.

"Oh, are you looking for Ian Murray?" I said, pushing back from the desk. "He's—"

"No, it's you I was looking for." There was a very odd tone to her voice, and I stood up, feeling suddenly defensive without knowing why.

"Ah," I said. "And you are …?"

She stepped out of the shadowed hall into the light.

"Ye'll not know me, then?" Her mouth twitched in an angry half smile. "Laoghaire MacKenzie … Fraser," she added, almost reluctantly.

"Oh," I said.

I would have recognized her at once, I thought, save for the incongruity of context. This was the last place I would have expected her to be, and the fact that she was here … A recollection of what had happened the last time she had come to Lallybroch made me reach inconspicuously for the letter opener on the desk.

"You were looking for me," I repeated warily. "Not Jamie?"

She made a contemptuous gesture, pushing the thought of Jamie aside, and reached into the pocket at her waist, bringing out a folded letter.

"I've come to ask ye a favor," she said, and for the first time I heard the tremor in her voice. "Read that. If ye will," she added, and pressed her lips tight together.

I looked warily at her pocket, but it was flat; if she'd brought a pistol, she wasn't carrying it there. I picked up the letter and motioned her to the chair on the other side of the desk. If she took it into her head to attack me, I'd have a little warning.

Still, I wasn't really afraid of her. She was upset; that was clear. But very much in control of herself.

I opened the letter, and, with the occasional glance to be sure she stayed where she was, began to read.

15 February 1778
Philadelphia

"Philadelphia?" I said, startled, and looked up at Laoghaire. She nodded.

"They went there in the summer last year, himself thinking 'twould be safer." Her lips twisted a little. "Two months later, the British army came a-marching into the city, and there they've been since."

"Himself," I supposed, was Fergus. I noted the usage with interest; evidently Laoghaire had become reconciled to her older daughter's husband, for she used the word without irony.

Dear Mam,

I must ask you to do something for love of me and my children. The trouble is with Henri-Christian. Because of his oddness of form, he has always had some trouble in breathing, particularly when suffering from the catarrh, and has snored like a grampus since he was born. Now he has taken to stopping breathing altogether when he sleeps, save he is propped up with cushions in a particular position. Mother Claire had looked in his throat when she and Da saw us in New Bern and said then that his adenoids—this being something in his throat—were overlarge and might give trouble in future. (Germain has these, also, and breathes with his mouth open a good deal of the time, but it is not a danger to him as it is to Henri-Christian.)

I am in mortal terror that Henri-Christian will stop breathing one night and no one will know in time to save him. We take it in turns to sit up with him, to keep his head just right and to wake him when he stops breathing, but I do not know how long we can contrive to keep it up. Fergus is worn out with the work of the shop and I with

> *the work of the house (I help in the shop, as well, and so of course does Germain. The little girls are great help to me in the house, bless them, and so willing to care for their little brother—but they cannot be left to sit up with him by night alone).*
>
> *I have had a physician to look at Henri-Christian. He agrees that the adenoids are likely to blame for the obstruction of breathing, and he bled the wee lad and gave me medicine to shrink them, but this was of no use at all and only made Henri-Christian cry and vomit. Mother Claire—-forgive me for speaking of her to you, for I know your feelings, but I must—had said that it might be necessary to remove Henri-Christian's tonsils and adenoids at some point, to ease his breathing, and plainly this point has been reached. She did this for the Beardsley twins some time ago on the Ridge, and I would trust no one else to attempt such an operation on Henri-Christian.*
>
> *Will you go to see her, Mam? I think she must be at Lallybroch now, and I will write to her there, begging her to come to Philadelphia as soon as possible. But I fear my inability to communicate the horror of our situation.*
>
> *As you love me, Mam, please go to her and ask her to come as quickly as may be.*
>
> *Your most affectionate daughter,*
> *Marsali*

I set down the letter. *I fear my inability to communicate the horror of our situation*. No, she'd done that, all right.

Sleep apnea, they called it; the tendency to stop breathing suddenly when asleep. It was common—and much more common in some sorts of dwarfism, where the respiratory airways were constricted by the skeletal abnormalities. Most people who had it would wake themselves, thrashing and snorting as they breathed again. But the enlarged adenoids and tonsils obstructing his throat—probably a hereditary problem, I thought distractedly, for I'd noted them in Germain and to a lesser extent in the girls, as well—would aggravate the difficulty, since even if the reflex that causes a person short of oxygen to breathe kicked in belatedly, Henri-Christian likely couldn't draw the immediate deep breath that would waken him.

The vision of Marsali and Fergus—and probably Germain—taking it in turns to sit up in a dark house, watching the little boy sleep, perhaps nodding off themselves in the cold and quiet, jerking awake in terror lest he have shifted in his sleep and stopped breathing … A sick knot of fear had formed under my ribs, reading the letter.

Laoghaire was watching me, blue eyes direct under her cap. For once, the anger, hysteria, and suspicion with which she had always regarded me was gone.

"If ye'll go," she said, and swallowed, "I'll give up the money."

I stared at her.

"You think that I—" I began incredulously, but stopped. Well, yes, she plainly *did* believe I would require to be bribed. She thought that I had abandoned Jamie after Culloden, returning only when he had become prosperous again. I struggled with the urge to try to tell her … but that was pointless, and quite beside the point now, too. The situation was clear and sharp as broken glass.

She leaned forward abruptly, her hands on the desk, pressed down so hard that her fingernails were white.

"Please," she said. *"Please."*

I was conscious of strong, conflicting urges: on the one hand, to smack her, and on the other, to put a sympathetic hand over hers. I fought down both and forced myself to think calmly for a moment.

I would go, of course; I'd have to. It had nothing to do with Laoghaire, or with what lay between us. If I did not go, and Henri-Christian died—he well *might*—I'd never be able to live with myself. If I came in time, I could save him; no one else could. It was as simple as that.

My heart sank precipitously at the thought of leaving Lallybroch now. How horrible; how could I, knowing that I left Ian for the last time, perhaps leaving them all and the place itself for the last time. But even as I thought these things, the part of my mind that was a surgeon had already grasped the necessity and was setting about the business of planning the quickest way to Philadelphia, contemplating how I should acquire what I needed once there, the possible obstructions and complications that might arise—all the practical analysis of how I should do what had so suddenly been asked of me.

And as my mind clicked through these things, the ruthless logic overwhelming shock, subduing emotion, it began to dawn upon me that this sudden disaster might have other aspects.

Laoghaire was waiting, eyes fixed on me, her mouth firm, willing me to do it.

"All right," I said, leaning back in my chair and fixing her in turn with a level look. "Let's come to terms, then, shall we?"

* * *

"So," I said, eyes fixed on the flight of a gray heron as it crossed the loch, "we made a bargain. I'll go to Philadelphia as quickly as I can to take care of Henri-Christian. She'll marry Joey, give up the alimony—and give her permission for Joan to go to the convent. Though I suppose we'd best get it in writing, just in case."

Jamie stared at me, speechless. We were sitting in the long rough grass at the side of the loch, where I'd brought him to tell him what had happened—and what was going to happen.

"She—Laoghaire—has kept Joan's dowry intact; Joan will have that, for traveling and for her entry to the convent," I added. I took a deep breath, hoping to keep my voice steady. "I'm thinking that—well, Michael will be leaving in a few days. Joan and I could go with him to France; I could sail from there on a French ship, and he could see her safely to her convent."

"You—" he began, and I reached to squeeze his hand, to stop him speaking.

"You can't go now, Jamie," I said softly. "I know you can't."

He closed his eyes, grimacing, and his hand tightened on mine in instinctive denial of the obvious. I clung to his fingers just as tightly, in spite of the fact that it was his tender right hand I held. The thought of being parted from him for any amount of time or space—let alone the Atlantic Ocean and the months it might take before we saw each other again—made the bottom of my stomach fall away and filled me with desolation and a sense of vague terror.

He would go with me if I asked—if I even gave him room for doubt about what he must do. I must not.

He needed this so much. Needed what small time remained with Ian; needed even more to be here for Jenny when Ian died, for he could be her comfort in a way that not even her children could be. And if he had needed to go and see Laoghaire out of guilt over the failure of their marriage—how much more acute would be his guilt at abandoning his sister, yet again, and in her most desperate time of need.

"You can't leave," I whispered, urgent. "I *know*, Jamie."

He opened his eyes then and looked at me, eyes dark with anguish.

"I canna let ye go. Not without me."

"It … won't be long," I said, forcing the words past the lump in my throat—a lump that acknowledged both my sorrow in parting from him and the greater sorrow for the reason why our separation wouldn't be a long one.

"I've gone farther by myself, after all," I said, trying to smile. His mouth moved, wanting to respond, but the trouble in his eyes didn't change.

I lifted his crippled hand to my lips and kissed it, pressed my cheek against it, my head turned away—but a tear ran down my cheek and I knew he felt the wetness of it on his hand, for his other hand reached for me and drew me into him, and we sat pressed together for a long, long time, listening to the wind that stirred the grass and touched the water. The heron had set down at the far side of the loch and stood on one leg, waiting patiently amid the tiny ripples.

"We'll need a lawyer," I said at last, not moving. "Is Ned Gowan still alive?"

* * *

Much to my astonishment, Ned Gowan *was* still alive. How old could he possibly be? I wondered, looking at him. Eighty-five? Ninety? He was toothless and wrinkled as a crumpled paper bag, but still jaunty as a cricket, and with his lawyer's bloodlust quite intact.

He had drawn up the agreement of annulment for the marriage between Jamie and Laoghaire, cheerfully arranging the annual payments to Laoghaire, the dowries for Marsali and Joan. He set himself now just as cheerfully to dismantling it.

"Now, the question of Mistress Joan's dowry," he said, thoughtfully licking the point of his quill. "You specified, sir, in the original document, that this amount—may I say, this very *generous* amount—was to be endowed upon the young woman upon the occasion of her marriage and to remain her sole property thereafter, not passing to her husband."

"Aye, that's right," Jamie said, not very patiently. He'd told me privately that he would prefer to be staked out naked on an anthill than to have to deal with a lawyer for more than five minutes, and we had been dealing with the complications of this agreement for a good hour. "So?"

"So she is not marrying," Mr. Gowan explained, with the indulgence due to someone not very bright but still worthy of respect by reason of the fact that he was paying the lawyer's fee. "The question of whether she can receive the dowry under this contract—"

"She *is* marrying," Jamie said. "She's becoming a Bride o' Christ, ye ignorant Protestant."

I glanced at Ned in some surprise, having never heard that he *was* a Protestant, but he made no demur at this. Mr. Gowan, sharp as ever, noticed my surprise and smiled at me, eyes twinkling.

"I have no religion save the law, ma'am," he said. "Observance of one form of ritual over another is irrelevant; God to me is the personification of Justice, and I serve Him in that guise."

Jamie made a Scottish noise deep in his throat in response to this sentiment.

"Aye, and a fat lot o' good that will do ye, and your clients here ever realize ye're no a papist."

Mr. Gowan's small dark eyes did not cease to twinkle as he turned them on Jamie.

"I am sure ye dinna suggest such a low thing as blackmail, sir? Why, I hesitate even to name that honorable Scottish institution, knowing as I do the nobility of your character—and the fact that ye're no going to get this bloody contract done without me."

Jamie sighed deeply and settled into his chair.

"Aye, get on with it. What's to do about the dowry, then?"

"Ah." Mr. Gowan turned with alacrity to the matter at hand. "I have spoken with the young woman regarding her own wishes in the matter. As the original maker of the contract, you may—with the consent of the other signatory, which, I understand, has been given"—he uttered a dry little cough at this oblique mention of Laoghaire—"alter the terms of the original document. *Since*, as I say, Mistress Joan does not propose to wed, do you wish to rescind the dowry altogether, to keep the existing terms, or to alter them in some way?"

"I want to give the money to Joan," Jamie said, with an air of relief at finally being asked something concrete.

"Absolutely?" Mr. Gowan inquired, pen poised. "The word 'absolutely' having a meaning in law other than—"

"Ye said ye talked to Joan. What the devil does *she* want, then?"

Mr. Gowan looked happy, as he usually did upon perceiving a new complication.

"She wishes to accept only a small portion of the original dowry, this to be used to provide for her reception into a convent; such a donation is customary, I believe."

"Aye?" Jamie raised one eyebrow. "And what about the rest?"

"She wishes the residue to be given to her mother, Laoghaire MacKenzie Fraser, but not given absolutely, if you follow me. Given with conditions."

Jamie and I exchanged looks.

"*What* conditions?" he asked carefully.

Mr. Gowan held up a withered hand, folding down the fingers as he enumerated the conditions.

"One, that the money shall *not* be released until a proper record of the marriage of Laoghaire MacKenzie Fraser and Joseph Boswell Murray shall be written in the parish register of Broch Mordha, witnessed and attested by a priest. Two, that a contract be signed, reserving and guaranteeing the estate of Balriggan and all its inclusive goods as the sole property of Laoghaire MacKenzie Fraser until her death, thereafter being willed as the aforesaid Laoghaire MacKenzie Fraser shall so dispose in a proper will. Thirdly, the money shall not be given absolutely, but shall be retained by a trustee and disbursed in the amount of twenty pounds per annum, paid jointly to the aforesaid Laoghaire MacKenzie Fraser and Joseph Boswell Murray. Fourth, that these annual payments shall be used only for matters pertaining to the upkeep and improvement of the estate of Balriggan. Fifth, that payment of each year's disbursement shall be contingent upon the receipt of proper documentation regarding the use of the previous year's disbursement." He folded down his thumb and lowered his closed fist, and held up one finger of his other hand.

"Sixth—and lastly—that one James Alexander Gordon Fraser Murray, of Lallybroch, shall be trustee for these funds. Are these conditions agreeable, sir?"

"They are," Jamie said firmly, rising to his feet. "Make it so, if ye please, Mr. Gowan—and now, if no one minds, I am going away and having a wee dram. Possibly two."

Mr. Gowan capped his inkwell, tidied his notes into a neat pile, and likewise rose, though more slowly.

"I'll join ye in that dram, Jamie. I want to hear about this war of yours in America. It sounds the grandest of adventures!"

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COUNTING SHEEP

As the time grew shorter, Ian found it impossible to sleep. The need to go, to find Rachel, burned in him so that he felt hot coals in the pit of his stomach all of the time. Auntie Claire called it heartburn, and it was. She said it was from bolting his food, though, and it wasn't that—he could barely eat.

He spent his days with his father, as much as he could. Sitting in the corner of the speak-a-word room, watching his father and his elder brother go about the business of Lallybroch, he couldn't understand how it would be possible to stand up and walk away, to leave them behind. To leave his father forever behind.

During the days, there were things to be done, folk to be visited, to talk to, and the land to be walked over, the stark beauty of it soothing when his feelings grew too heated to bear. At night, though, the house lay quiet, the creaking silence punctuated by his father's distant cough and his two young nephews' heavy breathing in the room beside him. He began to feel the house itself breathe around him, drawing one ragged, heavy-chested gasp after another, and to feel the weight of it on his own chest, so he sat up in bed, gulping air only to be sure he could. And finally he would slide out of bed, steal downstairs with his boots in his hands, and let himself out of the kitchen door to walk the night under clouds or stars, the clean wind fanning the coals of his heart to open flame, until he should find his tears and peace in which to shed them.

One night he found the door unbolted already. He went out cautiously, looking round, but saw no one. Likely Young Jamie gone to the barn; one of the two cows was due to calf any day. He should go and help, maybe … but the burning under his ribs was painful, he needed to walk a bit first. Jamie would have fetched him in any case, had he thought he needed help.

He turned away from the house and its outbuildings and headed up the hill, past the sheep pen, where the sheep lay in somnolent mounds, pale under the moon, now and then emitting a soft, sudden *bah!*, as though startled by some sheep dream.

Such a dream took shape before him suddenly, a dark form moving against the fence, and he uttered a brief cry that made the nearer sheep start and rustle in a chorus of low-pitched *bahs*.

"Hush, *a bhailach,"* his mother said softly. "Get this lot started, and ye'll wake the dead."

He could make her out now, a small, slender form, with her unbound hair a soft mass against the paleness of her shift.

"Speak o' the dead," he said rather crossly, forcing his heart down out of his throat. "I thought ye were a ghost. What are ye doing out here, Mam?"

"Counting sheep," she said, a thread of humor in her voice. "That's what ye're meant to do when ye canna sleep, aye?"

"Aye." He came and stood beside her, leaning on the fence. "Does it work?"

"Sometimes."

They stood still for a bit, watching the sheep stir and settle. They smelled sweetly filthy, of chewed grass and sheep shit and greasy wool, and Ian found that it was oddly comforting just to be with them.

"Does it work to count them, when ye ken already how many there are?" he asked, after a short silence. His mother shook her head.

"No, I say their names over. It's like saying the rosary, only ye dinna feel the need to be asking. It wears ye down, asking."

Especially when ye ken the answer's going to be no, Ian thought, and moved by sudden impulse, put his arm around her shoulders. She made a small sound of amused surprise, but then relaxed, laying her head against him. He could feel the small bones of her, light as a bird's, and thought his heart might break.

They stood for a while that way, and then she freed herself, gently, moving away a little and turning to him.

"Sleepy yet?"

"No."

"Aye, well. Come on, then." Not waiting for an answer, she turned and made her way through the dark, away from the house.

There was a moon, half full, and he'd been out more than long enough for his eyes to adjust; it was simple to follow, even through the jumbled grass and stones and heather that grew on the hill behind the house.

Where was she taking him? Or rather, why? For they were heading uphill, toward the old broch—and the burying ground that lay nearby. He felt a chill round his heart—did she mean to show him the site of his father's grave?

But she stopped abruptly and stooped, so he nearly tripped over her. Straightening up, she turned and put a pebble into his hand.

"Over here," she said softly, and led him to a small square stone set in the earth. He thought it was Caitlin's grave—the child who'd come before Young Jenny, the sister who'd lived but one day—but then saw that Caitlin's stone lay a few feet away. This one was the same size and shape, but—he squatted by it, and running his fingers over the shadows of its carving, made out the name.

Yeksa'a.

"Mam," he said, and his voice sounded strange to his own ears.

"Is that right, Ian?" she said, a little anxious. "Your da said he wasna quite certain of the spelling of the Indian name. I had the stone carver put both, though. I thought that was right."

"Both?" But his hand had already moved down and found the other name.

Iseabaíl.

He swallowed hard.

"That was right," he said very softly. His hand rested flat on the stone, cool under his palm.

She squatted down beside him, and reaching, put her own pebble on the stone. It was what you did, he thought, stunned, when you came to visit the dead. You left a pebble to say you'd been there; that you hadn't forgotten.

His own pebble was still in his other hand; he couldn't quite bring himself to lay it down. Tears were running down his face, and his mother's hand was on his arm.

"It's all right, *mo duine,"* she said softly. "Go to your young woman. Ye'll always be here wi' us."

The steam of his tears rose like the smoke of incense from his heart, and he laid the pebble gently on his daughter's grave. Safe among his family.

It wasn't until many days later, in the middle of the ocean, that he realized his mother had called him a man.

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THE RIGHT OF IT

Ian died just after dawn. The night had been hellish; a dozen times, Ian had come close to drowning in his own blood, choking, eyes bulging, then rising up in convulsion, spewing up bits of his lungs. The bed looked like some slaughter had taken place, and the room reeked of the sweat of a desperate, futile struggle, the smell of Death's presence.

In the end, though, he had lain quiet, thin chest barely moving, the sound of his breathing a faint rattle like the scratch of the rose briers at the window.

Jamie had stood back, to give Young Jamie the place at Ian's side as eldest son; Jenny had sat all night on his other side, wiping away the blood, the evil sweat, all the foul liquids that oozed from Ian, dissolving his body before their eyes. But near the end, in the dark, Ian had raised his right hand and whispered, "Jamie." He hadn't opened his eyes to look, but all of them knew which Jamie it was that he wanted, and Young Jamie had made way, stumbling, so that his uncle could come and grasp that seeking hand.

Ian's bony fingers had closed round his with surprising strength. Ian had murmured something, too low to hear, and then let go—not in the involuntary relaxation of death; simply let go, that business done, and let his hand fall back, open, to his children.

He did not speak again but seemed to settle, his body diminishing as life and breath fled from it. When his last breath came, they waited in dull misery, expecting another, and only after a full minute of silence did they begin to look at one another covertly, steal glances at the ravaged bed, the stillness in Ian's face—and realize slowly that it was over at last.

* * *

Did Jenny mind? he wondered. That Ian's last words had been to him? But he thought not; the one mercy to a going such as his brother-in-law's had been was that there was time to take leave. He had made a time to speak alone with each of his children, Jamie knew. Comfort them as he could, maybe leave them with a bit of advice, at the least the reassurance that he loved them.

He had been standing next to Jenny when Ian died. She had sighed and seemed to slump beside him, as though the iron rod that had run up her back for the last year had suddenly been pulled out through her head. Her face had showed no sorrow, though he knew it was there; for that moment, though, she had only been glad it was over—for Ian's sake, for all their sakes.

So surely they had found time, she and Ian, to say what had to be said between them, in the months since they knew.

What would he say to Claire in such circumstances? he wondered suddenly. Probably what he *had* said to her, in parting. *"I love you. I'll see you again."* He didn't see any way of improving on the sentiment, after all.

He couldn't stay in the house. The women had washed Ian and laid him out in the parlor and were now embarked on an orgy of furious cooking and cleaning, for word had gone out and people were already beginning to come for the wake.

The day had dawned spitting rain, but for the moment, none was falling. He went out through the kailyard and climbed the little slope to the arbor. Jenny was sitting there, and he hesitated for a moment, but then came and sat down beside her. She could send him away if she wanted solitude.

She didn't; she reached up for his hand and he took it, engulfing hers, thinking how fine-boned she was, how frail.

"I want to leave," she said calmly.

"I dinna blame ye," he said, with a glance at the house. The arbor was covered with new leaves, the green of them fresh and soft from the rain, but someone would find them soon. "Shall we walk down by the loch for a bit?"

"No, I mean I want to leave here. Lallybroch. For good."

That took him aback more than a bit.

"Ye dinna mean that, I think," he said at last, cautious. "It's been a shock, after all. Ye shouldna—"

She shook her head and put a hand to her breast.

"Something's broken in me, Jamie," she said softly. "Whatever it was that bound me … it binds me nay more."

He didn't know what to say. He'd avoided the sight of the broch and the burying ground at its foot when he came out of the house, unable to bear the dark wet patch of raw ground there—but now he turned his head deliberately and raised his chin to point at it.

"And ye'd leave Ian?" he asked.

She made a small noise in her throat. Her hand lay against her breast still, and at this she pressed it flat, fierce against her heart.

"Ian's with me," she said, and her back straightened in defiance of the fresh-dug grave. "He'll never leave me, nor I him." She turned her head and looked at him then; her eyes were red, but dry.

"He'll never leave ye, either, Jamie," she said. "Ye ken that, as well as I do."

Tears welled in his own eyes then, unexpected, and he turned his head away.

"I ken that, aye," he muttered, and hoped it was true. Just now the place inside him where he was accustomed to find Ian was empty, hollow and echoing as a *bodhran*. Would he come back? Jamie wondered. Or had Ian only moved a bit, to a different part of his heart, a place he hadn't yet looked? He hoped—but he wouldn't go looking just yet awhile and kent it was for fear of finding nothing.

He wanted to change the subject, give her time and space to think. But it was difficult to find anything to say that didn't have to do with Ian being dead. Or with death in general. All loss is one, and one loss becomes all, a single death the key to the gate that bars memory.

“When Da died,” he said suddenly, surprising himself as much as her. “Tell me what happened.”

He felt her turn to look at him but kept his own eyes on his hands, the fingers of his left hand rubbing slowly over the thick red scar that ran down the back of his right.

“They brought him home,” she said at last. “Lying in a wagon. It was Dougal MacKenzie with them. He told me Da had seen ye being whipped, and all of a sudden he’d fallen down, and when they picked him up, one side of his face was drawn up in anguish but the other was slack. He couldna speak, or walk, and so they took him away and brought him home.”

She paused, swallowing, her eyes fixed on the broch and the burying ground.

“I had a doctor to him. He bled Da, more than once, and burned things in a wee burner and wafted the smoke under his nose. He tried to give him medicine, but Da couldna really swallow. I put drops of water on his tongue, but that was all.” She sighed deeply. “He died the next day, about noon.”

“Ah. He … never spoke?”

She shook her head. “He couldna speak at all. Only moved his mouth now and then and made wee gurgling sounds.” Her chin puckered a little at the memory, but she firmed her lips. “I could see, though, near the end, he was trying to speak. His mouth was trying to shape the words, and his eyes were on mine, trying to make me understand.” She glanced at him.

“He did say, ‘Jamie,’ the once. I ken that much for sure. For I thought he was trying to ask for you, and I told him Dougal said ye were alive and promised that ye’d be all right. That seemed to comfort him a bit, and he died soon after.”

He swallowed thickly, the sound of it loud in his ears. It had begun to rain again, lightly, drops pattering on the leaves overhead.

“Taing,” he said softly at last. “I wondered. I wish I could have said ‘Sorry’ to him.”

“Ye didna need to,” she said just as softly. “He’d ha’ known it.”

He nodded, unable to speak for a moment. Getting himself under control, though, he took her hand again and turned to her.

"I can say 'Sorry' to you, though, *a pìuthar*, and I do."

"For what?" she said, surprised.

"For believing Dougal when he told me … well, when he said ye'd become an English soldier's whore. I was a fool." He looked at his maimed hand, not wanting to meet her eyes.

"Aye, well," she said, and laid her hand on his, light and cool as the new leaves that fluttered round them. "Ye needed him. I didn't."

They sat awhile longer, feeling peaceful, holding hands.

"Where d'ye think he is now?" Jenny said suddenly. "Ian, I mean."

He glanced at the house, then at the new grave waiting, but of course that wasn't Ian anymore. He was panicked for a moment, his earlier emptiness returning—but then it came to him, and, without surprise, he knew what it was Ian had said to him.

"On your right, man." On his right. Guarding his weak side.

"He's just here," he said to Jenny, nodding to the spot between them. "Where he belongs."

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PART SEVEN

Reap the Whirlwind

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SON OF A WITCH

When Roger and Buccleigh drove up to the house, Amanda rushed out to meet them and returned to her mother, waving a blue plastic pinwheel on a stick.

“Mama! Look what I got, look what *I* got!”

“Oh, how pretty!” Brianna bent to admire it and, blowing, made the toy spin round.

“I do it, I do it!” Amanda grabbed it back, puffing and blowing with great determination but making little headway.

“From the side, *a leannan*, from the side.” William Buccleigh came round the car and picked Amanda up, gently turning her hand so the pinwheel was perpendicular to her face. “Now blow.” He put his face close to hers and helped blow, and the pinwheel whirred like a June bug.

“Aye, that’s fine, isn’t it? You have a go, then, on your own.” He gave Bree a half-apologetic shrug and carried Amanda up the path, she industriously puffing and blowing. They passed Jem, who stopped to admire the pinwheel. Roger got out of the car with a couple of carrier bags and paused for a private word with Brianna.

“If we had a dog, I wonder if it would like him, too?” she murmured, nodding after their guest, who was now engaged in animated conversation with both children.

“A man may smile, and smile, and be a villain,” Roger replied, watching with a narrowed eye. “And the claims of instinct quite aside, I don’t think either dogs or children are necessarily good judges of character.”

"Mm. Did he tell you anything else while you were out today?" Roger had taken William Buccleigh into Inverness to replenish his wardrobe, as he possessed nothing more than the jeans, T-shirt, and charity-store jacket in which he'd arrived.

"A few things. I asked him how he'd come here—to Lallybroch, I mean—and what was he doing hanging about. He said he'd seen me on the street in Inverness and recognized me, but I'd got in my car and gone before he could make up his mind to talk to me. He saw me once or twice more, though, and asked cautiously round to find out where I lived. He—" He stopped and looked at her, with a half smile. "Bear in mind what he is and when he came from. He thought—and I don't think he was telling me a tale—that I must be an Old One."

"Really?"

"Aye, really. And on the face of it … well, I did survive being hanged, which most people don't." His mouth twisted a little as he touched the scar on his throat. "And I—we—did, obviously, travel safely through the stones. I mean … I could see his point."

Despite her disquiet, she sniffed with amusement.

"Well, yes. You mean he was afraid of you?"

Roger shrugged, helpless. "He was. And I think I believe him—though I will say that if that's the case, he puts up a good front."

"Would you *act* afraid if you were going to confront a powerful supernatural being? Or would you try to play it cool? Being a male of the species, as Mama puts it. Or a proper man, as Da says. You and Da both act like John Wayne if there's anything fishy going on, and this guy is related to both of you."

"Good point," he said, though his mouth twitched at the "powerful supernatural being." Or possibly the "John Wayne" part. "And he admitted that he was reeling a bit at the shock of everything. I could sympathize with *that*."

"Mm. And we *knew* what we were doing. Sort of. He told me what happened when he came through—did he tell you that, too?"

They had been walking slowly but had nearly reached the door; she could hear Annie's voice in the hall, asking something, exclaiming among the children's chatter, and the lower rumble of William Buccleigh's voice in reply.

"Aye, he did. He wanted—wants, and wants badly—to get back to his own time. Clearly I knew how, and he'd have to come and talk to me to find out. But only a fool would walk straight up to a stranger's door, let alone a stranger you'd come close to killing, much less a stranger who might strike you dead on the spot or turn you into a crow." He shrugged again.

"So he left his job and took to lurking about the place, watching. To see if we were tossing human bones out the back door, I suppose. Jem ran into him out by the broch one day, and he told him he was a Nuckelavee—partly to scare him away, but also because if he came back and told me there was a Nuckelavee up the hill, I might come out and do something magical about it. And if I did …" He lifted his hands, palms up.

"If you did, you might be dangerous, but he'd also know you had the power to send him back. Like the Wizard of Oz."

He looked at her for a moment.

"Anyone less like Judy Garland than *him*—" he began, but was interrupted by Annie MacDonald demanding to know what they were hanging about being eaten by midgies for, when there was supper on the table? Apologizing, they went inside.

* * *

Brianna ate supper without really noticing what was on her plate. Jem was going to spend the night with Bobby again and go out fishing on Saturday with Rob on the Rothiemurchus estate. She felt a small twinge at that; she remembered her father patiently teaching Jem to cast, with the homemade rod and thread line that was all they had. Would he remember?

Still, it was just as well to have him out of the house. She and Roger were going to have to sit down with William Buccleigh and decide how best to get him back to his own time, and best if Jem wasn't lurking around the edges of such a discussion with his ears flapping. Should they consult Fiona? she wondered suddenly.

Fiona Graham was the granddaughter of old Mrs. Graham, who had kept house for Roger's adoptive father, the Reverend Wakefield. The very proper and elderly Mrs. Graham had also been the "caller"—the holder of a very old tradition indeed. On the fire feast of Beltane, the women whose families had passed the tradition down to them met at dawn and, clothed in white, performed a dance that Roger said was an ancient Norse circle dance. And at the end of it, the caller sang out in words that none of them understood anymore, bringing up the sun, so that as it rose above the horizon, the beam of light shot straight through the cleft of the split stone.

Mrs. Graham had died peacefully in her sleep years before—but had left her knowledge, and her role as caller, to her granddaughter, Fiona.

Fiona had helped Roger when he came through the stones to find Brianna—even contributing her own diamond engagement ring to help him, after his first attempt had ended much as William Buccleigh described his own: in flames in the center of the circle.

They could get a gemstone without much trouble, she thought, automatically passing the bowl of salad to Roger. From what they knew so far, it didn't have to be a terribly expensive stone, or even a large one. The garnets in Roger's mother's locket had apparently been enough to keep him from being killed during his first, abortive try.

She thought suddenly of the burn mark on William Buccleigh's chest and, as she did so, realized that she was staring at him—and he was staring back at her. She choked on a chunk of cucumber, and the subsequent hubbub of back-thumping and arm-raising and coughing and water-fetching luckily explained the redness of her face.

Everyone settled back to their food, but she was aware of Roger looking sideways at her. She shot him a brief look under her lashes, with a faint tilt of the head that said, *"Later. Upstairs,"* and he relaxed, resuming a three-way conversation with "Uncle Buck" and Jemmy about trout flies.

She wanted to talk to him about what Buccleigh had said, and decide what to do about him, as soon as possible. She was *not* going to tell him what William Buccleigh had said about Rob Cameron.

* * *

Roger lay in bed, watching the moonlight on Brianna's sleeping face. It was quite late, but he found himself wakeful. Odd, for he usually fell asleep in seconds after making love to her. Fortunately, she did, too; she had tonight, curling into him like a large, affectionate shrimp before lapsing into naked, warm inertness in his arms.

It had been wonderful—but that wee bit different. She was almost always willing, even eager, and that had been no different, though she'd made a particular point of dead-bolting the bedroom door. He'd installed the dead bolt because Jem had learned to pick locks at the age of seven. It was still bolted, in fact, and seeing that, he slid carefully out from under the covers to unfasten it. Jem was spending the night with his new best friend, Bobby, but if Mandy needed them in the night, he didn't want the door locked.

The room was cool, but pleasantly so; they'd put in baseboard heaters, which would be barely adequate to the winter temperatures of the Highlands but fine for late autumn.

Bree slept hot; he'd swear her body temperature rose two or three degrees when she slept, and she often threw off the covers. She lay now, bare to the waist, arms flung over her head and snoring faintly. He cupped a hand absently under his balls, wondering idly whether they might have another go. He thought she wouldn't mind, but …

But maybe he shouldn't. When he made love to her, he often took his time and, at the last, was filled with a barbarous delight when she yielded her red-thatched quim—willingly, to be sure, but with an instant always of hesitation, just one final breath of something that was not quite resistance. He thought it was a means of assuring herself—if not him—that she had the right to refuse. A stronghold once breached and repaired has stouter defenses. He didn't think she realized consciously that she did this; he'd never mentioned it to her, wanting no ghost to rise between them.

It had been a little different tonight. She'd balked more noticeably, then yielded with something like ferocity, pulling him in and raking her nails down his back. And he …

He'd paused for that one instant, but once safely mounted had had the insane urge to pillage ruthlessly, to show himself—if not her—that she was indeed his, and not her own, inviolate.

And she'd egged him on.

He noticed that he hadn't taken his hand away and was now eyeing his wife like a Roman soldier sizing up one of the Sabine women for weight and portabililty. *Raptio* was the Latin word, usually translated as "rape," though in fact it meant kidnapping, or seizing. *Raptio*, raptor, the seizing of prey. He could see it both ways, and noticed at this point that he *still* hadn't actually removed his hand from his genitals, which in the meantime had decided unilaterally that, no, she wouldn't mind at all.

His cerebral cortex, rapidly being overpowered by something a lot older and much lower down, hazarded a last faint notion that it was to do with having a stranger in the house—especially one like William Buccleigh MacKenzie.

"Well, he'll be gone by Samhain," Roger muttered, approaching the bed. The portal in the stones should be wide open then, and with some sort of gem in hand, the bugger ought to be back to his wife in …

He slid beneath the sheets, gathered his own wife up with a firm hand on her very warm bottom, and hissed in her ear, "I'll get you—and your little dog, too."

Her body quivered in a soundless subterranean laugh and, eyes closed, she reached down and drew a delicate fingernail up his very sensitive flesh.

"I'm meeeeeeeellllllting," she murmured.

* * *

He did fall asleep after that. But waked again, somewhere in the wee hours, and found himself annoyingly alert.

It must be him, he thought, slithering out of bed again. *I'll not sleep sound until we get rid of him.* He didn't bother being careful; he could tell from the faint rasp of Brianna's snore that she was dead to the world. He pulled his pajamas over his nakedness and stepped out into the upstairs corridor, listening.

Lallybroch talked to itself at night, as all old houses do. He was used to the sudden startling cracks, as wooden beams in the room cooled at night, and even the creaking of the second-floor hallway, as though someone was walking rapidly up and down it. The rattle of windows when the wind was in the west, reminding him comfortably of Brianna's irregular snoring. It was remarkably quiet now, though, wrapped in the somnolence of deep night.

They'd put William Buccleigh at the far end of the hall, having decided without speaking of it that they didn't want him above, on the same floor with the kids. Keep him close; keep an eye on him.

Roger walked quietly down the hall, listening. The crack under Buccleigh's door was dark, and from inside the room, he heard a deep, regular snore, interrupted once as the sleeper turned in bed, muttered something incomprehensible, and dropped back into slumber.

"That's all right, then," Roger muttered to himself, and turned away. His cerebral cortex, interrupted earlier, now patiently resumed its train of thought. Of course it was to do with having a stranger in the house—and such a stranger. Both he and Brianna felt obscurely threatened by his presence.

In his own case, there was a solid substratum of anger under the wariness, and a good bit of confusion, too. He had, from sheer necessity as well as religious conviction, forgiven William Buccleigh for his role in the hanging that had taken his voice. After all, the man had not tried to kill him personally and couldn't have known what would happen.

But it was a damned sight easier to forgive somebody you knew had been dead for two hundred years than it was to maintain that forgiveness with the bastard living under your nose, eating your food, and being charming to your wife and children.

And let us not forget he is *a bastard, too,* Roger thought savagely, making his way down the stairs in the dark. The family tree he'd shown William Buccleigh MacKenzie revealed him as all correct, pinned down on paper, neatly bracketed by parents and son. The chart was a lie, though. William Buccleigh MacKenzie was a changeling: the illegitimate offspring of Dougal MacKenzie, war chief of Clan MacKenzie, and Geillis Duncan, witch. And Roger thought William Buccleigh didn't know it.

Safely at the bottom of the stair, he turned on the light in the lower hall and went to the kitchen to check that the back door was locked.

They'd discussed that one, he and Brianna, but hadn't come to an agreement yet. He was for letting sleeping dogs lie; what good could it do the man to know the truth of his origins? The Highlands that had spawned those two wild souls was gone, both now and in William Buccleigh's rightful time.

Bree had insisted that Buccleigh had some right to know the truth —though, challenged, could not say quite what right that was.

"*You* are who you think you are, and you always have been," she'd said at last, frustrated but trying to explain. "I wasn't. Do you think it would have been better if I'd never *known* who my real father was?"

In all honesty, it might have been, he thought. The knowledge, once revealed, had torn both their lives apart, exposed them both to terrible things. It had taken his voice. Almost taken his life. Had put her in danger, gotten her raped, been responsible for her having killed a man—he hadn't spoken to her about that; he should. He saw the weight of it in her eyes sometimes and knew it for what it was. He carried the same weight.

And yet … would he choose *not to* have known what he now knew? Never to have lived in the past, met Jamie Fraser, seen the side of Claire that existed only in Jamie's company?

It wasn't the tree of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, after all; it was the tree of the *knowledge* of good and evil. Knowledge might be a poisoned gift—but it was still a gift, and few people would voluntarily give it back. Which was just as well, he supposed, since they *couldn't* give it back. And that had been *his* point in the discussion.

"We don't know what harm it could do," he'd argued. "But we don't know it *couldn't* do harm, and serious harm. And what would be the benefit to the man, to know his mother was insane, a sorceress, or both, certainly a multiple murderess, and his father an adulterer and at the least an attempted murderer? It was enough of a shock to *me* when your mother told me about Geillis Duncan, and she's eight generations removed from me. And before you ask, yes, I could have lived without knowing that."

She'd bitten her lip at that and nodded, reluctant.

"It's just—I keep thinking about Willie," Bree had said at last, giving up. "Not William Buccleigh, I don't mean—my brother." She flushed a little, as she always did, self-conscious at speaking the word. "I really wanted him to *know*. But Da and Lord John … they so *didn't* want him to know, and maybe they were right. He has a life, a good one. And they said he couldn't keep on having that life if I told him."

"They were right," Roger had said bluntly. "To tell him—if he believed it—would force him to live in a state of deceit and denial, which would eat him alive, or to openly acknowledge that he's the bastard son of a Scottish criminal. Which is Just. Not. On. Not in eighteenth-century culture."

"They wouldn't take his title away," Bree had argued. "Da said that by British law, a child born in wedlock is the legal offspring of the husband, no matter whether the husband was the real father or not."

"No, but imagine living with a title ye don't think you're entitled *to*, knowing the blood in your veins isn't the blue ye've always thought it was. Having people call ye 'Lord So-and-So' and knowing what they'd call ye if they knew the truth." He'd shaken her gently, trying to make her see.

"Either way, it would destroy the life he has, as surely as if you'd set him on a keg of gunpowder and lit the fuse. You wouldn't know when the bang would come, but come it would."

“Mmphm,” she’d said, and the argument ended there. But it hadn’t been a sound of agreement, and he knew the argument wasn’t over.

By now he had checked all the doors and windows on the ground floor, ending in his study.

He flipped on the light and came into the room. He was wide awake, nerves on edge. *Why?* he wondered. Was the house trying to tell him something? He snorted a little. Hard not to have fancies, in the middle of the night in an old house, with the wind rattling the windowpanes. And yet he usually felt very comfortable in this room, felt it was his place. What was wrong?

He glanced quickly over the desk, the deep windowsill with the small pot of yellow chrysanthemums that Bree had put there, the shelves—

He stopped dead, heart thumping in his chest. The snake wasn’t there. No, no, it was—his roving eye fixed on it. It was in the wrong place, though. It wasn’t in front of the wooden box that held Claire and Jamie’s letters but sitting in front of the books two shelves below it.

He picked it up, automatically stroking the old polished cherrywood with his thumb. Perhaps Annie MacDonald had moved it? No. She did dust and sweep in the study, but she never moved anything from its place. Never moved anything anywhere, for that matter; he’d seen her pick up a pair of galoshes carelessly left in the middle of the mudroom, sweep carefully under them, and set them back in the same place, mud splashes and all. She would never have moved the snake.

Still less would Brianna have moved it. He knew—without knowing how he knew it—that she felt as he did about it; Willie Fraser’s snake guarded his brother’s treasure.

He was lifting down the box before his train of conscious thought had reached its logical conclusion.

Alarm bells were going off right and left. The contents of the box had been disturbed; the little books were on top of the letters at one end of the box, not underneath. He took out the letters, cursing himself for never having counted them. How would he know if one was missing?

He sorted them quickly, read and unread, and *thought* the unread pile was about the same; whoever had been in the box hadn't opened them, that was something. But whoever it was had probably wanted to avoid detection, too.

He thumbed hastily through the opened letters and became aware at once that one was missing: the one written on Brianna's handmade paper with the embedded flowers. The first one. Jesus, what had it said? *We are alive*. He remembered that much. And then Claire had told all about the explosion and the burning of the Big House. Had she said in that one they were going to Scotland? Maybe so. But why in bloody hell should—

Two floors above, Mandy sat up in bed and screamed like a *bansidhe*.

* * *

He made it to Amanda's room a half step before Brianna and scooped the child out of her bed, cradling her against his pounding heart.

"Jemmy, Jemmy!" she sobbed. "He's gone, he's gone. He's *GONE*!!" This last was shrieked as she stiffened in Roger's arms, digging her feet hard into his belly.

"Hey, hey," he soothed, trying to rearrange her and pet her into calm. "It's okay, Jemmy's fine. *He's fine*, he's only gone to visit Bobby overnight. He'll be home tomorrow."

"He's *GONE!"* She squirmed like an eel, not trying to get away but merely possessed by a paroxysm of frantic grief. "He's not here, he's not here!"

"Aye, like I said, he's at Bobby's house, he—"

"Not *here*," she said urgently, and thumped the palm of her hand repeatedly on the top of her head. "Not here wif me!"

"Here, baby, come here," Bree said urgently, taking the tear-streaked child from him.

“Mama, Mama! Jemmy’s *GONE!”* She clung to Bree, staring desperately, still thumping her head. “He’s not wif me!”

Bree frowned at Mandy, puzzled, a hand running over her, checking for temperature, swollen glands, tender tummy …

“Not with you,” she repeated, speaking intently, trying to get Mandy out of her panic. “Tell Mummy what you mean, sweetheart.”

“Not *here*!” In utter desperation, Mandy lowered her head and butted her mother in the chest.

“Oof!”

The door at the end of the hall opened, and William Buccleigh came out, wearing Roger’s woolen dressing gown.

“What in the name of the Blessed Virgin’s all this riot?” he inquired.

“He took him, he took him!” Mandy shrieked, and buried her head in Brianna’s shoulder.

Despite himself, Roger was feeling infected by Amanda’s fear, irrationally convinced that something terrible had happened.

“Do you know where Jem is?” he snapped at Buccleigh.

“I do not.” Buccleigh frowned at him. “Is he not in his bed?”

“No, he isn’t!” Brianna snapped. “You saw him leave, for heaven’s sake.” She forced her way between the men. “Quit it right now, both of you! Roger, take Mandy. I’m going to phone Martina Hurragh.” She thrust Amanda, moaning around the thumb in her mouth, into his arms and hurried for the stairs, her hastily acquired nightclothes rustling like leaves.

He rocked Amanda, distracted, alarmed, nearly overcome by her sense of panic. She emitted fright and grief like a radio broadcasting tower, and his own breath came short and his hands were wet with sweat where he clutched her Winnie-the-Pooh nightie.

“Hush, *a chuisle,”* he said, pitching his voice as calmly as he could. “Hush, now. We’ll fix it. You tell Daddy what waked you up, and I’ll fix it, promise.”

She obediently tried to stifle her sobs, rubbing chubby fists into her eyes.

“Jemmy,” she moaned. “I want Jemmy!”

"We'll get him back straightaway," Roger promised. "Tell me, what made you wake up? Did you have a bad dream?"

"Uh-huh." She clutched him tighter, her face full of fear. "Was big wocks, *big* wocks. They scweamed at me!"

Ice water ran straight through his veins. Jesus, oh, Jesus. Maybe she *did* remember her trip through the stones.

"Aye, I see," he said, patting her as soothingly as he could, for the ferment in his own breast. He *did* see. In memory he saw those stones, felt and heard them again. And, turning a little, saw the pallor of William Buccleigh's face and knew he heard the ring of truth in Mandy's voice, too.

"What happened then, *a leannan*? Did you go close to the big rocks?"

"Not me; Jem! That man took him and the wocks *ate* him!" At this, she collapsed in tears again, sobbing inconsolably.

"That man," Roger said slowly, and turned a little more, so that William Buccleigh was in her field of view. "Do you mean *this* man, sweetheart? Uncle Buck?"

"No, nononononono, a *other* man!" She straightened up, staring into his face with huge, tear-filled eyes, straining to make him understand. "Bobby's daddy!"

He heard Brianna coming upstairs. Fast, but unevenly; it sounded as though she was bumping against the walls of the staircase, losing her balance as she hurried.

She stumbled into view at the top of the stair, and Roger felt every hair on his body stand up at the sight of her white, staring face.

"He's gone," she said, hoarse. "Martina says he's not with Bobby, she didn't expect him tonight at all. I made her go outside and look—Rob lives three houses down. She says his truck is gone."

* * *

Roger's hands were numb with cold, and the steering wheel was slippery with their sweat. He took the turn off the highway at such speed that the off-wheels lifted slightly and the car tilted. William Buccleigh's head thumped the window.

"Sorry," Roger muttered mechanically, and received a grunt of acceptance in reply.

"Mind yourself," Buccleigh said, rubbing his temple. "Ye'll have us over in a ditch, and then what?"

Then what, indeed. With great effort, he eased his foot back on the gas. It was near moonset, and a wan quarter moon did little to light the landscape, black as pitch around them. The headlights of the little Morris barely dented the darkness, and the frail beams swung to and fro as they bounced crazily on the dirt road that led near Craigh na Dun.

"Why the devil should this *trusdair* take your son?" Buccleigh rolled down his window and stuck his head out, vainly trying to see farther than the view through the dust-coated windshield. "And why, for the sake of all holy, bring him *here?"*

"How do I know?" Roger said through his teeth. "Maybe he thinks he needs blood to open the stones. *Christ,* why did I write that?" He pounded a fist on the wheel in frustration.

Buccleigh blinked, very startled, but his gaze sharpened at once.

"Is that it?" he said, urgent. "*Is* that how ye do it? Blood?"

"No, dammit!" Roger said. "It's the time of year, and gemstones. We think."

"But ye wrote down blood, with a query mark next it."

"Yes, but—what do you mean? Did you read my notebook, too, you cunt?"

"Language, son," said William Buccleigh, grim but cool. "Of course I did. I read everything in your study I could get my hands on—and so would you, in my place."

Roger throttled back the panic that gripped him, enough to manage a curt nod.

"Aye, maybe I would. And if *you'd* taken Jem—I'd kill ye once I found you, but I'd maybe understand why. But *this* fucker! What does he think he's *doing,* for God's sake?"

"Calm yourself," Buccleigh advised him briefly. "Ye'll do your wean no good if ye lose the heid. This Cameron—is he one like us?"

"I don't know. I don't bloody *know."*

"There are others, though? It's not just in the family?"

"I don't know—I think there are others, but I don't know for sure." Roger struggled to think, struggled to keep the car rolling at a low enough speed to handle the curves of the road, half overgrown with creeping gorse.

He was trying to pray but managing nothing but a terror-stricken, incoherent *Lord, please!* He wished Bree was with him, but they couldn't have brought Mandy anywhere near the rocks, and if they should be in time to catch Cameron … if Cameron was even here … Buccleigh would help him, he was fairly sure of that.

The back of his mind harbored a forlorn hope that there was some misunderstanding, that Cameron had mistaken the night and, realizing it, was bringing Jem back home, even as Roger and his bloody five times greatgrandfather tore over a rocky moor in the dark, headed straight for the most terrible thing either of them knew.

"Cameron—he read the notebook, too," Roger blurted, unable to bear his own thoughts. "By accident. He pretended to think it was all a—a—fiction, something I'd made up for fun. Jesus, what have I *done*?"

"Look out!" Buccleigh threw his arms over his face and Roger stood on the brake, swerving off the road and into a large rock—barely missing the old blue truck that stood on the road, dark and empty.

* * *

He scrambled up the hill, scrabbling for handholds in the dark, rocks rolling under his feet, gorse prickles piercing his palms, now and then stabbing under his nails, making him swear. Far below, he could hear William Buccleigh following. Slowly—but following.

He began to hear them long before he reached the crest. It was three days before Samhain, and the stones knew it. The sound that wasn't a sound at all vibrated through the marrow of his bones, made his skull ring and his teeth ache. He gritted his teeth together and kept on. By the time he reached the stones, he was on hands and knees, unable to stand upright.

Dear God, he thought, *God, preserve me! Keep me alive long enough to find him!*

He could barely form thoughts but recalled the flashlight. He'd brought it from the car and now fumbled it out of his pocket, dropping it, having to grope frantically over the short grass in the circle, finding it at last and squeezing the button with a finger that slipped off four times before finally achieving the strength to make the connection.

The beam of light sprang out, and he heard a muffled exclamation of amazement from the dark behind him. Of course, he thought dazedly, William Buccleigh hadn't yet seen a flashlight. The wavering beam passed slowly round the circle, back. What was he looking for? Footprints? Something Jem had dropped, that would show he'd come this way?

There was nothing.

Nothing but the stones. It was getting worse, and he dropped the flashlight, clutching his head with both hands. He had to move … had to go … go get Jem …

He was dragging himself over the grass, white-blind with the pain and nearly mindless, when strong hands grabbed him by the ankles and hauled him backward. He thought there might have been a voice, but if so, it was lost in the piercing scream that echoed inside his head, inside his soul, and he cried out his son's name as loud as he could to hear something besides that noise, felt his throat tear from the effort, but heard nothing.

Then the earth moved beneath him and the world fell away.

* * *

Fell away quite literally. When he came to some time later, he found that he and William Buccleigh were resting in a shallow declivity in the side of the hill, forty feet below the stone circle. They'd fallen and rolled; he could tell that from the way he felt and the way Buccleigh looked. There was a hint of dawn in the sky, and he could see Buccleigh, scratched and torn, sitting hunched beside him, curled into himself as though his belly hurt.

"What …?" Roger whispered. He cleared his throat and tried again to ask what had happened, but couldn't manage more than a whisper—and even that made his throat burn like fire.

William Buccleigh muttered something under his breath, and Roger realized that he was praying. He tried to sit up and made it, though his head spun.

"Did ye drag me free?" he demanded in his harsh whisper. Buccleigh's eyes were closed and stayed that way until he had finished his prayer. Then he opened them and glanced from Roger to the top of the hill, where the unseen stones still quired their ghastly song of time undone—no more from here, thank goodness, than an eerie whine that set his teeth on edge.

"I did," Buccleigh said. "I didna think ye were going to make it out on your own."

"I wasn't." Roger lowered himself back onto the ground, dizzy and aching. "Thanks," he added a moment later. There was a great void inside him, vast as the fading sky.

"Aye, well. Maybe it'll help to make up for getting ye hanged," Buccleigh said, in an offhand way. "What now?"

Roger stared up at the sky, rotating slowly overhead. It made him dizzier, so he closed his eyes and reached out a hand.

"Now we go home," he croaked. "And think again. Help me up."

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VALLEY FORGE

William wore his uniform. It was necessary, he told his father.

"Denzell Hunter is a man of great conscience and principle. I cannot engage to winkle him out of the American camp without proper leave of his officer. I think he would not come. But if I can obtain permission—and I think I can—then I believe he will."

But to obtain formal permission for the services of a Continental surgeon, obviously he had to ask formally. Which meant riding into Washington's new winter quarters at Valley Forge in a red coat, no matter what happened next.

Lord John had closed his eyes for a moment, plainly envisioning just what sort of thing *might* happen next, but then opened them and said briskly, "All right, then. Will you take a servant with you?"

"No," William said, surprised. "Why would I need one?"

"To care for the horses, to manage your goods—and to be the eyes in the back of your head," his father said, giving him a look indicating that he should already have been aware of some of this. He therefore did *not* say, *"Horses?"* or *"What goods?"* but merely nodded and said, "Thank you, Papa. Can you find me someone suitable?"

"Suitable" turned out to be one Colenso Baragwanath, a stunted youth from Cornwall who had come with Howe's troops as a stableboy. He did know horses, William would give him that.

There were four horses and a pack mule, this last laden with sides of pork, four or five fat turkeys, a bag of rough-skinned potatoes, another of turnips, and a large keg of cider.

"If conditions there are half as bad as I think they are," his father had told him, while overseeing the loading of the mule, "the commander would lend you the services of half a battalion in exchange for this, let alone a surgeon."

"Thank you, Papa," he said again, and swung into his saddle, his new captain's gorget about his neck and a white flag of truce folded neatly into his saddlebag.

Valley Forge looked like a gigantic encampment of doomed charcoal-burners. The place was essentially a wood lot, or had been before Washington's soldiers began felling everything in sight. Hacked stumps were everywhere, and the ground was strewn with broken branches. Huge bonfires burned in random spots, and piles of logs were stacked everywhere. They were building huts as fast as possible—and none too soon, for snow had begun falling three or four hours before, and the camp was already blanketed with white.

William hoped they'd be able to *see* the flag of truce.

"Right, up you go and ride ahead of me," he told Colenso, handing the boy the long stick to which he'd tied the flag. The youth's eyes widened in horror.

"What, me?"

"Yes, you," said Willie impatiently. "Up, or I'll kick your arse."

William's back itched between the shoulder blades as they entered the camp, Colenso crouched like a monkey on his horse's back, holding the flag as low as he dared and muttering strange oaths in Cornish. William's left hand itched, too, wanting to go for the hilt of his sword, the handle of his pistol. But he'd come unarmed. If they meant to shoot him, they'd shoot him, armed or not, and to come unarmed was a sign of good faith. So he put back his cloak, in spite of the snow, to show his lack of weapons, and rode slowly into the storm.

* * *

The preliminaries went well. No one shot him, and he was directed to a Colonel Preston, a tall, ragged man in the remnants of a Continental uniform, who had eyed him askance but listened with surprising courtesy to his request. Permission was granted—but this being the *American* army, the permission granted was not license to take the surgeon away but rather license to *ask* the surgeon if he would go.

Willie left Colenso with the horses and mule, with strict instructions to keep his eyes open, and made his way up the little hill where he had been told Denzell Hunter likely was. His heart was beating fast, and not only from the exertion. In Philadelphia, he had been sure Hunter would come at his request. Now he wasn't quite so sure.

He had fought Americans, knew a great many of them who were in no respect different from the Englishmen they'd been two years previous. But he'd never walked through an American army camp before.

It seemed chaotic, but all camps did in their early stages, and he was able to perceive the rough order that did in fact exist among the piles of debris and butchered tree stumps. But there was something very different about the feel of this camp, something almost exuberant. The men he passed were ragged in the extreme; not one in ten had shoes, despite the weather, and groups of them huddled like beggars around the bonfires, wrapped in blankets, shawls, the remnants of canvas tents and burlap sacks. And yet they didn't huddle in miserable silence. They talked.

Conversed amiably, telling jokes, arguing, getting up to piss in the snow, to stamp round in circles to get the blood going. He'd seen a demoralized camp before, and this one *wasn't*. Which was, all things considered, amazing. He assumed Denzell Hunter must share this spirit. That being so, would he consent to leave his fellows? No way to tell, save by asking.

There was no door to knock on. He came round a stand of leafless oak saplings that had so far escaped the ax and found Hunter crouched on the ground, sewing up a gash in the leg of a man who lay before him on a blanket. Rachel Hunter held the man's shoulders, her capped head bent over him as she spoke encouragingly to him.

“Did I not tell thee he was quick?” she was saying. “No more than thirty seconds, I said, and so it has been. I counted it out, did I not?”

“Thee counts in a most leisurely fashion, Rachel,” the doctor said, smiling as he reached for his scissors and clipped the thread. “A man might walk three times around St. Paul’s in one of your minutes.”

“Stuff,” she said mildly. “ ’Tis done, in any case. Here, sit thee up and take some water. Thee does not—” She had turned toward the bucket that sat beside her and, as she did so, perceived William standing there. Her mouth opened in shock, and then she was up and flying across the clearing to embrace him.

He hadn’t expected *that*, but was delighted and returned the embrace with great feeling. She smelled of herself and of smoke, and it made his blood run faster.

“Friend William! I thought never to see thee again,” she said, stepping back with glowing face. “What does thee here? For I think thee has not come to enlist,” she added, looking him up and down.

“No,” he said, rather gruffly. “I have come to beg a favor. From your brother,” he added, a little belatedly.

“Oh? Come, then, he is nearly finished.” She led him to Denny, still looking up at him in great interest.

“So thee is indeed a British soldier,” she remarked. “We thought thee must be but feared thee might be a deserter. I am pleased thee is not.”

“Are you?” he asked, smiling. “But surely you would prefer that I abjure my military service and seek peace?”

“Of course I would that thee should seek peace—and find it, too,” she said matter-of-factly. “But thee cannot find peace in oath-breaking and illegal flight, knowing thy soul steeped in deceit and fearing for thy life. Denny, look who has come!”

“Yes, I saw. Friend William, well met!” Dr. Hunter helped his freshly bandaged patient to his feet and came toward William, smiling. “Did I hear thee would ask a favor of me? If it is my power to grant it, it is thine.”

“I won’t hold you to that,” William said, smiling and feeling a knot relax at the base of his neck. “But hear me out, and I hope you will see fit to come.”

As he had half-expected, Hunter was at first hesitant to leave the camp. There were not many surgeons, and with so much illness due to the cold and the crowded conditions … it might be a week or more before he could return to camp … but William wisely kept silence, only glancing once at Rachel and then meeting Denzell's eyes straight on.

Would you have her stay here through the winter ?

"Thee wishes Rachel to come with me?" Hunter asked, instantly divining his meaning.

"I will come with thee whether he wishes it or not," Rachel pointed out. "And both of you know it perfectly well."

"Yes," said Denzell mildly, "but it seemed mannerly to ask. Besides, it is not only a matter of thy coming. It—"

William didn't hear the end of his sentence, for a large object was thrust suddenly between his legs from behind, and he emitted an unmanly yelp and leaped forward, whirling round to see who had assaulted him in this cowardly fashion.

"Yes, I was forgetting the dog," Rachel said, still composed. "He can walk now, but I doubt he can manage the journey to Philadelphia on foot. Can thee make shift to transport him, does thee think?"

He recognized the dog at once. There couldn't possibly be two like him.

"Surely this is Ian Murray's dog?" he asked, putting out a tentative fist for the enormous beast to sniff. "Where is his master?"

The Hunters exchanged a brief glance, but Rachel answered readily enough.

"Scotland. He has gone to Scotland on an urgent errand, with his uncle, James Fraser. Does thee know Mr. Fraser?" It seemed to William that both Hunters were staring at him rather intently, but he merely nodded and said, "I met him once, many years ago. Why did the dog not go to Scotland with his master?"

Again that glance between them. What was it about Murray? he wondered.

"The dog was injured, just before they took ship. Friend Ian was kind enough to leave his companion in my care," Rachel said calmly. “Can thee procure a wagon, perhaps? I think thy horse may not like Rollo.”

* * *

Lord John fitted the leather strap between Henry’s teeth. The boy was half unconscious from a dose of laudanum but knew enough still of his surroundings to give his uncle the bare attempt at a grin. Grey could feel the fright pulsing through Henry—and shared it. There was a ball of venomous snakes in his belly, a constant slithering sensation, punctuated by sudden stabs of panic.

Hunter had insisted upon binding Henry’s arms and legs to the bed, that there should be no movement during the operation. The day was brilliant; sun coruscated from the frozen snow that rimmed the windows, and the bed had been moved to take best advantage of it.

Dr. Hunter had been told of the dowser but declined courteously to have the man come again, saying that this smacked of divination, and if he were to ask God’s help in this endeavor, he thought he could not do so sincerely were there anything of witchcraft about the process. That had rather affronted Mercy Woodcock, who puffed up a bit, but she kept silence, too glad—and too anxious—to argue.

Grey was not superstitious but *was* of a practical turn of mind and had taken a careful note of the dowser’s location of the ball he had found. He explained this, and with Hunter’s reluctant assent, took out a small ruler and triangulated the spot on Henry’s sunken belly, dabbing a bit of candle black on the place to mark it.

“I think we are in readiness,” Denzell said, and, coming close to the bed, put his hands on Henry’s head and prayed briefly for guidance and support for himself, for endurance and healing for Henry, and ended in acknowledging the presence of God among them. Despite his purely rational sentiments, Grey felt a small lessening of the tension in the room and sat down opposite the surgeon, with the snakes in his belly calmed for the moment.

He took his nephew’s limp hand in his and said calmly, “Just hold on, Henry. I won’t let go.”

* * *

It *was* quick. Grey had seen army surgeons at work and knew their dispatch, but even by those standards, Denzell Hunter's speed and dexterity were remarkable. Grey had lost all sense of time, absorbed in the erratic clenching of Henry's fingers, the shrill keen of his screaming through the leather gag, and the doctor's movements, quickly brutal, then finicking as he picked delicately, swabbed, and stitched.

As the last stitches went in, Grey breathed, for what seemed the first time in hours, and saw by the carriage clock on the mantel that barely a quarter of an hour had elapsed. William and Rachel Hunter stood by the mantelpiece, out of the way, and he saw with some interest that they were holding hands, their knuckles as white as their faces.

Hunter was checking Henry's breathing, lifting his eyelids to peer at his pupils, wiping the tears and snot from his face, touching the pulse under his jaw—Grey could see this, weak and irregular but still pumping, a tiny blue thread beneath the waxen skin.

"Well enough, well enough, and thanks be to the Lord who has strengthened me," Hunter was murmuring. "Rachel, will thee bring me the dressings?"

Rachel at once detached herself from William and fetched the neat stack of folded gauze pads and torn linen strips, together with a glutinous mass of some sort, soaking green through the cloth that bound it.

"What is *that*?" Grey asked, pointing at it.

"A poultice recommended to me by a colleague, a Mrs. Fraser. I have seen it to have laudable effects upon wounds of all kinds," the doctor assured him.

"Mrs. Fraser?" Grey said, surprised. "Mrs. *James* Fraser? Where the de—I mean, where did you happen to encounter the lady?"

"At Fort Ticonderoga" was the surprising answer. "She and her husband were with the Continental army through the battles at Saratoga."

The snakes in Grey's belly roused abruptly.

"Do you mean to tell me that Mrs. Fraser is now at Valley Forge?"

"Oh, no." Hunter shook his head, concentrated on his dressing. "If thee will please lift him a little, Friend Grey? I require to pass this bandage underneath—ah, yes, exactly right, I thank thee. No," he resumed, straightening up and wiping his forehead, for it was very warm in the room, with so many people and a blazing fire built up in the hearth. "No, the Frasers have gone to Scotland. Though Mr. Fraser's nephew was sufficiently kind as to leave us his dog," he added, as Rollo, made curious by the smell of blood, now rose from his spot in the corner and poked his nose under Grey's elbow. He sniffed interestedly at the splattered sheets, up and down Henry's naked body. He then sneezed explosively, shook his head, and padded back to lie down, where he promptly rolled onto his back and relaxed, paws in the air.

"Someone must remain with him for the next day or so," Hunter was saying, wiping his hands on a rag. "He must not be left alone, lest he cease breathing. Friend William," he said, turning to Willie, "might it be possible to find a place for us to stay? I should be near for several days, so that I may call regularly to see how he progresses."

William assured him that this had already been taken care of: a most respectable inn, and—here he glanced at Rachel—quite near at hand. Might he convey the Hunters there? Or take Miss Rachel, if her brother should be not quite finished?

It was apparent to Grey that Willie would like nothing better than a ride through the snow-sparkling city alone with this comely Quaker, but Mrs. Woodcock put a spoke in that wheel by observing that, in fact, it was Christmas; she had not had time or opportunity to make much of a meal, but would the gentlemen and lady not honor her house and the day by taking a glass of wine, to drink to Lieutenant Grey's recovery?

This was generally agreed to as a capital idea, and Grey volunteered to sit with his nephew while the wine and glasses were being fetched.

With so many people suddenly gone, the room felt much cooler. Nearly cold, in fact, and Grey drew both sheet and coverlet gently up over Henry’s bandaged stomach.

“You’ll be all right, Henry,” he whispered, though his nephew’s eyes were closed, and he thought the young man might be asleep—hoped he was.

But he wasn’t. Henry’s eyes slowly opened, his pupils showing the effect of the opium; his creased lids showed the pain that the opium could not touch.

“No, I won’t,” he said, in a weak, clear voice. “He got only one. The second ball will kill me.”

His eyes closed again, as the sound of Christmas cheer came up the stairs. The dog sighed.

* * *

Rachel hunter put one hand to her stomach, another to her mouth, and stifled a rising eructation.

“Gluttony is a sin,” she said. “But one that carries its own punishment. I think I may vomit.”

“All sins do,” her brother replied absently, dipping his pen. “But thee is not a glutton. I saw thee eat.”

“But I am like to burst!” she protested. “And, besides, I cannot help but think of the poor Christmas those we left at Valley Forge will make, by comparison with the … *the* … *decadence* of our meal tonight.”

“Well, that is guilt, not gluttony, and false guilt at that. Thee ate no more than would constitute a normal meal; it is only that thee hasn’t had one in months. And I think roast goose is perhaps not the uttermost word in decadence, even when stuffed with oysters and chestnuts. Now, had it been a pheasant stuffed with truffles, or a wild boar with a gilded apple in its mouth …” He smiled at her over his papers.

“Thee has seen such things?” she asked curiously.

“I have, yes. When I worked in London with John Hunter. He was much in society and would now and then take me with him to attend a case and sometimes to accompany him and his wife to some grand occasion—most kind of him. But we must not judge, thee knows, most particularly by appearance. Even one who seems most frivolous, spendthrift, or light-minded yet has a soul and is valuable before God."

"Yes," she said vaguely, not really attending. She pulled back the curtain from the window, seeing the street outside as a white blur. There was a lantern hung by the inn's door that cast a small circle of light, but the snow was still falling. Her own face floated in the dark glass of the window, thin and big-eyed, and she frowned at it, pushing a straggle of dark hair back under her cap.

"Does thee think he knows?" she asked abruptly. "Friend William?"

"Does he know what?"

"His very striking resemblance to James Fraser," she said, letting the curtain fall. "Surely thee does not think this coincidence?"

"I think it is not our business." Denny resumed scratching with his quill.

She heaved an exasperated sigh. He was right, but that didn't mean she was forbidden to observe and to wonder. She had been happy—more than happy—to see William again, and while his being a British soldier was no less than she had suspected, she had been extremely surprised to find him an officer of high rank. Much more than surprised to learn from his villainous-looking Cornish orderly that he was a lord, though the little creature had been uncertain what kind.

Yet surely no two men could look so alike who did not share blood in some close degree. She had seen James Fraser many times and admired him for his tall, straight dignity, thrilling a bit at the fierceness in his face, always feeling that niggle of recognition when she saw him—but it wasn't until William suddenly stepped out before her at the camp that she realized *why*. Yet how could an English lord be in any way related to a Scottish Jacobite, a pardoned criminal? For Ian had told her something of his own family history—though not enough; not nearly enough.

"Thee is thinking of Ian Murray again," her brother observed, not looking up from his paper. He sounded resigned.

"I thought thee abjured witchcraft," she said tartly. "Or does thee not include mind reading among the arts of divination?"

"I notice thee does not deny it." He looked up then, pushing his spectacles up his nose with a finger, the better to look through them at her.

"No, I don't deny it," she said, lifting her chin at him. "How did thee know, then?"

"Thee looked at the dog and sighed in a manner betokening an emotion not usually shared between a woman and a dog."

"Hmph!" she said, disconcerted. "Well, what if I *do* think of him? Is that not my business, either? To wonder how he does, what his family in Scotland makes of him? Whether he feels he has come home there?"

"Whether he will come back?" Denny took off his spectacles and rubbed a hand over his face. He was tired; she could see the day in his features.

"He will come back," she said evenly. "He would not abandon his dog."

That made her brother laugh, which annoyed her very much.

"Yes, he will likely come back for the dog," he agreed. "And if he comes back with a wife, Sissy?" His voice was gentle now, and she swung round to the window again, to keep him from seeing that the question disturbed her. Not that he needed to see to know that.

"It might be best for thee and for him if he did, Rachel." Denny's voice was still gentle but held a warning note. "Thee knows he is a man of blood."

"What would thee have me do, then?" she snapped, not turning round. "Marry William?"

There was a brief silence from the direction of the desk.

"William?" Denny said, sounding mildly startled. "Does thee feel for him?"

"I—of course I feel friendship for him. And gratitude," she added hastily.

"So do I," her brother observed, "yet the thought of marrying him had not crossed my mind."

"Thee is a most annoying person," she said crossly, turning round and glaring at him. "Can thee not refrain from making fun of me for one day, at least?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but a sound from outside took her attention, and she turned again to the window, pulling back the heavy curtain. Her breath misted the dark glass, and she rubbed it impatiently with her sleeve in time to see a sedan chair below. The door of it opened and a woman stepped out into the swirling snow. She was clad in furs and in a hurry; she handed a purse to one of the chair-bearers and rushed into the inn.

"Well, that is odd," Rachel said, turning to look first at her brother, and then at the small clock that graced their rooms. "Who goes a-visiting at nine o'clock on Christmas night? It cannot be a Friend, surely?" For Friends did not keep Christmas and would find the feast no bar to travel, but the Hunters had no connections—not yet—with the Friends of any Philadelphia meeting.

A thump of footsteps on the staircase prevented Denzell's reply, and an instant later the door of the room burst open. The fur-clad woman stood on the threshold, white as her furs.

"Denny?" she said in a strangled voice.

Her brother stood up as though someone had applied a hot coal to the seat of his breeches, upsetting the ink.

"Dorothea!" he cried, and in one bound had crossed the room and was locked in passionate embrace with the fur-clad woman.

Rachel stood transfixed. The ink was dripping off the table onto the painted canvas rug, and she thought she ought to do something about that, but didn't. Her mouth was hanging open. She thought she ought to close it, and did.

Quite suddenly she understood the impulse that caused men to engage in casual blasphemy.

* * *

Rachel picked up her brother's spectacles from the floor and stood holding them, waiting for him to disentangle himself. *Dorothea,* she thought to herself. *So this is the woman—but surely this is William's* *cousin?* For William had mentioned his cousin to her as they rode in from Valley Forge. Indeed, the woman had been in the house when Denny performed the operation on—but then, Henry Grey must be this woman's brother! She had hidden in the kitchen when Rachel and Denny came to the house this afternoon. Why … Of course: it was not squeamishness or fear but a wish not to come face-to-face with Denny, and him on his way to perform a dangerous operation.

She thought somewhat better of the woman for that, though she was not yet disposed to clasp her to her own bosom and call her sister. She doubted the woman felt so toward her, either—though in fact, she might not even have noticed Rachel yet, let alone have conclusions about her.

Denny let go of the woman and stood back, though from the look on his glowing face, he could hardly bear not to touch her.

"Dorothea," he said. "Whatever does thee—"

But he was forestalled; the young woman—she was very pretty, Rachel saw now—stepped back and dropped her elegant ermine cloak on the floor with a soft thud. Rachel blinked. The young woman was wearing a sack. No other word for it, though now that she looked, she perceived that it had sleeves. It was made of some coarse gray fabric, though, and hung from the young woman's shoulders, barely touching her body elsewhere.

"I will be a Quaker, Denny," she said, lifting her chin a little. "I have made up my mind."

Denny's face twitched, and Rachel thought he could not make up his own mind whether to laugh, cry, or cover his beloved with her cloak again. Not liking to see the lovely thing lie disregarded on the floor, Rachel bent and picked it up herself.

"Thee—Dorothea," he said again, helpless. "Is thee sure of this? I think thee knows nothing of Friends."

"Certainly I do. You—thee, I mean—see God in all men, seek peace in God, abjure violence, and wear dull clothes so as not to distract your minds with the vain things of the world. Is that not right?" Dorothea inquired anxiously. *Lady* Dorothea, Rachel corrected herself. William had said his uncle was a duke.

“Well … more or less, yes,” Denny said, his lips twitching as he looked her up and down. “Did thee … make that garment?”

“Yes, of course. Is something wrong with it?”

“Oh, no,” he said, sounding somewhat strangled. Dorothea looked sharply at him, then at Rachel, suddenly seeming to notice her.

“What’s wrong with it?” she appealed to Rachel, and Rachel saw the pulse beating in her round white throat.

“Nothing,” she said, fighting her own urge to laugh. “Friends are allowed to wear clothes that fit, though. Thee need not purposefully uglify thyself, I mean.”

“Oh, I see.” Lady Dorothea gazed thoughtfully at Rachel’s tidy skirt and jacket, which might be of butternut homespun but most assuredly fit well, and became her, too, if she did say so.

“Well, that’s good, then,” Lady Dorothea said. “I’ll just take it in a bit here and there.” Dismissing this, she stepped forward again and took Denny’s hands in her own.

“Denny,” she said softly. “Oh, Denny. I thought I should never see you again.”

“I thought so, too,” he said, and Rachel saw a new struggle taking place in his face—one between duty and desire, and her heart ached for him. “Dorothea … thee cannot stay here. Thy uncle—”

“He doesn’t know I’ve gone out. I’ll go back,” Dorothea assured him. “Once we’ve settled things between us.”

“Settled things,” he repeated, and, with a noticeable effort, withdrew his hands from hers. “Thee means—”

“Will thee take a little wine?” Rachel broke in, reaching for the decanter the servant had left for them.

“Yes, thank you. He’ll have some, too,” Dorothea said, smiling at Rachel.

“I expect he will need it,” Rachel murmured, with a glance at her brother.

“Dorothea …” Denny said helplessly, running a hand through his hair. “I know what thee means. But it is not only a matter of thee becoming a Friend—always assuming that to be … to be … possible.”

She drew herself up, proud as a duchess.

"Do you doubt my conviction, Denzell Hunter?"

"Er … not exactly. I just think that perhaps thee has not given the matter sufficient thought."

"That's what you think!" A flush rose in Lady Dorothea's cheeks, and she glared at Denny. "I'll have you—thee, I mean—know that I've done nothing *but* think, ever since you left London. How the devil do you—thee—think I bloody got here?"

"Thee conspired to have thy brother shot in the abdomen?" Denny inquired. "That seems somewhat ruthless, and perhaps not certain of success."

Lady Dorothea drew two or three long breaths in through her nose, eyeing him.

"Now, you see," she said, in a reasonable tone of voice, "was I not quite the perfect Quaker, I would strike you. Thee. But I have not, have I? Thank you, my dear," she said to Rachel, taking a glass of wine. "You are his sister, I collect?"

"Thee has not," Denny admitted warily, ignoring Rachel. "But even allowing, for the sake of argument," he added, with a glimmer of his usual self, "that God has indeed spoken to thee and said that thee must join us, that still leaves the small matter of thy family."

"There is nothing in your principles of faith that requires me to have my father's permission to marry," she snapped. "I asked."

Denny blinked.

"Who?"

"Priscilla Unwin. She's a Quaker I know in London. You know her, too, I think; she said you'd—thee'd? That can't be right—that you'd lanced a boil on her little brother's bum."

At this point, Denny became aware—perhaps because his eyes were sticking out of his head looking at Lady Dorothea, Rachel thought, not altogether amused—that his spectacles were missing. He put out a finger to push them up the bridge of his nose, then stopped and looked about, squinting. With a sigh, Rachel stepped forward and settled them onto his nose. Then she picked up the second glass of wine and handed it to him.

"She's right," she told him. "Thee needs it."

* * *

“Plainly,” Lady Dorothea said, “we are getting nowhere.” She did not look like a woman accustomed to getting nowhere, Rachel thought, but was keeping a fair grip on her temper. On the other hand, she was not even close to giving in to Denny’s urging that she must go back to her uncle’s house.

“I’m not going back,” she said, in a reasonable tone of voice, “because if I do, you’ll sneak off to the Continental army in Valley Forge, where you think I won’t follow you.”

“Thee would not, surely?” Denny said, and Rachel thought she divined a thread of hope in the question, but she wasn’t sure what kind of hope it was.

Lady Dorothea fixed him with a wide blue stare.

“I have followed thee across an entire bloody ocean. You—thee—think a damned army can stop me?”

Denny rubbed a knuckle down the bridge of his nose.

“No,” he admitted. “I don’t. That is why I have not left. I do not wish thee to follow me.”

Lady Dorothea swallowed audibly but bravely kept her chin up.

“Why?” she said, and her voice shook only a little. “Why do you not wish me to follow you?”

“Dorothea,” he said, as gently as possible. “Putting aside the fact that thy going with me would put thee in rebellion and in conflict with thy family—it is an army. Moreover, it is a very poor army, and one lacking every conceivable comfort, including clothing, bedding, shoes, and food. Beyond that, it is an army on the verge of disaster and defeat. It is no fit place for you.”

“And it is a fit place for your sister?”

“Indeed it is not,” he said. “But—” He stopped short, obviously realizing that he was on the verge of stepping into a trap.

“But thee can’t stop me coming with thee.” Rachel sprang it for him, sweetly. She was not quite sure she should help this strange woman, but she did admire the Lady Dorothea’s spirit.

“And you can’t stop me, either,” Dorothea said firmly.

Denny rubbed three fingers hard between his brows, closing his eyes as though in pain.

"Dorothea," he said, dropping his hand and drawing himself up. "I am called to do what I do, and it is the Lord's business and mine. Rachel comes with me not only because she is pigheaded but also because she is my responsibility; she has no other place to go."

"I do, too!" Rachel said hotly. "Thee said thee would find me a place of safety with Friends, if I wanted. I didn't, and I don't."

Before Denny could come back with anything else, Lady Dorothea held out her hand in a dramatic gesture of command, stopping him dead.

"I have an idea," she said.

"I greatly fear to ask what it is," Denny said, sounding entirely sincere.

"I don't," Rachel said. "What?"

Dorothea looked from one to the other. "I have been to a Quaker meeting. Two, in fact. I know how it's done. Let us hold a meeting and ask the Lord to guide us."

Denny's mouth fell open, greatly entertaining Rachel, who was seldom able to dumbfound her brother but was beginning to enjoy seeing Dorothea do it.

"That—" he began, sounding stunned.

"Is an excellent idea," Rachel said, already dragging another chair near to the fire.

Denny could hardly argue. Looking remarkably discombobulated, he sat, though Rachel noticed that he put her between Dorothea and himself. She wasn't sure whether he was afraid to be too close to Dorothea, lest the power of her presence overwhelm him, or whether it was only that sitting across the hearth from her gave him the best view.

They all settled slowly, shifting a bit for comfort, and lapsed into silence. Rachel closed her eyes, seeing the warm redness of the fire inside her lids, feeling the comfort of it on her hands and feet. She gave silent thanks for it, remembering the constant griping of cold in the camp, the nails of her fingers and toes on fire with it, and the continual shivering that lessened but did not stop when she huddled into her blankets at night and left her muscles fatigued and sore. It was no wonder Denny didn't want Dorothea to go with them. She didn't want to go back, would give almost anything not to go—anything but Denny's well-being. She hated being cold and hungry, but it would be much worse to be warm and well-fed and know that he suffered alone.

Did Lady Dorothea have any idea what it would be like? she wondered, and opened her eyes. Dorothea sat quiet but upright, graceful hands folded in her lap. She supposed Denny was imagining, as Rachel was, those hands reddened and marred by chilblains, that lovely face gaunt with hunger and blotched with dirt and cold.

Dorothea's eyes were shadowed by her lids, but Rachel was sure she was looking at Denny. This was a considerable gamble on Dorothea's part, she thought. For what if the Lord spoke to Denny and said it was impossible, that he must send her away? What if the Lord spoke to Dorothea now, she thought suddenly, or what if He had already? Rachel was quite taken back at the thought. It wasn't that Friends thought that the Lord spoke only to them; it was only that they weren't sure other folk listened very often.

Had she been listening herself? In all honesty, she was forced to admit that she had not. And she knew why: out of a disinclination to hear what she was afraid she must—that she must turn away from Ian Murray and abandon the thoughts of him that warmed her body and heated her dreams in the freezing forest, so she woke sometimes sure that if she put out her hand to the falling snow, it would hiss and vanish from her palm.

She swallowed hard and closed her eyes, trying to open herself to the truth but trembling in fear of hearing it.

All she heard, though, was a steady panting noise, and an instant later Rollo's wet nose nudged her hand. Disconcerted, she scratched his ears. Surely it wasn't seemly to be doing that in meeting, but he would keep nudging her until she complied, she knew. He half-closed his yellow eyes in pleasure and rested his heavy head upon her knee.

The dog loves him, she thought, rubbing gently through the thick, coarse fur. *Can he be a bad man, if that is so?* It wasn't God she heard in reply but her brother, who would certainly say, *"While dogs are worthy creatures, I think they are perhaps no judge of character."*

But I am, she thought to herself. *I know what he is—and I know him for what he might be, too*. She looked at Dorothea, motionless in her gray bag of a dress. Lady Dorothea Grey was prepared to abandon her former life, and very likely her family, to become a Friend, for Denny's sake. Might it not be, she wondered, that Ian Murray could turn from violence for hers?

Well, there is a proud thought, she scolded herself. *What sort of power does thee think thee has, Rachel Mary Hunter? No one has that sort of power, save the Lord*.

But the Lord did have it. And if the Lord should be so inclined, anything was possible. Rollo's tail moved gently, thumping thrice upon the floor.

Denzell Hunter straightened a little on his stool. It was the slightest movement, but coming as it did out of utter stillness, it surprised both the women, who lifted their heads like startled birds.

"I love thee, Dorothea," he said. He spoke very quietly, but his soft eyes burned behind his spectacles, and Rachel felt her chest ache. "Will thee marry me?"

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SEVERANCE AND REUNION

April 20, 1778

As Transatlantic Voyages went—and after our adventures with Captains Roberts, Hickman, and Stebbings, I considered myself something of a connoisseur of seagoing disaster—the trip to America was quite dull. We did have a slight brush with an English man-of-war but fortunately outran her, did run into two squalls and a major storm but luckily didn't sink, and while the food was execrable, I was much too distracted to do more than knock weevils out of the biscuit before eating it.

Half my mind was on the future: Marsali and Fergus's precarious situation, the danger of Henri-Christian's condition, and the logistics of dealing with it. The other half—well, to be fair, seven-eighths—was still at Lallybroch with Jamie.

I felt raw and bruised. Severed in some vital part, as always when parted from Jamie for very long, but also as though I had been violently ejected from my home, like a barnacle ripped from its rock and heedlessly tossed into boiling surf.

The greater part of that, I thought, was Ian's impending death. Ian was so much a part of Lallybroch, his presence there so much a constant and a comfort to Jamie all these years, that the sense of his loss was in a way the loss of Lallybroch itself. Oddly enough, Jenny's words, hurtful as they might have been, didn't really trouble me; I knew only too well the frantic grief, the desperation that one turned to rage because it was the only way to stay alive. And in truth, I understood her feelings, too, because I shared them: irrational or not, I felt that I should have been able to help Ian. What good was all my knowledge, all my skill, if I couldn't help when help was truly vital?

But there was a further sense of loss—and a further nagging guilt—in the fact that I could not be there when Ian died, that I had had to leave him for the last time knowing that I would not see him again, unable to offer comfort to him, or to be with Jamie or his family when the blow fell, or even simply to bear witness to his passing.

Young Ian felt this, too, to an even greater degree. I often found him sitting near the stern, staring into the ship's wake with troubled eyes.

"D'ye think he's gone yet?" he asked me abruptly on one occasion when I'd come to sit beside him there. "Da?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "I'd think so, on the basis of how ill he was—but people do sometimes hang on amazingly. When is his birthday, do you know?"

He stared at me in bafflement. "It's in May sometime, near Uncle Jamie's. Why?"

I shrugged and pulled my shawl tighter against the chill of the wind.

"Often people who are very ill, but are near their birthday, seem to wait until it's passed before dying. I read a study of it once. For some reason, it's more likely if the person is famous or well known."

That made him laugh, though painfully.

"Da's never been that." He sighed. "Right now I wish I'd stayed for him. I know he said to go—and I wanted to go," he added fairly. "But I feel bad that I did."

I sighed, too. "So do I."

"But you had to go," he protested. "Ye couldna let poor wee Henri-Christian choke. Da would understand that. I know he did."

I smiled at his earnest attempt to make me feel better.

"He understood why you needed to go, too."

"Aye, I know." He was silent for a bit, watching the furrow of the wake; it was a brisk day and the ship was traveling well, though the sea was choppy, dotted with whitecaps. “I wish—” he said suddenly, then stopped and swallowed. “I wish Da could ha’ met Rachel,” he said, low-voiced. “I wish she could meet him.”

I made a sympathetic sound. I remembered all too vividly the years during which I had watched Brianna grow, aching because she would never know her father. And then a miracle had happened—but it wouldn’t happen for Ian.

“I know you told your da about Rachel—he told me you had and was so happy to know about her.” That made him smile a little. “Did you tell Rachel about your father? Your family?”

“No.” He sounded startled. “No, I never did.”

“Well, you’ll just have to—what’s wrong?” His brow had furrowed, and his mouth turned down.

“I—nothing, really. It’s only, I just thought—I never told her anything. I mean, we—didna really talk, aye? I mean, I said things to her now and then, and her me, but just in the ordinary way of things. And then we—I kissed her, and … well, that was all about it.” He made a helpless gesture. “But I never asked her. I was just sure.”

“And now you’re not?”

He shook his head, brown hair flying in the wind.

“Oh, no, Auntie; I’m as sure of what’s between us as I am of … of …” He looked about in search of some symbol of solidity on the heaving deck, but then gave up. “Well, I’m surer of how I feel than I am that the sun will come up tomorrow.”

“I’m sure she knows that.”

“Aye, she does,” he said, in a softer voice. “I know she does.”

We sat for a bit in silence. Then I stood up and said, “Well, in that case—perhaps you ought to say a prayer for your father and then go and sit near the bow.”

* * *

I had been in Philadelphia once or twice in the twentieth century, for medical conferences. I hadn’t liked the place then, finding it grubby and unwelcoming. It was different now, but not much more attractive. The roads that weren't cobbled were seas of mud, and streets that would eventually be lined with run-down row houses with yards full of rubbish, broken plastic toys, and motorcycle parts were now edged with ramshackle shanties with yards full of rubbish, discarded oyster shells, and tethered goats. Granted, there were no black-suited feral policemen visible, but the petty criminals were still the same, and still visible, despite the very obvious presence of the British army; red coats swarmed near the taverns, and marching columns went past the wagon, muskets on their shoulders.

It was spring. I'd give it that much. There were trees everywhere, thanks to William Penn's dictum that one acre in five should be left in trees—even the avaricious politicians of the twentieth century hadn't quite succeeded in deforesting the place, though probably only because they couldn't figure out how to make a profit at it without being caught—and many of the trees were in bloom, a confetti of white petals drifting over the horses' backs as the wagon turned into the city proper.

An army patrol was set up on the main road into the city; they had stopped us, demanding passes from the driver and his two male passengers. I had put on a proper cap, didn't meet anyone's eye, and murmured that I was coming in from the country to tend my daughter, who was about to give birth. The soldiers glanced briefly into the large basket of food I had on my lap, but didn't even look at my face before waving the wagon on. Respectability had its uses. I wondered idly how many spymasters had thought of using elderly ladies? You didn't hear about old women as spies—but then again, that might merely indicate how good they were at it.

Fergus's printshop was not in the most fashionable district but not far off, and I was pleased to see that it was a substantial red-brick building, standing in a row of solid, pleasant-looking houses like it. We had not written ahead to say I was coming; I would have arrived as soon as the letter. With a rising heart, I opened the door.

Marsali was standing at the counter, sorting stacks of paper. She glanced up as the bell above the door rang, blinked, then gaped at me.

"How are you, dear?" I said, and, putting down the basket, hurried to put up the flap of the counter and take her in my arms.

She looked like death warmed over, though her eyes lit with a passionate relief upon seeing me. She nearly fell into my arms and burst into uncharacteristic sobs. I patted her back, making soothing sounds and feeling somewhat alarmed. Her clothes hung limp on her bones, and she smelled stale, her hair unwashed for too long.

"It will be all right," I repeated firmly for the dozenth time, and she stopped sobbing and stood back a bit, groping in her pocket for a grubby handkerchief. To my shock, I saw that she was pregnant again.

"Where's Fergus?" I asked.

"I dinna ken."

"He's left you?!" I blurted, horrified. "Why, that wretched little—"

"No, no," she said hurriedly, almost laughing through her tears. "He's not left me, not at all. It's only he's in hiding—he changes his place every few days, and I dinna ken just which one he's in right now. The weans will find him."

"Why is he in hiding? Not that I need to ask, I suppose," I said, with a glance at the squat black printing press that stood behind the counter. "Anything specific, though?"

"Aye, a wee pamphlet for Mr. Paine. He's got a series of them going, ken, called 'The American Crisis.' "

"Mr. Paine—the Common Sense fellow?"

"Aye, that's him," she said, sniffing and dabbing. "He's a nice man, but ye dinna want to drink with him, Fergus says. Ken how some men are sweet and loving when they're drunk, but some get fou' and it's up wi' the bonnets o' bonnie Dundee and them not even Scots for an excuse?"

"Oh, that sort. Yes, I know it well. How far along are you?" I asked, changing the subject back to one of general interest. "Shouldn't you sit down? You oughtn't to be on your feet for a long time."

"How far …?" She looked surprised and put a hand involuntarily where I was looking, to her slightly swollen stomach. Then she laughed. “Oh, that.” She burrowed under her apron and removed a bulging leather sack she had tied around her waist.

“For escaping,” she explained. “In case they fire the house and I have to make a run for it wi’ the weans.”

The sack was surprisingly heavy when I took it from her, and I heard a muffled clicking down at the bottom, beneath the layer of papers and children’s small toys.

“The Caslon Italic 24?” I asked, and she smiled, shedding at least ten years on the spot.

“All except ‘X.’ I had to hammer that one back into a lump and trade it to a goldsmith for enough money for food, after Fergus left. There’s still an ‘X’ in there, mind,” she said, taking back the bag, “but that one’s real lead.”

“Did you have to use the Goudy Bold 10?” Jamie and Fergus had cast two full sets of type from gold, these rubbed in soot and covered with ink until they were indistinguishable from the many sets of genuine lead type in the type case that stood demurely against the wall behind the press.

She shook her head and reached to take the bag back again.

“Fergus took that wi’ him. He meant to bury it somewhere safe, just in case. Ye look fair fashed wi’ travel, Mother Claire,” she went on, leaning forward to peer at me. “Will I send Joanie down to the ordinary for a jug o’ cider?”

“That would be wonderful,” I said, still reeling a little from the revelations of the last few minutes. “Henri-Christian, though—how is he? Is he here?”

“Out back wi’ his friend, I think,” she said, rising. “I’ll call him in. He’s that wee bit tired, poor mite, from not sleepin’ well, and he’s got such a throat he sounds like a costive bullfrog. Doesna dampen him much, though, I’ll tell ye that.” She smiled, despite her tiredness, and went through the door into the living quarters, calling “Henri-Christian!” as she went.

“In case they fire the house.” Who? I wondered, feeling a chill. The British army? Loyalists? And however was she managing, running a business and a family alone, with a husband in hiding and a sick child who couldn’t be left alone while he slept? *The horror of our*

situation, she'd said in her letter to Laoghaire. And that had been months ago, when Fergus was still at home.

Well, she wasn't alone now. For the first time since I'd left Jamie in Scotland, I felt something more than the pull of grim necessity in my situation. I'd write to him this evening, I decided. He might—I hoped he would—leave Lallybroch before my letter reached him there, but if so, Jenny and the rest of the family would be glad to know what was going on here. And if by chance Ian was still alive … but I didn't want to think of that; knowing that his death meant Jamie's release to come to me made me feel like a ghoul, as though I wished for his death to come sooner. Though in all honesty, I thought Ian himself might wish it to be sooner rather than later.

These morbid thoughts were interrupted by Marsali's return, Henri-Christian scampering beside her.

"Grandmère!" he shouted, seeing me, and leapt into my arms, nearly knocking me over. He was a very solid little boy.

He nuzzled me affectionately, and I felt a remarkable rush of warm joy at seeing him. I kissed and hugged him fiercely, feeling the hole left in my heart by Mandy and Jem's departure fill up a bit. Isolated from Marsali's family in Scotland, I had nearly forgotten that I still had four lovely grandchildren left and was grateful to be reminded of it.

"Want to see a trick, *Grandmère*?" Henri-Christian croaked eagerly. Marsali was right; he did sound like a constipated bullfrog. I nodded, though, and, hopping off my lap, he pulled three small leather bags stuffed with bran out of his pocket and began at once to juggle them with amazing dexterity.

"His da taught him," Marsali said, with a certain amount of pride.

"When I'm big like Germain, Da will teach me to pick pockets, too!"

Marsali gasped and clapped a hand over his mouth.

"Henri-Christian, we dinna ever speak o' that," she said sternly. "Not to anybody. D'ye hear?"

He glanced at me, bewildered, but nodded obediently.

The chill I had felt earlier returned. Was Germain picking pockets professionally, so to speak? I looked at Marsali, but she shook her head slightly; we'd talk about it later.

"Open your mouth and stick out your tongue, sweetheart," I suggested to Henri-Christian. "Let Grannie see your sore throat—it sounds very ouchy."

"Owg-owg-owg," he said, grinning widely, but obligingly opened up. A faint putrid smell wafted out of his wide-open mouth, and even lacking a lighted scope, I could see that the swollen tonsils nearly obstructed his throat altogether.

"Goodness gracious," I said, turning his head to and fro to get a better view. "I'm amazed that he can eat, let alone sleep."

"Sometimes he can't," Marsali said, and I heard the strain in her voice. "Often enough, he canna manage to swallow anything but a bit o' milk, and even that's like knives in his throat, poor bairn." She crouched beside me, smoothing the fine dark hair off Henri-Christian's flushed face. "Can ye help, d'ye think, Mother Claire?"

"Oh, yes," I said, with much more confidence than I actually felt. "Absolutely."

I felt the tension drain out of her like water, and, as though it were a literal draining, tears began to run quietly down her face. She pulled Henri-Christian's head into her bosom so he couldn't see her cry, and I reached out to embrace both of them, laying my cheek against her capped head, smelling the stale musky tang of her terror and exhaustion.

"It's all right now," I said softly, rubbing her thin back. "I'm here. You can sleep."

* * *

Marsali slept the rest of the day and all through the night. I was tired from the journey but managed to doze in the big chair by the kitchen fire, Henri-Christian cradled in my lap, snoring heavily. He did stop breathing twice during the night, and while I got him started again with no difficulty, I could see that something had to be done at once. Consequently, I had a brief nap in the morning and, having washed my face and eaten a bit, went out in search of what I'd need.

I had the most rudimentary of medical instruments with me, but the fact was, tonsillectomy and adenoidectomy didn't really require anything complex in that line.

I wished that Ian had come into the city with me; I could have used his help, and so could Marsali. But it was dangerous for a man of his age; he couldn't enter the city openly without being stopped and questioned by British patrols, likely arrested as a suspicious character—which he most assuredly was. Beyond that … he'd been afire to look for Rachel Hunter.

The task of finding two people—and a dog—who might be almost anywhere between Canada and Charleston, with no means of communication other than the foot and the spoken word, would have daunted anyone less stubborn than a person of Fraser blood. Agreeable as he might be, though, Ian was as capable as Jamie of pursuing a chosen course, come hell, high water, or reasonable suggestions.

He did, as he'd pointed out, have one advantage. Denny Hunter was presumably still an army surgeon. If so, he was obviously with the Continental army—some part of the Continental army. So Ian's notion was to discover where the closest part of the army might be just now and begin his inquiries there. To which end he proposed to skulk round the edges of Philadelphia, creeping into taverns and shebeens on the outskirts, and, by means of local gossip, discover where some part of the army presently was.

The most I had been able to persuade him to do was to send word to Fergus's printshop telling us where he was bound, once he'd discovered anything that gave him a possible destination.

In the meantime, all I could do was say a quick prayer to his guardian angel—a most overworked being—then have a word with my own (whom I envisioned as a sort of grandmotherly shape with an anxious expression) and set about doing what I'd come to do.

I now walked through the muddy streets, pondering the procedure. I had done a tonsillectomy only once—well, twice, if you counted the Beardsley twins separately—in the last ten years. It was normally a straightforward, quick procedure, but then again, it wasn't normally performed in a gloomy printshop on a dwarf with a constricted airway, a sinus infection, and a peritonsillar abscess.

Still … I needn't do it in the printshop, if I could find a better-lighted place. Where would that be? I wondered. A rich person's house, most likely; one where candle wax was squandered profligately. I'd been in many such houses, particularly during our time in Paris, but knew no one even moderately well-to-do in Philadelphia. Neither did Marsali; I'd asked.

Well, one thing at a time. Before I worried any more about an operating theater, I needed to find a blacksmith capable of fine work, to make the wire-loop instrument I required. I could, in a pinch, cut the tonsils with a scalpel, but it would be more than difficult to remove the adenoids, located above the soft palate, that way. And the last thing I wanted was to be slicing and poking round in Henri-Christian's severely inflamed throat in the dark with a sharp instrument. The wire loop would be sharp enough but was unlikely to damage anything it bumped into; only the edge surrounding the tissue to be removed would cut, and then only when I made the forceful scooping motion that would sever a tonsil or adenoid neatly.

I wondered uneasily whether he had a strep infection. His throat was bright red, but other infections could cause that.

No, we'd have to take our chances with the strep, I thought. I *had* set some penicillin bowls to brew, almost the moment I arrived. There was no way of telling whether the extract I might get from them in a few days was active or not—nor, if it was, just *how* active. But it was better than nothing, and so was I.

I did have one undeniably useful thing—or would, if this afternoon's quest was successful. Nearly five years ago, Lord John Grey had sent me a glass bottle of vitriol and the pelican glassware necessary to distill ether using it. He'd procured those items from an apothecary in Philadelphia, I thought, though I couldn't recall the name. But there couldn't *be* many apothecaries in Phila delphia, and I proposed to visit all of them until I found what I was looking for.

Marsali had said there were two large apothecary's shops in town, and only a large one would have what I needed to make ether. What was the name of the gentleman from whom Lord John Grey had acquired my pelican apparatus? Was he in Philadelphia at all? My mind was a blank, either from fatigue or from simple forgetfulness; the time when I had made ether in my surgery on Fraser's Ridge seemed as distant and mythical as Noah's Flood.

I found the first apothecary and got from him some useful items, including a jar of leeches—though I boggled a little at the thought of putting one inside Henri-Christian's mouth; what if he managed to swallow the thing?

On the other hand, I reflected, he was a four-year-old boy with a very imaginative elder brother. He'd probably swallowed much worse things than a leech. With luck, though, I wouldn't need them. I had also got two cautery irons, very small ones. It was a primitive and painful way of stopping bleeding—but, in fact, very effective.

The apothecary had not had any vitriol, though. He had apologized for the lack, saying that such things must be imported from England, and with the war … I thanked him and went on to the second place. Where I was informed that they had had some vitriol but had sold it some time previous, to an English lord, though what he wanted with such a thing, the man behind the counter couldn't begin to imagine.

"An English lord?" I said, surprised. Surely it couldn't be Lord John. Though, come to that, it wasn't as though the English aristocracy was flocking to Philadelphia these days, save those members who were soldiers. And the man had said "a lord," not a major or a captain.

Nothing ventured, nothing gained; I asked and was obligingly told that it was a Lord John Grey, and that he had requested the vitriol be delivered to his house on Chestnut Street.

Feeling a little like Alice down the rabbit hole—I was still a bit lightheaded from lack of sleep and the fatigues of the journey from Scotland—I asked the way to Chestnut Street.

The door to the house was opened by an extraordinarily beautiful young woman, dressed in a fashion that made it clear she was no servant. We blinked at each other in surprise; she plainly hadn't been expecting me, either, but when I inquired for Lord John, saying I was an old acquaintance, she readily invited me in, saying that her uncle would be back directly, he had only taken a horse to be shod.

"You would think he'd send the boy," the young woman—who gave her name as Lady Dorothea Grey—said apologetically. "Or my cousin. But Uncle John is most particular about his horses."

"Your cousin?" I asked, my slow mind tracing the possible family connections. "You don't mean William Ransom, do you?"

"Ellesmere, yes," she said, looking surprised but pleased. "Do you know him?"

"We've met once or twice," I said. "If you don't mind my asking—how does he come to be in Philadelphia? I … er … had understood that he was paroled with the rest of Burgoyne's army and had gone to Boston in order to sail home to England."

"Oh, he is!" she said. "Paroled, I mean. He came here, though, first, to see his father—that's Uncle John—and my brother." Her large blue eyes clouded a little at the mention. "Henry's very ill, I'm afraid."

"I'm so sorry to hear it," I said, sincerely but briefly. I was much more interested in William's presence here, but before I could ask anything further, there was a quick, light step on the porch and the front door opened.

"Dottie?" said a familiar voice. "Have you any idea where—oh, I beg your pardon." Lord John Grey had come into the parlor and stopped, seeing me. Then he actually saw me, and his jaw dropped.

"How nice to see you again," I said pleasantly. "But I'm sorry to hear that your nephew is ill."

"Thank you," he said, and, eyeing me rather warily, bowed low over my hand, kissing it gracefully. "I am delighted to see you again, Mrs. Fraser," he added, sounding as though he actually meant it. He hesitated for a moment, but of course couldn't help asking, "Your husband …?"

"He's in Scotland," I said, feeling rather mean at disappointing him. It flickered across his face but was promptly erased—he was a gentleman, and a soldier. In fact, he was wearing an army uniform, which rather surprised me.

"You've returned to active duty, then?" I asked, raising my brows at him.

"Not exactly. Dottie, have you not called for Mrs. Figg yet? I'm sure Mrs. Fraser would like some refreshment."

"I'd only just come," I said hastily, as Dottie leapt up and went out.

"Indeed," he said, courteously repressing the *why?* that showed plainly on his face. He motioned me to a chair and sat down himself, wearing a rather odd expression, as though trying to think how to say something awkward.

"I am delighted to see you," he said again, slowly. "Did you—I do not wish to sound in any way ungracious, Mrs. Fraser, you must excuse me—but … did you come to bring me a message from your husband, perhaps?"

He couldn't help the small light that sprang up in his eyes, and I felt almost apologetic as I shook my head.

"I'm sorry," I said, and was surprised to find that I meant it. "I've come to beg a favor. Not on my own behalf—for my grandson."

He blinked at that.

"Your grandson," he repeated blankly. "I thought that your daughter … oh! Of course, I was forgetting that your husband's foster son—his family is here? It is one of his children?"

"Yes, that's right." Without more ado, I explained the situation, describing Henri-Christian's state and reminding him of his generosity in sending me the vitriol and glass apparatus more than four years before.

"Mr. Sholto—the apothecary on Walnut Street?—told me that he had sold you a large bottle of vitriol some months ago. I wondered—do you by any chance still have it?" I made no effort to keep the eagerness out of my voice, and his expression softened.

"Yes, I do," he said, and, to my surprise, smiled like the sun coming out from behind a cloud. "I bought it for you, Mrs. Fraser."

* * *

A bargain was struck at once. He would not only give me the vitriol but also purchase any other medical supplies I might require, if I would consent to perform surgery on his nephew.

"Dr. Hunter removed one of the balls at Christmas," he said, "and that improved Henry's condition somewhat. The other remains embedded, though, and—"

"Dr. Hunter?" I interrupted him. "Not Denzell Hunter, you don't mean?"

"I do mean that," he said, surprised and frowning a little. "You do not mean to say you know him?"

"I do indeed mean that," I said, smiling. "We worked together often, both at Ticonderoga and at Saratoga with Gates's army. But what is he doing in Philadelphia?"

"He—" he began, but was interrupted by the sound of light footsteps coming down the stair. I had been vaguely conscious of footsteps overhead as we talked but had paid no attention. I looked toward the doorway now, though, and my heart leapt at the sight of Rachel Hunter, who was standing in it, staring at me with her mouth in a perfect "O" of astonishment.

The next moment she was in my arms, hugging me fit to break my ribs.

"Friend Claire!" she said, letting go at last. "I never thought to see—that is, I am so pleased—oh, Claire! Ian. Has he come back with thee?" Her face was alive with eagerness and fear, hope and wariness chasing each other like racing clouds across her features.

"He has," I assured her. "He's not here, though." Her face fell.

"Oh," she said in a small voice. "Where—"

"He's gone to look for you," I said gently, taking her hands.

Joy blazed up in her eyes like a forest fire.

"Oh!" she said, in a completely different voice. "Oh!"

Lord John coughed politely.

"Perhaps it would be unwise for me to know exactly where your nephew is, Mrs. Fraser," he observed. "As I assume he shares your husband's principles? Just so. If you will excuse me, then, I will go and tell Henry of your arrival. I suppose you wish to examine him?"

“Oh,” I said, recalled suddenly to the matter at hand. “Yes. Yes, of course. If you wouldn’t mind …”

He smiled, glancing at Rachel, whose face had gone white at seeing me but who was now the shade of a russet apple with excitement.

“Not at all,” he said. “Come upstairs when you are at leisure, Mrs. Fraser. I’ll wait for you there.”

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RATHER MESSY

I missed Brianna all the time, in greater or lesser degree depending upon the circumstance. But I missed her most particularly now. She could, I was sure, have solved the problem of getting light down Henri-Christian's throat.

I had him laid on a table at the front of the printshop now, taking every advantage of such light as came in there. But this was Philadelphia, not New Bern. If the sky wasn't overcast with clouds, it was hazed with smoke from the city's chimneys. And the street was narrow; the buildings opposite blocked most of what light there was.

Not that it mattered that much, I told myself. The room could have been blazing with sun, and I still couldn't have seen a thing in the inner reaches of Henri-Christian's throat. Marsali had a small mirror with which to direct light, and that would perhaps help with the tonsils—the adenoids would have to be done by touch.

I could feel the soft, spongy edge of one adenoid, just behind the soft palate; it took shape in my mind as I carefully fitted the wire loop around it, handling it with great delicacy so as not to let the edge cut either my fingertips or the body of the swollen adenoid. There was going to be a gush of blood when I sliced through it.

I had Henri-Christian braced at an angle, Marsali holding his inert body almost on his side. Denzell Hunter kept his head steady, clamping the pad soaked in ether firmly over his nose. I had no means of suction other than my own mouth; I'd have to turn him quickly after I made the cut and let the blood run out of his mouth before it ran down his throat and choked him. The tiny cautery iron was heating, its spade-shaped tip thrust into a pan of hot coals. That might be the trickiest part, I thought, pausing to steady myself and steady Marsali with a nod. I didn't want to burn his tongue or the inside of his mouth, and it would be slippery.…

I twisted the handle sharply and the little body jerked under my hand.

"Hold him tight," I said calmly. "A little more ether, please."

Marsali's breath was coming hard, and her knuckles were white as her face. I felt the adenoid separate cleanly, come adrift, and scooped it between my fingers, pulling it out of his throat before it could slip down into his esophagus. Tilted his head quickly to the side, smelling the sheared-metal smell of hot blood. I dropped the severed bit of tissue into a pan and nodded to Rachel, who pulled the cautery iron from its coals and put it carefully into my hand.

I still had my other hand in his mouth, keeping the tongue and uvula out of the way, a finger on the site of the ex-adenoid, marking my place. The cautery iron seared a white line of pain down my finger as I slid it down his throat, and I let out a small hiss but didn't move my finger. The scorched scent of burning blood and tissue came hot and thick, and Marsali made a small, frantic noise but didn't loosen her hold on her son's body.

"It is well, Friend Marsali," Rachel whispered to her, clasping her shoulder. "He breathes well; he is not in pain. He is held in the light, he will do well."

"Yes, he will," I said. "Take the iron now, Rachel, if you will? Dip the loop in the whisky please, and give me that again. One down, three to go."

* * *

"I have never seen anything like it," Denzell Hunter said, for perhaps the fifth time. He looked from the pad of fabric in his hand to Henri-Christian, who was beginning to stir and whimper in his mother's arms. "I should not have believed it, Claire, had I not seen it with my own eyes!"

"Well, I thought you'd better see it," I said, wiping sweat from my face with a handkerchief. A sense of profound well-being filled me. The surgery had been fast, no more than five or six minutes, and Henri-Christian was already coughing and crying, coming out of the ether. Germain, Joanie, and Félicité all watched wide-eyed from the doorway into the kitchen, Germain keeping tight hold of his sisters' hands. "I'll teach you to make it, if you like."

His face, already shining with happiness at the successful surgery, lit up at this.

"Oh, Claire! Such a gift! To be able to cut without giving pain, to keep a patient quite still without restraint. It—it is unimaginable."

"Well, it's a long way from perfect," I warned him. "And it is very dangerous—both to make and to use." I'd distilled the ether the day before, out in the woodshed; it was a very volatile compound, and there was a better than even chance that it would explode and burn the shed down, killing me in the process. All had gone well, though the thought of doing it again made me feel rather hollow and sweaty-palmed.

I lifted the dropping bottle and shook it gently; more than three-quarters full, and I had another, slightly larger bottle as well.

"Will it be enough, does thee think?" Denny asked, realizing what I was thinking.

"It depends what we find." Henri-Christian's surgery, despite the technical difficulties, had been very simple. Henry Grey's wouldn't be. I had examined him, Denzell beside me to explain what he had seen and done during the earlier surgery, which had removed a ball lodged just under the pancreas. It had caused local irritation and scarring but had not actually damaged a vital organ very badly. He hadn't been able to find the other ball, as it was lodged very deeply in the body, somewhere under the liver. He feared that it might lie near the hepatic portal vein and thus hadn't dared to probe hard for it, as a hemorrhage would almost certainly have been fatal.

I was reasonably sure that the ball hadn't damaged the gallbladder or bile duct, though, and given Henry's general state and symptomology, I suspected that the ball had perforated the small intestine but had seared the internal entrance wound shut in its wake; otherwise, the boy would almost surely have died within days, of peritonitis.

It might be encysted in the wall of the intestine; that would be the best situation. It might be lodged actually within the intestine itself, and that wouldn't be good at all, but I couldn't say how bad it might be until I got there.

But we did have ether. And the sharpest scalpels Lord John's money could buy.

* * *

The window, after what seemed to John Grey to be an excruciatingly prolonged discussion between the two physicians, remained partly open. Dr. Hunter insisted on the benefit of fresh air, and Mrs. Fraser agreed with this because of the ether fumes but kept talking about something she called germs, worrying that these would come in through the window and contaminate her "surgical field." *She speaks as though she views it as a battleground*, he thought, but then looked closely at her face and realized that indeed she did.

He had never seen a woman look like that, he thought, fascinated despite his worry for Henry. She had tied back her outrageous hair and wrapped her head carefully in a cloth like a Negro slave woman. With her face so exposed, the delicate bones made stark, the intentness of her expression—with those yellow eyes darting like a hawk's from one thing to another—was the most unwomanly thing he had ever seen. It was the look of a general marshaling his troops for battle, and seeing it, he felt the ball of snakes in his belly relax a little.

She knows what she's doing, he thought.

She looked at him then, and he straightened his shoulders, instinctively awaiting orders—to his utter amazement.

"Do you want to stay?" she asked.

"Yes, of course." He felt a little breathless, but there was no doubt in his voice. She'd told him frankly what Henry's chances were—not good, but there *was* a chance—and he was determined to be with his nephew, no matter what happened. If Henry died, he would at least die with someone who loved him there. Though, in fact, he was quite determined that Henry would not die. Grey would not let him.

"Sit over there, then." She nodded him to a stool on the far side of the bed, and he sat down, giving Henry a reassuring smile as he did so. Henry looked terrified but determined.

"I can't live like this anymore," he'd said the night before, finally making up his mind to allow the operation. *"I just can't."*

Mrs. Woodcock had insisted upon being present, too, and after a close catechism, Mrs. Fraser had declared that she might administer the ether. This mysterious substance sat in a dropping bottle on the bureau, a faint sickly odor drifting from it.

Mrs. Fraser gave Dr. Hunter something that looked like a handkerchief, and raised another to her face. It *was* a handkerchief, Grey saw, but one with strings affixed to its corners. She tied these behind her head, so the cloth covered her nose and mouth, and Hunter obediently followed suit.

Used as Grey was to the swift brutality of army surgeons, Mrs. Fraser's preparations seemed laborious in the extreme: she swabbed Henry's belly repeatedly with an alcoholic solution she had concocted, talking to him through her highwayman's mask in a low, soothing voice. She rinsed her hands—and made Hunter and Mrs. Woodcock do the same—and her instruments, so that the whole room reeked like a distillery of low quality.

Her motions were in fact quite brisk, he realized after a moment. But her hands moved with such sureness and … yes, grace, that was the only word … that they gave the illusion of gliding like a pair of gulls upon the air. No frantic flapping, only a sure, serene, and almost mystic movement. He found himself quieting as he watched them, becoming entranced and half forgetting the ultimate purpose of this quiet dance of hands.

She moved to the head of the bed, bending low to speak to Henry, smooth the hair away from his brow, and Grey saw the hawk's eyes soften momentarily into gold. Henry's body relaxed slowly under her touch; Grey saw his clenched, rigid hands uncurl. She had yet another mask, he saw, this one a stiff thing made of basket withes lined with layers of soft cotton cloth. She fitted this gently to Henry's face and, saying something inaudible to him, took up her dropping bottle.

The air filled at once with a pungent, sweet aroma that clung to the back of Grey's throat and made his head swim slightly. He blinked, shaking his head to dispel the giddiness, and realized that Mrs. Fraser had said something to him.

"I beg your pardon?" He looked up at her, a great white bird with yellow eyes—and a gleaming talon that sprouted suddenly from her hand.

"I said," she repeated calmly through her mask, "you might want to sit back a little farther. It's going to be rather messy."

* * *

William, Rachel, and Dorothea sat on the edge of the porch like birds on a fence rail, Rollo sprawled on the brick walk at their feet, enjoying the spring sun.

"It's bloody quiet up there," William said, glancing uneasily at the window above, where Henry's room lay. "D'you think they've started yet?" He thought, but didn't say, that he would have expected to hear Henry making a certain amount of noise if they had, despite Rachel's description of her brother's account of the marvels of Mrs. Fraser's ether. A man lie quietly asleep while someone cut open his belly with a knife? All stuff, he would have said. But Denzell Hunter wasn't a man who could be easily beguiled—though he supposed Dottie had somehow managed it. He gave his cousin a sideways glance.

"Have you written Uncle Hal yet? About you and Denny, I mean?" He knew she hadn't—she'd told Lord John, perforce, but persuaded him to let her break the news to her father—but wanted to distract her if he could. She was white to the lips, and her hands had bunched the fabric over her knees into nests of creases. He still hadn't got used to seeing her in dove and cream instead of her usual brilliant plumage—though he thought in fact that the quiet colors suited her, particularly as Rachel had assured her that she might still wear silk and muslin if she liked, rather than sacking material.

"No," Dottie said, giving him a look that thanked him for the distraction, even while acknowledging that she knew what he was doing. "Or, yes, but I haven't sent it yet. If all's well with Henry, I'll write at once with the news and add the bit about Denny and me at the bottom, as a postscript. They'll be so overjoyed about Henry that perhaps they won't notice—or at least won't be as upset about it."

"I rather think they'll notice," William said thoughtfully. "Papa did." Lord John had gone quite dangerously quiet when told and had given Denzell Hunter a look suggesting swords at dawn. But the fact was that Denny had saved Henry's life once and was now helping—with luck and Mrs. Fraser—to save it again. And Lord John was, above all, a man of honor. Besides, William thought that his father was actually relieved to finally know what it was that Dottie had been up to. He hadn't said anything directly to William regarding William's own role in her adventure—yet. He would.

"May the Lord hold thy brother in his hand," Rachel said, ignoring William's remark. "And mine and Mrs. Fraser, as well. But what if all should not go as we wish? Thee will still have to tell thy parents, and they may see news of thy impending marriage as adding insult to injury."

"You are the most tactless plain-spoken creature," William told her, rather irritably, seeing Dottie go whiter still at the reminder that Henry might die in the next minutes, hours, or days. "Henry will be fine. I know it. Denny is a great physician, and Mrs. Fraser … she's … er …" In all honesty, he wasn't sure what Mrs. Fraser was, but she scared him a little. "Denny says she knows what she's doing," he ended lamely.

"If Henry dies, nothing will matter," Dottie said softly, looking at the toes of her shoes. "Not to any of us."

Rachel made a small, sympathetic sound and reached to put her arm round Dottie's shoulder. William added his own gruff clearing of the throat and for an instant thought the dog had done the same.

Rollo's intent, though, was not sympathetic. He had lifted his head suddenly, and the hackles half-rose at his neck, a low growl rumbling through his chest. William glanced automatically in the direction the dog was looking and felt a sudden tightening of his muscles.

"Miss Hunter," he said casually. "Do you know that man? The one down there, near the end of the street, talking to the butter-and-egg woman?"

Rachel shaded her eyes with her hand, looking where he nodded, but shook her head.

"No. Why? Is he what's troubling the dog, does thee think?" She prodded Rollo in the side with her toe. "What's amiss, then, Friend Rollo?"

"I don't know," William said honestly. "It might be the cat; one ran across the road just behind the woman. But I've seen that man before; I'm sure of it. I saw him by the roadside, somewhere in New Jersey. He asked me if I knew Ian Murray—and where he might be."

Rachel gave a little gasp at that, making William look sideways at her in surprise.

"What?" he said. "Do you know where Murray is?"

"No," she said sharply. "I have not seen him since the autumn, at Saratoga, and I have no notion where he is. Does thee know this man's name?" she added, frowning. The man had disappeared now, walking off down a side street. "For that matter, is thee sure he is the same?"

"No," William admitted. "But I think so. He had a staff with him, and so did this man. And there's something about the way he stands—a little stooped. The man I met in New Jersey was very old, and this one walks the same way." He didn't mention the missing fingers; no need to remind Dottie of violence and mutilation just this minute, and he couldn't see the man's hand at this distance anyway.

Rollo had left off growling and settled himself with a brief grunt, but his yellow eyes were still watchful.

"When do you mean to be married, Dottie?" William asked, wishing to keep her mind occupied. A strange smell was coming from the window above them; the dog was wrinkling his nose, shaking his head in a confused sort of way, and William didn't blame him. It was a nasty, sickly kind of thing—but he could distinctly smell blood, as well, and the faint stink of shit. It was a battlefield smell, and it made his insides shift uneasily.

"I want to be married before the fighting starts again in earnest," his cousin answered seriously, turning to face him, "so that I can go with Denny—and Rachel," she added, taking her prospective sister-in-law's hand with a smile.

Rachel returned the smile, but briefly.

"What a strange thing," she said to both of them, but her hazel eyes were fixed on William, soft and troubled. "In only a little while we shall be enemies again."

"I have never felt myself your enemy, Miss Hunter," he replied, just as softly. "And I shall always be your friend."

A smile touched her lips, but the trouble stayed in her eyes.

"Thee knows what I mean." Her eyes slid from William to Dottie, on her other side, and it occurred to William with a jolt that his cousin was about to wed a rebel—to become one herself, in fact. That he must in fact soon be directly at war with a part of his own family. The fact that Denny Hunter would not take up arms would not protect him—or Dottie. Or Rachel. All three of them were guilty of treason. Any of them might be killed, captured, imprisoned. What would he do, he thought suddenly, appalled, if he had to see Denny hanged one day? Or even Dottie?

"I know what you mean," he said quietly. But he took Rachel's hand, and she gave it him, and the three of them sat in silence, linked, awaiting the verdict of the future.

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INK-STAINED WRETCH

I made my way to the printshop, dead tired and in that state of mind in which one feels drunk—euphoric and uncoordinated. I was in truth somewhat physically drunk, too; Lord John had insisted upon plying both Denzell Hunter and myself with his best brandy, seeing how done up we both were in the wake of the surgery. I hadn't said no.

It was one of the most hair-raising pieces of surgery I'd done in the eighteenth century. I'd done only two other abdominal surgeries: the successful removal of Aidan McCallum's appendix, under the influence of ether—and the very unsuccessful cesarean I'd performed with a garden knife upon the murdered body of Malva Christie. The thought of that gave me the usual pang of sadness and regret, but it was oddly tempered. What I remembered now, walking home in the cool evening, was the feeling of the life I'd held in my hands—so brief, so fleeting—but *there*, unmistakable and intoxicant, a brief blue flame.

I'd held Henry Grey's life in my hands two hours before and felt that blaze again. Once more I'd willed all my strength into the burning of that flame—but this time had felt it steady and rise in my palms, like a candle taking hold.

The bullet had entered his intestine but had not encysted. Instead, it remained embedded but mobile, not able to leave the body but moving enough to irritate the lining of the intestine, which was badly ulcerated. After a quick discussion with Denzell Hunter—who was so fascinated with the novelty of examining a person's working insides while they lay unconscious that he could barely keep his mind on the business at hand, exclaiming in awe at the vivid colors and pulsating throb of live organs—I had decided that the ulceration was too extensive. To excise it would narrow the small intestine dramatically and risk scarring—constricting it further and perhaps obstructing it altogether.

We'd done a modest resection instead, and I felt a twinge of something between laughter and dismay at the recollection of Lord John's face when I severed the ulcerated segment of intestine and dropped it with a *splat* on the floor at his feet. I hadn't done it on purpose; I'd simply needed both my hands and Denzell's to control the bleeding, and we'd lacked a nurse to help.

The boy wasn't out of the woods, not by a long chalk. I didn't know whether my penicillin would be effective, or whether he might develop some hideous infection despite it. But he *was* awake, and his vital signs were surprisingly strong—perhaps, I thought, because of Mrs. Woodcock, who had gripped his hand and stroked his face, urging him to wake with a fierce tenderness that left her feelings for him in no doubt whatever.

I did wonder briefly what the future held for her. Struck by her unusual name, I'd inquired cautiously about her husband and was sure that it was he whose amputated leg I'd tended on the retreat from Ticonderoga. I thought it very likely he was dead; if so, what might happen between Mercy Woodcock and Henry Grey? She was a free woman, not a slave. Marriage wasn't unthinkable—not even as unthinkable as such a relationship would be in the United States two hundred years in the future: marriages involving black and mulatto women of good family to white men were, if not common in the Indies, not a matter of public scandal, either. Philadelphia was not the Indies, though, and from what Dottie had told me of her father …

I was simply too tired to think about it, and I needn't—Denny Hunter had volunteered to stay with Henry through the night. I dismissed that particular pair from my mind as I wandered down the street, weaving slightly. I hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, and it was nearly dark; the brandy had sunk directly through the walls of my empty stomach and entered my bloodstream, and I hummed gently to myself as I walked. It was the twilight hour, when things float on the air, when curved cobblestones seem insubstantial and the leaves of trees hang heavy as emeralds, glowing with a green whose fragrance enters the blood.

I should walk faster; there was a curfew. Still, who would arrest me? I was too old for patrolling soldiers to molest me, as they would a young girl, and of the wrong sex to be suspicious. Should I meet a patrol, they wouldn't do more than abuse me and tell me to go home—which I was doing, in any case.

It struck me quite suddenly that I could move the things Marsali described circumspectly as "Mr. Smith's job": the written letters circulated by the Sons of Liberty that passed between villages, between towns, that whirled through the colonies like leaves driven by a spring storm, were copied and sent on, sometimes printed and distributed within the towns, if a bold printer could be found to do the work.

There was a loose network through which these things moved, but it was always prone to discovery, with people arrested and imprisoned frequently. Germain carried such papers often, and my heart was in my throat when I thought of it. An agile boy was less noticeable than a young man or a tradesman going about his business—but the British were not fools and would certainly stop him if he looked at all suspicious. Whereas I …

Turning the possibilities over in my mind, I reached the shop and went in, to the smell of a savory supper, the greetings of excited children, and something that drove all thought of my potential new career as a spy from my mind: two letters from Jamie.

* * *

20 March, A.D. 1778
Lallybroch

My dearest Claire;

Ian is dead. It has been ten days since the Event, and I thought I should now be able to write calmly. Yet to see those Words written on the Page just now smote me with the most unexpected Grief; Tears are running down the sides of my Nose, and I was forced to stop to mop my Face with a Handkerchief before continuing. It was not an easy Death and I should be relieved that Ian is now at Peace, and glad for his Translation into Heaven. So I am. But I am also desolate, in a Way that I have never been before. Only the Thought of being able to confide in you, my Soul, gives me Comfort.

Young Jamie has the Estate, as he should; Ian's Will has been read out, and Mr. Gowan will see it executed. There is not much beyond the Land and Buildings; only the smallest Bequests to the other Children, these largely of personal Items. My Sister he has confided to my Care (he having inquired before his Death whether I was willing. I told him he knew better than to ask. He said he did, but thought to inquire whether I felt myself also equal to the Task, and laughed like a Loon. Dear God, I shall miss him).

There were some trifling Debts to be paid; I have discharged them, as we agreed I should.

Jenny worries me. I know she grieves Ian with all her Heart, but she does not weep much, but only sits for long Periods, looking at Something that only she sees. There is a Calmness about her that is almost eerie, as though her Soul has flown with Ian, leaving only the Shell of her Body behind. Though since I mention Shells, it occurs to me that perhaps she is like a Chambered Nautilus, like the one that Lawrence Sterne showed us in the Indies. A large, beautiful Shell, made of many Chambers, but all empty, save the innermost one, in which the small Animal hides itself in safety.

Since I speak of her, though—she bids me tell you of her Remorse regarding Things said to you. I told her we had spoken of it between us, and that your Compassion would not hold it against her, realizing the desperate Circumstances in which she spoke.

On the Morning of Ian's Death, she spoke to me with apparent Rationality, and said she thought she would leave Lallybroch, that with his Death, nothing holds her here. I was, as you may suppose, much astonished to hear this, but did not try to question or dissuade her, assuming this to be only the Counsel of a Mind deranged by Sleeplessness and Grief.

She has since repeated this Sentiment to me, though, with firm Assurance that she is indeed in her right Mind. I am going to France for a short Time—both to accomplish some private Transactions that I will not write of here, and to assure myself before departing for America that both Michael and Joan are settled, they having left together, the Day following Ian's Burial. I said to Jenny that she must think carefully whilst I am absent—but that if she is in Fact convinced that this is what she wants, I will bring her to America. Not to stay with us (I smile, imagining your Face, which is transparent, even in my Mind).

She would have a Place, though, with Fergus and Marsali, where she would be of Use, and yet would not be reminded daily of her Loss—and where she would be in a Position to help and support Young Ian, should he require such Help (or at least to know how he does, if he does not).

(It also occurs to me—as it surely has to her—that Young Jamie's Wife will now be the Lady of Lallybroch, and that there is not Room for Two such. She is wise enough to know what the Difficulties of such a Situation would be, and kind enough to wish to avoid them, for the Sake of her Son and his Wife.)

In any Case, I propose to depart for America by the End of this Month, or as near to that as Passage may be obtained. The Prospect of being Reunited with you lightens my Heart and I remain forever

Your Devoted Husband,
Jamie

* * *

Paris
1 April

My dearest Wife;

I am returned very late to my new Lodging in Paris tonight. In fact, I found the Door bolted against me on my Return, and was obliged to shout for the Landlady, who was somewhat ill-tempered at being roused from her Bed. I was the more ill-tempered in my Turn, at finding no Fire laid, no Supper kept, and Nothing upon the Bedframe save a moldy Tick and threadbare Blanket which would not serve to shelter the meanest Beggar.

Further Shouts earned me Nothing save Abuse (from behind a safely lock'd Door), and my Pride would not suffer me to offer Bribes even would my Purse do so. I remain thus in my barren Garret, frozen and starving (this pitiful Picture is here drawn for the craven Purpose of soliciting your Sympathy, and to convince you of how poorly I Fare without you).

I am determined to depart this Place as soon as it be Light, and seek whether better Lodging can be found without excessive Damage to my Purse. Meanwhile, I shall endeavor to forget both Cold and Hunger in pleasant Converse with you, hoping that the Effort of writing will *summon your Image before me and lend me the Illusion of your Company.*

(I have possessed myself of adequate Light by stealing Downstairs in my Stockings and snatching two silver Candlesticks from the front Parlor, whose deceitful Grandeur seduced me into assuming Residence here. I shall return the Candlesticks tomorrow—when Madame returns the extortionate Fee for this miserable Accommodation.)

To more pleasant Subjects: I have seen Joan, now secure in her Convent, and apparently content (why, no, since you ask; I did not attend the Wedding of her Mother to Joseph Murray—who is, it turns out, a second Cousin to Ian. I sent a handsome Present and my good Wishes, which are sincere). I will visit Michael tomorrow; I look forward to seeing Jared again and will give him your kindest Regards.

In the Meantime, I sought Sustenance this Morning in a Coffeehouse in Montmartre, and was there fortunate to encounter Mr. Lyle, whom I had met in Edinburgh. He greeted me most kindly, inquired after my Fortunes, and after some small Conversation of a personal Nature, invited me to attend the Meeting of a certain Society, whose Members include Voltaire, Diderot, and others whose Opinions are heard in the Circles I seek to influence.

I went thus by Appointment at two o'clock to a House, where I was admitted and found all within most grandly appointed, it being the Paris Residence of Monsieur Beaumarchais.

The Company there gathered was mixt indeed; it ran the Gamut from the shabbiest of Coffee-house Philosophers to the most elegant Ornaments of Parisian Society, the Character common to them all being only a love of Talk. Some Pretentions to Reason and Intellect were made, to be sure, but not insisted on. I could not ask a fairer Wind for *my maiden Voyage as a political Provocateur—and Wind, you will see, is a most apt Image in considering the Events of the Day.*

After some inconsequent Babble over the refreshment Tables (had I been forewarned of Conditions here, I should have taken Care to stuff my Pockets surreptitiously with Cakes, as I saw more than one of my fellow Guests doing), the Company withdrew into a large Room and took Seats, for the Purpose of witnessing a formal Debate between two Parties.

The Matter under Debate was that popular Thesis, Resolved: that the Pen be mightier than the Sword, with Mr. Lyle and his Adherents defending the Proposition, M. Beaumarchais and his friends stoutly averring the Counter. The Talk was lively, with much Allusion to the Works of Rousseau and Montaigne (and not a little personal Disparagement of the Former, owing to his immoral Views on Marriage), but eventually Mr. Lyle's Party prevailed in their arguments. I thought of showing the Society my Right Hand, as Evidence for the Counter-proposition (a Sample of my Penmanship must have proved the Case to the Satisfaction of All), but Forbore, being but an Observer.

I found Opportunity later to approach Monsieur Beaumarchais, and made such an Observation to him in Jest, by way of fixing his Attention. He was most imprest by sight of my missing Digit, and inform'd of the Occasion of it (or rather, what I chose to tell him), became most animated and insistent that I accompany his Party to the house of the Duchess de Chaulnes, whence he was obliged for Supper, as the Duke is known to have a great Interest in Matters pertaining to the Aboriginal Inhabitants of the Colonies.

You will be wondering, no doubt, what Connexion exists between Aboriginal Savages and your most elegant Surgery? Have Patience for a few Lines longer.

The ducal Residence is placed in a Street with a sweeping Drive upon which I perceived several fine Carriages ahead of M. Beaumarchais's. Imagine my Delight upon being informed that the Gentleman who descended just before us was none other than M. Vergennes, the Foreign Minister.

I congratulated myself upon my good Fortune in so soon encountering so many Persons suited to my Purpose, and did my best to ingratiate myself with them—to this End, telling Tales of my Travels in America, and borrowing in the Process not a few Stories from our Good Friend Myers.

The Company was most gratifyingly astonished, being particularly attentive to the Story of our Meeting with the Bear and with Nacognaweto and his Fellows. I made much of your valiant Efforts with the Fish, which much amused the Party, though the Ladies appeared most Shocked at my Description of your Indian Attire. Mr. Lyle, to the Contrary, was agog to hear more of your Appearance in leather Trouserings—I judged him by this a confirm'd Lecher and a Reprobate, a Judgement verified later in the Evening by a Passage I observ'd in the Hallway between Mr. Lyle and Mademoiselle Erlande, who I perceive to be most wanton in her own Conduct.

In any Case, this Story led Mr. Lyle to draw the Attention of the Company to my Hand, and urge me to tell them the Story which I had unfolded to him in the Afternoon, of how I came to lose my Finger.

Seeing that the Company had reached such a Pitch of Enjoyment—being well lubricated with Champagne, Holland Gin, and large quantities of Hock—that they hung upon my Words, I spared no Pains in weaving them a Tale of Horror calculated to leave them shivering in their Beds.

I had (I said) been taken Captive by the dreadful Iroquois while journeying from Trenton to Albany. I described in great Detail the frightful Appearance and bloodthirsty Habit of these Savages—which required no *great Exaggeration, to be sure—and dwelt at Length upon the fearful Tortures which the Iroquois are wont to inflict upon their hapless Victims. La Comtesse Poutoude swooned at my recounting of the grisly Death of Father Alexandre, and the rest of the Party was much affected.*

I told them of Two Spears, who I trust will not object to my Slandering his Character in a good Cause, the more so as he will never hear of it. This Chief, I said, being determined to put me to the Torture, caused me to be stripped naked, and most cruelly whip'd. With Thought of our good Friend Daniel, who has turned the same Misfortune to his Advantage, I raised my Shirt and Displayed my Scars. (I felt somewhat the Whore, but it has been my Observation that most Whores pursue this Profession from Necessity, and I comfort myself that it is much the same.) The reaction of my Audience was all that could be hoped, and I continued my Narrative, secure in the Knowledge that from this Point, they would believe Anything.

Thereafter (I said), two of the Indian Braves brought me fainting into the Chief's Presence, and secured me extended flat upon a large Stone, whose Surface bore sinister Witness to previous Sacrifice conducted thereon.

A heathen Priest or Shaman then approached me, uttering hideous Cries and shaking a Stick decorated by many waving Scalps, which caused me to fear that my own Hair might prove of such Attraction by Virtue of its unusual Colour as shortly to be added to his Collection (I had not powder'd my Hair, tho' from lack of Powder, rather than Forethought). This Fear was much enhanced when the Shaman drew forth a large Knife and advanced upon me, Eyes glittering with Malice.

At this Point, the Eyes of my Hearers were glittering as well, being enlarged to the size of Saucers by Reason of their Attention to my Story. Many of the Ladies cried out in Pity for my desperate Situation, and the Gentlemen *uttered fierce Execrations of the foul Savages responsible for my Plight.*

I told them then how the Shaman had driven his Knife straight through my Hand, causing me to lose Consciousness by Reason of Fear and Pain. I awoke (I continued) to find my fourth Finger sever'd completely, and Blood pouring from my wounded Hand.

But most horrifying of all was the sight of the Iroquois Chief, seated upon the carved Trunk of a giant Tree, tearing the Flesh from the severed Digit with his Teeth, as one might gobble the Meat of a Chicken's Leg.

At this point in my narrative, La Comtesse swooned again, and—not to be outdone—the Honorable Miss Elliott launched into a full-fledg'd fit of the Hysterics, which fortunately saved me from having to invent the Means of my Escape from the Savages. Professing myself undone by the Memories of my Trials, I accepted a Glass of Wine (I was sweating pretty freely by this time), and escaped from the Party instead, assailed by Invitations on all Sides.

I am much pleased by the Effects of my first Foray. I am further uplifted by Reflection that should Age or Injury prevent my making a Livelihood by means of Sword, Plow, or Printing Press, I might still find useful Employment as a scribbler of Romances.

I expect Marsali will wish to know in great Detail the Appearance of the Gowns worn by the Ladies present, but I must beg her Forbearance for the Moment. I do not pretend not to have observ'd the Matter (though I might so protest, if I thought by so doing to relieve your Mind of Apprehensions concerning any supposed Vulnerability to the Wiles of Femininity. Knowing your suspicious and irrational Nature, my Sassenach, I make no such Protestations), but my Hand will not bear the Strain of recounting such Descriptions now. For the Moment, suffice it to say that the Gowns were of very rich Stuff, and the

Charms of the Ladies inside them made most apparent by the Style.

My pilfered Candles are burning low, and both my Hand and my Eyes are so fatigued that I have Difficulty in deciphering my own Words, let alone in forming them—I can only hope you will be able to read the last Part of this illegible Epistle. Still, I retire to my inhospitable Bed in good Spirits, encouraged by the day's Events.

Thus I bid you goodnight, with Assurance of my most tender Thoughts, in trust that you will have patience with and abiding Affection for

Your Ink-stain'd Wretch and Most Devoted Husband,
James Fraser

Postscriptum: Ink-stained Wretch, indeed, as I see that I have contriv'd to cover both my Paper and my Person with unsightly Blots. I flatter myself that the Paper is the more disfigured.

Postscriptum 2: I have been so absorbed in Composition as to forget my original Intent in writing: to say that I have booked Passage on the Euterpe, sailing from Brest in two Weeks' Time. Should anything transpire to prevent this, I will write again.

Postscriptum 3: I yearn to lie beside you again, and know your Body complicit with mine.

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ARMED WITH DIAMONDS AND WITH STEEL

Brianna cut the brooch apart with a steady hand and a pair of kitchen shears. It was an antique but not a valuable one—an ugly Victorian thing in the shape of a sprawling silver flower surrounded by writhing vines. Its only worth lay in the scatter of small diamonds that decorated the leaves like dewdrops.

"I hope they're big enough," she said, and was surprised at how calm her own voice sounded. She had been screaming inside her own head for the last thirty-six hours, which was how long it had taken them to make their plans and preparations.

"I think they'll be fine," Roger said, and she felt the tension under the calm of his own words. He was standing behind her, his hand on her shoulder, and the warmth of it was comfort and torment. Another hour, and he would be gone. Perhaps forever.

But there was no choice about it, and she went about the necessary things dry-eyed and steady.

Amanda, very weirdly, had fallen asleep quite suddenly after Roger and William Buccleigh had left in pursuit of Rob Cameron. Brianna had laid her in her bed and sat there watching her sleep and worrying until the men had returned near dawn with their horrifying news. But Amanda had waked as usual, sunny as the day, and apparently with no memory of her dream of screaming rocks. Neither was she bothered about Jem's absence; she had asked once, casually, when he would be home and, receiving a noncommittal "Soon," had gone back to her play, apparently contented.

She was with Annie now; they'd gone into Inverness to do a big shopping, with the promise of a toy. They wouldn't be home until mid-afternoon, and by then the men would be gone.

"Why?" William Buccleigh had asked. "Why would he take your lad?"

That was the same question she and Roger had been asking themselves since the moment they discovered Jem's loss—not that the answer was likely to help.

"Only two things it might be," Roger had answered, his voice thick and cracked. "Time travel—or gold."

"Gold?" Buccleigh's dark green eyes had turned to Brianna, puzzled. "What gold?"

"The missing letter," she'd explained, too tired to worry whether it was safe to tell him. Nothing was safe anymore, and nothing mattered. "The postscript my father wrote. Roger said you'd read the letters. *The property of an Italian gentleman*—you remember that?"

"I took no great notice," Buccleigh admitted. "That's gold, is it? Who's the Italian gentleman, then?"

"Charles Stuart." And so they'd explained, in disjoint fashion, about the gold that had come ashore in the last days of the Jacobite Rising—Buccleigh himself would have been about Mandy's age then, Brianna thought, startled by the notion—to be divided for safety among three Scottish gentlemen, trusted tacksmen of their clans: Dougal MacKenzie, Hector Cameron, and Arch Bug, of the Grants of Leoch. She watched carefully, but he gave no sign of recognition at the name of Dougal MacKenzie. No, she thought, he doesn't know. But that was not important now, either.

No one knew what had become of the two-thirds of the French gold held by the MacKenzies or the Grants—but Hector Cameron had fled Scotland in the last days of the Rising, the chest of gold under the seat of his carriage, and had brought it with him to the New World, where part of it had bought his plantation, River Run. The rest …

“The Spaniard guards it?” Buccleigh said, heavy fair brows knitted. “What the devil does that mean?”

“We don’t know,” Roger said. He was sitting at the table, head sunk in his hands, staring down at the wood. “Only Jem knows.” Then he had raised his head suddenly, looking at Brianna.

“The Orkneys,” he said. “Callahan.”

“What?”

“Rob Cameron,” he’d said urgently. “How old d’ye think he is?”

“I don’t know,” she’d said, confused. “Mid, late thirties, maybe. Why?”

“Callahan said Cameron went on archaeological digs with him in his early twenties. Is that far enough back—I mean, I only just now thought—” He had to stop to clear his throat and did so angrily before going on. “If he was into the ancient stuff fifteen, eighteen years ago—might he have known Geilie Duncan? Or Gillian Edgars, I suppose she still was then.”

“Oh, no,” Brianna said, but in denial, not disbelief. “Oh, no. Not another Jacobite nut!”

Roger had almost smiled at that one.

“I doubt it,” he’d said dryly. “I don’t think the man’s insane, let alone a political idealist. But he does belong to the SNP. They aren’t insane, either—but what’s the odds that Gillian Edgars would have been involved with them?”

There was no telling, not without digging into Cameron’s connections and history, and there was no time for that. But it was possible. Gillian—who’d later taken the name of a famous Scottish witch—had certainly been deeply interested both in Scottish antiquity and in Scottish politics. She might have crossed paths with Rob Cameron, easily. And if so …

“If so,” Roger said grimly, “God only knows what she might have told him, might have left him with.” A few of Geillis’s notebooks were in his study; if Rob had known her, he would have recognized them.

“And we bloody well know he read your da’s postscript,” he added. He rubbed his forehead—there was a dark bruise along his hairline—and sighed. “It doesn’t matter, does it? The only thing that matters now is Jem.”

And so Brianna gave each of them a chunk of silver studded with small diamonds and two peanut butter sandwiches. “For the road,” she said, with a ghastly attempt at humor. Warm clothes and stout shoes. She gave Roger her Swiss army knife; Buccleigh took a stainless-steel steak knife from the kitchen, admiring its serrated edge. There wasn’t time for much more.

The sun was still high when the blue Mustang bumped along the dirt road that led near the base of Craigh na Dun; she had to be back before Mandy came home. Rob Cameron’s blue truck was still there; a shudder went through her at the sight of it.

“Go ahead,” Roger said roughly to Buccleigh when she stopped. “I’ll be along directly.”

William Buccleigh had given Brianna a quick look, direct and disconcerting, with those eyes, so like Roger’s, touched her hand briefly, and got out. Roger didn’t hesitate; he’d had time on the way to decide what to say—and there was only one thing to say, in any case.

“I love you,” he said softly, and took her by the shoulders, holding her together long enough to say the rest. “I’ll bring him back. Believe me, Bree—I’ll see you again. In *this* world.”

“I love you,” she’d said, or tried to. It came out as a soundless whisper against his mouth, but he took it, along with her breath, smiled, gripped her shoulders so hard that she would find bruises there later—and opened the door.

She’d watched them—she couldn’t help watching them—as they climbed toward the top of the hill, toward the invisible stones, until they disappeared, out of her sight. Perhaps it was imagination; perhaps she really could hear the stones up there: a weird buzzing song that lived in her bones, a memory that would live there forever. Trembling and tear-blinded, she drove home. Carefully, carefully. Because now she was all that Mandy had.

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FOOTSTEPS

Late that night, she made her way to Roger's study. She felt dull and heavy, the horror of the day blunted by fatigue. She sat at his desk, trying to feel his presence, but the room was empty.

Mandy was asleep, surprisingly unworried by the chaos of her parents' feelings. Of course, she was used to Roger's occasional absences, gone to London or to Oxford, lodge nights in Inverness. Would she remember him if he never came back? Brianna thought with a pang.

Unable to bear that thought, she got up and prowled restlessly round the office, seeking the unfindable. She hadn't been able to eat anything and was feeling light-headed and friable.

She took up the little snake, finding a minimal comfort in its smooth sinuosity, its pleasant face. She glanced up at the box, wondering whether she should seek solace in her parents' company—but the thought of reading letters that Roger might never read with her … She put the snake down and stared blindly at the books on the lower shelves.

Beside the books on the American Revolution that Roger had ordered were her father's books, the ones from his old office. *Franklin W. Randall*, the neat spines said, and she took one out and sat down, holding it to her chest.

She'd asked him once before for help—to look after Ian's lost daughter. Surely he would look after Jem.

She thumbed the pages, feeling a little soothed by the friction of the paper.

Daddy, she thought, finding no words beyond that, and needing no more. The folded sheet of paper tucked among the leaves came as no surprise at all.

The letter was a draft—she could see that at once from the crossings-out, the marginal additions, words circled with question marks. And being a draft, it had neither date nor salutation but was plainly intended for her.

> *You've just left me, dearest deadeye, after our wonderful afternoon at Sherman's (the clay pigeon place—will she remember the name?). My ears are still ringing. Whenever we shoot, I'm torn between immense pride in your ability, envy of it, and fear. I don't know quite when you will read this, or if you will. Maybe I'll have the courage to tell you before I die (or I'll do something so unforgivable that your mother will—no, she won't. I've never met anyone so honorable as Claire, notwithstanding. She'll keep her word).*
>
> *What a queer feeling it is, writing this. I know that you'll eventually learn who—and perhaps what—you are. But I have no idea how you'll come to that knowledge. Am I about to reveal you to yourself, or will this be old news when you find it? I can only hope that I've succeeded in saving your life, either way. And that you will find it, sooner or later.*
>
> *I'm sorry, sweetheart, that's terribly melodramatic. And the last thing I want to do is alarm you. I have all the confidence in the world in you. But I am your father and thus prey to the fears that afflict all parents—that something dreadful and unpreventable will happen to your child, and you powerless to protect them. And the truth is that through no fault of your own, you are …*

Here he had changed his mind several times, writing *a dangerous person*, amending that to *always in some danger*, then crossing that out in turn, adding *in a dangerous position*, crossing *that* out, and circling *a dangerous person*, though with a question mark.

"I get the point, Daddy," she muttered. "What are you *talking* about? I—"

A sound froze the words in her throat. Footsteps were coming down the hall. Slow, confident steps. A man's. Every hair on her body rose.

The light was on in the hall; it darkened briefly as a shape took form in the door to the study.

She stared at him, dumbfounded.

"What are *you* doing here?" Even as she spoke, she was rising from the chair, groping for something that might be used as a weapon, her mind lagging far behind her body, not yet able to penetrate the fog of horror that gripped her.

"I came for you, hen," he said, smiling. "And for the gold." He laid something on the desk: her parents' first letter. *"Tell Jem the Spaniard guards it,"* Rob Cameron quoted, tapping it. "I thought maybe it's best you tell Jem that. And tell him to show me where this Spaniard is. If ye'd like to keep him alive, I mean. Up to you, though." The smile widened. "Boss."

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INDEPENDENCE DAY, II

Brest

Seeing Jenny deal with it all was disturbing his own presence of mind considerably. He could see her heart in her throat the first time she spoke French to a real Frenchman; her pulse fluttered in the hollow of her neck like a trapped hummingbird. But the *boulanger* understood her—Brest was full of foreigners, and her peculiar accent roused no particular interest—and the sheer delight on her face when the man took her penny and handed her a baguette filled with cheese and olives made Jamie want to laugh and cry at the same time.

"He understood me!" she said, clutching him by the arm as they left. "Jamie, he understood me! I spoke *French* to him, and he kent what I said, clear as day!"

"Much more clearly than he would have had ye spoken to him in the *Gaididhlig,"* he assured her. He smiled at her excitement, patting her hand. "Well done, *a nighean."*

She was not listening. Her head turned to and fro, taking in the vast array of shops and vendors that filled the crooked street, assessing the possibilities now open to her. Butter, cheese, beans, sausage, cloth, shoes, buttons … Her fingers dug into his arm.

"Jamie! I can buy anything! By myself!"

He couldn't help sharing her joy at thus rediscovering her independence, even though it gave him a small twinge. He'd been enjoying the novel sensation of having her rely on him.

“Well, so ye can,” he agreed, taking the baguette from her. “Best not to buy a trained squirrel or a longcase clock, though. Be difficult to manage on the ship.”

“Ship,” she repeated, and swallowed. The pulse in her throat, which had subsided momentarily, resumed its fluttering. “When will we … go on the ship?”

“Not yet, *a nighean,”* he said gently. “We’ll go and ha’ a bite to eat first, aye?”

* * *

The *Euterpe* was meant to sail on the evening tide, and they went down to the docks in mid-afternoon to go aboard and settle their things. But the slip at the dock where the *Euterpe* had floated the day before was empty.

“Where the devil is the ship that was here yesterday?” he demanded, seizing a passing boy by one arm.

“What, the *Euterpe?*” The boy looked casually where he was pointing, and shrugged. “Sailed, I suppose.”

“You *suppose?”* His tone alarmed the boy, who pulled his arm free and backed off, defensive.

“How would I know, *Monsieur?*” Seeing Jamie’s face, he hastily added, “Her master went into the district a few hours ago; probably he is still there.”

Jamie saw his sister’s chin dimple slightly and realized that she was near to panic. He wasn’t so far off it himself, he thought.

“Oh, is he?” he said, very calm. “Aye, well, I’ll just be going to fetch him, then. Which house does he go to?”

The boy shrugged helplessly. “All of them, *Monsieur*.”

Leaving Jenny on the dock to guard their baggage, he went back into the streets that adjoined the quay. A broad copper halfpenny secured him the services of one of the urchins who hung about the stalls, hoping for a half-rotten apple or an unguarded purse, and he followed his guide grimly into the filthy alleys, one hand on his purse, the other on the hilt of his dirk.

Brest was a port city, and a bustling port, at that. Which meant, he calculated, that roughly one in three of its female citizenry was a prostitute. Several of the independent sort hailed him as he passed.

It took three hours and several shillings, but he found the master of the *Euterpe* at last, dead drunk. He pushed the whore sleeping with him unceremoniously aside and roused the man roughly, slapping him into semiconsciousness.

"The ship?" The man stared at him blearily, wiping a hand across his stubbled face. "Fuck. Who cares?"

"I do," Jamie said between clenched teeth. "And so will you, ye wee arse-wipe. Where is she, and why are ye not on her?"

"The captain threw me off," the man said sullenly. "We had a disagreement. Where is she? On her way to Boston, I suppose." He grinned unpleasantly. "If you swim fast enough, maybe you can catch her."

* * *

It took the last of his gold and a well-calculated mixture of threats and persuasion, but he found another ship. This one was headed south, to Charleston, but at the moment he would settle for being on the right continent. Once in America, he'd think again.

His sense of grim fury began finally to abate as the *Philomene* reached the open sea. Jenny stood beside him, small and silent, hands braced on the rail.

"What, *a piùthar*?" He put his hand in the small of her back, rubbing gently with his knuckles. "You're grieving Ian?"

She closed her eyes for a moment, pressing back into his touch, then opened them and turned her face up to him, frowning.

"No, I'm troubled, thinkin' of your wife. She'll be peeved wi' me—about Laoghaire."

He couldn't help a wry smile at thought of Laoghaire.

"Laoghaire? Why?"

"What I did—when ye brought Claire home again to Lallybroch, from Edinburgh. I've never said sorry to ye for that," she added, looking up earnestly into his face.

He laughed.

"I've never said sorry to *you,* have I? For bringing Claire home and being coward enough not to tell her about Laoghaire before we got there."

The frown between her brows eased, and a flicker of light came back into her eyes.

"Well, no," she said. "Ye haven't told me sorry. So we're square, are we?"

He hadn't heard her say that to him since he'd left home at fourteen to foster at Leoch.

"We're square," he said. He put an arm round her shoulders and she slipped her own around his waist, and they stood close together, watching the last of France sink into the sea.

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A SERIES OF SHORT, SHARP SHOCKS

I was in Marsali’s kitchen, plaiting Félicité’s hair while keeping one eye on the porridge over the fire, when the bell over the printshop door rang. I whipped a ribbon round the end of the plait and, with a quick admonition to the girls to watch the porridge, went out to attend to the customer.

To my surprise, it was Lord John. But a Lord John I had never seen before. He was not so much disheveled as shattered, everything in order save his face.

“What?” I said, deeply alarmed. “What’s happened? Is Henry—”

“Not Henry,” he said hoarsely. He put a hand flat on the counter, as though to steady himself. “I have—bad news.”

“I can see that,” I said, a little tartly. “Sit down, for God’s sake, before you fall down.”

He shook his head like a horse shaking off flies and looked at me. His face was ghastly, shocked and white, and the rims of his eyes showed red. But if it wasn’t Henry …

“Oh, God,” I said, a fist clenching deep in my chest. “Dottie. What’s happened to her?”

“Euterpe,” he blurted, and I stopped dead, jarred to the backbone.

“What?” I whispered. *“What?”*

“Lost,” he said, in a voice that wasn’t his own. “Lost. With all hands.”

“No,” I said, trying for reason. “No, it’s not.”

He looked at me directly then, for the first time, and seized me by the forearm.

"Listen to me," he said, and the pressure of his fingers terrified me. I tried to jerk away but couldn't.

"Listen," he said again. "I heard it this morning from a naval captain I know. I met him at the coffeehouse, and he was recounting the tragedy. He saw it." His voice trembled, and he stopped for a moment, firming his jaw. "A storm. He had been chasing the ship, meaning to stop and board her, when the storm came upon them both. His own ship survived and limped in, badly damaged, but he saw the *Euterpe* swamped by a broaching wave, he said—I have no notion what that is—" He waved away his own digression, annoyed. "She went down before his eyes. The *Roberts*—his ship—hung about in hopes of picking up survivors." He swallowed. "There were none."

"None," I said blankly. I heard what he said but took no meaning from the words.

"He is dead," Lord John said softly, and let go of my arm. "He is gone."

From the kitchen came the smell of burning porridge.

* * *

John Grey stopped walking because he had come to the end of the street. He had been walking up and down the length of State Street since sometime before dawn. The sun was high now, and sweat-damp grit irritated the back of his neck, mud and dung splashed his stockings, and each step seemed to drive the nails in his shoe sole into the sole of his foot. He didn't care.

The Delaware River flowed across his view, muddy and fish-smelling, and people jostled past him, crowding toward the end of the dock in hopes of getting on the ferry making its slow way toward them from the other side. Wavelets rose and lapped against the pier with an agitated sound that seemed to provoke the people waiting, for they began to push and shove, and one of the soldiers on the dock took down his musket from his shoulder and used it to shove a woman back.

She stumbled, shrieking, and her husband, a bantam-rooster of a man, bounced forward, fists clenched. The soldier said something, bared his teeth and made a shooing motion with the gun, his fellow, attracted by the disturbance, turned to see, and with no more than incitement than that, there was suddenly a heaving knot of people at the end of the dock and shouts and screams ran through the rest, as people toward the rear tried to get away from the violence, men in the crowd tried to press toward it, and someone was pushed into the water.

Grey took three steps back and watched as two little boys rushed out of the crowd, their faces bloated with fright, and ran off up the street. Somewhere in the crowd, he heard a woman's high call, distraught: "Ethan! Johnny! *Jooooooohnnny!*"

Some dim instinct said he should step forward, raise his own voice, assert his authority, sort this. He turned and walked away.

He wasn't in uniform, he told himself. They wouldn't listen, would be confused, he might do more harm than good. But he wasn't in the habit of lying to himself, and dropped that line of argument at once.

He'd lost people before. Some of them dearly loved, more than life itself. But now he'd lost himself.

He walked slowly back toward his house in a numb daze. He hadn't slept since the news had come, save in the snatches of complete physical exhaustion, slumped in the chair on Mercy Woodcock's porch, waking disoriented, sticky with sap from the sycamores in her yard and covered with the tiny green caterpillars that swung down from the leaves on invisible strands of silk.

"Lord John." He became aware of an insistent voice, and with it, the realization that whoever was speaking had called his name several times already. He stopped, and turned to find himself facing Captain Richardson. His mind went quite blank. Possibly his face had, too, for Richardson took him by the arm in a most familiar manner and drew him into an ordinary.

"Come with me," Richardson said in a low voice, releasing his arm, but jerking his head toward the stair. Faint stirrings of curiosity and wariness made themselves felt through the haze that wrapped him, but he followed, the sound of his shoes hollow in the wooden stairwell.

Richardson closed the door of the room behind him and began speaking before Grey could gather his wits to begin questioning him regarding the very peculiar circumstances William had recounted.

“Mrs. Fraser,” Richardson said without preamble. “How well do you know her?”

Grey was so taken aback by this that he answered.

“She is the wife—the widow”—he corrected himself, feeling as though he had stuck a pin into a raw wound—“of a good friend.”

“A good friend,” Richardson repeated, with no particular emphasis. The man could scarcely look more nondescript, Grey thought, and had a sudden creeping vision of Hubert Bowles. The most dangerous spies were men whom no one would look at twice.

“A good friend,” Grey repeated firmly. “His political loyalties are no longer an issue, are they?”

“Not if he’s truly dead, no,” Richardson agreed. “You think he is?”

“I am quite sure of it. What is it you wish to know, sir? I have business.”

Richardson smiled a little at this patently false statement.

“I propose to arrest the lady as a spy, Lord John, and wished to be certain that there was no … personal attachment on your part, before I did so.”

Grey sat down, rather abruptly, and braced his hands on the table.

“I—she—what the devil for?” he demanded.

Richardson courteously sat down opposite him.

“She has been passing seditious materials to and fro all over Philadelphia for the last three months—possibly longer. And before you ask, yes, I’m sure. One of my men intercepted some of the material; have a look, if you like.” He reached into his coat and withdrew an untidy wad of papers, these looking to have passed through several hands. Grey didn’t think Richardson was practicing upon him, but took his time in deliberate examination. He put down the papers, feeling bloodless.

“I heard that the lady had been received at your house, and that she is often at the house where your nephew abides,” Richardson said. His eyes rested on Grey's face, intent. "But she is not a … friend?"

"She is a physician," Grey said, and had the small satisfaction of seeing Richardson's brows shoot up. "She has been of—of the greatest service to me and my nephew." It occurred to him that it was likely better that Richardson did not know how much esteem he might hold for Mrs. Fraser, as if he thought there *was* a personal interest, he would immediately cease to give Grey information. "That is ended, though," he added, speaking as casually as possible. "I respect the lady, of course, but there is no attachment, no." He rose then, in a decided manner, and took his leave, for to ask more questions would compromise the impression of indifference.

He set off toward Walnut Street, no longer numb. He felt once more himself, strong and determined. There was, after all, one more service he might perform for Jamie Fraser.

* * *

"You must marry me," he repeated.

I'd heard him the first time, but it made no more sense upon repetition. I stuck a finger in one ear and wiggled it, then repeated the process with the other.

"You can't possibly have said what I think you said."

"Indeed I did," he said, his normal dry edge returning.

The numbness of shock was beginning to wear off, and something horrible was beginning to crawl out of a small hole in my heart. I couldn't look at that and took refuge in staring at Lord John.

"I know I'm shocked," I told him, "but I'm sure I'm neither delusional nor hearing things. Why the bloody hell are you *saying* that, for God's sake?!" I rose abruptly, wanting to strike him. He saw it and took a smart step back.

"You are going to marry me," he said, a fierce edge in his voice. "Are you aware that you are about to be arrested as a spy?"

"I—no." I sat down again, as abruptly as I'd stood up. "What … why?"

"You would know that better than I would," he said coldly.

In fact, I would. I repressed the sudden flutter of panic that threatened to overwhelm me, thinking of the papers I had conveyed secretly from one pair of hands to another in the cover of my basket, feeding the secret network of the Sons of Liberty.

"Even if that were true," I said, struggling to keep my own voice level, "why the bloody hell would I marry you? Let alone why you would want to marry *me*, which I don't believe for an instant."

"Believe it," he advised me briefly. "I will do it because it is the last service I can render Jamie Fraser. I can protect you; as my wife, no one can touch you. And *you* will do it because …" He cast a bleak glance behind me, raising his chin, and I looked around to see all four of Fergus's children huddled in the doorway, the girls and Henri-Christian watching me with huge, round eyes. Germain was looking straight at Lord John, fear and defiance plain on his long, handsome face.

"Them, too?" I asked, taking a deep breath and turning to meet his gaze. "You can protect them, too?"

"Yes."

"I—yes. All right." I rested both hands flat on the counter, as though that somehow could keep me from spinning off into space. "When?"

"Now," he said, and took my elbow. "There is no time to lose."

* * *

I had no memory whatever of the brief ceremony, conducted in the parlor of Lord John's house. The only memory I retained of the entire day was the sight of William, standing soberly beside his father—his stepfather—as best man. Tall, straight, long-nosed, his slanted cat-eyes resting on me with uncertain compassion.

He can't be dead, I remembered thinking, with unusual lucidity. *There he is*.

I said what I was told to say and then was escorted upstairs to lie down. I fell asleep at once and didn't wake until the next afternoon.

Unfortunately, it was still real when I did.

* * *

Dorothea was there, hovering near me with concern. She stayed with me through the day, trying to coax me to eat something, offering me sips of whisky and brandy. Her presence was not exactly a comfort—nothing could be that—but she was at least an innocuous distraction, and I let her talk, the words washing over me like the sound of rushing water.

Toward evening, the men came back—Lord John and Willie. I heard them downstairs. Dottie went down and I heard her talking to them, a slight rise of interest in her voice, and then her steps on the stairs, quick and light.

“Aunt,” she said, breathless. “Are you well enough to come down, do you think?”

“I—yes, I suppose so.” Slightly taken aback at being called “Aunt,” I rose and made vague tidying motions. She took the brush from my hand, twisted up my hair, and, whipping out a ribboned cap, tucked my hair tenderly under it. I let her, and let her convey me gently downstairs, where I found Lord John and William in the parlor, both of them a little flushed.

“Mother Claire.” Willie took my hand and gently kissed it. “Come and look. Papa has found something he thinks you will like. Come and see it,” he repeated, drawing me gently toward the table.

“It” was a large wooden chest, made of some expensive wood, banded in gold. I blinked at it and put out a hand to touch it. It looked rather like a cutlery safe but much bigger.

“What …?” I looked up to find Lord John standing beside me, looking somewhat abashed.

“A, um, present,” he said, deprived for once of his smooth manners. “I thought—I mean, I perceived that you lacked somewhat in the way of … equipment. I do not wish you to abandon your profession,” he added gently.

“My profession.” A chill was beginning to spread up my spine, along the edges of my jaw. Fumbling a little, I tried to raise the lid of the chest, but my fingers were sweating; they slipped, leaving a slick of moisture gleaming on the wood.

"No, no, this way." Lord John bent to show me, turning the chest toward himself. He slipped the hidden catch, lifted the lid, and swung the hinged doors open, then stood back with something of the air of a conjurer.

My scalp prickled with cold sweat, and black spots began to flicker at the corners of my eyes.

Two dozen empty gold-topped bottles. Two shallow drawers below. And above, gleaming in its velvet bed, the pieces of a brass-bound microscope. A medical chest.

My knees gave way and I fainted, welcoming the cool wood of the floor against my cheek.

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THE PATHS OF DEATH

Lying in the tangled hell of my bed at night, I searched for the way to death. I longed with every fiber of my being to pass from this present existence. Whether what lay on the other side of life was undreamed glory or only merciful oblivion, mystery was infinitely preferable to my present inescapable misery.

I cannot say what it was that kept me from a simple and violent escape. The means, after all, were always to hand. I had my choice of pistol ball or blade, of poisons ranging from swiftness to stupor.

I rummaged through the jars and bottles of the medicine chest like a madwoman, leaving the little drawers ajar, the doors hanging open, seeking, scrabbling in my haste, ransacking knowledge and memory as I did the chest, knocking jars and bottles and bits of the past to the floor in a jumble.

At last I thought I had them all and, with a shaking hand, laid them one by one by one on the tabletop before me.

Aconite. Arsenic …

So many kinds of death to choose from. How, then?

The ether. That would be the easiest, if not quite the surest. Lie down, soak a thick pad of cloth in the stuff, put the mask over my nose and mouth, and drift painlessly away. But there was always the chance that someone would find me. Or that, losing consciousness, my head might fall to one side or I'd suffer convulsions that would dislodge the rag, and I would simply wake again to this aching void of existence.

I sat still for a moment, and then, feeling dreamlike, reached out to pick up the knife that lay on the table, where I had carelessly left it after using it to cut flax stems. The knife Jamie had given me. It was sharp; the edge gleamed raw and silver.

It would be sure, and it would be fast.

* * *

Jamie Fraser stood on the deck of the *Philomene*, watching the water slide endlessly away, thinking about death. He had at least stopped thinking about it in a personal manner, since the seasickness had—at long, long last—abated. His thoughts now were more abstract.

To Claire, he thought, death was always the Enemy. Something always to be fought, never yielded to. He was as well acquainted with death as she was but had perforce made his peace with it. Or thought he had. Like forgiveness, it was not a thing once learned and then comfortably put aside but a matter of constant practice—to accept the notion of one's own mortality, and yet live fully, was a paradox worthy of Socrates. And that worthy Athenian had embraced exactly that paradox, he reflected, with the ghost of a smile.

He'd come face-to-face with death often enough—and remembered those encounters with sufficient vividness—to realize that there were indeed worse things. Much better to die than be left to mourn.

He had still a dreadful feeling of something worse than sorrow when he looked at his sister, small and solitary, and heard the word "widow" in his mind. It was wrong. She could not be that, couldn't be severed in that brutal way. It was like watching her be cut in pieces, and he helpless to do anything.

He turned from that thought to his memories of Claire, his longing for her, the flame of her his candle in the dark. Her touch a comfort and a warmth beyond that of the body. He remembered the last evening before she'd left, holding hands on the bench outside the broch, feeling her heartbeat in her fingers, his own steadying to that warm, quick pulse.

Odd how the presence of death seemed to bring with it so many attendants, shades long-forgotten, glimpsed briefly in the gathering shadow. The thought of Claire, and how he had sworn to protect her from the first time he held her, brought back to him the nameless girl.

She'd died in France, on the far side of the void in his head that had been made by the blow of an ax. He hadn't thought of her in years, but suddenly she was there again. She'd been in his mind when he'd held Claire at Leoch, and he'd felt that his marriage might be some small atonement. He'd learned—slowly—to forgive himself for what had not been his fault and, in loving Claire, gave the girl's shade some peace, he hoped.

He had felt obscurely that he owed God a life and had paid that debt by taking Claire to wife—though God knew he would have taken her in any case, he thought, and smiled wryly. But he'd kept faith with the promise to protect her. *The protection of my name, my clan—and the protection of my body*, he'd said.

The protection of my body. There was an irony in that that made him squirm, as he glimpsed another face among the shades. Narrow, mocking, long-eyed—so young.

Geneva. One more young woman dead as the result of his lust. Not his fault, precisely—he'd fought that through, in the long days and nights following her death, alone in his cold bed above the stables, taking what comfort he could in the solid, voiceless presence of the horses shifting and champing in their stalls below. But had he not lain with her, she would not have died; that was inescapable.

Did he owe God another life? he wondered. He had thought it was Willie, the life he'd been given to protect with his own, in exchange for Geneva's. But that trust had had to be handed to another.

Well, he had his sister now and assured Ian silently that he would keep her safe. *As long as I live*, he thought. And that should be some time yet. He thought he'd used only five of the deaths the fortune-teller in Paris had promised him.

"You'll die nine times before you rest in your grave," she'd said. Did it take so many tries to get it right? he wondered.

I let my hand fall back, exposing my wrist, and placed the tip of the knife midway up my forearm. I'd seen many unsuccessful suicides, those who slashed their wrists from side to side, the wounds small mouths that cried for help. I'd seen those who meant it. The proper way was to slit the veins lengthwise, deep, sure cuts that would drain me of blood in minutes, assure unconsciousness in seconds.

The mark was still visible on the mound at the base of my thumb. A faint white "J," the mark he'd left on me on the eve of Culloden, when we first faced the stark knowledge of death and separation.

I traced the thin white line with the tip of the knife and felt the seductive whisper of metal on my skin. I'd wanted to die with him then, and he had sent me on with a firm hand. I carried his child; I could not die.

I carried her no longer—but she was still there. Perhaps reachable. I sat motionless for what seemed a long time, then sighed and put the knife back on the table carefully.

Perhaps it was the habit of years, a bent of mind that held life sacred for its own sake, or a superstitious awe of extinguishing a spark kindled by a hand not my own. Perhaps it was obligation. There were those who needed me—or at least to whom I could be useful. Perhaps it was the stubbornness of the body, with its inexorable insistence on never-ending process.

I could slow my heart, slow enough to count the beats … slow the flowing of my blood 'til my heart echoed in my ears with the doom of distant drums.

There were pathways in the dark. I knew; I had seen people die. Despite physical decay, there was no dying until the pathway was found. I couldn't—yet—find mine.

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NUMBNESS

The new medical chest sat on the table in my room, gleaming softly in the candlelight. Beside it were the gauze bags of dried herbs I had bought during the morning, the fresh bottles of the tinctures I had brewed in the afternoon, much to Mrs. Figg's displeasure at having her kitchen's purity so perverted. Her slitted eyes said that she knew me for a rebel and thought me likely a witch; she'd retreated to the doorway of the cookhouse while I worked but wouldn't leave altogether, instead keeping silent suspicious watch over me and my cauldron.

A large decanter of plum brandy was keeping me company. Over the course of the last week, I had found that a glass of it at night would let me find surcease in sleep, at least for a little. It wasn't working tonight. I heard the clock on the mantelpiece downstairs chime softly, once.

I stooped to pick up a box of dried chamomile that had spilled, sweeping the scattered leaves carefully back into their container. A bottle of syrup of poppies had fallen over, too, lying on its side, the aromatic liquid oozing round the cork. I set it upright, wiped the golden droplets from its neck with my kerchief, blotted up the tiny puddle from the floor. A root, a stone, a leaf. One by one, I picked them up, set them straight, put them away, the accoutrements of my calling, the pieces of my destiny.

The cool glass seemed somehow remote, the gleaming wood an illusion. Heart beating slowly, erratically, I put a hand flat on the box, trying to steady myself, to fix myself in space and time. It was becoming more difficult by the day.

I remembered, with sudden, painful vividness, a day on the retreat from Ticonderoga. We had reached a village, found momentary refuge in a barn. I'd worked all day then, doing what could be done with no supplies, no medicines, no instruments, no bandages save what I made from the sweat-sodden, filthy clothes of the wounded. Feeling the world recede further and further as I worked, hearing my voice as though it belonged to someone else. Seeing the bodies under my hands, only bodies. Limbs. Wounds. Losing touch.

Darkness fell. Someone came, pulled me to my feet, and sent me out of the barn, into the little tavern. It was crowded, overwhelmed with people. Someone—Ian?—said that Jamie had food for me outside.

He was alone there, in the empty woodshed, dimly lit by a distant lantern.

I'd stood in the doorway, swaying. Or perhaps it was the room that swayed.

I could see my fingers dug into the wood of the doorjamb, nails gone white.

A movement in the dimness. He rose fast, seeing me, came toward me. What was his—

"Jamie." I'd felt a distant sense of relief at finding his name.

He'd seized me, drawn me into the shed, and I wondered for an instant whether I was walking or whether he was carrying me; I heard the scrape of the dirt floor under my feet but didn't feel my weight or the shift of it.

He was talking to me, the sound of it soothing. It seemed a dreadful effort to distinguish words. I knew what he must be saying, though, and managed to say, "All right. Just … tired," wondering even as I spoke them whether these sounds were words at all, let alone the right ones.

"Will ye sleep, then, lass?" he'd said, worried eyes fixed on me. "Or can ye eat a bit first?" He let go of me, to reach for the bread, and I put out a hand to the wall to support myself, surprised to find it solid.

The sense of cold numbness had returned.

"Bed," I said. My lips felt blue and bloodless. "With you. Right now."

He'd cupped my cheek, calloused palm warm on my skin. Big hand. Solid. Above all, solid.

"Are ye sure, *a nighean*?" he'd said, a note of surprise in his voice. "Ye look as though—"

I'd laid a hand on his arm, half fearing that it would go through his flesh.

"Hard," I'd whispered. "Bruise me."

My glass was empty, the decanter halfway full. I poured another and took hold of the glass carefully, not wanting to spill it, determined to find oblivion, no matter how temporary.

Could I separate entirely? I wondered. Could my soul actually leave my body without my dying first? Or had it done so already?

I drank the glass slowly, one sip at a time. Another. One sip at a time.

There must have been some sound that made me look up, but I wasn't aware of having raised my head. John Grey was standing in the doorway of my room. His neckcloth was missing and his shirt hung limp on his shoulders, wine spilled down the front of it. His hair was loose and tangled, and his eyes as red as mine.

I stood up, slow, as though I were underwater.

"I will not mourn him alone tonight," he said roughly, and closed the door.

* * *

I was surprised to wake up. I hadn't really expected to and lay for a bit trying to fit reality back into place around me. I had only a slight headache, which was almost more surprising than the fact that I was still alive.

Both those things paled in significance beside the fact of the man in bed beside me.

“How long has it been since you last slept with a woman, if you don’t mind my asking?”

He didn’t appear to mind. He frowned a little and scratched his chest thoughtfully.

“Oh … fifteen years? At least that.” He glanced at me, his expression altering to one of concern. “Oh. I do apologize.”

“You do? For what?” I arched one brow. I could think of a number of things he *might* apologize for, but probably none of those was what he had in mind.

“I am afraid I was perhaps not …” he hesitated. “Very gentlemanly.”

“Oh, you weren’t,” I said, rather tartly. “But I assure you that I wasn’t being at all ladylike myself.”

He looked at me, and his mouth worked a bit, as though trying to frame some response to that, but after a moment or two he shook his head and gave it up.

“Besides, it wasn’t me you were making love to,” I said, “and both of us know it.”

He looked up, startled, his eyes very blue. Then the shadow of a smile crossed his face, and he looked down at the quilted coverlet.

“No,” he said softly. “Nor were you, I think, making love to *me*. Were you?”

“No,” I said. The grief of the night before had softened, but the weight of it was still there. My voice was low and husky, because my throat was halfway closed, where the hand of sorrow clutched me unawares.

John sat up and reached to the table, where a carafe stood along with a bottle and a glass. He poured something out of the bottle and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I said, and lifted it to my lips. “Good grief, is that *beer*?”

“Yes, and very good beer, too,” he said, tilting back the bottle. He took several hearty gulps, eyes half closed, then lowered it with a sigh of satisfaction. “Clears the palate, freshens the breath, and prepares the stomach for digestion.”

Despite myself, I was amused—and shocked.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are in the habit of drinking beer for breakfast every day?"

"Of course not. I have food with it."

"I am amazed that you have a single tooth in your head," I said severely—but risked a small sip. It *was* good beer: heavy-bodied and sweet, with just the right sour edge.

At this point, I noticed a certain tenseness in his posture, which the content of the conversation didn't account for. Slow-witted as I was, it took a moment for me to realize what was amiss.

"Oh. If you need to fart," I said, "don't trouble on my account. Go ahead."

He was sufficiently startled by my observation that he did.

"I do beg your pardon, madam!" he said, his fair skin flushing up to the hairline.

I tried not to laugh, but suppressed amusement jiggled the bed, and he went redder still.

"Would you have any hesitation about it were you in bed with a man?" I asked, out of idle curiosity.

He rubbed his knuckles against his mouth, the color fading a bit from his cheeks.

"Ah. Well, that would depend upon the man. By and large, though, no."

The man. I knew that Jamie was the man in his mind—just as he was in mine. At the moment, I wasn't disposed to resent it.

He knew what I was thinking, too.

"He offered me his body once. You knew that?" His voice was dry.

"I take it you didn't accept." I knew he hadn't but was more than curious to hear his side of that encounter.

"No. What I wanted from him was not that—or not entirely that," he added, with honesty. "I wanted all of it—and was young and proud enough to think that if I could not have that, then I would accept no less. And that, of course, he couldn't give me."

I was silent for a time, thinking. The window was open, and the long muslin curtains moved in the breeze.

"Did you regret it?" I asked. "Not taking him up on his offer, I mean?"

"Ten thousand times, at the very least," he assured me, breaking into a rueful grin. "At the same time … refusing him was one of the few acts of true nobility to which I would lay claim for myself. It's true, you know," he added, "selflessness does carry its own reward—for if I *had* taken him, that would have destroyed forever what did exist between us.

"To have given him instead the gift of my understanding, hard come by as it was," he added ironically, "left me with his friendship. So I am left with momentary regret on the one hand, but satisfaction on the other. And in the end it was the friendship that I valued most."

After a moment's silence, he turned to me.

"May I … You will think me odd."

"Well, you *are* a bit odd, aren't you?" I said tolerantly. "I don't really mind, though. What is it?"

He gave me a look, strongly suggesting that if one of us was indeed odd, he didn't think it was himself. Gentlemanly instincts suppressed any remark he might have made to this effect, though.

"Will you allow me to see you? Ah … naked?"

I closed one eye and looked at him.

"This certainly isn't the first time you've slept—I do mean *slept* with—a woman, is it?" I asked. He *had* been married, though I seemed to recall that he had spent much of his married life living separately from his wife.

He pursed his lips thoughtfully, as though trying to recall.

"Well, no. I do think it may be the first time I've done it entirely voluntarily, though."

"Oh, I *am* flattered!"

He glanced at me, smiling slightly.

"So you should be," he said quietly.

I was of an age, after all, where … Well, on the other hand, he presumably didn't have the same instinctive reactions that the majority of men did, in terms of feminine attractions. Which rather left open the question …

"Why?"

A shy smile touched the corner of his mouth, and he hitched himself up against the pillow.

"I … am not quite sure, to tell you the truth. Perhaps it is only an effort to reconcile my memories of last night with the … er … actuality of the experience?"

I felt a sharp jolt, as though he had punched me in the chest. He couldn't have known my first thoughts on waking and seeing him—that sharp, disorienting flash when I had thought he was Jamie, remembering so acutely Jamie's flesh and weight and ardor, and so urgently wanted him to be Jamie that I had succeeded for an instant in thinking that he was, only to be crushed like a grape at the realization that he wasn't, all my soft insides spurting out.

Had he felt or thought the same things, waking to find me there beside him?

"Or perhaps it is curiosity," he said, smiling a little more broadly. "I have not seen a naked woman in some time, bar Negro slaves at the docks in Charleston."

"How long is some time? Fifteen years, you said?"

"Oh, a good deal longer than that. Isobel—" He stopped abruptly, the smile vanishing. He hadn't mentioned his dead wife before.

"You never saw her naked?" I asked, with more than idle curiosity. He turned his face away a little, eyes cast down.

"Ah … no. It wasn't … She did not … No." He cleared his throat, then raised his eyes, looking into mine with an honesty raw enough to make me want to look away.

"I am naked to you," he said simply, and drew back the sheet.

Thus invited, I could hardly not look at him. And in all truth, I wanted to, out of simple curiosity. He was trim and lightly built, but muscular and solid. A little softness at the waist, but no fat—and softly furred with vigorous blond hair, darkening to brown at his crutch. It was a warrior's body; I was well acquainted with those. One side of his chest was heavily marked with crisscrossing scars, and there were others—a deep one across the top of one thigh, a jagged thing like a lightning bolt down his left forearm.

At least my own scars weren't visible, I thought, and before I could hesitate further, I pulled the sheet away from my own body.

He looked at it with deep curiosity, smiling a little.

“You are very lovely,” he said politely.

“For a woman of my age?”

His gaze passed over me dispassionately, not with any sense of judgment but rather with the air of a man of educated tastes evaluating what he saw in the light of years of seeing.

“No,” he said finally. “Not for a woman of your age; not for a woman at all, I think.”

“As what, then?” I asked, fascinated. “An object? A sculpture?” In a way, I could see that. Something like museum sculptures, perhaps: weathered statues, fragments of vanished culture, holding within them some remnant of the original inspiration, this remnant in some odd way magnified by the lens of age, sanctified by antiquity. I had never regarded myself in such a light, but I couldn’t think what else he might mean.

“As my friend,” he said simply.

“Oh,” I said, very touched. “Thank you.”

I waited, then drew the sheet up over both of us.

“Since we’re friends …” I said, somewhat emboldened.

“Yes?”

“I only wondered … have you … been quite alone all this time? Since your wife died?”

He sighed, but smiled to let me know he didn’t mind the question.

“If you really must know, I have for many years enjoyed a physical relationship with my cook.”

“With … your cook?”

“Not with Mrs. Figg, no,” he said hastily, hearing the horror in my voice. “I meant with my cook at Mount Josiah, in Virginia. His name is Manoke.”

“Ma—oh!” I recalled Bobby Higgins telling me that Lord John retained an Indian named Manoke to cook for him.

“It is not merely the relief of necessary urges,” he added pointedly, turning his head to meet my eyes. “There is true liking between us.”

“I’m pleased to hear that,” I murmured. “He, er, he’s …”

"I have no idea whether his preference is solely for men. I rather doubt it—I was somewhat surprised when he made his desires known in re myself—but I am in no position to complain, whatever his tastes may be."

I rubbed a knuckle over my lips, not wanting to seem vulgarly curious—but vulgarly curious, all the same.

"You don't mind, if he … takes other lovers? Or he you, come to that?" I had a sudden uneasy apprehension. I did not intend that what had happened the night before should *ever* happen again. In fact, I was still trying to convince myself that it hadn't happened this time. Nor did I mean to go to Virginia with him. But what if I should and Lord John's household then assumed … I had visions of a jealous Indian cook poisoning my soup or lying in wait behind the necessary house with a tomahawk.

John himself seemed to be considering the matter, lips pursed. He had a heavy beard, I saw; the blond stubble softened his features and at the same time gave me an odd feeling of strangeness—I had so seldom seen him less than perfectly shaved and groomed.

"No. There is … no sense of possession in it," he said finally.

I gave him a look of patent disbelief.

"I assure you," he said, smiling a little. "It—well. Perhaps I can describe it best by analogy. At my plantation—it belongs to William, of course; I refer to it as mine only in the sense of habitation—"

I made a small polite sound in my throat, indicating that he might curtail his inclinations toward complete accuracy in the interests of getting on with it.

"At the plantation," he said, ignoring me, "there is a large open space at the rear of the house. It was a small clearing at first, and over the years I have enlarged it and finally made a lawn of it, but the edge of the clearing runs up to the trees. In the evenings, quite often, deer come out of the forest to feed at the edges of the lawn. Now and then, though, I see a particular deer. It's white, I suppose, but it looks as though it's made of silver. I don't know whether it comes only in the moonlight or whether it's only that I cannot see it save by moonlight—but it is a sight of rare beauty."

His eyes had softened, and I could see that he wasn't looking at the plaster ceiling overhead but at the white deer, coat shining in the moonlight.

"It comes for two nights, three—rarely, four—and then it's gone, and I don't see it again for weeks, sometimes months. And then it comes again, and I am enchanted once more."

He rolled onto his side in a rustle of bedclothes, regarding me.

"Do you see? I do not own this creature—would not, if I could. Its coming is a gift, which I accept with gratitude, but when it's gone, there is no sense of abandonment or deprivation. I'm only glad to have had it for so long as it chose to remain."

"And you're saying that your relationship with Manoke is the same. Does he feel that way about you, do you think?" I asked, fascinated. He glanced at me, clearly startled.

"I have no idea."

"You, um, don't … talk in bed?" I said, striving for delicacy.

His mouth twitched, and he looked away.

"No."

We lay in silence for a few moments, examining the ceiling.

"Have you ever?" I blurted.

"Have I what?"

"Had a lover that you talked to."

He cut his eyes at me.

"Yes. Perhaps not quite so frankly as I find myself talking to *you*, but, yes." He opened his mouth as though to say or ask something further, but instead breathed in, shut his mouth firmly, and let the air out slowly through his nose.

I knew—I couldn't not know—that he wanted very much to know what Jamie was like in bed, beyond what I had inadvertently shown him the night before. And I was obliged to admit to myself that I was very tempted to tell him, only in order to bring Jamie back to life for the brief moments while we talked. But I knew that such revelations would have a price: not only a later sense of betrayal of Jamie but a sense of shame at using John—whether he wished such usage or not. But if the memories of what had passed between Jamie and myself in our intimacy were no longer shared—still, they belonged only to that intimacy and were not mine to give away.

It occurred to me—belatedly, as so many things did these days—that John's intimate memories belonged to him, as well.

"I didn't mean to pry," I said apologetically.

He smiled faintly, but with real humor.

"I am flattered, madam, that you should entertain an interest in me. I know many more … conventional marriages in which the partners remain by preference in complete ignorance of each other's thoughts and histories."

With considerable startlement, I realized that there was now an intimacy between myself and John—unexpected and uninvited on both our parts, but … there it was.

The realization made me shy, and with that realization came a more practical one: to wit, that a person with functional kidneys cannot lie in bed drinking beer forever.

He noticed my slight shifting and rose at once himself, donning his banyan before fetching my own dressing gown—which, I saw with a sense of unease, some kindly hand had hung over a chair to warm before the fire.

"Where did that come from?" I asked, nodding at the silk robe he held for me.

"From your bedroom, I assume." He frowned at me for a moment before discerning what I meant. "Oh. Mrs. Figg brought it in when she built the fire."

"Oh," I said faintly. The thought of Mrs. Figg seeing me in Lord John's bed—doubtless out cold, disheveled, and snoring, if not actually drooling—was hideously mortifying. For that matter, the mere fact of my *being* in his bed was deeply embarrassing, no matter what I had looked like.

"We *are* married," he pointed out, with a slight edge to his voice.

"Er … yes. But …" A further thought came to me: perhaps this was not so unusual an occurrence for Mrs. Figg as I thought—had he entertained other women in his bed from time to time?

"Do you sleep with women? Er … not sleep, I mean, but …"

He stared at me, stopped in the act of untangling his hair.

"Not willingly," he said. He paused, then laid down his silver comb. "Is there anything else you would like to ask me," he inquired, with exquisite politeness, "before I allow the bootboy to come in?"

Despite the fire, the room was chilly, but my cheeks bloomed with heat. I drew the silk dressing gown tighter.

"Since you offer … I know Brianna told you what—what we are. Do you believe it?"

He considered me for a time without speaking. He didn't have Jamie's ability to mask his feelings, and I could see his mild irritation at my previous question fade into amusement. He gave me a small bow.

"No," he said, "but I give you my word that I will of course behave in all respects as if I did."

I stared at him until I became aware that my mouth was hanging unattractively open. I closed it.

"Fair enough," I said.

The odd little bubble of intimacy in which we had spent the last half hour had burst, and despite the fact that I had been the one asking nosy questions, I felt like a snail suddenly deprived of its shell—not merely naked but fatally exposed, emotionally as well as physically. Thoroughly rattled, I murmured a farewell and made for the door.

"Claire?" he said, a question in his voice.

I stopped, hand on the doorknob, feeling quite queer; he'd never called me by my name before. It took a small effort to look over my shoulder at him, but when I did, I found him smiling.

"Think of the deer," he said gently. "My dear."

I nodded, wordless, and made my escape. Only later, after I had washed—vigorously—dressed, and had a restorative cup of tea with brandy in it, did I make sense of this last remark.

Its coming is a gift, he'd said of the white deer, *which I accept with gratitude*.

I breathed the fragrant steam and watched the tiny curls of tea leaf drift to the bottom of the cup. For the first time in weeks, I wondered just what the future might hold.

“Fair enough,” I whispered, and drained the cup, the shreds of tea leaf strong and bitter on my tongue.

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FIREFLY

It was dark. Darker than any place he'd ever been. Night outside wasn't really ever dark, even when the sky was cloudy, but this was darker than the back of Mandy's closet when they played hide 'n seek. There was a crack between the doors, he could feel it with his fingers, but no light came through it at all. It must still be night. Maybe there'd be light through the crack when it got morning.

But maybe Mr. Cameron would come back when it got morning, too. Jem moved a little away from the door, thinking that. He didn't think Mr. Cameron wanted to hurt him, exactly—he *said* he didn't, at least—but he might try to take him back up to the rocks and Jem wasn't going *there*, not for anything.

Thinking about the rocks hurt. Not as much as when Mr. Cameron pushed him against one and it … started, but it hurt. There was a scrape on his elbow where he banged it, fighting back, and he rubbed at it now, because it was lots better to feel that than to think about the rocks. No, he told himself, Mr. Cameron *wouldn't* hurt him, because he'd pulled him back out of the rock when it tried to … He swallowed hard, and tried to think about something else.

He sort of thought he knew where he was, only because he remembered Mam telling Da about the joke Mr. Cameron played on her, locking her in the tunnel, and she said the wheels that locked the doors sounded like bones being chewed, and that's *just* what it sounded like when Mr. Cameron shoved him in here and shut the doors.

He was kind of shaking. It was cold in here, even with his jacket on. Not as cold as when he and Grandda got up before dawn and waited in the snow for the deer to come down and drink, but still pretty cold.

The air felt weird. He sniffed, trying to smell what was going on, like Grandda and Uncle Ian could. He could smell rock—but it was just plain old rock, not … *them*. Metal, too, and an oily sort of smell, kind of like a gas station. A hot kind of smell he thought was electricity. There was something in the air that wasn't a smell at all, but a kind of hum. That was power, he recognized that. Not quite the same as the big chamber Mam had showed him and Jimmy Glasscock, where the turbines lived, but sort of the same. Machines, then. He felt a little better. Machines felt friendly to him.

Thinking about machines reminded him that Mam said there was a train in here, a little train, and that made him feel lots better. If there was a train in here, it wasn't all just empty dark space. That hum maybe belonged to the train.

He put out his hands and shuffled along until he bumped into a wall. Then he felt around and walked along with one hand on the wall, found out he was going the wrong way when he walked face first into the doors and said, "Ow!"

His own voice made him laugh, but the laughter sounded funny in the big space and he quit and turned around to walk the other way, with his other hand on the wall to steer by.

Where was Mr. Cameron now? He hadn't said where he was going. Just told Jem to wait and he'd come back with some food.

His hand touched something round and smooth, and he jerked it back. It didn't move, though, and he put his hand on it. Power cables, running along the wall. Big ones. He could feel a little hum in them, same as he could when Da turned on the car's motor. It made him think of Mandy. She had that kind of quiet hum when she was sleeping, and a louder one when she was awake.

He wondered suddenly whether Mr. Cameron might have gone to take Mandy, and the thought made him feel scared. Mr. Cameron wanted to know how you got through the stones, and Jem couldn't tell him—but Mandy for sure couldn't be telling him, she was only a baby. The thought made him feel hollow, though, and he reached out, panicked.

There she was, though. Something like a little warm light in his head, and he took a breath. Mandy was OK, then. He was interested to find he could tell that with her far away. He'd never thought to try before, usually she was just right *there*, being a pain in the arse, and when him and his friends went off without her, he wasn't thinking about her.

His foot struck something and he stopped, reaching out with one hand. He didn't find anything and after a minute got up his nerve to let go of the wall and reach out further, then to edge out into the dark. His heart thumped and he started to sweat, even though he was still cold. His fingers stubbed metal and his heart leaped in his chest. The train!

He found the opening, and felt his way in on his hands and knees, and cracked his head on the thing where the controls were, standing up. That made him see colored stars and he said *"Ifrinn!"* out loud. It sounded funny, not so echoey now he was inside the train, and he giggled.

He felt around over the controls. They were like Mam said, just a switch and a little lever, and he pushed the switch. A red light popped into life, and made him jump. It made him feel lots better, though, just to see it. He could feel the electricity coming through the train, and that made him feel better, too. He pushed the lever, just a little, and was thrilled to feel the train move.

Where did it go? He pushed the lever a little more, and air moved past his face. He sniffed at it, but it didn't tell him anything. He was going away from the big doors, though—away from Mr. Cameron.

Maybe Mr. Cameron would go and try to find out about the stones from Mam or Da? Jem hoped he *would*. Da would settle Mr. Cameron's hash, he kent that for sure, and the thought warmed him. Then they'd come and find him and it would be OK. He wondered if Mandy could tell them where he was. She kent him the same way he kent her, and he looked at the little red light on the train. It glowed like Mandy, steady and warm-looking, and he felt good looking at it.

He pushed the lever a little farther, and the train went faster into the dark.

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NEXUS

Rachel poked suspiciously at the end of a loaf. The bread-seller, catching sight, turned on her with a growl.

“Here, don’t you be touching that! You want it, it’s a penny. You don’t, go away.”

“How old is this bread?” Rachel said, ignoring the young woman’s glower. “It smells stale, and if it is as stale as it looks, I would not give thee more than half a penny for a loaf.”

“It’s no more than a day old!” The young woman pulled back the tray of loaves, indignant. “There’ll be no fresh bread ’til Wednesday; my master can’t get flour ’til then. Now, d’you want bread or not?”

“Hmm,” said Rachel, feigning skepticism. Denny would have fits if he thought she was trying to cheat the woman, but there was a difference between paying a fair price and being robbed, and it was no more fair to allow the woman to cheat her than it was the other way about.

Were those crumbs on the tray? And were those tooth marks in the end of that loaf? She bent close, frowning, and Rollo whined suddenly.

“Does thee think the mice have been at these, dog?” she said to him. “So do I.”

Rollo wasn’t interested in mice, though. Ignoring both Rachel’s question and the bread-seller’s indignant reply, he was sniffing the ground with great industry, making an odd, high-pitched noise in his throat.

“Whatever ails thee, dog?” Rachel said, staring at this performance in consternation. She put a hand on his ruff and was startled at the vibration running through the great hairy frame.

Rollo ignored her touch as well as her voice. He was moving—almost running—in small circles, whining, nose to the ground.

“That dog’s not gone mad, has he?” the baker’s assistant asked, watching this.

“Of course not,” Rachel said absently. “Rollo … *Rollo!*”

The dog had suddenly shot out of the shop, nose to the ground, and was heading down the street, half-trotting in his eagerness.

Muttering under her breath, Rachel seized her marketing basket and went after him.

To her alarm, he was already at the next street and vanished round the corner as she watched. She ran, calling after him, the basket bumping against her leg as she went and threatening to spill out the goods she’d already bought.

What was the matter with him? He’d never acted thus before. She ran faster, trying to keep him in sight.

“Wicked dog,” she panted. “Serve thee right if I let thee go!” And yet she ran after him, calling. It was one thing for Rollo to leave the inn on his own hunting expeditions—he always returned. But she was well away from the inn and feared his being lost.

“Though if thy sense of smell is so acute as it seems, doubtless you could follow me back!” she panted, and then stopped dead, struck by a thought.

He was following a scent, so much was clear. But what kind of scent would make the dog do that? Surely no cat, no squirrel …

“Ian,” she whispered to herself. “Ian.”

She picked up her skirts and ran flat out in pursuit of the dog, heart hammering in her ears, even as she tried to restrain the wild hope she felt. The dog was still in sight, nose to the ground and tail held low, intent on his trail. He went into a narrow alley and she followed without hesitation, hopping and lurching in an effort to avoid stepping on the various squashy, nasty things in her path.

Any of these would normally have fascinated any dog, including Rollo—and yet he ignored them all, following his trail.

Seeing this, she realized suddenly what “dogged” really meant, and smiled to herself at the thought.

Could it be Ian? It was surely folly to think so; her hope would be dashed, and yet she could not conquer the conviction that had sprung up in her breast with the possibility. Rollo’s tail flicked round the corner, and she dashed after, breathless.

If it was Ian, what could he be doing? The trail was leading them toward the edge of the town—not along the main road but quite out of the settled, prosperous part of the city, into an area of ramshackle houses and the informal camps of the British camp followers. A flock of chickens squawked and scattered at Rollo’s approach, but he didn’t pause. Now he was circling back, coming round the far side of a shed and out into a narrow street of packed dirt, curling like a tongue between rows of close-packed, ill-built houses.

She had a pain in her side and sweat was pouring down her face, but she, too, knew the meaning of “dogged” and kept on. The dog was drawing away from her, though; she would lose sight of him at any moment—her right shoe had rubbed the skin from her heel, and she felt as though her shoe was filling with blood, though likely this was imagination. She’d seen men with shoes filled with blood …

Rollo vanished at the end of the street, and she dashed madly after him, her stockings falling down and her petticoat drooping so she stepped on the hem and tore it. If she did find Ian, she’d have a thing to say to him, she thought. If she could speak by then.

There was no sign of the dog at the end of the street. She looked round wildly. She was at the back of a tavern; she could smell the hops from the brew tubs, and the stink of the midden, and voices came from the street on the other side of the building. Soldiers’ voices—there was no mistaking the way soldiers talked, even if she couldn’t make out the words—and she halted, heart in her throat.

But they hadn’t caught someone; it was only the usual way men talked, casual, getting ready to do something. She caught the clink and jingle of equipment, the sound of boots on the pavement—

A hand seized her arm, and she swallowed the shriek before it could tear out of her throat, terrified of giving Ian away. But it wasn’t Ian who had grabbed her. Hard fingers dug into her upper arm, and a tall, white-haired old man looked down at her with burning eyes.

* * *

Ian was famished. He had not eaten in more than twenty-four hours, unwilling to take time either to hunt or to find a farmhouse that might give him food. He had covered the twenty miles from Valley Forge in a daze, hardly noticing the distance.

Rachel was here. By some miracle, *here*, in Philadelphia. It had taken him some time to overcome the suspicion of Washington's soldiers, but at last a rather stout German officer with a big nose and a peering, friendly way had come along and expressed curiosity regarding Ian's bow. A brief demonstration of archery and a conversation in French—for the German officer had only the most rudimentary English—and he was at last able to inquire as to the whereabouts of a surgeon named Hunter.

This at first produced only blank looks, but von Steuben had taken a liking to Ian and sent someone to ask while he found a little bread. At long last, the someone had come back and said that there *was* a surgeon named Hunter, who was usually in camp, but who went now and then to Philadelphia to tend a private patient. Hunter's sister? The someone had shrugged.

But Ian knew the Hunters: where Denzell was, Rachel was. Granted, no one knew *where* in Philadelphia Dr. Hunter's private patient might be—there was some reserve about it, some hostility that Ian didn't understand but was much too impatient to unravel—but they were at least in Philadelphia.

And now so was Ian. He'd crept into the city just before dawn, threading his way silently through the camps that ringed the city, past the sleeping, blanket-wrapped forms and smothered, reeking campfires.

There was food in the city, food in abundance, and he paused for a moment of anticipatory bliss on the edge of the market square, deciding between fish fried in batter or a Cornish pasty. He had just stepped forward, money in hand, to the pasty-seller's stall, when he saw the woman look over his shoulder and her face change to a look of horror.

He whirled round and was knocked flat. There were screams and shouts, but these were lost in the mad slobber of Rollo's tongue licking every inch of his face, including the inside of his nose.

He whooped at that and half-sat up, fending off the ecstatic dog.

"A cú!" he said, and hugged the huge, wriggling creature in delight. He seized the dog's ruff in both hands then, laughing at the lolling tongue.

"Aye, I'm glad to see ye, too," he told Rollo. "But what have ye done wi' Rachel?"

* * *

Fergus's missing hand itched. It hadn't done that for some time, and he wished it didn't now. He was wearing a bran-stuffed glove pinned to his sleeve rather than his useful hook—he was much too memorable with that—and it was impossible to rub his stump for relief.

Seeking distraction, he came out of the barn where he'd been sleeping and slouched casually toward a nearby campfire. Mrs. Hempstead nodded at him and picked up a tin mug, into which she ladled thin porridge and passed it over. Aye, well, he thought, there was some advantage to the glove, after all—he couldn't grasp the mug with it but could use it to cradle the hot cup against his chest without burning himself. And, he was pleased to discover, the heat killed the itch.

"Bon jour, madame," he said, with a polite bow, and Mrs. Hempstead smiled, despite her bedraggled tiredness. Her husband had been killed at Paoli, and she eked out a bare living for her three children by doing laundry for English officers. Fergus augmented her income in return for food and shelter. Her house had been taken by her husband's brother, but he had graciously allowed her and her family to sleep in the barn—one of three or four such bolt-holes Fergus employed in turn.

“There was a man looking out for you, sir,” she said in a low voice, coming to give him a cup of water.

“Aye?” He kept himself from glancing round; if the man was still here, she would have told him. “Did you see this man?”

She shook her head.

“No, sir. ’Twas Mr. Jessop he spoke to, and Jessop told Mrs. Wilkins’s youngest, who came by and said to my Mary. Jessop said he was a Scotch man, very tall, a fine-looking man. Thought he might have been a soldier once.”

Excitement sprang up in Fergus’s breast, hot as the porridge.

“Had he red hair?” he asked, and Mrs. Hempstead looked surprised.

“Well, I don’t know as how the young’un said. Let me ask Mary, though.”

“Do not trouble yourself, madame. I will ask myself.” He swallowed the rest of the porridge, nearly scalding his throat, and handed back the cup.

Small Mary, carefully questioned, did not know whether the tall Scotch man had red hair; she hadn’t seen him, and Tommy Wilkins didn’t say. He had, however, told her where Mr. Jessop had seen the man, and Fergus, thanking Mary with his best Gallic courtesy—which made her blush—made his way into the city, heart beating fast.

* * *

Rachel jerked her arm, but the old man merely tightened his grip, his thumb digging hard into the muscle below her shoulder.

“Let me go, Friend,” she said calmly. “Thee has mistaken me for someone else.”

“Oh, I think not,” he said politely, and she perceived him to be a Scot. “Yon dog is yours, is he not?”

“No,” she said, puzzled and beginning to be vaguely alarmed. “I am but minding him for a friend. Why? Has he eaten one of thy chickens? I will be pleased to pay thee for it.…” She leaned away, groping with her free hand for her purse, gauging the possibilities of escape.

"Ian Murray is the name of your friend," he said, and she was now genuinely alarmed to see he did not phrase this as a question.

"Let me go," she said, more strongly. "Thee has no right to detain me."

He paid no attention to this but looked intently into her face. His eyes were ancient, red-rimmed, and rheumy—but sharp as razors.

"Where is he?"

"In Scotland," she told him, and saw him blink with surprise. He bent a little to peer directly into her eyes.

"Do you love him?" the old man asked softly—but there was nothing soft about his tone.

"Let go!" She kicked at his shin, but he stepped aside with an adroitness that surprised her. His cloak swung aside as he moved, and she caught the gleam of metal in his belt. It was a small ax, and with the sudden memory of the dreadful house in New Jersey, she jerked back and shrieked out loud.

"Hush!" the old man snapped. "Come with me, lass." He put a large, dirty hand over her mouth and tried to pull her off her feet, but she struggled and kicked and got her mouth free long enough to scream again, as loudly as she could.

Startled exclamations, as well as the sound of heavy boots, came rapidly toward her.

"Rachel!" A familiar bellow reached her ears, and her heart bounded at the sound.

"William! Help me!"

William was running toward her, and some distance behind him were three or four British soldiers, muskets in hand. The old man said something in Gaelic, in tones of absolute amazement, and let go of her so suddenly that she staggered back, tripped on the torn hem of her petticoat, and sat down hard in the road.

The old man was backing away, but William was roused; he charged the old man, ducking his shoulder, clearly meaning to knock him off his feet. The old man had his ax in his hand, though, and Rachel screamed, "William!" at the top of her voice. But it was no good. There was a flash of light on metal and a sickening thud, and William lurched sideways, took two ungainly steps, and fell.

"William, William! Oh, Lord, oh, Lord …" She couldn't get to her feet but crawled to him as fast as she could, moaning. The soldiers were shouting, roaring, running after the old man, but she had no attention to spare for them. All she saw was William's face, ghastly pale, his eyes rolled up in his head so the whites of them showed, and the blood running dark, soaking his hair.

* * *

I tucked William up in bed, despite his protests, and bade him stay there. I was reasonably sure the protests were for Rachel's sake, since as soon as I had shooed her out the door, he allowed me to ease him back onto his pillow, his face pale and clammy under the bandage wrapped around his forehead.

"Sleep," I said. "You'll feel perfectly bloody in the morning, but you won't die."

"Thank you, Mother Claire," he murmured, with the faintest of smiles. "You're always such a comfort. Before you go, though …" Despite how ill he plainly felt, his hand on my arm was solid and firm.

"What?" I asked warily.

"The man who attacked Rachel. Do you have any idea who he might be?"

"Yes," I said reluctantly. "From her description, he's a man named Arch Bug. He used to live near us in North Carolina."

"Ah." His face was pale and clammy, but the deep blue eyes brightened a little with interest. "Is he mad?"

"Yes, I think so. He … lost his wife under very tragic circumstances, and I do believe it turned his wits to some degree." I did in fact think this was true, and the months and months since that winter night on the Ridge, spent alone in the woods, walking endless roads, listening for the vanished voice of his dead wife … If he had not been mad to start with, I thought he would be now. At the same time, I wasn't about to tell William the whole story. Not now, and possibly not ever.

"I'll speak to someone," he said, and suddenly gave a massive yawn. "Sorry. I'm … awfully sleepy."

"You have a concussion," I told him. "I'll come and wake you every hour. Speak to whom?"

"Officer," he said indistinctly, his eyes already closing. "Have men look for him. Can't let him … Rachel." Her name came out on a sigh as the big young body went slowly limp. I watched him for a moment to be sure he was soundly asleep. Then I kissed his forehead gently, thinking—with the same wrench of the heart with which I had kissed his sister at the same age—*God, you are so like him.*

Rachel herself was waiting on the landing, anxious and disheveled, though she'd made some effort to tidy her hair and cap.

"Will he be all right?"

"Yes, I think so. He has a mild concussion—you know what that is? Yes, of course you do. That, and I've put three stitches into his head. He'll have an ungodly headache tomorrow, but it was a glancing wound, nothing serious."

She sighed, slender shoulders drooping suddenly as the tension went out of them.

"Thank the Lord," she said, then glanced at me and smiled. "And thee, too, Friend Claire."

"My pleasure," I said sincerely. "Are you sure that you're all right? You should sit down and have something to drink." She wasn't hurt, but the shock of the experience had plainly marked her. I knew she wouldn't drink tea, as a matter of principle, but a little brandy, or even water …

"I'm fine. Better than fine." Relieved of her worry about William, she looked at me now, her face aglow. "Claire—he's here! Ian!"

"What? Where?"

"I don't know!" She glanced at the door to William's room and drew me a little way away, lowering her voice. "The dog—Rollo. He smelled something and went off after it like a shot. I ran after him, and that's when I ran into the poor madman. I know, thee will tell me he might chase anything, and he might—but, Claire, he has not come back! If he had not found Ian, he would have come back."

I caught her sense of excitement, though I was afraid to hope as much as she did. There were other things that could prevent the dog coming back, and none of them was good. One of them was Arch Bug.

Her description of him just now had taken me aback—and yet she was right, I realized. Ever since Mrs. Bug's funeral at Fraser's Ridge, I had seen Arch Bug only as a threat to Ian—and yet, with Rachel's words, I also saw the maimed, arthritic hands fumbling to pin a bird-shaped brooch to his loved wife's shroud. Poor madman, indeed.

And a bloody dangerous one.

"Come downstairs," I said to her, with another glance at William's door. "I need to tell you about Mr. Bug."

* * *

"Oh, Ian," She whispered, when I had finished my account. "Oh, poor man." I didn't know whether this last referred to Mr. Bug or Ian, but she was right, either way. She didn't weep, but her face had gone pale and still.

"Both of them," I agreed. "All three, if you count Mrs. Bug."

She shook her head, in dismay rather than disagreement.

"Then that is why—" she said, but stopped.

"Why what?"

She grimaced a little, but glanced at me and gave a small shrug.

"Why he said to me that he was afraid I might die because I loved him."

"Yes, I expect so."

We sat for a moment over our steaming cups of lemon balm tea, contemplating the situation. At last, she looked up and swallowed.

"Does thee think Ian means to kill him?"

"I—well, I don't know," I said. "Certainly not to begin with; he felt terrible about what happened to Mrs. Bug—"

“About the fact that he killed her, thee means.” She gave me a direct look; not one for easy evasions, Rachel Hunter.

“I do. But if he realizes that Arch Bug knows who you are, knows what you mean to Ian, and means you harm—and make no mistake about it, Rachel, he *does* mean you harm”—I took a swallow of hot tea and a deep breath—“yes, I think Ian would try to kill him.”

She went absolutely still, the steam from her cup the only movement.

“He must not,” she said.

“How do you mean to stop him?” I asked, out of curiosity.

She let out a long, slow breath, eyes fixed on the gently swirling surface of her tea.

“Pray,” she said.

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MISCHIANZA

May 18, 1778
Walnut Grove, Pennsylvania

It had been quite a long time since I'd seen a gilded roast peacock, and I hadn't really expected to see another. Certainly not in Philadelphia. Not that I should have been surprised, I thought, leaning closer to look—yes, it *did* have eyes made of diamonds. Not after the regatta on the Delaware, the three bands of musicians carried on barges, and the seventeen-gun salute from the warships on the river. The evening had been billed as a "mischianza." The word means "medley" in Italian—I was told—and in the current instance appeared to have been interpreted so as to allow the more creative souls in the British army and the Loyalist community free rein in the production of a gala celebration to honor General Howe, who had resigned as commander in chief, to be replaced by Sir Henry Clinton.

"I am sorry, my dear," John murmured at my side.

"For what?" I asked, surprised.

He was surprised in turn; his fair brows went up.

"Why, knowing your loyalties, I must suppose that it would be painful to you, to see so much …" He made a discreet motion of the wrist, indicating the lavish displays around us, which were certainly not limited to the peacock. "… so much pomp and extravagant expense devoted to—to—"

"Gloating?" I ended dryly. "I might—but I don't. I know what will happen."

He blinked at that, very much taken aback.

"What will happen? To whom?"

The sort of prophecy I possessed was seldom a welcome gift; in these circumstances, though, I took a rather grim pleasure in telling him.

"To you. The British army, I mean, not you personally. They'll lose the war, in three years' time. What price gilded peacocks then, eh?"

His face twitched, and he hid a smile.

"Indeed."

"Yes, indeed," I replied amiably. *"Fuirich agus chi thu."*

"What?" He stared at me.

"Gaelic," I said, with a small, deep twinge. "It means 'Wait and see.' "

"Oh, I shall," he assured me. "In the meantime, allow me to make known Lieutenant-Colonel Banastre Tarleton, of the British Legion." He bowed to a short, wiry young gentleman who had approached us, an officer of dragoons in a bottle-green uniform. "Colonel Tarleton, my wife."

"Lady John." The young man bowed low over my hand, brushing it with very red, very sensual lips. I wanted to wipe my hand on my skirt, but didn't. "Are you enjoying the festivities?"

"I'm looking forward to the fireworks." He had foxy, clever eyes that missed nothing, and his ripe red mouth twisted at this, but he smiled and left it, turning to Lord John. "My cousin Richard bids me give you his best regards, sir."

John's air of pleasant cordiality warmed into genuine pleasure at that.

"Richard Tarleton was my ensign at Crefeld," he explained to me before switching his attention back to the green dragoon. "How does he do these days, sir?"

They lapsed at once into a detailed conversation of commissions, promotions, campaigns, troop movements, and parliamentary politics, and I moved away. Not out of boredom, but rather out of tact. I had not promised John that I would refrain from passing on useful information; he hadn't asked it. But delicacy and a certain sense of obligation required that I at least not acquire such information through him, or directly under his nose.

I drifted slowly through the crowd in the ballroom, admiring the ladies' dresses, many of them imported from Europe, most of the rest modeled on such imports with such materials as could be obtained locally. The brilliant silks and sparkling embroidery were such a contrast to the homespuns and muslins I was accustomed to see that it seemed surreal—as though I'd found myself in a sudden dream. This impression was heightened by the presence among the crowd of a number of knights, dressed in surcoats and tabards, some with helms tucked under their arms—the afternoon's entertainment had included a mock jousting tournament—and a number of people in fantastic masks and extravagant costume, whom I assumed would later be part of some theatrical presentation.

My attention drifted back over the table where the gaudier viands were displayed: the peacock, tail feathers spread in a huge fan, occupied pride of place in the center of the table, but it was flanked by an entire roast boar on a bed of cabbage—this emitting a smell that made my stomach growl—and three enormous game pies, decorated with stuffed songbirds. Those reminded me suddenly of the King of France's dinner with the stuffed nightingales, and my appetite vanished at once in a puff of nausea and grief recalled.

I shifted my gaze hastily back to the peacock, swallowing. I wondered idly how difficult it might be to abstract those diamond eyes and whether someone was keeping an eye on them. Almost certainly so, and I looked to see if I could spot him. Yes, there he was, a uniformed soldier standing in a nook between the table and the huge mantelpiece, eyes alert.

I didn't need to steal diamonds, though, I thought, and my stomach curled a little. I had them. John had given me a pair of diamond earrings. When the time came for me to leave …

"Mother Claire!"

I had been feeling pleasantly invisible and, startled out of this delusion, now glanced across the room to see Willie, his disheveled head sticking out from the red-crossed tabard of a Knight Templar, waving enthusiastically.

"I do wish you could think of something else to call me," I said, reaching his side. "I feel as though I ought to be swishing round in a habit with a rosary at my waist."

He laughed at that, introduced the young lady making goo-goo eyes at him as Miss Chew, and offered to get us both an ice. The temperature in the ballroom was rising eighty, at least, and sweat darkened not a few of the bright silks.

"What an elegant gown," Miss Chew said politely. "Is it from England?"

"Oh," I said, rather taken aback. "I don't know. But thank you," I added, looking down at myself for the first time. I hadn't really noticed the gown, beyond the mechanical necessities of getting into it; dressing was no more than a daily nuisance, and so long as nothing was too tight or chafed, I didn't care what I wore.

John had presented me with the gown this morning, as well as summoning a hairdresser to deal with me from the neck up. I'd shut my eyes, rather shocked at how enjoyable the man's fingers felt in my hair—but still more shocked when he handed me a looking glass and I saw a towering confection of curls and powder, with a tiny ship perched in it. Full-rigged.

I'd waited 'til he left, then hurriedly brushed it all out and pinned it up as simply as I could. John had given me a look, but said nothing. Concerned with my head, though, I hadn't taken any time to look at myself below the neck, and was vaguely pleased now to see how well the cocoa-colored silk fit me. Dark enough that it might not show sweat stains, I thought.

Miss Chew was watching William like a cat eyeing up a fat, handsome mouse, frowning a little as he stopped to flirt with two other young ladies.

"Will Lord Ellesmere be remaining long in Philadelphia?" she asked, eyes still on him. "I believe someone told me that he is not to go with General Howe. I do hope that is the case!"

"That's right," I said. "He surrendered with General Burgoyne; those troops are all on parole and are meant to go back to England, but there's some administrative reason why they can't embark just yet." I knew William was hoping to be exchanged, so that he could fight again, but didn't mention it.

"Really," she said, brightening. "What splendid news! Perhaps he will be here for my ball next month. Naturally, it will not be quite so good as this one"—she arched her neck a little, tilting her head toward the musicians who had begun to play at the far end of the room—"but Major André says he will lend his skill to paint the backdrops so we may have tableaux, so it will be—"

"I'm sorry," I interrupted, "did you say Major André? Major … John André?"

She glanced at me in surprise, half-annoyed at my interruption. "Of course. He designed the costumes for the joust today and has written the play they will do later. Look, there he is, speaking with Lady Clinton."

I looked where she pointed with her fan, feeling a sudden chill wash through me, despite the heat in the room.

Major André was the center of a group, men and women both, laughing and gesturing, plainly the focus of everyone's attention. He was a handsome young man in his late twenties, his uniform tailored to perfection and his face vivid, flushed with heat and pleasure.

"He seems … very charming," I murmured, wanting to look away from him, but unable to do so.

"Oh, yes!" Miss Chew was enthusiastic. "He and I and Peggy Shippen did almost all of the work for the mischianza together—he's a marvel, always with such good ideas, and he plays the flute just delightful. So sad that Peggy's father would not let her come tonight—quite unfair!" I thought there was an underlying tone of satisfaction to her voice, though; she was quite pleased not to have to share the limelight with her friend.

"Do let me present him to you," she said suddenly, and folding her fan, slipped her arm through mine. I was taken entirely by surprise and couldn't think of a way to extricate myself before I found myself towed into the group around André, with Miss Chew chattering brightly to him, laughing up at him, her hand familiarly on his arm. He smiled at her, then switched his gaze to me, his eyes warm and lively.

"I am enchanted, Lady John," he said, in a soft, husky voice. "Your servant, madame."

"I—yes," I said abruptly, quite forgetting the usual form. "You—yes. Glad to meet you!" I pulled my hand out of his before he could kiss it, disconcerting him, and backed away. He blinked, but Miss Chew reclaimed his attention at once, and I turned away, going to stand near the door where there was at least a little air. I was covered in cold sweat and vibrating in every limb.

"Oh, there you are, Mother Claire!" Willie popped up beside me, two half-melted ices in his hands, sweating freely. "Here."

"Thank you." I took one, noting absently that my fingers were nearly as cold as the misted silver cup.

"Are you quite all right, Mother Claire?" He bent down to look at me, concerned. "You look quite pale. As though you'd seen a ghost." He winced in brief apology at this clumsy reference to death, but I made an effort to smile back. Not a terribly successful effort, because he was right. I had just seen a ghost.

Major John André was the British officer with whom Benedict Arnold—hero of Saratoga and still a legendary patriot—would eventually conspire. And the man who would go to the gallows for his part in that conspiracy, sometime in the next three years.

"Had you better sit down for a bit?" Willie was frowning in concern, and I made an effort to shake off my cold horror. I didn't want him offering to leave the ball to see me home; he was plainly having a good time. I smiled at him, barely feeling my lips.

"No, that's all right," I said. "I think … I'll just step outside for some air."

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A BUTTERFLY IN A BUTCHER'S YARD

Rollo lay under a bush, noisily devouring the remains of a squirrel he'd caught. Ian sat on a rock, contemplating him. The city of Philadelphia lay just out of sight; he could smell the haze of fire, the stink of thousands of people living cheek by jowl. Could hear the clop and rattle of people going there, on the road that lay only a few hundred yards away. And somewhere, within a mile of him, hidden in that mass of buildings and people, was Rachel Hunter.

He wanted to step out on the road, stride down it into the heart of Philadelphia, and begin taking the place apart, brick by brick, until he found her.

"Where do we begin, *a cú*?" he said to Rollo. "The printshop, I suppose."

He'd not been there, but supposed it would not be hard to find. Fergus and Marsali would give him shelter—and food, he thought, feeling his stomach growl—and perhaps Germain and the girls could help him hunt for Rachel. Perhaps Auntie Claire could … Well, he knew she wasn't a witch or a fairy, but there was no doubt at all in his mind that she was something, and perhaps she would be able to find Rachel for him.

He waited for Rollo to finish his meal, then rose, an extraordinary sense of warmth suffusing him, though the day was overcast and cool. Could he find her that way? he wondered. Walk through the streets, playing the children's game of "warmer, colder," growing steadily warmer as he approached her more closely, coming to her at last just before he burst into flame?

"You could help, ye know," he said reproachfully to Rollo. He'd tried getting Rollo to backtrack to her at once when the dog had found him, but the dog had been so berserk with joy at Ian's return that there was no speaking to him. That was a thought, though—if they somehow ran across her trail, Rollo might take it up, now that he was more sober-minded.

He smiled crookedly at that thought; the bulk of the British army was encamped at Germantown, but there were thousands of soldiers quartered in Philadelphia itself. As well ask the dog to follow the scent of a butterfly through a butcher's yard.

"Well, we won't find her, sitting here," he said to Rollo, and stood up. "Come on, dog."

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LADY IN WAITING

I was waiting for things to make sense. Nothing did. I had lived in John Grey's house, with its gracious stair and crystal chandelier, its Turkey rugs and fine china, for nearly a month, and yet I woke each day with no idea where I was, reaching across an empty bed for Jamie.

I could not believe he was dead. *Could* not. I shut my eyes at night and heard him breathing slow and soft in the night beside me. Felt his eyes on me, humorous, lusting, annoyed, alight with love. Turned half a dozen times a day, imagining I heard his step behind me. Opened my mouth to say something to him—and more than once really *had* spoken to him, realizing only when I heard the words dwindle on the empty air that he was not there.

Each realization crushed me anew. And yet none reconciled me to his loss. I had, with shrinking mind, envisioned his death. He would so have hated drowning. Of all ways to die! I could only hope that the sinking of the ship had been violent, and that he had gone unconscious into the water. Because otherwise … he couldn't give up, he wouldn't have. He would have swum and kept swimming, endless miles from any shores, alone in the empty deep, swum stubbornly because he could not give up and let himself sink. Swum until that powerful frame was exhausted, until he could not lift a hand again, and then …

I rolled over and pressed my face hard into my pillow, heart squeezing with horror.

“What a bloody, bloody *waste!*” I said into the feathers, clenching handfuls of pillow in my fists as hard as I could. If he’d died in battle, at least … I rolled back over and shut my eyes, biting my lip until the blood came.

At last my breathing slowed, and I opened my eyes on darkness again, and resumed waiting. Waiting for Jamie.

Some time later, the door opened, and a slice of light from the hallway fell into the room. Lord John came in, setting a candle on the table by the door, and approached the bed. I didn’t look at him, but knew he was looking down at me.

I lay on my bed, staring at the ceiling. Or, rather, looking through it to the sky. Dark, full of stars and emptiness. I hadn’t bothered to light a candle, but I didn’t curse the darkness, either. Only looked into it. Waiting.

“You are very lonely, my dear,” he said, with great gentleness, “and I know it. Will you not let me bear you company, for a little time at least?”

I said nothing, but did move over a little and did not resist when he lay down beside me and gathered me carefully into his arms.

I rested my head on his shoulder, grateful for the comfort of simple touch and human warmth, though it didn’t reach the depths of my desolation.

Try not to think. Accept what there is; don’t think about what there is not.

I lay still, listening to John breathe. He breathed differently than Jamie, shallower, faster. A very slight catch in his breath.

It dawned on me, slowly, that I was not alone in my desolation or my loneliness. And that I knew all too well what had happened last time this state of affairs had become obvious to both of us. Granted, we were not drunk, but I thought he couldn’t help but remember it, as well.

“Do you … wish me to … comfort you?” he said quietly. “I do know how, you know.” And, reaching down, he moved a finger very slowly, in such a place and with such exquisite delicacy that I gasped and jerked away.

"I know you do." I did have a moment's curiosity as to how exactly he had learned, but was not about to ask. "It's not that I don't appreciate the thought—I do," I assured him, and felt my cheeks flush hotter. "It's—it's only—"

"That you would feel unfaithful?" he guessed. He smiled a little sadly. "I understand."

There was a long silence then. And a sense of growing awareness.

"You wouldn't?" I asked. He lay quite still, as if asleep, but wasn't.

"A standing cock is quite blind, my dear," he said at last, eyes still shut. "Surely you know that, physician that you are."

"Yes," I said, "I do know that." And taking him gently but firmly in hand, I dealt with him in tender silence, avoiding any thought of whom he might see in his mind's eye.

* * *

Colenso Baragwanath ran as though his boot heels were on fire. He burst into the Fox tavern near the foot of State Street, and barreled through the taproom into the cardroom at the back.

"They found him," he panted. "The ol' man. Ax. With the ax."

Captain Lord Ellesmere was already rising to his feet. To Colenso, he looked some eight feet tall, and awful in aspect. The place where the doctor had stitched his head was bristly with new hair, but the black stitching still showed. His eyes might have been shooting flames, but Colenso was afraid to look too closely. His chest heaved from running and he was out of breath, but he couldn't have thought of a thing to say, even so.

"Where?" said the captain. He spoke very softly, but Colenso heard him and backed toward the door, pointing. The captain picked up the pair of pistols he had laid aside, and putting them in his belt, came toward him.

"Show me," he said.

* * *

Rachel sat on the tall stool behind the printshop's counter, head on her hand. She'd wakened with a sense of pressure in her head, probably from the impending storm, and it had ripened into a throbbing headache. She would rather have gone back to Friend John's house, to see if Claire might have a tea that would help, but she'd promised Marsali that she would come and mind the shop while her friend took the children to the cobbler to have their shoes mended and Henri-Christian fitted for a pair of boots, for his feet were too short and wide to fit his sisters' outgrown shoes.

At least the shop was quiet. Only one or two folk had come in, and only one of those had spoken to her—asking the way to Slip Alley. She rubbed her stiff neck, sighing, and let her eyes close. Marsali would be back soon. Then she could go and lie down with a wet rag on her head, and—

The bell above the printshop door went *ting!* and she straightened up, a welcoming smile forming on her face. She saw the visitor and the smile died.

"Leave," she said, scrambling off the stool, measuring the distance between her and the door into the house. "Leave this minute." If she could get through, and out the back—

"Stand still," said Arch Bug, in a voice like rusty iron.

"I know what thee means to do," she said, backing up a step. "And I do not blame thee for thy grief, thy rage. But thee must know it is not right what thee intend, the Lord cannot wish thee to—"

"Be quiet, lass," he said, and his eyes rested on her with an odd sort of gentleness. "Not yet. We'll wait for him."

"For … him?"

"Aye, him." With that, he lunged across the counter and seized her arm. She screamed and struggled but could not get loose, and he flipped up the flap in the counter and dragged her through, pushing her hard against the table of books so that the stacks wobbled and fell with papery thumps.

"Thee cannot hope to—"

"I have nay hope," he interrupted, quite calm. The ax was in his belt; she saw it, bare and silver. "I need none."

"Thee will surely die," she said, and made no effort to keep her voice from trembling. "The soldiers will take thee."

"Oh, aye, they will." His face softened a little then, surprisingly. "I shall see my wife again."

"I could not counsel suicide," she said, edging as far away as she could get. "But if thee does intend to die in any case, why does thee insist upon—upon staining thy death, thy soul, with violence?"

"Ye think vengeance a stain?" The beetling white brows lifted. "It is a glory, lass. My glory, my duty to my wife."

"Well, certainly not mine," she said heatedly. "Why should I be forced to serve thy beastly vengeance? I have done nothing to thee or thine!"

He wasn't listening. Not to her, at least. He had turned a little, his hand going to his ax, and smiled at the sound of racing footsteps.

"Ian!" she shrieked. "Don't come in!!"

He came in, of course. She grasped a book and flung it at the old man's head, but he dodged it easily and grabbed her by the wrist once more, his ax in hand.

"Let her go," said Ian, hoarse with running. His chest heaved and sweat was running down his face; she could smell him, even above the old man's musty reek. She jerked her hand out of Arch Bug's clasp, speechless with horror.

"Don't kill him," she said, to both of them. Neither of them listened.

"I told ye, did I not?" Arch said to Ian. He sounded reasonable, a teacher pointing out the proof of a theorem. *Quod erat demonstrandum. Q.E.D.*

"Get away from her," Ian said.

His hand hovered above his knife, and Rachel, choking on the words, said, "Ian! Don't. Thee must not. Please!"

Ian gave her a look of furious confusion, but she held his eyes, and his hand dropped away. He took a deep breath and then a quick step to the side. Bug whirled to keep him in range of the ax, and Ian slid fast in front of Rachel, screening her with his body.

"Kill me, then," he said deliberately to Bug. "Do it."

"No!" Rachel said. "That is not what I—no!"

“Come here, lass,” Arch said, and put out his good hand, beckoning. “Dinna be afraid. I’ll make it fast.”

Ian shoved her hard, so she slammed into the wall and knocked her head, and braced himself before her, crouched and waiting. Unarmed, because she’d asked it.

“Ye’ll fucking kill me first,” he said, in a conversational tone.

“No,” said Arch Bug. “Ye’ll wait your turn.” The old eyes measured him, cold and clever, and the ax moved a little, eager.

Rachel shut her eyes and prayed, finding no words but praying all the same, in a frenzy of fear. She heard a sound and opened them.

A long gray blur shot through the air, and in an instant, Arch Bug was on the ground, Rollo on top of him, snarling and snapping at the old man’s throat. Old he might be but still hale, and he had the strength of desperation. His good hand seized the dog’s throat, pushing back, holding off the slavering jaws, and a long, sinewy arm flung out, ax gripped in a maimed fist, and rose.

“No!” Ian dove forward, knocking Rollo aside, grappling for the hand that held the ax, but it was too late; the blade came down with a *chunk!* that made Rachel’s vision go white, and Ian screamed.

She was moving before she could see, and screamed herself when a hand suddenly seized her shoulder and hurled her backward. She hit the wall and slid down it, landing winded and openmouthed. There was a writhing ball of limbs, fur, clothes, and blood on the floor before her. A random shoe cracked against her ankle and she scuttled away crabwise, staring.

There seemed to be blood everywhere. Spattered against the counter and the wall, smeared on the floor, and the back of Ian’s shirt was soaked with red and clinging so she saw the muscles of his back straining beneath it. He was kneeling half atop a struggling Arch Bug, grappling one-handed for the ax, his left arm hanging limp, and Arch was stabbing at his face with stiffened fingers, trying to blind him, while Rollo darted eellike and bristling into the mass of straining limbs, growling and snapping. Fixed on this spectacle, she was only dimly aware of someone standing behind her but looked up, uncomprehending, when his foot touched her bum.

“Is there something about you that attracts men with axes?” William asked crossly. He sighted carefully along his pistol’s barrel, and fired.

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REDIVIVUS

I was pinning up my hair for tea when there was a scratch at the bedroom door.

“Come,” John called, in the act of pulling on his boots. The door opened cautiously, revealing the odd little Cornish boy who sometimes served as William’s orderly. He said something to John, in what I assumed to be English, and handed him a note. John nodded kindly and dismissed him.

“Could you understand what he said?” I asked curiously, as he broke the seal with his thumb.

“Who? Oh, Colenso? No, not a word,” he said absently, and pursed his lips in a soundless whistle at whatever he was reading.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A note from Colonel Graves,” he said, carefully refolding it. I wonder if—”

There was another knock at the door, and John frowned at it.

“Not now,” he said. “Come back later.”

“Well, I would,” said a polite voice in a Scottish accent. “But there’s some urgency, ken?”

The door opened, and Jamie stepped in, closing it behind him. He saw me, stood stock-still for an instant, and then I was in his arms, the overwhelming warmth and size of him blotting out in an instant everything around me.

I didn’t know where my blood had gone. Every drop had left my head, and flickering lights danced before my eyes—but none of it was supplying my legs, which had abruptly dissolved under me.

Jamie was holding me up and kissing me, tasting of beer and his beard stubble rasping my face, his fingers buried in my hair, and my breasts warmed and swelled against his chest.

"Oh, there it is," I murmured.

"What?" he asked, breaking off for a moment.

"My blood." I touched my tingling lips. "Do that again."

"Oh, I will," he assured me. "But there are a number of English soldiers in the neighborhood, and I think—"

The sound of pounding came from below, and reality snapped back into place like a rubber band. I stared at him and sat down very suddenly, my heart pounding like a drum.

"Why the bloody hell aren't you dead?"

He lifted one shoulder in a brief shrug, the corner of his mouth turning up. He was very thin, brown-faced, and dirty; I could smell his sweat and the grime of long-worn clothes. And the faint whiff of vomit—he'd not been long off a boat.

"Delay for a few seconds longer, Mr. Fraser, and you may well go back to being dead." John had gone to the window, peering down into the street. He turned, and I saw that his face was pale but glowing like a candle.

"Aye? They were a bit faster than I thought, then," Jamie said ruefully, going to look out. He turned from the window and smiled. "It's good to see ye, John—if only for the moment."

John's answering smile lit his eyes. He reached out a hand and touched Jamie's arm, very briefly, as though wishing to assure himself that he was in fact solid.

"Yes," he said, reaching then for the door. "But come. Down the back stair. Or there's a hatchway to the attic—if you can get onto the roof—"

Jamie looked at me, his heart in his eyes.

"I'll come back," he said. "When I can." He lifted a hand toward me but stopped with a grimace, turned abruptly to follow John, and they were gone, the sound of their footsteps nearly drowned by the noises from downstairs. I heard the door open below and a rough male voice demanding entrance. Mrs. Figg, bless her intransigent little heart, was having none of it.

I'd been sitting like Lot's wife, shocked into immobility, but at the sound of Mrs. Figg's rich expletives was galvanized into action.

My mind was so stunned by the events of the last five minutes that it was, paradoxically, quite clear. There was simply no room in it for thoughts, speculations, relief, joy, or even worry—the only mental faculty I still possessed, apparently, was the ability to respond to an emergency. I snatched my cap, crammed it on my head, and started for the door, stuffing my hair up into it as I went. Mrs. Figg and I together could surely delay the soldiers long enough …

This scheme would probably have worked, save that, as I rushed out onto the landing, I ran into Willie—literally, as he came bounding up the stair and collided heavily with me.

"Mother Claire! Where's Papa? There are—" He had seized me by the arms as I reeled backward, but his concern for me was superseded by a sound from the hall beyond the landing. He glanced toward the sound—then let go of me, his eyes bulging.

Jamie stood at the end of the hall, some ten feet away; John stood beside him, white as a sheet, and his eyes bulging as much as Willie's were. This resemblance to Willie, striking as it was, was completely overwhelmed by Jamie's own resemblance to the Ninth Earl of Ellesmere. William's face had hardened and matured, losing all trace of childish softness, and from both ends of the short hall, deep blue Fraser cat-eyes stared out of the bold, solid bones of the MacKenzies. And Willie was old enough to shave on a daily basis; he *knew* what he looked like.

Willie's mouth worked, soundless with shock. He looked wildly at me, back at Jamie, back at me—and saw the truth in my face.

"Who are you?" he said hoarsely, wheeling on Jamie.

I saw Jamie draw himself slowly upright, ignoring the noise below.

"James Fraser," he said. His eyes were fixed on William with a burning intensity, as though to absorb every vestige of a sight he would not see again. "Ye kent me once as Alex MacKenzie. At Helwater."

William blinked, blinked again, and his gaze shifted momentarily to John.

"And who—who the *bloody* hell am *I*?" he demanded, the end of the question rising in a squeak.

John opened his mouth, but it was Jamie who answered.

"You are a stinking Papist," he said, very precisely, "and your baptismal name is James." The ghost of regret crossed his face and then was gone. "It was the only name I had a right to give ye," he said quietly, eyes on his son. "I'm sorry."

Willie's left hand slapped at his hip, reflexively looking for a sword. Finding nothing, he slapped at his chest. His hands were shaking so badly that he couldn't manage buttons; he simply seized the fabric and ripped open his shirt, reached in and fumbled for something. He pulled it over his head and, in the same motion, hurled the object at Jamie.

Jamie's reflexes brought his hand up automatically, and the wooden rosary smacked into it, the beads swinging, tangled in his fingers.

"God damn you, sir," Willie said, voice trembling. "God damn you to hell!" He half-turned blindly, then spun on his heel to face John. "And you! You *knew*, didn't you? God damn you, too!"

"William—" John reached out a hand to him, helpless, but before he could say anything more, there was a sound of voices in the hall below and heavy feet on the stair.

"Sassenach—keep him back!" Jamie's voice reached me through the hubbub, sharp and clear. By sheer reflex, I obeyed and seized Willie by the arm. He glanced at me, mouth open, completely nonplused.

"What—" His voice was drowned by the thunder of feet on the stairs and a triumphant whoop from the redcoat in front.

"There he is!"

Suddenly the landing was thronged with bodies pushing and shoving, trying to get past Willie and me into the hallway. I clung like grim death, despite the jostling and despite Willie's own belated efforts to free himself.

All at once the shouting stopped, and the press of bodies relaxed just a bit. My cap had been knocked over my eyes in the struggle, and I let go of Willie's arm with one hand in order to pull it off. I dropped it on the floor. I had a feeling that my status as a respectable woman wasn't going to be important for much longer.

Brushing disheveled hair out of my eyes with a forearm, I resumed my grip on Willie, though this was largely unnecessary, as he seemed turned to stone. The redcoats were shifting on their feet, clearly ready to charge but inhibited by something. I turned a little and saw Jamie, one arm wrapped around John Grey's throat, holding a pistol to John's temple.

"One step more," he said, calmly but loud enough to be easily heard, "and I put a ball through his brain. D'ye think I've anything to lose?"

Actually, given that Willie and myself were standing right in front of him, I rather thought he did—but the soldiers didn't know that, and judging from the expression on Willie's face, he would have torn his tongue out by the roots rather than blurt out the truth. I also thought he didn't particularly care at the moment if Jamie *did* kill John and then die in a fusillade of bullets. His arm was like iron under my grip; he'd have killed them both himself, if he could.

There was a murmur of menace from the men around me and a shifting of bodies, men readying themselves—but no one moved.

Jamie glanced once at me, face unreadable, then moved toward the back stair, half-dragging John with him. They vanished from view, and the corporal next to me sprang into action, turning and gesturing to his men on the stair.

"Round back! Hurry!"

"Hold!" Willie had come abruptly to life. Jerking his arm away from my slackened grip, he turned on the corporal. "Have you men posted at the back of the house?"

The corporal, noticing Willie's uniform for the first time, straightened himself and saluted.

"No, sir. I didn't think—"

"Idiot," Willie said shortly.

“Yes, sir. But we can catch them if we hurry, sir.” He was rocking up onto his toes as he spoke, in an agony to be gone.

Willie’s fists were clenched, and so were his teeth. I could see the thoughts crossing his face, as clearly as if they’d been printed on his forehead in movable type.

He didn’t *think* Jamie would shoot Lord John but wasn’t sure of it. If he sent men after them, there was a decent chance that the soldiers would catch up to them—which in turn meant some chance that one or both would die. And if neither died but Jamie was captured—there was no telling what he might say or to whom. Too much risk.

With a faint sense of déjà vu, I saw him make these calculations, then turn to the corporal.

“Return to your commander,” he said calmly. “Let him know that Colonel Grey has been taken hostage by … by the rebels, and ask him to notify all guard posts. I am to be informed at once of any news.”

There was a displeased murmur from the soldiers on the landing but nothing that could actually be called insubordination, and even this died away in the face of William’s glare. The corporal’s teeth set briefly in his lip, but he saluted.

“Yes, sir.” He turned smartly on his heel, with a peremptory gesture that sent the soldiers clumping heavily down the stair.

Willie watched them go. Then, as though suddenly noticing it, he bent and picked up my cap from the floor. Kneading it between his hands, he gave me a long, speculative look. The next little while was going to be interesting, I saw.

I didn’t care. While I was quite sure that Jamie wouldn’t shoot John under any circumstances, I was under no misapprehensions about the danger to either of them. I could smell it; the scent of sweat and gunpowder hung thick in the air on the landing, and the soles of my feet still vibrated from the slam of the heavy door below. None of it mattered.

He was alive.

So was I.

* * *

Grey was still in his shirtsleeves; the rain had cut through the cloth to his flesh.

Jamie went to the shed's wall and put his eye to a crack between the boards. He raised a hand, adjuring silence, and John stood waiting, shivering, as the sound of hooves and voices went past. Who might it be? Not soldiers; there was no sound of brass, no jingling spurs or arms. The sounds faded, and Jamie turned back. He frowned, noticing for the first time that Grey was wet through, and, taking the cloak from his shoulders, wrapped it round him.

The cloak was damp, too, but made of wool, and Jamie's body heat lingered in it. Grey closed his eyes for an instant, embraced.

"May I know what it is that you've been doing?" Grey inquired, opening them.

"When?" Jamie gave him a half smile. "Just now, or since I saw ye last?"

"Just now."

"Ah." Jamie sat down on a barrel and leaned back—gingerly—against the wall.

Grey noted with interest that the sound was nearly "ach," and deduced that Fraser had spent much of his time of late with Scots. He also observed that Fraser's lips were pursed in thought. The slanted blue eyes cut in his direction.

"Ye're sure ye want to know? It's likely better if ye don't."

"I put considerable trust in your judgment and discretion, Mr. Fraser," Grey said politely, "but somewhat more in my own. I'm sure you will forgive me."

Fraser appeared to find that funny; the wide mouth twitched, but he nodded and produced a small packet, sewn in oilskin, from inside his shirt.

"I was observed in the act of accepting this from my foster son," he said. "The person who saw me followed me to an ordinary, then went to fetch the nearest company of soldiers whilst I was refreshing myself. Or so I assume. I saw them coming down the street, supposed that it might be myself they sought, and … left."

"You are familiar, I suppose, with the trope regarding the guilty who flee when no man pursues? How do you know they were after you to begin with and not merely interested by your abrupt departure?"

The half smile flickered again, this time tinged with rue.

"Call it the instinct of the hunted."

"Indeed. I am surprised that you allowed yourself to be cornered, as it were, your instincts being what they are."

"Aye, well, even foxes grow old, do they not?" Fraser said dryly.

"Why the devil did you come to my house?" Grey demanded, suddenly irritable. "Why did you not run for the edge of town?"

Fraser looked surprised.

"My wife," he said simply, and it occurred to Grey, with a pang, that it had not been inadvertence or lack of caution that had impelled Jamie Fraser to come to his house, even with soldiers on his heels. He'd come for her. For Claire.

Jesus! He thought with sudden panic. *Claire!*

But there was no time to say anything, even could he have thought what to say. Jamie rose and, taking the pistol from his belt, beckoned him to come.

They went down an alleyway, then through the backyard of a pub, squeezing past the open brew tub, its surface pocked by falling rain. Smelling faintly of hops, they emerged into a street and slowed down. Jamie had gripped his wrist throughout this journey, and Lord John felt his hand beginning to go numb but said nothing. They passed two or three groups of soldiers, but he walked with Jamie, matching him stride for stride, keeping his eyes front. There was no conflict of heart and duty here: to shout for help might result in Jamie's death; it almost surely would result in the death of at least one soldier.

Jamie kept his pistol out of sight, half hidden in his coat but in his hand, putting it back into his belt only when they reached the place where he had left his horse. It was a private house; he left Grey by himself on the porch for a moment with a muttered "Stay here," while he disappeared inside.

A strong sense of self-preservation urged Lord John to run, but he didn't and was rewarded when Jamie emerged again and smiled a little, seeing him. *So you weren't sure I'd stay? Fair enough,* Grey thought. He hadn't been sure, either.

"Come on, then," Jamie said, and with a jerk of his head beckoned Grey to follow him to the stable, where he quickly saddled and bridled a second horse, handing the reins to Grey before mounting his own.

"Pro forma," he said politely to Grey, and, drawing the pistol, pointed it at him. "Should anyone ask later. Ye'll come with me, and I *will* shoot you, should ye make any move to give me away before we're out of the city. We are understood, I hope?"

"We are," Grey replied briefly, and swung up into the saddle.

He rode a little ahead of Jamie, conscious of the small round spot between his shoulder blades. *Pro forma* or not, he'd meant it.

He wondered whether Jamie would shoot him in the chest or simply break his neck when he found out. Likely bare hands, he thought. It was a visceral sort of thing, sex.

The idea of concealing the truth hadn't seriously occurred to him. He didn't know Claire Fraser nearly as well as Jamie did—but he knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that she couldn't keep secrets. Not from anyone. And certainly not from Jamie, restored to her from the dead.

Of course, it might be some time before Jamie was able to speak to her again. But he knew Jamie Fraser infinitely better than he knew Claire—and the one thing he was certain of was that nothing whatever would stand long between Jamie and his wife.

The rain had passed, and the sun shone on the puddles as they splashed through the streets. There was a sense of movement all around, agitation in the air. The army was quartered in Germantown, but there were always soldiers in the city, and their knowledge of imminent departure, anticipation of the return to campaigning, infected the city like a plague, a fever passing invisibly from man to man.

A patrol on the road out of the city stopped them but waved them on when Grey gave his name and rank. His companion he introduced as Mr. Alexander MacKenzie and thought he felt a vibration of humor from said companion. Alex MacKenzie was the name Jamie had used at Helwater—as Grey's prisoner.

Oh, God, Grey thought suddenly, leading the way out of sight of the patrol. *William*. In the shock of the confrontation and their abrupt departure, he hadn't had time to think. If Grey were dead, what would William do?

His thoughts buzzed like a swarm of hiving bees, crawling over one another in a seething mass; impossible to focus on one for more than an instant before it was lost in the deafening hum. Denys Randall-Isaacs. Richardson. With Grey gone, he would almost certainly move to arrest Claire. William would try to stop him, if he knew. But William didn't know what Richardson was.… Grey didn't know, either, not for sure. Henry and his Negro lover—Grey knew they were lovers now, had seen it in both their faces—Dottie and her Quaker: if the twin shocks didn't kill Hal, he'd be on a ship bound for America in nothing flat, and *that* would certainly kill him. Percy. Oh, Jesus, Percy.

Jamie was in front of him now, leading the way. There were little groups of people on the road: mostly farmers coming in with wagonloads of supplies for the army. They looked curiously at Jamie, much more so at Grey. But no one stopped or challenged them, and an hour later Jamie led them down a trace off the main road and into a small woodland dripping and steaming from the recent rain. There was a stream; Jamie swung down off his horse and left it to drink, and Grey did likewise, feeling strangely unreal, as though the leather of saddle and reins was foreign to his skin, as though rain-chilled air passed through him, body and bones, rather than around him.

Jamie crouched by the stream and drank, then splashed water over his head and face and stood up, shaking himself like a dog.

"Thank ye, John," he said. "I hadna time to say it earlier. I'm verra grateful to ye."

"Thank me? It was hardly my choice. You abducted me at gunpoint."

Jamie smiled; the tension of the last hour had eased, and with it the lines of his face.

"Not that. For taking care of Claire, I mean."

"Claire," he repeated. "Ah. Yes. That."

"Aye, that," Jamie said patiently, and bent a little to peer at him in concern. "Are ye quite well, John? Ye look a wee bit peaked."

"Peaked," Grey muttered. His heart was beating very erratically; perhaps it would conveniently stop. He waited for a moment to allow it to do this if it liked, but it went on cheerfully thumping away. No help, then. Jamie was still looking quizzically at him. Best to get it over quickly.

He took a deep breath, shut his eyes, and commended his soul to God.

"I have had carnal knowledge of your wife," he blurted.

He had expected to die more or less instantaneously upon this utterance, but everything continued just as usual. Birds continued chirping in the trees, and the rip and slobber of the horses champing grass was the only sound above that of the rushing water. He opened one eye to find Jamie Fraser standing there regarding him, head to one side.

"Oh?" said Jamie curiously. "Why?"

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BRED IN THE BONE

“I … uh … if you’ll excuse me for a moment …” I backed slowly to the door of my room and, seizing the knob, whipped inside and shut the door, leaving Willie to recover himself in decent privacy. And not only Willie.

I pressed myself against the door as though pursued by werewolves, my blood thundering in my ears.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” I whispered. Something like a geyser rose up inside me and burst in my head, the spray of it sparkling with sunlight and diamonds. I was dimly aware that it had come on to rain outside, and dirty gray water was streaking the windowpanes, but that didn’t matter a bit to the effervescence inside me.

I stood still for several minutes, eyes closed, not thinking anything, just murmuring, “Thank you, God,” over and over, soundlessly.

A tentative rap on the door jarred me out of this trance, and I turned to open it. William stood on the landing.

His shirt still hung open where he’d torn it, and I could see the pulse beat fast in the hollow of his throat. He bowed awkwardly to me, trying to achieve a smile but notably failing in the attempt. He gave it up.

“I am not sure what to call you,” he said. “Under the—the circumstances.”

“Oh,” I said, mildly disconcerted. “Well. I don’t think—at least I *hope* that the relationship between you and me hasn’t changed.” I realized, with a sudden dampening of my euphoria, that it very well might now, and the thought gave me a deep pang. I was very fond of him, for his own sake, as well as for his father's—or fathers', as the case might be.

"Could you bring yourself to go on calling me 'Mother Claire,' do you think? Just until we can think of something more … appropriate," I added hastily, seeing reluctance narrow his eyes. "After all, I suppose I am still your stepmother. Regardless of the … er … the situation."

He turned that over for a moment, then nodded briefly.

"May I come in? I wish to talk to you."

"Yes, I suppose you do."

If I hadn't known both his fathers, I would have marveled at his ability to suppress the rage and confusion he had so clearly exhibited a quarter of a hour ago. Jamie did it by instinct, John by long experience—but both of them had an iron power of will, and whether William's was bred in the bone or acquired by example, he most assuredly had one.

"Shall I send for something?" I asked. "A little brandy? It's good for shock."

He shook his head. He wouldn't sit—I didn't think he could—but leaned against the wall.

"I suppose that you knew? You could scarcely help but notice the resemblance, I suppose," he added bitterly.

"It *is* rather striking," I agreed, with caution. "Yes, I knew. My husband told me"—I groped for some delicate way of putting it—"the, um, circumstances of your birth some years ago."

And just how was *I* going to describe those circumstances?

It hadn't exactly escaped me that there were a few awkward explanations to be made—but caught up in the alarms of Jamie's sudden reappearance and escape and the giddiness of my own subsequent euphoria, it somehow hadn't occurred to me that I would be the person making them.

I'd seen the little shrine he kept in his room, the double portrait of his two mothers—both so heartbreakingly young. If age was good for anything, surely it should have given me the wisdom to deal with this?

How could I tell him that he was the result of an impulsive, self-willed young girl's blackmail? Let alone tell him that he had been the cause of both his legal parents' deaths? And if anyone was going to tell him what his birth had meant to Jamie, it was going to have to *be* Jamie.

"Your mother …" I began, and hesitated. Jamie would have taken the blame solely upon himself rather than blacken Geneva's memory to her son, I knew. I wasn't having that.

"She was reckless," William said, watching me closely. "Everybody says she was reckless. Was it—I suppose I only want to know, was it rape?"

"God, no!" I said, horrified, and saw his fists uncurl a little.

"That's good," he said, and let out the breath he'd been holding. "You're sure he didn't lie to you?"

"I'm sure." He and his father might be able to hide their feelings; I certainly couldn't, and while I would never be able to make a living playing cards, having a glass face was occasionally a good thing. I stood still and let him see that I told the truth.

"Do you think—did he say—" He stopped and swallowed, hard. "Did they love each other, do you think?"

"As much as they could, I think," I said softly. "They hadn't much time, only the one night." I ached for him and would have liked so much to take him in my arms and comfort him. But he was a man, and a young one, fierce about his pain. He'd deal with it as he could, and I thought it would be some years—if ever—before he learned to share it.

"Yes," he said, and pressed his lips together, as though he'd been going to say something else and thought better of it. "Yes, I—I see." It was quite clear from his tone that he didn't but, reeling under the impact of realization, had no idea what to ask next, let alone what to do with the information he had.

"I was born almost exactly nine months after my parents' marriage," he said, giving me a hard look. "Did they deceive my father? Or did my mother play the whore with her groom before she wed?"

"That might be a bit harsh," I began.

"No, it isn't," he snapped. "Which was it?"

"Your fa—Jamie. He'd never deceive another man in his marriage." *Except Frank*, I thought, a little wildly. But, of course, he hadn't known at first that he was doing it …

"My father," he said abruptly. "Pa—Lord John, I mean. He knew—knows?"

"Yes." Thin ice again. I didn't think he had any idea that Lord John had married Isobel principally for his sake—and Jamie's—but didn't want him going anywhere near the question of Lord John's motives.

"All of them," I said firmly, "all four of them; they wanted what was best for you."

"Best for me," he repeated bleakly. "Right." His knuckles had gone white again, and he gave me a look through narrowed eyes that I recognized all too well: a Fraser about to go off with a bang. I also knew perfectly well that there was no way of stopping one from detonating but had a try anyway, putting out a hand to him.

"William," I began. "Believe me—"

"I do," he said. "Don't bloody tell me any more. God *damn* it!" And, whirling on his heel, he drove his fist through the paneling with a thud that shook the room, wrenched his hand out of the hole he'd made, and stormed out. I heard crunching and rending as he paused to kick out several of the balusters on the landing and rip a length of the stair railing off, and I made it to the door in time to see him draw back a four-foot chunk of wood over his shoulder, swing, and strike the crystal chandelier that hung over the stairwell in an explosion of shattering glass. For a moment, he teetered on the open edge of the landing and I thought he would fall, or hurl himself off, but he staggered back from the edge and threw the chunk of wood like a javelin at the remnant of the chandelier with a burst of breath that might have been a grunt or a sob.

Then he rushed headlong down the stairs, thumping his wounded fist at intervals against the wall, where it left bloody smudges. He hit the front door with his shoulder, rebounded, jerked it open, and went out like a locomotive.

I stood frozen on the landing in the midst of chaos and destruction, gripping the edge of the broken balustrade. Tiny rainbows danced on walls and ceiling like multicolored dragonflies sprung out of the shattered crystal that littered the floor.

Something moved; a shadow fell across the floor of the hall below. A small, dark figure walked slowly in through the open doorway. Putting back the hood of her cloak, Jenny Fraser Murray looked round at the devastation, then up at me, her face a pale oval glimmering with humor.

“Like father, like son, I see,” she remarked. “God help us all.”

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THE HOUR OF THE WOLF

The British Army was leaving Philadelphia. The Delaware was choked with ships, and the ferries ran nonstop from the end of State Street across to Cooper's Point. Three thousand Tories were leaving the city, too, afraid to stay without the army's protection; General Clinton had promised them passage, though their baggage made a dreadful mess—stacked on the docks, crammed into the ferries—and occupied a good deal of space on board the ships. Ian and Rachel sat on the riverbank below Philadelphia, under the shade of a drooping sycamore, and watched an artillery emplacement being disassembled, a hundred yards away.

The artillerymen worked in shirtsleeves, their blue coats folded on the grass nearby, removing the guns that had defended the city, preparing them for shipping. They were in no hurry and took no particular notice of spectators; it didn't matter now.

"Does thee know where they are going?" Rachel asked.

"Aye, I do. Fergus says they're going north, to reinforce New York."

"Thee has seen him?" She turned her head, interested, and the leaf shadows flickered over her face.

"Aye, he came home last night; he'll be safe now, wi' the Tories and the army gone."

"Safe," she said, with a skeptical intonation. "As safe as anyone may be, in times like these, thee means." She'd taken off her cap because of the heat and brushed the damp, dark hair back from her cheeks.

He smiled, but said nothing. She knew as well as he did what the illusions of safety were.

"Fergus says the British mean to cut the colonies in half," he remarked. "Separate north from south and deal with them separately."

"Does he? And how does he know this?" she asked, surprised.

"A British officer named Randall-Isaacs; he talks to Fergus."

"He is a spy, thee means? For which side?" Her lips compressed a little. He wasn't sure where spying fell, in terms of Quaker philosophy, but didn't care to ask just now. It was a tender subject, Quaker philosophy.

"I shouldna like to have to guess," he said. "He passes himself off as an American agent, but that may be all moonshine. Ye canna trust anyone in wartime, aye?"

She turned round to look at him at that, hands behind her back as she leaned against the sycamore.

"Can thee not?"

"I trust you," he said. "And your brother."

"And thy dog," she said, with a glance at Rollo, writhing on the ground to scratch his back. "Thy aunt and uncle, too, and Fergus and his wife? That seems a fair number of friends." She leaned toward him, squinting in concern. "Does thy arm pain thee?"

"Och, it's well enough." He shrugged with his good shoulder, smiling. His arm did hurt, but the sling helped. The ax blow had nearly severed his left arm, cutting through the flesh and breaking the bone. His aunt said he had been lucky, in that it had not damaged the tendons. The body is plastic, she said. Muscle would heal, and so would bone.

Rollo's had; there was no trace of stiffness from the gunshot wound, and while his muzzle was growing white, he slid through the bushes like an eel, sniffing industriously.

Rachel sighed and gave him a direct look under dark, level brows.

"Ian, thee is thinking something painful, and I would much prefer thee tells me what it is. Has something happened?"

A great many things had happened, were happening all around them, would continue to happen. How could he tell her …? And yet he couldn't not.

"The world is turning upside down," he blurted. "And you are the only constant thing. The only thing I—that binds me to the earth."

Her eyes softened.

"Am I?"

"Ye ken verra well that you are," he said gruffly. He looked away, his heart pounding. Too late, he thought, with a mixture of dismay and elation. He'd begun to speak; he couldn't stop now, no matter what might come of it.

"I know what I am," he said, awkward but determined. "I would turn Quaker for your sake, Rachel, but I ken I'm not one in my heart; I think I never could be. And I think ye wouldna want me to say words I dinna mean or pretend to be something I canna be."

"No," she said softly. "I would not want that."

He opened his mouth but couldn't find more words to say. He swallowed, dry-mouthed, waiting. She swallowed, too; he saw the slight movement of her throat, soft and brown; the sun had begun to touch her again, the nut-brown maiden ripening from winter's pale bloom.

The artillerymen loaded the last of the cannon into a wagon, hitched their limbers to teams of oxen, and with laughter and raucous talk moved up the road toward the ferry point. When they were gone at last, a silence fell. There were still noises—the sound of the river, the rustle of the sycamore, and far beyond, the bellowings and crashings of an army on the move, the sound of violence impending. But between them, there was silence.

I've lost, he thought, but her head was still bent in thought. Is she maybe praying? Or only trying to think how to send me away?

Whichever it was, she lifted her head and stood up, away from the tree. She pointed at Rollo, who was lying couchant now, motionless but alert, yellow eyes following every movement of a fat robin foraging in the grass.

"That dog is a wolf, is he not?"

"Aye, well, mostly."

A small flash of hazel told him not to quibble.

"And yet he is thy boon companion, a creature of rare courage and affection, and altogether a worthy being?"

"Oh, aye," he said with more confidence. "He is."

She gave him an even look.

"Thee is a wolf, too, and I know it. But thee is my wolf, and best thee know that."

He'd started to burn when she spoke, an ignition swift and fierce as the lighting of one of his cousin's matches. He put out his hand, palm forward, to her, still cautious lest she, too, burst into flame.

"What I said to ye, before … that I kent ye loved me—"

She stepped forward and pressed her palm to his, her small, cool fingers linking tight.

"What I say to thee now is that I do love thee. And if thee hunts at night, thee will come home."

Under the sycamore, the dog yawned and laid his muzzle on his paws.

"And sleep at thy feet," Ian whispered, and gathered her in with his one good arm, both of them blazing bright as day.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Brigadier General Simon Fraser

There are, as anyone who's read my books will already realize, a *lot* of Simon Frasers running around the eighteenth century. The Brigadier who fought gallantly and was killed at Saratoga is not one of the Frasers of Lovat, but a Fraser of Balnain. That is, not a direct descendant of the Old Fox but certainly a relation of the family. He had an illustrious military career, including the famous taking of Quebec with James Wolfe in 1759 (which battle forms a part of a novella entitled "The Custom of the Army," a Lord John Grey story which will be published in March of 2010 as part of an anthology titled *Warriors*—in case you want more details).

My reason for mentioning the Brigadier particularly, though, is the interesting matter of his grave. Most accounts of Saratoga that mention Simon Fraser of Balnain report that he was buried in the evening of the day he died, within the boundaries of the Great Redoubt (not Breymann's Redoubt, which Jamie stormed with Benedict Arnold, but the larger one on the field), at his own request. Some accounts add details, such as the attendance of Balcarres's rangers, or of the Americans firing a minute gun in Fraser's honor when they realized what was taking place, while other accounts consider these romantic but probably apocryphal details and say that he was attended only by the close members of his staff.

Now, it isn't always possible to go in person to a place you're writing about, nor is it always necessary. It *is* usually desirable, though, and luckily, Saratoga is pretty accessible, and the battlefield there is well preserved and curated. I've walked the field there three times over the course of several years since I first decided that I wanted to use this particular battle as a centerpiece of a book, if not the book I happened to be writing at the time. On one of these occasions, I was there alone, there were no other tourists, and I got into conversation with one of the park employees (dressed in period costume and posted at the rebuilt site of the Bemis farm). After he patiently answered a lot of intrusive questions ("Are you wearing underwear?" being one of them, and "No," being the answer. "Long shirttails," being the further explanation for how one avoids chafing while wearing homespun breeches), allowed me to handle his Brown Bess musket and explained the loading and firing of it, we got into a discussion of the battle and its personalities—since I did, at this point, know quite a lot about it.

General Fraser's grave was at that point noted on the Park Service map—but it wasn't in the Great Redoubt; it was located near the river. I'd been down there but found no marker for it, and so inquired where it was—and why wasn't it in the Great Redoubt? I was informed that the Park Service had at one point—I don't know when, but fairly recently—done an archaeological excavation of the Great Redoubt, including the supposed gravesite. To everyone's surprise, General Fraser was *not* buried there, nor was anyone else. There were signs that a grave had once been dug, and a uniform button was found there, but no signs whatever of a body. (And while the body itself would be long since decomposed, you would expect still to see some signs.) There was (the employee told me) an account that said that General Fraser's grave had been moved to a site near the river, and that that was why the map was so marked—but no one knew where the specific place was, or, in fact, whether the General was in *that* one, either, which was why there was no marker there.

Well, novelists are a conscienceless lot. Those of us who deal with history tend to be fairly respectful of such facts as are recorded (always bearing in mind the proviso that just because it's in print, it isn't necessarily *true)*. But give us a hole to slide through, an omission in the historic record, one of those mysterious lacunae that occur in even the best-documented life … so all in all, I rather thought that perhaps General Fraser had been sent home to Scotland. (Yes, they did send bodies to and fro in the eighteenth century, on occasion. Someone exhumed poor old Tom Paine from his grave in France, intending to ship him back to America so he could be interred there with honor as a prophet of the Revolution. His body was lost in transit, and no one's ever found it. Speaking of interesting lacunae …)

Anyway, as it happened, I went to Scotland last year, and while wandering round the countryside in search of a logical place near Balnain in which to plant General Fraser, stumbled over (literally) the large chambered cairn at Corrimony. Such sites are always evocative, and when I read on the sign posted there that there had once been a body in the central chamber, but it had evidently decayed into the soil (there *were* traces of bones left in the earth, even after a thousand years or more), *and* that the tomb had been broken into sometime in the nineteenth century (thus explaining why you won't find anything in the cairn if you happen to go there now) … well, hey. (People always ask novelists where they get their ideas. Everywhere!)

Quaker Plain Speech

The Religious Society of Friends was founded around 1647 by George Fox. As part of the Society's belief in the equality of all men before God, they did not use honorific titles (such as "Mr./Mrs.," "General/Colonel," etc.), and used "plain speech" in addressing everyone.

Now, as any of you who know a second language with Latin roots (Spanish, French, etc.) realize, these languages have both a familiar and a formal version of "you." So did English, once upon a time. The "thee" and "thou" forms that most of us recognize as

Elizabethan or biblical are in fact the English familiar forms of "you"—with "you" used as both the plural familiar form ("all y'all"), and the formal pronoun (both singular and plural). As English evolved, the familiar forms were dropped, leaving us with the utilitarian "you" to cover all contingencies.

Quakers retained the familiar forms, though, as part of their "plain speech," until the twentieth century. Over the years, though, plain speech also evolved, and while "thee/thy" remained, "thou/thine" largely disappeared, and the verb forms associated with "thee/thy" changed. From about the mid-eighteenth century onward, plain speech used "thee" as the singular form of "you" (the plural form remained "you," even in plain speech), with the same verb forms normally used for third-person singular. For example, "He knows that/Thee knows that." The older verb endings —"knowest," "doth," etc.—were no longer used.

Scots/Scotch/Scottish

As noted elsewhere *(Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade,* see Author's Notes), in the eighteenth century (and indeed, well into the mid-twentieth century), the word "Scotch" and its variants (e.g., "Scotchman") were commonly used (by both English people *and* Scots) to describe an inhabitant of Scotland. The terms "Scottish" and "Scots" were also occasionally used, though less common.

Typos and Terminology

There may be an impulse to regard the term "mess-kid" (as used in Part Three of this book) as a typographical error. It's not. A mess-kid was a shallow, circular bucket in which sailors of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were served their food. A mess-*kit*, on the other hand, referred to the utensils carried and used by a soldier.

By the same token, while "crotch" is the usual American English term, the older form, "crutch," would have been used in eighteenth-century English-English usage. Which is not to say there aren't any typographical errors in this book (despite the heroic efforts of Ms. Kathy Lord, the copy editor; the alerts of various friends and translators who read the manuscript in chunks; and a fair amount of diligence by myself, these things happen) but these particular terms aren't.

Saratoga

A tremendous amount of historical research goes into a book like this (I am often bemused by letters from people telling me they'd visited a museum, seen some eighteenth-century artifacts, and been struck all a-heap by discovering that I hadn't just made it all up!), and while there isn't room to acknowledge or list even a fraction of the sources I've used, I did want to mention one specific book.

The two battles of Saratoga were historically important, remarkably dramatic, and very complex, both in the logistics of the battles and in the troop movements and politics that led up to them. I was fortunate to find, early on in my researches, Richard M. Ketchum's *Saratoga*, which is an amazingly well-done portrait of the battles, the background, and the plethora of colorful individuals who took part. I just wanted to recommend this book to those of you with a deeper interest in the historical aspects, as these could only be touched on lightly in the context of a novel.

Loch Errochty and Tunnel Tigers

During the 1950s and ’60s, a great hydroelectric scheme was implemented in the Scottish Highlands. The work of a great many “tunnel tigers” (also known as “the Hydro boys”)—laborers, many of them from Ireland and Poland—went into digging tunnels through the mountains and building dams for the creation of man-made lochs. Loch Errochty is in fact one of these man-made lochs. The tunnel I’ve drawn as being associated with it (complete with miniature train) is like those common to the hydroelectric scheme as a whole, but I don’t know that there actually *is* one at Loch Errochty. On the other hand, the dam, turbine service chamber, and fish-viewing chamber at Pitlochry are indeed all there. So are the anglers.

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To all my good dogs:

Penny Louise

Tipper John

John

Flip

Archie and Ed

Tippy

Spots

Emily

Ajax

Molly

Gus

Homer and JJ

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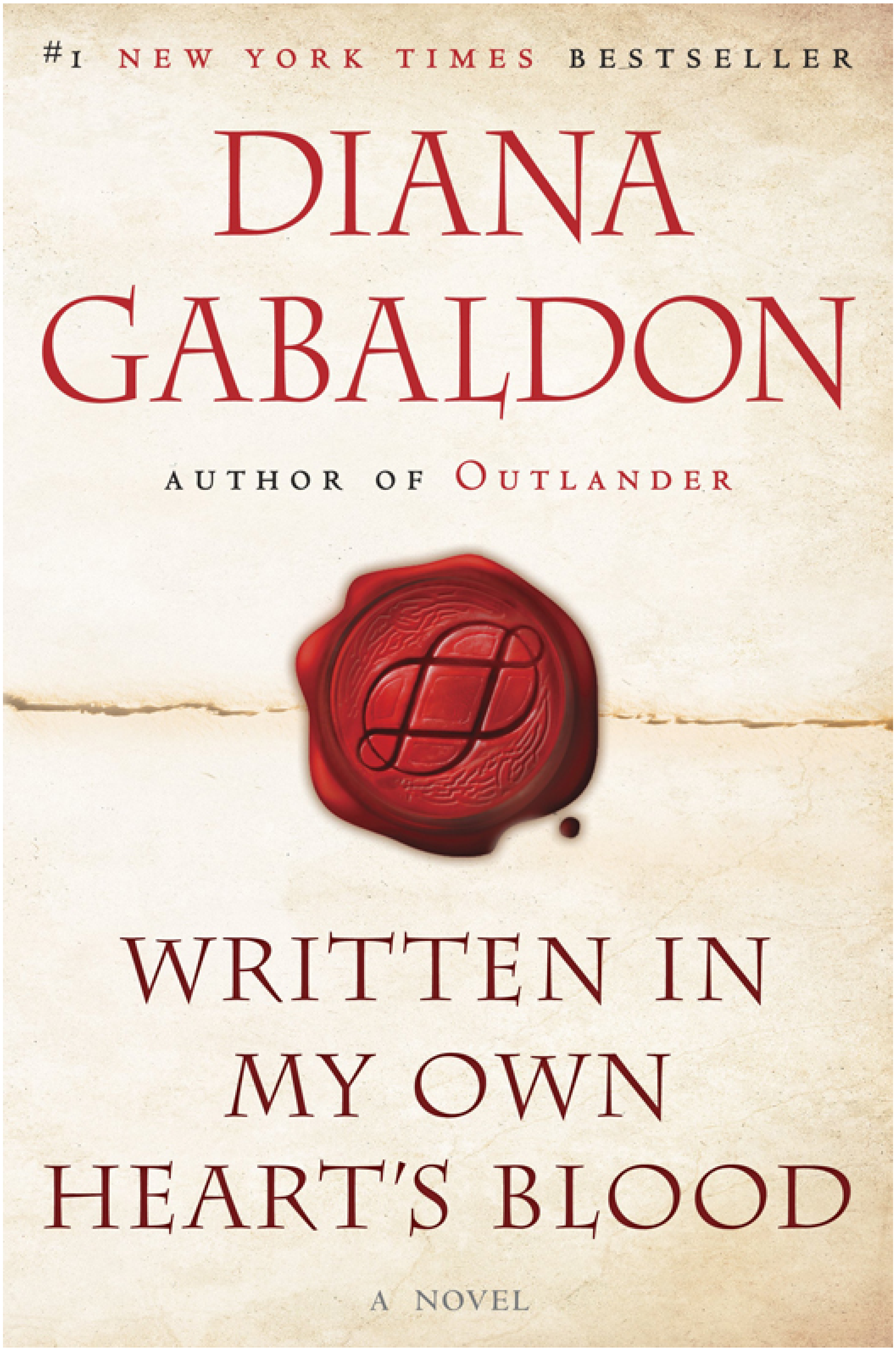
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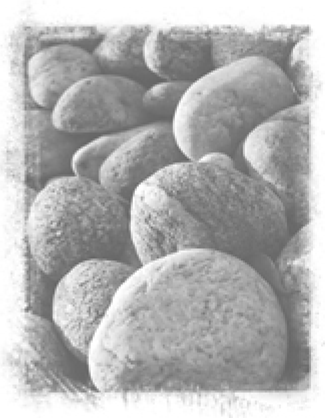

WRITTEN IN MY OWN HEART'S BLOOD

A NOVEL

DELACORTE PRESS
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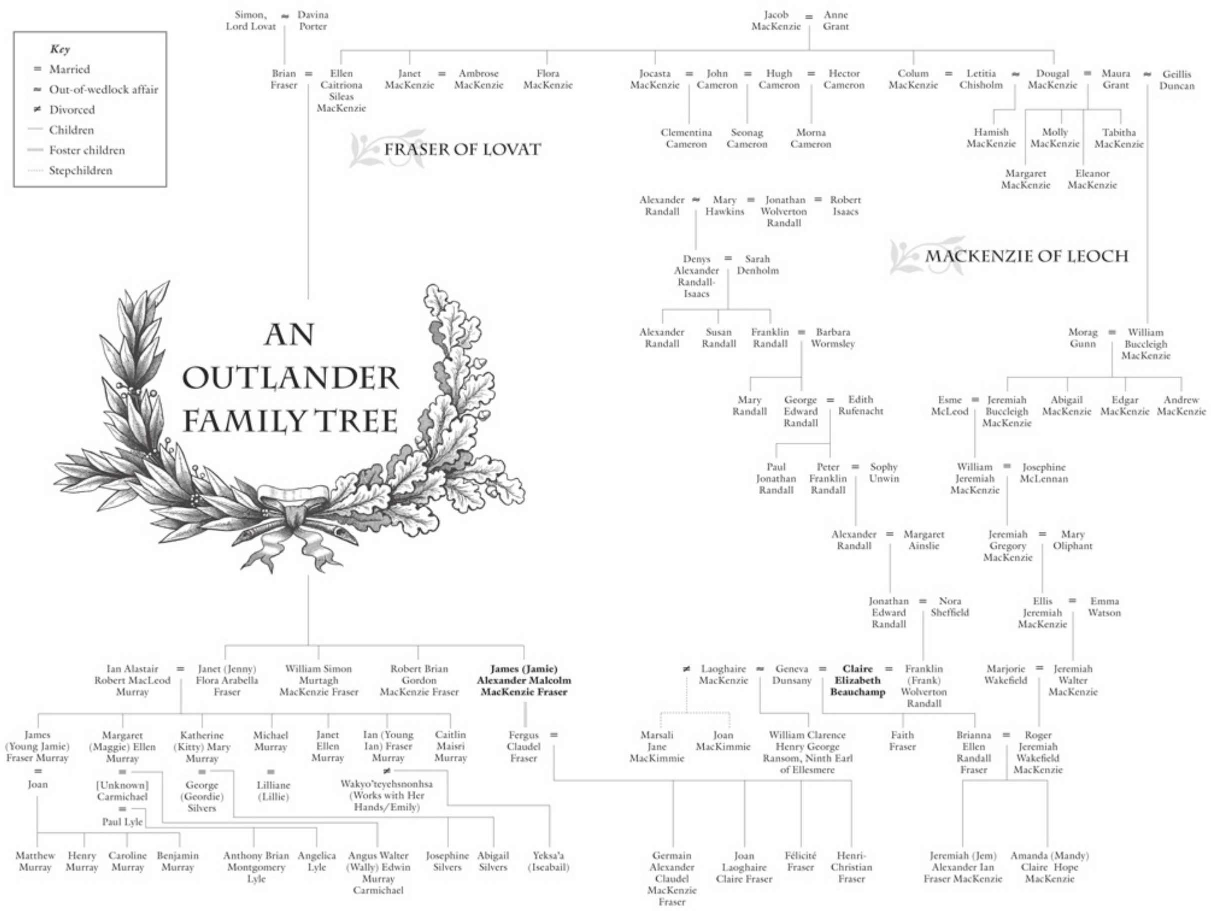
AN OUTLANDER FAMILY TREE
Key
= Married
≈ Out-of-wedlock affair
≠ Divorced
Children
Foster children
Stepchildren
FRASER OF LOVAT
MACKENZIE OF LEOCH
Simon, Lord Lovat
Davina Porter
Jacob MacKenzie
Anne Grant
Brian Fraser
Ellen Caitriona Sileas MacKenzie
Janet MacKenzie
Ambrose MacKenzie
Flora MacKenzie
Jocasta MacKenzie
John Cameron
Hugh Cameron
Hector Cameron
Colum MacKenzie
Letitia Chisholm
Dougal MacKenzie
Maura Grant
Geillis Duncan
Clementina Cameron
Seonag Cameron
Morna Cameron
Hamish MacKenzie
Molly MacKenzie
Tabitha MacKenzie
Margaret MacKenzie
Eleanor MacKenzie
Alexander Randall
Mary Hawkins
Jonathan Wolverton Randall
Robert Isaacs
Denys Alexander Randall-Isaacs
Sarah Denholm
Alexander Randall
Susan Randall
Franklin Randall
Barbara Wormsley
Morag Gunn
William Buccleigh MacKenzie
Mary Randall
George Edward Randall
Edith Rufenacht
Esme McLeod
Jeremiah Buccleigh MacKenzie
Abigail MacKenzie
Edgar MacKenzie
Andrew MacKenzie
Paul Jonathan Randall
Peter Franklin Randall
Sophy Unwin
William Jeremiah MacKenzie
Josephine McLennan
Alexander Randall
Margaret Ainslie
Jeremiah Gregory MacKenzie
Mary Oliphant
Jonathan Edward Randall
Nora Sheffield
Ellis Jeremiah MacKenzie
Emma Watson
Ian Alastair Robert MacLeod Murray
Janet (Jenny) Flora Arabella Fraser
William Simon Murtagh MacKenzie Fraser
Robert Brian Gordon MacKenzie Fraser
James (Jamie) Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser
Laoghaire MacKenzie
Geneva Dunsany
Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp
Franklin (Frank) Wolverton Randall
Marjorie Wakefield
Jeremiah Walter MacKenzie
James (Young Jamie) Fraser Murray
Joan
Margaret (Maggie) Ellen Murray
[Unknown] Carmichael
Paul Lyle
Katherine (Kitty) Mary Murray
George (Geordie) Silvers
Michael Murray
Lilliane (Lillie)
Janet Ellen Murray
Ian (Young Ian) Fraser Murray
Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa (Works with Her Hands/Emily)
Caitlin Maisri Murray
Fergus Claudel Fraser
Marsali Jane MacKimmie
Joan MacKimmie
William Clarence Henry George Ransom, Ninth Earl of Ellesmere
Faith Fraser
Brianna Ellen Randall Fraser
Roger Jeremiah Wakefield MacKenzie
Matthew Murray
Henry Murray
Caroline Murray
Benjamin Murray
Anthony Brian Montgomery Lyle
Angelica Lyle
Angus Walter (Wally) Edwin Murray Carmichael
Josephine Silvers
Abigail Silvers
Yeksa'a (Isebail)
Germain Alexander Claudel MacKenzie Fraser
Joan Laoghaire Claire Fraser
Félicité Fraser
Henri-Christian Fraser
Jeremiah (Jem) Alexander Ian Fraser MacKenzie
Amanda (Mandy) Claire Hope MacKenzie

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PROLOGUE

IN THE LIGHT OF eternity, time casts no shadow.

Your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions. But what is it that the old women see?

We see necessity, and we do the things that must be done.

Young women don't see—they *are*, and the spring of life runs through them.

Ours is the guarding of the spring, ours the shielding of the light we have lit, the flame that we are.

What have I seen? You are the vision of my youth, the constant dream of all my ages.

Here I stand on the brink of war again, a citizen of no place, no time, no country but my own … and that a land lapped by no sea but blood, bordered only by the outlines of a face long-loved.

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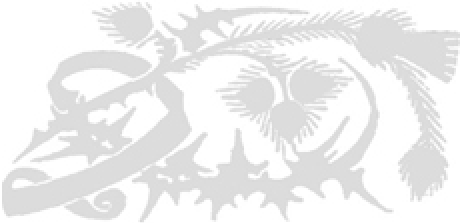
PART ONE



Nexus

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1

A HUNDREDWEIGHT OF STONES

June 16, 1778
The forest between Philadelphia and Valley Forge

IAN MURRAY STOOD with a stone in his hand, eyeing the ground he'd chosen. A small clearing, out of the way, up among a scatter of great lichened boulders, under the shadow of firs and at the foot of a big red cedar; a place where no casual passerby would go, but not inaccessible. He meant to bring them up here—the family.

Fergus, to begin with. Maybe just Fergus, by himself. Mam had raised Fergus from the time he was ten, and he'd had no mother before that. Fergus had known Mam longer than Ian had, and loved her as much. *Maybe more*, he thought, his grief aggravated by guilt. Fergus had stayed with her at Lallybroch, helped to take care of her and the place; he hadn't. He swallowed hard and, walking into the small clear space, set his stone in the middle, then stood back to look.

Even as he did so, he found himself shaking his head. No, it had to be two cairns. His mam and Uncle Jamie were brother and sister, and the family could mourn them here together—but there were others he might bring, maybe, to remember and pay their respects. And those were the folk who would have known Jamie Fraser and loved him well but wouldn't ken Jenny Murray from a hole in the—

The image of his mother *in* a hole in the ground stabbed him like a fork, retreated with the recollection that she wasn't after all in a grave, and stabbed again all the harder for that. He really couldn't bear the vision of them drowning, maybe clinging to each other, struggling to keep —

"A Dhia!" he said violently, and dropped the stone, turning back at once to find more. He'd seen people drown.

Tears ran down his face with the sweat of the summer day; he didn't mind it, only stopping now and then to wipe his nose on his sleeve. He'd tied a rolled kerchief round his head to keep the hair and the stinging sweat out of his eyes; it was sopping before he'd added more than twenty stones to each of the cairns.

He and his brothers had built a fine cairn for their father before he died, at the head of the carved stone that bore his name—all his names, in spite of the expense—in the burying ground at Lallybroch. And then later, at the funeral, members of the family, followed by the tenants and then the servants, would have come one by one to add a stone each to the weight of remembrance.

Fergus, then. Or … no, what was he thinking? Auntie Claire must be the first he brought here. She wasn't Scots herself, but she kent fine what a cairn was and would maybe be comforted a bit to see Uncle Jamie's. Aye, right. Auntie

Claire, then Fergus. Uncle Jamie was Fergus's foster father; he had a right. And then maybe Marsali and the children. But maybe Germain was old enough to come with Fergus? He was ten, near enough to being a man to understand, to be treated like a man. And Uncle Jamie was his grandsire; it was proper.

He stepped back again and wiped his face, breathing heavily. Bugs whined and buzzed past his ears and hovered over him, wanting his blood, but he'd stripped to a loincloth and rubbed himself with bear grease and mint in the Mohawk way; they didn't touch him.

"Look over them, O spirit of red cedar," he said softly in Mohawk, gazing up into the fragrant branches of the tree. "Guard their souls and keep their presence here, fresh as thy branches."

He crossed himself and bent to dig about in the soft leaf mold. A few more rocks, he thought. In case they might be scattered by some passing animal. Scattered like his thoughts, which roamed restless to and fro among the faces of his family, the folk of the Ridge—God, might he ever go back there? Brianna. Oh, Jesus, Brianna …

He bit his lip and tasted salt, licked it away and moved on, foraging. She was safe with Roger Mac and the weans. But, Jesus, he could have used her advice—even more, Roger Mac's.

Who was left for him to ask, if he needed help in taking care of them all?

Thought of Rachel came to him, and the tightness in his chest eased a little. Aye, if he had Rachel … She was younger than him, nay more than nineteen, and, being a Quaker, had very strange notions of how things should be, but if he had her, he'd have solid rock under his feet. He hoped he *would* have her, but there were still things he must say to her, and the thought of that conversation made the tightness in his chest come back.

The picture of his cousin Brianna came back, too, and lingered in his mind: tall, long-nosed and strong-boned as her father … and with it rose the image of his *other* cousin, Bree's half brother. Holy God, William. And what ought he to do about William? He doubted the man kent the truth, kent that he was Jamie Fraser's son—was it Ian's responsibility to tell him so? To bring him here and explain what he'd lost?

He must have groaned at the thought, for his dog, Rollo, lifted his massive head and looked at him in concern.

"No, I dinna ken that, either," Ian told him. "Let it bide, aye?" Rollo laid his head back on his paws, shivered his shaggy hide against the flies, and relaxed in boneless peace.

Ian worked awhile longer and let the thoughts drain away with his sweat and his tears. He finally stopped when the sinking sun touched the tops of his cairns, feeling tired but more at peace. The cairns rose knee-high, side by side, small but solid.

He stood still for a bit, not thinking anymore, just listening to the fussing of wee birds in the grass and the breathing of the wind among the trees. Then he sighed deeply, squatted, and touched one of the cairns.

"Tha gaol agam oirbh, a Mhàthair," he said softly. *My love is upon you, Mother*. Closed his eyes and laid a scuffed hand on the other heap of stones. The dirt ground into his skin made his fingers feel strange, as though he could maybe reach straight through the earth and touch what he needed.

He stayed still, breathing, then opened his eyes.

“Help me wi’ this, Uncle Jamie,” he said. “I dinna think I can manage, alone.”

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2

DIRTY BASTARD

WILLIAM RANSOM, Ninth Earl of Ellesmere, Viscount Ashness, Baron Derwent, shoved his way through the crowds on Market Street, oblivious to the complaints of those rebounding from his impact.

He didn't know where he was going, or what he might do when he got there. All he knew was that he'd burst if he stood still.

His head throbbed like an inflamed boil. Everything throbbed. His hand—he'd probably broken something, but he didn't care. His heart, pounding and sore inside his chest. His foot, for God's sake—what, had he kicked something? He lashed out viciously at a loose cobblestone and sent it rocketing through a crowd of geese, who set up a huge cackle and lunged at him, hissing and beating at his shins with their wings.

Feathers and goose shit flew wide, and the crowd scattered in all directions.

"Bastard!" shrieked the goose-girl, and struck at him with her crook, catching him a shrewd thump on the ear. "Devil take you, *dreckiger Bastard*!"

This sentiment was echoed by a number of other angry voices, and he veered into an alley, pursued by shouts and honks of agitation.

He rubbed his throbbing ear, lurching into buildings as he passed, oblivious to everything but the one word throbbing ever louder in his head. *Bastard*.

"Bastard!" he said out loud, and shouted, "Bastard, bastard, *bastard*!" at the top of his lungs, hammering at the brick wall next to him with a clenched fist.

"Who's a bastard?" said a curious voice behind him. He swung round to see a young woman looking at him with some interest. Her eyes moved slowly down his frame, taking note of the heaving chest, the bloodstains on the facings of his uniform coat, and the green smears of goose shit on his breeches. Her gaze reached his silver-buckled shoes and returned to his face with more interest.

"I am," he said, hoarse and bitter.

"Oh, really?" She left the shelter of the doorway in which she'd been lingering and came across the alley to stand right in front of him. She was tall and slim and had a very fine pair of high young breasts—which were clearly visible under the thin muslin of her shift, because, while she had a silk petticoat, she wore no stays. No cap, either—her hair fell loose over her shoulders. A whore.

"I'm partial to bastards myself," she said, and touched him lightly on the arm. "What kind of bastard are you? A wicked one? An evil one?"

"A sorry one," he said, and scowled when she laughed. She saw the scowl but didn't pull back.

“Come in,” she said, and took his hand. “You look as though you could do with a drink.” He saw her glance at his knuckles, burst and bleeding, and she caught her lower lip behind small white teeth. She didn’t seem afraid, though, and he found himself drawn, unprotesting, into the shadowed doorway after her.

What did it matter? he thought, with a sudden savage weariness. *What did anything matter?*

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3

IN WHICH THE WOMEN, AS USUAL, PICK UP THE PIECES

Number 17 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia

The residence of Lord and Lady John Grey

WILLIAM HAD LEFT the house like a thunderclap, and the place looked as though it had been struck by lightning. I certainly felt like the survivor of a massive electrical storm, hairs and nerve endings all standing up straight on end, waving in agitation.

Jenny Murray had entered the house on the heels of William's departure, and while the sight of her was a lesser shock than any of the others so far, it still left me speechless. I goggled at my erstwhile sister-in-law—though, come to think, she still *was* my sister-in-law … because Jamie was alive. *Alive.*

He'd been in my arms not ten minutes before, and the memory of his touch flickered through me like lightning in a bottle. I was dimly aware that I was smiling like a loon, despite massive destruction, horrific scenes, William's distress—if you could call an explosion like that "distress"—Jamie's danger, and a faint wonder as to what either Jenny or Mrs. Figg, Lord John's cook and housekeeper, might be about to say.

Mrs. Figg was smoothly spherical, gleamingly black, and inclined to glide silently up behind one like a menacing ball bearing.

"What's *this*?" she barked, manifesting herself suddenly behind Jenny.

"Holy Mother of God!" Jenny whirled, eyes round and hand pressed to her chest. "Who in God's name are you?"

"This is Mrs. Figg," I said, feeling a surreal urge to laugh, despite—or maybe because of—recent events. "Lord John Grey's cook. And, Mrs. Figg, this is Mrs. Murray. My, um … my …"

"Your good-sister," Jenny said firmly. She raised one black eyebrow. "If ye'll have me still?" Her look was straight and open, and the urge to laugh changed abruptly into an equally strong urge to burst into tears. Of all the unlikely sources of succor I could have imagined … I took a deep breath and put out my hand.

"I'll have you." We hadn't parted on good terms in Scotland, but I had loved her very much, once, and wasn't about to pass up any opportunity to mend things.

Her small firm fingers wove through mine, squeezed hard, and, as simply as that, it was done. No need for apologies or spoken forgiveness. She'd never had to wear the mask that Jamie did. What she thought and felt was there in her eyes, those slanted blue cat eyes she shared with her brother. She knew the truth now of what I was, and she knew I loved—

and always had loved—her brother with all my heart and soul—despite the minor complications of my being presently married to someone else.

She heaved a sigh, eyes closing for an instant, then opened them and smiled at me, mouth trembling only a little.

“Well, fine and dandy,” said Mrs. Figg shortly. She narrowed her eyes and rotated smoothly on her axis, taking in the panorama of destruction. The railing at the top of the stair had been ripped off, and cracked banisters, dented walls, and bloody smudges marked the path of William’s descent. Shattered crystals from the chandelier littered the floor, glinting festively in the light that poured through the open front door, the door itself cracked through and hanging drunkenly from one hinge.

“*Merde* on toast,” Mrs. Figg murmured. She turned abruptly to me, her small black-currant eyes still narrowed. “Where’s his lordship?”

“Ah,” I said. This was going to be rather sticky, I saw. While deeply disapproving of most people, Mrs. Figg was devoted to John. She wasn’t going to be at all pleased to hear that he’d been abducted by—

“For that matter, where’s my brother?” Jenny inquired, glancing round as though expecting Jamie to appear suddenly out from under the settee.

“Oh,” I said. “Hmm. Well …” Possibly worse than sticky. Because …

“And where’s my Sweet William?” Mrs. Figg demanded, sniffing the air. “He’s been here; I smell that stinky cologne he puts on his linen.” She nudged a dislodged chunk of plaster disapprovingly with the toe of her shoe.

I took another long, deep breath and a tight grip on what remained of my sanity.

“Mrs. Figg,” I said, “perhaps you would be so kind as to make us all a cup of tea?”

* * *

WE SAT IN the parlor, while Mrs. Figg came and went to the cookhouse, keeping an eye on her terrapin stew.

“You don’t want to scorch turtle, no, you don’t,” she said severely to us, setting down the teapot in its padded yellow cozy on her return. “Not with so much sherry as his lordship likes in it. Almost a full bottle—terrible waste of good liquor, that would be.”

My insides turned over promptly. Turtle soup—with a lot of sherry—had certain strong and private associations for me, these being connected with Jamie, feverish delirium, and the way in which a heaving ship assists sexual intercourse. Contemplation of which would *not* assist the impending discussion in the slightest. I rubbed a finger between my brows, in hopes of dispelling the buzzing cloud of confusion gathering there. The air in the house still felt electric.

“Speaking of sherry,” I said, “or any other sort of strong spirits you might have convenient, Mrs. Figg …”

She looked thoughtfully at me, nodded, and reached for the decanter on the sideboard.

“Brandy is stronger,” she said, and set it in front of me.

Jenny looked at me with the same thoughtfulness and, reaching out, poured a good-sized slug of the brandy into my cup, then a similar one into her own.

“Just in case,” she said, raising one brow, and we drank for a few moments. I thought it might take something stronger than brandy-laced tea to deal with the effect of recent events on my nerves—laudanum, say, or a large slug of straight Scotch whisky—but the tea undeniably helped, hot and aromatic, settling in a soft trickling warmth amidships.

"So, then. We're fettled, are we?" Jenny set down her own cup and looked expectant.

"It's a start." I took a deep breath and gave her a *précis* of the morning's events.

Jenny's eyes were disturbingly like Jamie's. She blinked at me once, then twice, and shook her head as though to clear it, accepting what I'd just told her.

"So Jamie's gone off wi' your Lord John, the British army is after them, the tall lad I met on the stoop wi' steam comin' out of his ears is Jamie's son—well, of course he is; a blind man could see that—and the town's aboil wi' British soldiers. Is that it, then?"

"He's not exactly *my* Lord John," I said. "But, yes, that's essentially the position. I take it Jamie told you about William, then?"

"Aye, he did." She grinned at me over the rim of her teacup. "I'm that happy for him. But what's troubling his lad, then? He looked like he wouldna give the road to a bear."

"What did you say?" Mrs. Figg's voice cut in abruptly. She set down the tray she had just brought in, the silver milk jug and sugar basin rattling like castanets. "William is *whose* son?"

I took a fortifying gulp of tea. Mrs. Figg did know that I'd been married to—and theoretically widowed from—one James Fraser. But that was all she knew.

"Well," I said, and paused to clear my throat. "The, um, tall gentleman with the red hair who was just here—you saw him?"

"I did." Mrs. Figg eyed me narrowly.

"Did you get a good look at him?"

"Didn't pay much heed to his face when he came to the door and asked where you were, but I saw his backside pretty plain when he pushed past me and ran up the stairs."

"Possibly the resemblance is less marked from that angle." I took another mouthful of tea. "Um … that gentleman is James Fraser, my … er … my—" "First husband" wasn't accurate, and neither was "last husband"—or even, unfortunately, "most recent husband." I settled for the simplest alternative. "My husband. And, er … William's father."

Mrs. Figg's mouth opened, soundless for an instant. She backed up slowly and sat down on a needlework ottoman with a soft *phumph*.

"William know that?" she asked, after a moment's contemplation.

"He does *now*," I said, with a brief gesture toward the devastation in the stairwell, clearly visible through the door of the parlor where we were sitting.

"*Merde* on— I mean, Holy Lamb of God preserve us." Mrs. Figg's second husband was a Methodist preacher, and she strove to be a credit to him, but her first had been a French gambler. Her eyes fixed on me like gun sights.

"You his mother?"

I choked on my tea.

"No," I said, wiping my chin with a linen napkin. "It isn't quite *that* complicated." In fact, it was more so, but I wasn't going to explain just how Willie had come about, either to Mrs. Figg or to Jenny. Jamie had to have told Jenny who William's mother was, but I doubted that he'd told his sister that William's mother, Geneva Dunsany, had forced him into her bed by threatening Jenny's family. No man of spirit likes to admit that he's been effectively blackmailed by an eighteen-year-old girl.

"Lord John became William's legal guardian when William's grandfather died, and at that point, Lord John also married Lady Isobel Dunsany, Willie's mother's sister. She'd looked after Willie since his mother's death in childbirth, and she and Lord John were essentially Willie's parents since he was quite young. Isobel died when he was eleven or so."

Mrs. Figg took this explanation in stride but wasn't about to be distracted from the main point at issue.

"James Fraser," she said, tapping a couple of broad fingers on her knee and looking accusingly at Jenny. "How comes he not to be dead? News was he drowned." She cut her eyes at me. "I thought his lordship was like to throw himself in the harbor, too, when he heard it."

I closed my own eyes with a sudden shudder, the salt-cold horror of that news washing over me in a wave of memory. Even with Jamie's touch still joyful on my skin and the knowledge of him glowing in my heart, I relived the crushing pain of hearing that he was dead.

"Well, I can enlighten ye on that point, at least."

I opened my eyes to see Jenny drop a lump of sugar into her fresh tea and nod at Mrs. Figg. "We were to take passage on a ship called *Euterpe*—my brother and myself—out o' Brest. But the blackhearted thief of a captain sailed without us. Much good it did him," she added, frowning.

Much good, indeed. The *Euterpe* had sunk in a storm in the Atlantic, lost with all hands. As I—and John Grey—had been told.

"Jamie found us another ship, but it landed us in Virginia, and we'd to make our way up the coast, partly by wagon, partly by packet boat, keepin' out of the way of the soldiers. Those wee needles ye gave Jamie against the seasickness work a marvel," she added, turning approvingly to me. "He showed me how to put them in for him. But when we came to Philadelphia yesterday," she went on, returning to her tale, "we stole into the city by night, like a pair o' thieves, and made our way to Fergus's printshop. Lord, I thought my heart would stop a dozen times!"

She smiled at the memory, and I was struck by the change in her. The shadow of sorrow still lay on her face, and she was thin and worn by travel, but the terrible strain of her husband Ian's long dying had lifted. There was color in her cheeks again and a brightness in her eyes that I had not seen since I had first known her thirty years before. She had found her peace, I thought, and felt a thankfulness that eased my own soul.

"… so Jamie taps on the door at the back, and there's no answer, though we can see the light of a fire comin' through the shutters. He knocks again, makin' a wee tune of it—" She rapped her knuckles lightly on the table, *bump-ba-da-bump-ba-da-bump-bump-bump*, and my heart turned over, recognizing the theme from *The Lone Ranger*, which Brianna had taught him.

"And after a moment," Jenny went on, "a woman's voice calls out fierce, 'Who's there?' And Jamie says in the *Gàidhlig,* 'It is your father, my daughter, and a cold, wet, and hungry man he is, too.' For it was rainin' hammer handles and pitchforks, and we were both soaked to the skin."

She rocked back a little, enjoying the telling.

"The door opens then, just a crack, and there's Marsali wi' a horse pistol in her hand, and her two wee lasses behind her, fierce as archangels, each with a billet of wood, ready to crack a thief across his shins. They see the firelight shine on Jamie's face then, and all three of them let out skellochs like to wake the dead and fall upon him and drag him inside and all talkin' at once and greetin', askin' was he a ghost and why was he not drowned, and that was the first we learned that the *Euterpe* had sunk." She crossed herself. "God rest them, poor souls," she said, shaking her head.

I crossed myself, too, and saw Mrs. Figg look sideways at me; she hadn't realized I was a Papist.

"I've come in, too, of course," Jenny went on, "but everyone's talkin' at once and rushin' to and fro in search of dry clothes and hot drinks and I'm just lookin' about the place, for I've never been inside a printshop before, and the smell of the ink and the paper and lead is a wonder to me, and, sudden-like, there's a tug at my skirt and this sweet-faced wee mannie says to me, 'And who are you, madame? Would you like some cider?' "

"Henri-Christian," I murmured, smiling at the thought of Marsali's youngest, and Jenny nodded.

" 'Why, I'm your grannie Janet, son,' says I, and his eyes go round, and he lets out a shriek and grabs me round the legs and gives me such a hug as to make me lose my balance and fall down on the settle. I've a bruise on my bum the size of your hand," she added out of the corner of her mouth to me.

I felt a small knot of tension that I hadn't realized was there relax. Jenny did of course know that Henri-Christian had been born a dwarf—but knowing and seeing are sometimes different things. Clearly they hadn't been, for Jenny.

Mrs. Figg had been following this account with interest, but maintained her reserve. At mention of the printshop, though, this reserve hardened a bit.

"These folk—Marsali is your daughter, then, ma'am?" I could tell what she was thinking. The entire town of Philadelphia knew that Jamie was a Rebel—and, by extension, so was I. It was the threat of my imminent arrest that had caused John to insist upon my marrying him in the wake of the tumult following Jamie's presumed death. The mention of printing in British-occupied Philadelphia was bound to raise questions as to just *what* was being printed, and by whom.

"No, her husband is my brother's adopted son," Jenny explained. "But I raised Fergus from a wee lad myself, so he's my foster son, as well, by the Highland way of reckoning."

Mrs. Figg blinked. She had been gamely trying to keep the cast of characters in some sort of order to this point, but now gave it up with a shake of her head that made the pink ribbons on her cap wave like antennae.

"Well, where the devil—I mean, where on earth has your brother gone with his lordship?" she demanded. "To this printshop, you think?"

Jenny and I exchanged glances.

"I doubt it," I said. "More likely he's gone outside the city, using John—er, his lordship, I mean—as a hostage to get past the pickets, if necessary. Probably he'll let him go as soon as they're far enough away for safety."

Mrs. Figg made a deep humming noise of disapproval.

"And maybe he'll make for Valley Forge and turn him over to the Rebels instead."

"Oh, I shouldna think so," Jenny said soothingly. "What would they want with him, after all?"

Mrs. Figg blinked again, taken aback at the notion that anyone might not value his lordship to the same degree that she did, but after a moment's lip-pursing allowed as this might be so.

"He wasn't in his uniform, was he, ma'am?" she asked me, brow furrowed. I shook my head. John didn't hold an active commission. He was a diplomat, though technically still lieutenant colonel of his brother's regiment, and therefore wore his uniform for purposes of ceremony or intimidation, but he was officially retired from the army, not a combatant, and in plain clothes he would be taken as citizen rather than soldier—thus of no particular interest to General Washington's troops at Valley Forge.

I didn't think Jamie was headed for Valley Forge in any case. I knew, with absolute certainty, that he would come back. Here. For me.

The thought bloomed low in my belly and spread upward in a wave of warmth that made me bury my nose in my teacup to hide the resulting flush.

Alive. I caressed the word, cradling it in the center of my heart. Jamie was alive. Glad as I was to see Jenny—and gladder still to see her extend an olive branch in my direction—I really wanted to go up to my room, close the door, and lean against the wall with my eyes shut tight, reliving the seconds after he'd entered the room, when he'd taken me in his arms and pressed me to the wall, kissing me, the simple, solid, warm fact of his presence so overwhelming that I might have collapsed onto the floor without that wall's support.

Alive, I repeated silently to myself. *He's alive*.

Nothing else mattered. Though I did wonder briefly what he'd done with John.

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4

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR THE ANSWERS TO

In the woods, an hour's ride outside Philadelphia

JOHN GREY HAD BEEN quite resigned to dying. Had expected it from the moment that he'd blurted out, *"I have had carnal knowledge of your wife."* The only question in his mind had been whether Fraser would shoot him, stab him, or eviscerate him with his bare hands.

To have the injured husband regard him calmly and say merely, *"Oh? Why?"* was not merely unexpected but … infamous. Absolutely infamous.

"Why?" John Grey repeated, incredulous. "Did you say *'Why?'* "

"I did. And I should appreciate an answer."

Now that Grey had both eyes open, he could see that Fraser's outward calm was not quite so impervious as he'd first supposed. There was a pulse beating in Fraser's temple, and he'd shifted his weight a little, like a man might do in the vicinity of a tavern brawl: not quite ready to commit violence but readying himself to meet it. Perversely, Grey found this sight steadying.

"What do you bloody *mean*, 'Why'?" he said, suddenly irritated. "And why aren't you fucking dead?"

"I often wonder that myself," Fraser replied politely. "I take it ye thought I was?"

"Yes, and so did your wife! Do you have the faintest idea what the knowledge of your death *did* to her?"

The dark-blue eyes narrowed just a trifle.

"Are ye implying that the news of my death deranged her to such an extent that she lost her reason and took ye to her bed by force? Because," he went on, neatly cutting off Grey's heated reply, "unless I've been seriously misled regarding your own nature, it would take substantial force to compel ye to any such action. Or am I wrong?"

The eyes stayed narrow. Grey stared back at them. Then he closed his own eyes briefly and rubbed both hands hard over his face, like a man waking from a nightmare. He dropped his hands and opened his eyes again.

"You are not misled," he said, through clenched teeth. "And you *are* wrong."

Fraser's ruddy eyebrows shot up—in genuine astonishment, Grey thought.

"Ye went to her because—from *desire*?" His voice rose, too. "And she let ye? I dinna believe it."

The color was creeping up Fraser's tanned neck, vivid as a climbing rose. Grey had seen that happen before and decided recklessly that the best—the only—defense was to lose his own temper first. It was a relief.

“We thought you were *dead*, you bloody arsehole!” he said, furious. “Both of us! Dead! And we—we—took too much to drink one night—very much too much … We spoke of you … and … Damn you, neither one of us was making love to the other—we were both fucking *you*!”

Fraser’s face went abruptly blank and his jaw dropped. Grey enjoyed one split second of satisfaction at the sight, before a massive fist came up hard beneath his ribs and he hurtled backward, staggered a few steps farther, and fell. He lay in the leaves, completely winded, mouth opening and closing like an automaton’s.

All right, then, he thought dimly. *Bare hands it is*.

The hands wrapped themselves in his shirt and jerked him to his feet. He managed to stand, and a wisp of air seeped into his lungs. Fraser’s face was an inch from his. Fraser was in fact so close that Grey couldn’t see the man’s expression—only a close-up view of two bloodshot blue eyes, both of them berserk. That was enough. He felt quite calm now. It wouldn’t take long.

“You tell me exactly what happened, ye filthy wee pervert,” Fraser whispered, his breath hot on Grey’s face and smelling of ale. He shook Grey slightly. “Every word. Every motion. *Everything*.”

Grey got just enough breath to answer.

“No,” he said defiantly. “Go ahead and kill me.”

* * *

FRASER SHOOK HIM violently, so that his teeth clacked painfully together and he bit his tongue. He made a strangled noise at this, and a blow he hadn’t seen coming struck him in the left eye. He fell down again, his head exploding with fractured color and black dots, the smell of leaf mold pungent in his nose. Fraser yanked him up and set him on his feet once more, but then paused, presumably deciding how best to continue the process of vivisection.

What with the blood pounding in his ears and the rasp of Fraser's breath, Grey hadn't heard anything, but when he cautiously opened his good eye to see where the next blow was coming from, he saw the man. A rough-looking dirty thug, in a fringed hunting shirt, gawping stupidly from under a tree.

"Jethro!" the man bellowed, taking a tighter hold on the gun he carried.

A number of men came out of the bushes. One or two had the rudiments of a uniform, but most of them were dressed in homespun, though with the addition of the bizarre "liberty" caps, tight-knitted woolen affairs that fitted over the head and ears, which through John's watering eye gave the men the bluntly menacing aspect of animated bombshells.

The wives who had presumably made these garments had knitted such mottoes as Liberty or Freedom into the bands, though one bloodthirsty abigail had knitted the adjuration Kill! into her husband's hat. The husband in question was, Grey noted, a small and weedy specimen wearing spectacles with one shattered lens.

Fraser had stopped at the sound of the men's approach and now rounded on them like a bear brought to bay by hounds. The hounds stopped abruptly, at a safe distance.

Grey pressed a hand over his liver, which he thought had likely been ruptured, and panted. He was going to need what breath he could get.

"Who're you?" one of the men demanded, jabbing pugnaciously at Jamie with the end of a long stick.

"Colonel James Fraser, Morgan's Rifles," Fraser replied coldly, ignoring the stick. "And you?"

The man appeared somewhat disconcerted but covered it with bluster.

"Corporal Jethro Woodbine, Dunning's Rangers," he said, very gruff. He jerked his head at his companions, who at once spread out in a businesslike way, surrounding the clearing.

"Who's your prisoner, then?"

Grey felt his stomach tighten, which, given the condition of his liver, hurt. He replied through clenched teeth, not waiting for Jamie.

"I am Lord John Grey. If it's any business of yours." His mind was hopping like a flea, trying to calculate whether his chances of survival were better with Jamie Fraser or with this gang of yahoos. A few moments before, he had been resigned to the idea of death at Jamie's hands, but, like many ideas, that one was more appealing in concept than in execution.

The revelation of his identity seemed to confuse the men, who squinted and murmured, glancing at him dubiously.

"He ain't got a uniform on," one observed to another, *sotto voce*. "Be he a soldier at all? We got no business with him if he ain't, do we?"

"Yes, we do," Woodbine declared, regaining some of his self-confidence. "And if Colonel Fraser's taken him prisoner, I reckon he has reason?" His voice went up, reluctantly questioning. Jamie made no reply, his eyes fixed on Grey.

"He's a soldier." Heads swung round to see who had spoken. It was the small man with the shattered spectacles, who had adjusted these with one hand, the better to peer at Grey through his remaining lens. A watery blue eye inspected Grey, then the man nodded, more certain.

"He's a soldier," the man repeated. "I saw him in Philadelphia, sittin' on the porch of a house on Chestnut Street in his uniform, large as life. He's an officer," he added unnecessarily.

"He is not a soldier," Fraser said, and turned his head to fix the spectacled man with a firm eye.

"Saw him," muttered the man. "Plain as day. Had gold braid," he murmured almost inaudibly, dropping his eyes.

"Huh." Jethro Woodbine approached Grey, examining him carefully. "Well, you got anything to say for yourself, Lord Grey?"

"Lord John," Grey said crossly, and brushed a fragment of crushed leaf off his tongue. "I am not a peer; my elder brother is. Grey is my family name. As for being a soldier, I have been. I still bear rank within my regiment, but my commission is not active. Is that sufficient, or do you want to know what I had for breakfast this morning?"

He was purposely antagonizing them, some part of him having decided that he would rather go with Woodbine and bear the inspection of the Continentals than remain here to face the further inspections of Jamie Fraser. Fraser was regarding him through narrowed eyes. He fought the urge to look away.

It's the truth, he thought defiantly. *What I told you is the truth. And now you know it.*

Yes, said Fraser's black gaze. *You think I will live quietly with it?*

"He is not a soldier," Fraser repeated, turning his back deliberately on Grey, switching his attention to Woodbine.

"He is my prisoner because I wished to question him."

"About what?"

"That is not your concern, Mr. Woodbine," Jamie said, deep voice soft but edged with steel. Jethro Woodbine, though, was nobody's fool and meant to make that clear.

"I'll be judge of what's my business. Sir," he added, with a notable pause. "How do we know you're who you say you are, eh? You aren't in uniform. Any of you fellows know this man?"

The fellows, thus addressed, looked surprised. They looked uncertainly at one another; one or two heads shook in the negative.

"Well, then," said Woodbine, emboldened. "If you can't prove who you are, then I think we'll take this man back to camp for questioning." He smiled unpleasantly, another thought having evidently occurred to him. "Think we ought to take you, too?"

Fraser stood quite still for a moment, breathing slowly and regarding Woodbine as a tiger might regard a hedgehog: yes, he could eat it, but would the inconvenience of swallowing be worth it?

"Take him, then," he said abruptly, stepping back from Grey. "I have business elsewhere."

Woodbine had been expecting argument; he blinked, disconcerted, and half-raised his stick, but said nothing as Fraser stalked toward the far edge of the clearing. Just under the trees, Fraser turned and gave Grey a flat, dark look.

"We are not finished, sir," he said.

Grey pulled himself upright, disregarding both the pain in his liver and the tears leaking from his damaged eye.

"At your service, sir," he snapped. Fraser glared at him and moved into the flickering green shadows, completely ignoring Woodbine and his men. One or two of them glanced at the corporal, whose face showed his indecision. Grey didn't share it. Just before Fraser's tall silhouette vanished for good, he cupped his hands to his mouth.

"I'm not bloody sorry!" he bellowed.

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5

THE PASSIONS OF YOUNG MEN

WHILE FASCINATED to hear about William and the dramatic circumstances under which he had just discovered his paternity, Jenny's true concern was for another young man.

"D'ye ken where Young Ian is?" she asked eagerly. "And did he find his young woman, the Quaker lassie he told his da about?"

I relaxed a little at this; Young Ian and Rachel Hunter were—thank God—*not* on the list of fraught situations. At least not for the moment.

"He did," I said, smiling. "As for where he is … I haven't seen him for several days, but he's often gone for longer. He scouts for the Continental army now and then, though since they've been in their winter quarters at Valley Forge for so long, there's been less need for scouting. He spends quite a bit of time there, though, because Rachel does."

Jenny blinked at that.

"She does? Why? Do Quakers not mislike wars and such?"

"Well, more or less. But her brother, Denzell, is an army surgeon—though he's a real physician, not the usual horse-leech or quack-salver the army usually gets—and he's been at Valley Forge since last November. Rachel comes and goes to Philadelphia—she can pass through the pickets, so she carries back food and supplies—but she works with Denny, so she's out there, helping with patients, much more often than she is here."

"Tell me about her," Jenny said, leaning forward intently. "Is she a good lass? And d'ye think she loves Young Ian? From what Ian told me, the lad's desperate in love with her but hadn't spoken to her yet, not knowing how she'd take it—he wasna sure she could deal with him being … what he is." Her quick gesture encompassed Young Ian's history and character, from Highland lad to Mohawk warrior. "God kens weel he'll never make a decent Quaker, and I expect Young Ian kens that, too."

I laughed at the thought, though in fact the issue might be serious; I didn't know what a Quaker meeting might think of such a match, but I rather thought they might view the prospect with alarm. I knew nothing about Quaker marriage, though.

"She's a very good girl," I assured Jenny. "Extremely sensible, very capable—and plainly in love with Ian, though I don't think she's told him so, either."

"Ah. D'ye ken her parents?"

"No, they both died when she was a child. She was mostly raised by a Quaker widow and then came to keep house for her brother when she was sixteen or so."

"That the little Quaker girl?" Mrs. Figg had come in with a vase of summer roses, smelling of myrrh and sugar. Jenny inhaled strongly and sat up straight. "Mercy Woodcock thinks the world of her. She comes by Mercy's house every time she's in town, to visit that young man."

"Young man?" Jenny asked, dark brows drawing together.

"William's cousin Henry," I hastened to explain. "Denzell and I carried out a very serious operation on him during the winter. Rachel knows both William and Henry and is very kind about visiting to see how Henry is. Mrs. Woodcock is his landlady."

It occurred to me that I had meant to go check on Henry today myself. There were rumors of a British withdrawal from the city, and I needed to see whether he was fit enough yet to travel. He was doing well when I'd stopped by a week before but at that point had been able to walk only a few steps, leaning on Mercy Woodcock's arm.

And what about Mercy Woodcock? I wondered, with a small jolt at the pit of the stomach. It was clear to me, as it was to John, that there was a serious—and deepening—affection between the free black woman and her aristocratic young lodger. I had met Mercy's husband, very badly wounded, during the exodus from Fort Ticonderoga a year before—and, lacking any communication from or about him, thought it very likely that he had died after being taken prisoner by the British.

Still, the possibility of Walter Woodcock returning miraculously from the dead—people *did*, after all, and a fresh bubble of joy rose under my heart at the thought—was the least of the matter. I couldn't imagine that John's brother, the very firm-minded Duke of Pardloe, would be delighted at hearing that his youngest son meant to marry the widow of a carpenter, whatever her color.

And then there was his daughter, Dottie, speaking of Quakers: she was betrothed to Denzell Hunter, and I did wonder what the duke would think of that. John, who liked a wager, had given me no better than even odds between Dottie and her father.

I shook my head, dismissing the dozen things I could do nothing about. During this minor reverie, Jenny and Mrs. Figg appeared to have been discussing William and his abrupt departure from the scene.

"Where would *he* go to, I wonder?" Mrs. Figg looked worriedly toward the wall of the stairwell, pocked with blood-smeared dents left by William's fist.

"Gone to find a bottle, a fight, or a woman," said Jenny, with the authority of a wife, a sister, and the mother of sons. "Maybe all three."

Elfreth's Alley

IT WAS PAST midday, and the only voices in the house were the distant chitterings of women. No one was visible in the parlor as they passed, and no one appeared as the girl led William up a foot-marked staircase to her room. It gave him an odd feeling, as though he might be invisible. He found the notion a comfort; he couldn't bear himself.

She went in before him and threw open the shutters. He wanted to tell her to close them; he felt wretchedly exposed in the flood of sunlight. But it was summer; the room was hot and airless, and he was already sweating heavily. Air swirled in, heavy with the odor of tree sap and recent rain, and the sun glowed briefly on the smooth top of her head, like the gloss on a fresh conker. She turned and smiled at him.

"First things first," she announced briskly. "Throw off your coat and waistcoat before you suffocate." Not waiting to see whether he would take this suggestion, she turned to reach for the basin and ewer. She filled the basin and stepped back, motioning him toward the washstand, where a towel and a much-used sliver of soap stood on worn wood.

“I’ll fetch us a drink, shall I?” And with that, she was gone, bare feet pattering busily down the stairs.

Mechanically, he began to undress. He blinked stupidly at the basin but then recalled that, in the better sort of house, sometimes a man was required to wash his parts first. He’d encountered the custom once before, but on that occasion the whore had performed the ablution for him—plying the soap to such effect that the first encounter had ended right there in the washbasin.

The memory made the blood flame up in his face again, and he ripped at his flies, popping off a button. He was still throbbing all over, but the sensation was becoming more centralized.

His hands were unsteady, and he cursed under his breath, reminded by the broken skin on his knuckles of his unceremonious exit from his father’s—no, *not* his bloody father’s house. Lord John’s.

“You bloody *bastard*!” he said under his breath. “You knew, you knew all along!” That infuriated him almost more than the horrifying revelation of his own paternity. His stepfather, whom he’d loved, whom he’d trusted more than anyone on earth—Lord John bloody Grey—had lied to him his whole life!

Everyone had lied to him.

Everyone.

He felt suddenly as though he’d broken through a crust of frozen snow and plunged straight down into an unsuspected river beneath. Swept away into black breathlessness beneath the ice, helpless, voiceless, a feral chill clawing at his heart.

There was a small sound behind him and he whirled by instinct, aware only when he saw the young whore's appalled face that he was weeping savagely, tears running down his own face, and his wet, half-hard cock flopping out of his breeches.

"Go away," he croaked, making a frantic effort to tuck himself in.

She didn't go away but came toward him, decanter in one hand and a pair of pewter cups in the other.

"Are you all right?" she asked, eyeing him sideways. "Here, let me pour you a drink. You can tell me all about it."

"No!"

She came on toward him, but more slowly. Through his swimming eyes, he saw the twitch of her mouth as she saw his cock.

"I meant the water for your poor hands," she said, clearly trying not to laugh. "I will say as you're a real gentleman, though."

"I'm not!"

She blinked.

"Is it an insult to call you a gentleman?"

Overcome with fury at the word, he lashed out blindly, knocking the decanter from her hand. It burst in a spray of glass and cheap wine, and she cried out as the red soaked through her petticoat.

"You *bastard*!" she shrieked, and, drawing back her arm, threw the cups at his head. She didn't hit him, and they clanged and rolled away across the floor. She was turning toward the door, crying out, "Ned! Ned!" when he lunged and caught her.

He only wanted to stop her shrieking, stop her bringing up whatever male enforcement the house employed. He got a hand on her mouth, yanking her back from the door, grappling one-handed to try to control her flailing arms.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he kept saying. "I didn't mean—I don't mean—oh, bloody *hell*!" She caught him abruptly in the nose with her elbow and he let go, backing away with a hand to his face, blood dripping through his fingers.

Her face was marked with red where he'd held her, and her eyes were wild. She backed away, scrubbing at her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Get … *out*!" she gasped.

He didn't need telling twice. He rushed past her, shouldered his way past a burly man charging up the stairs, and ran down the alley, realizing only when he reached the street that he was in his shirtsleeves, having left coat and waistcoat behind, and his breeches were undone.

"Ellesmere!" said an appalled voice nearby. He looked up in horror to find himself the cynosure of several English officers, including Alexander Lindsay.

"Good Christ, Ellesmere, what happened?" Sandy was by way of being a friend and was already pulling a voluminous snowy handkerchief from his sleeve. He clapped this to William's nose, pinching his nostrils and insisting that he put his head back.

"Have you been set upon and robbed?" one of the others demanded. "God! This filthy place!"

He felt at once comforted by their company—and hideously embarrassed by it. He was not one of them, not any longer.

"Was it? Was it robbery?" another said, glaring round eagerly. "We'll find the bastards who did it, 'pon my honor we will! We’ll get your property back and teach whoever did it a lesson!”

Blood was running down the back of his throat, harsh and iron-tasting, and he coughed but did his best to nod and shrug simultaneously. He *had* been robbed. But no one was ever going to give him back what he’d lost today.

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6

UNDER MY PROTECTION

THE BELL OF THE Presbyterian church two blocks away rang for half-two, and my stomach echoed it, reminding me that—what with one thing and another—I hadn't had any tea yet.

Jenny had had a bite with Marsali and the children but declared herself equal to dealing with an egg, if there might be one, so I sent Mrs. Figg to see whether there might, and within twenty minutes we were wallowing—in a genteel fashion—in soft-boiled eggs, fried sardines, and—for lack of cake—flapjacks with butter and honey, which Jenny had never seen before but took to with the greatest alacrity.

"Look how it soaks up the sweetness!" she exclaimed, pressing the spongy little cake with a fork, then releasing it. "Nay like a bannock at all!" She glanced over her shoulder, then leaned toward me, lowering her voice. "D'ye think her in the kitchen might show me the way of it, if I asked?"

A diffident rapping on the damaged front door interrupted her, and as I turned to look, it was shoved open and a long shadow fell across the painted canvas rug, narrowly preceding its owner. A young British subaltern peered into the parlor, looking disconcerted by the wreckage in the foyer.

“Lieutentant Colonel Grey?” he asked hopefully, glancing back and forth between Jenny and me.

“His lordship isn’t in just now,” I said, attempting to sound self-possessed. I wondered just how many more times I might have to say that—and to whom.

“Oh.” The young man looked further disconcerted. “Can you tell me where he is, mum? Colonel Graves sent a message earlier, asking Lieutenant Colonel Grey to attend General Clinton at once, and the general was, er … rather wondering why the lieutenant colonel hadn’t arrived yet.”

“Ah,” I said, with a sidewise glance at Jenny. “Well. I’m afraid his lordship was rather urgently called away before he received the colonel’s message.” That must have been the paper John had received moments before Jamie’s dramatic reappearance from a watery grave. He’d glanced at it but then shoved it unread into his breeches’ pocket.

The soldier heaved a small sigh at this but was undaunted.

“Yes, mum. If you’ll tell me where his lordship is, I’ll go fetch him there. I really can’t go back without him, you know.” He gave me a woeful look, though with a touch of a charming smile. I smiled back, with a small touch of panic in my midsection.

“I’m so sorry, but I really don’t *know* where he is right now,” I said, standing up in hopes of driving him back toward the door.

“Well, mum, if you’ll just tell me where he was heading, I shall go there and seek direction,” he said, doggedly standing his ground.

"He didn't tell me." I took a step toward him, but he didn't retreat. This was escalating beyond absurdity into something more serious. I'd met General Clinton briefly at the Mischianza ball a few weeks ago—God, had it been only weeks? It seemed whole lifetimes—and while he'd been quite cordial to me, I didn't think he'd receive a *nolle prosequi* from me with any sort of complaisance. Generals tended to think highly of their own consequence.

"You know, his lordship doesn't hold an active commission," I said, in the faint hope of putting the young man off. He looked surprised.

"Yes, he does, mum. The colonel sent notice of it with the message this morning."

"What? He can't do that—er, can he?" I asked, a sudden dread creeping up my backbone.

"Do what, mum?"

"Just—just tell his lordship that his commission is active?"

"Oh, no, mum," he assured me. "The colonel of Lieutenant Colonel Grey's regiment re-called him. The Duke of Pardloe."

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said, sitting down. Jenny snatched up her napkin to muffle what was plainly a laugh; it had been twenty-five years since she'd heard me say that. I gave her a look, but this was no time to be picking up the threads.

"All right," I said, turning to face the young man again and taking a deep breath. "I'd better go with you to see the general." I got to my feet again and only at this point realized that, having been surprised whilst changing, I was still wearing nothing but my shift and dressing gown.

"I'll help ye dress," Jenny said, standing up hurriedly. She gave the soldier a charming smile and gestured at the table, now strewn with toast, marmalade, and a steaming dish of kippers. “Have a bite while ye wait, lad. No point wasting good food.”

* * *

JENNY POKED HER head out into the corridor and listened, but the faint sound of a fork on china and Mrs. Figg’s voice from below indicated that the soldier had accepted her suggestion. She quietly closed the door.

“I’ll go with ye,” she said. “The town’s full of soldiers; ye shouldna go out by yourself.”

“I’ll be—” I began, but then stopped, unsure. Most of the British officers in Philadelphia knew me as Lady John Grey, but that didn’t mean that rank-and-file soldiers shared either that knowledge or the sense of respect that it normally engendered. I also felt like an imposter, but that was rather beside the point; it didn’t show.

“Thank you,” I said abruptly. “I’d be glad of your company.” Unsure as I felt about everything save my conviction that Jamie was coming, I *was* glad of a little moral support—though I wondered whether I might need to warn Jenny of the need for circumspection when I talked to General Clinton.

“I shallna say a word myself,” she assured me, grunting slightly as she pulled my laces tight. “D’ye think ye should tell him what’s happened to Lord John?”

“No, I definitely don’t,” I said, exhaling forcefully. “That’s … tight enough.”

“Mmm.” She was already deep in the armoire, picking through my gowns. “What about this one? It’s got a deep décolletage, and your bosom’s still verra good.”

"I'm not meaning to seduce the man!"

"Oh, yes, ye are," she said matter-of-factly. "Or at least distract him. If ye're no going to tell him the truth, I mean." One sleek black eyebrow lifted. "If I were a British general and was told that my wee colonel had been abducted by a wicked great Hieland man, I think I might take it amiss."

I couldn't really contradict this piece of reasoning and, with a brief shrug, wriggled my way into the amber silk, which had cream-colored piping in the seams and ruched cream ribbons outlining the edge of the bodice.

"Oh, aye, that's good," Jenny said, tying my laces and stepping back to eye the effect with approval. "The ribbon's near the same color as your skin, so the neck looks even lower than it is."

"One would think you'd spent the last thirty years running a dressmaker's salon or a brothel, rather than a farm," I remarked, nervousness making me rather cross. She snorted.

"I've got three daughters, nine granddaughters, and there's sixteen nieces and great-nieces on Ian's sister's side. It's often much the same sort o' thing."

That made me laugh, and she grinned at me. Then I was blinking back tears, and so was she—the thought of Brianna and of Ian, our lost ones, coming suddenly—and then we were embracing, holding hard to each other to keep grief at bay.

"It's all right," she whispered, hugging me fiercely. "Ye've not lost your lass. She's still alive. And Ian's still wi' me. He'll never go from my side."

"I know," I said, choked. "I know." I let go and straightened up, smudging tears away with a finger, sniffing. "Have you got a handkerchief?"

She had one in her hand, in fact, but reached into the pocket at her waist and pulled out another, freshly washed and folded, which she handed me.

"I'm a grannie," she said, and blew her nose vigorously. "I've *always* got a spare hankie. Or three. Now, what about your hair? Ye canna be going out in the street like *that*."

By the time we'd got my hair done up in something resembling order, corralled in a snood and pinned respectably under a broad-brimmed woven straw hat, I'd come up with at least a rough notion of what to tell General Clinton. *Stick to the truth as far as possible.* That was the first principle of successful lying, though it had been some time since I'd been last obliged to employ it.

Well, then. A messenger had come for Lord John—one had—bringing a note—he did. I had no idea what was in the note—totally true. Lord John had then left with the messenger but without telling me where they were going. Also technically true, the only variance being that it had been a different messenger. No, I hadn't seen in which direction they had gone; no, I didn't know whether they had walked or ridden—Lord John's saddle horse was kept at Davison's livery on Fifth Street, two blocks away.

That sounded good. If General Clinton chose to make inquiries, I was reasonably sure he'd discover the horse still in its stall and thus conclude that John was somewhere in the city. He would also presumably lose interest in me as a source of information and send soldiers round to whatever haunts a man such as Lord John Grey might be supposed to be visiting.

And with any luck at all, by the time the general had exhausted such possibilities as Philadelphia offered, John would be back and could answer his own damned questions.

"And what about Jamie?" Jenny asked, her face showing small signs of anxiety. "He'll not come back into the city, surely?"

"I hope not." I could scarcely draw breath, and not merely because of the tight lacing. I could feel the thudding of my heart against the placket of the stays.

Jenny gave me a long, considering look, eyes narrowed, and shook her head.

"No, ye don't," she said. "Ye think he'll come straight back here. For you. And ye're right. He will." She considered for a moment longer, her brow furrowed. "I'd best stay here," she said abruptly. "Should he come back whilst ye're wi' the general, he'll need to know what's the state o' things. And I dinna think I trust her in the kitchen not to stab him wi' a toasting fork, should he loom up in her doorway without notice."

I laughed, all too easily envisioning Mrs. Figg's response to a sudden Highlander in her midst.

"Besides," she added, "someone's got to clear up the mess, and I've had a good bit o' practice wi' *that*, too."

* * *

THE YOUNG SOLDIER greeted my belated reappearance with relief and, while not actually seizing my arm and hustling me down the pavement, offered me his own arm and then walked in such a fashion that I was urged into a near trot to keep up with him. It was not far to the mansion where Clinton had made his headquarters, but the day was warm and I arrived moist and gasping, with tendrils of hair escaping from under my straw hat and sticking to my neck and cheeks, and tendrils of sweat snaking their tickling slow way down inside my bodice.

My escort delivered me—with an audible sigh of relief—to another soldier in the spacious parquet-floored foyer, and I had a moment to shake the dust from my skirts, straighten and re-pin my hat, and blot my face and neck discreetly with a ladylike lace hankie. I was sufficiently taken up with this that it was a moment before I recognized the man sitting on one of the little gilded chairs on the other side of the foyer.

"Lady John," he said, standing up when he saw that I had noticed him. "Your servant, ma'am." He smiled slightly, though it lent no warmth at all to his eyes.

"Captain Richardson," I said flatly. "How nice." I didn't offer my hand and he didn't bow. There was no point in trying to pretend that we were anything but enemies—and not very cordial ones, either. He'd precipitated my marriage to Lord John by inquiring of John whether he, John, had any personal interest in me, as he, Richardson, was contemplating my immediate arrest on grounds of spying and of passing seditious materials. Both charges were quite true, and while John might not have known that, he took Richardson's word regarding his intentions, told Richardson politely that, no, there was no personal interest—also true as a statement, so far as it went—and two hours later I was standing in his parlor in a daze of shock and grief, mechanically saying, "I do," in response to questions that I neither heard nor comprehended.

I had barely heard Richardson's name at the time, let alone known him by sight. John had introduced me—with cold formality—when Richardson came up to us at the Mischianza, the huge ball thrown for the British officers by the Loyalist ladies of Philadelphia a month before. And only *then* had he told me about Richardson's threats, with a brief admonition to avoid the fellow.

"Are you waiting to see General Clinton?" I inquired politely. If he was, I had half a mind to execute a quiet sneak through the house and out of the back door whilst he was ensconced with the general.

"I am," he replied, adding graciously, "but you must certainly go before me, Lady John. My business will wait."

That had a mildly sinister ring to it, but I merely inclined my head politely, with a noncommittal "Hmm."

It was dawning upon me, like an incipient case of indigestion, that my position with regard to the British army in general, and Captain Richardson in particular, was on the verge of a marked reevaluation. Once it became common knowledge that Jamie wasn't dead—then I was no longer Lady John Grey. I was Mrs. James Fraser again, and while that was certainly cause for ecstatic rejoicing, it also removed any restraint on Captain Richardson's baser urges.

Before I could think of anything useful to say to the man, a lanky young lieutenant appeared to usher me into the general's presence. The drawing room, which had been converted to Clinton's main office, was now in a state of organized disarray, with packing crates lining one wall and bare flagstaffs tied together like a bundle of faggots, the military banners they usually sported being folded briskly into tidy packets by a corporal near the window. I'd heard—the whole city had probably heard—that the British army was withdrawing from Philadelphia. Evidently they were doing so with considerable dispatch.

There were several other soldiers carrying things in and out, but two men were seated, one on either side of the desk.

"Lady John," Clinton said, looking surprised but rising from his desk and coming to bow over my hand. "Your most obedient servant, ma'am."

"Good day to you, sir," I said. My heart had already been beating fast; it speeded up considerably at sight of the man who had risen from his chair and was standing just behind the general. He was in uniform and looked strikingly familiar, but I was sure I'd never seen him before. Who—?

"I am so sorry to have disturbed you, Lady John. I had hoped to surprise your husband," the general was saying. "But I understand that he is not at home?"

"Er … no. He's not." The stranger—an infantry colonel, though his uniform seemed to sport even more gold lace than the usual—raised a brow at this. The sudden familiarity of the gesture gave me a slight spinning sensation in the head.

"You're a relative of Lord John Grey's," I blurted, staring at him. He had to be. The man wore his own hair, as John did, though his was dark beneath its powder. The shape of his head—fine-boned and long-skulled—was John's, and so was the set of his shoulders. His features were much like John's, too, but his face was deeply weathered and gaunt, marked with harsh lines carved by long duty and the stress of command. I didn't need the uniform to tell me that he was a lifelong soldier.

He smiled, and his face was suddenly transformed. Apparently he had John's charm, too.

"You're most perceptive, madam," he said, and, stepping forward, smoothly took my limp hand away from the general and kissed it briefly in the continental manner before straightening and eyeing me with interest.

“General Clinton informs me that you are my brother’s wife.”

“Oh,” I said, scrambling to recover my mental bearings. “Then you must be Hal! Er … I beg your pardon. I mean, you’re the … I’m sorry, I know you’re a duke, but I’m afraid I don’t recall your title, Your Grace.”

“Pardloe,” he said, still holding my hand and smiling at me. “But my Christian name *is* Harold; do please use it if you like. Welcome to the family, my dear. I had no idea John had married. I understand the event was quite recent?” He spoke with great cordiality, but I was aware of the intense curiosity behind his good manners.

“Ah,” I said noncommittally. “Yes, quite recent.” It hadn’t for an instant occurred to me to wonder whether John had written to tell his family about me, and if he had, they could barely have received the letter by now. I didn’t even know who all the members of his family *were*—though I had heard about Hal, he being the father of John’s nephew Henry, who—

“Oh, of course, you’ve come to see Henry!” I exclaimed. “He’ll be so pleased to see you! He’s doing very well,” I assured him.

“I have already seen Henry,” the duke assured me in turn. “He speaks with the greatest admiration of your skill in removing pieces of his intestine and reuniting the remnants. Though eager as I naturally was to see my son—and my daughter”—his lips compressed for a moment; apparently Dottie had informed her parents about her engagement—“and delighted as I shall be to meet my brother again, it is actually duty that called me to America. My regiment is newly landed in New York.”

"Oh," I said. "Er … how nice." John plainly hadn't known that his brother, let alone his regiment, was coming. It occurred dimly to me that I ought to be asking questions and finding out what I could about the general's plans, but it didn't seem the time or place.

The general coughed politely.

"Lady John—do you happen to know the whereabouts of your husband at the moment?"

The shock of meeting Harold, Duke of Pardloe, had quite wiped the reason for my presence out of my mind, but this brought it back with a rush.

"No, I'm afraid I don't," I said, as calmly as possible. "I told your corporal. A messenger came a few hours ago, with a note, and Lord John went off with him. He didn't say where he was going, though."

The general's lips twitched.

"Actually," he said, still polite, "he didn't. Colonel Graves sent the messenger, with a note informing Lord John of his re-commission and directing him to come here at once. He didn't."

"Oh," I said, sounding as blank as I felt. Under the circumstances, it seemed all right to let that show, and I did. "Dear me. In that case … he did go off with *someone*."

"But you don't know with whom?"

"I didn't see him go," I said, neatly avoiding the question. "I'm afraid he didn't leave word as to where he was bound."

Clinton raised a strongly marked black brow and glanced at Pardloe.

"I suppose in that case he will return shortly," the duke said with a shrug. "The matter isn't urgent, after all."

General Clinton looked as though he differed somewhat with this opinion but, with a brief glance at me, said nothing. He clearly had little time to waste, though, and, bowing politely, bade me good day.

I took my leave with alacrity, barely pausing to assure the duke that I was pleased to have met him and to ask where might his brother send word …?

“I have rooms at the King’s Arms,” Pardloe said. “Shall I —”

“No, no,” I said hurriedly, to forestall his offer to see me home. “It’s quite all right. Thank you, sir.” I bowed to the general, then to Hal, and headed for the door in a whirl of skirts—and emotions.

Captain Richardson was no longer in the foyer, but I hadn’t time to wonder where he had gone. I gave the soldier at the door a quick nod and smile and then was out in the open air, breathing as though I’d just escaped from a bathysphere.

Now what? I wondered, swerving to avoid two little boys with a hoop, who were caroming down the street, bouncing off the legs of the soldiers carrying parcels and furniture to a large wagon. The boys must belong to one of Clinton’s officers, since the soldiers were tolerating them.

John had spoken fairly often of his brother and had remarked upon Hal’s tendency toward ruthless high-handedness. All the current situation needed was a nosey parker with a taste for authority mixing in. I wondered briefly whether William was on good terms with his uncle; if so, perhaps Hal could be diverted and put to good use in talking sense to—no, no, of course not. Hal mustn’t know—yet at least—about Jamie, and he couldn’t exchange two words with Willie without finding out—if William *would* talk about it, but then—

“Lady John.” A voice behind me stopped me in my tracks, only momentarily but long enough for the Duke of Pardloe to come up beside me. He took me by the arm, detaining me.

“You’re a very bad liar,” he remarked with interest. “What are you lying about, though, I wonder?”

“I do it better with a little warning,” I snapped. “Though, as it happens, I’m *not* lying at the moment.”

That made him laugh. He leaned closer, examining my face at close range. His eyes were pale blue, like John’s, but the darkness of his brows and lashes gave them a particularly piercing quality.

“Perhaps not,” he said, still looking amused. “But if you aren’t lying, you aren’t telling me everything you know, either.”

“I’m not obliged to tell you *anything* I know,” I said with dignity, trying to retrieve my arm. “Let go.”

He did let go, reluctantly.

“I beg your pardon, Lady John.”

“Certainly,” I said shortly, and made to go round him. He moved smartly in front of me, blocking my way.

“I want to know where my brother is,” he said.

“I should like to know that myself,” I replied, trying to sidle past him.

“Where are you going, may I ask?”

“Home.” It gave me an odd feeling, still, to call Lord John’s house “home”—and yet I had no other. *Yes, you do*, a small, clear voice said in my heart. *You have Jamie*.

“Why are you smiling?” asked Pardloe, sounding startled.

“At the thought of getting home and taking off these shoes,” I said, hastily erasing the smile. “They’re killing me.”

His mouth twitched a little.

“Allow me to offer you the use of my chair, Lady John.”

“Oh, no, I really don’t—” But he had taken a wooden whistle from his pocket and uttered a piercing blast on it that brought two squat, muscular men—who had to be brothers, such was their resemblance to each other—trotting round the corner, a sedan chair suspended on poles between them.

“No, no, this isn’t necessary at all,” I protested. “Besides, John says you suffer from the gout; you’ll need the chair yourself.”

He didn’t like that; his eyes narrowed and his lips compressed.

“I’ll manage, madam,” he said shortly, and, seizing me by the arm again, dragged me to the chair and pushed me inside, knocking my hat over my eyes as he did so. “The lady is under my protection. Take her to the King’s Arms,” he instructed Tweedledum and Tweedledee, shutting the door. And before I could say, “Off with his head!” we were jolting down the High Street at a terrific pace.

I seized the door handle, intending to leap out, even at the cost of cuts and bruises, but the bastard had put the locking pin through the outside handle, and I couldn’t reach it from the inside. I shouted at the chairmen to stop, but they ignored me completely, pounding along the cobbles as though bringing the news from Aix to Ghent.

I sat back, panting and furious, and jerked the hat off. What did Pardloe think he was doing? From what John had said, and from other remarks made by the duke’s children about their father, it was clear to me that he was used to getting his own way.

“Well, we’ll bloody see about *that*,” I muttered, stabbing the long, pearl-headed hatpin through the hat brim. The snood that had contained my hair had come off with the hat;

I crammed it inside and shook my loose hair out over my shoulders.

We turned in to Fourth Street, which was paved with brick rather than cobbles, and the jolting grew less. I was able to let go my grip on the seat and fumbled with the window. If I could get it open, I might be able to reach the locking pin, and even if the door flew open and decanted me into the street, it would put a stop to the duke's machinations.

The window worked on a sliding-panel arrangement but had no sort of latch by which to get a grip on it; the only way of opening it was by inserting the fingertips into a shallow groove at one side and pushing. I was grimly attempting to do this, in spite of the chair's renewed bucketing, when I heard the duke's voice choke and stop in the midst of some shouted direction to the chairmen.

"St … stop. I … can't …" His words trailed off, the chairmen faltered to a halt, and I pressed my face against the suddenly motionless window. The duke was standing in the middle of the street, a fist pressed into his waistcoat, struggling to breathe. His face was deeply flushed, but his lips were tinged with blue.

"Put me down and open this bloody door this instant!" I bellowed through the glass to one of the chairmen, who was glancing back over his shoulder, a look of concern on his face. They did, and I emerged from the chair in an explosion of skirts, stabbing the hatpin down into the placket of my stays as I did so. I might need it yet.

"Bloody sit down," I said, reaching Pardloe. He shook his head but let me lead him to the chair, where I forced him to sit, my feeling of satisfaction at this reversal of position somewhat tempered by the fear that he might just possibly be about to die.

My first thought—that he was having a heart attack—had vanished the moment I heard him breathe—or try to. The wheezing gasp of someone in the throes of an asthmatic attack was unmistakable, but I seized his wrist and checked his pulse just in case. Hammering but steady, and while he was sweating, it was the normal warm perspiration caused by hot weather rather than the sudden clammy exudation that often accompanied a myocardial infarction.

I touched his fist, still embedded in his midsection.

“Do you have pain here?”

He shook his head, coughed hard, and took his hand away.

“Need … pill … b …” he managed, and I saw that there was a small pocket in the waistcoat that he had been trying to reach into. I put in two fingers and pulled out a small enameled box, which proved to contain a tiny corked vial.

“What—never mind.” I pulled the cork, sniffed, and wheezed myself as the sudden fumes of ammonia shot up my nose.

“No,” I said definitely, putting the cork back in and shoving vial and box into my pocket. “That won’t help. Purse your lips and blow out.” His eyes bulged a bit, but he did it; I could feel the slight movement of air on my own perspiring face.

“Right. Now, relax, *don’t* gasp for air, just let it come. Blow out, to the count of four. One … two … three … four. In for a count of two, same rhythm … yes. Blow out, count of four … let it come in, count of two … yes, good. Now, don’t worry; you aren’t going to suffocate, you can keep doing that all day.” I smiled encouragingly at him, and he managed to nod. I straightened up and looked round; we were near Locust Street, and Peterman's ordinary was no more than a block away.

"You," I said to one of the chairmen, "run to the ordinary and fetch back a jug of strong coffee. He'll pay for it," I added, with a flip of the hand toward the duke.

We were beginning to draw a crowd. I kept a wary eye out; we were near enough to Dr. Hebdy's surgery that he might come out to see the trouble, and the very last thing I needed was that charlatan to materialize, fleam at the ready.

"You have asthma," I said, returning my attention to the duke. I knelt so that I could see into his face while I monitored his pulse. It was better, noticeably slower, but I thought I could feel the odd condition called "paradoxical pulse," a phenomenon you sometimes saw in asthmatics, wherein the heart rate speeded up during exhalation and dropped during inhalation. Not that I had been in any doubt. "Did you know that?"

He nodded, still pursing his lips and blowing.

"Yes," he managed briefly, before breathing in again.

"Do you see a doctor for it?" A nod. "And did he actually recommend *sal volatile* for it?" I gestured toward the vial in my pocket. He shook his head.

"For fain … ting," he managed. "All I … had."

"Right." I put a hand under his chin and tilted his head back, examining his pupils, which were quite normal. I could feel the spasm easing, and so could he; his shoulders were beginning to drop, and the blue tinge had faded from his lips. "You don't want to use it when you're having an asthma attack; the coughing and tearing will make matters worse by producing phlegm."

"Whatever are the idle lot of you doing, standing about? Go run and fetch the doctor, lad!" I heard a woman's sharp voice say in the crowd behind me. I grimaced, and the duke saw it; he raised his brows in question.

"You don't want *that* doctor, believe me." I stood up and faced the crowd, thinking.

"No, we don't need a doctor, thank you very much," I said, as charmingly as possible. "He's just been overtaken by the indigestion—something he ate. He's quite all right now."

"He don't look that good to me, ma'am," said another voice, doubtful. "I think we best fetch the doctor."

"Let him die!" came a shout from the back of the gathering crowd. "Fucking lobster!"

An odd sort of shimmer ran through the crowd at this, and I felt a knot of dread form in my stomach. They hadn't been thinking of him as a British soldier, merely as a spectacle. But now …

"I'll get the doctor, Lady John!" To my horror, Mr. Caulfield, a prominent Tory, had forced his way to the front, being tolerably free with his gold-headed walking stick. "Get away, you lice!"

He bent to peer into the sedan chair, lifting his hat to Hal.

"Your servant, sir. Help will be here presently, be assured of that!"

I seized him by the sleeve. The crowd was, thank God, divided. While there were catcalls and insults directed at Pardloe and at me, there were dissenting voices, too, those of Loyalists (or perhaps merely the saner sorts who didn't think attacking a sick man in the street part of their political philosophy) chiming in, with reason, protests—and not a few loud insults of their own.

"No, no!" I said. "Let someone else go for the doctor, please. We daren't leave His Grace here without protection!"

“His Grace?” Caulfield blinked, and carefully unfolding his gold-rimmed *pince-nez* from a little case, put them on his nose and bent to peer into the chair at Pardloe, who gave him a small, dignified nod, though he kept on assiduously with his breathing exercise.

“The Duke of Pardloe,” I said hastily, still keeping a grip of Mr. Caulfield’s sleeve. “Your Grace, may I present Mr. Phineas Graham Caulfield?” I waved a vague hand between them, then, spotting the chairman coming back at the gallop with a jug, I sprinted toward him, hoping to reach him before he got within earshot of the crowd.

“Thank you,” I said, panting as I snatched the jug from him. “We’ve got to get him away before the crowd turns nasty—nastier,” I amended, hearing a sharp *crack!* as a thrown pebble bounced off the roof of the sedan chair. Mr. Caulfield ducked.

“Oy!” shouted the chairman, infuriated at this attack upon his livelihood. “Back off, you lot!” He started for the crowd, fists clenched, and I seized him by the coattails with my free hand.

“Get him—*and* your chair—away!” I said, as forcefully as possible. “Take him to—to—” Not the King’s Arms; it was a known Loyalist stronghold and would merely inflame anyone who followed us. Neither did I want to be at the duke’s mercy, once inside the place.

“Take us to Number Seventeen Chestnut Street!” I said hurriedly, and, digging one-handed in my pocket, grabbed a coin and thrust it into his hand. “Now!” He didn’t pause for thought but took the coin and headed for the chair at the run, fists still clenched, and I trotted after him as fast as my red morocco heels would take me, clutching the coffee. His number was stitched into a band round his sleeve: THIRTY-NINE.

A shower of pebbles was rattling off the sedan chair's sides, and the second chairman—Number Forty—was batting at them as though they were a swarm of bees, shouting, "Fuck OFF!" at the crowd, in a businesslike if repetitious fashion. Mr. Caulfield was backing him up in more genteel fashion, shouting, "Away with you!" and "Leave off at once!" punctuated with pokes of his cane at the more daring children, who were darting forward to see the fun.

"Here," I gasped, leaning into the chair. Hal was still alive, still breathing. He raised one brow at me and nodded toward the crowd outside. I shook my head and thrust the coffee into his hands.

"Drink … that," I managed, "and keep breathing." Slamming the door of the chair, I dropped the locking pin into its slot with an instant's satisfaction and straightened up to find Fergus's eldest son, Germain, standing by my side.

"Have ye got a bit of trouble started again, *Grand-mère*?" he asked, unperturbed by the stones—now augmented with clumps of fresh manure—whizzing past our heads.

"You might say so, yes," I said. "Don't—"

But before I could speak further, he turned round and bellowed at the crowd, in a surprisingly loud voice, "THIS'S MY GRANNIE. You touch ONE HAIR on her head and—" Several people in the crowd laughed at this, and I put up a hand to my head. I'd completely forgotten the loss of my hat, and my hair was standing out in a mushroom-like cloud round my head—what wasn't sticking to my sweating face and neck. "And I'll do you BROWN!" Germain yelled. "Aye, I mean YOU, Shecky Loew! And you, too, Joe Grume!"

Two half-grown boys hesitated, clumps of filth in hand. Evidently they knew Germain.

"And my grannie'll tell your da what you've been a-doing, too!" That decided the boys, who stepped back a pace, dropping their clods of dirt and trying to look as though they had no idea where they had come from.

"Come on, *Grand-mère*," Germain said, grabbing my hand. The chairmen, no slouches on the uptake, had already seized their poles and hoisted the chair. I'd never manage to keep up with them in the high-heeled shoes. As I was kicking them off, I saw plump Dr. Hebdy puffing down the street, in the wake of the hectoring woman who had suggested calling him and who was now sailing toward us on the breeze of her heroism, face set in triumph.

"Thank you, Mr. Caulfield," I said hurriedly, and, snatching up the shoes in one hand, followed the chair, unable to keep my skirts up off the grubby cobbles but not terribly concerned about that. Germain fell back a little, making threatening gestures to discourage pursuit, but I could tell from the sound of the crowd that their momentary hostility had turned to amusement, and though further catcalls followed us, no missiles came in their wake.

The chairmen slowed a little once we'd turned the corner, and I was able to make headway on the flat brick of Chestnut Street, coming up beside the chair. Hal was peering through the side window, looking considerably better. The coffee jug was on the seat beside him, evidently empty.

"Where are we … going, madam?" he shouted through the window when he saw me. So far as I could tell over the steady thump of the chairmen's shoes and through the glass of the window, he sounded much better, too.

“Don’t worry, Your Grace,” I shouted back, jogging along. “You’re under my protection!”

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7

THE UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF ILL-CONSIDERED ACTIONS

JAMIE SHOVED THROUGH the brush, heedless of ripping brambles and slapping branches. Anything that got in his way could get out of it or be trampled.

He hesitated for no more than an instant when he reached the two horses, hobbled and grazing. He untied them both and, slapping the mare, sent her snorting into the brush. Even if no one made off with the extra horse before the militia let John Grey go, Jamie didn't mean to make it easy for the man to get back to Philadelphia. Whatever must be dealt with there would be done much more easily without the complications of his lordship's presence.

And what *would* be done? he wondered, nudging his heels into his horse's sides and reining its head round toward the road. He noticed with some surprise that his hands were shaking, and squeezed hard on the leather to make it stop.

The knuckles of his right hand throbbed, and a white stab of pain where his missing finger had been ran through his hand, making him hiss through his teeth.

"What the devil did ye *tell* me for, ye wee idiot?" he said under his breath, urging his horse up into a gallop. "What did ye *think* I'd do?"

Just what ye damn well did was the answer. John hadn't resisted, hadn't fought back. *"Go ahead and kill me,"* the wee bugger had said. A fresh spurt of rage curled Jamie's hands as he imagined all too well doing just that. Would he have gone ahead and done it, if that pissant Woodbine and his militia hadn't turned up?

No. No, he wouldn't. Even as he longed momentarily to go back and choke the life out of Grey, he was beginning to answer his own question, reason fighting its way through the haze of fury. Why *had* Grey told him? There was the obvious—the reason he'd hit the man by sheer reflex, the reason he was shaking now. Because Grey had told him the truth.

"We were both fucking you." He breathed hard and deep, fast enough to make him giddy, but it stopped the shaking and he slowed a little; his horse's ears were laid back, twitching in agitation.

"It's all right, *a bhalaich*," he said, still breathing hard but slower now. "It's all right."

He thought for a moment that he might vomit, but managed not to, and settled back in the saddle, steadier.

He could still touch it, that raw place Jack Randall had left on his soul. He'd thought it so well scarred over that he was safe now, but, no, bloody John Grey had torn it open with five words. "We were both fucking you." And he couldn't blame him for it—oughtn't to, anyway, he thought, reason doggedly fighting back the fury, though he knew only too well how weak a weapon reason was against that specter. Grey couldn't have known what those words had done to him.

Reason had its uses, though. It was reason that reminded him of the second blow. The first had been blind reflex; the second wasn't. Thought of it brought anger, too, and pain, but of a different sort.

"I have had carnal knowledge of your wife."

"You bugger," he whispered, clutching the reins with a reflexive violence that made the horse jerk its head, startled. "Why? Why did ye tell me that, ye bugger!"

And the second answer came belatedly, but as clearly as the first: *Because she'd tell me, the minute she had a chance. And he kent that fine. He thought if I'd do violence when I heard, best I do it to him*.

Aye, she would have told him. He swallowed. *And she* will *tell me*. What might he say—or do—when she did?

He was trembling again and had slowed inadvertently, so the horse was nearly at a walk, head turning from side to side as it snuffed the air.

It's nay her fault. I know *that. It's nay her fault.* They'd thought him dead. He knew what that abyss looked like; he'd lived there for a long while. And he understood what desperation and strong drink could do. But the vision—or the lack of one … How did it happen? Where? Knowing it had happened was bad enough; not knowing the how and the why of it from her was almost unbearable.

The horse had stopped; the reins hung slack. Jamie was sitting in the middle of the road, eyes closed, just breathing, trying not to imagine, trying to pray.

Reason had limits; prayer didn't. It took a little while for his mind to relax its grip, its wicked curiosity, its lust to *know*. But, after a bit, he felt he could go on and gathered up the reins again.

All that could wait. But he needed to see Claire before he did anything else. Just now he had no idea what he would say—or do—when he saw her, but he needed to see her, with the same sort of need that a man might feel who'd been cast away at sea, marooned without food or water for weeks on end.

* * *

JOHN GREY'S BLOOD was thrumming in his ears so loudly that he barely heard the discussion among his captors, who—having taken the elementary precautions of searching him and tying his hands together in front of him—had gathered into a knot a few yards away and were heatedly hissing at one another like geese in a barnyard, casting occasional hostile glares in his direction.

He didn't care. He couldn't see out of his left eye and he was by now quite certain that his liver was ruptured, but he didn't care about that, either. He'd told Jamie Fraser the truth—the *whole* bloody truth—and felt the same fierce constellation of feelings that attends victory in battle: the bone-deep relief of being alive, the giddy surge of emotion that carries you on a wave much like drunkenness, then ebbs and leaves you staggering light-headed on the beach—and an absolute inability to count the cost 'til later.

His knees experienced much the same post-battle sensations and gave way. He sat down unceremoniously in the leaves and closed his good eye.

After a short interval in which he was aware of nothing much beyond the gradual slowing of his heart, the thrumming noise in his ears began to abate, and he noticed that someone was calling his name.

"Lord Grey!" the voice said again, louder, and close enough that he felt a warmly fetid gust of tobacco-laden breath on his face.

"My name is not Lord Grey," he said, rather crossly, opening his eye. "I told you."

"You said you were Lord John Grey," his interlocutor said, frowning through a mat of grizzled facial hair. It was the large man in the filthy hunting shirt who had first discovered him with Fraser.

"I am. If you bloody have to talk to me, call me 'my lord,' or just 'sir,' if you like. What do you want?"

The man reared back a little, looking indignant.

"Well, since you ask … *sir*, first off, we want to know if this elder brother of yours is Major General Charles Grey."

"No."

"No?" The man's unkempt eyebrows drew together. "Do you *know* Major General Charles Grey? Is he kin to you?"

"Yes, he is. He's …" Grey tried to calculate the precise degree, but gave it up and flapped a hand. "Cousin of some sort."

There was a satisfied rumble from the faces now peering down at him. The man called Woodbine squatted down next to him, a square of folded paper in his hand.

"Lord John," he said, more or less politely. "You said that you don't hold an active commission in His Majesty's army at present?"

"That's correct." Grey fought back a sudden unexpected urge to yawn. The excitement in his blood had died away now and he wanted to lie down.

“Then would you care to explain these documents, my lord? We found them in your breeches.” He unfolded the papers carefully and held them under Grey’s nose.

John peered at them with his working eye. The note on top was from General Clinton’s adjutant: a brief request for Grey to attend upon the general at his earliest convenience. Yes, he’d seen that, though he’d barely glanced at it before the cataclysmic arrival of Jamie Fraser, risen from the dead, had driven it from his mind. Despite what had occurred in the meantime, he couldn’t help smiling. *Alive*. The bloody man was *alive*!

Then Woodbine took the note away, revealing the paper beneath: the document that had come attached to Clinton’s note. It was a small piece of paper, bearing a red wax seal and instantly identifiable; it was an officer’s warrant, his proof of commission, to be carried on his person at all times. Grey blinked at it in simple disbelief, the spidery clerk’s writing wavering before his eyes. But written at the bottom, below the King’s signature, was another, this one executed in a bold, black, all-too-recognizable scrawl.

“Hal!” he exclaimed. “You *bastard*!”

* * *

“TOLD YOU HE was a soldier,” the small man with the cracked spectacles said, eyeing Grey from under the edge of his knitted KILL! hat with an avidity that Grey found very objectionable. “Not just a soldier, neither; he’s a spy! Why, we could hang him out o’ hand, this very minute!”

There was an outburst of noticeable enthusiasm for this course of action, quelled with some difficulty by Corporal Woodbine, who stood up and shouted louder than the proponents of immediate execution, until those espousing it reluctantly fell back, muttering. Grey sat clutching the commission crumpled in his bound hands, heart hammering.

They bloody could hang him. Howe had done just that to a Continental captain named Hale, not two years before, when Hale was caught gathering intelligence while dressed as a civilian, and the Rebels would like nothing better than a chance to retaliate. William had been present, both at Hale's arrest and his execution, and had given Grey a brief account of the matter, shocking in its starkness.

William. Jesus, William! Caught up in the immediacy of the situation, Grey had had barely a thought to spare for his son. He and Fraser had absquatulated onto the roof and down a drainpipe, leaving William, clearly reeling with the shock of revelation, alone in the upstairs hallway.

No. No, not alone. Claire had been there, and the thought of her steadied him a bit. She would have been able to talk to Willie, calm him, explain … well, possibly not explain, and possibly not calm, either—but at least if Grey was hanged in the next few minutes, William wouldn't be left to face things entirely alone.

"We're taking him back to camp," Woodbine was saying doggedly, not for the first time. "What good would it do to hang him here?"

"One less redcoat? Seems like a good thing to *me*!" riposted the burly thug in the hunting shirt.

"Now, Gershon, I'm not saying as how we shouldn't hang him. I said, not here and now." Woodbine, musket held in both hands, looked slowly round the circle of men, fixing each one with his gaze. "Not here, not now," he repeated. Grey admired Woodbine's force of character and narrowly kept himself from nodding agreement.

"We're taking him back to camp. You all heard what he said; Major General Charles Grey's kin to him. Might be as Colonel Smith will want to hang him in camp—or might even be as he'll want to send this man to General Wayne. Remember Paoli!"

"Remember Paoli!" Ragged cries echoed the call, and Grey rubbed at his swollen eye with his sleeve—tears were leaking from it and irritating his face. Paoli? What the devil was Paoli? And what had it to do with whether, when, or how he should be hanged? He decided not to ask at just this moment and, when they hauled him to his feet, went along with them without complaint.

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8

HOMO EST OBLIGAMUS AEROBE (“MAN IS AN OBLIGATE AEROBE”)—HIPPOCRATES

THE DUKE’S FACE WAS dangerously flushed when Number Thirty-Nine ceremoniously opened the sedan chair’s door, and not, I thought, from the heat.

“You wanted to see your brother, did you not?” I inquired, before he could gather enough breath to say any of the things on his mind. I gestured toward the house. “This is his house.” The fact that John was not presently *in* the house could wait.

He gave me a marked look, but he was still short of breath and wisely saved it, irritably waving off Number Forty’s helping hand as he struggled out of the sedan chair. He did pay the chairmen—rather fortunate, as I hadn’t any more money with me—and, wheezing, bowed and offered me his arm. I took it, not wanting him to fall on his face in the front garden. Germain, who had kept up with the chair without noticeable effort, followed at a tactful distance.

Mrs. Figg was standing in the front doorway, watching our approach with interest. The broken door was now lying on a pair of trestles next to a camellia bush, having been removed from its hinges, and was presumably awaiting some sort of professional attention.

"May I present Mrs. Mortimer Figg, Your Grace?" I said politely, with a nod in her direction. "Mrs. Figg is his lordship's cook and housekeeper. Mrs. Figg, this is His Grace, the Duke of Pardloe. Lord John's brother."

I saw her lips form the words "*Merde* on toast," but fortunately without sound. She moved nimbly down the steps despite her bulk and took Hal by the other arm, shoring him up, as he was beginning to turn blue again.

"Purse your lips and blow," I said shortly. "Now!" He made an ugly choking noise but did start blowing, though making evil grimaces in my direction.

"What in the name of the everlasting Holy Ghost did you do to him?" Mrs. Figg asked me accusingly. "Sounds like he's about to die."

"Saved his life, to start with," I snapped. "Ups-a-daisy, Your Grace!" and between us we hoicked him up the steps. "Then I saved him from being stoned and beaten by a mob—with Germain's invaluable help," I added, glancing back at Germain, who grinned hugely. I was also in the act of abducting him, but I thought we needn't go into that.

"And I'm about to save his life again, I think," I said, pausing on the porch to pant for a moment myself. "Have we a bedroom we can put him in? William's, perhaps?"

"Will—" the duke began, but then started to cough spasmodically, going a nasty shade of puce. "Wh—wh—"

"Oh, I was forgetting," I said. "Of course, William's your nephew, isn't he? He's not here just now." I looked narrowly at Mrs. Figg, who snorted briefly but said nothing. “Blow, Your Grace.”

Inside, I saw that some progress had been made toward restoring order. The debris had been swept into a neat pile by the open doorway, and Jenny Murray was sitting on an ottoman beside it, picking unbroken crystals from the fallen chandelier out of the rubbish and dropping them into a bowl. She lifted an eyebrow at me but rose unhurriedly to her feet, putting the bowl aside.

“What d’ye need, Claire?” she said.

“Boiling water,” I said, grunting slightly as we maneuvered Pardloe—he was lean and fine-boned, like John, but a solid man, nonetheless—into a wing chair. “Mrs. Figg? Cups, several cups, and, Jenny, my medicine chest. Don’t lose your rhythm, Your Grace—blow … two … three … four—*don’t* gasp. Sip the air—you’ll get enough, I promise.” Hal’s face was twitching, shining with sweat, and while he still had control over himself, I could see panic creasing the lines around his eyes as his airways closed.

I fought down a similar sense of panic; it wouldn’t serve either of us. The fact was that he *could* die. He was having a severe asthmatic attack, and even with access to epinephrine injections and the facilities of a major hospital, people did die in such circumstances, whether of a heart attack brought on by stress and lack of oxygen or from simple suffocation.

His hands were clenched on his knees, the moleskin breeches crumpled and dark with sweat, and the cords of his neck stood out with strain. With some difficulty, I pried one of his hands loose and grasped it strongly in mine; I had to distract him from the panic darkening his mind, if he was to have any chance at all.

"Look at me," I said, leaning close and looking straight into his eyes. "It's going to be all right. Do you hear me? Nod if you can hear me."

He managed a short nod. He was blowing, but too fast; no more than a wisp of air touched my cheek. I squeezed his hand.

"Slower," I said, my voice as calm as I could make it. "Breathe with me, now. Purse your lips … blow …" I tapped out a regular count of four on his knee with my free hand, as slow as I dared. He ran out of air between two and three but kept his lips pursed, straining.

"Slow!" I said sharply as his mouth opened, gasping, starving for air. "Let it come by itself; one … two … blow!" I could hear Jenny hurrying down the stairs with my medicine chest. Mrs. Figg had departed like a great rushing wind in the direction of the cookhouse, where she kept a cauldron boiling—yes, here she came, three teacups looped over the fingers of one hand, a can of hot water wrapped in a towel clutched to her bosom with the other.

"… three … four—joint fir, Jenny—one … two … blow *out*, two … three … four—a good handful in each cup—two, yes, that's it … blow …" Still holding his gaze, willing him to blow—it was all that was keeping his airways open. If he lost his rhythm, he'd lose what little air pressure he had, the airways would collapse, and then—I shoved the thought aside, squeezing his hand as hard as I could, and gave disjoint directions between chanting the rhythm. Joint fir … what the bloody hell else did I have?

Not much, was the answer. Bowman's root, jimsonweed—much too dangerously toxic, and not fast enough. "Spikenard, Jenny," I said abruptly. "The root—grind it." I pointed at the second cup, then the third. "… two …

three … four …” A large handful of crumbled joint fir (aptly named; it looked like a pile of miniature sticks) had been placed in each cup and was already steeping. I’d give him the first as soon as it had cooled enough to drink, but it took a good half hour of steeping to get a truly effective concentration. “More cups, please, Mrs. Figg—in, one … two … that’s good …”

The hand in mine was slick with sweat, but he was gripping me with all the strength he had; I could feel my bones grind, and twisted my hand a bit to ease them. He saw and released the pressure a little. I leaned in, cradling his hand in both of mine—not incidentally taking the opportunity to get my fingers on his pulse.

“You aren’t going to die,” I said to him, quietly but as forcefully as I could. “I won’t let you.” The flicker of something much too faint to be a smile passed behind those winter-sharp blue eyes, but he hadn’t enough breath even to think of speaking. His lips were still blue and his face paper-white, in spite of the temperature.

The first cup of joint-fir tea helped briefly, the heat and moisture doing as much as the herb; joint fir did contain epinephrine and was the only really good treatment for asthma I had available—but there wasn’t enough of the active principle in a cup of the stuff after only ten minutes’ brewing. Even the momentary sense of relief steadied him, though. His hand turned, fingers linking with mine, and he squeezed back.

A fighter. I knew one when I saw one and smiled involuntarily.

“Start three more cups, please, Jenny?” If he drank them slowly—and he couldn’t do more than sip briefly between gasps—and continuously, we should have got a decent amount of stimulant into him by the end of the sixth, most-concentrated cup. “And, Mrs. Figg, if you would boil three handfuls of the joint fir and half that of spikenard in a pint of coffee for a quarter hour, then let it steep?” If he wasn’t going to die, I wanted a concentrated tincture of *Ephedra* easily on hand; this obviously wasn’t his first attack, and—if it wasn’t his last—there’d be another sometime. And quite possibly sometime soon.

The back of my mind had been ticking through diagnostic possibilities, and now that I was fairly sure he was going to survive the moment, I could spare time to think about them consciously.

Sweat was pouring down the fine-cut bones of his face; I’d got his coat, waistcoat, and leather stock off first thing, and his shirtfront was pasted to his chest, his breeches black-wet in the creases of his groin. No wonder, though, between the heat of the day, his exertions, and the hot tea. The blue tinge was fading from his lips, and there was no sign of edema in face or hands … no distention of the blood vessels in his neck, in spite of his effort.

I could hear the crackling rales in his lungs easily without a stethoscope, but he showed no thoracic enlargement; his torso was as trim as John’s, a bit narrower through the chest. Probably not a chronic obstructive pulmonary condition, then … and I didn’t *think* he had congestive heart failure. His color when I met him had been good, and his pulse was presently thumping against my fingers very steadily, fast, but no flutters, no arrhythmia …

I became aware of Germain hovering by my elbow, staring interestedly at the duke, who was now sufficiently himself as to lift an eyebrow in the boy’s direction, though still unable to speak.

"Mmm?" I said, before resuming my now-automatic counting of breaths.

"I'm only thinking, *Grand-mère*, as how himself there"—Germain nodded at Pardloe—"might be missed. Had I maybe best carry a message to someone, so as they aren't sending out soldiers after him? The chairmen will talk, will they not?"

"Ah." That was a thought, all right. General Clinton, for one, certainly knew that Pardloe was in my company when last seen. I had no idea with whom Pardloe might be traveling or whether he was in command of his regiment. If he *was*, people would be looking for him right now; an officer couldn't be gone from his place for long without someone noticing.

And Germain—an observant lad, if ever there was one—was right about the chairmen. Their numbers meant they were registered with the central chairmen's agency in Philadelphia; it would be the work of a moment for the general's staff to locate numbers Thirty-Nine and Forty and find out where they'd delivered the Duke of Pardloe.

Jenny, who had been tending the array of teacups, stepped in now with the next and knelt by Pardloe, nodding to me that she would see to his breathing while I talked to Germain.

"He told the chairmen to bring me to the King's Arms," I said to Germain, taking him out onto the porch, where we could confer unheard. "And I met him at General Clinton's office in the—"

"I ken where it is, *Grand-mère*."

"I daresay you do. Have you something in mind?"

"Well, I'm thinkin'—" He glanced into the house, then back at me, eyes narrowed in thought. "How long d'ye mean to keep him prisoner, *Grand-mère*?"

So my motives hadn't escaped Germain. I wasn't surprised; he undoubtedly had heard all about the day's excitements from Mrs. Figg—and, knowing as he did who Jamie was, had probably deduced even more. I wondered if he'd seen William. If so, he likely knew everything. If he didn't, though, there was no need to reveal *that* little complication until it was necessary.

"Until your grandfather comes back," I said. "Or possibly Lord John," I added as an afterthought. I hoped with all my being that Jamie would come back shortly. But it might be that he would find it necessary to stay outside the city and send John in to bring me news. "The minute I let the duke go, he'll be turning the city upside down in search of his brother. Always assuming for the sake of argument that he doesn't drop dead in the process." And the very last thing I wanted was to instigate a dragnet in which Jamie might be snared.

Germain rubbed his chin thoughtfully—a peculiar gesture in a child too young for whiskers, but his father to the life, and I smiled.

"That's maybe not too long," he said. "*Grand-père* will come back directly; he was wild to see ye last night." He grinned at me, then looked through the open doorway, pursing his lips.

"As to himself, ye canna hide where he is," he said. "But if ye were to send a note to the general, and maybe another to the King's Arms, saying as how His Grace was staying with Lord John, they wouldna start searching for him right away. And even if someone was to come here later and inquire, I suppose ye might give him a wee dram that would keep him quiet so ye could tell them he was gone. Or maybe lock him in a closet? Tied up wi' a gag if it should be he's got his voice back by then," he added. Germain was a very logical, thorough-minded sort of person; he got it from Marsali.

"Excellent thought," I said, forbearing to comment on the relative merits of the options for keeping Pardloe incommunicado. "Let me do that now."

Pausing for a quick look at Pardloe, who was doing better though still wheezing strongly, I whipped upstairs and flipped open John's writing desk. It was the work of a moment to mix the ink powder and write the notes. I hesitated briefly over the signature but then caught sight of John's signet on the dressing table; he hadn't had time to put it on.

The thought gave me a slight pang; in the overwhelming joy of seeing Jamie alive, and then the shock of William's advent, Jamie's taking John hostage, and the violence of William's exit—dear Lord, where was William now?—I had pushed John to the back of my mind.

Still, I told myself, he was quite safe. Jamie wouldn't let any harm come to him, and directly he came back into Philadelphia—the chiming of the carriage clock on the mantelpiece interrupted me, and I glanced at it: four o'clock.

"Time flies when you're having fun," I murmured to myself, and, scribbling a reasonable facsimile of John's signature, I lit the candle from the embers in the hearth, dripped wax on the folded notes, and stamped them with the smiling half-moon ring. Maybe John would be back before the notes were even delivered. And Jamie, surely, would be with me as soon as darkness made it safe.

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9

A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN

JAMIE WASN'T ALONE on the road. He'd been dimly aware of horses passing by, heard the distant talk of men on foot, but now that he'd come out of his red haze, he was startled to see how many there were. He saw what was plainly a militia company—not marching, but on the move as a body, knots and clumps of men, solitary riders—and a few wagons coming from the city, piled with goods, women and children afoot beside them.

He'd seen a few folk leaving Philadelphia when he'd come in the day before—God, was it only *yesterday*?—and thought to ask Fergus about it, but in the excitement of arrival and the later complications had quite forgotten.

His sense of disturbance increased and he kicked up his horse to a faster pace. It was no more than ten miles to the city; he'd be there long before nightfall.

Maybe just as well if it's dark, he thought grimly. Easier to have things out with Claire alone and undisturbed—and whether the having-out led to beating or bed, he wanted no interference.

The thought was like the striking of one of Brianna's matches. Just the word "bed" and he was aflame with fresh rage.

"Ifrinn!" he said aloud, and slammed his fist against the pommel. All the trouble to calm himself, and all to waste in an instant! God *damn* it—damn him, damn her, John Grey—damn everything!

"Mr. Fraser!"

He jerked as though shot in the back, and the horse slowed at once, snorting.

"Mr. Fraser!" came the loud, wheezy voice again, and Daniel Morgan came trotting up alongside on a small, sturdy bay, grinning all over his big scarred face. "Knew that was you, knew it! Ain't no other rascal that size with that color hair, and if there is one, I don't want to meet him."

"Colonel Morgan," he said, noting auld Dan's unaccustomed uniform with the fresh insignia on the collar. "On your way to a wedding?" He did his best to smile, though the turmoil inside him was like the whirlpools off the rocks of Stroma.

"What? Oh, that," said Dan, trying to look sideways down his own neck. "Pshaw. Washington's a damned stickler for 'proper dress.' The Continental army got more generals than they got private soldiers, these days. An officer lives through more 'n two battles, they make him some kind of general on the spot. Now, gettin' any pay for it, that's a different kettle of fish."

He tipped back his hat and looked Jamie up and down.

"Just come back from Scotland? Heard you went with Brigadier Fraser's body—your kin, I suppose?" He shook his head regretfully. “Cryin’ shame. Fine soldier, good man.”

“Aye, he was that. We buried him near his home at Balnain.”

They continued together, auld Dan asking questions and Jamie replying as briefly as good manners—and his real affection for Morgan—would allow. They hadn’t met since Saratoga, where he’d served under Morgan as an officer of his Rifle Corps, and there was a good deal to say. Still, he was glad of the company, and even of the questions; they distracted him and kept his mind from catapulting him again into fruitless fury and confusion.

“I suppose we must part here,” Jamie said, after a bit. They were approaching a crossroads, and Dan had slowed his pace a bit. “I’m bound into the city myself.”

“What for?” Morgan asked, rather surprised.

“I—to see my wife.” His voice wanted to tremble on the word “wife,” and he bit it off sharp.

“Oh, yes? Could you maybe spare a quarter hour?” Dan was giving him a sort of calculating look that made Jamie instantly uneasy. But the sun was still high; he didn’t want to enter Philadelphia before dark.

“Aye, maybe,” he replied cautiously. “To do what?”

“I’m on my way to see a friend—want you to meet him. It’s right close, won’t take a moment. Come on!” Morgan veered right, waving at Jamie to follow, which, cursing himself for a fool, he did.

Number 17 Chestnut Street

I WAS SWEATING as freely as the duke was by the time the spasm eased enough for him to breathe without the positive-pressure exercise. I wasn’t quite as tired as he was—

he lay back in the chair, exhausted, eyes closed, drawing slow, shallow—but free!—breaths—but close. I felt light-headed, too; it's not possible to help someone breathe without doing a lot of it yourself, and I was hyperventilated.

"Here, *a piuthar-chèile*." Jenny's voice spoke by my ear, and it was only when I opened my eyes in surprise that I realized they'd been closed. She put a small glass of brandy in my hand. "There's nay whisky in the house, but I expect this will help. Shall I give His Grace a dram, too?"

"Yes, you shall," the duke said, with great authority, though he didn't move a muscle or open his eyes. "Thank you, madam."

"It won't hurt him," I said, drawing myself up and stretching my back. "Or you, either. Sit down and have a drink. You, too, Mrs. Figg." Jenny and Mrs. Figg had worked nearly as hard as I had, fetching and grinding and brewing, bringing cool cloths to mop the sweat, spelling me now and then with the counting, and, by combining their not-inconsiderable force of will with mine, helping to keep him alive.

Mrs. Figg had very fixed notions of what was proper, and these didn't include sitting down to share a dram with her employer, let alone a visiting duke, but even she was obliged to admit that the circumstances were unusual. Glass in hand, she perched primly on an ottoman near the parlor door, where she could deal with any potential invasions or domestic emergencies.

No one spoke for some time, but there was a great sense of peace in the room. The hot, still air carried that sense of odd camaraderie that binds people who have passed through a trial together—if only temporarily. I gradually became aware that the air was carrying noises, too, from the street outside. Groups of people moving hurriedly, shouts from the next block, and a rumble of wagons. And a distant rattle of drums.

Mrs. Figg was aware of it, too; I saw her head rise, the ribbons of her cap atremble with inquisitiveness.

"Baby Jesus, have mercy," she said, setting down her empty glass with care. "Something's coming."

Jenny looked startled and glanced at me, apprehensive.

"Coming?" she said. "What's coming?"

"The Continental army, I expect," said Pardloe. He let his head fall back, sighing. "Dear God. What it is … to draw breath." His breath was still short, but not very much constrained. He raised his glass ceremoniously to me. "Thank you, my … dear. I was … already in your debt for your … kind services to my son, but—"

"What do you mean, 'the Continental army'?" I interrupted. I set down my own glass, now empty. My heart rate had calmed after the exertions of the last hour but now abruptly sped up again.

Pardloe closed one eye and regarded me with the other.

"The Americans," he said mildly. "The Rebels. What else … would I mean?"

"And when you say, 'coming …' " I said carefully.

"I didn't," he pointed out, then nodded at Mrs. Figg. "She did. She's right, though. General Clinton's … forces are with … drawing from Philadelphia.… I daresay Wa … Washington is … poised to rush in."

Jenny made a small sputtering noise, and Mrs. Figg said something really blasphemous in French, then clapped a broad pink-palmed hand to her mouth.

"Oh," I said, doubtless sounding as blank as I felt. I'd been so distracted during my meeting with Clinton earlier in the day that the logical consequences of a British withdrawal had not occurred to me at all.

Mrs. Figg stood up.

"I best go and be burying the silver, then," she said in a matter-of-fact sort of way. "It'll be under the laburnum bush by the cookhouse, Lady John."

"Wait," I said, raising a hand. "I don't think we need do that *just* yet, Mrs. Figg. The army hasn't yet left the city; the Americans aren't precisely snapping at our heels. And we'll need a few forks with which to eat our supper."

She made a low rumbling noise in her throat but seemed to see the sense in this; she nodded and began to collect the brandy glasses instead.

"What'll you be wanting for supper, then? I got a cold boiled ham, but I was thinking to make a chicken fricassee, William liking that so much." She cast a bleak look at the hallway, where the bloody smudges on the wallpaper had now turned brown. "You think he's coming back for his supper?" William had an official billet somewhere in the town, but frequently spent the night at the house—particularly when Mrs. Figg was making chicken fricassee.

"God knows," I said. I hadn't had time to contemplate the William situation, what with everything else. *Might* he come back, when he'd cooled down, determined to have things out with John? I'd seen a Fraser on the boil, many times, and they didn't sulk, as a rule. They tended to take direct action, at once. I eyed Jenny speculatively; she returned the look and casually leaned her elbow on the table, chin in hand, and tapped her fingers thoughtfully against her lips. I smiled privately at her.

"Where *is* my nephew?" Hal asked, finally able to take note of something other than his next breath. "For that matter … where is my brother?”

“I don’t know,” I told him, putting my own glass on Mrs. Figg’s tray and scooping his up to add to it. “I really wasn’t lying about that. But I do expect he’ll be back soon.” I rubbed a hand over my face and smoothed my hair back as well as I could. First things first. I had a patient to tend.

“I’m sure John wants to see you as much as you want to see him. But—”

“Oh, I doubt it,” the duke said. His eyes traveled slowly over me, from bare feet to disheveled hair, and the faint look of amusement on his face deepened. “You must tell me how John … happened to marry you … when there’s time.”

“A counsel of desperation,” I said shortly. “But in the meantime we must get you to bed. Mrs. Figg, is the back bedroom—”

“Thank you, Mrs. Figg,” the duke interrupted, “I shan’t be … requiring …” He was trying to struggle up out of the chair and hadn’t enough breath to talk. I walked up to him and gave him my best piercing head-matron look.

“Harold,” I said in measured tones. “I am not merely your sister-in-law.” The term gave me an odd *frisson*, but I ignored it. “I am your physician. If you don’t—what?” I demanded. He was staring up at me with a most peculiar expression on his face, something between surprise and amusement. “You invited me to use your Christian name, didn’t you?”

“I did,” he admitted. “But I don’t think anyone has … actually called me Harold since … I was three years old.” He did smile then, a charming smile quite his own. “The family call me Hal.”

“Hal, then,” I said, smiling back but refusing to be distracted. “You’re going to have a nice refreshing sponge bath, Hal, and then you’re going to bed.”

He laughed—though he cut it short, as he began to wheeze. He coughed a little, fist balled under his ribs, and looked uneasy, but it stopped, and he cleared his throat and glanced up at me.

“You’d think I *was* … three years old. Sister-in-law. Trying to send me … to bed without my tea?” He pressed himself gingerly upright, getting his feet under him. I put a hand on his chest and pushed. He hadn’t any strength in his legs and fell back into the chair, astonished and affronted. And afraid: he hadn’t realized—or at least had not admitted—his own weakness. A severe attack usually left the victim completely drained, and often with the lungs still dangerously twitchy.

“You see?” I said, tempering my tone with gentleness. “You’ve had attacks like this before, haven’t you?”

“Well … yes,” he said unwillingly, “but …”

“And how long were you in bed after the last one?”

His lips compressed.

“A week. But the fool doctor—”

I put a hand on his shoulder and he stopped—as much because he’d temporarily run short of air as because of the touch.

“You. Cannot. Breathe. Yet. On. Your. Own,” I said, separating the words for emphasis. “Listen to me, Hal. Look what’s happened this afternoon, will you? You had a fairly severe attack in the street; had that crowd on Fourth Street decided to set upon us, you would have been quite helpless—don’t argue with me, Hal, I was there.” I narrowed my eyes at him. He did the same back at me but didn’t argue.

“Then the walk from the street to the door of the house—a distance of some twenty feet—threw you straight into a full-blown *status asthmaticus;* have you heard that term before?”

"No," he muttered.

"Well, now you have, and now you know what it is. And you were in bed for a week the last time? Was it as bad as this?"

His lips were a thin line and his eyes sparking. I imagined most people didn't speak to a duke—let alone the commander of his own regiment—like this. Be good for him, I thought.

"Bloody doctor … said it was my heart." His fist had uncurled and the fingers were slowly rubbing his chest. "Knew it wasn't that."

"I think you're probably right about that," I conceded. "Was this the same doctor who gave you smelling salts? Complete quack, if so."

He laughed, a brief, breathless sound.

"Yes, he is." He paused to breathe for a moment. "Though in … justice, he … he didn't give me … salts. Got them … myself. For fainting … told you."

"So you did." I sat down beside him and took hold of his wrist. He let me, watching curiously. His pulse was fine; it had slowed and was thumping along very steadily.

"How long have you been subject to fainting spells?" I asked, bending to look closely into his eyes. No sign of petechial hemorrhage, no jaundice, pupils the same size …

"A long time," he said, and pulled his wrist abruptly away. "I haven't time to chat about my health, madam. I—"

"Claire," I said, and put a restraining hand on his chest, smiling amiably at him. "You're Hal, I'm Claire—and you aren't going anywhere, Your Grace."

"Take your hand off me!"

"I'm seriously tempted to do just that and let you fall on your face," I told him, "but wait until Mrs. Figg finishes brewing the tincture. I don't want you thrashing about on the floor, gasping like a landed fish, and no way of getting the hook out of your mouth."

I did in fact take my hand off his chest, though, and, rising, I went out into the hall before he could find breath to say anything. Jenny had taken up a stand by the open doorway, looking up and down the street.

"What's going on out there?" I asked.

"I dinna ken," she said, not taking her eyes off a couple of rough-looking men who were lounging down the other side of the street. "But I dinna like the feel of it a bit. D'ye think he's right?"

"That the British army is leaving? Yes. They are. And very likely half the Loyalists in the city with them." I knew exactly what she meant by not liking the feel of things. The air was hot and thick, buzzing with cicadas, and the leaves of the chestnut trees along the street hung limp as dishrags. But *something* was moving in the atmosphere. Excitement? Panic? Fear? All three, I thought.

"Had I best go to the printshop, d'ye think?" she asked, turning to me with a slight frown. "Would Marsali and the weans be safer if I fetched them here, I mean? If there was to be a riot or the like?"

I shook my head.

"I don't think so. They're well-known Patriots. It's the Loyalists who will be in danger, if the British army is leaving. They won't have any protection, and the Rebels may well … do things to them. And"—a very unpleasant feeling snaked down my backbone, like a cold, slimy finger —"this is a Loyalist household." *"Without even a door to shut and bolt,"* I might have added, but didn't.

There was a loud thump from the parlor, as of a body hitting the floor, but Jenny didn't turn a hair, nor did I. We'd both had a lot of experience with stubborn men. I could hear him panting; if he started wheezing again, I'd go in.

"Will it put ye in danger, then, to have him here?" she asked, *sotto voce*, with a tilt of her head toward the parlor. "Maybe ye'd best come to the printshop."

I grimaced, trying to evaluate the possibilities. The notes I'd sent with Germain would delay inquiries, and I could put off anyone who did come. But that also meant I could expect no immediate help from the army, if help was needed. And it might be; someone in that hostile crowd on Fourth Street might well have heard where I'd told the chairmen to come. That hostility now showed itself in a different light.

If the Rebels in the city were about to rise and turn upon the defenseless Loyalists—and the currents I sensed beginning to swirl through the streets were dark ones—

"Someone might just show up on your porch wi' a keg of tar and a bag o' feathers," Jenny observed, preempting my thought in a most unnerving way.

"Well, that wouldn't help His Grace's asthma a bit," I said, and she laughed.

"Had ye maybe better give him back to General Clinton?" she suggested. "I've had soldiers search my house, wi' a wanted man hidin' in the bottom o' my wardrobe and my newborn bairn in his arms. I dinna think it would be a great deal easier on the nerves to have the Sons o' Liberty come in here after His Grace, if half what Marsali told me about them is true."

"It probably is." A gunshot smacked through the heavy air, flat and dull, from somewhere near the river, and we both tensed. It wasn't repeated, though, and after a moment I drew breath again.

"The thing is, he's not stable. I can't risk taking him through streets filled with dust and tree pollen and then leaving him in the care of an army surgeon, or even that quack Hebdy. Were he to have another attack and no one able to get him through it …"

Jenny grimaced.

"Aye, ye're right," she said reluctantly. "And ye canna leave him here and go yourself, for the same reason."

"That's right." And Jamie would be coming here, to find me. I wouldn't leave.

"Ken, if Jamie came and didna find ye here, he'd go to the printshop next thing," Jenny observed, making the hair prickle on the back of my neck.

"Will you stop doing that!?"

"What?" she said, startled.

"Reading my mind!"

"Oh, that." She grinned at me, blue eyes creasing into triangles. "Everything ye think shows on your face, Claire. Surely Jamie's told ye that?"

A deep flush burned upward from my low-cut décolletage, and only then did I recall that I was still wearing the amber-colored silk, which was now soaked with sweat, rimed with dust, and altogether rather the worse for wear. And which had very tight stays. I rather hoped that *everything* I was thinking didn't show on my face, because there was quite a bit of information I didn't mean to share with Jenny just yet.

"Well, I canna tell *everything* ye think," she admitted—doing it *again*, dammit!—"but it's easy to tell when ye're thinking about Jamie."

I decided that I really didn't want to hear what I looked like when thinking about Jamie and was about to excuse myself to look in on the duke, who I could hear coughing and swearing breathlessly to himself in German, when my attention was distracted by a boy sprinting down the street as though the devil were after him, his coat on inside out and shirttails streaming.

"Colenso!" I exclaimed.

"What?" Jenny said, startled.

"Not what. Who. Him," I said, pointing at the grubby little creature panting up the walk. "Colenso Baragwanath. William's groom."

Colenso, who always looked as though he should be squatting atop a toadstool, came hurtling toward the door with such violence that Jenny and I both leapt out of the way. Colenso tripped on the doorsill and fell flat on his face.

"Ye look as though Auld Hornie himself was after ye, lad," Jenny said, bending down to hoick him to his feet. "And whatever's become of your breeks?"

Sure enough, the boy was barefoot and wearing only his shirt beneath his coat.

"They took 'em," he blurted, gasping for breath.

"Who?" I said, pulling his coat off and turning it right side out again.

"Them," he said, gesturing hopelessly toward Locust Street. "I put me head into the ordinary, to see was Lord Ellesmere there—he is, sometimes—and there was a knot o' men all buzzin' like a hive o' bees together. They was big lads with 'em, and one of 'em as knew me saw me and raises up a great cry, shoutin' as I'm a-spyin' on 'em and mean to take word back to the army, and then they grabbed me and they called me a turncoat and put me coat on backward and the one man said he'd beat me and teach me not to do such as that and pulled off me breeches and … and … anyway, I squirmed out of his hand and fell down on the floor and crawled out under the tables and took off a-runnin'." He wiped a sleeve under his runny nose. "His lordship here, ma'am?"

"No," I said. "Why do you want him?"

"Oh, I don't, ma'am," he assured me, with evident sincerity. "Major Findlay wants him. Now."

"Hmm. Well … wherever he is at the moment, he'll likely go back to his regular billet this evening. You know where that is, don't you?"

"Yes, ma'am, but I'm not a-goin' back in the street 'thout my breeches!" He looked both horrified and indignant, and Jenny laughed.

"Dinna blame ye a bit, lad," she said. "Tell ye what, though—my eldest grandson's likely got an old pair of breeches he could spare. I'll step round to the printshop," she said to me, "fetch the breeches, and tell Marsali what's ado."

"All right," I said, a little reluctant to see her go. "But hurry back. And tell her not to print *any* of this in the newspaper!"

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10

THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY GHOST UPON A RELUCTANT DISCIPLE

DAN MORGAN'S "IT" *WAS* nearby: a ramshackle cabin set in a little elm grove, down a short dirt lane off the main road. There was a big gray gelding hobbled and cropping grass nearby, his tack resting on the porch; he looked up briefly and whinnied at the newcomers.

Jamie ducked under the lintel after Dan and found himself in a dark, shabby room that smelled of cabbage water, grime, and the sharp reek of urine. There was one window, its shutters left open for air, and the sunlight coming in silhouetted the long-skulled head of a large man sitting at the table, who raised his head at the opening of the door.

"Colonel Morgan," he said, in a soft voice touched with the drawl of Virginia. "Have you brought me good news?"

"That's *just* what I brought you, General," auld Dan said, and shoved Jamie ahead of him toward the table. "I found this rascal on the road and bade him come along. This'll be Colonel Fraser, who I've told you of before. Just come back from Scotland, and the very man to take command of Taylor's troops."

The big man had risen from the table and put out a hand, smiling—though he smiled with his lips pressed tight together, as though afraid something might escape. The man was as tall as Jamie himself, and Jamie found himself looking straight into sharp gray-blue eyes that took his measure in the instant it took to shake hands.

"George Washington," the man said. "Your servant, sir."

"James Fraser," Jamie said, feeling mildly stunned. "Your … most obedient. Sir."

"Sit with me, Colonel Fraser." The big Virginian gestured toward one of the rough benches at the table. "My horse pulled up lame, and my slave's gone to find another. No notion how long it may take him, as I require a good sturdy beast to bear my weight, and those are thin on the ground these days." He looked Jamie up and down with frank appraisal; they were much of a size. "I don't suppose you have a decent horse with you, sir?"

"Aye, I do." It was clear what Washington expected, and Jamie yielded gracefully. "Will ye do me the honor to take him, General?"

Auld Dan made a disgruntled noise and shifted from foot to foot, clearly wanting to object, but Jamie gave him a brief shake of the head. It wasn't that far to Philadelphia; he could walk.

Washington looked pleased and thanked Jamie with grace in turn, saying that the horse should be returned to him as soon as another suitable mount might be procured.

"But it *is* somewhat necessary that I be nimble at present, Colonel," Washington remarked, with an air of apology.

"You're aware, are you, that Clinton is withdrawing from Philadelphia?"

A shock went through Jamie like a hot penny dropped on butter.

"It—he—no, sir. I was not aware."

"I was just about to get to that," Dan said tetchily. "No one lets me get one word in edgewise, I tell you."

"Well, now you've got one," Washington said, amused. "You might get another, if you're quick enough to speak before Lee gets here. Sit down, gentlemen, if you will. I'm expecting—ah, there they are." Sounds from the dooryard indicated a number of horsemen arriving, and within a few moments the cabin was crowded with Continental officers.

They were a creased and weathered lot, for the most part, dressed in motley bits of uniform, these coupled uneasily with hunting shirts or homespun breeches. Even the complete suits of clothes were mud-spattered and worn, and the smell of men who'd been living rough quite overcame the gentler domestic reeks of the cabin.

Among the shuffling and excited greetings, Jamie spotted the source of the urinous smell, though: a thin-faced woman stood with her back pressed into a corner of the room, holding an infant wrapped in a ratty shawl against her bosom, her eyes darting to and fro among the intruders. A dark wet patch showed on the shawl, but it was plain the woman was afraid to move from her place to change the wean and instead shifted mechanically from foot to foot, patting the child to soothe it.

"Colonel Fraser! Well met! Well met!" The voice jerked his attention away, and, to his astonishment, he found his hand being pumped with enthusiasm by Anthony Wayne—known quite openly by now as “Mad Anthony”—whom he had last seen a few weeks before the fall of Ticonderoga.

“Is your wife well, sir, and your Indian nephew?” Wayne was asking, beaming up into Jamie’s face. Anthony was short and stocky, with the full cheeks of a chipmunk, but also equipped with a sharp, poking sort of nose over which his eyes did now and then seem to glow with fire. At the moment, Jamie was relieved to see them merely alight with friendly interest.

“All well, sir, I thank ye. And—”

“Tell me, is your wife near at hand?” Wayne moved a little closer and lowered his voice a bit. “I’ve been having the most damnable time with my gouty foot, and she did wonders with the abscess at the base of my spine while we were at Ti—”

“Colonel Fraser, allow me to make you acquainted with Major General Charles Lee and with General Nathanael Greene.” George Washington’s voice drove a smooth Virginia wedge between himself and the base of Mad Anthony’s spine, to Jamie’s relief.

Besides Washington himself, Charles Lee was the best equipped of the lot, wearing complete uniform from gorget to polished boots. Jamie hadn’t met him before but could have picked him out of a crowd as a professional soldier, no matter how he was dressed. An Englishman of the sort who seemed always to be smelling something dubious, but he shook hands cordially enough, with a clipped “Your servant, sir.” Jamie knew exactly two things about Charles Lee, both told to him by Young Ian: to wit, that the man had a Mohawk wife—and that the Mohawk called him “Ounewaterika.” Ian said it meant “Boiling Water.”

Between Mad Anthony and Boiling Water, Jamie was beginning to feel that he should have spurred up and run for it when he met Dan Morgan on the road, but too late for regrets.

"Sit, gentlemen, we have no time to waste." Washington turned to the woman in the corner. "Have you anything to drink, Mrs. Hardman?"

Jamie saw her throat move as she swallowed, squeezing the child so hard that it squealed like a piglet and started to cry. He felt several of the men, doubtless fathers, wince at the sound.

"No, Friend," she said, and he realized she was a Quaker. "Naught but water from the well. Shall I fetch you a bucket?"

"Don't trouble thyself, Friend Hardman," Nathanael Greene said, soft-voiced. "I've two bottles in my saddlebag will do us." He moved slowly toward the woman, not to startle her, and took her gently by the arm. "Come outside. Thee needn't be disturbed by this business." He was a heavy, imposing man, who walked with a noticeable limp, but she seemed reassured by his plain speech and went with him, though looking back with an anxious face, as though fearing that the men might set fire to the place.

A quarter hour later, Jamie wasn't so sure that they might not ignite the cabin by the sheer force of their excitement. Washington and his troops had been bottled up at Valley Forge for the last six months, drilling and preparing, and the generals were on fire to be at the enemy.

Much talk, plans proposed, argued over, put aside, returned to. Jamie listened with half a mind; the other half was in Philadelphia. He'd heard enough from Fergus to know that the city was divided, with regular clashes between Patriots and Loyalists, these kept under control only by the presence of the British soldiers—but the Loyalists were a minority. The moment the army's protection was withdrawn, the Loyalists would be at the mercy of the Rebels—and Rebels who had been suppressed for months were not likely to be merciful.

And Claire … His mouth went dry. Claire was, so far as anyone in Philadelphia knew, the wife of Lord John Grey, a very visible Loyalist. And Jamie himself had just removed John Grey's protection from her, leaving her alone and helpless in a city about to explode.

How long did he have before the British left the city? No one at the table knew.

He took as little part as possible in the conversation, both because he was estimating how fast he could reach Philadelphia on foot—versus the possibility of going out to the privy and stealing back the horse he'd just given Washington—and because he hadn't forgotten what auld Dan had said to General Washington when he'd dragged Jamie in here. The very last thing he wanted was—

"And you, Colonel Fraser," Washington said. Jamie closed his eyes and commended his soul to God. "Will you do me the signal service of accepting command of Henry Taylor's battalion? General Taylor fell ill and died two days ago."

"I … am honored, sir," Jamie managed, thinking frantically. "But I have very urgent business … in Philadelphia. I should be happy to oblige ye, so soon as my business is accomplished—and I could, of course, bring back word of exactly how matters stand with General Clinton's forces." Washington had been looking severe during the first part of this speech, but the last sentence made Greene and

Morgan hum with approval and Wayne nod his little chipmunk head.

"Can you manage your business within three days, Colonel?"

"Yes, sir!" It was no more than ten miles to the city; he could do that in two or three hours. And it wasn't going to take him more than thirty seconds to take Claire out of that house, once he reached it.

"Very well, then. You're appointed to a temporary field rank of General of the Army. That—"

"Ifrinn!"

"I beg your pardon, Colonel?" Washington looked puzzled. Dan Morgan, who'd heard Jamie say "Hell!" in *Gàidhlig* before, shook silently beside him.

"I—thank ye, sir." He swallowed, feeling a dizzy wave of heat pass over him.

"Though the Congress will have to approve your appointment," Washington went on, frowning a little, "and there's no guarantee as to what those contentious, shopkeeping sons of bitches will do."

"I understand, sir," Jamie assured him. He could only hope. Dan Morgan passed him a bottle, and he drank deep, hardly noticing what was in it. Sweating profusely, he sank back on the bench, hoping to avoid any further notice.

Jesus, now what? He'd meant to slip quietly into the city and out again with Claire, then head south to retrieve his printing press, perhaps establish a wee business in Charleston or Savannah until the war was over and they could go home to the Ridge. But he *had* known there was a risk; any man below the age of sixty could be compelled into militia service, and if it came down to it, he was likely a little safer being a general than a commander of militia.

Maybe. And a general could resign; that was a heartening thought.

Despite all the talk and the worrying prospects of the immediate future, Jamie found himself paying more attention to Washington's face than to what he said, taking note of how the man talked and carried himself, so that he could tell Claire. He wished that he could tell Brianna; she and Roger Mac had sometimes speculated about what it might be like to meet someone like Washington—though having met a number of famous people himself, he'd told her that the experience was likely to prove a disappointment.

He would admit that Washington knew what he was about, though; he listened more than he talked, and when he said something, it was to the point. And he did give off an air of relaxed authority, though it was clear the present prospect excited him very much. His face was pockmarked, big-featured, and far from handsome, but had a good bit of dignity and presence.

His expression had become very animated, and he went so far as to laugh now and then, showing very bad, stained teeth. Jamie was fascinated; Brianna had told him they were false, made of wood or hippopotamus ivory, and he had a sudden dislocating recollection of his grandfather: the Old Fox had had a set of teeth made of beechwood. Jamie had thrown them on the fire during an argument at Beaufort Castle—and just for an instant he was there, smelling peat smoke and roasting venison, every hair on his body a-prickle with warning, surrounded by kinsmen who might just kill him.

And as suddenly he was back, pressed between Lee and auld Dan, smelling sweat and exhilaration and, despite himself, feeling the rising excitement among them begin to seep into his blood.

It gave him a queer feeling in his wame, to sit nay more than a foot away from a man whom he knew not at all but about whom he maybe kent more than the man himself.

True, he'd sat with Charles Stuart many evenings, knowing—and believing—what Claire had said would happen to him. But still … Christ had told doubting Thomas, *"Blessed are those who have not seen but have believed."* Jamie wondered what you called those who *had* seen and were obliged to live with the resultant knowledge. He thought "blessed" was maybe not the word.

* * *

IT WAS MORE than an hour before Washington and the others took their leave—an hour during which Jamie thought repeatedly that he might just stand up, flip the table over, and run out the door, leaving the Continental army to make shift without him.

He kent perfectly well that armies moved slowly, save when fighting. And clearly Washington expected that it would be a week or more before the British actually quit Philadelphia. But it was no use talking sense to his body, which as usual had its own measures of importance. He could ignore or suppress hunger, thirst, fatigue, and injury. He couldn't suppress the need to see Claire.

Likely it was what she and Brianna called testosterone poisoning, he thought idly—their term for the obvious things men did that women didn't understand. Someday he must ask her what testosterone was. He shifted uncomfortably on the narrow bench, forcing his mind back to what Washington was saying.

At long last, there came a rap on the door, and a black man put his head in and nodded to Washington.

“Ready, suh,” he said, in the same soft Virginia accent as his master.

“Thank you, Caesar.” Washington nodded back, then put his hands on the table and rose swiftly. “We are agreed, then, gentlemen? You’re coming with me, General Lee. I’ll see the rest of you in due course at Sutfin’s farm, save you hear otherwise.”

Jamie’s heart leapt and he made to rise, too, but auld Dan put a hand on his sleeve.

“Set a bit, Jamie,” he said. “You’ll need to know something about your new command, won’t you?”

“I—” he began, but there was no help for it. He sat and waited while Nathanael Greene thanked Mrs. Hardman for her hospitality and begged her to accept a small recompense from the army for her civil reception of them. Jamie would have wagered a good deal that the coins he plucked from his purse were his own and not the army’s, but the woman took them, an acceptance too faint to be pleasure showing in her worn face. He saw her shoulders sag with relief as the door closed behind the generals and realized that their presence might have put her and her child in considerable peril, should the wrong people see uniformed Continental officers visiting her house.

She glanced consideringly at him and Dan, but they seemed to trouble her much less, in their rough civilian clothes. Dan had taken off his uniform coat and folded it inside out, laying it on the bench beside him.

"Feel any tongues of fire come down on your head just now, Jamie?" Dan asked, seeing his look.

"What?"

"Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you," Dan quoted, and grinned wide at Jamie's look of astonishment.

"My Abigail's a reading woman, and she reads bits o' the Bible out to me regular, in hopes it'll do some good, though ain't much luck in that direction yet." He took up the rucksack he'd brought in and dredged about in it, coming out with a folded sheaf of dog-eared papers, an inkhorn, and a couple of tattered quills.

"Well, now that the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost are gone off about their own business, let me write you down the names of your company commanders, what-all you got in the way of militia, and where they all are, 'cuz it ain't like they're all in barracks—or even in the same village. Missus Hardman, might I trouble you, ma'am, for a drop of water for my ink?"

Jamie bent his mind with difficulty to the business at hand, the better to dispatch it quickly, and within a quarter hour was gathering together the lists, made out in Dan's slow, crabbed hand. *Two hours to Philadelphia … maybe three …*

"Got any money on you to speak of?" Dan asked, pausing by the door.

"Not a penny," Jamie admitted, with a glance at the spot on his belt where his purse was normally fastened. He'd given it to Jenny to keep on the journey, as she delighted in making their small purchases. And this morning he'd been so much on fire to see Claire that he'd left the printshop with nothing but the clothes on his back and the packet of papers for Fergus. He spared an instant to wonder whether things would be different now, had he not been spotted giving the papers to Fergus and followed to Lord John's house by the soldiers—and William—but there was no point in regrets.

Dan pawed in his sack again, came out with a smaller bag and a clinking purse, both of which he tossed to Jamie.

"A bit of food for your journey, and an advance on your general's pay," he said, and chortled with amusement at his own wit. "You'll need to pay hard cash for a uniform these days; ain't a tailor in Philadelphia will take Continentals. And woe betide you if you show up before his worshipfulness George Washington without being dressed proper. He's a stickler for proper uniform, says you can't expect to command respect without lookin' like you deserve it. But I reckon you know all about that."

Dan, who had fought both battles of Saratoga in a hunting shirt, leaving his uniform coat hung over a tree branch in camp because of the heat, smiled broadly at Jamie, the scar on his upper lip where a bullet had torn through his face showing white against the weathered skin.

"Fare thee well, General Fraser!"

Jamie snorted but smiled nonetheless as he stood to shake Dan's hand. Then he turned back to the litter on the table, stowing the papers and purse—and a stray quill that Dan had abandoned, overlooked—into the bag. He was grateful for the food; the scent of jerked meat and journeycake floated out of the canvas depths, and he could feel the hard shape of apples at the bottom. He'd left the printshop without breakfast, too.

He straightened, and a pain like white lightning shot from the middle of his spine down the back of his leg to the sole of his foot. He gasped and collapsed onto a stool, his lower back and right buttock clenched with cramp.

"Jesus, Mary, and Bride—not *now*," he said between his teeth, and meant it somewhere between prayer and curse. He'd felt something small wrench or tear in his back when he'd hit John Grey, but in the heat of the moment it hadn't seemed important. It hadn't troubled him much walking—he'd barely noticed, with all there was on his mind—but now that he'd sat for a time and the muscles had chilled …

He tried rising, carefully, collapsed again. Bent sweating over the table with his fists clenched, he said a number of things in Gaelic that weren't at all prayerful.

"Is thee quite well, Friend?" The woman of the house leaned near, peering nearsightedly at him in concern.

"A … moment," he managed, trying to do as Claire told him and breathe through the spasm.

"Like labor pains," she'd told him, amused. He hadn't thought it was funny the first time and didn't now.

The pain eased. He extended his leg, then flexed it back under him, very gingerly. So far, so good. But when he once more tried to rise, his lower back was locked in a vise, and a pain that made him catch his breath stabbed down his buttock.

"Have ye … anything like … whisky? Rum?" If he could just get to his feet … But the woman was shaking her head.

"I'm sorry, Friend. I have not even small beer. Not even milk for the children any longer," she added with a certain bitterness. "The army took my goats away."

She didn't say which army, but he supposed it didn't matter to her. He made a sound of apology, just in case it had been the Continentals or the militia, and subsided, breathing heavily. This had happened three times before—just the same sudden flashing pain, the inability to move. Once, it had taken four days before he could hobble; the other two times, he had got to his feet within two days, and while it had twinged sporadically for weeks, he'd been able to walk, if slowly.

"Is thee ill? I could give thee rhubarb syrup," she offered. He managed to smile at that, shaking his head.

"I thank ye, ma'am. It's no but a clench in my back. When it eases, all will be well." The trouble was that *until* it eased, he was all but helpless, and the dawning realization of that gave him a sense of panic.

"Oh." The woman hesitated for a moment, hovering, but then the baby started to wail and she turned away to fetch it. A little girl—five or six, he thought, a stunted little creature—crawled out from under the bed and stared at him curiously.

"Is thee going to stay to supper?" she asked, in a high, precise voice. She gave him an appraising frown. "Thee looks like thee would eat a lot."

He revised his estimate of the girl's age to eight or nine and smiled at her. He was still sweating with the pain, but it was easing a bit.

"I'll not take your food, *a nighean*," he assured her. "In fact, there's a good loaf and some jerked meat in yon bag; it's yours." Her eyes went round as pennies, and he amended, "Your family's, I mean."

She glanced eagerly at the bag, swallowing painfully as her mouth watered; he could hear the tiny gulp and it wrung his heart.

“Pru!” she whispered, turning urgently toward the table. “Food!”

Another small girl crawled out and stood beside her sister. They were both plain as fence posts, though they otherwise didn’t resemble each other much.

“I heard,” the newcomer told her sister, and turned a solemn gaze on Jamie.

“Don’t let Mam give thee rhubarb syrup,” she advised him. “It makes thee shit like the blazes, and if thee can’t get to the privy, it—”

“Prudence!”

Prudence obligingly shut her mouth, though she continued to look Jamie over with interest. Her sister knelt and rummaged under the bed, emerging with the family utensil, this a homely object of brown earthenware, which she presented gravely for his inspection.

“We’ll turn our backs, sir, if thee should need to—”

“Patience!”

Red in the face, Mrs. Hardman took the pisspot from her daughter and shooed the little girls to the table, where—with a glance at Jamie to be sure he had meant it—she took the bread and meat and apples from his bag, dividing the food scrupulously into three parts: two large portions for the girls, and a smaller one for herself, put aside for later.

She had left the chamber pot on the floor beside the bed, and as she eased him gingerly onto the corn-shuck mattress, Jamie caught sight of lettering painted in white across the bottom. He squinted to make it out in the dim light, then smiled. It was a Latin motto, encircling a vividly executed bee with a jovial expression and a pronounced wink. *Iam apis potanda fineo ne*.

He'd seen the jest before—the brothel in Edinburgh where he'd once kept a room had been equipped throughout with utensils sporting a variety of Latin tags, most of them prurient, but some merely puns, like this one. It *was* a Latin sentence, if a foolish one—"Drink not the bee now"—but if read phonetically in English, ignoring the spacing, it read, "I am a pisspot and a fine one." He glanced up at Mrs. Hardman in speculation but thought it was likely not her work. The absent Mr. Hardman must be—*or have been,* he thought, given the obvious poverty of the household, and he crossed himself unobtrusively at the thought—an educated man.

The baby had waked and was fussing in her cradle, making small sharp yelps like a fox kit. Mrs. Hardman scooped the child out, pulling a worn nursing chair toward the fire with one foot. She laid the baby momentarily on the bed beside Jamie, opening her blouse with one hand, the other reaching automatically to save an apple that was rolling toward the edge of the table, nudged by a little girl's elbow.

The baby smacked her lips, hungry as her sisters. "And this will be wee Chastity, I make nay doubt?" he said.

Mrs. Hardman gaped at him. "How did thee know the child's name?"

He glanced at Prudence and Patience, who were silently stuffing bread and meat into their mouths as quickly as they could eat. "Well, I havena yet met a lassie named Sobriety or Fortitude," he said mildly. "The wean's sopping; have ye a clean clootie for her?"

There were two worn clouts hung to dry before the fire; she brought one, to find that Jamie had already unpinned the baby's soggy nappie—that's what Claire called them—

and wiped the shit from her bottom, holding her tiny ankles in one hand.

“Thee has children, I see.” Eyebrows raised, Mrs. Hardman took the soiled clout from him with a nod of thanks and dropped it into a bucket of vinegar and water that stood in the far corner.

“And grandchildren,” he said, wiggling a finger in front of wee Chastity’s nose. She gurgled and went cross-eyed, kicking her legs enthusiastically. “To say nothing of six nephews and nieces.” *And where are Jem and wee Mandy, I wonder? Can she breathe easy now, poor lassie?* He gently tickled the baby’s soft pink foot, remembering the strangely beautiful, heart-wrenching blue tinge to Mandy’s perfect toes, long-jointed and graceful as a frog’s.

“They’re just like yours,” Claire had told him, drawing a fingernail lightly down the sole of Mandy’s foot, making the long big toe spring suddenly away from the others. What had she called that?

He tried it himself, gingerly, and smiled with delight to see it happen to Chastity’s chubby toes.

“Babinski,” he said to Mrs. Hardman, with a sense of deep satisfaction at recalling the name. “That’s what it’s called when a wean’s great toe does that. A Babinski reflex.”

Mrs. Hardman looked astonished—though much more so when he skillfully repinned the new clout and swaddled wee Chastity afresh in her blanket. She took the baby from him and, with an uncertain expression, sank down in the chair and pulled the ratty shawl over the baby’s head. Unable to turn over easily, Jamie instead closed his eyes to afford her such privacy as he could.

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11

REMEMBER PAOLI!

IT WAS HARD TO wipe away the sweat with his hands tied and impossible to keep the stinging salt out of his wounded eye, so puffed and slitted that he couldn’t close it tightly. Water ran down his cheek in a steady flow, dripping off his chin. Blinking in a vain attempt to clear his vision, John Grey missed a fallen branch in his path and fell heavily.

Those behind him on the narrow trail halted abruptly, with sounds of mild collision, jangling weapons and canteens, confusion and impatience. Rough hands seized him and hauled him up again, but the tall, rawboned man deputed to be his escort said only, “Watch your step, me lord,” in a mild tone of voice, and gave him a nudge down the path rather than a shove.

Encouraged by this evidence of consideration, he thanked the man and asked his name.

“Me?” The man sounded surprised. “Oh. Bumppo. Natty Bumppo.” Adding, after a moment, “Folks mostly call me

‘Hawkeye,’ though.”

“I don’t wonder,” Grey said, half under his breath. He bowed, as well as he could whilst walking, and nodded at the long rifle that bobbed in a sling at the man’s back. “Your servant, sir. I deduce that you are a fine shot, then?”

“Reckon that would be a good deduction, your lordship.” Bumppo’s voice sounded amused. “Why? D’you want something shot? Or somebody?”

“I’m keeping a list,” Grey told him. “I’ll let you know when it’s complete.”

He felt, rather than heard, the other’s laugh—the amusement was palpable, but it made little sound.

“Let me guess who’s first on your list—the big Scotch fellow what put your light out?”

“He’d be fairly high on the list, yes.” Actually, he couldn’t decide who he’d rather see shot first: Jamie Fraser or his own bloody brother. Probably Hal, all things considered. Rather ironic, if Hal ended up getting *him* shot. Though his captors seemed quite convinced that hanging was the preferred method.

That reminded him of the uncomfortable bit of conversation that had preceded his being chivvied through the woods on a deer trail bountifully equipped with bramblish bushes, low-hanging branches, ticks, and biting flies the size of the ball of his thumb.

“Would you happen to know what—or possibly who—Paoli is, Mr. Bumppo?” he asked politely, kicking a fir cone out of his way.

“What’s Paoli?” The man’s voice was filled with astonishment. “Why, man, are you just come to this neck o’ the woods?”

“Fairly recently,” Grey replied guardedly.

“Oh.” Bumppo considered, carefully matching his lengthy stride to Grey’s shorter one. “Why, ’twas an infamous attack, to be sure. Your kinsman—Major General Grey, as they said—him and his troops snuck up by night to where General Wayne’s men were camped. Grey didn’t want to risk a stray flint sparking and giving them away, so he gives the order to take out all the flints from their guns and use the bayonets. Fell upon the Americans and bayoneted near a hundred men in their beds, in cold blood!”

“Really?” Grey tried to reconcile this account with any recent battle *he* knew of, and failed. “And … Paoli?”

“Oh. That’s the name of the tavern nearby—Paoli’s Tavern.”

“Ah. Where is it? Geographically, I mean. And when, exactly, did this battle occur?”

Bumppo’s prehensile lips pushed out in thought, then withdrew.

“Be up near Malvern, last September. The Paoli Massacre, they calls it,” he added with a certain dubiousness.

“Massacre?” Grey echoed. The engagement had taken place before his own arrival, but he’d heard it talked about—briefly, and not in terms of massacre, to be sure. But, then, perceptions of the event were bound to be different, depending upon one’s position in the matter. William Howe had spoken of it with approval—as a successful engagement in which a minimal number of British troops had routed an entire American division, with a loss of only seven men.

Bumppo seemed disposed to share Grey’s opinion of the rhetorical nature of the name, albeit from yet a third perspective.

“Well, you know how folks will talk,” he said, lifting one shoulder. “Ain’t what *I’d* call a proper massacre, but, then, ain't many folk seen one, and I have."

"You have?" Glancing up at the tall, bearded ruffian, Grey thought it only too likely.

"Was raised as an Indian," Bumppo said, with visible pride. "By the Mohican, my own folks havin' died when I were just a tadpole. Aye, I've seen a massacre or two."

"Indeed?" Grey said, innate courtesy obliging him to invite the man to elaborate, should he wish to. Besides, it would pass the time; they seemed to have been walking for hours, and no end in sight—not that he was eagerly anticipating the end.…

As it was, Mr. Bumppo's reminiscences passed the time to such good effect that Grey was surprised when Corporal Woodbine, in the lead, called the company to a halt at the edge of a fairly sizable encampment. He was glad enough to stop, though; he was wearing city shoes, not suited for the terrain at all, and they had worn through his stockings and rubbed his feet to blood and blisters.

"Scout Bumppo," Woodbine said, with a short nod to Grey's companion. "You'll take the company on to Zeke Bowen's place. I'll deliver the prisoner to Colonel Smith."

This statement gave rise to vocal discontent, from which Grey gathered that the company wished very much to accompany Woodbine, in order not to miss Grey's execution, which they confidently expected to occur within moments of his delivery to the aforesaid Colonel Smith. Woodbine was firm about it, though, and with democratic mutterings and execrations, the militia moved reluctantly off under the guidance of Natty Bumppo.

Woodbine watched them out of sight, then drew himself up, brushing a stray caterpillar from the breast of his shabby coat and straightening his disreputable hat.

“Well, Lieutenant Colonel Grey. Shall we go?”

* * *

NATTY BUMPPO’S reminiscences of the proper way to conduct a massacre had left Grey with the feeling that perhaps, by contrast, hanging was not the worst way to die. But while he hadn’t personally witnessed any firstrate massacres, he’d seen men hanged, very close to—and the memory of it dried his throat. The leakage from his eye hadn’t stopped completely but had lessened; the skin felt raw and inflamed, though, and the swelling gave him the annoying sense that his head was grossly misshapen. Still, he drew himself upright and strode chin out into the ragged canvas tent ahead of Corporal Woodbine.

Colonel Smith looked up from his lap desk, startled at the intrusion—though not quite as startled as Grey.

He’d last seen Watson Smith in his own sister-in-law’s drawing room in London two years ago, eating cucumber sandwiches. In the uniform of a captain of the Buffs.

“Mr. Smith,” he said, recovering his wits first. He bowed very correctly. “Your servant, sir.” He didn’t bother trying to keep the edge out of his voice or his expression. He sat down upon a vacant stool without being invited and gave Smith as direct a stare as he could with one operant eye.

Smith’s cheeks flushed, but he leaned back a little, gathering his own wits before replying, and returned Grey’s stare, with interest. He was not a big man but had broad shoulders and considerable presence of manner—and Grey knew him to be a very competent soldier. Competent enough not to reply directly to Grey but to turn instead to Corporal Woodbine.

“Corporal. How comes this gentleman here?”

“This is Lieutenant Colonel Lord John Grey, sir,” Woodbine said. He was near bursting with pride at his capture and placed Grey’s King’s warrant and Graves’s accompanying note on the rickety table with the manner of a butler presenting a roast pheasant with diamond eyes to a reigning monarch. “We caught him in the woods near Philadelphia. Out of uniform. Er … as you see, sir.” He cleared his throat in emphasis. “*And* he admits to being a cousin of Major General Charles Grey. You know—the Paoli Massacre.”

“Really?” Smith picked up the papers but cocked an eyebrow at Grey. “What was he doing there?”

“Having the shit beaten out of him by Colonel Fraser, sir—he’s one of Morgan’s officers. He said,” Woodbine added, with less certainty.

Smith looked blank.

“Fraser … don’t believe I know him.” Switching his attention to Grey, he addressed him for the first time. “Do *you* know Colonel Fraser … Colonel Grey?”

The elaborate hesitation spoke volumes. Well, he hadn’t expected anything else. Grey wiped his nose as well as he could on a forearm and sat straight.

“I decline to answer your questions, sir. They are improperly put. You know my name, rank, and regiment. Beyond that, my business is my own.”

Smith stared at him, eyes narrowed. Smith’s eyes were rather attractive, a pale gray with black brows and lashes, very dramatic. Grey had noticed them when the man came to tea with Minnie.

Woodbine coughed.

“Er … Colonel Fraser said the man was his prisoner, sir. But he wouldn’t say what for, and when I pressed the matter, he … er … left. That’s when we searched Lord … er, the lord colonel here, and found his papers.”

“He left,” Smith repeated carefully. “And you allowed him to leave, Corporal?”

Woodbine was looking less confident in the virtue of his conduct but wasn’t the sort to be easily cowed, Grey saw. He lowered his brow and gave Smith a look of his own.

“Couldn’t have stopped him, short of shooting him. Sir,” he added flatly. The flesh around Smith’s nostrils whitened, and Grey had the distinct impression that the Englishman must find his new command not quite what he’d been used to.

The quarters certainly weren’t. While Smith’s Continental uniform was smart and well tended, and his wig in good order, his tent, while large, appeared to have been through several campaigns, being worn to the threads in places and patched in others. Not entirely a bad thing, Grey thought, briefly closing his eyes as a faint evening breeze came wafting through the walls of the tent, relieving the stifling heat. He had a noticeable headache, and even such minor relief was welcome.

“Very well, Corporal,” Smith said after a moment, having evidently tried and failed to think of something new to ask. “Well done,” he added, offering a belated note of congratulation.

“Thank you, sir.” Woodbine hovered, obviously loath to surrender his share of the excitement. “If I may ask, sir—what do you mean to do with the prisoner?”

Grey opened his eye and a half, interested to hear what the answer might be, and found Smith eyeing him in what seemed a faintly carnivorous fashion. The turncoat smiled.

"Oh, I'll think of something, Corporal Woodbine," he said. "You are dismissed. Good night."

* * *

SMITH GOT UP and came over to Grey, leaning down to examine his face. Grey could smell his sweat, sharp and musky.

"Do you need a doctor?" he asked dispassionately, but without hostility.

"No," Grey said. Both his head and his side ached deeply, and he felt dizzy, but he doubted there was anything a doctor could do about either condition. And he found that after prolonged contact with Claire and her opinions, he had much less trust in physicians than heretofore—and he hadn't had much to begin with.

Smith nodded and, straightening up, went to a battered campaign chest and dug out two dented pewter cups and a stone bottle of what proved to be applejack. He poured two generous tots, and they sat in silence for a time, sipping.

So close to Midsummer Day, it was still bright light out, though Grey could hear the rattle and shuffle of a camp beginning the evening routine. A mule brayed loudly, and several more answered it in raucous chorus. Wagons, then … perhaps artillery? He breathed deeply, nostrils flaring; an artillery company had a distinct smell to it, a sort of distillation of sweat, black powder, and hot metal, much more pungent than the scent of an infantry company with their muskets—the scent of searing iron seeped into an artilleryman's clothes, as well as his soul.

What came to him was not the stink of guns but the smell of roasting meat. It drifted through the tent, and his stomach growled loudly; he'd eaten nothing since the beer that had been his preliminary to a preempted meal. He thought Smith's mouth twitched a little at the noise, but the colonel politely ignored it.

Smith finished his drink, refilled both cups, and cleared his throat.

"I will not plague you with questions, as you don't wish to answer them," he said carefully, "but in the interests of civil conversation, should you wish to make any inquiries of me, I should not take offense."

Grey smiled wryly.

"Very gracious of you, sir. Do you wish to justify your present allegiance to me? I assure you, it's unnecessary."

Small red patches sprang up immediately on Smith's cheekbones.

"That was not my intent, sir," he said stiffly.

"Then I apologize," Grey said, and took another mouthful. The sweet strong cider was assuaging his hunger pangs as well as the pain in his side, though it admittedly wasn't doing much for the dizziness. "What sort of question did you think I might ask? What is the current state of the Continental army? I could deduce that easily enough, I think, from the state of the gentlemen who captured me, and … other evidence." He let his eyes roam deliberately around the tent, taking in the chipped pottery utensil under the lopsided cot, the tail of dirty linen straggling out of a portmanteau in the corner; evidently Smith had either no orderly or an inept one. For an instant, Grey felt a pang of nostalgia for Tom Byrd, the best valet he had ever had.

Smith's flush had faded; he gave a small, ironic laugh. "I imagine you could. It's not much of a secret. No, I rather thought you might be curious as to what I propose to do with you."

"Oh, that." Grey put down his cup and rubbed gingerly at his forehead, trying not to touch the swollen area around his eye. "Frankly, I'd forgotten, in the surprise of seeing you. And the pleasure of your kind hospitality," he added, lifting the cup with no irony at all. "Corporal Woodbine and his men appeared to think I should be promptly hanged, both on the charge of spying and on the more serious one of being related to Major General Charles Grey, who I gather is believed to have committed some atrocity at a place called Paoli."

Smith's brow creased.

"Do you deny being a spy?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Smith. I'm a lieutenant colonel. What on earth would I be doing, spying in a deserted wood? Well, deserted until Woodbine and his merry men showed up," he added. His cup was empty; he stared into it, wondering how that had happened. With a small sigh, Smith refilled it.

"Besides, I was carrying no documents of information, no secret writings—no evidence whatever of spying."

"Doubtless you committed to memory whatever information you had gained," Smith said, sounding cynically amused. "I recall that you have a prodigious memory." He gave a small snort that could perhaps have been called a snigger. *"So sayeth Sally, nimble-fingered, as her grip upon his prick did linger …"*

In fact, Grey's memory was quite good. Good enough to remember a dinner at which a number of officers from different regiments had been guests. When the gentlemen were at their port, Grey had—upon invitation, and to thunderous applause—recited entirely from memory one of the longer, and very scabrous, odes from Harry Quarry's infamous *Certain Verses Upon the Subject of Eros*, copies of which were still eagerly sought and covertly passed around the circles of society, though the book had been published nearly twenty years before.

"What on earth is there to spy *on*?" he demanded, realizing the logical trap too late. Smith's mouth turned up at one corner.

"You expect me to tell you?" Because the answer, of course, was that Washington's entire force was likely on the move in his immediate vicinity, positioning for the move into Philadelphia—and, very possibly, for an attack on Clinton's withdrawing troops.

Grey dismissed Smith's question as rhetorical and took another tack—though a dangerous one.

"Woodbine gave you a correct assessment of the circumstances in which he discovered me," he said. "Plainly I was not discovered *in flagrante* by Colonel Fraser, as he would simply have done what Corporal Woodbine did and arrested me."

"Are you asserting that Colonel Fraser met you by arrangement, to pass on information?"

Jesus Christ. He'd known this tack was dangerous but hadn't foreseen *that* possibility—that Jamie Fraser could be suspected of being his confederate. But of course Smith would be particularly sensitive to such a possibility, given his own change of loyalties.

"Certainly not," Grey said, allowing a certain asperity to creep into his tone. "The encounter that Corporal Woodbine witnessed was of a purely personal nature."

Smith, who plainly knew a thing or two about interrogation, cocked a brow at him. Grey knew a thing or two about it, too, and sat back, sipping his applejack insouciantly, as though quite sure his statement had settled matters.

“They *will* probably hang you, you know,” Smith said after a suitable pause. He spoke quite casually, eyes on the amber stream as he refilled both cups again. “After what Howe did to Captain Hale? Even more, after Paoli. Charles Grey is your cousin, is he not?”

“Second or third cousin, yes.” Grey knew the man, though they didn’t move in the same circles, either socially or militarily. Charles Grey was a pig-faced professional killer, rather than a soldier, and while he doubted that the Paoli Massacre had been entirely as described—what sort of idiots would lie on the ground waiting to be bayoneted in their beds? Because he didn’t for an instant think a column of infantry was capable of sneaking up in the dark over rough country to within stabbing distance without giving some notice of their presence—he *did* know about Charles’s merciless bayonet tactics at Culloden.

“Nonsense,” Grey said, with as much confidence as he could summon. “Whatever one may think of the American high command, I doubt it is composed entirely of fools. My execution would yield nothing, whereas my exchange might be of value. My brother does have some small influence.”

Smith smiled, not without sympathy.

“An excellent argument, Lord John, and one I’m sure would find favor with General Washington. Unfortunately, the Congress and the King remain at loggerheads over the matter of exchange; at present, there is no mechanism to allow the exchange of prisoners.”

That one struck him in the pit of the stomach. He knew all too well that there were no official channels of exchange; he'd been trying to have William exchanged for months.

Smith upended the bottle, dribbling the last amber drops into Grey's cup.

"Are you a Bible-reading man, Colonel Grey?"

Grey looked at him blankly.

"Not habitually. I have read it, though. Some of it. Well … bits. Why?"

"I wondered if you were familiar with the concept of a scapegoat." Smith rocked back a little on his stool, gazing at Grey with his lovely deep-set eyes, which seemed to hold a certain sympathy—though perhaps it was just the applejack. "Because I'm afraid that is where your chief value lies, Colonel. It is no secret that the Continental army is in poor condition, lacking money, disillusion and desertion rife. Nothing would hearten and unify the troops more—or send a more potent message to General Clinton—than the trial and very public execution of a high-ranking British officer, a convicted spy and close relation to the infamous 'No Flints' Grey."

He belched softly and blinked, eyes still fixed on Grey.

"You asked what I meant to do with you."

"No, I didn't."

Smith ignored this, leveling a long, knobby finger at him.

"I'm sending you to General Wayne, who, believe me, has 'Paoli' carved upon his heart."

"How very painful for him," Grey said politely, and drained his cup.

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12

EINE KLEINE NACHTMUSIK

THE INTERMINABLE DAY was reluctantly ending, the heat at last beginning to fade from the forest along with the waning light. He didn't suppose that he would be taken directly to General Wayne, unless that worthy were close at hand, and he thought not. He could tell from the sounds and the feel of the camp that it was a small one, and plainly Colonel Smith was the senior officer present.

Smith had asked him, *pro forma,* to give his parole—and been substantially taken aback when Grey had courteously refused to do so.

"If I am in fact a duly commissioned British officer," Grey had pointed out, "then clearly it is my duty to escape."

Smith eyed him, the failing light shading his face with sufficient ambiguity that Grey was not sure whether he was fighting an impulse to smile or not. Probably not.

"You're not escaping," he said definitely, and went out. Grey could hear a brief, heated discussion, conducted in low voices outside the tent, as to just what to do with him. A militia camp on the move had no facilities for prisoners. Grey amused himself by composing a mental entertainment in which Smith was obliged to share his narrow cot with Grey, in the interests of keeping his prisoner secure.

In the end, though, a corporal came in, carrying a rusty set of fetters that looked as though they had last seen use during the Spanish Inquisition, and took Grey to the edge of camp, where a soldier who had been a blacksmith in private life banged them into place with a stout hammer, using a flattish rock as an anvil.

He felt the oddest sensations, kneeling on the ground in the twilight, an interested group of militiamen gathered round in a circle to watch. He was forced to lean forward in a crouching posture, hands laid before him, as though he were about to be beheaded, and the hammer blows echoed through the metal, into the bones of his wrists and arms.

He kept his eyes on the hammer, and not only from fear that the smith would miss his aim in the growing dusk and smash one of his hands. Under the influence of intoxication and a growing, deeper fear that he didn't want to acknowledge, he sensed the mingled curiosity and animus surrounding him and felt it as he would a nearby thunderstorm, electricity crawling over his skin, the threat of lightning annihilation so close he could smell its sharp odor, mixed with gunpowder and the heavy tang of the sweat of men.

Ozone. His mind seized on the word, a small escape into rationality. That's what Claire called the smell of lightning. He'd told her he thought it was from the Greek *ozon*, the neuter present participle of *ozein*, meaning "to smell."

He began to work his way methodically through the complete conjugation; by the time he'd finished, surely they would be done with it. *Ozein*, to smell. I smell …

He could smell his own sweat, sharp and sweet. In the old days, it was considered a better death, beheading. To be hanged was shameful, a commoner's death, a criminal's death. Slower. He knew that for a fact.

A final reverberating blow, and a visceral sound of satisfaction from the watching men. He was made prisoner.

* * *

THERE BEING NO shelter other than the brushy wigwams and scraps of canvas the militiamen rigged near their fires, he was escorted back to Smith's big, threadbare tent, given supper—which he forced down, not much noticing what he ate—and then tethered to the tent pole with a long, thin rope run through the chain of his irons, with sufficient play as to allow him to lie down or use the utensil.

At Smith's insistence, he took the cot and did lie down with a slight groan of relief. His temples throbbed with each heartbeat, and so did the entire left side of his face, which was now radiating small jolts down into his upper teeth, very unpleasant. The pain in his side had dulled to a deep ache, almost negligible by comparison. Luckily, he was so tired that sleep swamped all discomfort, and he fell into it with a sense of profound gratitude.

He woke in the full dark sometime later, slicked with sweat, heart hammering from some desperate dream. He raised a hand to push the soaked hair off his face and felt the heavy, chafing weight of the fetters, which he'd forgotten about. They clanked, and the dark figure of a sentry silhouetted in the fire glow at the entrance of the tent turned sharply toward him, but then relaxed as he turned over on the cot, clanking further.

Bugger, he thought, still groggy with sleep. *Couldn't even masturbate if I wanted to*. The thought made him laugh, though fortunately it came out as a mere breath of sound.

Another body turned over, rustling, shifting heavily near him. Smith, he supposed, sleeping on a canvas bed sack stuffed with grass; Grey could smell the meadow scent of dry hay, faintly musty in the humid air. The bed sack was standard issue to the British army; Smith must have kept it, along with his tent and other equipment, changing only his uniform.

Why had he turned his coat? Grey wondered vaguely, peering at Smith's humped shape, just visible against the pale canvas. Advancement? Starved as they were for professional soldiers, the Continentals offered rank as inducement; a captain in any European army might become anything from a major to a general in the blink of an eye, whereas the only means of achieving higher rank in England was to find the money to purchase it.

What was rank without pay, though? Grey was no longer a spy, but he had been one, once—and still knew men who labored in those dark fields. From what he'd heard, the American Congress had no money at all and depended upon loans—these unpredictable in amount and erratic in occurrence. Some from French or Spanish sources, though the French wouldn't admit to it, of course. Some from Jewish moneylenders, said one of his correspondents. *Salomon, Solomon … some name like that*.

These random musings were interrupted by a sound that made him stiffen. A woman's laughter.

There were women in the camp, wives who had come along to war with their husbands. He'd seen a few when they took him across the campground, and one had brought his supper, glancing suspiciously up at him from under her cap. But he thought he *knew* that laugh—deep, gurgling, and totally unself-conscious.

"Jesus," he whispered under his breath. "Dottie?"

It wasn't impossible. He swallowed, trying to clear his left ear, to listen through the multitude of small sounds outside. Denzell Hunter was a Continental surgeon, and Dottie had—to her brother's, cousin's, and uncle's horror—joined the camp followers at Valley Forge in order to help her fiancé, though she rode into Philadelphia regularly to visit her brother Henry. If Washington's forces were moving—and very plainly they were—it was entirely possible that a surgeon might be anywhere among them.

A high, clear voice, raised in question. An English voice, and not common. He strained to hear but couldn't make out the words. He wished she'd laugh again.

If it *was* Dottie … he breathed deep, trying to think. He couldn't call out to her; he'd felt the avid hostility directed at him from every man in camp—letting the relationship be known would be dangerous for her and Denzell, both, and certainly wouldn't help Grey. And yet he had to risk it—they'd move him in the morning.

Out of sheer inability to think of anything better, he sat up on the cot and began to sing *"Die Sommernacht."* Quietly at first, but gathering strength and volume. As he hit *"In den Kulungen wehn"* at the top of his very resonant tenor voice, Smith sat up like a jack-in-the-box and said, *"What?"* in tones of utter amazement.

“So umschatten mich Gedanken an das Grab
Meiner Geliebten, und ich seh’ im Walde
Nur es dämmern, und es weht mir
Von der Blüte nicht her.”

Grey went on, reducing his volume somewhat. He didn’t want Dottie—if it was Dottie—coming to look, only to let her know he was here. He’d taught her this *lied* when she was fourteen; she sang it often at musicales.

“Ich genoß einst, o ihr Toten, es mit euch!
Wie umwehten uns der Duft und die Kühlung,
Wie verschönt warst von dem Monde,
Du, o schöne Natur!”

He stopped, coughed a little, and spoke into the marked silence before him, slurring his words a bit, as though still drunk. In fact, he discovered, he was.

“Might I have some water, Colonel?”

“Will you sing anymore if I give it to you?” Smith asked, deeply suspicious.

“No, I think I’m finished now,” Grey assured him. “Couldn’ sleep, you know—too much to drink—but I find a song settles the mind rem-remarkably.”

“Oh, does it?” Smith breathed heavily for a moment, but clambered to his feet and fetched the ewer from his basin. Grey could feel him repressing an urge to douse his prisoner with the contents, but Smith was a man of strong character and merely held the pitcher for him to drink, then put it back and resumed his own bed with no more than a few irritable snorts.

The *lied* had caused some comment in the camp, and a few musical souls took it as inspiration and began singing everything from “Greensleeves”—a very poignant and tender rendition—to “Chester.” Grey quite enjoyed the singing, though it was only by exercise of his own strong character that he refrained from shaking his fetters at the end of:

> *“Let tyrants shake their iron rods. And slavery clank her galling chains.”*

They were still singing when he fell asleep again, to dream in anxious fragments, the fumes of applejack drifting through the hollow spaces of his head.

Number 17 Chestnut Street

THE BELL OF the Presbyterian church struck midnight, but the city wasn’t sleeping. The sounds were more furtive now, muffled by darkness, but the streets were still alive with hurrying feet and the sound of moving wagons—and, in the far distance, I heard a faint cry of “Fire!” being raised.

I stood by the open window, sniffing the air for smoke and watching out for any sign of flames that might spread in our direction. I wasn’t aware of Philadelphia having ever burned to the ground like London or Chicago, but a fire that merely engulfed the neighborhood would be just as bad from my point of view.

There was no wind at all; that was something. The summer air hung heavy, damp as a sponge. I waited for a bit, but the cries stopped, and I saw no red glimmer of flames against the half-clouded sky. No trace of fire save the cool green sparks of fireflies, drifting among the shadowed leaves in the front garden.

I stood for a bit, letting my shoulders slump, letting go of my half-formed plans for emergency evacuation. I was exhausted but unable to sleep. Beyond the need to keep an eye on my unsettled patient, and the unsettled atmosphere beyond the quiet room, I was most unsettled in myself. I'd been listening all day, constantly on the alert for a familiar footstep, the sound of Jamie's voice. But he hadn't come.

What if he had learned from John that I had shared his bed on that one drunken evening? Would the shock of that, given without preparation or suitable explanation, be enough to have made him run away—for good?

I felt sudden tears come to my eyes and shut them, hard, to stem the flow, gripping the sill with both hands.

Don't be ridiculous. He'll come as soon as he can, no matter what. You know he will. I did know. But the shocked joy of seeing him alive had wakened nerves that had been numb for a long time, and while I might seem calm externally, on the inside my emotions were at a rolling boil. The steam was building up, and I had no way to release the pressure—save pointless tears, and I wouldn't give way to those.

For one thing, I might not be able to stop. I pressed the sleeve of my dressing gown briefly to my eyes, then turned back resolutely into the darkness of the room.

A small brazier burned near the bed under a tented wet cloth, casting a flickering red glow on Pardloe's sharp-cut features. He was breathing with an audible rasp and I could hear his lungs rattle with each exhalation, but it was a deep breathing, and regular. It occurred to me that I might not have been able to smell the smoke of a fire outside, had there been one: the atmosphere in the room was thick with oil of peppermint, eucalyptus … and cannabis. Despite the wet cloth, enough smoke had escaped the brazier to form a hanging cloud of purling wisps, moving pale as ghosts in the darkened air.

I sprinkled more water on the muslin tent and sat down in the small armchair beside the bed, breathing the saturated atmosphere in cautiously but with an agreeable small sense of illicit pleasure. Hal had told me that he was in the habit of smoking hemp to relax his lungs and that it seemed to be effective. He'd said "hemp," and that was undoubtedly what he'd been smoking; the psychoactive form of the plant didn't grow in England and wasn't commonly imported.

I hadn't any hemp leaves in my medical supply but did have a good bit of ganja, which John had acquired from a Philadelphia merchant who had two Indiamen. It was useful in the treatment of glaucoma, as I'd learned when treating Jamie's aunt Jocasta, it relieved nausea and anxiety—and it had occasional non-medicinal uses, as John had informed me, to my private amusement.

Thought of John gave me a small internal qualm, to add to my anxiety over Jamie, and I took a deep, deliberate breath of the sweet, spicy air. Where was *he*? What had Jamie done with him?

"Do you ever make bargains with God?" Hal's voice came quietly out of the half dark.

I must subconsciously have known he wasn't sleeping, for I wasn't startled.

"Everyone does," I said. "Even people who don't believe in God. Do you?"

There was the breath of a laugh, followed by coughing, but it stopped quickly. Perhaps the smoke *was* helping.

"Have you got such a bargain in mind?" I asked, as much from real curiosity as to make conversation. "You aren't going to die, you know. I won't let you."

"Yes, you said that," he replied dryly. After a moment's hesitation, he turned on his side to face me. "I do believe you," he said rather formally. "And … I thank you."

"You're quite welcome. I can't let you die in John's house, you know; he'd be upset."

He smiled at that, his face visible in the brazier's glow. We didn't speak for a bit but sat looking at each other, with no particular sense of self-consciousness, both of us calmed by the smoke and the sleepy chirping of crickets outside. The sound of wagon wheels had ceased, but there were still people passing by. Surely I would know Jamie's step, be able to distinguish his, even among so many.…

"You're worried about him, aren't you?" he asked. "John."

"No," I said quickly, but I saw one dark brow rise and remembered that he already knew me for a bad liar. "That is … I'm sure he's quite all right. But I *would* have expected him home by now. And with so much commotion in the city …" I waved a hand toward the window. "You don't know what might happen, do you?"

I heard him draw breath, his chest rattling faintly, and clear his throat.

"And you still decline to tell me where he is."

I lifted one shoulder and let it fall; it seemed pointless to repeat that I didn't know, even though that *was* the truth. Instead, I took up a comb from the table and began to deal slowly with my hair, untangling and smoothing the unruly mass, enjoying the cool feel of it in my hands. After we had bathed Hal and got him put to bed, I'd taken a quarter hour for a somewhat more leisurely wash of my own and had rinsed the sweat and dust from my hair, despite knowing it would take hours to dry in the humid air.

"The bargain I had in mind was not for my own life," he said after a bit. "As such."

"I'm sure John isn't going to die, either, if that's what you —"

"Not John. My son. My daughter. And my grandson. You have grandchildren, I collect? I believe I heard that rather stalwart young man call you 'Grannie' this afternoon, did I not?" His voice held a trace of amusement.

"You did, and I do. You mean Dorothea? Is something the matter with her?" A stab of alarm made me set down the comb. I'd seen Dottie only a few days before, at the house where her brother Henry was staying.

"Aside from the fact that she appears to be on the verge of marrying a Rebel and declares her intent to accompany the man onto battlefields and to live with him under the most insalubrious conditions imaginable?"

He sat up in bed and spoke with evident passion, but I couldn't help smiling at his mode of expression; evidently the Grey brothers shared the same habit of speech. I coughed to hide this, though, and replied as tactfully as possible.

"Um … you've seen Dottie, then?"

"Yes, I have," he said shortly. "She was with Henry when I arrived yesterday, and wearing the most extraordinary garment. Evidently the man to whom she considers herself affianced is a Quaker, and she declares that she has become one, as well!"

"So I understand," I murmured. "You … er … hadn't heard about it?"

"No, I had not! And I have a few things to say to John regarding both his cowardice in not telling me about it and his son's unpardonable machi … machinations …" The choler in this speech literally choked him, and he had to stop and cough, wrapping his arms round his knees to steady himself against the racking spasms.

I took up the fan I'd left on the table earlier and wafted a bit of smoke from the brazier into his face. He gasped, coughed harder for a moment, and then subsided, wheezing.

"I'd tell you not to excite yourself, if I thought there was the slightest chance of you listening," I remarked, handing him a cup of the boiled tincture of *Ephedra* in coffee. "Drink that. Slowly.

"As for John," I went on, watching him make faces over the bitter taste, "he considered writing to you when he found out what Dottie intended. He didn't, because at the time he thought it might be nothing more than a passing whim and that once she'd seen the reality of Denny's—er, that's her fiancé, Dr. Hunter—of his life, she might think better of it. And if she did, there was no need to alarm you and your wife. He never expected you to turn up here."

Hal coughed once, then drew breath in a tentative fashion.

"I didn't, either," he said, and, putting the cup aside, coughed again and lay back against the heaped pillows. "The War Office decided to send my regiment to support Clinton when the new strategy was decided upon; there wasn't time to write."

"Which new strategy is this?" I asked, only mildly interested.

"To sever the southern colonies from the north, suppress the rebellion there, and thus starve the north into submission. Keep the bloody French out of the West Indies, too," he added as an afterthought. "You think Dottie might change her mind?" He sounded dubious but hopeful.

"Actually, no," I said. I stretched and ran my fingers through my damp hair, which had settled softly on my neck and shoulders, curling light and tickling round my face. "I wondered whether it was you or your wife she took after in terms of willfulness, but the instant I met you, it was clear."

He gave me a narrow look but had the grace to smile.

"She does," he admitted. "So does Benjamin—my eldest son. Henry and Adam are both like my wife in terms of temperament. Which does not mean that they aren't capable of seeking their own way," he added thoughtfully. "Only that they're rather more diplomatic about it."

"I'd like to meet your wife," I said, smiling, too. "Her name is Minnie, John said?"

"Minerva," he said, his smile growing more genuine. "Minerva Cunnegunda, to be exact. Couldn't call her 'Cunny,' could I?"

"Probably not in public, no."

"Wouldn't try it in private, either," he assured me. "She's very demure—to look at."

I laughed, and darted a glance at the brazier. I hadn't thought the active principle in ganja would be very strong, burned as an atmospheric rather than smoked directly. Still, it was obviously having a beneficial effect on Hal's mood as well as his asthma, and I was conscious of a slight feeling of well-being beginning to creep into my own outlook. I was still worried about Jamie—and John—but the worry had lifted from my shoulders and seemed to be floating a little way above my head: still visible, and a dull purple-gray in color, but floating. *Like a lead balloon,* I thought, and gave a small, amused snort.

Hal was lying back, eyes half lidded, watching me with a sort of detached interest.

"You're a beautiful woman," he said, sounding faintly surprised. "Not demure, though," he added, and made a low chuckling noise. "What could John have been thinking?"

I knew what John had been thinking but didn't want to talk about it—for assorted reasons.

"What did you mean earlier," I asked curiously, "about making bargains with God?"

"Ah." His eyelids closed slowly. "When I arrived at General Clinton's office this morning—God, was that only this morning?—he had rather bad news for me—and a letter. Sent some weeks ago from New Jersey, forwarded eventually to him through the army post.

"My eldest son, Benjamin, was captured by the Rebels at the Brandywine," he said, almost dispassionately. Almost; there was enough light for me to see the bulge of his jaw muscle. "There is at present no agreement with the Americans involving the exchange of prisoners, so he remains in captivity."

"Where?" I asked, disturbed at the news.

"I don't know that," he said shortly. "Yet. But I shall discover his whereabouts as quickly as possible."

"Godspeed," I said sincerely. "Was the letter from Benjamin?"

"No." His jaw tightened a little further.

The letter had been from a young woman named Amaranthus Cowden, who informed His Grace the Duke of Pardloe that she was the wife of his son Benjamin—and the mother of Benjamin's son, Trevor Wattiswade Grey, aged three months. *Born after Benjamin was captured*, I thought, and wondered whether Benjamin knew about the baby.

The young Mrs. Grey found herself in difficult circumstances, she wrote, owing to her husband's sad absence, and therefore proposed to go to her relatives in Charleston. She felt some delicacy in approaching His Grace for assistance, but her state was such that she felt she had little choice in the matter and hoped that he would forgive her forwardness and look kindly upon her plea. She enclosed a lock of her son's hair, feeling that His Grace might like to have such a keepsake of his grandson.

"Dear me," I said. I hesitated for a moment, but the same thought must surely have occurred to him. "Do you think she's telling the truth?"

He sighed, a mixture of anxiety and aggravation.

"Almost certainly she is. My wife's maiden name was Wattiswade, but no one outside the family would know that." He nodded toward the wardrobe where Mrs. Figg had hung his uniform. "The letter is in my coat, should you wish to read it."

I waved a hand in polite dismissal.

"I see what you meant about making bargains with God. You want to live to see your grandchild—and your son, of course."

He sighed again, his lean body seeming to diminish slightly. Mrs. Figg had undone his queue—much against his will—brushed out his hair, and tied it in a loose tail that now fell over his shoulder, a soft dark brown shot with streaks of white that glinted red and gold in the fire glow.

"Not precisely. I do want that, of course, but—" He groped for words, quite unlike his earlier elegant loquacity. "You'd die for them, happily. Your family. But at the same time you think, *Christ, I can't die! What might happen to them if I weren't here?*" He gave me a wry and rueful smile. "And you know bloody well that you mostly can’t help them anyway; they’ve got to do it—or not—themselves.”

“Unfortunately, yes.” A draft of air moved the muslin curtains and stirred the hanging pall of smoke. “Not the grandchildren, though. You can help them.” And I suddenly missed Henri-Christian’s soft weight, his solid head against my shoulder; I’d saved his life by removing his tonsils and adenoids, and I thanked God that I’d been in time to do it. And Mandy … *God, take care of her*, I prayed fiercely. I’d been able to tell Bree what was wrong and that it could be fixed—but *I* couldn’t fix her heart defect, and I regretted that lack every day of my life. If I could have done the necessary surgery in this time, they’d all still be here.…

The curtains moved again, and the heavy atmosphere drew a clean, sudden breath. I inhaled deeply, catching the faint, sharp scent of ozone. “Rain,” I said. “Rain’s coming.”

The duke didn’t reply but turned, lifting his face toward the window. I got up and raised the sash higher, gratefully letting in a cool breeze. I looked out into the night again; clouds were drifting fast across the moon, so the light seemed to pulse rather than flicker, like the beat of a palpitating heart. The streets were dark, with no more than the occasional glow of a moving lantern to mark the muted agitation of the city.

Rain might damp the movement, both of fleeing Loyalists and the army readying itself to depart. Would the cover of the storm make it easier for Jamie to come into the city? A bad storm might hamper him, turning the roads to mud. How far away was he?

The lead balloon had come down on my head. My mood had taken a plunge, whether from fatigue, the oncoming storm, or merely as a natural effect of cannabinol, I didn’t know. I shivered, though the air was still hot, unable to keep my brain from projecting vivid images of all the dire possibilities that could befall a man caught between two armies, alone in the night.

Maybe alone. What *had* he done with John? Surely he wouldn't have—

"I was twenty-one when my father died," Hal remarked out of the blue. "Grown. Had my own life, had a wife—" He broke off abruptly, his mouth twisting. "Didn't think I needed him at all, until he suddenly wasn't there."

"What could he have done for you?" I asked, sitting down again. I was curious—but also anxious to avoid my own racing thoughts.

Hal lifted one slender shoulder. The neck of the nightshirt was unbuttoned, both because of the heat and so I could more easily see the pulse in his neck. It fell open, the cloth limp with moisture, and his clavicle showed, high-arched and clean, shadowed sharp against his skin.

"Been there," he said simply. "Listened. Perhaps … approved of what I was doing." The last few words came low, barely audible. "Or maybe not. But … been there."

"I know what you mean," I said, more to myself than to him. I'd been lucky; I was very young when my parents died, and my uncle had stepped promptly into my life, to be there for me. And casual as his own life had been—he always *was* there. I'd felt his loss acutely when he died, but I'd been married then—a spasm of guilt seized me out of nowhere, thinking of Frank. And another, worse, thinking of Brianna. I'd left her, once—and then she had left me.

That unleashed a jumble of morbid thoughts: of Laoghaire, abandoned by both daughters, unlikely ever to see her grandchildren, now mine. Of Jem and Mandy … and Jamie.

Where *was* he? And why wasn't he here? Surely, whatever John might have told him …

"Oh, dear," I said hopelessly, under my breath. I could feel the tears prick and well, pressing up against the dam of my determination.

"Do you know, I'm most remarkably hungry," Hal said, sounding surprised. "Is there any food in the house?"

* * *

JAMIE'S STOMACH GROWLED, and he coughed to cover the sound, but there was no need. The little girls were curled up like a pair of capped hedgehogs under a tattered quilt by the hearth, back to back and snoring like drunken bumblebees. Mrs. Hardman was on the settle, singing to the baby under her breath. He couldn't make out the words, so he couldn't tell what song it was, but imagined it to be a lullaby. On the other hand, he'd heard Highland women sing their babes asleep often enough with things like *"Nighean Nan Geug,"* which dealt with severed heads and blood-soaked ground. But Mrs. Hardman was a Friend; presumably she'd have no truck with that sort of lullaby. Maybe "The Great Silkie of Sule Skerry," he thought, beginning to relax. Clearly Friends had no objection to carnal relations as such …

That reminded him of bloody John Grey, and he grimaced, then stifled a grunt as his back sent a warning shot down his leg, indicating that even that much movement wouldn't be tolerated.

The song was no more music to him than the snoring, but both were gentle sounds, and he eased himself cautiously, checked that knife and pistol were easily to hand, and shut his eyes. He was tired to the bone but doubted he'd sleep. He couldn't even shift himself in the bed without white stabs of pain jabbing him in the backside like the devil's pitchfork.

It had been years since his back had last done this to him. Ached frequently, now and then was stiff in the morning, but it hadn't done this in … ten years? He remembered it vividly. It was soon after they'd come to the Ridge, just after he and Ian built the cabin. He'd gone out a-hunting, sprung over a bank in pursuit of a fleeing elk, and found himself lying on his face at the foot of the bank, quite unable to move.

Claire, bless her, had come searching for him—he smiled wryly at thought of it; she'd been so proud of tracking him through the forest. If she hadn't found him … well, it would have been the luck of the draw as to whether a painter, bear, or wolf came upon him before his back released its clench and let him move. He supposed he wouldn't have died of cold, though he might well have lost a few toes to frostbite.

She—

A sound brought his head up, fast. His back stabbed viciously, but he set his teeth, ignoring it, and pulled the pistol out from underneath his pillow.

Mrs. Hardman's head jerked up at his movement. She stared at him, wide-eyed, then heard what he had heard and got up hastily. Feet on the path, more than one pair. She turned, looking for the cradle, but he shook his head.

"Keep the bairnie with ye," he said, low-voiced. "Answer when they knock, open if they ask."

He saw her swallow, but she did as he said. There were three or four, he thought, but not bent on mischief. There were feet on the porch, low murmurs, and a bit of laughing. A knock, and Mrs. Hardman called, "Who's there?"

“Friends, missus,” said a man’s voice, slurred with drink. “Let us in.”

She cast a frightened glance at Jamie, but he nodded, and she lifted the latch, opening the door to the night. The first man started to come in but then saw Jamie on the bed and stopped, mouth open.

“Good evenin’ to ye,” Jamie said, polite, but holding the other man’s eyes with his own. The pistol lay in plain sight, under his hand.

“Oh,” said the other man, disconcerted. He was young and rather stout, dressed in hunting garb but with a militia badge; he glanced over his shoulder at his companions, who had stopped on the threshold. “I—er—good evening to you, sir. We didn’t—er—we thought …” He cleared his throat.

Jamie smiled at him, well aware what he thought. Keeping the man in sight from the corner of his eye, he turned to Mrs. Hardman and gestured to her to sit down. She did and bent her head over the child, brushing her lips over Chastity’s tiny cap.

“We’ve nothing to offer ye in the way of food, gentlemen,” Jamie said. “But there’s cold water from the well, and a bed in the shed, if ye need it.”

The other two men stood outside, shuffling awkwardly. There was a strong smell of liquor coming off them, but they hadn’t come in a mood to do damage.

“That’s all right,” the young man said, backing up to his friends. His round face was flushed, as much with embarrassment as with liquor. “We’ll just … sorry to disturb you. Sir.”

The other two bobbed their heads, and all three retreated, shuffling and bumping into one another in their haste to leave. The last one pulled the door to, but not all the way.

Mrs. Hardman rose and pushed it to with a small bang, then leaned against it, her eyes closed, the child clasped against her bosom.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“It’s all right,” he said. “They’ll not come back. Put the bairn down and bar the door, aye?”

She did, then turned and leaned against the door, her hands pressed flat against it. She looked at the floor between her feet, breathing audibly for a moment, then slowly straightened.

Her plain jacket was fastened with pins—he didn’t know if this was to avoid the vanity of buttons, as the Moravians did, or whether she was simply too poor to have any. Her fingers fiddled nervously with the top pin, and then she suddenly pulled it out and laid it glinting on the shelf. She looked directly at him then, her fingers gripping the head of the next pin. Her long upper lip was pressed down, and a nervous sweat glistened on it.

“Dinna even think about it,” he said bluntly. “In my present condition, I couldna swive a dead sheep. To say nothing of which, I’m old enough to be your father, lass—and I’m marrit, forbye.”

Her mouth quivered slightly, though he couldn’t tell whether with disappointment or relief. Her fingers relaxed, though, and her hand dropped to her side.

“Ye dinna need to pay me for the food, lass,” he said. “It was a gift.”

“I—yes, I know. I thank thee, Friend.” She looked aside, swallowing a little. “I only—I hoped that perhaps—thee might stay. For a time.”

“I’m marrit, lass,” he repeated gently, then, after an uncomfortable pause, felt compelled to ask, “Do ye have such callers often?” It had been clear to him that the men were strangers to her—but she was not to them. They’d heard of the Quaker woman who lived alone with three young girls.

“I take them to the shed,” she blurted, her face going redder than the flames made it. “After the girls are asleep.”

“Mmphm,” he said, after another pause that lasted much too long. His eyes went to the cradle but then shot away. He wondered how long Mr. Hardman had been gone from home, but it wasn’t his business. Nor was it his business how she managed to feed her girls.

“Sleep, lass,” he said. “I’ll keep watch.”

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13

MORNING AIR AWASH WITH ANGELS

Next day

JAMIE AWOKE TO THE smell of frying meat and sat up straight in bed, forgetting his back.

“Lord have mercy,” said Mrs. Hardman, looking over her shoulder. “I haven’t heard a noise like that since the last time my husband, Gabriel, killed a pig.” She shook her head and returned to her cookery, pouring batter into an oiled cast-iron spider that sat in the coals, smoking and spitting in a baleful sort of way.

“I beg your pardon, ma’am—”

“Silvia is my name, Friend. And thine?” she asked, raising one brow at him.

“Friend Silvia,” he said through clenched teeth. “My name is Jamie. Jamie Fraser.” He’d raised his knees in the involuntary jerk that brought him upright, and now he wrapped his arms around them and laid his sweating face against the worn quilt that covered them, trying to stretch his recalcitrant back. The effort shot pain down his right leg and caused an instant sharp cramp in his left calf muscle, which made him grunt and pant until it let go.

"I'm pleased to see thee sit up, Friend Jamie," Silvia Hardman remarked, bringing him a plate filled with sausage, fried onions, and johnnycake. "Your back is some better, I collect?" She smiled at him.

"Somewhat," he managed, and smiled back as well as he could while trying not to groan. "You—have fresh food, I see."

"Yes, God be thanked," she said fervently. "I sent Pru and Patience out to the main road at dawn to watch for wagons coming in to the market in Philadelphia, and they came back with a pound of sausage, two of cornmeal, a sack of oats, and a dozen eggs. Eat up!" She placed the wooden plate on the bed beside him, with a wooden spoon.

Jamie could see Prudence and Patience behind their mother, industriously wiping sausage grease from their empty plates with chunks of johnnycake. Easing himself gingerly around in order to put his back against the wall, he stretched out his legs, picked up the plate, and followed their example.

The food filled him with a surprising sense of well-being, and he put down the empty plate determined upon enterprise.

"I propose to visit your privy, Friend Silvia. But I may need some assistance to rise."

Once on his feet, he found that he could make shift to stagger a few inches at a time, and Prudence and Patience at once rushed up to seize him by the elbows, in the manner of small flying buttresses.

“Don’t worry,” Prudence advised him, squaring her puny shoulders and looking confidently up at him. “We won’t let thee fall.”

“I’m sure ye won’t,” he said gravely. In fact, the little girls had a wiry strength that belied their fragile appearance, and he found their presence an actual help, as they provided something for him to hold on to for balance when it was necessary to stop—as it was every few feet.

“Tell me about the wagons that go into Philadelphia,” he said at one such stop, as much to make conversation as because he required the information. “Do they come only in the early morning?”

“Mostly,” Patience said. “They go back empty an hour or two before sunset.” She set her feet wider, bracing herself. “It’s all right,” she assured him. “Lean on me. Thee seems summat shaky.”

He squeezed her shoulder gently in thanks and let her take a very little of his weight. Shaky, indeed. It was more than half a mile to the main road; it would take over an hour to totter that far, even with the girls’ assistance, and the likelihood of his back freezing again and stranding him midway was yet too high to risk it. To say nothing of the risk of arriving in Philadelphia completely unable to move. By tomorrow, though …

“And did ye see soldiers on the road?” he asked, essaying a ginger step that shot pain from hip to foot. “Ow!”

“We did,” Patience said, taking a tighter grip on his elbow. “Courage, Friend. Thee will prevail. We saw two companies of militia, and one Continental officer on a mule.”

“We saw some British soldiers, too, though,” Prudence put in, eager not to be overlooked. “They were with a train of carts, going in the other direction.”

“The other—away from Philadelphia?” Jamie asked, his heart jumping. Was the evacuation of the British army already begun? “Could you see what was in the carts?”

Prudence shrugged. “Furniture. Trunks and baskets. There were ladies riding atop some of the carts, though mostly they walked alongside. No room,” she clarified. “Guard thy shirttail, Friend, or thy modesty will be at risk.” The morning was cool and breezy, and an errant gust of wind had risen up, bellying his shirt—wonderful on his sweating body, but definitely a risk to maiden eyes.

“Shall I knot the tails between thy legs?” Patience inquired. “I can tie a granny knot, an overhand knot, or a square knot. My daddy taught me!”

“Don’t be silly, Patience,” her sister said crossly. “If thee knots his shirt, how will he lift it to shit? No one can untie her knots,” she confided to Jamie. “She always makes them too tight.”

“Oh, I do not, liar!”

“Fie upon thee, sister! I’ll tell Mummy what thee said!”

“Where is your father?” Jamie interrupted, wanting to stop the acrimony before they began pulling each other’s hair. They did stop and glanced at each other for a moment before replying.

“We don’t know,” Prudence said, her voice small and sad. “He went a-hunting one day a year ago and didn’t come back.”

“It might be that Indians took him,” Patience said, trying to sound hopeful. “If so, may be that he’ll escape one day and come home.”

Prudence sighed.

“Maybe,” she said flatly. “Mummy thinks the militia shot him.”

"Why?" Jamie asked, looking down at her. "Why would they shoot him?"

"For being a Friend," Patience explained. "He wouldn't fight, and so they said he was a Loyalist."

"I see. Was—er, I mean—*is* he?"

Prudence looked at him, grateful for the "is."

"I don't think so. But Mummy says Philadelphia Yearly Meeting told everyone that all Friends should be for the King, as the King would keep peace and the Rebels seek to break it. So"—she shrugged—"people think all Friends are Loyalists."

"Daddy wasn't—*isn't,*" Patience put in. "He used to say all kinds of things about the King, and Mummy would get worried and beg him to hold his tongue. Here's the privy," she announced unnecessarily, letting go of Jamie's elbow in order to open the door. "Don't wipe thyself with the towel; it's for hands. There are corncobs in the basket."

* * *

JOHN GREY WOKE feverish and heavy-limbed, with a pounding headache, and a stabbing pain in his left eye when he tried to open it. Both his eyes were crusted and gummy. He'd been dreaming in vivid, fractured swaths, a confusion of images, voices, emotions … Jamie Fraser had been shouting at him, face dark with passion, but then something changed, some sort of pursuit began, and he fell back into queasy nightmare. They were running together through a bog, a sucking quagmire that pulled at his steps, and Fraser was struggling just ahead of him, trapped, shouting at him to go back, but he couldn't, his feet were mired fast and he was sinking, flailing madly but unable to get a purchase on anything …

“Gaah!” A hand shook him by the shoulder, startling him out of the morass. He pried his good eye open and saw the wavering form of a neat young man in a dark coat and spectacles, peering down at him in an oddly familiar way.

“John Grey?” said the young man.

“I am,” he said. He swallowed painfully. “Have I—the honor of your acquaintance, sir?”

The young man flushed a bit.

“Thee has, Friend Grey,” he said, low-voiced. “I am—”

“Oh!” Grey said, sitting up in a rush. “Of course, you—oh. Oh, Jesus.” His head, disturbed by the abrupt change of posture, had apparently decided to fly off his shoulders and thump into the nearest wall. The young man … *Hunter*, he thought, finding the name turn up with an odd neatness among the chaos inside his skull. *Dr*. Hunter. Dottie’s Quaker.

“I think thee had best lie down, Friend.”

“I think I had best vomit first.”

Hunter snatched the pot out from under the cot just in time. By the time he had administered water—“Drink slowly, Friend, if thee wishes to keep it”—and eased Grey back down on the cot, Colonel Smith was looming up behind him.

“What do you say, Doctor?” Smith was frowning and seemed worried. “Is he in his right mind? He was singing last night, now he’s been moaning and saying odd things, and the look of him …” Smith grimaced in a fashion that made Grey wonder what the devil he *did* look like.

“He’s badly fevered,” Hunter said, with a piercing look through his spectacles as he bent to take hold of Grey’s wrist. “And thee sees the condition of his eye. It would be dangerous to move him. A further extravasation of blood into the brain …”

Smith made a discontented noise and compressed his lips. He nudged Hunter aside and bent over Grey.

“Can you hear me, Colonel?” he asked, speaking in the slow, distinct manner one used with idiots and foreigners.

“Ich bin ein Fisch …” Grey murmured beatifically, and closed his eyes.

“His pulse is much disordered,” Hunter said warningly, his thumb pressing Grey’s wrist. His hand was cool and firm; Grey found the touch comforting. “I really cannot answer for the consequences should he be moved abruptly.”

“I see.” Smith stood still for a moment; Grey could hear his heavy breathing but forbore opening his eyes. “Very well, then.” He gave a short, humorless laugh. “If Mohammed cannot go to the mountain, then the mountain will jolly well have to come here. I’ll send a note to General Wayne. Do what you can, please, to see that he’s coherent, Doctor?”

* * *

HE COULD SEE Denzell Hunter out of his damaged eye; that was reassuring: he wasn’t blind. Yet. Hunter had removed his spectacles in order to peer more closely into the injured organ; he had very nice eyes himself, Grey thought—the iris just the light-brown color of the flesh of a ripe olive, with tiny streaks of deep green.

“Look up, please,” Hunter murmured.

Grey tried to oblige.

“Ow!”

"No? Look down." This attempt was no more successful, nor could he move the eye to the right or left. It seemed to have solidified in its socket, like a hard-boiled egg. He put this theory to Hunter, who smiled, though in a rather worried way.

"There *is* a great deal of swelling, to be sure. Whatever struck thee did so with a good deal of force." Hunter's fingers moved gently over Grey's face, prodding here and there in a questioning manner. "Does this—"

"Yes, he did. Don't keep asking if it hurts; everything from my scalp to my chin hurts, including my left ear. What you said regarding extravasation of blood into the brain—did you mean it?"

"It's possible." Hunter did smile at that, though. "But since thee has shown no disposition to seizure or unconsciousness—save that due to alcohol—and thee apparently walked for several hours following the injury, I think perhaps the probability is lower. There *is* bleeding beneath the sclera, though." His cool fingertips brushed the puffy lid. "Thy eyeball is crimson, as is the lining of thy eyelid. It's rather … dramatic." There was a distinct tone of amusement in this, which Grey found reassuring.

"Oh, good," he said dryly. "How long will it take to go away?"

That made the Quaker grimace and shake his head.

"The blood will take a week to a month to clear; it's essentially the same as mere bruising—the bursting of small blood vessels under the skin. What worries me is thy inability to move the eye. I think thee has a fracture of the bony orbit, which is somehow trapping the orbicularis muscle. I do wish thy wife was here; she has a much greater—"

“My wife,” Grey said blankly. “Oh!” Memory and realization collided, and he felt a sudden leap of spirit. “She isn’t my wife! Not anymore,” he added, and found himself grinning. He leaned forward to whisper into Hunter’s astonished ear, “Jamie Fraser isn’t dead!”

Hunter stared at him, blinked, put his spectacles back on, and resumed staring, obviously rethinking his appraisal of Grey’s brain.

“He’s the one who hit me,” Grey said helpfully. “It’s all right,” he added at Hunter’s frown. “I was asking for it.”

“God be praised,” Hunter whispered, breaking into a huge smile—apparently at the news of Fraser’s survival rather than Grey’s assurance of the morality of his actions. “Ian will be—” He broke off with a gesture indicating his inability to describe Ian Murray’s probable emotions.

“And Friend Claire!” he exclaimed, eyes huge behind his spectacles. “Does she know?”

“Yes, but—” Approaching footsteps made Grey hurl himself back onto the cot, with a completely authentic exclamation of pain. He shut his eyes and rolled his head to one side, groaning.

“The mountain seems to be with General Washington,” Smith said, plainly disedified. Grey felt him come to a stop by the cot, bumping it with his legs. “Do what you can to see that he’s capable of travel by tomorrow, Doctor—we’ll load him into one of the wagons, if necessary.”

Number 17 Chestnut Street

HIS GRACE WOKE up in the morning red-eyed as a ferret and in roughly the same temper as a rabid badger. Had I a tranquilizing dart, I would have shot him with it without an instant's hesitation. As it was, I prescribed a large slug of brandy to be added to his breakfast coffee and—after a brief struggle with my Hippocratic conscience—added a very small amount of laudanum to it.

I couldn't give him much; it depressed the respiration, among other things. Still, I reasoned, counting the aromatic reddish-brown drops as they plinked into the brandy, it was a more humane way of dealing with him than crowning him with the chamber pot or calling Mrs. Figg to sit on him whilst I tied him to the bedstead and gagged him.

And I did require him to be both immobile and quiet for a short period. Mr. Figg, a preacher of the Methodist Society, was bringing round two young men of the society who were carpenters, to rehang the front door and nail boards over the shutters of the downstairs windows, in case of roving mobs. I'd told Mrs. Figg that of course she might confide our circumstances to her husband—I couldn't very well stop her—but that perhaps he might be persuaded not to mention His Grace's presence, in the interests of protecting Lord John's safety and property—to say nothing of His Grace, who was, after all, Lord John's presumably beloved brother.

Mrs. Figg would cheerfully have handed the duke over to be tarred and feathered, but an appeal on Lord John's behalf would always carry weight with her, and she nodded in sober agreement. So long as His Grace didn't draw attention to himself by shouting out of the upstairs window or hurling things at the workmen, she thought his presence could be concealed.

"What you mean to do with him, though, Lady John?" she asked, glancing warily toward the ceiling. We were standing in the back parlor, conferring in lowered voices while Jenny administered Hal's breakfast and made sure all the brandy-laced coffee was drunk. “And what if the army sends someone round to ask after him?”

I made a helpless gesture.

“I have no idea,” I confessed. “I just need to keep him here until either Lord John or my—er, Mr. Fraser—comes. They’ll know what to do with him. As for the army, if anyone comes asking after His Grace, I’ll … um … speak to them.”

She gave me a look indicating that she’d heard better plans, but nodded reluctantly and went off to fetch her marketing basket. The first thing that happens in a newly occupied city is a shortage of food, and with the Continental army poised to descend on Philadelphia like a plague of locusts, the wagons that normally brought in produce from the countryside would likely be sparse. If either army *was* on the road already, they’d be seizing anything that came along.

At the door, though, Mrs. Figg paused and turned around.

“What about William?” she demanded. “If he comes back …” She was obviously torn between hope that he *would* come back—she was worried for him—and consternation at what might happen if he encountered his uncle in captivity.

“I’ll speak to him,” I repeated firmly, and waved a hand toward the door.

Running upstairs, I found Hal yawning over a nearly empty breakfast tray and Jenny fastidiously wiping egg yolk off the corner of his mouth. She’d spent the night at the printshop but had come back to help, bringing with her a battered portmanteau filled with possibly useful items.

“His Grace made a good breakfast,” she reported, stepping back to examine her work critically. “And he’s moved his bowels. I made him do that afore he drank his coffee, just in case. Wasna sure how quick it might be.”

Hal frowned at her, though whether in puzzlement or offense, I couldn't tell. His pupils were already noticeably constricted, which gave him a slightly staring look. He blinked at me and shook his head, as though trying to clear it.

"Let me have a quick check of your vital signs, Your Grace," I said, smiling and feeling like Judas. He was my patient—but Jamie was my husband, and I hardened my resolve.

His pulse was slow and quite regular, which reassured me. I took out my stethoscope, unbuttoned his nightshirt, and had a listen: a nice, steady heartbeat, no palpitations, but the lungs were gurgling like a leaky cistern, and his breathing was interrupted by small gasps.

"He'd best have some of the *Ephedra* tincture," I said, straightening up. It was a stimulant and would antagonize the opiate in his system, but I couldn't risk his stopping breathing while asleep. "I'll stay with him; will you go down and get a cup—don't bother heating it, cold will do." I wasn't sure he'd stay conscious long enough to have a cup heated.

"I really must go to see General Clinton this morning," Pardloe said, with surprising firmness, considering his foggy mental state. He cleared his throat and coughed. "There are arrangements to make.… My regiment …"

"Ah. Er … where *is* your regiment just now?" I asked cautiously. If they were in Philadelphia, Hal's adjutant would be starting to look for him in earnest at any minute. He might reasonably have spent the night with a son or daughter, but by now … and I didn't know precisely how much distraction value my forged notes might have had.

"New York," he replied. "Or at least I sincerely hope so." He closed his eyes, swayed slightly, then straightened his back with a jerk. "Landed there. I came down to Philadelphia … to see Henry … Dottie." His face twisted with pain. "Mean … to go back with Clinton."

"Of course," I said soothingly, trying to think. *When*, exactly, would Clinton and his troops leave? Assuming Pardloe to be sufficiently recovered that he wouldn't actually die without my attendance, I could give him back as soon as the exodus was under way. At that point, he'd have no way of starting a major search for John and endangering Jamie. But surely Jamie—with or without John—would come back at any moment?

Who did come back was Jenny, with the *Ephedra* tincture—and a hammer in the pocket of her apron and three stout laths under her arm. She handed me the cup without comment and proceeded to nail the laths over the window, in a surprisingly brisk and competent manner.

Hal sipped his *Ephedra* slowly, watching Jenny with bemusement.

"Why is she doing that?" he asked, though not as if he cared particularly what the answer was.

"Hurricanes, Your Grace," she said with a straight face, and zipped out to return the hammer to the carpenters, whose cheerful banging sounded like a battalion of woodpeckers attacking the house.

"Oh," Hal said. He was glancing vaguely round the room, possibly in search of his breeches, which Mrs. Figg had thoughtfully taken away and hidden in the cookhouse. His eye rested on the small pile of Willie's books I had moved to the top of the dressing table. Evidently he recognized one or more, because he said, "Oh. William. Where *is* William?"

“I’m sure Willie’s very busy today,” I said, and picked up his wrist again. “Perhaps we’ll see him later.” His heartbeat was slow but still strong. Just as his grip loosened, I caught the empty cup and set it on the table. His head drooped, and I eased him carefully back on the pillow, propped for easier breathing.

“If he comes back …” Mrs. Figg had said of Willie, with the obvious implication, *“what then?”*

What indeed?

Colenso had not returned, so presumably he had found William; that was reassuring. But what William was doing—or thinking …

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14

INCIPIENT THUNDER

"*AN ASSIGNMENT BEFITTING your peculiar situation,*" Major Findlay had said. Findlay didn't know the half of it, William reflected bitterly. Not that his situation wasn't "peculiar," even without his recent discoveries.

He had surrendered at Saratoga, with the rest of Burgoyne's army, in October of '77. The British soldiers and their German allies had been obliged to yield their weapons but were not to be held prisoner; the Convention of Saratoga, signed by Burgoyne and by the Continental general, Gates, had stated that all troops would be allowed to return to Europe, once they had given their parole not to take up arms again in the American conflict.

But ships could not sail during the winter storms, and something had to be done with the captured soldiers. Referred to as the Convention army, they had been marched en masse to Cambridge, Massachusetts, there to await spring and repatriation. All but William and a few like him, who had either connections in America with influence, or connections with Sir Henry, who had succeeded Howe as commander in chief of the American campaign.

William, fortunate fellow, had both; he had served on Howe's personal staff, his uncle was the colonel of a regiment, and his father was an influential diplomat, presently in Philadelphia. He had been released under an exceptional personal parole, as a favor to General Lord Howe, and sent to Lord John. He was, however, still part of the British army, merely precluded from actual fighting. And the army had any number of obnoxious chores that did not involve fighting; General Clinton had been delighted to make use of him.

Deeply galled by his situation, William had begged his father to try to have him exchanged; that would remove the conditions of his parole and allow him to resume full military duties. Lord John had been quite willing to do this, but in January of 1778 there had been a falling-out between General Burgoyne and the Continental Congress over the former's refusal to provide a list of the surrendered soldiers. The Convention of Saratoga had been repudiated by the Congress, which then declared that it would detain the entire Convention army until the convention and the required list were ratified by King George—the Congress knowing damned well that the King would do no such thing, as such an act would be tantamount to acknowledging the independence of the colonies. The upshot of this was that there was at present no mechanism at all for the exchange of prisoners. Any prisoners.

Which left William in a deeply ambiguous position. Technically, he was an escaped prisoner, and in the highly unlikely event that he was recaptured by the Americans and discovered to be one of the Saratoga officers, he would promptly be marched off to Massachusetts to languish for the rest of the war. At the same time, no one was quite sure whether it was appropriate for him to take up arms again, since even though the convention had been repudiated, William had been given a personal parole.

Which had led to William's present invidious situation, in charge of troops assisting the evacuation of Philadelphia's richest Loyalists. The only thing he could think of that might be worse was driving a herd of swine through the eye of a needle.

While the poorer citizens who felt endangered by the proximity of General Washington's militias were obliged to brave the dangers of the road, making their exodus by wagon, handcart, and foot, the wealthier Loyalists were allowed a safer and theoretically more luxurious removal by ship. And not one of them could be brought to understand that there was but *one* ship presently available—General Howe's own ship—and very limited room aboard it.

"No, madam, I'm very sorry, but it's quite impossible to accommodate—"

"Nonsense, young man, my husband's grandfather purchased that tall clock in the Netherlands in 1670. It displays not only the time but also the phases of the moon and a complete table of tides for the Bay of Napoli! Surely you do not expect me to allow such an instrument to fall into the clutches of the Rebels?"

"Yes, madam, I'm afraid I do. No, sir, no servants; only the members of your immediate family and a very small amount of baggage. I'm sure that your bond servants will be perfectly safe following by—"

"But they'll starve!" exclaimed a cadaverous-looking gentleman who was loath to part with his talented cook and a plumply voluptuous housemaid, who, if not talented at sweeping, obviously had other desirable abilities, these clearly on display. "Or be abducted! They are my responsibility! Surely you cannot—"

"I can," said William firmly, with an appreciative sideways glance at the housemaid, "and I must. Corporal Higgins, please see Mr. Hennings's bond servants safely off the quay. No, madam. I agree that the matched armchairs are quite valuable, but so are the lives of the people who will drown if the ship sinks. You may take your carriage clock, yes." He raised his voice and bellowed, "Lieutenant Rendill!"

Rendill, face red and streaming, fought his way through the crowd of pushing, cursing, heaving, shrieking evacuees. Arriving in front of William, who was perched on a box in order to avoid being trampled or pushed into the water by the crowd, the lieutenant saluted but was rudely jostled by several people attempting to gain William's attention and ended with his wig pushed over his eyes.

"Yes, sir?" he said gamely, pushing it back and elbowing a gentleman out of the way as politely as possible.

"Here's a list of General Howe's particular acquaintances, Rendill. Go on board and see if they've all made it—if they haven't …" He cast an eloquent glance over the surging throng on the dock, surrounded by mountains of semi-abandoned possessions and trampled baggage, and thrust the list unceremoniously into the lieutenant's hand. "Find them."

"Oh, God," said Rendill. "I mean … yes, sir. At once, sir." And, with a hopeless air, he turned and began to swim through the crowd, doing a modified but vigorous form of breaststroke.

"Rendill!"

Rendill obediently turned and made his way resignedly back into earshot, a stout red porpoise surging his way through shoals of hysterical herring.

“Sir?”

William leaned down and lowered his voice to a level inaudible to the press of people around them, then nodded at the piles of furniture and baggage heaped unsteadily all over the dock—many of them dangerously close to the edge.

“As you pass, tell the fellows on the dock that they should take no great pains to preserve those heaps of things from falling into the river, would you?”

Rendill’s perspiring face brightened amazingly.

“Yes, sir!” He saluted and swam off again, radiating renewed enthusiasm, and William, his soul slightly soothed, turned courteously to attend to the complaint of a harried German father with six daughters, all of them carrying what appeared to be their entire lavish wardrobes, anxious round faces peering out between the brims of their wide straw hats and the piles of silk and lace in their arms.

Paradoxically, the heat and incipient thunder in the air suited his mood, and the sheer impossibility of his task relaxed him. Once he’d realized the ultimate futility of satisfying all these people—or even one in ten of them—he stopped worrying about it, took what steps he could to preserve order, and let his mind go elsewhere while he bowed courteously and made noises of reassurance to the phalanx of faces pressing in upon him.

Had he been in a mood for irony, he reflected, there was plenty of it to go round. He was neither fish nor fowl nor good red beef, as the country folk said of an ambiguous cut of meat. Not a full soldier, not a free civilian. And, evidently, neither an Englishman nor an earl … and yet … how could he possibly not be an Englishman, for God's sake?

Once he had regained enough of his temper to think, he had realized that he was still *legally* the Ninth Earl of Ellesmere, regardless of his paternity. His parents—his real parents—his *theoretically* real parents—had undeniably been married at the time of his birth. At the moment, though, that seemed to make matters worse: how could he go about letting people think and act as though he were the heir of Ellesmere's ancient blood when he knew damned well that he was really the son of—

He choked that thought off, shoving it violently to the back of his mind. "Son of" had brought Lord John vividly to mind, though. He breathed deep of the hot, murky, fish-smelling air, trying to quell the sudden pang that came to him at thought of Papa.

He hadn't wanted to admit it to himself, but he'd been looking through the crowd all day, scanning the faces in search of his fa—yes, dammit, his father! John Grey was as much his father now as he ever had been. *Goddamned liar or not.* And William was growing worried about him. Colenso had reported that morning that Lord John had not returned to his house—and Lord John *should* have returned by now. And if he had, he would have come to find William, he was sure of that. Unless Fraser had killed him.

He swallowed bile at the thought. Why would he? The men had once been friends, good friends.

True, war severed such bonds. But even so—

On account of Mother Claire? He recoiled from that thought, too, but made himself come back to it. He could still see her face, glowing in spite of the uproar, fierce as flame with the joy of seeing Jamie Fraser, and felt a prick of jealousy on behalf of his father. If Fraser felt similarly impassioned, might he … but that was nonsense! Surely he must realize that Lord John had only taken her under his protection—and done that for the sake of his good friend!

But, then, they *were* married … and his father had always been quite open regarding matters of sex.… His face grew even hotter, with embarrassment at the vision of his father enthusiastically bedding the not-quite-ex-Mrs. Fraser. And if Fraser had discovered that—

"No, sir!" he said sharply to the importunate merchant who—he realized belatedly—had just tried to bribe him to admit the merchant's family to Howe's ship. "How dare you? Begone, and think yourself fortunate that I have no time to deal with you as I ought!"

The man shuffled disconsolately away, and William felt a small pang of regret, but there was in fact little he could do. Even had he felt able to stretch a point in the merchant's favor, once a bribe was offered, he had no choice.

Even if it were true, how would Fraser have discovered it? Surely Lord John wouldn't have been foolish enough to tell him. No, it must be something else that was delaying Papa's return—doubtless the muddle of people leaving Philadelphia; the roads must be choked.…

"Yes, madam. I think we have room for you and your daughter," he said to a young mother, very frightened-looking, with a baby clutched against her shoulder. He reached out and touched the infant's cheek; she was awake, but not troubled by the crowd, and regarded him with soft brown long-lashed eyes. "Hallo, sweetheart. Want to go on a boat with your mummy?"

The mother gave a stifled sob of relief.

"Oh, thank you, Lord—it is Lord Ellesmere, is it not?"

“It is,” he said automatically, and then felt as though someone had punched him in the belly. He swallowed and his face burned.

“My husband is Lieutenant Beaman Gardner,” she said, offering the name in anxious justification of his mercy, and bobbed a short curtsy. “We’ve met. At the Mischianza?”

“Yes, of course!” he said, bowing, though he didn’t recall Mrs. Lieutenant Gardner at all. “Honored to be of service to a brother officer’s wife, ma’am. If you will be so good as to go on board directly, please? Corporal Anderson? Escort Mrs. Gardner and Miss Gardner on board.”

He bowed again and turned away, feeling as though his insides had been scooped out. *Brother officer. My lord.* And what would Mrs. Lieutenant Gardner have thought if she’d known? What would the lieutenant himself think?

He sighed deeply, closing his eyes for an instant’s escape. And when he opened them, found himself face-to-face with Captain Ezekiel Richardson.

“Stercus!” he exclaimed, startled into his uncle Hal’s habit of Latin denunciation in moments of extreme stress.

“Indeed,” Richardson remarked politely. “May I have a word with you? Yes, just so—Lieutenant!” He beckoned to the nearby Rendill, who was eyeball-to-eyeball with an elderly woman in black bombazine with no fewer than four small dogs yapping at her heels, these held by a long-suffering small black boy. Rendill made a quelling motion to her and turned to Richardson.

“Sir?”

“Relieve Captain Lord Ellesmere, please. I require a moment of his time.”

Before William could decide whether to object or not, Richardson had him by the elbow and was towing him out of the scrum and into the lee of a neat little sky-blue boathouse that stood on the riverbank.

William breathed deep with relief as the shade fell upon him but had by then gathered his wits. His first impulse had been to speak sharply to Richardson—followed perhaps by knocking him into the river—but wisdom spoke in his ear, advising otherwise.

It was at Richardson's instigation that William had become for a short time an intelligencer for the army, collecting information in the context of various journeys and delivering this to Richardson. On the last of these missions, though, a journey into the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia, William had had the misfortune to become lost, be wounded, and suffer a fever that would certainly have killed him had Ian Murray not found and rescued him—in the course of the rescue informing William that he had almost certainly been gulled and sent not into the bosom of British allies but into a nest of Rebels, who would hang him should they discover who he was.

William was of two minds as to whether to believe Murray or not—particularly after the arrival of Jamie Fraser had made it patently clear that Murray was his own cousin but hadn't felt it necessary to apprise him of the fact. But a deep suspicion of Richardson and his motives remained, and it was no friendly face that he turned on the man.

"What do you want?" he said abruptly.

"Your father," Richardson replied, causing William's heart to give a great thump that he thought must be audible to the other. "Where is Lord John?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," William said shortly. "I haven't seen him since yesterday." *The day my bloody life* *ended*. “What do you want with him?” he asked, not bothering with any semblance of courtesy.

Richardson twitched an eyebrow but didn’t otherwise respond to his tone.

“His brother, the Duke of Pardloe, has disappeared.”

“The—what?” William stared at him for a moment, uncomprehending. “His brother? Disappeared … from where? When?”

“Evidently from your father’s house. As to when: Lady John said that he left the house just after tea yesterday afternoon, presumably in search of your father. Have you seen him since then?”

“I haven’t seen him at all.” William felt a distinct ringing in his ears—probably his brains trying to get out through them. “What—I mean, I had no idea he was in Philadelphia. In the colonies at all, for that matter. When did he arrive?” *Jesus, did he come to deal with Dottie and her Quaker? No, he can’t have, he couldn’t have had time … could he?*

Richardson was squinting at him, probably trying to determine whether he was telling the truth.

“I haven’t seen either of them,” William said flatly. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, Captain …” There was a tremendous splash from the direction of the dock and a loud chorus of shock and dismay from the crowd. “Excuse me,” William repeated, and turned away.

Richardson seized him by the arm and made an effort to fix William with his gaze. William looked deliberately in the direction of his neglected duty.

“*When* you see either one of them, Captain Ransom, be so good as to send word to me. It would be a great help—to many people.”

William jerked his arm free and stalked off without reply. Richardson had used his family name instead of his title—did that mean anything beyond mere rudeness? At the moment, he didn't care. He couldn't fight, he couldn't help anyone, he couldn't tell the truth, and he wouldn't live a lie. God damn it, he was stuck like a hog, mired to the hocks.

He wiped the sweat from his face on his sleeve, squared his shoulders, and strode back into the fray. All there was to do was his duty.

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15

AN ARMY ON THE MOVE

WE WERE JUST IN time. No sooner had I closed the bedroom door on Pardloe's gentle snore than a knock came on the newly hung front door below. I hurried downstairs to find Jenny face-to-face with a British soldier, this time a lieutenant. General Clinton was escalating his inquiries.

"Why, no, lad," she was saying, in a tone of mild surprise, "the colonel isn't here. He took tea with Lady John yesterday, but then he went off to look for his brother. His lordship hasn't come back, and"—I saw her lean closer, her voice lowered dramatically—"her ladyship's that worried. Ye'll not have news of him, I suppose?"

This was my cue, and I came down from the landing, rather surprised to find that I was indeed "that worried." Tending Hal had distracted me from the situation temporarily, but by now there was no denying that something had gone seriously wrong.

"Lady John. Lieutenant Roswell, your servant, ma'am." The lieutenant bowed, with a professional smile that didn't hide the slight furrowing of his brow. The army was getting worried, too, and that was bloody dangerous. “Your servant, mum. Have you in fact had no word from Lord John or Lord Melton—oh, I beg your pardon, my lady, I mean from His Grace?”

“D’ye think I’m a liar, lad?” Jenny said tartly.

“Oh! No, mum, not at all,” he said, flushing. “But the general will want to know that I spoke with her ladyship.”

“Of course,” I said soothingly, though my heart was pittering in my throat. “Tell the general that I haven’t heard from my husband”—*either of them*—“at all. I’m most disturbed.” I wasn’t a good liar, but I wasn’t lying now.

He grimaced.

“The thing is, mum, the army has begun withdrawing from Philadelphia, and all Loyalists remaining in the city are being advised that they may wish to … er … make preparations.” His lips compressed for a moment as he glanced at the stairwell, with its ruined banister and bloody fist marks. “I … see that you have already experienced some … difficulty?”

“Och, no,” Jenny said, and with a deprecating glance at me, stepped nearer the lieutenant and put her hand on his arm, pushing him gently toward the door. He automatically moved away with her, and I heard her murmur, “… no but a wee family quarrel … his lordship …”

The lieutenant shot me a swift glance, in which surprise mingled with a certain sympathy. But the lines in his forehead eased. He had an explanation to take back to Clinton.

Blood flamed in my cheeks at his look—as though there truly had been a family row, during which Lord John had stamped out, leaving wreckage in his wake and a wife at the mercy of the Rebels. True, it *was* a family row, but the circumstances were more through-the-looking-glass than a matter of mere common scandal.

The White Rabbit shut our new door firmly on Lieutenant Roswell and turned to me, back pressed against it.

"Lord Melton?" she asked, one black eyebrow raised.

"It's one of the duke's titles, one he used before he became Duke of Pardloe. Lieutenant Roswell must have known him some years ago," I explained.

"Oh, aye. Well, lord or duke, how long can we keep him asleep?" she asked.

"The laudanum will keep him out for two or three hours," I replied, glancing at the gilt carriage clock on the mantel, which had somehow escaped the carnage. "But he had a very hard day yesterday and a rather disturbed night; he may well go straight off into a natural sleep as the drug wears off. If no one comes along to knock the house down round our ears," I added, wincing at sounds of a violent altercation somewhere nearby.

Jenny nodded. "Aye. I'd best go along to the printshop now, then, to see what the news in the city is. And perhaps Jamie will ha' gone there," she added hopefully. "Not thinking it safe to come here, I mean, wi' the streets full of soldiers."

A spark of hope at the suggestion flared up like a lit match. Though even as I envisioned the possibility, I knew that if Jamie was in the city at all, he'd be standing before me right now. Possibly enraged, possibly disturbed, but before me.

With the army already beginning its withdrawal, and the concomitant public disturbances, no one would have time or inclination to notice—let alone arrest—a tall Scotsman suspected of nothing more than passing suspicious documents. It wasn't as though there was an all points bulletin out on him—or at least I hoped not. William was the only soldier who knew that Jamie had taken Lord John hostage, and from his manner in leaving, I rather thought that the last thing William would have done was give a full report of the situation to his superiors.

I said as much to Jenny, though agreed that she ought to go back to the printshop, to check on the welfare of Fergus and Marsali's family, as well as to find out what was going on amongst the Rebels in the city.

"Will you be safe in the streets?" I asked, unfolding her cloak and holding it up for her to put on.

"Oh, I expect so," she said briskly. "No one much thinks to look at an auld woman. But I suppose I'd best put away my wee bawbee." The bawbee in question was a small silver chiming watch, with a delicately filigreed cover, which she wore pinned to the bosom of her dress.

"Jamie bought it for me in Brest," she explained, seeing me looking at it as she unpinned it. "I told him it was foolery; I didna need such a thing to ken the time, nay more than he did himself. But he said, no, I must have it, that knowing what o'clock it is gives ye the illusion that ye have some control over your circumstances. Ye ken how he is," she added, putting the watch carefully away in her pocket, "always explaining ye to yourself. Though I will say as he's no often wrong.

"Now, then," she added, turning to me as she opened the door. "I'll come back before him upstairs wakes up, unless I can't, and if I can't, I'll send Germain to say so."

"Why should you not be able to?" I asked, in some surprise.

“Young Ian,” she said, equally surprised that I should not have thought of this. “Wi’ the army leaving, he may have come back from Valley Forge by now—and ye ken, the poor lad thinks I’m dead.”

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16

ROOM FOR SECRETS

In the forest, five miles from Valley Forge

"DO QUAKERS BELIEVE in heaven?" Ian Murray asked.

"Some do," Rachel Hunter replied, pausing to turn over a large toadstool with the toe of her shoe. "No, dog, don't touch that one. See the color of its gills?" Rollo, who had come to sniff at the fungus, dismissed it with a perfunctory sneeze and lifted his snout to the wind in hopes of more promising prey.

"Auntie Claire says dogs canna see colors," Ian remarked. "And what d'ye mean, 'Some do'? Is there a difference of opinion on the matter?" Quaker beliefs puzzled him beyond measure, but he found Rachel's explanations invariably entertaining.

"Perhaps they smell them instead. The dogs, I mean. But to return to thy question, we consider our life here on earth to be a sacrament, lived in the light of Christ. There may be an afterlife, but as no one has come back to say so, it's a matter of speculation, left to each person individually."

They had paused in the shade of a small walnut grove, and the soft green sun that fell flickering through the leaves gave Rachel herself an unearthly glow that any angel might have envied.

"Well, I havena been there, either, so I'll no just say that's wrong," he said, and bent to kiss her just above the ear. A faint rush of tiny gooseflesh stippled her temple for an instant, and the sight touched his heart.

"Why does thee think of heaven?" she asked curiously. "Does thee think there will be fighting in the city? I haven't known thee overly fearful for thy life before." Valley Forge had been hoaching like a grain sack full of weevils when they left it an hour before, the soldiers salvaging what they could from the camp, molding fresh musket balls and packing cartridges, preparing to march on Philadelphia when the word was given that Clinton's men had withdrawn.

"Och, no. There'll be nay fighting in the city. Washington will try to catch Clinton's men in retreat." He took her hand, small and brown and work-roughened but the fingers reassuringly strong as they turned and clasped his. "Nay, I was thinking of my mam—that I should ha' liked to show her places like this." He gestured toward the little clearing in which they stood, a tiny spring of an improbably deep blue welling up from the rock under their feet, overhung by a yellow wild-rose brier, humming with summer bees. "She had a big yellow rose brier growin' up the wall at Lallybroch; my grandmother planted it." He swallowed a small lump in his throat. "But then I thought, may be as she's happier in heaven with my da than she would be here without him."

Rachel's hand squeezed his, hard.

"She would be with him always, in life or in death," she whispered, and stood a-tiptoe to kiss him back. "And thee will take me someday to see thy grandmother's rose in Scotland."

They stood in silence for a bit, and Ian felt his heart, clenched with a sudden grief at the thought of his mother, ease in Rachel's sympathetic company. He hadn't said it, but what he most regretted was not his inability to show his mother the beauties of America but the fact that he couldn't show her Rachel.

"She'd have liked ye," he blurted. "My mam."

"I hope that she would," Rachel said, though with a tinge of dubiousness. "Did thee tell her about me, in Scotland? That I am a Friend, I mean. Some Catholics find us scandalous."

Ian tried to remember whether he *had* mentioned that to his mother, but couldn't. It made no difference, in any case, and he shrugged, dismissing it.

"I told her I loved ye. That seemed to be enough. Come to think, though—my da asked all kinds of questions about ye; he wanted to know everything he could. He kent ye were a Quaker, so that means she kent it, too." He took her elbow to help her down from the rock.

She nodded, thoughtful, but as she followed him out of the clearing, he heard her ask behind him, "Does thee think a married couple should be completely in each other's confidence—share not only their histories, I mean, but every thought?"

That sent a qualm skittering down his backbone like a mouse with cold feet, and he took a deep breath. He loved Rachel with every fiber of his being, but he found her apparent ability to read him like a book—if not to actually hear his thoughts, and sometimes he thought for sure she did that, too—unsettling.

He had in fact suggested that they walk together to Matson's Ford and meet Denzell with the wagon there, rather than ride with him from Valley Forge, so that Ian might have sufficient time and solitude in which to share a few necessary things with her. He'd rather be tortured by Abenakis than tell her some of those things, but it was right she should know them, no matter what the result might be.

"Aye. I mean … well, so far as one can, I think they maybe should. Not every thought, I dinna mean, but important things. Ahh … history, like ye said. Here, come sit for a wee while." There was a big fallen log, half rotted and covered with moss and fuzzy gray lichens, and he led her to it, sitting down beside her in the fragrant shade of a big red cedar.

She didn't say anything, but lifted a brow in question.

"Well." He drew a deep breath, feeling that there wasn't enough air in the whole forest for this. "Did ye ken … I've been marrit before?"

Her face flickered, surprise overcome by determination so fast that he'd have missed it if he hadn't been watching so close.

"I did not," she said, and began to pleat the folds of her skirt, one-handed, clear hazel eyes fixed intently on his face. "Thee did say *been* married. Thee isn't now, I suppose?"

He shook his head, feeling a little easier—and very grateful to her. Not every young woman would have taken it so calmly.

"No. I wouldna have spoken to ye—asked ye to marry me, I mean—otherwise."

She pursed her lips a little and her eyes narrowed.

"In point of fact," she said thoughtfully, "thee never *has* asked me to marry thee."

"I didn't?" he said, staggered. "Are ye sure?"

"I would have noticed," she assured him gravely. "No, thee didn't. Though I recall a few very moving declarations, there was no suggestion of marriage among them."

"But—well." Heat had risen in his cheeks. "I—but you … ye said …" Maybe she was right. She *had* said … or had she? "Did ye not say ye loved me?"

Her mouth turned up just a little, but he could see her laughing at him at the back of her eyes.

"Not in so many words. But I did give thee to understand that, yes. Or at least I meant to."

"Oh. Well, then," he said, much happier. "Ye did." And he pulled her into his one sound arm and kissed her with great fervor. She kissed him back, panting a little, her fists curled in the fabric of his shirt, then broke away, looking mildly dazed. Her lips were swollen, the skin around them pink, scraped by his beard.

"Perhaps," she said, and swallowed, pushing him away with one hand flat on his chest, "perhaps thee should finish telling me about not being married, before we go further? Who was thy—thy wife—and what happened to her?"

He let go of her reluctantly but would not surrender her hand. It felt like a small live thing, warm in his.

"Her name is Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa," he said, and felt the accustomed inner shift at the speaking of it, as though the line between his Mohawk self and his white self had momentarily disappeared, leaving him awkwardly suspended somewhere in between. “It means ‘Works With Her Hands.’ ” He cleared his throat. “I called her Emily. Most of the time.”

Rachel’s small, smooth hand jerked in his.

“Is?” she said, blinking. “Thee said is? Thy wife is *alive*?”

“She was a year ago,” he said, and, with an effort, didn’t cling to her hand but let her take it back. She folded her hands in her lap, fixed her eyes on him, and swallowed; he saw her throat move.

“All right,” she said, with no more than a faint tremor in her voice. “Tell me about her.”

He took another deep breath, trying to think how to do *that*, but then abandoned the effort and spoke simply.

“D’ye truly want to know that, Rachel? Or do ye only want to ken whether I loved her—or whether I love her now?”

“Start there,” she said, lifting one brow. “*Does* thee love her?”

“I—yes,” he said, helpless to speak other than the truth to her. Rollo, sensing some disturbance among his pack, got up from his resting place and padded over to Rachel. He sat down by her foot, making his allegiance in the matter clear, and gave Ian a yellow-eyed wolf look over Rachel’s knee that bore an uncomfortable resemblance to the look in her own eye. “But …”

The brow lifted a fraction of an inch higher.

“She … was my refuge,” he blurted. “When I left my own family and became a Mohawk, it was as much to be wi’ her as because I had to.”

“Had to … what?” She looked baffled, and he saw her eyes drop a little, tracing the tattooed lines across his cheekbones. “Thee had to become a Mohawk? Why?”

He nodded, feeling momentarily on firmer ground. He could tell her this story; it was only what had happened. Her eyes went round when he explained how he and Uncle Jamie had met Roger Wakefield, not realized who he was and thought him to be the man who had raped his cousin Brianna and got her with child, had come close to killing him, but had thought better of the notion—

"Oh, good," Rachel said, half under her breath. He glanced sidelong at her but couldn't tell if she meant this ironically or not, so he coughed and went on, telling how they had instead given the man to the Tuscarora, who in turn had sold him as a slave to the Mohawk farther north.

"We didna want to risk him ever comin' back to trouble Brianna, aye? Only then—" He swallowed, reliving in memory both the terror of his asking Brianna to marry him and the utter horror when cousin Bree had drawn a picture of the man she loved, the man she was waiting for—and the strong dark features of the man they had given to the Mohawk sprang into view.

"You asked thy cousin to marry thee? Did thee want to?" She looked wary; he supposed she must be thinking that he went about proposing to every third or fourth woman he met and hastened to correct this impression.

"Nay, I mean—well, Brianna's a … well, I didna *mind*, ken, we'd ha' got on fine, and she—well … I mean, no, not exactly," he added hurriedly, seeing Rachel's graceful brows draw together. The truth was that he'd been seventeen and Brianna several years older; she'd terrified him, but the thought of bedding her had— He choked that thought off as though it were a venomous snake.

"It was Uncle Jamie's idea," he said, with as much an air of casual dismissal as could be assumed on short notice. He lifted one shoulder. “To give the bairn a name, aye? I said I would, for the family honor.”

“The family honor,” she repeated, giving him a fishy look. “To be sure. But then—”

“But then we found it was Roger Mac—he’d taken back his own name of MacKenzie, is why we didna recognize him—that we’d given to the Indians by mistake, and so we went to retrieve him,” he said quickly. By the time he’d finished explaining all the events that had culminated in his volunteering to take the place of a Mohawk killed during Roger’s rescue, the washing of his body in the river, the Mohawk women scrubbing him with sand to remove the last trace of his white blood, the plucking of his hair and the tattoos, he thought his marriage to Emily might seem only one more picturesque detail.

But of course it didn’t.

“I—” He stopped dead, realizing suddenly that the conversation was about to become even stickier than he’d thought. He glanced at her apprehensively, heart beating in his throat and ears. But she was still looking back; the pinkness round her mouth showing more vividly because she’d gone a little pale—but looking, clear and steady.

“I—wasna a virgin when I wed,” he blurted.

The eyebrow went up again.

“Really, I am not quite sure what to ask,” she said, examining him in the way he’d seen his auntie Claire appraise some horrible growth—fascinated rather than repelled, but with a firm air of deciding exactly how best to deal with the offending bit. He hoped fervently she didn’t mean to cut him out of her life like a wart or amputate him like a gangrenous toe.

"I'll … tell ye anything ye want to know," he said bravely. "Anything."

"A generous offer," she said, "and one I shall accept—but I think I must offer thee the same accommodation. Thee does not wish to ask whether I am virgin?"

His mouth fell open, and her shoulders shook briefly.

"Ye're not?" he croaked.

"No, I am," she assured him, still quivering with the effort not to laugh. "But why should thee assume it?"

"Why?" He felt the blood rise in his face. "Because—anyone who looked at ye would know ye on the instant for a—a—a virtuous woman!" he concluded, with a sense of relief at having found a reasonable term.

"I might have been raped," she pointed out. "That would not mean I was not virtuous, would it?"

"I—well. No, I suppose not." He knew that a good many folk *would* think a raped woman was not virtuous—and Rachel knew that. He was on the verge of becoming completely confused, and she knew that, too; he could see her taking pains not to laugh. He squared his shoulders and gave a great sigh, then met her eyes directly.

"D'ye want to hear about every woman whose bed I've shared? Because I'll tell ye, if so. I've never taken a woman unwilling—though they were mostly whores. I'm no poxed, though," he assured her. "Ye should ken that."

She considered that for a moment.

"I think I need not know the details," she said finally. "But should we ever meet a woman thee has bedded, I wish to know it. Thee does not mean to continue fornicating with prostitutes once we are wed, though, does thee?"

"No!"

"Good," she said, but rocked back a little on the log, hands linked around her knees, holding his gaze. "I do wish to hear more about thy wife. Emily."

He could feel the warmth of her leg, her body, close beside him. She hadn't moved away from him when he'd said about sleeping with whores. The silence grew around them, and a jay called somewhere in the wood beyond.

"We loved each other," he said at last, softly, eyes on the ground. "And I wanted her. I—could talk to her. Then, at least."

Rachel drew breath but didn't say anything. He took his courage in his hands and looked up. Her face was carefully expressionless, her eyes intent on his face.

"I dinna ken how to say it," he said. "It wasna the same way I want you—but I dinna mean to make it sound as though … as though Emily didna matter to me. She did," he added, very low-voiced, and glanced down again.

"And … she does?" Rachel asked quietly, after a long pause. After a longer one, he nodded, swallowing.

"But," he said, and stopped, searching for the way to go on, because now they were coming to the most perilous part of his confession, the thing that might make Rachel stand up and walk away, dragging his heart behind her through the rocks and brush.

"But?" she said, and her voice was gentle.

"The Mohawk," he began, and had to stop for a breath. "It's the woman's choice, about being married. If a woman should take against her husband for some reason—if he beats her, or he's a lazy sot, or smells too bad when he farts"—he stole a glance and saw the corner of her mouth twitch, which heartened him a little—"she puts his things out o' the longhouse, and he has to go back to live wi' the unmarried men—or find another woman who'll have him at her fire. Or leave altogether."

"And Emily put thee out?" She sounded both startled and a bit indignant. He gave her a wee smile in return.

"Aye, she did. Not because I beat her, though. Because … of the bairns."

He felt the tears come to his eyes and clenched his hands in frustration on his knees. Damn, he'd sworn to himself that he wouldn't weep. Either she'd think he made a show of his grief to win her sympathy—or she'd see too deep; he wasn't ready … but he had to tell her, he'd started this on purpose to tell her, she had to know….

"I couldna give her children," he blurted. "The first—we had a wee daughter, born too early, who died. I called her Iseabaìl." He wiped the back of his hand viciously under his nose, swallowing his pain. "After that, she—Emily—she got wi' child again. And again. And when she lost the third … her heart toward me died with it."

Rachel made a small sound, but he didn't look at her. Couldn't. Just sat hunched on the log like a toadstool, shoulders drawn up around his ears, and eyes blurred with the tears he couldn't shed.

A small warm hand settled on his.

"And thy heart?" she asked. "Thine died, too?"

He closed his hand on hers and nodded. And then just breathed for a bit, holding on to her hand, until he could speak again without his voice breaking.

"The Mohawk think that the man's spirit fights wi' the woman's, when they … lie together. And she willna get with child unless his spirit can conquer hers."

"Oh, I see," Rachel said softly. "So she blamed thee."

He shrugged.

“I canna say she was wrong.” He turned a little on the log, to look at her directly. “And I canna say that it would be different—with us. But I did ask Auntie Claire, and she told me about things in the blood … well, perhaps ye should ask her to explain it; I wouldna make a decent job of it. But the end of it was that she thought it *might* be different wi’ another woman. That I maybe could. Give ye bairns, I mean.”

He only realized that Rachel had been holding her breath when she let it out, a sigh that brushed his cheek.

“Do ye—” he began, but she had risen a little, into him, and she kissed him gently on the mouth, then held his head against her breast and took the end of her kerchief and wiped his eyes and then her own.

“Oh, Ian,” she whispered. “I do love thee.”

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17

FREEDOM!

GREY PASSED ANOTHER interminable—though less eventful—day, broken only by watching Colonel Smith write dispatches, which he did at a furious rate, quill scratching with the sound of a scuttling cockroach. This bit of imagery did nothing for Grey's digestion, which, in the aftermath of intoxication, hadn't dealt all that well with the cold grease-caked journeycake and burnt-acorn coffee he'd been given for breakfast.

In spite of physical infelicity and an uncertain future, though, he found himself surprisingly cheerful. Jamie Fraser *was* alive, and he, John, wasn't married. Given those two marvelous facts, the dubious prospects of escape and the much higher probability of being hanged seemed only mildly concerning. He settled himself to wait with what grace he could, sleeping as much as his head allowed, or singing softly to himself—a practice that caused Smith to hunch his shoulders up around his ears and scratch faster.

Messengers came and went with great frequency. If he hadn't already known that the Continentals were not only moving but preparing for a fight, it would have been clear to him within an hour. The hot air was burdened with the scent of molten lead and the whine of a sharpening wheel, and the camp had a sense of rising urgency that any soldier would have felt at once.

Smith made no attempt to keep him from hearing what was said by and to the messengers and subalterns; clearly he didn't expect the information gained to be of any use to Grey. Well … neither did Grey, to be honest.

Toward the evening, the tent's door was darkened by a slender female form, though, and Grey raised himself to a sitting position, careful of his tender head, because his heart had begun to beat strongly again and it made his eye throb.

His niece Dottie was in sober Quaker garb, but the soft blue of much-laundered indigo was surprisingly flattering to her English-rose coloring—and she was in amazing fine looks. She nodded to Colonel Smith and set down her tray upon his desk, before glancing over his shoulder at the prisoner. Her blue eyes widened in shock, and Grey grinned at her over the colonel's shoulder. Denzell must have warned her, but he supposed he must look a literal fright, with a grotesquely swollen face and a fixed and glaring crimson eye.

She blinked and swallowed, then said something low-voiced to Smith, with a brief questioning gesture in Grey's direction. He nodded impatiently, already taking up his own spoon, and she wrapped a thick rag around one of the steaming cans on the tray and came across to Grey's cot.

"Dear me, Friend," she said mildly. "Thee seems much injured. Dr. Hunter says thee may eat as much as is comfortable, and he will attend thee later to put a dressing on your eye."

"Thank you, young woman," he said gravely, and, glancing over her shoulder to be sure Smith's back was turned, nodded at her. "Is it squirrel stew?"

"Possum, Friend," she said. "Here, I brought thee a spoon. The stew is boiling; be careful." Putting herself carefully between him and Smith, she placed the rag-wrapped can between his knees and rapidly touched the rags, then the links of his fetters, her eyebrows raised. A horn spoon was produced from the pocket tied at her waist—and a knife with it, which was slipped under his pillow, quick as any conjurer could have managed it.

Her pulse was beating fast in her throat, and perspiration gleamed at her temples. He touched her hand once, softly, and picked up the spoon.

"Thank you," he said again. "Tell Dr. Hunter I look forward to seeing him again."

* * *

THE ROPE WAS horsehair and the knife dull, and it was very late and with innumerable small cuts stinging his hands and fingers that Grey rose cautiously from the cot. His heart was pounding; he could feel it thumping briskly behind his injured eye and hoped the eye itself was not going to explode under the impact.

He bent and picked up the tin chamber pot and used it; Smith was a very sound sleeper, thank God; if he roused at all, he would hear the familiar noise, be reassured, and—presumably—fall back asleep, subconsciously ignoring any further small noises as being Grey resettling himself.

Smith’s breathing didn’t change. He had a small, buzzing snore like a bee working in a flower, a tidy, busy sound that Grey found mildly comical. He lowered himself to his knees, slowly, between the cot and Smith’s pallet, fighting a momentary insane impulse to kiss Smith on the ear—he had sweet, small ears, very pink. This vanished in an instant, and he crept on hands and knees to the edge of the tent. He’d threaded the rags and the gauze with which Denzell Hunter had packed his eye through the links of his fetters but still moved with the utmost caution. Being caught would be bad for him; it would be disastrous for Hunter and Dottie.

He’d been listening intently to the sentries for hours. There were two guarding the colonel’s tent, but he was fairly sure that both were presently near the front flap, warming themselves at the fire; hot as the day had been, this late at night the forest’s blood ran cold. So did his.

He lay down and squirmed as quickly as he could under the edge of the tent, clinging to the canvas to minimize any shaking of the tent itself—though he’d taken pains to jerk on his rope every so often through the evening, so that any shifting of the structure might be put down to his normal movements.

Out! He allowed himself one deep gulp of air—fresh, cold, and leafy—then rose, clutching the padded fetters close against his body, and walked as silently as possible away from the tent. He mustn’t run.

He had had a short, sharp, whispered argument with Hunter during the latter’s evening visit, seizing the brief moment when Smith had left the tent to visit the latrine. Hunter had insisted that Grey hide in his wagon; he was going into Philadelphia, everyone knew that, there would be no suspicion, and Grey would be safe from patrols. Grey appreciated Hunter's desire to rescue him, but he couldn't possibly put the doctor—let alone Dottie—at risk, and risk it would be. In Smith's place, the first thing he would do was prevent anyone from leaving, the second, search the camp and everything in it.

"There's no time," Hunter had said, briskly tucking in the end of the bandage he had wrapped around Grey's head, "and thee may be right." He glanced over his shoulder; Smith would be back any minute. "I'll leave a bundle of food and clothing in my wagon for thee. If thee chooses to make use of it, I'm glad. If not, God go with thee!"

"Wait!" Grey seized Hunter by the sleeve, making his fetters rattle. "How will I know which wagon is yours?"

"Oh." Hunter coughed, seeming embarrassed. "It … has a, um, sign painted on the tailboard. Dottie purchased it from — Now, you must take care, Friend," he said, abruptly raising his voice. "Eat generously but slowly, take no alcohol, and be careful in moving. Do not stand up too quickly."

Colonel Smith came in and, seeing the doctor present, came over to inspect the patient himself.

"Are you feeling better, Colonel?" he inquired politely. "Or are you still suffering from the need to burst into song? If so, might I suggest you do so now and get it out of your system, before I retire for the night?"

Hunter—who had of course heard *"Die Sommernacht"* the night before—made a small noise in his throat but managed to take his leave without losing control.

Grey grinned to himself, recalling Smith's glower—and imagining what the colonel might look like in a few hours, when he woke to discover that his songbird had flown. He made his way around the edge of the camp, avoiding the picket lines of mules and horses—easy to detect by the smell of manure. The wagons were parked nearby: no artillery, he noted.

The sky was overcast, a sickle moon glimmering uneasily between racing clouds, and the air held the scent of impending rain. Fine. There were worse things than being wet and cold, and rain would hamper pursuit, if anyone discovered his absence before daylight.

No abnormal sounds from the camp behind him; none he could hear above the noise of his own heart and breathing. Hunter's wagon was easy to find, even in the flickering dark. He'd thought by "sign" that the doctor meant a name, but it was one of the barn signs that some of the German immigrants painted on their houses and sheds. He smiled when the clouds parted, revealing this one clearly, and he saw why Dottie had chosen it: it was a large circle, in which two comical birds faced each other, beaks open in the manner of lovebirds. *Distlefink*. The word floated into his head; someone, somewhere, had told him the name of that sort of bird, saying it was a symbol of good luck.

"Good," he said under his breath, climbing up into the wagon. "I'll need it."

He found the bundle under the seat, where Hunter had told him, and took a moment to remove the silver buckles from his shoes, tying the flaps together instead with a length of leather lacing that had evidently been meant for his hair. He left the buckles tucked under the seat, put on the shabby coat, which smelled strongly of stale beer and what he thought was old blood, and peered at the knitted cap, which held two journeycakes, an apple, and a small canteen of water. Turning back the edge of the hat, he read by the fitful moonlight, Liberty or Death, in bold white letters.

* * *

HE WASN'T HEADED in any particular direction; even had the sky been clear, he wasn't sufficiently familiar as to be able to chart his direction by the stars. His only goal was to get as far away from Smith as possible, without running into another militia company or a patrol of Continentals. Once the sun was up, he could orient himself; Hunter had told him that the main road lay south–southwest of the camp, about four miles away.

What the public might make of a man strolling down the main road in fetters was another question, but not one he needed to answer just now. After walking for an hour or so, he found a sheltered spot among the roots of an enormous pine tree and, taking out the knife, hacked off his hair as best he could. He stuffed the shorn locks well back under a root, rubbed his hands in the dirt, and then applied them vigorously to hair and face before donning his Phrygian cap.

Thus suitably concealed, he heaped a thick blanket of fallen dry needles over himself, curled up, and went to sleep to the sound of pattering rain in the trees above, once more a free man.

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18

NAMELESS, HOMELESS, DESTITUTE, AND VERY DRUNK INDEED

HOT, DISHEVELED, AND still thoroughly out of temper from his encounter with Richardson, William made his way back through the crowded streets. One more night in a decent bed, at least. Tomorrow he'd leave Philadelphia with the last few companies of the army, following Clinton north—and leaving the remaining Loyalists to fend for themselves. He was torn between relief and guilt at the thought but had little energy left to consider them.

He arrived at his billet to find that his orderly had deserted and had taken with him William's best coat, two pairs of silk stockings, a half bottle of brandy, and the seed-pearl-encrusted double miniature of William's mother, Geneva, and his other mother, her sister, Isobel.

This was so far over the bloody limit of what could be borne that he didn't even swear, merely sank down on the edge of the bed, closed his eyes, and breathed through clenched teeth until the pain in his stomach subsided. It left a raw-edged hollow. He'd had that miniature since he was born, was accustomed to bid it good night before he slept, though since he'd left home he did this silently.

He told himself it didn't matter; he was unlikely to forget what his mothers looked like—there were other paintings, at home at Helwater. He remembered Mama Isobel. And he could see the traces of his real mother in his own face.… Involuntarily, he glanced at the shaving mirror that hung on the wall—the orderly had somehow overlooked that in his flight—and felt the hollow inside him fill with hot tar. He no longer saw the curve of his mother's mouth, her dark wavy chestnut hair; he saw instead the too-long, knife-edged nose, the slanted eyes and broad cheekbones.

He stared at this blunt evidence of betrayal for an instant, then turned and stamped out.

"Fuck the resemblance!" he said, and slammed the door behind him.

He didn't care where he was going, but within a few streets he ran into Lindsay and another couple of fellows he knew, all intent on making the most of their last evening in a semi-civilized city.

"Come along, young Ellesmere," Sandy said, collaring him firmly and shoving him down the street. "Let's make a few memories to see us through the long winter nights up north, eh?"

Some hours later, viewing the world through the bottom of a beer glass, William wondered rather blearily whether memories counted if you didn't remember them. He'd lost count some time ago of what—and how many of what—he'd drunk. He thought he'd lost one or two or three of the companions with whom he'd started the evening, too, but couldn't swear to it.

Sandy was still there, swaying in front of him, saying something, urging him to his feet. William smiled vaguely at the barmaid, fumbled in his pocket, and laid his last coin on the table. That was all right, he had more in his trunk, rolled up in his spare pair of stockings.

He followed Sandy outside into a night that seized and clung, the hot air so thick that it was hard to breathe, clogged with the smell of horse droppings, human ordure, fish scales, wilted vegetables, and fresh-slaughtered meat. It was late, and dark; the moon had not yet risen, and he stumbled over the cobbles, lurching into Sandy, a blacker smudge on the night before him.

Then there was a door, a blur of light, and an enveloping hot scent of liquor and women—their flesh, their perfume, the smell more befuddling than the sudden light. A woman in a ribboned cap was smiling at him, greeting him, too old to be a whore. He nodded amiably at her and opened his mouth, only to be mildly surprised by the fact that he'd forgotten how to talk. He closed his mouth and went on nodding; the woman laughed in a practiced way and guided him to a shabby wing chair, where she deposited him as she might leave a parcel to be called for later.

He sat slumped in a daze for some time, the sweat running down his neck under his stock and dampening his shirt. There was a fire burning in a hearth near his legs, a small cauldron of rum punch steaming on the hob, and the scent of it made him queasy. He had the feeling that he was melting like a candle but couldn't move without being sick. He shut his eyes.

Some time later, he slowly became aware of voices near him. He listened for a little, unable to make sense of any words but feeling the flow vaguely soothing, like ocean waves. His stomach had settled now, and with his eyelids at half-mast, he gazed placidly at a shifting sand of light and shadow, pricked with bright colors, like darting tropical birds.

He blinked a few times, and the colors shimmered into coherence: the hair and ribbons and white shifts of women, the red coats of infantry, the blue of an artilleryman moving among them. Their voices had given him the impression of birds, high and trilling, squawking now and then, or scolding like the mockingbirds who lived in the big oak near the plantation house at Mount Josiah. But it wasn't the women's voices that caught his attention.

A pair of dragoons were lounging on the settee nearby, drinking rum punch and eyeing up the women. He thought they'd been talking for some time, but now he could make out the words.

"Ever buggered a girl?" one of the dragoons was saying to his friend. The friend giggled and flushed, shook his head, murmured something that sounded like, "Too dear for *my* purse."

"What you want's a girl that hates it." The dragoon hadn't moved his gaze from the women across the room. He raised his voice, just a little. "They clamp down, trying to get rid of you. But they can't."

William turned his head and looked at the man, repulsed, and making his disgust evident. The man ignored him. He seemed vaguely familiar, dark and heavy-featured, but no one William knew by name.

"Then you take her hand and make her reach back and feel you. God, the squirming—milk you like a dairymaid, she will!" The man laughed loudly, still staring across the room, and for the first time William looked to see the target of this brutish farrago. There were three women standing in a group, two in their shifts, the thin fabric molded damply to their bodies, one in an embroidered petticoat, but it was plain to see who the dragoon's insinuations were meant for: the tallish one in the petticoat, who stood there with her fists clenched, glaring back at the dragoon fit to burn a hole through his forehead.

The madam was standing a little apart, frowning at the dragoon. Sandy had disappeared. The other men present were drinking and talking with four girls at the far end of the room; they hadn't heard this vulgar impertinence. The dragoon's friend was scarlet as his coat, between liquor, amusement, and embarrassment.

The dark dragoon was flushed, too, a livid line across his heavy stubbled jowls where they pressed against the leather of his stock. One hand plucked absently at the sweat-stained crotch of his moleskin breeches. He was having too much fun with his prey to cut the chase short, though.

"Mind, you don't want one who's used to it. You want her tight." He leaned forward a little, elbows on his knees, eyes intent on the tall girl. "But you don't want one who's never had it before, either. Better if she knows what's coming, eh?"

His friend mumbled something indistinct, glanced at the girl and hastily away. William looked back at the girl, too, and as she made a small involuntary movement—not quite a flinch—the candlelight glowed for an instant on the smooth crown of her head: soft chestnut, with the gloss of a fresh conker. Jesus Christ.

Before he knew it, he was on his feet. He took two swaying paces to the madam's side, touched her shoulder politely, and when she turned a surprised face up to him—all her attention had been on the dragoon, a worried line between her brows—he said slowly, so as not to slur his words, “I’ll take that one, please. The—the tall girl. In the petticoat. For the night.”

The madam’s plucked eyebrows all but vanished into her cap. She looked quickly at the dragoon, who was still so fixed on his prey that he hadn’t noticed William at all. His friend had, though; he nudged the dragoon and muttered in his ear.

“Eh? What’s that?” The man was already moving, scrambling to his feet. William groped hastily in his pocket, remembering too late that he was penniless.

“What’s this, Madge?” The dragoon was with them, dividing a glower between the madam and William. William straightened instinctively—he had six inches on the man—and squared up. The dragoon assessed his size and his age and lifted the corner of his upper lip to show an eyetooth. “Arabella’s mine, sir. I’m sure Madge will find another young lady to accommodate you.”

“I am before you, sir,” William said, and bowed, inclining his head a quarter inch, keeping a close eye on the cullion. Wouldn’t put it past the filthy bugger to try to kick him in the balls—the look on his face, he wouldn’t stick at it.

“He is, Captain Harkness,” the madam said quickly, stepping between the men. “He’s already offered for the girl, and as you hadn’t made up your mind …” She wasn’t looking at Harkness; she jerked her chin urgently at one of the girls, who looked alarmed but swiftly vanished through a door at the back. *Gone to fetch Ned*, William thought automatically, and wondered dimly for an instant how he knew the doorkeeper’s name.

“Haven’t seen the color of his money yet, have you?” Harkness reached into his bosom and pulled out a well-stuffed wallet, from which he withdrew a careless sheaf of paper money. “I’ll have her.” He grinned unpleasantly at William. “For the night.”

William promptly whipped off his silver gorget, took the madam’s hand, and pressed the crescent into it.

“For the night,” he repeated politely, and without further ado turned and walked across the room, though the floor seemed to undulate slightly beneath his feet. He took Arabella—*Arabella*?—by the arm and steered her toward the back door. She looked appalled—plainly she recognized him—but a quick glance at Captain Harkness decided her that William was the lesser of two weevils, as he’d heard a sailor friend of his father’s put it.

He could hear Harkness’s shout behind them, but just then the door opened and a very large, tough-looking man walked in. He had but one eye, but that one focused instantly on Harkness. The man advanced on the captain, walking lightly on the balls of his feet, fists half curled. *Ex-boxer*, William thought, pleased. *Put that in your pipe and smoke it, Harkness!*

Then, a hand on the stairwell wall to stop from stumbling, he found himself following a round, agitated bum up the same worn, lye-soap-smelling stairs he had trodden yesterday, wondering what the devil he’d say to her when he reached the top.

* * *

HE’D BEEN VAGUELY hoping that it wouldn’t be the same room, but it was. It was night now, though, and the windows were open. The warmth of the day lingered in the walls and floor, but there *was* a breeze, spicy with tree sap and the river's breath, that made the single candle flame flicker and bend. The girl waited for him to come in, then closed the door and stood with her back against it, her hand still on the knob.

"I won't hurt you," he blurted. "I didn't mean to, last time." Her hand relaxed a bit, though she continued to look narrowly at him. It was dark where she stood, and he could barely make out the gleam of her eyes. She didn't look friendly.

"You didn't hurt me," she said. "You spoilt my best petticoat, though, *and* a decanter of wine. Cost me a beating and a week's wages, that."

"I'm sorry," he said. "Truly. I'll—I'll pay for the wine and the petticoat." *Using what*? he wondered. It had belatedly occurred to him that the spare stockings in which he kept his cash had vanished with his orderly, and undoubtedly so had the cash. Well, he'd pawn something if he had to, or borrow a bit. "Can't do much about the beating. But I *am* sorry."

She made a small huffing noise through her nose but seemed to accept this. She took her hand off the doorknob and came a little way into the room, so he could see her face in the candlelight. She was very pretty, despite the look of suspicious wariness, and he felt a mild stirring.

"Well." She looked him up and down, much as she'd done when she met him in the alley. "William, you said your name is?"

"Yes." The silence lengthened a heartbeat past comfort, and he asked, almost at random, "Is your name really Arabella?"

That surprised her, and her mouth twitched, though she didn't laugh.

"No. I'm a fancy piece, though, and Madge thinks the fancies should have names like—like—ladies?" She raised a brow, and he wasn't sure whether she was questioning whether ladies had names like Arabella or what he thought of Madge's philosophy.

"I do *know* a couple of Arabellas," he offered. "One of them's six and the other's eighty-two."

"Are they ladies?" She waved a hand, dismissing the question as soon as it was asked. "Of course they are. You wouldn't know them, otherwise. Do you want me to send for wine? Or punch?" She gave him an assessing eye. "Only, if you want to do anything, I really think you'd best stay off the drink. Your choice, though." She put a hand to the tie of her petticoat in tepid invitation but didn't pull it loose. Clearly, she wasn't keen to induce him to "do anything."

He rubbed a hand over his sweating face, imagined he smelled the alcohol oozing from his pores, and wiped it on his breeches.

"I don't want wine, no. Nor do I want to … to do … well, that's not true," he admitted. "I do want to—very much," he added hurriedly, lest she think him insulting, "but I'm not going to."

She looked at him openmouthed.

"Why not?" she said at last. "You've paid well over the odds for anything you want to do. Including buggery, if that's your pleasure." Her lip curled a little.

He flushed to the scalp.

"You think I would save you from—that, and then do it *myself*?"

"Yes. Often men don't think of something until another mentions it, and then they're all eagerness to try it themselves."

He was outraged.

"You must have a most indifferent opinion of gentlemen, madam!"

Her mouth twitched again, and she gave him a look of such barely veiled amusement that the blood burned in his face and ears.

"Right," he said stiffly. "I take your point."

"Well, that's a novelty," she said, the twitch breaking into a malicious smile. "It's generally the other way round."

He breathed deeply through his nose.

"I … it is meant as an apology, if you like." It was a struggle to keep meeting her eye. "For what happened last time."

A faint breeze came in, ruffling the hair about her shoulders and filling the fabric of her shift so it billowed, which afforded him a glimpse of her nipple, like a dark rose in the candlelight. He swallowed and looked away.

"My … um … my stepfather … told me once that a madam of his acquaintance said to him that a night's sleep was the best gift you could give a whore."

"It runs in the family, does it? Frequenting brothels?" She didn't pause for a response to that. "He's right, though. Do you really mean that you intend for me to … sleep?" From her tone of incredulity, he might have asked her to engage in some perversion well past buggery.

He kept his temper with some difficulty.

"You can sing songs or stand on your head, if you prefer, madam," he said. "I don't propose to … er … molest you. Beyond that, your actions are quite up to you."

She stared at him, a small frown between her brows, and he could see that she didn't believe him.

"I … would go," he said, feeling awkward again, "but I have some concern that Captain Harkness might be still on the premises, and should he learn that you are alone …" And he somehow couldn't face his own dark, empty room. Not tonight.

"I imagine Ned's disposed of *him*," she said, then cleared her throat. "But don't go. If you do, Madge will send somebody else up." She took off her petticoat, with no display of coquetry or artifice in the motion. There was a screen in the corner; she went behind this, and he heard the splash of her using a chamber pot.

She came out, glanced at him, and with a brief wave at the screen said, "Just there. If you—"

"Uh … thank you." He did in fact need to piss fairly badly, but the thought of using her pot, so soon after her own use of it, caused him an unreasonable amount of embarrassment. "I'll be fine." He looked round, found a chair, and sat down in it, ostentatiously thrusting out his boots and leaning back in an attitude of relaxation. He closed his eyes—mostly.

Through slitted lids, he saw her observe him closely for a moment, then she leaned over and blew out the candle. Ghostlike in the darkness, she climbed into her bed—the ropes creaked with her weight—and drew up the quilt. A faint sigh came to him over the sounds of the brothel below.

"Er … Arabella?" He didn't expect thanks, exactly, but he did want *something* from her.

"What?" She sounded resigned, obviously expecting him to say that he'd changed his mind about buggery.

"What's your real name?"

There was silence for a minute, as she made up her mind. There was nothing tentative about the young woman, though, and when she did reply, it was without reluctance.

"Jane."

"Oh. Just—the one thing more. My coat—"

"I sold it."

"Oh. Er … good night, then."

There was a prolonged moment, filled with the unspoken thoughts of two people, then a deep, exasperated sigh.

"Come and get into bed, you idiot."

* * *

HE COULDN'T GET into bed in full uniform. He did keep his shirt on, with some idea of preserving her modesty and his original intent. He lay quite rigid beside her, trying to envision himself as the tomb figure of a Crusader: a marble monument to noble behavior, sworn to a chastity enforced by his stone embodiment.

Unfortunately, it was a rather small bed and William was rather large. And Arabella–Jane wasn't trying at all to avoid touching *him*. Granted, she wasn't trying to arouse him, either, but her mere presence did that without *half* trying.

He was intensely aware of every inch of his body and which of them were in contact with hers. He could smell her hair, a faint scent of soap mingled with the sweetness of tobacco smoke. Her breath was sweet, too, with the smell of burnt rum, and he wanted to taste it in her mouth, share the lingering stickiness. He closed his eyes and swallowed.

Only the fact that he needed desperately to pee made it possible to keep his hands off her. He was in that state of drunkenness where he could perceive a problem but could not analyze a solution to it, and sheer inability to think of two things at once prevented him either speaking to her or laying a hand on hers.

“What’s the matter?” she whispered hoarsely. “You’re wiggling like you’ve got tadpoles in your drawers—only you haven’t any drawers on, have you?” She giggled, and her breath tickled his ear. He groaned softly.

“Here, now—” Her voice took on a tone of alarm, and she sat up in bed, twisting round to look at him. “You’re not going to be sick in my bed! Get up! Get up right this minute!” She pushed at him with small, urgent hands, and he stumbled out of bed, swaying and clutching at furniture to keep from falling.

The window gaped before him, open to the night, a lovely sickle moon pale above. Taking this as the celestial invitation it surely was, he raised his shirt, gripped the window frame, and pissed into the night in a majestically arching rush of blinding bliss.

The sense of relief was so intense that he noticed nothing whatever in its wake, until Arabella–Jane seized him by the arm and pulled him away from the window.

“Get out of sight, for God’s sake!” She risked a hasty glance downward, then dodged back, shaking her head. “Oh, well. It’s not as though Captain Harkness was ever going to propose you for membership in his favorite club, is it?”

“Harkness?” William swayed toward the window, blinking. There was a remarkable amount of shouting and abuse coming from below, but he was having trouble in focusing his eyes and perceived nothing save the flicker of red uniforms, redder still in the light from the lantern over the establishment’s door.

“Never mind. He’ll likely think I did it,” Arabella–Jane said, a dark note in her voice.

“You’re a girl,” William pointed out logically. “You couldn’t piss out a window.”

“Not without making a prime spectacle of myself, no,” she agreed. “But ’tisn’t unknown for a whore to throw the contents of her chamber pot out on someone, accidental on purpose. Well.” She shrugged, went behind the screen, and emerged with the aforementioned receptacle, which she promptly upended out the open window. In response to renewed howls from below, she leaned out and shrieked several insults that a regimental sergeant would have been proud to author, before ducking back in and banging the shutters closed.

“May as well be hanged—or buggered—for a sheep as a lamb,” she remarked, taking him by the arm again. “Come back to bed.”

“It’s only in Scotland that they bugger sheep,” William said, obediently following her. “And maybe part of Yorkshire. Northumbria, too, maybe.”

“Oh, really? Is Captain Harkness from one of those places, then?”

“Oh, him?” William sat down on the bed rather suddenly, as the room had begun to revolve in a stately manner round him. “No. I’d say maybe Devon, from his—his … speech,” he concluded, pleased to have found the word.

“So they’ve got sheep in Devon, too, then, I suppose.” Arabella–Jane was unbuttoning his shirt. He raised a hand to stop her, wondered why he should, and left the hand hanging in midair.

“Lot of sheep,” he said. “Lot of sheep everywhere in England.”

“God save the Queen, then,” she murmured, intent on her work. The last button came free, and a faint draft of air stirred the hairs on William’s chest.

He remembered then why he should have been stopping her, but she'd put her head inside the open front of his shirt and licked his nipple before he could make his arrested hand complete its motion, and when he did, it merely settled gently on her head, which was surprisingly warm. So was her breath. So was her hand, which had wrapped itself around his prick in a possessive sort of way.

"No," he said, after what seemed a very long time but could have been no more than seconds. His hand descended and closed—regretfully—over hers where it grasped him. "I … I meant it. I won't bother you."

She didn't let go but did sit up and regard him with an air of puzzled impatience, just visible in the lantern light that seeped through the shutters.

"If you bother me, I'll tell you to stop; how's that?" she offered.

"No," he repeated. He was concentrating fiercely now; it seemed exceedingly important that she understand. "Honor. It's my honor."

She made a small sound that might have been impatience or amusement.

"Maybe you should have considered your honor before you came to a whorehouse. Or did someone drag you inside against your will?"

"I came with a friend," he said with dignity. She still hadn't let go but couldn't move her hand, not with his clasped tightly around it. "That's … not what I mean. I mean …" The words that had come easily a moment before had slipped away again, leaving him blank.

"You could tell me later, once you've had a good think," she suggested, and he was startled to discover that she had *two* hands and knew what to do with the other one, too.

"Unhand my …" *Damn, what is the bloody word?* "Unhand my testicles if you please, madam."

"Just as you like," she replied crisply, and, doing so, put her head back inside his damp, smelly shirt, seized one nipple between her teeth, and sucked so hard that it pulled every last word out of his head.

Matters thereafter were unsettled but largely pleasant, though at one point he found himself rearing above her, sweat dripping from his face onto her breasts, muttering, "I'm a bastard, I'm a bastard, I'm a *bastard*, don't you understand?"

She didn't reply to this but stretched up a long white arm, cupped her hand round the back of his head, and pulled him down again.

"That's why." He came gradually to himself, aware that he was talking and evidently had been for some time, in spite of his head being cradled in the curve of her shoulder, his senses aswim in her musk (*like a sweating flower*, he thought dreamily), and her nipple a dark sweet thing an inch or two from his nose. "The only honor I have left is my word. Have to keep it." Then tears came suddenly to his eyes, with recollection of the moments just past. "Why did you make me break my word?"

She didn't answer for a while, and he would have thought she'd fallen asleep, save for the hand that roved over his bare back, gentle as a whisper.

"Ever think that maybe a whore has a sense of honor, too?" she said at last.

Frankly, he hadn't, and opened his mouth to say so, but once more his words had gone missing. He closed his eyes and fell asleep on her breast.

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DESPERATE MEASURES

SILVIA HARDMAN STOOD regarding Jamie with a lowered brow, her lips pushed out in concentration. Finally she shook her head, sighed, and drew herself up.

“Thee means it, I suppose?”

“I do, Friend Silvia. I must be in Philadelphia as quickly as may be. And to do that, I must reach the road. I must be able to walk tomorrow morning, however haltingly.”

“Well, then. Patience, fetch me thy father’s special flask. And, Prudence, will thee grind a good measure of mustard seed …” She stepped a little closer to the bed, peering nearsightedly at Jamie’s back as though to gauge the acreage. “A good handful—no, make it two; thy hands are small.” She took a digging stick from the shelf near the door but hesitated before opening it. “Do not touch thy eyes or face, Pru—and by no means touch Chastity without washing thy hands first. Let Patience mind her if she cries.”

Chastity was making fretful noises, though freshly fed and changed. Patience, though, had already run out the door, making Jamie wonder where her father's special flask might be. Hidden, apparently.

"Put the wean beside me," he suggested. "I can mind her for a bit."

Silvia did so without hesitation, which pleased him, and he lay face-to-face with wee Chastity, amusing them both by making faces at her. She giggled—and so did Prudence, as the pestle scraped and the hot smell of ground mustard thickened the air. He stuck out his tongue and waggled it; Chastity shook like a small jelly and put out a tiny pink tongue tip in turn, which made *him* laugh.

"What are you all laughing at?" Patience demanded, opening the door. She frowned censoriously from one sister to the other, making them all laugh harder. When Mrs. Hardman came in a few moments later with a large grubby root in her hand, they had reached the point of laughing at absolutely nothing, and she blinked in bewilderment, but then shook her head and smiled.

"Well, they do say laughter is good medicine," she remarked, when the hilarity had run its course, leaving the girls pink-faced and Jamie feeling slightly better—to his surprise. "May I borrow thy knife, Friend James? It is more suited to the purpose than mine."

This was patently true; her knife was a crude iron blade, badly sharpened, the haft bound with string. Jamie had a good ivory case knife, bought in Brest, of hardened steel, with an edge that would shave the hairs off his forearm. He saw her smile with involuntary pleasure at the feel of it in her hand and had a momentary flash of memory—Brianna, delicately unfolding a blade of her Swiss Army knife, an air of pleased satisfaction on her face.

Claire appreciated good tools, too. But she touched tools with immediate thought of what she meant to do with them, rather than simple admiration for elegance and function. A blade in her hand was no longer a tool but an extension of her hand. His own hand closed, thumb rubbing gently against his fingertips, remembering the knife he had made for her, the handle carefully grooved and sanded smooth to fit her hand, to match her grip exactly. Then he closed his fist tight, not wanting to think of her so intimately. Not just now.

Bidding the girls stand well back out of the way, Silvia carefully peeled the root and grated it into a small wooden bowl, keeping her face averted as much as possible from the rising fumes of the fresh horseradish but still with tears streaming down her face. Then, wiping her eyes on her apron and taking up the “special flask”—this being a dark-brown stoneware bottle stained with earth (had the lass just dug it up?)—she cautiously poured a small amount of the very alcoholic contents. What was it? Jamie wondered, sniffing cautiously. Very old applejack? Twice-fermented plum brandy? It had probably started life as some sort of fruit, but it had been some time since that fruit hung on a tree.

Mrs. Hardman relaxed, putting the cork back into the bottle as though relieved that the contents had not in fact exploded upon being decanted.

“Well, then,” she said, coming over to pick up Chastity, who squealed and fussed at being removed from Jamie, whom she plainly regarded as a large toy. “That must steep for a few hours. Thee needs heat. Thee should sleep, if thee can. I know thee passed a wakeful night, and tonight may not be much better.”

* * *

JAMIE HAD STEELED himself to the prospect of drinking horseradish liquor with a mix of trepidation and curiosity. The first of these emotions was momentarily relieved when he discovered that Mrs. Hardman didn't mean him to drink it, but it returned in force when he found himself a moment later facedown on the bed with his shirt rucked up to his oxters and his hostess vigorously rubbing the stuff into his buttocks.

"Have a care, Friend Silvia," he managed, trying to turn his head enough to get his mouth clear of the pillow without either twisting his back or unclenching his bum. "If ye drip that down the crack of my arse, I may be cured wi' a somewhat sudden violence."

A small snort of amusement tickled the hairs in the small of his back, where the flesh was still smarting and tingling from her administrations.

"My grandmother did say this receipt would raise the dead," she said, her voice pitched low in order not to disturb the girls, who were rolled up on the hearth in their blankets like caterpillars. "Perhaps she was less careful in her applications."

* * *

"THEE NEEDS HEAT," she'd said. Between the horseradish liniment and the mustard plaster resting on his lower back, he thought he might suffer spontaneous combustion at any moment. He was sure his skin was

blistering. *"I know thee passed a wakeful night, and tonight may not be much better."* She'd got that right.

He shifted, trying to turn stealthily onto his side without making noise or dislodging the plaster—she'd bound it to his lower back by means of strips of torn flannel tied round his body, but they had a tendency to slip. The pain when shifting was in fact much less, which encouraged him greatly. On the other hand, he felt as though someone was repeatedly passing a pine torch within inches of his body. And while she *had* been very careful while working the liniment into him from rib cage to knees, a bit of the ferocious liquid had touched his balls, giving him a not-unpleasant sense of remarkable heat between his legs but also an uncontrollable urge to squirm.

He hadn't, while she was working on him, and hadn't said a word. Not after seeing the state of her hands: red as a lobsterback's coat, and a milky blister rising on the side of her thumb. She hadn't said a word, either, just drawn down his shirt when she was done and patted him gently on the backside before going to wash and then smooth a little cooking grease gingerly into her hands.

She was asleep now, too, a hunched form curled up in the corner of the settle, little Chastity's cradle by her foot, safely away from the banked embers of the fire. Now and then one of the glowing chunks of wood split with a loud *crack!* and a small fountain of sparks.

He stretched gingerly, experimenting. Better. But whether he was cured in the morning or not, he was leaving—if he had to drag himself on his elbows to the road. The Hardmans must have their bed back—and he must have his. Claire's bed.

The thought made the heat in his flesh bloom up through his belly, and he did squirm. His thoughts squirmed, too, thinking of her, and he grabbed one, pinning it down like a disobedient dog.

It's nay her fault, he thought fiercely. *She's done me nay wrong*. They'd thought him dead—Marsali had told him so and told him that Lord John had wed Claire in haste following the news of Jamie's death, in order to protect not only her but Fergus and Marsali as well, from imminent arrest.

Aye, and then he took her to his bed! The knuckles of his left hand twinged as he curled his fist. *"Never hit them in the face, lad."* Dougal had told him that a lifetime ago, as they watched a knockdown fight between two of Colum's men in the courtyard at Leoch. *"Hit them in the soft parts."*

They'd hit *him* in the soft parts.

"Nay her fault," he muttered under his breath, turning restlessly into his pillow. What the bloody *hell* had happened, though? How had they done it—why?

He felt as though he was fevered, his mind dazed with the waves of heat that throbbed over his body. And like the half-glimpsed things in fever dreams, he saw her naked flesh, pale and shimmering with sweat in the humid night, slick under John Grey's hand …

We were both fucking you*!*

His back felt as though someone had laid a hot girdle on it. With a deep growl of exasperation, he turned onto his side again and fumbled at the bandages holding the scalding plaster to his skin, at last wriggling out of its torrid embrace. He dropped it on the floor and flung back the quilt that covered him, seeking the relief of cool air on body and mind.

But the cabin was filled to the rooftree with the fuggy warmth of fire and sleeping bodies, and the heat that flamed over him seemed to have rooted itself between his legs. He clenched his fists in the bedclothes, trying not to writhe, trying to calm his mind.

"Lord, let me stand aside from this," he whispered in *Gàidhlig*. "Grant me mercy and forgiveness. Grant me understanding!"

What his mind presented him with instead was a fleeting sense, a memory of cold, as startling as it was refreshing. It was gone in a flash but left his hand tingling with the touch of cold stone, cool earth, and he clung to the memory, closing his eyes, in imagination pressing his hot cheek to the wall of the cave.

Because it was his cave. The place where he'd hidden, where he'd lived, in the years after Culloden. He had throbbed there, too, pulsing with heat and hurt, rage and fever, desolation and the sweet brief consolation of dreams wherein he met his wife again. And he felt in mind the coldness, the dark chill that he'd thought would kill him, finding it now relief in the desert of his thoughts. He envisioned himself pressing his naked, scalded back to the rough damp of the cave wall, willing the coldness to pass into his flesh, to kill the fire.

His rigid body eased a little, and he breathed slower, stubbornly ignoring the ripe reeks of the cabin, the fumes of horseradish and plum brandy and mustard, of cooking and bodies washed infrequently. Trying to breathe the piercing cleanliness of the north wind, the scents of broom and heather.

And what he smelled was …

"Mary," he whispered, and his eyes flew open, shocked.

The scent of green onions and cherries, not quite ripe. A cold boiled fowl. And the warm smell of a woman's flesh, faintly acrid with the sweat in her clothes, overlaid by the mild, fatty smell of his sister's lye soap.

He took a deep breath, as though he might capture more of it, but the cool air of the Highlands had fled, and he inhaled a thick gulp of hot mustard, and coughed.

"Aye, all right," he muttered ungraciously to God. "Ye've made your point."

He hadn't sought out a woman, even in his most abject loneliness, living in the cave. But when Mary MacNab had come to him on the eve of his departure for an English prison, he'd found consolation for his grief in her arms. Not as replacement for Claire, never that—but only desperately needing, and gratefully accepting, the gift of touch, of not being alone for a little while. How could he possibly find it wrong that Claire had done the same?

He sighed, wriggling to find a more comfortable position. Little Chastity emitted a faint cry, and Silvia Hardman sat up at once in a rustle of clothes, bending down to the cradle with a sleepy murmur.

For the first time, the child's name struck him. The baby was perhaps three or four months old. How long had Gabriel Hardman been gone? More than a year, he thought, from what the little girls had said. Chastity, indeed. Was the name merely the natural companion to Prudence and Patience—or Mrs. Hardman's private, poignant bitterness, a reproach to her missing husband?

He closed his eyes and sought a sense of coolness in the dark. He thought he had burned long enough.

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OF CABBAGES AND KINGS

HE WALKED TO THE road just before dawn, declining help from Prudence and Patience, though they insisted upon coming with him, in case he should fall flat on his face, be stricken with sudden paralysis, or step into a gopher's hole and twist an ankle. They had no great opinion of his powers but were well mannered enough to keep a distance of a foot or so on either side, their hands hovering like small white butterflies near his elbows, pale in the half dark.

"There's not so many wagons coming in, these last few days," Patience observed, in a tone somewhere between anxiety and hope. "Thee may not find a suitable conveyance."

"I should be satisfied wi' a dung cart or a wagon filled with cabbages," he assured her, already glancing down the road. "My business is somewhat urgent."

"We know," Prudence reminded him. "We were under the bed when Washington appointed thee." She spoke with a certain reserve, as a Quaker opposed to the practice of war, and he smiled at her small, serious face, long-lipped and kind-eyed like her mother's.

"Washington is nay my greatest concern," he said. "I must see my wife, before … before anything else."

"Thee has not seen her in some time?" Prudence asked, surprised. "Why?"

"I was detained upon business in Scotland," he said, deciding not to observe that he'd seen her but two days ago. "Is that a wagon coming, d'ye think?"

It was a drover with a herd of swine, in fact, and they were obliged to scuttle back from the roadside with some haste, in order to avoid being either bitten or trampled. By the time the sun was fully up, though, regular traffic had begun to flow along the road.

Most of this was coming from Philadelphia, as the girls had told him: Loyalist families who could not afford to leave by ship, fleeing the city with what they could carry, some with wagons or handcarts, many with no more than what they could convey on their backs or in their arms. There were also British soldiers in groups and columns, presumably assisting the exodus and protecting the Loyalists from being attacked or looted, should Rebel militia suddenly come out of the wood.

That thought reminded him of John Grey—who had been mercifully absent from his mind for several hours. Jamie ruthlessly pushed him out again, muttering, "Aye, *stay* gone," under his breath. But a reluctant second thought occurred to him—what if Grey had been released by the militia at once and had already made his way back to Philadelphia? On the one hand, he would see to Claire's safety; he could trust the man for that. But on the other …

Aye, well. If he walked into the house and found Grey there with her, he'd just take her away with him and say nothing. Unless …

"Does thee still suffer from the horseradish, Friend Jamie?" Patience asked politely. "Thee snorts quite fearful. Perhaps thee had best take my hankie."

In the woods outside Philadelphia

GREY WOKE ABRUPTLY to full daylight and a musket barrel jabbed into his belly.

"Come out of there with your hands up," said a cold voice. He got his good eye sufficiently open as to see that his interlocutor wore a tattered Continental officer's coat over homespun breeches and an open-collared shirt, topped by a slouch hat turned up with a turkey feather through the brim. Rebel militia. Heart in his throat, he crawled stiffly out of his refuge and rose, hands in the air.

His captor blinked at Grey's battered face, then at the fetters, strips of muslin bandage hanging from the rusted links. He withdrew the musket slightly but didn't lower it. Now that Grey was on his feet, he could see several other men, as well, all peering at him with extreme interest.

"Ah … where did you escape from?" the officer with the musket asked carefully.

There were two possible answers, and he chose the riskier option. Saying "gaol" would have likely led to them leaving him alone or, at worst, taking him with them but leaving him in irons; either way, he'd still be wearing fetters.

"I was put in irons by a British officer who took me up as a spy," he said boldly. *Entirely true*, he reflected, *so far as it goes*.

A deep hum of interest ran among the men, who pressed closer to look at him, and the prodding musket barrel was withdrawn altogether.

“Indeed,” said his captor, who had an educated English voice, with a slight Dorset accent. “And what might be your name, sir?”

“Bertram Armstrong,” he replied promptly, using two of his middle names. “And may I have the pleasure of knowing your own name, sir?”

The man pursed his lips a little but answered readily enough.

“I am the Reverend Peleg Woodsworth, Captain of the Sixteenth Pennsylvania, sir. And your company?” Grey saw Woodsworth’s eyes flick toward his liberty cap with its bold motto.

“I haven’t yet joined a company, sir,” he said, softening his own accent just a little. “I was on my way to do so, in fact, when I ran afoul of a British patrol and shortly thereafter found myself in the straits you see.” He raised his wrists a little, clanking. The hum of interest came again, this time with a distinct note of approval.

“Well, then,” Woodsworth said, and lifted his musket to his shoulder. “Come along with us, Mr. Armstrong, and I think we might be able to relieve your straits.”

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21

BLOODY MEN

ONCE THEY REACHED the trace, there were horses, mules, and wagons, as well as militia companies. Rachel was able to ride in a teamster's wagon filled with sacks of barley, Ian and Rollo trotting along beside, as far as Matson's Ford, where they were meant to meet Denzell and Dottie. They waited at the ford until midmorning, but there was no sign of Denzell's wagon, and none of the militia groups crossing there had seen him.

"He'll have had an emergency," Rachel said, lifting one shoulder in resignation. "We'd best go on by ourselves; perhaps we can find a wagon on the main road that will carry us into the city." She wasn't troubled; any doctor's family was used to fending for themselves unexpectedly. And she loved being alone with Ian, talking, looking at his face.

Ian agreed that this was good sense, and they splashed across, shoes in hand, the cold water a relief. Even in the forest, the air was close and hot, restless with prowling thunder that never came close enough to do much good.

"Here," he said to Rachel, and handed her his moccasins, his rifle, and his belt, with powder horn, shot bag, and dirk. "Stand back a bit, aye?" He could see a scour in the streambed, where a persistent eddy had carved a deep hole, a dark, inviting shadow in the ripples of the creek. He leapt from stone to stone and jumped from the last one, going into the hole with a *PLUNK!* like a dropped boulder. Rollo, belly-deep in the ford and soaked to the shoulders, barked and showered Rachel with water from a huge wagging tail.

Ian's head lunged back into view, streaming water, and he reached a long, skinny arm toward her leg, beckoning her to join him. She didn't retreat but held his rifle out at arm's length and raised one brow, and he dropped his invitation, scrambling out of the hole on hands and knees. He stood up in the ford and shook himself like Rollo, spattering her with icy drops.

"Want to go in?" he asked, grinning as he took back his weapons. He wiped water from his brows and chin with the back of his hand. "It'll cool ye right down."

"I would," she said, smearing the cold droplets over her sweating face with one hand, "if my clothes were as impervious to the elements as thine are." He had on his worn buckskin leggings and breechclout, with a calico shirt so faded that the red flowers on it were nearly the same color as the brown background. Neither water nor sun would make any difference, and he would look just the same wet or dry—while she would look like a drowned rat all day, and an immodest drowned rat at that, shift and dress half transparent with water and sticking to her.

The casual thought coincided with Ian's buckling of his belt, and the movement drew her eye to the flap of his linen breechclout—or, rather, to where it had been before he raised it to pull it over his belt.

She drew in her breath audibly and he looked up at her, surprised.

"Eh?"

"Never mind," she said, her face going hot despite the cool water. But he looked down, following the direction of her gaze, and then looked back, right into her eyes, and she had a strong impulse to jump straight into the water, damage to her wardrobe notwithstanding.

"Are ye bothered?" he said, eyebrows raised, as he plucked at the wet cloth of his breechclout, then dropped the flap.

"No," she said with dignity. "I've seen one before, thee knows. *Many* of them. Just not …" *Not one with which I am soon to be intimately acquainted*. "Just not … thine."

"I dinna think it's anything out o' the ordinary," he assured her gravely. "But ye can look, if ye like. Just in case. I wouldna want ye to be startled, I mean."

"Startled," she repeated, giving him a look. "If thee thinks I am under any illusions about either the object or the process, after living for months in a military camp … I doubt I shall be shocked, when the occasion a—" She broke off, a moment too late.

"Rises," he finished for her, grinning. "I think I'll be verra disappointed if ye're not, ken?"

* * *

IN SPITE OF the hot blush, which seemed to run from her scalp straight down into her nether regions, she didn't begrudge him fun at her expense. Anything that made him smile like that was balm to her own spirit.

He'd been deeply oppressed, ever since the dreadful news of the ship's sinking had come, and while he'd borne up with a stoicism she thought natural to both Highlanders and Indians, saying little about it, he hadn't tried to hide his desolation from her, either. She was glad of that, despite her own sadness for Mr. Fraser, for whom she had a deep respect and affection.

She did wonder about Ian's mother and how she might have got on with that lady. At the best, she might have had a mother again herself—and that would have been a great blessing. She hadn't been expecting the best, though; she doubted that Jenny Murray would have been any more pleased at the notion of her son marrying a Friend than a Quaker meeting might be to hear of Rachel's intention of marrying a man of blood—and a Catholic, to boot. She wasn't sure which of those would be more cause for consternation but *was* sure that Ian's tattoos would pale in contrast to his affiliation with the Pope.

"How shall we be wed, d'ye think?" Ian, who had been walking in front of her to push branches out of her way, paused and turned to let her come alongside, the path here being wide enough to walk abreast for a little.

"I don't know," she told him frankly. "I think I cannot in good conscience be baptized Catholic, no more than thee in good conscience could live as a Friend."

"Do Friends marry only other Friends, then?" One side of his mouth curled. "I'd think the choice might be a bit sparse.

Or d'ye all end up marrying your cousins?"

"They marry other Friends or they get put out of meeting," she told him, ignoring the gibe about cousins. "With rare exceptions. A marriage between a Friend and a non-Friend might be allowed in case of dire circumstance—after a committee on clearness had conferred with both bride and groom—but it's rare. I fear that even Dorothea may have difficulty, in spite of her very evident sincerity of conversion."

Ian laughed at thought of Denny's fiancée. Lady Dorothea Jacqueline Benedicta Grey was no one's notion of a demure Quaker—though, for that matter, Rachel thought that anyone who supposed female Friends to be demure had never met one.

"Have ye asked Denny what they mean to do?"

"I haven't," she admitted. "To tell the truth, I am somewhat afraid to ask."

Ian's feathery brows shot up.

"Afraid? Why?"

"Both on his account and ours. Thee knows we were put out of our meeting in Virginia—or, rather, he was, and I went with him. It affected him very much, and I know he wishes above all things to marry Dottie properly, before the witness of a meeting to which they both belong."

Ian shot her a quick glance, and she knew he was about to ask if she felt likewise. She hurried on, to forestall him.

"There are other Friends in his same case, though: men who cannot abide the thought of capitulation to the King and who feel obliged to assist the Continental army. 'Fighting Quakers,' they call themselves." She couldn't help smiling at the name; it conjured such incongruous images.

"Some such held meeting now and then at Valley Forge, but they aren't accepted by Philadelphia yearly meeting. Denny has to do with them but hasn't joined them as yet."

"Aye?" The trail had narrowed again and Ian moved ahead, turning his head to speak over his shoulder so she would know he attended. She was somewhat distracted herself; the buckskin was drying slowly, molding itself damply to Ian's long, sinewy shanks, and reminding her of his breechclout.

"Yes," she said, recovering her train of thought. "The thing is—is thee familiar with religious disputation, Ian?"

That made him laugh again.

"I thought not," she said dryly. "I am. And the thing is, when a group of … of … persons who disagree with a central teaching of—"

"Heretics?" he offered helpfully. "Quakers wouldna burn folk, would they?"

"Those who are led of the spirit to follow a different path, let us say," she said, a little tersely. "And, no, they wouldn't. But the point I am making is that when such a group breaks away over some point of doctrine, they are inclined to cling even more rigorously to the rest of their beliefs and be more fierce even than the original group."

Ian's head lifted; so did Rollo's. Both hunters turned to and fro, nostrils flaring, but then shook themselves slightly and resumed walking. "Aye, so?" Ian said, reminding her of her point.

"So even if Denny should become convinced that he should belong to a meeting of Fighting Quakers, they might be that much more reluctant to accept a member such as Dottie. Though, on the other hand, should they be willing to do so, that *might* mean that they would at least consider our marriage.…” She tried to sound hopeful about that prospect but in truth thought pigs might fly before any meeting of Friends accepted Ian Murray—or vice versa.

“Is thee attending, Ian?” she asked a little sharply, for man and dog were still moving but with a new wariness. Rollo’s ears cocked alertly and Ian shifted his rifle from shoulder to hand. Within a few steps, she heard what they had heard—the distant sounds of wagon wheels and marching feet. An army on the move, and the thought made the fine hairs prickle on her arms, in spite of the heat.

“What?” Ian turned a blank face toward her, then came to himself and smiled. “Well, no. I was wondering what a dire circumstance might be. To Friends.”

Rachel had wondered that herself, if only briefly. “Well …” she began dubiously. In truth, she had no idea what sort of dire circumstance would make such a marriage thinkable, let alone acceptable.

“I was only thinking,” he went on, before she could think of anything. “Uncle Jamie told me how it was when his parents wed. His father stole his mother away from her brothers, and they were obliged to hide where they could, for the MacKenzies of Leoch werena anything ye’d want to face, when roused.”

His face was animated, telling the story.

“They couldna be marrit in kirk, for the banns couldna be called, and they’d be discovered the moment they came out of hiding to speak to a priest. So they stayed hidden until Ellen—that would be my grannie, aye?—was big wi’ child, and then came out. Her brothers couldna object to the marriage at that point, and so they were wed.” He shrugged. “So I was only wondering: would Friends think a coming child a dire circumstance?”

Rachel stared at him.

"If thee thinks that I will lie with thee without marriage, Ian Murray," she said, in measured tones, "thee has no notion just how dire thy own circumstances might become."

* * *

BY THE TIME they reached the main road that led to Philadelphia, the sound had grown amazingly—and so had the traffic making it. Normally a busy road, carrying travelers and wagons full of produce to and from the nearby countryside, it was all but choked now, mules braying, children shrieking, harried parents calling out for their offspring, pushing handcarts and barrows full of possessions along the road, often with a resentful pig towed alongside by a rope round its neck or a basket of chickens wobbling atop the pile.

And in, around, and through the struggling knots of civilians fleeing at footpace was the army. Marching columns, two by two, leather straps and gaiters creaking as they sweated through their coats, faces more crimson in the heat than their fading uniforms. Small platoons of cavalry, still fine on their horses, knots of green-clad Hessians, and, here and there, companies of infantry stationed at the side of the road, providing support for officers who were stopping wagons, sometimes commandeering them, sometimes waving them on.

Ian paused in the shadow of the trees, judging the situation. The sun was nearly overhead—plenty of time. And they had nothing that the army would want; no one would stop them.

He was aware of the militia companies, too. They had met several, passing through the woods. These for the most part stayed off the road, making their way carefully through the verges in ones and twos and threes, not hiding, but not drawing attention to themselves, either.

“Look!” Rachel exclaimed, her hand tightening on his arm. “It’s William!” She pointed at a tall officer on the far side of the road and looked up at Ian, her face bright as sun on water. “We must speak to him!”

Ian’s hand had tightened on her shoulder in response, and he felt the urgency of her flesh—but also the terrible fragility of the bones under it.

“Not you,” he said, and lifted his chin toward the plodding ranks of disgruntled troops, sweating and dust-stained. “I dinna want ye anywhere in sight o’ them.”

Her eyes narrowed just a trifle—but Ian had been married once and took his hand off her shoulder promptly.

“I mean,” he said hastily, “I’ll go and talk to William. I’ll bring him here to ye.”

Rachel opened her mouth to reply, but he snooved his way hastily through the screening bushes before she could speak.

“Stay,” he said sternly to Rollo, turning back for an instant. The dog, who had not stirred from his comfortable spot at Rachel’s feet, twitched one ear.

William was standing by the roadside, looking hot, tired, disheveled, and thoroughly unhappy. As well he might, Ian thought with some sympathy. He kent William had surrendered at Saratoga; he was likely bound for England—if he was lucky—or for a long parole in some rough lodging somewhere far to the north. In either case, his active role as a soldier was over for some time.

His face changed abruptly at sight of Ian. Surprise, the beginnings of indignation, then a quick glance round, decision clamping down upon his features. Ian was surprised for a moment that he could read William's face so easily but then remembered why. Uncle Jamie guarded his own expression in company—but not with Ian. Ian's own face didn't show his knowledge, though, any more than William's now showed more than an irritable acknowledgment.

"Scout," William said, with the briefest of nods. The corporal to whom he had been talking gave Ian a brief, incurious look, then saluted William and plunged back into the trudging stream.

"What the bloody hell do *you* want?" William drew a grubby sleeve across his sweating face. Ian was mildly surprised at this evident hostility; they'd parted on good terms the last time they had seen each other—though there had been little conversation at the time, William having just put a pistol ball through the brain of a madman trying to kill Rachel, Ian, or both, with an ax. Ian's left arm had healed enough to dispense with a sling, but it was still stiff.

"There's a lady who'd like to speak with ye," he said, ignoring William's narrowed eyes. The eyes relaxed a little.

"Miss Hunter?" A small gleam of pleasure lit William's eyes, and Ian's own narrowed slightly. *Aye, well,* he thought, *let her tell him, then.*

William waved to another corporal down the line, who waved back, then he stepped off the road after Ian. A few soldiers glanced at Ian, but he was unremarkable, the double line of dotted tattooing on his cheeks, his buckskin breeches, and his sun-browned skin marking him as an Indian scout—a good many of these had deserted the British army, but there were still a good many left, mostly Loyalists like

Joseph Brant, who held land in Pennsylvania and New York; there were also still some ranging parties from the Iroquois nations who had come down to fight at Saratoga.

"William!" Rachel flew across the little clearing and clasped the tall captain's hands, beaming up at him with such joy that he smiled back at her, all irritability vanished. Ian hung back a bit, to give her time. There hadn't been any, really, what with Rollo roaring and tearing at Arch Bug's miserable auld carcass, Rachel sprawled on the floor, frozen with horror, himself lying on the floor pouring blood, and half the street outside screaming bloody murder.

William had pulled Rachel to her feet and thrust her into the arms of the first woman available, who, as it happened, was Marsali.

"Get her out of here!" William had snapped. But Rachel, Ian's nut-brown maiden—her brownness much splattered with blood—had pulled herself together in an instant and, gritting her teeth—Ian had seen her do it, bemused by shock as he lay on the floor, watching things happen as though in a dream—had stepped over auld Arch's body, fallen to her knees in the mess of brains and blood, wrapped her apron tight about Ian's wounded arm and tied it with her kerchief, and then, with Marsali, had dragged him bodily out of the printshop and into the street, where he'd promptly passed out, waking only when Auntie Claire began stitching his arm.

Ian hadn't had time to thank William, even had he been able to speak, and he meant to convey his own thanks as soon as he might. But clearly Rachel wanted to talk to him first, and he waited, thinking how beautiful she looked, her eyes the clouded hazel of thicket and greenbrier, face clever and quick as flame.

“But thee is tired, William, and thin,” she was saying, drawing a finger disapprovingly down the side of his face. “Do they not feed thee? I’d thought it was only the Continentals who went short of rations.”

“Oh. I—I haven’t had time of late.” The happiness that had lit William’s face while he talked with Rachel faded noticeably. “We—well, you see.” He waved an arm toward the invisible road, where the hoarse chants of the sergeants rang like the calling of disgruntled crows above the shuffle of feet.

“I do see. Where is thee going?”

William rubbed the back of his hand across his mouth and glanced at Ian.

“I suppose he oughtn’t to say,” Ian said, coming across and touching Rachel’s arm, smiling at William in apology. “We’re the enemy, *mo nighean donn*.”

William looked sharply at Ian, catching the tone of his voice, then back at Rachel, whose hand he was still holding.

“We are betrothed, William—Ian and I,” she said, gently pulling her hand out of his and putting it on Ian’s.

William’s face changed abruptly, losing its look of happiness altogether. He eyed Ian with something remarkably close to dislike.

“Are you,” he said flatly. “I suppose I must wish you every happiness, then. Good day.” He turned on his heel, and Ian, surprised, reached out to pull him back.

“Wait—” he said, and then William turned and hit him in the mouth.

He was lying on his back in the leaves, blinking in disbelief, as Rollo hurtled over him and sank his teeth into some soft part of William, judging by the yelp and the brief cry of startlement from Rachel.

"Rollo! *Bad* dog—and thee is a bad dog, too, William Ransom! What the devil does thee mean by this?"

Ian sat up, tenderly fingering his lip, which was bleeding. Rollo had retreated a little under Rachel's scolding but kept a yellow eye fixed on William and a curled lip raised over bared teeth, the faintest rumble of a growl coming from his huge chest.

"Fuirich," Ian said to him briefly, and got to his feet. William had sat down and was examining the calf of his leg, which was bleeding through his torn silk hose, though not badly. When he saw Ian, he scrambled to his feet. His face was bright red and he looked as though he meant to either do murder or burst into tears. *Maybe both*, Ian thought in surprise.

He was careful not to touch William again but stood back a bit—in front of Rachel, just in case the man meant to go off again. He *was* armed, after all; there was a pistol and knife at his belt.

"Are ye all right, man?" Ian asked, in the same tone of mild concern he'd heard his da use now and then on his mam or Uncle Jamie. Evidently it was in fact the right tone to take with a Fraser about to go berserk, for William breathed like a grampus for a moment or two, then got himself under control.

"I ask your pardon, sir," he said, back stiff as a stick of rock maple. "That was unforgivable. I shall … leave you. I—Miss Hunter … I—" He turned, stumbling a little, and that gave Rachel time to dart round in front of Ian.

"William!" Her face was full of distress. "What is it? Have I—"

He looked down at her, his face contorted, but shook his head.

“You haven’t done anything,” he said, with an obvious effort. “You … you could never do anything that—” He swung round toward Ian, fist clenched on his sword. “But *you*, you fucking bas—you son of a bitch! *Cousin!*”

“Oh,” said Ian stupidly. “Ye know, then.”

“Yes, I bloody know! You could have fucking told me!”

“Know what?” Rachel looked from him to William and back again.

“Don’t you bloody tell her!” William snapped.

“Don’t be silly,” Rachel said reasonably. “Of course he’ll tell me, the minute we’re alone. Does thee not wish to tell me thyself? I think perhaps thee might not trust Ian to say it aright.” Her eye rested on Ian’s lip, and her own mouth twitched. Ian might have taken offense at this, save that William’s distress was so apparent.

“It isna really a disgrace—” he began, but then stepped hastily back as William’s clenched fist drew back.

“You think not?” William was so furious, his voice was nearly inaudible. “To discover that I am—am—the … the get of a Scottish criminal? That I am a fucking *bastard*?”

Despite his resolve to be patient, Ian felt his own dander start to rise.

“Criminal, forbye!” he snapped. “Any man might be proud to be the son of Jamie Fraser!”

“Oh,” said Rachel, forestalling William’s next heated remark. “That.”

“What?” He glared down at her. “What the devil do you mean, *‘that’*?”

“We thought it must be the case, Denny and I.” She lifted one shoulder, though keeping a close watch on William, who looked as if he were about to go off like a twelve-pound mortar. “But we supposed that thee didn’t wish the matter talked about. I didn't know that thee—how could thee not have known?" she asked curiously. "The resemblance—"

"Fuck the resemblance!"

Ian forgot Rachel and hit William on the head with a double-fisted thump that knocked him to his knees, then kicked him in the stomach. Had the kick landed where he'd meant it to, it would have finished the matter right there, but William was a good deal faster than Ian expected him to be. He twisted sideways, caught Ian's foot, and yanked. Ian hit the ground on one elbow, rolled up, and got hold of William's ear. He was dimly aware of Rachel screaming and was momentarily sorry for it, but the relief of fighting was too great to think of anything else, and she disappeared as his fury surged.

There was blood in his mouth and his ears were ringing, but he had one hand on William's throat and the other stabbing forked for his eyes, when hands seized him by the shoulders and jerked him off his cousin's squirming body.

He shook his head to clear it, panting and pulling at whoever was holding him—there were two of the villains. That earned him a thump in the ribs that knocked out what little breath he had.

William wasn't doing much better. He got to his feet, wiping the back of his hand under his nose, which was bleeding profusely. He glanced at the result and grimaced in disgust, wiping the hand on his coat.

"Take him," he said, half breathless but in control of himself. One of his eyes was swelling shut, but the other gave Ian a look of straightforward bloodlust—and, despite the circumstances, Ian was once more startled at seeing one of Uncle Jamie's expressions on another face.

There was a thunderous growl from Rollo. Rachel had the big dog's scruff twisted tight, but Ian kent well enough that she couldn't hold him if he decided to savage William. *"Fuirich, a cu!"* he said, with all the authority he could summon. The soldiers would kill Rollo without a second thought if he lunged for William's throat. The dog eased back down on his haunches but stayed tensed, his lips drawn back from saliva-dripping fangs and a deep, constant growl echoing through his body.

William glanced at Rollo, then turned his back on the dog. He sniffed, hawked, and spat blood to one side, then continued, still breathing heavily. "Take him to the head of the column, to Colonel Prescott. He's under arrest for assaulting an officer; he'll be dealt with at camp this evening."

"What does thee mean, 'dealt with'?" Rachel demanded, pushing her way past the two soldiers holding Ian. "And how dare thee, William Ransom? How—how … how *dare* thee?!" She was white-faced with fury, small fists clenched and shaking at her sides, and Ian grinned at her, licking fresh blood from his split lip. She was paying no attention to him, though, all her ire focused on William, who drew himself up to his full height and glared down the steep bridge of his nose at her.

"This is no longer your concern, madam," he said, as coldly as a man who was red as a piece of flannel and shooting sparks out of his ears could manage.

Ian thought Rachel might actually kick William in the shins, and would have paid good money to see that, but her Quaker principles got the better of the situation and she drew herself up to her own not insignificant height—she was as tall as Auntie Claire—and thrust her chin pugnaciously up at William.

"Thee is a coward and a brute," she declared at the top of her voice. Swinging round toward the men holding Ian, she added, "And so are thee brutes and cowards, to be following an order so lacking in justice!"

One of the soldiers sniggered, then coughed as he caught William's bloodshot eye upon him.

"Take him," William repeated. "Now." And, turning on his heel, stalked off. There was a broad stripe of pale road dust down the back of his coat and a good deal of it in his hair.

"Best bugger off, miss," one of the soldiers advised Rachel, not unkindly. "You don't want to be down amongst the troops, like, not on your own."

"I will not bugger off," Rachel said, narrowing her eyes at the man in a way that reminded Ian of a panther about to spring. "What does thee intend to do to this man?" She gestured at Ian, who was getting his own breath back by now.

"Rachel," he began, but was interrupted by the other soldier.

"Assaulting an officer? Probably five hundred lashes. Wouldn't hang him, I don't s'pose," the man added dispassionately. "Seeing as young Galahad's not maimed, I mean."

Rachel went even whiter at this, and Ian jerked hard at his arms, getting his feet solidly under him.

"It'll be all right, *a nighean*," he said, hoping he sounded reassuring. "Rollo! *Sheas!* But he's right—the camp's nay place for ye, and ye canna do me any good by coming. Go back to the city, aye? Tell Auntie Claire what's happened—she can speak to L—*ungk!*" A third soldier, coming out of nowhere, had hit him in the pit of the stomach with a musket butt.

“What are you lot hangin’ about for? Get on! And you—” The soldier turned on Rachel and the dog, glowering. “Shoo.” He jerked his head at Ian’s captors, who obligingly hauled Ian around.

Ian tried to turn his head to give Rachel a final word, but they jerked him back and firmly down the road.

He stumbled along, in preference to being dragged, thinking furiously. Auntie Claire was his best chance—likely his only one. If she could make Lord John take a hand, either speaking to Willie or directly to this Colonel Prescott … He glanced up at the sun. Noon, more or less. And the British on the march carried out routine flogging and other punishment after the evening meal; he’d seen it now and then, and he’d seen his uncle’s back now and then, too. A cold worm crawled through his sore belly.

Six hours. Maybe.

He risked another quick glance back. Rachel was running, Rollo loping alongside.

* * *

WILLIAM SWABBED HIS face with what was left of his handkerchief. His features felt foreign to him, lumped and swollen, and he explored the inside of his mouth gingerly with his tongue: no teeth missing, a couple maybe loose, and a stinging cut inside his cheek. Not bad. He thought he’d done worse to Murray and was glad of it.

He was still trembling—not with shock but with the urge to rip someone limb from limb. At the same time, he was beginning to *feel* shock, though conscious thought still came in fleeting snatches. What the devil had he done?

A short column of soldiers marched past, a few of them openly staring at him. He gave them a vicious look, and their heads snapped forward so fast he could hear the leather of their stocks creak.

He hadn't done it. Murray had attacked *him*. Where did Rachel Hunter get off, calling *him* a coward and a brute? He felt the tickle of blood crawling down from one nostril and stanched it, snorting into the filthy rag. He saw someone approaching, coming up the road, accompanied by a large dog. He straightened, stuffing the handkerchief into his pocket.

"Speak of the bloody she-devil," he muttered, and coughed, his throat raw with the iron taste of blood.

Rachel Hunter was pale with rage. Apparently she hadn't turned round to apologize for her insults. She had snatched off her cap and held it clutched in one hand—did she mean to throw it at him? he wondered in fogged amazement.

"Miss Hunter—" he began in a rasping voice, and would have bowed, save he was afraid the motion would make his nose bleed again.

"Thee cannot mean it, William!"

"Mean what?" he said, and she gave him a look that might have singed the small hairs off his body, had he not still been hot himself.

"Do not be obtuse!" she snapped. "What possessed thee, to —"

"What possessed your—your *fiancé*?" he snapped back. "Did I attack him? No!"

"Yes, thee did! Thee struck him in the mouth, without the slightest provocation—"

"And he hit me on the head, without the least warning! If anyone is a coward—"

"Don't thee dare call Ian Murray coward, thee—thee—"

"I'll call him what I bloody like—what he bloody *is*. Just like his goddamned uncle, goddamned Scottish bastard fu—I mean …"

"His uncle? Thy *father*?"

"Shut up!" he bellowed, and felt the blood surge into his face, stinging all the raw places. "Don't call him my father!"

She breathed stertorously through her nose for a moment, glaring up at him.

"If thee allows this to be done, William Ransom, I will—I will—"

William could feel the blood pool in his belly and thought he might faint, but not because of her threats.

"You'll what?" he asked, half breathless. "You're a Quaker. You don't believe in violence. Ergo, you can't—or at least won't"—he corrected himself, seeing the dangerous look in her eye—"stab me. You probably won't even strike me. So what did you have in mind?"

She did strike him. Her hand whipped out like a snake and slapped him across the face hard enough to make him stagger.

"So now thee has doomed thy kinsman, repudiated thy father, and caused me to betray my principles. What next?!"

"Oh, bloody hell," he said, and grabbed her arms, pulled her roughly to him, and kissed her. He let go and stepped back quickly, leaving her bug-eyed and gasping.

The dog growled at him. She glared at him, spat on the ground at his feet, then wiped her lips on her sleeve and, turning away, marched off, the dog at her heels casting a red-eyed look at William.

"Is spitting on people a part of your bloody *principles*?" he shouted after her.

She swung round, fists clenched at her sides.

"Is assaulting women part of thine?" she bellowed back, to the amusement of the infantrymen who had been standing still by the road, leaning on their weapons and gaping at the show provided.

Flinging her cap on the ground at his feet, she whirled on her heel and stamped away, before he could say more.

* * *

JAMIE CAUGHT SIGHT of a small group of redcoats coming down the road and slumped on the wagon's seat, hat pulled down over his eyes. No one would be looking for him, with the British army on the move, and even were he recognized, probably no one would bother trying to detain or question him in the midst of such an exodus—but the sight of British soldiers would likely put a knot in his tailbone for the rest of his life, and today was no exception.

He turned his head casually away toward the far side of the road as the soldiers passed, but then heard a loud *"Ifrinn!"* in a very familiar voice, and jerked round in reflex to find himself staring straight into his nephew Ian's startled, horrified face.

He was equally startled—and nearly as horrified—to see Ian, hands tied behind his back, smeared with dirt and blood and obviously the worse for wear, being shoved along by two cross-looking British privates, red-faced and sweating in their heavy uniforms.

He stifled his immediate urge to leap off the wagon and stared hard at Ian, willing the lad not to speak. He didn't, just goggled back with his eyes bulging out of his head and his face pale, as though he'd seen a ghost, and walked past, speechless.

"Jesus," Jamie murmured under his breath, realizing. "He thinks he *has* seen my fetch."

"Who thinks what?" asked the driver, though without much interest.

"I think I must get down here, sir, if ye'd be so civil as to stop? Aye, thanks." Without thought of his back, he swung down off the wagon; it twinged, but there was no warning stab of pain down his leg—and if there had been, he would still have gone up the road as fast as he could, because he saw a small figure a little way ahead, running like a rabbit with its tail on fire. The figure was plainly female, it was accompanied by a large dog, and he had the sudden thought that it might be Rachel Hunter.

It was, and he just managed to catch her up, seizing her by the arm as she ran, petticoats kirtled up in her arms and feet hammering the dust.

"Come with me, lass," he said urgently, grabbed her round the waist, and pulled her off the road. She uttered a stifled shriek—and then a much louder one, when she looked up and saw his face.

"No, I'm not dead," he said hurriedly. "Later, aye? Step back on the road wi' me now, or someone's going to come see am I raping ye in the bushes. *Ciamar a tha thu, a choin?*" he added to Rollo, who was sniffing him industriously.

She made an odd gargling noise in her throat and continued to stare, but after an instant blinked and nodded and they were back on the road. Jamie smiled and acknowledged a man who had stopped in the middle of the road, dropping the handles of a barrow he was trundling.

The man looked suspiciously at them, but Rachel, after a moment's stunned bewilderment, waved at him with a ghastly smile, and he shrugged and picked up his barrow.

"Wh-what—" she croaked. She looked as though she might collapse or vomit, chest heaving and her face going scarlet and white and scarlet again. She'd lost her cap, and her dark hair was matted with sweat and sticking to her face.

"Later," he said again, but gently. "What's happened to Ian? Where are they taking him?"

Between wrenching gasps, she told him what had happened.

"A mh'ic an diabhail," he said softly, and wondered for a split second what—or who—he meant by that. The thought vanished, though, as he looked up the road. Perhaps a quarter mile back, he could see the large, slow-moving knot of evacuees, a sprawling mass of slow wagons and trudging people, with the neat scarlet columns of soldiers splitting to flow round them, coming on now four abreast.

"Aye, then," he said grimly, and touched Rachel's shoulder. "Dinna fash, lassie. Get your breath and go back after Ian, but dinna get close enough that the soldiers take notice of ye. When he's free, tell him the two of ye must come back to the city straightaway. Go to the printshop. Oh—and best leash the hound wi' your sash. Ye dinna want him to eat anyone."

"Free? But what—what is thee going to do?" She'd got the hair out of her eyes and was calmer, though the whites of her eyes still showed all round. She reminded him of a young badger at bay, baring its teeth in panic, and the thought made him smile a little.

“I mean to have a word with my son,” he said, and, leaving her, strode purposefully up the road.

* * *

HE MADE OUT William at a considerable distance. The young man was standing at the side of the road, bareheaded, disheveled, and slightly battered, but evidently attempting to look collected; his hands were folded behind his back, and he appeared to be counting the wagons that passed him. He was alone, and Jamie hastened his step to reach the lad before anyone came along to talk to him; he needed privacy for his own conversation.

He was reasonably sure Rachel hadn’t told him everything about the recent stramash and wondered whether she herself had been partly the cause of it. She *had* said the trouble began just after she’d told William about her betrothal to Ian. Her account had been slightly confused overall, but he’d got the gist of it well enough, and his jaw tightened as he came up to William and saw the look on his face.

Christ, do I look like that in a temper? he wondered briefly. It was off-putting to speak to a man who looked as though he asked nothing more of the world than the chance to rend someone limb from limb and dance on the pieces.

“Well, rend away, lad,” he said under his breath. “And we’ll see who dances.” He stepped up beside William and took off his hat.

“You,” he said baldly, not wishing to call the lad by either title or name, “come aside wi’ me. Now.”

The look on William’s face changed from incipient murder to the same look of startled horror Jamie had just surprised on Ian’s. Had matters been otherwise, he’d have laughed. As it was, he gripped William hard by the upper arm, pushed him off-balance, and had him into the shelter of a scrim of saplings before he could set his feet hard.

"You!" William blurted, wrenching loose. "What the devil are you doing here? And where is my—what have you—" He made a convulsive gesture of dismissal. "What are you *doing* here?"

"Talking to you, if ye'll close your mouth for a moment," Jamie said coldly. "Listen to me, lad, because I'm telling ye what you're going to do."

"You're not telling me *anything,*" William began furiously, and cocked a fist. Jamie grabbed him by the upper arm again, and this time dug his fingers hard into the spot Claire had shown him, on the underside of the bone. William let out a strangled "Agh!" and started to pant, his eyes bulging.

"You're going to catch up the men ye sent Ian with and tell them to set him free," Jamie said evenly. "If ye don't, I go down under a flag of truce to the camp where they're taking him, introduce myself, tell the commander who *you* are, and explain the reason for the fight. Ye'll be right there beside me. Do I make myself clear?" he asked, increasing the pressure of his fingers.

"Yes!" The word came out in a hiss, and Jamie let go suddenly, folding his fingers into a fist to hide the fact that they were trembling and twitching from the effort.

"God damn you, sir," William whispered, and his eyes were black with violence. "God damn you to hell." His arm hung limp and must have hurt, but he wouldn't rub it, not with Jamie watching.

Jamie nodded. "Nay doubt," he said quietly, and went into the forest. Once out of sight of the road, he leaned against a tree, feeling sweat stream down his face. His back felt cast in cement. His whole body was trembling, but he hoped that William had been too distrait to notice.

God, should it have come to blows, I couldna take him.

He closed his eyes and listened to his heart, which was thumping like a bodhran. After a little, he heard the sound of hooves on the road, a horse galloping, and, turning to peer through the trees, caught a glimpse of William thundering past, heading in the direction Ian had been taken.

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THE GATHERING STORM

BY BREAKFAST ON Thursday, I'd come to the firm conclusion that it was the Duke of Pardloe or me. If I stayed in the house, only one of us would remain alive by sundown. Denzell Hunter must have come into the city by now, I reasoned; he'd call in daily at Mrs. Woodcock's house, where Henry Grey was convalescing. A very kind and capable doctor, he could easily manage Hal's recovery—and perhaps his future father-in-law would be grateful for his professional attention.

The thought made me laugh out loud, despite my increasing anxiety.

To Dr. Denzell Hunter
From Dr. C. B. R. Fraser

I am called away to Kingsessing for the day. I surrender His Grace the Duke of Pardloe to your most competent *care, in the happy confidence that your religious scruples will prevent your striking him in the head with an ax.*

Yours most sincerely,
C.

Postscriptum: I'll bring you back some asafoetida and ginseng root as recompense.

Post-postscriptum: Strongly suggest you don't bring Dottie, unless you possess a pair of manacles. Preferably two.

I sanded this missive, gave it to Colenso for delivery to Mrs. Woodcock's house, and executed a quiet sneak out the front door before Jenny or Mrs. Figg should pop up and demand to know where I was going.

It was barely seven o'clock, but the air was already warming, gradually heating up the city. By noon, the pungent mix of animals, humans, sewage, rotting vegetable matter, resinous trees, river mud, and hot brick would be stifling, but for the moment, the faint scent lent a piquant touch to the gentle air. I was tempted to walk, but even my most utilitarian shoes weren't up to an hour's walk on country roads—and if I waited for sundown and the cooling evening to make my way back, I'd be remarkably late.

Neither was it a good idea for a woman to be alone on the roads, on foot. Day *or* night.

I thought I could manage the three blocks to the livery stable without incident, but at the corner of Walnut I was hailed by a familiar voice from a carriage window.

"Mrs. Fraser? I say, Mrs. Fraser!"

I looked up, startled, to see the hawk-nosed face of Benedict Arnold smiling down at me. His normally fleshy features were gaunt and lined, and his usually ruddy complexion had faded to an indoor pallor, but there was no mistaking him.

“Oh!” I said, and made a quick bob. “How nice to see you, General!”

My heart had sped up. I’d heard from Denny Hunter that Arnold had been appointed military governor of Philadelphia but hadn’t expected to see him so soon—if at all.

I should have left it there but couldn’t help asking, “How’s the leg?” I knew he’d been badly injured at Saratoga—shot in the same leg that had been wounded a short time before, and then crushed by his horse falling with him in the storming of Breymann Redoubt—but I hadn’t seen him then. The regular army surgeons had attended him, and from what I knew of their work, I was rather surprised that he was not only alive but still *had* two legs.

His face clouded a bit at that, but he continued to smile.

“Still present, Mrs. Fraser. If two inches shorter than the other. Where are you going this morning?” He glanced automatically behind me, registering my lack of a maid or companion, but didn’t seem disturbed by it. He’d met me on the battlefield and knew me—and appreciated me—for what I was.

I knew what he was, too—and what he would become.

The hell of it was that I *liked* the man.

“Ah … I’m on my way out to Kingsessing.”

“On foot?” His mouth twitched.

“Actually, I had it in mind to hire a gig from the livery stable.” I nodded in the general direction of Davison’s stable.

"Just round the corner there. Lovely to see you, General!"

"Wait a moment, Mrs. Fraser, if you would …" He turned his head toward his aide, who was leaning over his shoulder, nodding toward me, and saying something inaudible. Next thing I knew, the carriage door popped open and the aide jumped down, offering me an arm.

"Do come up, ma'am."

"But—"

"Captain Evans here says the livery is closed, Mrs. Fraser. Allow me to put my carriage at your service."

"But—" Before I could think of anything to complete this protest, I was handed up opposite the general and the door firmly shut, Captain Evans hopping nimbly up beside the driver.

"I gather that Mr. Davison was a Loyalist," General Arnold said, eyeing me.

"Was?" I said, rather alarmed. "What's happened to him?"

"Captain Evans says that Davison and his family have left the city."

They had. The carriage had turned in to Fifth Street, and I could see the livery stable, its doors hanging open—one of them pulled entirely off and lying in the street. The stable was empty, as was the stable yard—the wagon, the gig, and the small coach gone with the horses. Sold, or stolen. From the Davisons' house, next to the stable, the tatters of Mrs. Davison's lace curtains fluttered limp in a broken window.

"Oh," I said, and swallowed. I darted a quick look at General Arnold. He'd called me "Mrs. Fraser." Obviously, he didn't know what my current situation was—and I couldn't make up my mind whether to tell him. On impulse, I decided not to. The less official inquiry there was into events at Number 17 Chestnut Street, the better, whether the inquiry was British or American.

"I'm told the British kept quite a clamp on Whigs in the city," he went on, looking me over with interest. "I hope you weren't much troubled, you and the colonel?"

"Oh, no," I said. "Not really." I took a deep breath, groping for some means of diverting the conversation. "But I have been rather short of news—er, American news, I mean. Have there been any … remarkable developments of late?"

He laughed at that, but wryly.

"Where shall I start, madam?"

Despite my unease at meeting Benedict Arnold again, I was glad for his courtesy in offering me a ride; the air was thick with moisture and the sky white as a muslin sheet. My shift was moist with perspiration after only a brief walk; I would have been wringing wet—and likely on the verge of heatstroke—by the time I had walked as far as Kingsessing.

The general was excited, both by his new appointment and by the impending military developments. He was not at liberty to tell me what those were, he said—but Washington was on the move. Still, I could see that his excitement was much tempered by regret; he was a natural warrior, and sitting behind a desk, no matter how important and ornate, was no substitute for the bone-deep thrill of leading men into a desperate fight.

Watching him shift in his seat, hands clenching and unclenching on his thighs as he talked, I felt my uneasiness deepen. Not just about him, but about Jamie. They were quite different kinds of men—but Jamie's blood roused at the scent of battle, too. I could only hope he wasn't going to be anywhere in the vicinity of whatever battle might be impending.

The general set me down at the ferry; Kingsessing was on the other side of the Schuylkill. He got out himself to hand me down from the carriage, in spite of his bad leg, and pressed my hand in parting.

"Shall I send the carriage to retrieve you, Mrs. Fraser?" he asked, glancing up at the hazy white sky. "The sky looks untrustworthy."

"Oh, no," I assured him. "I shouldn't be much longer than an hour or two about my business; it won't rain before four o'clock—it never does at this time of year. Or so my son assures me."

"Your son? Do I know your son?" His brow wrinkled; he prided himself on his memory, Jamie had said.

"I don't think you would. Fergus Fraser, he's called; he's my husband's adopted son, really. He and his wife own the printshop on Market Street."

"Indeed?" His face lighted with interest, and he smiled. "A newspaper called … *The Onion*? I heard it mentioned in the ordinary where I breakfasted this morning. A Patriot periodical, I gather, and somewhat given to satire?"

"L'Oignon," I agreed, laughing. "Fergus is a Frenchman, and his wife has a sense of humor. They do print other things, though. And they sell books, of course."

"I shall call upon them," Arnold declared. "I'm quite without books, having left such belongings as I possess to follow after me. But really, my dear, how will you get back to Philadelphia?"

"I'm sure I can borrow some form of transportation from the Bartrams," I assured him. "I've been to their gardens several times; they know me." In fact, I intended to walk—I was in no hurry to return to the Chestnut Street house and my cantankerous prisoner (what the devil was I going to do with *him*? Particularly now that the British had left …), and it was no more than an hour on foot—but knew better than to tell him that, and we parted with mutual expressions of esteem.

It was only a quarter hour's walk from the ferry to Bartram's Garden, but I took my time about it, as much because my mind was still on General Arnold as because of the heat.

When? I wondered uneasily. When would it begin to happen? Not yet; I was almost sure of that. What was it, what would it be, that turned this gallant, honorable man from patriot to traitor? Who would he talk to, what would plant the deadly seed?

Lord, I thought in a moment of sudden, horrified prayer, *please! Don't let it be something I said to him!*

The very idea made me shudder, in spite of the oppressive heat. The more I saw of how things worked, the less I knew. Roger worried a lot about it, I knew: the *why* of it. Why were a few people able to do this? What effect—conscious or unconscious—did travelers have? And what ought they to do about it if they—we—did?

Knowing what would happen to Charles Stuart and the Rising hadn't stopped him, and it hadn't stopped our being dragged into the tragedy, either. But it had—maybe—saved the lives of a number of men whom Jamie had led from Culloden before the battle. It *had* saved Frank's life, or so I thought. Would I have told Jamie, though, if I'd known what the cost would be to him and me? And if I *hadn't* told him, would we have been dragged into it anyway?

Well, there weren't any bloody answers, no more than there had been the hundreds of other times I'd asked those bloody questions, and I heaved a sigh of relief as the gate to

Bartram’s Garden came in sight. An hour in the midst of acres of cool greenery was just what I needed.

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IN WHICH MRS. FIGG TAKES A HAND

JAMIE'S BREATH CAME SHORT, and he found that he was clenching and unclenching his fists as he turned in to Chestnut Street. Not as a means of controlling his temper—he had it well leashed and it would stay that way—but only to let out more of the energy inside him.

He was trembling with it, with the need to see her, touch her, have her tight against him. Nothing else mattered. There'd be words, there needed to be words—but those could wait. Everything could wait.

He'd left Rachel and Ian at the corner of Market and Second, to go on to the printshop to find Jenny, and he spared an instant's quick prayer that his sister and the wee Quaker might get on well together, but this vanished like smoke.

There was a burning just under his ribs that spread through his chest and throbbed in his restless fingers. The city smelled like burning, too; smoke hung under a lowering sky. He noted automatically the signs of looting and violence

—a half-burnt wall, the smudge of soot like a giant thumbprint on the plaster, broken windows, a woman's cap snagged on a bush and left to hang limp in the heavy air—and the streets around him were full of people, but not those going about their business. Mostly men, many of them armed, half of them walking warily, glancing about, the rest standing in loose knots of excited conversation.

He didn't care what was happening, providing only that it wasn't happening to Claire.

There it was, Number 17; the neat brick three-story house that he'd rushed into—and out of—three days ago. The sight of it hit him in the pit of the stomach. He'd been in there perhaps five minutes and recalled every second. Claire's hair, half brushed and clouding up around his face as he bent to her, smelling of bergamot, vanilla, and her own green scent. Her warmth and solidness in his arms, his hands; he'd grabbed her by the arse, her lovely round arse so warm and firm under the thin shift, and his palms tingled with the memory of instant lust. And no more than an instant later …

He pushed the vision of William out of his mind. William could wait, too.

His knock at the door was answered by the rotund black woman he'd seen on his first arrival, and he greeted her in much the same way, though with not quite the same words.

"Good day to ye, madam. I've come for my wife." He stepped inside, past her open mouth and raised brows, and paused, blinking at the damage.

"What happened?" he demanded, rounding on the housekeeper. "Is she all right?"

"I expect she is, if you're meaning Lady John," the woman said, with a heavy emphasis on the name. "As to all this"—

she rotated smoothly on her axis, gesturing toward the gouged, blood-smeared wall, the broken banister, and the iron skeleton of a chandelier, lying drunkenly in a corner of the foyer—"that would be Captain Lord Ellesmere. Lord John's *son*." She narrowed her eyes and glared at Jamie in a way that made it apparent to him that she knew damned well what had happened in the hallway above when he'd come face-to-face with William—and she was not at all pleased.

He hadn't time to worry about her feelings and pushed past her as politely as possible, heading up the stairs as quickly as his twitching back muscles would allow.

As he reached the top of the stair, he heard a woman's voice—but not Claire's. To his astonishment, it was his sister's voice, and he approached the farthest bedroom to see her back blocking the doorway. And over her shoulder …

He'd felt unreal ever since his conversation with William at the roadside. Now he was convinced that he was hallucinating, because what he *thought* he saw was the Duke of Pardloe, face contorted in annoyance, rising from a chair, clad in nothing but a nightshirt.

"Sit down." The words were spoken quietly, but their effect on Pardloe was instantaneous. He froze, and everything in his face save his eyes went blank.

Leaning forward, Jamie peered over Jenny's shoulder to see a large Highland dag in her hand, its eighteen-inch barrel trained steady on the duke's chest. What he could see of her face was white and set like marble. "Ye heard me," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

Very slowly, Pardloe—yes, it really was him, Jamie's eyes informed his dazed mind—took two steps backward and lowered himself into the chair. Jamie could smell the gunpowder in the priming pan and thought the duke very likely could, too.

“Lord Melton,” Jenny said, moving slightly so as to have him silhouetted against the dim light that filtered through the shutters. “My good-sister said that you’re Lord Melton—or were. Is that so?”

“Yes,” Pardloe said. He wasn’t moving, but Jamie saw that he had sat down with his legs flexed under him; he could be out of the chair in one lunge, if he chose. Very quietly, Jamie edged to the side. He was close enough that Jenny should have sensed him behind her, but he could see why she didn’t; her shoulder blades were pressed together in concentration, sharp-edged under the cloth as a pair of hawk’s wings.

“It was your men who came to my house,” she said, her voice low. “Came more than once, to loot and destroy, to take the food from our mouths. Who took my husband away”—for an instant, the barrel trembled, but then steadied again—“away to the prison where he took the ill that killed him. Move one inch, my lord, and I’ll shoot ye in the guts. Ye’ll die quicker than he did, but I daresay ye willna think it fast enough.”

Pardloe didn’t say a word but moved his head a fraction of an inch to indicate that he’d understood her. His hands, which had been clutching the arms of the chair, relaxed. His eyes left the pistol—and saw Jamie. His mouth fell open, his eyes sprang wide, and Jenny’s finger whitened on the trigger.

Jamie got a hand under the gun just as it went off in a puff of black smoke, the crack of the firing simultaneous with the explosion of a china figure on the mantelpiece.

Pardloe sat frozen for an instant, then—very carefully—reached up and removed a large shard of porcelain from his hair.

"Mr. Fraser," he said, in a voice that was almost steady. "Your servant, sir."

"Your most obedient, Your Grace," Jamie replied, suffering an insane urge to laugh, and kept from it only by the sure knowledge that his sister would immediately reload and shoot him at point-blank range if he did. "I see ye're acquainted with my sister, Mrs. Murray."

"Your—dear lord, she is." Pardloe's eyes had flicked back and forth between their faces, and he now drew a long, slow breath. "Is your entire family given to irascibility?"

"We are, Your Grace, and I thank ye for the compliment," Jamie said, and laid a hand on Jenny's back. He could feel her heart going like a trip-hammer, and her breath was coming in shallow pants. Putting the pistol aside, he took her hand in both of his. It was cold as ice in spite of the temperature in the room, which was slightly hotter than Hades, with the window shuttered and boarded over.

"Would ye be so amiable as to pour out a dram of whatever's in that decanter, Your Grace?"

Pardloe did and approached warily, holding out the glass—it was brandy; Jamie could smell the hot fumes.

"Don't let him out," Jenny said, getting hold of herself. She glared at Pardloe and took the brandy, then glared at Jamie. "And where in the name of St. Mary Magdalene have *you* been these three days past?"

Before he could answer, heavy footsteps came hastily down the hallway and the black housekeeper appeared in the doorway, breathing audibly and holding a silver-inlaid fowling piece in a manner suggesting that she knew what to do with it.

"The two of you can just sit yourselves down this minute," she said, moving the barrel of the gun back and forth between Pardloe and Jamie in a businesslike fashion. "If you think you're going to take that man out of here, you—"

"I told you—I beg your pardon, madam, but would ye honor me with your name?"

"You—what?" The housekeeper blinked, disconcerted. "I—Mrs. Mortimer Figg, if it's any of your business, and I doubt *that*."

"So do I," Jamie assured her, not sitting down. The duke, he saw, had. "Mrs. Figg, as I said to ye downstairs, I've come for my wife and nothing more. If ye'll tell me where she is, I'll leave ye to your business. Whatever that may be," he added, with a glance at Pardloe.

"*Your* wife," Mrs. Figg repeated, and the barrel swiveled toward him. "Well, now. I'm thinking that perhaps you ought just to sit down and wait until his lordship comes and we see what he has to say about all this."

"Dinna be daft, Jerusha," said Jenny, rather impatiently. "Ye ken Claire's my brother's wife; she told ye that herself."

"Claire?" exclaimed Pardloe, standing up again. He had been drinking from the decanter and still held it carelessly in one hand. "My brother's wife?"

"She's no such thing," Jamie said crossly. "She's mine, and I'll thank someone to tell me where the devil she is."

"She's gone to a place called Kingsessing," Jenny said promptly. "To pick herbs and the like. We've been doctoring this *mac na galladh*—" She scowled at Pardloe. "Had I kent who ye were, *a mh'ic an diabhail*, I'd ha' put ground glass in your food."

"I daresay," Pardloe murmured, and took another gulp from the decanter. He turned his attention to Jamie. "I don't suppose that *you* know where my brother is at the moment?"

Jamie stared at him, a sudden feeling of unease tickling the back of his neck. "Is he not here?"

Pardloe made a wide gesture round the room, wordlessly inviting Jamie to look. Jamie ignored him and turned to the housekeeper. "When did ye see him last, madam?"

"Just before he and you skedaddled out the attic window," she replied shortly, and prodded him in the ribs with the barrel of the fowling piece. "What have you done with him, *fils de salope*?"

Jamie edged the barrel gingerly aside with one finger. The fowling piece was primed but not yet cocked.

"I left him in the woods outside the city, two days ago," he said, a sudden feeling of disquiet tightening the muscles at the base of his spine. He backed against the wall, discreetly pressing his arse into it to ease his back. "I expected to find him here—with my wife. Might I inquire how you come to be here, Your Grace?"

"Claire kidnapped him," Jenny said, before Pardloe could speak. The duke's eyes bulged slightly, though whether at the remark or at the fact that Jenny was reloading her pistol, Jamie couldn't tell.

"Oh, aye? What did she want him for, did she say?"

His sister gave him a look.

"She was afraid he'd turn the city upside down looking for his brother and you'd be taken up in the kerfuffle."

"Aye, well, I think I'm safe enough now," he assured Jenny. "Ought ye to turn him loose, d'ye think?"

"No," she said promptly, pounding home her ball and patch. She reached into her apron and came out with a tiny powder horn. “We canna do that; he might die.”

“Oh.” He considered this for a moment, watching the duke, whose face had assumed a slight purple tinge. “Why is that?”

“He canna breathe properly, and she was afraid if she let him loose before he was quite over it, he’d die in the street, and her conscience wouldna let her do that.”

“I see.” The urge to laugh was back, but he controlled it manfully. “So ye were about to shoot him in the house, in order to keep him from dyin’ in the street.”

Her dark-blue eyes narrowed, though she kept her gaze fixed on the powder she was pouring into the priming pan.

“I wouldna really have shot him in the guts,” she said, though from the press of her lips it was apparent that she’d have liked nothing more. “I’d just have winged him in the leg. Or maybe shot off a couple o’ toes.”

Pardloe made a sound that might have been outrage, but, knowing the man as he did, Jamie recognized it as smothered laughter. He hoped his sister wouldn’t. He opened his mouth to ask just how long Pardloe had been held captive, but before he could speak, there was a knock at the door below. He glanced at Mrs. Figg, but the housekeeper was still regarding him with narrowed eyes and made no move either to lower the fowling piece or to go downstairs and answer the door.

“Come in!” Jamie shouted, sticking his head out into the hall, then jerking back into the room before Mrs. Figg should take it into her head that he was attempting to escape and discharge a load of buckshot into his backside.

The door opened, closed, and there was a pause as the caller apparently looked around the devastated entry, then light, quick steps came up the stairs.

"Lord John!" breathed Mrs. Figg, her stern face lightening.

"In here!" called the duke, as the steps reached the landing. An instant later, the slight, bespectacled form of Denzell Hunter appeared in the doorway.

"Merde!" said Mrs. Figg, bringing her shotgun to bear on the newcomer. "I mean, Shepherd of Judea! Who in the name of the Holy Trinity are *you*?"

* * *

HUNTER WAS NEARLY as pale as Jenny, Jamie thought. Nonetheless, he didn't blink or pause but walked up to Pardloe and said, "I am Denzell Hunter, Friend Grey. I am a physician, come at the request of Claire Fraser to attend thee."

The duke dropped the decanter, which fell over and disgorged the few drops it still contained onto the braided hearthrug.

"You!" he said, drawing himself abruptly to his full height. He was in fact no taller than Hunter, but it was obvious that he had the habit of command. "You are the skulking fellow who has had the temerity to seduce my daughter, and you dare come here and offer to physic me? Get out of my sight, before I—" At this point, it dawned on Pardloe that he was in his nightshirt and unarmed. Nothing daunted, he seized the decanter from the floor and swung it at Denzell's head.

Denzell ducked, and Jamie got hold of Pardloe's wrist before he could try again. Denny straightened up, fire glinting behind his spectacles.

"I take issue both with thy description of my behavior and thy slur upon thy daughter's reputation," he said sharply. "I can only conceive that the order of thy mind is deranged by illness or drugs, for surely the man who sired and reared such a person as Dorothea could not speak so meanly of her or have so little faith in her strength of character and her virtue as to think that anyone might seduce her."

"I'm sure His Grace didna mean physical seduction," Jamie said hastily, twisting Pardloe's wrist to make him let go of the decanter.

"Is it the act of a gentleman, sir, to induce a young woman to run away with him? Ow! Let go, damn you!" he said, dropping the decanter as Jamie jerked his arm up behind his back. It fell to the hearth and burst in a shower of glass, but the duke disregarded this entirely.

"A gentleman would have sought the approval of the young lady's father, sir, before ever venturing to speak to her!"

"I did," Denzell said more mildly. "Or, rather, I did write to thee at once, apologizing for having been unable to speak with thee in person beforehand, and explaining that Dorothea and I wished to become betrothed and sought thy blessing upon our desire. I doubt thee received my letter before embarking for America, though."

"Oh, thee did, did thee? Your *desire*?" Pardloe snorted, tossing a hank of loosened hair out of his face. "Will you let go of me, you bloody Scotchman! What do you think I'm going to do, strangle him with his own neckcloth?"

"Ye might," Jamie said, easing his grip but keeping hold of Pardloe's wrist. "Jenny, would ye put that pistol somewhere out of His Grace's reach?"

Jenny promptly handed the freshly loaded pistol to Denzell, who took it by reflex, then regarded the thing in his hand in astonishment. "You need it more than I do," she said, and looked grimly at the duke. "If ye shoot him, we'll all swear it was self-defense."

"We will *not*," said Mrs. Figg indignantly. "If you think I'm going to tell his lordship I let his brother be murdered in cold blood—"

"Friend Jamie," Denny interrupted, holding out the pistol. "I should feel much happier was thee to release Dorothea's father and take charge of this. I think that might increase the civility of our conversation."

"It might," Jamie said dubiously, but let go of Pardloe and took the pistol.

Denny approached the duke, edging glass shards out of the way, and looked carefully into his face.

"I will be pleased to speak and counsel with thee, Friend, and offer any reassurances that lie within my power regarding thy daughter. But thy breathing alarms me, and I would examine thee first."

The duke was in fact making a faint wheezing noise, and Jamie noted that the purple tinge to his face had become more pronounced. At Denzell's remark, this was augmented by a wash of dull red.

"You don't touch me, you qu … quack-salver!"

Denzell glanced round and seized upon Jenny as the most likely source of information.

"What did Friend Claire say regarding him, in terms of ailment and treatment?"

"Asthma, and joint fir brewed in coffee. She calls it *Ephedra*." Jenny replied promptly, turning to add to Pardloe, "Ye ken, I didna have to tell him that. I might ha' let ye strangle, but I suppose that's no a Christian way to carry on. Are Quakers Christians, by the by?" she asked Denny curiously.

“Yes,” he replied, advancing cautiously on Pardloe, whom Jamie had forced to sit down by pressing on his shoulder. “We believe the light of Christ is present in all men—though in some cases, perceiving it is somewhat difficult,” he added, under his breath but loud enough for Jamie—and the duke—to hear.

Pardloe appeared to be trying to whistle, blowing with pursed lips, meanwhile glaring at Denzell. He gasped in air and managed a few more words.

“I will … not be doctored … by you, sir.” Another pause for blowing and gasping. Jamie noticed Mrs. Figg stir uneasily and take a step toward the door. “I will not … leave my … daughter in your … clutches—” Blow. Gasp. “If you kill me.” Blow. Gasp. “Nor risk … you sav … ing my life … and putting … me in … your … debt.” The effort involved in getting that one out turned him a ghastly gray, and Jamie was seriously alarmed.

“Has he medicine, Jenny?” he asked urgently. His sister compressed her lips but nodded, and, with a final glare at the duke, scurried out of the room.

With the ginger air of one embracing a crocodile, Denzell Hunter crouched, took hold of the duke’s wrist, and peered closely into his eyes, these organs repaying his inspection by narrowing in the most threatening fashion manageable by a man dying of suffocation. Not for the first time, Jamie suffered a reluctant admiration for Pardloe’s strength of character—though he was likewise obliged to admit that Hunter’s nearly matched it.

His concentration on the tableau before him was broken by the sound of an excited fist hammering the front door below. The door opened, and he heard his nephew Ian exclaim, “Mam!” in a hoarse voice, concurrent with his sister's astonished "Ian!" Jamie stepped out of the room and, reaching the shattered banister in a few steps, saw his sister engulfed and all but obliterated by her tall son's embrace.

Ian's eyes were closed and his cheeks wet, arms wrapped tight round his small mother, and Jamie felt a sudden lump in his own throat. What would he not give to embrace his daughter that way once more?

A slight motion drew his eye, and he saw Rachel Hunter standing shyly back, smiling at mother and son, her own eyes filled with tears. She dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief, then, happening to glance up, saw Jamie above and blinked.

"Miss Rachel," he said, smiling down at her. He pointed at a jug standing on the occasional table by the door, which he assumed was Pardloe's medicine. "Might ye bring that wee jug up here? Quickly?" He could hear Pardloe's heavy breathing from the room behind him; it didn't seem to be getting worse but was still worrying.

The gasping was momentarily drowned out by the footsteps of Mrs. Figg, appearing behind him with her fowling piece. She peered over the banister at the touching scene below, then at Rachel Hunter, trotting up the stairs, jug in hand.

"And who is *this*?" she demanded of Jamie, not quite brandishing her weapon under his nose.

"Dr. Hunter's sister," he told her, interposing his body between Rachel, who looked taken aback, and the agitated housekeeper. "Your brother wants the stuff in the jug, Miss Rachel."

Mrs. Figg made a low rumbling noise but stepped back and allowed Rachel to pass. With a bleak look down at Jenny and Ian, who had now separated enough to speak and were waving their hands and interrupting each other in excited *Gàidhlig,* she vanished back into the bedroom on Rachel's heels. Jamie hesitated, wanting to rush out the front door and head for Kingsessing, but a sense of morbid responsibility obliged him to follow her.

Denny had pulled up the stool from the dressing table and was still holding Pardloe's wrist, addressing him in calm tones.

"Thee is in no immediate danger, as thee likely knows. Thy pulse is strong and regular, and while thy breathing is clearly compromised, I think—ah, is this the tincture the Scotswoman mentioned? I thank thee, Rachel; will thee pour—" But Rachel, long accustomed to medical situations, was already decanting into the brandy glass some blackish-brown stuff that looked like the contents of a spittoon.

"Shall I—" Denzell's attempt to hold the glass for the duke was preempted by Pardloe's seizing the glass for himself and taking a gulp that all but choked him on the spot. Hunter calmly observed the coughing and spluttering, then handed him a handkerchief.

"I have heard it theorized that such cataclysms of breath as thee is experiencing may be precipitated by violent exercise, a rapid change of temperature, exposure to smoke or dust, or, in some cases, by a surge of violent emotion. In the present instance, I believe I may possibly have caused thy crisis by my appearance, and if so, I ask thy pardon." Denny took the handkerchief and handed Pardloe back the glass, wise enough not to tell him to sip the stuff.

"Perhaps I may make some recompense for this injury, though," he said. "I gather thy brother is not at home, since I can't suppose that he would remain absent from this gathering unless he were dead in the cellar, and I should hope that's not the case. Has thee seen him recently?"

"I have—not." Pardloe's breathing was in fact growing smoother and his face a more normal color, though the expression on it was still feral. "Have you?"

Hunter took off his spectacles and smiled, and Jamie was struck by the kindness of his eyes. He glanced at Rachel; her eyes were hazel, rather than her brother's soft olive brown, and, while good-natured, were much warier. Jamie thought wariness a good thing in a woman.

"I have, Friend. Thy daughter and I discovered him in a militia camp some distance from the city. He had been taken prisoner, and—" Pardloe's exclamation collided with Jamie's, and Hunter patted the air with his hand, begging attention. "We were able to assist his escape, and, since he'd been injured during his capture, I treated him; his injuries were not intrinsically serious."

"When?" Jamie asked. "When did ye see him?" His heart had given a small, disquietingly happy lurch at the news that John Grey was not dead.

"Last night," Denny told him. "We heard of his escape this morning and heard nothing of his recapture as we made our way back to Philadelphia, though I asked each group of regulars or militia we encountered. He will have needed to go with care, both woods and roads being alive with men, but I imagine he'll be with you soon."

Pardloe drew a long, deep breath.

"Oh, God," he said, and closed his eyes.

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WELCOME COOLNESS IN THE HEAT, COMFORT IN THE MIDST OF WOE

THERE WAS PLENTY OF cool greenery available; the gardens covered the best part of a hundred acres, with trees, bushes, shrubs, vines, and flowers of all descriptions—and the odd exotic fungus thrown in here and there for variety. John Bartram had spent the greater part of a long life combing the Americas for botanical specimens, most of which he had hauled home and induced to grow. I regretted not having met the old gentleman; he had died a year before, leaving his famous garden in the capable hands of his children.

I found Young Mr. Bartram—he was about forty, but so called to distinguish him from his elder brother—in the center of the gardens, sitting under the shade of an immense creeper that covered half the porch of his house, a sketchbook open on the table before him, making careful drawings of a handful of pale, leggy roots that lay on a napkin.

“Ginseng?” I asked, bending to peer at them.

“Yes,” he said, not taking his eyes off the delicate line of his pen. “Good morning, Lady John. You’re familiar with the root, I see.”

“It’s fairly common in the mountains of North Carolina, where I … used to live.” The casual sentence caught in my throat with a sudden unexpectedness. Out of nowhere, I smelled the woods on Fraser’s Ridge, pungent with balsam fir and poplar sap, heavy with the musty scent of wood ears and the tang of wild muscats.

“Yes, indeed.” Reaching the end of his line, he set down his pen, removed his spectacles, and looked up at me with the bright face of a man who lives for plants and fully expects the world to share his obsession. “These are Chinese ginseng; I want to see whether I might be able to persuade it to grow here—” He waved a hand toward the encompassing acres of lush garden. “The Carolina variety languishes, and the Canadian ginseng stubbornly refuses even to try!”

“How very perverse of it. Though I expect it’s too hot,” I observed, taking the stool he gestured me to and setting down my basket on the floor. My shift was sticking to me, and I could feel a large splotch of spreading wetness between my shoulder blades, where my hair dripped sweat down my back. “They like cold weather.”

The vivid memory of the woods had blossomed into a visceral longing for the Ridge, so immediate that I felt the ghost of my vanished house rise around me, a cold mountain wind thrumming past its walls, and thought that, if I reached down, I could feel Adso’s soft gray fur under my fingers. I swallowed, hard.

“It *is* hot,” he said, though he himself looked as dry as one of the roots on the table, dappled with shade from his vine.

"May I offer you some refreshment, Lady John? I have some iced negus in the house."

"I'd love it," I said, meaning it. "But—iced?"

"Oh, we have quite a large icehouse by the river, Sissy and I," he said proudly. "Let me just tell her …"

I *had* had sufficient forethought as to bring a fan with me and now pulled this out of my basket. The sense of longing had turned suddenly into a new—and wonderful—realization. *We could go home.* Jamie had been released from service with the Continental army in order to see his cousin's body back to Scotland. He'd meant, when we returned, to go back to North Carolina, reclaim his printing press, and take up arms on behalf of the revolution via the pen rather than the sword.

That plan had vanished, along with the rest of my life, when he'd been reported drowned. But now … A thrill of excitement ran through me and must have shown on my face, for Mr. and Miss Bartram both blinked at me as they came out onto the porch. They were twins, and while their faces bore only a faint similarity of feature, they often shared the same expression and were doing so presently, both looking slightly bewildered but pleased.

I could barely keep myself from sharing my wonderful thought with them, but that wouldn't do, and I managed to sip the negus—port mixed with hot water, sugar, and spices, then chilled to a cold—*truly* cold!—water-beaded delight—and engage in civil admiration of the ongoing improvements to Bartram's Garden, these being already famous for their beauty and variety. Old Mr. Bartram had been planning and planting and extending them for fifty years, and his children had evidently inherited the family mania, as well as the gardens.

"… and we've improved the river path, and we've just put up a *much* bigger potting shed," Sissy Bartram was saying eagerly. "So many customers wanting potted vines and flowers for their drawing rooms and conservatories! Though I don't know …" Her eagerness faded a little, and she made a moue of doubt. "With all this kerfuffle—war is *so* bad for business!"

Mr. Bartram coughed a little. "It does depend on the sort of business," he said mildly. "And I'm afraid we shall have a much increased demand for the medicinals."

"But if the army is leaving …" Miss Bartram began hopefully, but her brother shook his head, his face growing sober.

"Does thee not feel it in the air, Sissy?" he said softly. "Something is coming." He lifted his face, as though scenting something on the heavy air, and she reached to put a hand on his arm, silent, listening with him for the sound of distant violence.

"I hadn't realized that you were Friends, Mr. Bartram," I said, to break the ominous quiet. Both of them blinked and smiled at me.

"Oh," said Miss Bartram. "Father was read out of meeting some years ago. But sometimes the habits of childhood come back when you least expect them." She lifted one plump shoulder, smiling, but with something regretful behind it. "I see you have a list, Lady John?"

That recalled me abruptly to my business, and the next hour was spent in busy exploration, discussion of the merits and drawbacks of various medicinals, the selection of dried herbs from the vast drying sheds, and cutting of fresh ones from the beds. With my sudden realization that we might return to the Ridge quite soon, and Mr. Bartram's very acute observation about the impending demand for medicinals, I bought much more than I had originally intended, replenishing not only my usual stocks (including a pound of dried Chinese joint fir, just in case. What *was* I going to do with the bloody man?), but also a good quantity of Jesuit bark, elecampane, and even lobelia, plus the asafoetida and ginseng I'd promised Denny.

In the end, there was too much for my basket, and Miss Bartram said she would put it up into a package and have one of the assistant gardeners who lived in Philadelphia bring it into the city when he went home in the evening.

"Would you like to see the river path, before you go?" she asked me, with a quick glance skyward. "It's not finished yet, of course, but we have some amazing things put in, and it is wonderfully cool at this time of day."

"Oh, thank you. I really—wait. You wouldn't have fresh arrowhead down there, would you?" I hadn't thought to put that on my list, but if it was available …

"Oh, yes!" she cried, beaming. "Masses of it!" We were standing in the largest of the drying sheds, and the late-afternoon light falling through the boards striped the walls with bars of swimming gold, illuminating the constant rain of tiny pollen grains from the drying flowers. There was a scatter of tools on the table, and she plucked a wooden trowel and a stubby knife from the litter without hesitation. "Would you like to dig your own?"

I laughed with pleasure. The opportunity to grub around in the wet mud wasn't an offer that most women would have made—especially to another woman dressed in pale-blue muslin. But Miss Bartram spoke my language. I hadn't had my hands in the earth in months, and the mere suggestion made my fingers tingle.

THE RIVER PATH was lovely, edged with willow and silver birch that cast a flickering shade over banks of nasturtium and azalea and the floating masses of dark-green cress. I felt my blood pressure drop as we strolled, chatting of this and that.

“Do you mind if I ask you something about the Friends?” I asked. “I have a colleague who was read out of meeting—he and his sister—because he volunteered as a surgeon with the Continental army. Since you mentioned your father … I wondered, how important a thing is that? Belonging to a meeting, I mean?”

“Oh!” She laughed, rather to my surprise. “I imagine it depends upon the individual—everything does, really, as a Friend. My father, for instance: he *was* read out of meeting, for refusing to acknowledge the divinity of Jesus Christ, but he went right on going to meeting; it made no particular difference to him.”

“Oh.” That was rather reassuring. “What if—what is a Quaker marriage like? Would one have to belong to a meeting in order to get married?”

She thought that interesting and made low humming noises for a bit.

“Well, a marriage between Friends is … between the Friends marrying. No clergyman, I mean, and no specific prayer or service. The two Friends marry *each other*, rather than it being considered a sacrament administered by a priest or the like. But it does need to be done before witnesses—other Friends, you know,” she added, a small crease forming between her brows. “And I think that there might be considerable objection if the Friends involved—or one of them—had been formally expelled.”

“How interesting—thank you.” I wondered how this might affect Denzell and Dorothea; even more, how it might affect Rachel and Ian. “Can a Friend marry a, er, non-Friend?”

“Oh, yes, of course. Though I think they would be put out of meeting as a result,” she added dubiously. “But there might be special consideration for dire circumstances. The meeting would appoint a committee of clearness to look into the situation, I suppose.”

I hadn’t got so far as worrying about dire circumstances, but thanked her, and the conversation went back to plants.

She’d been right about the arrowhead: there *were* masses of it. She smiled happily at my amazement but then left me to my digging, assuring me that I might take some of the lotus and some Sweet Flag rhizomes, as well, if I liked. “And fresh cress, of course!” she added over her shoulder, waving a blithe hand at the water. “All you like!”

She’d thoughtfully brought along a burlap sack for me to kneel on; I spread it carefully, not to crush anything, and kirtled up my skirts out of the way as best I could. There was a faint breeze; there always is, over moving water, and I sighed in relief, both at the coolness and the sudden sense of solitude. The company of plants is always soothing, and after the incessant—well, you couldn’t call it sociability, exactly, but at least the incessant *presence* of people requiring to be conversed with, directed, hectored, scolded, conferred with, persuaded, lied to—that I had experienced over the last few days, I found the rooted silence, rushing stream, and rustling leaves balm to the spirit.

Frankly, I thought, my spirit could use a bit of balm. Between—or rather, among—Jamie, John, Hal, William, Ian, Denny Hunter, and Benedict Arnold (to say nothing of Captain Richardson, General Clinton, Colenso, and the whole bloody Continental army), the male of the species had been rather wearing on my nerves of late.

I dug slowly and peaceably, lifting the dripping roots into my basket and packing each layer between mats of watercress. Sweat was running down my face and between my breasts, but I didn't notice it; I was melting quietly into the landscape, breath and muscle turning to wind and earth and water.

Cicadas buzzed heavily in the trees nearby, and gnats and mosquitoes were beginning to collect in uneasy clouds overhead. These were luckily only a nuisance when they flew up my nose or hovered too close to my face; apparently my twentieth-century blood wasn't attractive to eighteenth-century insects, and I was almost never bitten—a great blessing to a gardener. Lulled into mindlessness, I had quite lost track of time and place, and when a pair of large, battered shoes appeared in my field of view, I merely blinked at them for a moment, as I might at the sudden appearance of a frog.

Then I looked up.

* * *

"OH," I SAID, a little blankly. Then, "There you are!" I said, dropping my knife and scrambling to my feet in a surge of joyous relief. "Where the bloody hell have you *been*?"

A smile flickered briefly across Jamie's face, and he took my hands, wet and muddy as they were. His were large and warm and solid.

“In a wagon full of cabbages, most recently,” he said, and the smile took hold as he looked me over. “Ye look well, Sassenach. Verra bonny.”

“You don’t,” I said frankly. He was grubby, very thin, and he plainly hadn’t been sleeping well; he had shaved, but his face was gaunt and shadowed. “What’s happened?”

He opened his mouth to reply but then seemed to think better of it. He let go my hands, cleared his throat with a low Scottish noise, and fixed his eyes on mine. The smile had gone.

“Ye went to bed with John Grey, aye?”

I blinked, startled, then frowned at him. “Well, no, I wouldn’t say that.”

His eyebrows rose.

“He told me ye did.”

“Is that what he said?” I asked, surprised.

“Mmphm.” Now it was his turn to frown. “He told me he’d had carnal knowledge of ye. Why would he lie about such a thing as that?”

“Oh,” I said. “No, that’s right. Carnal knowledge is a very reasonable description of what happened.”

“But—”

“ ‘Going to bed,’ though … For one thing, we didn’t. It started on a dressing table and ended—so far as I recall—on the floor.” Jamie’s eyes widened noticeably, and I hastened to correct the impression he was obviously forming. “For another, that phraseology implies that we decided to make love to each other and toddled off hand in hand to do so, and that wasn’t what happened at all. Umm … perhaps we should sit down?” I gestured toward a rustic bench, standing knee-deep in creamy drifts of ranunculus.

I hadn't had a single thought of that night since learning Jamie was alive, but it was beginning to dawn on me that it might quite possibly seem important to Jamie—and that explaining what *had* happened might be somewhat tricky.

He nodded, rather stiffly, and turned toward the bench. I followed, noting with some concern the set of his shoulders.

"Have you hurt your back?" I asked, frowning as I saw the care with which he sat down.

"What *did* happen?" he asked, ignoring the question. Politely, but with a distinct edge.

I took a deep breath, then blew out my cheeks in a helpless gesture.

He growled. I glanced at him, startled, having never heard such a noise from him before—at least, not aimed at me. Apparently it was somewhat more than important.

"Er …" I said cautiously, sitting down beside him. "What did John say, *exactly*? After telling you about the carnal knowledge, I mean?"

"He desired me to kill him. And if ye tell me ye want me to kill *you* rather than tell me what happened, I warn ye, I willna be responsible for what happens *next*."

I looked at him narrowly. He seemed self-possessed, but there was an undeniable tension in his posture.

"Well … I remember how it began, at least.…"

"Start there," he suggested, the edge more pronounced.

"I was sitting in my room, drinking plum brandy and trying to justify killing myself, if you must know," I said, with an edge of my own. I stared at him, daring him to say something, but he merely cocked his head at me in a "Go on, then" gesture.

"I ran out of brandy and was trying to decide whether I might walk downstairs to look for more without breaking my neck, or whether I'd had enough not to feel guilty about drinking the whole bottle of laudanum instead. And then John came in." I swallowed, my mouth suddenly dry and sticky, as it had been that night.

"He did say there was drink taken," Jamie observed.

"Lots. He seemed nearly as drunk as I was, save that he was still on his feet." I could see John's face in memory, white as bone save for his eyes, which were so red and swollen that they might have been sandpapered. And the expression in those eyes. "He looked the way a man looks just before he throws himself off a cliff," I said quietly, eyes on my folded hands. I took another breath.

"He had a fresh decanter in his hand. He put it down on the dressing table beside me, glared at me, and said, *'I will not mourn him alone tonight.'* " A deep quiver ran through me at the memory of those words.

"And …?"

"And he didn't," I said, a little sharply. "I told him to sit down and he did, and he poured out more brandy and we drank it, and I have not one single notion what we said, but we were talking about you. And then he stood up, and I stood up. And … I couldn't bear to be alone and I couldn't bear for *him* to be alone and I more or less flung myself at him because I very much needed someone to touch me just then."

"And he obliged ye, I take it."

The tone of this was distinctly cynical, and I felt a flush rise in my cheeks, not of embarrassment but of anger.

"Did he bugger you?"

I looked at him for a good long minute. He meant it.

"You absolute bastard," I said, as much in astonishment as anger. Then a thought occurred to me. "You said he desired you to kill him," I said slowly. "You … didn't, did you?"

He held my eyes, his own steady as a rifle barrel.

"Would ye mind if I did?" he asked softly.

"Yes, I bloody well would," I said, with what spirit I could summon up amongst the growing confusion of my feelings. "But you didn't—I *know* you didn't."

"No," he said, even more softly. "Ye don't know that."

Despite my conviction that he was bluffing, a small chill prickled the hairs on my forearms.

"I should have been within my rights," he said.

"You would not," I said, chill fading into crossness. "You didn't have any rights. You were bloody dead." Despite the crossness, my voice broke a bit on the word "dead," and his face changed at once.

"What?" I said, turning my own face away. "Did you think it didn't *matter*?"

"No," he said, and took my mud-stained hand in his. "But I didna ken it mattered quite that much." His own voice was husky now, and when I turned back to him, I saw that tears stood in his eyes. With an incoherent noise, I flung myself into his arms and clung to him, making foolish hiccuping sobs.

He held me tight, his breath warm on the top of my head, and when I stopped at last, he put me away a little and cupped my face in his hands.

"I have loved ye since I saw you, Sassenach," he said very quietly, holding my eyes with his own, bloodshot and lined with tiredness but very blue. "I will love ye forever. It doesna matter if ye sleep with the whole English army—well, no," he corrected himself, "it would matter, but it wouldna stop me loving you."

"I didn't think it would." I sniffed and he pulled a handkerchief from his sleeve and handed it to me. It was worn white cambric and had the initial "P" embroidered awkwardly in one corner in blue thread. I couldn't imagine where he'd got such a thing but didn't bother asking, under the circumstances.

The bench was not very large, and his knee was within an inch or two of mine. He didn't touch me again, though, and my heart rate was beginning to speed up noticeably. He meant it, about loving me, but that didn't mean the next while was going to be pleasant.

"It was my impression that he told me because he was sure that *you* would tell me," he said carefully.

"So I would have," I said promptly, wiping my nose. "Though I might possibly have waited 'til you'd got home, had a bath, and been fed supper. If there's one thing I know about men, it's that you don't break things like this to them on an empty stomach. When did you last eat?"

"This morning. Sausages. Dinna be changing the subject." His voice was level, but there was a good deal of feeling bubbling under it; he might as well have been a pan of simmering milk. One extra degree of heat and there'd be an eruption and scorched milk all over the stove. "I understand, but I want—I need—to know what happened."

"You understand?" I echoed, sounding surprised even to my own ears. I hoped he *did* understand, but his manner was more than a little at odds with his words. My hands were no longer cold; they were starting to sweat, and I gripped the skirt over my knees, heedless of mud stains.

"Well, I dinna *like* it," he said, not quite between clenched teeth. "But I understand it."

"You do?"

"I do," he said, eyeing me. "Ye both thought I was dead. And I ken what ye're like when you're drunk, Sassenach."

I slapped him, so fast and so hard that he hadn't time to duck and lurched back from the impact.

"You—you—" I said, unable to articulate anything bad enough to suit the violence of my feelings. "How bloody *dare* you!"

He touched his cheek gingerly. His mouth was twitching.

"I … uh … didna quite mean that the way it sounded, Sassenach," he said. "Besides, am I no the aggrieved party here?"

"No, you bloody *aren't*!" I snapped. "You go off and get—get drowned, and leave me all alone in the m-midst of spies and s-soldiers and with children—you and Fergus both, you bastards! Leave me and Marsali to-to—" I was so choked with emotion that I couldn't go on. I was damned if I'd cry, though, *damned* if I'd cry any more in front of him.

He reached out carefully and took my hand again. I let him, and let him draw me closer, close enough to see the faint dusting of his beard stubble, to smell the road dust and dried sweat in his clothes, to feel the radiant heat from his body.

I sat quivering, making small huffing sounds in lieu of speech. He ignored this, spreading my fingers out between his own, gently stroking the palm of my hand with a large, callused thumb.

"I didna mean to imply that I think ye a drunkard, Sassenach," he said, making an obvious effort to be conciliatory. "It's only that ye think wi' your body, Claire; ye always have."

With a tremendous effort of my own, I found words.

"So I'm a—a—what are you calling me now? A loose woman? A trollop? A strumpet? And you think that's better than calling me a drunkard?!?"

He gave a small snort of what might have been amusement. I yanked at my hand, but he wouldn't let go.

"I said what I meant, Sassenach," he said, tightening his grip on my hand, and augmenting it with another hand on my forearm, preventing me from rising. "Ye think wi' your body. It's what makes ye a surgeon, no?"

"I—oh." Overcoming my dudgeon momentarily, I was obliged to admit that there was something in this observation.

"Possibly," I said stiffly, looking away from him. "But I don't think that's what you meant."

"Not entirely, no." There was a very slight edge to his voice again, but I wouldn't meet his eyes. "Listen to me."

I sat stubbornly silent for a moment, but he simply held on, and I knew that he was more stubborn by nature than I could be if I worked at it for a hundred years. I was going to hear what he had to say—and I was going to tell him what he wanted to hear—whether I liked it or not.

"I'm listening," I said. He drew breath and relaxed a little but didn't lessen his grip.

"I've taken ye to bed a thousand times at least, Sassenach," he said mildly. "Did ye think I wasna paying attention?"

"Two or three thousand at least," I said, in the interests of strict accuracy, staring at the digging knife I'd dropped on the ground. "And no."

"Well, then. I ken what ye're like in bed. And I see—all too well," he added, his mouth compressing momentarily, "—how this likely was."

"No, you bloody don't," I said warmly.

He made another Scottish noise, this one indicating hesitation.

"I do," he said, but carefully. "When I lost ye, after Culloden—I kent ye weren't dead, but that made it all the worse, if ye ask me … eh?"

I had made a noise of my own but gestured briefly at him to go on.

"I told ye about Mary MacNab, aye? How she came to me, in the cave?"

"Several years after the fact," I said rather coldly. "But, yes, you did get round to it eventually." I gave him a look. "I certainly didn't blame you for that—and I didn't ask you for the gory details, either."

"No, ye didn't," he admitted. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with a knuckle. "Maybe ye weren't jealous. I am." He hesitated. "I'd tell ye, though—how it was—if ye wanted to know."

I looked at him, biting my lip dubiously. *Did* I want to know? If I didn't—and I wasn't at all sure whether I did or not—would he take that as evidence that I didn't care? And I was quite conscious of that brief *"I am."*

I took a deep breath, accepting the implied bargain.

"Tell me," I said. "How it was."

Now he did look away, and I saw his throat move as he swallowed.

"It … was tender," he said quietly, after a moment. "Sad."

"Sad," I echoed. "How?"

He didn't look up but kept his eyes fixed on the flowers, following the movements of a big black bumblebee among the furled blooms.

"Both of us mourning things that were lost," he said slowly, brows drawn down in thought. "She said she meant to keep ye alive for me, to let me … to let me imagine it was you, I suppose she meant."

"Didn't work quite that way?"

"No." He looked up then, straight on, and his eyes went through me like a rapier through a scarecrow. "There couldna be anyone like you."

It wasn't said with an air of compliment, more one of flat finality—or, even, of resentment.

I lifted a shoulder briefly. There wasn't much response I could make.

"And?"

He sighed and looked back at his knotted hands. He was squeezing the fingers of his narrowed right hand with his left, as though to remind himself of the missing finger.

"It was quiet," he said to his thumb. "We didna talk, really, not once we'd … begun." He closed his eyes, and I wondered, with a small twinge of curiosity, just what he saw. I was surprised to realize that curiosity was all I felt—with, perhaps, pity for them. I'd seen the cave in which they'd made love, a cold granite tomb, and I knew how desperate the state of things had been in the Highlands then. Just the promise of a little human warmth … *"Both of us mourning things that were lost,"* he'd said.

"It was just the once. It didna last very long; I—it had been a long time," he said, and a faint flush showed across his cheekbones. "But … I needed it, verra much. She held me after, and … I needed that more. I fell asleep in her arms; she was gone when I woke. But I carried the warmth of her with me. For a long time," he said very softly.

That gave me a quite unexpected stab of jealousy, and I straightened a little, fighting it back with clenched hands. He sensed it and turned his head toward me. He'd felt that flame ignite—and had one to match it.

"And you?" he said, giving me a hard, direct look.

"It wasn't tender," I said with an edge. "And it wasn't sad. It should have been. When he came into my room and said he wouldn't mourn you alone, and we talked, then I got up and went to him, expecting—if I had so much as an expectation; I don't think I had any conscious thoughts…."

"No?" He matched my edge with his own. "Blind drunk, were ye?"

"Yes, I bloody was, and so was he." I knew what he was thinking; he wasn't making any effort to hide it, and I had a sudden, vivid recollection of sitting with him in the corner of a tavern in Cross Creek, his taking my face suddenly between his hands and kissing me, and the warm sweetness of wine passing from his mouth to mine. I sprang to my feet and slapped my hand on the bench.

"Yes, I bloody was!" I said again, furious. "I was drunk every damned day since I heard you were dead."

He drew a deep, deep breath, and I saw his eyes fix on his hands, clenched on his knees. He let it out very slowly.

"And what did he give ye, then?"

"Something to hit," I said. "At least to begin with."

He looked up at me, startled.

"Ye hit him?"

"No, I hit *you*," I snapped. My fist had curled, without my realization, clenched against my thigh. I remembered that first blow, a blind, frenzied punch into unwary flesh, all the force of my grief behind it. The flex of recoil that took away the sensation of warmth for an instant, brought it back with a smash that flung me onto the dressing table, borne down by a man's weight, his grip tight on my wrists, and me screaming in fury. I didn't remember the specifics of what came next—or, rather, I recalled certain things very vividly but had no idea of the order in which they happened.

"It was a blur," people say. What they really mean is the impossibility of anyone truly entering such an experience from outside, the futility of explanation.

"Mary MacNab," I said abruptly. "She gave you … tenderness, you said. There should be a word for what this was, what John gave me, but I haven't thought of it yet." I needed a word that might convey, encapsulate.

"Violence," I said. "That was part of it." Jamie stiffened and gave me a narrow look. I knew what he was thinking and shook my head. "Not that. I was numb—deliberately numb, because I couldn't bear to feel. He could; he had more courage than I did. And he made me feel it, too. That's why I hit him."

I'd been numb, and John had ripped off the dressing of denial, the wrappings of the small daily necessities that kept me upright and functioning; his physical presence had torn away the bandages of grief and showed what lay below: myself, bloody and unhealed.

I felt the air thick in my throat, damp and hot and itching on my skin. And finally I found the word.

"Triage," I said abruptly. "Under the numbness, I was … raw. Bloody. *Skinned.* You do triage, you … stop the bleeding first. You stop it. You stop it, or the patient dies. He stopped it."

He'd stopped it by slapping his own grief, his own fury, over the welling blood of mine. Two wounds, pressed together, blood still flowing freely—but no longer lost and draining, flowing instead into another body, and the other's blood into mine, hot, searing, not welcome—but life.

Jamie said something under his breath in Gaelic. I didn't catch most of the words. He sat with his head bent, elbows on his knees and head in his hands, and breathed audibly.

After a moment, I sat back down beside him and breathed, too. The cicadas grew louder, an urgent buzz that drowned out the rush of water and the rustling of leaves, humming in my bones.

"Damn him," Jamie muttered at last, and sat up. He looked disturbed, angry—but not angry at me.

"John, um, *is* all right, isn't he?" I asked hesitantly. To my surprise—and my slight unease—Jamie's lips twisted a little.

"Aye. Well. I'm sure he is," he said, in a tone admitting of a certain doubt, which I found alarming.

"What the bloody hell did you do to him?" I said, sitting up straight.

His lips compressed for an instant.

"I hit him," he said. "Twice," he added, glancing away.

"Twice?" I echoed, in some shock. "Did he fight you?"

"No," he said shortly.

"Really." I rocked back a bit, looking him over. Now that I had calmed down enough to take notice, I thought he was displaying … what? Concern? Guilt?

"Why did you hit him?" I asked, striving for a tone of mild curiosity, rather than one of accusation. Evidently I was less than successful with this, as he turned on me like a bear stung in the rump by a bee.

"*Why*? Ye dare to ask me *why*?"

"Certainly I do," I said, discarding the mild tone. "What did he do to make you hit him? And *twice*?" Jamie had no problem with mayhem, but he normally did require a reason.

He made a deeply disgruntled Scottish noise, but he'd promised me honesty a long time ago and hadn't seen fit to break that promise yet. He squared his shoulders and looked at me straight.

"The first was between him and me; it was a blow I've owed him for a good while."

"And you just seized the opportunity to punch him, because it was convenient?" I asked, a bit wary of asking directly what the devil he meant by "between him and me."

"I couldna help it," he said testily. "He said something and I hit him."

I didn't say anything but inhaled through my nose, meaning him to hear it. There was a long moment of silence, weighted with expectation and broken only by the shush of the river.

"He said the two of ye hadna been making love to each other," he finally muttered, looking down.

"No, we weren't," I said, somewhat surprised. "I told you. We were both—oh!"

He did look up at me then, glaring.

"Oh," he said, the word dripping with sarcasm. "Ye were both fucking me, he said."

"Oh, I see," I murmured. "Well. Um. Yes, that's quite true." I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "I see," I said again, and thought I probably did. There was a deep friendship of long standing between Jamie and John, but I was aware that one of the pillars it rested on was a strict avoidance of any reference to John's sexual attraction toward Jamie. If John had lost his composure sufficiently as to kick that pillar out from under the two of them …

"And the second time?" I asked, choosing not to ask him to elaborate any further on the first.

"Aye, well, that one was on your account," he said, both voice and face relaxing a little.

"I'm flattered," I said, as dryly as possible. "But you really shouldn't have."

"Well, I ken that now," he admitted, flushing. "But I'd lost my temper already and hadna got it back again. *Ifrinn*," he muttered, and, stooping, picked up the discarded digging knife and jammed it hard into the bench beside him.

He closed his eyes then, pressed his lips tight, and sat tapping the fingers of his right hand against his leg. He hadn't done that since I'd amputated the remains of his frozen fourth finger, and I was taken aback to see him do it now. For the first time, I began to appreciate the true complexities of the situation.

"Tell me," I said, in a voice not much louder than the cicadas. "Tell me what you're thinking."

"About John Grey. About Helwater." He drew a deep, exasperated breath and opened his eyes, though he didn't look at me. "I managed there. Staying numb, as ye said. I suppose I might have stayed drunk, too, had I been able to afford it." His mouth twisted, and he folded his right hand into a fist, then looked down at it in surprise; he hadn't been able to do that for thirty years. He opened it and put his hand flat on his knee.

"I managed," he repeated. "But then there was Geneva—and I told ye how that was, too, did I not?"

"You did."

He sighed. "And then there was William. When Geneva died and it was my fault, it was a knife in my heart—and then William …" His mouth softened. "The bairn cut me wide open, Sassenach. He spilled my guts out into my hands."

I put my hand on his, and he turned it, his fingers curling over mine.

"And that bloody English sodomite bandaged me," he said, so low I could scarcely hear him above the sound of the river. "With his friendship."

He drew breath again and let it out explosively. "No, I didna kill him. I dinna ken if I'm glad of it or not—but I didn't."

I let out my own breath in a deep sigh and leaned against him.

"I knew that. I'm glad."

The haze had thickened into steel-gray clouds, coming purposefully up the river, muttering with thunder. I took a deep, lung-filling whiff of ozone and then another, of his skin. I detected the basic male animal, very appetizing in itself, but he seemed to have acquired a rather unusual—though savory—bouquet in addition: a faint whiff of sausage, the strong bitter scent of cabbage, and … yes, mustard, underlaid with something oddly spicy. I sniffed again, repressing the urge to lick him.

"You smell like—"

"I smell like a large plate of *choucroute garnie*," he interrupted, with a slight grimace. "Give me a moment; I'll have a wash." He made as though to get up and go toward the river, and I reached out and seized him by the arm.

He looked at me for a moment, then drew a deep breath and, reaching slowly out in turn, pulled me against him. I didn't resist. In fact, my own arms went round him in reflex, and we both sighed in unison, in the sheer relief of embrace.

I would have been quite content to sit there forever, breathing the musky, dusty, cabbage-laced smell of him and listening to the thump of his heart under my ear. All the things we'd said—all the things that had happened—hovered in the air around us like the cloud of troubles from Pandora's box, but for this one moment, there was nothing but each other.

After a bit, his hand moved, smoothing the loose, damp curls behind my ear. He cleared his throat and shifted a little, drawing himself up, and I reluctantly let go of him, though I left my hand on his thigh.

"I wish to say something," he said, in the tone of one making a formal statement before a court. My heart had quieted while he held me; now it fluttered in renewed agitation.

"What?" I sounded so apprehensive that he laughed. Only a breath, but he did laugh, and I was able to breathe again. He took my hand firmly and held it, looking into my eyes.

"I don't say that I dinna mind this, because I do. And I don't say that I'll no make a fuss about it later, because I likely will. But what I do say is that there is nothing in this world or the next that can take ye from me—or me from you." He raised one brow. "D'ye disagree?"

"Oh, no," I said fervently.

He breathed again, and his shoulders came down a fraction of an inch.

"Well, that's good, because it wouldna do ye any good if ye did. Just the one question," he said. "Are ye my wife?"

"Of course I am," I said, in utter astonishment. "How could I not be?"

His face changed then; he drew a huge breath and took me into his arms. I embraced him, hard, and together we let out a great sigh, settling with it, his head bending over mine, kissing my hair, my face turned into his shoulder, openmouthed at the neck of his open shirt, our knees slowly giving way in mutual relief, so that we knelt in the fresh-turned earth, clinging together, rooted like a tree, leaf-tossed and multi-limbed but sharing one single solid trunk.

The first drops of rain began to fall.

* * *

HIS FACE WAS open now and his eyes clear blue and free of trouble—for the moment, at least. "Where is there a bed? I need to be naked with ye."

I was entirely in sympathy with this proposition, but the question took me momentarily aback. Of course we couldn't go to John's house—or at least not in order to go to bed together. Even if John himself was in no position to object, the thought of what Mrs. Figg would say if I walked into the house with a large Scotsman and immediately ascended the stairs to my bedroom with him … and then there was Jenny … On the other hand, eager as I was, I really didn't want to be naked with him among the ranunculus, where we might be interrupted at any moment by Bartrams, bumblebees, or rain.

"An inn?" I suggested.

"Is there one where folk wouldna ken ye? A decent one, I mean?"

I knit my brows, trying to think of one. Not the King's Arms, definitely not that. Otherwise … I was familiar only with the two or three ordinaries where Marsali bought ale or bread—and people most assuredly knew me there—as Lady John Grey.

It wasn't that Jamie by himself needed to avoid notice anymore—but his supposed death and my marriage to John had been the subject of a tremendous amount of public interest, by reason of its tragedy. For it to become widely known that the presumably deceased Colonel Fraser had suddenly reappeared from the dead to reclaim his wife would be a subject of conversation that would dwarf the withdrawal of the British army from the city. I had a quick flash of memory—our wedding night, witnessed at close quarters by a crowd of raucously drunk Highland clansmen—and imagined a reprise of this experience, with interested commentary by the ordinary's patrons.

I glanced at the river, wondering whether, after all, a nice, sheltering bush—but it was late in the afternoon, cloudy, and the gnats and mosquitoes were hanging in small carnivorous clouds of their own beneath the trees. Jamie stooped suddenly and swept me up in his arms.

"I'll find a place."

* * *

THERE WAS A wooden thump as he kicked open the door of the new potting shed, and suddenly we were in a light-streaked darkness smelling of sun-warmed boards, earth, water, damp clay, and plants.

"What, *here*?"

It was abundantly clear that he wasn't seeking privacy for the purpose of further inquiry, discussion, or reproach. For that matter, my own question was largely rhetorical.

He stood me on my feet, turned me about, and began undoing my laces. I could feel his breath on the bare skin of my neck, and the tiny hairs there shivered.

"Are you—" I began, only to be interrupted by a terse "Hush." I hushed. I could hear then what he'd heard: the Bartrams, in conversation with each other. They were some distance away, though—on the back porch of the house, I thought, screened from the river path by a thick hedge of English yew.

"I don't think they can hear us," I said, though I lowered my voice.

"I've done wi' talking," he whispered, and, leaning forward, closed his teeth gently on the nape of my exposed neck.

"Hush," he said again, though mildly. I hadn't actually said anything, and the sound I'd made was too high-pitched to draw the attention of anything save a passing bat. I exhaled strongly through my nose and heard him chuckle deep in his throat.

My stays came loose, and cool air flooded through the damp muslin of my shift. He paused, one hand on the tapes of my petticoats, to reach round with the other and gently lift one breast, heavy and free, thumb rubbing the nipple, hard and round as a cherry stone. I made another sound, this one lower-pitched.

I thought vaguely how fortunate it was that he was left-handed, as that was the hand nimbly engaged in undoing the tapes of my skirts. These fell in a swishing heap round my feet, and I had a sudden vision—as his hand left my breast and the shift whiffed up round my ears—of Young Mr. Bartram suddenly realizing a dire need to pot up a batch of rosemary seedlings. The shock probably wouldn't kill him, but …

"May as well be hung for sheep as lambs," Jamie said, having evidently divined my thought from the fact that I'd turned round and was shielding my more private bits in the manner of Botticelli's Venus. "And I'll have ye naked."

He grinned at me, whipped off his own dirt-streaked shirt—he'd thrown off his coat when he set me down—and yanked down his breeks without pausing to undo the flies. He was thin enough to make this possible; the breeches hung on his hipbones, barely staying up by themselves, and I saw the shadow of his ribs beneath his skin as he bent to shed his stockings.

He straightened and I put a hand on his chest. It was damp and warm, and the ruddy hairs prickled into gooseflesh at my touch. I could smell the hot, eager scent of him, even over the agricultural fug of the shed and the lingering smell of cabbage.

"Not so fast," I whispered.

He made a Scottish sound of interrogation, reaching for me, and I dug my fingers into the muscle of his breast.

"I want a kiss first."

He put his mouth against my ear and both hands firmly on my bottom.

"Are ye in a position to make demands, d'ye think?" he whispered, tightening his grasp. I caught the faint barb in *that.*

"Yes, I bloody am," I said, and adjusted my own grip somewhat lower. *He* wouldn't be attracting any bats, I thought.

We were eyeball-to-eyeball, clasped and breathing each other's breath, close enough to see the smallest nuance of expression, even in the dimness. I saw the seriousness that underlay the laughter—and the doubt beneath the bravado.

"I *am* your wife," I whispered, my lips brushing his.

"I ken that," he said, very softly, and kissed me. Softly. Then closed his eyes and brushed his lips across my face, not so much kissing as feeling the contours of cheekbone and brow, of jaw and the tender skin below the ear, seeking to know me again past skin and breath, to know me to the blood and bone, to the heart that beat beneath.

I made a small sound and tried to find his mouth with my own, pressing against him, bare bodies cool and damp, hair rasping sweetly, and the lovely firmness of him rolling between us. He wouldn't let me kiss him, though. His hand gripped the tail of my hair at the base of my neck, cupping my head, the other hand pursuing the same game of blind man's buff.

There was a rattling thump; I had backed into a potting bench, setting a tray of tiny seedling pots to vibrating, the spicy leaves of sweet basil trembling in agitation. Jamie pushed the tray aside with one hand, then grasped me by the elbows and lifted me onto the bench.

"Now," he said, half breathless. "I must have ye now."

He did, and I ceased caring whether there were splinters in the bench or not.

I wrapped my legs round him and he laid me flat and leaned over me, hands braced on the bench, with a sound halfway between bliss and pain. He moved slowly in me and I gasped.

The rain had grown from a patter to a ringing din on the tin roof of the shed, covering any sounds I might make, and a good thing, too, I thought dimly. The air had cooled but was full of moisture; our skins were slick, and heat sprang up where flesh touched flesh. He was slow, deliberate, and I arched my back, urging him. In response, he took me by the shoulders, bent lower, and kissed me lightly, barely moving.

"I willna do it," he whispered, and held tight when I struggled against him, trying vainly to goad him into the violent response I wished—I needed.

"Won't do what?" I was gasping.

"I willna punish ye for it," he said, so softly I could barely hear him, close as he was. "I'll not do that, d'ye hear?"

"I don't frigging *want* you to punish me, you bastard." I grunted with effort, my shoulder joints creaking as I tried to break free of his grasp. "I want you to … God, you know what I want!"

"Aye, I do." His hand left my shoulder and cupped beneath my buttock, touching the flesh of our joining, stretched and slippery. I made a small sound of surrender, and my knees loosened.

He pulled back, then came back into me, strongly enough that I gave a small, high-pitched cry of relief.

"Ask me to your bed," he said, breathless, hands on my arms. "I shall come to ye. For that matter—I shall come, whether ye ask it or no. But remember, Sassenach—I am your man; I serve ye as I will."

"Do," I said. "*Please* do. Jamie, I want you so!"

He seized my arse in both hands, hard enough to leave bruises, and I arched up into him, grasping, hands sliding on his sweat-slick skin.

"God, Claire, I need ye!"

Rain was roaring on the tin roof now, and lightning struck close by, blue-white and sharp with ozone. We rode it together, forked and light-blind, breathless, and the thunder rolled through our bones.

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GIVE ME LIBERTY …

AND AS THE SUN set on the third day since he had left his home, Lord John William Bertram Armstrong Grey found himself once more a free man, with a full belly, a swimming head, a badly mended musket, and severely chafed wrists, standing before the Reverend Peleg Woodsworth, right hand uplifted, reciting as prompted:

“I, Bertram Armstrong, swear to be true to the United States of America, and to serve them honestly and faithfully against all their enemies and opposers whatsoever, and to observe and obey the orders of the Continental Congress and the orders of the generals and officers set over me by them.”

Bloody hell, he thought. *What next*?

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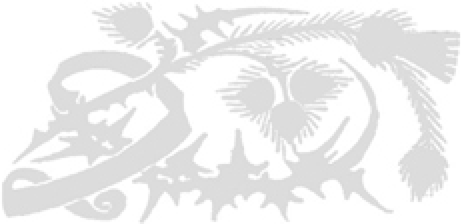
PART TWO



Meanwhile, Back at the Ranch . . .

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26

A STEP INTO THE DARK

October 30, 1980
Craigh na Dun

A BLOTCH OF SWEAT darkened the shirt between William Buccleigh's shoulder blades; the day was cool, but it was a steep climb to the top of Craigh na Dun—and the thought of what awaited them at the top was enough to make anybody sweat.

"Ye haven't got to come," Roger said to Buccleigh's back.

"Get stuffed," his great-great-great-great-great-grandfather replied briefly. Buck spoke absentmindedly, though, all his attention, like Roger's, focused on the distant crest of the hill.

Roger could hear the stones from here. A low, sullen buzz, like a hive of hostile bees. He felt the sound move, crawling under his skin, and scratched viciously at his elbow, as though he could root it out.

"Ye've got the stones, aye?" Buck stopped, clinging one-handed to a birch sapling as he looked back over his shoulder.

"I have," Roger said shortly. "D'ye want yours now?"

Buck shook his head and wiped shaggy fair hair off his brow with the back of his free hand.

"Time enough," he said, and began to climb again.

Roger knew the diamonds were there—he knew Buck knew, too—but put a hand into his jacket pocket anyway. Two rough pieces of metal clinked together, the halves of an old brooch Brianna had cut apart with the poultry shears, each half with a scatter of tiny diamonds, barely more than chips. He hoped to God they'd be enough. If not—

The day was only cool, but a bone-deep shudder ran through him. He'd done it twice—three times, if he counted the first attempt, the one that had almost killed him. It got worse each time. He'd thought he wouldn't make it the last time, coming back on Ocracoke, mind and body shredding in that place that was neither place nor passage. It had only been the feel of Jem in his arms that made him hold on, come through. And it was only the need to find Jem now that would make him do it again.

A hydroelectric tunnel
under the Loch Errochty dam

HE MUST BE getting near the end of the tunnel. Jem could tell by the way the air pushed back against his face. All he could see was the red light on the service train's dashboard—did you call it a dashboard on a train? he wondered. He didn't want to stop, because that meant he'd have to get out of the train, into the dark. But the train was running out of track, so there wasn't much else he could do.

He pulled back a bit on the lever that made the train go, and it slowed down. More. Just a little more, and the lever clicked into a kind of slot and the train stopped with a small jerk that made him stumble and grab the edge of the cab.

An electric train didn't make any engine noise, but the wheels rattled on the track and the train made squeaks and clunks as it moved. When it stopped, the noise stopped, too. It was really quiet.

"Hey!" he said out loud, because he didn't want to listen to his heart beating. The sound echoed, and he looked up, startled. Mam had said the tunnel was really high, more than thirty feet, but he'd forgotten that. The idea that there was a lot of empty space hanging over him that he couldn't see bothered him a lot. He swallowed and stepped out of the tiny engine, holding on to the frame with one hand.

"Hey!" he shouted at the invisible ceiling. "Are there any bats up there?"

Silence. He'd kind of been hoping there *were* bats. He wasn't afraid of them—there were bats in the old broch, and he liked to sit and watch them come out to hunt in the summer evenings. But he was alone. Except for the dark.

His hands were sweating. He let go of the metal cab and scrubbed both hands on his jeans. Now he could hear himself breathing, too.

"Crap," he whispered under his breath. That made him feel better, so he said it again. Maybe he ought to be praying, instead, but he didn't feel like that, not yet.

There was a door, Mam said. At the end of the tunnel. It led into the service chamber, where the big turbines could be lifted up from the dam if they needed fixing. Would the door be locked?

Suddenly he realized that he'd stepped away from the train and he didn't know whether he was facing the end of the tunnel or back the way he'd come. In a panic, he blundered to and fro, hands out, looking for the train. He tripped over part of the track and fell, sprawling. He lay there for a second, saying, "Crap-crap-crap-crap-*crap!*" because he'd skinned both knees and the palm of his hand, but he was okay, really, and now he knew where the track was, so he could follow it and not get lost.

He got up, wiped his nose, and shuffled slowly along, kicking the track every few steps to be sure he stayed with it. He thought he was in front of where the train had stopped, so it didn't really matter which way he was going—either he'd find the train or he'd find the end of the tunnel. And then the door. If it *was* locked, maybe—

Something like an electric shock ran right through him. He gasped and fell over backward. The only thing in his mind was the idea that somebody had hit him with a lightsaber like Luke Skywalker's, and for a minute he thought maybe whoever it was had cut off his head.

He couldn't feel his body, but he could see in his mind his body lying bleeding in the dark and his head sitting right there on the train tracks in the dark, and his head couldn't see his body or even know it wasn't attached anymore. He made a breathless kind of a noise that was trying to be a scream, but it made his stomach move and he felt that, he *felt* it, and suddenly he felt a lot more like praying.

"Deo … gratias!" he managed to gasp. It was what Grandda said when he talked about a fight or killing

something, and this wasn't quite that sort of thing, but it seemed like a good thing to say anyway.

Now he could feel all of himself again, but he sat up and grabbed his neck, just to be sure his head was still on. His skin was jumping in the weirdest way. Like a horse's does when a horsefly bites it, but all over. He swallowed and tasted sugared silver and he gasped again, because now he knew what had hit him. Sort of.

This wasn't quite like it had been when they'd all walked into the rocks on Ocracoke. One minute he'd been in his father's arms, and the next minute it was as if he'd been scattered everywhere in little wiggly pieces like the spilled quicksilver in Grannie's surgery. Then he was back together again, and Da was still holding him tight enough to squeeze his breath out, and he could hear Da sobbing and that scared him, and he had a funny taste in his mouth and little pieces of him were still wiggling around trying to get away but they were trapped inside his skin …

Yeah. That was what was making his skin jump now, and he breathed easier, knowing what it was. That was okay, then; he was okay; it would stop.

It was stopping already, the twitchy feeling going away. He still felt kind of shaky, but he stood up. Careful, because he didn't know where it was.

Wait—he *did* know. He knew exactly.

"That's weird," he said, out loud without really noticing, because he wasn't scared by the dark anymore; it wasn't important.

He couldn't *see* it, not with his eyes, not exactly. He squinted, trying to think how he *was* seeing it, but there wasn't a word for what he was doing. Kind of like hearing or smelling or touching, but not really any of those.

But he knew where it was. It was right *there*, a kind of … shiver … in the air, and when he stared at it, he had a feeling in the back of his mind like pretty sparkly things, like sun on the sea and the way a candle flame looked when it shone through a ruby, but he knew he wasn't really *seeing* anything like that.

It went all the way across the tunnel, and up to the high roof, too, he could tell. But it wasn't thick at all; it was thin as air.

He guessed that was why it hadn't swallowed him like the thing in the rocks on Ocracoke had. At least … he thought it hadn't and, for an instant, worried that maybe he'd gone sometime else. But he didn't think so. The tunnel felt just the same, and so did he, now that his skin had stopped jumping. When they'd done it, on Ocracoke, he'd known right away it was different.

He stood there for a minute, just looking and thinking, and then shook his head and turned around, feeling with his foot for the track. He wasn't going back through *that*, no matter what. He'd just have to hope the door wasn't locked.

***The laird's study*,**
Lallybroch estate

BRIANNA'S HAND closed on the letter opener, but even as she calculated the distance involved, the obstacle of the desk between Rob Cameron and herself, and the flimsiness of the wooden blade, she was reluctantly concluding that she couldn't kill the bastard. Not yet.

"Where's my son?"

"He's okay."

She stood up suddenly, and he jerked a little in reflex. His face flushed and he hardened his expression.

"He'd bloody well *better* be okay," she snapped. "I said, where is he?"

"Oh, no, hen," he said, rocking back on his heels, affecting nonchalance. "That's no how we're playing it. Not tonight."

God, why didn't Roger keep a hammer or a chisel or something *useful* in his desk drawer? Did he expect her to *staple* this jerk? She braced herself, both hands flat on the desk, to keep from leaping over it and going for his throat.

"I'm not playing," she said through her teeth. "And neither are you. *Where's Jemmy*?"

He leveled a long finger at her.

"You're no longer the boss lady, *Ms*. MacKenzie. I call the shots now."

"Oh, you think so, do you?" she asked, as mildly as she could. Her thoughts were slipping past like grains of sand in an hourglass, a slithering cascade of *what if, how, shall I, no, yes* …

"I do, aye." His color, already high, rose higher, and he licked his lips. "Ye're gonna find out what it's like to be on the bottom, hen."

Cameron's eyes were very bright, and his hair was clipped so short that she could see beads of sweat glittering above his ears. Was he high on something? She thought not. He was wearing track pants, and his fingers flicked unconsciously across the front, where a substantial bulge was beginning to show. Her lips tightened at the sight.

Not on your life, buddy.

She widened her gaze as much as possible, to take him in without letting his eyes move from hers. She didn't *think* he was armed, though the pockets of his jacket had stuff in them. He really thought he could make her have sex with him, without a set of manacles and a sledgehammer?

He twirled his finger, pointing to the floor in front of him.

"Come round here, hen," he said softly. "And take your jeans down. Might do ye good to learn what it's like to take it up the arse regularly. Ye've done it to me for months—fair's fair, isn't it?"

Very slowly, she came around the desk but stopped well short of him, keeping out of reach. She fumbled cold-fingered at the button of her fly, unwilling to look down, unwilling to take her eyes off him. Her heart was beating so hard in her ears that she could barely hear his heavy breathing.

The tip of his tongue showed briefly, involuntarily, as she pushed the jeans down over her hips, and he swallowed.

"The knickers, too," he said, half breathless. "Take them off."

"You don't rape people very often, do you?" she said rudely, stepping out of the puddled jeans. "What's your rush?" She bent and picked the heavy denim pants up, shook out the legs, and turned as though to lay them on the desk. Then whipped back, clutching the jeans at the ankle, and lashed them as hard as she could at his head.

The heavy cloth with its zipper and brass fly button struck him full in the face, and he staggered back with a grunt of surprise, clutching at the jeans. She let go of them instantly, leapt onto the desk, and launched herself at him, shoulder-first.

They fell together with a crash that shook the hardwood floor, but she landed on top, kneed him hard in the belly, and then grabbed him by both ears and thumped his head on the floor as hard as she could. He let out a cry of pain, reached for her wrists, and she promptly let go of his ears, leaned backward, and grabbed for his crotch.

Had she been able to get a decent grip on his balls through the soft fabric, she would have crushed them. As it was, she managed a glancing squeeze but one hard enough to make him yelp and convulse, nearly dislodging her from her perch.

She couldn't win a fistfight. Couldn't let him hit her. She scrambled to her feet, looking wildly round the office for something heavy to hit him with, seized the wooden letter box, and smashed it over his head as he started to rise. He didn't fall down but bobbed his head, dazed amongst the cascade of letters, and she kicked him in the jaw as hard as she could, her own teeth clenched. It was a sliding, sweaty impact, but she'd hurt him.

She'd hurt herself, too, had kicked him with her heel, as much as she could, but she felt a burst of pain in the middle of her foot; she'd torn or broken something, but it didn't matter.

Cameron shook his head violently, trying to clear it. He was on his hands and knees now, crawling toward her, reaching for her leg, and she backed up against the desk. With a banshee shriek, she kneed him in the face, squirmed out of his grasp, and ran for the hall, limping heavily.

There were weapons on the walls of the foyer, a few targes and broadswords kept for ornament, but all hung high, to be out of the children's reach. There was a better one easily to hand, though. She reached behind the coat rack and grabbed Jem's cricket bat.

You can't kill him, she kept thinking, dimly surprised at the fact that her mind was still working. *Don't kill him. Not yet. Not 'til he says where Jemmy is.*

“Fucking … *bitch*!” He was nearly on her, panting, half blinded by blood running down his forehead, half sobbing through the blood pouring from his nose. “Fuck you, split you open, fuck you up the—”

“Caisteal DOOON!” she bellowed, and, stepping out from behind the coat rack, swung the bat in a scything arc that caught him in the ribs. He made a gurgling noise and folded, arms across his middle. She took a deep breath, swung the bat as high as she could, and brought it down with all her strength on the crown of his head.

The shock of it vibrated up her arms to her shoulders and she dropped the bat with a *clunk* and stood there gasping, trembling and drenched with sweat.

“Mummy?” said a tiny, quavering voice from the foot of the stair. “Why is you not got pants on, Mummy?”

THANK GOD FOR instinct was her first coherent thought. She’d crossed the length of the foyer, snatched Mandy up in her arms, and was patting her comfortingly before any sort of conscious decision to move had been made.

“Pants?” she said, eyeing the limp form of Rob Cameron. He hadn’t twitched since he’d fallen, but she didn’t think she’d killed him. She’d have to take more-certain steps to neutralize him, and fast. “Oh, pants. I was just getting ready for bed when this naughty man showed up.”

“Oh.” Mandy leaned out of her arms, peering at Cameron. “Iss Mr. Rob! Iss a burglar? Iss a bad man?”

“Yes, both,” Brianna said, deliberately casual. Mandy’s speech showed the sibilance it had when she got excited or upset, but the little girl seemed to be recovering pretty fast from the shock of seeing her mother crown a burglar in the front hall while wearing only a T-shirt and underpants. The thought made her want to stomp on Cameron's balls, but she choked it back. No time for that.

Mandy clung to her neck, but Brianna set her firmly on the stairs.

"Mummy wants you to stay here, *a ghraidh*. I have to put Mr. Rob someplace safe, where he can't do anything bad."

"No!" Mandy cried, seeing her mother head toward the crumpled Cameron, but Brianna waved in what she hoped was a reassuring manner, picked up the cricket bat as insurance, and nudged her prisoner in the ribs with a cautious toe. He wobbled but didn't stir. Just in case, she moved round behind him and prodded him rudely between the buttocks with the cricket bat, which made Mandy giggle. He didn't move, and she drew a deep breath for the first time in what seemed like hours.

Going back to the stairs, she gave Mandy the bat to hold and smiled at her. She pushed a strand of sweaty hair behind her ear.

"Okay. We're going to put Mr. Rob in the priest's hole. You go and open the door for Mummy, all right?"

"I hit him?" Mandy asked hopefully, clutching the bat.

"No, I don't think you need to do that, darling. Just open the door."

Her work tote was hanging from the coat rack, the big roll of duct tape easily to hand. She trussed Cameron's ankles and wrists, a dozen turns each, then bent and, clutching him by the ankles, dragged him toward the swinging baize door at the far end of the hall, which separated the kitchen from the rest of the house.

He began to stir as they negotiated the big table in the kitchen, and she dropped his feet.

“Mandy,” she said, keeping her voice as calm as possible. “I need to have a grown-up talk with Mr. Rob. Give me the bat. Then you go right on out to the mudroom and wait for me there, okay?”

“Mummy …” Mandy was shrinking back against the sink cabinet, eyes huge and fixed on the moaning Cameron.

“*Go,* Mandy. Right now. Mummy will be there before you can count to a hundred. Start counting *now.* One … two … three …” She moved between Cameron and Mandy, motioning firmly with her free hand.

Reluctantly, Mandy moved, murmuring, “Four … five … six … seven …” and disappeared through the back kitchen door. The kitchen was warm from the Aga, and despite her lack of clothes, Bree was still streaming with sweat. She could smell herself, feral and acrid, and found that it made her feel stronger. She wasn’t sure she’d ever truly understood the term “bloodthirsty” before, but she did now.

“Where’s my son?” she said to Cameron, keeping a wary distance in case he tried to roll at her. “Answer me, you piece of crap, or I’ll beat the shit out of you and then call the police.”

“Yeah?” He rolled slowly onto his side, groaning. “And tell them what, exactly? That I took your boy? What proof of that d’ye have?” His words were slurred; his lip was puffed out on one side, where she’d kicked him.

“Fine,” she snapped. “I’ll just beat the shit out of you.”

“What, beat a helpless man? Fine example for your wee lassie.” He rolled onto his back with a muffled grunt.

“As for the police, I can tell them you broke into my house and assaulted me.” She pointed one foot at him, so he could see the livid scratches on her leg. “You’ll have my skin cells under your fingernails. And while I’d rather not have Mandy go through it all again, she'd certainly tell them what you were saying in the hallway." *She would, too,* Bree thought. Mandy was a very faithful tape recorder, especially where bad language was concerned.

"Nng." Cameron had closed his eyes, grimacing against the light over the sink, but now opened them again. He was less dazed; she could see the light of calculation back in his eyes. Like most men, she thought, he was probably smarter when he wasn't sexually aroused—and she'd taken care of *that.*

"Aye. And I tell them it was just a wee sex game that got out of hand, and you say it wasn't, and they say, 'Aye, fine, missus, and where's your husband, then?' " The undamaged side of his mouth twisted up. "You're not that swift tonight, hen. But, then, ye're not usually."

His mention of Roger made the blood surge in her ears. She didn't reply but grabbed him by the feet and pulled him roughly through the kitchen and into the back passageway. The grating that covered the priest's hole was hidden by a bench and several boxes of milk bottles, bits of farm equipment awaiting repair, and other items that didn't go anywhere else. She dropped Rob's feet, shoved the bench and boxes aside, and pulled up the grating. There was a ladder leading down into the shadowy space; she pulled this up and slid it behind the bench. *That* little amenity wouldn't be needed.

"Hey!" Rob's eyes widened. Either he hadn't known there really was a priest's hole in the house or he hadn't thought she'd do it. Without a word, she seized him under the arms, dragged him to the hole, and shoved him in. Feetfirst, because if he broke his neck, he couldn't tell her where Jem was.

He fell with a shriek, which was cut short by a heavy thump. Before she could worry that he'd managed to land on his head after all, she heard him moaning and a rustle as he started to stir. A muttering of very bad language further reassured her that he was in good enough shape to answer questions. She fetched the big flashlight from the kitchen drawer and shone it down into the hole. Cameron's face, congested and streaked with blood, glared up at her. He curled up and with some difficulty managed to wriggle into a sitting position.

"You've broken my leg, you fucking bitch!"

"Good," she said coldly, though she doubted it. "Once I get Jem back, I'll take you to a doctor."

He breathed heavily through his nose, making a nasty snuffling noise, and swiped at his face with his bound hands, smearing the blood across one cheek.

"You want him back? You get me out of here, and fast!"

She'd been considering—and discarding—different plans of action, shuffling through them like a mental pack of cards, ever since she'd duct-taped him. And letting him out wasn't one she'd considered. She *had* thought of fetching the .22 rifle the family used to hunt rats and winging him in a few nonessential places—but there was some risk of either disabling him too badly to be of help or killing him accidentally by hitting something vital if he squirmed.

"Think fast," he shouted up at her. "Your wee lass will hit a hundred and be back any second!"

Despite the situation, Brianna smiled. Mandy had very recently been introduced to the idea that numbers were infinite and had been enchanted by the concept. She wouldn't stop counting until she ran out of breath or someone stopped her. Still, she wasn't going to engage in pointless conversation with her prisoner.

"Okay," she said, and reached for the grate. "We'll see how talkative you are after twenty-four hours without food or water, shall we?"

"You bloody bitch!" He tried to surge to his feet but fell over onto his side, writhing impotently. "You—you just think about this, aye? If I'm without food and water, so's your wee lad!"

She froze, the metal edge of the grate digging into her fingers.

"Rob, you're not bright," she said. She was amazed that her voice sounded conversational; waves of horror and relief and renewed horror were rippling across her shoulders, and something primitive in the back of her mind was screaming.

A sullen silence from below, as he tried to work out what he'd just given away.

"Now I know you didn't send Jem back through the stones," she clarified for him. She carefully didn't shriek, *But you sent Roger back to look for him! And he'll never find him. You … you …* "He's still here, in this time."

Another silence.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "Okay, you know that. But you don't know where he is. And you're not going to, until you turn me loose. I meant it, hen—he'll be thirsty by now. *And* hungry. It'll be a lot worse for him by morning."

Her hand tightened on the grate. "You had better be lying," she said evenly. "For your sake." She shoved the grate back into place and stepped on it, clicking it down into its frame. The priest's hole was literally a hole: a space about six feet by eight, and twelve feet deep. Even if Rob Cameron hadn't been bound hand and foot, he couldn't jump high enough to get hold of the grate, let alone reach the latch that held it down.

Ignoring the furious shouts from below, Brianna went to retrieve her daughter and her jeans.

* * *

THE MUDROOM WAS empty, and for an instant she panicked—but then she saw the tiny bare foot sticking out from under the bench, long toes relaxed as a frog's, and her heart rate dropped. A little.

Mandy was curled up under Roger's old mac, thumb half in her mouth, sound asleep. The impulse was to carry her to her bed, let her sleep 'til daylight. Brianna laid a soft hand on her daughter's black curly hair—black as Roger's—and her heart squeezed like a lemon. There was another child to consider.

"Wake up, sweetheart," she said, gently shaking the little girl. "Wake up, honey. We need to go and look for Jem."

It took no little cajoling and the administration of a glass of Coca-Cola—a rare treat, and absolutely unheard of so late at night, how exciting!—to get Mandy into a state of alertness, but once there she was all eagerness to go and hunt for her brother.

"Mandy," Bree said as casually as she could, buttoning her daughter's pink quilted coat, "can you feel Jem? Right now?"

"Uh-huh," Mandy replied offhandedly, and Brianna's heart leapt. Two nights before, the child had waked screaming from a sound sleep, weeping hysterically and insisting that Jem was gone. She had been inconsolable, wailing that her brother had been eaten by "big wocks!"—an assertion that had terrified her parents, who knew the horrors of those particular rocks all too well.

But then, a few minutes later, Mandy had suddenly calmed. Jem was there, she said. He was there in her head. And she had gone back to sleep as though nothing had happened.

In the consternation that had followed this episode—the discovery that Jem had been taken by Rob Cameron, one of Brianna's fellow employees at the hydroelectric plant, and presumably taken through the stones into the past—there had been no time to recall Mandy's remark about Jem being back in her head, let alone to make further inquiries. But now Brianna's mind was moving at the speed of light, bounding from one horrifying realization to the next, making connections that might have taken hours to make in cooler blood.

Horrifying Realization Number 1: Jem hadn't gone into the past, after all. While by itself this was undeniably a *good* thing, it made Horrifying Realization Number 2 that much worse: Roger and William Buccleigh *had* undoubtedly gone through the stones, searching for Jemmy. She hoped they were in fact in the past and not dead—traveling through whatever sort of thing the stones were was a bloody dangerous proposition—but, if so, that brought her back to Horrifying Realization Number 1: Jem *wasn't* in the past. And if he wasn't there, Roger wasn't going to find him. And since Roger would never give up looking …

She pushed Horrifying Realization Number 3 aside with great force, and Mandy blinked, startled.

"Why you making faces, Mummy?"

"Practicing for Halloween." She rose, smiling as best she could, and reached for her own duffel coat.

Mandy's brow creased in thought.

"When's Halloween?"

Cold rippled over Brianna, and not just from the draft through the crack under the back door. *Did they make it*? They thought the portal was most active on the sun feasts and fire feasts—and Samhain was an important fire feast—but they couldn't wait the extra day, for fear that Jem would be taken too far from Craigh na Dun after passing through the stones.

"Tomorrow," she said. Her fingers slipped and fumbled on the fastenings, shaky with adrenaline.

"Goody, goody, goody!" Mandy said, hopping to and fro like a cricket. "Can I wear my mask to look for Jemmy?"

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NOTHING'S SO HARD BUT SEARCH WILL FIND IT OUT

HE'D FELT THE DIAMONDS explode. For some time, that was the only thought in his mind. *Felt it.* One instant, briefer than a heartbeat, and a pulse of light and heat in his hand and then the throb of something going through him, surrounding him, and then …

Not "then," he thought muzzily. *Wasn't any then. Wasn't any* now. *Now there is, though …*

He opened his eyes to find that there was a now. He was lying on stones and heather and there was a cow breathing—no, not a cow. He made to rise and managed to turn his head half an inch. It was a man, sitting huddled on the ground. Taking huge, irregular, gasping sobs of breath. *Who …?*

"Oh," he said aloud, or almost. " 'S you." The words came out in a mangle that hurt his throat, and he coughed. That hurt, too. "You … okay?" he asked hoarsely.

"No." It came out in a grunt, filled with pain, and alarm got Roger up onto hands and knees, head spinning. He did a bit of gasping himself but crawled as fast as he could toward Buck.

William Buccleigh was curled over, arms crossed, gripping his left upper arm with his right hand. His face was pale and slicked with sweat, lips pressed so tight together that a ring of white showed round his mouth.

"Hurt?" Roger lifted a hand, not sure where or whether to prod. He couldn't see any blood.

"My … chest," Buck wheezed. "Arm."

"Oh, Jesus," Roger said, the last remnants of muzziness stripped away by a blast of adrenaline. "Are you having a bloody heart attack?"

"What …" Buck grimaced, then something seemed to ease a little. He gulped air. "How would *I* know?"

"It's—never mind. Lie down, will you?" Roger looked wildly round, though even as he did, he realized the sheer pointlessness of doing so. The area near Craigh na Dun was wild and unpopulated in his own time, let alone this one. And even should someone appear out of the stones and heather, the chances of whoever it was being a doctor were remote.

He took Buck by the shoulders and eased him gently down, then bent and put his ear to the man's chest, feeling like an idiot.

"D'ye hear anything?" Buck asked anxiously.

"Not with you talking, no. Shut up." He thought he could make out a heartbeat of some sort but had no idea whether there was anything wrong with it. He stayed bent a moment longer, if only to compose himself.

Always act as if you know what you're doing, even if you don't. He'd been given that bit of advice by a number of people, from performers he'd shared a stage with to academic advisers … and, much more recently, by both of his in-laws.

He put a hand on Buck's chest and looked into the man's face. He was still sweating and plainly scared, but there was a little more color in his cheeks. His lips weren't blue; that seemed a good sign.

"Just keep breathing," he advised his ancestor. "Slow, aye?"

He tried to follow that bit of advice himself; his own heart was hammering and sweat was running down his back, in spite of a cold wind that whined past his ears.

"We did it, aye?" Buck's chest was moving more slowly under his hand. He turned his head to look round. "It's … different. Isn't it?"

"Yes." In spite of the current situation and the overwhelming worry for Jem, Roger felt a surge of jubilation and relief. It *was* different: from here, he could see the road below—now no more than an overgrown drovers' trace rather than a gray asphalt ribbon. The trees and bushes, they were different, too—there were pines, the big Caledonian pines that looked like giant stalks of broccoli. They *had* made it.

He grinned at Buck. "We made it. Don't die on me now, you bugger."

"Do my best." Buck was gruff but maybe starting to look better. "What happens if ye die out of your time? D'ye just disappear, like ye never were?"

"Maybe ye explode into bits. I don't know, and I don't want to find out. Not while I'm standing next to you, at least.” Roger got his feet under him and fought down a wave of dizziness. His own heart was still beating hard enough that he felt it in the back of his head. He breathed as deep as he could and stood up.

“I’ll … get ye some water. Stay there, aye?”

* * *

ROGER HAD BROUGHT a small empty canteen, though he’d worried about what might happen to the metal in transit. Evidently whatever it was that vaporized gemstones wasn’t bothered about tin, though; the canteen was intact, and so was the small knife and the silver pocket flask of brandy.

Buck was sitting up by the time Roger came back from the nearest burn with water, and after mopping his face with the water and drinking half the brandy, he declared himself recovered.

Roger wasn’t all that sure; the look of the man was a little off-color still—but he was much too anxious about Jem to suggest waiting any longer. They’d talked about it a bit on the drive to Craigh na Dun, agreeing on a basic strategy, at least to start.

If Cameron and Jem had made it through without mishap—and Roger’s heart misgave him at that thought, recalling Geillis Duncan’s careful collection of news reports involving people found near stone circles, most of them dead—they had to be on foot. And while Jem was a sturdy little boy and capable of walking a good distance, he doubted they could make much more than ten miles in a day over rough country.

The only road was the drovers' track that led near the base of the hill. So one of them would take the direction that would intersect with one of General Wade's good roads that led to Inverness; the other would follow the track west toward the pass that led to Lallybroch and, beyond it, Cranesmuir.

"I think Inverness is the most likely," Roger repeated, probably for the sixth time. "It's the gold he wants, and he knows that's in America. He can't be meaning to walk from the Highlands to Edinburgh to find a ship, not with winter breathing down his neck."

"He won't find a ship anywhere in the winter," Buck objected. "No captain would cross the Atlantic in November!"

"D'ye think he knows that?" Roger asked. "He's an amateur archaeologist, not a historian. And most folk in the twentieth century have trouble thinking anything was ever different in the past, save the funny clothes and no indoor plumbing. The notion that the weather could stop them going anywhere they'd a mind to—he may well think ships run all the time, on a regular timetable."

"Mmphm. Well, maybe he means to hole up in Inverness with the lad, maybe find work, and wait 'til the spring. D'ye want to take Inverness, then?" Buck lifted his chin in the direction of the invisible town.

"No." Roger shook his head and began patting his pockets, checking his supplies. "Jem knows this place." He nodded toward the stones above them. "I brought him here, more than once, to make sure he never came upon it unawares. That means he knows—approximately, at least—how to get home—to Lallybroch, I mean—from here. If he got away from Cameron—and, God, I hope he did!—he'd run for home."

He didn't trouble saying that even if Jem wasn't there, Brianna's relatives were, her cousins and her aunt. He'd not met them, but they knew from Jamie's letters who he was; if Jem wasn't there—and, Lord, how he hoped he was—they'd help him search. As to how much he might try to tell them … that could wait.

"Right, then." Buck buttoned his coat and settled the knitted comforter round his neck against the wind. "Three days, maybe, to Inverness and time to search the town, two or three back. I'll meet ye here in six days' time. If ye're not here, I follow on to Lallybroch."

Roger nodded. "And if I've not found them but I've heard some word of them, I'll leave a message at Lallybroch. If …" He hesitated, but it had to be said. "If ye find your wife, and things fall out—"

Buck's lips tightened.

"They've already fallen," he said. "But, aye. If. I'll still come back."

"Aye, right." Roger hunched his shoulders, anxious to go, and awkward with it. Buck was already turning away but suddenly about-faced and gripped Roger's hand, hard.

"We'll find him," Buck said, and looked into Roger's eyes, with those bright-moss eyes that were the same as his. "Good luck." He gave Roger's hand one sharp, hard shake and then was off, arms outstretched for balance as he picked his way down through the rocks and gorse. He didn't look back.

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WARMER, COLDER

"CAN YOU TELL when Jem's at school?"

"Yes. He goes on da bus." Mandy bounced a little on her booster seat, leaning to peer out the window. She was wearing the Halloween mask Bree had helped her make, this being a mouse princess: a mouse face drawn with crayons on a paper plate, with holes pierced for eyes and at either side for pink yarn ties, pink pipe cleaners glued on for whiskers, and a precarious small crown made with cardboard, more glue, and most of a bottle of gold glitter.

Scots celebrated Samhain with hollowed-out turnips with candles in them, but Brianna had wanted a slightly more festive tradition for her half-American children. The whole seat sparkled as though the car had been sprinkled with pixie dust.

She smiled, despite her worry.

"I meant, if you played warmer, colder with Jem, could you do it if he wasn't answering you out loud? Would you know if he was closer or farther away?"

Mandy kicked the back of the seat in meditative fashion. "Maybe."

"Can you try?" They were headed toward Inverness. That was where Jem was supposed to be, spending the night with Rob Cameron's nephew.

"Okay," Mandy said agreeably. She hadn't asked where Rob Cameron was. Brianna spared a thought as to the fate of her prisoner. She really *would* shoot him through the ankles, elbows, knees, or anything else necessary to find out where Jem was—but if there were quieter ways of interrogation, it would be better all round. It wouldn't be good for Jem and Mandy to have their mother sent to prison for life, particularly if Roger— She choked that thought off and stepped harder on the gas.

"Colder," Mandy announced, so suddenly that Brianna nearly stalled the car.

"What? Do you mean we're getting farther away from where Jemmy is?"

"Uh-huh."

Brianna took a deep breath and made a U-turn, narrowly avoiding an oncoming panel truck, which hooted at them in annoyance.

"Right," she said, gripping the wheel with sweaty hands. "We'll go the other way."

* * *

THE DOOR WASN'T locked. Jem opened it, heart pounding in relief, and then it pounded harder, as he realized the lights weren't on in the turbine chamber, either.

There was *some* light. The little windows up at the top of the huge space, up where the engineers' room was: there was light coming from there. Just enough so he could see the monsters in the huge room.

"They're just machines," he muttered, pressing his back hard against the wall beside the open door. "Justmachinesjustmachinesjustmachines!" He knew the names of them, the giant pulley hoists that ran overhead with the big hooks dangling, and the turbines, Mam had told him. But he'd been up *there* then, where the light was, and it had been daylight.

The floor under his feet vibrated, and he could feel the knobs on his backbone knocking against the wall as it shook from the weight of the water rushing through the dam under him. Tons of water, Mummy said. Tons and tons and tons of black dark water, all around him, under him … If the wall or the floor broke, it—

"Shut up, baby!" he said fiercely to himself, and rubbed his hand hard over his face and wiped it on his jeans. "You got to move. *Go*!"

There were stairs; there had to be stairs. And they were somewhere in here, among the big black humps of the turbines that poked up. They stood higher than the big stones on the hill where Mr. Cameron had taken him. That thought calmed him down some; he was lots more scared of the stones. Even with the deep roaring noise the turbines made—that was making his bones twitch, but it didn't really get *inside* his bones.

The only thing that kept him from going right back into the tunnel and hoping for someone to find him in the morning was the … thing in there. He didn't want to be anywhere near that.

He couldn't hear his heart anymore. It was too noisy in the turbine chamber to hear anything. He sure couldn't hear himself think, but the stairs had to be near the windows, and he wobbled that way, keeping as far as he could from the huge black double humps sticking up through the floor.

It was only when he finally found the door, yanked it open, and fell into the lighted staircase that it occurred to him to wonder whether Mr. Cameron was maybe up there, waiting for him.

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RETURN TO LALLYBROCH

ROGER HAULED HIS WAY laboriously toward the summit of the mountain pass, muttering under his breath (as he had been doing for the last several miles):

> *"If you had seen this road before it was made,*
> *You would lift up your hands and bless General Wade."*

The Irish General Wade had spent twelve years building barracks, bridges, and roads all over Scotland, and if that bit of admiring verse was not in fact carved into a stone on one of the general's roads, it ought to have been, Roger thought. He had picked up one of the general's roads near Craigh na Dun, and it had carried him as swiftly as he could walk to within a few miles of Lallybroch.

These last few miles, though, had not had the benefit of Wade's attention. A rocky trail, pitted with small mud bogs and thickly overgrown with heather and gorse, led up through the steep pass that overlooked—and protected—

Lallybroch. The lower slopes were forested with beeches, alders, and stout Caledonian pines, but up this high there was neither shade nor shelter, and a strong, cold wind battered him as he climbed.

Could Jem have come this far by himself, if he'd escaped? Roger and Buck had cast round in the vicinity of Craigh na Dun, hoping that perhaps Cameron had stopped to rest after the strain of the passage, but there had been no sign—not so much as the print of a size-4 trainer in a muddy patch of ground. Roger had come on then by himself, as fast as he could, pausing to knock at the door of any croft he came to—and there weren't many along this way—but he'd made good time.

His heart was pounding, and not only from the exertion of the climb. Cameron had maybe a two-day lead, at the most. If Jem hadn't got away and run for home, though … Cameron wouldn't come to Lallybroch, surely. But where *would* he go? Follow the good road, left now ten miles behind, and head west, maybe, into the MacKenzies' territory—but why?

"Jem!" He shouted now and then as he went, though the moors and mountains were empty save for the rustling of rabbits and stoats and silent but for the calling of ravens and the occasional shriek of a seagull winging high overhead, evidence of the distant sea.

"Jem!" he called, as though he could compel an answer by sheer need, and in that need imagined sometimes that he heard a faint cry in response. But when he stopped to listen, it was the wind. Only the wind, whining in his ears, numbing him. He could walk within ten feet of Jem and never see him, and he knew that.

His heart rose, in spite of his anxiety, when he came to the top of the pass and saw Lallybroch below him, its white-harled buildings glowing in the fading light. Everything lay peaceful before him: late cabbages and turnips in orderly rows within the kailyard walls, safe from grazing sheep—there was a small flock in the far meadow, already bedding for the night, like so many woolly eggs in a nest of green grass, like a kid's Easter basket.

The thought caught at his throat, with memories of the horrible cellophane grass that got everywhere, Mandy with her face—and everything else within six feet of her—smeared with chocolate, Jem carefully writing *Dad* on a hard-boiled egg with a white crayon, then frowning over the array of dye cups, trying to decide whether blue or purple was more Dad-like.

"Lord, let him be here!" he muttered under his breath, and hurried down the rutted trail, half sliding on loose rocks.

The dooryard was tidy, the big yellow rose brier trimmed back for the winter, and the step swept clean. He had the sudden notion that if he were simply to open the door and walk in, he would find himself in his own lobby, Mandy's tiny red galoshes flung helter-skelter under the hall tree where Brianna's disreputable duffel coat hung, crusty with dried mud and smelling of its wearer, soap and musk and the faint smell of her motherhood: sour milk, fresh bread, and peanut butter.

"Bloody hell," he muttered, "be weeping on the step, next thing." He hammered at the door, and a huge dog came galloping round the corner of the house, baying like the bloody hound of the Baskervilles. It slid to a stop in front of him but went on barking, weaving its huge head to and fro like a snake, ears cocked in case he might make a false move that would let it devour him with a clear conscience.

He wasn't risking any moves; he'd plastered himself against the door when the dog appeared and now shouted, "Help! Come call your beast!"

He heard footsteps within, and an instant later the door opened, nearly decanting him into the hall.

"Hauld your wheesht, dog," a tall, dark man said in a tolerant tone. "Come ben, sir, and dinna be minding him. He wouldna eat you; he's had his dinner."

"I'm pleased to hear it, sir, and thank ye kindly." Roger pulled off his hat and followed the man into the shadows of the hall. It was his own familiar hall, the slates of the floor just the same, though not nearly as worn, the dark-wood paneling shining with beeswax and polishing. There *was* a hall tree in the corner, though of course different to his; this one was a sturdy affair of wrought iron, and a good thing, too, as it was supporting a massive burden of jackets, shawls, cloaks, and hats, which would have crumpled a flimsier piece of furniture.

He smiled at it, nonetheless, and then stopped dead, feeling as though he'd been punched in the chest.

The wood paneling behind the hall tree shone serene, unblemished. No sign of the saber slashes left by frustrated redcoat soldiers searching for the outlawed laird of Lallybroch after Culloden. Those slashes had been carefully preserved for centuries, were still there, darkened by age but still distinct, when he had owned—would own, he corrected mechanically—this place.

"We keep it so for the children," Bree had quoted her uncle Ian as saying. *"We tell them, 'This is what the English are.' "*

He had no time to deal with the shock; the dark man had shut the door with a firm Gaelic adjuration to the dog and now turned to him, smiling.

"Welcome, sir. Ye'll sup wi' us? The lass has it nearly ready."

"Aye, I will, and thanks to ye," Roger bowed slightly, groping for his eighteenth-century manners. "I—my name is Roger MacKenzie. Of Kyle of Lochalsh," he added, for no respectable man would omit to note his origins, and Lochalsh was far enough away that the chances of this man—who was he? He hadn't the bearing of a servant—knowing its inhabitants in any detail was remote.

He'd hoped that the immediate response would be, *"MacKenzie? Why, you must be the father of wee Jem!"* It wasn't, though; the man returned his bow and offered his hand.

"Brian Fraser of Lallybroch, your servant, sir."

* * *

ROGER FELT ABSOLUTELY nothing for a moment. There was a faint clicking that reminded him of the noise a car's starter makes when the battery is dead, and for a disoriented moment he assumed it was being made by his brain. Then his eyes focused on the dog, which, prevented from eating him, had come into the house and was walking down the passage, its toenails clicking on the parquet floor.

Oh. So that's what left those scratches on the kitchen door, he thought, dazed, as the beast reared up and heaved its weight at the swinging door at the end of the passage, then shot through as it opened.

“Are ye quite well, sir?” Brian Fraser was looking at him, thick black brows drawn down in concern. He reached out a hand. “Come into my study and sit. I’ll maybe fetch ye a dram?”

“I—thank you,” Roger said abruptly. He thought his knees might give way at any second, but he managed to follow the master of Lallybroch into the speak-a-word room, the laird’s office and study. His own study.

The shelves were the same, and behind his host’s head was the same row of farm ledgers that he’d often thumbed through, conjuring up from their faded entries the phantom life of an earlier Lallybroch. Now the ledgers were new, and Roger felt himself the phantom. He didn’t like the feeling at all.

Brian Fraser handed him a small, thick, flat-bottomed glass half full of spirit. Whisky, and very decent whisky, too. The smell of it began to bring him out of his shock, and the warm burn of it down his gullet loosened the tightness in his throat.

How was he to ask what he so desperately needed to know? *When?!* He glanced over the desk, but there was no half-finished letter, conveniently dated, no planting almanac that he might glance casually through. None of the books on the shelf were of help; the only one he recognized was Defoe’s *THE LIFE AND STRANGE SURPRIZING ADVENTURES OF ROBINSON CRUSOE, OF YORK, MARINER*, and that had been published in 1719. He knew he must be later than that; the house itself hadn’t yet been built in 1719.

He forced down the rising tide of panic. It didn’t matter; it didn’t matter if it wasn’t the time he’d expected—not if Jem was here. And he must be. He *must* be.

“I’m sorry to disturb your family, sir,” he said, clearing his throat as he set down the glass. “But the fact is that I’ve lost my son and am in search of him.”

“Lost your son!” exclaimed Fraser, eyes widening in surprise. “Bride be with ye, sir. How did that come about?”

Just as well to tell the truth where he could, he thought, and, after all, what else could he say?

“He was kidnapped two days ago and carried away—he’s no but nine years old. I have some reason to think the man who took him comes from this area. Have ye by chance seen a tall man, lean and dark, traveling with a young red-haired lad, about so tall?” He put the edge of his hand against his own arm, about three inches above the elbow; Jem was tall for his age and even taller for this age—but, then, Brian Fraser was a tall man himself, and *his* son …

A fresh shock went through Roger with the thought: Was Jamie here? In the house? And if he was, how old might he be? How old had he been when Brian Fraser die—

Fraser was shaking his head, his face troubled.

“I have not, sir. What’s the name of the man who’s taken your lad?”

“Rob—Robert Cameron, he’s called. I dinna ken his people,” he added, falling naturally into Fraser’s stronger accent.

“Cameron …” Fraser murmured, tapping his fingers on the desk as he searched his memory. The motion flicked something in Roger’s memory; it was the ghost of one of Jamie’s characteristic gestures when thinking—but Jamie, with his frozen finger, did it with the fingers flat, where his father’s came down in a smooth ripple.

He picked up the glass again and took another sip, glancing as casually as he might at Fraser’s face, searching for resemblance. It was there but subtle, mostly in the cock of the head, the set of the shoulders—and the eyes. The face was quite different, square in the jaw, broader of brow, and Brian Fraser's eyes were a dark hazel, not blue, but the slanted shape of them, the wide mouth—that was Jamie.

"There're nay many Camerons nearer than Lochaber." Fraser was shaking his head. "And I've heard nothing of a wanderer in the district." He gave Roger a direct look, not accusing but definitely questioning. "Why is it ye think the man came this way?"

"I—he was seen," Roger blurted. "Near Craigh na Dun."

That startled Fraser.

"Craigh na Dun," he repeated, leaning back a little, his eyes gone wary. "Ah … and where might ye have come from yourself, sir?"

"From Inverness," Roger replied promptly. "I followed him from there." *Close enough.* He was trying hard not to recall that he'd left on his quest to find Cameron and Jem from the very spot in which he was now sitting. "I—a friend—a kinsman—came with me. I sent him toward Cranesmuir to search."

The news that he apparently wasn't a solitary nutter seemed to reassure Fraser, who pushed back from the desk and stood up, glancing at the window, where a big rose brier curved up gaunt and black against the fading sky.

"Mmphm. Well, bide for a bit, sir, and ye will. It's late in the day, and ye'll make no great distance before dark falls. Sup with us, and we'll gie ye a bed for the night. Mayhap your friend will catch ye up with good news, or one of my tenants may ha' seen something. I'll send round in the morning, to ask."

Roger's legs were quivering with the urge to leap up, rush out, *do* something. But Fraser was right: it would be pointless—and dangerous—to blunder round the Highland mountains in the dark, losing his way, perhaps be caught in a killing storm this time of year. He could hear the wind picking up; the rose brier beat at the glass of the window. It was going to rain soon. *And is Jem out in it?*

"I—yes. I thank you, sir," he said. "It's most kind of ye."

Fraser patted him on the shoulder, went out into the hallway, and called, "Janet! Janet, we've a guest for supper!"

Janet?

He'd risen to his feet without thinking and came out of the office as the kitchen door swung open—and a small, slender shape was momentarily silhouetted against the glow of the kitchen, rubbing her hands on her apron.

"My daughter, Janet, sir," Fraser said, drawing his daughter into the fading light. He smiled fondly at her. "This is Mr. Roger MacKenzie, Jenny. He's lost his wee lad somewhere."

"He has?" The girl paused, halfway through a curtsy, and her eyes went wide. "What's happened, sir?"

Roger explained again briefly about Rob Cameron and Craigh na Dun, but all the time was consumed by the desire to ask the young woman how old she was. Fifteen? Seventeen? Twenty-one? She was remarkably beautiful, with clear white skin that bloomed from the heat of cooking, soft curly black hair tied back from her face, and a trim figure that he tried hard not to stare at—but what was most disturbing was that, despite her obvious femininity, she bore a startling resemblance to Jamie Fraser. *She might be his daughter*, he thought, and then brought himself up short, realizing afresh—and remembering, with a stab of the heart that nearly dropped him to his knees—who Jamie Fraser's daughter really was.

Oh, God. Bree. Oh, Jesus, help me. Will I ever see her again?

He realized that he'd fallen silent and was staring at Janet Fraser with his mouth open. Apparently she was used to this sort of response from men, though; she gave him a demure, slant-eyed smile, said that supper would be on the table in a few moments and maybe Da should show Mr. MacKenzie the way to the necessary? Then she was walking back down the hallway, the big door swung to behind her, and he found he could breathe again.

* * *

THE SUPPER WAS plain but plentiful and well cooked, and Roger found that food restored him amazingly. No wonder—he couldn't remember when he'd last eaten.

They ate in the kitchen, with a pair of housemaids called Annie and Senga and a man-of-all-work named Tom McTaggart sharing the table with the family. All of them were interested in Roger and, while giving him great sympathy in the matter of his missing son, were even more interested in where he might come from and what news he might bear.

Here he was at something of a loss, as he had no firm notion what year it was *(Brian died—God,* will *die—when Jamie was nineteen, and if Jamie was born in May of 1721—or was it 1722?—and he was two years younger than Jenny …)* and thus no idea what might have been happening in the world of late, but he delayed a bit, explaining his antecedents in some detail—that was good manners, for one thing, and for another, his birthplace in Kyle of Lochalsh was far enough away from Lallybroch that the Frasers were unlikely to have met any of his people.

Then at last he had a bit of luck, when McTaggart told about taking off his shoe to shake out a stone, then seeing one of the pigs wriggle under the fence and head for the kailyard at a trot. He rushed after the pig, of course, and succeeded in catching it—but had dragged it back to the pen only to find that the other pig had likewise wriggled out and was peacefully eating his shoe.

“This was all she left!” he said, pulling half a shredded leather sole out of his pocket and waving it at them reproachfully. “And a rare struggle I had to pull it from her jaws!”

“Why did ye bother?” Jenny asked, wrinkling her nose at the dank object. “Dinna trouble yourself, Taggie. We’ll slaughter the pigs next week, and ye can have a bit o’ the hide to make yourself a new pair of shoon.”

“And I suppose I’m to go barefoot ’til then, am I?” McTaggart asked, disgruntled. “There’s frost on the ground in the morn, aye? I could take a chill and be dead of the pleurisy before yon pig’s eaten its last bucket o’ slops, let alone been tanned.”

Brian laughed and lifted his chin toward Jenny. “Did your brother no leave a pair of his outgrown shoon behind when he left for Paris? I mind me he did, and if ye havena given them to the poor, might be as Taggie could manage wi’ them for a bit.”

Paris. Roger’s mind worked furiously, calculating. Jamie had spent not quite two years in Paris at the *université* and had come back … when? When he was eighteen, he thought.

Jamie would have been—will be—eighteen in May of 1739. So it was now 1737, 1738, or 1739.

The narrowing of uncertainty calmed him a little, and he managed to put his mind to thinking of historical events that had occurred in that gap that he might offer as current news in conversation: absurdly, the first thing that came to mind was that the bottle opener had been invented in 1738. The second was that there had been an enormous earthquake in Bombay in 1737.

His audience was initially more interested by the bottle opener, which he was obliged to describe in detail—inventing wildly, as he had no notion what the thing actually looked like, though there were sympathetic murmurs regarding the residents of Bombay and a brief prayer for the souls of those crushed under falling houses and the like.

"But where *is* Bombay?" asked the younger of the housemaids, wrinkling her brow and looking from one face to another.

"India," said Jenny promptly, and pushed back her chair. "Senga, fetch the cranachan, aye? I'll show ye where India is."

She vanished through the swinging door, and the bustle of removing dishes left Roger with a few moments' breathing space. He was beginning to feel a little easier, getting his bearings, though still agonized with worry for Jem. He did spare a moment's thought for William Buccleigh and how Buck might take the news of the date of their arrival.

Seventeen thirty-something … Jesus, Buck himself hadn't even been born yet! But, after all, what difference did that make? he asked himself. *He* hadn't been born yet, either, and had lived quite happily in a time prior to his birth before.… Could their proximity to the beginning of Buck's life have something to do with it, though?

He did know—or thought he knew—that you couldn't go back to a time during your own lifetime. Trying to exist physically at the same time as yourself just wasn't on. It had just about killed him once; maybe they'd got too close to Buck's original lifeline, and Buck had somehow recoiled, taking Roger with him?

Before he could explore the implications of *that* unsettling thought, Jenny returned, carrying a large, thin book. This proved to be a hand-colored atlas, with maps—surprisingly accurate maps, in many cases—and descriptions of "The Nations of the World."

"My brother sent it to me from Paris," Jenny told him proudly, opening the book to a double-page spread of the Continent of India, where the starred circle indicating Bombay was surrounded by small drawings of palm trees, elephants, and something that upon close scrutiny turned out to be a tea plant. "He's at the *université* there."

"Really?" Roger smiled, being sure to look impressed. He was, the more so at realization of the effort and expense involved in going from this remote mountain wilderness to Paris. "How long has he been there?"

"Oh, almost two years now," Brian answered. He put out a hand and touched the page gently. "We do miss the lad cruelly, but he writes often. And he sends us books."

"He'll be back soon," Jenny said, though with an air of conviction that seemed somewhat forced. "He said he'd come back."

Brian smiled, though this too was a little forced.

"Aye. I'm sure I hope so, *a nighean*. But ye ken he may have found opportunities that keep him abroad for a time."

"Opportunities? Ye mean that de Marillac woman?" Jenny asked, a distinct edge in her voice. "I dinna like the way he writes about her. Not one bit."

"He could do worse for a wife, lass." Brian lifted one shoulder. "She's from a good family."

Jenny made a very complicated sound in her throat, indicating sufficient respect for her father as to prevent her expressing a fuller opinion of "that woman" while still making that opinion plain. Her father laughed.

"Your brother's no a *complete* fool," he assured her. "I doubt he'd marry a simpleton or a—a—" He'd obviously thought better of saying "whore"—his lips had begun to shape the word—but couldn't think of a substitute in time.

"He would," Jenny snapped. "He'd walk straight into a cob's web wi' his eyes wide open, if the cob had a pretty face and a round arse."

"Janet!" Her father tried to look shocked but failed utterly. McTaggart guffawed openly, and Annie and Senga giggled behind their hands. Jenny glowered at them but then drew herself up with dignity and addressed herself to their guest.

"So, then, Mr. MacKenzie. Is your own wife living, I hope? And is she your wean's mother?"

"Is she—" He felt the question like a blow in the chest but then remembered when he was. The odds of a woman surviving childbirth were no more than even in many places. "Yes. Yes, she's—in Inverness, with our daughter."

Mandy. Oh, my sweet baby. Mandy. Bree. Jem. All at once, the enormity of it struck him. He'd managed so far to ignore it by concentrating on the need to find Jem, but now a cold wind whistled through the holes in his heart left by hurtling odds. The odds were that he would never see any of them again. And they would never know what had happened to him.

"Oh, sir." Jenny whispered it, leaning forward to lay a hand on his arm, her eyes wide with horror at what she'd provoked. "Oh, sir, I'm sorry! I didna mean to—"

"It's all right," he managed, forcing the words through his mangled larynx in a croak. "I'm—" He waved a hand in blind apology and stumbled out. He went straight out through the mudroom at the back of the house and found himself in the night outside.

There was a narrow crack of sullen light just at the tops of the mountains, where the cloud had not quite settled, but the yard about him was deep in shadow, and the wind touched his face with the scent of cold rain. He was shaking, but not from chill, and sat down abruptly on the big stone by the path where they pulled the children's wellies off when it was muddy.

He put his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, overcome for a moment. Not only for his own situation—but for those in the house. Jamie Fraser was coming home soon. And soon after there would come the afternoon when red-coated soldiers marched into the yard at Lallybroch, finding Janet and the servants alone. And the events would be set in train that would end with the death of Brian Fraser, struck down by an apoplexy while watching his only son flogged—he thought—to death.

Jamie … Roger shivered, seeing in mind not his indomitable father-in-law but the lighthearted young man who, among the distractions of Paris, still thought to send books to his sister. Who—

It had begun to rain, with a quiet thoroughness that slicked his face in seconds. At least no one would know if he wept in despair. *I can't stop it,* he thought. *I can't tell them what's coming.*

A huge shape loomed out of the darkness, startling him, and the dog leaned heavily against him, nearly pushing him off the stone he sat on. A large, hairy nose was thrust sympathetically into his ear, whoofling and wetter than the rain.

"Jesus, dog," he said, half-laughing in spite of everything. "God." He put his arms round the big, smelly creature and rested his forehead against its massive neck, feeling inchoate comfort.

He thought of nothing for a little and was inexpressibly relieved. Little by little, though, coherent thought came back. It maybe wasn't true that things—the past—couldn't be changed. Not the big things, maybe, not kings and battles. But maybe—just maybe—the small ones could. If he couldn't come right out and tell the Frasers of Lallybroch what doom was to come upon them, perhaps there was *something* he could say, some warning that might forestall—

And if he did? If they listened? Would that good man in the house die of his apoplexy anyway, some weakness in his brain giving way as he came in from the barn one day? But that would leave his son and his daughter safe—and then what?

Would Jamie stay in Paris and marry the flirtatious Frenchwoman? Would he come home peaceably to live at Lallybroch and mind his estate and his sister?

Either way, he wouldn't be riding near Craigh na Dun in five or six years, pursued by English soldiers, wounded and needing the assistance of a random time traveler who had just stepped out of the stones. And if he didn't meet Claire Randall.… *Bree,* he thought. *Oh, Christ. Bree.*

There was a sound behind him—the door of the house opening—and the beam of a lantern fell onto the path nearby.

“Mr. MacKenzie?” Brian Fraser called into the night. “Are ye all right, man?”

“God,” he whispered, clutching the dog. “Show me what to do.”

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LIGHTS, ACTION, SIRENS

THE DOOR AT THE top of the staircase *was* locked. Jem pounded on it with his fists, kicked it with his feet, and shouted. He could feel *it* back down there behind him, in the dark, and the feel of it crawled up his back, as if it were coming to get him, and the thought of that scared him so bad that he shrieked like a *ban-sìdhe* and threw himself hard against the door, over and over, and—

The door flew open and he fell flat on a dirty lino floor, all footmarks and cigarette butts.

"What the devil—who are you, laddie, and what in God's name were ye doing in there?"

A big hand grabbed him by the arm and pulled him up. He was out of breath from yelling and almost blubbering from relief, and it took a minute to remember who he was.

"Jem." He swallowed, blinking in the light, and wiped his face on his sleeve. "Jem MacKenzie. My mam's …" He went blank, suddenly unable to remember what Mam's first name was. "She works here sometimes."

"I know your mam. No mistaking *that* hair, laddie." The man who'd pulled him up was a security guard; the patch on his shirtsleeve said so. He tilted his head to one side and the other, looking Jem over, light flashing off his bald head, off his glasses. The light was coming from those long tube lights in the ceiling Da said were fluorescent; they buzzed and reminded him of the thing in the tunnel, and he turned round fast and shoved the door shut with a bang.

"Is someone chasin' ye, lad?" The guard reached a hand toward the doorknob, and Jem put his back hard against the door.

"No!" He could feel it back there, behind the door. Waiting. The guard was frowning at him. "I—I just—it's really dark down there."

"Ye were down in the dark? However did ye come to be there? And where's your mother?"

"I don't know." Jem started being scared again. *Really* scared. Because Mr. Cameron had shut him up in the tunnel so he could go somewhere. And he might have gone to Lallybroch.

"Mr. Cameron put me in there," he blurted. "He was supposed to take me to spend the night with Bobby, but instead he took me to Craigh na Dun, and then he took me to his house and locked me in a room overnight, and then the next morning he brought me here and shut me up in the tunnel."

"Cameron—what, Rob Cameron?" The guard crouched down so he could frown right into Jem's face. "Why?"

"I—I don't know." *Don't ever tell anyone*, Da had said. Jem swallowed hard. Even if he wanted to tell, he didn't know how to start. He could say Mr. Cameron took him up the hill at Craigh na Dun, to the stones, and pushed him into one.

But he couldn't tell what had happened then, not any more than he could tell Mr. MacLeod—that's what it said on his badge, JOCK MACLEOD—what the shiny thing in the tunnel was.

Mr. MacLeod made a thinking noise in his throat, shook his head, and stood up.

"Well, I'd best be calling your parents to come and fetch ye home, aye? They can say if they maybe want to speak to the polis."

"Please," Jem whispered, feeling his knees turn to water at the thought of Mam and Da coming to get him. "Yes, please."

Mr. MacLeod took him along to a little office where the phone was, gave him a warm can of Coke, and told him to sit down just there and say his parents' telephone number. He sipped the drink and felt lots better right away, watching Mr. MacLeod's thick finger whirl the telephone dial. A pause, and then he could hear ringing on the other end. *Breep-breep … breep-breep … breep-breep …*

It was warm in the office, but he was starting to feel cold around his face and hands. Nobody was answering the phone.

"Maybe they're asleep," he said, stifling a Coke burp. Mr. MacLeod gave him a sideways look and shook his head, pushed down the receiver, and dialed the number again, making Jem say the numbers one at a time.

Breep-breep…. breep-breep …

He was concentrating so hard on willing somebody to pick up the phone that he didn't notice anything until Mr. MacLeod suddenly turned his head toward the door, looking surprised.

"What—" the guard said, and then there was a blur and a thunking noise like when cousin Ian shot a deer with an arrow, and Mr. MacLeod made an awful noise and fell right out of his chair onto the floor, and the chair shot away and fell over with a crash.

Jem didn't remember standing up, but he was pressed against the filing cabinet, squeezing the can so hard that the bubbly Coke blurped out and foamed over his fingers.

"You come with me, boy," said the man who'd hit Mr. MacLeod. He was holding what Jem thought must be a cosh, though he'd never seen one. He couldn't move, even if he'd wanted to.

The man made an impatient noise, stepped over Mr. MacLeod like he was a bag of rubbish, and grabbed Jem by the hand. Out of sheer terror, Jem bit him, hard. The man yelped and let go, and Jem threw the can of Coke right at his face, and when the man ducked, he tore past him and out of the office and down the long hallway, running for his life.

* * *

IT WAS GETTING late; they passed fewer and fewer cars on the road, and Mandy's head began to nod. The mouse-princess mask had ridden up on top of her head, its pipe-cleaner whiskers poking up like antennae. Seeing this in the rearview mirror, Brianna had a sudden vision of Mandy as a tiny radar station, scanning the bleak countryside for Jem's small, pulsing signal.

Could she? She shook her head, not to dispel the notion but to keep her mind from slipping all the way out of reality. The adrenaline of her earlier rage and terror had all drained away; her hands shook a little on the steering wheel, and the darkness around them seemed vast, a yawning void that would swallow them in an instant if she stopped driving, if the feeble beam of the headlights ceased …

“Warm,” Mandy murmured sleepily.

“What, baby?” She’d heard but was too hypnotized by the effort of keeping her eyes on the road to take it in consciously.

“Warm … *er*.” Mandy struggled upright, cross. The yarn ties of her mask were stuck in her hair, and she made a high-pitched cranky noise as she yanked at them.

Brianna pulled carefully onto the verge, set the hand brake, and, reaching back, began to disentangle the mask.

“You mean we’re going toward Jem?” she asked, careful to keep her voice from trembling.

“Uh-huh.” Free of the nuisance, Mandy yawned hugely and flung out a hand toward the window. “Mmp.” She put her head down on her arms and whined sleepily.

Bree swallowed, closed her eyes, then opened them, looking carefully in the direction Mandy had pointed. There was no road … but there was, and with a trickle of ice water down her spine, she saw the small brown sign that said: SERVICE ROAD. NO PUBLIC ACCESS. NORTH OF SCOTLAND HYDRO ELECTRIC BOARD. Loch Errochty dam. The tunnel.

“Damn!” said Brianna, and stomped the gas, forgetting the hand brake. The car jumped and stalled, and Mandy sat bolt upright, eyes glazed and wide as a sun-stunned owl’s.

“Iss we home yet?”

* * *

JEM PELTED DOWN the hallway and threw himself at the swinging door at the end, so hard that he skidded all the way across the landing on the other side and fell down the stairs beyond, bumping and banging and ending up in a dazed heap at the bottom.

He heard the footsteps coming fast toward the door above and, with a small, terrified squeak, scrambled on all fours round the second landing and launched himself headfirst down the next flight, tobogganing on his stomach for a few stairs, then tipping arse over teakettle and somersaulting down the rest.

He was crying with terror, gulping air and trying not to make a noise, stumbling to his feet, and everything hurt, everything—but the door: he had to get outside. He staggered through the half-dark lobby, the only lights shining through the glass window where the receptionist usually sat. The man was coming; he could hear him cursing at the bottom of the stairs.

The main door had a chain looped through the bars. Swiping tears on his sleeve, he ran back in to the reception, looking wildly round. EMERGENCY EXIT—there it was, the red sign over the door at the far end of another small corridor. The man burst into the lobby and saw him.

“Come back here, you little bugger!”

He looked round wildly, grabbed the first thing he saw, which was a rolling chair, and pushed it as hard as he could into the lobby. The man cursed and jumped aside, and Jem ran for the door and flung himself against it, bursting into the night with a scream of sirens and the flash of blinding lights.

“WHASSAT, MUMMY? Mummy, I scared, I SCARED!”

“And you think I’m not?” Bree said under her breath, heart in her mouth. “It’s okay, baby,” she said aloud, and pressed her foot to the floor. “We’re just going to get Jem.”

The car slewed to a stop on the gravel, and she leapt out but dithered for a moment, needing urgently to rush toward the building, where sirens and lights were going off over an open door at the side, but unable to leave Mandy alone in the car. She could hear the rush of water down the spillway.

“Come with me, sweetheart,” she said, hastily undoing the seat belt. “That’s right, here, let me carry you …” Even as she spoke, she was looking here, there, from the lights into the darkness, every nerve she had screaming that her son was here, he was *here*, he had to be … rushing water … her mind filled with horror, thinking of Jem falling into the spillway, or Jem in the service tunnel—God, why hadn’t she gone there first? Of course Rob Cameron would have put him there, he had the keys, he … but the lights, the sirens …

She’d almost made it—at a dead run, impeded only slightly by thirty pounds of toddler—when she saw a big man at the edge of the drive, thrashing through the bushes with a stick or something, cursing a blue streak.

“What do you think you’re *doing*?” she bellowed. Mandy, alarmed anew, let out a screech like a scalded baboon, and the man jumped, whirling to face them, stick raised.

“What the bleedin’ hell are you doing here?” he said, so taken aback that he spoke almost normally. “You’re supposed to be—”

Bree had peeled Mandy off. Setting her daughter down behind her, she prepared to take the man apart with her bare hands, if necessary. Evidently this intent showed, because the man dropped the stick and abruptly vanished into the darkness.

Then flashing lights washed over the drive and she realized that it wasn't her own aspect that had frightened him. Mandy was clinging to her leg, too frightened even to wail anymore. Bree picked her up, patting her gently, and turned to face the two police officers who were advancing cautiously toward her, hands on their batons. She felt wobbly-legged and dreamlike, things fading in and out of focus with the strobing lights. The rush of tons of falling water filled her ears.

"Mandy," she said into her daughter's warm curly hair, her own voice almost drowned out by the sirens. "Can you feel Jem? Please tell me you can feel him."

"Here I am, Mummy," said a small voice behind her. Convinced she was hallucinating, she lifted a restraining hand toward the police officers and pivoted slowly round. Jem was standing on the drive six feet away, dripping wet, plastered with dead leaves, and swaying like a drunk.

Then she was sitting splay-legged on the gravel, a child clutched in each arm, trying hard not to shake, so they wouldn't notice. She didn't start to sob, though, until Jemmy lifted a tearstained face from her shoulder and said, "Where's Daddy?"

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31

THE SHINE OF A ROCKING HORSE'S EYES

FRASER DIDN'T ASK BUT poured them each a dram of whisky, warm-smelling and smoke-tinged. There was something comfortable in drinking whisky in company, no matter how bad the whisky. Or the company, for that matter. This particular bottle was something special, and Roger was grateful, both to the bottle and its giver, for the sense of comfort that rose from the glass, beckoning him, a genie from the bottle.

"Slàinte," he said, lifting the glass, and saw Fraser glance at him in sudden interest. Lord, what had he said? *"Slàinte"* was one of the words that had a distinct pronunciation, depending on where you came from—men from Harris and Lewis said *"Slàn-ya,"* while far north it was more like *"Slànj."* He'd used the form he'd grown up with in Inverness; was it strikingly wrong for where he'd said he came from? He didn't want Fraser to think him a liar.

"What is it ye do for yourself, *a chompanaich*?" Fraser asked, having taken a sip, closing his eyes in momentary respect to the drink, then opening them to regard Roger with a kind curiosity—tinged perhaps with a little wariness, lest his visitor be unhinged. “I’m accustomed to know a man’s work at once by his dress and manner—not that ye find many folk truly unusual up here.” He smiled a bit at that. “And drovers, tinkers, and gypsies dinna take much effort to descry. Clearly you’re none of those.”

“I have a bit of land,” Roger replied. It was an expected question; he was ready with an answer—but found himself longing to say more. To tell the truth—so far as he himself understood it.

“I’ve left my wife wi’ the running of things whilst I came to search for our lad. Beyond that—” He lifted one shoulder briefly. “I was trained as a minister.”

“Oh, aye?” Fraser leaned back, surveying him with interest. “I could see ye’re an educated man. I was thinkin’ maybe a schoolmaster or a clerk—perhaps a lawyer.”

“I’ve been both schoolmaster and clerk,” Roger said, smiling. “Havena quite risen—or fallen, maybe—to the practice of law yet.”

“And a good thing, too.” Fraser sipped, half-smiling.

Roger shrugged. “Law’s a corrupt power but one acceptable to men by reason of having arisen from men—it’s a way of getting on wi’ things, is the best ye can say for it.”

“And not a mean thing to say for it, either,” Fraser agreed. “The law’s a necessary evil—we canna be doing without it—but do ye not think it a poor substitute for conscience? Speakin’ as a minister, I mean?”

“Well … aye. I do,” Roger said, somewhat surprised. “It would be best for men to deal decently with one another in accordance with—well, with God’s principles, if ye’ll pardon my putting it that way. But what are ye to do, first, if ye have men to whom God is of no account, and, second, if ye have men—and you do, always—who own no power greater than their own?”

Fraser nodded, interested.

“Aye, well, it’s true that the best conscience willna avail a man who willna mind it. But what d’ye do when conscience speaks differently to men of goodwill?”

“As in political disputes, you mean? Supporters of the Stuarts versus those of the … the House of Hanover?” It was a reckless thing to say, but it might help him to figure out when he was, and he meant to say nothing that might make it look as though he had a personal stake on either side.

Fraser’s face underwent a surprising flow of expression, from being taken aback to mild distaste, this then ending in a look of half-amused ruefulness.

“Like that,” he agreed. “I fought for the House of Stuart in my youth, and while I’d not say that conscience didna come into it, it didna come very far onto the field wi’ me.” His mouth quirked at the corner, and Roger felt again the tiny *plop!* of a stone tossed into his depths, the ripples of recognition spreading through him. Jamie did that. Brianna didn’t. Jem did.

He couldn’t stop to think about it, though; the conversation was teetering delicately on the precipice of an invitation to political disclosure, and that, he couldn’t do.

“Was it Sheriffmuir?” he asked, making no effort to disguise his interest.

“It was,” Fraser said, openly surprised. He eyed Roger dubiously. “Ye canna have gone yourself, surely … did your faither maybe tell ye?”

“No,” said Roger, with the momentary twinge that thought of his father always brought. In fact, Fraser was only a few years older than himself, but he knew the other man doubtless took him for a decade younger than he was.

"I … heard a song about it. 'Twas two shepherds met on a hillside, talking about the great fight—and arguing who'd won it."

That made Fraser laugh.

"Well they might! We were arguing that before we finished pickin' up the wounded." He took a sip of whisky and washed it meditatively round his mouth, clearly reminiscing. "So, then, how does the song go?"

Roger breathed deep, ready to sing, and then remembered. Fraser had seen his rope scar and been tactful enough not to remark on it, but no need to make the damage obvious. Instead, he chanted the first few lines, tapping his fingers on the desk, echoing the rhythm of the big bodhran that was the song's only accompaniment.

"O cam ye here the fight to shun,
Or herd the sheep wi' me, man?
Or were ye at the Sherra-moor,
Or did the battle see, man?"
I saw the battle, sair and teugh,
And reekin-red ran mony a sheugh;
My heart, for fear, gaed sough for sough,
To hear the thuds, and see the cluds
O' clans frae woods, in tartan duds,
Wha glaum'd at kingdoms three, man.

It went better than he'd thought; the song really *was* more chanted than sung, and he managed the whole of it with no more than the odd choke or cough. Fraser was rapt, glass forgotten in his hand.

"Oh, that's braw, man!" Fraser exclaimed. "Though yon poet's got the devil of an accent. Where's he come from, d'ye ken?"

"Er … Ayrshire, I think."

Fraser shook his head in admiration and sat back.

"Could ye maybe write it down for me?" he asked, almost shyly. "I wouldna put ye to the trouble of singin' it again, but I'd dearly love to learn the whole of it."

"I—sure," Roger said, taken aback. Well, what harm could it do to let Robert Burns's poem loose in the world some years in advance of Burns himself? "Ken anyone who can play a bodhran? It's best wi' the drum rattlin' in the background." He tapped his fingers in illustration.

"Oh, aye." Fraser was rustling about in the drawer of his desk; he came out with several sheets of foolscap, most with writing on them. Frowning, he flicked through the papers, picked one, and pulled it from the sheaf, placing it facedown in front of Roger, offering him the blank back side.

There were goose quills, rather tattered from use but well trimmed, in a jar on the desk, and a brass inkstand, which Fraser offered him with a generous sweep of one broad hand.

"My son's friend plays well—he's gone for a soldier, though, more's the pity." A shadow crossed Fraser's face.

"Ach." Roger clicked his tongue in sympathy; he was trying to make out the writing that showed faintly through the sheet. "Joined a Highland regiment, did he?"

"No," Fraser said, sounding a little startled. *Christ, were there Highland regiments yet*? "He's gone to France as a mercenary soldier. Better pay, fewer floggings than the army, he tells his da."

Roger's heart lifted; yes! It was a letter or maybe a journal entry—whatever it was, there was a date on it: 17 … was that a 3? Had to be, couldn't be an 8. 173 … it might be a 9 or a 0, couldn't tell for sure through the paper—no, it had to be a 9, so 1739. He breathed a sigh of relief. Something October, 1739.

"Probably safer," he said, only half attending to the conversation as he began to scratch out the lines. It was some time since he'd written with a quill, and he was awkward.

"Safer?"

"Aye," he said, "from the point of view of disease, mostly. Most men that die in the army die of some sickness, ken. Comes from the crowding, having to live in barracks, eat army rations. I'd think mercenaries might have a bit more freedom."

Fraser muttered something about "freedom to starve," but it was half under his breath. He was tapping his own fingers on the desk, trying to catch the rhythm as Roger wrote. He was surprisingly rather good; by the time the song was finished, he was singing it softly in a pleasant low tenor and had the drumming down pretty well.

Roger's mind was divided between the task in front of him and the feel of the letter under his hand. The feel of the paper and the look of the ink reminded him vividly of the wooden box, filled with Jamie's and Claire's letters. He had to stop himself from glancing at the shelf where it would be kept when this room was his.

They'd been rationing the letters, reading them slowly—but when Jem was taken, all bets were off. They'd rushed through the whole of the box, looking for any mention of Jem, any indication that he might have escaped from Cameron and found his way to the safety of his grandparents. Not a word about Jem. Not one.

They'd been so distraught that they'd scarcely noticed anything else the letters said, but occasional phrases and images floated up in his mind, quite randomly—some of them distinctly disturbing—Brianna's uncle Ian had died—but scarcely noticeable at the time.

They weren't anything he wanted to think about now, either.

"Will your son be studying the law, then, in Paris?" Roger asked abruptly. He picked up the fresh dram Brian had poured for him and took a sip.

"Aye, well, he'd maybe make a decent lawyer," Fraser admitted. "He could argue ye into the ground, I'll say that for him. But I think he hasna got the patience for law or politics." He smiled suddenly. "Jamie sees at once what he thinks should be done and canna understand why anyone else should think otherwise. And he'd rather pound someone than persuade them, if it comes to that."

Roger laughed ruefully.

"I understand the urge," he said.

"Oh, indeed." Fraser nodded, leaning back a little in his chair. "And I'll no say as that's not a necessary thing to do on occasion. Especially in the Highlands." He grimaced but not without humor.

"So, then. Why do ye think this Cameron has stolen your lad?" Fraser asked bluntly.

Roger wasn't surprised. As well as they'd been getting on together, he'd known Fraser had to be wondering just how much Roger was telling and how truthful he was. Well, he'd been ready for that question—and the answer was at least a version of the truth.

“We lived for a time in America,” he said, and felt a pang with the saying of it. For an instant, their snug cabin on the Ridge was around him, Brianna asleep with her hair loose on the pillow beside him and the children’s breath a sweet fog above them.

“America!” Fraser exclaimed in astonishment. “Where, then?”

“The colony of North Carolina. A good place,” Roger hastened to add, “but not without its dangers.”

“Name me one that is,” Fraser said, but waved that aside. “And these dangers made ye come back?”

Roger shook his head, a tightness in his throat at the memory.

“No, it was our wee lass—Mandy, Amanda, she’s called. She was born with a thing wrong with her heart, and there was no physician there who could treat it. So we came … back, and while we were in Scotland, my wife inherited some land, and so we stayed. But …” He hesitated, thinking how to put the rest, but knowing what he did of Fraser’s antecedents and his history with the MacKenzies of Leoch, the man probably wouldn’t be overly disturbed at his story.

“My wife’s father,” he said carefully, “is a good man—a very good man—but the sort who … draws attention. A leader of men, and one that other men … Well, he told me once that his own father had said to him that, since he was a large man, other men would try him—and they do.”

He watched Brian Fraser’s face carefully at this, but, beyond the twitch of an eyebrow, there was no apparent response.

"I'll not go into all the history of it"—*since it hasn't happened yet*—"but the long and the short of it is that my father-in-law was left in possession of a large sum in gold. He doesna regard it as his own property but as something held in trust. Still, there it is. And while it's been kept secret so far as possible …"

Fraser made a sympathetic sound, acknowledging the difficulties of secrecy in such conditions.

"So this Cameron learned of the treasure, did he? And thought to extort it from your father-in-law by taking the bairn captive?" Fraser's dark brow lowered at the thought.

"That may be in his mind. But beyond that—my son kens where the gold is hidden. He was with his grandfather when it was put away safe. Only the two of them ken the whereabouts—but Cameron learned that my son knew the place."

"Ah." Brian sat for a moment staring into his whisky, thinking. Finally he cleared his throat and looked up, meeting Roger's eyes. "I maybe shouldna say such a thing, but it may be in your own mind already. If he's taken the boy only because the lad kens where yon treasure is … well, was I a wicked man with no scruples, I think I might force the information out of the lad, so soon as I had him alone."

Roger felt the cold slide of the suggestion down into the pit of his belly. It *was* something that had been at the back of his own mind, though he hadn't admitted it to himself.

"Make him tell—and then kill him, you mean."

Fraser grimaced unhappily.

"I dinna want to think it," he said. "But without the lad, what is there to mark him out? A man alone—he could travel as he liked, without much notice."

"Yes," Roger said, and stopped to breathe. "Yes. Well … he didn't. I—I know the man, a little. I don't think he'd do that, mur—" His throat closed suddenly, and he coughed violently. "Murder a child," he finished hoarsely. "He wouldn't."

* * *

THEY GAVE HIM a room at the end of the hallway on the second floor. When his family would live here, this would be the children's playroom. He undressed to his shirt, put out the candle, and got into bed, resolutely ignoring the shadows in the corners that held the ghosts of giant cardboard building blocks, of dollhouses, six-guns, and chalkboards. The fringed skirt of Mandy's Annie Oakley costume fluttered at the corner of his eye.

He ached from follicles to toenails, inside and out, but the panic engendered by his arrival had passed. How he felt didn't matter, though; the question was—what now? They hadn't gone where they thought, he and Buck, but he had to assume that they *had* ended up in the right place. The place where Jem was.

How else could they have come here? Perhaps Rob Cameron knew more now about how the traveling worked, could control it, and had deliberately brought Jem to this time, in order to frustrate pursuit?

He was too exhausted to keep hold of his thoughts, let alone string them into coherence. He pushed everything out of his mind, so far as he could, and lay still, staring into the dark, seeing the shine of a rocking horse's eyes.

Then he got out of bed, knelt on the cold boards, and prayed.

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"FOR MANY MEN WHO STUMBLE AT THE THRESHOLD ARE WELL FORETOLD THAT DANGER LURKS WITHIN"

Lallybroch
October 31, 1980

BRIANNA COULDN'T open her own front door. She kept trying, rattling the big iron key all over the escutcheon plate, until the WPC took it from her shaking hand and got it into the keyhole. She hadn't started to shake until the police car turned up the lane to Lallybroch.

"Rather an old lock," the police constable observed, giving it a dubious look. "Original to the house, is it?" She lifted her head, peering up the white-harled front of the house, pursing her lips at sight of the lintel, with its carved date.

"I don't know. We don't usually lock the door. We've never had burglars." Brianna's lips felt numb, but she thought she'd managed a weak smile. Luckily, Mandy was unable to contradict this bald-faced lie, as she'd seen a toad in the grass by the path and was following it, poking at it with the toe of her shoe to make it hop. Jemmy, glued protectively to Brianna's side, made a low noise in his throat that reminded her startlingly of her father, and she looked down at him, narrowing her eyes.

He made the noise again and looked away.

There was a rattle and click as the lock opened, and the constable straightened up with a pleased sound.

"Aye, that's done it. Now, you're quite sure as you'll be all right, will you, Mrs. MacKenzie?" the woman said, giving her a dubious look. "Out here by yourself, and your man away?"

"He'll be home soon," Brianna assured her, though her stomach went hollow at the words.

The woman eyed her consideringly, then gave a reluctant nod and pushed open the door.

"Well, then, you know best, I expect. I'll just check to see that your phone's in order and all the doors and windows locked, shall I, while you have a look round to be sure everything's as it should be?"

The lump of ice that had formed in her middle during the long hours of questioning shot straight up into her chest.

"I—I—I'm sure everything's fine." But the constable had already gone inside and was waiting impatiently for her. "Jem! Bring Mandy inside and take her up to the playroom, will you?" She couldn't bear to leave the kids outside by themselves, exposed. She could scarcely bear to have them out of her sight. But the *very* last thing she needed was to have Mandy tagging helpfully along, chatting to Constable

Laughlin about Mr. Rob in the priest's hole. Leaving the door open, she hurried after the WPC.

"The phone's in there," she said, catching up with Constable Laughlin in the hall and gesturing toward Roger's study. "There's an extension in the kitchen. I'll go and check that and see to the back door." Not waiting for an answer, she strode down the hall and nearly threw herself through the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

She didn't pause to check anything but jerked open the junk drawer and snatched up a big rubber-covered flashlight. Meant to assist farmers lambing at night or searching for lost stock, the thing was a foot long and weighed nearly two pounds.

The .22 rifle was in the mudroom, and for an instant, as she walked through the house, she debated killing him, in a dispassionate way that would probably scare her if she had time to think about it. She had Jem back, after all—but no. Constable Laughlin would certainly recognize the sound of a shot, in spite of the muffling green baize on the kitchen door. And there was apparently more she needed to learn from Rob Cameron. She'd knock him unconscious and tape his mouth.

She stepped into the mudroom and quietly closed the kitchen door behind her. There was a deadbolt, but she couldn't lock it from this side without the key, and her keys were on the table in the foyer, where Constable Laughlin had left them. Instead, she dragged the heavy bench over and jammed it catty-corner between the door and the wall, concentrating on the logistics. Where was the best place to hit someone on the head so as to render them unconscious without fracturing their skull? She had a vague memory of her mother mentioning that once … the occiput?

She'd expected an outcry from Cameron at the sound of her entry, but he didn't peep. She could hear footsteps above, the confident stride of an adult going down the hall. Constable Laughlin on her tour of inspection, no doubt checking the first-floor windows, ladder-bearing burglars in mind. She closed her eyes for an instant, envisioning the constable sticking her head into the playroom just as Mandy was regaling her brother with the details of her own adventures the night before.

Nothing to be done about that. She took a deep breath, lifted the grate over the priest's hole, and shone the light down into the shadows. The empty shadows.

For a few moments she went on looking, swinging the torch beam from one side of the priest's hole to the other, then back, then back again … her mind simply refusing to believe her eyes.

The light caught the dull gleam of duct tape—two or three discarded wads, flung into a corner. There was a cold feeling at the back of her neck, and she jerked round, flashlight raised—but it was no more than apprehension; no one was there. The outer door was locked, the mudroom windows secure.

The door was locked. She made a small, frightened sound and clapped her hand hard over her mouth. Like the door between mudroom and kitchen, the mudroom's outer door locked with a deadbolt—from the inside. If someone had gone out that way and left the door locked behind him—he had a key to the house. And her rifle was gone.

THEY'RE TOO LITTLE, she kept thinking. *They shouldn't know about things like this; they shouldn't know it's possible.* Her hands were shaking; it took three tries to open the sticky drawer in Mandy's dresser, and after the third failure, she pounded it in fury with the side of her fist, whispering through gritted teeth, "You goddamned fucking bloody buggering *thing*! Don't you *dare* get in my way!" She crashed her fist on top of the dresser, raised her foot, and smashed the sole of her sneaker into the thing so hard that it rocked back and thumped into the wall with a bang.

She grabbed the drawer pulls and yanked. The terrorized drawer shot out, and she snatched the whole thing free and flung it into the opposite wall, where it struck and exploded in a rainbow spray of underpants and tiny striped T-shirts.

She walked over and looked down at the battered drawer, lying upside down on the floor.

"So there," she said calmly. "Teach *you* to get in my way when I have things to think about."

"Like what, Mam?" said a cautious voice from the doorway. She looked up to see Jemmy hovering there, eyes flicking from her to the mistreated drawer and back.

"Oh." She thought of trying to explain the drawer but instead cleared her throat and sat down on the bed, holding out a hand to him. "Come here, *a bhalaich*."

His ginger brows flicked up at the Gaelic endearment, but he came willingly, cuddling into her arm. He hugged her hard, burying his head in her shoulder, and she held him as tightly as she could, rocking back and forth and making the sorts of soft noises she'd made to him when he was tiny.

"It'll be all right, baby," she whispered to him. "It will."

She heard him swallow and felt his small, square back move under her hand.

"Yeah." His voice quivered a little and he sniffed hard, then tried again. "Yeah. But *what's* going to be all right, Mam? What's going on?" He drew away a little then, looking up at her with eyes that held more questions and more knowledge than any nine-year-old should reasonably have.

"Mandy says you put Mr. Cameron in the priest's hole. But he's not there now—I looked."

A cold hand stroked her nape as she remembered the shock of the empty hole.

"No, he's not."

"But you didn't let him out, did you?"

"No. I didn't let him out. He—"

"So somebody else did," he said positively. "Who, do you think?"

"You have a very logical mind," she said, smiling a little, despite herself. "You get it from your Grandda Jamie."

"He said I got it from Grannie Claire," Jem replied, but automatically; he wasn't to be distracted. "I thought maybe it was the man who chased me at the dam—but he couldn't have been here letting Mr. Cameron out at the same time he was chasing me. Could he?" A sudden fear showed in his eyes, and she choked back the overwhelming urge to hunt the man down and kill him like a rabid skunk.

The man had got away at the dam, running off into the dark when the police showed up, but, God help her, she was going to find him one day, and then—but this was not the day. The problem now was to stop him—or Rob Cameron—from getting anywhere near her kids again.

Then she got what Jemmy was saying and felt the chill she'd carried in her heart spread like hoarfrost through her body.

“You mean there has to be another man,” she said, surprised at how calm she sounded. “Mr. Cameron, the man at the dam—and whoever let Mr. Cameron out of the priest’s hole.”

“It could be a lady,” Jemmy pointed out. He seemed less scared, talking about it. That was a good thing, because her own skin was rippling with fear.

“Do you know what Grannie called—calls—goose bumps?” She held out her arm, the fine reddish hairs all standing on end. “Horripilation.”

“Horripilation,” Jemmy repeated, and gave a small, nervous giggle. “I like that word.”

“Me, too.” She took a deep breath and stood up. “Go pick out a change of clothes and your PJs, would you, sweetheart? I have to make a couple of phone calls, and then I think we’re going to go visit Auntie Fiona.”

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IT’S BEST TO SLEEP IN A HALE SKIN

ROGER WOKE SUDDENLY, but without shock. No sense of abandoned dreams, no half-heard noise, but his eyes were open and he was fully aware. It was perhaps an hour before sunrise. He’d left the shutters open; the room was cold and the clouded sky the color of a black pearl.

He lay motionless, listening to his heart beat, and realized that for the first time in several days it wasn’t pounding. He wasn’t afraid. The fear and turmoil of the night, the terror of the last few days, had vanished. His body was completely relaxed; so was his mind.

There *was* something floating in his mind. Absurdly, it was a line from “Johnny Cope”: *“It’s best to sleep in a hale skin; for ’twill be a bluidy morning.”* Weirder still, he could hear—could almost feel—himself singing it, in his old voice, full of power and enthusiasm.

“Not that I’m ungrateful,” he said to the whitewashed ceiling beams, his morning voice cracked and rough. “But what the hell?”

He wasn't sure whether he was talking to God or to his own unconscious, but the likelihood of getting a straight answer was probably the same in either case. He heard the soft thud of a closing door somewhere below and someone outside whistling through his or her teeth—Annie or Senga, maybe, on the way to the morning milking.

A knock came on his own door: Jenny Murray, tidy in a white pinny, dark curly hair tied back but not yet capped for the day, with a jug of hot water, a pot of soft soap, and a razor for shaving.

"Da says can ye ride a horse?" she said without preamble, looking him up and down in an assessing sort of way.

"I can," he replied gruffly, taking the towel-wrapped jug from her. He needed badly to clear the phlegm from his throat and spit but couldn't bring himself to do that in front of her. Consequently, he just nodded and muttered, *"Taing,"* as he took the razor, instead of asking why.

"Breakfast'll be in the kitchen when you are," she said matter-of-factly. "Bring the jug down, aye?"

* * *

AN HOUR LATER, filled to bursting with hot tea, parritch, bannocks with honey, and black pudding, he found himself on an autumn-shaggy horse, following Brian Fraser through the rising mist of early morning.

"We'll go round to the crofts nearby," Fraser had told him over breakfast, spooning strawberry preserves onto a bannock. "Even if no one's seen your lad—and to be honest," his wide mouth twisted in apology, "I think I should ha' heard already if anyone had seen a stranger in the district—they'll pass on the word."

“Aye, thanks very much,” he’d said, meaning it. Even in his own time, gossip was the fastest way of spreading news in the Highlands. No matter how fast Rob Cameron might travel, Roger doubted he could outpace the speed of talk, and the thought made him smile. Jenny caught it and smiled back sympathetically, and he thought again what a very pretty lass she was.

The sky was still low and threatening, but impending rain had never yet deterred anyone in Scotland from doing anything and wasn’t likely to start now. His throat felt much better for the hot tea, and the odd sense of calm with which he’d waked was still with him.

Something had changed in the night. Maybe it was sleeping in Lallybroch, among the ghosts of his own future. Perhaps that had settled his mind while he slept.

Maybe it was answered prayer and a moment of grace. Maybe it was no more than Samuel Beckett’s bloody existential *I can’t go on; I’ll go on*. If he had a choice—and he did, Beckett be damned—he’d go with grace.

Whatever had caused it, he wasn’t disoriented any longer, thrown off-balance by what he knew about the futures of the people around him. There was still a deep concern about them—and the need to find Jem still filled him. But now it was a quiet, hard thing in his core. A focus, a weapon. Something to brace his back against.

He straightened his shoulders as he thought this and, at the same time, saw Brian’s straight, flat back and the broad, firm shoulders under the dark sett of his tartan coat. They were the echo of Jamie’s—and the promise of Jem’s.

Life goes on. It was his job above all to rescue Jem, as much for Brian Fraser’s sake as for his own.

And now he knew what had changed in him and gave thanks to God for what was indeed grace. He'd slept—and waked—in a whole skin. And however bloody the mornings to come, he had direction now, calmness and hope, because the good man who rode before him was on his side.

* * *

THEY VISITED MORE than a dozen crofts in the course of the day and stopped a tinker they met along the way, as well. No one had seen a stranger recently, with or without a red-haired lad, but all promised to spread the word and all without exception offered their prayers for Roger and his quest.

They stopped for supper and the night with a family named Murray that had a substantial farmhouse, though nothing to rival Lallybroch. The owner, John Murray, turned out in the course of conversation to be Brian Fraser's factor—the overseer of much of the physical business of Lallybroch's estate—and he lent his grave attention to Roger's story.

An elderly, long-faced man with rawboned, muscular arms, he sucked his teeth consideringly, nodding his head.

"Aye, I'll send one of my lads down in the morn," he said. "But if ye've found nay trace o' this fellow up along the Hieland passes … might be as ye should go down to the garrison and tell your tale, Mr. MacKenzie."

Brian Fraser cocked a dark brow, half-frowning at this, but then nodded.

"Aye, that's no a bad thought, John." He turned to Roger. "It's some distance, ken—the garrison's in Fort William, down by Duncansburgh. But we can ask along our way, and the soldiers send messengers regularly betwixt the garrison, Inverness, and Edinburgh. Should they hear a thing about your man, they could get word to us swiftly."

"And they could maybe arrest the fellow on the spot," Murray added, his rather melancholy countenance brightening a bit at the idea.

"Moran taing," Roger said, bowing a little to them both in acknowledgment, then turning to Fraser. "I'll do that, and thanks. But, sir—ye needna go with me. You've business of your own to tend to, and I wouldna—"

"I'll come, and glad to," Fraser interrupted him firmly. "The hay's long since in and naught to do that John canna take care of for me."

He smiled at Murray, who made a small noise, halfway between a sigh and a cough, but nodded.

"Fort William's in the midst of the Camerons' land, forbye," Murray observed absently, gazing off toward the dark fields. They had dined with his family but then come out to the dooryard, ostensibly to share a pipe; it smoldered in Murray's hand, disregarded for the moment.

Brian made a noncommittal sound in his throat, and Roger wondered just what Murray meant. Was it a warning that Rob Cameron might have relatives or allies to whom he was heading? Or was there some tension or difficulty between some of the Camerons and the Frasers of Lovat—or between the Camerons and the MacKenzies?

That presented some difficulty. If there *was* a feud of any importance going on, Roger ought already to know about it. He gave a small, grave "hmp" himself and resolved to approach any Camerons with caution. At the same time … *was* Rob Cameron intending to seek refuge or help with the Camerons of this time? Had he maybe come to the past before and had a hiding place prepared among his own clan? That was an evil thought, and Roger felt his stomach tighten as though to resist a punch.

But no; there hadn't been time. If Cameron had only learned about time travel from the guide Roger had written for his children's eventual use, he wouldn't have had time to go to the past, find ancient Camerons, and … no, ridiculous.

Roger shook off the tangle of half-formed thoughts as though they were a fishing net thrown over his head. There was nothing more to be done until they reached the garrison tomorrow.

Murray and Fraser were leaning on the fence now, sharing the pipe and chatting casually in Gaelic.

"My daughter bids me ask after your son," Brian Fraser said, with an air of casualness. "Any word?"

Murray snorted, smoke purling from his nostrils, and said something very idiomatic about his son. Fraser grimaced in sympathy and shook his head.

"At least ye ken he's alive," he said, dropping back into English. "Like enough, he'll come home when he's had his fill of fighting. We did, aye?" He nudged Murray gently in the ribs, and the taller man snorted again, but with less ferocity.

"It wasna boredom that led us here, *a dhuine dhubh*. Not you, anyway." He raised one shaggy graying brow, and Fraser laughed, though Roger thought there was a regretful edge in it.

He remembered the story very well: Brian Fraser, a bastard of old Lord Lovat's, had stolen Ellen MacKenzie from her brothers Colum and Dougal, the MacKenzies of Castle Leoch, and had ended up at last with her at Lallybroch, the pair of them more or less disowned by both clans but at least left alone by them. He'd seen the portrait of Ellen, too—tall, red-haired, and undeniably a woman worth the effort.

She'd looked very much like her granddaughter Brianna. By reflex, he closed his eyes, breathed deep of the cold Highland evening, and thought he felt her there at his side. If he opened them again, might he see her standing in the smoke?

I'll come back, he thought to her. *No matter what*, a nighean ruaidh—*I'm coming back. With Jem.*

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SANCTUARY

IT WAS NEARLY AN hour's drive over the narrow, twisting Highland roads from Lallybroch to Fiona Buchan's new house in Inverness. Plenty of time for Brianna to wonder if she was doing the right thing, if she had any right to involve Fiona and her family in a matter that looked more dangerous by the moment. Plenty of time to get a stiff neck from looking over her shoulder—though if she was being followed, how would she know?

She'd had to tell the kids where Roger was, as gently and briefly as possible. Mandy had put a thumb in her mouth and stared gravely at her, round-eyed. Jem … Jem hadn't said anything but had gone white under his freckles and looked as though he was about to throw up. She glanced in the rearview mirror. He was hunched in a corner of the backseat now, face turned to the window.

"He'll come back, honey," she'd said, trying to hug him in reassurance. He'd let her but stood stiff in her arms, stricken.

"It's my fault," he'd said, his voice small and wooden as a puppet's. "I should have got away sooner. Then Dad wouldn't—"

"It's *not* your fault," she'd said firmly. "It's Mr. Cameron's fault and no one else's. You were *very* brave. And Daddy will come back really soon."

Jem had swallowed hard but said nothing in reply. When she'd let him go, he swayed for a moment, and Mandy had come up and hugged his legs.

"Daddy'll come back," she said encouragingly. "For supper!"

"It might take a little bit longer than that," Bree said, smiling in spite of the panic packed like a snowball under her ribs.

She drew a deep breath of relief as the highway opened out near the airport and she could go faster than 30 mph. Another wary glance in the mirror, but the road was empty behind her. She stepped on the gas.

Fiona was one of the only two people who knew. The other one was in Boston: her mother's oldest friend, Joe Abernathy. But she needed sanctuary for Jem and Mandy, right now. She couldn't stay with them at Lallybroch; the walls were two feet thick in places, yes, but it was a farm manor, not a fortified tower house, and hadn't been built with any notion that the inhabitants might need to repel invaders or stand off a siege.

Being in the city gave her a sense of relief. Having people around. Witnesses. Camouflage. Help. She pulled up in the street outside the Craigh na Dun Bed-and-Breakfast (three AA stars) with the sense of an exhausted swimmer crawling up onto shore.

The timing was good. It was early afternoon; Fiona would have finished the cleaning and it wouldn't yet be time to check in new guests or start the supper.

A little painted bell in the shape of a bluebell tinkled when they opened the door, and one of Fiona's daughters instantly popped an inquiring head out of the lounge.

"Auntie Bree!" she shouted, and at once the lobby was filled with children, as Fiona's three girls pushed one another out of the way to hug Bree, pick up Mandy, and tickle Jem, who promptly dropped to all fours and crawled under the bench where folk left their wraps.

"What—oh, it's you, hen!" Fiona, coming out of the kitchen in a workmanlike canvas apron that said PIE QUEEN on the front, smiled with delight at sight of Bree and enveloped her in a floury hug.

"What's wrong?" Fiona murmured in her ear, under cover of the embrace. She drew back a bit, still holding Bree, and looked up at her, squinting in half-playful worry. "Rog playing away from home, is he?"

"You … could say that." Bree managed a smile but evidently not a very good one, because Fiona at once clapped her hands, bringing order out of the chaos in the lobby, and dispatched all the children to the upstairs lounge to watch telly. Jem, looking hunted, was coaxed out from under the bench and reluctantly followed the girls, looking back over his shoulder at his mother. She smiled and made shooing motions at him, then followed Fiona into the kitchen, glancing by reflex over her own shoulder.

* * *

THE TEAKETTLE SCREAMED, interrupting Brianna, but not before she'd got to the most salient point of her story. Fiona warmed and filled the pot, purse-lipped with concentration.

"Ye say he took the rifle. Ye've still got your shotgun?"

"Yes. It's under the front seat of my car at the moment."

Fiona nearly dropped the pot. Brianna shot out an arm and grabbed the handle, steadying it. Her hands were freezing, and the warm china felt wonderful.

"Well, I wasn't going to leave it in a house the bastards have a key to, now, was I?"

Fiona set down the pot and crossed herself. *"Dia eadarainn 's an t-olc." God between us and evil.* She sat, giving Brianna a sharp look. "And ye're quite sure as it's bastards, plural?"

"Yes, I bloody am," Bree said tersely. "Even if Rob Cameron managed to grow wings and fly out of my priest's hole—let me tell you what happened to Jem at the dam."

She did, in a few brief sentences, by the end of which Fiona was glancing over her own shoulder at the closed kitchen door. She looked back at Bree, settling herself. In her early thirties, she was a pleasantly rounded young woman with a lovely face and the calm expression of a mother who normally has the Indian sign on her offspring, but at the moment she had a look that Brianna's own mother would have described as "blood in her eye." She said something very bad in English regarding the man who'd chased Jem.

"So, then," she said, picking up a paring knife from the nearby drainboard and examining the edge critically, "what shall we do?"

Bree drew a breath and sipped cautiously at the hot, milky tea. It was sweet, silky, and very comforting—but not nearly as comforting as that "we."

"Well, first—would you let Jem and Mandy stay here while I go do a few things? It might be overnight; I brought their pajamas, just in case." She nodded at the paper sack that she'd set down on one of the chairs.

"Aye, of course." A small frown formed between Fiona's dark brows. "What … *sorts* of things?"

"It's—" Brianna began, intending to say, *"better if you don't know,"* but in fact someone *had* better know where she was going and what she was doing. Just in case she didn't come back. A little bubble of what might be either fear or anger rose up through the sense of warmth in her middle.

"I'm going to visit Jock MacLeod in hospital. He's the night watchman who found Jem at the dam. He might know the man who hit him and tried to take Jem. And he *does* know Rob Cameron. He can maybe tell me who Cameron's mates are outside of work or in lodge."

She rubbed a hand down over her face, thinking.

"After that … I'll talk to Rob's sister and his nephew. If she's not involved in whatever he's up to, she'll be worried. And if she *is* involved—then I need to know that."

"D'ye think ye'll be able to tell?" Fiona's frown had eased a bit, but she still looked worried.

"Oh, yes," Brianna said, with grim determination. "I'll be able to tell. For one thing, if someone I talk to *is* involved, they're probably likely to try to stop me asking questions."

Fiona made a small noise that could best be spelled as *"eeengh,"* indicating deep concern.

Brianna drank the last of her tea and set down the cup with an explosive sigh.

"And then," she said, "I'm going back to Lallybroch to meet a locksmith and have him change all the locks and install burglar alarms on the lower windows." She looked questioningly at Fiona. "I don't know how long it might take.…"

"Aye, that's why ye brought the kids' nighties. Nay problem, hen." She chewed her lower lip, eyeing Brianna.

Bree knew what she was thinking, debating whether to ask or not, and saved her the trouble.

"I don't know what I'm going to do about Roger," she said steadily.

"He'll come back, surely," Fiona began, but Bree shook her head. Horrifying Realization Number 3 couldn't be denied any longer.

"I don't think so," she said, though she bit her lip as if to keep the words from escaping. "He—he can't know that Jem isn't there. And he'd never ab-abandon him."

Fiona was clasping Brianna's hand in both of her own.

"No, no, of course he wouldna do that. But if he and the other fellow go on searching and find no trace … eventually, surely he'd think …" Her voice died away as she tried to imagine *what* Roger might think under those circumstances.

"Oh, he'll be thinking, all right," Bree said, and managed a small, shaky laugh. The thought of Roger's determination, the growing sense of fear and desperation that must inevitably eat away at it, his fight to keep going—because he would; he'd never give up and come back to tell her Jem was lost for good. For if he didn't find any trace of Jem, what could he think? That Cameron had maybe killed Jem, hidden his body, and gone to America in search of the gold? Or that they had both been lost in that horrifying space between one time and another, never to be found?

"Well, and he'll be praying, too," Fiona said with a brisk squeeze of Bree's hand. "I can help wi' that."

That made tears well, and she blinked hard, scrubbing at her eyes with a paper napkin.

"I can't cry now," she said, in a choked voice. "I *can't.* I haven't got time." She stood up suddenly, pulling her hand free. She sniffed, blew her nose hard on the napkin, and sniffed again.

"Fiona … I—I know you haven't told anybody about … us," she began, and even she could hear the doubt in her own voice.

Fiona snorted.

"I have not," she said. "I'd be taken off to the booby hatch, and what would Ernie do wi' the girls and all? Why?" she added, giving Brianna a hard look. "What are ye thinking?"

"Well … the women who—who dance at Craigh na Dun. Do you think any of them know what it is?"

Fiona sucked in one cheek, thinking.

"One or two o' the older ones might have an idea," she said slowly. "We've been callin' down the sun on Beltane there for as far back as anyone knows. And some things do get passed down, ken. Be strange if nobody ever wondered. But even if someone kent for sure what happens there, they'd not speak—no more than I would."

"Right. I just wondered—could you maybe find out, quietly, if any of the women have ties to Rob Cameron? Or maybe … to the Orkneys?"

"To what?" Fiona's eyes went round. "Why the Orkneys?"

"Because Rob Cameron went on archaeological digs there. And I think that's what made him interested in stone circles to start with. I know one man named Callahan, a friend of Roger's—who worked up there with him, and I'll talk to him, too—maybe tomorrow; I don't think I'll have time today. But if there's anyone else who might be connected with things like that …” It was more than a long shot, but at the moment she was inclined to look under any stone she could lift.

“I’ll call round,” Fiona said thoughtfully. “And speak of calling—telephone me if ye’re not coming back tonight, aye? Just so as I know ye’re safe.”

Bree nodded, her throat tight, and hugged Fiona, taking one more moment’s strength from her friend.

Fiona saw her down the hall to the front door, pausing at the foot of the stair, and glanced toward the chatter coming from above. Did Bree want to say goodbye to Jem and Mandy? Wordless, Brianna shook her head. Her feelings were too raw; she couldn’t hide them sufficiently and didn’t want to scare the kids. Instead, she pressed her fingers to her lips and blew a kiss up the stairs, then turned to the door.

“That shotgun—” Fiona began behind her, and stopped. Brianna turned and raised an eyebrow.

“They canna get ballistics off buckshot, can they?”

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AN GEARASDAN

THEY REACHED Fort William in early afternoon of the second day's travel.

"How large is the garrison?" Roger asked, eyeing the stone walls of the fort. It was modest, as forts went, with only a few buildings and a drill yard within the surrounding walls.

"Maybe forty men, I'd say," Brian replied, turning sideways to allow a pair of red-coated guards carrying muskets to pass him in the narrow entry passage. "Fort Augustus is the only garrison north of it, and that's got maybe a hundred."

That was surprising—or maybe not. If Roger was right about the date, it would be another three years before there was much talk of Jacobites in the Highlands—let alone enough of it to alarm the English crown into sending troops en masse to keep a lid on the situation.

The fort was open, and any number of civilians appeared to have business with the army, judging from the small crowd near one building. Fraser steered him toward another, smaller one with a tilt of his head, though.

"We'll see the commander, I think."

"You know him?" A worm of curiosity tickled his spine. Surely it was too early for—

"I've met him the once. Buncombe, he's called. Seems a decent fellow, for a Sassenach." Fraser gave his name to a clerk in the outer room, and within a moment they were ushered into the commander's office.

"Oh …" A small, middle-aged man in uniform with tired eyes behind a pair of half spectacles half-rose, half-bowed, and dropped back into his seat as though the effort of recognition had exhausted him. "Broch Tuarach. Your servant, sir."

Perhaps it had, Roger thought. The man's face was gaunt and lined, and his breath whistled audibly in his lungs. Claire might have known specifically what was up with Captain Buncombe, but it didn't take a doctor to know that something was physically amiss.

Still, Buncombe listened civilly to his story, called in the clerk to make a careful note of Cameron's description and Jem's, and promised that these would be circulated to the garrison and that any patrols or messengers would be advised to ask after the fugitives.

Brian had thoughtfully brought along a couple of bottles in his saddlebags and now produced one, which he set on the desk with a gurgling thump of enticement.

"We thank ye, sir, for your help. If ye'd allow us to present a small token of appreciation for your kindness …"

A small but genuine smile appeared on Captain Buncombe's worn face.

“I would, sir. But only if you gentlemen will join me …? Ah, yes.” Two worn pewter cups and—after a brief search—a crystal goblet with a chip out of the rim were produced, and the blessed silence of the dram fell upon the tiny office.

After a few moments’ reverence, Buncombe opened his eyes and sighed.

“Amazing, sir. Your own manufacture, is it?”

Brian inclined his head with a modest shake.

“Nay but a few bottles at Hogmanay, just for the family.”

Roger had himself seen the root cellar from which Brian had chosen the bottle, lined from floor to ceiling with small casks and with an atmosphere to it that would have knocked a moose flat had he stayed to breathe it long. But an instant’s thought told him that it was probably wiser not to let a garrison full of soldiers know that you kept any sort of liquor in large quantities on your premises, no matter what terms you were on with their commander. He caught Brian’s eye, and Fraser looked aside with a small “mmphm” and a tranquil smile.

“Amazing,” Buncombe repeated, and tipped another inch into his glass, offering the bottle round. Roger followed Brian’s lead and refused, nursing his own drink while the other two men fell into a sort of conversation he recognized very well. Not friendly but courteous, a trade of information that might be of advantage to one or both—and a careful avoidance of anything that might give the other too *much* advantage.

He’d seen Jamie do it any number of times, in America. It was headman’s talk, and there were rules to it. Of course … Jamie must have seen his da do it any number of times himself; it was bred in his bones.

He thought Jem maybe had it. He had *something* that made people look at him twice—something beyond the hair, he amended, and smiled to himself.

While Buncombe occasionally directed a question to him, Roger was for the most part able to leave them to it, and he gradually relaxed. The rain had passed, and a beam of sun from the window rested on his shoulders, warming him from without as the whisky warmed him within. He felt for the first time that he might be accomplishing something in his search, rather than merely flailing desperately round the Highlands.

"And they could maybe arrest the fellow," John Murray had remarked, anent the soldiers and Rob Cameron. A comforting thought, that.

The clan angle, though … he didn't *think* Cameron could have accomplices here, but—he straightened in his chair. *He* had an accomplice from this time, didn't he? Buck had the gene, and while it was clearly less frequent to travel forward from one's original lifeline—well, Roger *thought* it was less frequent (his own lack of knowledge was an unnerving realization in itself)—Buck had done it. If Cameron was a traveler, he'd got the gene from an ancestor who could also have done it.

Chill was running through his veins like iced wine, killing the whisky's warmth, and a sinister tangle of cold worms came writhing into his mind. Could it be a conspiracy, maybe, between Buck and Rob Cameron? Or Buck and some ancient Cameron from his own time?

He'd never thought Buck was telling the whole truth about himself or his own journey through the stones. Could all this have been a plot to lure Roger away from Lallybroch—away from Bree?

Now the worms were bloody *eating* his brain. He picked up his cup and threw back the rest of the whisky at a gulp to kill them. Buncombe and Fraser both glanced at him in surprise but then courteously resumed their conversation.

In the cold light of his present state of mind, something else now cast new shadows. Brian Fraser. While Roger had taken Fraser's bringing him to the garrison as purely a helpful gesture toward finding Jem, it had another function, didn't it? It displayed Roger to Captain Buncombe, in a context that made it clear that he had no claim of clan obligation or personal friendship on Fraser, just in case Roger turned out not to be what he said he was. And it allowed Fraser to see whether Buncombe recognized Roger or not. Just in case he wasn't what he said he was.

He took a deep breath and pressed his hands on the desktop, concentrating on the feel of the wood grain under his fingers. All right. Perfectly reasonable. How many times had he seen Jamie do the same sort of thing? For these men, the welfare of their own people always came first; they'd protect Lallybroch, or Fraser's Ridge, above all, but that didn't mean they were unwilling to help when help was in their power to give.

And he did believe that Fraser meant to help him. He clung to the thought and found that it floated.

Fraser glanced at him again, and something in the man's face eased at whatever it saw in his own. Brian picked up the bottle and poured another inch into Roger's glass.

"We'll find him, man," he said softly, in Gaelic, before turning to serve Captain Buncombe in turn.

He drank and put everything out of his mind, concentrating on the trivia of the conversation. It was all right. Everything was going to be all right.

He was still repeating this mantra to himself when he heard shouts and whistles from outside. He glanced toward the window, but it showed nothing save a view of the fort's wall. Captain Buncombe looked startled—but Brian Fraser was on his feet, and moving fast.

Roger followed, emerging into the fort's drill yard to see a fine-looking young woman mounted on a large, fine-looking horse and glaring down at a small cluster of soldiers who had gathered round her stirrup, pushing one another, snatching at the reins, and shouting remarks up at her. The horse plainly didn't like it, but she was managing to keep it under control. She was also holding a switch in one hand and, from the look on her face, was plainly choosing a target amongst those presenting themselves.

"Jenny!" Brian roared, and she looked up, startled. The soldiers were startled, too; they turned and, seeing Captain Buncombe come out behind the Scot, instantly melted away, heads down as they hurried off about their business.

Roger was at Brian's shoulder when he grabbed the horse's bridle.

"What in the name of the Blessed Mother are you—" Brian began, furious, but she interrupted him, looking straight at Roger.

"Your kinsman," she said. "William Buccleigh. He sent word to Lallybroch that he's taken bad and will ye come at once. They said he may not live."

* * *

IT TOOK A good day and a half to make the journey, even in good weather. Given that it was raining, that the journey back was uphill, and that the latter portion of it involved stumbling around in the dark, hunting for a nearly invisible trail, they covered the distance in a surprisingly short time.

"I'll come in with ye," Brian had said, swinging off his horse in the dooryard. "They're no my tenants, but they know me."

The household—it was a modest crofter's cottage, dull white as a pebble in the light of a gibbous moon—was closed up tight for the night, shutters drawn and the door bolted. Fraser thumped on the door and shouted in Gaelic, though, identifying himself and saying that he'd brought the sick man's kinsman to him, and presently the door swung open, framing a squat, bearded gentleman in shirt and nightcap, who peered at them for a long moment before stepping back with a gruff "Come ben."

Roger's first impression was that the house was crammed to the rafters with odorous humanity. These lay in small snuggled heaps on the floor near the hearth or on pallets by the far wall, and here and there tousled heads poked up like prairie dogs, blinking in the glow of the smoored fire to see what was to do.

Their host—introduced by Fraser as Angus MacLaren—nodded curtly to Roger and gestured toward a bedstead drawn into the center of the room. Two or three small children were sleeping on it, but Roger could just make out the blur of Buck's face on the pillow. Christ, he hoped Buck didn't have anything contagious.

He leaned in close, whispering, "Buck?" so as not to wake anyone who hadn't waked already. He couldn't make out much of Buck's face in the gloom—and it was covered with beard stubble, as well—but his eyes were closed, and he didn't open them in response to Roger's saying his name. Nor in response to Roger's laying a hand on his arm. The arm did feel warm, but given the suffocating atmosphere in the cottage, he thought it likely Buck would feel warm even if he'd been dead for hours.

He squeezed the arm, lightly at first, then harder—and at last Buck gave a strangled cough and opened his eyes. He blinked slowly, not seeming to recognize Roger, then closed them again. His chest heaved visibly, though, and he breathed now with a slow, clearly audible gasping note.

"He says as there's something the matter wi' his heart," MacLaren told Roger, low-voiced. He was leaning over Roger's shoulder, watching Buck intently. "It flutters, like, and when it does, he goes blue and canna breathe or stand up. My second-eldest lad found him out in the heather yesterday afternoon, flat as a squashed toad. We fetched him down and gave him a bit to drink, and he asked would we send someone to Lallybroch to ask after his kinsman."

"Moran taing," said Roger. "I'm that obliged to ye, sir." He turned to Brian, who was lurking behind MacLaren, looking at Buck with a small frown.

"And thank ye, too, sir," Roger said to him. "For all your help. I can't thank ye enough."

Fraser shrugged, dismissing this.

"I imagine ye'll stay with him? Aye. If he's able to travel in the morn, bring him along to Lallybroch. Or send, if there's aught we can do." Fraser nodded to MacLaren in farewell but then paused, squinting through the murk at Buck's face. He glanced at Roger, as though comparing their features.

"Is your kinsman from Lochalsh, as well?" he asked, curious, and looked back at Buck. "He's the look of my late wife's people about him. The MacKenzies of Leoch." Then he noticed the small squat shape of what must be Mrs.

MacLaren—glowering under her cap—and he coughed, bowed, and took his leave without waiting for an answer.

Mr. MacLaren went to bolt the door, and the lady of the house turned to Roger, yawned cavernously, then motioned toward the bed, scratching her bottom unself-consciously.

"Ye can sleep wi' him," she said. "Push him oot the bed if he dies, aye? I dinna want ma quilts all spoilt."

* * *

HAVING TAKEN OFF his boots, Roger lay down gingerly on the quilt beside Buck—readjusting the position of the small children, who were limp and flexible as cats in sunshine—and spent the remainder of the night listening to his ancestor's irregular snoring, poking him whenever it seemed to stop. Toward dawn, though, he dozed off, to be waked sometime later by the thick warm smell of porridge.

Alarmed by the fact that he'd fallen asleep, he raised up on one elbow to find Buck pale-faced and breathing stertorously through his mouth. He seized his ancestor by the shoulder and shook him, causing Buck to start up in bed, glaring wildly round. Spotting Roger, he punched him solidly in the stomach.

"Bugger off wi' that!"

"I just wanted to be sure you were alive, you bastard!"

"What are ye doing here in the first place?" Buck rubbed a hand through his disheveled hair, looking cross and confused.

"Ye sent for me, fool." Roger was cross, too. His mouth felt as though he'd been chewing straw all night. "How are you, anyway?"

“I—not that well.” Buck’s face changed abruptly from crossness to a pale apprehension, and he put a hand flat on his chest, pressing hard. “I—it—it doesna feel right.”

“Lie down, for God’s sake!” Roger squirmed off the bed, narrowly avoiding stepping on a little girl who was sitting on the floor, playing with the buckles of his boots. “I’ll get ye some water.”

A row of children was watching this byplay with interest, ignored by Mrs. MacLaren and two of the older girls, who were respectively stirring a huge cauldron of parritch and rapidly laying the large table for breakfast, slapping down wooden plates and spoons like cards in a game of old maid.

“If ye need the privy,” one of the girls advised him, pausing in her rounds, “ye’d best go now. Robbie and Sandy’ve gone to tend the kine, and Stuart’s no got his shoon on yet.” She lifted her chin toward a stripling of twelve or so, who was crawling slowly about on hands and knees, with one worn shoe in one hand, peering under the sparse furniture in search of its mate. “Oh—and since your kinsman’s lived the night, Da’s gone for the healer.”

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THE SCENT OF A STRANGER

SHE'D BROUGHT Jock MacLeod the traditional hospital present of grapes. And a bottle of eighteen-year-old Bunnahabhain, which had brightened his face—or what could be seen of it behind the bandage that wrapped his head and the bruising that narrowed both eyes to bloodshot slits.

"Oh, I'm a bit peely-wally," he'd told her, wrapping the bottle in his dressing gown and handing it to her to stash in his bedside cabinet, "but no bad, no bad. A wee dunt on the head, is all. I'm only glad the lad got away. D'ye ken how he came to be in the tunnel, lass?"

She'd given him the official version, listened patiently to his speculations, and then asked if he'd maybe recognized the man who hit him?

"Well, I did, then," Jock had said, surprising her. He leaned back on his pillows. "Which is not to say as I know his name. But I've seen him, aye, often. He skippers a boat on the canal."

"What? A charter boat, or one of the Jacobite cruise boats?" Her heart beat faster. The Caledonian Canal, he meant. It ran from Inverness to Fort William and carried a huge amount of water traffic, much of it visible from the road.

"Nice wee motor sailer—must be a charter. I only noticed because my wife's cousin has one like it; we went out wi' him the once. Ten-meter, I think it is."

"You told the police, of course."

"I did, so." He tapped blunt fingers on the coverlet, glancing sideways at her. "I described the man so well as I could—but, ken, he didna really look unusual. I'd know him again—and maybe your wee lad would—but I don't know as the polis would pick him out easy."

She'd brought her Swiss Army knife out of her pocket as she talked, playing with it meditatively, flicking the blades open and shut. She opened the corkscrew, testing the sharp end of it with the ball of her thumb.

"Do you think you could maybe describe him to me? I draw a bit; I could make a stab at a picture."

He grinned at her, eyes disappearing into the bruised flesh.

"Pour me a dram, lass, and we'll have a go."

* * *

BRIANNA REACHED Lallybroch again in the late afternoon, just in time for her four o'clock appointment with the locksmith. A scrap of white tacked to the door fluttered in the autumn wind; she yanked it off and fumbled it open with chilled fingers.

Had an emergency call in Elgin; won’t be back ’til late. Will call by in the morning. Apologies, Will Tranter

She crumpled the note and stuffed it into her jacket pocket, muttering under her breath. Bloody kidnapping rapist bastards walking in and out of her house like it was the public highway and this *wasn’t* an emergency?

She hesitated, fingers wrapped around the big antique key in her pocket, looking up at the white-harled front of the house. The sinking sun flashed in the upper windows, glazing them with red, hiding whatever might be behind them. *They had a key*. Did she really want to go in there alone?

She glanced round, self-conscious, but saw nothing out of the ordinary. The home fields lay tranquil, the small flock of sheep already bedding down in the setting sun. She breathed deeply, turning from side to side as she would when hunting with Da in the North Carolina forest, as though she might catch the tang of deer on the breeze.

What was she looking for now? *Exhaust fumes. Rubber, hot metal, unlaid dust in the air, the ghost of a car*. Or maybe something else, she thought, remembering the stink of Rob Cameron’s sweat. The scent of a stranger.

But the cold air brought her only the smell of dead leaves, sheep shit, and a hint of turpentine from the Forestry Commission’s pine plantation to the west.

Still. She’d heard her father mention a feeling at the back of his neck when something was wrong, and she felt the hairs on her nape prickle now. She turned away, got back into her car, and drove off, glancing automatically behind her every few minutes. There was a petrol station a few miles up the road; she stopped there to call Fiona and say she'd pick the kids up in the morning, then bought a few snacks and drove back, taking the farm track that circled the far edge of Lallybroch's land and led up into the pine plantation.

At this time of year, it got dark by 4:30 P.M. Up the hillside, the track was no more than a pair of muddy ruts, but she bumped carefully along until she came to one of the clearings where the foresters piled slash for burning. The air was rough with the smell of wood fire, and a big blackened patch of earth and ember still sent up wisps of smoke, but all the fires were out. She drove the car behind a heap of fresh-cut branches, piled ready for the next day, and cut the ignition.

As she came down out of the plantation, carrying the shotgun in one hand, something large shot past her head in total silence, and she stumbled, gasping. An owl; it disappeared, a pale blur in the dark. In spite of her pounding heart, she was glad to see it. White animals were harbingers of good luck in Celtic folklore; she could use any luck going.

"Owls are keepers of the dead, but not just the dead. They're messengers between worlds." For an instant Roger was next to her, solid, warm in the cold night, and she put out a hand by impulse, as though to touch him.

Then he was gone and she was standing alone in the shadow of the pines, looking toward Lallybroch, the shotgun cold in her hand. "I'll get you back, Roger," she whispered under her breath, and curled her left hand into a fist, clenching the copper ring with which he'd married her. "I will." But first she had to make sure the kids were safe.

Night rose up around the house and Lallybroch faded slowly out of sight, a paler blotch against the dark. She checked the safety on the gun and moved silently toward home.

* * *

SHE CAME UP the hill behind the broch, as quietly as she could. The wind had come up, and she doubted anyone would hear her steps over the rustling of the gorse and dry broom that grew thick back here.

If they were waiting for her, wanting to do harm, surely they'd be in the house. But if they just wanted to know where she was … they might be watching the house instead, and this was the place to do it from. She paused by the wall of the broch and put a hand on the stones, listening. Faint rustling, punctuated by an occasional dovish coo. The bats would have gone out long since, hunting, but the doves were abed.

Pressing her back against the stones, she sidled around the broch, pausing near the door, and reached out a hand, groping for the latch. The padlock was cold in her hand; intact and locked. Letting out her breath, she fumbled the bunch of keys out of her pocket and found the right one by touch.

The sleeping doves erupted in a mad flutter when the wind from the open door whooshed up to the rafters where they roosted, and she stepped hastily back against the wall, out of the way of a pattering rain of panicked incontinence. The doves calmed in a moment, though, and settled down again in a murmurous rustle of indignation at the disturbance.

The upper floors had long since fallen in and the timbers cleared away; the broch was a shell, but a sturdy shell, its outer stones repaired over the years. The stair was built into the wall itself, the stone steps leading up between the inner and outer walls, and she went up slowly, feeling her way one-handed. There was a torch in her pocket but no need to risk using it.

A third of the way up, she took up station by a window slit that commanded a view of the house below. It was cold sitting on the stones, but her jacket was down-filled and she wouldn't freeze. She pulled a bar of Violet Crumble from her pocket and settled down to wait.

She'd called the Hydro Board and asked for a week's leave in order to deal with a family emergency. News of what had happened at the Loch Errochty dam last night had spread, so there'd been no difficulty, save in deflecting the flood of sympathetic exclamations and curious questions—all of which she'd claimed not to be able to answer, owing to the ongoing police inquiry.

The police … they *might* be of help. Jock had told them about the man at the dam; they'd be following that up. She'd had to tell them about Rob Cameron. And, with some reluctance, she'd told them about his coming into the house and threatening her, since Mandy would likely blow the gaff about that. She told them about his open disgruntlement over having a woman supervisor and his harassing her at work—though that seemed like a paltry motive for kidnapping a child. She hadn't mentioned most of the physical stuff, the priest's hole, or Cameron's assisted escape, though. Just said she'd hit him—first with the letter box, and then with the cricket bat—and he'd run away. She'd gone with Mandy to find Jem, that being obviously more urgent than calling the police. The police didn't agree with that assessment, but they were British and thus polite about their disapproval.

She’d said Cameron had told her where Jem was. If the police found him, he wasn’t going to be in any position to contradict her. She *did* hope they picked him up. It might cause complications, but she’d feel safer if he wasn’t wandering around loose. With her rifle. Possibly lurking in her house.

Her hand curled up in the deep pocket of her jacket, fingering the comforting shapes of a dozen shotgun shells.

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COGNOSCO TE

THE HEALER ARRIVED in midafternoon. He was a short man but not slight; he looked like an amateur wrestler, with shoulders nearly as broad as Roger's own. He didn't introduce himself but nodded politely to Mrs. MacLaren, his eyes flicking round the room in a brief, all-encompassing glance, then focused on Buck, who had fallen into an uneasy sleep and did not wake even to the disturbance caused by the healer's entrance.

"He says his heart—" Roger began awkwardly. The man glanced sharply sideways at him, then flicked a hand in dismissal and, walking over, peered closely at Buck for a moment. All the MacLarens waited in breathless silence, clearly expecting something spectacular.

The man nodded to himself, removed his coat, and turned back his shirtsleeves, displaying sun-browned forearms corded with muscle.

"Well, then," he said, sitting down by the bed and laying a hand on Buck's chest. "Let me—" His face went quite blank and he stiffened, his hand jerking back as though he'd received an electric shock. He gave a quick, hard shake of the head and pulled Buck's shirt open, plunging both hands into the opening and laying them flat on Buck's laboring chest.

"Jesu," he whispered. *"Cognosco te!"*

Quite suddenly the hairs on Roger's body lifted, prickling as though a thunderstorm was coming. The man had spoken in Latin, and what he had said was, *"I know you!"*

* * *

THE MACLARENS ALL watched the healer work, with great respect and not a little awe. Roger, who had learned a good bit about the psychology of healing from Claire, was just as impressed. And, to be frank, scared shitless.

The healer had stood motionless for a long moment, hands on Buck's chest, his head thrown back and eyes closed, his face contorted in an expression of the deepest concentration, as though listening to something far, far off. He had murmured what Roger recognized as the Pater Noster—from the looks on the faces of the MacLarens, it might as well have been the Abracadabra. Then, keeping his hands in place, he had raised one thick forefinger and begun to tap, delicately, in a slow, regular rhythm, his finger rebounding each time as though he were striking a piano key.

Thup … *thup* … *thup*. It went on for a long time, so long that everyone in the room began to draw breath again—even Buck, whose labored gasping began to ease, his lungs filling naturally again. Then it was two fingers, *Thup-tup* … *thup-tup* … *thup-tup*. Slow. Regular as a metronome. On and on and on and on … Soothing. Hypnotic. And Roger realized that the rhythm was that of a beating heart—his *own* heart. Looking round the room at the wide eyes and slightly open mouths of the adenoidal MacLaren clan, he had the most peculiar sense that *all* their hearts were beating to precisely the same rhythm.

He knew they were breathing as one; he could hear the susurrus of indrawn breath and the sea-foam rush of exhalation. He *knew* it—and was helpless to change his own rhythm, to resist the sense of unity that had formed insensibly among all the people in the cabin, from Angus MacLaren down to little Josephine, round-eyed as the rest in her mother's arms.

All of them were breathing, hearts beating as one—and somehow they were supporting the stricken man, holding him as part of a larger entity, embracing him, bracing him. Buck's injured heart lay in the palm of Roger's hand: he realized it quite suddenly and, just as suddenly, realized that it had been there for some time, resting as naturally in the curve of his palm as rounded river rock, smooth and heavy. And … beating, in time with the heart in Roger's chest. What was much stranger was that none of this felt in any way out of the ordinary.

Odd—and impressive—as it was, Roger could have explained this. Mass suggestion, hypnosis, will and willingness. He'd done much the same thing himself any number of times, singing—when the music caught the audience up with him, when he knew they were with him, would follow him anywhere. He'd done it once or twice, preaching; felt the people warm to him and lift him up as he lifted them. It was impressive to see it done so quickly and thoroughly without any sort of warm-up, though—and much more disquieting to feel the effects in his own flesh. What was scaring him, though, was that the healer's hands were blue.

No doubt about it. It wasn't a trick of the light—there wasn't any to speak of, bar the dull glow of the smoored fire. It wasn't a huge thing; no fiery coruscations or neon. But a soft blue tinge had come up between the healer's fingers, crept over the backs of his hands—and now spread in a faint haze *around* his hands, seeming to penetrate Buck's chest.

Roger glanced to one side, then the other, without moving his head. The MacLarens were paying rapt attention but showed no sign of seeing anything startling. *They don't see it.* The hairs on his forearms lifted silently. *Why do* I *see it*?

Thup-tup … *thup-tup* … *thup-tup* … Tireless, regular—and yet Roger became aware of some subtle change. Not in the healer's rhythm—that didn't vary at all. But something had shifted. He glanced down involuntarily into his palm, where he still imagined that Buck's heart lay, and was now scarcely surprised to see it there, a ghostly round object, transparent but pulsing gently, regularly. On its own.

Thup-tup …… *thup-tup* …… *thup-tup*. The healer now was following, not leading. Not slowing the beats but pausing for a longer period between them, letting Buck's heart beat alone between them.

At last, the faint sound stopped, and there was silence in the room for the length of three heartbeats. And then the silence popped like a soap bubble, leaving the onlookers blinking and shaking their heads, as those awakened from dreaming. Roger closed his empty hand.

"He'll be all right," the healer said to Mrs. MacLaren, in a matter-of-fact manner. "Let him sleep as long as he can, give him something to eat when he wakes up."

"Much obliged, sir," Mrs. MacLaren murmured. She patted Josephine, who had fallen asleep with her mouth open, a glimmering trail of saliva falling from the corner of her mouth to her mother's shoulder. "Will I make up a pallet for ye by the fire?"

"Ah, no," the healer said, smiling. He shrugged back into his coat, put on his cloak, and reached for his hat. "I'm staying no great distance away."

He went out, and Roger waited for a moment, just long enough for people to turn back to their own conversations, and then followed, shutting the door quietly behind him.

* * *

THE HEALER WAS a little way down the road; Roger saw the man's dark figure kneeling in prayer before a tiny shrine, the ends of his cloak fluttering in the wind. Roger came up to him slowly, hanging back so as not to disturb his devotions—and, on impulse, bowed his own head toward the small statue, so weathered as to be faceless. *Take care of them, please*, he prayed. *Help me get back to them—to Bree*. That was all he had time for, before the healer rose to his feet—but that was all he had to say, in any case.

The healer hadn't heard him; he rose and turned, surprised at seeing Roger but recognizing him at once. He smiled, a little wearily, clearly expecting some medical question of a private nature.

Heart thumping, Roger reached out and grasped the healer's hand. The man's eyes widened with shock.

"Cognosco te," Roger said, very softly. *I know you.*

* * *

“WHO ARE YE, then?” Dr. Hector McEwan stood squinting against the wind, his face wary but excited. “The two of ye—who are ye?”

“I think ye maybe ken that better than I do,” Roger told him. “That—the light in your hands …”

“You could see it.” It wasn’t a question, and the wary excitement in McEwan’s eyes blazed into life, visible even in the dimming light.

“Aye, I could. Where did ye …” Roger groped for the best way to ask, but, after all, how many ways were there? “*When* did ye come from?”

McEwan glanced involuntarily over his shoulder toward the croft, but the door was shut, smoke pouring from the hole in the roof. It was beginning to rain, a premonitory pattering among the mounded heather near the path. He moved abruptly, taking Roger’s arm.

“Come,” he said. “We canna be standing out here, dreich as it is; we’ll catch our deaths.”

“Dreich” was the word; the rain set to in good earnest and Roger was half soaked in minutes, having come out without hat or cloak. McEwan led the way quickly up a winding path through thickets of dark gorse, emerging onto a stretch of moorland where the remains of a tumbledown croft offered some shelter. The rooftree had been burned, and recently; the smell still lingered. A corner of thatch remained, though, and they huddled inside, close beneath its scanty protection.

“Anno Domini eighteen hundred and forty-one,” McEwan said matter-of-factly, shaking rain from his cloak. He looked up at Roger, one thick brow raised.

“Nineteen hundred and eighty,” Roger replied, heart hammering. He cleared his throat and repeated the date; the cold had affected his throat, and the words emerged in a strangled croak. McEwan leaned close at the sound, peering at him.

“What’s that?” the man asked sharply. “Your voice—it’s broken.”

“It’s noth—” Roger began, but the healer’s fingers were already groping behind his head, undoing his neckcloth in nothing flat. He closed his eyes, not resisting.

McEwan’s broad fingers were cold on his neck; he felt the icy touch delicate on his skin as it traced the line of the rope scar, then firmer as the healer prodded gently round his damaged larynx—it gave him an involuntary choking sensation, and he coughed. McEwan looked surprised.

“Do that again,” he said.

“What, cough?” Roger said, hoarse as a crow.

“Aye, that.” McEwan fitted his hand snugly round Roger’s neck, just under the chin, and nodded. “Once, then wait, then do it again.” Roger hacked obligingly, feeling a slight pain with each expulsion of breath where the healer’s hand pressed. The man’s face brightened with interest, and he removed his hand.

“Do you know what a hyoid bone is?”

“If I had to guess, it’s something in the throat.” Roger cleared his throat hard and rubbed at it, feeling the roughness of the scar under his palm. “Why?” He wasn’t sure whether to be offended at the personal intrusion or—something else. His skin tingled slightly where McEwan had touched it.

“It’s just *there*,” the healer said, pressing with his thumb, high up under Roger’s chin. “And if it had been *here*”—he moved the thumb down an inch—“you’d have been dead, sir. It’s a fragile wee bone. Easy to strangle someone by breaking it—with your thumbs *or* a rope.” He drew back a little, eyes intent on Roger’s; the curiosity was still plain on his face, but the wariness had returned. “Are you and your friend fleeing from … something? Someone?”

“No.” Roger felt at once very tired, the strain of everything catching up to him, and looked round for something to sit on. There was nothing but a few dark chunks of rock that had fallen from the cottage’s wall when the burning thatch had been pulled down. He pushed two blocks together and sat on one, knees up round his ears. “I—this—” He touched his throat briefly. “It was a long time ago, nothing to do with what we—we—we’re looking for my son. He’s only nine.”

“Oh, dearie me.” McEwan’s broad face creased in sympathy. “How—”

Roger lifted a hand. “You first,” he said, and cleared his throat again. “I’ll tell ye everything I know, but … you first. Please.”

McEwan pursed his lips and glanced aside, thinking, but then shrugged and lowered himself, grunting, to his own rude seat.

“I was a doctor,” he said abruptly. “In Edinburgh. I came up to the Highlands to shoot grouse with a friend. Do folk still do that, a hundred years hence?”

“Aye. Grouse are still tasty,” Roger said dryly. “It was at Craigh na Dun that ye came through, then?”

“Yes, I—” McEwan halted abruptly, realizing what that question implied. “Dear Lord in heaven, do ye mean to be telling me there are other places? Where … *it* happens?”

“Yes.” The hairs rippled on Roger’s arms. “Four that I know of; likely there are others. How many stone circles are there in the British Isles?”

"I've no idea." McEwan was clearly shaken. He got up and went to the doorway, the jamb of it scorched and the lintel burned almost away. Roger hoped none of the stones above it would fall on the man's head—at least not until he found out more.

Dr. McEwan stayed for a long time, staring out into the rain, which had gone the silvery gray of cat's fur. Finally he shook himself and came back, mouth set in firm decision.

"Aye, nothing to be gained from secrecy. And I hope nothing to be lost by honesty." This last was not quite a question, but Roger nodded and tried to look earnest.

"Well, then. Grouse, as I say. We were on the moor, just below that hill where the standing stones are. All of a sudden a fox shot out of the bracken, right by my foot, and one of the dogs lost his head and chased it. Brewer—that was my friend, Joseph Brewer—started after it, but he has—he *had*," McEwan corrected, with an expression of mild irritation that made Roger want to smile, because he was so familiar with the feeling that dealing with the phenomenon caused, "a clubfoot. He managed all right with a special boot, but climbing and chasing …" He shrugged.

"So you went after the dog, and …" Roger shuddered involuntarily at the memory, and so did McEwan.

"Exactly."

"Did the dog … go?" Roger asked suddenly. McEwan looked surprised and vaguely affronted.

"How should I know? It didn't turn up where I did, I can tell ye that much."

Roger made a brief gesture of apology.

"Just curious. We—my wife and I—we've been trying to puzzle out as much as we can, for the sake of the children."

"Children" caught in his throat, coming out in no more than a whisper, and McEwan's expression softened.

"Aye, of course. Your son, you said?"

Roger nodded and managed to explain what he could, about Cameron, the letters … and, after a moment's hesitation, about the Spaniard's gold, for, after all, he'd have to give a reason for Cameron's taking Jem in the first place, and his sense of Dr. McEwan was one of solid kindness.

"Dearie me," the doctor murmured, shaking his head in dismay. "I'll ask among my patients. Perhaps someone …" He trailed off, his face still troubled. Roger had the distinct impression that the sense of trouble wasn't all down to Jem, or even to the staggering discovery that there were other—

He stopped, seeing plainly in his mind's eye the soft blue glow surrounding McEwan's fingers—and the look of surprised delight on his face. *Cognosco te*. I know you. Delight, not just shock. He and Buck weren't the first time travelers this man had known. But the doctor hadn't said as much. Why not?

"How long have you been here?" Roger asked, curious.

McEwan sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Maybe too long," he said, but then pushed that away, straightening up. "Two years, about. Speaking of too long, though …" He straightened, pulling the cloak over his shoulders. "It'll be dark in less than an hour. I'll need to go, if I'm to reach Cranesmuir by nightfall. I'll come again tomorrow to tend your friend. We can talk a bit more then."

He turned abruptly, but just as suddenly turned back and, reaching out, took Roger's throat in his hand.

"Maybe," he said, as though to himself. "Just maybe." Then he nodded once, let go, and was gone, his cloak fluttering like bat wings behind him.

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THE NUMBER OF THE BEAST

AFTER *FRAGGLE ROCK*, the telly went to the evening news, and Ginger reached to turn it off but stopped abruptly as Jem's last year's school picture flashed on the screen. She stared at the television, mouth half open, then looked incredulously at Jem.

"That's you!" she said.

"Ken that fine," he said crossly. "Turn it off, aye?"

"No, I want to see." She blocked him as he lunged for the screen; Ginger was eleven and bigger than him.

"Turn it off!" he said, then, with cunning inspiration, "It'll scare Mandy and she'll howl."

Ginger shot Mandy a quick glance—she had good lungs, did Mandy—then reluctantly turned the TV off.

"Mmphm," she said, and lowered her voice. "Mam told us what happened, but she said we weren't to trouble ye about it."

"Good," Jem said. "Don't." His heart was hammering and he felt sweaty, but his hands were going cold and hot and cold again.

He’d got away by the skin of his teeth, diving under the bushes planted at the top of the spillway and crawling down the concrete edging ’til he found a ladderway that went down into the water. He’d shoogled down it as far as he could and clung on so hard his hands went numb, with the black water rumbling inches under his feet and surging down the spillway past him, drenching him with cold spray. He could still feel his bones shake with it.

He believed he might throw up if he thought about it anymore, so he turned away and went to look into the wee girls’ toy chest. It was full of girlie toys, of course, but maybe if they had a ball … They did. It was pink but one of the good high-bouncy kind.

“We could go out to the garden, maybe, and have a bit o’ catch?” he suggested, bouncing the ball on the floor and catching it.

“It’s dark and rainin’ like the clappers,” Tisha said. “Dinna want to get wet.”

“Ach, it’s no but a saft drizzle! What are ye, made of sugar?”

“Yes,” said Sheena, with a simper. “Sugar and spice ’n everything nice, that’s what little girls are made of. Snips and snails and puppy-dog tails—”

“Come play dollies,” suggested Tisha, waggling a naked doll invitingly at him. “Ye can have GI Joe if ye want. Or would ye rather Ken?”

“Nay, I’m no playin’ dollies,” Jem said firmly. “Canna be doing wi’ the clothes and all.”

“I play dollies!” Mandy muscled her way between Tisha and Sheena, eager hands stretched out for a Barbie in a pink frilly ball gown. Sheena grabbed it away just in time.

“Aye, aye,” she soothed Mandy’s impending screech, “you can play, sure. Ye have to play nice, though; ye dinna want to spoil her dress. Here, sit down, pet, I’ll give ye this one. See her wee comb and brush? Ye can fix her hair.”

Jem took the ball and left. The upstairs hall had carpet, but the landing was bare wood. He popped the ball off it and it shot up and hit the ceiling with a smack, just missing the hanging light fixture. It bounced off the floor and he caught it before it could get away, clutching it to his chest.

He listened for a second, to be sure Mrs. Buchan hadn’t heard. She was back in the kitchen, though; he could hear the sound of her singing along to the radio.

He was halfway down the stairs when the bell over the front door went, and he looked over the banister to see who it was coming in. Who it was was Rob Cameron, and Jem nearly swallowed his tongue.

* * *

JEM PRESSED himself back against the wall of the landing, his heart pounding so loud he could barely hear Mrs. Buchan come out of the kitchen.

Should he go get Mandy? There wasn’t any way out of the house but by the stairs; he couldn’t drop Mandy out the lounge window, there wasn’t a tree or anything …

Mrs. Buchan was saying hello and she was sorry if the gentleman was wanting a room, because she was booked full every day this week. Mr. Cameron was being polite, saying, no, thank ye kindly, he was only wondering might he have a wee word …

“If ye’re selling anything—” she started, and he interrupted her.

“No, missus, nothing like that. It’s a few questions I have about the stones at Craigh na Dun.”

Jem was gasping for air. His lungs were heaving, but he’d pressed a hand over his mouth so Mr. Cameron wouldn’t hear. Mrs. Buchan didn’t gasp, but he could hear her take breath, then stop, deciding what to say.

“Stones?” she said, and even he could tell she was faking puzzlement. “I dinna ken anything about stones.”

Rob made a polite laugh.

“I apologize, missus. I should have introduced myself, first. My name’s Rob Cameron—and—is something wrong, missus?” She’d not only gasped really loud, Jem thought she must have stepped back without looking and hit the wee table in the hall, because there was a thump and an “Ach!” and the splat of picture frames falling over.

“No,” Mrs. Buchan said, getting ahold of herself. “No. Had a wee turn, that’s all—I’ve the high blood pressure, ken. Get that wee bit dizzy. Your name’s Cameron, is it?”

“Aye. Rob Cameron. I’m cousin by marriage to Becky Wemyss. She told me a bit about the dancing up at the stones.”

“Oh.” That “oh” meant trouble for Becky Wemyss, thought Jem, who knew a lot about mothers’ voices.

“I’m a bit of a scholar of the auld ways, see. I’m writing a wee book … Anyway, I wondered if I could maybe talk to you for a few minutes. Becky said ye’d know more about the stones and the dancing than anybody else.”

Jem’s breathing slowed down, once he realized that Mr. Cameron hadn’t come because Mr. Cameron knew Mandy and he were here. Or maybe he did and was trying it on with Mrs. Buchan ’til he could make an excuse to use the loo and come poke round in search of them? He looked apprehensively up the half flight of stairs that led from the landing, but the lounge door above was closed, and while he could hear Mandy's giggling fine through it, probably Mr. Cameron couldn't.

Mrs. Buchan was taking Mr. Cameron back to the kitchen. Her voice when she'd said, "Come ben. I'll tell ye what I can," hadn't sounded at all friendly. Jem wondered whether she might be going to put rat poison in Mr. Cameron's tea.

Maybe Mrs. Buchan didn't have any rat poison, though. He took a step one way, then the other, then back. He really, really wanted to run down the stairs and out the door and keep going. But he couldn't leave Mandy.

His havering stopped at once when the kitchen door opened, but he could hear it was Mrs. Buchan's step, and just hers, coming fast and light.

She turned up the stairs but started back when she saw him on the landing, a hand to her chest. Then she ran up to him and hugged him tight, whispering in his ear.

"Bloody heck, lad. What're you—well, never mind, I was coming to find you. Ye saw him?"

Jem nodded, wordless, and Mrs. Buchan's mouth pressed flat.

"Aye. I'm going to take ye out the door. Go left out the gate. Two houses down is Mrs. Kelleher. Knock and tell her I sent ye to use the phone. Ye call the polis and tell them the man that kidnapped you is here—ye ken the address here?"

He nodded. He'd seen the number when he visited before with Mam and Dad and remembered it because it was 669; Dad had said it should by rights be 666, but that was the number of the beast. Jem had asked whether it was Mr. or Mrs. Buchan that was the beast, and Mam and Dad both laughed like loons.

"Good," said Mrs. Buchan, letting go of him. "Come on, then."

"Mandy—" he started, but she shushed him.

"I'll mind her. Come!"

He ran down the stairs after her, trying not to make any noise, and, at the door, she stood on her toes and held the little bell so it wouldn't ring.

"Run!" she whispered.

He ran.

* * *

MRS. KELLEHER WAS an old lady and kind of deaf. Jem was out of breath and so scared that he couldn't put his words together right, so it was a long time before she took him to the telephone, and then the lady at the police station put the phone down on him twice, because she thought he was some bampot wean who'd got hold of the phone and was playing tricks.

"I'm Jeremiah MacKenzie!" he bellowed, next time she answered. "I was kidnapped!"

"Ye were?" said Mrs. Kelleher, very startled. She grabbed the phone away from him. "Who's this?" she demanded of it. Faint squawking—at least the police lady hadn't hung up again. Mrs. Kelleher turned and squinted through her spectacles at him.

"Who was it ye were wanting to call, lad? Ye've got the polis by mistake."

He really wanted to hit something, but he couldn't hit Mrs. Kelleher. He said something very bad in Gaelic, and her mouth fell open. She'd let the phone fall away from her ear, though, and he grabbed it.

“The man that kidnapped me is *here*,” he said, as slow as he could. “I need somebody to come! Before—” Inspiration struck. “Before he hurts my little sister! It’s 669 Glenurquhart Road. Come right away!” Then *he* put the phone down, before the lady could ask him questions.

Mrs. Kelleher had plenty of those, and he didn’t want to be rude, so he asked could he use the loo and locked the door against her, then hung out the upstairs window, watching for the police.

Nothing happened for what seemed forever. The raindrops started to drip off his hair and eyelashes, but he was afraid of missing anything. He was rubbing the water out of his eyes when all of a sudden the door of 669 flew open and Rob Cameron came running out, jumped in a car, and drove off with the tires squealing.

Jem almost fell out the window but then rushed back and barreled out of the bathroom, nearly knocking Mrs. Kelleher over.

“Thank you, Mrs. Kelleher!” he yelled over his shoulder, taking the stairs three at a time, and shot out the front door.

There was a lot of screaming and crying going on inside the Buchans’ house, and he felt his chest go so tight he couldn’t breathe.

“Mandy!” He tried to call, but her name came out in a whisper. The front door was hanging open. Inside, there were girls everywhere, but he picked Mandy out of the muddle in the lounge instantly and ran to grab her. She wasn’t crying, but she latched on to him like a leech, burying her black curly head in his stomach.

“It’s okay,” he told her, squeezing the stuffing out of her in relief. “It’s okay, Man. I gotcha. I gotcha.”

His heart started to slow down a little, and he saw that Mrs. Buchan was sitting on the sofa, holding a towel full of ice cubes to her face. Some of the ice had fallen out and was lying on the rug at her feet. Tisha and Sheena were holding on to their mother and crying, and Ginger was trying to pat her mam's hair and comfort her sisters at the same time, but her face was dead white and tears were running silently down it.

"Mrs. Buchan … are ye all right?" Jem asked timidly. He had an awful feeling in the bottom of his stomach. Somehow, he was sure this was his fault.

Mrs. Buchan looked up at him. One side of her face was puffy and the eye on that side was swollen half shut, but the other one had fire in it, and that made him feel a little better.

"Aye, fine, Jem," she said. "Dinna fash, girls! It's well enough; no but a black eye. Quit your caterwauling, will ye? I canna hear myself think." She gave a small, good-natured shake to detach the clinging girls, pushing and patting at them with her free hand. Then there was a knock on the doorjamb, and a man's voice from the front hall.

"Police, here! Anyone to home?"

Jem could have told Mrs. Buchan what happened once you called the police. Questions, and questions, and more questions. And if there were things you couldn't *tell* the police … At least Mrs. Buchan wouldn't let them take Jem or her to the police station to answer questions, insisting that she couldn't leave the girls on their own. By the time the police gave up, Mandy and Sheena were both asleep on the couch, curled up together like a pair of kittens, and Ginger and Tisha had made everyone tea, then sat yawning in the corner together, blinking now and then to keep awake.

A few minutes after the police left, *Mr*. Buchan came home for his supper, and all the explaining was to do all over again. There really wasn't much to it: Mrs. Buchan had sat Mr. Cameron down in the kitchen and told him a bit about the dancing—it wasn't secret, most folk who'd lived in Inverness for a long time knew about it—but she'd left the radio playing while they were talking, and all of a sudden the newscaster was saying the name "Robert Cameron" and how Robert Cameron was wanted for questioning in the kidnapping of a local boy, and—

"And then the wee bastard jumps up, and so do I, and he must have thought I meant to stop him—I was betwixt him and the door, anyroad—and he belts me one in the eye, pushes me into the wall, and he's away off!"

Mr. Buchan was giving Jem a hard look now and then and seemed like *he* wanted to start asking questions, but instead he said they'd all go into the town and have a fish supper as it was so late, and everyone started feeling better at once. Jem could see the looks going back and forth between the Buchans, though, and he kind of wondered whether Mr. Buchan maybe meant to drop him and Mandy off at the police station on the way back. Or maybe just leave them by the side of the road.

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THE GHOST OF A HANGIT MAN

THE HEAVENS OPENED, and Roger was soaked to the skin by the time he got back to the MacLarens' cottage. Amid cries of dismay from Mrs. MacLaren and her ancient mother, he was hastily stripped, wrapped up snug in a ragged quilt, and stood to steam before the fire, where his presence greatly impeded the preparations for supper. Buck, propped up on pillows with the two smallest MacLarens curled up in sleep on the bed beside him, lifted a brow at Roger in inquiry.

Roger moved his hand slightly, in a tell-you-later gesture. He thought Buck looked better; there was color in his face, and he was sitting upright, not slumped into the bedding. For a brief instant, Roger wondered what would happen if he were to lay his own hand on Buck. Would it glow blue?

The thought sent a shiver through him, and Allie, one of the MacLaren daughters, pushed the trailing edge of his quilt away from the fire with a squeak of alarm.

"Take care, sir, do!"

“Aye, do,” said Grannie Wallace, pulling the blackened iron spider—this spitting hot grease—well away from his bare legs and making shooing motions. “Take a spark, and ye’ll go up like tinder.” She was blind in one eye, but the other was sharp as a needle and gave him a piercing look. “Tall as ye are, ye’d likely set the rooftree afire, and then where should we all be, I’d like tae know!”

There was a general titter at that, but he thought the laughter had an uneasy note to it and wondered why.

“Moran taing,” Roger said in polite thanks for the advice. He moved a foot or so farther from the hearth, fetching up against the settle on which Mr. Angus MacLaren was sitting, mending his pipe stem. “Since ye speak of rooftrees—there’s a wee croft just over the hill that’s been burnt out. Cooking accident, was it?”

The room went silent, and people froze for an instant, all looking at him.

“Evidently not,” he said, with an apologetic cough. “I’m sorry to make light—were folk killed, then?”

Mr. MacLaren gave him a brooding sort of look, quite at odds with his earlier geniality, and set the pipe on his knee.

“No by the fire,” he said. “What led ye up there, man?”

Roger met MacLaren’s eye directly.

“Searching for my lad,” he said simply. “I dinna ken where to look—so I look everywhere. Thinkin’ what if he’s got away, what if he’s wandering about by himself … maybe taking shelter where he can find it …”

MacLaren took a deep breath and sat back, nodding a little.

“Aye, well. Ye’ll want to keep well away from that croft.”

“Haunted, is it?” Buck asked, and all heads swung round to look at him—then swung back to Mr. MacLaren, waiting for him to give the answer.

"It might be," he said, after a reluctant pause.

"It's cursed," Allie whispered to Roger under her breath.

"Ye didna go in, sir, did ye?" said Mrs. MacLaren, the permanent worry crease deepening between her brows.

"Och, no," he assured her. "What was it happened there?" McEwan hadn't had any hesitation about going into the croft; did he not know whatever they were concerned about?

Mrs. MacLaren made a small "Mmp!" noise and, with a shake of her head, swung the cauldron out on its bracket and began to scoop out boiled neeps with a wooden spoon. Not her place to speak of such goings-on, said her primly sealed mouth.

Mr. MacLaren made a somewhat louder noise and, leaning forward, got ponderously to his feet.

"I'll just be going to check the beasts before supper, ken," he said, and gave Roger an eye. "Perhaps ye'd like to come along and be oot the way o' the lasses and their doings."

"Oh, aye," Roger said, and, with a small bow to Mrs. MacLaren, hitched the quilt up higher over his shoulders and followed his host into the byre. He caught Buck's eye in passing and gave him a brief shrug.

In the usual way, the cattle's quarters were separated from the people's by no more than a stone wall with a large space at the top, allowing the considerable heat—along with floating bits of straw and a strong scent of piss and manure—generated by several large cows to percolate into the ben. The MacLarens' was a snug byre, well kept and piled with clean straw at one end, with three fat, shaggy red cows and a diminutive black bull who snorted fiercely at Roger, nostrils red-black in the dim light and the brass ring in his nose agleam.

The ben of the croft was far from cold—what with nine people crammed into it and a good peat fire on the hearth—but the byre was filled with an encompassing warmth and a sense of peace that made Roger sigh and drop his shoulders, only then realizing that they'd been up round his ears for what seemed hours.

MacLaren made no more than a cursory check of his beasts, scratching the bull between the ears and administering a comforting slap to a cow's flank. Then he led Roger to the far end of the byre with a jerk of his head.

Ever since his conversation with Hector McEwan, Roger had had an uneasy feeling, caused by something he felt he had heard and not understood. And now, as MacLaren turned to speak to him, it was there suddenly, clear in his head. *Cranesmuir*.

"Twa strangers built the croft up there," MacLaren said. "They came from nowhere seemingly; just one day they were there. A man and a woman, but we couldna tell were they man and wife, or maybe a man and his daughter, for he seemed a good bit older than she did. They said they came from the isles—and I think he maybe did, but her speech wasna like any islander I've heard."

"Was she Scots?"

MacLaren looked surprised.

"Oh, aye, she was. She had the *Gàidhlig*. I'd have said she came from somewhere up northwest of Inverness—maybe Thurso—but there again … it wasna quite … *right*."

Not quite right. Like someone out of their proper place, pretending.

"What did she look like?" Roger said. His voice was thick; he had to clear his throat and repeat himself.

MacLaren's lips pursed but not in condemnation; it was the sort of soundless whistle of appreciation one gives at sight of something remarkable.

"Bonny," he said. "Verra bonny, indeed. Tall and straight, but … er … not so straight in places, if ye take my meaning." He ducked his head, half embarrassed, and Roger realized that his reluctance to talk in front of the womenfolk perhaps wasn't due entirely to the scandalous nature of his story.

"I do," Roger said, lowering his own voice to MacLaren's confidential level. "Did they keep to themselves, then?" If they hadn't, surely the whole district would have known about them and quickly discovered whether they were man and wife.

MacLaren frowned.

"Aye, they did … though he was friendly enough; I met him now and again, out on the moor, and we'd have a word, and I'd always come away thinkin' as how he was a good wee fellow, and yet when I came to tell my Maggie about it, I couldna just charge my memory wi' anything he'd *said*."

MacLaren said somehow word got round that the woman was something that wee bit odd—a root doctor, but maybe would give you a bit more than a grass cure, if you found her alone in the house.…

There was no light in the byre save the dull glow from the hearth fire next door, but, even so, Roger could see that MacLaren had grown flushed and discomfited. Roger was beginning to feel uncomfortable himself, but not for the same reason.

Cranesmuir. He knew the name, had known it when McEwan said it. The MacLarens had said the healer came from Draighhearnach. Cranesmuir was in the opposite direction—and two miles farther on. Why was he going there tonight?

"There were stories. Always are, about a woman like that." MacLaren cleared his own throat. "But she was good wi' the grass cures—and wi' charms, as well. Or so folk said."

But then the man had gone, MacLaren said. No one knew where; they just didn't see him anymore, and the woman went on as before, but now more of her visitors were men. And the women stopped taking their bairns up there, though they'd go sometimes themselves, quietly, in secret.

And then on the day before Samhain, as the sun was sinking and the great fires being built up for the evening, a woman from nearby had gone up to the lonely croft and run down again, screaming.

"She'd found the door o' the croft standing wide, the woman and her things all gone—and a man hanging from the rooftree, stone dead wi' a rope around his neck."

The shock tightened Roger's own throat. He couldn't speak.

MacLaren sighed, head bent. A cow had come up behind him, nudging gently, and he laid one hand on her back as though seeking support from the animal, who went on placidly chewing her cud.

"It was the priest who said we should cleanse the place with fire, for it had the smell of evil about it, and no one kent the man. We couldna tell was it just a poor fellow as took his life by despair—or was it murder."

"I … see." Roger forced the words through the burn in his throat, and MacLaren looked up suddenly at him. He saw the man's mouth drop open, his eyes bulging, and realized that in the warmth he'd let the quilt slide back on his shoulders. MacLaren was looking straight at his throat, where the livid and unmistakable scar of hanging must show plain in the dim red light.

MacLaren backed away, or tried to, but there was nowhere to go. He plastered himself against one beast's shaggy flank, making a low gobbling noise. The cow seemed annoyed by this and brought her hoof down solidly on MacLaren's foot. The consequent anguish and fury at least brought MacLaren out of his fright, and when he had extricated himself—by means of thumps and curses—he turned bravely on Roger, jaw thrust out.

"Why come ye here, *a thaibse*?" he said, fists clenched but his voice low. "Whatever sin I might have done, I did naught to you. I'd nay part in your death—and I said they must bury your body beneath the hearthstone before they fired the place. The priest wouldna have ye in the kirkyard, aye?" he added, evidently fearing that the ghost of the hangit man had come to complain about the unsanctifed disposal of his mortal remains.

Roger sighed and rubbed a hand over his face, the stubble rasping against his palm. He could see several curious faces, attracted by MacLaren's cries, peering into the shadows of the byre from the glow of the room beyond.

"Have ye got a rosary in the house, sir?" he said.

* * *

IT WAS A long and restless night. Grannie Wallace had snatched the children off Buck's bed, as though fearing he might devour them the moment her back was turned, and put them to bed with her in the trundle, while the older children slept either with their parents or rolled up in quilts by the hearth. Roger shared the pariah's bed with Buck, for while his ability to hold the rosary in his hand, kiss the crucifix, and then lead the family in saying the rosary had—barely—kept Angus MacLaren from throwing him out into the night and pissing on the gateposts to keep him from coming back in, it hadn't made him much more popular.

He doubted Buck had slept much better than himself, for his ancestor had rolled out of bed at first light, declaring an urgent necessity to visit the privy. Roger had as hastily arisen, saying, "I'll help ye," and pulled on a still-damp shirt and breeks.

He was pleased to see that Buck didn't actually appear to need help. He walked stiffly and limped a little, but his shoulders were square and he wasn't gasping or turning blue.

"If they think ye're a vengeful ghost, what the devil do they think *I* am?" Buck inquired, the instant they were clear of the cottage. "And surely to goodness ye could ha' just said the Lord's Prayer once and not dragged everyone through five decades o' the rosary and ruined the supper!"

"Mmphm." Buck had a point there, but Roger had been too much upset at the time to think of that. Besides, he'd wanted to give them time to recover from the shock. "It wasn't ruined," he said crossly. "Only the neeps a bit scorched."

"Only!" Buck echoed. "The place still reeks. And the women hate ye. They'll put too much salt in your porridge, see if they don't. Where d'ye think we're going? It's that way."

He pointed at a path on the left that did indeed lead to the privy, this sitting in plain sight.

Roger made another testy sound but followed. He was off-kilter this morning, distracted. No wonder about why, either.

Now? He wondered, watching the door of the privy close behind Buck. It was a two-seater, but he wasn't minded to broach what he had to say under conditions of *that* much intimacy, no matter how private the subject matter was.

"The healer," he said instead through the door, choosing the simplest place to start. "McEwan. He said he'd come back today to see to ye."

"I don't need seeing to," Buck snapped. "I'm fine!" Roger had known the man long enough to recognize bravado covering fear, and replied accordingly.

"Aye, right. What did it feel like?" he asked curiously. "When he put his hand on you?"

Silence from the privy.

"Did ye feel *anything*?" he asked, after the silence had lengthened well past any time required for natural functions.

"Maybe," said Buck's voice, gruff and reluctant. "Maybe no. I fell asleep whilst he was tapping on my chest like a yaffle after tree grubs. Why?"

"Did you understand what it was he said to ye? When he touched you?" Buck had been a lawyer in his own time; he must have studied Latin.

"Did you?" A slight creak of wood and a rustling of cloth.

"I did. And I said it back to him, just before he left."

"I was asleep," Buck repeated doggedly. Clearly he didn't want to talk about the healer, but he wasn't going to have a choice about that, Roger thought grimly.

"Come out of there, will ye? The MacLarens are all out in the dooryard, crossing their legs." He glanced over his shoulder and was surprised to see that in fact the MacLarens *were* out in the dooryard.

Not all of them—it was only Angus and a tall boy, plainly a MacLaren, too, from the shape of him. He seemed familiar—had he been at the house the evening before? They were bent close together, talking in evident excitement, and the boy was pointing off toward the distant road.

“Come out,” Roger repeated, sudden urgency in his voice. “Someone’s coming. I hear horses.”

The privy door flew open and Buck sprang out like a jack-in-the-box, stuffing his shirt into his breeks. His hair was matted and dirty, but his eyes were alert, and he looked entirely capable; that was reassuring.

The horses had come up over the brow of the hill now—six of them: four of the shaggy Highland ponies called garrons, one indifferent rangy bay, and a startlingly fine chestnut with a flaxen mane. Buck seized Roger’s arm with a grip like a horse’s bite.

“A Dhia,” Buck said, half under his breath. “Who’s that?”

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ANGELS UNAWARE

ROGER HAD NO IDEA who the tall man with the good horse was, but it was crystal clear *what* he was, both from the deferential manner of the MacLarens and from the way in which his companions fell naturally into place a step behind him. The man in charge.

A tacksman of the MacKenzies? he wondered. Most of the men wore a hunting tartan with a sett in green, brown, and white, but Roger wasn't yet familiar enough with the local patterns as to tell whether they came from somewhere close by or not.

The tall man glanced over his shoulder at MacLaren's nod, and his eyes rested on Roger and Buck with an air of casual interest. There was nothing threatening in his manner, but Roger felt himself draw up to his own full height and wished for an instant that he wasn't barefoot and unshaven, breeks flapping unbuckled at his knees.

At least he did have someone at his own back: Buck had fallen a step behind him. He hadn't time to be surprised at that before he came within the stranger's ken.

The man was an inch or two shorter than himself and close to his own age, dark and good-looking in a faintly familiar sort of …

"Good morn to ye, sir," the dark man said, with a courteous inclination of the head. "My name is Dougal MacKenzie, of Castle Leoch. And … who might you be?"

Dear Jesus bloody hell, he thought. The shock rippled through him, and he hoped it didn't show on his face. He shook hands firmly.

"I am Roger Jeremiah MacKenzie, of Kyle of Lochalsh," he said, keeping his voice mild and—he hoped—assured, as some compensation for his shabby appearance. His voice sounded nearly normal this morning; if he didn't force it, with luck it wouldn't crack or gurgle.

"Your servant, sir," MacKenzie said with a slight bow, surprising Roger with his elegant manners. He had deep-set hazel eyes, which looked Roger over with frank interest—and a faint touch of what appeared to be amusement—before shifting to Buck.

"My kinsman," Roger said hastily. "William Bu—William MacKenzie." *When*? he thought in agitation. *Was Buck born yet? Would Dougal recognize the name William Buccleigh MacKenzie? But, no, he can't be born yet; you can't exist twice in the same time—can you?!?*

A question from Dougal MacKenzie interrupted this stream of confusion, though Roger missed hearing it. Buck answered, though.

"My kinsman's son was taken," he said, looking Dougal over with exactly—*oh, Jesus, exactly*—the same attitude of insouciant confidence that the other MacKenzie carried.

"About a week past, abducted by a man named Cameron. Robert Cameron. Will ye maybe ken such a man?"

Dougal of course did not—not surprising, as Cameron hadn't existed here until a week ago. But he conferred with his men, asked intelligent questions, and expressed an open sympathy and concern that at once comforted Roger and made him feel as though he was about to vomit.

To this point, Dougal MacKenzie had been no more than a name on the historical page, momentarily, if vividly, illustrated by Claire's disjunct memories. Now he sat solid in the early-morning sun beside Roger on the bench outside the MacLarens' cottage, his plaid rough and smelling faintly of piss and heather, two days' stubble rasping as he scratched his jaw in thought.

I like him, God help me. And, God help me, I know what's going to happen to him….

His eyes fixed in helpless fascination on the hollow of Dougal's throat, sun-brown and strong, framed in the open collar of his crumpled shirt. Roger jerked his eyes away, glancing instead at the russet hairs on Dougal's wrist, these catching the sunlight as he motioned toward the east, talking of his brother, chieftain of the clan MacKenzie.

"Colum doesna travel, himself, but he'd be glad to welcome the two of ye, should you find yourselves near Leoch in your search." He smiled at Roger, who smiled back, warmed by it. "Where d'ye mean to go now?"

Roger took a deep breath. Where, indeed?

"South, I think. William found no trace of Cameron in Inverness, so I'm thinking that he might be headed toward Edinburgh, meaning to take ship there."

Dougal pursed his lips, nodding in thought.

"Well, then." He turned to his men, who had sat down on the rocks that lined the path, and called to them. "Geordie, Thomas—we'll lend your beasts to these men; get your bags. Ye'd have little chance of catching up to the villain on foot," he said, turning back to Roger. "He must be mounted himself, and moving fast, or ye'd have found some trace of him."

"I—thank you," Roger managed. He felt a deep chill, in spite of the sun on his face. "You must—I mean—that's very kind. We'll bring them back as soon as we can—or send them, if—if we should be detained anywhere."

"Moran taing," Buck murmured, nodding to Geordie and Thomas, who nodded back, looking dour but philosophical at the prospect of walking back to wherever they'd come from.

Where have *they come from*? Apparently, Angus MacLaren had sent his son off last night before supper, to summon Dougal to come and have a look at his alarming guests. But Dougal and his men had to have been somewhere close at hand …

The chink of metal as Jock dumped an obviously heavy bag on the ground beside Dougal gave him a clue. *Quarter Day*. Dougal was collecting the rents for his brother—and likely on his way back to Leoch. A lot of the rents would have been paid in kind—hams, chickens, wool, salt fish—probably Dougal's party was accompanied by one or more wagons, which they'd left behind wherever they'd stayed last night.

Angus MacLaren and his oldest son stood a little to the side, eyes fixed suspiciously on Roger as though he might sprout wings and fly away. Dougal turned to Angus with a smile and said in *Gàidhlig,* "Don't trouble, friend; they're nay more ghosts than the lads and I are."

"Do not forget to entertain strangers," Buck said in the same language, *"for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."*

There was a startled pause at that, everyone staring at him. Then Dougal laughed, and his men followed him. Angus merely made a polite noise in his throat but shifted his weight and visibly relaxed. As though this had been a signal—and perhaps it was—the door opened, and Mrs. MacLaren and Allie came out, with a stack of wooden bowls and a steaming pot of parritch. One of the smaller MacLarens came after, carefully bearing a saltcellar in both hands.

In the general hubbub of serving and eating—the women *had* oversalted his porridge, though not badly—Roger said quietly to Dougal, "Did MacLaren actually send to have you come and see whether I was a ghost?"

Dougal looked surprised but then smiled, one side of his mouth turning up. It was the way Brianna smiled when she wanted to acknowledge a joke she didn't think was funny—or when she saw something funny that she didn't mean to share with the company. A searing pang followed the jolt of recognition, and Roger was obliged to look down for a moment and clear his throat in order to get control of his voice.

"No, man," Dougal said casually, also looking down as he wiped his bowl with a bit of hard journeycake taken from his saddlebag. "He thought I might be of help to ye in your search." He looked up then, straight at Roger's neck, and raised one dark, heavy brow. "Not that the presence of a half-hangit man at your door doesna raise questions, ken?"

"At least a half-hangit man can answer the questions," Buck put in. "Not like him from the croft above, aye?"

That startled Dougal, who put down his spoon and stared at Buck. Who stared back, one fair brow raised.

Holy Lord … do they see it? Either of them? It wasn't warm, despite the sun, but Roger felt sweat begin to trickle down his spine. It was more a matter of posture and expression than of feature—and yet the echo of similarity between the two faces was plain as the … well, as the long, straight nose on both faces.

Roger could see the thoughts flickering across Dougal's face: surprise, curiosity, suspicion.

"And what have ye to do with him above?" he asked, with a slight lift of his chin in the direction of the burnt-out croft.

"Not a thing, so far as I ken," Buck answered, with a brief shrug. "Only meaning as how if ye want to know what happened to my kinsman, ye can ask him. We've nothing to hide."

Thanks a lot, Roger thought, with a sideways look at his ancestor, who smiled blandly back at him and resumed gingerly eating his salty parritch. *Why the bloody hell did you say* that, *of all things*?

"I was hanged in mistake for another man," he said, as casually as possible, but he heard the voice grate in his throat, tightening, and had to stop to clear it. "In America."

"America," Dougal repeated, in open astonishment. All of them were staring at him now, men-at-arms and MacLarens both. "What took ye to America—and what brought ye back, come to that?"

"My wife has kin there," Roger replied, wondering what the devil Buck was up to. "In North Carolina, on the Cape Fear River." He very nearly named Hector and Jocasta

Cameron, before remembering that Jocasta was Dougal's sister. Also that it was Culloden that had sent them to America—and Culloden hadn't happened yet.

And he won't live to see it, he thought, watching Dougal's face as he spoke, feeling a state of bemused horror. Dougal would die, hours before the battle, in the attics of Culloden House near Inverness, with Jamie Fraser's dirk sunk in the hollow of his throat.

He told the story of his hanging and rescue briefly, leaving out the context of the War of the Regulation—and leaving out Buck's role in getting him hanged, too. He could feel Buck there beside him, leaning forward, intent, but didn't look at him. Couldn't look at him without wanting to strangle him. Wanted to strangle him anyway.

He could barely speak by the time he finished, and his heart was thumping in his ears with suppressed rage. Everyone was looking at him, with a range of emotions from awe to sympathy. Allie MacLaren was openly sniffing, her apron hem at her nose, and even her mother looked as though she somewhat regretted the salt. Angus coughed and handed him a stone bottle of what turned out to be beer, and a very grateful beverage it was, too. He muttered thanks and gulped it, avoiding all eyes.

Dougal nodded soberly, then turned to Angus.

"Tell me about the man above," he said. "When did that happen—and what d'ye ken about it?"

MacLaren's face lost a little of its natural high color, and he looked as though he wanted his beer back.

"Six days past, *a ghoistidh*." He gave a brief, and much less atmospheric, account than he had the night before—but it was the same story.

Dougal looked thoughtful, tapping his fingers gently on his knee.

"The woman," he said. "D'ye ken where she's gone?"

"I … uh … heard as how she'd gone to Cranesmuir, sir." MacLaren's color had all come back, with interest, and he carefully avoided his wife's hard eye.

"Cranesmuir," Dougal repeated. "Aye, well. Perhaps I'll seek her out, then, and just have a word. What's her name?"

"Isbister," MacLaren blurted. "Geillis Isbister."

Roger didn't actually feel the earth shake under his feet but was surprised that it hadn't.

"Isbister?" Dougal's brows went up. "From the northern isles, is she?"

MacLaren shrugged in elaborate pantomime of ignorance—and unconcern. He looked as though someone had made a serious attempt to boil his head, and Roger saw Dougal's mouth twitch again.

"Aye," he said dryly. "Well, an Orkneywoman maybe won't be hard to find, then, in a place the size of Cranesmuir." He lifted his chin in the direction of his men, and they all rose as one when he stood. So did Roger and Buck.

"Godspeed to ye, gentlemen," he said, bowing to them. "I'll have word put about regarding your wee lad. If I hear anything, where shall I send?"

Roger exchanged glances with Buck, nonplussed. He couldn't ask for word to be sent to Lallybroch, knowing what he knew of the relations between Brian Fraser and his brothers-in-law.

"Do ye ken a place called Sheriffmuir?" he asked, groping for some other place he knew that existed at the present time. “There’s a fine coaching inn there—though not much else.”

Dougal looked surprised but nodded.

“I do, sir. I fought at Sheriffmuir with the Earl of Mar, and we supped there with him one night, my father and brother and I. Aye, I’ll send word there, if there is any.”

“Thank you.” The words came half choked but clear enough. Dougal gave him a sympathetic nod, then turned to take leave of the MacLarens. Stopped by a sudden thought, though, he turned back.

“I dinna suppose ye really are an angel, are ye?” he asked, quite seriously.

“No,” Roger said, smiling as best he could, despite the coldness in his belly. *And it isn’t you that’s talking to a ghost*.

He stood with Buck, watching the MacKenzies depart, Geordie and Thomas keeping up with little effort, as the horses went slowly on the steep, rocky path.

The phrase *“Blessed are those who have not seen but have believed”* floated through his head. It was maybe not the believing that was the blessing; it was the not having to look. Seeing, sometimes, was bloody awful.

* * *

ROGER DELAYED their own departure as long as he decently could, hoping for the return of Dr. McEwan, but as the sun rose high in the sky, it was plain that the MacLarens wanted them gone—and Buck wanted to go.

“I’m fine,” he said crossly, and thumped his chest with a fist. “Sound as a drum.”

Roger made a skeptical noise in his throat—and was surprised. It hadn’t hurt. He stopped himself putting a hand to his own throat; no need to draw attention to it, even if they were leaving.

"Aye, all right." He turned to Angus MacLaren and Stuart, who'd helpfully filled Roger's canteen in the hope of hurrying them on their way and was standing with it dripping in his hands. "I thank ye for your hospitality, sir, and your kindness to my kinsman."

"Och," said MacLaren, a distinct look of relief coming over his face at what was plainly farewell. "That's fine. Nay bother."

"If—if the healer should come along, would ye thank him for us? And say I'll try to come and see him on our way back."

"On your way back," MacLaren repeated, with less enthusiasm.

"Aye. We're bound into Lochaber, to the Cameron lands. If we find nay trace of my son there, though, we'll likely come back this way—perhaps we'll call at Castle Leoch for news."

MacLaren's face cleared at that.

"Och, aye," he said heartily. "Good thought. Godspeed!"

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IN WHICH THINGS CONVERGE

“NOW, IT’S NOT that I dinna want to be helping your mam,” Mr. Buchan said, for the third time. “But I canna be having ructions going on in my house, and criminals coming and goin,’ not with my girls there, now, can I?”

Jem shook his head obediently, though Mr. Buchan wasn’t looking at him; he was peering into his rearview mirror and looking over his shoulder now and then, like he thought somebody might be following them. It made Jem want to look, too, but he couldn’t see behind without getting up on his knees and turning round, and Mandy was passed out asleep, half on his lap.

It was late, and he yawned, forgetting to cover his mouth. He thought of saying, “Excuse me,” but he didn’t think Mr. Buchan had noticed. He felt a burp coming and did cover his mouth this time, tasting vinegar from the fish and chips. Mr. Buchan had bought an extra fish supper for Mam; it was in a brown-paper bag on the floor by Jem’s feet, so as not to get grease on the seat.

"Ken when your da's expected back?" Mr. Buchan asked abruptly, glancing down at him. Jem shook his head, feeling the fish and chips rise up in a queasy ball.

Mr. Buchan's mouth pressed tight, like he wanted to say something he thought he shouldn't.

"Daddy …" Mandy murmured, then pushed her head into his ribs, snorted, and went back to sleep. He felt terrible. Mandy didn't even know where Da was; she probably thought he was just at lodge or something.

Mam said Da would come back, as soon as he figured out that Jem wasn't there with Grandda. *But how*? he thought, and had to bite his lip hard not to cry. *How would he know*? It was dark, but there was a glow from the dashboard. If he cried, Mr. Buchan would maybe see.

Headlights flashed in the rearview mirror and he looked up, brushing his sleeve furtively under his nose. He could see a white panel truck coming up behind them. Mr. Buchan said something under his breath and stepped on the gas pedal harder.

* * *

BRIANNA HAD SETTLED into the hunter's wait: a state of physical detachment and mental abeyance, mind and body each minding its own business but able to spring into unified action the moment something worth eating showed up. Her mind was on the Ridge, reliving a possum hunt with her cousin Ian. The pungent stickiness and eye-watering smoke of pine-knot torches, a glimpse of glowing eyes in a tree, and a sudden bristling possum like a nightmare in the branches, needle-toothed and gaping threats, hissing and growling like a flatulent motorboat …

And then the phone rang. In an instant she was standing, gun in hand, every sense trained on the house. It came again, the short double *brr!* muffled by distance but unmistakable. It was the phone in Roger's study, and even as she thought this, she saw the brief glow of a light inside as the study door was opened, and the ringing phone abruptly stopped.

Her scalp contracted, and she felt a brief kinship with the treed possum. But the possum hadn't had a shotgun.

Her immediate impulse was to go and flush out whoever was in her house and demand to know the meaning of this. Her money was on Rob Cameron, and the thought of flushing him like a grouse and marching him out at the point of a gun made her hand tighten on said gun with anticipation. She had Jem back; Cameron would know she didn't need to keep him alive.

But. She hesitated in the door of the broch, looking down.

But whoever was in the house had answered the phone. *If I was a burglar, I wouldn't be answering the phone in the house I was burgling. Not unless I thought it would wake up the people inside*.

Whoever was in her house already knew no one was home.

"Quod erat demonstrandum," her father's voice said in her mind, with a grim satisfaction. Someone in the house was expecting a call.

She stepped outside, with a deep breath of the fresh cold scent of gorse replacing the dank musk of the broch, her heart beating fast and her mind working faster. *Who would be calling him—them? To say what*?

Maybe someone had been watching earlier, seen her coming down the forestry road. Maybe they were calling to tell Rob she was outside, in the broch. No, that didn't make sense. Whoever was in the house, they'd *been* in there when she arrived. If someone had seen her come, they'd have called the house then.

"Ita sequitur …" she murmured. *Thus it follows:* if the call wasn't about her, it must be either a warning that someone—the police, and why?—was coming toward Lallybroch—or news that whoever was on the outside had found the kids.

The metal of the barrel was slick under her sweating palm, and it took a noticeable effort to keep a firm grip on the gun. Even more of an effort not to run toward the house.

Aggravating as it was, she had to wait. If someone had found the kids, she couldn't reach Fiona's house in time to protect them; she'd have to depend on Fiona and Ernie and the City of Inverness police. But if that was the case, whoever was in the house would surely be coming out right away. *Unless that bastard Rob means to hang around in hopes of catching me unawares, and …* Despite the gun in her hand, that thought gave her an unpleasant squirm deep inside—one she recognized as the ghostly touch of Stephen Bonnet's penis.

"I killed you, Stephen," she said under her breath. "And I'm glad you're dead. You may have company in hell pretty soon. Make sure the fire's lit for him, okay?"

That restored her nerve, and dropping to her haunches, she duckwalked through the gorse, coming down the hillside at an angle that would bring her out near the kailyard, not by the path, which was visible from the house. Even in the dark, she was taking no chances; there was a rising half-moon, though it showed erratically through scudding cloud.

The sound of a car coming made her lift her head, peering over a tuft of dry broom. She put a hand in her pocket, thumbing through the loose shotgun shells. Fourteen. That should be enough.

Fiona's remark about ballistics flitted through her mind, along with a faint reminder of the possibility of going to prison for wholesale manslaughter. She might risk it, for the satisfaction of killing Rob Cameron—but the unwelcome thought occurred to her that while she didn't need him to locate Jem anymore, she *did* need to find out what the hell was going on. And while the police might track down the man from the dam, if there was some sort of gang involved, Rob was likely the only way of finding out who the others were—and what they wanted.

The headlights jounced down the lane and into the dooryard, and she stood up abruptly. The motion-detecting light had come on, showing her Ernie's white panel truck, unmistakable, with BUCHAN ELECTRICS/FOR ALL YOUR CURRENT NEEDS, CALL 01463 775 4432 on the side, with a drawing of a severed cable, spitting sparks.

"Bloody hell," she said. "Bloody, *bloody* hell!"

The truck's door opened and Jem tumbled out, then turned round to help Mandy, who was no more than a short dark blot in the recesses of the truck.

"GET BACK IN THE TRUCK!" Brianna bellowed, leaping down the slope, skittering on rolling stones and bending her ankles in spongy patches of heather. "JEMMY! GET BACK!"

She saw Jem turn, his face white in the glare of the light, but it was too late. The front door flew open and two dark figures rushed out, running for the truck.

She wasted no more breath but ran for all she was worth. A shotgun was useless at any distance—or maybe not. She skidded to a halt, shouldered the gun, and fired. Buckshot flew into the gorse with a whizzing sound like tiny arrows, but the bang had halted the intruders in their tracks.

"BACK IN THE TRUCK!" she roared, and fired again. The intruders galloped toward the house, and Jem, bless his heart, leapt into the truck like a startled frog and slammed the door. Ernie, who had just got out, stood for a moment gawking up the slope, but then, realizing what had happened, came suddenly to life and dived for his own door.

She ran for Ernie's truck. More headlights jerked her attention toward the lane. Holy Mary, Mother of God, who was this? *Please, God, let it be the police …*

The light winked out, then on again almost at once, as the second vehicle roared into the dooryard, moving fast. The people inside the house were hanging out of the drawing room casement, yelling something at the new truck—yes, it was another panel truck, much like Ernie's, save that it said Poultney's, Purveyor of Fine Game and had a picture of a wild boar.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death …" She had to get to Ernie's truck before—too late. The Fine Game truck revved up and rammed Ernie's truck in the side, shunting it several yards. She could hear Mandy's scream above everything, sharp as an augur through her heart.

"Bloody Mother of … Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" She couldn't take time to circle the dooryard. She ran straight across it, took close aim, and shredded the front tire of the Fine Game truck with a blast of buckshot.

"STAY IN THE TRUCK!" she shouted, pointing the gun at the windshield. A blur of white as at least two people ducked down out of sight below the dash.

The men—yes, both men—inside the house were yelling at each other, and at the people in the truck, and at her. Useless adjurations and insults, mostly, but one of them was now pointing out to the others that her weapon *was* a shotgun. Useless except at short range.

"You can't cover us all, hen!"

That was Rob Cameron, shouting from the Poultney's truck. She didn't bother replying but ran to get in range of the house, and the drawing room window dissolved in a shower of glass.

Sweat was running down her sides, tickling. She felt as though she were moving in slow motion—but the rest of the world was moving slower. With no sense of hurry, she walked to Ernie's truck and put her back against the door behind which Jem and Mandy were sheltering. A strong waft of fish and malt vinegar floated out as the window cranked down a few inches.

"Mam—"

"Mummy! Mummy!"

"Bloody hell, Brianna! What's going on?"

"A bunch of nutters are trying to kill me and take my kids, Ernie," she said, raising her voice over Mandy's wailing. "What does it look like? How about you start the engine, hmm?"

The other truck was out of effective shotgun range from here, and she could see only one side of it. She heard its door open on the other side and saw a flicker of movement inside the shattered window of the house.

"*Now* would be a good time, Ernie." She wasn't forgetting that one of the bastards had her rifle. She could only hope they didn't know how to use it.

Ernie was frantically turning the key and stomping the gas. She could hear him praying under his breath, but he'd flooded the engine; the starter whirred uselessly. Lower lip tucked under her teeth, she strode round the front of the truck in time to catch one of the people from the FINE GAME truck—to her surprise, this one was a woman, a short, dumpy shape in a balaclava and an old Barbour. She raised the shotgun to her shoulder, and the woman tried to run backward, tripped, and fell on her backside with an audible "Oof!"

She wanted to laugh but then saw Cameron climbing out of the truck, her rifle in hand, and the urge left her.

"Drop it!" She strode toward him, gun at her shoulder. He *didn't* know how to use the rifle; he glanced wildly from her to the gun, as though hoping it would aim itself, then changed his mind and dropped it.

The front door of the house slammed open, and she heard running feet coming fast. She whirled on her heel and ran, too, reaching Ernie's truck barely in time to hold off the two men from the house. One immediately began to sidle round, clearly meaning to circle the other truck and collect his idiot comrades. Rob Cameron was now advancing on her slowly, hands held up to show his non-offensive—*ha*—intent.

"Look, Brianna, we don't mean ye any harm," he said.

She swung the barrel toward him in answer to that, and he took a step back.

"I mean it," he said, an edge in his voice. "We want to talk to you, is all."

"Aye, pull the other one," she said, "it's got bells on. *Ernie*?"

"Mam—"

"Don't you dare open that door until I say so, Jemmy!"

"Mam!"

"Get down on the floor, Jem, right now! Take Mandy!" One of the men from the house and the dumpy woman were moving again; she could hear them. And the second man from the house had disappeared into the dark outside the circle of light. "ERNIE!"

"But, Mam, somebody's coming!"

Everyone froze for an instant, and the sound of an engine advancing down the farm track came clearly through the night. She turned and grabbed the door handle, jerking it open just as Ernie's engine finally coughed into full-throated life. She hurled herself into the seat, her feet narrowly missing Jem's head as he peered up from the footwell, eyes huge in the dim light.

"Let's go, Ernie," she said, very calmly under the circumstance. "Kids, you stay down there."

A rifle butt struck the window near Ernie's head, starring the glass, and he yelped but didn't, God bless him, flood the engine again. Another blow and the glass broke in a cascade of glittering fragments. Brianna dropped her own gun and lunged across Ernie, reaching for the rifle. She got a hand on it, but the man holding it wrenched it free. Grabbing wildly, she scrabbled at the balaclava'd shape, and the woolly helmet came off in her hand, leaving the man beneath openmouthed with shock.

The spotlight went off, plunging the yard into darkness, and bright spots danced in front of her eyes. It popped back on again as the new vehicle roared into the yard, horn blaring. Brianna lifted herself out of Ernie's lap, trying to see out through the windshield, then flung herself toward the other side of the truck.

It was an ordinary car, a dark-blue Fiat, looking like a toy as it circled the yard, horn blatting like a sow in heat.

"Friend, d'ye think?" Ernie asked, his voice strained but not panicked. "Or foe?"

"Friend," she said, breathless, as the Fiat charged three of the intruders who were standing together: the unmasked rifle-wielder, the woman in the Barbour jacket, and whoever the guy who wasn't Rob Cameron was. They scattered like cockroaches into the grass, and Ernie slammed a fist on the dash in exultation.

"That'll show the buggers!"

Bree would have liked to stay and watch the rest of the show, but wherever Cameron was, he was undoubtedly too close.

"*Go*, Ernie!"

He went, with a terrible crunching and screeching of metal. The van lurched badly; the back axle must be damaged. She could only hope a wheel didn't come off.

The blue Fiat was prowling the dooryard; it honked and flashed its lights at Ernie's truck, and a hand waved from the driver's window. Brianna stuck her head out cautiously and returned the wave, then dropped back into her seat, panting. Black spots were swimming in her field of vision and her hair stuck to her face, lank with sweat.

They limped down the lane in first gear, with a horrible grinding noise; from the sound of it, the back wheel well had caved in.

"Mam." Jemmy stuck his head up over the edge of the seat like a prairie dog. "Can I come up now?"

"Sure." She took a deep breath and helped Mandy scramble up after him. The little girl plastered herself at once to Brianna's chest, whimpering.

“It’s okay, baby,” she whispered into Mandy’s hair, clinging to the solid small body as much as Mandy clung to her. “Everything will be fine.” She glanced down at Jem, riding between Ernie and herself. He was hunched into himself and shivering visibly in his checked wool jacket, even though it was warm in the cab. She reached out a hand and took him by the back of the neck, shaking him gently. “Okay there, pal?”

He nodded, but without saying anything. She folded her hand over his, clenched into a small fist on his knee, and held it tight—both in reassurance and to stop her own hand shaking.

Ernie cleared his throat.

“I’m sorry, Brianna,” he said gruffly. “I didna ken that—I mean, I thought it would be okay to bring the bairns back, and after yon Cameron came to the house and hit Fiona, I—” A trickle of sweat gleamed as it ran down behind his ear.

“He what?” After the events of the last hour, this news registered only as a blip on her personal seismograph, obscured by the bigger shock waves that were only now dying down. But she asked questions, and Jem began to come out of his own shell shock, telling about his part, gradually becoming indignant about Mrs. Kelleher and the police dispatcher. She felt a quiver in the pit of her stomach that wasn’t quite laughter but close enough.

“Don’t worry about it, Ernie.” She brushed off his renewed attempts at apology. Her voice rasped, her throat sore from shouting. “I’d have done the same, I expect. And we’d never have got away without you.” They’d never have *been* there without him in the first place, but he knew that as well as she did; no point in rubbing it in.

"Aye, mmphm." He drove in silence for a moment, then remarked conversationally, looking in the rearview mirror, "Yon wee blue motor's following us, ken." His throat moved as he swallowed.

Brianna rubbed a hand over her face, then looked. Sure enough, the Fiat was trundling after them at a discreet distance.

Ernie coughed. "Ehm … where d'ye want to go, Bree? Only, I'm none sae sure we'll make it all the way into the town. But there's a petrol station with a garridge bay on the main road—if I was to stop there, they'd have a phone. Ye could call the polis while I deal wi' the van."

"Don't call the polis, Mam," Jemmy said, his nostrils flaring with disgust. "*They're* no help."

"Mmphm," she said noncommittally, and raised an eyebrow at Ernie, who nodded and set his jaw.

She was inclined against calling the police herself—but out of concern lest they be *too* inquisitively helpful. She'd managed to deflect them from the touchy question of just where her husband was last night, telling them he was in London to visit the British Museum Reading Room and that she'd call him as soon as they got home. If the police found out about the shoot-out at the O.K. Corral, there was going to be a lot more scrutiny of her private affairs. And it took no stretch of imagination at all to conclude that the police might really suspect her of having something to do with Roger's disappearance, since she couldn't produce him and couldn't tell them where he was. *Might never be able to*. She swallowed, hard.

The only recourse would be to claim that they'd had a fight and he'd walked out on her—but that would sound pretty flimsy, in light of recent events. And she wouldn't say something like that in front of the kids, regardless.

But stopping at the petrol station was the only thing she could see to do at the moment. If the blue Fiat followed them there, at least she might discover an ally. And if it was the police, incognito … well, she'd cross that bridge when she came to it. Adrenaline and shock had both left her now; she felt detached, dreamy, and very, very tired. Jemmy's hand had relaxed in hers, but his fingers were still curled around her thumb.

She leaned back, closing her eyes, and slowly traced the curve of Mandy's spine with her free hand. Her little girl had relaxed into sleep against her chest, her son with his head on her shoulder, the weight of her children's trust heavy on her heart.

* * *

THE PETROL STATION was next to a Little Chef café. She left Ernie to talk to the garageman while she extracted the kids. She didn't bother looking over her shoulder; the blue Fiat had fallen back to a respectful distance, not crowding them as they crawled clanking and grinding down the motorway at 20 mph. If the driver didn't mean to talk to her, he'd have driven off and disappeared. Maybe she'd manage a cup of tea before she had to deal with him.

"Can't wait," she muttered. "Get the door, please, Jem?"

Mandy was inert as a bag of cement in her arms but began to stir at the smell of food. Bree gagged at the reek of stale frying oil, burnt chips, and synthetic pancake syrup, but ordered ice cream for Jem and Mandy, with a cup of tea for herself. Surely even this place couldn't ruin tea?

A cup of barely warm water and a PG Tips tea bag convinced her otherwise. It didn't matter; her throat was so tight that she doubted she could swallow even water.

The blessed numbness of shock was lifting, much as she would have preferred to keep it wrapped blanket-like around her. The café seemed too bright, with acres of foot-marked white lino; she felt exposed, like a bug on a grimy kitchen floor. Prickles of apprehension sparked unpleasantly over her scalp, and she kept her eyes fixed on the door, wishing she'd been able to bring the shotgun inside.

She didn't realize that Jem had also been watching the door until he stiffened to attention beside her in the booth.

"Mam! It's Mr. Menzies!"

For a moment, neither the words nor the sight of the man who had just entered the café made any sense. She blinked several times, but he was still there, striding toward them with an anxious face. Jem's school principal.

"Mrs. MacKenzie," he said, and, reaching across the table, shook her hand fervently. "Thank God you're all right!"

"Er … thanks," she said feebly. "You—was that *you*? In the blue Fiat?" It was like being keyed up to confront Darth Vader and coming face-to-face with Mickey Mouse.

He actually blushed behind his glasses.

"Ehm … well, aye. I—er …" He caught Jem's eye and smiled awkwardly. "You're taking good care of your mother, then, Jem?"

"Aye, sir." Jem was quite obviously about to burst with questions. Bree forestalled him with a quelling look and gestured to Lionel Menzies to sit down. He did and took a deep breath, about to say something, but was interrupted by the waitress, a solid, middle-aged woman with thick stockings and a cardigan and an air that indicated that she didn't care whether they were space aliens or cockroaches, so long as they didn't complicate her life.

"Don't order the tea," Bree said, with a nod toward her cup.

"Aye, thanks. I'll have … a bacon butty and an Irn-Bru?" he asked tentatively, looking up at the waitress. "With tomato sauce?" She scorned to reply but flipped her pad shut and trundled off.

"Right," Menzies said, squaring his shoulders like one about to face a firing squad. "Tell me the one thing, would you? Was it Rob Cameron there at your house?"

"It was." Bree spoke tersely, recalling belatedly that Cameron was related to Menzies in some way—a cousin or something? "Why?"

He looked unhappy. A pale-faced man with slightly receding curly brown hair and glasses, he wasn't remarkable in any way and yet usually had a presence, a friendliness and quiet air of authority about him that drew the eye and made one feel reassured in his company. This was notably lacking tonight.

"I was afraid that it might be. I heard—on the evening news. That Rob was being looked for by the police"—he lowered his voice, though there was no one within earshot—"in connection with … well, with"—he nodded discreetly toward Jem—"taking Jeremiah, here."

"He did!" Jem said, dropping his spoon and sitting up straight. "He did, Mr. Menzies! He said he was going to take me to spend the night with Bobby, only he didn't, he took me up to the rocks and—"

"Jem." Brianna spoke quietly, but it was her Shut Up Right Now voice, and he did, though with an audible snort and a glare at her.

"Yes, he did," she said levelly. "What do you know about it?"

He blinked in surprise.

"I—why, nothing. I can't imagine why he—" He broke off, coughed, and taking his glasses off, pulled a pocket handkerchief out and polished them. By the time he put them back on, he'd pulled himself together.

"You may remember, Rob Cameron's my cousin. And he's in lodge, of course. I was knocked off my perch to hear this about him. So I thought I'd maybe come out to Lallybroch, have a word with you and your husband"—he lifted an eyebrow, but she didn't respond to this obvious hint about Roger, and he went on—"see that Jem was all right—are ye all right, Jem?" he broke off to ask seriously, glancing at the boy.

"Oh, aye, fine," Jem replied airily, though he seemed tense. "Sir," he added belatedly, and licked a smear of chocolate ice cream off his upper lip.

"That's good." Menzies smiled at Jem, and Brianna saw a little of his usual warmth light up behind the glasses. The warmth was still in his eyes, though he was serious when he looked at her. "I wanted to ask if there'd maybe been a mistake, but I'm thinking that there likely wasn't? In light of … all that." He tilted his head in the direction of Lallybroch and swallowed.

"Yes, there was," she said grimly, shifting Mandy's weight on her lap, "and Rob Cameron made it."

He grimaced, drew a deep breath, but nodded.

"I'd like to help," he said simply.

"You definitely did," she assured him, wondering what on earth to do with him now. "Ick! Mandy, you're dribbling all over everywhere! Use a napkin, for heaven's sake." She swabbed Mandy's face briskly, ignoring her daughter's cranky whine. *Could* he help? She wanted badly to believe him; she was still shaking internally and all too ready to grab at any offer of assistance.

But he *was* Rob Cameron's relative. And maybe he'd come out to the house to talk, and maybe he'd come for some other reason. He might, after all, have intervened to keep her from blasting Rob into bloody shreds, rather than to save her and the kids from Rob and his masked sidekicks.

"I spoke to Ernie Buchan," Menzies said, nodding toward the plate-glass window. "He, um, seemed to think that you might not want the police involved?"

"No." Bree's mouth was dry; she sipped the lukewarm tea, trying to think. It was getting harder by the moment; her thoughts scattered like drops of quicksilver, wobbling away in a dozen directions. "Not—not just yet. We were at the police station half of last night. I really can't deal with any more questions tonight." She took a deep breath and stared at him directly.

"I don't know what's going on," she said. "I don't know why Rob Cameron should have kidnapped Jemmy—"

"Yes, you d—" Jem started, and she whipped her head round and glared at him. He glared back, red-eyed and clench-fisted, and with a jolt of alarm she recognized the Fraser temper, about to go off with a bang.

"You do so know!" he said, loudly enough that a couple of truckers at the counter turned round to look at him. "I *told* you! He wanted me to—" Mandy, who had started to drop off again, jerked awake and started to wail.

"I want Daddeeeee!"

Jem's face was bright red with fury. At this, it went white.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" he shrieked at Mandy, who yelped in terror and screamed louder, trying to scramble up Brianna's body.

"DADDEEE!"

"Jem!" Lionel Menzies was on his feet, reaching for the boy, but Jem was absolutely beside himself, literally hopping up and down with rage. The entire restaurant was gaping at them.

"Go AWAY!" Jem roared at Menzies. "DAMMIT! Don't you touch me! Don't touch my mam!" And, in an excess of passion, he kicked Menzies hard on the shin.

"Jesus!"

"Jem!" Bree had a grip on the struggling, bawling Mandy but couldn't reach Jem before he picked up his dish of ice cream, flung it at the wall, and then ran out of the café, crashing the door open so hard that a man and woman on the verge of entering were forced to leap aside to avoid being knocked over as he rocketed past.

Brianna sat down quite suddenly, as all the blood left her head. *Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us …*

The room was silent, save for Mandy's sobbing, though this was dying down as her panic subsided. She burrowed into Brianna's chest, burying her face in the padded coat.

"Hush, sweetie," Bree whispered, bending her head so that Mandy's curls brushed her lips. "Hush, now. It's all right. Everything will be all right."

A muffled mumble ended with a tearful "… Daddy?"

"Yes," Bree said firmly. "We'll see Daddy soon."

Lionel Menzies cleared his throat. He'd sat down to massage his shin but left off doing this to gesture toward the door.

"Had I … better go after Jem?"

"No. He's all right … I mean … he's with Ernie. I can see him." They were in the parking lot, just visible in the glow of light from the neon sign. Jem had cannoned into Ernie, who was coming toward the restaurant, and was clinging to him like a limpet. As Brianna watched, Ernie, an experienced father, knelt down and hugged Jem to him, patting his back and smoothing his hair, talking earnestly to him.

"Mmphm." It was the waitress with Menzie's butty, her stolid face melted into sympathy. "The wee lassie's tired, nay doubt."

"I'm sorry," Bree said feebly, and nodded at the shattered dish and splotch of chocolate ice cream on the wall. "I'll, um, pay for it."

"Och, dinna fash, lass," the waitress said, shaking her head. "I've had weans. I can see ye've got enough trouble to be goin' on with. Let me fetch ye oot a nice cup o' tea."

She trundled off. Without speaking, Lionel Menzies popped the tab on his can of Irn-Bru and shoved it in her direction. She picked it up and gulped it. The advertising implied that the stuff was made from rusty iron girders salvaged from Glasgow shipyards. Only in Scotland would this have been considered a good selling point, she reflected. But it was about half sugar, and the glucose hit her bloodstream like the elixir of life.

Menzies nodded, seeing her straighten up like a wilting flower revived.

"Where *is* Roger?" he asked softly.

"I don't know," she said, just as softly; Mandy had given a final hiccuping sigh and fallen heavily asleep, face still buried in Brianna's coat. She twitched the quilted fabric aside so Mandy wouldn't suffocate. "And I don't know when he's coming back."

He grimaced, looking unhappy and strangely embarrassed; he was having trouble meeting her eyes.

"I see. Mmphm. Was it—I mean, did he … leave because of what Rob … er … did to Jem?" His voice dropped even lower and she blinked at him. Rising blood sugar had brought her thoughts back into focus, though, and suddenly the penny dropped, and the blood rushed into her face.

He thought Rob had abducted Jemmy in order to—and Jemmy had said, *"You know what he did,"* and she'd shut him up sharp … and she'd said she didn't want the police involved … oh, dear Lord. She took a deep breath and rubbed a hand over her face, wondering whether it was better to let him think Rob had molested Jemmy—and was now trying to murder her in order to cover that up—or to tell him some halfway believable version of some part of the truth.

"Rob came to my house last night and tried to rape me," she said, leaning over Mandy's head in order to keep her voice low enough to escape the flapping ears of the truckers sitting at the counter, who were glancing covertly over their shoulders at her. "He'd already taken Jem, and Roger had left to try to find him. We thought he'd taken Jem away to … to Orkney." *That seems far enough.* "I … left messages; I expect Roger'll be back any time now—as soon as he hears that Jemmy's been found." She crossed her fingers under the table.

Menzies's face went blank, all his previous assumptions colliding with new ones.

"He—he—oh." He paused for a moment, mechanically took a swallow of her cold tea, and made a face. "You mean," he said carefully, "that you think Rob took Jem in order to lure your husband away, so that he … ehm … could —"

"Yes, I do." She seized on this suggestion gratefully.

"But … those other people. With the—" He passed a hand vaguely over his head, indicating the balaclavas. "What on earth …?"

"I have *no* idea," she said firmly. She wasn't going to mention the Spanish gold unless or until she had to. The fewer people who knew about that, the better. And as for the other thing …

But the mention of "those other people" reminded her of something, and she groped in her capacious pocket, drawing out the balaclava that she'd snatched off the man who'd broken the window with the rifle. She'd caught the barest glimpse of his face amidst the shifting light and shadow and had had no time to think about it. But now she did, and a fresh qualm went through her.

"Do you know a man named Michael Callahan?" she asked, trying to keep her voice casual. Menzies glanced at the balaclava, then at her, eyes widening.

"Of course I do. He's an archaeologist, something to do with ORCA—Orkney Research Centre, I mean. Orkney … You're no telling me he was with the people who—"

"Pretty sure. I saw his face for just a second when I pulled this off him. And"—she grimaced in distaste, plucking a tuft of sandy hair from the inside of the balaclava—"apparently that's not all I pulled off him. Rob knows him. He came out to Lallybroch to give us an opinion on some ruins up behind the house, and stayed to supper."

"Oh, dearie me," Menzies murmured, seeming to sink back into his seat. He took off his glasses and massaged his forehead for a bit. She watched him think, feeling increasingly remote.

The waitress hove to and put down a fresh cup of hot, milky tea, already sugared and stirred. Brianna thanked her and sat sipping it, watching the night outside. Ernie had taken Jem off in the direction of the garage, doubtless to check on his van.

"I can see why you don't want trouble," Menzies said carefully at last. He'd eaten half his butty; the rest of it lay on the plate, oozing ketchup in a queasy sort of way. "But really, Mrs.—may I call you Brianna?"

"Bree," she said. "Sure."

"Bree," he said, nodding, and one corner of his mouth twitched.

"Yes, I know what it means in Scots," she said dryly, seeing the thought cross his face. A bree was a storm or a great disturbance.

Lionel's face broke into a half smile.

"Yes. Well … what I'm thinking, Bree—I hate to suggest it, but what if Rob's done some harm to Roger? Would it not be worth the questions to get the police to look for him?"

"He hasn't." She felt unutterably tired and wanted only to go home. "Believe me, he hasn't. Roger went with his—his cousin, Buck. And if Rob had managed to hurt them somehow, he'd certainly have gloated about that when he … well." She took a breath that went all the way down to her aching feet and shifted her weight, getting a solid hold on Mandy.

"Lionel. Tell you what. Drive us home, will you? If that lot's still lurking around, then we'll go to the police right away. If not—it can wait 'til the morning."

He didn't like it, but he was suffering from the aftereffects of shock and fatigue, too, and after more argument finally agreed, done in by her implacable stubbornness.

Ernie had telephoned for a ride, after being assured that Lionel would see them home. Lionel was tense on the way back to Lallybroch, hands white-knuckled on the steering wheel, but the Fiat's headlights showed the dooryard empty, save for a discarded tire lying in the gravel, shredded rubber spraying out like the wings of some gigantic vulture shot out of the sky.

Both the kids were sound asleep; Lionel carried Jem in, then insisted on searching the house with Bree, nailing up laths across the shattered window in the parlor while she combed the rooms—again—suffering déjà vu.

"Had I not better spend the night?" Lionel asked, hesitating at the door. "I'd be happy to sit up and keep watch, you know."

She smiled, though it took a lot of effort.

"Your wife will already be wondering where you are. No, you've done enough—more than enough for us. Don't worry; I'll … take steps in the morning. I just want the kids to be able to have a good night's sleep in their own beds."

He nodded, lips drawn in in worry, and glanced round the foyer, its gleaming walnut paneling serene in the lamplight, even the English saber slashes somehow grown homely and peaceful with age.

"Do you maybe have family—friends—in America?" he asked abruptly. "I mean, it might not be a bad idea to get right away for a bit, aye?"

"Yes," she said. "I was thinking that myself. Thanks, Lionel. Good night."

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ALL MY LOVE

SHE WAS SHAKING. Had been shaking ever since Lionel Menzies left. With a faint sense of abstraction, she held out her hand, fingers spread, and watched it vibrate like a tuning fork. Then, irritated, made a fist and smacked it hard into the palm of her other hand. Smacked it again and again, clenching her teeth in fury, until she had to stop, gasping for breath, her palm tingling.

“Okay,” she said under her breath, teeth still clenched. *“Okay.”* The red haze had lifted like a cloud, leaving a pile of cold, icy little thoughts under it.

We have to go.

Where?

And when?

And the coldest of all:

What about Roger?

She was sitting in the study, the wood paneling glowing softly in the candlelight. There was a perfectly good reading lamp, as well as the ceiling fixture, but she’d lit the big candle instead. Roger liked to use that when he wrote late at night, writing down the songs and poems he'd memorized, sometimes with a goose quill. He said it helped him recall the words, bringing back an echo of the time where he'd learned them.

The candle's smell of hot wax brought back an echo of *him*. If she closed her eyes, she could hear him, humming low in his throat as he worked, stopping now and then to cough or clear his damaged throat. Her fingers rubbed softly over the wooden desk, summoning the touch of the rope scar on his throat, passing round to cup the back of his head, bury her fingers in the thick black warmth of his hair, bury her face in his chest …

She was shaking again, this time with silent sobs. She curled her fist again, but this time just breathed until it stopped.

"This will *not* do," she said out loud, sniffed deeply, and, clicking on the light, she blew out the candle and reached for a sheet of paper and a ballpoint pen.

* * *

WIPING THE TEARS off her face with the back of her hand, she folded the letter carefully. Envelope? No. If anybody found this, an envelope wouldn't stop them. She turned the letter over and, sniffing, wrote *Roger*, in her best parochial-school penmanship.

She groped in her pocket for a Kleenex and blew her nose, feeling obscurely that she should do something more … ceremonial?… with the letter, but other than putting it in the fireplace and touching a match to it so the north wind would carry it, as her parents had done with her childhood letters to Santa, nothing occurred to her.

In her present state of mind, she found it comforting that Santa had always come through.

She opened the big drawer and was groping at the back for the catch that released the secret hiding place when something else did occur to her. She slammed the big drawer shut and yanked open the wide shallow one in the center, which held pens and paper clips and rubber bands—and a lipstick left in the downstairs powder room by some random dinner guest.

It was pink but a dark pink, and it didn't matter that it clashed with her hair. She applied it hastily by feel, then pressed her lips carefully over the word *Roger*.

"I love you," she whispered, and, touching the pink kiss with one fingertip, opened the big drawer again and pushed the spot that unlocked the hiding place. It wasn't a secret drawer but a space built into the underside of the desk. A sliding panel let you reach up into a shallow hole about six inches by eight.

When Roger discovered it, it had three stamps printed with the head of Queen Victoria in it—unfortunately, all run-of-the-mill late-Victorian postage rather than a helpfully valuable One-Penny Black—and a wispy curl of a child's fine blond hair, faded with age, tied with white thread and a tiny scrap of heather. They'd left the stamps there—who knew, maybe they *would* be valuable by the time another few generations inherited the desk—but she'd put the lock of hair between the pages of her Bible and said a small prayer for the child and his—her?—parents, whenever she came across it.

The letter fit easily into the heart of the old desk. A moment of panic: should she have included locks of the kids' hair? *No,* she thought fiercely. *Don't be morbid. Sentimental, yes. Morbid, no*.

"Lord, let us all be together again," she whispered, pushing down the fear, and, closing her eyes, shut the panel with a little *click*.

If she hadn't opened her eyes right as she withdrew her hand, she'd never have seen it. Just the edge of something hanging down at the back of the big drawer, barely visible. She reached up and found an envelope, far back, attached to the underside of the desk with Scotch tape. This had dried with age; her earlier slamming of the drawer had probably loosened it.

She turned the envelope over with a sense of something happening in a dream and was, dreamlike, not surprised to see the initials *B.E.R.* written on the yellowed envelope. Very slowly, she opened it.

Dearest Deadeye, she read, and felt each tiny hair on her body rise slow and silent, one at a time.

> *Dearest Deadeye,*
>
> *You've just left me, after our wonderful afternoon among the clay pigeons. My ears are still ringing. Whenever we shoot, I'm torn between immense pride in your ability, envy of it—and fear that you may someday need it.*
>
> *What a queer feeling it is, writing this. I know that you'll eventually learn who—and perhaps, what—you are. But I have no idea how you'll come to that knowledge. Am I about to reveal you to yourself, or will this be old news when you find it? If we're both lucky, I may be able to tell you in person, when you're a little older. And if we're very*

lucky, it will come to nothing. But I daren't risk your life in that hope, and you're not yet old enough that I could tell you.

I'm sorry, sweetheart, that's terribly melodramatic. And the last thing I want to do is alarm you. I have all the confidence in the world in you. But I am your father and thus prey to the fears that afflict all parents—that something dreadful and unpreventable will happen to one's child, and you powerless to protect her.

"What the hell, Daddy?" She rubbed hard at the back of her neck to ease the prickling there.

Men who've lived through war usually don't talk about it, save to other soldiers. Men from my part of the Service don't talk to anyone, and not only because of the Official Secrets Act. But silence eats at the soul. I had to talk to someone, and my old friend Reggie Wakefield became my confessor.

(That's the Reverend Reginald Wakefield, a Church of Scotland minister who lives in Inverness. If you're reading this letter, I'll very likely be dead. If Reggie is still alive and you are of age, go to see him; he has my permission to tell you anything he knows at that point.)

"Of age?" Hastily, she tried to calculate when this had been written. Clay pigeons. Sherman's—the shooting range where he'd taught her to use a shotgun. The shotgun had been a present for her fifteenth birthday. And her father had died soon after her seventeenth birthday.

The Service has nothing directly to do with this; don't go looking in that direction for information. I mention it only because that's where I learned what a conspiracy looks like. I also met a great many people in the war, many of them in high places, and many of them strange; the two overlap more often than one might wish.

Why is this so hard to say? If I'm dead, your mother may have told you already the story of your birth. She promised me that she would never speak of it, so long as I lived, and I'm sure she hasn't. If I'm dead, though, she might—

Forgive me, darling. It's hard to say, because I love your mother and I love you. And you are my daughter forever, but you were sired by another man.

All right, that's out. Seeing it in black and white, my impulse is to rip this paper to bits and burn them, but I won't. You have to know.

Shortly after the war ended, your mother and I came to Scotland. Something of a second honeymoon. She went out one afternoon to pick flowers—and never came back. I searched—everyone searched—for months, but there was no sign, and eventually the police stopped—well, in fact they didn't stop suspecting me of murdering her, damn them, but they grew tired of harassing me. I had begun to put my life back together, made up my mind to move on, perhaps leave Britain—and then Claire came back. Three years after her disappearance, she showed up in the Highlands, filthy, starved, battered—and pregnant.

Pregnant, she said, by a Jacobite Highlander from 1743 named James Fraser. I won't go into all that was said between us; it was a long time ago and it doesn't matter—save for the fact that IF your mother was telling the truth, and did indeed travel back in time, then you may have the *ability to do it, too. I hope you don't. But if you should—Lord, I can't believe I'm writing this in all seriousness. But I look at you, darling, with the sun on your ruddy hair, and I see him. I can't deny that.*

Well. It took a long time. A very long time. But your mother never changed her story, and though we didn't speak about it after a while, it became obvious that she wasn't mentally deranged (which I had rather naturally assumed to be the case, initially). And I began … to look for him.

Now I must digress for a moment; forgive me. I think you won't have heard of the Brahan Seer. Colorful as he was—if, in fact, he existed—he's not really known much beyond those circles with a taste for the more outlandish aspects of Scottish history. Reggie, though, is a man of immense curiosity, as well as immense learning, and was fascinated by the Seer—one Kenneth MacKenzie, who lived in the seventeenth century (maybe), and who made a great number of prophecies about this and that, sometimes at the behest of the Earl of Seaforth.

Naturally, the only prophecies mentioned in connection with this man are the ones that appeared to come true: he predicted, for instance, that when there were five bridges over the River Ness, the world would fall into chaos. In August 1939 the fifth bridge over the Ness was opened, and in September, Hitler invaded Poland. Quite enough chaos for anyone.

The Seer came to a sticky end, as prophets often do (do please remember that, darling, will you?), burnt to death in a spiked barrel of tar at the instigation of Lady Seaforth—to whom he had unwisely prophesied that her husband was

> *having affairs with various ladies while away in Paris. (That one was likely true, in my opinion.)*
>
> *Amongst his lesser-known prophecies, though, was one called the Fraser Prophecy. There isn't a great deal known about this, and what there is is rambling and vague, as prophecies usually are, the Old Testament notwithstanding. The only relevant bit, I think, is this: "The last of Lovat's line will rule Scotland."*
>
> *Pause if you will, now, dear, and look at the paper I am enclosing with this letter.*

Fumbling and clumsy with shock, she dropped the sheets altogether and had to retrieve them from the floor. It was easy to tell which paper he meant; the paper was flimsier, a photocopy of a handwritten chart—some sort of family tree—the writing not her father's.

> *Yes. Well. This bit of disturbing information came into my hands from Reggie, who'd had it from the wife of a fellow named Stuart Lachlan. Lachlan had died suddenly, and as his widow was clearing out his desk, she found this and decided to pass it on to Reggie, knowing that he and Lachlan had shared an interest in history and in the Lovat family, they being local to Inverness; the clan seat is in Beauly. Reggie, of course, recognized the names.*
>
> *You likely know nothing about the Scottish aristocracy, but I knew Simon Lovat, Lord Lovat that is, in the war—he was Commandos, then Special Forces. We weren't close friends but knew each other casually, in the way of business, you might say.*

“Whose business?” she said aloud, suspicious. “His, or yours?” She could just see her father’s face, with the hidden smile in the corner of his mouth, keeping something back but letting you know it was there.

> *The Frasers of Lovat have a fairly straightforward line of descent, until we come to Old Simon—well, they’re all called Simon—the one they call the Old Fox, who was executed for treason after the Jacobite Rebellion—the ’45, they call it. (There’s quite a bit about him in my book on the Jacobites; don’t know if you’ll ever read that, but it’s there, should you feel curious.)*

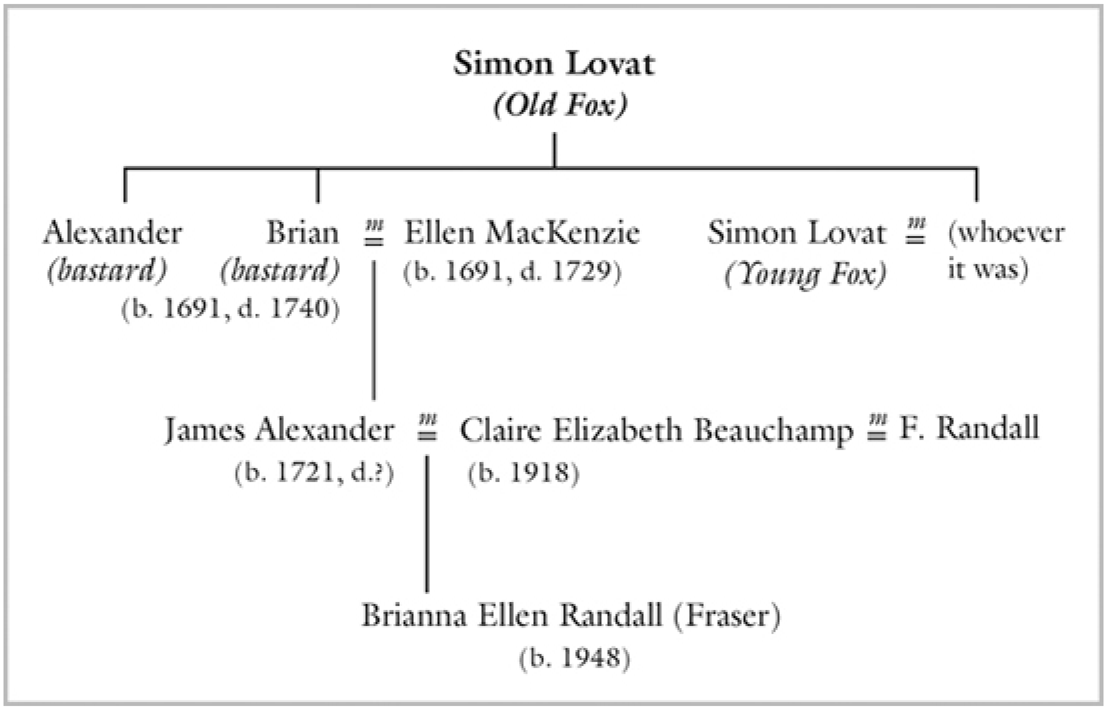
“Should I feel curious,” she muttered. “Ha.” Brianna sensed a definite, if muted, note of accusation there and pressed her lips together, as much annoyed at herself for not having read her father’s books yet as at him for mentioning it.

> *Simon was one of the more colorful Frasers, in assorted ways. He had three wives but was not famous for fidelity. He did have a few legitimate children, and God knows how many illegitimate ones (though two illegitimate sons were acknowledged), but his heir was Young Simon, known as the Young Fox. Young Simon survived the Rising, though attainted and stripped of his property. He eventually got most of it back through the courts, but the struggle took him most of a long life, and while he married, he did so at a very advanced age and had no children. His younger brother, Archibald, inherited, but then died childless, as well.*

So Archibald was the “last of Lovat’s line”—there’s a direct line of descent between him and the Fraser of Lovat who would have been concurrent with the Brahan Seer—but clearly he wasn’t the Scottish ruler foreseen.

You see the chart, though. Whoever made it has listed the two illegitimate sons, as well as Young Simon and his brother. Alexander and Brian, born to different mothers. Alexander entered the priesthood and became the abbot of a monastery in France. No known children. But Brian—

She tasted bile and thought she might throw up. *But Brian*—She closed her eyes in reflex, but it didn’t matter. The chart was burned on the inside of her eyelids.


Simon Lovat
(Old Fox)
Alexander
(bastard)
Brian
(bastard)
(b. 1691, d. 1740)
m
Ellen MacKenzie
(b. 1691, d. 1729)
Simon Lovat
(Young Fox)
m
(whoever it was)
James Alexander
(b. 1721, d.?)
m
Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp
(b. 1918)
m
F. Randall
Brianna Ellen Randall (Fraser)
(b. 1948)

She stood up, pushing back the chair with a screak, and lurched out into the hallway, heart thundering in her ears. Swallowing repeatedly, she went to the lobby and got the shotgun from its place behind the coat rack. She felt a little better with it in hand.

“It isn’t right.” She hadn’t realized that she’d spoken aloud; her own voice startled her. “It’s not right,” she repeated, in a low, fierce voice. “They left people out. What about Aunt Jenny? She had *six* kids! What about them?”

She was stomping down the hallway, gun in hand, swinging the barrel from side to side as though she expected Rob Cameron—or *somebody*, and the thought made her shudder—to jump out of the parlor or the kitchen or come sliding down the banister. That thought made her look up the stairs—she’d left all the lights on when she came down from tucking in the kids—but the landing was empty and no noise came from above.

A little calmer, she searched the ground floor carefully, testing every door and window. And the priest’s hole, whose empty blackness gaped mockingly up at her.

Jem and Mandy were all right. She knew they were. But she still went upstairs, soft-footed, and stood by their beds for a long time, watching the pale glow of the Snow White night-light on their faces.

The longcase clock in the hall below struck the hour, and then a single *bong!* She drew a deep breath and went down to finish reading her father’s letter.

> *The current line of Fraser of Lovat is descended from a collateral branch; presumably the Fraser Prophecy isn’t referring to one of them—though there are plenty of heirs in that line.*
>
> *I don’t know who drew this chart, but I do intend to find out. This letter is in case I don’t. In case of a number of things.*

One of those things being the possibility that your mother's story is true—I still have difficulty believing it, when I wake in the morning beside her and everything is so normal. *But late at night, when I'm alone with the documents … Well, why not admit it? I found the record of their marriage. James Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser and Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp. I'm not sure whether to be grateful or outraged that she didn't marry him using* my *name.*

Forgive me, I'm rambling. It's hard to keep emotion out of it, but I'll try. The essence of what I'm saying is this: if you can indeed go back in time (and possibly return), you are a person of very great interest to a number of people, for assorted reasons. Should anyone in the more shadowed realm of government be halfway convinced that you are what you may be, you would be watched. Possibly approached. (In earlier centuries, the British government pressed men into service. They still do, if less obviously.)

That's a very remote contingency, but it is a real one; I must mention it.

There are private parties who would also have a deep interest in you for this reason—and evidently there is someone who has spotted you and is watching. The chart showing your line of descent, with dates, indicates that much. It also suggests that this person's or persons' interest may be a concern with the Fraser Prophecy. What could be more intriguing to that sort of person than the prospect of someone who is *"the last of Lovat's line" and is also a time traveler? These sorts of people—I know them well—invariably believe in mystic powers of all sorts—nothing would draw them more powerfully than the conviction that you hold such power.*

> *Such people are usually harmless. But they can be very dangerous indeed.*
>
> *If I find whoever drew this chart, I will question them and do my best to neutralize any possible threat to you. But as I say—I know the look of a conspiracy. Nutters of this sort thrive in company. I might miss one.*

"Neutralize them," she murmured, the chill in her hands spreading through her arms and chest, crystallizing around her heart. She had no doubt at all what he'd meant by that, the bland matter-of-factness of the term notwithstanding. And had he found him—them?

> *Don't—I repeat,* don't*—go anywhere near the Service or anyone connected with it. At best, they'd think you insane. But if you are indeed what you may be, the last people who should ever know it are the funny buggers, as we used to be known during the war.*
>
> *And if worse should come to worst—and you can do it—then the past may be your best avenue of escape. I have no idea how it works; neither does your mother, or at least she says so. I hope I may have given you a few tools to help, if that should be necessary.*
>
> *And … there's* him. *Your mother said that Fraser sent her back to me, knowing that I would protect her—and you. She thought that he died immediately afterward. He did not. I looked for him, and I found him. And, like him, perhaps I send you back, knowing—as he knew of me—that he will protect you with his life.*
>
> *I will love you forever, Brianna. And I know whose child you truly are.*

With all my love,
Dad

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43

APPARITION

THE LOCHABER DISTRICT, according to the North of Scotland Hydro Electric Board (as interpreted by Brianna), is a “high glaciated landscape.”

“That means it goes up and down a lot,” Roger explained to Buck, as they fought their way through what he thought was part of the Locheil Forest, looking for the edge of Loch Lochy.

“Ye don’t say?” Buck glanced bleakly over his shoulder at the distant hump of Ben Nevis, then back at Roger. “I’d not noticed.”

“Cheer up, it’s all downhill for a bit now. And the midgies are all dead wi’ the cold. Count your blessings.” Roger felt unaccountably cheerful this morning—perhaps only because the walking *was* downhill, after a strenuous week of combing the Cameron clan lands, a bewildering network of corries, tarns, moraines, and Munros, those deceptive summits with their gently rounded tops and their unspeakable slopes. Thank God no one lived on top of them.

Perhaps also because, while they hadn't found Jem or any trace of him, it was progress, of a sort. The Camerons on the whole had been hospitable, after the initial surprise, and they'd had the luck to find a tacksman of Lochiel, the clan chieftain, who'd sent a man to Tor Castle for them. Word had come back a day later: no word of a stranger matching Rob Cameron's description—though, in fact, Rob looked like half the people Roger had met in the last few days—or Jem's, he being a lot more noticeable.

They'd worked their way back along the shores of Loch Arkaig—the fastest way for someone to travel from the Great Glen, if heading for the ocean. But no word of a boat stolen or hired, and Roger began to feel that Cameron had not, after all, sought refuge or help among his ancient clan—a relief, on the whole.

"Blessings, is it?" Buck rubbed a hand over his face. Neither of them had shaved in a week, and he looked as red-eyed and grubby as Roger felt. He scratched his jaw consideringly. "Aye, well. A fox took a shit next to me last night, but I didna step in it this morning. I suppose that'll do, for a start."

The next day and night dampened Roger's mood of optimism somewhat: it rained incessantly, and they spent the night under heaps of half-dry bracken on the edge of a black tarn, emerging at dawn chilled and frowsty, to the shrieks of plovers and killdeer.

He hesitated momentarily as they rode past the place where they might turn toward Cranesmuir; he wanted badly to talk again with Dr. McEwan. His hand found his throat, thumb stroking the scar. *"Maybe,"* the healer had said. *"Just maybe."* But McEwan couldn't aid them in looking for Jem; that visit would have to wait.

Still, he felt his heart rise as they came over the pass and saw Lallybroch below. It was bittersweet, coming home to a home that was not his and might never be again. But it promised refuge and succor, if only temporarily—and it promised hope, at least in these last few minutes before they reached the door.

"Och, it's you!" It was Jenny Fraser who opened the door, her look of wariness changing to one of pleased welcome. Roger heard Buck behind him making a small humming noise of approval at sight of her, and, despite his determination not to hope too much, Roger felt his own spirits rise.

"And this will be your kinsman?" She curtsied to Buck. "Welcome to ye, sir. Come ben; I'll call Taggie to mind the horses." She turned in a flicker of white apron and petticoats, beckoning them to follow. "Da's in the speak-a-word," she called over her shoulder as she headed for the kitchen. "He's something for you!"

"Mr. MacKenzie and … this would be also Mr. MacKenzie, aye?" Brian Fraser came out of the study, smiling, and offered Buck his hand. Roger could see him looking Buck over with close attention, a slight frown between his dark brows. Not disapproval—puzzlement, as though he knew Buck from somewhere and was trying to think where.

Roger knew exactly where and felt again that peculiar quiver he'd felt on meeting Dougal MacKenzie. The resemblance between father and son was by no means instantly striking—their coloring was very different, and Roger thought most of Buck's features came from his mother—but there was a fugitive similarity, nonetheless, something in their manner. Men cocksure of their charm—and no less charming for knowing it.

Buck was smiling, making commonplace courtesies, complimenting the house and its estate.… The puzzlement faded from Brian's eyes, and he invited them to sit, calling down the hall to the kitchen for someone to bring them a bite and a dram.

"Well, then," Brian said, pulling out the chair from behind his desk in order to sit with them. "As ye havena got the lad with ye, I see he's not found yet. Have ye heard any news of him, though?" He looked from Buck to Roger, worried but hopeful.

"No," Roger said, and cleared his throat. "Not a word. But—your daughter said that you … might have heard something?"

Fraser's face changed at once, lighting a little.

"Well, it's nay so much *heard* anything, but …" He rose and went to rummage in the desk, still talking.

"A captain from the garrison came by here twa, three days ago, wi' a small party of soldiers. The new man in charge—what was his name, Jenny?" For Jenny had come in with a tray, this holding a teapot, cups, a small bottle of whisky, and a plate of cake. The smell made Roger's stomach rumble.

"Who? Oh, the new redcoat captain? Randall, he said. Jonathan Randall." Her color rose a little, and her father smiled to see it. Roger felt the smile freeze on his own face.

"Aye, he took to you, lass. Wouldna be surprised if he came back one of these days."

"Precious little good it will do him if he does," Jenny snapped. "Have ye lost that thing, *an athair*?"

"No, no, I'm sure I put …" Brian's voice trailed off as he scrabbled in the drawer. "Oh. Erm, aye." He coughed, hand in the drawer, and, through his shock, Roger realized what the trouble was. The desk had a secret compartment. Evidently Brian had put the "thing," whatever it was, in the hiding place and was now wondering how to get it out again without revealing the secret to his visitors.

Roger rose to his feet.

"Will ye pardon me, mistress?" he asked, bowing to Jenny. "I'd forgot something in my saddlebag. Come with me, aye?" he added to Buck. "It's maybe in with your things."

Jenny looked surprised but nodded, and Roger blundered out, Buck making little grunts of annoyance at his heels.

"What the devil's wrong wi' you?" Buck said, the minute they were out the door. "Ye went white as a sheet in there, and ye still look like a fish that's been dead a week."

"I feel like one," Roger said tersely. "I know Captain Randall—or, rather, I know a lot of things about him. Leave it that he's the last person I'd want to have any knowledge of Jem."

"Oh." Buck's face went blank, then firmed. "Aye, well. We'll see what it is he brought, and then we'll go and have it out with him if we think he might have the lad."

What it is he brought. Roger fought back all the horrible things that phrase conjured—Jem's ear, a finger, a lock of his hair—because if it had been anything like that, surely the Frasers wouldn't be calm about it. But if Randall had brought some hideous token in a box?

"Why, though?" Buck was frowning, plainly trying to read Roger's expression, which, judging from Buck's own, must be appalling. "Why would this man mean you and the lad ill? He's never met ye, has he?"

"That," Roger said, choking down his feelings, "is an excellent question. But the man is a—do you know what a sadist is?"

"No, but it's plainly something ye dinna want close to your wean. Here, sir! We'll be taking those in, thank ye kindly." They'd come right round the house by now, and McTaggart the hired man was coming down the path from the stable, their saddlebags in either hand.

McTaggart looked surprised but surrendered the heavy bags gladly and went back to his work.

"I ken ye just wanted to get us out of there so to give your man a bit of privacy to work the secret drawer," Buck remarked. "And he kens that fine. Do we need to take in something, though?"

"How do you know about—" Buck grinned at him, and Roger dismissed the question with an irritable gesture. "Yes. We'll give Miss Fraser the cheese I bought yesterday."

"Ah, Mrs. Jenny." Buck made the humming noise again. "I wouldna blame Captain Randall. That skin! And those bubs, come to that—"

"Shut up right this minute!"

Buck did, shocked out of his jocularity.

"What?" he said, in quite a different tone. "What is it?"

Roger unclenched his fist, with an effort.

"It's a bloody long story; I haven't time to tell it to ye now. But it's—something I know from the other end. From my time. In a year or so, Randall's coming back here. And he's going to do something terrible. And, God help me, I don't think I can stop it."

"Something terrible," Buck repeated slowly. His eyes were boring into Roger's own, dark as serpentine. "To that bonnie wee lass? And ye think ye can't *stop* it? Why, man, how can ye—"

"Just shut up," Roger repeated doggedly. "We'll talk about it later, aye?"

Buck puffed out his cheeks, still staring at Roger, then blew out his breath with a sound of disgust and shook his head, but he picked up his saddlebag and followed without further argument.

The cheese—a thing the size of Roger's outstretched hand, wrapped in fading leaves—was received with pleasure and taken off to the kitchen, leaving Roger and Buck alone once more with Brian Fraser. Fraser had regained his own composure and, picking up a tiny cloth-wrapped parcel from his desk, put it gently in Roger's hand.

Too light to be a finger …

"Captain Randall said that Captain Buncombe sent word out wi' all the patrols, and one of them came across this wee bawbee and sent it back to Fort William. None of them ever saw such a thing before, but because of the name, they were thinking it might have to do wi' your lad."

"The name?" Roger untied the cord and the cloth fell open. For an instant, he didn't know what the hell he was seeing. He picked it up; it was light as a feather, dangling from his fingers.

Two disks, made of something like pressed cardboard, threaded onto a bit of light woven cord. One round, colored red—the other was green and octagonal.

"Oh, Jesus," he said. "Oh, Christ Jesus."

J. W. MacKenzie was printed on both disks, along with a number and two letters. He turned the red disk gently over with a shaking fingertip and read what he already knew was stamped there.

RAF

He was holding the dog tags of a Royal Air Force flier. Circa World War II.

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AMPHISBAENA

"YE CANNA BE SURE those things name your father." Buck nodded at the dog tags, their cord still wrapped round Roger's hand, the tiny disks themselves folded tight in his palm. "How many MacKenzies are there, for God's sake?"

"Lots." Roger sat down on a big lichen-covered boulder. They were at the top of the hill that rose behind Lallybroch; the broch itself stood on the slope just below them, its conical roof a broad black whorl of slates. "But not so bloody many who flew for the Royal Air Force in World War Two. And even fewer who disappeared without a trace. As for those who might be time travelers …"

Roger couldn't remember what he'd said when he saw the dog tags or what Brian Fraser had said to him. When he'd started to notice things again, he was sitting in Brian's big wheel-backed chair with a stoneware mug of hot tea cupped between his hands and the entire household crammed into the doorway, regarding him with looks ranging from compassion to curiosity. Buck was squatting in front of him, frowning in what might have been concern or simply curiosity.

"Sorry," Roger had said, cleared his throat, and set the tea undrunk on the desk. His hands throbbed from the heat of the cup. "Rather a shock. I—thank you."

"Is it something to do wi' your wee boy, then?" Jenny Fraser had asked, deep-blue eyes dark with concern.

"I think so, yes." He'd got his wits back now and rose stiffly, nodding to Brian. "Thank ye, sir. I canna thank ye enough for all ye've done for me—for us. I … need to think a bit what's to do now. If ye'll excuse me, Mistress Fraser?"

Jenny nodded, not taking her eyes from his face but shooing the maids and the cook away from the door so he could pass through it. Buck had followed him, murmuring reassuring things to the multitude, and come along with him, not speaking until they reached the solitude of the craggy hilltop. Where Roger had explained just what the dog tags were and to whom they had belonged.

"Why two?" Buck asked, reaching out a tentative finger to touch the tags. "And why are they different colors?"

"Two in case one was destroyed by whatever killed you," Roger said, taking a deep breath. "The colors—they're made of pressed cardboard treated with different chemicals—substances, I mean. One resists water and the other resists fire, but I couldn't tell ye which is which."

Speaking of technicalities made it just barely possible to speak. Buck, with unaccustomed delicacy, was waiting for Roger to bring up the unspeakable.

How did the tags turn up here*? And when—and under what circumstances—had they become detached from J(eremiah) W(alter)MacKenzie, Roman Catholic, serial number 448397651, RAF*?

"Claire—my mother-in-law—I told ye about her, did I not?"

"A bit, aye. A seer, was she?"

Roger laughed shortly. "Aye, like I am. Like you are. Easy to be a seer if what you see has already happened."

What's already happened …

"Oh, God," he said out loud, and curled over, pressing the fist that held the dog tags hard against his forehead.

"All right, there?" Buck asked after a moment. Roger straightened up with a deep breath.

"Know the expression 'damned if ye do, damned if ye don't'?"

"No, though I wouldna think it was one a minister would use." Buck's mouth twitched into a half smile. "Are ye not dedicated to the notion that there's always one sure way out o' damnation?"

"A minister. Aye." Roger breathed deep again. There was a lot of oxygen on a Scottish hilltop, but somehow there didn't seem quite enough just this minute. "I'm not sure that religion was constructed with time travelers in mind."

Buck's brows rose at that.

"Constructed?" he echoed, surprised. "Who builds God?"

That actually made Roger laugh, which made him feel a little better, if only momentarily.

"We all do," he said dryly. "If God makes man in His image, we all return the favor."

"Mmphm." Buck thought that one over, then nodded slowly. "Wouldna just say ye're wrong about that. But God's *there*, nonetheless, whether we ken quite what He is or not. Isn't He?"

"Yeah." Roger wiped his knuckles under his nose, which had begun to run with the cold wind. "Ever hear of Saint

Teresa of Avila?"

"No." Buck gave him a look. "Nor have I heard of a Protestant minister who has to do wi' saints."

"I take advice where I can get it. But St. Teresa once remarked to God, 'If this is how you treat your friends, no wonder you have so few of them.' God's got his own ways."

Buck smiled; it was one of his rare, unwary smiles, and it heartened Roger enough to try to come to grips with the situation.

"Well, Claire—my mother-in-law—she told Brianna and me a good bit. About the things that happened when she went through the stones in 1743, and about things that had happened before that. Things about Captain Randall." And in sentences as brief and unemotional as he could make them, he told the story: Randall's raid on Lallybroch while Brian Fraser was away, his attack on Jenny Murray, and how Jamie Fraser—newly returned from Paris and wondering what to do with his life—had fought for his home and his sister's honor, been arrested and taken to Fort William, where he had been flogged nearly to death.

"Twice," Roger said, pausing for air. He swallowed. "The second time … Brian was there. He thought Jamie *was* dead, and he had a stroke—an apoplexy—on the spot. He … died." He swallowed again. "Will die."

"Jesus, Mary, and Bride." Buck crossed himself. His face had gone pale. "Your man in the house? He'll be dead in a year or two?"

"Yes." Roger looked down at Lallybroch, pale and peaceful as the sheep that browsed its pastures. "And … there's more. What happened later, just before the Rising."

Buck raised a hand.

"I say that's more than enough. I say we go down to Fort William and do for the wicked bugger now. Preemptive action, ye might say. That's a legal term," he explained, with an air of kindly condescension.

"An appealing notion," Roger said dryly. "But if we did—what *would* happen four years from now?"

Buck frowned, not comprehending.

"When Claire came through the stones in 1743, she met—will meet—Jamie Fraser, an outlaw with a price on his head, coming home from France. But if what happened with Captain Randall *doesn't* happen—Jamie won't be there. And if he isn't …?"

"Oh." The frown grew deeper, comprehension dawning. "Oh, aye. I see. No Jamie, no Brianna …"

"No Jem or Mandy," Roger finished. "Exactly."

"Oh, God." Buck bent his head and massaged the flesh between his brows with two fingers. "Damned if ye do, damned if ye don't, did ye say? Enough to make your head spin like a top."

"Yes, it is. But I have to do something, nonetheless." He rubbed a thumb gently over the dog tags' surfaces. "I'm going down to Fort William to talk to Captain Randall. I have to know where these came from."

* * *

BUCK LOOKED squiggle-eyed at the tags, lips pressed together, then switched the look to Roger.

"D'ye think your lad's with your father, somehow?"

"No." That particular thought hadn't occurred to Roger, and it shook him for a moment. He shrugged it away, though.

"No," he repeated more firmly. "I'm beginning to think that maybe … maybe Jem's not here at all." The statement hung there in the air, revolving slowly. He glanced at Buck, who seemed to be glowering at it.

"Why not?" his kinsman asked abruptly.

"A, because we've found no hint of him. And B, because now there's *these*." He raised the tags, the light cardboard disks lifting in the breeze.

"Ye sound like your wife," Buck said, half amused. "She does that, aye? Layin' things out, A, B, C, and all."

"That's how Brianna's mind works," Roger said, feeling a brief surge of affection for her. "She's very logical."

And if I'm right, and Jem's not here—where is he? Has he gone to another time—or did he not travel at all? As though the word "logical" had triggered it, a whole array of horrifying possibilities opened out before him.

"What I'm thinking—we were both concentrating on the name 'Jeremiah' when we came through, aye?"

"Aye, we were."

"Well …" He twirled the cord between his fingers, making the disks spin slowly. "What if we got the wrong Jeremiah? That was my father's name, too. And—and if Rob Cameron *didn't* take Jem through the stones—"

"Why would he not?" Buck interrupted sharply. He transferred the glower to Roger. "His truck was there at Craigh na Dun. He wasn't."

"Plainly he wanted us to *think* he'd gone through. As to why—" He choked on the thought. Before he could clear his throat, Buck finished it for him.

"To get us away, so he'd have your missus to himself." His face darkened with anger—part of it aimed at Roger. "I told her yon man had a hot eye for her."

“Maybe he does,” he said shortly. “But think, aye? Beyond whatever he may have had in mind with regard to Brianna—” The mere words conjured up pictures that made the blood shoot up into his head. “Whatever he had in mind,” he repeated, as calmly as he could, “he likely also wanted to see whether it was true. About the stones. About whether we—or anyone—really could go through. Seeing’s believing, after all.”

Buck blew out his cheeks, considering.

“Ye think he was there, maybe? Watching to see if we disappeared?”

Roger shrugged, momentarily unable to speak for the thoughts clotting his brain.

Buck’s fists were clenched on his knees. He looked down at the house, then behind him at the rising mountains, and Roger knew exactly what he was thinking. He cleared his throat with a hacking growl.

“We’ve been gone for two weeks,” Roger said. “If he meant Brianna harm … he’ll have tried.” *Jesus. If he—no.* “She’ll not have let him harm her or the kids,” he went on, as steadily as he could. “If he tried anything, he’ll either be in jail or buried under the broch.” He lifted his chin toward the tower below, and Buck snorted in reluctant amusement.

“So, then. Aye, I want to rush straight back to Craigh na Dun, too. But think, man. We ken Cameron *went* to the stones after he took Jem. Would he not make Jem touch them, to see? And if he did … what if Cameron can’t travel but Jem did—to get away from him?”

“Mmphm.” Buck thought that one over and gave a reluctant nod. “So ye’re maybe thinkin’ that if the lad was scairt of Cameron and popped through accidental, he maybe wouldn’t try to come straight back?”

"He maybe couldn't." Roger was dry-mouthed and swallowed hard to generate enough saliva to speak. "He didn't have a gemstone. And even with one …" He nodded at Buck. "Ken what happened to you, even with one. It *does* get worse each time. Jemmy might have been too scared to try." *And he might have tried, not made it, and now he's lost for good … NO!*

Buck nodded.

"So. Ye think he's maybe with your da, after all?" He sounded dubious in the extreme.

Roger couldn't bear sitting any longer. He stood up abruptly, thrusting the dog tags into the breast pocket of his coat.

"I don't know. But this is the only solid bit of evidence we have. I have to go and see."

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45

THE CURE OF SOULS

“YE’RE OUT OF YOUR wee pink mind, ye ken that, aye?”

Roger looked at Buck in amazement.

“Where the devil did you get *that* expression?”

“From your wife,” Buck replied. “Who’s a verra bonnie lass and a well-spoken one, forbye. And if ye mean to get back to her bed one of these days, ye’ll think better of what ye mean to do.”

“I’ve thought,” Roger said briefly. “And I’m doing it.” The entrance to Fort William looked much as it had when he’d come here with Brian Fraser nearly two weeks earlier, but this time with only a few people hastening in, shawls over their heads, and hats pulled down against the rain. The fort itself now seemed to have a sinister aspect, the gray stones bleak and streaked black with wet.

Buck reined up, grimacing as the horse shook its head and sprayed him with drops from its soaking mane.

“Aye, fine. I’m no going in there. If we have to kill him, it’s best if he doesna ken me, so I can get behind him. I’ll wait at yonder tavern.” He lifted his chin, indicating an establishment called the Peartree, a few hundred feet down the road from the fort, then kicked his horse into motion. Ten feet on, he turned and called over his shoulder, “One hour! If ye’re not with me by then, I’m comin’ in after ye!”

Roger smiled, despite his apprehension. He waved briefly to Buck and swung off his horse.

Bless me, Lord, he prayed. *Help me to do the right thing—for everyone. Including Buck. And* him.

He hadn’t actually stopped praying at any time since Jem had disappeared, though most of it was just the frantic, reflexive *Dear Lord, let it be all right* of everyone facing crisis. Over time, either the crisis or the petitioner wears down, and prayer either ceases or … the person praying starts to listen.

He knew that. And he was listening. But he was still taken aback to get an answer.

He had enough experience in the business of prayer to recognize an answer when it showed up, though, however unwelcome. And the pointed reminder, arriving as a random thought in the middle of their mud-spattered, rain-sodden journey—that Jack Randall’s soul was in as much danger as Brian Fraser’s life—was damned unwelcome.

“Well, then,” Buck had said, brightening under the soggy brim of his hat when Roger had shared his disturbance at this insight. “All the more reason to kill him now. Save yon Frasers, and keep the wicked wee sod from going to hell—if he hasn’t done something already as would send him there,” he’d added as an afterthought. “Two birds wi’ one stone, aye?”

Roger had squelched along for a moment before replying.

"Out of sheer curiosity—were you a solicitor or a barrister, when ye did law?"

"Solicitor. Why?"

"No wonder you failed at it. All your talents lie in the other direction. Can ye not have a conversation without arguing?"

"Not wi' *you,*" Buck had said pointedly, and kicked his horse into a trot, sending up thumping clods of mud in his wake.

Roger gave his name and asked the army clerk if he might have a word with Captain Randall, then stood by the peat fire, shaking off as much water as he could before the man came back to lead him to Randall's office.

To his surprise, it was the same office where he and Brian Fraser had had their audience with Captain Buncombe almost two weeks before. Randall was seated behind the desk, quill in hand, but looked up with a courteous expression at Roger's entrance and half rose, with a small bow.

"Your servant, sir. Mr. MacKenzie, is that right? You've come from Lallybroch, I collect."

"Your most obedient, sir," Roger replied, adjusting his accent back to his normal Scots-tinged Oxbridge. "Mr. Brian Fraser was good enough to give me the object that you brought. I wanted both to thank you for your kind assistance—and to ask whether you might be able to tell me where the object was discovered."

He knew about the banality of evil; human monsters came in human shapes. Even so, he was surprised. Randall was a handsome man, rather elegant in bearing, with a lively, interested expression, a humorous curve to his mouth, and warm dark eyes.

Well, he is *human. And perhaps he's not a monster yet*.

"One of my messengers brought it in," Randall replied, wiping his quill and dropping it into a stoneware jar full of such objects. "My predecessor, Captain Buncombe, had sent dispatches to Fort George and Fort Augustus about your son—I am very sorry for your situation," he added rather formally. "A patrol from Ruthven Barracks had brought the ornament in. I'm afraid I don't know where they discovered it, but perhaps the messenger who brought it from Ruthven does. I'll send for him."

Randall went to the door and spoke to the sentry outside. Coming back, he paused to open a cupboard, which revealed a wig stand, a powdering shaker, a pair of hairbrushes, a looking glass, and a small tray with a cut-glass decanter and glasses.

"Allow me to offer you refreshment, sir." Randall poured a cautious inch into each glass and offered one to Roger. He picked up his own, his nostrils flaring slightly at the scent of the whisky. "The nectar of the country, I'm given to understand," he said with a wry smile. "I am told I must develop a taste for it." He took a wary sip, looking as though he expected imminent death to result.

"If I might suggest … a bit of water mixed with it is customary," Roger said, carefully keeping all trace of amusement out of his voice. "Some say it opens the flavor, makes it smoother."

"Oh, really?" Randall put down his glass, looking relieved. "That seems sensible. The stuff tastes as though it's flammable. Sanders!" he shouted toward the door. "Bring some water!"

There was a slight pause, neither man knowing quite what to say next.

"The, um, *thing*," Randall said. "Might I see it again? It's quite remarkable. Is it a jewel of some kind? An ornament?"

"No. It's a … sort of charm," Roger said, fishing the dog tags out of his pocket. He felt an ache in his chest at thought of the small personal rituals that the fliers did—a lucky stone in the pocket, a special scarf, the name of a woman painted on the nose of a plane. Charms. Tiny bits of hopeful magic, protection against a vast sky filled with fire and death. "To preserve the soul." *In memory, at least.*

Randall frowned a little, glancing from the dog tags to Roger's face, then back. He was clearly thinking the same thing Roger was: *And if the charm is detached from the person it was meant to protect* … But he didn't say anything, merely touched the green tag gently.

"J. W. Your son's name is Jeremiah, I understand?"

"Yes. Jeremiah's an old family name. It was my father's name. I—" He was interrupted by the entrance of Private MacDonald, a very young soldier, dripping wet and slightly blue with cold, who saluted Captain Randall smartly, then gave way to a rattling cough that shook his spindly frame.

Once recovered, he complied at once with Randall's order to tell Roger all he knew about the dog tags—but he didn't know much. One of the soldiers stationed at Ruthven Barracks had won them in a dice game at a local pub. He did recall the name of the pub—the Fatted Grouse; he'd drunk there himself—and he thought the soldier had said he'd won the bawbee from a farmer come back from the market in Perth.

"Do you recall the name of the soldier who won them?" Roger asked.

"Oh, aye, sir. 'Twas Sergeant McLehose. And now I think —" A broad grin at the recollection showed crooked teeth. "I mind me of the farmer's name, too! 'Twas Mr. Anthony Cumberpatch. It did tickle Sergeant McLehose, bein' foreign and soundin' like 'cucumber patch.' " He sniggered, and Roger smiled himself. Captain Randall cleared his throat, and the sniggering stopped abruptly, Private MacDonald snapping to a sober attention.

"Thank you, Mr. MacDonald," Randall said dryly. "That will be all."

Private MacDonald, abashed, saluted and left. There was a moment's silence, during which Roger became aware of the rain, grown harder now, clattering like gravel on the large casement window. A chilly draft leaked around its frame and touched his face. Glancing at the window, he saw the drill yard below, and the whipping post, a grim crucifix stark and solitary, black in the rain.

Oh, God.

Carefully, he folded up the dog tags again and put them away in his pocket. Then met Captain Randall's dark eyes directly.

"Did Captain Buncombe tell you, sir, that I am a minister?"

Randall's brows rose in brief surprise.

"No, he didn't." Randall was plainly wondering why Roger should mention this, but he was courteous. "My younger brother is a clergyman. Ah … Church of England, of course." There was the faintest implied question there, and Roger answered it with a smile.

"I am a minister of the Church of Scotland myself, sir. But if I might … will ye allow me to offer a blessing? For the success of my kinsman and myself—and in thanks for your kind help to us."

"I—" Randall blinked, clearly discomfited. "I—suppose so. Er … all right." He leaned back a little, looking wary, hands on his blotter. He was completely taken aback when Roger leaned forward and grasped both his hands firmly. Randall gave a start, but Roger held tight, eyes on the captain's.

"Oh, Lord," he said, "we ask thy blessing on our works. Guide me and my kinsman in our quest, and guide this man in his new office. May your light and presence be with us and with him, and your judgment and compassion ever on us. I commend him to your care. Amen."

His voice cracked on the last word, and he let go Randall's hands and coughed, looking away as he cleared his throat.

Randall cleared his throat, too, in embarrassment, but kept his poise.

"I thank you for your … er … good wishes, Mr. MacKenzie. And I wish you good luck. And good day."

"The same to you, Captain," Roger said, rising. "God be with you."

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BABY JESUS, TELL ME …

Boston, November 15, 1980

DR. JOSEPH ABERNATHY pulled into his driveway, looking forward to a cold beer and a hot supper. The mailbox was full; he pulled out a handful of circulars and envelopes and went inside, tidily sorting them as he went.

"Bill, bill, occupant, junk, junk, more junk, charity appeal, bill, idiot, bill, invitation … hi, sweetie—" He paused for a fragrant kiss from his wife, followed by a second sniff of her hair. "Oh, man, are we having brats and sauerkraut for dinner?"

"You are," his wife told him, neatly snagging her jacket from the hall tree with one hand and squeezing his buttock with the other. "I'm going to a meeting with Marilyn. Be back by nine, if the rain doesn't make the traffic too bad. Anything good in the mail?"

"Nah. Have fun!"

She rolled her eyes at him and left before he could ask if she'd bought Bud. He tossed the half-sorted mail on the kitchen counter and opened the refrigerator to check. A gleaming red-and-white six-pack beckoned cheerily, and the warm air was so tangy with the smells of fried sausage and vinegar that he could taste it without even taking the lid off the pan sitting on the stove.

"A good woman is prized above rubies," he said, inhaling blissfully and pulling a can loose from its plastic ring.

He was halfway through the first plate of food and two-thirds of the way into his second beer when he put down the sports section of the *Globe* and saw the letter on top of the spilled pile of mail. He recognized Bree's handwriting at once; it was big and round, with a determined rightward slant—but there was something wrong with the letter.

He picked it up, frowning a little, wondering why it looked strange … and then realized that the stamp was wrong. She wrote at least once a month, sending photos of the kids, telling him about her job, the farm—and the letters all had British stamps, purple and blue heads of Queen Elizabeth. This one had an American stamp.

He slowly set down the letter as though it might explode and swallowed the rest of the beer in one gulp. Fortified, he set his jaw and picked it up.

"Tell me you and Rog took the kids to Disneyland, Bree," he murmured, licking mustard off his knife before using it to slit the envelope. She'd talked about doing that someday. "Baby Jesus, tell me this is a photo of Jem shaking hands with Mickey Mouse."

Much to his relief, it *was* a photo of both children at Disneyland, beaming at the camera from Mickey Mouse's embrace, and he laughed out loud. Then he saw the tiny key that had fallen out of the envelope—the key to a bank's safe-deposit box. He set down the photo, went and got another beer, and sat down deliberately to read the brief note enclosed with the photo.

> *Dear Uncle Joe,*
>
> *I'm taking the kids to see Grandma and Grandpa. I don't know when we'll be back; could you please see to things while we're gone? (Instructions in the box.)*
>
> *Thank you for everything, always. I'll miss you. I love you.*
>
> *Bree*

He sat for a long time next to the cold grease congealing on his plate, looking at the bright, happy photo.

"Jesus, girl," he said softly. "What's happened? And what do you mean *you're* taking the kids? Where the hell's Roger?"

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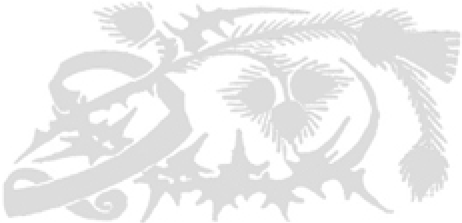
PART THREE



A Blade New-Made from the Ashes of the Forge

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47

SOMETHING SUITABLE IN WHICH TO GO TO WAR

June 19, 1778 Philadelphia

I WOKE COMPLETELY disoriented, to the splat of water dripping into a wooden bucket, the sharp smells of wood pulp and printer's ink, the softer musk of Jamie's body and frying bacon, the clank of pewter plates, and the loud braying of a mule. The latter noise brought back memory at once, and I sat up, sheet clutched to my bosom.

I was naked, and I was in the loft of Fergus's printshop. When we had left Kingsessing the day before, during a brief pause in the rain, we had found Fergus patiently sheltering in a toolshed near the gates, Clarence the mule and two horses tethered under its eaves.

"You haven't been out here all this time!" I'd blurted upon seeing him.

“Did it take that long?” he inquired, cocking a dark brow at Jamie and giving him the sort of knowing look that Frenchmen appear to be born with.

“Mmphm,” Jamie replied ambiguously, and took my arm. “I rode Clarence out, Sassenach, but I asked Fergus to come on a wee bit later wi’ a horse for you. The mule canna carry us both, and my back willna stand walking that far.”

“What’s the matter with your back?” I asked, suspicious.

“Nothing that a night’s sleep in a good bed willna cure,” he replied, and, stooping so I could put a foot in his hands, tossed me up into the saddle.

It had been past dark when we made it back to the printshop. I’d sent Germain at once to Jenny at Number 17 with word where I was but had gone to bed with Jamie before he came back. I wondered vaguely who else was at the house on Chestnut Street and what they were doing: was Hal still a captive, or had Young Ian decided to release him? If not, had Hal assassinated Denny Hunter, or had Mrs. Figg shot him?

Jamie had told me he’d left Ian in charge of the situation—or situations; there seemed to have been a great deal going on the day before. All of it seemed unreal and dreamlike, both the events I’d participated in and the ones Jamie had told me about on the ride back. The only vividly real recollection I had was of our conversation in the garden—and what followed it, in the potting shed. My flesh still felt the echoes.

Breakfast was plainly preparing below; besides the delectable scent of frying bacon, I could smell toasted yeast bread and fresh honey. My stomach gave a loud gurgle at this, and as though the sound had caused it, the ladder leading up into the loft began to shake. Someone was coming up, moving slowly, and in case it wasn't Jamie, I seized my shift and pulled it hastily over my head.

It wasn't. A pewter tray rose slowly into sight, laid with a plate piled with food, a bowl of porridge, and a pottery mug of something steaming; it couldn't be tea and didn't smell like coffee. As the tray levitated, Henri-Christian's beaming face appeared below it; he was balancing the thing on his head.

I held my breath until he'd stepped off the ladder, and then, as he removed the tray from his head and presented it to me with a ceremonious little bow, applauded.

"Merveilleux!" I told him, and he grinned from ear to ear.

"Félicité wanted to try," he told me proudly, "but she can't do it with a full tray yet. She spills."

"Well, we can't have that. Thank you, sweetheart." I leaned forward to kiss him—his dark wavy hair smelled of woodsmoke and ink—and took the mug. "What's this?"

He looked at it dubiously and shrugged. "It's hot."

"So it is." I cradled the mug in my hands. The loft had been warm the night before, the day's heat trapped under the roof, but it had rained most of the night, and the chilly damp had come through the holes in the roof—four or five vessels placed under the leaks made a symphony of plinking sounds. "Where's *Grand-père*?"

Henri-Christian's face at once went bright red, his lips pressed tight together, and he shook his head vigorously.

"What?" I said, surprised. "Is it a secret?"

"Don't you tell her!" Joanie's shrill voice floated up from the shop below. "*Grand-père* said not to!"

"Oh, a surprise, is it?" I asked, smiling. "Well, perhaps you'd best go down and help your mama, then, so you don't give it away by mistake."

He giggled, hands pressed over his mouth, then reached up over his head, gave a convulsive leap, and flipped over backward, landing adroitly on his hands. He walked on them to the ladder, stocky little legs splayed to keep his balance, and for an instant my heart was in my mouth as he reached the edge and I thought he might try to go down the ladder upside down. He flipped over again, though, landing neatly on the top rung, and scampered out of sight like a squirrel, giggling all the way down.

Smiling, I plumped up the sparse bedding—we had slept on a flattened pallet of worn straw from the stable, which smelled rather strongly of Clarence, and on our half-dried cloaks, covered with a spare sheet and a ragged blanket, though Joanie and Félicité had given us one of their feather pillows, they sharing the other—and sat back against the wall, the tray perched on a keg of ink powder. I was surrounded by stacks of paper, these shielded by oilcloth from the leaks. Some of it was blank reams awaiting the press, some of it pamphlets, circulars, posters, or the guts of unbound books, awaiting delivery to customers or to the bookbinder.

I could hear Marsali's voice below, back in the living quarters behind the shop, raised in maternal command. No male voices but Henri-Christian's, though; Fergus and Germain must have gone out with Clarence the mule to make the morning deliveries of *L'Oignon*, the satirical newspaper started by Fergus and Marsali in North Carolina.

Normally, *L'Oignon* was a weekly paper, but there was a copy on my tray of the special edition for today, with a large cartoon on the first page, showing the British army as a horde of cockroaches, fleeing Philadelphia with tattered flags dragging behind them and trailing ribbon banners filled with speeches of futile threat. A large buckled shoe labeled *General Washington* was squashing some of the more laggard roaches.

There was a large glob of opaque yellow-white honey melting slowly in the middle of the porridge; I stirred it in, poured a bit of cream over it, and settled down to enjoy breakfast in bed, along with an article noting the imminent entrance into Philadelphia of General Arnold, who was taking office as the military governor of the city, welcoming him and praising his military record and gallant exploits at Saratoga.

How long? I thought then, setting down the paper with a small shiver. *When*? I had the feeling that it had been—would be—much later in the war, when circumstance turned Benedict Arnold from patriot to traitor. But I didn't know.

It didn't matter, I told myself firmly. I couldn't change it. And long before that happened, we would be safely back on the Ridge, rebuilding our house and our lives. Jamie was alive. Everything would be all right.

The bell over the shop door below rang, and there was an excited gabble as the children stampeded out of the kitchen. The soft rumble of Jamie's voice floated up over the confusion of shrill greetings, and I caught Marsali's voice among them, stunned.

"Da! What have ye *done*?"

Alarmed, I scrambled out of my nest and went on hands and knees to the edge of the loft to look down. Jamie stood in the middle of the shop, surrounded by admiring children, his loose hair spangled with raindrops, cloak folded over his arm—dressed in the dark blue and buff of a Continental officer.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt *Christ*!” I exclaimed. He looked up and his eyes met mine like those of a guilty puppy.

“I’m sorry, Sassenach,” he said apologetically. “I had to.”

* * *

HE’D COME UP to the loft and pulled the ladder up behind him, to prevent the children coming up. I was dressing quickly—or trying to—as he told me about Dan Morgan, about Washington and the other Continental generals. About the coming battle.

“Sassenach, I *had* to,” he said again, softly. “I’m that sorry.”

“I know,” I said. “I know you did.” My lips were stiff. “I—you—I’m sorry, too.”

I was trying to fasten the dozen tiny buttons that closed the bodice of my gown, but my hands shook so badly that I couldn’t even grasp them. I stopped trying and dug my hairbrush out of the bag he’d brought me from the Chestnut Street house.

He made a small sound in his throat and took it out of my hand. He threw it onto our makeshift couch and put his arms around me, holding me tight with my face buried in his chest. The cloth of his new uniform smelled of fresh indigo, walnut hulls, and fuller’s earth; it felt strange and stiff against my face. I couldn’t stop shaking.

“Talk to me, *a nighean*,” he whispered into my tangled hair. “I’m afraid, and I dinna want to feel so verra much alone just now. Speak to me.”

“Why has it always got to be *you*?” I blurted into his chest.

That made him laugh, a little shakily, and I realized that all the trembling wasn’t coming from me.

"It's no just me," he said, and stroked my hair. "There are a thousand other men readying themselves today—more—who dinna want to do it, either."

"I know," I said again. My breathing was a little steadier. "I know." I turned my face to the side in order to breathe, and all of a sudden began to cry, quite without warning.

"I'm sorry," I gasped. "I don't mean—I don't want t-to make it h-harder for you. I—I—oh, Jamie, when I knew you were alive—I wanted so much to go home. To go home with you."

His arms tightened hard round me. He didn't speak, and I knew it was because he couldn't.

"So did I," he whispered at last. "And we will, *a nighean*. I promise ye."

The sounds from below floated up around us: the sounds of children running back and forth between the shop and the kitchen, Marsali singing to herself in Gaelic as she made fresh ink for the press from varnish and lampblack. The door opened, and cool, rainy air blew in with Fergus and Germain, adding their voices to the cheerful confusion.

We stood wrapped in each other's arms, taking comfort from our family below, yearning for the others we might never see again, at once at home and homeless, balanced on a knife edge of danger and uncertainty. But together.

"You're not going off to war without me," I said firmly, straightening up and sniffing. "Don't even *think* about it."

"I wouldna dream of it," he assured me gravely, went to wipe his nose on his uniform sleeve, thought better of it, and stopped, looking at me helplessly. I laughed—tremulous, but it was a laugh nonetheless—and gave him the handkerchief I'd tucked automatically into my bosom when I fastened my stays. Like Jenny, I *always* had one.

"Sit down," I said, swallowing as I picked up the hairbrush. "I'll plait your hair for you."

He'd washed it this morning; it was clean and damp, the soft red strands cool in my hands and smelling—oddly—of French soap, scented with bergamot. I rather missed the scent of sweat and cabbage that had surrounded me all night.

"Where did you bathe?" I asked curiously.

"At the house on Chestnut Street," he answered, a little tersely. "My sister made me. She said I couldna turn up to be a general smelling like a stale dinner, and there was a tub and hot water to spare."

"Did she?" I murmured. "Um … speaking of Chestnut Street … how is His Grace, the Duke of Pardloe?"

"Gone before dawn, Jenny said," he said, bending his head to aid in the plaiting. His neck was warm under my fingers. "According to Ian, Denny Hunter said he was well enough to go, provided that he took along a flask of your magic potion. So Mrs. Figg gave him back his breeches—wi' some reluctance, I understand—and he went."

"Went *where*?" I asked. His hair was more heavily traced with silver than it had been. I didn't mind that; I minded that I hadn't been there to see it slowly change, day by day.

"Ian didna ask him. But he said Mrs. Figg told the duke the names of some friends of Lord John's—Loyalists that might be still in the city. And his son's staying in a house here, no? Dinna be worrit on his account, Sassenach." He turned his head to smile sideways at me. "His Grace is a man who's hard to kill."

"I suppose it takes one to know one," I said tartly. I didn't ask why Jamie had gone to Chestnut Street; Hal, Jenny, and all other concerns notwithstanding, I knew he wanted to know whether John had reappeared. Apparently not, and a small chill frosted my heart.

I was groping in my pocket for a ribbon with which to club his queue, when a fresh draft swept through the loft, lifting the oilcloth and fluttering the papers beneath. I turned to see the source of the breeze and beheld Germain, swinging off the pulley rope to come in by the shuttered doors through which bales and kegs could be lowered from the loft to wagons below.

"Bonjour, Grand-père," he said, wiping a cobweb off his face as he landed and bowing to Jamie with great formality. He turned and bowed to me, as well. *"Comment ça va, Grand-mère?"*

"Fi—" I began automatically, but was interrupted by Jamie.

"No," he said definitely. "Ye're not coming."

"Please, Grandda!" Germain's formality disappeared in an instant, replaced by pleading. "I could be a help to ye!"

"I know," Jamie said dryly. "And your parents would never forgive me if ye were. I dinna even want to know what your notion of help involves, but—"

"I could carry messages! I can ride, ye ken that, ye taught me yourself! And I'm nearly twelve!"

"Ye ken how dangerous that is? If a British sharpshooter didna take ye out of the saddle, someone from the militia would club ye over the head to steal the horse. And I can count, ken? Ye're no even eleven yet, so dinna be tryin' it on with me."

Obviously, danger held no fears whatever for Germain. He shrugged, impatient.

"Well, I could be an orderly, then. I can find food anywhere," he added, cunning. He was in fact a very accomplished scrounger, and I looked at him thoughtfully. Jamie intercepted my glance and glowered at me.

“Dinna even think about it, Sassenach. He’d be taken up for theft and hanged or flogged within an inch of his life, and I couldna do a thing to stop it.”

“Nobody’s ever caught me!” Germain said, his professional pride outraged. “Not once!”

“And they’re not going to,” his grandfather assured him, fixing him with a steely eye. “When ye’re sixteen, maybe—”

“Oh, aye? Grannie Janet says ye were *eight* when ye first went raiding with your da!”

“Lifting cattle’s no the same as war, and I wasna anywhere near the fighting,” Jamie said. “And your Grannie Janet should keep her mouth shut.”

“Aye, I’ll tell her ye said so,” Germain retorted, disgruntled. “She says ye got bashed on the head with a sword.”

“I did. And with luck ye’ll live to be an auld man with your brains unscrambled, unlike your grandsire. Leave us, lad, your grannie needs to put her stockings on.” He stood up and, lifting the ladder, slid it down from the loft and pushed Germain firmly onto it.

He stood looking sternly down until Germain had reached the floor below, marking his displeasure by skipping the last few rungs and landing with a loud thud.

Jamie sighed, straightened up, and stretched himself gingerly, groaning a little.

“God knows where we’ll sleep tonight, Sassenach,” he remarked, glancing at our rude couch as he sat down for me to finish clubbing his hair. “For the sake of my back, I hope it’s a bit softer than this.” He grinned at me suddenly. “Did ye sleep well?”

"Never better," I assured him, smoothing out the ribbon. In fact, I ached in almost every place it was possible to ache, save perhaps the top of my head. For that matter, I'd barely slept, and neither had he; we'd passed the hours of darkness in slow and wordless exploration, finding again each other's body … and, toward dawn, had touched each other's soul again. I touched the back of his neck now, gently, and his hand rose to mine. I felt simultaneously wonderful and wretched, and didn't know from moment to moment which feeling was uppermost.

"When will we leave?"

"As soon as ye put your stockings on, Sassenach. And tidy your hair. And do up your buttons," he added, turning and catching sight of my excessive décolletage. "Here, I'll do that."

"I'll need my medicine box," I said, going cross-eyed as I watched his nimble fingers flicking down my chest.

"I brought it," he assured me, and frowned a bit, eyes intent on a recalcitrant button. "It's a bonny bit of furniture. I expect his lordship bought it for ye?"

"He did." I hesitated a moment, rather wishing he had said "John" rather than "his lordship." I also wished I knew where John was—and that he was all right. But this didn't seem the moment to say any of those things.

Jamie leaned forward and kissed the top of my breast, his breath warm on my skin.

"I dinna ken whether I'll have a bed at all tonight," he said, straightening up. "But whether it's feathers or straw, promise ye'll share it with me?"

"Always," I said, and, picking up my cloak, shook it out, swirled it round my shoulders, and smiled bravely at him. "Let's go, then."

* * *

JENNY HAD SENT my medicine chest from Chestnut Street and with it the large parcel of herbs from Kingsessing, which had been delivered there the night before. With the forethought of a Scottish housewife, she'd also included a pound of oatmeal, a twist of salt, a package of bacon, four apples, and six clean handkerchiefs. Also a neat roll of fabric with a brief note, which read:

> *Dear Sister Claire,*
>
> *You appear to own nothing suitable in which to go to war. I suggest you borrow Marsali's printing apron for the time being, and here are two of my flannel petticoats and the simplest things Mrs. Figg could find amongst your wardrobe.*
>
> *Take care of my brother, and tell him his stockings need darning, because he won't notice until he's worn holes in the heel and given himself blisters.*
>
> *Your Good-sister,*
> *Janet Murray*

"And just how is it that *you* own something suitable in which to go to war?" I asked, eyeing Jamie in his indigo splendor. His uniform appeared to be complete, from coat with epaulets and a brigadier general's insignia to buff waistcoat and cream silk stockings. Tall and straight, with auburn hair neatly clubbed and ribboned in black, he distinctly drew the eye.

He drew his chin back and looked down his nose at himself.

"Well, the sark and smallclothes were mine already; I had them when I came from Scotland. But when I came back to Philadelphia to find ye yesterday, I found Jenny first, and I told her about General Washington and asked her would she see to it. So she took my measurements and found a tailor and his son who do uniforms and browbeat them into working all night to make the coat and waistcoat—poor wretches," he added, gingerly pulling a loose thread from the edge of his cuff. "How is it that ye don't, Sassenach? Did his lordship think it unseemly for ye to doctor folk and make ye burn your working clothes?"

This was said with the sort of jesting tone that's meant to suggest perfect innocence on the part of the speaker while making it perfectly apparent that malice is intended. *"I don't say that I'll no make a fuss about it later."* I looked pointedly at the medical chest John had given me, then back at him, narrowing my eyes ever so slightly.

"No," I said, with great casualness. "I spilled vitriol on them, making—making ether." The memory made my hands shake slightly, and I had to set down the cup of nettle tea I was drinking.

"Jesus, Sassenach." Jamie spoke under his breath—Félicité and Joan were kneeling at his feet, arguing with each other as they busily burnished his brass shoe buckles—but he met my eyes over their heads, appalled. "Tell me ye werena doing that drunk."

I took a deep breath, at once reliving the experience and trying not to. Standing in the hot, semi-dark shed behind the house, the rounded glass slick in my sweating hands … then the flying liquid—it had barely missed my face—and the sickly smell and magically widening, smoking holes that burned straight through my heavy canvas apron and the skirt beneath. I hadn't really cared at the time whether I lived or died—until it looked as though I was going to die in the next few seconds. That made rather a difference. It hadn't convinced me not to commit suicide—but the shock of the near accident did make me think more carefully about how. Slitting one's wrists was one thing; dying in slow, disfiguring agony was another.

"No, I wasn't," I said, and, taking up the cup, managed a deliberate mouthful. "I—it was a hot day. My hands were sweating, and the flask slipped."

He closed his eyes briefly, all too clearly envisioning the scene himself, then reached across Félicité's sleek dark head to cup my cheek.

"Dinna be doing that again, aye?" he said softly. "Don't make it anymore."

To be honest, the thought of making ether again made my palms sweat. It wasn't chemically difficult, but it *was* terribly dangerous. One wrong move, a little too much vitriol, a few degrees of heat too much … And Jamie knew as well as I did just how explosive the stuff was. I could see the memory of flames in his eyes, the Big House going up around us. I swallowed.

"I don't want to," I said honestly. "But—without it, Jamie, I can't do things that I can do with it. If I hadn't had it, Aidan would be dead—so would John's nephew Henry."

He compressed his lips and looked as though he considered that Henry Grey might be disposable—but he was fond of little Aidan McCallum Higgins, whose appendix I'd removed on the Ridge with the assistance of my first batch of ether.

"Grannie *has* to help people feel better, *Grand-père*," Joanie said reproachfully, rising from her spot at Jamie's feet and frowning up at him. "It's her callin', Mam says. She can't just *not*."

"I ken that fine," he assured her. "But she needna blow herself to kingdom come doing it. After all, who's going to look after all the sick folk, if your grannie's lying about in pieces?"

Félicité and Joanie both thought that image hilarious; I was less amused, but didn't say anything further until they'd taken their rags and vinegar back to the kitchen. We were left in the sleeping part of the living quarters, assembling our bags and bundles for departure, and momentarily alone.

"You said you were afraid," I said quietly, eyes on the spools of coarse thread and twists of silk floss I was stowing in a wooden box with several suture needles. "But that won't stop you doing what you think you have to do, will it? *I'm* afraid *for* you—and that certainly won't stop you, either." I was careful to speak without bitterness, but he was as sensitive to tones of voice this morning as I was.

He paused for a moment, regarding his shining shoe buckles, then lifted his head and looked at me straight.

"Do ye think that because ye've told me the Rebels will win, I am free to walk away?"

"I—no." I slid the box lid shut with a snick, not looking at it. I couldn't look away from him. His face was still, but his eyes held mine, intent. "I know you have to. I know it's part of what you are. You can't stand aside and still be what you are. That was more or less my point, about—"

He interrupted me, stepping forward and seizing me by the wrist.

"And what is it that ye think I am, Sassenach?"

“A bloody *man*, that’s what!” I pulled loose and turned away, but he put a hand on my shoulder and turned me back to face him.

“Aye, I *am* a bloody man,” he said, and the faintest trace of rue touched his mouth, but his eyes were blue and steady.

“Ye’ve made your peace with what I am, ye think—but I think ye dinna ken what that means. To be what I am doesna mean only that I’ll spill my own blood when I must. It means I must sacrifice other men to the ends of my own cause—not only those I kill as enemies, but those I hold as friends … or as kin.”

His hand dropped away, and the tension left his shoulders. He turned toward the door, saying, “Come when ye’re ready, Sassenach.”

* * *

I STOOD THERE for an instant, blinking, then ran after him, leaving my half-packed bag behind.

“Jamie!” He was standing in the printshop, Henri-Christian in his arms, bidding goodbye to the girls and Marsali. Germain was nowhere in sight, doubtless sulking. Jamie looked up, startled, then smiled at me.

“I wasna going to leave ye behind, Sassenach. And I didna mean to hurry ye, either. Do ye—”

“I know. I just—I have to tell you something.”

All the little heads turned toward me like a nestful of baby birds, soft pink mouths open in curiosity. It occurred to me that I might better have waited until we were on the road, but it had seemed urgent that I tell him now—not only to relieve his anxieties, but to make him know I *did* understand.

"It's William," I blurted, and Jamie's face clouded for an instant, like a breathed-on mirror. Yes, I had understood.

"Come to me, *a bhalaich,*" Marsali said, taking Henri-Christian from Jamie and setting him on the floor. "Oof! Ye weigh more than I do, wee man! Come away now, lassies, Grandda isn't going just yet. Help me fetch out Grannie's things."

The children obediently scampered off behind her, though still looking back at us in frustrated curiosity. Children hate secrets, unless they're the ones keeping them. I glanced after them, then turned back to Jamie.

"I didn't know if they knew about William. I suppose Marsali and Fergus do, since—"

"Since Jenny told them. Aye, they do." He rolled his eyes in brief resignation, then fixed them on my face. "What is it, Sassenach?"

"He can't fight," I said, letting out a half-held breath. "It doesn't matter what the British army is about to do. William was paroled after Saratoga—he's a conventioner. You know about the Convention army?"

"I do." He took my hand and squeezed it. "Ye mean he's not allowed to take up arms unless he's been exchanged—and he hasn't been, is that it?"

"That's it. Nobody *can* be exchanged, until the King and the Congress come to some agreement about it."

His face was suddenly vivid with relief, and I was relieved to see it.

"John's been trying to have him exchanged for months, but there isn't any way of doing it." I dismissed Congress and the King with a wave of my free hand and smiled up at him. "You won't have to face him on a battlefield."

“Taing do Dhia,” he said, closing his eyes for an instant. “I’ve been thinking for days—when I wasna fretting about *you,* Sassenach—” he added, opening his eyes and looking down his nose at me, “—the third time’s the charm. And that would be an evil charm indeed.”

“Third time?” I said. “What do you—would you let go my fingers? They’ve gone numb.”

“Oh,” he said. He kissed them gently and let go. “Aye, sorry, Sassenach. I meant—I’ve shot at the lad twice in his life so far and missed him by no more than an inch each time. If it should happen again—ye canna always tell, in battle, and accidents do happen. I was dreaming, during the night, and … och, nay matter.” He waved off the dreams and turned away, but I put a hand on his arm to stop him. I knew his dreams—and I’d heard him moan the night before, fighting them.

“Culloden?” I said softly. “Has it come back again?” I actually hoped it *was* Culloden—and not Wentworth. He woke from the Wentworth dreams sweating and rigid and couldn’t bear to be touched. Last night, he hadn’t waked, but had jerked and moaned until I’d got my arms around him and he quieted, trembling in his sleep, head butted hard into my chest.

He shrugged a little and touched my face.

“It’s never left, Sassenach,” he said, just as softly. “It never will. But I sleep easier by your side.”

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JUST FOR THE FUN OF IT

IT WAS A PERFECTLY ordinary red-brick building. Modest—no pediments, no carved stone lintels—but solid. Ian looked at it warily. The home of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, the weightiest meeting of the Society of Friends in the Americas. Aye, very solid.

"Will this be like the Vatican?" he asked Rachel. "Or more like an archbishop's palace?"

She snorted.

"Does it look like any sort of palace to thee?" She spoke normally, but he could see the pulse beat quick in the soft spot just beneath her ear.

"It looks like a bank," he said, and that made her laugh. She cut it short, though, glancing over her shoulder as though afraid someone might come out and scold her for it.

"What do they do in there?" he asked, curious. "Is it a great meetinghouse?"

"It is," she said. "But there is also business to be done, thee knows. The yearly meetings deal with matters of … I suppose thee would call it principle. We call it Faith and Practice; there are books, rewritten every so often, to reflect the present sense of the meeting. And queries." She smiled suddenly, and his heart gave a small extra thump. "I think thee would recognize the queries—they're much like thee has described the examination of conscience before thy confession."

"Och, aye," he said agreeably, but declined to pursue the subject. He hadn't been to confession in some years and didn't feel sufficiently wicked at present to trouble about it. "This Faith and Practice—is that where they say ye mustn't join the Continental army, even if ye dinna take up arms?"

He was immediately sorry he'd asked; the question dimmed the light in her eyes, but only momentarily. She drew a deep breath through her nose and looked up at him.

"No, that would be an opinion—a formal opinion. Friends talk over every possible point of consideration before they give an opinion—whether it's a positive one or not." There was the barest hesitation before "not," but he heard it and, reaching out, pulled out her hatpin, gently straightened her straw hat, which had slid a little askew, and pushed the pin back in.

"And if in the end it's not, and we canna find a meeting that will have us, lass—what will we do?"

Her lips pressed together, but she met his eyes straight on.

"Friends are not married *by* their meeting. Or by priest or preacher. They marry each *other*. And we will marry each other." She swallowed. "Somehow."

The small bubbles of misgiving that had been rising through his wame all morning began to pop, and he put a hand over his mouth to stifle a belch. Being nervous took him in the innards; he'd not been able to eat breakfast. He turned a little away, from politeness, and spied two figures coming round the far corner. “Och! There’s your brother now, and lookin’ gey fine for a Quaker, too.”

Denzell was dressed in the uniform of a Continental soldier and looked self-conscious as a hunting dog with a bow tied round its neck. Ian suppressed his amusement, though, merely nodding as his future brother-in-law drew to a stop before them. Denny’s betrothed had no such compunctions.

“Is he not *beautiful*?” Dottie crowed, standing back a little to admire him. Denzell coughed and pushed his spectacles up his nose. He was a tidy man, not over-tall, but broad in the shoulder and strong in the forearm. He did look fine in the uniform, Ian thought, and said so.

“I will try not to let my appearance engorge my vanity,” Denzell said dryly. “Is thee not also to be a soldier, Ian?”

Ian shook his head, smiling.

“Nay, Denny. I shouldna be any kind of soldier—but I’m a decent scout.” He saw Denzell’s eyes fix on his face, tracing the double line of tattooed dots that looped across both cheekbones.

“I expect thee would be.” A certain tenseness in Denny’s shoulders relaxed. “Scouts are not required to kill the enemy, are they?”

“No, we’ve our choice about it,” Ian assured him, straight-faced. “We can kill them if we like—but just for the fun of it, ken. It doesna really count.”

Denzell blinked for an instant at that, but Rachel and Dottie both laughed, and he reluctantly smiled.

“Thee is late, Denny,” Rachel said, as the public clock struck ten. “Was Henry in difficulty?” For Denzell and Dottie had gone to take farewell of Dottie’s brother, Henry, still convalescent from the surgery Denny and Ian's auntie Claire had done.

"Thee might say so," Dottie said, "but not from any physical ill." The look of amusement faded from her face, though a faint gleam still lingered in her eyes. "He is in love with Mercy Woodcock."

"His landlady? Love's no usually a fatal condition, is it?" Ian asked, raising one brow.

"Not if thy name is neither Montague nor Capulet," Denny said. "The difficulty is that while Mercy loves him in return, she may or may not still have a husband living."

"And until she finds out he's dead …" Dottie added, lifting one slim shoulder.

"Or alive," Denny said, giving her a look. "There is always the possibility."

"Not much of one," Dottie replied bluntly. "Auntie—I mean Friend—Claire doctored a man called Walter Woodcock who'd been badly wounded at Ticonderoga, and she said he was near death then and taken p-prisoner." She stumbled slightly on the last word, and Ian was reminded suddenly that her eldest brother, Benjamin, was a prisoner of war.

Denzell saw the cloud cross her face and gently took her hand in his.

"Both thy brothers will survive their trials," he said, and warmth touched his eyes behind the glass. "So will we, Dorothea. Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them—but not for love."

"Hmph!" said Dottie, but gave him a small, grudging smile. "All right, then—go ahead. There's *such* a lot to do before we go."

To Ian’s surprise, Denzell nodded, took a folded sheaf of papers from his bosom, and, turning, went up the step to the door of the meetinghouse.

Ian had supposed the place was only a convenient spot to meet—he would be catching up his uncle and Auntie Claire on the road to Coryell’s Ferry but had lingered to help with the loading, for Denny, Dottie, and Rachel were driving a wagon filled with medical supplies—but evidently Denny had business with Philadelphia Yearly Meeting.

Was he seeking advice in how to be married as a Quaker even while flouting their … what would you call it, edict—no, Rachel had said it was an opinion, but a “weighty” opinion—regarding support of the rebellion?

“He’s giving them his witness—his testimony,” Dottie said matter-of-factly, seeing the puzzlement in Ian’s face. “He wrote it all out. Why he thinks it’s right to do what he’s doing. He’s going to give it to the clerk of the yearly meeting and request that his views be mentioned and discussed.”

“D’ye think they will?”

“Oh, yes,” Rachel said. “They may disagree with him, but they won’t stifle him. And good luck to them if they thought to try,” she added, half under her breath. She pulled a handkerchief out of her bosom, very white against the soft brown of her skin, and patted tiny droplets of sweat away from her temples.

Ian felt a sudden and profound longing for her and glanced involuntarily toward the clock tower. He’d need to be on the road soon and hoped there’d be time for a precious hour alone with Rachel first.

Dorothea’s eyes were still fixed on the door through which Denny had passed.

“He *is* so lovely,” she said softly, as though to herself. Then glanced self-consciously at Rachel. “He felt badly for wearing his uniform to see Henry,” she said, a tone of apology in her voice. “But the time was so short …”

“Was thy brother upset?” Rachel asked sympathetically. Dottie’s brows drew down.

“Well, he didn’t *like* it,” she said frankly. “But it’s not as though he didn’t know that we’re Rebels; I told him some time ago.” Her expression relaxed a little. “And he *is* my brother. He won’t disown me.”

Ian wondered whether the same was true of her father, but didn’t ask. She hadn’t mentioned the duke. He wasn’t really attending to Dottie’s family concerns, though—his mind was busy with thought of the coming battle and all that needed to be done immediately. Ian caught Rachel’s eye and smiled, and she smiled back, all worry melting from her face as she met his gaze.

He had concerns himself, certainly, annoyances and worries. At the bottom of his soul, though, was the solid weight of Rachel’s love and what she had said, the words gleaming like a gold coin at the bottom of a murky well. *“We will marry each other.”*

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UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

AS JAMIE EXPLAINED to me on the way out of Philadelphia, the problem lay not in finding the British but in catching up to them with enough men and matériel to do some good.

“They left with several hundred wagons and a verra large number of Loyalists who didna feel quite safe in Philadelphia. Clinton canna be protecting them and fighting at the same time. He must make all the speed he can—which means he must travel by the most direct road.”

“I suppose he can’t very well be legging it cross-country,” I agreed. “Have you—meaning General Washington—got any idea how big a force he has?”

He lifted one shoulder and waved off a large horsefly with his hat.

“Maybe ten thousand men. Maybe more. Fergus and Germain watched them assemble to march out, but ye ken it’s not easy to judge numbers when they’re crawlin’ out of the side streets and all.”

"Mmm. And … um … how many men do we have?" Saying *"we"* gave me an odd sensation that rippled through my lower body. Something between tail-curling apprehension and an excitement that was startlingly close to sexual.

It wasn't that I'd never felt the strange euphoria of war before. But it had been a very long time; I'd forgotten.

"Fewer than the British," Jamie said, matter-of-fact. "But we willna ken how many until the militia have gathered—and pray it's not too late when we do."

He glanced aside at me, and I could see him wondering whether to say something further. He didn't speak, though, just gave a little shrug and settled himself in the saddle, putting on his hat again.

"What?" I said, tilting my head to peer up at him from under the brim of my own broad straw. "You were about to ask me something."

"Mmphm. Aye, well … I was, but then I realized that if ye did know anything about … what might happen in the next few days, ye'd surely have told me."

"I would." In fact, I didn't know whether to regret my lack of knowledge or not. Looking back at those instances where I'd thought I knew the future, I hadn't known nearly enough. Out of nowhere, I thought of Frank … and Black Jack Randall, and my hands gripped the reins so strongly that my mare jerked her head with a startled snort.

Jamie looked round, startled, too, but I waved a hand and leaned forward to pat the horse's neck in apology.

"Horsefly," I said, in explanation. My heart was thumping noticeably against the placket of my stays, but I took several deep breaths to quiet it. I wasn't about to mention my sudden thought to Jamie, but it hadn't left me.

I'd thought I knew that Jack Randall was Frank's five-times-great-grandfather. His name was right there, on the genealogical chart that Frank had shown me many times. And, in fact, he *was* Frank's ancestor—on paper. It was Jack's younger brother, though, who had sired Frank's bloodline but then had died before being able to marry his pregnant lover. Jack had married Mary Hawkins at his brother's request and thus given his name and legitimacy to her child.

So many gory details didn't show up on those tidy genealogical charts, I thought. Brianna was Frank's daughter, on paper—and by love. But the long, knife-blade nose and glowing hair of the man beside me showed whose blood ran through her veins.

But I'd thought I *knew*. And because of that false knowledge, I'd prevented Jamie killing Jack Randall in Paris, fearing that if he did, Frank might never be born. What if he *had* killed Randall then? I wondered, looking at Jamie sidelong. He sat tall, straight in the saddle, deep in thought, but with an air now of anticipation; the dread of the morning that had gripped us both had gone.

Anything might have happened; a number of things might not. Randall wouldn't have abused Fergus; Jamie wouldn't have fought a duel with him in the Bois de Boulogne … perhaps I would not have miscarried our first child, our daughter Faith. Likely I would have—miscarriage was usually physiological in basis, not emotional, however romantic novels painted it. But the memory of loss was forever linked to that duel in the Bois de Boulogne.

I shoved the memories firmly aside, turning my mind away from the half-known past to the complete mystery of the waiting future. But just before the images blinked out, I caught the edge of a flying thought.

What about the child? The child born to Mary Hawkins and Alexander Randall—Frank's true ancestor. He was, in all probability, alive now. Right now.

The ripple I'd experienced before came back, this time running from my tailbone up my spine. *Denys*. The name floated up from the parchment of a genealogical chart, calligraphic letters that purported to capture a fact, while hiding nearly everything.

I knew his name was Denys—and he was, so far as I knew, actually Frank's four-times great-grandfather. And that was all I knew—likely all I ever would know. I fervently hoped so. I wished Denys Randall silently well and turned my mind to other things.

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THE GOOD SHEPHERD

TWELVE. BLOODY. *MILES!* The train of baggage wagons stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction and raised a cloud of dust that nearly obscured the mules negotiating a bend in the road a half mile away. The people trudging beside the wagons on either side were coated with the fine brown stuff—and so was William, though he kept as much distance as he could from the slow-moving cavalcade.

It was mid-afternoon of a hot day, and they'd been on the march since before dawn.

He paused to slap dust from the skirts of his coat and take a mouthful of tin-tasting water from his canteen. Hundreds of refugees, thousands of camp followers, all with packs and bundles and handcarts, with here and there a laden horse or mule that had somehow escaped the army teamsters' rapacity, were strung over the twelve miles between the two main bodies of the army. They spread out in a straggling mass that reminded him of the plague of locusts from the

Bible. Was that the book of Exodus? Couldn't recall, but it seemed apposite.

Some of them looked over their shoulders now and then. He wondered if it was fear of pursuit or thoughts of what they'd left behind—the city itself was long out of sight.

Well, if there was any danger of turning to a pillar of salt, it would be owing to sweat, not yearning, he thought, wiping his sleeve across his face for the dozenth time. He was himself eager to shake the dust of Philadelphia from his boots and never think of it again.

If it weren't for Arabella–Jane, he'd likely have forgotten it already. He certainly *wanted* to forget everything else that had happened in the last few days. He twitched his reins and nudged his horse back toward the trudging horde.

It could be worse; nearly *had* been much worse. He'd come close to being dispatched back to England or sent north to join the other conventioners in Massachusetts. Thank Christ that Papa—that is, *Lord John*, he corrected himself firmly—had made him learn German, along with French, Italian, Latin, and Greek. Besides the divisions commanded by Sir Henry and Lord Cornwallis, the army included a huge body of mercenary troops under General von Knyphausen—nearly all of them from Hesse-Kassel, whose dialect William could manage with no trouble.

It had still taken a good deal of persuasion, but in the end he'd landed up as one of Clinton's dozen aides-de-camp, charged with the tedious chore of riding up and down the ponderously moving column, collecting reports, delivering dispatches, and dealing with any small difficulties that developed en route—a more or less hourly occurrence. He kept a running mental note of where the various surgeons and hospital orderlies were; he lived in horror of having to attend the delivery of one of the camp followers' babies—there were at least fifty very pregnant women with the column.

Maybe it was the proximity of these ladies, gravid and pale, their swollen bellies borne like burdens, balanced with the ones on their backs, that made him think of …

Surely whores knew how to avoid pregnancy? He didn't recall Arabella–Jane doing anything … but he wouldn't have noticed, drunk as he was.

William thought of her whenever he touched the spot on his breast where his gorget should be. If asked, he would have said he put the thing on with his uniform and forgot about it—but from the number of times he found Arabella–Jane in his mind, he was apparently in the habit of fiddling with it constantly.

The loss of the gorget had cost him an unpleasant five-minute analysis of his character, dress, hygiene, and personal failings from Clinton's chief aide, Captain Duncan Drummond, and a ten-shilling fine for being out of proper uniform. He didn't grudge her the cost.

He did find himself keeping an eye out for Captain Harkness. He couldn't recall enough of their encounter to have any idea of Harkness's regiment, but there weren't that many dragoon companies with the present army. He was working his way back along the column now, doing his daily round on Visigoth, a big bay gelding with good wind. The horse wasn't pleased with the slow pace and kept twitching under him, wanting to break into a gallop, but William held him to a steady trot, nodding as he passed each company, looking to the corporals and sergeants to see if any were in difficulty or needed assistance.

“Water’s coming!” he called to a particularly wilted-looking group of Loyalist refugees who had stopped on the verge of the road, taking pause in the scant shade provided by a scatter of oak saplings and a handcart precariously piled with their belongings.

This reassurance made the women look up hopefully from under their bonnets, and the gentleman rose to his feet, waving William down.

He reined in and recognized Mr. Endicott, a well-to-do Philadelphia merchant, and his family. He’d been to dinner at their house and had danced with the two older Misses Endicott at several parties.

“Your servant, sir,” he said, sweeping off his hat with a bow and nodding in turn to the ladies. “And yours, Mrs. Endicott. Miss Endicott, Miss Sally … and your most humble and obedient, Miss Peggy.” Miss Peggy Endicott, aged nine, went pink as a young strawberry at being singled out, and her elder sisters exchanged raised brows over her head.

“Is it true, Lord Ellesmere,” Endicott said, “that we are closely pursued by the Rebels?” He was holding a large red-flannel handkerchief, with which he wiped a perspiring round face. “The … er … the ladies find themselves summat worried by the prospect.”

“The ladies have no cause for concern, sir,” William assured him. “You are under the protection of His Majesty’s army, you know.”

“Well, yes, we do know that,” Mr. Endicott said, rather testily. “Or so we hope, at least; certainly wouldn’t be here else, I can tell you. But have you any news of Washington’s whereabouts, is what I’d like to know?”

Visigoth shifted his weight and danced a little, eager to be off, but William pulled his head round, clicking his tongue in rebuke.

"Why, yes, sir," he said respectfully. "We have had several deserters from the Rebel camp, come in last night. They say that Washington is gathering his troops, no doubt in hopes of catching up to us—but he has no more than two thousand regulars, with a few scrubby militia companies."

Mr. Endicott looked somewhat reassured at this, but the girls and their mother didn't. Mrs. Endicott plucked at her husband's sleeve and murmured something. He flushed more deeply.

"I said I'll deal with it, madam!" he snapped. He had taken off his wig because of the heat and wore a spotted silk handkerchief tied over his head against the sun; his grizzled hair was cropped short, and tiny bristles stuck out from the edge of the kerchief like the feelers of angry insects.

Mrs. Endicott's lips pressed tight, but she stepped back, jerking her head in a small nod. Miss Peggy, though, emboldened by Captain Ellesmere's particularity, scampered forward and seized hold of his stirrup. Visigoth, startled by the flying scrap of calico at the corner of his vision, shied violently; Peggy shrieked, stumbled back, and went flying. All of the Endicott ladies were shrieking, but William could do nothing about that; he fought the horse's head round and held on grimly while Goth crow-hopped and whirled, then settled down gradually, snorting and jerking at the bit. He could hear passing infantrymen being profanely amused as their column swerved to go round him.

"Is Miss Peggy quite all right?" he inquired, breathing heavily as he finally brought the horse back to the verge. Miss Anne Endicott was standing near the edge of the road, waiting for him; the rest of her family had retreated, and he heard a loud howling coming from behind the handcart.

“Aside from being spanked by Papa for nearly being killed, yes,” Miss Endicott replied, looking amused. She drew a little closer, keeping a wary eye on Goth, but the horse was calm enough now, stretching his neck to grab a mouthful of grass.

“I’m sorry to have been the cause of her distress,” William said politely, and groped in his pocket, coming out with nothing but a crumpled handkerchief and a stray sixpence. He handed the coin down to Anne, smiling. “Give her that, will you, with my apologies?”

“She will be fine,” Anne said, but took the coin. She glanced over her shoulder, then drew a step closer and spoke rapidly, lowering her voice. “I … hesitate to ask, Lord Ellesmere … but, you see, the cart has broken a wheel, my father cannot fix it, he *won’t* abandon our belongings—and my mother is terrified that we will be overtaken and captured by Washington’s men.” Her dark eyes—very fine dark eyes—fixed on his with a brilliant intensity. “Can you help? Please? That was what my little sister meant to ask you.”

“Oh. What exactly is the trouble with—never mind. Let me have a look.” It would do Goth no harm to settle for a few minutes. He swung down and tied the horse to one of the saplings, then followed Miss Endicott to the handcart.

It was overflowing with the same higgledy-piggledy assortment of goods he’d seen on the docks two days ago—a tall clock stuck out of heaped clothing and linens, and a homely earthenware chamber pot was stuffed with handkerchiefs, stockings, and what was probably Mrs. Endicott’s jewel case. The sight of this particular mess gave him a sudden pang, though.

These were remnants of a real home, one he'd been a guest in—the rubbish and treasures of people he knew … and liked. He'd heard that very clock, with its pierced-work crown, strike midnight just before he'd stolen a kiss from Anne Endicott in the shadows of her father's hallway. He felt the mellow *bong, bong* now, deep in his vitals.

"Where will you go?" he asked quietly, a hand on her arm. She turned to him, flushed and harried, her dark hair coming out of her cap—but still with dignity.

"I don't know," she said, just as quietly. "My aunt Platt lives in a small village near New York, but I don't know that we can travel so far, as we are …" She nodded at the unwieldy cart, surrounded by bags and half-wrapped bundles. "Perhaps we can find a safe place closer and wait there while my father goes to make … arrangements." Her lips pressed suddenly tight, and he realized that she was holding on to her composure by dint of great effort. And that it was unshed tears that made her eyes so bright. He took her hand and kissed it, gently.

"I'll help," he said.

Easier said than done. While the axle of the cart was intact, one wheel had struck a jagged rock and not merely popped off but had in the process lost the flat-iron tire that encircled the felloes—which in consequence had come apart, being badly glued. The wheel lay in pieces in the grass, and a gaudy orange-and-black butterfly perched on the disjunct hub, lazily fanning its wings.

Mrs. Endicott's fears weren't unfounded. Neither was Mr. Endicott's anxiety—which he was attempting with little success to disguise as irritability. If they were stranded for too long, and left behind … even if Washington's regular troops were moving too fast for looting, there were always scavengers on the outskirts of an army—any army.

A respectful period of inspection allowed Mr. Endicott, still red-faced but more settled, to emerge from his domestic imbroglio, followed by Peggy, also red-faced and downcast. William nodded to the merchant and gestured, summoning him to join in contemplation of the wreckage, out of hearing of the women.

"Are you armed, sir?" William asked quietly. Endicott's face paled noticeably, and his Adam's apple bobbed above his dirt-grimed stock.

"I have a fowling piece that belonged to my father," he said, in a voice so low as to be scarcely audible. "I—it's—not been fired in twenty years." *God*, William thought, appalled. William felt himself naked and edgy without weapons. Endicott had to be fifty, at least, and alone here with four women to protect?

"I'll find you help, sir," William said firmly. Mr. Endicott drew a deep, deep breath. William thought the man might sob if obliged to speak, and turned without haste toward the women, talking as he went.

"There will be a cooper or wainwright somewhere along the column. Ah, and here's the water carrier coming!" He extended a hand to Peggy. "Will you come with me to catch him, Miss Margaret? I'm sure he'll stop for a pretty face." She didn't smile, but she sniffed, wiped her nose on her sleeve, drew herself up, and took his hand. The Endicott ladies were nothing if not courageous.

A bored-looking mule pulled a cart with several barrels of water, passing slowly down the column, the driver pausing when hailed. William waded determinedly into the fray, lifting Peggy in his arms for safety—to her evident delight—

and deflected the carrier to the Endicotts' service. Then, with a sweep of his hat to the ladies, he mounted again and made his way down the road in search of a cooper.

The army traveled with the equivalent of several villages' worth of artisans and those men called "supportives": coopers, carpenters, cooks, smiths, farriers, wainwrights, drovers, hauliers, orderlies. To say nothing of the vast swarm of laundresses and sempstresses among the camp followers. It wouldn't take long to find a cooper or a wainwright and persuade him to deal with the Endicotts' trouble. William glanced at the sun; nearly three.

The army was proceeding briskly, but that didn't mean it was moving at any great rate of speed. Clinton had given orders to march an additional two hours per day, though, a strain in the increasing heat. Another two hours before they made camp; with luck, the Endicotts might be whole again by then and able to keep up tomorrow.

A rumble of hooves and catcalls from the infantry caught his attention and made him glance over his shoulder, heart speeding up. Dragoons, plumes fluttering. He reined up and rode Goth straight at them, glancing from face to face as he passed down their double line. Several of them stared at him, and an officer made irritated motions at him, but he ignored that. A small voice in the back of his mind inquired what he meant to do if he *found* Harkness among them, but he ignored that, too.

He passed the end of the company, circled to the rear, and rode up the other side of the column, looking back over his shoulder at the rank of puzzled faces staring at him, some affronted, some amused. No … no … no … maybe? Would he even recognize the fellow? he wondered. He'd been very drunk. Still, he thought Harkness would recognize *him*.…

They were all staring at him by this time, but none with an aspect either of alarm or violence. Their colonel reined up a little and called to him.

"Ho, Ellesmere! Lost something, have you?"

He squinted against the sun and made out the vivid face of Ban Tarleton, red-cheeked and grinning under his flamboyant plumed helmet. He jerked his chin up in invitation, and William wheeled his horse and fell in beside him.

"Not lost, exactly," he said. "Just looking for a dragoon I met in Philadelphia—named Harkness; you know him?"

Ban pulled a face.

"Yes. He's with the Twenty-sixth. Randy bugger, always after women."

"And you aren't?" Ban wasn't a close friend, but William had been out on the randan with him once or twice in London. He didn't drink much, but he didn't need to; he was the sort of man who always seemed a little intoxicated.

Tarleton laughed, face flushed with the heat and red-lipped as a girl.

"Yes. But Harkness doesn't care about anything *but* women. Known him to have three at once, in a brothel."

William considered that one for a moment.

"All right. I can see a use for two, maybe … but what's the third one for?"

Ban, who was maybe four years older than William, gave him the sort of pitying look reserved for virgins and confirmed bachelors, then ducked back, laughing, when William punched him in the arm.

"Right," William said. "That aside, I'm looking for a wainwright or a cooper. Any close by?"

Tarleton straightened his helmet and shook his head.

“No, but there’s bound to be one or two in that mess.” He gestured negligently at the train of baggage wagons. “Which regiment are you with, these days?” He frowned at William, seeming to realize that something was amiss with his dress. “Where’s your sword? And your gorget?”

William gritted his teeth—and they really did grit, there being so much coarse dust in the air—and apprised Tarleton of his situation in the minimum number of words. He didn’t mention where or under what circumstances he had lost his gorget, and with a brief salute of farewell to the colonel, reined round and went down the column again. He was breathing as though he’d run the length of London Bridge, and pulses of electricity were running down his arms and legs, jolting at the base of his spine.

His anger over his situation had been rekindled by his conversation with Tarleton and—unable to do any bloody thing about any of it—turned his mind to what he wanted to do to Harkness, should he meet the 26th Light Dragoons. He touched his chest by reflex, and his sudden urge to do violence changed at once to an equally sudden rush of desire that made him light-headed.

Then he recalled his original errand, and hot blood washed through his face. He rode more slowly, calming his mind. Harkness could wait. The Endicotts couldn’t.

Thought of the family pained him—and not only because he was ashamed of letting himself be distracted from their difficulty. But in recollecting them now, he realized that for those few moments with the Endicotts, concerned with their troubles, he’d forgotten. Forgotten the burden he’d been carrying like a pound of lead in his chest. Forgotten who he really was.

What would Anne Endicott have done, if she knew? Her parents? Even … well, no. He smiled, despite his disquiet. He didn't think Peggy Endicott would mind if he told her he was secretly a cutpurse or a cannibal, let alone a—

Everyone *else* he knew, though … The Endicotts were only one Loyalist family who'd welcomed him into their home, and he'd not taken proper leave of any of those who chose to stay in Philadelphia, too ashamed to see them, knowing the truth.

He looked back over his shoulder; the Endicotts were barely visible, now sitting in the grass in a companionable circle, sharing food of some kind. He felt a keen pang at the sight of their companionability. He'd never be part of a decent family, couldn't ever marry a woman even of such modest origins as Anne Endicott.

Her father might well be ruined, might have lost his wealth and business, the family might descend into poverty—but they would remain who they were, firm in their courage and the pride of their name. Not him. His name didn't belong to him.

Well … he *could* marry, he grudgingly admitted to himself, making his way gingerly through a group of camp followers. But only a woman who wanted nothing but his title and money would have him, and to wed under such circumstances, knowing that your wife despised you … and to know that you passed the taint of your blood to your sons …

This morbid train of thought stopped abruptly with the appearance of a small group of artisans, trudging beside a large wagon that undoubtedly held their tools.

He came down on them like a wolf on a flock of startled sheep and ruthlessly cut out a fine, fat wainwright, whom he persuaded by threats and bribery to mount behind him and thus carried his prey back to the Endicotts.

With his spirit soothed by their gratitude, he turned northward again, toward the head of the army, camp, and his supper. Absorbed in thoughts of roast chicken and gravy—he ate with Clinton's staff, and thus ate very well—he didn't notice at once that another horseman had come up alongside him, matching his pace.

"Penny for your thoughts?" said a pleasant, half-familiar voice, and he turned to find himself looking into the smiling face of Denys Randall-Isaacs.

* * *

WILLIAM REGARDED Randall-Isaacs with something between annoyance and curiosity. The man had to all effects abandoned him in Quebec City a year and a half before and vanished, leaving him to spend the winter snowbound with nuns and *voyageurs*. The experience had improved both his French and his hunting abilities, but not his temper.

"Captain Randall-Isaacs," he said in acknowledgment, rather coldly. The captain smiled sunnily at him, not at all put off by his tone.

"Oh, just Randall these days," he said. "My father's name, you know. The other bit was a courtesy to my stepfather, but as the old man's passed on now …" He lifted one shoulder, leaving William to draw the obvious conclusion: that a Jewish-sounding surname couldn't be an asset to an ambitious officer.

"Surprised to see you here," Randall went on, chummy, as though they'd seen each other at a ball last month. "You were at Saratoga with Burgoyne, weren't you?"

William's hand tightened on the reins, but he patiently explained his peculiar status. For possibly the twentieth time.

Randall nodded, respectful.

"Certainly better than cutting hay in Massachusetts," he said, with a glance at the marching columns they were passing. "Thought of going back to England, though?"

"No," William said, somewhat startled. "Why? For one thing, I doubt I can, by the terms of parole. For another—why should I?" *Why, indeed*? he thought, with a fresh stab. He'd not even begun to think about what awaited him in England, at Helwater, at Ellesmere. In London, for that matter … oh, Jesus …

"Why, indeed?" Randall said, unconsciously echoing him. The man sounded thoughtful. "Well … not much opportunity for distinguishing yourself here, is there?" He glanced very briefly at William's belt, bare of weapons, and away again directly, as though the sight was somehow shameful—which it was.

"And what is it you think I could do there?" William demanded, keeping his temper with some difficulty.

"Well, you *are* an earl," Randall pointed out. William felt the blood rise up his neck, but couldn't say anything. "You have a seat in the House of Lords. Why not use it to accomplish something? Take up politics. Doubt your parole says anything about that—and as long as you weren't going back to rejoin the army, I shouldn't think the travel itself would be a problem."

"I'd never thought of it," William said, striving for politeness. He couldn't think of anything he'd less rather do than be political—unless it was be political while acting a sham.

Randall tilted his head amiably to and fro, still smiling. He was much as he'd been when William had seen him last: dark hair tied back without powder, good-looking rather than handsome, slender without being slight, graceful in movement, with a constant expression of sympathetic geniality. He hadn't changed much—but William had. He was two years older now, much more experienced, and was both surprised and a little gratified to discover that he realized that Randall was playing him like a hand of bezique. Or trying to.

"I suppose there are other possibilities," he said, guiding his horse around an enormous puddle of muddy urine that had collected in a dip in the road.

Randall's horse had paused to add to it. Randall sat as composedly as one can in such a situation, but didn't try to raise his voice over the noise. He picked his way out of the mud and caught William up before continuing the conversation.

"Possibilities?" He sounded genuinely interested, and probably was, William thought—but why? "What were you thinking of doing?"

"You recall Captain Richardson, of course?" William asked casually, but with an eye on Randall's face. One dark brow rose a bit, but otherwise he showed no particular emotion at hearing the name.

"Oh, yes," Randall replied, as casual as William. "Have you seen the good captain recently?"

"Yes, a couple of days ago." William's temper had abated, and he waited with interest to see what Randall might have to say to this.

The captain didn't look taken aback, exactly, but his air of pleasant inconsequence had definitely sharpened into something else. William could actually *see* him wondering whether to ask bluntly what Richardson had wanted or to take another tack, and the perception gave him a small thrill.

“Is Lord John with Sir Henry?” Randall asked. That was enough of a non sequitur to make William blink, but there was no reason not to answer.

“No. Why should he be?”

The brow lifted again.

“You didn’t know? The Duke of Pardloe’s regiment is in New York.”

“It is?” William was more than startled by that, but hastened to collect himself. “How do you know?”

Randall waved a well-manicured hand, as though the answer to this was irrelevant—as perhaps it was.

“Pardloe left Philadelphia this morning with Sir Henry,” he explained. “As the duke has recalled Lord John to duty, I thought—”

“He *what*?” William’s horse jerked his head and snorted at the exclamation, and William stroked the big neck, using the gesture to avert his face for a moment. His father was *here*?

“I stopped at his lordship’s house in Philadelphia yesterday,” Randall explained, “and a rather odd Scotchwoman—she must be his lordship’s housekeeper, I collect?—told me that his lordship had been gone for several days. But if you haven’t seen him …”

Randall raised his head, looking ahead. A haze of woodsmoke was already showing above the trees, cook fires, wash fires, and watch fires all marking the growing camp, their tang a pleasant spice in the nostrils. It made William’s stomach growl.

“Hup! Hup! At the double, quick … march!” A sergeant’s bellow came from behind them, and they pulled aside for a double column of infantry, who hadn’t needed the exhortation; they were eager for their dinner and the chance to lay down their arms for the night.

The pause gave William room for a moment’s thought: ought he to ask Randall to sup with him later, try to draw him out? Or get the hell away from the man as quickly as possible, using his need to wait on Sir Henry as excuse? But what if Lord John really *was* with Sir Henry right this moment? *And* bloody Uncle Hal—all he needed in the present circumstance!

Randall had evidently used the pause for thought, as well, and come to his own decision. He came up close beside William, and after a quick glance to be sure no one was near them, leaned close and spoke in a low voice.

“I say this as a friend, Ellesmere—though I grant you’ve no reason to trust me, I hope you’ll listen. Don’t, for God’s sake, engage in any enterprise that Richardson suggests. Don’t go with him anywhere, no matter what the circumstances. If you can avoid it, don’t even talk to him again.”

And with that, he reined his horse’s head around, spurred up abruptly, and was off down the road at a gallop, heading away from the camp.

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SCROUNGING

GREY WOULDN'T MIND, if it weren't for the headaches. The ache in his side had faded to something tolerable; he thought a rib might be cracked, but as long as he didn't have to run, that wouldn't be a problem. The eye, though …

The injured eye stubbornly refused to move but jerked in its socket, pulling against whatever obstruction held it—an orbicularis muscle? Was that what Dr. Hunter had called it?—in an attempt to focus with its fellow. This was painful and exhausting in itself but also led to double vision and crushing headaches, and he found himself often unable to eat when they halted, wanting only to lie down in darkness and wait for the throbbing to cease.

By the time they stopped to make camp on the evening of the second day of march, he could barely see out of his good eye, and his stomach was heaving with nausea.

"Here," he said, thrusting his hot journeycake at one of his fellows, a tailor from Morristown named Phillipson. "You take it. I can’t, not just …” He couldn’t go on, but pressed the heel of his hand hard against his closed eye. Green and yellow pinwheels and brilliant flashes of light erupted behind his eyelid, but the pressure eased the pain for a moment.

“You save it for later, Bert,” Phillipson said, tucking the journeycake into Grey’s rucksack. He bent close and peered at Grey’s face in the firelight. “You need a patch for that eye,” he declared. “Keep you from rubbing at it, at least; it’s red as a whore’s stocking. Here.”

And with that, he took off his own battered felt hat and, whipping a small pair of scissors from his bosom, cut a neat round patch from the brim, rubbed a bit of spruce gum round the edge to make it stick, and then bound it carefully in place over the injured orb with a spotted handkerchief contributed by one of the other militiamen. All of them clustered round to watch, with the kindest expressions of concern, offers of food and drink, suggestions as to which company had a surgeon that might come to let his blood, and so on. Grey, in the weakness of pain and exhaustion, thought he might weep.

He managed to thank them all for their concern, but at last they left off, and after a swig of something unidentifiable but strongly alcoholic from Jacobs’s canteen, he sat on the ground, shut his good eye, leaned his head back against a log, and waited for the throbbing in his temples to lessen.

Despite his bodily discomfort, he felt comforted in spirit. The men with him weren’t soldiers, and God knew they weren’t an army—but they were men, engaged in common purpose and mindful of one another, and that was a thing he knew and loved.

"… and we bring our needs and desires before thee, O great Lord, and implore thy blessing upon our deeds …"

The Reverend Woodsworth was conducting a brief service of prayers. He did this every evening; those who wished might join him; those who didn't occupied themselves in quiet conversation or small tasks of mending or whittling.

Grey had no real idea where they were, save somewhere to the northeast of Philadelphia. Messengers on horseback met them now and then, and confused bits of news and speculation spread like fleas through the group. He gathered that the British army was heading north—clearly to New York—and that Washington had left Valley Forge with his troops and was intending to attack Clinton somewhere en route, but no one knew where. The troops were to muster at a place called Coryell's Ferry, at which point they might, possibly, be told where they were going.

He didn't waste energy on thinking about his own position. He could escape easily enough in the darkness, but there was no point in doing so. Wandering around the countryside in the midst of converging militia companies and regular troops, he ran more risk of ending up back in the custody of Colonel Smith, who would probably hang him out of hand, than he did in remaining with Woodsworth's militia.

The danger might increase when they *did* join Washington's troops—but large armies really couldn't hide from each other, nor did they try to avoid notice. If Washington got anywhere near Clinton, Grey could at that point easily desert—if one considered it desertion—and cross the lines into British hands, risking only being shot by an overenthusiastic sentry before he could surrender and make himself known.

Gratitude, he thought, hearing Mr. Woodsworth's prayer through a haze of growing drowsiness and fading pain. Well, yes, there were a few more things he could count on his list of blessings.

William was still on parole and thus a noncombatant. Jamie Fraser had been released from the Continental army to escort Brigadier Fraser's body back to Scotland. Though he'd returned, he was no longer in the army; he wouldn't be in this fight, either. His nephew Henry was healing, but in no way fit for combat. There was no one likely to be involved in the coming battle—if there was one—over whom he need worry. Though come to think.… His hand found the empty pocket of his breeches. *Hal*. Where the bloody hell *was* Hal?

He sighed, but then relaxed, breathing in the scents of woodsmoke, pine needles, and roasted corn. Wherever Hal was, he'd be safe enough. His brother could take care of himself.

The prayers over, one of his companions had started to sing. It was a song he knew, but the words were quite different. His version, picked up from an army surgeon who'd fought with the Colonials during the French and Indian war, went:

Brother Ephraim sold his Cow
And bought him a Commission;
And then he went to Canada
To fight for the Nation;

But when Ephraim he came home
He proved an arrant Coward,

He wouldn't fight the Frenchmen there
For fear of being devour'd.

Dr. Shuckburgh hadn't had much opinion of the colonials, and neither had the composer of the newer version, used as a marching song. He'd heard that one in Philadelphia and hummed along under his breath.

Yankee Doodle came to town,
For to buy a firelock,
We will tar and feather him,
And so we will John Hancock!

His present companions were now singing—with gusto—the latest evolution:

Yankee Doodle went to town
A-riding on a pony,
Stuck a feather in his cap
And called it Macaroni!

He wondered, yawning, whether any of them knew that the word *dudel* meant "simpleton" in German. He doubted Morristown, New Jersey, had ever seen a macaroni, those affected young men who went in for pink wigs and a dozen face patches.

As his headache eased, he began to appreciate the simple pleasure of reclining. The shoes with their makeshift laces fit him badly and, as well as rubbing his heels raw, gave him shooting pains in the shins from the effort of constantly clenching his toes in order to keep the bloody things on. He stretched his legs gingerly, almost enjoying the tenderness in his muscles, so near bliss by contrast with walking.

He was distracted from his catalog of meager blessings by a small, hungry gulp near his ear, followed by a young, low voice.

"Mister … if ye're not meanin' to eat that journeycake yourself …"

"What? Oh … yes. Of course."

He struggled to sit up, one hand pressed protectively over his bad eye, and turned his head to see a boy of eleven or twelve sitting on the log just beside him. He had his hand inside his sack, rummaging for the food, when the boy let out a gasp, and he looked up, vision wavering in the firelight, to discover himself face-to-face with Claire's grandson, fair hair in a tousled halo round his head and a look of horror on his face.

"Hush!" he said in a whisper, and grabbed the child's knee in such a sudden grip that the boy gave a small yelp.

"Why, what's that you've got there, Bert? Caught you a thief?" Abe Shaffstall, distracted from a desultory game of knucklebones, looked over his shoulder, peering shortsightedly at the boy—Christ, what was his name? His father was French; was it Claude? Henri? No, that was the younger boy, the dwarf.…

"Tais-toi!" he said under his breath to the boy, and turned to his companions. "No, no—this is a neighbor's son from Philadelphia—er … Bobby. Bobby Higgins," he added, grabbing at the first name that offered itself. "What's brought you out here, son?" he asked, hoping that the boy was as quick-witted as his grandmother.

"Lookin' for my grandda," the boy replied promptly, though his eyes shifted uneasily round the circle of faces, now all aimed in his direction as the singing died away.

"My mam sent me with some clothes and food for him, but some wicked fellows in the wood pulled me off my mule and … and t-took everything." The boy's voice trembled realistically, and Grey noticed that, in fact, his dirty cheeks showed the tracks of tears.

This provoked a rumble of concern round the circle and the immediate production from pokes and pockets of hard bread, apples, dried meat, and dirty handkerchiefs.

"What's your grandpa's name, son?" Joe Buckman inquired. "What company is he with?"

The boy looked nonplussed at this and shot a quick glance at Grey, who answered for him.

"James Fraser," he said, with a reassuring nod that made his head throb. "He'd be with one of the Pennsylvania companies, wouldn't he, Bobby?"

"Aye, sir." The boy wiped his nose on the proffered handkerchief and gratefully accepted an apple. *"Mer—"* He interrupted himself with an artful coughing fit and amended this to "Thank ye kindly, sir. And you, sir." He handed back the handkerchief and set himself to ravenous consumption, this limiting his replies to nods and shakes of the head. Indistinct mumbles indicated that he had forgotten the number of his grandfather's company.

"No matter, boy," Reverend Woodsworth said comfortingly. "We're all a-going to the same place to muster. You'll find your grandpa with the troops there, surely. You think you can keep up with us, though, a-foot?"

"Oh, aye, sir," Germain—*that was it! Germain!*—said, nodding fast. "I can walk."

"I'll take care of him," Grey said hastily, and that seemed to settle it.

He waited impatiently until everyone had forgotten the boy's presence and begun to ready themselves for sleep, then rose, muscles protesting, and jerked his head at Germain to follow him, muffling an exclamation of pain at the movement.

"Right," he said in a low voice, as soon as they were out of earshot. "What the devil are you doing out here? And where *is* your bloody grandfather?"

"I *was* lookin' for him," Germain replied, unbuttoning his flies to piss. "He's gone to—" He paused, obviously unsure what his relationship with Grey now was. "Beg pardon, my lord, but I dinna ken should I tell ye that or not. I mean …" The boy was no more than a silhouette against the darker black of the undergrowth, but even the outline of his body expressed an eloquent wariness. *"Comment se fait-il que vous soyez ici?"*

"How did I come to be here," Grey repeated under his breath. "*Comment*, indeed. Never mind. I'll tell *you* where we're going, shall I? I gather we're bound for a place called Coryell's Ferry to join General Washington. Does that ring a bell?"

Germain's slender shoulders relaxed, and a soft pattering on the earth indicated that apparently it did. Grey joined him, and, finished, they turned back toward the glow of the campfire.

Still in the shelter of the woods, Grey put his hand on Germain's shoulder and squeezed. The boy stopped dead.

"Attendez, monsieur," Grey said, low-voiced. "If the militia learn who I am, they'll hang me. Instantly. My life is in your hands from this moment. *Comprenez-vous*?"

There was silence for an unnerving moment.

"Are you a spy, my lord?" Germain asked softly, not turning round.

Grey paused before answering, wavering between expediency and honesty. He could hardly forget what he'd seen and heard, and when he made it back to his own lines, duty would compel him to pass on such information as he had.

"Not by choice," he said at last, just as softly.

A cool breeze had risen with the setting of the sun, and the forest murmured all around them.

"Bien," Germain said at last. "And thank ye for the food." He turned then, and Grey could see the glint of firelight on one fair brow, arched in inquisitiveness.

"So I am Bobby Higgins. Who are you, then?"

"Bert Armstrong," Grey replied shortly. "Call me Bert."

He led the way then toward the fire and the blanket-humped rolls of sleeping men. He couldn't quite tell, above the rustling of the trees and the snoring of his fellows, but he *thought* the little bugger was laughing.

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MORPHIA DREAMS

WE SLEPT THAT NIGHT in the public room of an ordinary in Langhorne. Bodies were sprawled on tables and benches, curled *under* the tables, and laid in haphazard arrangements on pallets, folded cloaks, and saddlebags, as far away from the hearth as they could get. The fire was banked, but it still radiated considerable heat. The room was filled with the bitter scents of burning wood and boiling bodies. I estimated the temperature in the room at something like ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit, and the slumbering bodies on display were largely unclad, pale haunches, shoulders, and bosoms glimmering in the sullen glow of the embers.

Jamie had been traveling in shirt and breeches, his new uniform and its dazzling smallclothes carefully folded into a portmanteau until we got within range of the army, so his disrobing was a simple matter of unbuttoning his flies and pulling off his stockings. Mine was complicated by the fact that my traveling stays had leather laces, and over the course of a sweat-drenched day, the knot had tightened into a stubborn nodule that resisted all attempts.

“Are ye no coming to bed, Sassenach?” Jamie was already lying down, having found a remote corner behind the bar counter and spread out our cloaks.

“I’ve broken a fingernail trying to get this bloody thing loose, and I can’t bloody reach it with my teeth!” I said, on the verge of breaking into tears of frustration. I was swaying with weariness, but couldn’t bring myself to sleep in the clammy confines of my stays.

Jamie reached up an arm out of the darkness, beckoning.

“Come lie down wi’ me, Sassenach,” he whispered. “I’ll do it.”

The simple relief of lying down, after twelve hours in the saddle, was so exquisite that I nearly changed my mind about sleeping in my stays, but he’d meant it. He squirmed down and bent his head to nuzzle at my laces, an arm round my back to steady me.

“Dinna fash,” he murmured into my midsection, voice somewhat muffled. “If I canna nibble it loose, I’ll prise it wi’ my dirk.”

He looked up with an inquiring noise, as I’d uttered a strangled laugh at the prospect.

“Just trying to decide whether being accidentally disemboweled would be worse than sleeping in my stays,” I whispered, cupping his head. It was warm, the soft hair at his nape damp to the touch.

“My aim’s no that bad, Sassenach,” he said, pausing in his labors for an instant. “I’d only risk stabbin’ ye in the heart.”

As it was, he accomplished his goal without recourse to weapons, gently jerking the knot loose with his teeth until he could finish the job with his fingers, opening the heavy seamed canvas stays like a clamshell to expose the whiteness of my shift. I sighed like a grateful mollusk opening at high tide, plucking the fabric out of the creases the stays had made in my flesh. Jamie pushed away the discarded stays but remained where he was, his face near my breasts, rubbing his hands gently over my sides.

I sighed again at his touch; he'd done it by habit, but it was a habit I'd missed for the last four months, and a touch I'd thought never to feel again.

"Ye're too thin, Sassenach," he whispered. "I can feel every rib. I'll find ye food tomorrow."

I had been too much preoccupied in the last few days to think about food, and was much too tired at the moment to be hungry, but made an agreeable sound in response and stroked his hair, tracing the curve of his skull.

"I love you, *a nighean*," he said, very softly, his breath warm on my skin.

"I love you," I answered just as softly, taking the ribbon from his hair and loosening his plait between my fingers. I pressed his head closer to me, not in invitation, but out of the sudden urgent need to *keep* him close to me, to protect him.

He kissed my breast and turned his head, laying it in the hollow of my shoulder. He took one deep breath, one more, and then was asleep, the relaxing weight of his body against me both protection and trust.

"I love you," I said, almost soundless, my arms wrapped tight about him. "Oh, dear God, I love you."

* * *

IT MIGHT HAVE been the sense of overwhelming fatigue, or the smell, the mingling of alcohol and unwashed bodies, that made me dream of the hospital.

I was walking down the little hall beyond the men's ward at the hospital where I'd done my nurse's training, the tiny bottle of morphia grains in my hand. The walls were dingy gray; so was the air. At the end of the hall was the alcohol bath where the syringes were kept.

I lifted one out, cold and slippery, careful not to drop it. But I did drop it; it slid from my hand and shattered on the floor, spraying glass shards that cut my legs.

I couldn't worry about that; I had to get back with the morphine injection—men were calling out behind me, desperate, and somehow it was the sound of the operating tent in France back there, men moaning, screams and hopeless sobbing, and my fingers shook with urgency, groping in the cold steel bath among glass syringes that rattled like bones.

I pulled one out, gripping it so tightly that it, too, broke in my hand, and blood ran down my wrist, but I wasn't conscious of pain. Another, I must have another; they were in dreadful pain and I could stop it, if *only* …

Somehow I had a clean syringe and had got the top off the tiny bottle of morphia grains, but my hand was shaking, the grains spilling like salt; Sister Amos would be furious. I needed tweezers, forceps; I couldn't grasp the tiny pellets with my fingers and, in a panic, shook several of them into the syringe, a whole grain, not the quarter grain called for, but I *had* to get to the men, had to stop their pain.

Then I was running back down the endless gray hall toward the cries, shards of glass glinting among the red blood drops on the floor, both as bright as dragonfly wings. But my hand was growing numb, and the last syringe fell from my fingers before I reached the door.

And I woke up with a jolt that seemed to stop my heart. I gulped smoke and the fug of beer and bodies, not knowing where I was.

“Jesus, Sassenach, are ye all right?” Jamie, startled out of sleep, rolled up onto his elbow above me, and I came back into the present with as much of a jolt as my awakening had been. My left arm was numb from the shoulder down, and there were tears on my cheeks; I felt the coolness on my skin.

“I … yes. Just a … a bad dream.” I felt ashamed to confess it, as though it were his privilege alone to suffer nightmares.

“Ah.” He lowered himself beside me with a sigh and gathered me to him with one arm. He ran a thumb over my face and, finding wetness, blotted it matter-of-factly with his shirt. “All right now?” he whispered, and I nodded, thankful that I needn’t talk about it.

“Good.” He stroked the hair off my face and rubbed my back gently, the circles of his hand growing gradually slower until he fell asleep again.

It was deep night, and a deep sleep lay upon the room. The whole of it seemed to breathe in unison, snores and gasps and grunts all fading into something like the waves of a receding tide, rising and falling and bearing me with them, safely back into the depths of sleep.

Only the pins and needles of feeling returning to my dead arm kept me from it, and that only momentarily.

I could still see the blood and the shards of glass and heard against the susurrus of snores the crash of falling crystal, saw the bloody smudges on the wallpaper at Number 17.

Dear Lord, I prayed, listening to Jamie's heart under my ear, slow and steady. *Whatever happens, let him have a chance to talk to William*.

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TAKEN AT A DISADVANTAGE

WILLIAM LED HIS HORSE down among the rocks to a level place where both of them could drink. It was midafternoon, and after a day spent riding to and fro along the column in the blazing sun, he was parched as a piece of last year's venison jerky.

His present horse was Madras, a cob with a deep chest and a steady, stolid disposition. The horse waded purposefully into the stream, hock-deep, and sank his nose into the water with a blissful snort, shivering his coat against the cloud of flies that appeared instantly out of nowhere whenever they stopped.

William waved a couple of insects away from his own face and took off his coat for a moment's relief from the heat. He was tempted to wade in, too—up to his neck, if the creek was deep enough—but … well … He looked cautiously over his shoulder, but he was well out of sight, though he could hear the sounds of the baggage train on the distant road. Why not? Just for a moment. It wasn't as though the dispatch he was carrying was urgent; he'd seen it written, and it contained nothing more than an invitation for General von Knyphausen to join General Clinton for supper at an inn with a reputation for good pork. Everyone was wringing with sweat; dampness would be no telltale.

He hastily shucked shoes, shirt, stockings, breeches, and smalls, and walked naked into the purling water, which barely reached his waist but was wet and cool. He closed his eyes in blissful relief—and opened them abruptly a half second later.

"William!"

Madras flung up his head with a startled snort, showering William with droplets, but he barely noticed in the shock of seeing two young women standing on the opposite bank.

"What the devil are *you* doing here?" He tried to squat a little lower in the water without being conspicuous about it. Though a dim voice in the back of his mind wondered aloud why he bothered: Arabella–Jane had already seen anything he had. "And who's that?" he demanded, jerking his chin at the other girl. Both of them were flushed as summer roses, but he thought—he hoped—it was the result of the heat.

"This is my sister, Frances," Jane said, with the elegance of a Philadelphia matron, and gestured to the younger girl. "Curtsy to his lordship, now, Fanny."

Fanny, a very lovely young girl with dark curls peeping out under her cap—what was she, eleven, twelve?—bobbed him a sweet curtsy, blue-and-red-calico petticoats outspread, and dropped long lashes modestly over the big, soft eyes of a young doe.

"Your most humble servant, mademoiselle," he said, bowing with as much grace as possible, which, judging from the expressions on the girls' faces, was probably a mistake.

Fanny clapped a hand over her mouth and went much redder from the effort not to laugh.

“I am charmed to meet your sister,” he said to Jane, rather coldly. “But I fear you take me at something of a disadvantage, madam.”

“Yes, that’s a piece of luck,” Jane agreed. “I couldn’t think how we were to find you in that moil, and when we saw you ride past like the fiend was after you—we’d got a ride on a baggage wagon—I didn’t think we’d ever catch you. But we took the chance, and … *voilà! Fortuna favet audax*, you know.” She wasn’t even trying to *pretend* she wasn’t laughing at him!

He scrabbled for some cutting rejoinder in Greek, but the only thing that came to his inflamed mind was a humiliating echo from his past, something his father had said to him on the occasion when he’d accidentally fallen into a privy: *“What news from the underworld, Persephone?”*

“Turn your backs,” he said curtly. “I’m getting out.”

They didn’t. Gritting his teeth, he turned his own back on them and deliberately climbed the bank, feeling the itch of four interested eyes focused on his dripping backside. He grabbed his shirt and wrestled his way into it, feeling that even that much shelter would enable him to carry on the conversation in a more dignified manner. Or maybe he’d just tuck his breeches and boots under his arm and leave without further chat.

The sound of heavy splashing whilst he was still enveloped in the folds of his shirt made him whirl round, head popping free just in time to see Madras lunge up out of the creek on the girls’ side, lips already reaching for the apple Jane was holding out to him.

"Come back here, sir!" he shouted. But the girls had more apples, and the horse paid no attention whatever—nor did he object when Arabella–Jane took his reins and looped them casually round the trunk of a young willow.

"I noticed that you didn't ask how we came to be here," she said. "Doubtless surprise has deprived you of your usual exquisite manners." She dimpled at him and he eyed her severely.

"I did," he said. "I distinctly recall saying, 'What. The. Devil. Are. You. Doing. Here.' "

"Oh, so you did," she said, without a blush. "Well, not to put too fine a point on the matter, Captain Harkness came back."

"Oh," he said, in a slightly different tone. "I see. You, um, ran away, then?"

Frances nodded solemnly.

William cleared his throat. "Why? Captain Harkness is doubtless *with* the army. Why would you come here, of all places, instead of staying safe in Philadelphia?"

"No, he isn't," Jane said. "He was detained on business in Philadelphia. So we came away. Besides," she added carelessly, "there are *thousands* of women with the army. He'd never find us, even if he was looking—and why should he be?"

That was reasonable. Still … he knew what the life of an army whore was like. He also had a strong suspicion that the girls had run out on their contract with the brothel; very few saved enough from their wages to buy their way out, and both of these girls were much too young to have made much money. To abandon the reasonable comfort of clean beds and regular meals in Philadelphia in order to accommodate filthy, sweating soldiers amidst mud and flies, paid in blows as often as in coin … Yet he was obliged to admit that he'd never been buggered by a vicious sod like Harkness and thus had no true basis for comparison.

"I expect you want money, to assist in your escape?" he said, an edge in his voice.

"Well, perhaps," said Jane. Reaching into her pocket, she held up something shiny. "Mostly, I wanted to give this back to you."

His gorget! He took an involuntary step toward her, toes squelching in the mud.

"I—thank you," he said abruptly. He'd felt its lack every time he dressed, and felt even more the weight of his fellow officers' eyes on the empty spot where it should rest. He'd been obliged to explain to Colonel Desplains what had happened—more or less—saying that he'd been robbed in a bawdy house. Desplains had chewed him bloody, but then had given him reluctant leave to appear without a gorget until he might get another in New York.

"What I—we, I mean—*really* want is your protection," Jane said, doing her best to look winsomely earnest, and doing it damned well.

"You *what*?"

"I don't think I should have any difficulty in making a living with the army," she said frankly, "but 'tisn't really what I want for my dear sister, that sort of life."

"Er … no. I imagine not," William said warily. "What else did you have in mind?" *"Lady's maid?"* he wanted to suggest sarcastically, but in light of the return of his gorget, he refrained.

"I haven't quite made up my mind," she said, fastening her gaze on the ripples where the creek ran over rocks. "But if you could help us to get safely to New York—and maybe find us a place there …”

William ran a hand down his face, wiping away a layer of fresh sweat.

“Don’t want much, do you?” he said. On the one hand, if he didn’t give her some assurance of help, he wouldn’t put it past her to fling his gorget into the water in a fit of pique. And on the other … Frances was a lovely child, delicate and pale as a morning-glory blossom. And on the third hand, he hadn’t any more time to spare in argument.

“Get on the horse and come across,” he said abruptly. “I’ll find you a new place with the baggage train. I have to ride a dispatch to von Knyphausen just now, but I’ll meet you in General Clinton’s camp this evening—no, not this evening, I won’t be back until tomorrow.…” He fumbled for a moment, wondering where to tell her to find him; he could *not* have two young whores asking for him at General Clinton’s headquarters. “Go to the surgeons’ tent at sundown tomorrow. I’ll—think of something.”

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IN WHICH I MEET A TURNIP

DURING THE NEXT DAY'S ride, we encountered a messenger, sent back from Washington's command with a note for Jamie. He read this leaning against a tree, while I made an unobtrusive visit to a nearby clump of brush.

"What does he say?" I asked, straightening my clothes as I emerged. I was still rather awed that Jamie had actually spoken with George Washington, and the fact that he was frowning at a letter presumably *written* by the future Father of the Country …

"Two or three things," he replied with a shrug, and, refolding the note, stuffed it into his pocket. "The only important bit o' news is that my brigade is to be under the command of Charles Lee."

"Do you know Charles Lee?" I got my foot into the stirrup and heaved myself into the saddle.

"I know *of* him." What he knew appeared to be rather problematic, judging from the line between his brows. I raised my own; he glanced at me and smiled.

“I met him, ken, when I first met General Washington. I made it my business to learn a bit more about him since.”

“Oh, so you didn’t like him,” I observed, and he gave me a small snort.

“No, I didn’t,” he said, nudging his horse into a walk. “He’s loud and unmannerly and a sloven—I could see that much for myself—but from what I’ve heard since, he’s also jealous to the bone and doesna trouble to hide it verra well.”

“Jealous? Of whom?” Not Jamie, I hoped.

“Of Washington,” he answered matter-of-factly, surprising me. “He thought he should have command o’ the Continental army and doesna like playin’ second fiddle.”

“Really?” I’d never once heard of General Charles Lee, which seemed odd, if he had such prominence as to have made that a reasonable expectation. “Why does he think that, do you know?”

“I do. He feels he has a good deal more in the way of military experience than Washington—and that’s maybe true: he was in the British army for some time and fought a number of successful campaigns. Still—” He lifted one shoulder and dropped it, dismissing General Lee for the moment. “I wouldna have agreed to do this, had it been Lee who asked me.”

“I thought you didn’t want to do it, regardless.”

“Mmphm.” He considered for a moment. “It’s true I didna want to do this—I don’t now.” He looked at me, apologetic. “And I truly dinna want you to be here.”

“I’m going to be where you are for the rest of our lives,” I said firmly. “If that’s a week or another forty years.”

“Longer,” he said, and smiled.

We rode for a time in silence, but deeply aware of each other. We had been, since that conversation in the gardens at Kingsessing.

"I will love ye forever. It doesna matter if ye sleep with the whole English army—well, no, it would matter, but it wouldna stop me loving you."

"I've taken ye to bed a thousand times at least, Sassenach. Did ye think I wasna paying attention?"

"There couldna be anyone like you."

I hadn't forgotten a word we'd said—and neither had he, though neither one of us had spoken of it again. We weren't walking on tiptoe with each other, but we were feeling our way … finding our way into each other, as we'd done twice before. Once, when I'd returned to find him in Edinburgh—and at the beginning, when we'd found ourselves wed by force and joined by circumstance. Only later, by choice.

"What would you have wanted to be?" I asked, on impulse. "If you hadn't been born the laird of Lallybroch?"

"I wasn't. If my elder brother hadna died, ye mean," he said. A small shadow of regret crossed his face, but didn't linger. He still mourned the boy who had died at eleven, leaving a small brother to pick up the burden of leadership and struggle to grow into it—but he had been accustomed to that burden for a very long time.

"Maybe that," I said. "But what if you'd been born elsewhere, maybe to a different family?"

"Well, I wouldna be who I am, then, would I?" he said logically, and smiled at me. "I may quibble wi' what the Lord's called me to do now and then, Sassenach—but I've nay argument wi' how he made me."

I looked at what he was—the strong, straight body and capable hands, the face so full of everything he was—and had no argument, either.

"Besides," he said, and tilted his head consideringly, "if it had been different, I wouldna have you, would I? Or have had Brianna and her weans?"

If it had been different … I didn't ask whether he thought his life as it was had been worth the cost.

He leaned over and touched my cheek.

"It's worth it, Sassenach," he said. "For me."

I cleared my throat.

"For me, too."

* * *

IAN AND ROLLO caught us up a few miles from Coryell's Ferry. Darkness had fallen, but the glow of the camp was faintly visible against the sky, and we made our way cautiously in, being stopped every quarter mile or so by sentries who popped unnervingly out of the dark, muskets at the ready.

"Friend or foe?" the sixth of these demanded dramatically, peering at us in the beam of a dark lantern held high.

"General Fraser and his lady," Jamie said, shielding his eyes with his hand and glaring down at the sentry. "Is that friendly enough for ye?"

I muffled a smile in my shawl; he'd refused to stop to find food along the way, and I'd refused to let him consume uncooked bacon, no matter how well smoked. Jenny's four apples hadn't gone far, we'd found no food since the night before, and he was starving. An empty stomach generally woke the fiend that slept within, and this was clearly in evidence at the moment.

"Er … yes, sir, General, I only—" The lantern's beam of light shifted to rest on Rollo, catching him full in the face and turning his eyes to an eerie green flash. The sentry made a strangled noise, and Ian leaned down from his horse, his own face—Mohawk tattoos and all—appearing suddenly in the beam.

"Dinna mind us," he said genially to the sentry. "We're friendly, too."

* * *

TO MY SURPRISE, there was actually a good-sized settlement at the Ferry, with several inns and substantial houses perched on the bank of the Delaware.

"I suppose that's why Washington chose this as the rendezvous point?" I asked Jamie. "Good staging, I mean, and some supply."

"Aye, there's that," he said, though he spoke abstractedly. He'd risen a little in his stirrups, looking over the scene. Every window in every house was lit, but a large American flag, with its circle of stars, flapped above the door of the largest inn. Washington's headquarters, then.

My chief concern was to get some food into Jamie before he met with General Lee, if the aforementioned indeed had a reputation for arrogance and short temper. I didn't know what it was about red hair, but many years' experience with Jamie, Brianna, and Jemmy had taught me that while most people became irritable when hungry, a redheaded person with an empty stomach was a walking time bomb.

I sent Ian and Rollo with Jamie to find the quartermaster, discover what we might have in the way of accommodation, and unload the pack mule, then followed my nose toward the nearest scent of food.

The dug-in camp kitchens would long since have banked their fires, but I'd been in many army camps and knew how they worked; small kettles would be simmering all night, filled with stew and porridge for the morning—the more so as the army was in hot pursuit of General Clinton. Amazing to think that I had met him socially only a few days before—

I'd been so focused on my quest that I hadn't seen a man come out of the half dark and nearly ran into him. He seized me by the arms and we waltzed a dizzy half-turn before coming to rest.

"*Pardon, madame!* I am afraid I have stepped upon your foot!" said a young French voice, very concerned, and I looked straight into the very concerned face of a very young man. He was in shirtsleeves and breeches, but I could see that his shirtsleeves sported deep, lace-trimmed cuffs. An officer, then, in spite of his youth.

"Well, yes, you have," I said mildly, "but don't worry about it. I'm not damaged."

"Je suis tellement désolé, je suis un navet!" he exclaimed, striking himself in the forehead. He wore no wig, and I saw that despite his age, his hair was receding at a rapid pace. What was left of it was red and inclined to stand on end—possibly owing to his apparent habit of thrusting his fingers through it, which he was now doing.

"Nonsense," I said in French, laughing. "You aren't a turnip at all."

"Oh, yes," he said, switching to English. He smiled charmingly at me. "I once stepped on the foot of the Queen of France. She was much less gracious, *sa Majesté*," he added ruefully. "*She* called me a turnip. Still, if it hadn't happened—I was obliged to leave the court, you know—perhaps I would never have come to America, so we cannot bemoan my clumsiness altogether, *n'est-ce pas*?"

He was exceedingly cheerful and smelled of wine—not that that was in any way unusual. But given his exceeding Frenchness, his evident wealth, and his tender age, I was beginning to think—

"Have I the, um, honor of addressing—" Bloody hell, what was his actual title? Assuming that he really was—

"Pardon, madame!" he exclaimed, and, seizing my hand, bowed low over it and kissed it. *"Marie Joseph Paul Yves Roch Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de La Fayette, à votre service!"*

I managed to pick "La Fayette" out of this torrent of Gallic syllables and felt the odd little thump of excitement that happened whenever I met someone I knew of from historical accounts—though cold sober realism told me that these people were usually no more remarkable than the people who were cautious or lucky enough *not* to end up decorating historical accounts with their blood and entrails.

I gathered sufficient composure to inform him that I was Madame General Fraser and that I was sure my husband would shortly be along to pay his respects, directly I had located some supper.

"But you must come and dine with me, madame!" he said, and, having not let go of my hand, was in a position to tuck it cozily into his elbow and tow me off toward a large building that looked like an inn of some sort. An inn was precisely what it was, but an inn that had been commandeered by the Rebel forces and was now General Washington's headquarters—as I discovered when *le marquis* led me under a fluttering banner, through the taproom, and into a large back room where a number of officers were sitting at table, presided over by a large man who did not look precisely like the image on a dollar bill, but close enough.

"Mon Général," the marquis said, bowing to Washington and then gesturing to me. "I have the honor to present to you Madame General Fraser, the personification of grace and loveliness!"

The table rose as one, with a screeching of wooden benches, and the men—in fact, there were only six of them—rose and bowed to me in turn, murmuring, "Your servant," and "Your most obedient, ma'am." Washington himself stood up at the head of the table—*My God, he's as tall as Jamie,* I thought—and gave me a very graceful bow, hand on his bosom.

"I am honored by your presence, Mrs. Fraser," he said, in a soft Virginia drawl. "Dare I hope that your husband accompanies you?"

I had a moment's insane impulse to reply, *"No, he sent me to fight instead,"* but managed not to say it.

"He does," I replied instead. "He's … er …" I gestured helplessly toward the doorway, where—with remarkably good timing—Jamie himself now appeared, brushing pine needles off his sleeve and saying something to Young Ian, behind him.

"There ye are!" he exclaimed, spotting me. "Someone told me ye'd gone off with a strange Frenchman. What—" He stopped abruptly, having suddenly realized that I wasn't merely in the company of a strange Frenchman.

The table fell about laughing, and La Fayette rushed up to Jamie and seized his hand, beaming.

"Mon frère d'armes!" He clicked his heels together, doubtless by reflex, and bowed. "I must apologize for having

stolen your lovely wife, sir. Allow me, please, to make recompense by inviting you to dinner!"

I'd met Anthony Wayne before, at Ticonderoga, and was pleased to see him again. I was also delighted to see Dan Morgan, who gave me a hearty buss on both cheeks, and I admitted to a certain thrill at having my hand kissed by George Washington, though noticing the halitosis that accompanied his notorious dental problems. I wondered how I might make an opportunity to inspect his teeth, but gave such speculations up immediately with the arrival of a procession of servants with trays of fried fish, roast chicken, buttermilk biscuits with honey, and an amazing selection of ripe cheeses, these having been—he told me—brought by the marquis himself from France.

"Try this one," he urged me, cutting a slab of an extremely fragrant Roquefort, green-veined and crumbly. Nathanael Greene, who sat on the other side of the marquis, pinched his nose unobtrusively and gave me a small private smile. I smiled back—but in fact I quite liked strong cheese.

I wasn't the only one. Rollo, who had come in—naturally—with Young Ian and was sitting behind him, across the table from me, lifted his head and poked a long, hairy snout between Ian and General Lee, sniffing interestedly at the cheese.

"Good Christ!" Lee apparently hadn't noticed the dog before this and flung himself to one side, nearly ending in Jamie's lap. This action distracted Rollo, who turned to Lee, sniffing him with close attention.

I didn't blame the dog. Charles Lee was a tall, thin man with a long, thin nose and the most revolting eating habits I'd seen since Jemmy had learned to feed himself with a spoon. He not only talked while he ate and chewed with his mouth open, but was given to wild gestures while holding things in his hand, with the result that the front of his uniform was streaked with egg, soup, jelly, and a number of less identifiable substances.

Despite this, he was an amusing, witty man—and the others seemed to give him a certain deference. I wondered why; unlike some of the gentlemen at the table, Charles Lee never attained renown as a Revolutionary figure. He treated *them* with a certain … well, it wasn't scorn, certainly—condescension, perhaps?

I was taken up in conversation—mostly with the marquis, who was putting himself out to be charming to me, telling me how much he missed his wife (Good Lord, how old was he? I wondered. He didn't look more than twenty, if that), who had been responsible for the cheese. No, no, not making it herself, but it came from their estate at Chavaniac, which his wife ran most ably in his absence—but now and then caught a glimpse of Jamie. He took part in the conversation, but I could see his eyes flick round the table, appraising, judging. And they rested most often on General Lee, beside him.

Of course, he knew Wayne and Morgan quite well—and he knew what I'd been able to tell him about Washington and La Fayette. God, I hoped what I thought I knew about them was halfway accurate—but we'd find out soon enough if it wasn't.

Port wine was brought—evidently the meal was being hosted by the marquis; I had the distinct feeling that the high command of the Continental army didn't always eat this well. The men had largely avoided talking about the impending battle during the meal, but I could feel the subject looming like an approaching thunderstorm, bright-rimmed black clouds, excitingly shot with flickers of lightning. I began to rearrange my skirts and make gestures of incipient leave-taking, and saw Jamie, seated next to Lee across the table, notice and smile at me.

Lee noticed, too—he'd been gazing in an absent way at my décolletage—and broke off the anecdote he'd been telling Ian, seated on his other side.

"Such a pleasure to make your acquaintance, ma'am," he said cordially. "Your husband obliges us extremely by allowing us the delight of your company. I—"

Lee stopped abruptly in mid-sentence—and mid-bite, staring at Rollo, who had unobtrusively moved closer and was now standing no more than a couple of feet from the general. Given the low bench on which Lee was sitting and Rollo's size, this proximity placed them roughly eye-to-eye.

"Why is that dog looking at me like that?" Lee demanded, swinging round to glare at Ian.

"He's waitin' to see what ye drop next, I expect," Ian said, chewing placidly.

"If I were you, sir," Jamie put in politely, "I'd drop something quickly."

* * *

IAN, ROLLO, AND I took our leave of the generals and went out into the dark to find our beds, escorted by an orderly with a lantern. Fires burned high all up and down the bank of the Delaware, and many of the boats on the river had lanterns or open fires as well, the lights reflecting in the water like shoals of glimmering fish.

"Do you know anything about the man who ate beside you?" I asked Ian, in my hesitant Gaelic. He laughed—he and Jamie *always* laughed when I spoke Gaelic—but lifted one shoulder in a negative shrug.

"I do not, but I will find out," he said. "He is an Englishman, I can tell you that much."

He used the word "Sassenach," which gave me a mild shock. It had been a long time since I'd heard a Scot use that word in the way it was meant.

"Yes, he is. Do you think it makes a difference?" Technically, they were *all* still Englishmen—well, bar La Fayette, von Steuben, Kosciuszko, and similar oddities—but it was true that most of the Continental officers had been born and spent their lives in America. Lee hadn't. Ian made a derisory Scottish noise, indicating that it did.

"But I hear that he was adopted into the Kahnyen'kehaka, too," I objected.

Ian was silent for a moment, then took my arm, leaning close to speak in my ear.

"Auntie," he said softly. "D'ye think I ever stopped bein' a Scot?"

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VESTAL VIRGINS

JAMIE AND I WERE billeted at the home of the Chenowyths, a pleasant—if understandably somewhat anxious—family whose home stood at the end of the single road that ran through Coryell's Ferry. Mrs. Chenowyth was in her wrapper, but greeted me kindly with a candlestick and took me to a small bedroom at the back of the house—this showing the evidence of hasty evacuation by a number of young Chenowyths, these presumably now sharing their parents' room, judging from the sounds of mixed heavy breathing.

The single bed was fairly large, though Jamie's feet would still stick out by a good six inches. There was a washbasin and ewer full of fresh water; I picked this up carefully and drank from it; my throat was dry from too much French wine. I replaced the ewer and sat down on the bed, feeling rather strange.

Possibly it was the wine. Possibly it was the fact that the room had no windows, and Mrs. Chenowyth had thoughtfully closed the door behind her. It was a small room, perhaps ten feet by eight. The air was still and the candle's flame burned high and steady, pure against the bricks of the wall. Perhaps it was the candle that brought to mind Uncle Lamb and the day he'd told me about vestal virgins, showing me a blue chalcedony carving from the temple of Vesta.

"Should a virgin betray her vows," he'd said, waggling his eyebrows at me, *"she'd be whipped, then sealed up alive in a small underground tomb, equipped with a table and chair, some water, and a single candle. And there she would die, when the air ran out."*

I'd considered that with a sort of morbid relish—I might have been ten—and then asked with interest just *how* a vestal might betray her vows. Which is how I learned what used to be called "the facts of life," Uncle Lamb not being one to shirk any fact that wandered across his path, or mine. And while Uncle Lamb had assured me that the cult of Vesta had long since ceased operations, I had at that point resolved not to be a virgin, just in case. On the whole, a good resolution, though sleeping with men did have the most peculiar side effects.

Ian had brought along my saddlebags, which he'd dumped in the corner of the room before going off with Rollo to find his own sleeping place. I got up and fumbled for my toothbrush and tooth powder, though it seemed quite surreal to be brushing my teeth on what might be the eve of battle. Not *quite* rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic … or at least I hoped not.

I knew that Washington and the marquis were going to survive whatever happened—and spared a thought for the strangeness of now thinking of them as men and not names.

The large pores on George Washington's nose as he'd bent over my hand, and the shadowed pits of old smallpox scars across his lower cheeks; the smell of him, starch and sweat, wine and wig powder—for he wore his wig, hot as it was—the sweetly nasty smell of dental decay … I picked up my toothbrush, reminded, and set to work with some vigor. He'd smelled of blood, too; I wondered why—bleeding gums, perhaps?

I wriggled my way out of gown, jacket, and stays and stood for a bit flapping my shift, in hopes of admitting a little air. It made the candle flicker but didn't have much effect beyond that, so I blew the candle out and lay down.

I didn't expect to sleep. Adrenaline had been jolting through me like the current in a faulty circuit ever since we'd left Philadelphia, but now it was settling down to a steady humming in my blood. The conversation over dinner had been fairly general, but the atmosphere had been electric with anticipation. Clearly, once Ian and I had left and the plates had been removed … It was as close as I had ever been to a council of war, and the vibrations of it were still tingling through me.

There was anxiety tingling, too, to be sure—there had been amongst the men, as well. But given a suitable outlet, anxiety can be transformed into very effective action, and that's plainly what Washington and his generals were now doing, hammering out plans, assigning troops, drawing up strategies … I wished I was amongst them. It would be much easier than lying in the pitch dark, staring up into a boring infinity—nasty way to die, that.

I sat up, gulping air, and went hastily to the door. No sounds, no light seeping under the door. I patted round on the floor 'til I located my shoes and the puddle of my cloak and, swinging this over my shoulders, slipped out and made my way silently through the half-dark house, past the smoldering hearth and out.

The door was unbolted and on the latch; perhaps Mr. Chenowyth was out and expected back. I supposed there was some danger of my being locked out, but at this point spending the night in the midst of a military camp in my shift seemed preferable to sleeping—or, rather, not sleeping—in a tomb. Besides, I was sure that one of the small Chenowyths had wee'd in the bed fairly recently.

No one took any notice of me as I walked back along the road. The taverns and ordinaries were crammed full and spilling customers all over the road. Continental regulars in their blue and buff, swaggering about, the envy—they hoped—of the militiamen. Any number of women, too, and not all whores, by any means. But above all … air.

The heat of the day had largely gone, and while the air wasn't cold by any means, it wasn't stifling, either. Having escaped entombment, I reveled in the feeling of freedom—and what amounted to invisibility, for tall as I was, with my cloak on and my hair tied back in a plait for bed, I looked much like many of the militiamen in the dark; no one glanced twice at me.

The street and the camp beyond were electric; I recognized the feeling, and it gave me the oddest sense of dislocation—for I recognized it in its various forms from half of the battlefields I'd served near, from France in 1944 to Prestonpans and Saratoga. It wasn't always this way; often the sense of the occasion was one of dread—or worse. I remembered the night before Culloden and felt a wave of cold wash through me so strongly that I staggered and nearly fell against the wall of a building.

"Friend Claire?" said a voice, in amazement.

"Denzell?" Half-blinded by a number of torches being borne past, I blinked at the shape that had manifested before me.

"What is thee doing out here?" he said, alarmed. "Is anything wrong? Is it Jamie?"

"Well, you could say it's Jamie," I said, getting back my composure. "But there's nothing wrong, no. I was just getting a bit of air. What are *you* doing here?"

"I was fetching a pitcher of beer," he said, and took me firmly by the arm, steering me down the street. "Come with me. Thee ought not be in the street with the fighting men. Those that aren't drunk now will be shortly."

I didn't argue. His hand on my arm felt good, steadying me against the strange currents of the night that seemed to carry me willy-nilly into the past—and the future—and back again without warning.

"Where are Rachel and Dottie?" I asked, as we turned right at the end of the street and began to thread our way through the campfires and rows of tents.

"Rachel's gone somewhere with Ian; I didn't inquire. Dottie's in our medical tent, dealing with a case of acute indigestion."

"Oh, dear. What did she eat?"

He laughed softly. "The indigestion isn't hers. A woman named Peabody, who came in complaining of colic pains. Dorothea said she would administer something appropriate, if I would go and fetch her some beer—it being not safe for her to venture to the ordinary alone."

I thought I detected a small note of reproach in his voice, but I made an indeterminate "hmm" in response and he said no more about my wandering the streets *en déshabillé*.

Possibly because he hadn't noticed that I was *en déshabillé*, until we entered the Hunters' big medical tent and I took my cloak off.

Denny gave me one brief, shocked look, coughed, and, picking up a canvas apron, managed to hand it to me without looking directly at me. Dottie, who was massaging the massive back of a very large woman seated hunched over on a stool in front of her, grinned at me over the woman's capped head.

"How are you, Auntie. Restless tonight?"

"Very," I replied frankly, putting on the apron. "This is Mrs. Peabody?"

"Yes." Dottie smothered a yawn with her shoulder. "The indigestion seems to be better—I gave her gripe water and peppermint," she added, to Denny. "But she's complaining of pains in her back, as well."

"Hmm." I came over and squatted down in front of the woman, who appeared to be half asleep—until I caught a whiff of her breath, which was eighty proof, at least. I put my hand on her belly to see if I could feel the location of the trouble, when she coughed thickly in a way I'd heard all too often before, choked—and I leapt back just in time.

"Thank you for the apron, Denny," I said mildly, brushing off some of the higher flecks of mud and vomit that had spattered on me. "I don't suppose you brought a birthing stool with you?"

"A birthing stool. To a battle?" he said faintly, his eyes bulging slightly behind his spectacles as he looked at the woman, now swaying ponderously to and fro, like a large bell making up its mind whether to ring or not.

"I rather think it may be one," I said, glancing round. "*If* she's in labor. Can you find a blanket, Dottie? I think we'll have to lay her on the ground; she'll collapse the cot."

It took all three of us to wrestle Mrs. Peabody—who relapsed comfortably into unconsciousness the moment we touched her—onto a blanket spread on the ground under the lantern. There was an almost instant insurgence of moths, as they came fluttering in, attracted not only by the light but by the assorted smells thickening the air.

Mrs. Peabody had lapsed not merely into unconsciousness but into what appeared to be an alcoholic coma. After a certain amount of discussion, we'd turned her onto one side, in case she should vomit again, and the position had allowed her belly to flow away from the rest of her corpulent body, so that it lay on the ground in front of her, gravid and sac-like. She looked like the queen of some order of social insect, ready to deliver in the thousands, but I refrained from mentioning this, as Dottie was still pale.

Denzell had recovered from the shock and was keeping an eye—or rather a hand—on her wrist, keeping track of her pulse. "Amazingly strong," he said at last, letting go, and looked up at me. "Does thee think she is near her time?"

"I really hope *not*," I said, looking down. "But there's no telling without … er … closer examination." I took a deep breath and a grip on my more generous instincts. "Would you like me to … er …"

"I'll go and find clean water," he said, springing to his feet and seizing a bucket.

Given that Dottie was engaged to Denny, I refrained from calling him a coward in her presence and merely waved him off in a reserved manner. Mrs. Peabody made me uneasy on a number of scores. I had no idea whether she might be about to go into labor, or, if she did, how her comatose state might affect it. The level of alcohol in her blood was certainly affecting the child's; would a drunken newborn be able to breathe? It wouldn't vomit, as there wasn't anything in its stomach *to* vomit, but might it void its bowels in utero and aspirate the material? That was a remarkably dangerous thing to happen even in a modern hospital with a full delivery-suite staff attending—most of the babies who did that died of suffocation, lung injury, or infection.

I was very much ashamed to admit to myself that my chief fear, though, was that something would happen during delivery that would require me to remain with mother and/or child for a prolonged period. I could not, by my oath as a physician—and what I conceived my responsibilities to be—abandon a patient in dire need of me.

But I *would* not abandon Jamie. I knew beyond all doubt that he was going into battle, and soon. He wasn't going without me.

A slight noise jerked me out of my hypothetical moral quandary. Dottie had started unpacking and had dropped an amputation saw. She stooped to pick it up and said something under her breath in German that I thought was probably a bad word—John always swore in German; perhaps it was a family habit.

Thought of John added another layer of guilt to my complicated feelings—though the logical part of my brain firmly rejected this as undeserved. Still, the worry for him couldn't be rejected so easily, though I did my best to tuck it away for the present.

"You needn't stay up, Dottie," I said. "I can take care of matters here. Nothing's going to happen immediately, regardless—I can make up the surgical kits."

"No, that's all right," she said, and then yawned involuntarily, gaping so widely that she startled herself and clapped a hand belatedly over her mouth. “Oh, dear. I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Fraser.” That made me smile; she had John’s elegant manners—perhaps Hal did, too, when he wasn’t engaging in undiluted bastardliness.

“Actually,” she said, fixing me directly with her striking gaze, “I’m pleased to have a chance to talk with you in privacy.”

“Oh?” I said, squatting to put a hand on Mrs. Peabody’s belly. I wasn’t feeling any movement from the baby, but they usually did go quiet if labor was impending. I could have used my stethoscope to listen for a fetal heartbeat, but it was in one of the boxes or bags that Ian and the orderly had carried off somewhere. Besides, whatever I heard or didn’t would make no difference to the immediate protocol.

“Yes.” Dottie sat down on a packing case as though it were a throne—like all the Greys I’d met, she had excellent posture. “I want to know the correct way of performing sexual intercourse.”

“Oh. Erm …”

She glanced down at Mrs. Peabody.

“And whether there is any way of preventing … er …”

“Pregnancy. To be sure.” I cleared my throat. I rather thought the sight of Mrs. Peabody would have put most young women off the idea of childbearing—if not sex—altogether. Dorothea Grey, though, was plainly a young woman of blood and iron.

“Don’t mistake me, Auntie,” she said earnestly. “Or do I mean Friend Claire? I *do* want children—want them terribly. But if there is any choice about giving birth on a battlefield or a moving ship, say—”

I seized on this last, in part to give myself time to compose something coherent in the way of advice. I’d rather thought

Rachel might want to talk about such things at some point, having no mother, but …

“A ship? Are you thinking of going home to England, then?”

She grimaced in a way that brought her father vividly before me, and I nearly laughed but fortunately didn’t.

“I don’t know. I dearly want to see Mama again, of course, and Adam … and my … well, actually, I doubt I should see any of my friends again.” She waved a hand, dismissing the friends. “Not that there aren’t any Quakers in society, but they’re all very rich, and we won’t be.”

She bit her lip, but in a way indicating calculation rather than chagrin.

“If I can contrive to make Denny marry me here, so that we arrived in England as husband and wife already, it would be a simple matter to find a London meeting that would welcome us. Whereas here—” She flung out a hand toward the hum of the camp around us. “His involvement in the war would always stand in his way, you see?”

“Even after the war is over?”

She gave me a patient look, too old for her face.

“Papa says that wars take three generations to fade from the ground where they’re fought. And from what I’ve seen, Friends have quite long memories, as well.”

“He might just have a point.” Mrs. Peabody had begun to snore wetly, but I felt no sense of contraction. I rubbed a hand through my hair and braced my back more comfortably against one of the packing crates set against the wall. “All right. Perhaps … a little basic anatomy, to begin with.”

I really had no idea how much—if anything—a nobly born young woman might have been told, or found out by other means, so began with female reproductive anatomy, starting with the womb—for surely she knew what that was—and leading outward, part by part.

"You mean it has a *name*?" she exclaimed, charmed, when I got to the clitoris. "I'd always thought of it as just, you know … *that* bit." Her tone of voice made it abundantly clear that I needn't explain what *that* bit did, and I laughed.

"To the best of my knowledge, it's the only structure of the human body that appears to have no function whatever save the pleasure of the owner."

"But men … don't they …?"

"Well, yes, they do," I said. "And very pleasurable they find theirs, too. But a penis is extremely functional, as well. You, er … do know how it … works? In terms of intercourse?"

"Denzell won't let me touch his naked member, and I'm *longing* to see it at my leisure—not just the odd glimpse when he, well, you know." Her eyes sparkled at the thought. "But I know what it feels like through his breeches. I was amazed, the first time it went stiff under my hand! However does it do that?"

I explained the concept of hydrostatic pressure as simply as possible, already seeing what was coming next. I cleared my throat and rose to my knees.

"I need to examine Mrs. Peabody for any sign of labor. And while we must be respectful of her privacy—so far as such a thing exists under these conditions"—for Dottie had snorted loudly—"since you're assisting me here, there's no reason why you shouldn't observe what I'm doing, and I'll explain it to you as we go. How things … work."

She hummed with interest as I gingerly unveiled Mrs. Peabody's nether regions, which were thickly forested but still identifiably—very identifiably—feminine.

“When the cervix—that’s the opening to the womb—when it begins to open in order for the baby to come out, there’s often some blood and mucus released, but it’s quite harmless. I don’t see any sign of it yet, though.” That heartened me.

“Oh,” said Dottie, rather faintly. But she leaned intently over my shoulder as I carefully inserted my freshly washed hand. “Oh!” Dottie said, in tones of extreme revelation. “*That’s* where it goes!”

“Well, yes, it is,” I said, trying not to laugh—and failing. “Denzell would have told you, I expect. Did you ask him?”

“No,” she said, sitting back a little on her heels but still watching closely as I put a hand on Mrs. Peabody’s abdomen and felt the cervix. Softened, but still firm. I began to breathe again.

“No?” I said, only half-attending.

“No.” She drew herself up. “I didn’t want to seem ignorant. Denny’s so—I mean, he’s *educated*. I can read, of course, and write, but only letters, and play music, but that’s useless. I bustle round after him and help where I can, of course, and he’s always so good about explaining things … but … well, I kept having this vision of our wedding night and him explaining it to me in just the same way he’d tell me how to suck the snot out of a child’s nose with a tube or hold the skin together so he could stitch a wound. And …” She made a graceful little moue, which had to be her mother’s legacy. “And I made up my mind it wasn’t going to be that way.”

“Very … um … commendable.” I withdrew my hand and wiped it, recovered Mrs. Peabody, and checked her pulse again—slow, but strong as a tympani; the woman must have the heart of an ox. “How—er—how *do* you want it to be? Bearing in mind,” I hastened to add, “that this sort of thing is rather variable.” Another thought occurred to me. “Has Denzell ever …? Though I don’t suppose you’d know.”

Her soft white brow wrinkled in thought.

“I don’t know; I never thought of asking him. I just assumed—well, I have brothers. I know *they* have, because they talk about it—whores, I mean—with their friends. I suppose I thought all men … but, come to think, perhaps Denny wouldn’t go to a prostitute. Do you think he might have?” Her brow furrowed a little, but she didn’t seem upset at the thought. Of course, it was probably commonly accepted in the Greys’ social circle that men, or soldiers at least, naturally would.

With very vivid memories of my own wedding night—and my stupefaction upon being informed that my bridegroom was a virgin—I temporized a bit.

“Possibly not. Now, being a medical man, plainly he must know the essential mechanics. But there *is* more to it than that.”

Her eyes grew brighter and she leaned forward, hands on her knees.

“Tell me.”

* * *

“RATHER LIKE EGG white mixed with a drop or two of civet. Theoretically good for the skin, though frankly—” I was saying, when I heard the sound of voices just outside the tent.

Rachel and Ian had returned, looking cheerful, flushed, and quite like young people who had just passed the last hour or two doing the sorts of things in which I'd been instructing Dottie. I saw her glance sideways at Rachel, then —very briefly—at Ian's breeches. Her color went up a notch.

Rachel didn't notice, her attention having fixed at once on Mrs. Peabody—well, everyone's attention was fixed on Mrs. Peabody; it was really impossible to look at anything else. She frowned at the supine woman on the ground and then looked at me.

"Where's Denzell?"

"An excellent question. He left a quarter of an hour ago to find water. There's beer, though, if you're thirsty." I nodded at the neglected pitcher.

Ian poured a cup for Rachel, waited while she drank it, then refilled it for himself, eyes still fixed on Mrs. Peabody, who was emitting a remarkable variety of noises, though still out cold.

"Does Uncle Jamie ken where ye are, Auntie?" he asked. "He was lookin' for ye just now. He said he'd put ye somewhere safe to sleep, but ye'd escaped. Again," he added with a broad grin.

"Oh," I said. "He's finished with the generals for the night, then?"

"Aye, he went to make the acquaintance o' some of the militia captains under him, but most had gone to sleep by then, so he went to join ye at the Chenowyths. Mrs. Chenowyth was a bit taken aback to find ye gone," he added delicately.

"I just came out for a little air," I said, defensive. "And then—" I gestured at the patient on the floor, who had now settled down to a rhythmic snore. Her color was looking better; that was heartening. "Er … is Jamie put out, do you think?"

Ian and Rachel both laughed at that.

"No, Auntie," Ian said. "But he's dead tired, and he wants ye bad."

"Did he tell you to say that?"

"Not in precisely those words," Rachel said, "but his meaning was plain." She turned to Ian, with a quick squeeze of his arm. "Would thee go and find Denny, Ian? Claire can't leave this woman alone—I think?" she asked, arching a brow at me.

"Not yet," I said. "She doesn't seem to be going into labor immediately"—I crossed my fingers against the possibility—"but she oughtn't to be left alone in this state."

"Aye, of course." Ian yawned suddenly, widely, but then shook himself back into alertness. "If I come across Uncle Jamie, I'll tell him where ye are, Auntie."

He left, and Rachel poured another cup of beer, which she offered me. It was room temperature—and a warm room, at that—but refreshingly sour and strong. I hadn't really thought I was tired, but the beer revivified me astonishingly.

Dottie, having checked Mrs. Peabody's pulse and breathing, laid a ginger hand on the distended bulge of pregnancy. "Has thee attended a birth before, good-sister?" Dottie asked Rachel, being careful of her plain speech.

"Several," Rachel replied, squatting down by Mrs. Peabody. "This looks somewhat different, though. Has she suffered some injur—oh!" The brewery reek hit her, and she reared back and coughed. "I see."

Mrs. Peabody uttered a loud moan and everyone stiffened. I wiped my hands on my apron, just in case. She relaxed again, though, and after a few moments' contemplative silence to see if Mrs. Peabody would do it again, Dottie took a deep breath.

"Mrs.—I mean, Friend Claire was just telling me some very interesting things. Regarding … er … what to expect on one's wedding night."

Rachel looked up with interest.

"I should welcome any such instruction myself. I know where the … um … parts go, because I've seen them go there fairly frequently, but—"

"You *have*?!?" Dottie gawked at her, and Rachel laughed.

"I have. But Ian assures me that he has more skill than the average bull or billy goat, and my observations are limited to the animal world, I'm afraid." A small line showed between her brows. "The woman who cared for me after the death of my parents was … very dutiful in informing me of my womanly obligations, but her instructions consisted largely of 'Spread thy legs, grit thy teeth, girl, and let him.' "

I sat down on the packing case and stretched to ease my back, suppressing a groan. God knew how long it might take Ian to find Jamie among the teeming hordes. And I did hope that Denny hadn't been knocked on the head or trampled by a mule.

"Pour me another cup of beer, will you? And have some more yourselves. I suspect we may need it."

* * *

"… and if he says, 'Oh, God, oh, God,' at some point," I advised, "take note of what you were just doing, so you can do it again next time."

Rachel laughed, but Dottie frowned a little, looking slightly cross-eyed.

"Do you—does thee—think Denny would take the Lord's name in vain, even under those circumstances?"

“I’ve heard him do it on much less provocation than that,” Rachel assured her, stifling a burp with the back of her hand. “He tries to be perfect in thy company, thee knows, for fear thee will change thy mind.”

“He does?” Dottie looked surprised but rather pleased. “Oh. I wouldn’t, thee knows. Ought I to tell him?”

“Not until he says, ‘Oh, God, oh, God,’ for thee,” Rachel said, succumbing to a giggle.

“I wouldn’t worry,” I said. “If a man says, ‘Oh, God,’ in that situation, he nearly always means it as a prayer.”

Dottie’s fair brows drew together in concentration.

“A prayer of desperation? Or gratitude?”

“Well … that’s up to you,” I said, and stifled a small belch of my own.

Approaching male voices outside the tent made us all glance self-consciously at the empty beer pitcher and sit up straight, poking at our slightly disheveled hair, but none of the gentlemen who came in were in any condition to cast stones.

Ian had found Denzell *and* Jamie, and somewhere along the way they had acquired a small, stout companion in a cocked hat, with his hair in a stumpy pigtail. All of them were flushed and, while certainly not staggering, were surrounded by a distinct haze of fermented barleycorn.

“There ye are, Sassenach!” Jamie brightened still further at seeing me, and I felt a small rush of delight at it. “Are ye—who’s this?” He had been advancing toward me, hand outstretched, but stopped abruptly at sight of Mrs. Peabody, who was lying with her arms flung out, mouth wide open.

“That’s the lady I told ye about, Uncle Jamie.” Ian wasn’t staggering, either, but was distinctly swaying and took hold of the tent pole to steady himself. “The one that’s …

ehm …" He gestured with his free hand to the gentleman in the cocked hat. "She's his wife."

"Oh? Aye, I see." He edged gingerly around Mrs. Peabody's recumbent form. "She's no dead, is she?"

"No," I said. "I think I would have noticed." He might have been somewhat inebriated, but still caught the faint dubious emphasis I'd placed on "think." He knelt down carefully and put a hand in front of her open mouth.

"Nay, only drunk," he said cheerfully. "Shall we lend ye a hand to take her home, Mr. Peabody?"

"Better lend him a wheelbarrow," Dottie whispered to Rachel, beside me, but luckily no one noticed.

"That would be kindly of you, sir." Surprisingly, Mr. Peabody appeared to be the only sober one of the lot. He knelt and smoothed the damp hair tenderly off his wife's brow. "Lulu? Wake up, darling. Time to be going now."

To my surprise, she opened her eyes and, after blinking several times in confusion, appeared to fix her gaze on her husband.

"There you are, Simon!" she said, and, with a rapturous smile, fell soundly back asleep.

Jamie rose slowly, and I could hear the small bones in his back pop as he eased himself. He was still flushed and smiling, but Ian had been right—he *was* dead tired. I could see the deep lines of weariness in his face and the hollows under his bones.

Ian saw them, too.

"Auntie Claire's in need of her bed, Uncle Jamie," he said, squeezing Jamie's shoulder and giving me a meaning look. "It's been a long night for her. Take her along, aye? Denny and I can help Mr. Peabody."

Jamie gave his nephew a sharp look and then turned the same look on me, but I obligingly yawned widely enough to make my jaw crack—no great effort—and with a final quick look at Mrs. Peabody to be *sure* she was neither dying nor going into labor, I took his arm and towed him determinedly outside, waving briefly in farewell.

Outside, we both drew deep breaths of fresh air, sighed in unison, and laughed.

"It *has* been rather a long night, hasn't it?" I put my forehead against his chest and my arms around him, slowly rubbing the knobs of his vertebrae through his coat. "What happened?"

He sighed again and kissed the top of my head.

"I've command of ten companies of mixed militia from Pennsylvania and New Jersey; the marquis has command of a thousand men—including mine—and is in charge of a plan to go and bite the British army in the arse."

"Sounds like fun." The racket of the camp had died down considerably, but the thick air still held the vibrations of many men, awake or uneasily asleep. I thought I could feel that same expectant vibration pass through Jamie, in spite of his obvious tiredness. "You need sleep, then."

His arm tightened round me and his free hand traveled slowly down my back. I'd left Denny's apron in the tent, and my cloak was over my arm; the thin muslin of my shift might as well have not existed.

"Oh, God," he said, and his big, warm hand cupped my buttock with a sudden urgency. "I need *you*, Sassenach. I need ye bad."

The shift was just as thin in front as in back; I could feel his waistcoat buttons—and a few other things—through it. He did want me bad.

“Do you mind doing it in a crypt that smells of wee?” I asked, thinking of the Chenowyths’ back bedroom.

“I’ve taken ye in worse places, Sassenach.”

Before I could say, “Name three,” the tent flap opened to disgorge a small procession, this consisting of Denzell, Dottie, Rachel, and Ian, each couple carrying one end of a canvas sheet on which lay the protuberant form of Mrs. Peabody. Mr. Peabody led the way, lantern held high.

We were standing in shadow, and they passed without noticing us, the girls giggling at the occasional stumble, the young men grunting with effort, and Mr. Peabody calling out encouragement as they made their laborious way through the darkness, presumably heading for the Peabody abode.

The tent stood before us, dark and invitingly empty.

“Aye?”

“Oh, yes.”

The stretcher bearers had taken the lantern, and the setting moon was the barest sliver above the horizon; the inside of the tent was filled with a soft, dusty black that rose up around us in a fragrantly alcoholic cloud—with a faint tang of vomit—when we stepped inside.

I recalled exactly where things were, though, and we managed to push together four of the packing crates. I spread my cloak on these, he took off his coat and waistcoat, and we lay down precariously in the beery dark together.

“How long do you think we have?” I asked, undoing his flies. His flesh was warm and hard under my hand, and his skin there soft as polished silk.

“Long enough,” he said, and brushed my nipple with his thumb, slowly, in spite of his own apparent urgency. “Dinna hurry yourself, Sassenach. There’s no telling when we’ll have the chance again.”

He kissed me lingeringly, his mouth tasting of Roquefort and port. I could feel the vibration of the camp here, too—it ran through both of us like a fiddle string pegged tight.

"I dinna think I've got time to make ye scream, Sassenach," he whispered in my ear. "But I've maybe time to make ye moan?"

"Well, possibly. It's some time 'til dawn, isn't it?"

Whether it was the beer and premarital explanations, the late hour and lure of secrecy—or only Jamie himself and our increasing need to shut out the world and know only each other—he had time, and to spare.

"Oh, God," he said at last, and came down slowly on me, his heart beating heavy against my ribs. "Oh … God."

I felt my own pulse throb in hands and bones and center, but couldn't manage any response more eloquent than a faint "Ooh." After a bit, though, I recovered enough to stroke his hair.

"We'll go home again soon," I whispered to him. "And have all the time in the world."

That got me a softly affirmative Scottish noise, and we lay there for a bit longer, not wanting to come apart and get dressed, though the packing cases were hard and the possibility of discovery increasing with each passing minute.

At last he stirred, but not to rise.

"Oh, God," he said softly, in another tone altogether. "Three hundred men." And held me tighter.

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STINKING PAPIST

THE SUN WASN'T YET above the horizon, but the horse park was busy as an anthill, full of grooms, foragers, teamsters, and farriers, all scurrying about their business in an incongruous soft pink light filled with the sound of hundreds of pairs of steadily champing jaws. William picked up the bay gelding's hoof and held out his hand for the hoof pick his new, small groom was clutching nervously to his chest.

"Now, come here, Zeb," he said coaxingly. "I'll show you how it's done; there's nothing to it."

"Yes, sir." Zebedee Jeffers edged an inch closer, eyes flicking back and forth from the hoof to the towering mass of horseflesh. Jeffers did not like horses. He particularly didn't like Visigoth. William thought it was just as well that Zeb likely didn't know what a Visigoth was.

"All right. See there?" He tapped the pick against the shadow: the edge of a small rock that had trapped itself under the curve of the iron shoe during the night. "It's only a little one, but it feels just like a pebble in your own shoe would feel, and he'll go lame if we don't take care of it. Here, it's not stuck fast; do you want to try?"

"No, sir," Zeb said honestly. Zebedee came from the shore of Maryland and knew about oysters, boats, and fish. Not horses.

"He won't hurt you," William said, with a touch of impatience. He'd be riding back and forth along the columns a dozen times a day, carrying dispatches and gathering reports; both his horses needed to be kept ready, his regular groom, Colenso Baragwanath, was down with a fever, and he hadn't time to find another servant.

"Yes, he will. Sir," Zeb added as an afterthought. "See?" He held out a scrawny arm, displaying what was undoubtedly a festering bite mark.

William suppressed the urge to ask what the devil the boy had been doing to the horse. Visigoth wasn't a bad-tempered horse on the whole, but he could be irritable, and Zeb's nervous fidgeting was enough to try anyone, let alone a tired and hungry horse.

"All right," he said with a sigh, and pried the rock loose with one sharp dig. "Better, then?" he said to the horse, running a hand down the leg and then patting Goth's flank. He felt in his pocket and drew out a bunch of limp carrots, bought the night before from a farmwoman who'd come through camp with baskets of produce on a yoke across her broad shoulders.

"Here. Give him that; make friends with him," he suggested, handing a carrot to Zeb. "Hold it flat on your hand." Before the boy could extend this putative olive branch, though, the horse reached down and snatched it from his fingers with an audible crunch of big yellow teeth.

The boy uttered a small shriek and took several steps back, collided with a bucket, and fell over it, arse over teakettle.

Torn between annoyance and an unseemly urge to laugh, William smothered both and went to pick his groom out of a manure pile.

"Tell you what," he said, dusting the boy off with a firm hand, "you see that *all* my dunnage is aboard the baggage wagon, see if Colenso needs anything, and make sure there's something for me to eat tonight. I'll ask Sutherland's groom to tend the horses."

Zeb sagged with relief.

"Thank you, sir!"

"And go see one of the surgeons and have that arm tended to!" William shouted after him, above the rising sound of braying and whickering. The boy's shoulders rose up around his ears and he walked faster, pretending he hadn't heard.

William saddled Goth himself—he always did, not trusting anyone else to check tack that his life might depend on—then left him with his other horse, Madras, and went to find Lord Sutherland's groom. Despite the bustle, he had no trouble finding the string; Sutherland had ten horses, all prime creatures of sixteen hands or so, and at least a dozen grooms to tend them. William was just concluding negotiations with one of these when he caught sight of a familiar face among the throng.

"Shit," he said, under his breath, but Captain Richardson had seen him and was coming toward him, smiling genially.

"Captain Lord Ellesmere. Your servant, sir."

"Yours, sir," William said, as pleasantly as he could. *What did the scoundrel want now*? he wondered. Not that Richardson *was* a scoundrel—or not necessarily one, despite Randall's warning. It might, after all, be Randall who was the scoundrel. But he did hold rather a grudge against Richardson, on Mother Claire's account, as well as his own. The thought of Mother Claire stabbed him unexpectedly, and he forced it back. None of it was *her* fault.

"I'm surprised to see you here, your lordship," Richardson said, glancing round at the roiling camp. The sun was up, and bands of gold lit the fog of dust rising from the mules' rough coats. "You are a conventioneer, are you not?"

"I am," William said coldly. Richardson certainly knew he was. William felt obliged to defend himself, though against what, he wasn't sure. "I cannot fight." He spread his arms slightly. "As you see, I carry no weapons." He made polite motions indicating his immediate need to be elsewhere, but Richardson went on standing there, smiling with that very ordinary face, so unremarkable that his own mother probably couldn't pick him out of a crowd, save for a large brown mole on the side of his chin.

"Ah, to be sure." Richardson drew a little closer, lowering his voice. "That being the case … I wonder whether—"

"No," William said definitely. "I am one of General Clinton's aides, and I cannot leave my duty. You will excuse me, sir; I am expected."

He turned on his heel and made off, his heart hammering—and realized rather belatedly that he had left his horse behind. Richardson was still standing at the far side of the horse park, talking to a groom who was taking down the pickets, coiling the rope around one shoulder as he did so. The crowd of horses and mules was swiftly diminishing, but there were enough still near Visigoth to enable William to duck in and pretend to be fiddling with his saddlebags, head bent to hide his face until Richardson should go away.

The conversation had left him with an unsettling image of his erstwhile stepmother as he had last seen her, disheveled and *en déshabillé* but glowing with a radiant life he had never seen. He didn't suppose she was his stepmother anymore, but he'd liked her. Belatedly, it occurred to him that Claire now-Fraser still *was* his stepmother—by a different father.… Bloody hell.

He set his teeth, rummaging in the saddlebag for his canteen. Now that that Scotch bugger had returned from his watery grave, throwing everything and everyone into confusion … why couldn't he have drowned and never come back?

Never come back.

"You are a stinking Papist, and your baptismal name is James." He froze as though shot in the back. He bloody remembered it. The stables at Helwater, the warm smell of horses and mash, and the prickle of straw that worked its way through his stockings. Cold stone floors. He'd been crying … Why? All he recalled was a huge wash of desolation, total helplessness. The end of the world. Mac leaving.

He took a long, slow breath and pressed his lips together. Mac. The word didn't bring back a face; he couldn't remember what Mac had looked like. He'd been big, that was all. Bigger than Grandfather or any of the footmen or the other grooms. *Safety. A sense of constant happiness like a soft, worn blanket.*

"Shit," he whispered, closing his eyes. And had that happiness been a lie, too? He'd been too little to know the difference between a groom's deference to the young master and real kindness. But …

“ ‘You are a stinking Papist,’ ” he whispered, and caught his breath on something that might have been a sob. “ ‘And your baptismal name is James.’ ”

“It was the only name I had a right to give ye.”

He realized that his knuckles were pressed against his chest, against his gorget—but it wasn’t the gorget’s reassurance that he sought. It was that of the little bumps of the plain wooden rosary that he’d worn around his neck for years, hidden under his shirt where no one would see it. The rosary Mac had given him … along with his name.

With a suddenness that shocked him, he felt his eyes swim. *You went away. You left me!*

“Shit!” he said, and punched his fist so hard into the saddlebag that the horse snorted and shied, and a bolt of white-hot pain shot up his arm, obliterating everything.

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DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

IAN WOKE JUST BEFORE dawn to find his uncle squatting beside him.

“I’m away to break bread wi’ the captains of my companies,” Jamie said without preamble. “Ye’ll report to Colonel Wilbur as a scout. And will ye see about horses, Ian? I’ll need a spare mount, gun-broke, and so will you.” He dropped a purse on Ian’s chest, smiled, and vanished into the morning mist.

Ian rolled slowly out of his blanket, stretching. He’d chosen his resting spot well away from the main camp, on a small rise of ground near the river. He didn’t bother wondering how Uncle Jamie had found him, or waste time in marveling at his uncle’s recuperative powers.

He took his time about his preparations, dressed carefully, and found some food, thinking over the things that must be done. He’d dreamed during the night, and the dream was still on him, though he couldn’t recall the details. He’d been in thick woods, and something was there with him, hiding among the leaves. He wasn't sure what it was, or even if he'd seen it, but the sense of danger lingered uneasily between his shoulder blades. He'd heard a raven calling in his dream, and that was certainly a warning of some kind—but then the raven had flown past him, and it wasn't a raven at all but a white bird of some kind. Its wing had touched his cheek in flight, and he could still feel the brush of its feathers.

White animals were messengers. Both the Mohawk and the Highlanders said so.

He was an Indian and a Highlander; dreams were not to be dismissed. Sometimes the meaning of a dream floated to the surface of your mind like a drowned leaf rising. He let it go, hoping the dream would return to explain itself, and went about his work, seeing Colonel Wilbur, finding and haggling for two reasonable horses, big enough to bear a large man through battle … but the white bird stayed by him all day long, hovering just above his right shoulder, a glimpse now and then in the corner of his eye.

* * *

IN THE LATE afternoon, his business done for the moment, he returned to the main camp and found Rachel standing in line with a number of other women at the well in the yard of the Goose and Grapes, two buckets resting at her feet.

"I could take those down to the river for ye," he offered. She was flushed with the heat of the day but looked beautiful, her bare arms brown and the curving muscle of them so neat and delicate that it lifted his heart to look at them.

"I thank thee, Ian, but no." She smiled up at him and reached to tweak one of the two eagle feathers he'd knotted into his hair. "Thy auntie says the boats throw their waste into the river, and half the army is pissing in it, as well, and she's right. I should need to walk a mile upstream to find a clean place from which to draw water. Is thee about thy business, then?"

She spoke with interest but with no sense of concern or disapproval, and he appreciated that.

"I willna kill anyone unless I have to, Rachel," he said softly, and touched her cheek. "I'm signed on as a scout. I shouldna have to."

"But things happen," she said, and looked away, to keep him seeing the sudden shadow in her eyes. "I know."

With an unexpected spurt of impatience, he wanted to ask her: would she rather he kill or *be* killed for the sake of his soul's grace? But he smothered the impulse, and the tinge of anger with it. She loved him, he didn't doubt that. It was maybe a fair question to put to a Quaker, but not to his betrothed.

Her eyes were on his face, interested and thoughtful, and he felt a slight flush rise in his cheeks, wondering just how much of his thoughts showed.

"Thy life's journey lies along its own path, Ian," she said, "and I cannot share thy journey—but I can walk beside thee. And I will."

The woman standing behind them in the line heaved a deep, contented sigh.

"Now, that's a very pretty and right thing to say, sweetheart," she said to Rachel, in approving tones. And, switching her gaze to Ian, looked him skeptically up and down. He was dressed in buckskins, clout, and calico shirt, and, bar the feathers in his hair and the tattoos, didn't look too outlandish, he thought.

"You probably don't deserve her," the woman said, shaking her head doubtfully. "But try, there's a good lad."

* * *

HE CARRIED THE water for Rachel, making their way through the sprawl of the camp toward the place where Denzell had set up his medical practice. The tent was still standing, but Denzell's wagon with its painted goldfinches on the tailboard was drawn up beside it, Dottie standing in it, and Denzell handing up parcels and boxes to her.

Rachel stood on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, then vanished into the tent to help with the packing.

"Wilt thee join us later, Ian?" Denny looked up from the pack he was strapping together.

"Anywhere, *a bhràthair*," Ian said, smiling. "Where are ye bound, then?"

"Oh. Nowhere." Denny took off his spectacles, polishing them absently on the tail of his shirt. "It's not yet First Day, but we may well be engaged in battle then; we thought to hold meeting before supper tonight. We would be pleased if thee feels it good to sit with us, but if not …"

"No, I'll come," Ian said quickly. "To be sure. Ah … where …?" He waved a hand vaguely, indicating the half-ordered chaos of the camp surrounding them. New companies of militia were still coming in from New Jersey and Pennsylvania to join the Continental soldiers, and while officers had been assigned to receive and organize these and help them find campgrounds, they were swiftly overwhelmed. Men were making camp anywhere they could find open ground, and there was great to-ing and fro-ing in search of water and food, arguments and raised voices, and the sound of industrious shoveling and muttered curses nearby indicated the creation of yet another set of sanitary trenches. A constant small procession of persons who couldn't wait visited a nearby copse in hopes of a private moment. Ian made a mental note to step wary if he walked that way.

"Ye dinna mean to do it here, surely?" People came in and out all day, in need of the doctor's attention, and wouldn't be likely to stop, only because meeting was being held.

"Friend Jamie says he will provide us a refuge," Denny assured him. "We'll go as soon as—who has thee there, Dorothea?"

Dottie was stowing supplies but had paused to talk with a young girl who had climbed up to kneel on the wagon's seat and was addressing Dorothea earnestly.

"It's a woman in childbed, Denny," she called. "Three campfires over!"

"Urgent?" Denny at once began unstrapping the pack he had just done up.

"This child says so." Dottie straightened up and tucked her straggling fair hair back under her cap. "It's her mother's fourth; no trouble with the first three, but given the conditions …" She sidled past the baggage to the lowered tailboard, and Ian gave her a hand to hop down.

"She really wanted Mrs. Fraser," Dottie said to Denny, *sotto voce*. "But she'll settle for thee." She dimpled. "Is thee flattered?"

"I see my reputation spreads like pomade on a silken pillow," he replied tranquilly. "And thy use of plain speech inflames me. Thee had best come with me. Will thee watch the wagon, Ian?"

The two of them made off through the maze of wagons, horses, and stray pigs—some enterprising farmer had driven a dozen lean hogs into camp, seeking to sell them to the quartermaster, but the pigs had taken fright at the inadvertent explosion of a musket nearby and run off among the crowd, causing mass confusion. Rollo had run one down and broken its neck; Ian had bled and eviscerated the carcass and—after giving Rollo the heart and lights—stashed it under damp canvas, hidden beneath Denzell's wagon. Should he meet the distraught swineherd, he'd pay him for the beast, but he wasn't letting it out of his sight. He stole a quick glance under the skirting board, but the canvas-covered lump was still there.

Rollo moved a little and made an odd sound, not quite a whine, that shifted Ian's attention at once to the dog.

"How is it, *a choin*?" he asked. Rollo at once licked his hand and panted in a genial fashion, but Ian slid off the wagon tongue and knelt in the leaves, feeling his way over the big, shaggy body, just in case. Palpating, Auntie Claire called it, a word that always made Ian smile.

He found a little tenderness where the dog had been shot the autumn before, in the meat of the shoulder just above the foreleg, but that was always there. And a spot on his spine, a few inches forward of the beast's tail, that made him splay his legs and groan when it was pressed. Maybe Rollo had strained himself taking down the hog.

"None sae young as ye used to be, are ye, *a choin*?" he asked, scratching Rollo's whitened jaw.

“None of us are, *a mac mo pheathar,*” said his uncle Jamie, coming out of the gloaming and sitting down on the stump Dottie had been using to mount the wagon. He was wearing full uniform and looked hot. Ian passed over his canteen and Jamie took it with a nod of thanks, wiping his sleeve across his face.

“Aye, day after tomorrow,” he said, in answer to Ian’s raised brow. “First light, if not before. Wee Gilbert’s got command of a thousand men and permission to go after the rear guard.”

“You—I mean us”—Ian corrected himself—“with him?”

Jamie nodded and drank deep. Ian thought he looked a bit tense, but, after all, he was in command of three hundred men—if all of them were going with La Fayette …

“I think they’re sending me with him in hopes that my ancient wisdom will balance the Seigneur de La Fayette’s youthful enthusiasm,” Jamie said, lowering the canteen with a sigh. “And it’s maybe better than staying back wi’ Lee.” He grimaced. “Boiling Water thinks it beneath his dignity to marshal no but a thousand men and declined the command.”

Ian made a noise indicating amusement at this and faith in his uncle’s sagacity. It might be fun, harrying the British rear. He felt a tingle of anticipation at thought of putting on his war paint.

“Where’s Denzell gone?” Jamie asked, glancing at the wagon.

“Attending a childbirth over yon,” Ian said, lifting his chin in the direction Denzell and Dottie had taken. “He says ye’re hosting a Quaker meeting tonight.”

Jamie lifted a thick brow glistening with droplets of sweat.

“Well, I wasna planning to join in, but I said they might use my tent and welcome. Why, are ye going yourself?”

“Thought I might,” Ian said. “I was invited, after all.”

“Were ye?” Jamie looked interested. “D’ye think they mean to convert ye?”

“I dinna think that’s how Quakers work,” Ian said, a little ruefully. “And good luck to them if they do. I think the power o’ prayer must have limits.”

That made his uncle snort with amusement, but Jamie shook his head. “Never think it, laddie,” he advised. “If wee Rachel sets her mind to it, she’ll have your sword beaten into a plowshare before ye can say Peter Piper picked a peck o’ pickled peppers. Well, twice,” he added. “Or maybe three times.”

Ian made a dissentient noise through his nose. “Aye, and if I were to try bein’ a Friend, who would there be to protect the lot of ’em? Rachel and her brother and Dottie, I mean. Ye ken that, don’t ye? That they can only be what they are because you and I are what we are?”

Jamie leaned back a little, purse-lipped, then gave him the ghost of a wry smile.

“I ken that fine. And so does Denzell Hunter; it’s why he’s here, though it’s cost him his home and his meeting. But, mind, they’re worth protecting—beyond you bein’ in love wi’ Rachel, I mean.”

“Mmphm.” Ian wasn’t in the mood to discuss philosophy, and he doubted his uncle was, either. The light was in that long hour before darkfall, when the things of the forest pause and draw breath, slowing for the night. It was a good time to hunt, because the trees slowed first, so you saw the animals still moving among them.

Uncle Jamie kent that. He sat, relaxed, nothing moving save his eyes. Ian saw his gaze flick up and turned his own head to see. Sure enough, a squirrel clung to the trunk of a sycamore, ten feet away. He'd not have seen it, had he not caught the last flick of its tail as it stilled there. He met Jamie's eyes, and they both smiled and sat silent for a while, listening to the racket of the camp, even this beginning to mute itself.

Denzell and Dottie hadn't come back; perhaps the birth was more complicated than Denny had thought. Rachel would be going to Jamie's tent soon, for the meeting.

He wondered about that. You needed a meeting, to counsel the two of you, then to approve and witness the marriage. Might Denny have it in his mind to establish a new Friends meeting, within which he could marry Dottie—and Rachel might wed Ian?

Jamie sighed and stirred, getting ready to rise.

"Ahh … Uncle," Ian said, in a casual tone that made his uncle instantly focus attention on him.

"What?" said his uncle warily. "Ye havena got your lass wi' child, have ye?"

"I have not," Ian said, offended—and wondering vaguely how his uncle had known he was thinking of Rachel. "And why would ye think a thing like that, ye evil-minded auld mumper?"

"Because I ken well enough what 'Ahh … Uncle' usually means," Jamie informed him cynically. "It means ye've got yourself into some confusion involving a lass and want advice. And I canna think what ye could be confused about wi' regard to wee Rachel. A more straightforward lass I've never met—bar your auntie Claire, that is," he added, with a brief grin.

"Mmphm," Ian said, not best pleased by his uncle's acuity, but obliged to admit the truth of it. "Well, then. It's only …" Despite the completely benign intent—the *innocence,* even—of the question that had come into his mind, he felt his face go hot.

Jamie raised his brows.

"Well, if ye must know, then—I've never lain wi' a virgin." Once he'd got it out, he relaxed a little, though his uncle's brows nearly met his hairline. "And, aye, I'm sure Rachel is one," he added defensively.

"I'm sure, too," his uncle assured him. "Most men wouldna consider it a problem."

Ian gave him a look. "Ye ken what I mean. I want her to like it."

"Verra commendable. Have ye had complaints from women before?"

"Ye're in a rare mood, Uncle," Ian said coldly. "Ye ken verra well what I mean."

"Aye, ye mean if ye're paying a woman to bed ye, ye're no likely to hear anything ye dinna like regarding your own performance." Jamie rocked back a little, eyeing him. "Did ye tell Rachel ye're in the habit of consorting wi' whores?"

Ian felt the blood rush to his ears and was obliged to breathe evenly for a moment before replying.

"I told her everything," he said between clenched teeth. "And I wouldna call it a 'habit.' " He did know better than to go on with, *"It's no more than other men do,"* because he kent fine what sort of answer he'd get to *that.*

Fortunately, Jamie seemed to have reined in his jocularity for the moment and was considering the question.

"Your Mohawk wife," he said delicately. "She, er …"

“No,” Ian said. “The Indians see bedding a bit differently.” And, seizing the opportunity to get a bit of his own back, added, “D’ye not recall the time we went to visit the Snowbird Cherokee and Bird sent a couple of maidens to warm your bed?”

Jamie gave him an old-fashioned sort of look that made him laugh.

“Tell me, Ian,” he said, after a pause, “would ye be having this conversation with your da?”

“God, no.”

“I’m flattered,” Jamie said dryly.

“Well, see …” Ian had answered by reflex and found himself fumbling for an explanation. “It—I mean … it’s no that I wouldna talk to Da about things, but if he’d told me anything about … it would ha’ been to do with him and Mam, wouldn’t it? And I couldna … well, I couldn’t, that’s all.”

“Mmphm.”

Ian narrowed his eyes at his uncle.

“Ye’re no going to try and tell me that my mother—”

“Who’s my sister, aye? No, I wouldna tell ye anything like that. I see your point. I’m only thinkin’…” He trailed off and Ian gave him a pointed look. The light was fading, but there was still plenty. Jamie shrugged.

“Aye, well. It’s only—your auntie Claire was widowed when I wed her, aye?”

“Aye. So?”

“So it was me that was virgin on our wedding night.”

Ian hadn’t thought he’d moved, but Rollo jerked his head up and looked at him, startled. Ian cleared his throat.

“Oh. Aye?”

"Aye," said his uncle, wry as a lemon. "And I was given any amount of advice beforehand, too, by my uncle Dougal and his men."

Dougal MacKenzie had died before Ian was born, but he'd heard a good bit about the man, one way and another. His mouth twitched.

"Would ye care to pass on any of it?"

"God, no." Jamie stood up and brushed bits of bark from the tails of his coat. "I think ye already ken ye should be gentle about it, aye?"

"Aye, I'd thought of that," Ian assured him. "Nothing else?"

"Aye, well." Jamie stood still, considering. "The only useful thing was what my wife told me on the night. 'Go slowly and pay attention.' I think ye canna go far wrong wi' that." He settled his coat on his shoulders. "*Oidhche mhath*, Ian. I'll see ye at first light—if not somewhat before."

"*Oidhche mhath*, Uncle Jamie."

As Jamie reached the edge of the clearing, Ian called after him.

"Uncle Jamie!"

Jamie turned to look over his shoulder.

"Aye?"

"And was she gentle with ye?"

"God, no," Jamie said, and grinned broadly.

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CASTRAMETATION

THE SUN WAS LOW in the sky by the time William reached Clinton’s camp, and lower still before he’d turned Goth over to Sutherland’s grooms. Zeb was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he was with Colenso.

He delivered his cartouche of dispatches to Captain von Munchausen, saw the company clerk, and found the tent he shared with two other young captains, both of the 27th Foot. Randolph Merbling was sitting outside, reading by the last of the sun, but there was no sign of Thomas Evans—nor of Colenso Baragwanath. Nor of Zebedee Jeffers. Nor of William’s baggage.

He breathed for a moment, then shook himself like a dog shedding water. He was so tired of being angry that he just couldn’t be arsed anymore. He shrugged, borrowed a towel from Merbling, washed his face, and went to find a bite to eat.

He’d made up his mind not to think about anything whatever until he’d had some food and largely succeeded, letting roast chicken, bread, cheese, and beer fill at least some of his empty spaces. As he finished, though, a sudden sharp image punctured his pleasant digestive reverie. A flushed, pretty face, with wary eyes the exact color of the cider he was drinking.

Jane. Bloody hell! What with one thing and another, he'd quite forgotten the whore and her sister. He'd told them to meet him at the surgeon's tent at sundown.… Well, the sun wasn't down yet. He was on his feet and on his way, but then had a second thought and, going back to the cook, wangled a couple of loaves and some cheese, just in case.

Castrametation was the science of laying out a proper military camp. Drainage, sanitary trenches, where to put the powder depot to avoid flooding if it rained … He'd had a brief course in it once. He'd likely never need to do it himself, but it did help in locating things, if you knew where they were supposed to be. And when in camp, the hospital was meant to be on the opposite side from command headquarters, close to water but on a height, if one was available.

One was, and he found the large green-canvas tent without difficulty. Could have found it with his eyes closed. Surgeons carried the smell of their work around with them, and the whiff of dried blood and the uneasy tang of sickness and recent death were perceptible at a hundred yards. It was worse—much worse—after a battle, but there was always illness and accident, and the stink lingered even on peaceful days, aggravated now by the muggy heat that lay like a wet blanket over the camp.

There were men, and not a few women, clustered round the tent, waiting for attention. He gave them a quick glance, but didn't see Jane. His heart had sped up a little at thought of seeing her, and he felt unaccountably disappointed. No reason why, he told himself. She and her sister would be nothing but trouble to him. They must have grown tired waiting, and—

"You're very late, my lord," said an accusatory voice at his elbow, and he whirled round to see her looking down her nose at him—as well as someone who was shorter than he could do, which wasn't very well. He found himself smiling down at her, absurdly.

"I said sundown," he replied mildly, nodding toward the west, where a thin slice of brilliance still glowed through the trees. "Not down yet, is it?"

"The sun takes a bloody long time to go down out here." She switched her disapproval to the orb in question. "It's much faster in the city."

Before he could argue with this ridiculous assertion, she'd glanced back at him, frowning.

"Why aren't you wearing your gorget?" she demanded, hands on her hips. "I went to a deal of trouble to get it back for you!"

"I'm exceedingly grateful to you, ma'am," he said, striving for gravity. "I thought it might provoke inquiries, though, should I turn up suddenly in the midst of camp wearing it, and I thought you and your sister might just possibly wish to avoid … tedious explanations?"

She sniffed, but not without amusement.

"How thoughtful. Not quite so thoughtful of your servants, though, are you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Come with me." She linked her arm with his and towed him off toward the wood before he could protest. She led him to a small lean-to shelter in the undergrowth, which seemed to have been constructed of an unstuffed army bed sack and two petticoats. Bending down at her invitation, he discovered her sister, Fanny, within, sitting next to a bed sack that had been stuffed with fresh grass, upon which crouched both Colenso and Zeb, both looking bewildered. On sight of him, they crouched further.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he demanded. "And where is my dunnage, Zeb?"

"Back there, sir," Zeb quavered, jerking a thumb toward the growth behind the lean-to. "I couldn't find your tent and I didn't want to leave it, see."

"But I told you—and what about you, Baragwanath? Are you still ill?" William demanded, kneeling down suddenly and thrusting his head into the shelter. Colenso looked bad, pale as a cup of soured milk, and plainly in pain, curled up into himself.

"Oh … 'tisn't nothin', sir," he said, swallowing heavily. "Just must have … ate … something."

"Did you see the surgeon?"

Colenso turned his face into the bed sack, shoulders hunched. Zeb was edging away, apparently thinking of making a run for it.

William grabbed him by the arm; the little groom yelped and he let go. "What's wrong? Did you not have that arm seen to?"

"They're afraid of the surgeons," Jane said sharply.

William drew himself up to his full height and glared down at her.

"Oh? Who told them they should be afraid of the surgeons? And how do they come to be in *your* care, may I ask?"

Her lips pressed tight together, and she glanced involuntarily into the shelter. Fanny was looking out at them, doe eyes huge in the fading light. She swallowed and put a protective hand on Colenso's shoulder. Jane sighed deeply and took William's arm again.

"Come with me."

She led him away a short distance, still within sight of the little shelter but out of earshot.

"Fanny and I were waiting for you when those boys came along together. The bigger one—*what* did you say his name is?"

"Colenso Baragwanath. He's Cornish," William added shortly, seeing a look of amusement flit across her face.

"Really. I hope it isn't catching. Well, he was so ill he couldn't stand, and sank down on the ground near us, making the most horrid noises. The little one—yes, I know he's Zebedee, thank you—was beside himself, half-weeping with confusion. My sister is a most tenderhearted creature," she said, rather apologetically. "She went to help, and I followed." She shrugged.

"We got Colenso into the wood far enough to get his britches down in time, and I gave him a little water." She touched a small wooden canteen that hung from her shoulder, and he wondered briefly where she'd got it. She hadn't had it when he'd met the girls by the creek yesterday.

"I am much obliged to you, ma'am," he said formally. "Now—why is it, exactly, that you did not then take the boys in to see the surgeons?"

For the first time, her composure showed signs of cracking. She turned a little away from him, and he noticed the last rays of the sun polishing the smooth crown of her head with a faint, familiar gleam of chestnut. The sight of it brought back memory of his first meeting with her with the force of a thunderclap—and, with it, the memory of his mingled shame and arousal. Especially the latter.

“Answer me,” he said, more roughly than he’d intended, and she turned on him, eyes narrowed at his tone.

“There was a finger lying on the ground by the surgeon’s tent,” she snapped. “It frightened my sister, and the boys took fright from her.”

William rubbed a knuckle down the bridge of his nose, eyeing her.

“A finger.” He had himself seen piles of amputated limbs outside the surgeons’ tents at Saratoga, and aside from a quick prayer of gratitude that none of the disconnected arms and legs was his, had experienced no particular qualms. “Whose was it?”

“How should I know? I was too much occupied in keeping your orderly from shitting himself to ask.”

“Ah. Yes. Thank you,” he said, rather formally. He glanced toward the shelter again and was surprised to see that Fanny had come out and was hovering a little way from her sister, a wary look on her lovely face. Did he look threatening? he wondered. Just in case, he relaxed his posture a bit and smiled at Fanny. She didn’t change expression, but continued to stare at him suspiciously.

He cleared his throat and took the sack off his shoulder, holding it out to Jane. “I thought you might have missed your supper. Have the boys—well, Zeb, at least—eaten anything?”

Jane nodded and took the bag with a celerity suggesting that it had been some time since the girls had had a meal. “He ate with the other grooms, he said.”

“All right, then. I’ll take him in to have his arm seen to and perhaps get a dose for Colenso, while you and your sister refresh yourselves. Then, madam, we can discuss your own situation.”

He’d been intensely aware of her physical presence for some moments, but when he said that, she turned the full effect of her eyes on him—*cider,* he thought vaguely, *or sherry wine*?—and seemed somehow to *flow*, shifting in some indefinable way. He hadn’t seen her move, but suddenly she was standing near enough to touch, and he smelled the odor of her hair and imagined he felt the warmth of her skin through her clothes. She took his hand briefly, and her thumb moved across the palm, slowly. The palm tingled and the hairs on his arm rippled.

“I’m sure we can come to a reasonable accommodation, my lord,” she said, very grave, and let him go.

He dragged Zeb into the surgeon’s tent like a recalcitrant colt and stood by, only half-attending, as a young Scottish surgeon with freckles swabbed the boy’s wound clean of dirt. Arabella–Jane didn’t smell of the whorish scent she’d worn at the brothel, but, by Christ, she smelled good.

“We should cauterize the wound, sir,” the young doctor’s voice was saying. “It will stop an abscess forming, aye?”

“No!” Zeb jerked away from the doctor and made a dash for the door, knocking into people and sending one woman flying with a shriek. Jolted out of his random thoughts, William made a reflexive dive and knocked the boy flat.

“Come on, Zeb,” he said, hauling Zeb to his feet and propelling him firmly back to Dr. MacFreckles. “It won’t be that bad. Just a moment or two, and then it’s all over.”

Zeb appearing patently unconvinced by this, William deposited him firmly on a stool and pulled up his own right cuff.

"Look," he said, displaying the long, comet-shaped scar on his forearm. "*That's* what happens when you get an abscess."

Both Zeb and the doctor peered at the scar, impressed. It had been a splinter wound, he told them, caused by a lightning-struck tree.

"Wandered round the Great Dismal Swamp for three days in a fever," he said. "Some … Indians found me and got me to a doctor. I nearly died, and"—he lowered his brows and gave Zeb a piercing look—"the doctor was just about to *cut off my arm,* when the abscess burst and he cauterized it. You might not be so lucky, hey?"

Zeb still looked unhappy, but reluctantly agreed. William gripped him by the shoulders and said encouraging things while the iron was heating, but his own heart was beating as fast as it might have had he been awaiting cautery himself.

Indians. One, in particular. He'd thought he'd exhausted his anger, but there it bloody was again, bursting into bright fresh flame like an ember smashed open with a poker.

Bloody fucking Ian Murray. Fucking Scot and sometime Mohawk. His bloody fucking *cousin*, which made it all that much worse.

And then there was Rachel.… Murray had taken him to Dr. Hunter and Rachel. He drew a deep, ragged breath, remembering her worn indigo gown, hanging on its peg in the Hunters' house. Grabbing a handful of the cloth and pressing it to his face, breathing in her scent as though starved of air.

That was where Murray had met Rachel himself. And now she was *betrothed* to that—

"Ow!" Zeb writhed, and William realized belatedly that he was digging his fingers into the boy's shoulder, just like—he let go as though Zeb were a hot potato, feeling the memory of James Fraser’s iron grip on his arm and the agonizing pain that had numbed him from shoulder to fingertip.

“Sorry,” he said, voice shaking a little with the effort to hide his fury. “Sorry, Zeb.” The surgeon was ready with the glowing iron; William took Zeb’s arm, as gently as he could, and held it still while the thing was done. Rachel had held his own.

He’d been right; it was quick. The surgeon pressed the hot iron to the wound and counted five, slowly, then took it away. Zeb went stiff as a tent pole and sucked in enough breath to supply three people, but didn’t scream.

“It’s done,” the doctor said, taking the iron away and smiling at Zeb. “Here, I’ll put a bit of sweet oil on and bandage it. Ye did well, laddie.”

Zeb’s eyes were watering, but he wasn’t crying. He sniffed deeply and wiped the back of his hand across his face, looking up at William.

“Well done, Zeb,” William said, squeezing his shoulder gently, and Zeb managed a tiny smile in return.

By the time they’d returned to the girls and Colenso, William had managed to tamp down the rage—again. Was he never going to be able to get rid of it? *Not ’til you make up your mind what to do about things*, he thought grimly. But there wasn’t anything that could be done right now, so he squashed all the sparks in his head firmly into one dense red ball and rolled it to the back of his mind.

“Here, let Fanny do it. He trusts her.” Jane took the vial containing the dose Dr. MacFreckles had made up for Colenso and gave it to her sister. Fanny promptly sat down beside Colenso, who was pretending as hard as he could to be asleep, and began stroking his head, murmuring something to him.

William nodded and, gesturing to Jane to accompany him, withdrew far enough to be out of earshot. Rather to his surprise, part of his brain had apparently been analyzing the problem and coming to conclusions while the rest was occupied, for he had a rough plan.

“What I suggest is this,” he said, without preamble. “I will make provision for you and your sister to receive regular army rations, as camp followers, and to travel under my protection. Once in New York, I will give you five pounds, and you’re on your own. In return …”

She didn’t quite smile, but a dimple showed in one cheek.

“In return,” he repeated more firmly, “you will mind my orderly and my groom, tend their ills, and make sure they’re reasonably cared for. You will also be my laundress.”

“Your laundress?!” The dimple had disappeared abruptly, replaced by an expression of sheer astonishment.

“Laundress,” he repeated doggedly. He knew what she’d been expecting him to propose and was rather surprised himself that he hadn’t, but there it was. He couldn’t, not with his thoughts of Rachel and of Anne Endicott so fresh in his mind. Not with the deep, smothered rage fueled by the thought that he deserved no woman but a whore.

“But I don’t know how to do laundry!”

“How hard can it be?” he asked, as patiently as he could. “You wash my clothes. Don’t put starch in my drawers. That’s about it, isn’t it?”

“But—but—” She looked aghast. “One needs a … a kettle! A fork, a paddle, something to stir with … Soap! *I* haven’t any soap!”

"Oh." That hadn't occurred to him. "Well …" He dug in his pocket, found it empty, and tried the other, which held a guinea, tuppence, and a florin. He handed her the guinea. "Buy what you need, then."

She looked at the golden coin in her palm, her face utterly blank. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"What's the matter?" he asked impatiently. She didn't answer, but a soft voice behind him did.

"The duffent know how."

He whirled to find Fanny looking up at him from under her cap, her delicate cheeks flushed red by the sunset.

"What did you say?"

Fanny's soft mouth pressed tight and her cheeks grew redder, but she repeated it, dogged. "The … duffent … know how."

Jane reached Fanny in two steps, putting an arm around her sister's shoulders and glaring at William.

"My sister's tongue-tied," she said, daring him to say anything. "That's why she's afraid of the surgeons. She thinks they will amputate her tongue if they find out."

He drew a deep, slow breath.

"I see. And what she said to me … 'She doesn't know how'? She means you, I collect? What is it, pray, that you don't know how?"

"Muddy," whispered Fanny, now staring at the ground.

"Mud—money?" He stared at Jane. "You don't know how to—"

"I've never *had* any money!" she snapped, and threw the guinea on the ground at his feet. "I know the names of the coins, but I don't know what you can buy with them, except—except—what you can buy in a brothel! My cunt is worth six shillings, all right? My mouth is three. And my arse is a pound. But if someone gave *me* three shillings, I wouldn't know if I could buy a loaf of bread or a horse with them! I've never bought *anything*!"

"You—you mean—" He was so flabbergasted, he couldn't string words into a sentence. "But you have wages. You said—"

"I've been a brothel whore since I was ten years old!" Her fists clenched, knuckles sharp under the skin. "I never *see* my wages! Mrs. Abbott spends them—she says—for my—our—food and clothes. I've never had a penny to my name, let alone spent one. And now you hand me … *that*"—she stamped her foot on the guinea, driving it into the ground—"and tell me to buy a kettle?!? Where? How? From whom?!"

Her voice shook and her face was a deal redder than the setting sun could make it. She was furious, but also very near to tears. He wanted to take her in his arms and soothe her, but thought that might be a good way to lose a finger.

"How old is Fanny?" he asked instead. She jerked her head up, panting.

"Fanny?" she said blankly.

"I'm e-lev-en," Fanny's voice said behind him. "You weve her *awone*!"

He turned to see the girl glaring up at him, a stick clutched in her hand. He might have laughed, if not for the expression on her face—and if not for what he'd just realized. He took a step back, so as to see both girls at once, and like magnet and iron, they came together and clung, both staring distrustfully at him.

"How much is her maidenhead worth?" he asked Jane baldly, with a nod at Fanny.

"Ten pounth," Fanny answered automatically, just as Jane shouted, "She's not for sale! To you or any other bugger!" She pressed Fanny fiercely closer, daring him to make a move toward the girl.

"I don't *want* her," he said through his teeth. "I don't fornicate with children, for God's sake!"

Jane's hard expression didn't alter, and she didn't loosen her grip on her sister.

"Then why did you ask?"

"To verify my suppositions regarding your presence here."

Jane snorted. "Those being?"

"That you ran away. Presumably because your sister has now reached an age where …?" He raised an eyebrow, nodding at Fanny. Jane's lips compressed, but she gave him a tiny, grudging nod.

"Captain Harkness?" he asked. It was a shot in the dark, but well aimed. Harkness hadn't been pleased at being deprived of his prey and, unable to come at William, might well have decided to take his revenge elsewhere.

The light bathed everything in tones of gold and lavender, but he could see Jane's face go pale, nonetheless, and felt a tightening in his loins. If he found Harkness … He resolved to go looking tomorrow. The man might be in Philadelphia, as she'd said—but he might not. It would be a welcome focus for his rage.

"Right, then," he said, as matter-of-factly as he could. He stooped and pried the guinea out of the soft earth, realizing as he did so that he'd been a fool to offer it to her. Not because of what she'd told him but because someone like her—or Colenso—would never have such a sum. They'd be suspected of stealing it and very likely would be relieved of it by the first person to see it.

“Just look after the boys, will you?” he said to Jane. “And the both of you keep clear of the soldiers until I can find you simple clothes. Dressed like that”—he gestured at their dust-smudged, sweat-stained finery—“you’ll be taken for whores, and soldiers don’t take no for an answer.”

“I am a whore,” Jane said, in a strange, dry voice.

“No,” he said, and felt his own voice as oddly separate from himself but very firm. “You’re not. You travel under my protection. I’m not a pimp—so you’re not a whore. Not until we reach New York.”

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A DISCOVERY IN THE RANKS

THE 16TH PENNSYLVANIA militia company, Captain the Reverend Peleg Woodsworth in command, marched into camp in good order, having paused just outside to tidy themselves, clean their weapons, and wash their faces. Lord John knew no one would take notice but approved of the preparations on grounds of good military discipline, as he explained to Germain.

“Slovenly troops make bad fighters,” he said, critically examining a large rent in the sleeve of his filthy black coat. “And soldiers must be in the habit of obeying orders, no matter what those orders are.”

Germain nodded. “Aye, that’s what my mam says. Doesn’t matter whether ye see the point or not, ye do as ye’re told, or else.”

“Your mother would make an admirable sergeant,” Grey assured his orderly. He’d encountered Marsali Fraser once or twice, at her printshop. “Splendid grasp of the essence of command. Speaking of ‘or else,’ though—what, exactly, do you expect to happen when you go home?”

It was evident that Germain hadn’t given much thought to the prospect, but after a moment he uncreased his brow.

“Likely it’ll depend how long I’ve been gone,” he said, with a shrug. “If I went back tomorrow, I’d get my ears blistered and my arse, too. But I think if I was to be gone longer than a week, she’d be pleased I wasna deid.”

“Ah. Have you heard the story of the Prodigal Son, by chance?”

“No, me lo—er … Bert.” Germain coughed. “How does it go?”

“It’s—” he began automatically, but then stopped dead, feeling as though a stake had been driven through his chest. The company had already begun to fray and straggle; the few men behind him merely skirted him and went past. Germain twisted round to see what he was looking at.

“It’s that man who pretends to be a Frenchman. My father doesn’t like him.”

Grey stared at the gentleman in the suit of very fashionable blue and gray-striped silk, who was likewise staring at Grey, mouth slightly open, ignoring the small knot of Continental officers accompanying him.

“I know a lot of Frenchmen,” Grey said, recovering his breath. “But you’re right; that’s not one of them.” He turned his back on the man, mind awhirl, and gripped Germain by the arm.

“Your grandfather has to be in this moil somewhere,” he said, forcing resolution into his voice. “Do you see the building over there, with the flag?” He nodded at the limp banner, on the far side of the sprawling camp, but clearly visible. “Go there. That will be the commander in chief’s headquarters. Tell one of the officers who you're looking for; they'll find him for you among the militia."

"Oh, they won't have to," Germain assured him. "*Grand-père* will be there."

"Where?"

"With General Washington," Germain said, with the exaggerated patience of those forced to consort with dunces. "He's a general, too; did ye not know that?" Before Grey could respond to this piece of flabbergasting intelligence, Germain had scampered away in the direction of the distant banner.

Grey risked a glance over his shoulder, but Perseverance Wainwright had disappeared, as had the Continental officers, leaving only a couple of lieutenants in conversation.

He thought several blasphemous things in a row, alternating between Jamie Fraser and Percy Wainwright as the recipients of assorted violent assaults of a personal nature. What the fucking *hell* was either of them doing here? His fingers twitched, wanting to strangle someone, but he fought back this useless impulse in favor of deciding what the devil to do now.

He began to walk hastily, with no clear notion where he was going. Percy had seen him, he knew that much. Jamie hadn't, but might at any moment. *A general? What the—no time to worry about that just now*. What might either one of them do about it?

He hadn't seen Percy—ex-lover, ex-brother, French spy, and all-around shit—since their last conversation in Philadelphia, some months before. When Percy had first reappeared in Grey's life, it had been with a last attempt at seduction—political rather than physical, though Grey had an idea that he wouldn't have balked at the physical, either.… It was an offer for the British government: the return to France of the valuable Northwest Territory, in return for the promise of Percy's "interests" to keep the French government from making an alliance with the American colonies.

He had—as a matter of duty—conveyed the offer discreetly to Lord North and then expunged it—and Percy—from his mind. He had no idea what, if anything, the First Minister had made of it.

Too late now in any case, he thought. France had signed a treaty with the rebellious colonies in April. It remained to be seen, though, whether that treaty would result in anything tangible in the way of support. The French were notoriously unreliable.

So now what? His instinct toward self-preservation urged him to fade quietly through the camp and disappear as quickly as possible. Germain wouldn't tell Jamie he was here; they'd agreed that much in advance. Two considerations held him back, though: first, the minor matter that he didn't yet know where the British army was or how far away. And second … a sense of curiosity about Percy that he himself recognized as dangerously reckless.

He'd kept moving, since to stand still was to be knocked over and trampled, and now found himself walking beside the Reverend Woodsworth. The tall minister's face was suffused with an excitement that kept breaking through the man's normal mien of calm dignity, and Grey couldn't help smiling at it.

"God has brought us safe thus far, Bert," Woodsworth said, looking about him with shining eyes. "And He will grant us victory, I know it!"

“Ah.” Grey groped for some reply, and finding—to his surprise—that he was incapable of agreeing with this statement, settled for, “I suppose we cannot presume to divine the Almighty’s intent, but I do trust He will preserve us, in His mercy.”

“Very well said, Bert, very well said.” And Woodsworth clapped him resoundingly on the back.

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QUAKERS AND QUARTERMASTERS

JAMIE FOUND NATHANAEL Greene in his tent and still in shirtsleeves, the remains of breakfast on a table before him, frowning at a letter in his hand. He put this down at once upon seeing Jamie and rose to his feet.

"Come in, sir, do! Have you et anything yet today? I've a spare egg going to waste." He smiled, but briefly; whatever had troubled him about the letter still lurked in the creases of his brow. Jamie glanced at it from the corner of his eye; from the blots and ragged edge, it looked a piece of domestic correspondence, rather than an official note.

"I have, I thank ye, sir," Jamie said, with a slight bow of acknowledgment toward the egg, which sat neglected in a little wooden cup with a flowered heart painted on it. "I only wondered, if ye meant to ride out today, might I come with ye?"

"Of course!" Greene looked surprised but pleased. "I should welcome your advice, General."

"Perhaps we might trade wisdom, then," Jamie suggested. "For I should value your own advice, though perhaps on a different matter."

Greene paused, coat half-pulled on.

"Really? Advice on what sort of matter?"

"Marriage."

Greene's face struggled between astonishment, a courteous attempt to suppress the astonishment, and something else. He glanced behind him at the letter lying on the table and settled his coat on his shoulders.

"I could use sound advice on *that* matter myself, General Fraser," he said, with a wry twist of the lips. "Let's be off, then."

They rode out of camp north by northwest—Greene was equipped with a battered compass, and Jamie wished for a moment that he still possessed the gold-plated astrolabe that William had sent from London at the behest of Lord John. That had perished when the Big House burned, though the spurt of dark feeling that went through him now had more to do with the thought of John Grey than with the fire and its aftermath.

Conversation at first dealt only with the business at hand: the location of supply dumps along the probable line of march—and, if necessary, retreat, though no one spoke of that possibility. There was no particular doubt as to where the British army was headed; a body that large, with an enormous baggage train and outlying flocks of camp followers, was limited in its choice of roads.

"Aye, that would do," Jamie said, nodding in agreement at Greene's suggestion of an abandoned farmstead. "D'ye think the well's good?"

"I'm minded to find out," Greene said, turning his horse's head toward the farm. "It's hot as Hades already. Scorch our ears off by noon, I reckon."

It was hot; they'd left off their stocks and waistcoats and were riding in shirtsleeves, coats across their saddlebows, but Jamie felt the linen of his shirt sticking to his back and sweat trickling over his ribs and down his face. Fortunately, the well *was* still good; water glimmered visibly below, and a stone dropped in gave back a satisfactory *plunk!*

"I confess I'm surprised to find you in want of advice regarding marriage, General," Greene said, having first drunk his fill and then upended a bucketful of water luxuriously over his head. He blinked water off his lashes, shook himself like a dog, and handed the bucket to Jamie, who nodded thanks. "I should have thought your own union most harmonious."

"Aye, well, it's not my own marriage I'm worrit for," Jamie said, grunting a little as he pulled up a fresh full bucket—hand over hand, for the windlass had rotted away and he'd been obliged to fetch a rope from his saddlebag. "Will ye ken a young scout named Ian Murray? He's my nephew."

"Murray. Murray …" Greene looked blank for a moment, but then comprehension dawned. "Oh, him! Yes, drat him. Your nephew, you say? Thought he was an Indian. Cost me a guinea on that race. My wife won't be happy about that at all. Not that she's happy at the moment, regardless," he added with a sigh. Evidently the letter *had* been domestic.

"Well, I might persuade him to give it ye back," Jamie said, suppressing a smile, "if ye might be able to help him to wed."

He raised the bucket overhead and gave himself over to a moment of joy as the drench of water quenched the heat. He drew one deep, grateful breath of coolness, tasting of the dank stones at the bottom of the well, and likewise shook himself.

"He means to marry a Quaker lass," he said, opening his eyes. "I kent that ye were a Friend yourself, havin' heard ye speak to Mrs. Hardman when we met. So I wondered, maybe, if ye could tell me just what's needed in the way of requirement for such a marriage?"

If Greene had been surprised to find that Ian was Jamie's nephew, this news seemed to knock him speechless. He stood for a moment, pushing his lips in and out, as though they might suck up a word he could spit back out, and at last found one.

"Well," he said. He paused for a bit, considering, and Jamie waited patiently. Greene was a man of fairly strong opinions, but he didn't give them hastily. Jamie did wonder what there was to consider in his question, though—were Quakers even stranger in their customs than he thought?

"Well," Greene said again, and exhaled, settling his shoulders. "I must tell you, General, that I no longer consider myself a Friend, though I was indeed raised in that sect." He shot Jamie a sharp look. "And I must also tell you that the cause of my departure was a mislike of their narrow-minded, superstitious ways. If your nephew means to turn Quaker, sir, I'd recommend you do your best to dissuade him."

"Och. Well, that's part of the difficulty, I gather," Jamie replied equably. "He doesna mean to turn Quaker himself. And I think that a wise decision; he isna suited for it at all."

Greene relaxed a little at that and went so far as to smile, if wryly.

"I'm glad to hear it. But he has no objection to his wife remaining a Friend?"

"I think he's better sense than to suggest otherwise."

That made Greene laugh. "Perhaps he'll manage marriage well enough, then."

"Oh, he'll make a bonny husband for the lass, I've nay doubt. It's the getting them wed that seems a difficulty."

"Ah. Yes." Greene glanced round the homestead, wiping his wet face with a wadded handkerchief. "That might in fact be *very* difficult, if the young woman … well. Let me think for a moment. In the meantime … the well's good, but we can't store powder here; there's not much roof left, and I'm told this weather often presages thunderstorms."

"There's likely a root cellar at the back," Jamie suggested.

There was. The door had gone and a tangle of spindly, pallid vines had sprouted from a rotted sack of potatoes abandoned in the corner, tendrils crawling in slow desperation toward the light.

"It'll do," Greene decided, and made a penciled note in the small book he carried everywhere. "Let's move on, then."

They let the horses drink, poured more water over themselves, and rode on, gently steaming. Greene was not a chatterer, and there had been no conversation for a mile or two, when he finally reached a conclusion of his mental processes.

"The principal thing to bear in mind regarding Friends," he said, without preliminary, "is that they depend very much upon one another's company and opinion—often to the exclusion of the world outside their meetings." He shot

Jamie a glance. “The young woman—is your nephew known to her meeting?”

“Mmphm,” Jamie said. “As I understand from her brother, they were both put out of their meeting—in a small place in Virginia when he decided to become a surgeon in the Continental army. Or perhaps he was put out, and she merely went with him; I dinna ken whether it makes a difference.”

“Oh, I see.” Greene plucked the wet shirt away from his body in hopes of admitting a little air to his skin, but it was a vain hope. The air lay thick as a woolen blanket on the simmering countryside. “A ‘fighting Quaker,’ as they call it?”

“No, he willna take up arms,” Jamie assured Greene, “but apparently his merely being connected with the army offended his meeting.” Greene snorted in what appeared to be a personal way, and Jamie cleared his throat. “In fact, Denzell Hunter—Dr. Hunter—also is engaged to be married. Though his path may be somewhat smoother, in that his bride has become a Friend herself.”

“Has she a home meeting?” Greene asked sharply. Jamie shook his head.

“No, it appeared to be a … private event. The conversion, I mean. I am told that Quakers dinna have either clergy or ritual …?” He left that hanging delicately, and Greene snorted again.

“Nor do they. But I assure you, General, there is nothing truly private in a Friend’s life—certainly no spiritual matter. My own father opposed reading, as being a practice likely to separate one from God, and when as a young man I not only read but began to collect works on military strategy, in which I had an interest, I was brought before an examination committee from our meeting and subjected to such questions as to—well, as I say, I am no longer a member of that sect."

He blew out his lips and made small rumbling noises for a bit, frowning at the road ahead—though Jamie saw that, even in his preoccupation, Greene was taking note of their surroundings, with an eye to logistics.

He himself had become aware of a certain vibration in the air and wondered if Greene sensed it. Not quite noise, it was a disturbance that he knew well: a large body of men and horses, too far away to see their dust—but there. They'd found the British army. He slowed a little, looking carefully at the trees ahead in case of British scouts—for the British must surely know by now that they were pursued.

Greene's hearing was less acute, though, or perhaps he was only preoccupied, for he glanced at Jamie in surprise, though he slowed, as well. Jamie raised a hand to stop him speaking and lifted his chin—there was a rider coming toward them, following the road. The sound of hooves was audible, and Jamie's own mount flung up his head and whickered with interest, nostrils flaring.

Both men had come armed; Greene set a hand on the musket balanced across his saddle. Jamie left his rifle in its sling but checked the priming of the pistols in his saddle holsters. Awkward to fire a long gun from horseback.

The rider was coming slowly, though; Jamie's hand on the pistol's grip relaxed, and he shook his head at Greene. They reined up, waiting, and a moment later the rider came in view.

"Ian!"

"Uncle Jamie!" Ian's face blossomed with relief at sight of him, and no wonder. He was dressed like a Mohawk, in buckskin leggings and calico shirt, with feathers in his hair, and a long, hairy gray carcass lay across his saddlebow, blood dripping slowly from it down the horse's leg.

The beast wasn't dead, though; Rollo twitched and raised his head, giving the newcomers a yellow wolf glare, but recognized Jamie's scent and barked once, then let his tongue loll out, panting.

"What's happened to the hound, then?" Jamie rode up alongside and leaned forward to look.

"The numpty fell into a deadfall trap," Ian said, frowning rebuke at the dog. Then he gently scratched the big dog's ruff. "Mind, I'd ha' fallen in it myself, if he hadna gone before me."

"Bad hurt?" Jamie asked. He didn't think so; Rollo was giving General Greene his usual look of appraisal—a look that made most people take a few steps back. Ian shook his head, his hand curled into Rollo's fur to keep him steady.

"Nay, but he's torn his leg and he's lame. I was looking for a safe place to leave him; I've got to report in to Captain Mercer. Though seein' as you're here—oh, good day to ye, sir," he said to Greene, whose horse *had* backed up in response to Rollo and was presently indicating a strong desire to keep going, in spite of his rider's inclination. Ian sketched a salute and turned back to Jamie. "Seein' as you're here, Uncle Jamie, could ye maybe fetch Rollo back to the lines with ye and get Auntie Claire to tend his leg?"

"Oh, aye," Jamie said, resigned, and swung down from the saddle, groping for his soggy handkerchief. "Let me bind his leg first. I dinna want blood all over my breeks, and the horse willna like it, either."

Greene cleared his throat.

"As you mention reporting, Mr.… Murray?" he asked, with a sideways glance at Jamie, who nodded. "Perhaps you'd be so good as to give me, as well as Captain Mercer, the benefit of your report?"

"Aye, sir," Ian said agreeably. "The army's divided into three bodies now, wi' a great long line o' baggage wagons in between. Sae far as I could tell—I exchanged words wi' another scout who'd gone all the way up the column—they're headed toward a place called Freehold. The ground's no verra good for attack—folded up like a used napkin, all cut up wi' ravines and bitty creeks—though the other scout told me there's meadows beyond that might do for a fight, and ye could lure them or drive them out there."

Greene asked sharp questions, some of which Ian could answer and some he couldn't, while Jamie tended to the ginger business of binding up the dog's leg—there was a nasty stake wound, though not too deep; he hoped the stake hadn't been poisoned. Indians would do that sometimes, in case a wounded deer or wolverine might spring out of the trap.

Jamie's horse was not enthused at the prospect of carrying a wolf on his back but eventually was persuaded, and with no more than a nervous eye roll backward now and then, they were mounted.

"Fuirich, a choin," Ian said, leaning over and scratching Rollo behind the ears. "I'll be back, aye? *Taing,* Uncle!" And with a brief nod to Greene, he was away, his own horse clearly wanting to put as much distance between himself and Rollo as possible.

"Dear Lord," Greene said, wrinkling his nose at the dog's reek.

"Aye, well," Jamie said, resigned. "My wife says ye get used to any sort of smell after a bit of smelling it. And I suppose she'd know."

“Why, is she a cook?”

“Och, no. A physician. Gangrene, ken, festering bowels and the like.”

Greene blinked.

“I see. You have a most interesting family, Mr. Fraser.” He coughed and looked after Ian, rapidly vanishing in the distance. “You might be wrong about him never becoming a Quaker. At least he doesn’t bow his head to a title.”

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A VISCOUS THREE-WAY

JAMIE CAME BACK from his ride with General Greene looking damp, wrinkled, and completely disheveled but otherwise refreshed—and with Rollo, bloody and disgruntled but not badly hurt.

“He’ll be fine,” I said, scratching Rollo gently behind the ears. The gash had bled a lot, but wasn’t deep. “I don’t think I’ll stitch it.”

“Dinna blame ye a bit, Sassenach,” Jamie said, glancing at the dog, who had suffered my cleaning, salving, and bandaging his leg but didn’t look at all inclined to stand for more fiddling. “Where are my good stockings?”

“In the portmanteau with your other linen,” I replied patiently. “Where they are every morning. Surely you know that?”

“I do,” he admitted. “I just like ye to tend to me.”

“All right,” I said, obligingly pulling them out. “D’you want me to put them on for you?”

"Nay, I can manage that," he said, taking them. "Could ye find my shirt, though?"

"I think I can do that, yes," I replied, taking the shirt out of the same portmanteau and shaking it out. "How was General Greene this morning?"

"Good. I asked him about the Quaker way of marriage," he said, pulling a fresh white shirt—his *only* fresh white shirt, as I pointed out—over his head.

"Evidently the difficulty is with Denzell and Rachel not havin' a home meeting, as it's called. It's no that they canna marry, but to do it in the proper way, it would involve the whole meeting. There's a thing called a Clearness Committee, which meets wi' the bride and groom to counsel them and make sure they're suited and that they've some notion what they're in for." He shrugged into the sleeves and grinned at me. "I couldna help thinking, while he was tellin' me, what a committee like that would have had to say about us when we wed."

"Well, they wouldn't have had any more notion what we were in for than we did," I said, amused. "Do you think they would have thought us well suited?"

"If they'd seen the way I looked at ye, Sassenach, when ye didna see me lookin'—then, aye, they would." He kissed me briefly and looked round for the hairbrush. "Can ye club up my hair for me? I canna be reviewing my troops like this." His hair was tied back carelessly with a leather thong, damp stray wisps sticking to his face.

"Of course. How many of them are you reviewing? And when?" I sat him down on the stool and set to work with the brush. "Have you been burrowing through the countryside headfirst? You have foxtails and leaves in your hair, and those winged seeds that elder trees make. Ooh! To say nothing of this.” I carefully removed a tiny green caterpillar that had become entangled in his tresses and showed it to him, perched inquisitively on my forefinger.

“Thalla le Dia,” he said to the caterpillar. *Go with God.* And taking it carefully onto his own finger, brought it to the tent flap and loosed it into the grass.

“All of them, Sassenach,” he said, returning and sitting down again. “My last two companies came in this morning; they’ll have been fed now and rested a bit. I meant to ask,” he added, twisting round to look up at me, “would ye come with me, Sassenach, and have a look at them? To see if any should be left back from the fighting or to tend any that might need the odd bit o’ repair.”

“Yes, of course. When?”

“Come to the parade ground in an hour, if ye would.” He passed a hand over the neatly gleaming auburn queue, doubled on itself and ribboned in a club at his nape. “Aye, that’s grand. Am I decent otherwise?”

He stood up and brushed bits of discarded leaf from his sleeve. The crown of his head brushed the tent, and he was glowing—with sun, energy, and the suppressed excitement of impending action.

“You look like bloody Mars, god of war,” I said dryly, handing him his waistcoat. “Try not to scare your men.”

His mouth quirked as he shrugged into the waistcoat, but he spoke seriously, eyes on mine.

“Och, I want them frightened of me, Sassenach. It’s the only way I’ll have a chance of bringing them out of it alive.”

* * *

WITH AN HOUR to spare, I took my kit of everyday medical supplies and went out to the big tree where the sick among the camp followers tended to gather. The army surgeons would tend camp followers as well as soldiers, if they had time—but they wouldn't be having time today.

There was the usual assortment of minor ailments and injuries: a deeply embedded splinter (infected, requiring the application of drawing salve, followed by excavation, disinfection, and bandage); a dislocated toe (caused by the patient having kicked a fellow in play, but the work of a moment to reduce); a split lip (requiring one stitch and a little gentian ointment); a badly gashed foot (the result of inattention whilst chopping wood, requiring twenty-eight stitches and a large dressing); one child with an ear infection (an onion poultice and willow-bark tea prescribed); another with the bellyache (peppermint tea and a strong admonition against eating eggs of unknown age out of birds' nests of unknown provenance)…

The few patients requiring medicines I put aside until I'd dealt with the injuries. Then—with a wary eye on the sun—I led them off to my tent to dispense packets of willow bark, peppermint, and hemp leaves.

The tent flap was open; surely I had left it closed? I ducked my head into the gloom of the tent and stopped abruptly. A tall figure stood before me, apparently in the act of rifling my medicine chest.

"What the devil are you doing with that?" I asked sharply, and the figure jerked, startled.

My eyes had now become accustomed to the diffuse light, and I saw that the thief—if that's what he was—was a Continental officer, a captain.

"I beg your pardon, madam," he said, giving me a perfunctory bow. "I had heard that there was a supply of medicaments here. I—"

"There is, and they're mine." This seemed a trifle ungracious—though I certainly thought his own attitude rather brusque—and I softened the remark a little. "What is it that you need? I imagine I can spare a little—"

"Yours?" He glanced from the chest—very clearly an expensive professional bit of furniture—to me, and his brows rose. "What are *you* doing with a thing like that?"

Several possible replies flitted through my head, but I'd recovered from the surprise of seeing him sufficiently as not to make any of them. I settled for a neutral "May I ask who you are, sir?"

"Oh." Mildly flustered, he bowed to me. "I beg pardon. Captain Jared Leckie, your servant, ma'am. I am a surgeon with the Second New Jersey."

He eyed me consideringly, clearly wondering who the devil *I* was. I was wearing a canvas apron with capacious pockets over my gown, these pockets presently stuffed with all manner of small instruments, dressings, bottles and jars of ointments and liquids. I'd also taken off my broad-brimmed hat when I came into the tent and, as usual, was not wearing a cap. I *had* bound up my hair, but it had come loose and was coiling damply round my ears. He obviously suspected me of being a laundress, come to collect soiled linen—or possibly something worse.

"I am Mrs. Fraser," I said, drawing myself up with what I hoped was a gracious nod. "Er … Mrs. *General* Fraser, that is," I added, seeing that he appeared unimpressed.

His eyebrows shot up, and he looked me openly up and down, his eyes lingering on the top pockets of my apron, these featuring an unwieldy rolled dressing in the act of coming unrolled and trailing down my front and a jar of asafoetida, whose cork was loose, thus allowing the reek of it to waft gently above the other notable smells of the camp. It was known commonly as "devil's dung," and for good reason. I pulled the jar out and pushed the cork in more securely. This gesture seemed somehow to reassure him.

"Oh! The general is a physician, I perceive," he said.

"No," I said, beginning to see that I should have uphill work with Captain Leckie, who appeared young and not overbright. "My husband is a soldier. *I* am a physician."

He stared at me as though I'd told him I was a prostitute. Then he made the mistake of assuming that I was joking and laughed heartily.

At this point, one of my patients, a young mother whose one-year-old son had an ear infection, poked her neatly capped head hesitantly into the tent. Her little boy was in her arms, howling and red-faced.

"Oh, dear," I said. "I'm so sorry to keep you waiting, Mrs. Wilkins. Do bring him in; I'll get the bark for him directly."

Captain Leckie frowned at Mrs. Wilkins and beckoned her closer. She looked nervously at me, but allowed him to lean down and look at little Peter.

"He has a difficult tooth," Leckie said, rather accusingly, after running a large, unwashed thumb through Peter's drooling mouth. "He ought to have the gum slit, to let the tooth come through." He began to fumble in his pocket, where he doubtless had a highly insanitary scalpel or lancet.

"He is teething," I agreed, shaking out a quantity of crumbled willow bark into my mortar. "But he also has an ear infection, and the tooth will come through of its own accord within the next twenty-four hours."

He rounded on me, indignant and astonished.

"Are you contradicting me?"

"Well, yes," I said, rather mildly. "You're wrong. You want to have a good look in his left ear. It's—"

"I, madam, am a diplomate of the Medical College of Philadelphia!"

"I congratulate you," I said, beginning to be provoked. "You're still wrong." Having thus rendered him momentarily speechless, I finished grinding the bark into powder and poured it into a square of gauze, which I folded into a neat packet and handed to Mrs. Wilkins, with instructions as to the brewing of the infusion and how to administer it, as well as how to apply an onion poultice.

She took the packet as though it might explode and, with a hasty glance at Captain Leckie, fled, little Peter's howls receding like a siren in the distance.

I drew a deep breath.

"Now," I said, as pleasantly as possible. "If you're in need of simples, Dr. Leckie, I have a good supply. I can—"

He had drawn himself up like a crane eyeing a frog, beady-eyed and hostile.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said curtly, and stalked past me.

I rolled my eyes up toward the canvas overhead. There was a small gecko-like creature clinging to the cloth, who viewed me with no particular emotion.

"How to win friends and influence people," I remarked to it. "Take note." Then I pushed the tent flap back and beckoned for the next patient to come in.

* * *

I HAD TO hurry in order to make my rendezvous with Jamie, who was just about to begin his review when I dashed up, twisting my hair into a mass and pinning it hastily under my broad-brimmed hat. It was a terribly hot day; being in the open sun for only a few minutes had made my nose and cheeks tingle warningly.

Jamie bowed gravely to me and began his advance along the line of men drawn up for review, greeting men, saluting officers, asking questions, giving his aide-de-camp notes of things to be done.

He had Lieutenant Schnell with him as aide-de-camp—a nice German boy from Philadelphia, perhaps nineteen—and a stout gentleman I didn't know but assumed from his uniform to be the captain in charge of whatever companies we were inspecting. I followed them, smiling at the men as I passed, while looking them over sharpish for any overt signs of illness, injury, or disability—I was sure that Jamie could spot excessive drunkenness without my expert opinion.

There were three hundred men, he'd told me, and most of them were quite all right. I kept walking and nodding, but wasn't above beginning to fantasize some dangerous circumstance in which I found Captain Leckie writhing in pain, which I would graciously allay, causing him to grovel and apologize for his objectionable attitude. I was trying to choose between the prospect of a musket ball embedded in his buttock, testicular torsion, and something temporarily but mortifyingly disfiguring, like Bell's palsy, when my eye caught a glimpse of something odd in the lineup.

The man in front of me was standing bolt upright, musket at port arms, eyes fixed straight ahead. This was perfectly correct—but no other man in the line was doing it.

Militiamen were more than capable, but they generally saw no point in military punctilio. I glanced at the rigid soldier, passed by—then glanced back.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!” I exclaimed, and only sheer chance kept Jamie from hearing me, he being distracted by the sudden arrival of a messenger.

I took two hasty steps back, bent, and peered under the brim of the dusty slouch hat. The face beneath was set in fierce lines, with a darkly ominous glower—and was completely familiar to me.

“Bloody effing hell,” I whispered, seizing him by the sleeve. “What are you *doing* here?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you,” he whispered back, not moving a muscle of face or body. “Do walk on, my dear.”

Such was my astonishment, I might actually have done it, had my attention not been drawn by a small figure skulking about behind the line, trying to avoid notice by crouching behind a wagon wheel.

“Germain!” I said, and Jamie whirled about, eyes wide.

Germain stiffened for an instant and then turned to flee, but too late; Lieutenant Schnell, living up to his name, sprang through the line and grabbed Germain by the arm.

“Is he yours, sir?” he asked, glancing curiously from Jamie to Germain and back.

“He is,” Jamie said, with a tone that had turned many a man’s blood to water. “What the devil—”

“I’m an orderly!” Germain said proudly, trying to detach himself from Lieutenant Schnell’s grip. “I’m supposed to be here!”

“No, you’re not,” his grandfather assured him. “And what do ye mean, an orderly? Whose orderly?”

Germain at once glanced in John's direction, then, realizing his mistake, jerked his eyes back, but it was too late. Jamie reached John in a single stride and ripped the hat off his head.

The face was identifiable as that of Lord John Grey, but only by someone who knew him well. He wore a black felt patch over one eye, and the other was all but obscured by dirt and bruises. He'd cut his luxuriant blond hair to roughly an inch in length and appeared to have rubbed dirt into it.

With considerable aplomb, he scratched his head and handed Jamie his musket.

"I surrender to you, sir," he said, in a clear voice. "To you, personally. So does my orderly," he added, putting a hand on Germain's shoulder. Lieutenant Schnell, quite flabbergasted, let go of Germain as though he were red-hot.

"I surrender, sir," Germain said solemnly, and saluted.

I'd never seen Jamie at a complete loss for words, and didn't now, but it was a near thing. He inhaled strongly through his nose, then turned to Lieutenant Schnell.

"Escort the prisoners to Captain McCorkle, Lieutenant."

"Er …" I said apologetically. A hard blue eye swiveled in my direction, brow raised.

"He's injured," I said, as mildly as I could, with a brief gesture in John's direction. Jamie's lips compressed for an instant, but he nodded.

"Take the prisoners—and Mrs. Fraser"—I daresay it was merely sensitivity on my part that perceived a certain emphasis on "Mrs. Fraser"—"to my tent, Lieutenant."

With scarcely a breath, he turned on John.

"I accept your surrender, Colonel," he said, with icy politeness. "And your parole. I will attend you later."

And, with that, he turned his back on the three of us, in what could only be described as a marked manner.

* * *

“WHAT ON EARTH happened to your eye?” I demanded, peering at it. I had John on the cot in my small medical tent, the flap open to admit as much light as possible. The eye was swollen half shut and surrounded by a sticky black ring where the felt patch had been peeled away, the underlying flesh a lurid palette of green, purple, and ghastly yellow. The eye itself was red as a flannel petticoat and, from the irritated state of the eyelids, had been watering more or less constantly for some time.

“Your husband punched me when I told him I’d bedded you,” he replied, with complete composure. “I do hope he didn’t take any similarly violent actions upon being reunited with you?”

Had I been capable of a convincing Scottish noise, I might have resorted to one. As it was, I merely glared at him.

“I decline absolutely to discuss my husband with you,” I said. “Lie down, blast you.”

He eased himself back on the cot, wincing.

“He said he hit you twice,” I remarked, watching this. “Where was the second one?”

“In the liver.” He gingerly touched his lower abdomen. I pulled up his shirt and inspected the damage, which amounted to further spectacular bruising around the lower ribs, with blue streaks draining down toward the ilial crest, but little more.

“That’s not where your liver is,” I informed him. “It’s on the other side.”

"Oh." He looked blank. "Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I am," I assured him. "I'm a doctor. Let me look at your eye."

I didn't wait for permission, but he didn't resist, lying back and staring up at the canvas roof while I spread the eyelids as far as possible. The sclera and conjunctiva were badly inflamed, and even the dim light made the eye water profusely. I held up two fingers.

"Two," he said, before I could ask. "And before you start ordering me to look to and fro and up and down … I can't. I can see out of it—though it's a bit blurry, and I see everything doubled, which is very disagreeable—but I can't move it at all. Dr. Hunter opined that some muscle or other was trapped by some sort of bone. He didn't feel competent to deal with it."

"I'm flattered that you think I might be."

"I have the fullest confidence in your abilities, Dr. Fraser," he said politely. "Besides, have I any choice?"

"No. Keep quite still, there … Germain!" I had caught sight of a telltale flutter of pink calico from the corner of my eye, and the runaway came sidling in, looking vaguely guilty.

"Don't tell me what you have in your shirt," I said, noting a suspicious bulge or two. "I don't want to be an accessory to crime. No, wait—is it alive?"

Germain prodded the bulge, as though not quite sure, but it didn't move, and he shook his head. "No, *Grand-mère*."

"Good. Come here and hold this, will you?"

I handed him my pocket looking glass and, adjusting the tent flap so that a ray of light shone in, then adjusted Germain's hand so that the reflected light shone directly from the mirror into the affected eye. John yelped slightly when the light struck his eye, but obediently clutched the sides of the cot and didn't move, though his eye watered terribly. All the better; it would wash out bacteria and perhaps make it easier to move the eyeball.

Denny was most likely right, I thought, selecting my smallest cautery iron and slipping it gently under the lower lid. It was the best thing I could find for the job, being flat, smooth, and spade-shaped. I couldn't move the globe of the eyeball upward at all; even slight pressure made him go white. I could move it slightly from side to side, and given the sensitivity of John's face just below the eye, I began to form a mental picture of the damage. It was almost certainly what was called a "blowout" fracture, which had cracked the delicate bone of the orbital floor and forced a displaced bit of it—along with part of the inferior rectus muscle—down into the maxillary sinus. The edge of the muscle was caught in the crack, thus immobilizing the eyeball.

"Bloody, bloody-minded, effing *Scot*," I said, straightening up.

"Not his fault," said John. "I provoked him." He sounded excessively cheerful, and I turned a cold look on him.

"I'm not any more pleased with you," I informed him. "You aren't going to like this, and it will serve you right. How in heaven's name did you—no, don't tell me now. I'm busy."

He folded his hands across his stomach, looking meek. Germain sniggered, but desisted when I gave him a glare of his own.

Tight-lipped, I filled a syringe—Dr. Fentiman's penis syringe, as it happened; how appropriate—with saline solution for irrigation and found my small pair of needle-nosed forceps. I had another peek at the site with my makeshift spatula and prepared a tiny, curved needle with a wet catgut suture, cut very fine. I *might* manage without needing to stitch the inferior rectus—it depended whether the edge of the muscle had frayed very badly, by reason of its long entrapment, and how it survived being dislodged—but best to have the suture handy, in case of need. I hoped the need wouldn't occur; there was so much swelling … but I couldn't wait several days for it to subside.

What was troubling me was not so much the immediate reduction of the fracture and freeing of the muscle but the longer-term possibility of adhesion. The eye should be kept fairly immobile, to aid healing, but doing that might cause the muscle to adhere to the orbit, literally freezing the eye permanently. I needed something slippery with which to dress the site, something biologically inert and non-irritating—in my own time, sterile glycerin drops would have been instantly available, but here …

Egg white, perhaps? Probably not, I thought; body heat might coddle it, and then what?

"John!"

A shocked voice behind me made me turn, needle in hand. A very dapper-looking gentleman in a stylish wig and a gray-blue velvet suit was standing just inside the tent flap, staring aghast at my patient.

"What's happened to him?" Percy Beauchamp demanded, spotting me in the background.

"Nothing serious," I said. "Are you—"

"Leave," said John, in a voice I'd never heard him use before. He sat up, fixing the newcomer with as steely a look as could be managed with one badly watering crimson eye. "Now."

"What in God's name are you doing here?" Beauchamp demanded. His accent was English, but English faintly tinged with French. He took a step nearer and lowered his voice. "Surely you have not become a Rebel?"

"No, I bloody haven't! Leave, I said."

"Dear God, you mean you—what the devil *happened* to you?" He'd come close enough now to behold the complete picture: filthy cropped hair, filthy disheveled clothes, filthy stockinged feet with holes in toe and heel, and a distorted visage now directing a glare of bloodshot venom at him.

"Now, look here—" I began, turning on Percy with determined firmness, but Germain stopped me.

"He's the man who was looking for Papa in New Bern last year," Germain said. He'd put down the looking glass and was watching the evolving scene with interest. "*Grand-père* thinks he's a villain."

Percy cast Germain a startled look, but recovered his composure with remarkable speed.

"Ah. The proprietor of distinguished frogs," he said, with a smile. "I recall. Peter and Simon were their names? One yellow and one green."

Germain bowed respectfully.

"Monsieur has an excellent memory," he said, with exquisite politeness. "What do you want with my papa?"

"An excellent question," said John, putting one hand over his injured eye, the better to glare at Monsieur Beauchamp.

"Yes, that *is* a good question," I said mildly. "Do sit down, Mr. Beauchamp—and bloody explain yourself. And, *you,*" I added, taking John firmly by both shoulders, "lie down."

"That can wait," John said shortly, resisting my attempt to flatten him. He swung his legs over the side of the cot. "What are you doing here, Percy?"

“Oh, you know him, do you?” I said, beginning to be provoked.

“Certainly. He’s my brother—or was.”

“What?” Germain and I exclaimed as one. He looked at me and giggled.

“I thought Hal was your only brother,” I said, recovering. I glanced back and forth between John and Percy. There was no resemblance at all between them, whereas John’s resemblance to Hal was as marked as if they’d been stamped from the same mold.

“Stepbrother,” John said, still more shortly. He got his feet under him, preparing to rise. “Come with me, Percy.”

“You’re not going anywhere,” I said, raising my voice slightly.

“How do you propose to stop me?” John was on his feet, staggering a little as he tried to focus his eyes. Before I could answer, Mr. Beauchamp had lunged forward and grabbed his arm, to keep him from falling. John jerked violently away from him, nearly falling again as he stumbled backward into the cot. He caught his balance and stood glowering at Beauchamp, his fists half clenched.

Beauchamp’s gaze was locked with his, and the air between them was … electric. *Oh*, I thought, glancing from one to the other, suddenly enlightened. *Oh*.

I must have made some small movement, because Beauchamp’s gaze flicked suddenly toward my face. He looked startled at whatever he saw there, then, recovering himself, smiled wryly and bowed.

“Madame,” he said. Then, in perfect, accentless English, “He is really my stepbrother, though we haven’t spoken in … some time. I am here as the guest of the Marquis de La Fayette—amongst other things. Do allow me to take his

lordship to meet the marquis. I promise to bring him back in one piece." He smiled at me, warm-eyed and sure of his charm, which was considerable.

"His lordship is a prisoner of war," said a very dry Scottish voice from behind Beauchamp. "And my responsibility. I regret that he must remain here, sir."

Percy Beauchamp whirled round, gaping at Jamie, who was filling the tent flap in a most implacable fashion.

"I *still* want to know what he wants with Papa," Germain said, small blond brows drawn down in a suspicious glower.

"I should like to know that, too, monsieur," Jamie said. He came into the tent, ducking, and nodded toward the stool I had been using. "Pray be seated, sir."

Percy Beauchamp glanced from Jamie to Lord John and back again. His face had gone smooth and blank, though the lively dark eyes were full of calculation.

"Alas," he said, the slight French accent back. "I am engaged to *le marquis*—and General Washington—just now. You will excuse me, I am sure. *Bonjour, Mon Général.*" He marched to the tent flap, head held high, turning at the last moment to smile at John. *"Au revoir, mon frère."*

"Not if I bloody see you first."

* * *

NOBODY MOVED FOR the space of nine heartbeats—I counted them—following Percy Beauchamp's dignified exit. Finally, John sat down abruptly on the cot, exhaling audibly. Jamie caught my eye and, with a slight nod, sat down on the stool. Nobody spoke.

"You mustn't hit him again, *Grand-père*," Germain said earnestly, breaking the silence. "He's a very good man, and

I'm sure he won't take Grannie to bed anymore, now that you're home to do it."

Jamie gave Germain a quelling look, but his mouth twitched. From my position behind the cot, I could see the back of John's neck flush a deep pink.

"I'm much obliged to his lordship for his care of your grannie," Jamie told Germain. "But if ye think makin' impertinent remarks regarding your elders is going to save your arse—think again."

Germain shifted uneasily, but rolled his eyes at Lord John in a "worth a try" sort of way.

"I'm obliged to you for your good opinion, sir," John told him. "And I reciprocate the compliment—but I trust you are aware that good intent alone does not absolve one from the consequences of rash conduct."

Jamie was beginning to flush as deeply as John.

"Germain," I said. "Do go away. Oh—see if you can find me some honey, would you?"

All three of them looked at me, startled at this apparent non sequitur.

"It's viscous," I said, with a slight shrug. "And antibacterial."

"Of course it is," John said under his breath in a hopeless sort of way.

"What does 'viscous' mean?" Germain asked, interested.

"Germain," said his grandfather, in a menacing tone, and he hastily disappeared without waiting for enlightenment.

Everyone took a deep breath.

"Lie down *now*," I said to John, before anything regrettable might be said. "Have you got a moment, Jamie? I need someone to hold the mirror while I fix his eye."

With no more than an instant's hesitation, they both obeyed, not looking at each other. I was nearly ready; when I'd got Jamie positioned and the ray of light focused on the eye, I once more irrigated the eye and socket gently with saline solution, then rinsed my fingers thoroughly with the same stuff.

"I need you both to hold completely still," I said. "I'm sorry, John, but there's no other way to do this, and if we're lucky, it will be quick."

"Aye, I've heard that one before," Jamie muttered, but desisted when I shot a sideways look at him.

I was afraid to use the forceps, for fear of puncturing his eyeball. So I spread the lids of John's affected eye with the fingers of my left hand, wedged the fingertips of my right as deeply into the eye socket as I could, and squeezed.

He made a shocked, strangled sort of noise, and Jamie gasped but didn't drop the mirror.

There are not many things in the world slipperier than a wet eyeball. I tried to squeeze as lightly as I could, but there was no help for it; a light pressure merely allowed the eyeball to pop out of my fingers like an oiled grape. I clenched my teeth and tried again, gripping harder.

On the fourth try, I managed to get a sufficient grip as to allow me to try to rotate the eyeball in its socket. I didn't quite manage it, but at least got a better idea of how it might go.

Five minutes later, John was trembling like a blancmange, hands clenched tight on the rails of the cot, Jamie was praying under his breath in Gaelic, and all three of us were drenched with sweat.

"Once more," I said, drawing breath and wiping sweat from my chin with the back of my hand. I rinsed my fingers again. “If I can’t get it this time, we’ll have a rest and try again later.”

“Oh, God,” said John. He closed both eyes briefly, swallowed hard, and opened them as wide as he could. Both eyes were watering badly, and tears washed down his temples.

I felt Jamie move slightly next to me. He refocused the mirror—but I saw that he had also moved nearer to the cot, so that his leg pressed against the rail, just next to John’s gripping fingers. I wiggled my wet fingers in preparation, said a brief prayer to St. Claire, patron of sore eyes, and thrust my fingers as deeply into the socket as I could manage.

By this time, I had a very clear mental image of the fracture, a dark line beneath the torn conjunctiva, and the line of the inferior rectus muscle wedged into it. I twisted, a short, sharp jerk, before my fingers slipped—and felt the muscle pop free. John shuddered the full length of his body and gave a little moan.

“Glory be,” I said, and laughed from sheer relief. There was a little blood—not much—on my fingers, and I wiped them on my apron. Jamie flinched and looked away.

“Now what?” he asked, carefully not looking at John.

“Now what—Oh.” I considered that one for a moment, then shook my head.

“He has to lie down for several hours with the eye covered—a day or two, ideally. If Germain finds me some honey, I’ll lubricate the eye socket with a bit of it, to prevent adhesion.”

“I mean,” Jamie said patiently, “does he require to be kept under a doctor’s care?”

"Not all the time," I said, surveying John critically. "Someone—me, I mean—needs to check the eye every so often, but there's really nothing else to be done for it; the swelling and bruises will take care of themselves. Why? What were you planning to do with him?"

Jamie made a small gesture of frustration.

"I *would* hand him over to Washington's staff for interrogation," he said. "But—"

"But I surrendered to you personally," John said helpfully. He glanced at me out of his working eye. "That means I'm his responsibility."

"Aye, thank ye for that," Jamie muttered, giving him an irritable look.

"Well, you aren't going to tell him anything useful, either, are you?" I asked, putting a hand on John's forehead. Slightly warm, but no gross fever. "Such as the nature of the relations between yourself and the recent Mr. Beauchamp?"

Jamie gave a brief snort.

"I ken fine what his relations are wi' that wee sodomite," he said bluntly. He gave John a piercing stare. "Ye dinna mean to tell me what he's doing here, do ye?"

"No," John said cheerfully. "Though it almost certainly wouldn't help you if I did."

Jamie nodded, having evidently expected nothing better, and rose with an air of decision.

"Well, then. I've work to do, and so have you, Sassenach. Wait here for Germain, if ye will, and when ye've finished with the honey, tell Germain he's to be in charge of his lordship. He's no to leave his lordship under any circumstances, save you or I tell him he may—and should Monsieur Beauchamp pay another call, Germain is to be present at any conversation. He speaks French verra fluently," he advised John. "And should ye think of attempting to subvert my grandson's loyalty—"

"Sir!" John said, looking shocked at the mere idea.

"Mmphm," Jamie said darkly, and left.

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THE MULE DISLIKES YOU

I DIDN’T KNOW QUITE what to say to John, in the wake of recent events. He seemed similarly at a loss, but coped with the social awkwardness by closing his eyes and pretending to be asleep. I couldn’t leave him until Germain got back with the honey—assuming he found any, but I had a fair amount of faith in his abilities.

Well, no point in sitting about with my hands folded. I took out my mortar and pestle and set to work grinding gentian root and garlic for antibiotic ointment. This occupied my hands, but unfortunately not my mind, which was scampering in circles like a hamster on a wheel.

I had two main anxieties at the moment, one of which I could do nothing about: that being the escalating sense of oncoming battle. I knew it very well; I couldn’t be mistaken. Jamie hadn’t told me explicitly, perhaps because he hadn’t had written orders yet—but I knew as clearly as if it had been shouted by a town crier. The army would move soon.

I stole a glance at John, who lay like a tomb effigy, hands neatly crossed at his waist. All it wanted was a small dog curled up at his feet. Rollo, snoring under the cot, would have to do, I supposed.

John, of course, was the other anxiety. I had no idea how he'd come to be where he was, but enough people had seen him surrender that his presence would be common knowledge by nightfall. And once it *was* …

"I don't suppose you'd consider escaping, if I left for a moment?" I asked abruptly.

"No," he said, not opening his eyes. "I gave my parole. Besides, I wouldn't make it outside the camp," he added.

The silence resumed, broken by the *brumm* of a large bumblebee, which had blundered into the tent, and the more distant shouts and drumbeats of soldiers drilling and the low thrashing noises of daily camp life.

The only good thing—if one chose to regard it that way, and I might as well—was that the rising sense of battle urgency was likely to preclude official curiosity about John. What the devil would Jamie do with him when the army decamped in the morning? I wondered.

"Grand-mère, Grand-mère!" Germain burst into the tent, and Rollo—who had slept through Percy Beauchamp's visit without stirring a whisker—shot out from under the cot with an explosive *WOOF!* that nearly overturned the cot and John with it.

"Hush, dog," I said, seeing him glaring wildly round, and took a restraining grip on his scruff. "And what the he—I mean the dev—I mean what's the matter, Germain?"

"I saw him, Grannie! I saw him! The man who took Clarence! Come quick!" And without waiting for response, he turned and raced out of the tent.

John began to sit up, and Rollo tensed under my hand.

"Sit!" I said to both of them. "And bloody stay!"

* * *

THE HAIRS ON my forearms were prickling, even as sweat streamed down my neck. I'd left my hat behind and the sun blazed on my cheeks; I was panting by the time I caught up with Germain, as much from emotion as from heat.

"Where—"

"Just there, Grannie! The big bugger wi' the kerchief round his arm. Clarence must ha' bitten him!" Germain added, with glee.

The bugger in question *was* big: roughly twice my size, with a head like a pumpkin. He was sitting on the ground under the shade of what I thought of as the hospital tree, nursing his kerchief-wrapped arm and glowering at nothing in particular. A small group of people seeking medical treatment—you could tell as much from their hunched and drooping attitudes—was keeping a distance from him, looking warily at him from time to time.

"You'd best keep out of sight," I murmured to Germain, but, hearing no answer, glanced round to discover that he'd already faded artfully from view, canny child that he was.

I walked up, smiling, to the little group of waiting people—mostly women with children. I didn't know any of them by name, but they clearly knew who and what I was; they bobbed their heads and murmured greetings, but cut their eyes sideways at the man under the tree. *"Take him first before he does something messy"* was the clear message. Just as clear as the sense of badly contained violence that the man was radiating in all directions.

I cleared my throat and walked over to the man, wondering what on earth I was to say to him. *"What have you done with Clarence the mule?"* or *"How dare you rob my grandson and leave him in the wilderness alone, you bloody bastard?"*

I settled for "Good morning. I'm Mrs. Fraser. What happened to your arm, sir?"

"Bleedin' mule bit me to the bone, gaddamn his stinkin' hide," the man replied promptly, and glowered at me under eyebrows ridged with scar tissue. So were his knuckles.

"Let me see it, will you?" Not waiting for permission, I took hold of his wrist—it was hairy and very warm—and unwrapped the kerchief. This was stiff with dried blood, and no wonder.

Clarence—if it was Clarence—actually *had* bitten him to the bone. Horse and mule bites could be serious but usually resulted only in deep bruising; equines had powerful jaws, but their front teeth were designed for tearing grass, and as most bites were through clothing, they didn't often break skin. It could be done, though, and Clarence had done it.

A flap of skin—and a good chunk of flesh—about three inches wide had been partially detached, and I could see past the thin fatty layer to the gleam of tendon and the red membranous covering of the radius. The wound was recent but had stopped bleeding, save for a little oozing at the edges.

"Hmm," I said noncommittally, and turned his hand over. "Can you close your fingers into a fist?" He could, though the ring finger and little finger wouldn't fold in completely. They did move, though; the tendon wasn't severed. "Hmm," I said again, and reached into my bag for the bottle of saline solution and a probe. Saline was a little less painful for disinfection than dilute alcohol or vinegar—and it was somewhat easier to get hold of salt, at least when living in a city—but I kept a tight grip on the enormous wrist as I poured the liquid into the wound.

He made a noise like a wounded bear, and the waiting onlookers took several steps back, as a body.

"Rather a vicious mule," I observed mildly, as the patient subsided, panting. His face darkened.

"Gonna beat the gaddamn bastarding fucker to death, soon as I get back," he said, and bared his yellow teeth at me. "Skin him, I will, and sell his meat."

"Oh, I wouldn't advise that," I said, keeping a grip on my temper. "You don't want to be using that arm violently; it could bring on gangrene."

"It could?" He didn't go pale—it wasn't possible, given the temperature—but I'd definitely got his attention.

"Yes," I said pleasantly. "You've seen gangrene, I daresay? The flesh goes green and putrid—beastly smell—limb rots, dead in days … that sort of thing?"

"I seen it," he muttered, eyes now fixed on his arm.

"Well, well," I said soothingly, "we'll do our best here, won't we?" I would normally have offered a patient in such a case a fortifying draft of whatever liquor was available—and, thanks to the marquis, I had quite a good supply of French brandy—but in the present instance, I wasn't feeling charitable.

In fact, my general feeling was that Hippocrates could turn a blind eye for the next few minutes. Do no harm, forsooth. Still, there wasn't a great deal I could do to him, armed with a two-inch suture needle and a pair of embroidery scissors.

I stitched the wound as slowly as I could, taking care to slosh more saline over it periodically and glancing covertly round for assistance. Jamie was with Washington and the high command as they strategized the imminent engagement; I couldn't summon him out to deal with a mule thief.

Ian had vanished on his pony, scouting the British rear guard. Rollo was with Lord John. Rachel had gone off with Denny and Dottie in the Quakers' wagon, to look for supplies in the nearest village. And good luck to them, I thought; General Greene's foragers had spread out like locusts over the face of the earth the moment the army halted, stripping farmsteads and storage barns in their path.

The patient was cursing in a rather monotonous and uninspired fashion, but showed no signs of keeling over in a convenient faint. What I was doing to his arm was unlikely to improve his temper; what if he actually *did* intend to go straight off and beat Clarence to death?

If Clarence was loose, I'd put good odds on the mule to win any such encounter, but he was very likely tied or hobbled. But then … a horrid thought struck me. I *knew* where Germain was, and what he was doing—or trying to do.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I muttered, bending my head over the teamster's arm to hide an undoubtedly appalled expression. Germain was an extremely talented pickpocket, but stealing a mule out of the middle of a gang of teamsters …

What had Jamie said? *"He'd be taken up for theft and hanged or flogged within an inch of his life, and I couldna do a* *thing to stop it.”* Teamsters being what they were, they’d likely just break his neck and be done with it, rather than waiting for any sort of military justice.

I swallowed hard and glanced quickly over my shoulder, to see if I could spot the teamsters’ encampment. If I could see Germain …

I didn’t see Germain. What I saw was Percy Beauchamp, regarding me thoughtfully from the shadow of a nearby tent. Our eyes met, and he instantly came toward me, straightening his coat. Well, I was in no position to look a gift horse—or mule—in the mouth, was I?

“Madame Fraser,” he said, and bowed. “Are you in need of some assistance?”

Yes, I bloody did need assistance; I couldn’t drag my surgical repairs out much longer. I darted a look at my massive patient, wondering whether he had any French.

Apparently my face was just as transparent as Jamie had always told me it was; Percy smiled at me and said conversationally in French, “I don’t think this clot of decaying menstrual blood is capable of understanding more English than it takes to hire the sort of poxed and imbecile whore who would let him touch her, let alone understand the tongue of angels.”

The teamster went on muttering, “Shit-fire, shit-fire, fucking shit-ass fucking-ass mule, that gaddamn *hurts* …”

I relaxed a little and replied in French. “Yes, I need help—with the utmost urgency. My grandson is trying to steal the mule this oaf stole from him. Can you retrieve him from the teamsters’ camp before someone notices?”

“À votre service, madame,” he replied promptly, and, clicking his heels smartly together, bowed and went off.

I TOOK AS long as I could over the final dressing of the wound, worried that should my foul-mouthed patient find Germain among the teamsters, Percy's French manners might be unequal to the occasion. And I couldn't really expect Hippocrates to continue turning a blind eye, were I compelled to do something drastic if the man tried to break Germain's neck.

I heard a familiar loud braying behind me, though, and turned sharply to see Percy, flushed and a trifle disheveled, leading Clarence toward me. Germain sat atop the mule, his face set in lines of vindictive triumph as he glared at my patient.

I stood up hastily, groping for my knife. The teamster, who had been gingerly prodding the fresh bandage round his arm, looked up, startled, then surged to his feet with a roar.

"Shit-*FIRE*!" he said, and started purposefully toward them, fists clenched.

Percy, to his credit, stood his ground, though he paled a little. He handed the reins up to Germain, though, and stepped firmly forward.

"Monsieur …" he began. I would have liked to know just what he had in mind to say but didn't find out, as the teamster didn't bother with colloquy, instead driving a hamlike fist into Percy's belly. Percy sat down hard and folded up like a fan.

"Bloody *hell—Germain*!" For Germain, nothing daunted by the sudden loss of support, had gathered up Clarence's reins and tried to lash the teamster across the face with them.

This might possibly have been effective, had he not telegraphed his intention quite so clearly. As it was, the teamster ducked and reached out, clearly intending to grab either the reins or Germain. The crowd around me had realized what was happening by now, and women started screaming. At this point, Clarence decided to become involved and, laying back his ears, curled his lips and snapped at the teamster's face, coming within a toucher of taking off the man's nose.

"SHIT-ASS FUCKING MULE!!" Deeply inflamed, the teamster leapt at Clarence and fixed his teeth in the mule's upper lip, clinging like grim death to his neck. Clarence screamed. The women screamed. Germain screamed.

I didn't scream, because I couldn't breathe. I was elbowing my way through the crowd, fumbling for the slit in my skirt so I could reach my knife. Just as I laid my hand on the hilt, though, a hand came down on my shoulder, halting me in my tracks.

"Pardon me, milady," said Fergus, and, stepping purposefully past me, walked up beside the lunging mass of mule, teamster, and shrieking child, and fired the pistol in his hand.

Everything stopped, for a split second, and then the shouting and screaming started again, everyone surging toward Clarence and his companions to see what had happened. For a long moment, it wasn't apparent what *had* happened. The teamster had let go his grip in astonishment and turned toward Fergus, eyes bulging and blood-tinged saliva running down his chin. Germain, with more presence of mind than I would have had in such a situation, got hold of the reins and was hauling on them with all his strength, trying to turn Clarence's head. Clarence, whose blood was plainly up, was having none of it.

Fergus calmly put the fired pistol back into his belt—I realized at this point that he must have fired into the dirt near the teamster's feet—and spoke to the man.

"If I were you, sir, I would remove myself promptly from this animal's presence. It is apparent that he dislikes you."

The shouting and screaming had stopped, and this made several people laugh.

"Got you there, Belden!" a man near me called. "The mule dislikes you. What you think of that?"

The teamster looked mildly dazed but still homicidal. He stood with his fists clenched, legs braced wide apart and shoulders hunched, glowering at the crowd.

"What I think …?" he began. "I think—"

But Percy had managed to get to his feet and, while still somewhat hunched, was mobile. Without hesitation, he walked up and kicked the teamster smartly in the balls.

This went over well. Even the man who appeared to be a friend of Belden's whooped with laughter. The teamster didn't go down but curled up like a dried leaf, clutching himself. Percy wisely didn't wait for him to recover, but turned and bowed to Fergus.

"*À votre service, monsieur*. I suggest that you and your son—and the mule, of course—might withdraw?"

"*Merci beaucoup*, and I suggest you do the same, *tout de suite*," Fergus replied.

"Hey!" shouted the teamster's friend, not laughing now. "You can't steal that mule!"

Fergus rounded on him, imperious as the French aristocrat Percy had implied he might be.

"I cannot, sir," he said, inclining his head a quarter of an inch in acknowledgment. "Because a man cannot steal that which already belongs to him, is this not so?"

"Is that not … is *what* not so?" demanded the man, confused.

Fergus scorned to answer this. Lifting one dark brow, he strode off several paces, turned, and shouted, "Clarence! *Écoutez-moi!*"

With the teamster's collapse, Germain had succeeded in getting Clarence somewhat under control, though the mule's ears were still laid out flat in displeasure. At the sound of Fergus's voice, though, the ears rose slowly upright and swiveled in his direction.

Fergus smiled, and I heard a woman behind me sigh involuntarily. Fergus's smile was remarkably charming. He reached into his pocket and withdrew an apple, which he skewered neatly on his hook.

"Come," he said to the mule, extending his right hand and twiddling the fingers in a head-scratching motion. Clarence came, disregarding Mr. Belden, who had now sat down and was clutching his knees, the better to contemplate his state of inner being. The mule ducked his head to take the apple, nudging Fergus's elbow, and allowed his forehead to be scratched. There was a murmur of interest and approbation from the crowd, and I noticed a few censorious glances being shot at the groaning Mr. Belden.

The sense of being about to faint had left me, and now my insides began to unclench. With some effort, I slid the knife back into its sheath without stabbing myself in the thigh and wiped my hand on my skirt.

"As for *you, sans cervelle,*" Fergus was saying to Germain, with a low-voiced menace that he'd plainly learned from

Jamie, “we have a few things to discuss presently.”

Germain turned a rather sickly shade of yellow. “Yes, *Papa*,” he murmured, hanging his head in order to avoid his father’s minatory eye.

“Get down,” Fergus said to him, and, turning to me, raised his voice. “Madame General, permit me to present this animal personally to General Fraser, in the service of liberty!”

This was delivered in such a tone of ringing sincerity that a few souls applauded. I accepted, as graciously as possible, on behalf of General Fraser. By the conclusion of these proceedings, Mr. Belden had got awkwardly to his feet and stumbled off toward the teamsters’ camp, tacitly ceding Clarence to the cause.

I took Clarence’s reins, relieved and glad to see him again. Apparently it was mutual, for he nosed me familiarly in the shoulder and made chummy huffing noises.

Fergus, meanwhile, stood for a moment looking down at Germain, then squared his shoulders and turned to Percy, who still looked a little pale but had straightened his wig and regained his self-possession. Percy bowed very formally to Fergus, who sighed deeply, then bowed back.

“And I suppose that we, too, have matters to discuss, monsieur,” he said, resigned. “Perhaps a little later?”

Percy’s handsome face lighted.

“À votre service … seigneur,” he said, and bowed again.

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AN ALTERNATE USE FOR A PENIS SYRINGE

GERMAIN HAD, IN FACT, found some honey, and now that the excitement of recovering Clarence was over, he produced a large chunk of sticky honeycomb, wrapped in a dirty black kerchief, from the recesses of his shirt.

"What are you going to do wi' that, Grannie?" he asked, curious. I'd set the oozing chunk of comb in a clean pottery dish and was again employing the useful penis syringe—carefully sterilized with alcohol—to suck up honey, being careful to avoid bits of wax and noticeable pollen grains. Having been designed for irrigation rather than puncture, the syringe had a blunt, smoothly tapered tip: just the thing for dribbling honey into someone's eye.

"I'm going to lubricate his lordship's bad eye," I said. "Fergus, will you come and steady his lordship's head, please? Put your hand on his forehead. And, Germain, you'll hold his eyelids open."

"I can keep still," John said irritably.

"Be quiet," I said briefly, and sat down on the stool beside him. "No one can keep still while having things poked into their eye."

"You were poking your bloody *fingers* into my eye not an hour since! And I didn't move!"

"You squirmed," I said. "It's not your fault, you couldn't help it. Now, be quiet; I don't want to accidentally stab you in the eyeball with this."

Breathing audibly through his nose, he clamped his mouth shut and suffered Fergus and Germain to immobilize him. I'd debated whether to dilute the honey with boiled water, but the heat of the day had made it sufficiently thin that I thought it better to use it at full strength.

"It's antibacterial," I explained to the three of them, using my cautery iron again to lift the eyeball and squirting a slow dribble of honey under it. "That means it kills germs."

Fergus and Germain, to whom I had explained germs more than once, nodded intelligently and tried to look as though they believed in the existence of such things, which they didn't. John opened his mouth as though to speak, but then shut it again and exhaled strongly through his nose.

"But the chief virtue of honey in the present instance," I went on, anointing the eyeball generously, "is that it's viscous. Let go now, Germain. Blink, John. Oh, *very* good!" The handling had of course made the eye water, but even dilute honey retains its viscosity; I could see the altered gleam of the light across the sclera, indicating the presence of a thin, soothing—I hoped—layer of honey. Some had overflowed, of course, and amber beads were sliding down his temple toward his ear; I stanched the flow with a handkerchief.

"How does it feel?"

John opened and closed his eye a couple of times, very slowly.

"Everything looks blurry."

"Doesn't matter; you aren't going to be looking out of that eye for a day or two anyway. Does it feel any better?"

"Yes," he said, in a distinctly grudging manner, and the other three of us made approving noises that made him look embarrassed.

"Right, then. Sit up—carefully! Yes, that's it. Close your eye and hold this to catch the drips." And, handing him a clean handkerchief, I unrolled a length of gauze bandage, thumbed a pad of lint carefully into the eye socket, and rolled the bandage round his head a few times, tucking in the ends. He strongly resembled a figure in an old painting titled *The Spirit of '76*, but I didn't mention it.

"All right," I said, exhaling and feeling rather pleased with myself. "Fergus, why don't you and Germain go and find some food? Something for his lordship, and something for the road tomorrow. I rather think it will be a long day."

"This one's been quite long enough already," John said. He was swaying a little, and I pushed him gently back down with little resistance. He stretched his neck to ease it, then settled on the pillow with a sigh. "Thank you."

"It was my pleasure," I assured him. I hesitated, but, with Fergus's departure, I didn't think I'd have a better chance to ask what was in my mind. "I don't suppose *you* know what Percival Beauchamp wants with Fergus, do you?"

The good eye opened and looked at me.

"You mean you don't think he believes Fergus to be the lost heir to a great fortune? No, I don't, either. But if Mr. Fraser will take a bit of unsolicited advice, I'd strongly suggest having as little as possible to do with Monsieur Beauchamp.” The eye closed again.

Percy Beauchamp had taken his leave—very gracefully—after Clarence’s rescue, explaining that he must attend *le marquis* but adding that he would seek out Fergus on the morrow.

“When things are quieter,” he’d added, with a genteel bow.

I regarded John thoughtfully.

“What did he do to you?” I asked. He didn’t open his eye, but his lips tightened.

“To me? Nothing. Nothing at all,” he repeated, and turned over on his side with his back to me.

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THREE HUNDRED AND ONE

THREE HUNDRED MEN. Jamie stepped into the darkness beyond the 16th New Jersey’s campfire and paused for a moment to let his eyes adjust. Three *hundred* bloody men. He’d never led a band of more than fifty. And never had much in the way of subalterns, no more than one or two men under him.

Now he had ten militia companies, each with its own captain and a few informally appointed lieutenants, and Lee had given him a staff of his own: two aides-de-camp, a secretary—now, *that* he could get used to, he thought, flexing the fingers of his maimed right hand—three captains, one of whom was striding along at his shoulder, trying not to look worrit, ten of his own lieutenants, who would serve as liaison between him and the companies under his command, a cook, an assistant cook—and, of course, he had a surgeon already.

Despite the preoccupations of the moment, the memory of Lee’s face when Jamie’d told him exactly why he didn’t need an army surgeon assigned to him made him smile.

"Indeed," Lee had said, his long-nosed face going blank. Then he'd gathered his wits and gone red in the face, thinking himself practiced upon. But Jamie had pushed back his cuff and shown Lee his right hand, the old white scars on his fingers like tiny starbursts where the bones had come through, and the broad one, still red but neat, straight, and beautifully knit, running down between the middle finger and the little one, showing where the missing finger had been amputated with such skill that one had to look twice to see why the hand seemed strange.

"Well, General, your wife seems a most accomplished needlewoman," Lee said, now amused.

"Aye, sir, she is," he'd said politely. "And a verra bonny hand with a blade, too."

Lee gave him a sardonic look and spread out the fingers of his own right hand; the outer two were missing.

"So was the gentleman who took these off me. A duel," he added offhandedly, seeing Jamie's raised brows, and curled up his hand again. "In Italy."

He didn't know about Lee. The man had a reputation, but he was a boaster, and the two didn't often go together. On the other hand, he was proud as one of Louis's camels, and arrogance sometimes did mark a man who kent his worth.

The plan to attack the British rear guard, at first intended as a quick strike by La Fayette and a thousand men—Lee scorning such a minor command—had grown more elaborate, as such things always did if you gave commanders time to think about them. Once Washington had decided that the expeditionary force should be five thousand men, Lee had graciously condescended to this more appropriate command—leaving La Fayette in charge of his own smaller force, for the sake of the marquis's *amour-propre,* but with Lee in command overall. Jamie had his doubts, but it wasn't his place to voice them.

He glanced to his left, where Ian and his dog were ambling along, the former whistling to himself and the latter a huge, shaggy shape in the dark, panting from the heat.

"Iain," he said casually in *Gàidhlig,* "did your friends with the feathers have aught to say about Ounewaterika?"

"They had, Uncle," Ian replied in the same language. "Not much, though, for they know him only by repute. He's a most ferocious fighter, or so it's said."

"Mmphm." The Mohawk were certainly ferocious and did set great store by personal courage—but he thought they had a negligible grasp of strategy, tactics, and judgment. He was about to ask about Joseph Brant, who was likely the closest thing to a general—in the formal sense—among the Mohawk, but was interrupted by a tall, gangling form stepping out in front of him.

"I beg your pardon, sir. Might I have a word?" the man said, and, looking right and left at Jamie's companions, added, "A private word."

"Certainly, Captain … Woodsworth," he replied, hoping his hesitation in finding the man's name was small enough to pass unnoticed. He'd memorized all the militia captains as he met them—and as many men as he could—but their names wouldn't come easy to him for a bit yet.

After a moment's further hesitation, he nodded to Ian to go on with Captain Whewell to the next fire.

"Tell them what's afoot, Captain," he said, for the next fire was one of Whewell's assigned companies, "but wait for me there, aye?"

“What’s afoot?” Woodsworth repeated, sounding alarmed. “What’s happening? Are we to go now?”

“Not yet, Captain. Come aside, aye? Else we’ll be trampled.” For they were standing in the path that led from the fires to a set of hastily dug latrine trenches; he could smell the acrid tang of ordure and quicklime from here.

Leading Woodsworth aside, he acquainted him with the change of commander for the morning, but assured him that this would make no real difference to the militia companies under Jamie’s command; they would receive their orders in the normal way.

He thought privately that it wouldn’t make a difference in how the companies operated—it might well make a difference as to whether they met battle on the morrow or not, and whether they survived if they did—but there was no telling whether the better odds lay with La Fayette or Lee. Chances were that sheer accident, Fate, or, just possibly, God, would decide.

“Now, sir,” he said. “Ye wished to speak wi’ me?”

“Oh.” Woodsworth inhaled through his nose and straightened himself, hastily retrieving the words of whatever speech he’d composed. “Yes, sir. I wished to inquire after the—er—the disposition made of Bertram Armstrong.”

“Bertram … what?”

“The man you took from my—er, from the lines earlier today, with the little boy.”

Jamie didn’t know whether to laugh or be annoyed. *Bertram*?

“The man is well enough disposed for the present, sir. My wife’s seen to his eye, and he’s been fed.”

"Oh." Woodsworth shuffled his feet, but stood his ground. "I'm glad of that, sir. But what I meant—I am concerned for him. There is talk about him."

"I'm sure there is," Jamie said, not bothering to hide the edge in his voice. "And what is your concern, sir?"

"They are saying—the men from Dunning's company—that Armstrong is a government spy, that he is a British officer who concealed himself among us. That they found a commission upon him, and correspondence. I—" He paused and gulped breath, the next words coming out in a rush. "I cannot believe it of him, sir, nor can any of us. We feel that some mistake must have been made, and we—we wish to say that we hope nothing … hasty will be done."

"No one has suggested anything of the sort, Captain," Jamie assured him, alarm running down his spine like quicksilver. *Only because they haven't had time.* He'd been able to ignore the thorny problem Grey presented as a prisoner, in the fierce rush of preparation and the fiercer rush of his own feelings, but he couldn't ignore it much longer. He should have notified La Fayette, Lee, *and* Washington of Grey's presence immediately, but had gambled on the confusion of imminent battle to disguise his delay.

His eyes had grown used to the scattered light of stars and fire; he could see Woodsworth's long face, apologetic but determined.

"Yes. I hesitate to speak so frankly, sir, but the sorry fact is that when men's passions run high, regrettable actions—irretrievable actions—may be taken." Woodsworth swallowed audibly. "I should not like to see that."

"Ye think someone might see fit to take such action? Now?" He glanced round at the encircling fires. He could see bodies moving, restless as the flames, dark shadows in the woods—but he caught no sense of riot, no pulse of anger. A murmur of talk, to be sure, voices raised in excitement, bursts of laughter and even singing, but it was the nervous spirit of anticipation, expectation, not the sullen rumble of a mob.

"I am a clergyman, sir." Woodsworth's voice was stronger now, urgent. "I know how men may turn to evil conversation and how quickly such conversation may turn to action. One drink too many, a careless word …"

"Aye, ye're right about that," Jamie said. He cursed himself for not having thought of this possibility; he'd let his own feelings cloud his mind. Of course, he'd had no idea when he left Grey that he'd been carrying a commission—but that was no excuse. "I've sent word to General Lee about … Mr. Armstrong. Should ye hear any more talk about the man, ye might let it be known that the matter is in official hands. That might prevent anything … regrettably informal happening."

Woodsworth's sigh of relief was palpable.

"Yes, sir," he said, with gratitude. "I shall certainly let that be known." He stepped aside, bobbing his head, but then stopped, struck by a thought. "Oh."

"Aye?" Jamie spoke impatiently; he felt assailed from all sides by swarms of tiny, stinging troubles, and was inclined to swat this one.

"I trust you will forgive my persistence, General. But I just thought—the boy who was with Armstrong. Bobby Higgins, he's called."

All Jamie's senses were instantly alert.

"What about him?"

“He—I mean Armstrong—the boy said he was in search of his grandfather, and Armstrong said he knew the man—and that his name was James Fraser.…”

Jamie shut his eyes. If no one lynched John Grey before dawn, he might throttle the man himself.

“The boy is indeed my grandson, Captain,” he said, as evenly as he could, opening his eyes. *Which means, aye, I ken bloody Bert Armstrong.* And if that small bit of information became generally known, there were going to be a lot of very awkward questions asked, by people in a position to demand answers. “My wife is caring for him.”

“Oh. Good. I just wished to—”

“To make known your concern. Aye, Captain. I thank ye. Good night.”

Woodsworth bowed and stepped back, murmuring, “Good night,” in his turn, and disappeared into a night that was far from good and getting worse by the moment.

Jamie jerked his coat straight and strode on. Three hundred men to inform and command, to rouse, lead, and control. Three hundred lives in his hands.

Three hundred and bloody *one*.

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MOSQUITOES

JAMIE WALKED INTO the light of the fire quite late, smiled at me, and sat down suddenly.

“Is there food?” he asked.

“There is, sir,” said the woman who was stirring it. “And you’ll have some, too, ma’am,” she added firmly, giving me a look that strongly suggested that I was not looking my very best. I wasn’t disposed to care, but accepted with thanks a wooden bowl of something hot and a chunk of bread to eat it with.

I barely noticed what I ate, though I was ravenous. The day had been so filled with activity that I hadn’t had time to eat—would not have eaten at all, in fact, had I not brought food for John, at which point he insisted that I sit down for ten minutes and eat with him. Percy Beauchamp had not come back; that was something on the plus side of the ledger, I supposed.

There had been a couple of dozen men from Jamie’s companies that I rejected by reason of disfirmity—crippled, asthmatic, collapsed with age—and perhaps three dozen more who were essentially sound but sporting some injury requiring attention, these mostly the result of fistfights or falling down while under the influence of drink. Several of them were *still* under the influence of drink and had been sent off under guard to sleep it off.

I did wonder for a moment how many men normally went into battle drunk. In all honesty, I'd be strongly tempted to do it myself, were I required to do what these men were about to do.

There was still a tremendous bustle, but the earlier sense of exhilaration had transmuted into something more concentrated, more focused and sober. Preparations were being made in earnest.

I'd finished my own, or hoped I had. A small tent for shelter from the blazing sun, packs of medical supplies, surgical kits, each equipped with a jar of wet sutures, a wad of lint for mopping up blood, and a bottle of dilute alcohol—I'd run out of salt and couldn't summon the will to badger or beg more from the commissary officer; I'd try to do it in the morning. And the emergency kit that I carried over my shoulder, no matter what.

I sat close to the fire, but despite that and in spite of the warmth of the night itself, I began to feel chilled and heavy, as though I were slowly ossifying, and only then realized how tired I was. The camp hadn't gone to sleep entirely—there was still talk around the fires, and the occasional rasp of a scythe or a sword being sharpened, but the volume had dropped. The atmosphere had settled with the sinking of the moon, even those souls most excited at the prospect of imminent battle succumbing to sleep.

“Come and lie down,” I said softly to Jamie, and rose from my seat with a muffled groan. “It won’t be for long, but you need *some* rest—and so do I.”

“Aye, all right, but I canna be under canvas,” he said, low-voiced, following me. “I feel half smothered; couldna breathe in a tent.”

“Well, plenty of room outside,” I said, nobly suppressing a twinge at the thought of sleeping on the ground. Fetching a couple of blankets, I followed him, yawning, a little way along the riverbank, until we found a private spot behind the scrim of willows that dragged their leaves in the water.

In fact, it was surprisingly comfortable; there was a thick growth of springy grass on which to spread the blankets, and, so close to the water, the air was at least moving, cool on my skin. I shucked out of my petticoats and took my stays completely off, with a blissful shiver of relief as the coolness stirred gently through my damp shift.

Jamie had stripped to his shirt and was rubbing his face and legs with mosquito ointment, the presence of hordes of these insects accounting for the lack of company near the water. I sat down beside him and helped myself to a small scoop of the mint-smelling grease. Mosquitoes seldom bit me, but that didn’t stop them whining past my ears and poking inquisitively into my mouth and nostrils, which I found disconcerting in the extreme.

I lay back, watching as he finished his more thorough anointing. I could feel the distant approach of morning, but longed all the more for whatever brief oblivion I could get before the sun rose and all hell broke loose.

Jamie closed the tin and stretched out beside me with a low groan, black leaf shadows trembling over the paleness of his shirt. I rolled toward him just as he rolled toward me, and we met with a blind and groping kiss, smiling against each other's mouth, wriggling and squirming to find a good way of lying together. Warm as it was, I wanted to be touching him.

He wanted to be touching me, too.

"Really?" I said, astonished. "How can you possibly—you've been up for hours!"

"No, only the last minute or two," he assured me. "I'm sorry, Sassenach. I ken ye're tired and I wouldna ask—but I'm desperate." He let go of my bottom long enough to pull up his shirt, and I rather resignedly started disentangling my shift from my legs.

"I dinna mind if ye fall asleep while I'm about my business," he said in my ear, feeling his way one-handed. "I willna take long about it. I just—"

"The mosquitoes will bite your arse," I said, wiggling my own arse into a better position and opening my legs. "Hadn't I best put some—oh!"

"Oh?" he said, sounding pleased. "Well, it's all right if ye want to stay awake, of course …"

I pinched his buttock, hard, and he gave a small yelp, laughed, and licked my ear. The fit was a bit dry, and he fumbled for the tin of mosquito ointment.

"Are you sure—" I began dubiously. "Oh!" He was already applying the half-liquid ointment, with more enthusiasm than dexterity, but the fact of his enthusiasm was more arousing than skill might have been. Having a small amount of oil of peppermint vigorously applied to one's private parts was a rather novel sensation, too.

"Make that noise again," he said, breathing heavily in my ear. "I like it."

He was right; it didn't take long. He lay half on and half off me, panting, his heart beating slow and hard against my breast. I had my legs wrapped round him—I could feel the flutter of tiny insects on my ankles and bare feet as they swarmed, avid for his unprotected bare flesh—and didn't mean to let him go. I squeezed him close, rocking gently, slippery and tingling and … I didn't take long, either. My quivering legs relaxed, releasing him.

"Shall I tell you something?" I said, after a bit of mint-scented heavy breathing. "The mosquitoes won't bite your cock."

"I dinna mind if they carry me off to their lair to feed to their bairns," he murmured. "Come here, Sassenach."

I pushed damp hair out of my face and settled contentedly in the hollow of his shoulder, his arm around me. By now, I had reached that sense of accommodation with the humid atmosphere in which I stopped trying to keep track of my own body's boundaries and simply melted into sleep.

I slept without dreaming and without moving, until a touch of cramp in my left foot roused me enough to shift a little. Jamie raised his arm a bit, then replaced it as I settled again, and I became aware that he wasn't asleep.

"You … all right?" I murmured, thick-tongued with drowsiness.

"Aye, fine," he whispered, and his hand smoothed the hair from my cheek. "Go back to sleep, Sassenach. I'll wake ye when it's time."

My mouth was sticky, and it took a moment to locate any words.

"You need to sleep, too."

"No," he said, soft but definite. "No, I dinna mean to sleep. So close to the battle … I have dreams. I've had them the last three nights, and they get worse."

My own arm was lying across his midsection; at this, I reached up involuntarily, putting my hand over his heart. I knew he'd dreamed—and I had a very good idea what he'd dreamed about, from the things he'd said in his sleep. And the way he'd wakened, trembling. *"They get worse."*

"Shh," he said, and bent his head to kiss my hair. "Dinna fash, *a nighean*. I want only to lie here wi' you in my arms, to keep ye safe and watch ye sleep. I can rise then with a clear mind … and go to do what must be done."

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WAR PAINT

“NESSUN DORMA.” None shall sleep. It was a song—an aria, Brianna had called it—from an opera she knew; she’d played a part in it at her university, dressed up in Chinese robes. Ian smiled at thought of his cousin, taller than most men, striding up and down on a stage, swishing her silk robes about her; he wished he’d seen that.

He’d thought of her from the moment he’d opened the little deerskin bag that held his paints. She was a painter, Bree, and a good one. She ground her own pigments, and she’d made his red ochre for him, and the black and white from charcoal and dried clay—and made for him, too, a deep green from ground malachite, and a brilliant yellow from the gall of the buffalo she and her mother had killed; no other man had such deep colors to his paint, and he wished for a moment that Eats Turtles and some of his other Mohawk clan brothers could be with him to admire them.

The noise of the distant camp was like the singing of cicadas in the trees near a river: a buzz too loud to think through, but one that went away as you got used to it. *None shall sleep* … The women and children, they might sleep—but the whores surely didn't. Not tonight.

He felt a twitch at the thought, but dismissed it. Thought of Rachel, and dismissed her, too, but reluctantly.

He opened the willow-bark box of deer fat and anointed his face and chest and shoulders with it, slowly, focusing his mind. Normally he'd speak to the spirits of the earth as he did this, and then to his own particular saints, Michael and Bride. But he wasn't seeing Michael or Bride; Brianna was still faintly with him, but what he was feeling was a strong sense of his da, which was disconcerting.

It didn't seem respectful to be dismissing his own father. He stopped what he was doing and closed his eyes instead, waiting to see if maybe Da had a thing to tell him.

"I hope ye're no bringing me word of my death, aye?" he said aloud. "Because I dinna mean to die until I've lain wi' Rachel, at least."

"Well, there's a noble goal, to be sure." The dry voice was Uncle Jamie's, and Ian's eyes popped open. His uncle was standing among the trailing fronds of a river willow, dressed in nothing but his shirt.

"Out of uniform, are ye not, Uncle?" he said, though his heart had leapt in his chest like a startled deer mouse. "General Washington willna be pleased." Washington was a great stickler for proper uniform. Officers *must* be dressed suitably at all times; he said the Continentals couldn't be taken seriously as an army, did they come to the field looking and acting like a rabble in arms.

"I'm sorry to interrupt ye, Ian," his uncle said, stepping out from the willow. The moon was nearly down; he was nay more than a ghost, barelegged in his floating sark. “Who were ye speaking to, though?”

“Oh. My da. He was just … there in my mind, ken? I mean, I think of him often, but it’s not sae often I feel him *with* me. So I wondered had he come to tell me I’d die this day.”

Jamie nodded, not seeming bothered at the thought.

“I doubt it,” he said. “Ye’re putting on your paint, aye? Getting ready, I mean.”

“Aye, I was about to. Ye want some, too?” It was only half said in jest, and Jamie took it that way.

“I would, Ian. But I think General Washington might have me strung up by the thumbs and flogged, should I come before him wi’ my troops all marshaled and me wi’ war paint on.”

Ian made a small sound of amusement and scooped two fingers into the dish of red ochre, which he began to rub on his chest.

“And what are ye doin’ out here in your sark, then?”

“Washing,” Jamie said, but in a tone indicating that that wasn’t all of it. “And … talkin’ to my ain dead.”

“Mmphm. Anyone in particular?”

“My uncle Dougal, and Murtagh, him who was my godfather. They’re the two I’d most want with me, in battle.” Jamie made a small restless movement. “If I can, I make a wee moment to be alone before a fight. To wash, ken, and pray a bit, and then … to just ask if they’ll bide with me as I go.”

Ian thought this interesting; he hadn’t known either man himself—they’d both died at Culloden—but he’d heard stories.

"Bonnie fighters," he said. "Did ye ask my da, too? To go with ye, I mean. Perhaps that's why he's about."

Jamie turned his head sharply toward Ian, surprised. Then relaxed, shaking his head.

"I never had to ask Ian Mòr," he said softly. "He was always … just with me." He gestured briefly to the darkness on his right.

Ian's eyes stung and his throat closed. But it was dark; it didn't matter.

He cleared his throat and held out one of the tiny dishes. "Will ye help me, Uncle Jamie?"

"Oh? Aye, surely. How d'ye want it?"

"Red across my forehead—I can do that bit. But black from the wee dots to the chin." He drew a finger across the line of tattooed dots that curved under his cheekbones. "Black's for strength, aye? It declares ye're a warrior. And yellow means ye're no afraid to die."

"Och, aye. Are ye wantin' the yellow today?"

"No." He let the smile show in his voice, and Jamie laughed.

"Mmphm." Jamie dabbed with the rabbit-foot brush, then spread the color evenly with his thumb. Ian closed his eyes, feeling strength come into him with the touch.

"Do ye usually do this alone, Ian? Seems hard, save ye've a looking glass."

"Mostly. Or sometimes we'd do it together, and a clan brother would paint ye. If it's an important thing—a big raid, say, or going to make war on someone—then the medicine man would paint us, and sing."

"Tell me ye dinna want me to sing, Ian," his uncle murmured. "I mean, I'd *try*, but …"

"I'll do without, thanks."

Black for the lower face, red on the forehead, and a band of the malachite green following the line of his tattoos, from ear to ear, across the bridge of his nose.

Ian peered at the small dishes of pigment; it was easy to spot the white, and he pointed to it.

"Can ye maybe draw a wee arrow, Uncle? Across my forehead." He drew a finger from left to right, showing where.

"I can, aye." Jamie's head was bent over the paint dishes, hand hovering. "Did ye not tell me once the white is for peace, though?"

"Aye, should ye be going to parley or trade, ye use a good deal of white. But it's for the mourning, too—so if ye go to avenge someone, ye'd maybe wear white."

Jamie's head came up at that, staring at him.

"This one's no for vengeance," Ian said. "It's for Flying Arrow. The dead man whose place I took, when I was adopted." He spoke as casually as he could, but he felt his uncle tighten and look down. Neither one of them was ever going to forget that day of parting, when he'd gone to the Kahnyen'kehaka, and both of them had thought it was forever. He leaned over and put a hand on Jamie's arm.

"That day, ye said to me, *'Cuimhnich,'* Uncle Jamie. And I did." *Remember*.

"So did I, Ian," Jamie said softly, and drew the arrow on his forehead, his touch like a priest's on Ash Wednesday, marking Ian with the sign of the cross. "So did we all. Is that it?"

Ian touched the green stripe gingerly, to be sure it was dry enough.

"Aye, I think so. Ken Brianna made me the paints? I was thinking of her, but then I thought I maybe shouldna take her with me that way."

He felt Jamie's breath on his skin as his uncle gave a small snort and then sat back.

"Ye always carry your women wi' ye into battle, Ian Òg. They're the root of your strength, man."

"Oh, aye?" That made sense—and was a relief to him. Still … "I was thinkin' it maybe wasna right to think of Rachel in such a place, though. Her being Quaker and all."

Jamie dipped his middle finger into the deer fat, then delicately into the white clay powder, and drew a wide, swooping "V" near the crest of Ian's right shoulder. Even in the dark, it showed vividly.

"White dove," he said with a nod. He sounded pleased. "There's Rachel for ye."

He wiped his fingers on the rock, then rose and stretched. Ian saw him turn to look toward the east. It was still night, but the air had changed, just in the few minutes they'd sat. His uncle's tall figure was distinct against the sky, where a little before he'd seemed part of the night.

"An hour, nay more," Jamie said. "Eat first, aye?" And, with that, turned and walked away to the stream and his own interrupted prayers.

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REACHING FOR THINGS THAT AREN'T THERE

WILLIAM WISHED he could stop reaching for things that weren't there. A dozen times today—oftener!—he'd reached for the dagger that should have been on his belt. Once or twice, for one of his pistols. Slapped an impotent hand against his hip, missing his sword, missing the small, solid weight of his shot pouch, the swing of his cartridge box.

And now he lay sweating naked on his cot, hand slapped flat on his chest where he'd reached without thinking for the wooden rosary. The rosary that, if he'd had it, would no longer be the comfort it had been for so many years. The rosary that, if he'd had it, no longer said *"Mac"* to him. If he *did* still have it, he'd have snatched it off and thrown it into the nearest fire. That's likely what James Fraser had done with it after William had thrown the rosary in the bastard's face. But, then, Fraser wasn't the bastard here, was he?

He muttered *"Scheisse!"* and flung himself irritably over. Three feet away, Evans stirred and farted in his sleep, a sudden, muffled sound like distant cannon. On his other side, Merbling went on snoring.

Tomorrow. He'd gone to bed late after an exhausting day and would be up in an hour, maybe, but he lay wide awake, eyes so adapted to the dark that he could see the pale blur of the tent canvas overhead. No chance of sleep, he knew. Even if he'd see no action himself—and he wouldn't—the proximity of battle had him so keyed up that he could have leapt from bed and gone straight for the enemy right now, sword in hand.

There'd be a battle. Maybe not a big one, but the Rebels were yapping at their heels, and tomorrow—today—there would be a meeting. It might put paid to Washington's ambitions, though Sir Henry was firm that this was not his goal. He meant to get his army and the people under its protection to New York; that was all that mattered—though if his officers should choose to demonstrate their military superiority while doing so, he had no great objection.

William had stood at attention behind Sir Henry's chair at dinner, his back against the tent wall, listening attentively while the plans were drawn up. Had in fact had the honor of carrying the formal written orders to von Knyphausen, whose troops were to march to Middletown, while Clinton's brigade would form up at the rear, to engage the Rebels while my lord Cornwallis's escorted the baggage train on to safety. That's why he'd been so late getting to bed.

He yawned suddenly, surprising himself, and settled back, blinking. Maybe he *could* sleep a bit, after all. Thinking of dinner and orders and such mundanities as the color of von Knyphausen's nightshirt—it was pink silk, with purple pansies embroidered round the neck—rather than the oncoming battle had calmed his mind amazingly. Distraction. That's what he needed.

Worth a try, he supposed.… He squirmed into the most comfortable attitude he could manage, closed his eyes, and began mentally extracting the square roots of numbers greater than one hundred.

He'd got to the square root of 117 and was muzzily groping for the product of 12 and 6 when he felt the sudden stir of air on his damp skin. He sighed and opened his eyes, thinking that Merbling had got up for a piss, but it wasn't Merbling. A dark figure stood just inside the tent flap. The flap wasn't closed, and the figure was clearly visible against the faint glow from the banked campfires outside. A girl.

He sat up fast, groping one-handed for the shirt he'd tossed to the foot of his cot.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he whispered, as softly as he could.

She'd been hovering, uncertain. But hearing him speak, she came straight for him, and next thing he knew, her hands were on his shoulders, her hair brushing his face. He put up his own hands in reflex and found that she was in her shift, her breasts free and warm under it, a few inches from his face.

She pulled back, and in what seemed like the same motion, skimmed the shift off over her head, shook out her hair, and straddled him, her moist round thighs pressing his.

"Get off!" He grabbed her by the arms, pushing her away. Merbling stopped snoring. Evans's bedclothes rustled.

William stood up, snatched up her shift and his shirt, and, taking her by the arm, marched her out of the tent, as quietly as he could.

"What the devil do you think you're doing? Here, put that on!" He thrust the shift unceremoniously into her arms and hastily pulled his shirt on. They were not in full view of anyone, but might be at any moment.

Her head emerged from the shift like a flower popping out of a snowbank. A rather angry flower.

"Well, what do you *think* I was doing?" she said. She pulled her hair free of the shift and fluffed it violently. "I was trying to do you a kindness!"

"A—what?"

"You're going to fight tomorrow, aren't you?" There was enough light to see the shine of her eyes as she glared at him. "Soldiers always want to fuck before a fight! They need it."

He rubbed a hand hard over his face, palm rasping on his sprouting whiskers, then took a deep breath.

"I see. Yes. Very kind of you." He suddenly wanted to laugh. He also—very suddenly—wanted to take advantage of her offer. But not enough to do it with Merbling on one side and Evans on the other, ears flapping.

"I'm not going to fight tomorrow," he said, and the pang it caused him to say that out loud startled him.

"You're not? Why not?" She sounded startled, too, and more than a little disapproving.

"It's a long story," he said, struggling for patience. "And it's not your business. Now, look. I appreciate the thought, but I told you: you're not a whore, at least not for the time being. And you're not *my* whore." Though his imagination was busy with images of what might have happened had she stolen into his cot and taken hold of him before he was fully awake … He put the thought firmly aside and, taking her by the shoulders, turned her round.

"Go back to your own bed now," he said, but couldn't stop himself from patting her very nice arse in farewell. She turned her head and glared at him over her shoulder.

"Coward!" she said. "A man that won't fuck won't fight."

"What?" For an instant, he didn't think she'd really said it, but she had.

"You heard me. Good—fucking—night!"

He reached her in two strides, seized her shoulder, and whirled her round to face him.

"And who gave you that bit of wisdom, may I ask? Your good friend Captain Harkness?" He wasn't truly angry, but the shock of her unexpected arrival was still reverberating in his blood and he *was* annoyed. "Did I save you from buggery so you could throw my circumstances in my face?"

Her chin drew back, and she breathed hard, but not in apparent distress.

"What circumstances?" she demanded.

"I told you—bloody hell. Do you know what the Convention army is?"

"No."

"Well, that's the long story, and I'm not telling you it standing in my shirt in the middle of camp. Now, bugger off and take care of your sister and the lads. That's your job; I'll take care of myself."

She exhaled sharply, with a *puh!* sound.

"Doubtless you *will*," she said, with the maximum of sarcasm and a pointed glance at his cock, which was poking absurdly at his shirt, making its own urgent preferences known.

"Scheisse," he said again, briefly, then grabbed her in a bear hug that pressed her body against his all the way down and kissed her. She struggled, but after the first moment he

realized that the struggle was not meant to procure her release but to provoke him further. He tightened his grip until she stopped, but didn't quit kissing her for some time thereafter.

He finally let go, panting and bedewed with perspiration; the air was like breathing hot tar. She was panting, too. He could take her. Wanted to. Push her down on her knees in the grass beside the tent, pull up her shift, and have her from behind—it wouldn't take more than seconds.

"No," he said, and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. "No," he said again, more positively. Every nerve in his body wanted her, and had he been sixteen, it would have been long over by this time. But he wasn't, and he had just enough self-control to turn her round again. He gripped her by scruff and buttock to keep her from turning back and held her immobile.

"When we get to New York," he whispered, bending to speak in her ear, "I'll think again."

She stiffened, her buttock rounding hard in his hand, but didn't pull away or try to bite him, which he'd half-expected.

"Why?" she said, in a calm voice.

"That's a long story, too," he said. "Good night, Jane." And, releasing her, stalked away into the dark. Nearby, the drums of reveille began.

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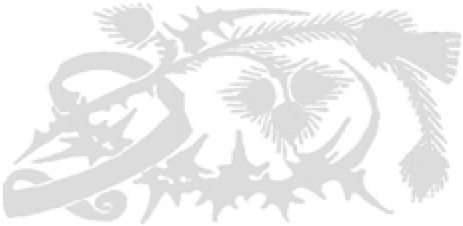
PART FOUR



Day of Battle

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GO OUT IN DARKNESS

IAN HAD BEEN OVER the land briefly the day before, scouting. “And a good thing, too,” he said, under his breath. It was the dark of the moon, and he must go canny and keep the road. He wasn’t risking his horse’s legs over the rough land before he had to, and Bride grant him the sky would be fully light by then.

Still, he was glad of the dark, and the solitude. Not that the land was still; the woods lived at night, and many things came out in the strange dawn hour when the light began to swell. But neither the rustle of hares and voles nor the sleepy call of waking birds demanded his notice or took any notice of him. He had finished his own prayers after Uncle Jamie left him, then departed alone in silence, and the peace of his preparations was still on him.

When he had lived with the Mohawk—particularly when things had gone wrong with Emily—he would leave the longhouse for days, hunting alone with Rollo, until the wilderness had eased his spirit enough to go back, strengthened. He glanced down by reflex, but Rollo had been left behind with Rachel. The wound from the deadfall trap was clean; Auntie Claire had put something on it that helped—but he wouldn't have let Rollo come to a battle like this one offered to be, even had he been whole and a good deal younger than he was.

There was no doubt of the coming battle. He could smell it. His body was rising toward the fight; he could feel the tingling of it—but he treasured this momentary stillness the more for that.

"Won't last long, mind," he said softly to the horse, who ignored him. He touched the white dove on his shoulder and rode on, still quiet but not alone.

* * *

THE MEN HAD lain on their arms all night, by Sir Henry's orders. While one didn't actually lie *on* a musket and cartridge box, there was something about sleeping with a gun touching your body that kept you alert, ready to rouse from sleep in nothing flat.

William had no arms to lie on, and hadn't needed rousing, as he hadn't slept, but was no less alert for the lack. He wouldn't be fighting, and deeply regretted that—but he would be out in it, by God.

The camp was a-bustle, drums rattling up and down the aisles of tents, summoning the soldiers, and the air was full of the smells of baking bread, pork, and hot pease porridge.

There was no visible sign of dawn yet, but he could feel the sun there, just below the horizon, rising with the slow inevitability of its daily dominion. The thought reminded him, vividly, of the whale he had seen on the voyage to

America: a dark shadow below the ship's side, easily dismissed as the change of light on the waves—and then, slowly, the growing bulk, the realization and the breathless wonder of seeing it rise, so close, so huge—and suddenly *there*.

He fastened his garters and tugged them tight before buckling his knee bands and pulling on his Hessian boots. At least he had his gorget back, to lend a touch of ceremony to the mundane task of getting dressed. The gorget, of course, reminded him of Jane—was he ever going to be able to wear it *without* thinking of the damned girl?—and of recent events.

He'd regretted not accepting her offer, and still did. He could still smell her scent, musky and soft, like putting his face in thick fur. Her remark still rankled, too, and he snorted, settling his coat on his shoulders. Perhaps he'd think again *before* they reached New York.

These idle thoughts were interrupted by the appearance of another of Sir Henry's aides, Captain Crosbie, who popped his head through the tent flap, clearly in a great flurry.

"Oh, there you are, Ellesmere. Hoped I'd catch you—here." He tossed a folded note in William's general direction and vanished.

William snorted again and picked it up off the ground. Evans and Merbling had both left, they having actual troops to inspect and command; he envied them bitterly.

It was from General Sir Henry Clinton, and hit him in the stomach like a blow: … *in view of your peculiar status, I think it best that you remain with the clerical staff today* …

"Stercus!" he said, finding German insufficient to his feelings. *"Excrementum obscaenum! Filius mulieris prostabilis!"*

His chest was tight, blood was pounding in his ears, and he wanted to hit something. It would be useless to appeal to Sir Henry, he knew that much. But to spend the day essentially kicking his heels in the clerks' tent—for what was there for him to *do*, if he wasn't allowed to carry dispatches or even do the lowly but necessary work of shepherding the camp followers and Loyalists? What—was he to fetch the clerks' dinner in, or hold a torch in each hand when it got dark, like a fucking candelabra?

He was about to crumple the note into a wad, when yet another unwelcome head intruded itself, followed by an elegant body: Captain André, dressed for battle, sword at his side and pistols in his belt. William eyed him with dislike, though in fact he was an amiable fellow.

"Oh, there you are, Ellesmere," André said, pleased. "Hoped you hadn't gone off yet. I need you to run me a dispatch, quickly. To Colonel Tarleton—with the British Legion, the new Provincials, green chaps—you know him?"

"I do, yes." William accepted the sealed dispatch, feeling odd. "Certainly, Captain."

"Good man." André smiled and squeezed his shoulder, then strode out, ebullient with the promise of imminent action.

William drew a deep breath, carefully folded Sir Henry's note back into its original shape, and placed it on his cot. Who was to say that he hadn't met André first and, owing to the urgency of his request, left immediately, without reading Sir Henry's note?

He doubted he'd be missed, in any case.

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SPARROW-FART

IT WAS PERHAPS four o’clock ack emma. Or before sparrow-fart, as the British armed forces of my own time used to put it. That sense of temporal dislocation was back again, memories of another war coming like a sudden fog between me and my work, then disappearing in an instant, leaving the present sharp and vivid as Kodachrome. The army was moving.

No fog obscured Jamie. He was big and solid, his outlines clearly visible against the shredding night. I was awake and alert, dressed and ready, but the chill of sleep still lay upon me, making my fingers clumsy. I could feel his warmth and drew close to him, as I might to a campfire. He was leading Clarence, who was even warmer, though much less alert, ears sagging in sleepy annoyance.

“You’ll have Clarence,” Jamie told me, putting the mule’s reins in my hand. “And these, to make sure ye keep him, if ye should find yourself on your own.” “These” were a heavy pair of horse pistols, holstered and strung on a thick leather belt that also held a shot bag and powder horn.

“Thank you,” I said, swallowing as I wrapped the reins around a sapling in order to belt the pistols on. The guns were amazingly heavy—but I wouldn’t deny that the weight of them on my hips was amazingly comforting, too.

“All right,” I said, glancing toward the tent where John was. “What about—”

“I’ve seen to that,” he said, cutting me off. “Gather the rest of your things, Sassenach; I’ve nay more than a quarter hour, at most, and I need ye with me when we go.”

I watched him stride off into the mêlée, tall and resolute, and wondered—as I had so often before—*Will it be today? Will this be the last sight I remember of him*? I stood very still, watching as hard as I could.

When I’d lost him the first time, before Culloden, I’d remembered. Every moment of our last night together. Tiny things would come back to me through the years: the taste of salt on his temple and the curve of his skull as I cupped his head; the soft fine hair at the base of his neck, thick and damp in my fingers … the sudden, magical well of his blood in dawning light when I’d cut his hand and marked him forever as my own. Those things had kept him by me.

And when I’d lost him this time, to the sea, I’d remembered the sense of him beside me, warm and solid in my bed, and the rhythm of his breathing. The light across the bones of his face in moonlight and the flush of his skin in the rising sun. I could hear him breathe when I lay in bed alone in my room at Chestnut Street—slow, regular, never stopping—even though I knew it *had* stopped. The sound would comfort me, then drive me mad with the knowledge of loss, so I pulled the pillow hard over my head in a futile attempt to shut it out—only to emerge into the night of the room, thick with woodsmoke and candle wax and vanished light, and be comforted to hear it once more.

If this time—but he had turned, quite suddenly, as though I'd called his name. He came swiftly up to me, grasped me by the arms, and said in a low, strong voice, "It willna be today, either."

Then he put his arms around me and drew me up on tiptoe into a deep, soft kiss. I heard brief cheers from a few of the men nearby, but it didn't matter. Even if it should be today, I would remember.

* * *

JAMIE STRODE toward his waiting companies, loosely assembled near the river. The breath of the water and the mist rising from it comforted him, keeping him wrapped for a little while longer in the peace of the night and the deep sense of his kin, there at his shoulder. He'd told Ian Mòr to stay with Ian Òg, as was right, but had the odd sense that there were three men with him, still.

He'd need the strength of his dead. Three hundred men, and he'd known them for only days. Always before, when he'd taken men into battle, they were men of his blood, of his clan, men who knew him, trusted him—as he knew and trusted them. These men were strangers to him, and yet their lives were in his hands.

He wasn't worried by their lack of training; they were rough and undisciplined, a mere rabble by contrast with the Continental regulars who'd drilled all winter under von Steuben—the thought of the little barrel-shaped Prussian made him smile—but his troops had always been this kind of men: farmers and hunters, pulled from their daily occupations, armed with scythes and hoes as often as with muskets or swords. They'd fight like fiends for him—with him—if they trusted him.

"How is it, then, Reverend?" he said softly to the minister, who had just blessed his flock of volunteers and was hunched among them in his black coat, arms still half spread like a scarecrow protecting his misty field at dawn. The man's face, always rather stern in aspect, lightened upon seeing him, and he realized that the sky itself had begun to glow.

"All well, sir," Woodsworth said gruffly. "We are ready." He didn't, thank God, mention Bertram Armstrong.

"Good," said Jamie, smiling from face to face, and seeing them all lighten in turn as the dawn touched them. "Mr. Whelan, Mr. Maddox, Mr. Hebden—ye're all well in yourselves this morning, I hope?"

"We are," they murmured, looking shyly gratified that he knew their names. He wished he knew them all, but had had to do the best he could, learning the names and faces of a handful of men in each company. It might give them the illusion that he did know every man by name—he hoped so; they needed to know he cared for them.

"Ready, sir." It was Captain Craddock, one of his three captains, stiff and self-conscious with the importance of the occasion, and Judah Bixby and Lewis Orden, two of Jamie's lieutenants, behind him. Bixby was no more than twenty, Orden maybe a year older; they could barely repress their excitement, and he smiled at them, feeling their joy in their young manhood echo in his own blood.

There were some *very* young men among the militia, he noticed. A couple of half-grown boys, tall and spindly as cornstalks—who were they? Oh, yes, Craddock's sons. He remembered now; their mother had died only a month ago, and so they had come with their father into the militia.

God, let me bring them back safe! he prayed.

And felt—actually felt—a hand rest briefly on his shoulder, and knew who the third man was who walked with him.

Taing, Da, he thought, and blinked, raising his face so the tears in his eyes might be thought due to the brightness of the growing light.

* * *

I TIED CLARENCE to a picquet and made my way back into the tent, less troubled, though still keyed up. Whatever was going to happen was going to happen fast, and likely with little warning. Fergus and Germain had gone to find breakfast; I hoped they would show up before I had to leave—because when the time came, I would have to leave, no matter my reservations about abandoning a patient. Any patient.

This particular patient was lying on his back, under the lantern, his working eye half closed, singing to himself in German. He desisted when I came in, and turned his head to see who it was, blinking at sight of my armament.

"Are we expecting imminent invasion and capture?" he asked, sitting up.

"Lie back down. No, this is Jamie being provident." I touched one of the pistols gingerly. "I don't know if they're loaded yet."

"Certainly they are. The man is nothing if not thorough." He eased himself back down, groaning slightly.

"You think you know him awfully well, don't you?" I asked, with an edge that rather surprised me.

"Yes, I do," he answered promptly. He smiled slightly at my expression. "Not nearly as well as you do in some matters, I'm sure—but perhaps better in others. We are both soldiers." He tilted his head, indicating the military racket going on outside.

"If you know him that well," I said, nettled, "you should have known better than to say whatever you did say to him."

"Ah." The smile disappeared and he looked up at the canvas overhead in contemplation. "I did. Know better. I just said it anyway."

"Ah," I replied, and sat down next to the pile of bags and supplies that had made it thus far. Much of this would have to be abandoned. I could take a good deal in Clarence's packs and saddlebags, but not everything. The army had been instructed to abandon almost everything they carried, save weapons and canteens, in the interests of speed.

"Did he tell you what it was?" John asked after a moment, his voice elaborately casual.

"What you said? No, but I could very likely guess." I compressed my lips and didn't look at him, instead lining up bottles on top of a chest. I'd got salt from the innkeeper—not without trouble—and had made up a couple of bottles of crude saline solution, and there was the alcohol … I picked up the candle and began to dribble wax carefully over the corks, lest they loosen and the bottles discharge their contents along the way.

I didn't want to pursue the history of John's eye any further. Other considerations aside, any discussion might lead a little too close to Wentworth Prison for comfort.

However close a friend Jamie might have considered John during the last few years, I was positive that he'd never told John about Black Jack Randall and what had happened at Wentworth. He'd told his brother-in-law Ian, many years ago—and therefore Jenny must know, too, though I doubted she'd ever spoken of it to Jamie—but no one else.

John would likely assume that Jamie had hit him purely from revulsion at something overtly sexual from John—or from jealousy over me. It was perhaps not quite fair to let him think that—but fairness didn't come into it.

Still, I regretted the trouble between them. Beyond whatever personal awkwardness I found in the present situation, I knew how much John's friendship had meant to Jamie—and vice versa. And while I was more than relieved not to be married to John anymore, I did care for him.

And—while the noise and movement all around urged me to forget everything else but the urgency of departure—I couldn't forget that this might be the last time I ever saw John, too.

I sighed and began to wrap the waxed bottles in towels. I should add whatever I could find room for from my Kingsessing haul, but …

"Don't be troubled, my dear," John said gently. "You know it will all come right—provided that we all live long enough."

I gave him a marked look and nodded toward the tent flap, where the clatter and clash of a military camp on the verge of movement was escalating.

"Well, *you'll* likely survive," I said. "Unless you say the wrong thing to Jamie before we leave and he really does break your neck this time."

He glanced—as briefly as possible—toward the pale shaft of dust-filled light, and grimaced.

"You've never had to do it, have you?" I said, seeing his face. "Sit and wait through a battle, wondering if someone you care for will come back."

"Not with regard to anyone other than myself, no," he replied, but I could see that the remark had gone home. He *hadn't* thought of that, and he didn't like the thought one bit. *Welcome to the club*, I thought sardonically.

"Do you think they'll catch Clinton?" I asked, after a moment's silence. He shrugged, almost irritably.

"How should I know? I haven't the slightest idea where Clinton's troops are—I have no idea where Washington is, or where we are, for that matter."

"General Washington would be about thirty yards that way," I said, picking up a basket of bandages and lint, and nodding toward where I'd last seen the commander. "And I would be surprised if General Clinton is very much farther off."

"Oh? And why is that, madam?" he asked, now half amused.

"Because the order came down an hour ago to jettison all unnecessary supplies—though I don't know if he actually said 'jettison,' come to think; that may not be a word in common use now. That's why we were inspecting the men, when we found you—to leave back any who aren't capable of a long forced march on short rations, should that be necessary. Apparently it is.

"But you know what's happening," I added, watching him. "I can hear it. You surely can." Anyone with ears or eyes could sense the nervous excitement in camp, see the hasty preparations being made, the small fights and outbreaks of cursing as men got in each other's way, the bawling of officers, only a hair short of eye-rolling, horn-tossing violence, the braying of mules—I hoped no one would steal Clarence before I got back to him.

John nodded, silent. I could see him turning the situation over in his mind, along with the obvious implications.

"Yes, 'jettison' is certainly a word in common use," he said absently. "Though you hear it more in terms of sea cargo. But—" He jerked a little, realizing the further implications of what I'd said, and stared hard at me with his uncovered eye.

"Don't do that," I said mildly. "You'll hurt the other one. And what I am or am not isn't important just now, is it?"

"No," he muttered, and shut the eye for a moment, then opened it, staring upward at the canvas overhead. Dawn was coming; the yellowed canvas was beginning to glow, and the air around us was thick with dust and the odor of dried sweat.

"I know very little that would be of interest to General Washington," he said, "and I would be surprised if he didn't know that little already. I am not a serving officer—or … well, I wasn't, until my bloody brother decided to reenter me on the rolls of his bloody regiment. Do you know, he nearly got me *hanged*?"

"No, but it sounds extremely like him," I said, laughing despite my disquiet.

"What do you—oh, God. You've *met* Hal?" He'd reared up on one elbow, blinking at me.

"I have," I assured him. "Lie down, and I'll tell you." Neither of us was going anywhere for a few minutes at least, and I was able to give him the entire story of my adventures with Hal in Philadelphia, while I wound up bandages, put my medical box in good order, and extracted what I thought the most important items from the supplies I'd brought. In an emergency, I might be reduced to what I could carry on my back at a dead run, and I made up a small rucksack with that contingency in mind, whilst regaling John with my opinions of his brother.

"Jesus, if he thinks he's a chance in hell of preventing Dorothea from marrying Dr. Hunter … I believe I'd pay good money to overhear the conversation when he meets Denzell," he remarked. "Who would you bet on—given that Hal hasn't got a regiment at his back to enforce his opinions?"

"He likely *has* met him by now. As to odds—Denzell, three to two," I said, after a moment's consideration. "He's got not only God but love—and Dorothea—on his side, and I do think that will outweigh even Hal's brand of … of … autocratic conviction?"

"I'd call it undiluted bastardliness, myself, but, then, I'm his brother. I'm allowed liberties."

The sound of voices speaking French announced the arrival of Fergus and Germain, and I stood up abruptly.

"I may not—" I began, but he raised a hand, stopping me.

"If not, then goodbye, my dear," he said softly. "And good luck."

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A SINGLE LOUSE

IT WAS BARELY AN hour past dawn and it would doubtless be another beastly hot day, but for the moment the air was still fresh and both William and Goth were happy. He threaded his way through the boiling mass of men, horses, limbers, and the other impedimenta of war, quietly whistling “The King Enjoys His Own Again.”

The baggage wagons were already being readied; a great dust cloud rose, roiling and shot through with gold from the rising sun, from the teamsters’ park near von Knyphausen’s division, encamped a quarter mile away, on the other side of Middletown. They’d be off directly, heading for Sandy Hook—and Jane, Fanny, Zeb, and Colenso with them, he sincerely hoped. A brief sensory recollection of the skin inside Jane’s thighs sparked through his mind and he stopped whistling for an instant, but then shook it out of his head. Work to be done!

No one quite knew where the new British Legion was, though it was assumed to be somewhere in the vicinity of

Clinton's division, it being one of his personal regiments, raised only a month ago in New York. That might be chancy, but William was quite willing to wager that he could evade Sir Henry's notice, under the conditions.

"Like picking one louse out of a Frenchie's wig," he murmured, and patted Goth's neck. The horse was fresh and frisky, couldn't wait to reach the open road and break into a gallop. Clinton's division was holding the rear guard at Middletown—enough distance to take the edge off Goth's bounciness. First, though, they'd have to get through the spreading mass of camp followers, struggling out of sleep into a desperate haste. He kept Goth on a short rein, lest he trample a child—there were dozens of the little buggers, swarming over the ground like locusts.

Glancing up from the ground, he caught sight of a familiar form, standing in line for bread, and his heart gave a small leap of pleasure. Anne Endicott, dressed for day but without her cap, dark hair in a thick plait down her back. The sight of it gave him a *frisson* of intimacy, and he barely stopped himself calling out to her. Time enough, after the fight.

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FOLIE À TROIS

FERGUS HAD BROUGHT me a sausage roll and a cannikin of coffee—real coffee, for a wonder.

"Milord will send for you shortly," he said, handing these over.

"Is he nearly ready?" The food was warm and fresh—and I knew it might be the last I got for some time—but I barely tasted it. "Have I time to dress Lord John's eye again?" The pervading air of haste was clearly perceptible to me, and my skin had started twitching as though I were being attacked by ants.

"I will go and see, milady. Germain?" Fergus tilted his head toward the tent flap, beckoning Germain to go with him.

But Germain, out of what might have been either loyalty to John or fear of finding himself alone with Jamie—who had rather plainly meant what he said regarding the future of Germain's arse—wanted to stay in the tent.

"I'll be fine," John assured him. "Go with your father." He was still pale and sweating, but his jaw and hands had relaxed; he wasn't in severe pain.

"Yes, he will be fine," I said to Germain, but nodded to Fergus, who went out without further comment. "Fetch me some fresh lint, will you? Then you can come and help me while his lordship rests. As for you—" I turned to John. "You lie flat, keep your eye closed, and bloody stay out of trouble, if such a thing is possible."

He swiveled his good eye in my direction, wincing slightly as the movement pulled on the bad one.

"Are you accusing *me* of causing the imbroglio that resulted in my injury, madam? Because I distinctly recall your playing some minor role in its origins." He sounded rather cross.

"I had nothing whatever to do with your ending up *here*," I said firmly, though I could feel my cheeks flush. "Germain, have you found the lint?"

"Will the honey not draw flies, Grannie?" Germain handed me the requested lint but stood by the cot, frowning down at its occupant. "Ken what they say, aye? Ye catch more flies wi' honey than ye do wi' vinegar. Ye couldna pour vinegar on him, I suppose?"

"Hmmm." He had a point. We were no great distance from the teamsters; I could hear mules snorting and braying, and newly wakened flies, still heavy with sleep, had been buzzing round my ears even as I unwrapped the old bandage. "Right. Not vinegar, but mint might help. Find the tin with the fleur-de-lis, then, and rub ointment on his lordship's face and hands—*don't* get it in his eyes. Then bring the small box—"

"I am certainly capable of rubbing ointment on myself," John interrupted, and extended a hand to Germain. "Here, give it to me."

"Lie still," I said, rather cross myself. "As for what you're capable of, I shudder to think." I had set a small dish of honey to warm near the lantern; I filled my syringe and injected the honey around his bad eye, made a small pad of lint, thumbed it gently into his eye socket, and bound a clean length of gauze round his head to hold it in place, thinking as I did so.

"Germain … go and fill the canteen, will you?" It was half full already, but he obligingly took it and went, leaving me alone with John.

"Shall I leave Germain with you?" I asked, stuffing the last few items into my first-aid kit. "And Fergus?" I added hesitantly.

"No," he said, slightly startled. "What for?"

"Well … protection. In case Monsieur Beauchamp should come back, I mean." I didn't trust Percy in the slightest. I was also dubious about putting Fergus in close proximity to him, but it had occurred to me that perhaps John might be some protection to *him*.

"Ah." He closed his good eye for a moment, then opened it again. "Now, *that* imbroglio is indeed of my own making," he said ruefully. "But while Germain is admittedly a formidable presence, I shan't need a bodyguard. I rather doubt that Percy intends either to assault or to kidnap me."

"Do you … care for him?" I asked curiously.

"Is it your business if I do?" he replied evenly.

I flushed more deeply, but took a few breaths before answering.

"Yes," I said at last. "Yes, I rather think it is. Whatever my role in the origins of this … this … er …"

"Folie à trois?" he suggested, and I laughed. I'd told him what a *folie à deux* was, with reference to Mrs. Figg's and the laundress's shared obsession with starched drawers.

"That will do. But, yes, it is my business—on Jamie's behalf, if not yours." But it was on his behalf, as well. The shock and rush of recent events had prevented my thinking through the situation, but I was quite sure that Jamie had. And now that I was thoroughly awake and undistracted by my own affairs, my thoughts were catching up with uncomfortable rapidity.

"Do you recall a Captain André?" I asked abruptly. "John André. He was at the Mischianza."

"I may have lost a few things over the course of the last few days," he said, with some acerbity, "but neither my memory nor my wits. Yet," he added, in a marked manner. "Of course I know him. A very sociable and artistic young man; he was invited everywhere in Philadelphia. He's on General Clinton's staff."

"Did you know that he's also a spy?" My heart was thumping in my ears, and my stays felt suddenly too tight. Was I about to do something hideously irrevocable?

He blinked, obviously startled.

"No. Why on earth should you think that?" And, a half second later, "And why the devil would you tell me about it, if you do think so?"

"Because," I said, as evenly as I could, "he'll be caught doing it, in another year or two. He'll be found behind the American lines, in civilian clothes, with incriminating documents on his person. And the Americans will hang him."

The words hung in the air between us, visible as though they were written in black smoke. John opened his mouth, then shut it again, clearly nonplussed.

I could hear all the sounds of the camp around us: talk, occasional shouting, and the sounds of horses and mules, the beat of a drum in the distance, summoning men to … what? Someone at close range practicing a fife, the shrill note breaking in the same place each time. The constant rumble and shriek of the grinding wheel, frenziedly sharpening metal for the last time. And the increasing buzz of flies.

They were drifting into the tent in small clouds of carnivory; two of them landed on John's forehead, to be irritably brushed away. The tin of bug repellent lay on the cot where Germain had put it down; I reached for it.

"No," he said, rather sharply, and took it from my hand. "I can—I—don't touch me, if you please." His hand trembled, and he had a moment's difficulty in getting the lid off, but I didn't help him. I'd gone cold to the fingertips, in spite of the stifling atmosphere in the tent.

He'd surrendered to Jamie personally, given his parole. It would be Jamie who would eventually have to hand him over to General Washington. Would *have* to; too many people had seen the incident, knew where John was—and, by this time, what he was.

John didn't sit up, but managed to thumb a glob of the mentholated grease from the tin and rub it on his face and neck.

"You didn't have anything in your clothes," I ventured, with a faint hope. "No incriminating documents, I mean."

"I had my warrant of commission in my pocket when the Rebel militia took me, outside Philadelphia," he said, but spoke in an abstract tone, as though it didn't really matter.

He rubbed ointment briskly over his hands and wrists. "Not proof of spying in itself—but certainly proof that I was a British officer, out of uniform and arguably behind the American lines at the time. Don't talk anymore, my dear; it's very dangerous."

He snapped the lid onto the tin and held it out to me.

"You'd better go," he said, looking me in the eye and speaking in a low voice. "You must not be found alone with me."

"Grannie?" Germain pushed back the tent flap, red as a beet under his shaggy bangs. "Grannie! Come quick! *Papa* says *Grand-père* wants you!"

He disappeared and I hastily snatched up my equipment, bedizening myself with bags and boxes. I made for the tent flap, but paused for an instant, turning to John.

"I should have asked—does he care for *you*?" I said.

He shut his good eye and his lips compressed for a moment.

"I hope not," he said.

* * *

I HURRIED AFTER Germain with my medical satchel full of gurgling bottles slung over my shoulder, a small box of extra instruments and sutures under my arm, Clarence's reins in hand, and a mind so agitated I could hardly see where I was going.

I realized now that I hadn't been telling John anything he didn't know. Well … bar the account of Captain André's future fate, and while that was chilling enough, it wasn't of direct importance at the moment.

He'd stopped me speaking, because he'd already known how much danger he stood in—and what the effects were likely to be on Jamie, and on me. *"You must not be found alone with me."*

Because I'd been at one point his wife, he meant. That's what he'd been thinking but hadn't wanted to tell me, until I forced the issue.

If anything happened—well, be blunt about it: if he broke his parole and escaped—I'd very likely be suspected of having a hand in it, but the suspicion would be a great deal more pronounced if anyone could testify to having seen us in private conversation. And Jamie would be suspected of complicity at worst, or, at best, of having a wife who was disloyal both to him and to the cause of independence.… I could easily end up in a military prison. So might Jamie.

But if John *didn't* escape … or escaped and was recaptured …

But the road lay before me, and Jamie was there on his horse, holding the reins of my mare. And it was Jamie with whom I'd cross the Rubicon today—not John.

* * *

THE MARQUIS de La Fayette was waiting for them at the rendezvous, face flushed and eyes bright with anticipation. Jamie couldn't help smiling at sight of the young Frenchman, got up regardless in a glorious uniform with red silk facings. He wasn't inexperienced, though, despite his youth and his very obvious Frenchness. He'd told Jamie about the battle at Brandywine Creek a year before, where he'd been wounded in the leg, and how Washington had insisted that he lie beside him and wrapped him in his own cloak. Gilbert idolized Washington, who had no sons of his own, and who clearly felt a deep affection for the wee marquis.

Jamie glanced at Claire, to see if she was appreciating La Fayette's stylish toilette, but her gaze was fixed—with a small frown—on a group of men in the far distance, beyond the Continental regulars drawn up in orderly formations. She wasn't wearing her spectacles; he could see easily at a distance and half-stood in his stirrups to look.

"General Washington and Charles Lee," he told her, sitting back in the saddle. La Fayette, spotting them, as well, swung himself into his own saddle and rode toward the senior officers. "I suppose I'd best go join them. D'ye see Denzell Hunter yet?" He had it in mind to confide Claire to Hunter's care; he didn't mean her to be wandering the battlefield—if there was one—on her own, no matter how helpful she might be there, and was wary of leaving her alone.

Hunter was driving his wagon, though, and that couldn't keep up with the marching men. Clouds of dust rose in the air, stirred by thousands of eager feet; it tickled in his chest, and he coughed.

"No," she said. "Don't worry." And she smiled at him, brave, though her face was pale despite the heat, and he could feel the flutter of her fear in his own wame. "Are you all right?" She always looked at him in that searching way when he set out to a fight, as though committing his face to memory in case he was killed. He kent why she did it, but it made him feel strange—and he was already unsettled this morning.

"Aye, fine," he said, and taking her hand, kissed it. He should have spurred up and gone, but lingered for a moment, loath to let go.

“Did you—” she began, and then stopped abruptly.

“Put on clean drawers? Aye, though it’s like to be wasted effort, ken, when the guns start firin’.” It was a feeble enough jest, but she laughed, and he felt better.

“Did I what?” he prompted, but she shook her head.

“Never mind. You don’t need anything else to think of now. Just—be careful, will you?” She swallowed visibly, and his heart turned over.

“I will,” he said, and took up the reins but looked back over his shoulder, in case Young Ian should be coming. She was safe enough, in the midst of the forming companies, but he’d still be happier with someone to look after her. And if he told her that, she’d likely—

“There’s Ian!” she exclaimed, squinting to see. “What’s the matter with his horse, I wonder?”

He looked where she was looking and saw the cause at once. His nephew was afoot, leading the halting horse, and both of them were looking crankit.

“Lame,” he said. “And badly lamed, too. What’s amiss, Ian?” he called.

“Stepped on summat sharp, coming up the bank, and cracked his hoof, right down into the quick.” Ian ran a hand down the horse’s leg and the animal all but leaned on him, picking up its unshod hoof at once. Sure enough, the crack was visible, and deep enough to make Jamie wince in sympathy. Like having a toenail torn off, he supposed, and having to walk a distance with it.

“Take my horse, Ian,” Claire said, and slid off in a flurry of petticoats. “I can ride Clarence. No need for me to be fast, after all.”

“Aye, all right,” Jamie said, though a bit reluctant. Her mare was a good one, and Ian had to have a mount. “Shift the saddles, then, and, Ian, watch out for Dr. Hunter. Dinna leave your auntie 'til he comes, aye? Goodbye, Sassenach; I'll see ye later in the day." He could wait no longer, and nudged his horse away into the crowd.

Other officers had gathered around Washington; he'd barely be in time. But it wasn't the risk of being conspicuously late that cramped his bowels. It was guilt.

He ought to have reported John Grey's arrest at once. He kent that fine, but had delayed, hoping … hoping what? That the ridiculous situation would somehow evaporate? If he *had* reported it, Washington would have had Grey taken into custody and locked up somewhere—or hanged him out of hand, as an example. He didn't think that likely, but the possibility had been enough to keep him from saying anything, counting on the chaos of the impending exodus to keep anyone from noticing.

But what was eating at his insides now was not guilt over duty deferred, or even over exposing Claire to danger by keeping the wee sodomite in his own tent instead of turning him over. It was the fact that he had not thought to revoke Grey's parole this morning when he left. If he had, Grey might easily have escaped in the confusion of leaving, and even if there had been trouble later over it … John Grey would be safe.

But it was too late, and with a brief prayer for the soul of Lord John Grey, he reined up beside the Marquis de La Fayette and bowed to General Washington.

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MORASSES AND IMBROGLIOS

THERE WERE THREE CREEKS running through the land, cutting it up. Where the earth was soft, the water had cut deep and the creek ran at the bottom of a steep ravine, the banks of it thick with saplings and underbrush. A farmer he'd spoken to while scouting the day before had told him the names of them—Dividing Brook, Spotswood Middle Brook, and Spotswood North Brook—but Ian wasn't at all sure he kent for sure which this one was.

The ground here was wide and low; the creek ran out into a sunken, marshy sort of place, and he turned away; bad footing for either man or horse. One of the farmers had called the ravines "morasses," and he thought that a good word. He looked up the creek, searching for good watering places, but the ravine fell too steeply. A man could make shift to scramble down to the water, maybe, but not horses or mules.

Ian felt them before he saw them. The sense of a hunting animal, lying concealed in the wood, waiting for prey to come down to drink. He turned his horse sharply and rode along the creek bank, watching the trees on the other side.

Movement, a horse's head tossing against flies. A glimpse of a face—faces—painted, like his own.

A thrill of alarm shot up his spine and instinct flattened him against the horse's neck, as the arrow whizzed over his head. It stuck, quivering, in a nearby sycamore.

He straightened, his own bow in hand, nocked an arrow in the same movement, and sent it back, aiming blind for the spot where he'd seen them. The arrow shredded leaves as it went but struck nothing—he hadn't expected it to.

"Mohawk!" came a derisory shout from the other side, and a few words in a language he didn't understand but whose intended meaning was clear enough. He made a very Scottish gesture, whose meaning was also clear, and left them laughing.

He paused to yank the arrow out of the sycamore. Fletched with a yaffle's tail feathers, but not a pattern he knew. Whatever they'd been speaking wasn't an Algonquian tongue. Might be something northern like Assiniboine—he'd know, if he got a clear look at them—but might equally be something from nearer to hand.

Very likely working for the British army, though. He kent most of the Indian scouts presently with the Rebels. And while they hadn't been trying to kill him—they could have done so, easily, if they'd really wanted to—this was rougher teasing than might be expected. Perhaps only because they'd recognized him for what he was.

Mohawk! To an English speaker, it was just easier to say than "Kahnyen'kehaka." To any of the tribes who lived within knowledge of the Kahnyen'kehaka, it was either a word to scare children with or a calculated insult. "Man-eater," it meant, for the Kahnyen'kehaka were known to roast their enemies alive and devour the flesh.

Ian had never seen such a thing, but he knew men—old men—who had and would tell you about it with pleasure. He didn't care to think about it. It brought back much too vividly the night the priest had died in Snaketown, mutilated and burned alive—the night that had inadvertently taken Ian from his family and made him a Mohawk.

The bridge lay upstream, perhaps sixty yards from where he was. He paused, but the woods on the other side were silent, and he ventured across, his horse's hooves a careful clopping on the boards. If there were British scouts here, the army was not too far beyond.

There were broad meadows past the woods on the far side, and beyond these the fields of a good-sized farm; he could see a snatch of the buildings through the trees—and the movement of men. He turned hastily, circling a copse and coming out into ground open enough to see.

There were green-coated soldiers on the ridgeline beyond the farm buildings, and he could smell the sulfur of their slow match on the heavy air. Grenadiers.

He wheeled his horse and headed back, to find someone to tell.

* * *

WILLIAM FINALLY discovered the cavalry detachment of the British Legion, filling their canteens from a well in the yard of a farmhouse. They had a picket out, though, who gave a warning shout at sight of a lone horseman, and half the company swung round, on the alert. A well-trained company; Banastre Tarleton was a good, energetic officer.

Tarleton himself was standing relaxed in the shade of a big tree, his ornately plumed helmet cradled in one arm, mopping his face with a green silk kerchief. William rolled his eyes briefly at this bit of affectation, but not so Tarleton could see. He came to a walk and rode up beside Tarleton, leaning down to give him the dispatch.

"From Captain André," he said. "Been busy?" The men had been fighting; he could smell the smoke on them, and a couple of men with what looked like minor wounds were sitting against the barn, uniforms streaked with blood. The barn doors hung open on emptiness, and the yard was trampled and spotted with dung; he wondered for a moment whether the farmer had driven his own stock away, or whether one or another of the armies had taken the animals.

"Not nearly busy enough," Tarleton replied, reading the note. "This may help, though. We're to go reinforce my lord Cornwallis." His face was flushed with the heat, and his leather stock was clearly cutting into his thick, muscular neck, but he looked exceedingly cheerful at the prospect.

"Good," said William, reining up to turn and go, but Tarleton stopped him with a raised hand. He tucked the dispatch away in his pocket, along with the green kerchief.

"Since I see you, Ellesmere—saw a tasty piece last night in camp, in the bread line," he said. Tarleton sucked his lower lip for an instant and released it, red and wet. "*Very* tasty, and a sweet little sister with her, too, though that one's not quite ripe enough for me." William raised his brows, but felt himself tense in thighs and shoulders.

"Made her an offer," Tarleton said, overtly careless but with a swift glance at William's hands. William relaxed them with an effort. "She declined, though—said she was yours?" This last was not quite a question, but not quite not.

“If her name is Jane,” William said shortly, “she and her sister are traveling under my protection.”

Tarleton’s quizzical look flowered into open amusement.

“Your protection,” he repeated. His full lips twitched. “I believe she told me that her name was Arabella, though—perhaps we’re thinking of different girls.”

“No, we’re not.” William did *not* want to be having this conversation, and gathered up his reins. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

That was a mistake; Tarleton never passed up a challenge. His eyes sparkled and William saw him set himself, legs spread.

“Fight you for her,” he said.

“What, here? Are you insane?” There were bugles in the distance, and not a very far distance, either. To say nothing of Tarleton’s troops, many of them clearly listening to this exchange.

“Wouldn’t take long,” Tarleton said softly, rocking back on his heels. His left fist was loosely curled and he rubbed his right hand flat on the side of his breeches, coat pushed back. He glanced over his shoulder, to the empty barn. “My men wouldn’t interfere, but we could go in there, if you’re shy.” *“Shy”* said with that particular intonation that made it clear that cowardice was meant.

It had been on the tip of William’s tongue to say, *“I don’t* own *the girl”*—but to make that admission was to give Tarleton license to go after her. He’d seen Ban with girls often enough; he wasn’t violent with them, but he was insistent. Never left without getting what he wanted, one way or another.

And after Harkness … His thoughts hadn’t caught up with his body; he was on the ground, shucking his coat, before he'd made a conscious decision.

Ban laid his helmet on the ground, grinning, and took off his own coat in a leisurely fashion. The motion attracted all his men at once, and in seconds they were surrounded by a circle of dragoons, whistling and hooting encouragement. The only dissenter was Ban's lieutenant, who had gone a sickly shade of gray.

"Colonel!" he said, and William realized that the man's fear had all to do with taking issue with Ban and not the consequences of what might happen if he didn't. He meant to do his duty, though, and reached out a hand to grip Tarleton's arm. "Sir. You—"

"Let go," Ban said, not taking his eyes off William. "And shut up." The lieutenant's hand dropped away as though someone had punched him in the shoulder.

William felt at once detached, as though he were watching this from somewhere outside himself, above it all—and that part of him wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of the situation. And some very tiny remnant of conscience was appalled. But the fleshly part of him was grimly exultant, and very much in charge.

He'd seen Ban fight before, and didn't make the mistake of waiting for any sort of signal. The moment the green coat hit the ground, William launched himself and—ignoring a ferocious hook that slammed into his ribs—grabbed Tarleton by both shoulders, jerked him forward, and butted him in the face with a horrid sound of cracking bone.

He let go, pushed Ban hard in the chest, and sent him staggering backward, blood flying from his broken nose and a surprised look on his face that turned immediately to berserk fury. Tarleton dug in his heels and leapt at William like a rabid dog.

William had six inches and forty pounds on Ban, and three older cousins who had taught him to fight. Banastre Tarleton had an unshakable conviction that he was going to win any fight he started.

They were struggling on the ground, so locked that neither was actually able to hit the other effectively, when William dimly heard the lieutenant's voice, full of panic, and a rush all round them. Hands seized him and dragged him away from Tarleton; more hands pushed him frantically toward his horse. There were drums coming down the lane and the sound of marching feet.

He mounted in a daze, a taste of blood in his mouth, and spat by reflex. His coat was thrown across his lap, and someone slapped his horse with a sharp "T'cha!" that nearly unseated William, whose feet were nowhere near the stirrups.

He pressed knees and calves into the horse's sides, urging Goth into a gallop, and burst from the lane directly in front of an infantry column, whose sergeant recoiled with a shout of alarm. Scots. He saw the checkered trews and caps, and heard a few uncouth shouts in what might be Scots or Gaelic, but didn't care. They belonged to a regiment he didn't know—and so their officers wouldn't know him.

Tarleton could give what explanations he liked. William's left ear was ringing, and he shook his head and pressed the flat of his hand against the ear to quiet it.

When he took the hand away, the ringing had eased, and a number of people were singing "Yankee Doodle" instead. He glanced over his shoulder, incredulous, and saw a number of blue-coated Continentals, dragging a number of cannon, making for the distant ridgeline.

Go back and tell the Scots infantry and Tarleton’s men? Head south to Cornwallis?

“Hey, redcoat!” A shout from his left made him look in that direction, and just in time. A group of ten or fifteen men in hunting shirts was bearing down on him, most of them armed with scythes and hoes. One man was aiming a musket at him; apparently he was the one who had shouted, for he did so again: “Drop your reins and get off!”

“The devil I will,” William replied, and booted Goth, who took off as though his tail were on fire. William heard the boom of the musket, but crouched low over the horse’s neck and kept going.

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PECULIAR BEHAVIOR OF A TENT

WHILE NOT EAGER to be removed to a prison of some sort, John Grey was beginning to wish at least for solitude. Fergus Fraser and his son had insisted on remaining with him until someone came for him. Presumably so they could tell Jamie how he had been disposed of.

He was peculiarly disinterested in the method and means of that disposal, content to await developments. What he wanted solitude for was a contemplation of Percy Wainwright's presence, motives, and possible action. With La Fayette, he'd said. Adviser. John shuddered to think what sort of advice might be given by that … and what about his interests in Fergus Fraser?

He glanced at said printer, presently engaged in argument with his precocious offspring.

"You did it!" Germain glowered up at his father, face flushed red with righteous indignation. "Ye told me so yourself, a dozen times or more! How you went to war with *Grand-père*, and stabbed a man in the leg, and rode on a cannon when the soldiers dragged it back from Prestonpans—and ye weren't even as old as I am now when ye did all that!"

Fergus paused for an instant, regarding his offspring through narrowed eyes, obviously regretting his previous prolixity. He breathed steadily through his nose for a moment, then nodded.

"That was different," he said evenly. "I was milord's employee at the time, not his son. I had a duty to attend him; he had no responsibility to prevent me doing so."

Germain blinked, frowning uncertainly.

"You weren't his son?"

"Of course not," Fergus said, exasperated. "If I told you about Prestonpans, surely I have told you that I was an orphan in Paris when I met your *grand-père*. He hired me to pick pockets for him."

"He did?" John hadn't meant to interrupt, but couldn't help it. Fergus glanced at him, startled; evidently he hadn't really noticed John's presence, focused as he was on Germain. He bowed.

"He did, my lord. We were Jacobites, you understand. He required information. Letters."

"Oh, indeed," John murmured, and took a sip from his flask. Then, recalling his manners, offered it to Fergus, who blinked in surprise, but then accepted it with another bow and took a healthy gulp. Well, it must be thirsty work, pursuing an errant child through an army. He thought briefly of Willie, and thanked God his son was safe—or was he?

He'd known that William would of course have left Philadelphia when Clinton withdrew the army—perhaps as a non-fighting aide-de-camp to a senior officer. But he hadn't thought about that supposition in conjunction with the apparent present fact that General Washington was now in hot pursuit of Clinton and might just possibly catch up with him. In which case, William …

These thoughts had distracted him from the ongoing tête-à-tête, and he was jerked out of them by a question directed to him by Germain.

"Me? Oh … sixteen. I might have gone to the army earlier," John added apologetically, "had my brother's regiment been formed, but he only raised it during the Jacobite Rising." He looked at Fergus with new interest. "You were at Prestonpans, were you?" That should have been his own first battle, too—and would have been, save for his happening to meet one Red Jamie Fraser, notorious Jacobite, in a mountain pass two nights before.

"Did you kill anybody?" Germain demanded.

"Not at Prestonpans. Later, at Culloden. I wish I hadn't." He stretched out a hand for the flask. It was nearly empty, and he drained it.

A moment later, he was glad of his celerity; had he not drained the flask already, he might have choked. The tent flap folded back, and Percy Wainwright/Beauchamp stuck his head in, then froze in surprise, dark eyes darting from one to another of the tent's inhabitants. John had an impulse to throw the empty flask at him, but thought better of it, instead saying coldly, "I beg your pardon, sir; I am engaged."

"So I see." Percy didn't look at John. "Mr. Fergus Fraser," he said softly, coming into the tent, hand outstretched. "Your servant, sir. *Comment ça va*?"

Fergus, unable to avoid him, shook his hand with reserve and bowed slightly but said nothing. Germain made a small growling noise in his throat, but desisted when his father gave him a sharp glance.

“I am so pleased finally to have encountered you in private, Monsieur Fraser,” Percy said, still speaking French. He smiled as charmingly as possible. “Monsieur—do you know who you are?”

Fergus regarded him thoughtfully.

“Few men know themselves, monsieur,” he said. “For my part, I am entirely content to leave such knowledge to God. He can deal with it far better than I could. And having come to this conclusion, I believe that is all I have to say to you. *Pardonnez-moi.*” With that, he shouldered past Percy, taking him off-guard and knocking him off-balance. Germain turned at the tent flap and stuck out his tongue.

“Damned frog!” he said, then disappeared with a small yelp as his father jerked him through the flap.

Percy had lost one of his silver-buckled shoes in trying to stay upright. He brushed dirt and vegetable matter from the bottom of his stocking and screwed his foot back into the shoe, lips compressed and a rather attractive flush showing across his cheekbones.

“Oughtn’t you to be with the army?” John inquired. “Surely you want to be there, if Washington does meet Clinton. I imagine your ‘interests’ would want a full report by an eyewitness, wouldn’t they?”

“Shut up, John,” Percy said briefly, “and listen. I haven’t got much time.” He sat down on the stool with a thump, folded his hands on his knee, and looked intently at John, as though evaluating his intelligence. “Do you know a man—a British officer—called Richardson?”

* * *

FERGUS MADE HIS way through the shambles left by the exodus of the army, holding Germain firmly by the hand. The camp followers and such men as had been left behind as unfit were setting to the work of salvage, and no one gave the Frasers more than a glance. He could only hope that the horse was where he had left it. He touched the pistol tucked under his shirt, just in case.

"Frog?" he said to Germain, not bothering to keep amusement out of his voice. "Damned *frog*, you said?"

"Well, he *is*, Papa." Germain stopped walking suddenly, pulling his hand free. "Papa, I need to go back."

"Why? Have you forgotten something?" Fergus glanced over his shoulder at the tent, feeling an uneasiness between his shoulder blades. Beauchamp couldn't force him to listen, let alone to do anything he didn't wish to, and yet he had a strong aversion to the man. Well, call it fear; he seldom bothered lying to himself. Though why he should fear a man such as that …

"No, but …" Germain struggled to choose among several thoughts that were plainly all trying to emerge into speech at once. "*Grand-père* told me I must stay with his lordship and if Monsieur Beauchamp should come, I must listen to anything they said."

"Really? Did he say why?"

"No. But he said it. And, also, I was—I *am*—his lordship's servant, his orderly. I have a duty to attend him." Germain's face was touchingly earnest, and Fergus felt his heart squeeze a little. Still …

Fergus had never mastered the Scottish way of making crude but eloquent noises in the throat—he rather envied them—but was not bad with similar communications made via the nose.

"According to what the soldiers said, he is a prisoner of war. Do you mean to accompany him to whatever dungeon or hulk they put him in? Because I think *Maman* would come and hoick you out of it by the scruff of your neck. Come along, she's very worried and waiting to hear that you're safe."

Mention of Marsali had the hoped-for effect; Germain cast down his eyes and bit his lip.

"No, I don't—I mean, I'm not … well, but, Papa! I *have* to just go and be sure that Monsieur Beauchamp isn't doing anything bad to him. And maybe see that he has some food before we leave," he added. "You wouldna have him starve, would you?"

"Milord looked reasonably well nourished," Fergus said, but the urgency on Germain's face drew him a reluctant step back toward the tent. Germain at once glowed with relief and excitement, seizing his father's hand again.

"Why do you think Monsieur Beauchamp means his lordship harm?" Fergus asked, holding Germain back for a moment.

"Because his lordship doesna like him, and neither does *Grand-père*," the boy said briefly. "Come on, Papa! His lordship is unarmed, and who knows what that sodomite has in his pocket?"

"Sodomite?" Fergus stopped dead in his tracks.

"*Oui, Grand-père* says he's a sodomite. Come on!" Germain was nearly frantic now and drew his father on by sheer willpower.

Sodomite? Well, that was interesting. Fergus, observant and very much experienced in the ways of the world and of sex, had some time ago drawn his own conclusions regarding milord Grey's preferences but had naturally not mentioned these to Jamie, as the English lord was his father's good friend. Did he know? Regardless, that might make his lordship's relationship with this Beauchamp a good deal more complex, and he approached the tent with a heightened sense of both curiosity and wariness.

He was prepared to clap his hand over Germain's eyes and drag him away, should anything untoward be going on in that tent, but before they came close enough to see through the flap, he saw the canvas quiver in a very odd way, and pulled Germain to a halt.

"Arrête," he said softly. He couldn't conceive of even the most depraved sexual practices causing a tent to behave in that way and, gesturing to Germain to stay put, moved soft-footed to one side, keeping a little distance among the camp debris.

Sure enough, Lord John was wriggling out under the back edge of the tent, cursing quietly in German. Eyes on this peculiar exhibition, Fergus didn't notice that Beauchamp had emerged from the front of the tent until he heard Germain's exclamation and turned to find the boy behind him. He was impressed at Germain's ability to move quietly, but this was not the time for praise. He motioned to his son and withdrew a little farther, taking cover behind a pile of spiled barrels.

Beauchamp, with a high color in his face, walked off briskly, dusting chaff from the elegant skirts of his coat. Lord John, scrambling to his feet, made off in the other direction, toward the woods, not bothering about his own costume, and no wonder. What on earth had the man been doing, dressed in such a way?

“What shall we do, Papa?” Germain whispered.

Fergus hesitated only a moment, glancing after Beauchamp. The man was heading toward a large inn, likely General Washington’s erstwhile center of command. If Beauchamp were remaining with the Continental army, he could be found again—if that proved necessary.

“Shall we follow Lord John, Papa?” Germain was vibrating with anxiety, and Fergus put his hand on the boy’s shoulder to calm him.

“No,” he said, firmly but with some regret—he himself was more than curious. “Clearly his business is urgent, and our presence would be more likely to cause him danger than to help.” He didn’t add that Lord John was almost certainly headed for the battlefield—if there should be one. Such an observation would only make Germain more eager.

“But—” Germain had his mother’s sense of Scottish stubbornness, and Fergus suppressed a smile at seeing his small blond brows draw down in Marsali’s exact expression.

“He will be looking either for your *grand-père* or for his compatriots,” Fergus pointed out. “Either will take care of him, and in neither case would our presence be useful to him. And your mother will assassinate both of us if we don’t return to Philadelphia within the week.”

He also didn’t mention that the thought of Marsali and the other children alone in the printshop caused him a great uneasiness. The exodus of the British army and a horde of Loyalists hadn’t rendered Philadelphia safe, by any means. There were a good many looters and lawless men who had moved in to pick over the leavings of those who had fled—and there were plenty still left with Loyalist sympathies who didn’t admit them openly but might easily act upon them under cover of darkness.

"Come," he said more gently, and took Germain by the hand. "We'll need to find some food to eat along the way."

* * *

JOHN GREY MADE his way through the wood, stumbling now and then by reason of having only one working eye; the ground wasn't always where he thought it was.

Once away from the campsite, he made no effort to keep out of sight; Claire had packed his eye with cotton lint and wrapped his head in a most professional manner with a gauze bandage to keep the lint in place. It would protect the bad eye while allowing air to dry the skin around it, she said. He supposed it was working—his eyelids weren't as raw and sore as they had been, only rather sticky—but at the moment was only grateful that he looked like a wounded man who'd been left behind by the rushing American army. No one would stop or question him.

Well, no one save his erstwhile comrades of the 16th Pennsylvania, should he have the misfortune to encounter them. God only knew what they'd thought when he surrendered to Jamie. He felt badly about them—they'd been very kind to him and must feel their kindness betrayed by the revelation of his identity, but there hadn't been much bloody choice about it.

There wasn't much choice about this, either.

"They mean to take your son." It was probably the one thing Percy could have said that would have made him attend.

"They who?" he'd said sharply, sitting up. "Take him where? And what for?"

"The Americans. As to what for—you and your brother." Percy had looked him over, shaking his head. "Do you have the slightest notion of your value, John?"

"Value to whom?" He'd stood up then, swaying perilously, and Percy had grabbed his hand to steady him. The touch was warm and firm and startlingly familiar. He withdrew his hand.

"I'm told I have considerable value as a scapegoat, should the Americans decide to hang me." Where was that bloody note from Hal … who had it now? Watson Smith? General Wayne?

"Well, that won't do at all, will it?" Percy appeared undisturbed at thought of Grey's imminent demise. "Don't worry. I'll have a word."

"With whom?" he asked, curious.

"General La Fayette," Percy said, adding with a slight bow, "to whom I have the honor of being an adviser."

"Thank you," Grey said dryly. "I am not concerned with the possibility of being hanged—at least not right this minute—but I want to know what the devil you mean about my son, William."

"This would be much easier over a bottle of port," Percy said, with a sigh, "but time doesn't permit, alas. Sit down, at least. You look as though you're going to fall on your face."

Grey sat, with as much dignity as he could muster, and glared up at Percy.

"To put it as simply as possible—and it's not simple, I assure you—there is a British officer named Richardson—"

"I know him," Grey interrupted. "He—"

"I know you do. Be quiet." Percy flapped a hand at him. "He's an American spy."

"He—what?" For an instant, he thought he might really fall on his face, despite the fact of sitting down, and grasped the cot's frame with both hands to prevent this. "He told me that he proposed to arrest Mrs. Fraser for distributing seditious materials. That was what caused me to marry her. I —"

"You?" Percy goggled at him. "*You* married?"

"Certainly," Grey said crossly. "So did you, or so you told me. Go on about bloody Richardson. How long has he been spying for the Americans?"

Percy snorted but obliged.

"I don't know. I became aware of him in the spring of last year, but he may well have been at it before that. Active fellow, I'll give him that. And not content with merely gathering information and passing it on, either. He's what one might call a *provocateur*."

"He's not the only one who's provoking," Grey muttered, resisting the urge to rub his bad eye. "What's he got to do with William?" He was beginning to have an unpleasant feeling in his abdomen. *He* had given William permission to undertake small intelligence-gathering missions for Captain Richardson, who—

"Put as bluntly as possible, he's tried more than once to lure your son into a position where he might appear to have sympathies with the Rebels. I gather that last year he sent him into the Great Dismal in Virginia, with the intention that he should be captured by a nest of Rebels who have a bastion there—presumably they would let it be known that he had deserted and joined their forces, while actually holding him prisoner."

"What for?" Grey demanded. "Will you bloody sit down? Looking up at you is giving me a headache."

Percy snorted again and sat—not on the conveniently placed stool, but beside Grey on the camp bed, hands on his knees.

"Presumably to discredit your family—Pardloe was making rather inflammatory speeches in the House of Lords at the time, about the conduct of the war." He made a small, impatient gesture that John recognized, a quick flutter of the fingers. "I don't know everything—yet—but what I *do* know is that he's arranged to have your son taken, during the journey to New York. He's not bothering with indirection or politics; things have changed, now that France has come into the war. This is simple abduction, with the intent of demanding your—and Pardloe's—cooperation in the matter of the Northwest Territory—and possibly something else—as the price of the boy's life."

Grey closed his good eye, in an effort to stop his head spinning. Two years before, Percy had abruptly reentered his life, bearing a proposal from certain French "interests"—to wit, that these interests wanted the return of the valuable Northwest Territory, presently held by England, and in return for assistance in achieving that goal would offer their influence to keep France from entering the war on the side of the Americans.

"Things have changed," he repeated, with an edge.

Percy inhaled strongly through his nose.

"Admiral d'Estaing sailed from Toulon with a fleet, in April. If he's not already off New York, he will be shortly. General Clinton may or may not know that."

"Jesus!" He clenched his fists on the bedframe, hard enough to leave marks from the nailheads. So the bloody French *had* now officially entered the war. They'd signed a Treaty of Alliance with America in February, and declared war on England in March, but talk was cheap. Ships and cannon and men cost money.

Suddenly he grasped Percy's arm, squeezing hard.

"And where do you come into this?" he said, voice level and cold. "Why are you telling me all this?"

Percy drew breath, but didn't jerk away. He returned Grey's stare, brown eyes clear and direct.

"Where I come into it doesn't matter," he said. "And there isn't time. You need to find your son quickly. As to why I tell you …"

John saw it coming and didn't pull away. Percy smelled of bergamot and petitgrain and the red wine on his breath. John's grip on Percy's arm loosened.

"Pour vos beaux yeux," Percy had whispered against his lips—and laughed, damn him.

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THE SORT OF THING THAT WILL MAKE A MAN SWEAT AND TREMBLE

WE FOLLOWED IN the wake of the army. Because of the speed of march, the soldiers had been instructed to jettison their nonessential equipment, and I had had to abandon many of my supplies, as well. Still, I was mounted and thus would be able to keep up, even loaded with what I managed to keep. After all, I reasoned, it would do me no good to catch up with the army if I had nothing with which to treat wounds when I did.

I had Clarence packed with as much as he could reasonably be expected to carry. As he was a large mule, this was a substantial amount, including my small tent, a folding camp bed for surgery, and all I could cram in, in terms of bandages, lint, and disinfectant—I had both a small cask of purified saline solution and a couple of bottles of straight ethyl alcohol (these disguised as poison, with large skull-and-crossbones labels painted on). Also a jug of sweet oil for burns, my medicine chest, and bundles of raw herbs, large jars of prepared ointment, and dozens of small bottles and vials of tinctures and infusions. My surgical instruments, stitching needles, and sutures were in their own small box, this in a haversack with extra bandage rolls, to be carried on my person.

I left Clarence tied and went to find out where the hospital tents were to be set up. The camp was milling with non-combatants and support personnel, but I was finally able to locate Denny Hunter, who told me that on the basis of General Greene's reports, the surgeons were to be dispatched to the village of Freehold, where there was a large church that could be used as a hospital.

"The last thing I've heard is that Lee has taken command of the force attacking the British rear and means to encircle the British," he said, polishing his spectacles on the tail of his shirt.

"Lee? But I thought he didn't think it an important command and wouldn't take it." I wouldn't care one way or the other—save that Jamie and his companies would be engaged in that mission, and I had my own doubts about General Lee.

Denzell shrugged, putting his spectacles back on and tucking in his shirttail.

"Apparently Washington decided that a thousand men were insufficient to his purpose and raised the number to five thousand, which Lee considered more appropriate to his … sense of his own importance." Denny's mouth twisted a little at this. He looked at my face, though, and touched my arm gently.

"We can but put our trust in God—and hope that the Lord has his eye upon Charles Lee. Will thee come with the girls and me, Claire? Thy mule will bide with us willingly."

I hesitated for no more than a moment. If I rode Clarence, I could take only a fraction of the equipment and supplies he could otherwise carry. And while Jamie had said he wanted me with him, I knew quite well that what he really meant was that he wanted to be assured of where I was, and that I was near at hand if he needed me.

"Thy husband does trust me with thy welfare," Denny said, smiling, having plainly divined what I was thinking.

"Et tu, Brute?" I said rather curtly, and, when he blinked, added more civilly, "I mean—does *everyone* know what I'm thinking, all of the time?"

"Oh, I doubt it," he said, and grinned at me. "If they did, I expect a number of them would take a deal more care in what they said to thee."

I rode in Denny's wagon with Dottie and Rachel, Clarence pacing stolidly along behind, tied to the tailboard. Dottie was flushed with heat and excitement; she had never been near a battle before. Neither had Rachel, but she had helped her brother during a very bad winter at Valley Forge and had much more idea of what the day might hold.

"Does thee think perhaps thee should write to thy mother?" I heard Rachel ask seriously. The girls were behind Denny and me, sitting in the bed of the wagon and keeping things from bouncing out when we hit ruts and mud bogs.

"No. Why?" Dottie's tone was wary—not quite hostile, but very reserved. I knew she had written to tell her mother that she intended to wed Denzell Hunter, but she hadn't received a reply. Given the difficulties of correspondence with England, though, there was no assurance that Minerva Grey had ever read the letter.

It occurred to me, with a sudden qualm, that I hadn't written a letter to Brianna in several months. I hadn't been able to bear to write about Jamie's death, and there hadn't been time since his return even to think about it.

"It *is* a war, Dottie," Rachel said. "Unexpected things may happen. And thee would not wish thy mother to … well … to discover that thee had perished without some assurance that she was in thy heart."

"Hmm!" said Dottie, clearly taken aback. Beside me, I felt Denzell shift his weight, bending a little forward as he took a fresh grip on the reins. He glanced aside at me, and his mouth turned up in an expression that was as much grimace as smile, acknowledging that he'd been listening to the girls' talk, too.

"She worries for me," he said very quietly. "Never for herself." He let go the reins with one hand to rub a knuckle under his nose. "She has as much courage as her father and brothers."

"As much pigheadedness, you mean," I said under my breath, and he grinned, despite himself.

"Yes," he said. He glanced over his shoulder and so did I, but the girls had moved to the tailboard and were talking over it to Clarence, brushing flies off his face with the needles of a long pine twig. "Does thee think it a familial lack of imagination? For in the case of the men of her family, it cannot be ignorance of the possibilities."

"No, it certainly can't," I agreed, with a note of ruefulness. I sighed and stretched my legs a little. "Jamie is the same way, and *he* certainly doesn't lack for imagination. I think it's …" I made a small helpless gesture. "Perhaps 'acceptance' is the word."

"Acceptance of the fact of mortality?" He was interested and pushed his spectacles back into place. "We have discussed that—Dorothea and I." He nodded back toward the girls. “Friends live in the certain knowledge that this world is temporary and there is nothing to fear in death.”

“Some of that, perhaps.” In fact, almost everyone in this time had a very matter-of-fact acceptance of mortality; death was a constant presence at everyone’s elbow, though they regarded that presence in a variety of ways. “But they—those men—what they do is something different, I think. It’s more an acceptance of what they think God made them.”

“Really?” He seemed slightly startled by that, and his brows drew together in consideration. “What does thee mean by that? That they believe God has created them deliberately to—”

“To be responsible for other people, I think,” I said. “I couldn’t say whether it’s the notion of *noblesse oblige*—Jamie was a laird, you know, in Scotland—or just the idea that … that’s what a man does,” I ended, rather lamely. Because “that” was plainly not what Denzell Hunter thought a man should do. Though I did wonder a bit. Plainly the question troubled him a little.

As well it might, given his position. I could see that the prospect of battle excited him and that the fact that it did troubled him a great deal.

“You’re a very brave man,” I said quietly, and touched his sleeve. “I saw that. When you played Jamie’s deserter game, after Ticonderoga.”

“It wasn’t courage, I assure thee,” he said, with a short, humorless laugh. “I didn’t seek to be brave; I only wanted to prove that I was.”

I made a rather disrespectful noise—I wasn’t in either Jamie’s or Ian’s class, but I *had* picked up a few pointers—and he glanced at me in surprise.

“I do appreciate the distinction,” I told him. “But I’ve known a lot of brave men in my time.”

“But how can thee know what lies—”

“Be quiet.” I waved my fingers at him. “ ‘Brave’ covers everything from complete insanity and bloody disregard of other people’s lives—generals tend to go in for that sort—to drunkenness, foolhardiness, and outright idiocy—to the sort of thing that will make a man sweat and tremble and throw up … and go and do what he thinks he has to do *anyway*.

“Which,” I said, pausing for breath and folding my hands neatly in my lap, “is exactly the sort of bravery you share with Jamie.”

“Thy husband does not sweat and tremble,” he said dryly. “I’ve seen him. Or, rather, I have *not* seen him do such things.”

“He does the sweating and trembling on the inside, mostly,” I replied. “Though he really does often vomit before—or during—a battle.”

Denzell blinked, once, and didn’t speak for a bit, absorbed—apparently—in steering his way past a large hay wagon whose oxen had suddenly decided they didn’t want to go any farther and stopped dead in the middle of the road.

At last he took a breath and let it out explosively.

“I am not afraid to die,” he said. “That isn’t my difficulty.”

“What is?” I asked, curious. “Are you afraid of being maimed and left helpless? I certainly would be.”

“No.” His throat moved as he swallowed. “It’s Dorothea and Rachel. I’m afraid I would lack the courage to see them die without trying to save them, even if that meant killing someone.”

I couldn’t think of anything to say to this, and we jolted on in silence.

* * *

LEE'S TROOPS LEFT Englishtown at about 6 A.M., heading east toward Monmouth Courthouse. Lee arrived at the courthouse at about nine-thirty, to find that the bulk of the British army had left—presumably moving toward Middletown, as that was where the road went.

Lee was prevented from following, though, by the presence of a small but very belligerent rear guard under the command of General Clinton himself. Or so Ian told Jamie, having got close enough to see Clinton's regimental banners. Jamie had communicated this information to Lee, but saw no evidence that it affected either that gentleman's plan of action (always assuming that he had one) or his disinclination to send out more scouts to reconnoiter.

"Go round this lot and see can ye find out where Cornwallis is," Jamie told Ian. "The grenadiers ye saw are likely Hessians, so they'll be close to von Knyphausen."

Ian nodded and took the full canteen Jamie offered him.

"Shall I tell General Lee, if I do? He didna seem much interested in what I had to say."

"Aye, tell him if ye see him before ye see me—tell the marquis, too, should ye come within reach of him—but find me, regardless, aye?"

Ian grinned at him and slung the canteen over his pommel.

"Good hunting, *a Bhràthair-mathàr*!"

Jamie had had two companies blooded by midmorning, skirmishing near Monmouth Courthouse, but no one killed yet and only three wounded badly enough to retire. Colonel Owen had requested cover for his artillery—only two cannon, but any artillery was welcome—and Jamie had sent Thomas Meleager's Pennsylvanians to deal with that.

He'd sent one of Captain Kirby's companies to reconnoiter toward what he thought was the creek and kept back the rest, waiting for orders from La Fayette or Lee. La Fayette was somewhere ahead of him, Lee well behind and to the east with the main body of his troops.

The sun stood just short of ten o'clock when a messenger appeared, crouched dramatically in his saddle as though dashing through a hail of bullets, though in fact there was not a British soldier in sight. He pulled his lathered horse to a stop and gasped out his message.

"There's dust clouds in the east—might be more redcoats comin'! And the marky says there's redcoat cannon in the cider orchard, sir, and will you do summat about it, please."

The sweating messenger gulped air, loosening his rein in obvious preparation for dashing off again. Jamie leaned over and seized the horse's bridle to prevent it.

"Where *is* the cider orchard?" he asked calmly. The messenger was young, maybe sixteen, and wild-eyed as his rawboned horse.

"Dunno, sir," he said, and began glancing to and fro, as though expecting the orchard to materialize suddenly out of the meadow they were standing in. A sudden distant boom reverberated in Jamie's bones, and his horse's ears pricked up.

"Never mind, lad," he said. "I hear them. Breathe your horse, or he's like to die under ye before the sun's high."

Letting go the bridle, he waved to Captain Craddock and turned his own horse's head toward the sound of cannon.

* * *

THE AMERICAN ARMY had several hours' lead on him, and the British army very much more—but a man alone could move a great deal faster than even a company of light infantry. Neither was John burdened with weapons. Or food. Or water.

You know perfectly well that he's lying to you.

"Oh, be quiet, Hal," Grey muttered to his brother's shade. "I know Percy a great deal better than you do."

I said, *you* know *perfectly well* …

"I do. What am I risking if he is lying—and what am I risking if he's *not*?"

Hal was high-handed, but logical. He was also a father; that shut him up.

What he was risking if Percy *was* lying was being shot or hanged out of hand if anyone recognized him. Anyone. If the Americans found him out before he reached the British lines, they'd arrest him for breaking his parole and promptly execute him as a spy. If the British *didn't* recognize him in time, they'd shoot him on sight as Rebel militia. He put a hand in the pocket where he'd wadded the Liberty or Death cap and debated the wisdom of throwing it away, but, in the event, kept it.

What he was risking if Percy wasn't lying was Willie's life. No great effort required to call the odds.

It was midmorning, and the air was like treacle, thick and sweet with flowers, sticky with tree sap, and completely unbreathable. His good eye was beginning to itch from the floating pollen grains, and flies were buzzing interestedly round his head, drawn by the scent of honey.

At least the headache had gone away, dispelled by the burst of alarm—and a brief flare of lust, might as well admit it—occasioned by Percy's revelation. He wouldn't begin to speculate as to Percy's motives, but …

" 'For your beautiful eyes,' indeed!" he muttered, but couldn't help smiling at the impudence. A wise man would not touch Percy Wainwright with a ten-foot pole. Something shorter, though …

"Oh, do be quiet, will you?" he murmured to himself, and made his way down a clay bank to the edge of a tiny creek, where he could throw cold water on his heated face.

* * *

IT WAS PERHAPS eight o'clock in the morning when we reached Freehold, where Tennent Church was to be established as the main hospital. It was a large building, set in the midst of a huge, sprawling churchyard, an acre or more of ground whose headstones were as individual as doubtless their owners had been in life. No neat aisles of uniform white crosses here.

I spared a thought for the graves of Normandy and wondered whether those rows upon rows of faceless dead were meant to impose a sort of postmortem tidiness on the costs of war—or whether it was meant rather to underline them, a solemn accounting carried out in endless rows of naughts and crosses.

But I didn't think long. Battle had been joined already—somewhere—and there were already wounded coming in, a number of men sitting in the shade of a large tree next to the church, more coming down the road, some staggering with the help of friends, some being carried on litters—or in someone's arms. My heart lurched at the sight, but I tried not to look for Jamie or Ian; should they be among the early wounded, I'd know it soon enough.

There was a bustle near the church's porch, where the double doors had been flung wide to accommodate passage, and orderlies and surgeons were coming and going in haste—but organized haste, so far.

"Go and see what's happening, why don't you?" I suggested to Denzell. "The girls and I will unload things."

He paused long enough to unhitch his own two mules and hobble them, then hastened into the church.

I found the buckets and dispatched Rachel and Dottie to find a well. The day was already uncomfortably hot; we were going to need a good deal of water, one way or another.

Clarence was showing a strong urge to go join Denny's mules in cropping grass among the headstones, jerking his head against the pull of his tether and uttering loud cries of annoyance.

"All right, all right, all *right*," I said, hurrying to undo the packing straps and lift his burdens off. "Hold your—oh, dear."

A man was staggering toward me, giving at the knees with every step and lurching dizzily. The side of his face was black, and there was blood down the facing of his uniform. I dropped the bundle of tenting and poles and rushed to catch him by the arm before he should trip over a headstone and fall face-first into the dirt.

"Sit down," I said. He looked dazed and appeared not to hear me, but as I was pulling on his arm, he did go down, letting his knees relax abruptly and nearly taking me with him as he landed on a substantial stone commemorating one Gilbert Tennent.

My patient was swaying as though about to fall over, and yet a hasty check showed me no significant wounds; the blood on his coat was from his face, where the blackened skin had blistered and split. It wasn't just the soot of black powder—the skin had actually been burned to a crisp, the underlying flesh seared, and my patient smelled appallingly like a pork roast. I took a firm grip on my lurching stomach and stopped breathing through my nose.

He didn't respond to my questions but stared hard at my mouth, and he seemed lucid, despite his continued swaying. The penny finally dropped.

"Ex … plo … sion?" I mouthed with exaggerated care, and he nodded vigorously, then stopped abruptly, swaying so far that I had to grasp him by the sleeve and pull him upright.

Artilleryman, from his uniform. So something big had exploded near him—a mortar, a cannon?—and not only burned his face nearly to the bone but also likely burst both his eardrums and disturbed the balance of his inner ear. I nodded and set his hands to grip the stone he sat on, to keep him in place while I hastily finished unloading Clarence—who was making the welkin ring with frustration; I should have realized at once that the artilleryman was deaf, as he was taking no notice of the racket—hobbled him, and set him loose to join Denny's mules in the shade. I dug what I needed out of the packs and set about to do what little I could for the injured man, this consisting mostly of soaking a towel in saline and applying it to his face like a poultice, to remove as much soot as I could without scrubbing.

I thanked God that I'd had the forethought to bring a jug of sweet oil for burns—and cursed my lack of it for not having asked for aloe at Bartram's Garden.

The girls hadn't yet returned with water; I hoped there was a well somewhere close at hand. Creek water so close to an army couldn't be used without boiling it. That thought led me to look round for a spot where a fire could be lighted and to make a mental note to send the girls to look for wood next.

My mind was jerked from my rapidly expanding mental checklist, though, by Denny's sudden emergence from the church. He wasn't alone; he appeared to be having a passionate argument with another Continental officer. With a brief exclamation of exasperation, I dug in my pocket and found my silk-wrapped spectacles. With these on my nose, the face of Denny's interlocutor sprang into clear focus—Captain Leckie, diplomate of the Medical College of Philadelphia.

My patient tugged at my skirt and, when I turned to him, apologetically opened his mouth and mimed drinking. I held up a finger, adjuring him to wait one moment, and went to see whether Denzell required reinforcement.

My appearance was greeted by an austere look from Captain Leckie, who viewed me rather as he might have looked at something questionable on the bottom of his shoe.

"Mrs. Fraser," he said coldly. "I have just been telling your Quaker friend that there is no room inside the church for cunning-women or—"

"Claire Fraser is the most skillful surgeon I have seen operate!" Denzell said. He was flushed and fairly bristling with anger. "Thee will do thy patients great harm, sir, by not allowing her to—"

"And where did you obtain your training, *Dr*. Hunter, that you are so confident of your own opinion?"

"In Edinburgh," Denny said through his teeth. "Where I was trained by my cousin, John Hunter." Seeing that this made no impact on Leckie, he added, "And his brother, William Hunter—*accoucheur* to the queen."

That took Leckie aback, but unfortunately also got up his nose.

"I see," he said, dividing a faint sneer evenly between us. "I congratulate you, sir. But as I doubt the army requires a man midwife, perhaps you should assist your … colleague"—and here he actually flared his nostrils at me, the pompous little swine—"with her seeds and potions, rather than—"

"We haven't time for this," I interrupted firmly. "Dr. Hunter is both a trained physician and a duly appointed surgeon in the Continental army; you can't bloody keep him out. And if my experience of battle—which I venture to suggest may be somewhat more extensive than your own, *sir*—is anything to go on, you'll need every hand you can get." I turned to Denzell and gave him a long, level look.

"Your duty is with those who need you. So is mine. I told you about triage, did I not? I have a tent and my own surgical instruments and supplies. I'll do triage out here, deal with the minor cases, and send in anyone requiring major surgery."

I had a quick look over my shoulder, then turned back to the two fuming men.

"You'd best go inside and be quick about it. They're starting to pile up."

This was not a metaphorical expression. There was a crowd of walking wounded under the trees, a few men lying on makeshift stretchers and sheets of canvas … and a small, sinister heap of bodies, these presumably men who had died of their wounds en route to the hospital.

Fortunately, Rachel and Dottie appeared at this moment, each lugging a heavy bucket of water in each hand. I turned my back on the men and went to meet them.

“Dottie, come and put up the tent poles, will you?” I said, taking her buckets. “And, Rachel—you know what arterial bleeding looks like, I imagine. Go and look through those men and bring me anyone who’s doing it.”

I gave my burnt artilleryman water, then helped him to his feet. As he stood up, I saw behind his legs the epitaph carved into Gilbert Tennent’s headstone:

O Reader had you heard his last Testimony you would have been convinced of the extreme Madness of delaying Repentance.

“I suppose there are worse places to be doing this,” I remarked to the artilleryman, but, unable to hear me, he simply raised my hand and kissed it before swaying off to sit down on the grass, the wet towel pressed to his face.

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THE CIDER ORCHARD

THE FIRST SHOT took them by surprise, a muffled boom from the cider orchard and a slow roll of white smoke. They didn't run, but they stiffened, looking to him for direction. Jamie said to those near him, "Good lads," then raised his voice. "To my left, now! Mr. Craddock, Reverend Woodsworth—circle them; come into the orchard from behind. The rest—scatter to the right and fire as ye can—" The second crash drowned his words, and Craddock jerked like a puppet with his strings cut and dropped to the ground, blood spraying from the blackened hole in his chest. Jamie's horse shied violently, nearly unseating him.

"Go with the reverend!" he shouted at Craddock's men, who stood there drop-jawed, staring at their captain's body. "Go now!" One of the men shook himself, grabbed the sleeve of another, pulled him away, and then they all began to move as a body. Woodsworth, bless him, raised his musket overhead and roared, "To me! Follow me!" and broke into the stork-legged shamble that passed with him for running—but they followed him.

The gelding had settled but was moving uneasily. He was—supposedly—used to the sound of guns, but he didn't like the strong smell of blood. Jamie didn't like it, either.

"Shouldn't we … bury Mr. Craddock?" a timid voice suggested behind him.

"He's not *dead*, lackbrain!"

Jamie glanced down. He wasn't—but it wouldn't be more than a few seconds longer.

"Go with God, man," he said quietly. Craddock didn't blink; his eyes were fixed on the sky, not yet dull but sightless.

"Go wi' your fellows," he said to the two lingerers, then saw that they were Craddock's two sons, maybe thirteen and fourteen, white-faced and staring as sheep. "Say farewell to him," he said abruptly. "He'll still hear ye. Then … go." He thought for a moment to send them to La Fayette, but they'd be no safer there. "Run!"

They ran—they were a deal safer running—and with a gesture to Lieutenants Orden and Bixby, he wheeled his horse to the right, following Guthrie's company. The cannon were firing more regularly from the orchard. He saw a ball bounce past, ten feet away, and the air was thickening with smoke. He could still smell Craddock's blood.

He found Captain Moxley and sent him with a full company to look at the farmhouse on the far side of the orchard.

"At a distance, mind. I want to know if the redcoats are in it or if the family's still there. If the family's there, surround the house; go inside if they'll let ye, but don't force your way. If there are soldiers inside and they come out after you, engage them and take the house if ye think ye can. If they stay inside, don't stir them up; send someone back to tell me. I'll be at the back o' the orchard; the north side."

Guthrie was waiting for him, the men lying flat in the long grass behind the orchard. He left the two lieutenants with his horse, which he tied to a fence rail well out of range of the orchard, and scrambled along to the company, keeping low. He dropped to his belly by Bob Guthrie.

"I need to know where the cannon are—exactly where they are, and how many. Send three or four men in from different directions, goin' canny—ye know what I mean? Aye. They're not to do anything; see what they can and come out again, fast."

Guthrie was panting like a dog, stubbled face awash with sweat, but he grinned and nodded and wormed his way off through the grass.

The meadow was dry, brown and brittle in the summer heat; Jamie's stockings prickled with foxtails, and the warm sharp scent of ripe hay was stronger than that of black powder.

He gulped water from his canteen; it was nearly empty. It wasn't yet noon, but the sun was coming down on them like a flatiron. He turned to tell one of the lieutenants who'd been following him to go and find the nearest water, but nothing moved in the grass behind him save hundreds of grasshoppers, whirring up like sparks. Gritting his teeth against the stiffness in his knees, he scrambled up onto hands and feet and scuttled back toward his horse.

Orden was lying ten feet away, shot through one eye. Jamie froze for an instant, and something whirred close past his cheek. It might be a grasshopper and it might not. He was flat to the earth beside the dead lieutenant, heart pounding in his ears before the thought had fully formed.

Guthrie. He daren't raise his head to call out—but had to. He got his feet under him as best he could, shot out of the grass, and ran like a rabbit, to and fro, zigging away from the orchard as best he could while still going in the direction he'd sent Guthrie.

He could hear the shots now: more than one sniper in the orchard, protecting the cannon, and the sound was the flat *crack!* of a rifle. Jaegers? He flung himself down and crawled madly, now shouting for Guthrie.

"Here, sir!" The man popped up suddenly beside him like a groundhog, and Jamie seized Guthrie's sleeve, pulling him back down.

"Get … your men back." He gulped air, chest heaving. "Shooting—from the orchard. This side. They'll be picked off."

Guthrie was staring at him, mouth half open.

"Get them!"

Shaken out of his shock, Guthrie nodded like a puppet and started to rise. Jamie grabbed him by the ankle and jerked him flat, pressed him down with a hand on his back.

"Don't … stand up." His breathing was slowing and he managed to speak calmly. "We're still in range here. Get your men and retire with your company—back to the ridgeline. Join Captain Moxley; tell him to come round and join me …" His mind went blank for a moment, trying to think of some reasonable place for a rendezvous. "South of the farmhouse. With Woodbine's company." He took his hand off Guthrie.

"Aye, sir." The man scuffed up onto hands and knees, reaching for the hat that had fallen off. He glanced back at

Jamie, eyes full of earnest concern.

“Are you hit bad, sir?”

“Hit?”

“There’s blood all down your face, sir.”

“It’s nothing. Go!”

Guthrie swallowed, nodded, wiped his face on his sleeve, and made off through the grass, as fast as he could go. Jamie put a hand to his own face, belatedly aware of a slight sting across his cheekbone. Sure enough, his fingers came away bloody. Not a grasshopper, then.

He wiped his fingers on the skirt of his coat and noticed mechanically that the seam of the sleeve had burst at the shoulder, showing the white shirt beneath. He rose a little, cautious, looking round for Bixby, but there was no sign of him. Maybe dead in the long grass, too; maybe not. With luck, he’d seen what was happening and run back to warn the companies coming up. The horse was still where he’d left it, thank God, tethered to a fence, fifty yards away.

He hesitated for a moment, but there wasn’t time to lose in looking for Bixby. Woodsworth and his two companies would be coming round the orchard in a few minutes, and right into range of the German rifles. He popped up and ran.

Something tugged at his coat, but he didn’t stop, and reached his horse, gasping for air.

“Tiugainn!” he said, swinging up into the saddle. He turned away from the orchard and galloped through a potato field, though it bruised his farmer’s heart to see what the armies’ passing had done to it already.

* * *

I DON'T KNOW when physicians began calling it "the Golden Hour," but surely every battlefield medic from the time of the *Iliad* onward knows about it. From the time of an accident or injury that isn't immediately fatal, the victim's chances of living are best if he receives treatment within an hour of sustaining the injury. After that, shock, continued loss of blood, debility due to pain … the chance of saving a patient goes sharply downhill.

Add in blazing temperatures, lack of water, and the stress of running full out through fields and woods, wearing wool homespun and carrying heavy weapons, inhaling powder smoke, and trying either to kill someone or avoid being killed, just prior to being injured, and I rather thought we were looking at a Golden fifteen minutes or so.

Given also the fact that the wounded were having to be carried or to *walk*—probably more than a mile—to a place where they could find assistance … I supposed we were doing well to save as many as we were. *If only temporarily*, I added grimly to myself, hearing the screaming from inside the church.

"What's your name, dear?" I said to the young man in front of me. He couldn't be more than seventeen and was precious near to bleeding to death. A bullet had gone through the meat of his upper arm, which would normally be a fortuitous location for a wound. Unfortunately, in this instance the ball had passed through the underside of the arm and nicked the brachial artery, which had been spurting blood in a slow but earnest manner until I'd taken a death grip on his arm.

"Private Adams, ma'am," he replied, though his lips were white and he was shaking. "Billy, they call me," he added politely.

"Pleased to meet you, Billy," I said. "And you, sir …?" For he'd been brought in staggering, leaning on another boy of about his own age—and nearly as white-faced, though I thought he wasn't hurt.

"Horatio Wilkinson, ma'am," he said, dipping his head in an awkward bow—the best he could manage while holding his friend upright.

"Lovely, Horatio," I said. "I've got him now. Would you pour him out a little water, with a splash of brandy in it? Just there." I nodded at the packing case I was using for a table, on which one of my brown bottles marked Poison stood, along with a canteen full of water and wooden cups. "And as soon as he's drunk it, give him that leather strip to bite down on."

I'd have told Horatio to have a tot, too, save that there were only two cups, and the second one was mine. I was sipping water steadily—my bodice was soaked and clung to me like the membrane inside an eggshell, and sweat ran steadily down my legs—and I didn't want to be sharing the germs of assorted soldiers who didn't brush their teeth regularly. Still, I might have to tell him to take a quick gulp direct from the brandy bottle; someone was going to have to apply pressure to Billy Adams's arm while I stitched his brachial artery, and Horatio Wilkinson didn't presently look equal to the task.

"Would you—" I began, but I was holding a scalpel and a suture needle with a dangling ligature in my free hand, and the sight of these overcame young Mr. Wilkinson. His eyes rolled up in his head and he dropped, boneless, into the gravel.

“Wounded?” said a familiar voice behind me, and I turned my head to see Denzell Hunter looking down at Mr. Wilkinson. He was nearly as pale as Horatio and, with strands of hair come loose and clinging to his cheeks, very much the antithesis of his usual collected self.

“Fainted,” I said. “Can you—”

“They are idiots,” he said, so pale—with rage, I now realized—that he could barely speak. “Regimental surgeons, they call themselves! A good quarter of them have never seen a man wounded in battle before. And those who have are barely capable of anything in the way of treatment save the crudest amputation. A company of barbers would do better!”

“Can they stop bleeding?” I asked, taking his hand and wrapping it round my patient’s upper arm. He automatically pressed his thumb to the brachial artery near the armpit, and the spurting that had started when I took my own hand away stopped again. “Thank you,” I said.

“Not at all. Yes, most of them can do that,” he admitted, calming down just a little. “But they are so jealous of privilege—and so much affiliated with their own regiments—that some are letting a wounded man die because he is not one of theirs and his own regimental surgeon is otherwise occupied!”

“Scandalous,” I murmured, and, “Bite hard now, Private,” as I thrust the leather between his teeth and made a quick incision to enlarge the wound enough to find the end of the severed artery. He did bite, and made no more than a low grunting noise as the scalpel sliced into his flesh; perhaps he was sufficiently in shock that he didn’t feel it much—I hoped not.

“We haven’t a lot of choice,” I observed, glancing toward the big shade trees that edged the graveyard. Dottie was minding the victims of heatstroke, giving them water and—as time and buckets permitted—dousing them with it. Rachel was in charge of depressed head fractures, abdominal wounds, and other serious wounds that couldn’t be treated by amputation or binding and splinting. In most cases, this amounted to nothing more than comforting them as they died, but she was a good, steady girl, who had seen a great many men die during the winter at Valley Forge; she didn’t shrink from the job.

“We have to let them”—I jerked my chin toward the church, my hands being occupied in holding Private Adams’s arm and ligating the severed vessel—“do what they’re able to do. Not that we could bloody *stop* them.”

“No.” Denny breathed out, let go of the arm as he saw I had the vessel tied off, and wiped his face on his coat. “No, we can’t. I just needed to express my anger where it wouldn’t cause more trouble. And to ask if I may have some of thy gentian ointment; I saw thee had two good-sized tubs made up.”

I gave him a small, wry laugh.

“Be my guest. That ass Leckie sent an orderly out a little while ago to try to appropriate my stock of lint and bandages. Do you need some, by the way?”

“If thee has them to spare.” He cast a bleak eye over the dwindling pile of supplies. “Dr. McGillis has sent an orderly to scavenge the neighborhood for items of use and another to carry word back to camp and bring more.”

“Take half,” I said, with a nod, and finished wrapping Billy Adams’s arm with as miserly a bandage as would still do the job. Horatio Wilkinson had recovered himself a little and was sitting up, though still rather pale. Denny hoisted him to his feet and dispatched him with Billy to sit in the shade for a bit.

I was digging through one of my packs for the gentian ointment when I noticed the approach of another party and straightened up to see what their state of need might be.

None of them appeared to be wounded, though all were staggering. They weren't in uniform and bore no weapons save clubs; no telling whether they were militia, or …

"We hear you've some brandy, missus," one of them said, reaching out in a quasi-friendly manner and seizing me by the wrist. "Come and share it with us, eh?"

"Let go of her," Denzell said, in a tone of deep menace that made the man holding my wrist actually let go in surprise. He blinked at Denzell, whom he evidently hadn't noticed before.

"Who the hell're you?" he asked, though more in tones of befuddled astonishment than confrontation.

"I'm a surgeon with the Continental army," Denzell said firmly, and moved to stand beside me, thrusting a shoulder between me and the men, all of whom were clearly very drunk. One of them laughed at this, a high *heeheehee* sound, and his fellow giggled and poked him, repeating, "surgeon with the Continental *ar-my*."

"Gentlemen, thee must go," Denzell said, edging farther in front of me. "We have wounded men who need attention." He stood with his fists loosely curled, in the attitude of a man ready to do battle—though I was fairly sure he wouldn't. I hoped intimidation would do the trick, but glanced at my bottle; it was three-quarters empty—perhaps it would be better to give it to them and hope they went away.…

I could see a small party of wounded Continentals coming down the road, two on stretchers, and a few more stumbling, stripped to their bloodied shirts, coats in their hands being dragged in the dust. I reached for the bottle, intending to thrust it at the intruders, but a movement at the corner of my eye made me look toward the shade where the girls were tending prisoners. Both Rachel and Dottie were standing upright, watching the proceedings, and at this point, Dottie, with a strong look of determination on her face, began to walk toward us.

Denny saw her, too; I could see the sudden shift in his posture, a touch of indecision. Dorothea Grey might be a professed Quaker, but her family blood clearly had its own ideas. And I could—rather to my surprise—tell exactly what Denzell was thinking. One of the men had already noticed Dottie and had turned—swaying—in her direction. If she confronted them and one or more of them attacked her …

"Gentlemen." I interrupted the hum of interest among our visitors, and three pairs of bloodshot eyes turned slowly toward me. I withdrew one of the pistols Jamie had given me, pointed it into the air, and pulled the trigger.

It went off with a violent jerk and a *blam* that momentarily deafened me, along with a puff of acrid smoke that made me cough. I wiped streaming eyes on my sleeve in time to see the visitors departing hastily, with anxious looks back over their shoulders. I located a spare handkerchief tucked into my stays and wiped a smear of soot from my face, emerging from the damp linen folds to find the doors of the church occupied by several surgeons and orderlies, all goggling at me.

Feeling rather like Annie Oakley, and repressing the urge to try to twirl my pistol—mostly for fear I would drop it; it was nearly a foot long—I reholstered my weapon and took a deep breath. I felt a trifle light-headed.

Denzell was regarding me with concern. He swallowed visibly and opened his mouth to speak.

“Not now,” I said, my own voice sounding muffled, and nodded toward the men coming toward us. “There isn’t time.”

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THE DANGERS OF SURRENDER

FOUR BLOODY HOURS. Hours spent slogging through an undulant countryside filled with mobs of Continental soldiers, clots of militia, and more bloody rocks than anyplace required for proper functioning, if you asked Grey. Unable to stand the blisters and shreds of raw skin any longer, he'd taken off his shoes and stockings and thrust them into the pockets of his disreputable coat, choosing to hobble barefoot for as long as he could bear it.

Should he meet anyone whose feet looked his size, he thought grimly, he'd pick up one of the omnipresent rocks and avail himself.

He *knew* he was close to the British lines. He could feel the tremble in the air. The movement of large bodies of men, their rising excitement. And somewhere, no great distance away, the point where excitement was turning to action.

He'd felt the presence of fighting since just past daylight. Sometimes heard shouting and the hollow boom of muskets. *What would I do if I were Clinton*? he'd wondered.

Clinton couldn't outstrip the pursuing Rebels; that was clear. But he would have had time enough to choose decent ground on which to stand and to make some preparation.

Chances were, some part of the army—Cornwallis's brigade, maybe; Clinton wouldn't leave von Knyphausen's Hessians to stand alone—would have taken up some defensible position, hoping to hold off the Rebels long enough for the baggage train to get away. Then the main body would wheel and take up its own position—perhaps occupying a village. He'd walked through two or three such, each with its own church. Churches were good; he'd sent many a scout up a steeple in his day.

Where's William most likely to be? Unarmed and unable to fight, chances were that he was with Clinton. That's where he *should* be. But he knew his son.

"Unfortunately," he muttered. He would, without hesitation, lay down both life and honor for William. That didn't mean he was pleased at the prospect of having to do so.

Granted, the current circumstance was not William's fault. He had to admit—reluctantly—that it was at least in part his own. He'd allowed William to undertake intelligence work for Ezekiel Richardson. He should have looked much more closely into Richardson …

The thought of having been gulled by the man was almost as upsetting as what Percy had told him.

He could only hope to run across Richardson in circumstances that would allow him to kill the man unobtrusively. But if it had to be at high noon in full view of General Clinton and his staff—so bloody be it.

He was inflamed in every particular of his being, knew it, and didn't care.

There were men coming, rumbling up the road behind him. Americans, disorderly, with wagons or caissons. He stepped off the road and stood still in the shade of a tree, waiting for them to pass.

It was a group of Continentals, pulling cannon. Fairly small: ten guns, and only four-pounders. Pulled by men, not mules. It was the only artillery he'd seen in the course of the morning, though; was it all Washington possessed?

They didn't notice him. He waited a few minutes, until they were out of sight, and followed in their wake.

* * *

HE HEARD MORE cannon, some way to his left, and paused to listen. British, by God! He'd had somewhat to do with artillery, early in his military career, and the rhythm of a working gun crew was embedded in his bones.

Sponge piece!

Load piece!

Ram!

Fire!

A single artillery unit. Ten-pounders, six of them. They had something in range but weren't being attacked; the firing was sporadic, not that of hot combat.

Though, to be fair, any physical effort whatever had to be described as "hot" today. He lunged into a patch of trees, exhaling in relief at the shade. He was ready to expire in his black coat and took it off for a moment's respite. Dare he abandon the bloody thing altogether?

He'd seen a band of militia earlier, shirtsleeved, some with kerchiefs tied over their heads against the sun. Coated, though, he might bluff his way as a militia surgeon—the beastly garment smelled badly enough.

He worked his tongue, bringing a little saliva to his dry mouth. Why the devil had he not thought to bring a canteen when he'd fled? Thirst decided him to make his move now.

Dressed as he was, he might well be shot by any infantryman or dragoon who saw him, before he could speak a word. But while cannon were very effective indeed against a massed enemy, they were almost useless against a single man, as the aim couldn't be adjusted quickly enough to bear, unless the man was fool enough to advance in a straight line—and Grey was not *that* foolish.

Granted, the officer in charge of each gun's crew would be armed with sword and pistol, but a single man approaching an artillery unit on foot could be no conceivable danger; sheer amazement would likely let him get within earshot. And pistols were so inaccurate at anything over ten paces, he wasn't risking much anyway, he reasoned.

He hastened his step as much as he could, a wary eye out. There were a lot of Continental troops in his vicinity now, marching furiously. The regulars would take him for walking wounded, but he daren't try to surrender to the British lines while combat was joined, or he'd be the walking dead in short order.

The artillery in the orchard might be his best chance, hair-raising as it was to walk into the mouths of the guns. With a muffled oath, he put his shoes back on and began to run.

* * *

HE RAN HEAD-ON into a militia company, but they were headed somewhere at the trot and gave him no more than a cursory glance. He swerved aside into a hedgerow, where he floundered for a moment before breaking through. He was in a narrow field, much trampled, and on the other side of it was an apple orchard, only the crowns of the trees showing above a heavy cloud of white powder smoke.

He caught a glimpse of movement beyond the orchard and risked a few steps to the side to look—then ducked back hastily out of sight. American militia, men in hunting shirts or homespun, a few shirtless and glistening with sweat. They were massing there, likely planning a rush into the orchard from behind, in hopes of capturing or disabling the guns.

They were making a good deal of noise, and the guns had stopped firing. Plainly the artillerymen knew the Americans were there and would be making preparations to resist. Not the best time to come calling, then …

But then he heard the drums. Well in the distance, to the east of the orchard, but the sound carried clearly. British infantry on the march. A better prospect than the artillery in the orchard. Moving, infantry wouldn't be disposed or prepared to shoot a single, unarmed man, no matter how he was dressed. And if he could get close enough to attract the attention of an officer … but he'd still have to cross the open ground below the orchard in order to reach the infantry before they'd marched off out of reach.

Biting his lip with exasperation, he shoved through the hedgerow and ran through the clouds of drifting smoke. A shot cracked the air much too near him. He flung himself into the grass by instinct, but then leapt up and ran again, gasping for breath. Christ, there were riflemen in the orchard, defending the cannon! *Jaegers*.

But most of the riflemen must be facing the other way, ready to meet the gathering militia, for no more shots came on this side of the orchard. He slowed down, pressing a hand to the stitch in his side. He was past the orchard now. He could still hear the drums, though they were drawing away … keep going, keep going …

“Hoy! You there!” He *should* have kept going but, short of breath and unsure who was calling, paused for an instant, half-turning. Only half, because a solid body hurtled through the air and knocked him down.

He hit the ground on one elbow and was already grappling the man’s head with his other hand, wet greasy hair sliding through his fingers. He jabbed at the man’s face, squirmed eel-like out from under his weight, kneeing the fellow in the stomach as he moved, and made it lurching to his feet.

“Stop right there!” The voice cracked absurdly, shooting up into a falsetto, and startled him so that he *did* stop, gasping for breath.

“You … no-account … filthy …” The man—no, by God, it was a boy!—who’d knocked him down was getting to his feet. He had a large stone in his hand; his brother—it had to be his brother; they looked like two peas in a pod, both half grown and gawky as turkey poults—had a good-sized club.

Grey’s hand had gone to his waist as he’d risen, ready to draw the dagger Percy had given him. He’d seen these boys before, he thought—the sons of the commander of one of the New Jersey militia companies?—and, rather clearly, they’d seen him before, too.

“Traitor!” One of them yelled at him. “Bloody fucking spy!” They were between him and the distant infantry company; the orchard was at his back, and the three of them were well within range of any Hessian rifleman who happened to look in their direction.

“Look—” he began, but could see that it was pointless. Something had happened; they were crazed with something—terror, anger, grief?—that made their features shift like water and their limbs tremble with the need to do something immediate and violent. They were boys, but both taller than he was and quite capable of doing him the damage they clearly intended.

“General Fraser,” he said loudly, hoping to jar them into uncertainty. “Where is General Fraser?”

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THE PRICE OF BURNT SIENNA

“COMPANIES ALL present, sir!” Robert MacCammon rushed up, panting. He was a heavyset man, and even the gently rolling fields and meadows were hard on him; the dark stains in his oxters were the size of dinner plates.

“Aye, good.” Jamie glanced beyond Major MacCammon and saw Lieutenant Herbert’s company emerging from a small wood, glancing cautiously round, their weapons in their hands. They were doing well, untrained as they were, and he was pleased with them.

Lord, let me bring them through it as best I can.

This prayer barely formed in his mind, he turned to look toward the west, and froze. On the slope below him, no more than a hundred yards away, he saw the two Craddock boys, armed with a rock and a stick, respectively, menacing a man whose back was turned to him but whose bare, cropped blond head was instantly recognizable, even without the stained bandage tied round it.

Then he saw Grey put a hand to his waist and knew beyond the shadow of doubt that it was a knife he reached for.

“Craddock!!” he bellowed, and the boys both started. One dropped his rock and stooped to pick it up again, exposing his scrawny neck to Grey. Grey looked at the vulnerable expanse of flesh, glanced bleakly at the older boy, gripping his stick like a cricket bat, then up the slope at Jamie, and let both hands and shoulders drop.

“Ifrinn!” Jamie muttered under his breath. “Stay here,” he said briefly to Bixby, and ran down the slope, stumbling and pushing his way through a thick growth of alders that left sticky sap all over his hands.

“Where the devil is your company?” he demanded without preamble, breathing hard as he came up with the boys and Grey.

“Oh. Er …” The younger Craddock looked to his brother to answer.

“We couldn’t find ’em, sir,” the older boy said, and swallowed. “We were looking, when we run into a party of redcoats and had to scamper pretty quick to get away.”

“Then we saw *him*,” the younger Craddock said, thrusting out his chin at Grey. “Everybody in camp had said as how he was a redcoat spy, and, sure enough, there he was, makin’ for them, waving and callin’ out.”

“So we thought as how it was our duty to stop him, sir,” the older boy put in, anxious not to be eclipsed by his brother.

“Aye, I see.” Jamie rubbed the spot between his eyebrows, which felt as though a small, painful knot had formed there. He glanced over his shoulder. Men were still running up from the south, but the rest of Craddock’s company was nearly all there, milling anxiously and looking in his direction. No wonder: he could hear British drums, near at hand. Doubtless that was the company the boys had run into—the one Grey had been making for.

"Wenn ich etwas sagen dürfte," Grey said in German, with a glance at the Craddocks. *If I might speak* …

"You may not, sir," Jamie replied, with some grimness. There wasn't time—and if these two wee blockheids survived to get back to camp, they'd recount every word that had passed between Grey and him to anyone who would listen. The last thing he could afford was for them to report him involved in foreign confabulation with an English spy.

"I am in search of my son!" Grey switched to English, with another glance at the Craddocks. "I have reason to believe he's in danger."

"So is everyone else out here," Jamie replied with an edge, though his heart jerked in his chest. So that was why Grey had broken his parole. "In danger from whom?"

"Sir! *Sir!*" Bixby's voice was shouting from the other side of the alders, high and urgent. He had to go, and quickly.

"Coming, Mr. Bixby!" he shouted. "Why didn't you kill them?" he asked Grey abruptly, and jerked his head toward the Craddocks. "If you got past them, you could have made it."

One fair brow arched above the handkerchief binding Grey's bad eye.

"You'd forgive me for Claire—but not for killing your … men." He glanced at the two Craddocks, spotty as a pair of raisin puddings and—Grey's look implied—likely no brighter.

For a split second, the urge to punch him again surged up from Jamie's bowels, and for the same split second, the knowledge of it showed on John Grey’s face. He didn’t flinch, and his good eye widened in a pale-blue stare. This time, he’d fight back.

Jamie closed his eyes for an instant, forcibly setting anger aside.

“Go with this man,” he said to the Craddocks. “He is your prisoner.” He pulled one of the pistols from his belt and presented it to the elder Craddock, who received it with wide-eyed respect. Jamie didn’t bother telling the lad it was neither loaded nor primed.

“And you,” he said evenly to Grey. “Go with them behind the lines. If the Rebels still hold Englishtown, guide them there.”

Grey nodded curtly, lips compressed, and turned to go.

He reached out and caught Grey by the shoulder. The man whipped round, blood in his eye.

“Listen to me,” Jamie said, speaking loudly enough to be sure the Craddock boys could hear him. “I revoke your parole.” He fixed Grey’s single-eyed glare with one of his own. “D’ye understand me? When you reach Englishtown, ye’ll surrender yourself to Captain McCorkle.”

Grey’s mouth twitched, but he said nothing and gave the merest nod of acknowledgment before turning away.

Jamie turned, too, running for his waiting companies, but risked a single glance over his shoulder.

Shooing the Craddocks before him, awkward and flapping as a pair of geese bound for market, Grey was headed smartly to the south, toward the American lines—if the concept of “lines” held any meaning in this goddamned battle.

Grey had certainly understood, and despite the present emergency, a weight lifted from Jamie’s heart. With his parole revoked, John Grey was once more a prisoner of war, in the custody of his jailors, officially without freedom of movement. But also without the obligation of honor that would hold him prisoner on his own recognizance. Without parole, his primary duty now was that of any soldier in the hands of his enemy—escape.

"Sir!" Bixby arrived at his shoulder, panting. "There are redcoats—"

"Aye, Mr. Bixby. I hear them. Let's be having them, then."

* * *

IF IT WEREN'T for the coloring book, I might not have noticed immediately. In third or fourth grade, Brianna had had a coloring book featuring scenes from the American Revolution. Sanitized, suitably romantic scenes: Paul Revere flying through the night on a galloping horse, Washington crossing the Delaware while exhibiting (as Frank pointed out) a lamentable lack of seamanship … and a double-paged spread featuring Molly Pitcher, that gallant woman who had carried water to the heat-stricken troops (left-hand page) and then taken her wounded husband's place to serve his cannon (right-hand page)—at the Battle of Monmouth.

Which, it had dawned on me, was very likely what the battle we were engaged in was going to be called, once anyone got round to naming it. Monmouth Courthouse was only two or three miles from my present location.

I wiped my face once more—this gesture did nothing for the perspiration, which was instantly renewed, but, judging from the state of my three soggy handkerchiefs, was removing a fair amount of dirt from my countenance—and glanced toward the east, where I had been hearing distant cannon fire most of the day. Was she there?

“Well, George Washington certainly is,” I murmured to myself, pouring out a fresh cup of water and returning to my work rinsing out bloody cloths in a bucket of salt water. “Why not Molly Pitcher?”

It had been a complicated picture to color, and as Bree had just got to the phase where she insisted that things be colored “real,” the cannon could *not* be pink or orange, and Frank had obligingly drawn several crude cannon on a sheet of paper and tried out everything from gray (with shadings of black, blue, blue-violet, and even cornflower) to brown, with tints of burnt sienna and gold, before they finally settled—Frank’s opinion as to actual historicity of cannon being diffidently advanced—on black with dark green shadings.

Lacking credentials, I had been relegated to coloring in the grass, though I also got to help with the dramatic shading of Mrs. Pitcher’s raggedly streaming clothes, once Brianna got tired of it. I looked up, the smell of crayons strong in my memory, and saw a small group coming down the road.

There were two Continental regulars—and a man in what I recognized as the light-green uniform of Skinner’s Greens, a Provincial Loyalist regiment. He was stumbling badly, though supported on both sides by the Continentals. The shorter of these also seemed to be wounded; he had a bloodstained scarf wrapped around one arm. The other was looking from side to side as though on guard, but didn’t seem to be wounded.

At first I’d looked at the Provincial, who must be a prisoner. But then I looked more closely at the wounded Continental supporting him. And with Molly Pitcher so clearly and recently in mind, I realized with a small shock that the Continental was a woman. The Continental's coat covered her hips, but I could plainly see the way in which her legs slanted in toward the knee; a man's thighbones run straight up and down, but a woman's width of pelvic basin compels a slightly knock-kneed stance.

It also became clear, by the time they reached me, that the wounded soldiers were related: both were short and thin, with squared-off chins and sloping shoulders. The Provincial was definitely male, though—his face was thickly stubbled—while his … sister? They seemed close in age … was clear-skinned as an egg and nearly as white.

The Provincial was not. He was red as a blast furnace and nearly as hot to the touch. His eyes were white slits, and his head wobbled on his spindly neck.

"Is he wounded?" I asked sharply, putting a hand under his shoulder to ease him down onto a stool. He went limp the moment his buttocks touched it and would have fallen to the ground had I not tightened my grip. The girl gave a frightened gasp and put out a hand toward him, but she also staggered and would have fallen, had the other man not seized her by the shoulders.

"He took a blow to the head," the male Continental said. "I—hit him with the hilt of my sword." This admission was made with some embarrassment.

"Help me lay him down." I ran my hand over the Provincial's head, detecting an ugly, contused wound under his hair, but found no crepitation, no sense of a skull fracture. Concussion, likely, but maybe no worse. He began to twitch under my hand, though, and the tip of his tongue protruded from his mouth.

“Oh, dear,” I said, under my breath, but not far enough under, for the girl gave a small, despairing cry.

“It’s heatstroke,” I told her at once, hoping this might sound reassuring. The reality was far from it; once they collapsed and fell into seizures, they usually died. Their core temperature was far above what the systems of the body could tolerate, and seizing like that was often an indication that brain damage had started to occur. Still—

“Dottie!” I bellowed, and made urgent gestures at her, then turned to the sound—but very frightened-looking—Continental soldier. “See that young woman in gray? Drag him over into the shade where she is; she’ll know what to do.” It was simple. Pour water over him and—if possible—into him. That was the sum total of what *could* be done. Meanwhile …

I got hold of the girl by the non-wounded arm and sat her down on the stool, hastily pouring most of what remained in my brandy bottle into a cup. She didn’t look as though she had much blood left.

She didn’t. When I got the scarf off, I discovered that her hand was missing, and the forearm badly mangled. She hadn’t bled to death only because someone had twined a belt round her upper arm and fastened the tourniquet tight with a stick thrust through it. It had been a long time since I’d fainted at sight of anything, and I didn’t now, but did have one brief moment when the world shifted under my feet.

“How did you do that, sweetheart?” I asked, as calmly as possible. “Here, drink this.”

“I—grenado,” she whispered. Her head was turned away, not to see the arm, but I guided the cup to her lips and she drank, gulping the mix of brandy and water.

"She—he picked it up," said a low, choked voice at my elbow. The other Continental was back. "It rolled by my foot and he—she picked it up."

The girl turned her head at his voice, and I saw his anguished look.

"She came into the army because of you, I suppose?" Clearly the arm would have to be amputated; there was nothing below the elbow that could be saved, and to leave it in this state was to doom her to death by infection or gangrene.

"No, I didn't!" the girl said, huffing for breath. "Phil—" She gulped air and twisted her head to look toward the trees. "He tried to make me go with him. Loyalist c-camp … follower. Wouldn't." With so little blood remaining in her body, she was having trouble getting enough oxygen. I refilled the cup and made her drink again; she emerged from it spluttering and swaying, but more alert. "I'm a patriot!"

"I—I tried to make her go home, ma'am," the young man blurted. "But wasn't anyone left to look out for her." His hand hovered an inch from her back, wanting to touch her, waiting to catch her if she fell over.

"I see. Him—" I nodded toward Dottie's station under the trees, where the man with heatstroke lay in the shade. "Your brother?"

She hadn't the strength to nod, but closed her eyes briefly in acquiescence.

"Her father died just after Saratoga." The young man looked completely wretched. Christ, he couldn't be more than seventeen, and she looked about fourteen, though she must be older. "Phillip was already gone; he'd broke with his father when he joined the Provincials. I—" His voice broke, and he shut his mouth hard and touched her hair.

“What’s your name, dear?” I said. I’d loosened the tourniquet to check that there was still blood flow to the elbow; there was. Possibly the joint could be saved.

“Sally,” she whispered. Her lips were white, but her eyes were open. “Sarah.” All my amputation saws were in the church with Denzell—I couldn’t send her in there. I’d stuck my head in once and nearly been knocked over by the thick smell of blood and excrement—even more by the atmosphere of pain and terror and the sounds of butchery.

There were more wounded coming along the road; someone would have to tend them. I hesitated for no more than a minute.

Both Rachel and Dottie had the necessary resolve to deal with things and the physical presence to command distraught people. Rachel’s manner came from months of experience at Valley Forge, Dottie’s more from a habit of autocratic expectation that people would of course do what she wanted them to. Both of them inspired confidence, and I was proud of them. Between them, they were managing as well as could be expected, and—I thought—much better than the surgeons and their assistants in the church, though these were commendably quick about their bloody business.

“Dottie!” I called again, and beckoned. She rose and came at the trot, wiping her face on her apron. I saw her look at the girl—at Sarah—then turn with a brief look at the bodies on the grass, and turn back with a look in which curiosity, horror, and a desperate compassion were blended. So the brother was dead already, or dying.

“Go and get Denzell, Dottie,” I said, moving just a little so that she could see the mangled arm. She turned white and swallowed. “Tell him to bring my bow-frame saw and a small tenaculum.”

Sarah and the young man made small gasps of horror at the word “saw,” and then he moved swiftly, touching her at last, gripping her by her sound shoulder.

“You’ll be all right, Sally,” he said fiercely. “I’ll marry you! Won’t make a blind bit of difference to me. I mean—your—your arm.” He swallowed, hard, and I realized that he needed water, too, and passed over the canteen.

“Like … hell,” Sally said. Her eyes were dark and bright as unfired coal in her white face. “I won’t—be married for pity. Damn … you. Nor guilt. Don’t … need you!”

The young man’s face was blank with surprise—and, I thought, affront.

“Well, what are you going to live on?” he demanded, indignant. “You don’t own a thing in this world but that damned uniform! You—you—” He pounded a fist on his leg in frustration. “You can’t even whore, with one arm!”

She glared at him, breathing slow and hard. After a moment, a thought crossed her face and she nodded a little and turned to me.

“You reckon the army might … pay me … a pension?” she asked.

I could see Denzell now, blood-splattered but collected, hurrying across the gravel with the box of surgical instruments. I would have sold my soul for ether or laudanum, but had neither. I took a deep breath of my own.

“I expect they will. They’ll give Molly Pitcher one; why not you?”

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IN THE WRONG PLACE AT THE WRONG TIME

WILLIAM TOUCHED his jaw gingerly, congratulating himself that Tarleton had only managed to hit him in the face once, and it hadn't been in the nose. His ribs, arms, and abdomen were another matter, and his clothes were muddy and his shirt rent, but it wouldn't be apparent to a casual observer that he'd been in a fight. He *might* just get away with it—so long as Captain André didn't happen to mention the dispatch to the British Legion. After all, Sir Henry had had his hands full during the morning, if half what William had heard along his way was true.

A wounded infantry captain on his way back to camp had told of seeing Sir Henry, in command of the rear guard, lead a charge against the Americans, getting so far out to the front that he was nearly captured before the men behind came up to him. William had burned, hearing this—he would have loved to be part of that. But at least he hadn't stayed mewed up in the clerks' tent….

He was no more than a quarter mile along his way back to Cornwallis's brigade when Goth threw a shoe. William said something very bad, pulled up, and swung down to have a look. He found the shoe, but two nails had gone and a quick search didn't turn them up; no chance of hammering it back on with the heel of his boot, which had been his first thought.

He shoved the shoe in his pocket and looked round. Soldiers swarmed in every direction, but there was a company of Hessian grenadiers on the opposite side of the ravine, forming up at the bridgehead. He led Goth across, stepping gingerly.

"Hallo!" he called to the nearest fellow. *"Wo ist der nächste Hufschmied?"*

The man glanced indifferently at him and shrugged. A young fellow, though, pointed across the bridge and called out, *"Zwei Kompanien hinter uns kommen Husaren!" Hussars are coming, two companies behind!*

"Danke!" William called back, and led Goth into the sparse shade of a stand of spindly pines. Well, that was luck. He wouldn't have to walk the horse a long way; he could wait for the farrier and his wagon to come to him. Still, he fretted at the delay.

Every nerve was keyed tight as a harpsichord string; he kept touching his belt, where his weapons would normally be. He could hear the sounds of musket fire in the far distance, but couldn't see a thing. The countryside was folded up like a leporello, rolling meadow diving suddenly into wooded ravines, then springing back out, only to disappear again.

He dug out his handkerchief, so soggy by now that it served only to sluice the sweat from his face. He caught a faint breath of coolness wafting up from the creek, forty feet below, and walked nearer the edge in hopes of more. He drank warm water from his canteen, wishing he could scramble down and drink from the stream, but he daren't; he might get down the steep slope without trouble, but coming back up would be an awkward climb, and he couldn't risk missing the farrier.

"Er spricht Deutsch. Er hat es gehört!" Heard what? He hadn't been paying attention to the grenadiers' sporadic conversation, but these hissed words came to him clearly, and he glanced round to see who it was they were saying spoke German, only to see two of the grenadiers quite close behind him. One of them grinned nervously at him, and he stiffened.

Suddenly two more were there, between him and the bridge. *"Was ist hier los?"* he demanded sharply. *"Was macht Ihr da?" What is this? What are you doing*?

A burly fellow pulled an apologetic face.

"Verzeihung. Ihr seid hier falsch."

I'm in the wrong place? Before William could say anything more, they closed on him. He elbowed, punched, kicked, and butted wildly, but it didn't last more than a few seconds. Hands pulled his arms behind him, and the burly fellow said once more, *"Verzeihung,"* and, still looking apologetic, bashed him in the head with a rock.

He didn't lose consciousness altogether until he hit the bottom of the ravine.

* * *

THERE WAS THE devil of a lot of fighting, Ian thought —but that was about all you could say about it. There was a good deal of movement—particularly among the Americans—and whenever they met with a group of redcoats, there was fighting, often ferocious fighting. But the countryside was so irregular, the armies seldom came together anywhere in large numbers.

He had found his way around several companies of British infantry more or less lying in wait, though, and beyond this vanguard were a goodly number of British, regimental banners in the midst of them. Would it help to know who was in command here? He wasn't sure he could tell, even if he was close enough to make out the details of the banners.

His left arm ached, and he rubbed it absently. The ax wound had healed well, though the scar was still raised and tender—but the arm hadn't yet recovered anything like its full strength, and loosing an arrow at the Indian scouts earlier had left the muscles quivering and jumping, with a burning deep in the bone.

"Best not try that again," he murmured to Rollo—then remembered that the dog wasn't with him.

He looked up and discovered that one of the Indian scouts *was* with him, though. Or at least he thought so. Twenty yards away, an Abenaki warrior sat on a rawboned pony, eyeing Ian thoughtfully. Yes, Abenaki, he was sure of it, seeing the scalp shaved clean from brows to crown and the band of black paint across the eyes, the long shell earrings that brushed the man's shoulders, their nacre glittering in the sun.

Even as he made these observations, he was turning his own mount, seeking shelter. The main body of men was a good two hundred yards distant, standing in open meadow, but there were stands of chestnut and poplar, and perhaps a half mile back the way he'd come, the rolling land dipped into one of the big ravines. Wouldn't do to be trapped in the low ground, but if he had enough lead, it was a good way to disappear. He kicked his horse sharply and they shot off, turning abruptly left as they passed a patch of thick growth—and a good thing, too, because he heard something heavy whiz past his head and go crashing into the growth. Throwing stick? Tomahawk?

It didn't matter; the only important thing was that the man who'd thrown it was no longer holding it. He did look back, though—and saw the second Abenaki come round the grove from the other side, ready to cut him off. The second one shouted something and the other answered—hunting cries. *Beast in view.*

"Cuidich mi, a Dhia!" he said, and jammed his heels hard into his horse's sides. The new mare was a good horse, and they made it out of the open ground, crashed through a small copse of trees and out the other side to find a rail fence before them. It was too close to stop, and they didn't; the horse dropped her hindquarters, bunched, and soared over, back hooves clipping the top rail with a solid *whank!* that made Ian bite his tongue.

He didn't look back but bent low over his horse's neck, and they ran flat out for the curving land he could see before him, dropping down. He turned and ran at an angle, not wanting to hit the edge of the ravine straight on, in case it should be steep just there.… No sound from behind save the rumble and clash of the army massing. No yelps, no hunting calls from the Abenaki.

There it was, the thick growth that marked the edge of the ravine. He slowed and now risked a look over his shoulder. Nothing, and he breathed and let the horse slow to a walk, picking their way along the edge, looking for a good way down. The bridge was just visible above him, maybe fifty yards distant, but no one was on it—yet.

He could hear men fighting *in* the ravine—perhaps three hundred yards from where he was—but there was sufficient growth that he was hidden from them. Only a scuffle, from the sounds—he'd heard or seen that a dozen times already today; men on both sides, driven by thirst down to the creeks that had carved the ravines, occasionally meeting and going for one another in a bloody splash among the shallows.

The thought of it reminded him of his own thirst—and the horse's, for the creature was stretching out her neck, nostrils greedily flaring at the scent of water.

He slid off and led the way down to the creek's edge, careful of loose stones and boggy earth—the creek bank here was mostly soft mud, edged with mats of duckweed and small reedbeds. A glimpse of red caught his eye and he tensed, but it was a British soldier, facedown in the mud and clearly dead, his legs swaying in the current.

He shucked his moccasins and edged out into the water himself; the creek was fairly wide here and only a couple of feet deep, with a silty bottom; he sank in ankle-deep. He edged out again and led the horse farther up the ravine, looking for better footing, though the mare was desperate for the water, pushing Ian with her head; she wouldn't wait long.

The sounds of the skirmish had faded; he could hear men up above and some way off, but nothing in the ravine itself anymore.

There, that would do. He let the horse's reins fall, and she lunged for the creek, stood with her forefeet sunk in mud but her hind feet solid on a patch of gravel, blissfully gulping water. Ian felt the pull of the water nearly as much and sank to his knees, feeling the blissful chill as it soaked his clout and leggings, that sensation fading instantly to nothingness as he cupped his hands and drank, and cupped and drank again and again, choking now and then in the effort to drink faster than he could swallow.

At last he stopped—reluctantly—and dashed water over his face and chest; it was cooling, though the bear grease in his paint made the water bead and run off his skin.

"Come on," he said to the horse. "Ye'll burst and ye keep on like that, *amaidan*." It took some struggle, but he got the horse's nose out of the creek, water and bits of green weed sloshing out of the loose-lipped mouth as the horse snorted and shook her head. It was while hauling the horse's head round in order to lead her up the bank that he saw the other British soldier.

This one was lying near the bottom of the ravine, too, but not in the mud. He was lying facedown, but with his head turned to one side, and …

"Och, Jesus, *no*!" Ian flung his horse's reins hastily round a tree trunk and bounded up the slope. It was, of course. He'd known it from the first glimpse of the long legs, the shape of the head, but the face made it certain, even masked with blood as it was.

William was still alive; his face twitched under the feet of a half-dozen black flies feeding on his drying blood. Ian put a hand under his jaw, the way Auntie Claire did, but, with no idea how to find a pulse or what a good one should feel like, took it away again. William was lying in the shadow of a big sycamore, but his skin was still warm—it couldn't help but be, Ian thought, even if he was dead, on a day like this.

He'd risen to his feet, thinking rapidly. He'd need to get the bugger onto the horse, but maybe best undress him? Take off the telltale coat, at least? But what if he were to take him back toward the British lines, find someone there to take charge of him, get him to a surgeon? That was closer.

Still need to take the coat off, or the man might die of the heat before he got anywhere. So resolved, he knelt again, and thus saved his own life. The tomahawk chunked into the sycamore's trunk just where his head had been a moment before.

And, a moment later, one of the Abenaki raced down the slope and leapt on him with a shriek that blasted bad breath into his face. That split second of warning, though, was enough that he'd got his feet under him and pushed to the side, heaving the Abenaki's body over his hip in a clumsy wrestling throw that landed the man in the mud four feet away.

The second one was behind him; Ian heard the man's feet in the gravel and weeds and whirled to meet the downward strike, catching the blow on his forearm, grabbing for the knife with his other hand.

He caught it—by the blade, and hissed through his teeth as it cut into his palm—and chopped down on the man's wrist with his half-numbed arm. The knife jarred loose. Hand and knife were slippery with blood; he couldn't get hold of the hilt but had got it away—he turned and threw it as far as he could upstream, and it plunked into the water.

Then they were both on him, punching, kicking, and tearing at him. He staggered backward, lost his balance but not his grip on one of his attackers, and succeeded in falling into the creek with the man atop him. After that, he lost track.

He had one of the Abenaki on his back in the water, was trying earnestly to drown him, while the other rode his own back and tried to get an arm around his neck—and then there was a racket on the other side of the ravine and everything stopped for a moment. A lot of men, moving in a disorganized sort of way—he could hear drums, but there was a noise like the distant sea, incoherent voices.

The Abenaki stopped, too, just for an instant, but that was long enough: Ian twisted, flinging the man off his back, and bounded awkwardly through the water, slipping and sinking in the muddy bottom, but made it to shore and ran for the first thing that met his eye—a tall white oak. He flung himself at the trunk and shinned up, grabbing at branches as they came in reach to pull himself higher, faster, reckless of his wounded hand, the rough bark scraping his skin.

The Indians were after him, but too late; one leapt and slapped at his bare foot but failed to get a grip, and he got a knee over a large branch and clung, panting, to the trunk, ten feet up. Safe? He thought so, but after a moment peered down cautiously.

The Abenaki were casting to and fro like wolves, glancing up at the noise above the rim of the ravine, then up at Ian—then across the creek toward William, and that made Ian's wame curl up. God, what could he do if they should decide to go cut the man's throat? He hadn't even got a stone to throw at them.

The one good thing was that neither of them seemed to have either a gun or a bow; must have left those with their horses, up above. They couldn't do anything but throw stones at *him*, and they seemed disinclined.

More noise from above—a *lot* of men up there; what were they shouting?—and the Abenaki abruptly abandoned Ian.

They splashed back across the stream, their leggings clinging with water and streaked with black mud, paused briefly to turn William over and rummage his clothes—evidently he'd already been robbed, for they found nothing—and then untied Ian's horse and with a last mocking call of "Mohawk!" disappeared with the mare into a growth of pussy willows downstream.

* * *

IAN HAD DRAGGED himself one-handed up the slope, crawled some distance, and then lay for a while under a fallen log on the edge of a clearing, spots coming and going before his eyes like a swarm of midgies. There was a lot going on nearby, but none of it near enough to cause him immediate concern. He closed his eyes, hoping that would make the spots go away. They didn't, instead turning from black to a horrid constellation of swimming pink and yellow blobs that made him want to vomit.

He hastily opened his eyes again, in time to see several powder-blackened Continental soldiers, stripped to their shirts, some bare to the waist, dragging a cannon down the road. They were followed in short order by more men and another cannon, all staggering with the heat and white-eyed with exhaustion. He recognized Colonel Owen, stumping along between the limbers, sooty face set in unhappy desperation.

Some sense of stirring drew Ian's wandering eye away toward a group of men, and he realized with a faint sense of interest that it was a very large group of men, with a standard hanging limp as an unstuffed haggis against its pole.

That in turn stirred recognition. Sure enough, there was General Lee, long-nosed and frowning but looking very keen, riding out of the mass toward Owen.

Ian was too far away and there was too much noise to hear a word, but the trouble was obvious from Owen's gestures and pointings. One of his cannon was broken, burst, probably from the heat of firing, and another had broken free of its limber and was being dragged with ropes, its metal scraping on the rocks as it juddered along.

A dim sense of urgency was reasserting itself. *William*. He needed to tell someone about William. Plainly it wasn't going to be the British.

Lee's brows drew in and his lips thinned, but he kept his composure. He had bent down from his saddle to listen to Owen; now he nodded, spoke a few words, and straightened up. Owen wiped a sleeve across his face and waved to his men. They picked up their ropes and leaned into the weight, disconsolate, and Ian saw that three or four were wounded, cloths wrapped round heads or hands, one half-hopping with a bloody leg, a hand on one of the cannon for support.

Ian's wame had begun to settle now, and he was desperately thirsty, despite having drunk his fill at the creek only a short time before. He'd taken no notice where he was going but, seeing Owen's cannon come down the road, knew he must be near the bridge, though it was out of sight. He crawled out of his hiding place and managed to stand up, holding on to the log for a moment while his vision went black and white and black again.

William. He had to find someone to help … but first he had to find water. He couldn't manage without it. Everything he'd drunk at the creek had run off him as sweat, and he was parched to the bone.

It took several tries, but he got water at last from an infantryman who had two canteens hanging round his neck.

"What happened to you, chum?" the infantryman asked, eyeing him with interest.

"Had a fight with a British scout," Ian replied, and reluctantly handed back the canteen.

"Hope you won it, then," the man said, and waved without waiting for an answer, moving off with his company.

Ian's left eye was stinging badly and his vision was cloudy; a cut in his eyebrow was bleeding. He groped in the small bag at his waist and found the handkerchief wrapped round the smoked ear he carried. The cloth was a small one, but big enough to tie round his brow.

He wiped his knuckles over his mouth, already longing for more water. What ought he to do? He could see the standard now being vigorously waved, flapping heavily in the thick air, summoning the troops to follow. Plainly Lee was headed over the bridge; he knew where he was going, and his troops with him. No one would—or could—stop to climb down a ravine to aid a wounded British soldier.

Ian shook his head experimentally and, finding that his brains didn't seem to rattle, set off toward the southwest. With luck, he'd meet La Fayette or Uncle Jamie coming up, and maybe get another mount. With a horse, he could get William out of the ravine alone. And whatever else might happen today, he'd settle the hash of those Abenaki bastards.

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HIGH NOON

ONE OF LA FAYETTE'S men came up at this point with orders to fall back, to rejoin La Fayette's main body near one of the farms between Spotswood South Brook and Spotswood Middlebrook. Jamie was pleased to hear it; there was no reasonable way for half-armed militia companies to lay siege to the artillery entrenched in the orchard, not with rifles guarding the cannon.

"Gather your companies, Mr. Guthrie, and join me on the road up there," Jamie said, pointing. "Mr. Bixby, can ye find Captain Kirby? Tell him the same thing; I'll fetch along Craddock's troops."

Captain Craddock's companies had been badly demoralized by his death, and Jamie had brought them under his own direct command to prevent them scattering like bumblebees.

They made their way across the fields, picking up Corporal Filmer and his men at the farmhouse—it was deserted; no need to leave anyone there—and across the bridge over one of the creeks. He slowed a little as his horse's hooves thudded on the planks, feeling the blessed cool dampness coming up from the water thirty feet below. They should stop, he thought, for water—they hadn't, since early morning, and the canteens would be running dry—but it would take too long for so many men to work their way along the ravine, down to the creek, and back up. He thought they could make it to La Fayette's position; there were wells there.

He could see the road ahead and peeled an eye for lurking British. He wondered, with a moment's irritation, where Ian was; he would have liked to know where the British *were*.

He found out an instant later. A gunshot cracked nearby, and his horse slipped and fell. Jamie yanked his foot free and rolled out of the saddle as the horse hit the bridge with a thud that shook the whole structure, struggled for an instant, neighing loudly, and slid over the edge into the ravine.

Jamie scrambled to his feet; his hand was burning, all the skin taken off his palm when he'd skidded on the splintered boards.

"Run!" he shouted, with what breath he had left, and waved an arm wildly, gathering the men, pointing them down the road toward a growth of trees that would cover them. *"Go!"*

He found himself among them, the surge of men carrying him with them, and they stumbled into cover, gasping and wheezing with the effort of running. Kirby and Guthrie were sorting out their companies, the late Captain Craddock's men were clustering near Jamie, and he nodded, breathless, to Bixby and Corporal Greenhow to count noses.

He could still hear the sound the horse had made, hitting the ground below the bridge.

He was going to vomit; he felt it rising and knew better than to try to hold it back. He made a quick staying motion toward Lieutenant Schnell, who wanted to speak to him, stepped behind a large pine, and let his stomach turn itself out like an emptied sporran. He stayed bent for a moment, mouth open and forehead pressed against the rough bark for support, letting the gush of saliva wash the taste of it from his mouth.

Cuidich mi, a Dhia … But his mind had lost all notion of words for the moment, and he straightened up, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. As he came out from behind the tree, though, all thought of what might be going on and what he might have to do about it vanished. Ian had come out of the trees nearby and was making his way across the open space. The lad was afoot and moving slowly, but doggedly. Jamie could see the bruises, even from a distance of forty feet.

“That one of ourn or one of theirn?” a militiaman asked doubtfully, raising his musket to bear on Ian, just in case.

“He’s mine,” Jamie said. “Don’t shoot him, aye? Ian! *Ian!*” He didn’t run—his left knee hurt too much to run—but made his way toward his nephew as fast as possible and was relieved to see the glassy look in Ian’s eyes shatter and brighten into recognition at sight of him.

“Uncle Jamie!” Ian shook his head as though to clear it and stopped abruptly with a gasp.

“Are ye bad hurt, *a bhalaich*?” Jamie asked, stepping back and looking for blood. There was some, but nothing dreadful. The lad wasn’t clutching himself as though wounded in the vitals.…

"No. No, it's—" Ian worked his mouth, trying to get up the spit to make words, and Jamie thrust his canteen into Ian's hand. There was pitifully little water left in it, but some, enough, and Ian gulped it.

"William," Ian gasped, lowering the empty canteen. "Your —"

"What about him?" Jamie interrupted. There were more men coming down the road, some of them half-running, looking back. *"What?"* he repeated, grasping Ian's arm.

"He's alive," Ian said at once, correctly gauging both intent and intensity of the question. "Someone hit him on the head and left him in the bottom of yon ravine." He gestured vaguely toward the scouts. "Maybe three hundred yards west o' the bridge, aye? He's no dead, but I dinna ken how bad hurt he may be."

Jamie nodded, making instant calculations.

"Aye, and what happened to *you*?" He could only hope that William and Ian hadn't happened to each other. But if William was unconscious, it couldn't be he who'd taken Ian's horse, and plainly someone had, for—

"Two Abenaki scouts," Ian replied with a grimace. "The buggers have been following me for—"

Jamie was still holding Ian by the left arm and felt the impact of the arrow and the shock of its reverberation through the lad's body. Ian glanced unbelievingly at his right shoulder, where the shaft protruded, and gave at the knees, his weight pulling him from Jamie's grasp as he keeled over.

Jamie launched himself over Ian's body and hit the ground rolling, avoiding the second arrow; he heard it rip the air near his ear. Heard the militiaman's gun speak just above him and then a confusion of screaming and shouting, a group of his men breaking, running toward the source of the arrows, bellowing.

"Ian!" He rolled his nephew onto his back. The lad was conscious, but as much of his face as showed under the paint was white and ghastly, his throat working helplessly. Jamie grasped the arrow; it was lodged in what Claire called the deltoid, the fleshy part of the upper arm, but it didn't budge when he shook it gently.

"I think it's struck the bone," he said to Ian. "No bad, but the tip's stuck fast."

"I think so, too," Ian said faintly. He was struggling to sit up, but couldn't. "Break it off, aye? I canna be going about wi' it sticking out like that."

Jamie nodded, got his nephew sitting unsteadily upright, and broke the shaft between his hands, leaving a ragged stub a few inches long with which to pull the arrow out. There wasn't much blood, only a trickle running down Ian's arm. Claire could see to getting the arrowhead out later.

The shouting and confusion were becoming widespread. A glance showed him more men coming down the road, and he heard a fife signaling in the distance, thin and desperate.

"D'ye ken what's happened up there?" he said to Ian, nodding toward the noise. Ian shook his head.

"I saw Colonel Owen comin' down wi' his cannon all in shambles. He stopped to say a word to Lee and then came on, but he wasna running."

A few men *were* running, though in a heavy, clumsy way—not as though pursuit was close. But he could feel alarm beginning to spread through the men around him and turned to them at once.

"Stay by me," he said calmly to Guthrie. "Keep your men together, and by me. Mr. Bixby—say that to Captain Kirby, as well. Stay by me; dinna move save on my word.”

The men from Craddock’s company who had run after the Abenaki—he supposed that to be the source of the arrows—had vanished into the woods. He hesitated for an instant, but then sent a small party after them. No Indian he’d ever met would fight from a fixed position, so he doubted he was sending his men into ambush. Perhaps into the face of the oncoming British, but if that was the case, best he knew about it as soon as possible, and at least one or two would likely make it back to tell him.

Ian was getting his feet under him; Jamie bent and gave the lad an arm under his good shoulder and got him standing. His legs shook in their buckskins and sweat ran in sheets down his bare torso, but he stood.

“Was it you who called my name, Uncle Jamie?” he asked.

“Aye, I did when I saw ye come out of the trees.” Jamie nodded toward the wood, keeping one eye out for anyone coming back that way. “Why?”

“Not then. Just before this—” He touched the ragged end of the arrow shaft gingerly. “Someone called out behind me; that’s what made me move, and a good thing, too. I’d ha’ taken this square in the chest otherwise.”

Jamie shook his head and felt that faint sense of bemusement that always attended brushes with ghosts—if that’s what this was. The only strangeness of it was that it never seemed strange at all.

But there was no time to think of such things; there were calls now of “Retreat! Retreat!” and the men behind him stirred and rippled like wheat in a rising wind.

“Stay by me!” he said, in a loud, firm voice, and the ones nearest him took a grip of their weapons and stood.

William. Thought of his son sparked a flare of alarm in his bones. The arrow that had struck Ian had jolted the vision of William, sprawled and bloody in the mud, out of his head, but now … Christ, he couldn't send men after the lad, not with half the army pouring back in this direction, and the British maybe on their heels.… A sudden ray of hope: if the British *were* headed this way, they'd maybe come across the lad and care for him.

He wanted badly to go himself. If William was dying … but he could in no circumstances leave his men, and particularly not in these circumstances. A terrible urgency seized him.

Christ, if I never speak to him—never tell him—

Now he saw Lee and his aides coming down the road. They were moving slowly, no air of haste about it, but deliberate—and looking back now and then, almost surreptitiously, glancing quickly again to the front, sitting straight in their saddles.

"Retreat!" The cry was springing up now all around them, growing stronger, and men were streaming out of the woods. "Retreat!"

"Stay by me," Jamie said, softly enough that only Bixby and Guthrie heard him—but it was enough. They stiffened, stood by him. Their resolve would help to hold the rest. If Lee came even with him, ordered him … then they would have to go. But not 'til then.

"Shit!" said one of the men behind him, surprised. Jamie glanced back, saw a staring face, then whipped round to look where the man was looking. Some of Craddock's men were coming out of the wood, looking pleased with themselves. They had Claire's mare with them, and over her saddle was the limp body of an Indian, his long, greased scalp locks nearly dragging the ground.

"Got him, sir!" One of the men—Mortlake—saluted, grinning white-toothed from the shade of a hat that he didn't think to remove. His face gleamed like oiled leather, and he nodded to Ian in a friendly fashion, jerking his thumb at the mare. "Horse—you?"

"It is," Ian said, and his Scots accent made Mortlake blink. "I thank ye, sir. I think my uncle had best take the horse, though. Ye'll need her, aye?" he added to Jamie, lifting an eyebrow toward the ranks of men behind them.

Jamie wanted to refuse; Ian looked as if he could barely walk. But the lad was right. Jamie would have to lead these men, whether forward or back—and he'd need them to be able to see him. He nodded reluctantly, and the body of the Abenaki was dragged from the saddle and tossed carelessly into the brush. He saw Ian's eyes follow it, dark with dislike, and thought for a split second of the smoked ear his nephew carried in his sporran, and hoped that Ian wouldn't—but, no, a Mohawk took no trophies from another's kill.

"There were two of them, ye said, Ian?"

Ian turned from contemplation of the dead Abenaki and nodded.

"Saw t'other one," Mortlake answered the implied question. "Ran when we shot this villain." He coughed, glancing at the increasing streams of men coming down the road. "Beg pardon, sir, but oughtn't we be moving, too?"

The men were fidgeting, craning their necks to see, murmuring when they spotted Lee, whose aides were spreading out, trying to marshal the swarming men into some kind of orderly retreat but being roundly ignored.

Then something, some change of atmosphere, made Jamie turn, and half the men with him.

And here came Washington up the road on Jamie's erstwhile white stallion, galloping, and a look on his big, rough face that would have melted brass.

The incipient panic in the men dissolved at once as they pressed forward, urgent to learn what was afoot. There was chaos in the road. Some companies scattered, stopping abruptly to look round for their fellows, some noticing Washington's sudden appearance, others still coming down the road, colliding with those standing still—and, in the midst of it, Washington pulled his horse up beside Charles Lee's and leaned toward him, flushed like an apple with heat and anger.

"What do you mean by this, sir?!" was all that Jamie heard clearly, the words carried to him by some freak of the heavy air, before noise and dust and smothering heat settled so thickly on the scene that it was impossible to hear anything over the clishmaclaver, save the disquieting echo of musket volleys and the occasional faint popping of grenadoes in the distance.

He didn't try to shout above the noise; it wasn't necessary. His men were going nowhere, as riveted to the spectacle before them as he was.

Lee's long-nosed face was pinched with fury, and Jamie saw him for a brief instant as Punch, the furious puppet in a Punch-and-Judy show. An unhinged urge to laugh bubbled up, as the necessary corollary irresistibly presented itself: George Washington as Judy, the mobcapped shrew who belabored her husband with a stick. For an instant, Jamie feared he had succumbed to the heat and lost his mind.

Once envisioned, though, he couldn't escape the thought, and for an instant he was standing in Hyde Park, watching Punch feed his baby to the sausage machine.

For that was what Washington was very clearly doing. It lasted no more than three or four minutes, and then Washington made a furious gesture of disgust and dismissal and, wheeling his horse, set off at a trot, circling back to pass the troops who had clotted along the roadside, watching in fascination.

Emerging from his own fascination with a jolt, Jamie put a foot in the mare's stirrup and swung up.

"Ian—" he said, and his nephew nodded, putting a hand on his knee—as much to steady himself, he thought, as to reassure his uncle.

"Give me a few men, Uncle Jamie," he said. "I'll see to … his lordship." There was barely time to summon Corporal Greenhow and detail him to take five men and accompany Ian, before Washington came close enough to spot Jamie and his companies. The general's hat was in his hand and his face was afire, anger and desperation subsumed in eagerness, and the whole of his being radiating something Jamie had seldom seen, but recognized. Had felt himself, once. It was the look of a man risking everything, because there was no choice.

"Mr. Fraser!" Washington shouted to him, and his wide mouth stretched wider in a blazing grin. "Follow me!"

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PATER NOSTER

WILLIAM CAME AWAKE slowly, feeling terrible. His head hurt and he wanted to vomit. He was horribly thirsty, but the thought of drinking anything made his gorge rise and he retched feebly. He was lying in grass and bugs; there were bugs crawling on him.… He saw, for one vivid moment, a line of tiny ants climbing busily through the dark hairs on his wrist and tried to dash his hand against the ground to dislodge them. His hand didn't move, though, and his consciousness faded.

It came back with a throbbing rush and jounce. The world was jigging dizzily up and down, and he couldn't breathe. Then he made out the dark things that went in and out of his field of view as being a horse's legs and realized that he was belly-down over a saddle, being carried somewhere. *Where* …?

There was a lot of shouting going on nearby, and the noise hurt his head very much.

"Stop!" shouted an English voice. "What are you doing with him? Stand! Stand or I'll kill you!"

"Leave him! Push him off! Run!" A vaguely familiar voice, Scottish.

Then a confusion of noise and somewhere in it the Scottish voice again, shouting, "Tell my—" But then he hit the ground with a thud that knocked out both wit and wind, and slid back into darkness, headfirst.

* * *

IN THE END, it was simplicity itself. John Grey walked down a cattle track, following the hoofprints toward what must be water, and walked straight into a startled group of British soldiers filling their canteens at a muddy ford. Light-headed from thirst and heat, he didn't bother trying to identify or explain himself, just put his hands in the air and gave himself up with an intense feeling of relief.

The soldiers gave him water, at least, and then he was marched off under the guard of a nervous boy with a musket and into the yard of a farmhouse that appeared to be deserted. No doubt the owners had fled upon realizing that they were in the middle of twenty thousand or so armed troops bent on mayhem.

Grey was hustled over to a large wagon half filled with cut grass, made to sit down on the ground with several other captured prisoners—in the shade, thank God—and left there under the guard of two middle-aged privates, armed with muskets, and a nervous child of fourteen or so in a lieutenant's uniform, who twitched every time the sound of a volley echoed off the trees.

This might be his best chance. If he could shock or intimidate the boy into sending him to Cornwallis or Clinton …

“Sir!” he barked at the boy, who blinked at him, startled. So did the captured Americans.

“What is your name, sir?” he demanded, in his command voice. That rattled the young lieutenant badly; he took two involuntary steps backward before stopping himself. He flushed, though, and rallied.

“You be quiet!” he said, and, stepping forward, aimed a cuff at Grey’s ear.

Grey caught him by the wrist by reflex, but before he could release the boy, one of the privates had taken a stride toward him and brought down the butt of his musket on Grey’s left forearm.

“ ’E said be quiet,” the private said mildly. “I’d do it, was I you.”

Grey *was* quiet, but only because he couldn’t speak. That arm had been broken twice before—once by Jamie Fraser, once by a cannon explosion—and the third time was definitely not the charm. His vision went black for a moment, and everything inside him contracted into a ball of hot lead. Then it started to hurt, and he could breathe again.

“What’s that you just said?” the man sitting next him said under his breath, eyebrows raised. “ ’Tain’t English, is it?”

“No,” said Grey, and paused for another breath, clutching the arm against his belly. “It’s German for ‘Oh, shit.’ ”

“Ah.” The man nodded understandingly and—with a wary glance at the guards—brought a small flask out from under his coat and pulled the cork before handing it to Grey. “Try that, friend,” he whispered.

The scent of overripe apples surged directly into his brain and very nearly made him vomit. He managed to swallow, though, and handed back the flask with a nod of thanks. Sweat ran down his face in streams, stinging his good eye.

No one spoke. The man who'd given him the applejack was a Continental regular, middle-aged, with a haggard face and only half his teeth remaining. He sat hunched, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the distance, where the sound of fighting was. The others were doing the same thing, he realized—all craning toward the battle.

Colonel Watson Smith popped into his mind, doubtless summoned up by the fumes of applejack, but appearing so suddenly that Grey jerked a little, and one of the guards stiffened, giving him a hard look. Grey looked away, though, and the man relaxed.

Shocked with pain, exhausted and thirsty, he lay down, nursing his throbbing arm against his chest. The buzzing of insects filled his ears, and the volley of muskets retreated into the meaningless rumble of distant thunder. He let himself lapse into a not unpleasant catatonia visualizing Smith shirtless, lying on the narrow cot under a lantern, cradling Grey in his arms, stroking his back with a comforting hand. At some point, he drifted into an uneasy sleep, punctuated by the sounds of guns and shouting.

He woke suddenly, with a mouth like cotton, to find that several more prisoners had been delivered and that there was an Indian sitting beside him. Grey's working eye was gummy and bleared, and it took a moment before he recognized the face under the remnants of black and green war paint.

Ian Murray gave him a long, level look that said plainly, *"Don't talk,"* and he didn't. Murray raised an eyebrow at his wounded arm. Grey lifted his good shoulder in a brief shrug and focused his attention on the water cart that had come to a halt on the nearby road.

“You and you, come with me.” One of the privates jerked a thumb at two of the prisoners and led them off toward the cart, from which they returned shortly, carrying buckets of water.

The water was blood-warm and tasted of sodden, half-rotted wood, but they drank greedily, spilling it down their clothes in their haste. Grey wiped a wet hand across his face, feeling somewhat more settled in his mind. He flexed his left wrist experimentally; perhaps it was only a brui—no, it wasn’t.

He’d drawn in his breath with a hiss, and Murray, as though in response, closed his eyes, steepled his hands together, and began to intone the Pater Noster.

“What in b-buggery is that?” the lieutenant demanded, stamping over to him. “Are you talking Indian, sir?”

Ian opened his eyes, regarding the child with a mild stare.

“It’s Latin. I’m sayin’ my prayers, aye?” he said. “D’ye mind?”

“Do I—” The lieutenant stopped, baffled as much by being addressed in a Scottish accent as by the circumstance. He stole a glance at the privates, who looked off into the distance. He cleared his throat.

“No,” he said shortly, and turned away, pretending absorption in the distant cloud of white powder smoke that hung low over the trees.

Murray cut his eyes at Grey and, with a slight nod, began the Pater Noster again. Grey, somewhat puzzled, joined him, stumbling a bit. The lieutenant stiffened, but didn’t turn round.

“Do they not know who you are?” Murray asked in Latin at the end of the prayer, not varying his intonation.

“I told them; they don’t believe me,” Grey replied, adding a random *“Ave Maria”* at the end for verisimilitude.

“*Gratia plena, Dominus tecum*. Shall *I* tell them?”

“I have no idea what comes next. I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

“Benedicta tu in mulieribus, et benedictus fructus ventris tui, Jesu,” Murray replied, and rose to his feet.

The guards swung round immediately, raising their muskets to their shoulders. Murray ignored this, addressing the lieutenant.

“It’s maybe no my business, sir,” he said mildly. “But I shouldna like to see ye ruin your career over a wee mistake.”

“Be qui—what mistake?” the lieutenant demanded. He had taken off his wig because of the heat but now crammed it back on his head, evidently thinking it might lend him authority. He was mistaken in this impression, as the wig was a good deal too large and immediately slipped sideways over one ear.

“This gentleman,” Murray said, gesturing to Grey, who sat up straight and stared impassively at the lieutenant. “I canna imagine what’s brought him here or why he should be dressed as he is—but I ken him well. This is Lord John Grey. The, ehm, brother of Colonel Grey, the Duke of Pardloe?” he added delicately.

The hue of the young lieutenant’s face changed noticeably. He glanced quickly back and forth between Murray and Grey, frowning, and absently shoved his wig back into place. Grey rose slowly, keeping an eye on the guards.

“That’s ridiculous,” the lieutenant said, but without force. “Why should Lord John Grey be here, looking like—like *that*?”

“The exigencies of war, Lieutenant,” said Grey, keeping his voice level. “I see you belong to the Forty-ninth, which means that your colonel is Sir Henry Calder. I know him. If you will be so kind as to lend me paper and pencil, I will write him a short note, asking him to send an escort to fetch me. You can send the note via the water carrier,” he added, seeing a wild look come into the boy’s eyes, and hoping to calm him before he panicked and decided that the simplest way out of this imbroglio was to shoot Grey.

One of the privates—the one who had broken Grey’s arm—coughed gently.

“We’m goin’ to need more men, sir, in any case. Three of us with a dozen prisoners … and doubtless more comin’?” The lieutenant looked blank, and the private had another go. “I meantersay … might be you’d mean to send for reinforcements anyroad.” The man caught Grey’s eye and coughed again.

“Accidents happen,” Grey said, though with no great charity, and the guards relaxed.

“All right,” the lieutenant said. His voice broke on it and he repeated, “All right!” in a gruff baritone, looking belligerently around. No one was foolish enough to laugh.

Grey’s knees were wanting to tremble, and he sat down rather abruptly to prevent it. Murray’s face—well, the faces of all the prisoners—were carefully blank.

“Tibi debeo,” Grey said quietly. *I acknowledge the debt.*

“Deo gratias,” Murray murmured, and only then did Grey see the trail of blood that streaked Murray’s arm and side, staining his breechclout—and the stub of a broken arrow protruding from the flesh of his right shoulder.

WILLIAM CAME round again lying on something that didn't move, thank God. There was a canteen being pressed to his lips, and he drank, gulping, lips reaching for more water even as it was drawn away.

"Not that fast, you'll be sick," said a familiar voice. "Breathe once, and you can have more." He breathed and forced his eyes open against a glare of light. A familiar face appeared over him, and he reached up a wavering hand toward it.

"Papa …" he whispered.

"No, but the next best thing," said his uncle Hal, taking a firm hold on the groping hand and sitting down beside him. "How's the head?"

William closed his eyes and tried to focus on something other than the pain.

"Not … that bad."

"Pull the other one, it's got bells on," his uncle murmured, cupping William's cheek and turning his head to the side. "Let's have a look."

"Let's have more water," William managed, and his uncle gave a small snort and put the canteen back to William's lips.

When William stopped to breathe again, his uncle set the canteen down and inquired, in a perfectly normal tone of voice, "Can you sing, do you think?"

His vision was going in and out; there were momentarily two of his uncle, then one, then two again. He closed one eye, and Uncle Hal steadied.

"You want me to … *sing*?" he managed.

“Well, perhaps not right this minute,” the duke said. He sat back on his stool and began to whistle a tune. “Recognize that, do you?” he asked, breaking off.

“ ‘Cillibulero,’ ” William said, beginning to feel rather cross. “Why, for God’s sake?”

“Knew a chap once who was hit on the head with an ax and lost his ability to make out music. Couldn’t tell one note from another.” Hal leaned forward, holding up two fingers. “How many fingers am I holding up?”

“Two. Stick them up your nose,” William advised him. “Go away, will you? I’m going to be sick.”

“Told you not to drink too fast.” But his uncle had a basin under his face and a strong hand on his head, bracing him while he heaved and coughed and shot water out of his nose.

By the time he had subsided back onto his pillow—it *was* a pillow, he was lying on a camp cot—he’d recovered enough of his senses to be able to look around and determine that he was in an army tent—probably his uncle’s, judging from the battered campaign chest and the sword that lay across it—and the glare of light was coming from the low afternoon sun flooding in through the open tent flap.

“What happened?” he asked, wiping his mouth on the back of his hand.

“What’s the last thing you recall?” Uncle Hal countered, handing him the canteen.

“The—er—” His mind was full of confused bits and pieces. The last thing he truly remembered was Jane and her sister, laughing at him as he stood bare-arsed in the creek. He sipped water and put cautious fingers to his head, which seemed to be wrapped in a bandage. It felt sore to the touch. “Taking my horse down to drink at a creek.”

Uncle Hal raised one eyebrow. "You were found in a ditch, near a place called Spottiswood or some such thing. Von Knyphausen's troops were holding a bridge there."

William started to shake his head, but thought better of it and closed his eyes against the light.

"Don't remember."

"It will likely come back to you." His uncle paused. "Do you happen to remember where you last saw your father?"

William felt an unnatural calm come over him. He just bloody didn't care anymore, he told himself. The whole world was going to know, one way or another.

"Which one?" he said flatly, and opened his eyes. His uncle was regarding him with interest, but no particular surprise.

"You've met Colonel Fraser, then?" Hal asked.

"I have," William said shortly. "How long have *you* known about it?"

"Roughly three seconds, in the sense of certainty," his uncle replied. He reached up and unfastened the leather stock around his neck, sighing with relief as it came off. "Good Lord, it's hot." The stock had left a broad red mark; he massaged this gently, half-closing his eyes. "In the sense of thinking there was something rather remarkable in your resemblance to the aforesaid Colonel Fraser … since I met him again in Philadelphia recently. Prior to that, I hadn't seen him for a long time—not since you were very small, and I never saw him in close conjunction with you then, in any case."

"Oh."

They sat in silence for a bit, gnats and black flies caroming off the canvas and falling onto William's bed like snowflakes. He became aware of the noises of a large camp surrounding them, and it occurred to him that they must be with General Clinton.

"I didn't know you were with Sir Henry," he said at last, breaking the silence. Hal nodded, pulling his worn silver flask out of his coat pocket before tossing the coat itself over the campaign chest.

"I wasn't; I've been with Cornwallis. We—the regiment, that is—arrived in New York about two weeks ago. I came down to Philadelphia to see Henry and John and make inquiries about Benjamin. I arrived just in time to leave the city with the army."

"Ben? What's he done that you're inquiring about?"

"Got married, had a son, and been mug enough to be captured by the Rebels, evidently," his uncle replied lightly. "Thought he might do with a bit of help. If I give you a sip of this, can you keep it down?"

William didn't reply, but reached for the flask. It was filled with good brandy; he breathed it in cautiously, but it seemed not to trouble his wobbly stomach, and he risked a sip.

Uncle Hal watched him for a bit, not speaking. The resemblance between him and Lord John was considerable, and it gave William an odd feeling to see him—something between comfort and resentment.

"Your father," Hal said after a few moments. "Or my brother, if you prefer. Do you recall when you saw him last?"

Resentment sparked abruptly into anger.

"Yes, I bloody do. On the morning of the sixteenth. In his house. With my *other* father."

Hal made a low humming noise, indicating interest.

"That when you found out, was it?"

"It was."

"Did John tell you?"

"No, he bloody didn't!" Blood surged to William's face, making his head throb with a fierce suddenness that made him dizzy. "If I hadn't come face-to-face with the—the fellow, I don't suppose he'd ever have told me!"

He swayed and put out a hand to keep from falling over. Hal grabbed him by the shoulders and eased him back down onto the pillow, where he lay still, teeth clenched, waiting for the pain to ebb. His uncle took the flask from his unresisting hand, sat down again, and took a meditative sip.

"You might have done worse," his uncle observed after a moment. "In the way of sires, I mean."

"Oh, really?" William said coldly.

"Granted, he is a Scot," the duke said judiciously.

"And a traitor."

"And a traitor," Hal agreed. "Damned fine swordsman, though. Knows his horses."

"He was a fucking *groom*, for God's sake! Of course he knows horses!" Fresh outrage made William jerk upright again, despite the thunder in his temples. "What am I bloody going to do?!"

His uncle sighed deeply and put the cork back in the flask.

"Advice? You're too old to be given it and too young to take it." He glanced aside at William, his face very like Papa's. Thinner, older, dark brows beginning to beetle, but with that same rueful humor in the corners of his eyes. "Thought of blowing your brains out?"

William blinked, startled.

"No."

"That's good. Anything else is bound to be an improvement, isn't it?" He rose, stretching, and groaned with the movement. “God, I’m old. Lie down, William, and go to sleep. You’re in no condition to think.” He opened the lantern and blew it out, plunging the tent into warm gloom.

A rustling as he raised the tent flap, and the searing light of the sinking sun outlined the duke’s slender figure as he turned.

“You *are* still my nephew,” he said in a conversational tone. “Doubt that’s much comfort to you, but there it is.”

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AMONG THE TOMBSTONES

THE SUN WAS LOW and shining directly into my eyes, but the casualties had come so fast that I couldn't take time to move my equipment round. They'd fought all day; it was still going on—I could hear it, close by, but saw nothing when I glanced up, blinking against the sun. Still, the shouts and banging of muskets and what I thought must be grenades—I'd never heard a grenade explode, but something was making a sort of irregular hollow *poong!* that was quite different from the boom of cannon or the slow percussion of musket fire—were loud enough to drown the sounds of groaning and crying from the shade trees and the relentless buzzing of the flies.

I was swaying with weariness and heat and, for my own part, was nearly indifferent to the battle. Until, that is, a young man in militia brown staggered in, blood streaming down his face from a deep cut in his forehead. I had stanched the bleeding and half-wiped his face before I recognized him.

“Corporal … Greenhow?” I asked dubiously, and a small spurt of fear penetrated the fog of fatigue. Joshua Greenhow was in one of Jamie’s companies; I’d met him.

“Yes, ma’am.” He tried to bob his head, but I stopped him, pressing firmly on the wad of lint I’d slapped on his forehead.

“Don’t move. General Fraser—have you …” My mouth dried, sticky, and I reached automatically for my cup, only to find it empty.

“He’s all right, ma’am,” the corporal assured me, and reached out a long arm to the table, where my canteen lay. “Or at least he was last time I saw him, and that was no more ’n ten minutes gone.” He poured water into my cup, tossed it into his own mouth, breathed heavily for an instant in relief, then poured more, which he handed to me.

“Thank you.” I gulped it; it was so warm that it was barely discernible as wet, but it eased my tongue. “His nephew—Ian Murray?”

Corporal Greenhow started to shake his head, but stopped.

“Haven’t seen him since about noon, but I haven’t seen him dead, either, ma’am. Oh—sorry, ma’am. I meant—”

“I know what you meant. Here, put your hand there and keep the pressure on.” I placed his hand on the lint and fished a fresh suture needle threaded with silk out of its jar of alcohol. My hands, steady all day, trembled a little, and I had to stop and breathe for a moment. Close. Jamie was so close. And somewhere in the midst of the fighting I could hear.

Corporal Greenhow was telling me something about the fighting, but I was having trouble attending. Something about General Lee being relieved of his command and—

“Relieved of command?” I blurted. “What the devil for?”

He looked startled by my vehemence, but replied obligingly.

"Why, I don't quite know, ma'am. Was something to do with a retreat and how he oughtn't to have told them to do it, but then General Washington come up on his horse and cursed and swore like the dickens—saving your presence, ma'am," he added politely. "Anyway, I *saw* him! General Washington. Oh, ma'am, it was so …" Words failed him, and I handed him the canteen with my momentarily free hand.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I murmured under my breath. Were the Americans winning? Holding their own? Had bloody Charles Lee cocked things up after all—or not?

Corporal Greenhow luckily hadn't noticed my language, but was coming to life like a flower in the rain, enthused by his account.

"And so we rushed straight after him, and he was all along the road and the ridgeline, shouting and waving his hat, and all the troops trudging back down … why, they all looked up with their eyes staring out of their heads and then they turned round and fell in with us, and the whole army, we just—we just *threw* ourselves on the damned redcoats.… Oh, ma'am, it was just *wonderful*!"

"Wonderful!" I echoed dutifully, catching a trickle of blood that threatened to run into his eye. The shadows of the tombstones in the graveyard stretched out long and violet, and the sound of the flies buzzed in my ears, louder than the ringing of the shots that still came—were coming closer—to the frail barrier of the dead. And Jamie with them.

Lord, keep him safe! I prayed in the silence of my heart.

"Did you say something, ma'am?"

* * *

JAMIE RUBBED a blood-wet sleeve across his face, the wool rasping his skin, sweat burning in his eyes. It was a church they'd chased the British into—or a churchyard. Men were dodging through the tombstones, vaulting them in hot pursuit.

The British had turned at bay, though, an officer shouting them into a ragged line, and the drill began, the muskets grounded, ramrods drawn …

"Fire!" Jamie bellowed, with all the power left in his cracked voice. "Fire on them! Now!"

Only a few men had loaded weapons, but sometimes it took only one. A shot rang out from behind him, and the British officer who was shouting stopped shouting and staggered. He clutched himself, curling up and falling to his knees, and someone shot him again. He jerked backward, then fell over sideways.

There was a roar from the British line, which dissolved at once into a rush, some men pausing long enough to fix their bayonets, others wielding their guns like clubs. The Americans met them, mindless and shrieking, with guns and fists. One militiaman reached the fallen officer, seized him by the legs, and began to drag him away toward the church, perhaps with the notion to take him prisoner, perhaps to get him help.…

A British soldier threw himself upon the American, who stumbled backward and fell, loosing his hold on the officer. Jamie was running, shouting, trying to gather the men, but it was no use; they'd lost their wits altogether in the madness of fighting, and whatever their original intent in seizing the British officer, they'd lost that, too.

Leaderless, so had the British soldiers, some of whom were now engaged in a grotesque tug-of-war with two Americans, each grasping the limbs of the dead—for surely he must be now, if he hadn't been killed outright—British officer.

Appalled, Jamie ran in among them, shouting, but his voice failed altogether under strain and breathlessness, and he realized he was making no more than faint cawing noises. He reached the fight, grasped one soldier by the shoulder, meaning to pull him back, but the man rounded on him and punched him in the face.

It was a glancing blow off the side of his jaw but made him lose his grip, and he was knocked off-balance by someone shoving past him to grab some part of the hapless officer's body.

Drums. A drum. Someone in the distance was beating something urgent, a summons.

"Retreat!" someone shouted in a hoarse voice. "Retreat!"

Something happened; a momentary pause—and suddenly it was all different and the Americans were coming past him, hasty but no longer frantic, a few of them carrying the dead British officer. Yes, definitely dead; the man's head lolled like a rag doll's.

Thank God they're not dragging him through the dirt was all he had time to think. Lieutenant Bixby was at his shoulder, blood pouring down his face from an open flap of scalp.

"There you are, sir!" he said, relieved. "Thought you was taken, we did." He took Jamie respectfully by the arm, tugging him along. "Come away, sir, will you? I don't trust those wicked buggers not to come back."

Jamie glanced in the direction Bixby was pointing. Sure enough, the British were retiring, under the direction of a couple of officers who had come forward out of a mass of redcoats forming up in the middle distance. They showed no disposition to come closer, but Bixby was right: there were still random shots being fired, from both sides. He nodded, fumbling in his pocket for his extra kerchief to give the man to stanch his wound.

The thought of wounds made him think of Claire, and he recalled suddenly what Denzell Hunter had said: *"Tennent Church, the hospital's set up there."* Was this Tennent Church?

He was already following Bixby toward the road but glanced back. Yes, the men who had the dead British officer were taking him into the church, and there were wounded men sitting near the door, more of them near a small white—God, that was Claire's tent, was she—

He saw her at once, as though his thought had conjured her, right there in the open. She was standing up, staring openmouthed, and no wonder—there was a Continental regular on a stool beside her, holding a bloodstained cloth, and more such cloths in a basin at her feet. But why was she out here? She—

And then he saw her jerk upright, clap a hand to her side, and fall.

* * *

A SLEDGEHAMMER hit me in the side, making me jerk, the needle dropping from my hands. I didn't feel myself fall but was lying on the ground, black and white spots flashing round me, a sense of intense numbness radiating from my right side. I smelled damp earth and warm grass and sycamore leaves, pungent and comforting.

Shock, I thought dimly, and opened my mouth, but nothing but a dry click came out of my throat. *What* … The numbness of the impact began to lessen, and I realized that I had curled into a ball, my forearm pressed by reflex over my abdomen. I smelled burning, and fresh blood, very fresh. *I've been shot, then.*

"Sassenach!" I heard Jamie's bellow over the roaring in my ears. He sounded far off, but I heard the terror in his voice clearly. I wasn't disturbed by it. I felt very calm.

"Sassenach!" The spots had coalesced. I was looking down a narrow tunnel of light and spinning shadow. At the end of it was the shocked face of Corporal Greenhow, the needle dangling by its thread from the half-sewn gash in his forehead.

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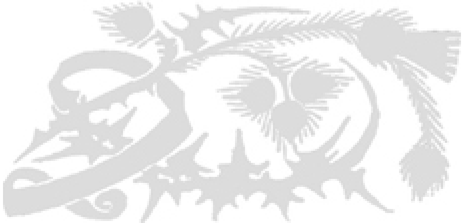
PART FIVE



Counting Noses

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82

EVEN PEOPLE WHO WANT TO GO TO HEAVEN DON’T WANT TO DIE TO GET THERE

I SWAM DIZZILY TO the surface of consciousness, thinking, *What was it Ernest Hemingway had said, about how one is supposed to pass out from the pain but you don’t*? I just had, but he was more or less right; the unconsciousness hadn’t lasted more than a few seconds. I was curled into a tight ball, both hands pressed against my right side, and I could feel the blood welling between my fingers, hot and cold and sticky, and it was beginning to hurt … very much …

“Sassenach! Claire!” I swam out of the fog again and managed to open one eye. Jamie was kneeling by me. He was touching me, had his hands on me, but I couldn’t feel it.…

Sweat or blood or something ran burning into my eyes. I could hear someone gasping—short, shallow, panting breaths. *Me, or Jamie*? I was cold. *I shouldn't be cold, it was hot as blazes today*…. I felt jellied, quivering. And it hurt. A lot.

"Sassenach!"

Hands turned me. I screamed. Tried to. I felt it wrench my throat but couldn't hear it; there was a roaring in my ears. *Shock*, I thought. I couldn't feel my limbs, my feet. I felt the blood leaving my body.

It hurt.

The shock's wearing off, I thought. *Or is it getting worse*? I could see the pain now, going off in bursts like black lightning, jagged and searing.

"Sassenach!"

"What?" I said through clenched teeth. "Auh!"

"Are ye dying?"

"Probably."

Gutshot. The word formed unpleasantly in my mind, and I hoped vaguely that I hadn't spoken it out loud. Even if I had, though … surely Jamie could see the wound …

Someone was trying to pull my hands away, and I struggled to keep them in place, keep pressing, but my arms had no strength and I saw one hand hanging limp as they lifted it, the nails outlined black with blood, fingers coated scarlet, dripping. Someone rolled me onto my back and I thought I screamed again.

It hurt unspeakably. *Jellied. Impact shock. Cells blasted to shreds and goo. No function … organ failure*.

Tightness. Couldn't breathe. Jerking, and someone cursing above me. My eyes were open, I saw color, but the air was thick with pulsing spots.

Shouting. Talk.

I couldn’t draw breath. Something tight around my middle. *What’s gone? How much*?

God, it hurt. *Oh, God*.

* * *

JAMIE COULDN’T take his eyes off Claire’s face, lest she die in the second when he looked away. He fumbled for a kerchief, but he’d given it to Bixby, and in desperation seized a fold of her skirt and pressed it hard to her side. She made a horrible sound and he nearly let go, but the ground under her was already darkening with blood and he pressed harder, shouting, “Help! Help me, Rachel! Dottie!”

But no one came, and when he risked a split second’s glance around, he saw nothing but clumps of wounded and dead under the trees some distance away and the flickering forms of soldiers, some running, some wandering dazed through the tombstones. If the girls had been nearby, they must have been forced to run when the skirmish rolled through the graveyard.

He felt the slow tickle of Claire’s blood running over the back of his hand and shouted again, his dry throat tearing with the effort. *Someone* must hear.

Someone did. He heard running footsteps on the gravel and saw a doctor named Leckie whom he knew racing toward him, white-faced, hurdling a tombstone as he came.

“Shot?” Leckie asked, breathless, collapsing onto his knees beside Jamie. Jamie couldn’t speak, but nodded. Sweat was running down his face and the crease of his spine, but his hands seemed frozen to her body; he couldn’t pull them away, couldn’t let go until Leckie, pawing in one of Claire’s baskets, seized a wad of lint and jerked Jamie's hand out of the way in order to clap it in place.

The surgeon elbowed him ruthlessly aside and he scuttled crabwise a foot or two away, then rose to his feet, swaying helplessly. Jamie couldn't look away but became slowly aware that a knot of soldiers had gathered, appalled, shuffling among themselves, not knowing what to do. Jamie gulped air, seized the nearest of these, and sent him running to the church in search of Dr. Hunter. She'd want Denny. If she survived long enough for him to come—

"Sir! General Fraser!" Not even the shouting of his own name made him look away from the spectacle on the ground: the blood, so much of it, soaking her clothes, making a hideous dark red puddle that stained the knees of Leckie's breeches as he knelt over her; her hair, untied and spilling wild, full of grass and bits of leaf from the ground she lay on, her face—oh, Christ, her face.

"Sir!" Someone grabbed his arm to compel his attention. He drove his elbow hard into whoever it was, and the man grunted in surprise and let go.

A gabble of whispers, agitation, people telling the newcomer that it was the general's wife, hurt, shot, dead or dying …

"She's not dying!" he turned and bellowed at them. He thought dimly that he must look demented; their blackened faces were aghast. Bixby stepped out and touched his shoulder gingerly, as though he were a lighted grenade that might go off in the next second. He thought he might.

"Can I help, sir?" Bixby said quietly.

"No," he managed to say. "I—he—" He gestured to Leckie, busy on the ground.

“General,” said the newcomer, at his other elbow. He turned to find a blue-clad regular, a very young man in a baggy lieutenant’s uniform, face set in dogged earnestness. “I dislike to intrude, sir, but as your wife’s not dying—”

“Go away!”

The lieutenant flinched, but stood his ground.

“Sir,” he said stubbornly. “General Lee has sent me urgently to find you. He requires that you attend him at once.”

“Bugger Lee,” said Bixby, very rudely, saving Jamie the trouble, and advanced on the newcomer, fists clenched.

The lieutenant was already flushed with heat, but at this grew redder. He ignored Bixby, though, attention focused on Jamie.

“You *must* come, sir.”

* * *

VOICES … I heard words, disjointed, coming out of the fog like bullets, striking randomly.

“… find Denzell Hunter!”

“General—”

“No!”

“—but you’re needed at—”

“No!”

“—orders—”

“NO!”

And another voice, this one stiff with fear.

“… could be shot for treason and desertion, sir!”

That focused my wandering attention and I heard the reply, clearly.

"Then they'll shoot me where I stand, sir, for I will not leave her side!"

Good, I thought, and, comforted, lapsed into the spinning void again.

* * *

"TAKE OFF YOUR coat and waistcoat, lad," Jamie said abruptly. The boy looked completely bewildered, but—stimulated by a menacing movement from Bixby—did as he was told. Jamie took him by the shoulder, turned him round, and said, "Stand still, aye?"

Stooping swiftly, he scooped a handful from the horrifying puddle of bloody mud and, standing, wrote carefully on the messenger's white back with a finger:

I resign my commission. J. Fraser.

He made to fling the remnants of mud away but, after a moment's hesitation, added a smeared and reluctant *Sir* at the top of the message, then clapped the boy on the shoulder.

"Go and show that to General Lee," he said. The lieutenant went pale.

"The general's in a horrid passion, sir," he said. "I dassen't!"

Jamie looked at him. The boy swallowed, said, "Yes, sir," shrugged on his garments, and went at a run, unbuttoned and flapping.

Rubbing his hands heedlessly on his breeches, Jamie knelt again beside Dr. Leckie, who spared him a quick nod. The doctor was pressing a wad of lint and a handful of skirt hard against Claire's side with both hands. The surgeon's hands were red to the elbow, and sweat was running down his face, dripping from his chin.

"Sassenach," Jamie said softly, afraid to touch her. His own clothes were sodden with sweat, but he was cold to the core. "Can ye hear me, lass?"

She'd regained consciousness, and his heart rose into his throat. Her eyes were closed, shut tight in a furious grimace of pain and concentration. She did hear him; the golden eyes opened and fixed on him. She didn't speak; her breath hissed through clenched teeth. She did see him, though, he was sure of that—and her eyes weren't clouded with shock, nor dim with imminent death. Not yet.

Dr. Leckie was looking at her face, too, intent. He let out his own breath, and the tension in his shoulders eased a little, though he didn't relax the pressure of his hands.

"Can you get me more lint, a wad of bandage, anything?" he asked. "I *think* the bleeding is slowing."

Claire's bag lay open a little way behind Leckie. Jamie lunged for it, upended it on the ground, and snatched up a double handful of rolled bandages from the litter. Leckie's hand made a sucking sound as he pulled it away from the sopping wad of cloth and grabbed the fresh bandages.

"You might cut her laces," the doctor said calmly. "I need her stays off. And it will help her to breathe more easily."

Jamie fumbled his dirk free, hands shaking in his haste.

"Un … *tie* … them!" Claire grunted, scowling ferociously.

Jamie grinned absurdly at hearing her voice, and his hands steadied. So she thought she'd live to need her laces. He gulped air and set himself to undo the knot. Her stay laces were leather and as usual soaked with sweat—but she used a very simple granny knot, and he got it loose with the tip of his dirk.

The knot fell free and he jerked the laces loose, wrenching the stays wide apart. Her bosom rose white as she gasped, and he felt an instant's embarrassment as he saw her nipples stiffen through the sweat-soaked fabric of her shift. He wanted to cover her.

There were flies everywhere, black and buzzing, drawn by the blood. Leckie shook his head to dislodge one that lighted on his eyebrow. They were swarming round Jamie's own ears, but he didn't bother about them, instead brushing them away as they crawled on Claire's body, over her twitching, pallid face, her hands half curled and helpless.

"Here," Leckie said, and, seizing one of Jamie's hands, pushed it down on the fresh compress. "Press hard on that." He sat back on his heels, grabbed another bandage roll, and unfurled it. With some lifting and grunting and a terrible moan from Claire, together they contrived to pass the cingulum round her body, securing the dressing in place.

"Right." Leckie swayed for a moment, then got laboriously to his feet. "The bleeding's mostly stopped—for now," he said to Jamie. "I'll come back when I can." He swallowed and looked directly at Claire's face, wiping his chin on his sleeve. "Good luck to you, ma'am."

And with that, he simply strode off toward the open doors of the church, not looking back. Jamie felt such a rush of fury that he would have gone after the man and dragged him back, could he have left Claire's side. He'd left—just left her, the bastard! Alone, helpless!

"May the devil eat your soul and salt it well first, you whore!" he shouted in *Gàidhlig* after the vanished surgeon. Overcome by fright and the sheer rage of helplessness, he dropped to his knees beside his wife and pounded a fist blindly on the ground.

"Did you just … call him a … whore?" The whispered words made him open his eyes.

"Sassenach!" He was scrambling for his discarded canteen, lost in the rubble of stuff from her bag. "Here, let me get ye water."

"No. Not … yet." She managed to raise one hand halfway, and he stopped dead, canteen in hand.

"Why not?" She was the gray of rotted oats and slick with sweat, trembling like a leaf. He could *see* her lips beginning to crack in the heat, for God's sake.

"I don't … know." She worked her mouth a moment before finding the next words. "Don't … know where it is." The trembling hand touched the dressing—already showing a stain of blood seeping through. "If it's perf … perf'rated the … bowel. Drink would … kill me. Fast. Intestin'l … sh-sh-shock."

He sat down by her slowly and, closing his eyes, breathed deliberately for a few seconds. For the moment, everything had disappeared: the church, the battle, the screams and shouts and the rumble of limber wheels along the rutted road through Freehold. There wasn't anything but her and him, and he opened his eyes to look on her face, to fix it in his mind forever.

"Aye," he said, keeping his voice as steady as he could. "And if that's the case … and if it didna kill ye quick … I've seen men die gutshot. Balnain died that way. It's long and it's foul, and I willna have ye die like that, Claire. I won't!"

He meant it, truly he did. But his hand squeezed the canteen hard enough to dent the tin. How could he give her the water that might kill her right before his eyes, right … *now*?

Not now, he prayed. *Please, don't let it be now!*

“I’m not … keen … either way,” she whispered, after a long pause. She blinked away a green-bellied fly, shining like emerald, that had come to drink her tears. “I need … Denny.” A soft gasp. “Quick.”

“He’s coming.” He could barely breathe, and his hands hovered over her, afraid to touch anything. “Denny’s coming. Hold on!”

The answer to this was a tiny grunt—her eyes were squinched shut and her jaw set hard—but she’d heard him, at least. With the vague recollection that she always said you must cover folk suffering from shock and lift their feet, he took off his coat and put it over her, then took off his waistcoat, rolled it up, and shoved it under her feet. At least the coat covered the blood that had now soaked the whole side of her dress. It terrified him to see that.

Her fists were clenched, both driven hard into her wounded side; he couldn’t hold her hand. He put a hand on her shoulder, so she’d know he was there, shut his eyes, and prayed with his whole being.

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SUNDOWN

THE SUN WAS NEARLY down, and Denzell Hunter was laying out his knives. The air was thick with the sweetness of corn liquor; he'd dipped his instruments in it, and they lay gleaming wetly on the clean napkin Mrs. Macken had put down on the sideboard.

Young Mrs. Macken herself was hovering in the doorway, a hand pressed over her mouth and her eyes big as a cow's. Jamie tried to give her a reassuring smile, but whatever his expression was, it wasn't a smile and appeared to alarm her further, for she retreated into the darkness of her pantry.

She'd likely been alarmed all day, like everyone else in the village of Freehold; she was heavily pregnant and her husband was fighting with the Continentals. And still more alarmed for the last hour, ever since Jamie had pounded on her door. He'd battered six doors before hers. She was the first to answer, and, in poor return for her hospitality, now found a badly injured woman lying on her kitchen table, oozing blood like a fresh-killed deer.

That image unnerved him still further—Mrs. Macken was not the only one in the house who was shaken by events—and he came close and took Claire's hand, as much to reassure himself as her.

"How is it, Sassenach?" he said, low-voiced.

"Bloody awful," she replied hoarsely, and bit her lip to keep from saying more.

"Had ye best have a wee nip?" He moved to pick up the bottle of rough corn liquor from the sideboard, but she shook her head.

"Not quite yet. I don't *think* it struck the bowel—but I'd rather die of blood loss than sepsis or shock, if I'm wrong."

He squeezed her hand. It was cold, and he hoped she would keep talking, though at the same time he knew he ought not to make her talk. She'd need all her strength. He tried as hard as he could to will some of his own strength into her without hurting her.

Mrs. Macken edged into the room, carrying a candlestick with a fresh wax candle; he could smell the sweetness of the beeswax, and the scent of honey reminded him of John Grey. He wondered for an instant whether Grey had made it back to the British lines, but he had no real attention for anything but Claire.

Right this moment, he was busy regretting that he'd ever disapproved of her making ether. He would have given anything he possessed to spare her awareness of the next half hour.

The setting sun washed the room in gold, and the blood seeping through her bandages showed dark.

* * *

“ALWAYS CONCENTRATE when you’re using a sharp knife,” I said weakly. “You might lose a finger, else. My granny used to say that, and my mother, too.”

My mother had died when I was five, my granny a few years later—but I hadn’t seen her often, as Uncle Lamb spent at least half his time on archaeological expeditions round the world, with me as part of his baggage.

“Did you frequently play with sharp knives as a child?” Denny asked. He smiled, though his eyes stayed fixed on the scalpel he was carefully sharpening on a small oilstone. I could smell the oil, a soft murky scent under the tang of blood and the resinous smell of the unfinished rafters baking overhead.

“Constantly,” I breathed, and shifted my position as slowly as I could. I bit my lip hard and managed to ease my back without groaning aloud. It made Jamie’s knuckles go white when I did.

He was standing by the window at the moment, clutching the sill as he looked out.

Seeing him there, broad shoulders outlined by the sinking sun, brought back a sudden memory, surprising in its sharpness. Or rather, memories, for the layers of experience came back altogether, in a wodge, and I was seeing Jamie rigid with his fear and grief, the slight black figure of Malva Christie leaning toward him—and remembered feeling both a vague affront and a tremendous sense of peace as I began to leave my body, carried on the wings of fever.

I shook the memory off at once, frightened even to think of that beckoning peace. The fear was reassuring; I wasn’t yet so close to death as to find it appealing.

“I’m sure it went through the liver,” I said to Denny, gritting my teeth. “That much blood …”

“I’m sure thee is right,” he said, pressing gently on my side. “The liver is a great mass of densely vascularized tissue,” he added, turning to Jamie, who didn’t turn from the window but hunched his shoulders against the possibility of being told anything else of a horrifying nature.

“But the excellent thing about a wound to the liver,” Denny added cheerfully, “is that the liver, unlike the other organs of the body, will regenerate itself—or so thy wife tells me.”

Jamie cast me a brief, haunted look, and went back to staring out the window. I breathed as shallowly as I could, trying to ignore the pain, and trying even harder not to think about what Denny was about to do.

That little exercise in self-discipline lasted about three seconds. If we were all lucky, it would be simple, and quick. He had to widen the bullet’s entrance wound enough to see the direction of its track and to insert a probe along it, in hopes of finding the bullet before he had to dig for it. Then a quick—I could only hope—insertion of whichever one of his jawed forceps looked most appropriate. He had three, of different lengths, plus a davier: good for grasping a rounded object, but the jaws were much bigger than the tips of a forceps and would cause more bleeding.

If it wasn’t simple or quick, I’d very likely be dead within the next half hour. Denny was entirely correct in what he’d told Jamie: the liver is hugely vascularized, an enormous sponge of tiny blood vessels crossed by very large ones like the hepatic portal vein. That’s why the wound, superficially tiny, had bled so alarmingly. None of the major vessels had been damaged—yet—because I would have bled to death in minutes if they had been.

I was trying to breathe shallowly, because of the pain, but had an overwhelming need to draw deep, gasping breaths; I needed oxygen, because of the blood loss.

Sally flitted through my mind, and I seized on thought of her as distraction. She'd survived the amputation, screaming through a leather gag, Gabriel—yes, Gabriel, that was the name of the young man with her—white-eyed as a panicked horse, fighting to hold her steady and not to faint himself. She *had* fainted, luckily, toward the end—*So sucks to you, Ernest*, I thought blearily—and I'd left them both in Rachel's care.

"Where's Rachel, Denny?" I asked, suddenly thinking to wonder. I thought I'd glimpsed her briefly in the churchyard after I'd been shot, but couldn't be sure of anything that had happened in that blur of black and white.

Denny's hand stopped for an instant, the cautery iron he was holding suspended over a tiny brazier he'd set fuming at the end of the sideboard.

"She is searching for Ian, I believe," he said quietly, and laid the iron very gently in the fire. "Is thee ready, Claire?"

Ian, I thought. *Oh, God. He hasn't come back*.

"As I'll ever be," I managed, already imagining the stench of burning flesh. Mine.

If the bullet was resting near one of the large vessels, Denny's probing and grasping could rupture it and I'd hemorrhage internally. The cauterization might cause shock suddenly to set in and assassinate me without warning. Most likely, I'd survive the surgery but die of lingering infection. Consoling thought … At least in that case I'd have time to write a brief note to Brianna—and perhaps warn Jamie to be more careful about who he married next time.…

“Wait,” Jamie said. He didn’t raise his voice, but there was enough urgency in it to freeze Denny.

I closed my eyes, rested a hand gingerly on the dressing, and tried to envision just where the damned bullet might be. Was it only *in* the liver, or had it gone all the way through? There was so much trauma and swelling, though, that the pain was generalized over the whole right side of my abdomen; I couldn’t pick out a single, vivid line of bright pain leading to the ball.

“What is it, Jamie?” Denny asked, impatient to be about his business.

“Your betrothed,” Jamie said, sounding bemused. “Coming up the road with a gang of soldiers.”

“Does thee think she is under arrest?” Denny asked, with a fair assumption of calm. I saw his hand tremble slightly as he picked up a linen napkin, though.

“I dinna think so,” Jamie said doubtfully. “She’s laughing wi’ a couple of them.”

Denny took his spectacles off and wiped them carefully.

“Dorothea is a Grey,” he pointed out. “Any member of her family would pause on the gallows to exchange witty banter with the hangman before graciously putting the noose about his neck with his own hands.”

That was so true that it made me laugh, though my humor was cut off at once by a jolt of pain that took my breath away. Jamie looked at me sharply, but I flapped a hand weakly at him, and he went to open the door.

Dorothea popped in, turning to wave over her shoulder and call goodbye to her escort, and I heard Denny sigh in relief as he put his spectacles back on.

“Oh, good,” she said, going to kiss him. “I hoped thee hadn’t started yet. I’ve brought a few things. Mrs. Fraser—Claire—how are you? I mean, how is thee?” She put down the large basket she was carrying and came at once to the table I was lying on, to take my hand and gaze sympathetically at me with her big blue eyes.

“I’ve been slightly better,” I said, making an effort not to grit my teeth. I felt clammy and nauseated.

“General La Fayette was most concerned to hear that you’d been hurt,” she said. “He has all of his aides telling their rosary beads for you.”

“How kind,” I said, meaning it, but rather hoping the marquis hadn’t sent a complicated greeting that I might need to compose a reply to. Having got this far, I wanted to get the bloody business over with, no matter *what* happened.

“And he sent this,” she said, a rather smug look on her face as she held up a squat green-glass bottle. “Thee will want this first, I think, Denny.”

“What—” Denny began, reaching for the bottle, but Dorothea had pulled the cork, and the sweet cough-syrup smell of sherry rolled out—with the ghost of a very distinctive herbal scent beneath it, something between camphor and sage.

“Laudanum,” said Jamie, and his face took on such a startling look of relief that only then did I realize how frightened he had been for me. “God bless ye, Dottie!”

“It occurred to me that Friend Gilbert might just possibly have a few things that might be useful,” she said modestly. “All the Frenchmen I know are dreadful cranks about their health and have enormous collections of tonics and pastilles and clysters. So I went and asked.”

Jamie had me half sitting, with his arm braced behind my back and the bottle at my lips, before I could add my own thanks.

"Wait, will you?" I said crossly, putting my hand over the bottle's open mouth. "I haven't any idea how strong this stuff is. You won't do me any good by killing me with opium."

It cost me something to say so; my instinct was to drain the bottle forthwith, if it would stop the beastly pain. That nitwit Spartan who allowed the fox to gnaw his vitals had *nothing* on me. But, come right down to it, I didn't want to die, either of gunshot, fever, or medical misadventure. And so Dottie borrowed a spoon from Mrs. Macken, who watched in grisly fascination from the door while I took two spoonfuls, lay down, and waited an interminable quarter of an hour to judge the effects.

"The marquis sent all sorts of delicacies and things to aid your recovery," Dottie said encouragingly, turning to the basket and starting to lift things out by way of distraction. "Partridge in jelly, mushroom *pâté*, some *terrible*-smelling cheese, and—"

My sudden desire to vomit ceased just as suddenly, and I half-sat up, causing Jamie to emit a cry of alarm and grab me by the shoulders. Just as well that he did; I would have fallen onto the floor. I wasn't attending, though, my attention fixed on Dottie's basket.

"Roquefort," I said urgently. "Is it Roquefort cheese? Sort of gray, with green and blue veins?"

"Why, I don't know," she said, startled by my vehemence. She gingerly plucked a cloth-wrapped parcel out of the basket and held it delicately in front of me. The odor wafting from it was enough, and I relaxed—very slowly—back down.

“Good,” I breathed. “Denzell—when you’ve finished … pack the wound with cheese.”

Used to me as he was, this still made Denny’s jaw drop. He glanced from me to the cheese, plainly thinking that fever must have set in with unusual speed and severity.

“Penicillin,” I said, swallowing and waving a hand at the cheese. My mouth felt sticky from the laudanum. “The mold that makes that sort of cheese is a species of *Penicillium.* Use the stuff from the veins.”

Denny shut his mouth and nodded, determined.

“I will. But we must begin soon, Claire. The light is going.”

The light *was* going, and the sense of urgency in the room was palpable. But Mrs. Macken brought more candles, and Denny assured me that it was a simple operation; he would do quite as well by candlelight.

More laudanum. I was beginning to feel it—a not unpleasant dizzy sensation—and I made Jamie lay me down again. The pain was definitely less.

“Give me a bit more,” I said, and my voice didn’t seem to belong to me.

I took as deep a breath as I could and eased myself into a good position, looking with distaste at the leather gag that lay beside me. Someone—perhaps Dr. Leckie—had slit my shift up the side earlier in the proceedings. I spread the edges of the opening wide and stretched out my hand to Jamie.

The shadows grew between the smoke-stained rafters. The kitchen fire was banked, but still live, and the glow of it began to show red on the hearth. Looking up at the flickering rafters in my drugged state reminded me too much of the time I had nearly died of bacterial poisoning, and I shut my eyes.

Jamie was holding my left hand, curled on my breast, his other hand gently stroking my hair, smoothing damp wisps of it off my face.

"Better now, *a nighean*?" he whispered, and I nodded—or thought I did. Mrs. Macken murmured some question to Dottie, received an answer, and went out. The pain was still there but distant now, a small, flickering fire that I could shut out by closing my eyes. The thud of my heartbeat was more immediate, and I was beginning to experience … not hallucinations, quite. Disconnected images, though—the faces of strangers that faded in and out behind my eyes. Some were looking at me, others seemed oblivious; they smiled and sneered and grimaced but had nothing, really, to do with me.

"Again, Sassenach," Jamie whispered, lifting my head and putting the spoon to my lips, sticky with sherry and the bitter taste of opium. "One more." I swallowed and lay back. If I died, would I see my mother again? I wondered, and experienced an urgent longing for her, shocking in its intensity.

I was trying to summon her face before me, bring her out of the floating horde of strangers, when I suddenly lost my grip on my own thoughts and began to float off into a sphere of dark, dark blue.

"Don't leave me, Claire," Jamie whispered, very close to my ear. "This time, I'll beg. Dinna go from me. Please." I could feel the warmth of his face, see the glow of his breath on my cheek, though my eyes were closed.

“I won’t,” I said—or thought I said—and went. My last clear thought was that I’d forgotten to tell him not to marry a fool.

* * *

THE SKY OUTSIDE was lavender, and Claire’s skin was washed with gold. Six candles burned around the room, the flames tall and still in the heavy air.

Jamie stood by her head, a hand on her shoulder as though he could comfort her. In fact, it was the sense of her, still alive under his hand, that was keeping him on his feet.

Denny made a small sound of satisfaction behind his highwayman’s mask, and Jamie saw the muscle of his bared forearm tense as he slowly drew the instrument out of Claire’s body. Blood gushed from the wound, and Jamie tensed like a cat, ready to spring forward with a pledget, but no spurt followed and the blood died to a trickle, with a final small blurt of blood as the jaws of the instrument emerged, something dark clamped between them.

Denny dropped the ball into the palm of his hand and peered at it, then made an irritable noise; his glasses were fogged with the sweat of his efforts. Jamie snatched them off the Quaker’s nose and rubbed them hastily on his shirttail, replacing them before Hunter could blink twice.

“I thank thee,” Denny said mildly, returning his attention to the musket ball. He turned it delicately and let out an audible breath.

“Whole,” he said. “Thank God.”

“Deo gratias,” Jamie echoed fervently, and reached out a hand. “Let me see it, will ye?”

Hunter's brows rose, but he dropped the thing in Jamie's hand. It was startlingly warm, warm from her body. Warmer even than the air or Jamie's own sweating flesh, and the feel of it made him fold his fist over it. He stole a look at Claire's chest: rising, falling, though with alarming slowness. Almost as slowly, he opened his hand.

"What is thee looking for, Jamie?" Denny asked, pausing to re-sterilize his beaked probe.

"Marks. A slit, a cross—any mark of tampering." He rolled the ball carefully between his fingers, then relaxed, a small spurt of gratitude making him murmur, *"Deo gratias,"* again.

"Tampering?" There were vertical lines between Denny's brows, deepening as he looked up. "To make the ball fragment, thee means?"

"That—or worse. Sometimes a man will rub something into the marks—poison, say, or … or shit. Just in case the wound itself isna fatal, aye?"

Hunter looked shocked, his appalled expression clear even behind the shielding handkerchief.

"If ye mean to kill a man, ye mean him harm," Jamie said dryly.

"Yes, but …" Hunter looked down, laying his tool carefully on the towel as though it were made of porcelain, not metal. His breath fluttered the handkerchief tied over his mouth. "But it is one thing, surely, to kill in battle, to shoot at an enemy when it is a matter of one's own life … and to form the cold-blooded intent that thy enemy should die a horrible and lingering death …"

Claire made a ghastly moaning noise and twitched under his hands as Denny gently squeezed the flesh on either side of the wound. Jamie gripped her by the elbows, to keep her from turning. Denny picked up the jawed thing again.

“Thee wouldn’t do it thyself,” Hunter said with certainty. His eyes were intent on his delicate probing, a pledget held to catch the blood that dribbled slowly from the wound. Jamie felt the loss of each drop as though it left his own veins, and felt cold; how much could she lose and still live?

“No. It would be a cowardly thing.” But he spoke automatically, scarcely attending. She had gone limp; he saw her fingers uncurl, droop, and looked at her face, her throat, searching for a visible pulse. He felt one, in his thumb where it pressed the bone of her arm, but couldn’t tell whether it was her heart that beat there or his own.

He was acutely conscious of Denny’s breath, audible behind his mask. It stopped for an instant, and Jamie glanced up from his scrutiny of Claire’s face to see the Quaker’s look of intentness as he drew the thing free once more—this time clutching a tiny clump of something unrecognizable. Denny opened the jaws of his forceps and dropped the clump on the towel, then used the tool to poke at it, trying to spread it, and Jamie saw the prickle of tiny dark threads as the blood soaked away into a bright red stain on the towel. Cloth.

“What does thee think?” Denny asked him, frowning at the thing. “Is it a bit of her shift, or the—the bodice—or material from her stays? For from the hole in her stays, I should think …”

Jamie rootled hastily in his sporran, pulled out the little silk bag in which he kept the spectacles he used for reading, and clapped these on his nose.

“Ye’ve at least two separate bits there,” he announced, after an anxious perusal. “Canvas from the stays, and a lighter bit of cloth. See?” He took up a probe and delicately teased the fragments apart. “I think that one bit’s her shift.”

Denny glanced at the disconsolate pile of bloodstained garments on the floor, and Jamie, at once divining his intent, reached in, stirred about, and pulled out the remnants of her dress.

"It's a clean hole," Denny said, looking at the fabric Jamie spread out on the table. "Maybe …" He picked up the forceps and turned back, not finishing.

More probing, deeper, and Jamie gritted his teeth not to cry out in protest. *"The liver is so vascular,"* she'd said, talking Denny through what he must do. *"The risk of hemorrhage …"*

"I know," Denny murmured, not looking up. The sweat had plastered the handkerchief to his face, molding itself to nose and lips, so his speech was visible. "I'm being … careful."

"Ken that," Jamie said, but so softly he didn't know whether Hunter heard him. *Please. Please let her live. Blessed Mother, save her … saveher, saveher, saveher* … The words all ran together in an instant and he lost the sense of them, but not the sense of desperate entreaty.

The red stain on the toweling under her had grown to alarming proportions by the time Hunter set down his tool again and sighed, shoulders slumping.

"I think—I hope—I have it all."

"Good. I—what will ye do next?"

He saw Denny smile a little behind the sodden cloth, olive-brown eyes soft and steady over it.

"Cauterize it, bind the wound, and pray, Jamie."

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NIGHTFALL

IT WAS PAST DARK when Lord John Grey, accompanied by a respectful escort and a slightly damaged Indian, limped into Clinton's camp.

Things were much as might be expected after a battle: strong currents of mingled agitation and exhaustion, the latter prevailing. No carousing amid the tents, no music. Men around the fires and camp kitchens, though, eating, getting themselves sorted, talking it over in low tones. No sense of celebration—more a sense of irritation, of disgruntled surprise. The scent of roast mutton came strongly through the smells of dust, mules, and sweating humanity, and Grey's mouth watered so much that he had to swallow before replying to Captain André's solicitous inquiry as to his immediate desires.

"I need to see my brother," he replied. "I'll attend upon General Clinton and my lord Cornwallis later. When I've washed and changed," he added, shucking the horrible black coat for what he sincerely hoped was the last time.

André nodded understandingly, taking the vile garment from him.

"Of course, Lord John. And … um …?" He nodded delicately in the direction of Ian Murray, who was attracting glances, if not stares, from passersby.

"Ah. He'd best come, too."

He followed André through the orderly aisles of tents, hearing the clinking of mess kits and feeling the comfort of the army's stolid routine settle into place around him. Murray paced at his heel, silent. He'd no idea what the man was thinking and was too weary to care.

He did feel Murray's step falter, though, and automatically looked over his shoulder. Murray had turned, all his attention focused on a nearby fire, this an open wood fire, around which sat several Indians. Grey wondered dimly whether these might be friends of Murray's … and corrected this impression in the next second, as Murray took three giant strides, grabbed one of the Indians with a forearm round his throat, and punched him in the side with such force as to drive the other's wind out in an audible whoop.

Murray then threw the Indian on the ground, dropped on him with both knees—Grey winced at the impact—and gripped the man by the throat. The other Indians lurched out of the way, laughing and making high-pitched yips of encouragement or derision, Grey couldn't tell which.

He stood there blinking, swaying slightly, and unable either to intervene or to look away. Murray had declined to let one of the field surgeons remove the arrowhead from his shoulder, and fresh blood spattered from the wound as he punched his opponent viciously—and repeatedly—in the face.

The Indian—he had a shaved scalp and dangling earrings of shell; Grey noticed these when Murray ripped one out of the ear and stuffed it into his opponent's mouth—was making a stout attempt at resistance and retaliation, in spite of his being taken at such a disadvantage.

"Do you suppose they are acquainted?" Captain André asked Grey. He had turned back, hearing the outcries, and was now standing beside Grey, watching the affray with interest.

"I think they must be," Grey replied absently. He glanced briefly at the other Indians, none of whom seemed to have any interest in assisting their fellow, though a few of them appeared to be making wagers on the result. They'd plainly been drinking, but seemed no more intoxicated than the average soldier at this time of day.

The combatants were now squirming on the ground, evidently striving for possession of a large knife worn by the man Murray had attacked. The fight was attracting attention from other quarters; a number of men had hurried over from nearby fires and were clustered behind Grey and André, making speculations and hasty bets, offering shouted advice.

Grey was conscious, through his fatigue, of a certain concern for Murray—and not only on Murray's own account. On the off chance that he might at some point in future actually speak with Jamie Fraser again, he didn't want the first subject raised to be the demise of Fraser's nephew while more or less in Grey's custody. He couldn't think what the hell to do about it, though, and thus continued to stand there, watching.

Like most fights, it didn't last very long. Murray gained possession of the knife, by the brutal but effective expedient of bending one of his opponent’s fingers backward ’til it broke and grabbing the hilt as the man let go.

As Murray pressed the blade against the other man’s throat, it belatedly occurred to Grey that he might really intend to kill him. The men around him certainly thought so; there was a universal gasp as Murray drew the blade across his enemy’s throat.

The momentary silence engendered by this was enough for most of the assembled to hear Murray say, with a noticeable effort, “I give you back your life!” He rose off the Indian’s body, swaying and staring as though blind drunk himself, and hurled the knife into the darkness—causing considerable consternation and not a little cursing among those in whose direction he’d hurled it.

In the excitement, most of the crowd likely didn’t hear the Indian’s reply, but Grey and André did. He sat up, very slowly, hands shaking as they pressed a fold of his shirt to the shallow cut across his throat, and said, in an almost conversational tone, “You will regret that, Mohawk.”

Murray was breathing like a winded horse, his ribs visible with each gasp. Most of the paint had gone from his face; there were long smears of red and black down his glistening chest, and only a horizontal streak of some dark color remained across his cheekbones—that and a smudge of white on the point of his shoulder, above the arrow wound. He nodded to himself, once, then twice. And, without haste, stepped back into the circle of firelight, picked up a tomahawk that was lying on the ground, and, swinging it high with both hands, brought it down on the Indian’s skull.

The sound froze Grey to the marrow and silenced every man present. Murray stood still for a moment, breathing heavily, then walked away. As he passed Grey, he turned his head and said, in a perfectly conversational tone of voice, “He’s right. I would have,” before disappearing into the night.

There was a sudden, belated stir among the spectators, and André glanced at Grey, but he shook his head. The army took no official notice of what went on among the Indian scouts, save there was an incident involving regulars. And they didn’t get more irregular than the gentleman who had just left them.

André cleared his throat.

“Was he your … er … prisoner, my lord?”

“Ah … no. A, erm … relation by marriage.”

“Oh, I see.”

* * *

IT WAS FULL dark before the battle ended. William gathered as much from the orderly who’d brought him supper, and he could hear the sounds of a camp slowly reassembling itself as companies of soldiers came in, were dismissed, and scattered to drop their equipment and find food. Nothing like the usual sense of relaxation that lay on a camp after sunset. Everything was agitated and restless—and so was William.

His head ached horribly and someone had stitched his scalp; the stitches were tender and itching. Uncle Hal hadn’t come back, and he’d had no news whatever beyond the orderly’s sketchy report, which indicated only that there had been no clear victory over the Americans but that all three parts of Clinton’s army had withdrawn in good order, though with considerable casualties.

He wasn't sure he *wanted* any further news, to be honest. There was going to be a moment of reckoning with Sir Henry about that ignored order—though he supposed Sir Henry might just possibly be too preoccupied to realize …

Then he heard the sound of footsteps and sat up. His fretting disappeared on the instant when the tent flap lifted and he saw his father—*Lord John*, he corrected himself, but as an absent afterthought. His father seemed surprisingly small, almost fragile, and as Lord John limped slowly into the lantern light, William saw the stained bandage round his head, the makeshift sling, and when William cast his eyes down, he saw, too, the state of his father's bare feet.

"Are you—" he began, shocked, but Lord John interrupted him.

"I'm fine," he said, and tried for a smile, though his face was white and creased with fatigue. "Everything's all right, Willie. As long as you're alive, everything's all right."

He saw his father sway, put out a hand as though to steady himself, and, finding nothing to take hold of, withdraw it and force his body upright. Lord John's voice was hoarse, and his exposed eye bloodshot and exhausted but … tender. William swallowed.

"If you and I have things to say to each other, Willie—and of course we do—let it wait until tomorrow. Please. I'm not …" He made a vague, wavering gesture that ended nowhere.

The lump in William's throat was sudden and painful. He nodded, hands clenched tight on the bedding. His father nodded, too, drew a deep breath, and turned toward the tent flap—where, William saw, Uncle Hal was hovering, eyes fixed on his brother and brows drawn with worry.

William’s heart seized, in a lump more painful than the one in his throat.

“Papa!” His father stopped abruptly, turning to look over his shoulder.

“I’m glad you’re not dead,” William blurted.

A smile blossomed slowly on his father’s battered face.

“Me, too,” he said.

* * *

IAN MADE HIS way out of the British camp, looking neither to right nor to left. The night was throbbing slowly round him. It was like being trapped inside a huge heart, he thought, feeling the thick walls squeeze him breathless, then draw away to leave him floating and weightless.

Lord John had offered to have an army surgeon tend his wound, but he couldn’t bear to stay. He needed to go, to find Rachel, find Uncle Jamie. Had refused the offer of a horse, as well, unsure that he could stay on it. He’d do better walking, he’d told his lordship.

And he was walking all right, though obliged to admit that he didn’t feel just that well in himself. His arms were still trembling from the shock of the killing blow. It had come up from his bowels and was still echoing through his bones, couldn’t seem to find a way out of his body. Well, it would settle soon enough—this wasn’t the first time, though he hadn’t killed anyone in a long while, and a longer while since he’d done it with that much violence.

He tried to think who the last one had been, but couldn’t. He could hear and see and feel things, but while his senses *worked*, they weren’t joined up aright with the things he sensed. Troops were still marching past him into the camp.

The battle must have ceased now with the darkness; the soldiers were coming home. He could hear the din they made, marching, their tin cups and canteens jangling against their cartridge boxes—but he heard it clanging long after they'd passed, and he couldn't always tell the light of distant campfires from the glow of fireflies near his feet.

The Scottish overseer. At Saratoga. The man's face was suddenly there in his memory, and just as suddenly his body remembered the feel of the blow. The violent punch of his knife, hard up under the man's back ribs, straight into the kidney. The huge, strange flexing he'd felt in his own body as the man's life surged up and then rushed out.

He wondered for a dazed moment whether butchers felt it—that echo—when they slaughtered a beast. You did, sometimes, when you cut a deer's throat, but usually not if it was just wringing a chicken's neck or crushing a weasel's skull.

"Or maybe ye just get used to it," he said.

"Maybe ye'd best try not to get used to it. Canna be good for your soul, *a bhalaich*, bein' used to that sort of thing."

"No," he agreed. "But ye mean when it's with your hands, aye? It's no the same wi' a gun or an arrow, now, is it?"

"Och, no. I did wonder sometimes, does it make a difference to the man ye kill, as well as yourself?"

Ian's feet blundered into a knee-high growth of thick weed and he realized that he'd stumbled off the road. It was just past the dark of the moon, and the stars still faint overhead.

"Different," he murmured, steering back into the roadway. "How d'ye mean, different? He'd be dead, either way."

"Aye, that's so. I'm thinkin' it's maybe worse to feel it's personal, though. Bein' shot in battle's more like bein' struck by lightning, ken? But ye canna help it bein' personal when ye do a man to death wi' your hands."

"Mmphm." Ian walked a bit farther in silence, the thoughts in his head circling like leeches swimming in a glass, going this way and that.

"Aye, well," he said at last—and realized suddenly that he'd spoken aloud for the first time. "It *was* personal."

The trembling in his bones had eased with the walking. The huge throbbing of the night had shrunk and come to rest in the arrow wound, the ache of it pulsing to the beat of his own heart.

It made him think of Rachel's white dove, though, flying serene above the hurt, and his mind steadied. He could see Rachel's face now, and he could hear crickets chirping. The cannon fire in his ears had stopped and the night grew slowly peaceful. And if his da had more to say on the subject of killing, he chose to keep his silence as they walked toward home together.

* * *

JOHN GREY EASED his battered feet into the pan, teeth gritted against the expected sensation, but to his surprise found that it caused him little pain, in spite of the torn skin and ruptured blisters.

"What—that's not hot water, is it?" he asked, leaning forward to look.

"Sweet oil," his brother said, his worn face relaxing a little. "And it had better be warm, not hot, or my orderly will be crucified at dawn."

"I'm sure the man trembles in his boots. Thank you, by the way," he added, gingerly dabbling. He was sitting on Hal's cot, his brother perched on the campaign chest, pouring something out of a canteen into one of the scarred pewter cups that had accompanied him for decades.

"You're welcome," Hal said, handing him the cup. "What the devil happened to your eye? And is your arm broken? I've called for a surgeon, but it may be some time." He waved a hand, encompassing the camp, the recent battle, and the stream of the returning wounded and sun-stricken.

"I don't need one. At first I thought my arm was broken, but I'm fairly sure it's just badly bruised. As for the eye … Jamie Fraser."

"Really?" Hal looked surprised and bent forward to peer at Grey's eye, now unwrapped from the bandages and—so far as Grey himself could tell—much improved. The constant watering had stopped, the swelling had gone down quite a bit, and he could, with caution, move it. From the look on Hal's face, though, the redness and bruising had perhaps not quite disappeared.

"Well, first Jamie, and then his wife." He touched the eye lightly. "He punched me, and then she did something excruciating to fix it and put honey in it."

"Having been subject to the lady's notions of medical treatment, I am not even faintly surprised to hear that." Hal lifted his cup in brief salute; Grey did the same and they drank. It was cider, and a dim recollection of applejack and Colonel Watson Smith floated through Grey's mind. Both seemed remote, as though they'd happened years ago rather than days.

"Mrs. Fraser doctored you?" Grey grinned at his brother. "What did she do to *you*?"

"Well … saved my life, to be perfectly frank." It was hard to tell in the lantern light, but Grey thought his brother was blushing slightly.

"Oh. In that case, I'm doubly obliged to her." He raised the cup again ceremoniously, then drained it. The cider went down gratefully after a hot day with no food. "How the hell did you fall into her clutches?" he asked curiously, extending the cup for more.

"I was looking for *you*," Hal said pointedly. "If you'd been where you were *supposed* to be …"

"You think I'm supposed to be sitting somewhere waiting for you to turn up without warning and involve me in—do you know you nearly got me *hanged*? Besides, I was busy being kidnapped by James Fraser at the time."

Hal raised one eyebrow and poured more cider. "Yes, you did say he'd punched you. What for?"

Grey rubbed two fingers between his brows. He hadn't really noticed the headache before, only because he'd had it all day. Hal was definitely making it worse, though.

"I couldn't begin to explain it, Hal," he said tiredly. "Can you find me a bed? I think I'm going to die, and if by some unfortunate chance I don't, I'll have to speak to Willie tomorrow about … well, never mind." He drank the last of the cider and set down the cup, preparing reluctantly to lift his feet from the soothing oil.

"I know about William," Hal said.

Grey stopped abruptly, looking dubiously at his brother, who shrugged.

"I saw Fraser," he said simply. "In Philadelphia. And when I said something to William this afternoon, he confirmed it."

"Did he?" Grey murmured. He was surprised but somewhat heartened by that. If Willie had calmed down sufficiently as to talk to Hal about the matter, Grey's own conversation with his son might be a trifle less fraught than he'd feared.

"How long have you known?" Hal asked curiously.

"For certain? Since Willie was two or three." He suddenly gave an enormous yawn, then sat blinking stupidly. "Oh—meant to ask. How did the battle go?"

Hal looked at him with something between affront and amusement. "You were bloody *in* it, weren't you?"

"My part of it didn't go that well. But my perspective was somewhat limited by circumstance. That, and having only one working eye," he added, gently prodding the bad one. A good night's sleep … Longing for bed made him sway, narrowly catching himself before simply falling into Hal's cot.

"Hard to tell." Hal fished a crumpled towel out of a basket of laundry lurking disreputably in a corner and, kneeling down, lifted Grey's feet out of the oil and blotted them gently. "Hell of a mess. Terrible ground, chopped up by creeks, either farmland or half covered in trees … Sir Henry got away with the baggage train and refugees all safe. But as for Washington …" He shrugged. "So far as I can tell from what I saw and heard, his troops acquitted themselves well. Remarkably well," he added thoughtfully. He rose to his feet. "Lie down, John. I'll find a bed somewhere else."

Grey was much too tired to argue. He simply fell over and rolled onto his back, not bothering to undress. The bad eye felt gritty, and he wondered dimly whether to ask Hal to find some honey but decided that could wait 'til morning.

Hal took the lantern from its hook and turned toward the tent flap, but paused for an instant, turning back.

"Do you think Mrs. Fraser—by the way, tomorrow I want to know how on earth she came to marry you—do you think she knows about William and James Fraser?”

“Anyone with eyes who’d seen the two of them would know,” Grey murmured, eyes half closed. “She never mentioned it, though.”

Hal grunted. “Apparently everyone knew—save William. Little wonder he’s …”

“That’s one word for it.”

“I hadn’t found one yet.”

“Does it matter?” Grey’s eyes closed all the way. Through the drifting mists of sleep, he heard Hal’s quiet voice, by the tent flap.

“I’ve had word of Ben. They say he’s dead.”

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LONG ROAD HOME

JAMIE SAT BY THE tiny window in his shirt and breeches, watching his wife's hair dry.

It was hot as a forge in the tiny spare room Mrs. Macken had given them, and his sweat lay on him in a heavy dew that broke under its own weight and ran down his sides with any movement, but he was careful not to block any faint breath of air that might seep into the room; the air reeked of Roquefort cheese and blood.

He'd soaked her hair with water from the ewer Mrs. Macken had brought and wetted her shift; it clung to her body, the round of her buttock showing pink through the fabric as it dried. It showed the thick wad of the dressing, too, and the bloody stain that spread slow upon the cloth.

Slow. His lips formed the word and he thought it passionately but didn't speak aloud. *Slow!* Stopping altogether would be much better, but he'd settle for slow just now.

Eight pints. That's how much blood she said a human body had. It must vary some, though; clearly a man his size had more than a woman of hers. Single hairs were beginning to rise from the soaking mass, curling as they dried, delicate as an ant's feelers.

He wished he might give her some of his blood; he had plenty. She'd said it was possible, but not in this time. Something to do with things in the blood that mightn't match.

Her hair was a dozen colors, brown, molasses, cream and butter, sugar, sable … gleams of gold and silver where the dying light touched it. A broad streak of pure white at her temple, nearly the shade of her skin. She lay on her side facing him, one hand curled against her bosom, the other loose, upturned, so the inside of her wrist showed pure white, too, the blue veins heartbreaking.

She'd said she thought of cutting her wrists when she believed him dead. He didn't think he'd do it that way, if she died. He'd seen it: Toby Quinn with his wrist cut to the bone and all his blood run out across the floor, the room stinking of butchery and the word *"teind"* written on the wall above him in blood, his confession. A tithe to hell, it meant, and he shuddered in spite of the heat and crossed himself.

She'd said it was maybe the blood that had made Young Ian's bairns all die—the blood not matching betwixt him and his Mohawk wife—and that maybe it would be different with Rachel. He said a quick Ave, that it might be so, and crossed himself again.

The hair that lay upon her shoulders was coiling now, sinuous, slow as rising bread. Ought he rouse her to drink again? She needed the water, to help make more blood, to cool her with sweat. But while she slept, the pain was less. A few moments longer, then.

Not now. Please, not now.

She shifted, moaning, and he saw that she was different; restless now. The stain on her bandage had changed color, darkened from scarlet to rust as it dried. He laid a hand softly on her arm and felt the heat.

The bleeding had stopped. The fever had begun.

* * *

NOW THE TREES were talking to him. He wished they'd stop. The only thing Ian Murray wanted just now was silence. He was alone for the moment, but his ears buzzed and his head still throbbed with noise.

That always happened for a bit after a fight. You were listening so hard, to start with, for the sounds of the enemy, the direction of the wind, the voice of a saint behind you … you began to hear the voices of the forest, like you did hunting. And then you heard the shots and shouting, and when there were moments when that stopped, you heard the blood pounding round your body and beating in your ears, and, all in all, it took some time for the racket to die down afterward.

He had brief flashes of things that had happened during the day—milling soldiers; the thud of the arrow that struck him; the face of the Abenaki he'd killed by the fire; the look of George Washington on his big white horse, racing up the road, waving his hat—but these came and went in a fog of confusion, appearing as though revealed to him by a stroke of lightning, then disappearing into a buzzing mist.

A wind went whispering through the branches over him, and he felt it on his skin as though he'd been brushed with sandpaper. What might Rachel say, when he told her what he'd done?

He could still hear the sound when the tomahawk caved in the Abenaki's skull. He could still feel it, too, in the bones of his arms, in the bursting pain of his wound.

Dimly, he realized that his feet were no longer keeping to the road; he was stumbling over clumps of grass, stubbing his moccasin-clad toes on rocks. He looked back to find his path—he saw it, plain, a wavering line of black … Why was it wavering?

He didn't want silence, after all. He wanted Rachel's voice, no matter what she might say to him.

It came to him dimly that he couldn't go any farther. He was aware of a faint sense of surprise but was not afraid.

He didn't remember falling but found himself on the ground, his hot cheek pressed against the cool prickle of pine needles. Laboriously, he got to his knees and scraped away the thick layer of fallen needles. Then he was lying with his body on damp earth, the blanket of needles half pulled over him; he could do no more and said a brief prayer to the tree, that it might protect him through the night.

And as he fell headlong into darkness, he did hear Rachel's voice, in memory.

"Thy life's journey lies along its own path, Ian," she said, *"and I cannot share thy journey—but I can walk beside thee. And I will."*

His last thought was that he hoped she'd still mean it when he told her what he'd done.

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IN WHICH ROSY-FINGERED DAWN SHOWS UP MOB-HANDED

GREY WOKE TO THE drums of reveille, not startled by the accustomed rattle but with no clear idea where he was. *In camp*. Well, that much was obvious. He swung his legs out of the cot and sat up slowly, taking stock. His left arm hurt a lot, one of his eyes was stuck shut, and his mouth was so dry he could barely swallow. He'd slept in his clothes, smelled rank, and needed badly to piss.

He groped under the cot, found a utensil, and used it, noting in a rather dreamy way that his urine smelled of apples. That brought back the taste of cider and, with it, full recollection of the day and night before. Honey and flies. Artillery. Jamie, blood down his face. Rifle butt and the crack of bone. William … Hal …

Almost full recollection. He sat down and remained quite still for a moment, trying to decide whether Hal had really told him that his eldest son, Benjamin, was dead. Surely not. It must have been a shred of nightmare, lingering in his mind. And yet he had the dreadful feeling of doomed certainty that comes down like a curtain on the mind, smothering disbelief.

He stood up, staggering a little, determined to go and find his brother. He hadn't yet found his shoes, though, when the flap was thrown back and Hal came in, followed by an orderly with a basin, a steaming pitcher, and shaving implements.

"Sit down," Hal said, in a completely ordinary voice. "You'll have to wear one of my uniforms, and you're not doing it smelling like that. What the devil happened to your hair?"

Grey had forgotten his hair and flattened a palm on top of his head, surprised at the bristly stubble there.

"Oh. A *ruse de guerre*." He sat down slowly, eyes on his brother. The bad eye had come open, though it was unpleasantly crusty, and so far as Grey could see, Hal looked much as he usually did. Tired, of course, worn, and a little haunted, but everyone looked like that the day after a battle. Surely if it were true, he'd look different. Worse, somehow.

He would have asked, but Hal didn't linger, going off and leaving John in the hands of the orderly. Before the ablutions were complete, a young Scottish surgeon with freckles appeared, yawning as though he hadn't slept all night, and blinked blearily at Grey's arm. He prodded this in a professional manner, pronounced the bone cracked but not broken, and put it in a sling.

The sling had to be removed almost at once, in order for him to dress—another orderly arrived with a uniform and a tray of breakfast—and by the time he was made tidy and had been forcibly fed, he was wild with impatience.

He would have to wait for Hal to reappear, though; no point going out to scour the camp for him. And he really must talk to his brother before seeking out William. A small dish of honey had been provided with his toast, and he was dipping a dubious finger into it, wondering whether he ought to try dabbing it into his eye, when at last the flap opened again and his brother was with him.

"Did you actually tell me that Ben is dead?" he blurted at once. Hal's face contracted a bit, but his jaw was set.

"No," Hal said evenly. "I told you that I'd had news of Ben, and they *said* he was dead. I don't believe it." He gave John a stare defying him to contradict this belief.

"Oh. Good," Grey said mildly. "Then I don't believe it, either. Who told you, though?"

"That's why I don't believe it," Hal replied, turning to lift the tent flap and peer out—evidently to be sure of not being overheard, and the thought made Grey's belly flutter a little. "It was Ezekiel Richardson who brought me the news, and I wouldn't trust that fellow if he told me I had a hole in the seat of my breeches, let alone something like that."

The flutter in Grey's belly became a full-blown beating of wings.

"Your instincts haven't led you amiss there," he said. "Sit down and have a piece of toast. I have a few things to tell you."

* * *

WILLIAM WOKE with a shattering headache and the conviction that he had forgotten something important. Clutching his head, he discovered a bandage wound round it, chafing his ear. He pulled it off impatiently; there was blood on it, but not much and all dried. He recalled vague bits of things from the night before—pain, nausea, his head swimming, Uncle Hal … and then an image of his father, white-faced and fragile … *"If you and I have things to say to each other …"* Christ, had he dreamed that?

He said something bad in German, and a young voice repeated it, rather doubtfully.

"What's that mean, sir?" asked Zeb, who had popped up beside his cot with a covered tray.

"You don't need to know, and don't repeat it," William said, sitting up. "What happened to my head?"

Zeb's brow creased.

"You don't remember, sir?"

"If I did, would I be asking you?"

Zeb's brow creased in concentration, but the logic of this question escaped him, and he merely shrugged, set down the tray, and answered the first one.

"Colonel Grey said you was hit on the head by deserters."

"Desert—oh." He stopped to consider that. British deserters? No … there was a reason why German profanity had sprung to his mind. He had a fleeting memory of Hessians, and … and what?

"Colenso's got over the shits," Zeb offered helpfully.

"Good to know the day's starting out well for somebody. Oh, Jesus." Pain crackled inside his skull, and he pressed a hand to his head. "Have you got anything to drink on that tray, Zeb?"

"Yes, sir!" Zeb uncovered the tray, triumphantly revealing a dish of coddled eggs with toast, a slice of ham, and a beaker of something that looked suspiciously murky but smelled strongly of alcohol.

"What's in this?"

"Dunno, sir, but Colonel Grey says it's a hair-of-the-dog-what-bit-you sort of thing."

"Oh." So it hadn't been a dream. He shoved that thought aside for the moment and regarded the beaker with a cautious interest. He'd had the first of his father's restoratives when he was fourteen and had mistaken the punch being prepared for Lord John's dinner party as the same sort that ladies had at garden parties. He'd had a few more in the years since and found them invariably effective, if rather startling to drink.

"Right, then," he said, and, taking a deep breath, picked up the beaker and drained it, swallowing heroically without pausing for breath.

"Cor!" said Zeb, admiring. "The cook said he could send some sausages, was you up to eating 'em."

William merely shook his head—being momentarily incapable of speech—and picked up a piece of toast, which he held for a moment, not quite ready to consider actually inserting it into his mouth. His head still hurt, but the restorative had jarred loose a few more bits from the detritus in his brain.

"… Advice? You're too old to be given it and too young to take it.…"

"… Er spricht Deutsch. Er gehört!…" He speaks German. He heard.

"I heard," he said slowly. "What did I hear?"

Zeb appeared to think this another rhetorical question and, instead of trying to answer it, asked one of his own.

"What happened to Goth, sir?" His thin face was solemn, as though he expected to receive bad news.

"Goth," William repeated blankly. "Has something happened to Goth?"

"Well, he's gone, sir," Zeb said, apparently trying to be tactful. "That is—when the regulars took you and the Indian away from the Rebels, you wasn't on him."

"When the … what Indian?—what the devil *happened* yesterday, Zeb?"

"How would I know?" Zeb said, affronted. "Wasn't there, was I?"

"No, of course—bloody hell. Is my uncle—the Duke of Pardloe—in camp? I need to talk to him."

Zeb looked dubious.

"Well, I can go and look for him, I s'pose."

"Do, please. Now." William waved him off, then sat still for a moment, trying to stick the jagged fragments of his memory back together. Rebels? Goth … He did recall *something* about Goth, but what was it? Had he run into Rebels, who took the horse? But what was this about Indians and deserters, and why did he keep hearing echoes of German speech in the back of his brain?

And who, come to think of it, was the Colonel Grey that Zeb had referred to? He'd assumed it was Uncle Hal—but his father's rank was lieutenant colonel, and he'd also be addressed as "Colonel" in common use. He glanced at the tray and the empty beaker. Uncle Hal certainly knew about the hair of the dog, but …

"As long as you're alive, everything's all right."

He put the untouched toast down, a sudden lump in his throat. Again. He'd had the lump last night, when he saw Papa. When he'd said to his father—yes, God damn it, his father!—*"I'm glad you're not dead."*

He maybe wasn't quite ready to talk to Papa—or Papa to him—and he didn't quite agree that everything was all right, but …

A shaft of brilliant sunlight lanced into his face as the tent flap was shoved aside, and he sat bolt upright, swinging his legs out of bed to be ready to meet—

But it wasn't either his uncle or his father who appeared out of the eye-watering blur of sunlight. It was Banastre Tarleton, in uniform but wigless and unbuttoned, looking indecently cheerful for someone whose face seemed to have been beaten badly not too long ago.

"Alive, are you, Ellesmere?" Ban spotted the dish and, scooping up a coddled egg in his fingers, gulped it. He licked his buttery fingers, making pleased noises.

"Christ, I'm hungry. Been up since dawn. Killing on an empty stomach leaves you rare sharp-set, I'll say that. Can I have the rest?"

"Be my guest. Who've you been killing for breakfast? Rebels?"

Tarleton looked surprised, arrested with a mouthful of toast. He chewed this imperfectly and bolted the bite before answering with a shower of crumbs.

"No, Washington's troops withdrew to the south, so far as I know. Hessian deserters. The same lot that crowned you and left you for dead, or so I assume. They had your horse; recognized him." He reached for another egg, and William thrust a spoon into his hand.

"For God's sake, eat like a Christian. Do you *have* my horse?"

"I do. He's lame in the right fore, but I don't think it's bad. Mmm … have you got your own cook?"

"No, he's my uncle's. Tell me about the deserters. They knocked me on the head, and my memory's a bit spotty." More than a bit, but chunks of it were beginning to come back pretty fast now.

Between bites, Tarleton gave him the story. A company of mercenaries under von Knyphausen had made up their minds to desert during the battle, but not all the men were of the same mind. Those in favor of desertion had drawn away a bit and were quietly discussing whether it was necessary to kill the dissenters, when William had shown up unexpectedly in their midst.

"That knocked them a bit skew-ways, as you might surmise." Tarleton, having finished the eggs and most of the toast, picked up the beaker and looked disappointed at finding it empty.

"There's probably water in that canteen," William said, motioning toward the battered tin-and-leather object hanging from the tent pole. "So that's it.… They looked a bit nervous, but when I asked one of them in German whether there was a farrier nearby—that was it! Goth threw a shoe, that's why he—but then I heard someone whispering, sounding frantic, and he was saying, 'He heard! He knows!' Must've meant he thought I'd overheard them plotting and knew what they were up to."

He breathed out in relief at having this much of the previous day restored to him.

Tarleton nodded. "Imagine so. They *did* kill some of the dissenters—gather a barney broke out after they bashed you on the head and threw you into the ravine—but not all of them."

A few of the mercenaries had escaped and headed for von Knyphausen, who, upon hearing the news, had sent a dispatch to Clinton asking for assistance in dealing with the miscreants.

William nodded at this. It was always better to have matters like desertion or treason dealt with by troops outside the affected companies. And knowing Ban Tarleton, he would have leapt at the chance to track down the deserters and—

“Were you told to kill them?” he asked, striving for casualness.

Tarleton gave him an eggy grin and wiped a few lingering crumbs off his chin.

“Not specifically. Got the impression that as long as I brought a few back to tell the tale, no one much cared how many. And there *was* a hint of *pour encourager les autres* in my orders.”

Politely suppressing his shock at the revelation that Tarleton could read, let alone read Voltaire, William nodded.

“I see. My orderly said something rather curious: mentioned that I’d been found by Rebels—with an Indian. D’you know anything about that?”

Tarleton looked surprised, but shook his head.

“Not a thing. Oh—” He’d sat down on the stool and now rocked back a little, hands clasped about one knee, looking pleased with himself. “I *do* know something, though. Recall you asked me about Harkness?”

“Harkness … oh, yes!” William’s exclamation had less to do with mention of Captain Harkness and more to do with the important thing he’d forgotten, which had just come back to him: Jane and her sister.

He had an immediate impulse to get up and go find her, make sure they were all right. The fugitive Loyalists and camp followers would have been well clear of the actual battle, of course—but the violence and agitation that attended fighting didn’t simply stop when the fighting did. And it wasn’t only deserters and scavengers who looted, raped, and hunted among the hapless sheep.

He spared a flickering thought for Anne Endicott and her family—but they did at least have a man to protect them, however ill-equipped. Jane and Fanny … but surely Zeb would have known, if anything—

“What?” He looked blankly at Tarleton. “What did you say?”

“That knock on the head affected your hearing, too, did it?” Ban took a swig from the canteen. “I said I made inquiries. Harkness never joined his regiment. For all anyone knows, he’s still in Philadelphia.”

William’s mouth felt dry. He reached for the canteen and took a swallow; the water was warm and tin-tasting, but wet.

“Absent without leave, do you mean?”

“Very much without leave,” Tarleton assured him. “Last anyone recalls seeing him, he was promising to go back to some brothel and give some whore a proper seeing-to. Maybe she saw to him, instead!” He laughed heartily at the thought.

William stood up abruptly, then—for something to do—reached to replace the canteen on its nail. The tent flap was down, but a stray beam of dust-filled sunlight still fell through the gap, catching the glitter of metal. His officer’s gorget hung from the nail, its silver gleaming in the sun.

* * *

“PERCIVAL *WAINWRIGHT*?” John hadn’t seen Hal so disconcerted since the events concerning their father’s death—which had also involved Percy, come to think of it.

“In the—very fashionable—flesh. He’s apparently an adviser to the Marquis de La Fayette.”

"Who's that?"

"A flash young frog with a lot of money," Grey said with a one-shouldered shrug. "Rebel general. Said to be very close to Washington."

"Close," Hal repeated, with a sharp look at Grey. "Close to Wainwright, too, you think?"

"Probably not that way," he replied calmly, though his heart beat a little faster. "I gather you're not altogether surprised that he isn't dead. Percy, I mean." He was vaguely affronted; he'd gone to a lot of trouble to make it appear that Percy had died in prison while awaiting trial for sodomy.

Hal merely snorted. "Men like that never die so conveniently. Why the bloody hell is he telling you this, do you think?"

Grey suppressed the vivid memory of bergamot, red wine, and petitgrain.

"I don't know. But I *do* know he's deeply involved with French interests, and—"

"Wainwright's never been involved with any interests other than his own," Hal interrupted brusquely. He gave John a sharp look. "You'd do well to remember that."

"I doubt I shall ever see the fellow again," John replied, overlooking the implication that his brother considered him gullible—or worse. He was entirely aware that while Hal was treating Richardson's news of Ben with scorn, and was very likely right to do so, neither of them could completely ignore the possibility that the man had been telling the truth.

Hal verified this assumption by smacking his fist down on the campaign chest, making the pewter cups jump and fall over. He stood abruptly.

"Bloody hell," he muttered. "Stay here!"

"Where are you going?"

Hal paused at the tent flap for an instant. His face was still haggard, but John recognized the battle light in his eyes.

"To arrest Richardson."

"You can't arrest him yourself, for God's sake!" Grey was on his feet, too, reaching for Hal's sleeve.

"Which regiment does he belong to?"

"The Fifth, but he's detached. I told you he was an intelligencer, did I not?" The word "intelligencer" dripped with contempt.

"All right—I'll speak to Sir Henry first."

John had got a grip on Hal's arm and tightened his hold at this. "I should have thought you'd had enough of scandal by now," he said, trying for calmness. "Take a breath and imagine what will likely happen if you do that. Assuming that Sir Henry would take the time to consider your request. Today, for God's sake?" He could hear the army moving outside; there was no danger of pursuit from Washington's troops, but Clinton was not going to hang about. His division, with its baggage and refugees under its wing, would be on the road within the hour.

Hal's arm was hard as marble under John's hand and stayed that way. But he *did* stop, breathing with a slow, deep regularity. At last he turned his head and looked into his brother's eyes. A beam of sunlight threw every line in his face into stark relief.

"Name one thing you think I wouldn't do," he said quietly, "in order not to have to tell Minnie that Ben is dead."

Grey drew one long, deep breath of his own and nodded, letting go.

“Point taken. Whatever you mean to do, I’ll help. But first I have to find William. What Percy said—”

“Ah.” Hal blinked and his face relaxed a fraction. “Yes, of course. Meet you here in half an hour.”

* * *

WILLIAM HAD BARELY finished dressing before the message he’d been halfway expecting arrived from Sir Henry, delivered by Lieutenant Foster, whom he knew slightly. Foster grimaced sympathetically when handing it over.

William observed Sir Henry Clinton’s personal seal: not a good sign. On the other hand, if he was to be arrested for being absent without leave the previous day, Harry Foster would have brought an armed escort and taken him off without a by-your-leave. That was mildly heartening, and he broke the seal without hesitation.

In the event, it was a terse note advising him that he was relieved of duty until further notice—but that was all. He exhaled, only then realizing that he’d been holding his breath.

But of course Sir Henry wouldn’t imprison him—how and where, with the army on the move? Short of putting him in irons and transporting him by wagon … Realistically, Clinton couldn’t even confine him to quarters; the quarters in question were beginning to shake overhead as his uncle’s orderly set to dismantling the tent.

All right, then. He stuffed the note into his pocket, stuffed his feet into his boots, seized up his hat, and went out, feeling not that bad, all things considered. He had a headache, but it was bearable, and he'd managed to eat what breakfast Tarleton had left.

When things settled down and Sir Henry got round to taking official notice of his disobedience of orders, William could fish up Captain André and have him explain about going to find Tarleton, and all would be well. Meanwhile, he'd go down to the camp followers' area and find Jane.

There was a strong bitter smell of fresh cabbage floating over the sprawl of makeshift shelters and human detritus, and a scatter of farm wagons drawn up along the road, with women crowding round them. The army cooks fed the refugees, but rations were sparse—and had doubtless been disrupted by the battle.

He walked along the road, keeping an eye out for Jane or Fanny, but didn't spot either one. His eye attuned for a young girl, though, he did see Peggy Endicott, trudging down the road with a bucket in either hand.

"Miss Peggy! May I offer my assistance, ma'am?" He smiled down at her and was warmed to see her own face—somewhat anxious before—bloom into delight under her cap.

"Captain!" she cried, nearly dropping her buckets in her excitement. "Oh, I'm *so* happy to see you! We were all so worried for you, you know, in the battle, and we all said a prayer for your safety, but Papa told us you would surely prevail over the wicked Rebels and God would see you safe."

"Your lovely prayers were to great effect," he assured her gravely, taking the buckets. One was full of water and the other of turnips, their green tops wilting over the rim. "Are your mama and papa well, then, and your sisters?"

They walked along together, Peggy dancing on her toes and chattering like an affable small parrot. William kept an eye peeled for Jane or Fanny among the laundresses; it was safer near those redoubtable ladies than in some other parts of the camp. There were no kettles boiling this morning, of course, but the scent of lye soap floated on the humid air like scum on a cauldron full of dirty clothes.

There was no sign of Jane and Fanny by the time he'd reached the Endicotts' wagon—still on all four wheels, he was glad to see. He was greeted warmly by all the Endicotts, though the girls and Mrs. Endicott made a great fuss of the lump on his head when he took his hat off to help with the loading of their wagon.

"Nothing, ma'am, the merest bruise," he assured Mrs. Endicott for the ninth time, when she urged him to sit down in the shade and drink some water with the tiniest bit of brandy in it, for they still had some, thank goodness.…

Anne, who had maneuvered herself close to him, passing him items to be loaded, leaned in with a tea chest and let her hand brush his—deliberately, he was sure.

"Will you stay in New York, do you think?" she asked, stooping to pick up a portmanteau. "Or perhaps—you must excuse my prying, but people *will* talk—go back to England? Miss Jernigan said that you might."

"Miss … oh, of course." He recalled Mary Jernigan, a very flirtatious blond piece with whom he'd danced at a ball in Philadelphia. He glanced over the throng of Loyalist refugees. "Is she here?"

"Yes," Anne replied, a little tersely. "Dr. Jernigan has a brother in New York; they will stay with him for a time." She collected herself—he could see that she was regretting having recalled his attention to Mary Jernigan—and smiled at him, deeply enough as to invoke the dimple in her left cheek. "You needn't take refuge with reluctant relatives, though, need you? Miss Jernigan said that you have a great vast estate awaiting you in England."

"Mmm," he said noncommittally. His father had warned him early on about marriage-minded young women with an eye to his fortune, and he'd met quite a few of them. Still, he *liked* Anne Endicott and her family and was inclined to think they had a real regard for him, as well, despite his position and the pragmatical considerations that must now afflict Anne and her sisters, with their father's affairs so precarious.

"I don't know," he said, taking the portmanteau from her. "I truly have no idea what's to become of me. Who does, in wartime?" He smiled, a little ruefully, and she seemed to feel his sense of uncertainty, for she impulsively laid a hand on his sleeve.

"Well, be assured that you have friends, at least, who care what becomes of you," she said softly.

"Thank you," he said, and turned his face toward the cart, lest she see how much that touched him.

In turning, though, his eye caught a purposeful movement, someone threading toward him through the crowd, and Anne Endicott's soft dark eyes disappeared abruptly from his mind.

"Sir!" It was his groom Colenso Baragwanath, gasping from the effort of running. "Sir, have you—"

"There you are, Baragwanath! What the devil are you doing here, and where have you left Madras? Good news, though: Goth's come back. Colonel Tarleton has him and—what, for God's sake?" For Colenso was squirming as though he had a snake in his breeches, his square Cornish face contorted with information.

"Jane and Fanny're gone, sir!"

"Gone? Gone where?"

"Dunno, sir. But they've gone. I came back to get my jacket and the shelter was still up, but their things were gone and I couldn't find 'em and when I asked the folk who camps near us, they said as the girls had rolled up their bundles and sneaked off!"

William didn't waste time inquiring how one could possibly sneak out of an open camp of several thousand people, let alone why that should be necessary.

"Which way did they go?"

"That way, sir!" Colenso pointed down the road.

William rubbed a hand over his face and stopped abruptly when he inadvertently touched the bruised swelling on his left temple.

"Ouch. Well, bloody hell—oh, I beg your pardon, Miss Endicott." For at this point he became aware of Anne Endicott at his elbow, eyes round with curiosity.

"Who are Jane and Fanny?" she asked.

"Ahh … two young ladies who are traveling under my protection," he said, knowing exactly what effect *that* information was likely to have, but there wasn't much help for it. "*Very* young ladies," he added, in the vain hope of improving things. "Daughters of a … um, distant cousin."

"Oh," she said, looking distinctly unconvinced. "But they've run off? Whyever should they do such a thing?"

"Damned if I—er, beg pardon, ma'am. I don't know, but I must go and find out. Will you make my excuses to your parents and sisters?"

"I—of course." She made a small, abortive gesture toward him, putting out her hand and then withdrawing it. She looked both startled and slightly affronted. He regretted it, but there wasn't time to do anything about it.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said, and, bowing, left her.

* * *

IN THE END, it was half a day, rather than half an hour, before John saw Hal again. He found his brother, quite by chance, standing by the road that led northward, watching the marching columns go past. Most of the camp had already left; only the cook wagons and laundry kettles were trundling past now, the disorderly sprawl of camp followers spreading out behind them like the plague of lice over the land of Egypt.

“William’s gone,” he said to Hal without preamble.

Hal nodded, face somber. “So is Richardson.”

“Bloody hell.”

Hal’s groom was standing by, holding two horses. Hal jerked his head at a dark-bay mare and took the reins of his own horse, a light-bay gelding with a blaze and one white stocking.

“Where do you think we’re going?” John inquired, seeing his brother turn the gelding’s head south.

“Philadelphia,” Hal replied, tight-lipped. “Where else?”

Grey could himself think of any number of alternatives, but recognized a rhetorical question when he heard one and contented himself with asking, “Have you got a clean handkerchief?”

Hal gave him a blank look, then rummaged in his sleeve, pulling out a crumpled but unused linen square.

“Apparently. Why?”

“I expect we’re going to need a flag of truce at some point. The Continental army lying presently between us and Philadelphia, I mean.”

"Oh, that." Hal stuffed the handkerchief back up his sleeve and said no more until they had negotiated their way past the last trailing remnants of the horde of refugees and found themselves more or less alone on the road leading south.

"No one could be sure, in the confusion," he said, as though he'd last spoken ten seconds before. "But it looks very much as though Captain Richardson has deserted."

"What?!"

"Not a bad moment to choose, really," Hal said reflectively. "No one would have noticed he was gone for days, had I not come looking for him. He was in camp last night, though, and unless he's disguised himself as a teamster or a laundress, he's not here any longer."

"The contingency seems remote," Grey said. "William *was* here this morning—both your orderly and his young grooms saw him, and so did a Colonel Tarleton of the British Legion, who breakfasted with him."

"Who? Oh, him." Hal waved off Tarleton as a distraction. "Clinton values him, but I never trust a man with lips like a girl's."

"Regardless, he seems to have had nothing to do with William's disappearance. The groom Baragwanath thinks that William went off to see about a couple of … young women among the camp followers."

Hal glanced at him, one brow raised.

"What sort of young women?"

"Probably the sort you're thinking," John replied, a little tersely.

"At that hour of the morning, after being bashed on the head the night before? And young women, plural? The boy's got stamina, I'll say that for him."

Grey could have said a number of other things about William at this point, but didn't. "So you think Richardson's deserted." That would explain Hal's focus on Philadelphia; if Percy was right and Richardson was in fact an American agent, where else might he go at this point?

"It seems the most likely possibility. Also …" Hal hesitated for a moment, but then his mouth firmed. "If I believed that Benjamin was dead, what might I be expected to do?"

"Go and make inquiries into his death," Grey replied, suppressing the queasy feeling the notion induced. "Claim his body, at the least."

Hal nodded. "Ben was—or is—being held at a place in New Jersey called Middletown Encampment. I've not been there, but it's in the middle of Washington's strongest territory, in the Watchung Mountains. Nest of Rebels."

"And you'd be unlikely to undertake that sort of journey with a large armed guard," John observed. "You'd go alone, or perhaps with an orderly, an ensign or two. Or me."

Hal nodded. They rode for a bit, each alone with his thoughts.

"So you're not going to the Watchung Mountains," Grey said at last. His brother sighed deeply and set his jaw.

"Not immediately. If I can catch up with Richardson, I may find out what's really happened—or not happened—to Ben. After that …"

"Do you have a plan for proceeding once we reach Philadelphia?" Grey inquired. "Given that it's in the hands of the Rebels?"

Hal's lips compressed. "I will have, by the time we get there."

"I daresay. I have one now, though."

Hal looked at him, thumbing a hank of damp hair behind his ear. His hair was carelessly tied back; he'd not bothered to have it plaited or clubbed this morning, a sure sign of his agitation. "Does it involve anything patently insane? Your better plans always do."

"Not at all. We're certain to encounter the Continentals, as I said. Assuming we aren't shot on sight, we produce your flag of truce"—he nodded at his brother's sleeve, from which the edge of the handkerchief was drooping—"and demand to be taken to General Fraser."

Hal gave him a startled look.

"*James* Fraser?"

"The same." Grey's knotted stomach clenched a little tighter at the thought. At both the thought of speaking to Jamie again—and the thought of telling him that William was missing. "He fought with Benedict Arnold at Saratoga, and his wife is friendly with the man."

"God help General Arnold, in that case," Hal murmured.

"And who else has a better reason for helping us in this matter than does Jamie Fraser?"

"Who indeed?" They rode for some time in silence, Hal apparently lost in thought. It wasn't until they paused to find a creek and water the horses that he spoke again, water streaming down his face where he'd splashed it.

"So you've not only somehow married Fraser's wife, but you've accidentally been raising his illegitimate son for the last fifteen years?"

"Apparently so," Grey said, in a tone that he hoped indicated complete unwillingness to talk about it. For once, Hal took the hint.

"I see," he said, and, with no further questions, wiped his face with the flag of truce and mounted up.

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MOONRISE

IT HADN'T BEEN a peaceful day. Apparently Jamie had somehow retained sufficient presence of mind last night to write a brief note—though he didn't recall doing so—to La Fayette, explaining what had happened and confiding care of his troops to the marquis. This he had sent with Lieutenant Bixby, with instructions to notify the captains and militia commanders of his companies. After which, he'd forgotten everything but Claire.

Everything had not forgotten him, though. The sun was barely up before a stream of officers appeared at Mrs. Macken's door, in search of General Fraser. Mrs. Macken took every arrival as being the possible bearer of bad news concerning her still-missing husband, and the reek of burnt porridge rose through the house, seeping into the walls like the smell of fear.

Some came with questions, some with news or gossip—General Lee was relieved of duty, was under arrest, had gone to Philadelphia, had turned his coat and joined Clinton, had hanged himself, had challenged Washington to a duel. A messenger arrived from General Washington with a personal note of sympathy and good wishes; another came from La Fayette with an enormous hamper of food and a half-dozen bottles of claret.

Jamie couldn't eat, but gave the food to Mrs. Macken. He retained a couple of bottles of the wine, though, which he'd opened and kept by him through the day, taking occasional gulps to sustain him as he sponged and watched and prayed.

Judah Bixby came and went like a helpful ghost, appearing and disappearing, but always seeming to be there if something was needed.

"The militia companies …" Jamie began, but then couldn't think what he'd meant to ask concerning them. "Are they …?"

"Most of them have gone home," Bixby told him, unloading a basket full of beer bottles. "Their enlistment ends on the thirtieth—that's tomorrow, sir," he added gently, "but they mostly set off first thing this morning."

Jamie let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding and felt a small measure of peace.

"I reckon it'll be months before anyone knows was it a victory or not," Bixby remarked. He drew the cork from one bottle, then another, and handed one to Jamie. "But it surely wasn't defeat. Shall we drink to it, sir?"

Jamie was worn out with worry and praying, but managed a smile for Judah and a quick word of thanks to God for the boy.

Once Judah had left, a somewhat longer prayer on behalf of his nephew. Ian hadn't returned, and none of Jamie's visitors had had any word of him. Rachel had come back late the night before, white-faced and silent, and had gone out again at daybreak. Dottie had offered to go with her, but Rachel had refused; the two of them were needed to deal with the wounded still being brought in and those sheltering in the houses and barns of Freehold.

Ian, Jamie thought in anguish, addressing his brother-in-law. *For God's sake, have an eye to our lad, because I canna do it. I'm sorry*.

Claire's fever had risen fast during the night, then seemed to fall a little with the coming of the light; she was conscious now and then and capable of a few words, but for the most part she lay in an uneasy doze, her breath coming in shallow pants punctuated by sudden deep, tearing gasps that woke her—she dreamed that she was being suffocated, she said. He would give her as much water as she would take and douse her hair again, and she would drop back into fever dreams, muttering and moaning.

He began to feel as though he were living in a fever dream himself: trapped in endless repetitions of prayer and water, these broken by visitations from some vanished, alien world.

Perhaps this was purgatory, he thought, and gave a wan smile at memory of himself, waking on Culloden Moor so many years ago, his eyelids sealed with blood, thinking himself dead and grateful for it, even if his immediate prospect was a spell in purgatory—that being a vague, unknown circumstance, probably unpleasant but not one he feared.

He feared the one that might be imminent.

He *had* come to the conclusion that he couldn't kill himself, even if she died. Even could he bring himself to commit a sin of that magnitude, there were people who needed him, and to abandon them would be a greater sin even than the willful destruction of God's gift of life. But to live without her—he watched her breathe, obsessively, counting ten breaths before he would believe she hadn't stopped—that would certainly be his purgatory.

He didn't think he'd taken his eyes off her, and maybe he hadn't, but he came out of his reverie to see that her own eyes were open, a soft smudged black in the white of her face. The light had faded to the final cusp of twilight and all color had washed from the room, leaving them in a luminous dusty haze that wasn't daylight any longer but not yet night. He saw that her hair was nearly dry, curling in masses over the pillow.

"I've … decided … not to die," she said, in a voice little more than a whisper.

"Oh. Good." He was afraid to touch her, for fear of hurting her, but couldn't bear not to. He laid a hand as lightly as he could over hers, finding it cool in spite of the heat trapped in the small attic.

"I *could*, you know." She closed one eye and looked accusingly at him with the other. "I *want* to; this is … bloody horrible."

"I know," he whispered, and brought her hand to his lips. Her bones were frail, and she hadn't the strength to squeeze his hand; her fingers lay limp in his.

She closed her eyes and breathed audibly for a little.

"Do you know why?" she said suddenly, opening her eyes.

"No." He'd thought of making some jesting remark about her needing to write down her receipt for making ether, but her tone was dead serious, and he didn't.

"Because," she said, and stopped with a small grimace that squeezed his heart. "Because," she said through clenched teeth, "I know what it felt … like when I … thought you were dead, and—" A small gasp for breath, and her eyes locked on his. “And I wouldn’t do that to *you.*” Her bosom fell and her eyes closed.

It was a long moment before he could speak.

“Thank ye, Sassenach,” he whispered, and held her small, cold hand between his own and watched her breathe until the moon rose.

* * *

I COULD SEE the moon through the tiny window; we were in the attic of the house. It was the first breath of the new moon, but the whole of it was visible, a perfect ball of violet and indigo cupped in a sickle of light, luminous among the stars. “The new moon with the old,” country folk called it in England. On the Ridge, people called it “holding water.”

The fever had left me. It had also left me drained, light-headed, and weak as a newborn mouse. My side was swollen from hip to oxter, hot and tender to the touch, but I was sure this was only surgical trauma. There wasn’t any significant infection, only a little inflammation near the surface of the incision.

I felt rather like the new moon: the shadow of pain and death was still clearly visible to me—but only because the light was there to throw it into perspective. On the other hand, there were still small practicalities and indignities to be dealt with. I had to pee, and I couldn’t sit up by myself, let alone squat over a chamber pot.

I had no idea what time it was, though with the moon like that, it couldn’t be the middle of the night. The house was still, though—Lieutenant Macken had returned safely in late afternoon, bringing with him several other men, but they had been too exhausted for celebration; I could hear faint snoring from the floor below. I couldn't disturb everyone by calling out for Loretta Macken's assistance. With a sigh, I leaned gingerly over the side of the bed and cleared my throat.

"Sassenach? Are ye all right?" A segment of the darkness on the floor moved suddenly and resolved itself into a Jamie-shaped shadow.

"Yes. Are you?"

That got me the breath of a laugh.

"I'll do, Sassenach," he said softly, and I heard the rustle of his movement as he got his feet under him. "I'm glad ye feel well enough to ask. D'ye need water?"

"Er … rather the opposite, really," I said.

"Oh? Oh." He stooped, a pale blur in his shirt, to reach under the bed. "D'ye need help?"

"If I didn't, I wouldn't have waked you up," I said, a little testily. "I didn't think I could wait for Mrs. Macken or Dottie, though." He snorted a little and got me under the arms, lifting me into a sitting position.

"Now, then," he murmured. "It's no like ye've not done this—and a good many worse things—for me."

While this was true, it didn't make matters easier.

"You can let go now," I said. "Perhaps leave the room?"

"Perhaps not," he said, still mildly, but with a tone indicating that his mind was made up on the subject. "If I let go, ye'll fall on your face, and ye ken that perfectly well, so stop talkin' and be about your business now, aye?"

It took some time—anything that put pressure on my abdomen, including the act of urinating, hurt remarkably—but the business was accomplished and I was eased back down onto the pillow, gasping. Jamie bent and picked up the chamber pot, clearly intending to hurl the contents out the window in customary Edinburgh fashion.

"No, wait!" I said. "Keep that 'til morning."

He paused.

"What for?" he asked cautiously. Clearly he suspected I might still be unhinged from fever and be contemplating some grossly irrational use of the pot's contents, but he didn't like to say so, in case I had something logical, if bizarre, in mind. I would have laughed, but it hurt too much.

"I need to check, once there's light, to be sure there's no blood," I said. "My right kidney's very sore; I want to be sure there's no damage."

"Ah." He set the utensil down carefully and, to my surprise, opened the door and glided out, moving soft-footed as a hunting fox. I heard one squeak as he stepped on a stair tread, but nothing more until a glow betokened his return with a candlestick.

"Have a look, then," he said, picking up the pot again and bringing it to me. "I kent ye'd just fret about it did ye have to wait for daybreak."

He sounded resigned, but this small thoughtfulness brought me close to tears. He heard the catch in my breathing and leaned close, alarmed, bringing the light up to my face.

"Are ye all right, Sassenach? Is it bad, then?"

"No," I said, and wiped my eyes hastily on a corner of the sheet. "No—it—it's fine. I just—oh, Jamie, I love you!" I did give way to tears, then, snuffling and blubbering like an idiot. "I'm sorry," I said, trying to get hold of myself. "I'm all right, there's nothing wrong, it's just—"

"Aye, I ken fine what it's just," he said, and, setting the candle and pot on the floor, lay down on the bed beside me, balancing precariously on the edge.

"Ye're hurt, *a nighean*," he said softly, smoothing my hair off my wet cheeks. "And fevered and starved and worn to a shadow. There's no much of ye left, is there, poor wee thing?"

I shook my head and clung to him. "There's not much of you left, either," I managed to say, mumbling wetly into the front of his shirt.

He made a small amused noise and rubbed my back, very gently. "Enough, Sassenach," he said. "I'm enough. For now."

I sighed and fumbled under the pillow for a hankie to blow my nose.

"Better?" he asked, sitting up.

"Yes. Don't go, though." I put a hand on his leg, hard and warm under my hand. "Can you lie with me a minute? I'm awfully cold." I was, though I realized from the damp and salt on his skin that the room was quite hot. But loss of so much blood had left me chilled and gasping; I couldn't get through a sentence without stopping to breathe, and my arms were permanently goose-pimpled.

"Aye. Dinna move; I'll go round." He came round the bed and edged carefully in behind me. It was a narrow bed, barely wide enough to hold us closely pressed together.

I exhaled gingerly and relaxed against him in slow motion, reveling in the feel of his warmth and the solid comfort of his body.

"Elephants," I said, drawing the shallowest possible breath compatible with speaking. "When a female elephant is dying, sometimes a male will try to mate with her."

There was a marked silence behind me, and then a big hand came round and rested assessingly on my forehead.

"Either ye're fevered again, Sassenach," he said in my ear, "or ye have verra perverse fancies. Ye dinna really want me to—"

"No," I said hastily. "Not right this minute, no. And I'm not dying, either. The thought just came to me."

He made an amused Scottish noise and, lifting the hair off my neck, kissed my nape.

"Since ye're no dying," he said, "maybe that will do for the moment?"

I took his hand and placed it on my breast. Slowly I grew warmer, and my chilly feet, pressed against his shins, relaxed. The window now was filled with stars, hazy with the moistness of the summer night, and I suddenly missed the cool, clear, black-velvet nights of the mountains, the stars blazing huge, close enough to touch from the highest ridge.

"Jamie?" I whispered. "Can we go home? Please?"

"Aye," he said softly. He held my hand and the silence filled the room like moonlight, both of us wondering where home might be.

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A WHIFF OF ROQUEFORT

I HADN'T SEEN ANY of the previous day's flock of visitors, though Jamie had told me about them. This day, though, brought one for me. Mrs. Macken brought him up the stairs, in spite of her advanced state of pregnancy, and showed him into my tiny room with great respect.

He wasn't in uniform and was—for him—quite subfusc, in a coat and breeches of the dull gray that was referred to (with accuracy) as "sad-colored," though he *had* taken the trouble to wear a dove-gray waistcoat with it that flattered his coloring.

"How are you, my dear?" he asked, taking off his hat. Not waiting for an answer, he came down on one knee by the bed, took my hand, and kissed it lightly. His blond hair had been washed, I saw—I smelled his bergamot soap—and trimmed to a uniform length. As that length was roughly an inch, the overall effect reminded me irresistibly of a fuzzy duckling. I laughed, then gasped and pressed a hand to my side.

"Dinna make her laugh!" Jamie said, glowering at John. His tone was cold, but I saw him take in John's aspect, and the corner of his own mouth twitched.

"I know," John said ruefully to me, passing a hand over his head and ignoring Jamie completely. "Isn't it dreadful? I ought really to wear a wig for the sake of public decency, but I couldn't bear it in the heat."

"Don't know that I blame you," I told him, and ran a hand through the damp mass of my own hair, drying on my shoulders. "Though I haven't yet got to the point of wanting to shave my head," I added pointedly, not quite turning my head toward Jamie.

"Don't. It wouldn't suit you at all," John assured me.

"How is your eye?" I asked, gingerly trying to raise myself on the pillow. "Let me have a look at it."

"Stay there," he said, and, leaning over me, opened both eyes wide. "I think it's quite good. It's still a bit tender to the touch and gets the odd twinge when I move it too far up or to the right, but—do you smell French cheese?" He sounded slightly startled.

"Mmm." I was gently prodding the flesh around the orbit, which showed only a slight residual swelling. The sclera was still quite bloodshot, but the bruising was much better. I thumbed down the lower lid to inspect the conjunctiva: a nice slippery pink, no sign of infection. "Does it water?"

"Only in strong sunlight, and not very much," he assured me, straightening up. He smiled at me. "Thank you, my dear."

Jamie didn't say anything, but the way he breathed had a distinctly edgy feel about it. I ignored him. If he chose to make a fuss, I couldn't bloody stop him.

"What are ye doing here?" he asked abruptly. John looked up at him, one brow raised, as though surprised to see him looming on the other side of my bed. John rose slowly to his feet, holding Jamie's eyes with his own.

"What do you think I'm doing?" he asked quietly. There was no hint of challenge in the question, and I could see Jamie suddenly check his own hostility, frowning slightly as he looked John over, considering.

One side of John's mouth turned up a little.

"Do you think I've come to fight you for the favors of this lady? Or to seduce her from your side?"

Jamie didn't laugh, but the line between his brows smoothed out.

"I don't," he said dryly. "And as ye dinna seem to be much damaged, I doubt ye've come to be doctored."

John gave an amiable bob of the head, indicating that this line of reasoning was correct.

"And I doubt, as well," Jamie continued, an edge creeping into his voice, "that ye've come to continue our previous discussion."

John inhaled slowly, and exhaled even slower, regarding Jamie with a level gaze. "Is it your opinion that anything remains to be said, regarding any part of that discussion?"

There was a marked silence. I glanced from one to the other, Jamie's eyes narrowed and John's eyes wide, both with fixed blue stares. All it lacked was growling and the slow lashing of tails.

"Are you armed, John?" I inquired pleasantly.

He glanced at me, startled. "No."

"Good," I said, grunting slightly as I struggled to sit up. "Then you obviously aren't going to kill *him*"—I nodded at Jamie, standing over me with fists half curled—"and if he didn't break your neck the first time, he isn't going to do it now. Are you?" I inquired, arching a brow at Jamie.

He looked down his nose at me, but I saw the slight relaxation of his mouth. And his hands. "Probably not."

"Well, then." I brushed the hair back from my face. "No point in hitting each other. And harsh language would detract from the pleasant nature of this visit, wouldn't it?"

Neither of them chose to answer this.

"That was not actually a rhetorical question," I said. "But let that go." I turned to John, folding my hands in my lap. "Flattered as I am by the attention, I don't think you came *solely* to inquire after my well-being. So if you'll pardon my vulgar curiosity … why *are* you here?"

He finally relaxed and, at my nod, took the stool, linking his fingers round his knee.

"I've come to ask your help," he said directly to Jamie. "But also"—it was slight, but I noticed the hesitation—"to make you an offer. Not as quid pro quo," he added. "The offer is not contingent on your assistance."

Jamie made a Scottish noise indicating deep skepticism but willingness to listen.

John nodded and took a breath before continuing. "You once mentioned to me, my dear, that—"

"Dinna be calling her that."

"Mrs. Fraser," John amended, and, with a polite bow to me, turned his attention to Jamie, "once mentioned that she—and you, I would imagine—had some acquaintance with General Arnold."

Jamie and I exchanged puzzled looks. He shrugged and folded his arms.

"Aye, we do."

"Good. What I—and my brother"—I felt, rather than saw, Jamie's start at mention of Hal—"would ask of you is a note of introduction to Arnold, with your personal request that the general allow us official entrance into the city—and whatever aid he might find it convenient to give us—for the purpose of making a search for my son."

John let out the rest of his breath and sat, head down, not moving. Nobody moved.

At last, Jamie let out a long sigh and sat down on the room's other stool.

"Tell me," he said, resigned. "What's the wee bastard done now?"

* * *

THE STORY FINISHED, John inhaled, made to rub his bad eye, and luckily stopped in time.

"I'll put a bit more honey in that before you leave," I told him. "It will ease the grittiness." This non sequitur helped to bridge the awkward gap in the conversation left by Jamie's being struck momentarily speechless.

"Jesus," he said, and rubbed a hand hard over his face. He was still wearing the bloodstained shirt and breeches in which he'd fought; he hadn't shaved in three days, had barely slept or eaten, and looked like something you wouldn't want to meet in broad daylight, let alone a dark alley. He took a deep breath and shook his head like a dog shedding water.

"So ye think the two of them have gone to Philadelphia—William and this Richardson?"

"Probably not together—or at least not to begin with," John said. "William's groom said he left to find a couple of … er … girls who had gone from the camp. But we strongly suspect that this was a ploy by Richardson, to decoy William out of camp and intercept him on the road."

Jamie made an irascible noise.

"I should *like* to think the lad's no such a fat-heided gomerel as to go off wi' this Richardson. Not after the man sent him into the Great Dismal last year and nearly killed him."

"He told you that?"

"Oh. He didna tell ye that?" Jamie's voice might possibly have held a shade of scorn, had one been listening closely.

"I'm damned sure he didn't tell *you* anything," John replied, with an edge. "He hadn't seen you for years before he met you at Chestnut Street, I'd bet money he hasn't seen you since, and I'm reasonably sure I would have noticed had he mentioned Richardson in the hallway there."

"No," Jamie said briefly. "He told my nephew, Ian Murray. Or at least," he amended, "Ian got it from what he said, raving wi' fever when Ian got him out of the swamp. Richardson sent him wi' a message for some men in Dismal Town—men he said were Loyalists. But half the men in Dismal Town are named Washington."

John's appearance of pugnacity had vanished. He looked pale, and the fading bruises stood out like leprosy against his skin. He took a deep breath, glanced round the room, and, seeing a half-empty bottle of claret on the table, picked it up and drank a quarter of it without stopping.

He set it down, stifled a belch, rose with a brief nod and a "wait a moment," and went out, leaving Jamie and me staring at each other in bafflement.

This was not significantly assuaged by the reappearance of John, followed by the Duke of Pardloe. Jamie said something remarkably creative in *Gàidhlig,* and I gave him a look of startled appreciation.

“And a good day to you, too, General Fraser,” Hal said, with a correct bow. Like John, he was dressed in civvies, though with a rather loud mulberry striped waistcoat, and I did wonder where he’d got it from.

“I have resigned my commission,” Jamie said coldly. “ ‘Mr. Fraser’ will do. May I ask to what we owe the honor of your presence, Your Grace?”

Hal’s lips pressed tight together, but, with a glance at his brother, he obliged with a brief précis of his personal concern with Captain Richardson.

“And I do, of course, wish to retrieve my nephew, William—should he in fact be with Richardson. My brother informs me that you have doubts as to the probability of this being the case?”

“I do,” Jamie said shortly. “My son is not a fool, nor a weakling.” I caught the faint emphasis on *“my son,”* and so did both Greys, who stiffened slightly. “He wouldna go off on some feeble pretext, nor would he allow someone of whom he was suspicious to take him captive.”

“You have a bloody lot of faith in a boy you haven’t seen since he was six,” Hal observed conversationally.

Jamie smiled, with considerable rue.

“I had the making of him until he was six,” he said, and turned his gaze on John. “I ken what he’s made of. And I ken who shaped him after that. Tell me I’m wrong, my lord.”

There was a marked silence, broken only by Lieutenant Macken’s voice below, calling plaintively to his wife about the location of his clean stockings.

“Well, then,” Hal said with a sigh. “Where do *you* think William’s gone, if he’s not with Richardson?”

"He's gone after the girls he spoke of," Jamie said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "He told his groom so, did he not? D'ye ken who these lassies are?"

The Greys exchanged looks of muted chagrin, and I coughed, very carefully, holding a pillow to my stomach.

"If that's the case," I said, "then presumably he'll come back, once he's either found them or given up looking for them. Wouldn't he? Would he go AWOL over them—er … absent without leave, I mean?"

"He wouldn't have to risk that," Hal said. "He's been relieved of duty."

"What?" John exclaimed, rounding on his brother. "What the devil for?"

Hal sighed, exasperated. "Leaving camp when he was ordered to stay there in the middle of a battle, what else? Getting into a fight with another officer, ending up at the bottom of a ravine with a dent in his skull through being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and in general being a bloody nuisance."

"You're right, he *is* your son," I said to Jamie, amused. He snorted, but didn't look altogether displeased.

"Speaking of nephews," Jamie said to Hal, "ye seem remarkably well informed, Your Grace. Might ye know anything of an Indian scout named Ian Murray?"

Hal looked blank, but John's head turned quickly in Jamie's direction.

"Yes," he said. "I do. He was taken prisoner late on the day of battle and walked with me into camp, whereupon he killed another scout with a tomahawk and walked out again."

"Blood will tell," I murmured, though privately both shocked and worried. "Er … was he injured?"

"Aye, he was," Jamie answered brusquely. "He'd been shot wi' an arrow, in the shoulder. I couldna pull it, but I broke the shaft for him."

"And … no one's seen him since the night of the battle?" I asked, striving to keep my voice steady. The men exchanged glances, but none of them would meet my eyes.

"I, um, did give him a canteen of water mixed with brandy," John said, a little diffidently. "He wouldn't take a horse."

"Rachel will find him," Jamie said, as firmly as he could. "And I've asked Ian Mòr to watch out for the lad. He'll be all right."

"I trust your faith in your blood will be justified, sir," Hal said with a sigh, evidently meaning it. "But as we can do nothing about Murray, and the question of William's whereabouts is apparently moot for the moment … I hesitate to intrude my concerns regarding *my* blood, but I have stringent reasons for finding Captain Richardson, quite apart from anything he may have done or not done with William. And to that end …"

"Aye," Jamie said, and the tension in his shoulders relaxed. "Aye, of course, Your Grace. Sassenach, will ye have the goodness not to die whilst I go and ask Mrs. Macken for paper and ink?"

"We have some," John said, reaching into the leather pouch he'd been carrying under his arm. "Allow me." And proceeded to lay out paper, an inkhorn, a small bundle of quills, and a stub of red sealing wax.

Everyone watched as Jamie mixed the ink, trimmed a quill, and began. Knowing how laborious writing was for him and how much he'd hate being watched, I pushed myself up a little more, stifling a groan, and turned to Hal.

“John mentioned that you wanted to make us an offer,” I said. “Of course we’re happy to help, regardless. But out of curiosity—”

“Oh.” Hal blinked but changed gears rapidly, fixing his gaze on me. “Yes. The offer I had in mind has nothing to do with Mr. Fraser’s kind accommodation,” he said. “John suggested it, as a matter of convenience for all concerned.” He turned to his brother, who smiled at me.

“My house on Chestnut Street,” John said. “Plainly I shan’t be living there for the foreseeable future. And I understand that you had taken refuge with the printer’s family in Philadelphia. Given your present fragile state of health”—he nodded delicately at the small heap of bloody dressings in the corner—“clearly it would be more comfortable for you to resume residence at my house. You—”

A deep Scottish noise interrupted him, and he looked up at Jamie, startled.

“The last time I was compelled to accept assistance from your brother, my lord,” Jamie said precisely, staring at John, “I was your prisoner and incapable of caring for my own family. Now I am no man’s prisoner, nor ever will be again. I shall make provision for my wife.”

In dead silence, with all eyes fixed on him, he bent his head to the paper and slowly signed his name.

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ONE DAY, COCK OF THE WALK—NEXT DAY, A FEATHER DUSTER

HE'D GONE BY INSTINCT to fetch Madras, but paused to think on the way. If he found the girls, he couldn't bring them both back with him on the horse. He changed direction and plunged into the teamsters' park, emerging a brief time later with an ammunition cart, now sans ammunition, pulled by a large, rugged gray mule with half of one ear missing.

The mule was disinclined to move fast, but still made better time than two girls on foot might. How long a head start did they have? Maybe an hour, from what Zebedee had said, maybe longer.

"Heya!" he shouted, and snapped the whip over the mule's rump. The animal was surly, but not a fool, and lurched into a faster pace—though William suspected that this effort might be as much to outrun the swarming flies as in response to his own urging.

Once solidly in motion, though, the mule seemed able to keep it up without noticeable effort, and they trotted down the road at a tooth-rattling pace, easily passing farm carts, foragers, and a couple of scouting parties. Surely he would catch the girls up in no time.

He didn't. He drove nearly ten miles, by his estimation, before concluding that there was no way the girls could possibly have outrun him, and he turned back, searching carefully along the few farm roads that led off into fields. To and fro he went, inquiring of everyone he saw, growing hotter and more irritated by the moment.

Midway through the afternoon, the army caught up with him, marching columns overtaking the mule, which had slowed to a walk by now. Reluctantly, he turned about and continued with the army to camp. Perhaps Colenso had been wrong; maybe the girls hadn't left at all. In which case, he'd find them once the camp settled for the night.

He did not. He did find Zeb, though, and Colenso with him. Both were adamant that the girls were indeed gone—and William found no trace of them, though he made stubborn inquiries among the laundresses and cooks.

At last, he trudged through the camp in search of either Papa or Uncle Hal. Not that he expected either man to have any notion regarding the girls—but he somehow felt that he could not abandon his search without at least soliciting their help in putting out word of the girls. Two half-grown girls couldn't possibly outstrip an army, and—

He stopped dead in the middle of camp, letting men on their way to supper flow around him.

"Bloody hell," he said, too hot and tired even to make it an exclamation. "Colenso, you left-handed little bugger." And barely containing his exasperation—with himself as much as with his groom—he set off grimly to find Colenso Baragwanath.

Because Colenso *was* a left-handed little bugger. William had noticed that immediately, as he suffered from the same affliction himself. Unlike Colenso, though, William could tell the difference between his right hand and his left—and had a sense of direction. Colenso … didn't, and William wanted to kick himself for not remembering that.

"You bloody *idiot*," he muttered, wiping a sleeve across his sweating, dusty face. "Why didn't you think of that?"

Because it made little sense—once he paused to think about it—for the girls to have run off *ahead* of the army. Even if they were afraid of someone in the army, and even if they meant to reach New York, they would have been better served to have gone the other way, at least temporarily. Let the army march on well ahead, and then make their way wherever they meant to go.

He glanced at the sun, just barely still above the horizon, and heaved a deep, exasperated breath. Whatever else she might be, Jane wasn't a fool. First he'd find some supper, and then Colenso—but he'd give good odds that the morrow would find him on the road back toward Middletown.

* * *

HE FOUND THEM, just before noon. They saw him coming, but he'd seen them first: the two of them walking down the side of the road, each with a bundle in either hand. They glanced over their shoulders at the sound of his wheels, saw nothing alarming, turned back—and then Jane whirled round again, her face aghast as she realized who she'd just seen.

She dropped one of her bundles, clutched her younger sister by the wrist, and jerked her off the road. The road led through farmland here, with open fields on either side—but there was a sizable chestnut grove a few hundred yards ahead, and, despite William's shout, the girls ran for this as though the devil himself were after them.

Muttering under his breath, he pulled up, dropped the reins, and leapt out. Long-legged as he was, he failed to catch them before they reached the edge of the wood.

"Stop, for God's sake!" he bellowed. "I'm not going to hurt you!"

Fanny, hearing this, seemed disposed to stop, but Jane yanked her urgently on and they vanished among the rustling leaves.

William snorted and slowed down. Jane could make up her own mind—if she had one, which he was strongly inclined to doubt at the moment—but she hadn't any business to be dragging her little sister off through land that had been a battlefield only two days ago.

Broken trails and big crushed patches marred the fields, from soldiers running or artillery being dragged through it. He could smell death when he drew a deep breath; it made him uneasy. The stink of uncollected corpses swelling in the sun, bursting open, weltering with flies and maggots … On the one hand, he hoped the girls wouldn't stumble over such a sight. On the other, if they did, they'd likely come haring back out into his arms, screaming.

And corpses might not be the only things hiding in the folds and furrows of the countryside. His hand went automatically to his waist, groping for the hilt of his knife—which, of course, wasn't there.

"Fucking buggering shit-fucking *hell*!"

As though this had been a signal, a sudden racket broke out in the trees. Not a corpse; he could hear male voices, cursing, cajoling, and high-pitched shrieks. He snatched up a fallen branch and charged into the grove, shouting at the top of his lungs. He could hear them; they could certainly hear him, and the tone of the shouting changed. The girls were still shrieking, but less frantically, and the men—yes, more than one … two, three? Not more—were arguing, agitated, fearful. *Not English … not speaking English …*

"Mistkerle!" he bellowed at the top of his lungs. *Bloody stinking Hessians! "Feiglinge!" Shit-eating cowards!*

A great thrashing of leaves and snapping branches, and, peering through the trees, he saw that the lot of them—judging by the noise, the girls were still with them—were heading for the road.

He stopped yelling and instantly altered his own course, charging back toward the road, crashing heedless through brush and low-hanging branches, half-ripe chestnuts thumping off his head and shoulders. There! He saw a man push out of the trees, stumbling onto the road, and lunge back, grabbing. A louder shriek and Fanny came stumbling out in turn, the man gripping her by the neck.

William veered toward them and burst out running, shouting incoherent curses, brandishing his makeshift club. He must nonetheless have looked frightening in his uniform, for the man holding Fanny let go of her at once, turned, and ran like a rabbit, dust spurting from his feet. Fanny staggered and fell to her knees, but there was no blood, she was all right.…

"Jane!" He shouted. "Jane! Where are you?"

"Here! He—" Her voice was cut off suddenly, but he could see where she was, no more than ten feet from him, and dived for the wildly waving branches.

There were two men with her, one with a hand over her mouth, the other struggling to detach the bayonet from a brown Bess musket. William kicked the gun out of his hands, then lunged at the man, and in moments was on the ground, grappling with a burly man who might not know what to do with a bayonet but certainly was acquainted with battle of a more primitive sort.

They rolled to and fro, panting and gouging, twigs breaking with a sound like gunshots, cracking beneath their bodies. He heard dimly a screech from the other man—perhaps Jane had bitten him; good girl!—but had no attention to spare for anything but the man who was trying earnestly to throttle him. He had a grip on the man's wrists, and, with a faint memory of Ban Tarleton, jerked the man closer and butted him in the face.

It worked again; there was a horrible crunch, hot blood spattered his face, and the man's grip relaxed. William squirmed away, his head swimming, only to find himself facing the other man, who had evidently succeeded in freeing the bayonet, for he had a foot of sharpened steel in his hand.

"Here! Here!" Jane popped out of a bush right beside William, startling him, and shoved something into his hand. It was, thank God, a knife. Nothing to rival the bayonet, but a weapon.

Jane was still by him; he grasped her arm and began to walk backward, knife held low and threatening in his other hand. The Hessian—Christ, was it one of the sons of bitches who'd hit him in the head? He couldn't tell; there were spots floating in front of his eyes, and the men had thrown away their telltale green coats. Did all sons of bitches wear green coats? he wondered muzzily.

Then they were on the road, and things became confused. He thought he'd stuck one of the men, and the girls were screaming again, and once he found himself in the roadway, choking on dust, but came up again before one of the bastards could kick him in the face … and then there was a shout and the pounding of hooves, and he let go of the man whose arm he was gripping and whirled round to see Rachel Hunter on a mule, coming fast down the road, swinging her bonnet from its strings and shouting, "Uncle Hiram! Cousin Seth! Hurry! Come on! Come on! Help me!"

His mule jerked its head up from the grass and, seeing Rachel's mount, brayed in greeting. This seemed to be the last straw for the deserters, who stood gaping for one stunned moment, then turned and galloped down the road after their vanished fellow.

William stood swaying for a moment, gasping for breath, then dropped his knife and sat down abruptly.

"What," he said, in a voice that sounded petulant even to his own ears, "are *you* doing here?"

Rachel ignored him. She swung down from her mule, landing with a small thump, and led it to William's mule, tethering it to the cart. Only then did she walk over to where William sat, slowly brushing dirt from his knees and counting his limbs.

"You wouldn't happen to have seen a couple of girls, would you?" he asked, tilting his head back to look up at Rachel.

"Yes. They ran into the trees," she said, nodding toward the chestnut grove. "As for what I am doing here, I have been up and down this road three times, looking for thy cousin, Ian Murray." She gave him a hard look as she said this, as though daring him to contradict her assertion regarding his kinship with Murray. Under other circumstances, he might have taken offense, but at the moment he hadn't the energy. "I assume that if thee had seen him, dead or alive, thee would tell me?"

"Yes," he said. There was a swollen knot between his eyes, where he had butted the deserter, and he rubbed this gingerly.

She drew a deep breath, sighed loudly, and wiped her sweating face on her apron, before replacing her bonnet. She looked him over, shaking her head.

"Thee is a rooster, William," Rachel said mournfully. "I saw this in thee before, but now I know it for certain."

"A rooster," he repeated coldly, brushing dirt from his sleeve. "Indeed. A vain, crowing, gaudy sort of fellow—that's what you think me?"

Her brows went up. They were not the level brows of classic beauty; they quirked up at the ends, even when her face was at rest, giving her a look of interested intelligence. When she was *not* at rest, they slanted with a sharp, wicked sort of look. They did this for an instant now, but then relaxed. A little.

"No," she said. "Has thee ever kept chickens, William?"

"Not for some years," he said, examining the hole torn in the elbow of his coat, the hole ripped in the shirt beneath, and the bloody scrape upon his bare elbow. Bloody hell, one of the buggers had come close to taking his arm off with that bayonet. "What with one thing and another, my recent acquaintance with chickens has been limited largely to breakfast. Why?"

"Why, a rooster is a creature of amazing courage," Rachel said, rather reproachful. "He will throw himself into the face of an enemy, even knowing he will die in the attack, and thus buy his hens time to escape."

William's head jerked up.

"My *hens*?" he said, outrage bringing the blood to his face. "*My* hens?" He glanced in the direction Jane and Fanny had taken, then glared back at Rachel. "Do you not realize that they are whores?"

She rolled her eyes at him in exasperation. She bloody rolled her eyes at him!

"I expect I have been living with an army for somewhat longer than thee has thyself," she said, making a decided effort to look down her nose at him. "I am familiar with women who lack both property and protection and are thus reduced to the dreadful expedient of selling their bodies, yes."

" 'Dreadful expedient'?" he repeated. "You realize that I —"

She stamped a foot and glared at him.

"Will thee stop repeating everything I say?" she demanded. "I was attempting to pay thee a compliment—while, as thy friend, lamenting the end thy roosterishness will surely bring thee to. Whether thy companions are whores or not—and whether thee pays for their company—is irrelevant to the matter."

"Irre—" William began in indignation, but choked the word off before he could be further accused of repetition. "I don't bloody pay them!"

"Irrelevant," she repeated, doing it herself, by God! "Thee has behaved in exactly the same way on my own behalf, after all."

"You—" He stopped abruptly. "I have?"

She exhaled strongly, eyeing him in a manner suggesting that she would have kicked him in the shins or stamped on his toes if not reminded of her Quaker principles.

"Twice," she said, elaborately polite. "The occasions were so negligible, I suppose—or I was—that thee has forgotten?"

"Remind me," he said dryly, and, ripping a chunk from the torn lining of his coat, used it to wipe the mud—and blood, he saw—from his face.

She snorted briefly, but obliged. "Does thee not recall the odious creature who attacked us in that dreadful place on the road in New York?"

"Oh, that." His belly clenched in recollection. "I didn't exactly do it on your account. Nor did I have much choice in the matter. He bloody tried to cave my head in with an ax."

"Hmph. I think thee has some fatal attraction for ax-wielding maniacs," she said, frowning at him. "That Mr. Bug actually *did* hit thee in the head with an ax. But when thee killed him later, it was to protect Ian and me from a similar fate, was it not?"

"Oh, indeed," he said, a little crossly. "How do you know it wasn't just revenge for his attacking *me*?"

"Thee may be a rooster, but thee is not a vengeful rooster," she said reprovingly. She pulled a kerchief from her pocket and blotted her face, which was growing shiny with perspiration again. "Should we not look for thy … companions?"

"We should," he said, with a degree of resignation, and turned toward the grove. "I think they'll run if I go in after them, though."

Rachel made an impatient noise and, pushing past him, stomped into the woods, rustling through the brush like a hungry bear. The thought made him grin, but a sudden yelp wiped the smile off his face. He started after her, but she was already backing out, yanking Jane by one arm, meanwhile trying to avoid the wild swipes Jane was making with her free hand, fingers clawed and slashing toward Rachel's face.

"Stop that!" William said sharply, and, stepping forward, grabbed Jane by the shoulder and jerked her out of Rachel's grasp. She turned blindly on *him*, but he had longer arms than Rachel and could easily hold her at bay.

"Will you quit that?" he said crossly. "No one's going to hurt you. Not now."

She did stop, though she looked back and forth between him and Rachel like a cornered animal, panting and the whites of her eyes showing.

"He's right," Rachel said, edging cautiously toward her. "Thee is quite safe now. What is thy name, Friend?"

"She's called Jane," William said, gradually loosing his hold, ready to grab her again if she bolted. "I don't know her surname."

She didn't bolt, but didn't speak, either. Her dress was torn at the neck, and she put a hand to the torn edge automatically, trying to fit it back in place.

"Have you seen my bundle?" she said, in an almost ordinary voice. "I have a housewife in it. I need a needle."

"I'll look for it," Rachel said soothingly. "Did thee drop it in the wood?"

"Thir!" Fanny spoke quite sharply behind William, and he became aware that she'd been there for a few moments; she'd said it once or twice before.

"What?" he said impatiently, half-turning toward her while trying to keep both Jane and Rachel in view.

“There’th an Indian in there,” she said, and pointed toward the woods.

“Ian!”

Rachel ran across the road, fleet as a snipe, and vanished into the trees. William followed hastily, hand on his knife. There was likely more than one Indian in these woods, and if it *wasn’t* Murray …

But he could tell from Rachel’s exclamation of mingled horror and relief from the depths of the wood that it was.

Murray was crumpled into a heap in the deep shadow at the base of a big pine tree, needles half-scuffled over him; evidently he’d tried to disguise himself but had passed out before managing the job.

“He’s breathing,” Rachel said, and he heard the catch in her voice.

“Good,” William said briefly, and, squatting beside her, put a hand on Murray’s shoulder to turn him over. The apparently insensible body gave a shriek, contorted violently, and ended on his knees, swaying and glaring wildly round, clutching the shoulder William had seized. Only then did William see the dried blood streaked down the arm and the fresh dribbles running down from the broken shaft of an arrow embedded in the swollen flesh.

“Ian,” Rachel said. “Ian, it’s me. It’s all right now. I have thee.” Her voice was steady, but her hand trembled as she touched him.

Murray gulped air, and his bleared gaze seemed to clear, traveling from Fanny and Jane, who had come into the grove after William, pausing briefly with a frown at William’s face, then settling and easing as he saw Rachel. He closed his eyes and let out a long breath.

“Taing do Dhia,” he said, and sank back on his haunches.

“Water,” Rachel said urgently, shaking the empty canteen that lay on the ground beside Ian. “Has thee got any water, William?”

“I have,” said Jane, stirring out of her trance and groping for the canteen round her neck. “Will he be all right, do you think?”

Rachel didn’t answer but helped Murray to drink, her face pale with anxiety. Murray’s own face bore the remnants of war paint, William saw with interest, and a brief ripple raised the hairs on his scalp, wondering whether Murray had killed any of the British soldiers. At least the bugger wasn’t sporting any scalps on his belt, British or otherwise.

Rachel was conversing now in low tones with Murray, glancing now and then at William, a certain speculation in her gaze.

William was mildly surprised to find that he knew exactly what she was thinking. Though perhaps it wasn’t so surprising; he’d been wondering much the same thing: could Murray ride the mule? Plainly he couldn’t walk far. And if he couldn’t … could Rachel persuade William to take Murray and her into the city in the wagon?

He felt his stomach clench at the thought of going back to Philadelphia.

His own gaze flicked toward Jane—only to discover that she wasn’t there. Neither was Fanny.

He was halfway to his feet when he heard Rachel’s mule bray in protest, and he made it to the road in seconds, to find Jane engaged in a futile struggle to push Fanny up into the saddle. The younger girl was trying valiantly, clutching at the mule’s bristly mane and attempting to get a leg up, but the mule was objecting strenuously to this sort of interference, tossing his head and backing away from Jane, leaving Fanny's legs kicking desperately in the air.

William reached her in three paces and clasped her about the waist.

"Let go, sweetheart," he said calmly. "I've got you." Fanny was surprisingly solid, given her fragile appearance. She smelled sweet, too, though her neck was grubby and her clothes grimed with mud and road dust.

He put her down and turned a firm eye on Jane, who was looking defiant. He'd been acquainted with her long enough now, though, to see that the uplifted chin and tight jaw were covering fear, and, in consequence, spoke more gently than he might have.

"Where were you planning to go?" he asked, in a tone of mild interest.

"I—well, New York," she answered, but uncertainly, and her eyes were darting to and fro, as though expecting some threat to manifest itself from the peaceful countryside.

"Without me? I'm hurt, madam, that you should have conceived a sudden dislike of my company. What have I done to offend you, pray?"

She pressed her lips tight together, but he could see that his jesting tone had settled her a little; she was still red in the face from exertion, but not breathing in that jerky way.

"I think we must part, Lord Ellesmere," she said, with a touchingly absurd attempt at formality. "I—we—shall make our own way now."

He folded his arms, leaned back against the wagon, and looked down his nose at her.

"How?" he inquired. "You haven't any money, you don't have a mount, and you wouldn't get five miles on foot without running into someone else like those German fellows."

"I—have a little money." She smoothed a hand over her skirt, and he saw that there was indeed a bulge where her pocket lay. Despite his intent to remain calm, there was still a spring of anger in him, and it burst forth at this.

"Where did you get it?" he demanded, straightening up and grabbing her by the wrist. "Did I not forbid you to whore?"

She yanked her hand smartly free and took two quick steps back.

"You haven't any right to forbid me to do any damned thing I want!" she snapped, color burning high in her cheeks. "And it's none of your business, but I didn't make this money on my back!"

"What, then? Pimping your sister?"

She slapped him, hard. He shouldn't have said it and knew it, but the knowledge—and his stinging cheek—only made him angrier.

"I *should* bloody leave you here, you—"

"Good! That's just what I want you to do! You—you—"

Before either of them could decide upon an epithet, Rachel and Ian emerged from the wood, the tall Scot leaning heavily on her. William gave Jane a final glare and went to help, taking Murray's weight on one side. The man stiffened, resisting for a moment, but then yielded; he had to.

"What happened?" William asked, nodding at the broken arrow shaft. "A private quarrel or just bad aim?"

That made Murray's mouth twitch, reluctantly.

"Fortunes of war," he said hoarsely, and sat down at the open tailboard of the wagon. He was breathing like a winded ox, but had possession of himself. He gave William a brief glance.

"What are ye doing here, *a fang Sassunaich*?"

"None of your business, but a good job I was," William replied, just as briefly. He turned to Rachel, having made up his mind on the moment.

"Take the wagon and see the girls somewhere safe."

"That—" Rachel began, but then looked round, startled, as Jane and Fanny ran past her, crossed the road, and dived into the wood. "Where are they going?"

"Oh, bloody hell," William said, already striding across the road. "Wait here."

* * *

THEY COULDN'T outrun him, and they had nothing in the way of woodcraft that would enable them to lie hidden. He caught Fanny—again the slower of the two—by the back of her pinafore as she was scrambling over a log. To his astonishment, she squirmed round in his grasp and launched herself at him, scratching at his face and screaming, "Wun, Janie, wun!"

"Will you bloody stop that?" he said crossly, holding her at arm's length. "Ow!" For she had sunk her teeth into his wrist, and he dropped her.

She eeled over the log and bounded away like a rabbit, still screaming her head off. He started to follow her, and then thought better. On the one hand, he had a strong impulse to abandon them, but on the other … He remembered Mac telling him about plovers one day as they sat near Watendlath Tarn, eating bread and cheese, watching the birds.

“Bugger off, Mac,” he said under his breath, and shoved thought of both Helwater and the groom ruthlessly away. But remembered, whether he wanted to or not.

“They run about and call out as though wounded, see?” Mac’s arm had been round him, keeping him from going too close to the fluttering bird. *“But it’s to draw ye away from their nest, lest ye crush the eggs or damage the young. Look canny, though, and ye’ll see them.”*

William stood quite still, calming his own breath and looking round, slow and careful, barely moving his head. And there indeed was the plover’s nest: alas for Jane, she had worn her pink calico today, and her rosy buttocks rounded smoothly up out of the grass ten feet away, quite like a pair of eggs in a nest, at that.

He walked quietly, without haste. Nobly resisting the strong urge to smack her beguilingly curved behind, he instead laid a hand flat on her back.

“Tag,” he said. “You’re it.”

She wriggled out from under his hand and shot up onto her feet.

“What?” she said. “What the bloody hell do you mean?” She was wild-eyed and nervy, but cross, as well.

“You’ve never played tag?” he asked, feeling foolish even as he said it.

“Oh,” she said, and let out her breath a little. “It’s a game. I see. Yes, but not for a long time.”

He supposed one *didn’t* play tag in a brothel.

“Look,” she said tersely, “we want to go. I—I appreciate what you’ve done for me—for us. But—”

“Sit down,” he said, and compelled her to do so, leading her to the log over which her sister had escaped and pressing on her shoulder until she reluctantly sat. He then sat down beside her and took her hand in his. It was very small, cold and damp from the grass where she'd hidden.

"Look," he said, firmly but not—he hoped—unkindly, "I'm not letting you run off. That's flat. If you want to go to New York with the army, I'll take you; I've already said so. If you want to return to Philadelphia—"

"No!" Her terror at the thought was clear now. She pulled desperately at her hand, but he wouldn't let go.

"Is it because of Captain Harkness? Because—"

She gave a cry that might have come from the throat of a wild bird caught in a trap, and he tightened his grip on her wrist. It was fine-boned and slender, but she was surprisingly strong.

"I know you stole the gorget back," he said. "It's all right. No one's going to find out. And Harkness won't touch you again; I promise you that."

She made a small bubbling noise that might have been a laugh or a sob.

"Colonel Tarleton—you know, the green dragoon that made advances to you?—he told me that Harkness was absent without leave, hasn't come back to his regiment. Do you know anything about that?"

"No," she said. "Let me go. Please!"

Before he could answer this, a small, clear voice piped up from the trees a few yards away.

"You'd best tew him, Janie."

"Fanny!" Jane swung round toward her sister, momentarily forgetting that she was pinioned. "Don't!"

Fanny stepped out of the shadows, wary but curiously composed.

"If you don't, I wiw," she said, her big brown eyes fixed on William's face. "He won't thtop." She came a little closer, cautious but not afraid. “If I tew you,” she said, “do you pwomise not to take us back?”

“Back where?”

“To Phiwadelphia,” she said. “Or the army.”

He sighed, exasperated, but short of torturing the answer out of one of the girls, clearly no progress would be made unless he agreed. And he was beginning to have a cold feeling under the ribs about just what the answer might be.

“I promise,” he said, but Fanny hung back, distrustful.

“Sweaw,” she said, folding her arms.

“Sw—oh. Bloody hell. All right, then—I swear on my honor.”

Jane made a small, dreary noise that was still a laugh. That stung.

“Do you think I haven’t got any?” he demanded, turning on her.

“How would I know?” she countered, sticking out her chin. It wobbled, but she stuck it out. “What does honor look like?”

“For your sake, you’d better hope it looks a lot like me,” he told her, but then turned to Fanny. “What do you want me to swear on?”

“Your mudder’s head,” she said promptly.

“My mother’s dead.”

“Your favver, den.”

He drew a long, deep breath. *Which one*?

“I swear on my father’s head,” he said evenly.

And so they told him.

* * *

"I KNEW HE'D come back," Jane said. She was sitting on the log, hands clasped between her thighs and eyes on her feet. "They always do. The bad ones." She spoke with a sort of dull resignation, but her lips tightened at the memory. "They can't stand to think you've got away without … without. I thought it would be me, though."

Fanny was sitting beside her sister, as close as she could get, and now she put her arms around Jane and hugged her, her face in Jane's calico shoulder.

"I'm sowwy," she whispered.

"I know, lovie," Jane said, and patted Fanny's leg. A fierce look came into her face, though. "It's not your fault, and don't ever—*ever*—think so."

William's throat felt thick with disgust at the thought. That beautiful, flower-faced little girl, taken by—

"Her maidenhead's worth ten pound," Jane reminded him. "Mrs. Abbott was saving her, waiting for a rich man with a taste for new-hatched chicks. Captain Harkness offered her twenty." She looked directly at William for the first time. "I wasn't having that," she said simply. "So I asked Mrs. Abbott to send us up together; I said I could help keep Fanny from making a fuss. I knew what he was like, see," she said, and pressed her lips involuntarily together for an instant. "He wasn't the sort to plow you like a bull and have it done. He'd play with you, making you undress a bit at a time and —and do things—while he told you all about what *he* meant to do."

And so it had been easy to come behind him while he was watching Fanny, with the knife she'd taken from the kitchen hidden in the folds of her petticoats.

"I meant to stab him in the back," she said, looking down again. "I saw a man stabbed that way once. But he saw on Fanny's face what I—it wasn't her fault, she couldn't help it showing," she added quickly. "But he turned round quick and there wasn't any choice."

She'd plunged the knife into Harkness's throat and wrenched it free, intending to stab again. But that hadn't been necessary. "There was blood everywhere." She'd gone pale in the telling, her hands wrapped in her apron.

"I frew up," Fanny added matter-of-factly. "It was a mess."

"I expect it was," William said dryly. He was trying not to envision the scene—the candlelight, the spraying blood, the panicked girls—with remarkably little success. "How did you get away?"

Jane shrugged. "It was my room, and he'd bolted the door. And nobody was surprised when Fanny started screaming," she added, with a trace of bitterness.

There was a basin and pitcher of water, the usual rags for mess; they'd washed themselves hastily, changed clothes, and climbed out the window.

"We found a ride on a farmer's wagon, and … you know the rest." She closed her eyes for a moment, as though reliving "the rest," and then opened them and looked up at him, her gaze dark as shadowed water.

"Now what?" she asked.

* * *

WILLIAM HAD BEEN asking himself that question for the last several moments of Jane's story. Having met Harkness himself, he had considerable sympathy for Jane's action, but—

“You planned it,” he said, giving her a sharp look. Her head was bent, her unbound hair hiding her face. “You took the knife, you had clothes to change into, you knew how to get down from the window and get away.”

“Tho?” said Fanny, in a remarkably cold voice for a girl of her age.

“So why kill him?” he asked, transferring his attention to Fanny, but keeping a wary eye on Jane. “You were going to leave anyway. Why not just escape before he came?”

Jane raised her head and turned it, looking him directly in the eye.

“I wanted to kill him,” she said, in a perfectly reasonable voice that chilled him despite the warmth of the day.

“I … see.”

He saw more than the vision of Jane, with her delicate white wrists, plunging a knife into Captain Harkness’s thick red throat while her little sister screamed. He saw Rachel’s face, pale among the leaves, six feet away. From her expression, it was apparent that she had heard everything.

He cleared his throat.

“Is, um, Mr. Murray all right?” he asked politely. Jane and Fanny whirled, wide-eyed.

“He fainted,” Rachel replied. She was eyeing the younger girls in much the same way that they were looking at her, with a gaze of fascinated horror. “His shoulder is badly inflamed. I came to see if thee had any brandy.”

He fumbled in his pocket and withdrew a small silver flask with the Grey family arms engraved upon it.

“Whisky do for you?” he asked, handing it over. Rachel looked surprised; whisky wasn’t a popular drink, but Lord John had always had a taste for it and William had taken to it himself—though now, knowing the truth about his disgraceful taint of Scottish blood, he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to drink the stuff again.

"It will, I thank thee." She stood holding it for a moment, clearly wanting to go to Murray but also hesitant to leave. He felt rather grateful to her for that hesitancy; he would as soon not be alone with Jane and Fanny—or, rather, he didn't want to be alone with the decision as to what the devil to do about them.

Rachel appeared to correctly interpret this feeling, for with a brief "I'll bring it right back," she disappeared in the direction of the road.

No one spoke. After that one direct look, Jane had bent her head again and sat quietly, though one hand restlessly smoothed the fabric of her skirt across one round thigh, over and over.

Fanny ran a hand over the crown of Jane's head in a protective gesture, while staring at William with a complete lack of expression. He found it unnerving.

What *was* he to do with them? Of course they couldn't go back to Philadelphia. And he dismissed as unworthy the impulse simply to abandon them to their own devices. But—

"Why not go to New York with the army?" he asked, his voice seeming unnaturally loud, harsh to his own ears. "What made you run yesterday?"

"Oh." Jane looked up slowly, her eyes a little unfocused, as though she had been dreaming. "I saw *him* again. The green dragoon. He'd wanted me to go with him the night before, and I wouldn't. But I saw him again yesterday morning and thought he was looking for me." She swallowed. "I told you—I know the ones who don't give up."

"Very perceptive of you," he said, eyeing her with some respect. "He doesn't. You misliked him on sight, then?"

Because he didn't think for an instant that his having forbidden her to ply her trade would have stopped her, had she wanted to.

"It wasn't that," she said, and flicked Banastre Tarleton away with the sort of abrupt gesture one uses to shoo insects. "But he'd come to the brothel before, last year. He didn't go with me then, he chose another girl—but I knew if he spent much time with me, he'd likely remember why I seemed familiar to him. He said I did," she added, "when he came up to me in the bread line."

"I see." He paused. "So you did want to go to New York—but not with the army. Is that right?"

Jane shrugged, angry. "Does it matter?"

"Why the devil shouldn't it matter?"

"When has it *ever* mattered what a whore wants?" She sprang up and stamped across the clearing, leaving him staring after her in astonishment.

"What's wrong with her?" he demanded, turning to Fanny. The younger girl eyed him dubiously, lips pressed together, but then gave a little shrug.

"She thinks you might give her to a conthable or a magithtrate," she said, struggling a bit with "magistrate." "Or maybe to the army. It was a tholdier she killed."

William rubbed a hand over his face. In fact, the thought of delivering Jane to justice *had* flitted through his mind, in the wake of the shock of learning of her crime. The thought hadn't outlasted its birth, though.

"I wouldn't do that," he said to Fanny, striving to sound reasonable. She looked at him skeptically, under level dark brows.

"Why wouldn' you?"

"Excellent question," he said dryly. "And I haven't got an answer. But I suppose I don't need one."

He lifted a brow at her, and she gave a small snort of a laugh. Jane was edging along the far side of the clearing, glancing back toward Fanny every few seconds; her intent was clear—but she wouldn't go without her sister. He was sure of that much.

"Since you're here with me," he observed, "and *not* over there with your sister … you don't want to run, and you know she won't go without you. Ergo, I conclude that you don't think I'd give her up to justice."

She shook her head, slow and solemn as an owl.

"Jane says I don' know anyting about men yed, but I do."

He sighed.

"God help me, Frances, you do."

* * *

THERE WAS NO further conversation until Rachel returned a few minutes later.

"I can't lift him," she said directly to William, ignoring the girls for the moment. "Will thee help me?"

He rose at once, relieved by the prospect of physical action, but glanced over his shoulder at Jane, still hovering by the far side of the clearing like a hummingbird.

"We'll be heah," Fanny said quietly. He gave her a nod, and went.

He found Murray lying by the side of the road, near the wagon. The man wasn't unconscious, but the influence of the fever upon him was clear; his gaze was bleared and his speech slurring.

"I c'n walk."

“Like hell you can,” William said briefly. “Hold on to my arm.”

He got the man sitting upright and had a look for himself at the wounded shoulder. The wound itself wasn’t that bad; it was apparent no bones were broken and it hadn’t bled a lot. On the other hand, the flesh was red and swollen and starting to suppurate. He leaned close and took an unobtrusive sniff—not unobtrusive enough: Rachel noticed.

“There’s no gangrene,” she said. “I think there will not—I think things will be well, so long as we can get him to a doctor soon. What does thee mean to do about thy girls?” she added abruptly.

He didn’t bother telling her again that they weren’t *his*. Evidently they were, at least in terms of immediate responsibilities.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, rising to his feet. He glanced into the woods, but the clearing was far enough in that there was no flicker of garment or movement visible.

“They can’t go to Philadelphia, and I can’t take them back to the army. The best I can think of just now is to find them some place of refuge in one of the little villages hereabouts and cache them there until I can make some provision to get them to … to someplace safer.” *Wherever the hell that might be. Canada*? he wondered wildly.

Rachel shook her head decidedly.

“Thee has no notion how people talk in small places—or how quickly news and rumor spread.” She glanced down at Murray, who was still sitting upright but swaying, his eyes half closed.

“They have no other profession,” she said. “And it would be quickly apparent to anyone what that profession is. They require not only refuge but refuge with people who will not cast them out once that becomes known."

She was brown with the sun—her blue calico bonnet had fallen off in the struggle with Jane and hung back over her shoulders—but her face paled when she looked at Murray. She clenched her fists, closed her eyes for an instant, then opened them, straightening to her full height, and looked William in the eye.

"There is a small settlement of Friends, perhaps two hours' travel from here. No more than three or four farms. I know of it from one of the women who came to Valley Forge with her husband. The girls could be kept safe there, for a while, at least."

"No!" Murray said. "Ye canna be …" He paused, eyes going out of focus, and braced himself on his sound arm, still swaying. He swallowed thickly. "No," he repeated. "Not … safe."

"It isn't," William agreed. "Three young women on the road, alone? And without even a pistol to defend yourselves?"

"If I had a pistol I would not use it," Rachel pointed out with some asperity. "Nor a cannon, come to that."

Murray laughed—or at least made a noise that might pass for amusement.

"Aye," he managed, and stopped to breathe before getting the next words out. "You take them," he said to William. "I'll … do here, fine."

"Thee bloody *won't*," Rachel said fiercely. She grabbed William's arm and pulled him closer to Murray. "Look at him! Tell him, since he professes not to believe me."

William looked, reluctantly, glancing at Murray's face, pale as suet and slick with an unhealthy sweat. Flies clustered thick on Murray's shoulder; he lacked the strength to brush them away.

"Merde," William muttered under his breath. Then louder, though still with reluctance, "She's right. You need a doctor, if you're to have a chance of keeping your arm."

That thought evidently hadn't struck Murray; death, yes—amputation, no. He turned his head and frowned at the wound.

"Bloody hell," William said, and turned to Rachel.

"All right," he said. "Tell me where this settlement is. I'll take them."

She grimaced, fists balling up at her sides. "Even Friends may not take well to the sudden appearance of a stranger who asks them to give indefinite sanctuary to a murderess. I am not a stranger and can plead the girl's case better than thee can." She drew a breath that swelled her bosom noticeably and looked at Murray, then turned her head to give William a piercing look.

"If I do this, thee must see him safe."

"*I* must?"

"Rachel!" Murray said hoarsely, but she ignored him.

"Yes. We'll have to take the wagon, the girls and I."

William drew a breath of his own, but he could see that she was right. He could also see just what the decision to save Jane was costing her.

"All right," he said tersely. He reached up and took the gorget from his neck and handed it to her. "Give Jane this. She may need it, if they find themselves on their own." Oddly, the removal of the gorget seemed a weight off his mind, as well. Even the possibility of being arrested if anyone in Philadelphia recognized him didn't trouble him overmuch.

He was about to remove his incriminating coat and waistcoat—he'd have to hide those somewhere—when Rachel stepped close to him and laid a hand on his arm.

"This man is my heart and my soul," she said simply, looking up into his face. "And he is thy own blood, whatever thee may presently feel about the fact. I trust thee to see him safe, for all our sakes."

William gave her a long look, thought of several possible replies, and made none of them, but gave a curt nod.

"Where should I take him?" he asked. "To my—to Lady J—I mean, to Mrs. F—I *mean*, God damn it," he amended, feeling the blood rise in his cheeks, "to his aunt?"

Rachel looked at him, startled.

"Thee doesn't know? Of course thee doesn't, how could thee?" She waved off her own denseness, impatient. "His aunt was shot in the course of the battle, outside Tennent Church, where she was tending the wounded."

William's annoyance was doused at once, as though ice water had been poured on his head, flooding his veins.

"Is she dead?"

"By the grace of our Lord, no," she said, and he felt the tightness in his chest relax a little. "Or at least she wasn't yesterday," she amended with a frown. "Though very badly hurt." The tightness returned.

"She is in the Macken house in the village of Freehold—about six miles in that direction." She nodded down the road. "My brother is likely there, as well, or nearby; there are still wounded from the battle there. He can deal with I-Ian's wound." For the first time, her voice lost its steadiness as her eyes went to her betrothed.

Murray's eyes were sunken and glazed with fever, but he had sufficient command of himself to reach out his good hand to her. The movement put weight on the bad arm and he grimaced, but Rachel was kneeling beside him in an instant, arms around him.

William coughed and turned discreetly away to leave them a moment's privacy in which to make their farewells. Whatever his own feelings, they deserved that. He'd seen many wounds go bad, and reckoned Murray's chances as no better than even. On the other hand, the man was apparently both a bloody Scot *and* a Mohawk, and both races were notoriously hard to kill.

He had walked away from the road, and his eye now caught the flutter of pink fabric behind a bush.

"Jane!" he called. "Is that you?"

"Yes," she said. She stepped out into the open, folded her arms, and pointed her chin at him. "What do you mean to do? With me, I mean."

"Miss Hunter is going to take you and Fanny to a safe place," he said, as gently as he could. In spite of her brave façade, she reminded him of a fawn, dappled light coming through the trees mottling her face and gown, making her seem shy and insubstantial, as though she might fade into the forest in the next breath. "I'll send word to you there when I've made some … suitable arrangement."

"Her?" Jane shot a surprised glance toward the road. "Why? Why can't you take us? Doesn't she want to stay with her—the Indian?"

"Miss Hunter will have time to explain everything to you on the way." He hesitated, unsure what else to say to her. From the road, he heard the distant murmur of voices, Rachel and Ian Murray. He couldn't make out the words, but it didn't matter; what they were saying to each other was plain. He felt a small, sharp pain under his third waistcoat button and coughed, trying to dislodge it.

"Thank you, thir," said a soft voice behind him, and he turned to find Fanny at his elbow. She took his hand, turned it palm upward, and planted a small, warm kiss in the center.

"I—you're most welcome, Miss Fanny," he said, smiling at her in spite of everything. She nodded to him, very dignified, and walked out to the road, leaving him with Jane.

For a moment, they stood staring at each other.

"I offered you a lot more than a kiss," she said quietly. "You didn't want it. I haven't got anything else to give you in thanks."

"Jane," he said. "It's not—I didn't—" And then stopped, desperately sorry but helpless to think of anything he could possibly say in reply. "Safe travels, Jane," he said at last, his throat tight. "Goodbye."

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IT'S A WISE CHILD WHO KNOWS HIS FATHER

IT WAS APPARENT that, while sound, Rachel's mule wasn't up to the weight of two men the size of William and Ian Murray. No matter; they couldn't go any faster than a walk in any case; Murray could ride, and William would walk alongside to make sure the bastard didn't fall off.

Murray managed to get up into the saddle, in spite of having only one functional hand; Rachel had roughly bandaged his wounded arm and put it into a sling torn from her underpetticoat. William didn't offer him assistance, feeling reasonably sure that such an offer would be neither welcomed nor accepted.

Watching the laborious process, though, William was interested to note that while the fabric of the sling was much-laundered and faded, it had been embroidered with small blue and yellow sunbursts along one edge. Did Quaker women commonly wear attractive undergarments beneath their sober gowns?

As they set off at a cautious walk, the sound of the wagon was still audible, though fading into the rush of trees.

“Are ye armed?” Murray asked suddenly.

“Slightly.” He still had the knife Jane had pushed into his hand, now wrapped in a handkerchief and tucked in his pocket, as he had no sheath for it. He fingered the wooden handle, wondering whether it was the same knife that she … Well, of course it was.

“I’m not. Will ye find me a club?”

“You don’t trust me to see you safe?” William asked sarcastically.

Murray’s shoulders were slumped and his head thrust forward, nodding a little with the mule’s gait, but he turned and gave William a look that was heavy-eyed with fever, but still surprisingly alert.

“Oh, I trust ye fine. It’s men like the ones ye just fought I dinna trust.”

This was a fair point; the roads were far from safe, and the knowledge gave William a severe pang of conscience on behalf of the women he’d just dispatched, unarmed and unprotected, to drive miles over those very roads with a valuable mule and cart. *I should have gone with them, insisted we all go together …*

“My mam always says there’s no one more stubborn than my uncle Jamie,” Murray observed mildly, “but a Quaker lass wi’ her mind made up could give Uncle Jamie a run for his money, I’ll tell ye. I couldna have stopped her—and neither could you.”

William wasn’t in a mood to discuss any of the persons mentioned, nor yet engage in philosophical discussions of relative stubbornness. He put a hand on the bridle and pulled the mule to a halt.

"Stay here. I see something that might do." He'd already seen that there was little in the way of fallen branches near the road; there never was, when an army's foragers had recently passed through. But he saw an orchard of some kind, a little way from the road, with a farmhouse beyond.

As he made his way toward the orchard, he could see that artillery had been hauled through it; there were deep furrows in the ground, and many of the trees had broken limbs, hanging like jackstraws.

There was a dead man in the orchard. American militia, by his hunting shirt and homespun breeches, lying curled among the gnarled roots of a big apple tree.

"Should have culled that one," William said aloud, keeping his voice steady. Old apple trees never yielded much; you took them out after fifteen, twenty years and replanted. He turned away from the body, but not fast enough to avoid seeing the greedy flies rise up in a buzzing cloud from what was left of the face. He walked three paces away and threw up.

No doubt it was the cloying smell of rotting apples that rose above the ghost of black powder; the whole orchard hummed with the noise of wasps gorging themselves on the juices. He unwrapped the handkerchief from Jane's knife and thrust the knife through his belt without looking to see if there were bloodstains on it. He wiped his mouth, then, after a moment's hesitation, went and laid the handkerchief over the Rebel's face. Someone had stripped the body; he had neither weapons nor shoes.

* * *

“THIS DO YOU?” He laid a three-foot length of applewood across the saddlebow. He’d broken it at both ends, so it made a serviceable club, about the thickness of his own forearm.

Murray seemed to wake from a doze; he drew himself slowly upright, took hold of the club, and nodded.

“Aye, that’ll do,” he said softly. His voice sounded thick, and William looked at him sharply.

“You’d best drink some more,” he said, handing up the canteen again. It was getting low; probably no more than a quarter full. Murray took it, though moving sluggishly, drank, and gave it back with a sigh.

They walked without conversation for a half hour or so, leaving William time at last to sort through the events of the morning. It was well past noon now; the sun was pressing on his shoulders like a heated flatiron. How far did Rachel say it was to Freehold? Six miles?

“D’ye want me to tell ye, or no?” Murray said suddenly.

“Tell me what?”

There was a brief sound that might have been either amusement or pain.

“Whether ye’re much like him.”

Possible responses to this came so fast that they collapsed upon themselves like a house of cards. He took the one on top.

“Why do you suppose I should wonder?” William managed, with a coldness that would have frozen most men. Of course, Murray was blazing with such a fever, it would take a Quebec blizzard to freeze him.

“I would, if it was me,” Murray said mildly.

That defused William’s incipient explosion momentarily.

“Perhaps you think so,” he said, not trying to hide his annoyance. “You may know him, but you know nothing whatever about me.”

This time, the sound was undeniably amusement: laughter, of a hoarse, creaking sort.

“I helped fish ye out of a privy ten years ago,” Murray said. “That was when I first kent it, aye?”

Shock struck William almost dumb, but not quite.

“What—that … that place in the mountains—Fraser’s Ridge …?!” He’d succeeded, for the most part, in forgetting the incident of the snake in the privy, and with it, most of a miserable journey through the mountains of North Carolina.

Murray took William’s choler for confusion, though, and chose to elucidate.

“The way ye came out o’ the muck, your eyes bleezin’ blue and your face set for murder—that was Uncle Jamie to the life, when he’s roused.” Murray’s head bobbed forward alarmingly. He caught himself and straightened up with a muffled groan.

“If you’re going to fall off,” William said, with elaborate courtesy, “do it on the other side, will you?”

“Mmphm.”

They paced another hundred yards before Murray came to life again, resuming the conversation—if it could be called that—as though there had been no pause.

“So when I found ye in the swamp, I kent who ye were. I dinna recall ye thankin’ me for saving your life that time, by the way.”

“You can thank *me* for not strapping you into a travois with a dead panther and dragging you for miles through the dirt now,” William snapped.

Murray laughed, gasping a little.

“Ye’d likely do it, if ye had a dead panther.” The effort of laughing seemed to deprive him of balance, and he swayed alarmingly.

“Fall off and I’ll do it anyway,” William said, grabbing him by the thigh to steady him. “Dead panther or not.” Christ, the man’s skin was so hot he could feel it through the buckskin leggings.

Despite his fog, Murray noticed his reaction.

“You lived through the fever,” he said, and took a deep breath. “I will, too; dinna fash.”

“If by that expression you mean that I ought not to be concerned that you’ll die,” William said coldly, “I’m not.”

“I’m no worrit, either,” Murray assured him. The man wobbled slightly, reins held loose in one hand, and William wondered if he could be sunstruck. “Ye promised Rachel, aye?”

“Yes,” William said, adding almost involuntarily, “I owe her and her brother my life, as much as I do you.”

“Mmphm,” Murray said agreeably, and fell silent. He seemed to be going a nasty grayish color under the sun-browned skin. This time he stayed silent for a good five minutes before coming suddenly to life again.

“And ye dinna think I ken much about ye, after listening to ye rave wi’ fever for days?”

“I do not,” William said. “No more than I think I’ll know a great deal about you by the time I get you to Freehold.”

“Maybe more than ye think. Stop, aye? I’m going to puke.”

“Whoa!” The mule obligingly halted, though it clearly didn’t like either the sound or the smell of what was going on behind its head, and kept sidling round in circles, trying to escape it.

William waited ’til it was over, then handed up his canteen without comment. Murray drained it and handed it back. His hand was shaking, and William began to be worried.

“We’ll stop as soon as I find water,” he said. “Get you into the shade.” Neither of them had a hat; he’d left his in the copse, rolled up with his uniform coat under a bush.

Murray didn’t reply to this; he was not precisely raving, but seemed to be pursuing a separate conversation in his head.

“I maybe dinna ken ye that well, but Rachel does.”

That was undeniably true and gave William an oddly mixed sense of shame, pride, and anger. Rachel and her brother *did* know him well; they’d saved his life and nursed him back to health, had traveled with him for weeks and shared both food and danger.

“She says ye’re a good man.”

William’s heart squeezed a little.

“I’m obliged for her good opinion,” he said. The water hadn’t helped that much; Murray was definitely swaying in the saddle, his eyes half closed.

“If you die,” William said loudly, “I’ll marry her.”

That worked; Murray’s eyelids lifted at once. He smiled, very slightly.

“Ken that,” he said. “Ken I’m no going to die? And, besides, ye owe me a life, Englishman.”

“I don’t. I saved your bloody life, too; I saved the both of you from that maniac—Bug, was he?—with the ax in Philadelphia. We’re quits.”

Some interminable time later, Murray roused himself again.

“I doubt it,” he said.

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KEEPING SCORE

JAMIE SAW THE GREYS out of the house and came back with an air of grim satisfaction. I would have laughed if it hadn't hurt to do it, but settled for smiling at him.

"*Your* son, *your* nephew, *your* wife," I said. "Fraser, three; Grey, nil."

He gave me a startled look, but then his face truly relaxed for the first time in days. "You're feeling better, then," he said, and, coming across the room, bent and kissed me. "Talk daft to me some more, aye?" He sat down heavily on the stool and sighed, but with relief.

"Mind," he said, "I havena the slightest idea how I'm going to keep ye, with no money, no commission, and no profession. But keep ye I will."

"No profession, forsooth," I said comfortably. "Name one thing you can't do."

"Sing."

"Oh. Well, besides that."

He spread his hands on his knees, looking critically at the scars on his maimed right hand.

"I doubt I could make a living as a juggler or a pickpocket, either. Let alone a scribe."

"You haven't got to write," I said. "You have a printing press—Bonnie, by name."

"Well, aye," he admitted, a certain light coming into his eyes. "I do. But she's in Wilmington at the moment." His press had been shipped from Edinburgh in the care of Richard Bell, who was—presumably—keeping her in trust until her real owner should come to repossess her.

"We'll go and get her. And then—" But I stopped, afraid to jinx the future by planning too far. It was an uncertain time for everyone, and no telling what the morrow might bring.

"But first," I amended, reaching out to squeeze his hand, "you should rest. You look as though you're about to die."

"Dinna talk that sort of daft," he said, and laughed and yawned simultaneously, nearly breaking his jaw.

"Lie down," I said firmly. "Sleep—at least until Lieutenant Bixby shows up again with more cheese." The American army had withdrawn to Englishtown, some seven miles away, only an hour's ride. The British army had decamped entirely, but as many of the militia units' enlistments had expired soon afterward, the roads were still very busy with men going home, mostly afoot.

He did lie down on his pallet, with surprisingly little protest—a good indication of just how exhausted he really was—and was asleep in seconds.

I was very tired myself, still very weak and easily exhausted, even by something like the Greys' visit, and I lay back and dozed, stirring to wakefulness every so often when some sound roused me, but Jamie slept deeply, and it eased my heart to hear his soft, regular snore.

I woke some time later, hearing a distant knocking below. As I raised my head blearily off the pillow, I heard a voice shouting, “Hallo, the house!” and snapped into instant alertness. I knew that voice.

I glanced quickly down, but Jamie was dead asleep, curled up like a hedgehog. With excruciating slowness, I managed to swing my legs off the bed and—moving like a geriatric tortoise and clinging to the bed frame—took the two steps that brought me to the window, where I clung to the sill.

There was a handsome bay mule in the dooryard, with a half-naked body laid over the saddle. I gasped—and immediately doubled in pain, but didn’t let go the sill. I bit my lip hard, not to call out. The body was wearing buckskins, and his long brown hair sported a couple of bedraggled turkey feathers.

“Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ,” I breathed, through gritted teeth. “Please, God, don’t let him be—” But the prayer was answered before I’d finished speaking it; the door below opened, and in the next moment William and Lieutenant Macken walked out and lifted Ian off the mule, put his arms about their shoulders, and carried him into the house.

I turned, instinctively reaching for my medical bag—and nearly fell. I saved myself by a grab at the bed frame but let out an involuntary groan that brought Jamie up into a crouch, staring wildly about.

“It’s … all right,” I said, willing my belly muscles into immobility. “I’m fine. It’s—Ian. He’s come back.”

Jamie sprang to his feet, shook his head to clear it, and at once went to the window. I saw him stiffen and, clutching my side, followed him. William had come out of the house and was preparing to mount the mule. He was dressed in shirt and breeches, very grubby, and the sun licked his dark chestnut hair with streaks of red. Mrs. Macken said something from the door, and he turned to answer her. I don't think I made a noise, but something made him look up suddenly and he froze. I felt Jamie freeze, too, as their eyes met.

William's face didn't change, and after a long moment he turned to the mule again, mounted, and rode away. After another long moment, Jamie let out his breath.

"Let me put ye back to bed, Sassenach," he said calmly. "I'll have to go and find Denny to put Ian right."

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I WILL NOT HAVE THEE BE ALONE

SOMEONE HAD GIVEN HIM laudanum before setting to work on his shoulder. Strange stuff, that. He'd had it before, he thought, a long time ago, though he hadn't known the name at the time. Now Ian lay on his back, blinking slowly as the drug ebbed from his mind, trying to decide where he was and what was real. He was pretty sure most of what he was looking at right now wasn't.

Pain. That was real and something to use as an anchor. It hadn't entirely gone away—he'd been aware of it, but remotely, as a disagreeable muddy green strand like a stream of dirty water meandering through his dreams. Now that he was awake, though, it was becoming more disagreeable by the minute. His eyes didn't want to focus yet, but he forced them to roll about in search of something familiar.

He found it at once.

Girl. Lass. Ifrinn, *what was her*—"Rachel," he croaked, and she rose instantly from what she was doing and came to him, her face worried but alight.

"Rachel?" he said again, uncertain, and she took hold of his good hand, pressing it to her bosom.

"Thee is awake, I see," she said softly, her eyes searching his face. "But still much fevered, from the heat of thy skin. How does thee feel?"

"Better for seein' ye, lass." He tried to lick his dry lips. "Is there maybe water?"

She made a small sound of distress that he'd had to ask, and hurried to bring a cup to his lips. It was perhaps the best thing he'd ever tasted, made better by her holding his head in her hand as he drank—he was very dizzy. He didn't want to stop, but she took the cup away.

"More presently," she promised. "Thee must not drink too much, too fast, or thee will vomit. And between the dirt and the blood, thee has made enough mess already," she said, smiling.

"Mmphm," he said, lying back. He was mostly clean, he discovered. Someone had washed away the last of the deer fat and paint, and a good deal of sweat and blood with it. His shoulder was bound up with a poultice of some kind; it smelled tangy and familiar, but his hazy mind was a long way yet from allowing him to think of the name of the herb.

"Did Auntie Claire bind my arm?" he asked. Rachel glanced at him, her brows furrowing.

"Thy aunt is ill," she said carefully. "Thee remembers I told thee that she was wounded—shot—in the battle?"

"No," he said, feeling blank and confused. He had no recollection of the last couple of days or of battle. "No. What—is she all right, then?"

"Denny removed the ball, and thy uncle Jamie is with her. Both of them say very firmly that she will be well." Her mouth twitched a bit, halfway between a smile and worry. He did his best to smile back.

"Then she'll be fine," he said. "Uncle Jamie's a verra stubborn man. Can I have more water?"

This time he drank more slowly and got more down before she took it away. There was a regular clanging noise somewhere; for a time he had taken it for some phantom of hearing left over from the dreams, but now it ceased for a moment, punctuated by a loud curse.

"What—where are we?" he asked, beginning to be able to look at things again. His wavering sight convinced him that he was indeed in a tiny cow byre; it was new hay he'd been smelling, and the warm scent of fresh cow dung. He was lying on a blanket spread over a mound of hay, but the cow was absent for the moment.

"A place called Freehold. The battle was fought nearby; Washington and the army have withdrawn to Englishtown, but a good many wounded soldiers have been given refuge by the inhabitants here. We currently enjoy the hospitality of the local smith, a gentleman named Heughan."

"Oh." The forge. That was the source of the clanging and cursing. He closed his eyes; that helped with the dizziness, but he could see shadows of his dreams on the inside of his eyelids and opened them again. Rachel was still there; that was good.

"Who won the battle?" he asked.

She shrugged, impatient. "So far as anyone has said anything sensible about it, no one. The Americans are cock-a-hoop at not having been defeated, to be sure—but the British army surely wasn't, either. All I care about is thee. And thee will be fine," she said, and laid her hand gently on his forehead. “I say so. And I am as stubborn as any Scot thee cares to name—including thyself.”

“I need to tell ye something, lass.” He hadn’t meant to say that, but the words felt familiar in his mouth, as though he’d said them before.

“Something different?” She had been turning away but paused now, looking wary.

“Different? Did I tell ye things while I was …” He tried to wave a hand in illustration, but even his good arm was heavy as lead.

Rachel caught her upper lip between her teeth, regarding him.

“Who is Geillis?” she asked abruptly. “And what in the name of—of goodness did she *do* to thee?”

He blinked, startled and yet relieved to hear the name. Yes, that was what he’d been dreaming—oh, Jesus. The relief departed at once.

“What did I say?” he asked warily.

“If thee doesn’t recall it, I don’t wish to bring it back to thee.” She knelt down by him, skirts rustling.

“I remember what happened—I just want to ken what I said about it.”

“What happened,” she repeated slowly, watching his face. “In thy dreams, thee means? Or—” She broke off, and he saw her throat move as she swallowed.

“Likely both, lass,” he said softly, and managed to reach for her hand. “I spoke of Geillis Abernathy, though?”

“Thee only said ‘Geillis,’ ” she said, and covered his hand with both of hers, holding fast. “Thee was afraid. And thee called out in pain—but of course thee *was* in pain, so … but then … it—whatever thee saw, it—”

Color rose slowly up her neck and washed her face, and with a slight relapse into the dream, he saw her for an instant as an orchid with a dusky throat into which he could plunge his— He cut that vision off and found that he was breathing fast.

"It seemed that thee experienced something other than pain," she said, frowning.

"Aye, I did," he said, and swallowed. "Can I have a bit more water?"

She gave it to him, but with a fixed look indicating that she didn't mean to be distracted from his story by his physical needs.

He sighed and lay back again. "It was a long time agone, *a nighean,* and nothing to fash about now. I was taken—kidnapped—for a brief time, when I was maybe fourteen or so. I stayed wi' a woman named Geillis Abernathy, on Jamaica, until my uncle found me. It wasna very pleasant, but I wasna damaged, either."

Rachel raised an elegant brow. He loved to watch her do that, but sometimes more than others.

"There were other lads there," he said, "and they were not so lucky." For a long time afterward, he'd been afraid to close his eyes at night, because he saw their faces. But they'd faded away, little by little—and now he felt a spasm of guilt because he'd let them go into darkness.

"Ian," Rachel said softly, and her hand stroked his cheek. He felt the rasp of his beard stubble as she touched him, and a pleasant gooseflesh ran down his jaw and shoulder. "Thee needn't speak of it. I would not bring it back to thee."

"It's all right," he said, and swallowed a little easier. "I'll tell ye—but later. It's an old story, and one ye dinna need to hear just now. But—” He stopped short and she raised the other brow.

“But what I *do* have to tell ye, lass …” And he told her. Much of the previous two days’ events was still a blur, but he recalled vividly the two Abenaki who had hunted him. And what he’d finally done, in the British camp.

She was silent for so long that he began to wonder whether he’d really waked and had this conversation or was still dreaming.

“Rachel?” he said, shifting uneasily on his bed of prickly hay. The door of the byre was open and there was light enough, but he couldn’t read her face at all. Her gaze rested on his own face, though, hazel-eyed and distant, as though she were looking *through* him. He was afraid she was.

He could hear Heughan the smith outside, walking to and fro and making clanking sounds, pausing to apostrophize some uncooperative implement in coarse terms. He could hear his own heart beating, too, an uncomfortable, jerky thump.

Finally a shiver went over Rachel, as though she shook herself awake, and she put a hand on his forehead, smoothing back his hair as she looked into his eyes, her own now soft and fathomless. Her thumb came down and traced the tattooed line across his cheekbones, very slowly.

“I think we can’t wait any longer to be married, Ian,” she said softly. “I will not have thee face such things alone. These are bad times, and we must be together.”

He closed his eyes and all the air went out of him. When he drew breath again, it tasted of peace.

“When?” he whispered.

“As soon as thee can walk without help,” she said, and kissed him, lightly as a falling leaf.

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THE HOUSE ON CHESTNUT STREET

THE HOUSE WAS occupied; there was smoke drifting from the west chimney. The door was locked, though, and bolted to boot.

"I wonder what happened to the old door?" John said to Hal, trying the knob again, just in case. "It used to be green."

"If you knock on this one, you might conceivably get someone to come out and tell you," Hal suggested. They weren't in uniform, but Hal was noticeably on edge, and had been since their call on General Arnold.

The general had been understandably reserved, but civil, and after reading Fraser's letter over three or four times, had agreed to give them passes to remain in the city and to make such inquiries as they saw fit.

"With the understanding," Arnold had said, a flash of his reputed arrogance showing through the façade of governorship, "that if I hear of anything untoward, I'll have you both arrested and ridden out of the city on a rail."

"On a what?" Hal had said incredulously, he having not encountered this peculiarly American method of making guests feel unwelcome.

"A rail," Arnold had repeated, smiling genially. "Long piece of wood? Used for fences, I believe?"

Hal had turned to John, one eyebrow raised, as though inviting him to translate the speech of some Hottentot randomly encountered. John sighed internally, but did so.

"An undesirable person is mounted on the object in question," he said, "straddling it. Whereupon a party of men lift either end and set off through the streets with it, decanting the rider outside the city. I believe tar and feathers are sometimes applied as a preliminary gesture, though the physical effects of the rail are generally presumed to be sufficient."

"Flatten your ball sac like a horse stepped on it," Arnold said, still smiling. "Won't do your arse any good, either."

"I should imagine not," Hal said politely. His color was somewhat higher than usual, but he gave no other indication of offense, which Grey thought a reasonable indication—not that he needed one—of the importance of their mission to Hal.

The sound of the bolt grating free interrupted his recollection. The door swung open, revealing his housekeeper and cook, Mrs. Figg, fowling piece in hand.

"Lord John!" she exclaimed, dropping the gun with a clatter.

"Well, yes," he said, stepping in and picking it up. He smiled, feeling affection well up in his bosom at sight of her—substantial, tidy, and beribboned as always. "It's very good to see you again, Mrs. Figg. Allow me to make you acquainted with my brother, the—"

"We've met," Hal said, a wry edge to his voice. "How do you do, madam?"

"Better than Your Grace, by the looks of you," Mrs. Figg replied, narrowing her eyes at him. "Still breathing, though, I see." She sounded as though this was not entirely a desirable state of affairs, but Hal smiled broadly at her.

"Did you manage to bury the silver in time?" he asked.

"Certainly," she replied with dignity, and, turning to John, asked, "You come to get it, my lord? I can have it dug up right smart."

"Perhaps not just yet," John said. He looked round, noting the missing banister railing on the upper landing, the smudged and pockmarked wall by the staircase, and—"What's happened to the chandelier?"

Mrs. Figg sighed and shook her head darkly.

"That'd be Master William," she said. "How is he, my lord?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Mrs. Figg. I was in some hopes that he might have been here—but I gather not?"

She looked disturbed at this.

"No, sir. We've not seen him since—well, since the day you went away yourself." She looked hard at him, taking in everything from the cropped hair to the fading bruises and the undistinguished suit, shook her head and sighed, but then straightened her broad shoulders, determined to be cheerful. "And glad we are to see you, sir! And Your Grace," she added as a definite afterthought. "Go sit yourselves down and I'll have you up a nice cup of tea in two minutes."

"You have tea?" Hal said, brightening.

"We buried the tea chest first thing," she informed him. "But I just brought in a brick for Miss Dottie, so—"

"Dottie's here?"

“To be sure,” said Mrs. Figg, pleased to be the bearer of good news. “I’ll just step out to the kitchen and fetch her.”

This proved to be unnecessary, as the sound of the back door opening betokened Dottie’s entrance, carrying an apronful of lumpy objects. These proved to be vegetable marrows from the kitchen garden, which cascaded over the floor in a bouncing flood of green and yellow as she let go the apron in order to leap at her father and embrace him.

“Papa!”

For an instant, Hal’s face changed entirely, soft with love, and Grey was surprised and disconcerted to feel tears come to his own eyes. He turned away, blinking, and wandered over to the sideboard, meaning to give them a private moment.

The silver tea service was gone, of course, but his Meissen porcelain plates were in their accustomed spots on the plate rail. He touched the cool giltribboned border of one, feeling oddly disembodied. *And his place shall know him no more*.

But Dottie was talking now to both of them; Grey turned round to her, smiling.

“I’m so glad you’re both safe and both here!” Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes sparkling—and Grey’s heart misgave him at the knowledge that this state of happiness would be quenched within the next minute, as soon as Hal told her the reason for their presence. Before any such doom could fall, though, Dottie had seized the reins of the conversation and driven it off in another direction entirely.

“Since you *are* here—Uncle John, could we possibly use your house? For the wedding, I mean. Please, please?”

“The wedding?” Hal disengaged himself gently and cleared his throat. “*Your* wedding?”

“Of course I mean my wedding, Papa. Don’t be silly.” She beamed at her uncle, placing a coquettish hand on his sleeve. “May we, Uncle John? We cannot be married in a meetinghouse, but we must have witnesses for a proper marriage of Friends, and, really, I’m sure Papa wouldn’t want to see me married in the public room of a tavern. Would you?” she appealed, turning to Hal, whose expression had reverted to its earlier guardedness.

“Well, certainly you may, my dear,” John said, glancing round his parlor. “Assuming that I retain possession of this place long enough for the marriage to take place. When is the ceremony to be, and how many witnesses will we need to accommodate?”

She hesitated, tapping a fingernail against her teeth.

“I’m not really sure. There will be some of the conscientious Friends who, like Denny, have been put out of meeting for joining the Continental army. And some friends—friends in the lowercase, meaning no disrespect—if any are left in Philadelphia. And … family?” She hesitated again, looking at her father sideways, from under her lashes. John suppressed a smile.

Hal closed his eyes and sighed deeply.

“Yes, I’ll come to your wedding,” he said, opening them with resignation. “And so will Henry, if I have to drag him by the scruff of the neck. I suppose Mrs. Woodcock must be invited, too,” he added, with a marked lack of enthusiasm. “But of course Adam … and—and Ben—”

John thought for a moment that he must tell her now, but his brother’s lips closed, firmed with determination. He didn’t look at John, but John caught the *“Not now, for God’s sake. Let her be happy for a bit longer,”* as clearly as if it had been spoken aloud.

“No, that’s too bad,” Dottie said with regret, and met her father’s eyes directly. “I’m sorry about Mama. I did write to her, though.”

“Did you, sweetheart?” Hal said, sounding almost normal. “That was thoughtful.” He tilted his head at her, though, eyes narrowing a bit. “What else?”

“Oh.” Her color, which had returned to normal, rose again, and she began absently pleating her apron with one hand. “Well. Did you know that Rachel—Denzell’s sister—is affianced to Ian Murray? That’s Mr. James—no, no, we don’t use ‘Mister,’ sorry—he’s the nephew of James Fraser. You know—”

“I do know,” Hal said, in a tone cutting off further amendation. “Who he is, I mean. What are you saying, Dottie? Without embroidery, if you please.”

She sniffed at him but didn’t appear to be discomposed in the least.

“Well, then. Rachel and Ian wish to be married as soon as they can, and so do Denny and I. As all the witnesses will be present, why not have both marriages at the same time?”

This time, Hal did look at John. Who returned the look, somewhat taken aback.

“Ah … well. I suppose that would mean additional guests? Including the aforementioned Mr. Fraser? I’m sure you will excuse my using his title, my dear; I’m accustomed to such social excesses.”

“Well, yes. Rachel says that Mrs. Fraser is enough recovered that they will return to Philadelphia tomorrow or next day. And then of course there’s Fergus and his wife, Marsali, and perhaps the children, and I don’t know if there are other friends who—I don’t *think* Ian has any Mohawk relations nearby, but—”

“One, two, three, four, five …” John turned and began counting the small gilt chairs that stood rigidly to attention beneath the wainscoting. “I think we shall be somewhat cramped, Dottie, but if—”

Mrs. Figg cleared her throat. The sound was sufficiently impressive that everyone else stopped talking and looked at her.

“Beg pardon, gentlemen,” she said, and a faint flush was visible on her round face. “I don’t mean to be forward or presuming … but so happens that I mentioned to the Reverend Figg about Miss Dottie and Friend Denzell needing a place to be married in.”

She cleared her throat, the blush growing deeper beneath her dark skin, so that she bore a surprising resemblance to a just-fired cannonball, Grey thought, charmed by the notion.

“And … well, the long and the short of it, ma’am and gentlemen, is that the reverend and his congregation would be pleased was you to consider being married in the new church building, you having been so kind as to contribute to it. ’Tain’t anyways fancy, mind, but—”

“Mrs. Figg, you are a marvel.” Grey clasped her hands in his, an attention that flustered her to the point of speechlessness. Seeing this, he let go, though this allowed Dottie to swoop in and kiss the housekeeper, exclaiming in gratitude. That was all right, but when Hal took Mrs. Figg by the hand and kissed it, the poor lady was reduced nearly to the point of suffocation and, snatching back her hand, retreated in haste, muttering disjointedly about tea and narrowly avoiding tripping on a marrow.

“Is it all right to be married in a church?” Hal asked Dottie, once Mrs. Figg had retired to a safe distance. “It’s not like Jews, is it? We needn’t be circumcised in order to attend? Because if so, I think your guest list may be substantially reduced."

"Oh, I'm sure it's not …" Dottie began rather vaguely, but her attention was distracted by something seen through the front window. "Goodness, is that …?"

Not bothering to complete her thought, she flew to the unbolted door and yanked it open, revealing a startled William on the stoop.

"Dottie!" he said. "What—" And then caught sight of John and Hal. William's face underwent a lightning shift that made a *frisson* run straight down John's back to his tailbone. He'd seen that exact expression on Jamie Fraser's face a hundred times, at least—but had never before seen it on William's.

It was the look of a man who doesn't like his immediate prospects one bit—but who feels himself entirely capable of dealing with them. William stepped inside, repelling by force of will Dottie's abortive attempt to embrace him. He removed his hat and bowed to Dottie, then, punctiliously, to John and Hal.

"Your servant, ma'am. Sirs."

Hal snorted, looking his nephew over from head to toe. William was dressed much as John and Hal were, in ordinary clothes—though clothes of good cut and quality, John observed; clearly his own.

"And where the devil have *you* been for the last three days, may I ask?"

"No, you mayn't," William replied briefly. "Why are *you* here?"

"Looking for you, for one thing," John replied equably, before Hal could stick his oar in again. He'd put the fowling piece on the mantel, easily within Hal's reach, but was reasonably sure it wasn't loaded. "And for Captain Richardson, for another. Have you seen him recently?"

William's expression of surprise made John heave an internal sigh of relief. "No, I haven't." William glanced shrewdly from one man to the other. "Is that what you were doing at Arnold's headquarters? Looking for Richardson?"

"Yes," John answered, surprised. "How did you—oh. You were watching the place." He smiled. "I did wonder how you happened to appear here so fortuitously. You followed us from General Arnold's."

William nodded and, stretching out a long arm, drew out one of the chairs from the wall. "I did. Sit down. Things need to be said."

"*That* sounds rather ominous," Dottie murmured. "Perhaps I'd best fetch the brandy."

"Please do, Dottie," John said. "Tell Mrs. Figg we want the '57, if you would. If it isn't buried, I mean."

"I think everything of an alcoholic nature is in the well, actually. I'll fetch it."

Mrs. Figg herself arrived at this point with a rattling tea tray, apologizing for the lowly earthenware pot in which the beverage was brewing, and within a few moments, everyone was provided with a steaming cup and a small glass of the '57.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Hal said, accepting a glass from Dottie, then adding pointedly, "You needn't stay."

"I'd rather you did, Dottie," William said quietly, but with an overt stare at Hal. "There are things you ought to know, I think."

With no more than a brief glance at her father, Dottie, who had been picking up the scattered squash, sat down on the ottoman, opposite her cousin.

"Tell me, then," she said simply.

"Nothing out of the way," he assured her, with an assumption of casualness. "I've recently discovered that I am the natural son of one James Fraser, who—"

"Oh," she said, and looked at him with renewed interest. "I *did* think General Fraser reminded me of someone! Of course, that's it! Goodness, Willie, you *do* look like him!"

William looked flabbergasted, but quickly pulled himself together.

"He's a general?" he asked Hal.

"He was," Hal said. "He's resigned his commission."

William made a small, humorless noise. "Has he? Well, so have I."

After a long silent moment, John placed his cup carefully on its saucer with a small clink.

"Why?" he asked mildly, at the same moment that Hal, frowning, said, "Can you do such a thing while technically a prisoner of war?"

"I don't know," William said tersely, and evidently in answer to both questions. "But I've done it. Now, as to Captain Richardson …" and he recounted his astonishing encounter with Denys Randall-Isaacs on the road.

"Or, rather, Denys Randall, as he now calls himself. Evidently his stepfather's a Jew, and he wishes to avoid the association."

"Sensible," Hal said briefly. "I don't know him. What else do you know about him, William? What's his connection with Richardson?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," William said, and, draining his cup, reached for the pot and poured another. "There *is* one, obviously, and prior to this, I would have assumed that Randall perhaps worked with, or for, Richardson."

“Perhaps he still does,” John suggested, a slight edge in his voice. He’d been a spy himself for some years and was disinclined to take things said by known intelligencers at face value.

That seemed to take William aback for a moment, but he nodded reluctantly.

“All right,” he conceded. “But tell me—why the devil are *you* two interested in Richardson?”

They told him.

At the conclusion, Hal was perched anxiously on the ottoman beside Dottie, an arm round her shaking shoulders. She was weeping silently, and he was dabbing at her face with his handkerchief, this now a grubby rag following its service as a flag of truce.

“I don’t believe it,” he was repeating doggedly, for the sixth or seventh time. “Do you hear me, darling, I do *not* believe it, and I won’t have you believe it, either.”

“N-no,” she said obediently. “No … I won’t. Oh, *Ben*!”

In some hopes of distracting her, John turned back to William.

“And what business brought you to Philadelphia, may I ask? You can’t have come in search of Captain Richardson, because when you left camp, you didn’t know he’d disappeared.”

“I came on a personal matter,” William said, in a tone suggesting that the matter was still personal and was going to remain that way. “But also …” He pressed his lips together for a moment, and again John had that odd sense of dislocation, seeing Jamie Fraser. “I was going to leave this here for you, in case you came back to the city. Or ask Mrs. Figg to send it to New York, if …” His voice trailed away, as he pulled a letter from the breast of his dark-blue coat.

"But I needn't now," he concluded firmly, and put it away again. "It's only saying what I've already told you." A slight flush touched his cheekbones, though, and he avoided John's eye, turning instead to Hal.

"I'll go and find out about Ben," he said simply. "I'm not a soldier any longer; there's no danger of my being taken up as a spy. And I can travel much more easily than you can."

"Oh, William!" Dottie took the handkerchief from her father and blew her nose with a small, ladylike honk. She looked at him with brimming eyes.

"Will you, really? Oh, *thank* you!"

That was not, of course, the end of it. But it was no revelation to Grey that William possessed a stubbornness so obviously derived from his natural father that no one but Hal would even have thought of arguing with him. And even Hal didn't argue long.

In due course, William rose to go.

"Give Mrs. Figg my love, please," he said to John, and, with a small bow to Dottie, "Goodbye, cousin."

John followed him to the door to let him out, but at the threshold put a hand on his sleeve.

"Willie," he said softly. "Give me the letter."

For the first time, William looked a little less than certain. He put his hand to his breast, but left it there, hesitant.

"I won't read it—unless you don't come back. But if you don't … I want it. To keep."

William drew breath, nodded, and, reaching into his coat, removed a sealed cover and handed it over. Grey saw that it had been sealed with a thick daub of candle wax and that William hadn't used his signet, preferring instead to stamp it with his thumbprint, firm in the hot wax.

“Thank you,” he said through the lump in his throat. “Godspeed. Son.”

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THE SENSE OF THE MEETING

THE METHODIST CHURCH was a modest wooden building with plain glass windows, and, while it did have an altar, might otherwise easily have passed as a Quaker meetinghouse, bar three framed cross-stitched samplers bearing Bible verses that hung on one wall. I heard Rachel let out her breath as she stopped just inside, looking around.

"No flowers?" Mrs. Figg had said the day before, scandalized. "I understand plain, but *God* made flowers!"

"A Friends' meetinghouse would not have flowers," Rachel had said, smiling. "We think them somewhat pagan, and a distraction to worship. But we are thy guests, and surely a guest must not tell his host how to keep his own house."

Mrs. Figg blinked at the word "pagan," but then made a low humming noise and settled back into benignity.

"Well and good, then," she said. "His lordship has three good rosebushes, and there's sunflowers in every yard in town. Lot of honeysuckle, too," she added thoughtfully. There was; everyone planted honeysuckle by the privy.

As a nod to the Quakers' sensibilities, though, there was only one vase of flowers—a very plain glass vase—between the two wooden benches that had been set at the front of the room, and the faint perfume of honeysuckle and pink cabbage roses mingled with the turpentine smell of hot pine boards and the pungent scents of fairly clean but very hot people.

Rachel and I stepped outside again, joining the rest of what I supposed might be called the wedding party, in the shade under a big lime tree. People were still arriving in ones and twos, and I caught a good many curious looks directed at us—though these were not aimed at the two brides.

"You are being married in … *that*?" Hal said, eyeing Dottie's Sunday-best gown of soft gray muslin with a white fichu and a bow at the back of the waist. Dottie raised one smooth blond brow at him.

"Ha," she said. "Mummy told me what *she* wore when you married her in a tavern in Amsterdam. *And* what your first wedding was like. Diamonds and white lace and St. James's Church didn't help all that much, did they?"

"Dorothea," Denzell said mildly. "Don't savage thy father. He has enough to bear."

Hal, who had flushed at Dottie's remarks, went somewhat redder at Denny's and breathed in a menacing rasp, but didn't say anything further. Hal and John were both wearing full dress uniform and far outshone the two brides in splendor. I thought it rather a pity that Hal wouldn't get to walk Dottie down the aisle, but he had merely inhaled deeply when the form of the marriage was outlined to him and said—after being elbowed sharply in the ribs by his brother—that he was honored to witness the event.

Jamie, by contrast, did not wear uniform, but his appearance in full Highland dress made Mrs. Figg's eyes bulge—and not only hers.

"Sweet Shepherd of Judea," she muttered to me. "Is that man wearing a woolen *petticoat*? And what sort of pattern is that cloth? Enough to burn the eyes out your head."

"They call it a *Fèileadh beag,*" I told her. "In the native language. In English, it's usually called a kilt. And the pattern is his family tartan."

She eyed him for a long moment, the color rising slowly in her cheeks. She turned to me with her mouth open to ask a question, then thought better and shut it firmly.

"No," I said, laughing. "He isn't."

She snorted. "Either way, he's like to die of the heat," she predicted, "and so are those two gamecocks." She nodded at John and Hal, glorious and sweating in crimson and gold lace. Henry had also come in uniform, wearing his more modest lieutenant's apparel. He squired Mercy Woodcock on his arm and gave his father a stare daring him to say anything.

"Poor Hal," I murmured to Jamie. "His children are rather a trial to him."

"Aye, whose aren't?" he replied. "All right, Sassenach? Ye look pale. Had ye not best go in and sit down?"

"No, I'm quite all right," I assured him. "I just *am* pale, after a month indoors. It's good to be in the fresh air." I had a stick, as well as Jamie, to lean on but was feeling quite well, bar a slight stitch in my side, and was enjoying the sensations of mobility, if not the sensation of wearing stays and petticoats in hot weather again. It was going to be even hotter, sitting packed together once the meeting began; the

Reverend Mr. Figg's congregation was there, of course, it being their church, and the benches were filled with bodies.

The church had no bell, but a few blocks away the bell of St. Peter's began to toll the hour. It was time, and Jamie, I, and the Grey brothers made our way inside and found our places. The air hummed with murmured conversation and curiosity—the more so at the British uniforms and Jamie's plaid, though both he and the Greys had left their swords at home, in deference to the Friends' meeting.

Both curiosity and conversation rose to a much higher pitch when Ian walked in. He wore a new shirt, white calico printed with blue and purple tulips, his buckskins and breechclout, moccasins—and an armlet made of blue and white wampum shells, which I was reasonably sure that his Mohawk wife, Works With Her Hands, had made for him.

"And here, of course, is the best man," I heard John whisper to Hal. Rollo stalked in at Ian's heel, disregarding the further stir *he* caused. Ian sat down quietly on one of the two benches that had been set at the front of the church, facing the congregation, and Rollo sat at his feet, scratched himself idly, then collapsed and lay panting gently, surveying the crowd with a yellow stare of lazy estimation, as though judging them for eventual edibility.

Denzell came in, looking a little pale, but walked up and sat down on the bench beside Ian. He smiled at the congregation, most of whom murmured and smiled back. Denny wore his best suit—he owned two—a decent navy broadcloth with pewter buttons, and while he was both shorter and less ornamental than Ian, did not by any means disappear beside his outlandish brother-in-law-to-be.

"You're no going to be sick, lass?" Jamie said to Rachel. She and Dottie had come in, but hovered near the wall.

Rachel's hands were clenched in the fabric of her skirt. She was white as a sheet, but her eyes glowed. They were fastened on Ian, who was looking at no one but her, his own heart in his eyes.

"No," she whispered. "Come with me, Dottie." She held out a hand, and the two girls walked together to the other bench and sat down. Dottie's color was high, and so was her head. Rachel folded her hands in her lap and resumed looking at Ian. I felt Jamie sigh a little and relax. On Jamie's far side, Jenny craned to see round him, then smiled with gratification.

She'd made Rachel's dress herself, for after the exigencies of recent months, Rachel owned nothing that wasn't near rags. And while Jenny was generally in favor of modesty in dress, she knew her way around a bustline. The dress was a pale-green chintz with a small pattern of dark-green curling vines, and fitted like a glove. With her dark-brown hair shining loose on her shoulders and hazel eyes huge in her face, Rachel looked like some denizen of the forest—perhaps a tree nymph.

I was about to share this fancy with Jamie when the Reverend Mr. Figg walked up to the front of the church, turned, and smiled at the congregation.

"Blessings to you all this day, brothers and sisters!" he said, and was answered by a genial rumble of "Blessings to you, brother!" and discreet "Amens."

"Well, now." He glanced from Ian and Denny to the girls, then back to the congregation. "We're gathered here for a wedding today. But the ladies and gentlemen being married belong to the Society of Friends, so it will be a Quaker wedding—and that's maybe a little different from ones you've seen before, so I take the liberty of telling you how it goes."

A little hum of interest and speculation, which he quieted with one hand. Mr. Figg was small and dapper in black suit and high white stock, but had immense presence, and every ear was tuned attentively to his explanations.

"We have the honor to host this meeting—for that's what the Friends call their worship. And for them, a wedding is just a normal part of meeting. There's no priest or minister involved; the lady and the gentleman just … marry each other, when they feel like it's the right time."

That caused a ripple of surprise, perhaps a little disapproval, and I could see the color rise in Dottie's cheeks. Mr. Figg turned to smile at the girls, then back to his congregation.

"I think perhaps one of our Quaker friends might tell us a little bit about their notion of meeting, as I'm sure they know more about it than I do." He turned expectantly toward Denzell Hunter—but it was Rachel who rose to her feet. Mr. Figg didn't see her and started with surprise when she spoke behind him, making everyone laugh.

"Good morning," she said, soft-spoken but clear, when the laughter had died down. "I thank you all for your presence here. For Christ said, 'Wherever two or more of you are gathered in my name, there am I.' And that is all the essence of a meeting of Friends: that Christ may make His presence known among us—and within us." She spread her hands a little. "So we gather, and we listen—both to one another and to the light within us. When a person is moved of the spirit to speak, he or she does speak."

"Or sing, if thee likes," Dottie put in, dimpling at John.

"Or sing," Rachel agreed, smiling. "But we do not fear silence, for often God speaks loudest in the quiet of our hearts." And with that, she sat down again, composed.

A moment of shuffling and blinking among the crowd was succeeded in fact by an expectant silence—this broken by Denny, who rose deliberately and said, "I am moved to tell thee how grateful I am for your gracious use of us. For I was put out of meeting, and my sister with me, for my stated intent to join the Continental army. And for the same reason, we are not welcome as members of Philadelphia meeting." He glanced at Rachel, light glinting from his spectacles.

"This is a grievous thing to a Friend," he said quietly. "For our meeting is where our lives and souls abide, and when Friends marry, the whole of their meeting must approve and witness the marriage, for the community itself will support the marriage. I have deprived my sister of this approval and support, and I beg she will forgive me."

Rachel gave an unladylike snort. "Thee followed thy conscience, and if I hadn't thought thee right, I would have said so."

"It was my responsibility to take care of thee!"

"Thee has taken care of me!" Rachel said. "Do I look malnourished? Am I naked?"

A ripple of amusement ran through the congregation, but neither of the Hunters was noticing.

"I took thee from thy home and from the meeting that cared for thee and obliged thee to follow me into violence, into an army full of violent men."

"That would be me, I expect," Ian interrupted, clearing his throat. He looked at Mr. Figg, who seemed somewhat stunned, then at the rapt assemblage on the benches. "I'm no a Friend myself, ye ken. I'm a Highlander and a Mohawk, and they dinna come much more violent than that. By rights, I shouldna wed Rachel, and her brother shouldna let me."

"I should like to see him stop me!" said Rachel, sitting bolt upright with her fists curled on her knees. "Or thee, either, Ian Murray!"

Dottie appeared to be finding the conversation amusing; I could see her struggling not to laugh—and, glancing sideways along the bench in front of me, I could see precisely the same expression on her father's face.

"Well, it's on my account that ye couldna be wed in a proper Quaker meeting," Ian protested.

"No more than on mine," Denny said, grimacing.

"Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa," Jamie murmured in my ear. "D'ye think I should say it's all my fault, for leaving Ian wi' the Indians and bein' a bad example to him?"

"Only if the spirit moves you," I said, not taking my eyes off the show. "Personally, I'd advise you and the spirit to stay out of it."

Mrs. Figg was not disposed to stay out of it. She cleared her throat loudly.

"Now, pardon me for interrupting, but from what I understand, you Friends think a woman's equal to a man, is that right?"

"It is," Rachel and Dottie said firmly together, and everyone laughed.

Mrs. Figg flushed like a ripe black plum, but kept her composure. "Well, then," she said. "If these ladies want to marry with you gentlemen, why do you think you got any business trying to talk them out of it? Have you maybe got your own reservations about the matter?"

A distinctly feminine murmur of approval came from the congregation, and Denny, who was still standing, seemed to be struggling for his own composure.

“Does he have a cock?” came a French-accented whisper from behind me and an unhinged giggle from Marsali in response. “You can’t get married without a cock.”

This reminiscence of Fergus and Marsali’s unorthodox wedding on a Caribbean beach made me stuff my lace handkerchief into my mouth. Jamie shook with suppressed laughter.

“I do have reservations,” Denzell said, taking a deep breath. “Though not,” he added hastily, with a glance at Dottie, “regarding my desire to wed Dorothea or the honor of my intentions toward her. My reservations—and perhaps Friend Ian’s, though I must not speak for him—lie entirely the other way. That is, I—we, perhaps—feel that we must lay bare our failings and limitations as … as husbands—” And for the first time, he, too, blushed. “That Dorothea and Rachel may … may come to a proper—er …”

“That they know what they may be getting into?” Mrs. Figg finished for him. “Well, that’s a fine sentiment, Dr. Hunter—”

“Friend,” he murmured.

“*Friend* Hunter,” she said, with a minimal roll of the eyes. “But I tell you two things. One, your young lady probably knows more about you than you do.” More laughter. “And two—speaking as a woman with some experience—I can tell you that nobody knows what being married’s going to be like until you find yourself in the midst of it.” She sat down with an air of finality, to a hum of approbation.

There was a certain amount of glancing to and fro and a sense of movement on the left side of the church, where several men sat together. I had seen them come in, with women who were plainly their wives; the women had separated, though, and gone to sit on the right side of the church, which made me think that they might be Quakers, though there was nothing in their dress that differentiated them from the other workmen and merchants in the congregation. I could see them come to some sort of silent consensus now, and one of them rose.

"I am William Sprockett," he said formally, and cleared his throat. "We have come to speak in support of Friend Hunter. For we also are Friends who have followed the dictates of our conscience to involvement with rebellion and other matters that a Friend would normally seek to avoid. And in consequence … have been read out of meeting."

He paused, brow furrowed, evidently not sure how to go on. A small woman in yellow rose on the other side and spoke clearly.

"What my husband seeks to say, friends, is that a man who would not do as his inner light tells him to is no man. And that while a man of conscience can be mighty inconvenient at times, it don't make him a bad husband." She smiled at Mr. Sprockett and sat down.

"Yes," said Mr. Sprockett gratefully. "As my wife is kind enough to say, going to fight don't unfit us for marriage. So we've all come"—he swept a broad hand around him, indicating his companions and the wives across the aisle—"to approve and witness thy marriage, Friend Hunter."

"And we will support thy marriage, Dorothea," Mrs. Sprockett put in, with a bob of her head. "And thine, Rachel."

Denny Hunter had remained standing while all this colloquy was going on.

“I … thank you, Friends,” he said, and sat down abruptly, followed more slowly by the Sprocketts.

A hush fell upon the room, and for a little while there was no sound but the remote noise of the streets outside. Here and there a cough, the clearing of a throat, but, overall, silence. Jamie laid a hand on mine, and my fingers turned to intertwine with his. I could feel his pulse in my own fingertips, the solid bones of knuckle and phalanges. His right hand, battered and marked with the scars of sacrifice and labor. Marked also with the signs of my love, the crude repairs done in pain and desperation.

Blood of my blood, bone of my bone …

I wondered whether people who are unhappily married think of their own nuptials when they witness a wedding; I thought that those who are happy always do. Jenny’s head was bowed, her face calm and inward but peaceful; did she think now of Ian and her wedding day? She did; her head turned a little to one side, she laid a hand lightly on the bench and smiled at the ghost who sat by her side.

Hal and John sat on the bench in front of us, a little to the side, so I could catch glimpses of their faces, so much alike and yet so different. Both of them had been married twice.

It was a slight shock, in fact, to recall that John’s second marriage had been to me, for he felt entirely separate from me now, our brief partnership seeming so removed in time as almost to be unreal. And then … there was Frank.

Frank. John. Jamie. Sincerity of intention wasn’t always enough, I thought, looking at the young people on the benches at the front of the church, none of them now looking at one another but staring at their folded hands, the floor, or sitting with closed eyes. Perhaps realizing that, as

Mrs. Figg had said, a marriage is made not in ritual or in words but in the living of it.

A movement pulled me out of my thoughts; Denny had risen to his feet and held out a hand to Dottie, who rose as though mesmerized and, reaching out, clasped both his hands in hers, hanging on for dear life.

“Does thee feel the sense of the meeting clear, Dorothea?” he asked softly, and at her nod, spoke:

“In the presence of the Lord, and before these our Friends, I take thee, Dorothea, to be my wife, promising, with divine assistance, to be unto thee a loving and faithful husband so long as we both shall live.”

Her voice was low but clearly audible as, face shining, she replied:

“In the presence of the Lord, and before these our Friends, I take thee, Denzell, to be my husband, promising, with divine assistance, to be unto thee a loving and faithful wife so long as we both shall live.”

I heard Hal catch his breath, in what sounded like a sob, and then the church burst into applause. Denny looked startled at this but then broke into a brilliant smile and led Dottie, beaming on his arm, out through the congregation to the back of the church, where they sat close together on the last bench.

People murmured and sighed, smiling, and the church gradually quieted—but not to its former sense of contemplation. There was now a vibrant sense of expectation, tinged perhaps with a little anxiety, as attention focused on Ian and Rachel—no longer looking at each other but down at the floor.

Ian took a breath audible to the back benches, raised his head, and, taking the knife from his belt, laid it on the bench beside him.

"Aye, well … Rachel kens I was once married, to a woman of the Wolf clan of the Kahnyen'kehaka. And the Mohawk way of marriage is maybe none so different from the way Friends do it. We sat beside each other before the people, and our parents—they'd adopted me, ken—spoke for us, sayin' what they kent of us and that we were of good character. So far as *they* knew," he added apologetically, and there was a breath of laughter.

"The lass I was to wed had a basket on her lap, filled wi' fruit and vegetables and other bits o' food, and she said to me that she promised to feed me from her fields and care for me. And I—" He swallowed and, reaching out, laid a hand on his knife. "I had a knife, and a bow, and the skins of some otters I'd taken. And I promised to hunt for her and keep her warm wi' my furs. And the people all agreed that we should be married, and so … we were."

He stopped, biting his lip, then cleared his throat and went on.

"But the Mohawk dinna take each other for as long as they live—but only for as long as the woman wishes. My wife chose to part wi' me—not because I hurt or mistreated her, but for … for other reasons." He cleared his throat again, and his hand went to the wampum armlet round his biceps.

"My wife was called Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa, which means 'Works With Her Hands,' and she made this for me, as a love token." Long brown fingers fumbled with the strings, and the strip of woven shells came loose, slithering into his hand. "Now I lay it down, as witness that I come here a free man, that my life and my heart are once more mine to give. And I hope I may be allowed now to give them forever."

The blue and white shells made a soft clicking noise as he laid them on the bench. He let his fingers rest on them for a moment, then took his hand away.

I could hear Hal's breathing, steady now but with a faint rasp. And Jamie's, thick in his throat.

I could feel all sorts of things moving like wraiths in the thick, still air of the church. Sentiment, sympathy, doubt, apprehension … Rollo growled very softly in his throat and fell silent, yellow-eyed and watchful at his master's feet.

We waited. Jamie's hand twitched in mine, and I looked up at him. He was looking at Ian, intent, his lips pressed tight, and I knew he was wondering whether to stand up and speak on Ian's behalf, to assure the congregation—and Rachel—of Ian's character and virtue. He caught my glance, though, shook his head very slightly, and nodded toward the front. It was Rachel's part to speak, if she would.

Rachel sat still as stone, face bleached as bone and her eyes on Ian, burning. But she said nothing.

Neither did she move, but something moved in her; I could see the knowledge of it cross her face, and somehow her body changed, straightening and settling. She was listening.

We all listened with her. And the silence kindled slowly into light.

There was a faint throb in the air then, not quite a sound, and people began to look up, called from the silence. A blur appeared between the benches at the front, and a hummingbird materialized, drawn through the open window, a tiny blur of green and scarlet hovering beside the coral trumpets of the native honeysuckle.

A sigh came from the heart of the church, and the sense of the meeting was made clear.

Ian rose, and Rachel came to meet him.

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A CODA IN THREE-TWO TIME

DENZELL AND DOROTHEA

IT WAS THE BEST party that Dorothea Jacqueline Benedicta Grey had ever attended. She had danced with earls and viscounts in the most beautiful ballrooms in London, eaten everything from gilded peacock to trout stuffed with shrimp and riding on an artful sea of aspic with a Triton carved of ice brandishing his spear over all. And she'd done these things in gowns so splendid that men blinked when she hove into view.

Her new husband didn't blink. He stared at her so intently through his steel-rimmed spectacles that she thought she could feel his gaze on her skin, from across the room and right through her dove-gray dress, and she thought she might burst with happiness, exploding in bits all over the taproom of the White Camel tavern. Not that anyone would notice if she did; there were so many people crammed into the room, drinking, talking, drinking, singing, and drinking, that a spare gallbladder or kidney underfoot would pass without notice.

Just possibly, she thought, one or two whole people might pass without notice, too—right out of this lovely party.

She reached Denzell with some difficulty, there being a great many well-wishers between them, but as she approached him, he stretched out a hand and seized hers, and an instant later they were outside in the night air, laughing like loons and kissing each other in the shadows of the Anabaptist Meeting House that stood next door to the tavern.

“Will thee come home now, Dorothea?” Denny said, pausing for a momentary breath. “Is thee … ready?”

She didn’t let go of him but moved closer, dislodging his glasses and enjoying the scent of his shaving soap and the starch in his linen—and the scent of him underneath.

“Are we truly married now?” she whispered. “I am thy wife?”

“We are. Thee is,” he said, his voice slightly husky. “And I am thy husband.”

She thought he’d meant to speak solemnly, but such an uncontainable smile of joy spread across his face at the speaking that she laughed out loud.

“We didn’t say ‘one flesh’ in our vows,” she said, stepping back but keeping hold of his hand. “But does thee think that principle obtains? Generally speaking?”

He settled his glasses more firmly on his nose and looked at her with intense concentration and shining eyes. And, with one finger of his free hand, touched her breast.

“I’m counting on it, Dorothea.”

* * *

SHE'D BEEN IN his rooms before. But first as a guest, and then as an assistant, coming up to pack a basket with bandages and ointments before accompanying him to some professional call. It was quite different now.

He'd opened all the windows earlier and left them so, careless of flying insects and the butcher's shop down the street. The second floor of the building would have been suffocating after the day's heat—but with the gentle night breeze coming through, the air was like warm milk, soft and liquid on the skin, and the meaty smells of the butcher's shop were now overborne by the night perfume of the gardens at Bingham House, two streets over.

All trace of his profession had been cleared away, and the light of the candle he lit shone serenely on a plainly furnished but comfortable room. Two small wing chairs sat beside the hearth, a single book on the table between them. And, through the open door, a bed fresh-made with a smooth counterpane and plump white pillows beckoned enticingly.

The blood still thrummed through her body like wine, though she'd had very little to drink. Still, she felt unaccountably shy and stood for a moment just inside the door, as though waiting to be invited in. Denny lit two more candles and, turning, saw her standing there.

"Come," he said softly, stretching out a hand to her, and she did. They kissed lingeringly, hands roaming slowly, clothes beginning to loosen. Her hand drifted casually down and touched him through his breeches. He drew breath and would have said something, but wasn't quick enough.

"One flesh," she reminded him, smiling, and cupped her hand. "I want to see thy half of it."

* * *

"THEE *HAS* SEEN such things before," Denny said. "I know thee has. Thee has brothers, for one thing. And—and in the course of … of treating wounded men …" He was lying naked on the bed, and so was she, fondling the object in question, which seemed to be enjoying the attention immensely. His fingers were sliding through her hair, playing with her earlobes.

"I hope thee doesn't think I ever did this to any of my brothers," she said, sniffing him with pleasure. "And those of wounded men aren't generally in a condition to be appreciated at all."

Denny cleared his throat and stretched himself a little, not quite squirming.

"I think thee should allow me to appreciate thy own flesh for a bit," he said. "If thee expects me to be able to make thee a wife tonight."

"Oh." She looked down at his cock and then at herself, surprised. "What do—does thee—mean? Why wouldn't thee be able to?"

"Ah." He looked pleased and eager—he was so young without his glasses—and bounced off the bed, going into the outer room, his bottom pale and tidy in the candlelight. To Dottie's astonishment, he came back with the book she'd noticed on the table and handed it to her. It was bristling with bookmarks, and as she took it, it fell open in her hands, displaying several drawings of a naked man in cross section, his private parts in various stages of operation.

She looked up at Denny in disbelief.

"I thought—I know thee is a virgin; I didn't want thee to be frightened, or unprepared." He was blushing like a rose, and instead of collapsing in howls of laughter, which she badly wanted to do, she shut the book gently and took his face between her hands.

"Is thee a virgin, too, Denny?" she said softly. His blush grew fierce, but he kept her gaze.

"Yes. But—I do know how. I'm a physician."

That was too much, and she did laugh, but in small, half-stifled blurts of giggling, which infected him, and in seconds they were in each other's arms on the bed, shaking silently, with occasional snorts and repetitions of "I'm a physician," which sent them into fresh paroxysms.

At last she found herself on her back, breathing heavily, Denny lying on top of her, and a slick of perspiration oiling them. She lifted a hand and touched his chest, and gooseflesh rippled over him, the dark hairs of his body curly and bristling. She was trembling, but not with either fear or laughter.

"Is thee ready?" he whispered.

"One flesh," she whispered back. And they were.

* * *

THE CANDLES had burned down nearly to their sockets, and the naked shadows on the wall moved slowly.

"Dorothea!"

"Thee should probably be quiet," she advised him, briefly removing her mouth in order to talk. "I've never done this before. Thee wouldn't want to distract me, now, would thee?" Before he could summon a single word, she had resumed her alarming actions. He groaned—he couldn't help it—and laid his hands gently, helplessly, on her head.

"It's called fellatio, did thee know that?" she inquired, pausing momentarily for breath.

"I did. How … I mean … Oh. Oh, God."

"What did thee say?" Her face was beautiful, so flushed that the color showed even by candlelight, her lips deep rose and wet …

"I said—oh, God."

A smile lit her shadowed face with happiness, and her already firm grip on him tightened. His shadow jerked.

"Oh, *good*," she said, and with a small, triumphant crow of laughter, bent to slay him with her sharp white teeth.

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IAN AND RACHEL

IAN LIFTED THE GREEN gown off in a whuff of fabric, and Rachel shook her head hard, shedding hairpins in all directions with little pinging sounds. She smiled at him, her dark hair coming damply down in chunks, and he laughed and plucked out a few more of the little wire hoops.

"I thought I should die," she said, running her fingers through her loosened hair, which Jenny had put up before the party at the White Camel tavern. "Between the pins sticking into my head and the tightness of my stays. Unlace me, will thee—husband?" She turned her back to him but looked over her shoulder, eyes dancing.

He hadn't thought it possible to be more moved in his feelings or more excited in body—but that one word did both. He wrapped one arm around her middle, making her squeak, pulled the knot of her laces loose, and gently bit the back of her neck, making her squeak much louder. She struggled, and he laughed, holding her tighter as he loosened the laces. She was slim as a willow sapling and twice as springy; she squirmed against him, and the small struggle heated his blood still further. If he had had no self-control, he would have had her pinned to the bed in seconds, stays and shift and stockings be damned.

But he did and let her go, easing the stay straps off her shoulders and the stays themselves over her head. She shook herself again, smoothing down the damp shift over her body, then stood tall, preening for him. Her nipples stood out hard against the limp fabric.

"I won thy wager for thee," she said, passing a hand over the delicate blue satin ribbon threaded through the neck of her shift and fluttering the hem, adorned with embroidered flowers in blue and yellow and rose.

"How did ye hear about that?" He reached for her, pulled her close, and clasped both hands on her arse, bare under the shift. "Christ, ye've got a sweet round wee bum."

"Blasphemy, on our wedding night?" But she was pleased, he could tell.

"It's not blasphemy, it's a prayer of thanksgiving. And who told ye about the wager?" Fergus had bet him a bottle of stout that a Quaker bride would have plain linen undergarments. He hadn't known, himself, but had had hopes that Rachel wouldn't feel that pleasing her husband was the same thing as making a vain show for the world.

"Germain, of course." She put her own arms around him and clasped him in similar manner, smiling up. "Thine is neither wee nor round, but no less sweet, I think. Does thee need help with thy fastenings?"

He could tell she wanted to, so he let her kneel and unbutton the flies of his breeches. The sight of the top of her dark, disheveled head, bowed earnestly to the task, made him put his hand gently on it, feeling her warmth, wanting the touch of her skin.

His breeches fell and she stood up to kiss him, her hand caressing his standing cock as though by afterthought.

"Thy skin is so soft there," she said against his mouth. "Like velvet!"

Her touch wasn’t tentative but very light, and he reached down and wrapped his fingers round hers, showing her the way of it, how to grasp it firmly and work it a bit.

“I like it when thee moans, Ian,” she whispered, pressing closer and working it more than a bit.

“I’m not moaning.”

“Yes, thee is.”

“I’m only breathin’ a bit. Here … I like that … but … here.” Swallowing, he picked her up—she made a little whoop—and carried her the two steps to the bed. He dropped her onto the mattress—she made a louder whoop—and landed beside her, scooping her into his arms. There was a certain amount of writhing, giggling, and inarticulate noises, and she got him out of his calico shirt, while he had her shift pulled up at the bottom and down at the top but still puddled round her waist.

“I win,” she said, wiggling the wadded shift down over her hips and kicking it off.

“Ye think that, do ye?” He bent his head and took her nipple in his mouth. She made a very gratifying noise and clutched his head. He butted her gently under the chin, then lowered his head and sucked harder, flicking his tongue like an adder’s.

“I like it when ye moan, Rachel,” he said, pausing for breath and grinning down at her. “D’ye want me to make ye scream?”

“Yes,” she said, breathless, one hand on her wet nipple. “Please.”

“In a bit.” He’d paused to breathe, lifting himself above her to let a bit of air in between them—it was a small room, and hot—and she reached up to feel his chest. She rubbed a thumb lightly over his nipple, and the sensation shot straight down to his cock.

"Let me," she said softly, and lifted herself, a hand round his neck, and suckled him, very gently.

"More," he said hoarsely, bracing himself against her weight. "Harder. Teeth."

"Teeth?" she blurted, letting go.

"Teeth," he said breathlessly, rolling onto his back and pulling her on top. She drew breath and lowered her head, hair spilling across his chest.

"Ow!"

"Thee *said* teeth." She sat up anxiously. "Oh, Ian, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt thee."

"I—ye didn't … well, ye did, but … I mean—do it again, aye?"

She looked at him, dubious, and it occurred to him that when Uncle Jamie told him to go slow and gentle with his virgin, it might not have been all to do with sparing the virgin.

"Here, *mo nighean donn*," he said, drawing her down beside him. His heart was hammering and he was sweating. He brushed the hair back from her temple and nuzzled her ear. "Slow for a bit, aye? Then I'll show ye what I mean by teeth."

* * *

IAN SMELLED OF wine and whisky and musky male skin—he burned astonishingly under her hands and smelled now something like a distant skunk, but in a much better way. She pressed her face into the curve of his shoulder, breathing him in with pleasure. She had his cock in her hand, gripping firmly … but curiosity made her loose her hold and grope lower, fingers probing through the thickness of his pubic hair. He breathed out very suddenly when she cupped his scrotum, and she smiled against his shoulder.

“Does thee mind, Ian?” she whispered, rolling the lovely egg-like shapes of his balls in her palm. She’d seen male scrota many times, baggy and wrinkled, and while she wasn’t disgusted, had never thought them more than mildly interesting. This was wonderful, drawn up tight, the skin so soft and so hot. Daring, she scooted down a little and felt farther back between his legs.

He had an arm about her shoulders and it tightened, but he didn’t tell her to stop, instead spreading his legs a little, allowing her to explore him. She’d wiped men’s arses hundreds of time, and the fleeting thought occurred to her that not all of them took great care … but his hair was curly and very clean, and her hips moved against him involuntarily as her fingertip slid tentatively between his buttocks. He twitched, tensing involuntarily, and she stopped, feeling him shiver. Then she realized that he was laughing, shaking silently.

“Am I tickling thee?” she asked, raising up on one elbow. The light of the single candle flickered over his face, hollowing his cheeks and making his eyes shine as he smiled up at her.

“Aye, that’s one word for it.” He ran a hand half roughly up her back and gripped her by the nape. He shook his head slowly, looking at her. His hair had come loose from its binding and spread out dark behind his head. “Here I am, tryin’ to go slow, tryin’ to be gentle … and next thing I ken, ye’re squeezin’ my balls and stickin’ your fingers up my arse!”

“Is that wrong?” she asked, feeling a slight qualm. “I didn’t mean to be … er, too … bold?”

He pulled her down and hugged her close.

“Ye canna be too bold wi’ me, lass,” he whispered in her ear, and ran his own hand down her back—and down farther. She gasped.

“Shh,” he whispered, and went on—slowly. “I thought—ye’d maybe be scairt at first. But ye’re no scairt a bit, are ye?”

“I am. I’m t-terrified.” She felt the laughter bubble up through her chest, but there was some truth in it, too—and he heard that. His hand stopped moving and he drew back enough to look at her, squinting a little.

“Aye?”

“Well … not terrified, exactly. But—” She swallowed, suddenly embarrassed. “I just—this is so nice. But I know when thee—when we—well, it does hurt, the first time. I—I’m somewhat afraid that … well, I don’t want to stop what we’re doing, but I … I’d like to get that part over with, so I needn’t worry about it.”

“Over with,” he repeated. His mouth twitched a bit, but his hand was gentle on the small of her back. “Well, then.” He eased his other hand down and cupped her, very delicately, between the legs.

She was swollen there, and slippery—had been growing more so ever since he’d lifted her gown off over her head. His fingers moved, one and then two, playing, stroking … and … and …

It took her entirely by surprise, a feeling she knew but bigger, bigger, and then she gave way to it entirely, washed through with ecstasy.

She settled slowly into limpness, throbbing. Everywhere. Ian kissed her lightly.

"Well, that didna take verra long, did it?" he murmured. "Put your hands on my arms, *mo chridhe*, and hold on." He moved over her, agile as a big cat, and eased his cock between her legs, sliding slow but firm. Very firm. She flinched, clenching involuntarily, but the way was slick and her flesh swollen in welcome and no amount of resistance would keep him out.

She realized that her fingers were digging into his arms, but didn't let go.

"Am I hurting ye?" he said softly. He'd stopped moving, his full length inside her, stretching her in a most unnerving way. Something had torn, she thought; it burned a little.

"Yes," she said, breathless. "I don't … mind."

He lowered himself very slowly and kissed her face, her nose, her eyelids, lightly. And all the time the awareness of it—*him*—inside her. He pulled back a little and moved. She made a small, breathless noise, not quite protest, a little pain, not *quite* encouragement …

But he took it as that and moved more strongly.

"Dinna be worrit, lass," he said, a little breathless, too. "I won't take long, either. Not this time."

* * *

ROLLO WAS snoring in the corner, lying on his back for coolness, legs folded like a bug's.

She tasted faintly sweet, of her own musk and a trace of blandness with an animal tang that he recognized as his own seed.

He buried his face in her, breathing deep, and the slight salt taste of blood made him think of trout, fresh-caught and barely cooked, the flesh hot and tender, pink and slick in his mouth. She jerked in surprise and arched up into him, and he tightened his hold on her, making a low *hmmm* of reassurance.

It *was* like fishing, he thought dreamily, hands under her hips. Feeling with your mind for the sleek dark shape just under the surface, letting the fly come down just so … She drew her breath in, hard. And then engagement, the sudden sense of startlement, and then a fierce awareness as the line sprang taut, you and the fish so focused on each other that there was nothing else in the world …

“Oh, God,” he whispered, and ceased to think, only feeling the small movements of her body, her hands on his head, the smell and taste of her, and her feelings washed through him with her murmured words.

“I love thee, Ian.…”

And there was nothing else in the world but her.

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JAMIE AND CLAIRE

THE LIGHT OF a low yellow half-moon shone through gaps in the trees, glimmering on the dark rushing waters of the Delaware. So late at night, the air was cool by the river, very welcome to faces and bodies heated by dancing, feasting, drinking, and generally being in close proximity to a hundred or so other hot bodies for the last six or seven hours.

The bridal couples had escaped fairly early: Denzell and Dottie very inconspicuously, Ian and Rachel to the raucous shouts and indelicate suggestions of a roomful of festive wedding guests. Once they'd left, the party had settled down to serious merrymaking, the drinking now unhampered by the interruption of wedding toasts.

We'd taken our leave of the Grey brothers—Hal, as father of one of the brides, was hosting the party—sometime after midnight. Hal had been sitting in a chair near a window, very drunk and wheezing slightly from the smoke, but sufficiently composed as to stand and bow over my hand.

"You want to go home," I advised him, hearing the faint squeak of his breathing over the winding-down noises of the party. "Ask John if he's got any more ganja, and if he does, smoke it. It will do you good." And not only in a physical way, I thought.

“I thank you for your kind advice, madam,” he said dryly, and, too late, I recalled our conversation the last time he had been exposed to ganja: his worry over his son Benjamin. If he thought of it, too, though, he said nothing, and merely kissed my hand and nodded to Jamie in farewell.

John had stood by his brother’s side most of the evening and stood behind him now as we took our leave. His eyes met mine briefly, and he smiled but didn’t step forward to take my hand—not with Jamie at my shoulder. I wondered now briefly if I should ever see either of the Greys again.

We hadn’t gone back to the printshop but had wandered down by the river, enjoying the coolness of the night air and chatting about the young couples and the excitements of the day.

“I imagine their nights are bein’ a bit more exciting still,” Jamie remarked. “Reckon the lassies will be sore come morning, poor wee things.”

“Oh, it may not be just the girls,” I said, and he sniffed with amusement.

“Aye, well, ye may be right about that. I seem to recall wakin’ the next morning after our wedding and wondering for a moment whether I’d been in a fight. Then I saw you in the bed wi’ me and *knew* I had.”

“Didn’t slow you down any,” I remarked, dodging a pale stone in my path. “I seem to recall being rather rudely awakened next morning.”

“Rude? I was verra gentle with ye. More than ye were with me,” he added, a distinct grin in his voice. “I told Ian so.”

“You told Ian *what*?”

“Well, he wanted advice, and so I—”

"Advice? *Ian*?" To my certain knowledge, the boy had begun his sexual career at the age of fourteen, with a prostitute of similar age in an Edinburgh brothel, and hadn't looked back. Besides his Mohawk wife, there were at least half a dozen other liaisons that I knew of, and I was sure I didn't know them all.

"Aye. He wanted to know how to deal kindly wi' Rachel, her bein' virgin. Something new to him," he added wryly.

I laughed.

"Well, they'll be having an interesting night of it, then—all of them." I told him about Dottie's request in camp, Rachel's advent, and our ad hoc session of premarital counseling.

"Ye told them *what*?" He snorted with amusement. "Ye make *me* say, 'Oh, God,' all the time, Sassenach, and it's mostly not to do wi' bed at all."

"I can't help it if you're naturally disposed to that expression," I said. "You *do* say it in bed with no little frequency. You even said it on our wedding night. Repeatedly. I remember."

"Well, little wonder, Sassenach, wi' all the things ye did to me on our wedding night."

"What I did to *you*?" I said, indignant. "What on earth did I do to you?"

"Ye bit me," he said instantly.

"Oh, I did not! Where?"

"Here and there," he said evasively, and I elbowed him. "Oh, all right—ye bit me on the lip when I kissed ye."

"I don't recall doing that at all," I said, eyeing him. His features were invisible, but the moonglow off the water as he walked cast his bold, straight-nosed profile in silhouette. "I remember you kissing me for quite a long time while you were trying to unbutton my gown, but I'm sure I didn't bite you then."

"No," he said thoughtfully, and ran a hand lightly down my back. "It was later. After I went out to fetch ye some food, and Rupert and Murtagh and the rest all chaffed me. I know, because it was when I drank some o' the wine I'd fetched back, I noticed it burned the cut in my lip. And I bedded ye again before I got round to the wine, so it must ha' been that time."

"Ha," I said. "By that time, you wouldn't have noticed if I'd bitten your head off like a praying mantis. You'd got it properly up your nose and thought you knew everything."

He put an arm round my shoulders, pulled me close, and whispered in my ear, "I'd got it properly up *you, a nighean*. And ye weren't noticing all that much yourself, besides what was goin' on between your legs."

"Rather hard to ignore that sort of carry-on," I said primly.

He gave the breath of a laugh and, stopping under a tree, gathered me in and kissed me. He had a lovely soft mouth.

"Well, I willna deny ye taught me my business, Sassenach," he murmured. "And ye made a good job of it."

"You caught on reasonably quickly," I said. "Natural talent, I suppose."

"If it was a matter of special training, Sassenach, the human race would ha' died out long since." He kissed me again, taking more time over it.

"D'ye think Denny kens what he's about?" he asked, letting go. "He's a virtuous wee man, aye?"

"Oh, I'm sure he knows everything he needs to," I protested. "He's a physician, after all."

Jamie gave a cynical laugh.

"Aye. While he may see the odd whore now and then, it's likely in the way of his profession, not hers. Besides …" He moved close and, putting his hands through the pocket slits in my skirt, took a firm and interesting grip on my bottom. "Do they teach ye in medical college how to spread your wife's wee hams and lick her from tailbone to navel?"

"*I* didn't teach you that one!"

"Indeed ye didn't. And you're a physician, no?"

"That—I'm sure that doesn't make any sense. Are you drunk, Jamie?"

"Dinna ken," he said, laughing. "But I'm sure *you* are, Sassenach. Let's go home," he whispered, leaning close and drawing his tongue up the side of my neck. "I want ye to make me say, 'Oh, God,' for ye."

"That … could be arranged." I'd cooled down during our walk, but the last five minutes had lit me like a candle, and if I'd wanted to go home and take off my stays before, I was now wondering whether I could wait that long.

"Good," he said, pulling his hands out of my skirt. "And then I'll see what I can make *you* say, *mo nighean donn*."

"See if you can make me say, 'Don't stop.' "

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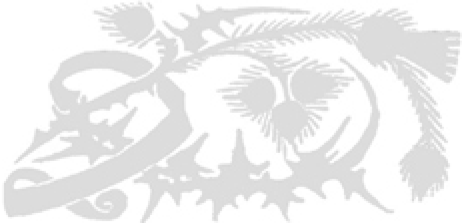
PART SIX



The Ties That Bind

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THE BODY ELECTRIC

Redondo Beach, CA

December 5, 1980

IF SHE HADN'T NEEDED stamps, she wouldn't have stopped in at the post office. She'd have clipped this batch of letters to the mailbox for the postman to collect, or posted them in the corner mailbox when she took the kids down to the beach to look for pelicans.

But she did need stamps; there were at least a dozen more niggling things to deal with: things needing notarization or photocopies or tax returns or …

"S-word," she muttered, sliding out of the car. "Bloody F-wording S-word!" This was small relief to her feelings of anxiety and oppression. It really wasn't fair. Who needed the relief of occasional bad language more than a mother of small children?

Maybe she should start using her mother's "Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ!" instead. Jem had incorporated that one into his own collection of expletives before he turned four and had long since taught it to Mandy; they wouldn't be warped by hearing it.

It hadn't been this hard, last time. Well, no, she corrected herself. It had been a lot harder, in the most important respect. But this … this … this quagmire of pettifogging details—property, bank accounts, leases, notifications … She flicked the sheaf of sealed envelopes in her hand against her thigh with irritation. Some days, she would have taken Jem and Mandy by their hands and run, not walked, straight into the stones with no feeling save relief at abandoning all this bloody Stuff.

She hadn't really had much Stuff when she did it the first time. And, of course, she'd had someone to leave it with. Her heart squeezed a little, remembering the day she'd nailed down the lid on the wooden shipping crate that held her family's modest history: the silver passed down through her father's family, cabinet photographs of her mother's parents, the collection of her father's first editions, her mother's World War II Queen Alexandra uniform cap, still with a faint but detectible odor of iodine about it. And taken such pains in writing the note to Roger to go with it: *You told me once that … everyone needs a history. This is mine.…*

Almost sure then that she'd never see Roger again, let alone the silverware.

She blinked hard and shoved the door of the post office open with so much force that it crashed into the wall, and everyone in the lobby turned to stare at her. Hot-faced, she grabbed the doorframe and closed it with exaggerated care, then crossed the lobby soft-footed, avoiding all eyes.

She shoved the envelopes through the collection-box slot one by one, with a certain feeling of grim satisfaction at each tedious thing disposed of. Preparing to disappear into the past, leaving all Stuff behind, was one thing; preparing to disappear while thinking that you might eventually come *back* and need that Stuff again—or that your children might come back twenty years later, without you … She swallowed. That was something else again, as her father was inclined to say. She couldn't just dump it all on Uncle Joe; he didn't—

She turned, glancing across the lobby automatically at her PO box, and stopped, seeing the letter. She felt the hairs rising on her forearm as she strode across the grubby linoleum and reached for the knob, even before her mind had consciously registered the fact that it didn't look like a utility bill, a credit-card application, or any other sort of official mail.

G-H-I-D-E-I … the tumblers of the combination lock fell and the heavy little door swung open. And right there in the post office, she smelled heather and peat smoke and the breath of the mountains, so strongly that her eyes blurred and her own breath caught in her throat.

It was a regular white envelope, addressed to her in Joe Abernathy's round, capable hand. She could feel something inside it, another envelope, this one with a lump on it—a seal of some kind? She made it to her rented car before ripping it open.

It wasn't an envelope but a sheet of paper, folded and sealed with wax, blurs of black ink bleeding through the paper where a quill had scratched too deep. An eighteenth-century letter. She pressed it to her face, inhaling, but the scent of smoke and heather was gone—if it had ever been there. It smelled now only of age and brittle paper; not even the tang of the iron-gall ink was left.

There was a brief note from Uncle Joe, a slip of paper folded next to the letter.

> *Bree, darlin'—*
>
> *Hope this catches you in time. It came from the estate agent in Scotland. He said when the new tenant at Lallybroch went to put the furniture in storage, they couldn't get that big old desk through the door of the study. So they called an antiques guy to take the thing apart—very carefully, he assured me. And when they did, they found three Queen Victoria stamps and this.*
>
> *I didn't read it. If you haven't left yet, let me know if you want the stamps; Lenny Jr. collects them and will give them a good home, if not.*
>
> *All my love,*
> *Uncle Joe*

She folded the note carefully, pressing the creases, tucking it into her handbag. She felt as though she ought to go somewhere else to read the letter, somewhere private and quiet, so she could go to pieces without anyone noticing. The seal was sooty gray candle wax, not sealing wax, and Roger had sealed it with his thumbprint. It wasn't necessary—she'd recognized the writing immediately—but there was no doubt of the tiny hook-shaped scar left when a scaling knife had slipped while he was cleaning a salmon he and Jem had caught in Loch Ness. She'd kissed it while the cut was healing, and a dozen times since.

But she couldn't wait and, hands trembling, opened her pocketknife and carefully pried off the seal, trying not to break it. It was old and brittle; the candle grease had seeped into the paper over the years, making a shadow around the glob of wax, and it shattered in her hand. She clutched the fragments convulsively and turned the folded paper over.

Brianna Randall Fraser MacKenzie, he'd written on the front. *To be kept until called for*.

That made her laugh, but the sound came out as a sob, and she dashed the back of her hand across her eyes, desperate to read.

The very first words made her drop the letter as though it were on fire.

> *November 15, 1739*

She snatched it back up. Lest she somehow miss it, he'd underlined *1739*.

"How in bloody *hell* did you—" she said aloud, and clapped a hand over her mouth, where she kept it as she read the rest.

> *My Dearest Heart,*
>
> *I know what you're thinking, and I don't know. My best idea is that I've come in search of Jeremiah and found him—or may have found him—but not the person I thought I was looking for.*
>
> *I sought help at Lallybroch, where I met Brian Fraser (you would like him, and he, you), and through him—with the assistance of one Captain Jack Randall, of all people—came into possession of a set of RAF identification disks. I recognized the information on them.*
>
> *We (Buck is still with me) have been searching for Jem since our arrival and have found no sign at all. I won't give*

up—of course you know that—but as our inquiries have borne no fruit in the northern clan lands, I feel I must follow the one clue I have and see if I can locate the owner of those tags.

I don't know what might happen, and I had to leave you some word, however faint the chance that you'll ever see it.

God bless you and Jem—wherever he is, poor little guy, and I can only hope and pray he's safe—and my sweet Mandy.

I love you. I'll love you forever.

R.

She didn't realize that she was crying, until the tears running down her face tickled her hand.

"Oh, Roger," she said. "Oh, dear *God*."

* * *

IN THE LATE evening, with the kids safely asleep and the sound of the Pacific Ocean washing through the open balcony doors, Brianna took out a bound notebook, brand-new, and a Fisher Space Pen (guaranteed to write upside down, underwater, and in conditions of zero gravity), which she thought entirely appropriate to this particular piece of composition.

She sat down under a good light, paused for a moment, then got up and poured a glass of cold white wine, which she set on the table beside her notebook. She'd been composing bits of this in her mind all day and so began with no difficulty.

There was no telling how old the kids might be when—or if—they read it, so she made no effort to simplify things. It wasn't a simple matter.

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR TIME TRAVELERS—PART II

> *Right. Dad's written down what we think we know about this, in terms of observation of occurrence, physical effects, and morality. This next part could best be described as preliminary hypotheses of cause: how time travel might work. I'd call it the scientific part, but you can't actually apply the scientific method very far with the scanty data we have available.*
>
> *Any scientific approach starts with observations, though, and we have enough of those to maybe construct a rough series of hypotheses. Testing those …*

The idea of testing those made Brianna's hand shake so badly that she was obliged to set down her pen and breathe slowly for two or three minutes, until the black spots stopped swarming in front of her eyes. Gritting her teeth, she wrote:

> *Hypothesis 1: That the time passages/vortices/whatever the bloody hell they are/are caused by or occur at the crossing of ley lines. (Defined here as lines of geomagnetic force, rather than the folkloric definition of straight map lines drawn between ancient structures like hill forts, henges, or places of ancient worship, like saints' pools. Supposition is that folkloric lines may be identical or parallel with geomagnetic lines, but no hard evidence to this effect.)*
>
> *Evidence in Support of Hypothesis: Some. But to start with, we don't know whether the standing stones are part of the vortex thingy or just markers set up when ancient*

> *people saw other ancient people step on the grass right … there … and poof!*

“Poof,” she muttered to herself, and reached for the glass of wine. She’d planned to drink it as a reward when she’d finished, but at the moment felt more in need of first aid than reward. “I *wish* it was just poof.” One sip, two, then she set it down, the citric edge of the wine lingering pleasantly on her tongue.

“Where were we? Oh, poof …”

> *Dad was able to connect a lot of the folkloric leys to standing stone circles. It would theoretically be possible to check the geomagnetic polarity of the rock around standing stone circles; that should actually go some way toward supporting Hypothesis 1, but might be a little difficult to execute. That is, you can measure the earth’s magnetic field —Carl Friedrich Gauss figured out how to do it back in 1835 or so—but it isn’t the sort of thing individuals do much.*
>
> *Governments that do geological surveys have the equipment for it; I know the British Geological Survey’s Eskdalemuir Observatory does, because I saw a write-up on them. And I quote: “Such observatories can measure and forecast magnetic conditions such as magnetic storms that sometimes affect communications, electric power, and other human activities.”*

“Other human activities,” she muttered. “Riiight …”

The army does this sort of thing, too, she wrote as an afterthought. “Yes, I’ll get the army right on that.…”

The pen hovered over the page as she thought, but she couldn't add anything else useful there, and so went on:

> *Hypothesis 2: That entering a time vortex with a gemstone (preferably faceted,* vide *remarks made by Geillis Duncan to this effect) offers some protection to the traveler in terms of physical effect.*
>
> *Query: why facets? We used mostly unfaceted ones coming back through Ocracoke, and we know of other travelers using plain unfaceted ones.*
>
> *Speculation: Joe Abernathy told me about one of his patients, an archaeologist who told him about some study done on standing stones up in Orkney, where they discovered that the stones have interesting tonal qualities; if you strike them with wooden sticks or other stones, you get a kind of musical note. Any kind of crystal—and all gems have a crystalline interior structure—has a characteristic vibration when struck; that's how quartz watches work.*
>
> *So what if the crystal you carry has vibrations that respond to—or stimulate, for that matter—vibrations in the standing stones nearby? And if they did … what might be the physical effect? D.B.K.**

She made a swift note at the bottom of the page: **D.B.K.—Don't Bloody Know*, and returned to her writing.

> *Evidence: There really isn't any, other than the aforesaid remarks from Geillis Duncan (though she may have noted some anecdotal material in her journals, which you'll find in the large safe-deposit box at the Royal Bank of Scotland in Edinburgh. Uncle Joe will have the key or will have made provisions for you to get it).*

> *NB: Grannie Claire traveled the first two times without any stones (though note that she was wearing a gold wedding ring the first time, and a gold and a silver ring on the second journey).*
>
> *Grannie said that going with a stone seemed slightly easier—but given the subjectivity of the experience, I don't know how much weight to put on that. Doing it with a stone is the most horrible thing I …*

Maybe better not to say that. She hesitated for some time, but, after all, her own experiences were data, and given how little there was of it … She finished the sentence, then went on.

> *Hypothesis 3: That traveling with a gemstone allows one better control in choosing where/when to emerge.*

She stopped, frowning, and crossed out *where*. There wasn't any indication of people traveling *between* sites. Be bloody handy if they could, though.… She sighed and went on.

> *Evidence: Pretty sketchy, owing to lack of data. We know of a few travelers other than ourselves, and of these, five Native Americans (part of a political group called the Montauk Five) traveled with the use of stones. One of these is known to have died in the attempt, one survived and traveled back about 200 years, and another, a man named Robert Springer (aka "Otter-Tooth"), traveled back more than the usual distance, arriving (approximately) 250–260 years prior to his year of departure. We don't know what happened to the two other members of this group; they may*

> *have traveled to a different time and we haven't found any mention of them (difficult to track down a time traveler, if you don't know when they may have gone, what their real names are, or what they look like), may have been blown out of the time vortex for unknown reasons, or may have died inside it.*

That little possibility unnerved her so much that she set down the pen and took several large swallows of wine before resuming.

> *By the evidence of Otter-Tooth's journal, these men all did travel with gemstones, and he procured a large opal with which he intended to make the return trip. (This is the stone Jemmy made explode, in North Carolina, presumably because fire opals have a high water content.)*

It hadn't—and, thinking back, she couldn't imagine how it hadn't—occurred to her at the time to see whether Jemmy could make water boil by touching it. Well, she could see why it hadn't occurred to her, in retrospect; the last thing she'd wanted was any more dangerous peculiarity near her children, much less dangerous peculiarities being inherent in them.

"I wonder how often it happens that two time travelers marry each other?" she said aloud. No telling what the frequency of the gene—if it was a gene, but that looked to be a decent bet—in the general population was, but it couldn't be *very* common, or people would be walking into Stonehenge and Callanish and going *poof!* on a daily basis.… "Somebody would have noticed," she concluded, and sat twiddling the pen for a bit in meditation.

Might she have met and married Roger if it weren't for the time-traveling thing? No, because it was her mother's need to find out what had happened to the men of Lallybroch that had led them to Scotland.

"Well, I'm not sorry," she said aloud to Roger. "In spite of … everything."

She flexed her fingers and picked up the pen, but didn't write at once. She hadn't thought further with her hypotheses and wanted them to be clear in her mind, at least. She had vague notions about how a time vortex might be explained in the context of a unified field theory, but if Einstein couldn't do it, she didn't think she was up to it right this minute.

"It has to be in there *somewhere*, though," she said aloud, and reached for the wine. Einstein had been trying to form a theory that dealt both with relativity and electromagnetism, and plainly they were dealing with relativity here—but a sort in which it maybe wasn't the speed of light that was limiting. What, then? The speed of time? The *shape* of time? Did electromagnetic fields crisscrossing in some places warp that shape?

What about the dates? Everything they thought they knew—precious little as it was—indicated that travel was easier, safer, on the sun feasts and fire feasts; the solstices and equinoxes.… A little ripple ran up her back. A few things were known about standing stone circles, and one of the common things was that many had been built with astronomical prediction in mind. Was the light striking a specific stone the signal that the earth had reached some planetary alignment that affected the geomagnetism of that area?

“Huh,” she said, and sipped, flipping back over the pages she’d written. “What a hodgepodge.” This wouldn’t do anyone much good: nothing but disconnected thoughts and things that didn’t even qualify as decent speculation.

Still, her mind wouldn’t let go of the matter. *Electromagnetism* … Bodies had electric fields of their own, she knew that much. Was that maybe why you didn’t just disintegrate when you traveled? Did your own field keep you together, just long enough to pop out again? She supposed that might explain the gemstone thing: you *could* travel on the strength of your own field, if you were lucky, but the energy released from the molecular bonds in a crystal might well add to that field, so perhaps …?

“Bugger,” she said, her overworked mental processes creaking to a halt. She glanced guiltily at the hallway that led to the kids’ room. They both knew that word, but they oughtn’t to think their mother did.

She sank back to finish the wine and let her mind roam free, soothed by the sound of the distant surf. Her mind wasn’t interested in water, though; it seemed still concerned with electricity.

“I sing the Body Electric,” she said softly. *“The armies of those I love engirth me.”*

Now, there was a thought. Maybe Walt Whitman had been onto something … because if the electric attraction of *the armies of those I love* had an effect on time-traveling, it would explain the apparent effect of fixing your attention on a specific person, wouldn’t it?

She thought of standing in the stones of Craigh na Dun, thinking of Roger. Or of standing on Ocracoke, mind fixed fiercely on her parents—she’d read all the letters now; she knew exactly where they were.… Would that make a difference? An instant's panic, as she tried to visualize her father's face, more as she groped for Roger's …

The expression of the face balks account. The next line echoed soothingly in her head. *But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face;*

> *It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints of his hips and wrists;*
> *It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his waist and knees—dress does not hide him;*
> *The strong, sweet supple quality he has, strikes through the cotton and flannel;*
> *To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more;*
> *You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.*

She didn't remember any more, but didn't need to; her mind had calmed.

"I'd know you anywhere," she said softly to her husband, and lifted the remains of her glass. *"Slàinte."*

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NAY GREAT SHORTAGE OF HAIR IN SCOTLAND

MR. CUMBERPATCH proved to be a tall, ascetic person with an incongruous crop of red curls that sat on his head like a small, inquisitive animal. He had, he said, taken the disks in trade for a sucking pig, along with a tin pan whose bottom had been burnt through but could easy be patched, six horseshoes, a looking glass, and half a dresser.

“Not really a tinker by trade, see?” he said. “Don’t travel much. But things come and find me, they do.”

Evidently they did. Mr. Cumberpatch’s tiny cottage was crammed to its rafters with items that had once been useful and might be so again, once Mr. Cumberpatch got round to fixing them.

“Sell much?” Buck asked, raising an eyebrow at a disassembled carriage clock that sat on the hearth, its internal organs neatly piled into a worn silver comfit dish.

“Happen,” Mr. Cumberpatch said laconically. “See anything ye like?”

In the interests of cooperation, Roger haggled politely for a dented canteen and a canvas bed sack with only a few small charred holes at one end, these the result of some soldier taking his rest too close to a campfire. And received in turn the name and general direction of the person from whom Mr. Cumberpatch had got the disks.

"Flimsy sort of jewel," his host said, with a shrug. "And t'old woman said she wouldn't have it in t'house, all those numbers might be to do with magic, aye? Her not holdin' with sorcery and t'like."

The old woman in question was possibly twenty-five, Roger thought, a tiny, dark-eyed creature like a vole, who—summoned to provide tea—sized them up with a shrewd glance and proceeded to sell them a small, flabby-looking cheese, four turnips, and a large raisin tart, at an extortionate price. But the price included her own observations on her husband's transaction—well worth it, so far as Roger was concerned.

"That ornament—strange thing, no?" she said, narrowing her eyes at the pocket where Roger had replaced it. "Man what sold it to Anthony said he'd had it from a hairy man, one of them as lives on the wall."

"Which wall would this be, missus?" Buck asked, draining his cup and holding it out for more. She gave him a look from her bead-bright eyes, obviously thinking him a simpleton, but they *were* paying customers, after all.…

"Why, the Roman one, to be sure," she said. "They say the old king o' the Romes put it up, so as to keep the Scots from coming into England." The thought made her grin, small teeth gleaming. "As though anybody'd want to be a-going *there* in t'first place!"

Further questions elicited nothing more; Mrs. Cumberpatch had no idea what was meant by “a hairy man”; that was what the man said, and she hadn’t wondered about it. Declining an offer from Mr. Cumberpatch for his knife, Roger and Buck took their leave, the food wrapped in the bed sack. But as they did so, Roger saw a pottery dish containing a tangle of chains and tarnished bracelets, and a stray gleam of rainy light struck a tiny red glow.

It must have been Cumberpatch’s description of the disks as a jewel—a common way to refer to a pendant ornament—that had made his mind sensitive. He stopped and, stirring the dish with a forefinger, drew out a small pendant, blackened, cracked, and with a broken chain—it looked as though it had been in a fire—but set with a fairly large garnet, caked with grime but faceted.

“How much for this?” he said.

* * *

IT WAS DARK by four o’clock, and long cold nights to be sleeping out of doors, but Roger’s sense of urgency drove them on, and they found themselves benighted on a lonely road, with nothing but a wind-gnarled Caledonian pine for shelter. Starting a fire with tinder and damp pine needles was no joke, but after all, Roger reflected, grimly bashing steel and flint for the hundredth time—and his finger for the twentieth—they had nothing but time.

Buck had, with a forethought born of painful experience, brought a sack of peats, and after a quarter hour of frantic blowing on sparks and thrusting grass-stems and pine needles into the infant flame, they succeeded in getting two of these miserable objects to burn with sufficient heat as to roast—or at least sear—the turnips and warm their fingers, if not the rest of them.

There hadn't been any conversation since they'd left the Cumberpatch establishment: impossible to talk with the cold wind whistling past their ears as they rode, and no breath with which to do it during the struggle with fire and food.

"What'll you do if we find him?" Buck asked suddenly, mid-turnip. "If J. W. MacKenzie really is your father, I mean."

"I've speg"—Roger's throat was clogged from the cold and he coughed and spat, resuming hoarsely—"spent the last three days wondering that, and the answer is, I don't know."

Buck grunted and unwrapped the raisin tart from the bed sack, divided it carefully, and handed Roger half.

It wasn't bad, though Mrs. Cumberpatch couldn't be said to have a light hand with pastry.

"Filling," Roger remarked, thriftily dabbing crumbs off his coat and eating them. "D'ye not want to go, then?"

Buck shook his head. "Nay, I canna think of anything better to do. As ye say—it's the only clue there is, even if it doesna seem to have aught to do with the wee lad."

"Mmphm. And there's the one good thing—we can head straight south to the wall; we needn't waste time looking for the man Cumberpatch got the disks from."

"Aye," Buck said dubiously. "And then what? Walk the length of it, askin' after a hairy man? How many o' those do ye think there might be? Nay great shortage of hair in Scotland, I mean."

"If we have to," Roger said shortly. "But if J. W. MacKenzie—and not just his identity disks—was anywhere in the neighborhood, I'm thinking he would have caused a good bit of talk."

"Mmphm. And how long's this wall, d'ye know?"

"I do, yes. Or, rather," Roger corrected, "I know how long it was when it was built: eighty Roman miles. A Roman mile being just slightly shorter than an English one. No idea how much of it's still there now, though. Most of it, likely."

Buck grimaced. "Well, say we can walk fifteen, twenty miles in a day—the walkin' will be easy, if it's along a bloody wall—that's only four days to cover the lot. Though …" A thought struck him and he frowned, pushing his damp forelock back. "That's if we could walk from end to end. If we hit it midway, though, what then? We might cover half and find nothing, and then have to go all the way back to where we started." He looked accusingly at Roger.

Roger rubbed a hand over his face. It was coming on to rain, and the mizzle was misting on his skin.

"I'll think about it tomorrow, aye?" he said. "We'll have plenty of time to make plans on our way." He reached for the canvas bed sack, shook out a limp turnip frond and ate it, then pulled the sack over his head and shoulders. "Want to join me under this, or are ye for bed?"

"Nay, I'm all right." Buck pulled his slouch hat lower and sat hunched, toes as close to the remnants of the fire as he could get.

Roger drew his knees up and tucked in the ends of the bed sack. The rain made a gentle pittering on the canvas, and in the fatigue of exhaustion and cold, but with the comfort of a full stomach, he allowed himself the further comfort of imagining Bree. He did this only at night but looked forward to it with a greater anticipation than he did supper.

He envisioned her in his arms, sitting between his knees, her head lying back on his shoulder, snug under the canvas with him and her soft hair spangled with raindrops that caught the faint light of the fire. Warm, solid, breathing against his chest, his heart slowing to beat with hers …

“I wonder what I’d say to my own father,” Buck said suddenly. “Had I ever kent him, I mean.” He blinked at Roger from under the shadowed brim of his hat. “Did yours—does he, I mean—know about you?”

Roger suppressed his annoyance at being disturbed in his fantasy, but answered shortly. “Yes. I was born before he disappeared.”

“Oh.” Buck rocked back a little, looking meditative, but said no more. Roger found, though, that the interruption had made his wife vanish. He concentrated, trying to bring her back, imagining her in the kitchen at Lallybroch, the steam of cooking rising up around her, making wisps of red hair curl round her face and moisture gleam on the long straight bridge of her nose …

What he was hearing, though, was her arguing with him about whether he should tell Buck the truth of his begetting.

“Don’t you think he has a right to know?” she’d said. *“Wouldn’t* you *want to know something like that?”*

“Actually, I don’t think I would,” he’d said at the time. But now …

“Do you know who your father was?” Roger asked suddenly. The question had been in his mind for months, he unsure whether he had any right to ask it.

Buck gave him a baffled, faintly hostile glance.

“What the devil d’ye mean by that? Of course I do—or did. He’s dead now.” His face twisted suddenly, realizing. “Or—”

“Or maybe he’s not, since ye’re not born yet. Aye, it gets to ye after a bit, doesn’t it?”

Apparently, it had just gotten to Buck. He stood up abruptly and stalked off. He stayed gone for a good ten minutes, giving Roger time to regret saying anything. But at last Buck came out of the dark and sat down again by the smoldering peat. He sat with his knees pulled up, arms locked round them.

"What did ye mean by that?" he asked abruptly. "Did I ken my father, and that."

Roger took in a deep breath of damp grass, pine needles, and peat smoke. "I mean ye werena born to the house ye grew up in. Did ye ken that?"

Buck looked wary and slightly bewildered. "Aye," he said slowly. "Or—not kent it straight out, I mean. My parents didna have any bairns besides me, so I thought there was maybe—well, I thought I was likely a bastard born to my father's sister. She died, they said, about the time I was born, and she wasna marrit, so …" He shrugged, one-shouldered. "So, no." He turned his head and looked at Roger, expressionless. "How d'ye come to know, yourself?"

"Brianna's mother." He felt a sharp, sudden longing for Claire and was surprised at it. "She was a traveler. But she was at Leoch, about that time. And she told us what happened." He had the hollow-bellied feel of one about to jump off a precipice into water of unknown depth, but there was no way to stop now.

"Your father was Dougal MacKenzie of Castle Leoch—war chieftain of the clan MacKenzie. And your mother was a witch named Geillis."

Buck's face was absolutely blank, the faint firelight shimmering on the broad cheekbones that were his father's legacy. Roger wanted suddenly to go and take the man in his arms, smooth the hair back from his face, comfort him like a child—like the child he could so plainly see in those wide, stunned green eyes. Instead, he got up and went off into the night, giving his four-times great-grandfather what privacy he could in which to deal with the news.

* * *

IT HADN'T HURT. Roger woke coughing, and drops of moisture rolled tickling down his temples, dislodged by the motion. He was sleeping under the empty canvas bed sack rather than on it, valuing its water-resilience more than its potential comfort when stuffed with grass, but he hadn't been able to bear having it over his head.

He put a hand cautiously to his throat, feeling the thickened line of the rope scar cutting across the lower swell of his larynx. He rolled over, lifted himself on one elbow, and cleared his throat experimentally. It didn't hurt this time, either.

"Do you know what a hyoid bone is?" He did; as a result of a number of medical consultations about his damaged voice, he understood the anatomy of his throat quite well. And thus had known what Dr. McEwan meant; his own hyoid was placed slightly higher and farther back than the usual, a fortunate circumstance that had saved his life when he was hanged, as the crushing of that wee bone would have suffocated him.

Had he been dreaming of McEwan? Or of being hanged? Yes, that. He'd had dreams like that often in the months afterward, though they'd grown less frequent in later years. But he remembered looking up through the lacy branches of the tree, seeing—in the dream—the rope tied to the branch above him, and the desperate struggle to scream a protest through the gag in his mouth. Then the ineluctable sliding under him as the horse he sat on was led away … but this time it hadn't hurt. His feet had struck the ground and he waked—but waked without the choking or the burning, stabbing sensations that left him gasping and gritting his teeth.

He glanced across; yes, Buck was still there, huddled up under the ragged plaid he'd bought from Cumberpatch. Wise purchase.

He lay back down on his side, hauling the canvas up to shield his face while still allowing him to breathe. He'd admit to a feeling of relief at seeing Buck; he'd half-expected the man to decamp and head straight back to Castle Leoch after hearing the truth about his own family. Though, in justice to Buck, he wasn't a sneak. If he'd made up his mind to do that, he'd likely say so—after punching Roger in the nose for not telling him sooner.

As it was, he'd been there, staring into the ashes of the fire when Roger came back. He hadn't looked up, and Roger hadn't said anything to him but had sat down and taken out needle and thread to mend a rip in the seam of his coat.

After a bit, though, Buck had stirred himself.

"Why wait to tell me now?" he'd asked quietly. His voice held no particular note of accusation. "Why not tell me while we were still near Leoch and Cranesmuir?"

"I hadn't made up my mind to tell ye at all," Roger had said bluntly. "It was just thinking about—well, about what we're doing and what might happen. I thought of a sudden that maybe ye *should* know. And …" He hesitated for a moment. "I didn't plan it, but it's maybe better so. Ye'll have time to think, maybe, whether ye want to find your parents before we go back."

Buck had merely grunted in reply to that and said no more. But it wasn't Buck's response that was occupying Roger's mind at the moment.

It hadn't hurt when he'd cleared his throat while talking to Buck, though he hadn't noticed consciously at the time.

McEwan—was it what he'd done, his touch? Roger wished he'd been able to see whether McEwan's hand shed blue light when he'd touched Roger's damaged throat.

And what about that light? He thought that Claire had mentioned something like it once—oh, yes, describing how Master Raymond had healed her, following the miscarriage she'd had in Paris. Seeing her bones glow blue inside her body was how she'd put it, he thought.

Now, that was a staggering thought—was it a familial trait, common to time travelers? He yawned hugely and swallowed once more, experimentally. No pain.

He couldn't keep track of his thoughts any longer. Felt sleep spreading through his body like good whisky, warming him. And let go, finally, wondering what he might say to his father. If …

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A MAN TO DO A MAN'S JOB

Boston, MA
December 8, 1980

GAIL ABERNATHY provided a quick but solid supper of spaghetti with meatballs, salad, garlic bread, and—after a quick, penetrating look at Bree—a bottle of wine, despite Brianna's protests. "You're spending the night here," Gail said, in a tone brooking no opposition, and pointed at the bottle. "And you're drinking that. I don't know what you've been doing to yourself, girl, and you don't need to tell me—but you need to stop doing it."

"I wish I could." But her heart had risen the moment she walked through the familiar door, and her sense of agitation did subside—though it was far from disappearing. The wine helped, though.

The Abernathys helped more. Just the sense of being with friends, of not being alone with the kids and the fear and uncertainty. She went from wanting to cry to wanting to laugh and back again in the space of seconds, and felt that if Gail and Joe had not been there, she might have had no choice but to go into the bathroom, turn on the shower, and scream into a folded bath towel—her only safety valve in the last few days.

But now there was at least someone to talk to. She didn't know whether Joe could offer anything beyond a sympathetic ear, but at the moment that was worth more to her than anything.

Conversation over dinner was light and kid-oriented, Gail asking Mandy whether she liked Barbies and whether her Barbie had a car, and Joe talking soccer versus baseball—Jem was a hard-core Red Sox fan, being allowed to stay up to ungodly hours to listen to rare radio broadcasts with his mother. Brianna contributed nothing more than the occasional smile and felt the tension slowly leave her neck and shoulders.

It came back, though with less force, when dinner was over and Mandy—half-asleep with her arm in her plate—was carried off to bed by Gail, humming "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring" in a voice like a cello. Bree rose to pick up the dirty plates, but Joe waved her back, rising from his chair.

"Leave them, darlin'. Come talk to me in the den. Bring the rest of the wine," he added, then smiled at Jem. "Jem, whyn't you go up and ask Gail can you watch TV in the bedroom?"

Jem had a smudge of spaghetti sauce at the corner of his mouth, and his hair was sticking up on one side in porcupine spikes. He was a little pale from the journey, but the food had restored him and his eyes were bright, alert.

“No, sir,” he said respectfully, and pushed back his own chair. “I’ll stay with my mam.”

“You don’t need to do that, honey,” she said. “Uncle Joe and I have grown-up things we need to talk about. You—”

“I’m staying.”

She gave him a hard look, but recognized instantly, with a combination of horror and fascination, a Fraser male with his mind made up.

His lower lip was trembling, just a little. He shut his mouth hard to stop it and looked soberly from her to Joe, then back.

“Dad’s not here,” he said, and swallowed. “And neither is Grandda. I’m … I’m staying.”

She couldn’t speak. Joe nodded, though, as soberly as Jem, took a can of Coke from the refrigerator, and led the way to the den. She followed them, clutching the wine bottle and two glasses.

“Bree, darlin’?” Joe turned back for a moment. “Get another bottle from the cupboard over the stove. This is gonna take some talking.”

It did. Jemmy was on his second Coke—the question of his going to bed, let alone to sleep, was clearly academic—and the second bottle of wine was one-third down before she’d finished describing the situation—all the situations—and what she thought of doing about them.

“Okay,” Joe said, quite casually. “I don’t believe I’m saying this, but you need to decide whether to go through some rocks in North Carolina or in Scotland and end up in the eighteenth century either way, is that it?”

“That’s … most of it.” She took a swallow of wine; it seemed to steady her. “But that’s the first thing, yes. See, I know where Mama and Da are—were—at the end of 1778, and that's the year we'd go back to, if everything works the way it seems to have worked before. They'll either be back on Fraser's Ridge or on their way there."

Jem's face lightened a little at that, but he didn't say anything. She met his eyes directly.

"I was going to take you and Mandy through the stones on Ocracoke—where we came through before, you remember? On the island?"

"Vroom," he said very softly, and broke into a sudden grin, reliving his first exposure to automobiles.

"Yes," she said, smiling back despite herself. "Then we could go to the Ridge, and I was going to leave you with Grannie and Grandda while I went to Scotland to find Daddy."

Jem's smile faded, and his red brows drew together.

"Pardon my pointing out the obvious," Joe said. "But wasn't there a war going on in 1778?"

"There was," she said tersely. "And, yes, it might be a little bit difficult to get a ship from North Carolina to Scotland, but believe you me, I could do it."

"Oh, I do," he assured her. "It would be easier—and safer, I reckon—than going through in Scotland and searching for Roger with Jem and Mandy to look after at the same time, but—"

"I don't need looking after!"

"Maybe not," Joe told him, "but you got about six years, sixty pounds, and another two feet to grow before you can look after your mama. 'Til you get big enough that nobody can just pick you up and carry you off, she's got to worry about you."

Jem looked as if he wanted to argue the point, but he was at the age where logic did sometimes prevail, and happily this was one of those times. He made a small “mmphm” sound in his throat, which startled Bree, and sat back on the ottoman, still frowning.

“But you can’t go to where Grannie and Grandda are,” he pointed out. “ ’Cuz Dad’s not where—I mean when—you thought. He’s not in the same time they are.”

“Bingo,” she said briefly, and, reaching into the pocket of her sweater, carefully withdrew the plastic bag protecting Roger’s letter. She handed it to Joe. “Read that.”

He whipped his reading glasses out of his own pocket and, with them perched on his nose, read the letter carefully, looked up at her, wide-eyed, then bent his head and read it again. After which he sat quite still for several minutes, staring into space, the letter open on his knee.

At last, he heaved a sigh, folded the letter carefully, and handed it back to her.

“So now it’s space *and* time,” he said. “You ever watch *Doctor Who* on PBS?”

“All the time,” she said dryly, “on the BBC. And don’t think I wouldn’t sell my soul for a TARDIS.”

Jem made the little Scottish noise again, and Brianna looked sideways at him.

“Are you doing that on purpose?”

He looked up at her, surprised. “Doing what?”

“Never mind. When you *are* fifteen, I’m locking you in the cellar.”

“What? Why?” he demanded indignantly.

“Because that’s when your father and grandfather started getting into real trouble, and evidently you’re going to be just like them.”

“Oh.” He seemed pleased to hear this, and subsided.

“Well, putting aside the possibility of getting hold of a working TARDIS …” Joe leaned forward, topping up both glasses of wine. “It’s possible to travel farther than you thought, because Roger and this Buck guy just did it. So you think you could do it, too?”

“I’ve got to,” she said simply. “He won’t try to come back without Jem, so I have to go find him.”

“Do you know *how* he did it? You told me it took gemstones to do it. Did he have, like, a special kind of gem?”

“No.” She frowned, remembering the effort of using the kitchen shears to snip apart the old brooch with its scatter of chip-like diamonds. “They each had a few tiny little diamonds—but Roger went through before with a single biggish diamond. He said it was like the other times we know about; it exploded or vaporized or something—just a smear of soot in his pocket.”

“Mmm.” Joe took a sip of wine and held it meditatively in his mouth for a moment before swallowing. “Hypothesis one, then: number is more important than size—i.e., you can go farther if you have more stones in your pocket.”

She stared at him for a moment, somewhat taken aback.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she said slowly. “The first time he tried it, though … he had his mother’s locket; that had garnets on it. Definitely garnets, plural. But he didn’t get through—he was thrown back, on fire.” She shuddered briefly, the sudden vision of Mandy flung on the ground, burning … She gulped wine and coughed. “So—so we don’t know whether he might have gone farther if he *had* gone through.”

“It’s just a thought,” Joe said mildly, watching her. “Now … Roger’s mentioning Jeremiah here, and it sounds like he means there's somebody besides Jemmy who's got that name. Do you know what he means?"

"I do." A skitter of something between fear and excitement ran down her back with icy little feet, and she took another swallow of wine and a deep breath before telling him about Jerry MacKenzie. The circumstances of his disappearance—and what her mother had told Roger.

"*She* thought he was very likely an accidental traveler. One who—who couldn't get back." She took another quick sip.

"That's my other grandda?" Jemmy asked. His face flushed a little at the thought and he sat forward, hands clutched between his thighs. "If we go where Dad is, will we get to meet him, too?"

"I can't even think about that," she told him honestly, though the suggestion made her insides curl up. Among the million alarming contingencies of the current situation, the possibility of meeting her deceased father-in-law face-to-face was about 999,999th on the list of Things to Be Worried About—but apparently it *was* on the list.

"But what did Roger mean about seeking Jeremiah?" Joe asked, clinging stubbornly to the point.

"We think that's how you … steer," Brianna said. "Focusing your thoughts on a particular person who's in the time you want to go to. We don't know that for sure, though," she added, and stifled a small belch. "Each time we—or Mama—did it, it was always two hundred and two years. And it was when Mama went back the first time—though come to think of it," she added, frowning, "she thought it might have been because Black Jack Randall—Daddy's ancestor—was there. He was the first person she met when she came through the stones. She said he looked a lot like Daddy."

"Uh-huh." Joe poured another half glass and stared at it for a moment, as though hypnotized by the soft reddish light glowing in its bowl. "But." He stopped, marshaling his thoughts. "But other people did go farther. This Geillis your mother mentioned, and Buck? Did he—never mind. Roger *and* Buck *did* do it this time, for sure. So it's possible; we just don't know how."

"I was forgetting Geillis," Bree said slowly. She'd seen the woman only once, and very briefly. A tall, slender figure, fair hair flying in the wind of a murderous fire, her shadow thrown onto one of the standing stones, enormous, elongated.

"Now that I think, though … I don't believe she had gemstones when she went back. She thought it took … er … sacrifice." She glanced at Jem, then looked at Joe, lowering her brows with a meaningful look that said, *"Don't ask."* "And fire. And she never came back the other way, though she planned to, with stones." And suddenly a penny that she hadn't known was there dropped. "She told Mama about using stones—not the other way around. So somebody … somebody *else* told her."

Joe digested that one for a moment, but then shook his head, dismissing the distraction.

"Huh. Okay, Hypothesis two: focusing your thoughts on a particular person helps you go to where they are. That make sense to you, Jem?" he asked, turning to Jemmy, who nodded.

"Sure. If it's somebody you know."

"Okay. Then—" Joe stopped abruptly, looking at Jem. "If it's somebody you *know*?"

The icy centipede came rippling up Bree's backbone and into her hair, making her scalp contract.

"Jem." Her voice sounded odd to her own ears, husky and half breathless. "Mandy says she can hear you—in her head. Can you … hear her?" She swallowed, hard, and her voice came clearer. "Can you hear Daddy that way?"

The small red brows drew together in a puzzled frown.

"Sure. Can't you?"

* * *

THE DEEP LINE between Uncle Joe's eyebrows hadn't gone away since the night before, Jem saw. He still looked friendly; he nodded at Jem and pushed a cup of hot chocolate across the counter to him, but his eyes kept going back to Mam, and every time they did, the line got deeper.

Mam was buttering Mandy's toast. Jem thought she wasn't as worried as she had been, and felt a little better himself. He'd slept all night, for the first time in a long time, and he thought maybe Mam had, too. No matter how tired he was, he usually woke up every couple of hours, listening out for noises, and then listening harder to be sure Mandy and Mam were still breathing. He had nightmares where they weren't.

"So, Jem," Uncle Joe said. He put down his coffee cup and patted his lips with a paper napkin left over from Halloween; it was black with orange jack-o'-lanterns and white ghosts on it. "Um … how far can you … er … you know, when your sister's not with you?"

"How far?" Jem said uncertainly, and looked at Mam. It hadn't ever occurred to him to wonder.

"If you went in the living room right now," Uncle Joe said, nodding at the door. "Could you tell she was in here, even if you didn't know she was in here?"

"Yeah. I mean, yes, sir. I think so." He stuck his finger in the hot chocolate: still too hot to drink. "When I was in the tunnel, in the train—I knew she was … somewhere. It's not like science fiction or anything, I mean," he added, trying to explain. "Not like X-rays or phasers or like that. I just …" He struggled for an explanation and finally jerked his head at Mam, who was staring at him with a serious kind of look that bothered him a little. "I mean, if you closed your eyes, you'd still know Mam was here, wouldn't you? It's like that."

Mam and Uncle Joe looked at each other.

"Want toast?" Mandy thrust her half-gnawed piece of buttered toast at him. He took it and had a bite; it was good, squidgy white bread, not the home-baked brown kind Mam made, with gritty bits in it.

"If he could hear her—sense her—from the tunnel while she was at home, he can do it for a good long way," Mam said. "But I don't know for sure that she *was* at home then—I was driving all over with her, looking for Jem. And Mandy could sense him while we were in the car that night. But—" Now *her* eyebrows went together. He didn't like seeing a line there. "She was telling me she was getting colder, when we drove toward Inverness, but I don't know if she meant she couldn't hear him at all, or …"

"I don't think I can feel her when I'm at school," Jem said, anxious to be helpful. "But I'm not sure, 'cause I don't think about her at school."

"How far's the school from your place?" Uncle Joe asked. "You want a Pop-Tart, princess?"

"Yes!" Mandy's buttery round face lighted up, but Jem glanced at Mam. Mam looked as if she wanted to kick Uncle

Joe under the counter for a second, but then she glanced down at Mandy and her face went all soft.

"All right," she said, and Jem felt a fluttery, excited sort of feeling in his middle. Mam was telling Uncle Joe how far the school was, but Jem wasn't paying attention. They were going to do it. They were really going to do it!

Because the only reason Mam would let Mandy eat Pop-Tarts without a fuss was because she figured she'd never get to eat another one.

"Can I have one, too, Uncle Joe?" he asked. "I like the blueberry ones."

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THE WALL

HADRIAN'S WALL looked very much as Roger recalled it from a long-ago school trip. A huge thing, standing nearly fifteen feet high and eight feet wide, double stone walls filled with rubble in between, winding off into the distance.

The people were not that much different, either—at least in terms of speech and livelihood. They raised cattle and goats, and the Northumberland dialect had apparently not developed much since Geoffrey Chaucer's time. Roger and Buck's Highland accents elicited slit-eyed looks of suspicious incomprehension, and they were for the most part reduced to basic gestures and sign language in order to obtain food and—occasionally—shelter.

With a bit of trial and error, Roger did work out an approximate Middle English for *"Hast come here a stranger?"* From the looks of the place—and the looks he and Buck were getting—he would have said the contingency was remote, and so it proved. Three days of walking, and they were still plainly the strangest men anyone near the wall had ever seen.

"Surely a man dressed in RAF uniform would look even more peculiar than we do?" he said to Buck.

"He would," Buck replied logically, "if he was still wearing it."

Roger grunted in chagrin. He hadn't thought of the possibility that Jerry might have discarded his uniform on purpose—or been deprived of it by whomever came across him first.

It was on the fourth day—the wall itself had rather surprisingly changed, being no longer built of stone and rubble but of stacked turves—that they met a man wearing Jerry MacKenzie's flight jacket.

The man was standing at the edge of a half-plowed field, staring morosely into the distance, apparently with nothing on his mind save his hair. Roger froze, hand on Buck's arm, compelling him to look.

"Jesus," Buck whispered, grabbing Roger's hand. "I didn't believe it. That's it! Isn't it?" he asked, turning to Roger, brows raised. "I mean—the way ye described it …"

"Yes. It is." Roger felt his throat tighten with excitement—and fear. But there was only the one thing to be done, regardless, and, dropping Buck's hand, he forged through the dead grass and scattered rock toward the farmer, if that's what he was.

The man heard them coming and turned casually—then stiffened, seeing them, and looked wildly round for help.

"Eevis!" he shouted, or so Roger thought. Looking over his shoulder, Roger saw the stone walls of a house, evidently built into the wall.

“Put up your hands,” Roger said to Buck, throwing up his own, palm out, to show his lack of threat. They advanced slowly, hands up, and the farmer stood his ground, though watching them as though they might explode if they got too close.

Roger smiled at the man and elbowed Buck in the ribs to make him do likewise.

“Gud morn,” he said clearly and carefully. “Hast cum a stranger here?” He pointed to his own coat—and then to the flight jacket. His heart was thumping hard; he wanted to knock the man over and strip it off his back, but that wouldn’t do.

“Naow!” said the man quickly, backing away, holding on to the edges of the jacket. “Begone!”

“We mean ye no harm, daftie,” Buck said, in as conciliating a tone as he could manage. He patted the air in a soothing manner. “Kenst du dee mann …?”

“What the bloody hell is that?” Roger asked, out of the side of his mouth. “Ancient Norse?”

“I don’t know, but I heard an Orkneyman say it once. It means—”

“I can tell what it means. Does this look like Orkney to you?”

“No. But if you can tell what it means, maybe he can, too, aye?”

“Naow!” the man repeated, and bellowed, “EEVIS!” again. He began to back away from them.

“Wait!” said Roger. “Look.” He fumbled quickly in his pocket and withdrew the little oilcloth packet holding his father’s identity disks. He pulled them out, dangling them in the chilly breeze. “See? Where is the man who wore these?”

The farmer's eyes bulged, and he turned and ran clumsily, his clogs hindering him through the clods of the field, shouting, "Eevis! Hellup!" and several other, less comprehensible things.

"Do we want to wait for Eevis to turn up?" Buck said, shifting uneasily. "He may not be friendly."

"Yes, we do," Roger said firmly. The blood was high in his chest and face, and he flexed his hands nervously. Close. They were so close—and yet … his spirits went from exhilaration to plunging fear and back within seconds. It hadn't escaped him that there was a strong possibility that Jerry MacKenzie had been killed for that jacket—a possibility that seemed much more likely in view of their interlocutor's precipitate flight.

The man had disappeared into a windbreak of small trees, beyond which some sheds were visible. Perhaps Eevis was a stockman or dairyman?

Then the barking started.

Buck turned to look at Roger.

"Eevis, ye think?"

"Jesus Christ!"

A huge, broad-headed, barrel-chested brown dog with a broad, toothy jaw to match came galloping out of the trees and made for them, its proprietor bringing up the rear with a spade.

They ran for it, circling the house with Eevis on their heels, baying for blood. The broad green bank of the wall loomed up in front of Roger and he leapt for it, jamming the toes of his boots into the turf and scrabbling with fingers, knees, elbows—and likely his teeth, too. He hurled himself over the top and bounced down the far side, landing with a tooth-rattling thud. He was fighting to draw breath when Buck landed on top of him.

“Shit,” his ancestor said briefly, rolling off him. “Come on!” He jerked Roger to his feet and they ran, hearing the farmer shouting curses at them from the top of the wall.

They found refuge in the lee of a crag a few hundred yards beyond the wall and collapsed there, gasping.

“The Emp … Emperor Had … rian kent what the blood … y hell he … was about,” Roger managed, at last.

Buck nodded, wiping sweat from his face. “No … very hospitable,” he wheezed. He shook his head and gulped air. “What … now?”

Roger patted the air, indicating the need for oxygen before he could formulate ideas, and they sat quiet for a bit, breathing. Roger tried to be logical about it, though spikes of adrenaline kept interfering with his thought processes.

One: Jerry MacKenzie had been here. That was all but certain; it was beyond the bounds of probability that there should be *two* displaced travelers wearing RAF flight jackets.

Two: he wasn’t here now. Could that be safely deduced? No, Roger concluded reluctantly, it couldn’t. He *might* have traded the jacket to Eevis’s owner for food or something, in which case he’d likely moved on. But if that were the case, why had the farmer not simply said so, rather than setting the dog on them?

And if he’d stolen the jacket … either Jerry was dead and buried somewhere nearby—that thought made Roger’s stomach clench and the hairs prickle on his jaw—or he’d been assaulted and stripped but perhaps had escaped.

All right. If Jerry was here, he was dead. And if so, the only way of finding out was to subdue the dog and then beat the information out of Eevis's owner. He didn't feel quite up to it at the moment.

"He's not here," Roger said hoarsely. His breathing was still hard, but regular now.

Buck gave him a quick look, but then nodded. There was a long streak of muddy green down his cheek, smeared moss from the wall that echoed the green of his eyes.

"Aye. What next, then?"

The sweat was cooling on Roger's neck; he wiped it absently with the end of the scarf that had somehow made it over the wall with him.

"I've got an idea. Given the reaction of our friend there"—he nodded in the direction of the farmstead, invisible beyond the green mass of the wall—"I'm thinking that asking for a stranger might be not the wisest thing. But what about the stones?"

Buck blinked at him in incomprehension.

"Stones?"

"Aye. Standing stones. Jerry did travel, we ken that much. What're the odds he came through a circle? And if so … they're likely none so far away. And folk wouldn't be threatened, I think, by two dafties asking after stones. If we find the place he likely came through, then we can start to cast out from there and ask at the places nearest to the stones. Cautiously."

Buck tapped his fingers on his knee, considering, then nodded.

"A standing stone isna like to bite the arses out of our breeks. All right, then; let's go."

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RADAR

Boston

December 9, 1980

JEM FELT NERVOUS. Mam and Uncle Joe were both trying to act as if everything was okay, but even Mandy could tell something was up; she was squirming around in the backseat of Uncle Joe's Cadillac like she had ants in her pants, pulling up her buttoned sweater over her head so her black curls fluffed out of the neckhole like something boiling over.

"Sit *still*," he muttered to her, but he didn't expect her to, and she didn't.

Uncle Joe was driving, and Mam had a map open in her lap.

"What are you doing, Mandy?" Mam said absently. She was making marks on the map with a pencil.

Mandy unbuckled her seat belt and popped up on her knees. She'd pulled her arms out of her sweater so they flopped around, and now just her face was poking out of the neckhole.

"I'm an ottopus!" she said, and shook herself so the sweater's arms danced. Jem laughed, in spite of himself. So did Mam, but she waved Mandy back down.

"Octopus," she said. "And put your seat belt back on right now. *Octo* means eight in Latin," she added. "Octopuses have eight legs. Or arms, maybe."

"You've only got four," Jem said to Mandy. "Does that make her a tetra-pus, Mam?"

"Maybe." But Mam had gone back to her map. "The Common, do you think?" she said to Uncle Joe. "It's a little more than a quarter mile across the longest axis. And we could go down into the Public Garden, if …"

"Yeah, good idea. I'll let you and Jem off on Park Street, then drive along Beacon to the end of the Common and back around."

It was cold and cloudy, with just a few flakes of snow in the air. He remembered Boston Common and was kind of glad to see it again, even with the trees leafless and the grass brown and dead. There were still people there; there always were, and their winter hats and scarves looked happy, all different colors.

The car stopped on Park Street, across from the tourist trolleys that stopped every twenty minutes. Dad had taken them all on one once—one of the orange ones, with the open sides. It had been summer then.

"Do you have your mittens, sweetheart?" Mam was already out on the sidewalk, peering through the window. "You stay with Uncle Joe, Mandy—just for a few minutes."

Jem got out and stood with Mam on the sidewalk, putting on his mittens while they watched the gray Caddy pull away.

“Close your eyes, Jem,” Mam said quietly, and took his hand, squeezing it. “Tell me if you can feel Mandy in your head.”

“Sure. I mean, yes. She’s there.” He hadn’t thought of Mandy as a little red light before the business in the tunnel with the train, but now he did. It kind of made it easier to concentrate on her.

“That’s good. You can open your eyes if you want to,” Mam said. “But keep thinking about Mandy. Tell me if she gets too far away for you to feel.”

He could feel Mandy all the way, until the Caddy pulled up next to them again—though she had got a little fainter, then stronger again.

They did it again, with Uncle Joe and Mandy going all the way down to Arlington Street, on the far side of the Public Garden. He could still do it and was getting kind of cold and bored, standing there on the street.

“She can hear him fine,” Uncle Joe reported, rolling down his window. “How ’bout you, sport? You hear your sister okay?”

“Yeah,” he said patiently. “I mean—I can tell where she is, kind of. She doesn’t talk in my head or anything like that.” He was glad she didn’t. He wouldn’t want Mandy chattering away in his head all the time—and he didn’t want her listening to his thoughts, either. He frowned at her; he hadn’t actually thought of *that* before.

“You can’t hear what I’m thinking, can you?” he demanded, shoving his face in the open window. Mandy was riding up front now and looked up at him, surprised. She'd been sucking her thumb, he saw; it was all wet.

"No," she said, kind of uncertainly. He could see she was sort of scared by this. So was he, but he figured he wouldn't let her—or Mam—know that.

"That's good," he said, and patted her on the head. She hated being patted on the head and swiped at him with a ferocious snarl. He stepped back out of reach and grinned at her.

"If we have to do it again," he said to his mother, "maybe Mandy can stay with you, and I'll go with Uncle Joe?"

Mam glanced uncertainly at him, then at Mandy, but seemed to get what he was really saying and nodded, opening the door for Mandy to bounce out, relieved.

Uncle Joe hummed softly to himself as they turned around, went right, and headed down past the big theater and the Freemasons' building. Jem could see Uncle Joe's knuckles showing through his skin, though, where he was clutching the wheel.

"You nervous, sport?" Uncle Joe said, as they passed the Frog Pond. It was drained for the winter; it looked sort of sad.

"Uh-huh." Jem swallowed. "Are you?"

Uncle Joe glanced at him, kind of startled, then smiled as he turned back to keep his eyes on the road.

"Yeah," he said softly. "But I think it's gonna be okay. You'll take good care of your mom and Mandy, and you'll find your dad. You'll be together again."

"Yeah," Jem said, and swallowed again.

They drove in silence for a little bit, and the snow made little scratchy noises on the windshield, like salt being shaken on the glass.

“Mam and Mandy are gonna be pretty cold,” Jem ventured.

“Yeah, this’ll be our last try today,” Uncle Joe assured him. “Still got her? Mandy?”

He hadn’t been paying attention; he’d been thinking about the stone circles. And the thing in the tunnel. And Daddy. His stomach hurt.

“No,” he said blankly. “No! I can’t feel her!” The idea suddenly panicked him and he stiffened in his seat, pushing back with his feet. “Drive back!”

“Right away, pal,” Uncle Joe said, and made a U-turn right in the middle of the street. “Gloucester Street. Can you remember that name? We need to tell your mom, so she can work out the distance.”

“Uh-huh,” Jem said, but he wasn’t really listening to Uncle Joe. He was listening hard for Mandy. He’d never thought about it at all before this, never paid any attention to whether he could sense her or not. But now it was important, and he balled up his fists and shoved one into his middle, under his ribs, where the hurt was.

Then there she was, just as though she’d always been there, like one of his toenails or something, and he let his breath out in a gasp that made Uncle Joe look sharply at him.

“You got her again?”

Jem nodded, feeling inexpressible relief. Uncle Joe sighed and his big shoulders relaxed, too.

“Good,” he said. “Don’t let go.”

* * *

BRIANNA PICKED UP Esmeralda the rag doll from the floor of the Abernathys' guest room and tucked her carefully in next to Mandy. *Four miles*. They'd spent the morning driving round Boston in circles, and now they knew roughly how far the kids' mutual radar went. Jem could sense Mandy at a little over a mile, but she could sense him at nearly four. Jem could sense Brianna, too, but only vaguely and only for a short distance; Mandy could sense her mother almost as far as she could detect Jem.

She should write that down in the guide, she thought, but she'd spent the afternoon in frenzied arrangements, and right now the effort of finding a pencil felt like searching for the source of the Nile or climbing Kilimanjaro. *Tomorrow*.

The thought of tomorrow jolted her out of her exhausted torpor with a zap of adrenaline. Tomorrow, it would start.

They'd talked, after the kids had gone to bed. She and Joe, with Gail listening in the corner, the whites of her eyes showing now and then, but saying not a word.

"It has to be Scotland," she'd explained. "It's December; ships can't sail until the springtime. If we crossed in North Carolina, we couldn't travel from the colonies before April and wouldn't get to Scotland before the summer. And putting aside the fact that I know what ocean travel in the eighteenth century is like and I wouldn't do that with children unless the alternative was being shot … I can't wait that long."

She'd taken a gulp of wine and swallowed, but the knot in her throat didn't go down, any more than it had with the last half-dozen swallows. *Anything could happen to him in six months. Anything.* "I—have to find him."

The Abernathys glanced at each other, and Gail's hand touched Joe gently on the knee.

"Of course you do," she said. "You sure about Scotland, though? What about the people that tried to take Jem from you? Won't they be waiting, if you go back?"

Bree laughed—shakily, but a laugh.

"Another reason to go right away," she said. "In the eighteenth century, I can stop looking over my shoulder."

"You haven't seen anybody—" Joe started, frowning, but she shook her head.

"Not in California. And not here. But I keep watching." She'd taken a few other precautions, too, things she'd recalled from her father's brief—and discreet—memoir of his World War II experiences, but no need to go into those.

"And you have some idea how to keep the kids safe in Scotland?" Gail was perched uneasily on the edge of her seat, as though wanting to spring up and go check on the kids. Brianna knew the feeling.

She sighed and wiped a straggle of hair out of her eye.

"There are two people—well, three—there that I think I can trust."

"You think," Joe echoed, sounding skeptical.

"The only people I *know* I can trust are right here," she said simply, and lifted her wineglass to them. Joe looked away and cleared his throat. Then he glanced at Gail, who nodded at him.

"We'll go with you," he said firmly, turning back to Bree. "Gail can mind the kids, and I can make sure nobody bothers you 'til you're set to go."

She bit her lip to quell the rising tears.

"No," she said, then cleared her own throat hard, to kill the quaver in her voice—caused as much by the vision of the two Drs. Abernathy strolling the streets of Inverness as by gratitude. It wasn't that there were *no* black people in the Highlands of Scotland, but they were sufficiently infrequent as to cause notice.

"No," she repeated, and took a deep breath. "We'll go to Edinburgh to start; I can get the things we need there, without attracting attention. We won't go up to the Highlands until everything is ready—and I'll only get in touch with my friends there at the last minute. There won't be time for anyone else to realize we're there, before we—before we go … through."

That one word, "through," hit her like a blow in the chest, freighted as it was with memory of the howling void that lay between now and then. Between herself and the kids—and Roger.

The Abernathys hadn't given up easily—or altogether; she was sure there would be another attempt at breakfast—but she had faith in her own stubbornness and, pleading exhaustion, had escaped from their kind worries in order to be alone with her own.

She *was* exhausted. But the bed she'd share with Mandy didn't draw her. She needed just to be alone for a bit, to decompress before sleep would come. She could hear going-to-bed noises on the floor below; taking off her shoes, she padded silently down to the first floor, where a light had been left on in the kitchen and another at the end of the hallway by the den, where Jem had been put to bed on the big couch.

She turned to go and check on him, but her attention was diverted by a familiar metallic *chunk!* The kitchen had a pocket door, slid half across. She stepped up to it and glanced through the opening, to discover Jem standing on a chair next to the counter, reaching to pull a Pop-Tart out of the toaster.

He looked up, wide-eyed at the sound of her step, held the hot pastry for a second too long, and dropped it as it burned his fingers.

“Ifrinn!”

“Don’t say that,” she told him, coming to retrieve the fallen tart. “We’re about to go where people would understand it. Here—do you want some milk with that?”

He hesitated for an instant, surprised, then hopped down like a towhee, both feet together, and landed with a light thud on the tiled floor. “I’ll get it. You want some, too?” Suddenly, nothing on earth sounded better than a hot blueberry Pop-Tart with melting white icing and a glass of cold milk. She nodded and broke the hot tart in two, putting each half on a paper towel.

“Couldn’t sleep?” she finally said, after they’d eaten their snack in companionable silence. He shook his head, red hair ruffled up in porcupine spikes.

“Want me to read you a story?” She didn’t know what made her say that; he was much too old to be read to, though he was always somewhere nearby when she read to Mandy. He gave her a jaundiced look, but then, surprisingly, nodded and scampered up to the third floor, coming back with the new copy of *Animal Nursery Tales* in hand.

He didn’t want to lie down right away but sat very close to her on the sofa while she read, her arm round his shoulders and his weight growing warm and heavy against her side as his breathing slowed.

“My dad used to read to me if I woke up and couldn’t go back to sleep,” she said softly, turning the last page. “Grandpa Frank, I mean. It was a lot like this; everything quiet." And themselves cozy and bonelessly content, alone together in a puddle of warm yellow light, with the night far away.

She felt Jem's sleepy interest rise.

"Was he like Grandda? Grandpa Frank?" She'd told the kids little things about Frank Randall, not wanting him to be forgotten, but she knew he'd never be much more than a faint ghost beside the vivid warmth of their other grandfather—the grandfather they might have back. She felt a sudden small tearing in her heart, a vivid second of understanding for her mother.

Oh, Mama …

"He was different," she said softly, her mouth brushing his bright hair. "He was a soldier, though—they had that in common. And he was a writer, a scholar—like Daddy. All of them were—are—alike, though: they'd all take care of people. It's what a good man does."

"Oh." She could feel him falling asleep, struggling to keep a hold on consciousness, the dreams beginning to walk through his waking thoughts. She eased him down into the nest of blankets and covered him, smoothing the cowlick on the crest of his head.

"Could we see him?" Jem said suddenly, his voice drowsy and soft.

"Daddy? Yes, we'll see him," she promised, making her own voice solid with confidence.

"No, *your* daddy …" he said, his eyes half open, glazed with sleep. "If we go through the stones, could we see Grandpa Frank?"

Her mouth dropped open, but she still hadn't found an answer when she heard him start to snore.

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BE THOSE THY BEASTS?

WHILE IT WAS undeniably true that standing stones didn't bite, Roger thought, that didn't mean they weren't dangerous. It had taken them only a day and a half to find the stone circle. He'd made a quick sketch of standing stones on the back of his hand with a bit of charcoal, to assist communication, and it had worked surprisingly well. While the scattered people they'd found had regarded them with immense curiosity—and not a few private glances accompanied by whirling motions of the forefinger beside the head—no one had found the visitors more than odd, and everyone had known where the stones were.

They'd come across a tiny village, in fact—consisting of a church, a public house, a smithy, and several houses—where the last household they'd approached had even sent one of their younger sons along to guide Buck and Roger to their goal.

And there they were now: a scatter of stumpy, lichened, wind-scored pillars beside a shallow lake filled with reeds.

Ageless, harmless, part of the landscape—and the sight of them filled Roger with a fear that shivered as coldly over his skin as though he stood there naked to the wind.

"Can ye hear them?" Buck muttered under his breath, his own eyes fixed on the stones.

"No," Roger muttered back. "Can you?"

"I hope not." But Buck shuddered suddenly, as though something had walked across his grave.

"Be those thy be-asts?" the boy asked, grinning at Roger. He pointed at the stones, explaining—Roger thought—the local legend that the stones were in fact faery cattle, frozen in place when their drover had too much drink betaken and fell into the lake.

"Sooth," the boy assured them solemnly, making a cross over his heart. "Mester Hacffurthe found es whip!"

"When?" Buck asked sharply. "And where liveth Mester Hacffurthe?"

A week ago, maybe twa, said the boy, waving a hand to indicate that the date was not important. And he would take them to Mester Hacffurthe, if they liked to see the thing.

Despite his name, Mester Hacffurthe proved to be a slight, light-haired young man, the village cobbler. He spoke the same impenetrable Northumbrian dialect, but with some effort and the helpful intervention of the boy—whose name, he said, was Ridley—their desire was made clear, and Hacffurthe obligingly fetched the faery whip out from under his counter, laying it gingerly before them.

"Oh, Lord," Roger said at sight of it—and, with a raised brow at Hacffurthe to ask permission, touched the strip carefully. A machine-woven, tight-warped strip some three inches wide and two feet long, its taut surface gleaming even in the dim light of the cobbler's shop. Part of the harness of an RAF flier. They had the right stones, then.

Careful questioning of Mr. Hacffurthe, though, elicited nothing else helpful. He had found the faery lash lying in the shallows of the lake, washing to and fro among the reeds, but had seen nothing else of note.

Roger noticed, though, that Ridley twitched slightly when Mr. Hacffurthe said this. And after they had left the cobbler's house, he paused at the edge of the village, hand in his pocket.

"I thank 'ee, Master Ridley," he said, and pulled out a broad tuppenny piece that made the boy's face light up. Roger put it into Ridley's hand, but, when the boy would have turned to go, laid his own hand on the lad's arm.

"One thing more, Master Ridley," he said, and, with a glance at Buck, drew out the identity disks.

Ridley jerked in Roger's grasp, his round face going pale. Buck made a small sound of satisfaction and took Ridley by his other arm.

"Tell us about the man," Buck suggested pleasantly. "And I might not break thy neck."

Roger shot Buck a glance of annoyance, but the threat was effective. Ridley gulped as though he'd swallowed a mushroom whole, but then began to talk. Between Ridley's dialect and his distress, the tale took some time to piece together, but at last Roger was fairly sure they had the gist of it.

"Let him go," he said, letting go of Ridley himself. He groped in his pocket and came out with another copper penny, which he offered to the boy. Ridley's face flexed between fear and outrage, but after a moment's hesitation, he snatched the penny and made off, glancing over his shoulder as he ran.

"He'll tell his family," Buck observed. "We'd best hurry."

"We had. But not on that account—it's getting dark." The sun was very low, a brilliant band of yellow light showing at the foot of a cold ochre sky. "Come on. We need to take the direction while we can."

So far as Roger had been able to follow Ridley's story, the strangely dressed man (some said he was a faerie, some thought him a northerner, though there was confusion as to whether this meant a Scot, a Norseman, or something else) had had the ill luck to show up at a farm two or three miles from the stones, where he had been set upon by the inhabitants, these being an antisocial clan called Wad.

The Wads had taken everything of apparent value off the man, beaten him, and tossed him into a ravine—one of the Wads had boasted of it to a drover passing through, who had mentioned the stranger in the village.

The village had of course been interested—but not sufficiently so as to go looking for the man. When Hacffurthe the cobbler had found the peculiar strip of cloth, though, rumors had started to fly thick and fast. Excitement had reached a higher pitch this very afternoon, when one of Mester Quarton's cowmen had come into the village to have a boil lanced by Granny Racket and revealed that a stranger with incomprehensible speech had tried to steal a pie from Missus Quarton's sill and was even now held captive whilst Mester Quarton thought what best to do with him.

"What *might* he do?" Roger had asked. Ridley had pushed out his lips portentously and shaken his head.

"Might kill 'un," he said. "Might take 'un's hand off. Mester Quarton don't hold with thievin'."

And that—aside from a vague direction regarding the location of the Quarton farm—was that.

"This side of the wall, two miles west and a little south, below a ridge and along the stream," Roger said grimly, lengthening his stride. "If we can find the stream before full dark …"

"Aye." Buck fell in beside him as they turned toward where they'd left the horses. "Suppose Quarton keeps a dog?"

"Everybody here keeps a dog."

"Oh, God."

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JUST ONE CHANCE

THERE WAS NO MOON. Undeniably a good thing, but it had its drawbacks. The farmhouse and its outbuildings lay in a pocket of darkness so profound that they mightn't have known it was there, had they not seen it before the light was quite gone. They'd waited, though, for full dark and the dousing of the dim candlelight inside the house, and then an extra half hour or so to ensure that the inhabitants—and their dogs—were well asleep.

Roger was carrying the dark lantern, but with the slide still closed; Buck ran into something lying on the ground, let out a startled cry, and fell headlong over it. The something proved to be a large sleeping goose, which let out a startled *whonk!* somewhat louder than Buck's cry, and promptly set about him with beak and thrashing wings. There was a sharp, inquiring bark in the distance.

"Hush!" Roger hissed, coming to his ancestor's aid. "Ye'll wake the dead, let alone them in the house." He dropped his cloak over the goose, which shut up and began waddling around in confusion, a mobile heap of dark cloth. Roger clapped a hand to his mouth, but couldn't help snorting through his nose.

"Aye, right," Buck whispered, getting to his feet. "If ye think I'm getting your cloak back for ye, think again."

"He'll get out of it soon enough," Roger whispered back. "He's no need of it. Meanwhile, where the devil d'ye think they've got him?"

"Someplace that's got a door ye can bolt." Buck rubbed his palms together, brushing off the dirt. "They'd no keep him in the house, though, would they? It's no that big."

It wasn't. You could have fitted about sixteen farmhouses that size into Lallybroch, Roger thought, and felt a sudden sharp pang, thinking of Lallybroch as it was when he had—he would—own it.

Buck was right, though: there couldn't be more than two rooms and a loft, maybe, for the kids. And given that the neighbors thought Jerry—if it was Jerry—was a foreigner at best, a thief and/or supernatural being at worst, it wasn't likely that the Quartons would be keeping him in the house.

"Did ye see a barn, before the light went?" Buck whispered, changing to Gaelic. He had risen onto his toes, as though that might help him see above the tide of darkness, and was peering into the murk. Dark-adapted as Roger's eyes now were, he could at least make out the squat shapes of the small farm buildings. Corncrib, goat shed, chicken coop, the tousled shape of a hayrick …

"No," Roger replied in the same tongue. The goose had extricated itself and gone off making disgruntled small honks; Roger bent and retrieved his cloak. "Small place; they likely haven't more than an ox or a mule for the plowing, if that. I smell stock, though … manure, ken?"

"Kine," Buck said, heading abruptly off toward a square-built stone structure. "The cow byre. That'll have a bar to the door."

It did. And the bar was in its brackets.

"I don't hear any kine inside," Buck whispered, drawing close. "And the smell's old."

It was near-on winter. Maybe they'd had to slaughter the cow—or cows; maybe they'd driven them to market. But, cow or no, there was *something* inside; he heard a shuffling noise and what might have been a muffled curse.

"Aye, well, there's something inside." Roger raised the dark lantern, groping for the slide. "Get the bar, will you?"

But before Buck could reach for the bar, a shout of "Hoy!" came from inside, and something fell heavily against the door. "Help! Help me! Help!"

The voice spoke English, and Buck changed back at once. "Will ye for God's sake hush your noise?" he said to the man inside, annoyed. "Ye want to have them all down on us? Here, then, bring the light closer," he said to Roger, and drew the bar with a small grunt of effort.

The door swung open as Buck set down the bar, and light shot out of the lantern's open slide. A slightly built young man with flyaway fair hair—*the same color as Buck's*, Roger thought—blinked at them, dazzled by the light, then closed his eyes against it.

Roger and Buck glanced at each other for an instant, then, with one accord, stepped into the byre.

He is, Roger thought. *It's him. I know it's him. God, he's so young! Barely more than a boy*. Oddly, he felt no burst of dizzying excitement. It was a feeling of calm certainty, as though the world had suddenly righted itself and everything had fallen into place. He reached out and touched the man gently on the shoulder.

"What's your name, mate?" he said softly, in English.

"MacKenzie, J. W.," the young man said, shoulders straightening as he drew himself up, sharp chin jutting. "Lieutenant, Royal Air Force. Service Number—" He broke off, staring at Roger, who belatedly realized that, calmness or no, he was grinning from ear to ear. "What's funny?" Jerry MacKenzie demanded, belligerent.

"Nothing," Roger assured him. "Er … glad—glad to see you, that's all." His throat was tight, and he had to cough. "Have ye been here long?"

"No, just a few hours. Ye wouldn't have any food on ye, I don't suppose?" He looked hopefully from one man to the other.

"We do," Buck said, "but this isna the time to stop for a bite, aye?" He glanced over his shoulder. "Let's be off."

"Aye. Aye, we should." But Roger spoke automatically, unable to stop looking at J. W. MacKenzie, RAF, aged twenty-two.

"Who *are* you?" Jerry asked, staring back. "Where d'ye come from? God knows ye're not from here!"

Roger exchanged a quick look with Buck. They hadn't planned what to say; Roger hadn't been willing to jinx the enterprise by thinking that they'd really find Jerry MacKenzie, and as for Buck—

"Inverness," Buck said abruptly. He sounded gruff.

Jerry's eyes flicked back and forth between them, and he caught Roger's sleeve.

"Ye know what I mean!" he said, and gulped air, bracing himself. *"When?"*

Roger touched Jerry's hand, cold and dirty, the fingers long like his own. The question caught at his throat and thickened his voice too much to speak.

"A lang way from you," Buck said quietly, and for the first time, Roger caught a note of desolation in his voice. "From now. Lost."

That struck him to the heart. He'd truly forgotten their situation for a little, driven by the urgency of finding this man. But Buck's answer made Jerry's face, already drawn with hunger and strain, go white under the dirt.

"Jesus," Jerry whispered. "Where are we now? And—and when?"

Buck stiffened. Not at Jerry's question, but at a noise from outside. Roger didn't know what had made it, but it wasn't the wind. Buck made a low, urgent noise in his throat, shifting.

"I think it's part of Northumbria now," Roger said. "Look, there's no time. We have to go, before someone hears—"

"Aye, right. Let's go, then." Jerry had a filthy silk scarf round his neck; he tugged the ends straight and shoved them into his shirt.

The air outside was wonderful after the smells of the cow byre, fresh with new-turned earth and dying heather. They made their way as quickly as they could through the yard, skirting the farmhouse. Jerry was lame, he saw, limping badly, and Roger took his arm to help. A shrill yap came from the darkness, some distance away—then another bark, in a deeper tone.

Roger hastily licked a finger and held it up to gauge the direction of the breeze. A dog barked again, and another echoed it.

“This way,” he whispered to his companions, tugging Jerry’s arm. He led them away from the house as fast as possible, trying to keep his bearings, and they found themselves stumbling through a plowed field, dirt clods crumbling under their boots.

Buck stumbled and swore under his breath. They lurched from furrow to ridge, half-legged and clumsy, Roger clinging to Jerry’s arm to keep him upright; one of Jerry’s legs seemed gammy and wouldn’t take his weight. *He’s been wounded. I saw the medal.…*

Then the dogs began to bark, voices suddenly clear—and much closer.

“Jesus.” Roger stopped for an instant, breathing hard. Where the bloody hell was the wood they’d hidden in? He’d swear they’d been heading for it, but—the beam from the lantern swung crazily, showing meaningless patches of field. He shut the slide; they’d be better off without it.

“This way!” Buck lurched away and Roger and Jerry followed perforce, hearts thumping. Christ, it sounded like a half-dozen dogs at least had been let loose, all barking. And was that a voice, calling to the dogs? Yes, it bloody was. He couldn’t understand a word, but the meaning was as clear as ice water.

They ran, stumbling and panting. Roger couldn’t tell where they were; he was following Buck. He dropped the lantern at one point; it fell over with a clank and he heard the oil inside gurgle out of its reservoir. With a soft *whoosh*, it flowered into brilliant flame.

“Shit!” They ran. It didn’t matter where, what direction. Just away from the burning beacon and the irate voices—more than one now.

Suddenly they were into a scrim of trees—the low, wind-crabbed grove they'd lurked in earlier. But the dogs were on their track, barking eagerly, and they didn't linger but fought their way through the brush and out again, up a steep hill turfed with heather. Roger's foot sank through the spongy growth into a puddle, soaking him to the ankle, and he nearly lost his balance. Jerry set his feet and yanked Roger upright, then lost his own balance when his knee gave way; they clung together, wobbling precariously for an instant, then Roger lurched forward again and they were out of it.

He thought his lungs would burst, but they kept going—not running any longer; you couldn't run up a hill like this—slogging, planting one foot after another, after another … Roger began to see bursts of light at the edges of his vision; he tripped, staggered, and fell, and was hauled to his feet by Jerry.

They were all three half sopping and smeared head to foot with mud and heather scratchings when they lurched at last to the crest of the hill and stopped for a moment, swaying and gasping for air.

"Where … are we going?" Jerry wheezed, using the end of his scarf to wipe his face.

Roger shook his head, still short of breath—but then caught the faint gleam of water.

"We're taking you … back. To the stones by the lake. Where … you came through. Come on!"

They pelted down the far side of the hill, headlong, almost falling, now exhilarated by the speed and the thought of a goal.

"How … did you find me?" Jerry gasped, when at last they hit bottom and stopped for breath.

“Found your tags,” Buck said, almost brusque. “Followed their trail back.”

Roger put a hand to his pocket, about to offer them back—but didn’t. It had struck him, like a stone to the middle of his chest, that, having found Jerry MacKenzie against substantial odds, he was about to part from him, likely forever. And that was only if things went *well*.…

His father. *Dad*? He couldn’t think of this young man, white-faced and lame, nearly twenty years his junior, as his father—not the father he’d imagined all his life.

“Come on.” Buck took Jerry’s arm now, nearly holding him up, and they began to forge their way across the dark fields, losing their way and finding it again, guided by the light of Orion overhead.

Orion, Lepus. Canis major. He found a measure of comfort in the stars, blazing in the cold black sky. Those didn’t change; they’d shine forever—or as close as made no difference—on him and on this man, no matter where each one might end up.

End up. The cold air burned in his lungs. *Bree* …

And then he could see them: squatty pillars, no more than blotches on the night, visible only because they showed dark and immobile against the sheet of moving water stirred by the wind.

“Right,” he said hoarsely, and, swallowing, wiped his face on his sleeve. “This is where we leave you.”

“Ye do?” Jerry panted. “But—but you—”

“When ye came … through. Did ye have anything on you? A gemstone, any jewelry?”

“Aye,” Jerry said, bewildered. “I had a raw sapphire in my pocket. But it’s gone. It’s like it—”

“Like it burnt up,” Buck finished for him, grim-voiced. “Aye. Well, so?” This last was clearly addressed to Roger, who hesitated. *Bree* … No more than an instant, though—he stuck a hand into the leather pouch at his waist, pulled out the tiny oilcloth package, fumbled it open, and pressed the garnet pendant into Jerry’s hand. It was faintly warm from his body, and Jerry’s cold hand closed over it in reflex.

“Take this; it’s a good one. When ye go through,” Roger said, and leaned toward him, trying to impress him with the importance of his instructions, “think about your wife, about Marjorie. Think hard; see her in your mind’s eye, and walk straight through. Whatever the hell ye do, though, don’t think about your son. Just your wife.”

“What?” Jerry was gobsmacked. “How the bloody hell do you know my wife’s name? And where’ve ye heard about my son?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Roger said, and turned his head to look back over his shoulder.

“Damn,” said Buck softly. “They’re still coming. There’s a light.”

There was: a single light, bobbing evenly over the ground, as it would if someone carried it. But look as he might, Roger could see no one behind it, and a violent shiver ran over him.

“Thaibhse,” said Buck, under his breath. Roger knew that word well enough—spirit, it meant. And usually an ill-disposed one. A haunt.

“Aye, maybe.” He was beginning to catch his breath. “And maybe not.” He turned again to Jerry. “Either way, ye need to go, man, and now. Remember, think of your wife.”

Jerry swallowed, his hand closing tight around the stone.

“Aye. Aye … right. Thanks, then,” he added awkwardly.

Roger couldn't speak, could give him nothing more than the breath of a smile. Then Buck was beside him, plucking urgently at his sleeve and gesturing at the bobbing light, and they set off, awkward and lumbering after the brief cooldown.

Bree … He swallowed, fists clenched. He'd got a stone once, he could do it again.… But the greater part of his mind was still with the man they had just left by the lake. He looked over his shoulder and saw Jerry beginning to walk, limping badly but resolute, thin shoulders squared under his pale khaki shirt and the end of his scarf fluttering in the rising wind.

Then it all rose up in him. Seized by an urgency greater than any he'd ever known, he turned and ran. Ran heedless of footing, of dark, of Buck's startled cry behind him.

Jerry heard his footsteps on the grass and whirled round, startled himself. Roger grabbed him by both hands, squeezed them hard enough to make Jerry gasp, and said fiercely, "I love you!"

That was all there was time for—and all he could possibly say. He let go and turned away fast, his boots making a *shoof-shoof* noise in the dry lake grass. He glanced up the hill, but the light had vanished. Likely it had been someone from the farmhouse, satisfied now that the intruders were gone.

Buck was waiting, shrouded in his cloak and holding Roger's; he must have dropped it coming down the hill. Buck shook it out and folded it round Roger's shoulders; Roger's fingers shook, trying to fasten the brooch.

"Why did ye tell him a daft thing like that?" Buck asked, doing it for him. Buck's head was bent, not looking at him.

Roger swallowed hard, and his voice came clear but painful, the words like ice shards in his throat.

“Because he isn’t going to make it back. It’s the only chance I’ll ever have. Come on.”

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POSTPARTUM

THE NIGHT SHIVERED. The *whole* night. The ground and the lake, the sky, the dark, the stars, and every particle of his own body. He was scattered, instantly everywhere and part of everything. And part of *them*. There was one moment of an exaltation too great for fear and then he vanished, his last thought no more than a faint, *I am* … voiced more in hope than declaration.

Roger came back to a blurred knowledge of himself, flat on his back under a clear black sky whose brilliant stars seemed pinpoints now, desperately far away. He missed them, missed being part of the night. Missed, with a brief rending sense of desolation, the two men who'd shared his soul for that blazing moment.

The sound of Buck throwing up returned him to a sense of his body. He was lying in cold, wet grass, half soaked, smelling of mud and old manure, chilled to the bone, and bruised in a number of uncomfortable places.

Buck said something horrible in Gaelic and retched again. He was on his hands and knees a few feet away, a blot on the darkness.

"You all right?" Roger croaked, rolling onto his side. He'd remembered, suddenly, the trouble with Buck's heart when they'd made their passage at Craigh na Dun. "If your heart's giving you bother again—"

"If it was, damn-all ye could do about it, is there?" Buck said. He hawked a glob of something nasty into the grass and sat down heavily, wiping his sleeve across his mouth. "Christ, I hate that! Didna ken we'd feel it, this far away."

"Mmphm." Roger sat up slowly. He wondered whether Buck had felt the same thing he had, but it didn't seem the moment for metaphysical discussion. "He's gone, then."

"Want me to go and make sure of it?" Buck said disagreeably. "God, my head!"

Roger rose to his feet, staggering a little, and went and got Buck under one arm, levering him to his feet.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go find the horses. We'll get away a bit, make a wee camp, get some food into you."

"I'm not hungry."

"*I* bloody am." In fact, he was ravenous. Buck swayed but appeared able to stand on his own. Roger released him and turned briefly to look back at the distant lake and the standing stones. For an instant, he recaptured the sense of being part of them, and then it was gone; the gleaming water and the stones were no more than part of the craggy landscape.

There was no way of knowing what time it was, but the night was still pitch-dark by the time they'd retrieved the horses, made their way to a sheltered spot under a cliff face, found water, made fire, and toasted some bannocks to eat with their dried salt herring.

They didn't talk, both exhausted. Roger pushed away the obvious *"So now what?"* and let his thoughts come randomly as they would; time enough for plans tomorrow.

After a bit, Buck got up abruptly and went off into the dark. He stayed gone for some time, during which time Roger sat gazing into the fire, replaying every moment he'd spent with Jerry MacKenzie in his mind, trying to fix it all. He wished passionately that it had been daylight, that he'd been able to see more of his father's face than the brief glimpses he'd had in the beam of the dark lantern.

Whatever his regrets, though, and the cold knowledge that Jerry wouldn't make it back—or not back to where he'd started from, at least (God, what if he ended up lost in yet another strange time? Was that possible?)—there was the one small, warm thing. He'd said it. And wherever his father had gone, he'd carry that with him.

He wrapped himself in his cloak, lay down by the embers of the fire, and carried it with him into sleep.

* * *

WHEN ROGER WOKE in the morning, thickheaded but feeling reasonably okay, Buck had already built up the fire and was frying bacon. The smell of it got Roger into a sitting position, rubbing the last of the sleep from his eyes.

Buck blotted a slice of thick bacon out of the pan with a bannock and handed it to him. He seemed to have recovered from the aftereffects of Jerry's leaving; he was disheveled and unshaven, but clear-eyed, and gave Roger an assessing look.

“Are ye in one piece?” It wasn’t asked as a rhetorical question, and Roger nodded, taking the food. He started to say something in reply, but his throat was constricted, and nothing much came out. He cleared his throat hard, but Buck shook his head, indicating that no effort need be made on his part.

“I’m thinking we’ll head north again,” Buck said, without preamble. “Ye’ll want to keep looking for your lad, I suppose—and I want to go to Cranesmuir.”

So did Roger, though likely for other reasons. He eyed Buck closely, but his ancestor avoided his eye.

“Geillis Duncan?”

“Wouldn’t you?” Buck’s tone was belligerent.

“I just did,” Roger said dryly. “Aye, of course ye do.” This didn’t come as a surprise. He chewed his makeshift butty slowly, wondering just how much to tell Buck about Geillis. “Your mother,” he began, and cleared his throat again.

When Roger had finished, Buck sat in silence for some time, blinking at the last slice of bacon, drying in the pan.

“Jesus,” he said, but not in tones of shock. More a deep interest, Roger thought, with some unease. Buck glanced up at Roger, speculation in his moss-green eyes. “And what d’ye ken about my father, then?”

“More than I can tell ye in a few minutes, and we should be on our way.” Roger got up, brushing crumbs off his knees. “I don’t want to try explaining our presence to any of those hairy buggers. My Old English isn’t what it used to be.”

“ ‘Sumer is icumen in,’ ” Buck said, with a glance at the leafless, wind-blasted saplings precariously rooted in the cliff’s crevices. “ ‘Lhude sing cuccu.’ Aye, let’s go.”

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SOLSTICE

December 19, 1980
Edinburgh, Scotland

A PRACTICAL GUIDE FOR TIME TRAVELERS—PART II

It's almost time. The winter solstice is day after tomorrow. I keep imagining that I can feel the earth shifting slowly in the dark, tectonic plates moving under my feet and … things … invisibly lining up. The moon is waxing, nearly a quarter full. Have no idea whether that might be important.

In the morning, we'll take the train to Inverness. I've called Fiona; she'll meet us at the station, and we'll eat and change at her house—then she'll drive us to Craigh na Dun … and leave us there. Keep wondering if I should ask her to stay—or at least to come back in an hour, in case one or more of us should still be there, on fire or unconscious. Or dead.

After dithering for an hour, I called Lionel Menzies, too, and asked him to keep an eye on Rob Cameron. Inverness is a small town; there's always the chance that someone will see us coming off the train, or at Fiona's. And word spreads fast. If anything's going to happen, I want warning.

I have these brief lucid moments when everything seems okay and I'm filled with hope, almost trembling with anticipation. Most of the time, I keep thinking I'm insane, and then I'm really shaking.

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THE SUCCUBUS OF CRANESMUIR

Cranesmuir, Scotland

ROGER AND BUCK stood at the far side of the tiny square in the middle of Cranesmuir, looking up at the fiscal's house. Roger cast a bleak look at the plinth in the middle of the square, with its wooden pillory. At least there were holes for only one miscreant; no crime waves in Cranesmuir.

"The attic, ye said?" Buck was staring intently at the windows of the top story. It was a substantial house, with leaded windows, and even the attic had some, though smaller than the ones in the lower stories. "I can see plants hanging from the ceiling, I think."

"That's what Claire said, aye. That she keeps her … her"—the word "lair" came to mind, but he discarded this in favor of—"her surgery up there. Where she makes up her potions and charms." He inspected his cuffs, which were still damp after a hasty sponge bath at the village horse trough to remove the worst stains of travel, and checked to see that his hair ribbon was in order.

The door opened and a man came out—a merchant, maybe, or a lawyer, well dressed, with a warm coat against the mizzle. Buck shifted to one side, peering to get a look before the door closed behind him.

"There's a servant at the door," he reported. "I'll knock, then, and ask if I can see—Mrs. Duncan, is that her name?"

"For the moment, aye," Roger said. He sympathized entirely with Buck's need to see his mother. And in all truth, he was curious to meet the woman himself; she was his five-times great-grandmother—*and* one of the few time travelers he knew about. But he'd also heard enough about her that his feelings were of excitement mixed with considerable unease.

He coughed, fist to his mouth. "D'ye want me to come up with you? If she's to home, I mean."

Buck opened his mouth to reply, then closed it, considered a moment, then nodded.

"Aye, I do," he said quietly. He shot Roger a sidelong look, though, with a gleam of humor in it. "Ye can help keep the conversation going."

"Happy to help," Roger said. "We're agreed, though: ye dinna mean to tell her who ye are. Or what."

Buck nodded again, though his eyes were now fixed on the door, and Roger thought he wasn't attending.

"Aye," he said. "Come on, then," and strode across the square, head up and shoulders squared.

"Mrs. Duncan? Well, I dinna ken, gentlemen," the maid said. "She's to hame the day, but Dr. McEwan's with her just noo."

Roger's heart jumped.

"Is she ill?" Buck asked sharply, and the maid blinked, surprised.

"Och, no. They're takin' tea in the parlor. Would ye like to step in oot the rain and I'll go and see what she says?" She stepped back to let them in, and Roger took advantage of this to touch her arm.

"Dr. McEwan's a friend of ours. Would ye maybe be giving him our names? Roger and William MacKenzie—at his service."

They discreetly shook as much water as possible off their hats and coats, but within a few moments the maid was back, smiling.

"Come up, gentlemen, Mrs. Duncan says, and welcome! Just up the stair there. I'll just be fetching ye a bit o' tea."

The parlor was one floor above, a small room, rather crowded, but warm and colorful. Neither of the men had eyes for the furnishings, though.

"Mr. MacKenzie," Dr. McEwan said, looking surprised but cordial. "And Mr. MacKenzie." He shook hands with them and turned to the woman who had risen from her seat beside the fire. "My dear, allow me to make you acquainted with an erstwhile patient of mine and his kinsman. Gentlemen, Mrs. Duncan."

Roger felt Buck stiffen slightly, and no wonder. He hoped he wasn't staring himself.

Geillis Duncan was maybe not a classic beauty, but that didn't matter. She was certainly good-looking, with creamy-blond hair put up under a lace cap, and—of course—the eyes. Eyes that made him want to close his own and poke Buck in the back to make him do the same, because surely she or McEwan would notice….

McEwan had noticed something, all right, but it wasn't the eyes. He was eyeing Buck with a small frown of displeasure, as Buck took a long stride forward, seized the woman's hand, and boldly kissed it.

"Mrs. Duncan," he said, straightening up and smiling right into those clear green eyes. "Your most humble and obedient servant, ma'am."

She smiled back, one blond brow raised, with an amused look that met Buck's implied challenge—and raised it. Even from where he was standing, Roger felt the snap of attraction between them, sharp as a spark of static electricity. So had McEwan.

"How is your health, Mr. MacKenzie?" McEwan said pointedly to Buck. He pulled a chair into place. "Do sit down and let me examine you."

Buck either didn't hear or pretended not to. He was still holding Geillis Duncan's hand, and she wasn't pulling it away.

" 'Twas kind of you to receive us, ma'am," he said. "And certainly we don't mean to disturb your tea. We'd heard of your skill as a healer and meant to call in what you might say is a professional way."

"Professional," she repeated, and Roger was surprised at her voice. It was light, almost girlish. Then she smiled again and the illusion of girlishness vanished. She drew her hand away now, but with a languid air of reluctance, her eyes still fixed on Buck with obvious interest. "Your profession, or mine?"

"Ah, I'm naught but a humble solicitor, ma'am," Buck said, with a gravity so patently mock that Roger wanted to punch him. Then he added, turning to Roger, "and my kinsman here is a scholar and musician. But as ye see, he's suffered a sad accident to his throat, and—"

Now Roger truly wanted to punch him. "I—" he began, but with the cruel whim of fate, his throat chose that moment to constrict, and his protest ended in a gurgle like a rusty pipe.

"We'd heard of ye, mistress, as I said," Buck went on, putting a sympathetic hand on Roger's shoulder and squeezing hard. "And as I say, we wondered …"

"Let me see," she said, and came to stand in front of Roger, her face suddenly a few inches from his. Behind her, McEwan was growing red in the face.

"I've seen this man," he told her. "It's a permanent injury, though I was able to offer some small relief. But—"

"Permanent, indeed." She'd undone his neckcloth in seconds and spread his shirt open, her fingers warm and light on his scar. She shifted her gaze and looked directly into his eyes. "But a lucky one, I'd say. You didn't die."

"No," he said, his voice hoarse but at least serviceable again. "I didn't." God, she was unsettling. Claire had described her vividly—but Claire was a woman. She was still touching him, and while her touch was not in any way improper, it was damned intimate.

Buck was growing restive; he didn't like her touching Roger any more than McEwan did. He cleared his throat.

"I wonder, mistress—might ye have any simples, medicines, perhaps? Not only for my kinsman here, but … well …" He coughed in a way meant to indicate that he harbored more-delicate ailments that he didn't wish to mention before others.

The woman smelled of sex. Very recent sex. It rose from her like incense.

She stayed in front of Roger for a moment, still looking intently into his face, but then smiled and took her hand away, leaving his throat feeling suddenly cool and exposed.

"Of course," she said, switching smile and attention to Buck. "Come up to my wee attic, sir. I'm sure I've something there that will cure what ails ye."

Roger felt gooseflesh ripple across his chest and shoulders, in spite of the good fire on the hearth. Buck and McEwan had both twitched slightly, and she bloody well knew it, though her face was entirely composed. Roger fixed a glare on Buck, willing his ancestor to look at him. Buck didn't but moved to take Geillis's arm, pulling her hand through his elbow. A slow, hot flush burned up the back of his neck.

McEwan made a very small noise in his throat.

Then Buck and Geillis were gone, the sound of their footsteps and animated voices dying away as they climbed the stairs to the attic, leaving Roger and McEwan both silent, each for his own reasons.

* * *

ROGER THOUGHT that the good doctor might be about to suffer an apoplexy, if that was the correct medical term for "blow a gasket." Whatever his own feelings about the abrupt departure of Buck and Geillis—and those were vivid—they paled beside the hue of Hector McEwan's face.

The doctor was panting slightly, his complexion puce. Plainly he wanted to follow the errant pair but just as clearly was constrained by the fact that he had no idea what he might conceivably do when he caught up with them.

"It's not what you think," Roger said, commending his soul to God and *hoping* that it wasn't.

McEwan swung round to glare at him. “The devil it’s not,” he snapped. “You don’t know her.”

“Plainly not as well as you do, no,” Roger said pointedly, and raised one brow.

McEwan said something blasphemous in reply, took up the poker, and stabbed viciously at the smoking bricks of peat in the hearth. He half-turned toward the door, the poker still in his hand, and the look on his face was such that Roger leapt to his feet and grabbed him by the arm.

“Stop, man,” he said, keeping his voice pitched as low and evenly as he could, in hopes of soothing McEwan. “Ye’ll do yourself no good. Sit down, now. I’ll tell ye why it—why he—why the man’s interested in her.”

“For the same reason every dog in the village is *interested* in a bitch in heat,” McEwan said venomously. But he let Roger take the poker from his hand, and while he wouldn’t sit down, he did at least take several deep breaths that restored a semblance of calm.

“Aye, tell me, then—for all the good it will do,” he said.

It wasn’t a situation that allowed for diplomacy or euphemism.

“She’s his mother, and he knows it,” Roger said bluntly.

Whatever McEwan had been expecting, that wasn’t it, and for an instant, Roger was gratified to see the man’s face go absolutely blank with shock. Only for an instant, though. It was likely going to be a tricky bit of pastoral counseling, at best.

“Ye know what he is,” Roger said, taking the doctor by the arm again and pulling him toward a brocaded wing chair. “Or, rather, what we are. *Cognosco te*?”

“I—” McEwan’s voice died, though he opened and closed his mouth a few times, helplessly looking for words.

“Aye, I know,” Roger said soothingly. “It’s difficult. But ye do know, don’t ye?”

“I—yes.” McEwan sat down abruptly. He breathed for a moment, blinked once or twice, and looked up at Roger.

“His mother. His *mother*?”

“I have it on good authority,” Roger assured him. A thought struck him, though.

“Ah … ye did know about her, didn’t ye? That she’s … one of us?”

McEwan nodded. “She’s never admitted it. Just—just laughed at me when I told her where I’d come from. And I didn’t know for a long time. Not until I—” His lips clamped abruptly into a tight line.

“I’m guessing ye didn’t have occasion to heal her of anything,” Roger said carefully. “Does she … er … has it got anything to do with blue light, by chance?”

He was trying hard to avoid the mental picture of Geillis and Dr. McEwan, naked and sweating, both bathed in a faint blue glow. The woman *was* his several-times great-grandmother, whatever else you liked to say about her.

McEwan gave him a bleak look and shook his head.

“Not … exactly. She’s a very fine herbalist and not bad at diagnosis, but she can’t—do that.” He twiddled his fingers briefly in illustration, and Roger felt a faint memory of the warmth when McEwan had touched his throat.

The doctor sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

“No point in evasion, I suppose. I got her with child. And I could—‘see’ is not quite the right word, but I can’t think of a better one. I could see the moment when my … seed … reached her ovum. The … er … the fetus. It glowed inside her womb; I could sense it when I touched her.”

A certain heat rose in Roger’s face. “Forgive me for asking, but—how do you know that happened because she’s … what she is? Might it not be the case with a normal woman?”

McEwan smiled—very bleakly—at the word “normal,” and shook his head.

“I had two children by a woman in Edinburgh, in—in my own time,” he said quietly, and looked down at his feet. “That … was one of the reasons I didn’t try to return.”

Roger made a sound in his damaged throat that was meant to be regretful and compassionate, but whether his feelings or his larynx had got the better of him, it emerged as a rather stern “Hrmph!” and McEwan’s color began to rise again.

“I know,” he said wretchedly. “I don’t seek to—to excuse it.”

Just as well, Roger thought. *I’d like to see ye try, you—you—* But recriminations would do no one any good just now, and he stifled whatever else he might have said on the subject, instead returning to Geillis.

“Ye said ye got her”—jerking his chin upward, to where the sounds of footsteps and bumpings were audible overhead—“with child. Where *is* the child?”

McEwan drew a long, trembling breath. “I said … she is a very fine herbalist …?”

“Jesus, Lord,” Roger said. “Did ye know she meant to do it?”

McEwan swallowed audibly, but kept silent.

“My God,” Roger said. “My God. I know it’s not my place to judge you—but if it was, man, you’d burn in hell.”

And with that, he went downstairs and out into the streets of Cranesmuir, leaving the lot of them to their own devices.

HE’D MADE SIXTEEN circuits of the village square—it was a small square—before getting a precarious hold on his sense of outrage. He stood in front of the Duncans’ front door, fists clenched, taking deep, deliberate breaths.

He had to go back. You didn’t walk away from people who were drowning, even if they’d jumped into a quagmire on purpose. And he didn’t want to think what might happen if McEwan, left to himself, should be overcome by anguish or fury and rush in on the pair in the attic. He *really* didn’t want to think what Buck—or, God forbid, Geillis—might do in that case, and the thought galvanized him.

He didn’t trouble knocking. Arthur Duncan was the procurator fiscal; his door was always open. The wee maid poked her head out of an inner door at the sound of his footsteps, but when she saw who he was, she drew it in again, doubtless thinking he’d just stepped out for something.

He nearly sprinted up the stair, a guilty conscience now furnishing him with visions of Hector McEwan hanging from the small chandelier in the parlor, helpless feet kicking in the air.

When he burst in, though, he found McEwan slumped forward in the wing chair, face buried in his hands. He didn’t look up at Roger’s entrance and wouldn’t raise his head even when Roger shook him gently by the shoulder.

“Come on, man,” he said gruffly, then cleared his throat. “Ye’re still a doctor, aren’t ye? Ye’re needed.”

That made the man look up, startled. His face was mottled with emotion—anger, shame, desolation, lust. Could lust be an emotion? Roger wondered briefly, but dismissed the consideration as academic at the moment. McEwan straightened his shoulders and rubbed both hands hard over his face, as though trying to erase the feelings so plainly displayed there.

"Who needs me?" he said, and rose to his feet with a decent attempt at composure.

"I do," Roger said, and cleared his throat again, with a noise like falling gravel. It felt like gravel, too; strong emotion choked him, literally. "Come outside, aye? I need air, and so do you."

McEwan cast one last look up at the ceiling, where the noises had now ceased, then firmed his lips, nodded, and, taking up his hat from the table, came along.

Roger led the way out of the square and past the last house, then up a cow path, dodging heaps of manure, until they reached a drystane wall that they could sit upon. He sat down himself and gestured to McEwan, who sat obediently. The walk had lent the doctor some semblance of calm, and he turned at once to Roger and spread open his collar—this still flapping loose. Roger felt the ghost of Geillis Duncan's touch on his throat and shivered, but it was cold out, and McEwan took no notice.

The doctor wrapped his fingers loosely around the scar and seemed to listen for a moment, head to one side. Then he pulled his hand back a little and felt delicately up higher with two probing fingers, then lower, a small frown of concentration on his face.

And Roger felt it. The same odd sensation of light warmth. He'd been holding his breath under the doctor's touch, but at this realization he exhaled suddenly—and freely.

"Jesus," he said, and put his own hand to his throat. The word had come freely, too.

"It's better?" McEwan was looking at him intently, his earlier upset subsumed in professional concern.

"It … is." The scar was still bumpy under his fingers, but something had changed. He cleared his throat experimentally. A little pain, a little blockage—but noticeably better. He lowered his hand and stared at McEwan. "Thank you. What the bloody hell did you do?"

The tension that had been twanging through McEwan since Roger and Buck had entered the Duncans' house finally eased, just as the tightness in Roger's throat had.

"I don't know that I can tell you with any great precision," he said apologetically. "It's just that I know what a sound larynx should feel like, and I can tell what yours feels like, and …" He shrugged a little, helpless. "I put my fingers there and … envision the way it *should* feel."

He touched Roger's throat gently again, exploring. "I can tell that it's very slightly better now. But there *is* a good deal of damage. I can't say whether it would ever be completely healed—in all truth, I doubt it. But if I were to repeat the treatment—it seems to need some time between treatments, no doubt for the tissue to heal, just as an external wound would. So far as I can tell, the optimum time between treatments of a serious injury is about a month; Geillis—" And here his face twitched violently; he had forgotten. He mastered himself with an effort, though, and went on, "Geillis thinks that the process may be affected by the phase of the moon, but she is …"

"A witch," Roger finished for him.

The look of unhappiness had returned to McEwan's face, and he lowered his head to hide it.

"Perhaps," he said softly. "Surely she is … an unusual woman."

"And a good thing for the human race that there aren't more like her," Roger said, but then checked himself. If he could pray for Jack Randall's immortal soul, he couldn't do less for his own great-grandmother, homicidal maniac or not. But the immediate problem was to try to extract the hapless soul before him from her clutches before she could destroy Hector McEwan utterly.

"Dr. McEwan … Hector," he said softly, and laid a hand on the doctor's arm. "You need to go right away from this place, and from her. She won't merely bring you great unhappiness or imperil your soul—she may well kill you."

A look of surprise momentarily displaced the unhappiness in McEwan's eyes. He looked aside, pursed his mouth, and glanced back at Roger, sidelong, as though afraid to look at him too directly.

"Surely you exaggerate," he said, but the words had no force. McEwan's own Adam's apple bobbed visibly as he swallowed.

Roger drew a deep, unconstricted breath and felt the cold, damp air fresh in his chest.

"No," he said gently. "I don't. Think about it, aye? And pray, if ye can. There *is* mercy, aye? And forgiveness."

McEwan sighed, too, but not with any sense of freedom in it. He cast his eyes down, fixed them on the muddy lane and the rain-dancing puddles in the low spots.

"I cannot," he said, his voice low and hopeless. "I've … tried. I can't."

Roger's hand was still on McEwan's arm. He squeezed, hard, and said, "Then I'll pray for ye. And for her," he added, hoping no reluctance showed in his voice.

“Thank you, sir,” the doctor said. “I value that extremely.” But his eyes had lifted and turned, as though he had no power over them, toward Cranesmuir and its smoking chimneys, and Roger knew there was no hope.

* * *

HE WALKED BACK to Cranesmuir and waited in the square ’til the door of the Duncans’ house opened and Buck emerged. The man looked mildly surprised—but not displeased—to see Roger, and nodded at him but didn’t speak. They walked together to an ordinary, where they got a room and went upstairs to refresh themselves before supper. The ordinary didn’t run to a bath, but hot water, soap, razor, and towels went some way to restore them to a decent state of cleanliness.

Buck hadn’t spoken a word more than necessary, but he had an odd expression—half pleased and half ashamed—and kept darting sidelong glances at Roger, as though unsure whether to say something but rather wanting to.

Roger poured a cup of water from the ewer, drank half of it, and set the cup down with an air of resignation.

“Tell me you didn’t,” he said finally. “Please.”

Buck shot him a quick glance, looking both shocked at the words and slightly amused.

“No,” he said, after a pause long enough to knot Roger’s belly. “No, I didn’t. I’m no saying I couldn’t have, though,” he added. “She … wasn’t unwilling.”

Roger would have said he didn’t want to know, but he wasn’t quite able to deceive himself.

“Ye tried?”

Buck nodded, then picked up the cup of water and dashed the remnants into his own face, shaking them off with a *whoof* of breath.

“I kissed her,” he said. “Put my hand on her breast.”

Roger had seen the upper slopes of those breasts as they swelled above her deep-green woolen bodice, round and white as snowdrops—but a lot bigger. By a considerable force of will, he kept himself from asking, *“And what happened then?”*

He didn’t have to, though; Buck was obviously reliving the experience and wanted nothing more than to talk about it.

“She put her hand on mine, but she didn’t pull my hand away. Not at first. She went on kissing me—” He broke off and looked at Roger, one brow raised. “Have ye kissed many women?”

“I haven’t kept count,” Roger said, with a slight edge. “Have you?”

“Four besides her,” Buck said contemplatively. He shook his head. “That was different.”

“I’d expect it would be. Kissing your mother, I mean—”

“Not *that* kind of different.” Buck touched his lips with two fingers, lightly as a girl might. “The other kind. Or maybe I dinna mean that, quite. I kissed a whore once, and it wasna like that at all.” He patted his lips absently for a moment, then realized what he was doing and drew his hand away, looking momentarily embarrassed. “Ever gone wi’ a whore?”

“I have not,” Roger said, trying not to sound censorious, but not managing all that well.

Buck shrugged, dismissing it.

“Well, so. She kept my hand on her breast while she took her time about kissin’ me. But then …” He paused, blushing, and Roger drew himself up. Buck, blushing?

"What, then?" he asked, unable to refrain.

"Well, she drew it down, ken, over her body, very slow, and still kissin' me, and—well, I must have heard her skirts rustle, mustn't I? But I wasna paying attention, because when she took my hand and put it on her … erm … lady part, I thought I'd pass out from the shock."

"Her—was she—it, I mean—naked?"

"Bare as an egg, and just as bald, too," Buck assured him. "Have ye ever heard of such a thing?"

"I have, aye."

Buck stared at him, green eyes wide.

"Ye mean your wife—"

"I bloody don't," Roger snapped. "Don't ye dare speak of Brianna, *an amaidan*, or I'll gie you your head in your hands to play with."

"You and who else?" Buck said automatically, but waved a hand to calm Roger. "Why did ye not tell me my mother was a whore?"

"I wouldn't tell ye something like that, even if I knew it for a fact, and I didn't," Roger said.

Buck looked at him for a moment in silence, eyes direct. "Ye'll never make a decent minister," he said at last, "if ye can't be honest."

The words were said objectively, without heat—and stung the more on that account, being true. Roger breathed in hard through his nose and out again.

"All right," he said. And told Buck everything he knew, or thought he knew, concerning Gillian Edgars, alias Geillis Duncan.

"Jesus God," Buck said, blinking.

“Aye,” Roger said shortly. Buck’s description of his encounter with his mother had given Roger a vividly disturbing image of Brianna, and he hadn’t been able to dismiss it. He hungered for her, and as a result was acutely aware of Buck’s lingering images of Geillis; he saw the man’s hand absently cup itself, fingers drawing slowly in, as though he were guddling—Christ, he could smell her on Buck’s flesh, pungent and taunting.

“So now ye’ve met her,” Roger said abruptly, looking away. “And now ye ken what she is. Is that enough, do ye think?” He was careful to make the question no more than a question, and Buck nodded, but not in answer, more as though he were having an internal conversation—with himself or with Geillis, Roger didn’t know.

“My father,” Buck said thoughtfully, without actually answering. “From what he said when we met him at the MacLarens’ croft, I thought he maybe didna ken her yet. But he was interested, ye could tell that.” He looked suddenly at Roger, a thought having struck him.

“D’ye think it was meeting us that made him—will make him,” he corrected, with a grimace, “go and find her?” He glanced down, then back up at Roger. “Would I not exist if we hadn’t come to find your wee lad, I mean?”

Roger felt the usual sense of startled creepiness at realizations of this sort, something like having cold fingers suddenly laid against the small of his back.

“Maybe so,” he said. “But I doubt ye’ll ever know that. Not for sure.”

He was glad enough to leave the subject of Geillis Duncan, though Buck’s other parent was probably no less dangerous.

“D’ye think ye need to speak with Dougal MacKenzie?” Roger asked carefully. He didn’t want to go anywhere near

Castle Leoch or the MacKenzies, but Buck had a right to do it if he wanted, and Roger himself had an obligation—two of them, as kin and as priest—to help him if he did. And however such a conversation might work out, he doubted very much that it would be as disconcerting as the meeting with Geillis.

As for dangerous, though …

"I don't know," Buck said softly, as though talking to himself. "I dinna ken what I'd say to the man—to either of them."

That alarmed Roger, who sat up straight.

"Ye don't mean ye'd go back to her? To—your mother?"

Buck's mouth curled up on one side.

"Well, we really didna say much to each other," he pointed out.

"Neither did I," Roger said shortly, "to my father."

Buck made an indeterminate noise in his throat, and they fell silent, listening to the growing drum of rain on the slates of the roof. The tiny fire dwindled under the rain coming down the chimney and went out, leaving no more than the faint smell of warmth, and after a bit Roger wrapped himself in his cloak and curled up on one side of the bed, waiting for his body to warm enough for sleep to come.

The air through the cracked window was sharp with cold and the tingling smell of wet bracken and pine bark. No place smelled like the Highlands, and Roger found his heart eased by its harsh perfume. He was nearly asleep when Buck's voice came softly to him through the dark.

"I'm glad ye got to say it, though."

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NO A VERY GOOD PERSON

ROGER HAD INSISTED on camping outside the town, thinking it better to get Buck as far away from Geillis Duncan as was feasible. For once, it wasn't raining, and they'd managed to gather enough in the way of pine twigs for a decent wood fire; pine would usually burn even if damp, because of the resin.

"I'm no a very good person." The words were quiet and took a moment to register. Roger looked up to see Buck slumped on his rock, a long stick in his hand, poking at the fire in a desultory fashion. Roger rubbed a hand along his jaw. He felt tired, discouraged, and in no mood for more pastoral counseling.

"I've met worse," he said, after a pause. It sounded unconvincing.

Buck looked at him from under the fringe of blond hair. "I wasna looking for contradiction or consolation," he said dryly. "It was a statement of fact. Call it a preface, if ye like."

"All right." Roger stretched, yawning, then settled himself. "A preface to what? An apology?" He saw the question on his ancestor's face and, irritated, touched his throat. "For this."

"Ah, that." Buck rocked back a little and pursed his lips, eyes fixed on the scar.

"Aye, *that*!" Roger snapped, irritation flaring suddenly into anger. "Do you have any notion what it was ye took from me, you bastard?"

"Maybe a bit." Buck resumed poking at the fire, waiting 'til the end of his stick caught, then stubbing it out again in the dirt. He fell silent, then, and for a bit there was no sound but the rattle of wind through the dry bracken. *A ghost walking by*, Roger thought, watching the brown fronds within the circle of firelight stir and then fall still.

"I don't say it as excuse, mind," Buck said at last, eyes still fixed on the fire. "But there's the matter of intent. I didna mean to get ye hanged."

Roger made a low, vicious noise in response to this. It hurt. He was damned tired of it hurting to speak, or sing, or even grunt.

"Bugger off," he said abruptly, standing up. "Just—bugger off. I don't want to look at you."

Buck gave him a long look, as though debating whether to say something, but then shrugged, got up, and disappeared. He was back within five minutes, though, and sat down with the air of someone who had something to say. *Fine*, Roger thought. *Get on with it.*

"Did it not occur to the two of ye, whilst reading those letters, that there's another way for the past to speak to the future?"

“Well, of course,” Roger said, impatient. He stabbed his dirk into one of the turnips to test it; still hard as a rock. “We thought of all sorts of things—diaries left under stones, newspaper notices”—he grimaced at that one—“and a number of less-useful notions. But most of those options were either too unsure or too risky; that’s why we arranged to use the banks. But …”

He trailed off. Buck was looking smugly superior.

“And I suppose you’ve thought of something better?” Roger said.

“Why, man, it’s right under your nose.” With a smirk, Buck bent to test his own turnip and, evidently finding the results acceptable, lifted it out of the ashes on the point of his dirk.

“If ye think I’m going to *ask* you—”

“Beyond that—” Buck said, blowing on the hot turnip between phrases, “beyond that—it’s the only way for the future to speak to the past.”

He gave Roger a straight, hard look, and Roger felt as though he’d been stabbed with a screwdriver.

“What—you?” he blurted. “You mean you—”

Buck nodded, eyes casually on his smoking turnip.

“Can’t be you, can it?” He looked up suddenly, green eyes catching the firelight. “You won’t go. Ye wouldn’t trust me to keep looking.”

“I—” The words caught in Roger’s throat, but he was well aware that they showed in his face.

Buck’s own face twisted in a lopsided smile. “I would keep looking,” he said. “But I see how ye’d not believe me.”

“It’s not that,” Roger said, clearing his throat. “It’s only—I *can’t* leave while Jem might be here. Not when I don’t know for sure that I could come back if I left and he … wasn’t at the other end." He made a helpless gesture. "Go, and know I was maybe abandoning him forever?"

Buck nodded, looking down. Roger saw the other man's throat move, too, and was struck by a pang of realization.

"Your Jem," Roger said softly. "You do know where he is, at least. When, I mean." The question was clear: if Buck was willing to risk the stones again, why would he not do it in search of his own family, rather than to carry a message to Bree?

"Ye're all mine, aren't ye?" Buck said gruffly. "My blood. My … sons."

Despite everything, Roger was moved by that. A little. He coughed, and it didn't hurt.

"Even so," he said. He gave Buck a direct look. "Why? Ye ken it might do for you; it might have done this last time, if McEwan hadn't been there."

"Mmphm." Buck poked his turnip again and put it back into the fire. "Aye. Well, I meant it; I'm no a very good person. No such a waste, I mean, if I didna make it." His lips twisted a little as he glanced up at Roger. "Ye've maybe got a bit more to offer the world."

"I'm flattered," Roger said dryly. "I imagine the world can get on well enough without me, if it came to that."

"Aye, maybe. But maybe your family can't."

There was a long silence while Roger digested that, broken only by the pop of a burning twig and the distant hooting of courting owls.

"What about your own family?" he asked at last, quietly. "Ye seem to think your wife would be happier without ye. Why? What did ye do to her?"

Buck made a short, unhappy noise that might have been meant for a wry laugh.

“Fell in love wi’ her.” He took a deep breath, looking down into the fire.

“Wanted her.”

He’d met Morag Gunn just after he’d begun reading law with a solicitor in Inverness. The lawyer had been called to go out to a farm near Essich, to draw up a will for an old man, and had taken his junior along to see the way of it.

“It took three days, for the auld man was that ill, he couldna attend more than a few minutes at a time. So we stayed wi’ the family, and I’d go out to help wi’ the pigs and the chickens when I wasna needed inside.” He shrugged. “I was young and no bad-looking, and I had the trick of makin’ women like me. And she did like me—but she was in love wi’ Donald McAllister, a young farmer from Daviot.”

But Buck had been unable to forget the lass, and whenever he had a day free from the law, would ride out to visit. He came for Hogmanay, and there was *a cèilidh*, and …

“And wee Donald had a dram—or two or three or four—too many and was found in a stall wi’ his hand down Mary Finlay’s bodice. God, the stramash there was!” A rueful smile flickered over Buck’s face. “Mary’s twa brothers gave Donald laldy and laid him out like a mackerel, and all the lasses were screamin’ and the lads shoutin’ like it was Judgment Day. And poor wee Morag was off behind the cow byre, greetin’ her heart out.”

“You, um, comforted her,” Roger suggested, not trying to keep the skeptical note out of his voice. Buck shot him a sharp glance, then shrugged.

“Thought it might be my only chance,” he said simply. “Aye. I did. She was the worse for drink herself, and that upset.… I didna force her.” His lips pressed together. “But I didna take no for an answer, either, and after a bit, she gave up sayin' it."

"Aye. And when she woke up next morning and realized …?"

Buck cocked a brow.

"She didna say anything to anyone then. It was two months later when she realized …" Buck had arrived at Mr. Ferguson's rooms one day in March to find Morag Gunn's father and three brothers waiting for him, and as soon as the banns could be read, he was a married man.

"So." Buck took a breath and rubbed a hand over his face. "We … got on. I was mad in love wi' her, and she kent that and tried to be kind to me. But I knew well enough it was Donald she'd wanted and still did. He was still there, ken, and she'd see him now and then at *cèilidhean* or the cattle sales."

It was knowing that that had made Buck take the opportunity to sail for North Carolina with his wife and small child.

"Thought she'd forget," he said, a little bleakly. "Or at least I wouldna have to see the look in her eyes when she saw him."

But things had gone badly for the MacKenzies in the New World; Buck had failed to establish a practice as a solicitor, they had little money and no land, and they had no one in the way of kinfolk to turn to for help.

"So we came back," Buck said. He rolled the turnip out of the fire and stabbed it with his stick; the black crust broke and oozed white. He stared at the vegetable for a moment, then stamped on it, mashing it into the ashes.

"And Donald was still there, of course. Was he married?"

Buck shook his head, then knuckled the hair out of his eyes.

"It was no good," he said softly. "It was true, what I told ye about how I came to pass through the stones. But once I'd come to myself and discovered how things were—I kent Morag would be best served if I never came back. Either she'd give me up for dead after a time and marry Donald, or, at the worst, her father would have her back, wi' the bairns. They'd live well—her da had inherited the farm, when his auld one died."

Roger's throat felt tight but it didn't matter. He reached out and squeezed Buck's shoulder, hard. Buck gave a small snort, but didn't pull away.

After a bit, though, he heaved a sigh and straightened up, turning to Roger.

"So ye see," he said. "If I go back and tell your wife what's to do—and, with luck, come back to tell you—it's maybe the one good thing I could do. For my family—for yours."

It took some time for Roger to get his voice sufficiently under control as to speak.

"Aye," he said. "Well. Sleep on it. I mean to go up to Lallybroch. Ye'll maybe go and see Dougal MacKenzie at Leoch. If ye think ye still … mean it, after … there's time enough to decide then."

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A BROTHER OF THE LODGE

Craigh na Dun, the Scottish Highlands

December 21, 1980

ESMERALDA'S HAIR was much too red. *Somebody will notice. They'll ask questions. You idiot, why are you even thinking about it? They'd notice a Barbie in a polka-dot bikini a heck of a lot faster.…* Brianna shut her eyes for an instant to blot out the sight of Mandy's rag dolly with her scarlet fright wig, brilliant with a dye much brighter than anything achievable in the eighteenth century. She tripped on a stone, said, "S-word!" under her breath, and, her eyes having flown open, took a firmer hold of Mandy's free hand, the other being employed to clutch Esmeralda.

She knew bloody well why she was worrying about the doll's hair. If she didn't think of something inconsequential, she was going to turn right around and run down the rocky slope like a panicked hare, dragging Jem and Mandy through the dead gorse.

We're going to do it. We have to. We'll die, we'll all die in there, in the black … Oh, God, oh, God …

"Mam?" Jemmy looked up at her, small brow furrowed. She made a good attempt—she thought—at a reassuring smile, but it must have looked less than convincing, judging from his alarmed expression.

"It's okay," she said, abandoning the smile and putting what little conviction she could muster into her voice. "It's okay, Jem."

"Uh-huh." He still looked worried, but he turned his face uphill, and his expression smoothed out, intentness replacing concern. "I can hear them," he said softly. "Can ye hear them, Mama?"

That "Mama" made her hand tighten, and he winced, though she didn't think he really noticed. He was listening. She came to a stop, and they all listened. She could hear the rush of the wind and a slight patter as brief rain swept through the brown heather. Mandy was humming to Esmeralda. But Jem's face was turned upward, serious but not frightened. She could just see the pointed top of one of the stones, barely visible above the crest of the hill.

"I can't, honey," she said, letting out just a bit of the huge breath she'd been holding. "Not yet." *What if I can't hear them at all? What if I've lost it? Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us* … "Let's … get a little closer."

She'd been frozen inside for the last twenty-four hours. She hadn't been able to eat or sleep but had kept going, shoving everything aside, tamping it down—refusing to actually believe they were going to do it, yet making the necessary preparations in a state of eerie calmness.

The leather bag hanging from her shoulder clanked a little, reassuring in its solid reality. Weight might be heavy to carry—but it would hold her steady against the pull of wind and water, secure against the earth. Jem had let go of her hand, and she reached compulsively through the slit in her skirt to feel the three hard little lumps in the pocket tied round her waist.

She'd been afraid to try synthetic stones, for fear they wouldn't work—or might explode violently, like the big opal Jemmy had burst into pieces in North Carolina.

Suddenly she was swept by a longing for Fraser's Ridge—and her parents—so intense that tears welled in her eyes. She blinked hard and wiped her eyes on her sleeve, pretending that the wind had made them water. It didn't matter; neither of the kids was noticing. Now both of them were staring upward—and she finally realized, with a small, flat thump of dread, that she could hear the stones; they were humming, and Mandy was humming with them.

She glanced behind her involuntarily, checking to be sure that they hadn't been followed—but they had. Lionel Menzies was coming up the path behind them, climbing fast.

"F-word!" she said aloud, and Jem whirled to see what was going on.

"Mr. Menzies!" he said, and his face broke into a smile of relief. "Mr. Menzies!"

Bree gestured firmly to Jem to stay where he was and took a couple of steps down the steep path toward Menzies, little rocks sliding under her shoes and bouncing downhill toward him.

"Don't be afraid," he said, coming up breathlessly and stopping just below her. "I—I had to come, be sure you were safe. That you—that you—get away." He nodded upward, looking beyond her. She didn't turn to look; she could feel the stones now, humming gently—for the moment—in her bones.

"We're okay," she said, her voice surprisingly steady. "Really. Er … thank you," she added, belatedly polite.

His face was pale and a little strained, but quirked into a small smile at that.

"My pleasure," he said, with equal politeness. But he didn't move to turn and go away. She breathed for a moment, realizing that the frozen core had thawed. She was alive again, completely, and thoroughly on the alert.

"Is there some reason why we might *not* be safe?" she asked, watching his eyes behind the glasses. He grimaced slightly and glanced over his shoulder.

"Shit," she said. "Who? Rob Cameron?" She spoke sharply and heard the creak of gravel under Jem's shoes as he turned sharply, hearing the name.

"Him and his friends, yes." He nodded uphill. "You, um, really should go. Now, I mean."

Brianna said something really bad in Gaelic, and Jemmy gave a nervous giggle. She glared at Menzies.

"And just what were you planning to do if Rob and his band of jerks all turned up after us?"

"What I just did do," he said simply. "Warn you. I'd bloody go if I were you. Your, um, daughter …?"

She whirled round to see Mandy, Esmeralda in the crook of one arm, stumping laboriously up the path.

"Jem!" She took one giant step, seized him by the hand, and they bolted up the hill after Mandy, leaving Lionel Menzies on the path below.

They caught Mandy up right at the edge of the circle, and Bree tried to grab Mandy's hand but missed. She could hear

Lionel Menzies coming up behind them. “Mandy!” She grabbed the little girl and stood, panting, surrounded by stones. The hum was higher-pitched and making her teeth itch; she gnashed them once or twice, trying to rid herself of the feeling, and saw Menzies blink. *Good.*

Then she heard the sound of a car’s engine below and saw Menzies’s face change to a look of acute alarm.

“Go!” he said. “Please!”

She fumbled under her skirt, hands shaking, and finally got hold of all three stones. They were the same kind, small emeralds, though of slightly different cut. She’d chosen them because they reminded her of Roger’s eyes. Thought of him steadied her.

“Jem,” she said, and put a stone in his hand. “And, Mandy—here’s yours. Put them in your pockets, and—”

But Mandy, little fist clutching her emerald, had turned toward the biggest of the standing stones. Her mouth drooped open for a moment, and then suddenly her face brightened as though someone had lit a candle inside her.

“Daddy!” she shrieked, and, yanking her hand out of Brianna’s, raced directly toward the cleft stone—and into it.

“Jesus!” Brianna barely heard Menzies’s shocked exclamation. She ran toward the stone, tripped over Esmeralda, and fell full length in the grass, knocking out her wind.

“Mama!” Jem paused for a moment beside her, glancing wildly back and forth between her and the stone where his little sister had just vanished.

“I’m … okay,” she managed, and with that assurance, Jem charged across the clearing, calling back, “I’ll get her, Mam!”

She gulped air and tried to shriek after him, but made only a wheezing croak. The sound of feet made her glance fearfully round, but it was only Lionel, who'd run to the edge of the circle, peering down the hillside. In the distance, she could hear car doors slamming. *Doors. More than one …*

She staggered to her feet; she'd fallen on the bag and bruised her ribs, but that didn't matter. She limped toward the cleft stone, pausing only to scoop up Esmeralda by reflex. *God, God, God* … was the only thought in her head, an agony of unworded prayer.

And suddenly the prayer was answered. Both of them stood in front of her, swaying and white-faced. Mandy threw up; Jem sat down hard on his bottom and slumped there, wavering.

"Oh, God …" She ran to them, grabbed them hard against her in spite of the nastiness. Jem clung to her a moment, but then pushed himself away.

"Mam," he said, and his voice was breathless with joy. "Mam, he's *there*. We could feel him. We can find him—we gotta go, Mam!"

"You do." It was Lionel back, breathless and scared, tugging at Brianna's cloak, trying to straighten it for her. "They're coming—three of them."

"Yes, I—" But then realization struck her, and she turned to the children in panic. "Jem, Mandy … your stones—where are they?"

"Burned up," Mandy said solemnly, and spat into the grass. "Puh-toody! Yuck." She wiped her mouth.

"What do you mean—"

"Yeah, they are, Mam. See?" Jem turned out the pocket of his breeches, showing her the burnt spot and the smear of carbon black around it, smelling strongly of scorched wool.

Frantic, she fumbled at Mandy's clothes, finding the same scorch mark on the side of her skirt, where the vaporized stone had burned through from her pocket.

"Did it burn you, honey?" she asked, running a hand down Mandy's sturdy little thigh.

"Not much," Mandy reassured her.

"Brianna! For God's sake—I can't—"

"*I* can't!" she shouted, rounding on him, fists clenched. "The kids' stones are *gone*! They can't—they can't go through without them!" She didn't know for sure that this was true, but the thought of letting them try to go into that … *that* … without the protection of a stone shriveled her stomach, and she nearly wept with fright and exasperation.

"Stones," he repeated, looking blank. "Jewels, do you mean? Gemstones?"

"Yes!"

He stood for an instant with his mouth open, then fell to his knees, yanking at his left hand, and the next instant was whacking his right hand feverishly against a rock that lay half sunk in the grass.

Bree stared at him helplessly for a moment, then ran to the edge of the circle, ducked round a stone, and stood flat against it in the shadow, looking out. By peering sideways, she could just see human forms, halfway up the hill and moving fast.

On the other side of the stone, Menzies gave a grunt of pain or frustration and smacked something hard against the rock, with a small cracking noise.

"Brianna!" he called, urgent, and she rushed back, afraid the children were trying to go through—but it was all right; they were standing in front of Lionel Menzies, who was stooping over Mandy, holding one of her hands.

“Curl up your fist, wee lassie,” he said, almost gently. “Aye, that’s it. And, Jem—here, put out your hand.” Brianna was close enough now to see that it was a small glittering thing he put in Jem’s palm—and that Mandy’s fist was curled around a large ring, rather battered, with a Masonic emblem carved into its onyx—and the twin of Jem’s small diamond winking beside it, an empty socket on the other side.

“Lionel,” she said, and he reached out and touched her cheek.

“Go now,” he said. “I can’t leave until ye go. Once you’re gone, though, I’ll run for it.”

She nodded jerkily, once, then stooped and took the children’s hands. “Jem—put that in your other pocket, okay?” She gulped air and turned toward the big cleft stone. The racket of it hammered at her blood and she could feel it pulling, trying to take her apart.

“Mandy,” she said, and could barely hear her own voice. “Let’s find Daddy. Don’t let go.”

It was only as the screaming began that she realized she’d not said “Thank you,” and then she thought no more.

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THE BURYING GROUND

SHE LOVED LALLYBROCH in winter. The gorse and broom and heather didn't seem to die so much as simply to fade back into the landscape, the purple heather fading to a soft brown shadow of itself and the broom to a cluster of dry sticks, their long flat pods rattling softly in the wind. Today the air was cold and still, and the soft gray smoke from the chimneys rose straight up to touch the lowering sky.

"Home, we're home!" Mandy said, hopping up and down. "Goody, goody, goody! Can I have a Coke?"

"It isn't home, goofy," Jem said. Only the pink tip of his nose and a flicker of eyelash was visible in the gap between his woolly hat and the muffler round his neck. His breath wisped white. "It's—*then*. They don't have Cokes now. Besides," he added logically, "it's too cold to drink Coke. Your tummy would freeze."

"Huh?"

"Never mind, honey," Brianna said, and tightened her grasp on Mandy's hand. They were standing at the crest of the hill behind the house, near the remains of the Iron Age fort. It had been a laborious haul up the hill, but she'd been reluctant to approach the house from the front, where they would have been visible for a good quarter mile, coming across open ground.

"Can you feel Daddy anywhere nearby?" she asked the children. She'd automatically looked for Roger's old orange Morris in the drive as they'd crested the hill—and felt a ridiculous plunge of spirits at seeing neither car nor graveled drive. Jem shook his head; Mandy didn't answer, distracted by a faint bleating from below.

"Iss sheep!" she said, delighted. "Let's go see da sheep!"

"It's not sheep," Jem said, rather crossly. "It's goats. They're in the broch. Can we go down now, Mam? My nose is about to fall off."

She was still hesitant, watching the house. Every muscle was straining, pulling toward it. *Home*. But it wasn't her home, not now. *Roger. "The strong, sweet, supple quality he has …"*

Of course, she knew that he likely wasn't here; he and Buck would be searching somewhere for Jerry MacKenzie. *And what if they found him?* she thought, with a little thump of something between excitement and fear.

The fear was what was stopping her racing down the hill to hammer on the door and meet whatever of her family happened to be home today. She'd spent the last few days on the road, and the hours on the final walk from where the carter had dropped them, trying to decide—and her mind was still as divided as ever.

"Come on," she said to the kids. She couldn't keep them standing out here in the cold while she made up her mind. "Let's visit the goats first."

The smell of goats struck her the moment she opened the door—pungent, warm, and familiar. Warm, above all; all three humans sighed in relief and pleasure as the animal heat rolled over them, and they smiled at the eager rush and outcry of *mehhs* that greeted their presence.

From the noise that echoed off the stone walls, there might have been fifty goats inside the broch—though Brianna counted only half a dozen nannies, flop-eared and dainty, four or five half-grown, round-bellied kids, and a single robust billy goat who lowered his horns and glowered at them, suspicious and yellow-eyed. All of them shared a rough pen that fenced off half the ground floor of the broch. She glanced up—but instead of the exposed rafters high above that she half-expected to see, there was the intact underside of another floor above.

The kids—her kids, that is, and she smiled at the thought—were already sticking wisps of hay through the fence and playing with the young goats, who were standing on their back legs to peer at the visitors.

"Jemmy, Mandy!" she called. "Take off your hats and mufflers and mittens and put them over by the door, so the goats don't chew on them!" She left Jem to disentangle Mandy from her fuzzy muffler and went up the stair to see what was on the second floor.

Pale winter light from the windows striped the haunches of burlap bags that filled most of the floor space. She breathed in and coughed a little; flour dust was floating in the air, but she smelled the sweetness of dried corn—maize, they called it—and the deeper, nutty smell of ripe barley, as well, and when she nudged her foot against a particularly lumpy sack, she heard the shift and clack of hazelnuts. Lallybroch wouldn't starve this winter.

Curious, she went up one more flight and on the top floor found a good number of small wooden casks arrayed against the wall. It was much colder up here, but the heady aroma of good whisky filled the air with the illusion of warmth. She stood breathing it in for a moment, wanting very badly to be drunk on the fumes, to obliviate her mind, be able not to bloody *think*, if only for a few minutes.

But that was the last thing she could do. In minutes, she'd have to act.

She stepped back onto the narrow stair that wound up between the inner and outer walls of the broch and looked out toward the house, with vivid memories of the last time she had been here, crouched on the stair in the dark with a shotgun in her hands, watching the light of strangers in her house.

There were strangers here now, too, although her own blood. What if … She swallowed. If Roger had found Jerry MacKenzie, his father would be only in his early twenties—much younger than Roger himself. And if her own da was here now—

"He can't be," she whispered to herself, and wasn't sure if that was reassurance or regret. She'd met him for the first time in North Carolina, pissing against a tree. He'd been in his forties, she twenty-two.

You couldn't enter your own lifeline, couldn't exist in the same time twice. They thought they knew that for sure. But what if you entered someone else's life twice, at different times?

That was what was turning her blood to ice and making her curled fists tremble. *What happened*? Did one or the other of your appearances change things, perhaps cancel out the other? Would it not happen that way, would she *not* meet Jamie Fraser in North Carolina if she met him now?

But she had to find Roger. No matter what else happened. And Lallybroch was the only place she knew for sure he'd been. She took a deep, deep breath and closed her eyes.

Please, she prayed. *Please help me. Thy will be done, but please show me what to do …*

"Mam!" Jemmy came running up the stair, his footsteps loud in the confined stone corridor. "Mam!" He popped into sight, blue eyes round and hair standing half on end with excitement. "Mam, come down! A man's coming!"

"What does he look like?" she asked, urgent, grabbing him by the sleeve. "What color is his hair?"

He blinked, surprised.

"Black, I think. He's at the bottom of the hill—I couldn't see his face."

Roger.

"All right. I'm coming." She felt half choked but no longer frozen. It was happening now, whatever it was, and energy fizzed through her veins.

Even as she hurtled down the stairs behind Jemmy, rationality told her that it wasn't Roger—distance or not, Jemmy would know his father. But she had to see.

"Stay *here,*" she said to the children, with so much command in her voice that they blinked but didn't argue. She threw open the door, saw the man coming up the path, and stepped out to meet him, closing the door firmly behind her.

From the first glance, she saw that it wasn't Roger, but the disappointment was subsumed at once in relief that it wasn't Jamie. And intense curiosity, because it must surely be …

She'd run down the path, to get well away from the broch, just in case, and was picking her way through the stones of the family burying ground, eyes on the man coming up the steep, rocky path.

A tall, solid-looking man, his dark hair graying a little but still thick, glossy, and loose on his shoulders. His eyes were on the rough ground, watching his footing. And then he came to his destination and made his way across the hill, to one of the stones in the burying ground. He knelt by it and laid down something he'd been carrying in his hand.

She shifted her weight, uncertain whether to call out or wait 'til he'd finished his business with the dead. But the small stones under her feet shifted, too, rolling down with a *click-clack-click* that made him look up and, seeing her, rise abruptly to his feet, black brows raised.

Black hair, black brows. *Brian Dubh*. Black Brian.

I met Brian Fraser (you would like him, and he, you)…

Wide, startled hazel eyes met hers, and for a second that was all she saw. His beautiful deep-set eyes, and the expression of stunned horror in them.

"Brian," she said. "I—"

"A Dhia!" He went whiter than the harled plaster of the house below.

"Ellen!"

Astonishment deprived her of speech for an instant—long enough to hear light footsteps scrambling down the hill behind her.

"Mam!" Jem called, breathless.

Brian's glance turned up, behind her, and his mouth fell open at sight of Jem. Then a look of radiant joy suffused his face.

“Willie!” he said. *“A bhalaich! Mo bhalaich!”* He looked back at Brianna and stretched out a trembling hand to her. *“Mo ghràidh … mo chridhe …”*

“Brian,” she said softly, her heart in her voice, filled with pity and love, unable to do anything but respond to the need of the soul that showed so clearly in his lovely eyes. And with her speaking of his name for the second time, he stopped dead, swaying for a moment, and then the eyes rolled up in his head and he fell.

* * *

SHE WAS KNEELING in the crunchy dead heather beside Brian Fraser before she’d even thought to move. There was a slight blue tinge to his lips, but he was breathing, and she drew a deep cold breath of relief herself, seeing his chest rise slowly under the worn linen shirt.

Not for the first time, she wished fervently that her mother was there, but turned his head to one side and laid two fingers on the pulse she could see at the side of his neck. Her fingers were cold, and his flesh was startlingly warm. He didn’t rouse or stir at her touch, though, and she began to fear that he hadn’t just fainted.

He’d died—would die—of a stroke. If there was some weakness in his brain … oh, God. Had she just killed him prematurely?

“Don’t die!” she said to him aloud. “For God’s sake, don’t die here!”

She glanced hastily toward the house below, but no one was coming. Looking down again, she saw what it was he’d held: a small bouquet of evergreen twigs, tied with red thread. Yew—she recognized the oddly tubular red berries—and holly.

And then she saw the stone. She knew it well, had sat on the ground beside it often, contemplating Lallybroch and those who lay sleeping on its hillside.

> Ellen Caitriona Sileas MacKenzie Fraser
> Beloved wife and mother
> Born 1691, Died in childbed 1729

And below, in smaller letters:

> Robert Brian Gordon MacKenzie Fraser
> Infant son
> Died at birth 1729

And:

> William Simon Murtagh MacKenzie Fraser
> Beloved son
> Born 1716, Died of the smallpox 1727

"Mam!" Jem skidded down the last few feet, almost falling beside her. "Mam, Mam—Mandy says—who is he?" He stared from Brian's pallid face to her own and back again.

"His name's Brian Fraser. He's your great-grandfather." Her hands were trembling, but to her surprise she felt suddenly calm at the speaking of the words, as though she had stepped into the center of a puzzle and found herself to be the missing piece. "What about Mandy?"

"Did I scare him?" Jem squatted down, looking worried. "He looked at me just before he fell down. Is he—dead?"

“Don’t worry, I think he’s just had a shock. He thought we were … somebody else.” She touched Brian’s cheekbone, feeling the soft prickle of his beard stubble, and smoothed the tumbled hair behind his ear. His mouth twitched a little as she did so, the ghost of a half smile, and her heart jumped. Thank God, he was coming round. “What did Mandy say?”

“Oh!” Jem stood up, fast, eyes wide. “She says she hears Dad!”

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REALITY IS THAT WHICH, WHEN YOU STOP BELIEVING IN IT, DOESN'T GO AWAY

ROGER TURNED HIS horse's head toward Lallybroch, knowing nowhere else to go. He'd taken leave of Brian Fraser six weeks before and had been sad at what he'd thought was a permanent parting. His heart was eased a little now at the thought of seeing Brian again. Also at the certainty of a sympathetic ear, even though there was little he could openly discuss with him.

He'd have to tell Brian, of course, that he hadn't found Jem. That thought was a thorn in his heart, and one felt at every beat. For the last weeks, he had been able to put the brutal ache of Jemmy's absence aside for a little, hoping that somehow, finding Jerry might also lead to finding Jem. But it hadn't.

What the devil it *did* mean was a complete mystery. Had he found the only Jeremiah there was to be found here? If he had … where *was* Jem?

He wanted to tell Brian that he'd found the man to whom the identity disks belonged—Brian would ask. But how to do so without divulging either Jerry's identity, Roger's relationship with him—or explaining what had happened to him? He sighed, reining his horse around a large puddle in the road. Maybe better to say simply that he'd failed, hadn't found J. W. MacKenzie—though it troubled him to lie outright to such an openhearted man.

And he couldn't discuss Buck, either. Beyond thought of Jem, Buck was the matter lying heaviest on his mind at the moment.

"Ye'll never make a decent minister, if ye can't be honest." He'd tried to be. The honest truths of the situation from his own selfish point of view were that he'd miss Buck's company badly, that he was deeply jealous of the possibility that Buck *might* make it to Brianna, and—not least, he assured himself—that he was terrified that Buck *wouldn't* make it through the stones again. He'd die in the void, or maybe be lost once more, alone in some random time.

The truth for Buck was that while it could be argued (and with no little force) that Buck should remove himself forthwith and permanently from the vicinity of Geillis Duncan, going through the stones was maybe the least desirable means of ensuring such an outcome.

To accept Buck's gallant gesture was a temptation, though. If he *could* make it, tell Bree where Roger was … Roger didn't think Buck could come back, though. The effects of travel were cumulative, and Hector McEwan likely wouldn't be standing by next time.

But if Buck was willing to risk the crossing, in spite of the very real danger to his own life, surely it was Roger's obligation to try to persuade him to return to his own wife, rather than to Roger's?

He brushed the back of his hand against his lips, feeling in memory the softness of Morag's brown hair on his cheek when he'd bent to kiss her forehead on the banks of the Alamance. The gentle trust in her eyes—and the fact that she'd bloody saved his own life very shortly thereafter. His fingers rested for an instant on his throat, and he realized, with the flicker of surprise that attends recognition of things already long known, that whatever the bitterness of his regrets about his voice, he'd never for an instant wished that she *hadn't* saved him.

When Stephen Bonnet would have thrown Morag's son overboard, Roger had saved the child from drowning, and that at some risk to his own life. But he didn't think she'd done what she'd done at Alamance in payment of that debt. She'd done it because she didn't want him to die.

Well. He didn't want Buck to die.

Did Morag *want* Buck back? Buck thought not, but he might be wrong. Roger was fairly sure that the man still loved Morag and that his abnegation was due as much to Buck's own sense of personal failure as to what he thought Morag's desires might be.

"Even if that's true," he said aloud, "where do I get off trying to manage people's lives?"

He shook his head and rode on through a light mist that wove shreds of fog through the wet black spikiness of the gorse. It wasn't raining, that was one thing, though the sky bore a burden of cloud that brought it down to shroud the tops of the nearby mountains.

He'd never asked his adoptive father anything about the art of being a priest; it was the last thing he'd ever thought of being. But he'd grown up in the Reverend's house and had seen parishioners come every day to the comfortably shabby study in search of help or advice. He remembered his father (and now felt a new oddness in the word, layered as it was with the freshness of Jerry MacKenzie's physical presence), remembered him sitting down with a sigh to drink tea in the kitchen with Mrs. Graham, shaking his head in response to her questioning look and saying, *"Sometimes there's nothing you can give some of them but a friendly ear and a prayer to be going on with."*

He came to a dead stop in the road, closed his eyes, and tried to find a moment's peace in the chaos of his thoughts. And ended, as every priest since Aaron's time doubtless had, by throwing up his hands and demanding, "What do You *want* of me? What the hell should I *do* about these people?"

He opened his eyes when he said that, but instead of finding an angel with an illuminated scroll standing before him, he was confronted by the beady yellow eyes of a fat seagull sitting in the road a few feet from his horse and not discomposed in the slightest by the presence of a creature a hundred times its size. The bird gave him an old-fashioned sort of look, then spread its wings and flapped off with a piercing *screek!* This echoed from the hillside above, where a few more gulls wheeled slowly, barely visible against the paper-white sky.

The presence of the gull broke his sense of isolation, at least. He rode on in a calmer frame of mind, resolved only not to think about things until he had to.

He thought he was close to Lallybroch; with luck, would reach it well before dark. His belly rumbled at the prospect of tea, and he felt happier. Whatever he could and couldn't tell Brian Fraser, just seeing Brian and his daughter Jenny again would be a comfort.

The gulls cried high overhead, still wheeling, and he looked up. Sure enough: he could just make out the low ruins of the Iron Age hill fort up there, the ruins he'd rebuilt—would rebuild? What if he never got back to—*Jesus, don't even think about it, man, it'll drive you crazier than you are already*.

He nudged the horse and it reluctantly accelerated a bit. It accelerated a lot faster in the next moment, when a crashing noise came from the hillside just above.

"Whoa! Whoa, you eedjit! Whoa, I said!" These adjurations, along with a heave of the reins to bring the horse's head around, had an effect, and they ended facing back the way they'd come, to see a young boy standing, panting, in the middle of the road, his red hair all on end, nearly brown in the muted light.

"Daddy," he said, and his face lit as though touched by a sudden sun. "Daddy!"

* * *

ROGER HADN'T ANY memory of leaving his horse or running down the road. Or of anything else. He was sitting in the mud and the mist in a patch of wet bracken with his son hugged tight to his chest, and nothing else mattered in the world.

"Dad," Jem kept saying, gasping with sobs, "Daddy, Daddy …"

"I'm here," he whispered into Jem's hair, the tears running down his own face. "I'm here, I'm here. Don't be afraid."

Jem took a shuddering breath, managed to say, “I’m *not* afraid,” and cried some more.

At last, a sense of time crept back, along with the sensation of water soaking through the seat of his breeches. He breathed and shuddered a bit himself, smoothed Jem’s hair, and kissed his head.

“You smell like a goat,” he said, swallowed, brushed at his eyes with the back of a hand, and laughed. “Where the *hell* have you been?”

“In the broch with Mandy,” Jem said, as though this was the most natural statement in the world. He gave Roger a faintly accusing look. “Where have *you* been?”

“Mandy?” Roger said blankly. “What do you mean Mandy?”

“My sister,” Jem said, with the patience children occasionally show for the denseness of their parents. “*You* know.”

“Well … where *is* Mandy, then?” In Roger’s state of surreal confusion, Mandy might just as well have popped up beside Jem like a mushroom.

Jem’s face went momentarily blank with confusion, and he glanced round as though expecting Mandy to materialize out of the moss and heather at any moment.

“I don’t know,” he said, sounding mildly puzzled. “She ran away to find you, and then Mam fell down and broke something and—”

Roger had let go of Jem but grabbed him again at this, startling the breath out of the boy.

“Your mother’s here, *too*?”

“Well, sure,” Jem said, sounding mildly annoyed. “I mean —not *here* here. She’s up there, in the old fort. She tripped on a rock when we were running to catch Mandy.”

“Jesus, Lord,” Roger said fervently, taking a stride in the direction of the fort, then halting abruptly. “Wait: you said she broke something—she’s hurt?”

Jem shrugged. He was beginning to look worried again, but not very worried. Dad was here; everything would be okay.

“I don’t think it’s bad,” he assured his father. “She couldn’t walk, though, so she told me to run and catch Mandy. But I found you first.”

“Okay. She’s awake, though, she’s talking?” He had Jem by the shoulders, as much to keep him from disappearing—he half-feared he was hallucinating—as to compel an answer.

“Uh-huh.” Jem was looking vaguely about, a slight frown on his face. “Mandy’s here *someplace*.…” Wriggling free, he turned round slowly, face creased in intent concentration.

“Mandy!” Roger shouted up the hill. He cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled again. “BREE!” He scanned the fort and the hillside anxiously for Bree’s head popping up above the ruins or any sign of agitation among the vegetation that might be occasioned by a scrambling two-year-old. No head showed, but a breeze had come up and the whole hill seemed alive.

“Mandy ran away down this hill?” he asked, and, at Jem’s nod, he glanced behind him. The land flattened out into moor on the other side of the road, and there wasn’t a glimpse of anything that might be Mandy on it. Unless she’d fallen down and was lying in a hollow …

“You stay *right here*,” he said to Jem, squeezing his shoulder hard. “I’m going to go up the hill and look. I’ll bring your mother down.” He bounded up the gravel trace that was the nearest thing there was to a path, calling out

Mandy’s name at intervals, torn between overwhelming joy and terrifying panic, lest it not be real, lest he actually had cracked and was simply imagining that Jem was there—he turned at every third step to check that he *was* there, still standing on the road.

Bree. The thought that she was up there, just above him …

“Mandy!” he shouted again, his voice cracking. But it cracked from emotion, and he realized in a startled instant that he’d been shouting at full volume for minutes now—and it hadn’t hurt.

“God bless you, Hector,” he said fervently under his breath, and went on, beginning now to zigzag back and forth across the hill, beating through the sticks of dry broom and birch saplings, kicking at gorse and dead ferns in case Mandy should have fallen, maybe knocked herself out on a rock.

He heard the seagulls shriek above, thin and piercing, and looked up, hoping to see Brianna peering over the wall of the fort. She wasn’t, but something called again—thin and piercing, but not a gull.

“Daddeeeee …”

He whirled, almost losing his footing, and saw Jem running down the road—and coming round the bend of that road, Buck’s horse with Buck atop him, and a wildly squirming bundle with black curly hair cradled precariously in Buck’s arm.

He couldn’t speak at all by the time he reached them.

“Think ye might have lost something,” Buck said gruffly, and handed Mandy carefully down to him. She was a heavy, lively weight in his arms—and smelled of goats.

“Daddy!” she exclaimed, beaming at him as though he’d just come in from work. “Mwah! Mwah!” She kissed him noisily and snuggled into his chest, her hair tickling his chin.

"Where *were* you?" Jem was saying accusingly.

"Where was *you*?" Mandy countered, and stuck her tongue out at him. "Bleah."

Roger was crying again, couldn't stop. Mandy had burrs and foxtails stuck in her hair and in the fabric of her jacket, and he thought she might have wet herself somewhere in the recent past. Buck twitched the reins, as though about to turn and go, and Roger reached out a hand and grabbed his stirrup.

"Stay," he croaked. "Tell me it's real."

Buck made an incoherent noise, and, looking up through his tears, Roger could see that Buck was making an inadequate attempt at hiding his own emotion.

"Aye," Buck said, sounding almost as choked as Roger. He looped his reins and, sliding off into the road, took Jem very gently into his own arms. "Aye, it's real."

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FROTTAGE

DR. McEWAN WAS a single man and owned a single bed. The bed was presently accommodating four people, and even if two of those people were not full-sized, the general atmosphere was that of the London Tube in rush hour. Heat, random flesh in all directions, and a distinct shortage of oxygen.

Brianna squirmed, trying to find room to breathe. She was lying on her side, back pressed to the wall, with Mandy squashed into a heavily breathing mass between her parents. Roger balanced precariously on the bed's outer edge with Jem draped bonelessly over him, Jem's legs occasionally twitching spasmodically, prodding Bree in the shins. And Esmeralda was taking up most of the single pillow, red yarn hair getting up everyone's nose.

"Do you know the word 'frottage'?" Bree whispered to Roger. He wasn't asleep; if he had been, he'd have been on the floor by now.

“I do. Why, do ye want to try it now?” He reached carefully across Jem and stroked her bare arm lightly. The fine hairs rose on her forearm; she could see them do it, lifting silently in the dull glow from the hearth.

“I want to do less of it with a two-year-old. Mandy’s zonked. Is Jem asleep enough to move?”

“We’ll find out. I’m going to suffocate if he’s not.” Roger edged out from under his son, who emitted a loud “mmmm,” but then smacked his lips and subsided. Roger patted him softly, bent to check that he was solidly asleep, and straightened up. “Okay, then.”

They’d appeared at McEwan’s door well after dark, Brianna supported between Roger and Buck, the children at their heels. The doctor, while clearly surprised at this nocturnal invasion of MacKenzies, had taken it calmly, sitting Bree down in his surgery with her foot in a pan of cold water and then going to call his landlady to find a bit of supper for the children.

“A sprain, and not too bad,” he’d assured Brianna, drying her foot with a linen towel and expertly palpating her swollen ankle. He passed a thumb up the problematic tendon and noted her wince. “It will just take time to heal—but I think I can ease the pain a bit … if you like?” He glanced toward Roger, brow raised, and Brianna breathed in through her nose.

“It’s not *his* ankle,” she said, mildly annoyed. “And *I’d* certainly appreciate anything you can do.”

Roger nodded, to her further annoyance, and McEwan took her foot onto his knee. Seeing her grip the edges of the stool to keep her balance, Roger knelt behind her and wrapped his arms around her.

"Lean on me," he said quietly in her ear. "Just breathe. See what happens."

She shot him a puzzled look, but he merely brushed her ear with his lips and nodded toward McEwan.

The doctor's head was bent over the foot, which he held lightly in both hands, his thumbs on her instep. He moved them slowly in circles, then pressed firmly. A sharp pain shot up her ankle, but died abruptly before she could gasp.

The doctor's hands were noticeably warm on her chilled flesh, and she wondered at that, since they'd been immersed in the same cold water as her foot. One hand now cupped her heel, and thumb and forefinger massaged the puffy flesh lightly, repeatedly, then a little harder. The sensation hovered unsettlingly somewhere between pain and pleasure.

McEwan looked up suddenly and smiled at her.

"It will take a little time," he murmured. "Relax, if you can."

In fact, she could. For the first time in twenty-four hours, she wasn't hungry. For the first time in days, she was beginning to thaw out completely—and for the first time in months, she wasn't afraid. She let out her breath and eased her head back on Roger's shoulder. He made a low humming noise in his throat and took a firmer hold, settling himself.

She could hear Mandy telling Jem a disjointed story about Esmeralda's adventures, in the back room where the landlady had taken them to eat their soup and bread. Sure that they were safe, she gave herself up to the elemental bliss of her husband's arms and the smell of his skin.

But the expression of a well-made man appears not only in his face;

It is in his limbs and joints also, it is curiously in the joints
of his hips and wrists …

"Bree," Roger whispered to her some moments later. "Bree—look."

She opened her eyes and saw at first the curve of his wrist where it rested on her bosom, the hard elegance of bone and the curve of muscled forearm. But then her focus widened and she started a little. Her toes were glowing with a faint blue light barely visible in the crevices between them. She blinked hard and looked again, to be sure she was really seeing it, but the sound Roger made in his throat assured her that she was—and that he saw it, too.

Dr. McEwan had felt her startlement; he looked up and smiled again, this time joyful. His eyes flicked up toward Roger, then back to her.

"You, too?" he said. "I thought so." He held her foot still for a long moment, until she thought she felt the pulse in his fingers echo in the spaces between the small bones, and then he wrapped a bandage neatly around her ankle and lowered her foot gently to the floor. "Better now?"

"Yes," she said, and found her voice a little husky. "Thank you."

She'd wanted to ask him questions, but he rose and put on his coat.

"Ye'll oblige me greatly by staying here the night," he said firmly, still smiling at her. "I'll find a bed with a friend." And raising his hat to Roger, he bowed and went out, leaving them to put the children to bed.

Not surprisingly, Mandy had put up a fuss at sleeping in a strange bed in a strange room, complaining that Esmeralda thought the surgery smelled funny and was scared of the big wardrobe because there might be kelpies in it.

"Kelpies only live in water, silly," Jem had said, but he also looked a little apprehensively at the enormous dark armoire with its cracked door. So they'd all lain down on the narrow bed together, parents comforted as much as children by sheer physical proximity.

Brianna felt the soft warmth and the haze of exhalation blanketing her bodily exhaustion, a pull on her senses beckoning her toward the well of sleep. But not nearly such a strong pull as her sense of Roger.

> *It is in his walk, the carriage of his neck, the flex of his*
> *waist and knees; dress does not hide him …*

She lay for a moment, hand on Mandy's back, feeling the slow beating of the child's heart, watching as Roger scooped Jem into his arms and turned to lay him down on one of the extra quilts McEwan's landlady had brought up with the soup.

> *The strong, sweet, supple quality he has, strikes through the*
> *cotton and flannel …*

He was dressed in nothing but shirt and breeks and now paused to shed the homespun breeks, casually scratching his arse in relief, the long linen shirt momentarily rucked up to show the lean curve of a buttock. Then he came to pick up Mandy, smiling over her stertorously breathing body at Bree.

"Leave the bed to the kids, you think? We could make up a pallet with the cloaks—if they've dried out a bit—and quilts in the surgery." He gathered Mandy up like an armful of laundry, and Bree was able to sit up and scoot across the bed, feeling a wonderful movement of air through her perspiration-dampened shift and a brush of soft fabric across her breasts that made her nipples rise.

She turned back the bedding; he moved the children back to the bed, and she covered them and kissed their dreaming faces, kissing Esmeralda for good measure before tucking her into Mandy's arm. Roger turned toward the closed door to the surgery and looked back at Bree over his shoulder, smiling. She could see the shadow of his body through the linen shirt, against the glow of the hearth.

> *To see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more …*
>
> *You linger to see his back, and the back of his neck and shoulder-side.*

"Wilt bed with me, lass?" he said softly, and put out a hand to her.

"Oh, yes," she said, and came to him.

* * *

THE SURGERY WAS cold, after the humid heat of the bedroom, and they came to each other at once, warm limbs and warm lips seeking. The fire in this room had gone out, and they didn't trouble to rebuild it.

Roger had kissed her the moment he saw her on the ground in the fort, grabbing her and lifting her into an embrace that crushed her ribs and nearly bruised her lips. She'd had no objections whatever. But now his mouth was soft and tender and the scruff of his beard light on her skin.

“Fast?” he murmured against her mouth. “Slow?”

“Horizontal,” she murmured back, clutching his bottom. “Speed irrelevant.” She was standing on one leg, the bad foot elegantly—she hoped—extended behind her. Dr. McEwan’s ministrations had eased the throbbing quite a bit, but she still couldn’t put weight on it for more than the briefest second.

He laughed—quietly, with a guilty look toward the bedroom door—and, bending suddenly, scooped her up and staggered across the room to the coat rack, where she snagged the hanging cloaks and tossed them onto the floor by the table, that being the cleanest open space visible. He squatted, back creaking audibly and manfully suppressing a groan as he lowered her gently onto the heap.

“Be careful!” she whispered, and not jokingly. “You could put your back out, and then what?”

“Then ye’d get to be on top,” he whispered back, and ran a hand up her thigh, her shift rippling up with it. “But I haven’t, so ye don’t.” Then he pulled up his shirt, spread her legs, and came to her with an incoherent noise of deep satisfaction.

“I hope ye meant it about the speed being irrelevant,” he said in her ear, a few minutes later.

“Oh. Yes,” she said vaguely, and wrapped her arms round his body. “You … just … stay put.” When she could, she let him go, cradling his head and kissing the smooth warm flesh at the side of his neck. She felt the rope scar and gently drew the tip of her tongue along it, making gooseflesh erupt all over his back and shoulders.

“Are you asleep?” he inquired some moments later, suspicious.

She opened one eye halfway. He'd gone back into the bedroom for quilts and was kneeling beside her, spreading one over her. It smelled faintly musty, with a tang of mice, but she didn't care.

"No," she said, and rolled onto her back, feeling wonderful, despite the hard floor, her sprained ankle, and the dawning realization that Dr. McEwan must do operations and amputations on the table. There was a dark stain on the underside, above her head. "Just … limp." She stretched out a slow hand to Roger, urging him under the quilt with her. "You?"

"I'm not asleep," he assured her, sliding down close beside her. "And if ye think I'm going to say 'limp,' think again."

She laughed—quietly, with a glance at the door—rolled over, and rested her forehead against his chest.

"I thought I might never see you again," she whispered.

"Aye," he said softly, and his hand stroked her long hair and her back. "Me, too." They were silent for a long moment, each listening to the other's breath—his came easier than it had, she thought, without the small catches—and then he finally said, "Tell me."

She did, baldly and with as little emotion as she could manage. She thought he might be emotional enough for both of them.

He couldn't shout or curse, because of the sleeping children. She could feel the rage in him; he was shaking with it, his fists clenched like solid knobs of bone.

"I'll kill him," he said, in a voice barely pitched above silence, and his eyes met hers, savage and so dark that they seemed black in the dim light.

"It's okay," she said softly, and, sitting up, took both his hands in hers, lifting one and then the other to her lips. "It's okay. We're all right, all of us. And we're here."

He looked away and took a deep breath, then looked back, his hands tightening on hers.

"Here," he repeated, his voice bleak, still hoarse with fury. "In 1739. If I'd—"

"You had to," she said firmly, squeezing back hard. Besides," she added, a little diffidently, "I sort of thought we wouldn't stay. Unless you've taken a great liking to some of the denizens?"

Expressions flickered across his face, from anger to rue to reluctant acceptance … and an even more reluctant humor, as he got a grip of himself. He cleared his throat.

"Aye, well," he said dryly. "There's Hector McEwan, to be sure. But there are a good many other people, too—Geillis Duncan, for one."

A small jolt went through her at the name.

"Geillis Duncan? Well … yes, I suppose she *would* be here at this point, wouldn't she? Did you—did you meet her?"

A truly extraordinary expression went over Roger's face at that question.

"I did," he said, avoiding her questioning glance. He turned and waved a hand at the surgery window that looked out onto the square. "She lives just across the way."

"Really?" Brianna got to her feet, clutching a quilt to her bosom, forgot about her bad foot, and stumbled. Roger leapt up and caught her by the arm.

"You *don't* want to meet her," he said, with emphasis. "Sit down, aye? Ye're going to fall."

Brianna eyed him, but allowed him to ease her back down to their nest and to pull a quilt up over her shoulders. It *was* bloody cold in the surgery, now that the warmth of their efforts had faded.

"All right," she said, and shook her hair down to cover her ears and neck. "Tell me why I don't want to meet Geillis Duncan."

To her surprise, he flushed deeply, visible even in the shadows of the surgery. Roger had neither the skin nor the temperament to blush easily, but when he *did* describe—briefly, but vividly—what had happened (or possibly *not* happened) with Buck, Dr. McEwan, and Geillis, she understood it.

"Holy moly," she said, with a glance over her shoulder at the window. "Er … when Dr. McEwan said he'd find a bed with a friend …?"

Buck had gone off, saying that he'd take a bed at the ordinary at the foot of the High Street and would see them in the morning. Presumably he'd meant it, but …

"She *is* married," Roger said tersely. "Presumably her husband would notice were she inviting strange men to spend the night."

"Oh, I don't know so much," she said, half-teasing. "She's an herbalist, remember? Mama does a good sleeping potion; I imagine Geillis could, too."

The color washed up Roger's face again, and she knew, as clearly as if he'd said so, that he was envisioning Geillis Duncan doing something disgraceful with one or another of her lovers whilst lying beside her snoring husband.

"God," he said.

"You, um, do remember what's going to *happen* to her poor husband, don't you?" Bree said delicately. The color vanished instantly from Roger's face, and she knew he hadn't.

"That's one of the reasons we can't stay here," she said, gently but firmly. "There are too many things we know. And we *don't* know what trying to interfere might do, but it's a good bet that it's dangerous."

"Yes, but—" he began, but broke off at the look on her face. "Lallybroch. Is that why ye wouldna go there?" For he'd tried to take her down the hill to the house when he'd rescued her from the fort. She'd insisted that they must go to the village for help instead, even though it meant an awkward and painful three-hour ride.

She nodded and felt a small lump come into her throat. It stayed there as she told him about meeting Brian in the burying ground.

"It's not *just* that I'm afraid what meeting them might do to … later," she said, and the lump dissolved into tears. "It's … oh, Roger, the look on his face when he saw me and thought I was Ellen!

"I—he—he's going to die in a year or two. That beautiful, sweet man … and there isn't any-anything we can do to stop it." She gulped and swiped at her eyes. "He—he thinks he's seen his wife and his son, that they're w-waiting for him. And the—oh, God, the *joy* on his face. I couldn't take that away from him, I just couldn't."

He took her in his arms and rubbed her back gently as she sobbed.

"No, of course ye couldn't," he whispered to her. "Dinna fash, Bree. Ye did right."

She sniffed and groped among the cloaks for something to blow her nose on, settling at last for a stained cloth from Dr. McEwan's table. It smelled of some pungent medicine, thank God, not blood.

"But there's Da, too," she said, taking a deep, tremulous breath. "What will happen to him … the scars on his back …

I—can’t stand to think about that and us doing nothing, but we—”

“We can’t,” Roger agreed quietly. “We daren’t. God only knows what I may have done already, finding Jerry and sending him—wherever I *did* send him.” Taking the cloth, he dipped it in the water bucket and wiped her face, the cold of it soothing on her hot cheeks, though it made her shiver.

“Come lie down,” he said, putting an arm round her shoulders. “Ye need rest, *mo chridhe*. It’s been a terrible day.”

“No,” she murmured, easing down and laying her head in the curve of his shoulder, feeling the strength and warmth of his body. “It’s been a wonderful day. I have you back.”

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THE SOUNDS THAT MAKE UP SILENCE

ROGER FELT HER begin to relax, and quite suddenly she let go her stubborn hold on consciousness and fell asleep like someone breathing ether. He held her and listened to the tiny sounds that made up silence: the distant hiss of the peat fire in the bedroom, a cold wind rattling at the window, the rustling and breathing of the sleeping kids, the slow beating of Brianna's valiant heart.

Thank you, he said silently to God.

He had expected to fall asleep himself at once; tiredness covered him like a lead blanket. But the day was still with him, and he lay for some time looking up into the dark.

He was at peace, too tired to think coherently of anything. All the possibilities drifted round him in a slow, distant swirl, too far away to be troublesome. Where they might go … and how. What Buck might have said to Dougal MacKenzie. What Bree had brought in her bag, heavy as lead. Whether there would be porridge for breakfast—Mandy liked porridge.

The thought of Mandy made him ease out of the quilts to check on the children. To reassure himself that they were really there.

They were, and he stood by the bed for a long time, watching their faces in wordless gratitude, breathing the warm childish smell of them—still tinged with a slight tang of goat.

At last he turned, shivering, to make his way back to his warm wife and the beckoning bliss of sleep. But as he reentered the surgery, he glanced through the window into the night outside.

Cranesmuir slept, and mist lay in her streets, the cobbles beneath gleaming with wet in the half-light of a drowning moon. On the far side of the square, though, a light showed in the attic window of Arthur Duncan's house.

And in the shadow of the square below, a small movement betrayed the presence of a man. Waiting.

Roger closed his eyes, cold rising from his bare feet up his body, seeing in his mind the sudden vision of a green-eyed woman, lazy in the arms of a fair-haired lover … and a look of surprise and then of horror on her face as the man vanished from her side. And an invisible blue glow rose in her womb.

With his eyes tight shut, he put a hand on the icy windowpane, and said a prayer to be going on with.

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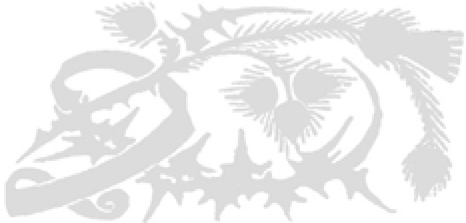
PART SEVEN



Before I Go Hence

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A DISTANT MASSACRE

September 5, 1778

I FOLDED THE CLOTH into a tidy square and used the tongs to dip it in the steaming cauldron, then stood waving it gently to and fro until the compress should cool enough for me to wring it out and use it. Joanie sighed, fidgeting on her stool.

“Don’t rub your eye,” I said automatically, seeing her curled fist steal toward the large pink sty on her right eyelid. “Don’t fret; it won’t take long.”

“Yes, it does take long,” she said crossly. “It takes *forever*!”

“Dinna be giving your grannie sauce,” Marsali told her, pausing in her stride on the way from kitchen to printshop, a cheese roll for Fergus in her hand. “Hauld your wheesht and be grateful.”

Joanie groaned and writhed, and stuck her tongue out after her departing mother, but whipped it back into her mouth again and looked rather shamefaced when she caught sight of my raised brow.

"I know," I said, with some sympathy. Holding a warm compress on a sty for ten minutes did feel like forever. Particularly if you'd been doing it six times a day for the last two days. "Maybe you can think of something to pass the time. You could recite me the multiplication tables while I grind valerian root."

"Oh, *Grannie*!" she said, exasperated, and I laughed.

"Here you go," I said, handing her the warm poultice. "Do you know any good songs?"

She exhaled moodily, small nostrils flaring.

"I wish Grandda was here," she said. "*He* could tell me a story." The note of comparative accusation was clear in her voice.

"Spell 'hordeolum' for me and I'll tell you the one about the water horse's wife," I suggested. That made her unaffected eye fly open with interest.

"What's a hordeolum?"

"That's the scientific name for a sty."

"Oh." She seemed unimpressed by this, but her forehead creased a little in concentration, and I could see her lips move as she sounded out the syllables. Both Joanie and Félicité were good spellers; they'd been playing with discarded lead type since they were toddlers and loved stumping each other with new words.

That was a thought; maybe I could get her to spell unusual words for me during the compress treatments. The sty was a big, nasty one; her entire eyelid had been red and swollen in the beginning, the eye no more than a gleaming, resentful slit. Now the sty itself had shrunk to the size of a pea, and at least three-quarters of the eye was visible.

"H," she said, watching me to see if that was right, and I nodded. "O, R, D …" I nodded again, and saw her lips move silently. "Hor-de-o-lum," I repeated helpfully, and she nodded, more confident. "E, O, L, U, M!"

"Excellent!" I said, beaming at her. "How about …" I cast about for another good one, long but strictly phonetic. "Hepatitis?"

"What's that?"

"Viral infection of the liver. Do you know where your liver is?" I was looking through my medicine chest, but appeared to be out of aloe salve. I should ride over to Bartram's Garden tomorrow, I thought, weather permitting. I was out of almost everything, in the wake of the battle. The usual small twinge came in my side at thought of it, but I pushed it firmly away. It would fade, and so would the thoughts.

Marsali appeared suddenly in the kitchen door, as Joanie was carefully spelling "acanthocytosis," and I looked up from my grinding. She was holding a letter in her hand and looked worried.

"Is it the Indian they call Joseph Brant that Young Ian kens?" she asked.

"I expect he knows quite a few of them," I replied, setting down my pestle. "But I've heard him mention Joseph Brant, yes. The man's Mohawk name starts with a 'T,' I think, but that's as much as I feel sure of. Why?" I felt a slight uneasiness at the name. Ian's Mohawk wife, Emily, had been living in a settlement in New York founded by Brant; Ian had mentioned it, very briefly, when he'd gone up there to visit her last year.

He hadn't said what the purpose of his visit was, and neither Jamie nor I had asked, but I assumed it to have had something to do with his fear that he couldn't sire children, as all his babies with Emily had either been stillborn or miscarried. He'd asked me about the matter, and I'd told him what I could, offering what reassurance I could that he might be able to have children with another woman.

I offered up a quick prayer for Rachel's chances, then returned abruptly to what Marsali was saying.

"They did *what*?"

"This gentleman"—she tapped the letter—"says that Brant and his men fell upon a wee place called Andrustown. No but seven families living there." Her lips pressed tight, and she glanced at Joanie, who was listening with her ears flapping. "They plundered and burnt the place, he says, and massa—er … did awa wi' a number of the folk who lived there."

"What's that word, Mam?" Joanie asked brightly. "The one that means 'did awa' with?"

" 'Massacred,' " I told her, saving her mother the embarrassment. "It means indiscriminate and brutal slaughter. Here." I handed her the fresh compress, which she applied without protest, frowning in thought.

"Is that different than just killin' someone?"

"Well," I said judiciously, "it depends. You might kill someone by accident, for instance, and that wouldn't be a massacre, though it would certainly be lamentable. You might kill someone who was trying to kill *you*, and that would be self-defense."

"Rachel says ye oughtn't do that," Joanie observed, but merely for the sake of thoroughness. "What about if ye're with an army and have to kill the soldiers on the other side?"

Marsali made a low Scottish noise of disapproval but answered tersely.

"If a man's gone to the army, then killin' is his job," she said. "He does it—mostly—" she added fairly, with a raised brow to me, "to protect his ain family and property. So that's more like self-defense, aye?"

Joanie glanced from her mother to me, still frowning.

"I ken what 'bru-tal' is," she said. "That's bein' mean when ye havena got to. But what's 'in-dis-crim-in-ate'?" She sounded it out carefully, as though about to spell it.

"Without choosing," I said, lifting one shoulder in a shrug. "It means you do something without taking much notice who you do it to and probably without much reason to do it to that particular person."

"Did Cousin Ian's Indian friend have nay reason for burning yon place and killing the folk, then?"

Marsali and I exchanged a glance.

"We dinna ken that," Marsali said. "But it's no a good thing, whatever he meant by it. Now, ye're done. Go along and find Félicité and start in fillin' up the washtub." She took the compress from Joanie and shooed her out.

She stood watching until Joanie had gone out through the back door, then turned to me and handed me the letter.

It was from a Mr. Johansen, apparently one of Fergus's regular correspondents, and the contents were as Marsali had said, though adding a few gruesome details that she hadn't mentioned in Joanie's hearing. It was fairly factual, with only the barest of eighteenth-century ornaments, and the more hair-raising—literally, I thought; some of the Andrustown residents had been scalped, by report—for that.

Marsali nodded as I looked up from the letter.

"Aye," she said. "Fergus wants to publish the account, but I'm nay so sure he ought to. Because of Young Ian, ken?"

"What's because of Young Ian?" said a Scottish voice from the printshop doorway, and Jenny came through, a marketing basket over one arm. Her eyes went to the letter in my hand, and her sharp dark brows rose.

"Has he told ye much about her?" Marsali asked, having explained the letter. "The Indian lass he wed?"

Jenny shook her head and began taking things out of her basket.

"Nay a word, save for his telling Jamie to say he wouldna forget us." A shadow crossed her face at the memory, and I wondered for a moment how it must have been for her and Ian, receiving Jamie's account of the circumstances in which Ian had become a Mohawk. I knew the agony with which he'd written that letter, and doubted that the reading of it had been done with less.

She laid down an apple and beckoned to me for the letter. Having read it through in silence, she looked at me. "D'ye think he's got feelings for her still?"

"I think he does," I answered reluctantly. "But nothing like his feelings for Rachel, surely." I did recall him, though, standing with me in the twilight on the demilune battery at Fort Ticonderoga, when he'd told me about his children—and Emily, his wife.

"He feels guilty about her, does he?" Jenny asked, shrewdly watching my face. I gave her a look, but nodded. She compressed her lips, but then handed the letter back to Marsali.

"Well, we dinna ken whether his wife has anything to do wi' this Brant or his doings, and it's no her that's been massacred. I'd say let Fergus print it, but"—and she glanced at me—"show the letter to Jamie and have him talk to wee Ian about it. He'll listen." Her expression lightened a little then, and a slight smile emerged. “He’s got a good wife now, and I think Rachel will keep him to home.”

* * *

MAIL WAS DELIVERED to the printshop at all hours of the day—and, not infrequently, the night—and by all manner of messengers. Philadelphia gloried in the best postal system in the colonies, this having been established by Benjamin Franklin only three years before; post riders rode regularly between New York and Philadelphia and over thirty other routes through the colonies.

Given the nature of Fergus’s business and the nature of the times, though, almost as much mail arrived by older routes: passed along by travelers, merchants, Indians, and soldiers, and shoved under the door in the night watches. Or handed to a member of the family in the street. It was exchanges of that sort during the British occupation of the city that had compelled me to marry John Grey in order to avoid arrest for sedition and spying.

John’s own letter, though, arrived sedately in the pouch of a postal rider, properly stamped, and sealed with a blob of yellow wax imprinted with his signet in the shape of a smiling half-moon.

To Mrs. James Fraser, Fraser’s Printshop, Philadelphia
From Lord John Grey, Wilbury House, New York

My dear,

I am with my brother and his regiment in New York, and am like to remain here for some time. That being so, I *thought I would mention that the Lease of my house on Chestnut Street will run until the End of the Year, and as the Thought of it being left empty to be vandalized or left to ruin distresses me, I conceived the Notion of offering it to you once again.*

Not, I hasten to add (lest your intransigent Husband be reading this), as a Domicile but rather as Premises for a Surgery. Acquainted as I am with your peculiar Habit of attracting Persons suffering from Disease, Deformity, or hideous Injury, and being also well acquainted with the Number of Persons presently inhabiting the younger Mr. Fraser's printing Establishment, I believe you may find your medical Adventures more easily accommodated in Chestnut Street than between a Printing Press and a towering Stack of sixpenny Bibles bound in buckram.

As I do not expect you to spend your valuable Time in domestic Labor, I have arranged for Mrs. Figg and a Servant of her choice to remain in my employment for so long as you require them, being paid through my Bank. You will greatly oblige me, my dear, by accepting this Proposition, as it will put my mind at ease regarding the Property. And the Thought of you at work, earnestly administering a Clyster to General Arnold, will greatly enliven the Tedium of my present Condition.

Your most obedient Servant,
John

"What are ye smiling at, Mother Claire?" Marsali inquired, observing me with the letter in hand. She smiled, teasing. "Has someone sent ye a *billet-doux*?"

"Oh, something of the sort," I said, folding it up. "You wouldn't know where Jamie is just now, would you?"

She closed one eye to assist thought, keeping the other on Henri-Christian, who was industriously blacking his father's best boots—and a good deal of himself in the process.

"He said he was going wi' Young Ian to see a man about a horse," she said, "and then to the docks."

"The docks?" I said in surprise. "Did he say why?"

She shook her head. "I could maybe guess, though. That'll do, Henri! *A Dhia*, the state of you! Go find one o' your sisters and tell her to wash your hands for ye, aye?"

Henri looked at his hands, as though astonished to find them completely black.

"Oui, Maman," he said, and, cheerfully wiping them on his breeches, scampered out into the kitchen, bellowing, "Félicité! Come wash me!" at the top of his lungs.

"Why?" I asked, moving closer and lowering my voice slightly—for obviously she'd got rid of Henri-Christian on the little pitchers–big ears principle.

"He's been talking wi' Fergus about going with ye, when ye go back to North Carolina," she said. "If I had to guess, I'd say he's gone to find out what it might cost to move everything"—she made a sweeping gesture, encompassing everything from printing press to loft—"by ship."

"Hmm," I said, as noncommittally as possible, though my heart had leapt—at both the thought of imminent departure for the Ridge and the thought that Fergus and Marsali might come with us. "Do you … want to?" I asked cautiously, seeing the line between her brows. She was still a lovely woman, fair and fine-boned, but she was too thin, and the lines of strain sharpened her features.

She shook her head, but in indecision rather than negation.

"I really dinna ken," she admitted. "It's a good bit easier now, wi' the British gone—but they're no so far away, are they? They could come back, and then what?" She glanced uneasily over her shoulder, though the printshop was empty for the moment. Fergus had had to leave home and live furtively on the outskirts of the city, during the last months of the British occupation.

I opened my mouth to tell her that I doubted this. Hal Grey had told me, under the influence of ganja, that the new British strategy was to sever the southern colonies from the North and suppress the rebellion there, thus starving the North into submission. But I closed it without speaking. Best not to mention that until I found out whether Jamie had told Fergus.

Why didn't I bloody *know* what was going to happen? I asked myself in frustration—and not for the first time. Why hadn't I thought to brush up on American history when I had the chance?

Well, because I hadn't expected to end up in America, was the answer. Just went to show, I supposed. Pointless to spend too much time in planning, anyway, given the propensity of life to make sudden left-hand turns without warning.

"It would be wonderful, if you were to come," I said, as mildly as possible, adding craftily, "so nice to have the children nearby."

Marsali snorted, giving me a sideways glance.

"Aye," she said dryly. "Never think I dinna appreciate the value of a grannie. And when ye leave, Grannie Janet will go, too."

"Do you think so?" I hadn't thought of that. "But Jenny loves you and your children—Fergus is as much a son to her as any of the boys she bore."

"Well, that's maybe true," she admitted, with a brief smile that showed me the radiant fifteen-year-old who had married Fergus on a Caribbean beach twelve years before. "But Young Ian's her youngest, ken? And she's had too little of him. Now he's wed, she'll want to be nearby, to help wi' his bairns when they come. And ye ken Rachel will go where Ian does—and Ian will go where Da does."

That was a shrewd assessment, I thought, and gave her a brief nod of agreement and respect.

She sighed deeply and, sitting down in her nursing chair, took up the topmost item in the brimming mending basket, the threaded needle still sticking up from the garment where she'd last put it down. I had no desire to abandon the conversation and, pulling out a stool, sat down beside her and plucked one of Germain's stockings out of the basket. The workbasket, with its housewife, thread balls, and darning egg, was set beside the mending, and I deftly threaded my own needle, feeling pleased that I could still do that without putting on my spectacles.

"What about Fergus?" I asked bluntly. Because plainly Fergus was the crux of the matter, where Marsali was concerned.

"Aye, that's the rub," she said frankly. "I'd go, and happy, but ye ken how it was for him when we stayed on the Ridge."

I did, and grimaced slightly, stretching the heel of the stocking over the darning egg.

"It's been dangerous in the city, this last year," she said, and swallowed at the memory. "Couldna tell ye how many times the soldiers came to arrest him; they broke up the shop, more than once, when they couldna find him. And the

Loyalists would come and paint slogans on the front wall sometimes. But the danger didna trouble him—so long as it didna threaten me and the bairns."

"And sometimes even if it does," I muttered. "And I don't mean just Fergus. Bloody men."

Marsali sniffed with amusement.

"Aye. But the thing is—he *is* a man, no? He's got to feel he's worth something. He needs to be able to care for us, and that's a thing he can do—and do well—here. I canna see how he'd make a decent living in the mountains."

"True," I admitted reluctantly. It was a hot day, and stifling in the kitchen, with the cauldron simmering over the hearth. Flies or no flies—and there were an ungodly number of flies in Philadelphia—I got up to open the back door. It wasn't noticeably cooler outside, though at least the fire under the big washtub hadn't yet been lit; the girls were still filling it, trudging to and fro from the well with their buckets.

Henri-Christian was nowhere in sight, but had presumably been scrubbed; a filthy black cloth lay crumpled on the doorstep. I stooped to pick it up and saw a folded bit of paper lying on the ground beside the step. It had no direction on it but looked purposeful, so I picked it up and took it back inside.

"Still," Marsali said, barely waiting for me to sit down. "I'm thinkin' that even if we canna go to the Ridge, it might be as well if we were to go. There must be places in the South that could use a printer, even if they're none sae big as Philadelphia."

"Well, there's Charleston," I said doubtfully, "and Savannah. They're just as hot and ghastly in the summer as Philadelphia is, but the winters are milder, I suppose."

She shot me a brief look over the shift she was mending, then set it down on her lap, as though having come to a decision.

"It's no the weather that troubles me," she said quietly. And, bending, she groped under the pile of shirts and stockings, emerging with a handful of grubby notes and frayed letters. Handling these gingerly, as though they carried some disease, she placed them on my knee.

"Any printer in these days gets such things poked under his door," she said, watching my face as I read through the first few. "Especially if ye take a stand. We didn't, for as long as we could, but after a time, ye just canna stand in the middle o' the road any longer."

This was said with a simplicity and acceptance that brought tears to my eyes. The more so with the content of the anonymous notes—for they were all unsigned and in a variety of hands, though some were plainly written by the same person—making it quite clear what the price of standing on the Rebel side might be.

"It was worse, maybe," she said, "when the British were here. I thought it might stop when they left, but it didn't."

"I don't imagine all the Loyalists left with them," I said, taking a deep breath in order to control myself. I felt as though I'd been punched in the stomach.

"Only the richer ones," Marsali said cynically. "The ones who thought they'd be dragged from their homes or beaten and robbed, without the army to protect them. But it doesna mean the poorer ones dinna have the same opinions."

"Why do you keep these?" I asked, handing them back with two fingers, as though holding them with tongs. "I think I'd throw them into the fire at once."

"I did, at first," she said, tucking the handful of nastiness carefully back into the bottom of the basket. "But I found I couldna forget what they'd said, and the words would come back to me at night and stop me sleeping." She straightened, shrugged, and took up her needle again.

"I told Fergus, and he said the thing to do was to keep them and read them through several times a day, one after the other. Read them tae each other." A brief, rueful smile touched her mouth. "So we did, after the bairns were asleep—we'd sit by the fire and take turns reading them. And he'd make fun o' them, criticizing the grammar and the lack o' poetry, comparing them one to another, and we'd rank them from best to worst … and then we'd put them away and go to sleep in each other's arms."

Her hand rested gently on the mound of mending, as though it were Fergus's shoulder, and I smiled.

"Well," I said, and, clearing my throat, produced the note I'd picked up on the step. "I have no idea whether this is another one for your collection—but I found it on the back step just now."

She took it with a raised brow and looked it over, turning it to and fro.

"It's cleaner than most," she observed. "A decent rag paper, too. It's maybe just a …" Her voice died away as she opened it and began to read. I could see that the writing inside was brief; within seconds, the blood drained from her face.

"Marsali." I reached toward her, and she thrust the note into my hand and rose swiftly.

Ladybird, ladybird, the note read, *fly away home. Your house is on fire and your children are gone*.

"Henri-Christian!" Marsali's voice was strong and urgent. "Girls! Where's your wee brother?"

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DAYLIGHT HAUNTING

I FOUND HENRI-CHRISTIAN in the first place I looked: down the street, playing with the two smallest Phillips girls. The Phillipses had ten children, and even Henri-Christian could blend into their household without causing much notice.

Some parents kept their children from coming anywhere near Henri-Christian—whether from fear that dwarfishness was catching, I supposed, or from the popular superstition that his appearance was the result of his mother having fornicated with the devil. I'd heard that one now and then, though everyone in the neighborhood knew better than to say it anywhere in the hearing of Jamie, Fergus, Ian, or Germain.

The Phillipses were Jewish, though, and apparently felt some kinship with a person whose differences set him apart. Henri-Christian was always welcome at their house. Their maid-of-all-work merely nodded when I asked whether one of the older children would walk home with him later, then went back to her washing; it was laundry day all over Philadelphia, and the humid atmosphere was aggravated by a score of steaming washtubs in the neighborhood, all fuming with the reek of washing soda.

I went back quickly to the printshop to tell Marsali where Henri-Christian was and, having relieved her fears, put on my wide-brimmed hat and announced my intent of going to buy some fish for supper. Marsali and Jenny, armed respectively with a laundry fork and a large paddle for clothes-stirring, gave me marked looks—both of them knew exactly how much I disliked doing laundry—but neither said anything.

I had of course been excused from housework while recuperating and, in all truth, was still not up to the labor of hoicking hot, sodden clothes about. I could have managed hanging out the washing, perhaps, but soothed my conscience on grounds that: 1) fish made an easy supper on laundry day, 2) I needed to walk regularly, in order to regain my strength, and 3) I wanted to talk to Jamie, alone.

The anonymous letter had upset me nearly as much as it had Marsali. It wasn't like the other threats she had shown me: those were all specifically political, and while some were aimed at Marsali (for she had run the newspaper alone while Fergus was in hiding), they were of the run-of-the-mill "Rebel bitch" variety. I'd heard such epithets—along with "Tory whore!" and their German and Yiddish equivalents—commonly in the rougher parts of Philadelphia.

This was different. It had the whiff of a refined and intelligent malice, and I suddenly felt the presence of Jack Randall at my shoulder, so strongly that I came to an abrupt halt and spun round.

The street was busy, but there was no one behind me. No glimpse of a red coat anywhere, though there were Continental officers here and there, in blue and buff.

"Bugger off, Captain," I said, under my breath. Not quite far enough under: I got a wide-eyed look from a round little woman selling pretzels from a tray round her neck. She glanced over her shoulder to see to whom I was speaking, then turned back to me with a look of concern.

"You are all right, madam?" she said in a heavy German accent.

"Yes," I said, embarrassed. "Yes, quite all right. Thank you."

"Take this," she said kindly, handing me a pretzel. "I think you are hungry." And waving away my fumbling attempt at payment, she went off down the street, wide hips rolling, waving a stick of pretzels stacked like quoits and shouting, *"Brezeln! Heiße Brezeln!"*

Feeling suddenly dizzy, I leaned against the front of a building, closed my eyes, and bit into the pretzel. It was chewy, fresh, and rimed with salt, and I discovered that the woman had been right. I *was* hungry. Starved, in fact.

The pretzel hit my stomach and then my bloodstream, imparting an instant sense of stability and well-being, and the momentary panic I'd felt evaporated so quickly that I could almost believe it hadn't happened. Almost.

It *hadn't* happened in some time. I swallowed the last bit of pretzel and, after checking my pulse—strong and steady—set off again toward the river.

I walked slowly; it was midday, and any great exertion would leave me drenched with sweat and very likely light-headed again. I ought to have brought my walking stick but had recklessly decided to do without it. I hated feeling infirm.

I hated feeling … *that*, even more. The sudden sense of threat, irrational fear … violation. Flashback, the military called it—would call it—in my time. It hadn't happened to me since Saratoga, though, and I'd almost forgotten about it. Almost.

Completely explainable, of course: I'd been shot, come close to dying, was still physically weak. The last time, I'd been in the dark in the forest near a battlefield, alone, lost, and surrounded by violent men. No wonder it had happened then; the situation was much too close to what it had been when I'd been abducted and assaulted—

"Raped," I said out loud, firmly, to the extreme startlement of a pair of gentlemen passing by. I paid no attention to them. No point in trying to avoid either the word or the memory. It was over; I was safe.

Before that … the first time I'd been overtaken by that sense of threat, it was at River Run, in the course of a party. But a party where the sense of imminent violence was palpable. On that occasion, Jamie had been nearby, thank God. He'd seen that I was spooked—literally, he assumed—and had given me a handful of salt with which to lay the ghost that haunted me.

The Highlands always had a practical answer, whether the difficulty was keeping a fire smoored for the night, having your cow run dry, or being haunted.

I touched the corner of my mouth with my tongue, found a stray salt crystal from the pretzel, and nearly laughed. I looked over my shoulder for the woman who'd given me succor, but she'd vanished.

"Just as an angel should, I suppose," I murmured. "Thank you."

There was probably a charm for it in the *Gàidhlig,* I reflected. There were dozens, probably hundreds. I knew only a few, mostly those concerned with health (they gave my Gaelic-speaking patients reassurance), but picked the one that seemed most suitable to the situation and strode firmly along, my feet solid on the cobbles, chanting:

"I trample on thee, thou seizure,
As tramples whale on brine,
Thou seizure of back, thou seizure of body,
Thou foul wasting of chest."

And then I saw Jamie, coming up from the docks, laughing at something Fergus was saying, and the world dropped back into place around me.

* * *

JAMIE TOOK ONE look at me, took my arm, and steered me into a small coffeehouse around the corner on Locust Street. At this hour of the day, it was all but deserted, and I attracted relatively little attention. Women did drink coffee—when any was to be had—but they mostly drank it at home, in company with friends or at small parties and salons. And while there were grander coffeehouses in London and Edinburgh that women might now and then frequent, the Philadelphia coffeehouses tended to be male preserves of business, gossip, and politics.

“What have ye been doing, Sassenach?” Jamie inquired mildly, taking the tray of coffee cups and almond biscuits from the server. “Ye look—” He squinted at me, evidently searching for a term that would be accurate without causing me to pour scalding coffee on him.

“Somewhat indisposed,” Fergus said, taking up the sugar tongs. “Here, milady.” Without asking, he dropped three large lumps of brown sugar into my cup. “They say that drinking hot beverages will cool you,” he added helpfully.

“Well, it does make you sweat more,” I said, taking up my spoon. “But if the sweat doesn’t evaporate, it certainly won’t make you cooler.” I estimated the ambient humidity at roughly a thousand percent, but tipped a little of my sweetened coffee into the saucer and blew on it nonetheless. “As to what I’ve been doing, I was on my way to buy fish for supper. And what have *you* gentlemen been doing?”

Sitting down had made me feel a good bit steadier, and being flanked by Jamie and Fergus made the odd sense of threat I’d experienced in the street fade a bit. But thought of the anonymous letter on the step raised the hairs on the back of my neck, despite the heat.

Jamie and Fergus glanced at each other, and Fergus raised one shoulder.

“Reckoning our assets,” Jamie said. “And visiting warehouses and shipping captains.”

“Really?” The thought made my heart lift immediately. These sounded like the first concrete steps toward going home. “Have we got any assets to speak of?” Most of our available cash had gone to pay for horses, uniforms, weapons, food for Jamie’s men, and other war-related expenses. Theoretically, Congress would reimburse these expenses, but given everything General Arnold had told me about Congress, I rather thought we oughtn't to hold our collective breath in anticipation.

"A bit," Jamie said, smiling at me. He knew very well what I was thinking. "I've found a buyer for the gelding; four pounds."

"That seems a good price," I said uncertainly. "But … wouldn't we need the horse, for travel?"

Before he could answer, the door opened and Germain came in, a bundle of broadsheets under one arm and a scowl on his face. The latter disappeared like the morning dew as he spotted us, though, and he came to hug me.

"*Grand-mère!* What are you doing in here? *Maman* said you went to buy fish."

"Oh," I said, suddenly guilty at thought of the laundry. "Yes. I am—er, I mean, I was just on my way.… Would you like a bite, Germain?" I offered him the plate of almond biscuits, and his eyes lighted up.

"One," said Fergus firmly. Germain rolled his eyes at me but took a single biscuit, lifting it with two fingers in exaggerated delicacy.

"Papa," he said, consuming the biscuit in two swift bites, "I think perhaps you should go home."

Both of Fergus's strongly marked black brows rose.

"Why?"

"Because," Germain said, licking sugar from the corner of his mouth and eyeing the remaining biscuits, "Grannie Janet told Mr. Sorrel that if he didn't leave off pestering *Maman*, she would stab him with the laundry fork. She might do it, too," he added thoughtfully, dabbing a finger on the plate for crumbs.

Fergus growled. It quite startled me, as I hadn't heard anything like that from him since he'd been a feral eight-year-old pickpocket in Paris.

“Who’s Mr. Sorrel?” Jamie asked, in a deceptively mild tone of voice.

“A tavern owner who passes by the shop on his way to and from his work and stops to buy a newspaper—and to ogle my wife,” Fergus said tersely. He pushed back his bench, and rose. “Excuse me, milady,” he said, bowing to me.

“Had I best come with ye?” Jamie asked, also pushing back from the table. Fergus shook his head, though, and put on his cocked hat.

“No. The man is a coward. One sight of me, and he will be gone.” His very white teeth showed in a sudden smile. “If your sister has not disposed of him already.”

He went out, leaving the biscuits at the mercy of Germain, who scooped them tidily into his pocket before going to the counter to deposit the new broadsheets, take away the much-read and coffee-spotted ones from yesterday, and collect his money from the proprietress.

“Whilst you were reckoning assets, did Fergus tell you how well he’s doing with the printing business?” I asked, pitching my voice low enough as not to reach Germain.

“He did.” Jamie passed a coffee cup under his nose and grimaced slightly. The beverage was nominally coffee—a few genuine beans had likely been included in the brew—but contained a high proportion of chicory and a few other ingredients. I picked a small fragment of charred acorn out of my saucer and added more sugar.

The printshop was in fact very profitable; the more so now, as Fergus’s chief competitor, a Loyalist, had left town with the departure of the British army.

"There are a good many expenses, though," Jamie explained. "And some of those have increased since the army left." Paper and ink were more difficult to obtain, with the army no longer protecting transport in and out of the city. And the increased danger of the public roads meant that fewer orders of printed books were shipped and, when they were, must either be insured or risk loss.

"And then there's insurance on his premises, which is expensive," Jamie added. He pinched his nose slightly, then drank his coffee in three large gulps. "Marsali doesna like paying that," he said, gasping a little, "but Fergus kent what happened to my place in Edinburgh. And he told me a few things that Marsali doesna ken, too."

"Such as?" I cast a wary eye at Germain, but he was engaged in what was plainly a saucy conversation with a serving girl at the counter. The girl was two or three years older than Germain but clearly amused by him.

"Oh, the odd threat from folk who dinna like something he's printed or who have their noses put out o' joint because he willna print something of theirs. Bit of sabotage, sometimes: his broadsheets stolen from coffeehouses and taverns and scattered in the street—though he said that's got better since Mr. Dunphy left town."

"Dunphy being the Loyalist printer?"

"Aye. Germain!" he called across the shop. "Have ye other places to visit today? Because if so, ye'd best get to them before your news goes stale."

That made the few customers laugh, and Germain's ears went somewhat pink. He gave his grandfather a measured look, but was wise enough not to say anything, and with a few last words to the counter girl, went out, slipping the small cake she'd given him into his pocket with a casual air.

"You don't suppose he's been picking pockets, do you?" I asked, observing the skill with which this maneuver was accomplished. Fergus had taught Germain a good many of his own techniques in that regard, not wanting the skills to be lost.

"God knows, but all the better if he leaves Philadelphia. He willna find so much scope for that particular talent in the mountains." Jamie craned his neck to see out the window, watching Germain go down the street, then sat back, shaking his head.

"The main thing Fergus hasna told Marsali, though, is about yon French popinjay Wainwright."

"What, the fashionable Percival?" I asked, mildly amused. "Is he still around?"

"Aye, he is. Persistent wee sodomite," he observed dispassionately. "He wrote out a detailed account of what he claims is the story of Fergus's parents, wi' the conclusion that Fergus is the heir to some great estate in France. Fergus says if it had been a romantic novel, it would have been criticized as too implausible and nay publisher would touch it." He grinned at the thought, but then sobered. "Still. Fergus says he hasna the slightest intent o' having anything to do with the matter, as even if it were true, he doesna mean to be a pawn for someone else's interests—and if it's not true, still less."

"Hmm." I had taken to simply eating the sugar lumps by now, rather than mixing them into the problematical coffee, and crunched one between my back teeth. "Why is he keeping that from Marsali, though? She knows about Wainwright's earlier approaches, doesn't she?"

Jamie drummed his hand on the table in thought, and I watched in fascination; he had been accustomed for a great while to drumming the two stiff fingers of his right hand when thinking—the middle and ring finger, which had been badly broken, crudely reset, and frequently re-broken, owing to the clumsy way it stuck out. But I had finally amputated the ruined ring finger after he'd had half of it sliced off by a cavalry saber during the first battle of Saratoga. He still drummed his hand, though, as if the finger were still there, though now only the middle finger struck the tabletop.

"She does," he said slowly. "But Fergus said that there began to be that odd wee bit of … something … in Wainwright's importunities. No *quite* a threat—but just things like an observation that, of course, since Fergus is the heir to the Beauchamp estate—if he is, in fact—then Germain would inherit the title and land after him."

I frowned.

"I can see that being offered as an inducement—but why is it a threat?"

He gave me a level look over the coffee debris.

"If Germain would inherit this estate—Wainwright's principals dinna really need Fergus, now, do they?"

"Jesus H.… Really?" I said. "You—or, rather, Fergus thinks Wainwright and company might *kill* him and then use Germain to get hold of this property or whatever it is they have in mind?"

Jamie gave the ghost of a shrug.

"Fergus hasna lived as long as he has without having a sense of when someone means him harm. And if he thinks there's summat amiss wi' this Wainwright, I'm inclined to believe him. Besides," he added fairly, "if it makes him more willing to leave Philadelphia and come south with us, I'm no going to persuade him he's wrong."

“Well, there’s that.” I looked dubiously at the dregs of my coffee and decided against it. “Speaking of Germain, though—or, rather, the children in general—that’s actually why I was looking for you.” And, in a few words, I described the ladybird note and its effect on Marsali.

Jamie’s thick auburn brows drew together, and his face took on a look that his enemies would have recognized. I had last seen it in the light of dawn on a North Carolina mountainside, when he had escorted me through woods and meadows, from one cold body to the next, to show me that the men who had hurt me were dead, to reassure me that they could not touch me.

“That was what made me … er … indisposed in the street,” I said, rather apologetically. “It just seemed so … evil. But a sort of *delicate* evil, if you know what I mean. It—rather gave me a turn.” The dead had their own means of making you remember them, but I felt nothing at the memory of his vengeance beyond a remote sense of relief and an even remoter sense of awe at the supernatural beauty of carnage in such a setting.

“I do know,” he said softly, and tapped his missing finger on the table. “And I should like to see that note.”

“Why?”

“To see whether the handwriting looks like that in Percy Wainwright’s letter, Sassenach,” he said, pushing back from the table and handing me my hat. “Are ye ready?”

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THANKS FOR ALL THE FISH

I HAD BOUGHT A striped bass nearly as long as my arm, along with a mess of crayfish and a gunnysack of oysters from the estuary, and the kitchen smelled delightfully of fresh bread and fish stew. This was a good thing, as stew can always be stretched, and Ian and Rachel, with Rollo in tow, had drifted into the printshop just before supper, so visibly in the throes of wedded bliss that it made one smile—and occasionally blush—to look at them.

Jenny did smile, and I saw her thin shoulders relax a little, seeing Ian's radiant face. I gave the stew a quick stir and came over to stand behind her as she sat by the fire, laying my hands on those shoulders and kneading them gently. I knew bloody well what a day's laundry felt like in the muscles.

She heaved a long, blissful sigh and bent her head to allow me to get my thumbs on her neck.

"D'ye think our wee Quaker lass is wi' child yet?" she murmured to me. Rachel was across the room, chatting with the younger children and very easy with them—though her eyes kept turning to Ian, who was looking at something Fergus had taken out of a drawer in the sideboard.

"They've been married barely a month," I whispered back, though I looked carefully at Rachel.

"It doesna take *that* long," Jenny said. "And plainly the lad kens his job. Look at her." Her shoulders quivered slightly with a suppressed laugh.

"A fine thing for a mother to be thinking about her son," I said under my breath, though I could neither keep the amusement out of my own voice nor say she was wrong. Rachel glowed in the magic light of mingled dusk and hearth fire, and her eyes rested on the lines of Ian's back, even as she admired Félicité's new rag doll.

"He takes after his father," Jenny said, and made a little "hmph" in her throat—still amused, but with a faint tinge of … longing? My own eyes went to Jamie, who had come to join Fergus and Ian by the sideboard. Still here, thank God. Tall and graceful, the soft light making shadows in the folds of his shirt as he moved, a fugitive gleam from the long straight bridge of his nose, the auburn wave of his hair. Still mine. Thank God.

"Come cut the bread, Joanie!" Marsali called. "Henri-Christian, stop playin' with that dog and fetch the butter, aye? And, Félicité, put your heid outside and call Germain." The distant sound of boys' voices came from the street, shouts punctuated by the occasional thud of a ball against the front wall of the shop. "And tell those wee heathens I said if they break a windowpane, their fathers will hear about it!"

A brief outbreak of domestic chaos ended with all the adults seated on the benches at table and the children in their own huddle by the hearth with their wooden bowls and spoons. Despite the heat of the evening, the fragrant steam of onions, milk, seafood, and fresh bread enveloped the table in a brief enchantment of anticipation.

The men sat down last, their murmured talk stopping well short of the table, and I gave Jamie a brief, questioning look. He touched my shoulder as he sat down beside me, saying, "Aye, later," under his breath, and nodded at the hearth. *Pas devant les enfants*, then.

Fergus cleared his throat. A small sound, but the children instantly stopped talking. He smiled at them, and their heads bowed over earnestly clasped hands.

"Bless us, O Lord," he said in French, "and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord."

"Amen," everyone murmured, and talk washed over the room like the tide coming in.

"Are ye bound back to the army soon, Ian?" Marsali asked, tucking a damp lock of blond hair back into her cap.

"Aye," he replied, "but not Washington's army. No yet, anyway."

Jamie leaned across me to raise a brow at him.

"Ye've turned your coat, then?" he said. "Or just decided the British pay better?" There was a wry edge to this; he'd not seen a penny of pay and told me frankly that he didn't expect to. Congress wasn't swift about paying anyone, and a temporary general who'd resigned his commission was likely at the bottom of their list.

Ian closed his eyes in momentary bliss, chewing an oyster, then swallowed and opened them, wiping a dribble of milk from his chin.

“No,” he said equably, “I’m takin’ Dottie up to New York to see her da and Lord John.”

That stopped all adult conversation dead, though the children continued to chatter by the hearth. I saw Jenny dart her eyes at Rachel, who looked composed, though considerably less blissful than she had before. She’d known about it, though; there was no surprise on her face.

“Why’s that, then?” Jamie asked, in a tone of mild curiosity. “She’s not decided Denzell doesna suit her, I hope? For I doubt he’s taken to beating her.”

That made Rachel laugh—briefly, but out loud, and the company relaxed a bit.

“No,” she said. “I believe Dottie to be pleased in her marriage; I know my brother is.” The smile lingered in her eyes, though her face grew serious as she glanced at Ian, then turned to Jamie.

“Her eldest brother has died. He was a prisoner of war, held in New Jersey. Her brother Henry received news yesterday confirming his death, but Henry cannot bear the strain of so long a journey yet, especially with the roads so dangerous, and Dottie feels she must go to her father.”

Jenny gave her a sharp look, which sharpened a bit further as she turned it on Ian.

“The roads bein’ so dangerous,” she repeated, with a mild tone that matched Jamie’s and fooled no one. Ian grinned at her and took a fresh chunk of bread, which he dunked in his stew.

“Dinna fash, Mam,” he said. “There’s a wee band o’ folk I ken, traveling north. They’re agreeable to going by New York. We’ll be gey safe wi’ them.”

“What *sort* of folk?” Jenny asked suspiciously. “Quakers?”

“Mohawk,” he said, the grin widening. “Come out wi’ me and Rachel after supper, Mam. They’d be that pleased to meet ye.”

I could honestly say that, in all the time I’d known her, I’d never before seen Jenny Murray gobsmacked. I could feel Jamie vibrating with suppressed hilarity next to me, and had to look down into my bowl for a moment to regain my own composure.

Jenny was made of stern stuff, though. She took a long moment, took a longer breath, pushed Rollo’s nose out of her lap, and then said calmly, “Aye. I’d like that. Pass me the salt, Fergus, aye?”

In spite of the general amusement, I hadn’t forgotten what Rachel had said about Dottie’s brother Benjamin, and I felt a twist of surprisingly acute pain, as though someone had knotted a length of barbed wire round my heart. *“Do you ever make bargains with God?”* If Hal had offered such a bargain, evidently God had declined it. *Oh, God, Hal … I’m sorry*.

“I’m so sorry to hear about Dottie’s brother,” I said, leaning forward to talk to Rachel. “Do you know what happened?”

She shook her head briefly, and the firelight, now behind her, cast shadow on her face from the curtain of dark hair.

“Henry had had a letter from their brother Adam. He’d had the news from someone on General Clinton’s staff, I think he said. All it said was that whoever had written the letter wished to express their regrets as to the death of Captain Benjamin Grey, a British prisoner of war who had been held at Middlebrook Encampment in New Jersey, and would General Clinton’s office please relay this sad news to the captain’s family. They’d thought it possible that he was dead—but this seems to put the matter beyond all doubt, alas.”

“Middlebrook Encampment is what they call the place in the Watchung Mountains where Washington took his troops after Bound Brook,” Fergus remarked with interest. “But the army left there in June of last year. Why would Captain Grey be there, I wonder?”

“Does an army travel wi’ its captives?” Jamie asked, raising one shoulder in a shrug. “Save if they’re taken when the army’s on the move, I mean.”

Fergus nodded, conceding the point, but seemed still to be pondering something. Marsali stepped in before he could speak, though, gesturing at Ian with her spoon.

“Speakin’ o’ why—why are your friends going north?” she asked. “Hasn’t anything to do wi’ the massacre at Andrustown, has it?”

Jenny turned toward her son, intent. A closed look came over Ian’s face, though he answered calmly enough.

“It does, aye. Where did ye hear o’ that?”

Marsali and Fergus shrugged in unison, making me smile involuntarily, in spite of my distress over Hal’s son.

“The way in which we hear most of the news we print,” Fergus amplified. “A letter from someone who heard of the matter.”

“And what do your friends have in mind to do about the matter?” Jenny asked.

“More to the point,” Jamie said, twisting to address Ian, “what do *you* have in mind to do about it?”

I was watching Rachel, on the other side of the table, rather than Ian, but I saw a look too faint to be called anxiety cross her brow, relaxing in the next instant when Ian replied flatly, “Nothing.” Perhaps feeling this too blunt, he coughed and took a gulp of beer.

“I dinna ken anyone who was there, and as I havena any intent to turn my coat and fight for the British wi’ Thayendanegea … Nay,” he finished, setting down his cup. “I’ll go as far as New York to see Dottie safe and then come back to wherever Washington might be.” He smiled at Rachel, his face shifting abruptly from its usual appealing half-homely expression to a startling attractiveness. “I need my scout’s pay, after all; I’ve a wife to support.”

“Ye must come and stay wi’ us, then,” Marsali said to Rachel. “While Ian’s gone, I mean.”

I hadn’t time to wonder exactly where she planned to put Rachel—Marsali was ingenious and would doubtless find a place—before Rachel shook her head. She wasn’t wearing a cap but wore her straight dark hair loose on her shoulders; I could hear the whisper of it against her dress as she moved.

“I shall go with Ian to fetch Dottie. Rollo and I will stay in camp with my brother until Ian returns. I can be useful there.” Her long fingers curled and flexed in illustration, and she smiled at me. “Thee knows the joy of useful occupation, Claire, I expect.”

Jenny made a nondescript noise in her throat, and Marsali snorted briefly, though without rancor.

“Indeed I do,” I said, my eyes on the slice of bread I was buttering. “And which would you rather find useful occupation in, Rachel—boiling laundry, or lancing the boils on Mr. Pinckney’s arse?”

She laughed, and the arrival of Henri-Christian with an empty bowl in his hands saved her replying. He set it on the table and yawned sleepily, swaying on his feet.

"Aye, it's late, wee man," his mother said to him, and, picking him up, cradled him in her arms. "Lay your head, *a bhalaich*. Papa will take ye up presently."

More beer was fetched, the little girls collected the empty bowls and put them in the bucket to soak, Germain vanished outside into the gathering dusk for the last few minutes of play with his friends, Rollo curled up to sleep by the fire, and talk became general.

Jamie's hand rested warmly on my thigh, and I leaned against him, laying my head briefly on his shoulder. He looked down at me and smiled, squeezing my leg. I was looking forward to the Spartan comfort of our pallet in the loft, the cooling freedom of shift and nakedness, and the sharing of whispers in the dark—but for the moment was more than content to be where I was.

Rachel was talking across Marsali to Fergus, Marsali humming quietly to Henri-Christian, whose round dark head lolled on her bosom, his eyes almost closed. I looked carefully at Rachel, but it was much too soon to see any signs of pregnancy, even if— And then I stopped, startled, as my eye caught something else.

I'd seen Marsali through her pregnancy with Henri-Christian. And I was seeing a bloom on her cheeks now that wasn't from the warmth of the room: a slight fullness of the eyelids, and a subtle softening and rounding of face and body that I might have recognized earlier, had I been looking for it. Did Fergus know, I wondered? And glanced quickly at the head of the table, to see him looking at Marsali and Henri-Christian, his dark eyes soft with love.

Jamie shifted a little beside me, turning to say something to Ian, on my other side. I turned, too, and saw that Ian's eyes were also fixed on Marsali and Henri-Christian, with a look of wistfulness that smote me to the heart.

I felt his longing, and my own—for Brianna. Roger, and Jem, and Mandy. Safe, I hoped—but not here, and I swallowed a lump in my throat.

"You'd die for them, happily," Hal had said, in the long night watch when I'd kept him breathing. "*Your family. But at the same time you think*, Christ, I *can't* die! What might happen to them if I weren't here?" He'd given me a wry and rueful smile. *"And you know bloody well that you mostly can't help them anyway; they've got to do it—or not—themselves."*

That was true. But it didn't stop you caring.

* * *

IT WAS HOT and close in the loft, with the comfortable lingering scents of supper crammed in under the rafters, the more argumentative pungencies of ink, paper, buckram, and leather that had built up all day, and the faintly pervasive scent of mule straw underlying everything. I gasped at the impact as I stepped off the ladder and went at once to open the loading door that looked out onto the cobbled alley behind the shop.

A blast of Philadelphia rushed in, fluttering the stacks of paper: smoke from a dozen nearby chimneys, an acrid stink from the manure pile behind the livery stable down the street, and the intoxicatingly resinous scent of leaves and bark and brush and flowers that was William Penn's legacy. *Leave one acre of trees for every five acres cleared,* he'd advised in his charter, and if Philadelphia had not quite met that ideal, it was still a particularly verdant city.

"God bless you, William," I said, beginning to shed my outer clothes as fast as possible. The evening air might be warm and humid, but it *was* moving, and I couldn't wait to let it move over my skin.

"That's a kind thought, Sassenach," Jamie said, stepping off the ladder into the loft. "Why, though? Is the lad in your mind for some reason?"

"Wh—oh, William," I said, realizing. "I hadn't actually meant your son, but naturally …" I fumbled to organize an explanation but gave it up, seeing that he wasn't really attending. "Were you thinking of him?"

"I was, aye," he admitted, coming to help with my laces. "Being wi' the weans and the bairns, and all sae comfortable together …" His voice died away and he drew me gently to him, bent his head to mine, and let it rest there with a sigh that stirred the hair near my face.

"You wish he could be part of it," I said softly, reaching up to touch his cheek. "Be part of the family."

"If wishes were horses, then beggars would ride," he said, and let go, with a wry smile visible in the glow from the kitchen below. "And if turnips were swords, I'd hae one by my side."

I laughed, but my eye went to the stack of Bibles where he was accustomed to leave his sword. His dirk was there, his pistols, shot bag, and a scatter of oddments from his sporran, but no sword. I squinted to be sure I was seeing a-right, but I was.

"I sold it," he said matter-of-factly, seeing the direction of my glance. "It's one good thing to be said of war: ye can get a good price for a decent weapon."

I wanted to protest, but didn't. He wore weapons with a lifelong ease, to the point that his knives and guns seemed a part of him, and I didn't like to see him diminished by the loss of any. But without an army commission, he likely wouldn't *need* a sword immediately, and we did certainly need money.

"You can buy another when we reach Wilmington," I said practically, returning his favor by unbuttoning his breeks. They slid off his lean hips and fell, puddling round his feet. "It would be lovely for William to know the truth about Bree and her family sometime. Will you tell him?"

"In the event that he ever comes within speakin' distance of me without trying to kill me?" One corner of his mouth curled ruefully. "Aye, maybe. But I maybe wouldn't tell him *all* the truth."

"Well, perhaps not all at once, no," I agreed. A warm breeze from the window stirred his hair and the tails of his shirt. I fingered the creased linen, warm and damp from his body. "Why don't you take that off?"

He looked me over carefully; I was standing now in nothing but my shift and stockings. A slow smile spread into his eyes.

"Fair's fair," he said. "Take yours off, as well, then."

* * *

CLAIRE WAS LOVELY, standing white and naked as a French statue against the deep twilight from the open window, her curly hair a storm cloud round her shoulders. Jamie wanted to stand and look at her, but he wanted a lot more to have his cock inside her.

There were still voices down in the kitchen, though, and he went and pulled the ladder up. Wouldn't do to have Germain or one of the girls scamper up to say good night.

There was a hoot of laughter from Ian and Fergus below, probably at sight of the ladder disappearing, and he grinned to himself, laying it aside. They had their own wives, and if they were foolish enough to sit drinking beer instead of enjoying their beds, it was none of his affair.

Claire was already on their pallet when he turned from the edge of the loft, a pale shadow under the gloom of the ink casks. He eased himself in naked beside her, touched her curving hip; she touched his cock. “I want you,” she whispered, and suddenly everything changed.

It was their common magic, but magic nonetheless, the smell of onions and brine on her hands, the taste of butter and beer on her tongue, a tickle of hair on his shoulder, and a sudden rush when she ran a finger down the crack of his arse, which drew him straight up hard between her willing legs.

She made a sound that made him put a hand over her mouth, and he felt her laugh, hot breath against his palm, so he took his hand away and stopped her noises with his mouth, lying full on her for a moment, not moving, trying to wait, not able to wait for the feel of her squirming under him, slick and slippery, rubbing her nipples on his, urging him … and then she quivered and made a small noise of surrender that freed him to do as he would, and he did.

* * *

JAMIE HEAVED a deep sigh of utter relaxation.

“I have been wanting to do that all day, Sassenach. *Moran taing, a nighean.*”

“So have— Is that a *bat*?” It was: a flittering scrap of detached darkness, ricocheting from one side of the loft to the other. I grabbed Jamie's arm with one hand and pulled a corner of the sheet over my head with the other. It wasn't that I minded bats, as such; a bat whizzing to and fro three feet over my head in the dark, though …

"Dinna fash, Sassenach," he said, sounding amused. "It'll go out again directly."

"I'm not so sure of that," I said, slapping something ticklish on my neck. "There are probably any number of insects in here for it to hunt." Clouds of gnats and mosquitoes were inclined to roam in through the open loading window when evening fell, and it was always a Hobson's choice: keep the window closed and die of suffocation, or open it and be chivvied all night by crawling feet and the irritating *sneeeee!* of mosquitoes whining in our ears.

"Ye ought to be pleased about the bat, then," Jamie told me, rolling onto his side and using another bit of sheet to blot a sheen of sweat from his chest. "How many bugs did ye tell me they eat?"

"Well … lots," I said. "Don't ask me how I remember this, but according to Brianna's encyclopedia, the average little brown bat can eat up to a thousand mosquitoes in an hour."

"Well, there ye are, then," he said. "I dinna think there can be more than two or three hundred mosquitoes in here just now—it shouldna take him more than a quarter hour to deal wi' those."

It was a definite point, but I was not quite convinced of the virtues of entertaining a resident bat. I did emerge from my makeshift shelter, though, peering upward. "What if more bats come in?"

"Then they'll clear the place in five minutes." He sighed briefly. "D'ye want me to catch him, throw him out, and close the door, Sassenach?”

“No,” I said, envisioning Jamie pirouetting around the loft in the dark, either being bitten by a startled bat if he did succeed in catching it or plunging over the edge of the loft in the effort to do so. “No, that’s all right. Tell me what you didn’t want to say earlier—that will take my mind off it.”

“What I—oh, aye.” He rolled onto his back, hands clasped on his stomach. “It’s only I’ve been talking wi’ Fergus and Ian about coming with us when we leave for the Ridge. Didna want to mention it at table, though. Ian and Fergus should talk it over wi’ Rachel and Marsali by themselves first—and I didna want the bairns to hear. They’d go mad with excitement, and Marsali would run me through the heart wi’ a meat skewer for stirring them up just before bed.”

“She might,” I said, amused. “Oh—speaking of Marsali … I rather think she’s pregnant.”

“Is she, now?” He turned his head to me, deeply interested. “Are ye sure?”

“No,” I admitted. “I can’t be sure without asking her nosy questions and examining her. But I think there’s a good chance of it. If so … that might affect whether they go with us, mightn’t it?”

The prospect of going home was suddenly real, in a way that it hadn’t been even a moment before. I could almost feel the breath of the mountains on my bare skin, and gooseflesh rippled fleetingly over my ribs at the thought, in spite of the heat.

“Mmm,” Jamie said, though absently. “I suppose it might. D’ye think—if she is wi’ child, might the new one be like Henri-Christian?”

“Probably not,” I said, though professional caution made me add, “I can’t be positive that his type of dwarfism isn’t a hereditary condition, because Fergus doesn't know anything about his family. But I think Henri-Christian's is probably a mutation—something that happens just once, a sort of accident."

Jamie gave a small snort.

"Miracles only happen once, too, Sassenach," he said. "That's why all bairns are different."

"I wouldn't argue with that," I said mildly. "But we'll need to be traveling quite soon, won't we? Even if Marsali is pregnant, she won't be more than three or four months along." A small sense of unease crept into my mind. It was early September; snow might begin to close the mountain passes as early as October, though if it was a warm year …

"How long will it take, do you think? To get back to the Ridge?"

"Too long to make it before the snow, Sassenach," he said gently, running a hand down my back. "Even if I manage the money and find a ship to take us down to North Carolina—and I'd rather do that—"

"You would?" I blurted, astonished. "*You*? Take a ship? I thought you'd sworn you'd never set foot on one again unless it was the ship taking your coffin back to Scotland."

"Mmphm. Aye, well. If it was only me, then, aye, I'd rather walk to North Carolina barefoot over hot coals. But it's not. It's you, and—"

"Me?" I sat up straight, angry. "What do you mean by that? Ahhh!" I clutched my hair and dived into his lap, for the bat had zoomed within inches of my head; I actually *heard* its faint squeaking and the leathery flap of wings.

Jamie laughed, but with a faint edge to it. As I sat up again, he ran a hand down my right side and rested two fingers over the fresh scar there.

"I mean that, Sassenach," he said, and pressed. Very gently, and I kept myself from flinching at the touch—but the scar was still red and tender.

"I'm fine," I said, as firmly as possible.

"I've been shot, Sassenach," he said, very dryly. "More than once. I ken what it feels like—and how long it takes to get your full strength back. Ye nearly fell over in the street today, and—"

"I hadn't eaten anything; I was hungry, and—"

"I'm no taking ye overland," he said, in a tone that brooked no argument. "And it's not only you—though it's mostly you," he added, in a softer tone, smoothing the hair off my face. "But there are the wee bairns, as well, and now Marsali, if she's wi' child … It's a hard journey, lass, and dangerous, forbye. Did ye not say the duke told ye the British mean to take the South now?"

"Hmph," I said, but allowed him to pull me down next to him. "Yes, he did. But I've no idea what that might actually *mean*, in terms of where they are or what they're doing. The only battles I'd actually heard of, beyond Lexington and Concord and Bunker Hill, are Saratoga and Yorktown—that's where it ends, Yorktown," I added. "Obviously a few things must happen in between, though."

"Obviously," he said. "Aye. Well, I'll buy another sword when we get to North Carolina and I've money again."

He did in fact have considerable assets—in North Carolina. But there was no way of retrieving any of the gold hidden in the Spaniard's Cave there—even if he had trusted anyone to do so, no one knew where the cave was, save him and Jemmy—and the aging whisky (almost as valuable as the gold, if brought to the coast for sale) was in the same place.

“I suppose the price of a good sword isn’t quite enough for ship’s passage for nine people—no, eleven, if Ian and Rachel come, too—is it?”

“No,” he said thoughtfully. “I said to Fergus that he might consider selling his press. He doesna own the premises, ken—but the press is his.” He made a small gesture, encompassing the building around us. “There’s my Bonnie in Wilmington, after all.”

“Your—oh, your press. Of course.” I hid a smile in his biceps. He invariably spoke of … well, her … with a certain possessive affection. Come to think, I wasn’t sure I’d ever heard him talk about *me* that way.…

“Aye. Fergus has his mind set that he’ll go on bein’ a printer, and I think that’s wise. Germain’s not yet big enough to plow—and poor wee Henri-Christian never will be.”

I suppressed my speculations as to just what Germain’s reaction might be if forcibly removed from the environs of a thriving city and plunked down behind a plow. He might remember the Ridge fondly, but that didn’t mean he wanted to be a farmer.

“What about Richard Bell?” Bell was the Loyalist who had been forcibly deported from his North Carolina home and sent, penniless and friendless, to England, ending up eventually in Edinburgh, where he had found employment as a printer—and where Jamie had encountered him and made the bargain whereby Richard would bring Bonnie to North Carolina and look after her in return for his passage home.

“I dinna ken,” Jamie said reflectively. “I wrote to him, to say we were coming to Wilmington and that we must make some arrangement … but I’ve had no reply.” This didn’t necessarily mean anything; letters frequently were lost or late. Jamie shrugged a little and shifted, stretching as he resettled himself. “Aye, well; let that bide. We’ll see when we see. How’s our wee friend?”

“Our—oh.” I looked up, scanning the low ceiling, but saw no trace of the bat. I didn’t hear any whining mosquitoes, either. “Well done, bat,” I said appreciatively.

Jamie laughed, low in his throat.

“Remember sittin’ on the stoop and watching the bats come out in the summer evenings on the Ridge?”

“I do,” I said softly, and turned on my side to embrace him lightly, hand on the curly hairs of his chest. I did remember. The Ridge. The cabin Jamie and Ian had built for shelter when we first came there, and the white piglet we’d bought, who had become the fearsome white sow, terror of the entire neighborhood. Our friends, Jamie’s tenants, Lizzie and the Beardsley twins … My heart squeezed at some of the memories.

Malva Christie. Poor doomed child. And the Bugs—Jamie’s trusted factor and his wife—who had proven a good deal less than trustworthy. And the Big House, our house, gone up in flames, and our life there with it.

“I’ll need to build the new house first thing,” he said thoughtfully. He laid his own hand on mine and squeezed it. “And I’ll make ye a new garden. Ye can have half the money I got for my sword, to buy seeds.”

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BELIEF IS A WISE WAGER

September 10, 1778
New York

HAL GAVE A MILD snort. “I don’t like your going alone,” he said.

“I don’t like it, either,” John said matter-of-factly, corking his hip flask. “But the only person who could effectively go with me is you, and you can’t, because of the regiment, so … God, I miss Tom Byrd,” he said impulsively.

“Your erstwhile valet?” Hal smiled, despite the worry of the situation. “How long has it been since you’ve seen him? Ten years at least, surely?”

“At least that.” Thought of Tom still gave him a slight pang. Tom had left his employment—with deep regret on both sides—in order to marry, and had become a successful publican in Southwark, his wife having inherited a thriving public house from her father. Grey couldn’t begrudge him his happiness, but he still sorely missed Byrd, with his sharp eyes, quick mind, and anxious care for Grey's person as well as his clothes.

He glanced down at himself; his current valet managed to keep him decent—a task that he himself admitted to be Sisyphean—but lacked both imagination and conversation.

"You should take Marks, regardless," Hal said, having evidently followed his train of thought without difficulty. "Someone's got to keep you in order." He gave John's uniform a critical look.

"I *can* dress myself, you know," John said mildly. "As for the uniform—" He glanced down and shrugged. "Bit of a brush-off, clean shirt, spare stockings … it's not as though I mean to be calling on General Washington."

"We can only hope." Hal's lips pressed together. He'd already expressed his reservations—if anything so violently explicit could be described in such terms—regarding Grey's intent to travel as himself, in uniform.

"I've had quite enough of being arrested as a spy, thank you," John replied. "Beyond the risk of being hanged out-of-hand, the Americans' sense of hospitality … though come to think, I'd meant to ask: do you know a Watson Smith? Used to be a captain in the Twenty-second, I think."

Hal frowned in concentration, but his brow cleared almost immediately.

"I do," he said. "A very good officer; did well at Crefeld and Zorndorf." He cocked his head to one side, brows raised. "Why?"

"He's turned his coat; he's now a colonel in the Continental army. I was his involuntary guest for a short time. Nice fellow," Grey added fairly. "Got me drunk on applejack."

"Doubtless with the intent of extracting intelligence from you?" Hal's expression made it clear that he doubted there had been much in that line for Smith to extract.

"No," Grey said thoughtfully. "I don't think so. We just got drunk together. Nice fellow," he repeated. "I was going to express the hope that I wouldn't meet him again—shouldn't like to have to kill him, I mean—but I suppose it isn't beyond belief that I might run into him somewhere." The thought gave him a small, pleasant clench low down in the belly that rather surprised him.

"Anyway," he added, "I'm going in uniform, even if grubby uniform. It won't necessarily keep me from arrest, imprisonment, starvation, and torture, but it *will* save me from being hanged."

"Torture?" Hal gave him a look.

"I had in mind waking up after the applejack," John told him. "And the singing. Have you any idea how many verses the Americans have for 'Yankee Doodle'?"

Hal grunted in response to this and took out a leather folder, from which he extracted a thin sheaf of documents.

"Here are your *bona fides*," he said, handing them over. "They *may* help—assuming firstly that you're captured or detained, rather than shot on sight, and secondly that your captors take the time to read them."

Grey didn't trouble to reply to this, being occupied in thumbing through the documents. A copy of his warrant of commission; a note from Hal as Colonel of the Regiment, detaching Lieutenant Colonel John Grey temporarily from service and desiring him to undertake the task of locating and assisting one Mrs. Benjamin Grey (née Amaranthus Cowden), widow of Captain Benjamin Grey, late of the Thirty-fourth Foot; a "To Whom It May Concern" letter from

Clinton, formally recognizing Grey's mission and requesting that every courtesy and assistance be provided him in consequence thereof; several bills of exchange drawn on Coutts' bank in New York ("Just in case," Hal told him. "In case of what?" "In case you get knocked over and relieved of your gold, halfwit." "Oh."); and … Benedict Arnold's note, granting the Duke of Pardloe and his brother, Lord John Grey, permission to abide temporarily in Philadelphia for the purpose of searching for the duke's nephew.

"Really?" Grey said, raising his brows at this last. "Under what circumstances do you think this might be helpful?"

Hal shrugged and straightened his waistcoat. "The fact that you and I are known to General Arnold is worth something. The note doesn't give his opinion of us, after all."

Grey gave the note a critical eye, but, in fact, Arnold had refrained from personalities and had not codified his threats regarding rails and tar and feathers.

"All right." He closed the folder and put it down, laying his hat on it to ensure against walking off without it. "That's that, then. What's for supper?"

* * *

JOHN GREY WAS enjoying a confused but pleasant dream involving spring rain, his dachshund Roscoe, Colonel Watson Smith, and a great deal of mud, when he gradually became aware that the raindrops on his face were real.

He opened his eyes, blinking, to discover his niece, Dottie, holding his pitcher in one hand and sprinkling water from her fingertips onto his face.

"Good morning, Uncle John," she said cheerily. "Rise and shine!"

"The last person injudicious enough to say that to me in the morning came to a most unpleasant end," he said, struggling upright and rubbing the sleeve of his nightshirt across his face.

"Really? What happened to him? Or was it a him?" She dimpled at him and set down the pitcher, wiping her wet fingers on her skirt.

"What an improper question," he said, eyeing her.

"Well, I am a married woman now, you know," she said, sitting down with an air of extreme self-possession. "I am allowed to know that men and women occasionally share a bed, even outwith the bonds of matrimony."

"Outwith? Where did you pick up that barbarous construction? Have you been speaking to Scotchmen?"

"Constantly," she said. "But what happened to the unfortunate person who tried to roust you from your slumbers?"

"Oh, him." He rubbed a hand over his head, still surprised at feeling the hair so short, though it had at least grown enough to fall over and lie somewhat flat, rather than sticking straight up like a shaving brush. "He was scalped by red Indians."

She blinked.

"Well, that will teach him, to be sure," she murmured.

Grey swung his legs out of bed and gave her a pointed look.

"I don't care how married you are, Dottie, you are *not* allowed to help me dress. What the devil are you doing here, anyway?"

"I'm going with you to find B-Ben's widow," she said, and all of a sudden her bright façade collapsed like papier-mâché in the rain. Tears welled up in her eyes, and she clamped a hand hard over her mouth to prevent them falling.

“Oh,” Grey said. “Oh, my dear …” And pausing only to fling on his banyan—even in emergency, there were limits—he knelt beside her and gathered her into his arms.

“It’s all right,” he said softly to her, rubbing her back. “Ben may not be dead, after all. We think he’s not—your father and I.” *We certainly hope he’s not*, he thought, but opted for the most positive view of the situation.

“You don’t?” She choked, sniffed, and sat up a bit, looking up at him with drowned-cornflower eyes.

“Certainly not,” he said firmly, and dug in the pocket of his banyan for a handkerchief.

“But why not?” She accepted the proffered linen—somewhat crumpled but not indecently so—and dabbed at her face. “How could he not be?”

Grey sighed, caught between Scylla and Charybdis, as usual when enmeshed in one of Hal’s situations.

“Does your father know you’re here?” he asked, as a delaying tactic.

“Don’t—I mean, no,” she said, clearing her throat and sitting up straighter. “I went to his quarters, but he was out, so I came on here to find you.”

“How is it that you’re sure Ben’s died?” Grey stood up and, tying the belt of his banyan, began looking about for his slippers. He knew that Hal hadn’t yet written to Minnie about Ben—wouldn’t do so unless forced by dreadful certainty—and even if he had, there was no way in which word could have come back to Dottie so soon. And Hal would not have told his daughter the news until he was sure, no more than he would have told his wife.

“Henry told me,” she said. She poured a little water onto the handkerchief and commenced repairs to her complexion. “I went to visit him and Mercy, and he’d just had a letter from Adam, telling him … you’re *sure* he isn’t dead?” she asked anxiously, lowering the handkerchief to gaze at him. “Adam’s letter said he’d heard it from someone on General Clinton’s staff, telling him for sure that Ben had died at a military camp in New Jersey—Middlebrook, I think he said it was called.”

“No, we’re not sure,” he admitted. “But we have reasonable grounds for doubt, and until those have been completely explored, we will proceed on the assumption that he’s not. I do have to find his wife, though,” he added.

“And child.”

Dottie’s eyes flew wide.

“A *child*? Ben has a baby?”

“Well, the woman who claims to be his wife has a son, or so she says—and she did say that Ben is the father of her offspring.” Seeing that there was little alternative, he apprised her of the letter from Amaranthus Cowden that Hal had received in Philadelphia, and its contents.

“Now, as Ben didn’t happen to mention this woman to Hal, one of the duties I’m to carry out for your father is the determination as to whether she’s telling the truth. And if she is, then of course I will bring her back with me, and the family will take care of her and the child.”

“What if she’s *not* telling the truth?” Dottie’s distress was rapidly being subsumed by a combination of hope and curiosity.

“God knows,” Grey said frankly. “Would you like to go and ask Marks to see about breakfast for us, Dottie? I may be out of bed, but I'm in no way equipped to conduct hypothetical conversations before I've had a cup of tea."

"Oh. Yes, of course." She rose, though slowly, plainly still thinking about the revelations, and went toward the door, but paused on the threshold and looked back at him.

"I *am* coming with you," she said firmly. "We can talk about it on the way."

* * *

HAL WALKED IN as the kippers and mixed grill were being laid out. He halted for a split second as he saw Dottie, but then came on, more slowly, eyeing her.

"Good morning, Papa," she said briskly, rising and coming to kiss his cheek. "Sit down and have a kipper."

He did sit down, still eyeing her, then switched his gaze to John.

"I had nothing to do with it," Grey assured his brother. "She arrived—how did you get here, Dottie?"

"On a horse," she replied patiently, taking a slice of toast.

"And where is your husband?" Hal asked mildly. "Does he know where you are?"

"Denzell is where his duty takes him," she said, rather tersely. "With the Continental army. Mine takes me here. And of course he knows."

"And he had no objection to your traveling alone from Pennsylvania to New York, over roads infested by—"

"I wasn't alone." She took a delicate bite of her toast, chewed, and swallowed. "Ian and some of his Mohawk friends brought me. The Mohawks were traveling to someplace north of here."

“Ian—is that by chance Ian Murray?” Grey asked, but then answered himself. “I suppose it must be; how many Mohawks can there be named Ian? I take it that he survived his wound, then; I’m pleased to hear it. How did you come to—”

“Dorothea,” said Hal, in measured tones, staring at Dottie. “Why are you here?”

Dottie returned his stare, her jaw visibly clenched.

“B-because of Ben,” she said, unable to keep her voice entirely steady. “Are you— Papa, are you *sure* he’s not dead?”

Hal took an audible breath and nodded.

“I’m sure,” he said in his best command voice. But John could see his knuckles whiten as he clutched a teaspoon, and felt the knot in his own stomach tighten in response.

Dottie clearly had her own doubts, judging from her glance at her father, but she obligingly nodded. Being Dottie, of course, she didn’t stop there.

“How?” she said. “How do you know? Adam and Henry both think … the worst.”

Hal’s mouth opened a fraction of an inch, but nothing came out.

John thought that Hal ought really to have been prepared for this, but, after all, his brother *had* been having a difficult time. And, in all justice, it was hard to be prepared for something like Dottie.

“I suppose you’d better tell her,” John said. “If you don’t, she’ll likely write to Minnie.”

Hal shot him a glance full of venom, fully aware that this helpful suggestion had been made with the intent of forcing him to divulge his reasoning to Dottie—but there wasn’t much of a choice, and he did so with as much grace as he could.

“But this Captain Richardson *hadn’t* done anything to Willie?” Dottie said, frowning a little. “I thought—”

“Not on this occasion,” John said briefly, “but given his earlier behavior over the Dismal Swamp and Quebec, we’re somewhat suspicious.”

“And the man apparently *has* deserted,” Hal pointed out.

“You don’t know that. He might have been killed by someone and his body concealed,” Dottie pointed out logically.

“He was seen leaving the camp,” John said patiently. “Alone. And given what we know and surmise about him, I think we have grounds to consider the possibility that he might be an American agent.” He was himself fairly well convinced of it, viewing all his experience of Richardson now with the clarity of hindsight. He’d been an intelligencer himself for some years, and every instinct he possessed was presently shouting *Stinking fish!* with regard to Ezekiel Richardson.

“I blame myself extremely,” he said apologetically to Hal. “I should have been on to him much sooner. But I was … distracted at the time.” Distracted. Blown sideways and more than half obliterated by the news of Jamie Fraser’s death. Even the memory of it was enough to close his stomach. He put down the forkful of kipper, untasted.

“All right,” Dottie said slowly. Her own breakfast was congealing on her plate. So was Hal’s. “So you don’t believe Ben is dead, because this Richardson told you he *was*—and you think Richardson is a wrong ’un. But that’s … all?” She looked intently at her father, her young chin trembling slightly, begging reassurance.

Hal closed his eyes for an instant, opened them, and looked at her directly.

“Dorothea,” he said softly. “I have to believe that Ben is alive. Because if he isn’t, then your mother will die of heartbreak—and I will die with her.”

There was a moment of long silence, during which Grey heard the passage of carts in the street and the muffled voices of his valet and a bootblack in the corridor. Dottie made no sound at all, but he felt he could hear, too, the tears that rolled slowly down her cheeks.

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THE RAVELED SLEEVE OF CARE

September 15, 1778
Philadelphia

I WOKE ABRUPTLY IN the dark, disoriented and alarmed. For a moment, I had no idea where I was or what was happening—only that something was seriously wrong.

I sat up, blinking furiously in an attempt to focus my eyes. Patted round in confusion and found myself naked, legs tangled in a sheet and wisps of straw prickling … oh. Loft. Printshop.

Jamie.

That was what was wrong. He lay next to me, but not still. He was on his side, turned away from me, body contorted, knees drawn up, and his arms crossed tight over his chest, head bowed. Shivering violently, though moonlight showed me the gleam of cold sweat on his shoulders. And making the terrible small whimpering noises that betokened the worst of his dreams.

I knew better than to try to wake him suddenly. Not in a small space with a lot of clutter and a steep drop ten feet away.

My own heart was pounding, and I knew his was. I eased myself carefully down beside him, facing his back. I needed to touch him, to bring him slowly to himself—or to enough of himself that he could recover alone. This wasn't the sort of nightmare eased by talking. Or, sometimes, even by waking.

"God, no," he said, in a heartbroken whisper. "God, no!"

I mustn't grab or shake him. I clenched my teeth and ran my hand lightly from the slope of his shoulder down to his elbow, and his skin shivered like a horse ridding itself of flies. That was all right, then. I did it again, paused, and again. He took a deep, horrible gasp, choked with fear … but the violent shivering eased a little.

"Jamie," I whispered, and, with extreme caution, touched his back very lightly. If he was dreaming about Jack Randall, this might—

"No!" he exclaimed, in a loud, fierce voice, and his legs straightened, every muscle in his body tight against his skin. "Damn you to *hell*!"

I took a deep breath and relaxed, just a bit. Anger was a thousand times better than fear or pain. Anger would leave him, as soon as he woke completely. The other things tended to linger.

"Hush," I said, a little louder but still softly. Germain often slept by the hearth, not wanting to share a bed with his younger siblings. "Hush, Jamie. I'm here." And with some trepidation, I put my arm round him, lightly, and laid my cheek against his back. His skin was hot; he smelled pungently of our lovemaking and even more strongly of fear and rage.

He stiffened, caught his breath—but I felt his awareness come back: instantly, the way it did when he woke to some alarm, ready to leap out of bed, reaching for a weapon. I tightened my hold and pressed my body against his. He didn't move, but I felt the thud of his heart, beating hard and fast.

"Can you hear me?" I asked. "Are you all right?"

After a moment, he drew a deep breath and let it out in a long, quivering sigh.

"Aye," he whispered, and his hand reached back to grasp my thigh, so tightly that I jerked but managed not to squeal. We rested quietly together for a time, until I felt his heart begin to slow and his skin cool, and then I kissed his back and traced the scars that would never fade from his body, over and over with gentle fingers, until they faded from his mind and he slept in my arms.

* * *

THE PIGEONS ON the roof of the boardinghouse made a purling noise, like the sea coming in on a pebbled shore, rolling tiny rounded rocks in the surf. Rachel was making a similar noise, snoring very faintly. Ian found it charming and could have lain watching her and listening to her all night—save that she was lying on his left arm, which had gone numb, and he needed urgently to piss.

As gently as possible, he edged out from under her soft weight, but she was a light sleeper and woke at once, yawning and stretching like a young catamount in the candlelight. She was naked, arms and face the color of just-toasted bread, her body white and her privates under their dark-brown bush a wonderful dusky color that wasn't either rose or violet or brown, but reminded him of orchids in the forests of Jamaica.

She stretched her arms above her head, and the movement lifted her startlingly white round breasts and made her nipples slowly rise. He began to slowly rise, too, and hastily turned away, before it became impossible to do what he'd meant to.

"Go back to sleep, lass," he said. "I just—er …" He gestured toward the chamber pot under the bed.

She made a pleasant sleepy noise and rolled onto her side, watching him.

"Does thee mind my looking at thee?" she asked, in a soft voice husked by sleep and earlier muffled shrieks.

He glanced at her in astonishment.

"Why would ye want to?" The notion seemed mildly perverse, but in a distinctly arousing fashion. He wanted to turn his back so he *could* piss, but if she wanted to watch him …

"It seems an intimacy of the body," she said, looking at him through half-closed eyes. "A trusting, perhaps. That thee consider thy body to be mine, as I consider mine to be thine."

"Do ye?" That idea surprised him, but he didn't object. At all.

"Thee has seen the most hidden parts of me," she pointed out, and, spreading her legs, drew her fingers delicately between them in illustration. "And tasted them, as well. What *did* it taste like?" she asked curiously.

"Fresh-caught trout," he replied, smiling at her. "Rachel—if ye want to watch me piss, ye can. But ye canna do it if ye talk to me like that while I'm trying, aye?"

"Oh." She made a small snort of amusement and rolled over, turning her back and her very round bottom to him. "Go ahead, then."

He sighed, examining his prospects.

"It will take a minute, aye?" Before she could think of anything else outrageous to say to him, he went on, in hopes of distracting her. "Uncle Jamie and Auntie Claire think of leaving Philadelphia soon. To go back to North Carolina, ken? What would ye think of going with them?"

"What?" He heard the rustle of the corn-husk mattress as she turned over quickly. "Where is thee thinking of going, that thee would not take me with thee?"

"Och, I didna mean that, lass," he assured her, with a quick glance over his shoulder. She was propped on her elbows, looking at him accusingly. "I meant we'd both go. To Fraser's Ridge—Uncle Jamie's settlement."

"Oh." That surprised her into silence. He could hear her thinking about it, and smiled to himself.

"Thee does not feel an obligation to the Continental army?" she asked after a moment, cautiously. "To the cause of freedom?"

"I dinna think those are necessarily the same thing, lass," he said, and closed his eyes in relief as everything relaxed at last. He shook himself and put away the pot, giving himself time to form a coherent sentence.

"The Duke of Pardloe told Auntie Claire that after Saratoga the British made a new plan. They mean to try to separate the southern colonies from the northern ones, blockade the South, and try to starve the North into submission."

"Oh." She moved to give him room to lie down beside her, then snuggled into him, her free hand cupping his balls. "Then thee means there will not be fighting in the North, so thee will not be needed as a scout here—but thee might, in the South?"

"Aye, or I might find another use for myself."

"Outside the army, thee means?" She was trying hard to keep hopefulness out of her voice; he could tell from the very sincere way she looked up at him, and he smiled at her, putting his own hand over hers. He was much in favor of bodily intimacy, but would rather not be squeezed like an orange should Rachel be overcome by enthusiasm.

"Perhaps," he said. "I own some land, ken, on the Ridge. Uncle Jamie gave it to me, some years back. 'Twould be hard work, mind, clearing fields and planting and plowing, but farming is mostly peaceful. Bar things like bears and wild pigs and fire and hailstorms, I mean."

"Oh, Ian." Her face had gone soft, and so had her hand, now resting peacefully in his. "I should love to farm with thee."

"Ye'd miss your brother," he reminded her. "And Dottie. Maybe Fergus and Marsali and the weans, too—I dinna think they'd come settle on the Ridge, though Uncle Jamie thinks they'd maybe travel south with us but settle near the coast. Fergus would need a decent-sized city, if he's to make much living as a printer."

A shadow crossed her face at that, but she shook her head.

"I will miss Denzell and Dottie—but I should in any case, for they will go where the army goes. But I will be very happy if thee does not," she added softly, and lifted her face to kiss him.

* * *

RACHEL WOKE instantly. She hadn't been soundly asleep, her body still a-hum from lovemaking, and still so attuned to Ian's that when he gasped and stiffened beside her, she sprang at once into awareness and had her hands on his shoulders, meaning to shake him gently out of his dream.

The next moment, she was on the floor in a tangle of bedding, her husband on top of her and his very large hands vised round her throat. She flopped and wriggled, pushed at him in futile panic—and then, as her breath vanished and brilliant red stars flashed in the darkness of her vision, she got hold of herself and brought her knee up as hard as she could.

It was a lucky blow, though it missed its mark; she hit Ian hard in the thigh, and he woke with a start and let go. She struggled out from under him, gasping and wheezing, and crawled as fast as she could to the corner, where she sat quivering with her arms wrapped round her knees, chest heaving and her heart thumping in her ears.

Ian was breathing heavily through his nose, pausing every so often to grunt or to say something brief—and probably very expressive, if she'd had the wit to understand it—in either Gaelic or Mohawk. After a few minutes, though, he got slowly into a sitting position and leaned back against the bedstead.

"Rachel?" he said warily, after a moment's silence. He sounded rational, and her tight-clasped arms loosened a little.

"Here," she said, tentative. "Is thee … all right, Ian?"

"Oh, aye," he said mildly. "Who taught ye to do that to a man?"

"Denny," she said, beginning to breathe easier. "He said that discouraging a man from committing the sin of rape wasn't violence."

There was a moment of silence from the vicinity of the bed.

"Oh," said Ian. "I might have a wee chat wi' Denny, one of these days. A philosophical discussion on the meaning of words, like."

"I'm sure he would enjoy it," Rachel said. She was still unnerved by what had happened, but crawled over and sat beside Ian on the floor. The sheet was lying in a pale puddle nearby, and she shook it out and draped it over her nakedness. She offered half of it to Ian, but he shook his head and leaned back a little, groaning as he stretched out his leg.

"Um. Would thee like me to … rub it?" she asked tentatively.

He made a small huffing noise that she interpreted as amusement. "Not just now, aye?"

They sat together, shoulders barely touching, for a bit. Her mouth was dry, and it took some time to work up enough spit to speak.

"I thought thee was going to kill me," she said, trying hard to keep her voice from quivering.

"I thought I was, too," Ian said quietly. He groped for her hand in the dark and held it, hard. "Sorry, lass."

"Thee was dreaming," she ventured. "Does—does thee want to tell me about it?"

"God, no," he said, and sighed. He let go her hand and bent his head, folding his arms atop his knees.

She kept quiet, not knowing what to say, and prayed.

"It was the Abenaki," he said eventually, his voice muffled. "The one I killed. In the British camp."

The words were simple and bald, and struck her in the pit of the stomach. She knew; he'd told her when he came back wounded. But to hear it again here, in the dark, with her back scraped from the floor and her throat bruised from his hands … She felt as though the deed itself had just happened in front of her, the reverberation of it shocking as a scream in her ear.

She swallowed and, turning to him, put a hand on his shoulder lightly, feeling with her thumb for the fresh, ragged scar where Denzell had cut to remove the arrow.

"Thee strangled the man?" she asked, very quietly.

"No." He breathed deep and sat up slowly. "I choked him, and I cut his throat, just a wee bit, and then I bashed his head in wi' a tomahawk."

He turned to her then and passed a hand lightly over her hair, smoothing it.

"I didna have to," he said. "Not right that moment, I mean. He didna attack me—though he'd tried to kill me before."

"Oh," she said, and tried to swallow, but her mouth had dried afresh. He sighed and bent so that his forehead rested on hers. She felt the warmth of his nearness, the warmth of his breath, smelling of beer and the juniper berries he chewed to clean his teeth. His eyes were open but so shadowed that she couldn't see into them.

"Is thee afraid of me, Rachel?" he whispered.

"I am," she whispered back, and closed her hand on his wounded shoulder, lightly but hard enough for him to feel the hurt of it. "And I am afraid for thee, as well. But there are things I fear much more than death—and to be without thee is what I fear most."

* * *

RACHEL REMADE the bed by candlelight and left the candle burning for a bit, saying that she wanted to read, to settle her mind. Ian had nodded, kissed her, and curled up like a dog beside her—the bedstead was too short for him. She glanced at the corner where Rollo slept; *he* was stretched out straight as a knife, head between his paws.

Ian put a hand on her leg and sank into sleep. She could see him doing it, his face going slack and peaceful, the muscles of his shoulders easing. It was why she'd kept the candle lit, so she might watch him sleep for a little and let the sight of him bring her peace, as well.

She'd put on her shift, feeling obscurely exposed, and though it was hot enough to lie above the sheet, she'd pulled it over her legs, too, wanting to be able to feel Ian when she moved in her sleep. She moved a leg toward him now, slowly, and felt the touch of his knee against her calf. His long lashes cast shadows on his cheeks in the candlelight, just above the looping line of his tattoos.

"Thee is my wolf," she'd said to him. *"And if thee hunts at night, thee will come home."*

"And sleep at thy feet," he'd replied.

She sighed, but felt better, and opened her Bible, to read a psalm before blowing out the candle, only to discover that she had absently picked up *Pamela: Or Virtue Rewarded*, from the bedside table. She gave a small snort of amusement and, all sense of distress now driven from her mind, closed the book, put out the candle, and snuggled down beside her sleeping wolf.

Sometime much later, in the empty hours before dawn, she opened her eyes. Not asleep, but certainly not awake, she had a sense of perfect consciousness without thought. And a distinct and vivid sense that she was not alone.

Ian was beside her; his breath touched her face, but she felt quite apart from him. It was only when it happened again that she realized what had wakened her: a tiny, sharp pain in her belly. Like the pain that sometimes came when she started her monthly, but smaller, less an ache than a … stab. A stab of awareness.

She blinked and put her hands over her stomach. The rafters were just barely visible overhead, shadowed with the distant coming of the light.

The pain had stopped, but the sense of … company? Of presence, rather. That hadn't gone away. It seemed very odd and completely natural—and of course it was, she thought. Natural as the beating of her own heart and the breath in her lungs.

She had a faint impulse to wake Ian, but that passed almost at once. She wanted to keep this for now, be alone with the knowledge—but not alone, she corrected herself, and sank peacefully back to sleep, hands still crossed over her lively womb.

* * *

IAN USUALLY WOKE before her, but she always felt him stir and would rise to the edge of wakefulness to enjoy his sleepy warm smell, the small male sounds he made, and the feel of his legs brushing hers as he swung them out of bed and sat up. He'd sit there on the edge for a moment, rubbing his hands through his hair and getting his bearings on the day, and if she cracked her eyes open, she could see his long, lovely back just in front of her, columnar muscles tanned by the sun and sloping gently down to his neat, tight buttocks, white as milk in contrast.

Sometimes he would emit a small, popping fart and look guiltily over his shoulder. She'd shut her eyes instantly and pretend to be still asleep, thinking that she must be completely besotted to find this adorable—but she did.

This morning, though, he sat up, rubbed a hand through his hair, and stiffened. She opened her eyes all the way, instantly alarmed by something in his posture.

"Ian?" she whispered, but he didn't attend.

"A Dhia," he said, very softly. "Ah, no, *a charaid* …"

She knew at once. Should have known from the instant she woke. Because Rollo woke when Ian did, stretching and yawning with a groaning creak of jaw muscles and a lazy thump of tail against the wall, before coming to poke a cold nose into his master's hand.

This morning there was only stillness, and the curled form of what used to be Rollo.

Ian rose and went to him swiftly, knelt on the floor beside the body of his dog, and laid a gentle hand on the big furry head. He didn't say anything, or weep, but she heard the sound he made when he breathed, as of something tearing in his chest.

She got out of bed and came to Ian, kneeling beside him, arm about his waist, and *she* was weeping, quite without meaning to.

“Mo chiù,” Ian said, running his hand lightly over the soft, thick fur. *“Mo chuilean.”* There was a catch in his voice when he said, *“Beannachd leat, a charaid.” Goodbye, old friend*.

Then he sat back on his heels, took a deep breath, and clasped Rachel’s hand very hard. “He waited, I think. Until he kent ye were here for me.” He swallowed audibly, and his voice was steady when he spoke again.

“I’ll need to bury him. I ken a place, but it’s some way. I’ll be back by midafternoon, though.”

“I’ll come with thee.” Her nose was running. She reached for the towel by the ewer and blew her nose on one end.

“Ye needn’t, *mo ghràidh*,” he said gently, and passed a hand over her hair to smooth it. “It’s a long way.”

She drew breath and stood up.

“Then we’d best get started.” She touched her husband on the shoulder, as lightly as he’d touched Rollo’s fur. “I married him, as well as thee.”

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A-HUNTING WE WILL GO

September 15, 1778
First Watchung Mountain

THERE WAS A NEAT mound of droppings by the path, dark and glistening as coffee beans and much the same size. William was leading his mare, owing to her stoutness and the steep nature of the trail, so took the opportunity to stop for a moment and let her breathe. This she did, with an explosive snort and a shake of her mane.

He squatted and scooped up a few of the pellets, sniffing. Very fresh, though not warm, and with the faint oaky tang that meant the deer had been browsing on green acorns. Glancing to his left, he saw the broken brush that marked the animal's passage, and his hand twitched, wanting to wrap itself round his rifle. He could leave the mare tethered …

“What about it, owd lass?” he asked the mare, in the accents of the Lake District, where he’d grown up. “Would ’ee carry a carcass, if I shot ’un?”

The mare was maybe fourteen, old enough to be steady; in fact, it would be hard to imagine a steadier mount. She was more like riding a sofa than a horse, with her broad back and sides curved like a hogshead of beer. But he hadn’t thought to ask, when he bought her, whether she was used to hunting. Steadiness of gait and a mild temper didn’t necessarily mean she’d be fine if he heaved a deer across her back, leaking blood. Still …

He lifted his face to the breeze. Perfect. It was straight across the mountainside, toward him, and he imagined he could actually smell the—

Something moved in the wood, snapping twigs, and he heard the unmistakable rustling: the sound of a large herbivorous creature, wrenching mouthfuls of leaves off a tree.

Before he could think twice, he’d got to his feet, slipped the rifle from its sheath as silently as he could, and shucked his boots. Soft-footed as a ferret, he slid into the brush …

And, five minutes later, grasped the thrashing stubby antlers of a yearling buck with one hand as he slit the deer’s throat with the other, the sound of his shot still echoing off the rocky escarpment above him.

It had happened so fast, it scarcely seemed real, despite the warm-cold feel of the blood soaking into his stockings and the thick smell of it. There was a tick hanging just under the deer’s glazing eye, round as a tiny muscat grape. Would it let go at once, he wondered? Or would there be enough blood left for it to go on feeding for some time?

The deer shuddered violently, shoving its antlers hard into his chest, bunched its legs convulsively as though about to make one final leap, and died.

He held it for a few moments, the shredded velvet still on the antlers like rough suede under his sweating palm, the weight of the coarse-haired shoulders growing heavy on his knee.

"Thank you," he whispered, and let go. He remembered that it had been Mac the groom who'd told him that you always thanked a creature that gave you its life—and that it had been James Fraser, some years later, who had killed a huge wapiti in front of him and spoken what he said was a "gralloch prayer" in Gaelic before butchering the beast. But with the deer's blood on his skin and the breeze moving in the wood around him, for once he didn't push those memories away.

He went to check the mare, who was fortunately close to where he'd left her, having merely moved a few yards in order to crop weeds, and who looked at him with tranquil eyes, yellow wildflowers dangling from the corners of her mouth, as though gunshots and the smell of blood were commonplace in her life. Perhaps they were, he thought, and slapped her shoulder companionably.

Here's for you, Ben, he thought a few minutes later, slitting the belly skin. His cousin, nearly six years older than himself, had taken him hunting now and then in the forest near Earlingden, with Viscount Almerding, a friend of Ben's whose preserve it was.

He'd tried not to think of his cousin too much as he'd made his preparations. The greater part of him truly believed that Ben was dead. Gaol fever, according to what Richardson had told his uncle. Not an unusual thing to happen to a prisoner, by any means. And while he was convinced—reluctantly, for it made him burn with shame to have been such a flat as to have been gulled by the man—that Richardson was probably a villain, that didn't necessarily mean that every word from the man's mouth was a lie. Granted, he'd found no other trace of Ben in several weeks of searching.

But there was the small part of his heart that wouldn't give up. And a larger part that would do anything he could to ease the grief of his uncle and father, whatever the truth might prove to be.

"And if you bloody come down to it, what the hell *else* is there for me to do?" he muttered, reaching into the steaming heat of the body and groping for the heart.

At least he'd be welcome when he walked into Middlebrook Encampment, as they called it. A man bearing fresh meat was always welcome.

A half hour later, he'd gutted the carcass and wrapped his canvas bed sack around it to keep off flies. The horse flared her nostrils and snorted in disgust at the smell, but made no great objection when he wrestled it onto her back.

It was late in the afternoon, but this late in the summer it would stay light for some time. Better, he thought, to make his first approach at suppertime. Chances were good that he'd be invited to sit down with someone, and conversation was much easier over food and drink.

He'd gone up to the rocky summit in order to survey the terrain and had to admit that Washington and his engineers had chosen well. From the top of First Watchung Mountain, which he was standing on, the plains before New Brunswick lay clear below. The Continentals could easily keep a beady eye on the British army from their aerie and swoop down to interfere with their movements—and had.

The armies were gone now, though: both of them. The British to New York, Washington's troops to … well, wherever they might be at the moment. They weren't *here*, and that was all to the good. But there were people, still, who lived near the encampment.

Ben had been—*was*, he corrected himself fiercely—an officer; an infantry captain, like himself. And captured officers were often billeted upon local householders, under parole. That was the place to begin his inquiries.

"Come on, then, lass," he said to the mare, untying the reins from the sapling he'd wrapped them round. "Let's go and make ourselves welcome."

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INTO THE BRIAR PATCH

September 16, 1778
Philadelphia

WE'D JUST FINISHED supper and I was wiping Henri-Christian's face with the hem of my apron, when a knock came at the alley door. Jenny, sitting next to me with Félicité on her lap, gave me a quick glance, brows raised. Was this cause for alarm?

I hadn't time to shrug or shake my head; all conversation had ceased on the instant, the children's chatter quelled as though someone had dropped a candle snuffer over them. It was first dark and the door was bolted. Fergus and Jamie exchanged looks and, without a word, both of them rose.

Jamie stood to one side, hand on his dirk—I hadn't realized until this moment that he wore it all the time now, even at table. I heard the shuffle of feet in the alley. There was more than one man out there, and the hair stirred on my nape. Jamie stood relaxed but watchful, weight on his back foot, ready as Fergus lifted the bar.

"Bonsoir," Fergus said calmly, with an interrogative lift at the end of the phrase. A face hovered pale in the dark, not close enough to recognize.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur Fraser." I blinked in surprise; I knew the voice, but had never heard Benedict Arnold speak French. But of course he could, I thought, recovering. He'd led more than one campaign in Quebec. It was a soldier's French he spoke: rough but serviceable.

"Madame Fraser est ici, monsieur?" he said. *"Votre mère?"*

Fergus glanced reflexively over his shoulder at Jenny, astonished. I coughed and eased Henri-Christian off my lap, smoothing his rumpled hair.

"I rather think the governor means me," I said. The governor turned aside and murmured something to his aide, who nodded and retired into the shadows.

"Mrs. Fraser," Arnold said, sounding relieved. Fergus stood aside, and the governor came in, bowing to Marsali and Jenny, nodding to Jamie, before fixing his attention on me. "Yes, I do mean you, ma'am. I beg pardon for my untimely intrusion, sir," he added, turning to Fergus. "I wasn't sure where Mrs. Fraser was residing and was obliged to make inquiries."

I saw Jamie's mouth tighten briefly at this galling reference to our homelessness, but he bowed courteously.

"And I daresay the matter is urgent, sir, since ye come to make your inquiries in person?"

"It is, rather." The governor turned to me. "I come to beg a favor of you, ma'am, on behalf of a friend." He looked a little better than he had the last time I'd seen him; he'd gained a bit of weight and his color was better, but the lines and smudges of strain and fatigue were still plain in his face. The eyes, though, were as alert as ever.

“This would be a sick friend?” I asked, already glancing toward the ladder that led to the loft where we slept—and where the box holding my modest pharmacopeia was kept when I wasn’t holding regular surgery hours.

“A matter of injury, ma’am, rather than illness,” Arnold said, and his mouth tightened involuntarily. “Severe injury.”

“Oh? Well, then, I’d better—”

Jamie stopped me, a hand on my arm and his eyes on Arnold.

“A moment, Sassenach,” he said quietly. “Before I let ye go, I want to know the nature of the injury and the name of the injured man. And I also want to ken why the governor comes to ye under cover of night and hides his intent from his own aide.”

The color rose in Arnold’s cheeks, but he nodded.

“Fair enough, Mr. Fraser. Do you know a man called Shippen?”

Jamie looked blank and shook his head, but Fergus chimed in.

“I do,” he said, looking thoughtfully at Arnold. “He is a wealthy man, and a well-known Loyalist—one of those who chose not to leave the city when the British army withdrew.”

“I know one of the Shippen girls,” I said, with a vague memory of General Howe’s lavish leaving party in May—God, could that possibly be only four months past? “I don’t think I’ve met the father, though. Is he the injured party?”

“No, but he is the friend on whose behalf I ask your help, ma’am.” Arnold drew a deep, unhappy breath. “Mr. Shippen’s young cousin, a man named Tench Bledsoe, was set upon last night by the Sons of Liberty. They tarred and feathered him, ma'am, and left him on the docks in front of Mr. Shippen's warehouse. He rolled off the dock into the river and by a mercy didn't drown, but crept up the bank and lay in the muddy shallows until a slave hunting crabs found him and ran for help."

"Help," Jamie repeated carefully.

Arnold met his eye and nodded. "Just so, Mr. Fraser," he said bleakly. "The Shippens live within two streets of Dr. Benjamin Rush, but under the circumstances …"

The circumstances being that Benjamin Rush was a very visible and outspoken Rebel, active in the Sons of Liberty, and would certainly be familiar with everyone in Philadelphia who held similar sentiments—very likely including the men who had attacked Tench Bledsoe.

"Sit down, Sassenach," Jamie said, gesturing to my stool. I didn't, and he gave me a brief, dark look.

"I dinna mean to stop ye going," he said, a distinct edge in his voice. "I ken well enough that ye will. I just mean to make sure ye come back. Aye?"

"Er … yes," I said, and coughed. "I'll just—go and get my things together, then." I sidled through the clump of staring children to the ladder and went up as quickly as I could, hearing Jamie's stern inquisition of Governor Arnold begin behind me.

Severe burns—and the attendant difficulties of hardened tar—and very likely fever and infection already started, after a night lying in river mud. This was going to be messy—and possibly worse. There was no telling how badly the young man had been burned; if we were lucky, it might be only splashes of tar that had reached his skin. If we weren't lucky …

I set my jaw and began packing. Linen bandages, a scalpel and small paring knife for debridement … leeches? Perhaps; there would certainly be bruising involved—no one submitted meekly to being tarred and feathered. I tied a hasty bandage around the leech jar to keep the lid from coming off in transit. Definitely a jar of honey … I held it up to the flicker of light from below: half full, a clouded gold that caught the light through brown glass like candle glow. Fergus kept a tin of turpentine in the shed for cleaning type; I should borrow that, as well.

I didn't worry overmuch about the political delicacies that had made Arnold come to me so surreptitiously. Jamie would take what precautions were possible, I knew. Philadelphia lay in Rebel hands, but it was by no means a safe place—for anyone.

Not for the first time—or the last, I was sure—I was glad that at least my own path lay clear before me. The door below opened and closed with a thump; the governor was gone.

* * *

I LOOKED AT the rather grubby sedan chair, inhaled the scent of several dozen previous users, and took a firmer grip on my cane.

"I can walk," I said. "It's not that far."

"Ye're not walking," Jamie replied equably.

"Surely you don't intend to stop me?"

"Aye, I do," he said, still mildly. "I canna stop ye going—and I wouldna try—but I can, by God, make sure ye dinna fall on your face in the street on your way. Get in, Sassenach. Go slow," he added to the chairmen, as he opened the door of the sedan and gestured to me. “I’m coming, and I dinna want to gallop so soon after supper.”

There being no reasonable alternative, I gathered the remnants of my dignity and got in. And with my basket of supplies settled at my feet and the window slid open as far as it would go—the memories of my last claustrophobic ride in a sedan chair were as vivid as the smell of this one—we set off at a stately jog through the quiet nighttime streets of Philadelphia.

The curfew had been eased of late, owing to protests from tavern owners—and, likely, their patrons—but the overall sense of the city was still edgy, and there were no respectable women on the street, no gangs of rowdy apprentices, or any of the slaves who worked for their masters but lived on their own. I saw one whore, standing by the mouth of an alley; she whistled at Jamie and called out an invitation, but halfheartedly.

“Her pimp’ll be a-hiding … in the alley with a cosh … lay you three to one,” the chairman behind me remarked, his remarks punctuated by his breathing. “Ain’t as safe … as when the army was here.”

“Think not?” His partner grunted, then found breath to reply. “Army was here … when that officer got his … throat cut in a whorehouse. Reckon ’s why that … drab’s out here in her shift.” He gulped air and went on. “How you mean … to settle the bet, then? Go with her yourself?”

“May be as this gentleman’d do us the service,” the other said with a brief, gasping laugh.

“It may be that he won’t,” I said, sticking my head out the window. “But I’ll go and look, if you like.”

Jamie and the forward man laughed, the other grunted, and we jolted gently round the corner and down the street to where the Shippen house stood, gracious in its own grounds, on a small rise near the edge of town. There was a lighted lantern by the gate, another by the door. I wondered whether that meant we were expected; I hadn't thought to ask Governor Arnold if he had sent word ahead of us. If he hadn't, the next few minutes might be interesting.

"Any notion how long we might be, Sassenach?" Jamie inquired, taking out his purse to pay the chairmen.

"If he's already dead, it won't take long," I replied, shaking my skirts into order. "If he's not, it could well take all night."

"Aye. Wait a bit, then," Jamie told the chairmen, who were staring at me, mouths agape. "If I havena come out in ten minutes, ye're free to go."

Such was his force of personality, they didn't observe that they were quite free to go at once if they wanted, and merely nodded meekly as he took my arm and escorted me up the steps.

We were expected; the door swung wide as Jamie's boots scuffed the scrubbed stone of the stoop, and a young woman peered out, alarm and interest showing in equal measure on her face. Evidently Mr. Bledsoe wasn't dead, then.

"Mrs. Fraser?" She blinked slightly, looking at me sideways. "Er … I mean … it *is* Mrs. Fraser? Governor Arnold said—"

"It is Mrs. Fraser," Jamie said, a slight edge in his voice. "And I assure ye, young woman, I'm in a position to know."

"This would be *Mr.* Fraser," I informed the young lady, who was looking up at him, clearly bewildered. "I was probably Lady John Grey last time you saw me," I added, trying for a nonchalant matter-of-factness. "But, yes, I'm

Claire Fraser. Er … still. I mean—again. I understand that your cousin …?”

“Oh, yes! Please—come this way.” She stepped back, gesturing toward the rear of the house, and I saw that she was accompanied by a servant, a middle-aged black man, who bowed when I met his gaze and then led the way through a long hallway to the back stair and thence upward.

On the way, our hostess introduced herself belatedly as Margaret Shippen and apologized prettily for the absence of her parents. Her father—she said—was called away on business.

I hadn’t been formally introduced to Peggy Shippen before, but I had seen her and knew a bit about her; she’d been one of the organizing lights of the Mischianza, and while her father had prevented her actually attending the ball, all her friends had talked about her at length—and I’d glimpsed her, lavishly dressed, once or twice at other functions I’d attended with John.

Called away on business, was it? I caught Jamie’s eye when she’d said that, and he’d raised one shoulder in the briefest of shrugs. More than likely, Edward Shippen wanted to avoid any public linkage with his nephew’s misfortune—and, so far as possible, keep talk about the incident to a minimum. It wasn’t a safe time or place to make a point of Loyalist leanings in the family.

Miss Shippen led us to a small bedroom on the third floor, where a blackened, man-shaped object lay on the bed. The smell of tar was thick in the air, along with a distinct smell of blood and a sort of constant low moaning noise. This must be Tench Bledsoe—and wherever had he got a name like that? I wondered, gingerly approaching him. So far as I knew, a tench was a rather undistinguished-looking sort of carp.

"Mr. Bledsoe?" I said quietly, setting down my basket on a small table. There was a candlestick on the table, and by the light of the single flame, I could make out his face—or half of it. The other half was obscured by tar, as was a good bit of his head and neck. The clean half was that of a somewhat plain young man with a large, beaky nose, his features contorted in agony, but not at all fish-looking.

"Yes," he gasped, and pressed his lips tight together, as though even the escape of a single word jeopardized the tenuous grip he had on himself.

"I'm Mrs. Fraser," I said, and laid a hand on his shoulder. A fine shudder was running through him like current through a wire. "I've come to help."

He heard me and nodded jerkily. They'd given him brandy; I could smell it under the aromatic reek of pine tar, and a half-full decanter stood on the table.

"Have you any laudanum in the house?" I asked, turning to Peggy. It wouldn't help that much in the long run, but a large dose might get us through the worst of the preliminaries.

She was quite young—no more than eighteen, I thought—but alert and self-possessed, as well as very pretty. She nodded and disappeared, with a murmured word to the servant. *Of course*, I thought, seeing her skirts whisk out of sight. *She couldn't send him for it.* The laudanum would be with the other household simples, in a closet under lock and key.

"What can I do, Sassenach?" Jamie said softly, as though afraid to break the injured man's concentration on his pain.

"Help me undress him." Whoever had attacked him hadn't stripped him; that was lucky. And most of the tar probably hadn't been boiling hot when it was applied; I smelled burnt hair, but not the sickening stench of cooked flesh. Pine tar wasn't like the asphalt road tar of later centuries; it was a byproduct of turpentine distillation, and might be soft enough to be daubed without needing to be boiled first.

What *wasn't* fortunate was his leg, as I saw at once when Jamie peeled back the sheet covering him. That was where the smell of blood had come from; it spread in a soggy smear on the bedclothes, black in the candlelight, but copper and scarlet to the nose.

"Jesus H. Roosevelt Christ," I said under my breath. Tench's face was dead white and streaked with sweat and tears, his eyes closed, but he grimaced, hearing that.

Jamie set his jaw and drew his case knife, which was sharp enough to shave the hairs on a man's arm. Sharp enough to slice through shredded stocking and damp breeches, spreading the stiffened fabric aside to show me the damage.

"Who did that to ye, man?" he asked Tench, gripping him by the wrist as the injured man reached a tentative hand downward, seeking the extent of the damage.

"No one," Tench whispered, and coughed. "I—I jumped off the dock when he set my head afire, and landed on one foot in the mud. It stuck well in, and when I fell over …"

It was a very nasty compound fracture. Both bones of the lower leg had snapped clean through, and the shattered ends were poking through the skin in different directions. I was surprised that he had survived the shock of it, together with the trauma of the attack—to say nothing of a night and part of a day spent lying in the filthy river shallows afterward.

The macerated flesh was swollen, raw, red, and ugly, the wounds deeply infected. I breathed in gently, half-expecting the reek of gangrene, but no. Not yet.

"He set your head afire?" Jamie was saying incredulously. He leaned forward, touching the darkened mass on the left side of the young man's head. "Who?"

"Don't know." Tench's hand floated up, touched Jamie's, but Tench didn't try to pull it away. It rested on Jamie's, as though his touch would tell Tench what he needed to know but couldn't bear to find out for himself.

"Think he … Way he spoke. Maybe England, maybe Ireland. He … poured pitch over my head and sprinkled feathers on. Others would have left me then, I think. But all of a sudden, he turned back and seized a torch …" He coughed, wincing against the spasm, and ended breathlessly, "… like he … hated me." He sounded astonished.

Jamie was carefully breaking off small chunks of singed hair and matted clumps of mud and tar, revealing the blistered skin underneath.

"It's none sae bad, man," he said, encouraging. "Your ear's still there, no but a wee bit black and crusty round the edges."

That actually made Tench laugh—no more than a breathy gasp—though this was extinguished abruptly when I touched his leg.

"I'll need more light," I said, turning to the servant. "And a lot of bandages." He nodded, avoiding looking at the man on the bed, and left.

We worked for some minutes, murmuring occasional encouragement to Tench. At one point, Jamie pulled the chamber pot out from under the bed, excused himself with a brief word, and took it into the hall; I heard him retching.

He came back a few moments later, pale and smelling of vomit, and resumed the delicate work of uncovering what might remain of Tench's face.

"Can ye open this eye, man?" he asked, gently touching the left side. I peered up from my station over his leg, to see that the lid was evidently whole but badly blistered and swollen, the lashes singed off.

"No." Tench's voice had changed, and I moved abruptly up to his head. He sounded almost sleepy, his voice unconcerned. I laid the back of my hand against his cheek; it was cool and clammy. I said something very bad out loud, and his working eye sprang open, staring up at me.

"Oh, there you are," I said, much relieved. "I thought you were going into shock."

"If he hasna been shocked by what's already happened to him, I shouldna think anything would do it, Sassenach," Jamie said, but bent closer to look. "I think he's only worn out from the pain, aye? Sometimes ye canna be bothered to put up with it anymore, but ye're no ready to die, so ye just drift away for a bit."

Tench sighed deeply and gave a small, jerky nod.

"If you could … stop for a little while?" he whispered. "Please."

"Aye," Jamie said softly, and, patting his chest, drew the stained sheet up over him. "Rest a bit, *mo charaid*."

I wasn't at all sure that he wasn't trying to die, but there was a limit to what I could do to prevent him, if that were the case. And there was a much more serious limit to what I could do if he *didn't* die.

On the other hand, I had a vivid understanding of exactly what Jamie meant by "drifting away" and of the symptoms of severe blood loss. There was no telling how much blood

Tench *had* lost, lying in the river. The fracture had by some miracle not ruptured either of the main tibial arteries—if it had, he'd have been dead long since—but it had certainly made hash of a number of smaller vessels.

On the other hand … the Delaware was a fairly cold river, even in summer. The chill of the water might well have constricted the smaller blood vessels, as well as slowed his metabolism and even perhaps minimized the damage due to burns, both by extinguishing the fire and by cooling the burnt skin. I'd whipped a pro forma tourniquet bandage round the leg above the knee but hadn't tightened it; blood loss at the moment was no more than a slow oozing.

And, in fact, the burns *were* minimal. His shirt had been torn open, but the tar on his chest, hands, and clothes hadn't been hot enough to blister his skin—and while there was certainly visible damage to one side of his face and head, I didn't *think* more than a few square inches of scalp had third-degree burns; the rest was redness and blistering. Painful, of course, but not life-threatening. Whoever had attacked him had likely not meant to kill him—but they stood a good chance of doing so, anyway.

"Pitch-capping, they call it," Jamie said, low-voiced. We had moved away to the window, but he nodded back toward the bed. "I havena seen it before, but I've heard of it." He shook his head, lips tight, then picked up the ewer and offered it to me. "D'ye want water, Sassenach?"

"No—oh, wait. Yes, I do, thank you." The window was firmly closed, in accordance with the custom of the times, and the small room was sweltering. I took the pitcher and nodded to the window. "Can you get that open, do you think?"

He turned to wrestle with the window; it was stuck fast in its frame, the wood swollen with humidity and disuse.

“What about the leg?” he said, back turned to me. “Ye’ll have to take it off, no?”

I lowered the pitcher—the water was flat and tasted of earth—and sighed.

“Yes,” I said. I’d been fighting that conclusion almost from the moment I’d seen Tench’s leg, but hearing Jamie’s matter-of-factness made it easier to accept.

“I doubt I could save it in a modern hospital, with blood transfusions and anesthetic—and, *God*, I wish I had ether right now!” I bit my lip, looking at the bed, and watching closely to see whether Tench’s chest was still rising and falling. A tiny, treacherous part of me rather hoped it wasn’t—but it was.

Feet on the stairs, and both Peggy and the manservant were with us again, armed respectively with a stable lantern and an enormous candelabra, Peggy with a square glass bottle clasped to her chest. Both turned anxious faces toward the bed, then toward me, standing apart by the window. Was he dead?

“No,” I said, shaking my head, and saw the same half-regretful relief flit across their faces that I had just experienced. I wasn’t without sympathy; no matter what their feelings for the injured man, having him on the premises was a danger to the Shippens.

I came forward and explained in a low voice what had to be done, watching Peggy go the color of a bad oyster in the flickering light. She swayed a little, but swallowed hard and drew herself up.

“Here?” she said. “I don’t suppose you could take him to … Well, no, I suppose not.” She took a deep breath. “All right. What can we do to help?”

The manservant coughed behind her in a meaningful manner, and she stiffened.

“My father would say the same,” she informed him coldly.

“Just so, miss,” he said, with a deference that wasn’t all that deferential. “But he might like to have the chance to say it himself, don’t you think?”

She shot him an angry glance, but before she could say anything, there was a grinding screech of wood as the window gave way to Jamie’s will, and everyone’s eye jerked to him.

“I dinna mean to interrupt,” he said mildly, turning round. “But I do believe the governor has come to call.”

* * *

JAMIE PUSHED PAST Miss Shippen and her servant before either could react. He ran lightly down the back stair and came through the house, startling a kitchen maid. Clearly the governor wasn’t going to be admitted by the kitchen door.

He reached the front door just as a firm knock sounded, and pulled it open.

“Miss Margaret!” Arnold pushed past Jamie as though he wasn’t there—no small feat—and seized Peggy Shippen’s hands in his. “I thought I must come—your cousin? How does he do?”

“He is alive.” Peggy swallowed, her face the color of the beeswax candle she was holding. “Mrs. Fraser is—she says —” She swallowed again, and Jamie swallowed with her, out of sympathy, knowing all too well what she was thinking of. Tench Bledsoe’s shattered leg bones, red and slimy as an ineptly butchered pig's. The back of his throat was still bitter with the taste of vomit.

"I thank you *so* much for sending Mrs. Fraser to us, sir—I couldn't think what on earth we were to do. My father's in Maryland and my mother with her sister in New Jersey. My brothers …" She trailed off, looking distraught.

"No, no, my dear—may I call you so? It is my most fervent concern, to help you—your family, to … protect you." He hadn't let go her hands, Jamie noted, and she wasn't pulling them away.

Jamie glanced covertly from Arnold to Peggy Shippen, then turned away a little, drawing back. It wasn't hard for them to ignore him; they were focused on each other.

That made matters plain—or at least plainer. Arnold wanted the girl, and wanted her so nakedly that Jamie was slightly ashamed for the man. You couldn't help lust, but surely a man should have enough control to hide it. *And no just for the sake of decency, either*, he thought, seeing a certain look of cautious calculation come into Peggy's face. It was, he thought, the look of a fisherman who has just seen a fat trout swim right under the lure.

He cleared his throat in a pointed manner, and both of them jerked as though he'd run a drawing pin into them.

"My wife says it will be necessary to amputate the injured leg," he said. "Quickly. She requires a few things—instruments and the like."

"I need both the large saw and the small lunar one, the set of tenaculae—the long things that look like fishing hooks—and quite a lot of sutures …"

He was trying to keep the list in his head, though it made him ill to envision most of the items, thinking of the use they were about to be put to. Beneath the sense of revulsion and pity, though, was wariness—the same wariness he saw at the back of Benedict Arnold's eyes.

"Does she," Arnold said, not quite a question. His eyes flicked back to Peggy Shippen, who bit her lip in a becoming manner.

"Can ye maybe send your coachman to the printshop?" Jamie asked. "I can go with him and fetch back what's needed."

"Yes," Arnold said slowly, but in an abstracted way, the way he did when he was thinking rapidly. "Or … no. Let us rather remove Mr. Bledsoe—and Mrs. Fraser, to be sure—to the printshop in my coach. Mrs. Fraser will have access there to everything she requires, and the assistance and support of her family."

"What?" Jamie exclaimed, but Peggy Shippen was already hanging on to Arnold's arm, her face transformed by relief. Jamie seized Arnold by the arm to compel his attention, and the governor's eyes narrowed.

Jamie's intent had been to demand rhetorically whether Arnold was mad, but the split second's delay was enough to change this to a more politic "There's nay room at the shop for such a venture, sir. We live atop one another, and folk come in and out all day. This willna be a simple matter; the man will need to be nursed for some time."

Peggy Shippen made a small moan of anxiety, and it dawned upon Jamie that Tench Bledsoe was a hot potato, as much—or more—for Arnold as for the Shippens. The last thing Arnold could want, as military governor of the city, was public scandal and disorder, the remaining Loyalists in Philadelphia threatened and frightened, the Sons of Liberty seen as secret vigilantes, a law unto themselves.

Arnold must very much want the incident kept quiet. At the same time, he wanted to be the noble knight, riding to the aid of the very young and enchanting Miss Shippen by caring for her cousin while removing the potential danger he posed to her household.

By bringing it to mine, Jamie thought, his wariness beginning to turn to anger.

"Sir," he said formally. "There is no possibility of preventing the matter from being known, should ye bring yon man into my son's shop. And clearly ye ken the danger of that."

The truth of this was evident, and Arnold paused, wrinkling his brow. But Jamie had fought with the man and kent him well enough; Jamie saw that, having made up his mind to relieve Miss Peggy's concern, Arnold meant to do it, come hell or high water.

Evidently Claire was right in what she'd told him about testosterone, and he'd already known that Arnold was a ram, in terms both of balls and hard-headedness.

"Ah, I have it!" Arnold exclaimed triumphantly, and Jamie saw—with grudging admiration—the general emergent. This admiration disappeared with Arnold's next sentence.

"Lord John Grey," he said. "We could transport Mr. Bledsoe to his lordship's house."

"No!" Jamie said by reflex.

"Yes," Arnold said, but in self-congratulation rather than contradiction; he was paying no attention. "Yes, the ideal solution! His lordship and his brother are much in my debt," he explained to Peggy, with a feigned modesty that made Jamie want to hit him. "And as his lordship and Mrs. Fraser —" At this point, he caught sight of Jamie's face and arrested his speech just in time to prevent exactly such a happenstance. He coughed. “The ideal solution,” he repeated. “Will you go and tell Mrs. Fraser what we intend, sir?”

“We?” Jamie said. “I intend nothing of the—”

“What the *bloody* hell is going on down here?” Claire’s voice came from the stairway behind him, and he swung round to see her leaning on the banister, a-flicker like a ghost in the light from the tin sconce above her. There was blood smudging her apron, blotches black on the pale cloth.

“Nothing, *a nighean*,” he said, fixing Arnold with a firm eye. “Only discussing where Mr. Bledsoe should be.”

“I don’t care where he *should* be,” she snapped, coming down into the foyer, skirts rustling with agitation. “Where he *will* be is dead, if I can’t take care of his leg quickly.” Then she noticed the glaring going on betwixt him and Arnold and moved up beside Jamie, looking hard at the governor herself.

“General Arnold,” she said, “if you have the slightest concern for Miss Shippen’s cousin’s life, you’ll oblige me by taking my husband promptly to fetch the instruments I need. Hurry!”

Arnold blinked, and Jamie would have smiled had he not been worrit for the lass—she was fierce, but she looked pale, and her fists were clenched in the cloth of her apron. It might have been to keep her from slapping the governor, but he rather thought it was to hide the fact that her hands were trembling—and he realized with a shock that she was afraid.

Not afraid of the circumstance or any future danger—afraid that she couldn’t do what she knew she must.

His heart smote him at the thought. He took Arnold firmly by the upper arm, compelling him toward the stair.

"Aye," he said abruptly to Claire. "We'll take the man to Lord John's house, and whilst ye fettle him for the job there, I'll fetch what ye need from the shop. The general will help me to move him."

Arnold's stiff resistance ceased abruptly as he took Jamie's meaning.

"Yes," he said. "Yes, I—" A long moan from above interrupted him, and Claire's face tightened.

"There isn't time," she said, quite calmly. "Miss Shippen—Peggy. Fetch me the largest knife you have in the kitchen, and do it now. Have your servants bring more hot water and cloth for bandages. A strong sewing needle and black thread." Her eyes sought Jamie's, and he let go of the governor at once and went to her.

"Ye're all right, lass?" he said quietly, taking her elbow.

"I am," she said, and squeezed his hand briefly. "This is very bad, though. I don't—I'm sorry, I'll need you to help hold him."

"I'll be fine," he said. "Dinna be worrit. Only do what ye need to do. I promise I willna vomit on him while ye're taking off his leg."

He hadn't actually meant that to be funny, and was surprised—but pleased—when she laughed. Not much of a laugh, but the tension in her arm relaxed, and her fingers were steady on his.

He could tell the minute they entered the room. He didn't know what it was had changed, but clearly Claire had heard the beating of the wings of Death from the floor below; he could sense them now. Bledsoe was still conscious, but barely so; a slice of white showed as one eyelid lifted at their entrance.

"We're here, man," Jamie whispered, sinking to his knees and grasping Bledsoe's hand. It was cold to the touch and clammy with sweat. "Dinna fash, we're here. It'll be done soon."

There was a strong smell of laudanum in the air, together with the stink of tar and blood and burnt hair. Claire was on the other side of the bed, holding Bledsoe's wrist, her eyes flickering from his slack face to the mangled leg.

"Sepsis," she said, quietly but in a normal voice. "Do you see the red line there?" She gestured at the wounded leg, and Jamie saw it clearly: a streak of an ugly dark-red color that he thought hadn't been there before—or perhaps it had, and he'd not noticed. The sight of it made the fine hairs ripple on his shoulders, and he shifted uneasily.

"Blood poisoning," Claire said. "Bacteria—germs—in the blood. It moves very fast, and if it should get into the body proper … there's nothing I can do."

He looked up sharp, hearing a tiny tremor in her voice.

"But before that, ye might? There's a chance?" He tried to sound encouraging, though the thought of the alternative made the gooseflesh that much worse.

"Yes. But it isn't a good one." She swallowed. "The shock of the amputation may well kill him on the spot. And if it doesn't, there's still a great chance of infection."

He stood up then and came round the bed to her, taking her gently but solidly by the shoulders. Her bones were close to the surface, and he thought her feelings were, too.

"If he's got a chance, we must give it to him, Sassenach."

"Yes," she murmured, and he felt the shiver go all through her, though the air was hot and close. "God help me."

"He will," Jamie whispered, folding his arms briefly round her. "So will I."

* * *

I WAS STANDING in the wrong place. The fact that I understood what was happening to me didn't help at all.

A trained surgeon is also a potential killer, and an important bit of the training lies in accepting the fact. Your intent is entirely benign—or at least you hope so—but you are laying violent hands on someone, and you must be ruthless in order to do it effectively. And sometimes the person under your hands will die, and knowing that … you do it anyway.

I had had them bring more candles, though the air in the room was already suffocating. The miasma of humidity and slowly evaporating sweat made the light of the candelabra fill the chamber with a gentle, romantic glow; just the thing for a dinner party filled with wine, flirtations, and dancing.

The wine could wait, and any surgeon dances with death routinely. The problem was that I'd forgotten the steps and was flirting with panic.

I bent to check Tench's heart rate and respiration. He was breathing shallowly but fast. Lack of oxygen, severe blood loss … and I felt my own chest tighten, heaving for air, and stood up, giddy, heart hammering.

"Sassenach." I turned, hand on the bedpost, to see Jamie watching me, eyebrows drawn together. "Are ye all right?"

"Yes," I said, but my voice sounded queer even to my own ears. I shook my head hard, trying to clear it. Jamie came close to me and put his hand on mine, where it rested on the bedpost. It was big and steady, and it helped.

"Ye willna help him, lass, if ye faint in the midst of it," he said, low-voiced.

“I’m not going to faint,” I said, made a bit testy by anxiety. “I just—I—I’m fine.”

His hand fell away, and after a long, searching look into my face, he nodded soberly and stepped back.

I wasn’t going to faint. Or at least I hoped not. But I was trapped there in that close, hot room, smelling blood and tar and the scent of myrrh in the laudanum, feeling Tench’s agony. And I could *not* do that. I couldn’t, I mustn’t.

Peggy hurried in, a maidservant behind her, several large knives clutched to her bosom.

“Will one of these do?” She laid them in a clinking heap at the foot of the bed, then stood back, gazing anxiously at her cousin’s pale, slack face.

“I’m sure one will.” I stirred the heap gingerly, extracting a couple of possibilities: a carving knife that looked sharp, and a big, heavy knife of the sort used for chopping vegetables. And, with a vivid recollection of what it felt like to sever tendons, I picked up a paring knife with a freshly sharpened, silvered edge.

“Do you butcher your own meat? If you have something like a bone saw …”

The servant went as pale as a black man reasonably can, and went out, presumably to acquire one.

“Boiling water?” I asked, brows raised.

“Chrissy is bringing it,” Peggy assured me. She licked her lips, uneasy. “Do you—mmm.” She broke off, narrowly avoiding saying what she so plainly thought: *“Do you know what you’re doing?”*

I did. That was the trouble. I knew much too much about what I was doing—from both sides.

“Everything will be fine,” I assured her, with a decent appearance of calm and confidence. “I see we have needles and thread. Would you take the biggest needle—a carpet needle, perhaps—and thread it for me, please? And then a couple of smaller ones, just in case.” Just in case I had time and opportunity to actually capture and ligate blood vessels. It was much more likely that the only choice I would have was cautery—a brutal searing of the fresh stump to stanch the bleeding, for Tench didn’t have enough blood left to be able to spare any of it.

I needed to be alone in my head, in a calm, clear place. The place from which I could see everything, sense the body under my hand in all its particularities—but not *be* that body.

I was about to disjoint Tench Bledsoe’s leg like a chicken’s. Throw away his bones and flesh. Sear the stump. And I felt his fear in the pit of my stomach.

Benedict Arnold had come in with an armload of firewood and a silver table knife in one hand—my cautery iron, if there wasn’t time to stitch. He set them down on the hearth, and the butler began to poke up the fire.

I closed my eyes for an instant, trying not to breathe through my nose, shutting out the candle glow. Denny Hunter had operated on me by candlelight; I remembered watching through a haze of eyelashes, unable to open my eyes more than a crack, as each of the six big candles was lit, the flames rising up pure and hot—and smelling the small iron heating in the brazier beside them.

A hand touched my waist, and, gulping air, I leaned blindly into Jamie.

“What’s wrong, *a nighean*?” he whispered to me.

“Laudanum,” I said, almost at random. “You don’t—you don’t lose consciousness altogether. It makes the pain go away—not stop, just seem not connected to you—but it’s *there*. And you … you know what's happening to you." I swallowed, forcing down bile.

I felt it. The hard probe jabbing its way into my side, startling. The remarkable sense of cold intrusion, mingled with incongruous faint warm echoes of internal movement, the forceful jabs of a child in the womb.

"You know what's happening," I repeated, opening my eyes. I found his, looking down at me with gentleness.

"I ken that, aye?" he whispered, and cupped my cheek with his four-fingered hand. "Come and tell me what ye need me to do, *mo ghràidh*."

* * *

THE MOMENTARY PANIC was subsiding; I forced it aside, knowing that even to think about it was to slide headfirst back into it. I laid a hand on Tench's injured leg, willing myself to feel it, find the truth of it.

The truth was all too obvious. The lower leg was a complete wreck, mechanically, and so compromised by septicemia that there was no chance of saving it. I was searching desperately for a way to save the knee; having a knee made a tremendous difference in the ability to walk, to manage. But I couldn't do it.

He was far gone from injury, blood loss, and shock; he was a stubborn man, but I could feel his life flickering in his flesh, dying away in the midst of infection, disruption, and pain. I could *not* ask his body to withstand the longer, painstaking surgery that would be necessary to amputate below the knee—even if I felt sure that such an amputation would be sufficient to forestall the advancing septicemia, and I didn't.

"I'm going to take his leg off above the knee," I said to Jamie. I thought I spoke calmly, but my voice sounded odd. "I need you to hold the leg for me and move it as I tell you. Governor"—I turned to Arnold, who stood with a reassuring arm about Peggy's Shippen's waist—"come and hold him down." Laudanum alone wasn't going to be enough.

To his credit, Arnold came instantly and laid a hand against Tench's slack cheek for a moment in reassurance before taking firm hold of his shoulders. His own face was calm, and I remembered the stories I'd heard of his campaigns into Canada: frostbite, injury, starvation … No, not a squeamish man, and I felt a small sense of reassurance from the presence of my two helpers.

No, three: Peggy Shippen came up beside me, pale to the lips and with her throat bobbing every few seconds as she swallowed—but jaw set with determination.

"Tell me what to do," she whispered, and clamped her mouth shut hard as she caught sight of the mangled leg.

"Try not to vomit, but if you must, turn away from the bed," I said. "Otherwise—stand there and hand me things as I ask."

There was no further time for thought or preparation. I tightened the tourniquet, grasped the sharpest knife, nodded to my helpers, and began.

A deep incision, fast, around and across the top of the leg, cutting hard down to expose the bone. An army surgeon could lop off a leg in less than two minutes. So could I, but it would be better if I could manage to cut flaps to cover the stump, could seal the major vessels.…

"Big needle," I said to Peggy, holding out my hand. Lacking a tenaculum to seize the large blood vessels that snapped back into the flesh when severed, I had to probe for them with the point of the needle and drag them out, anchor them into the raw, exposed flesh, and then ligate them as fast as I could, whipping thread round them with one of the smaller needles and tying it off. Better than cautery, if there was time …

Sweat was running into my eyes; I had to dash it away with my bared forearm; my hands were bloody to the wrist.

“Saw,” I said, and no one moved. Had I spoken aloud? *“Saw,”* I said, much louder, and Jamie’s head twisted toward the implements on the table. Leaning heavily on Tench’s leg with one hand, he stretched to grab the saw from the table with the other.

Where was Peggy? On the floor. I saw the bloom of her skirt from the corner of my eye and felt vaguely through the floorboards the steps of a servant coming to haul her out of the way.

I groped for another suture, blind, and the jar of brandy in which I’d stowed them tipped, spilling on the sheet and adding its sweet stickiness to the atmosphere. I heard Jamie gag, but he didn’t move; his fingers squeezed the thigh hard above the tourniquet. Tench would have bruises there, I thought idly. If he lived long enough for his capillaries to bleed.…

The saw had been made to disjoint hogs. Sturdy, not sharp, and not well kept—half the teeth were bent, and it jumped and skittered in my hand, grating over the bone. I clenched my teeth and pushed, my hand slipping on the handle, greased with blood and sweat.

Jamie made a deep, desperate noise and moved suddenly, taking the saw from my hand and nudging me aside. He gripped Tench’s knee and bore down on the saw, driving it into the bone by main force. Three, four, five dragging strokes, and the bone, three-quarters sawn through, made a cracking noise that jolted me into action.

"Stop," I said, and he did, white-faced and pouring sweat. "Lift his leg. Carefully." He did, and I made the cut from below, long, deep strokes of the knife deepening the incision at an angle to make the flap, joining the cut with the upper incision. The sheet was wet and dark with blood—but not too much. Either the tourniquet was holding, or the man had so little blood left to lose …

"Saw again," I said urgently, discarding the knife. "Hold steady! Both pieces." There was no more than a thin section of bone remaining; the spongy bone of the marrow showed, blood flowering slowly from the cut surface. I put no pressure on the saw; the last thing I wanted was to crack the bone in some awkward way. It wasn't working, though, and I looked back toward the line of tools, desperate to find something else.

"Rasp," Jamie said, his voice rough with strain. He nodded toward the table. "There."

I seized the rasp, a rat-tailed thing, drenched it with brandy, and, turning it sideways, filed through the last bit of bone, which parted gently. With a ragged edge, but intact, not shattered.

"Is he breathing?" I asked. I was having trouble breathing myself, and couldn't sense the patient's vital signs—save to notice his heart was beating, because blood was pulsing slightly out of the smaller vessels—but Arnold nodded, his head bowed, intent on Tench's face.

"He'll do," he said, his voice firm and loud, and I knew he was speaking as much to Tench as to me. Now I could feel the stir in the upper leg, a violent reflexive urge to move, and Jamie leaned hard on it. My fingers brushed the discarded lower leg, the flesh horribly flaccid and rubbery, and I snatched them back, wiping them convulsively on my apron.

I swiped the bloody apron then across my face and pushed back loosened bits of hair with the back of my hand. It was shaking; they both were.

What the bloody hell are you shaking now *for*? I thought irritably. But I was, and it took much longer than it should have to cauterize the last few small bleeders—adding the ghastly smell of roasting flesh to everything else in the room; I thought even General Arnold might throw up—stitch the flaps, bandage the wound, and, at last, loosen the tourniquet.

“All right,” I said, and straightened up. “Now …” But if I said anything else, I didn’t hear it. The room revolved slowly round me and dissolved into a flicker of black and white spots, and then everything went black.

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THE SECOND LAW OF THERMODYNAMICS

TENCH LIVED.

“I should have known you would,” I said to him. “If you were determined enough to survive all night in the river, plainly a mere amputation wouldn’t slow you down.”

He hadn’t enough strength to laugh—the journey by litter to Chestnut Street had left him white-faced and gasping—but he did twitch his mouth enough to qualify his expression as a smile.

“Oh … I’ll live,” he managed. “Wouldn’t … give ’em … the satis … faction … of dying.” Worn out by this, he closed his eyes, chest heaving. I wiped his face gently with my handkerchief, patted his shoulder, and left him to rest.

I had had the litter bearers take him upstairs, to what had been my bedroom, and I closed the door behind me now with a queerly mixed feeling of triumph and depression.

I had spent the morning with Mrs. Figg and the housemaid, Doreen, packing away what remained of Lord John’s furnishings—for many had already been shipped to

New York—and rearranging the house to serve as a temporary surgery. Even if we were to leave for North Carolina soon—and the sooner the better—I did have to have someplace to put Tench where he could be looked after in conditions approaching comfort and hygiene. And the patients I had been seeing at the printshop could certainly be taken care of more conveniently here.

At the same time … being here again brought back echoes of the numb despair I had lived with all those weeks of believing Jamie dead. I thought the bustle of work and the clean sweep of furnishings would perhaps obviate that distant sense of drowning, but at the moment it was an uneasy swirl around my ankles.

Mental oppression was not the only debilitating condition connected with the new situation. Leaving Number 17 to return to the Shippen house, I had been followed in the street by a gang of young men. Mostly boys, but some big fellows of sixteen or seventeen, big enough to make me uneasy with their glances.

Still more uneasy when they began to draw up close to me, taking a quick step to whisper, “King’s whore!” in my ear before falling back, or to try to tread on the hem of my skirt, sniggering.

I thought I had seen one or two of them in the mob when I’d brought Hal here. Perhaps they’d followed me then and, finding that I was married to Lord John, assumed I was a turncoat, a traitor to the Rebel cause. Or possibly, I thought, stiffening my spine, they were just troublemaking pipsqueaks.

I whirled round to face them, gripping my parasol. It wasn’t much of a weapon, but no physical weapon would have been of use against so many. Even a twelve-year-old boy was likely stronger than I was at the moment.

"What do you want?" I demanded, using the memory of my matron's voice, whipcrack and steel—or at least I hoped I could still do that.

Some of the little warts blinked and took a step back, but one of the bigger ones took a step toward me, grinning. It took all my control not to recoil.

"I don't know, hinnie," he said, looking me up and down with a lazy insolence. "What does a Loyalist *lady* have that we *might* want?"

"A swift poke in the eye is all I can offer you," I informed him crisply, with a meaningful pointing of my parasol. "Apparently I'm walking too slowly and blocking your progress, gentlemen. Do go on ahead of me." Holding his eye with a menacing stare, I stepped into the street and gestured with my parasol, indicating that they should pass on.

That made some of them giggle, but the big fellow flushed a nasty pink that made his adolescent pimples fluoresce. I stepped back farther into the street, in an imitation of politeness, but actually in hopes of attracting some attention.

I was lucky: a rag-and-bone cart was coming down the road, the horse's hooves clopping on the cobbles, and I moved still farther, blocking the way. The carter, aroused from semi-somnolence, half-stood, peering out from under his hat.

"What the devil are you idle buggers a-doing in the road? Get your fat arses out my way!" He raised his whip in a menacing fashion, and the boys, who had started to advance on me, quickly retreated.

The carter stood up all the way, took off his hat, and bowed to me.

“Good day, your ladyship; I hopes I sees you well. Can I offer you a ride, mayhap?” He was speaking in jest; I didn’t think he actually knew I had recently *been* a ladyship. He was certainly surprised when I swept up my skirts and mounted his cart, though.

“Home, James,” I said, furling my parasol, “and don’t spare the horses.”

The recollection made me smile a little, but the smile faded at the thought that the louts who had accosted me certainly lived somewhere nearby. I mightn’t be as lucky a second time. And at that thought, a wave of cold terror washed over me and I felt a band of soreness across my middle, the chafing and bruising from hours spent tied facedown across a horse’s back, being carried helpless to—

“Stop that!” I said sharply to myself. “Stop it at once. I won’t have it.” They were teenaged boys. I wasn’t afraid of … But the first man to rape me had been about sixteen; he’d been apologetic about it. I stepped into a narrow alley between two buildings and threw up.

I’d managed to function. I got back to the Shippens’ house and collected my things, then returned to the printshop to eat lunch and pack up the rest of my herbs and medicines; Fergus and Germain would bring them to Chestnut Street on their afternoon delivery round.

No one had molested me on the way back to Chestnut Street. I could have asked Jenny to come with me, but pride prevented me. I would *not* let simple-minded fear stop me doing what needed to be done.

But how long can you keep doing it? And what’s the point?

“There’s always a point,” I muttered. “It’s someone’s life. That’s a point.”

A life that could be snatched away, thrown away, frittered on a battlefield … How many men had died that way? And it didn’t stop, it didn’t get better.… This was an *early* war, for God’s sake. An endless chain of wars lay between my lives: the Revolution here, the Great War at the other end—and constant slaughter in between.

The summer was dying; the air was beginning to have a hint of freshness in the mornings, but in midafternoon it still hung thick and heavy. Too heavy to draw a full breath.

I stood for a moment outside Number 17, feeling unequal to going in and dealing with things. After a moment, I turned down the path that led round the side of the house, out to the tiny garden at the back, and sat down on the bench there, among the roses, feeling most unwell.

* * *

I DON’T KNOW how long I had been sitting there, head in my hands, listening to the loud buzzing of bees. But I heard footsteps coming down the path and managed to lift my head.

“Are ye all right, Sassenach?” It was Jamie, the large box of medicines and bandages in his arms. And from the look of alarm on his face, it was reasonably obvious that I didn’t look all right. I couldn’t muster the energy to try to look all right.

“I just—thought I’d sit down,” I said, flapping a hand helplessly.

“I’m glad ye did.” He set down the box on the yellowing grass and came to crouch in front of me, examining my face.

“What happened?”

“Nothing,” I said, and without warning began to cry. Or, rather, to leak. There was nothing of the sobbing, convulsive, racking nature of weeping; tears were just streaking down my cheeks without my approval.

Jamie nudged me over a little and sat down beside me, wrapping his arms around me. He was wearing his old kilt, and the smell of the dusty wool fabric, worn thin with age, made me utterly dissolve.

He tightened his grip and, sighing, pressed his cheek to my head and said small, tender things in Gaelic. And in a little time, the effort to understand them gave me a tenuous grip on myself. I drew a deep breath and he released me, though he kept an arm around me for support.

“Mo nighean donn,” he said softly, and smoothed hair out of my face. “Have ye got a hankie?”

That made me laugh. Or rather emit a sort of strangled giggle, but still …

“Yes. At least, I think so.” I groped in my bosom and withdrew a sturdy square of much-laundered linen, on which I blew my nose several times and then wiped my eyes, trying to think what on earth to offer as an explanation for my disordered state—of mind, as well as body. There wasn’t any good way to begin, so I just began.

“Do you ever—well, no. I know you do.”

“Likely,” he said, smiling a little. “What do I do?”

“See the … the void. The abyss.” Speaking the words reopened the rent in my soul, and the cold wind came through. A shudder ran through me, in spite of the warmth of the air and Jamie’s body. “I mean—it’s always there, always yawning at your feet, but most people manage to ignore it, not think about it. I’ve mostly been able to. You have to, to do medicine." I wiped my nose on my sleeve, having dropped my handkerchief. Jamie pulled a crumpled hankie out of his sleeve and handed it to me.

"Ye dinna mean only death?" he asked. "Because I've seen that often enough. It hasna really scairt me since I was ten or so, though." He glanced down at me and smiled. "And I doubt ye're afraid of it, either. I've seen ye face it down a thousand times and more."

"Facing something down doesn't mean you aren't afraid of it," I said dryly. "Usually quite the opposite. And I *know* you know that."

He made a small sound of agreement in his throat and hugged me gently. I would normally have found this comforting, and the fact that I didn't merely added to my sense of despair.

"It's—it's just … *nothing*. And so much endless nothing … It's as though nothing you do, nothing you are, can possibly matter, it's all just swallowed up …" I closed my eyes, but the darkness behind my eyelids frightened me and I opened them again. "I—" I raised a hand, then let it fall.

"I can't explain," I said, defeated. "It wasn't there—or I wasn't looking at it—after I was shot. It wasn't nearly dying that made me look in, see it yawning there. But being so … so bloody *frail!* Being so stinking *afraid*." I clenched my fists, seeing the knobby bones of my knuckles, the blue veins that stood out on the backs of my hands and curved down my wrists.

"Not death," I said at last, sniffing. "Futility. Uselessness. Bloody entropy. Death *matters*, at least sometimes."

"I ken that," Jamie said softly, and took my hands in his; they were big, and battered, scarred and maimed. "It's why a warrior doesna fear death so much. He has the hope—sometimes the certainty—that his death will matter."

"What happens to me between now and then doesna matter to anyone."

Those words swam out of nowhere and struck me in the pit of the stomach, so hard that I could barely breathe. He'd said that to me, from the bottom of despair, in the dungeon of Wentworth Prison, a lifetime ago. He'd bargained for my life then, with what he had—not his life, already forfeit, but his soul.

"It matters to me!" I'd said to him—and, against all odds, had ransomed that soul and brought him back.

And then it had come again, stark and dire necessity, and he'd laid down his life without hesitation for his men and for the child I carried. And that time I had been the one who sacrificed my soul. And it had mattered, for both of us.

It still mattered. And the shell of fear cracked like an egg and everything inside me poured out like blood and water mingled and I sobbed on his chest until there were no more tears and no more breath. I leaned against him, limp as a dishcloth, and watched the crescent moon begin to rise in the east.

"What did you say?" I said, rousing myself after a long while. I felt groggy and disoriented, but at peace.

"I asked, what's entropy?"

"Oh," I said, momentarily disconcerted. When had the concept of entropy been invented? Not yet, obviously. "It's, um … a lack of order, a lack of predictability, an inability for a system to do work."

"A system of what?"

"Well, there you have me," I admitted, sitting up and wiping my nose. "Just an ideal sort of system, with heat energy. The Second Law of Thermodynamics basically says that in an isolated system—one that's not getting energy from somewhere outside, I mean—entropy will always increase. I think it's just a scientific way of saying that everything is going to pot, all of the time."

He laughed, and despite my shattered state of mind, I did, too.

"Aye, well, far be it from me to argue wi' the Second Law of Thermodynamics," he said. "I think it's likely right. When did ye last eat, Sassenach?"

"I don't know," I said. "I'm not hungry." I didn't want to do anything but sit still beside him.

"D'ye see the sky?" he said, a little later. It was a pure deep violet at the horizon, fading into a blue-black immensity overhead, and the early stars burned like distant lamps.

"Hard to miss," I said.

"Aye." He sat with his head tilted back, looking up, and I admired the clean line of his long, straight nose, his soft wide mouth and long throat, as though seeing them for the first time.

"Is it not a void there?" he said quietly, still looking up. "And yet we're no afraid to look."

"There are lights," I said. "It makes a difference." My voice was hoarse, and I swallowed. "Though I suppose even the stars are burning out, according to the Second Law."

"Mmphm. Well, I suppose men can make all the laws they like," he said, "but God made hope. The stars willna burn out." He turned and, cupping my chin, kissed me gently. "And nor will we."

The noises of the city were muted now, though even darkness didn't stifle it entirely. I heard distant voices and the sound of a fiddle: a party, perhaps, from one of the houses down the street. And the bell of St. George's struck the hour with a small, flat *bong*! Nine o'clock. And all's well.

"I'd better go and see to my patient," I said.

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“ALAS, POOR YORICK!”

September 17, 1778
Middlebrook Encampment, New Jersey

TWO NIGHTS LATER, William stood at the edge of a dark wood, watching a lopsided rising moon shed its light over Middlebrook Encampment. His heart was thumping in his ears and he was breathing fast, his hands clenched around the handle of the spade he’d just stolen.

He’d been correct in his assessment of his welcome. He’d roughened his accent and, posing as a young immigrant from England interested in joining Washington’s troops, he’d been invited to join the Hamilton family for supper and given a bed for the night. The next day, he’d walked up to Middlebrook Encampment with the eldest Hamilton son, a man about his own age, where he’d been introduced to a Captain Ronson, one of the few officers still there.

One thing had led to another, and, by degrees, he had steered the conversation to the battle at Brandywine Creek and thence to British prisoners of war … and eventually he'd been taken to the small burying ground that lay before him now.

He'd been cautious about Ben, mentioning his name only casually among several others—family acquaintances, he'd said, that he'd heard had been at the battle. Some of the men he talked to hadn't recognized the name at all; two or three said, oh, yes, the English viscount, prisoner, billeted with a family called Tobermory, very civil fellow, shame that he'd died.…

And one man, a Lieutenant Corey, had said the same thing but his eyes had flickered slightly when he said it. William was wise enough to abandon the subject at once—but brought up Captain Benjamin Grey with someone else, much later and out of hearing of Corey.

"Is he buried nearby?" he'd asked, with a decent assumption of casual concern. "I know his family. I should like to be able to write to them, tell them I'd visited, you know.…"

It had taken some effort; the burying ground was well outside the encampment, up on a little wooded knoll, and while some of the graves were neatly ranked, others had been dug hastily, and many were unmarked. His companion was not busy, though, and of a helpful complexion; he went and unearthed the adjutant's ledger in which the dead were listed and, with some poking about, eventually led William to a flattened mound with a piece of lath stuck into it, on which GREY had been scratched with a nail.

"Lucky you came before another winter got at it," his companion had remarked, pulling the lath out and examining it critically. He shook his head, reached into his pocket, and, fetching out a lead pencil, reinforced the name with strong, scrubbing strokes before pushing it back into the earth. “Maybe that will last a bit, in case the family should want to set up a stone.”

“That’s … very good of you,” William had said, his throat tight. “I’ll tell his family of your kindness.” But he couldn’t weep for a man he theoretically hadn’t known and so swallowed his emotions and turned away, finding something commonplace to talk about as they made their way downhill.

He *had* wept in private, later, leaning against the comforting bulk of the mare, whom he’d named Miranda. She wasn’t sprightly, but she was a good horse, and merely whuffed a little and shifted her weight to give him support.

He’d been stubbornly insisting to himself that there must be some mistake. Ben *couldn’t* be dead. This belief had been sustained by Uncle Hal’s complete refusal to believe the news. And it was plausible; whatever Ezekiel Richardson was up to, he meant no good to the Greys.

But here was Ben’s grave, silent and muddy, speckled with the first yellowing leaves of September. And all around him lay the decaying bodies of other men, some prisoners, some Continental regulars, some militia … equal, and equally alone in death.

He’d eaten dinner that night with the Hamiltons again, replying automatically to their conversation but concerned with his own misery—and the thought of the much greater misery to come when he had to return to New York and tell his father and Uncle Hal.…

William had taken leave of the Hamiltons next morning, consigning the remains of the deer to them, and was followed down the narrow road by their good wishes and hopes that they would see him again with General Washington, when the troops came back to Middlebrook to winter. He'd made it several miles down the mountain, dragging his spirit behind him, when he stopped to take a piss.

He'd been hunting once with Ben, and they'd stopped like this; Ben had told him a particularly scabrous joke, and he'd laughed so much that he couldn't piss and Ben had pissed on his shoes, which made them both laugh harder, and …

"God damn it," he said aloud, and, buttoning his flies, stamped back to Miranda and swung up into the saddle. "I'm sorry, owd lass," he said, reining her head around to face uphill. "We're going back."

And here he was, wavering between the conviction that this was madness and the stark fact that there wasn't anything else he could do besides go back to New York, and he wouldn't do that until and unless he had no other choice. At least he might be able to salvage a lock of Ben's hair for Aunt Minnie.…

That thought made him want to throw up, but he touched the knife at his waist, took a firmer hold of the spade, and made his way gingerly in among the graves.

The moonlight was bright enough to find footing but not to read most of the markers. He had to kneel and run his thumb over several before feeling the letters G-R-E-Y.

"Right," he said out loud. His voice sounded small and choked, and he cleared his throat and spat—to the side, not on the grave. "Right," he said again, more forcefully, and, standing, took up the spade and drove it into the earth.

He'd started close to what he thought should be the head, but dug in from the side—the thought of driving his spade down into Ben's face made his flesh creep. The dirt was soft, damp with recent rain, but it was heavy work, and despite the coolness of the mountain night, he was soaked with sweat before he'd dug a quarter of an hour. If Ben had died of camp fever, as they said—and come to think, was that sensible? He hadn't been held in the stockade with the enlisted men. As an officer, he'd been billeted with the Tobermorys. How had he come to catch camp fever? But still, if he had, then others would have died at the same time; it was a badly infectious sort of plague, he knew that much.

But if *that* were true, then a number of other men would have been buried at the same time, and buried hastily, to prevent contagion from the bodies. (Oh, *there* was a good thought: he might be opening a grave full of teeming pestilence.…) Anyway, if that were the case, the graves would be shallow ones.

This one was. His spade struck something harder than dirt, and he stopped abruptly, muscles quivering. He swallowed and resumed shoveling, more cautiously.

The body had been wrapped in a shroud of coarse burlap. He couldn't see, but a ginger probing with his fingers told him as much. Squatting, he dug with his hands, unearthing what he hoped was the head. His stomach was clenched tight and he was breathing through his mouth. The stink was less than he'd expected, but still definitely there.

Oh, God. Ben … He'd been nursing the hope that the grave was empty.

Patting and probing, he made out the rounded shape and took a deep breath, feeling for the edge of the shroud. Had it been stitched? No, the edge was loose.

He'd thought of bringing a torch but had dismissed the idea, not wanting to risk detection. On the whole, he was glad he hadn't. He wiped dirt from his hands onto his breeches and peeled the burlap gently back, grimacing as it stuck to the skin beneath. It came loose with a grisly, rasping sound, and he nearly dropped it and ran. But he steeled himself and touched the dead man's face.

It wasn't as awful as he'd thought it might be; the body seemed largely still intact. *How long will a man lie i' the earth ere he rot?* What had the gravedigger said in reply—nine years? Well, then … He'd seen *Hamlet* with Ben and Adam, in London.…

William fought back an insane urge to laugh and felt gently over the dead features. The nose was broad and stubby, not Ben's sharp beak—but no doubt the process of decay … He slid his fingers over the temple, thinking to see if a presentable lock of hair might—and stopped dead, not breathing.

The corpse was missing an ear. Bloody hell, it was missing *both* ears. He felt again, both sides, unable to believe it. But it was true—and the ears had been missing for some time; even with the nasty slack feel of the decaying flesh, the ridges of scar tissue were distinct. A thief.

William sat back on his heels and tilted up his head, letting out a huge breath. He felt dizzy, and the stars made little pinwheels in his vision.

"Jesus," he breathed, flooded with relief, gratitude, and creeping horror. "Oh, Jesus, thank you! And, oh, Christ," he added, looking down at the invisible stranger in Ben's grave, "*now* what?"

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A CRACKLING OF THORNS

September 18, 1778
Philadelphia

I WAS HAVING A pleasantly incoherent dream involving autumn leaves and fireflies. The fireflies were red, rather than green, and were floating down through the trees like live sparks, and where they brushed against the yellow leaves, the edges browned and curled as the leaves caught fire. Smoke curled upward through the trees, lazy against an evening sky, pungent as tobacco, and I was walking underneath, smoking a cigarette with Frank …

I woke muzzily, thinking how nice it was to see Frank again, followed abruptly by *Dreams don't smell, do they*? along with *I don't smoke*, and then—

"Jesus! We're on fire!" I sat up, panicked and wriggling to get out of the sheets. Smoke was already thick in the loft, drifting layers above my head, and Jamie was coughing, grabbing my arm and dragging me free before I could locate all my limbs.

“Quick,” he said, hoarse as a crow. “Dinna wait to dress, come down!”

I didn’t dress, but did seize my shift and pulled it over my head as I crawled toward the edge of the loft. Jamie had the ladder over the edge as I reached it and was already started down, shouting in a loud, cracked voice.

I could hear the fire. It rattled and crackled, and the ashy smell of burning paper and the stink of singed buckram was thick in the air.

“In the shop,” I gasped, catching up with Jamie in the kitchen. “It’s in the shop. The Bibles are burning—the typefoundry …”

“Get the weans.” He ran across the kitchen, shirttails flying, and slammed shut the door that led into the printshop, from which smoke was fuming in clouds. I ran the other way, into the room that served Fergus and Marsali as living and sleeping quarters, with a smaller loft above, where the children and Jenny slept.

That door was shut, thank God. The smoke hadn’t yet reached them. I flung it open, shouting, “Fire! Fire! Get up, get up!” and ran for the ladder to the loft, hearing Fergus swear behind me in French and Marsali’s confused “What? *WHAT?”*

My hands were sweating and slipped on the smooth wooden rails of the ladder.

“Jenny! Germain!” I bellowed—or tried to. Smoke was drifting here, too, high up under the roof, and I was coughing, my eyes and nose running.

“Jo-hoan!”

There was one small bedstead, two little humps under the bedclothes. I ran to the bed, flinging back the covers. Joan and Félicité were curled together, Félicité's nightdress rucked up to show her little bottom. I grabbed her by the shoulder, shaking her and trying to speak calmly.

"Girls, girls! You have to get up. Right now. Do you hear me, Joan? Wake up!"

Joan's eyelids were fluttering, and she was coughing, turning her head to and fro to escape the smoke, eyes stubbornly closed. Félicité normally slept like the dead, and tonight was no exception; her head wobbled like her rag doll's when I shook her.

"What? What is it?" Jenny was struggling out of the quilts on her pallet in the corner.

"We're on fire!" I shouted. "Hurry—help me!"

I heard a cracking noise from the kitchen and a scream from Marsali. I didn't know what had happened, but in desperation I grabbed Félicité bodily out of bed, still shouting at Joan to wake up, for God's sake!

I felt the vibration of the ladder against the loft and Jamie was there, snatching Joan up out of the bed.

"The lads, where are the lads?" he asked urgently. In the frantic need to wake the girls, I'd forgotten Germain and Henri-Christian. I looked round in an urgent daze; there was a thin mattress on the floor, flattened and dented by bodies, but no sign of the boys.

"Germain! Joan! Henri-Christian!" Marsali's face popped up over the edge of the loft, pale with fear. "Félicité!" In an instant, she was with me, taking Félicité from me. The little girl was coughing and whining, starting to cry.

"It's all right, *a nighean*, it's all right; you're safe, aye?" Marsali was patting her back, coughing herself as the smoke thickened. “Where are the boys?”

Jamie had shoved Jenny onto the ladder and was following her down, Joan draped over his shoulder, small pink feet kicking urgently.

“I’ll find them!” I said, pushing Marsali toward the ladder. “Take Félicité down!”

Something in the shop exploded with a loud *whoosh*—probably a barrel of ink, made with varnish and lampblack. Marsali gasped, clutched Félicité hard, and scuttled for the ladder. I began rootling madly through the bits of furniture and boxes and bags in the loft, calling the boys’ names between fits of coughing.

The smoke was much worse now; I could barely see. I was kicking my way through blankets, a chamber pot—unfortunately full—and other things, but there was no sign of Henri-Christian or Germain. Even if they’d been overcome by the smoke, surely—

“Sassenach!” Jamie was suddenly there by my elbow. “Come down, come down! The fire’s in the wall; the loft will come down any minute!”

“But—”

He didn’t wait for argument, but picked me up bodily and swung me down onto the ladder. I missed my footing and slid the last few feet, knees buckling as I hit the floor. The wall in front of me was alight, plaster shattered and the fire moving, glowing along the edges of the laths. Jamie landed beside me with a thud that shook the floor, seized my arm, and we ran for the kitchen.

I heard a rending crack and then a crash that seemed to happen in slow motion, as the supports to the children’s loft gave way and the timbers came down.

“Germain,” I gasped. “Henri—”

"Not here," Jamie said, and shook with coughing. "Out, we must get out." The air in the kitchen was a little clearer, but not by much. It was hot enough to sear the hairs inside my nose. Eyes streaming, we made our way across the room to the back door, now standing open, and more or less fell through into the alleyway behind.

Marsali and Jenny were crouched in the privy yard of the house on the other side of the alley, both girls now awake and clinging to them, shrieking.

"Where's Fergus?" Jamie shouted, pushing me toward Marsali. She pointed toward the burning building, screaming something that I couldn't hear over the rumble of the fire. Then there was a second's respite in the noise, and a long, panicked bray split the night air.

"Clarence!" Jamie spun on his heel and ran for the tiny stable, little more than a shed next to the main building. I ran after him, thinking that perhaps the boys had taken refuge there. My bare feet slid on the cobbles, stubbing my toes, but I scarcely noticed, my heart pounding in my ears with fear, lungs laboring to find fresh air.

"Germain!" I heard the shout, faint above the fire, and turned to see a shadow moving just beyond the open door into the kitchen. Smoke was pouring from the door in a thick white column, glowing from the fire beyond. I took a deep gulp of air and dived into the smoke, flailing my arms in a vain effort to dispel enough to see.

One of my flailing arms struck something solid, though, and Fergus collapsed into me, so far overcome with heat and smoke that he couldn't stand. I grabbed him under the arms and dragged him toward the door with that sort of strength that comes from the absolute determination not to die.

We fell out into the alley, and there were shouts from what proved to be neighbors rushing to help. Hands gripped me and pulled me away. I could hear Fergus, gasping and sobbing, struggling against the helpful hands, desperately croaking his sons' names.

Through streaming eyes, I saw the stable roof alight and Jamie leading Clarence out, the torn-off sleeve of his shirt wrapped round the mule's eyes.

And then I heard a shriek that rose above all the noise, fire, neighbors, Clarence's bray. Marsali stood up straight, eyes and mouth round with horror, looking up.

The loading door that led to the kitchen loft was open, smoke and sparks fuming out, and in the midst of it was Germain, dragging Henri-Christian by the hand.

He shouted something, but no one could hear above the racket. There was a muffled *boom* from the loft as another cask went, and the fire blazed up suddenly as the stacks of paper caught, silhouetting the boys in the doorway.

"Jump! Jump!" Jamie was shouting, and everyone else in the alley was shouting it, too, people shoving one another in the effort to get underneath, to help. Germain looked wildly to and fro; Henri-Christian was panicked, struggling to go back into the loft. The rope used to raise and lower loads to a waiting wagon was there, almost within reach. Germain saw it and let go of Henri-Christian for an instant to reach for it, hanging on to the edge of the doorframe.

He got it, and a gasp went through the crowd. His fair hair was standing on end in the wind from the fire, surrounding his head like flames, and for an instant I thought it *was* on fire.

Henri-Christian, dizzy from the smoke, had fallen against the doorframe and was clinging to it. He was too frightened to move; I could see him shaking his head as Germain pulled at him.

"Throw him, Germain! Throw your brother!" Fergus was shouting as loudly as he could, his voice cracking with the strain, and several other voices joined in. "Throw him!"

I saw Germain's jaw set hard, and he yanked Henri-Christian loose, picked him up, and clutched him with one arm, wrapping the rope around the other.

"No!" Jamie bellowed, seeing it. "Germain, *don't*!" But Germain bent his head over his brother's, and I thought I saw his lips move, saying, *"Hold on tight!"* And then he stepped out into the air, both hands clinging to the rope, Henri-Christian's stocky legs wrapped round his ribs.

It happened instantly and yet so slowly. Henri-Christian's short legs lost their grip. Germain's grab failed, for the little boy was already falling, arms outstretched, in a half somersault through the smoky air.

He fell straight through the sea of upraised hands, and the sound as his head struck the cobbles was the sound of the end of the world.

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WALKING ON COALS

September 19, 1778
Philadelphia

EVEN WHEN THE world ends, things bloody go on *happening*. You just don't know what to do about them.

Everything smelled of smoke and burning. The air, my hair, Jamie's skin, the ill-fitting gown someone had given me … Even food tasted of ashes. But, then, it would, wouldn't it? I reflected. It didn't matter; I couldn't eat more than the mouthful or two required for politeness.

No one had slept. The printshop had burned to the ground in the small hours; there was nothing to be done but to beat off flying embers and stamp out sparks in an effort to preserve the nearby houses. By a mercy, it hadn't been a windy night.

The neighbors had given us shelter, clothes, food, and abundant sympathy. None of it seemed real, and I hoped in a vague sort of way that this state of things would continue, even though I knew it couldn't.

What did seem real, though, was the small collection of vivid images that had been literally seared on my mind during the night. Henri-Christian's bare feet, dirty-soled and large in comparison with his legs, sticking out from under his mother's skirt as she cradled him, rocking to and fro, wrapped in a grief too dense for any sound to escape it. Germain, letting go the rope in a frantic attempt to fly after his brother, dropping like a rock into Fergus's arms. Fergus clutching Germain so hard against him that it must have bruised them both, his hook gleaming against Germain's soot-streaked back.

The boys had been sleeping on the roof. There was a small trapdoor in the ceiling of the bedroom loft, which no one had remembered in the panic of the fire.

When Germain began finally to talk, sometime toward dawn, he said they had gone out to be cool and to look at the stars. They had fallen asleep and not waked until the slates they lay on began to feel hot—and by then smoke was rolling up through the cracks of the trapdoor. They'd run across the roof to the other side, where a similar trapdoor let them into the printing loft. Half the loft had fallen away and the rest was on fire, but they'd made it through the smoke and rubble to the loading door.

"Why?" he'd cried, passed from one set of arms to another, ignoring all futile words of would-be comfort. "Why didn't I hold on to him?! He was too little; he couldn't hold on."

Only his mother hadn't embraced him. She held Henri-Christian and wouldn't let go until daylight came and sheer exhaustion loosened her grasp. Fergus and Jamie had eased the small, chunky body from her grip and taken him away to be washed and made decent for the long business of being dead. Then Marsali had come to find her eldest son and touched him gently in his deadened sleep, sorrowing.

The Reverend Figg had once more come to our aid, a small neat figure in his black suit and high white stock, offering his church in which to hold the wake.

I was sitting in the church now, in midafternoon, alone, on a bench with my back against a wall, smelling smoke and trembling intermittently with echoes of flame and loss.

Marsali was asleep in a neighbor's bed. I had tucked her in, her daughters curled up on either side of her, Félicité sucking her thumb, round black eyes watchful as those of her rag doll, fortuitously saved from the flames. So few things had survived. I remembered the constant pang of loss after the Big House had burned, reaching for something and realizing that it wasn't there.

Jenny, worn to the gray-white color of weathered bone, had gone to lie down at the Figgs' house, her rosary in her hands, the wooden beads sliding smoothly through her fingers as she walked, her lips moving silently; I doubted that she would stop praying, even in her sleep.

People came and went, bringing things. Tables, extra benches, platters of food. Late-summer flowers, roses and jasmine and early blue asters, and for the first time, tears ran down my cheeks at this scented remembrance of the wedding held here so little time before. I pressed a stranger's handkerchief to my face, though, not wanting anyone to see and feel that they must try to comfort me.

The bench beside me creaked and gave, and I peeped over the edge of my handkerchief to see Jamie beside me, wearing a worn suit that plainly belonged to a chairman—it had a band round the coat sleeve reading “82”—and with his face washed but the whorls of his ears still grimed with soot. He took my hand and held it tight, and I saw the blisters on his fingers, some fresh, some burst and shredded from the efforts to save what could be saved from the fire.

He looked to the front of the church, toward what couldn’t be saved, then sighed and looked down to our clasped hands.

“All right, lass?” His voice was hoarse, his throat raw and soot-choked as my own.

“Yes,” I said. “Have you had anything to eat?” I already knew he hadn’t slept.

He shook his head and leaned back against the wall, closing his eyes, and I felt the relaxation of his body into momentary exhaustion. There were things still to be done, but just for a moment … I wanted to dress his hands, but there was nothing to dress them with. I lifted the hand he held and kissed his knuckles.

“What do ye think it’s like when ye die?” he asked suddenly, opening his eyes and looking down at me. His eyes were red as an emery bag.

“I can’t say I’ve really thought about it,” I replied, taken aback. “Why?”

He rubbed two fingers slowly between his brows; I thought from the look of him that his head must ache.

“I only wondered if it’s like this.” He made a brief gesture, encompassing the half-empty room, the well-wishers coming and going in whispers, the mourners sitting, blank-faced and sagging like bags of rubbish, stirring—with a visible effort—only when spoken to. “If ye dinna ken what to do, and ye dinna much want to do anything. Or is it like going to sleep and wakin' up in a new, fresh place and wanting to go out at once and see what it's like?"

"According to Father O'Neill, innocents are just in the presence of God immediately. No limbo, no purgatory. Assuming they were properly baptized," I added. Henri-Christian had indeed been baptized, and as he was not yet seven, the Church held that he lacked sufficient sense of reason to commit sins. Ergo …

"I've known people in their fifties who had less sense than Henri-Christian," I said, wiping my nose for the thousandth time. My nostrils were as raw as my eyelids.

"Aye, but they've more capacity for causing harm wi' their foolishness." A faint smile touched his mouth. "I thought I was dead on Culloden field; did I ever tell ye that?"

"I don't think you did. Under the circumstances, I suppose it would have been a reasonable assumption, though—were you knocked out?"

He nodded, eyes fixed on the floorboards.

"Aye. If I'd been able to look about, I should have known better, but my eyes were sealed shut wi' the blood. It was all red and dim, so I supposed I was in purgatory and would just have to wait 'til someone came round to chastise me. After a bit, I supposed boredom was meant to be part of the punishment." He glanced at the tiny coffin on its bench at the front of the room. Germain sat by it, one hand on its lid. He hadn't moved at all in the last half hour.

"I've never seen Henri-Christian bored," I said quietly, after a moment. "Not once."

"No," Jamie said softly, and took my hand. "I dinna suppose he ever will be."

Gaelic wakes have their own rhythm. Fergus and Marsali came in quietly an hour or so later and sat together at first, holding hands near the coffin, but as more people came, the men gradually surrounded Fergus, absorbing him, much as a gang of phagocytes surround a microbe, carrying it along with them, and after a time, as happens normally in such situations, half the men were at one side of the room, talking quietly, and the others outside, unable to bear close quarters and exigent emotion but wanting to lend their presence and sympathy.

The women clustered, first near Marsali, hugging and weeping, then gathering in small clumps with their friends, drifting back to the tables to rearrange things or put out more bread or cakes. Josiah Prentice came with his fiddle, but left it in its case for the time being. Tobacco smoke from the pipes of the men outside drifted through the church in soft blue clouds. It tickled uneasily at the back of my nose, too reminiscent of the fire for comfort.

Jamie left me with a brief squeeze of the hand and went to speak to Ian. I saw them both look at Germain; Ian nodded and moved quietly to his nephew, putting both hands on his shoulders. Rachel hovered nearby, dark eyes watchful.

The bench beside me creaked, and Jenny sat down. Wordless, she put her arm about my shoulder, and equally wordless, I bent my head to hers and we wept for a bit—not only for Henri-Christian but for the babies we each had lost, my stillborn Faith, her infant Caitlin. And for Marsali, now joining us in this sorrowful kinship.

The night drew in, beer and ale were poured, some stronger drink was brought out, and the somber mood of the gathering lifted a little. Still, it was the wake of a child and a life cut short; there couldn't be the sense of shared memory and laughter that there might be for a man who had lived a full life and whose friends had come to share in his death.

Josiah Prentice played his fiddle, but quietly, mixing laments with peaceful tunes and the occasional hymn; there wouldn't be much singing tonight. I wished suddenly and fiercely that Roger were here. He would perhaps have known what to say, in a situation where there was nothing one could say. And even with his ruined voice, he would have known a song to sing, a prayer to offer.

Father O'Neill from St. George's Church had come, tactfully overlooking the unorthodox Quaker marriage of a month before, and stood talking near the door with Fergus and a few other men.

"Poor wee child," Jenny said, her voice roughened by tears but steady now. She was holding my hand, and I hers, and she was looking not at the coffin but at Fergus. "His bairns mean everything to him—and especially our wee man." Her lips trembled, but she pressed them together and straightened her back.

"D'ye think Marsali's breedin'?" she said, very softly, looking at Marsali, with Joan and Félicité clinging to her skirts, Joan's head in her lap. Her mother's hand rested on her hair, gently smoothing it.

"I do," I said, as softly.

She nodded, and her hand twitched, half hidden in the folds of her skirt, making the horns against evil.

More people had come. The Congress was meeting in Philadelphia, and several delegates who did business with Fergus had come. Jonas Phillips and Samuel Adams were both there, chatting by the refreshments table. In a different frame of mind, I might have marveled at being in the same room with two signers of the Declaration of Independence, but, after all, they were only men—though I took it kindly that they'd come.

I looked for Germain every few minutes; now he was standing by the tables with Ian, drinking something from a cup. I blinked and looked again.

"Jesus H— I mean, good Lord. Ian's giving Germain cherry bounce!"

Jenny glanced at Germain's bright red lips, and a quiver of amusement ran through her.

"Canna think of anything better for the lad just now, can you?"

"Well … no." I stood up, shaking out my skirts. "D'you want some?"

"I do," she said, and got up with alacrity. "And maybe a wee bite, too. It'll be a long night; we'll need a bit to sustain us, aye?"

It felt better to be up and moving. The fog of grief still numbed sensation, and I didn't look forward to its passing, but at the same time … I realized that I *was* hungry now.

The feeling in the room shifted gradually, from the first impact of shock and sorrow, to comforting support for the family, and now to more-general talk. Which was, I realized uneasily, beginning to focus on speculation as to what—or who—had caused the fire.

In the shock and grief of the event, none of us had spoken of it, but even through that numbing fog, the insidious question had hovered like a bat overhead: Why? How? And … who?

If anyone. Fire was a common plague in a time when every household had open hearths, and a printshop, with its type forge and its stock of inflammables, was still more vulnerable to simple accident. An open window, a stray breeze, loose papers blowing … a spitting ember from a badly smoored fire catching hold …

And yet.

The memory of the anonymous letter floated queasily on the surface of my mind. *Your house is on fire and your children are gone …*

And the young men who had followed me from Chestnut Street, their stealthy plucking and whispered taunts. God, could I have brought their enmity to Fergus's door?

Jamie had come to stand by me again, steady and solid as a rock, and handed me a fresh cup of cherry bounce. It was like drinking very strong cough syrup, but it was undeniably bracing. Up to the point where you fell down insensible, at least. I saw that Germain had slid slowly down the wall; Rachel knelt next to him and eased him to the ground, then folded her shawl and put it under his head.

The cherry bounce was taking the place of the fog; I thought drunkenness was probably an improvement, on the whole.

"Mrs. Fraser?" A strange voice on my left drew my attention from bemused contemplation of the dark-red depths of my cup. A young man in shabby clothes was standing at my elbow, a small package in his hand.

"She is," Jamie said, giving the young man a searching look. "Are ye needing a physician? Because—"

"Oh, no, sir," the young man assured him, obsequious. "I was told to give this into Mrs. Fraser's hand, that's all." He handed it to me and, with a short bow, turned and left.

Puzzled, and slow with fatigue, grief, and cherry bounce, I fumbled with the string, then gave up and handed the package to Jamie, who reached for his knife, failed to find it—for it had, of course, perished in the fire—and, with a flicker of annoyance, simply broke the string. The wrapping fell open to reveal a small leather purse and a note, folded but unsealed.

I blinked and squinted for a moment, then dipped a hand into my pocket. By a miracle, my spectacles had been downstairs, left behind in the kitchen when I took them off while chopping onions, and Jamie had retrieved them in his hurried foray into the burning house. The stylish handwriting sprang into reassuring clarity.

> *Mrs. Fraser,*
>
> *I cannot think my Presence would be welcome and I would not intrude on private Grief. I ask nothing, neither Acknowledgment nor Obligation. I do ask that you would allow me to help in the only way that I can and that you will not reveal the Source of this Assistance to the younger Mr. Fraser. I trust your Discretion, as to the Elder.*

It was signed simply, *P. Wainwright (Beauchamp)*.

I raised my brows at Jamie and passed him the note. He read it, lips pressed tight together, but glanced at Marsali and the girls, now clustered with Jenny, talking to Mrs. Phillips, all of them crying quietly. Then across the room, to Fergus, flanked by Ian and Rachel. He grimaced very briefly, but his features set in resignation. There was a family to provide for; he couldn't, for the moment, afford pride.

"Well, it probably wasn't him, then," I said, with a sigh, and tucked the little purse into the pocket under my skirt. Numbed as I was, I still felt a vague sense of relief at that. Whatever he might be, might have done, or might intend, I still rather liked the erstwhile Monsieur Beauchamp.

I had no time to consider Percy further, though, for at this point there was a stir among the people near the door, and, looking to see what had caused it, I saw George Sorrel come in.

It was apparent at a glance that the tavern owner had been availing himself of his own wares—possibly as a means of getting up his courage, for he stood swaying slightly, fists clenched at his sides, looking slowly round the room, belligerently meeting the stares that greeted him.

Jamie said something very unsuitable in a house of God under his breath in Gaelic, and started toward the door. Before he could reach it, though, Fergus had turned to see the cause of the stir and had spotted Sorrel.

Fergus was no more sober than Sorrel but was much more upset. He stiffened for an instant, but then pulled himself free of the grasping hands of his supporters and headed for Sorrel without a word, red-eyed as a hunting ferret and just as dangerous.

He hit Sorrel with his fist as the man was opening his mouth. Unsteady as they were, both of them staggered from the impact, and men rushed in to separate them. Jamie reached Sorrel and, grabbing his arm, jerked him out of the scrum.

“I suggest that ye leave, sir,” he said, politely, under the circumstances, and turned the man firmly toward the door.

“Don’t,” Fergus said. He was breathing like a train, sweat pouring down his chalk-white face. “Don’t go. Stay—and tell me why. Why have you come here? How dare you come here?” This last was uttered in a cracked shout that made Sorrel blink and take a step backward. He shook his head doggedly, though, and drew himself up.

"I came to—to offer Mrs. Fraser con-condol—to say I was sorry about her son," he said sullenly. "And you ain't a-going to stop me, either, you farting French son of a bitch!"

"You offer my wife nothing," Fergus said, shaking with fury. "Nothing, do you hear? Who is to say you did not set the fire yourself? To kill me, to seize upon my wife? *Salaud!*"

I would have bet money that Sorrel didn't know what a *salaud* was, but it didn't matter; he went the color of beetroot and lunged at Fergus. He didn't reach him, as Jamie managed to grab his collar, but there was a sound of rending cloth and Sorrel jerked to a stop, staggering.

There was a rumble through the room, men and women gathering in a thundercloud of disapproval. I could see Jamie drawing himself up and in, settling himself to haul Sorrel out before someone besides Fergus took a swing at him. A certain shuffling readiness suggested that a number of men had it in mind.

And then Rachel walked between the two men. She was very pale, though a red spot burned in each cheek, and her hands were clenched in the fabric of her skirt.

"Does thee indeed come to offer comfort, friend?" she said to Sorrel, in a voice that shook only a little. "For if that is so, thee ought to offer it to all of those who are met here for the sake of the child. Particularly to his father."

She turned toward Fergus, reaching to put a careful hand on his sleeve.

"Thee will not see thy wife distressed further, I know," she said quietly. "Will thee not go to her now? For while she is grateful for the presence of so many kind folk, it is only thee she wants."

Fergus's face worked, anguish and fury warring with confusion. Seeing him unable to decide what to do or how to do it, Rachel moved closer and took his arm, tucking her hand into the curve of his elbow, and compelled him to turn and to walk with her, the crowd parting in front of them. I saw the curve of Marsali's blond head as she raised it slowly, her face changing as she watched Fergus come.

Jamie took a deep breath and released Sorrel.

"Well?" he said quietly. "Stay or go. As ye will."

Sorrel was still panting a little but had himself in hand now. He nodded jerkily, drew himself up, and straightened his torn coat. Then he walked through the silent crowd, head up, to give his sympathies to the bereaved.

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HALLOWED GROUND

IN SPITE OF THE neighbors' generosity, there was very little to pack. Nor was there any reason to linger in Philadelphia. Our life there was ended.

There was—there always is—considerable speculation as to the cause of the fire. But after the outburst at the wake, a sense of flat finality had settled over all of us. The neighbors would continue to talk, but among the family there was an unspoken agreement that it made little difference whether the fire had been pure accident or someone's ill design. Nothing would bring Henri-Christian back. Nothing else mattered.

Jamie had taken Fergus to make the arrangements for our travel: not because he needed assistance but as a way of keeping Fergus moving, lest he simply sit down by Henri-Christian's small coffin and never rise again.

Things were both easier and harder for Marsali. She had children to care for, children who needed her badly.

Rachel and I packed what there was to pack, bought food for the journey, and dealt with the final details of leaving. I packed the bits and bobs of my surgery and, with mutual tears and embraces, gave the keys of Number 17 Chestnut Street to Mrs. Figg.

And in the early afternoon of the day following the wake, we borrowed a small cart, hitched up Clarence, and followed Henri-Christian to his grave.

There hadn't been any discussion as to the burial. After the wake, Ian had simply stood up and said, "I know where he must rest."

It was a long way, perhaps two hours' walk outside the city. The heat had broken at last, though, and the air moved gently over us, with the first cool touch of autumn. There was no ceremony to our procession; no Gaelic laments for a life cut short, no professional wailing. Only a small family, walking together for the last time.

We left the road at Ian's signal. Jamie unhitched Clarence and hobbled him to graze, then he and Fergus lifted the coffin and followed Ian into the whisper of the trees, along a small and hidden path made by the hooves of deer, and so upward to a small clearing in the forest.

There were two large cairns there, knee-high. And a smaller one, at the edge of the clearing, under the branches of a red cedar. A flat stone lay against it, the word ROLLO scratched into it.

Fergus and Jamie set down the little coffin, gently. Joanie and Félicité had stopped crying during the long walk, but seeing it there, so small and forlorn, facing the thought of walking away … they began to weep silently, clinging hard to each other, and at the sight of them, grief rose in me like a fountain.

Germain was holding hard to his mother's hand, mute and jaw-set, tearless. Not seeking support, giving it, though the agony showed clear in his eyes as they rested on his brother's coffin.

Ian touched Marsali's arm gently.

"This place is hallowed by my sweat and my tears, cousin," he said softly. "Let us hallow it also by our blood and let our wee lad rest here safe in his family. If he canna go with us, we will abide with him."

He took the *sgian dubh* from his stocking and drew it across his wrist, lightly, then held his arm above Henri-Christian's coffin, letting a few drops fall on the wood. I could hear the sound of it, like the beginning of rain.

Marsali drew a shattered breath, stood straight, and took the knife from his hand.

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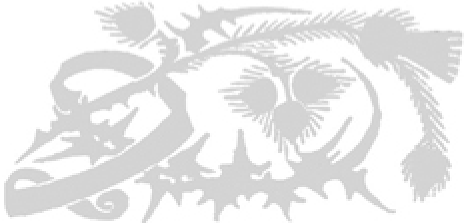
PART EIGHT



Search and Rescue

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QUOD SCRIPSI, SCRIPSI

From Mrs. Abigail Bell, Savannah, the Royal Colony of Georgia
To Mr. James Fraser, Philadelphia, Colony of Pennsylvania

Dear Mr. Fraser,

I write in response to yours of the 17th inst., apprising my Husband of your return to America, which was forwarded to him by a Friend in Wilmington.

As you will see from the Direction of this Letter, we have removed from Wilmington to Savannah, the political Climate of North Carolina having become increasingly dangerous to Loyalists, particularly to my Husband, given his History and Profession.

I wish to assure you that your Press has been preserved in excellent condition but is not presently in use. My husband contracted a serious Ague soon after our arrival here, and it became evident that his Illness was of the *periodic, or relapsing, Kind. He does somewhat better these days but is unable to sustain the difficult Labor of the printing Trade. (I will add, should you think of establishing a Business here, that while the Politics of the Place are a great deal more congenial to those of the Loyalist Persuasion than those of the northern Colonies, a Printer is exposed to much Unpleasantness, whatever his personal Beliefs.)*

Your Press is presently stored in the Barn of a Farmer named Simpson, who lives a short Distance outside the City. I have seen it and assured myself that the Instrument is Clean, Dry (it is packed in Straw), and sheltered from the Weather. Please apprise me of your Desires, should you wish me to sell the Press and forward the Money to you, or should you wish to come and fetch it.

We are most appreciative of your Help and Kindness, and the Girls pray for you and your Family every Day.

Yours most Sincerely,
Abigail Bell

William Ransom, to His Grace Harold, Duke of Pardloe
September 24, 1778

Dear Uncle Hal,

You will be gratified to know that your paternal Instinct was correct. I am very pleased to tell you that Ben probably isn't dead.

On the other hand, I haven't the slightest Idea where the devil he is or why he's there.

I was shown a Grave at Middlebrook Encampment in New Jersey, purported to be Ben's, but the Body therein is not Ben. (It's probably better if you don't know how that bit of information was ascertained.)

Clearly someone in the Continental army must know something of his whereabouts, but most of Washington's troops who were at the Encampment when he was captured have gone. There is one Man who might possibly yield some Information, but beyond that, the only possible Connection would seem to be the Captain with whom we are acquainted.

I propose therefore to hunt the Gentleman in question and extract what Information he may possess when I find him.

Your most obedient nephew,
William

Lord John Grey, to Harold, Duke of Pardloe
Charleston, South Carolina
September 28, 1778

Dear Hal,

We arrived in Charleston by ship two days ago, having encountered a Storm off the Chesapeake that blew us out to Sea, delaying us for several days. I'm sure you will not be surprised in the least to learn that Dottie is a much better Sailor than I am.

She also shows Promise as an inquiry Agent. First thing this morning, she discovered the Whereabouts of

Amaranthus Cowden by the simple Expedient of stopping a well-dressed Lady on the Street, admiring her Gown, and then asking for the names of the better Dressmakers in the City, on the Assumption (as she later explained to me) that Ben would not have married either a plain Woman or one with no Interest in Fashion.

The third Shop we visited did indeed boast that Miss Cowden (she was calling herself Mrs. Grey, they said, but they knew her Maiden Name, as she was residing with an Aunt named Cowden) was a Customer, and they were able to describe her to me as a slight young Woman of middle Height, with an excellent Complexion, large brown Eyes, and abundant Hair of a dark-blond Hue. They could not, however, give me her Address, as the Lady had recently decamped to winter with Friends in Savannah. (The Aunt has annoyingly died, I find.)

Interestingly, she styles herself as a Widow, so apparently she was informed—and by whom? I should like to know—of Ben's presumed Death, sometime after the Date of her Letter to you, as otherwise she would certainly have mentioned it.

I also find it interesting that she should be able to afford the Services of Madame Eulalie—and these to no little Extent; I succeeded in inducing Madame to show me her recent Bills—when her Letter to you professed her to be in financial Difficulties owing to Ben's Capture.

If Ben is indeed dead and both the Death and the Marriage proved, then presumably she would inherit some Property—or at least the Child would. But she can't possibly have taken such Legal Steps in the Time between her Letter to you and the Present; it could easily take that long merely to send a Letter to London—assuming that she *had any Idea to whom it should be sent. And assuming also that whoever received it would not immediately have informed you.*

Oh—she does possess an Infant, a Boy, and the Child is hers; Madame made her two Gowns and a set of Stays to accommodate the Pregnancy. Naturally, there's no telling whether Benjamin is the child's Father. She clearly has at least met Ben—or possibly Adam; she could have got "Wattiswade" from anyone in the Family—but that's not Proof of either Marriage or Paternity.

All in all, an interesting Woman, your putative Daughter-in-law. Plainly our Path lies now toward Savannah, though this may require somewhat more investigative Effort, as we don't know the Name of the Friends with whom she's taken Refuge, and if she is indeed poverty-stricken, she won't be buying new Gowns.

I hope to convince Dottie that she need not accompany me. She's most determined, but I can see that she pines for her Quaker Physician. And if our Quest should be greatly prolonged … I will not allow her to be placed in Danger, I assure you.

Your most affectionate Brother,
John

General Sir Henry Clinton, Commander in Chief for North America, to Colonel His Grace Duke of Pardloe, 46th Foot

Sir,

You are hereby ordered and directed to assemble and refit your Troops in whatever manner you deem necessary, and then to make Junction with Lieutenant Colonel Archibald Campbell, to march upon the City of Savannah in the colony of Georgia, and take possession of it in His Majesty's name.

H. Clinton

HAROLD, DUKE OF Pardloe, felt his chest tightening and rang for his orderly.

"Coffee, please," he said to the man. "Brewed very strong, and quickly. And bring the brandy while you're at it."

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BROUGHT TO YOU BY THE LETTERS Q, E, AND D

IT WAS, OF COURSE, unthinkable that we should sell Clarence. “Do you think he weighs as much as a printing press?” I asked, looking at him dubiously. His tiny stable next to the shop had survived the fire, and while he wrinkled his nose and sneezed when the wind raised a whiff of ash from the charred remains of the printshop, he didn’t seem much affected.

“Substantially more, I think.” Jamie scratched his forehead and ran a hand up the length of one long ear. “D’ye think mules suffer from seasickness?”

“Can they vomit?” I tried to recall whether I’d ever seen a horse or mule regurgitate—as opposed to dropping slobbery mouthfuls of whatever they were eating—but couldn’t call an instance to mind.

“I couldna say if they *can*,” Jamie said, picking up a stiff brush and beating clouds of dust from Clarence’s broad gray back, “but they don’t, no.”

“Then how would you know if a mule was seasick?” Jamie himself got violently seasick, and I did wonder how he was going to manage if we did go by ship; the acupuncture needles I used to quell his nausea had perished in the fire—with so much else.

Jamie gave me a jaundiced look over Clarence’s back.

“Can ye no tell if I’m seasick, even when I’m not puking?”

“Well, yes,” I said mildly, “but you aren’t covered with hair, and you can talk. You turn green and pour with sweat and lie about, groaning and begging to be shot.”

“Aye. Well, bar the turning green, a mule can tell ye verra well if he’s feeling peely-wally. And he can certainly make ye want to shoot him.”

He ran a hand down Clarence’s leg to pick up the mule’s left front hoof. Clarence picked it up and set it down again very solidly, exactly where Jamie’s own foot had been an instant before. His ears twitched.

“On the other hand,” Jamie said to him, “I could make ye walk all the way to Savannah, pullin’ a cart behind ye. Think about that, aye?” He came out of the stall and closed the gate, shaking it to be sure it was securely latched.

“Mr. Fraser!” A shout from the end of the alley drew his attention. It was Jonas Phillips, presumably on his way home to a midday dinner from the assembly room, where the Continental Congress was still locked in struggle. Jamie waved back and, with a nod to me, walked down the alley. While I waited for him, I turned my attention to the jumble of items occupying the other half of the stable.

What little room there was besides Clarence’s stall was filled with the things the neighbors had managed to salvage from the remains of the printshop. All of it had the sour reek of ash about it, but a few of the items might be salvaged or sold, I supposed.

Mrs. Bell's letter had caused a certain reevaluation of our immediate prospects. Fergus's press had definitely perished in the flames; the derelict carcass was still there, the metal parts twisted in a way suggesting uncomfortably that the thing had died in agony. Fergus hadn't wept; after Henri-Christian, I didn't think anything could ever make him weep again. But he did avert his eyes whenever he came near the ruins.

On the one hand, the loss of the press was terrible—but, on the other, it did save us the problem of hauling it to …

Well, that was another problem. Where were we going?

Jamie had assured me that we were going home—back to the Ridge. But it was late September, and even if we found the money to pay the passage for so many people—and Clarence—and were fortunate enough not to be sunk or captured by an English cutter … we would part company with Fergus and Marsali in Wilmington, then go up the Cape Fear River into the North Carolina backcountry, leaving Marsali, Fergus, and the children to go on alone to Savannah. I knew that Jamie didn't want to do that. In all honesty, neither did I.

The little family was surviving, but there was no doubt that Henri-Christian's death and the fire had left them all badly wounded. Especially Germain.

You could see it in his face, even in the way he walked, no longer jaunty and bright-eyed, eager for adventure. He walked with his shoulders hunched, as though expecting a blow to come out of nowhere. And while sometimes he would forget for a few moments and revert to his normal swagger and talk, you could see it when the blow of memory did come out of nowhere to send him reeling.

Ian and Rachel had taken it upon themselves to be sure that he didn't slink away by himself; one or the other was always calling on him to come and help carry the marketing or go out to the forest to look for the proper wood for an ax handle or a new bow. That helped.

If Fergus went to Savannah to retrieve Bonnie, Jamie's original press, Marsali would be hampered and preoccupied by advancing pregnancy and the difficulties both of travel with a family and then of establishing a new home, Fergus needing to devote himself to setting up the new business and dealing with whatever the local politics might be. Germain could so easily slip through the cracks in his family and be lost.

I wondered whether Jenny would go with them—or with Ian and Rachel. Marsali could certainly use her help, but I remembered what Marsali had said, and thought she was right: *"Ian's her youngest.… And she's had too little of him."* She had; Ian had essentially been lost to her at the age of fourteen, and she hadn't seen him again until he was a grown man—and a Mohawk. I'd seen her now and then, gazing at him as he talked and ate, with a small inward glow on her face.

I poked gingerly through the pile of remnants. Marsali's cauldron had survived unscathed, though covered with soot. A few pewter plates, one half melted—the wooden ones had all burned—and a stack of Bibles, rescued from the front room by some pious soul. A line of washing had been hung out across the alley; what clothes were on it had all survived, though a couple of Fergus's shirts and Joanie's pinafore had been badly singed. I supposed boiling with lye soap might get the stink of fire out of the clothes, but I doubted that any of the family would wear them again.

Clarence, having finished his hay, was methodically rubbing his forehead against the top rail of his gate, making it rattle and thump.

“Itchy, are you?” I scratched him, then poked my head out of the stable. Jamie was still in conversation with Mr. Phillips at the mouth of the alley, though, and I went back to my explorations.

Under a pile of smoke-stained playscripts I found Marsali’s small chiming clock, somehow miraculously intact. It had stopped, of course, but emitted one small, sweet silver *bing!* when I picked it up, making me smile.

Perhaps that was a good omen for the journey. And, after all, even if Jamie and I—and Rachel and Ian—were to set out at once for Fraser’s Ridge, there was no chance of reaching the mountains of North Carolina before snow had closed the passes for the winter. It would be March, at the earliest, before we could turn inland.

I sighed, clock in hand, envisioning the Ridge in springtime. It would be a good time to arrive, the weather good for planting and building. I could wait.

I heard Jamie’s steps come down the cobbled alley and stop. Stepping to the open front of the stable, I saw that he’d paused at the place where Henri-Christian had died. He stood unmoving for a moment, then crossed himself and turned.

The solemnity left his face as he saw me, and he held up a small leather bag, smiling.

“Look, Sassenach!”

“What is it?”

“One of the Phillips boys found it, scavenging about, and brought it to his father. Hold out your hands.”

Puzzled, I did so, and he tilted the bag, decanting a small cascade of surprisingly heavy dark-gray chunks of lead—the type for a complete set of … I picked one out and squinted at it. “Caslon English Roman?”

“Better than that, Sassenach,” he said, and, plucking the letter “Q” from the pile in my hand, he dug his thumbnail into the soft metal, revealing a faint yellow gleam. “Marsali’s hoard.”

“My God, it is! I’d forgotten all about it.” At the height of the British occupation, when Fergus had been obliged to leave home to avoid arrest, sleeping in a different place each night, Marsali had cast a set of type in gold, carefully rubbing each slug with grease, soot, and ink, and had carried the pouch under her apron, in case she and the children should be likewise forced to flee.

“So did Marsali, I expect.” His smile faded a bit, thinking of the causes of Marsali’s distraction. “She’d buried it under the bricks of the hearth—I suppose when the army left. Sam Phillips found it when they were pulling down the chimney.” He nodded toward the charred spot where the printshop had stood. The chimney had been damaged by the wall falling in, so a number of men had taken it down, neatly stacking the bricks, most of which were intact despite the fire and could be sold.

I poured the type carefully back into the pouch and glanced over my shoulder at Clarence.

“I suppose a goldsmith could make me a set of really *big* acupuncture needles. Just in case.”

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SQUID OF THE EVENING, BEAUTIFUL SQUID

Charleston, Royal Colony of South Carolina

LORD JOHN AND HIS niece, Dorothea, ate that night at a small ordinary near the shore, whose air was redolent with the luscious scents of baked fish, eels in wine sauce, and small whole squid, fried crisply in cornmeal. John inhaled deeply with pleasure, handed Dottie to a stool, and sat down himself, enjoying the moment of gustatory indecision.

"It's that moment when you can convincingly imagine the delightful prospect of eating everything the establishment has to offer," he told Dottie. "Momentarily untroubled by the knowledge that one's stomach has a limited capacity and thus one must, alas, choose in the end."

Dottie looked a little dubious, but, thus urged, she took a deep sniff of the atmosphere, to which the scent of fresh-baked bread had just been added as the serving maid came in with a great loaf and a dish of butter with a four-leafed clover—this being the name of the establishment—stamped into its oleaginous surface.

“Oh, that smells wonderful!” she said, her face lighting. “Might I have some, please? And a glass of cider?”

He was pleased to see her nibble hungrily at the bread and take a deep breath of the cider—which was aromatic enough to challenge even the squid, his own reluctantly final choice, though this was accompanied by a dozen fresh-shucked oysters to fill whatever crevices might remain. Dottie had chosen the baked hake, though she had only picked at it so far.

“I came down to the harbor this afternoon while you were resting,” he said, tearing off a wodge of bread to counteract the grated horseradish mixed with the oysters’ brine. “I asked about and found two or three small boats whose owners are not averse to a quick journey to Savannah.”

“How quick?” she asked warily.

“It’s little more than a hundred miles by water,” he said, shrugging in what he hoped was a casual manner. “Perhaps two days, with a good wind and fair weather.”

“Mmm.” Dottie cast a skeptical glance at the ordinary’s shuttered window. The shutters trembled to a blast of rain and wind. “It’s October, Uncle John. The weather is seldom predictable.”

“How do you know? Madam—might I have some vinegar for the squid?” The proprietor’s wife nodded, bustling off, and he repeated, “How do you know?”

“Our landlady’s son is a fisherman. So was her husband. He died in a gale—last October,” she finished sweetly, and popped the last bite of bread into her mouth.

“Such squeamish prudence is unlike you, Dottie,” he remarked, accepting the vinegar bottle from the proprietress and sousing his crisp squidlings. “Oh, God,” he said, chewing. “Ambrosia. Here—have one.” He speared one with his fork and passed it across to her.

“Yes. Well …” She regarded the squid-laden fork with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. “How long would it take to travel overland?”

“Perhaps four or five days. Again, with good weather.”

She sighed, lifted the squid to her mouth, hesitated, and then, with the air of a Roman gladiator facing an oncoming crocodile in the arena, put it into her mouth and chewed. She went white.

“Dottie!” He leapt up, knocking his stool over, and managed to catch her as she wilted toward the floor.

“Gah,” she said faintly, and, lunging out of his arms, bolted for the door, retching. He followed and was in time to hold her head as she lost the bread, cider, and the half-chewed squid.

“I’m so sorry,” she said a few moments later, as he emerged from the ordinary with a mug and a damp cloth. She was leaning against the most sheltered wall of the building, wrapped in his cloak, and was the color of spoiled suet pudding. “How disgusting of me.”

“Think nothing of it,” he said amiably. “I’ve done just the same for all three of your brothers, on occasion—though I somehow doubt from the same cause. How long have you known you were with child?”

“I became certain of it about five minutes ago,” she said, swallowing audibly and shuddering. “Dear Lord, I will never eat squid again.”

“Had you ever eaten squid before?”

"No. I never want to *see* another squid. Bother, my mouth tastes of sick."

John, who was indeed experienced in such matters, handed her the mug of beer.

"Rinse your mouth with that," he said. "Then drink the rest. It will settle your stomach."

She looked dubious at this but did as he said, and emerged from the cup still pale but much improved.

"Better? Good. I don't suppose you want to go back inside? No, of course not. Let me pay, and I'll take you home." Inside, he asked the landlady to make up a parcel of their abandoned supper—he didn't mind eating cold fried squid, but he did want to eat; he was starving—and held this carefully to windward as they walked back to their lodgings.

"You didn't know?" he asked curiously. "I've often wondered about that. Some women have told me they knew at once, and yet I've heard of others who somehow remained oblivious to their condition until the moment of birth was upon them, incredible as that seems."

Dottie laughed; the cold wind had brought some of the color back to her cheeks, and he was relieved to see her spirits recovered.

"Do lots of women discuss their intimacies with you, Uncle John? That seems somewhat unusual."

"I seem to attract unusual women," he said, rather ruefully. "I also seem to have the sort of face that people feel compelled to tell things to. In another age, perhaps I should have been a confessor, if that's the word. But returning to the point"—he took her elbow to guide her round a large pile of horse droppings—"now that you *do* know … what shall we do about it?"

"I don't think anything actually needs to be *done* for about eight months," she said, and he gave her a look.

"You know what I mean," he said. "I doubt you wish to establish residence in Charleston until after your child arrives. Do you wish to return to Philadelphia—or New Jersey, or whatever godforsaken place Denzell happens to be at the moment—or shall I make arrangements to proceed to Savannah and remain there for some time? Or—" Another thought struck him, and he altered the look to one of seriousness.

"Do you want to go home, Dottie? To England, I mean. To your mother?"

Her face went blank with surprise, which gave way to a look of longing that broke his heart. She looked away, blinking back tears, but her voice was steady when she turned back to him.

"No," she said, and swallowed. "I want to be with Denzell. All other considerations aside," she added, managing a smile, "he knows how to deliver a baby. His cousin William is *accoucheur* to the Queen, and Denny studied with him for a time."

"Well, that *will* be helpful," Grey agreed, rather dryly. He had himself delivered a child once—completely against his will—and still had nightmares about it.

It was just as well that Dottie didn't want to return to England, though. He'd suggested the notion on impulse but now realized that it might be more dangerous than any of the other alternatives. Since France had entered the war, all English shipping would be at risk.

"I'm thinking that we ought to go to Savannah, though," Dottie was saying. "We're so close, I mean—and if Ben's wife *is* there … she might need our help, mightn't she?"

“Yes,” he agreed reluctantly. There was a familial obligation. And, after all, unless he *did* take up residence in Charleston for the next eight months, there seemed no alternative to Dottie’s traveling, in whichever direction. Still … the thought of her giving birth *here*, him responsible for finding midwives and nurses … and then she *and* the child would need to be transported …

“No,” he said, more definitely. “Amaranthus—assuming she does exist—will have to muddle on by herself a little longer. I’m taking you back to New York.”

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THE OGLETHORPE PLAN

Late November

SAVANNAH, UNLIKE MOST American cities, had been carefully planned by its founder, a man named Oglethorpe. I knew this because Mrs. Landrum, the woman from whom we rented our room, had explained to me that the city was laid out according to “the Oglethorpe plan”—this spoken in portentous tones, for Mrs. Landrum was a relative of the aforesaid Oglethorpe and intensely proud of the city and its civic perfection.

The plan called for six wards—a ward being composed of four civic blocks—for business, and four “tything” blocks for houses, these arrayed around an open square. There were ten houses to a block, and the men of a tything trained together for militia duty.

“Though that’s not so important now as it used to be,” Mrs. Landrum explained to me. “The Indians are still a bother in the backcountry, but it's years since they troubled to come into the city."

I rather thought Indians were the least of it, but as Mrs. Landrum didn't seem concerned about the war with the British, I didn't bring it up. It was apparent from her references that as not only her family but everyone she knew were Loyalists, plainly this was the proper state of things, and pesky nuisances like this "rebellion, as they're pleased to call it!" would soon be put down and we could get tea at a decent price again.

From my point of view, the most interesting thing about Mr. Oglethorpe's plan—in the course of conversation, it was revealed to me that he'd founded not only Savannah but the whole Province of Georgia—was that each house of a tything was provided with a one-mile tract of farmland outside the city and a five-acre kitchen garden closer in.

"Really," I said, my fingers beginning to itch at the thought of dirt. "Er … what do you plant?"

The upshot of this conversation—and many like it—was that I made an arrangement to help with the keeping of the kitchen garden in return for a share of "sass" (as Mrs. Landrum puzzlingly referred to green stuff like kale and turnips), beans, and dried corn, as well as a small plot where I could cultivate medicinal herbs. A secondary consequence of this amiable acquaintance was that Rachel and Ian, whose room was below ours, began referring to their unborn child as Oglethorpe, though this was politely shortened to "Oggy" whenever Mrs. Landrum was in hearing.

And the third and most important effect of Mrs. Landrum's friendship was that I found myself once more a doctor.

We had been in Savannah for a few weeks when Mrs. Landrum came up to our room one afternoon and inquired as to whether I might know anything regarding cures for the toothache, she knowing that I had a way with herbs?

"Oh, I might," I replied, with a surreptitious glance at my medical bag, which had been gathering dust under the bed since our arrival. "Whose tooth is it?"

The tooth had belonged to a gentleman named Murphy from Ellis Ward, the one we lived in. I say "had belonged" because I had the badly broken and infected bicuspid out of Mr. Murphy's head before he could have said Jack Robinson, though he was in such pain that he could barely recall his own name, let alone Jack's.

Mr. Murphy was extremely grateful for his deliverance. Mr. Murphy was also the owner of a very small vacant shop on the other side of Ellis Square. It was the work of a few moments to acquire a small shingle with TEETH EXTRACTED on it. And within twenty-four hours of hanging out my shingle, I was proudly depositing my earnings on the kitchen table—which was also my herbal-preparations counter and Jamie's desk, as it occupied the center of our single room.

"Well done, Sassenach!" Jamie picked up a small jar of honey, taken in payment for a nastily impacted wisdom tooth. He loved honey. I'd also acquired two large speckled turkey eggs (one of them filled the entire palm of my hand), a loaf of reasonably fresh sourdough bread, six pennies, and a small silver Spanish coin.

"I think ye could support the family all on your own, *a nighean*," he said, dipping a finger in the honey and licking it before I could stop him. "Ian and Fergus and I can all retire and become gentlemen of leisure."

"Good. You can start by making supper," I said, stretching my back. Stays did keep you upright through a long day's work, but I was looking forward to taking them off, eating supper, and lying down, in quick succession.

"Of course, Sassenach." With a small flourish, he drew the knife from his belt, cut a slice off the loaf, drizzled honey on it, and gave it to me. "There ye are."

I raised an eyebrow at him but bit into it. Sweetness flooded my mouth and my bloodstream simultaneously, and I tasted sunlight and flowers. I moaned.

"What did ye say, Sassenach?" He was busily buttering another slice.

"I said, 'Well done,' " I said, and picked up the pot of honey. "We'll make a cook of you yet."

* * *

THE BASIC ISSUES of housing and food taken care of, plainly the next order of business was to retrieve Bonnie. Jamie had located the Bell family, and three weeks after our arrival in Savannah, he and Fergus had scraped together enough money to hire a cart and an extra mule from the livery stable where Clarence boarded. We met Richard Bell in the morning, and he came with us to the farm of one Zachary Simpson, the farmer with whom Bonnie boarded.

Mr. Simpson cleared away the last of the hay and pulled away the canvas with the air of a magician producing a rabbit from a hat. From the reaction of three-quarters of his spectators, you'd think he *had:* Jamie and Fergus both gasped audibly, and Richard Bell emitted a hum of satisfaction. I bit my lip and tried not to laugh, but I doubted they'd have noticed if I'd rolled on the floor in paroxysms of mirth.

"Nom de Dieu," Fergus said, stretching out a reverent hand. "She's *beautiful.*"

"Best I've ever seen," Mr. Bell agreed, clearly torn between regard and regret.

"Aye." Jamie was pink with pleasure, trying visibly to retain a modest constraint. "Aye. She's bonnie, no?"

I supposed "she" was—if one was a connoisseur of printing presses, which I wasn't. Still, I confessed some fondness for Bonnie; we'd met before, in Edinburgh. Jamie had been oiling some part of her mechanism when I'd returned to find him after twenty years, and she had been witness to our reunion.

And she had withstood the rigors of disassembly, sea travel, reassembly, and months of being immured in a barn with commendable fortitude. A pale winter sun shone through a crack in the barn's wall, making her wood glow with somber pride, and her metal was—so far as I could see—quite free from rust.

"Well done," I said, giving her a small pat. Mr. Simpson was modestly accepting the applause of the crowd for his feat of preserving Bonnie from harm, and I could see that they'd be some time in getting her onto the cart we'd brought, so I made my way back to the farmhouse. I'd noticed a number of chickens scratching in the yard and had some hopes of acquiring fresh eggs.

Marsali's hoard—and Jenny's novena to St. Bride, Queen of the Sea, plus a modest assist from my acupuncture needles (Clarence luckily proved a good sailor)—had got us safely to Savannah, but the requirements of housing ten people and renting premises suitable for a small printing business had exhausted both the Caslon English Roman gold and the insurance money paid to Fergus for the fire's destruction.

With the need for income somewhat acute, Ian and Jamie had found employment at one of the warehouses on the river. A wise choice, as it turned out: in addition to their pay and the odd damaged cask of salt fish or biscuit, being on the docks all day allowed them first—and cheapest—choice from the fishermen coming in with their catch. We therefore hadn't been starving nor yet threatened with scurvy—the climate was mild enough that plenty of green things grew, even in late November—but I was getting tired of rice and fish and winter kale. A nice dish of scrambled eggs, now … possibly with fresh butter …

I'd come equipped for trading, with several packets of pins and a bag of salt, and Mrs. Simpson and I amicably concluded a bargain for a basket of eggs and a small tub of butter before the men had got Bonnie out of the barn and were sat on the back stoop, comfortably drinking beer.

"What remarkable chickens those are," I said, stifling a small belch. The beer, of Mrs. Simpson's own production, was tasty but strong. The chickens in question were more than remarkable: they appeared to have no legs but to be trundling round the yard on their bottom sides, pecking at their corn with cheerful imperturbability.

"Oh, aye," said Mrs. Simpson, nodding with pride. "My mother brought those—well, their great-great-grandmothers—with her from Scotland, thirty years a-gone. 'Creepies,' she always called them—but they've got a true name. Scots Dumpy, it is, or so a gentleman from Glasgow told me."

"How very appropriate," I said, taking another sip of beer and peering at the chickens. They did after all *have* legs; just very short ones.

"I breed them for sale," Mrs. Simpson added helpfully. "If might should be ye should find yourself in want of a good hen or two."

"I can't think of anything I'd like better," I said wistfully. The rice paddies and palmettos of Savannah seemed infinitely far away from the clean sharp air of Fraser's Ridge … but we were in the South, at least. And come March and good traveling weather, Marsali and Fergus should be safely established, and we could turn our faces toward North Carolina. "Perhaps in a few months …" I added *Scots Dumpy chickens* to the mental list I was accumulating and returned to the beer.

The men had got the printing press onto the cart, suitably swathed in canvas and repacked with straw for the journey into town, and now came into the house to resume their own well-earned refreshment.

We sat companionably round Mrs. Simpson's scrubbed kitchen table, drinking beer and eating salted radishes. Jamie and Fergus were glowing with excitement and satisfaction; the looks on their faces warmed me more than the beer. Poor Richard Bell was trying his best to be generous and share their delight, but it was plain that he was low in both body and spirit.

I had met him only a few days before, and that briefly, so had not yet cultivated an acquaintance sufficient as to allow me to make him undress and let me palpate his liver, but I was morally certain that the "relapsing ague" Mrs. Bell had written of was malaria. I couldn't say so with complete certainty without looking at his blood cells under a microscope—and God knew when I might ever have one again—but I'd seen enough people suffering from "the quartan ague" or "the tertian fever" as to have little doubt.

Luckily, I had a small supply of Jesuit bark among the selection of herbs and medicines I'd brought with me. It wouldn't cure him, but I could, with luck, limit the more-severe attacks and relieve some of the symptoms. Thinking of this reminded me suddenly of Lizzie Wemyss. Coming to America as Brianna's bond servant, she also had contracted malaria from the coastal mosquitoes. I'd managed to control the disease in her fairly well, but how had she fared in my absence?

"I'm sorry, what did you say?" My attention was jerked back to the conversation, but I added *LOTS of Jesuit bark* to my mental list before replying.

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PLUMBING

LIKE PLUMBING, MEDICINE is a profession where you learn early on not to put your fingers in your mouth. I smelled my next patient coming and was reaching for the jar of soft soap and the bottle of raw alcohol before she came through the door. And the instant I saw her, I knew what the problem was.

There were two women, in fact: one was a tall, rather commanding-looking woman, well dressed and wearing a hat rather than the usual bonnet. The other was a small, slight girl who might have been any age between twelve and twenty. She was what they called a mulatto, half black and half white, with *café au lait* skin and snub features. I set her lower age limit at twelve only because she had apparent breasts bubbling over the top of her stays. She was dressed neatly but plainly in blue gingham, and she stank like an open sewer.

The tall woman paused, looking me over consideringly.

"You are a female physician?" she asked, in a tone just short of accusation.

"I am Dr. Fraser, yes," I replied equably. "And you are …?"

She flushed at that and looked disconcerted. Also very dubious. But after an awkward pause, she made up her mind and gave a sharp nod. "I am Sarah Bradshaw. Mrs. Phillip Bradshaw."

"I'm pleased to meet you. And your … companion?" I nodded at the young woman, who stood with her shoulders hunched and her head bent, staring at the ground. I could hear a soft dripping noise, and she shifted as though trying to press her legs together, wincing as she did so.

"This is Sophronia. One of my husband's slaves." Mrs. Bradshaw's lips compressed and drew in tight; from the lines surrounding her mouth, she did it routinely. "She—that is—I thought perhaps—" Her rather plain face flamed crimson; she couldn't bring herself to describe the trouble.

"I know what it is," I said, saving her the difficulty. I came round the table and took Sophronia by the hand; hers was small and very callused, but her fingernails were clean. A house slave, then. "What happened to the baby?" I asked her gently.

A small, frightened intake of breath, and she glanced sideways at Mrs. Bradshaw, who gave her another sharp nod, lips still pursed.

"It died in me," the girl said, so softly I could scarcely hear her, even though she was no more than an arm's length from me. "Dey cut it out in pieces." That had likely saved the girl's life, but it surely hadn't helped her condition.

Despite the smell, I took a deep breath, trying to keep my emotions under control.

“I’ll need to examine Sophronia, Mrs. Bradshaw. If you have any errands, perhaps you’d like to go and take care of them …?”

She unzipped her lips sufficiently as to make a small, frustrated noise. Quite obviously, she would like nothing better than to leave the girl and never come back. But just as obviously, she was afraid of what the slave might tell me if left alone with me.

“Was the child your husband’s?” I asked baldly. I didn’t have time to beat around the bush; the poor girl was dripping urine and fecal matter on the floor and appeared ready to die of shame.

I doubted that Mrs. Bradshaw meant to die of that condition, but she plainly felt it almost as acutely as did Sophronia. She went white with shock, then her face flamed anew. She turned on her heel and stamped out, slamming the door behind her.

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes,’ then,” I said to the door, and turned to the girl, smiling in reassurance. “Here, sweetheart. Let’s have a look at the trouble, shall we?”

Vesicovaginal fistula *and* rectovaginal fistula. I’d known that from the first moment; I just didn’t know how bad they might be or how far up the vaginal canal they’d occurred. A fistula is a passage between two things that ought never to be joined and is, generally speaking, a bad thing.

It wasn’t a common condition in civilized countries in the twentieth century but more common than one might think. I’d seen it several times in Boston, at a clinic where I gave time once a week to provide medical care to the city’s poor. Young girls, much too young to be considering the opposite sex in any serious way, becoming pregnant before their bodies had ripened enough. Prostitutes, some of them.

Others just girls who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. Like this one.

A full-term baby that couldn't be forced out through the birth canal, and days of nonproductive labor, the child's head a battering ram against the tissues of the pelvis, the bladder, the vagina, and the bowel. Until at last the tissues thinned and split, leaving a ragged hole between bladder and vagina, or between vagina and rectum, allowing the body's waste to drip out unhindered through the vagina.

Not a matter of life or death, but revolting, uncontrollable, and bloody uncomfortable, too. Sophronia's inner thighs were swollen, a bright, patchy red, the skin macerated by the constant wetness, the irritating fecal slime. Like a permanent diaper rash, I thought, suppressing a deeply visceral urge to find Mr. Bradshaw and make a few fistulas in him with a blunt probe.

I talked to her while I made my examinations, soothingly, and after a little she began to answer me, though still in whispers. She was thirteen. Yes, Mr. Bradshaw had took her to his bed. She hadn't minded. He said his wife was mean to him, and she was—all the slaves knew it. Mr. Bradshaw had been nice to her, gentle-like, and when she fell pregnant, he'd taken her from the laundry and put her to kitchen work, where she'd have good food and wouldn't have to break her back with the heavy linens.

"He was sad," she said softly, looking up at the ceiling while I wiped away the filthy trickle between her legs. "When the baby died. He cried."

"Did he," I said, in what I hoped was a neutral voice. I folded a clean towel and pressed it between her legs, throwing the wet one she'd been wearing into my bucket of vinegar and water. “When did the baby die—how long ago, I mean?”

She frowned, the expression barely rippling the pure young skin of her forehead. Could she count? I wondered.

“Be some time before the sausage-makin’,” she said uncertainly.

“In the fall, then?”

“Yessum.”

And it was mid-December now. I poured water over my dirty hand and dribbled a bit of soap into my palm. I really must try to get a nailbrush, I thought.

Mrs. Bradshaw had come back but hadn’t come in; I’d pulled the curtains over the front window, but her shadowed outline was plain on the cloth, the jaunty feathers in her hat stuck up like a silhouette cowlick.

I tapped my foot thoughtfully, then shook myself into order and went to open the door.

“I *might* be able to help,” I said without preamble, startling the woman.

“How?” She blinked at me, and, taken unawares, her face was open, troubled but without the pinched look she’d worn earlier.

“Come inside,” I said. “It’s cold out here in the wind,” and guided her in, a hand on her back. She was very thin; I could feel the knobs of her spine, even through her coat and stays.

Sophronia was sitting on the table, hands folded in her lap; when her mistress came in, she bent her head, looking at the floor again.

I explained the nature of the difficulty, so well as I could—neither of them had any grasp of internal anatomy at all; it was simply a matter of holes to them. Still, I managed to get the general point across.

"You know that a wound can be stitched, to hold the skin together while it heals?" I said patiently. "Well, this is much the same kind of thing, but made much harder by the wounds being inside and the tissues being very thin and slippery. It would be very difficult to mend—I'm not *sure* I can do it—but it is at least possible to try."

It was—just. In the late nineteenth century, a physician named J. Marion Sims had more or less invented the entire practice of gynecological surgery, in order to address exactly this condition. It had taken him years to develop the techniques, and I knew them—had done the procedure more than once. The catch was that you really needed good, solid anesthesia in order to have a chance of success. Laudanum or whisky might answer for cruder, swifter operations, but for painstakingly delicate surgery like this, the patient had to be completely unconscious and immobile. I would have to have ether.

I had no idea how I was going to make ether, living in a small rented house with a number of people whom I really didn't want to risk blowing to bits. And the thought of what flammable ether could do—had done—made me break out in a cold sweat. But seeing the faint hope rise in both their faces, I made up my mind to do it.

I gave Sophronia a small jar of beeswax ointment for the skin of her thighs and told them to come back in a week; I would know then whether it was possible. I saw them out, and as they went away down the street, Mrs. Bradshaw reached out unconsciously and touched Sophronia's shoulder in a brief caress of reassurance.

I took a deep breath and resolved that I *would* find a way. Turning to go inside, I glanced the other way down the street and saw a tall young man whose lean ranginess struck me with a sense of instant recognition. I blinked once, and imagination promptly clothed him in scarlet.

“William!” I called, and, picking up my skirts, ran after him.

* * *

HE DIDN’T HEAR me at first, and I had time for doubt—but not much; the set of head and shoulders, that long, decisive stride … He was thinner than Jamie, and his hair was a dark chestnut, not red, but he had his father’s bones. And his eyes: hearing me at last, he turned, and those dark-blue cat eyes widened in surprise.

“Mother Cl—” He cut the word off, his face hardening, but I reached out and took his big hand between my own (rather hoping that I had got all of the slime off).

“William,” I said, panting just a bit, but smiling up at him. “You can call me what you like, but I’m no less—and no more—to you than I ever was.”

His severe look softened a little at that, and he ducked his head awkwardly.

“I think I must call you Mrs. Fraser, mustn’t I?” He detached his hand, though gently. “How do you come to be here?”

“I might ask the same of you—and perhaps with more reason. Where’s your uniform?”

“I’ve resigned my commission,” he said, a little stiffly. “Under the circumstances, there seemed little point to my remaining in the army. And I have business that requires somewhat more independence of movement than I should have as one of Sir Henry’s aides.”

"Will you come and have something hot to drink with me? You can tell me about your business." I'd rushed out without my cloak, and a chilly breeze was fingering me with more intimacy than I liked.

"I—" He caught himself, frowning, then looked at me thoughtfully and rubbed a finger down the long, straight bridge of his nose, just as Jamie did when making up his mind. And just as Jamie did, he dropped his hand and nodded briefly as though to himself.

"All right," he said, rather gruffly. "In fact, my business may be of some … importance to you."

Another five minutes saw us in an ordinary off Ellis Square, drinking hot cider, rich with cinnamon and nutmeg. Savannah wasn't—thank God—Philadelphia, in terms of nasty winter weather, but the day was cold and windy, and the pewter cup was delightfully warm in my hands.

"What *does* bring you here, then, Willie? Or should I call you William now?"

"William, please," he said dryly. "It's the only name I feel is rightfully mine, for the moment. I should like to preserve what small dignity I have."

"Mmm," I said noncommittally. "William it is, then."

"As for my business …" He sighed briefly and rubbed a knuckle between his brows. He then explained about his cousin Ben, Ben's wife and child, then Denys Randall, and finally—Captain Ezekiel Richardson. *That* name made me sit up straight.

He noticed my reaction and nodded, grimacing.

"That's what I meant when I said my business might have some relevance to you. Pa—Lord John said that it was Richardson's threatening to arrest you as a spy that caused him to, er, marry you." He flushed a little.

“It was,” I said, trying not to recall the occasion. In fact, I recalled only snatches of those empty, glaring days when I’d believed Jamie to be dead. One of those snatches, though, was a vivid recollection of standing in the parlor of Number 17, holding a bouquet of white roses, with John beside me and a military chaplain with a book before us—and, standing on John’s other side, grave and handsome, William in his captain’s uniform and shining gorget, looking so like Jamie that I felt for a dizzying instant that Jamie’s ghost had come to watch. Unable to decide whether to faint or to run out of the room shrieking, I’d simply stood frozen, until John had nudged me gently, whispering in my ear, and I’d blurted out, “I do,” and collapsed on the ottoman, flowers spilling from my hands.

Caught up in the memory, I’d missed what William was saying and shook my head, trying to focus.

“I’ve been searching for him for the last three months,” he said, putting down his cup and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “He’s an elusive scoundrel. And I don’t know that he’s in Savannah at all, for that matter. But the last hint I had of him was in Charleston, and he left there three weeks ago, heading south.

“Now, for all I know, the fellow’s bound for Florida or has already taken ship for England. On the other hand … Amaranthus is here, or at least I believe so. Richardson seems to take an inordinate interest in the Grey family and its connections, so perhaps … Do you know Denys Randall yourself, by the way?”

He was looking at me intently over his cup, and I realized, with a faint sense of amusement mingled with outrage, that he had thrown the name at me suddenly in hopes of surprising any guilty knowledge I might have.

Why, you little scallywag, I thought, amusement getting the upper hand. *You need a bit more practice before you can pull off that sort of thing, my lad*.

I did in fact know something about Denys Randall that William almost certainly didn't know—and that Denys Randall himself might not know—but it wasn't information that would shed any light on the whereabouts and motives of Ezekiel Richardson.

"I've never met him," I said, quite truthfully, and held up my cup toward the serving maid for more cider. "I used to know his mother, Mary Hawkins; we met in Paris. A lovely, sweet girl, but I've had no contact with her for the last … thirty … no, thirty-four years. I assume from what you tell me that she married a Mr. Isaacs—you said he was a Jewish merchant?"

"Yes. So Randall said—and I can't see why he'd lie about it."

"Nor can I. But what you do know—you think," I corrected, "is that while Denys Randall and Ezekiel Richardson have heretofore appeared to be working together, now they aren't?"

William shrugged, impatient.

"So far as I know. I haven't seen Randall since he warned me about Richardson, but I haven't seen Richardson, either."

I could sense his rising desire to be up and off; he was drumming his fingers softly on the tabletop, and the table itself shuddered slightly when his leg bumped it.

"Where are you staying, William?" I asked impulsively, before he could go. "In—in case I do see Richardson. Or hear anything of Amaranthus, for that matter. I am a doctor; a lot of people come to see me, and everyone talks to a doctor."

He hesitated, but then gave another shrug, this one infinitesimal. “I’ve taken a room at Hendry’s, on River Street.”

He stood, tossed some money on the table, and extended a hand to help me up.

“We’re staying at Landrum’s, one square over from the City Market,” I said on impulse, rising. “If you should—want to call. Or need help. Just in case, I mean.”

His face had gone carefully blank, though his eyes were burning like match flames. I felt a chill, knowing from experience the sort of thing that was likely going on behind such a façade.

“I doubt it, Mrs. Fraser,” he said politely. And, kissing my hand in brief farewell, he left.

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GIGGING FROGS

December 22, 1778

JAMIE TOOK A FIRM grip of the back of Germain's shirt and beckoned with his free hand to Ian, who held the torch.

"Look out over the water first, aye?" Jamie whispered, lifting his chin at the black glitter of the submerged marsh. It was broken by clumps of waist-high cordgrass and smaller ones of needlerush, bright green in the torchlight. This was a deep spot, though, with two or three of what the natives of Savannah called "hammocks," though plainly they meant "hummock"—wee islands, with trees like wax myrtle and yaupon holly bushes, though these, too, were of a spiky nature, like everything else in a marsh save the frogs and fish.

Some of the spikier inhabitants of the marsh, though, were mobile and nothing you wanted to meet unexpectedly.

Germain peered obediently into the darkness, his gigging spear held tight and high, poised for movement. Jamie could feel him tremble, partly from the chill but mostly, he thought, from excitement.

A sudden movement broke the surface of the water, and Germain lunged forward, plunging his gig into the water with a high-pitched yell.

Fergus and Jamie let out much deeper cries, each grabbing Germain by an arm and hauling him backward over the mud, as the irate cottonmouth he'd nearly speared turned on him, lashing, yawning mouth flaring white.

But the snake luckily had business elsewhere and swam off with a peeved sinuosity. Ian, safely out of range, was laughing.

"Think it's funny, do ye?" said Germain, scowling in order to pretend he wasn't shaking.

"Aye, I do," his uncle assured him. "Be even funnier if ye were eaten by an alligator, though. See there?" He lifted the torch and pointed; ten feet away, there was a ripple in the water, between them and the nearest hammock. Germain frowned uncertainly at it, then turned his head to his grandfather.

"That's an alligator? How d'ye ken that?"

"It is," Jamie said. His own heart was pounding from the sight of the cottonmouth. Snakes unnerved him, but he wasn't scairt of alligators. Cautious, yes. Scairt, no. "See how the ripples come back from the island there?"

"Aye." Germain squinted across the water. "So?"

"Those ripples are coming toward us side on. The one Ian's pointing at? It's coming at a right angle—right toward us."

It was, though slowly.

“Are alligators good to eat?” Fergus asked, watching it thoughtfully. “A good deal more meat on one than on a frog, *n’est-ce pas*?”

“They are, and there is, aye.” Ian shifted his weight a little, gauging the distance. “We canna kill one of those wi’ spears, though. I should have brought my bow.”

“Should we … move?” Germain asked doubtfully.

“Nay, see how big it is first,” Ian said, fingering the long knife at his belt. He was wearing a breechclout, and his bare legs were long and steady as a heron’s, standing mid-calf in the muddy water.

The four of them watched with great concentration as the ripple came on, paused, came on a little more, slowly.

“Are they stunned by light, Ian?” Jamie asked, low-voiced. Frogs were; they had maybe two dozen bullfrogs in their sack, surprised in the water and killed before they kent what hit them.

“I dinna think so,” Ian whispered back. “I’ve not hunted one before, though.”

There was a sudden gleam in the water, a scatter of ripples, and the glow of two small burning orbs, a demon’s eyes.

“A Dhia!” Jamie said, making a convulsive sign against evil. Fergus pulled Germain back farther, making a clumsy sign of the cross with his hook. Even Ian seemed taken back a bit; his hand fell from his knife and he stepped back toward the mud, not taking his eyes off the thing.

“It’s a wee one, I think,” he said, reaching safety. “See, its eyes are nay bigger than my thumbnail.”

“Does that matter, if it’s possessed?” Fergus asked, suspicious. “Even if we were to kill it, we might be poisoned.”

“Oh, I dinna think so,” Jamie said. He could see it now as it hung motionless in the water, stubby clawed feet halfway drawn up. It was perhaps two feet long—the toothy jaw maybe six inches. It could give you a nasty bite, nay more. But it wasn’t close enough to reach.

“Ken what a wolf’s eyes look like in the dark? Or a possum’s?” He’d taken Fergus hunting, of course, when he was young, but seldom at night—and such things as you’d hunt at night in the Highlands were usually running from you, not looking at you.

Ian nodded, not taking his eyes off the small reptile.

“Aye, that’s true. Wolves’ eyes are usually green or yellow, but I’ve seen them red like that sometimes, by torchlight.”

“I would suppose that a wolf could be possessed by an evil spirit as easily as an alligator could,” Fergus said, a little testily. It was clear, though, that he wasn’t afraid of the thing, either, now that he’d got a good look; they were all beginning to relax.

“He thinks we’re stealing his frogs,” Germain said, giggling. He was still holding the spear, and even as he spoke, he spotted something and slammed the three-tined sapling into the water with a whoop.

“I got it, I got it!” he shouted, and splashed into the water, heedless of the alligator. He bent to see that his prey was firmly transfixed, let out another small whoop, and pulled up his spear, displaying a catfish of no mean size, belly showing white in its frantic flapping, blood running in trickles from the holes made by the tines.

“More meat on that than on yon wee lizard there, aye?” Ian took the spear, pulled the fish off, and bashed its head with the hilt of his knife to kill it.

Everyone looked, but the alligator had departed, alarmed by the kerfuffle.

"Aye, that's us fettled, I think." Jamie picked up both bags—one half full of bullfrogs, and the other still squirming slightly from the inclusion of a number of shrimp and crayfish netted from the shallows. He held open the one with the frogs for Ian to toss the fish inside, saying a verse from the Hunting Blessing, for Germain: *"Thou shalt not eat fallen fish nor fallen flesh/Nor one bird that thy hand shall not bring down/Be thou thankful for the one/Though nine should be swimming."*

Germain was not paying attention, though; he was standing quite still, fair hair lifting in the breeze, his head turned.

"Look, *Grand-père*," he said, voice urgent. "Look!"

They all looked and saw the ships, far out beyond the marsh but coming in, heading for the small headland to the south. Seven, eight, nine … a dozen at least, with red lanterns at their masts, blue ones at the stern. Jamie felt the hair rise on his body and his blood go cold.

"British men-of-war," Fergus said, his voice empty with shock.

"They are," Jamie said. "We'd best get home."

* * *

IT WAS ALMOST dawn before I felt Jamie slide into bed behind me, bringing chilled skin and the smell of brine, cold mud, and marsh plants with him. Also …

"What's that smell?" I asked drowsily, kissing the arm he'd put round me.

"Frogs, I expect. God, ye're warm, Sassenach." He cuddled closer, pressing his body into mine, and I felt him pull loose the bow of the ribbon that gathered the neck of my shift.

"Good hunting, then?" I obligingly wiggled my bottom into the hollow of his thighs and he sighed in appreciation, his breath warm on my ear, and slipped a cold hand inside my shift. "Ooh."

"Aye. Germain caught a fine big catfish, and we brought back a sack of crawfish and shrimps—the wee gray ones."

"Mmm. We'll have a good supper, then." His temperature was quickly equalizing with mine, and I was drifting pleasantly back down toward sleep—though quite willing to be roused for the right reasons.

"We saw a wee alligator. And a snake—a water moccasin."

"You didn't catch those, I hope." I knew that snakes and alligators were technically edible, but I didn't think we were quite hungry enough to make the challenges of cooking one worthwhile.

"No. Oh—and a dozen British ships full of soldiers turned up, too."

"That's ni— *What*?" I flipped over in his arms, ending face-to-face.

"British soldiers," he repeated gently. "Dinna fash, Sassenach. I expect it will be all right. Fergus and I already hid the press, and we havena got any silver to bury. That's one thing to be said for poverty," he added reflectively, stroking my bottom. "Ye dinna need to fear bein' plundered."

"That—what the bloody hell are they doing *here*?" I rolled over and sat straight up in bed, pulling my shift up round my shoulders.

"Well, ye did say Pardloe told ye they meant to cut off the southern colonies, aye? I imagine they decided to start here."

"Why here? Why not … Charleston? Or Norfolk?"

"Well, I couldna say, not being privy to the British councils of war," he said mildly. "But if I was to guess, I'd say it's maybe that there are a good many troops already in Florida, and they'll be marching up to join this new lot. The Loyalists are thick as fleas on a dog all along the coast of the Carolinas; if the army's secured Florida and Georgia, they'd be well placed to advance northward, picking up local support."

"You have it all figured out, I see." I pressed my back against the wall—there was no headboard—and finished retying the ribbon of my shift. I didn't feel equal to meeting an invasion with my bosom uncovered.

"No," he admitted. "But there are only two things to do, Sassenach: stay or flee. It's the dead of winter in the mountains; we canna get through the passes 'til March, and I'd rather not be stravaiging about the countryside with three bairns, two pregnant women, and nay money. And I doubt they'll burn the city, not if they mean it to be a base for invading the rest of the South." He reached up and ran a soothing hand down my shoulder and arm. "It's not as though ye've not lived in an occupied city before."

"Hmm," I said dubiously, but he did have a point. There *were* some advantages to the situation, the chief one being that if an army already held a city, they wouldn't be attacking it: no fighting in the streets. But, then … they didn't hold it yet.

"Dinna fash yourself, lass," he said softly, and twined a finger in my ribbon. "Did I not tell ye when we wed, ye'd have the protection of my body?"

"You did," I admitted, and laid a hand over his. It was big, strong, and capable.

"Then come lie wi' me, *mo nighean donn*, and let me prove it," he said, and pulled the ribbon loose.

* * *

FROG LEGS OF that size really did look quite like chicken drumsticks. And tasted very like, too, dredged in flour and egg with a little salt and pepper and fried.

"Why is it that the meat of strange animals is so often described as tasting like chicken?" Rachel asked, neatly snaring another leg out from under her husband's reaching hand. "I've heard people say that of everything from catamount to alligator."

"Because it does," Ian answered, raising a brow at her and stabbing his fork into a platter of catfish chunks, similarly coated and fried.

"Well, if you want to be technical about it," I began, to a chorus of mingled groans and laughter. Before I could launch into an explanation of the biochemistry of muscle fiber, though, there was a rap on the door. We had been making so much noise over supper that I hadn't heard footsteps on the stair and was taken by surprise.

Germain popped up to open the door and gazed up in surprise at two Continental officers, in full uniform.

There was a general scraping of chairs as the men stood up, and Jamie stepped out from behind the table. He'd been working in the warehouse all day, after hunting in the marshes half the night, and was not only barefoot but wearing a badly stained, grimy shirt and a faded plaid so worn that it was thin in spots. Still, no one would have doubted that he was the master of the house. When he inclined his head and said, “Gentlemen? Be welcome,” both officers took off their hats, bowed, and came in, murmuring, “Your servant, sir.”

“General Fraser,” the senior officer said, the title not quite a question, as he eyed Jamie’s attire. “I am Major General Robert Howe.”

I’d never seen Major General Howe before, but I knew his companion, and my hand tightened on the bread knife. He was wearing a colonel’s uniform now, and his face was as blandly forgettable as ever, but I wasn’t likely to forget Captain Ezekiel Richardson—lately a captain in His Majesty’s army, last seen in Clinton’s headquarters in Philadelphia.

“Your humble servant, sir,” Jamie said, in a tone quite belying the usual compliment. “I am James Fraser but no longer an officer in any army. I have resigned my commission.”

“So I understand, sir.” Howe’s rather bulging eyes scanned the table, flicking past Jenny, Rachel, Marsali, and the little girls before settling on me. He gave a small nod of inward conviction and bowed to me. “Mrs. Fraser? I trust I see you well, ma’am.” Obviously, he’d heard the story behind Jamie’s dramatic resignation.

“You do, thank you,” I said. “Do watch out for the crayfish there, Colonel.” For Richardson was standing just in front of the tin tub in which I’d set the crayfish, covered with water and supplied with a few handfuls of cornmeal, with which they’d purge their nasty little entrails over the next twenty-four hours and become safe to eat.

"Your pardon, ma'am," he said politely, moving aside. Unlike Howe, he was chiefly concerned with the men; I saw his eyes touch for an instant on Fergus's hook, dismiss him, then rest on Ian, with an air of satisfaction. What Jamie called a cold grue went down my back. I knew already what they wanted; this was a high-level press gang.

Jamie recognized their purpose, too.

"My wife is well, thanks be to God, General. I expect she would like her husband to remain in that condition, too."

Well, that was fairly blunt. Howe evidently decided there was no point in further civilities and waded in directly.

"Are you aware, sir, that a number of British troops have disembarked just outside the city and doubtless mean to invade and capture it?"

"I am," Jamie said patiently. "I watched their ships come in last night. As for capturing the city, I think they're verra well placed to do just that. And if I were you, General—and I thank the Lord that I'm not—I should be gatherin' my men this minute and marching out of the city wi' them. Ken the proverb about livin' to fight another day, do ye? I recommend it as a strategy."

"Do I understand you aright, sir?" Richardson put in, his tone edgy. "You decline to join in the defense of your own city?"

"Aye, we do," Ian put in before Jamie could answer. He eyed the visitors in an unfriendly way, and I saw his right hand drop to his side, reaching for Rollo's head, then his fingers curl up tight, missing it. "It's no our city and we're no disposed to die for it."

I was sitting next to Rachel and felt her shoulders lose a little of their tension. Across the table, Marsali's eyes slid sideways, meeting Fergus's, and I saw a moment of silent marital communication and accord. *"If they don't know who we are, don't tell them."*

Howe, a rather thickset man, opened and closed his mouth several times before finding words.

"I am appalled, sir," he managed finally, his face quite red. "Appalled," he repeated, his second chin quivering with outrage—and, I thought, no little desperation. "That a man known for his bravery in battle, his constancy to the cause of freedom, would cravenly submit to the rule of the bloody tyrant!"

"A choice little short of treason," Richardson put in, nodding severely. I raised my eyebrows at this and stared at him, but he sedulously avoided my eye.

Jamie stood looking at them for a moment, rubbing a forefinger down the bridge of his nose.

"Mr. Howe," he said at last, dropping his hand. "How many men have ye in your command?"

"Why … nearly a thousand!"

"How nearly?"

"Six hundred," Richardson said, at the same moment that Howe exclaimed, "Nine hundred, sir!"

"Aye," said Jamie, clearly unimpressed. "Those transports carry three thousand men, easily—well armed, with artillery—and they've an entire Highland regiment wi' them, too; I heard their pipes as they came ashore."

Howe's color faded noticeably. Still, he had grit; he kept his dignity.

"Whatever the odds, sir," he said, "it is my duty to fight and to protect the city entrusted to my care."

"I respect your devotion to your duty, General," Jamie said, quite seriously. "And may God be with ye. But I won't."

"We could physically compel you," Richardson pointed out.

"Ye could," Jamie agreed, unruffled. "But to what end? Ye canna make me command men if I refuse to do it, and what good is an unwilling soldier?"

"This is craven cowardice, sir!" Howe said, but it was clear that this was bluster, and poorly acted bluster, at that.

"Dia eadarainn 's an t-olc," Jamie said quietly, and nodded toward the door. *"God between us and evil,"* he said. "Go with God, gentlemen, but leave my house."

* * *

"THEE DID WELL, Jamie," Rachel said quietly, after the sound of the soldiers' footsteps had faded from the stairwell. "No Friend could have spoken more wisely."

He glanced at her, mouth quirking.

"Thank ye, lass," he said. "But I think ye ken I wasna speaking from the same reasons a Friend might have."

"Oh, I do," she said, smiling. "But the effect is the same, and Friends are grateful for whatever they can get. Will thee have the last frog leg?"

A small ripple of laughter ran through the adults, and the children, who had been sitting rigid and white-faced during the soldiers' visit, relaxed as though they were balloons that someone had let the air out of and began zooming around the room in relief. Fearing for the tub of crayfish, Jenny and Marsali marshaled them into some sort of order and marched them off home to bed, Marsali pausing to kiss Fergus and adjuring him to be careful walking home alone.

"The British are not in the city yet, *mon chou*," he said, kissing her back.

"Aye, well—it never hurts to keep in practice," she said tartly. "Come along, ye wee rattans."

The rest of us sat for a time discussing the immediate future and what little might be done. Jamie was right about the advantages of poverty in such a situation—but at the same time …

"They'll take whatever food they find," I said. "At least at first." I gave the shelf behind me a quick glance; it was our pantry and held the sum total of the household's stores: a small crock of lard, cloth bags of oatmeal, flour, rice, beans, and parched corn, a braid of onions and a few dried apples, half a wheel of cheese, a little box of salt and a pepper pot, and the remains of a loaf of sugar. Plus our small stock of candles.

"Aye." Jamie nodded, got up, and fetched his purse, which he turned out on the table. "Fourteen shillings, about. Ian? Fergus?" Ian and Rachel's resources amounted to another nine shillings, Fergus's one guinea, two shillings, and a handful of pennies.

"See what ye can get at the tavern tomorrow, lass," he said, pushing a small pile of coins toward Rachel. "I think I can put aside a cask of salt fish from the warehouse. And you, Sassenach—if ye're quick at the market in the morning, ye might manage to get more rice and beans, maybe a flitch of bacon?" Bits of copper and silver winked on the table before me, the King's stolid countenance chiseled in profile.

"There's no good hiding place in our room," Ian observed, looking around. "Nor here. Auntie's wee surgery, d'ye think?"

"Aye, that's what I was thinking. It's a board floor, and the building's got a good foundation. I'll maybe make a wee hidey-hole tomorrow. I shouldna think there's much in your surgery that soldiers would want?” This last was said questioningly to me.

“Only the medicines that are made with alcohol,” I said. I took a deep breath. “Speaking of soldiers—I have to tell you something. It may not be important—but then again …” And I told them about Ezekiel Richardson.

“Ye’re quite sure of it, Sassenach?” Jamie frowned a little, red brows sparking in the candlelight. “Yon man’s got a face that might belong to anyone.”

“He’s not what you’d call memorable, at all,” I admitted. “But, yes, I am sure. He has that mole on the side of his chin; I remember that. It’s more the way he was looking at me, though. He recognized *me*, I’m positive.”

Jamie drew breath and blew it out slowly, considering. Then he put his hands flat on the table and looked at Ian.

“Your auntie met my son, William, in the city the other day—by accident,” he said, his voice carefully neutral. “Tell them what he said of Richardson, Sassenach, will ye?”

I did, keeping an eye on the pulse in Ian’s throat. So was Rachel; she put a hand quietly on his, which he was clenching in a fist on the table. He glanced at her, smiled briefly, and reluctantly unclenched it, lacing his fingers with hers.

“And what’s William doing here, then?” Ian asked, obviously working to keep any hint of hostility out of his voice.

“He was looking for Richardson, in fact, but he’s also searching for his cousin’s wife, a woman named Amaranthus Grey—or perhaps Cowden,” I added. “She might be going by her maiden name. I’d meant to ask if either of you had heard any mention of her.”

Both Ian and Rachel shook their heads.

“Thee would remember a name like that,” Rachel said. “But thee thinks William doesn’t know that Richardson is here?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” I said. “Nor that Richardson has gone over to the Rebels. Apparently.”

There was silence for a moment. I could hear the faint clicking of the crayfish in the tub behind me and the slight pop as a fault in the candlewick made the flame bob and dance.

“This man Richardson may simply have changed his allegiance,” Rachel suggested. “I know of many who have, over the last two years.”

“He might,” I said slowly, “but the thing is—John thought he was an intelligencer—a spy or secret agent of some sort. And when someone of that stripe turns his coat … you have to ask whether he’s turned it once or twice. Or not at all. Don’t you?”

Jamie laid a hand on the table, thinking.

“Aye, well,” he said at last, and, sitting up straight, stretched himself with a sigh. “If there’s aught fishy about the man, we’ll ken it soon enough.”

“We will?” I asked. He gave me a wry smile.

“Aye, Sassenach. He’ll come looking for you. Keep your wee knife close to hand, aye?”

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INVASION

December 29

WE HEARD THE GUNS soon after dawn. Jamie paused in the act of shaving to listen. It was a distant thunder, irregular, muffled by distance. But I had heard artillery close at hand and felt the sound as an echo in my bones, urging instant flight. Jamie had heard artillery at a much closer range than I and set down his razor, planting his hands flat on the washstand. To keep them from trembling, I thought.

"They're firing cannon from the ships in the river," he said quietly. "And regular artillery from the south. God help Howe and his men." He crossed himself and picked up the razor.

"How far away do you think they are?" I had paused in the act of putting on my stockings and now drew one up, slowly fastening my garter. Jamie shook his head.

“No telling from in here. I’ll go out in a bit, though, and then I’ll see how the wind lies.”

“You’re going out?” I asked, uneasy at the prospect. “Surely you’re not going to work today.” Fadler’s warehouse, where he worked as a supervisor and senior clerk, was *on* the river.

“I am not,” he said briefly. “But I thought I’d go and fetch the bairns and Marsali and my sister. Fergus will be gone to see what’s happening, and I dinna want them left alone without a man.” His mouth thinned. “Especially not if the soldiers come into the city.”

I nodded, at once unable to speak. The thought of the things that happened—could happen—during an invasion … I had, thank God, never lived through such an event but had seen too many newsreels and photographs to be under any illusions as to the possibilities. And there had already been reports of a British company come up from Florida under an officer named Major Prevost, raiding the countryside around Sunbury, running off cattle, and burning barns and farmhouses. Sunbury was not nearly far enough away for comfort.

When Jamie left, I rattled around for a few minutes, undecided what to do first, but then pulled myself together and decided to make a quick visit to my surgery. It would be a good idea to take away my more-valuable instruments—not that any of them had great value; there was no black market in amputation saws (at least not yet …)—and such drugs and supplies as might be needed if—

I cut that “if” off sharply and looked around our modest room. I had been keeping only a few staples, like flour and butter, and the more perishable items of food here; anything that could be stored for a while was now hidden under the floor of my surgery. If we were about to have Marsali, Jenny, and the children to stay for an indefinite time, though, I'd best bring back a few more things.

I took my biggest basket and knocked at Rachel's door downstairs. She answered at once, already dressed to go out.

"Ian has gone with Fergus," she said, before I could ask. "He says he will not fight with the militia but that Fergus is his brother and it is his duty to see him safe. I can't complain about that."

"I could," I said frankly. "I'd complain like billy-o if I thought it would do any good. Waste of breath, though. Will you come with me down to the surgery? Jamie's gone to get Jenny and Marsali and the children, so I thought I'd best bring back something for them to eat."

"Let me get my basket."

The streets were full of people—most of them in some process of leaving the city, fetching goods, or drawing carts through the streets, though some were clearly bent on looting. I saw two men break a window and crawl through it into a large house off Ellis Square.

We reached the surgery without incident, though, and found two whores standing outside. They were women I knew, and I introduced them to Rachel, who was much less discomposed by the introduction than they were.

"We're wanting to buy pox cures, missus," said Molly, a sturdy Irish girl. "So many as ye might have to hand and be willin' to part with."

"Are you, um, expecting a—er—rash of the pox? So to speak?" I was unlocking the door as we spoke, calculating whether the current crop of penicillin was likely to be sufficiently potent as to make any difference.

"It don't matter that much whether it works or not, ma'am," said Iris, who was very tall, very thin, and very black. "We'uns plan to sell 'em to the soldiers."

"I see," I said, rather blankly. "Well, then …"

I gave them what penicillin I had in liquid form, declining to charge them. I kept the powdered mold and the remnants of Roquefort cheese, though, in case the family might have need of them—and suffered a bolt of vivid fear at the thought of Fergus and Ian, doing God knew what. The artillery had stopped—or the wind had changed—but it started up again as we made our way home, holding our baskets under our cloaks to prevent snatch-and-grab attacks.

Jamie had brought back Marsali and Jenny and the children, all of them carrying what they could in the way of clothes, food, and bedding. There was a long period of total chaos, while things were organized, but at last we sat down to a sort of rough tea, at around three o'clock. Jamie, declining to be involved in the domestic engineering, had exercised his male prerogative of disappearing on vaguely unspecified "business" but, with unerring instinct, reappeared just as the cake was being set out, bearing a large gunnysack full of clams, a barrel of flour, and a modicum of news.

"The fighting's over," he said, looking for someplace to set the clams down.

"I noticed the guns had stopped some time ago. Do you know what's happened?" I took the bag and decanted the clams with a loud clatter into the empty cauldron, then poured a bucket of water over them. They'd keep until supper.

"Exactly what I told General Howe would happen," he said, though not with any sense of pleasure at being right.

"Campbell—that's the British Lieutenant Colonel, Archibald Campbell—circled Howe and his men and bagged them up like fish in a net. I dinna ken what he's done wi' them, but I expect there will be troops in the city before nightfall."

The women all looked at one another and relaxed visibly. This was actually good news. What with one thing and another, the British army was quite good at occupying cities. And while the citizenry might justifiably resent the billeting of troops and the requisitioning of supplies, the underlying fact was that there's nothing for keeping public order like having an army living with you.

"Will we be safe, then, with the soldiers here?" Joanie asked. She was bright-eyed with the adventure, like her siblings, and had been following the adult conversation closely.

"Aye, mostly," Jamie said, but his eye met Marsali's, and she grimaced. We probably would be safe enough, though food might be short for a while, until the army quartermasters got things straightened out. Fergus and Bonnie, though, were another matter.

"Luckily, we hadna started up *L'Oignon* yet," she said, answering Jamie's look. "It's only been printing up handbills and broadsheets and the odd religious tract. I think it will be all right," she said bravely, but she reached to touch Félicité's dark head, as though to reassure herself.

We had the clams made into chowder—rather a watery chowder, as we had very little milk, but we thickened it with crumbled biscuit, and there *was* enough butter—and were setting the table for supper when Fergus and Ian came clattering up the stairs, flushed with excitement and full of news.

“It was a black slave who made the difference,” Fergus said, cramming a piece of bread into his mouth. “*Mon Dieu*, I’m famished! We haven’t eaten all day. This man wandered into the British camp soon after the fighting began and offered to show them a secret path through the swamp. Lieutenant Colonel Campbell sent a regiment of Highlanders—we could hear the pipes; it reminded me of Prestonpans.” He grinned at Jamie, and I could see the scrawny ten-year-old French orphan he’d been, riding on a captured cannon. He swallowed and washed the bite down with water, that being all we had at the moment.

“Highlanders,” he continued, “and some other infantry, and they followed the slave through the swamp and got well round General Howe’s men, who were all clumped together, for of course they didn’t know from which direction the fight might come.”

Campbell had then sent another infantry company to Howe’s left, “to make some demonstrations,” Fergus said, waving an airy hand and scattering crumbs. “They turned, of course, to meet this, and then the Highlanders fell on them from the other side, and *voilà!*” He snapped his fingers.

“I doubt Howe feels any gratitude to that slave,” Ian put in, scooping his bowl into the cauldron of chowder. “But he ought. He didna lose more than thirty or forty men—and had they stood and fought, they’d likely all have been killed, if they hadn’t the sense to surrender. And he didna strike me as a man o’ sense,” he added thoughtfully.

“How long d’ye think they’ll stay, the army?” Jenny was slicing bread and handing out the pieces round the table but paused to wipe a forearm across her brow. It was winter, but with the fire going in the small room and so many people crowded in, the temperature was quickly approaching Turkish-bath levels.

All the men exchanged glances. Then Jamie spoke, reluctantly.

“A long time, *a piuthar*.”

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A SOVEREIGN CURE

IT HAD TO BE done, and it had to be done now. Between Jamie's uneasiness and my own misgivings, I'd put off the question of making ether. But now we were up against it: I simply couldn't do what needed to be done for Sophronia without a dependable general anesthetic.

I'd already decided that I could do the manufacture in the tiny toolshed in Mrs. Landrum's huge kitchen garden. It was outside the city limits, with an acre of open space on every side, this occupied only by winter kale and hibernating carrots. If I blew myself to kingdom come, I wouldn't take anyone else with me.

I doubted that this observation would reassure Jamie to any great extent, though, so I put off mentioning my plans. I'd assemble what I needed and tell him only at the last minute, thus saving him worry. And, after all, if I couldn't obtain the necessary ingredients … but I was sure that I could. Savannah was a sizable city, and a shipping port. There were at least three apothecaries in town, as well as several warehouses that imported specialty items from England. *Someone* was bound to have sulfuric acid, otherwise known as oil of vitriol.

The weather was cool but sunny, and seeing a number of red-coated soldiers in the street, I wondered idly whether climatic considerations had had anything to do with the British deciding to switch their theater of operations to the South.

The elder Mr. Jameson—a sprightly gentleman in his seventies—greeted me pleasantly when I entered Jameson's Apothecary. I'd had occasion to make small purchases of herbs from him before, and we got on well. I presented him with my list and browsed among the jars on his shelves while he pottered to and fro in search of my requests. There were three young soldiers on the other side of the shop, gathered in furtive conversation with the younger Mr. Jameson over something he was showing them under his counter. Pox cures, I assumed—or—giving them the benefit of the doubt regarding foresight—possibly condoms.

They concluded their surreptitious purchases and scuttled out, heads down and rather red in the face. The younger Mr. Jameson, who was the grandson of the owner and about the same age as the just-departed soldiers, was also rather pink but greeted me with aplomb, bowing.

"Your servant, Mrs. Fraser! Might I be of assistance?"

"Oh, thank you, Nigel," I said. "Your grandfather has my list. But"—a thought had occurred to me, perhaps jogged by the soldiers—"I wonder whether you might know of a Mrs. Grey. Amaranthus Grey is her name, and I believe her maiden name was … oh, what was it? Cowden! Amaranthus Cowden Grey. Have you ever heard that name?"

He wrinkled his very smooth brow in thought.

“What an odd name. Er—meaning no offense, ma’am,” he hastily assured me. “I meant … rather exotic. Quite unusual.”

“Yes, it is. I don’t know her,” I said, “but a friend of mine said that she lived in Savannah and had urged me to … er … make her acquaintance.”

“Yes, of course.” Nigel hmm’d for a bit but shook his head. “No, I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t believe I’ve ever encountered an Amaranthus Cowden.”

“Cowden?” said Mr. Jameson, emerging suddenly from his back room with several bottles in his hands. “Of course we have, boy. Or, rather, not encountered; she’s never come in the shop. But we had a request brought by mail, only two or three weeks ago, asking for … oh, what was it, my mind is a sieve, Mrs. Fraser, an absolute sieve, I assure you—don’t get old, that’s my advice—oh, yes. Gould’s complexion cream, Villette’s gripe water, a box of pastilles to sweeten the breath, and a dozen bars of Savon D’Artagnan French soap. That was it.” He beamed at me over his spectacles. “She lives in Saperville,” he added, as an afterthought.

“You’re a wonder, Granddad,” Nigel murmured dutifully, and reached for the bottles his grandfather was holding. “Shall I wrap these, or are we mixing something for the lady?”

“Oh.” Mr. Jameson looked down at the bottles in his hands, as though wondering how they’d got there. “Oh, yes! I wanted to ask you, Mrs. Fraser, what it was you had in mind to *do* with oil of vitriol. It’s amazingly dangerous, you know.”

“Um, yes, I do.” I eyed him consideringly; some men would be quite capable of refusing to sell a woman something they thought inappropriate or dangerous, but Mr.

Jameson seemed a worldly sort—and he did at least know that I knew the use of medicinal herbs.

"I have it in mind to make ether," I said. The substance was known, I knew—someone or other had discovered it back in the eighth century, or so I was told in medical school—but its use as an anesthetic wouldn't be developed 'til somewhere in the nineteenth century. I wondered idly whether anyone in the intervening eleven hundred years *had* noticed that the stuff put people to sleep, but had inadvertently killed them and thus abandoned further experimentation.

Both Mr. Jamesons looked surprised.

"Ether?" said Nigel, openly puzzled. "Why would you make it yourself?"

"Why would I—what, do you mean that you have the stuff already made up?" I asked, astonished.

Both of them nodded, pleased to be of service.

"Oh, yes," Mr. Jameson said. "We don't always stock it, of course, but with the … er … army"—he waved a hand, encompassing the recent invasion and occupation—"there are the troop transports, and there will be a great increase of shipping, now that the blockade is not in effect."

"What does the increase of shipping have to do with the sale of ether?" I asked, wondering whether Mr. Jameson might just possibly be right about the effects of advancing age on the brain.

"Why, ma'am," said Nigel. "It's a sovereign cure for the seasickness. Did you not know?"

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A BORN GAMBLER

I COUNTED MY INSTRUMENTS for the third time and, finding that none of them had escaped since the last count, covered them with a clean linen cloth and patted it lightly in reassurance—whether of the scalpels or myself, I wasn't sure. Silk sutures, gut sutures, needles—the finest embroidery needles obtainable in Savannah. Pledgets, swabs, dressings, rolled bandages. A six-inch willow twig, carefully cleaned of its pith, sanded smooth, and boiled slowly—so as not to crack the wood—to be used as a catheter to stabilize the urethra and bladder and keep urine out of the surgical field. I'd thought of using a larger one for the bowel, but decided that I'd be better using my fingers to manipulate the slippery tissues there—so long as I managed neither to cut nor puncture myself in the process.

Rachel was coming to assist with the surgery, and I'd go through all the instruments and procedures again with her. I'd come down an hour early, though, wanting both to make my final preparations and to spend a little time alone, settling my mind and spirit to the job ahead.

I felt surprisingly calm, considering the complexity and risks of the operation ahead. It could be argued that even if I failed, the poor child couldn't possibly be worse off than she was—but of course she could die as a result of the surgery, from shock, infection, or even accidental hemorrhage. Abdominal surgery was much more serious than trying a transvaginal correction—but given what I had at hand, I thought the chances of achieving a cure were much better that way. And then there was the matter of the curettage that had removed the dead infant; I had no idea what kind of damage that might have inflicted, but if there was any, I might be able to correct it.

I glanced automatically at the shelf where my penicillin factory was working—or at least I hoped it was working, billions of little spores excreting their helpful substance. I hadn't had time in Savannah to establish a good process and test the resultant product; there was, as was so often the case, no guarantee whatever that I *had* usable penicillin in my broth. But I did have a small chunk of very ripe French cheese, acquired at extravagant cost and stirred into a little boiled milk to make a paste; the thick scent of it fought for ascendancy with the pungent smell of ether.

I could hear the early-morning sounds of the city outside, soothing in their ordinariness: the whisk of a broom on pavement, the clop of horse-drawn wagons, a tantalizing smell of hot bread as the baker's boy's quick footsteps passed by. The simple demands of life quickly made routine out of any sort of chaos, and as invasions went, the occupation of Savannah had been reasonably bloodless.

My sense of well-being and calm detachment was interrupted a moment later by the opening of the surgery door.

"May I help—" I began, turning. Then I saw my visitor and altered my remark to a fairly hostile "What do *you* want?"

Captain—no, he was a colonel now; the wages of treason, I supposed—Richardson smiled charmingly at me, then turned and bolted the door. I pulled out a drawer and removed my small amputation saw; it was small enough to handle quickly, and the serrated edge would take his nose off, if my aim was good.

The charming smile broadened into a grin as he saw what I was about, and he bowed. He wasn't wearing a uniform—and no wonder—but was clothed in a decent, rather sober suit, with unpowdered hair tied simply back. No one would have looked at him twice.

"Your most humble servant, ma'am. Have no alarm; I merely wished to make sure we weren't interrupted."

"Yes, that's what I'm alarmed *about*," I said, taking a firm grip on the saw. "Unbolt that bloody door this minute."

He looked at me for a moment, one eye narrowed in calculation, but then uttered a short laugh and, turning, pulled the bolt. Folding his arms, he leaned against the door.

"Better?"

"Much." I let go the saw but didn't move my hand far from it. "I repeat—what do you want?"

"Well, I thought perhaps the time had come to lay my cards upon your table, Mrs. Fraser—and see whether you might want to play a hand or two."

"The only thing I might be inclined to play with you, Colonel, is mumblety-peg," I said, tapping my fingers on the handle of the saw. “But if you want to show me your cards, go right ahead. You want to be quick about it, though—I have an operation to conduct in less than an hour.”

“It shouldn’t take that long. May I?” Raising his brows, he gestured at one of the stools. I nodded, and he sat down, looking quite relaxed.

“The essence of the matter, ma’am, is that I am a Rebel—and always have been.”

“You—what?”

“I am presently a colonel in the Continental army—but when you first knew me, I was working as an American agent in the guise of a captain in His Majesty’s army in Philadelphia.”

“I don’t understand.” I grasped *what* he was telling me but couldn’t grasp *why* the hell he should be telling me.

“You are a Rebel yourself, are you not?” One sparse brow lifted in inquiry. He really was the most ordinary-looking man, I thought. If he *was* a spy, he was physically well suited for it.

“I am,” I said guardedly. “What about it?”

“Then we’re on the same side,” he said patiently. “When I cozened Lord John Grey into marrying you, I—”

“You *what*?”

“Surely he told you that I had threatened to have you arrested for distributing seditious materials? At which you’re very clumsy, I might add,” he added dispassionately. “His lordship assured me that he had no personal interest in you whatever and then most obligingly married you the next day. His lordship is a very gallant man—particularly in view of his own preferences.”

He cocked his head, smiling in a conspiratorial manner, and a spear of ice shot through my belly.

"Oh, you do know, then," he observed, watching my face. "I thought you would. He's extremely discreet, but I think you a very perceptive woman, particularly in sexual matters."

"Stand up," I said, in my coldest voice, "and leave. Right now."

He didn't, of course, and I cursed my lack of forethought in not keeping a loaded pistol in the surgery. The saw might serve if he attacked me, but I knew better than to try attacking him.

Besides, what would you do with the body, if you killed him? the logical side of my mind inquired. *He wouldn't fit in the cupboard, let alone the hidey-hole.*

"For the third—and last—time," I said. "What do you bloody want?"

"Your help," he said promptly. "I'd originally had it in mind to use you as an agent in place. You could have been very valuable to me, moving in the same social circles as the British high command. But you seemed too unstable—forgive me, ma'am—to approach immediately. I hoped that as your grief over your first husband faded, you would come to a state of resignation in which I might seek your acquaintance and by degrees achieve a state of intimacy in which you could be persuaded to discover small—and, at first, seemingly innocent—bits of information, which you would pass on to me."

"Just what do you mean by 'intimacy'?" I said, folding my arms. Because while the word in current parlance often meant merely friendship, he hadn't used it with that intonation at all.

"You're a very desirable woman, Mrs. Fraser," he said, looking me over in an objectionably appraising way. "And one who knows her desirability. His lordship obviously wasn't obliging you in that regard, so …" He lifted a shoulder, smiling in a deprecating fashion. "But as General Fraser has returned from the dead, I imagine you're no longer susceptible to lures of that kind."

I laughed and dropped my arms.

"You flatter yourself, Colonel," I said dryly. "If not me. Look: why not stop trying to fluster me and tell me what you want me to do and why on earth you think I'd do it."

He laughed, too, which lent some sense of individuality to his face.

"Very well. It may be difficult to believe, but this war will not be won on the battlefield."

"Oh, yes?"

"Yes, I assure you, ma'am. It will be won by spying and by politics."

"A very novel approach, I'm sure." I was trying to place his accent; it was English but a rather flat sort of accent. Not London, not the north … educated, but not polished. "I assume you weren't soliciting my assistance in the political line."

"No, actually, I am," he said. "If somewhat indirectly."

"I suggest you try the direct approach," I said. "My patient will be arriving very shortly." The sounds outside had changed; apprentices and housemaids were going past in little groups, bound for work or daily marketing. Calls to and fro, the occasional giggle of a flirtation in passing.

Richardson nodded in acceptance.

"Are you aware of the Duke of Pardloe's opinion of this war?"

I was somewhat taken aback by this. Foolishly, it hadn't occurred to me that Hal might have one, outside the requirements of his service. But if ever I had met a man guaranteed to have opinions, it was Harold, Second Duke of Pardloe.

"What with one thing and another, I've never exchanged views with the duke on political matters. Nor with my—nor with his brother, for that matter."

"Ah. Well, ladies often take no interest in things outside their own sphere of interest—though I rather thought you might have a … wider appreciation, shall we say?" He looked pointedly from my canvas apron and tray of instruments to the other appointments of my surgery.

"What about his politics?" I asked shortly, disregarding his implications.

"His Grace is a strong voice in the House of Lords," Richardson said, playing with a frayed thread on the edge of his cuff. "And while he was at first very much in favor of the war, his opinions of late have been noticeably more … moderate. He wrote a public letter to the first minister in the fall, urging a consideration of reconciliation."

"And?" I hadn't the slightest idea where he was going with this and was growing impatient.

"Reconciliation is not what we want, ma'am," he said, and, pulling the thread free, flicked it aside. "Such efforts will only delay the inevitable and interfere with the commitment of the citizenry that we desperately need. But the fact that His Grace shows this moderation of outlook is useful to me."

"Jolly good," I said. "Get to the point, if you please."

He ignored this and proceeded about his exposition as though he had all the time in the world.

"Were he fiercely committed to one extreme or the other, he would be difficult to … influence. While I don't know His

Grace well, everything I know *of* him indicates that he values his sense of honor—"

"He does."

"—almost as much as he values his family," Richardson finished. He looked directly at me, and for the first time I felt a flicker of real fear.

"I have for some time been working to acquire influence—whether direct or otherwise—over such members of the duke's family as are within my reach. With, say, a son—a nephew?—perhaps even his brother in my control, it would then be possible to affect His Grace's public position, in whatever way seemed most advantageous to us."

"If you're suggesting what I think you're suggesting, then I suggest you leave my sight this instant," I said, in what I hoped was a tone of calm menace. Though I spoiled whatever effect there might have been by adding, "Besides, I have absolutely no connection with any of Pardloe's family now."

He smiled faintly, with no sense of pleasantry at all.

"His nephew, William, is in the city, ma'am, and you were seen speaking with him nine days ago. Perhaps you are unaware, though, that both Pardloe and his brother are here, as well?"

"Here?" My mouth hung open for an instant and I closed it sharply. "With the army?"

He nodded.

"I gather that in spite of your recent … marital rearrangement?… you remain on good terms with Lord John Grey."

"Sufficiently good that I would do nothing whatever to deliver him into your bloody hands, if that's what you had in mind."

"Nothing so crude, ma'am," he assured me, with a brief flash of teeth. "I had in mind only the transmission of information—in both directions. I intend no damage at all to the duke or his family; I only wish to—"

Whatever his intentions, they were interrupted by a tentative knock on the door, which then opened to admit Mrs. Bradshaw's head. She looked apprehensively at me and suspiciously at Richardson, who cleared his throat, stood up, and bowed to her.

"Your servant, ma'am," he said. "I was just taking my leave of Mrs. Fraser. Good day to you." He turned and bowed to me, more elaborately. "Your most humble servant, Mrs. Fraser. I look forward to seeing you again. Soon."

"I'll just bet you do," I said, but far enough under my breath that I doubted he heard me.

Mrs. Bradshaw and Sophronia edged into the room, coming close enough to Richardson on his way out that his face wrinkled up in involuntary revulsion at smelling Sophronia, and he cast a startled glance over his shoulder at me—this causing him to collide heavily with Rachel, hurrying in. He waltzed with her for a step or two, finally getting his balance and making his inelegant escape, pursued by my laughter.

This bit of slapstick had partially dispelled the uneasiness he'd brought to my surgery, and I put him firmly out of my mind. Sufficient to the day was the Richardson thereof, and I had work to do. It was with a sense of confidence that I took Sophronia's small hand between my own and smiled at her downcast face.

"Don't be worried, sweetheart," I said. "I'm going to take care of you."

WITH A MODERN hospital and equipment, I would have done the surgery transvaginally. Given my current resources, though, it would have to be abdominal. With Mrs. Bradshaw anxiously perched on a stool out of the way—she wouldn’t leave, and I hoped she wouldn’t faint—and Rachel carefully counting drops of ether under her breath, I took my best scalpel and cut into Sophronia’s fresh-scrubbed belly. The stretch marks left by her pregnancy were fading but still visible on her very young flesh.

I had makeshift stirrups, should I need them, made by nailing blocks of wood to the table at an angle, and I’d put a wadded towel between her thighs, soaked with the antibacterial lotion I’d scrubbed her with, an alcoholic extraction of crushed garlic mixed with a hot-water extract of lemon balm. It smelled pleasantly kitchen-like and did something to kill the sewage smell—as well as germs, I hoped.

The ether, though, was stronger than anything else, and within ten minutes of starting, I began to feel a slight swimming in my head.

“Mrs. Bradshaw,” I called over my shoulder. “Will you open the window, please? And the shutters?” I hoped we wouldn’t attract any spectators—but the need for fresh air was imperative.

The vesicovaginal fistula was luckily fairly small and in a reasonably easy position to reach. Rachel was holding a retractor for me with one hand, keeping the other on Sophronia’s pulse, and administering more ether every few minutes.

“Are you all right, Rachel?” I asked, trimming back the edges of the fistula in order to get a decent field for stitching—the edges were flattened and macerated, and the tissue would shred and pull apart under any sort of pressure. I’d had some hesitation in asking her to help today; I would have asked Jenny, but she was suffering from what was called the catarrh, and sneezing and coughing were the last things I wanted in a surgical assistant.

“I am,” she answered, her voice slightly muffled behind her not-quite-sterile-but-at-least-boiled mask. She’d used one of Ian’s handkerchiefs for the purpose; it was an incongruously cheerful calico in dark-pink-and-white checks. Ian’s taste in clothing was strongly Mohawk.

“Good. Tell me if you feel at all dizzy.” I had no idea what I’d do if she *did* feel dizzy—perhaps Mrs. Bradshaw could take over the dropping bottle for a few minutes.…

I spared a quick glance over my shoulder. Mrs. Bradshaw sat on her stool, gloved hands clasped tight in her lap and her face pale as a sheet, but she sat firm.

“It’s going well so far,” I said to her, trying to sound as reassuring as possible through my own chaste white mask. The masks seemed to unnerve her, and she looked away, swallowing.

It really was going well, though. While it was Sophronia’s youth that had caused the problem, that also meant that her tissues were healthy, in good shape, and she had considerable animal vitality. If the surgery was successful, if there was little or no subsequent infection, she’d heal very quickly. If.

“Ifs” hover in the air above your head all the time when you’re doing surgery, like a cloud of gnats. For the most part, though, they keep a respectful distance, only buzzing dimly in the background.

Done.

"One down, one to go," I murmured, and, dipping a wad of sterilized gauze into my cheese lotion, I daubed some—not without a qualm—over the newly stitched repair. "Onward."

The bowel repair was easier—though more unpleasant. It was quite cold in the surgery—I hadn't lit a fire, not wanting soot in the air—but I was sweating; beads of perspiration ran tickling down the side of my nose and down my neck from my bound-up hair.

I could feel the girl, though, the life of her echoing in my hands, her heartbeat strong and steady—there was a large blood vessel visible on the surface of the uterus, and I could see it pulsing. She'd been lucky in the one thing: the uterus hadn't been perforated, and looked healthy. I couldn't tell whether there was internal scarring, but when I cupped my hand gently over the organ, it felt normal to me. For a moment, I closed my eyes, feeling deeper, and found what I thought I needed. I opened them again, blotted the ooze of blood from the cut tissues, and reached for a fresh needle.

How long? Anesthesia complications were one of the nasty little flying "ifs," and that one flew down and perched on my shoulder. I had no clock or pocket watch but had brought a small sandglass borrowed from our landlady.

"How long has it been, Rachel?"

"Twenty minutes." Her voice was soft, and I looked up, but she was still steady, her eyes fixed on the open belly. She was nearly four months' pregnant, her own belly slightly rounded. "Don't worry," I said to her briefly. "It won't happen to you."

"Surely it *could*?" she said, still more softly.

I shook my head.

"Not if I'm with you when you give birth."

She made a small amused sound and picked up the dropping bottle again. "Thee will be, I assure thee, Claire."

Rachel was shivering slightly by the time I'd finished; I was wringing wet but feeling the glow of at least temporary victory. The fistulas were repaired, the leakage stopped. I irrigated the surgical field with saline solution and the organs glistened, the beautiful deep colors of the body unmarred by smears of fecal matter.

I paused for a moment to admire the neat compactness of the pelvic organs, all in their places. There was a tiny trickle of pale urine from the catheter, staining the towel with a faint yellow shadow. In a modern hospital, I would have left the catheter in during the healing, but it would be difficult to manage without a drainage bag, and the chances of irritation or infection from the device were likely greater than the possible benefits of leaving it. I eased it free of her body, watching. Within a few seconds, the flow of urine ceased, and I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding.

I had taken up a fresh needle threaded with silk, to close the incision, when something occurred to me.

"Rachel—do you want to look? Closely, I mean." Sophronia had had ether within the last couple of minutes and was still deeply under; Rachel checked her color and breathing and then came round the table to stand beside me.

I didn't think she'd be disturbed by the blood or the sight of organs, given the things she'd seen in military camps and battlefields. She wasn't, but she *was* disturbed.

"That—" She swallowed and put a hand to her swelling stomach, very gently. "So beautiful," she whispered. "How the body is made. How such things can be."

"It is," I said, her awe making me lower my own voice.

"To think of her poor infant, though … and she no more than a child …"

I glanced at Rachel and saw tears standing in her eyes. And I saw the thought cross her face, masked as it was: *It could happen to me*.

"Yes," I said quietly. "Go back to the ether; I'll close the incision now." But as I dipped my hands again in the bowl of alcohol and water, something else occurred to me.

Oh, God, I thought, appalled at the thought. But …

"Mrs. Bradshaw," I said. She was sitting with her head bowed, arms wrapped round herself against the chill, perhaps half asleep. When I spoke, though, her head came up sharply.

"Is it over?" she asked. "Does she live?"

"She does," I said. "And, with luck, will continue to do so. But …" I hesitated, but I had to ask. And I had to ask this woman.

"Before I sew up the incision … I can—do a very minor procedure that will stop Sophronia from becoming pregnant again."

Mrs. Bradshaw blinked.

"You can?"

"Yes. It's a simple thing to do—but, once done, it can't be undone. She'd never be able to have babies." A fresh cloud of "ifs" had formed, buzzing anxiously over my shoulder.

She was thirteen. She was a slave. And had a master who used her. If she were to become pregnant again soon, she might well die during the labor and would almost certainly be seriously damaged. It might never be safe for her to bear a child—but it wasn't safe for any woman, ever. And "never" is a very big word.

Mrs. Bradshaw had drifted slowly toward the table, her eyes twitching toward the exposed, half-draped body, then away, unable either to look or to stay away. I put out a hand, warding her off.

"Don't come closer, please."

"He was sad when the baby died. He cried." I could still hear the sadness in Sophronia's voice; she mourned her child. How could she not? Could I take away the possibility of another—forever—without even asking her what she felt about it?

And yet …

If she bore a child, it, too, would be a slave; it might be taken from her and sold. Even if not, it would likely live and die in slavery.

And yet …

"If she wasn't able to bear children …" Mrs. Bradshaw said slowly. She stopped speaking, and I could see the thoughts crossing her white, pinched face; her lips had all but disappeared, so tightly were they pressed together. I didn't think she was concerned with the fact that Sophronia's value would be diminished if she couldn't reproduce.

Would the fear of damage due to pregnancy stop Mr. Bradshaw from using the girl?

If she were barren, would he feel no hesitation?

"He didn't hesitate because she was twelve," I said, my words cold as pellets of ice. "Would the chance of killing her next time stop him?"

She stared at me in shock, mouth hanging open. She blinked, swallowed, and looked at Sophronia, limp and helpless, body gaping open on the blood-soaked towels, the floor around her thickly spattered with her fluids.

"I think thee cannot," Rachel said quietly. She looked from me to Mrs. Bradshaw, and it wasn't clear to whom she was speaking: perhaps both of us. She was holding Sophronia's hand.

"She felt her child move within her. She loved it." Rachel's voice broke, and she choked a little. Tears welled and rolled down to disappear into her mask. "She wouldn't … she …" She stopped, gulping a little, and shook her head, unable to go on.

Mrs. Bradshaw put a hand clumsily over her face, as though to stop me seeing her thoughts.

"I can't," she said, and repeated almost angrily, behind the shield of her hand, "I *can't*. It isn't my fault! I tried—I tried to do the right thing!" She wasn't talking to me; I didn't know if it was to Mr. Bradshaw or God.

The "ifs" were all still there, but so was Sophronia, and I couldn't leave her any longer.

"All right," I said quietly. "Go and sit down, Mrs. Bradshaw. I said I'd take care of her, and I will."

My hands were cold, and the body under them was very warm, pulsing with life. I picked up the needle and put in the first suture.

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WILL-O’-THE-WISP

SAPERVILLE? WILLIAM WAS beginning to wonder whether Amaranthus Cowden Grey actually existed or whether she was a will-o’-the-wisp created by Ezekiel Richardson. But if so—to what end?

He’d made careful inquiries after receiving Mrs. Fraser’s note yesterday; there really was a place called Saperville—a tiny settlement some twenty miles to the southwest of Savannah, in what his interlocutor had told him was “the piney woods,” in a tone of voice suggesting that the piney woods were next door to hell, both in terms of remoteness and uncivil conditions. He couldn’t conceive what might have made the woman—if she really did exist—go to such a place.

If she *didn’t* exist … then someone had invented her, and the most likely suspect for such a deception was Ezekiel Richardson. William had been decoyed by Richardson before. The entire experience in the Dismal Swamp still made him grit his teeth in retrospect—the more so when he reflected that, if not for that chain of events, neither he nor Ian Murray would have met Rachel Hunter.

With an effort, he dismissed Rachel from his mind—she wouldn't stay out of his dreams, but he didn't have to think about her while awake—and returned to the elusive Amaranthus.

In purely practical terms, Saperville lay on the other side of Campbell's army, which was still encamped over several acres of ground outside Savannah, while billeting arrangements were made, housing built, and fortifications dug. A large part of the Continental forces that had opposed them had been neatly bagged up and sent north as prisoners, and the chances of the remnants causing trouble for Campbell were minuscule. That didn't mean William could walk straight through the camp without attracting attention. He might not meet with anyone who knew him, but that didn't mean no one would question him. And however innocuous his errand, the last thing he wanted was to have to explain to anyone why he had resigned his commission.

He'd had time, while Campbell was arraying his forces, to take Miranda out of Savannah and board her with a farmer some ten miles to the north. The army foragers might still find her—they certainly would, if the army remained in Savannah for any great time—but for the moment she was safe. All too familiar with military rapacity—he'd seized horses and supplies himself, many times—he wasn't about to take her within sight of the army.

He drummed his fingers on the table, thinking, but reluctantly concluded that he'd best walk to Saperville, making a wide circle around Campbell's men. He wasn't going to find out about bloody Amaranthus sitting here, that was sure.

Resolved, he paid for his meal, wrapped himself in his cloak, and set off. It wasn't raining, that was one good thing.

It was January, though, and the days were still short; the shadows were lengthening by the time he came to the edge of the sea of camp followers that had formed around the army. He made his way past a conclave of red-armed laundresses, their kettles all fuming in the chilly air and the scent of smoke and lye soap hanging over them in a witchy sort of haze.

"Double, double toil and trouble," he chanted under his breath. *"Fire burn and caldron bubble. Fillet of a fenny snake, in the caldron boil and bake. Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog …"* He couldn't recall what came next and abandoned the effort.

Beyond the laundresses, the ground was choppy, the boggy spots interspersed with higher bits of ground, these crowned with stunted trees and low bushes—and quite obviously providing a footing, so to speak, for the whores to ply their own trade.

He gave these a somewhat wider berth and consequently found himself squelching through something that was not quite a bog, but not far off, either. It *was* remarkably beautiful, though, in a chiaroscuro sort of way; the fading light somehow made each barren twig stand out in stark contrast to the air, the swollen buds still sleeping but rounded, balanced on the edge between winter's death and the life of spring. He wished for a moment that he could draw, or paint, or write poetry, but as it was, he could only pause for a few seconds to admire it.

As he did so, though, he felt a permanence form in his heart, a quiet sense that even though he had only these few seconds, he would have them forever, could come back to this place, this time, in his mind.

He was right, though not entirely for the reasons he supposed.

He would have passed right by her, thinking she was a part of the bog, for she was curled over in a tight ball and the hood of her sad-colored cloak covered her head. But she made a tiny sound, a heartbroken whimper that stopped him in his tracks, and he saw her then, crouched in the mud at the foot of a sweet gum.

"Ma'am?" he said tentatively. She hadn't been aware of him; she uncurled suddenly, her white face staring up at him, shocked and tear-streaked. Then she gulped air and leapt to her feet, throwing herself at him.

"Wiyum! Wiyum!" It was Fanny, Jane's sister, alone, daubed with mud, and in a state of complete hysteria. She'd catapulted into his arms; he gripped her firmly, holding her lest she fly to pieces, which she looked very like doing.

"Frances. Frances! It's all right; I'm here. What's happened? Where's Jane?"

At her sister's name, she gave a wail that made his blood go cold and buried her face in his chest. He patted her back and, this failing to help, then shook her a little.

"Frances! Pull yourself together. Sweetheart," he added more gently, seeing her swimming, red-rimmed eyes and swollen face. She'd been weeping for a long time. "Tell me what's happened, so I can help you."

"You can't," she blubbered, and thumped her forehead hard against his chest, several times. "You can't, you can't, nobody can, you *can't*!"

"Well, we'll see about that." He looked around for someplace to sit her down, but there was nothing more solid than clumps of grass and spindly trees in sight. “Come on, it’s getting dark. We need to get out of this place, at least.” He set her firmly on her feet, took her arm, and compelled her to start walking, on the theory that one can’t be hysterical and walk in a straight line at the same time.

In fact, this seemed to be the case. By the time he’d got her back to the camp followers’ area, she was sniffling but no longer wailing, and she was looking where she was going. He bought her a cup of hot soup from a woman with a steaming cauldron and made her drink it, though a remnant thought of the fingers of birth-strangled babes made him forgo one for himself.

He handed back the empty cup and, seeing that Fanny was at least superficially calm now, towed her toward the hillock with trees, in search of a seat. She stiffened, though, as they approached, and pulled back with a little mew of fear.

Losing patience, he put a hand under her chin and made her meet his eyes.

“Frances,” he said in a level tone. “Tell me what the devil is going on, and do it now. Words of one syllable, if you please.”

“Jane,” she said, and her eyes began to overflow again. She dashed at them with her cloak-covered forearm, though, and, with a visible effort, managed to tell him.

“It wass a cuwwy.”

“A what? Oh, a cully, sorry. At the brothel, you mean. Yes?”

She nodded.

“He wass looking thu the gulls and s-saw J-Jane …” She gulped. “He wass a fwend of Captain Hahkness. He wass at da house when he—Captain Hahkness—died. He weckognized huh.”

A ball of ice formed in William's entrails at her words.

"The devil he did," he said softly. "What did he do, Fanny?"

The man—a Major Jenkins, she said—had seized Jane by the arm and dragged her off, Fanny running after them. He had taken her all the way into the city, to a house with soldiers standing outside. They wouldn't let Fanny in, so she had stood outside in the street, terrified but determined not to leave, and after a time they had given up trying to drive her away.

The house with soldiers standing outside was very likely Colonel Campbell's headquarters, William thought, beginning to feel sick. Presumably Jenkins had hauled Jane before some senior officer, if not Campbell himself, to denounce her for Harkness's murder.

Would they even bother giving her a trial? He doubted it. The city was under martial law; the army—or, rather, Lieutenant Colonel Campbell—did as it saw fit, and he doubted very much that Campbell would give a whore accused of murdering a soldier the benefit of any doubt.

"Where is she now?" He forced himself to go on sounding calm, though he felt anything but.

Fanny gulped and wiped her nose on her cloak again. At this point, it scarcely mattered, but by instinct he pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve and handed it to her.

"Dey took her to anovver house. On de edge of da city. Dere's a big tree dere, ousside. I tink dey'll hang her, Wiyum."

William was very much afraid they would. He swallowed the saliva that had collected in his mouth and patted Fanny's shoulder.

"I'll go and see what I can find out. Do you have friends here—someone to stay with?" He motioned at the mass of the encampment, where small fires were beginning to glow amidst the oncoming shades of night. She nodded, pressing her lips together to keep them from trembling.

"All right. Go and find them. I'll come in the morning—at first light. Meet me where I found you, all right?"

"Awright," she whispered, and laid a small white hand on his chest, just over his heart. "Sank you, Wiyum."

* * *

HIS ONLY CHANCE was to talk to Campbell. Fanny had told him the house where Jenkins had taken Jane was the big gray house north of Reynolds Square; that was the likeliest place to start.

He paused on the street to brush the worst of the dried mud and bits of vegetation off his cloak. He was only too well aware that he looked like exactly what he'd been pretending to be for the last three months: an unemployed laborer. On the other hand—

As he'd resigned his commission, he was no longer under Campbell's authority. And no matter how he personally felt about the matter of his title, it was still his, by law. The Ninth Earl of Ellesmere drew himself up to his full height, squared his shoulders, and went to war.

Manner and speech got him past the sentries at the door. The servant who came to take his cloak stared at him in unmitigated dismay, but was afraid to throw him out, and vanished to find someone who would take the responsibility of dealing with him.

There was a dinner party going on; he could hear the clink of silver and china, the glugging of bottles being poured, and the muted rumble of conversation, punctuated by bursts of polite laughter. His hands were sweating; he wiped them unobtrusively on his breeches.

What the devil was he going to say? He'd tried to formulate some line of reasonable argument on his way, but everything seemed to fall to pieces the moment he thought of it. He'd have to say something, though.…

Then he heard a voice, raised in question, that made his heart skip a beat. Uncle Hal! He couldn't be mistaken; his uncle and his father both had light but penetrating voices, clear as cut crystal—and sharp as good Toledo steel when they wanted to be.

"Here, you!" He strode down the hall and grabbed a servitor coming out of the dining room with a platter of crab shells in his hands. "Give me that," he ordered, taking the platter from the man's hands, "go back in there, and tell the Duke of Pardloe his nephew would like a word."

The man goggled at him, mouth open, but didn't move. William repeated his request, adding "Please," but also adding a stare meant to indicate that, in the case of resistance, his next step would be to bash the man over the head with the platter. This worked, and the man turned like an automaton and marched back into the dining room—from which, in very short order, his uncle emerged, polished in dress and manner but clearly excited in countenance.

"William! What the devil are you doing with that?" He took the platter from William and shoved it carelessly under one of the gilt chairs ranged along the wall of the foyer. "What's happened? Have you found Ben?"

Christ, he hadn't thought of that. Naturally, Uncle Hal would assume … With a grimace, he shook his head.

"I haven't, Uncle, I'm sorry. I think I do know where his wife is, but—"

Hal's face underwent a couple of lightning shifts, from excitement to disappointment to outward calm.

"Good. Where are you staying? John and I will come and —"

"Papa's here, too?" William blurted, feeling like a fool. If he hadn't been so sensitive about his position and thus avoided anyone from the army, he would have learned that the 46th was part of Campbell's force in short order.

"Naturally," Hal said, with a touch of impatience. "Where else would he be?"

"With Dottie, looking for Ben's wife," William riposted smartly. "Is she here, too?"

"No." His uncle looked displeased, but not altogether displeased. "She discovered that she was with child, so John very properly brought her back to New York—and less properly consigned her to the care of her husband. She's presumably wherever Washington's troops are at the moment, unless that bloody Quaker's had the common sense to—"

"Oh, Pardloe." A stout officer in a lieutenant colonel's uniform and an ornate double-curled wig stood in the doorway, looking mildly surprised. "Thought you'd been taken ill, the way you dashed out." Despite the mild tone, there was an undercurrent in the man's voice that drove a two-penny nail into William's spine. This was Archibald Campbell, and from the visible frostiness with which he and Uncle Hal were viewing each other, Uncle Hal's value as a negotiator might not be what his nephew could hope.

Still, Uncle Hal could—and did—introduce William to Campbell, thus relieving him of the worry of producing adequate *bona fides*.

“Your servant, my lord,” Campbell said, eyeing him suspiciously. He glanced over his shoulder, moving out of the way of a pair of servants carrying a massive wine cooler. “I fear that dinner has nearly concluded, but if you’d like, I’ll have the servants provide a small supper for you in the office.”

“No, sir, I thank you,” William said, bowing—though the smell of food made his stomach gurgle. “I took the liberty of coming to speak with you about a … um … an urgent matter.”

“Indeed.” Campbell looked displeased and wasn’t troubling to hide it. “It can’t wait until the morning?”

“I don’t know that it can, sir.” He’d had a look at the big oak on the edge of town, which he thought must be the one Fanny meant. As Jane’s corpse wasn’t hanging from it, he assumed she was still being held prisoner in the house nearby. But that was no assurance that they didn’t mean to execute her at dawn. The army was rather fond of executing prisoners at dawn; start the day off in the right frame of mind …

He got hold of his racing thoughts and bowed again.

“It concerns a young woman, sir, who I understand was arrested earlier today, upon suspicion of—of assault. I—”

“Assault?” Campbell’s beetling brows shot up toward the furbelows of his wig. “She stabbed a man twenty-six times, then cut his throat in cold blood. If that’s your notion of assault, I should hate to see—”

“Who is this young woman, my lord?” Uncle Hal put in, his tone formal and his face impassive.

“Her name is Jane,” William began, and stopped, having no idea what her last name might be. “Uh … Jane …”

“Pocock, she says,” put in Campbell. “She’s a whore.”

“A—” Hal cut his exclamation off one syllable too late. He narrowed his eyes at William.

“She is … under my protection,” William said, as firmly as he could.

“Really?” drawled Campbell. He gave Uncle Hal a look of amused contempt, and Uncle Hal went white with suppressed fury—most of which was not suppressed at all in the look he turned on William.

“Yes. Really,” said William, aware that this was not brilliant but unable to think of anything better. “I wish to speak on her behalf. Provide her with a solicitor,” he added, rather wildly. “I’m sure she isn’t guilty of the crime of which she’s accused.”

Campbell actually laughed, and William felt his ears burning with hot blood. He might have said something imprudent had Lord John not appeared at this juncture, as impeccably uniformed as his brother and looking mildly inquisitive.

“Ah, William,” he said, as though he’d quite expected to see his son here. His eyes flicked rapidly from face to face, obviously drawing conclusions about the tenor of the conversation, if not its subject. With scarcely a pause, he stepped forward and embraced William warmly.

“You’re here! I’m delighted to see you,” he said, smiling up at William. “I have remarkable news! Will you excuse us for a moment, sir?” he said to Campbell, and, not waiting for an answer, gripped William by the elbow, yanked open the front door, towed him out onto the wide veranda, and closed the door firmly behind them.

"All right. Tell me what's going on," Lord John said, low-voiced. "And do it fast.

"Jesus," he said, when William had blurted out an only slightly confused account of the situation. He rubbed a hand slowly over his face, thinking, and repeated, "Jesus."

"Yes," William said, still upset but feeling some comfort at his father's presence. "I'd thought to talk to Campbell, but then when Uncle Hal was here, I hoped … but he and Campbell seem to be—"

"Yes, their relationship could best be described as one of cordial hatred," Lord John agreed. "Archibald Campbell is highly unlikely to do Hal any sort of favor, unless it was to escort him personally into the next southbound coach for hell." He blew out his breath and shook his head, as though to clear it of wine fumes.

"I don't know, William, I really don't. The girl—she *is* a whore?"

"Yes."

"Did she do it?"

"Yes."

"Oh, God." He looked helplessly at William for a moment, then squared his shoulders. "All right. I'll do what I can, but I don't promise anything. There's a tavern on the square, called Tudy's. Go there and wait—I rather think your presence will not be helpful in this discussion."

* * *

IT SEEMED FOREVER but must have been less than an hour when Lord John appeared at Tudy's. One look at his face told William that he hadn't been successful.

"I'm sorry," he said without preliminary, and sat down opposite William. He'd come out without his hat and brushed at the raindrops caught in his hair. "The girl—"

"Her name is Jane," William interrupted. It seemed important that he insist on that, not let everyone just dismiss her as "the whore."

"Miss Jane Eleanora Pocock," his father agreed, with a brief nod. "Apparently she not only committed the crime but has confessed to it. A signed confession, no less. I read it." He rubbed a hand tiredly over his face. "Her only objection was to the statement that she stabbed Harkness twenty-six times and cut his throat. According to her, she only stabbed him once before cutting his throat. People *will* exaggerate these things."

"That's what she told me." William's throat felt tight. His father darted a glance at him but chose not to say anything in response to this. What he thought was all too clear, though.

"She was trying to save her young sister from being defiled by the man," he said, urgently defensive. "And Harkness was a depraved sod who'd used her—Jane, I mean—abominably! I heard him talk about it. It would have turned your stomach to hear him."

"I daresay," Lord John agreed. "Dangerous clients are one of the hazards of that profession. But was there no recourse available to her other than a carving knife? Most brothels that cater to soldiers have some means of rescuing the whores from … excessive importunity. And Miss Pocock, from what Colonel Campbell tells me, is a—er—an—"

"Expensive piece. She is. Was."

William reached out blindly for the mug of beer he'd been ignoring, took a huge gulp, and coughed convulsively. His father watched with some sympathy.

William at last drew breath and sat, staring at his fists, clenched on the table.

“She hated him,” he said at last, low-voiced. “And the madam wouldn’t have kept her sister from him; he’d paid for her maidenhead.”

Lord John sighed and covered one of William’s fists with his hand, squeezing.

“Do you love the young woman, William?” he asked, very quietly. The tavern wasn’t busy, but there were enough men drinking there that no one was noticing them.

William shook his head, helpless.

“I—tried to protect her. To save her from Harkness. I—I bought her for the night. I didn’t stop to think that he’d come back—but of course he would,” he finished bitterly. “I likely made things worse for her.”

“There wouldn’t have been a way of making them better, save marrying the girl or killing Harkness yourself,” Lord John said dryly. “And I don’t recommend murder as a way of settling difficult situations. It tends to lead to complications—but not nearly as many as marriage.” He got up and went to the bar, returning with two steaming cups of hot rum punch.

“Drink that,” he said, pushing one in front of William. “You look chilled through.”

He was; he’d taken a table in a far corner, nowhere near the fire, and a fine, uncontrollable shiver was running through him, enough to ripple the surface of the punch when he wrapped his hand round the pewter cup. The punch was good, though made with preserved lemon peel, sweet, strong, and hot and made with good brandy as well as rum.

He hadn’t eaten anything in hours, and it warmed his stomach immediately.

They drank in silence—what was there to say? There was no way of saving Jane, bar some sort of physical assault, and he couldn’t ask his father or uncle to join or support him in that sort of desperate caper. He didn’t think they’d do it, for one thing. He believed in their considerable affection for him but knew quite well that they’d see it as their duty to prevent him committing folly that could well prove fatal.

“It won’t have been entirely in vain, you know,” Lord John said quietly. “She did save her sister.”

William nodded, unable to speak. The thought of seeing Fanny in the morning, only to tell her—and then what? Must he stand beside her and watch Jane be hanged?

Lord John stood up and, without asking, went back to the bar for another pair of drinks. William looked at the gently steaming cup set before him and then at his father.

“You think you bloody know me, don’t you?” he said, but with true affection in his voice.

“Yes, I do think that, William,” said his father, in the same tone. “Drink your drink.”

William smiled and, rising, clapped his father on the shoulder.

“Maybe you do, at that. I’ll see you in the morning, Papa.”

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LAST RESORT

I WAS LYING IN bed beside Jamie, drowsily wondering on what grounds I could induce Mrs. Weisenheimer to collect her urine for me. She suffered from gallstones, for which the most effective herbal treatment I had was bearberry. Fortunately, Mr. Jameson had some of the dried leaf in stock. One had to be careful in using it, though, because it contained arbutin, which hydrolyzed to hydroquinone—a very effective urinary antiseptic, but dangerously toxic. On the other hand … it was an effective skin lightener, if applied topically.

I yawned and decided that it wasn't worth the bother of making Jamie come to the surgery and talk to Mrs. Weisenheimer in German about her urine. He'd do it if I asked, but I'd never hear the end of it.

I dismissed the idea and rolled over, cuddling against Jamie, who was peacefully asleep on his back, as usual, but who half-woke at my touch, patted me clumsily, curled round me, and fell soundly asleep again at once. Ninety seconds later, there was a knock at the door.

"Ifrinn!" Jamie shot bolt upright, rubbed a hand roughly over his face, and threw back the covers. Groaning, I followed suit less athletically, crawling out of bed and groping blindly for my knitted slippers.

"Let me go. It's probably for me." At this hour of the night, a knock at the door was more likely someone with a medical emergency than one involving salt fish or horses, but given the military occupation of the city, one never knew.

One certainly hadn't anticipated opening the door to find William standing on the other side of it, looking pale and feral.

"Is Mr. Fraser at home?" he said tersely. "I need his help."

* * *

FRASER HAD DRESSED at once, taken up a belt with a sheathed dirk and a leather bag upon it, and fastened this round his waist without question. He was wearing Highland dress, William saw, a much-worn, faded plaid. He gathered up a fold of it around his shoulders, nodding toward the door.

"We'd best go down to my wife's surgery," he said softly, nodding toward the thin wall, the laths clearly visible through its plaster. "Ye can tell me there what's to do."

William followed him through the rain-slicked streets, water like cold tears on his cheeks. Inside, he felt parched and dry, cracked leather wrapped around a core of solid terror. Fraser didn't speak on the way but clutched him once by the elbow, pushing him into a narrow space between two buildings, just as an army patrol came round the corner. He pressed hard against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Fraser, and felt the man’s denseness and warmth as a shock.

In the back of his mind was the memory of having been small and lost in the fog on the fells of the Lake District. Cold and terrified, he’d fallen into a rocky hollow and lain there, frozen, hearing ghosts in the mist. And then the overwhelming relief of Mac’s finding him, of the enveloping warmth of the groom’s arms.

He shoved the memory impatiently aside, but a lingering sense of something that wasn’t quite hope remained when the last of the boots trampled out of hearing and Fraser slid from their hiding place, beckoning him to follow.

The small surgery was cold and dark, smelling of herbs and medicines and old blood. There was a sweetish smell, too, strange but familiar, and after a moment’s disorientation, he realized that it must be ether; he’d smelled it on Mother Claire and Denzell Hunter when they’d operated on his cousin Henry.

Fraser had locked the door behind them and found a candlestick in the cupboard. He handed this to William, took a tinderbox from the same cupboard, and set the candle alight with a brisk efficiency. The wavering light shone up into his face, and the boldness of his features sprang into view: long straight nose and heavy brows, broad cheekbones and the fine deep modeling of jaw and temple. It was damnably queer to see the resemblance so marked and so close, but at the moment William actually found it an odd comfort.

Fraser set the candlestick on the table and motioned William to one of the two stools, taking the other.

“Tell me, then,” he said calmly. “It’s safe here; no one will hear. I gather it’s a dangerous matter?”

“Life and death,” William said, and, with a deep breath, began.

Fraser listened with complete attention, his eyes fixed intently on William’s face as he talked. When he had finished, there was a moment of silence. Then Fraser nodded once, as if to himself.

“This young woman,” he said. “May I know what she is to you?”

William hesitated, not knowing what to say. What *was* Jane to him? Not a friend, nor yet a lover. And yet …

“She—I took her and her sister under my protection,” he said. “When they left Philadelphia with the army.”

Fraser nodded as though this was a perfectly adequate explanation of the situation.

“D’ye know that your uncle and his regiment are with the occupying army? That he’s here, I mean?”

“Yes. I spoke with my—with Lord John and Pardloe. They aren’t able to help. I—have resigned my commission,” he felt compelled to add. “That hasn’t anything to do with why they can’t help, only that I’m not subject any longer to military command myself.”

“Aye, I saw ye weren’t in uniform,” he said. He drummed the fingers of his right hand briefly on the tabletop, and William saw with surprise that the ring finger was missing, a thick scar down the back of the hand. Fraser saw him notice.

“Saratoga,” he said, with the flicker of something that might have been a smile in other circumstances.

William felt a small shock at the word, things unnoticed at the time suddenly returning to him. Himself kneeling through the night beside Brigadier Simon Fraser’s deathbed and a tall man on the other side, a white bandage on his hand, leaning down from the shadows to say something softly in the Scottish tongue to the brigadier, who replied in the same language.

“The brigadier,” he said, and stopped abruptly.

“My kinsman,” Fraser said. He delicately forbore to add, *“And yours,”* but William made that connection easily. He felt it as a distant echo of grief, a pebble dropped in water, but that could wait.

“Is the young woman’s life worth yours?” Fraser asked. “Because I think that consideration is likely what lies behind your—your other kinsmen’s”—the corner of his mouth twitched, though William couldn’t tell whether with humor or distaste—“failure to help ye.”

William felt hot blood rise in his face, anger supplanting desperation.

“They didn’t *fail* me. They couldn’t help. Are you saying that you will not help me, either, sir? Or can’t? Are you afraid of the venture?”

Fraser gave him a quelling look; William registered this but didn’t care. He was on his feet, fists clenched.

“Don’t bother, then. I’ll do it myself.”

“If ye thought ye could, ye’d never have come to me, lad,” Fraser said evenly.

“Don’t you call me ‘lad,’ you, you—” William choked off the epithet, not out of prudence but out of inability to choose among the several that sprang at once to his mind.

“Sit down,” Fraser said, not raising his voice but infusing it with an air of command that made it unthinkable—or at least uncomfortable—to disobey. William glared at him. His chest was heaving and yet he couldn’t draw enough breath to speak. He didn’t sit down, but he did uncurl his fists and stand still. At last he managed a jerky nod. Fraser drew a long, visible breath and let it out slowly, white in the chill of the dark little room.

"All right, then. Tell me where she is and what ye ken of the physical situation." He glanced at the shuttered window, where oozing damp showed black between the slats as the rain seeped through. "The night's not long enough."

* * *

THEY WENT TO the warehouse where Fraser worked, down by the river. Fraser left William outside to keep watch, unlocked a man door at the side, and slid through it with no sound, reappearing a few minutes later dressed in rough breeches and a shirt that didn't fit him, carrying a small burlap bag and two large black kerchiefs. He handed one of these to William and, folding the other diagonally, tied it round his face, covering nose and mouth.

"Is this truly necessary?" William tied on his own kerchief but felt slightly ridiculous, as though dressing up for some bizarre pantomime.

"Ye can go without if ye like," Fraser advised him, taking a knitted wool cap out of the bag, tucking his hair up under it, and then pulling it down over his eyebrows. "I canna risk being recognized."

"If you think the risk too great—" William began, an edge in his voice, but Fraser stopped him, gripping his arm.

"Ye've a claim to my help," he said, voice low and brusque. "For any venture ye deem worthy. But I've a family who have a claim to my protection. I canna leave them to starve if I'm taken."

William had no chance to reply to this; Fraser had locked the door and was already walking off, beckoning impatiently. He did think about it, though, following the Scot through the mist that rose knee-high in the streets. It had stopped raining; that was one thing in their favor.

"For any venture ye deem worthy." Not a word about Jane's being a whore or about her being a confessed murderess. Perhaps it was that Fraser himself was a criminal and felt some sympathy on that account.

Or maybe it's just that he's willing to take my word that I have to do it. And willing to take the devil of a risk to help me.

But such thoughts could do no good now, and he put them out of his mind. They hurried on, soft-footed and faceless, through the empty squares of Savannah, toward the house by the hanging tree.

* * *

"I DINNA SUPPOSE ye ken which room is hers?" Jamie murmured to William. They were loitering under the big live oak, concealed not only by its shadows but by the long beards of Spanish moss that hung from its branches and the mist that drifted under them.

"No."

"Wait here." Fraser disappeared in that unnerving catlike way of his. Left to his own devices and further unnerved by the silence, William thought to explore the contents of the bag Fraser had left on the ground. These proved to be several sheets of paper and a stoppered vial of what—unstoppered—proved to be treacle.

He was still puzzling over that when Fraser was back, as suddenly as he'd disappeared.

"There's no but one guard on the house, at the front," he said, moving close enough to whisper into William's ear. "And all the windows are dark, save one upstairs. There's a single candle burning; it must be hers."

"Why do you think that?" William whispered back, startled.

Fraser hesitated for a moment, but then said, even more quietly, "I once spent a night expecting to be hanged the next morning. I wouldna have spent it in darkness, given the choice. Come on."

It was a two-story house and, while fairly large, simply built. Two rooms on the upper floor at the back, two at the front. The shutters of the upper windows were open, and the glow of a candle flickered in the right-hand room at the back. Fraser insisted on circling the house—at a cautious distance, darting from bush to tree to bush—to be sure of the guard's position. The man, armed with a musket slung across his back, was on the veranda that ran across the front of the house. Judging from his build, he was young, probably younger than William. And by his posture, which was careless in the extreme, he wasn't expecting any trouble.

"I don't suppose they thought a whore would have any friends," William said under his breath, getting a brief Scottish grunt in return. Fraser beckoned and led him round the back of the house.

They passed a window that likely belonged to the kitchen; there were no curtains, and he could see the faint light of a smothered hearth deep inside, just visible through the shutters. There'd be a risk that one or more slaves or servants slept in the kitchen, though—and he was pleased to see that Fraser appeared to be going on that assumption. They moved around the next corner of the house, as quietly as possible.

Fraser pressed his ear to the shutters of a large window but appeared to hear nothing. He fitted the blade of his stout knife between the shutters and, with some difficulty, levered the bolt up out of its brackets. He gestured to William to come and lean hard on the shutter, to keep the bolt from falling suddenly, and with a joint effort composed of dumb-show and frantic gestures—that would likely have seemed comic to anyone not involved in performing it—they succeeded in getting the bloody shutters open without too much racket.

The window behind was curtained—all to the good—but a casement, with a thumb latch that wouldn't yield to Jamie's knife. The big Scot was sweating; he pulled his cap off for a moment to wipe his brow, then put it back on, and, taking the treacle from the bag, he un-stoppered the bottle and poured some of the sticky syrup into his hand. This he smeared over a pane of the casement and, taking a sheet of paper, pasted it onto the glass.

William could make no sense of this proceeding, but Fraser drew back his arm and struck the glass a sharp buffet with his fist. It broke with no more than a small cracking noise, and the shattered pieces were removed easily, stuck to the treacled paper.

"Where did you learn that one?" William whispered, deeply impressed, and heard a small chuckle of satisfaction from behind Fraser's mask.

"My daughter told me about it," he whispered in reply, laying glass and paper on the ground. "She read it in a book."

“That’s—” William stopped abruptly, and so did his heart. He’d forgotten. “Your … daughter. You mean—I have a sister?”

“Aye,” Fraser said briefly. “Ye’ve met her. Come on.” He reached through the hole in the glass, undid the catch, and pulled on the window frame. The window swung open, with an unexpected loud screech of unoiled hinges.

“Shit!” William said, under his breath.

Fraser had said something that William assumed was the equivalent sentiment in Gaelic, but he didn’t waste time. He shoved William back against the wall and, with a hissed “Stay there!”, faded into the night.

William plastered himself against the wall, heart hammering. He could hear rapid footsteps clattering down the wooden steps from the veranda, then muffled thumps on the damp ground.

“Who’s there?” the guard shouted, as he rounded the house. Seeing William, he shouldered his musket and took aim. And Fraser came out of the dark mist like an angry ghost, grabbed the boy by the shoulder, and laid him out with a rock slammed into the back of his skull.

“Hurry,” he said, low-voiced, jerking his chin toward the open window as he lowered the guard’s limp body to the ground. William wasted no time but heaved himself into the house, squirming across the sill to land almost soundlessly, squatting on the carpet of what must be a parlor, to judge from the dim outlines of the furniture. An unseen clock ticked accusingly, somewhere in the darkness.

Fraser hoisted himself into the open window frame and paused for a moment, listening. But there was no sound in the house save the ticking clock, and he hopped lightly down inside.

"Ye dinna ken whose house this is?" he whispered to William, looking round.

William shook his head. It must be an officer's billet, but he had no idea who the officer might be—probably the major in charge of disciplinary matters. Presumably Campbell had lodged Jane here as an alternative to putting her in the camp's stockade. Thoughtful of him.

His eyes had adapted quickly; there was a dark oblong a few feet away—the door. Fraser saw it, too; his hand rested on William's back for an instant, pushing him toward it.

There was an oval lozenge of glass set into the front door, and enough light came through it to show them the painted canvas floorcloth running down the hall, its diamond pattern black in the colorless light. Near the door, a pool of shadow hid the foot of the staircase, and within seconds they were creeping up the stairs, as quickly and as quietly as two very large men in a hurry could go.

"This way." William was in the lead; he motioned to Fraser as he turned to the left. The blood was beating in his head, and he could scarcely breathe. He wanted to tear off the clinging mask and gulp air, but not yet … not yet.

Jane. Had she heard the guard call out? If she was awake, she must have heard them on the stair.

The landing was windowless and very dark, but there was a faint glow of candlelight under Jane's door—he hoped to God it was Jane's door. Running a hand down the doorframe, he felt the knob, and his hand closed round it. It was locked, naturally—but in trying the knob, the heel of his hand brushed the key, still in the lock.

Fraser was behind him; he could hear the man's breathing. Behind the door of the next room, someone was snoring in a reassuringly regular sort of way. So long as the guard stayed out long enough …

“Jane,” he whispered as loudly as he dared, putting his lips to the crack between the door and its jamb. “Jane! It’s me, William. Be quiet!”

He thought he heard a swift intake of breath from the other side of the door, though it might have been only the sound of his own blood racing in his ears. With infinite care, he pulled the door toward him and turned the key.

The candle was standing on a small bureau, its flame flickering wildly in the draft from the open door. There was a strong smell of beer; a broken bottle lay on the floor, brown glass a-glitter in the wavering light. The bed was rumpled, bedclothes hanging half off the mattress … Where was Jane? He whirled, expecting to see her cowering in the corner, frightened by his entrance.

He saw her hand first. She was lying on the floor by the bed, beside the broken bottle, her hand flung out, white and half open as though in supplication.

“A Dhia,” Fraser whispered behind him, and now he could smell the cut-steel reek of blood, mingled with beer.

He didn’t remember falling on his knees or lifting her up in his arms. She was heavy, limp and awkward, all the grace and heat of her gone and her cheek cold to his hand. Only her hair was still Jane, shining in the candlelight, soft against his mouth.

“Here, *a bhalaich*.” A hand touched his shoulder, and he turned without thought.

Fraser had pulled the mask down around his neck, and his face was serious, intent. “We havena much time,” he said softly.

They didn't speak. They straightened the bedclothes in silence, put a clean quilt over the worst of the blood, and laid her on it. William wetted his kerchief from the ewer and cleaned the spatters of blood from her face and hands. He hesitated for a moment, then tore the kerchief violently in two and bandaged her torn wrists, then crossed her hands on her breast.

Jamie Fraser was by him then, with a fugitive gleam from the blade of his knife.

"For her sister," he said, and, bending, cut a lock of the shining chestnut hair. He put this into the pocket of the ragged breeches and went quietly out. William heard the brief creak of his footsteps on the stair and understood that he had been left to make his farewell in privacy.

He looked upon her face by candlelight for the first time, and the last. He felt emptied, hollow as a gutted deer. With no notion what to say, he touched one black-bound hand and spoke the truth, in a voice too low for any but the dead to hear.

"I wanted to save you, Jane. Forgive me."

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LAST RITES

JAMIE CAME HOME just before dawn, white-faced and chilled to the bone. I wasn't asleep. I hadn't slept since he'd left with William, and when I heard his step on the creaking stairs, I scooped hot water from the ever-simmering cauldron into the wooden mug I had ready, half filled with cheap whisky and a spoonful of honey. I'd thought he'd need it, but I hadn't had any idea how much.

"The lassie had cut her wrists wi' a broken bottle," he said, crouching on a stool by the fire, a quilt draped over his shoulders and the warm mug cupped between his big hands. He couldn't stop shivering.

"God rest her soul and forgive her the sin of despair." He closed his eyes and shook his head violently, as though to dispel his memory of what he'd seen in that candlelit room. "Oh, Jesus, my poor lad."

I'd made him go to bed and crawled in to warm him with my body, but I hadn't slept then, either. I didn't feel the need of it. There were things that would need to be done when the day came; I could feel them waiting, a patient throng. William. The dead girl. And Jamie had said something about the girl's young sister.… But for the moment, time was still, balanced on the cusp of night. I lay beside Jamie and listened to him breathe. For the moment, that was enough.

* * *

BUT THE SUN rose, as it always did.

I was stirring the breakfast porridge when William appeared, bringing with him a mud-smeared young girl who looked like a lightning-blasted tree. William didn't look any better but seemed less likely to fall to bits.

"This is Frances," he said, in a low, hoarse voice, putting a large paw on her shoulder. "These are Mr. and Mrs. Fraser, Fanny." She was so fine-boned that I half-expected her to stagger under the weight of his hand, but she didn't. After a stunned moment, she realized the introduction and gave a jerky nod.

"Sit down, sweetheart," I said, smiling at her. "The porridge is almost ready, and there's toasted bread with honey."

She stared at me, blinking dully. Her eyes were red and swollen, her hair lank under a tattered cap. I thought she was so shocked that she was unable to comprehend anything. William looked as though someone had hit him on the head, stunning him like an ox bound for slaughter. I looked uncertainly at Jamie, not knowing what to do for either of them. He glanced from one to the other, then rose and quietly took the girl into his arms.

“There, *a nighean*,” he said quietly, patting her back. His eyes met Willie’s and I saw something pass between them—a question asked and answered. Jamie nodded. “I’ll care for her,” he said.

“Thank you. She … Jane,” William said with difficulty. “I want to—to bury her. Decently. But I think I can’t … claim her.”

“Aye,” Jamie said. “We’ll see to it. Go and do whatever ye need to do. Come back when ye can.”

William stood a moment longer, red-rimmed eyes fixed on the girl’s back, then gave me an abrupt bow and left. At the sound of his departing footsteps, Frances gave a small, despairing howl, like an orphaned puppy. Jamie wrapped her closer in his arms, holding her snug against his chest.

“It will be all right, *a nighean*,” he said softly, though his eyes were fixed on the door through which William had gone. “Ye’re at home now.”

* * *

I DIDN’T REALIZE that Fanny was tongue-tied, until I took her to see Colonel Campbell. She hadn’t spoken at all until that point, merely shaking her head yes or no, making small motions of refusal or gratitude.

“You kilt my thither!” she said loudly, when Campbell rose from his desk to greet us. He blinked and sat back down.

“I doubt it,” he said, eyeing her warily. She wasn’t crying, but her face was blotched and swollen, as if someone had slapped her repeatedly. She stood very straight, though, small fists clenched, and glared at him. He looked at me. I shrugged slightly.

“The’th *dead*,” Fanny said. “The wath your prithoner!”

Campbell steepled his hands and cleared his throat.

“May I ask who you are, child? And who your sister is?”

“Her name is Frances Pocock,” I put in hastily. “Her sister was Jane Pocock, who I understand … died last night, while in your custody. She would like to claim her sister’s body, for burial.”

Campbell gave me a bleak look.

“I see that news travels fast. And you are, madam?”

“A friend of the family,” I said, as firmly as possible. “My name is Mrs. James Fraser.”

His face shifted a little; he’d heard the name. That probably wasn’t a good thing.

“Mrs. Fraser,” he said slowly. “I’ve heard of you. You dispense pox cures to the city’s whores, do you not?”

“Among … other things, yes,” I said, rather taken aback by this description of my medical practice. Still, it seemed to offer him a logical connection between Fanny and me, for he glanced from one of us to the other, nodding to himself.

“Well,” he said slowly. “I don’t know where the—er—the body has been—”

“Don’t oo call my thither ‘the *body*’!” Fanny shouted. “Her name ith Jane!”

Commanders, as a rule, aren’t used to being shouted at, and Campbell appeared to be no exception. His square face flushed and he put his hands flat on the desk, preparing to rise. Before he got the seat of his breeches clear of his chair, though, his aide came in and coughed discreetly.

“I beg pardon, sir; Lieutenant Colonel Lord John Grey wishes to see you.”

“Does he, indeed.” This didn’t seem to be welcome news to Campbell, but it was to me.

"You're clearly busy, sir," I said quickly, seizing Fanny by the arm. "We'll come back later." And without waiting to be dismissed, I more or less dragged her out of the office.

Sure enough, John was standing in the anteroom, in full uniform. His face was calmly pleasant and I saw that he was in diplomatic mode, but his expression altered the instant he saw me.

"What are you doing here?" he blurted. "And"—glancing at Fanny—"who the devil is this?"

"Do you know about Jane?" I said, grabbing him by the sleeve. "What happened to her last night?"

"Yes, I—"

"We want to claim her body, for burial. Can you help?"

He detached my hand, courteously, and brushed his sleeve.

"I can, yes. I'm here upon the same errand. I'll send word—"

"We'll wait for you," I said hastily, seeing the aide frown in my direction. "Outside. Come, Fanny!"

Outside, we found a place to wait on an ornamental bench set in the formal front garden. Even in winter, it was a pleasant spot, with several palmetto trees popping out of the shrubbery like so many Japanese parasols, and even the presence of a number of soldiers coming and going didn't much impair the sense of gracious peace. Fanny, though, was in no mood for peace.

"Who wath *that*?" she demanded, twisting to look back at the house. "What doth he want wif Jane?"

"Ah … that's William's father," I said carefully. "Lord John Grey is his name. I imagine William asked him to come."

Fanny blinked for a moment, then turned a remarkably penetrating pair of brown eyes on me, red-rimmed and bloodshot but decidedly intelligent.

“He doethn’t *wook* wike Wiyum,” she said. “Mither Fwather wooks a wot wike Wiyum.”

I looked back at her for a moment.

“Really?” I said. “I hadn’t noticed that. Do you mind not talking for a bit, Fanny? I need to think.”

* * *

JOHN CAME OUT about ten minutes later. He paused on the steps, looking around, and I waved. He came down to where we sat and at once bowed very formally to Fanny.

“Your servant, Miss Frances,” he said. “I understand from Colonel Campbell that you are the sister of Miss Pocock; please allow me to offer my deepest condolences.”

He spoke very simply and honestly, and Fanny’s eyes welled up with tears.

“Can I have huh?” she said softly. “Pwease?”

Heedless of his immaculate breeches, he knelt on the ground in front of her and took her hand in his.

“Yes, sweetheart,” he said, just as softly. “Of course you can.” He patted her hand. “Will you wait here, just for a moment, while I speak with Mrs. Fraser?” He stood and, as an afterthought, pulled a large snowy handkerchief out of his sleeve and handed it to her with another small bow.

“Poor child,” he said, taking my hand and tucking it into the curve of his elbow. “Or children—the other girl can’t have been more than seventeen.” We walked for a few paces, down a small brick walk between empty flower beds, until we were safely out of earshot of both street and house.

"I take it that William sought Jamie's help. I thought he might, though I hoped he wouldn't, for both their sakes."

His face was shadowed, and there were blue smudges under his eyes; evidently he'd had a disturbed night, too.

"Where *is* William, do you know?" I asked.

"I don't. He said he had an errand outside the city but would return tonight." He glanced over his shoulder at the house. "I've arranged for … Jane … to be appropriately tended. She cannot be buried in a churchyard, of course—"

"Of course," I murmured, angry at the thought. He noticed but cleared his throat and went on.

"I know a family with a small private cemetery. I believe I can make arrangement for a quiet burial. Quickly, of course; tomorrow, very early?"

I nodded, getting a grip on myself. It wasn't his fault.

"You've been very good," I said. Worry and the lack of sleep were catching up with me; things seemed oddly non-dimensional, as though trees and people and garden furniture were merely pasted onto a painted backdrop. I shook my head to clear it, though; there were important things to be said.

"I have to tell you something," I said. "I wish I didn't, but there it is. Ezekiel Richardson came to my surgery the other day."

"The devil he did." John had stiffened at the name. "He's not with the army here, surely? I would have—"

"Yes, but not with *your* army." I told him, as briefly as I could, what Richardson now was—or, rather, was revealed to be; God only knew how long he'd been a Rebel spy—and what his intentions were toward Hal and the Grey family in general.

John listened, his face quietly intent, though the corner of his mouth twitched when I described Richardson's plan to influence Hal's political actions.

"Yes, I know," I said dryly, seeing that. "I don't suppose he's ever actually *met* Hal. But the important thing …" I hesitated, but he had to know.

"He knows about you," I said. "What you … are. I mean that you—"

"What I am," he repeated, expressionless. His eyes had been fastened on my face to this point; now he looked away. "I see." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

John was a distinguished soldier and an honorable gentleman, member of an ancient noble family. He was also a homosexual, in a time when that particular attribute was a capital offense. For that knowledge to be in the hands of a man who meant ill to him and his family … I wasn't under any illusions about what I'd just done—with three words, I'd shown him that he was standing on a very narrow tightrope over a very deep pit, with Richardson holding the end of the rope.

"I'm sorry, John," I said, very softly. I touched his arm, and he laid his hand briefly over mine, squeezed it gently, and smiled.

"Thank you." He stared at the brick paving under his feet for a moment, then looked up. "Do you know how he came by the—information?" He spoke calmly, but a nerve was jumping just under his injured eye, a tiny twitch. I wanted to put my finger on it, still it. But there was nothing I could do.

"No." I looked back at the distant bench. Fanny was still there, a small, desolate figure, head bent. I turned my gaze back to John; his brow was creased, thinking.

“One last thing. Hal’s daughter-in-law, the young woman with the odd name—”

“Amaranthus,” he interrupted, and smiled wryly. “Yes, what about her? Don’t tell me that Ezekiel Richardson invented her for his own purposes.”

“I wouldn’t put it past him, but probably not.” I told him what I’d learned from Mr. Jameson.

“I told William day before yesterday,” I said. “But what with everything”—I waved a hand, encompassing Fanny, Jane, Colonel Campbell, and a few other things—“I doubt he’s had time to go to Saperville to look for her. You don’t suppose that’s the errand he spoke of, do you?” I asked, struck by the thought.

“God knows.” He rubbed a hand over his face, then straightened. “I must go. I’ll have to tell Hal a few things. Not … that, I don’t think,” he said, seeing my face. “But obviously there are things he needs to know, and know quickly. God bless you, my dear. I’ll send word about tomorrow.” He took my hand, kissed it very gently, and let go.

I watched him walk away, his back very straight, the scarlet of his coat bright as blood against the grays and faded greens of the winter garden.

* * *

WE BURIED JANE on the morning of a dull, cold day. The sky was sodden with low gray clouds, and a raw wind blew in from the sea. It was a small private burying ground, belonging to a large house that stood outside the city.

All of us came with Fanny: Rachel and Ian, Jenny, Fergus and Marsali—even the girls and Germain. I worried a bit;

they couldn't help but feel the echoes of Henri-Christian's death. But death was a fact of life and a common one, and while they stood solemn and pale amongst the adults, they were composed. Fanny was not so much composed as completely numb, I thought; she'd wept all the tears her small body could hold and was white and stiff as a bleached stick.

John came, dressed in his uniform (in case anyone became inquisitive and tried to disturb us, he explained to me in an undertone). The coffin-maker had had only adult coffins to hand; Jane's shrouded body looked so like a chrysalis, I half-expected to hear a dry rattling sound when the men picked it up. Fanny had declined to look upon her sister's face one last time, and I thought that was as well.

There was no priest or minister; she was a suicide, and this was ground hallowed only by respect. When the last of the dirt had been shoveled in, we stood quiet, waiting, the harsh wind flurrying our hair and garments.

Jamie took a deep breath and a step to the head of the grave. He spoke the Gaelic prayer called the Death Dirge, but in English, for the sake of Fanny and Lord John.

Thou goest home this night to thy home of winter,
To thy home of autumn, of spring, and of summer;
Thou goest home this night to thy perpetual home,
To thine eternal bed, to thine eternal slumber.

Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,
Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,
Sleep thou, sleep, and away with thy sorrow,

Sleep, thou beloved, in the Rock of the fold.

The shade of death lies upon thy face, beloved,
But the Jesus of grace has His hand round about thee;
In nearness to the Trinity farewell to thy pains,
Christ stands before thee and peace is in His mind.

Jenny, Ian, Fergus, and Marsali joined in, murmuring the final verse with him.

Sleep, O sleep in the calm of all calm,
Sleep, O sleep in the guidance of guidance,
Sleep, O sleep in the love of all loves,
Sleep, O beloved, in the Lord of life,
Sleep, O beloved, in the God of life!

It wasn't until we turned to go that I saw William. He was standing just outside the wrought-iron fence that enclosed the burying ground, tall and somber in a dark cloak, the wind stirring the dark tail of his hair. He was holding the reins of a very large mare with a back as broad as a barn door. As I came out of the burying ground, holding Fanny's hand, he came toward us, the horse obligingly following him.

"This is Miranda," he said to Fanny. His face was white and carved with grief, but his voice was steady. "She's yours now. You'll need her." He took Fanny's limp hand, put the reins into it, and closed her fingers over them. Then he looked at me, wisps of hair blowing across his face. "Will you look after her, Mother Claire?"

"Of course we will," I said, my throat tight. "Where are you going, William?"

He smiled then, very faintly.

"It doesn't matter," he said, and walked away.

Fanny was staring up at Miranda in complete incomprehension. I gently took the reins from her, patted the horse's jaw, and turned to find Jamie. He was just inside the fence, talking with Marsali; the others had come out already and were standing in a cold little cluster, Ian and Fergus talking with Lord John, while Jenny shepherded the children—all of whom were staring at Fanny.

Jamie was frowning a little, but at last he nodded and, bending forward, kissed Marsali on the forehead and came out. He raised one eyebrow when he saw Miranda, and I explained.

"Aye, well," he said, with a glance at Fanny. "What's one more?" There was an odd tone to his voice, and I looked at him in inquiry.

"Marsali asked me if we'd take Germain," he said, drawing Fanny in against him in a sheltering hug, as if this were a common thing.

"Really?" I glanced over my shoulder at the rest of the family. "Why?" We had all discussed the matter at some length the night before and concluded that we wouldn't wait until spring to leave Savannah. With the city occupied, there was no chance of Fergus and Marsali resuming publication of their newspaper, and with Colonel Richardson lurking behind the scenes, the place was beginning to seem distinctly dangerous.

We would all travel together to Charleston, get Fergus and Marsali established there, and then the rest of us would go on north to Wilmington, where we would begin to equip ourselves for the trip into the mountains when the snows began to melt in March.

“Ye told them, Sassenach,” Jamie said, scratching Miranda’s forelock with his free hand. “What the war would be, and how long it would last. Germain’s of an age when he’ll be out and in the thick o’ things. Marsali’s worrit that he’ll come to harm, loose in a city where the sorts of things happen that *do* happen in wartime. God knows the mountains may be no safer”—he grimaced, obviously recalling a few incidents that had taken place there—“but on the whole, he’s likely better off not being in a place where he could be conscripted by the militia or pressed into the British navy.”

I looked down the gravel path that led to the house; Germain had drifted away from his mother, grandmother, Rachel, and his sisters and joined Ian and Fergus in conversation with Lord John.

“Aye, he kens he’s a man,” Jamie said dryly, following the direction of my gaze. “Come along, *a leannan*,” he said to Fanny. “It’s time we all had breakfast.”

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AMARANTHUS

Saperville
January 15, 1779

SAPERVILLE WAS DIFFICULT to find but, once found, small enough that it was a matter of only three inquiries to discover the residence of a widow named Grey.

“Over there.” Hal reined up, nodding toward a house that stood a hundred yards back from the road in the shade of an enormous magnolia tree. He was being casual, but John could see the muscle twitching in his brother’s jaw.

“Well … I suppose we just go up and knock, then.” He turned his own horse’s head in at the rutted lane, taking stock of the place as they walked toward it. It was a rather shabby house, the front veranda sagging at one corner where its foundation had given way, and half its few windows boarded over. Still, the place was occupied; the chimney was smoking fitfully, in a way suggesting that it hadn't been recently swept.

The door was opened to them by a slattern. A white woman, but one clothed in a stained wrapper and felt slippers, with wary eyes and a sourly downturned mouth whose corners showed the stains of tobacco chewing. "Is Mrs. Grey at home?" Hal inquired politely.

"Nobody o' that name here," the woman said, and made to shut the door, this action being prevented by Hal's boot.

"We were directed to this address, madam," Hal said, the politeness diminishing markedly. "Be so good as to inform Mrs. Grey that she has visitors, please."

The woman's eyes narrowed.

"And who in tarnation are you, Mr. Fancy Pants?"

John's estimation of the woman's nerve rose considerably at this, but he thought he ought to intervene before Hal started wheezing.

"This is His Grace the Duke of Pardloe, madam," he said, with maximum politeness. Her face altered at once, though not for the better. Her jaw hardened, but a predatory gleam came into her eye.

"Elle connaît votre nom," he said to Hal. *She knows your name.*

"I know that," his brother snapped. "Madam—"

Whatever he would have said was interrupted by the sudden shrieking of a baby, somewhere upstairs.

"I beg your pardon, madam," Lord John said politely to the slattern, and, seizing her by the elbows, walked her backward into the house, whirled her round, and pushed her into the kitchen. There was a pantry, and he shoved her into this cubbyhole, slammed the door upon her, and, grabbing a bread knife from the table, thrust it through the hasp of the latch as a makeshift bolt.

Hal had meanwhile disappeared upstairs, making enough noise for a company of cavalry. John galloped after him, and by the time he reached the head of the stair, his brother was busily engaged in trying to break down the door of a room from which came the siren shrieks of a baby and the even louder cries of what was probably the baby's mother.

It was a good, solid door; Hal flung himself at it shoulder-first and rebounded as though made of India rubber. Barely pausing, he raised his foot and slammed the flat of his boot sole against the panel, which obligingly splintered but didn't break inward.

Wiping his face on his sleeve, he eyed the door and, catching the flicker of movement through the splintered paneling, called out, "Young woman! We have come to rescue you! Stand well away from the door!

"Pistol, please," he said, turning to John with his hand out.

"I'll do it," John said, resigned. "You haven't any practice with doorknobs."

Whereupon, with an air of assumed casualness, he drew the pistol from his belt, aimed carefully, and shot the doorknob to pieces. The boom of the gun evidently startled the room's inhabitants, for a dead silence fell. He gently pushed the stem of the shattered knob through the door; the remnants of the knob thunked to the floor on the other side, and he pushed the door cautiously open.

Hal, nodding his thanks, stepped forward through the wisps of smoke.

It was a small room, rather grimy, and furnished with no more than a bedstead, dresser, stool, and washstand. The stool was particularly noticeable, as it was being brandished by a wild-eyed young woman, clutching a baby to her breast with her other hand.

An ammoniac reek came from a basket in the corner, piled with dirty clouts; a folded quilt in a pulled-out drawer showed where the baby had been sleeping, and the young woman was less kempt than her mother would have liked to see, her cap askew and her pinny stained. Hal disregarded all matters of circumstance and bowed to her.

"Do I address Miss Amaranthus Cowden?" he said politely. "Or is it Mrs. Grey?"

John gave his brother a disparaging look and turned a cordial smile on the young woman.

"*Viscountess* Grey," he said, and made a leg in courtly style. "Your most humble servant, Lady Grey."

The young woman looked wildly from one man to the other, stool still raised, clearly unable to make head or tail of this invasion, and finally settled on John as the best—if still dubious—source of information.

"Who *are* you?" she asked, pressing her back against the wall. "Hush, darling." For the baby, recovered from shock, had decided to grizzle.

John cleared his throat.

"Well … this is Harold, Duke of Pardloe, and I am his brother, Lord John Grey. If our information is correct, I believe we are, respectively, your father-in-law and your uncle by marriage. And, after all," he remarked, turning to Hal, "how many people in the colonies do you think there could possibly *be* named Amaranthus Cowden?"

"She hasn't yet said she *is* Amaranthus Cowden," Hal pointed out. He did, however, smile at the young woman, who reacted as most women did, staring at him with her mouth slightly open.

"May I?" John reached forward and took the stool gently from her unresisting hand, setting it on the floor and gesturing her to take a seat. "What sort of name is Amaranthus, may I ask?"

She swallowed, blinked, and sat down, clutching the baby.

"It's a flower," she said, sounding rather dazed. "My grandfather's a botanist. It could have been worse," she added more sharply, seeing John smile. "It might have been Ampelopsis or Petunia."

"Amaranthus is a very beautiful name, my dear—if I may call you so?" Hal said, with grave courtesy. He wiggled a forefinger at the baby, who had stopped grizzling and was staring at him warily. Hal pulled his officer's gorget off over his head and dangled the shiny object, close enough for the child to grab—which he did.

"It's too large to choke him," Hal assured Amaranthus. "His father—and his father's brothers—all teethed on it. So did I, come to that." He smiled at her again. She was still white-faced but gave him a wary nod in response.

"What is the little fellow's name, my dear?" John asked.

"Trevor," she said, taking a firmer hold on the child, now completely engrossed in trying to get the demilune gorget—half the size of his head—into his mouth. "Trevor Grey." She looked back and forth between the Grey brothers, a frown puckering her brows. Then she lifted her chin and said, enunciating clearly, "Trevor … *Wattiswade* … Grey. Your Grace."

"So you are Ben's wife." A little of the tension left Hal's shoulders. "Do you know where Ben is, my dear?"

Her face went stiff, and she clutched the baby tighter.

“Benjamin is dead, Your Grace,” she said. “But this is his son, and if you don’t mind … we should quite like to come with you.”

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UNFINISHED BUSINESS

WILLIAM SHOVED his way through the crowds in the City Market, oblivious to the complaints of those rebounding from his impact.

He knew where he was going and what he meant to do when he got there. It was the only thing left to do before leaving Savannah. After that … it didn't matter.

His head throbbed like an inflamed boil. Everything throbbed. His hand—he'd probably broken something, but he didn't care. His heart, pounding and sore inside his chest. He hadn't slept since they'd buried Jane; would likely never sleep again and didn't care.

He remembered where the warehouse was. The place was almost empty; doubtless the soldiers had taken everything the owner hadn't had time to move out of reach. Three men were lounging by the far wall, sitting on the few remaining casks of salt fish and smoking their pipes; the smell of tobacco reached him, a small comfort in the echoing cold fishiness of the building.

“James Fraser?” he said to one of the loungers, and the man pointed with the stem of his pipe toward a small office, a sort of shed attached to the far wall of the warehouse.

The door was open; Fraser was seated at a table covered with papers, writing something by the light that fell through a tiny barred window behind him. He looked up at the sound of William’s footsteps and, seeing him, put down his quill and rose slowly to his feet. William came forward, facing him across the table.

“I have come to take my farewell,” William said, very formally. His voice was less firm than he liked, and he cleared his throat hard.

“Aye? Where is it that ye mean to go?” Fraser was wearing his plaid, the faded colors muted further by the dimness of the light, but what light there was sparked suddenly from his hair as he moved his head.

“I don’t know,” William said, gruff. “It doesn’t matter.” He took a deep breath. “I—wished to thank you. For what you did. Even though—” His throat closed tight; try as he might, he couldn’t keep Jane’s small white hand out of his thoughts.

Fraser made a slight dismissive motion and said softly, “God rest her, poor wee lass.”

“Even so,” William said, and cleared his throat again. “But there is one further favor that I wished to ask of you.”

Fraser’s head came up; he looked surprised but nodded.

“Aye, of course,” he said. “If I can.”

William turned and pulled the door shut, then turned to face the man again.

“Tell me how I came to be.”

The whites of Fraser’s eyes flashed in brief astonishment, then disappeared as his eyes narrowed.

"I want to know what happened," William said. "When you lay with my mother. What happened that night? If it *was* night," he added, and then felt foolish for doing so.

Fraser eyed him for a moment.

"Ye want to tell *me* what it was like, the first time ye lay with a woman?"

William felt the blood rush into his head, but before he could speak, the Scot went on.

"Aye, exactly. A decent man doesna speak of such things. Ye dinna tell your friends such things, do ye? No, of course not. So much less would ye tell your … father, or a father his …"

The hesitation before "father" was brief, but William caught it, no trouble. Fraser's mouth was firm, though, and his eyes direct.

"I wouldna tell ye, no matter who ye were. But being who ye are—"

"Being who I am, I think I have a right to know!"

Fraser looked at him for a moment, expressionless. He closed his eyes for an instant and sighed. Then opened them and drew himself up, straightening his shoulders.

"No, ye haven't. But that's not what ye *want* to know, in any case," he said. "Ye want to know, did I force your mother. I did not. Ye want to know, did I love your mother. I did not."

William let that lie there for a moment, controlling his breathing 'til he was sure his voice would be steady.

"Did she love you?" *It would have been easy to love him.* The thought came to him unbidden—and unwelcome—but with it, his own memories of Mac the groom. Something he shared with his mother.

Fraser's eyes were cast down, watching a trail of tiny ants running along the scuffed floorboards.

"She was verra young," he said softly. "I was twice her age. It was my fault."

There was a brief silence, broken only by their breathing and the distant shouts of men working on the river.

"I've seen the portraits," William said abruptly. "Of my—of the eighth earl. Her husband. Have you?"

Fraser's mouth twisted a little, but he shook his head.

"You know, though—knew. He was fifty years older than she was."

Fraser's maimed hand twitched, fingers tapping lightly against his thigh. Yes, he'd known. How could he *not* have known? He dipped his head, not quite a nod.

"I'm not stupid, you know," William said, louder than he'd intended.

"Didna think ye were," Fraser muttered, but didn't look at him.

"I can count," William went on, through his teeth. "You lay with her just before her wedding. Or was it just after?"

That went home; Fraser's head jerked up and there was a flash of dark-blue anger.

"I wouldna deceive another man in his marriage. Believe that of me, at least."

Oddly enough, he did. And in spite of the anger he still struggled to keep in check, he began to think he perhaps understood how it *might* have been.

"She was reckless." He made it a statement, not a question, and saw Fraser blink. It wasn't a nod, but he thought it was acknowledgment and went on, more confident.

“Everyone says that—everyone who knew her. She was reckless, beautiful, careless … she took chances …”

“She had courage.” It was said softly, the words dropped like pebbles in water, and the ripples spread through the tiny room. Fraser was still looking straight at him. “Did they tell ye that, then? Her family, the folk who kent her?”

“No,” William said, and felt the word sharp as a stone in his throat. For just an instant, he’d seen her in those words. He’d *seen* her, and the knowledge of the immensity of his loss struck through his anger like a lightning bolt. He drove his fist into the table, striking it once, twice, hammering it ’til the wood shook and the legs juddered over the floor, papers flying and the inkwell falling over.

He stopped as suddenly as he’d started, and the racket ceased.

“Are you *sorry*?” he said, and made no effort to keep his voice from shaking. “Are you sorry for it, damn you?”

Fraser had turned away; now he turned sharply to face William but didn’t speak at once. When he did, his voice was low and firm.

“She died because of it, and I shall sorrow for her death and do penance for my part in it until my own dying day. But—” He compressed his lips for an instant, and then, too fast for William to back away, came round the table and, raising his hand, cupped William’s cheek, the touch light and fierce.

“No,” he whispered. “No! I am not sorry.” Then he whirled on his heel, threw open the door, and was gone, kilt flying.

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PART NINE

“Thig crioch air an t-saoghal ach mairidh
ceol agus gaol.”
“The world may come to an end, but love
and music will endure.”

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IN THE WILDERNESS A LODGING PLACE

I COULDN'T STOP BREATHING. From the moment we left the salt-marsh miasma of Savannah, with its constant fog of rice paddies, mud, and decaying crustaceans, the air had grown clearer, the scents cleaner—well, putting aside the Wilmington mudflats, redolent with their memories of crocodiles and dead pirates—spicier, and more distinct. And as we reached the summit of the final pass, I thought I might explode from simple joy at the scent of the late-spring woods, an intoxicating mix of pine and balsam fir, oaks mingling the spice of fresh green leaves with the must of the winter's fallen acorns, and the nutty sweetness of chestnut mast under a layer of wet dead leaves, so thick that it made the air seem buoyant, bearing me up. I couldn't get enough of it into my lungs.

"If ye keep gasping like that, Sassenach, ye're like to pass out," Jamie said, smiling as he came up beside me. "How's the new knife, then?"

"Wonderful! Look, I found a huge ginseng root, and a birch gall and—" He stopped this with a kiss, and I dropped the soggy gunnysack full of plants on the path and kissed him back. He'd been eating wild spring onions and watercress plucked dripping from a creek and he smelled of his own male scent, pine sap, and the bloody tang of the two dead rabbits hanging at his belt; it was like kissing the wilderness itself, and it went on for a bit, interrupted only by a discreet cough a few feet away.

We let go of each other at once, and I took an automatic step back behind Jamie even as he stepped in front of me, hand hovering within reach of his dirk. A split second later, he'd taken a huge stride forward and engulfed Mr. Wemyss in an enormous hug.

"Joseph! *A charaid! Ciamar a tha thu*?"

Mr. Wemyss, a small, slight, elderly man, was swept literally off his feet; I could see a shoe dangling loose from the toes of one stockinged foot as he groped for traction. Smiling at this, I glanced round to see if Rachel and Ian had come into sight yet and spotted instead a small, round-faced boy on the path. He was perhaps four or five, with long fair hair, this flying loose around his shoulders.

"Er … Rodney?" I asked, making a hasty guess. I hadn't seen him since he was two or so, but I couldn't think who else might be accompanying Mr. Wemyss.

The child nodded, examining me soberly.

"You be the conjure-woman?" he said, in a remarkably deep voice.

"Yes," I said, rather surprised at this address, but still more surprised at how right my acknowledgment of it felt. I realized at that moment that I had been resuming my identity as we walked, that step by step as we climbed the mountain, smelling its scents and harvesting its plenty, I had sloughed off a few layers of the recent past and become again what I had last been in this place. I had come back.

"Yes," I said again. "I am Mrs. Fraser. You may call me Grannie Fraser, if you like."

He nodded thoughtfully, taking this in and mouthing "Grannie Fraser" to himself once or twice, as though to taste it. Then he looked at Jamie, who had set Mr. Wemyss back on his feet and was smiling down at him with a look of joy that turned my heart to wax.

"Izzat Himself?" Rodney whispered, drawing close to me.

"That is Himself," I agreed, nodding gravely.

"Aidan said he was big," Rodney remarked, after another moment's scrutiny.

"Is he big enough, do you think?" I asked, rather surprised by the realization that I didn't want Rodney to be disappointed in this first sight of Himself.

Rodney gave an odd sideways tilt of his head, terribly familiar—it was what his mother, Lizzie, did when making a judgment about something—and said philosophically, "Well, he's lot's bigger 'n me, anyway."

"Everything is relative," I agreed. "And speaking of relatives, how is your mother? And your … er … father?"

I was wondering whether Lizzie's unorthodox marriage was still in effect. Having fallen accidentally in love with identical-twin brothers, she had—with a guile and cunning unexpected in a demure nineteen-year-old Scottish bond servant—contrived to marry them both. There was no telling whether Rodney's father was Josiah or Keziah Beardsley, but I did wonder—

"Oh, Mammy's breedin' again," Rodney said casually. "She says she's a-going to castrate Daddy or Da or both of 'em, if that's what it takes to put a stop to it."

"Ah … well, that *would* be effective," I said, rather taken aback. "How many sisters or brothers have you got?" I'd delivered a sister before we'd left the Ridge, but—

"One sister, one brother." Rodney was clearly growing bored with me and stood on his toes to look down the path behind me. "Is that Mary?"

"What?" Turning, I saw Ian and Rachel navigating a horseshoe bend some way below; they vanished into the trees even as I watched.

"You know, Mary 'n Joseph a-flying into Egypt," he said, and I laughed in sudden understanding. Rachel, very noticeably pregnant, was riding Clarence, with Ian, who hadn't troubled to shave for the last several months and was sporting a beard of quasi-biblical dimensions, walking beside her. Jenny was presumably still out of sight behind them, riding the mare with Fanny and leading the pack mule.

"That's Rachel," I said. "And her husband, Ian. Ian is Himself's nephew. You mentioned Aidan—is his family well, too?" Jamie and Mr. Wemyss had started off toward the trailhead, talking sixteen to the dozen about affairs on the Ridge. Rodney took my hand in a gentlemanly way and nodded after them.

"We'd best be going down. I want to tell Mam first, afore *Opa* gets there."

"*Opa* … oh, your grandfather?" Joseph Wemyss had married a German lady named Monika, soon after Rodney's birth, and I thought I recalled that *"Opa"* was a German expression for "grandfather."

"Ja," Rodney said, confirming this supposition.

The trail meandered back and forth across the upper slopes of the Ridge, offering me tantalizing glimpses through the trees of the settlement below: scattered cabins among the bright-flowered laurels, the fresh-turned black earth of vegetable gardens—I touched the digging knife at my belt, suddenly dying to have my hands in the dirt, to pull weeds …

"Oh, you *are* losing your grip, Beauchamp," I murmured at the thought of ecstatic weed-pulling, but smiled nonetheless.

Rodney was not a chatterbox, but we kept up an amiable conversation as we walked. He said that he and his *opa* had walked up to the head of the pass every day for the last week, to be sure of meeting us.

"Mam and Missus Higgins have a ham saved for ye, for supper," he told me, and licked his lips in anticipation. "And there's honey to have with our corn bread! Daddy found a bee tree last Tuesday sennight and I helped him smoke 'em. And …"

I replied, but absentmindedly, and after a bit we both lapsed into a companionable silence. I was bracing myself for the sight of the clearing where the Big House had once stood—and a brief, deep qualm swept through me, remembering fire.

The last time I had seen the house, it was no more than a heap of blackened timbers. Jamie had already chosen a site for a new house and had felled the trees for it, leaving them stacked. Sadness and regret there might be in this return—but there were bright green spikes of anticipation poking through that scorched earth. Jamie had promised me a new garden, a new surgery, a bed long enough to stretch out in—and glass windows.

Just before we came to the spot where the trail ended above the clearing, Jamie and Mr. Wemyss stopped, waiting for Rodney and me to catch up. With a shy smile, Mr.

Wemyss kissed my hand and then took Rodney's, saying, "Come along, Roddy, you can be first to tell your mam that Himself and his lady have come back!"

Jamie took my hand and squeezed it hard. He was flushed from the walk, and even more from excitement; the color ran right down into the open neck of his shirt, turning his skin a beautiful rosy bronze.

"I've brought ye home, Sassenach," he said, his voice a little husky. "It willna be the same—and I canna say how things will be now—but I've kept my word."

My throat was so choked that I could barely whisper "Thank you." We stood for a long moment, clasped tight together, summoning up the strength to go around that last corner and look at what had been, and what might be.

Something brushed the hem of my skirt, and I looked down, expecting that a late cone from the big spruce we were standing by had fallen.

A large gray cat looked up at me with big, calm eyes of celadon green and dropped a fat, hairy, very dead wood rat at my feet.

"Oh, *God*!" I said, and burst into tears.

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FANNY'S FRENULUM

JAMIE HAD SENT word ahead, and preparations had been made for our coming. Jamie and I would stay with Bobby and Amy Higgins; Rachel and Ian with the MacDonalds, a young married couple who lived up the Ridge a way; and Jenny, Fanny, and Germain would bide for the nonce with Widow MacDowall, who had a spare bed.

There was a modest party thrown in our honor the first night—and in the morning we rose and were once more part of Fraser's Ridge. Jamie disappeared into the forest, coming back at nightfall to report that his cache of whisky was safe, and brought a small cask back with him to use as trade goods for what we might need to set up housekeeping, once we had a house to keep again.

As to said house—he'd begun the preparations for building a new house before we had left the Ridge, selecting a good site at the head of the wide cove that opened just below the ridge itself. The site was elevated but the ground there fairly level, and thanks to Bobby Higgins's industry, it had been cleared of trees, timber for the framing of the house laid in stacks, and an amazing quantity of large stones lugged uphill and piled, ready to be used for the foundation.

For Jamie, the first order of business was to see that his house—or the beginnings of it—was as it should be, and the second was to visit every household on the Ridge, hearing and giving news, listening to his tenants, reestablishing himself as the founder and proprietor of Fraser's Ridge.

My first order of business was Fanny's frenulum. I spent a day or two in organizing the various things we had brought with us, in particular my medical equipment, while visiting with the various women who came to call at the Higginses' cabin—our own first cabin, which Jamie and Ian had built when we first came to the Ridge. But once that was done, I summoned my troops and commenced the action.

* * *

"YE MAY PUT the poor lass off drinking whisky for good," Jamie observed, casting a worried look at the cup full of amber liquid sitting on the tray next to my embroidery scissors. "Would it not be easier for her to have the ether?"

"In one way, yes," I agreed, sliding the scissors point-first into a second cup, this one filled with clear alcohol. "And if I were going to do a lingual frenectomy, I'd have to. But there *are* dangers to using ether, and I don't mean merely burning down the house. I'm going to do just a frenotomy, at least for now. That *is* a very simple operation; it will literally take five seconds. And, besides, Fanny says she doesn't want to be put to sleep—perhaps she doesn't trust me." I smiled at Fanny as I said this; she was sitting on the oak settle by the hearth, solemnly taking note of my preparations. At this, though, she looked at me abruptly, her big brown eyes surprised.

“Oh, doh,” she said. “I twust oo. I zhust wanna thee.”

“Don’t blame you a bit,” I assured her, handing her the cup of whisky. “Here, then, take a good mouthful of that and hold it in your mouth—let it go down under your tongue—for as long as you can.”

I had a tiny cautery iron, its handle wrapped in twisted wool, heating on Amy’s girdle. I supposed it didn’t matter if it tasted like sausages. I had a fine suture needle, threaded with black silk, too, just in case.

The frenulum is a very thin band of elastic tissue that tethers the tongue to the floor of the mouth, and in most people it is exactly as long as it needs to be to allow the tongue to make all the complex motions required for speaking and eating, without letting it stray between the moving teeth, where it could be badly damaged. In some, like Fanny, the frenulum was too long and, by fastening most of the length of the tongue to the floor of her mouth, prevented easy manipulations of that organ. She often had bad breath because, while she cleaned her teeth nightly, she couldn’t use her tongue to dislodge bits of food that stuck between cheek and gum or in the hollows of the lower jaw below the tongue.

Fanny gulped audibly, then coughed violently.

“Tha’th … *thtrong*!” she said, her eyes watering. She wasn’t put off, though, and at my nod took another sip and sat stoically, letting the whisky seep into her buccal tissues. It would in fact numb the frenulum, at least a bit, and at the same time provide disinfection.

I heard Aidan and Germain calling outside; Jenny and Rachel had come down for the operation.

“I think we’d better do this outside,” I said to Jamie. “They’ll never all fit in here—not with Oglethorpe.” For Rachel’s belly had made considerable strides in the last few weeks and was of a size to make men shy nervously away from her lest she go off suddenly, like a bomb.

We took the tray of instruments outside and set up our operating site on the bench that stood by the front door. Amy, Aidan, Orrie, and wee Rob clustered together behind Jamie, who was charged with holding the looking glass—both to direct light into Fanny’s mouth to assist me and so that Fanny could indeed watch what was going on.

As Oglethorpe precluded Rachel being called into service as a back brace, though, we reshuffled the staff a bit and ended with Jenny holding the looking glass and Jamie sitting on the bench, holding Fanny on his knee, his arms wrapped comfortingly around her. Germain stood by, holding a stack of clean cloths, solemn as an altar boy, and Rachel sat beside me, the tray between us, so that she could hand me things.

“All right, sweetheart?” I asked Fanny. She was round-eyed as a sun-stunned owl, and her mouth hung open just a little. She heard me, though, and nodded. I took the cup from her limp hand—it was empty, and I handed it to Rachel, who refilled it briskly.

“Mirror, please, Jenny?” I knelt on the grass before the bench, and with no more than a little trial and error, we had a beam of sunlight trained on Fanny’s mouth. I took the embroidery scissors from their bath, wiped them, and, with a pledget of cloth, took hold of Fanny’s tongue with my left hand and lifted it.

It didn’t take even three seconds. I’d examined her carefully several times, making her move her tongue as far as she could, and knew exactly where I thought the point of attachment should be. Two quick snips and it was done.

Fanny made a surprised little noise and jerked in Jamie's arms, but didn't seem to be in acute pain. The wound was bleeding, though, suddenly and profusely, and I hurriedly pushed her head down, so that the blood could run out of her mouth onto the ground and not choke her.

I had another pledget waiting; I dipped this quickly into the whisky and, seizing Fanny's chin, brought her head up and tucked the pledget under her tongue. *That* made her emit a stifled *"Owy!"* but I cupped her chin and shut her mouth, adjuring her sternly to press down on the pledget with her tongue.

Everyone waited breathlessly while I counted silently to sixty. If the bleeding showed no sign of stopping, I'd have to put in a suture, which would be messy, or cauterize the wound, which would certainly be painful.

"… fifty-nine … sixty!" I said aloud, and peering into Fanny's mouth, found the pledget substantially soaked with blood but not overwhelmed by it. I extracted it and put in another, repeating my silent count. This time, the pledget was stained, no more; the bleeding was stopping on its own.

"Hallelujah!" I said, and everyone whooped. Fanny's head bobbed a bit and she smiled, very shyly.

"Here, sweetheart," I said, handing her the half-filled cup. "Finish that, if you can—just sip it slowly and let it go onto the wound if you can; I know it burns a bit."

She did this, rather quickly, and blinked. If it had been possible to stagger sitting down, she would have.

"I'd best put the lassie to bed, aye?" Jamie stood up, gently holding her against his shoulder.

“Yes. I’ll come and see to it that her head stays upright—just in case it should bleed again and run down her throat.” I turned to thank the assistants and spectators, but Fanny beat me to it.

“Missus … Fraser?” she said drowsily. “I—d-t-dth—” The tip of her tongue was sticking out of her mouth, and she looked cross-eyed toward it, astounded. She’d never been able to stick her tongue out before and now wiggled it to and fro, like a very tentative snake testing the air. “T-th—” She stopped, then, contorting her brow in a fearsome expression of concentration, said, “Th-ank y-y-YOU!”

Tears came to my eyes, but I managed to pat her head and say, “You’re very welcome, Frances.” She smiled at me then, a small, sleepy smile, and the next instant was asleep, her head on Jamie’s shoulder and a tiny drooling line of blood trickling from the corner of her mouth onto his shirt.

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A VISIT TO THE TRADING POST

BEARDSLEY'S TRADING POST was perhaps no great establishment by comparison to the shops of Edinburgh or Paris—but in the backcountry of the Carolinas, it was a rare outpost of civilization. Originally nothing but a run-down house and small barn, the place had expanded over the years, the owners—or rather, her managers—adding additional structures, some attached to the original buildings, other sheds standing free. Tools, hides, live animals, feed corn, tobacco, and hogsheads of everything from salt fish to molasses were to be found in the outbuildings, while comestibles and dry goods were in the main building.

People came to Beardsley's from a hundred miles—literally—in every direction. Cherokee from the Snowbird villages, Moravians from Salem, the multifarious inhabitants of Brownsville, and—of course—the inhabitants of Fraser's Ridge.

The trading post had grown amazingly in the eight years since I had last set foot in the place. I saw campsites in the forest nearby, and a sort of freelance flea market had sprung up alongside the trading post proper—people who brought small things to trade directly with their neighbors.

The manager of the trading post, a lean, pleasant man of middle years named Herman Stoelers, had wisely welcomed this activity, understanding that the more people who came, the greater the variety of what was available, and the more attractive Beardsley's became overall.

And the wealthier became the owner of Beardsley's trading post—an eight-year-old mulatto girl named Alicia. I wondered whether anyone besides Jamie and myself knew the secret of her birth, but if anyone did, they had wisely decided to keep it to themselves.

It was a two-day trek to the trading post, particularly as we had only Clarence, Jamie having taken Miranda and the pack mule—a jenny named Annabelle—to Salem. But the weather was good, and Jenny and I could walk, accompanied by Germain and Ian, leaving Clarence to carry Rachel and our trade goods. I'd left Fanny with Amy Higgins. She was still shy of talking in front of people; it would take a good deal of practice before she could speak normally.

Even Jenny, sophisticate as she now was after Brest, Philadelphia, and Savannah, was impressed by the trading post.

"I've never seen sae many outlandish-looking people in all my born days," she said, making no effort not to stare as a pair of Cherokee braves in full regalia rode up to the trading post, followed by several women on foot in a mixture of doeskins and European shifts, skirts, breeches, and jackets, these dragging bundles of hides on a travois or carrying huge cloth bundles full of squash, beans, corn, dried fish, or other salables on their heads or backs.

I came to attention, seeing the knobbly bulges of ginseng root protruding from one lady's pack.

"Keep an eye on Germain," I said, shoving him hastily at Jenny, and dived into the throng.

I emerged ten minutes later with a pound of ginseng, having driven a good bargain for a bag of raisins. They were Amy Higgins's raisins, but I would get her the calico cloth she wanted.

Jenny suddenly raised her head, listening.

"Did ye hear a goat just now?"

"I hear several. Do we want a goat?" But she was already making her way toward a distant shed. Evidently we *did* want a goat.

I shoved my ginseng into the canvas bag I'd brought and followed hastily.

* * *

"WE DON'T NEED that," a scornful voice said. "Piece o' worthless trash, that is."

Ian looked up from the mirror he was inspecting and squinted at a pair of young men on the other side of the store, engaged in haggling with a clerk over a pistol. They seemed somehow familiar to him, but he was sure he'd never met them. Small and wiry, with yellowish hair cropped short to their narrow skulls and darting eyes, they had the air of stoats: alert and deadly.

Then one of them straightened from the counter and, turning his head, caught sight of Ian. The youth stiffened and poked his brother, who looked up, irritated, and in turn caught sight of Ian.

"What the devil …? Cheese and rice!" the second youth said.

Plainly they knew *him;* they were advancing on him, shoulder to shoulder, eyes gleaming with interest. And seeing them side by side, suddenly he recognized them.

"A Dhia," he said under his breath, and Rachel glanced up.

"Friends of thine?" she said mildly.

"Ye might say so." He stepped out in front of his wife, smiling at the … well, he wasn't sure what they *were* just now, but they weren't wee lassies any longer.

He'd thought they were boys when he'd met them: a pair of feral Dutch orphans named—they said—Herman and Vermin, and they *thought* their last name was Kuykendall. In the event, they'd turned out to be in actuality Hermione and Ermintrude. He'd found them a temporary refuge with … oh, Christ.

"God, please, no!" he said in Gaelic, causing Rachel to look at him in alarm.

Surely they weren't still with … but they were. He saw the back of a very familiar head—and a still more familiar arse—over by the pickle barrel.

He glanced round quickly, but there was no way out. The Kuykendalls were approaching fast. He took a deep breath, commended his soul to God, and turned to his wife.

"Do ye by chance recall once tellin' me that ye didna want to hear about every woman I'd bedded?"

"I do," she said, giving him a deeply quizzical look. "Why?"

"Ah. Well …" He breathed deep and got it out just in time. "Ye said ye *did* want me to tell ye if we should ever meet anyone that I … er—”

“Ian Murray?” said Mrs. Sylvie, turning round. She came toward him, a look of pleasure on her rather plain, bespectacled face.

“Her,” Ian said hastily to Rachel, jerking his thumb in Mrs. Sylvie’s direction before turning to the lady.

“Mrs. Sylvie!” he said heartily, seizing her by both hands in case she might try to kiss him, as she had occasionally been wont to do upon their meeting. “I’m that pleased to see ye! And even more pleased to present ye to my … er … wife.” The word emerged in a slight croak, and he cleared his throat hard. “Rachel. Rachel, this is—”

“Friend Sylvie,” Rachel said. “Yes, I gathered as much. I’m pleased to know thee, Sylvie.” Her cheeks were somewhat flushed, but she spoke demurely, offering a hand in the Friends’ manner rather than bowing.

Mrs. Sylvie took in Rachel—and Oglethorpe—at a glance and smiled warmly through her steel-rimmed spectacles, shaking the offered hand.

“My pleasure entirely, I assure you, Mrs. Murray.” She gave Ian a sidelong look and a quivering twitch of the mouth that said as clearly as words, “*You*? You *married a* Quaker?”

“It *is* him! Toldja so!” The Kuykendalls surrounded him—he didn’t know how they managed it, there being only two of them, but he *felt* surrounded. Rather to his surprise, one of them seized him by the hand and wrung it fiercely.

“Herman Wurm,” he—*he*?—told Ian proudly. “Pleased to meetcha again, sir!”

“Worm?” Rachel murmured, watching them in fascination.

“Aye, Herman, I’m that fettled to see ye doing so … er … well. And you, too …” Ian extended a cautious hand toward what used to be Ermintrude, who responded in a high-pitched but noticeably gruff voice.

“Trask Wurm,” the youth said, repeating the vigorous handshake. “It’s German.”

“ ‘Wurm,’ they mean,” Mrs. Sylvie put in, pronouncing it *“Vehrm.”* She was pink with amusement. “They couldn’t ever get the hang of spelling ‘Kuykendall,’ so we gave it up and settled for something simpler. And as you’d made it *quite* clear that you didn’t want them to become prostitutes, we’ve reached a useful understanding. Herman and Trask provide protection for my … establishment.” She looked directly at Rachel, who went a shade pinker but smiled.

“Anybody messes with the girls, we’ll take care of him right smart,” the elder Wurm assured Ian.

“It’s not that hard,” the other said honestly. “Break just one of them bastards’ noses with a hoe handle and the rest of ’em settle right down.”

* * *

THERE WERE A dozen or so milch goats to choose from in the shed, in varying states of pregnancy. The Higginses had a good billy, though, so I needn’t trouble about that. I chose two friendly young unbred nannies, one all brown, the other brown and white, with an odd marking on her side that looked like the rounded fit of two jigsaw-puzzle pieces, one brown and one white.

I pointed out my choices to the young man in charge of the livestock and, as Jenny was still deliberating over her own choice, stepped outside to look over the chickens.

I had some hopes of spotting a Scots Dumpy but found only the usual run of Dominiques and Nankins. Well enough of their kind, but I thought I must wait until Jamie had time to build a chicken coop. And while we could lead the goats home easily enough, I wasn't going to carry chickens for days.

I came out of the chicken yard and looked about, slightly disoriented. That's when I saw him.

At first, I had no idea who he was. None. But the sight of the big, slow-moving man froze me in my tracks and my stomach curled up in instant panic.

No, I thought. *No. He's dead; they're all dead.*

He was a sloppily built man, with sloping shoulders and a protruding stomach that strained his threadbare waistcoat, but big. Big. I felt again the sense of sudden dread, of a big shadow coming out of the night beside me, nudging me, then rolling over me like a thundercloud, crushing me into the dirt and pine needles.

Martha.

A cold swept over me, in spite of the warm sunshine I stood in.

"Martha," he'd said. He'd called me by his dead wife's name and wept into my hair when he'd finished.

Martha. I had to be mistaken. That was my first conscious thought, stubbornly articulated, each word spoken aloud inside my mind, each word set in place like a little pile of stones, the first foundation of a bulwark. *You. Are. Mistaken.*

But I wasn't. My skin knew that. It rippled, a live thing, hairs rising in recoil, in vain defense, for what could skin do to keep such things out?

You. Are. Mistaken!

But I wasn't. My breasts knew that, tingling in outrage, engorged against their will by rough hands that squeezed and pinched.

My thighs knew it, too; the burn and weakness of muscles strained past bearing, the knots where punches and brutal thumbs left bruises that went to the bone, left a soreness that lingered when the bruises faded.

"You are mistaken," I said, whispering but aloud. "Mistaken."

But I wasn't. The deep soft flesh between my legs knew it, slippery with the sudden helpless horror of recollection—and so did I.

* * *

I STOOD THERE hyperventilating for several moments before I realized that I was doing it, and stopped with a conscious effort. The man was making his way through the cluster of livestock sheds; he stopped by a pen of hogs and leaned on the fence, watching the gently heaving backs with an air of meditation. Another man employed in the same recreation spoke to him, and he replied. I was too far away to hear what was said, but I caught the timbre of his voice.

"Martha. I know you don't want to, Martha, but you got to. I got to give it to you."

I was not going to be bloody sick. I wasn't. With that decision made, I calmed a little. I hadn't let him or his companions kill my spirit at the time; whyever would I let him harm me now?

He moved away from the pigs, and I followed him. I wasn't sure *why* I was following him but felt a strong compulsion to do so. I wasn't afraid of him; logically, there was no reason to be. At the same time, my unreasoning body still felt the echoes of that night, of his flesh and fingers, and would have liked to run away. I wasn't having that.

I followed him from pigs to chickens, back again to the pigs—he seemed interested in a young black-and-white sow; he pointed her out to the swineherd and seemed to be asking questions, but then shook his head in a dejected fashion and walked away. Too expensive?

I could find out who he is. The thought occurred to me, but I rejected it with a surprising sense of violence. I didn't bloody want to know his name.

And yet … I followed him. He went into the main building and bought some tobacco. I realized that I knew he used tobacco; I'd smelled the sour ash of it on his breath. He was talking to the clerk who measured out his purchase, a slow, heavy voice. Whatever he was saying went on too long; the clerk began to look strained, his expression saying all too clearly, *"We're done here; go away. Please go away …"* And a full five minutes later, relief was just as clearly marked on the clerk's face as the man turned away to look at barrels full of nails.

I'd known from what he said to me that his wife was dead. From his appearance and the way he was boring everyone he talked to, I thought he hadn't found another. He was plainly poor; that wasn't unusual in the backcountry. But he was also grubby and frayed, unshaven, and unkempt in a way that no man who lives with a woman normally is.

He passed within a yard of me as he went toward the door, his paper twist of tobacco and his bag of nails in one hand, a stick of barley sugar in the other. He was licking this with a large, wet tongue, his face showing a dim, vacant sort of pleasure in the taste. There was a small port-wine stain, a birthmark, on the side of his jaw. He was crude, I thought. Lumpish. And the word came to me: *feckless*.

Christ, I thought, with a mild disgust, this mingled with an unwilling pity that made me even more disgusted. I had had some vague thought—and realized it only now—of confronting him, of walking up to him and demanding to know whether he knew me. But he had looked right at me as he passed me, without a sign of recognition on his face. Perhaps there was enough difference between what I looked like now—clean and combed, decently dressed—and what I had looked like the last time he had seen me: filthy, wild-haired, half naked, and beaten.

Perhaps he hadn't really seen me at all at the time. It had been full dark when he came to me, tied and struggling for breath, trying to breathe through a broken nose. I hadn't seen him.

Are you sure it's really him? Yes, I bloody was. I was sure when I heard his voice and, even more so, having seen him, felt the rhythm of his bulky, shambling body.

No, I didn't want to speak to him. What would be the point? And what would I say? Demand an apology? More than likely, he wouldn't even remember having done it.

That thought made me snort with a bitter amusement.

"What's funny, *Grand-mère*?" Germain had popped up by my elbow, holding two sticks of barley sugar.

"Just a thought," I said. "Nothing important. Is Grannie Janet ready to go?"

"Aye, she sent me to look for ye. D'ye want one of these?" He generously extended a stick of candy toward me. My stomach flipped, thinking of the man's large pink tongue lapping his treat.

"No, thank you," I said. "Why don't you take it home for Fanny? It would be wonderful exercise for her." Clipping her frenulum hadn't miraculously freed her speech, or even her ability to manipulate food; it just made such things possible, with work. Germain spent hours with her, the two of them sticking out their tongues at each other, wiggling them in all directions and giggling.

"Oh, I got a dozen sticks for Fanny," Germain assured me. "And one each for Aidan, Orrie, and wee Rob, too."

"That's very generous, Germain," I said, slightly surprised. "Er … what did you buy them *with*?"

"A beaver skin," he replied, looking pleased with himself. "Mr. Kezzie Beardsley gave it to me for taking his young'uns down to the creek and minding 'em whilst he and Mrs. Beardsley had a lie-down."

"A lie-down," I repeated, my mouth twitching with the urge to laugh. "I see. All right. Let's find Grannie Janet, then."

* * *

IT TOOK NO little time to get organized for the journey back to the Ridge. It was a two-day ride; on foot, with goats, it would likely take four. But we had food and blankets, and the weather was fine. No one was in a hurry—certainly not the goats, who were inclined to pause for a quick mouthful of anything in reach.

The peace of the road and the company of my companions did a great deal to settle my disturbed feelings. Rachel's imitation over supper of Ian's expressions on suddenly meeting Mrs. Sylvie and the Wurms did even more, and I fell asleep by the fire within moments of lying down, and slept without dreaming.

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WOMAN, WILT THOU LIE WITH ME?

IAN COULDN'T TELL whether Rachel was amused, appalled, angry, or all three. This discomfited him. He usually *did* know what she thought of things, because she told him; she wasn't the sort of woman—he'd known a few—who expected a man to read her mind and got fashed when he didn't.

She'd kept her own counsel on the matter of Mrs. Sylvie and the Wurms, though. They'd done their wee bit of business, trading two bottles of whisky for salt, sugar, nails, needles, thread, a hoe blade, and a bolt of pink gingham, and he'd bought her a dilled cucumber that was as long as the span of his outstretched fingers. She'd thanked him for this but hadn't said much else on the way home. She was presently licking the vegetable in a meditative sort of way as she rocked along on Clarence.

It fascinated him to watch her do that, and he nearly walked straight off a steep rocky outcrop doing so. She turned round at his exclamation as he scrabbled for footing, though, and smiled at him, so she maybe wasn't that bothered about Sylvie.

"D'ye no mean to eat that?" he inquired, coming up beside her stirrup.

"I do," she said calmly, "but all in good time." She licked the substantial length of the warty green thing with a long, slow swipe of her tongue and then—holding his eyes—sucked deliberately on the end of it. He walked straight into a springy pine branch, which swiped him across the face with its needles.

He swore, rubbing at his watering eyes. She was laughing!

"Ye did that on purpose, Rachel Murray!"

"Is thee accusing me of propelling thee into a tree?" she inquired, arching one brow. "Thee is an experienced Indian scout, or so I was led to believe. Surely one of those should look where he's going."

She had pulled Clarence to a stop—Clarence was always agreeable to stopping, particularly if there was anything edible in sight—and sat there smiling at Ian, cheeky as a monkey.

"Give me that, aye?" She handed him the pickle willingly, wiping her damp hand on her thigh. He took a large bite, his mouth flooded with garlic and dill and vinegar. Then he jammed the cucumber into one of the saddlebags and extended a hand to her. "Come down here."

"Why?" she asked. She was still smiling, but her body had shifted, leaning toward him but making no effort to get off. He understood *that* sort of conversation and reached up, took her by what was left of her waist, and pulled her off in a flurry of skirts. He paused for an instant to swallow the bite of pickle, then kissed her thoroughly, a hand on her bottom. Her hair smelled of pinecones, chicken feathers, and the soft soap Auntie Claire called shampoo, and he could taste the German sausage they'd had for lunch, under the veil of pickling spice.

Her arms were round his neck, her belly pressed against him, and quite suddenly he felt a small hard shove in his own belly. He looked down in astonishment, and Rachel giggled. He hadn't realized that she wasn't wearing stays; her breasts were bound with a simple band under her shift, but her belly was just *there*, round and firm as a pumpkin under her gown.

"He—or she—is wakeful," she said, putting a hand on her bulge, which was moving slightly as tiny limbs poked experimentally here and there inside her. This was always fascinating in its own way, but Ian was still under the influence of her pickle-sucking.

"I'll rock him back to sleep for ye," he whispered in her ear, and, bending, lifted her in his arms. Nearly eight months gone, she was noticeably heavy, but he managed with no more than a slight grunt and, with a care to low-hanging branches and loose stones, carried her off into the forest, leaving Clarence to graze on a succulent clump of muhly grass.

* * *

"I RATHER HOPE that it wasn't the meeting with thy former paramour that caused this outbreak of passion," Rachel remarked a short time later, flicking a wandering wood louse off her husband's forearm, which was just by her face. They were lying on their sides on Ian's plaid, naked and cupped together like spoons in a box. It was cool under the trees, but she seemed never to grow cold these days; the child was like a small furnace—doubtless taking after its father, she thought. Ian's skin was usually warm, but for him the heat of passion was no mere metaphor; he blazed when they lay together.

"She's no my paramour," Ian murmured into her hair, and kissed the back of her ear. "It was only a commercial transaction."

She didn't like hearing that and stiffened a little.

"I did tell ye I'd gone wi' whores." Ian's voice was quiet, but she could hear the slight reproach in it. "Would ye rather I had discarded lovers strewn about the countryside?"

She took a breath, relaxed, and stretched her neck to kiss the back of his long, sun-browned hand.

"No, it's true—thee did tell me," she admitted. "And while there is some small part of me that could wish thee came to me virgin, chaste and untouched … honesty obliges me to acknowledge some gratitude for the lessons learned from the likes of Mrs. Sylvie." She wanted to ask whether he'd learned the things he'd just been doing to her from Mrs. Sylvie or perhaps from his Indian wife—but she had no wish to bring any thought of Works With Her Hands between them.

His hand lifted and cupped her breast, playing very gently with her nipple, and she squirmed involuntarily—a slow, insinuating squirm that thrust her buttocks back against him. Her nipples were very large these days and so sensitive that they couldn't bear the rubbing of stays. She squirmed again, and he laughed under his breath and rolled her over to face him so he could take her nipple in his mouth.

"Dinna make noises like that," he murmured against her skin. "The others will be comin' along the trail any time now."

"What—will they think when they see Clarence alone?"

"If anyone asks later, we'll say we were gatherin' mushrooms."

* * *

THEY MUSTN'T STAY much longer, she knew that. But she longed to stay like this forever—or at least for five minutes more. Ian lay once more behind her, warm and strong. But his hand was now on her stomach, tenderly stroking the rounded mystery of the child within.

He might have thought she was asleep. Perhaps he didn't mind if she heard him. He spoke in the *Gàidhlig*, though, and while she didn't yet know enough of the tongue to make out all he said, she knew it was a prayer. *"A Dhia"* meant "O God." And of course she knew what it was he prayed for.

"It's all right," she said to him softly, when he had stopped, and put her hand over his.

"What is?"

"That thee should think of thy first child—children. I know thee does. And I know how much thee fears for this one," she added, still more softly.

He sighed deeply, his breath, still scented with dill and garlic, warm on her neck.

"Ye turn my heart to water, lass—and should anything happen to you or to wee Oggy, it would punch a hole in me that would let my life run out."

She wanted to tell him that nothing would happen to them, that she wouldn't let it. But that was taking things upon herself that weren't hers to promise.

"Our lives are in God's hand," she said, squeezing his. "And whatever happens, we will be with thee forever."

* * *

DRESSED AGAIN, and as seemly as fingers combed through hair could make them, they reached the trail just as Claire and Jenny made their way around the bend, carrying packs and each leading two milch goats, friendly creatures who set up a loud *mehh* of greeting as they spotted the two strangers.

Rachel saw Ian’s mother glance sharply at her son, and then her dark-blue gaze lifted at once to Rachel, perched on Clarence’s back. She gave Rachel a smile that said, as plain as words, that she knew exactly what they’d been doing and found it funny. Warm blood rose in Rachel’s cheeks, but she kept her composure and inclined her head graciously to Jenny—in spite of the fact that Friends did not bow their heads save in worship.

Still blushing, she’d paid no attention to Claire, but after they had gone far enough ahead of the older women and the goats so as not to be overheard, Ian lifted his chin and gestured over his shoulder with it.

“Does aught seem amiss wi’ Auntie Claire, d’ye think?”

“I didn’t notice. What does thee mean?”

Ian lifted a shoulder, frowning slightly.

“I canna say, quite. She was herself on the way to the trading post and when we first got there, but when she came back from hagglin’ for the goats, she looked … different.” He struggled to find words to explain what he meant.

“No quite what ye’d say someone looks like if they’ve seen a ghost—not scairt, I mean. But … stunned, maybe? Surprised, or maybe shocked. But then when she saw me, she tried to act as though it was all as usual, and I was busy takin' the bundles out and forgot about it."

He turned his head again, looking over his shoulder, but the trail behind was empty. A faint *mehhhh* filtered down through the trees behind them, and he smiled—but his eyes were troubled.

"Ken—Auntie Claire canna hide things verra well. Uncle Jamie always says she's got a glass face, and it's true. Whatever it is she saw back there … I think it's with her, still."

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THE DEEPEST FEELING ALWAYS SHOWS ITSELF IN SILENCE

IT WAS SOMETIME in the midafternoon of the third day that Jenny cleared her throat in a significant manner. We had paused by a creek where the wild grass grew long and thick and were dabbling our tired feet in the water, watching the hobbled goats disport themselves. One seldom goes to the trouble of hobbling a goat, since they can, if they want to, chew their way free in a matter of seconds. In the present instance, though, there was too much food available for them to want to waste time in eating rope, and the hobbles would keep them within our sight.

"Got something caught in your throat?" I inquired pleasantly. "Luckily there's plenty of water."

She made a Scottish noise indicating polite appreciation of this feeble attempt at wit and, reaching into her pocket, withdrew a very battered silver flask and uncorked it. I could smell the liquor from where I sat—a local forerunner of bourbon, I thought.

“Did you bring that with you from Scotland?” I asked, accepting the flask, which had a crude fleur-de-lis on the side.

“Aye, it was Ian’s. He had it from when he and Jamie were soldiering in France; brought it back wi’ him when he lost his leg. We’d sit on the wall by his da’s house and share a dram, while he was mending; he’d need it, poor lad, after I made him walk up and down the road ten times every day, to learn the use of his peg.” She smiled, slanted eyes creasing, but with a wistful turn to her lips.

“I said I wouldna marry him, aye? Unless he could stand up beside me at the altar on two legs and walk me up the aisle after the vows.”

I laughed.

“That’s not quite the way *he* told it.” I took a cautious sip, but the liquid inside was amazingly good, fiery but smooth. “Where did you get this?”

“A man named Gibbs, from Aberdeenshire. Ye wouldna think they ken anything about whisky-making there, but doubtless he learnt it somewhere else. He lives in a place called Hogue Corners; d’ye ken it?”

“No, but it can’t be that far away. It’s his own make, is it? Jamie would be interested.” I took a second mouthful and handed back the flask, holding the whisky in my mouth to savor.

“Aye, I thought so, too. I have a wee bottle for him in my sack.” She sipped and nodded approvingly. “Who was the dirty fat lumpkin that scairt ye at Beardsley’s?”

I choked on the whisky, swallowed it the wrong way, and nearly coughed my lungs out in consequence. Jenny put down the flask, kirtled up her skirts, and waded into the creek, sousing her hankie in the cold water; she handed it to me, then cupped water in her hand and poured a little into my mouth.

"Lucky there's plenty of water, as ye said," she remarked. "Here, have a bit more." I nodded, eyes streaming, but pulled up my skirts, got down on my knees, and drank for myself, pausing to breathe between mouthfuls, until I stopped wheezing.

"I wasna in any doubt, mind," Jenny said, watching this performance. "But if I had been, I wouldn't be now. Who is he?"

"I don't bloody know," I said crossly, climbing back on my rock. Jenny wasn't one to be daunted by tones of voice, though, and merely raised one gull-wing-shaped brow.

"I don't," I repeated, a little more calmly. "I—had just seen him somewhere else. I have no idea who he is, though."

She was examining me with the interested air of a scientist with a new microorganism trapped under her microscope.

"Aye, aye. And where was it ye saw the fellow before? Because ye certainly kent him this time. Ye were fair gobsmacked."

"If I thought it would make the slightest bit of difference, I'd tell you it's none of your business," I said, giving her a look. "Give me that flask, will you?"

She gave it to me, watching patiently while I took several tiny sips and made up my mind what to say. At last I drew a deep, whisky-scented breath and gave her back the flask.

"Thank you. I don't know whether Jamie told you that about five years ago a gang of bandits who were terrorizing the countryside came through the Ridge. They burnt our malting shed—or tried to—and hurt Marsali. And they—they took me. Hostage."

Jenny handed back the flask, not speaking, but with a look of deep sympathy in her dark-blue eyes.

"Jamie … got me back. He brought men with him, and there was a terrible fight. Most of the gang was killed, but—obviously a few got away in the darkness. That—that man was one of them. No, it's all right, I don't need any more." I'd held the flask like a talisman of courage while I told her but now handed it back. She took a long, meditative swallow.

"But ye didna try to find out his name? Folk there kent him, I could see; they'd have told ye."

"I don't want to know!" I spoke loudly enough that one of the goats nearby emitted a startled *meh-eh-eh!* and bounded over a tussock of grass, evidently not discommoded at all by its hobbles.

"I—it doesn't matter," I said, less loudly but no less firmly. "The—ringleaders—are all dead; so are most of the others. This fellow … he … well, you can tell by looking at him, can't you? What did you call him—'a dirty fat lumpkin'? That's just what he is. He's no danger to us. I just—want to forget about him," I ended, rather lamely.

She nodded, stifled a small belch, looked startled at the sound, and, shaking her head, corked the flask and put it away.

We sat for a bit in silence, listening to the rush of water and the birds in the trees behind us. There was a mockingbird somewhere nearby, running through its lengthy repertoire in a voice like brass.

After ten minutes or so, Jenny stretched, arching her back and sighing.

"Ye'll remember my daughter Maggie?" she asked.

"I do," I said, smiling a little. "I delivered her. Or, rather, I caught her. You did the work."

"So ye did," she said, splashing one foot in the water. "I'd forgotten."

I gave her a sharp look. If she had, it would be the first thing she ever *had* forgotten, at least to my knowledge, and I didn't think she was old enough to have begun forgetting things now.

"She was raped," she said, eyes on the water and her voice very steady. "Not badly—the man didna beat her—but she got wi' child by him."

"How terrible," I said quietly, after a pause. "It—not a government soldier, though, surely?" That had been my first thought—but Maggie would have been no more than a child during the years of the Rising and Cumberland's clearing of the Highlands, when the British army had burned, plundered, and, yes, indeed, raped their way through any number of villages and crofts.

"No, it wasn't," Jenny said thoughtfully. "It was her husband's brother."

"Oh, God!"

"Aye, that's what I said about it, when she told me." She grimaced. "That was the one good thing about it, though; Geordie—that was the brother—had the same color hair and eyes as her husband, Paul, so the bairn could be passed off easy enough."

"And—did she?" I couldn't help asking. "Pass it off?"

Jenny let out a long sigh and nodded, taking her feet out of the water and tucking them up beneath her petticoat.

"She asked me what to do, poor lassie. I prayed about it—God, I prayed!" she said, with sudden violence, then snorted a little. "And I told her not to tell him—tell Paul, I mean. For if she did, what would be the end of it? One of them dead—for a Hieland man canna live wi' a man who's raped his wife nearby, nor should he—and it might be Paul, as like as not. And even if he only beat Geordie and drove him off, everyone would get to know what was behind it, and the poor wee lad—that was Wally, though of course we didna ken that yet, whilst we were talking it over—but the bairn branded as a bastard and the child of rape—what would become of it?"

She leaned down and, scooping up a handful of water, threw it over her face. She put her head back, eyes closed and the water running off her high, sharp cheekbones, and shook her head.

"And the family—Paul and Geordie's? A thing like that would tear them to pieces—and put them at loggerheads wi' us, nay doubt, for they'd be insisting up and down that Maggie was lying, rather than believe such a thing. Fat-heided creatures, the Carmichaels," she said judiciously. "Loyal enough, but stubborn as rocks."

"Thus sayeth a Fraser," I remarked. "The Carmichaels must be something special in that line."

Jenny snorted but didn't reply for a moment or two.

"So," she said at last, turning to look at me, "I said to Maggie that I'd prayed about it, and it seemed to me that if she could bear it for the sake of her man and her bairns, she should say nothing. Try to forgive Geordie if she could, and if she couldn't, keep away from him—but say nothing. And that's what she did."

"What—did Geordie do?" I asked curiously. "Did he—does he know that Wally is his son?"

She shook her head.

"I dinna ken. He left, a month after the bairn was born—emigrated to Canada. No one was surprised at that; everyone kent he was mad in love wi' Maggie and beside himself when she chose Paul. I expect that made it easier."

"Out of sight, out of mind? Yes, I'd suppose so," I said dryly. I thought I shouldn't ask but couldn't help myself. "Did Maggie ever tell Paul—after Geordie left, I mean?"

She shook her head and stood up, a little stiffly, shaking down her skirts.

"I dinna ken for sure, but I dinna think so. For her to tell him, after so long of keeping silent … how would he take that? And he'd still hate his brother, even if he couldna kill him right away." Her blue eyes, so like Jamie's, looked at me with rueful amusement. "Ye canna have been marrit to a Hieland man all these years and not ken how deep they can hate. Come on—we'd best gather these creatures before they burst." And she waded off into the grass, shoes in her hand, calling out a *Gàidhlig* charm for gathering livestock:

"The Three who are above in the City of glory,
Be shepherding my flock and my kine,
Tending them duly in heat, in storm, and in cold,
With the blessing of power driving them down
From yonder height to the sheiling fold."

* * *

I THOUGHT about it, after everyone had rolled up in their blankets and begun snoring that night. Well … I hadn't *stopped* thinking about it since I'd seen the man. But in light of the story that Jenny had told me, my thoughts began to clarify, much as throwing an egg into a pot of coffee will settle the grounds.

The notion of saying nothing was of course the first one to come to my mind and was still my intent. The only difficulty—well, there were two, to be honest. But the first one was that, irritating as it was to be told so repeatedly, I couldn't deny the fact that I had a glass face. If anything was seriously troubling me, the people I lived with immediately began glancing at me sideways, tiptoeing exaggeratedly around me—or, in Jamie's case, demanding bluntly to know what the matter was.

Jenny had done much the same thing, though she hadn't pressed me for details of my experience. Quite plainly, she'd guessed the outlines of it, though, or she wouldn't have chosen to tell me Maggie's story. It occurred to me belatedly to wonder whether Jamie *had* told her anything about Hodgepile's attack and its aftermath.

The underlying difficulty, though, was my own response to meeting the dirty fat lumpkin. I snorted every time I repeated the description to myself, but it actually helped. He was a man, and not a very prepossessing one. Not a monster. Not … not bloody *worth* making a fuss about. God knew how he'd come to join Hodgepile's band—I supposed that most criminal gangs were largely composed of feckless idiots, come to that.

And … little as I wanted to relive that experience … I did. He hadn't come to me with any intent of hurting me, in fact hadn't hurt me (which was not to say that he *hadn't* crushed me with his weight, forced my thighs apart, and stuck his cock into me …).

I unclenched my teeth, drew a deep breath, and started over.

He'd come to me out of opportunity—and need.

"Martha," he'd said, sobbing, his tears and snot warm on my neck. *"Martha, I loved you so."*

Could I forgive him on those grounds? Put aside the unpleasantness of what he'd done to me and see him only as the pathetic creature that he was?

If I could—would that stop him living in my mind, a constant burr under the blanket of my thoughts?

I put back my head, looking up at the deep black sky swimming with hot stars. If you knew they were really balls of flaming gas, you could imagine them as van Gogh saw them, without difficulty … and looking into that illuminated void, you understood why people have always looked up into the sky when talking to God. You need to feel the immensity of something very much bigger than yourself, and there it is—immeasurably vast, and always near at hand. Covering you.

Help me, I said silently.

I never talked to Jamie about Jack Randall. But I knew from the few things he told me—and the disjointed things he said in the worst of his dreams—that this was how he had chosen to survive. He'd forgiven Jack Randall. Over and over. But he was a stubborn man; he could do it. A thousand times, and still one more.

Help me, I said, and felt tears trickle down my temples, into my hair. *Please. Help me*.

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THINGS COMING INTO VIEW

IT WORKED. NOT EASILY, and often not for more than a few minutes at a time—but the shock faded and, back at home, with the peace of the mountain and the love of family and friends surrounding me, I felt a welcome sense of balance return. I prayed, and I forgave, and I coped.

This was greatly helped by distraction. Summer is the busiest time in an agricultural community. And when men are working with scythes and hoes and wagons and livestock and guns and knives—they hurt themselves. As for the women and children—burns and household accidents and constipation and diarrhea and teething and … pinworms.

“There, you see?” I said in a low voice, holding a lighted candle a few inches from the buttocks of Tammas Wilson, aged two. Tammas, drawing the not unreasonable conclusion that I was about to scorch his bum or ram the candle up his backside, shrieked and kicked, trying to escape. His mother took a firmer grip on him, though, and pried his buttocks apart again, revealing the tiny white wriggles of female pinworms swarming round his less than ideally immaculate small anus.

"Christ between us and evil," Annie Wilson said, letting go with one hand in order to cross herself. Tammas made a determined effort at escape and nearly succeeded in pitching himself headfirst into the fire. I seized him by one foot, though, and hauled him back.

"Those are the females," I explained. "They crawl out at night and lay eggs on the skin. The eggs cause itching, and so, of course, your wee lad scratches. That's what causes the redness and rash. But then he spreads the eggs to things he touches"—and, Tammas being two, he touched everything within reach—"and that's why your whole family is likely infected."

Mrs. Wilson squirmed slightly on her stool, whether because of pinworms or embarrassment, I couldn't tell, and righted Tammas, who promptly wriggled out of her lap and made for the bed containing his two elder sisters, aged four and five. I grabbed him round the waist and lugged him back over to the hearth.

"Bride save us, what shall I do for it?" Annie asked, glancing helplessly from the sleeping girls to Mr. Wilson, who—worn out from his day's work—was curled in the other bed, snoring.

"Well, for the older children and adults, you use this." I took a bottle out of my basket and handed it over, rather gingerly. It wasn't actually explosive, but, knowing its effects, it always gave me that illusion.

"It's a tonic of flowering spurge and wild ipecac root. It's a *very* strong laxative—that means it will give you the blazing shits," I amended, seeing her incomprehension, "but a few doses will get rid of the pinworms, provided you can keep

Tammas and the girls from respreading them. And for the smaller children—" I handed over a pot of garlic paste, strong enough to make Annie wrinkle her nose, even though it was corked. "Take a large glob on your finger and smear it round the child's bumhole—and, er, up inside."

"Aye," she said, looking resigned, and took both pot and bottle. It probably wasn't the worst thing she'd ever done as a mother. I gave her instructions regarding the boiling of bedding and strict advice about soap and religious hand-washing, wished her well, and left, feeling a strong urge to scratch my own bottom.

This faded on the walk back to the Higginses' cabin, though, and I slid into the pallet beside Jamie with the peaceful sense of a job well done.

He rolled over drowsily and embraced me, then sniffed.

"What in God's name have ye been doing, Sassenach?"

"You don't want to know," I assured him. "What do I smell like?" If it was just garlic, I wasn't getting up. If it was feces, though …

"Garlic," he said, luckily. "Ye smell like a French *gigot d'agneau.*" His stomach rumbled at the thought, and I laughed—quietly.

"I think the best you're likely to get is parritch for your breakfast."

"That's all right," he said comfortably. "There's honey for it."

* * *

THE NEXT AFTERNOON, there being no pressing medical calls, I climbed up to the new house site with Jamie. The shield-shaped green leaves and arching stems of the wild strawberries were everywhere, spattering the hillside with tiny, sour-sweet red hearts. I'd brought a small basket with me—I never went anywhere without one in spring or summer—and had it half filled by the time we reached the clearing, with its fine view of the whole cove that lay below the Ridge.

"It seems like a lifetime ago that we came here first," I remarked, sitting down on one of the stacks of half-hewn timbers and pulling off my wide-brimmed hat to let the breeze blow through my hair. "Do you remember when we found the strawberries?" I offered a handful of the fruit to Jamie.

"More like two or three. Lifetimes, I mean. But, aye, I remember." He smiled, sat down beside me, and plucked one of the tiny berries from the palm of my hand. He motioned at the more or less level ground before us, where he'd laid out a rough floor plan with pegs driven into the earth and string outlining the rooms.

"Ye'll want your surgery in the front, aye? The same as it was? That's how I've put it, but it's easy changed, if ye like."

"Yes, I think so. I'll be in there more than anywhere; be nice to be able to look out the window and see what sort of hideous emergency is coming."

I'd spoken in complete seriousness, but he laughed and took a few more strawberries.

"At least if they have to come uphill, it will slow them down a bit." He'd brought up the rough writing desk he'd made and now put it on his knee, opening it to show me his plans, neatly ruled in pencil.

"I'll have my speak-a-word room across the hall from you, like we did before—ye'll see I've made the hallway wider, because of the staircase landing—and I think I'd maybe like a wee parlor there, between the speak-a-word room and the kitchen. But the kitchen … d'ye think we should maybe have a separate cookhouse, as well, like John Grey did in Philadelphia?"

I considered that one for a moment, my mouth puckering a bit from the astringent berries. I wasn't surprised that the thought had occurred to him; anyone who'd lived through one house fire, let alone two, would have a very lively awareness of the dangers.

"Oh, I don't think so," I said at last. "They do that as much because of the summer heat as for the danger of fire, and that's not a problem here. We'll have to have hearths in the house, after all. The danger of fire can't be that much greater if we're cooking on one of them."

"Surely that depends who's doin' the cooking," Jamie said, cocking an eyebrow at me.

"If you mean anything personal by that remark, you may retract it," I said coolly. "I may not be the world's best cook, but I've never served you cinders."

"Well, ye *are* the only member o' the family who's ever burnt the house down, Sassenach. Ye've got to admit that much." He was laughing and put up a casual hand to intercept the mock blow I aimed at him. His hand completely enclosed my fist, and he pulled me effortlessly off my perch and onto his knee.

He put an arm round me and his chin on my shoulder, brushing my hair out of his face with his free hand. He was barefoot and wearing only a shirt and his threadbare green-and-brown working plaid, the one he'd bought from a rag dealer in Savannah. It was rucked up over his thigh; I pulled the fold out from under my bottom and smoothed it down over the long muscle of his leg.

"Amy says there's a Scottish weaver in Cross Creek," I said. "When you next go down, maybe you should commission a new plaid—maybe one in your own tartan, if the weaver's up to a Fraser red."

"Aye, well. There're plenty other things to spend money on, Sassenach. I dinna need to be grand to hunt or fish—and I work the fields in my shirt."

"I could go round day in and day out in a gray flannel petticoat with holes in it and it wouldn't make any difference to *my* work—but you wouldn't want me to do that, would you?"

He made a low Scottish noise of amusement and shifted his weight, settling me more firmly.

"I would not. I like to look at ye now and then in a fine gown, lass, wi' your hair put up and your sweet breasts showin'. Besides," he added, "a man's judged by how well he provides for his family. If I let ye go around in rags, folk would think I was either mean or improvident." It was clear from his tone which of these conditions would be the more frightful sin.

"Oh, they would not," I said, mostly teasing for the sake of argument. "Everyone on the Ridge knows perfectly well that you're neither one. Besides, don't you think I like to look at *you* in all your glory?"

"Why, that's verra frivolous of ye, Sassenach; I should never have expected something like that from Dr. C.E.B.R. Fraser." He was laughing again but stopped abruptly as he turned a little.

"Look," he said into my ear, and pointed down the side of the cove. "Just there, on the right, where the creek comes out o' the trees. See her?"

"Oh, *no*!" I said, spotting the smudge of white moving slowly among the green mats of cress and duckweed. "It can't be, surely?" I couldn't make out details at that distance without my glasses, but from the way it moved, the object in question was almost certainly a pig. A big pig. A big *white* pig.

"Well, if it's no the white sow, it's a daughter just like her. But my guess is that it's the auld besom herself. I'd know that proud rump anywhere."

"Well, then." I leaned back against him with a little sigh of satisfaction. "Now I *know* we're home."

"Ye'll sleep under your own roof within a month, *a nighean*," he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice. "Mind, it may not be more than the roof of a lean-to, to start—but it'll be our own. By the winter, though, I'll have the chimneys built, the walls all up, and the roof on; I can be puttin' in the floors and the doors while there's snow on the ground."

I put a hand up to cup his cheek, warm and lightly stubbled. I didn't fool myself that this was paradise or even a refuge from the war—wars tended not to stay in one place but moved around, much in the manner of cyclones and even more destructive where they touched down. But for however long it lasted, this was home, and now was peace.

We sat in silence for a while, watching hawks circle over the open ground below and the machinations of the white sow—if indeed it was she—who had now been joined in her foraging by a number of smaller porcine blobs, doubtless this spring's litter. At the foot of the cove, two men on horseback came into sight from the wagon road, and I felt Jamie's attention sharpen, then relax.

“Hiram Crombie and the new circuit rider,” he said. “Hiram said he meant to go down to the crossroads and fetch the man up, so he’d not lose his way.”

“You mean so Hiram can make sure he’s dour enough for the job,” I said, laughing. “You realize they’ll have got out of the habit of thinking you’re human, don’t you?” Hiram Crombie was head man of the little group of settlers that Jamie had acquired six years before. All of them were Presbyterians of a particularly rock-ribbed disposition and inclined to regard Papists as being deeply perverse, if not actually the spawn of Satan.

Jamie made a small noise, but it was one of tolerant dismissal.

“They’ll get used to me again,” he said. “And I’d pay money to watch Hiram talk to Rachel. Here, Sassenach, my leg’s gone asleep.” He helped me off his lap and stood up, shaking his kilt into place. Faded or not, it suited him, and my heart rose to see him looking so much as he should: tall and broad-shouldered, head of his household, once more master of his own land.

He looked out over the cove again, sighed deeply, and turned to me.

“Speakin’ of hideous emergencies,” he said thoughtfully, “ye do want to see them coming. So ye can be fettled against them, aye?” His eyes met mine directly. “Would now be a good time to tell me what’s coming, d’ye think?”

* * *

“THERE’S NOTHING wrong,” I said, for probably the tenth time. I picked at a scab of bark still clinging to the timber I sat on. “It’s perfectly all right. Really.”

Jamie was standing in front of me, the cove and the clouded sky bright behind him, his face shadowed.

“Sassenach,” he said mildly. “I’m a great deal more stubborn than you are, and ye ken that fine. Now, I know something upset ye when ye went to Beardsley’s place, and I know ye dinna want to tell me about it. Sometimes I ken ye need to fettle your mind about a matter before ye speak, but you’ve had time and more to do that—and I see that whatever it is is worse than I thought, or ye’d have said by now.”

I hesitated, trying to think of something to tell him that perhaps wasn’t quite … I looked up at him and decided that, no, I couldn’t lie to him—and not only because he’d be able to tell immediately that I *was* lying.

“Do you remember,” I said slowly, looking up at him, “on our wedding night? You told me you wouldn’t ask me to tell you things that I couldn’t. You said that love had room for secrets, but not for lies. I won’t lie to you, Jamie—but I really don’t want to tell you.”

He shifted his weight from one leg to the other and sighed.

“If ye think *that’s* going to relieve my mind, Sassenach …” he said, and shook his head. “I didna say that, anyway. I do remember the occasion—vividly”—and he smiled a little at me—“and what I said was that there was nothing between us then but respect—and that I thought respect maybe had room for secrets, but not for lies.”

He paused for a moment, then said very gently, “D’ye no think there’s more than respect between us now, *mo chridhe*?”

I took a very deep breath. My heart was thumping against my stays, but it was just normal agitation, not panic.

“I do,” I said, looking up at him. “Jamie … please don’t ask me just now. I truly think it’s all right; I’ve been praying about it, and—and—I think it will be all right,” I ended, rather lamely. I stood up, though, and took his hands. “I’ll tell you when I think I can,” I said. “Can you live with that?”

His lips tightened as he thought. He wasn’t a man for facile answers. If he couldn’t live with it, he’d tell me.

“Is it a matter that I might need to make preparation for?” he asked seriously. “If it might cause a fight of some kind, I mean, I should need to be ready.”

“Oh.” I let out the breath I’d been holding, somewhat relieved. “No. No, it isn’t anything like that. More of a moral question kind of thing.”

I could see that he wasn’t happy about that; his eyes searched my face, and I saw the troubled look in them, but at last he nodded, slowly.

“I’ll live with it, *a nighean*,” he said softly, and kissed my forehead. “For now.”

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INTERRUPTUS

THE OTHER MAJOR THINGS requiring a healer's attention in summer were pregnancy and birth. I prayed every day that Marsali had safely delivered her child. Even though it was already June 1, it would likely be months before we had any news, but I had examined her before we parted company—with tears—in Charleston, and all seemed normal.

"Do ye think this one might be … like Henri-Christian?" She spoke the name with difficulty and pressed a hand to her swelling belly.

"Probably not," I said, and saw the emotions ripple across her face like wind passing over water. Fear, regret … relief.

I crossed myself, with another quick prayer, and walked up the path to the MacDonald cottage, where Rachel and Ian were staying until Ian could build them a place of their own. Rachel was sitting on the bench out front, shelling peas into a basin, the basin sitting comfortably atop her stomach.

“Madainn mhath!” she said, smiling in delight when she saw me. “Is thee not impressed with my linguistic facility, Claire? I can say ‘Good morning,’ ‘Good night,’ ‘How are you?’ and ‘Bugger off to St. Kilda’ now.”

“Congratulations,” I said, sitting down next to her. “How does that last one go?”

“Rach a h-Irt,” she told me. “I gather ’St. Kilda’ is actually a figure of speech indicating some extremely remote location, rather than being specified as the actual destination.”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised. Do you try to impose the principles of plain speech on *Gàidhlig,* or is that even possible?”

“I have no idea,” she said frankly. “Mother Jenny proposes to teach me the Lord’s Prayer in *Gàidhlig.* Perhaps I can tell from that, as presumably one addresses the Creator in the same sort of voice that one uses for plain speech.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t thought about that, but it was sensible. “So you call God ‘Thee’ when speaking to Him?”

“Of course. Who should be a closer Friend?”

It hadn’t occurred to me, but presumably that *was* why one used “thou,” “thy,” et cetera, in prayer; that was originally the familiar form of the singular pronoun “you,” even though common English speech had now moved on and lost the distinction, save for the Friends’ plain speech.

“How interesting,” I said. “And how is Oggy today?”

“Restless,” she said, catching the edge of the basin as a vigorous kick made it bounce, scattering peas. “So am I,” she added, as I brushed the spilled peas off her petticoat and poured them back into the pan.

“I don’t doubt it,” I said, smiling. “Pregnancy actually *does* last forever—until suddenly you go into labor.”

“I can’t wait,” she said fervently. “Neither can Ian.”

“Any particular reason?”

A slow, glorious blush rose up from the neck of her shift and suffused her to the hairline.

“I wake him six times a night, rising to piss,” she said, avoiding my eye. “And Oggy kicks him, nearly as much as he does me.”

“And?” I said invitingly.

The blush deepened slightly.

“He says he can’t wait to, er, suckle me,” she said diffidently. She coughed and then looked up, the blush fading a little.

“Really,” she said, now serious, “he’s anxious for the child. Thee knows about his children by the Mohawk woman; he said he’d told thee, making up his mind if it was right for him to marry again.”

“Ah. Yes, he would be.” I laid a hand on her belly, feeling the reassuring pressure of a thrusting foot and the long curve of a tiny back. The baby hadn’t dropped, but Oggy was at least head-down. *That* was a great relief.

“It will be all right,” I said, and squeezed her hand. “I’m sure of it.”

“I’m not afraid for myself at all,” she said, smiling and squeezing back. The smile faded a little as she put her hand on her stomach. “But very much afraid for them.”

* * *

THE WEATHER being fine—and the smallest Higgins teething—we took a pair of quilts and walked up to the house site after supper, to enjoy the long twilight. And a little privacy.

"You don't think we're likely to be interrupted by a bear or some other form of wildlife, do you?" I asked, shimmying out of the rough gown I wore for foraging.

"No. I spoke wi' Jo Beardsley yesterday; he told me the nearest bear is a good league that way—" He nodded toward the far side of the cove. "And they dinna travel far in the summer, while the eating's good where they are. And painters wouldna trouble wi' people while there are easier things to kill. I'll make a bitty fire, though, just on principle."

"How's Lizzie?" I asked, unfolding the quilts as I watched him assemble a small fire with deft efficiency. "Did Jo say?"

Jamie smiled, eyes on what he was doing.

"He did, at some length. The meat of it bein' that she's well enough but summat inclined to bite pieces out o' him and Kezzie to distract her mind. That's why Jo was out hunting; Kezzie stays in when she's frachetty, because he canna hear her so well." The Beardsley twins were identical, and so alike that the only sure way to tell which you were talking to was that Keziah was hard of hearing, as the result of a childhood infection.

"That's good. No malaria, I mean." I'd visited Lizzie soon after our arrival and found her and the brood thriving—but she'd told me that she'd had a few "spells" of fever during the last year, doubtless owing to lack of the Jesuit bark. I'd left her with most of what I'd brought from Savannah. *I should have thought to ask if they had any at the trading post*, I thought—and pushed away the heavy sense of uneasiness that came with the thought of that place, thinking firmly, *I forgive you.*

The fire built, we sat feeding it sticks and watching the last of the sunset go down in flaming banners of golden cloud behind the black pickets of the farthest ridge.

And with the light of the fire dancing on the stacked timbers and the piles of foundation stones, we enjoyed the privacy of our home, rudimentary as said home might be at the moment. We lay peacefully afterward between our quilts—it wasn't cold but, so high up, the heat of the day vanished swiftly from the air—and watched the flickering lights of chimney sparks and lighted windows, in the few houses visible among the trees of the cove. Before the lights were extinguished for the night, we were asleep.

I woke sometime later from an erotic dream, squirming slowly on the lumpy quilt, limbs heavy with desire. This seemed to happen more frequently as I grew older, as though making love with Jamie ignited a fire that didn't quite die but continued to smolder through the night. If I didn't wake enough to do something about it, I'd wake in the morning stupid and foggy with unslaked dreams and unquiet sleep.

Fortunately, I was awake and, while still very pleasantly drowsy, quite capable of doing something about it, the process made much easier by the presence of the large, warm, pungent-smelling male beside me. He shifted a little as I edged onto my back, making a little space between us, but resumed his regular heavy breathing at once, and I edged my hand downward, encountering tumid warmth. It wouldn't take long.

A few minutes later, Jamie shifted again, and my hand stilled between my thighs. Then his hand slid swiftly under the quilt and touched me in the same place, nearly stopping my heart.

"I dinna mean to interrupt ye, Sassenach," he whispered in my ear. "But would ye like a bit of help wi' that?"

"Um," I said rather faintly. "Ah … what did you have in mind?"

In answer, the tip of his tongue darted into my ear, and I let out a small shriek. He snorted with amusement and cupped his hand between my legs, dislodging my own fingers, which had gone rather limp. One large finger stroked me delicately, and I arched my back.

"Ooh, ye're well started, then," he murmured. "Ye're slick and briny as an oyster, Sassenach. Ye hadna finished yet, though?"

"No, I—how long were you *listening*?"

"Oh, long enough," he assured me, and, ceasing operations for a moment, took hold of my disengaged hand and folded it firmly round a very enthusiastic bit of his own anatomy. "Mmm?"

"Oh," I said. "Well …" My legs had taken stock of the situation much more quickly than my mind had, and so had he. He lowered his head and kissed me in the dark with a soft, eager thoroughness, then pulled his mouth away long enough to ask, "How do elephants make love?"

Fortunately, he didn't wait for an answer, as I hadn't got one. He rolled over me and slid home in the same movement, and the universe shrank suddenly to a single vivid point.

A few minutes later, we lay under the blazing stars, quilt thrown off and hearts thumping slowly back to normal.

"Did you know," I said, "that your heart actually does stop for a moment at the point of climax? That's why your heartbeat is slow for a minute or two after; the sympathetic nervous system has fired all its synapses, leaving the parasympathetic to run your heart, and the parasympathetic decreases heart rate."

"I noticed it stopped," he assured me. "Didna really care why, as long as it started again." He put his arms over his head and stretched luxuriously, enjoying the cool air on his skin. "Actually, I never cared whether it started again, either."

"There's a man for you," I remarked tolerantly. "No forethought."

"Ye dinna need forethought for *that*, Sassenach. What ye were doing when I interrupted ye, I mean. I admit, if there's a woman involved, ye have to think of all sorts of things, but no for that." He paused for a moment.

"Um. Did I not … serve ye well enough earlier, Sassenach?" he asked, a little shyly. "I would ha' taken more time, but I couldna wait, and—"

"No, no," I assured him. "It wasn't that—I mean, I just … enjoyed it so much I woke up wanting more."

"Oh. Good."

He relaxed with a deep, contented sigh, closing his eyes. There was a waxing moon and I could see him clearly, though the moonlight washed all color from the scene, leaving him a sculpture in black and white. I ran a hand down his chest and lightly over his still-flat belly—hard physical labor had its price, but also its benefits—and cupped his genitals, warm and damp in my hand.

"Tha ball-ratha sìnte riut," he said, putting a big hand over mine.

"A what?" I said. "A lucky … leg?"

"Well, limb, really; leg would be overstating it by a good deal. 'There is a lucky limb stretched against you.' It's the first line of a poem by Alasdair mac Mhaighistir Alasdair. 'To an Excellent Penis,' it's called."

"Thought highly of himself, did Alasdair?"

"Well, he doesna *say* it's his—though I admit that's the implication." He squinted a little, eyes still closed, and declaimed:

"Tha ball-ratha sìnte riut
A choisinn mìle buaidh
Sàr-bodh iallach acfhainneach
Rinn-gheur sgaiteach cruaidh
Ùilleach feitheach feadanach
Làidir seasmhach buan
Beòdha treòrach togarrach
Nach diùltadh bog no cruaidh."

"I daresay," I said. "Do it in English; I believe I've missed a few of the finer points. He can't really have compared his penis to a bagpipe's chanter, can he?"

"Oh, aye, he did," Jamie confirmed, then translated:

"There is a lucky limb stretched against you
That has made a thousand conquests:
An excellent penis that is leathery, well-equipped,
Sharp-pointed, piercing, firm,
Lubricated, sinewy, chanter-like,
Strong, durable, long-enduring,
Vigorous, powerful, joyous,
That would not jilt either soft or hard body."

"Leathery, is it?" I said, giggling. "I don't wonder, after a thousand conquests. What does he mean, 'well-equipped,' though?”

“I wouldna ken. I suppose I must have seen it once or twice—havin’ a piss by the side o’ the road, I mean—but if so, I wasna greatly struck by its virtues.”

“You *knew* this Alasdair?” I rolled over and propped my head on my arm.

“Oh, aye. So did you, though ye maybe didna ken he wrote poetry, you not having much *Gàidhlig* in those days.”

I still didn’t have a great deal, though now that we were among *Gàidhlig*-speaking people again, it was coming back.

“Where did we know him? In the Rising?”

He was Prince Tearlach’s *Gàidhlig* tutor.

“Aye. He wrote a great many poems and songs about the Stuart cause.” And now that he reminded me, I thought I *did* perhaps recall him: a middle-aged man singing in the firelight, long-haired and clean-shaven, with a deep cleft in his chin. I’d always wondered how he managed to shave so neatly with a cutthroat razor.

“Hmm.” I had distinctly mixed feelings about people like Alasdair. On the one hand, without them stirring the pot and exciting irrational romanticism, the Cause might easily have withered and died long before Culloden. On the other … because of them, the battlefields—and those who had fallen there—were remembered.

Before I could think too deeply on that subject, though, Jamie interrupted my thoughts by idly brushing his penis to one side.

“The schoolmasters made me learn to write wi’ my right hand,” he remarked, “but luckily it didna occur to anyone to force me to abuse myself that way, too.”

“Why call it that?” I asked, laughing. “Abusing yourself, I mean.”

“Well, ‘masturbate’ sounds a great deal more wicked, aye? And if ye’re abusing yourself, it sounds less like ye’re havin’ a good time.”

“Strong, durable, long-enduring,” I quoted, stroking the object in question lightly. “Perhaps Alasdair meant something like glove leather?”

“Vigorous and powerful it may be, Sassenach, and certainly joyous—but I tell ye, it’s no going to rise to the occasion three times in one night. Not at my age.” Detaching my hand, he rolled over, scooping me into a spoon shape before him, and in less than a minute was sound asleep.

When I woke in the morning, he was gone.

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VISIT TO A HAUNTED GARDEN

I BLOODY *KNEW*. From the moment I woke to birdsong and a cold quilt beside me, I knew. Jamie often rose before dawn, for hunting, fishing, or travel—but he invariably touched me before he left, leaving me with a word or a kiss. We'd lived long enough to know how chancy life could be and how swiftly people could be parted forever. We'd never spoken of it or made a formal custom of it, but we almost never parted without some brief token of affection.

And now he'd gone off in the dark, without a word.

"You bloody, bloody man!" I said, and thumped the ground with my fist in frustration.

I made my way down the hill, quilts folded under my arm, fuming. Jenny. He'd gone and talked to Jenny. Of course he had; why hadn't I foreseen that?

He'd agreed not to ask me. He hadn't said he wouldn't ask anyone else. And while Jenny clearly loved me, I'd never been under any illusions as to where her ultimate loyalty lay. She wouldn't have voluntarily given up my secret, but if her brother asked her, point-blank, she would certainly have told him.

The sun was spreading warmth like honey over the morning, but none of it was reaching my cold bones.

He knew. And he'd gone a-hunting.

* * *

I DIDN'T NEED to look but looked anyway. Jamie's rifle was gone from its place behind the door.

"He came in early," Amy Higgins told me, spooning out a bowl of parritch for me. "We were all in bed still, but he called out soft, and Bobby got up to unbar the door. I would have fed him, but he said he was well enough and away he went. Hunting, he said."

"Of course," I said. The bowl was warm to my hands, and in spite of what I thought—what I *knew*—was going on, the thick grainy smell of it was enticing. And there was honey, and a little cream kept back from the butter-making; Amy allowed these in deference to Bobby's debauched English tastes, though she stuck to the usual virtuously Scottish salt on parritch herself.

Eating settled me, a little. The blunt fact was that there was absolutely nothing I could do. I didn't know the lumpkin's name or where he lived. Jamie might. If he'd talked to Jenny right away, he could easily have sent word to Beardsley's trading post and asked who was the fat man with the port-wine stain on his face. Even if he didn't yet know and was on his way to find out, I had no means of catching up with him—let alone stopping him.

"A Hieland man canna live wi' a man who's raped his wife nearby, nor should he." That's what Jenny had said to me. In

warning, I now realized.

“Gak!” It was wee Rob, toddling round the room, who had seized my skirt in both hands and was giving me a toothy smile—all four teeth of it. “Hungy!”

“Hallo, there,” I said, smiling back despite my disquiet. “Hungry, you say?” I extended a small spoonful of honeyed parritch in his direction, and he went for it like a starving piranha. We shared the rest of the bowl in companionable silence—Rob wasn’t a chatty child—and I decided that I would work in the garden today. I didn’t want to go far afield, as Rachel could go into labor at any moment, from the looks of it. And a short spell of solitude amid the soothing company of the vegetable kingdom might lend me a bit of much-needed calm.

It would also get me out of the cabin, I reflected, as Rob, having licked the bowl, handed it back to me, toddled across the cabin, and, lifting his dress, peed in the hearth.

* * *

THERE WOULD BE a new kitchen garden near the new house. It was measured and planned, the earth broken, and poles for the deer fence had begun accumulating. But there was little point in walking that far each day to tend a garden when there was not yet a house to live in. I minded Amy’s plot in the meantime, sneaking occasional seedlings and propagules into it between the cabbages and turnips—but today I meant to visit the Old Garden.

That’s what the people of the Ridge called it, and they didn’t go there. I privately called it Malva’s Garden, and did.

It was on a small rise behind where the Big House had stood. With the new house rising already in my mind, I passed the bare spot where the Big House had been, without a qualm. There were more exigent things to be qualm about, I thought, and sniggered.

"You are losing your mind, Beauchamp," I murmured, but felt better.

The deer fence had weathered and broken down in spots, and the deer had naturally accepted the invitation. Most of the bulbs had been pawed up and eaten, and while a few of the softer plants, like lettuce and radishes, had escaped long enough to reseed themselves, the growing plants had been nibbled to scabby white stalks. But a very thorny wild rose brier flourished away in one corner, cucumber vines crawled over the ground, and a massive gourd vine rippled over a collapsed portion of the fence, thick with infant fruits.

A monstrous pokeweed rose from the center of the patch, nearly ten feet high, its thick red stem supporting a wealth of long green leaves and hundreds of purplish-red flower stalks. The nearby trees had grown immensely, shading the plot, and in the diffuse green light the long, nubbly stalks looked like nudibranchs, those colorful sea slugs, gently swaying in currents of air rather than water. I touched it respectfully in passing; it had an odd medicinal smell, well deserved. There were a number of useful things one could do with pokeweed, but eating it wasn't one of them. Which was to say, people *did* eat the leaves on occasion, but the chances of accidental poisoning made it not worth the trouble of preparation unless there was absolutely nothing else to eat.

I couldn't remember the exact spot where she'd died. Where the pokeweed grew? That would be entirely apropos, but maybe too poetic.

Malva Christie. A strange, damaged young woman—but one I'd loved. Who perhaps had loved me, as well as she could. She’d been with child and near her time when her brother—the child’s father—had cut her throat, here in the garden.

I’d found her moments later and tried to save the child, performing an emergency cesarean with my gardening knife. He’d been alive when I pulled him from his mother’s womb but died at once, the brief flame of his life a passing blue glow in my hands.

Did anyone name him? I wondered suddenly. They’d buried the baby boy with Malva, but I didn’t recall anyone mentioning his name.

Adso came stalking through the weeds, eyes intent on a fat robin poking busily for worms in the corner. I kept still, watching, admiring the lithe way in which he sank imperceptibly lower as he came more slowly, creeping on his belly for the last few feet, pausing, moving, pausing again for a long, nerve-racking second, no more than the tip of his tail a-twitch.

And then he moved, too fast for the eye to see, and in a brief and soundless explosion of feathers, it was over.

“Well done, cat,” I said, though in fact the sudden violence had startled me a little. He paid no attention but leapt through a low spot in the fence, his prey in his mouth, and disappeared to enjoy his meal.

I stood still for a moment. I wasn’t looking for Malva; the Ridge folk said that her ghost haunted the garden, wailing for her child. Just the sort of thing they *would* think, I thought, rather uncharitably. I hoped her spirit had fled and was at peace. But I couldn’t help thinking, too, of Rachel, so very different a soul, but a young mother, as well, so near her time, and so nearby.

My old gardening knife was long gone. But Jamie had made me a new one during the winter evenings in Savannah, the handle carved from whalebone, shaped, as the last one had been, to fit my hand. I took it from its sheath in my pocket and nicked my wrist, not stopping to think.

The white scar at the base of my thumb had faded, no more now than a thin line, almost lost in the lines that scored my palm. Still legible, though, if you knew where to look: the letter "J" he had cut into my flesh just before Culloden. Claiming me.

I massaged the flesh near the cut gently, until a full red drop ran down the side of my wrist and fell to the ground at the foot of the pokeweed.

"Blood for blood," I said, the words quiet in themselves but seeming drowned by the rustle of leaves all around. "Rest ye quiet, child—and do no harm."

* * *

DO NO HARM. *Well, you tried.* As doctor, as lover, as mother and wife. I said a silent goodbye to the garden and went up the hill, toward the MacDonalds' cottage.

How would Jamie do it? I wondered, and was surprised to find that I did wonder, and wondered in a purely dispassionate way. He'd taken the rifle. Would he pick the man off at a distance, as if he were a deer at water? A clean shot, the man dead before he knew it.

Or would he feel he must confront the man, tell him why he was about to die—offer him a chance to fight for his life? Or just walk up with the cold face of vengeance, say nothing, and kill the man with his hands?

"Ye canna have been marrit to a Hieland man all these years and not ken how deep they can hate."

I really didn't want to know.

Ian had shot Allan Christie with an arrow, as one would put down a rabid dog, and for precisely similar reasons.

I'd seen Jamie's hate flame bright the night he saved me and said to his men, *"Kill them all."*

How was it now for him? If the man had been found on that night, there would have been no question that he would die. Should it be different now, only because time had passed?

I walked in the sun now but still felt cold, the shadows of Malva's Garden with me. The matter was out of my hands; no longer my business, but Jamie's.

* * *

I MET JENNY on the path, coming up briskly, a basket on her arm and her face alight with excitement.

"Already?" I exclaimed.

"Aye, Matthew MacDonald came down a half hour ago to say her water's broken. He's gone to find Ian now."

He had found Ian; we met the two young men in the dooryard of the cabin, Matthew bright red with excitement, Ian white as a sheet under his tan. The door of the cabin was open; I could hear the murmur of women's voices inside.

"Mam," Ian said huskily, seeing Jenny. His shoulders, stiff with terror, relaxed a little.

"Dinna fash yourself, *a bhalaich*," she said comfortably, and smiled sympathetically at him. "Your auntie and I have done this a time or two before. It will be all right."

"Grannie! Grannie!" I turned to find Germain and Fanny, both covered with dirt and with sticks and leaves in their hair, faces bright with excitement. "Is it true? Is Rachel having her baby? Can we watch?"

How did it work? I wondered. News in the mountains seemed to travel through the air.

"Watch, forbye!" Jenny exclaimed, scandalized. "Childbed isna any kind of a place for men. Be off with ye this minute!"

Germain looked torn between disappointment and pleasure at being called a man. Fanny looked hopeful.

"I'm no-t a man," she said.

Jenny and I both looked dubiously at her and then at each other.

"Well, ye're no quite a woman yet, either, are ye?" Jenny said to her. If not, she was close. Tiny breasts were beginning to show when she was in her shift, and her menarche wasn't far off.

"I've s-seen babies bor-n." It was a simple statement of fact, and Jenny nodded slowly.

"Aye. All right, then."

Fanny beamed.

"What do *we* do?" Germain demanded, indignant. "Us men."

I smiled, and Jenny gave a deep chuckle that was older than time. Ian and Matthew looked startled, Germain quite taken aback.

"Your uncle did his part of the business nine months ago, lad, just as ye'll do yours when it's time. Now, you and Matthew take your uncle awa' and get him drunk, aye?"

Germain nodded quite seriously and turned to Ian.

“Do you want Amy’s wine, Ian, or shall we use Grandda’s good whisky, do ye think?”

Ian’s long face twitched, and he glanced at the open cabin door. A deep grunt, not quite a groan, came out and he looked away, paling further. He swallowed and groped in the leather bag he wore at his waist, coming out with what looked like a rolled animal skin of some kind and handing it to me.

“If—” he started, then stopped to gather himself and started again. “When the babe is born, will ye wrap him—or her,”—he added hastily, “in this?”

It was a small skin, soft and flexible, with very thick, fine fur in shades of gray and white. A wolf, I thought, surprised. The hide of an unborn wolf pup.

“Of course, Ian,” I said, and squeezed his arm. “Don’t worry. It will be all right.”

Jenny looked at the small, soft skin and shook her head.

“I doubt, lad, if that will half-cover your bairn. Have ye no seen the size o’ your wife lately?”

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AND YOU KNOW THAT

JAMIE CAME HOME three days later, with a large buck tied to Miranda's saddle. The horse seemed unenthused about this, though tolerant, and she whuffed air through her nostrils and shivered her hide when he dragged the carcass off, letting it fall with a thump.

"Aye, lass, ye've done brawly," he said, clapping her on the shoulder. "Is Ian about, *a nighean*?" He paused to kiss me briefly, glancing up the hill toward the MacDonald cottage. "I could use a bit of help wi' this."

"Oh, he's here," I said, smiling. "I don't know if he'll come skin your deer for you, though. He's got a new son and won't let the baby out of his sight."

Jamie's face, rather tired and worn, broke into a grin.

"A son? The blessing of Bride and Michael be on him! A braw lad?"

"Very," I assured him. "I think he must weigh almost nine pounds."

“Poor lass,” he said, with a sympathetic grimace. “And her first, too. Wee Rachel’s all right, though?”

“Rather tired and sore, but quite all right,” I assured him. “Shall I bring you some beer, while you take care of the horse?”

“A good wife is prized above rubies,” he said, smiling. “Come to me, *mo nighean donn*.” He reached out a long arm and drew me in, holding me close against him. I put my arms around him and felt the quiver of his muscles, exhausted, and the sheer hard strength still in him, that would hold him up, no matter how tired he might be. We stood quite still for some time, my cheek against his chest and his face against my hair, drawing strength from each other for whatever might come. Being married.

* * *

AMID THE GENERAL rejoicing and fuss over the baby—who was still being called Oggy, his parents being spoiled for choice regarding his name—the butchering of the deer, and the subsequent feasting lasting well into the night, it was late morning of the next day before we found ourselves alone again.

“The only thing lacking last night was cherry bounce,” I remarked. “I never saw so many people drink so much of so many different things.” We were making our way—slowly—up to the house site, carrying several bags of nails, a very expensive small saw, and a plane that Jamie had brought back in addition to the deer.

Jamie made a small amused sound but didn’t reply. He paused for a moment to look up at the site, presumably envisioning the outline of the house-to-be.

“D’ye think it should maybe have a third story?” he asked. “The walls would bear it easily enough. Take careful building of the chimneys, though. Keeping them plumb, I mean.”

“Do we need that much room?” I asked doubtfully. There had certainly been times in the old house when I’d wished we’d *had* that much room: influxes of visitors, new emigrants, or refugees had often filled the place to the point of explosion—mine. “Providing more space might just encourage guests.”

“Ye make it sound like they’re white ants, Sassenach.”

“Wh—oh, termites. Well, yes, there’s a strong superficial resemblance.”

Arrived at the clearing, I piled the nails conveniently and went to bathe my face and hands in water from the tiny spring that flowed from the rocks a little way up the hill. By the time I came back, Jamie had stripped off his shirt and was knocking together a pair of rough sawhorses. I hadn’t seen him with his shirt off for a long time and paused to enjoy the sight. Beyond the simple pleasure of seeing his body flex and move, whipcord muscles moving easily under his skin, I liked knowing that he felt himself safe here and could ignore his scars.

I sat down on an upturned bucket and watched for a time. The blows of his hammer temporarily silenced the birds, and when he stopped and set the sawhorse on its feet, the air rang empty in my ears.

“I wish you hadn’t felt you had to do it,” I said quietly.

He didn’t reply for a moment but pursed his lips as he squatted and picked up a few stray nails. “When we wed—” he said, not looking at me. “When we wed, I said to ye that I gave ye the protection of my name, my clan—and my body.”

He stood up then and looked down at me, serious. “Do ye tell me now that ye no longer want that?”

“I—no,” I said abruptly. “I just—I wish you hadn’t killed him, that’s all. I’d—managed to forgive him. It wasn’t an easy thing to do, but I did it. Not permanently, but I thought I *could* do it permanently, sooner or later.”

His mouth twitched a little.

“And if ye could forgive him, he needn’t die, ye’re saying? That’s like a judge lettin’ a murderer go free, because his victim’s family forgave him. Or an enemy soldier sent off wi’ all his weapons.”

“I am not a state at war, and you are not my army!”

He began to speak, then stopped short, searching my face, his eyes intent.

“Am I not?” he said quietly.

I opened my mouth to reply but found I couldn’t. The birds had come back, and a gang of house finches chittered at the foot of a big fir that grew at the side of the clearing.

“You are,” I said reluctantly, and, standing up, wrapped my arms around him. He was warm from his work, and the scars on his back were fine as threads under my fingers. “I wish you didn’t have to be.”

“Aye, well,” he said, and held me close. After a bit, we walked hand in hand to the biggest pile of barked timber and sat down. I could feel him thinking but was content to wait until he had formed what he wanted to say. It didn’t take him long. He turned to me and took my hands, formal as a man about to say his wedding vows.

“Ye lost your parents young, *mo nighean donn*, and wandered about the world, rootless. Ye loved Frank”—his mouth compressed for an instant, but I thought he was unconscious of it—“and of course ye love Brianna and Roger

Mac and the weans … but, Sassenach—I am the true home of your heart, and I know that."

He lifted my hands to his mouth and kissed my upturned palms, one and then the other, his breath warm and his beard stubble soft on my fingers.

"I have loved others, and I do love many, Sassenach—but you alone hold all my heart, whole in your hands," he said softly. "And you know that."

* * *

WE WORKED through the day then, Jamie fitting stones for the foundation, me digging the new garden and foraging through the woods, bringing back pipsissewa and black cohosh, mint and wild ginger to transplant.

Toward late afternoon we stopped to eat; I'd brought cheese and bread and early apples in my basket and had put two stone bottles of ale in the spring to keep cold. We sat on the grass, leaning back against a stack of timber that was shaded by the big fir, tired, eating in companionable silence.

"Ian says he and Rachel will come up tomorrow to help," Jamie said at last, thriftily eating his apple core. "Are ye going to eat yours, Sassenach?"

"No," I said, handing it over. "Apple seeds have cyanide in them, you know."

"Will it kill me?"

"It hasn't so far."

"Good." He pulled off the stem and ate the core. "Have they settled on a name for the wee lad yet?"

I closed my eyes and leaned back into the shade of the big fir, enjoying its sharp, sun-warmed scent.

“Hmm. The last I heard, Rachel was suggesting Fox—for George Fox, you know; he was the founder of the Society of Friends, but naturally they wouldn’t call the baby George, because of the king. Ian said he doesn’t think highly of foxes, though, and what about Wolf, instead?”

Jamie made a meditative Scottish noise.

“Aye, that’s no bad. At least he’s not wanting to call the wean Rollo.”

I laughed, opening my eyes.

“Do you really think that’s what he has in mind? I know people name their children for deceased relatives, but naming one for your deceased dog …”

“Aye, well,” Jamie said judiciously. “He was a *good* dog.”

“Well, yes, but—” A movement down on the far side of the cove caught my eye. People coming up the wagon road. “Look, who’s that?” There were four small moving dots, but at this distance I couldn’t make out much more than that without my glasses.

Jamie shaded his eyes, peering.

“No one I ken,” he said, sounding mildly interested. “It looks like a family, though—they’ve a couple of bairns. Maybe new folk, wanting to settle. They havena got much in the way of goods, though.”

I squinted; they were closer now, and I could make out the disparity of height. Yes, a man and a woman, both wearing broad-brimmed hats, and a boy and girl.

“Look, the lad’s got red hair,” Jamie said, smiling and raising his chin to point. “He minds me of Jem.”

“So he does.” Curious now, I got up and rummaged in my basket, finding the bit of silk in which I kept my spectacles when not wearing them. I put them on and turned, pleased as I always was to see fine details spring suddenly into being. Slightly less pleased to see that what I had thought was a scale of bark on the timber near where I'd been sitting was in fact an enormous centipede, enjoying the shade.

I turned my attention back to the newcomers, though; they'd stopped—the little girl had dropped something. Her dolly—I could see the doll's hair, a splotch of color on the ground, even redder than the little boy's. The man was wearing a pack, and the woman had a large bag over one shoulder. She set it down and bent to pick up the doll, brushing it off and handing it back to her daughter.

The woman turned then to speak to her husband, throwing out an arm to point to something—the Higginses' cabin, I thought. The man put both hands to his mouth and shouted, and the wind carried his words to us, faint but clearly audible, called out in a strong, cracked voice.

"Hello, the house!"

I was on my feet, and Jamie stood and grabbed my hand, hard enough to bruise my fingers.

Movement at the door of the cabin, and a small figure that I recognized as Amy Higgins appeared. The tall woman pulled off her hat and waved it, her long red hair streaming out like a banner in the wind.

"Hello, the house!" she called, laughing.

Then I was flying down the hill, with Jamie just before me, arms flung wide, the two of us flying together on that same wind.

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AUTHOR'S NOTES

Dams and Tunnels

In the 1950s, a great hydroelectric project was started to bring power to the Highlands, and, in the process, many dams with turbines were built. During the construction of these dams, a good many tunnels were built, a number of them long enough to require a small electric train to transport men and equipment from one end to the other. (If you're interested in this project and its history, I recommend a book called *Tunnel Tigers: A First-Hand Account of a Hydro Boy in the Highlands* by Patrick Campbell, though there are several other good sources.)

Now, Loch Errochty does exist, and it does have a dam. I don't know whether it has a tunnel exactly like the one described in the book, but if it did—that's what it would look like; the tunnel and train are taken from multiple descriptions of the hydroelectric constructions in the Highlands. My description of the dam itself, its spillway, and its turbine room are based on those at the Pitlochry Dam.

Banastre Tarleton and the British Legion

There will likely be a certain amount of quibbling about my inclusion of Colonel Banastre Tarleton in the Battle of

Monmouth, as the British Legion of which he was a commander (a regiment of mixed cavalry and artillery) was technically not in existence until after General Clinton's return to New York following the battle. However, the British Legion did consist of two separate parts: cavalry, under the command of Banastre Tarleton, and artillery, and these parts were organized separately. The cavalry unit appears to have been in some stage of organization in early June of 1778, prior to the battle, though the artillery unit (reasonably enough, given the problems of equipping and training) was not organized until late July, after the battle, when Sir Henry Clinton had returned to New York.

Now, there is no report that I can find as to the definite whereabouts of Colonel Tarleton during the month of June 1778. While neither he nor his British Legion is listed in the official order of battle, that listing is admitted by every source I could find to be confused and deficient. Owing to the large number of militia units taking part and the irregular nature of the battle (by eighteenth-century standards), various small groups are known to have been there but were not documented, and others were there but under confusing circumstances (e.g., a portion of Daniel Morgan's Rifle Corps was reported as taking part in the battle, but Morgan himself didn't. I don't know whether his absence was the result of illness, accident, or conflict, but apparently he wasn't there, even though he plainly intended to be).

Now, if *I* were General Clinton, in the throes of imminent departure from Philadelphia, and more or less expecting the possibility of attack by Washington's Rebels, *and* I had this nice new cavalry unit forming up in New York—would I not send word to Colonel Tarleton to bring his men on down, to lend a hand in the evacuation and to have a bit of field experience to meld them together as a new unit? I would, and I can't think that General Clinton was less soldierly than I am.

(Besides, there is this interesting thing called novelistic license. I have one. Framed.)

The Battle of Monmouth

The battle lasted from before daylight 'til after dark: the longest battle of the Revolution. It was also by far the messiest battle of the Revolution.

Owing to the circumstances—Washington's troops trying to catch an enemy army fleeing in three widely separated divisions—neither side could choose its ground, and the ground over which they fought was so chopped up and patchworked with farms, creeks, and forests, they couldn't fight in the usual manner, with lines facing each other, nor was it possible to develop effective flanking maneuvers. Thus it wasn't so much a classic eighteenth-century battle as a very long series of pitched fights between small groups, most of whom had No Idea what was going on anywhere else. And it ended up as one of those indecisive battles that no one wins and where no one has any idea for some time afterward what the actual effects of the battle were or would be.

With two hundred–odd years of historical perspective, the general take on the Battle of Monmouth is that it was important not because the Americans won but because they didn't actually lose.

Washington and his troops had spent the preceding winter at Valley Forge, pulling together what men and resources they had and forming those troops into (they hoped) a real army, with the help of Baron von Steuben (who was actually not a baron but thought it sounded better) and other European officers who lent their services either out of idealism (*vide* the Marquis de La Fayette) or from a sense of personal adventure and ambition. (As the Continental army was a trifle lacking in money, they offered instant promotion as an inducement to experienced officers; a mere captain from a British or German regiment could become a colonel—or occasionally, a general—in the Continental army, no questions asked.)

Consequently, Washington was itching to find an opportunity to try out the new army, and General Clinton provided an excellent opportunity. The fact that the new army did acquit itself very well (bar the occasional snafu such as Lee's botched encircling maneuver and mistaken retreat) was a shot in the arm for the Rebel cause and gave both army and partisans new heart to continue the fight.

Still, in terms both of logistics and results, the battle was One Big Mess. While there is a tremendous amount of material on the battle, and a great many eyewitness reports, the fragmented nature of the conflict prevented anyone from ever having a clear idea as to the overall state of things during the battle, and the staggered arrival of so many companies of militia from Pennsylvania and New Jersey meant that some companies were not documented as having been there, even though they were. (Sources note "several unidentified militia companies from New Jersey," for instance. These are, of course, the companies commanded by General Fraser.)

From a historical perspective, the Battle of Monmouth is also interesting because of the participation of so many well-known Revolutionary figures, from George Washington himself to the Marquis de La Fayette, Nathanael Greene, Anthony Wayne, and Baron von Steuben.

Now, when you include real people in a historical novel, you want to balance a realistic and (insofar as is possible) accurate portrayal of them against the fact that the novel is seldom *about* these people. Therefore, while we do see most of them (and what we do see is based on reasonably accurate biographical information[1]), we see them *en passant*, and only in situations affecting the people who are the real focus of the novel.

In regard to the novelistic license mentioned above: a special embossed seal (stamped by the Temporal Authority) allows me to compress time when necessary. True battle aficionados (or those obsessive souls who feel compelled to construct timelines and then fret about them) will note that Jamie and Claire meet with General Washington and several other senior officers at Coryell's Ferry. Some five days later, we find them making preparations on the day of battle, with little or no description of what was happening to them during the interval. That's because, while there was a tremendous amount of moving around, nothing of dramatic note happened on those five days. While I do strive for historical accuracy, I do also know that a) history is often not very accurate, and b) most people who really care about the logistic minutiae of battles are reading Osprey's Men-at-Arms series or the transcript of the court-martial of General Charles Lee, not novels.

Ergo: While all the officers mentioned were with Washington's army, they were not all at dinner on the same night or in the same place. Commanders (and their troops) came to join Washington from several places over the course of the nine days between Clinton's exodus from Philadelphia and Washington's catching him near Monmouth Courthouse (the site of Monmouth Courthouse is now the Monmouth Hall of Records, for the benefit of people who choose to read with a map in hand[2]). The general state of the relations among those officers, though, is as shown during that dinner.

Likewise, it seemed unnecessary to depict the mundane events of five days of travel and military conference, just to prove to the meanest intelligence that five days had, in fact, passed. So I didn't.

The Court-Martial of General Charles Lee

Lee's lack of scouting, communications, and (not to put too fine a point on it) leadership led to the massive retreat that nearly scuttled the American attack altogether, this being retrieved by George Washington's personal rallying of the retreating troops. In consequence, General Lee was court-martialed following the battle on charges of disobeying orders, misbehavior before the enemy, and disrespect to the commander in chief; he was convicted and suspended from military command for a year. There would have been a great deal of talk around Philadelphia regarding this—particularly in the household of a printer who published a regular newspaper. However, the Fraser family had other pressing concerns at the time, and so no mention was made of this.

Quaker Plain Speech

The Religious Society of Friends was founded around 1647 by George Fox. As part of the society's belief in the equality of all men before God, they did not use honorific titles (such as "Mr./Mrs.," "General/Colonel/etc.") and used "plain speech" in addressing everyone.

Now, as any of you who have a second language with Latin roots (Spanish, French, etc.) realize, these languages have both a familiar and a formal version of "you." So did English, once upon a time. The "thee" and "thou" forms that most of us recognize as Elizabethan or Biblical are in fact the English familiar forms of "you"—with "you" used as both the plural familiar form ("all y'all") and the formal pronoun (both singular and plural). As English evolved, the familiar forms were dropped, leaving us with the utilitarian "you" to cover all contingencies.

Quakers retained the familiar forms, though, as part of their "plain speech" until the twentieth century. Over the years, though, plain speech also evolved, and while "thee/thy" remained, "thou/thine" largely disappeared, and the verb forms associated with "thee/thy" changed. From about the mid-eighteenth century onward, plain speech used "thee" as the singular form of "you" (the plural form remained "you," even in plain speech), with the same verb forms normally used for third person singular: e.g., "He knows that/Thee knows that." The older verb endings —"knowest," "doth," etc.—were no longer used.

If you would like to know a whole lot more about the grammatical foundations and usages of Quaker plain speech than most people normally want to, allow me to recommend to you *No Need to be Ashamed of the Plain Language* by Kenneth S. P. Morse

You can find this on the QuakerJane.com website, or Google it (in case that website should no longer be extant).

Scots/Scotch/Scottish

As noted elsewhere (*Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade*, see "Author's Notes"), in the eighteenth century (and, indeed, well into the mid-twentieth century), the word "Scotch" and its variants (e.g., "Scotchman") were commonly used (by both English people *and* Scots) to describe an inhabitant of Scotland. The terms "Scottish" and "Scots" were also occasionally used, though less common.

Personally, I don't think political correctness has any place in historical fiction, and therefore those persons in this book who normally would have used "Scotch" do.

Typos and Terminology

Owing to the interesting idiosyncrasies of Scots dialect, some words may appear to be misspelled—but they aren't. For instance, while an English cook may have made her flapjacks on an iron griddle, her Scottish counterpart was frying sausages on a hot girdle. (This occasional transposition of sounds results in such entertaining items as a Scottish dessert known as "creamed crud" ("curd" to the less-imaginative English). It also results in the occasional inattentive reviewer denouncing the occurrence of "typos" in my books. This is not to say that there *aren't* any typos—

there always are, no matter how many eyeballs have combed the pages—just that “girdle” isn’t one of them.

Besides dialectical idiosyncrasies, there are also the oddities due to obsolete (but entirely accurate) usage. For example, at one point in this book, you will find someone hiding behind a pile of “spiled” barrels. I do *not* mean “spoiled,” and it isn’t a typo. “Spiled” means that a spile (a small wooden peg or spigot) has been driven into a cask in order to broach it and draw off liquid. So the pile is composed of barrels that have been drained of their contents. (Yes, I could indeed have said “a pile of empty barrels” instead, but what fun would *that* be?)

Bibliography/LibraryThing

Having been an academic for a good long time, I appreciate the virtues of a good bibliography. Having been a reader of novels for a lot longer, I sort of don’t think extensive bibliographies belong in them.

Still, one of the side effects of reading historical fiction often is a desire to learn more about events, locations, flora, fauna, etc., described therein. I have a goodish number of references (about 1,500, last time I counted), acquired over the last twenty-odd years of writing historical fiction, and am happy to share the bibliographic information for these.

As it’s not convenient to do that individually with a large number of people, I’ve put my whole reference collection (as of the beginning of 2013, at least) on LibraryThing—this being an online bibliographic site, where people can catalog and share their personal library information. My catalog is public, and you should be able to access all of it using my name as a keyword. (Individual references also include keywords like “medicine,” “herbal,” “biography,” etc.)

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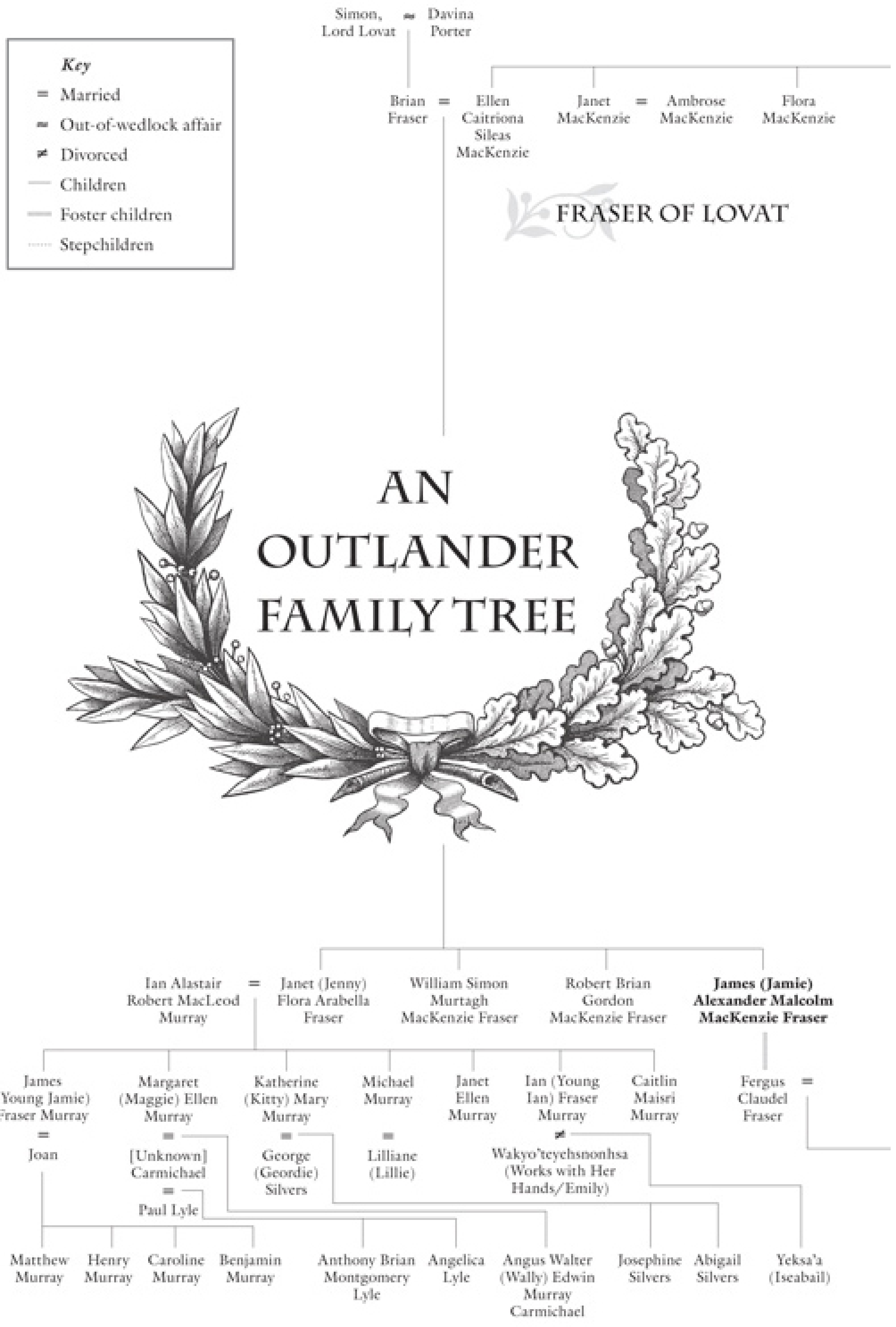
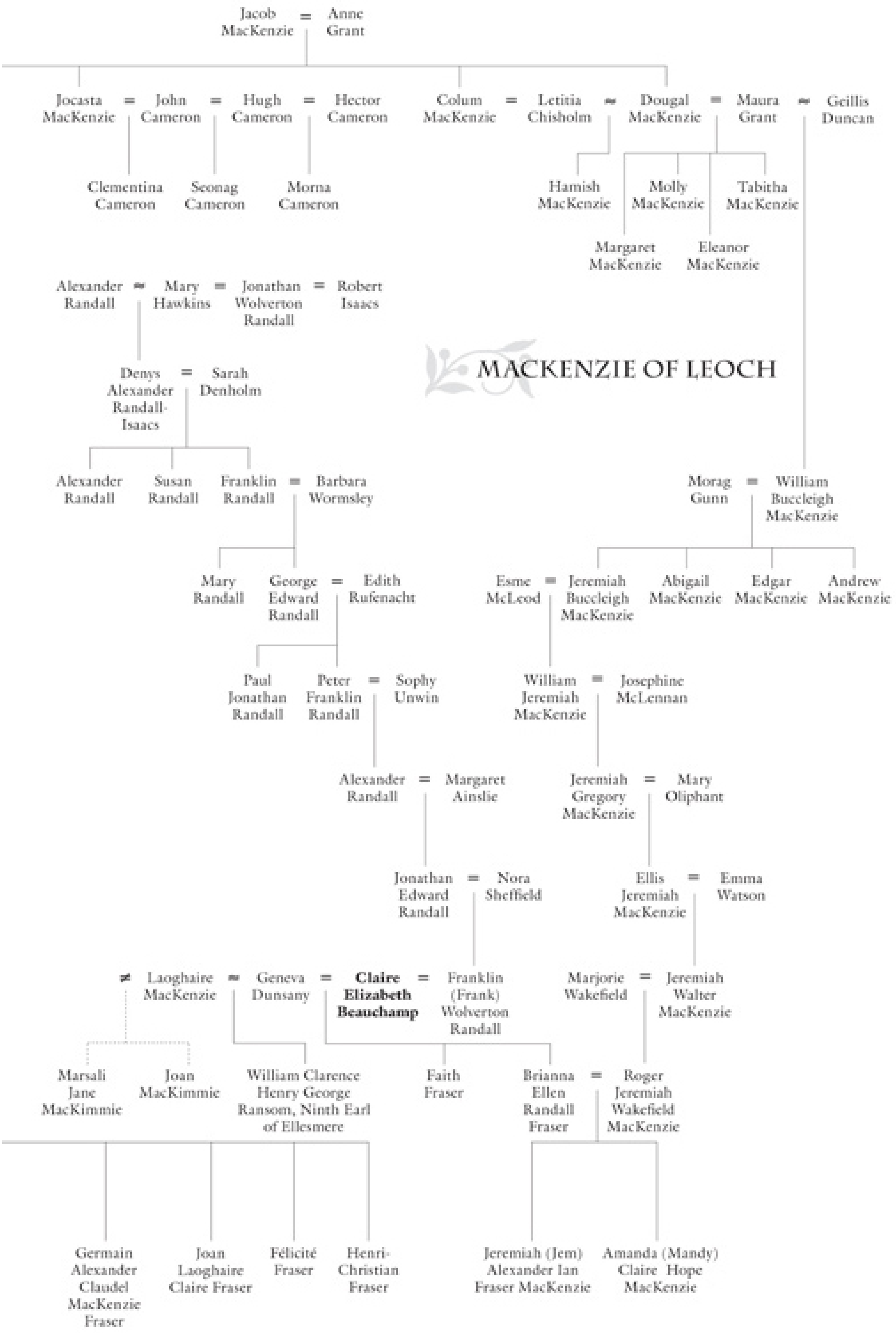
[1] For example, Nathanael Greene’s remarks about Quakers are taken from his own letters, as is his reference to his father’s discouraging reading as “tending to separate one from God.”

[2] With regard to maps and distances, etc., it’s worth noting that such things as township boundaries did change between the eighteenth century and the twenty-first. Ergo, Tennent Church is now in Manalapan, New Jersey, whereas originally it was in Freehold Township. The church didn’t move; the township did.

AN OUTLANDER FAMILY TREE

FRASER OF LOVAT


Key
= Married
≈ Out-of-wedlock affair
≠ Divorced
Children
Foster children
Stepchildren
Simon, Lord Lovat ≈ Davina Porter
Brian Fraser = Ellen Caitriona Sileas MacKenzie
Janet MacKenzie = Ambrose MacKenzie
Flora MacKenzie
Ian Alastair Robert MacLeod Murray = Janet (Jenny) Flora Arabella Fraser
William Simon Murtagh MacKenzie Fraser
Robert Brian Gordon MacKenzie Fraser
James (Jamie) Alexander Malcolm MacKenzie Fraser
Fergus Claudel Fraser =
James (Young Jamie) Fraser Murray = Joan
Margaret (Maggie) Ellen Murray = [Unknown] Carmichael = Paul Lyle
Katherine (Kitty) Mary Murray = George (Geordie) Silvers
Michael Murray = Lilliane (Lillie)
Janet Ellen Murray
Ian (Young Ian) Fraser Murray ≠ Wakyo'teyehsnonhsa (Works with Her Hands/Emily)
Caitlin Maisri Murray
Matthew Murray
Henry Murray
Caroline Murray
Benjamin Murray
Anthony Brian Montgomery Lyle
Angelica Lyle
Angus Walter (Wally) Edwin Murray Carmichael
Josephine Silvers
Abigail Silvers
Yeksa'a (Iseabail)


MACKENZIE OF LEOCH
Jacob MacKenzie = Anne Grant
Jocasta MacKenzie = John Cameron = Hugh Cameron = Hector Cameron
Colum MacKenzie = Letitia Chisholm ≈ Dougal MacKenzie = Maura Grant ≈ Geillis Duncan
Clementina Cameron
Seonag Cameron
Morna Cameron
Hamish MacKenzie
Molly MacKenzie
Tabitha MacKenzie
Margaret MacKenzie
Eleanor MacKenzie
Alexander Randall ≈ Mary Hawkins = Jonathan Wolverton Randall = Robert Isaacs
Denys Alexander Randall-Isaacs = Sarah Denholm
Alexander Randall
Susan Randall
Franklin Randall = Barbara Wormsley
Mary Randall
George Edward Randall = Edith Rufenacht
Paul Jonathan Randall
Peter Franklin Randall = Sophy Unwin
Alexander Randall = Margaret Ainslie
Jonathan Edward Randall = Nora Sheffield
Morag Gunn = William Buccleigh MacKenzie
Esme McLeod = Jeremiah Buccleigh MacKenzie
Abigail MacKenzie
Edgar MacKenzie
Andrew MacKenzie
William Jeremiah MacKenzie = Josephine McLennan
Jeremiah Gregory MacKenzie = Mary Oliphant
Ellis Jeremiah MacKenzie = Emma Watson
≠ Laoghaire MacKenzie ≈ Geneva Dunsany = Claire Elizabeth Beauchamp = Franklin (Frank) Wolverton Randall
Marjorie Wakefield = Jeremiah Walter MacKenzie
Marsali Jane MacKimmie
Joan MacKimmie
William Clarence Henry George Ransom, Ninth Earl of Ellesmere
Faith Fraser
Brianna Ellen Randall Fraser = Roger Jeremiah Wakefield MacKenzie
Germain Alexander Claudel MacKenzie Fraser
Joan Laoghaire Claire Fraser
Félicité Fraser
Henri-Christian Fraser
Jeremiah (Jem) Alexander Ian Fraser MacKenzie
Amanda (Mandy) Claire Hope MacKenzie

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This book is dedicated to ALL of the people
(besides me) *who worked like fiends*
to produce it for you.
Especially to

Jennifer Hershey *(editor, U.S.)*
Bill Massey *(editor, U.K.)*
Kathleen Lord *(aka "Hercules"—copy editor)*
Barbara Schnell *(translator and trench-buddy, Germany)*
Catherine MacGregor, Catherine-Ann MacPhee,
and Àdhamh Ó Broin *(Gaelic experts)*
Virginia Norey *(aka "Book Goddess"—designer)*
Kelly Chian, Maggie Hart, Benjamin Dreyer, Lisa Feuer, and the rest
of the Random House Production Team
and
Beatrice Lampe und Petra Zimmermann in München

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This being the case, I'm sure I'm leaving out dozens of kindly people who have given me useful information and assistance over the last four years and I apologize for not having written down their names at the time—but I surely do appreciate said information and assistance!

Among those whose names I *did* write down, I'd like to acknowledge …

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… Catherine MacGregor (Gaelic and French, including gruesome lullabies about beheaded lovers), Catherine-Ann

MacPhee (Gaelic, phraseology *and* idiom, besides introducing me to the Gaelic poem "To an Excellent Penis" and Àdhamh Ó Broin, Gaelic tutor for the *Outlander* Starz television production, for emergency help with exclamations. Barbara Schnell, for providing the German and occasional Latin bits (If you want to know how to say "Shit!" in Latin, it's *"Stercus!"*).

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… Karen L. Henry, for bumblebee-herding and for the “Friday Fun Facts” supplied weekly on her blog, *Outlandish Observations*. (The FFF are a collection of fascinating bits of trivia from the books, explored and expanded upon, with pictures.)

… Michelle Moore, for Twitter backgrounds, entertaining tea mugs, and a lot of assorted other things that can best be tactfully called “creative design.”

… Loretta Moore, faithful and timely mistress of my website.

… Nikki and Caitlin Rowe, for designing and maintaining my YouTube Channel (which is frankly not something I ever thought I’d need, but a handy thing to have).

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… Susan Butler, my assistant, Without Whom Nothing Would Ever Be Mailed, a thousand necessary things would not be done, nor would I ever show up for scheduled events.

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… the title of Chapter 13 (“Morning Air Awash with Angels”) is taken from a line of the poem by Richard Purdy Wilbur, “Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.”

… and the title of Chapter 117, “Into the Briar Patch,” is taken from the American folktale “Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby” (retold by various authors).

… whereas the title of Chapter 123, *“Quod Scripsi, Scripsi,”* is courtesy of Pontius Pilate.

… Joey McGarvey, Kristin Fassler, Ashley Woodfolk, Lisa Barnes, and a whole passel of other Highly Competent and Energetic People at Random House.

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… and my husband, Doug Watkins, who sustains me.

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By Diana Gabaldon

(in chronological order)
OUTLANDER
DRAGONFLY IN AMBER
VOYAGER
DRUMS OF AUTUMN
THE FIERY CROSS
A BREATH OF SNOW AND ASHES
AN ECHO IN THE BONE
THE OUTLANDISH COMPANION *(nonfiction)*
THE EXILE *(graphic novel)*

(in chronological order)
LORD JOHN AND THE HELLFIRE CLUB *(novella)*
LORD JOHN AND THE PRIVATE MATTER
LORD JOHN AND THE SUCCUBUS *(novella)*
LORD JOHN AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE BLADE
LORD JOHN AND THE HAUNTED SOLDIER *(novella)*

THE CUSTOM OF THE ARMY *(novella)*
LORD JOHN AND THE HAND OF DEVILS *(collected novellas)*
THE SCOTTISH PRISONER
A PLAGUE OF ZOMBIES *(novella)*

Other Outlander-related novellas
A LEAF ON THE WIND OF ALL HALLOWS
THE SPACE BETWEEN
VIRGINS

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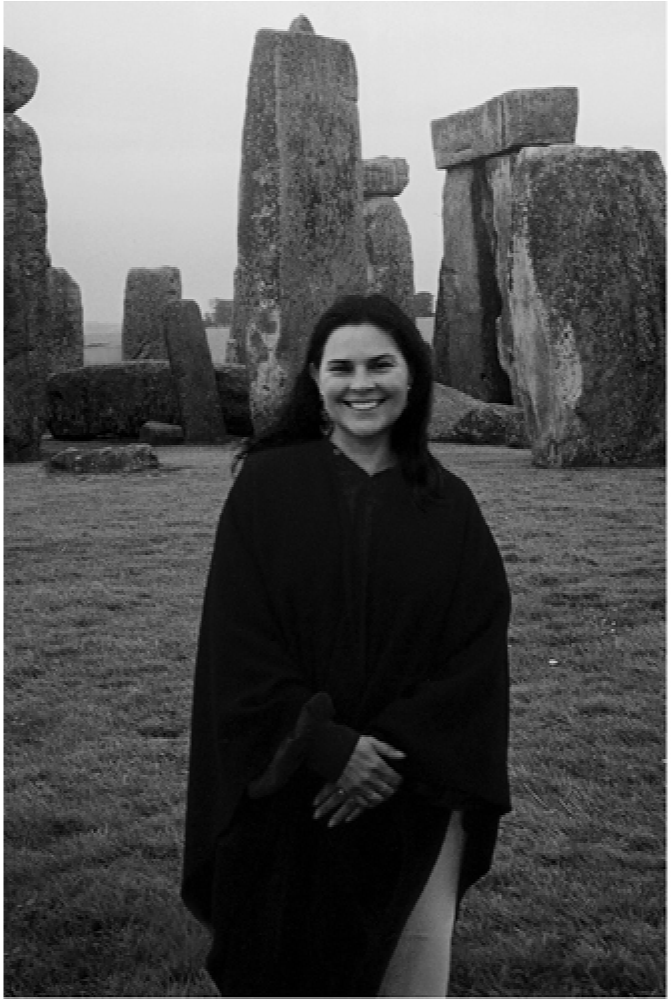

Jennifer Watkins

Diana Gabaldon is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of the wildly popular Outlander novels—*Outlander, Dragonfly in Amber, Voyager, Drums of Autumn, The Fiery Cross, A Breath of Snow and Ashes* (for which she won a Quill Award and the Conne International Book Prize), *An Echo in the Bone*, and *Written in My Own Heart's Blood*—as well as the related Lord John Grey books *Lord John and the Private Matter, Lord John and the Brotherhood of the Blade, Lord John and the Hand of Devils*, and *The Scottish Prisoner*, one work of nonfiction, *The Outlandish Companion;* and the Outlander graphic novel *The Exile*. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona, with her husband.

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DIANA GABALDON is available for select readings and lectures. To inquire about a possible appearance, please contact the Random House Speakers Bureau at rhspeakers@randomhouse.com.

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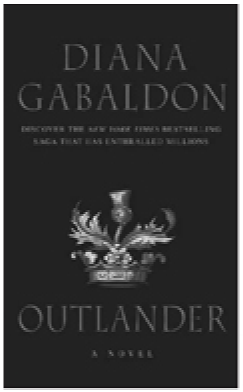

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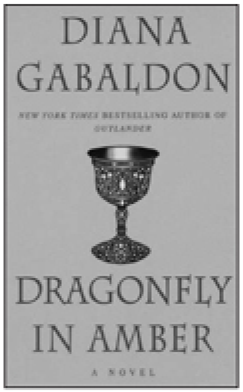
OUTLANDER

A NOVEL



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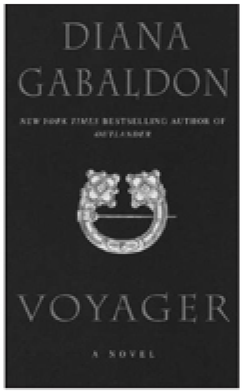

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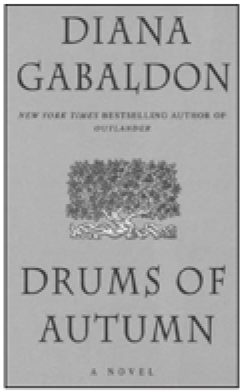

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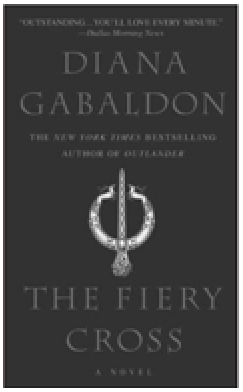

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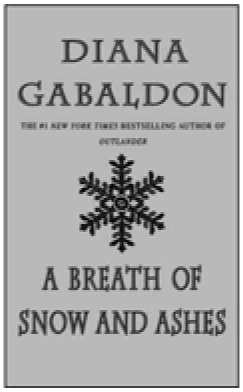

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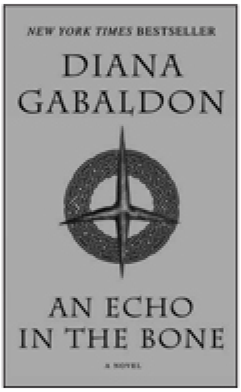

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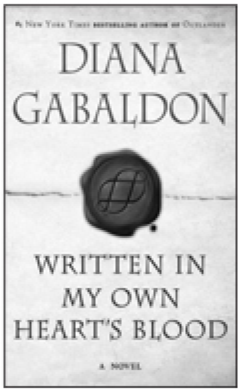
AN ECHO IN THE BONE

A NOVEL



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WRITTEN IN MY OWN HEART'S BLOOD

A NOVEL

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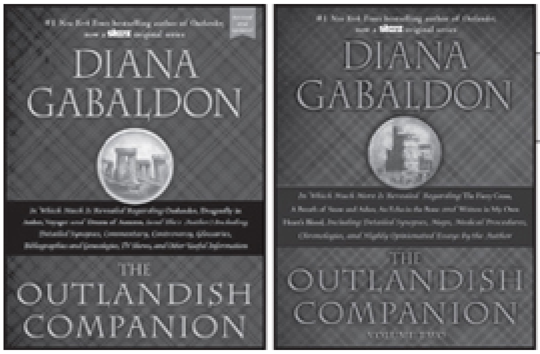
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THE COMPANION VOLUMES

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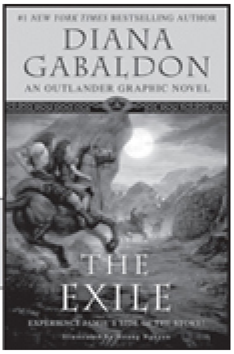
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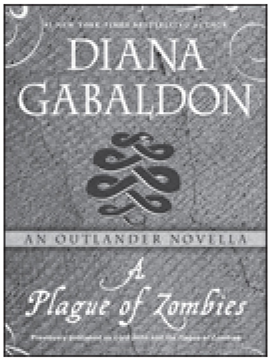
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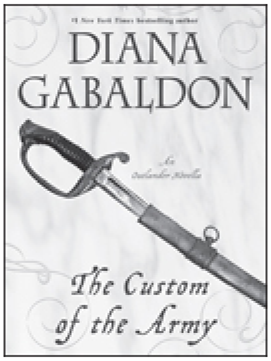
A Plague of Zombies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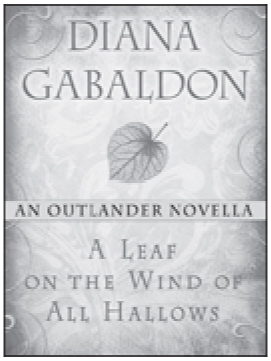
The Custom of the Army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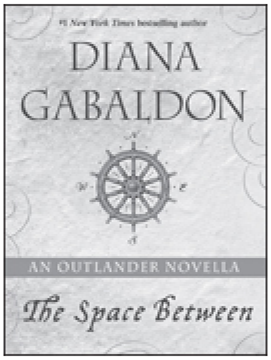
A Leaf on the Wind of All Hallows



The Space Between

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